

The islands at the edge of the world

Nick and Jenny Coghlan sailed less-travelled waters to the land of Raven the Trickster

The Spanish navigator Juan Perez was the first westerner to sight the archipelago, 100 nautical miles off the coast of what is now the Canadian province of British Columbia (latitude 54 North), in 1774. But fog and strong currents deterred him from landing. Thirteen years later an English fur trader called George Dixon came along in the *Queen Charlotte*, named after the consort of King George III; Dixon made a rough survey and called the islands after his vessel.

The name – often abbreviated to *The Charlottes* – lasted 200 years. But there had been people here for 13,000 years before Perez and Dixon. Numbering maybe 10,000, the Haida had a rich, artistic culture, lived in coastal villages and traded and raided up and down the coast in their ocean-going canoes. For them the islands were Haida Gwaii (Islands of the People) or, more poetically, the *Islands at the Edge of the World*.

White men – first traders, then missionaries – brought pestilence, alcohol, firearms and forced assimilation, causing such a decline in the population that by the early



20th century there were just a few hundred Haida remaining. Hope returned in the late 1960s with a modest renaissance – the Haida raised their first new totem pole in more than 100 years; their language was made mandatory at local elementary schools and leaders successfully confronted loggers and the federal government over the pillaging of the islands' spruce and cedar. June 2010 was another landmark date. In a solemn, though slightly tongue-in-cheek ceremony in Victoria, elders of the Haida nation politely presented to the Premier of British Columbia a traditional cedar bentwood box, containing a slip of paper upon which was

ABOVE
Into the wild: Haida Gwaii is one of the last 'untouched' cruising destinations

LEFT
Haida Gwaii, is an archipelago consisting of around 150 islands stretching up to 175 miles. The main islands are Graham and Moresby. These are rugged and rise to nearly 4,000ft. Warm ocean currents mean they enjoy a mild climate

BELOW
A calm day on Darwin Sound

written: *The Queen Charlotte Islands.*

"You gave us this name, they said. "We hereby return it to you and reclaim our own name: Haida Gwaii."

This is one of the last great untouched cruising destinations. But there are one or two catches. Although the southern third of the archipelago (1,500 sq km, not counting the many tortuous waterways between the islands) is a national park, no more than 100 visitors are allowed in the area at any one time: you need a permit. Then there is the weather, which is often stormy or foggy. Some areas of the exposed west coast





have not been fully charted, and unless you happen to live in remote Prince Rupert, it's one of those places about which sailors sigh: "You can't get there from here."

The passage north and west from Vancouver, Victoria, or Seattle in Washington State, USA is long and intricate, involving several sets of tidal rapids that run as fast as 16 knots, fog and fickle or nonexistent winds. Then there are on-shore hazards such as black bears. Orcas and humpbacks cruise these waters too. In the end it took five weeks to arrive at a good launch-pad from which to make the locally infamous 70-mile open water crossing of

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
A Haida Gwaii black bear spotted in Crescent Harbour; Bosun Bird moored in Sandspit; totems at Gaw (Old Massett); Raccoons having a dabble for shellfish at Thurston Harbour; a pod of orca in Johnstone Strait

Hecate Strait to the archipelago.

Hecate, thankfully, was anti-climactic. Strong currents and very shallow water make it inadvisable to be here when SE or NW gales whip the Haida Gwaii chain, but all we had to face was zig-zagging crabbing boats, cruise ships edging carefully through the only deep water channel, and sloppy seas where spring tides converged from opposite directions.

Arriving shortly after sunrise at the small fishing harbour of Sandspit, at the mouth of the inlet separating the two major islands, we parked our Vancouver 27 (Bosun Bird) and rented a car to explore the larger of the two (Graham), on which there are few sailboat-friendly anchorages. Gaw and Skidegate (pron: Skiddy-gut) are the two modern Haida villages, with many totem poles, but the tiny inland logging community of Port Clements, (pop: approx 50), also has a tale to tell. Close by, there once stood a unique, 160ft, 300-year-old tree, the Golden Spruce – or Kiidkyaas (Ancient Tree) – a beautiful genetic freak. In a shocking act of eco-terrorism in 1997, Grant Hadwin – a young ex-logger turned environmentalist – felled it, hoping to draw attention to indiscriminate

logging. The gesture backfired – the tree was sacred to the Haida – and the perpetrator was arrested and a court date set. He never made it to the court in Massett, disappearing with his kayak into a wintry Hecate Strait, never to be seen again. Today you can see a graft from the tree stump, but it is doubtful it will grow again to full size.

