



## Detour to Haida Gwaii

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**O**n a Sunday morning in mid-July, after eight days of pedaling through rain on the island of Haida Gwaii, the wettest place in Canada, I had had enough. I lay on my back inside my tent and watched the water cascade down either side of the rainfly. I felt a pool of water swelling up under the footprint. I was certain it was only a matter of seconds before I would be carried out to sea. As the downpour picked up, I asked myself what the hell I was doing. In that moment, I had no answer.

I had decided to make a detour to Haida Gwaii on my way from Seattle, Washington, to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, Canada. Haida Gwaii lies 93 nautical miles from Prince Rupert, off the northern coast of British Columbia. It takes eight hours to get there in good weather on the BC ferry system. It had rained nearly every day since I left Seattle three weeks earlier, but the sheer volume of rain on Haida Gwaii was more than I could bear.

Part of the reason for this trip, apart from experiencing the beauty of northern Canada, was to regroup after a breakup that felt like being hurled against a wall and left comatose in a heap of grief and despair. In a single phone call, I was thrown into darkness. I imagined that a three-month trip into the long days of the far north would give me the light I needed to clear my head, process the pain, and revive my crushed soul.

I needed solitude but craved connection. An important part of any trip for me is meeting new people, getting new perspectives, and sharing new experiences. I need long stretches in nature to help uncover buried fears and expose outdated stories, but I also need people now and then to give me a sense of belonging. Wet, dark, dreary days were not conducive to chance meetings. The loneliness was undermining my newly found sense of balance and harmony.

As I lay in my tent at Hidden Island RV Park and Campground, all I could think was that I wanted to scrap the



whole trip and go home. My usual resilience in the face of hardship and discomfort was gone. I just wanted out. My first step was to get from the tent to the shelter of the restroom. Maybe just being dry and warm would shift my mindset.

As I ran to the bathroom, I was surprised to see a man in his 40s at a table in a covered area nearby. Next to him was a backpack and a pair of hiking boots. When I came out of the restroom, he was still there, staring off into space.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked.

“This sucks,” he said. His monotone voice barely acknowledged my presence.

“You got that right,” I said.

Looking closer, I saw that his tent and sleeping bag were in a big, wet heap on the table.

“Is that your tent?” I asked.

“It was,” he said. “I just called the Boy Scouts on the island. They’re coming to pick up all my gear, including the backpack and hiking boots. I just want to get the F out of here!”

“How are you getting home?” I asked, shocked that he was carrying out the same plan I was contemplating.

“I booked a flight back to Vancouver from Masset airstrip across the street. It leaves at 10:00 AM. From there I’m flying back to Northern California.”

He made it look so easy. After he left, I called my hardcore outdoorsy friend, Linda, to tell her that I was done with the trip.

“You’re done? Are you kidding me?” she said. “Why don’t you just find a dry place to stay for a couple days? Regroup and then decide. Don’t make a rash decision based on a few crappy days of rain.”

She was right. I would probably regret just hanging it up. I decided to give it three days. If things didn’t drastically improve by then, I would call it quits.

I wanted to ride to Towhill Viewpoint at the end of the island, but I was hesitant due to the rain and muddy road. I sat at the sheltered table until there was a break in the rain. Then I rode to the bike shop at the airstrip to put air in my tires before deciding what to do.

As I was filling my tires at the pump outside the shop, the owner, Tom, asked me where I was headed. He told me he was going to Towhill in a couple of hours and would be happy to give me a lift back if I wanted one.

That was all I needed to motivate me to go for it. After riding to Towhill, I found Tom right where he said he’d be. We threw my muddy bike in the bed and drove back. I had a delightful ride with him and his three-year-old daughter, Hazel. He dropped me off at the campsite, gave me a big hug, and wished me well on my journey. That simple act of kindness nudged my spirit gauge forward a notch.

I gathered my things and rode 26 miles back down the island to the small hamlet of Port Clements. I checked into a small hostel with two dorm rooms above the Bayview Market. I was in one and a family was in the other. I took a warm shower and sat in the common area to read my book and

drink tea. As I sat there, lost in my novel, the young girl from next door walked up and offered me a freshly baked cupcake she had just frosted. My spirit meter sprang forward again.

The next day, I wanted to get back to the main town of Queen Charlotte to see if the ferries were running on schedule and find a dry place to stay. I rode the 42 miles nearly dry. About five miles from town, a gigantic cloud burst

open and unleashed its fury upon me. I rode to the gazebo outside the tourist office, which didn’t open for another hour. Inside the gazebo, in bright yellow rain attire, was a man from Cuba and a young French boy. Each had sailed down from Alaska with their families.

Mario, the Cuban, asked where I came from and where I was going. His eyes sparkled when I told him. He excused himself. Ten minutes later, he returned with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and two dark chocolate bars in the other.

“I want to celebrate with you,” he said, beaming.

“Bravo, for being persistent and making it this far.” My spirit barometer bounced up to half mast.

When the tourist information office finally opened, I went in to scour the local listings for accommodations. One hotel had space, but the price was exorbitant. When the rain calmed down a bit, I rode around to see if I could find anything else.

As I was getting on my bike, I recognized Jean, a woman I had chatted with on the ferry to Haida Gwaii. I waved as she was walking into the store. She stopped to ask how I was doing.

“Not great,” I confessed. “Finding shelter around here is proving more difficult than I anticipated.”

“I have a studio out in the backyard,” she said. “Why don’t you stay there?”

I found out that the ferry back to Prince Rupert wasn’t leaving the island until the following evening. Jean invited me to stay as long as I needed. We had coffee together in the morning and talked about the history of the island and how she and her family had landed there. I cooked a hearty meal and washed and dried my wet, dirty clothes. By now the needle on my spirit gauge had swung straight over to the far right where it landed with a resounding *yes!*

It was still cold and wet on the island, but the warmth and camaraderie of the folks I bumped into turned my feelings of loneliness and isolation into a warm blanket of community and inclusion. The support I felt over those three days gave me the faith I needed to continue the ride. Linda was right: giving difficult situations a little breathing room is often the best way to let go and embrace the suck long enough to let the unexpected surprises of the journey find you and lead you back to the reason you are there in the first place: joy, discovery, and connection. **AG**

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