

Christmas in DESOLATION

We wound our way slowly through the entrance to Prideaux Haven just before sunset. It was one week before Christmas and the cove, normally so crowded during the summer months, stood silent and empty. We felt caught in M. Wylie Blanchet's book *The Curve of Time*. We would not have been surprised by the arrival of her *Caprice*, piloted by a 1930s Blanchet, disappointed to have to share the anchorage.

WINTER BOATING We traditionally spend Christmas in Victoria's Inner Harbour and the Gulf Islands aboard Dirona, our 12 m (40') powerboat. Last year, we ranged farther north to Desolation Sound. While the summer throngs would be gone, we still expected to see a few other boats. Instead, the entire region was seemingly deserted. The scene at Prideaux Haven played out in one popular anchorage after another: Teakeme Arm, Walsh Cove, Laura Cove, Roscoe Bay, the Octopus Islands and Von Donop Inlet were all empty. We loved the solitude and serenity, and revelled in having each place all to ourselves.

However, the unfamiliar quiet was sometimes spooky, as if some terrible calamity had befallen all the pleasure craft but our own. My father, who lives in Campbell River, said his friends thought we were crazy to be going in the winter. Crazy or not, it was a wonderful experience.

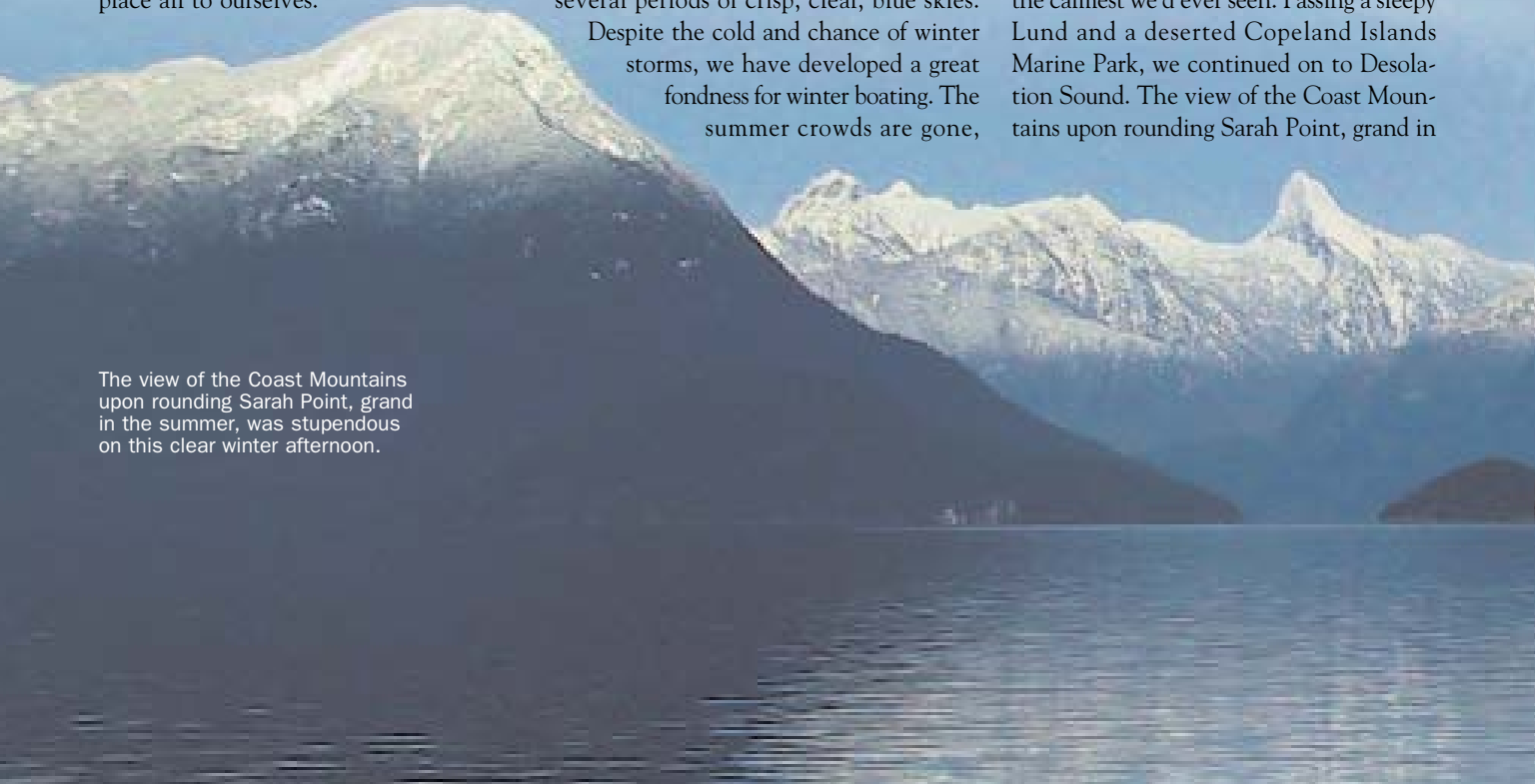
When learning of our trip, everyone immediately asks about the weather. It was cold of course—we did not spend any time lolling around on deck in shorts—but we saw little fog and relatively few storms. Although the skies were overcast more often than not, it seldom rained. In fact, we had several periods of crisp, clear, blue skies.

