



The schooner *Passing Cloud* anchors in a cove off Haida Gwaii.

CIVILIZATION IN THE DISTANCE

The pristine cruising grounds in British Columbia's Haida Gwaii Islands are a step back in time

Story and photography by Susan Colby

The silence made my ears ring. No electronic chirps, no roar of jets overhead, no sounds except the softly lapping waves on the sturdy wooden hull and the whisper of wind in the sails. An occasional screech of one of the many bald eagles inhabiting this archipelago out on the edge of the West Coast Continental Shelf shattered the calm. The giant bird swooped down, landing in a gnarly spruce tree clinging to the rocky cliff. Regally he stared down, watching *Passing Cloud*, the interloper, sail past.

We were aboard *Passing Cloud*, the William Roué-designed 71-foot schooner, built in 1974 in Victoria, British Columbia by Brian Walker. Designed for cruising, she nonetheless proved to be surprisingly fast, winning many Northwest races including the 1984 San Francisco Master Mariners Race, the first non-Americans to do so. Considering Roué also designed the famous *Bluenose*, this wasn't surprising. She logged thousands of miles over the years, down the coast and south to Tahiti, before returning home to British Columbia where, in 2012, she was bought by Russ Markel, founder of Outer Shores Expeditions, small-ship, niche adventure travel company operating wildlife, wilderness and cultural expeditions in the Northwest.

I was hesitant to explore this place that time had almost forgotten, as everything I had read about the islands and the expeditions confirmed that it would be wet and cold, two situations I try to avoid. Nevertheless, I forged ahead. Reading the clothing list stressing layers and long underwear, wool socks, gum boots, warm everything and foul weather gear, my enthusiasm flagged.

But not for long.

Haida Gwaii, an archipelago formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, was not an easy place to reach and boarding *Passing Cloud* in such a remote location added to the complexity. A very early morning flight brought me from Los Angeles to Vancouver, then another two-hour flight to tiny Sandspit on Moresby Island, an overnight at the handy Sandspit Inn, a shuttle van and then a small car ferry to Skidegate. I stopped at the Haida Heritage Center for the very informative orientation that is required of all visitors to Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, the collective generally referred to as Gwaii Haanas. By late afternoon, two other passengers and I boarded a 1950s de Havilland Beaver float plane, and gazing down at the dramatic coastline as it passed just a few hundred feet below. My excitement grew.

Passing Cloud reaches through a passage off Haida Gwaii. The crew enjoys hot coffee on a cool morning, facing page, while Kyle shows off some of varied sea life found beneath the British Columbia water.





With headgear firmly in place, I listened to our pilot Peter chat with our skipper Matt aboard *Passing Cloud* as we neared Rose Harbour on the northern shore of Kunghit Island. Skimming the surface, gently settling onto the glassy-smooth waters, we unloaded into the big RIB with Matt and first mate Kyle, then sped over to *Passing Cloud*, anchored quietly, all alone in the protected bay.

We watched from the deck as the plane, our last connection to civilization for a week took off, disappearing in the distance.

With no specific itinerary, we sailed at the whim of weather and tides, but we had the intention of visiting all five Haida villages during the week aboard. Bundled up on deck with coffee in hand, I gazed around at the land that surrounded us as we got underway—rocky islets, soaring cliffs and far-off mountains of the San Christoval Range still topped with snow. No wonder it felt so cold. But it was breathtakingly spectacular.

Passing Cloud sliced cleanly through the calm passages between islands and outcroppings with SGang Gwaay near the small town of Ninistints on Anthony Island, our first Haida village and a World Heritage site, identified as our first of many shore excursions. As only 12 people are allowed ashore at one time at any of the Haida villages, Matt had radioed ahead on the VHF to the Haida Watchman at SGang Gwaay to let them know we were on our way. I think we had a bit of an “in” as James, the Haida Watchman traveling with us, had spent the past 13 summers there, caring for and showing visitors the site.

