



WAVES OF THE PEOPLE

RICH CULTURE AND BIG SURF COME
TOGETHER ON THE NORTH COAST
OF HAIDA GWAI

By Mike Berard

46



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

WHEN I ASK HAIDA FIRST NATION SURFER GWALIGA HART IF THE AREA WE ARE HEADED TO IS CALLED ROSE SPIT, HE REPLIES "NAIKOON," REFERRING TO ITS TRUE HAIDA NAME.

Believing he didn't understand my meaning—and in honest ignorance—I repeat myself: “but that's Rose Spit, right?” In his eyes, I see the flash of defiant pride as he carefully repeats himself, “It's *Naikoon*.” I get it. I have offended my host. Not a good start to a weeklong tour of the islands by Hart, son of Haida Master Carver and Hereditary Chief 7idansuu (Edenshaw) James Hart, and himself a talented carver and filmmaker based in Old Massett, British Columbia. I apologize, but it falls flat.

LANGUAGE MATTERS, everywhere, but especially in Haida Gwaii. Captain George Dixon named this massive archipelago the “Queen Charlotte Islands” in 1787, after Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, wife of King George III of the United Kingdom. American sailors used another name—Washington's Isles—in the interest of sovereignty. After all, until the 1846 Oregon Treaty, these lands and waters were still disputed. Depending on who you talk to, they remain disputed. Visitors have been screwing up relations with the Haida as long as they've been coming here. Shortly after Dixon did his damage, a pair of trading ships—the *Ino* and the *Resolution*—were taken hostage by the Haida, and then sunk. Most of the crew was killed. In 1851, the Haida captured the *Georgiana* and held its crew ransom for nearly two months. Apparently, I am only one of many white men to mess up my first encounter with the Haida. But I am a lucky. Soon after my social *faux pas*, Hart flashes an understanding, charismatic smile and says “Welcome to Haida Gwaii. Let's go surfing.”

I HAVE BEEN to Haida Gwaii before. On a weeklong adventure, a friend and I paddled SUPs up the Tlell River and rode the tide

downstream to the river mouth, surfed North Beach's frigid winter waves and climbed Taaw Hill to gaze out at Naikoon Provincial Park's long beaches and boggy expanse. We walked the easy path to the opposite river bank of the infamous Golden Spruce, cut down to a mere stump (a tale chronicled by John Valliant in his bestselling book, *The Golden Spruce: A Study of Myth, Madness and Greed*). Later in the week, we hiked to a shipwrecked log barge. Located a five-kilometre hike through the mossy, emerald rainforest and pebbled East Beach,

RIGHT: Gorgeous swells at Naikoon, on the northeast tip of Haida Gwaii. **BELOW:** Gwaliga Hart paddles into the surf, something his people have done here for thousands of years, in various fashions.





