

Salish stories



Exploring British Columbia's Gulf Islands aboard an intimate schooner

BY FRANCES BACKHOUSE

It's late afternoon when we drop anchor

in Bedwell Harbour, but the mid-April sun still rides high above the horizon, illuminating the long, west-facing shore. A small crescent beach, tucked at the base of a forested slope, gleams white and enticing. In the three hours since the *Maple Leaf* left Sidney, we've cruised the Salish Sea, the waters off mainland British Columbia's southwest coast, past several of the many islands and islets that make up the terrestrial portion of Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. I'm eager for a closer look.

Eight of us, ranging in age from 15 to 79, have signed on for a six-day tour of British Columbia's southern Gulf Islands. Stretched out along the southeast coast of Vancouver

Island, this archipelago includes 13 major islands and some 450 smaller ones — part rural idyll, part wilderness, with a few villages tucked in here and there. Gulf Islands National Park Reserve safeguards a portion of this unique and ecologically sensitive region. In what will soon become a well-practised routine, my shipmates and I clamber down into the two rigid-hull inflatable boats the *Maple Leaf* uses for shore excursions. Captain Kevin Smith and trip naturalist Fiona Chambers zip us across the smooth water and nudge up to the beach. What appeared to be white sand is, in fact, the crushed remains of countless molluscs. I swing my legs over the side and land with a crunch.

A recent cruise on the *Maple Leaf* (THIS IMAGE) included (OPPOSITE, clockwise from top left), naturalist Fiona Chambers and chef James McKerricher, Hul'qumi'num elder Florence James (left) and shore excursions.



Orcas in Boundary Pass, as seen from the deck of the *Maple Leaf*.



Once everyone has disembarked, Chambers gathers us around her. “We are standing on literally thousands and thousands of years of history,” she says. Throughout the Gulf Islands, beaches like this mark the locations of former First Nations villages and their ancient middens.

But don’t mistake layers of discarded clam shells and cooking fire debris for mere scrap heaps. They’re constructed landscapes, designed to prevent coastal erosion and create suitable house-building sites, Chambers explains. She points to a level area behind her. “Imagine how many people and how long it would take to turn a beach and maybe a little foreshore into that benchland.”

I scoop up a handful of surf-smoothed shell fragments. They make this national park, established only in 2003, seem very young indeed.

“Orcas!”

We’ve barely left Bedwell Harbour the next morning when Bill Crawford spots a couple of tall, black fins. Crawford and his partner, Penny Rigby, have come all the way from England for this trip and have never encountered orcas before. “I was so thrilled when I saw the spout,” he tells me later. We’re all equally excited.

The orcas are moving in the opposite direction to us, so Smith swings the ship around and we follow at a respectful distance, watching them surface and dive. The dorsal fins slice the waves and the muscular black-and-white bodies heave up, as smooth and solid as marble, then slide out of sight, leaving short-lived clouds of misty breath that hang in the air. Intermittently, a petite and more buoyant calf pops into view, close beside the adults.

Chambers advises us to look for fin notches and scars, the distinctive markings that researchers use to identify individuals. We’ll learn later that “our” whales were members of the behaviourally distinct transient population: a 28-year-old



Steller sea lions lounge on rocks along the Strait of Georgia as the *Maple Leaf* waits for guests to return from exploring the nearby shore.

female known as T123, her 13-year-old son and a four-year-old whose gender won't be revealed until it reaches maturity (females reach maturity between six and 10 years of age, while males reach maturity at 10 to 13 years).

The week before our trip, passengers aboard the *Maple Leaf* watched a pod of transient orcas hunt sea lions, but this trio is simply in travelling mode. Even without witnessing that drama, it's a privilege to enjoy their company for a while.

Despite the whale detour, we reach our destination, Narvaez Bay, with plenty of time to explore another piece of the park. A leisurely 1.8-kilometre hike takes us up to Monarch Head and a long, south-facing ridge. When we break out of the cool shade of the Douglas fir forest, we're greeted by a sweeping view across the Salish Sea and the invisible line that separates Canada's Gulf Islands from the American San Juan Islands.

A little farther along, we find the perfect spot for the picnic lunch our Cordon-Bleu-trained chef, James McKerricher, has prepared. As we bask in the sunshine and feast on salad Niçoise, pickled asparagus, freshly baked baguette and cheese, washed down with a local microbrew, a pair of bald eagles flies by at eye level, piping and tumbling about in an acrobatic courting dance.

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'Thank you for coming to visit and be in our territory. Thank you for having me on board your beautiful canoe.'

"It's amazing," Smith says. "This is south-facing waterfront in the Gulf Islands, which is Canada's most expensive real estate, and it's been protected so everyone can enjoy it."

Technically, the ridge is more water-view than waterfront, but there's no doubt that if it were put up for sale, the price would be as spectacular as the vista before us. What's more, it's all within a day's travel of Greater Vancouver and the increasingly urbanized environs of Vancouver Island.

I begin the next morning on the foredeck, my back against a curved hatch cover, the sun warm on my face. I don't have to move an inch to add to the list of birds I've been checking off: rhinoceros auklets, pigeon guillemots, long-tailed ducks and a massive congregation of Bonaparte's gulls, reeling over the water and calling in querulous voices.

