

## **WCRT'S HAIDA GWAII TOUR, 18<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> May 2010.**

**-by Keith Anderson**

This is a new West Coast Rail Tours tour, running for the first time. We have not run a tour to the Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), ever before. There are a total of nine travelling, including tour leader.

As everyone knows, if you are going to the Charlottes, Jasper is on the way, especially if you are travelling on VIA Rail. Our train, the "Canadian", train #2, left Vancouver's Pacific Central Station right on time at 20:30. Our entire group of nine met in the lounge of the "Park" car, "Prince Albert Park", for the departure, and the customary delivery by the car attendant of champagne, and hors d'ouvres on departure of this train from major stations. All passengers met all of the others, and got to know each other. All us also saw the Royal Hudson from the train, where it was parked, without rods or other drive gear, at the east end of the VIA Rail shop. After some visiting, passengers retired to their rooms on the train somewhere between Port Mann and Mission.. Very pleasant start of our tour.

The consist of our train was two locomotives, #6418 and 6412, and 19 cars, including 3 mid train domes, and the famous "Park" car. Consist was 1,390 tons, with baggage car 8611, coaches 8106 and 8123, café dome car 8502, diner "Empress" #8408, café dome car 8501, sleeping cars car 210, #8339, Sherwood Manor, car 211, #8318 Craig Manor, car 212, #8342 Wolfe Manor, Panorama car #1721, car 213 #8305 Bayfield Manor, car 214, #8219 Chateau Montcalm. car 215, #8217 Chateau Maissonneuve, café dome car 8516, diner Palliser #8414, car 220, #8326 Franklin Manor, car 221, #8327 Fraser Manor, car 222 #8336 Monck Manor, and last, dome observation car #239, #8710, Prince Albert Park.

The train passed much gorgeous scenery, met many freights. The dining car provided good meals and the notable social experience. The four seat tables sat two from our group together with other passengers on the train. People on the train were from Vancouver area, and other

BC locations, together with many Americans, and others from around the world. Pyramid Falls, and Mount Robson attracted lots of attention from many of the passengers. The train arrived in Jasper about ten minutes early, at 15:50 with bright sunshine weather. Our passengers enjoyed the rest of the day visiting Jasper, and settled in our hotel, Whistlers, just across the street from the Jasper station. The rooms chosen for our group look out over the station and rail yard. What a neat touch!!!

Unfortunately, one of our passengers suffered a heart attack while at the hotel in Jasper. Paramedics attended immediately, preventing a worse scenario. He was sent to Edmonton for further assessment and help. He will not be able to continue with this tour due to this health problem. We wish him a speedy recovery, and the chance to come on this tour in future to complete the experience. (Ed Note—member Hugh Fraser reports a good recovery from his

home in Victoria)

Day 3 A free day in Jasper. A variety of activities were done by our passengers, including going to Maligne Lake, and Maligne Canyon, going on the Jasper Tramway to over 2,200 metres elevation on Whistlers's Mountain—where considerable amounts of snow are still there, together with near freezing temperature and gusty wind. The views from the top of the tramway are spectacular, where you can see three mountain ranges, two rivers (the Miette and the Athabasca) and the town of Jasper.

Day 4 Our group gathered at the Jasper Station near noon, to board our train to Prince Rupert. Train 5, the Skeena (sometimes known as the Rupert Rocket) was at the station with engine 6449, HEP 1 coach 8141, and car 8707 Kootenay Park. The rooms on this car are not available to passengers, however the car is accessible to all passengers. Most of all of the approximately 50 passengers made use of this car. Our train left Jasper exactly on time with engine 6435, as #6449 was being sent to Vancouver on the next train #1 for servicing. The local mountains had a new snowfall on them, nearly all the way down to the level of the town. Some snow was predicted for Jasper that day. Of interest is that a school group of about 20 boarded the train, and rode for about 90 minutes west, where the train stopped at a crossing, to let them off to be carried back to Jasper on a waiting bus. We carried on westbound, encountering a number of eastbound freights, including a meet where we met two trains, with our time in the siding being about 35 minutes. Weather was quite cloudy and rain for about the first two hours; Mount Robson was totally invisible due to weather. Meals on this train turn out to be take out items in the Park car. The checked baggage was carried on the coach in baggage areas. Our ride to Prince George was quite pleasant and uneventful, arriving about 20 minutes late at about 19:30 This part of the journey is eight hours aboard the train. We went to our hotel, the Ramada in Prince George, where we all went to their restaurant for dinner.

Day 5 An early rise for all, and breakfast in the hotel at 7 AM, and departing to the Prince George station for arrival there about 7:40 to board the train again for 8:00 departure. We

loaded and left right on time with the same consist, and same Service Manager, jack of all trades, Tracy McLean. She is excellent with her announcements, on board help, and attentiveness. The ride to Prince Rupert is a 12 hour ride. We were on or near on time for the entire run. We followed the Nechako River for quite some time. Shortly after leaving Red Pass Junction, and Moose Lake, passengers were able to see the headwaters of the Fraser River.

Weather was quite a heavy rainstorm afterward for about two hours. Wildlife of quite a few varieties were spotted.. bear, moose, mountain goats, beaver, seal, and perhaps more were spotted. The scenery from the train along the line confirms the comment several times made that this train is VIA Rail's best kept secret. There was a ten minute stop at Smithers for engine crew change, and chance for passengers to walk around, and visit the restaurant at the station for carry out items. By now, the weather has improved and is sunny. The mountains in

the Smithers area and further west in the Coast Range are truly spectacular. At Hazelton, the Bulkley River that we have been following merges with the Skeena River, which we follow for the rest of the way to Prince Rupert. On this section, there were no meets, except for one right at Prince Rupert, where we met a container train departing from the new container terminal there.

