

What goes up . . . must come down

Vancouver Island then home to New Zealand

Tom and Vicky Jackson

Awarded the Dulcibella Prize

In 2014 we made the long trek from New Zealand to Alaska for our third and almost certainly final time. We sailed nearly 10,000 miles in six months to get our varnished, S&S 40 *Sunstone*, to her winter home near Victoria, British Columbia (BC). As we flew home for the southern summer, we decided that such antics were not to be repeated. Our decline



into aged decrepitude demanded more gentle treatment. From April to July 2015, that's what we got.

In April, though somewhat damp and green, we found *Sunstone* still floating happily at Robin and Jill Spear's dock in Thetis Cove, Esquimalt Harbour. Though we had made contact through other cruising friends, in the usual way of cruising serendipity, we found that Robin was brother to Mike Spear (RCC), in whose marina at Levington, Suffolk, we had lived for four years in the distant past. Some furious cleaning, saw us ready to go - at least as far as Friday Harbor in the US San Juan Islands - in order to renew *Sunstone's* temporary importation to Canada. Returning to Sidney, BC, a quick haul-out and a few equipment replacements made *Sunstone* ready to go cruising, slowly and gently back in the San Juans.

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For the American and Canadian cruisers of the Pacific northwest, the San Juans and the Canadian Gulf Islands form a convenient and very congenial archipelago. On both sides of the border there are numerous marine parks with sheltered anchorages and pleasant woodland hikes. Among the nicest are Fossil Bay in Sucia Island, Reid Harbor in Stuart Island in the San Juans, and Bedwell Harbour in South Pender Island in the Gulf Islands. In most of these harbours it is possible either to anchor or to pick up one of the park moorings for a minimal charge.

Where the US/Canadian border weaves among the islands it is not surprising that there were disputes, some very long-standing. San Juan Island itself was the subject of such a dispute that was finally settled by Kaiser Wilhelm's arbitration in 1872. Both the British and the Americans maintained small forces on the island at English Camp and American Camp. The former has a well-sheltered anchorage in Garrison Bay.

A further anomaly of the border is at Point Roberts, just south of Vancouver. The cartographers charged with delineating the border at 49°N apparently failed to notice that a small peninsula, Point Roberts, jutted south of the boundary from the Canadian side. Point Roberts is now an American enclave in Canada. Its marina berths predominantly Canadian boats and many of its inhabitants have dual nationality. With Vancouver airport no great distance away, Point Roberts is a convenient place to pick up crew, as we did. Tom's sister and brother-in-law joined us for a week's cruising.

Having cruised around the San Juans, we made our way north through the Gulf Islands, stopping at previous favourites: Winter Cove in Saturna



Princess Louisa Inlet

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Island, Princess Cove in Wallace Island and Pirates Cove in De Courcy Island. All these gave us a chance to stretch our legs in the adjoining wooded parks. By way of contrast and variety we next anchored in False Creek. This unusual anchorage right in the centre of Vancouver allows cruising visitors immediate access to all the facilities of a major city. In our case, it also allowed us to get out our bikes and take the long, scenic ride around Stanley Park.

By the end of May, having reminded ourselves of the pleasures of our cruise through the area in 2002, we set our sights on a new goal, visiting Princess Louisa Inlet. To do so one must sail – or more likely motor - 40 miles inland up successive fiord-like reaches to Malibu Rapids, the narrow, shallow, tide-swept entrance to the Inlet. Impatient to get in and moored before sunset, we took the flood through the rapids about two hours before slack water. As so often, the swirls and eddies were less violent than predicted and we shot into the calmer waters quite



Tom & Vicky at Chatterbox Falls

safely, to find a magical fiord, bounded either side by wooded cliffs and lit by soft, evening light. At the head of the Inlet, Chatterbox Falls clattered and spattered near the long-dock, where we moored with the few other visiting yachts.