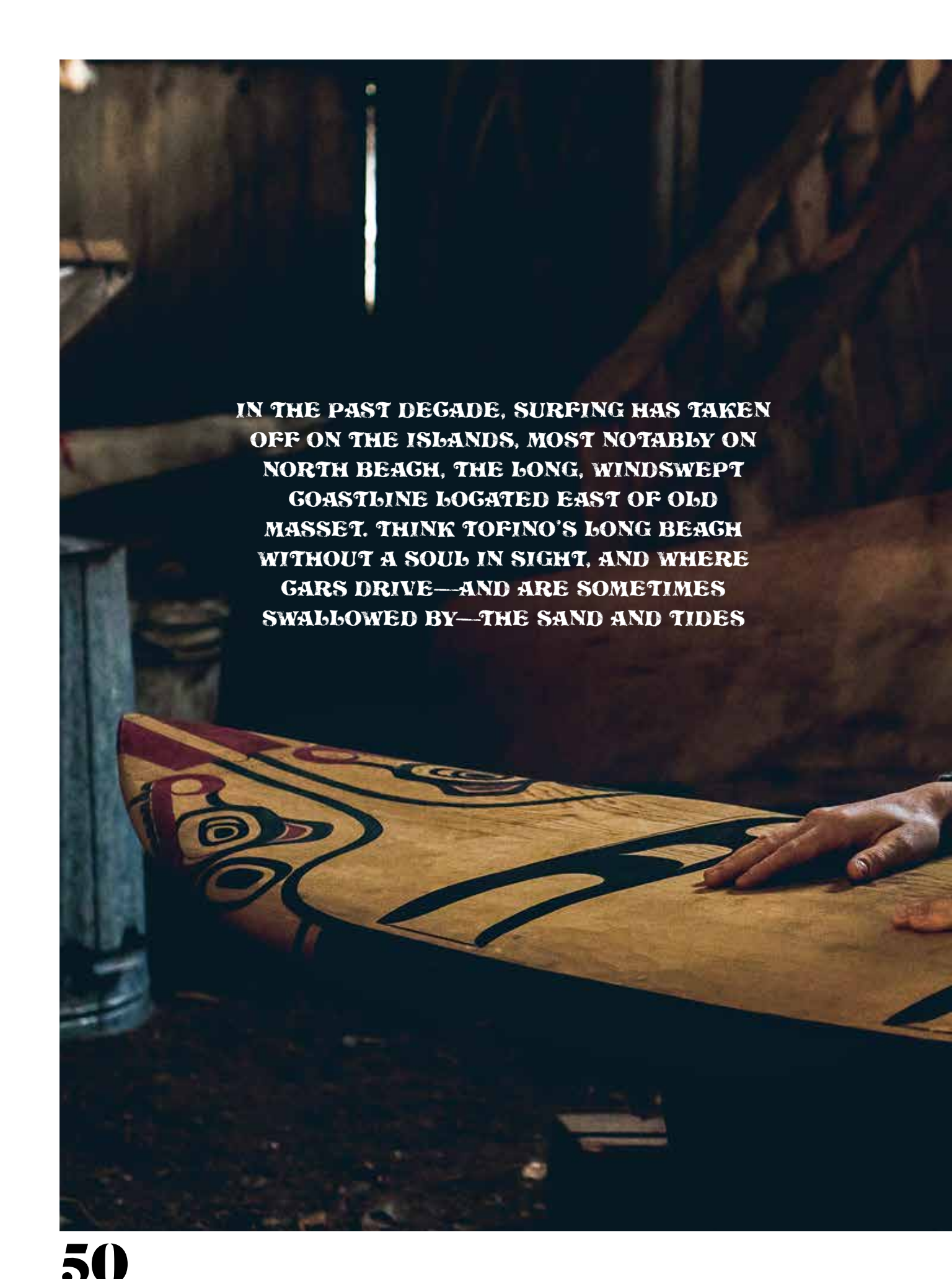
the *Pesuta* sits augured into the sand after being shipwrecked in 1928. On a sunny March day, we sat with our backs against the wreck and drank warm beers as we imagined surf breaks in the turbulent Hecate Strait. The week was a veritable greatest hits package of the quick-and-dirty tourist visit, but it left me wanting so much more. Haida Gwaii is massive, but it's remote and rugged. Getting around is difficult, especially without a 4x4. Despite reserving a capable truck from the rental agency, we ended up with a 15-passenger van with bald tires. Like so many before, we became stuck in the sand and walked five kilometres until we found some friendly locals who could pull us out. This time, I intended to be a better visitor.

Thankfully, I had the right guide. Hart is a tall, slender man, and it's hard to understand how he stays in the frigid water for so long, even with a wetsuit. Then again,

the surf at Naikoon is firing. It's a classic Haida Gwaii swell; an unpredictable beach break with moments of glorious brilliance. While Tofino-based photographer Marcus Paladino swims furiously to keep up, the powerful Hart paddles hard back-and-forth seeking a good wave. The rest of us stay on the beach. The swell that rolls in from Alaska is shockingly cold, and the waves are too big for our crew. Hart manages them easily. He's been surfing here since he was a child, and his people for much, much longer.

