

Chartering in the Gulf Islands/ By Laird Durham

ALTHOUGH just a few hours northwest of the U.S.'s San Juan Islands, British Columbia's Gulf Islands seem an age away in remoteness. It is still possible to live off the tidelands among these islands. Crabs, oysters, and clams are plentiful; the waters are home to five species of salmon, and rock fish are abundant and relatively easy to catch.

You can cruise for hours without seeing more civilization than a distant boat or a solitary cottage on shore. There are quiet coves ringed with dense woods where you are often the only boat at anchor, and there are uninhabited islands you can make your own for a day.

The Gulf Islands lie in the Strait of Georgia, running northwest to southeast about 60 miles along the east coast of Vancouver Island.

There are approximately 75 of them large enough to have names. They are part of the same geological formation as the San Juans but have few of the tourist facilities that bring jams of yachtsmen and ferry-borne tourists to crowd the American islands.

Passages among some of the Gulf Islands are fjord-like, 1,500 feet wide and overhung by mountains rising steeply from the water to heights of more than 2,000 feet. One summer as we were running through one of these channels, a golden eagle, testimony to the wildness of the area, flew over our bow from a bleached tree to a rocky ledge off our port beam.

In other places the islands are low and flat, formed of sandstone that has been carved by the wind and waves into an intricate geometry of planes pierced by holes and pocked

with small caves. Red-barked cedars with dark green leaves contrast sharply with the sandstone. Passages here are only 50 feet wide in spots, and some of the islands are home to feral goats, one of which once climbed up on a rock to bleat at us as we sailed by.

A few of the major islands are farmed extensively and support small towns supplied by ferry. Some of the islands and parts of others are Indian reserves.

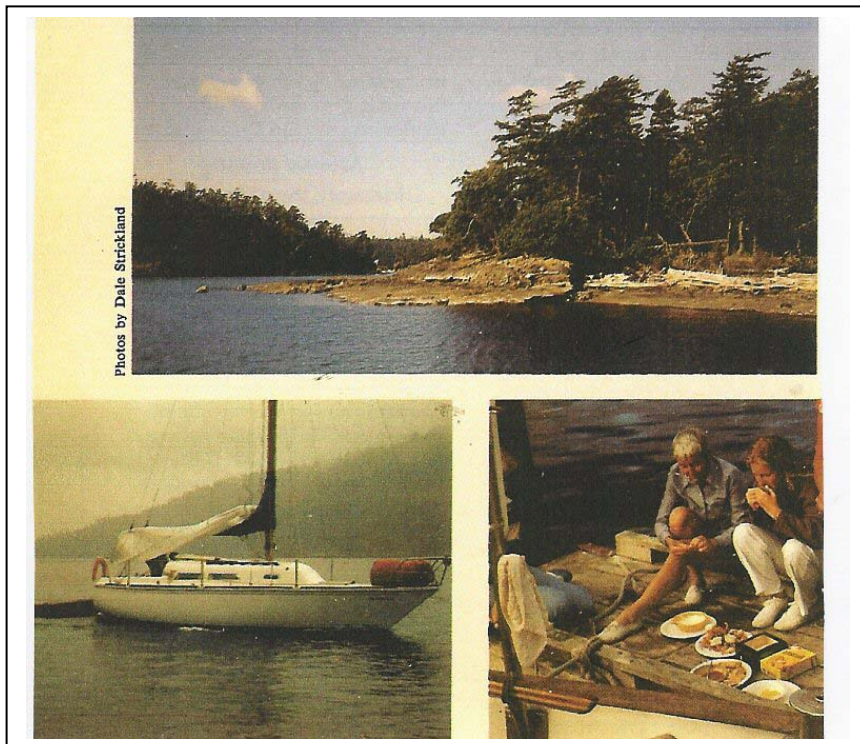
My wife and I with groups of friends making up a fleet of three or four boats have sailed the Gulf Islands for three summers, one week each time, by bareboat charter. We recommend it to everyone looking for a great vacation and a sailing adventure.

The weather

Before being persuaded by friends to join them for our first bareboat charter we had always had the notion that the weather was bad in the Northwest. ("It rains all the time.") We'd also formed the impression, from reports of friends who'd cruised the San Juans, that it is powerboat country. We

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The Flat Top Islands are among the most beautiful in the Gulf Island Group. There are isolated areas such as *at left above*, but there are also full-service marinas with swimming pool and entertainment facilities available if desired. *Far left*: Foul weather gear and a tarp will protect you from the occasional bad weather. However, storms and heavy fog are rare in summer. A typical dockside feast (*left*) consists of oysters and clams roasted on a hibachi, or boiled crabs, all dunked as desired in a special sauce.



