

Story and photography by Tor Johnson

The San Juan Islands are a treasure trove of unspoiled beauty good enough to make sailors want to keep some secrets for themselves



After a quick consultation of our charts, my sailing buddy and I had just discovered a new-to-us, pristine anchorage with two other boats. We anchored *Keala*, our Jeanneau 44i, just inside the southeast corner of San Juan Island, in northern Washington State. Since the “Waggoner Cruising Guide” mentioned that the anchorage offered access to several spectacular hiking trails, we jumped in the dinghy and rowed ashore. Unfortunately, the trails weren’t well marked, so I asked directions from a hiker coming out of a forest trail on his way back to his dinghy. I admitted that, being based in Hawaii, I was new to this bay.

“Hi there, you wouldn’t be coming from the hiking trail?”

“Which trail?” he asked before reluctantly parting with a few scraps of local knowledge, then parted with a warning: “Don’t tell anyone.”

It was a sentiment we heard a few times in the San Juans, even in the more crowded and well-known anchorages.

The outbreak of Covid-19, and the closing of Canada’s borders to cruisers, seem to have created a bottleneck of boats in the San Juan Islands. While it may be theoretically possible, and in some cases may even be legal to transit the coast of British Columbia while en

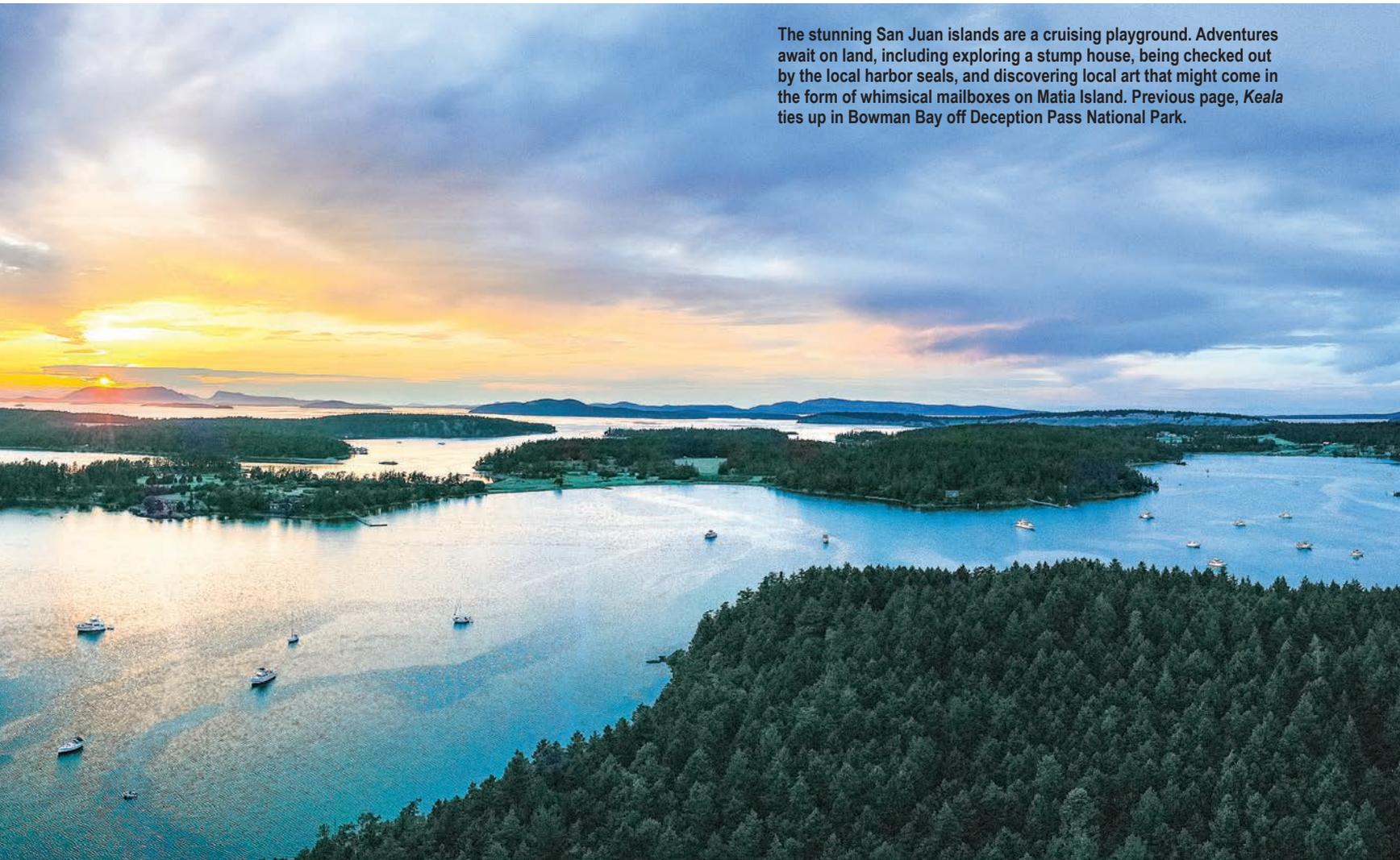




route to Alaska, it's unlikely the average cruiser qualifies, as they'd need proof of Alaskan residency, and would need permission to transit without landing or stopping to shop, fuel or provision. A few American boats are flaunting regulations and crossing the border regardless, but they risk fines, imprisonment and seizure. The rest of us who might normally travel Canadian waters and on to Alaska during the summer months have been exploring places closer at hand, such as Seattle, the San Juan Islands and Puget Sound.

Of course we all want to keep our favorite places pristine and untrammled. On the other hand, I don't think I've ever heard a true bluewater cruiser utter the words "Don't tell anyone." Open ocean veterans are invariably open, friendly and eager to share. Maybe it's the experience of the vast solitude of the open ocean, the endless empty, lonesome anchorages. Or maybe it's our own insignificance in the face of immense, hostile elements, and the vital need for sailors to unite against the dangers they can present. Maybe it's bluewater sailors' experiences of being newcomers themselves all over the world. In any case, voyagers share their knowledge freely. It's part of who we are as cruisers to share what we have learned, to make the experience more fun and safer for everyone.

