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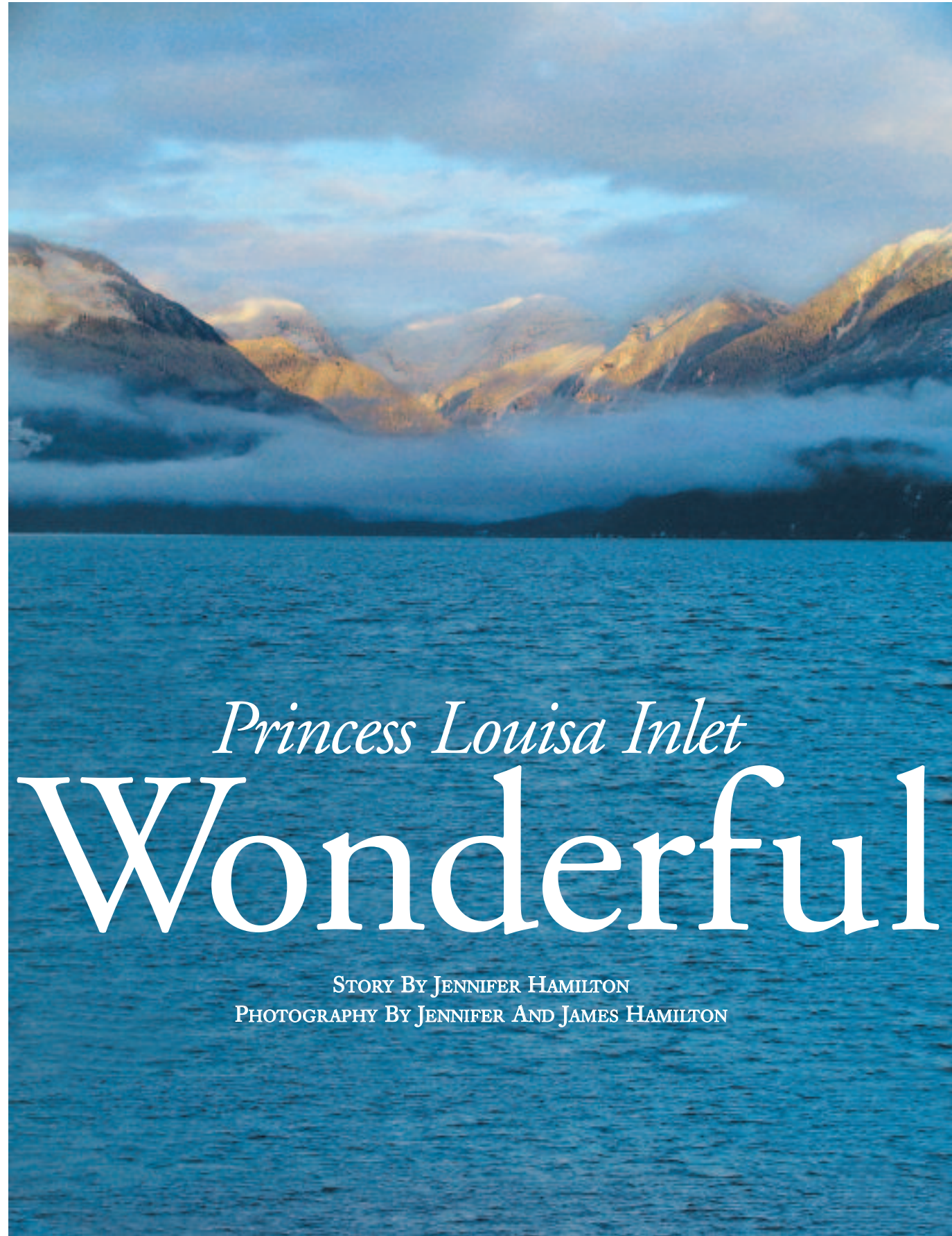
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Princess Louisa Inlet

Wonderful

STORY BY JENNIFER HAMILTON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

Author Erle Stanley Gardner wrote of this place:
“There is no use describing that inlet.
Perhaps an atheist could view it and remain an atheist,
but I doubt it....

One views the scenery with bared head
and choking feeling of the throat.
It is more than beautiful. It is sacred.”



In Winter

British Columbia’s glacial-carved fjords rival any in the world for magnificent scenery. However, their steep shorelines funnel and accelerate winds, while offering little shelter to the traveling boater.

Jervis Inlet, which stretches 46 miles, fits this mold, with one anomaly that makes all the difference. Near the head is an opening so unobtrusive that Capt. George Vancouver ignored it on his epic 18th-century quest for the Northwest Passage.

