

Mothership Adventures

Ocean Kayaking in the Johnstone Strait



by Marion Harrison

Sea kayaking in Johnstone Strait with Mothership Adventures combines a luxury base camp, laid-back paddling, and West Coast native history.

I awoke to the blurps and gurgles of the pumps and the rumble of the engines starting up, then felt the gentle sideways rocking as the Columbia III growled into action. It was early - about six o'clock, I guessed. Last night we'd agreed to an early start back to Johnstone Strait, hoping to catch sight of the orca whales that had so far eluded us. Lying in my berth, I snuggled deeper into my sleeping bag, hoping to doze for another hour. Orcas would be nice, I thought. But even without them, there would be stories enough to tell.

Six days ago, Peter and I and eight other guests had joined Sharon Comeau and Bill McKechnie on the "mothership" Columbia III for a week of luxury-style sea kayaking in Johnstone Strait and the Broughton Archipelago. Late Sunday afternoon, we met at the government wharf in Port McNeill, an uninspiring town on the east coast of Vancouver Island, about three hours north of the Comox ferry terminal. We were a polite bunch, four couples and two single men grouped self-consciously in the Columbia's gleaming dining room; who could guess that a week later we'd be gripping each other's hands and hugging our new buddies goodbye?

We introduced ourselves and watched bemused while Bill, Sharon, and their assistant, Lorna Cameron, hustled supplies on board. Box after box disappeared into the bulkheads to be stashed in every available nook and cranny. (Later, we discovered their wine "cellar" behind one of the toilets.) Then, as Bill fired up the engines, Sharon showed us to our cabins and demonstrated how to use the pump toilets and showers. What a treat those showers would prove to be in the days to come!

From Port McNeill, we motored across the strait to Cormorant Island and our overnight dock in Alert Bay. This small town of 1,100 people is home to the Kwakiuti Indians and a significant white population. In 1890, when the Indian Affairs headquarters moved there from Fort Rupert, native life was transformed irrevocably by the heavy hand of a government bent on assimilation. For the moment, however, we were somewhat oblivious to this embarrassing bit of history and with an evening free to explore, we set out to see the sights.

Most of us wandered up the hill to the "Big House," where potlatches and other native ceremonies are held. Recently rebuilt, the original Big House had been destroyed by fire in 1997 by an inflamed South American resident of the island whose native wife had jilted him. In front of the Big House was a totem pole of Guinness Book proportions that prompted the usual phallic remarks and a few belittling comments about the male ego.

From the Big House, Peter and I walked back down to the waterfront and along the main street to the graveyard. It was closed to non-natives, but we stood on the perimeter, admiring the intricately carved totems of the 20 or so poles that marked the graves. The newer totem poles stood straight and tall, magnificent works of art. Yet there were many older ones in various stages of disintegration. It seemed a shame that, inevitably, they would rot and disappear, never to be admired again.



A distinct advantage of travelling with the Columbia III is the distance you can cover in a week. Each day, our view of the Coast Mountains grew ever larger.

Paddling was what we had come for, and the next afternoon was devoted to "testing the waters" as Sharon put it, though I knew she really meant "testing the guests." We left Alert Bay and set anchor in a little bay on the south side of Blackfish Sound. The mothership crew had fine-tuned their duties: Lorna winched the kayaks from the top deck, Bill guided them over the side and into the water, and Sharon - the true matriarch of the ship - herded the guests into their respective boats.

Like any good mother, Sharon had firm control over her charges, and we obeyed her every command. We donned our spray skirts and life vests, and gathered our paddles and packs, ready to pass them down to the dive

platform. One by one we settled into our boats, assisted by the ever-doting mom. Sharon adjusted our foot rests, positioned our cushions and passed us our water bottles, packs, cameras, and goodie bags, all the while keeping a death grip on the rocking kayak. No way she was going to lose any of us to the drink!

Finally, every boat was launched and mom led her cluster around the bay. Did we pass the test? I think so. Nearly everyone had paddled before, and those who hadn't soon found their rhythm. That evening we celebrated with a campfire on a deserted beach, where, accompanied by a spectacular blood-red sunset, Lorna inducted us all into the s'mores tradition.

Virtually everyone knows about the orcas of Johnstone Strait, and we were no exception. All of the guests had signed up with the expectation that we would see orcas, but perhaps Peter and I alone knew how fickle they could be. On a previous trip in Johnstone Strait, it wasn't until our last day, just an hour before our takeout in Telegraph Cove, that we finally caught a glimpse of a small pod of whales.

On Tuesday, we paddled into a tiny cove on Cracroft Island, beached the kayaks, and hiked through the rainforest to the whale observation point overlooking Robson Bight. We were greeted by researchers who spend their summers counting and identifying the orcas that come to the "rubbing" beaches in the Michael Bigg Reserve. These are the famous pebble beaches where orca whales come to, well, rub - though why they rub is still a matter for speculation. My own theory is that it just feels good (does anyone really need a reason for a massage?).

We were treated to an interesting talk about the habits and "culture" of orcas, a.k.a. killer whales, but there would be no sightings today. In fact, we overheard several radio conversations between the researchers and increasingly worried whale-watching companies, whose bread-and-butter had suddenly and inexplicably vanished. There had been no sightings for six days - unusual at this time of year - and they weren't likely to show up anytime soon. No one knew where the whales had gone, or when they would return.

It mattered little to me. Our short trek through the rainforest was pleasant enough, with frequent stops to examine plants, trees, bugs, and my favourite slimy creature of all time, the banana slug. Lorna was not only assistant kayak guide, she was a biologist to boot - a veritable walking encyclopedia that we plied with questions at every opportunity. Back at the kayaks, we stuffed ourselves with lunch served up buffet-style on the beach, then enjoyed a leisurely two-hour paddle to the Columbia and our anchor for the night.