The Haida have been riding the energy of the ocean in their hollowed-out cedar canoes, paddling into a near-constant surf and bringing the vessels up to plane atop the cold saltwater for as long as they've been here. In the past decade, surfing has taken off on the islands, most notably on North Beach, the long, windswept coastline located east of Old Masset. Think Tofino's Long

Beach without a soul in sight, and where cars drive—and are sometimes swallowed by—the sand and tides. But it's not the only spot. With wherewithal, time and patience, die-hard surfers have found breaks in every corner of this place. There are fewer than 5,000 people here and Mike McQuade from North Beach Surf Shop is one of the few surfers who are local. McQuade has been surfing Haida Gwaii since 2003, and is an accomplished surfer and waterman. At one time a nationally ranked swimmer, he is the man to talk to about all things surf and SUP, and the only source for rental boards. When a surfer gets to Haida Gwaii, they head straight to McQuade. Photos on the wall of his backyard surf shop are evidence of how good the surfing can be. The trick, he says—as with any remote surfing location—is hitting it at the right time. Having a guy like Gwaliga Hart to show you around doesn't hurt either.

A close-up photograph of a hand resting on a surfboard. The surfboard is light-colored wood with intricate black and red indigenous-style artwork, including stylized faces and swirling patterns. The background is dark and out of focus, showing wooden structures. The text is centered in the upper half of the image.

**IN THE PAST DECADE, SURFING HAS TAKEN
OFF ON THE ISLANDS, MOST NOTABLY ON
NORTH BEACH, THE LONG, WINDSWEPT
COASTLINE LOCATED EAST OF OLD
MASSET. THINK TOFINO'S LONG BEACH
WITHOUT A SOUL IN SIGHT, AND WHERE
CARS DRIVE—AND ARE SOMETIMES
SWALLOWED BY—THE SAND AND TIDES**



Gwaliga Hart worked with Haida language programs to develop a traditional word for “surfboard”—“tluuwa tl’apjuu,” meaning “flat canoe.”

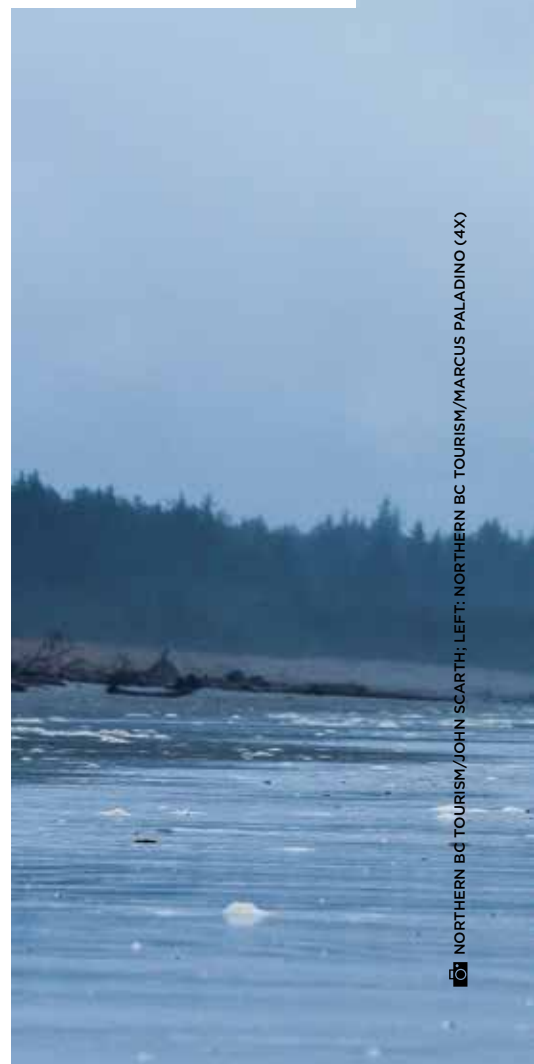
FROM THE TOP of Taaw Hill, you can see Alaska. Every Haida Gwaii local you meet will tell you this. Like the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower, you will be directed to Taaw Hill upon arrival. And yes, you can see Alaska from the top... sometimes. The storms that steamroll off the Pacific Ocean are the reasons many travellers make the pilgrimage to this mythical group of islands and see very little beyond the lush, green forest it's cloaked in. At the base of Taaw Hill, the Hiellen Longhouse Village sits tucked into a mystical emerald forest. The giant hemlocks and fir trees tower over the cedar longhouses, dripping with thick moss. There is no wi-fi, or even electrical plug-ins, in the cabins. Heated by woodstove, the accommodation is a rugged but rewarding way to spend a winter week on the north coast. During our stay, a strong storm blows in from Alaska, bending massive trees with ease. The next morning, the sun is shining and small waves peel in the river mouth less than 100 metres from our door. We hike the short-but-steep trail up Taaw hoping to see some surf. It's flat. At the small summit we peer out at the horizon looking for a hint of Alaska's shores. We can't see it but it doesn't bother us. We've come for Haida Gwaii, not Alaska. When I return to my cabin, I pass a friendly crew of surfers. They live on the island, and rent these cabins regularly in winter. This weekend, they've come up short, but you wouldn't know it. They're happy sipping coffee in the parking lot and playing with a dog. Most Haida Gwaii locals are like this. It's a friendly place, refreshingly removed from any pressure to move quickly. And when the weather doesn't turn out—which is often—you adjust and find a new adventure, or you just drink coffee.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Christian White, Gwaliga Hart's uncle, and his carving shed with meticulous works in progress. The empty shores of Naikoon—west coast paradise. An unfinished dugout canoe returns to the soil. White's carving shed, tucked away in the rainforest. A colourful Haida mask.