The channel, guarded by navigable tidal rapids, leads to the wondrous 4-mile-long Princess Louisa Inlet. This almost-landlocked waterway is sheltered from wind by the granite walls and high cliffs that surround it. From the inside, it looks and feels more like a remote, high-altitude mountain lake than a saltwater basin. Even when the region is packed with other boaters, a hushed calm pervades.

Princess Louisa Inlet, about 100 miles north of Vancouver, is the ultimate cruising destination in



SPECTACULAR SCENERY

The journey to Princess Louisa is rivaled only by the destination for scenery, especially in winter. Upper Jervis Inlet consists of a series of reaches—Prince of Wales Reach, Princess Royal Reach and Queens Reach—that wind deep into the Coast Mountains. On either side, mile-high peaks soar above the waterways, impressing all who pass. Even on overcast days when mountaintops disappear into the clouds and only their bases are showing, the scenery is grand.

In the summer, a little snow might cap these mountains. But in the winter, they are thick with it. Although it was cold that December day when we arrived, the snow-encrusted mountains drew us to the open flybridge of our 40-foot powerboat, *Dirona*. The sky was mostly clear, so we could see right to the peaks. The farther we

progressed, the more impressive the vista became.

We had spent the previous week farther north in British Columbia's Desolation Sound and had become somewhat spoiled by its winter mountain views, but those of Jervis Inlet proved even more dramatic. At the junction of Prince of Wales Reach and Princess Royal Reach, the snow-covered twin peaks of Marlborough Heights soared nearly 6,000 feet above us. Beyond them, the toothy peak of 6,500-foot Mount Churchill was completely white. We definitely were running short of superlatives.

ICE CHANNELS

The snowline dropped lower and lower as we traveled up Jervis Inlet, and when we rounded the final bend into Queens Reach, it was right at the waterline. To the east, 7,500-foot Mount Crerar and the peaks surrounding it were white from base to tip. We were well into the mountain range; the popular Whistler ski area, accessible by road from Vancouver, was less than 40 miles away behind the peaks.

As we neared the mouth of Princess Louisa Inlet, the water surface looked, well, odd. To our amazement we realized that a thin layer of ice coated the surface. The ice broke easily but was strong enough to support our wake, which spilled across it as we passed. Small pieces of ice skittered along the surface as we broke through. Although this was due in part to freshwater runoff, it seemed inconceivable to encounter ice in southern B.C. alt

The incredible scenery at the mouth of the inlet was enhanced by the ice-coated surface, which tested *Dirona's* gelcoat.

British Columbia, its boating mecca. Cradled deep within the Coast Mountains, the scenery is spectacular. Sheer cliffs soar skyward, humbling all who enter. Waterfalls cascade from snow-capped peaks high above the tree line. The much-photographed Chatterbox Falls cascade 1,600 feet before gushing over a 120-foot cliff into the inlet.

Author Erle Stanley Gardner wrote of this place: "There is no use describing that inlet. Perhaps an atheist could view it and remain an atheist, but I doubt it....One views the scenery with bared head and choking feeling of the throat. It is more than beautiful. It is sacred."

In mild summer months, hundreds of boaters from the United States and Canada traverse Jervis Inlet to visit this popular provincial marine park that was the home of the late, legendary James (Mac) MacDonald. In 1953, he dedicated his 45 acres to all boaters in the Northwest. The park is maintained with the help of donations to the Princess Louisa International Society.

The 900-foot dock and float typically are full, with many other vessels anchored at prime spots in front of the falls or around the inlet's perimeter. Princess Louisa Inlet is accessible only by water or air—an occasional floatplane alights there. The nearest road and fuel dock are 32 miles away in Egmont.

Despite its remoteness, if you are seeking solitude, you will not find it there—at least not in the summer. Last year, we made our pilgrimage the day after Christmas. The inlet was deserted, as we had expected, but there were a few surprises.



Docked at the inlet, we were essentially isolated, and we felt the need to respect the silence around us.

water. This experience was, however, only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg."

To enter Princess Louisa Inlet, you first must pass through Malibu Rapids. The current in this narrow tidal passage can attain speeds of up to 9 knots during large exchanges, though it is easily transited near slack water. A bend in the channel makes one end invisible to the other—prudent mariners broadcast a *Securité* call on Channel 16 to alert other vessels of their passage. Between these transmissions and intervessel hailing calls and conversations, Channel 16 is active here during the summer months. But we had not heard a peep all day. Although we did not anticipate any opposing traffic, we issued a *Securité* call anyway. As expected, there was no response.

Jervis Inlet is surrounded mostly by wilderness. Other than logging slash, there is little evidence that any human has set foot on its shores. There is one exception: Malibu Club.

In the 1940s, a businessman built a sprawling luxury resort at the entrance to Princess Louisa Inlet. The venture failed, and in 1953 the Young Life Christian youth organization purchased it for use as a summer camp. Its swimming pool abuts the rapids, with a patio that overlooks the channel. Summer boaters passing through the rapids are greeted by hordes of teenagers frolicking by the pool or looking on from the complex's decks and walkways.

