

Before the flood

So far, unspoiled Prince Rupert has avoided many a cruise port's pitfalls

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
COX NEWS SERVICE

PRINCE RUPERT, British Columbia — It's nice to be first on the scene. Or among the first. I would like to have seen the Columbia River when its waters ran free and the Yukon during the gold rush. To have explored Kenya in 1930 and Mexico in 1940.

The first travelers didn't always go in style, coping with places that were rough and dirty before they were sanitized for tourism.

Once in a while, it still happens. This summer, a scant few thousand travelers will drive or fly to Prince Rupert on British Columbia's northernmost coast, and a few thousand more Alaska cruise passengers will drop in each week for a quick look at this soon-to-be-discovered town.

Prince Rupert's first summer as a fledgling cruise port, in 2004, was a success despite an occasional snafu. Passengers disembarking at the new \$9 million Northland Dock and Atlin Terminal, in Cow Bay (formerly the historic Atlin Fish Packing Plant), had to thread their way past bulldozers enlarging the parking lot. Some tour operators were scrambling to find enough boats for pre-sold whale-watching tours.

Absent, happily, were the ubiquitous dockside stalls selling T-shirts, souvenir grizzly bears made in China, postcard racks and in-your-face street touts offering "two-for-one pitchers at Pedro's."

"We're holding out for quality," said Bruce Wishart,



ColorWorld/STEVE HAGGERTY

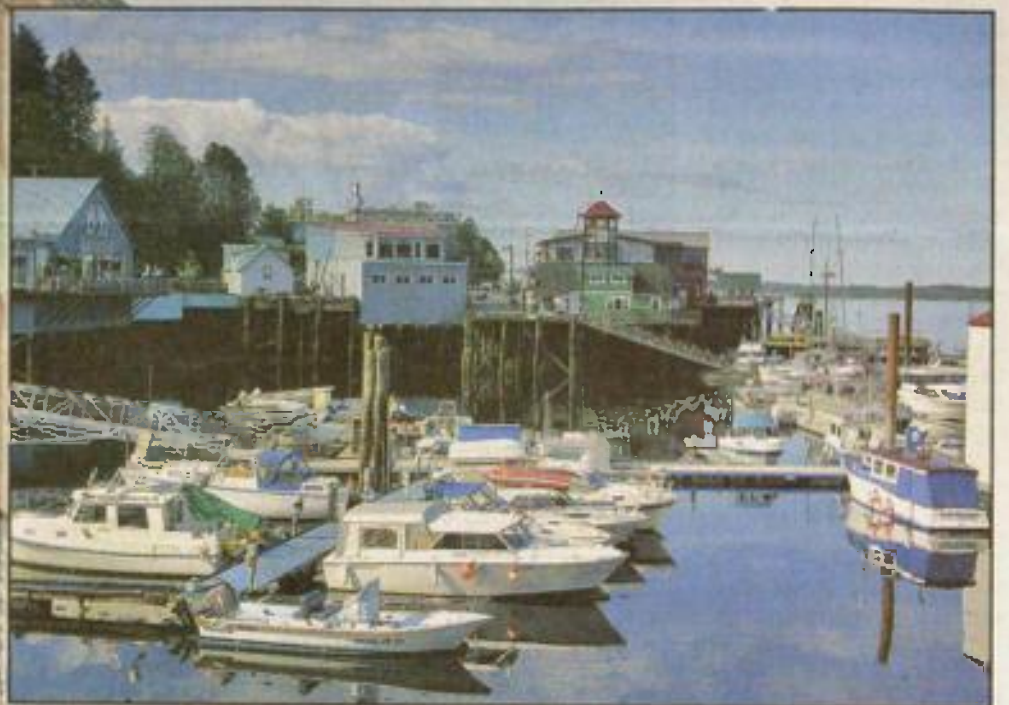
Tourists walk along the harbor side of the Atlin Cruise Terminal in Prince Rupert's harbor. The town began its stint as a cruise port in 2004 and has worked to keep quality a priority.

a spokesman for the Prince Rupert Tourism Council, which saw what happened when cruise passengers overwhelmed tiny ports in Alaska, like Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway. Wishart says Prince Rupert will be setting the bar high for storekeepers and outfitters hoping to set up shop in the historic downtown.

"It won't benefit anybody, us or the tourists, to try to be like everyone else," he said. "We want to avoid Alaska's mistakes."

