

① An 'Awakwa', a construction in honour of the ancestors and name givers of the various 'Namgis clans. There are five of these structures along the shore of Alert Bay. This Awakwa honours the clan of 'T'sit'salwalagame' (*the famous one*), the first human; the totem depicts Namxelayu, a sea monster.



..... Wednesday, May 15, 2019

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HAPPY DAYS

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I suspect I'm the only one locking my doors in Alert Bay. According to the lady at the Tourist Information Centre, Rhonda, approximately twelve hundred people live here and as far as I can tell, they all greet each other. And me. Pedestrians say hello, and a smile invokes a wave from every car that passes.

There's quite a lot of cars here. Nice, well-maintained cars. I don't see any poverty, despite the derelict impression the village made at first glance. From the quay, the village edges upward on a steep slope (which is probably why there are so many cars about, despite the short distances) and up there I've really only seen well-maintained houses.

I think that the wooden constructions along the shore just suffer a lot from the salty sea wind. Rhonda says that it rains three out of four days here. That won't help, I guess. But today the sun was out.

There isn't a lot to do. I find that to be a relief: no *Fear Of Missing Out*. The whales won't be this far north until June and the grizzly tour was so *incredibly* expensive (because a boat will take you to the Grizzly Rain Forest on the mainland and then you'll stay in a hide-out for three days) that I totally made myself forget about that option. After all, I've seen black bears already.

The island is enchantingly beautiful and the eagles fly high and low and everywhere. It's the time that their offspring starts to fly, so the parents are busy teaching them.

Bald Eagles don't get their distinct black-and-white feathers until they're five years old; the young ones are the same size as their parents, but are covered in brown camouflage. So it's quite easy to see what they're doing.

They skim just over the electricity poles, so how high is that? Five, six metres at best? They go too quickly to make a decent picture, and besides, then they would just seem farther away than they really are.

Today I walked through and around an accidental swamp. The cedars have drowned, but other plants came in their place and the birds love it there. The people made a boardwalk and christened the place **Gator Gardens**.

And *voilà*, a tourist attraction.

On my way there, a woman spoke to me from her garden. Middle-aged and sloven, she looked as if she'd reek quite unpleasantly. Before I could say anything, she went off about everything. That there is f*ck-all to do here, that the people are dumb and unkind, that it's terrible to be poor and stuck in a place you thoroughly hate.

That she's an artist, but no-one buys her work because 'all the tourists want the Native stuff' (erm... *duh*).

I asked her why she'd come to live here then. 'Because someone she knew had told her she'd like it here. And it was cheap'. I asked why she didn't leave, then. 'She couldn't drive', she said.

I thought one had to be fairly stupid (even though she called herself very intelligent—after all, she had a degree and her neighbours didn't) to go live at such a remote place, just cos someone says so and while you have no means to ever leave again.

I also thought that if she'd swap her pajama-pants for something decent and wash her hair, she might be allowed to operate the cash register at the **ShopRite** (the only grocery store here, a sort of huge campground store with unlit refrigerators) so she could make enough money to get out of here.

But I didn't say any of that. What she said was such a contradiction to my own two-day experience that it made me a bit cranky. I thought of Terry-Lynn from the hotel desk with her wide-open grey eyes and her flower obsession, who stops mid-sentence to remark on the fact that the wild roses are in bloom and that they smell so lovely!

I thought of Rhonda at the Tourist Information Centre, who obviously has been reciting the same talk for twenty-four years, but does so with charm and enthusiasm. Of all those 'Good mornings', 'Nice day, eh?'s and friendly waves.

I thought that she might try a smile for a change. Maybe not call her neighbours idiots, and in such a loud voice. Maybe then she might grow some goodwill.

I mumbled something and tried to shake off the bucket of battery-acid, while I walked through a pretty little accidental swamp. Dragonflies as big as my hand. Small, blue-grey swallows, gorging on all kinds of flying critters while flying and swooping. Ravens that were teasing each other while making the weirdest moves.

Sometimes such a human blunder turns out just fine.

On my way back I ran into a French cyclist who was drying his soaked camping gear and his pale torso in the sun. He told me about his travels, I told him about mine. He flirted; I was not impressed by either his bike or his torso.

A little while further, on the 'Namgis side of the village, a man started talking to me out of nowhere, about the eagle babies, and how they had all flown out together all of a sudden, a few

days ago—hurrying to the beach, cos that’s where the food is. They’d then sat in a row, looking totally bemused because they’d had no clue what to do.

I could almost see it.

I walked on and admired the **Big House**, where they hold the ceremonies and where the highest totem pole in the world is standing. Across the road, a ’Namgis man was sitting in his yard, playing with a little grey cat that looked like Casper. He saw me looking and called to me. “Nice day, eh? You can come play with the cat, he loves attention.”

He looked like the present-day Graham Greene: a friendly grizzly-turned-human, wearing a hat. He introduced himself as Laurence and while the little grey tomcat nestled in my lap and started licking my fingers, he started talking. About his own road-trip to Halifax, many years ago. About the exhibition of the U’mista Centre in the **Anthropological Museum in Leiden** (Trevor had mentioned that too), and that he had been invited but hadn’t been able to go.

He told me about the cats, that had been born underneath his deck and that he had saved from the ravens. That he had kittens now and I was welcome to take one. That sometimes there are forty eagles in his yard, when he’s smoking his freshly caught salmon.

I asked him about the bitter woman.

“O, Miriam!”

“All bark, no bite. She had some misfortunes, but all self inflicted.” And, as if he wanted to put my mind at ease: “**She has happy days, too.**”

After half an hour in his yard, with the cuddly little tomcat, I had finally lost the last trace of battery-acid. We said goodbye and I strolled back in the evening sun.

With a ‘Hello’ here and a little wave there.



..... 🚗 *Thursday, May 16, 2019* 🌲

BREAKDOWN

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"This is where they walked and swam
Hunted, danced and sang
Take a picture here
Take a souvenir
Cuyahoga
Cuyahoga, gone"

I left Alert Bay early in the morning. The ferry went at either half past nine or half past noon. And given the fact that I had to check out at ten, I left early.

The plan was to do a two-hour drive to **Campbell River** and then the next day another two-hour drive to Nanaimo where I would take the ferry to Vancouver. Or, if I felt like it, to drive all the way to Nanaimo in one stretch and stay with the friendly Korean for another night.

In those couple of days I grew attached to Alert Bay. I’m going to miss it. It was the first place where I was well and truly relaxed, from deep within.

"I've found a way to make you
I've found a way
A way to make you smile"