As we drew alongside that winter afternoon, Malibu Club stood snow-covered and silent. The only signs of life were huge flocks of Barrow's golden eyes and surf scoters, along with countless seagulls. The birds covered the water on both sides of the rapids. We later found out that Malibu Club was not deserted; although we did not know it at the time, a winter caretaker watched us pass by.

Beyond the rapids, we encountered much thicker ice. This worried us, as ice can cut right through fiberglass gelcoat. We stopped and prodded at the



The float at Chatterbox Falls, where we tied up in solitude, put us in the midst of the breathtaking scenery.



The swimming pool at Malibu Club was particularly impressive from shore. Hung out over the rapids, it was heated and rimmed with snow.

water surface with a boathook. The ice was just beyond a slushy state and was easily penetrated. We judged that the hazard was low and continued farther, although a loud crunching sound emanated as we broke through. Instead of a frothy wake, we trailed a well-defined channel through the ice.

It was exhilarating. We never expected to be breaking ice with *Dirona*. It had been near dusk when we passed through the rapids, and light was fading as we approached the head. There were no other boats in sight. We had not seen another person since the mouth of Jervis Inlet. The mountains were covered with snow from their soaring peaks right down to the waterline, while a few wispy clouds drifted just above the surface. The snow, silence, solitude and low light emphasized the inlet's cathedral-like aura. We felt almost compelled to whisper.

SETTLING INTO SOLITUDE

We typically choose the privacy of anchoring over a more public dock and were planning to drop the hook in front of the falls. But it was dark, and on this Boxing Day evening, no place offered more solitude than the float at Chatterbox Falls. We pulled up to the end, which gave us a clear view of the falls and the snow-covered mountains beyond. The ice ended a few hundred feet from the float, so the water there was open.

However, the float was covered with several inches of snow. I had to dig through it to find a tie-off point. Once settled in, we inspected the hull with a flashlight. Other than some minor scratches in the bottom paint, we appeared to have come through the ice unscathed. By then it was dark. We walked up the float with a flashlight but decided against going ashore. Bears live in the woods surrounding the inlet, and tripping over one at night was a discouraging prospect. A small creature, probably a seal, had hauled out onto the float and left an imprint in the snow. Otherwise, there were no marks in the deep powder.

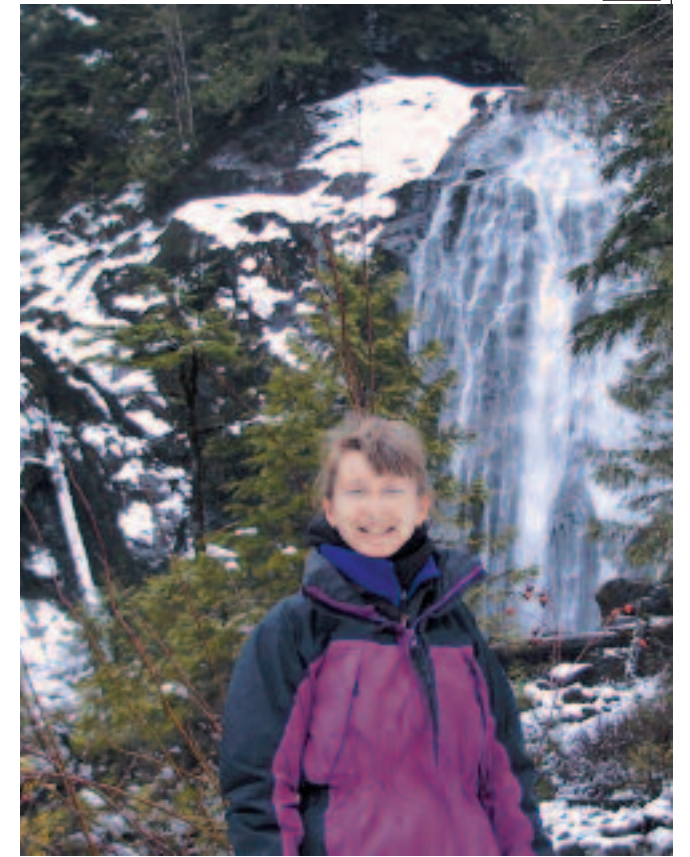
Although it was dark, it was not even 6 o'clock. We set off in the dinghy to examine the ice more closely. It varied in thickness—we readily cut through in some places, but in others we were almost stopped by it. As we proceeded, bright flashes lit the water around us, and our wake trailed behind like the tail of a shooting star.

