

PLACES: Desolation Sound in *Surfbird*

by Cameron D. Eckert

“That looks like a storybook!” A dock-side onlooker hails as we sail our 16-foot wooden Wayfarer *Surfbird* into the harbour at Powell River. And in many ways this trip has all the elements of a storybook with its secret coves, wild seas, beach cookouts, and an imaginative young crew ready for adventure.

On July 18 my sons Nigel and Rory, aged 16 and 11, and I, launch *Surfbird* near Nanoose Bay on the east side of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Our plan is to sail north to the Desolation Sound area, and then return to Nanaimo in about two weeks. This is a stunning landscape where richly forested mountains and a productive intertidal zone meet to create a fascinating and highly scenic coastal environment. The waters of the northern Strait of Georgia do not regularly mix with the cold Pacific and as a result are surprisingly warm. A complex shoreline along the east side of the strait, the Sunshine Coast, offers an abundance of sheltered anchorages. Our route will present some challenges, not the least of which will be crossing the Strait of Georgia twice—a relatively big piece of ocean for a small open boat. It turns out though that the shorter passages between small islands will also provide plenty of excitement. This area is known for strong tidal currents that will test our navigation skills and endurance, especially as we rely solely on sail and oar.

And so with a 7-knot breeze from the south, and a flood tide to help us along, we set sail north up the Strait of Georgia towards the distant mass of Mount Shepard on Texada Island. The Wayfarer is a wonderful boat to sail, and as we slip easily into its rhythm, the myriad details and small stresses of trip planning and preparation simply fade.

The rugged Ballenas Islands, site of one of the automated coastal weather stations, mark the halfway point on the 13-NM leg to Texada and look like they could offer some shelter if one were pressed. While we'd hoped to make Anderson Bay, the late afternoon wind drops to a whisper and so we shorten our course to Squitty Bay on the southeast end of Lasqueti Island. This tiny cove would be invisible to passing boats were it not for the small cluster of masts poking above the narrow



rocky entrance. Entering the bay is like discovering a hidden world. A small dock is populated by a variety of local boats, among them *Josey*, a strikingly beautiful 20-foot Atkins-designed gaffer, along with a flush-decked Paine-designed Frances 26. An ecological reserve around the bay protects a grove of Rocky Mountain Juniper—gnarled evergreens that look ancient and mysterious. This place appeals to me very much.

Our second day out will turn out to be the longest sail of the cruise. Ahead lies

an 8-NM stretch of open water between Texada and the Sunshine Coast, prompting a cautious eye to the weather. An early start would be wise. So in what would become our morning routine, I swing into action as cook while the crew packs up the sleeping bags and mats. We are all set to go by 11:30 a.m. Well, at least it's not noon. We take advantage of a 12-knot wind from the north to sail on a beam reach across Malaspina Strait. Our speed is good, though *Surfbird's* bow plunges a little too deeply into the chop. I make a



OPPOSITE—*Surfbird* takes to the ground at Village Bay—fortunately, no waves that night. ABOVE—The *Wayfarer* looks right at home at Squitty Bay.

mental note to pack the weight farther aft next time. Logically I know there is no inherent safety in sailing close to shore, but still it feels good to complete this crossing. The wind swings around to the south, which makes for a relaxed run north. The sparsely populated coastline here is riddled with small islands and coves. There are many suitable anchorages and by about 4 p.m. I ask the crew if they'd like to stop soon or go farther. Rory offers that maybe a bit farther would be okay. I am conscious of wanting to keep things fun, but somehow a "bit farther" stretches out to another 17 NM, and three hours later we make Powell River. A wonderful dinner at La Casita Mexican restaurant is our reward for a long day on the sea.

