



The Edge of The World

A nautical expedition around Cape St. James, the furthest point south in the Haida Gwaii Archipelago

Words and photos by Owen Perry

They call them the ‘Islands at the Edge’ for good reason. Sixty miles detached from the mainland of British Columbia and perched on a continental shelf that plunges 10,000ft just a few miles offshore, Haida Gwaii it is the most isolated group of Islands on the west coast of North America. Remote, mountainous and surrounded by water it is not easily explored by land. In fact, few good roads exist outside the one running between Masset and Queen Charlotte, the two main population centers. If you’re going to fully explore Haida Gwaii and visit remarkable places like Gwaii Haanas National Park, it really requires taking to the sea.

It’s estimated that the Haida have been inhabiting the islands for estimated 15,000 years, and over this vast amount of time they perfected the art of canoe building. Carved completely from the trunks of Haida Gwaii’s massive ancient cedars, some of these canoes reached 70 feet in length and carried more than 30 passengers and paddlers. So well-built and seaworthy were they that the Haida regularly made passages across Hecate Strait to trade with, or in many cases invade, tribes on the mainland. Today, the rich history of water exploration in Haida Gwaii continues, albeit mostly by kayak, zodiac or sailboat.

Over the past few years I’ve had the opportunity to explore Haida Gwaii by water in another type of wooden boat, a classic schooner called Passing Cloud. Owned and operated by Outer Shores Expeditions, Passing Cloud and it’s crew have taken me to places like SGang Gwaay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where I’ve seen and photographed the finest examples of remaining Haida memorial or mortuary poles in the world. I’ve been privileged to speak with and learn from the Haida Watchmen, an organization located within Gwaii Haanas National Park dedicated to educating visitors about Haida history and way of life. And I’ve seen beauty and wildlife that is hard to justifyingly describe or photograph. The experiences have enriched not only my understanding of Haida culture, but of how their way their life was inextricably woven into the ecology of Haida Gwaii.

In the summer of 2018 I had the chance to sail around Cape St. James, an extremely rugged group of islands inhabited mainly by seabirds and sea lions. The islands mark the southernmost tip of Haida Gwaii and have a notorious reputation amongst mariners for being inhospitable pretty well all year round. As many as five different currents converge at Cape St. James, creating raucous and unpredictable water conditions feared by even the most experienced sailors. Thankfully we were spared the Cape’s worst weather on the day we sailed around her. Conditions were rather excellent for sailing and Passing Cloud thrived at what it does best.



These photographs capture some of the memories of my trip around the Cape, but they'll never fully do this place justice. Whether it's the call of a raven on misty morning, or the sun breaking through the clouds on a rainy afternoon, there's a spirit you feel in Haida Gwaii that's greater than any photograph or combination of words. The history, culture and beauty need to be experienced first hand, and I encourage you to go and see for yourself.



Left: Flat Rock, also known as K'il to the Haida. According to their mythology this is where the universe began.

Above: Passing Cloud anchored near the Gordon Group of Islands in Gwaii Haanas

Next Page: Exploring the Gordon Group of Islands on a foggy morning





The poles of SGang Gwaay (Ninstints) provide a glimpse into the mythology of the Haida who saw the world as one suspended between ocean and forest. These two mysterious universes contained supernatural creatures. Early Haida stories recount experiences between the people and archetypes such as the Raven, Killer Whale and Grizzly Bear. Through time, these archetypes made their way into Haida art, and were expressed in the crest-like figures seen on these mortuary poles. The poles and their figures symbolize the importance of these interactions while serving as a symbol of pride a Haida family or individual maintained or handed down through generations. Each pole was an object of pride owned by a clan and contributing to its wealth and esteem.



Made to sail around the world, Passing Cloud was launched in Victoria, BC, in 1974. It was designed by William James Rou  , famous for designing the legendary fishing schooner Bluenose.