The next morning we took the opportunity of dry weather to complete the demanding hike up to the Trapper Cabin, high on the cliff above the dock. From the waterfall near the cabin's ruins, the view down the length of the sun-lit Inlet was stunning. The next day we saw the Inlet in its other guise of mist, low cloud and rain; it was very different, but also beautiful.



Hole in the Wall

From the Inlet we continued north to Desolation Sound to visit our friends, Steve and Carol on Cortes Island and to anchor in sun-filled, intimate and perfectly protected Laura Cove. There we had a mission: to pay *Sunstone* back for our winter desertion by varnishing her top-sides.

From Desolation Sound going north, one must choose a route through the strongly tide-swept narrows that lead to the Broughton Archipelago and thence to Queen Charlotte Strait. Having previously sampled the delights of the Yuculta Rapids and the Devil's Hole whirlpool, we chose this time to brave the aptly named Hole-in-the-Wall, where slack water lasts all of eight minutes. There are two rapids to pass. We had to inch through the first of these against five or six knots of tide. Punching



One of Tom's Tortuous Tracks

through to Chatham Point in Johnstone Strait, however, was only half the battle. After waiting a couple of days for the north-westerly gale in Johnstone Strait to die, we caught the tide, which ran at up to seven knots, to whisk us through the western reaches of the Strait to the calmer waters of Havannah Channel. Our final test by tide was through the narrow Chatham Channel, the next day, that led out into the Broughtons.

Though it was already the latter half of June, it was early season for the Broughtons. The archipelago has scores of anchorages and a large number of small resorts tucked into

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coves on the various islands. The distances between anchorages are small, so we set ourselves pilotage challenges by finding the narrowest, most rock-strewn channels to test our skills between stops. Vicky came to call these the three Ts, 'Tom's Tortuous Tracks'. There was little wind, so we mostly motored, often not even bothering to hoist the main. Fortunately, the engine behaved itself, with only one exception, when an alarm went off just as we were anchoring in Joe Cove. Fortunately the alarm was a false one, for the 'Sail Drive Seal'. We don't have a sail-drive.

The float-houses in Potts Cove formed a little, water-borne village. We went up the tidal rapids to the lagoon in the dinghy. We re-fuelled at the Echo Bay Resort and chatted to a local character, Billy Proctor, at his 'museum' of artefacts collected over a period of more than seventy years. Ladyboot, Waddington and Turnbull Coves were all pleasant stops in benign summer weather. With the end of June approaching we crossed Queen Charlotte Strait to Port Hardy, to restock for our trip down the west coast of Vancouver Island. We also managed a bike ride, across a narrow section of northern Vancouver Island to Coal Harbour.

The course to reach the west coast from Queen Charlotte Strait passes across the notorious Nawhitti Bar, where the tide runs strongly, the ebb often setting against the prevailing north-westerly. A nasty sea can result. We had planned to stop at nearby Bull Harbour to wait for slack water on the Bar, but when we approached, motoring in light airs, the sea was placid and the south-going tide not yet strong. We carried on, were soon clear and headed for Cape Scott with a building breeze that carried us round the Cape in bright sunshine.

Sea Otter Cove is the northern-most secure anchorage on the west coast, but even with good charts its shallow, rock-bound entrance requires the most careful pilotage.

Fortunately the clear water allowed us to spot the masses of kelp on dangerous rocks as we worked our way to one of the four huge steel moorings in the Cove. Leaving the following morning near the bottom of the tide was no easier, with only six inches of water under our keel at times. We breathed a sigh of relief when we cleared the last ledge into open water.

After all the motoring inside Vancouver Island it was a delight to reach in a brisk north-westerly down the coast to Winter Harbour, a small community in Quatsino Sound. Here we met with a friendly group of three West Vancouver Yacht Club cruisers who were also heading south. Having biked to Coal Harbour from the east we thought it only



Sea Otter in Winter Harbour

appropriate to head there by water from the west, motoring up the length of Quatsino Sound and through the narrows to tie up at the public dock. Walking around the village we were repeatedly invited to the Community Pig-Roast that evening.

