





RIDING THE NEW WAVE

Heading deep into B.C.'s remote Great Bear Rainforest is an adventure in itself. But do it on a stand-up paddleboard and it's a whole new trip

By Masa Takei

*Photography by
Taylor Kennedy*



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RESTAURANT THAT WE'D PASSED IN Prince Rupert keeps coming back to mind. It was one of those Chinese joints that you find in almost every small town in Canada. A standard now, but I'm thinking about what it must have been like for the first one to take root in this part of the world. And I'm pondering how that cultural transplant from across the Pacific might have some lessons for Norm Hann in his current venture. Or maybe I'm just hungry.

Chinese food is probably the furthest thing from Norm's mind right now, as he crouches on the floor of the dock shed, among an explosion of gear and provisions. He still has a lot to do before our hosts in the hamlet of Hartley Bay serve dinner. Tomorrow, we'll embark on a five-day scouting

mission through the mists of B.C.'s Great Bear Rainforest. This is the recce trip for what Norm hopes will become perhaps the world's first commercial stand-up paddleboard adventure.

Stand-up paddleboarding originated more than 4,000 sea-going kilometres west of here—halfway to China—in the islands of Polynesia. Called *Ku Hoe He'e Nalu* in the Hawaiian language, the sport has been



Setting out (clockwise from above): The author works on his technique while Norm Hann and Jen Segger look on; the hamlet of Hartley Bay in B.C.'s Great Bear Rainforest; the expedition begins on a rainy day in Cornwall Inlet.



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traced back three centuries to King Kamehameha and his queen Ka'ahumanu. But more recently, in the 1940s, the Waikiki beach boys used longboards and single-bladed paddles out in the breaks to keep watch over their surf students and call incoming sets. However, as surfing continued to evolve, the paddle got left behind.

Until the turn of the century that is, when some of surfing's leading watermen, most notably American Laird Hamilton, took a renewed interest. Hamilton, a six-foot-three, blond water god who grew up in Hawaii, has been credited with such surfing innovations as tow-in, big-wave riding and the foilboard (a surfboard fitted with a hydrofoil). He's also known for such well-documented feats as sluicing down the heaviest wave ever ridden, a 70-foot Tahitian monster.

Despite all his high-profile accomplishments on the cutting edge of the sport, Hamilton recently told ABC News that if he could continue to do only one thing in surfing, he would choose stand-up paddleboarding. Why? "Because of the diversity of it," he explained. Beyond the waves, big and small, Hamilton has run his paddleboard on supported trips down the Colorado River, across the English Channel, and along the entire chain of Hawaiian Islands. Still on his wish list: to paddle the Bering Strait and also through a hurricane.

Thanks largely to Hamilton, the form has experienced a rebirth of sorts and is now estimated by some to be the fastest-growing board sport in the world. In fact, a few pundits predict that the fledgling sport will surpass both surfing and snowboarding in popularity.

AROUND THE TIME THAT LAIRD Hamilton was first rediscovering stand-up paddleboarding in Hawaii, Norm Hann was 3,500 kilometres away from the Pacific, teaching high-school science and phys-ed in Sudbury, Ontario. Raised in a family of teachers, Norm had dutifully gone through university and teacher's college. Then, with three years of teaching under his belt, Norm remembers thinking, "Is this it? Is this the next 30 years laid before me?"

Norm, a quietly focused, athletic 39-year-old, had grown up an active, outdoorsy kid,

canoeing and exploring during the summers at a cabin his grandfather built on a river outside of town. He'd also worked a couple of summers at an uncle's ski store in Banff, spending every spare moment scrambling in the mountains. The west held an undeniably strong pull with its world of possibilities for outdoor adventure: mountaineering, mountain biking, ski touring, surfing. So in 1999, just before he turned 30, Norm decided to change course. He loaded his truck and headed west.

When he arrived in B.C., Norm enrolled in an adventure tourism program in Vancouver. Upon graduation, he landed a cherry job establishing a new eco-adventure program at King Pacific Lodge, the luxury fishing resort deep in the Great Bear Rainforest. Norm's work included forging close relations with the local native population in nearby Hartley Bay. He became so close that in October 2006, he was formally adopted into the Raven Clan of the Hartley Bay Gitga'at, part of the Tsimshian First Nations. His given name was *T'aam Laan*, meaning "Steersman of the Canoe."

