

OPENING DOORS

Through song and dance, carving and storytelling, the Haida people share their living history at the exceptional new Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay Llnagaay.

by **MATT J. SIMMONS** photography **ROLF BETTNER**

Haida Gwaii, shown on many maps as the Queen Charlotte Islands, is a world of ancient wonder and imposing cedars, a land of misty isles set in the turbulent sea off British Columbia's northwest coast. Eagles sweep over this remote archipelago, and lush rainforest envelops the weather-whitened totems of its ancestral villages.

Many uniquely evolved plant and animal subspecies in this "Galapagos of the North" are found nowhere else on Earth. Parks Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation are the joint stewards of the 1,470-square-kilometre Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, created in 1993. The park protects the wilderness of south Moresby Island and countless smaller islets, as well as important archaeological sites such as SGang Gwaay (Anthony Island), where the ruins of house posts and memorial poles indicate a once-thriving 19th-century village.

The Haida people have lived in this landscape for more than 10,000 years. The mythical story of their creation appears in *Solitary Raven* (Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), the collected writings of the late Haida artist Bill Reid, whose work brought international attention to the Haida's emerging cultural revival in the 1960s and '70s.

"In the beginning it was both light and dark," Raven—the trickster—stole the light and caused the moon and stars to be in the sky. Raven found the first people in a clamshell on a beach. From them, he created the Haida people. "They were no timid shell-dwellers these, but children of the wild coast, born between sea and land, challenging the strength

of the stormy North Pacific and wresting from it a rich livelihood. For many generations they grew and flourished, built and created, fought and destroyed, living according to the changing seasons and the unchanging rituals of their rich and complex lives."

Europeans made contact in 1774, initiating a 50-year trade in sea-otter pelts. As otter numbers dwindled, smallpox epidemics devastated the Haida; populations plunged from as many as 14,000 to fewer than 600 by 1911. Over time, survivors congregated to two sites, now known as the towns of Skidegate and Old Massett. Today, some 2,500 Haida live throughout the islands, and about 1,000 many live outside Haida Gwaii.

Last summer, the Haida opened the doors to a remarkable facility on southeast Graham Island that demonstrates their long journey toward spiritual, cultural, and economic revitalization. Just outside Skidegate, on an ancestral village site at Second Beach, the Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay Llnagaay (kai-ILL-na-gai), or "Sea Lion Town," blends tradi-

● Christian White of Old Massett carved this pendant-sized argillite mask (left), inspired by the story of Volcano Kikwani. The colourful ceremonial Raven helmet in cedar (below) was carved in Skidegate in the mid-1800s. Both pieces are part of the extensive Haida Gwaii Museum collection at the Haida Heritage Centre.





• Vernon White of the Tluu Xaada Naay dance group drums at an international meeting of elders in the Performing House of the Haida Heritage Centre in Haida Gwaii, the Queen Charlotte Islands.

tional Haida architecture and modern construction in a series of beautifully designed, connected cedar longhouses or "big houses." Overlooking a quiet bay, the nearly 5,000-square-metre centre is the culmination of a community dream nurtured for more than 30 years, the result of a partnership between the Haida Skidegate Band Council, Parks Canada, and the Haida Gwaii Museum.

The centrally positioned entrance hall or Welcome House treats visitors to a fine view of Second Beach and, beyond, Torrens and Jewell islands. Monumental poles, carved by six master carvers and more than a dozen apprentices in 2001, stand between the buildings and the beach. In the centre of the hall, suspended from the ceiling, is a hammered copper shield that signifies status, wealth, and prosperity. Haida guides lead interpretative tours from the Welcome House, sharing the ancient and modern history of their people with others.

From the Welcome House, visitors can turn right to explore the south wing of linked houses that ultimately lead to the museum, or left to explore the north wing, where, in the last house, carvers may be found working on canoes or totem poles.



Along the north wing, the entrance hall is the **Welcome House**, where visitors can enjoy Haida cuisine. Beyond this is the impressive **Performing House**, whose interior reflects traditional Haida architecture: the ceiling, supported by immense cedar

beams, the square floor space sunken below ground level and, rising on all four sides, wooden benches arranged in stepped tiers. The feature wall is adorned with an immense red-and-black **baran** (carved) depicting the Raven, and the natural fragrance of cedar hangs in the air.

