

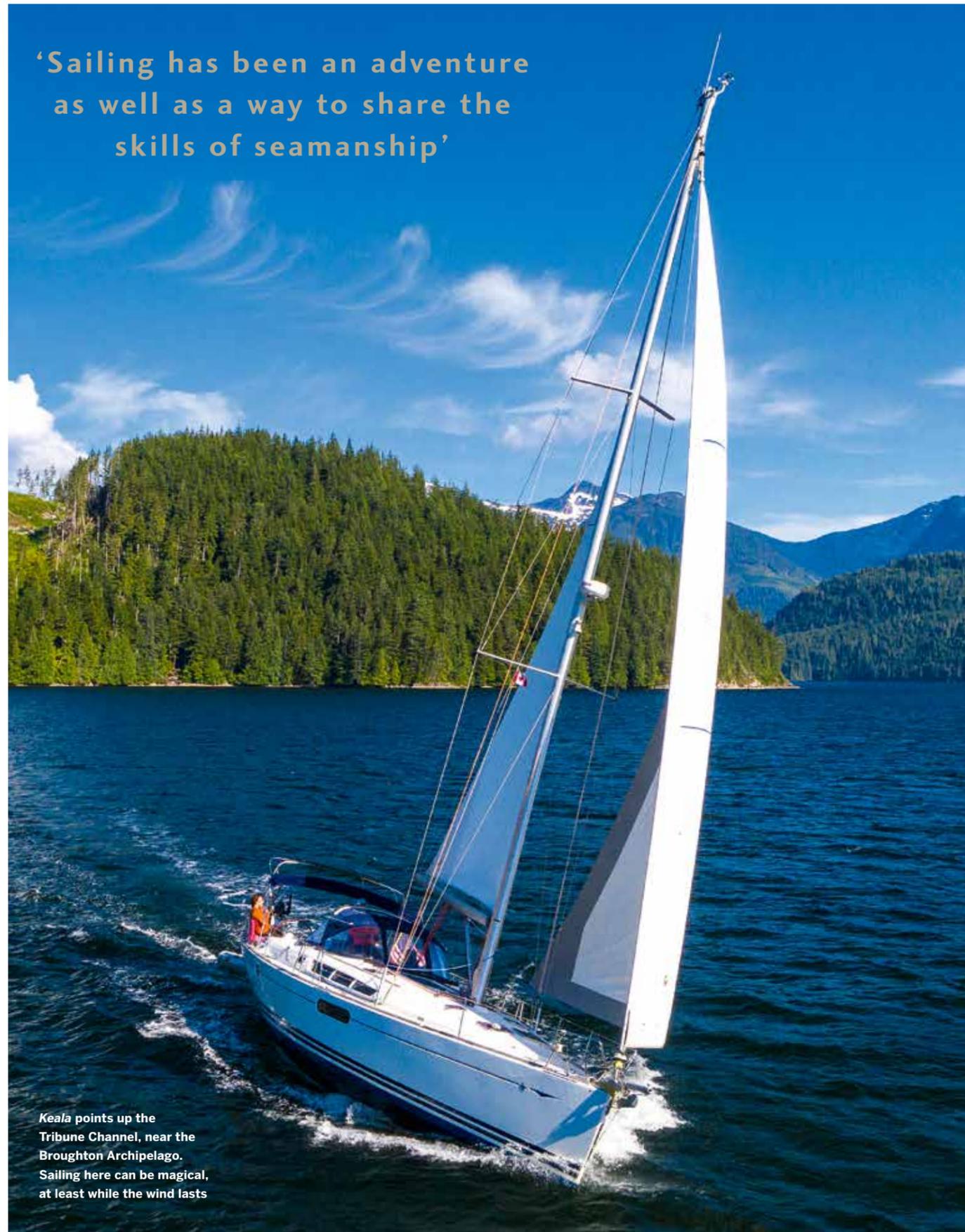


INSIDE AND OUT

TOR JOHNSON SAILS WITH HIS FATHER, SISTER AND FRIENDS ON A VOYAGE OF REDISCOVERY AROUND SPECTACULAR VANCOUVER ISLAND

Keala navigates the rocky entrance to the Bunsby Islands, on Vancouver Island's west coast

