

# Freighter cruising affords an up-labyrinthine Inside Passage



# Push the BEACH

## front glimpse of B.C.'s

BY KERRY MCPHEDRAN

While most of us are snug in bed on land in the dark of night, know that if the tide is right, somewhere along B.C.'s convoluted coastline of bays, coves, inlets and islands, in some remote logging camp, fish farm, First Nations village or rare homestead outpost, the shallow-draught *Aurora Explorer* is "pushing the beach" powered by two 260-horsepower Caterpillar diesel engines. Like a scene from World War II's D-Day landings, her bow ramp drops down. And under the glare of floodlights, a handful of men, using mostly hand signals and a hydraulic crane, unload freight and pump diesel with familiar ease. Crew cabs rumble off; empty fuel drums and dumpsters take their place. A shore dog races back and forth amid the excitement of new humans and new smells to sniff.

The *Aurora* has been ferrying freight since 1991. But back in 1994, former owner Alan Meadows decided there might also be a market in transporting passengers curious about B.C.'s working coast. Barely a year later, he knew he was onto something. "We were at the Scott Cove logging camp at 2 a.m., when I looked up and saw five of our eight guests – all in their housecoats – watching through the wheelhouse windows. *Two a.m.!* But they weren't going to miss a single cargo delivery."

I know why. In the *Aurora's* wheelhouse, those passengers had stumbled into one of those rare seats – like astronauts aboard a

space shuttle – that provide a privileged glimpse into an unknown world, one no cruise ship or ferry ever reaches. And now every spring, when the Pacific is relatively storm-free, a dozen lucky new adventurers join a crew of captain, first mate, engineer, deckhand, cook and steward every week on a three- or five-night *Aurora* sail along a protected coastline unlike anywhere else in the world: to the Broughton Archipelago, the Discovery Islands or a "mystery" destination revealed only on the day of sailing.

On this particular run up the coast, Captain Ron Stevenson is briefing us over an after-dinner "mug-up," tracing our four-day route on the wall chart in the passenger lounge. We'll travel north from Menzies Bay near Campbell River and through the Discovery Passage for deliveries on Sonora and Stuart Islands, then up Bute Inlet – one of the wildest inlets on the coast. On the return leg, we'll drop down Calm Channel past Cortes and Twin Islands for a stroll on tiny Savary Island's famous white-sand beaches, with a last night tucked inside dreamy Desolation Sound. Thirteen scheduled freight stops lie ahead of us, some as brief as 15 minutes.

Still the only scheduled vessel working B.C.'s Inside Passage to welcome passengers,

**WORKING COAST REVEAL** Thanks to a midlife refit that has added significant length, width and expanded decks, the *Aurora* – piloted here by Ron Stevenson (opposite, centre) – can deliver heavier freight and even more passengers to an ever-changing coast. (opposite, bottom) Corporate retreat on Stuart Island.



the *Aurora* has witnessed a tidal wave of change in 20 years. For one thing, “what the coast consumes cargo-wise has definitely changed,” notes Guy Adams, the *Aurora*’s current owner. “We used to deliver a lot more consumable freight. Now, those kinds of customers – the coast’s isolated camps, floating homes and small villages – are gone.”

He’s right. When I first sailed the *Aurora* 15 years ago, her cargo deck was a virtual Rubik’s cube of interlocking boom chains, spools of wire rope, Caterpillar treads and propane tanks, but also books marked “Little Wolf Preschool” and pallets of groceries. This April, there are no books or foodstuffs, just heavy equipment, machinery and diesel for logging camps, and the pallets are loaded with manure and soil alongside a lone Cadillac golf cart for

pregnant women willing to row to “civilization” just in time to give birth; mid-19th century bachelors posting poignant signs by their cabins – “Wife Wanted”; English women raised by servants in colonial India now raising children and gardens in a rainforest. What wasn’t afloat – and most things were, from logging camps to houses – was on skids, so it could be loaded onto floats and pulled north after the work. It was a tough life. And those who stayed were self-sufficient and, often, loners. Yet the coast was surprisingly social; residents thought nothing of rowing to nearby islands for a dance.

By the 1920s, the area’s “pink” gold rush had become the main draw, with more than 200 salmon canneries booming and funky little family run resorts scattered up and down

weeks. Yet surprisingly, says Adams, it’s a greener forestry industry today. He sees it in the *Aurora*’s backhaul. “We’re taking out things for repair or recycling that, before, would be left in the bush: batteries, oil barrels, used oil, old vehicles, steel and wire.”

What hasn’t changed, though, is the coast’s all-important link to the outside world: the boat. From the 1870s through the 1950s, a rowboat was a local’s most prized possession; some lived aboard their tiny vessels for months, even years, sleeping under tarps. Later, Union steamships worked coastal waters with onboard dances, alongside the Anglican mission boat, *Columbia*, where religion took a practical back seat to onboard weddings, dental care, minor surgeries and reel-to-reel cartoon screenings for mesmerized kiddies – many of whom, including



**ONBOARD BOUNTY** The passenger freighter’s overnight spot-prawn trap yields a succulent feast for crew and passengers – plus \$36 in toonies for the closest guess to the 200-plus catch count.

