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BUTE INLET
**The
Frontier
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Bute Inlet

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY ADAM MCKENTY

Cruising the Frontier Fiord of the South Coast

For those willing to brave its challenges, Bute is one of the most spectacular places on the B.C. coast.

After seven hours motor-ing up Bute, McKenty and crew dropped the hook at the head of the inlet. Mount Rodney's twin peaks are visible to the left with Superb Mountain's sawtooth summit in the centre.

A lean timber wolf trots towards us through the tall grass alongside the Homathko River. Across the rolling meadow, huge mountains heave up from the valley bottom, their ice-capped peaks gleaming in the midday sun. The wolf saunters out of the grass, crosses the riverbank and stops at the water's edge. Fifteen metres away, our rubber dinghy labours against the current. I watch from the canoe as we're towed upriver behind the dinghy, and the wolf stares back at us intently.

As we slowly pass, it follows, ambling among the giant stumps beached on the muddy bank. Our handheld radios buzz with inter-boat communication.

"Do wolves swim?" someone asks.

Not today. Two boatloads of wide-eyed humans don't interest the wolf for long, and it slips away into the underbrush. We're not disappointed. There's enough adventure in Bute's rugged vastness to satisfy any visitor—and then some.

Branching off the tangle of tide-swept passages north of the Strait of Georgia, Bute is a 40-mile-long fiord that cuts deep into the rocky backbone of the Coast Mountains. Home to abundant wildlife (and a few hardy people), it remains a backwater of B.C. cruising, visited by only a handful of boats each year. The few willing to brave its isolation, unpredictable climate and complete lack of protected



Above: The ketch sits at anchor, with the Teaquahan Valley in the background.

Left: Bute's famously foul weather was nowhere to be found on the way up, as clear skies and light winds revealed the natural wonders of one of B.C.'s largest and most spectacular inlets.



moorage are fortunate to experience one of the most spectacular places on the B.C. coast.

BUTE BOUND We left our homeport at Cortes Island on the morning of May 21 in our 55' wooden ketch, *Daemon* (see sidebar). Onboard were my older brother, serving as chief engineer, my parents (the skipper and first mate), my younger sister, three younger brothers and myself. We were an eager crew. The wind was light, and we planned to reach the head of Bute Inlet by nightfall. We left the sails under their covers and motored up Calm Channel under a clear blue sky. At 1300, two hours from Cortes, we passed the derelict bell tower at Church House and turned east into Bute Inlet.

The forest-covered hills near the inlet's mouth soon gave way to rocky faces and stunning snow-capped peaks. As the mountains grew taller, the inlet's glacier-fed rivers tinted the seawater a brilliant turquoise. Our waterline crept 10 centimetres higher on the hull as the boat settled into the freshwater surface layer.

