

White-tipped mountains
ring the head of tranquil
Bond Sound.

A winter adventure north of the rapids



Braving the Broughtons

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

Keeping cozy down below
on a snowy Boxing Day in
Claydon Bay.



Queen Charlotte Strait was expecting near-hurricane force winds of 60 knots. It was the third successive night of big December winds and it wasn't over yet. We listened to the weather report as 30-knot gusts boomed into our anchorage in Cullen Harbour.

"A 960 millibar low west of the Queen Charlotte Islands will move inland over the coast this evening," predicted Environment Canada.

We weren't suffering though. Our 30-kg Bruce anchor was well set with an all-chain rode and a 7:1 scope. The furnace was humming and we'd just finished a hearty meal aboard our 40' powerboat *Dirona*. One Christmas jingle, slightly modified, described our mood perfectly: "Oh, the weather outside is frightful... Let it blow, let it blow, let it blow." We were having a wonderful time.

STORMS AND STRAITS On our trip to the Broughtons last Christmas, we were really pounded by winter storms. Granted, we were further north, where the weather is worse, but there were just more storms. They didn't hinder us this trip though—we had good weather on the long runs up the Strait of Georgia and Johnstone Strait. And winter storms don't bother us anyway—we actually like them. You haven't really experienced the coast until you've been out in all its wild, wet and windy glory.

The Broughtons do not feel as deserted in the winter as do other destinations like Desolation Sound because more people live up there. We frequently saw local vessels underway and there was much radio traffic. With the summer pleasure craft community gone, residents were the dominant VHF users.

When we ran north from the Gulf Islands, Environment Canada was forecasting gale-force winds in the Strait of Georgia, so we didn't expect to get past Nanaimo. But once through Dodd Narrows, conditions were still fine, so we kept going, expecting to stop before Lasqueti Island. We repeated this several times until we found



ourselves in Campbell River. Other than dodging huge logs, we'd had no trouble at all.

We transited Seymour Narrows the following day and were soon into Johnstone Strait. The temperature was just above freezing, but the conditions were so calm that we rode at our open fly bridge the whole way. The scenery in Johnstone

Strait was amazing. The mountains on Vancouver Island were thick with snow, and the clouds were high enough that we could see the summits.

We turned off into Havannah Channel, where glass-smooth waters reflected the snow-capped peaks. Tranquil and deserted Cutter Cove, opposite Minstrel Island, was our anchorage for the night. We had hot chocolate on deck as a light rain fell and both mist and sun sank towards the waterline.

head, with the snow-encrusted peaks of Kingcome Inlet visible beyond. We continued through Tribune Channel past Watson Cove, where a large group of perhaps 50 Pacific white-sided dolphins surrounded us. We hadn't expected to see any in winter, so it was a special treat.

The weather forecast was for 45- to 50-knot winds in Queen Charlotte Strait that evening. Seeking shelter, we anchored in the centre of empty Waddington Bay. The wind did come up—the anemometer recorded frequent 30-knot gusts. We put on our coveralls and went up on the fly bridge to experience it. The wind was so loud that it sounded like a freeway or massive waterfall was nearby, while bioluminescence lit the wind wavelets in the bay. We returned below and listened to the weather report over a glass of wine. At 2030, the wind at Herbert Island in Queen Charlotte Strait was 44 knots gusting to 54. We spend a lot of time with Environment Canada on these winter trips—they're kind of our fireside chat.

The temperature had risen to a balmy 10° C (50° F) the next morning. The wind had fallen off a bit, but was still blowing in the 30s when we set off for Echo Bay to refuel. It really picked up when we arrived, and getting onto the fuel dock was a challenge. Once tied off, we checked the weather station—it had recorded 52 knots while we were docking.


WINTER COMFORT

WIND AND WEATHER The temperature was just below freezing and chilly the next morning. With the wind blowing 20 to 30 knots in Knight Inlet, chop and spray kept us at the lower helm station en route to Tribune Channel. We returned up top in calm Sargeaunt Pass, which looked like a bird sanctuary. There were eagles everywhere, plus huge flocks of mergansers, cormorants and buffleheads. The water surface ahead appeared to be covered with large, white feathers. As we got closer, the feathers turned out to be gulls, hundreds of them, littered across the channel.

Tribune Channel was impressive—all the peaks were snow-dusted and waterfalls spilled everywhere. We started down Thompson Sound for more mountain views, but 50-knot outflow winds drove us out. Bond Sound was calm though. White-tipped mountains ringed the



The place seemed deserted, but we had confirmed before the trip that they'd be open. "A little out of season?" the winter caretaker asked when he came down a few minutes later. The fuel dock was open, but after all that effort in docking, they were out of diesel for a few days. This was unexpected, as it would never happen in the summer.

