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Canada, Naturally

Rural coastal islands rich in wildlife, native culture

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Tlell, British Columbia – An oversize flat-screen television doesn't belong in a log house.



STEVE HAGGERTY/ ColorWorld
[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve in British Columbia has been an important site for native Canadians for thousands of years. It's the centerpiece of the Haida cultural revival.

Especially not in this log house, Cacilia Honisch's house. Her bed-and-breakfast inn is built deep in the woods on the Queen Charlotte Islands, an archipelago of more than 150 islands 50 miles west of the British Columbia coast and 30 miles south of Alaska.

Nearly everything else meets a city visitor's expectations. Wild flowers bloom near the door. Massive logs rise to support the second story and strips of fir frame the doors and windows. The kitchen cupboard serves breakfast to summer travelers, is knotty pine.

A local artist with a flair for fancy has taken sandpaper to driftwood to curving backs of the bar stools. Even the leaves on the upstairs skyl

Not one to prop for hours in front of a TV, Honisch would rather be h the beach that runs past her house and along the east coast of Graf Charlotte's 5,000 residents live.

But occasionally, she likes the company of the tube. "I turn on the ne conceding that long winter days can be gray and rainy. "I like to keep

The world, of course, is what most visitors to this mystic realm are h successful. "We'd like more tourists," says Carolyn Hesseltine, man Information Centre, pointing out the maps and guides she keeps on

At 53 degrees north, you wonder about the weather. But the climate mild, with annual rainfall of about 51 inches. Winter snow melts quic with occasional showers.

Like most people, we'd never heard of the islands — called Haida G friend mentioned kayaking around Gwaii Haanas National Park Res



STEVE HAGGERTY/ColorWorld
([ENLARGE](#))

You can take a cruise or hire a fishing charter at the harbor in Queen Charlotte City.



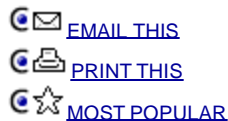
STEVE HAGGERTY/ColorWorld
([ENLARGE](#))

Visitors to Skedans, in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, show their park passes and sign in before joining a tour of the village site and totem poles.



STEVE HAGGERTY/ColorWorld
([ENLARGE](#))

Newly built canoes and totem poles in the Haida town of Old Masset are evidence of the revival of Haida culture. Most Haida live in Skidegate and Old Masset.



southernmost of the two largest islands.

The park, established in 1988, protects the Haida Nation's ancestral site of archaeological remains, abandoned villages and weathered

More than that, the Haida Gwaii are Canada's Galapagos, a wilderness of plant and animal subspecies. Because part of the islands were never touched by some species are threatened, wildlife sightings are an everyday occurrence. Orcas, gray whales, minke whales, humpbacks, seals, sea lions, bea

Though Graham Island is small, you'll need a car to get around. The highway runs north and south, from Queen Charlotte City on the southern tip (Tlell (tuh-LELL) and Port Clements, to Masset and Old Masset

Most Haida, who belong to two clans, live in Skidegate and Old Masset. Biologists, adventure outfitters, loners, descendants of early settlers, and recent years, urbanites fleeing the cities — are scattered around the island.

"We moved here to raise our kids," said Michelle Butler, a heritage park ranger at the Center, at the Sandspit Airport. "We don't have to lock our doors. That's a privilege to be here."

She showed us a map of hiking trails, starting from Yakoun Lake, and you can take a harbor cruise or hire a fishing charter for salmon or h

Haida history, crafts

We spent our first couple of nights in Queen Charlotte City, at Dorotea Canoe Shed in Skidegate. Here, Haida carver Andy Wilson showed us the shed (erected here in 2001, and the traditional canoes that he makes and sells at a new location close by.) While we watched, he painted one of the canoes with "repatriated ancestors" from some half-dozen North American muse

The Haida Gwaii Museum, though small, owns a unique and professional collection of Haida history. It also has a natural history exhibit showing flora and fauna. A wonderful tour.

