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## For natural charm, try Prince Rupert

By Anne Z. Cooke  
ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

PRINCE RUPERT, British Columbia - It's nice to be first on the scene. Or among the first. I would like to have seen the Columbia River when its waters ran free and the Yukon during the gold rush. To have explored Kenya in 1930 and Mexico in 1940.

The first travelers didn't always go in style, coping with places that were rough and dirty before they were sanitized for tourism.

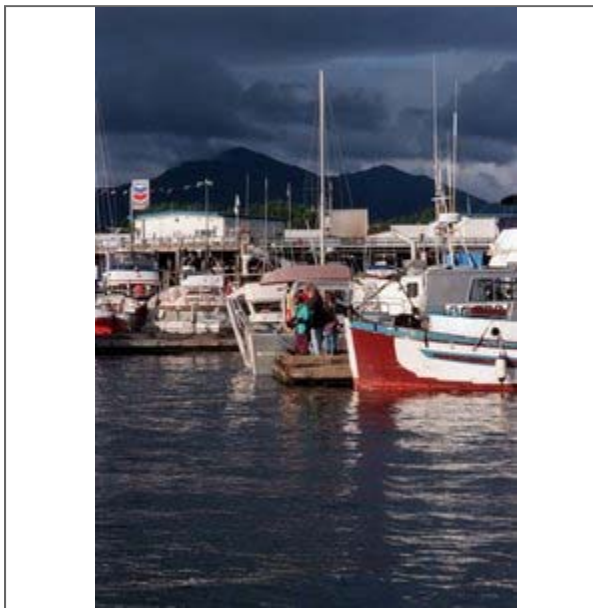
Once in a while, it still happens. This summer, a scant few thousand travelers will drive or fly to Prince Rupert, on British Columbia's northernmost coast, and a few thousand more Alaska cruise passengers will drop in each week for a quick look at this soon-to-be-discovered town.

Three years ago, Prince Rupert's first summer as a fledgling cruise port was a success despite an occasional snafu. Passengers disembarking at the new \$9 million Northland Dock and Atlin Terminal, in Cow Bay (formerly the historic Atlin Fish Packing Plant), had to thread their way past bulldozers enlarging the parking lot. Some tour operators were scrambling to find enough boats for pre-sold whale-watching tours.

Absent, happily, were the ubiquitous dockside stalls selling T-shirts, souvenir grizzly bears made in China, postcard racks and in-your-face street touts offering "two-for-one pitchers at Pedro's."

"We're holding out for quality," says Bruce Wishart, a spokesman for the Prince Rupert Tourism Council, which saw what happened when cruise passengers overwhelmed tiny Alaskan ports such as Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway. That's why Prince Rupert is setting the bar high for storekeepers and outfitters hoping to set up shop in the historic downtown, Wishart says.

"It won't benefit anybody, us or the tourists, to try to be like everyone else," he says. "We want to avoid Alaska's mistakes."



LARRY BLEIBERG / Dallas Morning News

Fishing and boating are economic mainstays for Prince Rupert, a coastal town with history, beauty and a determination to hold the influx of businesses catering to tourists to a high standard.

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Still, tourism promises to help the local economy, which has been in decline since 2001, when the last pulp mill closed. As we walked downtown, window shopping and popping into stores, the empty aisles and half-stocked shelves told the story. In the pharmacy, where we stopped to compare drug prices, we were the only customers. In the Safeway, no more than a dozen shoppers were filling their baskets.

But Prince Rupert isn't about shopping. It's all about being outdoors. We spent a sparkling sunny day following humpback whales with Prince Rupert Adventure Tours, on a high-powered lemon-yellow boat, the luxurious Georgia Master.

The next day, we crossed the harbor to Pike Island, led by Tsimshian guide John Haldane, who donned a hat and native dress for a tour of the island's pre-European-settlement sites, the oldest dating back 10,000 years.

The cultural highlight of our visit - and Prince Rupert's leading tourist attraction - was the Winter Feast tour at the Museum of Northern British Columbia, ranked among Canada's top 10 museums. Located in a traditional longhouse built of old-growth red and yellow cedar logs, the museum focuses on the history and art of the Tsimshian and Haida people, about 40 percent of the regional population.

The exhibits, part of a collection of arts and crafts made from the pre-European era to the present day, reveal a love of bold design and bright colors and a fine eye for craftsmanship, whether for decorating canoes and blankets or designing ceremonial masks, drums and headdresses.

"Whenever I'm feeling down about something, I come in here and look at this headpiece, made before the people had metal," says Sam Bryant, the museum's artistic director and a member of the Killer Whale Clan. He stopped in front of the crown-shaped headdress with miniature figures made from mountain goat horn inlaid with abalone. It was carved with a sharpened beaver's tooth, he says.

