

# The "Outside" Inside

*Despite its formidable reputation, Vancouver Island's West Coast offers much protected water in a series of sounds and inlets – and a surprisingly calm passage even when tackled in the "wrong way."*



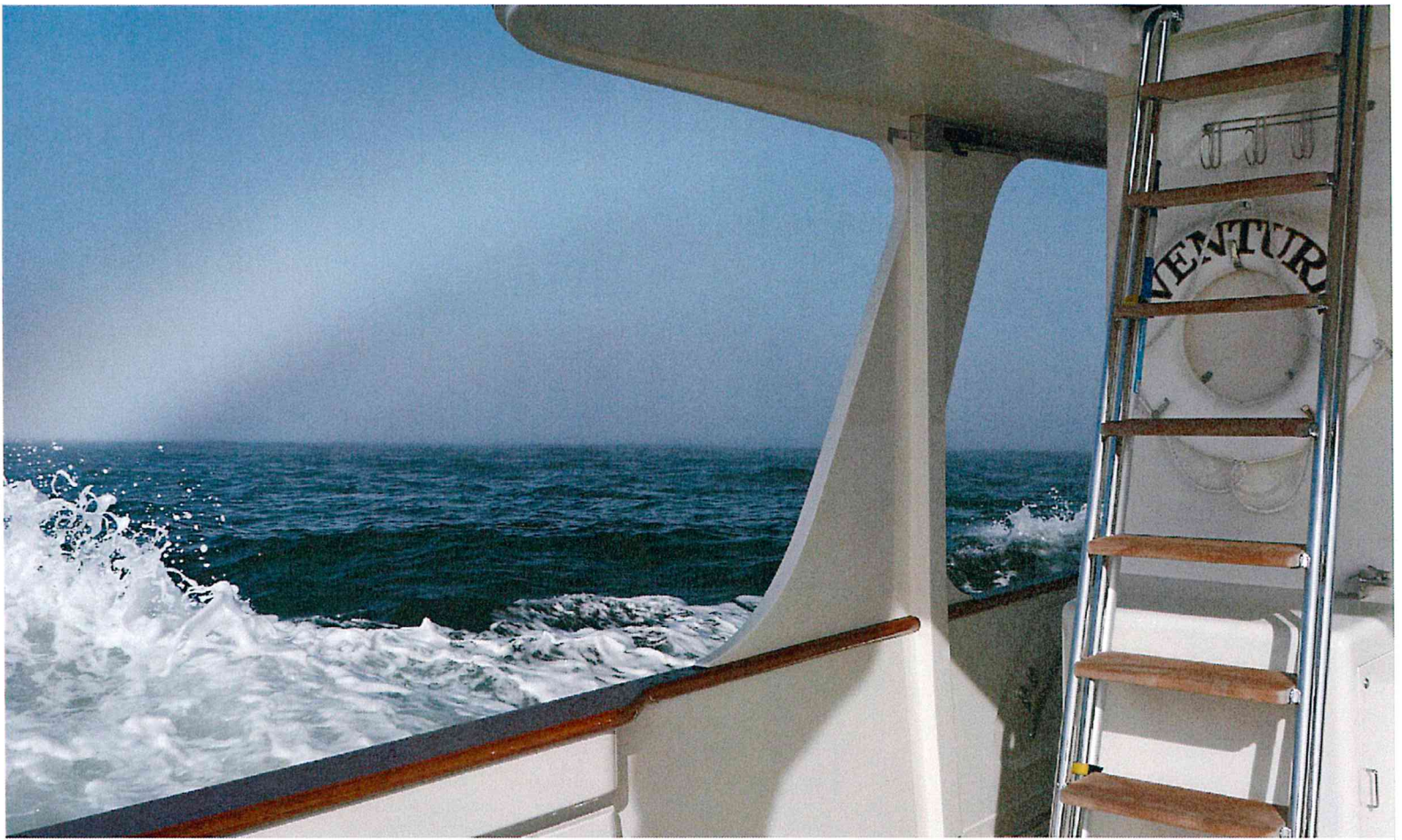
CRUISING

de”

# Passage

Story & Photos by Tony Fleming





A FOG BOW.