The next few nights we stayed at Cacilia's, in Tlell, an artists' colony. We visited local studios for handmade ceramics, wood carving, jewelry and painting. We also joined a walk in the rain forest organized by Weyerhaeuser, which own

Some residents here think it's high time logging companies found a better way. A tour guide Suki Davis gives the smartest and funniest introduction in the area. She also let us in on her "best kayaking secret," the Yaku River

Mix of ancient, modern

In Masset, we hiked into the Delkatla Sanctuary to see the birds, the Christian White's workshop. It took White, 41, and his brother six months to build the pole that stands in front of his house, and 200 men hauling on ropes to move it. "becoming Chief Edenshaw," he said.

In olden times, the Haida used natural dyes to make their paint. But in modern times, knowing little of its culture, the artists have had to learn on their own. "oil-base paint," White said. "To us, almost everything is new."

You shouldn't leave without visiting Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve. Until 1774, when the first Europeans anchored offshore, these islands were hunters, who built cedar houses, carved war canoes from giant logs

But they were no match for European diseases. Within a century, on Graham Island, Haida volunteers — the "watchmen" — live at village sites during the

the park you must present your pass, issued after you attend a short orientation (\$10 per person); ask a

Since the park is accessible only by water, we booked a day trip with Moresby Explorers (\$125 per person plus boat), wet suits, rain gear and life preservers. We felt as over-stuffed as Santa Claus, but appreciated the guide, cranked the outboard motor up to top speed.

Getting to Skedans village, we skimmed over clear water and past hidden inlets under a bright sunny sky. We had a picnic lunch on the beach, then anchored off Skedans, on a grassy isthmus between two coves.

Here, Haida "watchman" Joan Moody, who teaches Haida language and culture to grades 7-12, greets the site. In the mid-1700s, 250 people lived here, she said, in at least 27 timber houses with as many to fallen logs. Here and there she pointed out a mortuary pole, a pole topped by a large cedar box intended

"I have my carver all picked out," she told us, beaming. "And I'm making plans for a big potlatch [a party

Only 12 visitors are allowed onshore at any one time to lessen the impact of tramping feet. But like the i refuse hospitality to visitors.

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

IF YOU GO

Getting there

- From Atlanta, the best way to reach the islands is to fly to Vancouver, British Columbia, then on to Sandspit airport via / outlet near the Sandspit airport, which is three miles from Queen Charlotte City.

The only ferry operating between the islands and the British Columbia coast, the Queen of Prince Rupert, leaves from Pr The ferry trip to Skidegate Landing takes six hours. During summer, the ferry sails daily on alternate mornings and evening cabins are available. For reservations and a schedule call 1 -888-223-3779, or check www.bcferries.bc.ca.

Where to stay

- **Dorothy and Mike's Guest House**, 3125 Second Ave., Queen Charlotte City, is a cozy place, a house on the hill overlooking breakfast with home-baked muffins, fruit, eggs, waffles and juice. Coffee and tea are served all day. Double rooms start at Information: 240-559-8439; www.qcislands.net/doromike.

- **Cacilia's Bed & Breakfast**, on Highway 16 in Tlell, 29 miles north of Queen Charlotte City, is a two -story log cabin in the superb; it's hypnotic to fall asleep watching the stars through the skylight. Breakfast includes coffee, tea, fruit, yogurt, juice with shared bath start at \$49 for two, rooms with private bath start at \$60. 250-557-4664, www.qcislands.net/ceebysea.

What to do

- Look for two local books, "Guide to the Queen Charlotte Islands" and "Guide to the Haida Gwaii." Both have maps, history, restaurants.

Information

- **Queen Charlotte Visitor Information Centre**: 250-559-8316, www.qcinfo.com.
- **Haida Gwaii Tourism Association**: www.qcislands.net.
- **Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve**: parks.can.harbour.com/gwaii.
- **Moresby Explorers**: 1-800-806-7633, www.moresbyexplorers.com.
- **Northwest Recreation Services** offers land tours: 1-866-626-3949, www.northwestrecreation.com.

