

THE WORLD'S MOST BEAUTIFUL DEAD-END

Nick and Jenny Coghlan follow the road less traveled by - right up to the head of Princess Louisa Inlet, British Columbia



Fifty miles up the coast from Vancouver, just off a marine highway that in summer is busy with cruisers heading to and from popular Desolation Sound, is a maze of islands and channels that caught the attention of Captain George Vancouver in 1792. He was searching for the Northwest Passage.

The channels converge and become a deep, steep-sided fjord that zigzags in a northerly direction, cutting deep into the snow-capped Coastal Range of British Columbia. Vancouver named the fjord (well after the fact) Jervis Inlet for his patron, Rear Admiral Sir John Jervis. It doesn't reach as far as the North Atlantic, alas. But this is one of the most spectacular cruising destinations you'll find anywhere and is a favourite of ours.

A good starting point for a venture up-inlet is the tiny village of Egmont, which has a small marina. Not many people live here, but those who do are of the independent kind. A sign at the head of the jetty reassuringly proclaims Egmont to be a Nuclear Free Zone; an evening at the Backeddy Pub is likely to prove entertaining.

From Egmont, if you want to give yourself a scare, you can walk to an overlook and contemplate Skookumchuck Narrows where, at maximum ebb or flood, the tidal current flows in and out of another inlet - Sechelt - at speeds of up to 18 knots. The eddies and whirlpools can throw 15-meter logs into the air. We once watched a tug and his tow waiting quietly in a patch of still water on the downstream side. Once the tide slowed to three or four knots on his nose, he edged carefully into the white-water stream with his 500-metre-long log boom trailing astern. He strained to hold steady for ten minutes and then began almost imperceptibly to inch forward. When the current finally calmed - for no more than an instant - and reversed, the tug and tow were on their way again at a rapidly increasing speed. This is no place to make a mistake in reading your current tables.

Meanwhile, if you're heading up Jervis, you'll need an early start: it's over fifty miles to the nearest safe anchorage. In summer and in settled weather, the wind blows strongly up-inlet during the day then goes calm or blows very lightly down-inlet at night. In winter the reverse applies: Arctic outflows commonly reach fifty knots. Even though the inlet makes several ninety-degree turns, the wind finds its way around those bends with no lee or respite at the turning points.

Sailing into the continent

Racing wing-on-wing into the heart of the continent along a mile-wide channel, with a rendezvous to keep, we usually bypass wide Vancouver Bay where the *Discovery's* yawls overnighted on June 17, 1792. Muriel Wylie Blanchet, an intrepid widow who sailed these waters in the 1920s with her five young children aboard a small motor cruiser, had a disturbing adventure here, recounted in her book *The Curve of Time*. Having left the children to play on the beach, she found a good trout stream to fish. But she was suddenly seized by unaccountable panic, a sense of foreboding. When she rushed back, her eldest son reassured her. But, he said, there was a man, "all dressed in black", who had been →



observing them from the other end of the beach. Blanchet goes on:

“Peculiar place for a clergyman to be, I thought inanely...”

After a few moments, the “clergyman” begins bounding towards the family... on all fours. It’s a large and aggressive black bear, with cubs in tow. The family flees back to the *Caprice*, chastened.

After Vancouver Bay comes Deserted Bay. This was named by Europeans in the nineteenth century. Approaching a native village, they saw canoes drawn up, but no smoke. Ashore, they found the houses full of dead bodies, the victims of smallpox. Only a tiny child was still alive; she was adopted and recovered. There is nothing left of the village today. Neither Deserted nor Vancouver are anything but marginal, fine-weather anchorages; both suffer from very sharp drop-offs at their head.

Tricky tidal gate

When you make the turn into the last leg of the Inlet – steep-walled

Queen’s Reach – the following wind often dies. If so, it’s just as well, for here you may need to hang around in deep water for some time. A narrow gap in the north shore leads into a well-concealed haven known as Princess Louisa Inlet. The reversing tidal flow here - Malibu Rapids - is a “mere” 9 knots. This is half the speed of Skookumchuck but the passage is intricate and shallow and, once again, should only be negotiated at slack water. Vancouver noticed the entrance but took it for a creek. It is marked now by the prominent timber buildings of a summer camp dating back to the 1930s.

