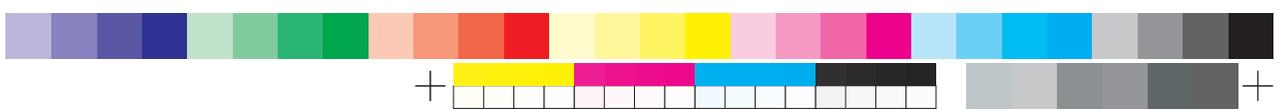


*Dirona* was the only boat anchored in Garden Bay for New Year's Eve. This tranquil scene belied the storm that was to follow.

# A Christmas Cruise on the Sunshine Coast

A boat, a "land yacht" and a surprisingly big storm  
make for a Christmas experience to remember

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON



**W**e've spent Christmas and New Year's afloat for the past several years. Sometimes we travel long distances to Desolation Sound or the Broughtons. Other years we just poke about Victoria and the Gulf Islands. Last year, we split the difference and cruised the Sunshine Coast.

This trip differed little from previous winter trips in that we experienced good weather punctuated by a few big winter storms. For the most part, we're usually safely at anchor when bad weather hits. Still, we're often surprised at the wind speed in seemingly all-weather anchorages during a winter blow. This year, one storm was particularly memorable.

Another difference with this trip was that we pair boated, with a twist. The other boat was a "land yacht"—a camper that gave us an opportunity to explore by road as well as by boat.

**WINDY WELCOME PASSAGE** We set off from Vancouver a couple of days before Christmas. A winter gale was forecast, and we were hoping to outrun the storm and reach Secret Cove by nightfall. The winds were mostly tame until we got about halfway through Welcome Passage, when it really started to blow. The seas were only about a metre high, but the wind tore spray off the wave tops and continued rising. Conditions weren't too bad, however, as we were running with the wind—it's amazing the difference that can make. We've run with gale-force winds with relative ease while watching the opposing traffic buck and plow through the oncoming waves.

The anemometer read 40 knots as we approached the north end of Welcome Passage, an area with a reputation for rough water during summer northwesterlies. Wind and waves that roar

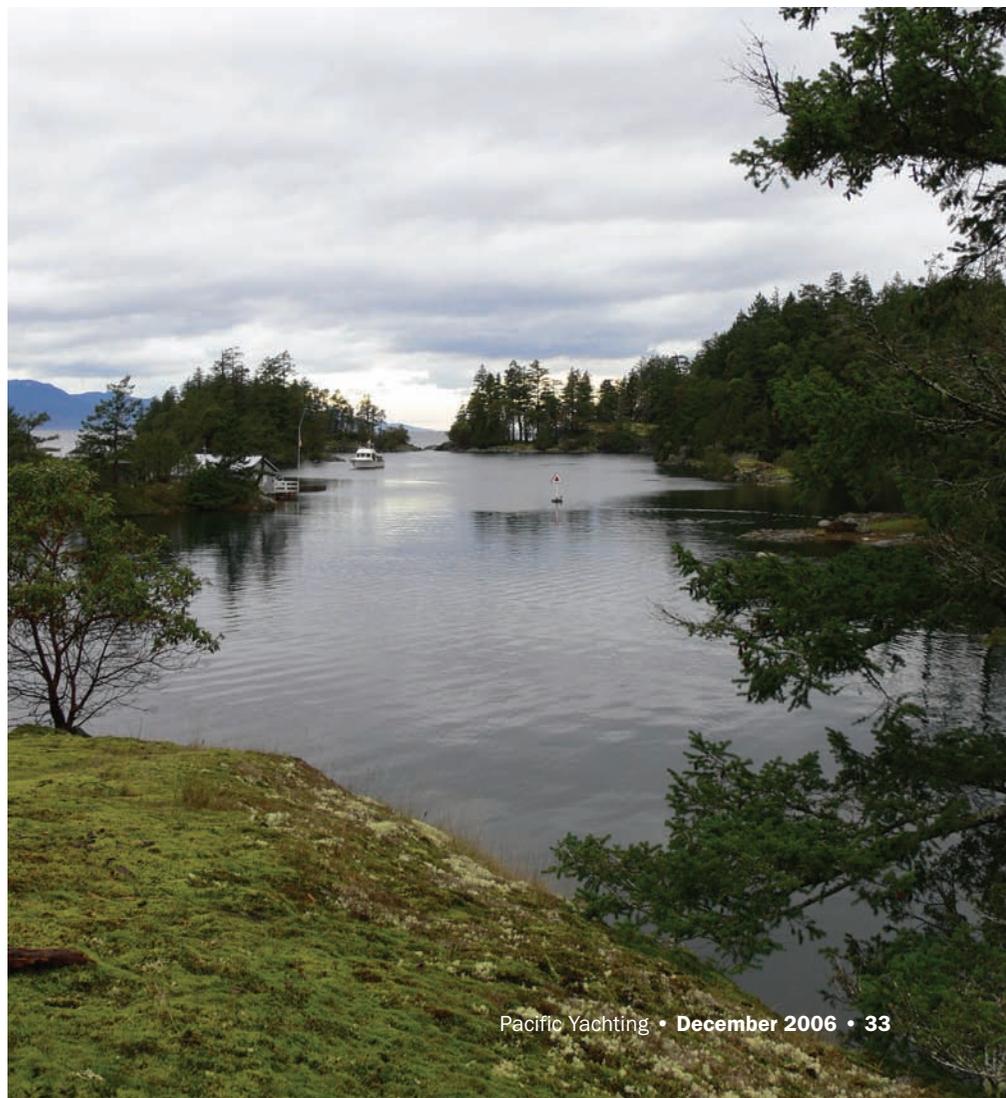
down the Strait of Georgia pile up outside the narrow entrance, right where we were headed. But in a southeasterly, this section turned out to be relatively protected. The winds were still high, but sea conditions had smoothed out considerably as we rounded Grant Island.

