

B . C . ' S M A J E S T I C F J O R D S

With dizzying heights above and unfathomable depths below exploring B.C.'s coastal fjords is a jaw-dropping experience

Photos and story by Marianne Scott

A boat is dwarfed by the fjord's height as it emerges from the fog.

A

AFTER ROUNDING CAPE SCOTT in our Hanse 411, *Beyond the Stars*, sailing east across the top of Vancouver Island and visiting Telegraph Cove, my husband David and I began exploring the many inlets and channels that cleave British Columbia's mainland. From an anchorage at the Burdwood Group islands (50° 47.759N, 126° 28.773W), a magnificent British Columbia Park, we entered Tribune Channel—our first mainland fjord.

Although in B.C. we call our waterways channels, sounds, arms, inlets, passages and even canals, they form a labyrinth of fjords, specific geological formations only found where glaciers once blanketed, carved, scraped and shaped the land and seascape. They stretch the length of mainland B.C.

Tribune Channel We proceeded up Tribune Channel alongside Gilford Island. The channel was named after the 19th century HMS *Tribune*, a steam frigate with 31 guns. The mountains soared above our sails and plunged straight into the water. Clouds resembling fat puffs of smoke hung halfway down to the waterline. It being August with minimal rainfall, the famous Lacey Falls had shrunk to a trickle, only visible with binoculars.

Our sounder quit registering depths after reaching 300 metres. Dripping water had nourished black lichen leaving zebra stripes on the vertical bluffs. Despite the cliffs' sheer angle, trees had managed to glom onto the hard granite by snaking taproots into a slim crevice and worming their way to water. We were all alone and felt dwarfed by the towering mountains but elated by their beauty. ▶

Suddenly, the placid water hopped and up to a hundred white-sided dolphins flounced, leaped, and vaulted themselves out of the water. I ran for my camera but the pod was faster than our 6.5 knots and as they moved ahead, they reminded me of the schools of flying fish we saw when crossing the Pacific to French Polynesia.

What is a Fjord?

Fjords differ from V-shaped valleys carved by rivers in that they are U-shaped. During the Pleistocene ice ages, glaciers created them as their huge mass, weight and sediment abraded and excavated the bottom and sides of valleys—usually below sea level. Once warmer weather melted the glaciers, melt water and seawater filled the troughs they'd carved.

Entry sills may result when glaciers drop and push huge amounts of till and sediment in their ever-advancing crawl. The foremost of these sills are known as terminal moraines, and are often found at the mouth of the fjord. Behind the sill, the fjord is usually deeper than the ocean on the other side.

One good example of a smallish fjord with a sill is Princess Louisa Inlet—a tributary fjord off Jervis Inlet. Many of us have cruised that spectacular waterway, so we also know about its entrance—Malibu Rapids. At full flood or ebb, this threshold can create violently turbulent currents that convince yachts to wait for slack water to enter or exit.

Princess Louisa is also a good example of a fjord's topography—steep sided, deep, and lacking flat land where one could build a house or village. The streams or rivers descending from atop mountainsides cascade down as waterfalls.

Kwatsi Bay Having spent several days at anchor, we decided to visit Kwatsi Bay Marina, tucked away at the end of a tributary fjord off Tribune. It's located in a stunning spot and is run by Anca and Max Fraser, who began building the marina in 1995 and who proudly run an environmentally friendly place. A dozen or so boats lined the docks. Rafting isn't allowed and there are no generators to provide electricity.

I had great fun speaking my native tongue with Anca as we both grew up in the Netherlands. It's perhaps in the nature of those whose homeland was wrested from the sea to be forever drawn to watery adventures.

Max Fraser came here years ago to teach in a one-room school in Echo Bay.

"We left there for Scott Cove salmon hatchery where we worked for five years," said Anca. "We loved the work, but it was a winter job. We wanted summer work too. We consulted with Billy Proctor about a location for a small marina. Eventually we obtained a lease on Crown land and built this

place, piece by piece. Max is the engineer, plumber, electrician and carpenter. When something breaks, you can't phone anyone to come fix it."

The couple raised two children here, who grew up with bears, otters and mink in the backyard. After home schooling, Anca lived in Port McNeil for four years while the kids completed high school. Their nest has now emptied.

I asked if she missed city life. "No," she said. "We made a decision to live in the bush and visit the city. When you live here long enough, it gets into your blood. It's really hard to leave. We'll never be rich but there's immense satisfaction in having built a business from scratch. No investors, no pension funds behind us. It's the little family eking out a living in the woods. And we have loyal customers who return year after year and support our dream."

