

Endless adventure in circumnavigation of Vancouver Island

25 days of thrills sailing rugged west coast

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JULY 9, 2014



A trip out into the open Pacific Ocean provided thrills and chills.

Sailing around Vancouver Island is one of the greatest sailing adventures in the Pacific Northwest.

Exploring secluded anchorages, visiting remote communities, swimming along white sandy beaches or taking a break from it all in a hot spring, an entire summer would not be enough to discover it all.

We decided on a 25-day circumnavigation, dividing it into three legs. We started with the Inside Passage, tackled the offshore passage on the west coast of Vancouver Island and then the return delivery to Vancouver. Different crews came on board for each section.

I met our crew in Port Hardy. Together we would sail our It's Magic (a Beneteau 40), along Vancouver Island's rugged west coast. Our crew were all experienced sailors from B.C. and Washington.

Bull Harbour was our first anchorage. Only a small spit of land separates the calm anchorage from Roller Bay, where a relentless surf crashes onto the beach, churning stones into smooth, almost perfectly round pebbles for which the bay is famous for.

Crossing infamous Nahwitt Bar next was a bit like being in a washing machine. The bar is shallow and narrow and swell from the open ocean gets kicked up, resulting in big, breaking waves giving even the best stomach a rough time.

Half a day later — stomachs settled again — rounding Cape Scott in favourable winds and sunshine was a real treat. The windswept cape is often covered in clouds. Strong winds and adverse currents can make the rounding treacherous. Poseidon was with us that day and our boat sailed around the northern tip of Vancouver Island with all her crew enjoying the beauty of this isolated coast.

The next day greeted us with fog. Undeterred, we pointed the bow west, heading offshore. The plan was to sail some 100 kilometres off the coast and spend two nights at sea, experiencing what a passage making distant shore might be like.

Offshore sailing is very different from the island-hopping and day sailing we may do on English Bay or through the Gulf Islands.

Instead of lying at anchor in a protected bay in the evenings, we sail the boat non-stop in any conditions. Hiding in a cove or harbour is not an option; instead the crew and boat have to deal with anything Mother Nature may throw at them.

The fog subsided as we headed away from the shore. Far off the coast, the deep blue sea of the Pacific Ocean stretched as far as the eye could see. Strong winds pushed It's Magic purposefully through the white-crested waves.

The wind never abated and the waves reached a formidable height of three metres or more, some big enough to crash through the cockpit, drenching the crew in a cold shower of sea water.

On the second day offshore, dolphins approached us and playfully cut through our bow wave, zooming under the boat and appearing just under the surface on the other side. What a spectacle — all our hardship from the last night was forgotten and everybody had a big smile on their face.

The wind picked up again in the evening, just as the sun was getting lower over the horizon, putting a golden blanket over the towering waves, making them look somewhat less intimidating. As night fell, the wind rose to gale force. The boat climbed each wave before crashing down into the next trough, drenching the helmsman with spray. The wires of the rigging sang in the howling wind. Nevertheless, everybody was in good spirits, ready for an exciting night at sea. We knew the boat was ready for this, and the training of the last few days prepared everybody for a rough night at sea. The nights are short this time of the year and we all looked forward to spending the next day at Hotspring Cove just north of Tofino.

A prudent mariner avoids making landfall at night, and we timed our approach for sunrise around 4:30 a.m. Two hours later, we soaked our sore bodies in the natural pools carved into the rock and overlooked a now calm, blue sea. Sitting in paradise, with hot water trickling down our shoulders from a rock formation above, we could barely believe that just hours before we were battling with the elements in the dark of the night.

Hotspring Cove can only be reached by sea or air. By the time the first visitors from Tofino landed, we were all fast asleep, dreaming of big waves, growling wind and playful dolphins.

The second part of the journey was in a more leisurely pace, giving us time to spend a few days in Barkley Sound and the Broken Islands as well as visiting Ucluelet and Bamfield. The weather gods still with us, we were flying down the coast under full sails, the sun warming our bodies on our way to Victoria, where a new crew would board for the next adventure of It's Magic; sailing through the Gulf Islands back to Vancouver.

During the 10 days of sailing from Port Hardy around the island to Victoria, Poseidon threw everything at us one could expect from offshore sailing. From fog, to gale-force winds, peaceful sunsets at sea, dolphins playing in our wake and champagne sailing in a stiff breeze and sunshine — we experienced it all.

As I am writing this, one of our crew closed the deal on a 40-foot Beneteau, just like the one we sailed on, and he will sail her back to his homeland, Japan.

It's been a lifelong dream of his, ever since he immigrated to Washington some 25 years ago. When are you casting off the bow lines and set sails to make your dream come true?

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