

## BRITISH COLUMBIA

◀ FROM P13

from about 20,000 to fewer than 600. “In one year we lost 75 per cent of the people,” says Sean Young, a Haida watchman at Tanu, one of five abandoned villages open to visitors. Here was once a thriving community with between 25 and 40 long houses fronted with carved poles. The houses collapsed long ago and are now slowly sinking into the earth.

At SGang Gwaay (pronounced SKung Gwhy), the best-preserved Haida village and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a dozen or so poles still stand, the last gasp of a once-vibrant village. Cracked, bleached and

leaning precariously, the poles exert a powerful pull. We stand before them in silent reverie.

The Haida themselves are surprisingly upbeat and optimistic. “It feels like we’re going back to our roots,” explains Donna Carter, who helps watch over what was once a major settlement at Windy Bay on Lyell Island. “It’s kind of neat, our language is coming back.” And the clan system that Haida have always used continues today. Haida are born into either the Eagle clan or the Raven clan, Donna explains, and are supposed to marry a person of the opposite clan. “I’m an Eagle and I married an Eagle. Maybe that’s why it didn’t last,” she adds.

Windy Bay is where, in the 1980s, the Haida protested against the rampant logging of these islands. “Haida elders — ladies in their 70s and 80s — were going out and standing in front of logging trucks,” recalls Scott. “It was a socially tumultuous time.”

Fortunately for them — and us — the Haida won that battle, which led to the creation in 1993 of the park reserve, Haida Heritage Site and National Marine Conservation Area, which, together, cover the southern third of this dagger-shaped archipelago.



The author rests on a bed of moss in the national park forest. Picture: Suzanne Morphet

Some of the biggest and oldest trees that were saved are at Windy Bay. We look up at a massive sitka spruce that was somewhere between 900 and 1000 years old when the Magna Carta was created in medieval England.

From the water’s edge, Haida Gwaii’s forests look dark and forbidding but inside we find them bright and welcoming. “I don’t know whether it’s all the negative ions or what but I feel very different in here,” confides Steve Shanaman, a semi-retired businessman from Washington State. “It’s like Stanley Park (Vancouver) but on steroids,” jokes his buddy John. When we

come to a babbling brook surrounded by a bed of lime-green moss I can’t resist. I lie down and sink into its soft embrace.

Pushing northward, we are sailing to our final anchorage when a dorsal fin slices the water on port side. Then another, and another. Someone quickly drops a hydrophone overboard. And just like that, we are eavesdropping on killer whales. We hear excited squeaks, enthusiastic squeals. It is easy to imagine they are talking about us. Perhaps they are sad to see us go, but nowhere near as sad as we are to be leaving.

### fact file

- Getting to Haida Gwaii: Air Canada offers one direct flight daily from Vancouver, BC to Sandspit (just under two hours). You can also take the ferry from Prince Rupert to Skidegate. The crossing time is eight hours.
- Outer Shores Expeditions offers multi-day cruises to Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve between April and October each year. The price per person for eight days/seven nights in 2017 is \$C5695 (\$5572) and includes a float plane ride either to or from Passing Cloud. [outershores.ca](http://outershores.ca) and phone 1 250 220 2311.

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