

MYTHS MASKS and MEDICINE



Some of the faces are those of ghostly-pale frightened souls, seemingly weeping tears of blood. One face bears the smirk of ridicule, and another has bulging, whirling eyes. Another still, with sunken eyes and disheveled hair, has her thick lips pursed together in an O, ready to utter her frightening cry: *hu hu*. It's the terrifying visage of Dzunuk'wa—the giant of the woods—who, according to legend, snatches naughty children, puts them into her cedar basket and spirits them away to her lair to devour them. >>

story + photography by Janet Gyenes

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travel at home

Lillian Hunt, curator of cultural tourism programs for Alert Bay's U'mista Cultural Centre,

explains some of the complex history and legend behind the wooden masks that make up the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation's potlatch collection as she takes our group through the exhibit that is arranged in the same strict order as the masks would be used during potlatch ceremony dances.

These elaborately carved masks, some adorned with horse hair and cedar bark, represent a centuries-old culture that was once held ransom for decades when the federal government, largely at the behest of missionary groups, banned the potlatch ceremony in the late 19th century. Authorities seized the masks in 1921 at what has been described as "the last potlatch ceremony," which was held at Mi'mkwamlis (Village Island). Here, 45 people were arrested and charged with spurious "offences," such as giving and receiving gifts and dancing at the potlatch.

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In 1980, almost six decades later, the U'mista Cultural Centre was opened with a mandate to ensure the survival of all aspects of the cultural heritage of the Kwakwaka'wakw. By this time, most of the potlatch masks had been repatriated. Some had been sent to museums in Canada and

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM LEFT Memorial totem poles at Namgis Burial Grounds, Alert Bay; close-up of U'mista totem pole; U'mista Cultural Centre. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Cruising on the *Columbia III*; through the bracken to Alert Bay Ecological Park; village homes, Alert Bay; remnants of the past, Village Island; shell midden, Village Island; scarlet poppy; frolicking dolphin sighting; curios on display at Billy's Museum, Echo Bay; *Columbia III*, sunset anchorage.

abroad; others were sold off to private collectors. Not all pieces have been returned.

Potlatches, which are held by hereditary chiefs, are at the core of the Kwakwaka'wakw culture: titles and privileges are passed on, marriages and deaths are commemorated, and dances are performed. Hunt explains that the dances aren't owned; they're carried and passed down at potlatch ceremonies. "It took so long [to get the masks back] that some families didn't survive, and in our culture, when that happens, the dance dies with them. We help to correct [what has been written] because [our culture] wasn't lost, it was taken away," says Hunt. "[The masks] weren't returned, we had to go get them. The villages were not abandoned, we were displaced."

After taking us through the potlatch collection, Hunt, who grew up in Alert Bay, joins our

group on the *Columbia III*, which has also had a storied presence on the British Columbia coast as a hospital ship. It will be our home for three more days as we explore aboriginal cultural sites scattered throughout the ragged coastlines of BC's pristine Broughton Archipelago.

The evening before, our group travelled from Port McNeill across the Broughton Strait on the *Columbia III*. We anchored among the battered old fishing boats and bunked down in the boat's snug confines and awoke to the mournful drone of fog horns. On board, Ross Campbell, captain of the *Columbia III*, and his crew—his wife, Fern and daughter Miray—shared historic anecdotes that unfolded on the coast during the Kwakwaka'wakw's cultural repression.

At the turn of the century, logging was plentiful, but death rates in the risky industry were high. And without roads or telephones, schools or libraries, families were isolated. With a mandate to deliver hospital services throughout the region, Reverend John Antle's Columbia Coast Mission (CCM) and the *Columbia III* became a lifeline to

the fragmented communities that eked out an existence in remote outposts.

Campbell describes how Antle, who was characterized as a "hard-talking, hard-swearing man," decided to start the CCM, not to convert people to religion, but to bring much-needed medical services, supplies and news to coastal denizens. And for 60 years the CCM fleet of 17 ships, including the *Columbia III*, unfailingly travelled thousands of kilometres through swells and storms. Campbell points out how the vessel's original doors open extra wide to accommodate a stretcher, and how the refurbished salon where we feasted on breakfast was once the hospital cabin. The vessel was also one of the first on the coast to have a radio.

Leaving our overnight anchorage at Dong Chong Bay, we gather in the wheelhouse to listen to the squawks coming from the radio. There's been an "HB" sighting, and within minutes we spy the spray from a humpback whale in the distance.

Soon, though, we're distracted from our quarry by breathy puffs of air, snorting and splashing around the stern. Dozens of Pacific White-sided dolphins have surrounded the boat. They're playing—and playing with us, too, showing off with their stealth. It's dolphin soup of fins, flukes and noses flipping and splashing in the briny broth. Pairs leap frog one over the other. Farther back, soloists propel themselves clear out of the water,

practise medicine on the BC coast today

After training in the UK, New Zealand and Vancouver, Dr. Granger Avery leapt at the chance to move to the rugged coastal community of Port McNeill in 1974, because "I thought I'd better go somewhere where I could learn to make a decision again."