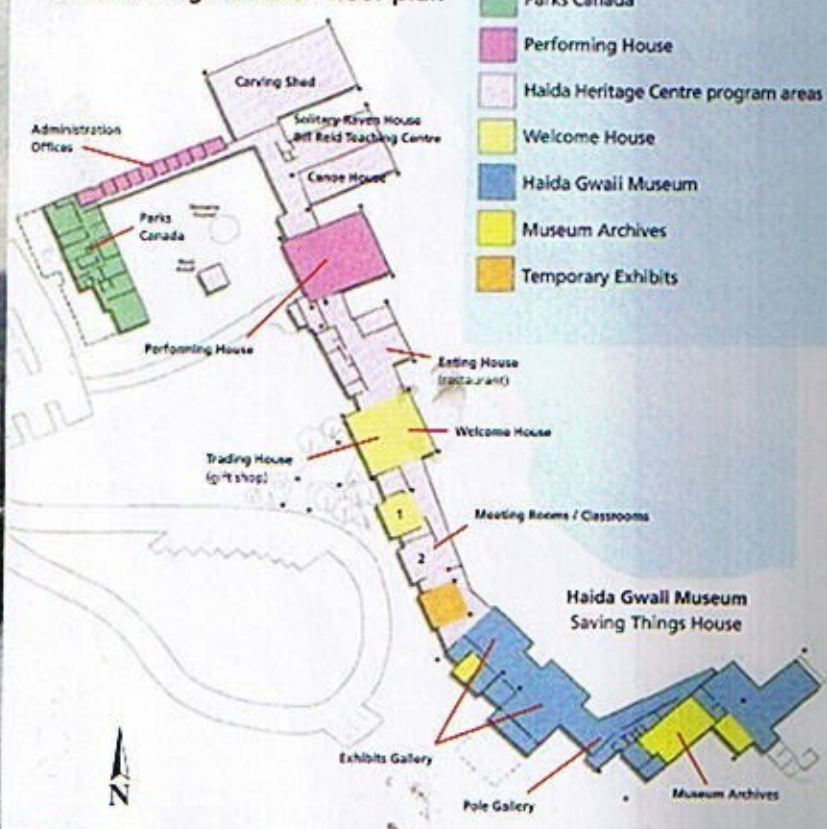
This space is used for ceremonial events, for performing traditional Haida songs and dances, and passing down ancient stories. Nika Collison, curator at the **Haida Gwaii Museum**, led a repatriation feast here in 2007.

"Our ancestors are our relatives and we have a deep connection to them," says Collison, also a co-chair of the **Haida Repatriation Committee**. "We are who we are because of them. We believe that as long as the remains of our ancestors are stored in museums and other **unusual** locations far from home, the souls of these people are wandering and unhappy."

So far, the committee has brought home more than 460 ancestors. Their remains, placed in hand-painted bentwood boxes crafted for them by members of the community, now rest in the Skidegate cemetery.

En route to the next house, a wall of windows looks onto the **Mortuary House**, which stands slightly apart from the Haida Heritage Centre. This sacred house was built specifically to house ancestral remains discovered during the centre's construction.

Haida Heritage Centre - floor plan



COURTESY HAIDA HERITAGE CENTRE





• left: Within Saving Things House, as the Haida Gwaii Museum is known, ancient totems in the Pole Gallery provide a striking backdrop to displays of weaving, basketry, and other crafts in the Exhibits Gallery.

opposite: Haida artist Charles Edenshaw (1839-1920) fashioned this silver bracelet with a dragonfly design. It is one of more than 10,000 artifacts—both modern and ancient—in the Haida Gwaii Museum's collection.

backdrop: Haida Heritage Centre overlooks Second Beach on an ancestral village site called Kaay Llnagaay, "Sea Lion Town," just south of the Haida community of Skidegate. The open-ended building on the far right is the Carving Shed.



● below: Acclaimed Haida artist Bill Reid (1920-1998) incorporated several important cultural figures into this 1.5-metre pole: on top, the Haida watchman; below, Raven with Halibut in his beak; Wolf with Frog in his mouth; and, gazing out at midpoint, a human face. Within the Haida Heritage Centre, Solitary Raven House is named in Reid's honour.



● Visitors to the Haida Heritage Centre paddle past Skidegate village in *Loo Taas*, the traditional Haida canoe Bill Reid carved in 1986.

Beyond this is an art centre called Solitary Raven House, honouring one of the names the Haida gave to artist Bill Reid. Here, Haida instructors and art teachers from schools such as Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design will offer classes to students from Haida Gwaii and beyond. Reid's legendary war canoe, *Loo Taas*, the Wave Eater—used to escort Princess Diana and Prince Charles of England into Vancouver for Expo '86—is kept in the adjacent Canoe House.

