

# on the [central] coast

*Where mountains and fjords meet at  
the western edge of British Columbia*

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARB SLIGL



Overlooking Lonesome Lake in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park just off the trail that leads to the top of Hunlen Falls, high on the Chilcotin Plateau. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Big Cedars Trail in the Bella Coola Valley; pilot Oban Gilbert with a 1949 de Havilland Beaver floatplane on Nimpo Lake; heli-hiking on 4 Mile Ridge; the route via heli to the ridgeline and Goat Mountain.



If trees could talk, what would they tell us? Tales of mystery and monotony, joy and woe, reign and ruin? Walking amidst the giants on the Big Cedars trail near Bella Coola, BC, it's as if I'm caught up in the ebb and flow of time.

Surrounded by living pillars that are a testament to more than I can imagine.

"Let's walk here with some reverence," says Doug on the Trail, as my guide is simply nicknamed (he also goes by Doug in the Bar). He calls for reverence for this forest's age and for those that were here before us. The Western Red Cedar giants date back to "pre-contact," says Doug, meaning before the mid-1700s, when the First Nations were living here in harmony and seclusion. And then we stop at a colossal cedar that's more than 1,000 years old. I feel as if I should kneel before it.

I feel this way in much of the Central Coast of BC as I make my way from Anahim Lake to Bella Coola: flying over the Talchako Glacier in a de Havilland Beaver floatplane, standing atop sheer cliffs overlooking the third-highest free-falling waterfall in Canada, floating down a placid river as bald eagles watch, coming across a paw print the length of my forearm on a dusty trail.

The Beaver (an original from 1949 piloted by a handsome outdoorsy type with a belt buckle as wide as his smile) flies from Nimpo Lake over the Chilcotin Plateau, Coast Mountains and Monarch Icefield to land on Turner Lake, which empties into those 260-metre-high Hunlen Falls. We unload at a dock by a wilderness campsite used by outback hikers and paddlers (Turner Lake is part of a seven-lake chain that's a canoeist's wet dream), complete with serious-looking bear caches...because we've landed where it would otherwise take a 16-km hike into the wild to get to, deep in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park, BC's largest.

From here we hike to the falls, stopping along the way at lookouts that jut over the curves of Lonesome Lake and the bluest blue of a lake with no name. "You can name it if you want to," says park operator George Probek. But I think perhaps its beauty speaks for itself and it should remain one of the few places left without a label. Much of the Central Coast seems uncharted, untouched





**Looking over the Coast Mountain Range while waiting for a heli ride back down into Bella Coola Valley. TOP Tallheo Hot Springs. ABOVE LEFT Lunch aboard the Nekhani: fresh-caught spot prawns pulled from South Bentinck Arm. ABOVE RIGHT Grizzly paw print near Tweedsmuir Park Lodge.**

and, yes, unnamed. Or unnameable.

