

A Late September Dash to the North Channel

A Short Cruise by Jonathan Dart and Kit Wallace

Preparation

Jonathan Dart first proposed the idea of a two boat Georgian Bay cruise to me in mid-August and later that month I received this e-mail from him:

*From: jdartfco@hotmail.com
To: kitwallace@hotmail.com
Subject: Sail Camping
Date: Wed, 28 Aug 2013 18:58:44 +0000*

Hi Kit

We spoke vaguely about this and you were sceptical about finding a crew and talked about a trip out to British Columbia to visit family instead.

Shaughnessy has now come down with meningitis. He's out of immediate danger, but is strongly recommended to rest for a month, so sail camping is out of the question for him until October. I think that is probably too late (temperature, daylight).

Would you be interested in going up just the two of us for a long weekend (13-16 September)? Your boat/trailer or mine. I'd been thinking driving to Spanish, Ontario and sailing down to the Benjamins, but I'm open to any ideas.

Jonathan

Jonathan's crew Shaughnessy was too ill to travel and so his misfortune was my good luck. However, as Jonathan's e-mail hinted, I had already planned a trip to the west coast and wouldn't be returning to Toronto until September 21st. Would there be enough time to squeeze in a sailing cruise before the weather turned too cold? Complicating the timing was Jonathan's very full schedule as British Consul General in Toronto. We agreed to meet for lunch to discuss the plan and decided that if we were going, we'd have to leave it to the last weekend in September. I lent Jonathan my old copy of the *Ports Cruising Guide* – an excellent resource for boaters with loads of information about the waters and harbours of Georgian Bay – to peruse while I was away.

Our plans started to firm up after I returned. Jonathan thought he could get away on the Wednesday afternoon but would have to be back in Toronto for the following Monday potentially giving us four full days for the cruise. There were a number of options about where we could go, but putting in at Spanish seemed impossible as it entailed a substantially longer drive. I suggested we launch at Killarney, a 5-hour drive from Toronto, which had the added advantage that my cottage is located only 15km. from the village. As we were planning to leave Toronto in rush hour, this would allow us to stay overnight at the cottage and get away for an early start on Thursday.

We looked into the possibility of sailing east to Key Harbour, a 70km. trip through the archipelago of small islands known as the Bustards, but this was problematic given that we only had four days, and with the prevailing westerlies of Georgian Bay we might be fighting a headwind all the way back. In the end we decided to try to make it to the Benjamin Islands that are about 65km, west of Killarney. This would also be a long trip requiring that we get to Little Current the first night, but it did offer more options in the event that we had to shorten our route.



We agreed to take my boat W994, because over the course of many cruising rallies, and in anticipation of such a trip, I have gathered most of the equipment necessary for a serious cruise. My mainsail has one set of deep reef points just above the lower batten, and the genoa has been fitted out with one of Ralph Roberts' wonderful Aero Luffspars allowing the foresail to be reefed in rough weather, so I was confident we could handle a blow. Just in case, we also brought along Jonathan's newly made up trysail. The one piece of gear I don't have is a boom tent, but we both preferred to camp on land, and if the opportunity presented itself we intended to stay in a rental cabin along the way which Jonathan had sussed out from the cruising guide.

My task was to buy provisions and charts and pack up the boat ready to leave on the afternoon of Wednesday the 25th. An amazing amount of gear can be packed into a Wayfarer which for this trip included among other things, warm clothing for fall weather, sleeping bags, cooking and camping equipment (taking two small tents actually takes up less space than a boom tent), food provisions, drinking water, a lot of rope, two anchors and a pair of oars.

Heading north out of Toronto on Highway 400 at 4pm at a snail's pace, I wondered whether we'd ever get to Killarney that evening, however by the time we reached Newmarket the rush hour traffic started to thin out and it was clear sailing from that point. Jonathan is a great companion to have on a long drive. As one would imagine, he's hugely informative on so many subjects concerning international trade and politics. One of the brilliant inventions he's following for example, that could revolutionize transportation in remote and hard to access areas, is a heavy-lift helium balloon.

We reached the cottage five hours later in near darkness, left the boat and trailer just off the highway and drove in to Lake Carlyle on the very bumpy cottage road. I prepared a quick evening meal by the light of oil lamps (the cottage is off the grid) and we settled in for the night. That evening we were treated to a spectacular display of stars, the Milky Way a bright streak across the night sky, something we city dwellers never get to see, and with the clear night sky came a promise of fine weather for the next few days.



