

A Cruise into First Nations Culture

By Hans Tammemagi July 23, 2011



The Columbia III is the last of three hospital/mission ships. It has been refitted by Mothership Adventures.

We arrive at Alert Bay on Cormorant Island off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. Over a century ago this was the site of a vibrant village, dominated by large cedar longhouses that extended almost to the waterline, with elegant towering totem poles at attention before every house. Today, I see a different picture. Moss-encrusted piers, several with missing planks, jut into the bay. Fishing boats with paint flaking from rusty hulls bob in the water. The tang of salt, seaweed and rotting fish hangs in the air. A few colourful totem poles punctuate the drab waterfront, reminders that this place, which has been home to the Namgis First Nation for thousands of years, has seen better days.

My wife and I are aboard the Columbia III on a First Nations' cruise operated by Mothership Adventures that will meander amongst the hundreds of glorious isles of the Broughton Archipelago to the northeast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, while we learn about Native history and culture.

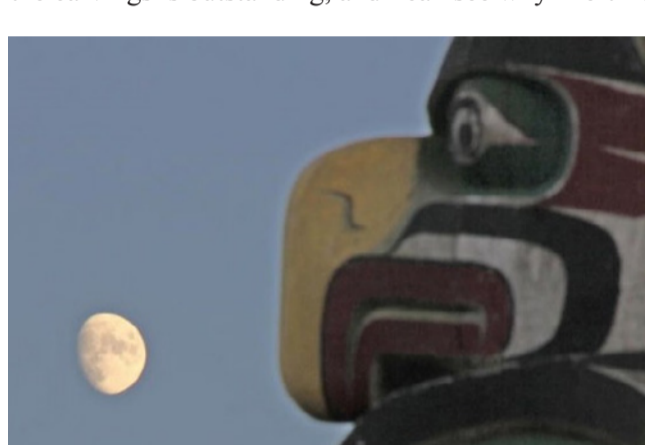
Lillian Hunt, a Namgis Native and curator of the U'mista Cultural Centre, comes aboard. She will be our guide for the next four days. An eagle perches high on a post beside our boat and on the shore St. Michael's Residential School looms in the darkening evening.



The T'sasala ("Determined") Dancers, youngsters in Native regalia, circle the fire in the Big House, performing a traditional dance.

After a night rocking gently on the tide, we head ashore to the u'mista Cultural Centre, which captures both the agony and glory of the Kwakwaka'wakw people, a group of 16 First Nations in this region that shared a common language. A film shows how the white man in the late 1800s banned the potlatch, an important Native ceremony. In December 1921, a large potlatch on Village Island was raided and the priceless ceremonial regalia confiscated and dispersed to museums and collectors around the world. The Cultural Centre was opened in 1980. About 20% of the seized items have been repatriated and are showcased in the Potlatch Collection. The gallery, designed as a traditional big house, is elegant and full of coppers and masks representing ravens, eagles, orcas, bears, the moon and sun as well as supernatural creatures. I sense a powerful pulse, an emotional celebration of the songs, legends and dances embodied in these masks. Then we are called to a Native meal of barbecued salmon, clam fritters, prawns, halibut and a special treat, an oily fish called oolichan. Delicious!

Only yards away from the modern cultural centre, sits the decaying St. Michael's residential school, a hulking, red-bricked reminder of the persecution of the Native people. From 1929 to 1974, children were forcibly taken from their families to live and study at the school in order to 'civilize' them. The school has long been abandoned but the community has refused to have it demolished, keeping it as a memorial. I enter a small workshop in the basement where two carvers are chipping at masks. The quality of the carvings is outstanding, and I can see why Alert Bay is renowned for its artists.



The moon hangs over a totem pole in Alert Bay.

