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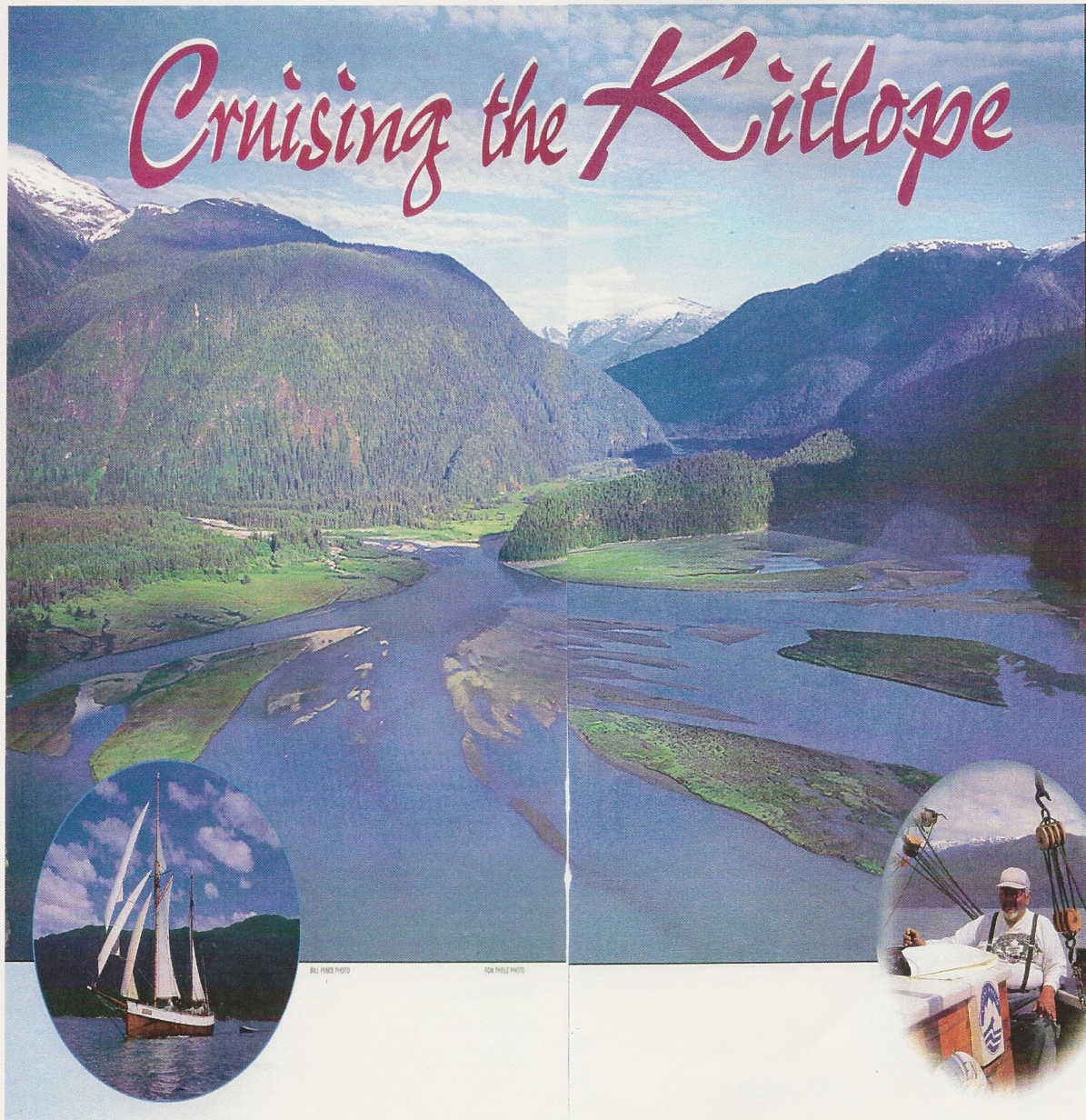
Pacific Yachting

Power & Sail In British Columbia



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The 72' *Duen*, a former Norwegian fishing vessel, took the author and charterers on a cruise from Kitimat into the Kitlope River Valley, a vast wilderness preserve east of Prince Rupert.

