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Duen's Great Bear Rainforest

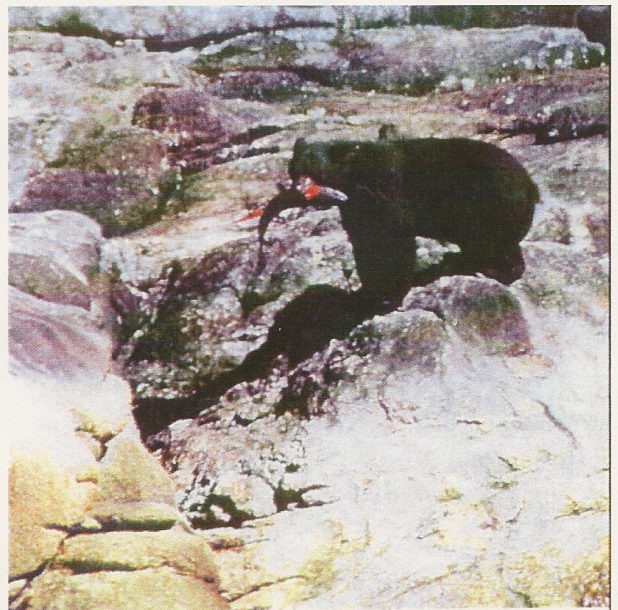
STORY AND
PHOTOS
BY
MICHAEL
PIGNEGUY

» A charter journey worth
a thousand memories

The black bear deftly swiped at a jumping salmon, bringing it frantically flapping onto the rocks at the bear's feet. One large paw quickly stilled the glistening silver fish just before huge jaws closed around it.

With the salmon's head and tail protruding from either side of the bear's mouth and its blood dripping onto the rocks, it was a premature end to a fish about to achieve its life's purpose: spawn in the lake at the head of the falls.

Then the bear saw me standing on the rocks slightly above him about 14 metres away. With the roar of the falls in our ears, he had surprised us, but luckily, he must have thought that a salmon in the mouth was worth more than a tourist on the rocks. Off he sauntered back into the forest while we retreated to the safety of our Zodiac. Ten minutes later he was back out again for his main course, but this time we were watching with a good bit of water between us.





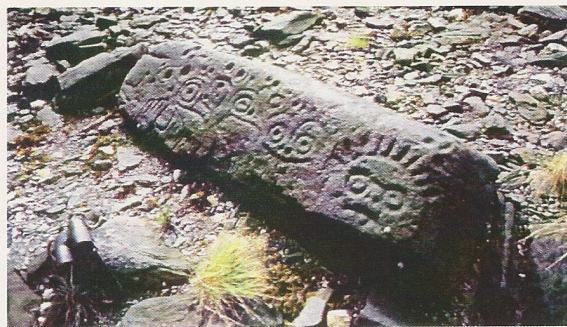
Duen, a 15 m Norwegian ketch built in 1939, was originally a fishing vessel.



Towering mountains carved smooth by glacial action in Kynoch Inlet.

We had just witnessed nature at work at the Verney Falls in Lowe Inlet, some 55 miles south of Prince Rupert. The salmon were running, and the ever-present bald eagles perched on overhanging cedar boughs swooped down to catch salmon that were careless enough to remain close to the surface. There was however, little incentive for the salmon to go deeper. Feasting on their deeper swimming mates were harbour seals, occasionally surfacing between snacks, their sleek heads glistening in the sun.

Experiences like this were going to be an everyday occurrence on our 12 day cruise between Prince Rupert and Bella



8,000 year old petroglyphs in the Douglas Channel

Bella aboard the charter boat *Duen*. Best of all, while watching this cycle of life unfold before us, there were no other boats; no other people; no man-made sounds at all.

