

SPECIAL CRUISE ISSUE



Photographs by MARGO PFEIFF

THE SWELL, which has been in service since 1912, was given a \$4-million refit to carry up to 12 guests through Canada's lush, wildlife-rich Haida Gwaii archipelago.

Small boat but big views

Canada's mystical Haida Gwaii are easy to enjoy up close aboard a 1912 tugboat.

BY MARGO PFEIFF

HAIDA GWAII, Canada — The aroma of coffee drifted into my cabin along with the distant squawking of seagulls, but it was a gentle swaying that reminded me I was waking on a boat.

I leaped from my bunk, the first passenger to reach the sunny salon for a steaming mug, and curled up on an upper-deck sofa. There I watched seals pop up from the mirror-smooth waters, sending ripples across a pristine bay toward the mist-veiled rainforest slope.

I love cruising remote wilderness on small, working boats, and British Columbia has a roll call of them pattering along its coast and islands.

When Vancouver, Canada-based Maple Leaf Adventures in 2015 launched cruises aboard a converted 1912 tugboat, I signed up for a seven-night adventure exploring the nooks and crannies of the mystical Haida Gwaii, formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The blade-shaped archipelago of more than 400 islands is off British Columbia's north coast. They are home to the Haida, a First Nations people known for their rich culture and craftsmanship.

During my July trip, I wanted to walk wild beaches, hike in some of the continent's most verdant rainforest, whale- and wildlife-watch and, I hoped, spot the elusive migratory tufted puffin in a region nicknamed "Canada's Galápagos."

And to putter about on a tugboat called the Swell.

There is a cheerful cuteness to the Swell that reminds me of the "Theodore Tugboat" kids' series I watched with my nephew in the '90s. But the Swell is the real deal, a grown-up, 88-foot powerhouse that worked hard for decades along British Columbia's coast.

Now, after a \$4-million refit, it's plying those waters to the delight of a maximum of 12 guests in six elegant, wood-paneled, en-suite cabins.

Graham Island

My trip began with a flight from Vancouver to Masset, a no-frills fishing town on the top of Graham Island, the bigger of the two main Haida Gwaii (which translates as "Islands of the Haida people").

Our group of 10 was met by Cody Waller, a local Haida Gwaii guide who led us to Old Massett, one of just two remaining Haida villages on the island.



LONGHOUSE-LIKE Sarah's Haida Arts & Crafts in Old Massett, Graham Island, shows locals' work.



CRABS crawl along the shore at Windy Bay on Lyell Island, which is part of Gwaii Haanas National Park.

"There were once over 500 Haida communities in the islands, with a population of over 7,000," he said. In the late 1800s smallpox epidemics reduced their numbers to fewer than 700.

Haida culture, once almost lost, has revived in the last 50 years, evident by the smell of fresh cedar shavings scattered around a totem pole being created by master carver and Old Massett Mayor Jim Hart.

At Sarah's Haida Arts & Jewelry, in a stylized longhouse in Old Massett, we browsed the works of dozens of local painters, printmakers, sculptors and other artists.

We saw three sandhill cranes and a bear on the way to a picnic on pebbly Agate Beach in Naikoon Provincial Park. We picked wild thimble and salmonberries, and hiked into forests of giant Sitka spruce and cedars where cashmere moss blanketed fallen logs and fence posts.

We spent our first night ashore at the native-owned seaside Haida House near the village of Tleil. We dined

on local razor clams, Dungeness crab, salmon, halibut and other local goodies.

"We have a saying here," our waitress said. "When the tide is out, the table is set."

The next morning we drove to Skidegate, the second Haida community on Graham Island, where, in 2008, the \$26-million Haida Heritage Centre opened with a museum, amphitheater, aboriginal cafe and canoe/totem carving shed.

The complex, in a contemporary series of longhouses, lies along a crescent-shaped beach.

Six totems erected in front were created by local carvers such as Bill Reid, whose monumental works are showcased throughout Vancouver and at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

By early afternoon we were chugging on a 20-minute ferry from Graham to Moresby, the second-biggest island.

After an hour on a bumpy forest logging road, we reached our launching point, where a Zodiac waited to



WALK along a mossy trail on Sgang Gwaay, home of the village Ninstints, a UNESCO World Heritage site.



Sources: Mapbox, OpenStreetMap
LOU SPIRITO Los Angeles Times

take us to the Swell, anchored just offshore, for the wild part of our adventure.

