

The Aurora Explorer

By Laurie Carter



A Unique Way to Explore Campbell River

“Humpback on the starboard side,” shouts First Mate Kevin, sticking his head down the companionway from the bridge of the motor vessel *Aurora Explorer*.

I grab my camera and leap up from the lunch table. In half-a-dozen steps, I’m through the back door of the main cabin and poised for a shot just as the last tip of a massive tailfin slips out of sight, leaving only a neatly expanding circle on the surface of the sea. I wait a few minutes in case the whale resurfaces within range, but I’m not disappointed when it doesn’t. I already have one good tail shot.

Out of habit, I walk to the port rail to see if there’s any action on the other side. We’re motoring north

through Johnstone Strait between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland north of Campbell River. No whales, but ahead, beyond the cargo crowded on our foredeck, a moving white mountain seems to fill the narrow channel. *Rhapsody of the Seas* towers over us as she muscles past, a virtual ghost ship with no visible signs of life behind her rows of darkly tinted windows and almost no one on deck to wave. Probably all at lunch, I think remembering my own abandoned meal.

I return to find a wedge of homemade pecan pie at my place. The passing ship has sparked a lively discussion on cruise travel as my 11 fellow passengers polish off the complimentary

wine. There’s no argument when I suggest that the folks on that floating island have no idea what they’re missing. No way can they sail to the head of a slender fjord deep in the flank of an all-but-uninhabited wilderness, and then nose up to a driftwood-strewn beach for an impromptu shore excursion or float at the base of an unnamed ribbon of water cascading from the rainforest into the sea. They might spot wildlife, but from twelve storeys up, they won’t feel the splash of white-sided dolphins frolicking alongside or smell the breath of a spouting humpback. We have.

Working Cruise

At the start of our five-day cruise,





BC waters are abundant with friendly finned wildlife like the White-sided dolphin.



Handling such a unique vessel takes a skilled and dedicated crew.



I boarded the 135-foot landing craft via the drawbridge bow, greeted by Captain Ron and his crew of five, including Donna, our all-important cook, and Shannon, the mind-reading steward who anticipates our every whim. Squeezing past a diesel tanker, pallets of tree seedlings and a host of miscellaneous freight, I make my way to the sterncastle where I'm soon settled in my closet-sized cabin and ready to explore.

It doesn't take long to navigate our little world. Above the accommodation deck, the main cabin serves as lounge and dining room. Large windows provide expansive views and hanging in the corner, a TV monitor constantly updates our charted GPS position. The mini-fridge is stocked with soft drinks, coffee and tea are

He and Kevin constantly wow us with their seamanship as they maneuver the ungainly *Aurora*...

always hot and Donna kills us with an endless supply of fresh baked cookies. A narrow companionway accesses the bridge overhead, where passengers are welcome any time, with comfortable seating arranged so that we can see the action without getting in the way.

Our first stop is a pick-up, and I watch in awe as the crew shoehorns a massive yellow logging machine onto the already crammed cargo deck. Throughout the voyage, I'm impressed by their skill, scooting around with a pair of forklifts, shifting boxes and trundling deliveries onto the steep landing stages of remote logging camps.

We're headed for one of those camps as we motor up Loughborough Inlet toward Frazer Bay. I'm reminded of the Chilean fjords. The Coast Mountains aren't as tall as the Andes, and we won't spot any glaciers, but it's the same kind of narrow passage—straight-sided



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walls—impenetrable forest.

When we've unloaded enough supplies at the camp to keep the loggers fed for weeks, Captain Ron orders the engines into reverse. He and Kevin constantly wow us with their seamanship as they maneuver the ungainly *Aurora* up to floating bunkhouses to top up domestic fuel tanks or pilot her into miniscule spaces like Echo Bay where there's about a meter to spare between us and the lovely sailboat tethered at the dock.

Coastal Life and Legends

This stop is the home of coastal legend Billy Proctor. A round, golden dog limps down the angled jetty beside a wiry character of indeterminate age wearing blue jeans, blue peaked cap and a bulky cardigan knit in a red, white and blue sailboat pattern straight out of my memory of the '60s.

Billy's little museum is housed in a clapboard cabin filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves. Antique bits include

Coastal legend Billy Proctor is always happy to see the *Aurora Explorer* enter Echo Bay.





Loggers working near Loughborough Inlet toward Frazer Bay.

Even this rustic freight boat provides a pleasant dining room and gracious hospitality to guests aboard.



First Nations totems at Alert Bay

glass net floats, stone anchors, hydro insulators, a parade of fishhooks and a newspaper whose headline proclaims the Moon landing. Even in this remote place, Billy's museum attracts more than 3,000 visitors a year.

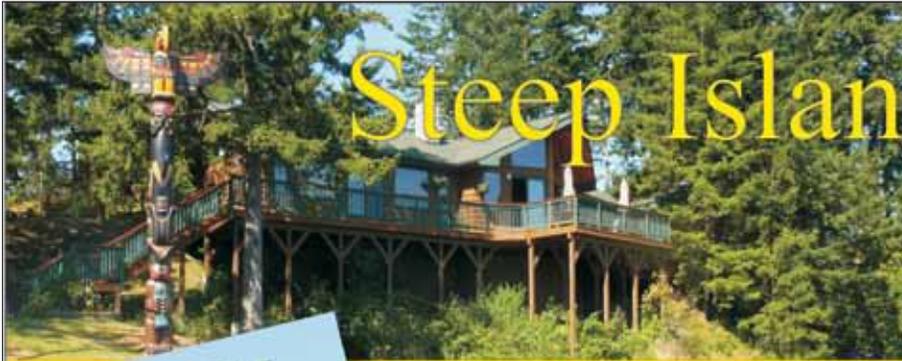
I buy his book *Heart of the Rain-coast: A Life Story*, and he signs it for me. When Ron toots the whistle, Billy walks us back to the *Aurora*, grumbling about damn pictures because everybody's begging him to pose.

The muted thrum of the engine is our constant soundtrack. Laying in my bunk one morning, a change in the tone alerts me to new activity. I roll over for a look out my window and find a pair of boom boats whipping around like sheep dogs herding a flock of floating logs. Their operators jump on and off, trotting along the slippery tree trunks as though they're out for a jog in the country.

Another day I'm lingering over cof-

fee when the settlement of Alert Bay appears through the mist. On a hill above the harbor, totem poles pierce the sky. With only one hour of shore leave, I beeline for the First Nations burial ground.

On our fifth day out, I'm perched on a guest stool in the wheelhouse. Shadowy headlands slowly solidify and darken as we come abeam. Each tree crowding the shore stands in sharp focus, and the tide line looks to



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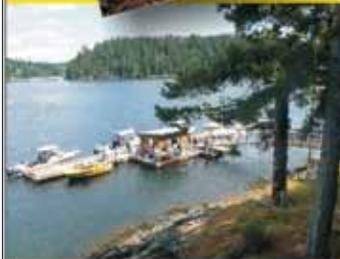
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be drawn with a ruler. A solitary bald eagle perched high on a spruce and a couple of sea lions swimming off the point mark our turn home into Menzies Bay.

We've travelled 456 nautical miles and glimpsed another world. 🐬

Aurora Explorer

Length – 135'

Beam – 34'

Draft – 9.5'

Year Built – 1972 in Hay River, NWT

Brought to Campbell River and operated as an 8 passenger carrying freight boat 1993.

In 1999/2000 in Victoria, BC the vessel was enlarged from 8 passenger capacity to 12.



Local residents of British Columbia waters.