"Remote areas are wonderful for teaching oneself—and for teaching others—about medicine," adds the former President of the BC Medical Association, and Clinical Professor at UBC's Department of Family Practice. "It's ideal for physicians who are rational risk-takers."

BC's legendary coast is home to plenty of rewarding opportunities for physicians today, permanent or locum.

You could join Dr. Avery in Port McNeill, home of the district hospital for the North Island. Not far away, there's also a vacancy in Port Alice, a sheltered gateway to the Pacific. Farther north are a few specialist and FP positions in booming Prince Rupert, the travel hub for northern BC. And across the Hecate Strait, the Masset Hospital is ready to welcome another physician to the team practicing at the tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands or Haida Gwaii.

Find big adventure in "the Bellas": the island village of Bella Bella, the largest community on the central coast, or Bella Coola.

Love to surf? The world-famous surfing mecca Tofino has one permanent FP position and one locum gig.

For less rugged, but still pristine, coastal adventures, explore specialist or FP careers in the laid-back cities of Campbell River, Comox or Courtenay. You'll be the envy of your colleagues if you start a practice on the islands of Gabriola or Hornby, or snap up the surgical position on the international get-away destination of Salt Spring Island.

Explore locums throughout the region. Why not make one into a paid extension of your trip to BC's coast? Work for six months, or stay for a year or more... You can check out what's available at Health Match BC (healthmatchbc.org).

—Pamela Clarke

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eliciting cheers and clapping from our gang. We speed up and the dolphins skim alongside the stern—one, two, three—and jockey for position to ride the waves in a playful bravado.

Eventually, the dolphins disappear, and we double back between craggy islets toward Mi'mkwamlis (Village Island), site of the last potlatch. Shards of old china—a handle from a teacup, the rim of a saucer decorated with tiny blue flowers—litter the beach, along with crushed white shells reveal traces of an abundant life. Honeysuckles perfume the air, and the din of bees buzzing around swaths of thimbleberries cuts through the stillness. Shells crunch underfoot as we stroll past the sun-bleached remains of a shed. We scramble up the embankment and Fern points out what's left of an old totem that now rests beneath the shade of an ancient cherry tree. Moss camouflages the barely perceptible outline of an otter and grizzly bear claws. A few old buildings and posts from the Big House stand as reminders of the once-bustling community of Aboriginals, missionaries, and teachers who may have greeted the *Columbia III* on its visits.

We continue to explore a range of visits over the next two days, visiting T'sadzis'grucame (New Vancouver) where Chief Ki'ki'klala (Bill Glendale) graciously tours our group through his remarkable Big House. We spy pictographs near Karlukwees on Turnout Island and navigate past rafts of bull kelp toward the deep shell middens at Insect Island. We drop in to visit Billy Proctor at Echo Bay and explore his museum of treasures scavenged from Gifford Island and the surrounding environs. Opium bottles from the 1930s, fishing lures, cobalt blue Milk-of-Magnesia bottles and other remnants of a bygone era line Proctor's handcrafted wooden shelves. And we commemorate Canada Day while catching glimpses of harbour porpoises that are almost apparitions in the blanket of fog.

I crane my neck high, and I can just see the top of the world's tallest totem pole near the Big House at Alert Bay. We've been invited inside to witness some of the potlatch dances being performed by the community's elders and toddlers alike. The fragrant aroma of smoke and cedar permeates the air and the drumming, chanting and dancing begins.

There are spellbinding dances performed with masks and eagle down and then we recognize one of the creatures we'd heard about at U'mista days ago. It's Bak'was—Wild-Man of the Woods, shyly shielding his face with his hands, which he uses for digging cockles—his favourite food—out of the sand. He's mesmerizing, dancing alone in the middle of the Big House, long hair tumbling forward over his green face and hooked, beak-like nose. Bak'was can lure you into his netherworld where you'll be stuck forever. But today, we're safe among our new-found friends.

Soon, Bak'was disappears and we're guided from our seats to the centre of the Big House to join the dancers. We chant, twirling, stamp our feet in the sand and raise our arms up high, progressing in a circle past the totems and the drummers in the smoke-scented air, while fluffy eagle down swirls around. ●

+ if you go

THE TOUR Mothership Adventures offers four-night/five-day First Nations cultural tours with Lillian Hunt on the *Columbia III*, departing and returning to Port McNeill from Vancouver Island. mothershipadventures.com GETTING THERE Pacific Coastal Airlines flights depart daily to Port Hardy 25 minutes north of Pt. McNeill. pacific-coastal.com; 1-800-663-2872 > Ground transportation via car, taxi or shuttle bus from Port Hardy to Pt. McNeill. > BC Ferries offers frequent service from Vancouver Island. Port McNeill is an approximately 4.5-hour drive from Nanaimo or 6 hours from Victoria. bcferries.com MORE U'MISTA CULTURAL CENTRE: mista.ca