During these years, Norm also began surfing in Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Norm says he'd been hooked on surfing ever since he was a teenager. "I was buying surfing magazines all the way through high school and I'd never even been to the ocean." Then while watching a surf video in Vancouver in 2007, Norm





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saw a new sport that immediately tripped something in his psyche. It was a cross between surfing and canoeing—Laird Hamilton on a stand-up paddleboard. Tracking down a board in Vancouver took some doing, but when he did find one for rent, Norm came back to the shop and convinced the owner to sell it to him. Soon he was spending as much time as he could on the board, paddling lakes, surfing, making open-water crossings.

Now, a couple of years later, Norm—currently based near Squamish—is in the first year of Mountain Surf Adventures, his fledgling paddleboarding business. “Definitely one of the challenges was, with it being such a new sport, most people here didn’t know about it.” Together with Jen Segger, an elite adventure athlete and coach, he’s been running PaddleFit sessions—think boot camps with boards—in Squamish and Whistler. The uptake has been brisk.

And then he came up with his big idea: guided paddleboarding trips in the Great Bear Rainforest.



Checking in (clockwise from opposite page): Arriving at the Raven Chief longhouse on Princess Royal Island; exploring the nearby Cornwall River delta; dinner back at the longhouse; enjoying a quiet moment by the fire.





FOR PHOTOGRAPHER Taylor Kennedy and me, the expedition begins with an hour-long flight aboard a Dash 8 from Vancouver to Prince Rupert. The view descending through the grey canopy confirms both things we'd heard most about the area. It's rugged and it's rainy. Endless folds of tree-covered mountains rise up to meet dark clouds pregnant with precipitation.

Early the next morning, Norm and Jen arrive, after a 17-hour drive from Squamish in a truck packed with gear and boards. We load onto the *Tsimshian Storm*, a boat which runs ferry service to remote communities to the south. A couple of hours later, we pull into Hartley Bay, a collection of 65 houses and a handful of common buildings connected by a few kilometres of elevated boardwalk. There are no hotels in town.

There are no roads in or out. We are here strictly as guests of the community.

We're greeted by Norm's adoptive brother, Cameron Hill, who's hosting us at his modern-day longhouse. Over the course of the next few hours, Cameron describes how the Gitga'a't's millennia-old way of life is slowly dying. The Great Bear Rainforest may be the largest patch of coastal temperate rainforest left on the planet—stretching from northern Vancouver Island to Alaska—but it's been under constant threat from resource extractors. Happily, thanks to the efforts of such environmental groups as the David Suzuki Foundation and Raincoast, and persistent individuals like Ian McAllister, the B.C. government last year made good on a years-old promise to protect a significant portion of the land here. But the

fish that support all life in the Great Bear are disappearing. Salmon feed the entire food chain: the bears, the ravens, the orcas, the wolves, the humans, even the trees. Researchers believe that grizzly populations have halved since the year before, likely due in part to the massive decrease in salmon. Other species have already succumbed to rapacious human harvesting.

Cameron is a fisherman and he's also one of four councilmen for the Hartley Bay community. He knows firsthand how badly the resource economy is suffering, and he's looking seriously at recreation and tourism as a way to sustain his community.

The buy-in of the band is key to our adventure. We'll be guests in their home, not just for the time that we're in Hartley Bay, but for the entire trip. The whole journey is within Gitga'a't traditional territory and we'll be staying in their longhouses and watchman's cabins. "I feel very, very fortunate to be in the position I'm in, in this community," Norm had told me before the trip, "and I never take it for granted."

THE NEXT MORNING is overcast and grey in a way that's patently West Coast. At six a.m., after a full French press of coffee, we squeeze into our wetsuits. Cameron fires up his metal powerboat and we churn out of the harbour into Wright Sound. Norm figures that the open sound, with its complex confluence of currents, would be a rough way to start, and has arranged for Cameron to drop us 28 kilometres away, at Clement Rapids, the entrance to Cornwall Inlet on Princess Royal Island.