Environment Canada's weather service faded out a few miles in, blocked by Bute's

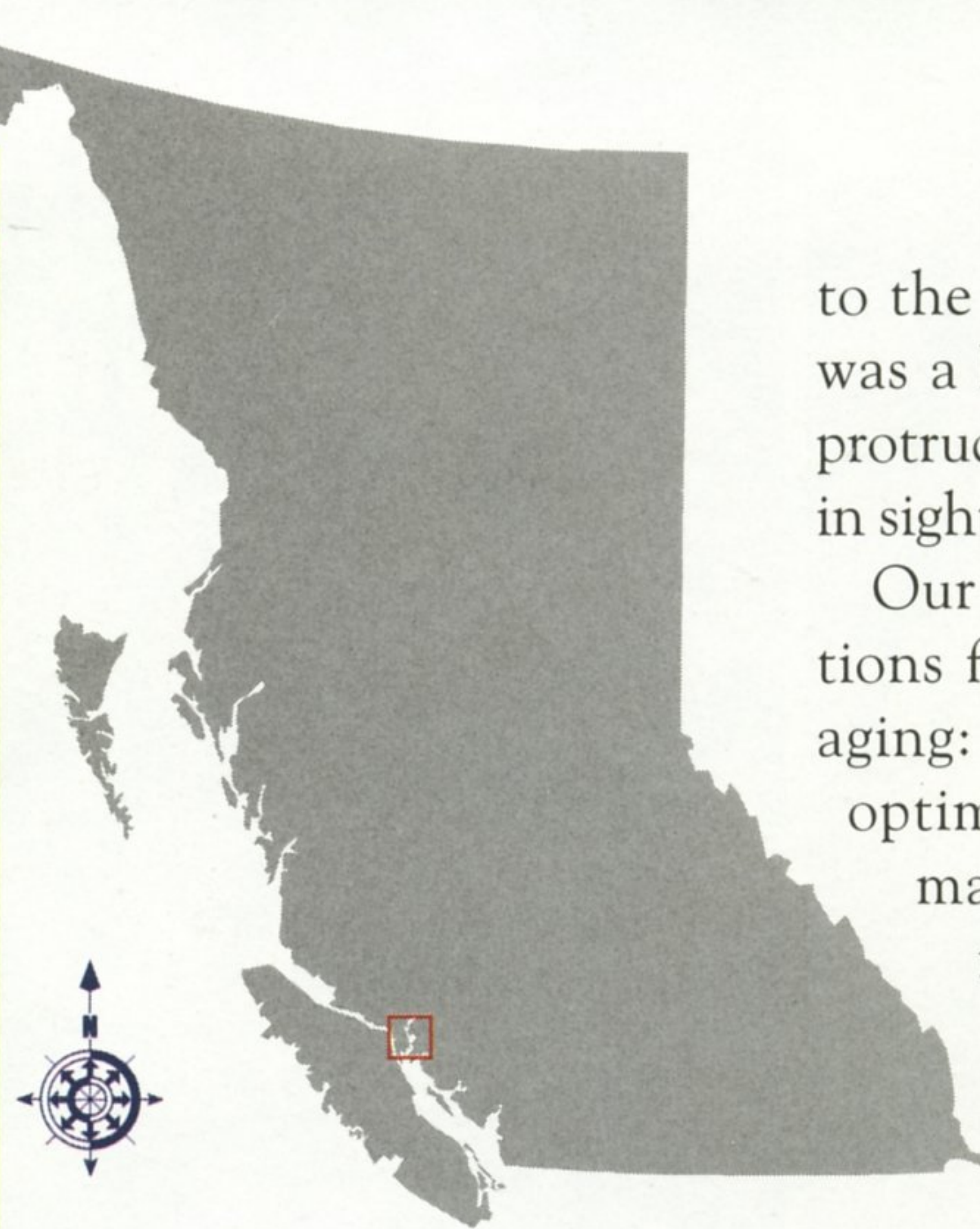
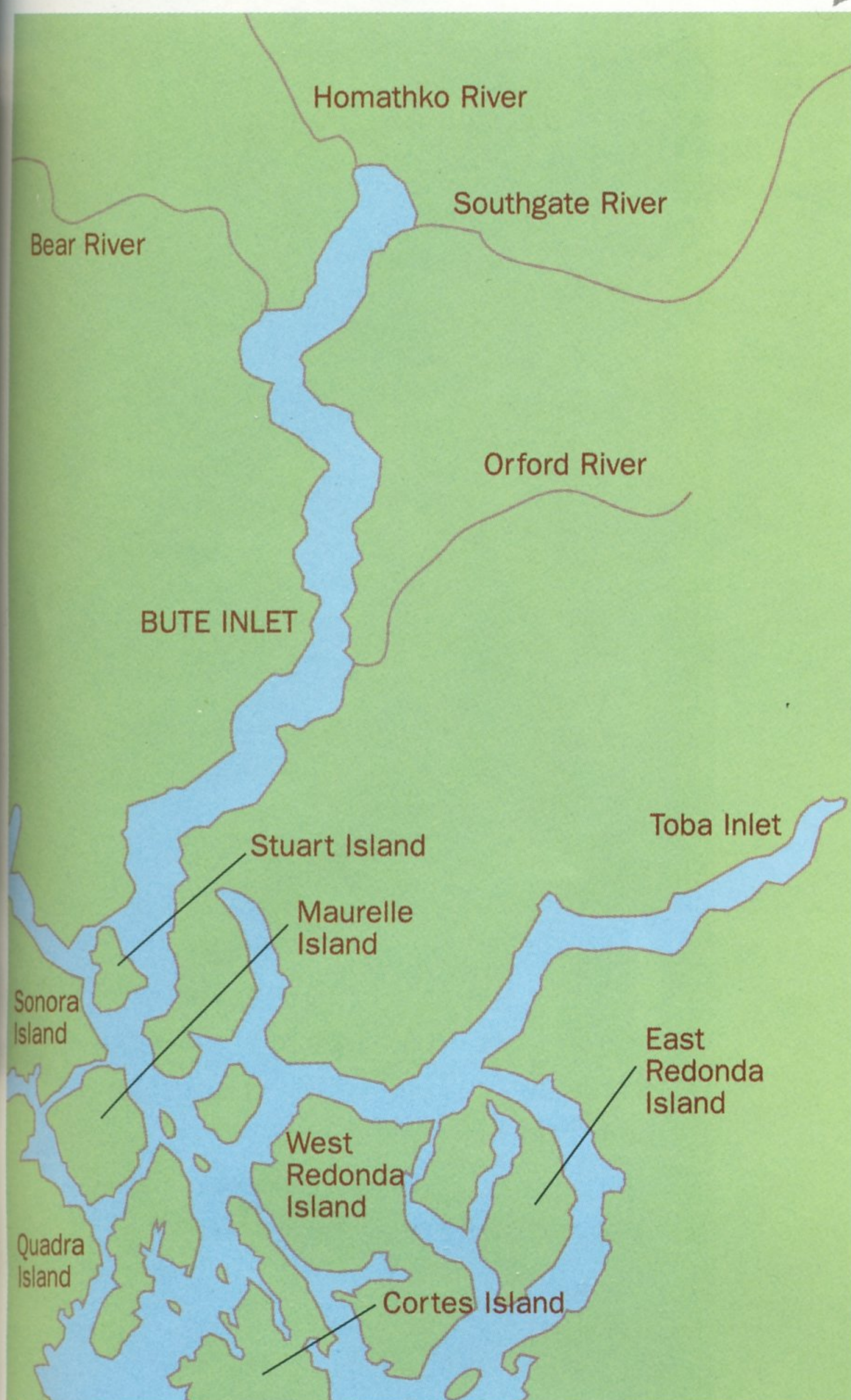


