

# TRAVEL



## Bar car with a view

What could be better than swirling, sipping and spitting on-board the Rocky Mountaineer?

**SUNDAY TRAVEL**

**TIME TO GET AWAY**

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# Fancy a magical mystery tour?

**B.C. COAST:** A maze of islands to amaze you aboard a ship that keeps changing its mind

MICHAEL MCCARTHY  
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

“We have three different trips we do on this ship,” says Captain Phillippe Menetrier, easing back the throttle at the bridge of the *MV Aurora Explorer*. “This is the Discovery Islands trip we are on. We also go north as far as Kingcome Inlet and then we have something we call a ‘mystery cruise.’ But since our freight schedule can change from hour to hour, in fact they are all mystery trips.”

The captain eases the *Aurora* up onto a white sand beach and lowers the front-loading ramp so passengers can amble ashore to stretch their legs. Here at the far eastern tip of Bute Inlet, grizzly bears may also roam the beaches, so passengers don’t wander far. Snow-covered mountain peaks tower 2,000 metres as far as the eye can see, and silt-laden emerald green waters lap gently at the shore. If this isn’t heaven, it’s sure not far away.

“We have to pick up some wire cable at a logging camp, but we have to wait for a higher tide to dock,” says Menetrier, bringing out charts to show the passengers, “so we simply relax. You see, everything we do is dictated by the tides.”

The *Aurora Explorer* is a unique motor vessel, the only ship carrying freight and passengers along remote sections of the B.C. coast. Starting from its home base of Menzies Bay just north of Campbell River, the *Explorer* will wander through the endless maze of the islands of Desolation Sound to remote inlets where not many boats ever venture. On this trip, the *Explorer* will reach the farthest reaches of Toba and Bute Inlets, making quick stops at many tiny logging camps, fishing lodges and villages too small to find on most maps. Hey, if it’s mystery cruise you want, the *Explorer* is certainly the vessel for you.

“Very few people ever see places like this,” says Menetrier, turning the 41-metre landing craft expertly around and heading directly for a nearby waterfall. “There is no place up here to buy any fuel and no real tourist destination to reach. We are the only ship that comes up this coast on a regular basis.”

The *Explorer* is indeed a working



A ramp is lowered so that passengers can go exploring the beaches, but not too far, since bears explore them, too. — SUBMITTED PHOTOS

boat, but it’s obvious the care and entertainment of the ship’s dozen paying passengers is paramount. In between off-loading freight — which can range from trucks to wire cable to diesel fuel to virtually anything — the *Explorer* stops at beaches, waterfalls, and tiny villages to have a look around. Passengers can observe grizzlies, black bears, eagles, mink, otter, deer, seals, porpoises and other wild creatures easily watched from the deck of the ship. The shallow-hulled

craft can manoeuvre in almost any depth of water and dock virtually anywhere its front ramp can touch.

The *Explorer* nudges underneath a huge waterfall and the cascade explodes over the ship, washing down the freight deck while allowing for a great photo opp. In late spring and early summer, waterfalls cascade everywhere down the steep mountainsides of Toba and Bute inlets and the *Explorer* makes every effort to explore them all. For passengers,

the hardest challenge is to figure out where on the vessel to sit and watch the action. Unlike virtually every other ship captain in the marine world, Menetrier actively encourages passengers to join him in the wheelhouse to discuss charts, tides, destinations and freight deliveries.

Also unlike a regular cruise ship where the emphasis may be on partying, on a working ship like the *Explorer* passengers line up in the wheelhouse to watch the show unfolding

on the freight deck below as the small crew (captain, mate, engineer, deckhand, steward, and cook) attempt to figure out how to get that huge metal container/steel box/fuel container/whatever off the ship.

