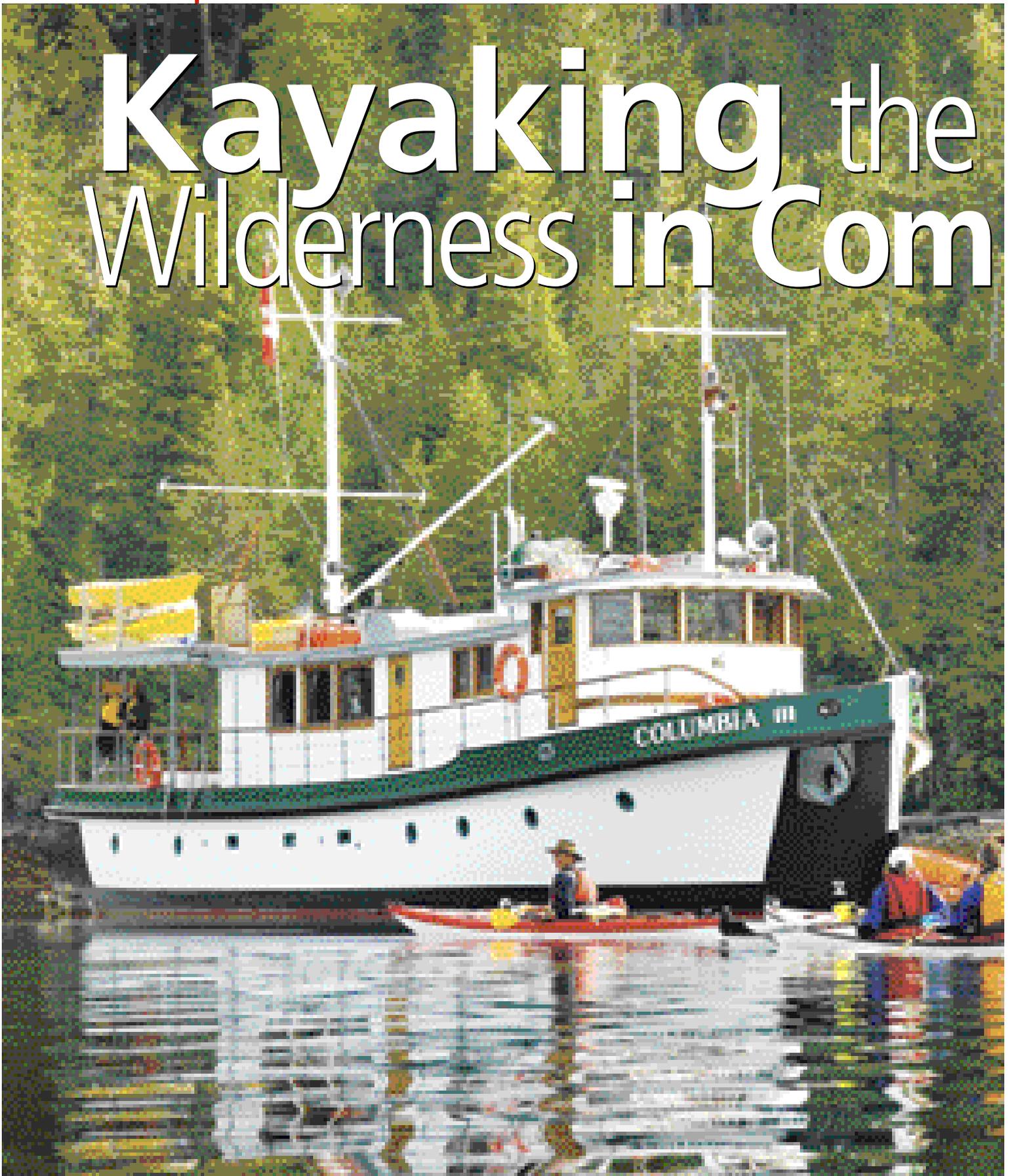


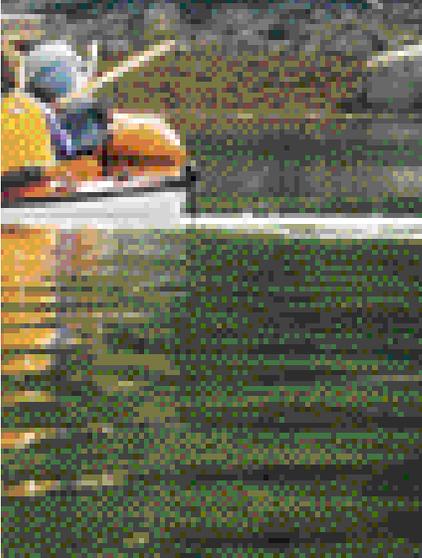
Kayaking the Wilderness in Com



B.C. fort

Explore by day,
relax in luxury
by night...now
that's the way
to adventure

By Jo Anne Walton



Photos: Robert Beaman (boat); Mothership Adventures (Great Bear Rainforest).

I'm warming myself on the boulders of a beach in the Burdwood Islands, deep in the Broughton Archipelago of British Columbia's Inside Passage. The rocks still hold the heat of a July afternoon sun long since departed. Clouds have set in and a cool southeasterly picks up as 24-year-old guide Miray Campbell signals it's time to leave.

Our group pushes off in three double kayaks, passing five weary paddlers beelining it to shore to camp for the night.

"A hot shower sure would be nice," one woman shouts good-naturedly after us.

"I bet you get that a lot," I say to Miray.

"Yeah," she grins.

There's more than hot water ahead. A chilled glass of wine, a gourmet meal, and cozy sleeping quarters await us aboard our mothership—the 68-foot (21-metre) *Columbia III* anchored a short paddle offshore.

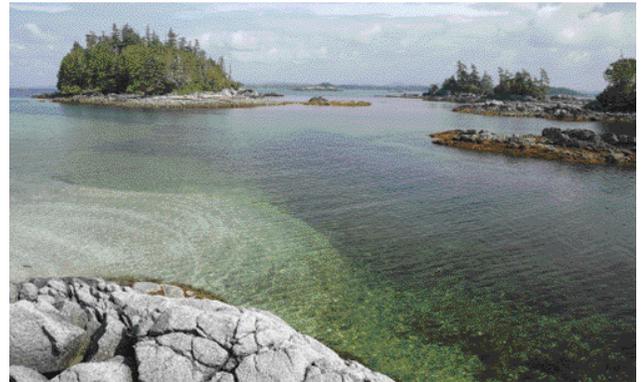
Touring by mothership offers the chance to enjoy remote wilderness travel by kayak and zodiac by day while relaxing in style at night. The concept has caught on around the world, but Captain Ross Campbell says the *Columbia* is the original.

"The guy who started this company in the late '80s wanted to call it Mothership.com," he explains, but a Seattle grunge band had already scooped the name after the

release of a popular alien movie coining the term. "So he went for the next best thing... Mothership Adventures."

Columbia III

To a long-distance kayaker like me, kayaking in comfort sounded like an alien concept, but, luxury aside, there are good reasons to give it a try. The trip to the Broughton Archipelago, off Vancouver Island's northeast coast, covered more territory in four days than conventional tripping could have. And on board was cultural interpreter Lillian Hunt, introducing us to the First Nations villages of this wilderness area.



The Great Bear Rainforest in the McMullin Islands.

Our party of eight met at Port McNeill's wharf, a four-hour drive north of Nanaimo's Horseshoe Bay ferry terminal. We searched for the *Columbia* amid a forest of fishing boat masts rocking in the brisk afternoon chop and found a green and white-trimmed, polished teak craft awaiting us, five yellow Necky kayaks stacked on top.

Once a working ship on British Columbia's remote coast, the *Columbia III* is



now the beautifully-restored first-class winner of the 2005 Victoria Classic Boat Show. Last year, she celebrated her 50th anniversary as a historic mission ship. She is third in a line of *Columbias* that provided medical service to isolated communities from 1905 to 1969.

