

QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS Archipelago holds on to heritage

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BY ANNE Z. COOKE
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

TLELL, British Columbia -- Like most houses in the Queen Charlotte Islands, Cacilia Honisch's bed-and-breakfast inn on Graham Island overlooks the water.

Visible from my room on the second floor was the Hecate Strait, a choppy gray sea dividing the islands from the British Columbia coast by only 50 miles.

But this archipelago, with two main islands -- Graham and Moresby -- and a scattering of dozens of other rocks and reefs, seems to belong to another world. Secluded but lively, it's the sort of offbeat destination guaranteed to intrigue a traveler such as me.

I had never heard of the place -- called Haida Gwaii by the native Haida people -- until a friend mentioned that he kayaked and camped through Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, on Moresby, the southernmost island.

The park, the centerpiece of the Haidas' cultural revival, was founded in 1988 to preserve what remains of the Haida people's ancestral homeland. Inhabited for more than 10,000 years, it's a trove of artifacts, village sites and weathered totem poles.

Until 1774, when the first Europeans anchored offshore, the Haida were the region's dominating presence, mighty warriors who built cedar longhouses, prowled the coast in war canoes carved from giant logs, and defeated and enslaved their neighbors. But they were no match for European diseases. Within a century, only a few hundred people who remembered the old ways remained.

Today, their numbers growing, Haida volunteers -- the "watchmen" -- live at the park during the summer to lead guided tours. To enter the park, we needed to purchase two \$10 passes and attend an orientation.

Although our vacation time was limited, we couldn't come so close without spending a day in the park. Picking an outfitter at random from a stack of brochures at the Visitor Info Centre in Queen Charlotte City, we booked a trip with Moresby Explorers, which leads one-day guided boat trips to the park.

The next morning, we struggled into wet suits, rain gear and life preservers before climbing into an eight-passenger, high-speed motorboat. We felt as overstuffed as Santa Claus but appreciated every layer when Darren Bouwman, the guide, cranked up the speed.

We sped over clear water and past rocky inlets toward Louise Island, stopping twice for shore walks and a picnic lunch on a rocky beach. Eventually, we reached Skedans, on a grassy isthmus between two coves.

Clumming un the bank we showed our passes and were

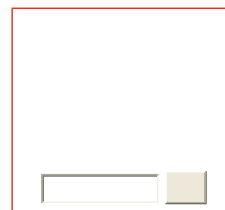


STEVE HAGGERTY COLORWORLD

Velvety moss grows over tree stumps along an island road.



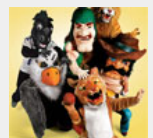
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met by Joan Moody, a summer "watchman" who teaches Haida language and culture in a grammar school. She led us to the crumbling remains of a small village.

There we found traces of 27 houses, each with a totem pole, some so worn they looked like fallen logs. As we walked, Moody pointed out the occasional mortuary pole, topped by a cedar box for its owner's bones.

To minimize the impact of tramping feet, only 12 visitors are allowed onshore at any one time. But like the islands themselves, Moody was the soul of hospitality.

"I let people come up and sit here in the sun, at the cabin," she said. "We want everyone to feel welcome."

Although the Haida are a presence here, with two clans living primarily in the towns of Skidegate and Old Masset, most of the 5,000 residents are a varied group, including descendants of early settlers and farmers.

"We moved here to raise our kids," said Michelle Butler, a Heritage Presenter with the Parks Canada Orientation Centre. "We don't have to lock our doors and the kids can ride their bikes by themselves. It's a privilege to be here."

When we asked for touring advice, she recommended some hiking trails and the harbor cruises out of Queen Charlotte City. But for a broader look of the island, shaped like a long, thin, ragged-edged slice of pizza, she suggested we drive to the far north end to look around Masset.

A single paved highway runs south to north, a half-day drive or less if you don't stop along the way. So we toured it over several days, first heading to the Canoe Shed in Skidegate, on the coast east of Queen Charlotte City, home of one of the island's two Haida clans.

There we met Haida carver Andy Wilson, who showed us six 25-foot totem poles created in 2001 to commemorate an important person, a clan chief, or an event. Painted red, white, black and brown, each depicted a stack of animals and sometimes people, one interwoven with the next, each representing a clan or subclan.

Originally the Haida used natural dyes to make paint, Wilson told us. But because his generation grew up knowing almost nothing of their culture, he had to learn everything on his own, starting almost from scratch.

"Now we use more colors and acrylic and oil-base paint," he said. "To us, almost everything is new."

Continuing to Tlell, at midway on Graham Island, we checked into Cecilia's B&B and spent a lazy afternoon beachcombing. The next day we continued north to Port Clements on the shore of Masset Inlet, a few miles inland, driving through the town before stopping for a cup of coffee.

Hearing about a rain forest walk organized by the logging company Weyerhaeuser, which owns leases on tracts of timber land, we decided to join the group.

Some Queen Charlotte's residents think it's time logging companies found a new product and moved on, but that didn't spoil our walk.

The hike was led by tour guide Suki Davis, who astonished the group with a comically smart introduction to forest life, one that made slugs and cedar bark sound as interesting as Hollywood gossip.

On our last full day in the Queen Charlottes, we went straight to Old Masset, where Haida carver Christian White works.

White came out to the front yard to talk about the canoe that sits on the grass, and the totem pole next to it, carved to commemorate his father's election as chief of Old Masset's Haida clan.

"It took me and my brother six months to paint and finish it," he said. "When we were done, it took 200 men hauling on ropes to raise it."

While we talked, passers-by stopped to say hello and compliment his work, thanking him for keeping the Haida traditions alive. We watched awhile as he posed for photos.

"Come back again," he said, with a wave. "You're always welcome."

If you go

QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS

Little-known in the United States, these islands off the coast of British Columbia have a surprisingly mild climate tempered by ocean currents.

GETTING THERE

To go by air, fly to Vancouver and on to the Sandspit Airport via Air Canada. By car, drive to Prince Rupert on the British Columbia mainland coast, and catch the ferry for the six-hour sail to the dock at Skidegate Landing.

The ferry to the mainland takes cars and walk-on passengers; 50 overnight cabins are available. During the summer, it sails daily on alternate mornings and evenings. For

STEVE HAGGERTY COLORWORLD PHOTOS

Nesting sea birds flourish on one of many small islets in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, Queen Charlotte Islands.



Carver and canoe builder Christian White opens his workshop to visitors.

reservations and a schedule, call 1-888-223-3779 or visit www.bcferries.bc.ca.

A rental car is recommended. Call Budget Car and Truck Rentals at 1-800-577-3228, or Rustic Car Rentals at 1-877-559-4641.

LOOKING AROUND

Travel brochures are available in stores and newsstands on the islands, with maps, history, suggested activities, hiking trails, lodging and restaurants.

For Moresby Explorers' motorboat and kayak trips, call 1-800-806-7633 or visit www.moresbyexplorers.com.

LEARNING MORE

For more information, call 1-800-435-5622, or the Queen Charlotte Visitor Info Centre at 250-559-8316. Or visit www.qcinfo.com.

For the Haida Gwaii Tourism Association, visit www.qcislands.net.



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