We stroll to the Alert Bay Big House, its front painted in bold green, black and red ovoids representing a whale. The world's tallest totem pole (173 feet/56.4 m) soars high over us. Inside, a large fire lights the dusky interior, showing colourful totems and immense cedar posts and beams. The smell of smoke and cedar envelopes us as four men drum on a log. The t'sasala ("Determined") Dancers, youngsters in Native regalia, circle the fire, performing traditional dances, including the Hamat'sa or cannibal dance, which re-enacts a young man's possession by a cannibal spirit living at the North end of the world. Dance and songs tame the man, bringing him back to his human self. We all join in for the final dance.

After the performance we stroll into town, which is dominated by the cemetery. I am touched by the array of totems as well as crosses, an intriguing mixture of Native and non-Native faiths. I admire the totems, including one for Mungo Martin, a high-ranking chief and respected carver who was the first to host a potlatch in 1953, after the ban was lifted.

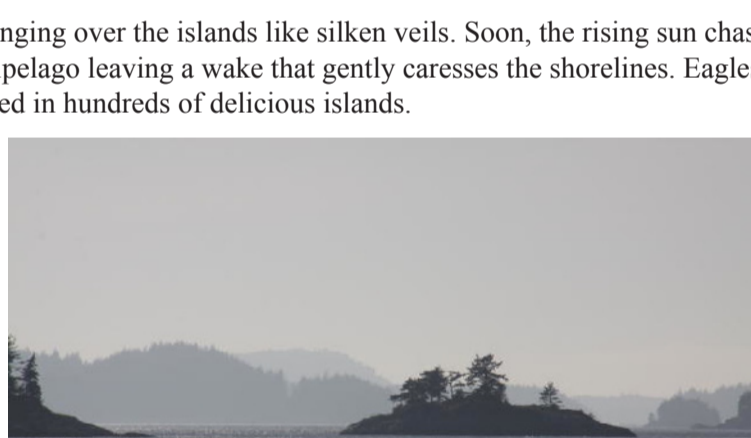


The abandoned St. Michaels Residential school is a reminder of the past.

As we sail away from Alert Bay, I lean against the railing and don't know whether to rejoice or to cry. The soul of the First Nations people is laid bare in this town of contrasts. It has living conditions that, in places, resemble a third-world country. But it also displays great beauty and a proud culture, one that is rich, appealing and rooted in nature. Alert Bay screams out about the injustices that Native people have suffered.

We cruise eastward and anchor on the north side of Hanson Island. Over dinner we chat about First Nations' dances, thunderbird masks and the taste of oolichan.

In the morning we rise to mist hanging over the islands like silken veils. Soon, the rising sun chases the fog and the Columbia purrs through the archipelago leaving a wake that gently caresses the shorelines. Eagles float effortlessly in the cloudless sky and we are immersed in hundreds of delicious islands.

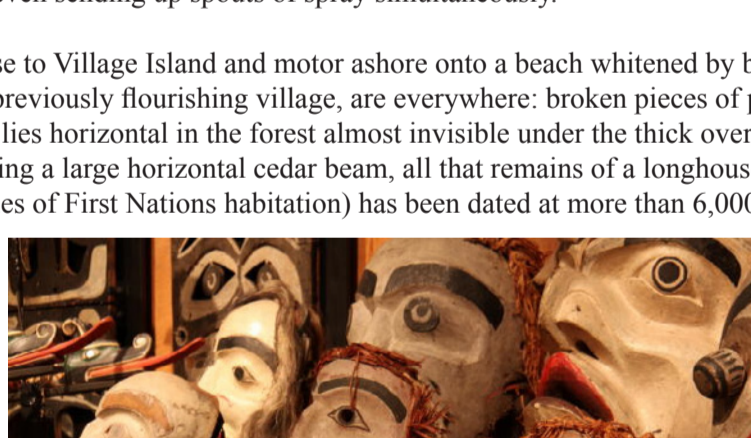


The Broughton Archipelago is gaggle of glorious isles.

Lillian points to a mortuary box peeking out of the greenery on Berry Island. Not allowed to go ashore, we study the box with binoculars wondering what high-ranking person lies inside. How did he or she live and die?