‘Sailing has been an adventure as well as a way to share the skills of seamanship’



Keala points up the Tribune Channel, near the Broughton Archipelago. Sailing here can be magical, at least while the wind lasts



Donald Johnson, the one who started his family tradition



Sister Anne Marie and family off to explore Kwatzi Bay by dinghy

At 94 years of age, my father, Donald, still hates sitting in harbour. He lives in La Conner, Washington, on a cliff overlooking the Swinomish Channel, where he can keep an eye on the fishermen, loggers, and eagles that ply the waters of the Pacific Northwest.

In a life of sailing around the world, my father has wrung more salt water out of his socks than most of us will ever see. The world is full of “harbour-sitters,” as he calls them, trading horror stories of deadly gales over drinks while waiting for perfect weather conditions to leave the dock.

Although over the years he has been called adventurous and even reckless, depending on the observer, I’ve always known my father to be a cautious skipper. He has taken my mother, brother, sister, and me safely across both oceans to places as varied as Norway, Turkey, the Philippines and Vanuatu. In all those miles, I can’t recall ever being in a dangerous sea. As kids we missed a lot of school but came back with skills in celestial navigation and the experience of standing night watch with the safety of everyone aboard in our young hands. Sailing has been an adventure as well as a way to share the skills of seamanship in our family.

Among the many places we visited together, one of my father’s favourites was the First Nations Reserve of Gwaii Haanas on the Queen Charlotte Islands. Ancient totem poles still stand sentinel over majestic Haida village sites. When my father told me he wanted to make one more trip out there with his friend, Christine, I pulled out the charts. Vancouver Island’s system of ferries, roads, and air service would allow me to rotate my crew among three generations of family and several old friends from voyages past.

We had sailed Keala, our Jeanneau 44i, from her birthplace in La Rochelle, France, across the Atlantic. While in the protected confines of Sidney, British

Columbia, visiting my sister’s family, I talked to a gregarious fellow sailor moored behind us at a yacht club. I told him of our intended voyage up the inside of Vancouver Island with my sister and her family to Port McNeill, where we’d meet my father and Christine for a cruise north to the next island chain, the Queen Charlottes. I’d make the return trip double-handed along the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island with a surfing friend from Hawaii.

“I’d never leave the Sunshine Coast. All there is up there are bears and bad weather,” said our new friend.

“Lots of fog up there too.”

My father may well be right about not listening to those dire dockside warnings about bears and bad



weather, but our fellow sailor actually did have a point: why leave the safety and comfort of the inside route? There are cruising grounds enough in the Inside Passage to keep a cruiser busy for a lifetime.

He and most of the thousands of sailors in places like Seattle and Sidney BC don't leave protected waters because they don't have to. With a few notable exceptions, it's possible to sail through the intricate network of islands and fjords of the Inside Passage from Tacoma, just south of Seattle, to Alaska's panhandle without encountering much open sea.

And the weather really is better. Summer temperatures on the protected Sunshine Coast, to which our friend referred, range in the teens and twenties and water temperatures get up to over 20°C in long fjord-like inlets. Swimming is actually a thing.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES

You might never see an ocean swell, but that's not to say cruising the inside route is without its challenges. First among these are strong tidal currents. The more constricted passages turn into turbulent rapids with currents in double digits several times a day. Since it's impossible for yachts and other low-powered vessels to negotiate these rapids, it's essential to arrive at slack water. When possible we plan for slack ebb or flood to carry a favourable current along our course.

Another challenge is the astounding number of logs. Logging is a major industry in British Columbia, and loose logs, some virtually submerged, can disable a small boat. It requires a constant lookout.

Tugs towing thousands of logs in a huge boom may require the entire channel to manoeuvre, as we found when forced into an impromptu gybing drill first thing in the morning on our way out of port. Common practice is to keep a watch on VHF Ch16 in narrow channels and to wait your turn after the last oncoming vessel uses the end of the tide to get through. Large car ferries, travelling at high speeds, commonly cross the channels at oblique angles. They always have the right of way, a fact of which they seem well aware.