We could see why. Every day around 17:00, visiting boaters dug into their lockers and bilges and organized a happy hour or potluck. It was completely voluntary and made for a highly social scene. People mingled and connected. Fun.

Mackenzie Sound We backtracked along Tribune Channel toward MacKenzie



Sound east of Watson Island. Fog descended quite suddenly and a sailboat showed up on our AIS, an invaluable instrument in these conditions as we could call the boat by name.

They veered off to port to avoid collision. The fog cleared just as suddenly as it came and we were surprised that going

up Tribune looked different than coming down. Direction *does* influence views. Promontories jugged out into the passage—the near ones looking inky, almost foreboding, the ones further down the channel in varying shades of royal and powder blues.

Until I checked, I didn't realize that the

Coastal Mountains, that run from the Vancouver area north to Alaska, have higher peaks than the Rockies. They grew from tectonic plate collisions as well as volcanic action—snow-topped cones and old lava flows are still visible. Their cloud-swathed tops recalled to me the Dutch word for skyscrapers, ▶

Glaciers carved the fjords of coastal B.C. out of the earth many thousands of years ago.

“wolkenkrabbers,” or “cloud scratchers”—here it was the mountains scratching the sky.

We moved along Dunsany Passage, past Cunning Point and into Grappler Sound—named after a Royal Navy gunboat built to fight in the Crimean War and serving here after 1859—and travelled on to the end of MacKenzie Sound.

The Numbers

B.C. fjords share many characteristics: they're an average of 1.5 miles wide and can be hundreds of metres deep with scant anchorages and abrupt turns—and their steep, roughly parallel mountainous sides and rushing waterfalls offer some of the most impressive, majestic scenery in the world.

Usually, the term “fjord” is associated with Norway, a country whose coastline is equally riven by deep ocean arms. Norway has at least 61 fjords—not counting smaller off-shoot fjordlets—with the longest,

It was warm and sunny. We saw many clear cuts—ugly scars littered with bleached wood and stumps, although areas were also greening with new growth. High above us soared five snow-smearred cones. Small islands—covered with evergreens abutting the waterline or with only a few green stalks—dotted the water. Eddies full of swirling popweeds

the Sognefjord, measuring 110 miles. The only fjords that beat that length are Greely Fiord/Tanquary Fjord on Ellesmere Island in Nunavut at 124 miles, and the longest of all, Greenland's Scoresby Sund at 189 miles.

B.C.'s two longest are the Gardner Canal and Knight Inlet, both of which are about 61 miles.

Did you know that Puget Sound is a fjord, as is Hood Canal? That Howe Sound, Indian Arm, Desolation Sound and Jervis Inlet were all wrought the same way? Most of these fjords are too wide and rug-

ged to bridge so they have necessitated active ferry systems and led to the ownership of many, many private boats.

From Seattle through to Alaska, the Inside Passage's fjords and innumerable islands make this coastline one of the longest in the world. The Canadian portion—from the U.S. border to the Alaskan Panhandle—is 885 kilometres as the Canada goose flies, but if you count the coastlines of all the islands and waterways, they add up to 25,750 km or five times the width of continental Canada.

and kelp surrounded us. Whole trees with tangled roots floated by having been knocked down by the many rockslides that occur on the precipitous bluffs.

White, bare streaks in the dark foliage demonstrate that even 10,000 years after the glaciers thawed the soil is still thin and easily dislodged. As rain falls and saturates the earth perched on hard rock, an avalanche of trees, rock, and earth catapults down stripping the rock bare. Clearcutting adds to the frequency of rockslides.

Along the way, we noted a huge turquoise structure, the Gypsy Lodge, a floating motel. We presumed it's a mobile home for the fallers whose equipment lined the shore. In the distance, we also saw the bright red roofs of Nimmo Bay Wilderness Resort, where hunters and fishers gather for adventures.

Wind absent, we motored to the top of MacKenzie, the lone boat in the anchorage. Several cedar log-booms were tied to shore, small

branches sticking out in all directions creating a sham haze of vegetation. The strong cinnamon scent of the freshly cut cedar perfumed the air. We swung gently in the current looking west down the fjord.

SUDDENLY, THE PLACID WATER HOPPED AND UP TO A HUNDRED WHITE-SIDED DOLPHINS FLOUNCED, LEAPED AND VAULTED THEMSELVES OUT OF THE WATER.

The slowly changing August light turned from pale rose to flaming tangerine. No moon. No ambient light. A zillion stars. Well worth the voyage.