**W**ith its reputation for fog, rain and tumultuous seas, the West Coast of Vancouver Island would hardly seem to be an ideal cruising ground, but a look at the chart reveals a different picture. A series of inlets or “sounds” indent the coast separated, like stepping stones, by no more than 30 miles of open ocean.

Almost all are accessible by road from the east coast of the island, and nowhere is this more true than in Barkley Sound. Port Alberni, located only a few miles from the east coast, lies at the head of Alberni Inlet. Boats launched or based here have direct access to the extensive and protected waters of Barkley Sound. Collectively, the sounds provide many more miles of protected cruising than can be found on the east coast of Vancouver Island.

**Although the distance between each protected sound is relatively short, you need the seaworthiness, range and time to handle – or wait out – the conditions should they turn nasty.**

For larger boats such as *Venture*, my Fleming 65, the situation is quite different. Although the distance between each protected sound is relatively short, you need the seaworthiness, range and time to handle – or wait out – the conditions should they turn nasty. Most

cruisers along this coast travel from north to south, partly to have the prevailing weather from astern, but also to negotiate the challenges of Cape Scott and the Brooks Peninsula early in the trip. For scheduling reasons we chose to travel in the reverse direction and to do so in August when fog is so prevalent that locals refer to it as the month of “Fogust.”

#### **FAVORABLE CURRENT**

We leave Delta Marine Services in Sidney, near the southeast corner of Vancouver Island. We bypass



Victoria, and a favorable current pushes our speed over the ground up from 9.5 knots to 13.2 through Race Passage. We spend the first night in Port Renfrew which is little more than an indentation on the coast.

In line with all our expectations, the following morning dawns foggy and rainy. Once underway, we soon lose sight of the land. After five hours we turn into Barkley Sound and tie up to the dock at Mills Landing in West Bamfield, which is only accessible by water or float plane. East Bamfield, across the inlet, can be reached by road and is the northern end of the rugged West Coast Trail.

Next morning, a welcome change in the weather allows us to enjoy clear skies and calm seas which last until we reach the northern tip of the island. We remain in Barkley Sound for several days, including an overnight stay at the Port Alberni Yacht Club on Fleming Island which, despite its name, is the club's only premises. We hike along well-maintained trails through

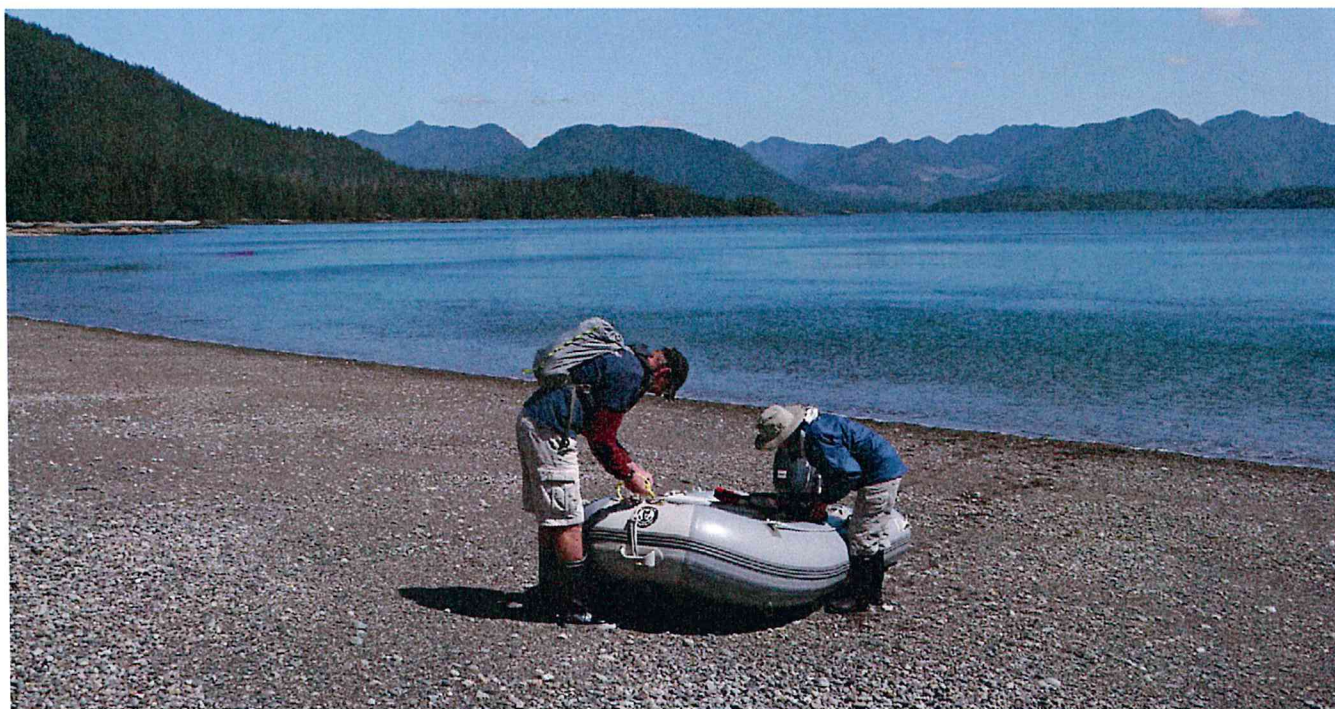
**Our luck with the weather continues and, at Solander Island off Cape Cook, we watch puffins scooting across the water and sea lions hauled out on the rocks.**

