

# Definitely **Off** the Beaten Path

Princess Louisa Inlet, British Columbia

By BoatU.S. Trailering Club Member John Gray

**A** 25-foot Ranger Tug, a departure from Bellingham, Washington and a choice between cruising 150 miles through the open waters in the Strait of Georgia and a longer trek with protective islands on either side to British Columbia was an easy decision for John and Laurie Gray. After all, when you're heading to Princess Louisa Inlet, taking your time will get you there quicker.

Princess Louisa Inlet is the grand cathedral for Pacific Northwest cruisers. Located north of Vancouver, British Columbia on the east side of the 150-mile long Strait of Georgia, it is the Mecca that serious cruisers have on their To Do list. This is where 6,000-foot mountains descend in a sheer wall into the water. Depths are in the high triple digits. It is God's place.

Princess Louisa Inlet is heavily guarded by natural obstacles and is not for the boater who is ill prepared or reckless. First, there is the 134-mile long and

20-mile wide Strait of Georgia to cross or ascend, with its own reputation of high winds, steep waves and when those are absent, fog. Then there are 50 miles of long and deep valleys in the inlet (called "reaches") where the wind can scream through the narrows, creating steep waves and swift tidal currents as the water level rises and falls as much as 17 feet. Finally, the door of the cathedral is protected by Malibu Rapids, a dogleg of large boulders that can only be transited near slack tide. Pretty inviting, huh?

Boating in Puget Sound and

Canadian waters requires monitoring current and tidal conditions. Fighting a two-to-eight knot current can waste fuel and add hours to a trip. During this cruise, the tidal swing of the Strait of Georgia was 10 feet and the current switched during the cruising hours from an ebb to a flood. Timing and routes were planned to "go-with-nature" as much as possible. We had done our homework and now, after 25 years of boating in the Pacific Northwest, it was time.

## Day One

We parked the trailer at a marina in Bellingham, Washington, checked the tides once again, looked at each other and said "We're off!" The *Laurie Ann* departed at 11 a.m., riding the diminishing ebb current through Hale Passage around Lummi Island and the slack or neutral

tide between Sucia and Matia Islands. A 15-knot westerly kicked up some chop and slowed the progress as we headed into the wind. Using the protection offered by hugging Waldron Island to the north and Stuart Island to the west, we crossed Boundary Pass into Canada as the flooding currents built. Forty miles later we arrived in Bedwell Harbor on South Pender Island at 4 p.m. to clear Canadian customs. We were pleased with the efficiency and courtesy of the customs official even though we had to throw out our plums and apples (clearing British Canadian Customs information is available at this web site: [www.bctravel.com/travel2.html](http://www.bctravel.com/travel2.html)).

With five hours of daylight remaining, we continued northward another 12 miles to stay in the protected Annette Inlet on Prevost Island in the Canadian

Gulf Islands. At 7 p.m., the anchor was dropped in 15 feet of water. The tide table showed the water would drop by 10 feet at the next day's departure time."

## Day Two

The following morning was spent fighting the tidal current as we headed northward and within the protected waters of the Gulf Islands to Dodd Narrows, a narrow passage between the islands

**"Princess Louisa Inlet is not on the way to anything, you have to want to get there."** — John Gray

and the town of Nanaimo where the current can exceed seven knots. VHF Channel 16 was busy as skippers announced their entry into the one-mile long narrows because it is only wide enough for one boat at a time.

Morning light at the entrance to Princess Louisa Inlet. Malibu Rapids is just ahead.

Photograph by Barbara Gray

After waiting for two trawlers to pass us, we entered the Dodd Narrows going 6.5 miles per hour and when the narrows “narrowed” to about 50 yards across, the water was filled with rising white foam and I was astonished to see we were flying at over 15 miles per hour.

