

# THE LIFE OF GUIDES

IS IT THE BEST JOB  
IN THE WORLD?

OR THE WORST? WE TALK TO THREE OF CANADA'S  
TOP WILDERNESS GUIDES TO UNCOVER THE  
UPS-AND-DOWNS OF THEIR OFTEN  
ENVIABLE, SOMETIMES BIZARRE AND  
ALWAYS REWARDING LIFESTYLES

BY  
MARGO PFEIFF



Whether ogling orangutans in Indonesia, muskox tracking in the Arctic or springbok stalking in South Africa, the lives of my guides have always struck me as intriguing as the wildlife and wilderness they're helping me explore. It seems the idyllic occupation for an experienced adventurer—spending months working in a roll-call of exotic places, connecting with critters, educating travellers and sharing experiences with wide-eyed clients. But is it the dream job it appears to be?

After years of after-hour beers and midnight chocolate-bingeing sessions with guides who work back-to-back 18-hour days, I've discovered that while they all love their freelance freedom, the natural environment and the unique opportunities they can incorporate into their annual schedules, it can be a very taxing profession.

Sure, they're being paid to fuel their addiction to adventure in wild workplaces, but it comes at the cost of juggling family and relationships during remote gigs that can last months. Most are single; many are "homeless"; few have children. They deal 24/7 with guests who sometimes pose more problems than the big-jawed, long-clawed wildlife. How do they prevent burnout in a profession where they're "on" for weeks without a break, bunking with other guides while bearing the responsibility of guests having a life-changing vacation and staying safe?

Experienced, full-time wilderness guides are a small, elite community of strongly independent, like-minded creatures who migrate just like some of the animals they observe. In Canada, the best of them all know one another and the country's premier wilderness outfitters know them all too. I spoke to a top trio who shared the ups-and-downs of the job that gives them the thrilling and rewarding experiences they crave as well as the means by which they get around its inherent challenges. ▶

Derek Kyostia,  
at peace on the  
floe edge.



## DEREK KYOSTIA

**Age:**  
44

**Annual Migration Pattern:**

Late January to late March, One Ocean Expeditions (ship-based Antarctic trips); May to October, Tide Rip Grizzly Adventures (boat-based bear viewing in British Columbia); mid-October to late November, Churchill Wild (polar bear experience at Dymond Lake, Manitoba).

**Nesting Site:**

Couch-surfing on Vancouver Island, BC

“**I** say goodnight to grizzlies in late fall and hello to polar bears, then spend northern winters communing with penguins,” says Derek Kyostia, who was raised on Lake Superior’s wild shores. “Being away nine months or more every year makes owning or renting a permanent dwelling unfeasible.”

Finding housing between gigs is a common lament among guides and the solution usually involves couch-surfing. “One must be creative and adaptable, never overstaying one’s welcome and ensuring the refrigerator is always well-stocked with adult beverages,” he explains. “Depending on my target demo-

graphic, my pitch is marketed as a ‘reunion,’ ‘hanging out’ or ‘man slave.’”

Along with finding digs, a guide’s biggest challenge is, surprisingly, not psychotic guests, having a toothy leopard seal bite and deflate your Zodiac in icy Antarctic waters or dealing with deranged ship’s captains—though they’re all in Derek’s log book. “Keeping relationships alive is the toughest part of the job,” he says. “They’re seasonally relegated to a holding pattern, a grey zone.” He managed an eight-year relationship with another guide, a personal record, but as of recently their flight patterns no longer overlap.

Having earned his biology degree before



gently informing them that walrus may not come out en masse daily as they do on *National Geographic* TV.

Nature has moved Derek to tears on many occasions, such as the time a 400-kilogram polar bear flopped down against the opposite side of a fence enclosure where he was taking a break, and simply fell asleep. He also cherishes an elegant aquatic ballet he once witnessed, performed by a pair of obliging humpbacks.

He's had his share of dramas too. At northern Manitoba's remote Dymond Lake, a group of Chinese tourists were bellies-down on the tundra staring through hefty telephoto lenses when Derek spotted an Arctic fox, its head thrown back, mouth foaming blood red, teeth bared and running straight at them. "It was making demonic sounds," he remembers, "and I screamed at the guests to get up and go." Though they spoke no English, they got the picture and fled. "I kicked that Frank-fox arse-over-tea-kettle and it took off," he says. "Then I took a brief 'Derek-moment' thinking about really not wanting that rabies needle in my nether regions..."

