

CRUISING

BARKLEY SOUND

FAMILY ADVENTURE
ON THE EDGE
OF THE CONTINENT

STORY & PHOTOS BY SARA DAWN JOHNSON

A shakedown cruise around Vancouver Island leads
this boating family to Barkley Sound, one of
Vancouver Island's most wild and beautiful locations



*Wondertime sits at
anchor in tranquil
Barkley Sound.*

IT WAS TWO IN THE MORNING, pitch black dark and as still as you can imagine. We had been the only boat anchored in this remote, peaceful spot on the west coast of Canada's Vancouver Island for two days. And now, in the middle of the night, my husband Michael and I were awoken from the sleep of the dead to a sound like buckshot spattering across the underwater hull of our boat.

Confused and bewildered, we stumbled out of bed and up the companionway to the cockpit of our 38-foot ketch, *Wondertime*. We looked around and what we saw convinced us that we were still dreaming. The motionless air was drenched with heavy mist, lit from underneath by a soft green glow. That glow came from a phosphorescent ring that formed a perfect undulating circle, our boat in the exact middle of it. The sight was absolutely unearthly.

We could still hear the spattering sounds on our hull and from above, we saw that the noise was coming from hundreds of tiny fish being driven out of the glowing circle into our boat, followed by larger glowing tracks that would shoot into and out of the green phosphorescent disk. After a few minutes we realized what we were actually watching: a nighttime sea lion feast. It continued on for hours.

SETTING OUT When we departed our homeport of Olympia, Washington, a few months earlier to circumnavigate Vancouver Island, the shakedown bit of our Pacific voyage, we knew we'd be traversing some of the most wild waters on the coast of North America. I don't think we were fully prepared with how wild those waters actually are.

To reach the west coast of Vancouver Island, you don't have to sail all the way up the inside coast of Vancouver Island, cross the dreaded Nahwitti Bar and round infamous Cape Scott to eventually arrive at the most southern of the five island-filled sounds, but it's certainly well worth the trip if you do and doesn't have to be dreadful at all with proper planning and weather watching. Wild Barkley Sound can be reached with just a couple days travel from the Gulf Islands.

It was late August by the time we reached Barkley after a much-too-rapid cruise down the west coast of Vancouver Island having rounded Cape Scott ourselves at the beginning of the month. We'd just had a taste of the other breathtaking sounds and smaller islands that are carved from this 290-mile long island, the largest on the western side of North America, and only had a few weeks left to explore this

final anchorage-choked sound before making our way south for the winter.

UCLUELET We tore ourselves away from Hot Springs Cove and sailed out of a thick fogbank to round Amphitrite Point into Barkley Sound. Right around the corner was our first stop, the village of Ucluelet, tucked along a narrow inlet on the north shore of the sound. With a population just shy of 2,000, it's the second most populated settlement on the west coast and we relished the opportunity to stock up on fresh stores. As you might expect, it's a sleepy town with a smattering of funky local arts and craft shops, a handful of eateries and a couple of coffee-scented bookstores. And, always to the delight of our two- and five-year-old daughters, several playgrounds to choose from.

We spent a few days exploring the town, including a walk out to Amphitrite Point lighthouse. As we've seen numerous times on our trip, there were signs warning us to look out for bears as well as tips for if we came across one. Michael carried our two-year-old daughter Holly on his shoulders for most of our walk along the cliffs, misty from crashing swells below.

ISLANDS UPON ISLANDS With full water tanks and some precious fresh produce, we set off to explore the rest of Barkley. August in this area is also known as "Fogust" and the month lived up to its name. It is a challenge navigating in this area even on a clear day, with dark waters rife with unforgiving reefs and rocks that barely break the surface at low tide. Thankfully anchorages are rarely more than a few miles apart so it's easy to wait for a break in the clouds for a chance to sail to the next one.

