

# PADDLE POWER

On a kayak tour of the San Juan Islands, in Washington state, the food is as ravishing as the scenery, discovers *Ella Buchan*

**O**ur guide, Matthew, is standing by the camp stove, one hand on the hip of his faded, slightly grubby chartreuse onesie – an outrageous look that he has the nonchalance to pull off – and the other brandishing a spatula. It isn't the weather that's causing his eyebrows to knit in a frown; nor is it the tidal forecast. The early-morning fog is already burning away. The bay is as glassy as a lake.

No, Matthew is on edge because of... eggs. "Did your yolk break OK, Ella?" he asks, pivoting on tiptoes, peering over the table. Mid-mouthful, I shoot him a thumbs-up. Because, yes, the yolk is perfect, golden and velvety, as are the cubed, pan-fried potatoes, jasmine rice, smoked local salmon and herby aioli that make up the rest of the bowl. Everyone in our group of nine – a mix of friends and couples, all from America apart from my partner, Lee, and me – gobbles it up with gusto.

We're on a four-day kayaking trip around the San Juan Islands, in Washington state, just off the coast northwest of Seattle. The Pacific Northwest archipelago consists of 172 named islands and reefs, scattered over the waterways of the Salish Sea and covering an area roughly twice the size of Seattle itself. Pods of resident and transient wild orcas can often be spotted here.

We're warned early on that we may not see any: the whales feed on salmon, too, and numbers are relatively low. But the scenery makes up for it, as do the gourmet meals.

Outdoor Odysseys – a small local company that runs the trips, owned by Tom Murphy, a former kayak guide – doesn't do burnt sausages and cold baked beans. Serving beautifully prepared, regionally sourced food and wine is its unique selling point. Matthew's delicious breakfast, served on Stuart Island after our first night's camping, is typical.

The trip had begun the day before at San Juan Island, reached via ferry from Anacortes, a 1½-hour drive

from Seattle. Loading up at our launch spot, a beach on the island, the heap of supplies dwarfed our group's five double kayaks. Yet within 10 minutes, it had disappeared. Chopping boards and tubs of cutlery were wedged behind seats. Bags of crisps and chocolate biscuits were

swallowed by hatches in the kayaks, alongside melons, punnets of strawberries and cool bags with cream, milk and cheese. And 20-odd bottles of Washington wine – perhaps our most precious cargo – were stashed among squishy sleeping bags and packets of rice.

With these trips, there's no need to be superfit, nor any pressure to paddle fast. Some paddle ahead, giving themselves more frequent breaks to gaze at the scenery and take photos. Others, including Snow and Charity, office colleagues from Nashville, adopt a more leisurely pace, while Lee and I fall somewhere in the middle.

We circumnavigate skinny Spieden, a former



game-hunting reserve with a spine-like line of trees and chocolate-hued mouflon sheep grazing its straw-coloured hillsides. We skim past hunks of rock barely big enough for a bob of dozing harbour seals. And we pull our shiny white kayaks onto a sand and gravel beach for a delicious lunch of tempeh wraps with spicy peanut sauce.

After a leisurely paddle through the brilliant blue waters, we drift lazily down an inlet to Reid Harbour, on Stuart Island, the shallower water turning pickle green.

We heft our kayaks onto the gravelly sand and drape damp life jackets on a jumble of driftwood. The boat-in campsite is set amid Douglas fir and madrone trees, whose peachy bark peels away to reveal pistachio-green trunks. The island has a population of just 20, with houses, a school and a church hidden away on the hillsides.

This isn't glamping. We sleep in tents, albeit ones that take only five minutes to erect. They're surprisingly easy to squash back into their nylon

bags, ready to be stored once more in the kayaks. There are no showers, so we all make do with a splash from the sink, but any concern about our salt-crusted skin and crunchy hair dissolves as the first cork pops. We gulp the red, a blend of merlot, syrah and cabernet from Columbia Valley, like thirsty sailors, and continue sipping and chatting as the sky softens to a dusky pink.

An osprey swooshes from a branch with a high-pitched whistle before swooping to

catch a fish for its dinner.

Matthew and his fellow guide, Jenny, already have ours in hand. The starter – sliced blood oranges and milky burrata cheese drizzled with lavender oil – could be served as part of a high-end tasting menu without raising an eyebrow.

Then it's pasta with a creamy sauce of sun-dried tomatoes and vegetables from San Juan Island: rocket, spinach, fennel and leeks. There's even a proper

pudding: a flourless chocolate cake, cooked in a Dutch oven (a cast-iron cooking pot) over the campfire coals.

We do our best to paddle it off the next day, hugging the coastline around Stuart Island, peering up at stately bald eagles and gazing at the snowy cap of Mount Baker. We pass shortbread-coloured, driftwood-strewn beaches, glide over forests of bouncy kelp and watch a pair of sleek river otters slink into the water from a rock.

Our final night is on the uninhabited Jones Island, which can't be reached by ferry and is accessible only by kayak or other boats. We pitch our tent beneath the wiggly branches of a Garry oak, just where a flower-freckled meadow meets the rocky shoreline. Matthew and Jenny set up their new kitchen while the rest of us fill our cups with wine and clamber onto the rocks.

Talk turns to what awaits back home. For Nick and

Crystal, it's their two teenagers – they've been checking up on them whenever they can catch a scrap of phone signal.

For Ryan and Jess, who recently moved here from LA, it's settling into their new life in Seattle, which makes the rest of us rather envious, because they have all this practically on their doorstep.

After a while, conversations peter out and the group falls silent. Each of us seems lost in thought: scouring the horizon in the hope of a last-minute orca sighting, maybe; basking in the views; or just enjoying the serenity that comes from a few days away from the tyranny of emails.

Or perhaps we're just wondering what's for supper.

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*Ella Buchan was a guest of the San Juan Islands (visitsanjuans.com) and Outdoor Odysseys, which has a four-day inter-island kayak and camping tour from £612pp, including equipment and all meals, but not flights (outdoorodysseys.com). It's a 1½-hour drive from Seattle to Anacortes, then an hour's ferry ride to Friday Harbor, on San Juan Island, where the tours start (wsdot.com). British Airways flies to Seattle from Heathrow; from £279 return*



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**MAKING WAVES** Orcas can be spotted off the islands

“  
**Milk, melons  
and biscuits  
were swallowed  
by hatches in  
the kayaks, and  
20-odd bottles  
of Washington  
wine – our most  
precious cargo  
– were stashed  
among squishy  
sleeping bags**



**WORKING IN TANDEM** Ella and her partner, Lee, in their kayak

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**Roche Harbor, on  
San Juan Island**

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**Sunset over Stuart Island,  
the first camping stop on  
the tour**