

The Fourth Voyage of Lumina - June 26

Gold Fever and the quest for Oval Beach

Post 5

Banks Island is almost 100 miles long and lies as one of the most western outposts of the inner Islands with only Haida Gwaii, or the Queen Charlotte islands in old money, further west. With the Hecate strait between the two being some 50 miles across, the west of Banks Island feels much like the ocean with big swells and impressive breakers on the skerries. There was, however a destination on my exploring agenda to get to. As with many places, you have not got to go very far off the beaten track to find solitude and it no different here. Essentially there are two main routes North and South through the islands and channels and even the big ships don't tend to go outside.



On the way to Banks Island we had taken a more “interesting” or “challenging” narrow channel pretty much through the middle of an island to a lagoon on its west side called intriguingly, [Ethelda Bay](#). Here there was apparently another abandoned settlement that used to service a radio station. We anchored for the night and the next morning went ashore where there was a broken down dock with an old boat moored to it. The inhabitant was a gent successfully trying to get away from the world of today and he had certainly managed to achieve that pretty successfully. He

didn't seem to mind having the occasional visitor and was quite happy to tell us of the history.

The radio station was it seems a listening post dating from the cold war but had been decommissioned 30 or so years ago. Eventually the place was sold to some investors who intended to turn it into a fishing lodge. They installed a couple to act as caretakers and no doubt supervise the works. You could see that considerable work had been done in one of the accommodation houses with new plumbing etc and a big stack of plasterboard and plywood, together with new mattresses and toilets still wrapped in polythene. Then disaster struck as the investors must have got cold feet as work stopped as maybe they saw what was happening with other fishing lodges.



The pantry still stocked with preserves and tins

It didn't stop there either, as the lady got diagnosed with cancer and her partner had a heart attack and died later in hospital in Prince Rupert. One way or another they left in a hurry and never returned.

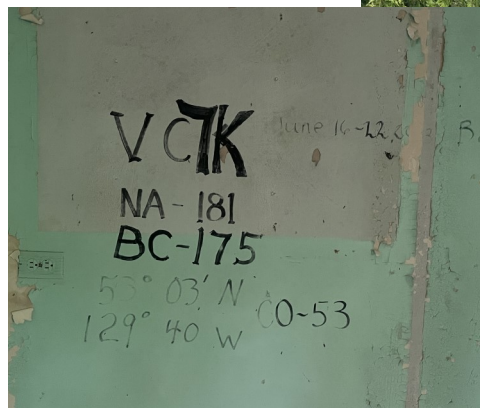
Their house was rather sobering as whilst it had obviously been gone through by people looking for anything they could use, there were so many every day items that placed the era that it was abandoned. A PC with a floppy drive and piles of VHS tapes together with books and magazines. The saddest part was the pantry, full of preserves, tins and dry goods, the stock of someone who expected to be there for a long time and yet unfortunately it was cut short.



Old graffiti in the radio hut showing its call sign and coordinates



Sometimes the boardwalk was in good shape but in other places a bit of a liability!



Leaving the buildings we started up the boardwalk to the radio station. This was an amazing construction of large timbers capable of holding a vehicle but today in its final stages of dereliction. Where it went through thick woodland with the alder branches reaching right across shading the timber, it was in a poor state, sometimes completely collapsed making progress difficult as you never quite

knew if the piece of timber you were about to tread on was going to be the next one to break. In other places however when out in the open it was in better shape. About half way to the radio shed was an off shoot going up to the helipad. This started off fine but the last bit was completely unpassable so we had to divert into the thick undergrowth to eventually come out at a rather well built concrete pad on the top



They had a good taste in generators but it's a long way from Gloucestershire

of the low hill. At least the view was worth the effort as it is rare in these parts to actually come out into the open and see a view of the area around. Back down at the main boardwalk we continued along to the radio hut which whilst on a high point was completely enveloped in forest and you couldn't even see the sea. We were now about a mile away from the settlement and you could just marvel at the sheer amount of timber that had been invested in building this trail.