Thursday September 26

I had set the alarm clock to rise before dawn, but despite that we weren't on the road until 8:30. The Environment Canada weather report was calling for light winds from the southwest, building and backing over the next couple of days, and for good measure fine conditions were forecast.

In Killarney, before we could put in at the public launch ramp we had to complete the packing of some gear in the boat, raise the mast and rig everything, and then find a place to park the car and trailer. The village seemed unusually absent of tourists; almost all the shops and places to eat were already closed for the winter. We headed for Pitfield's General Store, which seemed to be the only place open after Labour Day, for a last coffee before setting out. The young lady behind the counter assured me that the car would be fine parked beside the store for the four days that we planned to be away, and finally we were away on our adventure.



Killarney public launch



Waiting for a fisherman to haul out at the ramp



Mr. Perch fish & chip stand closed today



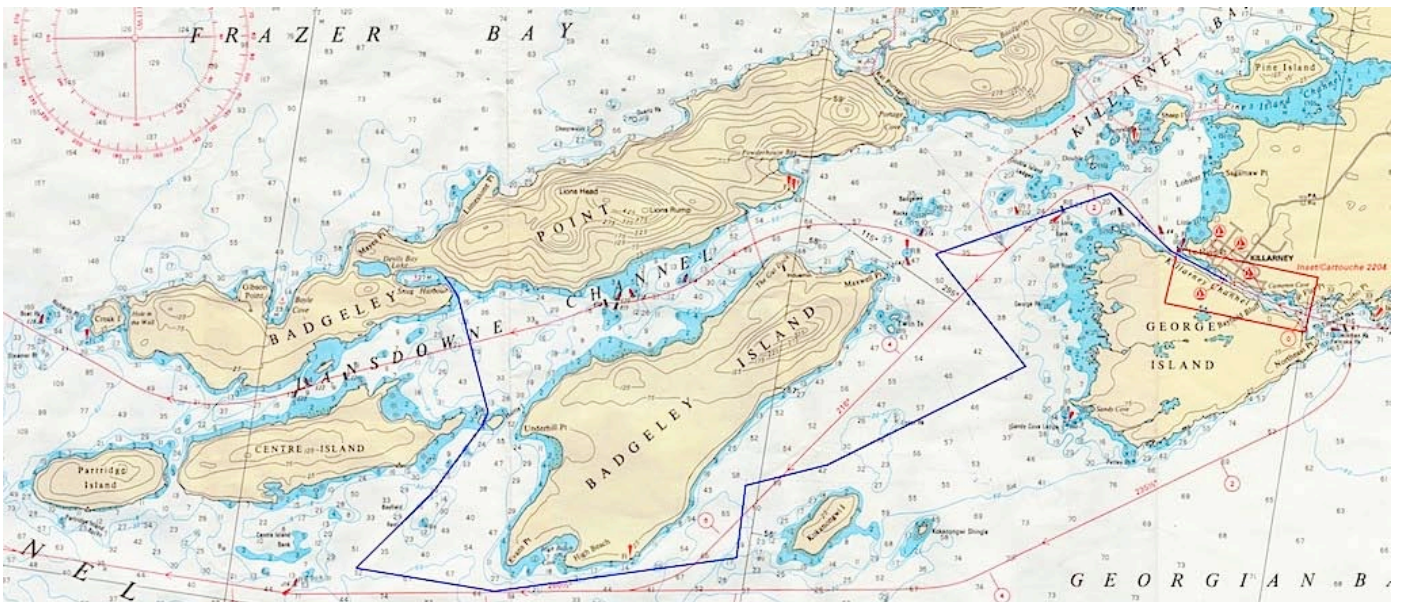
Rigged and ready to launch



Glassy water surface – no wind !!

