

Log of Baidarka - Log 2001

Part VII: Racing the Weather to Sandspit

by Don Douglas & Reanne Hemmingway-Douglas

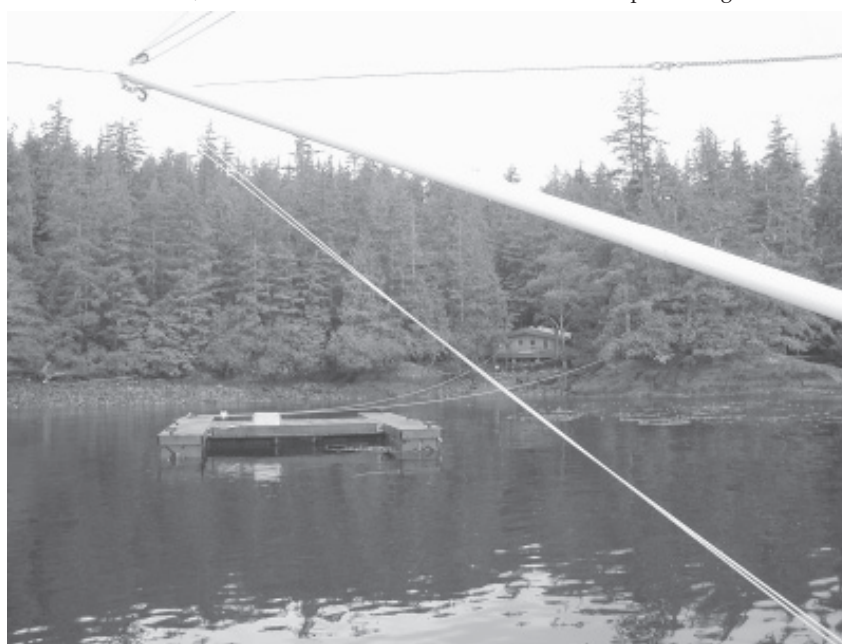
After three stormbound days in Louscoone Inlet, the weather finally gave us a break and we detached from the trusty buoy that had held our double lines and chain during the 30- to 50-knot winds. It was Thursday, August 23.

We had now completed gathering the data we needed for the Charlottes' unsounded west coast and were beginning our move up the east coast. Although Don and I had already spent several previous summers cruising this east coast, Kevin had not visited the length of the coast, so he was eager to see whatever he could. Provided the weather cooperated, we'd be able to do a little sightseeing and still deliver Kevin to Sandspit in time for his return plane flight to Sidney.

We also had one more goal to achieve: take careful soundings in Dolomite Narrows (also known as Burnaby Narrows), where several recent groundings had occurred, as well as in Louise Narrows, farther north. Although we had done extensive work on Dolomite for the First Edition of *Exploring the North Coast of British Columbia*, new private range marks had been installed recently, and we wanted to update our information for the book's Second Edition. Another low-pressure front was

predicted and we still had miles to go to reach Sandspit in just three days. At this point, on-time arrival didn't look promising.

We rounded Cape Fanny into Houston Stewart Channel and headed to Rose Harbour on the north end of Kunghit Island. Kunghit, the most southerly of the Queen Charlotte Islands, has few sheltered an-



New Park Ranger cabin & float in Rose Harbour.

chorages with the exception of Rose Harbour. From 1910 to 1943, Rose Harbour was the site of an active whaling station that employed over

100 men. In the 1970s, the former whaling station land was purchased by a group of island residents. It is the only private in-holding within Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve (NPR), and one of the homes offers accommodations and kayak tours for guests who arrive by float plane. Pleasure craft that enter the NPR from the south can pre-arrange to

of the harbor; a metal float moored off the shore is for Park boats only. Of three mooring buoys in Rose Harbour, two were lashed together, and the third was occupied by a small skiff. A 2-fathom anchor site we had shown in the First Edition of our North Coast book is now taken up by small private mooring buoys.

As we were departing, we waited to watch a Moresby Air float plane come in for a landing. Using the buoy area for their taxi-way, they pulled up in front of the Rose Harbour Guest House, dropped off some kayakers and took off again.

The night before, I had written in my journal: "We hope to make it to Bag Harbour (the anchorage for Dolomite Narrows) by evening. Will the seas in Hecate Strait have decreased by then? I hope so."