Despite the cold and chance of winter storms, we have developed a great fondness for winter boating. The summer crowds are gone,

replaced by huge flocks of wintering seabirds, and there is always plenty of space at even the most popular anchorages. 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.

SNOWY PEAKS AND HUSHED RETREATS

We crossed the Strait of Georgia at Nanaimo on a relatively windless day under a sparkling blue sky. Although a gale blew the night before, the conditions were among the calmest we'd ever seen. Passing a sleepy Lund and a deserted Copeland Islands Marine Park, we continued on to Desolation Sound. The view of the Coast Mountains upon rounding Sarah Point, grand in



The view of the Coast Mountains upon rounding Sarah Point, grand in the summer, was stupendous on this clear winter afternoon.

ON SOUND

the summer, was stupendous on this clear winter afternoon. The peaks seemed higher and more aloof, with a thick coating of snow up high and a dusting further down. After quickly running short of superlatives, we settled for just repeatedly exclaiming “Wow!”

We were eager to reach our first stop, Prideaux Haven, the most popular destination in the park, and extremely crowded in the summer. At least 50 boats were inside the last time we visited, with float planes constantly arriving outside to shuttle boaters between their vessels and the southern urban centres. This winter day, however, the cove was empty and still. Beyond the anchorage, Mount Denman’s snow-covered tooth jutted 2,012 m (6,600’) into a deep blue sky. By this point, we were feeling quite pleased with ourselves.

The following day we stopped at Refuge Cove to top off our fuel and water, which would become more difficult as Christmas approached. Winter hours are much more sporadic and it is worth checking in advance for any potential closures if you go. We had

contacted Refuge Cove, Heriot Bay and Lund prior to departing. All would be open, but with less frequent hours than the summer.

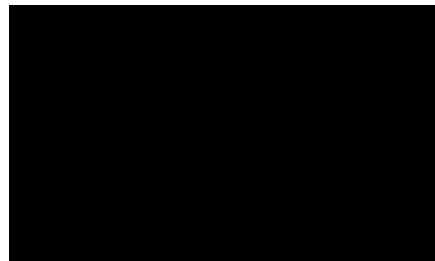
En route we passed the only pleasure craft we encountered underway during the entire trip, the sailing vessel Grizzly Bear (profiled in *Pacific Yachting*, March 2003), its decks piled high with fuel for a wood-burning stove. Refuge Cove was quiet when we arrived, with a few homes clearly occupied, but the fuel dock and store were closed. On a previous summer visit, we had to wait for space at the fuel dock. This time we waited for someone to notice that they had a customer. In the interim, we walked along the raised walkways that connect the homes, closed to the public in the summer, and up into the trails behind the village for a bird’s-eye view of the cove. The fuel dock eventually opened—the man running the pumps couldn’t decide if we were six months early or six months late.