the dense forest and marvel at the proliferation of mosses, fungi, ferns and new growth sprouting from fallen forests giants. We circumnavigate Fleming Island in the tender, spotting a few caves, but conditions are too robust to risk entering. We spend two nights in the Broken Group on the islands of Nettle and Effingham before heading for the town of Ucluelet located at the northern edge of Barkley Sound.

By chance our arrival coincides with the annual Ukee Days Festival. We watch the parade and attend a fete which includes a lumberjack

competition. Most of the competitors are local but a couple of them have come, bearing their razor-sharp axes, from as far away as Australia and New Zealand. Ucluelet has its own wild coast trail and we spot a black bear meandering along the shore and harvesting berries from the bushes.

We hear that mooring facilities for boats the size of *Venture* are limited in Tofino – the next town north at the end of the road – so we decide to rent a car in



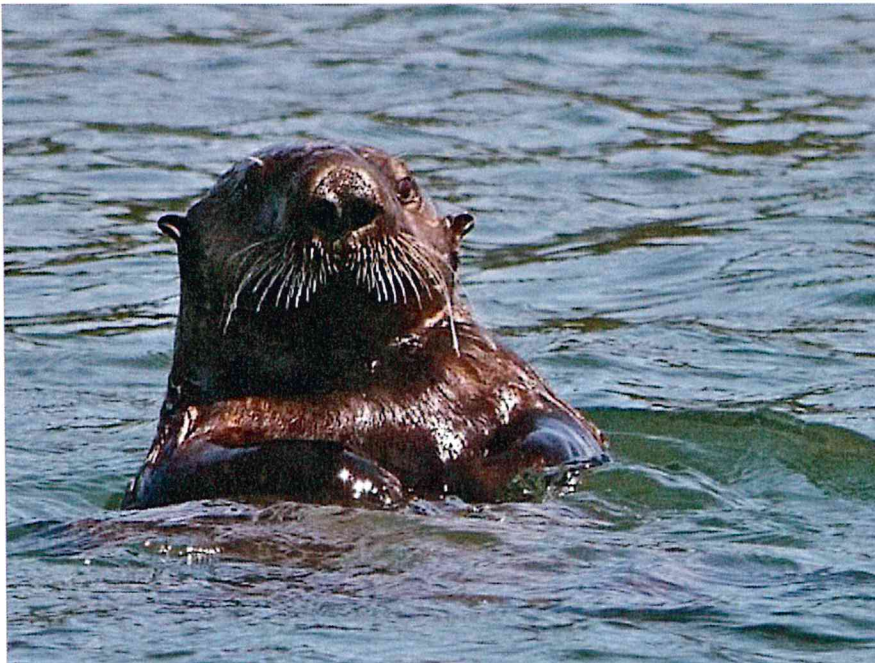
A SHORE EXCURSION.





