

CRUISING: BRITISH COLUMBIA

Wild about Canada's Galapagos

SUZANNE MORPHET is amazed at the diversity and history of Haida Gwaii



Suzanne Morphet has been writing professionally for her entire career — first as a radio news reporter and now as a freelance travel writer and photographer. Her award-winning stories have appeared in many magazines, newspapers and online, and she co-authored The Vancouver Island Book of Everything. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia — and we're glad to have her "on the team", albeit though she doesn't live next door. She brings experience, originality and great writing flair. Suzanne is happiest when she's outdoors — and writing, of course.

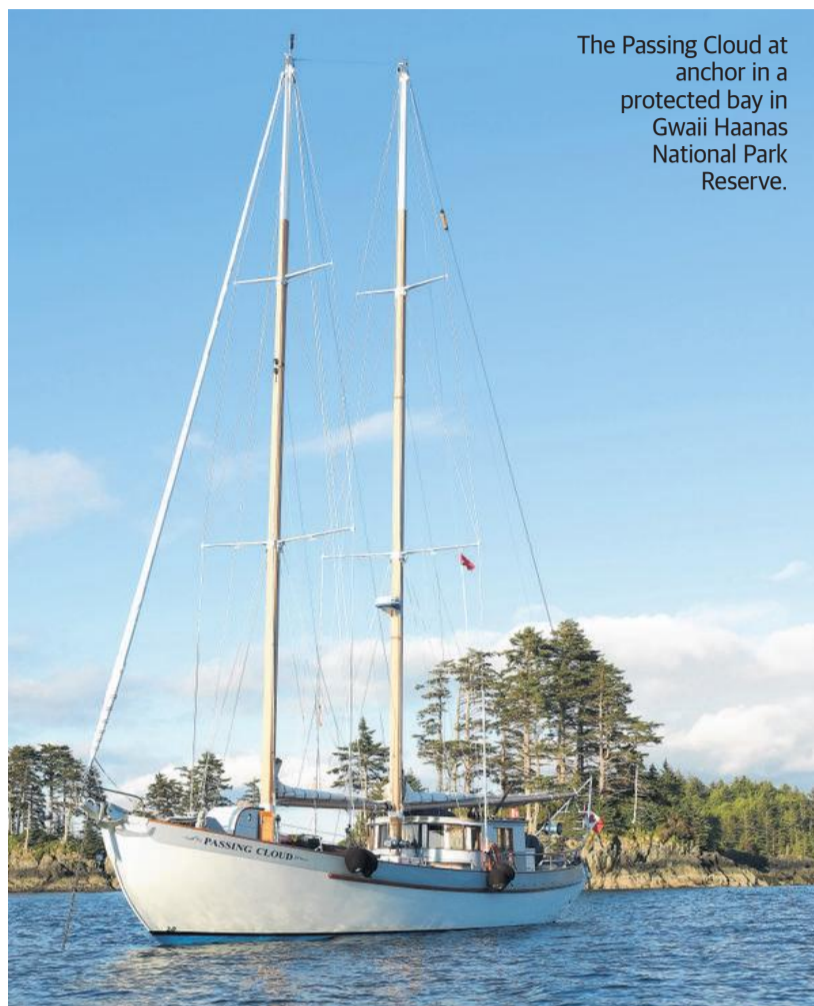
A whale slaps his tail repeatedly against the calm surface of the water. The rest of the enormous humpback's body is submerged, as if he is performing a headstand. The noise carries to our sailboat, where we sit on deck watching and listening for many minutes.

It is our first day exploring Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve in Haida Gwaii, an archipelago sometimes called Canada's Galapagos, with more than 150 islands. Separated from the British Columbia mainland by a 120km stretch of water, these rugged islands are thought to have escaped the last ice age and have been a refuge for wildlife ever since.

When the whale finally disappears we look to our on-board naturalist for an explanation of its behaviour. "It could have been territorial," says Scott Wallace, but he admits that no one really knows. Whatever the reason, it seems a fitting introduction to a place that's so remote it still carries an aura of mystery, even for Canadians.

