

# Van Isle 360 the adventure of lifetime in treacherous waters

## Van Isle 360 International Yacht Race competitors complete circumnavigation of Vancouver Island

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JULY 3, 2013



Neptune smiled on the last stages of the race with strong breezes.

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The west coast of Vancouver Island is one of the world's most treacherous waterways.

Countless boats have foundered on the rocks lurking just under the ocean's surface. The few sailors who survived and made it to shore found themselves lost in the most northern rainforest with no access to civilization.

To assist the stranded sailors a trail was built, giving the shipwrecked a chance to reach shelter and a place to recover from disaster.

Nowadays, with the widespread use of GPS, few boats run aground on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The trail built to save lives became known as the West Coast Trail and every year hundreds of keen hikers set out to conquer the 75 kilometres between Bamfield and Port Renfrew.

When I hiked this trail more than 15 years ago, I would have never imagined that I once will sail along this rugged coast, participating in a race around Vancouver Island.

The weather forecast for the leg from Ucluelet to Victoria looked promising. Everybody was excited about forecasted strong winds. One skipper even told me he was hoping to get his boat surfing down some of the big waves.

A few hours later, Carmanah lighthouse, which marks the entrance to the Juan the Fuca Strait, appeared on the horizon and we enjoyed yet another magnificent sunset. Just before dark we hoisted our colourful spinnaker sail. The wind steadily increased to 35 to 40 km/h, our boat become alive with joy and we raced toward Victoria in the black night. With the occasional gust reaching maybe 50 km/h and the building waves everybody was on deck having the time of their life.

Getting closer to Victoria, we shot through the narrow passage between the Race Rocks lighthouse and Vancouver Island. The winds increased even more and the waves tossed the boat around, but our helmsman kept a steady hand and steered the boat safely toward the finish. These are the moments we sailors live for: The wind hauling through the rigging, the sails full and the boat slicing through the water at its maximum speed. Forgotten were the lulls of last few days.

What a finish, flying into Victoria at 2 a.m., getting the sails down just in time before crashing into the breakwater at Ogden Point and finally snuggling down in front of the beautifully lit Empress Hotel.

The start for the last leg from Victoria to Nanaimo took place in sunshine and, for a change, Neptune was smiling on the Van Isle family and the wind was perfect. The 42 boats were jockeying for the best position on the start line. Two boats crashed into each other. Astral Plane was hit by Raven and had to retire from the race due to the sustained damage. Luckily, nobody got hurt.

The last leg is the most tactical one. Skippers had to make the decision whether to take the shorter route through the Gulf Islands but risking that the tidal current will turn against them as they have to sail through one of the passes later on. Alternatively, they can take the long way through Boundary Pass and up the Strait of Georgia. Some of the faster boats took their chances and went inside the Gulf Islands and through Active Pass. The gamble paid off and they came out ahead and getting into Nanaimo before the wind died again. The rest of the fleet languished in the Strait of Georgia, facing yet another long night. In light winds, one boat after the other crossed the finish line in Nanaimo Harbour and finally the last boat made it home just before sunrise.

Another great adventure came to an end. We are all left with new friends, memories of a lifetime, pictures of whales playing in our wake, bald eagles circling the sailing fleet and the rush we all felt when surfing down a wave when everything was just perfect.

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