





THE TRIP TAKES US

Exploring Gwaii Haanas in the Queen Charlotte Islands
aboard a Fleming 65 is a reminder that the best laid plans ...

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE SASS SR.

"WE DO NOT TAKE A TRIP; A TRIP TAKES US."

— John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*

Visiting new lands and experiencing unique cultures are passions of adventure travelers everywhere, and today's specialized travel agencies and tour companies offer well-organized trips to some of the world's most exotic places. But there are those rare, out-of-the-ordinary locations that are best explored by boat, and the Queen Charlotte Islands, aka Haida Gwaii, 50 miles off the coast of British Columbia in the Pacific Northwest, are tailor-made for intrepid voyagers. But as Steinbeck teaches us, one has only

limited control over journeys of this magnitude.

My latest adventure with Tony Fleming aboard his Fleming 65, *Venture*, began on Graham Island in the Queen Charlottes. With a population of 948, Queen Charlotte Village is the largest town in the chain of more than 400 islands. Graham Island's entire length can be driven on its one paved road in less than two hours, and nearby Moresby Island has less than 15 miles of paved roads. All of the other islands have only gravel paths and hiking trails. The

5,000 people who populate the islands make their living by logging, fishing or tourism, and many still live off the land, gathering clams, kelp and crabs, fishing for salmon and hunting deer.

The area's inhabitants know this, but visiting yachtsmen should be aware that weather conditions here change quickly, so you need to be prepared. A warm, sunny day can be followed by days of cool, rainy, windy weather. Winters are relatively mild, though, with temperatures often in the low 50s. The direction and speed of the wind can vary greatly as it hits the steep-sided islands, and conditions can be quite different from one anchorage to the next. Yachtsmen also need to be acutely aware of the 30-foot tidal range, especially when anchoring.

Venture was a welcome sight anchored off the town dock that is home to the commercial fishing fleet. On board was Tony, his companion Louisa, Capt. Chris Conklin and shipmate Tommy Cappenelli. Knowing that we would soon be leaving civilization, we enjoyed a hearty meal in town while discussing our five-day itinerary for exploring the islands and, in particular, the remote Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. John Steinbeck would have cast a broad smile at our attempt to plan such a voyage.

Set aside as part of the Parks Canada system of protected areas in 1988, Gwaii Haanas consists of 200 of Haida Gwaii's southernmost islands and is accessible only by boat or seaplane. Rich in Haida heritage (Haida translates to *the people*) — the indigenous tribe dates back more than 10,000 years — and with a spectacular display of natural, unspoiled beauty, the national park requires every entering visitor to first attend a 90-minute orientation session by a Parks Canada staff member at the Haida Gwaii Museum. We were briefed on safety issues (expect bad weather, don't count on communicating with the outside world, do count on seeing black bears) as well as given an overview of the fragile ecosystem.

As in the Galápagos Islands, the park service here is committed to preserving the land by limiting the number of visitors to each island. Tony, an accomplished cinematographer, and I had to apply for commercial photographer's permits and agree that we would not be erecting elaborate lighting or sound equipment. Briefed and eager to explore the islands, we weighed anchor and headed south. The notorious Hecate Strait separated us from the mainland to the east and the open Pacific Ocean and continental shelf to the west. Our destination was Cumshewa Inlet, just north of the park border.

Navigation throughout the islands is simple and straightforward,



because depths are typically 100 feet or more and the need for channel markers and navigation aids is minimal. Due to frequent rain and fog, however, radar is a must. And while traveling at night is not advised, the high latitude provides sunlight until 10 p.m. during the summer.

Arriving in McCoy Cove in the late afternoon, we had difficulty getting our anchor to hold, so instead we moved across the bay and set anchor off Louise Island, being careful to avoid the large kelp beds. As in much of the Pacific Northwest, anchoring in the Queen Charlottes requires lots of chain, since the anchorages often have depths of 40 to 50 feet or more. We walked along the charcoal gray beach until we discovered the mouth of Mathers Creek, which provided a rare glimpse into the deep forest. In this part of the world, the forest is thick and impenetrable — another reason settlements usually straddled the shoreline.

The next morning we arrived at Skedans Bay, our first stop in the Gwaii Haanas National Park and one of six Haida Gwaii Watchmen village sites. As instructed, we called the Skedans Bay Watchman on the VHF and asked permission to land. Throughout these six sacred sites, only 12 people at a time are allowed to visit, and the Watchmen, who live on the islands during the summer with their families, provide guided tours of the ancient villages and surrounding wilderness.

