

[Home](#) » [Lifestyle](#)

## Squamish set out to tell their own stories

New Vancouver Maritime Museum exhibit explores history of canoes

Tessa Holloway / North Shore News

JANUARY 20, 2012 02:00 AM



Vancouver Maritime Museum's Chatwilh: The Craft and Culture of the Squamish Canoe takes visitors through the lifecycle of a Squamish canoe. The exhibit is on display until May 21.  
Photo GARY FIEGEHEN

LONG before cars lined up at the B.C. Ferry terminal in Horseshoe Bay, canoes crisscrossed the Salish Sea.

That history - and the future of this ancient craft - is on display until May 21 at the Vancouver Maritime Museum in Kitsilano, just steps from the former Squamish village site of Fenakw on the shores of False Creek, where the canoes once pushed off to hunt and fish, to travel and to fight.

There's never been an exhibit that's brought together all the aspects of Squamish canoe craft, says hereditary chief Ian Campbell.

"Not so explicitly breaking down each one from the little children's canoe all the way up to the big war canoe," he says.

While most visitors will likely be familiar with the standard canoe and those still used for racing, the exhibit focuses on seven different styles that range up to 60 and 70 feet, explaining the history, and how they were made and used.

"It's very difficult to find those types of trees that are suitable today. Most of our forests have been altered in one way or another," says Campbell, pointing out even the largest canoes were made from a single tree.

They weren't only used in warfare, however, he explains, as the large size came in handy when groups moved seasonally from village to village.

"When we transported from village to village we would take down the planks off of the side wall and the roofs of the longhouses and leave just the post and beam frames, and then we would take two of these big canoes and take the posts across them as catamarans," he says.

As much as the exhibit focuses on the past, says Campbell, it's also about the future of the canoe. He emphasized the various races and events held up and down the coast each summer, including the annual Squamish Nation Canoe Race at Ambleside Park.

The exhibit features three full-size canoes in the museum space as well as photography and storytelling curated by the Squamish Nation itself. It was organized in part to coincide with the city of Vancouver's 125th anniversary last year, as it opened in November. It's a chance, says Campbell, to share aboriginal history and culture with a wider audience.

"Our history is your history. These canoes are a part of what we now call Vancouver," he said.

"My feeling is that we are more or less invisible in our own land, the local First Nations. I don't know the average Vancouverite would be able to say any of our traditional names, any of our traditional villages or recount all of our mythology," he adds. "We want to correct that...We're finally starting to move beyond that as a society."

Simon Robinson, executive director, says it was important that the museum partner with the Squamish to allow them to tell their own stories, rather than attempt to go it alone. It also adds a level of insight and authenticity not often seen in museum exhibits, he says.

"They curated it," he says. "It's not an interpretation, it's not an anthropological point of view, but it's authentic and that's what every museum should strive to do."

He says the museum has been in somewhat of a rebuilding phase after previous plans to move the exhibits a new National Maritime Centre on North Vancouver's waterfront were sunk by lack of funding. This exhibit is part of putting the museum back on the map, and so far the reviews have been positive, he adds.

"The comment cards have been full of praise, people have tweeted about it, there have been blogs about it," he says.

tholloway@nsnews.com

© 2020 North Shore News