

Pilot Boat Captain Gordon Coutts

Onboard Pacific Pathfinder with
Captain Gordon Coutts

The brightly coloured
Pacific Pathfinder is
designed to work in the
rough conditions of B.C.'s
north coast.



IN PRINCE RUPERT HARBOUR, Captain Gordon Coutts is calculating when to start the twin 1,200 horsepower MTUs on his bright yellow pilot boat, *Pacific Pathfinder*, to collect the B.C. coastal marine pilots who've guided a cruise ship and a freighter through Canadian waters.

"Let's see now," he mutters. "*Ocean Seagull* is scheduled to leave Stewart around noon. Travelling at 14 knots she should be in the area at about five. The *Zuiderdam* should be in the neighbourhood close to the same time. I'll only have to make one trip."

Gordon, who works for the Pacific Coast Pilotage, is enthralled by his job as launch master, driving the 22.5-metre pilot boat. "Being on the water, working on the water, it's an addiction," he says, buzzing with vigour.

Lean, athletic, with an outdoorsy look, Gordon's shaved head looks buffed. He's the type of guy who wears shorts when I contemplate putting on long johns. "I worked out three hours at the gym yesterday," he grins. "I've always had lots of energy, all my life. I don't need a lot of sleep and I like being busy."



Captain Gordon Coutts.

Early Life on the Sea Gordon grew up in Victoria and loved the water from childhood. "We used to sneak out of elementary school, build rafts and go sailing at night," he says. "Me and my friends saw ourselves as Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. The authorities would come after us but we never got caught."

After graduating from Oak Bay High School, he took physics at Camosun College but quit after a year. "I didn't see myself as a nerd with a white shirt with pencils in my pocket." Seeking

adventure in Yellowknife, he became a loadmaster for Northwest Territorial Airways.

"I was in my early twenties, having a great time and stayed four years. I wanted to become a loadmaster on a Hercules C130, but they didn't want to train me. So I returned to Victoria and worked on a 54-foot fishpacker. That's an ocean truck, collecting product for a fish processor. I also fished halibut. That's man's fishing."

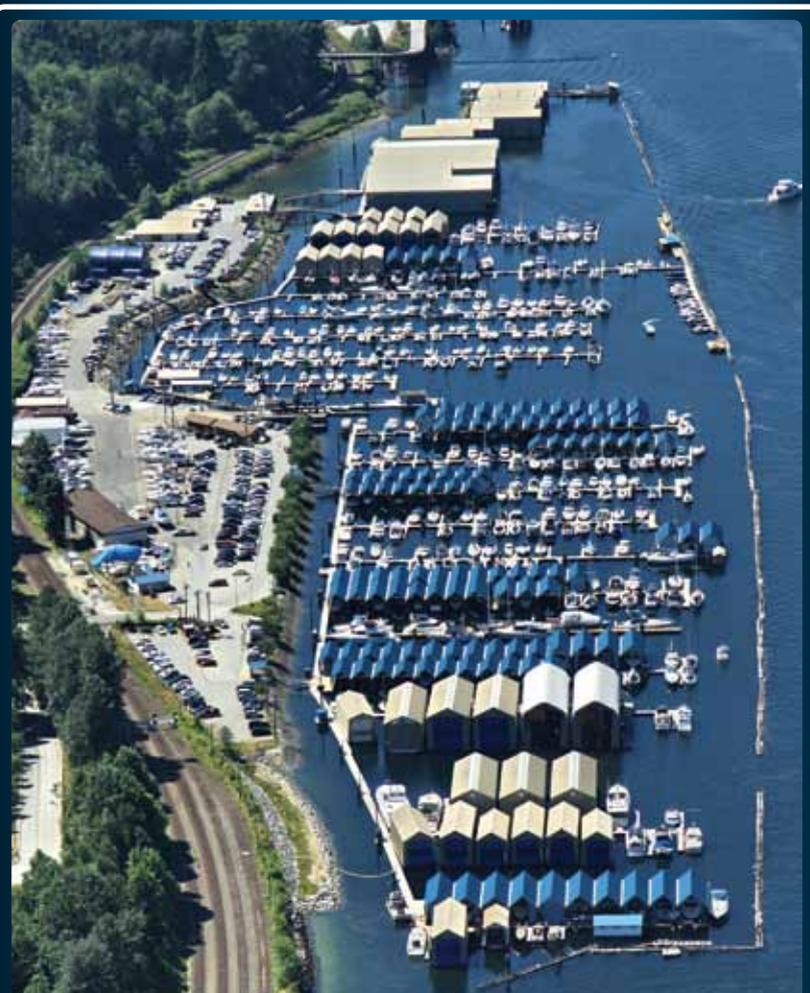
Eventually he bought an 80-foot tender, *Ocean Investor*. "She was built by Yarrows in Esquimalt in 1926. She was 160 feet of work and I went cash buying in Rupert and the coast, collecting all kinds of fish. It wasn't lucrative but it gave me an enjoyable lifestyle. I'd taken the course to earn a 350-ton captain's licence, and then the 500-ton. Fishing had gotten me sea time. I sold the tender in 2004 and the guy who bought it sank her a year later."