We now entered the strait and, for the time being, took just gently rolling seas as we headed northeast, passing inside Rankine Islands (the first of two Ecological Reserves on the east side of the NPR), then entering Collison Bay. This bay was a new "discovery" for us because the weather on our

previous visit had prevented our entering.

Collison, which is wide and open to the northeast at its entrance, nar-



Island Roamed moored in Hoya Passage.



rows near the head, trending south-southeast. A grassy islet sits in the narrowest part of the bay, protecting the head from all weather. We test-anchored two sites — one in 9 fathoms, the second closer to the head in 3 fathoms — and found a bottom of soft brown mud with fair-to-good holding. Tree limbs that hang low over the water and a lack of driftlogs along shore indicated good shelter.

While we were doing our grid of soundings, a black bear ambled down to shore and began flipping over rocks in search of shellfish and crabs. He sniffed the air, detecting our presence, but continued his search until Don shouted an enthu-

siastic, "Bravo!" which sent him packing into the bushes.

It was noon by then and we needed to get to Burnaby Strait by mid-afternoon so that Don and Kevin could begin their begin work on Dolomite Narrows. We continued to Skincuttle Inlet where we turned east for about 6 miles before rounding up into the southern half of Burnaby Strait. We were back on the "inside" and, except for some exposure in Juan Perez Sound, we would have calm waters until we left the Park.

Bag Harbour, named for its shape, is conveniently located at the south end of Dolomite Narrows. The north shore of the bay held a clam cannery in the 1900s and a rusty boiler from the operation still sits on shore. Although the 3/4-mile length of the bay and its flat bottom could accommodate a number of boats, we've never seen more than two vessels anchored here.

After we'd anchored and were in the process of lowering the dinghy from *Baidarka's* upper deck, *S/V Flying Colors* appeared. Its skipper, Bob



Rockwell, a physician from Seattle who was single-handling, slowed and waved as he passed our stern. He held up our book and shouted, "I've been using this all the way!" We needed the kudos; earlier in the day, we'd had a rude encounter on the radio with a local charter boat.

"We're going to head over to the narrows to gather data" Don told him. "Would you like to go with us?"

"I'd love to!" was his answer. "I'll anchor and be ready by the time you are."

Kevin and Don gathered their equipment - blank data sheets on a clipboard, cameras, GPS, echo sounder, bottled water - hopped into the dinghy and motored over to *Flying Colors* to pick Bob up.

Over the years, Dolomite Narrows (known locally as Burnaby Narrows)

has been a challenge to both commercial and pleasure craft. Because it's an important part of the smooth-water route along Moresby's east coast, boaters prefer the narrows to going outside. But it is basically uncharted and has led to a number of serious groundings.

About a third of a mile long, the narrows follows a circuitous route where the fairway dries on a 2-foot tide at its shallowest point. It's critical to transit on near-high-water slack when depths in the fairway are adequate. (We transit slightly before high water, in case we run aground.) We recommend that boaters reconnoiter the narrows by dinghy before entering, as we have done on each transit. (See the accompanying diagram and, if you have occasion to visit the Charlottes, remember — verify for yourself!)

In August 2000, the 92-foot vessel, wooden-hulled *Texada*, ran aground on the eastern portion of the large reef while attempting a south-to-north transit on an ebbing tide. It took Dave Unsworth, owner of D & E Towing of Port Clements (Graham Island), nearly three weeks of working the tides before he could repair the 70-year old boat enough to tow it to Prince Rupert. From there, she was towed to Vancouver



Baidarka anchored on Moresby Air's "runway."

and declared a total loss.

According to NPR surveys, more than 293 tidal and inter-tidal species are found in Dolomite Narrows and they calculate that more protein per square meter exists here than any place in the world! At low water there is such a variety in colors of these creatures — red, green, yellow, orange — that on our first-ever transit, Don called it “Salsa Passage.”



Bob & Kevin happy with the exploration.

Along the low, grassy margins of the narrows deer and black bear often come to graze. A couple of shacks remain along the east shore — remnants from the 1960s or 1970s, we had read. We conjured up our own stories of young draft dodgers living off the land and wondered how long they might have lasted in this

isolated environment. A lovely stream would have provided their source of water, but they would have been miles by sea from the nearest market!