The following morning, en route to a hot shower, I meet the wharfinger doing his rounds and ask about paying our mooring fees. He lets me know that earlier he had quietly tiptoed around our tent—yes, we camped on the dock—so as not to wake anyone. What a pleasant surprise to be so easily accommodated. The wind and tide also seem poised to make this an easy day, at least for the first few hours. With a 10-knot breeze from the south, we sail wing-on-wing north towards Savary Island. A couple of quick tacks are required to yield way to a tug towing three

massive woodchip barges en route to the mill. Our planned course is to stay on the open waters of the Strait of Georgia, passing west of Savary. But as we approach the island, the wind rises and the sea builds over the shallows of Mystery Reef. A large wave breaks over the transom and pours into *Surfbird*—we change course and head for the sheltered waters around the east side. A relaxing lunch on the beach gives us a chance to ponder the charts and we pinpoint Cortes Island as a good destination for the day. We set out again and the wind has risen to 20 knots. As we near Hernando Island, the full fetch of the strait opens up to the south. As a steep breaking swell rises behind us, the next few miles become an endurance test requiring our complete concentration and a fair bit of muscle to navigate each passing roller. Hernando Island suddenly seems an ideal destination. As *Surfbird* blows into the shelter of Dog Bay, a couple watching with some concern from their cottage deck call out, "Where are you going?"

I call back, "Right here!" Their reassuring response couldn't have been more welcoming: "Okay. Tie up to our mooring buoy and come up for a scotch." The Murphy family treats us to a wonderful dinner and invites us to spend the night. Their spontaneous kindness and generos-

ity is a highlight of our trip.

Over the next couple of days our course continues north, with stops at Whaletown on Cortes Island and then Village Bay at Quadra Island. We'd made surprisingly good time to that point, and it's only as we turn to head back south that it becomes clear why. The flood tide had been in our favor during the prime sailing hours each day, but as we head south those same tides claw at our speed and course. A little help from the oars—our version of motor-sailing—is needed when the wind drops below about 5 knots. But still, the sailing is truly brilliant. We contemplate sailing back along the east shore of Vancouver Island, but the charts show a relatively featureless stretch of coast, and the weather stations report consistently high winds in the Qualicum Beach area. And so we head south toward Malaspina Strait to further explore some of the places we'd sailed past on our way north.

It's an easy day's sail from Village Bay 10 NM south across Sutil Channel and through Uganda Passage to Mansons Landing on Cortes Island, a place we'd marked as a potential destination on the sail north. The public dock here is busy, and while a vacant space reserved for seaplanes is tempting, we decide to raft alongside another sailboat. A good



ABOVE— This colourful clinker-built ketch at Manson's Landing is based on a 1700s Finnish coastal freighter.

thing, since just as we secure the lines, a Beech 18 lands and taxis into that spot. The plane looks to be a classic straight out of a Tintin book, and the pilot explains that this particular aircraft, built in the early 1950s, appeared in the movies *King Kong* and *Godzilla*. Manson's Landing is also home to a wonderfully diverse assortment of boats—especially eye-catching is a colourful 46-foot clinker-built wooden ketch, designed after a 1700s Finnish coastal freighter, with a matching sailing dinghy.

Leaving Cortes Island the next morning we head for a bell buoy, about a mile from shore, which guides us around the bolder-strewn "Boneyard" off Sutil Point. Sailing on a broad reach with 8 knots of wind behind us, we pop the spinnaker—known as the "Devil Sail" onboard *Surfbird*—and settle in to a run south through Baker Passage. Just as Savary Island heaves into view, the wind drops and starts to swing around to the south—this I have learned can mean that we're in for more wind soon. We pack away the spinnaker and sure enough the wind starts to rise, first to 15 knots, at which point we reef the main, and then to 20 knots, though fortunately not quite

on the nose. We beat close-hauled towards Savary, but against a strong flood tide our progress is incredibly slow and I begin to wonder just how long this will take. Finally we arrive at Savary, which is known for its attractive beaches, but offers really nothing in the way of sheltered coves. We anchor on the north side of the island, which is presently the lee side—and hope it will stay that way through the night. My cousin Stephanie has a cabin on the island and I am amazed that we are actually able to find it—and even more impressed that she has a pot of chili and a bottle of wine ready to serve despite that we arrive more or less unannounced. Later that night we return to *Surfbird* to find a beach party in full swing right where we've anchored. However, before a moment has passed I am handed a beer and the circle around the campfire opens up and welcomes us in to enjoy the warmth. It's a beautiful night and we're in no hurry to turn in.

