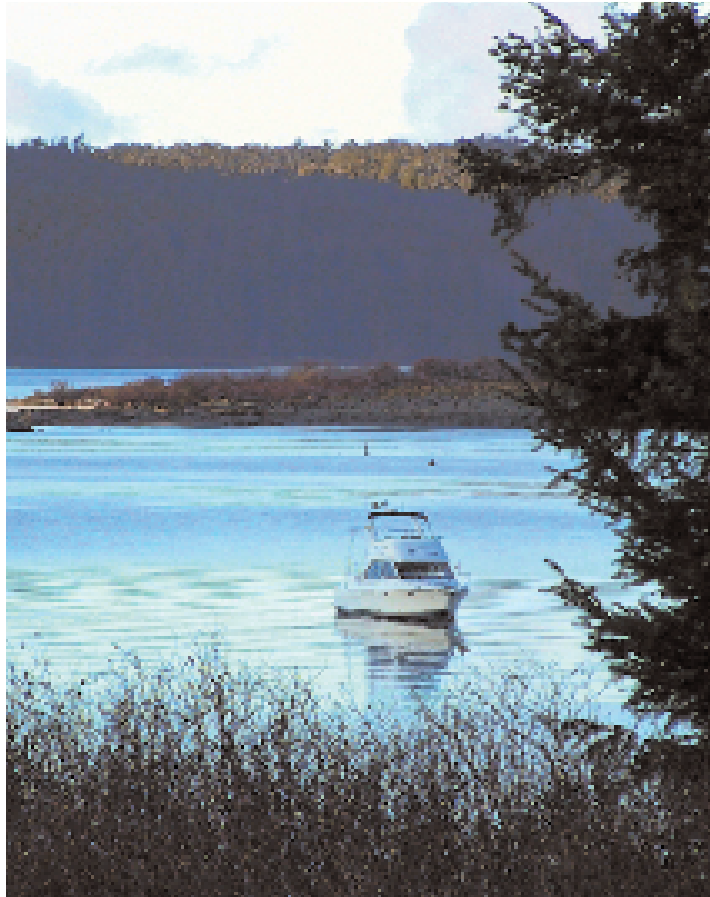


Ruins of the old coal mine at
Suquash south of Fort Rupert.



STORY & PHOTOS BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

FORT RUPERT



Beaver Harbour doesn't look like much of an anchorage, but it does provide limited shelter.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

Unusual attractions make this north island destination a worthwhile stopover

Fort Rupert lies in Beaver Harbour, just south of Port Hardy, at the northeast end of Vancouver Island. Many boaters pass by when visiting Port Hardy, but few ever stop here—Fort Rupert is not a destination in any of the cruising guides. Beaver Harbour does not look like much of an anchorage from the chart either. Certain Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) officials also held this opinion. But this is where, in 1849, HBC established Fort Rupert, the first European settlement in Kwakwaka'wakw territory.

Parts of Edward Curtis's 1914 documentary, *In the Land of the War Canoes*, were filmed in Fort Rupert and starred many residents.



COURTESY OF THE BURKE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AND CULTURE

THE KWAKWAKA'WAKW

Kwakwaka'wakw (pronounced kwalk-walk-aye-walk) means "the people who speak the Kwa'kwala language." Their territory includes the northeast waters and the northern tip of Vancouver Island. Early Europeans dubbed them the Kwakiutl. This is an Anglicization of Kwakiulth, the name of the tribe at Fort Rupert, where most initial contact occurred. The U'mista Cultural Society coined the term Kwakwaka'wakw in 1980 to provide a general name that was not specific to a single tribe.

For pleasure craft, one advantage the harbour has is shallow water with good holding and reasonable shelter. If you can forgo an all-weather anchorage, Fort Rupert has a surprising variety of attractions. These include the remains of the original HBC fort; a thriving native community full of impressive carvings; an art gallery; a major waterfront park with an expansive sandy beach; a 12 km hiking trail with dramatic ocean views; and monstrous equipment left from an abandoned mining operation.

OLD FORT RUPERT For almost 50 years, Fort Rupert was the region's European population, commerce and administrative centre. HBC closed the fort in 1882 and

sold it to the presiding chief factor, Robert Hunt. Within 20 years, two fires burned the fort to the ground, leaving nothing but the chimney. It has been slowly crumbling and falling over the years.

We wanted to see the chimney before it was gone, but we couldn't find any information on how to visit by boat. In the winter of 2003, armed with some local knowledge, we anchored in Beaver Harbour and landed our dinghy at Wa'wis Creek.

A few paces down the road, there was the 150-year old relic, certainly the oldest European structure in the region. Given the chimney's significance, it is surprising there is no marker or plaque for it.