American billionaire Dennis Washington’s private golf course on Stuart Island.

From the 1870s through the 1960s, though, this coast was hopping. The draw for early settlers? Millions of acres of cheap Crown land (160 acres could be had for one dollar and a promise to clear 10 acres in 10 years), salmon that almost jumped onto a fishing line and more Douglas fir, cedar and hemlock than could be felled by one man with a crosscut saw in a lifetime. Folks came from around the world for their share: adventurous husbands scouting ahead of their wives and broods; strong, young Finns and Norwegians rowing north from Vancouver;

the coast. Coastal kids such as writer and photographer Liv Kennedy (now back in Nanoose Bay after years sailing the world) were free-range rowboaters, familiar with riptides and giant whirlpools that swallowed and spit out 20-metre-long “boomsticks” (logs). By age nine, Kennedy was already fishing solo in a dinghy off then-Crown-owned Stuart Island.

Today, the canneries, pulp mills and independent loggers are almost all gone (see sidebar), replaced by a corporate, highly mechanized and mobile forestry industry with minimal workers. “Up to the early 1990s, we delivered to the same logging camps all spring, summer and fall,” says Adams. “And when the loggers moved to their winter camps to log cedar, we’d deliver there.” These were the years when forestry companies cut much larger volumes; now they’re seldom in one place more than a few months or even

Kennedy, were born and baptized aboard. Today, BC Ferries plies the coast’s waters and float planes transport cargo and passengers to its more remote outposts. Most coastal communities on Vancouver Island and the mainland have also had road access since the 1950s. But even today, amazingly, the mainland’s main coast route – Hwy. 101 – ends at Lund, just 198 clicks north of Vancouver; much of B.C.’s convoluted 25,725-km coastline remains without road access of any kind. In other words, B.C. explorers still need a boat.

Steaming north aboard the *Aurora* accompanied by porpoises and screeching gulls, we quickly fall into a soothing routine of doing “nothing” punctuated by occasional shore treks: reading in the passenger lounge with a fresh cup of coffee and sticky cinnamon bun;

afternoon naps in our bunks and chats in the galley doorway with Pat Stephton, the cook, while she keeps an eye on a simmering soup pot. Best seat in the house? The "bleachers" – a raised day bunk behind the wheel and navigation table providing 24-hour access to the ship's operations centre, an increasingly rare experience in today's security-conscious world. "We get lots of men up here who served in World War II convoys in the North Atlantic, as well as those who've always just wanted to work on boats," says Stevenson, as he points out a curious seal popping up to starboard. "They'll be out on the bridge wing letting us know 'It's good back here.'"

By the time we tie up to a log boom on the first night, we've made deliveries to a logging camp and three fish farms on Sonora, the latter part of a local aquaculture market that today relies on a range of highly specialized vessels. One delivers smolts, another brings in barges, cranes and crew to manage the net changes and anchor-dropping, a third ferries salmon to market – while one odorous specialist circumspectly scoops up only the "morts," as dead fish are known in the industry. That night, with the *Aurora* securely tied to a boom in Okisollo Channel's Woods Bay, I sleep like a mort cradled in a cedar chest. Despite the ship's brochure warning of vibration and working vessel noise, I need an alarm clock, not earplugs, to awaken next morning.

Day Two: Hot fresh-baked muffins, fruit and freshly brewed coffee surface on the galley shelf at 07:00. Meanwhile, Stephton hustles together sage-and-apple sausages, eggs, hash browns and toast for our "real" breakfast. As if on cue, a small black bear lumbers by on a nearby beach. No grizzlies will prowl the spring river grasses this trip, but porpoises race our bow and soaring eagles cry like kittens overhead. Sea lions laze in back eddies, waiting for schools of fish.

Stuart Island is still a fishy place. But mom-and-pop fish camps like Brimacombe, with its simple cottages and big tye that appealed to Hollywood's Roy Rogers and, later, Washington scions such as Robert and Ethel Kennedy, have given way to out-of-scale, strangely urban, megabuck corporate retreats owned by the likes of Dennis Washington and the Ritchie brothers. On neighbouring Sonora Island, the award-winning Sonora Resort bills itself as "where pure wilderness and perfect luxury meet."

Soon we're pushing a steady six knots up

the main event: 75-kilometre Bute Inlet. No luxe resorts here, along what is widely viewed as one of the grandest fjords in the world. It is a wet, rich, green, wild place fed by the Coast Mountains' vast Homathko Icefield, where 2,000-metre-high cliffs plunge 650 metres to the sea, where we throw our heads back to gaze at unending waterfalls and nights skies suddenly crowded with stars. Yet pleasure boats typically give Bute a pass. There are few safe anchorages and the notoriously chilling outflow wind can howl down the inlet at 100 knots an

hour. But of the scattering of tenacious souls who live and work on this stretch of coast, with addresses such as Echo Bay, Blind Channel and "Head of Bute Inlet," one has ordered the last delivery of our trip. Near the rich Homathko River delta, a lone prospector waits for fuel – convinced he, too, is sitting on the mother lode. By 21:55, we are secured to the Bear Bay booming ground for the night.

Day Three and we're back in the Discovery Islands, where ferry-served Quadra – a bedroom community for Vancouver Island

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