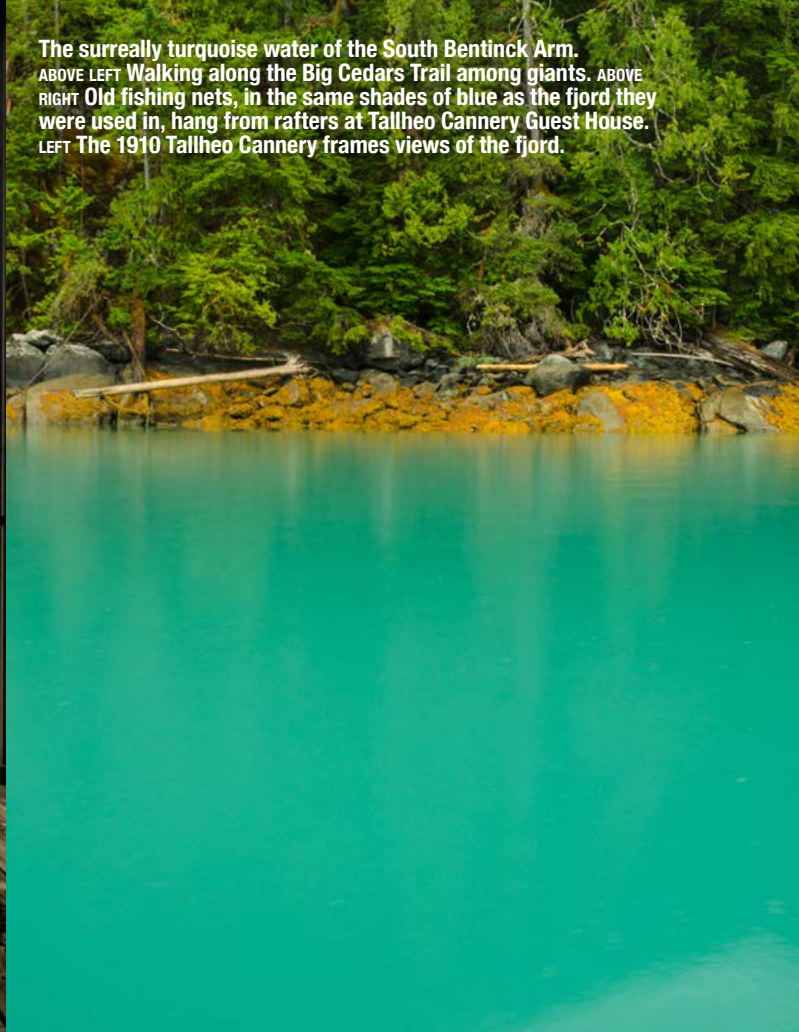
From being on top of the world, as if on a dish that can't contain its beauty and must spill it out in the form of falls and cliffs and glaciers, I descend 5,000 feet to the Bella Coola Valley floor via The Hill. Like the nameless lake of the bluest blue, The Hill is the all-too-simple name for a dramatic section of the "Freedom Road," or Highway 20, an hour-and-a-half of twists and turns from the arid Chilcotin Plateau to the lush Great Bear Rainforest.

It's in this valley and rainforest that I meet Doug on the Trail amidst giants. And see grizzly tracks. My base at Tweedsmuir Park Lodge (home of the largest multi-tenure heli-ski operation in the world and once host to Mt-Everest-conquerer, Sir Edmund Hillary) is set right on the Atnarko River, a prime bear-watching spot when salmon spawn in late summer and early fall. I'm here too early to see a grizzly catching dinner on the riverbank but I do stop in one's tracks and, again, almost drop to my knees.

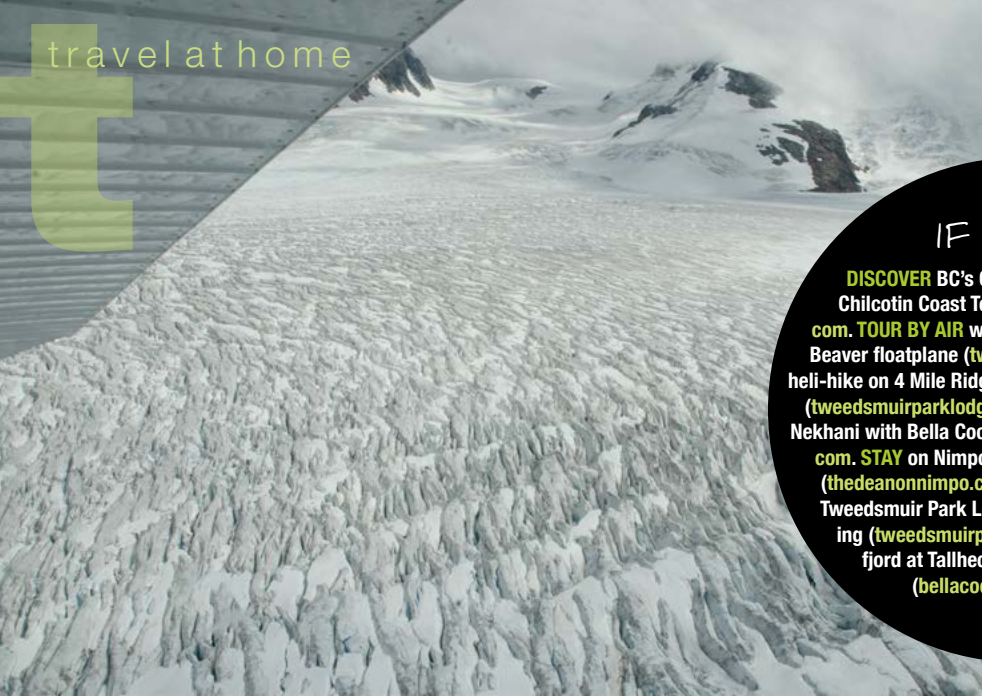
I keep scanning for the maker of that massive paw print as I float down the river on an eco-drift excursion, mountains rising on either side. The class-one river is a leisurely way to take in the scenery, with the adrenaline rush coming not from rapids but wildlife spotting (grizzly sightings are almost guaranteed during the salmon run). Tweedsmuir Park Lodge guide Mike Rilley, another seriously outdoorsy type, tells stories of bear encounters and how he can smell grizzlies before seeing them if the wind's right (think wet dog and salmon breath). I'm content to have had a moment with one's paw print.

