





## My Paddle, My Pie Lifter

As long as kayaks come with adjustable spray skirts, there will be room for culinary voyages through the Gulf Islands

by masa takei

**W**ine bottles clank together in the boat beside me as a mountain of provisions disappears into the hatches of seven other red, orange and yellow sea kayaks. My fellow travellers fuss around their crafts, securing gear-filled dry bags and plastic bins pregnant with culinary potential. We snap together paddles, tighten life jacket straps and apply sunscreen like war paint. Meanwhile, from a seaweed-strewn log, leader James Bray surveys the activity with a benevolent smile. At eight sharp this morning, he greeted us at the Nanaimo ferry terminal with a mischievous grin. Within minutes, we were rattling across the Nanaimo River in his 15-passenger van, a hula doll wobbling manically on the dashboard, power chords of Franz Ferdinand beating out the triumphant rhythms of "Take Me Out." Now, with the provisions almost loaded, all our party of 10 has to mull over is what lies ahead: three days of Gulf Island paddling, two nights camped luxuriously on De Courcy Island and an introduction to some of the finest cuisine that local ingredients can yield.

**Padding through a narrow channel on the north side of Pylades Island; Blue Planet guide and chef extraordinaire James Bray in his Valdez Island kitchen; mustard crusted wild B.C. spring salmon, baby turnips, fresh arugula, smoked almond butter sauce and brioche French toast topped with local blackberries – expedition fare that borders on the sublime.**

Thanks to Bray's six years' experience as a kayaking guide, 15 years working in restaurants throughout the province and a partnership with Edible B.C., his Blue Planet kayaking weekends have attracted more than 400 devotees in the first three seasons of operation. The 34-year-old, however, is not the first to lure urban escapees to B.C.'s Gulf Islands for a taste of the good life (though he is the first to do so with kayaks and fine food). Eighty years ago, cult leader Brother XII and members of his Aquarian Foundation launched their boats from this very beach at Cedar-by-the-Sea, just south of Nanaimo.

Born Edward Arthur Wilson, Brother XII was a British sailor turned bearded, charismatic occultist and self-proclaimed mystic who, by the early 1930s, had collected an earnest and wealthy following. The "Poultry King of Florida," Roger Painter, and Asheville, North Carolina socialite Mary Connally were just two of the hundreds who contributed their fortunes to the Brother's vision: escape the fall of the world's economic system and the destruction and chaos bound to follow for a self-sustaining utopia in the "wilds" of De Courcy and Valdes islands. The Brother's compelling manifesto, *The Three Truths*, espoused the "unity of all life," the "law of karma" and the "immortal soul." What actually happened, of course, was slightly more lurid. Accounts of the cult's seven island years are rife with references to black magic, sex slaves and "brutal" labour.

I consider this local colour a cautionary tale about putting one's faith entirely in the

hands of another. Yet, convinced by a recent convert (a foodie friend) as to the integrity of Blue Planet adventures, I remain eager to experience first-hand a nirvana where the Three Truths are active relaxation, fine wine and good food, all locally sourced. And all I've had to do so far is sign the relevant papers, pack my bags and hitch a ferry. Now, I cast an evaluating eye on James Bray, the man upon whom our little convoy will depend for sustenance and direction. I search for hints of megalomania or delusions of grandeur as he good-naturedly trades banter with two of the group's self-proclaimed Seattle soccer moms. He seems every bit as smooth as his clean-shaven pate might suggest. Black sleeveless shirt, wraparound sunglasses and studded leather belt holding

The evening meal:  
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and a pasture-raised

chicken-leg  
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raccoons maraud these lands. "They'll take your makeup and wear it; steal your clothes and sell them on eBay," warns Bray. We hang edibles and toiletry kits along a line strung between two trees and, colony established, ease into the rhythm of this new life.

Bray and his young assistant, Steve Elsbens, an affable Belgian-born chef in a broad-brimmed straw hat, are soon artfully arranging lunch on lime and sky-blue plates. A base of organic greens with fingerling potatoes, yellow beans and vine-ripened tomatoes from East Sooke's Ragley Farm is topped with hot smoked albacore tuna, truffled mayo, niçoise olives and red wine vinaigrette. Like the vegetables, the fish is locally sourced – from a supplier who controls everything from boat to box, ensuring qual-



up his manpris – a younger, hipper Mr. Clean assembling us on the beach for a last ritual. Standing back-to-back with a partner, we pass our paddles back and forth, from side to side, up over our heads, between our legs – movements symbolic, perhaps, of our imminent shared passage by paddle that also yield a pleasant stretching of the hamstrings, upper lats and obliques. Soon, we board our boats and push off, following Bray's lead. Clear skies. Gentle waters. Sailboats drifting by and a light breeze that takes the edge off a mercurial noon sun. It's an auspicious start. As we paddle and glide, I wonder if Brother XII's ill-fated group felt this same kind of optimism.

A chatty flotilla, we cross Stuart Channel to the promised land of Pirates Cove, less than four kilometres to the south. Just one hour's paddle and we're already in a different

world as we round De Courcy, wind- and surf-sculpted sandstone cliffs looming – three-dimensional Rorschach tests on a grand scale. Bray plucks a purple leather starfish from above the waterline, its underbelly covered with hundreds of raspy tentacles. Shaped like snails' eye-stalks, the undulating appendages grab carnivorously at my fingers when I pass the impromptu petting zoo along. Minutes later, we stop for awhile in a small cove. The solitude is broken only by the quacking of a wind turbine spinning over a glassy expanse of island architecture.