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to the west of the Homathko's mouth was a log dump, and a company dock protruded below. We were the only boat in sight.

Our chart book's terse sailing directions for Bute Inlet were not encouraging: "No safe anchorage." From an optimistic look at the chart's depth markings, however, we guessed it might be possible to anchor near the Homathko—if we kept a sharp eye on the weather. After we set our hefty 54-kg Bruce in about 12 metres of water just

southeast of the river, a strong outflowing current swung us towards the bay. This was good news. As long as the weather remained friendly, the current would keep us away from the mud flats.

The next morning, we were ready for exploring. My older brother and I lowered the inflatable from its davits and headed for the river. The Homathko is about 190 metres across at the mouth. A small, grassy knob protruding from the

expanse of milky white water at the inlet's head. A glacier spilled over the top of Teaquahan Mountain in front of us, and two large river valleys cut through the vista of high mountains around the bay—the Homathko on the northwest and the Southgate on the southeast. Barely visible

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report at May 21 on (see brother, nts (the nger sis- myself. ind was ne head the sails up Calm At 1300, sed the use and

mountainous walls. Our cellphone also went silent. We were alone with the inlet and whatever weather it had in store.

About halfway up, we pulled in close to shore and drifted up to a spectacularly tall, narrow waterfall. One of more than 50 creeks that cascade down Bute's steep sides, it splashed into the bright blue water after falling across a 15-metre cliff face.

WADDINGTON HARBOUR After seven hours in the inlet, we arrived at Waddington Harbour, a three-mile-wide



Heading for the Homathko River on the first day of exploring. Between Teaquahan Mountain and the glacier-silted water, a thin line of trees marks the flat bottom of the Homathko Valley.

» QUITE A KETCH

Built in Courtenay by shipwright George Bruigom, the 34-year-old 55' ketch *Daemon* is a modified version of the L. Francis Herreschoff Marco Polo motorsailor.

Although the lines of its red cedar hull are from the design of an offshore yacht, the ketch was built for a fisherman who trolled for tuna off the west coast of Vancouver Island for several years before it was converted to a live-aboard cruiser.

In the 1980s, the saloon was modified into a floating dental office. Between trips as a dentist to Lasqueti, Cortes and other remote communities, the owner took his family on a voyage to Hawaii and the South Pacific.

In the fall of 2003, the McKenty family acquired the ketch, which still bears the marks of its colourful and varied career. Eventually the family hopes to take *Daemon* offshore.

shore just west of it marks the tiny half-acre Potato Point Indian Reserve. East of the river mouth, the flat valley bottom extends into a huge tidal mud flat dotted with stumps and dilapidated pilings.

Motoring upstream, we were spotted by two young grizzly bears foraging on the shore. Apparently not interested in socializing, they ambled up the grassy



bank and disappeared into the bushes. We returned from the river with the falling tide, and that afternoon we made another exploration with the rest of the crew, which included our memorable encounter with the wolf and a picnic on a sandbar half a mile upriver.

I was preparing dinner back onboard when an aluminium skiff motored out of the Homathko. Minutes later it was tied alongside and we introduced ourselves to Chuck Burchill, caretaker and manager of the Homathko logging camp. Two of northern Bute's four permanent residents, Chuck and Sheron Burchill, have been at the camp for the last 10 years. We were astonished to learn that Chuck moored his 61' home-built steel sailboat at the camp dock, three kilometres up the snag-strewn river. He encouraged us to bring our boat up there too, pointing out that the mud delta where we were anchored was fraught with sunken stumps spewed out by the Homathko, which could foul our anchor permanently.

SOUTHGATE RIVER Just as his motorboat pulled away, another open skiff approached from the Southgate side of the bay. In the centre of the boat, a huge grey-bearded man reclined on a grand armchair, controlling the boat's outboard with a two-metre chunk of black

Chuck and Sheron Burchill have made the Homathko Camp their home for the last 10 years.

hosepipe and sharing the chair's aged upholstery with a little grey dog.

"Are you lost?" he asked, pulling alongside. A prospector and lifelong inlet veteran, he launched into a series of extraordinary tales about Bute's hidden mineral riches, and a few alternate theories on the origins of Bute Wax (see sidebar), all delivered from his floating settee. Then, apparently satisfied that we hadn't come to jump any of his mining claims, he zoomed off towards the Southgate River.

Although five or six miles of the Southgate River are reportedly navigable in a dinghy, boulders protruding from the river's rocky bottom are a menace to outboards, while rapids can make it nearly impassable during the freshet in July and August, which also loosens snags from the river's banks.

While we did not go ashore, the prospector lives on a barge at the Southgate River delta. Temporary anchorage can be found just offshore or, for those with dinghies or small powerboats, in shallow water alongside a set of old pilings inside the protected finger near the prospector's barge. Jim Bowen, who owns 600 acres up the valley, was contacted later and said a Forest Service road leads 10 km up the valley. He explained there is a beautiful walk alongside the river, but notes, however, that hikers should expect to see bears, wolves and/or cougars. Bowen said grizzlies have charged both him and his truck several times.

