

In search of

and The Queen Charlotte Islands pack a spiritual punch

BY MARGO PFEIFF

Moss, moss everywhere. Meandering lushly up tree trunks, it envelopes woodpiles, grows mossafros atop fence posts and encroaches on the cedar plank pathway I'm hiking through a rainforest of Sitka spruce so big they could be simultaneously hugged by a dozen people. Great green blobs of the stuff resembling baby bears droop from tree branches. "Moss sloths," my sister calls them. The air is cool, damp and fresh with an organic aroma of living, growing things — growing so enthusiastically, in fact, that I'm nervous about dallying too long in one spot lest I too become "mossed" like some hapless victim in a *Twilight Zone* episode.

Then, just ahead, a pair of huge eyes stares at me and my heart does a little jig. An unmistakable eagle's face, craggy and weathered with age, peers out from a bleached silver totem pole eerily naked in a green clearing. And then I see the others, the only cluster of ancient totems still standing. And like my first-ever encounter with giraffes in the African bush and the hilltop enclave of Machu Picchu, these poles pack a spiritual punch in real life that I never get from even the best documentary footage.

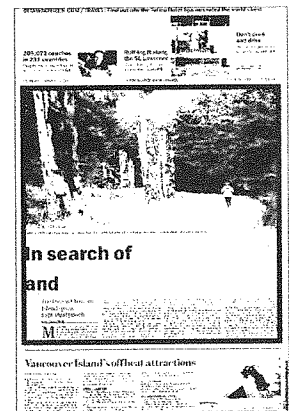
One hundred and twenty kilometres off the north coast of B.C., the Queen Charlotte Islands — a.k.a. "The Charlottes" or, increasingly, "Haida Gwaii" in the native Haida tongue — are just 40 kilometres shy of the Alaska Panhandle. To get there, you can fly

from Vancouver or take a ferry across Hecate Strait from Prince Rupert on the mainland. The cruise on BC Ferries is likely the best approach with 6½ hours to mellow down to the local's pace.

My sister and I came for glimpses of long-abandoned Haida village sites with their toppling totems now protected within Gwaii Haanas National Park, a wilderness covering most of the southern tip of this blade-shaped archipelago. We wanted to walk wild beaches and hike in some of the continent's most verdant rainforest drenched in 130 annual centimetres of rain. Also on the agenda was taking in the resurgence of Haida culture, a bit of fishing and whale-watching. And we had our fingers crossed for a sighting of the elusive migratory Tufted Puffin because neither of us had ever seen a puffin in the flesh. I had also never seen a fish in the flesh at the end of my fishing line, but more about that later.

There are two main islands — Graham and, to the south, Moresby — and 150 small surrounding islands. Only about 190 kilometres of paved roads connect the seven communities, the largest being Queen Charlotte City, population 1,000. The Charlottes are both an island and a remote northern community, and tourism is relatively new. This means things are costly and the only five stars you'll see will be in a rare cloud-free night sky.

My sister Linda is an island junkie and she also fished salmon commercially for years, which makes her particularly handy when I go fishing on islands. Since we were youngsters, salmon and trout of alarming size have flung themselves at Linda when she approaches water. I, on the other hand, have never caught anything and, when



I'm around, neither does anyone else. Linda's mission is to change this. So we stock up with brochures and maps at the useful visitor's centre/local art gallery in Queen Charlotte City, pick up a couple of killer lattes at Jag's Beanstalk, a nursery/flower shop/café near Skidegate (multi-purpose establishments are an island specialty) and zoom north to Masset to catch fish.

Everything in the Charlottes is oversized, from trees and bears (the biggest black bears in North America) to seaweed, scallops and record sized salmon that draw folks for some of the world's best sport fishing. You can hire a local Masset fisherman or head to one of the exclusive luxury lodges on Langara Island off the north coast. We zip over to one of them, the West Coast Fishing Club, by helicopter, scattering tame local deer off the landing pad. The lodge is an elegant, manly place that encourages catch and release by offering world class Haida art in exchange for letting your 40 pounder go. But I didn't have to make that decision since, as usual, nothing nibbled. We blame a pair of killer whales patrolling in the distance and switch to deeper water halibut gear. I find myself childishly overjoyed to snag a modestly-sized specimen, an experience akin to hauling a fridge door from the ocean depths.

