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Photo by Ryan Creary



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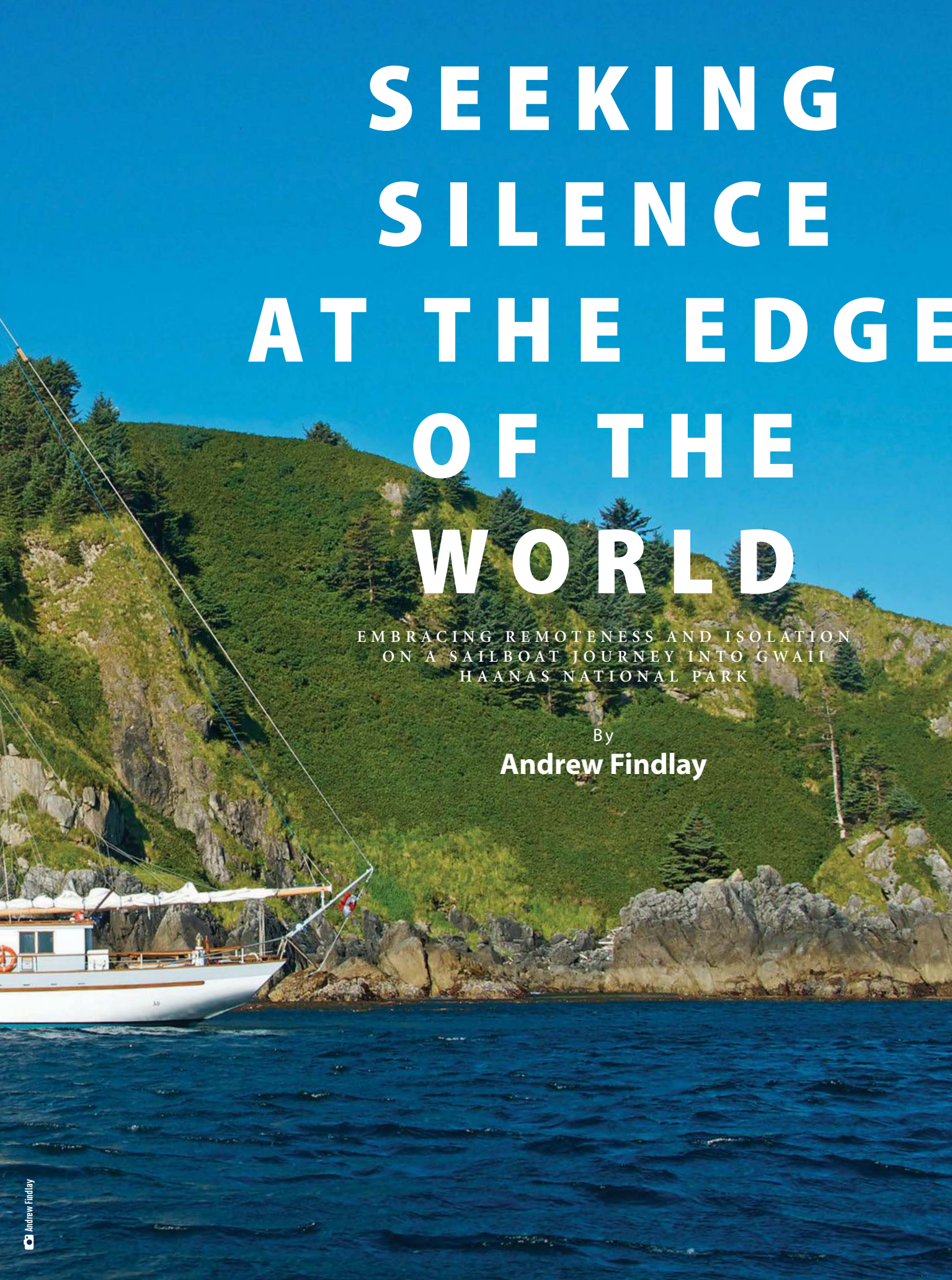
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A white sailboat with a wooden deck and a small cabin is on the left side of the frame, partially obscured by the title text. The boat is on a deep blue body of water. In the background, a steep, rocky cliff rises from the water's edge, covered in dense green forest. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

SEEKING SILENCE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

EMBRACING REMOTENESS AND ISOLATION
ON A SAILBOAT JOURNEY INTO GWAII
HAANAS NATIONAL PARK

By
Andrew Findlay

Sometimes silence is more evocative than words.