Haisla elder James Robertson served as interpreter aboard the *Duen* and spent most of the cruise at the helm.

You've heard the phrase "end-of-the-roads." These are people who live someplace like Deadhorse, Alaska, or Jake's Corner in the Yukon. The temptations of another road-end, the "inner" fjords of the Kitlope River Valley, lured me and a handful of other explorers 400 miles north of Vancouver to a world where bears,

bald eagles and bad-hair days outnumber the locals.

We met in late May in Kitimat, at the end of Douglas Channel, to combine a sailing/nature adventure with learning about a living, breathing native heritage. We gathered on the 72' sailing vessel *Duen*, a sturdy Norwegian fishing boat built in 1939, to discover the

terrestrial and aquatic sanctuary known as the Kitlope. We came to see the world's biggest temperate coastal rainforest watershed, with hanging glaciers, scores of waterfalls raining sheets of snowmelt down 2,000' granite cliffs, mountain goats, bears and thermal springs.



Robertson welcomed newcomers to the Kitlope by splashing their faces with river water.

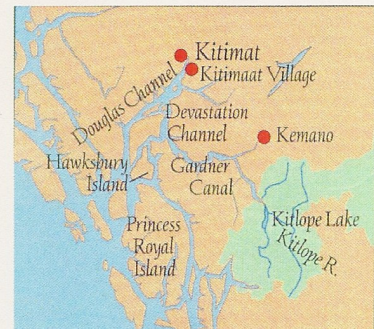
Although the Haisla people have enjoyed the Kitlope's abundance for more than 10,000 years, boaters are just learning about this spectacular backwater. Very few people had heard of the area until 1990 when the Haisla, based in Kitimaat Village, refused billions of dollars and much-needed jobs in logging over the next half-century to save their homeland as an 800,000-acre wilderness preserve. The logging industry has abandoned its interest in the area.

CHARTERS

Even though this region east of Prince Rupert is off the beaten path, there are several ways for Pacific Northwest boaters to explore it, even without bringing their boats north.

I flew from Vancouver to Terrace, where I took the Farwest Bus about 40 miles south to Kitimat. I met the *Duen* (the name means "dove") at MK Bay Marina in Kitimaat Village. Follow similar logistics to charter with local sailor Brian McCabe, who offers bareboat charters on his McGregor 26. Exodus Sailing Adventures in Kitimat provides skippered charters on a 34' Kismet trimaran. Powerboats and fishing guides are also available out of Kitimat.

Kitimat itself is a surprise. A planned community built in the 1950s to house employees of big companies such as Eurocan, Alcan and Methanex, the town is arranged in neighborhoods and surrounded by miles of walking trails.



Far from an isolated berg, this community of 11,000 provides every amenity including shopping, full-service marinas, fishing guides, scuba diving, a range of accommodations, RV camping, parks and play facilities.

The 200-slip MK Bay Marina is an excellent spot to launch almost any size boat. Spotlessly clean with public washrooms, showers and laundry.

It charges a \$10 launch fee and moorage fees of \$.60 per foot per day. It also offers 40 campsites with extraordinary views for \$12/night.

Prior to our departure from the marina, *Duen's* owner/skipper Michael Hobbis formally requested permission of the Haisla Council to sail the Kitlope region. This formality insures a cordial reception and imparts grace on the trip. Similarly, individual boaters need to ask permission to stop at the Haisla-run logging cabin several miles up the estuary.

