



Time for Nature



Exploring Aboriginal Roots

Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site

After travelling an hour in a float plane and a half an hour by inflatable boat, the youngsters are excited to arrive on the island. They have been anticipating this trip and have come well prepared, armed with cameras and plenty of questions. The Haida Gwaii Watchman greets the group and guides them through the old growth cedar forest.



Suddenly, the ancient village is there before their eyes. Striking weathered mortuary poles and the moss-covered foundations of Haida longhouses fill the clearing. These are the remains of the once-thriving village and trading centre on the island of SGang Gwaay in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site.

The youngsters have been anticipating this trip, and they have plenty of questions.
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Field trip of a lifetime

Haida Gwaii Roots & Shoots, part of the global environmental organization for youth founded by Jane Goodall, has arranged this field trip with support from the Parks and People Program. For most of the young children, who are just six to nine years-old, this is a first visit to the ancient Haida village and an introduction to old growth forests.



They learn that the Haida lived at this location for over ten thousand years. The island's cedar forests provided the material for carving handsome poles, constructing cedar longhouses, building ocean-going canoes and many household products. The sea provided salmon and shellfish, staples of the Haida diet.

The remains at SGang Gwaay are the best example in the world of a traditional Northwest Coast First Nation village.
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A village among the cedars

This village at the southern end of the Queen Charlotte Archipelago continued to thrive long after the Europeans arrived in North America. The fur trade increased the village's wealth. In 1841, the site boasted twenty houses and 308 people. But the Europeans also brought smallpox and other diseases, which decimated the local population. By 1873, the site was used only as a camp, never to be permanently inhabited again.



The visitors gained a deeper appreciation of the relationship between people and the earth.
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Today the remarkable remains are the best example in the world of a traditional Northwest Coast First Nation village, and SGang Gwaay has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The past comes alive

The children are captivated by tales of traditional village life. They snap pictures everywhere and listen intently as the Watchman explains the history of each pole and longhouse.

The visitors find the poles especially fascinating. The mortuary poles once contained the remains of high status Haida ancestors. A mortuary pole, carved with the crests (or symbols) of the deceased person, had a cavity at the top where the remains were placed. Memorial poles were erected in memory of a deceased person whose remains were deposited elsewhere or whose body was lost at sea. Only one is still found onsite.

Active learning

The visit to the island, like all Roots & Shoots activities, is designed for “active learning”. Children learn through interaction with the environment.

At SGang Gwaay, the visitors gained a new understanding of the cultural history of their home and a deeper appreciation of the relationship between people and the earth. “This was the best day of my life,” said one of the youngsters.

For more information visit www.pc.gc.ca/gwaiihaanas