

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH COLUMBIA®

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Ours to Cherish

SUMMER 2002

Hot wonders

Thompson River's
strange landscape

Lost

on a hidden trail
in the Rockies



Haida Gwaii
magic



\$5.95



Charting the Charlottes

WRITER IAN MACNEILL TURNS
NOTEPAD-TOTING DOROTHY ON
AN EIGHT-DAY SAILING TRIP
THROUGH THE MAGICAL OZ
THAT IS HAIDA GWAII.

by Ian MacNeill photography: Ron Watts



An unforgettable experience for sailors in B.C.'s coastal waters is an encounter with acrobatic and exuberant Pacific white-sided dolphins. photo: Jim Borrowman Photography

TO KNOW IF YOU GO



The must stop on any tour of Gwaii Haanas is little Hot Spring Island in Juan Perez Sound on South Moresby's east coast. Here the hot springs pool is captured in the long summer twilight of the north coast.

DAVID MUNIR

Sailing to Haida Gwaii

1 WHERE

Canadian Regional Airlines (800-665-1177) provides twice daily service from Vancouver to Sandspit on Moresby Island, the *Island Roamer's* point of departure. Harbour Air (250-627-1341, 800-689-4234) offers daily flights from Prince Rupert across Hecate Strait to Sandspit. BC Ferries (250-386-3431, 888-223-3779; www.bcferries.com) sail regularly from Prince Rupert to Skidegate Landing on Graham Island (an eight-hour trip), and also connect Prince Rupert with Port Hardy on Vancouver Island (15 hours); reserve well in advance.

Bluewater Adventures (604-980-3800; www.bluewateradventures.bc.ca), 3-252 E. First St., North Vancouver, BC, V7L 1B3. The *Island Roamer* travels to the Queen Charlotte Islands between late April and late August; all trips feature an on-board naturalist well versed in the area's natural and human history.

2 WHAT TO DO THERE

The Charlottes provide superlative opportunities for outdoor adventure, including boating, camping, crabbing, beach walking, scuba diving, photography, fishing, kayaking, and sailing. While in Sandspit, consider a short ferry trip to nearby Graham Island to visit Queen Charlotte City and Skidegate Mission. ● **Spend** a few nights in one of Sandspit's reasonably priced B&Bs, such as the Seaport (250-637-5698) and Bayside (250-637-2433); visit the town's website (www.sandspitqci.com) for detailed area information. ● **Cycle** tour Moresby Island (contact Gord Nettleton by e-mail: gmnettle@island.net) or venture down one of its mountain-bike trails. ● **Play** the Willows Golf Course (250-637-2388), an 18-hole whose clubhouse offers the best burgers on Moresby. ● **Admire** the Bill Reid totem in Skidegate Mission, the largest modern village of the Haida Nation. ● **Shop** for souvenirs in Queen Charlotte City, the Charlottes' administrative centre. ● **Hike** 720-metre Mount Genevieve, "the Sleeping Beauty," east of Queen Charlotte City.



ROW STOUT/PHOTOS

3 MORE INFORMATION

Queen Charlotte Visitor Information Centre (250-559-8316), 3220 Wharf St., Box 819, Queen Charlotte City, BC, V0T 1S0.

Gwaii Haanas Office (250-559-8818), Box 37, Queen Charlotte City, BC, V0T 1S0.

below: **The *Island Roamer* crew rig the sails in windy Hecate Strait off the Queen Charlotte Islands.**



opposite: **The *Island Roamer* lies at anchor in what the crew have dubbed Equinox Cove at De la Beche Inlet off Juan Perez Sound.**

right: **Shown here are controls and charts in the *Island Roamer's* cockpit.**

It has been going on like this for nearly a week, ever since I stepped aboard the *Island Roamer*. I have joined a dozen other passengers on the 21-metre, Bermuda-rigged ketch for an eight-day summertime cruise through the southern reaches of British Columbia's Queen Charlotte archipelago, or Haida Gwaii as it's more popularly known today. Unlike so many packaged holidays, this one is exceeding all expectations — I have felt less like a travel writer than a notepad-toting Dorothy on the Yellow Brick Road in the Land of Oz, encountering a new marvel at every twist and turn.

We had an auspicious start to our journey, spotting a Queen Charlotte black bear just after setting sail in Cumshewa Inlet. Unique to the Charlottes, these are the world's largest black bears. As we coasted in for a better look, the bear gave us a desultory glance and went back to flipping rocks in search of crabs, one of its favourite meals.

Eventually it lumbered into the forest, and the captain set us back on course. No sooner had we nudged into Hecate Strait than we spotted a pod of humpback whales feeding off Skedans Point.

Trust me, you don't get tired of these kinds of sights.

Our itinerary has been fluid as we've sailed down Moresby Island's east coast, leaving ample room for serendipitous adventure. Like circus performers, the crew members toss up natural and historical wonders for our delight and amazement. Already, we've spent a night on Limestone Island helping conservation workers band murrelet chicks. We've explored the ancient Haida villages of New Clew, Cumshewa, and Tanu; sighted peregrine falcons on Reef Island; and kayaked inside a sea cave at Poole Point. Our primary destination is

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the 1,470-square-kilometre Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. Cooperatively managed by the federal government and Haida Nation, the reserve incorporates the southern portion of Moresby Island along with many smaller islets and islands, including Lyell, Kunghit, and Anthony (Skung Gwaii), home of the ancient Ninstints village.