The stunning San Juan islands are a cruising playground. Adventures await on land, including exploring a stump house, being checked out by the local harbor seals, and discovering local art that might come in the form of whimsical mailboxes on Matia Island. Previous page, Keala ties up in Bowman Bay off Deception Pass National Park.







So when I met a young family enthusiastically exploring the first-growth forest while hiking across somewhat remote Matia Island in the northern San Juans, I shared the little local knowledge I'd picked up. The family was relatively new to sailing. They'd tied to a state mooring buoy on the exposed west side of the island, and their trailerable Cal 22 was already tossing in a westerly wind, which was forecast to increase that night. I mentioned that we were anchored in a tight cove on the eastern side that might offer better protection, although space was pretty limited. They sailed over to our side, and with their shoal draft were able to fit perfectly at the head of the narrow, shallow bay. It was great fun for us to meet the family, and watch them exploring every inch of the island. Their young son Abram was fascinated

"Where did you sail?" I asked.
 "We spent a week at the dock at Friday Harbor," he replied.
 A week at Friday Harbor, possibly the most visited marina in the San Juan Islands. It's no surprise it was crowded.
 Although the increased traffic means the popular anchorages are even more crowded than usual, it's still possible to find solitude in empty anchorages off the beaten path.
 The shallow and secluded Dungeness Spit was one such place. We managed to find just enough water to slowly wend our way into its narrow, wild inner bay. We were the only boat for miles. Although well protected, this isn't really a sailboat anchorage due to the depth. Passing fishermen told us it was dicey, and we were only able to enter because of the moderate neap tides. Still, at low



Fellow cruisers enjoy some on-the-water exploring at Matia Island, with Mount Baker looming in the background.



with sealife, and taught us all about the resident family of otters he'd found living in the rocks. He was also particularly interested in photography, and was genuinely pleased to meet, "the photographer who took all those photos in my favorite sailing magazines," as he put it. His parents said the anchorage was a highlight of their trip. It was so quiet, said their dad, that he could "hear the seals breathing."