“A lot of people’s lives have been touched by this vessel,” Captain Ross commented.

The bearded 52-year-old captain took charge of our gear, dispatching daughter Miray to show us our bunks. His partner, Fern Komelsen, blue-eyed with Joni Mitchell cheek bones, greeted us from the galley, where she was chopping fresh vegetables.

I surveyed our “campsite” for the next four nights: a cabin wrapped in windows with a gleaming mahogany table, a leather couch, shelves of books, and a roomy galley kitchen. Below deck, I shared the converted “chapel room,” where cozy bunks were set at perpendicular angles.

Lillian Hunt joined us for our first meal on board, her stories punctuated with quick bursts of laughter. She’s from the Namgis First Nations, one of 17 tribal groups forming the Kwakwaka’wakw Nation. Lillian grew up with the potlatch—a lavish ceremony of dance, feasts, and gift-giving that still marks important events. “When I was a little girl, they lasted five days,” she told us.

We dug into our own feast that night: Halibut baked with a pine nut crust, roasted yams, fresh garden greens, and

Fern's coconut-almond torte.

The Broughton Archipelago is a cluster of islands facing the full force of Queen Charlotte Strait. Here the strait divides: narrowing southeast into Johnstone Strait between the mainland and Vancouver Island, filtering northeast into the arterial waters surrounding Kingcome and Knight Inlets. It's a designated marine park (orca whales summer here) and home to the traditional winter village sites of Lillian's people.

"That's why we start at U'mista," Ross explained. "We're really in the heart of Kwakwaka'wakw territory."

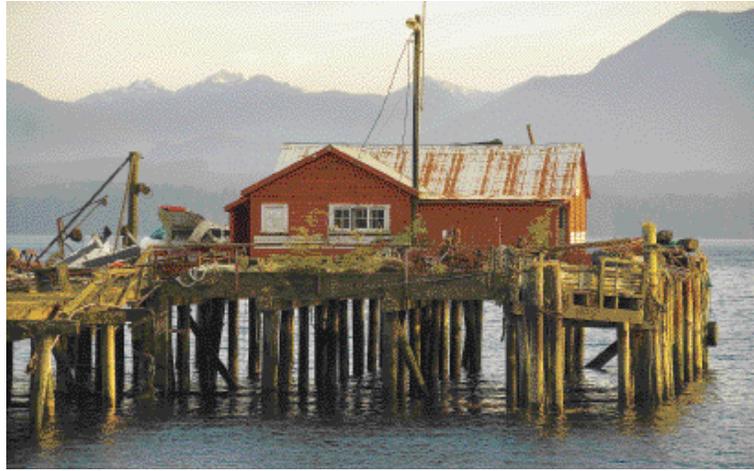
Approaching Alert Bay from sea, the U'mista Cultural Centre appears as a bold landmark next to the haunting brick facade of the old residential school. On its walls, the wings of an enormous thunderbird embrace a whale.

U'mista means "the return of something important"—a Kwak'waka' term once used to denote the return of captives by ransom payment. Today it describes a world-famous collection of masks and ceremonial regalia repatriated from North American museums. The objects were seized under a government ban of the potlatch that wasn't lifted until 1951.

"It was as if those masks were *u'mista*; they were coming home to us," Lillian explained.

Alert Bay to 'Mimkwamlis

Fern sticks her head into the



Alert Bay boathouse.

wheelhouse with an anxious look. "The quiche is rolling from side to side in the oven," she reports. Ross studies the chart, considering whether Friday night's menu will necessitate a change of course.

A stiff breeze kicks up a light chop. We're headed for 'Mimkwamlis on Village Island. Blue vistas of snow-topped coastal mountains unfold to the east fronted by layers of green-treed islands.