We dined on deck as the sun sank behind the mountains beside us, and its final rays gilded Mount Rodney's jagged 8,000' summit, visible across the bay.



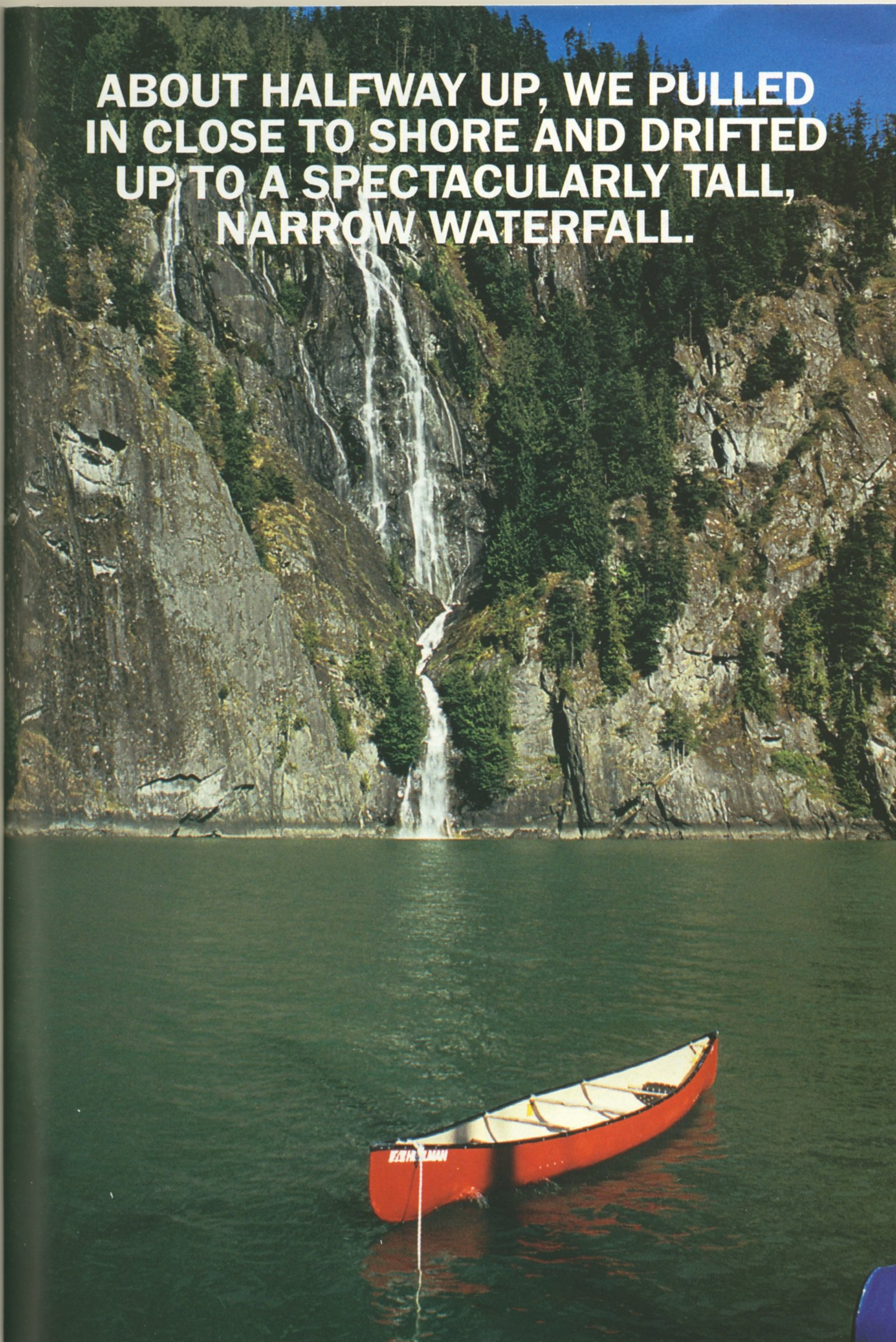
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**ABOUT HALFWAY UP, WE PULLED
IN CLOSE TO SHORE AND DRIFTED
UP TO A SPECTACULARLY TALL,
NARROW WATERFALL.**



This waterfall on the inlet's east side is one of more 50 creeks that pour out of the mountains into Bute Inlet.