Over the next couple of days we continue south and by late afternoon on the tenth day, a 7-knot wind is just enough to let the oars rest as we make our way to Nelson Island. Nigel and Rory find comfy spots on either side of the mast and doze

off, while I indulge in a long shift at the helm. I had dreamed of such a moment all winter, and here it is. The view up Jervis Inlet is simply beautiful, the lighting spectacular. A cluster of Harbour Seals hauled out on a rocky point eyes us warily as we sail past. Finally as the wind dies near shore, we row into Cockburn Bay and tie up at the small public dock. Another family enjoying this secluded cove wastes no time in greeting us with a tasty offering of barbecued shish kabobs. It seems the Wayfarer's spell has been invoked once again, or people are just generally friendly in these parts. Either way, we enjoy a sense of camaraderie with others out exploring the coast.

In anticipation of our return across the Strait of Georgia, we tune the VHF to the weather channel, both for current conditions and forecasts. It sounds good for the next day or so, but things are expected to crank up later in the week. Nosing out into the channel the next morning, the wind is blowing a solid 15 knots from the south, prompting a reefed main. Malaspina Strait is relatively narrow here and we sail the 5-NM crossing to the east shore of Texada Island on one long reach. Tacking south along the island there are no boats in sight, nor are there any houses along this steep rocky shoreline. Not only are we on our own, but there is little in the way of good hidey-holes. As the wind rises to 25 knots we spot a little beach with just enough shoreline relief to provide some shelter from the wind. The beach is pretty thin above the high tide line, but we've got a few hours before that becomes an issue. And so with *Surfbird* safely anchored we enjoy lunch, cold drinks, and a bit of beachcombing. Soon the wind does ease a bit, and another sailboat, a Richards-designed Haida 26, appears on the horizon. While there is a certain sense of safety in numbers, her name—*Running Scared*—doesn't immediately inspire confidence. Nonetheless, heading back out we sail loosely in tandem with the other boat south to Anderson Bay, a well-sheltered anchorage where just one other sailboat is already moored for the night. We stay up late, enjoying our beach campfire until it burns down to a small heart of glowing embers.

The final day of our cruise presents a 26-NM course across the Strait of Georgia



ABOVE— Camping Wayfarer style at Powell River—nobody commented that pitching a tent on the dock was unusual, so I guess it's not.

and then south to Nanaimo. The nearest automated weather station is reporting steady 13-knot north winds with moderate seas. This sounds fine, though we opt for a cautionary reef as we head out from the shelter of Lasqueti Island. The seas are rolling and we sail to keep our speed up and avoid the occasional breaking wave. *Surfbird* is even maintaining her lead on two large yachts decked out with kevlar sails also heading towards Nanaimo. Passing the Ballenas Islands the wind drops and the white caps dissipate. We shake out the reef and get the Devil Sail up and flying. It seems like it will be an easy run to Nanaimo. However, before long the wind shifts to the south just as a strong opposing flood tide builds. Unfortunately this wind shift doesn't come with any gusto, and so Rory takes the helm while Nigel and I spend the next few hours perfecting our rowing technique. It's late when Nanaimo's busy harbour finally comes into view, and rowing past a long line of private marinas and yacht clubs we begin to wonder where we'll stay. Eventually, a VHF call to the port authority confirms that they do have space for a 16-ft sailing dinghy—going small has its advantages.

Even before we are tied up, people are wandering over to ask about our boat, how far we've sailed, where we've been. Dinner can wait; we're happy to share stories of our trip.

Afterword

Over the course of our cruise we sailed 200 NM and encountered a wide variety of wind, tides, and coastal conditions. It was on our second night, in Powell River, that we began to appreciate the overwhelmingly positive reaction people had when they encountered our little boat and young crew, and learned a bit about the nature of our trip. Big adventures in small boats are impressive, but it seemed much more than that. A father and his young sons on a journey such as this, rich in simplicity and self-reliance, and intimately connected to nature, struck a chord with the people we met. They appreciated that, especially for young people, the experiences gained and lessons learned are indelible. In the current crush of technology, it's heartening to know that a 48 year-old wooden boat remains a profound source of enjoyment, inspiration, and balance. •SCA•



WAYFARER

LOA: 15' 10" Beam 6' 1"
 Draft: 8" / 3' 10" Displacement: 365 lb
 Sail Area: 125 sq ft