

Alone in Prideaux Haven. Mountain views become more dramatic when snow covers the peaks.



STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

# Winter Cruising

Forget about summer—winter cruising offers its own rewards

**D**espite the weather, we have developed a great fondness for winter cruising. Even the most popular anchorages have plenty of space. Instead of summer crowds, we find huge flocks of wintering seabirds.

Mountain views become more dramatic when snow covers the peaks. Lights reflecting on the water near communities add a warm glow to a moorage.

Marinas are more enjoyable in the winter, too. Many charge reduced off-season rates, and you'll typically have plenty of privacy. With fewer boaters about, the pace is slower and residents have more time to talk.

Contrary to what you might expect, pessimists make the most successful winter boaters. Expect the worse. Anchor

for a gale. Assume rain will fall for days. If it happens, you're prepared. If not, you're in luck and can enjoy the conditions.

**KEEPING WARM INSIDE** A key ingredient in our enjoyment of winter excursions is a diesel furnace, which keeps the cabin toasty and dry. Outdoor activities in particular are more appealing if we can easily warm up inside afterwards. We also carry two portable cabin heaters as backup (designed for marine use), which do a good job of heating the saloon or

stateroom. If you'd like to try winter boating but are unsure about investing in a furnace, start with these. They're typically power-hungry, so you'll need to be plugged in or running a generator.

Burning consumes oxygen and produces carbon monoxide. If you use a portable propane or gas heater, a well-ventilated cabin and a carbon monoxide detector are essential. Do not use a propane or gas oven to heat the cabin—they are not properly ventilated for this purpose.

**KEEPING WARM OUTSIDE** You don't want to feel pinned inside by bad weather. Carry a range of clothing that allows you to be outside comfortably, even if rain is falling and the wind is blowing. A second piece of equipment essential for comfort-

able winter cruising is a marine survival work suit. This is similar to a ski jump-suit, but with built-in flotation and hypothermia protection. Toss these on over light clothing, add a pair of gloves and perhaps an ear warmer, and be instantly warm in the coldest weather. We wear them to ride on our unenclosed flybridge and in the dinghy, or to relax on deck at anchor.

**SAFETY** With few boats nearby in winter, you have to be more safety-conscious—help could take awhile to arrive. Consider your crew-overboard plans. Lower water temperatures increase the risk of hypothermia, and you must get the person back on board quickly without outside assistance. Also have an abandon ship plan. Small boats can and do sink in under a minute. Don't assume that you can escape in your dinghy unless you can quickly deploy it. Think seconds, not minutes.

We purchased the survival work suits partly for abandon ship survival. The insulated suits don't provide the same level of exposure protection as a true survival suit. But in 45-degree water, the survival time of the wearer is roughly four hours, about double that of standard foul-weather gear. We wear Mustang 2175s, which are standard issue with the Coast Guard on both sides of the border.

**WEATHER** We pay much closer attention to the weather in winter than in summer. At minimum, carry a barometer so you can monitor conditions if you end up out of radio contact.

Listen to each new weather report during the day, and believe it. We've found the forecasts to be more accurate when big weather systems are in play. In milder weather, meteorologists have a more difficult time predicting 10- versus 20-knot winds. But if they say the wind will blow 35 from the south, it usually does.

Be aware of weather trouble spots—these become worse in bigger winter winds. Outflow winds can be particularly hazardous to small craft. Be cautious when crossing the mouth of or entering large inlets in the winter.

Wind and sea conditions can differ dramatically in a short distance, depending on location. A sheltered anchorage

## WINTER DESTINATIONS

Is all that effort to get to a winter destination worth it? Most definitely. Some of our most enjoyable cruises have been in the winter. Here are some of our favourite destinations.

- **Victoria Inner Harbour.** Victoria in the winter is a magical place. Downtown is aglow with lights, and with few other boats around, the docks feel like your private domain.
- **Port Sidney Marina.** Sidney is a great winter destination for all the same reasons as the summer. Plus, if a big storm comes through, you can enjoy it safely from the public wharf—and dock space is plentiful.
- **Revest Island.** Annette Inlet and Glenthorne Passage are snug winter retreats. Southeast winds can blow through the gap in Glenthorne Passage, so anchor well into the head.
- **Ganges Harbour, Saltspring Island.** Ganges feels as alive in the winter as it does in the summer. Residents sit outside for coffee on a frosty morning, and outdoor heaters abound.
- **Rincess Cove, Wallace Island Marine Park.** This is a lovely anchorage, with good southeast protection. The cove is popular in the winter, too—we've never managed to have it all to ourselves.
- **Winter Cove, Saturna Island.** During a gale, big gusts will reach into Winter Cove. But there's plenty of room for sufficient scope, and it's worth going ashore to walk to the exposed north-east side. With the waves pounding in off the Strait of Georgia, you'll think you're on the west coast of Vancouver Island.
- **Tod Inlet.** Besides being a lovely snug winter anchorage, the Butchart Gardens puts on a spectacular winter light display. The dinghy dock is closed in the winter, which is just as well because it can be a long, cold ride around. Instead, land at Tod Inlet along the north shore. Go north on the trail behind the bathrooms that runs along the fence, keeping left at any forks. After a quarter mile, you'll leave the park at the Butchart Gardens parking lot exit. Walk a short distance up the road to the main gates.
- **Bird's Eye Cove.** Anchor out or moor on the end of the Bird's Eye Cove Marina dock. The hills above glow with lights.
- **False Creek.** Winter is a particularly good time to stay at False Creek. The lights all around are spectacular. Granville Island is as vibrant and interesting in the winter as it is in the summer.