This was our first taste of getting around the islands and the routine became a twice daily ritual. At first it was a real mission but as the week went on, it became the norm. The drill went like this: First, we layered our clothes, long underwear, water-resistant pants, sweaters, topping everything with full rain gear; then find your boots that are stowed on deck, haul them on over thick socks, making sure your pants are carefully tucked in; lastly, we donned life preservers, all labeled with names of animals and creatures of Gwaii Haanas, ensuring that we didn’t have to fiddle with





them each time to get the right fit. Mine was Eagle. By this time, the dinghy was alongside the boarding ladder and we carefully climbed down to the bouncing craft for the trip to shore.

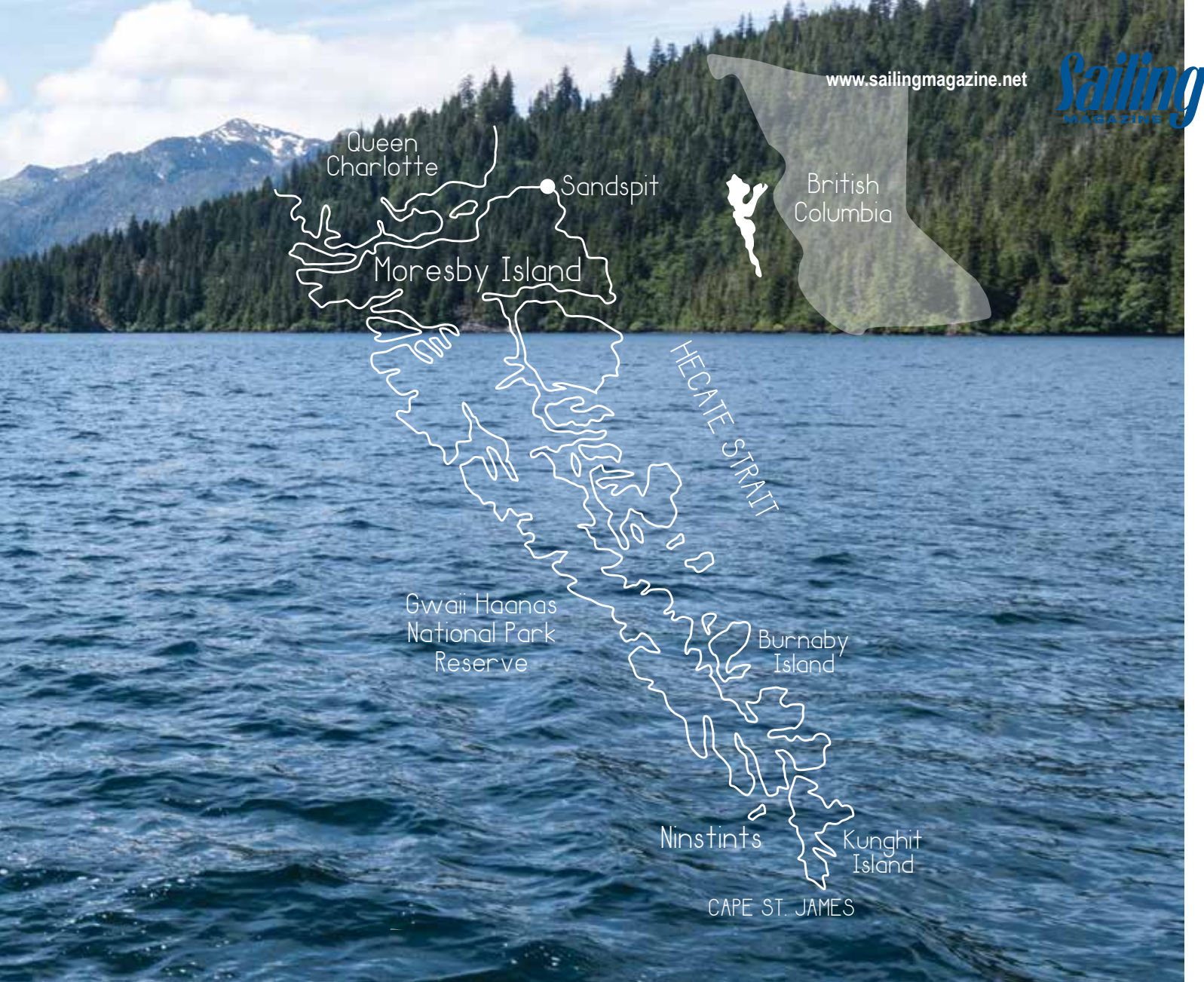
With no docks or ramps, the only way ashore is by wading through often knee-deep water. Sliding over the side of the dinghy into gently lapping water that covered slippery rocks, I was happy to accept an extended hand to steady me as I waded ashore into a fairy wonderland. And I was very grateful for the waterproof boots provided on board.

