

Padding the Queen Charlottes, BC, Canada

by Deirdre Sheppard & Sandy Ferguson. Photos - Marie Cooke

Where? Approximately 2 hours flying time north of Vancouver, almost opposite the bottom tip of Alaska, the Queen Charlotte Islands are the location for a national park reserve, a national marine conservation area and a Unesco World Heritage Site (Gwaii Haanas). It's a pretty impressive pedigree.



We gathered in the township of Sandspit, with 6 flying in and Mike and Chris coming across from Prince Rupert on the ferry. For a bunch of 7 senior Kiwi sea kayakers (plus one Canadian to make up numbers), a fully catered trip with everything provided was an enjoyable experience with lots of pluses. One of those pluses was that some of the group had also paddled in Fiji with one of the guides, so he knew something of our capabilities. The kayaks (6 singles - Seaward Tyees; 1 double Necky, 1 other double) were very spacious. It was a real novelty to have no trouble fitting in our gear (and the new sleeping bags, liners and pillows supplied) in the aft end in the drybags given us at our briefing, while the front was allocated for food. Some of us found the sliding rudder pedals awkward, while another never really came to terms with his non-wooden, over-length paddle. The tents were MSR Hubbas (single and double) - one party member wanted to keep his, while another actually resorted to reading the pitching instructions and another would have been just as happy to use his \$30 Aussie tent.

Maybe there can be those first comparisons. The most striking thing is the vegetation - the tall straight-up conifer forests, versus our more 'bushy' types. The abalone (paua) was absolutely protected - don't even take a small shell and the kelp was stiffer and more difficult to paddle through. The Haida black bears - both an attraction and a concern to Kiwis unused to large animals. Fires could only be lit using driftwood, even though dead branches littered the forest floor. Because this was a wilderness area without facilities we had to use the intertidal zone - occasionally challenging at high tide. But we did share one similarity - the Queen Charlotte Is are also on a major fault line and had had a 7.7 quake on Oct 27 2012. One effect of this was that the hot springs on Hot Spring Island had stopped flowing, so what would have been a pleasant soak was no longer possible.

Day 1

We were picked up by minivan and drove south along logging roads (monitoring the radio and pulling over at one point to let a logging truck hurtle by) to Moresby Camp on Gillatt Arm. Here we were issued heavy PVC raincoats and told to dress warmly and then double it. At 30 knots for 2 hours, windchill has a real meaning.



We then loaded all our food and gear into a large military-style Zodiac. We were just about to leave when - photographic frenzy - there was a bear wandering along the opposite shore. Our Zodiac headed south, our course taking us through one very narrow channel (Carmichael Passage) and on past forested shores. Eventually, we swept round behind a small peninsula on the west side of Burnaby Island and there was a group ready to swap over with us.

Lunch on the beach in the sun and then a shakedown paddle. Our Canadian was a new paddler and slower than the Kiwis, so he spent the rest of the trip in a double, usually with Matt (one of the guides) at the helm. Consequently, he found himself paddling in some quite 'interesting' water at times. No wind, no mosquitoes, wine with dinner, a rising moon - perfect.

Day 2

There had been talk of a big push south to go round Cape St James at the southern tip of Haida Gwaii, but Angie decided a better trip would be around the outside (east side) of Burnaby Island and down as far south as Antony Island and the village there. So we headed a little north and east (past some seals on rocks - very scary compared to our local ones) and out into a low lumpy swell. Back through the rocks, lots of kelp and a run down to Merrican Bay to camp and land through surf, surf at least 4 inches high. The camp ground was green, a large area of flat forest floor covered with thick moss – very comfortable. An easy 20+ km day (you can tell this was a holiday, not an expedition)

Day 3

A cloudless sky, mirror sea and freshly brewed coffee; what mornings should be. We had heard how Chris had been walking through forest on a previous trip and nearly stood on a cougar (and has some good close-up photos), and we had already noticed that if a whale was blowing Chris would spot it - so we weren't sure if it was Chris who saw the bear, but there was one, big and black, walking along the beach towards us. Some of us stood behind Chris just in case.