WATERFALLS AND RAINFOREST Our next stop was the waterfall at Teakerne Arm. Anticipating a more active winter flow, we

were delighted to find not one, but two waterfalls gushing over the cliff. Stern-tying to the point just south of the falls, we bundled up for a glass of wine on deck. Behind us the air was heavy with mist thrown up by the roaring falls, while ahead the sky turned deep purple with the setting sun. We awoke the next morning to a cloudless sky, with sea smoke drifting above the water surface. Taking the dinghy to the park dock, which was slippery and white with frost, we walked to the top of the falls and their source, Cassel Lake. The extra waterfall flowed over the trails, however, fallen logs provided necessary, albeit slippery, bridges. Cassel Lake, in the summer a warm and popular swimming spot, was chilly and tranquil, with not another soul about. We left Teakerne Arm mid-morning to take advantage of the clear skies and head deeper into the Coast Mountains, seeking views of snow-clad peaks. Were it summer, this would have been a perfect day to head up Bute Inlet. However, treacherous high winds can develop rapidly this time of year.



AN ONBOARD COZY CHRISTMAS
FOR TWO IN DESOLATION SOUND





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Even the sturdy Forest Service vessels that once patrolled the coast were not to enter Bute in the winter. The view down Pryce Channel would have been difficult to top anyway—snow-encrusted Mounts Grazebrooke and Whieldon were aglow in the afternoon sun. It was almost dusk when we neared the mouth of Toba Inlet, so we stopped at Walsh Cove. One of the distinct downsides of winter boating is the reduced number of daylight hours, although an upside is that the stars come out early.

The following day we returned under cloudy skies to Desolation Sound Marine Park and anchored in Laura Cove for the night. We bundled up for a dinghy trip, expecting by now to find someone in Prideaux Haven as Christmas neared. It was

still empty. Melanie Cove too was devoid of boats, but packed with moon jellyfish—literally thousands—with bodies coloured white, pink, salmon and purple. Continuing our Marine Park tour, Roscoe Bay was our next destination. The bay was empty except for six pairs of surf scoters, with their distinctive white forehead and skull patches, who swam with a pair of Barrow’s goldeneye, as is frequently their custom. We anchored just off a vigorous lacy waterfall on the northern shore face, which is just a trickle in the summer if it exists at all. Looking back from shore at the bay’s head, the white of Dirona’s hull matched the snow-covered crowns of Dudley Cone and Mount Crawshay in the distance. Roscoe Bay is connected to nearby Black Lake by an old

logging flume and the higher winter water levels had produced a torrent. The trail to the lake was covered by a thick carpet of moist and decomposing leaves, and the rain-forest on either side was in full glory. Steeped with life, it looked, felt and smelled magnificent. We found many different types of mosses and lichens throughout, in all shades of vibrant green. Black Lake was serene, with wisps of fog reflected perfectly in the smooth surface.

Christmas Afloat

The next marine park on the list was Octopus Islands, where we would spend Christmas Eve. A major winter storm was underway. Strong southerlies reached even into Okisollo Channel, and the park looked

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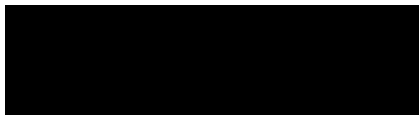
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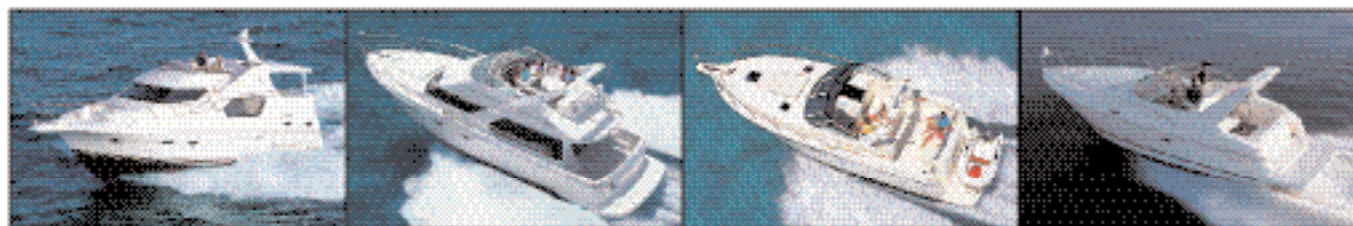
exposed and uninviting. We found shelter and solid holding in the middle of Tentacle Cove. The storm increased that night to blow 55 kts at Cape Mudge, while we

