

Westworld

Travel and Active Living from **B C A A** 

B.C.'s

Wild WEST COAST

» a **Nootka Sound** lighthouse
» arts on **Pender** » the
Discovery Islands » **Tofino's**
birding guru » a **coastal**
roadtrip – and more

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;