UP THE HOMATHKO A drizzle sprinkled my face when I slid back the foredeck hatch at 0700 the next morning. After two days of clear skies and comfortable temperatures, the weather was closing in. Clouds hid the mountaintops and a breeze from the southeast rippled the inlet's pale surface.

The small Teaquahan River meanders out of the hills a mile east of the Homathko, and my older bother and I went to explore it in the early morning. We motored slowly through the shore-side meadow and into an overhanging

deciduous forest, startling several pairs of mallards as we passed. After circumnavigating a host of snags, we were eventually stopped about one kilometre up by a latticework of trees that had fallen across the river.

Back at the boat, the rest of the crew was impatient to get going. We climbed into the familiar seats of our well-travelled fibreglass canoe while our parents and four younger siblings piled into the dinghy, and we all headed for the Homathko.

Although we had accepted a tow the previous day, this time we paddled, working the back eddies near the banks and often outpacing the dinghy's 9.9-hp

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engine as it battled the swift but snag-free current in the centre of the channel. As we made our way upriver, drizzle thickened to shower, then rain. Across from our previous day's picnic spot we glimpsed a young black bear before it retreated into the forest.

After an hour of hard paddling, we followed the river as it bent to the west, and Chuck's sailboat, *Domina Del Mar*, came into view. We tied up at the logging

camp dock and found Chuck in the camp's spacious mechanic's shed and machine shop. He gave us a tour of the whole operation, including the 60-kilowatt hydroelectric system he built to power the camp. Excess electricity heated a gigantic hot tub made from the back of a dump truck, and a small greenhouse. Elegant rock gardens surrounded Chuck and Sheron's home, and across the tidy lawn a small plot held their vegetable garden.



A curious find: a can of bear spray, punctured by several bear tooth holes.

Besides the seasonal logging crews, Homathko Camp also accommodates hikers, kayakers, fishermen, photographers and mountaineers. A room in the bunkhouse, three homemade meals a day and the company of Bute's most knowledgeable long-time residents are all available for an inexpensive daily rate (for info or to book, call 250-286-0962).

Waving goodbye to our generous hosts, we loaded back into our boats for the ride downstream. The Homathko valley is a major bird migration flyway through the Coast Range, and large flocks of ducks dotted the river. A bald eagle flew out of the trees and flapped past us, then rolled and plummeted towards the river. Turning just above the water, it grabbed



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WAX AND WEATHER

One of Bute's many intriguing features is "Bute Wax," a mysterious oily goo that has occasionally appeared in large rafts on the inlet's surface after winter storms. In 1971, two research ships were sent to investigate, and after dragging a fine-mesh trawl net around in the inlet and analyzing the results, they concluded that Bute Wax was made up of the buoyant carcasses of millions of microscopic copepods that had succumbed to Bute's violent winter weather.

Larger things than zooplankton have also fallen to the inlet's temperamental climate. Known throughout this area of the coast as "Bute Winds," the winter storms that howl down the inlet from the high elevation ice fields around its head commonly reach 40 to 60 knots, and have been clocked at 120 knots. Notoriously high winds, sub-zero temperatures and the inlet's freshwater surface make a dangerous combination—one that sank many ice-encrusted booming tugs before the logging companies stopped operating in Bute during winter.

At high tide the picturesque Teaquahan River is passable in a dinghy for a kilometre or so, but hidden snags can put outboards at risk.

a duck in its talons. After a moment of confused flapping, it took off, leaving the dishevelled duck behind. The duck dove, and when it came up the eagle resumed its attack, but left again without its prey. After a third attempt, it gave up on the duck and returned to its perch.