The Carving Shed anchors the north wing of the Haida Heritage Centre. Norman Price's Skidegate pole stands in front of this partly open-air structure, where Haida carvers come to work and to learn, aspiring to match the artistry and technical proficiency of their forefathers. They seek guidance from the handful of elders who remember seeing canoes made when they were very young. They study the construction of old cedar canoes and examine archaeological evidence in the forest—a partial canoe started at the site of a felled cedar—to understand the secrets of the trees.

Making canoes, says Haida carver Guujaaw, is an important link to the past. "It tells us a lot about the old people and the way they thought and the way they wanted and what they had to go through. It's an honour to do these things."

Retracing steps to the Welcome House, visitors following the south wing will pass a series of teaching classrooms before reaching what is arguably the centre's most important area. **Saving Things House** contains the Haida Gwaii Museum collection. Here are interactive exhibits and video displays and decayed wooden poles from the old villages. A thousand or so of the museum's 10,000 artifacts may be on display at any given time, from archaeological objects and historical photographs to items of natural history and contemporary art pieces.

"What we try to do is link every object, if possible, to its ancestors, or to the people who made it or owned it," says museum director Nathalie Macfarlane. This applies to ancient pieces as well as new ones the museum has commissioned from the community, including Isobel Rorick's intricate spruce-root weaving, and donated items from contemporary Haida artists such as Robert Davidson.

This community connection is essential to the museum, explains Nika Collison, who designed the guided tour that visitors take through the Haida Heritage Centre.



Within the centre's open-air Carving Shed, Bert Crosby of Skidegate uses a traditional handmade bent knife to refine the curve on master carver Garner Moody's canoe.

"Our elders are our knowledge and wisdom. They provide guidance in every step we take in our work, which we call *weh-gudangang*—respect," she says. "And children are involved in everything around here. Kids sing Haida songs as often as . . . western children's songs, and they pretend to have pole raisings or carve a canoe."

"The descendants of the people who made all those monumental pieces of art in museums, universities, books . . . now have a place to come experience what it's like to paddle a Haida war canoe," says Andy Wilson, a cultural interpreter from Skidegate, "to watch us carve those canoes and totem poles, to watch as our people sing the ancient songs of the Haida, and to explore the environment that influences our art [that] we've fought so hard to preserve."

"The most important goal of this centre is that our own people love and accept this place," Collison continues. "What good would the Haida Heritage Centre be to ourselves or the rest of the world if our own people don't like it or use it?" The reception thus far has been incredibly positive, she says. "It's part of our culture now."

And, finally, for visitors who want to take a bit of that culture home, there is the Trading House—the centre's gift shop, located just off the main entrance. ☺

TO KNOW IF YOU GO



Exploring the Haida Heritage Centre

GETTING THERE

In the Pacific off British Columbia's northwest coast, the archipelago known as Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) consists of two main islands—northerly Graham Island and southerly Moresby Island—and myriad smaller isles. The new Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay Llnagaay sits on a bay near Skidegate, on Graham Island's southeast shore.

- **BC Ferries** (www.bcferries.com). It is a 6.5-hour ferry passage between Skidegate and Prince Rupert, the closest centre on the northwest mainland. It is a 15-hour ferry journey to Prince Rupert from Port Hardy on northern Vancouver Island.
- **Air Canada** (www.aircanada.com). It's about a two-hour flight from Vancouver to Sandspit.
- **Pacific Coastal Airlines** (604-273-8666; www.pacificcoastal.com). Offers flights to Massett.

TRAVEL NOTES

The Skidegate Band Council, which owns the Haida Heritage Centre, plans to construct a full-service, off-site hotel. Until then, visitors can find accommodation in Queen Charlotte, west of Skidegate.

Haida Gwaii is known for its abundant rainfall. Even summers can be wet, so do bring raingear. May through September generally offers the best weather, especially for fishing, hiking, or kayaking excursions.

INFO

- **Haida Heritage Centre at Kaay Llnagaay** (250-559-7885; www.haidaheritagecentre.com).
- **Haida Gwaii Tourism** (www.haidagwaiitourism.ca).
- **Gwaii Hanaas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site** (www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/bc/gwaiihaanas).
- **Skidegate Repatriation & Cultural Committee** (www.repatriation.ca).