Pacific Northwest waters support a variety of life, among them, a microscopic organism called a dinoflagellate. When disturbed by movement, these organisms produce bioluminescence, or living light. A form of algae, dinoflagellates reproduce rapidly in dense populations, which at night produce an impressive light display when a boat moves across the water surface. The bioluminescence was spectacular that evening. We turned donuts in an ice-free section of water and generated a halo 10 feet in diameter.

We walked up to the falls the next morning and stopped to sign the guest book at the park kiosk. The last entry was dated Nov. 30; apparently, no one had been there since then. We took the requisite tourist picture, with a twist: While we've seen many pictures of pleased-looking people standing in front of Chatterbox Falls, none have depicted their subjects wearing parkas, with snow in the background.

We packed a picnic lunch and an emergency kit for a hike up to an old trapper's cabin. The trail is steep, difficult and slippery in the summer, and probably 10 times worse when covered with 6–12 inches of snow. We had difficulty locating many of the markers. Some we found buried in the snow after searching for several hundred yards in many directions. The branches holding them had bent over under the weight of the snow. We worked our way in and up for about two and a half hours, but eventually lost the trail and had to give up.

We were disappointed, as we wanted a photo of that cabin covered with snow. But we had enjoyed



The waters of the often-photographed Chatterbox Falls did not freeze like those in the channel. The area surrounding the falls was a great destination for hiking and photography.

the hike and could better appreciate the difficulties faced by trappers out there in winter. It had started to snow fairly heavily before we turned back, and we didn't realize how soaked we were until we later looked at our pictures. We were having too much fun. The scenery was grand, the rainforest was at its peak and we had hot showers waiting for us onboard.

The surface ice had receded that morning, had built up again during our hike and was retreating again when we returned. It moved visibly and swiftly, driven by a falling tide. The thickness and presence of ice varied throughout the inlet, as did the water temperature. Ten miles from the entrance, the temperature in Jervis Inlet was 47 degrees Fahrenheit. It was 37 just outside the rapids, bounced down to 35 halfway along Princess Louisa Inlet and went back up to 37 at the dock. Location of ice didn't correspond to lower temperature variations. It appeared that the ice was forming about halfway along the inlet, where the temperature was lowest, and was being driven back and forth by tidal

movement.

WINTER NEIGHBORS

We had warm showers and relaxed in *Dirona's* cozy cabin. In the winter, we tend to keep the VHF radio on and tuned to Channel 16 and the vessel traffic channel. With fewer boats about, this is partly to pick up a distress call and to hear weather warnings and learn about local conditions. We had arrived at Princess Louisa with a major winter storm forecast for the following day.

However, we could receive no further weather reports. Due to traffic on Channel 16 in the summer, it is not obvious that the inlet is out of radio contact with anything beyond Jervis Inlet. We couldn't tune in much on the shortwave receiver, either, and the cell phone was out of the question. We felt even more isolated. We kept the radio on at Chatterbox Falls but it had been silent since the day before.

It was quite a surprise, then, when it sparked to life that afternoon with a very clear broadcast: "Malibu, Malibu, Malibu. This is *Bad News*." Intrigued, we bundled up and set off for the rapids in the dinghy to investigate. The ice was much thicker than it had been when we arrived, although it was still clear near the edges of the inlet. We were careful not to damage our inflatable hull. When we arrived at Malibu Club, the capable and well-appointed landing craft *Bad News* was working through the rapids against a swift ebb current.

The vessel was full of wood and supplies for Michael, the caretaker who maintains the site year round. It also carried several of Michael's friends and family members who were coming to visit for the night. They invited us to land and take a look around. Michael had seen *Dirona* pass by the day before and asked about the ice. He said it was much worse the previous year, when a cedar boat had suffered considerable damage to her hull going through.

He hadn't seen another vessel for a while, but he said that at New Year's, many boaters arrive to celebrate at the falls. We definitely wanted to leave



The landing craft *Bad News* works through the rapids against a swift ebb current.

before crowds arrived. We toured the camp, and it was so serene compared to the summer months. The snow muffled sounds. The swimming pool was particularly impressive from shore: Hung out over the rapids, it was heated and rimmed with snow.

We awoke the next morning to a black sky packed with stars. At dawn, fog drifted in from Jervis Inlet, while the sky remained clear above it. The storm front must have passed, as the barometer had dropped 13 millibars overnight. The ice was gone, which was surprising, as it was much colder that morning than in the previous two days. Perhaps the ice we saw had been left over from an earlier freeze.

The day before, we had read in Bill Wolfertan's *Sunshine Coast* that the inlet often freezes over in cold winters, especially near the falls, where fresh water is maximal. Not wanting to risk re-enacting the fate of Shackleton's *Endurance*, we decided to take advantage of the ice and weather break to head south.

It was calm and clear as we made our way down the inlet, where little ice remained. We took a last look at the beautiful cliffs above as we left.

Our pilgrimage was complete. 