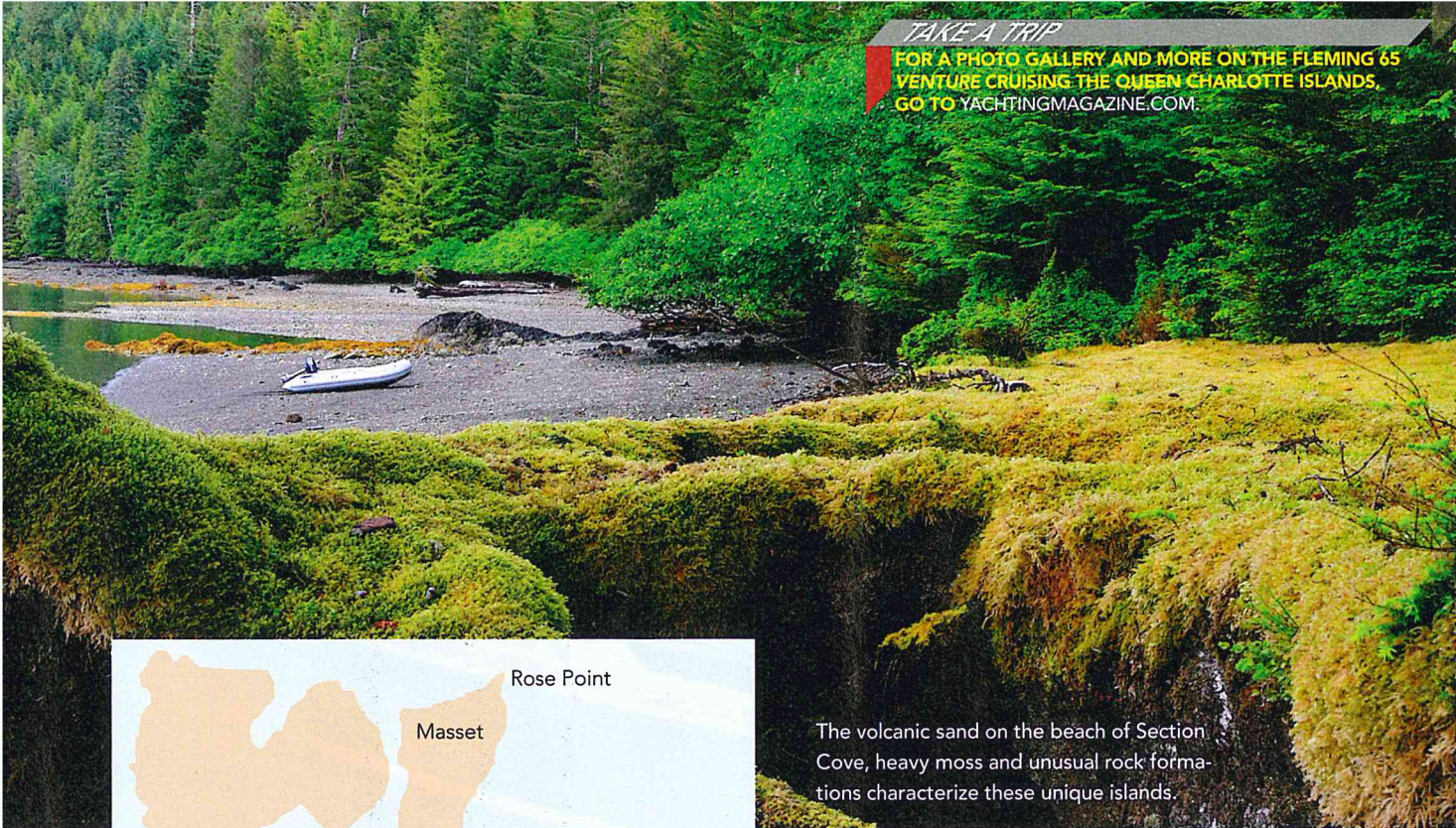
Our guide walked us past depressions in the earth where

Capt. Chris Conklin (foreground) pulls a small boat across the river at Windy Bay. A bald eagle surveys his kingdom (above). Tony Fleming (center) presides over dinner aboard *Venture*. Clockwise from Tony, his mates are the author, Capt. Conklin, Tommy Cappenelli and Louisa.