—J & J Hamilton



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can deceive you into thinking conditions aren't so bad. And conditions can be much worse locally than predicted. In big winds, avoid exposed, narrow channels, such as Navy Channel between North Pender Island and Mayne Island.

Overnight low temperatures can freeze shifters and other outdoor equipment. Carry a spray bottle of methanol, with plenty in reserve, for thawing.

**UNDERWAY** Poor visibility due to rain or fog is more common in winter, and conditions can quickly deteriorate. Radar is invaluable. Ensure that your navigation lights are all bright and functional, and carry spare bulbs. Permanently mount a radar reflector to be a good radar target. Sound a foghorn in poor visibility.

Listen to the VTS channel for your area. This is especially important to know what ships are out there if you will be travelling through or near VTS lanes. But you can also learn about local weather conditions. Commercial crews often discuss how conditions affect their navigation decisions.



With marine survival work suits, we can enjoy the outdoors year round.

Be vigilant when underway. Winter storm surges drag a massive amount of wood off beaches and into the water, and choppy winter water can make logs difficult to spot. Use binoculars to scan the water ahead for hazards.

**BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES** Always be prepared for rough water and big winds. Secure any loose equipment out-

side before getting underway. If conditions deteriorate, you don't want to be on deck wrestling to tie something down. Securing everything inside the boat is also important. In rough water, loose items will shift. Even with no safety risk, having things flying about the cabin is distracting and disconcerting. Studies of offshore sailors concluded that loose equipment moving about reduces a crew's confidence in their vessel's safety.

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**BACKUPS** Since few pleasure craft are out in the winter, you'll be on your own for spares. Have spare parts and backups for key equipment. Definitely carry spare fuel filters—in rough water the fuel will slosh around more in the tank, and crud in the bottom is more likely to be picked up and plug the filter. If you're rarely out in rough water, do a full pass, checking for loose connections prior to leaving and underway. With the boat moving around a lot more, something close to the edge may fail.

**ANCHORING** Winter anchoring requires more care than in the summer. You can't anchor without considering the wind. Big winds come up more frequently than in the summer, and often from the south. If you anchor with a southern exposure, be prepared to move.

Use a minimum 5:1 scope and have space for 7:1 or more if a storm is forecast. With few boats around, this is usually achievable. But you must know how much rode you have out and your swing radius. Use heavy ground tackle sized for

storm conditions and avoid anchorages with poor holding.

Given the opportunity to take a mooring buoy, we prefer to anchor in the winter. We're confident in our ground tackle, and have seen several Park mooring buoys washed ashore in both Washington and B.C. If you do take a buoy, run a second line with slightly more slack. The risk of chafing through a line increases in gusty winter winds.

**DEALING WITH MOISTURE** Adequate ventilation is particularly important—the boat is more likely to be sealed up to keep the heat in. Humidity is higher and you'll bring moisture inside with wet clothing and through opening the door in the rain. Indoor cooking, particularly with propane, also adds moisture to the air. High humidity is uncomfortable, and it encourages mould and impedes wet items from drying. Have a way to remove moist air from the boat, and ensure you can do so in the rain and not bring more moisture in. A large umbrella deployed over an open companionway works well.

**COMFORT** With shorter days and uglier weather, you will spend more time inside the cabin than in the summer. Making that environment warm, comfortable and enjoyable is important for successful winter boating.

A furnace or other heat source is the number-one necessity. Carry plenty of diversions such as books, board games or videos—whatever you enjoy. Bring a good supply of warming food and beverages. If you have an oven on board, plan to make use of it. Roasting and baking allows you to cook inside, and these are good foods for cold winter days.

**W**inter cruising requires more preparation than for summer, but it's worth the effort. Besides getting more out of your boating investment, winter cruising improves summer trips—you'll be a safer boater, and better prepared for rough weather. And when you boat in the winter, bad summer weather always feels balmy in comparison. ☺

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