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Circumnavigating Vancouver Island

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

Many trawler owners believe the west coast of Vancouver Island is only for ocean-capable boats. And until recently, we were among them—believing the west coast was not a place for our 40-foot trawler, *Dirona*.

Then, in summer 2003, we cruised the Inside Passage to the north of Vancouver Island, getting some open-ocean experience in small doses. The swells took a little getting used to, but we soon felt comfortable enough that the experience inspired us to take on the circumnavigation of Vancouver Island the following summer.

Vancouver Island—at 12,000 square miles, the largest island on North America’s Pacific Coast—lies along 300 miles of British Columbia coastline, starting at the border with Washington State and running halfway to Alaska. The island’s mountainous spine and eastern flank form a major portion of the sheltered passage to Alaska from the lower 48 states. Thousands of boaters cruise this area each year.

The island’s western shore abuts the Pacific Ocean—the first landfall to the west is Japan. This less-traveled outer shore, known simply as “the west coast,” is the challenging part of circumnavigating Vancouver Island. Conditions are among the most dangerous in British Columbia. Its ocean exposure means the region receives plenty of nasty weather. Winter storms can produce sustained 70- to 80-knot winds, with gusts to 95. In the summer, 40-knot gale force winds are common. On good days, a constant ocean swell rises; on bad days, ships go down and lives are lost.

But the west coast also is one of the Pacific Northwest’s best cruising destinations. Attractions include sea caves, sandy beaches, hot springs, sea otters, historic ruins, archipelagos, quirky settlements, grand scenery, and countless sheltered anchorages. Hundreds of boaters have circumnavigated the island successfully, and doing so is very rewarding. But still, sailboats dominate; fewer trawler owners tackle the west coast.

Although traveling the west coast is more demanding than the sheltered Inside Passage, we found the trip manageable in our well-equipped Bayliner. In fact, two of the three major cruising guides for the region were researched aboard small coastal cruisers: a Tollycraft 26 and a Nordic Tug 32.

TRIP PLANNING

The west coast may be “out there,” but it is well documented. Our main reference was the *Waggoner Cruising Guide*, but two other books also cover the territory:

Exploring Vancouver Island’s West Coast, by Don Douglass and Réanne Hemingway-Douglass, and *Cruising Guide to the West Coast of Vancouver Island*, by Don Watmough. We had no shortage of information. Our biggest problem was time. It is roughly 730 nautical miles around the island, not including side trips. We had only 3 weeks to cover the whole west coast (plus a week for weather delays and to travel the east side). Four weeks would have been better, and 6 weeks would be ideal.

Five sounds and several inlets indent the west coast, allowing for open-water exposure in controllable amounts. The longest run without shelter is about 40 nautical miles. We cruised in

open-water hops, spending several days between hops in protected waters. While each sound has settlements of various sizes with facilities for diesel, gas, and water, the area was decidedly rugged. Some facilities do cater to pleasure craft, but for the most part, cruisers either anchor out or moor at public

docks. Supply sources are limited, so self-sufficiency is a requirement. For us, this was part of the attraction. Fewer facilities meant fewer boaters—we rarely shared an anchorage the entire trip.

The west coast summer cruising season runs from May through September, when winds are lighter. We went in August. We made most open ocean runs early in the day, because the typical summer pattern is minimal morning winds with afternoon westerlies of 20 knots or more. Fog is common in the mornings, too, particularly in August and September, but it usually burns off by afternoon.

The guidebooks provided boat setup advice and equipment suggestions. Because we boat year round, our winter cruising safety and backup systems exceeded recommendations for this trip. As we do for all major trips, we made sure everything was in working order before we left.

Although we had a few failures en route, all were fixable, and we wouldn’t make any changes to our setup if we went again.

A major decision in planning a trip around Vancouver Island is which way to go. Most cruisers go counter-clockwise, in the direction of the prevailing wind and current. For sailboaters, this is particularly important. Even in a powerboat, it’s a lot smoother to go with the swells than against them. We, instead, went clockwise because

we wanted to spend any time we might have to spare at the north end of the island, which we have fewer opportunities to visit. (The south end is only about a half-day cruise from our home port in Seattle.) Given similar time constraints, we would go this way again.

We began our trip in Victoria, on Vancouver Island’s southeastern tip, casting off just before dawn for Barkley Sound, 92 nautical miles away. (We also could have left from Sooke, 20 miles west of Victoria.) Port Renfrew offers shelter halfway to Barkley Sound from Sooke. Conditions were near perfect, with clear skies and smooth seas, and



This totem pole in the mining town of Zeballos is a tribute to the rich history of the area.



interest are endless. We spent four nights there, but we could easily have spent 3 weeks in a different spot every night. One of Barkley Sound's major attractions is its archipelagos, particularly the Broken Group, part of the Pacific Rim National Park. The southern islets in the Broken Group are exposed to the ocean, which has carved extraordinary sea caves into the islets' outer shores. Several caves were large enough that we could take the dinghy all the way inside. Barkley Sound is an ideal destination for those who would like to try the west coast but aren't sure about taking on the whole circumnavigation.

