

a paddle through time

TAKAYA TOURS BRINGS FIRST NATIONS TRADITIONS TO LIFE WITH KAYAK TRIPS THROUGH THE MAJESTIC FIORD OF INDIAN ARM BY CHRIS MCBEATH

With every stroke of the paddle I was

rewarded with Harry Potter-style wizardry that sent brightly lit pearls of water up into the darkness, while strands of sparkling beads cascaded down towards the sea again. Such were the phosphorus pyrotechnics as we kayaked Indian Arm beneath a full moon. It had just climbed over the horizon between the shadows of the fiords, first with beams of light hinting of her arrival, then as an unexpectedly large and majestic globe that quickly filled the horizon and finally, as our guardian set on a distant mantle for her journey across the sky to morning. It was a breathtaking experience.

By day, these waters are equally inspiring not only for the scenery — wild, expansive and pristine — but for the First Nations myths and legends that are so much a part of their beauty. “Our elders have recalled stories of their grandparents and great grandparents so we have a wonderful account of our history here,” explains our guide Damian George who, as the grandson of the late Chief Dan George, the Oscar-nominated actor, and nephew of the current Nations chief, Leonard George, has a proud heritage himself. “Takaya Tours is a way of sharing our culture in a fun and informative way.”

Traditional Tours

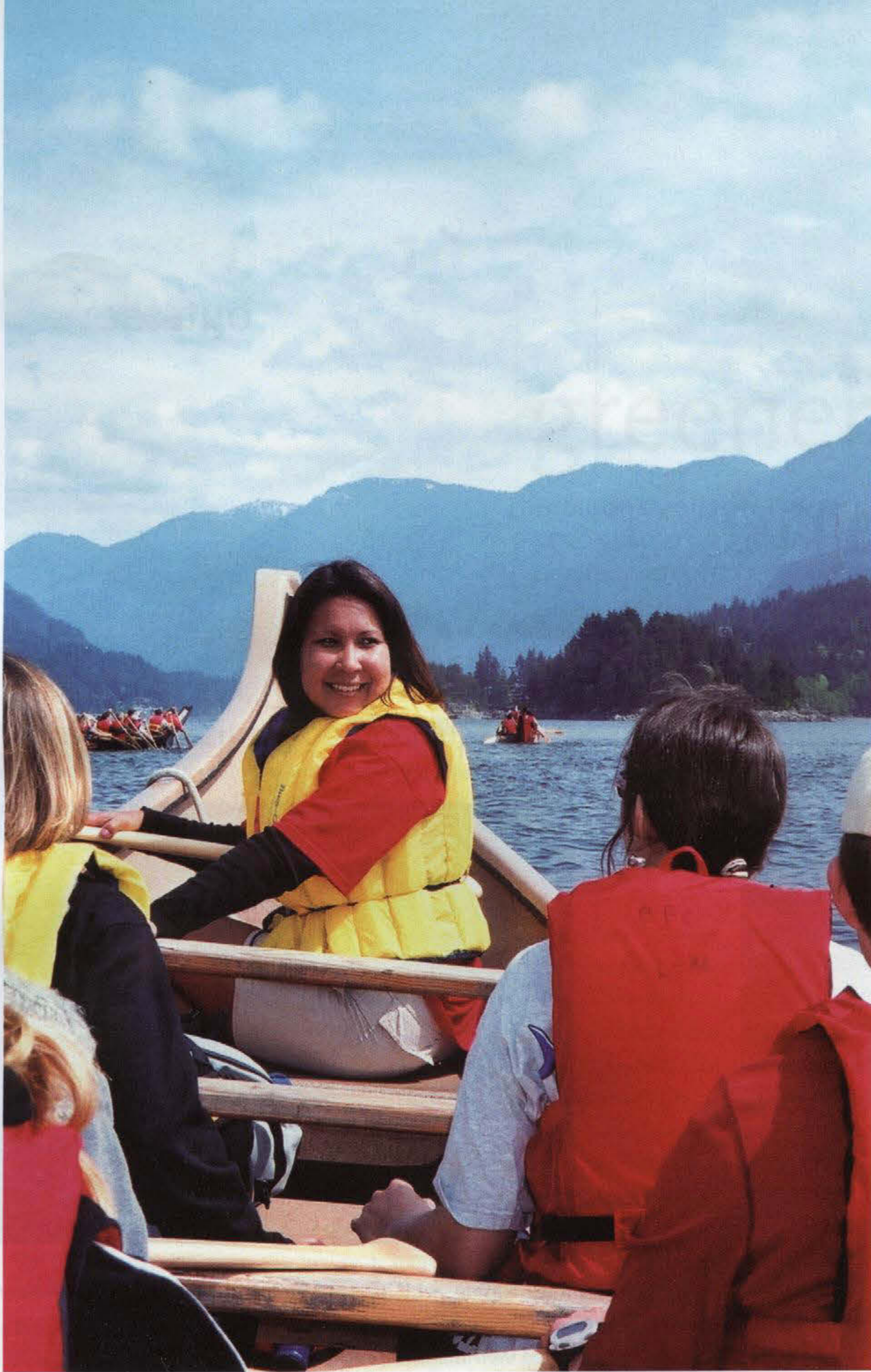
Takaya’s colourful canoes and pods of kayaks certainly do attract attention, not only for their traditional First Nations motifs but also for their sense of ceremony: every excursion starts with a sacred drum circle, and a prayerful song for the paddlers and their ancestors. The gathering marks the start of an eco-cultural adventure filled with stories, songs and legends that talk of an earlier time.