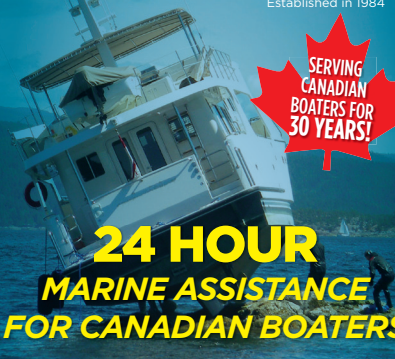
A quick motor down the channel away from Ucluelet and *Wondertime* was gently rocking in the Pacific swell once again. Only for a few minutes though as once we began weaving our way around the countless rocks and islands that huddle together in the center of the 16-mile wide sound the water was once again flat and calm—and windless. A few hours and a gallon or two of diesel later we arrived at Effingham Island, joining only a handful of other boats in the spacious bay. It was the most crowded anchorage we'd been in for weeks.

It was late afternoon by the time we were all settled in. After a simple dinner, we sat up in the cockpit to fully absorb the view around us. The air was still, but not silent. Birds sang to each other amongst the huge trees ashore. There were random splashes in the water around us: a fish jumping, a

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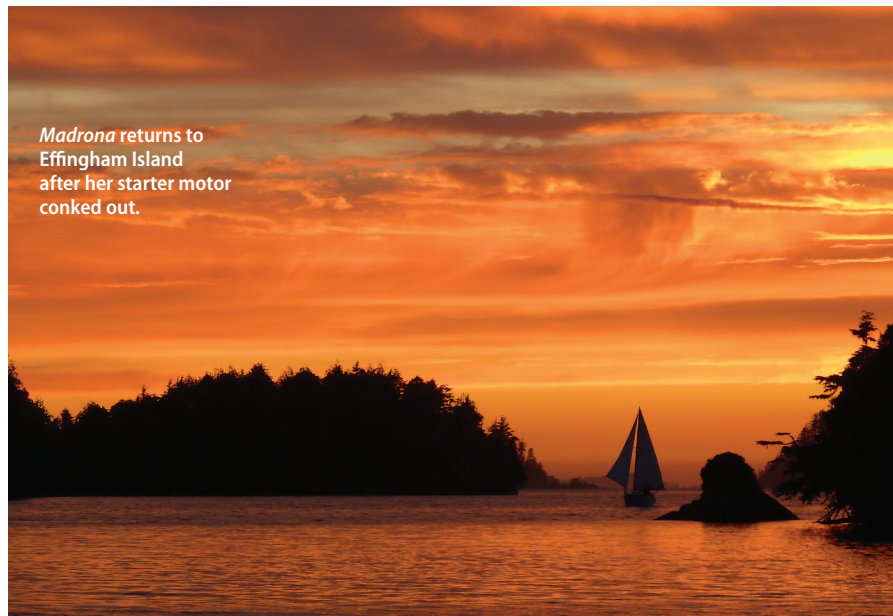
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sea lion's flipper slapping the sea. The sky began to pinken, then slowly light afire. Not long after, the entire western sky was a blazing sunset.

EXPLORING EFFINGHAM Our guidebook spoke of a forest trail leading to the other side of Effingham Island complete with a sea cave to explore. We set out to find it the following morning and pattered our dinghy slowly along the thickly treed shoreline, trying to find our way in. After a good long hour, we spotted the slight break in the shrubbery and a faint piece of ribbon high up, marking the trailhead at the head of a skinny inlet.

We tied up the dinghy and clambered along the rocky shore to make our way along the small, muddy trail and soon found ourselves deep within the forest. It was a veritable wonderland: thick with emerald-green summer growth, towering ancient firs, enveloping ferns, birds calling and swooping overhead. We felt like ants making our way along, losing the trail often, and then finding it again when one of the girls would spot a "clue," a tiny piece of ribbon tied up in a branch to show the way.

Effingham is not a large island, and we were soon on the other side. Native peoples made their home on this beach not all that long ago, and we easily spotted the middens, the large areas of discarded shells that mark a former village. We couldn't see them, but we could feel their spirits all around us, the strong sense of



Madrona returns to Effingham Island after her starter motor conked out.

tough and simple lives once lived here.

