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Haida Gwaii: A Place of Spirit

*Memories came out of this place to meet the Indians;
you saw remembering in their brightening eyes and heard it
in the quick hushed words they said to each other in Haida.*

EMILY CARR, arriving at the site of the village of Skedans,
in *Klee Wyck*

I'VE NEVER seen a ghost, don't read Tarot cards and grew up in a clear-headed Protestant home where we took our religion straight up, without a drop of mysticism. So, when I climbed gingerly out of the floatplane, balanced momentarily on a pontoon, then jumped off onto the beach at Skedans, I had no expectations about what might happen next.

Just beyond the high-tide line, I pushed past bushes and young conifers, stepped onto the old village site and gasped. Several of the famous Haida totems still stood or leaned dangerously in their original locations. One memorial pole, tilting almost horizontally, was more than 40 feet long. Carvings of beavers, ravens, killer whales, bears and eagles were still identifiable, sometimes clearly visible, on the decaying mortuary posts and poles.

Nothing I had read prepared me for this sight or the way it affected me: the feeling started at my neck, flowed up and down my arms, back and legs, through my whole body. One cresting wave of sensation: goose bumps like I'd never felt



◀ Close-up of eagle mortuary totem, Skedans.

PHOTO BY JANET GIFFORD BROWN

before. This was my immediate, unexpectedly visceral reaction to Skedans, also known as Koono or K'una, on Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands).

HAIDA GWAII is an archipelago of islands placed like jewels off the northwestern coast of British Columbia. It is in many ways perhaps the epitome of sacred places on the West Coast, a microcosm containing powerful elements that imbue this territory with its universally recognized mystique.

It has a richly woven First Nations history going back thousands of years; it is a land that has long embraced ritual and ceremony; it is a place where some people believe they can feel the presence of the Creator. Haida Gwaii is an isolated land of dangerous beauty: pristine, snow-capped mountains loom majestically above mossy, ancient forests and remote, wild beaches, and the constant presence of the sea envelops all.

It is a place apart from the ordinary, where the veil between worlds is thin, and the aura of the ancestors lingers. It is a legendary land where people listen for the language of Raven the Transformer. It's a place where spiritual geography affects daily life.

"There are places on this Earth that are spiritual, and on Haida Gwaii, there are so many places like this," Haida weaver April Churchill told me, as we chatted over tea in her living room shortly after my visit to Skedans. When I told her about my first reaction as I set foot on the village site, she was not at all surprised. She listened knowingly and then said simply that there is a "huge power in the ground" at Skedans and you "feel it through your body." April believes it's possible to "feel energy from the ground any place our people were working."

Even a month or two earlier, I could not have imagined that I'd be standing on the site of an abandoned Haida village on a chilly February day. But that was before I received an unexpected invitation from my friend Farah Nosh. Farah's

passion—to bring world attention to the often-unrecorded daily suffering in Iraq and the Middle East, and see peace restored there—has drawn her back time after time to photograph the underbelly of war, the ongoing tragedy that destroys the lives of ordinary citizens.

Farah is also passionate about Haida Gwaii, where she has lived and worked in the past, and she knows these islands are a place of spiritual healing. She invited me to join her in a rustic seaside cabin on the Skidegate reserve. While Farah didn't exactly say it, I sensed from the start that there was more to this invitation than just a chance to be a tourist. I think she thought this would be a good place for me to mend my body and soul following several months of cancer treatment. After some hesitation on my part (Do I have the time and money? What about my job? Have I earned the “right” to an unplanned journey, a spontaneous trip?), I accepted her invitation and then allowed myself to become increasingly excited about the journey.

I flew into Sandspit, the tiny village where the airport is located, one grey February day, and, a few days later, my unlikely mid-winter trip to Skedans took place. Farah and her friend Janet Brown were both keen to join me, and I found a floatplane pilot willing to brave the trip at that time of year, provided we got a break in the weather. Fortuitously, just hours after a surprise snowstorm, the weather cleared and conditions looked good. Twenty well-narrated and scenic minutes after takeoff, we were skimming into a perfectly U-shaped bay where 27 dwellings once stood, and I was about to experience Skedans.

