

Sep 19 - Alert Bay

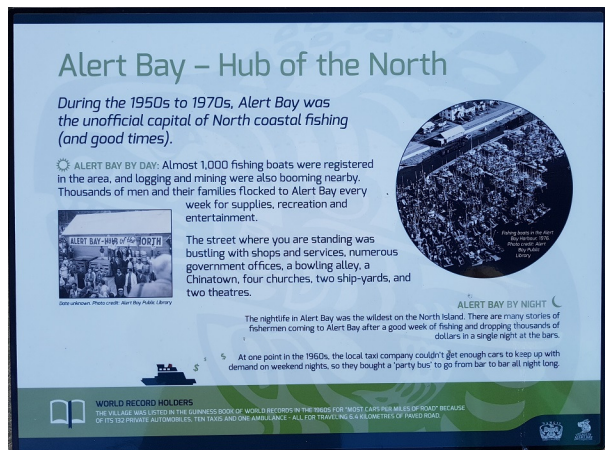
What an ugly sound at 0700! The alarm!! Time to get up, have breakfast, and head for the ferry. The ferry to Alert Bay leaves from Port McNeill at 8:40 a.m. We head out just before 9 and arrive in Port McNeill about 15 minutes later. Wow, we're first in line. And I was concerned that it might be busy!



We departed on time and enjoyed a 45-minute ocean cruise. You sure can't beat the scenery!

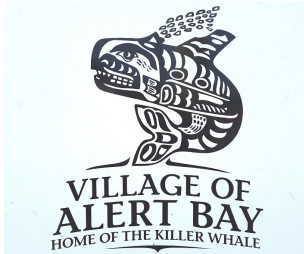


We arrived at Alert Bay and headed for the Tourist Info Centre.

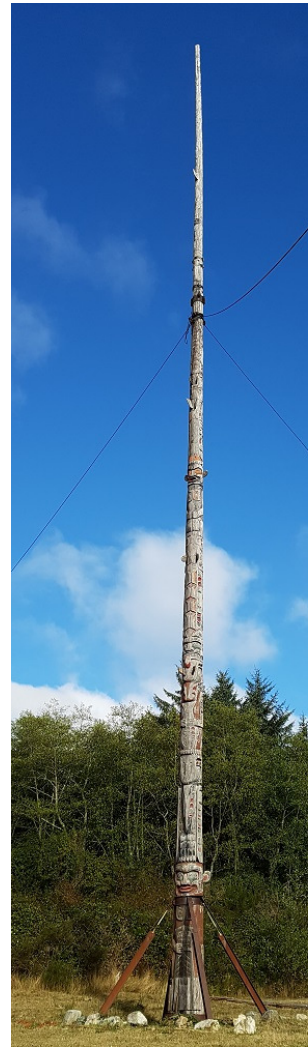


Bet you didn't know that Alert Bay was in the Guinness Book of World Records?! (Zoom into the green area)

Just outside the Tourist Centre, I looked back from whence we came.



We drove up the hill to the World's Largest Totem pole. It was 173' (56.4m) but during a storm the top 10' broke off. Still, it is very impressive. Right next door is the Big House

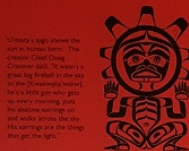


And just down the street is a cemetery.

We wanted to check out the Ecological Park but it meant walking, so we gave it a pass. The Ecological Park, originally known as "Gator Gardens", looks very much like the Florida everglades. It is the result of a dam built on the side of the hill for the fish processing plant many years ago. The dam blocked an underground spring which flooded the top of the hill, killing the trees. The town built a boardwalk across the marsh which allowed visitors a close-up look at the marsh.



We headed for the U'mista Cultural Centre down on the waterfront.



Chief Doug Cranmer with returned Inias (ancestor) mask, c. 1980
Although Doug referred to himself as a "whistler" and a "doodler," he is regarded as one of the greatest Kwakwaka'wakw artists of all time whose work has inspired generations of artists in Alert Bay and beyond.