Gordon settled back to Victoria, where his wife, Shannon, works for a recycling centre. His son and daughter are now on their own. He took a variety of water-related jobs—running San Juan Island excursion ferries for the Oak



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Bay Beach Hotel and conducting whale-watching tours. And he began providing on-call services on the Victoria-based pilot boats.

"It was sporadic," he says. "But then there was an opening in Prince Rupert. I got the job. I've now been here for three years. Even bought a house with a buddy. It's two weeks on, two weeks off. I fly between Rupert and Victoria."

Collecting Marine Pilots Seated in his Shockwave chair, Gordon tugs his joystick back and inches out of *Pacific Pathfinder's* permanent berth. Two deckhands are aboard and we begin the trek to Prince Rupert's Pacific pilot station, a mile north of Triple Island's light (54° 18.96' N, 130° 53.03' W).

Gordon explains the schedule. "We're on 12-hour shifts. Nine to nine. We have a bunch of regulations regarding service hours and rest. Even stricter rules on alcohol intake. Two full-time skippers, deckhands and engineers. The engineers keep the boats and the mechanical stuff functioning. You'll see what the deckhands do when we get to the ships."

Just before 17:00, we enter Venn Passage, a narrow, twisty strait. The pilot boat's cruising speed is 23 knots, but in these waters Gordon moves deliberately and carefully checks range markers and buoys.

Once we reach the open waters of Dixon Entrance, the boat speeds up. With winds at 12 knots, the sea has only minor chop. He consults the AIS. "In the old days, before Vessel Traffic Services, texting and AIS, we could sit at Triple Island for hours waiting for a ship to show up. Now it's much easier. I love all the electronic tools. There's always more to learn, keeping things interesting."

He pulls out his cell phone and calls VTS. His tone is polite: "Do you have an update on the *Zuiderdam* please? He's in Grenville? Here at Triple at 18:45? Good. And what about the other one, *Ocean Seagull*? OK. That'll work. Thanks so much."

We speed into the Pacific, leaving small islands to starboard. Eventually, the *Zuiderdam's* dark-blue hull looms through the moist air. As we

get closer, she overwhelms what earlier seemed our sizable boat. The ship slows to 13 knots and creates a lee.

Gordon runs his craft alongside the *Zuiderdam* toward an opening a metre-and-a-half above the pilot boat's deck. Just aft of the door, he steers sharply to port toward the towering hull and jams two tires attached to the pilot boat into the ship. It seems we're suctioned on as foamy water boils aft between the two vessels.

In the open door, several crewmembers—all sporting lifevests—are visible. Lowering a rope ladder just outside the entry, a crewmember steps on a rung to test its sturdiness. Two coastal pilots, dressed in blazer and ties, don the heavy-duty lifevests the deckhands passed up to them. The first pilot grabs the ropes, twists himself around the ladder and takes the four steps down to the pilot boat. Wearing survival suits, the deckhands grasp the pilot ensuring he's safely aboard, then repeat the manoeuvre with the second one. One of the ship's crew waves at me. "Filipino?" I ask. "Indonesia." He then tosses a foil-wrapped package of pizza to the deckhand.

Soon afterwards, *Ocean Seagull* appears on the horizon. The ore carrier doesn't offer pilots the same facilities as the cruise-ships. The pilots' back-

packs are lowered (they bring their own laptops and navigation software); the life jackets are hauled up. Then the rope ladder plummets down at least 12 metres from the freighter's deck. The pilot puts his foot on one rung after another as the ladder swerves away from, then slams back into the rolling ship. Gordon firmly keeps the pilot boat glommed onto the bulk loader. The deckhands grip each pilot after he descends the treacherous ladder.

All pilots safely aboard, everyone relaxes on the way back to Prince Rupert.

The pizza and coffee come out. Gordon continues focusing on returning *Pacific Pathfinder* to its berth. "This job has great challenges," he says. "Today was a relatively easy ride. But we can have fierce weather, huge seas, and the ocean floor has pinnacles. Twenty-foot tides are the norm here. And Triple Island is an oddball situation. Dixon Entrance, Hecate Strait and Chatham Sound create a nexus of confused seas. I'll see five dots on the radar and wonder which one is my ship. Yes. It's wonderful. I enjoy it every day." ☺

Retrieving the pilots from cruise ships, tankers and carriers can be a treacherous task.



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