As our friend forecasted, fog became a challenge the moment we emerged north from the protection of Vancouver Island into Queen Charlotte Strait. It was often thick in the mornings, which meant keeping an eye on the AIS, radar, nearby fishermen, ferries, and logs all at the same time. Mercifully, most days saw the fog burn off by mid-afternoon.

For my sister, the highlight of the entire route



Wheateam Bay is a welcome calm anchorage at sunset after crossing the notorious Hecate Strait

inside Vancouver Island was sailing into Broughton Archipelago. For once we had a favourable wind and managed to sail 25 miles inland up the Tribune Channel, which became like a fjord between immense rock cliffs. Suddenly a gray whale blew to starboard, while a pod of several hundred fast, agile Pacific white-sided dolphins reached nearly across the entire channel, surfacing in quick succession. They raced past as a group, so in rhythm they looked like a breaking wave.

Furling our sails at the head of the channel, we found the friendly little floating dock at Kwatsi Bay Marina nestled in a steep bowl of mountains. A group of veteran cruisers were surrounded by food and drink, and getting well into the local Happy Hour tradition.

Tracy Dixon, a surfing friend who had cruised with us in the Philippines when we were both kids,

'A pod of dolphins raced past, so in rhythm they looked like a breaking wave'

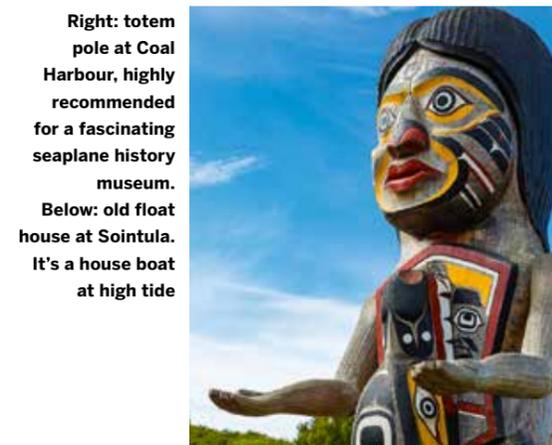
met us near Alert Bay, an old fishing town and First Nations community at the north end of the Vancouver Island. After a distinguished career defusing bombs for the Navy, Tracy had just completed a degree in anthropology at the University of Hawaii.

He'd already learned about Alert Bay's famous U'mista Cultural Centre, a cutting edge modern museum housing a treasure of elaborate and wondrous dance masks of the local First Nations group with the nearly unpronounceable name of Kwakwaka'wakw. Many of these ancient masks have made epic journeys, only recently finding their way back home to this museum.

LINKS TO THE PAST

On Moresby Island, the southern section of the Queen Charlottes, is a Haida Heritage site called Gwaii Haanas. Home to the Haida for over 1,500 years, the area was abruptly abandoned when European disease decimated the population. Today there are village sites with large communal houses gradually returning to the forest, and elaborately carved totem poles still standing.

Haida guides called 'Watchmen,' many of them descendants of those who first lived in the villages, now work as interpreters and guides to each historical site. The Watchmen appear to enjoy having visitors and, thanks to a permit system, the number of guests is regulated.



Right: totem pole at Coal Harbour, highly recommended for a fascinating seaplane history museum. Below: old float house at Sointula. It's a house boat at high tide