The crunch of pebbles underfoot and occasional call of a raven is the only sound as Russ Markel, owner and captain of the *Passing Cloud*, and I meander along a tea-coloured creek that trickles into Heater Harbour. Old growth cedars draped in moss fringe the intertidal grasses and sedges. Clam siphons spout miniature geysers and rockweed revealed by low tide pops underfoot like bubble-wrap. Markel asks me to look closely at the scene.

That's when a picture emerges, like in one of those perception-shifting puzzles that hides an image within an image. Rocks piled in careful, geometric patterns suggest something else at play, something organized and purposeful. I look closer and recognize the barely protruding ends of cedar stakes set at regular intervals in the mud. It is the ancient work of human hands that, centuries ago, transformed this inlet into a complex fishery using rock weirs and

cedar stakes to channel water and harvest the sea's bounty. Wooden stakes at this location have been carbon dated to between 1,200 and 1,500 years before present.

"An anthropologist friend of mine discovered this recently," Markel says, as we aim back toward the water to rejoin the others on the *Passing Cloud*. A popular Aboriginal expression states, 'when the tide rolls out, the table is set,' and it refers to places like Heater Harbour.

Such is the enduring mystery of Haida Gwaii. These islands on the edge of the continent have been inhabited for an estimated 12,500 years. At one time, before the ravages of European contact, the chain supported an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Haida, organized into two moieties, Raven and Eagle, and scattered throughout dozens of strategically located villages where rainforest meets sea. Haida Gwaii is a story of endurance, wilderness and wonder that has captured my imagination since the mid 1980s, when battles between government and the logging industry and the Haida ignited an international crusade to stop logging on Moresby Island and preserve the entire southern portion of this archipelago.

In 1988, Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area and Haida Heritage Site was born, and then formalized in 1993 with the *Gwaii Haanas Agreement* between the Haida and the Feds. It stands today as one of Canada's most celebrated, difficult to access and fascinating experiments in conservation and cooperation between Aboriginal people and government. It's not perfect, few experiments are, but it is a place that, once visited, leaves you changed.

Five days ago, after a 45-minute drive along a rough logging road, I had arrived at Moresby Camp where the schooner *Passing Cloud* was moored. A grey West Coast drizzle fit for an Emily Carr canvas oozed from the sky. Markel, founder and owner of Outer Coast Expeditions, chef Gem Salsberg and deckhand Joel White, were there to greet me, as well as a complement of fellow guests hailing from both coasts of the U.S.

I'm not a boat person. The thought of being confined to a ship for a week with 10 people I don't know makes me nervous. However, a boat is the best way to visit Gwaii Haanas and I was about to be spoiled. After introductions and ship orientation (including key information like how to work the ship's head), we motored down Cumsheewa Inlet, bound for that mythic place at the southern end of Gwaii Haanas called SGang Gwaay. Where we'd go in ▶



Clockwise From Top: Russ Markel, owner and captain of the *Passing Cloud*; outlining the route into Gwaii Haanas; above and below deck.



between depended on the weather. That's the beauty of a sailing vessel. And it's hard to take a wrong turn in Gwaii Haanas.

We'd been underway for less than two minutes when Markel eased off the throttle and called out, "Hey, marbled murrelets!" The fortuitous visit from an iconic forest bird set the tone for the week; wildlife sightings would be abundant and this would be the last grey skies we'd experience, a blessing in a part of the world that receives as much as 430 cm of rain per year.

I soon learned about Markel's deep connection to this area. His PhD thesis focused on the resurgence of sea otters on BC's West Coast and the impact of this on inshore marine ecosystems. The 18th and 19th century trade in sea otter pelts led to the systemic exploitation and near extirpation of this marine mammal, which unleashed a cascade of unforeseen ecological impacts. In the otter's absence, kelp forests, critical habitat for various species of fish, crustaceans and invertebrates, began to disap-

pear. Sea urchins, one of the otter's favourite foods, attach to the holdfasts of kelp and can destroy entire forests in a short time. Now that otters are returning, so too are kelp forests—great news for ocean biodiversity.