Now, only the rotting totem poles and traces of former houses mark the sacred ground used for centuries by hundreds of Haida families until smallpox, brought there by the white man, decimated the Native population in the mid-1800s. There is still a mournfulness at this spot. The presence of the ancestors is particularly strong at the old village sites, I was told later by Diane Brown. Diane, a well-respected medicine woman who has lived on Haida Gwaii all her life, believes the smallpox epidemics are partly responsible for the aura at these villages, saying, “When the epidemics hit, we weren't able to put people away properly. Their spirits still linger. Their presence is felt a lot.”



◀ Memorial pole on Skedans. PHOTO BY JANET GIFFORD BROWN

Perhaps the poignant heaviness cottoning the air around the totems was particularly noticeable because my two companions and I were the only human beings on the island and the first people to visit Skedans that year.

“There’s nothing better than being first to a site,” Diane agreed later, and something about the way she said it reminded me of being the first down a ski slope after a snowfall, a virginal exploration.

We took in as much as possible on our brief visit. Janet, who knew the island, led us to a huge, ancient alder tree near the village site. We were able to find remnants of the foundations of the village houses and nearly stumbled over reclining totems staring at the sky. We excitedly identified specific poles, using the book *Those Born at Kooná*, by John and Carolyn Smyly, as our guide. We took

photo after photo, hoping to capture our feelings on the images. I gently touched one totem for strength and stood for several minutes to marvel at the depth of the carved wings on another.

“I didn’t anticipate how I was going to lose myself there,” Farah said later. “You get there and it totally consumes you. All of a sudden, it was time to go and I wasn’t ready to leave.” Our visit felt unfinished, an introduction only, to the spirit of place on this spot. I was suddenly envious of Emily Carr, the iconic West Coast artist who was fascinated with the evocative beauty of the Haida carvings and who had the good fortune to spend a longer time at Skedans in the early 1900s.

“I went out to sketch the poles. They were in a long straggling row the entire length of the bay and pointed this way and that, but no matter how drunken their tilt, the Haida poles never lost their dignity. They looked sadder, perhaps, when they bowed forward and more stern when they tipped back. They were bleached to a pinkish silver colour and cracked by the sun, but nothing could make them

mean or poor, because the Indians had put strong thought into them and had believed sincerely in what they were trying to express.”¹

I like to think of Emily sitting there nearly a hundred years earlier, sketching the same totems I saw, though by now, much of what she observed has been lost. Through her paintings, she introduced many non-Natives to the Haida culture at a time when few people knew much about it. Luckily for us, she arrived when the totems were much more intact, and she had an unusually foresighted appreciation of the significance of Haida culture and art.

Since her visit to Skedans, vines and bushes have overtaken many of the poles as they rot and return to the earth. It may be that in another 50 years or so, very little will remain of them. Some people wonder if more of an effort should be made to preserve the remaining totems. Or, since they often served as mortuaries and memorials, and are in effect Haida tombstones, should they be left untouched, as others fiercely argue, out of respect?

This is a question that also hangs over Ninstints, or SGAang Gwaii, the most famous of the abandoned Haida villages, with the largest collection of in situ totems in the world. (Skedans has the second-largest collection.) Ninstints, on Anthony Island off the southwest coast of Haida Gwaii, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1981. When I confided to Diane that I yearned to return to Haida Gwaii soon to go to Ninstints, I knew she understood by the way she sighed, “That’s amazing there,” and urged me to go.

Robert Bateman, the world-famous wildlife artist, conservationist and writer who makes his home on Salt Spring Island, BC, has travelled the globe to observe, paint and protect wildlife and their habitat, and considers Ninstints one of the most sacred places on Earth.

“I think there are four or five places I’ve been to that are really powerful and Ninstints is the only one in British Columbia,” Robert said. (Other places on his list include St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, the sacred forest of Shinto-Ise in Japan and the Grand Canyon in Arizona.)

Yet Robert had two very different experiences at Ninstints. The first time he visited the site, it was a bright and sunny day.

“I don’t think that’s the right atmosphere,” he told me. The harsh clarity of a blue sky seems to burn away the mystery of such a place. And the UNESCO crew at work on the island at the time, with chainsaws buzzing and people shouting, made the situation even worse.

