

HAIDA GWAII HIGH

Aboard a *classic*
SCHOONER in Gwaii
Haanas, the **Islands**
of Wonder that are a
remote national park at
the **edge of the world** in
NORTHERN BC

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY Barb Sligl

Passing Cloud
anchored near
Burnaby Narrows
in Gwaii Haanas
National Park



I stand on a pristine crescent of pale sand fringed by dense rainforest and strewn with sculptural driftwood. All I can hear is the wind and I almost feel like Robinson Crusoe. The beach is blissfully free of any sign of civilization and the only eyes on me are those of a throng of eagles. Alight on trees at the mouth of a stream emptying into the bay, this feathered gathering is only marginally curious about the interlopers that have come ashore to Woodruff Beach.

I'm part of a small group of intruders on this southeastern tip of Haida Gwaii, the 150-island archipelago off northern BC (100 km from the mainland across Hecate Strait and 80 km from Alaska) that's often called the edge of the world. Quite literally, this sweep of islands lies at the very rim of the Continental Shelf, beyond which the ocean floor plummets from 100 metres to more than 1,000.

This isolated perch is at the crossroads of nutrient-rich currents that create such biodiversity, Haida Gwaii's also been called Canada's Galapagos. And Gwaii Haanas, the uninhabited national park at the southern tip, fittingly means Islands of Wonder (full name: Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area, and Haida Heritage Site). The only way to get here is by sea. That is, by boat. And my particular vessel, moored off Woodruff Beach, is a beautiful schooner, *Passing Cloud*, designed by Canadian naval architect William James Roué (think *Bluenose*).

After a flight to the north end of this remote island chain, there's another flight by floatplane to the even remoter south end of that chain in Gwaii Haanas. From here, it's a meandering journey into and out of deserted bays, around teeming sea-lion rookeries and lunge-feeding humpbacks, past rocky cliffs of roosting puffins and dense sea-kelp forests, with stops at ancient Haida villages and windswept beaches like Woodruff.

There are just five passengers on the *Passing Cloud*, with a crew of four—captain Russell Markel (also a marine ecologist and the founder and owner of Outer Shores, the expedition company we're touring with), mate Liam Ogle, chef Erin Vickers and

TOP LEFT Sea urchin **TOP RIGHT** Chef Erin Vickers in her galley **MIDDLE LEFT** View from the wheelhouse on *Passing Cloud* **MIDDLE RIGHT** *Passing Cloud* moored in Heater Harbour, as seen from the zodiac **BOTTOM LEFT** Watchman David at SGang Gwaay, Anthony Island **BOTTOM RIGHT** Mate Liam Ogle holds a 10,000-year-old (or so) stone tool on Ellen Island

archaeologist Al Mackie. We all get cozy over the week-long journey, synchronizing rhythms and preferences, from treats (there's a snack drawer stocked with chocolate; thanks, Erin) to bliss-out spots on deck (my go-to seat is in front of the foremast; thanks again, Erin) and below deck in the salon and library (filled with books that range from *On the Origin of Species* to a gorgeous photography tome, *Beneath Cold Seas: The Underwater Wilderness of the Pacific Northwest*).

Passing Cloud's sleek form, as we travel to and fro on our excursions, becomes a beacon in this otherworldly land. I keep glancing back at her as I beachcomb at Woodruff, finding an eagle feather as long as my arm, swirls of knots in long-weathered driftwood, frayed bits of nautical rope, curly wisps of seaweed, gleaming little limpet shells. These conical mollusks are the inspiration for our lunch, a pretty pasta dish dreamed up by Erin as homage to this place.

"Haida Gwaii writes its own menu...I feel like I'm just channelling it," says Erin. A sampler: chocolate-ganache balls in oyster shells mimic Haida trading beads scattered on a beach; dashi with kombu is a nod to fields of kelp; line-caught, lingcod tacos are garnished with black-and-white Orca beans; pickled white onions emulate the glossy, transparent shells of butterfly mollusks shed on another beach; a deconstructed, ringed salad looks like the anemones of these wondrous waters.

Oh, and Bog Salad.

A concoction of reindeer moss and sea asparagus, it's presented as a dinner dish after a hike into Dr. Seuss-like marshland. To get there we pass through the curves of Burnaby Narrows, ferried via zodiac by Liam, gliding over those anemones and sea stars and underwater beings of incredible biodiversity (decorator crabs, sea cucumbers, moon snails, nudibranchs...to name just a few), alongside a bear who blithely ignores us as she turns over boulders as big as my torso to crunch on uncovered crustaceans.

This is only the preview.

