


GO CRUISING

NORTH TO ALASKA

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY TONY FLEMING

The first of a three part series as we join Tony Fleming aboard a Fleming 65 cruising motor yacht, Venture, for a trip of a lifetime!



Unless you are one of those who seek endless sunshine, sandy beaches and trendy marinas, the coastal waters, off the Pacific Northwest of North America, offer some of the best cruising to be found anywhere in the world. Starting in Seattle the route north to Alaska lies almost entirely in protected waters and extends some 1200 nautical miles to Skagway along what is known as the Inside Passage.

From the group of islands known as the Gulf Islands in Canada and the San Juans in the USA, this route provides a succession of cruising areas each more adventurous than the last. As you head north you feel as though you are passing through a series of barriers until you emerge into the vastness of the Alaska experience.

This was our second cruise to Alaska - our first being in the summer of 2006 - and we had allowed two months for the trip. Actually, three would have been better but, like most, we had time constraints. We left Vancouver Island on 17 May when it was still quite chilly. On our previous visit we had arrived in Juneau in early August to be greeted by continuous rain. The harbour-master had told us that by July the summer was over and if we wanted any hope of drier weather we needed to get there early. We were aboard my Fleming 65, Venture, and, for those not already familiar with this vessel, perhaps I should say something about her history.

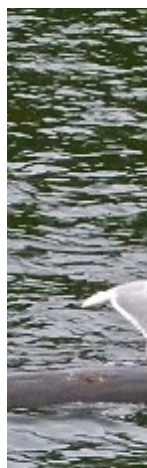
Commissioned in early 2005, she is hull #1 of the Fleming 65s and has cruised around 35,000 nautical miles from as far north as Juneau in Alaska to south of the equator in the Galapagos Islands. From there we took her through the Panama Canal and headed for the Great Lakes and thence down the St Lawrence Seaway to Nova Scotia. I have personally been aboard for all those areas and we have used her both to gain cruising experience as well as using her as a test bed for new ideas and equipment.

Over the years almost all major items of equipment - including engines, generators, steering, thrusters, shaft systems, water pumps and electrical components - have been substituted. Some changes were beneficial and others less so but there is no better way, in my opinion, to try new products and ideas than to install them in a boat and test them under realistic conditions.

Now in her eighth cruising season, we continue to meet many people who believe her to be a brand new vessel. Much of the credit for this goes to the yard on Vancouver Island where the boat has been modified and serviced and to Chris Conklin who has been her captain for six years.

From our starting point on Vancouver Island we headed north to Desolation Sound - so named around 1792 by Captain Vancouver on what must have been a bad day after he noted in his log that 'not a single prospect that was pleasing to the eye.' In fact the area is universally renowned for its spectacular natural beauty.

Proceeding north of here requires negotiating a series of channels through which the tides races at every turn of the tide. This discourages the faint hearted but, in reality, presents no problem provided they are negotiated at slack water when the waters are as placid as a lake. However



Captain Chris Conklin at the helm of Venture



Launching Venture's tender in Haida Gwaii



Submerged logs are a constant danger



Dent Rapids



Dent Island Docks

slack can last as little as ten minutes and the ferocity of the water has to be seen to be believed when it is running at full chat with whirlpools, boils and standing waves more than a metre in height.

The main channel is Seymour Narrows through which the current runs at up to 16 knots. Even cruise ships take notice of the tides before passing through. On this occasion we chose, instead, to thread our way through smaller channels to Dent Island which lies in the centre of three sets of notorious rapids. We made sure to negotiate these at slack but then took advantage of an exhilarating, high-speed zip through all three at full flood in a jet boat powered by two 350hp engines driven by Justin the manager of the Dent Lodge.

These side passages lead into Discovery Passage and Johnstone Strait - both identified and named by Captain Vancouver. Here we encountered the first of many floating logs which we somehow failed to spot despite being on the lookout in the pilothouse. Logs are a continual hazard in the Pacific Northwest and they preclude traveling at night. This one was a doozy which, after thumping its way aft, remained stuck under the hull with about 10 feet of it protruding beyond the transom. It took some effort to dislodge and I had visions of limping back south to Campbell River which had one of the very few facilities capable of hauling a boat the size of Venture. Amazingly, cautious checking of the hull, props and steering revealed nothing amiss; a happy state of affairs later confirmed by a diver. We were very lucky. Seabirds use floating logs as a convenient perch which often reveals the presence of an otherwise invisible log.

Johnstone Strait is flanked by steeply forested, snow-capped mountains which funnel



Cleaning salmon at Dent Lodge



Kitimat



Douglas Channel



Anti-pipeline sentiments are to the fore



Black Bear at Bute Inlet

ferocious winds down the channel even when relative calm prevails elsewhere. Conditions can be especially dicey when strong northwest winds run contrary to a strong east-going tide. Resident Orcas inhabit the northern end of the channel and the nearby Broughton Islands offer another wonderful cruising area which, on this occasion, we saved to visit on our return journey. We deviated from our route to visit the Nakwakto Rapids where 1000 square miles of catchment area drain through a channel only 400 metres wide. These are reputed to be the fastest tidal rapids in the world and we took care to be here close to slack which, at springs, lasts just five minutes. We plan to return at a later date to cruise the miles of fjords above the rapids.