Seen from a few kilometres offshore, the Queen Charlottes look more like tropical islands than something you'd find bobbing off Canada's West Coast. Composed primarily of basaltic rock, they were first extruded out of the Earth's mantle by ancient undersea volcanoes somewhere around the latitude of Peru. After rising to the surface, they spent the next 230 million years getting nudged around the Pacific by tectonic forces, coming to rest — albeit temporarily — about 100 kilometres off the coast of B.C. Geologists claim these islands once were part of a huge plate that included Vancouver Island and parts of the mainland, which broke into smaller pieces millions of years ago.

While the Charlottes share many common species with other coastal areas, the unique variations of flora and fauna here have earned these islands a reputation as Canada's Galapagos. Throughout our journey, we record 104 species of birds, mammals, amphibians, fish, plants, and invertebrates. The day after our encounter with





the dolphins, we paddle into Dolomite Narrows at low tide to discover an astonishing profusion of sea life: moon snails, bar stars, sea cucumbers, urchins, decorator crabs, sea nettles, dog whelks, and anemones of every shape, size, and colour.

In addition to its natural wonders, Gwaii Haanas is a dream-come-true for the amateur anthropologist. Before the arrival of Europeans in the late 18th century, a thriving indigenous Haida population lived in villages scattered throughout these islands. Cedar trees

bear evidence of “cultural modification,” signs that the early Haida tested the wood for use in building totems and canoes, or stripped bark to fashion hats, baskets, fishnets, and rope. Most villages were abandoned in the 19th century when a series of smallpox epidemics introduced by non-natives ravaged the coast, reducing the Haida population from some 7,000 to fewer than 600. As villages dwindled in size, the Haida were encouraged to abandon their traditional sites and regroup at new locations.

So devastating were the plagues that even some of these newer villages, such as New Clew on Louise Island, were subsequently abandoned as Haida numbers continued to dwindle. Most evidence of human habitation at New Clew today is from the 1930s — abandoned steam engines, trucks, and caulk boots left behind by loggers — but the village graveyard remains as a poignant reminder of how fragile life was in the post-contact Haida world. Peculiarly, rather than erecting traditional poles, the people of New Clew adopted the



European tradition of marking their graves with chiselled headstones.

Across the inlet from New Clew is Cumshewa, a long-abandoned village where a renaissance of sorts is underway. Here, in view of the rotting house posts and collapsed poles of his ancestors, Haida Chief Charlie Wesley and his wife, Caroline, have built a longhouse using traditional tools and methods. Their hope, explains son Steve, is that a new community will grow up around this nucleus.

While in Cumshewa, we joined a small group of natives and weekend sailors for a brief ceremony to honour the new site. "This represents the fulfillment of a lifelong dream of my dad's to have a longhouse here," said Steve. "He's so proud he's invited everybody from all over the world to come and visit him — 24 hours a day." As he spoke, I watched a native woman carving fillets of ruby-fleshed sockeye salmon for the feast to follow, pulling fresh fish from a bucket like a magician pulling rabbits from a hat.

A day's journey south of Cushewa is the empty village of Tanu, which overlooks Klue Passage between Tanu and Kunga islands. Bill Reid's mother was born here, and it is here that the sculptor is buried, under a canopy of evergreens and within earshot of the sea. He isn't alone. Nearby, a square of white stones marks a mass grave, one of many the Haida were forced to use during the

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smallpox plagues. While house depressions and rotting roof beams still mark the village site, Tanu has few poles. Most of the finer examples were cut up and "rescued" by the provincial government at mid-century; efforts are now being made to repatriate at least some of these relics.

Most famous of the deserted Haida villages is Ninstints, tucked into the lee shore of Anthony Island (Skung Gwaii) off Moresby's southwest tip. While one side of Skung Gwaii faces the flux and swell of the open Pacific, the village itself — a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site — is an idyllic refuge on the island's east coast, its face set toward the rising sun.

During the summer months, Haida Watchmen occupy many of the ancient villages, educating the curious and guarding the sites from treasure hunters. Our guide at Ninstints is Dion Williams, 19, a young Haida from Skidegate Mission with a passion for drumming and traditional dancing. He explains the meaning of various figures — ravens, eagles, bears, killer whales, frogs — carved into the dozens of weathered totems that line the beach here. The purpose of hollowed tops on the "mortuary" poles, he says, was to contain the remains of revered villagers following desiccation of their bodies. On the subject of death, he also describes a custom whereby, during the erection of a particularly important longhouse, as for a village chief, it was considered good luck to have a slave crawl into one of the postholes: when the giant post was raised and set in the excavation, the slave would be crushed.

top: A Haida guide on Anthony Island (Skung Gwaii) leads a tour of the totems remaining at the ancient village of Ninstints, now a World Heritage Site.

centre: Prawns are prepared for a meal aboard the *Island Roamer*.

bottom: Remnants of poles from a collapsed Haida longhouse are found at Tanu village on Gwaii Haanas' Tanu Island.

opposite: Kayaks from the *Island Roamer* are launched into Bag Harbour.