There was no permanent Kwakwaka'wakw village here when the outpost was established, but one sprung up around the fort. This was an ideal setting for those interested in their culture. Franz Boas, "the father of modern anthropology," visited Fort Rupert several times during his multi-decade study of native cultures.

Edward Curtis, renowned native photographer, made his only movie, *In the Land of the War Canoes*—the first documentary on native Americans and starred many Fort Rupert residents. A portion of the film, along with many of Curtis' photographs, are shown in the First Peoples' exhibit at Victoria's Royal BC

Museum. The dance of the grizzly bear, thunderbird and wasp are vivid memories from my time spent haunting the museum in my youth.

Robert Hunt built a new store after the fire and carried on the trading post. Hunt's many descendants had a huge impact on the region's history and fortunes. Hunt's son George was a skilled anthropologist who was instrumental to the success of Boas, Curtis and a host of others.

Worth visiting is an ornate graveyard near the chimney where Robert Hunt and his family are buried.

Calvin Hunt carving a totem. Calvin is a grandson of Mungo Martin, the first chief carver at the Royal BC Museum in Victoria.





(Above) A wrought iron fence encloses the grave of Robert Hunt, the HBC's last chief factor at Fort Rupert. (Left) This 40' cedar canoe is painted with an eagle, the village's main crest.



in Victoria. Calvin's cousin, Tony Hunt, operated the Art of the Raven gallery in Victoria for 20 years. Many talented carvers trained there, including Calvin.

We found more of Calvin's work down the road: a 12-metre traditional cedar canoe rested in an open shed. The main crest of the village, an eagle, was painted on the bow. Beside it was the village's striking daycare centre. It is built of cedar and glass following the traditional big house style. Calvin created the house front and carved both the elaborate front door and a large eagle, which perches on the back roof with outstretched wings.

To the west was another remnant of the HBC days: an old cannon from the fort lies in the grass. Beyond are the Fort Rupert graveyard and ceremonial big house. Many of the graves are adorned with impressive carvings and paintings. The big house supports the most dramatic carving in the village: a massive carved Sisiutl (two-headed serpent), perhaps 15 metres long. You can see it from the harbour with binoculars. The Sisiutl was designed by Tony Hunt and created by many members of the Hunt family.

Behind the big house is the Copper Maker Gallery, owned and operated by

MODERN FORT RUPERT Our first discovery in modern Fort Rupert was the sparkling, well-stocked Fort Rupert General Store. It was a cold December day, and a creamy hot chocolate from their latte machine was a welcome surprise.

The village of Fort Rupert itself is tidy and nondescript, discounting its sweeping view across Beaver Harbour. But what really impressed us were the carvings; they were everywhere, and they were amazing.

The first standout was a 7.6-metre

memorial pole just beyond the store. It was carved for Alfred Hunt in memory of his four deceased sons. This pole is one of several works here by world-class artisan Calvin Hunt, with assistance from his nephew and longtime apprentice, Mervyn Child.

Calvin is a descendent of Robert Hunt and hails from a family of talented artists. He is a grandson of the acclaimed Mungo Martin, the first chief carver at Thunderbird Park at the Royal BC Museum

Calvin and Marie Hunt. It carries a wide variety of spectacular Kwakiulth art. A workshop adjoins the gallery, where you can watch Calvin Hunt and his apprentices at work.

Next door stands the 18-metre Hunt Pole, a joint effort of the Hunt family, which, in 1988, was the first pole raised in the village in 70 years.

BEAVER HARBOUR PARK Beaver Harbour and Fort Rupert are in the Port Hardy District Municipality, which funds many waterfront parks. Their crown jewel is Beaver Harbour Park, which has covered picnic areas, barbeque pits, a children's playground and three ball fields.

The park's most popular feature is Storey's Beach, which lines much of the harbour. The expansive sandy beach slopes gradually into the water with views to Queen Charlotte Strait and the Coast Mountains beyond. Kayakers often



use the boat ramp at Beaver Harbour Park to explore the wonderful islets of Beaver Harbour.

Storey's Beach is also the starting point for the Tex Lyon Trail. This trail winds 12

km along the Beaver Harbour shoreline to Dillon Point and follows the old foot-path between Fort Rupert and Port Hardy. The trail is named for Tex Lyon, an ardent naturalist and a grandson of

IF YOU GO

We visited Fort Rupert in December. With the prevailing winds from the southeast, we anchored just northeast of the village of Fort Rupert, about where the seven-metre sounding is on Chart 3548. The holding was excellent in sand.

