



Rivers Inlet

Past,

WHILE NOT THE COAST'S BEST CRUISING
DESTINATION, IT OFFERS PLENTY OF
ADVENTURE FOR THOSE WHO VISIT

Present

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

and Future

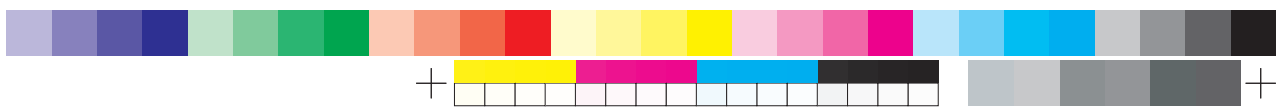
British Columbia's glacial-carved inlets wind deep into the magnificent Coast Mountains, where mile-high peaks dominate the view. Even bad weather here has an upside—after heavy rains, waterfalls ribbon the slopes.

While dramatic, these inlets are not typically boater-friendly. Their steep shorelines funnel and accelerate winds, and cruising to their heads can be a bit unnerving. The boat feels small, the waterway is wide and open, winds blow through, and few protected anchorages exist.

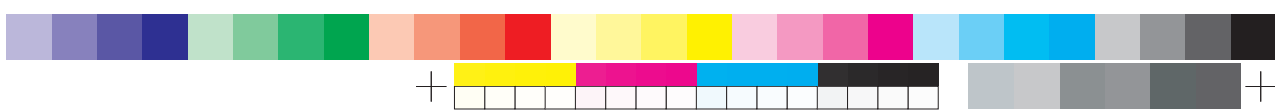
Jervis Inlet, with Princess Louisa Inlet at its head, is perhaps better known, but Rivers Inlet is equally striking, and has some unusual attractions. These include cannery ruins, an eagle-packed river, a thriving Native village and a 50-kilometre-long lake sandwiched between glacier-capped mountains.

RIVERS INLET PAST Rivers Inlet is north of Cape Caution, across the open waters of Queen Charlotte Sound. With two facilities offering fuel, moorage and provisions, the inlet is a popular stop for boats travelling the Inside Passage highway. Sport fishing resorts





The Kilbella River scenery is dramatic—steep slopes rise behind a forest that grows right up to the muddy bank.



are also scattered through the inlet. Much of the activity concentrates at the mouth, and a trip to the top can be a lonely experience.

This was not always the case. For the first half of the 20th century, the entire inlet was a busy place. At times, the population was large enough to support a hospital and a schoolhouse. Eighteen canneries operated there—the Rivers Inlet sockeye salmon runs averaged 1.5 million, among the highest in the province. By the mid-1900s, more than a thousand gillnet boats crowded the inlet during the annual salmon runs. Beginning in the 1930s, dozens of logging concerns operated, too, ranging in size from one-man shows to camps with many hundreds of people. Steamships, tugboats and other craft regularly travelled to, from and within the inlet.

Refrigeration made local canneries obsolete—the last Rivers Inlet cannery closed in the 1950s. The steamships stopped coming soon after. The salmon runs have fallen steadily during the past few decades, and the commercial sockeye fishery closed in 1996 due to near-extinction lows. Loggers and tugboats continue to work Rivers Inlet, but only a few large companies operate now.

The past century is but a blip on the timescale of the Wuikinuxv people. The Wuikinuxv (Anglicized and pronounced as Owikeno or Oweekeno, with the first syllable soft) have inhabited Rivers Inlet for 10,000 years and still occupy a village at the head.

TOWARDS THE HEAD Near the intersection with Moses Inlet, the water colour changes to glacial green and its temperature drops several degrees. The glacial water comes from Owikeno Lake, through the Wannock River at the head of Rivers Inlet.

The head has no all-weather anchorages—the closest is to the west at Sandell Bay. In settled weather, two possible anchorages are at McAllister Cove and Kilbella Bay. McAllister Cove is protected from all but east winds, and has panoramic views of the mountains



above Owikeno Lake. Unfortunately, the holding is poor. We instead consoled ourselves with lunch and a view.