We had also planned to hike into the hills north of Echo Bay for a view across Raleigh Passage and Cramer Pass. So we wrestled Dirona off the fuel dock and onto the park dock, and started on the

trail. The woods were noisy—the wind was blowing the trees so hard that they creaked and crashed together at the tops. We were a little nervous that one might fall. We had to push through alder saplings to get to the top, but the view of snow-encrusted Mount Stephens was worth it.

We still had the fuel problem to deal with, so once back at Dirona, we set off towards Minstrel Island. We made radio contact with the owner, but he wasn't on site—he was off visiting friends. He had a neighbour open up for us though, so we got our diesel. We anchored in the outer basin of Potts Lagoon for the night, and recorded 30-knot gusts from the storm-force winds that were predicted for Queen Charlotte Strait.

A heavy rainfall washed all the salt water off my coveralls as we raised anchor the next morning. We motored slowly through Beware Passage to Farewell Harbour and through Swanson Channel into Knight Inlet again. The coast looked wonderful: wild, wet and alive. This is the time to be here, when it's real and not all soft, warm and sunny.

After dropping the hook in Cullen Harbour, we set off in the dinghy to tour Twin Lagoon. The waves were nearly a metre in Fife Sound and we quickly discovered that our coveralls were not in fact waterproof. We must have looked crazy out there, pounding through the swells in our little three-metre tender. But we were having a great time, and it got even better when a pod of dolphins swarmed us. The



only downside was that we couldn't take their picture in the wind and rain.

SNOW AND ICE On Christmas Eve, we traversed Drury Inlet and anchored in Bond Lagoon. Christmas morning dawned hushed and still, with wisps of fog caught in the trees and a dusting of snow on the hilltops to our east. We got a whiter Christmas later that day at Turnbull Cove, northeast of Drury Inlet's mouth. Snow began falling so heavily that we could barely make out the entrance channel. It eased off a bit, and we anchored with a layer of snow on deck.

We had our traditional Christmas dinner, peppercorn-crusted roast beef tenderloin, in snow-muffled silence (see *GALLEY*, page 26). More snow fell on Boxing Day after we'd moored in nearby Claydon Bay. We took the dinghy to explore the old fore-and-aft logging roads. The temperature was near freezing, but it was beautiful and hushed outside in the snow.

We passed through Sullivan Bay the next morning—the settlement was barely visible in another snowstorm. A lone sailboat was there, presumably the winter caretakers. He hailed us to see if we needed anything. We told him we were just out cruising, and he responded with a laugh, "Crazy tourists!" The snow kept falling as we headed north to Blunden Harbour, where we anchored for the night.

The temperature fell below freezing overnight and Blunden Harbour was iced over the next morning. We'd encountered saltwater ice on last winter's trip, so this was not novel, but still exciting. Moving forward, then back, left an imprint of our hull in the ice. Although



ice can damage gelcoat, it was thin enough that we felt safe breaking through. Instead of a frothy wake, we trailed a well-defined channel through the ice behind us.

We crossed Queen Charlotte Strait, which showed no signs of the recent storms. There was hardly a ripple on the water and not a cloud in sight. The snow-covered Coast Mountains looked spectacular against the deep blue sky.

We spent the night at Beaver Harbour to explore Fort Rupert and area. Conditions remained so calm that we hardly needed an anchor. Port Hardy was our next stop. We intended to tie off at the public dock and head into town. But the dock was, um, gone. The city apparently removes it in winter. The Coast Guard let us moor at theirs instead.

After a walk through town, we continued to the Quarterdeck Marina for a visit to the pub. The bay was lightly iced over here too, but thick enough to resist our momentum. Docking was interesting in the ice: if we put the engines in neutral, the boat stopped.

SALT WATER ICICLES Port Hardy was our final stop in the area—we ran south over the next few days. After braving the Broughtons, the worst conditions we experienced were actually near Vancouver. We encountered two- to three-metre waves crossing the Strait of Georgia, and

frequently took spray well over the fly bridge. This was surprising, because our anemometer was only reading 10 knots. Along the way, we'd noticed that the rails were looking strange—the stainless steel shine was gone. It was cold enough, at -6°C (21°F), that salt water spray was freezing onto the rails.

By the time we got across and onto a buoy in Bedwell Harbour, Dirona was sheathed in ice and salt water icicles were dripping from every surface. The anemometer, five metres above the waterline, could barely spin—the cups were iced over completely. No wonder we only recorded 10 knots—it was probably blowing 40. Temperatures remained well below freezing for the remainder of our trip, so the ice stayed with us until we returned to our marina. With all that ice, we looked like one of those boats that you see coming back from the Bering Sea. At the fuel dock people just stood and stared. We'd had a wonderful winter adventure, but it turned out that we didn't need to go very far north to get it.

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