Two Dahl's porpoises join us, playing in the bow wake. Along the northeast corner of Malcolm Island we catch up with the A12 pod of killer whales (aka orcas). High black dorsal fins slice effortlessly through the water. A pair of orcas swims close together in perfect unison, even sending up spouts of spray simultaneously.

Under a perfect blue sky we cruise to Village Island and motor ashore onto a beach whitened by broken clamshells. The island is deserted, but signs of a previously flourishing village, are everywhere: broken pieces of pottery and metal litter the beach; a decaying totem pole lies horizontal in the forest almost invisible under the thick overgrowth; and two massive cedar posts stand upright supporting a large horizontal cedar beam, all that remains of a longhouse. The midden (layers of broken clam shells left by centuries of First Nations habitation) has been dated at more than 6,000 years.



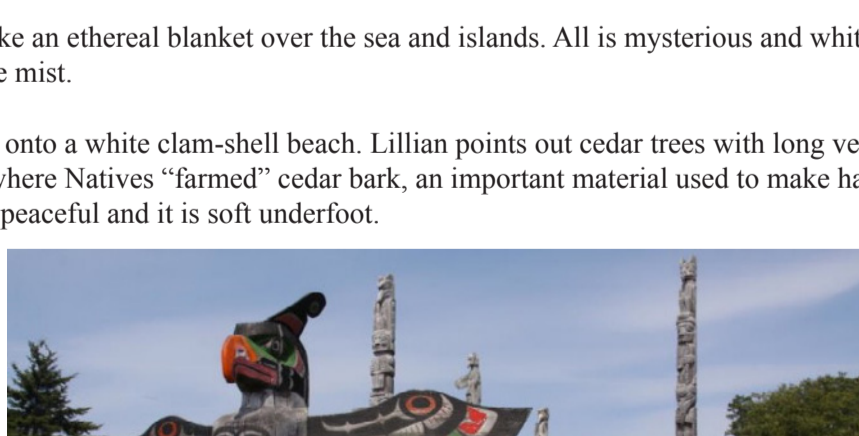
Ghostly masks in the Potlatch Collection of the U'mista Cultural Centre in alert Bay.

I can almost hear the cries of anguish as Chief Dan Cranmer's potlatch was raided and the treasures of masks, coppers, rattles and whistles were confiscated. This beautiful but lonely site offers a flashback to an iconic page in history; one that captures the misguided callousness with which the "white man" ruled the "red man".

We cruise on and a little later a red petroglyph winks at us from a cliff. Believed to represent an image of the North Spirit, the red coloring came from fish eggs. We drop anchor at Crease Island for the night.

When we awake, fog hangs like an ethereal blanket over the sea and islands. All is mysterious and white as we motor slowly until the sun chases the mist.

At Insect Island we go ashore onto a white clam-shell beach. Lillian points out cedar trees with long vertical scars (known as culturally modified trees) where Natives "farmed" cedar bark, an important material used to make hats, clothes, baskets and much more. The forest is peaceful and it is soft underfoot.



Totem poles intermingle with crosses in Alert Bay's cemetery.

We motor to Sunday Harbour where a long wall of rocks lies along one of the isles. "This is a clam garden," explains Lillian, "where clams were gathered at low tide." As the First Nations say, "When the tide is out, the table is set."

We arrive at the Burdwood Group, a glorious gaggle of little islands. With tall mountain peaks looming in the background, we lower kayaks into the water. Some of us paddle while others go ashore to explore the middens. I circle an island and then another. I ponder the long Native history of living off this bounteous land and sea. This is paradise.

We anchor for the night at Dusky Cove on the west end of Bonwick Island and discuss the day's adventures. Dusk settles and the islands transform into soft velvety shapes

On our last day we cruise slowly through the magical isles back to Alert Bay. We are silent, wrapped in our thoughts as we take a final stroll past the cemetery, the residential school and the cultural centre. We return to the Columbia, and motor back to Port Mcneil with the sun glistening on the waves. Leaning against the rail I don't know whether to rejoice or to cry.