Kevin, Don and Bob returned three hours later, happy with their explorations and data. The tide had risen and we prepared to make our transit through Dolomite. As we were raising our anchor, *Tasman*, a 42-foot ketch from Juneau, Alaska, rounded into Bag Harbour. The skipper Alan Brown was also single-handed.

Our ship's clock rang 1700 hours as we began our transit of the narrows. Using the data Kevin and Don had gathered, and lining up the new private range marks, we passed through without a problem and continued north along Burnaby Island to Section Cove at the northwest tip of the island. A Park warden's cabin on Huxley Island across the way was vacant at the moment, as the cabin at Rose Harbour had been. (We had hoped to be able to talk to a ranger about the agreement NPR had made with Canadian Hydrographic to take over servicing of the buoys within the Park boundaries, but to no avail.)

Of the three buoys showing on Chart 3809, we tied to the only one remaining and did our usual test-pull. The buoy held and we were safe for the night. As we ate supper, the sun appeared for the first time during the day. But it would be a short-lived reward Prince Rupert Coast Guard was already issuing storm warnings for Hecate Strait for the next day.

Friday, August 24. We awoke to pouring rain precursor of the gales predicted for the day and continued north across Juan Perez Sound. Along the sound, Moresby Island narrows down and is indented by five major inlets that cut deep in toward the San Christoval Range. If the sky had been clear, we would have had a magnificent view of the mountains that we'd found so impressive, but alas the weather window had closed.

On the northeast side of Juan Perez Sound, a group of islands and islets provides excellent kayaking grounds. The most popular is tiny Hot Springs Island (Gandll K'iin) which draw numerous tourists. The Haida maintain a Watchman's camp here during the summer, cleaning and maintaining the hot-spring pools and facilities, and serving as guides to the visitors. Since our last visit, a Haida longhouse with solar panels had been built along shore near the older shake cabin, and the “bathhouse” along shore upgraded. The number of visitors has increased



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Bob Rockwell examining old cabin in Dolomite Narrows.

dramatically in recent years; in fact, the charter operators seem to have a monopoly on groups, and cruising by.” (Evening seems to offer the best chance.) For those who go ashore, a soak



Deer have no fear in Dolomite Narrows.

boats sometimes have trouble making reservations if they just “drop in one of the three outside pools that tumble from the hillside above is a



S/V Tasman transits Dolomite Narrows at high water.

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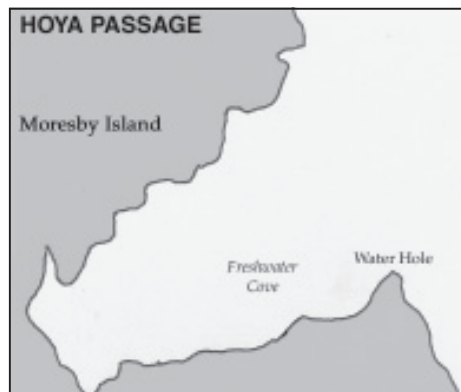
Anchorage off the southwest shore of Hot Spring Island — the only place from which a boat can be observed — is marginal; the bottom is rocky and conditions can become rough on a change of tide. While we once spent a quiet night anchored on the back side of the island, we wouldn't advise it in other than calm weather. (Besides, floatplanes that come and go during the day use this spot for landing.) The best place to leave a boat is a mile and a half to the south along the north shore of

Ramsey Island where there are two mooring buoys. But our notes read: "Buoys in serious need of repair. Heavily rusted and deteriorating. At the time of observation, the buoys are more of a hindrance than a benefit." Best to anchor!

The same was true of the three buoys on the north side of Murchison Island — an alternative to Ramsey Island and also a good kayak campsite; the buoys were all "buried" in kelp and looked as if no boat had touched them for years.

After lunch we continued northward, entering Hoya Passage (between Lyell Island and Moresby) to fill our tanks at Water Hole. The

graceful 70-foot S/V *Island Roamer* from Vancouver, which leads educational tours to the Charlottes each summer, was moored in the cove. We waved and headed directly to the float where the water hose is normally attached. Two of *Island Roamer's* crew whizzed over in their inflatable to meet us. "The hose is broken," one of them explained. "We're headed up there now to see if we can repair it."



The rain was coming down in sheets, and these guys didn't seem to mind. I thought of my Southern California relatives who scream about their hair if they have to go out in any kind of rain and marveled at the attitude of these young men.