CHRIS AND CHRISTINE EXPLORE THE CAVE AT MARBLE RIVER.

Ucluelet and drive there instead. Along the way we stop to walk along one of the many extensive beaches which, as always in this part of the world, are a cemetery for the sun-bleached skeletons of once-mighty trees.



CURIOS SEA OTTER.

#### MOURNFUL MOAN

After three days we continue north. As soon as we leave the harbor we catch a brief glimpse of the lighthouse at Amphitrite Point before it is enveloped in fog. We continue to hear its mournful moan long after it vanishes from sight. A distinctive fog bow hovers over the horizon. A north-flowing current increases our speed over the ground to 10.5 knots but, because it opposes the wind, the price is a steepening of the seas. We turn into Clayoquot Sound and make our way up Templar Channel to Quait Bay where we anchor amid tree-clad mountains. The water is still but numerous jellyfish discourage the use of the genset.

The following day we take the small tender up Watta Creek off Bacchante Bay. The entrance is hard to spot but inside the shal-





FOG HOVERS OUTSIDE UCLUELET HARBOUR.

low water flows crystal-clear over the stony bottom. Overhanging branches create deep shadows with glimpses of precipitous, tree-clad mountains beyond. When the water becomes too shallow, we resort to paddles. Our progress is brought to halt by rapids and we scramble ashore over slippery stones using the paddles for support. Further progress is prevented by deadfalls and tangled vegetation.

Continuing north we round Estevan Point into historic Nootka Sound and Resolution Cove where Capt. Cook first made landfall on March 29, 1778. Other than a plaque on the rocks, no signs remain of his visit and, after a brief stop, we cross the sound to Friendly Cove. This was the site of much rivalry between various nations and the center for the fur trade that ultimately led to the ending of a way of life for the local people and the extinction of the sea otter along the entire coast.

We go ashore in the tender and walk to the church where stained-glass windows commemorate the events of past centuries. The interior is decorated with artifacts reflecting First Nations culture and traditions.

All but one of a group of local children holds back from accompanying us into the church because, they say, there are ghosts inside.

### SHELTERED WATERWAYS

A series of inland waterways connects Nootka Sound to Esperanza Inlet, eliminating the need to venture into the ocean. Under continuing blue skies and sunny conditions, we penetrate deeper into the mountains to

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 82)



PORT ALBERNI YC, FLEMING ISLAND.



the very head of beautiful Tahsis Inlet and the village of Tahsis and Westview Marina, where they squeeze us into a tight spot. Tahsis is connected by road to Gold River and thence to Campbell River on the east coast. A small restaurant on the dock serves dinner accompanied by live music.

We awake to another calm and beautiful day and enjoy our morning coffee at the café to take advantage of a rare internet connection. We backtrack down Tahsis Inlet and turn off into Tahsis Narrows at Mozino Point, passing the Esperanza ministry and retreat. We reach Zeballos at the head of Zeballos Inlet just after noon. There is very little space at the limited docks and no response on the VHF. We maneuver ourselves into a shallow spot and hope for the best. Zeballos is rather different from what we had expected from the description in the guidebooks. The town is connected by road to main Highway 19 leading to Port McNeill but not to relatively nearby Tahsis.

From Esperanza Inlet a short sea passage takes us to Kyuquot Sound. Another short excursion into the ocean brings us to the scenic Bunsby Islands and Big Bunsby Marine Park. Here we meet a couple of kayakers on their way down



VENTURE ON THE DOCKS AT PORT ALBERNI YC, FLEMING ISLAND.



STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS IN THE CHURCH AT FRIENDLY COVE RECALL HISTORIC EVENTS HERE.

