



Hideaway: Life on the Queen Charlotte Islands

James Houston

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For more than thirty years James Houston has been flying to Vancouver, then taking a little plane north and west to the airport at Sandspit on the Queen Charlotte Islands. After the ferry ride to Skidegate, he takes the single road running north on Graham Island and settles down in his small cottage by the bridge over the Tlell River. There he fishes, writes, draws, roams around, and rejoices that he and his wife, Alice, have found the perfect place.

People go misty-eyed when they recall the Queen Charlottes, those distant islands in the Pacific within sight of Alaska that are miraculously temperate and see little snow. The glaciers of the Ice Age passed the islands by, leaving a treasure trove for botanists and biologists. Today, the warming Japan current still protects its shores.

Among its many delights are spectacular wildlife of all kinds. On land are many deer, river otters, and the largest black bears in the world. Its waters shelter giant crabs, salmon, and killer whales. And the air is filled with remarkable birds, especially the ravens and bald eagles that are everywhere. Special landscapes include moss-hung rainforests that remind us that this is Emily Carr country, sheer cliffs that plunge straight into the Pacific, miles of empty beaches piled with sculptured driftwood, Guinness-black forest pools and thundering seascapes, and even a secret Haida mountain that provides the rare carving stone known as argillite.

These are the islands of Haida Gwaii, of course, and James Houston has always had an affinity for native people, whether with Ojibway friends in his Ontario boyhood or with Inuit in the North. His book tells the history of the Haida, the coming of the Eagle and the Raven clans, and the rich culture they developed in this land of plenty. Then came the bloody sea otter fur trade with sometimes ruthless sea captains two centuries ago and later the smallpox that wiped out 80 per cent of the Haida population, with social effects that have lasted to this day. Houston also tells us about totem poles and potlatches, two traditions that he has seen being revived. And while many old Haida legends adorn his book, there are also fine modern characters, including the old Haida visitor who sang a song to her river *chez* Houston, and the Houstons' friend Teddy Bellis, who liked to offer their big-city guests a snack of "smoked dog."

From a visit to the awesome power of the crumbling poles at the deserted village of Ninstints in the south all the way to the site of a crab fishing tragedy on North Beach, the book covers the range of the archipelago. But James Houston is a fanatical fly fisherman and his love of fishing on his doorstep – and dramatic tales of salmon or trout caught or lost by him, or Alice, or their friends – runs through the book. So, too, does their beloved Tlell River, which ebbs and flows with the tide a mere twenty feet from his window. As he and Alice arrive and open up the old green cottage, their excitement will affect everyone whose family has ever had a special summer place, a hideaway. Reading this book is almost as good as being there.

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