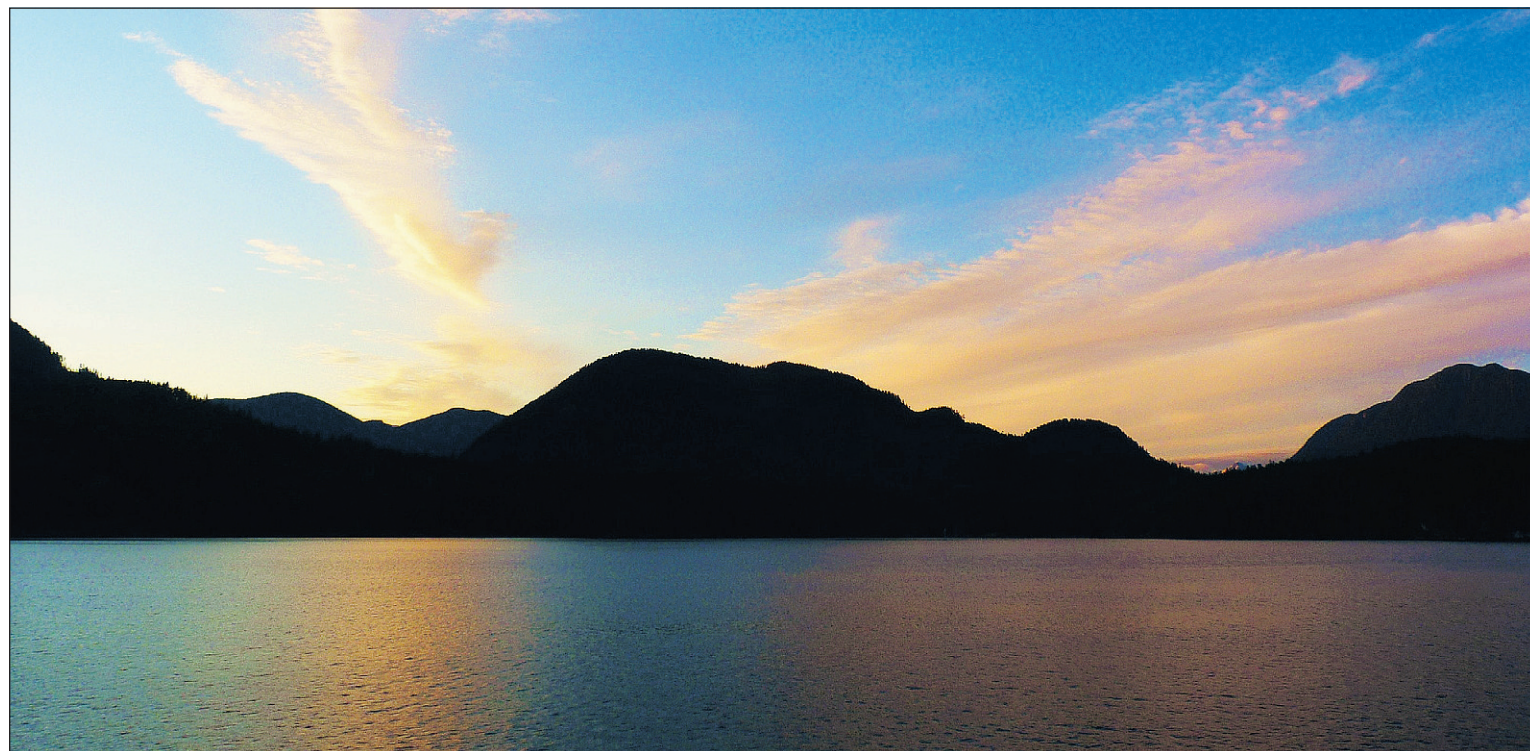
The *Explorer* carries every type of freight imaginable and the crew is always faced with figuring it how to get it off the ship. Somehow, they always do.

Continued on Page A30

**If you go:**

The Aurora Explorer departs Menzies Bay, a 20-minute drive north of Campbell River, for five-day trips once a week every Wednesday from March 29 through Nov. 4. Broughton Archipelago tours include Loughborough, Knight and Kingcome Inlets. Some three-day "mystery tours" are also available. All tours sell out early. Bring casual clothes, sensible shoes and a light jacket. Staterooms are quite small. (Note: This is not a "dress up" cruise.) Wine is served with evening meals. No pets allowed and no smoking inside the vessel. Passengers must be 16 years or over.

**Contact:**  
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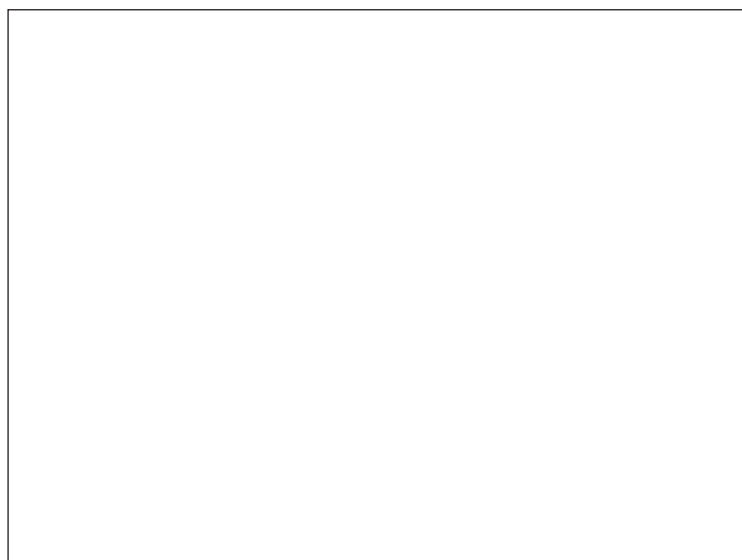
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# Stark beauty of Desolation Sound sords

