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CHARTERING ROMANCE

BY JOLIE SHEA
PHOTOS BY GREG SHEA

A hassle-free getaway for two through the heart of the Gulf Islands



WHEN ONE THINKS OF THE LOVEBOAT, THE IMAGE OF a luxury cruise liner with lovers promenading about the decks comes to mind. For my husband and I, it was the idea of chartering a sailboat to explore the Gulf Islands on a four-day getaway just for two; a chance to relax and re-connect to ourselves, each other and to the sea.

After dropping off our young children at Nana's and heading south to Nanaimo, Greg and I are giddy like two teenagers alone for the first time. Our station wagon is packed with crab traps, gear and provisions as we drive to Stones Marina in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. We're chartering with Nanaimo Yacht Charters and Sailing School, located in a convenient and central location to the Gulf Islands, and a direct flight or ferry from Vancouver.

Within minutes of pulling into the main dock's unloading zone, we are met by friendly staff member Trevor Matthew, a certified CYA and ISPA instructor, who promptly leads us down the marina to our gorgeous Beneteau 331, *Kala Kala*. Unzipping the fully enclosed cockpit cover, past the binnacle instrument pod and steering wheel, we descend below for the start of our orientation. *Kala Kala* is a model yacht of luxurious coastal cruising having ample headroom, large head, shower and two main cabins, her teak interior polished and shining. A reusable gift bag welcomes us from Nanaimo Yacht Charters, and our berth's crisp navy sheets and towel set belies a grand hotel. Trevor runs over the yacht systems, which are reinforced in the onboard manual, and takes the time to familiarize us with the boat before handing over the keys.

Next we stop by the office, where Elenor, daughter of owners Ian & Shari MacPherson (also co-owned by Lorraine Bell), greets us with complimentary sunhats and goes over the necessary paperwork. We sign the Bareboat Charter Agreement, leave a refundable damage deposit and head to the classroom. Trevor, an expert at trip planning, pulls out the charts and we go over our route. With our loaned case of charts, guidebooks and current table, Trevor gets a wagon, we load our gear and I move our car to their designated parking area.

After consulting the Canadian Tide and Current Table-Volume 5, we're aiming for a 12:00 ▶







arrival at Dodd Narrows 5 miles away, the “gatekeeper” to the protected waterways of the Gulf Islands. Slack is soon, ebbing south in our direction, so we’re eager to depart before the narrows gets too turbulent. With extra hands on the dock to guide *Kala Kala* out of her slip, we cast the lines and start our adventure.

Past the beautiful Garry Oak meadows of Newcastle Island, through bustling Nanaimo Harbour, alongside honeycomb sandstone cliffs of Gabriola Island in Northumberland Channel, we shoot through Dodd into the calm waters of Stuart Channel. I take a moment on the bow after the busyness of the morning and breathe in the salty air. Time to slow down. A labyrinth of islands awaits us and Mount Galiano to the south at over 1,100 feet above sea level provides a landmark for our destination 25 miles away.

■ **GUNKHOLING ON GALIANO ISLAND** With winds predicted to be calm, we anchor east of Gray Peninsula, on the outside of protected Montague Harbour, a popular anchorage with mooring buoys and a marina. Greg pulls the skiff up onto our anchorage’s beautiful white shell beach, spreads a blanket and I unpack a picnic of smoked oysters, cream cheese and crackers. The sun is slowly tracking across the sky and we bask in its warmth, and the joy of being together enjoying the silence and slip of time.

Into the forest, I run ahead on the trail and duck into the hollow of an enormous arbutus tree, its smooth green trunk revealed by the peeling skin, then jump out to surprise Greg. Purple lupines line the salt-water lagoon as we overlook Montague Harbour, and the many boats at anchor make for a picturesque scene. Upon our return to our Beneteau, the sun has started to set. It’s Happy Hour! We sit comfortably in the



↑ **Top** Greg and Jolie Shea enjoying smoked oysters and cream cheese-crackers and a quiet moment at Montague Harbour on Galiano Island.

↑ **Above** The author looks out toward Montague Harbour.

teak lined cockpit, watching the sky change crimson in colour, cocktail in hand and I can’t imagine a more romantic start to our holiday.

■ **SEAFOOD AND SIPPING ON SATURNA ISLAND** Heading east into Trincomali Channel, past the busy ferry thoroughfare of Active Pass, we enter Navy Channel running between Mayne and North Pender Island to enter Plumper Sound.

Although it’s only midmorning we’re already thinking about a crab dinner when we drop our trap on a distinctive shoal in the sound. Now for the wine to complement our seafood! After covering a distance of 12 miles from Galiano we motor into Breezy Bay, Croker Point, the southernmost point of Saturna Island for a tour of Saturna Island Family Estate Winery.



← **Far left** The author pulls up crabs for dinner in Plumper Sound.
 ← ↓ **Left & below** Jolie and Greg Shea relax with a Couples Sussurus Spa signature Jade Hot Stone Massage at Poet's Cove Resort and Spa on South Pender Island.