Knight Inlet This is one time we might have liked a powerboat. The fjord's length, its strong currents, sudden williwaws and sparse anchorages kept us from trying to cruise to its head at Mt. Waddington. There's no way we can sail the 61 miles round trip in one day. Thus

an aft wind gently blew us about halfway into spacious Glendale Cove, famous for the grizzlies that congregate at its shallow head. The anchorage seemed safe so we set the hook in about 20 metres. While we ate dinner in the cockpit, a couple of black bears gambolled on the rocks at the end of the cove.

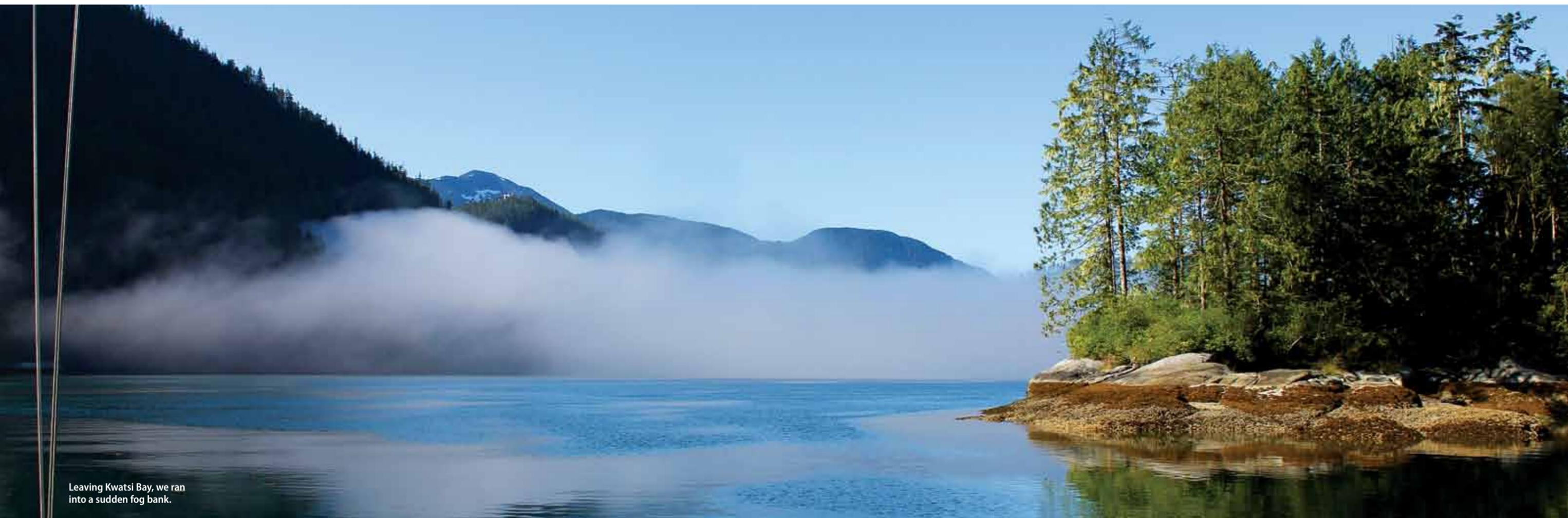
The guides warn of sudden wind changes—and they're right. We had a quiet evening with only one other vessel, a tour boat, *Odyssey*, in the anchorage. But by midnight, a northerly up to 30 knots began howling and the anchor watch was on. With the tide, we were now in 25-metre water. We turned on the electronic charts and learned the anchor had dragged a small distance. We bounced around. By 02:00 it calmed down, but by 04:00, the winds began another merry dance. We let out more and more chain and rode until all 90 metres had been deployed and *Beyond the Stars* circled and circled. It was

pitch black and we didn't dare to sleep until early morning when the winds abated. Life looked safer in the daylight.

We'd seen grizzlies with the binoculars so we rowed the dinghy to the head of the cove to witness them up close. But after we'd bypassed the old pilings that once supported a cannery, the bears had finished breakfast and disappeared into the woods. Guests from the nearby Knight Inlet Lodge—an outfit devoted to grizzly bear viewing were also cruising around the cove in their dinghies. The floating lodge burned completely a month later but new floating structures will be installed in time for the 2013 bear watching season.

T

TO VISIT ALL OF B.C.'S FJORDS would take a lifetime. We only visited a tiny fraction this time, but journeys like these will fill you with joy. These places are awesome—in the original sense of the word. 🐻



Leaving Kwatsi Bay, we ran into a sudden fog bank.