High above me, a "No Tankers" flag flutters from the rigging, a declaration of Smith's firm opposition to increased oil tanker traffic on the British Columbia coast. Tankers already wend their way through this archipelago. Their numbers will increase by nearly seven times if a proposed twinning of the Trans Mountain pipeline, which terminates near Vancouver, goes ahead.

It's too glorious a day to dwell on gloomy thoughts, but they heighten my appreciation of our surroundings, especially when we slip into the serenity of Tumbo Channel. I sit silently, savouring the beauty of the arbutus trees that lean out over the wave-carved sandstone shoreline.

That afternoon we beachcomb on Cabbage Island and explore a pioneer homestead on neighbouring Tumbo Island. Active farms still abound on the Gulf Islands, but this one appears to have been abandoned decades ago.

On the way to our next anchorage, we pause to check out the sea lions lolling around on the Belle Chain Islets. As we prepare to get into the inflatables, Smith reassures

us that even from outside the 100-metre no-go zone designed to help preserve the wildlife and their habitat, we'll get close enough "to hear the belching, farting and general commotion."

"Just like a night at the pub," Crawford deadpans.

On day four, we lose the sun and gain enough wind to give us a taste of what this 111-year-old schooner was built to do. Under Smith's direction, we raise the sails and let the wind propel us up Trincomali Channel to meet Hul'qumi'num elder Florence James, who will join us for dinner.

Because her mother courageously refused to let her be taken away to residential school, 65-year-old James grew up speaking Hul'qumi'num, a Coast Salish language, at home and learning traditional ways and oral history from her grandparents and great-grandparents. "They started training me on how to listen when I was four or five years old," she says.

This evening, we're the listeners, crowded around the dining table in the *Maple Leaf's* candlelit cabin. My favourite story tells of the Gulf Islands' creation. Long ago, as the First Ancestors paddled down the coast, the Transformer, Xeel's, turned their canoes into islands, giving the people their "origin lands."



An arbutus tree leans over a beach on Russell Island, which has a long history of use by the Coast Salish people, and was once home to Hawaiians who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company here in the 1800s.

James now teaches at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, where she earned a BA in First Nations studies in 2001. Given her busy schedule, we're lucky to have her here, but she graciously implies the honour is hers. Her soft voice rises and falls like waves as she speaks, first in Hul'qumi'num, then in English. "Thank you for coming to visit and be in our territory. Thank you for having me on board your beautiful canoe."

We spend our last night anchored off Russell Island. The Hul'qumi'num called this island Tth'umuqwa', after the fish we know as kelp greenling. British colonists surveyed it in 1874, and 12 years later the Crown granted ownership to William Haumea, a Hawaiian who came to British Columbia as a Hudson's Bay Company labourer and stayed on after his contract expired. Maria Mahoi, the daughter of a Coast Salish woman and a Hawaiian man (possibly Haumea, though some accounts suggest he was simply a friend) inherited the island in 1902, and she and her husband raised a family of 13 there. Mahoi lived on the island until her death in 1936, at 81.

Like everywhere in the Gulf Islands, there are many layers of stories here. Remnants of an orchard and vegetable gardens are still visible around the old Mahoi farmhouse. Less obvious to the uninitiated are the clam gardens down in the intertidal zone — highly productive clam beds created and maintained by generations of Coast Salish residents in pre-colonial times. Nowadays, it's easy to miss the lines of rocks that frame the beds, but the result of the clam gardeners' efforts is unmistakable. I walk down to the luminous white beach, one of the many that dot these islands, and listen to the crunch of history underfoot.



Hear the First Nation place names in the Hul'qumi'num language with the help of an interactive map at mag.cangeo.ca/mar15/salish.

By land or sea

Getting there Gulf Islands National Park Reserve (pc.gc.ca/gulfislands) is a patchwork of holdings on and around 15 islands, plus numerous islets and reefs. The park office is in Sidney, five kilometres north of Victoria International Airport and four kilometres south of the BC Ferries Swartz Bay terminal, where you can catch ferries to the major islands (bcferries.com).

Staying there Parks Canada operates two drive-in and 10 marine-access camping areas. You can also hike to the Beaumont (Bedwell Harbour) and Narvaez Bay campsites, or take the May-to-September passenger ferry from Sidney to Sidney Spit campground. Boaters can tie up to mooring buoys in three locations. For other sleepover options, consult hellobc.com. In summer, reservations for accommodations on the islands are strongly recommended.

Playing there The Gulf Islands are a mariner's delight, but you don't have to own a boat to enjoy them. Several companies offer nautical excursions in the area. The *Maple Leaf* (mapleleafadventures.com) sails the Gulf Islands in spring and fall, both peak times for viewing marine wildlife, while guests enjoy gourmet meals and the intimacy of a small-scale tour that takes them to places such as the bluffs overlooking Boundary Pass on Saturna Island (RIGHT). Alternatives, including kayak rentals and water taxis, are listed on the park's website, under "Activities." Road-accessible park attractions include the historic Georgina Point light station on Mayne Island; Roesland, a former cottage resort on North Pender Island; and Saturna Island's East Point, with its intriguing fog alarm building and views of Boiling Reef, a popular sea lion haul-out.