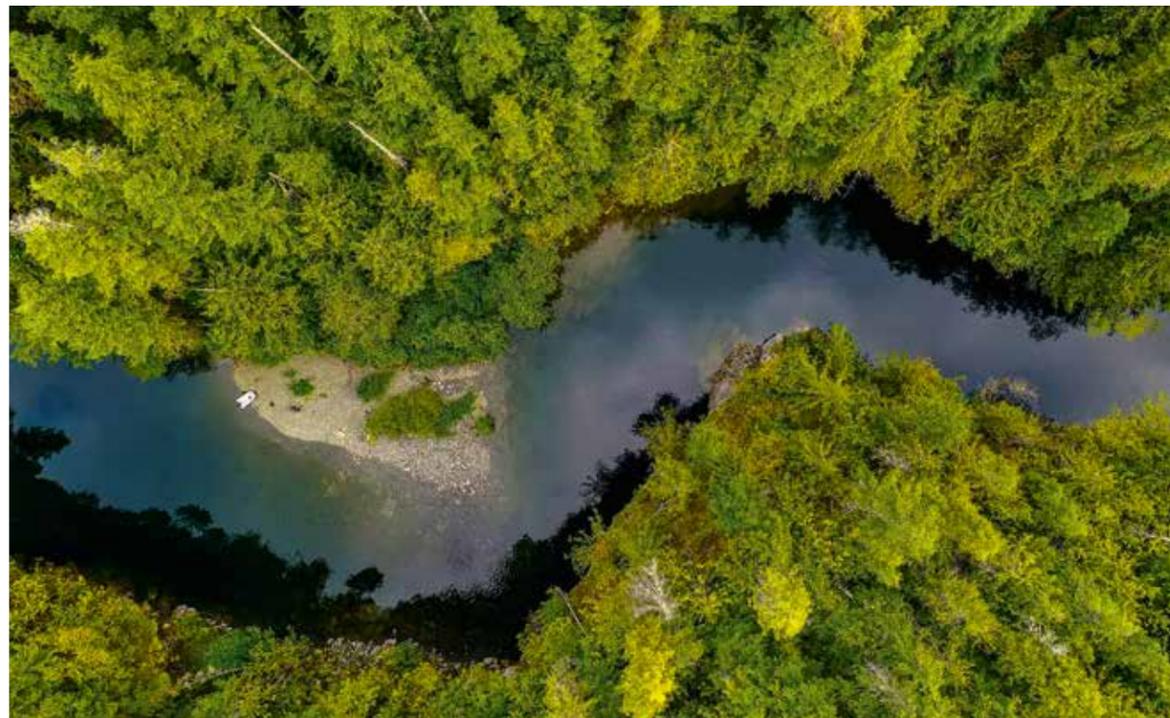
The Johnson's Jeanneau 44i Keala at sunset off Rose Harbour, Queen Charlotte Islands



Keala's crew enjoying a little salmon sashimi (from left) Donald Johnson, Burke Murphy, author Tor Johnson and Christine Carroll



Top: long time friend Jeff Max and nephew Rowan Ruddle tidy up the cockpit lines.
Above: the Marble River is a hidden gem



Above: yet another tranquil anchorage. Keala at Turnbull Cove, Broughton Archipelago.
Left: seen from above, the Marble River up Quatsino Sound on Vancouver Island's west coast

strength as possible for the precarious task of moving it to the sea. In the quiet of the trees, we imagined what this canoe might have been like with a full complement of proud Haida warriors.

My father enjoyed the solitude of the remote anchorages we visited, surrounded by immense trees, sea otters, and soaring eagles. Christine, an accomplished artist, made beautiful drawings of the scenes. My father had always been the skipper who did it all: the first one to tackle any job, easy or hard. It bothered him that at 94 he wasn't able to do the heavier work of sailhandling. I reminded him that, after all, that's what he trained me for. I feel lucky to have the chance to sail with him still.

BEAR COUNTRY

British Columbia has large numbers of black bears, and the impressive grizzly (*Ursus arctos horribilis*, or brown bear) can be found up several inlets: Knight, Rivers and Bute. We knew we were in bear territory when we stopped at the friendly, family-run North Island Marina in Port McNeill, the preferred re-provisioning stop for the Broughton Archipelago and environs. The marina's garbage-drop had been ripped apart, great gashes in the plywood siding proving the formidable power of the bears' claws. However, we found most bears to be shy of us humans – we are the most dangerous of all predators.

My shipwright friend Burke was an excellent lookout,

and he was keen to see a bear. He picked up the binoculars whenever he sighted anything even remotely bear-like on shore. It wasn't until we were motoring into Rose Harbour that he finally sighted a large black bear on the beach. It was a sunny day, and we watched as the husky bear ambled down to the water, waded in for a nice cool bath, shook off, and ambled casually back up the beach into the forest.