The next morning I rise from the base of the mountains to its peaks, getting a heli ride to a ridgeline starting at Goat Mountain. And it's here that I get my first glimpse of the fjord—the easternmost tip of the Pacific, where it crooks its finger deep into the Coast Mountain Range from Bella Bella to Bella Coola. The milky aquamarine waters are almost opaque, a spectacular silty swathe.

Later, on the surface, on what's called the South Bentinck Arm, local captain, fisherman and hunter Leonard Ellis tells stories during a fjord tour aboard his boat, the Nekhani. He points out where he found himself atop a massive basking shark; what he thought were two sharks' fins was actually one shark's dorsal fin and tail on either side of him. In a bit of a reversal, he also once found himself beneath a grizzly, sliding so close that the bear "woofed" in his face with "G-force" breath.



**The surreally turquoise water of the South Bentinck Arm.**  
ABOVE LEFT Walking along the Big Cedars Trail among giants. ABOVE RIGHT Old fishing nets, in the same shades of blue as the fjord they were used in, hang from rafters at Tallheo Cannery Guest House. LEFT The 1910 Tallheo Cannery frames views of the fjord.



IF YOU GO

**DISCOVER** BC's Central Coast via Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism: [landwithoutlimits.com](http://landwithoutlimits.com). **TOUR BY AIR** with Tweedsmuir Air's original Beaver floatplane ([tweedsmuirair.com](http://tweedsmuirair.com)), then do a heli-hike on 4 Mile Ridge with Tweedsmuir Park Lodge ([tweedsmuirparklodge.com](http://tweedsmuirparklodge.com)). **TOUR BY BOAT** on the Nekhani with Bella Coola Grizzly Tours: [bcgrizzlytours.com](http://bcgrizzlytours.com). **STAY** on Nimpo Lake at the Dean on Nimpo ([thedeanonnimpo.com](http://thedeanonnimpo.com)), in Bella Coola Valley at Tweedsmuir Park Lodge for prime grizzly viewing ([tweedsmuirparklodge.com](http://tweedsmuirparklodge.com)) and on the fjord at Tallheo Cannery Guest House, ([bellacoolacannery.com](http://bellacoolacannery.com)).

This is the hardy sort you'll find in these parts.

