

Coastal history caught in museum's galleries

By Patrick Murphy
Times Colonist staff

A revamped Maritime Museum of B.C. encapsulates the entire history of exploration of the Pacific coast in a special series of galleries that have just opened.

This is the first time the entire historical perspective — from the First Nations to Fort Victoria and the whalers of the coast — has ever been put in one, illustrated package in a B.C. museum.

"We have never had the history in one place," said Guy Mathias, the executive director of the Bastion Square museum.

"This is a strong presentation from the discovery and into the colonial period of B.C."

Designed by international consultants J.J. Andre, the gallery cost \$350,000 out of a total renovation bill of \$1.2 million.

This main-floor gallery is the culmination of 2½ years of redevelopment of the gallery. Two-thirds of the funds came from the federal infrastructure program. The museum board raised another \$400,000 from private, corporate and municipal sources.

In the previous work, the second floor of the former provincial courthouse was dedicated to passenger travel on the coast in general and B.C. Ferries in particular. The third floor holds the vice-admiralty court where B.C. chief Justice Matthew Baillie Begbie once reigned, and a theatre.

Mathias beamed as he showed off the main floor, which he called the centrepiece of the redevelopment.

It meant hauling out the famed boat

▼ MUSEUM FILE

Maritime Museum of B.C.

28 Bastion Square, Victoria

Open daily 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Admission: Adults \$5; Seniors \$4;

Students \$3; Children \$2

Trekka to go into storage, but it also meant a much more cohesive historical gallery.

The three themes are exploration, commerce and adventure.

Starting with the known history of aboriginals on the coast, the gallery opens with prints by artist Paul Kane who toured the New World with the first explorers.

From there, the exhibits lead into the Spanish explorations of the coast and its claim to most of the new world from South America to Alaska.

Detailed wall scripts explain the history and sensors are triggered as the visitor walks through to set off sounds from a squeaking rat to a rendition of *Rule Britannia* to a creaking ship.

Artifacts come from private collections and institutions, said Mathias.

For such a historical collection, it was the work of the modern Internet which served the curators best.

Mathias started hunting through the computer world to track down exotic spices from St. George University in the Caribbean and 17th-century weapons, cloths and maps and silver goblets from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

"This was a job where the Internet shone," he said. "A lot of this material is on long-term loan, but we could not have found it without the Internet."

The Spanish section has an interesting modern tie-in. This was the start of a global economy, with the Spaniards trading furs from B.C. for silks from China and silver bullion from Central and South America to build its formidable fleet to rule the seas.

The next gallery covers the days of piracy and privateering, whose star performer was the English rogue and hero Francis Drake. It even includes an original Letter of Marque from 1811 that made a pirate ravaging the seven seas into a patriot, called a privateer, serving his monarch.

A bridge and crow's nest are available for children to climb and tinker in.

Mathias called this an interactive centre, but instead of a computer screen, there are replicas of everything from a ship's wheel to cannons for children to fiddle with.

The galleries continue into the appearance of the English explorers James Cook and George Vancouver and how the land was wrested from the Spanish.

The story of the Danish explorer Vitus Bering, who served the Russian navy and was shipwrecked and died on Bering Island, is told.

U.S. interests are covered from the early part of the 19th century up to the Pig War and finally the resolution of an international boundary dispute with Canada.

That turned into a bonus for the museum when staff found an original Bound-



DEBRA BRASH/TIMES COLONIST

Executive director Guy Mathias, top, checks out the crow's nest and volunteer Ron Mack mans the wheel at the Maritime Museum.

ary Line Chart in its collections, and hauled it out for display.

The era of commerce for Victoria from colonial fort to capital city is covered in artifacts and documents of the shipbuilding era, the fishery, sealing and whaling.

The final component is the adventure theme that has the Tilikum, which tried to circumnavigate the globe, on display along with pieces of the many shipwrecks that dotted the coast, from the Princess Sophia to the Valencia.