

Sailing into the Rainforest, Guided by Native Wisdom

By Stephen Gauer

The black bear was enjoying a late dinner in a clearing near the riverbank. He looked up, leafy greens still in his mouth, and stared at us. We boldly returned his stare. It was easy to be bold because we were sitting in a zodiac with a hundred feet of the Kitlope River for protection. The bear calmly finished his meal and waddled off into the forest. We waited for a few minutes and then went ashore, and stood in the clearing where the bear had stood.

I looked down at the chewed-up leftovers of his dinner. Then I asked Cecil Paul, our guide, if he was scared of bears. Cecil is an elder and former chief of the Xanaksiyala people, who've lived in this part of central British Columbia for five thousand years or more.

“Yes,” he said. “Aren't you?”

I nodded.

The clearing where we were standing used to be a village, Misk'usa, that marked the entrance to the Kitlope Valley. Kitlope means “people of the rock”; it's a gorgeous world, empty and remote, full of trees and water and sky and snow-capped mountains that rise a mile above an ocean fiord. Thanks partly to Cecil this valley contains the world's largest unlogged coastal temperate rain forest.

Few boats venture here because anchoring is deep and difficult. Our tour group of nine had come in early May on the Maple Leaf, a 92-foot wooden schooner based in Victoria on Vancouver Island. The Maple Leaf does the 600-mile Kitlope voyage every spring and fall, following the Inside Passage route used by Alaska cruise ships. North of Prince Royal Island, the Maple Leaf turns right and motors east into the narrow waters of the Gardner Canal, a spectacular 75-mile-long fiord connecting the Kitlope Valley to the coastal inlets of British Columbia.

Misk'usa holds special meaning for Cecil. He was born here in 1932, when the traditional ways of the Xanaksiyala were still intact. He learned to hunt in the fir and cedar forests as a boy, and remembers watching his grandfather kill mountain goats with a bow and arrow. Like most Xanaksiyala, Cecil now lives in Kitimaat Village, near the industrial town of Kitimat, 80 miles to the northwest.

In the early 1990s Cecil helped lead the fight to save the Kitlope when forestry companies were offering lucrative jobs to his people in return for logging rights. More than seven hundred thousand acres of pristine rain forest are now protected.

The Xanaksiyala economy was a perfect model of sustainability. "We believe that the natural world is like a bank," Cecil told us. "The fish and the food are interest. But we would never destroy the capital. So in that way we Xanaksiyala were a very wealthy people."

He stopped talking and walked over to a totem pole, twenty yards from where the bear had been feeding, and told us another story.

The totem was a replica of the original, erected in the 1870s to commemorate an encounter between the Xanaksiyala chief and a spirit known as Tsooda. Tsooda sat at the top of the pole now, fierce and proud, wearing an enormous bowler-shaped hat. The original pole was sold to the Swedish consul in 1929 and later ended up in a Stockholm museum. After Cecil tracked down the pole, a native delegation went to the Sweden in the early 1990s to negotiate its return. The Swedes agreed, but only on the condition it be housed in a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled building. The Xanaksiyala couldn't afford to do this; as a compromise they returned to Sweden with cedar logs and carved two replicas—one stayed in the museum, the other was erected at Misk'usa.

At Kemano, Cecil took us ashore to tour a native cemetery that had almost been sacrificed to a planned expansion of the huge Alcan hydro-electric generating station that feeds power to the aluminum smelters at Kitimat.

The cemetery was a surreal, almost twilight world of rainforest shadow and patches of bright sunlight. Small headstones shared plots with seedlings, cedars, and moss-drenched carvings of salmon and orcas that were slowly decaying into the earth. "What Alcan wanted to do here, to destroy this

cemetery, was not right,” Cecil said. “But no one cared. No one uttered a word, for greed of the almighty dollar.”

After Cecil negotiated a plan to save the cemetery, a mortuary totem was carved and placed near the entrance. We stared at the top of the pole, where two metal disks, representing eagle eyes, shone as blue as the sky. Further down, a school of writhing oolichan fish came to life in the cedar.

“You negotiate, but never with hatred,” Cecil said. “My heroes, the people I admire are Ghandi, that little guy, and the man in South Africa, Nelson Mandela. It must always be a peaceful protest.”

Cecil knew how to play the role of wise native elder. His stories were polished to perfection. He spoke slowly and softly, measuring every word. You had to listen carefully, but everything he said was worth hearing. And he often mocked his own solemnity by ending a story with a joke and a smile. I tested him, asking if he was wise enough to predict the weather. He smiled and said, “I am happy when my guess is right.”