From Page A28

Whether it's dinnertime or two in the morning, the crew drop everything to concentrate on the freight. So, apparently, do some of the passengers, who offer expert words of advice as if they actually know the best way to off-load coiled wire cables onto a slippery rock face. All meals — served on linen tablecloths, with fine wines at dinner — are handcrafted by the ship's personal chef in a sumptuous galley. The *Explorer* may be "a soft adventure" trip for an older crowd, but the adventure seems to increase the appetite for fine food and storytelling around the dining tables.

The next day, Menetrier is faced with a challenge of a different sort, guiding the *Explorer* through an tight and shallow passage called Shark Point somewhere in the midst of Desolation Sound, where recently he and the ship's crew off-loaded millions of dollars worth of stage and sound equipment for



The sight of roaring waterfalls is always a draw and the cameras come out to capture the scene.

an invitation-only wilderness rock concert.

"I'm not sure whose party it was, but I think it was Bill Gates," says

Menetrier, as the *Explorer* clears the point with only a few inches to spare. "You could hear the music 10 kilometres away, not that there

were many people around here to hear it. Then they all flew off into the night."

B.C.'s ragged 27,000-kilometre Inside Passage is repository of crazy history ranging from abandoned native villages and fish processing plants to swank mansions hidden in the forest.

Here in its southern reaches the earliest explorer, Captain George Vancouver, grew so despondent sailing up inlets looking for the fabled Northwest Passage that he finally gave up and went home, hence the name Desolation.

But in terms of remote beauty, Desolation Sound's deep fiords, towering peaks and tiny islands have no equal anywhere in the world.

"You really ought to come with us on the Broughton Archipelago trip," says Captain Menetrier, pulling out a chart. "There is a floating houseboat community at Sullivan Bay you really must see, and Knight Inlet is so beautiful, and ..."



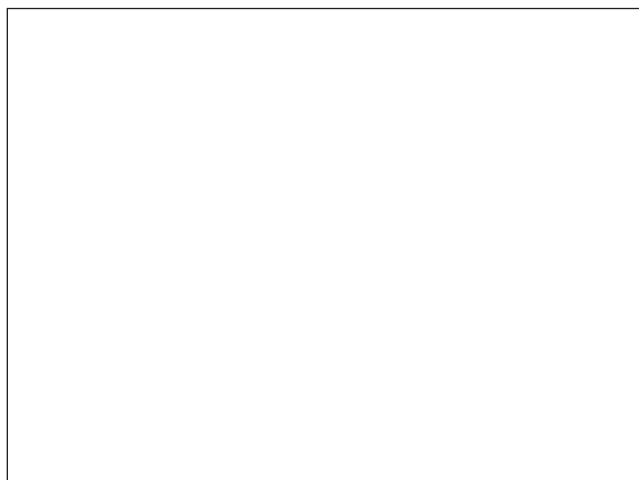
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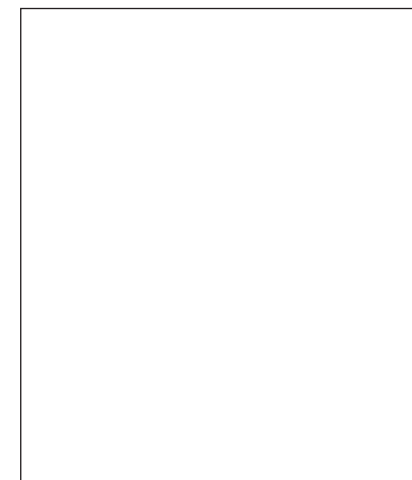
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West Redonda Island, evening sun gleaming on quiet waters, is a perfect picture shot through a lifebuoy.



Captain Menetrier at the bridge of the Aurora Explorer.