

Regional Guide

Haida Gwaii

Our Adventure Canada guide will lead this incredible expedition to Haida Gwaii, focusing on Canada's Haida Nation, one of North America's most culturally rich and developed groups of indigenous people. Signs of the ancient and living culture remain throughout the islands – longhouses and intricately designed totem poles tell a story of rich human history. We are privileged to be able to visit these ancient sites with Haida interpreters, sharing stories, history, and archaeological marvels of Canada's heritage.

We'll travel creeks threading through old-growth forests and navigate the rugged headlands and waterways between the many communities of the islands. We'll take in views of incredible landscapes and search for the elusive wildlife – puffins, auklets, and eagles as well as stellar sea lions, and a variety of whales. Indeed, the plethora of species that call Haida Gwaii home have led to the affectionate nickname "Galapagos of the North".

The richness of the landscape and the sophistication of Haida society allowed for the development of a strong artistic outpouring in visual arts and ceremonial life. We will encounter both on our journey, for Haida culture remains alive and vital. Guests will have the opportunity to learn about the customs and traditions of this great people – a people whose bond to the natural world is enduring and reciprocal. This bond is reflected in their unique art and reverent way of life.

This reverence means that the cultural landmarks are slowly returning to the land from whence they came - ancient totems and dwellings are slowly slipping back to the earth and before long will disappear entirely. See these living, ever-changing markers of a cultural epoch before they are gone forever.

Join us aboard the Island Solitude and take a step through the living history of one of Canada's true cultural treasures. Bring your camera, journal, and sketchpad – for Haida Gwaii is one of the world's most inspiring places.

Marine Wildlife

Because the islands lie on the edge of the continental shelf, a particularly robust plankton base bolsters the food chain. This plankton forms a rich feeding area for all manner of wildlife – particularly whales. Historically, blue, sperm, minke, fin, humpback, and orca whales have all called Haida Gwaii home. Though whaling in the early twentieth century devastated their populations, humpback and fin whales are now on the rebound and are regularly spotted by visitors. Harbour seals and Stellar sea lions congregate in large communities on shore and ply the waters for fish.

Land Animals

The Haida Gwaii black bear is the largest in the world. In isolation from their mainland brethren these bears developed a larger lower jaw to aid in shoreline foraging. Both black-tailed deer and raccoons have flourished on the island - problematically. Both species were introduced to the region, and without natural predators their ecological impact is becoming more pronounced each year. Bird colonies are at risk from the raccoons and the local cedar forests - foundation of Haida culture – are suffering from the over-browsing of the deer.

Haida Culture

The Haida name for the southern islands is Gwaii Haanas, which aptly translates to “islands of beauty” or “place of wonder”. As a nation, the Haida were divided into two social groups, or moieties, called Raven and Eagle. Their mythology, like that of many other coastal tribes, was based on the epic cycle of Raven and his exploits. A trickster to the core, Raven will set the universe in order at one moment only to throw it into chaos at the next. A greedy, mischievous lecher, Raven nevertheless unintentionally teaches mankind how to live well. He disguised himself to enter the home of the Sky Chief, from whom he stole the sun, moon, and starts to give to humankind.

Most Haida objects are decorated with crests – the figures of animals, birds, sea creatures, and mythic beings. These crests are used to identify the moiety and often the lineage of their owners. The precise arrangement and interaction of various crests and recurring motifs act as a personal signifier, and much can be gleaned from an individual's totem. The true “text” of a single totem pole is impossible to read without a thorough knowledge of the mythology involved.

Although the Haida have almost seventy crest figures, less than twenty are in general use. The orca whale in particular endures as a symbol of power, intelligence, cunning, and skill.

Permanent Haida villages consisted of one (or more) rows of houses along a beach. Generally, the house belonging to the town chief was larger and located near the centre of the settlement. According to myth, the house was one of the main contributions that Raven made to Haida life (after stealing the idea from Beaver). These houses form the centre of Haida social, political, and economic

life. They were built out of western red cedar with a framework of corner posts and massive structural beams

Like their houses, the Haida's canoes were hewn from red cedar – they were exquisite craft and widely praised by the chiefs of other nations along the coast. Like their totems, houses, and tools, these crafts were intricately adorned with crests, symbols, and motifs to identify their owners and their stories.