

Sailing the San Juan Islands aboard a Historic Tall Ship



In late July I took a five-day cruise aboard the 127ft. schooner Zodiac based up in Bellingham Bay, Washington. I boarded on a Sunday and the bay was overcast. I had heard that the winds around the San Juans are pretty light to non-existent and tried to prepare myself for a lot of motorsailing. But in Bellingham the winds were pretty honkin'. Just what I was used to in the 'slot' at San Francisco Bay!

So, more about my new home for the next five days. The Zodiac is a beautiful schooner built in 1924 for the Johnson & Johnson family as their racing yacht. In the late 1930's she was sold to the San Francisco Bar Pilots where she was renamed California. She worked outside the Golden Gate Bridge for about forty years, retiring in 1972, the last of the pilot schooners. A few years later, the Vessel Zodiac Corporation was formed to operate and maintain the restored Zodiac.

She was plenty spacious, with her 25ft beam. She had a full galley, three heads, and two showers. My berth was in the passenger quarters amidships; I took a top bunk which turned out to be quite wide enough for me to sleep with my gear. There were about 23 other passengers all from the Northwest, from Canada to Oregon. Shockingly enough, I was the only Nevadan.

We started out from Bellingham bay on a close reach but turned and ran northwards to our first anchorage: Echo Bay on Sucia Island. There were a few other boats tied to their mooring balls but we were the prettiest boat there. The rain that threatened all day finally started in but I went with a few of my shipmates to go kayaking. A drizzly rain was not going to stop me from checking out the nooks and crannies of our little cove. By the time I got back to the ship the fog was setting in and we all hoped it would burn off by tomorrow. The skipper, Captain Tim, didn't want to 'look for trouble' the next day.

We were lucky; the fog had moved eastwards and we headed out southwest to check out Roche Harbor. On the way there we drifted through President Channel and barely squeaked past Spieden Island for there was not much wind. As I would find, Captain Tim is a die-hard about starting the iron genny and would only use it if absolutely positively necessary. But I didn't mind the slow pace since the sun was out and the scenery was great! It gave me a chance to kick back and chat with the other passengers.

We came into Roche Harbor, which is a cute little town on San Juan Island—the most populated



and developed of the islands. We were given two hours shore leave so we checked out the little shops and bought ice cream cones. On the way back to the ship we stopped at a convenience store and bought some last minute goodies then headed back to the dock for pick-up.

That night we anchored off Stuart Island and I went kayaking again. There were moorings further down in the cove and seals and their pups were hanging about one of the docks. They barked at us kayakers. We saw an osprey, a bald eagle, and a crow fighting over a fish that the osprey had caught. They were swooping and dive-bombing each other, screaming. Finally the osprey dropped the fish but the eagle couldn't grab it in time so he went back to his nest where he got a thorough chewing-out by his mate. There was a liveaboard that had turned his houseboat into a gallery/museum/thingamajig and me and my kayak buddy wandered over there, but got a bit creeped out when we saw the guy grinning out at us. I heard later that others went over to the museum-houseboat and bought out all the fellow's Zodiac pictures.

The next morning I went with the 'wayward party' to go hiking to the other side of Stuart Island to the lighthouse on the other side. We were given two hours to tromp our way through four or five miles of hiking trail. We found so much to do on the way up, like a swing in the tree—photo op!—to a little schoolhouse and museum with a t-shirt stand, that the two hours became three hours. We were running the whole way back down to the dock. By the time we got back to the ship, we could see that the skipper was a



bit impatient. But I got a cool t-shirt!

We set off immediately back through Spieden Channel to drift our way to Friday Harbor which is the big attraction for tourism. We got our shore leave and ran amok for a few hours then headed back in time for dinner. We sailed up through the harbor and made our way up to Orcas Island to Deer Cove for the night. And yes, I did some more kayaking. I went with one of my shipmates to have a look at the tidepools near shore. We saw purple starfish, a number of jellyfish, fishes jumping out of the water, and various crabs in the kelp beds. It was a ton of fun! We watched the sun go down.



