

Around the world with a camera

Derek Drewe traveled most of the world before settling on Vancouver Island in the 1960s

By Heather Reid

Imagine you are a hand on an oil freighter in Aruba, or a coal miner in Nova Scotia, or an RCMP officer snowed in in the back country of 1960s Canada.

Derek Drewe doesn't have to imagine. He has been all of those things and been to all of those places.

"I've had many jobs," he says.

Derek has just returned from Shanghai after a two-week cruise through five Asian countries. It's the latest in his post-retirement photography trips.

"I don't go to lie on the beach," he says with twinkling eyes.

Travelling isn't new to him, it's been a mainstay most of his life.

He left his English home as an apprentice deck officer in the British Merchant Navy in 1945. In 1948 he was on a tanker run between the West Indies and the coast of South America. In the photos from that time, he looks like the boys in the surfer movies of the 50s - blonde and strong. He enjoyed the scuba diving there, and at least one dusky-eyed lady according to his meticulous photo album.

"I'd like to go back there," he says.

Derek has a most incredible photo collection. It runs from his early days sailing on ships around the world, right up to the present. He started out with a folding Kodak camera made in Germany and today he shoots a digital Nikon.

After his spell in Aruba, he returned to England, but made the move to Canada shortly thereafter.

He landed on the East Coast and travelled all the way across this vast nation to take his first job at Hillcrest Lumber Company in Cowichan Lake.

The forestry industry shut down for the summer, so he headed to Britannia Beach to work in the copper mine there. The old mine is now the B.C. Mining Museum that you see on the Sea-to-Sky Highway up to Whistler. When Derek worked there, the only way to get to Vancouver was by ship.

He headed down to Kitimat but things didn't work out there.

"I woke up one morning and I didn't have any money," Derek says, so he signed up for the air force. He failed the vision test, so he didn't become a pilot, but he went east to Quebec for basic training and from there to Clinton, Ont. for electronics and radar.

"During my enlistment, I reverted to the sea," he says. "A lot of my life has been connected to the sea."

After his military training they sent him all the back out west, just about as far as you can go, to Holberg, B.C.

Holberg sits just south and west



Derek Drewe shares his photo albums which include images from all over the world dating as far back as the 1940s. Heather Reid photo

of Port Hardy on the tip of Vancouver Island. During the cold war, the Royal Canadian Air Force established Canadian Forces Station Holberg, a Pinetree Line radar base.

"Our job was to run crew and goods," he says.

After three years in the air force, Derek moved to Vancouver, joined a freighter and started ferrying Caterpillar machine parts between Montreal and California.

"I went about eight times through the Panama Canal," he says.

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Derek Drewe, photographer

Next stop was back to merry old England to work on a concrete sea wall.

"Some parts of England are being taken away by the sea," he says, so there was work building retaining walls.

Around Christmas 1956, he wound up back on the East Coast of Canada and signed up for the RCMP in Halifax. While awaiting the application process he took work at the Spring Hill coal mine in Cumberland County, Nova Scotia.

"It was before the explosion, of course," he says.

The mine is known for a series of disasters, with one major explosion on October 23, 1958, that changed the town and the mining industry in Canada forever.

Derek evaded those dangers, when he was informed at the end of one shift that his land lady called to say the RCMP had accepted him.

"So I packed up my gear and that night, I went to Halifax," he says. And back on the road.

Derek did his police training in Ottawa and was at the 1957 opening of parliament escorting then Governor General Vincent Massey.

Sure enough, once his training was over, he went into the marine division of the force.

He served as an officer in five provinces intercepting contraband coming into the country by water. He was part of the marine escort that accompanied Queen Elizabeth and former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower when they sailed aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia to open the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959.

Shortly after that he made his way back to the West Coast of Canada through a transfer.

As a single man, at that time, the RCMP felt free to move him around a lot, he says. The dashing young man wasn't single for long, however. He married his first wife in 1962. Only two years later, she died of cancer. In 1965 he married again and with his second wife had three children and "a very happy marriage." She died just over a year ago and Derek downsized from the family home to a bright and tidy apartment in Port Alberni.

"The old house had lots of happy memories," that he says he didn't want to live with for too long.

Marriage seems to have settled the man at last because in 1966 he took a post in Port Alberni, and he's been here ever since. While

his home stayed in one place, his wide range of interests kept him taking up new things.

"I got my own boat," he says.

He skippered the Ganges in the Alberni Inlet. Then, faced with the possibility of moving again, now with a family, he left the RCMP in 1970.

But you can't keep a good man down, he next resurfaced in the Canadian Coast Guard where he served for three years based out of Nanaimo. There's that ocean-theme again.

After that he became the deputy harbour master, back on Port Alberni's waterfront. He worked at that until 1990 when he retired.

That's nearly two decades of leisure. Fortunately he and his wife got to do a lot of travelling before she passed away. Now he heads out with his camera gear solo.

This year it was an Asian cruise. Before that it was to New Zealand on a tour with his senior's group.

Derek's photography has been a constant in his life and his collection is lovingly arranged in a wood-cut album from Rio de Janeiro. He has photos, all taken in 1947, of the Panama Canal, French warships in Casablanca and the Lion's Gate bridge in Vancouver.

He has pictures of a ship docked in Tahsis, Nootka Sound, dressed for the Queen's wedding and a mosquito fleet of vessels picking their way through more than 2,000 oil rigs off of Venezuela in the late 1940s.

The collection is astounding and combines a record of his life, with a record of the world and the many places he's lived in it.

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