



Haida Spirits and Spirit Bears

Adventures on *Mola Mola*

by Pam Bacich

It was a summer of amazing adventures, spectacular scenery and surprise encounters with abundant wildlife. *Mola Mola*, our 55' Fleming, carried us safely, comfortably, and in great style from Victoria, B.C. to Alaska and back to Newport Beach, CA in five months of fantastic cruising. We marveled at our close up encounters with whales. Day after day we watched them breach and lunge feed. We even floated in the dinghy next to a sleeping Humpback. We sat just yards away from glaciers as they calved into the sea. We anchored in pristine harbors surrounded by otters and harbor porpoises. We watched a giant grey wolf devour its lunch from a whale carcass. But in a summer of never ending delights, two particular experiences stand out from all the rest.

Late in August after three exhilarating months of exploring Southeast Alaska, we





ventured across Hecate Strait to Haida Gwaii (previously the Queen Charlotte Islands), an archipelago of almost 150 islands and islets located just below the Canadian-Alaskan border. Few travelers make the 90 mile crossing because it is notoriously treacherous. The depths of the water change dramatically from thousands of feet to a least depth of 22 feet for several miles off the rugged islands. The weather must be monitored carefully, the charts are incomplete and there is spotty radio communications. Careful planning is a necessity. We headed out at 5 a.m. and luckily and unexpectedly, experienced gorgeous calm waters. It was a magical passage. We watched dozens of lunge feeding Hump-





back Whales and cruised thru silken waters that are the stuff of boating dreams.

At the top of Haida Gwaii are Graham and Moresby Islands which house the only population centers in the island chain. The bottom half of the islands is Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. It's an area of great natural beauty that is remote and unpopulated. You need to get a permit to travel in the Park and there are no services for boaters of any kind. Our two weeks in this wilderness reserve did not disappoint. Wildlife abounds and the five Watchman Heritage sites are historical and fascinating. The jewel

of Gwaii Haanas is S'Gang Gwaay, which was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. S'Gang Gwaay represents the only example in the world of the remains of a traditional Northwest Coast First Nations village site. It is complete with standing poles and the remnants of massive cedar longhouses. It is a sacred site. The Haida consider it more than a village site because the remains of many ancestors and their spirits reside here still. The weathered upright poles stand as silent sentinels to this amazing bygone civilization. Being among these ancient ruins is both spiritual and inspiring. It is hauntingly beautiful and like no place on earth.

The summer of 2011 also turned out to be the "summer of the bear". Time and time again we were thrilled by close up observations of Grizzly and Black bears. We watched them fish for salmon, climb trees and take care of their cuddly looking cubs.





But, the highlight of all our bear adventures was our day with the Spirit Bear. The Spirit Bear is a white, Black bear. Some Black bears in the Great Bear Rain Forrest in Canada have a recessive gene, much like blue eyes or red hair. Thus, a black bear can give birth to a white bear. It is believed that there are less than 400 of these Kermonde white bears in the world. For generations the First Nations people of the region kept the white bears a secret. If fur traders had discovered them, it is likely that none would have survived. Early in the summer on our trip north, we made our initial contact with Marven Robinson, the Spirit Bear “guru”. Your best chance to see a white bear is in September when they come down to the streams to fish for salmon. We talked to people who searched for days, even weeks, and never were lucky enough to find a bear. We allowed a week in early September in the area around Hartley Bay for our “great white bear search”. On our first day we met Marven in a remote bay and hiked into a wooded area that looked down on a fish laden stream. We waited over 5 hours..... no bears of any color in sight. I had actually packed up my photo gear and was ready to leave, when Marven spotted a white flash in the distance. I grabbed my camera and slid down the small embankment to a rock on the edge of the stream. Slowly “our bear” fished his way thru the water and rocks and walked within a few feet of us. Marven has known this

particular bear since it was a cub. The bear was not concerned about our presence and Marven wasn’t worried about being very close to him. I was over the moon! To be in the presence of such a rare and magnificent animal was a thrill that is hard to describe. I clicked away on my camera in amazement and awe.

In mid September we left this remote part of Canada and headed south. On one of our last nights in Canadian waters, I commented to my husband, Mick, that it had been the most amazing summer with the most incredible sights we had ever experienced. I said that the only thing we had missed was seeing the Northern Lights. Mick countered that we were now too far south. That night a heavy fog that had followed us for several days lifted as the moon came up. I walked out to the cockpit to survey the skies. To my amazement, chartreuse and violet streaks flashed across the northern sky. It was indeed a fitting end to a perfect summer of cruising.