Island isolation makes Gwaii Haanas both unique and challenging from a conservation point of view. Six of the 10 native terrestrial mammals are found nowhere else on Earth, including a subspecies of black bear, dusky shrew and ermine. Dolomite Narrows is where the richness of Gwaii Haanas comes into true focus. It is to biologists what the Louvre is to art historians. Constantly flushed with nutrient-rich water, the narrows hosts an astonishing concentration of biomass. Dungeness crabs crawl over sea cucumbers stacked upon sea stars and urchins, while kelp crabs scale the shimmering strands of feather boa kelp that give shelter to black rockfish. Life competes for every available square centimetre of intertidal real estate.

Yesterday, we slipped into Dolomite Narrows

aboard the Zodiac tender. Markel donned his scuba gear and went foraging for sea life, bringing to the surface one sample after another for us to view, or handle, if we so desired.

"This place is incredible," Markel said, after surfacing next to our Zodiac with a sea cucumber in his hand, offering it up to anyone with an urge to feel this slimy creature.

However, Gwaii Haanas also suffers from the impacts of invasive species. Introduced Sitka black-tailed deer, with no natural predators on the islands to keep populations in check, have proliferated throughout the archipelago. They've done extensive damage to the understory vegetation, including huckleberry and other fruiting plants that are important food sources for the endemic Haida black bears. Invasive raccoons, rats and red squirrels prey on endemic birds. So far, efforts to control these interlopers have proven expensive and difficult.

In 2013, marking the 20th anniversary of the *Gwaii Haanas Agreement*, the Haida community, along with guests like David Suzuki



and others who were involved in the fight for Gwaii Haanas, gathered at Windy Bay on Lyell Island to raise a Legacy Pole. Windy Bay was the crucible of conflict between industry and conservation. A logging road that ends abruptly less than five kilometres away reminds one just how close the foreshore of this bay, with its ancient forests and village site, came to being logged. Today, it's quiet and peaceful. In summer, a rotating cast of Haida Watchmen live on site, each sharing their own often colourful take on Haida history with travellers that come from around the world to see Windy Bay.

On day three, we weaved through the Bischof Islands, pausing to observe humpbacks frolicking in the kelp, before motoring into Windy Bay. I met a Haida Watchman (Watch Woman) named Duck Soup. Taking out my notepad, I asked for her actual name and she replied, deadpan, "Duck Soup."

"I had a lump in my throat. The world had come to witness," said Duck Soup, referring to the raising of the Legacy Pole in 2013. "I was 19

and pregnant when the blockade was up and people were getting arrested."