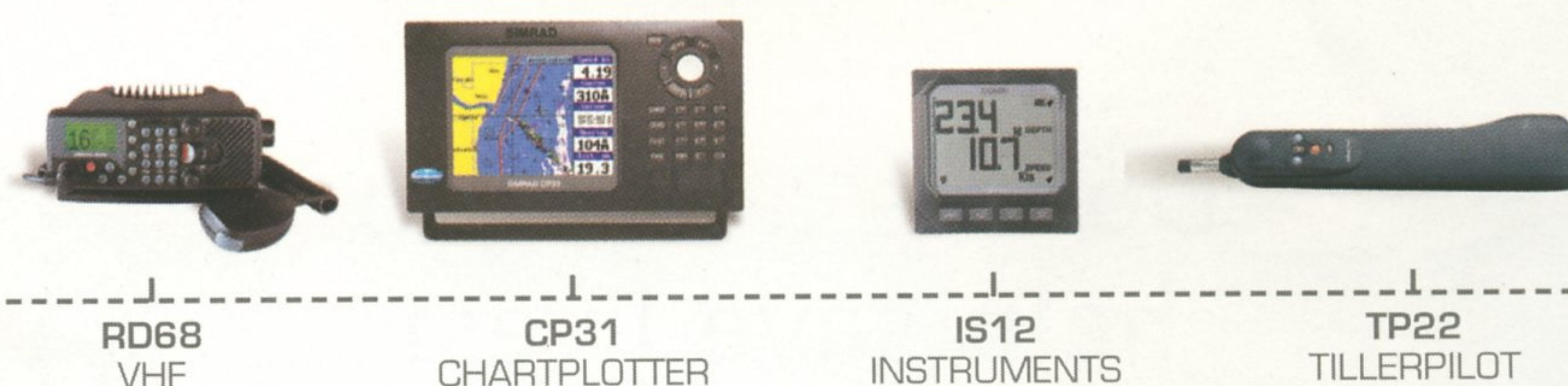
Although many slow-moving tributaries branch off the Homathko, perfect for exploring by canoe or kayak, we stayed in the main channel. The wind

was beginning to shake the treetops, and the ketch's insecure position on the edge of the river delta forbade any detours. Instead we paddled straight downstream, enjoying our easy progress—until we saw the river mouth.

STORMY DEPARTURE The inlet was furrowed by a strengthening southeaster, and a mess of pointy, metre-tall breakers blocked our way where it collided with



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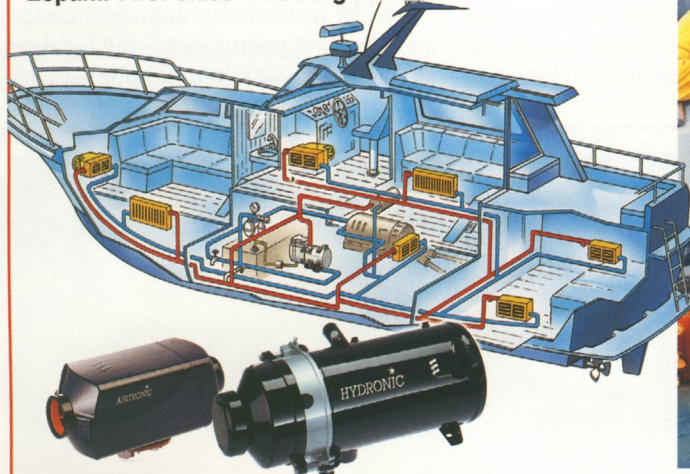
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the Homathko's current. The ketch had turned on its anchor and looked like it was nearly on the beach.

The canoe jabbed into the short, steep waves, then tilted up over their crests and slammed back down into the next set, taking water over the forward gunwales on the biggest waves. The heavily loaded dinghy ploughed through the breakers, showering its crew with spray.

