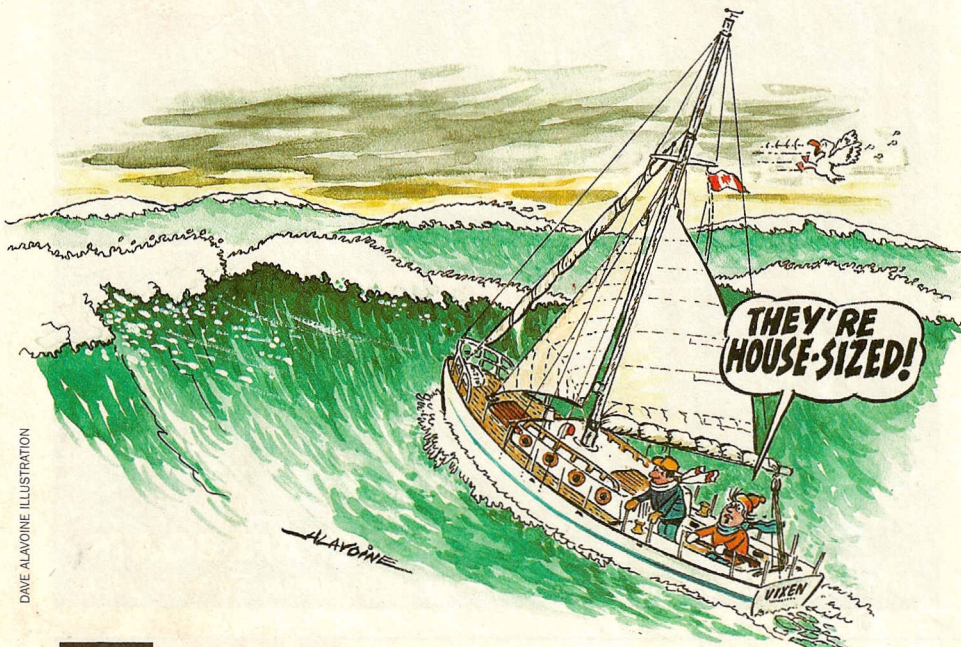


BLOWING OUT THE COBWEBS

It's the best way to test a new boat's abilities



DAVE ALAVOINE ILLUSTRATION

There is great cruising along the B.C. coast during the shoulder seasons of spring and summer; uncrowded anchorages and plenty of wind are the rewards if one is willing to put up with rain, cold and limited daylight. However, to enjoy completely deserted gunkholes and guaranteed “rail in the water” sailing, the season to be out on the water is winter. Of course it’s freezing cold, perpetually damp and the rarity of two consecutively sunny days are something to tell your grandchildren about years later. There stands to be a reason no one is out there. If, however, you’ve just bought your first sailboat and don’t have the experience of years of miserable winter cruises in this part of the world, you might be tempted to give winter sailing a try.

Last year I bought my first sailboat—a classic wooden cutter built in 1952. The *Vixen* had been lovingly restored in Port Townsend, WA, over the last decade. As a result of a public re-launching and multiple appearances at the Wooden Boat Show, the boat was a bit of a Port Townsend celebrity. “Oh, you’re

thinking of buying *Vixen*,” locals would say to me when they discovered my intentions. Then they would scrutinize me head to foot as if to assess my worthiness. I could sense them thinking: Who is this guy stealing away our town’s treasure? (I planned to take the boat north to Victoria.)

Soon, however, money changed hands, papers were notarized and the boat was mine. With *Vixen* in my possession, I was anxious to go on a first cruise with my girlfriend, Tiffany. Unfortunately, it was the middle of winter. For weeks on end, powerful winds swept the coast of Vancouver Island and freezing rain forestalled any hope of a midwinter cruise. By early March, the anticipation was unbearable. *Vixen* was ready, I was ready, Tiffany was willing and yet I’d continued to be relegated to poking out of Victoria Harbour for short day sails in the Strait.

Despite the season, a week-long cruise was overdue. The forecast was not encouraging. The marine weather channel was peppered with discouraging phrases like “gale force winds” and “small craft advisory,” not to mention the eter-

nally pessimistic report of some unfathomable wave heights at the entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait. Despite these meteorological warnings, I decided a Friday afternoon in early March looked good and we should head north to the Gulf Islands for a week of cruising.

We sailed downwind from Victoria wrapped in massive scarves Tiffany knitted. A gentle breeze came up, the skies cleared and I felt the pleasing sense of freedom and adventure brought on by motion under sail. Happy with the trip’s fortuitous commencement, we rounded Discovery Island light and anchored in 20’ of water. As the sun went down, the wind died off and the waters flattened. This being my first cruise, I was easily deceived by such placidity. Tiffany and I snuggled into the forepeak anticipating a deep sleep away from the sounds of the city.

