

THE BIG CHILL

**Discovering the Rewards
of Cruising the Pacific
Northwest in the
Cooler Months**

By Mark Bunzel

Photos by Brian Pemberton

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AND British Columbia offer one of the most scenic and memorable cruising grounds in the world: dynamic port cities, picturesque waterfront villages, lush marine parks and enough secluded anchorages and coves to provide a lifetime of exploration.



This boating paradise is far from undiscovered, and during the prime summer months, thousands of cruisers point their bows north, inspired by visions of wild, fjordlike inlets where snow-capped peaks provide a dramatic backdrop for waterfalls and lush green forests. Such destinations do await, but come July and August, there's a good chance you'll be sharing the more popular locales with quite a few boats.

For those who seek solitude, the off-season is the time to explore. Unlike other regions in the higher latitudes, the Pacific Northwest and the Inside Passage offer the potential for year-round cruising. Those same destinations that provided verdant green vistas against the blue summer sky take on a different look as fall colors are painted across the hillsides,

then replaced by the gray mists and snowfalls of winter. Few things can match the splendor of a clear winter day when a fresh snowfall blankets the coastal mountains and hillsides.

It's not just the scenery that changes, but the pace of cruising life as well. The people who run the many small marinas and shops that stay open year round now have time to chat and socialize when you stop in for fuel, supplies or moorage. And if the off-season weather does kick up, once you find the right anchorage, snuggling up with a book in a warm boat offers the ultimate in cocooning.

A few hearty cruisers know the joys of fall, winter and spring cruising, but they tend to keep the secret to themselves. Increasingly, however, the secret is getting out.

When and Where

Many experienced "shoulder-season" cruisers time their departures for the early fall, just after the crowds have thinned. This strategy allows them to enjoy six to eight weeks of moderate weather and glorious fall scenery before the winter storms roll in.

Those who decide to cruise right on into winter soon learn the importance of planning ahead, identifying potential destinations with an eye toward the weather and maintaining a flexible schedule that will allow them to time their passages and crossings around favorable weather windows.

One good way for first-timers to ease into fall and winter itineraries is to focus on destinations closer to home rather

than remote ports where support structure is minimal. The San Juan Islands are perfect for testing the winter waters, with scenic anchorages such as Sucia that offer a sense of solitude, yet lie within easy range of the region's major cities. In addition, a number of marina resorts such as Roche Harbor and Rosario continue to offer a full range of services.

Another prime choice for easing into the off-season is the charming harbor city of Victoria, B.C. Finding much-coveted dock space in Victoria's Inner Harbour becomes easier the closer you get to the Christmas holidays, when government buildings and waterfront hotels and shops festooned with lights for the holidays give the city a festive air.

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Another winter treat near Victoria is a tour by boat to the Butchart Gardens, which can be reached by traveling down the Saanich Inlet to Brentwood Bay. In the off-season, choice moorage spots are available in cozy Butchart Cove, where there is a dinghy dock and a special back-entrance gate to the gardens for visiting boats. Just across Brentwood Bay from Butchart Gardens is the Brentwood Bay Lodge & Spa. Here one can enjoy special wine-tasting events at the Arbutus Grille or a relaxing Essence of Life massage in the spa.

The Gulf Islands of British Columbia also offer a number of attractive off-season anchorages at towns and resorts such as Ganges on Salt Spring Island or Poets Cove Resort on South Pender Island. From there, one can await favorable weather to push farther north to destinations such as Montague Harbour on Galiano Island or Pirates Cove Marine Park on DeCourcy island, both of which provide good protection from passing storms, as well as delightful surroundings.

Another option is to work up the coast of mainland British Columbia from Vancouver, cruising the regions often referred to as the Sunshine Coast. One of the most majestic passages on this route is through Jervis Inlet to the Malibu Rapids and through Princess Louisa Inlet to the base of Chatterbox Falls. The dock at Chatterbox is full almost every night during the summer months, but in the off-season you may have the falls all to yourself.

Cold Comfort

But what about the cold? Experienced winter cruisers say coping with the cold is all about having the proper mind-set. You plan for it and equip yourself and your boat to deal with it. Winter weather can be extreme, but if you and your boat are prepared, you will open up another dimension to your cruising experiences.

Keeping the boat's interior warm and dry is critical (see "Staying Warm and Dry" on page 64). First and foremost for successful winter cruising is an adequate heating system. This is important not only for your personal comfort, but also for the boat itself, as heat is a critical component of keeping interior moisture levels under control.

