



# A Road TRIP

LIKE NO OTHER

FOR THE HAIDA GWAI ISLANDERS, AN ARCHIPELAGO-BASED RAGTAG TEAM WITHOUT A RINK TO CALL THEIR OWN, THE ANNUAL TREK TO MAINLAND B.C. FOR A WEEKEND HOCKEY TOURNAMENT ISN'T ABOUT WINNING OR LOSING – IT'S MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT

BY RONNIE SHUKER

**T**HE HECATE STRAIT lies between the Haida Gwaii archipelago and mainland British Columbia at the tail end of the Yellowhead Highway, the northern route of the Trans-Canada Highway. Named after the Greek goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, its shallow waters, strong currents and high winds are a witch's

brew that can turn a smooth 80-mile ferry crossing into a rollicking ride of toppled-over vending machines, flying saucers and frisbee plates in the cafeteria kitchen. Modern maritime technology has managed to tame much of the Hecate's fury, but it can still make for blue-faced seasickness (one of the route's vessels is nicknamed the 'Vomit Comet'), a long delay or even cancellation if the waves get too high.

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“WE HAD A REALLY CALM CROSSING, WHICH WAS GREAT. THAT KIND OF SHOWED THAT THE HOCKEY GODS WERE ON OUR SIDE - BEHN COCHRANE

“There’s always a little bit of fear that we’re gonna get weathered out and miss the whole tournament,” said Behn Cochrane. “You’re crossing the Hecate Strait, which is a pretty major body of water, and that ferry can get delayed if a big storm brews up. But we had a really calm crossing, which

was great. That kind of showed that the hockey gods were on our side.”  
On Haida Gwaii, the usual short drive to the rink for many Canadians requires an overnight ferry ride across the Hecate Strait for player and de facto coach-GM Cochrane and the rest of the Haida Gwaii

Islanders, a ragtag oldtimers assortment of local fishers, administrators, RCMP officers, teachers, paramedics, loggers, fallers, janitors and tattoo artists who make up the archipelago’s underground hockey community. It is a ride the Islanders make once a year, every fall, for a rec-hockey tournament in the

misty port city of Prince Rupert. With no artificial ice, and next to no natural ice anywhere on the archipelago, and only a dilapidated roller rink to play in, the annual event is their world championship, one the Islanders contest with little in the way of preparation.

Their annual pilgrimage begins with an overnight ferry ride from Skidegate, a small town on Graham Island, where many of the archipelago’s 4,500 people reside. After docking in Prince Rupert and disembarking early the next morning, the players beeline for the arena to get on the ice for a quick skate before the games begin. For most of the Islanders, it’s their first chance in a year to stickhandle with a real hockey puck, put on hockey skates or breathe in the dank air of a refrigerated rink.

“The first time you step on the ice, it’s like, ‘Here we are, we came from Haida Gwaii, no rink,’ ” said Cochrane, whose late uncle Glen Cochrane played 10 years in the NHL. “You get that first stride on the ice and the first time you get to shoot an actual hockey puck and not a roller-hockey puck.”

Pandemics notwithstanding, the Islanders have been making the trip once a year since 1999, when goaltender Mike Allen, defenseman “Turkey” Don Hancock and the rest of the iceless Islanders sailed across the Hecate bound for Kitimat, a couple of hours’ drive inland from Prince Rupert. It was their



PHOTOS BY JEFF EASINGWOOD

first-ever tournament. Some of the players hadn’t skated on ice in almost 10 years, and three of them had never skated at all. They lost their three games by a combined score of 40-5.

“We got shellshocked,” Allen said. “We couldn’t even get the puck out of our zone. Guys were running into each other. If we did get the puck, it would be a perfect tape-to-tape pass to one of their defensemen and it would be another shot on net. It had to be 80, 90 shots a game. It was fantastic. I loved it.”

The following year, the Islanders made their first foray into the tournament in Prince Rupert. After their lopsided showing in Kitimat, the team reversed its fortunes when organizers opted to put the over-35 Islanders into the 50-plus division.

“We killed them,” Hancock said. “It was so bad that Mike wasn’t getting any shots. He was like, ‘My water bottle is freezing, let them shoot.’ ”

All these years later, the Islanders continue to make their annual trek across the Hecate to Prince Rupert. And as they celebrated their 25th anniversary in November, there was still no ice anywhere on Haida Gwaii.

Vancouver Canucks fans might know the archipelago for the Haida Hat it bestowed upon the Canucks back in their 2013-14 season or for a local artist who handcrafted a three-meter-high logo for the team in 2022. But nature lovers know it as “the Galapagos of the North.” Haida Gwaii has 4,000 miles of shoreline, over 800 watersheds, some 20 species of whale and an abundance of wildlife. It is an outdoor feast of hiking, fishing, surfing, kayaking, boating, ATVing, clam digging and whale watching.

Everything except hockey.  
Warmed by a Pacific current that comes from Japan, Haida Gwaii rarely sees temperatures rise above 20 degrees Celsius or fall below zero degrees Celsius. The weather can be as petulant as the Hecate, with a mix of storms, surf, floods, landslides, earthquakes and windthrow.

In parts of the archipelago, especially in winter, heavy rainfall and hurricane-force winds can toss boulders ashore like a child flicking marbles.

Once covered in ice some 16,000 years ago during the Pleistocene glaciations, before humans arrived, Haida Gwaii now sees no more than a week or so of ice, at best, when it gets cold enough for people to play hockey on all the lakes, ponds, sloughs and mud bogs that are the stuff of glossy travel magazines. Yet when that winter window does open, however briefly, the archipelago’s latent but lively hockey community blossoms into a hockey hotspot like any other across Canada.

