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An intimate visit with an untouched jewel

Gwaii Haanas schooner voyage
a quiet trek into Haida history



Passing Cloud was designed by William James Roue, the naval architect behind the classic schooner Bluenose. AARON SAUNDERS

Sailing into Haida history

Take an intimate and eye-opening trip into B.C.'s past aboard the Passing Cloud

Aaron Saunders



FROM
THE
DECK
CHAIR

It's the silence that hits you. The lack of any man-made sounds is so subtle that I barely noticed it for the first three days I was on board Outer Shores Expeditions (outershores.ca) intimate schooner *Passing Cloud*. It wasn't until we'd arrived at the ancient Haida Heritage site of SGang Gwaay (pronounced skung-why) that I really became aware of it, standing in the middle of an old growth forest listening to nothing but the wind gently whistling through the trees.

I spent a week sailing through the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve, and Haida Heritage Site on Haida Gwaii, the archipelago located north of Vancouver Island and west of Prince Rupert across the Hecate Strait. Gwaii Haanas is part of Haida Gwaii, and consists of nearly everything south of Sandspit. Its full name is a real mouthful, but there's good reason for the verbosity: Gwaii Haanas — recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1981 — incorporates three unique reserves in a single location.

Jointly managed between the Council of the Haida Nation, Parks Canada, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Gwaii Haanas is the first place in the world to be protected from the highest mountain right down to the ocean floor, 200 metres down and 10 kilometres out to sea. There's little human infrastructure here save for five Haida Gwaii Watchmen sites and two Haida operations stations, not to mention the crumbling ruins of centuries-old fisheries and logging operations.

Once thriving villages in the 1800s, these Haida sites were abandoned before the start of the 20th century due to the spread of communicable diseases. Eventually, the surviving Haida moved north to places like Skidegate and Masset, leaving the earth to reclaim the former villages. Today, massive beams lay fallen atop the former foundations of these Haida houses, and both mortuary and memorial poles still stand, their delicate carvings fading with each pass-



At every turn, the Haida Heritage sites and old growth forests never failed to impress. PHOTOS AARON SAUNDERS



Passing Cloud sails past Cape St. James at the southernmost tip of Haida Gwaii.

ing year as they're slowly reclaimed by the earth.

The best way to see these amazing sites, of course, is by boat.

Passing Cloud was built in 1974, but her lines harken back to the glo-

ry days of sailing. Her designer was William James Roué, the naval architect who was responsible for creating the famous sailing schooner *Bluenose*. She carries eight guests and four crew members, and fea-

tures exceptionally elegant interiors — including her Main Lounge, which features a stunning collection of books on Haida culture and Pacific Coast wildlife, plush leather couches and high-back chairs, and

an invitingly warm stove that quickly became everyone's favourite feature after a wet day ashore.

Guests sleep in four cozy state-rooms featuring dual bunks and a small vanity area and sink. Three feature skylights that can open to let fresh air in, while the midship stateroom features natural light via a fantastic little deck prism and air circulation with a small fan. A fully-functional bathroom with shower is shared among the guests, and with only eight aboard, there's never really any competition for it.

Outer Shores Expeditions was founded by Russell Markel, who incidentally serves as *Passing Cloud*'s Master. He's also a well-respected naturalist, with a PhD in Marine Ecosystem Ecology from UBC and a stint as a Postdoctoral Fellow at UBC's Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability under his belt. The rest of *Passing Cloud*'s four-member crew are similarly educated. *Passing Cloud* is like a mini-university gone to sea.



Beachcombing at Woodruff Bay, near the southernmost tip of Haida Gwaii. Helping to clean up debris washed ashore is part of the trip. PHOTOS: AARON SAUNDERS

During my weeklong sailing, I was struck by the level of knowledge that some of my fellow guests — who hailed from California, England and British Columbia — had, either about Haida heritage or the diverse ecosystem. I, comparatively, kept hoping for a ship to pass us so I could demonstrate my maritime knowledge, but none ever did. If, like me, you can't pick out a pycnophidia helianthoides from a sea cucumber, don't worry — that's why the crew are there: to educate and inspire. There are no dumb questions, and the more you ask, the more you'll learn.

Markel and his crew are also the consummate hosts, serving up breakfast, lunch and dinner with the help of Passing Cloud's cook, pouring complimentary wine in the evening, and generally making sure guests are all comfortable and enjoying themselves. Markel — or Russ, as everyone just calls him — will even swing the ship around, stop for a bit, or change course if someone spots wildlife or something interesting worth checking out. He operates Passing Cloud's voyages with a start date and an end date; everything in between is flexible and can depend on what guests would like to see and do most. It's less like sailing with a company and



My journey aboard Passing Cloud in Haida Gwaii began with a complimentary 50-minute float plane flight from Sandspit to the ship, anchored in Rose Harbour.

more like joining a friend who just happens to own a schooner.

The experiences we were treated to over the course of seven days are too numerous to list here. We hiked in the brilliant sunshine on the Gordon Islands and helped clear the Caribbean-esque beach at Woodruff Bay of garbage found washed ashore. We stood transfixed in a rushing stream in the pouring rain, watching as hundreds of salmon fought their way upstream and jumped through waterfalls, all while a lone Haida Gwaii black bear lumbered lazily in

the background. We were the only humans around for miles.

The most memorable experiences, though, were at the Haida Watchmen sites of SGang Gwaay, T'aanuu, and Hlk'yah GawGa — better known as Windy Bay, where the first Haida pole erected in nearly 130 years was raised just last year. There's something profoundly sad about seeing the fallen remains of these sites, but the Haida Watchmen we encountered — who live at each site between May and September — are passionate about telling the stories

of the villages. Until recently, the Haida had no written language. Stories were passed down from generation to generation by way of dedicated "historians", individuals who had to recite tales word-for-word that could sometimes last a day or more. Failure to recite the story word-for-word meant that education of the historian-in-training would cease, and the story would have to be restarted from the top.

By the time I arrived back in Sandspit one week later, my view of the province that I call home had been entirely turned upside down. I can't count how many times I've sailed straight past Haida Gwaii on a huge cruise ship bound for Alaska, never knowing that this untouched jewel existed just over the horizon.

Next year, Outer Shores Expeditions is expanding their program in Haida Gwaii to include a pre-cruise land-tour component that features overnight accommodations in Sandspit and a guided tour of the Haida Heritage Centre in Skidegate. Pricing for 2015 also includes the scenic float plane trip either at the start or conclusion of your voyage — a fabulous touch.

With a maximum of eight guests per sailing, it's perhaps not surprising that spots on board Passing

Cloud's voyages fill up fast — but you might be surprised at just how quickly. While there is still availability on her Haida Gwaii voyages next year, many of Outer Shores' Great Bear Rainforest sailings are already wait-list-only — more than a year out.

There are relatively few ways to see Gwaii Haanas. Despite the fact that it exists only two hours by plane from Vancouver, it might as well be located at the edge of the earth. A week of exploring its beaches, forests, and Haida heritage sites showed it to be as unique as Australia's remote Kimberly region, and as biologically diverse as the Galapagos Islands. It's nothing like the rest of British Columbia. Gwaii Haanas is a step back in time to the days of Captain George Vancouver.

Better still, it exists right on our doorstep — and Outer Shores is there to show you the way. I tried to get a final glimpse of the Passing Cloud as my Air Canada Express plane lifted off from Sandspit Airport, but they were already gone, set off on another journey designed as much to enthrall as to protect the future.

Visit fromthedeckchair.com to read our full Live Voyage Report through Gwaii Haanas aboard Passing Cloud.