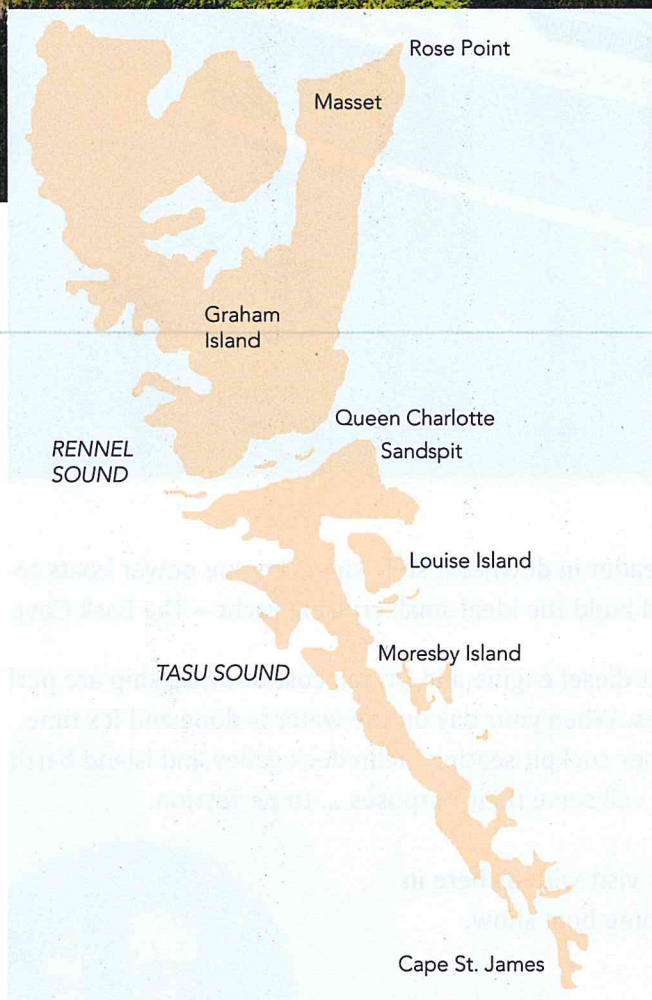


TAKE A TRIP

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The volcanic sand on the beach of Section Cove, heavy moss and unusual rock formations characterize these unique islands.



longhouses once stood, pointing to a number of carved mortuary and memorial totem poles and explaining the purpose of each. The Haida remain a very proud people, dedicated to keeping their heritage alive. Reading between the lines, though, I had the feeling that village life thousands of years ago wasn't very egalitarian, since there is frequent reference to "those of higher standing" and "the slaves," who were captured from raids on the mainland. Regardless of how they treated each other, the Haida have always been protective of the environment and understood the strong

connection between land and sea.

After finishing the tour, our Watchman joined other park staff members to unload a supply boat that was bringing food, water and fuel for the week. The Watchmen live on these remote islands in simple rustic cabins during the summer months only, because the windy winter conditions are severe. Solar panels and emergency generators supply the electricity.

We also visited the ancient village of Tanu, where our Watchman took us on a three-mile hike through the forest, showing us where 25 to 40 longhouses had once stood. The curved path through the dense forest was lined with white clamshells, and the only sound was the wind whistling through tall cedars. He took us to his cabin overlooking the bay and introduced us to his family.

Our exploration of Gwaii Haanas continued with a three-hour guided hike 10 miles south in Windy Bay, where we stood under 1,000-year-old cedar trees and marveled at the vast, silent moss-covered forest. We sighted bald eagles, and small deer crossed our path. As rain began to fall we weighed anchor and headed south, stopping for the night in nearby Sedgwick Bay.

The next couple of days brought chilly, rainy, windy weather, so we continued south, eventually anchoring off Hotspring Island. Hotspring is one of the six Watchman village sites, and it boasts a system of small hot springs that emit salty water at temperatures of up to 170 degrees. We chose the luxurious comfort of *Venture* over hiking through the cold, wet forest only to disrobe and scald our bodies in near-boiling water.

In the morning we woke to dark, cloudy skies, intermittent rain showers and a concern about whether the seaplane I had chartered would be able to fly in these conditions. There is no cell phone coverage throughout the national park, and the only way of communicating is by satellite phone or relaying messages between Watchmen via VHF. Then suddenly we heard the *de Havilland Beaver* as it emerged from the low clouds. I was soon off while a forecasted gale made Tony and Chris eager to cross to the mainland. As we had learned, the journey itself was in charge. □