It eventually spotted us and ambled off a little faster than it had approached. I think Chris got some good photos. It wasn't quite so exciting, but we also found some orchids and a very large (by NZ standards) slug in the forest behind the camp.

We re-filled our 10 litre plastic tanks from a nearby stream (we were able to stow them in the cockpits by our feet) and headed out. Whales were spotted spouting in the distance (we saw whales every day except one; the group the previous week had not seen any); seals, purple and orange starfish. We found a cave at Poole Point and a few slots and reefs to paddle through and round before crossing to East Copper Island.

Our campsite on East Copper Island was reached at lunchtime and at half-tide the gravel beach in the gulch was just wide enough for the 8 kayaks. Tent sites were up on the rocky outcrops on either side of the gulch - Marie, Waveney and Sandy on one side, and the rest on the other side. We saw another kayak group who had hoped to have lunch here, but chose to look for another spot. During

the afternoon Andy and Mike tried fishing (one middling fish), while Sandy paddled around the adjacent Skincuttle Island in search of another supposed campsite. Marie went for a swim.

The wind got up during the afternoon and by evening was getting strong. Deirdre decided that their cliffside site was too draughty, despite Andrew's efforts with a throw bag rope, so the tent was moved to a very sheltered site, well-upholstered with sphagnum moss, where they slept soundly. Mike created a macrame tie-down for his tent, but their sleep was still disturbed by what was thought to be raccoons in the trees overhead.

Day 4

Our first grey, breezy morning, but that didn't matter as we spotted more whales blowing in the distance as we crossed Skincuttle Inlet. Angie and Andrew peeled off to go fishing (unsuccessfully), while the rest of us headed to a beach for morning coffee - once we had scared the local bear away. We paddled on, and when offered the chance of lunch on an island nearby, or continuing round the next bay, startled Angie by declaring that we wanted to "keep paddling while the conditions were good" (says something about NZ conditions). Apparently we were the first group that was keen to keep going and it meant we paddled a little further than she expected.

Camp that night was at Kaidju (near Benjamin Point) at the head of a bay almost clogged with seaweed. Bald eagles, with young eaglets, were nesting in a tree and a deer and fawn wandered along the shore grazing quietly and generally ignoring the intruders, so close that photos were easy to get at no more than 5 metre distance. The Sitka deer were introduced by Europeans as a food source and have now become a problem as they are eating out the undergrowth; however, they are attractive and almost tame.

To our surprise we also had some visitors from a nearby small eco-resort, located on a tiny parcel of private land near a former whaling station in Rose Harbour; their guide was very knowledgeable about the local wildlife.

Day 5

A calm overcast morning, another great breakfast, coffee sitting on the logs on the beach - and suddenly, there he was, Benji the bear, maybe 20 years old, big, black and looking down on us from the bank (where our tents were). We looked at each other - then he turned and in a couple of steps, vanished from view.

We left Benji in peace and paddled out into Houston Stewart Channel, where our first stop was a tree, which Andy climbed onto for a photo shoot. One might wonder until it is pointed out that this was in the middle of the sea and it was very big log. This day we saw even more whales blowing, as well as some spectacular breaches and fin waving, while Andy got a very close look when one surfaced less than 50 metres in front of him.

Again the weather cleared for our evening on Ross Island and again we had a deer wandering by us. Again Chris excelled at spotting, this time cranes, walking on the other side of the channel from our camp.

Day 6

A short walk before launching saw us hunting for remnants of a mining town that had flourished here approx 100 years ago. This area has been occupied for generations, with more recent European exploitation by the fur trade, whaling, mining and logging industries Down Houston Stewart Channel, another bear, a wrecked 40 foot boat, the fore end of it. Firewood (driftwood - smaller pieces; there were plenty of logs) were collected in case supplies were short at the next campsite across Louscoone Inlet.



