

Alberta teens trade trucks for sailboat in sea adventure

Group of teenagers trade Rocky Mountains for the Gulf Islands — and prove to be able mariners

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JUNE 19, 2015



Alberta students proved to be quick learners on their sailing adventure in the Gulf Islands.

“We are six rednecks from Alberta and we traded our trucks for a sailboat,” sang my crew of teenagers during “talent night” at Telegraph Harbour Marina on Thetis Island. This was the third evening of a five-day West Coast sailing adventure for a group of 24 students from the Chestermere Middle School in Alberta.

For a week, they switched their view of the Rocky Mountains for the spectacular scenery of islands, coves and secluded bays the Gulf Islands offer.

Just three days earlier, I greeted the students and their teachers on Granville Island. Some looked a bit leery, perhaps tired from the flight or lack of sleep in anticipation of this adventure.

Not much time was to be lost, and we boarded our four boats on Granville Island; two boats for girls and two boats for boys. Each boat held six students, a chaperone and an instructor. With the bags stowed and the bow lines cast off, we soon headed under the Burrard Bridge into English Bay and across the Strait of Georgia toward the Gulf Islands.

Sunshine and a light breeze prevailed the first day. The four boats sliced side-by-side gracefully

through the water, each trying to be a bit faster than the other. At the end of a very long day, the students launched the dinghies to explore the shore or visit the other boats as soon as we dropped anchor in Clam Bay. Most of them even jumped into the cold water for a refreshing swim. The sun finally set over the flotilla and we all turned into our bunks for a well-deserved rest.

On following days, we would seek out a beautiful anchorage for our lunch stops, often rafting up the boats. The turquoise water invited some for a swim, white sandy beaches waited to be explored, and the adults stayed on board grilling hotdogs (while keeping an eye on the kids in the water). While at sea, we practised basic sailing skills and let the new sailors take the helm. It was wonderful to see how engaged they all were and how quickly everybody became comfortable in this new environment.

Funny enough, it was one of the boys' boats that had the "Titanic moment" — with all the guys perched on the bow, one spreading his arms just like Kate Winslet during the famous scene with Leonardo DiCaprio.

One of the highlights was anchoring in Pirate's Cove on D'Courcy Island. After sailing by the treasure chest near the head of the cove and navigating the harrowingly tight entrance, we anchored close to shore with all boats rafted together. The entire group went for a walk, following the footsteps of infamous Brother XII, spiritual leader of a cult with a colony on D'Courcy Island in the 1920s. Brother XII apparently amassed a treasure of gold, which some say is still hidden on the island, before he fled the island and disappeared.

Pirate's Cove never fails with a spectacular sunset. It is one of those magic places I keep coming back to. We all lounged on deck, soaking up the evening sun and then watched the sea and sky turn golden and red as the sun descended beyond the horizon. Another day in paradise came to an end.

Leading up to the voyage it was somewhat challenging to find instructors who wanted to sail with a "bunch of teenagers." How wrong they were. This was a fantastic group of enthusiastic and really well-educated students. Admittedly, I was a bit nervous as well, but it turned out to be a great experience not only for the school but for us instructors.

I never touched the helm between leaving Vancouver on Day 1 and a getting back five days later. There was some tricky manoeuvring in marinas and tight anchorages, but the students managed really well. Seeing their smiles and experiencing how they took control of the boat after just a few days at sea was truly satisfying.

A big thank you to Lauren and Trevor of the Chestermere Middle School, who went out of their way to make this happen.

Most of the students have never seen the West Coast, let alone been at sea. Exploring the Gulf Islands on a sailboat was a true adventure for them and hopefully one that created a lifetime memory.

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waters over the season.

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