**We catch a brief glimpse of the lighthouse at Amphitrite Point before it is enveloped in fog. We continue to hear its mournful moan long after it vanishes from sight.**

the coast. We dispense cold beers and they tell us about a ship called the *MV Uchuck III*. This unique vessel went into service in 1955; carrying up to 100 passengers and 70 tons of cargo, she drops off supplies to remote lodges, fish farms and logging camps. Using the same winch and platform used to lift cargo from the hold, they offer a service to wet-launch kayakers at the place of their choice and arrange pickups, thus solving the perennial problem for kayakers of how to get picked up at the end of their route. More info is available at [www.getwest.ca](http://www.getwest.ca).

### TWIN CAPES

A major landmark on the West Coast is the rectangular Brooks Peninsula with its twin capes of Clerke Point and Cape Cook. Our luck with the weather continues and, at Solander Island off Cape Cook, we watch puffins scooting across the water and sea lions hauled out on the rocks. Beyond the cape, the water turns glassy and is covered with countless tiny blue-purple sailing jellies called *velella velella*. North of the cape the sea temperature drops dramatically, the sky grows overcast and





MOORED IN BUSY BAMFIELD.

fog becomes our constant companion. At the base of the Brooks Peninsula we anchor in Klaskish Inlet after passing through a narrow entrance with cliffs on one side.

After another stretch of open water we enter Quatsino Sound which extends inland for many miles. Coal Harbour, at its head, is only eight miles from Port Hardy on the east coast. There is little to keep us at Coal Harbour itself and we move to Varney Bay where we anchor overnight in preparation for an excursion up the Marble River in the tender the following morning.

The approaches to the river are guarded by mud banks which dry at low water. We enter the estuary on a rising tide to allow us to negotiate the river in time to avoid being stranded on the return journey. Overhanging trees mask the entrance and the way ahead is revealed only at the last minute. Cliffs festooned with moss and ferns rise sheer from the water on either hand. There are shallow spots where we can see large, rounded stones on the bottom. We turn a corner to find a cave large enough to enter in

the tender. We switch off the motor and move inside using paddles. The only sound is a muted chuckle from nearby rapids and the steady plop of water dripping from the roof.

We try the rapids but it is too shallow so we decide to wait. Two kayakers from a boat anchored in the bay appear from upstream. They tell us that above these rapids are another set and beyond them the river is blocked by deadfalls. At the second attempt we make it through the lower rapids and stop below the upper set. We are now at high tide and cannot afford to dally to avoid being stuck on the extensive mud flats at the river's mouth. We make our way leisurely downstream and return to *Venture*.

#### **NASTY REPUTATION**

Quatsino is the most northerly of the sounds on the West Coast and San Joseph Bay, with its offshoot Sea Otter Cove, offers the only shelter before reaching Cape Scott at the northern tip of Vancouver Island. We find several boats anchored here including one with a crew who have been clearing garbage from remote beaches for three weeks.





VENTURE AT ZEBALLOS

Cape Scott has a reputation for nasty weather and seas, where the swirling currents coming around the island collide with those from Queen Charlotte Sound. For us the seas are calm but the cape itself lies hidden behind a blanket of dense fog. We are grateful for radar as we feel our way east and then south. We cross the notorious Nahwitti Bar without problem and enter Goletas Channel. We spend one night in Bull Harbour on Hope Island and, 25 leisurely days after departing Sidney, we arrive in Port Hardy. We are now back in familiar territory so our West Coast excursion is essentially complete – although we still have many miles to go to complete a full circumnavigation and return to our starting point.

Along the way we saw many trailerable fishing boats within the sounds but, despite traveling north against the usual traffic flow, we only encountered two powerboats and five sailboats heading south. As for endless fog, rain and tumultuous seas? They say it's the exception that proves the rule – I never did understand the logic of that!



*Trained in the aeronautical industry in England, Tony Fleming fell into the marine industry in 1961, when he was invited to join American Marine in Hong Kong. He served as Engineering and Development Manager for the company, where he was responsible for much of the development of the Grand Banks. In 1985 he founded Fleming Yachts and, after 20 years, retired from day-to-day company operations to devote time to using his boats. Since 2005, he has cruised more than 58,000 nautical miles aboard Venture and Venture II which serve as test beds for new ideas and equipment.*