Tom threw up his hands in disbelief. "I've never seen so many people!" he exclaimed. "Geez, I'm gonna lose my voice!"



Tom Sewid, native interpreter on Village Island, displays his ceremonial button cope, decorated with his family totems.

Tom Sewid, a native from Campbell River, spends six weeks each summer giving talks to visitors to Village Island, site of an abandoned native settlement. Laughing and scratching his head, he waved his thanks to one group and beckoned the next one to take their seats. While we settled on the log "bleachers," Tom hitched his blue nylon pants above his knees and donned an apron, a shirt, and a red blanket, all intricately set with traditional button art depicting totems specific to his tribe. Topped with a fur hat, Tom struck an imposing figure.

This was his "welcoming" regalia, and he proceeded to welcome us to Village Island and the land of his people, the Kwakwaka'wakw. A few minutes later, the ceremony was over. Tom took off his outfit, pulled his nylon pants down over his bright red legs, and, grimacing with pain, quipped, "Indians aren't supposed to sunburn!"

For the next hour, Tom entertained us with stories, legends, and the history of the native people in the area. He focused on the most important ceremony of all, the potlatch, which was outlawed by the Canadian government in 1884 in an effort to wipe out native traditions and assimilate First Nations people into the white man's world. It was a disgraceful period in Canada's history. One of many unforgivable acts was the confiscation during the 1920s of hundreds of priceless ceremonial masks and "coppers" used in the potlatch. Some of these found their way into private white homes, but many were shipped to the Museum of Man in Ottawa, where they were kept in storage. In the late 1970s, the government finally agreed to return the artifacts to their rightful owners, but under the condition that the natives build museums in which to display them!

Two days before, we'd visited one of the museums, the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, where, among other things, a collection of elaborate masks used in the potlatch was on display. I'd walked around the museum with a knot of shame clutching my throat, full of anger at the white man who'd robbed the native community of these precious items. I'd been amazed at the friendliness of the Alert



Sharon Comeau, the true "matriarch" of the mothership, grips the kayak while two guests settle into their seats.

Bay natives who waved and said hello as we walked through the streets of their town. Surely they hated us still?

But today, Tom revealed another side of the story. Worldly goods could be stolen, yes. But no mere white man could take away the natives' traditions, their spirituality, their pride - and certainly not their ingenuity. Here in 'Mimkwamlis - home of the Mamalilikala - the ceremony simply went underground. Tom related the story of a secret traditional wedding scheduled for Christmas Eve one year. The wedding took place on the second floor of a house, while downstairs some of the friends and family "celebrated" a very loud version of the Christian Christmas. Shouting carollers and boisterous piano accompaniment masked the throb of chants and drumbeats upstairs. Later, when the wedding guests left the house, they carried presents wrapped in Christmas paper - boxes filled with traditional potlatch gifts.

Since the opening of the museum in 1980, the Kwakiuti people - and interpreters like Tom Sewid - have been educating other cultures about the native way of life. It's an existence far richer and in tune with the natural world than many outsiders could ever hope to attain.

Over the past few days, we'd been making steady progress, paddling further away from the sea kayaking groups that clustered around Johnstone Strait, making our way deeper into the Broughton Archipelago. This was the distinct advantage of travelling on the Columbia III in an area where campsites were few and far between: we were free to paddle all day and simply meet up with the Columbia at our evening's anchorage.

Every day but one, Bill would take the skiff and deliver our lunch to a prearranged beach. One day, he brought the fresh crab from pots we'd set out the night before. I was horrified to learn how one goes about preparing fresh crab, but most everyone else was delighted with the result. Though I did taste a bit of it, I tended to side with Sharon, a confirmed vegetarian.

By now, our polite little group had degenerated to a point well beyond relaxed conversation. I hold Sharon responsible for this; her sense of humour - mostly harmless sarcasm at her own or Bill's expense - broke down barriers with a swift, gleeful jab. But although a lot of poking fun was going on, there was no question that Bill and Sharon made a master team.

The Columbia III and its predecessors had been hospital ships operated by Anglican missionaries. The first Columbia had started operating in 1905, servicing more than 80 isolated logging camps that dotted the myriad bays and inlets of Johnstone Strait. In 1910, the larger Columbia II was built; the sea-going ambulance augmented the services of the hospital, carrying doctors, nurses, dentists, and pastors to the tiny outposts to tend to the needs of the communities. The Columbia III started operating in 1956, but was soon replaced by small plane service.

Bill had purchased the Columbia III in 1989 from a group of tree planters and had completely and lovingly restored the boat. Renovations included comfortable cabins, shared bathrooms with showers, a dining area large enough to seat ten, and a galley, where the crew whipped up delicious meals that were quickly devoured by appreciative guests. Sharon joined Bill three years ago, adding her knowledge of the area (she's lived on Malcolm Island for nearly 30 years) and her kayaking skills to his expertise as skipper of the Columbia (though both are "Master Certified" to operate the boat).

On our last day, back in the "traffic circle" of Johnstone Strait, we launched the kayaks for one last dip of our paddles. Though we'd seen dolphins, seals, dozens of bald eagles, small island deer, and even a black bear, we had yet to see a single orca. Whale-watching operators and researchers were still scratching their heads, but the general consensus was that the whales had simply gone salmon' - further north, it turns out, where the salmin were more plentiful. Apparently, they were back in Johnstone Strait a few days after our group had departed.

So much for the "ever-present" orcas of Johnstone Strait. Yet there was so much more to our mothership journey than chasing elusive whales. The Columbia III had taken us through a region rich in story and legend, and thrown in some spectacular scenery and great paddling for good measure.

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