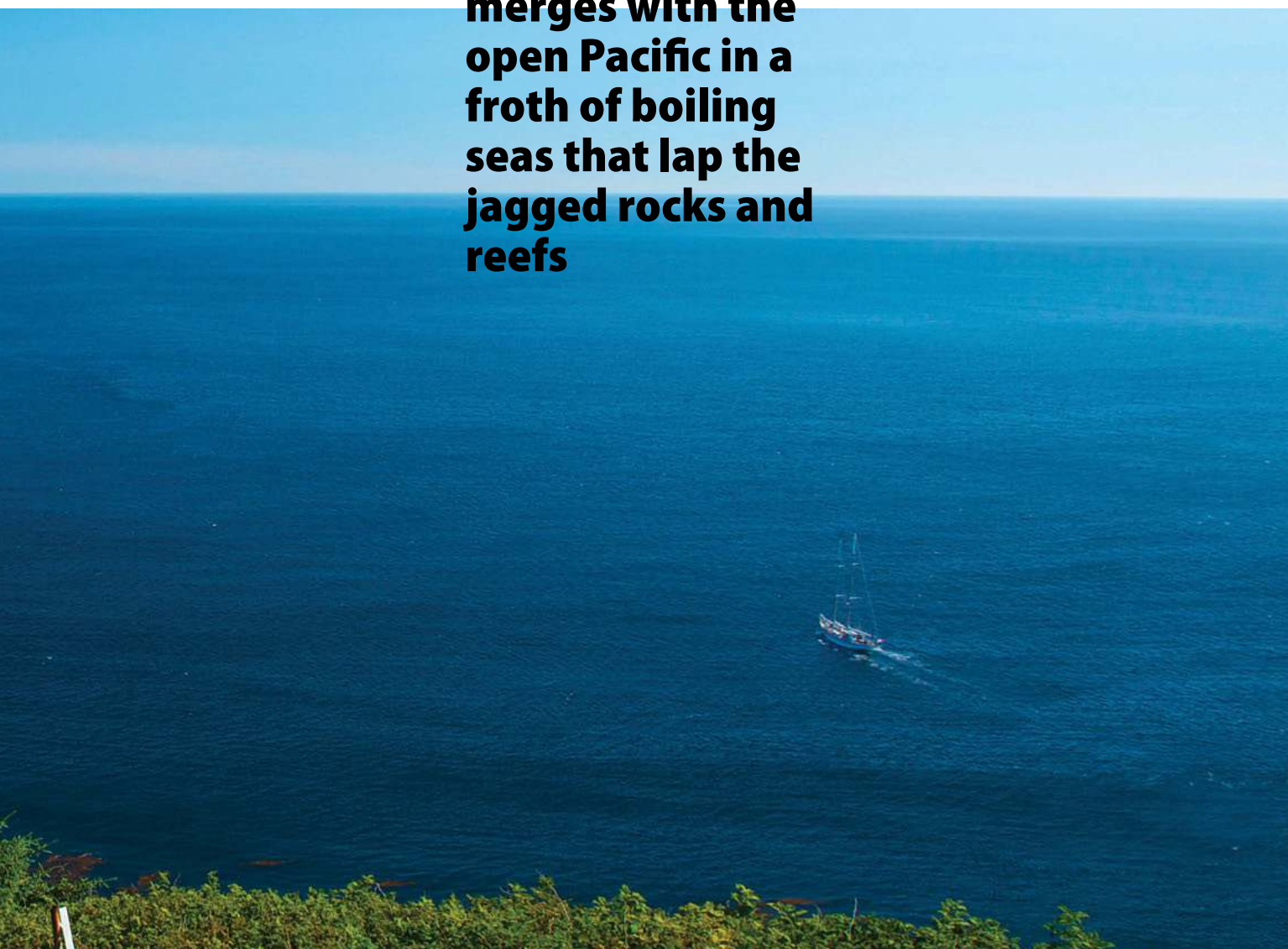
Now on the morning of day five, Markel sets the compass to the east and aims for Hecate Strait to hoist the sails and take advantage of favourable winds. Built in Victoria in 1974, the *Passing Cloud* is a lovely vessel; a 70-foot schooner designed by master naval architect William James Roue (who also designed the *Bluenose*). The skies are deep blue but an eight-knot wind blows from the northeast. In minutes, the crew raises the main, fore and aft sails, then Markel cuts the diesel engine, a quiet but steady drone to which I'd gotten accustomed. The long rolling hills of Banks Island, remote and rarely visited, are visible across the shallow and often rough waters of Hecate Strait, where some of

**It is power in
landscape, where
Hecate Strait
merges with the
open Pacific in a
froth of boiling
seas that lap the
jagged rocks and
reefs**

the world's biggest waves have been recorded. Far to the south lies remote Cape St. James, where the archipelago disappears into the sea in a chain of rocky islets.

"Cape St. James is like the Holy Grail," says Markel. I'm still exhilarated from yesterday's chance sighting of a blue shark—a first for Markel—that had randomly intersected our course near Goodwin Point, when Cape St. James comes into view. It is one of those places that needs no soundtrack, no narration. It is power in landscape, where Hecate Strait merges with the open Pacific in a froth of boiling seas that lap the jagged rocks and reefs.

With Markel's permission, Joel runs Gem and I ashore in the Zodiac to explore the once-manned lighthouse that sits on the cape's windswept high-point. The concrete stairs and metal pathway are now overgrown with salmonberry that grabs at our clothes as we clamber upwards. In 10 minutes, we emerge in a small clearing with a heli-pad, a shack equipped ▶



with emergency supplies and an automated weather and light station. Tufted puffins skim the surface of the sea below us and cormorants circle the cliffs. We climb a ladder to the flat roof of the emergency shelter and lean into a powerful wind that spills down Hecate Strait into Queen Charlotte Sound. To the north, all we can see is the rugged coastline of Gwaii Haanas; no boats in sight other than the flapping sails of the *Passing Cloud*.

