

MOTHERSHIP ADVENTURE PADDLES THROUGH CANADA'S COASTAL PARADISE

By Bill Vanderford

In an instant, the huge black and white mammal changed course and came directly toward our boat! I could have sworn that as its head was out of the water, blowing a geyser of spray into the morning air, I had caught a stare from one of its large, soft eyes! Again, the massive Orca surfaced no more than twenty feet from crashing into the Columbia III before diving directly below the boat!



Though I had seen killer whales at close range in sea aquariums in the past, this was my first experience of being eye-to-eye with one in the wild, and it was awesome! Chill bumps popped out all over my body and during the six days and nights aboard the mothership, Columbia III, or while paddling one of their kayaks through the pristine waters of the Broughton Archipelago and the Johnstone Strait, those feelings became common!

Though the Columbia III is used in a much more pleasant way these days, this 68 foot vessel has a colorful history on the wild Northwestern Canadian coast. In fact, for sixty-four years, from 1905 to 1969, people living in the remote settlements, logging camps, inlets, and lonely bays of British Columbia's coast grew to depend on the ships and crews of the Columbia Coast Mission, founded in 1904 by the Rev John Antle. These ships, seventeen in all (including a "Columbia I" built in 1905 and a "Columbia II" built in 1910), plied the hundreds of miles of rugged coastline year-round, bringing much needed medical and social care to the isolated outposts. Often braving severe weather and unpredictable seas, the ships pushed through to provide their important services.



Some of the boats were equipped as 'hospital ships' and carried a doctor and a nurse. The ship became the place where babies were born, logging injuries were repaired, and painful teeth were pulled. The ships and their crews were welcomed as communication links that brought news and supplies, and fostered a sense of community between coastal people and the outside world.

The Columbia III was actually designed in 1955 by renowned naval architect Robert Allan of Vancouver, Canada. She was built the following year at Star Shipyards in New Westminster, British Columbia, and still has the original, English-made Gardner diesel engine.



The Columbia III serviced the coast as a hospital ship, answering emergency calls until 1968, when it became evident that float planes met the needs of the logging camps and coastal villages much faster than a ship traveling at 8 knots. Also, the coastal population was dwindling because people gave up on the hardships of isolated living and moved to urban areas. The Columbia III was restored to its

present immaculate condition in 1990 by Bill McKechnie of Victoria, British Columbia, and since then has been used as a charter boat. Even today, the old vessel is welcomed and recognized, as many stop to reminisce, relive, and share their personal experiences aboard the Columbia III.

Mothership Adventures is now a family run operation that offers adventure and beauty to the lives of visitors who have never seen the native lands and wild coastlines of British Columbia. Varied sea kayaking adventures are offered for Vancouver Island, Desolation Sound, the Broughton Archipelago and Johnstone Strait, and the Great Bear Rainforest of British Columbia. Unlike traditional camping based kayaking, however, the Columbia III acts as a mothership that takes clients into remote places in the capable hands of Captain Ross Campbell, his wife, Fern, their daughter, Miray, and her fiancé, Luke. Once a site is reached, fast, stable double and single kayaks allow exploration of the remote wilderness areas of coastal British Columbia. Highly qualified naturalist guides (Luke and Miray) narrate as they lead the kayaks through beautiful coastal islands that are dotted with ancient Indian village sites and artifacts, with the possibility of observing whales, dolphins, harbor seals, black bear, bald eagles, and Sitka blacktail deer. When the day ends, all return to the warmth and security of the Columbia III and complete the day with gourmet food, conversation, laughter, and relaxation...but, watch out for the cook, Fern, she'll feed you far too much! Though I'm sure that no day is ever the same, on our trip into the Broughton Archipelago and Johnstone Strait, there were constant surprises. We observed orcas, humpback and Minke whales, hundreds of harbor seals, more bald eagles than one could count, Sitka blacktail deer, and a plethora of ducks and waterbirds. We experienced wonderful shore lunches, stuffed ourselves on natural-growing blackberries and thimbleberries, and feasted our eyes on more natural beauty than any mind can consume in the span of a week. Also, being the only angler on the trip, my partner and I would often paddle ahead so that I could fish from my kayak for a few minutes until the others in the group caught up. During that week of fishing for moments at a time, I was able to sample the beauty and fight of fifteen different species of local fish, which was quite educational for me.



Though quite small by cruise ship standards, the facilities and sleeping compartments aboard the Columbia III were very comfortable and extremely efficient. The food and service would rival any I have ever experienced; the professionalism, knowledge, and friendliness of the family crew were beyond compare. And, best of all, the experience of living, breathing, and viewing one of the most beautiful, natural areas in the world was absolutely breathtaking!

Bill Vanderford has won numerous awards for his writing and photography, and has been inducted into the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame as a Legendary Guide. He can be reached at 770-289-1543, JFish51@aol.com, or at his web site: www.fishinglanier.com