Many boats have a heating system that provides warm air salvaged from the engine's cooling system. Although this works well while underway, once anchored or at the dock you will need another source of heat. Electric heaters provide a compact, convenient alternative when shore power is available, but plan your cruising destinations around docks and marinas that have power available year round.

The best system is a separate furnace that warms either air or water and circulates heat throughout the interior of the boat. Like home furnaces, boat heating systems carry a Btu rating for the amount of heat they generate.

Some heating systems have been installed primarily to warm up a boat's cabin spaces during milder seasons, so you may need to do a bit of investigating to determine whether your system can keep your boat warm during the peak of winter. An expert in marine heating systems can recommend the proper size to keep the interior of your boat warm for the type of cruising you want to do.

As an alternative, you may want to call the manufacturer, as many have specialists who can answer your boat-heating questions. They may ask you about the expected temperatures in the area you plan to cruise, and the size of your boat. Powerboats tend to require a larger heating system for a



DON'T FORGET THE BUMBERSHOOT

Winter cruisers will of course have to make a few personal adjustments, but common sense dictates most of these. Obvious examples include warmer clothing, extra blankets and, because rain is more likely in fall and winter, a good waterproof jacket and pants, as well as waterproof boots.

There's another item, not generally considered boating equipment, that should be added to the list: an umbrella. It's a very useful item when hustling from the boat up the dock to the pub or the marine store in the rain.

given length to accommodate their larger interiors.

A heating system or furnace that uses the boat's fuel system is best. Such systems are available for gas-powered boats, but some people don't trust the volatility of this fuel. Much more common are diesel-fueled furnaces, which are sometimes equipped with a small, separate fuel supply.

Diesel furnace systems come in two types: forced air or hot water, which is recirculated inside the boat through radiator systems. One advantage to a hot-water, or hydronic, system is that you can tap into the freshwater side of an engine's heat exchange system to warm the boat while underway. An additional fuel-fired hot-water system can heat the water when at anchor.



Systems that circulate hot water with a pump or warm air using a blower will require battery power if the engines or generator is not running. Some boat owners elect to have a main cabin furnace that radiates heat throughout the boat without a blower. This avoids drawing on the battery supply while at anchor.

Dress Rehearsal

Once you have worked out the best system to stay warm inside your boat, the next consideration is staying warm when you need to brave the elements outside, especially when docking or anchoring. While the air temperatures on the water may moderate, the higher moisture levels of a marine climate make it feel colder, and damp air actually robs heat faster than dry air of the same temperature.

Dress in layers, starting with good long underwear. Thick wool socks will keep your feet warm and dry. The next layer can be a good shirt and slacks or jeans, lined if you like. A fleece vest will maintain body heat around your core without restricting movement. To top it off, use a waterproof coat or jacket to protect from the rain or mist and keep the layers underneath dry.

The head is a major source of heat loss, so keeping it covered will do a lot toward keeping your body warm. A knit watch cap is a good choice, but you may want to cover it with a waterproof hat or hood. If you are wearing a hooded jacket, consider pairing it with a baseball cap or a visor. The visor will not only keep the rain out of your eyes, but also will allow the hood to turn with you so that you don't end up staring into the inside of your hood when you turn your head.

Rubber boots with traction soles are the preferred cold-weather footwear for outside work. When inside the boat, you may want to consider wearing sandals. Thick socks will keep your feet warm, and sandals are easy to slip on and off to change into or out of boots.

Invest in a good pair of insulated, water-resistant gloves. You may find it handy to carry two pairs. Full-finger gloves work for most situations, but also consider a pair of sailing gloves with the finger tips exposed for working with lines or setting fenders.

On Ice

Once you are properly prepared for the cold both inside and out, the next consideration is ice and snow. To many, the Pacific Northwest conjures images of constant rain, but the reality is that precipitation more often takes the form of a damp mist or drizzle. In the temperate areas warmed by the seawater, this light rain persists even in the middle of winter.

But there are times when snow does fall, and anyone contemplating winter cruising in the region should be prepared for this inevitability. Carry a plastic snow shovel to clear snow off a dock or off the side decks or topsides of your boat.

Ice may be a more persistent issue than snow. The salt water will not get cold enough to freeze in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia. But fresh water will, and in inlets fed by rivers and mountain streams, freshwater runoff sitting atop

BE PREPARED

Prepare Your Boat

- Before departing, service and inspect all systems on your boat for proper operation.
- Have the boat's furnace inspected and checked.
- Check the ventilation system for proper and adequate airflow through the boat.
- Check anchor and rode for wear, and consider increasing the size of your anchor for additional holding.
- Carry additional fender and lines.
- Check or add chafing gear for anchor rode and lines.
- Carry a snow shovel and ice scrapers on board.