"You may be able to fill up later if we can get it repaired. You might as well stay on the float until we know."

An hour later they motored by again to give us an update. "We had to come back for a saw. We need to take out a section of the pipe and reinstall a new section." They zoomed over to the sailboat for the saw and returned to the creek.

"Look!" I said to Kevin and Don. "See how brown the water is! We'll never be able to use that stuff."

"You may be right," Don shrugged his shoulders. "At least we know we have enough to get us to Sandspit."

Another two-hour wait and the inflatable came alongside our stern. Despite their slickers, both guys were thoroughly drenched. "We had to climb a little higher than we anticipated. We finally got the section of pipe replaced, but we couldn't get the hose re-installed in its [filter] box. We wouldn't advise you to drink this stuff."

"Yeah, it's pretty brown!" Don said adding, "It looks like you're used to making these sorts of repairs."

"Yeah, it happens every summer." They both grinned.

We thanked them and complimented them on their attitude. "Aw, it's good to get out. Have a nice evening!"

We pulled away from the float and picked up the inside buoy. It was 1725 hours and the small creek had become a raging river that was causing a 6-knot current. *Baidarka* was pushed outward so we sat just 30 feet away from *Island Roamer* and their two tenders. Conditions were a repeat of Louscoone Inlet, but at least we were more protected in these inside waters. The weather channel reported 38-knot-winds at Sandspit Airport — not what we wanted to hear before we turned in for the

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The new longhouse at Hot Springs Cove.

night.

Saturday, August 25. Hecate Strait: Gales upgraded to storm-force winds. Winds southeast 30 to gales 40, increasing to gales 40 to storm-force 50 knots overnight. Seas 2 to 3 meters, increasing to 4 to 5 meters overnight. This was the forecast we heard as we motored north early in the morning — worse than the night before!

"It doesn't look promising, does it?" Kevin commented. "I may have to arrange for a taxi to come to Moresby Camp from Sandspit."

Our destination for the night was Gillatt Arm at the easternmost end of Cumshew Inlet from where, if *Baidarka* were stormbound, we could drop Kevin at Moresby Camp - the end of the unimproved logging road that leads from Sandspit, and a launching spot for local sportfishing boats. He might be able to hitch a ride with a local fisherman or call Bruce's Taxi (the *only* taxi on Moresby Island).

I thought about Bruce's description of a trip he had made to Moresby Camp a year earlier to pick someone up: "The road was so bad and the mud so thick that I couldn't tell two of my tires had gone flat." I didn't dare mention that Kevin might have trouble convincing Bruce to make the trip in this rain.

There was also one other slim possibility: he might be able to fly out from the Moresby Explorers Outpost Camp in Crescent Inlet.

We made a quick detour into Crescent Inlet, which snakes north then east outside the park. The young woman in charge of the float camp told us the planes weren't flying, but she offered to contact the base in Sandspit and patch us in to Bruce's Taxi. Her attempt was unsuccessful; she couldn't get through.

Thanking her, we left and continued out Logan Inlet into Hecate Strait for a short time, then back into protected waters. We were now outside the Park boundaries for the first time

in two weeks. We headed east through Dana Inlet then turned north and worked our way to Carmichael Passage where Don and Kevin had one more major challenge to document: Louise Narrows.

Navigating this narrows has always reminded me of traversing a canal in Europe. Contrary to Dolomite Narrows where the shore is wide and flat, Louise Narrows is bordered by dredged spoils that resemble the walls of a canal. (But on a high tide, the spoils are not apparent.) The channel is less than 30 feet

wide on a 10-foot tide, and the fairway not much more than 20 feet! We were transiting on the beginning of a flood tide (9.3 feet) that was flowing north at 2 knots, which made maneuvering tricky.

Because the northern entrance isn't visible from the south (or vice versa), we made a *Securité* call on Channel 16 before we started through. Don manned the helm, calling out the depths, while Kevin stood



Kevin compiles the data in *Baidarka's* salon.



Moresby Explorer's float camp in Crescent Inlet.

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on the bow with the clipboard recording the data and drawing a new diagram. I hung over the bowsprit watching the bottom and shouting directions to Don. I was entranced. Yellow, pink and orange starfish clung to the sides of the channels, small fingerlings darted here and there, and an occasional salmon sped by. "Don't take your eyes off the fairway, Réanne!" I had to warn myself.