The Meaning of U'mista

In earlier days, people were sometimes taken captive by raiding parties. When they returned to their homes, either through payment of ransom or by a raid, they were said to have u'mista. The return of our treasures from distant museums is a form of u'mista.

Many people believe that a rich and powerful person is someone who has a lot. The people who speak Kwakwaka'wakw, believe that a rich and powerful person is someone who gives the most away. Since a time beyond memory, the Kwakwaka'wakw have been hosting potlatches and potlatching continues to play a central and unifying role in community life today.



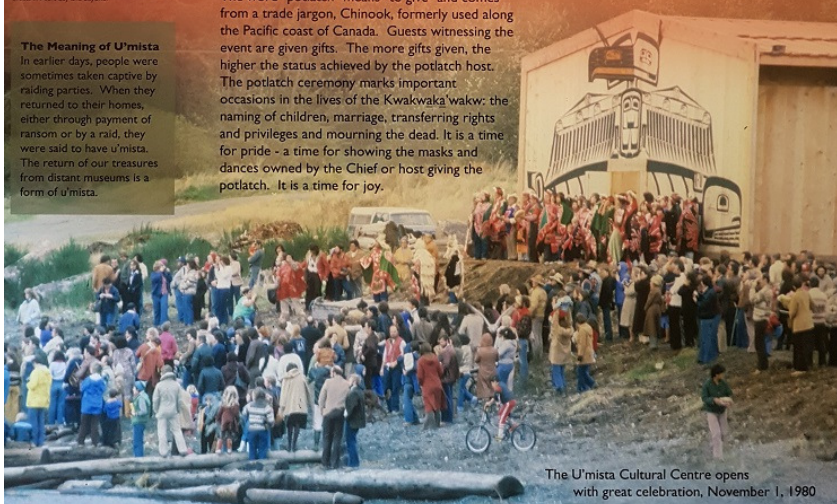
Regalia illegally seized by police after 1921 potlatch hosted during ban by Chief Dan Cranmer
Photograph by Indian Agent Hallday, c.



Photograph marked by U'mista staff to show masks still missing and far from home, c. 2012

The potlatch was banned in Canada between 1885 and 1951. The potlatch masks and other regalia that you see in the Potlatch Gallery were all surrendered under duress to the police after an illegal potlatch in 1921. After the ban was lifted, the Kwakwaka'wakw people fought for decades for the return of their sacred regalia that had ended up in museum and private collections around the world. Most of the regalia has come home and it is shown here at the U'mista Cultural Centre and at the Nuyumbalees Museum near Campbell River.

The word "potlatch" means "to give" and comes from a trade jargon, Chinook, formerly used along the Pacific coast of Canada. Guests witnessing the event are given gifts. The more gifts given, the higher the status achieved by the potlatch host. The potlatch ceremony marks important occasions in the lives of the Kwakwaka'wakw: the naming of children, marriage, transferring rights and privileges and mourning the dead. It is a time for pride - a time for showing the masks and dances owned by the Chief or host giving the potlatch. It is a time for joy.



The U'mista Cultural Centre opens
with great celebration, November 1, 1980

There are 4 totems here. The two framing the Centre's entrance and..



Also, on the shore, was this structure.



Gilakas'la

These structures are called awakwas. There are five along the shore and each one has a carving of one of the 'Namgis Ancestors from each 'na'mima. 'Na'mima means "those of one kind," and is used in a similar fashion to the word 'clan' in other indigenous groups.

T'sit'satwalagame' is one 'na'mima, and the name translates as "The Famous Ones."

Their ancestor is Namxelayu, a great sea monster.

At the time of the great flood a huge sea monster named Namxelayu, which means "Only-one-coming-up," surfaced with the first man walking along his edge. Namxelayu looked like a halibut with a quartz crystal on his forehead which showed the supernatural nature of this being. All T'sit'satwalagame' descend from the first man.