Prepare Your Crew

- Make sure each crew member has the proper cold-weather clothing layers for comfort when either inside or outside the boat.
- Pack rain gear including boots, hats and goggles for deck crew.
- If your crew is prone to seasickness, pack the preferred remedies.

Prepare Your Mind-Set

- Study Pacific Northwest and B.C. weather, talk to locals, and research through several good books the weather patterns for the areas you intend to cruise. Consider ahead of time the cruising routes that will work best for specific weather conditions.
- Determine your limits and allow for extra days at anchor or in port for your cruise schedule. There should be no need to venture out in weather that may be beyond your capabilities or those of your crew or boat.
- Consider your boat's limits for winter operations, covering performance in weather and including critical items like water, which may be harder to obtain when many docks turn off their water for the winter. Choose your destinations accordingly.
- Take a short shakedown cruise in the winter before a long cruise to test your boat and crew.

the salt water will freeze into patches or solid films of ice.

Cruising through an inch-thick layer of ice does not present a problem for most fiberglass boats. The preferred technique is to maintain a relatively slow speed and allow the bow to break the ice. Some captains find that running at a speed of about 4 knots will create a small bow wave, which will crack the ice and push it aside from the hull.

When first experienced, breaking ice sounds much more dramatic than it actually is. It produces a horrible crunching noise that will make you question whether your boat is being ground to bits while underway.

Boats at the dock or at anchor may also be targets of floating mats of freshwater ice moved by wind or tidal currents. Again, the impact of these floating chunks may create unnerving crunching noises as they work their way along the waterline. From the inside, it may sound as if the gelcoat is being scoured away, but in reality winter cruisers rarely receive more

than a scratch or two on their boot stripe from ice. Fiberglass stands up well to ice, whereas aluminum-boat owners may have to be more mindful of ice damage.

In addition to floating ice, ice may also build up on the topside. Moisture and a cold wind will freeze rainwater, creating a film of freshwater ice on your decks, rails and rigging. Extra caution and a good pair of traction-soled boots are required to safely maneuver on slippery decks.

Frozen lines are another cold-weather challenge. Dock lines that have frozen in place can be thawed with buckets of seawater. Wet lines should be placed in a warm engine room to dry. Some captains like to place these in a well-ventilated shower area to defrost and dry out.

One school of thought is to bring wet clothing and lines into the boat to dry out. The other is to keep wet lines and other items outside the boat to keep the moisture out. You can decide based on the ventilation and heating capacity of your boat.



STAYING WARM AND DRY

The key to comfortable winter cruising, indeed to comfortable cruising at any time of year, is to make every effort to keep moisture out of the boat. Moisture gets into a boat in a number of ways. The most obvious offenders are open or improperly gasketed ports and hatches. The second is through a biological imperative: We all have to breathe, and exhaled air contains a lot of moisture. Moisture buildup will be much more pronounced on a smaller boat, which will typically have less interior volume.

Extra moisture comes aboard along with wet outerwear, so it's best to leave damp, dripping coats in the cockpit, a warm engine room or a locker that doesn't vent into the cabin.

Cooking is by far the greatest contributor to unwanted moisture inside a boat. Most cruisers do their cooking on propane stoves, and a natural byproduct of the combustion of propane is water. Burning 1 pound of propane produces 1.6 pounds of water. Butane and compressed natural gas produce even more. Add to that the moisture released from the food being cooked; the water boiling for pasta, coffee or tea; food frying in a pan — all normal activities — and it's clear that moisture buildup is inevitable and continuous.

Two other factors come into play in winter cruising. Because outside temperatures are cooler, many boaters close up ports and hatches to "keep the heat in" and, often at the same time, fire up the propane stove as a heat source, even when not cooking. While both steps are understandable, that combination will almost certainly guarantee a damp, clammy boat and the discomfort that goes with that.

Luckily, it's easy to dump almost all the moisture generated inside the boat over the side. All that's required is good ventilation. Stale, damp air must be



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removed from inside the boat and replaced with fresh air from the outside. Even if it's raining, the fresh outside air will have a lower relative humidity than the air trapped inside a vessel. Only in a fog will outside air contain as much moisture as the interior.

Proper ventilation requires air movement. Even fully opening all the ports and hatches will not do the trick unless a breeze is blowing. Outside air need not be roaring through the boat at gale force. A gentle, wafting breeze is more than enough to move the moist, stale air out and fresh air in.

Ideally one tries to take fresh air in at one end of a vessel and exhausts the stale air at the opposite end. This will ensure the most complete air change throughout the boat. If drawers and doors are propped open a crack, moist air will not build up as much.