“It’s so popular for a short brief period of time, the one week that it will be frozen or cold enough to be able to skate on these ponds,” Cochrane said. “That hockey culture, that love of hockey is here. We just don’t have a rink.”

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When nature withdraws its brief winter blessing, hockey on Haida Gwaii retreats to the streets, high-school gyms and the John Lalonde Roller Rink, a functioning – if perhaps underloved – facility in the town of Masset in the northeast corner of Graham Island.

Former Vancouver Canuck Tiger Williams came up for the ribbon-cutting ceremony and to play in the inaugural game in 1994. For the Islanders, it is the closest thing to a home arena, and they’ve claimed it as such. Their logo, a slick scythe of Haida Gwaii’s more than 200 islands, marks the center of what is essentially a concrete pad surrounded by boards wrapped in cage fencing. Although it is



cheaper to maintain than ice, concrete comes with its own set of problems. Oftentimes, the roller rink is either too slippery from winter condensation, or too sticky,

with dripping residue falling from overhead insulation.

Although there are more than enough people on Haida Gwaii to merit an arena, political will has not caught up to





ago, settled down got married and had two daughters.

"I feel like other teams probably don't have the same kind of connection that our whole island has here," Wallace said. "I feel like we played a lot harder to win the games than other teams would've played. I don't know if they had as much heart as we did, even though they were probably better than us every game. We just went for it."

In their first game, straight off the boat with no practice, the Islanders were edged 5-4. They won their second outing 4-2 and carried the lead late in their third game before losing 4-3 in overtime. They had a fourth game scheduled for the final night of the tournament, but after their smooth sailing to Prince Rupert, the Hecate

had other ideas for the Islanders' trip back to Haida Gwaii. With a big storm barreling in, the Islanders had to cancel their final game after BC Ferries was forced to move up the return ferry.

"We were trying to reschedule the game," Cochrane said. "But at the same time, our fourth game was scheduled to be against this team called the Moose. We'd watched one of their games, and they were really, really good, so I don't think we were too unhappy that we didn't have to play against them. We were just going to get shellacked."

Yet win, lose or tie, the scores are almost inconsequential for the Islanders. It is about getting on the ice for that one weekend and all the off-ice antics that come with it, including a

night of karaoke and another night of dancing, which at least half of the team stays up for until the bitter end in the wee hours of the morning. Inevitably, between playing and partying, some of the players return home to Haida Gwaii under the weather.

"I've got just a little bit of a cold going on," Cochrane said. "I think it's pretty common for guys to get sick off these trips. It's a lot of effort, exertion and little sleep. It's the 'ferry flu.'"

After their final game of the tournament, as they do every year, the Islanders lingered on the ice and hung around in the dressing room for as long as they could, savoring the sights and sounds and smells of the game that most players in Canada have the luxury of taking for granted. They then packed

up their sweat-soaked gear and headed back home across the Hecate to rink-less Haida Gwaii, and quickly marked their calendars for next year's tournament. "For us, going off island, it's about the locker room and having some drinks with the boys afterward," Cochrane said. "Just the culture of it is the big thing for us."

"To get to play is great, and normally we lose, and that doesn't matter to us. It's the smell, the locker room afterward, and just going out to dinner with the guys and going to have a few beers. And some guys go too far, and that's a big funny thing. It always happens that way. It's a hockey trip, right? We're travelling across the Hecate Strait to go play. It's a real trip. For us, it's a big thing." **H**

## IT'S A HOCKEY TRIP, RIGHT? WE'RE TRAVELLING ACROSS THE HECATE STRAIT TO GO PLAY. IT'S A REAL TRIP. FOR US, IT'S A BIG THING - BEHN COCHRANE

local support. There have been op-eds in the local newspaper and unsuccessful attempts at applying for Kraft Hockeyville. Hopes more or less lie with the local Haida Gwaii Skating Society, which is trying to build up enough participation in street hockey, floor hockey and roller

hockey to eventually force the local government to take notice of the archipelago's enthusiastic hockey culture. Yet the prospect of full-time ice looks no closer to coming to Haida Gwaii than the last of the island's glaciers that left the archipelago thousands of years ago.

That is why the Islanders' annual trip across the Hecate to Prince Rupert is an event that players mark on their calendars well in advance, one that costs each of them north of \$1,000 for the roundtrip ferry, a hotel room for the weekend and registration fees, as well as food,

fermented beverages, and the various sundries that are either difficult to find or too expensive to ship over to Haida Gwaii. But ask any of the Islanders and they'll say, without hesitation, it is money well spent for all the players, many of whom use the trip to stock up on goodies and supplies, hit up specialized medical treatments for their aging bodies and mechanic services for their vehicles, or just to enjoy some harmless consumer culture, like a Tim Hortons or a Starbucks, that is otherwise unavailable on the other side of the Hecate.

This year, Allen (now playing forward) and Hancock both returned for the team's 25th anniversary tournament, as did Warren McIntyre and Derrick Chutter, the last four players remaining from the original '99 Islanders.

The team also brought along some new blood, including Terry Wallace, who owns a business selling and repairing bikes in Masset. Although he grew up playing hockey in Cambridge, Ont., and is one of Haida Gwaii's most-seasoned roller-hockey players, the last time he played on ice was 12 years earlier, before he moved to the archipel-



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