Most of us were city slickers, and in the close confines of the boat the level of chatter, joking, and small talk could seem unbearable. Whenever I needed a timeout I would sit with Cecil for a few minutes. He was a constant reminder that the purpose of the trip was not to share risotto recipes but to try to see this world through the eyes and minds of the Xanaksiyala.

One cold morning we squeezed into the zodiacs and raced up the Kitlope River bound for Kitlope Lake, where Cecil had

spent summers as a boy. Cecil sat in the middle of the boat, still and silent, and stared straight ahead. He wore his battered Mustang survival jacket, his baseball cap, his blue jeans and brown boots.

The river twisted back and forth. So did we. The current was very strong. I looked over the side into a blur of rushing water and coloured stones, and realized the bottom was alarmingly close. Kevin, the skipper, gunned the Honda to maintain speed against the current. How was he dodging the sandbars and sunken logs? Simple. Cecil tilted his head, left or right, and Kevin steered accordingly. For close to an hour Cecil navigated flawlessly until we reached the flat water of Kitlope Lake.

Here the lake played mirror for us, projecting hypnotic images of double forests and snow-capped mountains. We were still alone, as we had been for days. But not quite. Cecil pointed up at a mountain ridge, where we could see a human shape in the rock. "That is the Old Man," Cecil said. "He was a man who did not respect his elders and tried to run away from his tribe. But looked what happened to him! He was imprisoned in the rock."

We looked again. The profile came alive. It really did look like a man up there, imprisoned in rock. Someone in the group said he thought the Old Man had a brushcut, just like Cecil. Was that a coincidence? Cecil laughed and said maybe.

On the last night, at the dinner table, Kevin turned off the lights and lit four candles. Cecil picked up an eagle feather, and explained the procedure for a native "campfire". We were to take

turns holding the feather and talking about the meaning of the trip. No jokes, no interruptions were allowed. When my turn came, I talked about our obsessive need to photograph places like the Kitlope, and the Himalayas, and the Southwest. "Maybe we think photos will capture, or recreate, some of the feelings we feel when we're in these places," I said.

But what are these feelings? The Kitlope filled me with a sense of mystery and awe, appreciation and happiness, even a sense of homecoming. Perhaps some of these feelings are so ancient we don't have words for them; they express a connection to the land that we severed a long time ago and can never restore. Cecil still has that connection, and can express it. Is that why we think he's wise?

Sadly, when Cecil's turn came, he talked not about the beauty and power of the Kitlope but about the time he was taken from his family and sent to a residential school three hundred miles away. He was just ten years old. "I was forced to learn English, to become 'white'," he told us. "I was forced to wear shoes for the first time in my life. There was abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. It was a terrible thing to do to my people, to do to me."

Cecil told us he had been an alcoholic for many years. "I lost my focus but I got it back again," he said. "I stopped drinking." Cecil was silent for a moment. He touched the feather again. "Do you remember what I said about focus?"

The day before, during a walk in the rainforest, Cecil had bent down and plucked a small frond from a fern. He held it in one hand, then tore off one of the pinnae, which are the tiny branches of the frond. "We can lose the central focus in our lives," Cecil said. "Then we lose our balance, like this fern. Do you see?" He held it up. We saw.

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GETTING THERE

I flew Pacific Coastal Airlines (www.pacific-coastal.com, 800-663-2872) from Vancouver to Port Hardy on Vancouver Island (fare about \$200). A cab to Port McNeil, where we boarded the Maple Leaf, was \$50, shared with other passengers. The return flight to Vancouver from the Kitimat-Terrace Airport was on Air Canada (www.aircanada.com, 888-247-2262) for \$200.

THE TOUR

The trip was arranged and guided by Maple Leaf Adventures, Box 8845, 28 Bastion Square, Victoria, BC V8W 3Z1, Canada (www.mapleleafadventures.com, 888-599-5323). The price for the 12-day April Great Bear and Kitlope Supervoyage, including all meals, snacks, beverages and shore excursions, is \$4,000. The 8-day September Great Bear Rainforest trip is \$3800.

RECOMMENDED READING

“The Great Bear Rainforest: Canada’s Forgotten Coast”, by Ian McAllister, Karen McAllister and Cameron Young (Harbour Publishing)

“Monkey Beach”, by Eden Robinson (Vintage Canada)