There are two ways of getting air movement through the boat: passive ventilation and mechanical ventilation, which uses fans. Passive ventilation is always

preferred since it requires no electrical draw. Generally one need only point the bow into the prevailing wind when tying up for the night — something that occurs automatically when on the hook or on a mooring ball.

If the forward hatch opens at the leading edge and is cracked open a bit, the prevailing breeze will pressurize the vessel and force the stale air out at an opening farthest aft on the vessel. If the forward hatch opens at the trailing edge and is similarly cracked open, the prevailing breeze will create a negative pressure at the hatch opening and will suck the inside air out. Fresh air will then enter at any opening toward the aft of the vessel. If passive ventilation is not possible, a fan at the exhaust point will draw fresh air through the vessel at the opening farthest from the fan location.

Checking to ensure air is moving through the boat is easy. Just light a cigar, a cigarette or an incense stick and watch the smoke. Cigars work best. Adjust the hatch or port opening until the smoke shows a gentle flow.

Vessels equipped with onboard heating sources, be they full-blown hydronics, bulkhead heaters or diesel cook stoves, have no problem generating heat. And as long as the skipper pays attention to ventilation and keeps water out of the living spaces, comfort is almost guaranteed.

A boat without a built-in heating system can use small, portable electric heaters, so long as they can employ a marina's available AC power. In normal fall cruising conditions, a couple of these units will provide plenty of heat for boats up to about 28 feet. If one heater is placed on the cabin sole just under a main hatch and that hatch is cracked slightly, the warm air rising from the heater will exit the boat through the hatch, and fresh air will be drawn into the vessel from an opening at either end of the vessel. — Roger McAfee

Weather or Not

Winter weather patterns will often create conditions quite different from those of summer. Prevailing winds often come from a different direction and are more intense. Even some seemingly protected anchorages may not be entirely secure, as strong winds can spill over a protective ridge, creating fierce williwaws and gusts. For example, Kwatsi Bay, north of the Desolation Sound area, is a beautiful, tranquil anchorage during the summer months. But during the most extreme winter storms, when the winds build and funnel down the bay, it can be downright scary.

To determine which inlets and coves offer the best protection from winter conditions, study the forecasts and correlating weather patterns to the orientation of anchorages. The most extreme weather conditions cruisers are likely to encounter are the arctic outflows that sweep down from northern Canada. Such systems usually arrive out of the northeast and will create the worst conditions in inlets oriented in this same direction. For example, in anchorages such as Howe Sound, Jervis Inlet, Toba Inlet, Knight Inlet and Bute Inlet, the winds sweep out of the mountains and funnel directly down the steep-sided inlets.

But a number of other waterways run perpendicular to the winter wind pattern and offer calm havens during northeasters. Often, these areas are not as commonly used in summer, as they are unfavorably oriented for the prevalent winds of that season and so may not be popular or well-known to cruisers who visit only in the warmer months.

The keys to dealing with winter storms are to plan ahead, keep cruising plans flexible, identify safe havens and alternative destinations, pay attention to forecasts, and in all things err on the side of caution. Sturdy anchor tackle and ample chafing gear are musts, and in a strong blow, a well-anchored dock may be the best choice.

Talk to the locals, gather as much local knowledge as possible, and carry spares for items that may be subject to the ravages of winter weather. It is a good idea to call ahead to marinas to confirm they will be open. Some marinas will maintain power at their docks throughout the winter, but in the coldest



conditions or even all winter long their water may be shut off.

For additional information and to prep yourself on the weather, consider reading two excellent books published by Environment Canada: *Weather Ways and Marine Weather Hazards on the B.C. Coast*.

Getting Started

If the idea of winter cruising intrigues you, but you are hesitant to commit to a major adventure, consider starting with a short weekend trip. Venture out on a short passage to experience winter conditions and make sure you and your crew are

more experienced winter cruisers can be included in the mix. Those who do not keep a boat in the region might consider chartering. Many companies in Seattle, Anacortes and Bellingham in the United States and Sidney or Vancouver in British Columbia can advise you on off-season and winter cruising and can schedule you in a boat properly set up and maintained for winter operation.

If you, your crew and the boat are properly equipped and have the right mind-set, off-season and winter passages will allow you to see things other boaters may never have a chance to experience. ❄️

comfortable with the realities of the season.

Even on these short jaunts, you will want to incorporate a degree of flexibility into your float plan to allow a day or two for bad weather before attempting an exposed crossing. The most successful skippers manage to avoid the worst weather through patience and good timing.

A good option for the less experienced is to organize a flotilla, especially if one or

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