

Paddling The Outer Coast of Nootka Island Oct. 20–29 09

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The Voyages of the Starship White Squall – or....

Tim's vain attempt to revisit his youth and take his son Jesse (and other young staffers) to old stomping grounds on the west side of Vancouver Island at the backend of the paddling season. Tim was a kayak guide with Strathcona Outdoor Centre 30 years ago....

Background

Nootka Island is several hours paddling north of Tofino on the west side of Vancouver Island. It's just past Estevan Point where a Japanese sub supposedly shelled the lighthouse during WW2. A revisionist theory is that it may well have been friendly fire to fire up domestic support for the war – hey, that's a good idea, we got a road to Alaska out of it.

There is a tiny settlement out there called Friendly Cove (by the white guys) and Yuquot by the ones who have lived there for 4300 years – the Mowachaht of the Nuu-chah-nulth People. This is the oldest continuously occupied site in Canada and the scene of an international incident in the 1890's involving Britain, Spain, Russia, the United States and of course, the folks who lived there. The sailors of the high seas – Captain Cook and the boys to be precise - found it by blowing in on a storm, not having a clue as to where they were. They triumphantly called the people "Nootkas" because that's what the folks on shore were yelling from the cliff as they approached. Clearly that's what their name must be. Turns out they were saying "Go around the corner you dummies – there's a nice harbour over here" but forever after, the place was known as Nootka. The boys began fighting over who owned the west coast, while the fulltime residents looked on a bit bewildered. Ironically, the Mowachaht had no notion of ownership embedded in their culture so why were the others all worked up? The sea otter fur trade was booming and everyone wanted in on the action. A funny anecdote – on one occasion, the Brits bought furs from the locals for peanuts (well, ok – beads and other stuff) then sailed north and sold them to the Russians, thinking that this is a good gig. The Ruskies smiled, flipped them in another market and made a killing – beating the lads at their own game. I think this was the start of hedge funds, but I'm not too sure.

The Mowachaht were the only coastal peoples to hunt whales. They did it in big, ocean-going canoes made out of a single tree, and like logging in latter day BC, it was a dangerous trade. One whale was all they needed to get through another season, but imagine the courage needed to do that. They had a good life as food was plentiful, cedars provided most everything else and the weather was a lot better than downtown Toronto. Too bad the rest of us had to go and bugger it up. Ray and Terry Williams, along with their family are the only residents of Yuquot now. I knew Ray from 30 years ago when I guided out there – and it was a happy reunion for me. There are also two lightkeepers at Nootka Light Station as well – and that's it. The keepers are the eyes on the sea with constant weather observations. When I asked how on earth they measure cloud elevation (imagining a high tech computer with Doppler radar) they just looked at me with a strained smile. "Tim, see those mountains – well we know how high they are.....so we look at the clouds and figure it out.

The coastline and inlets of western Vancouver Island are a sea kayaking paradise – but the exposure is pretty much the whole Pacific. so when the autumn winds blow, the surf is wild and most sane kayakers stay away. Well ok, all sane kayakers stay away.

Crew

Tim and Jesse Dyer, Brian and Isaac Goodings, Kevin and Christine Utas, Ashley Strange

The Story

OK, you might ask what everyone else asked – “why are you guys kayaking now?” Short answer - we were all working up til then – the end of October was the only time we could get together. The longer answer is we secretly hoped for wet, wild weather and waves.

Except for Jess and me, the rest had not paddled any of the coast so it was all new. A good friend, Brian Henry met us at the Victoria Airport in the fog and rain in his old Ford van. Brian is the founder of Current Designs and an accomplished sea kayak builder and designer. He now operates Ocean River Sports – BC’s premiere sea kayak centre. It was fun arriving at OR and meeting up with Gary Doran, Director of Sea Kayaking. Brian Goodings immediately remembered Gary had been with the two of us on Lake Superior long ago – so it was a fun reunion. The young Squall staff took note that at OR, displays were neatly organized just like a real store – oh the things we learned....