The *Duen* is a lovely traditional gaff—rigged ketch, measuring 15 m on deck with a generous 5.5 m beam. Mike and Manon Hobbis have owned and operated

her since 1986, although Mike's history with *Duen* goes back to 1978 when he was crewing on her around the Pacific. Built in Norway in 1939 on traditional lines as a fishing vessel, the *Duen* has had a fascinating career, and the Hobbis' have kept her in top condition.

She comfortably sleeps eight passengers in twin/double cabins and has cozy saloon with a diesel fire. A pilothouse where all can sit ensures views of the outside world should the weather be inclement. Captain Mike Hobbis knowledge of coastal waters, the native fauna and flora and the First Nations peoples is the key to making his trips very successful. Ryan, the cheerful deckhand/ cook produces gourmet dishes that keep taste buds well satisfied.

On board were six Kiwis and an American couple, all with a love of the wilderness. Age is rarely a barrier on these trips, and it is not unusual to have an 80-year-old with us, but we were spring chickens this time with an average age of around the mid-70's.

Hartley Bay, nestled between the hills at the bottom of the Douglas Channel, gave our group an insight into the life of an isolated settlement. The small well protected harbour had plenty of depth for the *Duen's* 2.4-metre draft and, after tying up at the dock, we went ashore to meet the elders. Captain Mike is well known with the Gitgat'at elders, and we were warmly received.



Experienced guides come in handy, especially when bears are around, as in Lowe Inlet.

This 200-strong community is very proud of their stunning new longhouse, a great example of traditional design blended with modern materials, which gives them a sense of tradition and place in the modern world.

We were impressed with their clear ideas of where they should be heading in the future, including the recognition that eco-tourism operators will be playing a part in their economy. To this end, these operators are being asked to sign protocol agreements. A winning formula for operators, the First Nation peoples of the

coast and for the environment.

An easy 12 kt breeze gave the *Duen* an opportunity to spread her wings and we enjoyed a great sail up Douglas Channel before cutting through Sue Channel around the top of Hawkesbury Island. With the *Duen* underway, we would often take side trips in the Zodiac, going ashore for brief expeditions up interesting streams and discovering some spectacular waterfalls. On one such trip Captain Mike showed us some petroglyphs that for the past 8,000 years had been lying on the beach.



The entrance to the reversing falls, at Culpepper Inlet.

The entrance to the reversing falls, at Culpepper Inlet.

It was hard to imagine. In Devastation Channel (named after H.M. paddle sloop *Devastation* and not after a disaster) we anchored off Weewanie Hotpools which occur naturally just above the steep tree-lined shore. All hands were ashore for a well deserved soak. Bishop's Bay, only a few miles off the main Inside Passage track has hot springs too, and is a popular overnight anchorage. Our evening there gave us a chance to swap tales with other boaters, getting up-to-date information on the whereabouts of whales and bears. Fog is not uncommon in these parts and we had a good dose of

it the following morning as we made our way down Princess Royal Channel. Radar, lookouts, and horns were the order of the day, with some large tugs and tows sliding past unseen in the murk.

The sad sight of Butedale, with its crumbling buildings and docks came into view. The caretaker appeared anxious for visitors to talk to, but we considered it too dangerous to put people ashore. It was hard to visualize this had once been the site of a thriving cannery settlement, but after some 40 years of abandonment, the forest was clearly intent on reclaiming the land. Two humpback whales

accompanied us for the next hour, swimming in unison, cavorting together and passing underneath the *Duen* revealing clusters of large barnacles that were growing on their massive bodies.

Then it was into the glorious Khutze Inlet for the night and time to go ashore for a walk in the wide estuarine meadow there. It was a full but dropping tide, sufficient enough for us to explore the salmon-filled river and see bears foraging upstream with eagles soaring over them. Walking across the meadow we frequently saw partially eaten salmon that had become prey to either bears or wolves.

