

Desolation Sound perfect for fall sailing

Peaceful and quiet after tourists are gone

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 29, 2013



The Celeste is fog bound in Prideaux Haven.

Captain George Vancouver came to mind recently as I was sitting in the cockpit of our sailboat, Celeste, anchored in Prideaux Haven.

Vancouver and his men explored the waters in and around Desolation Sound, and they were not impressed. The Northwest Passage they were looking for remained elusive. The steep, rocky shores, covered in dense forest were uninviting. Erratic or complete lack of wind left his boats, the Chatham and the Discovery, vulnerable to the constant back-and-forth of tidal currents.

He and his men did not see what 200 years later adventure seekers, boaters, fishermen and kayakers would describe as paradise. People even built cabins precariously perched along rocky shores to spend a few summer weeks or sometimes a lifetime in Desolation Sound.

The water during our visit was placid; not a breath of wind could be felt. In the background the coastal mountains rose majestically toward the dark blue sky. As the sun set, the mountains changed their grey and green colour to a warm red, the glassy water reflecting their peaks like a mirror. After

the sun disappeared behind an island, stars started to dot the dark sky and I could see the Big Dipper and Polaris high above the entrance to Toba Inlet. It truly was paradise.

The next morning thick fog enclosed the anchorage like a heavy down blanket, closing out the rest of the world as if it did not exist. It was mystically beautiful.

My wife Andrea and our almost three-year-old son Leonardo climbed into our dinghy and rowed toward adjacent Melanie Cove.

We hiked up the small trail from the beach, between massive tree stumps, the only remaining witnesses that this area once was inhabited. Lush fern and rapidly growing alder reclaimed the area, covering any remnants of any cabin that still might be found under the thick, green carpet.

Early in the afternoon, the fog lifted, once again revealing the stunning beauty of the islands, distant mountains and dark blue ocean around us. Eager to push further into the wilderness, we weighed our anchor.

Even though the wind stayed nonexistent for most of our cruise, we enjoyed travelling through these tranquil waters, exploring inlets and channels and finding an anchorage in one of the countless, sometimes secretive coves along our way. Some mornings we would listen to the distinctive calls of the loon while Leonardo could not get enough of pointing out the countless jellyfish around us: "One more, one more", he would shout. When underway, porpoise would sometimes cross our wake delighting all of us.

After almost a week of cruising we were ready for some civilization. That mainly meant a hot shower (for my wife), a playground (for Leonardo) and to replenish the depleted beer stock (for the captain).

We decided to head for Gorge Harbour on Cortes Island, one of my favourite marinas in this area, knowing it would fulfil all our different desires.

As soon as we left Walsh Marine Park on our way south through Waddington Channel, grey fog engulfed Celeste. We stayed within 50 to 100 metres of the jagged coastline, carefully watching the depth sounder and looking out for oyster farms and their scattered floats protruding into the channel.

Late in the afternoon, the sun broke through the fog, as we passed Kinghorn Island on our way toward Cortes Island. The harbour entrance is through a narrow gorge, with towering rock cliffs. The next two days we spent lazily around the marina, enjoying a hot shower, re-supplying our stores, and Leonardo had fun running around the playground. In the afternoon, we would lounge in the wooden chairs by the pool, sipping on a rum and Coke while the sun warmed our bodies before it set over the hills surrounding the harbour.

In the summer this place is bustling with tourists. This time of the year, it was peaceful with only a handful of sailors visiting the marina and few local residents enjoying fish and chips in the restaurant overlooking the water.

Everything comes to an end, and eventually we had to point our boat south and sail toward Vancouver. We waved goodbye to this fabulous cruising grounds, passed the white, sandy beaches of Spilsbury Point, down infamous Malaspina Strait, and through Welcome Passage the Celeste once again entered the Strait of Georgia.

We sailed along the Sunshine Coast, both sails spread out like wings on either side of the boat. A strong north-westerly wind pushed us farther south and Celeste occasionally surfed down a big wave making my heart jump with joy. After a long, but wonderful day of sailing, the sun set, tainting our wake in an orange and golden hue as we slid under the Lions Gate Bridge toward our home port of Vancouver.

Recommended Reading:

The Curve of Time, Wylie Blanchet

Adventures in Solitude, Grant Lawrence

Cruising Guide to British Columbia, Vol. 2, Bill Wolferstan

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