The Centre is very well done. Photographs aren't allowed in the Potlatch area but these woven blankets were worth taking a look at.



Chilkat blanket

Weaver: Anonymous

This Northern blanket was made sometime in the late 1800s.

Donated by Lorne Balshine, Gilakas'la

The Art of Chilkat Weaving

Chilkat is one of the most technically difficult weavings in the world.

It is the only weaving technique that can represent a perfect circle.

Weaving a Chilkat takes a weaver seven to twelve months of full-time work.

Preparation of materials for the blanket also takes several months and involves cedar-bark stripping and cleaning; gathering mountain goats wool and processing the inner wool into yarn; and collecting natural pigments for dyeing the yarn such as wolf moss for yellow and copper oxide for blue or green.

Chilkat blanket

Weaver: Anisalaga, c. 1880s

Anisalaga (Mary Ebbets) made this blanket for her daughter Annie Spencer. Anisalaga was a high-ranking Tlingit noblewoman who brought the northern style of Chilkat weaving south to the Kwakwaka'wakw people.

Her father arranged her marriage to secure connections with the Hudson's Bay Company. Anisalaga married English HBC trader, Robert Hunt, and together they ran the store at Fort Rupert.

Anisalaga's many achievements include running a successful business as a First Nations woman in the late 19th century, birthing thirteen children, and weaving the many complex and beautiful Chilkat blankets and aprons. It is without a doubt that Anisalaga was a formidable woman and an exceptional artist whose story is interwoven with the major historical narratives of our province and nation.

Gilakas'la to the Canadian Heritage (CCPERB) for funding most of the purchase cost of this blanket.

Gilakas'la to 'Namgis First Nation, the Museum Assistance Program (Canadian Heritage) and Orca Sand and Gravel for funding the cost of this showcase.

This little gem caught Jen's eye.

Very fine basket, 2011

Weaver: Meghann O'Brien

Meghann excels at weaving with extremely fine materials.

Gilakas'la to collectors Joyce and Gary Follman for sharing this piece.



There were many very interesting displays.



I like First Nations art but in small doses. We left the Centre and drove back to the BC Ferries loading area.

We walked past the government dock towards more totem poles.



I snapped this picture and Jen reciprocated.



We walked back along the boardwalk and past the old courthouse.



The Old Courthouse: A One-Stop-Shop for Law Enforcement

This sunny house has an exciting secret. Hint: there are jail bars on the windows of some rooms!



Old Courthouse, Police Station, Jail and Officers' Residence, Pre-1976. Photo credit: Alert Bay Public Library

The bars on the bathroom and closet windows are some of the only reminders left of the days when this house was humming with law enforcement activity.

Amazingly, this small building was simultaneously a jail, courthouse, a police station, and a home for police officers. Some locals still remember crowding into the courthouse to watch a trial, or even spending a night or more in the cramped jail cells (which often held First Nations people who were caught outside after the mandatory evening curfew).

The house was built in 1923 by the BC Provincial Police, with the courthouse added later. It functioned as the police or RCMP office until the 1970s. The courthouse operated until the 1990s, and afterwards the building was a doctor's office, rental accommodation, pawn shop and now a private residence.



Members of the BC Provincial Police in front of the old Police Station, Circa 1948. Photo credit: Alert Bay Public Library

Our ferry docked and we drove on board. It was such a lovely warm day. I took this picture.

Back in Port McNeill it was time for a late lunch. When we visited Port McNeill Sunday, Mugz was closed, but not today.

After refreshments we walked out onto the marina floats and saw this catamaran.



Hard to tell but it is high tide, or close to it. I told Jen that I was a little disappointed when we visited Telegraph Cove the other day because it was low tide. She suggested we visit again, so we did.



The cove looks much nicer filled with water, nice clear salt water.



On the way back to Alfie, we noticed this exquisite carving.

So that was our day. Super nice, especially as the weather cooperated.

Tomorrow we are going to drive to Port Alice, about 1½ hr drive. We'll see you there.