Back down at the old dock we apologised to the unofficial caretaker for disturbing his peace and he ended up telling us of an abandoned



Somewhere behind that jetty there should be a gold mine

gold mine further up the coast in a quiet inlet where he had been the previous year. Without any hesitation, back at the boat we worked out where it was on the chart and with the aid of Starlink and Google found out what we could about the Yellow Giant gold mine.

It was about a days passage up the outside of Banks Island to the [unnamed inlet](#) south of Survey inlet. Here we anchored for the night in sight of the rubble slipway that they would have had barges come up to and a small pontoon. This abandonment was on a different scale to what we

were used to, both in size and time, being less than 10 years ago that it was working. I guess gold fever to a gold miner must be as strong today as it ever was in the days of the Klondikers where a man could make his fortune, but probably wouldn't! Like the majority of gold mining stories this falls into the latter category—for now at least.

After what must have been some years of preparatory work building roads and infrastructure the mine only operated for a short time in 2015 before being shut down due to exceeding environmental conditions for the discharge of waste. The company CEO was fined \$30,000 and the company filed for bankruptcy in 2016. Having had several startups myself I know the most vulnerable time for a company is when you just start production, at that point you have most likely exceeded the costs of getting it up and running so are pushing the envelope



Rather unexciting accomodation



Ten years ago this was a road

with the bank and then any returns from production always take longer than you expect to come through. In this case despite the environmental issues it sounds like they were having to process more rock to get the gold, which was already making its viability doubtful.

So with the company bankrupt it looks like everything mobile would have been loaded onto a barge and taken away and everything else was left behind. We went ashore in the morning to explore and see what we could find. Landing at the pontoon it was obvious nothing had been happening for a

good while, there was a generator from a hire company which had obviously missed a place on the barge looking a bit lonely. I can imagine the hire company writing it off as too expensive to recover!

A hundred yards up the road with the undergrowth already almost meeting in the middle, we came to



Thousands of boxes of core samples

the accommodation camp. Here there were four dormitory blocks with rooms for about 60 people with toilets and showers. There were no mess facilities so maybe they were of a value worth removing by the liquidator or were on hire. The rooms looked quite comfortable but with the buildings arranged in close rows, the inside rooms had windows facing a wall so had hardly any natural light, but I guess you only go there to work and sleep anyway!

The main processing site was a mile or so further up the road with several mining sites further away. The road varied from being completely clear in a few places to quite dense foliage that you had to push through. Unfortunately it had rained heavily during the night and the alder foliage was a bit on the drippy side giving us a good wetting. Along the way we saw plenty of deposits left by some unidentified animal, it didn't look like bear and was obviously a predator animal, maybe a wolf?



Eventually, a little damp we arrived at the processing site, with the final hundred yards lined with maybe thousands of boxes of core samples from exploratory drill holes. Each box had its own number and know doubt somewhere you could find the record of the hole it came out of and the depth. Also somewhere in these racks must be some with significant gold, or maybe there would be a special place

where they were stored? The site ran to several acres and was filled with crushers, conveyors and unknown plant that processes the crushed rock to concentrate the gold. There was also some buildings that were obviously maintenance workshops and an office and laboratory. This was surprisingly intact with even the key still sitting in the lock on the outside of the door. There was a good stock of chemicals and sample bottles waiting for the geologist to return to if the mine ever started up again.

So from what I could work out: the crushed rock went into a big rotating cylinder with metal balls of varying diameter from about 4 inches down to 1 inch. This must have further pulverised the rock into a slurry that then went into various round tanks with paddles to stir it up. Then the good stuff went into a filter press and the dried material fell down into dumpy bags to be taken off site for the last stage of processing. They obviously had high hopes as



there was a really good stock of dumpy bags! This interpretation is subject to moderation by our resident geologist who we will be meeting up with in about three weeks at a real gold mine in the interior....



