

Story and photography by Tor Johnson

CRUISING CONNECTION

Sailing the San Juan Islands brings both joy and challenges to an extended family that finds kindred spirits along the way



think we've lost steering," my brother Alex said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, his tone out of place in light of our situation.

Alex was at the helm of our Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509 under full sail at 9 knots, bombing down East Sound, a narrow channel just now funneling a northerly wind right down the middle of Orcas Island, in Washington's San Juan Islands. What was a spirited broad reach from historic Rosario Resort in 25 knots of wind, had suddenly turned into a crashing downwind jibe.

We grew up sailing the world with our family, and I've always looked up to my older brother Alex. As a kid I followed him around, learning about photography, surfing, sailing, diving.

Sailing is something we have always done as a family. In fact, this season I'd had the entire family—my wife and my Japanese stepmother along with my sister and her two kids—aboard for adventures in the San Juan Islands. I visited remote anchorages with my 98-year-old father. I'd even singlehanded with my faithful dog Guinness.

And now Guinness and I had my brother's family aboard, working together as a crew in a tense situation.

With a nasty rock shoreline fast approaching, our first priority was to get the sails down. Logan went straight for the reefing lines with a will, throwing himself at the flailing jib. I



Whatever Alex did, he did well. I tagged along. Together we experienced places and things only a cruising family could. Alex and I even ended up crewing on a commercial boat north of Guam during typhoon season. Predictably, there was a typhoon. The boat was lost, but the crew was safe ashore. Alex proved himself a true waterman, unflappable in a crisis, and nearly saved the vessel by securing it to some old mooring blocks using surplus cables, all while free diving. Of course the whole thing was dangerous. But we were young, so we didn't notice.

We were now sailing with two of Alex's three grown kids: Logan, 25, a navy veteran who has sailed with me on an ocean crossing from Fiji to New Zealand, and Brock, 18, now on his first sailing adventure.

stopped him, and slowed him down so as not to damage the delicate furling systems. He then carefully brought in most of the main.

I tried the autopilot first. Connected directly to the quadrant, this sometimes works even if a steering cable has snapped. I heard a clunk. The boat did not respond. We were still heading for the rocks, but with less sail, more slowly now.

I started releasing the davits to launch the dinghy, thinking of using the outboard to pull the bow around. Alex looked at me as if to say, "In 25 knots? Could be problematic?"

I paused. A dinghy might really complicate things.

We pulled up the lazarette to access the steering quadrant, and found the issue: the retaining collar that holds the steering quadrant (wires go from here to the steering wheels) onto the rudder post had snapped in half, leaving the quadrant dangling useless.

Where had I stowed that emergency tiller, I thought.

After what seemed a long time, but was probably under a minute, I remembered: aft port lazarette. I quickly unearthed the steel beast and fitted it over the rudder post. Then I started the engine.



What's better than a secluded cove to anchor in and explore on a paddleboard? Previous page, Kyoko and four-legged family members buzz back to the boat after a break ashore. Far left, the author enjoys a hike with his dog Guinness.



The crew of *Kāholo* enjoys a perfect golden hour view. Below, the Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509 is a great platform for lots of family sailing. Guinness assists on bow lookout, lower middle. Kayaking through the kelp is a graphic, and potentially challenging exercise, below. At right, younger crewmembers take Guinness for a ride.



Steering with the emergency tiller, I discovered, is no fun. The backstay is right in the way, and even under power in a relatively calm sea, the big rudder is a handful in 25 knots of wind.

We limped back to Rosario, where Logan and Brock swiftly snagged a mooring ball, and secured a mooring line. Brock, an intuitive learner, had just learned how to tie a bowline. He seems to do it better with his eyes closed. I was proud of my crew for their quick reactions when the chips were down, and I told them so. It was wonderful to see my family work together to overcome a challenge. None of us is likely to forget the day.

The boat, however, was basically disabled without steering.

I removed the collar from the steering post. It had sheered into two pieces, probably due to corrosion. I called Lewmar, who politely informed me that they couldn't supply the collar alone. I'd need to order an entire replacement quadrant, custom made in their factory in England. It would be expensive and it would take months.

Hoping to get our steering at least temporarily fixed, to get back to our slip on the mainland where we could make a permanent repair, I decided to visit a local boatyard and see if we could rebuild the part. Since they were on the other side of the island, and the only two taxis were booked, I decided to hitchhike across the island with my broken part, a castaway with a damaged quadrant collar.

The San Juans are small islands, where people still wave when they pass on the roads. There's a sense of community and strong counter-culture roots. There's little crime, and the pace of life is slow. All of this means it's easy to hitch a ride, although it may not be the ride you wanted.

The first car to pick me up was a weathered SUV driven by a heavily tattooed young guy with straggly hair and no shirt. He produced a huge joint and began smoking the entire thing. I became increasingly more nervous, we passed through gorgeous countryside, farms with ancient barns, and rolling fields with crops and grazing cattle. Then my driver unexpectedly turned off onto a small wooded lane. I'd been navigating with my phone, so I knew we were off course. My driver seemed harmless, but I wasn't completely sure. I hoped he was just extremely stoned.

"You're actually going the wrong way," I told him, as politely as I could, not wanting to harsh his buzz.

"Are you in a hurry? Let's see where this takes us!" he insisted. "Yes, I am actually in a rush!" I replied, a little too loudly.

He relented, and took me back to the main road, where I was relieved to get out of the car.

My next ride was the kind of coincidence that happens in the San Juan Islands: a young mother named LJ with her four kids in a



The crew enjoys a rousing sail past Rosario Resort on Orcas Island, Washington, shortly before their steering failed.



The swim platform also doubles as an excellent dog perch. At right, the author grins and bears it through arduous steering with the emergency tiller. Next page, the author's lens captures a fellow cruiser peeking through the foliage.



new SUV. When I mentioned my broken rudder assembly, LJ asked exactly what had broken. She wanted all of the details. I began to realize that I was talking to a fellow sailor, in fact, a particularly smart one. LJ is a hydrologist by training, and grew up sailing the world with her parents, just as I had. Now she and her husband Mike, a philosophy major turned particle physicist teacher turned investor in new decarbonizing technologies, were just about to set out with their two sets of twins Forrest and Sierra, age 9, and 6-year-old Aurora and Coral on an epic voyage to the South Pacific on their gorgeous Outremer 49 catamaran, *Epsilon Lyrae*, appropriately named after the constellation of double twin stars.

Mike was prepping to set sail on their first big leg down the coast to San Francisco the next day, so he invited me to come along while he refueled the boat for the long voyage ahead in the West Sound, the next bay along the coast. He said he would introduce me to his friend Bill, a local boatbuilder, after refueling.

Despite the stress of getting under way on their first major voyage, Mike somehow found the time to drive me to their neighborhood boatbuilder Bill Koral's shop, where we drilled and bolted our broken collar back together, a makeshift repair that would get our *Kāholo* safely back to her slip. Apparently the cruisers' ethic, and indeed the law of the sea, that requires us to render assistance to another boat in peril, still runs strong here among the islanders of the San Juans.

I was impressed by how well prepared Mike and LJ were, and how well they communicated with their kids, who seemed to love being aboard the boat. LJ had even done some beautifully spliced Dyneema synthetic lines for the rig and safety systems. They were ready for the sea.

It was a pleasure to see a young family like this, just at the beginning of their journey, starting out on the voyage of a lifetime. I realized we were a generation apart. But like us they'd be facing new challenges and adventures together, as a family, and just like us, they'd be creating memories, bonds, and friendships that will stay with them forever.

Cruising as a family is like that. 🍷