Hoods up against the wind, we look out at the landscape, which is a study in tonal shades of grey. Norm points out a spot where, when he was working for King Pacific Lodge, a ghostly Spirit bear—the famous white resident of the Great Bear Rainforest—wandered out of the woods within a few feet of his clients seated on a log. Norm regularly saw that Spirit bear around the creek we're passing, but one day it was found floating, its back broken and face torn, killed perhaps by a wolf pack in the neighbouring bay or by another bear. Princess Royal is one of the few places on earth where black, brown and white bears can be found together, but Disney Land it's not.

We enter the narrow mouth of the inlet and Cameron nudges the nose of the boat toward a rocky coast. We hump gear, three boards and a kayak ashore. (Our photographer Taylor will be travelling by more traditional means.) Cameron gives us a final wave and pulls away. And there we are:



Seeing the sights: The paddlers ditch the boards for a hike into the old-growth forest. Below: A close-up look at a sea-lion rookery. Opposite: Norm Hann checks out some wild life below the water.

four neoprene- and Gore-Tex-clad tubes of humanity in the Great Bear wilderness.

As the sound of Cameron's motor fades into the distance, all that remains is the patter of rain and the echo of our aloneness. The first order of business is to strap the 110-litre Seal bags and waterproof Pelican cases to our 12-foot boards. Before the trip, Norm had glued D-ring lashing points to the decks, including the virgin surface of his yellow cedar board, which he'd had hand-crafted by a surfboard shaper in the land-locked Whistler suburb of Pemberton.

Now that we're finally about to get underway, I'm nervous. It occurs to me that I might spend more time *in* the water than on it. And even if I do manage to stay up, will I be able to *keep* up? It's a long way to come to be the weak link in Norm's plans.

It was about a year ago that I saw my first stand-up paddleboard, although I didn't know what it was at the time—some guy, off in the distance, tooling around in the harbour near downtown Vancouver, looking a little dorky, I thought. Something about it just rubbed the Canadian in me the wrong way. It was like seeing someone standing up in a canoe. Why didn't he just sit down? But several months later, I decided to give it a try, and I liked it. Though that paddleboard outing lasted only about 20 minutes.

It's now the moment of truth. We step onto our boards and drift out. The first few tentative strokes, I'm aware of my whole body making minute adjustments in balance, right down to the small muscles firing in my feet. But I manage to keep upright.

During the next few hours, as we move

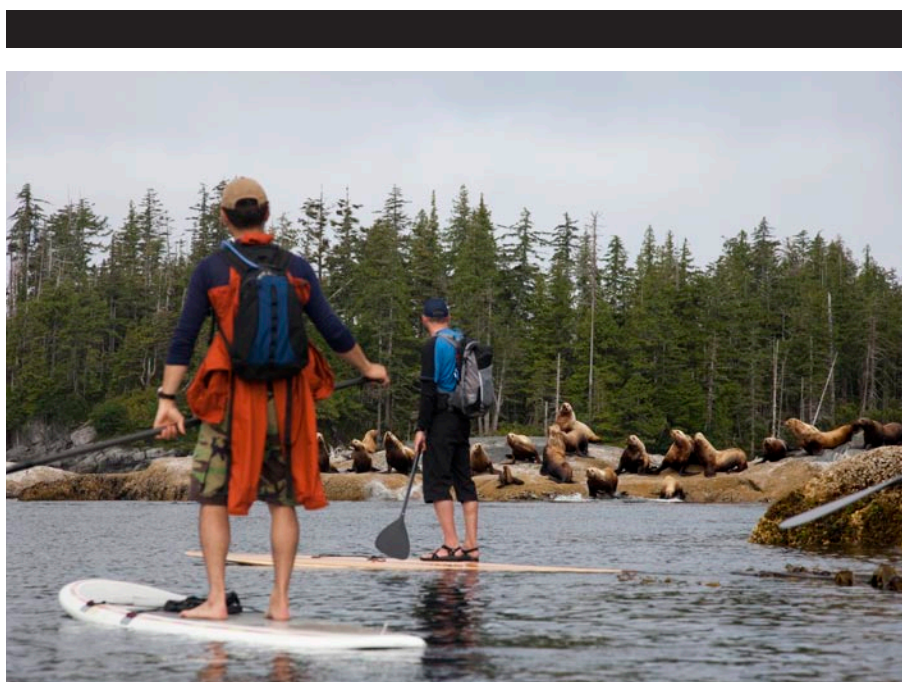
down the inlet, the benefits of a paddleboard become apparent. Gone is the constricted feeling of being in a kayak cockpit and the inevitable sore back. We pass over a deep kelp forest, and the high vantage point makes it feel like we're walking on a glass ceiling over a massive aquarium. We enter a passage no wider than a city street with orange, purple and brown sea stars and anemones studding the channel walls. I point out a cloud of jellyfish suspended in the darkness below, which Taylor, in his kayak, can't see until he's right above them. Later we marvel at a creature shaped remarkably like pendulous testicles.

