Story Idea: Haida Weavers

Summary: Haida weaving, once an important part of everyday life, is an art still being passed on through the generations. Some of the finest historic weavings are from the Haida and displayed prominently in museums. Today, Haidas have revived the weavings for ceremonial use as well as sale.

Facts:
- Weaving was traditionally practised by women, although today there are a few men practicing this art.
- As with many Haida traditions, weaving suffered during the 1800s when populations plummeted due to disease. Luckily, a handful of women kept the art alive.
- Some of the best known Haida weavers in recent times have been residents of Haida communities in Alaska (the Kaigani Haida in Ketchikan, Craig and Hydaburg).
- Traditional weaving materials included spruce root and red cedar bark. Today Haida basket weavers work mainly in cedar bark, but spruce root weaving continues.
- Historically, weavers created clothing, hats, sleeping mats, ceremonial objects, storage baskets and other items for everyday use. Haida weaving is now recognized internationally and many pieces sell for thousands of dollars at galleries and Native American markets.
- Red and yellow cedar bark is harvested by stripping a long, thin piece of bark from a standing tree. Only a small section of bark is removed so that the tree keeps growing. The strong, flexible inner bark is removed and cut into strips, which must be soaked in water before being used. Bark stripping is done in the spring and early summer.
- Thin, strong spruce roots are harvested from around the base of a young living tree. The roots must be singed and stripped of the outer bark, then split several times before it can be stored for later use. Spruce root can be woven tightly enough to make water-resistant baskets and hats. Like cedar bark there is a limited time in early summer and fall for harvesting.
- Haida weavers also use wool to create Ravenstail and Chilkat robes, aprons, leggings and other ceremonial regalia. This “finger weaving” technique employed mountain goat wool traded from the mainland. Today weavers use merino wool which is usually hand/thigh spun. Designs are a combination of traditional and contemporary.
- At public events, you will see many Haida people wearing traditional wide-brimmed hats, but also woven ball-caps, top-hats and other creative/contemporary variations on traditional theme. You may also see chiefs and people of high rank wearing Ravenstail Robes, aprons and headbands which have yellow, black and aqua-blue patterns on a white background.

Suggested Itinerary:
Contact a weaver by checking the Art Route brochure (http://www.gohaidagwaii.ca/what-to-do/art-route-tour/) for artists who open their studios to the public. Make an appointment in advance since many studios are home-based and are not open on a set schedule.

The Haida Heritage Centre sometimes has a weaver working on site. Call 250-559-7885 to inquire.  http://www.haidaheritagecentre.com/
Ask weavers if you can arrange to accompany them as they gather materials from the forest.

Further Information:
The best source of information is the weavers themselves. Some weavers have webpages that describe their work, but contacting them in person is usually the easiest way to get information.

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