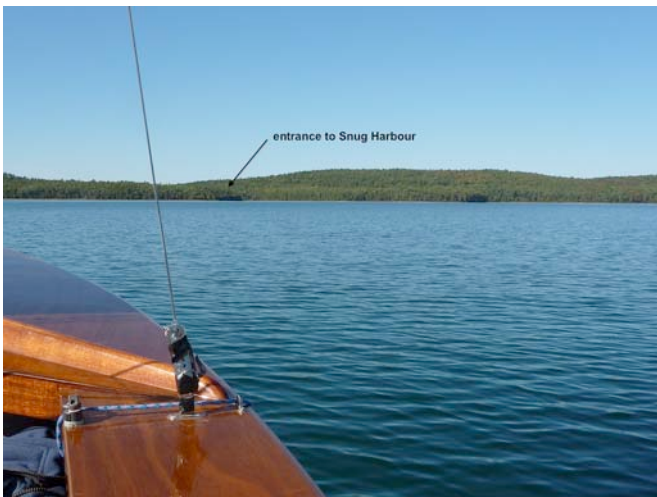


The temperature for the end of September was a surprisingly balmy 27°C and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. We were happy to be on the water, but concerned about whether there was enough wind to get to Little Current. Cruising gently out of Killarney Channel past the Sportsman's Inn it didn't look too good, and we hoped for better breezes from the south once we had cleared the west end of George Island.



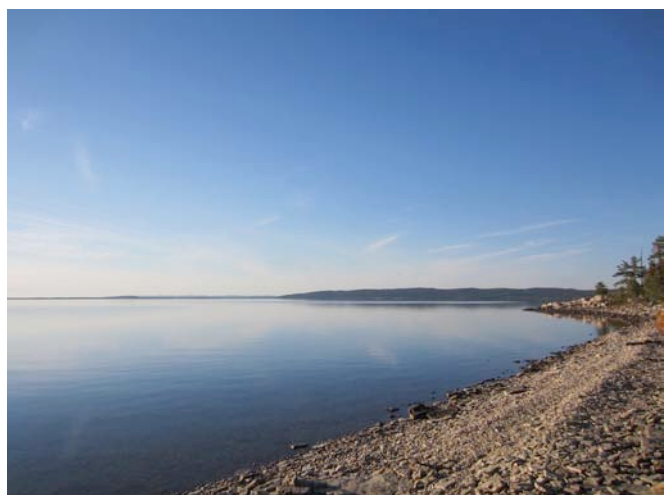
In open water and in 6 knots we headed upwind towards Badgeley Island with its characteristic scarred northern profile of blasted cliffs of quarried quartz. We spotted the Herbert fish boat chugging back to Killarney at a stately pace. A more direct route for us would have been to head through the Lansdowne Channel where the fishing boat had come from, but we were wary of getting into the lee of the island, so we kept out in open water to the east of Badgeley. By the time we reached the lighthouse at the southern tip of the island the wind had noticeably died. By 1:30pm at High Beach it was dead calm and we cracked out the oars for what was going to be a long row.

Jonathan's excellent home made trail mix, dried mangoes and figs provided some energy and by taking turns at rowing for over an hour and a half, we covered a fair distance. Even with Jonathan providing additional motive power by paddling while I was rowing (which has the unfortunate result of unbalancing the whole technique of rowing!), we were not going to get to our planned destination by nightfall. I quickly searched the cruising guide for alternatives and it looked as if we could make it to Snug Harbour on Badgeley Point, about 4 km. as the crow flies. So, turning back we gave up the idea of sailing to the Benjamin Islands, but this is what cruising is all about – taking what you get and making the best of the wind and weather conditions. Fortunately the wind picked up just enough to get the boat moving again, as we drifted through the shallow gap between Harris and Centre Islands towards the northern shore of Lansdowne Channel.