Among British Columbian cruisers, the Brooks Peninsula, jutting out from the west coast of Vancouver Island, has something of a reputation. Even in settled weather, the afternoon winds often reach gale force around its western tip. As a result, cruisers often plan to round in the early morning hours. There are two convenient anchorages just north of the Peninsula, Klaskino Inlet and Klaskish Basin. We had planned to stop at Klaskino



Vicky on a “stressed” beach

beautiful Columbia Cove on the south side of the Peninsula.

Despite extensive beach-combing in 2003, Vicky had failed to find a single Japanese glass fishing float. Spurred by a report from cruising friends this year of finding three, she was determined to explore every inch of the long ‘stressed’ beach near Columbia Cove. The beach was littered with thousands of logs and hundreds of plastic floats and nets, but sadly, despite hours of searching, we found not a single glass float.

Cruisers on this coast often report spending day after day in fog. We were mostly fortunate this summer and it was only on our short passage to the Bunsby Islands that we had a chance to use our newly replaced radar. For a time the Bunsbys were the site of the renewal of the sea otter population on the west coast. This summer, however, they appeared to have moved further south.



Once through Nootka Lighthouse



Bodega y Quadra and Vancouver, 1792

Cove followed by Friendly Cove the next day. Friendly Cove is the site of the agreement signed in 1792 by George Vancouver for Britain and Bodega y Quadra for Spain, that Spain would waive any claim to this coast, despite their extensive explorations that had left behind so many Spanish names. The occasion is commemorated in stained glass in the beautifully decorated little church. During our visit, the Mowachaht indigenous people were having



Friendly Cove Church

their annual gathering on their lands surrounding the Cove, though almost all now live a little further along the coast. As on a previous cruise, we had a pleasant visit to the lighthouse keeper. Canada is one of the few developed countries that still maintains numerous manned lighthouses.

Hotspings Cove was at one time an almost exclusively yachting destination, as shown by the planks on the boardwalk carved with yacht names. Now it is a prime tourist spot with a constant stream of float-planes and fast water taxis bringing visitors from Tofino. As a result, it is now a crowded, rather noisy stop. However, the boardwalk through beautiful temperate rain forest remains attractive and the hot springs themselves

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Sunstone in Tranquilito . . .

knew from experience that a fresh coat of external varnish was essential. For this we required a perfectly sheltered and unfrequented cove where we could shore-tie. Inspection of the chart threw up the perfect spot, which even had a perfect name, Tranquilito Cove, in Tranquil Inlet, near Tofino. Five days of furious sanding and varnishing saw all external surfaces covered, along with all the other normal checks to rig and equipment. A further week in Tofino, including a quick road trip to Victoria, saw our preparations complete.

Passages in the north-east Pacific must be planned around the semi-permanent high over the area. Often this high is far enough south and east to require a long leg to the south down the US coast before one can head on a more westerly course toward Hawaii. Fortunately for us, the high was well offshore when we left and its shape allowed us to sail much more directly towards Hawaii. Almost immediately we picked up good north-westerlies

are warming, if you can find an isolated nook.

By this latter half of July we were beginning to think about our long passages home to New Zealand. The increasing rumblings about a building El Niño made us think that we had better make an early start. We had originally planned to head all the way back to Victoria before setting off. On consideration and following the example of our Kiwi friends, Pete and Raewyn, on *Saliander*, we decided that it would be sensible to leave for Hawaii from the west coast of Vancouver Island, thus avoiding the difficulties of traversing the Strait of Juan de Fuca twice.

To prepare for the passages, we



. . . to be varnished

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and northerlies giving fast, if wet, reaching in which we made over 1,000 miles in the first week. As the weather warmed and we came somewhat closer to the centre of the high, the winds eased, turning more north-easterly and our progress slowed. After 10 days we began to have trade-wind conditions, with only one day of unpleasantly strong winds during the remainder of the 17 days to Honolulu.