Though this Land's End is hard to match, the destination at the end of this journey still tugs at my consciousness. The excitement is palpable as we motor through Houston Stewart Channel on a choppy swell toward Lousconne Inlet, where we'll anchor tonight and take on water before exploring SGang Gwaay tomorrow morning. I remember Markel telling me, a week ago, how flying in via floatplane for a quick visit may be more expedient than boat travel but you lose the sense of remoteness and isolation that makes the islands so special. I get it now. I stand next to Markel in the wheelhouse as we sail directly into the setting sun. A few nautical miles off the bow, the spray of feeding humpback whales is captured in the sun's glare. We've seen dozens of humpbacks on this journey, along with fin and minke whales.

"I've seen more humpbacks this year than I ever have," Markel says.

A few minutes later, one of these great whales breaches, three-quarters of its 30-plus-tonne body clearing the surface of the sea, momentarily silhouetted, then crashing back into the water. The strength required to execute this manoeuvre is mind-blowing.

We weigh anchor early the next morning for a short cruise, taking our coffee and breakfast while underway. The seas are calm in Lousconne Inlet, but when we nudge around the point into open water, the wind is brisk; I descend to my berth to get a jacket.

"This is a place I had read about many times. It's always been a place I've wanted to visit," confides one of my shipmates, a retired university librarian from South Carolina, as we near Anthony Island.

Covered in emerald green forest, it's exposed on its west side to the full brunt of the open Pacific—next stop Japan. I try to imagine the ferocity with which winter storms must pound the outer islets, where sea bird colonies nest, and wonder why a people would choose to settle here.

Markel, normally a fountain of natural and historical observations, is quiet as he steers *Passing Cloud* around Adam Rocks and into a deep, almost hidden harbour. I can tell that SGang Gwaay, though he has visited it dozens of times before, still has a profound impact on him.

We put ashore in the Zodiac then walk along a short trail that cuts through a dark, brooding forest to the other side of the island. James Williams is waiting at the Watchman's Hut. Though I haven't yet seen any obvious signs of prehistoric Haida occupation, I am already so enraptured with the place that I half expect to be greeted by Haida in cedar bark hats and traditional button-blankets. Instead, the 33-year-old Williams is wearing a blue sweatshirt and basketball



James Williams illuminates the history and culture of his people; mortuary poles slowly return to the ground on SGang Gwaay.

shorts and holding a cup of coffee. We follow him to the ancient village site. Mortuary and Frontal poles, some tilted at impossible angles and others fallen to the ground, are lined along a bench of open land above a sheltered cove where great ocean-going Haida canoes would have slid ashore. The haunting atmosphere is leavened only by Williams's candid commentary. He admits, as young man, though both his parents were arrested during the Lyell Island protests in the early 1980s, he had zero interest in Haida history. Even when he got the Watchman job, he says at first, "It was just a paycheck. Then I heard non-native tour guides walking through SGang Gwaay and telling our stories. I knew that wasn't right."

As we wander past old pit houses, massive cedar beams and posts now collapsed into the ground, I can't overcome the feeling of decay—of something that was, but is no more. I ask Williams what will happen to this ancient place, if there will be any need for Watchmen once the last traces of the mortuary poles have been reclaimed by nature.

"That's the Haida tradition, to let the poles return to the forest. That's just the way it is," he says without emotion. In the great span of time, human presence on the land can seem fleeting. Natural wonders, given half the chance, endure.

The next morning, my fellow passengers explore the shoreline and intertidal nooks and crannies of the Gordon Islands by sea kayak. Markel coaxes me into going snorkelling. I worm into a dry suit, put on flippers, mask and snorkel, then reluctantly lower myself from the Zodiac, bracing for the shock of the North Pacific. After a few deep breaths, I relax and drift on the gentle ocean surge, finning through a tangle of bull kelp; an alien world of motion and life. Black cod dart in the flickering light, while kelp crabs scale fronds with their delicate appendages, like the articulating arms of some strange spacecraft. An hour of experiencing this submarine magic passes in an instant. And for a moment, I lose myself to the silence and I forget that I'm drifting in the crystal-clear seas of the southern Gwaii Haanas. ■

A popular Aboriginal expression states, 'when the tide rolls out, the table is set'

If You Go

Outer Shores Expeditions (outershores.ca)
Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area & Haida Heritage Site (pc.gc.ca/gwaii)



