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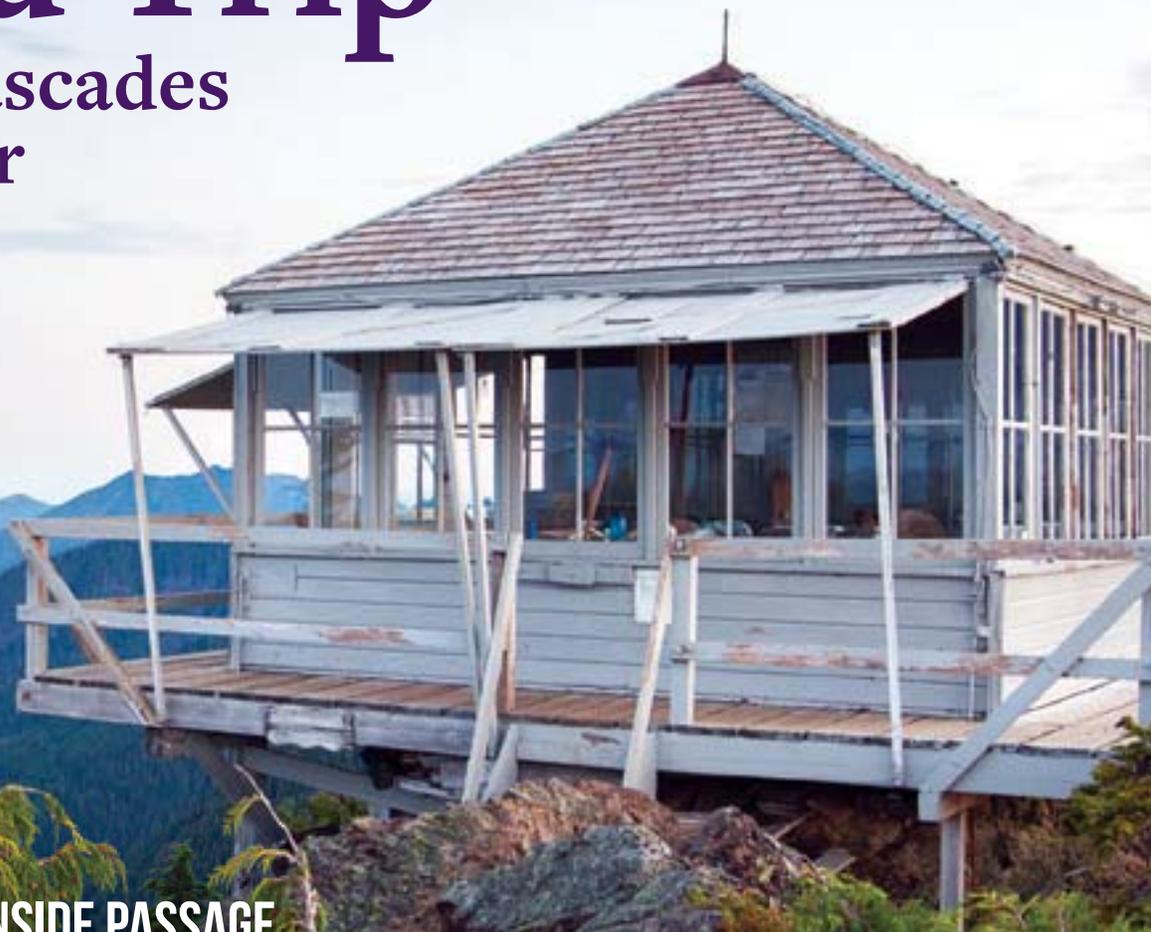
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National Park for spectacular views, **p.44**

Discover First Nations Culture in Alert Bay, B.C.

BY ANNIKA HIPPLE



For a getaway steeped in native culture

and natural beauty, Alert Bay makes a compelling off-the-beaten-path destination. Formerly a major regional fishing center, this community of approximately 1,500 residents is located on Cormorant Island, a crescent-shaped bump of land off northeastern Vancouver Island. About half the population belongs to the 'Namgis First Nation of the Kwakwaka'wakw people, whose heritage gives the village its special character.

The center of 'Namgis life in Alert Bay is the Big House, built like a traditional Kwakwaka'wakw residence and used primarily for potlatch ceremonies marking important events, such as marriage, death and the naming of children. Outlawed by the Canadian government from 1885 until 1951, potlatch is once more openly celebrated. During July and August, the T'salala Cultural Group performs potlatch ceremonies at the Big House Thursdays through Saturdays, with traditional masks and dances illustrating Kwakwaka'wakw legends.

Nearby stands a totem pole that many consider the world's tallest. Carved during the 1960s, its figures represent various Kwakwaka'wakw tribes. The title is not without contention—some say the pole doesn't qualify because it consists of separate sections rather than a single piece of wood—but either way the 173-foot height is impressive.

The U'mista Cultural Centre tells the story of a people whose culture and lifeways were suppressed and who later regained their traditions. The permanent collection consists of an array of masks, rattles, whistles and other ceremonial items that were seized by government agents at an illegal potlatch in 1921. The center was built specifically to house items recovered from various other collections over half a century later. Temporary exhibits highlight other aspects of 'Namgis culture and local history.

At the opposite end of the village lies the historical 'Namgis burial ground, with about two dozen commemorative totem poles, the oldest dating from the 1930s. Though entering the burial ground is prohibited, visitors can easily view the poles from the road.

The Inside Passage, renowned for its eco-tourism, shelters Alert Bay. Kayaking and whale-watching tours in the waters surrounding Cormorant Island provide one of the world's best opportunities to see orcas and other marine mammals. Above the village, at Alert Bay Ecological Park, a boardwalk leads through a marshland with fire-damaged trees where bald eagles, ravens, and migratory birds perch. In the adjacent cedar forest, look for "culturally modified" trees whose bark has been stripped to make baskets, rope, and other traditional crafts.

Alert Bay is a 45-minute ferry ride from Port McNeill, which is four hours north of Nanaimo on Highway 19. Visit alertbay.ca to plan your trip. 🗺️



*Namgis burial ground, Alert Bay, B.C.

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