

[ACTIVE TRAVEL]

Nature at its wildest awaits visitors to remote Nimmo Bay

BY ALYSSA SCHWARTZ

Beautiful British Columbia

It's a long trek to get to the middle of nowhere: it starts with an early-morning cab ride to Pearson and the nearly five-hour flight from Toronto to Vancouver — standard stuff. From there, it's a 15-minute ride on a shuttle bus to the airport's South Terminal, a regional hangar so small passengers aren't subject to the usual security hassles (no baggage X-rays or ID checks), followed by a quick flight on a 19-seat twin-engine turboprop bound for Port Hardy, the northernmost community on Vancouver Island.

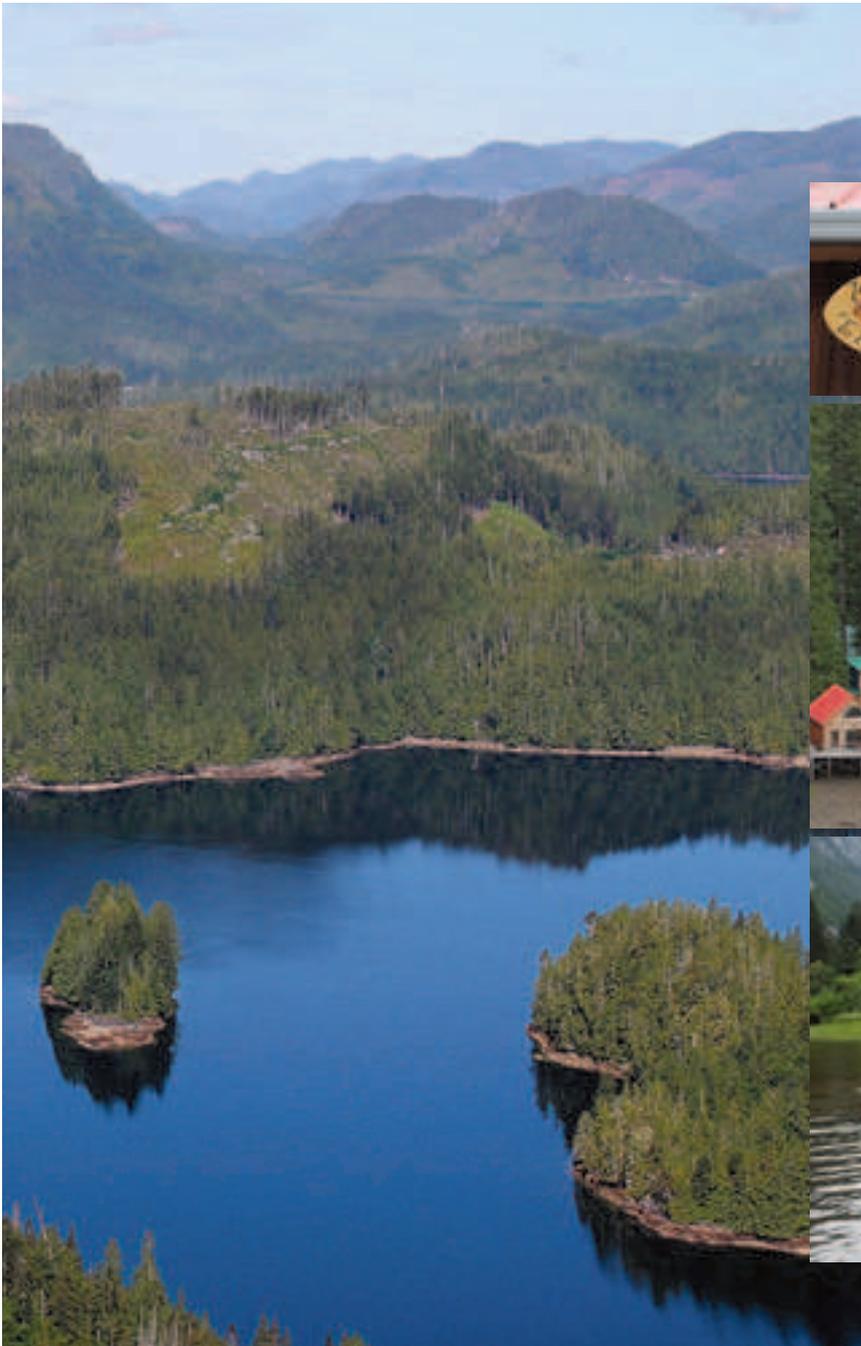
At each step, it feels as though you're shedding layers. The business travellers and Alaska cruisers stay behind in Vancouver. The hodgepodge of passengers from the Beechcraft 1900 collect their luggage from the tiny carousel in Port Hardy or fly onward to Bella Bella. At some point, cellular reception disappears. And then it's just

you, your overpacked suitcase and, coincidentally in my case, a 10-year veteran of the Nimmo Bay housekeeping staff, making a homecoming pilgrimage after a winter abroad to train this year's team.