Once onboard, we went straight to the depth sounder. It said 18' but we weren't convinced, suspecting that a steep, soft slope lay underneath. When the skipper dropped our sounding lead over the stern, it sank a few feet, then stopped. He jerked it up and glanced at the markers. "We've got about eight inches," he said, just as the boat sank behind a swell and we felt our keel nudge the bottom.

Grateful for the boat's massive full-skeg rudder, we wound in about 10 metres of all-chain rode to quickly move it away from the flats. We didn't know if we had dragged, or been swung into the mud by the wind. We were tense as we ate supper, pausing to drop the lead every few

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DREAMS OF GOLD

Although loggers and a few adventurous tourists are its only visitors these days, Bute Inlet hasn't always been so deserted.

The traditional home of the Homalco Nation (which had permanent settlements at the Homathko, Southgate and Orford rivers), Bute first caught the attention of European colonists in 1861, after large gold finds were made in the Cariboo on the other side of the Coast Range. Seeking a less roundabout route inland than the Fraser River, Victoria business man Alfred Waddington arranged a charter with the colonial government to build a wagon road from the head of Bute, up the Homathko canyon through the mountains, and into the gold fields of the Interior.

Although the tallest peak in the Coast Range now bears his name, Waddington's road never became reality. In the spring of 1864, a group of Chilcotin on whose traditional lands the road was being built, came out of the mountains and killed the construction crew. Still shrouded in historical uncertainty, the attack sparked the little-known "Chilcotin War" and ended Waddington's ambitious plans for Bute Inlet.

minutes. The wind increased to about 25 knots, and by 2200 we knew the anchor was dragging.

We flipped on our spreader-mounted floodlights (left over from the boat's days as an offshore tuna troller), hoisted the dinghy, tied the canoe on deck and braced ourselves for an all-night slog into the growing seas. At 2300 we motored out of the bay. The dim shapes of the mountains soon vanished behind a curtain of fog and driving rain, leaving only the red glow of the compass and the green flash of the radar trace to guide us out of the inlet. I went below. Lying in my bunk, I could feel the seas increasing as I fell asleep.

When I awoke for my 0400 watch, the

boat's motion was smooth. I pulled on my clammy survival suit, buckled on a harness and joined the on-watch crew in the dark cockpit. The wind had calmed, but rain still hammered the pilothouse. Later, the morning light revealed a silk-smooth ocean. Islands appeared, floated briefly between water and air, then vanished into the shifting mist.

At around 0800, as we passed the northern tip of Cortes Island, a pleasant

westerly breeze blew away the last scraps of fog. Unfurling the jib, we enjoyed a relaxing motor-sail to Campbell River. It was the perfect close for a magnificent West Coast adventure.

When not cruising the B.C. coast aboard his family's wooden ketch (or trying to keep the rot at bay), Adam McKenty writes and takes photographs from his home on Cortes Island. ●

IF YOU GO

Along with its spectacular scenery, Bute Inlet presents some substantial cruising challenges.

MOORAGE There is no good moorage in Bute. Its walls are as steep below the waterline as they are above, and a small bay at the mouth of the Orford River is the only place that affords any protection from the wind.

It's possible to anchor on the sea floor's relatively gradual slope at the head; however, it's completely exposed to the southeast, and the areas near the Homathko and Southgate rivers should be avoided because of snags. The logging company float on the west side of Waddington Harbour is apparently available in an emergency; otherwise, mooring options in Bute are scarce.

SNAGS The Homathko valley has been heavily logged, and the river bottom and the sea floor near its mouth are littered with stumps and sunken debris. A portable depth sounder would aid exploring, warning when the depth is within reach of a snag. A canoe or kayak is also helpful for getting into the inlet's many shallow and inviting streams.

WEATHER Bute is beautiful in spring, when snow still clings to the mountains' upper slopes. For wildlife viewing, the best time is from August to October, when spawning salmon in the Orford, Homathko and Southgate rivers attract bears, eagles and other wildlife. Frigid outflowing gales are common during winter months, making Bute a poor choice for off-season cruising.



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