

SAN JUAN SOJOURN

Story by **JEANNE CRAIG**

We cruise one of the most beautiful corners of the world on a brand-new Back Cove 33.

Photography by **TRACY FRANKEL**





Imagine a place where you feel almost unreachable, a ruggedly beautiful corner of the world several miles out to sea and far enough from everything that only seals can be seen socializing on the ledges of wet rocks. That's what we found the morning we rounded the south end of Lopez Island, craning our necks for a glimpse at the tops of the

granite cliffs standing watch over wild bays like Watmough, where wind-driven water lashed against empty beaches. It's an earthy, moody place any person would want to see at least once, and a destination that any sensible boater would want to explore more than twice.

The San Juan Islands sit between three major cities in the Pacific Northwest—Seattle, Vancouver and Victoria—but the people cruising here are far from the urban life, unless you know of a metropolitan area that counts orca whales among its residents. Naturally spectacular, this portion of the San Juan Archipelago is one of the most popular boating destinations in the country if not the world. There are over 300 miles of saltwater shoreline to explore and the coasts are a mixed bag of shallow and deep harbors, calm and reef-studded bays, so there's enough variety to keep an experienced helmsman both interested and on his toes.

This world-class destination was on our mind when *Motor Boating* made plans to celebrate its 100th anniversary with stories about some of the greatest places to cruise. We were able to coordinate this trip with the help of Bentley Collins, vice president at Back Cove Yachts,

who put us in touch with a helpful dealer who had a new Back Cove 33 fueled up and ready to go. Dean Ouillette owns Bellingham Yacht Sales in Bellingham, Wash. This former merchant marine is a Maine native who moved west to run ships for an oil refinery. Like some other locals who draw on a Down East past, Dean says the San Juans have much in common with his East Coast home. The boating is just as good, if not better, he says, if for no other reason than the temperature is 20 degrees warmer.

Before we left Bellingham, Dean suggested we stop at one of his favorite places, Matia Island, and to make sure we found it, he asked his son Matt to join our crew. Matia is on the northern fringe of the San Juans. Most boaters drive past with a wave and continue on to the big anchorage at nearby Sucia. Matia is smaller and more private with just a few moorings and a single dock that leads to a dark sand beach walled by sandstone. There



was another boat tied up when we arrived. Its owner helped with our lines, and then was considerate enough to carry his small, chatty dog into the cabin so we could absorb the immense quiet of the place, which could be the reason Dean enjoys Matia so much. In the days to follow, we would explore other peaceful anchorages like this one, and most would be empty. "That's the beauty of cruising on the shoulder season," Dean had said. "Spring and fall are the best times for boating in the San Juans."

There are some challenges associated with boating in late April, when we got under way. Wind can be a nuisance. In some areas, even relatively mild winds can double in velocity as they enter channels and become constrained by the steep hills on either side. But we had a capable boat in the Back Cove, a beautiful Downeast-style cruiser built in Casco, Maine, with a solid, beamy hull that felt planted in a chop and always well-balanced

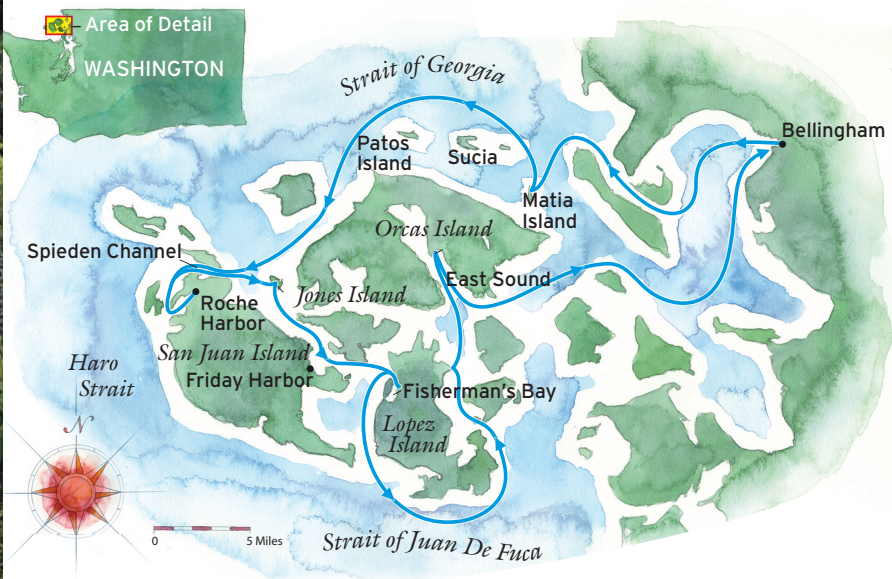
GREAT OUTDOORS (clockwise from top left): The Back Cove 33 under way; the lighthouse at Patos; the fallen trees on Jones Island; Friday Harbor; go online for video of the cruise.



