

Aspen Owners Adventure Cruise 2011

August 20-27, 2011

by Larry Graf

After several years of traveling north up the BC Coast, the current and new Aspen owners decided with so many grand cruising destinations nearby, a local trip would leave more time to sightsee and goof-off. Preparations for most began several weeks in advance with oil changes, new equipment, charts, and cruising books. Then, there's the rush of groceries, fishing licenses, books to read, special snacks and final packing and then rolling everything down the dock, stowing and hoping you'll remember where you put it. When you consider seven couples doing this, it's quite an undertaking.

As the leader of this adventure, I have the same To Do list; but also add enroute planning, destination reservations and docking or anchoring strategies. As the boat guy, I also make sure I have my tool bag and a few spares for owners who need a little love enroute. It's odd, but I actually enjoy planning for the unexpected and having just that one funny little widget on board when I need it. This year, it was 5mm locknuts for the throttle cables, one macerator pump, one water pump, a dab of silicone grease and one computerized bilge pump.

Day one, Saturday morning: Cathy and I are up early; we had planned on leaving Friday night; but with boats a building, I didn't get to start packing till 8:00 Friday night. Cathy's been my boat buddy for 33 years now and anticipates this. As usual, she's ready but not loading the ice box till she sees I'm loading the truck. Our boat is up in Bellingham and just returned from charter Friday morning (San Juan Yachting). Our boat has been booked solid everyday for eight weeks straight at this point with multiple trips all over Puget Sound and the BC Coast including - Olympia twice, Victoria, Hood Canal, Princess Louisa four times, Desolation Sound three times and all over the San Juans. Charter guests seem to feel liberated at 16 knots using 5 gallons per hour. The charter company had developed a short punch list of things that needed attention. I've learned over the years it's best to bang these out while you're two blocks from the ship chandlery. By noon, we're loaded fixed and ready to roll just as the wind on Bellingham Bay begins to build. Cathy also expects this, as we always seem to boat right into a storm when she's on board.

Just as we're untying my cell phone rings. It's the Rethmeyers, new owners up from California, just loaded, stored and about to leave from Anacortes. Alita's upset. CATALITA's shifter has just popped a gasket. No shift, what to do?? Cathy pops out her ever ready book; I grab the every ready tool bag and hop in the car. Turns out it was one of those itsy-bitsy 8mm lock nuts allowing the cable to slowly un-screw-itself. Twenty minutes later CATALITA's back together, lock-tighted and shifting like a champ.

Now back to Bellingham-zoom-back, hop on our boat, and now we're off to Sucia. Cathy's still reading, must be a good book, Something About Elephants. So, as the leader of the group, we are the last of seven to arrive at Sucia. The group is spread out, some anchored, some on park buoys, and they've started to meet

by dinghy. The docks are packed, and we decided to raft up four boats for pupas and barbecuing. The other owner's dinghy over, and we begin what becomes a magical evening with some of the nicest, most interesting people; complete with a picture perfect sunset.



Next morning just as Cathy's finished cooking breakfast, bob Ullman (SUE SEA B, Everett) calls out, "Larry, there's a boat leaving the dock!" I still have my jemmy's on, but I want that space. We can raft and have access for dogs, cats and everyone plus a picnic table on the dock. So engine on, lines off, and we're away in 90 seconds. As we glide away bob points to another boat casting off its park buoy-it's a race, I intend to win! We make it, and as the group finishes breakfast they begin to come in and raft up-first the Burr's, Ron and Sherry from Anacortes (ARISTOCAT); then, the Freewheelers, Curt and Alita, Manhatten Beach, CA)CATALITA); the Ullman's, Bob and Paul, Everett (SUE SEA B); then, Reed and Judy Jopling, Seattle (PASTICHE); then, Bob and Lois Hardwig, Gig Harbor (BRIZO) and finally, Bill and Mickey Wright from Friday Harbor - seven boats in all!!

Sunday is scheduled as a 100% goof-0ogg day with hikes around and over the islands many sandstone cliffs, bluffs and amazing little bays, mixed in with some reading, dinghy tour and a lot of boat talk and a nap or two. Dinner is a bring your own to the group picnic table. Sunset is a gra nd red sky with a few clouds building-red sky at night, sailors delight-red sky at morning, sailors take warning.

Monday dawns with a much different feel. The sky has gone gray, and the winds are building. Our plan is to cruise to Poets Cove on Pender Island about 30 miles away. I'd been through Poets Cove numerous times clearing customs, but always rushed onto Ganges for provisioning for trips farther north. It always looked so inviting. This year we get to stay. As we depart Tsuchiya, it's beginning to drip a little, and the winds pushing white caps to about 2-3 feet. The team pulls out from the protection of Henry Bluff picking up 16 knots into a quartering head sea. I have to admit I get a little giddy watching the seven boats slice and dice these seas - from an idea never done before, to smoothly elegantly doing their job. I am very pleased.