On another occasion, among Antarctica's tabular icebergs, a semi-circle of Zodiacs was set up to watch a pod of orcas tossing a Weddell seal like a toy. Suddenly, one of the whales punched clear out of the water in the direction of Derek's Zodiac with the seal draped across its rostrum. "It was clear we might be squashed by a flying Weddell seal and become the next play toy," he says. "The raw power of the incident left everyone speechless. This is the stuff of great bar stories.

"Creatures are one thing, but some of my biggest challenges are keeping people safe... mostly from themselves," he continues. Guests often overestimate their physical abilities, and their naivety about wildlife can have catastrophic consequences. "As I get older, I've changed and become much less tolerant of guests' blatant disrespect—whistling at animals to get their attention, being oblivious to where they're shoving their selfie sticks or trying to pet a polar bear when they've been safety-briefed over-and-over," he says. "Sometimes I'm really blunt."

Yet he believes it's worth all those carbon emissions to get people into the wild. "Educating people to respect wildlife and bridging the gap between us and creatures is important because we have become so disconnected," he says. "It's such a privilege to experience them, to learn, be inspired and have an emotional experience with them. It's worthwhile for the betterment of people and of the animals."

While he admits that it's easy to lose yourself when you're constantly either on the move or homeless, always saying goodbye to guests, friends and family, he adds: "But I couldn't think of a better job."

dabbling in fisheries science along BC's coast, Derek then collared koalas for four months in Australia before falling in love with guiding 14 years ago. Like most guides, he has a rambling list of essential and quirky qualifications—including a captain's licence and certifications for rescue, SCUBA and kayaking and lead belay at the Romper Room Indoor Climbing Centre in Nanaimo, BC.

"Professionally, I'm the vehicle by which others will hopefully connect the dots between their day-to-day lives and the radically different reality that is the wilderness," he says. Challenges include waking up daily with a smile, managing clients' needs and expectations and



Hayley Shephard in Antarctica.

## HAYLEY SHEPHARD

**Age:**  
46

**Annual Migration Pattern:**

January to March, ship-based Antarctic tours; March through late April, kayak guide in Mexico's Baja Peninsula; June to October, Knight Inlet Lodge, BC (whale-watching kayak tours and grizzly viewing) and/or ship-based Arctic tours out of Nunavut; mid-October to mid-November, aboard *Frontiers North's* tundra buggy for polar bear viewing in Churchill, Manitoba.

**Nesting Site:**  
Alert Bay, BC

**H**ayley Shephard grew up—and continues to live—surrounded by water. Born in Wellington, New Zealand, she was a teacher when she came to BC's Johnstone Strait for a three-week kayaking-with-orcas trip in the early 1990s. Within a year, she'd packed up and moved to Canada.

"On my first guiding trip, I remember watching this remarkable transformation in people," she says. "By day three, they were hugging one another and there were tears as they experienced the rainforest, the wildlife. Some quit their jobs and followed their dreams. It was powerful and I was hooked."

Hayley especially loves guiding's flexibility and diversity. She literally steps out of gumboots after an Antarctic cruise into sandals ▶

and shorts at a waiting kayak in the Mexican Baja. She often juggles her schedule, switching out summer bear-viewing in BC for an interpreter role on an Arctic cruise. “If you have a good reputation all sorts of things come your way, like being asked to guide in the Galapagos though I’d never been.” A tour leader needs to be an organizer, a good communicator and always 10 steps ahead of guests’ every need. “Learning the creature details is the easy part,” she says.

During the summer of 2015, she was virtual guide “Captain Hayley,” sitting alone in a Zodiac offshore of Churchill, on assignment for *explore.org*, surrounded by beluga whales. She ran a beluga live-cam—an underwater video camera and microphone broadcasting over the Internet—while answering questions from online observers around the world. “In a way, I had hundreds of people in my Zodiac with me on a guiding project—without a single guest!” One glassy day, a pod of belugas followed for three hours, becoming intensely vocal every time she spoke. She even invited a cellist onto the Zodiac. When he began to play, belugas flocked towards the boat, weeks’ old babies nosing against the hull. “I constantly felt like we were interacting with a community.”