By the time we entered Secret Cove, the sun had long since set, the wind was howling and rain was pouring. With the

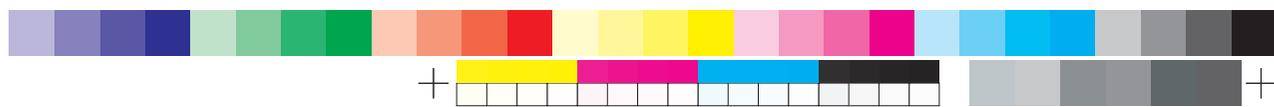
rain and darkness, conditions inside the cove seemed worse than we'd experienced outside. The Strait of Georgia must have been a mess. We'd made it, but only barely.

In the dark, with frequent 20-knot gusts, we wrestled ourselves into the Jolly Roger Inn's narrow moorage and climbed the hill to the pub for a welcome pint.

**BOATING WITH A TWIST** Most of the pub's occupants had watched us enter the cove that night. Among them were James' parents, Rob and Alayne, who'd recently replaced their Hunter 31 sailboat with a camper that was parked outside. We planned to pair boat for a few days with their "land yacht," using Secret Cove as a base.



*Solaster of Victoria was the only boat inside Smuggler Cove when Dirona arrived on Christmas Day. When it left shortly after, the authors had the cove all to themselves.*



The weather was typical for a winter day on the coast: overcast skies and frequent rain. Rain gear, however, kept the authors warm and dry.

James and I had always wanted to see Sechelt Rapids at speed, but the timing had never quite been right by boat (see “Sechelt Inlet: West Coast Shangri-La,” September 2006). The camper was our chance.

We all piled into the cab one morning and set off up the Sunshine Coast Highway (Highway 101). The road twisted and turned, and just after Sakinaw and Ruby lakes we turned off to Egmont. An enjoyable one-hour walk, first with water views and later through lush rainforest, took us from parking lot to rapids. The swiftest current that day wasn’t close to the 16.5-knot maximum. But even at seven knots, the flow’s fierceness was impressive. We could hear the current’s roar long before we actually arrived at the rapids. The weather was typical for a winter day on the coast: the skies were overcast and heavy rains fell frequently.

“IF YOU ANCHOR AT GARDEN BAY ONE YEAR AND PULL UP A LARGE WHITE PATIO TABLE WITH YOUR ANCHOR, OUR APOLOGIES.”

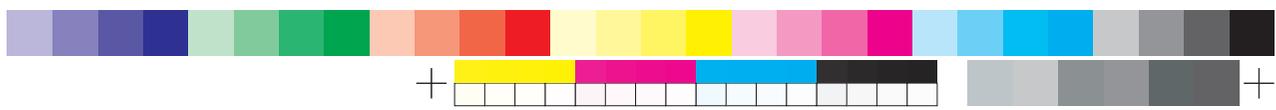
We all had rain gear, though, and were warm and dry. One of the keys to successful winter boating is to carry a range of clothing that allows you to be outside comfortably, even if rain is falling and wind is blowing (see “Winter Cruising,” January 2006).

After experiencing the rapids, we drove down into Pender Harbour for lunch at the Garden Bay Pub and returned later that afternoon to Secret Cove. We’d always travelled this coastline by boat, but going by road was an interesting change in perspective, and much faster, too. We’d gone round-trip from Secret Cove to Egmont and Pender Harbour in only a couple of hours, not including our stops.

**SMUGGLER COVE CHRISTMAS** Our plan for this trip was to have Christmas dinner with Rob and Alayne in Smuggler Cove. We’d all visited in our respective boats in the summer, but never in the winter. On Christmas morning, the four of us set out from Secret Cove for Smuggler Cove in our 40’ powerboat *Dirona*.

James was guessing we’d share the cove with at least another boat, and I was expecting the cove would be empty. In the end, we were both right. *Solaster* of Victoria was the only boat inside when we arrived, but left shortly afterward. Then we had Smuggler Cove all to ourselves.

We spent Christmas Day kayaking and dinghying around our private retreat and relaxing onboard. We topped off the day



The swiftest current at Sechelt Rapids that day wasn't close to the 16.5-knot maximum. But even at seven knots, the flow's fierceness was impressive. The current's roar was audible long before the rapids could be seen.

with our traditional Christmas dinner afloat: peppercorn-crusted beef tenderloin (see "Christmas Afloat," December 2004). Mission accomplished.

