

SECTION 15: CANADA REVISITED

Monday, August 6, 2007

Prince Rupert, British Columbia, Canada

It's BC Day. Two years ago we were in Victoria for this summer holiday, strolling along the quay in the sunshine, listening to bagpipes and watching street performers juggle, mime and sing. Now we are rafted to a steel sailboat, listening to the rain.

We did the trip yesterday from Ketchikan in one long ten-hour day instead of two, hoping to beat a forecasted weather front. Seas were flat and the sky sunny for the first part of the trip. We crossed the US/Canadian border (a dotted line on the chart) at 0955 Alaska time (1055 PDT) on Sunday morning,

The signature red roofs on the white buildings at Green Island light told us that we were back in British Columbia, as did the radio chatter from other boats, unlike the silence on the Behm Canal in Alaska.

Dundas Island to our west did provide some protection, but wind heralding the weather front and wake from a clutter of fishing boats gave us a rock and roll ride during the last hour or so. As Charlie's Charts notes, "powered vessels may find sea conditions more of a problem on the return because following seas will be experienced on the section between Dundas Island and the entrance to Prince Rupert." Avoiding gill netters hovering near the navigational aids just added to the excitement. But the "best" – or worst – was yet to come.

To shorten the open exposure, we planned to return via Venn Passage, a tortuous but well-marked route distinguished by twisting and narrow channels, shallow water, shoals and — we discovered — commercial fishing boats hell-bent on getting to sea. We came this way on our trip north and commented on the former utopian village of Metlakatla but encountered little traffic.



Returning, we discovered that Venn Passage's shoals and shallows are minor compared to the Challenge of the Seiners. As we were going in, they were coming out, more than a dozen of them, each about 60-feet long, speeding and not about to change course, give way or slow down to reduce their wakes. A few small sports fishing boats zipping around added to the rock and roll mess.

But we made it in, beating the brunt of the weather and completing the 88-mile journey from Ketchikan in ten hours. We cleared customs by telephone and hailed the Prince Rupert Rowing and Yacht Club. We'd telephoned from Ketchikan and that call at least got us on the top of the wait list. By promising to stay only one night (although we planned on staying somewhere in Prince Rupert at least more night), we managed to secure a berth (for Sunday night only).



Raven came in about the same time we did but went on to Rushbrook, the public marina about a mile north of town. We met up with Fran and Dick later and enjoyed dinner.

We (like everyone else) like the PRR&YC for many reasons; it is close to “town,” has internet access and showers and is quaint, a small old house with burgees strung around. We found Discovery Bay Yacht Club's on the fence rail near the small parking lot, and Coyote Point's right in front as we walked up the ramp. PRR&YC is not really a yacht club; it's just a small marina with atmosphere and a great name.

Prince Rupert Yacht Club is located at Cow Bay, now a trendy area near the cruise ship port. Cow Bay plays on its name, with black and white Holstein-spotted trash cans and an “Udder Theater Festival” in August. It apparently was named after a historic day when the first dairy cows arrived in town, the herd swimming in from a boat.

“Rainy Rupert” once again lived up to its name, but between deluges we explored a little more, finding a well-stocked Safeway about six blocks away. Coming back, Sam and I saw a cement tunnel behind an old office building and had to explore. It led to PR's Sunken Gardens... a great place for throwing and catching tennis balls... and a fascinating community project.



RUSHBROOK

This morning, a Monday holiday, I woke up at 6:30 a.m. to no electrical power to the boat. After fooling around with the dock's power boxes and breakers, we learned that although they said "30 amp service" they only had 15 amp breakers. (Much later, we found we could reprogram the inverter charger on the boat so that it would never draw more than 15 amps at a time.)

Also today, we got kicked out of the yacht club. They were very nice, and tried to find a space, but local boats out for the weekend are coming back in, and we must go. A local boater nearby offered us a spot at a private dock on Dodge Island. It was tempting, and probably would have been a great adventure, since Dodge Island is an archeological site, but we decide to join the crowd at Rushbrook.

"Crowded" does not adequately describe the situation at Rushbrook Public Floats. Instead of slips, the marina has seven long fingers perpendicular to a long float running parallel to shore, all protected by a floating log breakwater. Some fingers are reserved, for commercial fishing boats or for a sailing association; the rest are for transients on a "first come" basis, fishing boats and pleasure boats all mixed together. Boats tie to both sides of the fingers, and the end float as well, so some boats are perpendicular to others.

