

By Ruby Wax, The Mail on Sunday - Oregon trip, 06/05/2007

Eat your heart out, Bill Bryson.

Oh Canada! I love this place. In the middle of Vancouver is Granville Island, surrounded by kayaks, yachts and houseboats and circled by hawks. If this was a few inches over in America, it would be turned into the biggest floater of a mall in the history of malls. But here every individual shop is run by an indigenous craftsman, so its wares are all lovingly sculpted, sewn, beaded or painted by human hands.

In the middle of the island is a market the size of a football field, where local farmers come, with their goods on their mules or whatever, and sell or cook them on the spot for you.

In the distance, thousands of miles of pines undulate up and down mountains and you feel like this is God's final frontier. He's saying (or thunderbolting) that we haven't screwed this up yet and here's our last chance.

Vancouver has miles of bike paths, surrounding parks jutting into the ocean and crammed with gigantic primordial-looking trees whose trunks resemble dinosaurs' sinewy thighs.

Everything is bigger and better in Canada when it comes to plant life. Here, you find an aquarium full of hyperactive whales and seals; there, gondolas slide heavenward up mountains where dancing and singing lumberjacks perform on saws and moose sniff your socks. Everywhere are beaches, parks, parks and more parks.

The city's Chinatown remains as it was when it was built more than a hundred years ago, all cat-scribbled signs and weird things hanging by their claws in restaurant windows. You think Chinatown is only a few blocks long. Wrong. There's a large and thriving Chinese community outside the faux pagodas of the tourist area.

From Vancouver, I drove with my kids to Seattle airport, where we boarded a tiny plane and flew to Bend, Oregon. I am always in search of that pure Americana, white picket fence/local soda fountain fantasy (Bill Bryson is on the same hunt, so I eliminate a lot of places through his research). I had heard that this mom's apple-pie perfection might be found here. I can say, very quietly: 'It is.'

I don't want it ruined, but that pure 'home on the range' image really came to life for me in Bend and specifically at Rock Springs Ranch. Oregon, I have heard, is America's Canada in that the people there don't have that fear and loathing found in the eyes of many of my people. Oregonians are the real McCoy - funny, humble and warm.

At **Rock Springs Ranch** everyone sits together. Staff, horse wranglers and guests eat at big old log tables covered in red-and-white chequered tablecloths in a log cabin. The kids, mostly from small towns in Oregon, went from three years old to 17 and all of them got on.

They travelled day and night as a gaggle - older boys playing with babies, in between mud-sliding down hills or cannon-balling into the pond. It was like watching a hundred Huck Finns; not a brat among them and not a whine in two weeks. My children wept at the end as they were plied with gifts and promised to visit them all next summer.

The parents, it turns out, came to Rock Springs when they were kids, brought by their parents, so this pack all knew each other and are more like family. But they opened their arms and took us in from our cold, miserable lives. One of the mothers insisted I take her car when she heard I thought of renting one. Did I mention I loved these people?

In the morning, a bell would wake you and, outside your log cabin, shiny, groomed horses grazed in green pastures, with sprinklers zizzing and early fog rising. We'd ride our horses across small rivers, through sagebrush and forest pines for a cook-out. Rock Springs sits on 13,000 acres of high desert in the Cascade Mountains and we'd spend the day zig-zagging across the property on horseback.

Never have I encountered so many people to love in one place - as I hate most people, this is startling. For instance, there's 27-year-old head horse-wrangler Heather, who followed a Philosophy degree with four years jumping from planes into forest fires in a group called the Hot Shots, then learned to be a horse-whisperer (of course).

Heather gave my son Max her cowgirl shirt as an award for being an 'awesome boy' and he has not washed it or slept apart from it since. He composed a song for her and sang it in front of all the guests, his eyes shining with love.

All the ranch hands were having the time of their lives and this rubs off on the guests. They put on awful and flamboyant horse shows for us and we put on awful and flamboyant talent shows for them.

This place gets six stars, not for the food or the decor - even though the game room, the picnic tables, the rocking chairs and the pine interiors all remind you of a time when America meant well - but for its off-the-chart charm. It gets my resort of the century, for people asking how you are and really wanting to know the answer.

On the last night I was carried out, weeping, with a promise to return every year for the rest of my life.

Afterwards, wearing black, my family went to Seattle in Washington state. Seattle is darker and more broody than Canada. Everyone looks like a computer geek or a homeless person hunched over their coffees in zillions of coffee shops. Yeah, they made up Starbucks in Seattle and put it out into the world like herpes.

Like Vancouver, the place is crammed with activities but not so sporty, more freaky. Paul Allen's rock'n'roll museum, Experience Music Project, is shaped like a gigantic melted guitar. Here instruments play on their own and Jimi Hendrix pretty much comes to life, there's so much footage of him.

Finally, we drove to my favourite destination on earth, beautiful Tofino, British Columbia, back in happy Canada. You land on Vancouver Island and drive five hours into the mountains where you don't see anything outside of cathedral-sized redwoods with branches touching the clouds, soaring eagles, carpets of pines and dazzling lakes. All the ads you ever saw showing paradise are probably shot here.

We stayed at Middle Beach Lodge, recommended by Alan Rickman. In this complex of wooden cabins made of Douglas fir and old marine teak, the theme is seafaring meets Ralph Lauren - the ceilings are filled with canoes, in case we all sink suddenly.

Tofino is a peninsula with so many beaches you can have your own. If you pull over anywhere along the coast you find yourself in terrain where pine forest meets rainforest, so you have primordial ferns mixed with those God's-toe-tickling redwoods. Red wooden walkways take you through these surreal jungles, so as not to disturb the forest floor, and they end at beaches surfers dream of.

Here you can see the world's most beautiful teenagers, all blonde and buffed, dancing on the beach just like mama did, since this was the Mecca to hippiedom in the Sixties. The hippie dream continues in the town of Tofino where some shops are actually tepees.

Right on the waterfront is my favourite restaurant, Tough City Sushi. It's run by Crazy Ron, a combo of Cheech and Chong, smoking a joint and not making sense when he rants the menu at you. But it has serious steak and sushi and views of the ocean dotted with towering pine-filled islands and whales flipping their tails in your face.

This is my picture of perfection. Please don't go. I beg you.

Travelled with American Round-Up (01798 865946, www.americanroundup.com).

Unfortunately Rock Springs Ranch has been sold and shut - so call us for advice of where would compare 01798 865946