

West Coast Aquatic Safaris: Championing Responsible Tourism

Departing from the rugged coastline of Tofino, West Coast Aquatic Safaris treats visitors to immersive explorations of Clayoquot Sound's hidden wonders. Truly a leader among tour operators province-wide, the company demonstrates admirable leadership in responsible tourism, environmental education, and cultural preservation—all while ensuring guests of all ages and mobility levels receive an equally memorable experience.

Launched in 2008, West Coast Aquatic Safaris is the brainchild of Keith Phillips, a tourism industry veteran who arrived in Tofino determined to accomplish what few other tour operators had managed: successful execution of a comfortable, accessible, and sustainable ocean experience. The secret of his success lies in his tour boats: Keith took exceptional care designing the vessels, prioritizing clear views of the wildlife and natural beauty his customers would pay to enjoy; fashioning both covered and exposed areas, allowing guests to choose their preferred experience; and installing restrooms.

Throughout his many years working for tour operators throughout BC, Keith witnessed numerous instances of limited accommodation for people with disabilities; in some cases, he saw guests in wheelchairs who realized only when they arrived at the departure point that they would be physically unable to participate. Determined never to allow this to happen to his own clients, Keith met with an accessibility group during the design phase, and implemented their suggestions for creating an experience open to everyone: a ramp leading to the boats and booking office; a back gate on the boat wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers; and collaboration with the local Harbour Authority to allow people with disabilities to park right at the dock.

Since its first tour, West Coast Aquatic Safaris has become one of the most popular adventure operators in Tofino, particularly among families and those interested in eco-tourism. Keith has seen countless multigenerational trips, couples travelling with their infants and older visitors gravitating to the comfortable experience he took such care to design.

While on board, guests learn about the surrounding biosphere and the importance of environmental protection; when it rains, Keith and his staff lead tutorials on rainwater's benefits to local wildlife and forests. Staff members are also involved with the OceanWise sustainable oceans program, encouraging guests to "adopt" stuffed animals inspired by wildlife seen on the tours with proceeds donated to the initiative. The tour price also includes a small fee that is donated in full to charitable initiatives supporting biosphere preservation.

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The company's adventures allow guests to get up close and personal with whales, bears, and regional birds while exploring Clayoquot Sound's natural assets and historical footprints. The Hot Springs Cove Excursion—a Canadian Signature Experience—encompasses a boat-and-floatplane journey involving memorable sightings of whales, sea lions and otters; an easy 2km walk through second-growth forest; and ample time to soak in the hot springs and explore.

One guest enjoyed the tour so thoroughly she returned 10 years later from her home in Britain, saying she had enjoyed her first experience so much that she had added a repeat visit to her bucket list.

West Coast Aquatic Safaris' cultural tours share Tofino and Clayoquot Sound's history as part of the ancestral territory of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations, leading visitors to traditional territories while storytelling about the Nuu-chah-nulth history. The tour also encompasses recent modern history, such as logging and fisheries culture in Tofino. While designing the tour, Keith consulted with several local First Nations; he also employs First Nations staff to ensure the journeys are factually accurate and culturally respectful.

As the company grows ever more popular, Keith remains committed to environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and ensuring tourism adventures are accessible for everyone.

"Sustainability has always been important to me. I went to middle school in the 90s, right around the time schools started learning to 'reduce, reuse, recycle'," he says. "BC is such a beautiful place, and throughout the years I've learned that we in the tourism industry have tremendous influence to keep it that way."

Learn more about West Coast Aquatic Safaris at www.whalesafaris.com.

