

Little wind blew in Homfray Channel, where snow-dusted valleys separated high mountains thick with snow.



Winter Boating

Snow, Storms and Solitude

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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It was 04:00 hours on December 31. We'd left Port Hardy early, hoping to reach Seymour Narrows for the 11:30 slack. The winds were calm in Hardy Bay, but visibility was near zero. Daylight was hours away and a blizzard obscured what little ambient light there was. We peered through the snow from our unenclosed upper helm, trying to discern what lay ahead. Our 40' powerboat, *Dirona*, and a large, well-lit seiner were the only vessels leaving the harbour.



The water surface at the Quarterdeck Marina was iced over, and when the authors stopped their boat, M.V. *Dirona*, it stayed where it was, blocked by the thin ice.

The seiner was slightly ahead and started taking waves over the bridge as it turned south into Queen Charlotte Strait. As we neared that position, I thought I could see something in the water up ahead, perhaps a large, white boat. James already had the helm hard over and had turned us back to Port Hardy. “That wasn’t a boat,” he said, “It was a wave.” Conditions may have been calm in Hardy Bay, but Queen Charlotte Strait was a mess.

PORT HARDY We were in Port Hardy following a wonderful winter trip through the Broughtons. We’d arrived two days earlier, planning to first tie off at the public dock to walk about town before going to the Quarterdeck Marina to have dinner at their pub. The public dock, however, was nowhere to be seen. The city removes it in the winter, we discovered, to avoid storm damage.

The Port Hardy Coast Guard office is at the top of the pier. A couple of officers came out to say hello and allowed us to moor on their dock for a few hours. They were curious about our travels, but not particularly surprised that someone would be out boating in the winter. We were still a bit of a novelty, especially since we weren’t from the area.

Port Hardy was snow-dusted and mostly quiet. The view out Hardy Bay

across Queen Charlotte Strait to the Coast Mountains was even showier than in the summer. Their peaks, white with snow, seemed taller and more imposing.

Our next stop was the Quarterdeck Marina. There, we found the missing public dock strapped to the outside of the seine dock. Even with the public dock gone, we had our choice of moorage. One of winter boating’s many advantages is that marinas are less busy and often charge reduced off-season rates. Docking was easier too, almost like parking a car. The water surface was iced over, and when we stopped the boat, it stayed where it was, blocked by the thin ice.

Several centimetres of snow fell that night—we woke to a snowy scene, hushed and still. It fit our plans well—a hike along the Port Hardy Harbour Walkway and Nature Trail. The trail runs along the west side of Hardy Bay, then branches either to a lookout at the southeast corner of the bay or to the Quatse River Salmon Hatchery. We walked to both. The winter scenery was just beautiful, with snow covering the ground and caught in the trees. Ours were the first footprints along most of the trail, except for some ducks.

LEAVING PORT HARDY—AGAIN We had planned to leave Port Hardy that afternoon, but a gale warning was in effect while a front passed through. Winds at Scarlett Point in Queen Charlotte Strait were blowing 35 and gusting to 47, with two to three-metre seas. Conditions

were forecast to improve the next day.

We had not expected calm seas the following morning and had hoped only that conditions might be safely passable. They

WINTER BOATING COMFORT

TWO PIECES of equipment that we consider essential to comfortable winter cruising are a diesel furnace and flotation suits. The suits are similar to ski jumpsuits, but with built-in flotation and extra insulation. We use Mustang 2175s, which are standard issue with the Coast Guard on both sides of the border. We can toss these on over light clothing, add a pair of gloves and perhaps some ear warmers 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. We initially bought the suits as safety equipment, but they have completely transformed our winter boating experience. We no longer have to don multiple layers of clothing for warmth—the hassle of doing that tended to keep us inside more often. With the suits, we can be outside and comfortable in the winter as often as in the summer.

To keep our hands warm and dry, we wear SealSkinz waterproof gloves. Fleece gloves absorb water too easily and quickly become waterlogged, and neoprene gloves tend to smell rotten after a time. Ski gloves work reasonably well, but don’t stand up to much wear and will eventually absorb water, too. We carry the standard waterproof SealSkinz gloves as well as a more insulated winter version. —J & JH

weren't. After turning back, we waited several hours for daylight before trying again. The waves were still big, but we felt comfortable proceeding because the snow had stopped and we had daylight. Fortunately, there wasn't much wood in the water either, which, besides the weather, had also been a concern in the poor visibility.

The winds were from the south, and tightly spaced two-metre waves rolled towards us. We could run only at about four knots—any faster, and the boat would pound. Conditions eventually did improve as predicted, and finally we were able to make better time. The day's rough water was the first difficult conditions we'd encountered the entire trip, and it was no surprise. Other storms had passed through in past days, but we'd always had advance warning. (Actually, storms can often be a positive aspect of winter boating for us. We enjoy being safely anchored in a protected cove with a hot cup of tea while a big storm passes through. We listen to the weather reports and watch the wind and pressure change on our weather station.)

Snow fell heavily as we passed Alert Bay, producing another winter-white scene. The only downside was that visibility was reduced to less than a mile. We'd seen plenty of snow this trip, but it still felt a little strange to be out in the middle of Broughton Strait in a blizzard. It felt lonely, too. The only other boats we'd seen under way the entire day were

Beyond empty Prideaux Haven, Mount Denman's snow-covered tooth is set ablaze by the evening's setting sun.