At Poets Cove, we clear customs, some the old fashioned way at the customs dock on the phone (20 minutes), some owners with NEXUS passes do it on cell phones in 4 minutes. We're here early, 10:45, so not all our slips are ready. We wait at the Cove's floating concrete breakwater. It looks a little like an old floating bridge. Through a little cajoling we get all the slips in a row and even more cajoling I get everyone to back in and tie up almost in a straight line. I want that "money shot" with all the boats looking pretty. It's raining pretty steady now and you can sense this is not what most were hoping for. After lunch Cathy and I take the umbrellas for a hike up the hill and find a neat country road with great views down and back at the marina. We also find a delightful park with great trails through deep forest. By dinner the rains stopped and the sky is starting to show blue patches. The resort's bar/restaurant served a grand dinner for the team.



Tuesday morning came with clearing skies and crystal clear air as we departed for Butchart Gardens deep in Todd Inlet. Enroute, we took a few scenic detours around the islands just off Sydney - love that detailed Garmin chart for near shore sightseeing. By 12:30, we are rafted, anchored and stern tied snug in Todd Inlet just behind Butchart Gardens. This is not actually as simple as it might seem when you consider putting three anchors down to the north while the wind shifts pushing that rated boats eats while Larry and Reed are pulling 55,000 pounds of boats back into position for stern ties to just the right tree branch with a 2.5 HP Suzuki. This cove was once a protected loading harbor for cement mined and milled from the quarry that became Butchart Gardens.



The Garden's maintain a dinghy dock for access, though once we get to the dock it's not clear which of at least 10 trails goes to the Gardens. I bet the signs made good souvenirs for some wayward boaters. As you go up the dock, it's the old trail/abandoned road along the water, east, away from the Gardens that's actually the correct trail. Late August, mid-week, just after a rain storm, with bright blue skies and 75 degree temperatures is the perfect time to visit. We wandered around and were amazed for about 3 hrs. Our prior visits had been on Saturday and Saturday night to catch the amazing fireworks and see the gardens at night. In hindsight, while the fireworks are very grand, the volume of visitors they attract hides many of the amazing flowers, waterfalls and gardens.



After dinner, just as the sun is setting, we head back to the gardens. This time, we dinghy out of Todd Inlet and around to the north side entrance dock. The goal is to save a long walk in the dark and after touring the night lit gardens. the gardens have a familiar feel at night, but the experience is very different from daytime. Each area has a theme - mood and color that seems much more vibrant at night. I especially liked the sunken gardens area and 100 foot tall colored fountain on the south side. Next coolest was the Japanese gardens to the north with their deep green moss and delicate ponds and waterfalls lit just so.

Our trip back at 11 pm with no moon and only starlight and the phosphorescence trail from the dinghy motor to navigate with was a little spooky for the girls, but I was enchanted. I had an interesting worry just

after climbing into bed quickly as it was getting chilly. It dawned on me that with these cool temperatures some of the owners may have turned on their heaters. I bolt up in my skivvies' and start a boat tour listening for heaters. With the boats rafted snug the heater exhaust (very hot!) would be blowing right on the next boats smooth beautiful blue gel coat - not good! I gently stepped from one boat to the next listening - all is well; no exhaust noise. I climb back in bed to sleep soundly only to hear someone else up and moving around. Turns out that Alita had noticed someone on her boat and got up to check it out - good, we didn't meet.

Wednesday dawns with another postcard perfect day. We're off to Roche Harbor 32 miles away, but only after we reverse the anchoring - stern tying maneuver of yesterday with a little extra twist for the two anchors that tangle as we reel them in. Reed is in the dinghy again, a little lift here, over under and around and we are good to go. The run over to Roche goes uneventfully. The US Customs team was first class thorough and friendly, as were the dock aides at Roche. We tie up just below the little white church on the hill. The team spreads out as usual - some hiking, some to the art displays, some for groceries and ice-cream. Dinner is potluck on the dock with what are becoming very good friends.



Thursday, an even prettier day opens bright and warm. We are set to cruise over to Stuart Island (10 miles). We get off the dock at 10 right on schedule and make our way over to the state park at Stuart via Spiden Islands African Game Reserve. We look hard, but the warmth's got the animals hiding in the woods. At Stuart, the Aspen Cats gather round one of the two floating docks mid-harbor. Then, we lunch before hiking over to the historic lighthouse and one-room school on the north side of the Island. This is our final night and a grand farewell party ensues.

Friday, it's time for most to head home, though several owners begin to plan extension cruises together. I've got boats a building, Cathy's gotta get home to can peaches.....Aspen Fun II's is booked for another charter.