“ **It was a full dropping tide,** SUFFICIENT ENOUGH FOR US TO EXPLORE THE SALMON-FILLED RIVER AND SEE BEARS FORAGING UPSTREAM **with eagles soaring** OVER THEM. ”

The decaying salmon, if not completely eaten, would return important nutrients into the soil. In death, they are an important part of the cycle of life in the rainforest. Back out in Princess Royal Channel the rare spirit or kermode bear was busy fishing in his favourite stream, seemingly quite oblivious to our presence. This beautiful bear is a product of black bear parents with double recessive genes.

Turning east and away from the main Inside Passage route we now entered Sheep Pass, anchoring for lunch in Carter Bay named after one of Captain Vancouver men who was buried here after consuming poisonous mussels. Passing the proud rusting bow of the steamer *Ohio* that was run ashore here in 1909, we went on to explore the river that led us to a spectacular waterfall wreathed in mist rainbows. At the head of Sheep Pass is Mussel Inlet with another wide estuarine meadow just made for foraging bears. Well aware of bear danger Captain Mike kept us close together as we explored

ashore. We took some comfort in the fact that bears had not been known to attack groups of more than five people. The rushing stream was full of salmon wriggling and flapping through the shallows, instinct driving them upstream to quieter waters to lay their eggs. We spied a brown bear upsetting several salmon's travel plans as he grabbed them for snacks. The cries from hordes of screaming gulls filled the air, they swooped down to gorge on the remains of salmon carcasses that littered the banks and the sedge grass. On our way back to the Zodiac we were confronted very big grizzly bear watching us from the vantage point of a large rock while munching on a blueberry bush. It would have been dangerous for us to proceed, so we just backed out of his territory, keeping group, allowing him time to finish was he was doing. He soon disappeared giving us the space to return to our Zodiac. As we motored back to the Duen we could see the grizzly fishing in the stream where we had

been walking. It's on occasions such as that it is essential to have guides that know what to do. We had plenty to talk about during our daily "happy hour" that evening with the most perfect setting for dinner on deck while watching the sun set behind spectacular mountain peaks. The still water reflected the dying moments of another wonderful day. A panorama of towering mountains carved smooth by glacial action eons ago creates spectacular views making Kynoch Inlet simply stunning. At its head there is an estuary with yet another salmon-filled stream. Black bears emerging from forest in the early morning mist filled empty stomachs. Here there was no need to roll over rocks to eat scurrying crabs hiding underneath as we had seen them do on beaches. This was full-on "help yourself" in the salmon supermarket. Eagles, river otters, countless seagulls and the ever-present seal were in the lineup too.

Culpepper Inlet, which runs off the Kynoch, has reversing falls at its entrance, but with a good outboard you can get through. It's well worth exploring. At the head there is a deep winding stream through the rainforest that leaves one in awe at its beauty. Klemtu, a Kitasoo Nation settlement on Swindle Island, is another community that has recently built a traditional longhouse on a point overlooking the settlement.

Francis, a Kitasoo Elder, welcomed us ashore at the longhouse, pointing out that if we came in peace we should come in stern first to the beach. Luckily, he had a good sense of humour, as he didn't tell us that until our bow was taking ground! Inside the longhouse were some wonderfully carved house posts, including one with a double finned killer whale crest. We spent a delightful hour with Francis as he told us tales from the past and plans and hopes for the future of this 450 strong nation. Klemtu had a positive air about it with a new dock being built, new houses going up, a clean tidy settlement and friendly people. Like Hartley Bay, visiting and talking with the locals was an experience that everyone gained from.

Time was moving on and we had to be heading south. We were in search of some old totem poles on a point overlooking Seaforth Channel, and after landing and scrambling up the rocks, we found three ancient totems, one of which was still able to keep a lookout. What a thrill it was to stand on such a site.

After another great sail we ended up in Bella Bella where our group left us to their flight back to reality. But wasn't that just what we had been experiencing over the past 12 days? I think it was.



Mike Hobbis' history with Duen goes back over 30 years.