



MERCER ISLAND REPORTER

Mountains to sea in British Columbia | Painter's Lodge and April Point: Canada's Inside Passage

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Two for one. Sweet words to the ears of this travel lover. Next to “free” — my all-time favorite.

For that reason alone, Puget Sound travelers who want their annual fix of a relaxing saltwater getaway should put Painter's Lodge and April Point on their “to-do” list this summer or early fall.

These sister waterfront saltwater resorts can be found six miles north of Campbell River, British Columbia, on the Inside Passage of Vancouver Island. Painter's Lodge, the larger resort with over 90 rooms, suites and several meetings spaces, faces Quadra Island and the Coast Range Mountains and its fjords to the east. Ten minutes away by free water taxi across the Inside Passage to Quadra Island, April Point Resort looks west, toward the snow-capped peaks of Vancouver Island's Strathcona Provincial Park.

Both Painter's Lodge and April Point Lodge are owned by the expansive Oak Bay Marine Group (OBMG) of Victoria. Among the Oak Bay holdings are several fishing resorts in the Queen Charlottes and Langara Island, where 30-pound salmon and 70-pound halibut are everyday hauls. OBMG also owns and operates a number of marinas and restaurants around Vancouver Island and more serious fishing resorts, including a floating one on Vancouver Island's West Coast at Ucluelet. And for warm weather fishermen, they even own a beach resort in the Bahamas.

We liked our set-up at Painter's Lodge and April Point for many reasons, two being affordability and casual comfort. In the world of fishing resorts, especially in British Columbia and Alaska, prices can get high very quickly; \$1,000 and \$2,000 a day are not uncommon, not counting \$100 tips to guides. At these pricey fishing retreats, the focus is on the “catch,” and if the fish aren't running, well, there can be some pretty long faces on the guests. I've seen that, and it's not fun to be around. Days when the catch is meager are becoming more common.

At the other end of the spectrum are some very fashionable, artistic and gourmet resorts that deliver tastes of the Northwest to discerning sophisticates, including many from Europe, Asia and the distant corners of the United States. Sooke Harbour House, Wickininnish Resort, The Eyrie on Vancouver Island and Hasting House on Salt Spring Island each feature delightful repasts in charming rooms, some with amazing views of nature at its best. While dress codes don't require it, many of the guests wear ties, jackets and dresses with jewelry to complement the elegant settings. For some guests, it feels right. For others, it is a little stuffy and pricey.

Painter's Lodge and April Point offer a third path. They remind me of those sweet days of summer camps of yore, when you wore cut-offs and sweatshirts, and found yourself laughing a good amount of time. If you want to go swimming, the heated pool and two hot tubs at Painter's Lodge are made for suntanning and water fun. Or, if you are in the mood to rent a motor scooter, April Point has about 20 of them — new and highly polished — for exploring the bays and forests of Quadra Island, ideal for taking a picnic lunch along for the ride. Kayaking and circling the kelp beds where the otter hang out is another option. Painter's Lodge also has fishing boats and guides, which it books in four-hour segments — perfect for giving you a taste of how to lure the wily salmon. And the lodge has tennis courts, where a taxi can pick you up for nearby golfing.

Speaking of grounds, the campus at each resort includes classic British gardening at its best, with riots of flowers and an arboretum of trees and shrubs.

Since these are both retreats, everybody deserves a massage or a facial when on vacation. April Point's new Zen-inspired renewal spa is set in the middle of a tranquil lake, accessible only by a wooden bridge. The effect is serene and relaxing.

But I haven't told you the best part. If you go, sign up for the Zodiac Ocean Rapids Adventure Tour. These Zodiac inflatable tour boats are powered by twin 95-horsepower engines that zip up inlets at 40 to 60 mph. They fly.

All the guests were dressed in warm and cozy orange survival suits, and off we went. Kurt, our guide, set the tone early for the kind of adventure we were about to have by explaining that he had recently retired from a career in the army as a bomb disposal expert. I understood that to mean that he is a guy who likes to place his life in danger — one of those adrenaline freaks. Maybe so, but the Zodiac is the perfect boat for guys like Kurt because they can take anything.

The rip tides of the Inside Passage are among the most violent in the world. Several places that Kurt wanted to introduce us to featured water whirlpools where holes in the water appeared from nowhere, and the holes were three to five feet deep. Yikes! We experienced “shelves” of water in which one side was two feet higher than the other. These rip tides are referenced in Captain Vancouver's logs. He hated and feared the Inside Passage. But then, he didn't have a 180-horsepower engine to jet him through.

The whirlpool tides bring up plankton that attract herring and hake, and salmon and eagles are rarely far from there. We saw eagles with big talons snatching hake from the churning waters 10 feet from our Zodiac. At one point, we saw an unusual site — an eagle swimming to shore. He snagged a big enough salmon that he couldn't fly with it, and he wasn't about to let it free, so he swam to a beach 20 feet away. A half hour later, we saw a contented eagle with a massive orange salmon fillet stripped for everyone to see. Our tour mates, including a family from Ireland and a couple from Hawaii, were impressed.

Other highlights of our Zodiac experience were seeing deer enjoying a taste of salt as they walked along an empty beach, and a couple of bay dolphins visited for a minute to check us out.

If you are dead-set on seeing orcas, then sign up for the Whale Watching Adventure, which will take you up to the northern end of Johnstone Strait to see killer whales breaching and massaging themselves on the gravel bottoms of the nearby beaches.

As for comfort back at the resort, our suite at April Point — which offers an array of over 50 rooms, suites and cabins — had recently been renovated to feature a natural slate, extra-large bathroom with both a Jacuzzi tub and a glass shower. The king-size bed made for great sleeps, but does the bed or the fresh British



Above, a wildlife adventure tour sets out in a Zodiac boat. Painter's Lodge is visible in the background.

Photo courtesy of Oak Bay Marine Group

Columbia salt air get the credit for better nights of sleep?

Bill Morton can be reached at www.secondhalf.net.

If you go

Contact Oak Bay Marine Group, toll free, at 1-800-663-7090 or visit its Web site at www.obmg.com.

How do you get to Painter's Lodge and April Point? As it turns out, you can get there by lots of options, including driving. By car, take the excellent service on the Tsawwassen ferry just north of the border to Nanaimo, and from there Painter's Lodge is an easy and comfortable two-hour drive up-island to Campbell River. If you book your stay at April Point, you can park in the ample and secure lot at Painter's Lodge and take the free every-half-hour water taxi across to the April Point Resort and Spa.

Kenmore Air offers two ways to get there. If you are a float plane fan, you can zip up from the Kenmore base at the north end of Lake Washington. A new, second way to fly up is to take Kenmore's wheeled service from Sea-Tac, which lands at the Campbell River International Airport, and the staff of Painter's Lodge/April Point will be waiting with a complimentary shuttle.

A third option is to drive to the South Terminal at the Vancouver International Airport, park there for \$9 a day, and fly to the Campbell River Airport, which is the way we did it. The South Terminal at the Vancouver Airport serves various regional airlines. It is a cutie of an airport, with its 12-foot papier-mache' float plane suspended above the lobby.

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