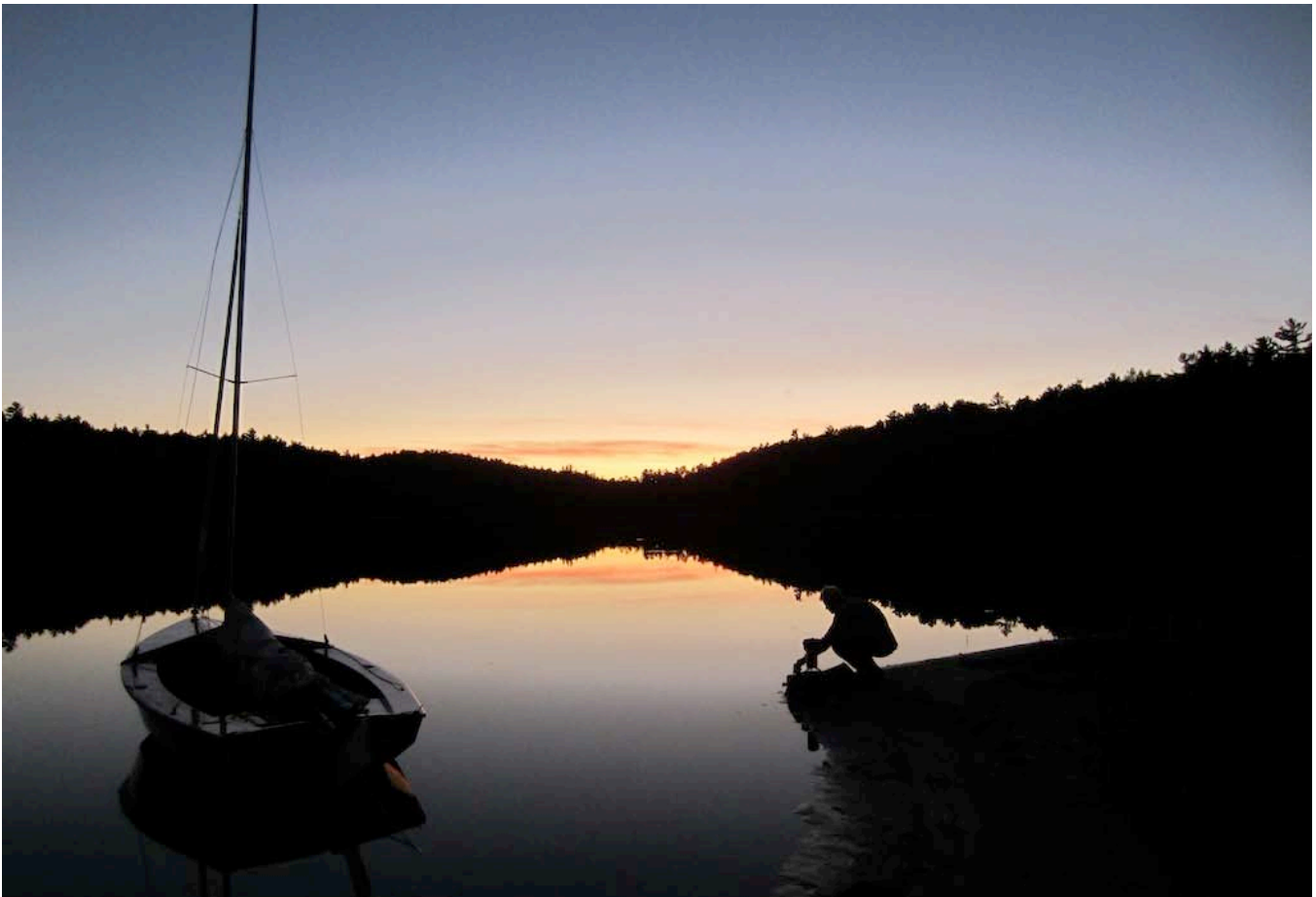


As it turned out, Snug Harbour was a great place to make land for the evening. The guide had described it as a natural safe haven in a storm, the entrance on the shoreline not easily visible from a distance. Often in the summer months it's an anchorage for up to 12 boats but in late September we had the whole pristine bay to ourselves.

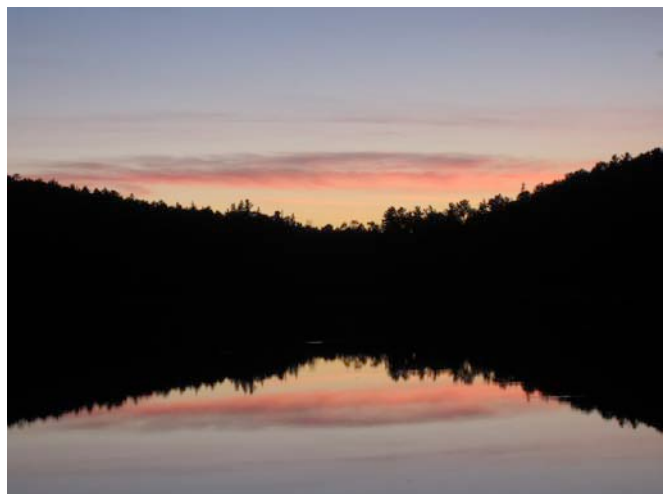
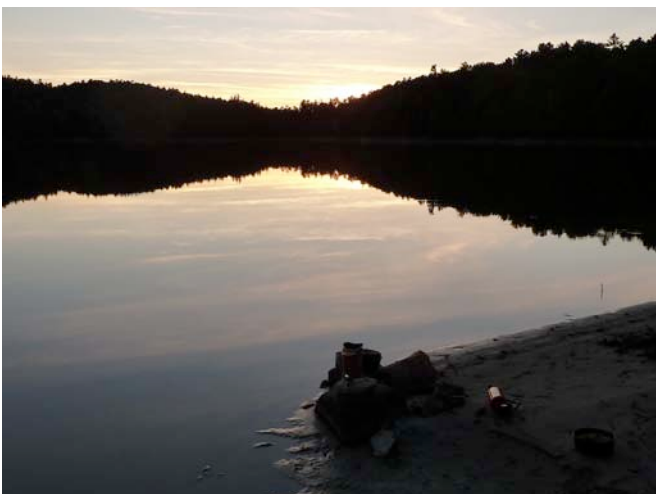