**A STORM TO REMEMBER** We visited the pub at Garden Bay Hotel and Marina ([www.gardenbaypub.com](http://www.gardenbaypub.com)) twice that trip, this time by boat. We'd spent New Year's Eve in Garden Bay and had come ashore to watch the Seahawks game the following day. One of us, probably not the one you'd expect, is an avid football fan.

A big storm was coming and the winds were already howling. Ours was the only boat at anchor in Garden Bay and was well set with a 7-1 all-chain scope. We weren't worried as the winds rose and our boat danced around in the gusts, although it did get our attention when someone in the pub asked



Sharing a pint at the Jolly Roger Inn, Secret Cove.

his friend, "Is that boat dragging?" We returned to our boat a few hours later when the storm knocked the power out and the pub went dark.

On boarding, our first indication that something was amiss was that our barbecue cover lay on the cockpit floor. As

we climbed the stairs to the aft deck, the area seemed, well, a little more spacious than when we'd left. "Didn't we used to have a table here?" I asked, half-joking. The large patio table had vanished. The only possibilities were that thieves had come aboard and stolen it, or the wind had carried it off.



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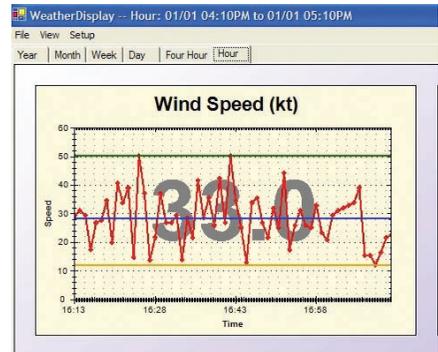
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Weather logging software answered the question of the patio table's disappearance. The current wind speed in Garden Bay was 33 knots, the past hour's average was 28 knots, and the maximum for the afternoon was a storm-force 52 knots.

Neither seemed particularly likely, given that the table was roughly two metres long by one metre wide.

Our weather logging software answered the question. The current wind speed in Garden Bay was 33 knots, the past hour's average was 28 knots, and the maximum for the afternoon was storm-force 52 knots. Environment Canada's website indicated a pressure-slope of 5.8 (see sidebar). Conditions out in the Strait of Georgia must have been terrifying.

Big winds have surprising strength. We were already in the habit of securing the table to the deck with bungee cord when underway in rough weather. We now secure our new table, even at anchor, if big winds are predicted. If you anchor at Garden Bay one year and pull up a large white patio table with your anchor, our apologies.

Rare is the winter trip on our coast that doesn't come with storms and bad weather. For us, that's part of the fun and excitement of winter cruising. As long as we're safely at anchor, we love to monitor our weather station as the pressure falls and the wind speed rises. And we often spend as much time hiking or exploring in the dinghy in the winter as we do in the summer—we're just dressed warmer. If you're prepared and weather conscious, winter boating can be as enjoyable as summer boating. Just remember to keep your patio table tied down.

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*"It was a great summer in Duncanby. Thanks Out."*

And if you have friends with a camper, we recommend this form of "pair boating." You'll get a chance to see the coast from a different perspective and have an opportunity to make side trips that would otherwise be difficult or impossible by boat.

Jennifer and James Hamilton are correspondents for the Waggoner Cruising Guide and regular contributors to Pacific Yachting. They also maintain a cruising website at [www.mvdirona.com](http://www.mvdirona.com). Between them, they have logged more than 30,000 miles cruising year-round throughout B.C. and Washington. ☺

### PRESSURE-SLOPES

ONE PUBLICATION we've found particularly useful in navigating through both winter and summer storms is *The Wind Came All Ways*, by Owen S. Lange (Environment Canada, 1998). The book contains detailed wind pattern and wave height diagrams for specific localities of the Georgia Basin, including the Juan de Fuca Strait, San Juan Islands and Desolation Sound.

The wave height diagrams are amazingly accurate. Whenever we've ended up in rougher water than expected and checked the book after the fact, the conditions were always as predicted. We are wiser now, and consult the wave height diagrams to plot a safer course before we get underway, or during the trip if conditions deteriorate.

The book uses "pressure-slopes" as a means of predicting wind patterns and wave heights. A pressure-slope specifies the rate of change, or slope, between a low and high pressure area and the direction that the wind will flow between them. A steeper slope means stronger winds because, as the book explains, "Air, like water, flows downhill from the ridge [of high pressure] to the trough [of low pressure]."

Pressure-slope steepness is indicated on a numerical scale starting at zero for a flat slope. There's no upper limit, but the steepest slope recorded in recent years is 10 and would occur only in the severest of storms. A typical major winter storm has a pressure slope of four or five.

Pressure-slope data for the previous 12 hours is available at [www.weatheroffice.pyr.ec.gc.ca/marine/pressureslope\\_e.html](http://www.weatheroffice.pyr.ec.gc.ca/marine/pressureslope_e.html). We monitor the pressure-slope during winter trips and find it a good predictor of sea conditions. —JH

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