CHANNELS AND REACHES

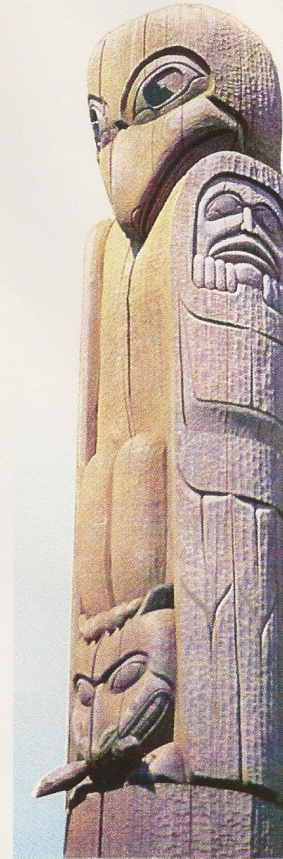
Even after studying the charts, 3743: Douglas Channel and 3745: Gardner Canal, we still had difficulty realizing how deeply this zigzag of channels, passages and reaches carves into the interior. We departed Kitimat Arm, following Amos Passage around the east edge of Coste Island. Coste Rocks is a favorite dive site where the current feeds an abundance of anemones, barnacles and rockfish. As we headed south into Devastation Channel we saw only an occasional recreational fisherman and a dwindling stream of commercial boats.

En route, Hobbis pointed out a regular and dependable scattering of protected anchorages.

We passed Eagle Bay, just east of Coste Island, and a terrific unnamed bay on the south side of Loretta Island, before sighting the tiny but suitable inlet at Weewanie Hot Springs about 16 miles from Kitimat. Weewanie is one of three thermal springs (along with Europa and Bishop Bay Springs) which are superbly maintained by the Kitimat YC. Each features a small bathhouse and startling views.

As we cruised that first evening down Devastation Passage to Shearwater Point and Europa Springs, Haisla elder and interpreter James Robertson shared stories of his people. He told how the mountain goats only clamber about on the east side of the channels and how the north wind promised the People (the animals at that time) not to rage more than two weeks on end.

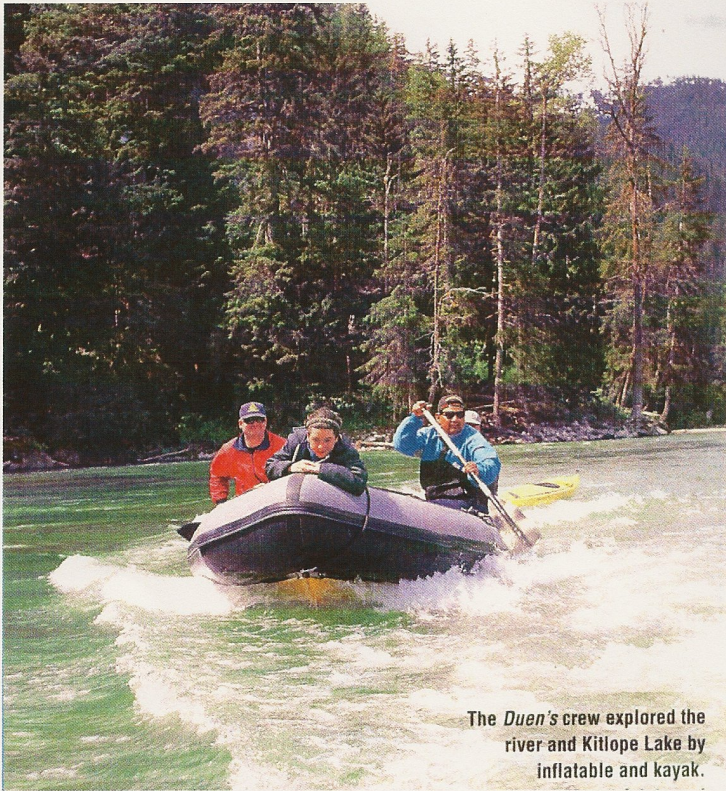
The next morning we motored into ever-narrowing fjords. Hobbis pointed out one of several hanging valley glaciers. The glacier up Barrie Reach recedes about halfway up the valley, leaving a perfectly smooth, naked bowl. We filed into the *Duen's* two inflatable dinghies for a good stretch on the rocky beach. The water is so deep and calm, Hobbis declined to anchor. Instead, he simply let the heavy wooden vessel rest quietly off shore.