(read the review in our June issue). Temperatures in the afternoon hovered in the low 60s during our visit, which is colder than some people like, but we were happy in our fleeces, which we needed only when we left the protected pilothouse. Our 33 had the optional hard enclosure. When it got nippy, we just shut the sliding door aft. And if temperatures were to take a dive, we were prepared with the optional heater. One of the nicest features on the Back Cove is the dinette. It's located behind the companion bench opposite the helm, but situated so that anyone who's seated there can see forward over the bow, aft and to the sides. Our crew of four (photographer Tracy Frankel was also with us) put it to good use.

As cozy as the cabin was, there were moments when we just had to step outside like the tourists we were to gawk at the views. After leaving Matia, for instance, we





did a slow cruise past Patos, where an abandoned lighthouse sits on a long, lonely point. “Better than an Andrew Wyeth painting,” said Tracy, clicking away with her camera. And we were hanging over the gunwales again after we made the short run down President’s Channel to Spieden Island. Across the grass-covered slope on the island’s south side there were a dozen very unusual animals grazing. Goats? Sheep? Cows? We couldn’t decide. Later, we learned that a group of investors had tried unsuccessfully to open a lodge for hunters who would pay for the chance to bag exotic animals that had been imported from around the world. The business went bust, but the strange creatures remain.

We spent that first night in Roche Harbor on San Juan Island. Boaters who’ve never been to this part of the country have heard about this harbor and the top-notch marina, Roche Harbor Resort, equipped to accommodate boats up to 200 feet. In season, some 40 dockhands are employed to keep up with the constant traffic. The marina has over 350 slips, 250 of which are for transient boats, yet reservations are always necessary in July and August. The village that surrounds the marina is also one of those places you hear a lot about. It’s listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the guidebooks say it’s come a long way from a 19th-century lime kiln operation to a modern resort. Yet when we saw the 121-year-old Hotel de Haro at the head of the harbor, looking every bit her age, we wondered if we should throttle back on our expectations. “Does it remind you of that place in ‘The Shining?’” asked Bentley.

Speaking of ghosts, the polite receptionist in the hotel lobby acknowledged that some guests do get “pricklies” on the back of their necks. But that’s half the fun of the Hotel de Haro. And the pricklies didn’t keep previous guests like Teddy Roosevelt and John Wayne from getting a good night’s sleep here.

Having devoured a four-star dinner at the hotel’s restaurant, we needed exercise the next morning, so we headed to Jones Island. Back in 1990, 100-mph winds tore through Jones and took down hundreds of trees. Many were never removed because of concerns about the ecological impact of such an action. As we walked the half-mile trail leading from the dock on the north side to the bay on the south, we felt like we were in some enchanted forest. There are huge evergreens lying on their sides with their roots completely upended. It’s a sculpture garden of sorts, compliments of Mother Nature. The wooded trail opens onto a grassy meadow and the remains of an old apple orchard. One of Matt’s colleagues told him 18th century British sailors would stop at Jones for a fruit fix to stave off scurvy.

We next made a fast stop at Friday Harbor, the hub of the San Juans. It’s centrally located and gets the ferry traffic from the mainland, so it’s a great place for a



WILD AND GRAND (clockwise from top left): The formal garden at the Hotel de Haro in Roche Harbor; the Moran Mansion at Rosario Resort on Orcas; hanging out on Lopez; Bentley Collins and Matt Oulette.

crew change. The harbor also is amazingly well protected by a floating breakwater designed by the Army Corps of Engineers. The huge marina (close to 500 slips) hosts about 12,000 boats every summer. This bustling port was very different from the one we found in Fisher’s Bay on Lopez Island, where we docked the second night. “Welcome to slow-pep,” was the greeting we received from the innkeepers at the Edenwild. They went out of their way to map out a bike route for us, since that’s what people like to do most on Lopez (it’s one of the flattest islands in the San Juans). But a light rain was falling, so we walked the small village instead.

From Lopez we went north into East Sound. This run was the highlight of the cruise. The big, fjord-like bay carves into Orcas Island, which has the tallest mountains in the San Juans. It’s one of those rare, wonderful places to cruise because you find yourself looking up as often as you do straight ahead. We turned east into Cascade Bay for a look at Rosario Resort, and the famous Moran Mansion, and to check out the marina. The East Coast members of our crew were surprised to learn how reasonable dockage is—\$1.62 per foot.

“There’s our eagle du jour,” said Bentley from the wheel of the Back Cove as we left Cascade Bay to return to Bellingham. We had seen our share of those, along with the other wildlife and views we had read about. The only things we’d missed were the crowds and the orca whales. Now we have one good reason to go back.

For more information, contact Back Cove Yachts, (207) 594-8844. www.backcoveyachts.com

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