Let me go on a tangent for a moment. As passenger/crew we helped hoist the sails every day—a heck of a chore!—and we did rotations on navigation, which I knew the basics, on the helm, on bow-watch,

and as messenger for helm. So we were either on rotation or free to do whatever, until the cry “all hand” came up and we would run up and help tack the ship. We either tacked or chicken jibed, of course because plain jibing those many-ton booms is no joke. But tacking a 220 ton ship in light winds was a pretty excruciating affair. I was on foresail duty, which meant I adjusted the topping lifts and rigged the preventers when running. I also found out how to get a cry of ‘all hand’—all I had to do was go below, after hanging out on deck for two hours or more, and try to sit down and read a magazine. As soon as I touched that magazine—“All Hands On Deck!” Of course.

We also had one day where we helped clean ship, which meant scrubbing decks, various cleaning, and repairing ropework. I learned to do a basic eye-splice; I always wondered how that was done. We got to do all these chores the next day, Wednesday. After that was done we weighed anchor—I got to help clean it—we headed south to Juan De Fuca channel where there were rumored to be orcas. But first we had to get past the channel between San Juan Island and Lopez Island...and there was not much wind...and we would be fighting a current. We actually made it close to Cattle Point but the wind died completely and we ended up drifting back the way we came about a mile or so. I told you the skipper was a die-hard!

But we got into Juan De Fuca channel, didn't see any whales, but did get pretty good winds. Our one-and-a-half-knot crawl became a six-knot scream. Skipper decided to put in at Hughes cove which is basically the southern most tip of the Islands on Lopez Island. We actually sailed into the anchorage since we were pretty shielded from the winds. Yes, I am a bit envious of the lady shipmate who got to steer a 127 foot schooner in to anchor under sail alone. Pretty darn cool!

I didn't do any kayaking that night, instead I just chilled out on deck where we all had bar-b-que. I was getting a bit sad that tomorrow was the last day of my wonderful cruise aboard a beautiful classic vessel. Some people actually slept on deck that night, but I really liked my warm berth! It's awfully dewy and cold in the mornings up on the Washington coast. The next morning a few of my shipmates decided to jump off the ship into that blasted cold water. I didn't go for that, instead I watched, happily dry. Then after all the fun and games, and shrieking were over, I went up to the bowsprit and took a nap. It's pretty comfy up there upon the folded jib.

Then it was time to weigh anchor, again I helped since I was in the vicinity. We actually got really good winds coming up northwards towards Bellingham Bay. We pretty much ran the whole way at about nine knots. I had fun helping my shipmates learn how a ship sails and where some of the crazy names come from. They were impressed with my knowledge and I credited sailing in San Francisco Bay with Tradewinds Sailing School for my sailing skills. It is really neat to be able to steer and sail a huge schooner and actually know what's happening. Thanks, Tradewinds!

We headed up through Rosario Strait and I took the helm for my half-hour rotation after shooting a three-point fix off Vendovi Island, Sinclair Island, and Pleasure Point on the mainland during my navigation watch. We took a little side trip into Padilla Bay near Anacortes to do a cool photo op. The first mate would take about four or five of us in the motor skiff so we could take pictures of Zodiac under sail. I got a kick out of that!



We recorded our best sailing speed coming into Bellingham Bay. The winds were at least fifteen knots and we were doing a good nine or ten on a broad reach. There was another tall ship up ahead of us, another ship I had sailed on briefly in San Francisco Bay: The Lady Washington. I shot some video of her as she screamed by close-hauled as a square-rigger can get.



Next thing I knew we were docking at the Ferry Terminal in Bellingham. No, I didn't pay attention to the prop walk; I was too busy gabbing with shipmates. It was such a great trip and I hope to do it again, or something similar. I was invited to be part of the volunteer crew by the skipper and first mate, which I would love to do...darn that day job! But I met a lot of really fun people that I hope to keep in touch with for next time!

Our Route (in red)