Masset is a no-frills fishing town of loggers and fishermen, hippies and Haida like the rest of the islands' 5,000 residents. It sits alongside Naikoon Provincial Park, a vast expanse of beach and forest occupying the northeast corner of Graham Island. We quickly became accustomed to the on-and-off light rain showers that are the Charlottes' trademark weather pattern as we comb the beach for agates, chat with local crab-seekers and poke around a shipwreck. Great coffee is generally a rarity in remote places, but we find it everywhere, even at Moon Over Naikoon, an offbeat, off-the-electrical-grid café and informal whale museum in the middle of Naikoon's rainforest, where we meet up with guide Andrew Merilees over a fair trade Java and still-warm cinnamon buns.

Merilees takes us nearby to Old Masset, one of two remaining native communities. "There were once more than 500 Haida communities in the islands with a population of over 7,000," he explains. Haida were fierce warriors and

traders with a rich culture afforded by a bountiful land. "Then, in the late 1800s, a series of smallpox epidemics decimated their numbers to fewer than 700." But the Haida were strong people. Remarkably, their culture didn't disappear, and has been undergoing a revival over the past 50 years. Artists encourage home visits so we drop in on silversmiths, carvers of argillite — a local black coal-like stone — and to the home of Joyce Bennett, a fourth-generation button blanket maker. Sarah's Haida Arts and Jewelry, in a stylized longhouse in Old Masset, sells the works of dozens of local artists.

We head south with Merilees towards Port Clements, a struggling logging town with an interesting pioneer museum. Years ago, loggers came across a huge, partially completed canoe in the forest and called in anthropologists. Sleek though mossy, it is a distinctively canoe-shaped log lying on the forest floor, one of more than 30 in the islands. "The trees were selected, felled and partially hollowed out before being moved on log rollers to the water," Merilees says. They were then filled with hot stones and water to steam them open. Canoes as long as 60 feet were the Haida's most valuable trading tool and have been found as far afield as Northern California. Along with standing cedars from which strips of bark were harvested years ago to weave baskets and hats, the canoes are officially dubbed CMTs — Culturally Modified Trees — and the Haida are presently mapping their sites using GPSs as evidence to back their native land claims.

At the southern end of Graham Island, 110 kilometres from Masset, Skidegate is the islands' second native community. On Aug. 23, it will host the official opening of a \$26-million Haida Heritage Centre, an elegant complex including a museum, traditional amphitheatre and canoe/totem-carving shed. Six totems erected out front were created by local master carvers who worked with apprentices learning the ancient skills. There is also the Bill Reid Teaching Centre named after the iconic part-Haida artist who spearheaded the current revival in Haida carving beginning in the 1950s and whose monumental works are showcased at Canada's embassy in Washington D.C., in Vancouver's airport and on

the Canadian \$20 bill.

The Heritage Centre stretches along a crescent of pebble beach, a contemporary rendering of a series of longhouses echoing the haunting black-and-white archival photos of once-thriving Haida villages, a line of totems and the family canoes parked out front.

It is the remnants of those old villages that we set off to see next after a short ferry ride south to Moresby Island where we join local outfitter Moresby Explorers for a four-day trip into Gwaii Haanas National Park. A unique reserve jointly managed by Parks Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation, it is comprised of hundreds of small islands accessible only by float plane and boat.

Zodiac is the most efficient way to see the park. With our trusty 23-year-old guide, Laura Pattison, a sharp homeschooled local, we zoom to sites of old copper mines, the ruins of canneries and logging operations that once clear-cut these lush rainforests. In 1985, the widely publicized Lyell Island blockade of clear-cut logging operations was the impetus for the park's establishment on south Moresby a few years later.

This is a Galapagos of the North, a major seabird stopover where eagles are so common locals call them "chickens." As we travel, we spot humpback whales from Hawaii gorging themselves en route to Alaska, pilot whales, bears and teenage Stellar sea lions goofing off in the water while their parents' syncopated grunts fill the air from a nearby rock. The sea life is lush, too, a Technicolor underwater forest of anemones and sea stars brightening the shallows of Burnaby Narrows.