Riding the Swell

Stepping aboard the 104-year-old Swell was a trip back in maritime history. It has also been a fishing boat, a private yacht and a live-aboard scuba boat.

After warm muffins and a warmer welcome, we pulled up two traps and counted 151 fresh spot prawns destined for dinner.

We set sail southward for a cluster of about 150 small islands accessible only by float plane and boat, most of them part of Gwaii Haanas National Park, a reserve jointly managed by Parks Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation.

We sailed past ruins of old salmon canneries and logging operations that once clear-cut these lush rainforests.

That evening we anchored at Ikeda Cove on Moresby Island, where, in the morning, we hiked amid the mossy remnants of an early 1900s copper mine complete with rails from a horse-drawn tramway.

I kayaked every morning

If you go

THE BEST WAY TO HAIDA GWAII, CANADA

From LAX to Vancouver, Canada, Alaska, Air Canada, American, Delta, United and WestJet offer nonstop service, and Delta, Alaska, United, Air Canada and WestJet offer connecting service (change of planes). Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$277, including taxes and fees. From Vancouver, Pacific Coastal Airlines flies nonstop to Masset. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$400. The flights are not included in the cruise fare.

Maple Leaf Adventures, (250) 386-7245, www.mapleleafadventures.com. Seven-night trips on the Swell to Haida Gwaii May 23-July 13 begin at \$5,000 a person, double occupancy. Includes tours and one night on Graham Island, all meals and wine with dinner and guided activities.

TO LEARN MORE

Destination British Columbia,

www.hellobc.com

Northern BC Tourism,

www.lat.ms/northernbc

Haida Gwaii Tourism,

www.gohaidagwaii.ca

Gwaii Haanas National Park,

www.lat.ms/hg-nationalpark

after breakfast, spotting sea otters, raccoons, oyster-catchers, countless bald eagles, and small herds of Sitka deer munching on sea asparagus at low tide.

One day we bobbed for an hour watching a black bear — Haida Gwaii has one of North America's biggest black bear populations — browse the shoreline.

Every afternoon after our shore hop-trot I settled into the hot tub on the upper deck with a glass of beer and listened to the gentle chug of the tug.

On our second day on the Swell a very excited Jane

Taylor from Boston snagged a 15-pound lingcod that became part of that evening's Thai chowder, along with salmon and halibut caught by a guest on the previous trip.

"The halibut weighed 60 pounds and the girl who caught it was only 10!" chef Oliver Burke said.

In front of two longhouses on Windy Bay on Lyell Island, part of Gwaii Haanas National Park, we met Vince Collison, our first Haida Watchmen. The Watchmen spend their summers protecting their heritage and guiding at Haida sites in the park.

Collison explained that in August 2013, Haida and Parks Canada staff raised the Legacy Pole at Windy Bay.

"It was the first monumental pole raised in Gwaii Haanas in 130 years," he said. It represents 20 years of the groups working together to preserve the Gwaii Haanas region.

We visited the remains of the villages of Skedans on Louise Island and Tanu on Tanu Island, where massive, fallen roof beams and poles made distinct mossy bulges on the forest floor. And we heard about the mass graves of villagers who died of smallpox.

At the abandoned Rose Harbour whaling station on Kunghit Island, where a pair of giant metal rendering drums rust on the beach, we met Götz Hanisch, who runs a guesthouse on site and is one of only three island residents.

"In the early 20th century," he said, showing off a fin whale jawbone, baleen and flipper bones, "4,000 whales were processed here, their meat and bones reduced to fertilizer."

The highlight of the trip was the village of Ninstints on the tiny island of S'Gang Gwaay at the archipelago's southernmost tip.

As I walked on a mossy boardwalk through the earthy, pungent rainforest I glimpsed eyes and great, gaping mouths through the trees ahead.

Goosebumps rose on the back of my neck. One weathered totem pole after another appeared, a stacked cedar menagerie of killer whales, ravens, beavers and bears, until there was a grove of ancient columns, tilted and vulnerable. The sacred Haida site was named to UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1981.

It was hard to imagine the trip could get better.

But then, as the Zodiac was taking us back to the Swell, Capt. Dave Holliss pointed.

An ungainly flock of birds had lifted off the waves, displaying chunky orange beaks and bright yellow Mohawks flapping in the wind.

"Tufted puffins!" we all shouted.

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