Adapted from a Nobletec chart

remained so the entire day. The ocean swell was less than 3 feet, and hardly noticeable. *Dirona* took on a gentle undulating motion as we proceeded to Barkley Sound. Navigating through such swells was easy and soon became almost relaxing. Conditions were nothing like the steep tide rips that form close to our home port.

As we entered the Pacific Ocean near Port Renfrew, a "superpod" of about 50 killer whales overtook us. We were exhilarated.

BARKLEY SOUND

Barkley Sound, the southernmost sound on Vancouver Island's west coast, is among the best cruising territories in the Pacific Northwest, with excellent infrastructure. Two Coast Guard stations service the area, and three towns—Port Alberni (pop. 19,500), Ucluelet (pop. 1,800), and Bamfield (pop. 200)—have fuel and moorage. Other facilities vary by town size.

Cruising grounds in Barkley Sound are diverse and dramatic, ranging from mountain-lined inlets to complex archipelagos. Anchorage choices and points of

At Hot Springs Cove, boaters can leave lasting reminders of their visits. The most impressive set of boards commemorates those who were part of the Royal Victoria Yacht Club's Millennium Cruise.



CLAYOQUOT SOUND

Our 25-mile run in open water to Clayoquot Sound was just as enjoyable as our first exposure to the ocean on the way to Barkley Sound. The sun was out and swells were minimal as we passed a few humpback whales and several sailboats running wing and wing.

Clayoquot has the second largest population of the west coast sounds. Fuel and moorage are available at Tofino (pop. 1,600) and Ahousat (pop. 400). Tofino has most of the facilities you'd expect to find in a port town, while Ahousat has a small store, a café, and marine ways.

When we turned into Templar Channel toward Tofino, we felt that we'd entered a time warp: The 188-foot barkentine *Concordia* was heading out to sea. The ship is one of several educational vessels that run the west coast in the summer.

We stayed four nights in Clayoquot Sound, but we would have enjoyed staying twice as long there. Our favorite anchorage was at Mosquito Harbour on Meares Island, at the eastern side of the sound. From there, we had a clear view northeast to Vancouver Island's striking Rhino Peak, and the sunset was stunning. On our last day there, we visited Hot Springs Cove Marine Park. This was our first experience with the west coast mooring buoys, which are designed to hold

several fishing vessels safely through fierce storms. These steel-plated monsters reached almost to our bow pulpit and were quite different from the small, recreational buoys at Inside Passage marine parks. We had to step onto the buoy to pass the line through.

Hot Springs Cove is a highlight of any west coast cruise. A boardwalk leads 2 miles from the park dock through lush rainforest to the hot springs. Following a long-standing tradition, boaters swap a board in the walk for one carved with their date of visit and boat name. Hundreds of carved boards, some very creative, are already in place. At trail's end, the park's namesake springs—122 degrees Fahrenheit—flow over a small cliff and into several large pools of varying temperatures. We enjoyed a long soak in our own private pool!

NOOTKA ISLAND AND NOOTKA SOUND

Nootka Island sits just off Vancouver Island, providing sheltered passage along its east and north shores and forming the western shore of Nootka Sound. Three towns are nearby: Gold River (pop. 1,700), Tahsis (pop. 900, before its sawmill closed recently), and Zeballos (pop. 300). Gold River is 9 miles from the water and doesn't cater to the cruising boater, but Tahsis and Zeballos have fuel, water, moorage, and supplies.

We began the 30-mile open-water run to Nootka Sound at 0630. Shoals and rocks lie well offshore, and the area has a reputation for sudden squalls, so we wanted to get through early. The swells were 2 to 3 feet, but widely spaced, and we comfortably bobbed over them.

Just inside Nootka Sound is Friendly Cove, a National Historic Site that commemorates the first European settlement, by Spain from 1789 to 1795, in what became British Columbia. (In 1778, Britain's Capt. James Cook, with his ships, *Resolution* and *Discovery*, was the first European to make contact with the native population at Nootka.) Cook's visit spurred the lucrative 18th-century fur trade that led to hostilities between Spain and Britain and nearly brought Europe to war in 1790. In 1792, Captains George Vancouver of England and Juan Francisco de la Odega y Quadra of Spain met at Nootka Sound but were unable to negotiate the Nootka Convention, under which Spain would relinquish to England all claim to the Pacific Northwest. The convention eventually was ratified in 1795.