KILBELLA BAY has excellent holding, although with less west wind protection than McAllister Cove. The mountain scenery is similarly impressive, and the bay is a good base for exploring several nearby attractions.

Cannery ruins are along the west shore. The cannery at Kilbella Bay, built in 1906, was one of the larger in the inlet. The old boiler is visible at low tide, and ashore are several decaying houses. Two newer cabins stand to the south, probably from a modern sport fishing endeavour.

KILBELLA RIVER The Kilbella River delta is filled with life. Long-time fishing restrictions must have improved the fish counts—the eagle population is easily triple that of anywhere else we've been. Every tree we passed seemed to hold three or four. Bears are common, too. We watched a large black bear lumber along an island in the flats, then swim across to the west shore.

The Kilbella River originates more than 50 kilometres away, deep within the coastal mountains, and is navigable a long way by dinghy. In two hours, with a few brief stops, we worked nearly 15 kilometres upriver. Nature surrounded us. Steep slopes rose behind a forest that grew right up to the muddy bank. Eagles constantly flew overhead.

The river valley also can be explored on foot. From the jetty at Kilbella Bay, Forest Service roads extend practically the length of both the Kilbella River and the adjacent Chuckwalla River.

DAVE BARNES ILLUSTRATION



RIVERS INLET PUBLIC DOCK A sturdy public dock is at the head of Rivers Inlet, north of the mouth of the Wannock River. The dock, however, is best suited for dinghies and small craft. The outer float is reserved for float planes, and the inner float has overhead protuberances that could damage a vessel. When the afternoon westerlies blast up Rivers Inlet, the dock bucks a metre or two in the seas. We tied our boat off in rough water

without noticing the danger, and made a hasty retreat seconds later when we realized the risk to our aft deck canopy.

Active logging is taking place around Owikeno Lake, and ashore are a permanent logging camp, a small sawmill, and much equipment and logging infrastructure both ancient and new. We can spend ages poking about places like that.

We were lucky, if you can call it that, to visit once after several days of monsoon-

The Wuikinuvx were building a splendid cedar big house when we visited. The self-funded project required a concerted group effort and signals both spiritual and economic renewal.

like weather. Right next to the public dock, a prodigious waterfall gushed and spilled down a cliff from high above.

OWIKENO LAKE extends 50 kilometres through 2,000-metre-high glacier-capped peaks. The scenery is rugged and beautiful. The lake can be reached on foot from the Rivers Inlet public dock or by dinghy on the Wannock River.

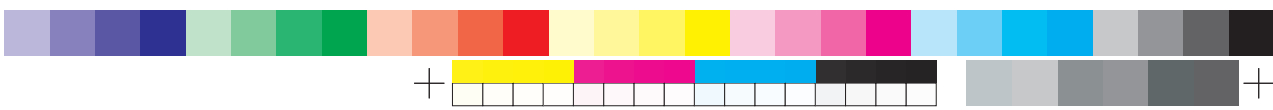
A logging road extends five kilometres from the public dock to Owikeno Lake's northwest edge. All logs from the region reach saltwater along that road. It is wide, well-travelled and easy walking. It's also the sanest way to enjoy the views.

The alternative is to take a dinghy along the six-kilometres Wannock River. The river is often a torrent and said to be one of the swiftest in the province. Locals told us that inflow and outflow winds can produce conditions dangerous for small craft at the river head. Tugs once pulled flat booms through the waterway, so calmer periods must occur.

Always up for a challenge, we set off for the lake by dinghy one morning. Although the river was running hard, the first part was relatively easy. The last third, where we had to run rapids, was the most difficult. Large boulders were everywhere, and the water was opaque with glacial silt. We



Enjoying lunch on deck in McAllister Cove.



Next to the Rivers Inlet public dock, a prodigious waterfall gushes and spills down a cliff from high above after several days of monsoon-like weather.

