

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

A spectacular First Nations centre celebrates the art of working together

By Sheri Radford



The Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre enshrines the art and history of two neighbouring First Nations at Whistler

Centuries before shredders and powder hounds took over Whistler, the Squamish and Lil'wat people lived, fished and hunted in the verdant mountains and valleys of British Columbia's Coast Range. The Squamish Nation traditionally resided in the lands now called Greater Vancouver, Squamish Valley and Howe Sound, while the territory of the Lil'wat Nation stretched from present-day Squamish to Lillooet. In Whistler's upper village, the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre celebrates the diverse cultures of the two neighbouring groups.

Clara, a Lil'wat guide whose ancestral name is Shushan, introduced me to the world of the centre, one in touch with nature and history. Hand-carved cedar welcome figures and pictograph-adorned boulders sit outside the three-storey building with its expanses of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Past the huge carved-cedar doors, two giant cedar spindle whorls loom overhead. The one on the left represents the Lil'wat Nation, the other the Squamish. Colour-coded exhibits lend cultural insights into each First Nations group.

Clara shared a glimpse into her own upbringing and the Lil'wat traditions she is passing to her daughter. I could have



let out of cedar strips and practised blanket weaving. I visited the gift shop, where it is nearly impossible to resist the siren call of ceremonial masks, cedar baskets and delicate silver jewellery.

In the café, where First Nations dishes are on the menu, I feasted on salmon chowder, then strolled along the herbology walk through the surrounding forest outside — all enticements to return to this exotic world.

The Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre is open daily year-round at 4584 Blackcomb Way, Park in Day Lot 4. For more information, visit www.slcc.ca or call toll-free 1-866-441-7522. ■

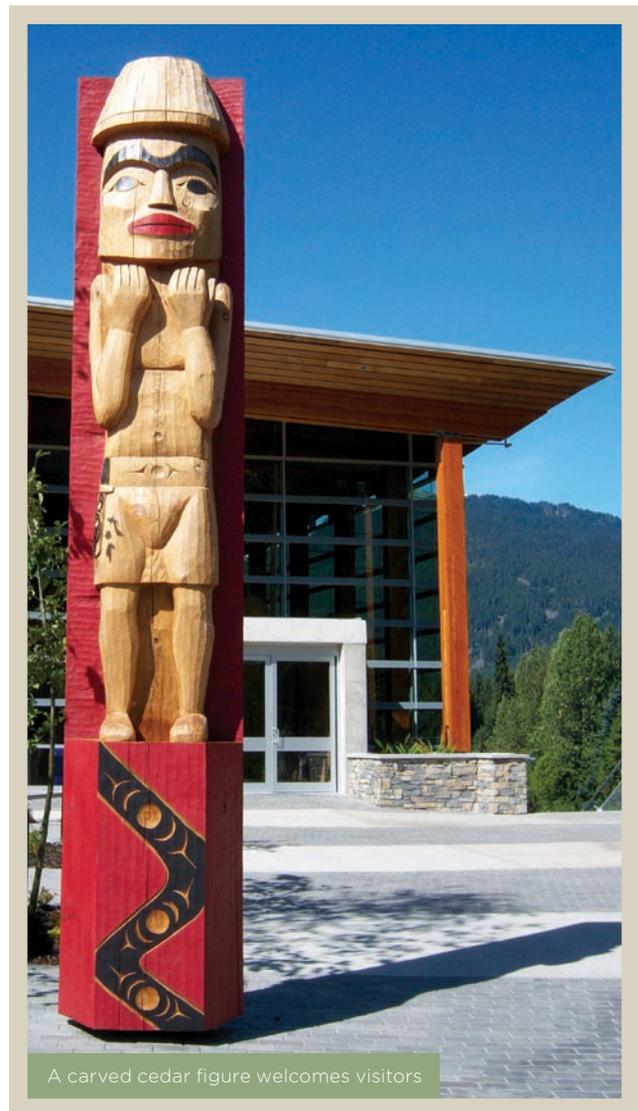
listened to her talk about her family history all day, but there were exhibits to explore.

In the airy, sun-drenched Great Hall, colourful examples of woven cedar hang everywhere below a 6.5-metre (22-foot) ceiling. The Lil'wat are skilled weavers; some finished baskets are so tight that they can be used for cooking.

Giant black-and-white photos hang from the walls and ceiling, depicting First Nations life a century ago. Hand-carved canoes fill the back of the hall. The smaller ones with no seats were used on rivers. The elaborate 12-metre- (40-foot-) long hunting canoe was carved from a single cedar tree by Ray Natrall for ocean use. Many traditional skills are no longer taught, so Natrall had to figure out some of the trickier tasks — such as using lava rocks and steam to stretch a canoe — from photos and through trial and error.

In other rooms, I saw fine examples of First Nations art, tools and drums, learned about ancient longhouse-building techniques, and watched a film on the Squamish and Lil'wat cultures. I explored a traditional Lil'wat Istken, or pit house; its main entrance was through the smoke hole in the roof, making it easy to defend against attackers. I tried an interactive computer program that taught the Lil'wat and Squamish languages — both in danger of dying out until concerted efforts were made to save them, as with many First Nations tongues. Proudly, Clara announced that she and her daughter are both learning to speak Lil'wat. In quiet moments she could often be found at the language computer.

The hands-on area of the centre is probably intended for children, but that didn't dampen my enthusiasm. With more zeal than skill I painted a petroglyph, twisted a brace-



PHOTOS: (OPPOSITE) GARY FIEGHEIN, COURTESY SLCC. (ABOVE) COURTESY TOURISM WHISTLER. (R) PAUL CORDICK