Sailing south from Sandspit and into the national park, we were soon into a landscape of steep-sided granite-topped mountains on whose summits snow lingers in July, mirror-still inner channels, anchorages with plunging wooded sides and tidal flats at their head where the deer come to graze every evening. At Crescent Harbour, a Haida Gwaii black bear, hungry after the long winter, rummaged along the beach, turning over rocks in search of something tasty. At Thurston Harbour a dozen raccoons foraged at low tide, washing their dainty forepaws as they stood up to look at us. Oystercatchers peeped, loons wailed hauntingly, and ravens and eagles – both of them sacred to the Haida – called raucously to us from the treetops.

There are several abandoned villages; all of which can be visited →



‘S’Gang Waay was once a village of 300 people, living in great cedar longhouses above the beach. Before each would stand a tall heraldic memorial pole’



with permission from the Watchmen who take care of the sites. Few have yacht-friendly anchorages nearby: the Haida travelled by canoe, valuing shingle beaches with gentle slopes – and a good view to the open water, whence their enemies were likely to come. So you need calm weather and/or a dinghy with a powerful engine that can safely move you in open water.

To visit the finest of all the sites – S’Gang Waay, also known as Ninstantis – we based ourselves at the abandoned whaling station at Rose Harbour, in the extreme south of the archipelago, near Cape St James. Here are the three private homes in the park, and we were able to arrange a RIB ride with Patrick, a French-Canadian who caters in the summer to tourists who arrive by floatplane.

S’Gang Waay was once a village of 300 people, living in great cedar longhouses above the beach. Before each would stand a tall heraldic memorial pole, by which any visitor would know the exact lineage and importance of its inhabitants. At the water’s edge were shorter mortuary poles, similarly carved with images of real or mythical creatures but topped with an aperture into which a bentwood cedar box had been inserted, containing the remains of the illustrious deceased.

The memorial poles have long ago fallen or been taken away to museums. But the mortuary poles remain. Some tilt crazily; one lies where it fell; some have cracked; others have grass or weeds growing in the bentwood-box aperture. There is no sign of the red, black and blue

that once adorned them. The woods – cleared when this was a vibrant village – have grown back and seem ready to swallow up the site.

This is an eerie, haunting place. David, our Haida guide, tells us the story of every pole, and the myths he learned in his childhood at Gaw. Central to many stories is Raven, the Trickster. It was Raven who, walking on the beach one day at Rose Spit, came across a clamshell, pecked at it, and released the first humans. It was Raven who, tired of always bumping into things in the darkness that covered the world, stole the sun from the box in which it had been locked up, escaped through the smoke-hole in the roof of the longhouse (thus covering himself with soot) and set the sun free.

Here on a pole, with his large ears and prominent cheeks, is Bear; here is Sea-Wolf (half bear, half orca), here is Orca with his great fin, and Beaver, who even has a stick to gnaw on. On one pole are the remains of a small copper shield. This means that

ABOVE
Remains of a longhouse, S’Gang Waay

BELOW
A bald eagle on sentry duty atop a totem pole. The eagle totem it sits upon doesn’t look best pleased

here was buried a chief, whose status was measured not by the extent of his wealth but by how many shields or other trading goods he gave away at ceremonial occasions (these were called potlatches, banned from 1884 to 1951 on the basis that they were “reckless and wasteful of personal property”). The mortuary poles will, by decree from the elders, not be raised again when they fall; neither will they be in any way restored.

David tells the old myths with passion and enthusiasm. For a few moments, you suspend disbelief: after all, why not? Then he brings us back to earth. Picking up a wavy strand of kelp from the beach he mentions that somewhere he has a few drops of Italian blood, and says to some bemused Japanese tourists accompanying us: “See? This is what I use to make Haida lasagna.”

Out here on the edge, you always worry about the weather. But with the wind set fair in the northwest and the sun setting behind Cape St. James, we set our Aries wind vane and make a fast overnight run back from Rose Harbour to the mainland. It takes us three more weeks to work our way down to our home cruising grounds near Victoria and it’s August by the time we are back, with 1,300 miles on the log.

This is still high summer in southern BC. But up in the Islands on the Edge of the World, the autumn is coming “West coast of Haida Gwaii”, says the pert automated female voice on Weather One: “Storm Warning: Winds Southeasterly 50 to 65 knots, backing to Southerly; seas 8 to 10 metres.” ✦