Boats just keep coming and coming, rafting to boats who have found a spot on a finger, leaving narrower and narrower passageways. Soon they will be three deep. We are tied to a large sailboat with sides about four feet off the water. I can just stretch my feet down to the dock, holding on to his shrouds. But it is easy to get from Apollo to the sailboat midship. His deck is just a foot or so higher than our wheelhouse deck. Once on the dock, it's a long walk – about five fingers – to the ramp leading to shore -- that same fearful steep one we braved in rainy June.

Raven is just ahead of us, tied to the dock with a powerboat (T. Puffin) rafted to it and Sandpiper, another Nordic Tug, tied to T Puffin. What a gathering -- three Nordic Tugs, two of them red!

Blue, the boat from Oxnard flying the multi-colored flag of South Africa, came in and somehow wriggled his way deep in towards shore, shoehorning his boat to a spot next to Arne A, a classic old fishing boat. (It was Blue who took our boat photo at Glacier Bay.)

Arne A's current owner bought the boat in 1958, when he was 23 years old. Next year he will have owned it 50 years. He is 73, and says he goes fishing to relax and this is what keeps him fit. The boat is a classical North Sea-style, built in 1948 by a man for his son, Arne. Turns out Arne didn't take to fishing, (but became successful in sheet metal) so the boat was sold to the current owner. He said he took 40 coats of paint off the cabin. The cabin and hull are now a gorgeous ceatol finished wood with the grain and "bruises of the years" beautifully restored and enhanced.



You see so many old boats here. Some shine like Arne A. Others look like derelicts but function admirably. Aluminum seems to be the preferred boat material.

We can't seem to live without an internet fix, so I walked the mile back to the Yacht Club to get messages – and got drenched! The promised weather front that sent us scooting out of Alaska finally has caught up with us. Weather is very changeable here, not predictable like San Francisco Bay, although "Rainy Rupert" is keeping its reputation. Is the weather over-reported? The topic often comes up. Yet if we ignore weather warnings, it will nail us one day. It's too wet to venture out again, so I made a delicious quiche from our Alaska crab – enough for two meals.

Tuesday, August 7, 2007
Prince Rupert to Baker Inlet (on the Grenville Channel)

Weather was still a little unsettled this morning, but we decided to go before it got worse and quickly prepared to leave. Raven, rafted ahead of us on the inside of three boats, left about half an hour earlier amid much line handling to get her out and the other two boats snugged back to the dock.

Leaving Alaska really involves two “to be respected” passages. Crossing Dixon Entrance, although a major check-off, is not the end of the gauntlet. There is still Chatham Sound, south of Prince Rupert.

“Chatham Sound,” our Waggoner guidebook says, “can be downright ugly when the wind blows. Especially on an ebb,...seas can get high, steep and close together... If it’s blowing at Holland Rock, you’ll be in for it if you try to cross.”

We did not check the weather at Holland Rock, although in general we knew that winds might pick up later in the morning and that now we had a flood tide, not an ebb. Bob had laid out a course that took us south fairly close to shore, the reciprocal course of our way up. Wind was not too bad but enough to produce confused seas with a generally easterly direction – beam seas that sent Apollo rolling from side to side, clearing countertops and sending Sam up on the settee.

I suggested we consider turning back, but Bob understood how to adapt and changed to a westerly course. We went quite a ways out, then turned on a southeasterly course that made the passage tolerable, if not fun. We made a few more course corrections like this, essentially “tacking” to the waves just as a sailboat would tack into the wind, and zigzagged our way across, passing very close to Holland Rock and to the east of Lawyer Rocks until we got into Arthur Passage and the lee of Porcher Island.

We aren’t sure what Raven did, but I think I saw them passing west of Lawyer Rocks, so they may have set a course in the beginning to head way out west then come east along side Stephens and Porcher Islands.

In June, heading north, we crossed Chatham Sound in less than an hour under calm conditions. This time it took about an hour and a half. We estimate the swells were four and five feet (or as the Canadian weather forecaster would say “one decimal seven metres”), not steep but confused by wind waves. Arthur Passage offers a respite from the swells on Chatham Sound, but then opens to Ogden Channel. Last June, this was one of our roughest passages, with significant following seas that the autopilot couldn’t handle. We feared the worse – and looked out to flat water and glassy seas! Guess you pay your dues, one side or the other.

Looking ahead, we saw Raven and gave them a quick radio call wishing them well. They are going to the west side of Pitt Island while we will retrace our steps and go down Grenville Channel along the east side of Pitt Island.

We are headed for Baker Inlet, a place not visited on the way up. As with Ford's Terror, all references caution to enter only at slack water.

