

BY HANS TAMMEMAGI

# A CULTURAL CRUISE THROUGH THE BROUGHTON ARCHIPELAGO

*B.C.'s fascinating and controversial Native history is brought back to life on this First Nations cruise*



 MOSS-ENCRUSTED PIERS, several with missing planks, jut out 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. We have just arrived at Alert Bay on Cormorant Island off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. Punctuating the drab waterfront are colourful totem poles that proudly reach toward the sky, reminders that this place, which has been home to the Namgis First Nation for thousands of

years, has seen better days.

My wife, Allyson, and I, along with eight other guests are aboard the *Columbia III* on a First Nations' cruise, one that started in Port McNeill and will meander amongst the hundreds of islands of the Broughton Archipelago 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. ▶

## ↑ Above

The *Columbia III* is the last of three hospital/mission ships that served as lifelines for isolated logging camps and settlers on the coast. Now re-fitted, it's the vessel for Mother-ship Adventures' First Nations cruise.

■ **A CULTURAL INTRODUCTION IN ALERT BAY** 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 who shared a common language. A film shows how in the late 1800s a law was passed banning the potlatch, an important Native ceremony. In December 1921, a large potlatch on Village Island was raided and the priceless ceremonial regalia confiscated. About 20 percent of the seized items, now repatriated, are displayed in the potlatch collection of the centre. 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. I am captivated and want to spend more time, but we are called to a Native feast 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, native children were forcibly taken from their families to live and study at the school in order to "civilize" them. Most of the school is closed, but I enter a 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.

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

↑ **Above** One of the many ancient totems sprinkled throughout the Broughton Archipelago.

pole soars 173 feet above our heads. Inside, a large fire lights the dusky interior, showing colourful totems and immense cedar posts and beams. The smell of smoke and cedar envelops us as four men drum on a log. The T'sasala ("Determined") Dancers, consisting of 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 ▶

## BROUGHTON ARCHIPELAGO



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 via the Ecological Park, a wetland with boardwalks, into town, which is dominated by the Native cemetery. I am touched by the extraordinary array of beautiful totems as well as crosses, an intriguing mixture of Native and non-Native faiths. I admire the totems, including the one erected for Mungo Martin, a high-ranking chief and respected carver who trained a generation of young artists and who was the first to host a potlatch in 1953 after the ban was lifted.

■ **INTO THE BROUGHTONS** As we power away from Alert Bay, I lean against the railing and don't know whether to rejoice or 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. As the sun sinks low, I'm sad to be leaving one of the most exotic and poignant places in Canada.

We cruise eastward and anchor in Dong Chong Bay 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.

Being relatively new to boating, I'm fascinated by our boat and enjoy sitting in the wheelhouse, chatting with the captain. Built in 1955, the *Columbia III* is the last of three hospital/mission ships that played an

important role in B.C. coastal life, serving as a medical and social lifeline for isolated logging camps and settlers from 1905 to 1969. Now re-fitted in shining brass and gleaming teak and mahogany, the *Columbia* is a classic wooden boat powered by the original Gardner engine.

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

The captain, using information from whale-watching boats chatting on the VHF radio, does a U-turn and heads northwest through Blackfish Sound. Two Dahl's porpoises join us, playing in the bow wake. Along the northeast corner of Malcolm

↓ **Above** Paddling through the Burdwood Group is a great way to explore and ponder the Native history of the coast.



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Island we catch up with the A12 pod of killer whales. High black dorsal fins slice effortlessly through the water. A pair of orcas swim closely together in perfect unison, even sending up spouts of spray simultaneously. Our on-board biologist explains how orcas live in matriarchal groups and are among the most evolved species on the planet. Their peaceful family lifestyle and lack of aggression are models for us humans.

■ **VILLAGE ISLAND** Under a perfect blue sky we cruise to Village Island and motor ashore onto a beach whitened by broken clamshells. Not a person lives on the island, but signs of a previously flourishing village, called Mamalilaculla, 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 ▶





↑ **Top** The totems dotting the shore at Alert Bay are reminders of the Namgis First Nation's colourful history, while St. Michael's residential school behind them serves as a symbol of the persecution of the Native people.

↑ **Above** The world's tallest totem pole stands beside the Big House in Alert Bay.

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 old.

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." (Note: this is a First Nations' site and visitors must obtain permission to land from the band office in Campbell River.)

■ **A GUNKHOLER'S DREAM** We cruise on for a little while and spot a red petroglyph winking at us from a cliff.

Believed to represent an image of the North Spirit, the red colouring came from fish eggs.

We drop anchor at Crease Island for the night, and when we awake, fog hangs like an ethereal blanket over the sea and islands. We can just make out an eagle on a nearby rock. All is mysterious and white as we motor slowly north up Retreat Passage until the sun chases the mist.

At Insect Island we go ashore onto a white clamshell beach. Hunt 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. I revel in the beauty of this site and mentally compare it to the ugly clear-cuts and monoculture tree farms that cover most of Vancouver Island.

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

After turning around Eden Island and heading east through Fife Sound, we arrive at the Burdwood Group, a glorious gaggle of little islands called a "gunkholer's dream" by the Waggoner Cruising Guide. With tall mountain peaks looming in the background, we lower kayaks into the water.

With one gentle stroke following another, some of us paddle while others go ashore to explore the middens. A long plume of bull kelp sways with the tidal current. 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 over glasses of wine and another delightful meal. Dusk settles and the islands transform into soft velvety shapes.

Today is our last day and we cruise slowly through the magical isles back to Alert Bay. We are silent, each of us wrapped in our own thoughts as we take a final stroll past the cemetery, the residential school and the cultural centre. All too soon we return to the Columbia, and then we are back at Port McNeill. Our cultural cruise through the Broughton Archipelago is over, but it will not be forgotten. 📍

#### IF YOU GO

**Charts** 3515, 3546, 3547

**U'mista Cultural Centre**  
[www.umista.ca](http://www.umista.ca)

**First Nations' Tourism Information**  
[www.aboriginalbc.com](http://www.aboriginalbc.com)

**Mamalilikulla Band Office**  
250-287-2955

**The First Nations' Cruise**  
[www.mothershipadventures.com](http://www.mothershipadventures.com)

**Alert Bay Boat Harbour** 250-974-8255,  
[www.alertbay.ca](http://www.alertbay.ca)

**Greenway Sound Marine Resort**, Broughton Island 250-629-9838,  
[www.greenwaysound.com](http://www.greenwaysound.com)

**Kwatsi Bay, Simoom Sound** 250-949-1384, [www.kwatsibay.com](http://www.kwatsibay.com)

**Malcolm Island Lions Harbour Authority**  
250-973-6544

**Port McNeill Boat Harbour** 250-956-3881,  
[www.portmcneillharbour.ca](http://www.portmcneillharbour.ca)

**The Port McNeill Fuel Dock & Marina**  
250-956-4044, [www.portmcneill.com](http://www.portmcneill.com)

**Pierres at Echo Bay, Gilford Island** 250-713-6415, [www.pierresbay.com](http://www.pierresbay.com)

**Shawl Bay Marina, Kingcome Inlet** 250-483-4169 [www.shawlbaymarina.com](http://www.shawlbaymarina.com)

**Sullivan Bay Marine Resort** 604-629-9900, [www.sullivanbay.com](http://www.sullivanbay.com)

**Telegraph Cove Marina** 250-928-3163,  
[www.telegraphcove.ca](http://www.telegraphcove.ca)

**Telegraph Cove Resorts** 1-800-200-4665