After lunch, we headed up island with our rental Siroccos trailing behind in Brian’s Econoline. We wanted Siroccos as they’re tough and great in surf - turns out we were very happy to have them. With tunes blaring and rain pelting , we were kids on the loose, heading north. Spent the night on Quadra Island near Campbell River with old friends. Quadra is a west coast paradise – coast mountain views, quiet villages and incredible paddling – but we were just passing through. Next morning we crossed back to Campbell River and after a burst at Starbucks, trucked over the spine of Vancouver Island to Gold River. On the way, we stopped at Strathcona Outdoor Centre where Jamie Boulding met us and went over the wallmaps with the gang – showing us what to look out for, emphasizing the dangers this time of year, and especially to watch out for “boomers”. The guys nodded knowingly to Jamie about how what he was saying was so true – then as we filed out, they’re elbowing me whispering “What the heck is a boomer dyer – and what exactly have you got us into????” I assured them that boomers were nothing different than Georgian Bay shoals - just a little more surprising.

We arrived at the Gold River docks in the afternoon to load onto the MV Uchuck, scheduled for departure the next morning. The Uchuck is a wooden coastal freighter and one of two vessels still plying the coast, servicing fish farms, villages, and village idiots like us. The crew were curious and a bit sceptical about these guys from away. They hadn’t seen paddlers for over a month – so we were a welcome distraction. We loaded the kayaks on board and fully packed them in preparation for the next day’s “wet launch”.

Morning dawned with rain, fog and wind, just like the BC I remembered. We headed out the salt chuck in darkness – with high powered lights shining on the Log Sort beside us going full tilt. We couldn’t believe the size of the logs being dumped into the water and the little push tugs tossing nearly sideways and back again to push them around. Log sorts are a BC thing – cut the trees, truck them to saltwater and then sort them out with little tug boats. Even in the morning darkness, float planes were flying overhead and we could see snow on the inland peaks - a real west coast moment. Inside the Uchuck we were warm and dry and the cook soon served up hot coffee, bacon and eggs. Life couldn’t get any better in my mind!

As we steamed out the inlet, the Uchuck stopped at floating fish farms to unload food bales. Imagine a 60’ x 200’ metal farm building on floats complete with kitchen, dormitory and lounge – and cages stretching out for hundreds of yards with fish jumping like mad. There

were two guys working the farm, 7 days on, 7 days off. They were from Ontario and loved their job, the money and the west – wouldn't even think of going home. These farms are large, mobile, and a bit of an environmental nightmare. The biggest issue is sea lice – they propagate in the farm fish and transfer over to young wild stock, killing them. Tellingly, the farms are owned by Norwegians who can't farm this way back home – but hey, come set your farms up in Canada cause we're friendly and not too bright.

A few hours later the ship dropped us over the side at San Carlos Pt. on Bligh Island and our adventure finally felt real. Crew taking pictures - us hamming it up on the hammock as we hoisted up and over – jess surfing the stern wave of the Uchuck as it steamed away and then silence - the ocean at last.

We paddled in relative calm up to the last of the Spanish Pilot Group of Islands and began to feel waves and swell increasing. Yuquot was blinking away in the wind and fog saying "over here you dummies" We sailed into the cove an hour later with seal escorts, hauling the boats up on logs way too big to be logs. Crawling our way through salal and salmon berry bushes, we saw Ray Williams walking towards us in the pouring rain – wearing an old cotton hoody. A funny contrast to our goretex drysuits – boy we must have looked like geeks. As we got closer, he raised his arm and shouted "Welcome to Yuquot!" As we got closer, I shouted through the wind, "Ray, it's Tim Dyer – I used to guide out here with Jim Boulding 30 years ago" He gave me a big smile and said in his best west coast native voice "Tim Dyerr – thirty years – holy smokes tim – that's many moons ago eh?" As the rain poured, the wind blowed and the sound of pounding surf teasing us over the cliffs, we huddled in a ragged circle with Ray. A National Geographic moment, and I wished we had captured it, in a way not unlike my ancient ancestral invaders hundreds of years ago I guess. You can't escape your culture huh?

I asked where we could camp and Ray pointed to the new tenting field, then with a grin he said, "Tim, we got cabins now – not trying to convince you, but it's gonna be really rainy and windy tonight. They're down by the lake Tim – got a wood stove, propane, go have a look" So off we went and true to his word there were these wonderful cedar-clad cabins, one of them facing out to the western surf. I remembered the lake as an ancient sacred spot for ritual cleansing before the whale hunt - now there are cabins. But how could we refuse and thank god we didn't because that night the winds were 70 knots (by the way, where on earth does BC get off in having 70 knot winds – hurricane force to be exact, I thought that was just in the textbooks!!)