Crossing the Strait of Georgia was the next challenge and monitoring VHF channel 10 told us that the military testing and exercise area near Nanaimo was active and boaters had to take a long route around this large area. By 1100 hours the Weather Channel said that the Strait had sustained winds of 20 knots with wind waves nearly four feet. We made a decision: We’d spend our second night at Mark Bay at nearby Newcastle Island that protects the city of Nanaimo from the Strait. We had traveled 35 miles in seven hours before the tug sat at anchor in 10 feet of water and with a lot of slack in the anchor line because another 15 feet of water was coming in at high tide.

Newcastle Island is a provincial park with ample trails, a visitor center and a walk-on ferry to Nanaimo that costs \$4 a person. Beautiful walking trails, a history of mining and removing limestone that left the island to build the San Francisco Mint and the special limestone rocks that were made into grinding wheels that transformed logs into wood pulp were compelling stories.

## Days Three and Four

Resolved to make another attempt at crossing the Strait of Georgia, the anchor was pulled in the morning light. There was a light breeze coming into the protected harbor that should have been our clue to what lay ahead. Thirty minutes later we were clear of all the protective headlands and into the Strait. The wind was exactly as predicted on the Canadian weather channel and the high wind warning was well deserved. The tug took massive amounts of spray over the cabin as the boat pitched and rolled. We made another decision: Try again the next day.

We spent the “free” time, enjoying Nanaimo, its museums, galleries, and wonderful waterfront. But through it all, our eyes always looked toward the Strait of Georgia in an attempt to mentally arm ourselves for the battle that lay ahead. It remained on our mind, as we fell asleep that night.

## Day Five

Before dawn and with a light breeze from the northwest, the anchor was raised and 30 minutes later, the tug was back in the Strait of Georgia. The winds were 17 knots and soon we were in two-foot seas, then three-foot seas, followed by the occasional four-foot wave. Spray drenched the



Chatterbox Falls in Princess Louisa Inlet. Nearby is 600 feet of dock space for visiting boaters.



port side of the tug constantly for nearly two hours with water streaming into the cockpit and pooling at the stern, caused by a partially plugged cockpit drain. In the heaviest of waves, the bottom of the fiberglass bulkhead groaned in protest.

We steamed through the military exercise area before it was active and thus saved over 20 miles of travel. In the lee of Texada Island, the swells disappeared and the wind was mitigated. We had beaten the Strait of Georgia!

We took the tug into Pender Harbour, a wonder and a labyrinth of coves, marinas and houses perched on the side of the hills among the Douglas fir trees, and dropped anchor in Garden Harbor in 60 feet of water and proceeded to have a leisurely breakfast and toasted ourselves for our good fortune. We washed away the salt, did some cockpit laundry, and planned the voyage to Egmont and Princess Louisa Inlet with the intention of crossing the Malibu Rapids, the entrance to Princess Louisa Inlet, at the high water slack no later than 8:30 p.m.

At John Henry’s Gas and Store, the diesel and water tanks were topped off, and we got a few groceries and chocolate ice cream for the crew. We waited for the flooding tide and turned east into an inlet with the winds and seas at our back. Past the town of Egmont, cell phone and Internet service was lost and the tug entered the first of several long valleys, called “reaches” on the chart. We were heading deeper inland between high walls of mountains.

The flooding tide was pushing us as did the afternoon winds screaming through the reaches. With the combined wind force of 15 knots at our back and a three-knot current on our stern, we were enjoying the benefits of nature’s “engine.”

The *Laurie Ann* was surfing down two- and three-foot seas. The high mountains with the old scars of clear cutting were clear of snow but the streams were cascading down to the water’s edge.

We checked our location and determined our estimated time of arrival at Malibu Rapids. If

we got there too late and missed the slack tide, we would be locked out by the opposing ebb tide until the next day. If we got there too early, the surging flood current could make passage over the rapids too dangerous.

The little tug rocketed through the nearly 40 miles of reaches and we arrived at Malibu Rapids with two sailboats and a powerboat an hour before the slack tide. The powerboat went on through the rapids but radioed back that he had to use a lot of power to make it. We decided to hang back and wait. Thirty minutes later, another powerboat and one of the sailboats went through. That was good enough for us and we powered up the *Ranger 25* and jetted over the rapids at nearly 15 miles per hour.