To me, this is what cruising is about. I was able help the family find a fantastic anchorage, and my family enjoyed their company. I

took photos of our new friends exploring the rocks at sunset. It's all about sharing what we in Hawaii call "a little aloha."

Back in Shelter Bay Marina, I noticed a couple heading down with two empty dock carts to unload their boat, and asked "How was the sailing?"

"I was disappointed," said the man. "It was so crowded."

tide we found ourselves just touching the mud bottom.

Going aground in many of these well-protected, mud-bottomed bays is more of an embarrassment than a danger, and more likely to injure one's pride than the boat.

Trying to beat a falling tide out of the heavily silted inner channel to the retirement community of Shelter Bay, we stuck firmly and spent half the day sitting solidly in the mud, right in front of several homes. The neighbors came out to chat, since we were literally posted up in their front yards. An older gentleman who was our new neighbor to starboard, walked out on his lawn to commend us.

"At least you have the right attitude. I see boats get stuck on that bar all the time," he said. "The big powerboats go crazy trying to power off bar. Some have even sprayed water onto my lawn! Sailors, on the other hand, tend to just shut it down, and pull out a bottle of wine or a book." Shutting down the engine, by the way, is key: a furiously rotating prop will easily stir up enough mud and seaweed to clog an impeller and overheat the engine.

Our neighbor to port walked out of her back door, took one look, and simply said, "Oops."



Keala sails through Deception Pass.

Keala tucks in to a perfect San Juan's anchorage.





**MATIA
ISLAND**

**CYPRESS
ISLAND**

**SAN JUAN
ISLAND**

**FRIDAY
HARBOR**

**SWINOMISH
CHANNEL**

**DUNGENESS
SPIT**

We also ran aground attempting to enter the silted-in Swinomish Channel at the bottom of a minus 2-foot low tide that had just begun to rise. With a strong 3-knot current still pulling out against us, the boat stopped making way over the bottom slowly. Hard aground, but with the current still flowing past us, the boat answered perfectly to the helm. Getting off was as easy as turning beam-to the current and letting it pull us back off the mud bank. But of course there happened to be two power cruisers following us into the narrow channel, which meant we had to wait in place a bit sheepishly for them to pass by. One skipper leaned out of his pilothouse and yelled "Are you aground?" Other replies presented themselves, but I managed to reply with a laugh, "Yes, we are!"

An unexpected advantage to short distance cruising near your home base is that it allows you to better choose the conditions in your favor. Finding that all of the mooring buoys at popular Eagle Harbor on Cypress Island had been snatched up, I consulted my favorite tide app, AyeTides, and the Windy prediction app. It looked like the ebb would carry me across Rosario Strait to Lopez Island, and before long I was rollicking close-hauled across the Straits at 10 knots. I found an uncrowded anchorage with one other boat, a beautiful primordial meadow on a land spit surrounded by sheer cliffs, and wonderful Dungeness crab fishing.

Strong currents created by large tidal ranges and constricted channels create one of the biggest navigational challenges in the area. Learning to use the currents can be interesting, particularly in a low-powered vessel. Our sloop motors at a modest 6 knots, so a current of just 3 knots against us means a snail's pace of 3 knots over the ground. In our favor, on the other hand, it means a ground speed of 9 knots, in effect tripling our speed. With a properly timed departure, sailing at a joyous 10 knots isn't uncommon. Going to weather with the current can also mean a 20-degree lift on each tack, and downwind angles become race-



ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Tor Johnson is a Hawaii-based photographer who was raised sailing the world's oceans, and credits his love of the sea to his father Donald Johnson, who he says, "has wrung more salt out of his socks than I'll ever see." More of Tor's work is at www.tjhawaii.com.

boat-worthy. Adjusting our departure times and goals for the day to take advantage of the tidal currents has become an enjoyable part of the game.

The San Juans are large islands, with wide open views of rolling farmland, deep bays, and a laid back, almost Hawaiian feel. Everyone waves at each other on the road. It's a place to take your time, and let the calm of the island pace sink in. And why not? The next port is only a few miles away. It's OK if you spend a few extra hours wandering around, touring an artist's studio, or just soaking in the pastoral calm.

Just don't tell anyone. 🗣️



The sun sets over an idyllic anchorage in Watmough Bay.