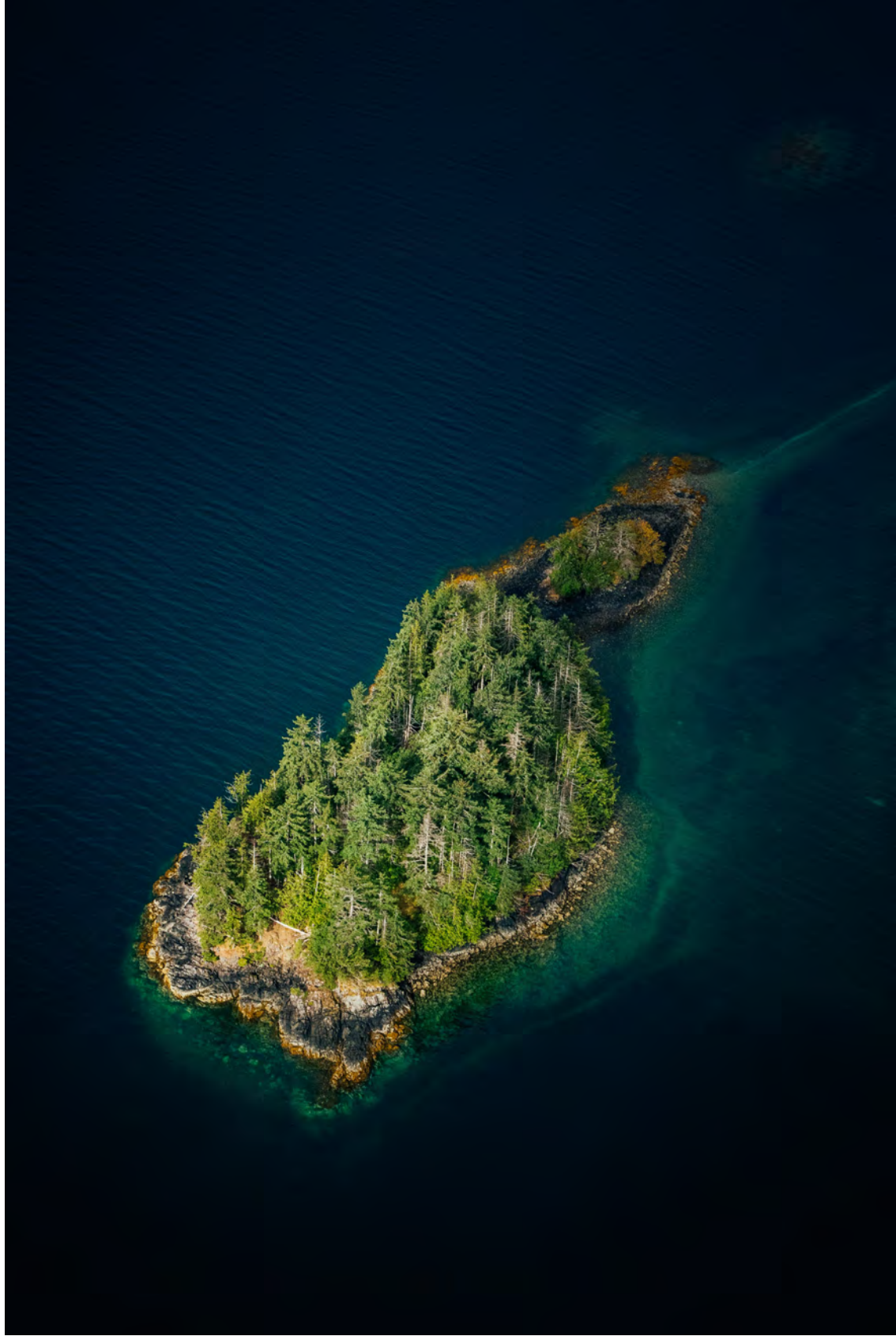
A pod of Risso dolphins we encountered while exploring in Gwaii Haanas.
The active and playful species is somewhat rare to see in Haida Gwaii.



The scarring on the Risso dolphin's skin is likely due to social interactions or their favourite prey, giant squid.



Even on the smallest pieces of land, rainforest just wants to grow.



Flying into Gwaii Haanas to meet up with Passing Cloud offers beautiful views from above



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