We crawled our way over the boulder-strewn beach and finally found our sea cave. The tide was already coming in so we hurried to wade inside and spend a few moments taking in the dark and dank rock, the ceiling of tiny delicate ferns clinging overhead. The water was quickly rising, so long before we were done exploring we made our escape back out toward the dry beach.

WEST COAST CHALLENGES Earlier that day, some friends of ours aboard another boat, *Madrona*, had left Effingham to sail back to Ucluelet. They had been unsure if they'd make it; their engine's starter motor had gone out and they were going to attempt the challenging trip back under sailpower alone.

When we returned to *Wondertime* late that afternoon, muddy, aching and buzz-

ing with delight from our trek, we heard *Madrona* calling on the VHF radio. The wind had dropped and they'd realized that there was no way they would make the few remaining miles to Ucluelet, especially up the narrow winding channel, by dark. They'd turned back and were almost at Effingham again. Sure enough, an hour later we could see the silhouette of their small ketch against another brilliant fire-red sunset. Michael headed out in our small inflatable dinghy to help tow them in and safely re-anchor for the night.

The following morning (after finding out our friends were going to kayak their starter back to Ucluelet that day—proving once again that the wild breeds inventiveness) we set out for the small town of Bamfield tucked on the southern shore of Barkley Sound. A fresh ocean breeze was blowing that day and we had a marvelous reach across Imperial Eagle Channel through a number of fog banks pierced by a clear and bright sunny sky above.

Bamfield is one of Vancouver Island's most unique and interesting coastal communities.



BAMFIELD As we found with most towns on Vancouver Island's west coast, Bamfield was truly unique. A township of 200, it lies on either side of a skinny inlet two miles long. There is no bridge or road to connect the two sides of town, only a small ferry or a private boat. We motored in and dropped our anchor among a few other moored boats toward the head of the inlet.

For such a small town, Bamfield turned out to be one of our most favourite stops on the whole of Vancouver Island. Along the western shore, a boardwalk is balanced over the water's edge and meanders along the inlet. The girls were giddy with delight as the entire walk was peppered with evidence of a significant artist population. There were brightly painted and decorated houses, tiny homes nestled in the hillside, a tunnel through bushes with painted mushrooms along the path, a feral cat hotel, public toilets built in a tree- ▶

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house. And at the end, ice-cream. Brilliant.

The other side of town was even better for our young oceanographers. Across the inlet lay the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre. We took a field trip there and the girls thoroughly enjoyed the hands-on marine lab and chatting with real marine scientists. We wandered down to the dock and found a group of researchers preparing to return a small octopus to its home in a nearby rock. It had been visiting the lab for a few days for observation. Our oldest daughter Leah was mesmerized.

THE BROKEN GROUP Our calendar showed the beginning of September looming, the time we had planned to set south for California. With only a few days left before we would return to Uclulet to prepare for our passage south, we closed our eyes, spun a finger over the chart and settled on our final stop: Nettle Island located in the Broken Group, a smattering of rocks and islands in the middle of the sound.

The other boat that had been anchored in our small bay was gone when we woke



The boardwalk at Bamfield is a magical place for kids and adults alike.

up and looked around the next morning. It was just us and the sea lions, who were curiously floating on their backs, looking half-asleep, like they were on holiday themselves. We launched the dinghy and set out to explore. We searched the shoreline for a way in but it was solid trees and bushes. We'd have to explore by water.

We cut the outboard engine and skimmed the water slowly with our oars. The water was glassy, reflective and a fine mist that had been hovering overhead began to fall. The cries of eagles over the

treetops faded and it was impossibly silent and we just listened to the sound of nothing at all.

Returning to the boat, we made popcorn and played Uno and dusk fell to the sound of the rain growing heavier on deck. It eased as we slept later that night and that was when we were awakened by the eerie splattering sound against our hull and got up to watch the phosphorescent feeding show.

Another unforgettable moment in a place so wild and earthy and real. 🐾

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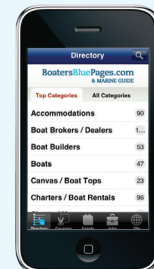
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