Leonard takes us to Tallheo Hot Springs, where a beer never tasted as good as under cool drizzle in a natural in-the-rocks "hot tub" on the fjord's edge. Practising hot-and-cold therapy,

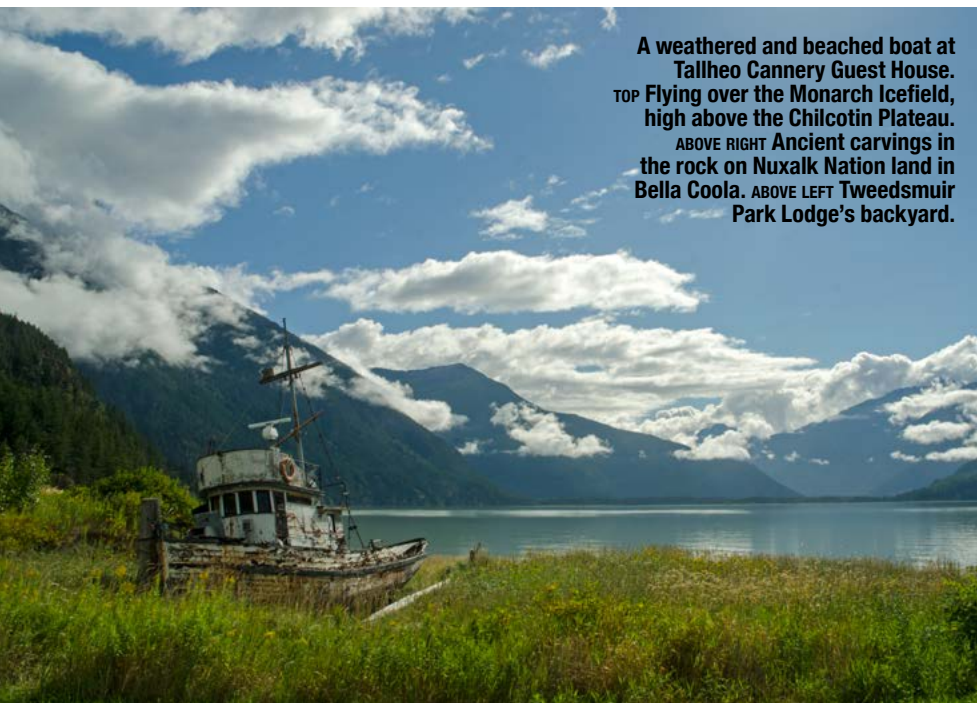
I take a breath-stealing dip into the fjord, immersed

in water that's as blue as in the Caribbean (yet infinitely colder). After the spa session, the Nekhani chugs back through the surreally turquoise water, past waterfalls, pristine coastline and mist-shrouded trees. Leonard stops at his spot-prawn traps to collect our lunch. Just another day on the Central Coast...

I stay on the fjord overnight at the Tallheo Cannery Guest House, a cannery that opened in 1910 and is now repurposed as a bed-and-breakfast only accessible by water. An old rooming house has become a boutique hotel of sorts and yet remains utterly rustic. There's no electricity (power comes from a diesel generator) and the entire property is like a living museum. I meander its grounds, stumbling upon huge coils of old rope, weathered buoys, beached boats, rusting machinery and an otherworldly display of fishing nets suspended from rafters that could be a contemporary art installation.

Back on shore in Bella Coola, I hike a short way on First Nations land into another lush corner of the rainforest. Ancient carvings in rocks have been uncovered (one benefit of the logging industry here) and seem to shimmer under the canopy of trees that likely stood and watched just as solemnly when they were first etched. Chris Nelson, a local Nuxalk guide, stands and addresses the trees. He sings the "Cedar Bark Softening" song. Accompanied by the rushing creek and rustling branches, the sound echoes and deepens, soft and powerful, ethereal and timeless. When I tell Chris this afterwards he nods and says, "You can almost feel the age of that song."

Yes. I feel sure that the trees do too. And that they chanted along with him. ●



**A weathered and beached boat at Tallheo Cannery Guest House. TOP** Flying over the Monarch Icefield, high above the Chilcotin Plateau. **ABOVE RIGHT** Ancient carvings in the rock on Nuxalk Nation land in Bella Coola. **ABOVE LEFT** Tweedsmuir Park Lodge's backyard.