Upon landing we bushwhack through the rainforest until a clearing appears. A vast plateau unfolds before us, spongy underfoot, crawling with tiny frogs—we tread softly to



TOP One of the still-standing, weathered memorial poles at SGang Gwaay, a UNESCO World Heritage site on Anthony Island **BOTTOM A sea star shows off her feelers in Burnaby Narrows—just one example of the astonishing marine biodiversity in Haida Gwaii, which has been called Canada's Galapagos**



avoid stepping on them—and dotted with big, bare-limbed trees as if from some savannah (look up!) and exquisite, diminutive blossoms that are like starbursts (look down!).

And this is just the flora and fauna...and food.

While the Gwaii Haanas is uninhabited now, once there were thriving Haida villages here. The remains of these past settlements are taken care of by Haida Watchmen, a modern-day version of the same-named guards of villages long ago. The most famous of these is SGang Gwaay, a UNESCO World Heritage site with still-standing mortuary and memorial poles. It's what everyone who comes to Haida Gwaii wants to see.

We arrive early morning. Captain Russ speaks to us solemnly. "If only this passage could talk," he says of the waters we've crossed to get to Anthony Island, wondering how many canoes have preceded us in tens of thousands of years. "Let this place sink in. Take a moment to be quiet. Listen to the songbirds...go as slow as you can."

Watchman David takes us to the village site, sharing stories of his grandmother scolding him for spitting in the sea ("Don't ever disrespect the ocean..."), shape-shifting otter spirits and Shaman's Island, which he points out but won't set foot on. It's as if there's some silent yet screaming presence here (the Haida name for this place is Wailing Island, after all). When I get my first glimpse of the silvery poles, crumbling and tilted this way and that, something powerful wells up in me. I gulp and gaze. It rains and clears. The big eyes of an eagle totem stare into me. The carved creature's face is blurred by time, scarred and softened. One day it'll disappear into these gwaii, the forest consuming it and everything else here.

But every place we visit in Gwaii Haanas has this spiritual essence. At Hlk'yah GaawGa (Windy Bay), Watchman Morgan takes us to a colossal Sitka spruce that's 900 years old. At Hotspring Island or Gandll K'in Gwaay, yaay I follow local tradition with a dip in the healing waters, on Ellen Island I go on a pseudo-archeological expedition and find a 10,000-year-old stone tool that I grasp in amazement, and at T'aanuu Llnagaay I gather around a blue bead in the palm of Watchman Ken's hand. He found it that



TOP Stellar sea lions rookery at Garcin Rocks
MIDDLE LEFT Chef Erin Vickers' Bog Salad **MIDDLE RIGHT** Standing with Watchman Morgan by the 900-year-old Sitka spruce at Windy Bay
BOTTOM Chef Erin watches the twilight sky from the bow of *Passing Cloud* **OPPOSITE** Mate Liam Ogle working on deck of *Passing Cloud*

IF YOU GO

Outer Shores Expeditions sails into Gwaii Haanas with *Passing Cloud* in early summer (and is now booking into 2019), as well as similarly stellar Pacific Northwest itineraries in the Great Bear Rainforest and Barkley Sound in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve:

outershores.ca

morning on the beach and tells us that visiting Haida threw trading beads as they arrived for potlatches. I look at this bead, an unexpected treasure, and think that each excursion, every walk on shore or coffee on deck, searching for stone tools or watching for whales, is another precious bead in a long string.

And holding these various beads—an eagle feather from Woodruff Beach, the stone tool on Ellen Island, a sea star in Burnaby Narrows—are part of the tactile and stirring nature of this trip. One afternoon, Erin giddily presents a trio of plum- and coral-coloured urchins. "Urchies!" she happily exclaims. She places one in my hands and I'm mesmerized by its undulating form of spiky spines, stretching and prodding. Erin asks if we'd like to sample this delicacy for dinner, another of-this-land ingredient. But after cradling these creatures—three decades old, apparently, and which can live to be centenarians—we decline.

The urchins are returned to the sea and we have local salmon instead. Each meal is a wonder, much like each creature and place—every bead—we encounter. Another morning, as the anchor is raised and we loll on deck, coffee in hand, we realize that we're surrounded by a beautiful bloom of enchanting blobs: moon jellyfish.

On the last night there's a many-hued sunset that lasts for hours. I keep sneaking back up on deck to catch another iteration of the sky, but eventually I'm lulled asleep by the soft lap of water against the side of the ship. In the morning, I scan the cloudless sky and admonish myself for missing a starry night at the edge of the world. I imagine the constellations as an echo of the ethereal formation of jellyfish—sky and sea similarly full of shimmering forms.

But, despite yearning for another Haida Gwaii bead to behold, it seems right to leave this fantastical land without all of it revealed. It's been far too generous already. ●



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