Beyond here lies Queen Charlotte Sound - the first of the two sections of the Inside Passage which are open to the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Captain Vancouver came close to losing both his ships on treacherous shoals in this channel. The Sound has a nasty reputation and acts as a deterrent to smaller boats. One elderly couple I knew had been held up here for ten days waiting for suitable weather. I asked them whether they had encountered any problems. "Yes", came the reply. "We almost ran out of liquor!"

We had been keeping a close eye on the weather forecast and conditions were favourable to make the crossing so we kept going and headed for Cape Caution and the town of Kitimat. There is a proposal to build a terminal here to run as many as 225 supertankers a year, a distance of 140 kilometres from the open waters of the Hecate Strait, up the Douglas Channel to export the especially dirty product from the tar sands in Alberta to China. The fjord passes through magnificent pristine country and is the sole habitat of a rare species of black bears. Due to a



Norwegian cruise ship in Discovery Passage



Nakwakto Rapids

generic anomaly some of these are white in colour and are known locally as Spirit Bears. I wanted to see this area for myself so I could form my own opinion about the wisdom of this hazardous venture.

When visiting this area last summer, we had crossed the Queen Charlotte Strait to the Queen Charlotte Islands. Now known as Haida Gwaii, these islands lie around 70 miles out in the Pacific on the western edge of the Hecate Strait. Haida Gwaii consists of a couple of main islands plus about 150 lesser ones - depending upon which source of information you consult. Moresby, the southern of the two main islands, is virtually uninhabited with almost all of it taken up with the Gwaii Hanaas national park. A visit to the park requires prior attendance at an orientation course at which we learned that it is the only place in the world where the



Venture in Hartley Bay



Venture off Tanu



Totem and store front in Old Masset



Totem pole Haida Gwaii

environment is protected all the way from the peaks of the mountains to offshore waters.

During our orientation we were required to complete forms listing our personal details in case of an emergency. Gwaii Haanas turned out to be among the most remote areas we had ever visited in our many miles of cruising. Unless you have a functioning sat phone - and we did not on this occasion - communications are non-existent. Literature handed out during the course makes the situation very clear:-

"Facilities in and around Gwaii Haanas are minimal. There are no roads, stores, or fueling facilities. Access is limited to boats and float planes. Gwaii Haanas does not maintain hiking trails in the area. There are a few mooring buoys, two water hoses and limited navigational aids. Make daily travel plans flexible to accommodate





Venture underway in Lowe Inlet



George boards his Float plane

delays caused by poor weather conditions. Bring enough fuel and food to sustain you for a few extra days. Carry clothing and equipment for a variety of weather conditions. This area has significant tidal variation, strong currents, rapidly changing weather, and strong winds that develop with little or no warning."

Over the following days we took Venture into the park and visited several village sites. Each of the official sites has a resident 'watchman' responsible for protecting the site and acting as a guide. A maximum of 12 people are allowed ashore at one time and the watchman should be called on the VHF at least one hour ahead of the desired landing time. All that remained of once-prosperous villages were the decaying remains of fallen totem poles. House sites of the elite could be identified by sunken pits and fallen beams. Everything was covered in a rich green blanket of velvety moss, soft and springy to the touch. We were warned to keep a look out for bears and we spotted a black bear foraging along the shore.

On previous trips we had been frustrated by our inability to make beach landings in the big tender and for this trip we had added a smaller, flat-bottomed boat. Without it, getting ashore would have been next to impossible in Gwaii Hanaas because none of the sites had any form of dock or jetty.

We had with us a journalist who had previously joined us on trips to Galapagos and Iceland. Before leaving Charlotte town we had arranged for him to be picked up by float plane. With the weather looking so chancy we were concerned that the plane might not be able to fly and, without a sat phone, we had no way to make contact. Luckily, the weather improved and the plane dropped out of the clouds on schedule. Float planes proliferate along this coast and



Rich green blanket of velvet moss



Bears are dangerous and it pays to be cautious



Vernay Falls in Nettle Basin



Prince Rupert waterfront



Rowers practising in Prince Rupert

provide a wonderful way of getting to remote places and will rendezvous with your boat if you give them a GPS location.

Back on the Canadian mainland, after leaving Kitimat we anchored near Hartley Bay - a small Indian village which had become the jumping off spot to see the Spirit Bears. We headed up narrow Grenville Channel and anchored in Nettle Bay where there was a sleek, glissading waterfall. You need to plan ahead as suitable anchorages are surprisingly rare. This is primarily due to the depth of water and you are lucky if you can find 20 metres or less. An absolute must for cruising this area are the guides published by Fine Edge and written by Don and Reanne Douglass who seemed to have visited every nook and cranny along the length of this coast.

From here we went directly to Prince Rupert which is the most northerly town on the Canadian coast and, apart from Kitimat, the only town we were to visit on the whole 2500 mile journey which is connected by road to the rest of Canada or the United States. We stayed in a marina at the Prince Rupert Yacht and Rowing Club and were able to provision at the large supermarket. This was the jumping off point for Ketchikan and the United States. Between the two lies Dixon Entrance, the second section along the route open to the broad expanse of Pacific Ocean.