This first day comes easily. I get into a meditative groove, practising the tips that Norm has passed along. It strikes me as a

sport that's easy to pick up, but difficult to master. Norm and Jen paddle casually, chatting and taking in the views of forested slopes and glacier-scoured sheets of granite shrouded in mist. We float under a cliff face bearing petroglyphs and 300-year-old cedar burial boxes.

As it turns out, we make shorter work of today's 12 kilometres than expected and arrive at the Raven Chief longhouse, *Waabs WiiDiis*, before lunch. Once we land, we need only untie a trucker's hitch, slip our arms through the backpack straps of our dry bags, and walk away. Taylor, meanwhile, hauls a garage sale's-worth of bits and bobs from his kayak onto the shore.

Inside the longhouse, we discover a spacious dry refuge, permeated with the smell



of cedar. A raised platform surrounds a square fire pit carpeted with broken white clam shells. Light streams in from slatted smoke vents between massive roof timbers. Outside an avalanche of rainforest biomass flows down right to the tide line. The soundscape of a waterfall—a kinetic cloud hanging in the trees—drifts across the inlet. Jen, who has raced in some exotic and wild locales around the world, is in wide-eyed awe of her surroundings. So is Taylor, who sits in front of the longhouse cradling his camera, taking in the ethereal haze and dramatic shifts in light. “It’s amazing how much the scenery changes,” he says.

Unencumbered with our luggage, we go explore the head of the inlet on our boards. When we approach the Cornwall River delta, a yearling bear pokes up a curious head and scampers away, scared off by the apparition. As the tea-coloured water becomes shallower, our hard efforts paddling against the river current are punctuated by stumbles each time our fins hit bottom or hook a submerged branch. Soon we’re enjoying another benefit of the paddleboard: easy portaging. With a 40-pound board hefted on one shoulder, we stride quickly through the shallows to our next put-in. The deeper we go into the forest, the more primordial it feels. We pass by a wall of lichen with grotesquely oversized leaves, as big and mottled as cabbage. “Biologists have discovered 350 new species in the canopy of a single tree,” says Norm.

It seems there’s a whole constellation of ecosystems above us.

THE NEXT DAY I LEARN that, while paddleboards may have their advantages, they also have their disadvantages. We head out

of Cornwall Inlet and enter the more open waters of Whale Channel. It’s sunny, but by mid-afternoon, the wind has kicked up the water into an angry slate grey shot through with mercury tips. Standing as we are, we’re about as aerodynamic as filing cabinets, teetering about in the chop. I feel like a plane-crash survivor, paddling a section of wing on the open ocean, scavenged materials balanced on top.

Jen tries paddling from her knees but can’t get a good stroke choking down on the long graphite paddle. Norm soldiers on, unbowed. Taylor, meanwhile, is having a much easier time of it. As we’re fighting for every nautical inch, he’s so relaxed in his heavily weighted kayak that he’s practically dozing off.

Grabbing the spare kayak paddle from Taylor, I make significantly more headway from my knees. We struggle through Burnes



Smooth paddling: Heading out into the open water of Whale Channel.

Passage to the shelter of Barnard Harbour and are greeted with the improbable vision of King Pacific Lodge, floating like Xanadu in the distance. Our new digs are simpler. A watchman’s cabin tucked in the woods of Cameron Cove. The fresh cedar structure is craftsman-made with two private rooms, a loft and a wood-burning stove.

