

Mothership Guiding

By Karen Stayura

It's 5:30 am on board the Columbia III and I'm being shaken from my peaceful slumber by a frantic guest. "Quick. Get up. Come up on deck!!" As I blindly reach for my glasses, I start to feel a bit panicky. This must be serious. Most guests are usually in a serene slumber at this time of the morning. I rush up on deck and squint to focus as some black birds come into view. Not the iceberg or the superpod of killer whales I had expected, but I guess to some people, cormorants are unusual. Another exciting day at work!!

That was my summer as a naturalist and assistant kayak guide on board a 68' mothership. Fresh out of university as an undergrad in Biology, and keen as can be, I had landed myself a summer position with a kayak tour operator, Mothership Adventures. I would be working out of Port McNeill and through the Broughton Archipelago for the summer months. Having just finished studying coastal invertebrates, plants and mammals, I was ready to embark on a new challenge, eager to put my academic knowledge to practical use. A meticulously restored classic wooden vessel carrying a fleet of yellow kayaks met me in Sointula as I began my summer adventure.



On the top deck of the Columbia III

The first few days involved prepping and stocking the boat for the upcoming week's trip. Four shopping carts full of food later, I begin to wonder if I would be sleeping beside the pasta. Where did all the food go? You soon discover the art of packing a vessel for a week's excursion with 10 to 12 guests, plus crew. Hatches magically appear, camouflaged in the flooring, revealing storage for fresh food. Up on the top deck, we readied the kayaks in custom-made racks and checked the winches for lowering them into the water. The extras aboard the vessel impressed me from the first: a well-stocked bookcase full of coastal history and field guides; wine glasses tucked away behind a locker; a cozy little fireplace in the main cabin; six private rooms below deck; and a hot shower!



Paddlers hit the beach for a hike to a cliffside whale watching site

were asked to remain ashore until mid-afternoon so that the boat could be loaded. Luggage began to appear on the stern deck. Gortex clad couples strolled the dock, glancing over at the boat now and then. You could sense the anticipation. I would always ask the head guide to brief me on the guests arriving the next week, and it would be a guessing game to see if we could identify them strolling around Port McNeill. I was particularly impressed by the way the groups were put together by the head guide. Some groups were mainly singles, some were all couples, some included kids, but all ended up working out well.

Having grown up near lakes, day boating was familiar to me, but I knew right away that living on a boat was going to be a new experience. I had to make sure I had all the appropriate nautical lingo. It's not a toilet, it's a 'head'. The kitchen is called a 'galley'. All the rooms are 'cabins'. 'Bow' means front, 'stern' is the back. 'Starboard' and 'port' got me every time. Ropes are 'lines'. "Jump off mid-ship port side and tie the bow line up first." The first few weeks were a tad stressful. Thanks to the patience of the seasoned skipper and head guide, I soon began to learn the ropes... I mean lines!

Day one of the trip was the day in which everyone would scope out who they would be sharing close quarters with for a week. That guy checking out the paddling gear would be the speed kayaker of the week. The couple up front were here to explore and important notes were already being recorded in fresh journals. The fellow in the main cabin was ready to grab a coffee and crack a fresh novel by the fire. The Nautical Nellies were fascinated by every nook and cranny on the Columbia (a former church mission boat, with many stories to tell). I found myself focusing on different aspects of the trip depending on guests. Strangers on Sunday were exchanging tearful goodbyes and email addresses the following Saturday.

We had our day off in Port McNeill. We arrived back Saturday afternoon, which gave us about 24 hours before the next guests arrived. Find the shoes that you wore last week and get your sea legs. Check in with family and friends and assure them that you have not been swept out to sea. Laundry was critical. Push the local fishermen aside and wash out those two faithful changes of clothes. I developed a new respect for quick-dry fleece.

The boat ran a similar route weekly through the small islands and beautiful waterways of the Broughton Archipelago. Intricately planned events and carefully charted paddling routes made for memorable trips. We pushed off Sundays from Port McNeill and motored over to Alert Bay on Cormorant Island. Monday morning was an exploration of Alert Bay and its native culture. Most guests were aching to get into the kayaks, so we did a quick paddle in the afternoon to get everyone used to their boats. The head guide fitted the guests to their boats on the deck below. Some had never seen a sprayskirt properly worn and so we would do a little fashion show to demonstrate.



The group discusses the paddling route for the day

Tuesdays we would paddle to a beach and hike up to a whale research station overlooking Johnstone Strait. Whale watching in Johnstone Strait is more like a whale show. Some weeks the whales seemed to be fully engaged in entertaining us. We were in the area when a superpod of orcas came in following the salmon, an annual summer event for the whales. And I would always look for my seal friend on Tuesday, who would follow us into the beach.

Wednesdays were Village Island visits by kayak. History and storytelling were enjoyed by our guests at lunch thanks to Tom Sewid. Thursdays were my favorite— long paddles to shell midden beaches, crab bakes on the beach, beautiful passages, a stop at Echo Bay and an amazing halibut dinner. Fridays were day paddles all the way into Burly Bay, or as I used to call it, Jellyfish Bay, where the water was thick with moon jellies, and where we were sure to see bears foraging for their dinner on the beaches. Saturday, a morning paddle and a boat ride back to McNeill.

I miss the mornings that I awoke to each day that summer. The silence was wonderful. I would walk along the deck wiping dew from the rails and hear the harbor porpoises coming up to breathe in the fog around the boat. The shrill call of a bald eagle would break the silence and kingfishers would chatter as they dove for their breakfast.

Paddling became as ordinary as walking. Would it be cheesy to say, "I became one with my boat"? I still cherish paddling on water that is so flat you feel you are sliding on a frictionless surface.

Becoming very familiar with the coastal creatures and the places we visited, I was always eager to share my knowledge with new guests. When the summer ended, I left for Taiwan to teach English for a year, and then went on to pursue certification in education. I am currently teaching Biology 11 and 12, and this year we introduced a beginner's kayak course that was really fun to teach.



Some of the moments guiding with crew and guests aboard Columbia III are ones I will always remember. I came away from the experience with a newfound respect and love for the Pacific coast and a journal full of great times with many wonderful people.