A few hours later, I'm doing both, heading south in a truck with Hart. We pass a logging museum, a Hutterite community and the trailhead for the Golden Spruce. There are few paved roads here, and if you're looking for adventure, eventually your tires will hit gravel. We pass logging trucks stacked with future lumber, as Hart tells me colourful stories of a Haida Gwaii upbringing: surfing, exploring, fishing, artwork and a strong culture of community. Later, at his uncle's carving shed, I will see a butchered hindquarter from a deer sitting open-air on the surfboard bag in the bed of his truck. He will show us the hollow cedar surfboard he carved himself. His uncle, Christian White, will tell us stories of the Haida hosting Emily Carr while she travelled and painted. For now though, we continue up a decommissioned logging road choked with alders that scrape the side of his Toyota. We reach a trailhead marked with a gigantic cedar. Hart leads us down a short trail to an unfinished dugout



canoe sitting in the rainforest. Far from a river, it now sits rotting in moss.

Haida history tells of a wave of illness that moved faster than men could, wiping out the carvers before the colonizers ever arrived on land. Tools, canoes, entire villages left behind, while the Haida tried to outrun the smallpox that would spell the end of many in their communities. And a few centuries later, this vessel meant to surf sits bereft of its purpose. It's more solemn than expected, to see this grand craft going back to Earth, left behind before it ever achieved its purpose, a reminder of all that has been lost.

IN 2009, the Canadian government finally acknowledged that it was ridiculous for an inconsequential British queen to somehow

have her name attached to this stunning place, and officially allowed the Haida to call it what they always have: *Islands of the People*. This is Haida Gwaii. A beautiful, towering archipelago of islands interconnected by difficult waterways. Before any white man landed on these shores, the Haida had settled every corner of this place. Untouched by the last ice age, Haida culture and DNA remained. Words have meaning beyond the things they describe. In language lives culture. As an active Haida language learner, Hart has worked alongside two Haida language programs to help create a new word for "surfboard" in the ancient language. Not new to wave riding in their ocean-going canoes, the Haida fittingly chose "tluuwa tl'apjuu" or "flat canoe" as the new name for surfboard.

The Xaad Kihlgaa Hl Suu.u Society on the northern end of Haida Gwaii and the Skidegate Haida Immersion Program in the southern end are umbrella programs created to preserve and revitalize the Haida Language. This resurgence is more than words. It is action building and expanding on a rich history.

What is in a name? Arguably everything. The identity of this land and the waters that surround it are intrinsically linked to the people who call it their own. A name sails on the wind, tucking into the curl of wave with the pride of all who carry it. Here on the Islands of the People, the place's true name is in the air again, pointing it down the line with renewed confidence and fierce pride, moving free with grace. ✕

THE IDENTITY OF THIS LAND AND
THE WATERS THAT SURROUND IT
ARE INTRINSICALLY LINKED TO THE
PEOPLE WHO CALL IT THEIR OWN. A
NAME SAILS ON THE WIND, TUCKING
INTO THE CURL OF WAVE WITH THE
PRIDE OF ALL WHO CARRY IT