The last time we were on Grenville it was breezy and choppy; now it is flat and calm, with no other boats. We're reversing our course and apparently also reversing our weather from the last time. We see high clouds and some brightness ahead.

If – no, when -- doing this again, I'd keep a log not just of points reached, time and weather, but also of where we got – and did not get – reception for weather reports and also keep one of cell phone/broadband coverage and alternate internet sources. The loss of internet connection is a minor inconvenience but the frequent lack of weather information is disconcerting.

BAKER INLET

To get to Baker Inlet you must transit Watt Narrows, short but very narrow, with a blind dogleg turn and potentially strong currents. We got to Griffin Point, at the entrance to Watt Narrows, at 1308 and were through at 1313. Compared to Ford's Terror, this entrance was a freeway! We could see and feel the ebbing current, but we have neap tides now and we were near slack water, so all was fine. Pretty, wide and long, Baker Inlet is described by our guidebook as "wonderful." It's such a large inlet with such a narrow opening – we can see how water must haul through those narrows!



We enjoy the long, gentle four-mile ride to the end of the inlet. Mountains are not as high as in Alaska, the slopes gentler. Trees seem greener with not as many old dead ones. Bob thinks they are fir in Alaska; do they have a shorter lifespan? Fog or gray clouds hover at the top of the mountains and some waterfalls pour down. This is very pretty and has an open feeling, not narrow and steep-sided like many inlets in Alaska.

We see signs of heavy logging in sections, but they are green with new growth – except near the end, when we round a corner and see a large, cleared area, recently logged. When we reach the end, at the edge of the water we see logs lashed together four-high (like you’d build a log cabin or stack Lincoln logs) and filled with rock to form a platform by the road. A logging road curves up the hill but from here we cannot see the logged area that we saw coming in. Trees along shore still remain.

We see what looks like a few crab trap floats, but we don’t have a BC fish license yet. It’s just as well. Half a crab quiche is in the refrigerator, awaiting tomorrow’s dinner. Tonight we’ll enjoy the evening by barbecuing. We are watching, but so far no bears on shore. We have this lovely place all to ourselves.

At 9:10 p.m. a rainstorm comes in, tiptoeing, with no wind but reducing visibility for a while.

Wednesday, August 8, 2007
Baker Inlet to Hartley Bay, British Columbia
Route 40 44.22 miles

Enjoying our oatmeal breakfast, we can look up over low mountains backed by taller ones to see blue sky and white (some gray) clouds. There is an open feeling, not the claustrophobic one of Ford’s Terror with its tall steep mountains. Yet we are just as alone and just as trapped by a narrow current-dependent passageway.

We raise the anchor at 9 a.m. and slowly make our way out, just taking in this beautiful sunshiny day and Tahoe-like scenery.



We arrive at Watts Narrows at 0943 and note how heavily it is forested. One tree even leans over the channel a bit. We call “Securite Securite” over the radio as we enter and make the sharp, blind turn at the dogleg. We are almost at slack water, but can see little swirls in the water from what’s left of the flooding current. Four minutes and we are through, back onto Grenville Channel.



Tides flow in and out of both ends of 45-mile-long Grenville Channel, also known as “The Ditch,” and meet at Klewnuggit. Our plan is to ride the flood down the Channel and then ride the ebb out. At 11 o’clock we pass Klewnuggit Inlet to the left; it looks like the main channel – very wide -- while Grenville Channel forking to the right is very narrow. Klewnuggit Inlet Marine Park is supposed to be beautiful but it is a long way in and we will pass.

Now we see a floating blue-roofed building at Nabannah Bay. We think it is a dorm, probably owned by a timber company. A helicopter sits on the roof, and work boats are tied to the barge. The green barge, white building and blue roof really stand out and seem out of place.

Last time we were on this channel it was overcast with a rainstorm on our tail. Today is sunny and calm. On the trip up we went from Lowe Inlet to Prince Rupert in one day. We’re impressed! This is our second day from Prince Rupert, and after 2.5 hours we still haven’t passed Lowe Inlet. That, we think, was Sam’s high point, when she got to fetch sticks on her own little private island with our friends from the sailboat *Companera*.

At 12:15 we finally pass Lowe Inlet and at 2 p.m. reach the end of Grenville Channel. Seas are flat, the sky cloudy but light with clouds and a hope of blue sky. Only three boats are in this big open water where six channels converge! We make a sharp left towards Douglas Channel and, taking Promise Island to starboard, head to Hartley Bay. By 3 o’clock we are tied to the dock. We have no cell signal.