We spent two nights at Yuquot – surfing the dumping beaches on the outside of Nootka – getting thoroughly trashed over and over and over again. The sun poked through the next afternoon as the front passed – and there we were, playing our brains out in sunshine with a cabin and beach fire to go back to. Who says BC is tough in the fall! Next day we decided to push on to Escalante.

In my mind I remember Escalante as nice waves, sandy beaches - no problem. Well sir, we got trashed. Escalante beach was my nemesis – I surfed in the first time no sweat, chortling "Hey boys, that's the way us surfer dudes do the deed, ya know what I'm sayin' !" Well, the dude was a dud. That afternoon it took me three "maytags" before getting off and even then, jess had to come back in, get out of his boat - line me up and push me out for dear life! I used to be the one doing the pushing...damn! If you haven't been "maytagged" let me explain. Imagine a dark wall of water full of rock and beach sand looming 15 feet over you and roaring, "I'm going to kill you sucker" then collapsing on your sorry arse and boat. All you do is pray you won't die. The wave rips you out of your seat and your paddle is eaten up like a

matchstick. If you survive, try rolling up, but just as you splutter to the surface, another one knocks you down even harder. It is completely humiliating, humbling and exhausting. Your body feels like it can't possibly go on – which explains why all of us at one time or another simply fell on the beach face down, glad to be breathing and out of the water.

Next morning in cold pouring rain, we crawled out of our soggy tents. It's disheartening what 100% humidity can do to down bags. Reminder to self, forget the stupid down bags next time. We gathered under the tarp and over coffee listened to the forecast - gale-force northwesterlies! Ever notice how even when it's a tame forecast, the radio voice you hear sounds like the world is going to end. I got on the VHF and called Ray – and through the weather we could hear his cheerful voice confirming we needed to get going. Throughout the trip, Ray was never away from his radio when I needed him. He would end every transmission by offering to come and get us if we needed it. He was the proud owner of a new sea boat – twin 200hp 4 stroke on the back of a 20 foot sealed aluminium hull with full GPS, radar and likely a good CD player too! I remember his boat from years ago, an open 16 footer with an old beater motor. Times have changed, but the guy is still one in a million.

Caution being the better part of valour, we traded a day of beach walking and surf for getting the hell out of there. Once through the mothering surf, we gathered up as best we could in confused seas, big bluffs and strengthening winds. The plan was to head up the coast to Burdwood, a more protected camp. Suddenly a smooth oily wave exploded right in front of the lead kayak. The next thing we knew, a 30 foot humpback whale breached underneath. With frenzied backpaddling and shrieking all round we retreated as the whale sank beneath the waves. That was worth the price of admission right there – our little freshwater hearts were still beating madly an hour later

With sea lions escorting us up the coast to Burdwood, we surfed in on another rainy, wild beach. It was just like I remembered – caves, sand, mountainous trees and fine waves - multiple trains with steep sides and then the big kaboom right at shore. We spent the night in the rainforest and enjoyed some of our best surfing with hoots of laughter, heads full of saltwater and sore bones.

The next morning I radioed Ray to say farewell. We didn't want to leave this place, and all of us wondered if we might ever return. By noontime the Uchuck was hoisting us aboard to familiar faces and welcoming smiles. The captain invited our group into the wheelhouse and regaled us with stories of storms and rescues and enough tall tales to last a winter – then down to the kitchen for coffee and grilled cheese – I was in heaven again!

We unloaded and drove to Quadra that night – then got the 6:15am ferry to Campbell River and headed back over to the southern west side of the Island – aiming for Pacific Rim National Park and Long Beach. Arrived late morning to some wicked waves – with very cool surfer dudes practising. The world championships were being held further up the shore in Tofino. I think they saw us as pretty odd – but hey – we kept up on the same waves, so what the hell.

A rainy night drive back to Victoria and another warm welcome from Brian and his family. Delivered the boats back to OR – raced out to the airport and flew back to what the deckhands on the Uchuck call "Onterrible". Well, she ain't so bad, but the sound of surf lingers in my ears and I'll never forget our excellent adventure. As with all fine journeys, it's the people we met who made it unforgettable.