Someone calls out “Dolphins!” and we rush to the bow. Grey and white torpedo shapes streak beneath the bow’s wake, accelerating with breath-taking speed. One after another, the Pacific white-sided dolphins appear, dorsal fins cresting the waves, until a half dozen are travelling with us, eliciting our admiring cries. I lean over the rail, adrenalin surging as I watch them drag-race with daredevil swiftness. Just as quickly, they’re gone, an exhilarating marine welcome to the archipelago.

We crowd back into the wheelhouse for a pre-dinner chat with the captain. Ross flew choppers for 17 years before buying the eco-ship operation. He says one day Miray came home with a brochure for the *Columbia III*. “Dad, we could run this as a family business,” she urged. “Yeah, right,” he responded. In 2005, the family launched their first season.

Ross planned to return to flying during the off-season. But when his boss called to

ask if he was coming back, he told him, “I don’t know. I’ve got 12,000 accident-free hours, and it’s weighing on me.” Hanging up the phone, he told Fern, “I think I just quit.” Ten days later his boss called back. The machine Ross had been flying had crashed, killing its two occupants.

Spending time with this remarkable family crew will be a highlight of the journey. Fern wrangles horses in the Chilcotin for three weeks every summer. A certified kayak guide at 19, Miray built a Sonora Island home mostly by herself. Her 18-year-old brother, Tavish, is on a tall ship bound for Papua New Guinea; twin sister Farlyn is on a Great Bear Rainforest research expedition.

Saturday Morning

I’m out of bed by six, despite the temptation to stay in bed gently rocked by the tide. We’re moored in a quiet inlet off Turnour Island. Fern is up, cutting raisin scones onto a baking

sheet and filling the thermos with fresh coffee. In the wheelhouse, Ross shows me a chart of yesterday’s course.

We’ve travelled from Alert Bay on Cormorant Island through Blackfish Sound crossing Weynton Passage, past Hanson and Harbledown Islands, entering the heart of the archipelago through Indian Channel. That’s a distance of about 16 nautical miles (30 kilometres) in only a few hours, roughly my equivalent of two days’ paddling.

In the day ahead, we’ll travel by zodiac to the Village Island site of Chief Dan Cranmer’s 1921 potlatch. The masks, rattles, and whistles we saw at U’mista were confiscated here by police; chiefs were arrested and imprisoned. We’ll visit Chief William Glendale’s cedar Big House at the modern-day village of Tsadzis’nukwame’. And there’ll be time left over for an evening paddle.

On six to 10-day kayaking trips, paddlers cover about eight miles (13 kilometres) daily with Miray. The



Left: Kayaking in the Broughton; right: A Kwakwaka'wakw chief on a pole outside the U'mista cultural centre.

Columbia leapfrogs ahead to meet them or transports them to prime paddling spots during lunch breaks.

“You never do any backtracking,” Ross says. “And you can cover a large distance. You may paddle with the orcas in one spot, then jump to some rocky cove paddling ahead.”

The Sedge Islands

After a day of exploring, I'm feeling overwhelmed by the rich history and geography of our journey. We're heading up Providence Channel towards a cluster of islets off the Sedge Islands. It's Fern's favourite area: “We take paddlers here on every trip.”

Cloistered green islands give way to an open ocean vista reminiscent of the West Coast's outer rim. A distant thread of fog hovers, blurring the line between calm sea and abalone sky. Rocky islets lay exposed to the northwest brunt of Queen Charlotte Strait; gnarled cedars are permanently bent against the force of winter storms.

The mothership is ideal for this area. “You may get only one calm day for being out here, and we can scoot up from wherever we are,” says Ross, navigating a narrow channel. He points to a cloud of eagles enshrouding a fish boat on our port side. They're after pilchard and herring. Despite hours at sea, he's never seen anything like it.

From our mooring in Dusky Cove, Miray and I escape the mothership in two single kayaks. The evening settles in peacefully around us. There are no other boats in sight. Almost every rocky isle holds a mother seal and mottled white pup. We sneak through shallow narrows, starting a mink on a rocky ledge as we drift silently by.

Spotting the distant mothership, we pick up our pace. I'm feeling no longing to pitch a tent, only well-being at the prospect of a fine meal and good company ahead.