The weather stayed good. That said, it would be unusual not to experience at least a few powerful North Pacific low-pressure systems during the course of a summer as far as 50°N. Our trip was no exception.

Having crossed the notorious Hecate Straits to the Queen Charlotte Islands from the BC mainland, we heard gale warnings forecast on the VHF. We headed for narrow, landlocked Sac Bay, surrounded by steep hillside, close in to mountainous Moresby Island. Thankfully, both BC and US Coast Guard regularly forecast via VHF, updated several times daily. Unfortunately, our perfectly sheltered anchorage turned out to be subject to powerful downdrafts and torrents of rain that created new waterfalls as we watched.

Beginning to feel a bit trapped in the prison of our own choosing, we spent our time visiting other boats taking refuge from the weather. We made friends with David and Gaylean Sutcliffe, an experienced sailing couple aboard *Kinetic*, a Beneteau First 47.7, on which David has skippered no less than five Victoria-Maui races as well as the Sydney Hobart Race.

We chatted in their diesel-heated cabin while munching on Gaylean's fresh cake and listening to buoy reports of steep seas in the Hecate Straits. Because it is shallow – below 10m in places – and open to the south, open-ocean swells tend to pile on up in chaotic seas. As we listened, reports came in of 5m seas at 4.5 seconds. In these conditions, the Hecate would be mostly white water and might even live up to its nickname among locals: Black Bitch.

As the gale passed with more torrents of rain, I began to wonder if the surrounding mountains weren't creating their own foul weather, so we left without waiting for rain and wind to abate. We found much milder conditions farther from the mountains, just offshore near Hot Springs Island. We soaked in the hot springs while looking back at Sac Bay, still covered in a hard rain surrounding the mountains, and congratulated ourselves.

One thing the Northwest is not famous for is great sailing. Winds are often light and variable, especially in the more protected areas popular with cruisers. The running joke is that most yachts on passage still have their boom covers on, which actually seems kind of true. ➤



A grizzly bear foraging on foreshore rocks

It's really not by chance that the power trawler is the boat of choice for the Northwest. But, when the wind actually is right, the sailing among rugged peaks covered in evergreens can be magical, somewhat like sailing in an endless mountain lake. We tried to get the sails up whenever we could, even if that meant furling them after a few minutes.

BC has such a complex coastline and so many potential anchorages, that a good cruising guide is essential. We had the Waggoner guide at hand at almost all times. Having Active Captain, Garmin's crowdsourced, up-to-date electronic guide on our chartplotter was also a huge help, with many firsthand and recent accounts to read. The Douglass guides also come recommended.

The anchorages are spectacular. Some are tucked into the mountains and trees in an inlet, only a few feet wider than the boat, with the feel of a serene lake. Others are protected within groups of small islands which shelter them from the open ocean. The Waggoner guide was accurate about one group in particular: the spectacular Bunsby Islands where we had perfect swimming weather. Waggoner says it's essential to stop here, because other sailors who had done so would inevitably ask if you'd visited, "... and you don't want to disappoint them."

And yet the BC coast is also a great place to ignore the cruising guides. There are thousands of potential anchorages available, with reasonable depths and good holding. We found our Navionics charts were quite accurate, though of course not infallible. So it's feasible to find your own anchorage, based on the current and expected conditions.

Some anchorages don't turn out to be as good as they look, but my favourites were those that we chose simply because they looked interesting on the chart, and many turned out to be magical. There is something special about finding your own place, without knowing exactly what you might find there: a little like the first explorers.

ON THE OUTSIDE

Our descent along Vancouver Island's west coast was late in the season, in September, so most of the fishing lodges had emptied, and the few cruising boats that travel this coast had mostly moved on. Our first stop was Guise Bay, on the extreme north-western tip of the island, just inside notorious Cape Scott.

Although untenable in southerly winds, it's a paradise in northerlies. As proved the rule on the west coast, we found ourselves the only boat anchored off an immense crescent of white sand beach. We rarely saw another boat.