Just above the high-tide mark, the ancient forest soared above us. Ken, one of the SGang Gwaay Watchmen met us and led the way along the wooden boardwalk that meandered through the trees and dense vegetation, the stillness heavy around us. Thick mosses carpeted the forest floor and tiny mushrooms and minute flowers hid in plain sight.

At the ancient village site, considered sacred among the Northwest Coast First Nation people, we were astounded by the number of fallen and upright poles, house pits and standing and fallen posts and beams from the 20 longhouses that had occupied the site.

**A cool fog drifts down from the mountains.
Passing Cloud sails near Anthony Island, above.**





Once again, the silence filled in, but this time it brought a sense of reverence, as we considered the lives of the people who used to occupy the village. In the mid-1800s, the Haida population was decimated, reduced to less than 600 by European diseases introduced by loggers and miners. The Haida people, with no defenses against these scourges, believe that the remains of many ancestors who died during this time are here in the village and that their spirits remain here as well.

Back on *Passing Cloud*, with the weather and sea conditions looking good, skipper Matt made the decision to go on the outside, west of the archipelago and south to round Cape St. James, the most southerly point of Gwaii Haanas. This is not a common occurrence, as the seas and weather on the west coast are notorious for their ferocity, and considered one of the most dangerous stretches of Canadian waters. But this day we were blessed with sunshine and a moderate breeze.

Up went the sails, and the boat came alive. On a beam reach, we raced south and with great joy and I took the wheel. The crew trimmed and for the next couple of hours, we watched islands slip behind us. There was great excitement as we sailed amidst a cloud

of tufted puffins that roost on these islands. For birdwatchers, Gwaii Haanas is paradise. Peregrine falcons, bald eagles, trumpeter swans, sandhill cranes, murrelets, shearwaters, cormorants and oyster catchers are just a few of the more than 260 bird species found in the islands.

Rounding Cape St. James, we stood off the rocky Kerouard islands, one of the two Steller sea lion rookeries in Gwaii Haanas. These giant pinnipeds looked like huge, golden slugs resting on the sun-warmed rocks. With over 600 breeding sea lions using this rookery, and because they are extremely sensitive to disturbances, we stayed well off and observed.

The waters around Gwaii Haanas are filled with marine life, currently more than 3,500 marine species. Humpback whales became almost a common sight, but we never tired of seeing them. Matt always brought us within a safe distance, stopping the boat to observe their antics. A pod of Orcas also chose to visit us but they were moving so fast they weren't around very long. And Risso's dolphins, one of the larger dolphin species, which usually stay offshore, frolicked around us.

Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site is the only reserve in the world that protects from the top of the mountains to the depths of the sea. In an unusual collaboration between the Council of the Haida Nation and the Government of Canada, a consensus-based, decision-making model works towards protecting both the cultural and ecological heritage for future generations. This unique arrangement was brought about by the 1985 standoff between the Haida and the logging industry on Lyell Island. When we visited Hlk'yah GawGa or Windy Bay on the island, we saw the Legacy pole that was raised in 2013, to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the agreement. It is the first monumental pole raised in Gwaii Haanas in 130 years.