Indian Arm is the most southerly glacial fiord in Canada, with stunning scenery throughout.



The Tslei-Waututh Nation, which once numbered 10,000, settled Indian Arm in the mid-1800s; first at Belcarra, and then, after smallpox ravaged their numbers, at Deep Cove. Both Cates Park and Belcarra Park, an eight-minute boat shuttle across the inlet from one another, are located on ancient middens, and today, beachcombers stumble across arrowheads, beads and other artifacts.

Although downtown Vancouver is less than 30 minutes away, paddling Indian Arm seems as far away from civilization as you can get. Twenty-four kilometres long, it is the most southerly glacial fiord in Canada and once you leave the pebbly shore, the landscape changes dramatically from a scattering of picturesque homes and boat ramps to glacial mountains that rise up out of the water as forested monoliths. As the fiord horizon stretches before us, a sudden tranquility falls among our tiny group “We believe the spirit is soothed with expansive views,” Damian whispers. And so it is.



What sets Takaya Tours apart from other operators is how they meld First Nations traditions with a fun kayak or canoe experience.

We paddle past Boulder Island, site of a traditional burial ground. “When our ancestors passed to the next life, we wrapped their bodies in cedar blankets and strung them up in the trees,” says Damian. “Chief Waut-Salk was the last to be buried in this manner until the church insisted he be moved to a cemetery. Legend recounts that because of the chief’s special connection to sea animals, two whales escorted the canoe that took his body from Boulder Island to the mainland. As soon as the last soil had covered his body, they left, and whales have never returned to Indian Arm.”

No sooner did he finish than a curious harbour seal popped his head up some 10 feet away, as if to prompt Damian into another story. This one tells of a dangerous sea serpent, and a seal who taught a child her secrets of the sea. When drought lowered the water levels, the serpent could no longer hide in its depths. The child, now a man, slew the creature and placed its tooth into the side of a rock which immediately sprang water and filled the inlet once again. By the time Damian finishes the story, we have paddled to a waterfall, and are feeling the mist against our faces.

We ply our way to 600-year-old pictographs painted in red ochre, paddle the waters beneath Cory Rock, a place of First Nations vision quests and meditation, bypass plump purple and red starfish clinging to rugged rock walls, and catch the rhythm home under the watchful eye of two bald eagles, each standing sentry atop a Douglas Fir. We finish our paddle the way we started: in a circle of “hatchka” (thanks) and with a deeper understanding of how paddling into the past is, in fact, taking us into the future. www.takayatours.com

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