WINTER SAFETY

The pleasures of winter solitude require a higher level of self-sufficiency than in the summer months. Fuel, water and supplies are less prevalent, as is assistance if necessary. We are well-stocked with stores and spares, can handle most mechanical issues ourselves and are fairly safety-conscious. However, the worst-case scenario of having to abandon ship becomes more serious in the winter. If we did end up in the water, the decreased temperature increases the risk of hypothermia and, with fewer boats about, another vessel might not arrive on-scene for several hours. Prior to the winter Desolation Sound trip, we considered how best to prepare for this situation. Our inflatable dinghy, hinged to the swim platform and flipped up on its side, with the motor mounted separately on the transom, cannot be quickly deployed, if at all, in rough seas. Boats can and do sink within minutes, so we already had an EPIRB installed to send off a distress signal with our location should we be unable to issue a Mayday call. In addition to Type I PFDs, we carry drysuits for scuba diving, which are effectively survival suits. However, neither is comfortable to wear on a regular basis, nor are the drysuits donned rapidly should time be tight. We considered a self-inflating life raft, but they are expensive, should be inspected yearly, and do not always inflate. In the end, we decided upon marine survival coveralls, our Christmas gifts to each other. They look somewhat like ski jumpsuits, are standard issue within the Coast Guard on both sides of the border,

and are commonly worn by commercial crew. While insulated, they do not provide the same level of exposure protection as a true survival suit. But in 7° C (45° F) water, the survival time of the wearer is roughly four hours, about double that of standard foul-weather gear. They have a second safety feature of flotation, so one is always wearing a life jacket with the suit. We opted for Mustang 2175s, although other companies produce similar products. In the deep pockets we carry a storm whistle, emergency signal mirror, waterproof strobe light, and submersible VHF radio. The suits are very comfortable to wear and are also the perfect antidote to the hassle of wearing multiple layers to combat winter temperatures. Unfortunately, extra-small was not in stock, so only James had one for this trip, mine didn't arrive until January. Instead, I wore long underwear, jeans, ski pants, insulated socks under boots, a long-sleeved shirt, a winter sweater, a fleece vest and jacket and then a large coat, topped with a hooded neckwarmer, ski gloves, and a PFD. James simply pulled the coveralls on over light clothing, added a pair of sneakers and gloves, and was out-side, warm and buoyant before I had my jeans on. The suits are excellent for dinghy trips, but less so for hiking, where a layered approach is more effective. They have quite transformed our winter boating experience. We now spend greater time on deck, both underway and at anchor, where a nightcap on a cold evening under a starry sky is a more frequent occurrence.

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recorded gusts of 35. Instead of Christmas music, we listened to the Vessel Traffic channel, as ships signed off early for Christmas Eve and everyone exchanged season's greetings. On Christmas morning we lazed in the cabin over breakfast and watched a huge flock of common goldeneye forage for their own meal nearby. We left that afternoon in the mist of the warm front that followed the previous night's storm. Passing through Hole in the Wall, the water temperature increased marginally to 8° C (46° F). In the summer, the waters on either side of these tidal rapids typically differ by 10°.

We anchored that night in Von Donop Inlet, empty and silent save for the soulful call of a loon. It was a wonderful setting for our Christmas dinner of peppercorn-crusted roast beef tenderloin, potatoes "Da Delfina," boiled fresh artichoke with lemon-butter sauce, and a bottle of cabernet. If nothing else, we're certainly maintaining the holiday eating tradition.

Boxing Day dawned clear and calm, with early morning twinkling stars reflected in still waters. With several more storms forecast, we took advantage of the weather break and ran south. "The Curve of Time" held us for two more days at another of Blanchet's favourite haunts, Princess Louisa Inlet, which was also deserted. We finally established ourselves firmly in the present by celebrating our adventure and ringing in the New Year at Vancouver's Granville Island.

Jennifer and James Hamilton are correspondents for the Waggoner Cruising Guide and boat year-round throughout the Pacific Northwest. Jennifer is currently writing her fourth book, North of the Rapids, the story of the Broughton Archipelago and North Island Straits. 🌐



Christmas dinner for two.