With the wind at our backs, just an hour later we're hauling the kayaks high on a driftwood-strewn shore. We stand blinking in PFDs and spray skirts like demented ballerinas arrayed in droopy, black tutus, before scattering to erect our tent utopia. Bears aren't a worry in paradise, apparently, but mice and

**Stuart Channel: those whose kayaks sit lower in the water are likely carrying more of the expedition's considerable culinary weight. (centre) Bray, who serves only locally sourced regional cuisine, prepares Cowichan Valley chicken. (far right) Snack break on Mudge Island, near Dodds Narrows, and the Cedar-by-the-Sea launch site.**

ity and wild provenance. The result kicks the pants off any salad niçoise I've ever sampled, including in the south of France. And Bray's hot-off-the-grill delivery bodes well for the congregation's continued high spirits.

Wandering off to explore our domain, we discover a pirate's chest out on the spit – a geocacher's treasure trove of knick-knacks. "Take something, leave something. Aaaaarrrr, matey," reads the handwritten note tacked under the lid. As we crouch around, Bray tells a tale of the island's real treasure: How Brother

XII converted his followers' funds into gold pieces and packed them in Mason jars sealed with wax, a few of which may have been left buried on the island. "Which brings us to the next activity," chuckles Bray. "Stevie and I have shovels for you all." There's no talk about how we'll split whatever we unearth.

**L**arge French coffee presses await us the next morning. And as their gourmet brew steams open our eyelids, we survey the day's first signs of wildlife: a heron stalks the shallows; a family of river otters scamper and slide at the water's edge; a raccoon on the day shift ambles along the shore.

Bray reads the wind and the waves and decides not to lead us on the planned

a pair of enormous Polynesians, dubbed "the wrecking crew," quieted those prone to grumbling.

Absent any such oppression, we scatter as we please. The chefs assemble West Coast clubhouse sandwiches with smoked and candied salmon, we concentrate on relaxing; and after the meal an Elysian calm falls over us all. A turkey vulture circles lazily overhead. We suck happily on Italian sweets. Couples do coupley things. We want for nothing.

Journeying back to base camp, we raft up and a sail, a tarp strung between two paddles. Perhaps the only things more gratifying than a free wind ride are those we catch surfing small waves. And so we return to our humble frontier, a successful day's paddling under our spray skirts.

adulation is unbounded. "I'd rub it on my bare arms and lick it off," sighs Debbie, a recently retired tech exec. Sea asparagus, harvested within sight, blanched and pan-fried in butter garnishes every plate. We wash it all down with 2005 Averill Creek Pinot Gris. Darkness falls and the tide rises, amplifying the sound of lapping waves.

What did St. Paul say? "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Sun-baked, salt-skinned and pleasantly tired, I sip my Cherry Point blackberry port and savour another slice of Comox Camembert. Should the world come to an end tomorrow, it's agreed, we are content to have placed our faith in James Bray. Unlike Brother XII, who along with Madame Z absconded with an ill-gotten fortune, he has not led us astray. ▣



pilgrimage to nearby Valdes. (A strenuous return paddle would run counter to his doctrines of safety and relaxation.) Instead, after settling on a suitable eddy to submerge the net bag of white wine to chill for this evening, we set off in the opposite direction, due north, paddling only long enough to feel justified in beaching at the nearest sandy cove for lunch. Kayaks lashed together in the shallows, we spread out on a knoll. Some seek the shade of a cypress tree. Others gravitate toward the Garry oaks, shaped, as Bray suggests, by filmmaker Tim Burton with bark fractured like dried mud. Here, Bray entertains with an account of Brother XII's sadistic mistress, Madame Z. Clad in thigh-high leather boots and wielding a bullwhip, she supposedly drove the cult's disciples to work themselves ragged clearing fields for farming. If she wasn't threatening enough,

By late afternoon I've made serious headway into a light summer novel. My eyes drift from the page to the canopy overhead: chocolate-coloured bark shavings peeled back from the pistachio trunk of an arbutus tree, its leaves sprigs of mint, crisp against a blue sky.

Yes, I'm hungry. Well, perhaps not technically, but craving something. I crane my head toward the cooks' domain. Bray and Elsbens are busy working the barrage of pots on a pair of double-burner Colemans. I loll back onto the sandstone shelf and find my place back on the page. I could get used to this. Bouts of idleness mixed with light exercise, punctuated by memorable meals. The day's outing a happy memory, I spend what's left of the afternoon largely horizontal.

The evening meal showcases braised red cabbage and a pasture-raised chicken-leg confit with mustard balsamic jam. Our

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**ACTIVE INGREDIENTS** Edible B.C./Blue Planet Kayaking Adventures gourmet kayaking weekends (604-812-9660; [edible-britishcolumbia.com](http://edible-britishcolumbia.com) and 1-866-595-7865; [blueplanetkayaking.com](http://blueplanetkayaking.com)). Other Edible B.C. excursions include test-driving a new Audi to food and wine destinations in the Okanagan and on Vancouver Island and working alongside a high-end restaurant chef for the day (includes shopping for ingredients on Granville Island and preparing a multi-course meal in a restaurant kitchen). \$749 per person. **SERVING TEMPERATURE** Moderate. **CONTEMPLATE & SERVE** *Madame Zee: A Novel*, by Pearl Luke (Perennial Canada, 2007; \$19.95); *Brother XII: The Strange Odyssey of a 20th-Century Prophet and His Quest for a New World*, by John Oliphant (Twelfth House Press, 2006; \$24.95). □ -M.T.