

Planning a cruise to Northern British Columbia and Alaska

By Katherine Buchanan and Carl Sidle

The first question to ask is: “Why do I want to do this?” Some people want to get out on their boat and see new places, experience new anchorages, meet new people, and experience new things. Others would rather get away from so much civilization and find a quiet harbor to anchor, explore, read, contemplate, etc. And there are those that want to “do” a particular area – like the Broughtons, Northern BC or Alaska. That would be the short but sweet visit. Whatever your reasons, think about what they are and that will help you plan your trip. It will also figure out how much time you want to allot. The old Douglas’ book “Exploring the Inside Passage to Alaska” offers examples of different itineraries for boats with speed of excess of 10 knots to boats that go 5 knots.

- “Ultra Marathon” for well-equipped offshore cruising boats with a cruising speed more than 10 knots.--4 week minimum
- “The Highlights”--6 weeks minimum.
- “The Classic”--8 weeks minimum.
- “Dream”--3 months or more.
- “Maxi-Dream”--unlimited time.

Planning is the best way to avoid surprising situations. There will be surprising situations and planning for them is not out of the question, but there is always something new. To quote from the Douglas’ book, “A solid plan, executed with good judgment minimizes potential surprises and has more to do with a successful voyage than the size or speed of your boat, or the number of crew you have aboard.”

What should we consider in thinking about going? First, think about yourself. How do you feel about handling your boat? How comfortable are you being on it? What do you need to do to make yourself more confident? Second, think about your boat. How does it handle? What are its best features, hard chine or round bottom? Does it handle well in a following sea or best to tack? On a long cruise an autopilot or two captains is a must. Keep a live watch that is the lookout for obstructions in the water, changes in waves and wind, etc. Are you taking extra crew? Meeting friends at a particular location at a time certain? Put that in your plan with a fairly wide window to get there.

Here are some other things to consider:

- Weather. Traveling on a boat no matter how big means you pay close attention to the weather. One article I read recommended reading “The Perfect Storm” for an example of what all can go wrong -- a bit extreme. There are many books about Northwest Weather. Listen to the marine weather on your VHS radio. Look at your barometer. Listen to the chatter on the VHS about what is going on ahead of you--fog, high winds coming in, or sunshine and calm seas. And, of course, look outside. There are many websites. Some boaters have a subscription to XM Weather service. Know how to use your equipment before you leave the dock.
- Safety equipment. Have PFDs in good condition for everyone you expect to be on board. Have a ready life ring in case someone on your boat that falls overboard or you have to rescue someone else in the water. Have a plan for how you are going to get them back on the boat.
- Fuel stops. North of Cape Caution fuel stops are few and far between. Plan for that. Also plan for provisioning.

- Water. Plan for that also unless you have a water maker. Have adequate water in case something does not work.
- Repairs. Repair shops are also few and far between. Carry spare parts. In Alaska there are grids in most towns that can be used if you want to do some work or inspect the bottom.

Most of all, plan your trip so it will be a memorable and enjoyable event in your life.

Other Tips:

- Radio and cell phones. Learn to use your VHF radio before you leave. Know how to give your position, know how to answer Coast Guard questions and know when you need to call them. Cell phones are great, but coverage north of Cape Caution is spotty or nonexistent. Add a Canadian rider on your cell service before you leave the US.
- Docking and anchoring. If you are unfamiliar with docking techniques, practice here before you leave. Take classes if possible. Do the same with anchoring – practice.
- Charts and chart plotters. Carry paper charts as well as your electronic ones. Learn how to put in a route, set a mark, etc.
- Insurance. Check your boat policy. Does it have an extension for Northern Canada and SE Alaska on the Inside Passage?
- US and CA Customs. Know the restrictions for provisions, such as produce, meats, and alcohol, when crossing both borders. Check the custom websites for both Canada and the United States. Firearms are strictly controlled in Canada. Don't bring them. If you have a pet, bring their vaccination papers.

Health:

- If you have any doubt about your physical ability to handle a strenuous 3 month cruise, discuss it with your doctor
- Carry enough of your medications for the trip and preferably 2 weeks beyond. Know your doctor's telephone number in case he needs to order meds for you. Ask him to order a common antibiotic for you just in case.
- Supply your first aid kit with OTC meds for colds, allergies, diarrhea, sea sickness, Ace wraps, etc. Know CPR.
- If you have a spare \$1,200 bring a defibulator with you. It could save a life.
- Check your health insurance policy for coverage away from home and whether it covers emergency medical transportation.

Carl's Check List for Boat Preparation for Cruising to Alaska:

- It's a 3 month commitment. Plan for 1000 nm to Glacier Bay and 500 to 1000 nm for side trips. At 7.5 knots, this is 400 hours running time. My log shows a typical summer cruising to be 100-150 hours. A trip to Alaska is at least 3 times the hours of a normal year.
- Oil needs to be changed at 200-250 hours, so you will need to change oil during the trip. Take oil filters, containers, any special tools, etc. with you. I am assuming that you will change the oil before leaving.
- Carry spare fuel filters. A dual fuel filter system is recommended. Plan on the same for your generator set, you will put heavy usage on it.
- Change all rubber impellers (sea water pump) and carry spares. If they fail, your engine will

overheat. Then you only have 2 options. Either shut the engine down or risk destroying it.

- Adjust valves.
- Adjust your fuel injectors. If they are approaching 1000 hours, consider having them rebuilt or carry a spare.
- Clean raw water strainers.
- When was the last time you disassembled your heat exchangers and cleaned them?
- Replace the zincs in your heat exchangers.

Some notes:

- Go by your own experience as to what is most likely to fail. Either rebuild it or carry a spare.
- I carry a spare alternator. Remember to bring a gear puller or any special tools needed to change the pulley.
- Carry spare belts for anything that has one, such as the alternator and water pump.
- Are your batteries old? Have you checked the water level?

Other Items:

- Carry a complete spare raw water pump as a direct replacement.
- Head/ Toilet repair kit. You will be using it every day for 3 months. The Admiral isn't happy using a bucket.

Anchoring:

- You will spend most of your time at anchor, be prepared to anchor in 100 feet of water. I carry 300 feet of chain which is adequate in most cases.
- Ensure your anchor windlass is in top condition.
- If anchoring in 20 feet of water, make sure it's low tide. The tidal range can be as much as 20 feet. You don't want to go aground when tide goes out and you don't want to have too little chain when the tide comes in!
- Carry a spare anchor sufficient to be used as your primary and sufficient anchor rode for it.

Dinghy:

- Service your outboard and be prepared to tow with it if you're in a tight spot.
- Carry spare parts, such as plugs, lower unit oil, etc. Your life may depend on it.
- Carry an extra tank of fuel.