In the waning dusk of the day, the Inlet was inspiring. Motoring along and complying with the no-wake rule, we were awed by the huge and high mountains rising out of the water, tree-covered slopes, and cascading waterfalls.

We anchored behind MacDonal Island and tied our stern to a tree only 25 feet from the boat’s stern. The anchor off the bow was in 70 feet of water while the depth at the stern was 18 feet.

## Day Six

The next day we watched a mother seal and her young pup play and feed, and a new family of Canadian geese paddled about the water. We let go of the stern tie and then pulled up the 90 feet of anchor

and proceeded to idle around the circumference of the inlet, taking in the massive views of the 6,000 foot high mountains and tree-covered ledges over sheer cliffs.

At the head of the inlet was Chatterbox Falls, a river about 100 feet wide dropping into the inlet. Near the falls, there was room on the 600-foot long dock so we tied up, walked to the falls and had a long conversation with the park ranger who had spent nine seasons in this remote spot. We also met a wonderful couple who lived aboard their steel sailboat and noted how they are frequent visitors to the park. They shared with us the location of the freshwater pool that stays warm and is perfect for bathing. We had arrived at Princess Louisa.

Comfortable cruising is mostly about knowing your comfort zone and staying within your abilities. Being pushed by nature and unfolding circumstances can widens that comfort zone and makes us boaters. This is exactly what happened after we crossed the Malibu Rapids and dropped the anchor at Princess Louisa Inlet. We sat back in the calm waters of McDonald Island and in the twilight of the setting sun, we looked at each other and realized that we had done more than just miles (on this day we had crossed the Strait of Georgia and transited Malibu Rapids). We had become better boaters. We raised our glasses in thanks to our boat and to our good fortune: the journey to Princess Louisa. 🍷



John and Laurie Gray and, of course, Lauri Ann last appeared in the April 2009 issue of BoatU.S. Trailing when they completed a part of “the Great Loop” going down the Mississippi River to the Gulf Coast.

## “Strait” Talk

Both the Washington State Board of Geographic Names (yes, there is such a thing) and the British Columbia Geographic Names Office (yep, it also exists) have agreed the 150 mile long and 34 mile wide Strait of Georgia, which separates Vancouver Island from the continental mainland can keep its name but it will be formerly referred to from now on as the Salish Sea. The new name honors the Salish, who occupied the coastline along the Strait of Georgia, Puget Sound, the San Juan Islands and the Strait of Juan de Fuca all of which connect to the Pacific Ocean. The decision hasn’t been without controversy as opponents contend the body of water is a “strait” because it is a narrow channel joining two larger bodies of water (the Pacific Ocean and the Inland Passage) while others argue it is indeed a “sea” because it is a continuous body of salt water. Navigation maps will use the new name.

## Advice from Vessel Assist Nanaimo, British Columbia

Captain Paul Gray operates Vessel Assist/Nanaimo and has a view of Dodd Narrows from his office. As a professional who travels the waters every day, he has four suggestions for boaters:

When Passing through Dodd Narrows and Malibu Rapids:

- Look at the tide book and determine when slack tide occurs. That’s when you want to pass through. Currents can reach eight knots—even higher if there is a full moon. The flood tide (when the current is at its fastest) will last about 30 minutes.
- If possible, go with the direction of the tide.
- Malibu Rapids is extremely narrow; only about 50 yards across. Dodd Narrows is about 100 yards across. Captain Gray says he has seen as many as 60 boats at a time passing through Dodd Narrows in the summer.
- Monitor the weather and know your boat.

Eight years ago Vessel Assist made a rescue of a commercial fisherman passing through Dodd Narrows when a log became jammed in his rudder turning the boat broadside to the fast-moving current. The boat capsized and the fisherman was able to climb onto the bottom of his boat and wait for assistance. The boat was pulled to shore and beached—and the log was removed from the rudder.