



# Hidden coast

If you've sailed BC's inland coastal waters on an Alaska cruise... here's what you missed

Story and photos by Laurie Carter



Rhapsody of the Seas looks like the White Cliffs of Dover towering over us as it muscles past in narrow Johnstone Strait between Vancouver Island and the mainland north of Campbell River. The sight sparks a lively discussion on cruise travel among the 11 passengers polishing off the complimentary wine after a homemade family-style meal aboard the freight boat Aurora Explorer. Bottom line, we all agree the hoards on that floating island have no idea what they're missing.

No way can they sail to the head of a slender fjord deep in the flank of BC's all but uninhabited wilderness, nose up to a driftwood strewn beach for an impromptu shore excursion or float at the base of an unnamed ribbon of water cascading from the rainforest into the sea. They might spot wildlife, but from 12 storeys up they won't feel the splash of white-sided dolphins frolicking around the boat or smell the fishy breath of a spouting humpback. We have.



Three days ago, I boarded the 135-foot landing craft via the drawbridge bow, greeted by Captain Ron and his crew of five including our all-important cook, Donna, and Shannon, the mind-reading steward who will anticipate our every whim. Squeezing past a diesel tanker and bags of fertilizer (think about it), pallets of tree seedlings packed in boxes, trucks, coiled cables and a host of miscellaneous freight, I make my way to the sterncastle where I'm soon settled in my closet-sized cabin and back out on deck for departure. No calypso

band or fruity drinks, but I'm welcome to pour a rum from my private supplies and, anyway, I'm too busy checking out the surroundings to care about a band. It doesn't take long to navigate our little world. Above the accommodation deck, the main cabin serves as lounge and dining room. Thanks to big windows it provides expansive views and, hanging in the corner, a TV monitor constantly updates our charted GPS position. The mini fridge is stocked with soft drinks, coffee and tea are always hot and Donna kills us with an endless supply of

fresh baked cookies. A narrow companionway gives access to the bridge overhead, where passengers are welcome anytime with comfy seating arranged so that we can see all the action without getting in the way. Our first stop is actually a pick-up and I watch in awe as the crew shoehorns a massive yellow logging machine onto the already crammed cargo deck. At virtually every stop I'm impressed with their skill and efficiency, scooting around with a pair of forklifts, shifting boxes and trundling deliveries onto the steep land-



ing stages of remote logging camps. I feel the same admiration for Captain Ron and Mate Kevin's seamanship when they maneuver the ungainly Aurora up to a floating bunkhouse to top up domestic fuel tanks or pilot her into miniscule Echo Bay with about a metre to spare between us and the lovely sailboat tethered there.

This is a stop we've all been anticipating because this is the home of coastal legend Billy Proctor. A round golden dog limps down the angled jetty beside a wiry guy of indeterminate age in blue jeans, blue

peaked cap and a bulky cardigan knit in a red, white and blue sailboat pattern straight out of my memory of the 60s. Ron gives us 20 minutes shore leave and we swarm up the plank for our first steps on land in two days.

Billy's little museum is housed in a clapboard cabin filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves. Rows of beached bottles form neat ranks in vivid colours backlit by gray skies behind small windows. Antique bits include glass net floats, stone anchors, hydro insulators, a parade of fishhooks and a newspaper whose headline proclaims the moon land-

ing. Even in this remote place, Billy's museum attracts more than 3,000 visitors a year.

I buy two of Billy's books and he signs them. When Ron toots the whistle, Billy walks us back to the Aurora, grumbling about damn pictures because everybody's begging him to pose. That evening I get started on *Heart of the Raincoast: A Life Story*.

One morning I look out the window beside my bunk and find a pair of boom boats whipping around like bumper cars just metres away. The men jump on and off, trotting along the slippery logs as

though they're out for a jog on dry land.

Another day I'm lingering over coffee when a settlement appears through the mist—Alert Bay. On the hill above the harbour totem poles pierce the sky as we motor in. With only one hour shore leave I beeline for the First Nations burial ground and eventually realize that I've spent too much time and won't be able to make it into town to see the museum by the ruins of a residential school and the little white church with its Gothic gingerbread steeple.

On our final day, I'm perched on a guest

stool in the wheelhouse. Shadowy headlands slowly solidify and darken as we come abeam and each tree crowding the shore stands in sharp focus, the tideline drawn with a ruler. Ron points out a solitary bald eagle and later, a couple of sea lions swimming off the point as we make our final turn into Menzies Bay. We've covered 456 nautical miles in five days and I'm ready to go again. [www.marinelinktours.com](http://www.marinelinktours.com) **OL**

