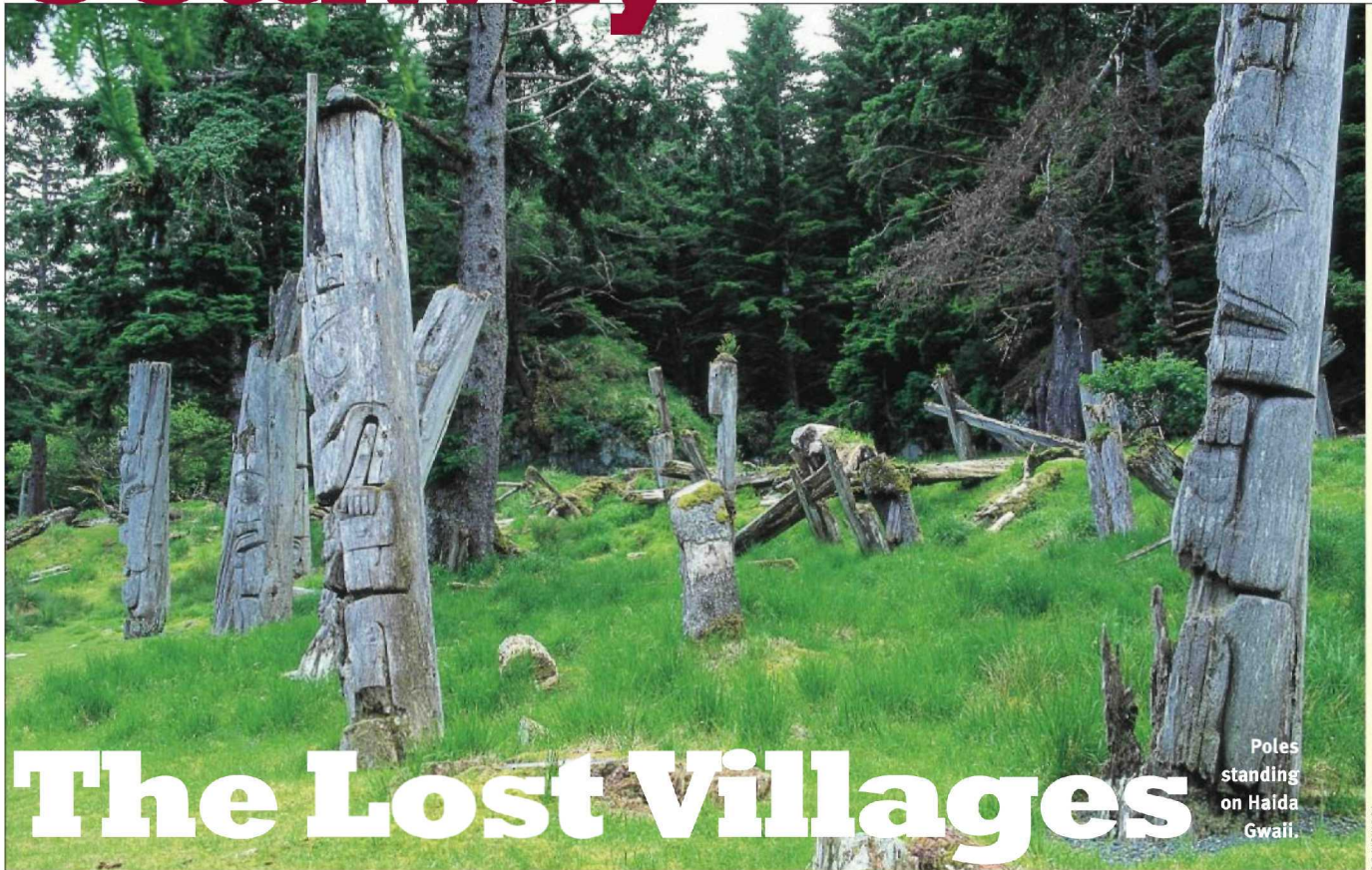


Getaway



Poles standing on Haida Gwaii.

TOURISM BC

The Lost Villages

Dennis Horwood explores the ancient history and culture of Haida Gwaii, travelling far back in “island time.”

When speaking of Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), images of fishing, wildlife viewing, beachcombing, and wandering through rainforests come to mind. Yet just beyond the beaches and beneath the towering trees lie some of our West Coast's most interesting historical places, including ancient native villages and remnants of European settlements and industry.

Haida villages that long predate European contact reveal much of this early history, even though they are now shadows of their former selves. Ancient villages were typically located along beachfronts. A row of houses, sometimes numbering more than thirty, stretched along the shoreline. Each faced the sea, as did the numerous intricately carved poles interspersed among the buildings.