Arrival was about 30 minutes late, about 20:45 at the VIA Rail station in Prince Rupert which is a building shared by VIA Rail and BC Ferries. Interestingly, we will use this station next day to board the ferry to the Charlottes. Our group went to a local restaurant for a very nice meal, most of the passengers enjoyed a seafood plate.

Day 6 This was a day for all to be on their own visiting the City of Prince Rupert. Prince Rupert has a new container terminal now, yielding about a train a day from the terminal eastbound on CN. Otherwise, the city appears to be smaller than a few years ago. A vibrant section of town was visited by most of our group, being Cow Bay. We met at our hotel at 22:00 to go to the Ferry terminal, to board our ship to Haida Gwaii, or Queen Charlotte Islands. We boarded at 22:30 on the *Northern Adventure*, which is a ship recently purchased from Greece. We departed on time at 23:00. Coffee shop was open for snacks, and visited by some of us. Our rooms for the overnight voyage were quite roomy, very comfortable. The ride proved to be rather rough over Hecate Strait, due to stormy conditions.

Day 7 On our arrival at Skidegate, we here disembarked at 17:45, to be met by our host for the next three days, Jin Chong. We boarded his Masset House bus, and taken to Masset from Skidegate, which is about 100 km. On arrival at Masset House, which is a very good accommodation, Jin cooked a breakfast for all of us. From about 9 AM, after breakfast, until noon, it was free time for all. Some walked around, others visited at the house. Weather was quite rainy, stormy, blustery. However, we began at noon with our tour of the area, visiting Old Massett, which is the native village, including Sarah's Gift Shop. A Long House next to her shop had suffered fire damage from an accidental fire recently. The Dixon Entrance

Maritime Museum in Masset, housed in their original hospital is very interesting. Our next visit was to the Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary in Masset. In their building, we saw many displays of wildlife in the area. Outside, where normally there would be more, we saw only a few birds, mainly due to inclement weather at the time. We toured North Beach (Agate Beach), Tow Hill Blow Hole, (which is a 15 minute walk through forest along the shoreline), and the section of Masset that was the former Armed Forces Station. After touring, a pleasant dinner in one of Masset's restaurants was the choice for all of us as a group.

Day 8 After a beautiful hot breakfast cooked by Jin, we departed from Masset House toward Skidegate where we visited the Skidegate Museum (of Haida history and culture). This museum is recently built, and is beautiful. We were given a tour of the museum by a native, who explained the buildings and totem poles in front of each building. They each

represented a village, for example, Ninstints. Further along were canoes, and pole carving. A detailed explanation of the canoe building, mostly from a single log, was fascinating. Many historical artefacts, and photos, were displayed in one of the buildings. A visitor could spend days there, and not see it all. However, due to time constraints, we moved on. We toured the village of Queen Charlotte. A very small place, but located near the ferry terminal, makes it more the commercial centre for the area. One store there is very folksy, Meegan's Store, which sells hardware and fishing equipment. They call themselves the "The Best Little Lurehouse in the Charlottes". Their store hours are shown as "Meegans Orfish Hours" then "Monkfishday" "Tubefishday", to "Sablefishday". On "Soleday", and on "Public Halibuts", they are "Clammed". They invite you to "Please Oolichan Again".

Our tour progressed northward from Charlotte, to Balance Rock, a shoreline anomaly, just north of Skidegate. Along the road, some deer were seen. There a many small deer on the Islands. A stop at "Bottle & Jug Works", a local potter located on the shoreline at Tlell was interesting. Mr. & Mrs. John Davies showed their pottery, their property, and the workshop with kiln, and greenware, to the interest and happiness of the group. Onward to Port Clements, another small place. We could not visit there much, since most of their places of interest were closed. We did, however, go to the "Golden Spruce Trail", to see the downed tree that was the Golden Spruce across the Yakoun River from where we were.

Our next stop was extremely interesting and exciting. We went to the house of Joyce and John Bennett, a Haida family in Old Massett. Joyce and her family cooked a lovely meal, Haida style, with salmon, black cod, halibut, deer roast and deer chops, (only Haidas can hunt deer on the Islands), along with soups, salads, coffee, tea, and punch bowl. There were three or more deserts.. Wonderful to say the least. Joyce Bennett posed beside a totem pole in the living room that was carved by her son and presented to her for Mother's Day!! John showed us through his shop were he builds from scratch (literally) double ender boats. He starts with a log, usually yellow cedar, makes the boards, lays the keel, and proceeds to complete the boat. Extreme craftsmanship, with a lovely product. He has a Monumental Cedar log in his yard.

This is a cedar of such size that it could be made into a very large totem pole. He says that his will become boats. We left the Bennetts after a beautiful time and proceeded down the street (Eagle Ave) to the Longhouse, where Christian White and his "Tluu Xaada Naay Dancers" performed along with singing, native songs and dances, in full regalia for over an hour. It seemed much shorter, as the time went so quickly. A beautiful day was had by all with a lovely cross section of Haida culture. We were addressed in the Haida language by some of the people that hosted us, with, of course, the English version too.

The tour ended with a Pacific Coastal Airlines flight home to the Vancouver Airport's South terminal—a great time was had by all.