After years of living out of a bag and sharing rooms with other guides, Hayley began to feel burned out, craving her own space. While guiding at Knight Inlet Lodge, she bought a 31-foot sailboat and commuted to work from just offshore. “Even if it was just to sleep, it was increasingly important for me to have a private retreat.”

In her desire to experience nature by herself, she launched solo adventures like circumnavigating Vancouver Island and then Haida Gwaii in her sailboat. In 2010, she paddled most of the way around South Georgia Island in a 17-foot extra-strengthened Nekkie kayak, a fundraising journey to raise awareness of albatross. She wrote about the two-and-a-half-month-long expedition in her book *South Solo*. “It took four years of planning and everything that could go wrong, did,” she says.

By 2006, she had lucked upon a friend who offered to go halves on a cottage on a small island off Northern Vancouver Island, where she now spends two months every year. “It’s a place to shut the door, put my bags down and be alone in silence,” she says. “When I first arrive, even socializing with friends feels like work because that’s what I do for a living.”

As far as relationships go, she hasn’t given up hope, but she’s realistic. “I was with someone for 10 years and we considered

spending a fragmented six months a year together a victory,” she says. “But mostly it was just dysfunctional.”

## ANDY MACPHERSON

**Age:**  
45

**Annual Migration Pattern:**

February with denning polar bears at northern Manitoba’s Nanuk Lodge; March at Manitoba’s North Knife Lake Wilderness Lodge; May and June on the Nunavut floe edge with Arctic Kingdom; July to mid-August at Churchill Wild’s Seal River Lodge in Manitoba; mid-August to October, back to Nanuk Lodge; Seal River Lodge until December.

**Nesting Site:**

Homeless, Victoria, BC

**O**n my first tundra walk at Seal River Lodge, my guide, Andy MacPherson, was sporting a holster to stash bear repellents. He showed them off in order of escalating threat, from noisemakers called Bangers and Screammers, to pepper spray, to a 12-gauge shotgun ready with birdshot. “In winter, bears really freak out when you throw a snowball at them. They can’t see them coming,” he chuckles. “It’s important to inform them immediately who’s the alpha beast, then they usually back off.”

He usually only reverts to his holster content after he has used: 1. His voice. 2. An escalated tone in his voice. 3. Clacking two rocks together (he stores them in his



Andy MacPherson, lifelong guide.



For Andy MacPherson,  
a typical workday is  
not very typical.



pocket). 4. An intricate repertoire of postures, eye contact and distractions he has tailored over the years.

“You can tell what they have in mind by their walk,” he says. “If they come straight at you with their head down, it means trouble. Zigzagging and looking around means they’re curious and bored, waiting for Hudson Bay to freeze over so they can leave.”

Reading bears’ minds and their body language has been Andy’s job since he began guiding at Churchill Wild’s various lodges in 1993, when they became the world’s only outfitter offering walking safaris in polar bear country. Only once in all those years has he had to fire his shotgun into the ground to scare off a bear that had come to within 10 metres. Fellow guides reverentially refer to Andy as “The Bear Whisperer.”

He learned guiding the old school way—the job and that included a stint in the ‘90s on the Thelon River with legendary Tundra Tom Faess, a cantankerous, chain-smoking Northwest Territories outfitter. He’s wrangled beluga whales to tag them for research, caught crocodiles during four years in the Belizean jungles, had sea ice under his group’s tents break up on an Arctic floe edge trip and stuck his fingers up a grizzly bear’s butt to monitor its temperature. “I was the rookie in the group,” he shrugs.

While there are guiding programs at colleges and universities, Andy is generally unimpressed with the outcome. “I’m seeing lots of young people from schools arrive with a big sense of entitlement,” he says. “They’re good at the business end, but at the skill side—especially people skills—not so much. This is a profession where you need to be able to take

in-the-field correction to build experience while navigating your way up the rungs.”

Andy came to guiding as a kid growing up taking multi-day kayaking trips with his dad and scheming how he could make a living from it. “It’s a hard juxtaposition between working 24/7 then suddenly being totally off... homeless,” says Andy who is currently astonished and very excited to have met a “non-guide type woman” with a normal life who is not scared away by his crazy schedule. He has his fingers crossed. “I get mentally burned out and gain weight out there, but I deal with it by trying to work only six months of the year and taking six off.” Then he packs up his gear—never forgetting Gold Bond Medicated Powder for chafing in hot and cold places—and heads back out there “...because I love it,” says the self-proclaimed wildlife junkie. ■