A watch totem at abandoned Kemano village.

CONTRASTS

The rest of the day was one of contrasts. Around noon we stopped at Kemano Bay, Robertson's family home until the late 1940s when a smallpox epidemic decimated the tribe. Later, surviving Haisla abandoned both the Kitlope and Kemano areas to amalgamate in Kitamaat. Quietly, we explored the remains of buildings and gravestones surrounded by enfolding rainforest. We photographed the new watch totem carved by Robert J. Stewart which keeps a sentinel eye on the Kemano power plant.



The *Duen's* crew explored the river and Kitlope Lake by inflatable and kayak.

Several hours later we toured the Kemano power operation. The eight-generator plant produces 150mW, enough power to serve the electricity-hungry aluminum and chemical industries of Kitimat. A private company town of 200 people (68 work at the plant), Kemano boasts a handsome dock, yachtclub (34 boats) and golf course. While boaters are welcome to moor at the dock (pay at the club building), all visitors must gain permission from the company to visit the townsite or take a plant tour (call Alcan at: 604-639-8000).

The following day we sailed down Whidney

Reach, past Chief Mathews Bay and down Egeria Reach to the fjord's end at Kitlope Anchorage. In the lingering light of a long day we watched dozens of harbor seals slap their tails on the pink and grey marbled water. Robertson pointed out that mother seals were teaching the juveniles how to hunt.

GREAT CATHEDRAL

The highlight of the cruise was our time spent exploring the Kitlope River Valley. Studies begun in 1991 under the aegis of the Nanakila Institute, a non-profit organization involved in policy development of the region, found the Kitlope to be the largest coastal temperate rainforest

watershed in the world. It is also the most intact.

This kind of rainforest is the most productive, diverse ecosystem on earth, richer than its tropical counterparts.

Bright and early we loaded *Duen's* inflatables for our first reconnoitre—guests in one, crew and chow in the other. As we powered into the estuary we were amazed to see the mountains recede into a broad valley punctuated by grass-covered islands and sandbars. We could understand how thousands of people once lived in this area. Barely a mile up the estuary Robertson pointed to an overgrown cave in a cliff, where women and children hid during Haida slaving raids. Historic enemies of the Haida, the Haisla are more closely related to the Bella Coola.

As we moved against the current into the fresh water, Robertson signaled for us to pause. Bringing the two inflatables together, he ceremoniously welcomed us to the Kitlope by gently splashing a few drops of the river into each of our sun-washed faces. Next, he dipped his cup into the Kitlope, taking the first long draft before passing it to his neighbor.

We stopped 2 ½ miles up the estuary at an old logging camp maintained as a base for the Haisla Rediscovery Program for teens of all backgrounds.

From the bank Robertson indicated well-worn bear trails and rubbing trees. He explained how bear, beaver, moose, caribou, seals, eagles and even eulachon—or candlefish, traditionally rendered into oil and a margarine-like food—still live in the valley.

We explored a further six miles upriver before entering Kitlope Lake, which is eight miles long and more than a mile wide. Ready for a stretch, we disembarked at the McGowan Camp, a traditional village site of the Eagle-Raven Clan. A class of high-school kids from Kitimat participating in the rediscovery program played on the sandspit, jostling one another off fallen logs into the frigid lake water.

Our group picnicked and kayaked. Later we toured the lake by inflatable for glimpses of seal haul-outs and petroglyphs. On the return trip to Kitlope anchorage we spotted a mountain goat within camera range and a black bear sow munching tall grass on the riverbank. Huddled together that evening in *Duen's* main saloon, we could hardly have been more at the end of the road. Yet each of us had discovered a sacred, spiritual home.

Looking into our faces, Robertson read from his Rediscovery Prayer: “Welcome to the great cathedral, the Kitlope. My heart is at peace as I return to my ancestral homeland. This is my heart saying thank you to people who love this area.”



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