

Cruising in the Broughton Archipelago

Tim Ellis, Vancouver, November, 2018.

Say “British Columbia” and Vancouver and Victoria are the names that spring to mind. In fact, they are both latecomers to the exploration and development of the coast. This began in the mid-to-late eighteenth century with the trade in sea otter pelts from the Nootka and Queen Charlotte Sounds to China.

It was our original intention to sail in pursuit of these early traders by sailing to Moresby Island, the southernmost of the Queen Charlotte Islands and thence to Prince Rupert for firsthand experience - the stories of this early trade are of stoicism and scurvy, of derring-do, cautious navigation and feats of seamanship in cumbersome square riggers that we may only share vicariously. It is the constant references to the solitude, the great silences and the difficulties of engineless travel in narrow channels with swift currents and mighty tides that drew us in. This time, we did not get up to the Queen Charlottes. My friend, with a charter fleet under his watchful eye buttonholed me upon hearing about our plans and said: “You will need three months in the Charlottes, but three weeks in Broughtons will be just fine.” We followed his advice.



Fox Island, waiting for the early morning mist to burn off

This journal is fleshed-out from the log of our trip into the Broughton Archipelago from 11th July thru 1st August followed by ten days at our family camp in Desolation Sound. We covered roughly 800 nautical miles. Two of us made the trip, that is myself and an Australian family friend with whom my older brother attended navigation school in Leith, Scotland, in 1973 - now, an ex-master mariner, ex-Geelong harbour master, and ex-surveyor. There is an old saw that the last two things you should entertain aboard a small sailing yacht are an umbrella and a professional seaman. Our long friendship and surprisingly similar approach to these things coupled with experience, diplomacy, discretion, and a short intense learning curve allowed us to limit this to the umbrella. He arrived from Melbourne on the 10th and we cast-off on the 11th. Peter handled the washing-up, navigation and pilotage. I made the morning cup of tea, and was acting grease monkey, deck hand and cook.

This is an interesting area because access is by sea or air and only in certain weather due to the notorious conditions that limit safe passage across or along the Johnstone Strait and into Queen Charlotte Sound. Weather in the strait is subject to virtually continuous Nor' Westerly winds, fogs, extreme currents, turbulence, and well known tidal

anomalies - all cracking good fun. The tourist season runs roughly from mid-July to the end-of September with a few brave souls fishing for Coho, Springs and Pinks the rest of the time. Fishing "resorts" and camps are in various states of disrepair, some are expensive constructs of glass and copper glistening empty behind "For Sale" signs. The ones that survive and prosper tend to be clubs or co-ops and off-limits to cruisers.



The southerly view from Maurelle Island, looking south down Hoskyn Channel

Staff, staff, staff - there are so few local residents, I wondered how these places survived. Everywhere gets by with make-do, some husband and wife teams, or caretakers whose function is to catch your lines in one hand and your money in the other. This sounds grasping, but it isn't meant to be - it is what they do! Mooring alongside was quite inexpensive, ranging from \$1/per-foot-night up to \$1.70/per-foot-night.

The archipelago is promoted as pristine cruising grounds but this is a flight of fancy and not the reality. It could be, but hasn't been since about 1750. Every picture, unless perfectly framed, includes the slash and clearcutting in some places for the 3rd time in 170 years - it is a vast farm devoted to silviculture. I do not believe there is a single island in this vastness, this strange and enigmatic place, that has not been logged before and is about to be logged again. Trucks and heavy equipment line every landing, and the noise and activity around modern logging practices is inescapable. This didn't absolutely spoil the experience, but the deception does not pass unremarked. What was uncanny was the sepulchral silences amongst the very few stands of ancient cypress, fir and pine remaining and the wild life; which is said to be very abundant but more wary of us than it is further south. It is the absence of a surge in human presence, and the complete lack of facilities that protect the archipelago from being overwhelmed by us. How long for? That is the question.