Compared to the South Pacific, passages in the North bring almost daily sightings of shipping. There are busy routes crossing from North America to Asia as well as from the Panama Canal. We found AIS a great help in determining quickly whether a ship would pass close or not, and since we have a transceiver, we noted that some ships clearly changed course to pass well clear having noticed our signal. This was reassuring.

The other characteristic of north-east Pacific passages is the constant presence of plastic rubbish, mostly fishing gear, but also other oddments. This has been much publicised recently since the Japanese tsunami of 2011. We had noticed the problem, however, even on our passage north in 2002.

Just after dawn on 18 August 2015 we tied up at the Waikiki Yacht Club in Honolulu after 17 days and 2,391 miles. Clearance was friendly, but rather more formal than in other US ports. Though moorage was somewhat expensive, the Yacht Club was welcoming and members were very helpful. We managed to restock and refuel quite quickly, which was just as well as even locals considered the weather hot and humid. In addition, Hawaii was repeatedly threatened by tropical depressions, some actually named storms or hurricanes. We watched the weather predictions anxiously to find a sufficient gap to head south. On 25 August we judged that we had as good a chance as any of passing through a gap between storms and we headed away.

With El Niño set in and reports that the ITCZ was very wide, we had put aboard extra fuel and hoped it would be enough. Our first goal was to get down to latitude 10°N, which is generally considered to be the southern limit of the eastern Pacific tropical storms in the northern hemisphere. We made good steady progress for the first five days and by 31 August had reached 10°N, at which point we almost immediately entered the convergence zone with fickle and often westerly winds, and foul current. A week of this, with days of motoring and having to tack to avoid Palmyra, saw us to the Equator on 6 September.

Just when we thought that we might have to conserve our last reserves of diesel for emergencies, we emerged from the convergence and into firmer winds. With mostly easterlies, somewhat forward of the beam, we could make good progress even in lighter breezes. In the early hours of 13 September, we passed through the gap between Tutuila, American Samoa, and Upolu, Western Samoa. On 15 September, we changed the date for



the dateline and arrived in Neiafu Harbour, Vava'u, Tonga after a 21 day, 2,731 mile passage.

Neiafu was a very different place from our previous visit in 1999, when there were only 20 or so cruisers on moorings around the harbour. This time there were over 80. Unfortunately, facilities ashore and the availability of stores had not improved, apart from a plethora of new cafes. Nevertheless we had a pleasant and reviving week to recover. The greatest blessing was much cooler weather after the equatorial heat of the passage. The other delight was to catch up on our rugby viewing and All Black supporting, as the first games of the Rugby World Cup were played.

The conventional wisdom is that the ideal time to head south from the islands for New Zealand is sometime in early to mid-November. We have always thought, however, that the pattern is more important than the month. It often pays to catch the south-easterlies on the north-east side of a big high drifting across from the central Australian desert. These winds then turn successively into easterlies and then northerlies as the high drifts east. If the passage is quick enough then one may even reach New Zealand before the front, which inevitably follows behind with south-westerlies.

We spotted just such a pattern developing and made a quick decision to depart on 25 September. A day's motoring saw us into the winds of the high. We made very good progress until the evening of 1 October when the winds went light and northerly. We knew from the GRIB files that we were in for a 'hard landing', with a vigorous front approaching the night of 2 October. Though we then had only 130 miles to go to Opuia in the Bay of Islands, it took a further two days of heavy beating into 25-35kts to reach our goal. Though we are no longer the youthful enthusiasts we

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once were for regular dousings with cold sea water, we remain amazed and thankful at the way our Olin Stephens' creation goes to windward in tough conditions.

Cheerful, efficient officials welcomed us home at the customs dock in Opuā. *Sunstone* had carried us 6,392 miles across the Pacific in just nine weeks, including both of our one-week pit-stops. Exhausted, we slid into the deep velvet pit of sleep.