Office and Laboratory with the key still in the door

As we were coming out of the anchorage the following morning I spotted an interesting animal swimming across in front of us. It turned out to be a wolf, one of the areas sea wolves—a sub species which inhabits the islands and maybe the same animal that had been leaving its evidence on the trail to the mine. It reached the shore just in front of us, climbed up the rocks, shook itself and disappeared into the undergrowth. I am not sure what it is this year but we have seen many creatures swim across in front of us. Do they jump in when they see us coming, is it coincidence or is it just that there is constant traffic across the inlets? I don't remember seeing anything last year but this year we have had deer, mink, bear and wolf off the bow.



A new quest opened up a couple of days later as reading the pilot guide there is a great long curving beach on the west side of Porcher island called Oval Bay. Inside the island is a long inlet that almost reaches Oval bay and there



was the promise of a trail joining the two. On the way we had a coffee stop at a native community that boasted the “Loaf of Bread and Coffee Shop”. There was a barge being loaded and the tug was pushing it hard against the ramp causing a good backwash behind it this making the main entrance to the harbour unusable so we had to detour round a small island and feel our way through the shallows to the dock. Successfully tied up we wandered up to where the loading was going on.

There was a digger, various trailers, a living van and other construction equipment being taken on board. We got talking to the couple and they were a family enterprise of groundworkers, the husband and son having been on site for the last couple of months building the foundations for a traditional longhouse that was going to be constructed. I did comment on lovely “traditional” concrete pad that they had constructed complete with service ducts, water and drainage pipes everywhere, “yes that’s about a million bucks so far”



We never did get a loaf of bread there, but the chilli and chips from the same shop was very good at filling an empty corner for lunch. Later on we arrived at the head of the inlet for our expedition over to the beach on the seaward side. You could hear the distant breakers but try as we might, scanning the shore then walking it we couldn't find any fishing floats hanging in a tree, the usual way they mark the start of a trail in these parts. Undeterred behind the site of an old cabin we found a deer track going in the right direction and set off into the bush. It was obviously not used by humans but at least it was slightly easier than the other option. The going was definitely not easy but we knew that around the half way mark was a more open area. As the trees grew shorter it opened up into a boggy heathland that wasn't much easier. Jumping from greener patch to patch, trying to keep out of the black peat hags we spied a fishing float hanging up on a dead tree ahead. The usual sign of a trail, however

it was a false dawn as just seemed to be in the middle of nowhere with no obvious route towards the trees we had come from or the trees ahead which were the next obstacle before you would reach Oval beach. Having already spent an hour getting to where we were and with the same



ahead with no obvious route it seemed sensible to cut our losses and return. Diving back into the forest into the forest again we hoped for easier going but



Difficult going in the forest

instead ended up in an area of ancient windblow with massive trunks felled in all directions. This proved to be an even more impressive obstacle as their diameter made them difficult to climb over and the dense undergrowth made it difficult to get underneath. We often ended up walking along a trunk several feet off the forest floor but you couldn't see where the ground was. Sometimes they were fairly solid but other times were just waiting to become compost. All in all it took even longer to return to our side and eventually we made it out

of the forest onto the beach just a hundred yards or so from where we had started, rather more tired than when we had left.



The following day we retraced our route into the inlet out into the open sea, along the full length of Oval Bay to the other end where there was a great sheltered little cove with a well marked track over to the beach. We did wonder if the original information was for this place rather than where we had been. Oval Bay didn't disappoint at all, although as we got close to the shore there was a rather pervasive aroma that became clear as we got to the beach. A long

The real trail at the other end of the beach

dead sealion was gently decomposing well above the normal high tide mark. We walked one way and then back past the trail entrance towards a rocky bluff with a lot of eagles making a tremendous racket. You could not see what they were fighting over as it was hidden by the rocks but as we got closer you could see the last remnants of a seal. The eagles had picked it completely clean, all that was left was the spine a few ribs, the skull and the skin.

Then on the way back along the beach I spied a dead eagle. It was still fresh and appeared to have a broken neck so maybe it had got some aeronautical trick wrong perhaps? Holding the wings up you could see



There are fierce predators on this beach!



its wingspan, probably a good 8ft from tip to tip, certainly a majestic bird. So whilst the beachcombing was a bit thin on the ground other unexpected factors mean that our quest for Oval Bay will be remembered for a good while!

Best wishes from Tim and Carol

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