It's low tide, Greg anchors in 16 feet and we take the skiff into the designated dock on the northern side of the bay. Following the signs, we walk for 15 minutes up a gravel road to a solid 95-year-old horse barn converted to a wine shop, tasting room and bistro. Nestled at the foot of the granite cliffs of Mt. Warburton Pike, rows of grapes as far as the eye can see are surrounded by sparkling waters, sailboats dotting the horizon. The 60-acre vineyard is a Shangri-La boasting a climate comparable to the Northern Mediterranean.

I hear voices amongst the netted rows of grapes, and we wander down to meet owners Larry and Robyn Page talking with their viticulturist, Meghan De Villiers, who grows the grapes and their oenologist, Danny Hattingh, who makes the wines. Over the next few hours Hattingh and De Villiers, a professional young couple who earned their degrees in South Africa before immigrating to Canada, lead us on a magical tour of the estate and explain the winery's step-by-step procedure from picking, pressing to fermenting. Hattingh takes out a glass and pulls back the spigot of one of the 4,500-litre stainless steel tanks of Pinot Noir, yet to be bottled. He swirls the red liquid around the glass, breathes in its aroma, sips then offers us a glass.

Back at the bistro manager Shane Miller uncorks for us eight different varieties from Sparkling Brut and Gewurztraminer to Vinsera, a port style wine. I hear descriptors such as "On the nose-pear, guava,

pepper, and on the mouth—a taste of fig with a jalapeño finish," and I am completely delighted.

Greg and I say our goodbyes, and we stroll down the terraced hillside hand in hand back to our boat. We backtrack in *Kala Kala* to our crab traps and I pull up a serious load of crabs to go with our wine. The snowcapped peak of Mount Baker appears like a castle in the clouds as we head south into Boundary Pass. Our next exotic destination is Poets Cove Resort and Spa on South Pender Island, 6.5 miles away and we can't be late for our spa appointment at 16:00.

■ **PAMPERED AT POET'S COVE, PENDER ISLAND** Entering Bedwell Harbour, we hail Poets Cove on VHF 66A and are given our slip number. Architecturally, the marina and resort are stunning, beautifully landscaped with a café, pub and formal restaurant, two pool and hot tub facilities, a gym and high-end spa.

Walking up the ramp to the lighthouse-style building, I notice an incision in the bluff, "1905 HMS *Egeria*," which was the original benchmark that hydrographers of the Royal Navy, including Captain Pender who the island is named after, used to gather chart datum. Admiralty men from the survey ship *Egeria* cut a horizontal incision into the rock in 1905 to measure the tide each hour over a complete lunar cycle. They also erected a hut to live in that later became the island's post office. ▶



↑ **Top** Good morning! Crab omelets aboard *Kala Kala*.
 → **Right** Jan Beals of Pot of Gold Roasting Company on Thetis Island.



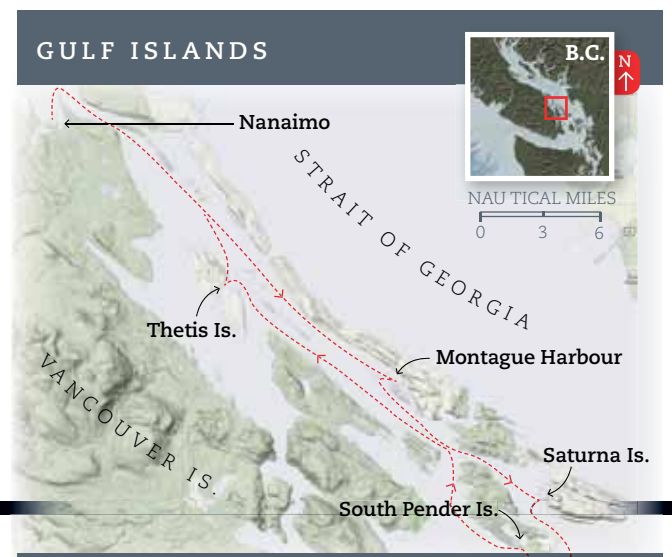
the chilled Saturna Vineyard's Blanc de Noir, an unusual white wine made with red grapes. We feel like a king and queen. After a leisurely dinner and the longest uninterrupted conversation Greg and I have had in years, we return to the adults-only hot tub for a late night soak in the pools set in faux granite rock slabs, accented with boulders and tall grasses. It's 22:00 and we have the place to ourselves. We play a game of Marco-Polo that makes me laugh blindly at Greg's underwater moves to elude me.

Entering the cobbled courtyard of seaside Susurrus Spa, a waterfall cascades down a rocky bluff beside the hot tub and a statue of a mermaid overlooks the harbour. A statuesque deer surprises me when it moves, unfazed by the bathrobe clad guests.

