



Nick and Jenny Coghlan narrate an eventful voyage to Prince William Sound, Alaska aboard their Vancouver 27 *Bosun Bird*

Baked Alaska

PHOTO: NICK COGHLAN/MAPI; WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The US Coast Pilot, describing the southwestern approach to Prince William Sound, was not encouraging:

“The wind among the Barren Islands is often twice as strong as it is a few miles away and the seas are often three times higher, attaining speeds of 100 knots and heights of thirty feet respectively.”

We were fifty miles out of Kodiak Island, which had been our base for two years, and it was midnight off the Barrens. At 60 degrees north in early July the sun never sets: the

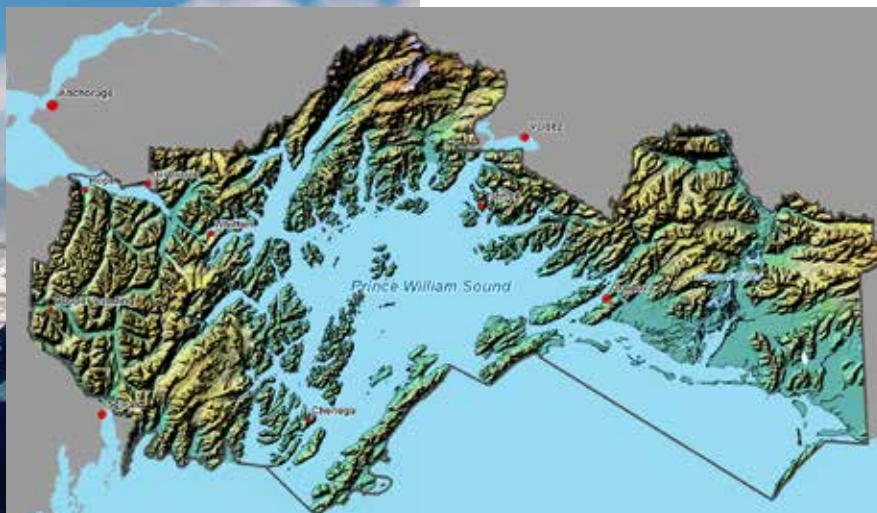
jagged islands were bathed in an eerie golden glow. We were reaching in a chilly but manageable 15 knots of wind, leaving a straight phosphorescent trail in the black ocean, and feeling cautiously confident. The favourable forecast was holding.

Then there was a sudden hard roll to starboard. The rhythmic rustle of our bow wave turned to a splash. The boat juddered, we lurched back the other way and the mainsail backed. Briefly we were at a standstill. I leapt to my feet, grabbed the lifelines and peered over the side, my heart thumping. A smooth, oblong black

ABOVE LEFT
Glaciers calving into the beautiful azure blue waters of Prince William Sound, Kenai Peninsula

shape was receding slowly beneath the water, with an audible sigh and a smell of rotting fish. We'd grazed a sleeping Humpback Whale.

Prince William, which we reached without apparent damage two days later, is named not for the current heir to the British throne, but after the third son of King George III, at a time when Captain Cook was running short of more obvious people to honour. A massive rectangular-shaped inlet at the head of the Gulf of Alaska, protected from the Gulf's stormy waters by a screen of high barrier islands, it is fed by over a hundred named glaciers. This makes for spectacular and protected cruising.



drained into the ocean; tens of thousands of birds and mammals were fouled; it was alleged that Hazelwood was drunk in command.

With a smirk the barman pointed out to us the favourite drink on the cocktail list at the Pipeline: “Tanqueray on the Rocks.”

Twenty-five years on, we saw no sign of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster. Lumps of hardened crude only occasionally come to light on remote beaches, and the wildlife – birds, bears, whales, seals, Sea Otters - has returned en masse. Death is now just one part of the natural cycle. We awoke one morning in Beartrap Bay to an especially high tide and the sight (and smell) of hundreds of dead salmon floating on the surface, Bald Eagles snickering and circling above us, and a Grizzly pawing at corpses on the tideline. Every year, after four years in the open Pacific, millions of Pink, Chum and Sockeye salmon return to these waters where they were born, to spawn and die. A king tide will float their rotting bodies from the stream mouths and off the beaches.

We were blessed with uncharacteristically fine weather as we explored the deeply indented coastline: hot, cloudless days with little wind. Most days on the VHF we'd hear commercial fishermen talking, trying to trick each other into saying how the day's trolling was going. On weekends a small flotilla of sports fishermen with their runabouts would be on the water →

Bligh and mighty

There are of course plenty of underwater rocks to watch out for. Cook's sailing master on HMS *Resolution*, the later infamous William Bligh, discovered one the hard way; it is now marked by a small metal beacon. We heard more about Bligh Reef when we called in for replenishment at Valdez. The only must-see stop in this rough-and-ready little community is an unlikely one: a dark and smoky dive with carpet on its walls, known as the Pipeline Club (this being the southern terminus of the Alaska pipeline). Here, at 9:00 p.m. one

March night in 1989, Captain Joseph Hazelwood had a last drink before taking the *Exxon Valdez* to the open sea, with a million barrels of crude on board. Three hours later the vessel diverted to avoid ice calving from the Columbia Glacier and struck Bligh Reef. Much of his cargo promptly

BELOW RIGHT
Grizzly on the shoreline

BELOW LEFT
The beacon on Bligh Reef (where the *Exxon Valdez* struck)





too. They weren't always that well-prepared; we would eavesdrop on the US Coastguard orchestrating rescues for boats that had run out of gas or had mechanical issues. The recreational boats seemed always to have cute names – Ciao Baby, Boncrusher, Saltwater Addiction – that distinguished them from the working fishing vessels: Icy Cape, Akatan Lady.