Yuquot, or Friendly Cove as Captain Cook nicknamed it, was fascinating as a place where First Nations and Europeans have long collided. An old church represents this long struggle. A stained glass window depicts treaties between Spain and England asserting their influence over the area. At the church altar, fantastic carvings by Yuquot craftsmen have completely displaced the old Christian icons, which now lie in the attic.



Above: an early start for the 75-mile crossing of the Hecate Straits. Right: some days it's nice enough for a swim; Tor and Tracy exploring the Bunsby Islands



At Hot Springs Cove a half-hour hike along a boardwalk, paved with treads carved with the names of visiting yachts from all over the world, brings you to a small hot spring with a hot waterfall you can stand under. It's essential to catch it before unrestricted hordes of tourists arrive at 0800 from Tofino via high speed boats. They leave again in the evening. Tofino is BC's surf mecca, and while it is a quaint town with amazing beaches, it's so full of marinas, high speed RIBs, and seaplane traffic that it feels more like Miami than the secluded Vancouver Island.

As we made our way south, we encountered rough seas a few times, usually when we put to sea a bit hastily at the tail end of a gale. The thousands of off-lying rocks necessitated careful navigation, but being bluewater sailors we didn't have a problem with the near constant Pacific swell, which actually helps the navigator by marking shallows with plumes of spray.

Whales are a constant along the coastline. A pod of orcas escorted us for miles up the Strait of Georgia, the huge dorsal fins of the males cutting through the water like scythes. Crossing the Hecate Strait, we ran into something underwater that may have been a whale. We never saw what it was that we hit, but it slowed the boat from about five knots to near three, then released softly.

Within the next hour, a large humpback came close alongside, and dived under the bow, inches from the



Sailing in to Deception Pass, Washington State, with Mount Baker in the background

'The anchorages are spectacular, some tucked into the mountains and trees'

hull. The same whale made several passes, very close to the boat and unusually active. I wondered if he wasn't giving us a message to stay away from his friends.

PINCH ZONES

Because the coast is so deeply indented and complex, weather conditions vary greatly by location. We sometimes found a near gale blowing off a cape, and calm a few miles away. Many of these 'pinch zones', where current, sea, and wind accelerate, can be ferocious – or completely calm, depending on the wind angle.

Cape Scott, off the north-western tip of Vancouver Island, Cape Cook on the Brooks Peninsula jutting ten miles out from the coast, and Cape Caution all have evil reputations. None is more notorious than the Nawahitti Bar off Vancouver Island's north coast. Completely exposed to the north and west, the bottom abruptly shoals from 150m to a mere 10m, and tidal currents race over the bar creating high potential for breaking seas.

Anxious about crossing the Nawahitti Bar, I began watching the weather carefully. After seeing reports of a large incoming westerly swell, to get some local knowledge I took our dinghy alongside a Canadian Coast Guard cutter anchored in nearby Gordon Channel. The officer on watch, reassured that ours was an offshore vessel, noted that there were no adverse wind conditions in the forecast and simply wished us a safe crossing.

As it happened, conditions were calm when we crossed the bar the next morning, although ominous large ocean swells 'felt the bottom', steepening before us and breaking astern on nearby reefs. Local fishermen and those in the know use an alternative route inside the reefs, close in to the Vancouver Island shore, where conditions are said to be much calmer.

Thankfully, the deeply indented coastline that creates these pinch zones also creates a multitude of places to hide from the weather. Since fronts are generally fast moving, it's easy to hide for a short time while waiting out adverse conditions in what often proves to be a fantastic anchorage on either side of each of these pinch zones.

As for my father, he enjoyed it all. The years have failed to dull his enthusiasm for cruising. He still feels the same about sitting in the harbour and he could barely sit still for a day even during gale warnings. He prefers to carry on despite the bears and bad weather. ■



A renowned marine photographer and bluewater sailor, Tor Johnson and his wife, Kyoko, run their photography business out of a beach house in Waialua, Hawaii. Tor grew up sailing the oceans with his family and is also a passionate surfer.