

# The magic of Haida Gwaii

For even a novice kayaker, a trip through the B.C. rainforest coast is a humbling experience

BY ANNE GEORG, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD AUGUST 9, 2013



Jo Hager of Green Coast Kayaking guides kayakers to shore.

**Photograph by:** Anne Georg photo for the, Calgary Herald

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I bobbed in my kayak enjoying the quiet and breathed in the nourishing atmosphere of Haida Gwaii. I looked up and through the early morning mist I saw a bald eagle gliding soundlessly overhead.

I was on a weeklong kayak trip as a guest of Green Coast Kayaking, owned and operated by Jo Hager. Not being a seasoned kayaker or camper, I wondered how I'd fare on B.C.'s northern rainforest coast. I needn't have worried. Jo and her assistant, Dominic, were superlative guides and I was able to drink in the wonder of one of the world's most biologically rich areas.

Kayaking with Jo was a lesson in the art of kayak camping ease. My fears of soggy sleeping bags and wet clothes were dispelled by her simple wisdoms, gained through years of guiding experience. She helped me steer my kayak through dogged currents determined to waylay me. She taught me the paddling stroke that I meditated to and that left my body feeling strong and invigorated, even against wind and choppy water.

One morning, my merry band of eight paddlers had just broken camp in a small cove on Haida Gwaii's Bowles Point. We'd launched our kayaks and the rocky beach receded behind us. All of a sudden, a humpback whale rose to the surface of the still ocean blowing spray and elegantly undulating — submerging, then emerging on the sea's surface. After our initial exclamations of delight, the utter calm of the cove enveloped us as we watched the nature that teemed around us.

Nutrients from the Pacific Ocean create some of the planet's densest intertidal life. And that's what

attracted our humpback whale.

We were experiencing a particularly extreme tide, which at its lowest allowed us an exquisite close-up view of brilliantly coloured sea stars, crabs, anemones, abalone, sea cucumbers and snails. We were continually delighted to paddle by huge egg yolk jelly fish that lingered just below the crystal clear ocean surface.

And we were challenged to power our way through the forests of bull kelp. On the surface they look like long golden tubular snakes with ribbons trailing behind them; together they form a veritable platform that can ground a kayak. Jo was there to talk us through, encouraging us to “keep paddling hard”.

Her Green Coast Kayaking tours offer a rare experience that attracts the young and the young at heart who are physically capable and want to fully participate in the adventure.

As guests, we helped with basic camp tasks. Morning and mid day, we gathered to examine potential routes using detailed nautical maps of the area, tidal calendars, regular weather updates and the deep experience and local wisdom of Jo and Dominic. They described options for optimal adventure or relaxation — whatever collective mood prevailed — and we democratically chose a route.

At the end of the day, we found our own campsites and pitched our tents in the aromatic cedar, spruce and hemlock forests. We invariably found comfort on a thick, luxurious mattress of moss. We collected firewood, built campfires and made communal meals from supplies we brought with us.

One of the paddlers came from Iran and prepared an Iranian dish. Our French contingent served the cuisine of their region, complete with a valiant — but failed — attempt at flambéed bananas.

Delicious all, but nothing could top the fresh black sea bass meals we hauled from the ocean an hour or so before frying them over the fire and then devouring them. The other delicacy we tasted directly from the ocean was bright orange sea urchin gonads, sold in the better sushi restaurants as ‘uni’.

Onshore we entered the rainforest to collect water from streams and to bask in the rich green and pure oxygen that the foliage exudes. We beach-combed on rocky shores that yielded fascinating sea shells, rocks and exotic marine detritus. Our soundtrack was bird calls, our alarm clock the raucous ravens.

Formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, Haida Gwaii is an archipelago on the north coast of B.C. It consists of about 150 islands whose isolation from the mainland has given rise to species that have evolved differently from their mainland counterparts. That and the rich wildlife lead scientists to describe the islands as the ‘Canadian Galapagos’.

Our group paddled mainly on the east coast of Haida Gwaii, whose coastline is a convoluted series of islands and anchorages.

Culturally, the Haida Nation’s history and present were the constant backdrop of our kayak voyage. We paddled in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. We walked among the still-standing 150-year-old mortuary poles at the UNESCO World Heritage Site, SGang Gwaay. Our Haida

guide wove anecdotes and jokes creating a tapestry-like image of life in the old village; and he gave us insight into present-day Haida culture.

With all of the cultural and natural wonders I experienced in Haida Gwaii, I would be remiss not to speak about the incredible openness and generosity of its people.

Upon my arrival in Sandspit I discovered that the kayak tour I'd booked had left me behind. I was an orphan. I was stressed and at a loss about what to do. With great patience, Moresby Explorers — the heart and soul of Haida Gwaii's kayaking community — found me the trip with Green Coast Kayaking. The women at the Air Canada desk spent nearly an hour helping me to change my return flight. Jo took me into her group and my fellow paddlers adopted me without question.

At every turn during my week in Haida Gwaii I was humbled by benevolence, beauty and abundance among the people and in nature — in every cove we explored, during our open-sea traverses and nestled in our luxurious-moss wilderness tent sites. I delighted as seals checked us out as we checked them out, at the orange globe moonrise and the soft slow sunrise. I was soothed by laughter amplified on a beach, by rocks warmed at the fire to ease sore muscles; and playing, gliding, paddling on the sea — mist softening the lines on my face, infusing me with its life.

Hawa'a Haida Gwaii. (Hawa'a means 'thank you' in Haida)

### **If you go**

- Book with Green Coast Kayaking: [gckayaking.com](http://gckayaking.com)
- Arrive in Sandspit by air with Air Canada from Vancouver: [www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)
- Or by ferry from Prince Rupert: [www.bcferrries.com](http://www.bcferrries.com)
- Stay at Seaport Bed and Breakfast in Sandspit (Run by Moresby Explorers)
- Eat lunch at Brady's Bistro in the Sandspit Airport
- Visit Moresby Explorers in Sandpit: [www.moresbyexplorers.com](http://www.moresbyexplorers.com)
- Visit Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay 'Llnagaay on Graham Island: [www.haidaheritagecentre.com](http://www.haidaheritagecentre.com)



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