"Our taxi driver thought we were going to Hawaii," chuckles John Crossen, a cartoonist from Vancouver who is one of just five guests on my voyage. Once called the Queen Charlotte Islands, they were renamed in 2009 to acknowledge the Haida Nation's long presence here. Archaeological evidence goes back more than 12,000 years.

Once on the islands, our adventure begins with a short flight by float plane from Sandspit on Moresby Island to Rose Harbour, a former whaling



The Passing Cloud at anchor in a protected bay in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve.

station at the bottom of the archipelago. Following the curving coastline south and flying well below the clouds, we were awed by long stretches of white sandy beaches.

The lushly forested San Christoval Mountains rear up on our right, while a pod of humpback whales churns the water white below us and Steller sea lions sprawl on rocky islets. There are no roads into Gwaii Haanas. You arrive either by air or by boat.

When we land on the glassy water of Rose Harbour, Capt. Russell Markel welcomes us

aboard our home for the week — the classy and comfortable Passing Cloud.

The 21m (70-foot) staysail schooner was designed by William James Roue (who also designed the legendary Bluenose), and has three private guest rooms, a lounge that doubles as a dining room in inclement weather, and a traditional wheelhouse. Polished brass, varnished wood, Persian-style carpets and shelves filled with books about British Columbia's natural and cultural history speak of a much-loved vessel and comfort

ahead. In fact, any fear of privation in the wilderness is quashed when chef Ryan Bissell — who has worked at one of the best restaurants in Whistler, BC — serves curried ling cod for lunch on the sunny upper deck. Rounding the southernmost point of Haida Gwaii we soon learn one reason why this place is so remarkable. These islands are on the edge of the open ocean — the closest point in all of North America to the Continental Shelf, where the ocean floor drops off abruptly to 2500m.

"The Continental Shelf causes massive upswelling," explains Russell, who has the unusual distinction of being both a master mariner and a research scientist with a PhD in marine biology. "The biggest wave ever recorded in BC was here — 30 metres."

Even smaller waves on this outer coast are so powerful they can knock the eyeballs out of basking sea lions. "They're called pop-eyes," says Scott, which causes us to chuckle, until he adds ruefully "they probably die as a result."

Fortunately for us, we are here in mid-June but even for summer it is unusually calm. Puffins nest in rocky crevices of small islands, while pigeon guillemots take flight before us, their bright red feet tucked under short black bodies. We watch seagulls chase a bald eagle with a fish in its beak. On a nearby beach, a massive fin whale rots in the sun, evidence of our proximity to the Continental Shelf and offshore sea life.

When it comes to endemic species, Haida Gwaii really does resemble the Galapagos. "Just as Darwin found a different finch or tortoise on each of the Galapagos islands, it's possible in Haida Gwaii to find a

The archipelago of Haida Gwaii has more than 150 islands and many more rocky islets like this one. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



different kind of deer mouse on each island," says Russell, "or a different kind of stickleback in each lake."

And just as tourism in the Galapagos is highly regulated, so it is in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, with 300 visitors allowed per day.

As we head north through a maze of channels, bays and inlets in subsequent days, we

stop to walk barefoot on beaches, and gaze into tidal pools at low tide. We climb craggy hillsides wrapped in fog. We kayak quiet coves where orange-and-blue bat stars and spiny sea urchins cling to rocks. Most days, there is no one else but us.

The marine life is particularly astonishing, even though it's out of whack.

Sea otters were wiped out in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in a frenzy of trading between the local Haida and British and American traders, and were never re-introduced. As a result, sea urchins — a favourite food of otters — are now out of control, razing the kelp that would normally protect the shoreline from erosion and provide habitat for



Steller sea lions rest on the rocky shoreline of Cape St James.



Colourful bat stars.

baby fish. "What happened here 200 years ago is still playing out today," observes Russell. "Life goes on but it's different," adds Scott with a tinge of sadness.

Soon after the slaughter of the sea otters, the Haida themselves were almost destroyed. Smallpox and other diseases reduced the population

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