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Boat builder quickly circumnavigates Vancouver Island

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Aspen Power Catamarans

Nick Graf (left) and father, Larry Graf, before setting out on their circumnavigation of Vancouver Island.



Aspen Power Catamarans

The 32-foot power catamaran during the circumnavigation of Vancouver Island.

By [Jim Davis](#), The Herald Business Journal

SNOHOMISH — The waters remained relatively calm five miles away from Cape Scott, the northernmost point of Vancouver Island.

That would soon change.

Aboard the 32-foot power catamaran Gateway II earlier this month, Larry Graf, of Snohomish, his son, Nick, and their friend, Dave Bonar, attempted to circumnavigate the island nonstop without refueling in the least

time possible.

At the tip of the island, the wind picked up and started blowing at 40 mph, with monstrous waves hitting the boat from all directions.

It made for what they called a “confused sea,” with the boat bouncing up and down eight to 12 feet every few moments. Waves crashed continuously over the bow.

“If you capsize a boat in that region of the world, it would be hours before help came,” said Nick Graf, 31.

Not only were the conditions dangerous but fuel was a concern. The rough weather was causing them to burn eight gallons an hour.

Would they have enough make it back?

“What's going through your mind at that point is, ‘What if this weather is going to be with us all the way through?’” said Larry Graf, 57, who owns Aspen Power Catamarans in Burlington.

From noon to midnight that day, all three scrambled trying to keep safe and forge ahead. It was the roughest patch of the voyage.

But it was a trip they were able to finish. They did it in 47 hours, 5 minutes using just 267 gallons of fuel.

The 641-mile voyage was in response to a challenge by Pacific Yachting magazine, a call to push the boundaries of boat design and fuel efficiency.

“I think what Larry, Nick and Dave did was truly a great adventure,” said Dale Miller, editor of the Vancouver, British Columbia-based magazine, in an email. “For many boaters, circumnavigating Vancouver Island is the trip of a lifetime, and the fact that these guys did it in one shot without refueling, and without any real troubles, is really impressive.”

In April, the magazine issued the parameters for the challenge: Make the trip around the island in the shortest amount of time possible in a 40-foot or smaller power boat without stopping to refuel.

It was a way to get boaters, boat builders and engine manufacturers excited about pushing the boundaries of what can be done in a powerboat.

“Our hope is to encourage boat builders and engine manufacturers to think of ways to make more fuel-efficient, durable and capable vessels,” Miller said.

Larry Graf read about the challenge and thought he knew the perfect boat.

One he had already built.

A self-described “business boat nut,” Larry Graf has owned [Aspen Power Catamarans](#) for six years, employing 18 people. Before that, he founded Glacier Bay Catamarans and ran it from 1987 to 2007. His businesses were in Snohomish until about two months ago, when he moved his company to a bigger space in Burlington.

He also moved to Skagit County but continues to own a home in Snohomish.

Larry Graf and his design team make proa catamarans, which have a thinner hull on one side than the other to help it glide through the water.

“Think of it like a spoon going through butter versus a sharp knife going through water,” Larry Graf said.

It's also a single-engine boat, which means it's about 40 percent lighter than regular boats.

He sent a letter to Miller saying that he would take up the challenge, and then he started planning. At 28 feet long, his own boat would be too small for the trip.

So he chartered the 32-foot catamaran for free from [Gateway Yachts](#) in Anacortes. He knew the boat well because he had built it in 2013.

He and his son would make the trip with Bonar, who owns a boat dealership on Granville Island in Vancouver, B.C. They built a 239-½ gallon gas tank to supplement the 80-gallon tank already onboard.

They didn't make any other modifications but took out some pots and pans and put in extra equipment such as survival suits, satellite phones and spare parts for the engine.

“There's really not much out there,” Larry Graf said. “If you have a problem, you're going to have to take care of yourself.”

The trio also wore lifejackets with whistles and strobe lights at all times.

They set out on Friday, June 20, from Anacortes and traveled to Victoria, B.C., where they refueled and spoke to a television station.

They left that day at 2:55 p.m.

The Grafts and Bonar went on the eastern side of the island through the Strait of Georgia, up the Inside Passage. They found mostly calm water on that side of the trip.

They saw two gray whales and a pod of dolphins zipping around their boat.

The dolphins “played in the bow wave and the stern wave,” Larry Graf said. “Because it's a catamaran, they swam right through the tunnel.”

In the middle of the first night, they hit a medium-sized tree floating in the water. It jolted the boat up 6 inches, but they didn't see any damage to the kevlar hull.

“This thing had branches and stuff,” Nick Graf said. “We were doing something silly, we were running at 16 knots on the chart plotter at night. We hit the tree and slowed down.”

They continued without problems until they hit rough water on the north side of the island, where the weather turned awful.

“You got to know what you're doing,” Nick Graf said. “You got to understand that people die there. There's a reason why they call the west side of Vancouver Island the ‘Graveyard of the Pacific.’”

They knew if conditions got too rough that they would turn back. But they had to get around the north end during daylight, because they wouldn't be able to find in the dark any “hurricane holes” — places along the coast to moor the boat during rough weather.

“Our goal was to get as far south as possible in the daylight,” Larry Graf said. “We weren't able to do that, because the sea conditions weren't allowing us.”

After making it through the roughest stretch of water, they traveled for 200 miles on the west side of the island without seeing another boat or any lights on shore. At one point, radar detected a cruise ship several miles out.

“The west side of Vancouver Island is a bit like Jurassic Park — green huge mountains popping right out of the ocean to 8,000 feet in places,” Larry Graf said.

During the two nights of the voyage, they slept in shifts with one man steering, another keeping a set of eyes on the water and the third trying to rest.

For that, they created what they called the “snore machine,” hollowed out foam pads that kept the sleeper stationary.

“If you don't have something like that, you'll rock back and forth and you can't get to sleep,” Larry Graf said.

They arrived in Victoria at 2 p.m. on June 22. They still had 60 gallons in the tanks.

“We were spraying ourselves with champagne and hooting and hollering,” Larry Graf said.

Miller hopes other boaters take up the challenge.

“It took some serious seamanship skills, preparation and planning, not to mention a very capable boat,” Miller said. “And it sounds like they had a great time doing it.”

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