

Editorial: Great future for First Nations tourism

Quickly now, why should tourists come to Vancouver Island? That's easy — to see the sights and experience the delights they cannot find closer to home.

And that is why the decision to open Kiixin, the ancient capital of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation, to visitors makes perfect sense.

Kiixin (pronounced Key-hin) is beside pristine beaches about two kilometres south of Bamfield. The national heritage site can be reached only by shallow-bottomed boat, followed by a hike through the forest, and has been seen by few non-aboriginal people over the past century.

The village is set to become a key part of the Huu-ay-aht cultural tourism strategy. The First Nation has been drafting economic development plans in anticipation of the April 1 implementation of the Maa-nulth Treaty, and is working with Parks Canada on the best ways to develop Kiixin as an attraction without ruining it.

The future might bring trails and guided tours — and possibly even a replica village on an adjacent beach, so visitors could capture a better sense of what Kiixin offered when it was a thriving community.

The village was the centre of Huu-ay-aht government and once included 15 massive longhouses. Some of the posts of the houses are still in place, along with middens and the remains of smaller houses.

Kiixin provides evidence of continuous occupation for almost 3,000 years. It was abandoned in the 1880s after its residents were massacred.

While it is unlikely that Kiixin will ever attract tourists in droves — its remote location assures that it will remain a rare treasure — it could still play a key role in Vancouver Island's tourism industry.

In Europe, the source of many of our visitors, First Nations are an essential ingredient in the marketing of British Columbia. People there are curious about Indian bands and native communities and willing to go well off the beaten path to see them.

Europe has its own ski hills and golf courses, and its own cycling and hiking areas. It does not, however, have aboriginal communities and attractions.

Tourism is already proving profitable for many aboriginal communities in the province. Attractions range from the summer Klahowya Village in Vancouver's Stanley Park to the U'Mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay. There are aboriginal-themed resorts, art galleries and wilderness tours.

There are always risks to going after tourist dollars. Yet First Nations communities have an edge, because they can offer experiences found nowhere else on Earth.

The aboriginal tourism industry already has a strong promotional vehicle in its website, aboriginalbc.com. That makes it easy to plan trips around locations of First Nations interest. Many aboriginal attractions provide ready access to wilderness areas, so they are a perfect complement to outdoor activities.

Kiixin could become the crown jewel of B.C.'s aboriginal destinations — a site that could be as well-known as Peru's Machu Picchu, a destination also rich in history.

It will be important, however, to ensure that it is preserved as it becomes better known. It has been a part of our history for 30 centuries — and if it is treated with care, it could help provide a brighter future for the Huu-ay-aht First Nation.