

Indigenous tourism gaining popularity

B.C. First Nations sharing their cultural heritage

By Mansoor Ladha

Leslie McGarry represents five generations of her family passionate about bringing cultural awareness and promoting her heritage. Her legacy began with her great-great-grandfather, George Hunt, who worked with anthropologist Franz Boaz to record the cultural heritage and practices of her people, Kwakwaka’ wakw.

Her credentials even go further than that as she is also a great-granddaughter of the late Chief Mungo Martin and the eldest granddaughter of the late Chief Henry Hunt, both of whom were internationally renowned artists as well as Master Carvers for the Royal B.C. Museum’s totem pole restoration project.

Leslie brings all this wealth of knowledge of indigenous people and her family heritage to impart it to the wider Canadian society by working as a First Nation Cultural Liaison Officer, especially with the Royal B.C. Museum. Asked as to why she has been so involved in promoting indigenous history and culture, Leslie said that the passion for her culture came from the legacy left behind by her family.

“They worked very hard to bridge the distance between indigenous people and the ‘Newcomers’, a term my great-grandfather applied when referring to non-indigenous people.”

With this inspirational legacy as a guiding force, and working with many community partners, Leslie provides opportunities to enhance and develop awareness and appreciation for the cultural diversity within Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples. As a First Nation Cultural Liaison, Leslie relays information that reflects a First Nations perspective from pre-contact to post-contact history with cultural authenticity and integrity.

From developing school programs in cooperation with the Royal B.C. Museum to providing cultural support for the B.C. Legislative Assembly’s Parliamentary Education Office, Leslie provides a cultural component derived from the stories, legends, values and traditions that have been passed down through her family for countless generations.

The Royal B.C. Museum has First People’s galleries, central of which is Totem Hall, featuring monumental carvings of the Kwakwake’wakw and other communities. The magnificent carvings portray variety of poles and carving styles used by 19th-

century coastal villagers. The museum also has a living language exhibit where visitors can learn First Nation languages.

She felt very strongly that it was now her turn to step up and continue their mission to attain understanding by sharing their culture. Museums and other learning centres promote reconciliation with main society by being sincere in their intentions.

“The promotion of reconciliation will only happen when dissemination of information is done in partnership with Indigenous Peoples as equal contributors. By engaging with First Peoples on an equal basis, we begin to breakdown preconceived notions about First Peoples that are often compromised through media interpretation and/or information shared during our school days.”

The B.C. Tourism and other tourism departments across Canada have now developed programmes promoting indigenous tourism to make everyone aware about the culture, traditions and food of the First Nations of Canada.

While Leslie is portraying the First Nation culture through museums and public speaking, another indigenous person, Chef Shirley Lang, who is of Cree Nation descent, has been doing the same thing through her culinary skills.

Chef Shirley Lang says she hates racism and “the only way I can help resolve it is by cooking our food.” Chef Lang operates Kitchen of Distinction from her Victoria home, offering delicious food, impeccable wines and surreal artisan creations. Our group of six people were treated to lovely seafood creations at her Chef’s Private Table, prepared using indigenous ingredients and paired with indigenous wines.

Chef Shirley began her journey learning from her mother and grandmother cooking rustic comfort food using meat and poultry they raised on their farm with the freshest and finest ingredients and produce they planted, nurtured, and harvested. Inspired by the world fusion cuisine, Shirley added her own unique twist to traditional recipes taught to her by Moroccan, Spanish, Middle Eastern, East Indian and Persian chefs she



PHOTOS BY MANSOOR LADHA

Harvesting seaweed from the ocean.



Leslie McGarry brings knowledge of indigenous people and her family heritage by working as a First Nation Cultural Liaison Officer with the Royal B.C. Museum.

knew, serving these unique Global dishes to her elite dinner guests

The grand finale of the day was when we went feasting on wild sockeye salmon, traditionally cooked over an open fire on sticks by Tsawout elder, Earl Claxton. This was supplemented with freshly picked wild edibles including wild Oregon grape dressing with a Cree bannock and raven spirit bread created by Lang.

The lunch was followed by a hands-on experience of tasting, exploring and learning the traditional uses and health benefits of seaweed cultivated from the Sooke area by Amanda Swinimer, owner of Dakini Tidal Winds. Edible seaweeds are hand-harvested from the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island, sending a powerful message that the environment has healing qualities which should be harnessed. Amanda, who is a marine biologist, teaches about seaweeds in schools, colleges and universities, through private venues and as an international presenter.

“Dakini Tidal Wilds is committed to provide the highest quality of seaweeds and herbs and products made from them, hand harvested on the rugged coast of Vancouver Island,” Ms. Swinimer said. “Edible seaweeds and medicinal plants from local forest and ocean is both a passionate skill, sending a powerful message that our environment has healing and economic benefits.”

Several well-known chefs in Victoria, including the executive chef of the Empress, have cooked food with Dakini Tidal Wild’s sustainable hand-harvested seaweeds.

A shining example of successful indigenous achievement is that of the

Songhees, who live on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, the San Juan and Gulf Islands. The Songhees First Nation, with approximately 630 members, live adjacent to the towns of Esquimalt and View Royal. The chief and council are responsible to govern members and for their economic welfare.

For thousands of years, First Nations peoples have called Victoria home and there is evidence of their ancestral influence everywhere, especially their totem poles. One of the world’s tallest freestanding totem poles is located at the Beacon Hill Park in downtown Victoria.

In 2014, the Songhees elders came up with a brilliant idea of combining food, culture and community to promote their deep roots by starting the Songhees Seafood and Steam food trucks which offered a vast menu with fresh local ingredients that authentically incorporates the craft and care of food preparation embodied by the Songhees.

The venture has popularized Songhees culture, tradition and food in Victoria and the surrounding region. The food truck is a welcome addition in downtown Victoria where one can experience an important piece of indigenous culture and tradition.

Indigenous culture, tradition and food is now celebrated all over Canada with June being set aside as National Indigenous History Month with events with powwow scheduled across major cities such as Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, etc.

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based travel writer/photographer and author of “Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing East Africa for the West” and “Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan’s Shia Ismaili Muslims.”



Tsawout elder Earl Claxton prepares to traditionally cook wild sockeye salmon over an open fire on sticks.