We moored at a small sandy beach, set up the tents right on the shoreline and then cooled off with a skinny dip in the chilly waters of Georgian Bay. Jonathan had read about nearby Devil's Bay Lake and the stony beach on the north side of the peninsula overlooking Frazer Bay, and set out to hike to it while I prepared dinner.



My brother had recently given me as a birthday present, a Biolite campstove, and this was the first chance I'd had to try it out in the field. It's an interesting concept – a high combustion miniature wood stove with a battery driven fan charged by a thermocouple that's activated by the heat of the fire. As an added benefit the stove will also charge any small device having a USB port! The stove burns dry twigs, and would boil a pot of water in 5 minutes for the copious amounts of tea that Jonathan loves to drink! Dinner that night was freeze-dried pasta - not bad at all. This is not the kind of stove you could use on the boat however.

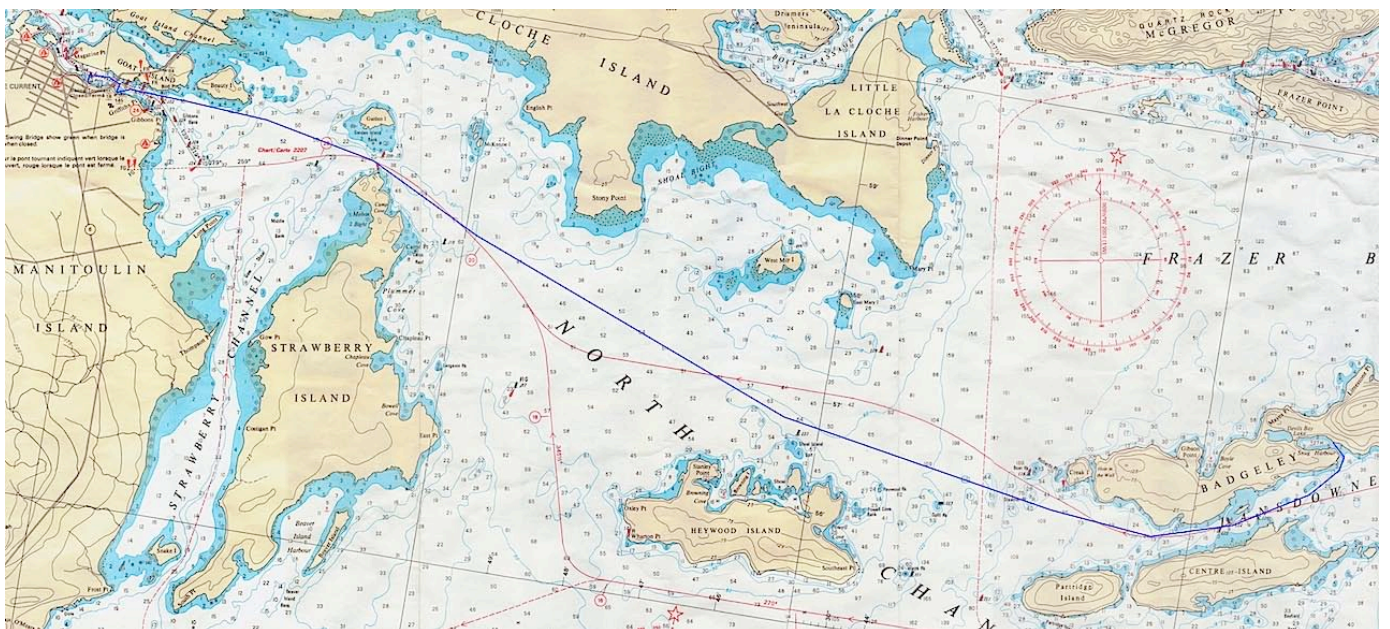


Friday September 27

Early the next morning, it looked as if the weather was changing. Heavy dew covered our tents and the deck of the boat and the sky was overcast; however the good news was that there was wind out in the channel. Our VHF weather forecast predicted light winds from the southeast, picking up later in the day. I had brought a few perishable items in a small cooler bag so we were able to have a nice hot breakfast of bacon and scrambled eggs (liquid eggs in a carton travel well). Jonathan's pop-up tent that took 2 minutes to set up turned into a 15-minute struggle to get it back in the bag.