McIntosh Cove in Simoom Sound
Note the ice-seared tree and the missing crown

The Broughton Marine Park, which sits in the SW corner of the archipelago, is said to be a different matter - nearly 12,000 hectares untouched since 1992, and where grizzlies are said to feed unmolested along the shoreline, whales cavort amongst the shallows in spume, spray and mists by ancient middens. We didn't see them as most of the park faces into Queen Charlotte Sound and suffers the effects of the long fetch with waves, swells, long periods of mist and fog and safe anchorages hard to find.

The weather was also interesting: 9-14dC at night, and 18dC when the sun finally burned off enough sea mist, usually around 1100 in the morning. This in contrast to the

weather at the south end of the Johnstone Strait where the temperatures were 10dC higher - a mere 35 kilometres away.

We motor-sailed almost the entire way bar a few hours with the sails up to prove to ourselves that raising the sails was a complete waste of time - You are either plugging into Nor'Westers as you negotiate the narrow channels which run NW to SE, or becalmed in those running NE to SW. Sailing up, there was a Strong Wind Advisory of 25 knot Nor'Westerly, and when we sailed back there was SWA for 25 knot Sou'Esterlies below the southern tip of Texada. Sailors love to sail but the narrowness of the channels means hard work when the wind blows, and frustration when it doesn't. Most



Hannant Pt in Simoom Sound

smaller sailing yachts, say 40 feet and under only carry 15-40 gallons of fuel and so they are festooned with barrels, jugs and cans of extra fuel. The recommended anchorages are mostly very good indeed, some of them must rank amongst the most treasured and beautiful places on this earth...I'm thinking of Simoom Sound, and so few visitors.

Prior to 1945 settlements within the archipelago were either trading posts, officially sanctioned military or explorative (late 18th to mid-19th Century), First Nations, missionaries, or loggers, but the demand for air travel in the late forties and early fifties brought the first major flying boat services to the area where they established fuel and accommodations for the long haul flying boat routes from the Orient and beyond. There appear to be three of them and these are virtually the only settlements, albeit floating ones, that received sufficient investments in infrastructure with onshore fuel depots, large and solidly constructed floats and buildings to survive into the 21st Century - they are Sullivan Bay, Echo Bay and Shawl Bay, this last one was closed for renovations.

Sullivan Bay got my vote with their friendly and efficient service. Echo Bay is where the idle rich go to be idle, 100-footers lie alongside with generators running and yet there isn't enough water for a shower or a bathroom. These are not luxurious places, but simply bundles of logs with ancient, cozy constructs sitting atop them. These three also accommodate floating homes within their havens, usually with some kind of co-operative financial arrangement - every bit helps. Only Sullivan Bay and Echo Bay offer fuel within the archipelago. There are other resorts in the area, but "*resort*" is a popular name-choice for even the most primitive construct. We found these lovely, interesting places advertise the breadth and quality of their services, but alas for many are close to the end - no kids and no staff, new rules on black water and



Hot Tub with snorkel stove at the Maurelle Island Camp

grey water disposal, limits on fuel storage are all expensive and must be hard to justify for the brief summer period. Of the six resorts we visited, including the two still-functioning former flying boat depots, only two offered showers and toilet facilities due to the lack of potable fresh water - Sullivan and Jennis Bays. Two floating stores had typical shelf fillers of the kind directed more towards the sweet-toothed.



Red Huckleberries and their roseate leaves and fruit

Of course, we indulged. Fortunately for us, we carried enough fuel and water and basic supplies for our time there. But fresh water can be a very real bug-bear, for example, Jennis Bay Marina has two 3 kilometre long 1.5" plastic pipes that bring delicious sweet water to the

domestic supply tanks; while, in Kwatsi Cove the water was plentiful but the colour of iced tea due to tannins from the fir trees. Echo Bay had no spare water and could not offer even showers.

Echo Bay is the foundation for a sizeable community of homes built on the surrounding hills, as well as some rustic float homes. Billy Proctor, a well known local personality maintains a museum of trivial things that add up to an important record of 20th Century exploration and community building in a remote, wilderness environment, and we spent a more than enjoyable hour pouring over the artifacts of early settlers' lives in BC. In Drury Inlet one can enjoy long walks from Jennis Bay Resort built so they say as a model community in the fifties, but now a place where the game fisherman bring their skiffs and rent accommodations either afloat or on dry land. The resort caretaker, Warren, lives aboard a mahogany planked ex-naval rescue boat built in the forties and now undergoing restoration in his skillful hands - she is a beauty.