During the long, 21-hour days, we soak in natural pools on Hotspring Island and visit the old village of T'anuu where massive, fallen roof beams and poles are distinct mossy bulges on the forest floor and spanning the sunken interiors of once-spacious longhouses where extended families lived.

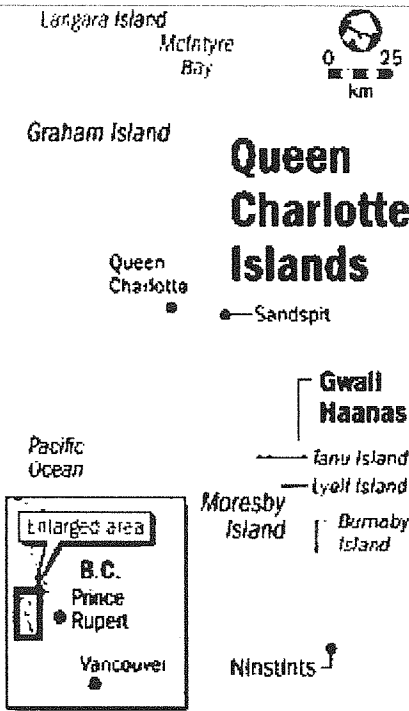
Two nights are spent at Moresby Explorers' cozy wooden float house, complete with a propane fireplace and a cook whipping up fabulous meals. The third night is at a quirky hippy-style guesthouse on the site of the abandoned Rose Harbour whaling station where a pair of giant metal "bone digesters," or rendering drums, rust on

the beach. Four thousand whales were processed here in the early 20th century, their meat and bones reduced to fertilizer. The guesthouse owner is Tassilo Goetz, German and an excellent acoustic guitarist. In an adjoining house lives cook Susan Cohen who grows all the veggies she uses for her off-the-land meals in a thriving garden out back. Both have lived in this isolated outpost for 26 years.

Ninstints, also known as Sgan Gwaii, is a tiny island at the far southern tip of the archipelago and I've wanted to come to this place for decades. Tension builds as I walk the boardwalk from the beach through rainforest following one of the Haida Watchmen who spend summers guiding and guarding the more popular sites in the park. The highlight of the trip is my first glimpse of the clearing where roughly a dozen totem poles tower, a stacked cedar menagerie of killer whales, ravens, beavers and bears. It's clear that this is a special place, a sacred site for the Haida who regard it as the resting place of ancestors felled by smallpox. UNESCO also found it sacred in 1981 when it declared it a World Heritage Site as the best preserved remaining First Nations village anywhere, abandoned when there were only a handful of survivors in the 1880s.

It is hard to imagine the trip could get any better as we leave Sgan Gwaii, when an ungainly flock of five birds suddenly lifts off the waves ahead of our Zodiac. Chunky orange beaks and a bright yellow Mohawk flapping in the breeze can mean only one thing —

Tufted Puffins. "Well spotted," one of the guests exclaims in a British accent as they flap in a circle around us. "Check!" we chime in as "twitchers" do, ticking another great life experience off our list.



if you go ...

"People need to make sure they know what this place is about before they go to the effort and expense of coming here," suggests Parks Canada communications officer Nathalie Fournier. Stormy winter weather dictates a short visitor season from late June to early September, so planning and booking ahead is essential.

Information:

- Northern British Columbia Tourism Association: www.nbctourism.com, phone 1-800-663-8843.
- Haida Gwaii Tourism: www.haidagwaiitourism.ca
- Queen Charlotte Visitor Centre: www.qcinfo.ca, 3220 Wharf St., Queen Charlotte City, Phone 1-250-559-8316
- Andrew Merilees, guide, Haida Gwaii Discovery Tours: www.northwestrecreation.com, Phone 1-250-626-3949 or 1-866-626-3949.
- Moresby Explorers, 365 Beach Rd., Sandspit, B.C. Phone 1-250-637-2215 or 1-800-806-7633, www.moresbyexplorers.com.
- Haida Heritage Centre Skidegate, www.haidaheritagecentre.com. Open 10-6. Closed Sundays. Adults \$12.