There's still farther to go before we get to Nimmo, an intimate wilderness lodge across the Queen Charlotte Strait, accessible only by boat, helicopter or float plane. But as Peter Barratt, the owner of Nimmo Bay's helicopter provider and our pilot, tells us after we pick up three more guests, "The trip is half the fun."

We lift off from West Coast Helicopters' hangar in Port McNeill (a 40-minute drive from Port Hardy, if you're keeping track), flying close enough to the water to see a pod of Pacific white-sided dolphins and a colony of lounging sea lions. We hover over a swamp filled with wild cranberries and what Peter points out as the best

Photography: Alyssa Schwartz



(Top to bottom) A hand-painted sign depicts the resort's motto; intimate cabins hold just 18 guests at capacity; the writer shows off her catch, a Dolly Varden trout.



(Left) The flight to Nimmo Bay takes guests across the pristine Queen Charlotte Strait and dozens of islands covered in rainforest.

bay for catching Dungeness and box crab, working our way through a pass full of lightning-struck trees that jut dramatically upward like church spires.

The helicopter rounds yet another bend and the red-roofed cabins and floating boardwalks of Nimmo finally reveal themselves, but Peter takes us right past the camp, hoping to spot a bear (we don't, but we do see a bald eagle). Finally, we touch down at the resort. Inside the lodge, the handful of guests whose arrivals preceded ours are standing around slurping oysters, glasses of B.C. wine in hand. Introductions made, we sit down to dinner and I try to shrug off the 15-hour journey. The mussels and spot prawns in Thai green curry sauce and the beef tenderloin with mushroom risotto and some Mission Hill Pinot Noir help, but tucking myself into bed in my cedar cabin and being lulled to sleep by the roar of the glacier-

fed waterfall that powers Nimmo helps even more.

Opened in 1981, Nimmo Bay was born out of founder Craig Murray's love of fishing. When veteran pilot Barratt visited four years later, the two cooked up the idea of "heli-fishing" — using helicopters to fly guests to the area's wildest, most remote, and otherwise completely inaccessible streams and rivers. The giant chinook and coho salmon, steelhead trout and other fish that run these waters had never seen the end of a fish hook; the fishers here are mostly bears who come down from the mountains in spring and summer, scooping fish out of the water or snatching them in their jaws.

While Craig's son Fraser, who now operates the resort, has grown the offerings at Nimmo Bay to include more general wilderness activities, angling has long been the main draw. Personally, I haven't done much fishing before.

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Wading into streams so remote they've rarely been fished.



Helicopters are the transportation mode of choice. (Right) Staff member Hayley Van Wieren offers up crab fresh from the trap.



Getting geared up in Nimmo's mud room the next morning is my first time putting on waders.

It's late June — the first day of summer, in fact. As we climb into the helicopter, Peter explains that it's too early for salmon and just past steelhead season. But it's hard to feel too disappointed when we touch down in a clearing surrounded by ferns as high as my chin and trek in past western red cedars that are at least 500 years old. We stop for a group photo in front of a Sitka spruce, four of us obscuring barely half the tree's girth. Our path takes us over the Mahatta River, where Prime Minister John Diefenbaker once fished, touching down at several lakes and streams that don't have names — or at least not any you'll find on a map.

One of the advantages of heli-fishing, I learn — in addition to the fact that it makes these wild locations ac-

cessible to anyone, including those with mobility issues — is that Peter can fly us right over the water, making sure there are fish before we set down. So although he has warned us not to get our hopes too high, we do catch a few fish, nearly 20 Dolly Varden trout in our small group. It might not be the kind of catch that has drawn guests such as George Bush and Richard Branson during the famed salmon runs that come later in the season, but it'll do. Besides, sport fishing at Nimmo is strictly catch-and-release, which means lack of photographic evidence aside, who's to stop us from bragging?

There's more to brag about: spotting mountain goats leaping spectacularly from cliff edge to cliff edge hundreds of metres above sea level and doing a flyby of the blue ice at the base of a nearby glacier. The day reveals both the earth's violent streak in the form of magnifi-

cent but deadly rapid pools and, as we picnic on a beach strewn with wood carried over from Japan after the 2011 tsunami, its smallness. On the way back to Nimmo, Peter sets us down in a marshy area filled with white rein orchid blossoms no bigger than my pinky nail and suggests we bring some back for our cabins. We collect a special bouquet for Sandi Irving, the resort's chef, whose delicious fare, including salad rolls filled with fresh crab, strawberry-Chardonnay ice cream, and pains au chocolat that shatter perfectly at breakfast, may not be the main thing that draws guests our this far, but it could be.

Back at the resort, after a soak in the hot tub, we gather with the other guests — most of whom have spent the day watching whales and dolphins — at the floating fire dock. We reconvene here again after dinner to light "wish bags," a Nimmo Bay summer solstice tradition in which everyone writes a wish on the inside of a paper bag, sets a tea light inside and floats it off into the bay (a staffer collects the bags later so we don't burn the rainforest down). I think longer and harder about my choice of wish than I usually would. After such a magical day, it strikes me that a wish made in such a divine place must surely come true. ■

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