

Vancouver Island BC Rainforest Tours: Discover the Forest Beyond the Big Trees

When you take a rainforest tour on Vancouver Island, it's hard to take your eyes off the giant mossy trees glowing like stained glass in nature's cathedral. Some of the tallest stretch over 90 meters, while others measure as much as 20 meters in circumference. At more than 1000 years old, the oldest are impressive to be sure. But don't get a kink in your neck by focussing only on the trees. You might miss the amazing diversity of plants and animals the old growth pacific temperate rainforest has to offer.

Even with your eyes closed there is a humid, fragrant coolness that enables the mosses and lichens clinging to the tree branches to grow. Multiple canopy layers, forest openings with berries and other pioneer species, dead standing trees with holes for owls, bats, squirrels, and nut hatches are just a few of the highlights.

There are also differences in the rainforests on different parts of the island. Where the west side receives more than three meters of rain, the southeast side gets little more than a meter. This variability combined with elevation changes in the mountains creates unique habitats with different tree species and vegetation.

For wildflowers, April and May are great times to see what's flourishing in the ancient rainforest. Coral root and calypso orchids, trilliums, wild cherry, elderberry and salmon berry are some of the flowers that you can find in the spring. Starting in June and lasting into September, you also can taste the wonderful parade of berries that result from this profusion of flowers. (Be sure to take along a field guide or an expert to avoid any poisonous plants.) There are some very tasty and nutritious plants like stinging nettle (cooked) and many medicinal ones as well.

If you slow your pace and look down...way down under the slabs of bark in the summer, you will see a menagerie of colourful critters. The black and yellow millipede gives off a cherry smell when handled, and while its faint whiff of cyanide is harmless to humans, it would prove deadly to others closer in size. Then there are the giant hermaphroditic banana slugs, which get to be 25cm long. Their slime has a natural anaesthetic if you happen to get a toothache while lost in the forest. There are also delicate and secretive red backed salamanders, which live their entire lives in rotten logs. In fact, there are over 92 species of animals, insects, and birds using dead trees in the forest. Over 500 new species of insects were recently found in the canopy of the forest and more are still being discovered.

For bird enthusiasts, the forest air fills with spring bird song starting in April, especially in the early morning. Many species prefer older forests, such as varied thrushes, brown creepers and pileated woodpeckers, and at dawn or dusk you may hear or see a western screech owl, northern saw-whet owl or northern-pygmy owl. While bird watching in rain forests with trees that stretch higher than 20 stories presents its challenges, a scope with an angled eyepiece can save your neck. So can lying on your back with binoculars. Many species can also be called down to more visible levels with their own call or a 'psss' sound. One excellent recording of birdcalls of Vancouver Island is John Neville's *Bird*

Songs of Canada's West Coast. This greatly assists with identifying these phantoms that flit about high in the tree canopy.

The mild climate on Vancouver Island means that you can experience the rainforest wonders all year. The wet season begins gradually in September or October sparking a Technicolor explosion of mushrooms and massive migrations of salmon upstream to their spawning sites. November brings the torrential rains that produce such fantastic forest growth and bring out the many shades of vibrant green in the mosses reconstituting from a dry summer. Mist, fog and rain bring a whole new atmosphere and photographic opportunities.

For more information, including the big tree registry visit http://www.coastalrevelations.com/vancouver_island_rainforest_eco_tours/index.htm.

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