Afterward, Bryant led us to the museum's longhouse to participate in a shortened version of the Winter Feast celebration, a potlatch held to celebrate weddings, promotions of chiefs and similar clan milestones. Donning costumes, Bryant and a small performance group, accompanied by two drummers, danced three traditional ceremonies and distributed gifts - tastes of local foods - to the onlookers.

"There's nothing mysterious about the potlatch," Bryant says. "Think of it as a birthday party or a wedding reception, where guests bring gifts and the hosts give party favors."

With limited time to spend, we missed other intriguing outings, including a harbor cruise on the city's restored "heritage tugboat" and a guided trip to the Khutzeymateen (pronounced COOT-zee-mah-teen) Grizzly Bear Sanctuary.

We also passed up salmon fishing in the ocean with one of the charters docked in Cow Bay. Fishermen can take home their catch, courtesy of Dolly's Fish Market, which meets the boats and takes orders for flash-freezing and mailing.

"Even if you're not a fisherman, you can take some home," says Dolly's owner Charmayne Carlson.

Instead of fishing, we saved our last day for a visit to Port Edward and the restored North Pacific Cannery, the last of dozens built along this coast. The cannery, a self-contained company town, was built entirely on a long row of wooded decks set atop pilings sunk into the Skeena River bank.

When the cannery opened in 1889, the millions of salmon gathering near the mouth of the river seemed inexhaustible; the operation ran around the clock from May through September. Seventy-nine years later, when the fish were nearly gone, it closed. (Since then, last-ditch conservation projects have restored a portion of the annual spawning run.)

The cannery had its own general store, post office, church, processing plant, machine shop, net loft, boathouse, cottages for managers and crowded shacks for workers. Those long summer days on the river, later remembered in letters and diaries, swung between heaven and hell, slave labor and summer camp, with families living and working in close quarters.

"The fishing industry was divided along racial and gender lines," says curator Sophie Cormier, throwing a switch that started the assembly line clanking into action.

The managers and storekeeper were Caucasian, Chinese workers made the cans, and the Japanese built the boats and mended the nets, she says. Tsimshian men, who traditionally spent summers in native fish camps, netted the salmon, while the women worked on the processing line and the children, mostly unsupervised, kept one another company.

An engaging one-woman stage show follows the 40-minute cannery tour. Half drama and half comedy, the story introduces a cast of characters, each one with a different hat and accent, telling his or her story of bygone

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Downlo:

wife, the Japanese family starting a new life in a strange land, and the children who played as equals.

A few months after our visit here, we learned that the national and provincial governments had created a joint grant of \$60 million to build a container port at the end of Kaien Island to handle trade with China.

Prince Rupert, they predicted, could become bigger than Vancouver. The port has the world's third-deepest natural harbor, a natural for giant cruise and container ships. And the city is the western end of Canada's national highways and the railroad.

Maybe someday. But this summer, Prince Rupert is still small-town Canada.

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### *Far North, to Prince Rupert*

#### Getting there

Air Canada flies a two-stop trip from Philadelphia International Airport to Prince Rupert, for a recent fare of about \$1,415.

#### Getting around

Bus service in Prince Rupert and environs is available but slow. You can get around without a car but not conveniently.

#### Cruising

Through Sept. 20, two cruise ships are scheduled to call weekly at Prince Rupert. Royal Caribbean visits each Wednesday and Norwegian Cruise Line, each Thursday. Cruise West's Spirit of Oceanus calls on four different dates. The Clipper Odyssey and Celebrity's Infinity each call once. Call a travel agent for special promotions and bookings.

#### Where to stay and eat

Andree's B&B, 315 Fourth Ave. E., is a homey two-story clapboard house, with a flower-decorated deck overlooking the harbor. Guests have the run of the ground floor, and the atmosphere is casual. A large front room has a harbor view and private bath; an average-size room with twin beds has a corner sink; this room and two others share a bath. Most town attractions are within walking distance at the bottom of the hill. If you are allergic, know that a cat lives here. Rates range from \$81 to \$104 per night, including taxes and breakfast. 250-624-3666; [www.andreesbb.com](http://www.andreesbb.com).

The Crest Hotel, 222 W. First Ave., has 101 rooms and four suites recently redecorated on a colonial theme. Harbor-side rooms have binoculars and bathrobes. Some rooms have minibars; all have coffeemakers and hair dryers. Room rates range from \$139 to \$177, not including taxes. 1-800-663-8150; [www.cresthotel.bc.ca](http://www.cresthotel.bc.ca).

Charlie's Lounge (named for Bonnie Prince Charlie) is a popular happy-hour meeting place.  The Waterfront Restaurant serves excellent American food.

#### More information

You can find out more about Prince Rupert by visiting the following tourism office Web sites.   
[www.tourismprincerupert.com](http://www.tourismprincerupert.com)

[www.hellobc.ca](http://www.hellobc.ca)

- Anne Z. Cooke