“The *Columbia* is Coming!”

“Generations of settlers...will

remember the staunch little ships that fought their way through dense fog, wild rapids, and stormy seas,” wrote B.C. author Doris Anderson.

After Saturday night's dinner of Greek salad, wild salmon, and fresh-baked apple tart, we settle in with coffee to hear the *Columbia's* story.

Her heritage dates back to the early 1900s, when Reverend John Antle set sail to explore Vancouver Island's isolated inside coast. Struck by the high incidence of logging accidents, he asked Anglican bishops to fund a marine medical service. They wrote him a cheque to buy the 110-foot (34 metre) *Columbia I*. The coast's largest hospital ship service was born, operating with four *Columbias* and a series of small ambulance boats until 1969.

These floating community centres carried small libraries, hosted summer picnics, and brought visits from Santa Claus. The Campbells are often greeted in port by



locals eager to share stories about relatives born, married, or baptized on board.

“I get goose bumps thinking about the people who have come through this ship,” Ross admits.

Echo Bay

No leisurely lounging after Sunday lunch—we’re arriving in Echo Bay on Gilford Island. As the *Columbia* eases into dock, we munch on fresh apricots and the shortbread cookies Fern has found time to bake. A handful of houses with solar-panelled roofs perch on the steep shoreline. The Echo Bay area is home to several coastal celebrities—well-known orca whale researcher Alexandra Morton, musician Thetis Phoenix, and artist Yvonne Maximchuk—but it’s Billy Proctor we’ve come to see.

A whimsical driftwood walkway leads to “Billy’s Museum;” out front is a quiet man in a red-checked shirt and blue suspenders. Billy Proctor grew up fishing in the Broughton’s isolated Freshwater Bay. After watching the wild salmon runs decline each year, he

helped start the Scott Cove hatchery on the island’s Viner River. Thousands of chum have returned to its mouth.

Inside his tiny museum, meticulously-ordered shelves exhibit treasures scavenged from the tides: Seventy different kinds of pop bottles dating from 1910, ship parts, arrowheads, and Japanese glass floats, one the size of a beach ball. I browse a 1908 Sears Roebuck catalogue, asking shipmates to guess the cost of an ornate iron bed frame. No one comes near the asking price of \$3.10.

Next door is Billy’s bookstore. “People put stuff in it and I sell it,” he says. Our group buys Thetis’ new CD, Yvonne’s delicate pottery, Billy’s *Heart of the Raincoast: A Life Story*, and Broughton maps. We may have doubled the GNP of Echo Bay in our short visit.

Ross is anxious to be off to our next stop—kayaking in the Burdwood Islands. “No cell phones, no wallets, no shopping,” he promises, herding us from the store. “It’s a wilderness experience.”

Resources:

For more information on *Columbia III* kayak, photography, natural history, and First Nations cultural tours:
www.mothershipadventures.com

For travel and accommodations:

BC Ferries: www.bcferries.com

Tourism BC: www.hellobc.com

For the U’mista Cultural Centre: www.umista.ca

Last Night— Fern Island

Our last night on board, we anchor off Fern Island, back in the heart of the archipelago. Wind-bunt and spent, we each find a spot to curl up in and read. A comfortable silence replaces the lively chatter of the last few days.

I reflect on past kayak trips, on which a First Nations presence was visible only as a marker on the chart. Today, at Insect Island, what might have been a brief paddling stop was instead a glimpse into Dzawada’enuxw culture. Lillian showed us strips of black kelp, a traditional food, floating at the tideline. A 30-foot high midden bank snaked the shore. A 300-year-old cedar sat atop these crushed shells, evidence of thousands of years of clam harvesting in the archipelago.

Back in Port McNeill on Monday afternoon, it’s hard to believe the time has come to leave our mothership and crew. Reluctantly we load our gear, say good-bye to the *Columbia III*, and settle shoulder to shoulder into the zodiac, for one last ride to shore. ■