Robert’s account of his return to the same spot a day or so later evokes a completely different image, so vivid that even just listening to him, I could share in his sense of wonder.

On his second visit, Robert set out with just three others in a Zodiac inflatable boat. As he told it, the atmosphere was “mist. Still as glass. Pacific white-sided dolphins were jumping in front of the Zodiac, almost like spirits. Then a huge fin whale came up right beside the Zodiac, and we cut our motor. The whale rolled and looked at us with its eye, and sprayed. We sat there in stunned silence, all alone, in the glassy, grey ocean. Then we went to Ninstints.”

After that magical interlude, Robert arrived, walked around the village site and realized that, in all his sacred places, “There’s a human component . . . I think the right kind of humanity really adds spirituality and feeling. It isn’t just pure nature.” His painting, “Spirits of the Forest—Totems and Hermit Thrush,” inspired by the experience he had at Ninstints on his second visit, honours the ancestors by its evocative portrayal of wildlife and totems.

Diane honours the ancestors while accepting them as part of her everyday life. She is a Haida healer whose mother spoke to her only in Haida, telling stories and teaching Diane to use herbal medicines from the time she was a small child. Now, she does both herbal and spiritual healing. When Diane talks about the power spots on Haida Gwaii, her understated, down-to-earth manner makes what she says both believable and authentic. She always calls on the ancestors to come and help at the ceremonies she conducts, and recently Farah had the opportunity to feel their presence in a healing ceremony.

When Farah returned to Haida Gwaii after a photography assignment covering the 2006 war in Lebanon, she didn’t realize she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the overwhelming effect that the tragic war images had had on her. When Diane saw Farah just after she had arrived back on

- ▼ “Spirits of the Forest—Totems and Hermit Thrush,” painting by Robert Bateman, on his second visit to Ninestints. © ROBERT BATEMAN. REPRODUCTION RIGHTS COURTESY OF ROBERT M. BATEMAN, BOSHKUNG, INC.





◀ Diane Brown.

▶ Farah Nosh on beach at Haida Gwaii.

the islands, she feared what she saw in Farah's eyes and was worried about her friend. She invited Farah to take part in a healing ceremony at Balance Rock.

At first, Farah resisted Diane's invitation, not sure a ceremony was necessary, but late one night, sleepless and upset, she got up, drove to Diane's

house and woke her up to ask her to go ahead.

Balance Rock is a huge, elliptical boulder left on the beach in the last ice age. The rock rests on a tiny portion of its stone base in a seemingly impossible balancing act and is a minor tourist attraction. It is also, according to Diane, a powerful place of healing. She frequently holds new- and full-moon ceremonies there, as well as women's healing ceremonies, and once took 45 Aboriginal healers from North and South America to the rock. She remembers clearly how moved the healers were by the power at the spot. Native elders and healers from all over the world come to Haida Gwaii and are always impressed by the number and strength of the power spots located throughout these islands.

Just before dawn, the morning after Farah's late-night visit to Diane's house, the two women headed to Balance Rock, built a fire and sipped hot coffee, while Diane made offerings of herbal medicines to the flames. The sun rose on a calm, windless morning, with the flames and smoke rising straight up to the sky. Diane prayed to the ancestors to come help ease Farah's heavy burden, and at that moment a gust of wind came over Farah's shoulder, a wind that gave her goose bumps. Afterwards, her heart felt lighter and she felt less stressed.

Farah hesitates in talking about this experience even now. "I wasn't expecting anything, because I didn't believe. I wasn't into that." But then she had the "amazing experience" on the beach and says she believes now that somehow she was being looked after by something beyond her understanding.

Diane said that a whole group of the ancestors came to help out that morning; she was aware of them. I've listened on several occasions to First Nations people talk about their relationships with the ancestors, a wisdom and knowing that goes



back for centuries. Despite my somewhat skeptical nature, I trust Diane's vision, and I'm thankful she and Farah welcomed the sun that morning.

I never expected to visit Haida Gwaii in 2005, but one thing I'm learning is to go where chance calls me and to be open to the element of surprise. The serendipitous leads us to the heart of our journey, a characteristic of any true pilgrimage.