

# TOURISM

# Haida Style

One entrepreneur's guide to exploring an island Nation

by Sasha Milam

**H**aida Gwaii, BC—travel to this remote archipelago at the edge of the Pacific and you might find, cutting through the waters just off the rocky coastline, a waterproof-clad James Cowpar at the helm of a Titan 240XI Zodiac as he introduces visitors to his island home.

Cowpar, a 2015 graduate of the Haida Owned and Operated chapter of Northwest Aboriginal Canadian



Entrepreneurs (NW-ACE) and a member of the Tsaahl Eagle Clan, is co-owner of the cultural adventures and fishing expeditions company Haida Style Expeditions, which he founded with his twin brother Shawn in 2013.

Haida Gwaii is renowned among travellers for its old-growth forests, rugged beaches and UNESCO World Heritage site. What Cowpar's Haida Style Expeditions provides is an opportunity to learn about these natural wonders as integrated elements of the living Haida culture. Although

excursions have long been offered on the islands, they were led by off-island tour operators. Haida Style Expeditions and other local tourism-focused businesses have moved to fill this niche for a more authentic island experience.

"Haida Style Expeditions is the first local company to offer cultural adventure tours," says Cowpar. "But our goal in sharing our story is always to help other local businesses enter the market. It's a competitive industry, so that may seem surprising, but we know that without our local partners and community we would not succeed. Learning and reciprocity is at the heart of what we do."

One way this reciprocity shines through is in Cowpar's ongoing interaction with the Haida Owned and Operated NW-ACE chapter, an initiative of Tribal Resources Investment Corporation (TRICORP), Haida government and Gustavson.

"In continuing to work with the Haida Owned and Operated program and its graduates, Haida Style Expeditions has become an active participant helping to support a network that caters to the interests of local businesses," he says. "Through teaching entrepreneurship, Haida Owned and Operated has aided the island's ongoing transition away from a primarily resource-based economy. By diversifying the local economy, Haida Gwaii now has the ability to compete



**"Haida Style Expeditions doesn't take the museum approach when we're leading our tours—we're not reading from a book while we walk through a village site. Authenticity is important in telling the story. We have to tell the story as it's living today and relate it to our past."**



globally and take advantage of the many sustainable opportunities around tourism and education-based industries."

Haida Style Expeditions is one of a number of burgeoning local businesses that have expanded the tourism industry on Haida Gwaii. Several of these local start-ups are owned by graduates of the Haida Owned and Operated NW-ACE program.

"Haida Owned and Operated graduates and their business concepts focus on the long-term opportunities available to them. The program is providing an opportunity to learn at home and build a business where the results are immeasurable." ■

**"One of our favourite sites to visit is Windy Bay. In addition to the historical discussion about the logging protests that took place here, what we want guests to understand is the meaning behind the legacy pole at this site. We talk about raising totems to tell a story and commemorate relationships. We don't just raise a totem pole for the visual benefit. That's an important part of the conversation to have at this site, and we get a lot of feedback from people who feel touched to be able to walk through the site and learn about the 900-year-old spruce, the logging, the protests, and the meaning of the legacy pole and longhouse."**