Larger villages had as many as seven hundred inhabitants, although in the summer months they might seem almost abandoned. Many residents migrated to

summer camps, focusing their time on food gathering. With the arrival of winter, families returned to their home villages to store their wares and prepare for celebrations, such as potlatches and pole raisings.

Today, museums have laid claim to many poles, leaving the few remaining vulnerable to moss and mould. Only a few old village sites, such as K'uuna llnagaay and SGang Gwaay llnagaay (formerly referred to as Skedans and Ninstantins), have untouched poles standing in their original location.

During the summer months, Haida watchmen live at both of these sites, acting as guardians and guides. They explain to visitors that a special kind of pole, a mortuary pole, would be erected to honour the death of a past chief or someone of nobility. Rather than providing an earthen burial, human remains were carefully placed in a cedar box atop an elaborately carved pole. The elongated and sometimes decorative side of the box gave the pole a “T” shape.

Visitors to Haida Gwaii will need either a boat or plane to visit nearly every ancient village on the island. If this is beyond a traveller's means, the Haida Gwaii Museum in Skidegate has



DENNIS HORWOOD

A young girl examines an ancient pole at Skedans, a village located on the neck of a peninsula at the head of Cumshewa Inlet.

several original poles on display. Newer poles, also of traditional design, stand near the museum and in front of the Skidegate band office. Their proximity offers an opportunity to compare old and new designs.

A special attraction is an eighteen-metre-long canoe stored in a building alongside the museum. This craft, completed in 1986, can be compared to two unfinished canoes discovered by loggers near Port Clements. For unknown reasons, the Haida abandoned them before they were finished, likely more than one hundred years ago. Their rough shape gives mute testimony to the time and commitment given to working with such rudimentary implements. Since they lie three kilometres from tidewater, moving such massive forms through the underbrush by human power is a task almost unimaginable in today's world.

Non-native settlers who came to these islands in the early 1900s faced similar challenges in overcoming the archipelago's harsh conditions. Forestland dominated, underbrush hindered travel, and what open land remained made poor farmland. Nevertheless, many hardy souls made a supreme effort to etch out a living as ranchers, prospectors, or farmers.

One of the most interesting places to visit is the Evans homestead at Nadu, constructed in 1911. The original dwelling – cut, sawn, and shaped by master axemen Alec Johnson and Ole Anderson – has collapsed in a heap. In stark contrast, rhododendrons planted by Mrs. Evans remain, reaching heights of more than eight metres. Nearby, and even more impressive, is a mortar-free stone breakwater. The massive wall of rock remains intact save for a small portion that has broken away. Clearly, transporting so many rocks with only a wheelbarrow or horse would have been a monumental achievement. Regrettably, the remains of most settlers' efforts have succumbed to the elements. Leaning fence posts, rotting bridges, or shallow drainage ditches provide only hints of previous habitation.

This is not the case, however, with the islands' railroads!

Evidence of railroad activity is still visible and accessible. During the first half of the twentieth century, the A.P. Allison Logging Company operated the only true railroad on the islands between Gillatt Arm and Skidegate Lake. Although the tracks have long been removed, a monolithic fuel tank remains intact, standing like a sentry over the remains of railroad debris.

A very different kind of railroad operated east of Aero on Louise Island. During World War II, logging trucks with hard rubber tires ran on hewn log rails. Lightweight yet strong, Sitka spruce hauled on these wooden rails was vital in the manufacturing of some combat aircraft. A few of

the old logging trucks can be found rusting away beneath the dense canopy of cedar and hemlock lining the beach. A trailer is half buried in the intertidal zone, encrusted with barnacles and seaweed.

Such images are symbolic of many island endeavors. Settlers ventured to these islands with grand schemes and desires. In the end, farms and ranches were abandoned, mineral deposits were depleted, and two world wars drew many of the youngest of the settlers away – only a few returned. The forest or ocean has all but covered their tracks. 🐻

Dennis Horwood lives in Kitimat, B.C., and is the author of several books on the Haida Gwaii region.

IF YOU GO ...

Before planning a trip to Haida Gwaii, contact the Queen Charlotte Islands information centre. Permission is required for anyone wishing to visit an ancient Haida village site. The information centre can help arrange a visit through either the Masset or Skidegate band office. To visit some of the historic sites covered in this article requires some planning. For instance, K'uuna Innaagay (on Louise Island) and SGang Gwaay (within Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve) are only accessible by boat or aircraft. Fortunately, only a car is required to see the canoes at Port Clements; drive approximately 15 kilometres south of the town, and you will find a short trail from a parking lot leads to the site. Moving along to Nadu, follow Nadu Road, 19 kilometres north of Port Clements. Follow the road to its terminus then walk



toward tidewater. Gumboots are recommended. Some sites in this article are open on a seasonal basis. For updated information, contact:

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