

Broughtons and Back



Flotilla Cruising in the Pacific Northwest

By Darren O'Brien

When we told fellow cruisers we were joining a flotilla of boats on a trip into Canada, we basically heard two kinds of response. Most thought the adventure sounded like a lot of fun and were slightly jealous. Others scoffed at the notion, implying they didn't have a "herd mentality" and could go anywhere on their own.

Well, we cruise 95% of the time on our own, too. But we happen to find flotillas fun, social, and more often than not a great opportunity to make new friends, learn new things and visit new places. And as opposed to feeling part of a herd, we approach the group travel dynamic with a positive, safety in numbers perspective.

My wife, Lisa, and I have been on quite a few flotilla cruises, mostly of the charter and "Share the Sail" variety. But this one was different. First and foremost we were on our own boat, *Traveler*. And this wasn't a leisurely week-long vacation in some exotic, palm-tree-lined-beach part of

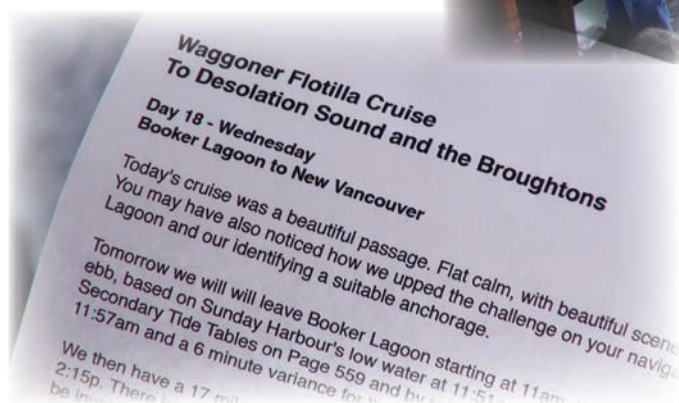
the world. It was a one-way, 22-day cruise to the ruggedly beautiful Broughton Archipelago, an essentially wild and remote area off the north end of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Getting there, which was the furthest we'd ever been on our boat, also required dealing with some navigational challenges. Things like hazardous tidal rapids, reef strewn narrows, and even a torpedo test range.

Our trip was organized by the Waggoner Cruising Guide, a.k.a. the "Bible for Northwest Cruising." And to make it even better, our flotilla leader was Mark Bunzel, publisher of the Waggoner. For many years Mark has traveled from Puget Sound to Alaska continuously updating the guide, logging more than 2,500 miles under his keel every summer. His local knowledge and expertise regarding the aforementioned navigation issues, as well as area marinas and countless anchorages, bolstered everyone's confidence.

There were six boats in our little flotilla representing quite a range of vessels and experience. We referred to our seven-knot trawler, a 1979 Cheoy Lee 46 LRC, as the big old slow boat. Though we were the slowest



Morning briefing session



powerboat, our group also included a Catalina 310 (crewed by a couple in their 80s!) that averaged 5.5 knots. The other vessels were a brand new Ranger 29, a Meridian 368, a North Pacific 43, and Mark's trusty 30-foot Tollycraft. Regarding experience, beyond Mark none of the skippers or crew had been to the Broughtons before. However, all but one boat had attended the two-day Waggoner's seminar on Desolation Sound and the Broughtons. So at least we were "well educated!"



Queen Charlotte Strait



Sarah Point, Desolation Sound

The beginning of the trip, which started from Deer Harbor on Orcas Island in the San Juans, was basically uneventful. The biggest hurdle was clearing into Canada on the first day which was, as predicted, very easy and even friendly. Secondly, due to large forest fires burning on Vancouver Island and the BC mainland, we had to get used to a very hazy sky, with the smoke creating almost fog-like conditions. Not enough to be a hindrance, though.