The Cruising Yachtsman

CHARTERING IN THE GULF ISLANDS *continued*

found that neither idea is true, at least not in July and August.

The Gulf Islands are about the sunniest place in Canada. During July and August the skies are over-cast only 35 percent of the time on the average, and during two of our charters we had sun six out of seven days. The air temperature in July and August ranges around 70°F., with 80°F not uncommon. Last summer we had two days when the temperature topped 95. It turned out to be a record hot spell, which we would have enjoyed a lot more if it hadn't coincided with a Canadian brewery workers' strike.

The prevailing winds during the summer in the Strait of Georgia are northwesterly, with a mean speed of 8.5 knots. Dead calm is rare in the Strait, though in the lee of some of the islands there are spots where you are glad to have auxiliary power, especially inboard power. There is a definite pattern to the northwesterlies. They begin to blow early in the morning, sometimes before daybreak, and pick up to 15-25 knots in the Strait. In midafternoon they begin to drop, so we've had our best sailing in the mornings.

Occasionally, there is in the Gulf Islands what is called a "three-day westerly," which produces almost continuous fresh and gusty winds night and day. On one of these three-day blows, however, we found that we were able to sail from one end of the islands to the other, as well as half way across the Strait to Vancouver and back.

Because you can expect *some* rain, come prepared for it with foul weather gear and a large plastic tarp which you can rig with poles cut on shore, as a protective canopy if needed.

Fish, clams, oysters, and crabs

Trolling for salmon or rock fish under sail only rarely produces

a fish, but we've never failed to score by trolling under auxiliary power at the edges of the three big passes -- Porlier Pass, Active Pass, and Sansome Narrows -- at maximum current. Four times a day the tide rushes through these passes at velocities up to eight to nine knots, creating awesome upwellings, eddies, and whirlpools. Even on the edges it can get rough, particularly when a flood runs onto a wind-driven chop off the Strait. But one year in these conditions four of us caught our limit on grilse (salmon under three pounds) in less than an hour. Oysters are even easier to find than clams. They attach themselves to drying rocks along most of the beaches. We like to pick the smallest we can find and barbecue

them over charcoal until they just open, then dunk them in barbecue sauce. Pacific oysters are larger than East and Gulf Coast oysters, and have a somewhat chalky taste. Of course, if they are small enough, they're best raw, although any size are best raw. After clamming we like to tie up at a public float in one of the harbors for a Gulf Islands shore dinner. We try to add crabs to our feast either by catching them in a crab trap we rent from the charter operator or by snorkeling for them and scooping them up in a landing net. Trapping for red crabs is best right off the public docks. The best snorkeling we've found is the northwest side of DeCourcy Island.

Marinas and anchorages

When we charter in the Gulf Islands we alternate each night between tying up at a marina and rafting up at anchor. At the marinas we can shower, do laundry, and replenish our ice. There are dozens of marinas among the Gulf Islands listed in the "British Columbia Small Craft Guide; Volume 1,"

which also gives complete information about them, including depths, facilities, and supplies. Well, almost complete. The "Guide" will also let you find the best anchorages, which in the Gulf Islands means ones that are protected from the prevailing northwesterlies as well as the storm southerlies. It also means protection from the wake of passing boats, a good holding bottom, preferably mud, and freedom from foul ground and submerged rocks.

Among the islands there are many little-used coves that meet all these requirements. The most beautiful and lonely are the northern half of the islands, from Tent Island to the DeCourcy group. All the harbors where there are marinas have good anchorages, but if you are going to use those places you might as well tie up at a float. Only rarely have we found the floats too crowded for our fleet.

The "Small Craft Guide" and charts are provided by the charter operator, and may be bought at most marinas or ordered from the Canadian Hydrographic Service, Ottawa, Ontario, KIA OE6. The only other book you need is a current sport fishing guide, available free almost everywhere. U.S. citizens chartering Canadian boats don't need fishing licenses, passports, or visas. U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere, but, depending on the exchange rate, you might be better off to take your currency in Canadian dollars or Canadian travelers checks, both available in U.S. branches of Canadian banks. #