One lesson from this cruise was figuring out where all our gear should be stowed. More experienced cruisers will know what should be readily at hand and what can be packed away in harder to get at places. Frustrated at not being able to find things that I knew I had packed somewhere, but had forgotten where, I think I completely reorganized the boat after our first day. The camping gear, sleeping bags, therm-a-rest pads, dry sacks full of our clothes and a spare anchor, were stored in the bow compartment. In the rear compartment were some safety equipment, a small toolbox, foul weather clothing, mooring lines, bailing pump, and Jonathan's pop-up tent that wouldn't fit in the bow. Our food went into a lidded pail at the forward bulkhead along with the anchor and rode stored in the bailing bucket. I had brought 5 gallons of fresh water, which was quite excessive, given that we were boiling almost all the water we consumed for rehydrating food, tea and coffee. The water container and a few things that wouldn't fit in the compartments were stowed under the forward benches.



Our destination for today was the town of Little Current, about 24 km. away. Once out in the Lansdowne Channel at 10am we had a nice steady breeze from the southeast and the sun came out to burn off the cloud cover. Within a half an hour there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was going to be a warm day. We popped the spinnaker somewhere around the end of Badgeley Island, but to my dismay as I was hoisting the sail, the spinnaker wrapped itself around the GPS unit that had been clipped to the Tacktick bracket on the mast and went into the drink. Damn!! Another lesson learned – when cruising always tie off anything that could fall out of the boat.

Just as it had done the day before the wind started to die at mid-day. By the time we reached Split Rock there was only a slight whisper. We debated about whether to start rowing but there was just enough to carry us along to Heywood Island. A sail that we had caught sight ahead of us was disappearing into the distance so we knew there must be wind ahead, and sure enough it started to build again. We sailed all the way to Little Current under spinnaker in 10 to 12 knots. Rounding the prominently located lighthouse at the northern point of Strawberry Island we finally spotted the swing bridge connecting Manitoulin Island to the mainland at Little Current.



The single lane swing bridge opens for yachts on the hour for only 15 minutes (between the time the bridge starts to swing to full closure) until mid-October. We arrived at Little Current Channel 10 minutes too late for the 3 o'clock opening, so beached the boat nearby the bridge on the south side for half an hour. As there were no other sailing vessels around we weren't sure whether the bridge operator would guess our intentions, so we tacked back and forth in the channel many times until he poked his head out of the cabin high up on the bridge and called down to us to find out if we wanted to go through. I lined up the approach in the narrow channel perfectly and we sailed through before the bridge had fully swung open. It was already closing as we passed the abutments. Jonathan captured the moment with this superb sequence of photos.



Sailing into town, we weren't sure where we could moor the boat, but there seemed to be numerous dock slips available, so we pulled into a free one next to a power cruiser. An initial reconnoitre established that this was the town dock - a marina. The guy in the powerboat told us that after Labour Day there was no one around to collect fees, and we'd be quite safe tying up here for the night.



The next order of business was to find a bed for the night. The Anchor Inn, an old hotel on the main drag near the waterfront seemed like a logical choice but when we enquired, a waitress kindly mentioned that it would be a noisy evening as Friday was karaoke night. When we decided to go elsewhere she told us to be sure to return for dinner, that the hotel restaurant was very good.

We went uphill from the shopping area and found the Hawberry Inn, a basic but quite acceptable motel on the outskirts of town, and still only a 10-minute walk from the waterfront. After showering, we did indeed return to the Anchor for dinner for a nice fry up of locally caught whitefish.

The plan for tomorrow was to head back eastward across Frazer Bay to Baie Fine. This seemed feasible as the wind was predicted to be 15 knots and more, again from the southeast. To make the 8 o'clock opening of the bridge we needed to get off to an early start, and Jonathan discovered that Garry's Restaurant across the road opened for breakfast at 6:30. We set the alarm for 6:00am and went to sleep.