During the time we were in the archipelago a flotilla of power boaters from the Tacoma Yacht Club - 50', 60' and some even larger motor yachts were plowing a furrow through the slop from at-anchor to alongside. The main attraction seems to be pot-luck dinners under plastic awnings. This caught us both askance, but one adapts.

Speaking for myself, I would have anchored the entire time except for forays ashore for fuel and supplies, and would have missed this camaraderie; which, in fact, was pleasant and an opportunity for socialising amongst interesting people escaping from



Kwatsi Cove, a beautiful and soulful place

the hum-drum of civilization. Sadly, these pleasant evenings were not well provided with youth, but us greybeards had a good time.

Cruising has always been a great leveller where titans of industry and internet can ponder life with lumberjacks and fisherman and other yachties over cocktails, pot-luck and pot without the luck. It appeared the resort owners acted as ring masters, directing conversation with wit and grace. Good, solid conversation, free of the nastiness of our reality - hard to find nowadays and well lubricated with liquor and food prepared by the crews of each yacht and shared with everyone else. Civil, humorous, brainy and interesting.



Mr. Bruin
seeking serendipitous delicacies along the foreshore

The wild life has never got over the fur trade and while it appeared abundant but shy, one suspects that the perpetual hum of helicopters, chain saws and heavy equipment might put them off. Blind Bay Resort, in Port Harvey now has a ship breaking yard next to it, George and family, owners, have invested their lives in the resort. One cannot fathom why a ship breaker deserves to exist in such an environment - weak politicians, greed, wealth, out-of-sight, who knows?

We enjoyed bear sightings along foreshores where they ambled along oblivious and obviously without much anticipation of success but tipping over rocks and foraging for serendipitous tasty morsels anyway. Otters busily carrying shell fish on little fat bellies while using a small stone between their forepaws to crush the shell and release the flesh inside, porpoise cavorting with such an eagerness and so full of life that every contact brings a smile and a sense of loss when their circus departs.

A family of deer swam across our course...a mother and two fawns travelling between the islands, perhaps to escape predators, but more likely in search of better food. Grey whales and orcas breached occasionally along with curious seals and sea lions. The Song birds shrilled, chirped and tweeted but they stayed well hidden from the hawks, falcons and other raptors.



A doe and her two fawns making a landfall

One interesting phenomenon, was the large number of trees with bare upper limbs, often extending more than 20 metres above the healthy tree below. It seems that in cold weather, the spume thrown up by a hard nor'wester coats the crowns and as they freeze they break off leaving a bleached spar atop a living tree. Extraordinary Huckleberries grew in such profusion on the south facing shores that I had to take my dinghy over to investigate the beautiful glowing radiance of red fruit and rose-ate leaves.



The Author at Blind Bay

Once ashore beneath the canopy of 2nd and 3rd growth trees there is hardly a sound as noise is absorbed by the thick, peaty carpet of leaves. Giants of the forest can be glimpsed here and there, streams tinkle between their roots, and a single ray of brilliant sunshine lighting the gloom is potent magic. We definitely plan to return.

Bibliography:

Canadian Hydrographic Service Charts

Sailing Directions

Cruising Guides by Peter Vassilopoulos, Anne and Lawrence Yeadon-Jones, and Walbran's BC Coast Names, first published in 1906

Tidal Prediction and Current Tables

TimeZero Navionics on iPad

About LEVITY:

"LEVITY" is a 33' Bill Garden designed TRUANT 33 foot sloop rigged motorsailer with a modified fin keel, built on Saltspring Island and moored there for most of her life. She has a range of 900 nautical miles under the power of her 30 h.p. diesel, and positively luxurious accommodations for the two of us: one forward in the v-berth and the other aft in the double quarter berth. For heat and cooking, she is equipped with a DICKINSON Pacific diesel stove.



"LEVITY" & Peter