When Blind Channel Resort says they are open year-round, they mean it. The authors purchased fuel on New Year's Eve and could have gotten it New Year's Day.

the seiner that morning and one small boat that crossed to Alert Bay from Vancouver Island. We love the solitude of winter boating—even the most popular summer anchorages have plenty of space. But we sometimes can't shake the feeling that some unusual calamity has befallen all the other boaters.

BLIND CHANNEL Except for the snow, the weather fortunately was no longer a concern. Our next problem was fuel. The run from Port Hardy through Johnstone Strait would nearly consume our remaining supply. We expected the fuel dock in Campbell River would be closed from early New Year's Eve through New Year's Day. For this reason, we had tried to leave Port Hardy before daylight in the hopes of reaching Campbell River to refuel by early afternoon. Rough water had slowed

us down enough that reaching Campbell River before dark was not even a possibility, so we cast about for alternatives. We wanted to keep running south and not lose a day to a fuel shortage.

Fuel availability is typically not a problem in the summer, but many facilities are closed in the winter or have reduced hours. Check in advance for any potential closures if you go. We consulted the current *Waggoner Cruising Guide* for possibilities and found that nearby Blind Channel was open year-round. They might already be closed for New Year's when we arrived, but it was our best bet.

We turned off into Sunderland Channel. Usually, we skip the inside routes and run through Johnstone Strait and





WINTER WEATHER

UNDERSTANDING BASIC weather terminology and local weather systems gives greater confidence in boating year-round and can even make storms entertaining. One publication that we have found particularly useful in navigating through winter (and summer) storms is Environment Canada's *The Wind Came All Ways*. This book describes weather patterns in the Georgia Basin, including the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the San Juan Islands and Desolation Sound. Elsewhere along the B.C. coast, we refer to Environment Canada's *Marine Weather Hazards Manual*. Two other educational and readable weather books are Jeff Renner's *Northwest Marine Weather* and the USA TODAY *Weather Book*.

Watch the weather more carefully in the winter, and listen to each scheduled weather report during the day. We've found the forecasts more useful when big weather systems are in play. Small wind speed changes in calm weather are difficult to predict and not particularly important. But if the forecast says the wind will blow 35 knots from the

south, big weather usually follows.

Every boat should carry a barometer to track conditions between forecasts or monitor them out of radio contact. We use a Davis Weather Monitor II that measures wind speed, barometric pressure, temperature, humidity and precipitation. The product is consumer quality and struggles in a marine environment—we've replaced many parts over the years. But we've not found a more cost-effective alternative.

Weather trouble spots can become worse in winter winds. Cold air is heavier than warm air, and builds bigger waves. According to *The Wind Came All Ways*, a 25-knot winter wind can produce significantly larger waves than a comparable summer wind (50 percent larger in the extreme). Outflow winds can be particularly hazardous to small craft. Be cautious when entering or crossing the mouth of large inlets in the winter. The Environment Canada books mentioned above and *Sailing Directions* typically warn of dangerous conditions for a given locale. —J & JH

Discovery Passage, but since we weren't going through Seymour Narrows this would be a nice alternative route for us. Except for Whirlpool and Green Point Rapids, the waterways were quiet and still. Snow powdered the trees above and extended down to the waterline. While we do enjoy travelling Johnstone Strait, it was comforting to be in more sheltered and intimate waters—especially after the day we'd had.

The guest docks at Blind Channel Resort were empty when we arrived, but lights were on ashore. Fingers crossed, we tied off and happily learned that when Blind Channel Resort says they are open year-round, they mean it. We purchased fuel at 16:00 on New Year's Eve and could have gotten it New Year's Day. The fuel dock does have operating hours but will open outside them. The owner said that people sometimes travel many miles for fuel and they can't just turn them away.

We anchored that night in Charles Bay for a picture-perfect New Year's Eve (if you don't mind skipping the television



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The skies remained clear at Prideaux Haven as the authors celebrated a beautiful day outside in the sun.



countdown). Snow fell steadily all around, muffling any sound, while the resort lights twinkled across the bay; not a ruffle of wind disturbed the surface. We had a glass of wine on deck and revelled in the setting.

PRIDEAUX HAVEN Our final destination before returning to the Lower Mainland was Prideaux Haven. It's probably our favourite winter cruising destination. We love having the place to ourselves, and the mountain views are more dramatic

with a coating of snow. The first time we visited in the winter, we kept expecting another boat to arrive, but none did. We've since learned that winter visitors aren't common.

Philips Arm was clouded in as we ran Cordero Channel from Charles Bay, but the skies cleared at Frederick Arm as the sun crested the mountains. High peaks coated with snow stood against a pink-tinted morning sky.

As we passed through Big Bay, we considered taking advantage of the clear day

to go up Bute Inlet. But 40-knot out-flow winds were blowing through Arran Rapids, and we could see whitecaps all the way across the inlet. The story was similar at Toba Inlet.

Little wind blew in Homfray Channel, where snow-dusted valleys separated high mountains thick with snow. Hundreds of gulls and other waterfowl were spread across water so smooth that, in this near-freezing temperature, it could easily be mistaken for ice. The sun's heat was nonetheless warm enough to sublime the snow on the lower foothills, converting it directly to mist.

We had our pick of spots in empty Prideaux Haven. Just to be sure, we toured the area by dinghy after anchoring—ours was definitely the only boat there. The skies remained clear and we basked outside in the sun. Beyond, Mount Denman's snow-covered tooth was prominent against a dazzling blue sky. That night, the moon was so bright and the winds so still that we could see not only the mountains close to us, but also their reflection in the water. ☺



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