The third day presented our most unique navigational challenge: Area Whisky Golf. Crossing the Strait of Georgia from Nanaimo to the mainland took us either through or around Area WG. As the test range was active that morning the wise course took us around. Not getting hit by a torpedo or otherwise incurring the wrath of the Canadian military was the primary goal. No big deal!

Getting closer to Desolation Sound we finally started seeing the sun through the thinning haze. We actually met a few boats in Powell River that had left the area and were

heading south, as ash from the fires earlier in the week had heavily dusted their decks a few times. When we made the famous turn to starboard at Sarah Point and officially entered Desolation Sound, the smoke had almost cleared. We could see the mountains rising dramatically from sea level a mere 20-30 miles away, but with the residual haze it wasn't the crisp, deep blue sky and water we had envisioned and seen in photos. Still, it took our breath away.

We had been shooting a lot of video as we were making a "Broughtons and Back" documentary on the trip. And so it was in stunningly picturesque Desolation Sound that our main camera, the workhorse that shot all the episodes of *Latitudes & Attitudes* TV, went on the fritz. Fortunately, we had just purchased a brand new DSLR camera that shot in full 1920x1080H D video. We just had to learn how to use it on the fly. Our friend Joe Andrade of Marine Motion was aboard the first week with his camera as well, so we were able to keep shooting.

A few days later saw us reach the first of four rapids. I won't go into detail here, but suffice to say the



planning required to hit the rapids at slack tide (highly recommended!) is very important, especially when traversing them in succession against the tide. Rapids were the one part of the trip, along with notorious Johnstone Strait, that put a bit of fear into some of the crews. But having been educated and provided resources like Mark's daily briefs, the rapids were, to the relief of many first-timers, a non-issue. Well, except that morning when one

of the boats got turned around and lost in pea soup fog in the middle of Greene Point Rapids, and our radar decided to spontaneously power off while swirling eddies tossed us around, causing the chart plotter to show our directional heading spinning 360 degrees. They were a non-issue...

The ninth day saw the flotilla enter the Broughtons after negotiating a brief 14-mile stretch of Johnstone Strait. We hit the strait early in the day, which is again the recommended





McIntosh Bay

thing to do, and enjoyed flat calm as we finally reached the southern part of our intended destination.

We spent the next 14 glorious days alternating between strikingly gorgeous anchorages and staying at some of

the coolest, friendliest marinas and floating villages you could imagine. And being part of a Waggoner flotilla in the Pacific NW meant some of the places we visited held special events just for us. One of our favorite moments

was at Pierre's Echo Bay, where owners Pierre and Tove took time from their very busy day to join our little group's potluck dinner. That turned out to be a memorable evening.

Three hundred seventy-seven nautical miles and 22 days from whence we began, the flotilla ended in Port McNeill on Vancouver Island. Boats and crews went their respective ways, most of them



Traveler stern-tied



Pierre's Echo Bay

heading home. Mark stayed and visited a few more places in the Broughtons, as every stop for him was a chance to update the Waggoner Guide. We ended up staying a week at the North Island Marina, enjoying

with all the requisite planning and reservations done by experts who have “been there and done that.” Especially if it’s somewhere you’ve never been before. The Broughtons flotilla turned out to be one of the best boating adventures we’ve ever had. Enough so we are considering a Waggoner flotilla to Alaska next summer! 🇺🇸

Interested in joining a Waggoner Cruising Guide flotilla? 2016 trips include Desolation Sound, the Broughtons, and SE Alaska. Visit www.waggonerguide.com. And look for the “Broughtons and Back” documentary at www.pacificnwboater.com.

their wonderful hospitality and taking advantage of the consistently strong WiFi (Lisa was closing the advertising for the previous issue of this magazine). After that, we went right back into the Broughtons for another 12 days, where on our own schedule we saw some fantastic new places and revisited favorites.

Like most cruisers we prefer traveling that way, moving at our own pace and going to the places we want to visit when we want. However, there’s something to be said for having an itinerary laid out for you in advance,



Traveler