Other possible anchorages are between Cormorant Rock and the Cattle Islands; in the 4.6-metre bight on the south side of Peel Island; in Patrician Cove; or in locally-named Basket Eater's Cove (the tiny cove west of Herald Rock). These have good shelter from west winds, while the first and last have reasonable southerly protection too.

Beaver Harbour Park is directly east of the four radio towers on Chart 3548. Be aware of the tide when going ashore at either Beaver Harbour or Suquash. It ebbs and flows a long way.

We landed at Fort Rupert off Wa'wis Creek, which has a relatively narrow intertidal zone. It is shown, but unnamed, on Chart 3548, and borders the east side of the smaller charted Fort Rupert reserve. An empty lot here gave access to the main road.

The chimney is slightly east of the creek on the north side of the road. Beyond the chimney, before the main road curves around to the south, a small dirt road leads to the right. About 50 metres along this road, a path branches to the right towards a meadow. This is the graveyard.



The village of Fort Rupert is west of Wa'wis Creek. The Coppermaker Gallery (calvinhunt.com) is open year round on weekdays and most Saturdays, with carvers usually in the workshop. You can call ahead at 250-949-8491 to confirm.

To visit the ruins at Suquash, anchor off Suquash Creek in about seven metres, with excellent holding in sand. This is an exposed, temporary anchorage only. The trailhead is about 100 metres south of

Be aware of the tide when going ashore at either Beaver Harbour or Suquash.

the creek, just north of the bluffs, and is marked with a blaze. It's a wide and well-travelled opening. Follow the trail for about 30 metres and you should see blazes on the left where the terrain steepens slightly. Head up to the south and look for blazes or big pieces of equipment. If you bring children, keep them close by, as there are several open pits here.



A four-metre high shovel (left) and a massive metal cable wheel (below), remnants of an early 1900s coal mining operation at Suquash.

walk from our landing. From this elevation, we could see clear across the harbour back to Storey's Beach, and across to Fort Rupert and the Coast Mountains beyond.

SUQUASH By boat, Suquash is eight miles southeast of Fort Rupert, opposite the western tip of Malcolm Island. We visited here the previous summer and anchored off Suquash Creek. The Suquash coalfield is the reason that nearby Fort Rupert—which offered the closest shelter—was established in 1849. Mining was halted in 1852 when a superior coal source was found near Nanaimo, but HBC continued to operate Fort Rupert due to their investment in the outpost. In the early 1900s, a private company deemed the Suquash coalfield worth mining again. This time, it was a major operation that anchored an on-site settlement large enough to support a school, post office and regular steamship service. It closed before the Second World War, but much of the equipment

Robert Hunt. His mother and father, Sarah Hunt and Alec Lyon, founded Port Hardy by starting a trading post there.

We landed the dinghy at the north end of Storey's Beach and picked up the trail from the rocky shore. The trail was clearly blazed and well maintained. Frequent spurs led to tiny coves packed with

intertidal life. For the most part, the trail was easy walking, although muddy. Sturdy wooden footbridges spanned several creek outflows. Where the going was steep, thick ropes had been installed for handholds.

Our goal was the bluffs just north of Patrician Cove, which was a 30-minute



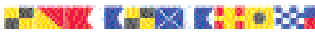
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View from the Tex Lyon Trail that follows the old foot path between Fort Rupert and Port Hardy.

was abandoned in place.

It is an easy walk from the beach at Suquash to see the ruins, and they are extraordinary. First we found huge shovels, perhaps four metres high. Farther along was a metal wheel with one-metre spokes.

To the south, and closer to shore, were the ruins of the foreman's house. Two intact river-rock chimneys soar skyward, blending into the second-growth forest. Inshore and south was a narrow concrete and stone structure, about seven metres high, with an archway through the centre. Beyond was the mine shaft itself, where a massive steam engine rests on a concrete bed.

ONE LAST SURPRISE When we returned to Wa'wis Creek after touring the carvings at Fort Rupert, a man was digging in the adjacent open lot. He was local resident Sundance (Andy Wilson), and among the friendliest people we'd ever met.

"Welcome to Fort Rupert," he said with a big smile. He gave us a further glimpse into Fort Rupert's past. When the tide is out, he told us, petroglyphs can be seen on the beach rocks north of the old chimney. And he showed us trading beads that he'd found previously—orange ones from China and blue ones from Spain.

Fort Rupert was full of unexpected treats and our chance encounter with Sundance capped our visit.

The authors wish to thank Annemarie Koch and Rick Davidge with the District of Port Hardy for directions to the fort ruins, and to Calvin and Marie Hunt for information on modern Fort Rupert and its carvings. 📍

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