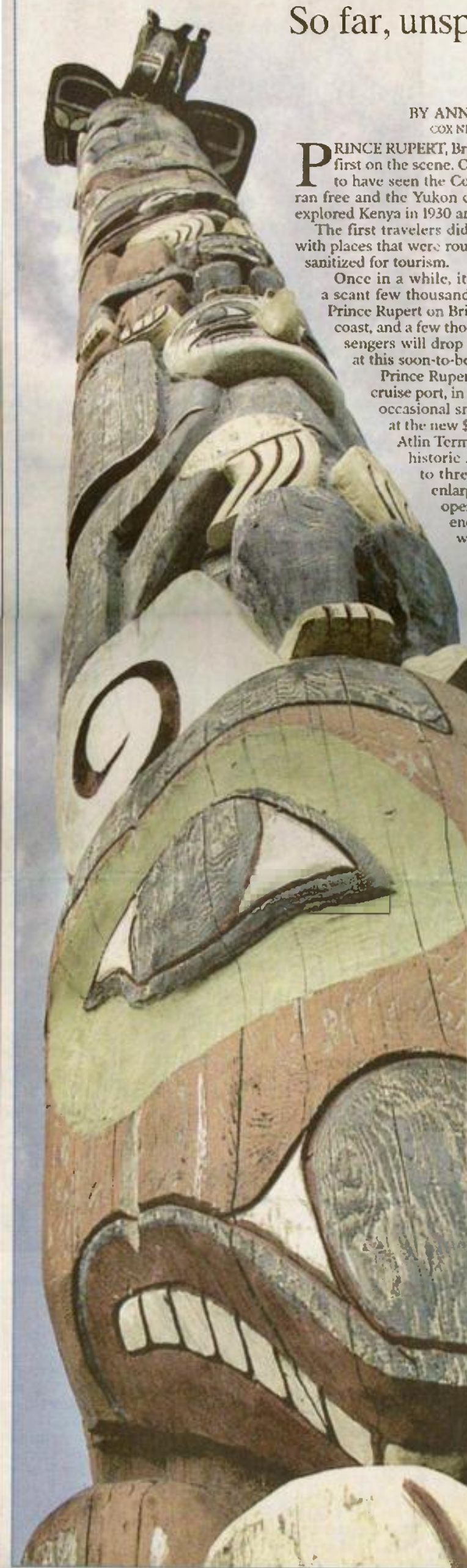
Still, tourism promises to help the local economy, in decline since 2001, when the last pulp mill closed.

See RUPERT, Page 3H



ColorWorld/STEVE HAGGERTY

Boats bob in Cow Bay's small boat harbor. Prince Rupert in British Columbia is a recent addition to cruise itineraries.



Rupert

• Continued from Page 1H

As we walked downtown, window shopping and looking in stores, the empty aisles and half-stocked shelves told the story. In the pharmacy, where we stopped to compare drug prices, we were the only customers. In the Safeway, no more than a dozen shoppers were filling their baskets.

But Prince Rupert isn't about shopping. It's all about being outdoors. We spent a sparkling sunny day following humpback whales with Prince Rupert Adventure Tours, on a high-powered lemon-yellow boat, the luxurious Georgia Master.

The next day, we crossed the harbor to Pike Island, led by Tsimshian guide John Haldane, who donned a hat and native dress for a tour of the island's pre-European-settlement sites, the oldest dating back 10,000 years.

The cultural highlight of our visit — and Prince Rupert's leading tourist attraction — was the Winter Feast tour at the Museum of Northern British Columbia, ranked among Canada's top 10 museums. Located in a traditional longhouse built of old-growth red and yellow cedar logs, the museum focuses on the history and art of the Tsimshian and Haida people, about 40 percent of the regional population.

The exhibits, part of a collection of arts and crafts made from the pre-European era to the present day, reveal a love of bold design and bright colors and a fine eye for craftsmanship, whether for decorating canoes and blankets or designing ceremonial masks, drums and headdresses.

"Whenever I'm feeling down about something, I come in here and look at this headpiece, made before the people had metal," said Sam Bryant, the museum's artistic director and a member of the Killer Whale Clan. He stopped in front of a favorite piece — a crown-shaped headdress with miniature figures made from mountain goat horn inlaid with abalone. It was carved, he said, with a sharpened beaver's tooth.

Afterward, Bryant led us to the museum's longhouse to participate in a shortened version of the Winter Feast celebration, a potlatch held to celebrate weddings, promotions of chiefs and similar clan milestones. Donning costumes, Bryant and a small performance group, accompanied by two drummers, danced three traditional ceremonies and distributed gifts — tastes of local foods — to the onlookers.