All five of the Haida villages are unique and we were lucky to visit all of them. They are watched over by Haida Watchmen, a program that began in 1981 and which operates during the summer months. James, our Watchman's family on his father's side is from K'uuna Linagaay, or Skendans and visiting the village was a very emotional time for him, as he doesn't visit often. He showed us the ancestral home with its deep pit and fallen beams and corner posts, all moss-covered and returning to the earth.

During our time on *Passing Cloud*, we observed a wide variety of flora and fauna unique to Gwaii Haanas, including the elusive, indigenous Haida Gwaii black bear (*ursus americanus carlottae*) that we saw on our float trip up Burnaby Narrows, a biodiversity hotspot. The bear was ambling along the bank just above the intertidal zone and ignored us completely. As we hung back, he (or she) walked down and swam to the other side of the narrows, allowing us to move on.

With the strong tidal action through the narrow, 164-foot channel, the marine species are supplied with a constant stream of plankton and nutrients, creating an enormous concentration of life. With the water so clear, visibility is excellent but we had the added advantage of first mate Kyle's snorkeling ability, as he went overboard in a thick wetsuit and retrieved specimens for us to look at. Sea slugs, bat stars of many colors, a bizarre "decorator crab"



An eagle stands watch from high atop a fir, top. A replica totem reaches high to the sky, right, in the Haida Heritage Site. The trees grow to great heights and widths, protected from forestry in the islands formerly known as Queen Charlotte, far right. A group of Stellar sea lions make their rookery on Gwaii Haanas, top.





The schooner *Passing Cloud* leaves a cove off Haida Gwaii at dawn.

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SAILING WHERE EAGLES SOAR

Haida Gwaii is the wild west for sailors and unless you are an ocean sailor with coastal and extreme tidal experience, it's a challenging place to sail. Extreme tides and fast-moving weather patterns can be disconcerting for sailors inexperienced in these kinds of conditions.

The closest bareboat charter fleet is about 500 miles south on Vancouver Island, so that option, unless you have several weeks to play around, is out of the question. Which leads to the best option, in my opinion: Cruise with an experienced captain and crew. This was the first time I had the luxury, yes luxury, of this type of cruising and it is a really appropriate way in this area. The crew has extensive experience in these waters. They know where the best anchorages are, where the whales congregate, where the Steller sea lion rookeries fill the air with their putrid smells and raucous cries. Having James who regaled us with Haida stories, as our local cultural guide brought the history and Haida lifestyle to life. The natural wonders below the surface and on land were intimately described by Kyle, our first mate and naturalist. And without our super-experienced skipper Matt, I doubt if we would have found the secluded anchorages, and the tucked away shore trails taking us into a fairytale wonderland. I would have missed so much if this had been a bareboat cruise.

For more information on this, contact Outer Shores Expeditions 855-714-7233 or visit the website www.outershores.ca.

and a huge moon snail. Of course, these were replaced within a couple of minutes to prevent any damage to them.

For those of us not keen to dive in, we got a firsthand look at the underwater world when we went to "the dock" for water. Expecting to see a marina-style facility, we eased onto a small floating dock tethered to shore with several hoses that brought water from the local spring! The biggest surprise though, was the marine life attached to the dock. Brilliant colored anemones and other creatures were clinging to the floats, in colors I only expect to see in the tropics.

Because Gwaii Haanas is a conservation reserve, fishing is limited but where it is allowed, it is excellent. As Matt knows all the good fishing, crabbing and shrimping areas, we were treated to fresh lingcod, Dungeness crab and spot prawns.

The preparation and presentation of three meals and two snacks every day was mind-boggling. Having cooked on a charter boat during a far-off point in my life, I remember well the hard work it takes to pull off a gourmet meal. So I really appreciated our chef, Natasha's hard work as she prepared and presented not just food, but gourmet dishes, incorporating the fresh seafood and also ingredients she foraged for ashore. Sea asparagus and a variety of seaweeds showed up daily in creative ways.

As our week came to an end, our last evening on board was a time for contemplation and reflection. For me, the week was about re-connecting not just with sailing, but with the adventure of life itself, which can be so easily ignored or lost in our noisy, connected world "out there." 