

Haida Gwaii

Tourism Advisory Committee



Story Idea: Haida Poles

Summary: Traditional Haida art is recognized around the world for its rich detail and unique style. Although modern Haida art takes many forms from jewellery to masks to paintings, monumental wood carvings will always stand out as one of the most recognizable of Haida art forms. The towering poles that could be seen in Haida villages hundreds of years ago are still being carved today.

Facts:

- Poles are carved from red cedar, which is soft and easy to carve but doesn't rot as fast as other trees due to the oils in the wood.
- Haida poles are often referred to as “totem poles” but this is a misnomer since the carvings do not represent individual totems of the carver but instead show the crests of the family for whom the pole is being carved.
- It is unclear when poles were first carved by the Haida. Historically, poles were probably smaller and less numerous than those seen in photographs from the 1800s. The fur trade (1770s to mid-1800s) resulted in an increase in size and number of poles as it brought wealth into central trading villages.
- Missionaries discouraged the Haida from carving poles, and combined with disease and population decreases resulted in a hiatus in pole carving from the late 1800's until almost 100 years later.
- In Masset, the resurgence in pole carving was marked by the raising of a pole carved by Robert Davidson in 1969.
- The first modern pole in Skidegate was carved by Bill Reid in 1978 and raised in front of the Haida Immersion Program longhouse, where it can still be seen today.
- Today, many carvers are active on the islands and there are often several pole raising ceremonies each summer.
- Carvers still follow the tradition of taking on apprentices, who work with a master carver to learn the art form.

Suggested Itinerary:

Visit the Haida Heritage Centre in Skidegate to see the six poles that were raised there in 2001, as well as ancient poles in the museum section. (250)559-7885 to arrange a guided tour of the poles. As well, the Old Massett is a social enterprise geared at teaching youth about their culture by teaching guests about the poles and stories behind them. Contact Patricia (250)626-3337

You can watch carvers work on new poles in the Carving House section of the Haida Heritage Centre, or in the Carving Shed located at the north end of Skidegate. In Old Massett, many carvers work out of their homes, and you can find out about open studios and current projects by contacting the Masset Visitor Information Centre. Christian White operates a longhouse that apprentices carvers and there are often projects underway and can give a tour for \$10 (250)626-5250

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Drive through Old Massett and Skidegate to view new poles that have been raised in both communities. If you're lucky, you may be able to attend the raising of a new pole in one of these communities.



Take a tour by boat or floatplane to visit historical Haida village sites and view the handful of poles that still stand in their original locations.

Further Information:

The Haida Heritage Centre (haidaheritagecentre.com) can usually connect you with a carver even if none are working at the Centre when you inquire.

An excellent source of historical information and photographs is [Haida Monumental Art](#) by George F. MacDonald (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1983).