Friendly Cove has one of the few manned and readily accessible lighthouses on the British



The Pacific Ocean has carved many extraordinary sea caves into the islands on Barkley Sound's outer shoreline. We took the dinghy deep inside this cave to get a better look.

Columbia coast. We tied to the public dock and walked to the light station, where the keeper introduced himself and answered our questions. We also visited a small church there that contains some beautiful native carvings and two impressive stained-glass windows that were gifts from the Spanish government.

Over the following 2 days, we visited Tahsis and Zeballos. Tahsis has an excellent marina, but because the sawmill—the town's mainstay—had closed, the town was quiet. However, the pub was open, and we enjoyed a pint on its wonderful outdoor deck, with high mountains and nature all around. The mining town of Zeballos has a fascinating museum and well-maintained walking trails.

KYUQUOT SOUND

Walters Cove is the only settlement in Kyuquot Sound. A small fishing community (pop. 300) on the west shore of the sound, it has moorage and a small



The west coast buoys are designed to hold several fishing vessels safely through fierce west coast storms. These steel-plated monsters reached almost to our bow pulpit.



we passed a huge kelp bed with perhaps 50 sea otters in it—extremely cute. The sea otter population was once wiped out during the fur trade, but in 1969, the Canadian government successfully reintroduced them to the west coast.

BROOKS PENINSULA

Jutting 10 miles into the ocean between Kyuquot and Quatsino Sounds, the Brooks Peninsula is pounded by winds that flow over and around it and combine with 15 knots of increased force. In storms, the passage around this headland is among the most dangerous on the coast. The 200-square mile Brooks

Peninsula Provincial Park encompasses the entire land mass, with several anchorages and places to explore on either side.

From the Bunsby Islands, we toured Nasparti Inlet on the south side of Brooks Peninsula and anchored there. There we found an unusual sea cave that started as a crevice in the cliff and then turned into a small cave at the end. Moss grew on the sides, and water dripped through at the front of the cave from the trees above.

We got up early the next day to round the fearsome peninsula. Conditions were calm, though, and we had a relaxing passage. Even with good weather, waves crashed and beat the shoreline—it must be truly frightening in a storm. We stopped for the night in Klaskish Basin, along the peninsula's north shore. Nearby East Creek felt like something from Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Land That Time Forgot*: Ten-foot stumps—the remains of felled trees—had blown in here during storms and lodged with their gnarled roots exposed. They looked eons old.

QUATSINO SOUND

The northernmost sound on the west coast, Quatsino, has several communities ranging in size from Port Alice (pop. 1,200) to Winter Harbour (pop. 20). Between them, fuel, moorage, provisions, and other services are available. Quatsino Sound itself consists of several inlets, where anchorage is difficult, but there are several places to stop and explore.



We worked north from Brooks Peninsula to Quatsino Sound through large swells, some approaching 10 feet. They were far apart, though, and navigating them was not difficult. Well inside Quatsino Sound are the Quatsino Narrows, in which currents can reach 9 knots. We transited near slack and anchored just beyond in Varney Bay.

We hurried to make it up the Marble River by dinghy while the tide was high enough to get in and back out again. The river starts out rather wide, with tidal flats on either side, then constricts tightly at high rock walls. With vegetation spilling down the sides, it felt like a jungle river. Above the water level, person-sized tunnels extended inland. We'd never seen any place like it.

THE FINAL LEG

Running short of time, we could spend only a day in Quatsino Sound before continuing north to Sea Otter Cove, just off the open ocean, near Cape Scott at Vancouver Island's northwest corner. A major storm was forecast, and we sneaked in before the winds came up. We put on our exposure suits to explore by dinghy. We found the area windswept and rugged; the waves outside the cove were 10 feet high and breaking.

The wind blew a steady 50 knots off Brooks Peninsula that night, while we recorded gusts to 45 at our location. Conditions calmed by the next morning. With another low-pressure system forecast for that afternoon, we left early to make the 35-mile run over Vancouver Island's northern tip before the storm hit. Water conditions were reasonable, with a widely spaced 6- to 9-foot swell.

But rounding Cape Scott put us into steep, tight 3- to 5-foot chop with sets of 5- to 6-foot waves. We slogged through it to Goletas Channel—and then we were officially “inside!” Over the next several days, we worked our way south to complete our circumnavigation.

While on the outer coast, we had encountered some rough water, but we never were surprised by it—west coast weather reports were timely and accurate. Being able to take on the open-water runs in small chunks made the rougher patches more tolerable. It was just never that long before we were back in sheltered water again.

We had undertaken an unforgettable adventure, and upon its successful completion, we felt a real sense of accomplishment. We definitely would return to the Wild West. The only thing we would wish for is more time. 