Summary: The islands were “discovered” in 1774 by the Spanish explorer Juan Perez, although the Russians may have been aware of the islands earlier and there has been talk of the Chinese coming on their 1424 expedition. Soon after, the fur trade for sea otter pelts brought a rush of European and American ships to the islands.

Facts:
• In 1774, Juan Perez named Cape Santa Margarita (where the lighthouse on Langara Island now stands). This was the first European place name to be given to a site in what would become British Columbia.
• The first explorers such as Juan Perez were not aware that the islands were separate from the rest of the coast. The French explorer Jean Francois de la Galaup, comte de La Perouse, was the first to identify them as islands in 1786.
• Captain George Dixon (English), sailed most of the way around the islands in 1787 and traded for 2000 sea otter furs which he then sold in Asia. This sparked the rush of fur trading vessels to the islands.
• Captain Dixon named the islands after his ship, the Queen Charlotte. Other names given to the islands in the early years of exploration include Nova Hibernia, the Great Island, and Washington's Island.
• British and American ships traded for thousands of furs, leading to a steady decline in sea otter populations until they were extirpated (locally extinct) by the 1830s. As many as 250 ships may have visited the islands during the maritime fur trade years.
• The fur trade was primarily peaceful, but occasional violence broke out including the notorious battle between Chief Koya of SGang Gwaay village and Captain Kendrick of the Lady Washington.
• In 1851-1852, British Columbia's first gold rush took place at Gold Harbour on the west coast of the islands, but the deposits were shallow and the rush was short-lived.
• The first European to live on the islands was copper miner Francis Poole, who prospected in the Skincuttle Inlet area (south of Burnaby Island) in 1862-1864.

Suggested Itinerary:
Visit the Haida Gwaii Museum in Skidegate, Port Clement’s Settlers Museum and the Dixon Entrance Maritime Museum in Masset for information and exhibits about early contact between Europeans and Haida.

Further Information:
A good overview of the European history of the islands is Kathleen E. Dalzell's The Queen Charlotte Islands 1774-1966. (Terrace, BC: C. M. Adam, 1968). Her second book, The Queen Charlotte Islands Volume 2: Places and Names (Madiera Park, BC: Harbour, 1973) is a great quick reference to the history of almost every place name on the islands. They can be found in most local bookstores and libraries.