It was nice to have a shortish day and to be able to laze on the grassy bank which looked as though it had been mowed specially for us. We took care not to scramble down the bank directly, as it was an old midden site and still being studied by archaeologists. A deer wandered among the tidal islands. The view was out to sea with islands to the south of us.



Day 7

After breakfast we headed into the forest to look at an enclosure erected in 1998 to keep the deer out and see how the forest would regenerate. Within the enclosure the vegetation was head-high and impenetrable - a very clear indication of the effect they have.

We headed south again (effectively in the Pacific Ocean), with a long stop beside Adam Rocks to watch the tufted puffins swoop overhead. Then we continued to Antony Island (Sgang Gwaay) where the remains of the village of Ninstints are located. In its very sheltered little harbour we took out our gear for the day, then Matt took the kayaks out and tied them to a rope stretched across the bay, thus keeping the landing area clear for other visitors. Usually visitors are restricted to around 12 people so we shared our visit with people from the eco-resort and a yacht, all of whom looked clean, tidy and even sported a little lipstick, unlike us whose only washing option was the sea (Marie was a star here).

A boardwalk took us to the 'watchmen's' (caretakers) house, where we had a leisurely lunch while soaking up the sun and the view of sparkling blue sea and rocky islets.



Then we were taken on a tour of the village site, looking at poles and houses that were still standing. Our guide had a book which had photos and drawings of the poles as they looked nearly 100 years ago - truly impressive and he was able to interpret the poles still standing.



The village (and the rest of the Queen Charlotte Is) was home to a very successful culture, which was decimated by European disease in a few years at the beginning of the 20th century. A short hike round the rest of the island finished our visit and we returned to the kayaks.

From this island it was a run across the channel to the Gordon Islands, just off the coast of Kunghit Island, the most southern of the Haida Gwaii islands. It was the first time we'd really had any wind and there was just enough sea to try to surf some of the waves. We followed Angie through the rocky maze into our campsite beach as the sky finally clouded over for the day. This island had no deer on it to keep the vegetation down, so finding a space for a tent proved exercising. Two tents were pitched on the beach up among the logs (truly Canadian), but the sight of the incoming tide (the tidal range was near 7 metres) only a couple of metres away caused one of them to relocate before daylight faded around 10 p.m.

Day 8

Fortified by French toast we set off round the island so Matt and Angie could get up close with the swells and enjoy some real paddling, while the rest of us just paddled. Then we headed back up the Houston Stewart Channel, with blowing whales on parallel courses and a final farewell wave from the tail flukes.



Reluctantly we crossed back to Raspberry Cove on the northern side for an early lunch and to prepare for our pick-up and swap over with the next group and were surprised by them arriving much earlier than expected. We helped unload / load the Zodiac, donned as much clothing as we could before settling into endurance mode for the 3-1/2 hour trip back to base. There was a welcome reprieve halfway back when we spotted a fin and stopped - it turned out to be a sunfish, which most of us had not seen before. Our route back differed from the outward route a little so it wasn't easy to identify where we were. We had the only rain of the trip - a passing shower and this in an area that can get 400 cm of rain on the western coast. We couldn't believe our luck.

Eight days of paddling and quite different from most New Zealand trips we've done. Only in Fiordland do you encounter sizeable areas of wilderness and that is a different type of landscape; perhaps the Marlborough Sounds, covered in conifers and stretching about 200 km comes nearest. We also gained an insight into this area because both natural and cultural aspects were present. And, of course, we were incredibly lucky with the weather - several fine sunny days (the temperature in summer can reach 25°C), not too much wind, no rain. Our guides looked after us so well and fed us almost too well - when do we get fresh melon for breakfast here, or chocolate cake for dessert? Now where did you say we should go next?

Guides: Angie & Matt

Paddlers: Andy & Deirdre, Marie, Mike & Chris, Sandy & Waveney, & Rob the Canadian

Outfitters: Kingfisher Tours