IF YOU GO

DAWSONS LANDING and **DUNCANBY LODGE AND MARINA** both offer fuel, water, moorage, showers, laundry and provisions for pleasure boaters.

Dawsons Landing is partway up Rivers Inlet on the north shore. It began in 1924 as a Department of Fisheries house and float. A store soon followed and a small community formed. With the only year-round store and post office, it became the commercial centre of the inlet. In that respect, not much has changed. The DFO still patrols Rivers Inlet from a base there. For a view of coastal life as it once was in Rivers Inlet, go to Dawsons Landing.

Duncanby Lodge and Marina is on the south shore, near the mouth of Rivers Inlet. The facility has transformed from an upgraded 1930s-era commercial fish camp to a modern marina with a wonderful restaurant. The facilities are excellent—we've been impressed on every stop.

KILBELLA BAY Anchor in 12 to 15 m off the drying flat near the west shore. Holding is excellent in thick, concrete-like mud. We anchored directly west of the 10-m contour line on Chart 3932, at 51° 41.79' N, 127° 21.27' W. The minimum depth over an 80-m swing radius was four to six metres. This is a river delta, so the bottom topography might change over time.

MCALLISTER COVE is our name for the tiny cove directly north of McAllister Point. Anchor in 12 metres poor holding in the middle of the cove. Swing room is restricted, so consider running a line ashore.

WUIKINUXV VILLAGE The best way to visit the village is on foot. About 1.5 km down the road from the Rivers Inlet public dock, take the small spur road to the right into the village. Before walking around, first go to the Band Office at the far end to ask permission to visit. This shows respect and is customary in less-public Native communities. We've been told that the completed big house has an unassuming exterior but a most impressive interior. Ask if a tour might be arranged.

Depending upon circumstances, visitors may not be allowed or their activities restricted—we were asked not to take pictures of people or their homes without their permission, but any other pictures were all right. As at many Native villages, a large number of dogs run loose. The dogs seem friendly, but this might not be a good place to bring yours. —JH

could not see an inch below the surface to know if we were about to hit something. But we did make it to the lake without incident.

A run on the river is certainly exciting, and also interesting. The river has much history: the ruins of dwellings, boats and past enterprise can be found along both banks. We also saw an unusual Ferris wheel-type structure that we're told is for counting fish. The scenery all the way is wonderful—rainforest crowds the shore and mountains rise all around.

WUIKINUXV VILLAGE, on the Wannock River, is the last remaining village of the Wuikinuxv Nation (formerly Oweekeno). Like many Native populations, the Wuikinuxv are slowly recovering from European-introduced diseases as well as economic and lifestyle changes that nearly destroyed them.

We weren't sure what to expect when we arrived. Their small village is not a tourist town, and visitors might be discouraged. We needn't have worried—the people were friendly, and a strong sense

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of community spirit is evident. A splendid cedar big house, under construction, was a highlight of our visit. The self-funded project required a concerted group effort and signals both spiritual and economic renewal.

We were fortunate to meet then-Chief Alex Chartrand, who took us through their big house site and told us much about Wuikinuxv history, a heritage that is intertwined with the Wannock River and its salmon. Most of Rivers Inlet's salmon come from rivers that flow into Owikeno Lake—during large salmon runs, the Wannock carried seemingly as much fish as water. The river clearly anchors the community: The main road through the village parallels the river, and new construction extends the village along its shores.

RIVERS INLET FUTURE Over the past century, the activity at Rivers Inlet has shifted from business to pleasure. A new sport-fishing venture seems to open every few years, and more pleasure boaters visit each season. Over time, the cannery ruins will gradually rot away and disappear. The Wuikinuxv population will probably continue to recover, and hopefully the sockeye runs will, too. Logging might yield somewhat to environmental pressures, but probably won't cease.

Constant through it all are the Coast Mountains at the head. Human progress is insignificant and temporary in comparison. Go there and feel small—the memories you bring back will stand large. 🌐



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