At 0100 I was awoken by violent rocking. The cupboard doors were banging. Stray fruit rolled across the cabin sole. Anxiously, I sat up and looked out a porthole. To my horror, the wind had switched to the southeast, the cove’s most exposed quarter, and was blowing hard. To make matters worse, the tide was rushing through our “harbour” and prevented *Vixen* from pointing into the wind; breaking seas slammed into the side of the boat. With every hit the anchor grumbled along the seabed, moving us closer to the rocky shore. My first thought was: “Oh, great, this boat survives 50 years and a dozen owners and I wreck it off Vancouver Island after owning it for less than three months.”

Pushing these thoughts aside, I jumped on deck, dropped the second anchor and let out all the chain and rode possible on both anchors. This held *Vixen* for the moment but the wind was continuing to build. I knew we should probably run for

it—motor-sail out of the cove and run downwind into the darkness of Haro Strait. But as I looked at the waves breaking off the surrounding ledges, the thought of heading out was slightly more terrifying than staying where we were and hoping the anchors would hold.


I paced the cabin and fretted. The cupboard doors continued to bang. Books and papers flopped onto the cabin floor and slid from side to side. Surprisingly, Tiffany slept and even managed to produce some gentle snoring. When dawn came, we were facing a full gale. There were no other boats in sight and the sea was a mass of white froth. As the first rays from a pale sun illuminated the cabin, Tiffany roused herself, looked out the companionway and stated the obvious: "We gotta get out of here!" As she said it, I realized how true it was; if the anchor were to drag or—God forbid—the rode to break, we would be on the rocks in about 20 seconds.

With Tiffany at the helm, I went forward, raised a reefed main and staysail and pulled up both anchors. Tiffany pointed us toward the cove's entrance and I went back to join her as we prepared to punch through the gale-fed breakers and out to open water. I now realized one reason why *Vixen* had been around for half-a-century. She met the breaking swells with what amounted to nothing less than enthusiasm. With each wave her bow would soar skyward and then push forward in an easy, confident motion.

Once out of the cove, we turned and ran with the wind. Tiffany gradually pulled her knuckles from the tiller and managed a faint smile. The wind held all morning and we zoomed along the coast of San Juan Island riding over what Tiffany would later describe as "house-sized waves." This was great sailing! The sky was clear and behind us the Olympic Mountains sparkled under the bright sunlight. Memory of the early morning's near catastrophe grew hazy with the reverie of a great downwind sail.

Innocently, Tiffany turned her bundled body towards me asked why there were no other boats out sailing. "Well," I shouted above the wind as I pulled my scarf up over my nose and pushed my hat down to my eyebrows, "I guess they're just not into winter sailing." ☺

STRANDED ON THE WATER?
**NEVER PAY
 A TOWING
 BILL AGAIN.**



**UNLIMITED TOWING BY
 VESSEL ASSIST**

**Canadian Owned And Operated
 Service Providers**
 Transport Canada Certified Operators and Vessels
 Fully Insured

UNLIMITED CAPTAIN'S CARD SERVICE
 Provides service within 30 coastal/offshore miles
 from a VESSEL ASSIST homeport.

UNLIMITED GOLD CARD SERVICE
 Provides service within 50 coastal/offshore miles
 from a VESSEL ASSIST homeport.

All service levels provide for any recreational boat you
 own, borrow, or charter in Canada or U.S.

**To enroll by phone,
 call: 800-888-4869
 or BoatUS.com**

24 Hour Emergency Dispatch

Vessel Assist Goes the Extra Miles for You

**SHIPSHAPE
 INTERIORS INC.**



Richmond
 604-729-4695
 Vancouver
 604-925-0778
 Fax:
 604-821-1242

On Board Consultations

**Custom Upholstery
 Drapes & Blinds
 Carpeting
 Fitted Bedding**

Shelter Island Marina
 #175-6831 Graybar Road
 Richmond, BC V6W 1H3

WINCHES

From around-the-world racers to family cruisers,
 Harken winches can't be beat.
 Aluminum, polished-bronze, stainless steel
 and chrome finishes.
 1-, 2-, 3- and 4-speeds. Super-holding self-tailers.
 Powered electric or hydraulic.
 A variety of shapes and sizes.



B53.2STC winch
 pictured. Features
 may vary by
 winch model.

HARKEN



17-4PH stainless steel load-carrying gears and bronze gears for strength, durability and efficiency



4 pawls maximize reliability and minimize backlash



Caged stainless steel roller bearings reduce friction

**See us at the
 Vancouver Boat
 Show—Booth 46**

Western Marine Company
 1494 Powell Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5L 5B5
 Sales Tel: 604-253-7721, Fax: 604-253-2656
 Toll Free Tel: 1-800-663-0600, Fax: 1-800-663-6790
 Email: sales@westernmarine.com, Web: www.harken.com