The next morning we again leave our loads behind and go out to explore. It’s another blue-sky day. As we drift by, crews on purse seine fishing boats keep their heads down, busy clear-cutting their particular patch of ocean, giving us only the odd surreptitious, sideways glance. But when we pay a visit to a local sea-lion rookery, we provoke an impressive display of bravado from three large males. “They’re not used to seeing us standing up like this,” says Norm, who has brought kayak groups here before without the fuss. As the rest of the raft charge into the water, the three males, each the size of legless horses, continue to haw and posture, wide-eyed and braying, before taking to the water themselves. Guillemots with brilliant red feet and oystercatchers with lipstick-red beaks splash away. Out in the strait, a pod of orcas spouts.

Later in the afternoon, Norm takes us for a hike into the estuary behind the watchman’s cabin. We walk past bear daybeds, wolf scat and a salmon stream hemmed in by Sitka spruce. Norm tells us of once seeing a bear and a wolf sitting on opposite ends of the same log, fishing. I let the

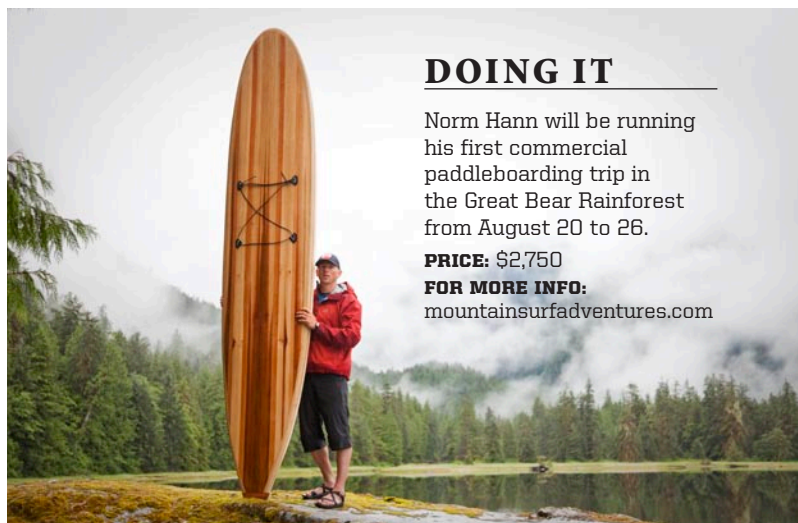
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DOING IT

Norm Hann will be running his first commercial paddleboarding trip in the Great Bear Rainforest from August 20 to 26.

PRICE: \$2,750

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image loll around in my mind, pleasurable to think of in a childlike way. As we wade further into the forest, we come to the distinct line between an area that had been logged many decades ago and soaring old growth. “They say that old growth will never fully recover from logging,” says Norm, “even if you were to leave it for a thousand years.”

ON OUR FOURTH DAY, we wake up to ravens, cackling and cawing, mid-debate. They beat our alarms, set extra early to take advantage of the still-morning waters. Using his chart and tide tables, Norm has painstakingly scheduled the timing of our outings, especially for exposed water crossings and the narrow channels that magnify the ebb and flood of tides. “Paddling a board goes from efficient to inefficient quickly,” Norm had said. “And distances in the Great Bear can be big.” As they will be today, with 30 kilometres to cover.

We hustle to get on the water, only to discover that the kayak is missing. It appears the tide must have lifted the boat in the night and carried it away. Taylor, Norm and I head out on the boards to search for it, splitting off into three directions. The water surface is a perfect glassiness, reflecting the subtle hues of blue and pink sky, and the bold lines of the surrounding mountains draped in strands of wispy cloud. By the time we reconvene—empty-handed—ripples dapple the water. Norm’s mood darkens.

But then there’s good news. A boat arrives in response to Norm’s call-out on the radio, with our errant kayak jutting out over its bow. One of the 30 seiners working the area had taken the time to pluck the ghost craft out of the water. We’re back in business. As we make our late start, two wolves lope up the estuary. One black and one grey. A good omen, we hope. We put our heads down and paddle.

Our meteorological luck thus far has been unbelievable. Prince Rupert holds the dubious distinction of being the wettest city in Canada. On average it gets about nine feet of rainwater each year. But the sky today is again clear blue. Like our Polynesian brothers and sisters, we enjoy the luxury of boardshorts.

