



SAN JUAN Islands Sojourn

*A family of sailors
leaves their sails
behind for a charter in
the Pacific Northwest*

By Jen Brett

“YOU’LL SEE A LOT OF SAILBOATS, but not a lot of sails up,” is something that we frequently heard about the San Juan Islands. They were definitely right about the sailboat part. As for the sailing part, I’m sure if we were there in July, we would see plenty of sails. It is true, though, that the San Juan Islands and the Pacific Northwest region are known for fluky winds and unpredictable weather patterns. In spite of that, this region of the world is a true cruising paradise.

Fortunately though, we were not too worried about the winds, since we had chartered a 52-foot Grand Banks trawler from NW Explorations in Bellingham, Wash. The weather in general, however, was more of a concern since our late-season charter ran the first week of November.

The San Juan Islands are part of a greater collection of islands called the San Juan Archipelago, which is located at the meeting point of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Strait of Georgia, about mid-way up the coast between Seattle, Wash., and Vancouver, Canada. The interna-

tional border divides the San Juan Archipelago into the American San Juan Islands and the Canadian Gulf Islands. For a family of sailors who have spent most of their lives cruising the East Coast and Caribbean, the San Juan Islands sounded downright exotic (as did cruising on a trawler), and we were all eager to begin our cruise.

ABOARD THE MYSTIC EAGLE

We converged on Bellingham, Wash., in early November 2007 – we being myself, my husband, Green, our daughter, Caitlin, Green’s parents, brother and sister-

The author and daughter Caitlin, right, getting ready to board the *Mystic Eagle*. Chilly weather? No worries: Green at the inside helm station, right bottom

in-law (yes, the whole family) – each group coming from a different corner of the country (Rhode Island, Florida and California). We had no plans except to have a relaxing week exploring an area of the country that none of us had been to before. Knowing the reputation of the Pacific Northwest in regards to weather, and rain in particular, I did not expect to have endless days of Popsicle-blue skies; if I had just one day of sun, I would have been happy. Fortunately, we lucked out and had decent weather most of the time. I later learned that the San Juan Islands are actually in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains and receive an average rainfall of just 25 inches per year, much less than other locations along Puget Sound.

Early November is not a popular time to cruise in the Pacific Northwest. But I am a firm believer in “shoulder season” charters. Lower prices and empty anchorages can make for a great charter vacation, and a good cabin heating system – not to mention hot showers – can really extend the cruising season. “As locals we consider off-season another beginning to boating season,” says Chara Stuart, NW Explorations’ charter manager. “When cruising in Grand Banks trawler style you can be warm in your slippers with your cup of soup, hot tea, cocoa or coffee. But always, all seasons, the waterways here are the same—pure magic.”

Our home for the week was *Mystic Eagle* (see “Cruising in Style,” *BWS* Jan. 2008). With three cabins and two heads, a beautiful main saloon and galley (and a washer and dryer), she was plenty spacious and quite comfortable for all of us. Special touches like a welcome bottle of wine, itinerary assistance and real personal attention make NW Explorations a great company to work



with. The morning after our arrival, NW Explorations owner Brian Pemberton went over each of *Mystic Eagle*'s systems (and there are lots of systems) with us and did a few practice dockings, too. Green passed with flying colors – not bad considering the jet lag – and we were free to go explore.

While helping us plan our charter, Chara had warned us that a week would just leave us wanting more, and once we saw the amazing snow-capped mountain vistas – so different from the East Coast – I knew she was right. If, like us, a week is all you have to spend here, resist the temptation to “do it all”—stick to the San Juan and Gulf islands and don't even think about going to Alaska and back. If you are fortunate enough to have more time, the extended cruising grounds here are all stunning. In addition to the San Juan and Gulf islands, you can cruise British Columbia's Desolation Sound or even explore the Inside Passage up to Southeast Alaska.



We met cruisers along the way who made it as far as this region, and decided to stay, as this area is worthy of years of exploration.

THE PLACE TO BE

After loading the galley with provisions, our first day out of Bellingham took us to Matia Island, an uninhabited island that is a designated state park. According to the cruising guide, the small anchorage fills up in the summer as the park is a popular place; we had the place to ourselves. Autumn is a great time to visit as the air had just enough bite to it as we hiked through the carpet of bright gold fallen leaves. If you happen to cruise here during warmer weather (while not frigid, it

SUMMER SAILING VACATION GUIDE

Views of Friday Harbor



did dip down into the 30s at night during our cruise), there are campsites nestled among the old growth cedar forest.

While the distances between the islands are relatively close, that does not mean that the cruising here is simple. Cruising in the San Juans definitely requires that you be on your toes due to the swift currents, large tidal variations, rocks and reefs. It is also common to come across crab trap buoys and floating logs, so a good lookout is always necessary. *Mystic Eagle* featured a fantastic flybridge, and with a good set of binoculars, this was the place to be while underway. We spotted otters, seals, bald eagles and many other birds, but unfortunately no whales. At other times of the year the San Juan Islands are the premier spot for viewing the magnificent Orcas (killer whales), and sea kayak

trips are a popular way to do this.

Over the next few days, we explored several anchorages along Orcas Island. Names like Massacre Bay, Skull Island and Victim Island had our imaginations working overtime when we thought of where these names came from. In the mid-1800s, a marauding tribe from the north destroyed the Lummi Indian villages in this area, and the names here serve as a grim reminder of this tragedy. These days, Skull Island and Victim Island are state parks and are definitely worth a visit. This area is also great for dinghy exploration; we saw several bald eagles here, so bring the binoculars.

NOT ENOUGH TIME

Cruising and eating go hand and hand, at least in my book. With that in mind, we set off toward Friday Harbor, on San Juan Island,

which is the largest town in the area, to restock some key provisions, namely wine and cheese. A bustling harbor during the summer high season, Friday Harbor resembled a sleepy fishing village during our visit. A downside to off-season cruising is that some restaurants and museums, such as Friday Harbor's Whale Museum, might already be closed for the winter. This is a "real" town with year-round residents though, so even in the off season, you will find things to do. We spent a pleasant afternoon poking around bookstores, galleries and other shops before stopping at a seafood stand on the docks to purchase the evening feast of local Dungeness crab. Cooking the giant, live crabs in the galley was another story...

All too soon it was time to start making way back toward Bellingham. Our final stop in the San Juans turned out to be one of our favorites. Cypress Island is heavily wooded with juniper trees (Cypress Island is a misnomer), quiet and undeveloped. The day we visited happened to be foggy with a light drizzle. Not ones to let the weather stop us from anything, we donned our foul weather jackets and explored the island. Cypress Island has miles of excellent hiking, and the trail that we chose took us several miles through the forest and up to Eagle Cliff. The view from the cliff is supposed to be stunning; however, on this day it was like being inside of a cloud, but still completely worth it.

Cruising the San Juan Islands was definitely a great experience, and Chara was right – our week aboard just left us wanting more. With so much to offer cruisers, this region will certainly be gaining in popularity. ~