Courtesy/Steve Haggerty

Andree's B&B overlooks Prince Rupert Harbor.

"There's nothing mysterious about the potlatch," Bryant said. "Think of it as a birthday party or a wedding reception, where guests bring gifts and the hosts give party favors."

With limited time to spend, we missed other intriguing outings, including a harbor cruise on the city's restored "heritage tugboat" and a guided trip to the Khutzeymateen (COOT-zee-mah-teen) Grizzly Bear Sanctuary.

We also passed up salmon fishing in the ocean with one of the charters docked in Cow Bay. Fishermen who go out can take home their catch, courtesy of Dolly's Fish Market, on the waterfront, which meets the boats and takes orders for flash-freezing and mailing.

"Even if you're not a fisherman, you can take some home," said Charmayne Carlson, owner of Dolly's. "We sell canned salmon, frozen salmon and vacuum-packed smoked salmon in the store. And we serve every kind of fresh seafood you can think of here in the restaurant."

Instead of fishing, we saved our last day for a visit to the restored North Pacific Cannery, in nearby Port Edward, the last of dozens built along this coast. The cannery, a self-contained company town, was built entirely on a long row of wooded decks set atop pilings sunk into the Skeena River bank.

When the cannery opened in 1889, the millions of salmon gathering near the mouth of the river seemed inexhaustible; the operation ran around the clock from May through September. Seventy-nine years later, when the fish were nearly gone, it closed. (Since then, last-ditch conservation projects have restored a portion of the annual spawning run.)

The cannery had its own general store, post office, church, processing plant, machine shop, net loft, boathouse, cottages for managers and crowded shacks

for workers. Those long summer days on the river, later remembered in letters and diaries, swung between heaven and hell, slave labor and summer camp, with families living and working in close quarters.

"The fishing industry was divided along racial and gender lines," said curator Sophie Cormier, throwing a switch that started the assembly line clanking into action. The managers and storekeeper were Caucasian, Chinese workers made the cans and the Japanese built the boats and mended the nets, she said. Tsimshian men, who traditionally spent summers in native fish camps, netted the salmon, the women worked on the processing line, and the children, mostly unsupervised, kept one another company.

An engaging one-woman stage show follows the 40-minute cannery tour. Half drama and half comedy, the story introduces a cast of characters, each one with a different hat and accent, telling the story of those bygone times: the Irish manager keeping the books and settling disputes, the Chinese man sending money home to his wife, the Japanese family starting a new life in a strange land and the children who played as equals.

A few months after our visit to Prince Rupert, we learned that the national and provincial governments had created a joint grant of \$60 million to build a container port at the end of Kaien Island to handle trade with China.

Prince Rupert, they predicted, could be bigger than Vancouver. The port has the world's third-deepest natural harbor, a natural for giant cruise and container ships. And Prince Rupert is the western end of Canada's national highways and the railroad.

Maybe someday. But this summer, Prince Rupert is still small-town Canada.

WAYS AND MEANS

GETTING AROUND

Bus service in Prince Rupert and environs is available but slow. You can get around without a car but not conveniently.

CRUISING

Through Sept. 20, two cruise ships are scheduled to call weekly at Prince Rupert. Royal Caribbean cruise line's 2,435-passenger Vision of the Seas visits each Wednesday; Norwegian Cruise Line's 2,200-passenger Norwegian Star visits each Thursday. Cruise West's Spirit of Oceanus calls on four different dates. The Clipper Odyssey and Celebrity's Infinity each call once. Call a travel agent for special promotions and bookings.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

■ Andree's B&B, 315 Fourth Ave. E., is a homey two-story clapboard house, with a flower-decorated deck overlooking the harbor. Guests have the run of the ground floor, and the atmosphere is casual. A large front



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

room has a harbor view and private bath; an average-size room with twin beds has a corner sink; this room and two others share a bath. Most town attractions are within walking distance at the bottom of the hill. If you are al-

lergic, know that a cat lives here. www.andreesbb.com.

■ The Crest Hotel, on 222 W. First Ave., has 101 rooms and four suites recently redecorated with a colonial theme. Harbor-side rooms have binoculars and bathrobes. Some rooms have minibars; all have coffee makers and hair dryers. www.cresthotel.bc.ca.

■ Charlie's Lounge (named for Bonnie Prince Charlie) is a popular happy-hour meeting place.

■ The Waterfront Restaurant serves excellent American food.

INFORMATION

Tourism offices: www.tourismprincerupert.com or www.hellobc.ca.

— Anne Z. Cooke