Tiny Whittier, where the sports fishers are based, is at the head of dark and steep-sided Passage Canal, overlooked by several glaciers. The settlement was established in World War Two by the US Army when a sustained Japanese attack on mainland Alaska looked possible. Shrouded in cloud most of the year and all but surrounded by near-vertical granite peaks – deterrents to bombing - this was a rare ice-free location accessible to ocean-going ships and, once a rail tunnel was bored under the Portage Glacier in 1942, it was linked directly to Anchorage.

Cold War legacy

In Cold War days Whittier saw a new lease of life as a secret army base. Two monolithic buildings were erected to house hundreds of servicemen: the fourteen-storey Begich Tower and the even larger Buckner Building. The military are long gone and Whittier's hundred or so permanent residents now all live on two floors of Begich, which has its own Post Office, shops and gym and which is linked to the few other buildings in town by tunnels. The Buckner complex is a post-apocalyptic ruin, half-engulfed by

the rainforest. This is a very weird place. But we were able to load up on diesel, renew our wine supplies and enjoy fish and chips at the Swiftwater Restaurant before retreating once again to the wilds. What more could anyone want?

The glaciers are the great attraction of Prince William. For a few days, we diverted into a complex of fiords called Port Nellie Juan, anchoring in a tight one-boat nook. Using the nautical chart for guidance, we bush-whacked through dense rainforest to emerge at the terminal moraine of the Nellie Juan glacier. We edged around the bay on foot until we could see its face: two kilometers wide, a hundred meters high, composed of craggy and ethereal blue ice. On some of the more hospitable floes in the bay, harbour seals lolled as if sun-bathing, but would have to shuffle off when a calving berg sent a metre-high wave their way. You could watch for hours.

The Columbia was the second

ABOVE LEFT
Approaching Whittier

ABOVE AND BELOW
Two views of the Nellie Juan Glacier

great glacier we inspected close-up. So rapidly is it retreating – at a rate described as “catastrophic” by climate scientists - that the number of bergs it generates can clog the waters for many miles around. So we quizzed local boats for up-to-date advice before we edged our way into Glacier Passage and then Heather Bay, the very place where our 1970's vintage paper chart showed the face to be. There were a few house-sized pieces we needed to steer around; some were of vehicle-size and we had to use the boathook for fending off. We recalled The Rime of the Ancient Mariner in these silent and ice-beset





seas, but there was no albatross to be seen. When we reached Heather Bay, the face was still 15km away – a day’s walk, there and back - so far had the glacier receded in forty years.

Winter lay up

By late August there were signs that Alaska’s spectacular but short summer was coming to an end. Deep lows were now sweeping in from the Aleutians, threatening winds of 40 to 60 knots. We made for the third and last settlement in the Sound, where we would haul out for the duration of another winter.

With a population of 2,000,

ABOVE RIGHT
Busun Bird at anchor,
near Cordova

BELOW LEFT
In Cordova
fishing harbour

BELOW RIGHT
Bosun Bird (centre)
Lashed down for the
winter - Cordova



Cordova (pron. Cor-DOE-ver) is snugly located on a narrow, shallow inlet, with high mountains all around. It has no road to the outside and the only ways in and out are by the Alaska State Ferry or by air. We tied up in the crowded fishing harbour just as dozens of salmon fishing boats were also decommissioning and readying for the winter. The walkways were busy with bearded young men carting duffel bags ashore in wheelbarrows, a few holding earnest and occasionally profane conversations by cellphone with patient (or sometimes not so patient...) girlfriends and wives in the Lower 48.

Over at the boatyard, Glenn the Travelift driver confided that he had not hauled many sailboats. But his pride was piqued when we mentioned that Bill, back in Kodiak, had twice taken us out and in without any problems. He measured us carefully, Googled our profile, and gave precise instructions – to the minute – about when to arrive so as to make the most of high tide.

All went well. As Glenn pressure-washed *Bosun Bird*’s bottom, we said how impressed we were with his professionalism to his buddy Jerry, who’d be renting us the space to winter over. Jerry nodded absently. He walked around, pondered our long keel and thoughtfully contemplated the near-bare patch where we’d grazed the Humpback. He looked preoccupied. “Thing is,” he eventually confessed. “I kinda wish I hadn’t agreed to do this. Fishing boats, see, they sit nice and squat, know what I mean?” And he pointed over to *Lucky Lady*.

We looked back at him questioningly. “Three years ago, that’s the last time I did a sailboat. An’ I said then I’d never do another. See, we got this 140-knot williwaw one day. Lifted the darn boat clean off the blocks. A write-off. I only just finished paying the guy off...”

Happily – tied down to lead blocks that Jerry had salvaged from the keel of the unfortunate flying sailboat – *Bosun Bird* was still waiting for us, intact, next spring. ✈