Getting There: Air Canada has two-hour flights from Vancouver to Sandspit. www.aircanada.com. BC Ferries operates a 6½-hour ferry ride from Skidegate from Prince Rupert, Phone 1-888-223-3779 or visit www.bcferries.com.

Accommodations:

- Dorothy & Mike's Guest House, 3127 Second Ave., Queen Charlotte City, Phone 1-250-559-8439 or visit www.qcislans.net/doromike. Serene comfortable lodgings overlooking Skidegate Inlet. Double from \$58 with breakfast.
- Premier Creek Lodge, 3101 - 3rd Ave., Queen Charlotte City, Phone 1-250-559-8415, 1-888-322-3388 or visit www.qcislans.net/premier. Funky renovated historic town lodge. Doubles from \$35.
- Masset Beach House B&B, Phone 1-250-626-6040. \$150 per person, per night, breakfast included. Fishing, sightseeing tours can be arranged. The owners also operate the luxury Clubhouse Fishing Lodge on nearby Langara Island. From \$4,425 per person for a three-night, four-day stay all inclusive with flight from Vancouver included.

- Tlell River House, Beitush Road, Tlell, Phone 1-250-557-4211 or visit www.tlellriverhouse.com. Elegant field stone and wood lodge and spa on the Tlell River. \$175 double per night with breakfast.

Dining: I usually pack my taste buds away when I head into the Canadian north, so it was a pleasant surprise to come across one quality eatery after another in the Charlottes.

- Queen B's Cafe, 3211A Wharf St., Queen Charlotte City, Phone 1-250-559-4463. Funky cafe/gallery, homemade food. Open daily. Lunch \$25; Dinner (Thurs & Fri) \$40.
- Purple Onion Deli, 1-3207 Wharf St., Queen Charlotte City, Phone 1-250-559-4119. Great breakfasts and deli sandwiches from \$15 for two.
- Keenawil's Kitchen, Phone 1-250-559-8347. Haida culinary expert Roberta Olson "Keenawil" comes from a long line of traditional food gatherers. She and her two teenaged kids cooked up our best meal on the islands, a traditional Haida-style feast including octopus, seaweed, silky smoked black cod, cod soufflé and much more. By appointment. \$50 per person.
- Jag's Beanstalk, www.jagsbeanstalk.com. Best coffee in the islands in a nursery/flower shop near the Haida Heritage Centre in Skidegate.
- Rising Tide Bakery, 37580 Hwy. 16, Tlell, Phone 1-250-557-4677. Healthy, delicious homemade fare. Open seven days. Lunch \$25.
- Trout House Restaurant and Bakery, 9102 Tow Hill Rd., Tow Hill, Phone 1-250-626-9330. Great food including halibut burgers, candied salmon focaccia and seafood chowder of the Gods. Local musicians on weekends. Call to check seasonal hours. Open for dinner Friday and Saturday. From \$25 for two.
- Hidden Island RV & Resort Fish 'n' Chips, Tow Hill Road, Masset, Phone 1-250-626-5286. Eight tables in a tackle shop/diner in an RV park where you dine on terrific fresh halibut and chips amid day-glo lures and fish bonkers. Lunch for two: \$20.
- Moon Over Naikoon, Tow Hill Road, Tow Hill. Open most days 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., summer only, for coffee and baked goods.
- Haida Rose Café, 415 Frog St. Phone 1-250-626-3310. Coffee and light lunch in Old Masset.

Art: Pick up an excellent Art Route brochure at the visitor's centre. And don't miss Sitka Studios and The Crystal Cabin Gallery on a dirt road in the forest near Tlell. Between them, they represent dozens of traditional and contemporary island artists from printmakers and silversmiths to potters and carvers.



MARGO PFEIFF, FOR THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

In 1981, UNESCO made the island of Ninstantin, or Sgan Gwaa, a World Heritage Site as the best preserved remaining First Nations village anywhere.



MARGO PFEIFF, FOR THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Visitors to Gwaa Haanas National Park off South Moresby Island travel from site to site by Zodiac.





Dusk in a magical, protected inlet in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Below, a fallen Sitka spruce on a trail near Port Clements is covered in moss.