Out in the strait, Norm encounters Marvin Robinson, a Hartley Bay councilman.

He’ll be picking us up at the end of our journey tomorrow, but today, Marvin’s taking the local MLA on a tour of an Enbridge oil tanker’s proposed route. It would pass directly by Hartley Bay, whose citizens can’t help but remember the *Exxon Valdez* catastrophe further up the coast, which killed hundreds of thousands of sea animals and billions of fish eggs. Three years ago, the people of Hartley Bay were the first responders to another major mishap right on their doorstep, when the *Queen of the North* ferry sank off Gil Island, leaving two people missing and diesel burping up from the depths. If the proposed tanker were to succumb to the siren song of the mermaids, life as the locals know it could be wiped out for generations to come.

We stop at the south end of Gil Island to visit Janie Wray and Hermann Meuter, the only permanent residents on the island. Their home is built of driftwood and Alaskan milled timber, and sits high on a rock promontory. Hermann’s not at home—he’s out helping a ship with some repairs, as a matter of courtesy. “Things happen out here,” says Janie, “there’s so few of us and sometimes you need to get rescued.”

Janie and Hermann spend their time studying the large sea life that migrates through these passages each year. For eight years now, their whale research station, dubbed the Cetacealab, has compiled data on clans of humpback whales and orcas. Down by the shore, one could, as Janie says, “almost reach out and touch the whales.” Thanks to a network of hydrophones set up in the surrounding waters, they’re able to listen to the whales’ songs and calls, some of which sound like men singing falsetto.

Sadly, we only have time for a quick visit, as we have to hurry if we want to reach MacDonald Bay, halfway up the west side of Gil. And the wind has started to pick up.

Leaving the protection of a land spit, the going gets increasingly tough. Norm leads the charge with Jen and me in tow, attempting to draft. But the poor tracking on the boards—designed more for riding waves—means that we’re alternately describing a double helix or weaving together like a snake into the wind.

We stop for a well-earned break in some protective islets just before rounding Fawcett Point. I’ve got a fistful of blisters on both hands, taped over with slivers of duct tape. But my body feels like it’s being hardened on the anvil of the paddleboard. If I were to keep this up, I imagine I’d be as

ripped as Matthew McConaughey or any of the other celebrity hipsters seen paddling their boards on the glossy pages of checkout-line magazines. After all, we’re not just paddling, we’re actively engaging our cores in full-body workouts.

Refreshed, we again mount our boards, squeeze past a small islet and turn onto the home stretch. Waves are bouncing off the shore cliffs and meeting other waves coming in, resulting in a completely unpredictable slosh. It takes Zen concentration to stay upright in the roiling tumult. I may as well be bobbing around on a cafeteria tray. But when I look over, I see that Norm has his backpack open on top of his board and his nose buried in his sea chart, as if he were reading a newspaper on the subway. His legs, like hydraulics, automatically compensate for the erratic movements of the liquid morass. He glances up only to peer at the explosions that follow after humpbacks breach out in the passage. Clearly, his regular surf trips to Tofino have paid off.

Then, suddenly, I’m in the water—and I’m drowning. I resurface into a barrage of waves, sputtering and hyperventilating. It’s cold enough that certain body parts have retracted and others have puckered. A wave washes over my head, and I gasp some more. The board has flipped but the buoyant dry bag has kept it from going over completely. I claw for the high edge, but it’s just out of reach. My backpack, weighted down with gear, full water bladder and emergency Snickers bars, is dragging me to the ocean floor. I flap my legs and try again to right the board, just falling short. I imagine Janie hearing my pathetic struggles on her hydrophone. Could she not send some dolphins to my rescue?

Then I see the look of curiosity on Taylor’s face, as he bobs next to me in the kayak, reflecting what an ass I’m making of myself. One last lunge, and I manage to grab the rail of the board and right it. Amazingly, the rigging system on the board works perfectly, the elastic cording holds the load tight to the board, and I throw myself on top.

I wave off concerns that anyone might have had, but it appears no one did. Instead, it seems like they’d prefer I stop goofing off. We still have some hard paddling ahead, before we get to the calm waters of MacDonald Bay and our last night in a watchman’s cabin. **C**

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