At the north end of the narrows, a local boat sat waiting to make a southbound transit; it hadn't acknowledged our call. We wondered if it was common practice *not* to

announce *Securité*. The boat had its stabilizing poles out, and if it had begun its transit at the same time we did, we would have met in the middle with no way to turn around.

Gillatt Arm is just north of Carmichael Passage and it was 1600 hours when we arrived. We went directly to the small dock at Moresby Camp to see if there was room to drop Kevin off. Several boats were tied to the dock but their owners weren't present, and we would have had to do some jockeying to squeeze in. A couple of groups had already hauled their sportfishing boats up the launching ramp and were load-

ing their trucks. None of them appeared to have any extra space.

"Let's go moor in Gordon Cove and listen to the weather again," Don suggested. "Then we'll decide what to do."

Gordon Cove, a well-protected indentation off the south side of Gillatt Arm, has seven mooring buoys that looked to be in good shape. We picked one and did our test-pull. No problem. We tuned to the weather channel and heard more of the same — the second low-pressure system was expected to hit by 1000 hours the next morning.

Don was determined to get Kevin



to Sandspit. We had about 23 miles to go — 6 miles to the entrance of Cumshewa Inlet before the open waters of Hecate Strait.

"Supposing we left before dawn. We might be able to make it before the storm and, besides, the seas may calm down a bit by morning." We all agreed to give it a try. We set the alarm for 0400 and hit the sack by 2100.

An hour before the alarm went off, Don got up. "Let's get going." It was pitch dark, but I didn't dare say a word. We started the engine, turned on the computer, the depth sounder, and the GPS, let off the line, turned on the spotlight so we could make our way out of the cove and were underway by 0330. The seas were rough and confused in Hecate Strait, so we deployed the paravanes and, for the last 20 miles, flew north.

At Skidegate Inlet, Don turned west, cutting across the sandpit via a shortcut locals had assured us was okay, and by noon we tied up at Sandspit Marina. The rain and wind had stopped, the sun had come out, and Kevin's duffels were packed and ready for offloading. His plane was expected within an hour. I rushed up to phone Bruce's Taxi and got his answer machine; I left a message that we needed a ride to the airport at 1245.

If Bruce didn't show up I could see the scenario: a three-person marathon for the 2-mile trek to Sandspit Airport, each of us toting a heavy duffel, but Bruce showed up on the minute.

I accompanied Kevin to the airport, then stopped by Neil and Betty Carey's to say "hi." Neil drove me back to the marina and came down

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Kevin taking notes as we enter Louise Narrows.

the float with me to see Don.

"We're leaving," Don said. "Ocean Light II left a while ago and they just radioed that Hecate Strait is fine right now. The storm is delayed, but it's expected to hit by tomorrow."

I groaned. I had been looking forward to a couple of restful days at the marina, but Don was right. We had to take advantage of this window.

Neil cast off our lines and I backed Baidarka out of the slip. I didn't have time to feel sad. We waved goodbye and headed out into Hecate Strait, our trip to the Charlottes a marvelous memory.

1. Bluewater Adventures has educational sailing tours on board Island Roamer. Website: www.bluewateradventures.bc.ca

2. Ocean Light II Adventures, owned by Tom and Jenn Ellison, offers charter tours along the coast on their Ocean 71. Website: www.bluewateradventures.bc.ca

Author's Note: The charter boats

mentioned in the text are just two of a dozen or more commercial operators licensed to operate in Gwaii Haanas NPR. For a full list, visit the NPR website at: <http://parkscan.harbour.com/gwaii/comops.htm>

Detailed documentation of the results of Baidarka's voyage to the Charlottes' west coast found in 75 pages of the new 2nd Edition of Exploring the North Coast of British Columbia can be viewed online at www.FineEdge.com. In addition, the Douglasses have published four other highly respected guidebooks covering essentially all the places to tie up or anchor a boat from Puget Sound to Glacier Bay. Their newest book, Exploring the Pacific Coast: San Diego to Seattle is soon to be released. You can also read the entire 600-page Exploring Southeast Alaska on www.FineEdge.com. In addition to the books, FineEdge publishes two excellent route-planning maps of the Inside Passage, each with over 2000 GPS waypoints.



End of the road at Moresby Camp, Gillatt Arm.


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