Princess Louisa is sublime. Four miles in length, it is hemmed in by massive grey granite walls that rise to 1,500 metres. The waters are emerald green and usually still. The only sound is the rush of Chatterbox Falls at the head. As you’d expect from the sheerness of the cliffs, there’s almost nowhere to anchor. But the BC Parks department maintains (in summer only) a precariously

PREVIOUS PAGE
Waiting for slack at Malibu Rapids

ABOVE LEFT
Sailing up Jervis Inlet at daybreak

ABOVE RIGHT
Chatterbox Falls, Princess Louisa Inlet

BELOW LEFT
Skookumchuck Rapids at maximum ebb (18 knots)

BELOW RIGHT
A “clergyman” (Black Bear) on the shore of Jervis Inlet

attached float at the head where you can tie up, and a set of three mooring buoys anchored in over 100 metres of water. There are a couple more buoys in an indentation halfway along the inlet, at MacDonald Bay. If you don’t mind living in a curtain of fine spray, a final option is to edge your boat right up to Chatterbox Falls and drop the anchor; the current will keep you offshore even if a rare up-inlet wind finds its way in.

The last time we were at Princess Louisa, it was the last year of Covid. American vessels were still banned from Canadian waters, so we had the place to ourselves. We repeated the steep walk through the forest that we had first made half a lifetime before, from the falls up to an old trapper’s cabin. All that had changed in thirty-five years was that there was now a stern notice warning that the walk is dangerous and exhausting. We were pleased to find we could still complete it within the estimated time on the notice.

Up beyond the cabin, if you are





prepared to bushwhack, you can climb past more waterfalls that rush through the forest over smooth rock. Here Wylie Blanchet and her children would slide “from pool to pool, like so many otters” – stark naked, because “we found it too hard on the seats of our bathing suits.” Finally, you reach the treeline and dazzling snowfields. Sit down here with a pair of binoculars, scan the pinnacles that emerge from the snow, and you have a good chance of spotting a few mountain goats, white pixels on black granite.

If you’re able to leave Princess Louisa at sunrise, you might get a down-inlet wind for an hour or two, but chances are that the time of slack at Malibu will mean you have to face the same stiff breeze that blew you in. If it’s any consolation, Vancouver and his men complained about the row down-inlet: it took them 17 hours, into what he described as the teeth of a full gale. And he was bitterly disappointed with yet another failure to find the elusive

Passage, another week wasted. But the *Discovery’s* botanist, Archibald Menzies, was more positive about the dead-end, writing in his diary of:

“Immense cascades dashing down chasms against projecting rocks and cliffs with a furious wildness that beggars all description.”

The end of the road

A leaky exhaust meant that, so as to spare our engine, we had to short-tack almost all of the way out of Jervis Inlet. Tired and in dire need of a welder, we headed another 25 miles up the coast to Lund.

Like Egmont, Lund has more than the usual share of free spirits. You can go south from here by road as far as Chilean Patagonia but you can’t go any further north. On account of its perceived remoteness, the village – today’s population is 280 - was a hippie mecca in the 1960s and 70s. Jaded academics, draft dodgers from the USA and disciples of nudity, LSD and free love all converged here. Most soon found the practicalities

ABOVE LEFT
Above the tree line at the head of Princess Louisa

ABOVE RIGHT
Princess Louisa Inlet, from the trapper’s cabin

BELOW LEFT
Lund BC - the End of the Road

BELOW RIGHT
Exiting Princess Louisa through Malibu Rapids

of life at The End of The Road – handling a chainsaw, catching or growing your own food then canning it - too daunting. They eventually drifted back south and doubtless became accountants or realtors. But a few stayed on.

We met an old acquaintance watering his dog at the head of the red-painted government dock. We’ve never learned his name.

Deeply tanned and of an age difficult to guess, he reflected on his own story as he rolled a cigarette:

“Yeah man, Lund’s moved on, like everywhere. Gentrified. Know what I do now? I rent out E-bikes.”

He snorted in self-mockery: “I do OK. The tourists, you know. Course, I used to be The Man round town. The dealer? But that’s all legal now, no money to be made...”

And he gave us the contact of a friend up in the woods who’d be able to re-weld our stainless-steel manifold for us. Another hippie who’d reinvented himself, we guessed.