I giggle at the sight of Greg in his spa robes and slippers, and then we get into the serious business of relaxing in the lounge next to the fireplace with cups of green tea. We are ushered into the same treatment room with massage tables side-by-side, ready for the Couples Sussurus Spa signature Jade Hot Stone Massage. The masseuses leave us to get comfortable and then return to set up the warmed jade stones on the hearth of the fireplace. A line of stones is placed along my spine, radiating heat as the masseuse uses another heated stone to massage up from the tip of my toes. A half hour later, deep into relaxation, I feel the pressure of everyday life being removed one stone at a time from my spine. Greg has started gently snoring. The 1.5-hour couples massage feels luxurious and after using the steam cave and hot tub we emerge tranquil, relaxed and rejuvenated. Using the provided Making-Thyme beauty products, I shower and spruce up for our date night aboard *Kala Kala*.

Returning to our charter boat, we see people enjoying the camaraderie of the Poet's Cove marina, people of small and large boats alike gather for sundowners. We descend into *Kala Kala* and switch the radio to CBC 2. Greg puts on a pot for the crab and uncorks

■ **TOP OF THE WORLD** For the past few years, having been a mum relegated to slow, stroller walks with curious dawdling toddlers, I feel the urge to move quickly. We travel 10 minutes north in the skiff to Beaumont Marine Park. Past the sailboats tied to mooring buoys, we pull our skiff up on the beach just inside of the Skull Islets. A kiosk gives us directions for the steep 3.1-kilometre hike to the top of Mount



Norman, elevation 890 feet. After a little confusion we find the main trail to the top of the mountain. What a view—a magnificent panoramic vista of the Gulf Islands! Eagles soar at eye level, and ferries and pleasure boats look like toys in the many bays and anchorages. I run down the mountain with the joy of speed, zipping through the peeling arbutus and gnarled firs along the coastline, shooting by a startled six point buck and doe.

Once back to the boat and with favourable winds of SE 5-15, we're eager to see how a Beneteau sails and soon we're circumnavigating North Pender Island and back into the familiar waters of Trincomali Channel. Greg decides to get out in the skiff and motor off to take a picture of *Kala Kala* under sail and soon realizes he's out of gas. Good practice for man-overboard! I tack back and rescue my love.

■ **THETIS GOLD** Our destination is Telegraph Harbour, between the Indian Reserve of Kuper Island (respect as private) and Thetis Island, 25 miles away. After a long day of travel from Pender Island, the harbour on Thetis Island will put us in range for our charter's pre-arranged return of 13:00 (normally 10:00) the following day. We arrive at dusk and opt to anchor instead of mooring at one of the two marinas in the area so we can have a quiet evening under the stars. I phone and make arrangements for the next morning to visit a coffee roastery called Pot of Gold Coffee Roasting Co. and sleep well that night with visions of fresh coffee dancing in my head.

It's early morning as Greg ties our skiff at Telegraph Harbour Marina. We take a left on Marina Road along the harbour, then turn right on Pilkey Road past scenic country farms to a driveway on the right side marked with an oversized coffee pot cut out of plywood. Behind the house we see the log cabin roastery and its peppy import delivery car with the giant yellow coffee pot logo. Greg and I are welcomed by Jan Beals who started the business with her late husband, Gene Beale, after purchasing a Gothot Brand Coffee Roaster from Germany in 1976. They nicknamed the roaster Gertrude and moved her to Thetis Island in 1982 to start Pot of Gold Roasting Company. Gertrude roasts 25 different varieties from around the world, 18 pounds at a time, and Jan sends fresh pound packages out on Mondays. Customers often get their coffee as early as the next day because the sorters at Canada Post love handling the divine aroma of her parcels. Thetis Island, named after a 36-gun frigate ship, is a 4,000-acre island claiming fame to its paltry 115-cm rainfall and being divided in half by the 49th Parallel, but I think it should also boast the world's freshest custom order coffee.

From the row of old fashioned, gleaming brass bins, Beals loads us up with five different coffee varieties, great presents for my parents and trip reminder to savour back home.

■ **HAPPY EVER AFTER** Greg and I have a boating ritual of cream cheese and crab omelets on our last morning and I crack the crab while sipping a cup of fresh coffee. I'm feeling a tad nostalgic that our trip has come to an end. Greg steers us back into Nanaimo Harbour and as we re-fuel and tidy up the boat, a staff member with Nanaimo Yacht Charters comes down to greet us, help us to our slip and inquires about our trip.

Our Gulf Island Charter Boat trip has been a fantastic get away. Diamonds may sparkle but I'd rather have the sparkle off the ocean. Why rent a berth on the *Loveboat* if you can charter a boat for two? Juliette may have had her balcony for the romantic prose of Romeo, but this Juliette couldn't have been more wooed than out on a boat with Gregorio, chartering luxury and convenience, a floating "cloud nine" for romance and adventure on our scenic coast.

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17 TIPS YOU SHOULD KNOW BEFORE YOU GO



1 Chartering qualification is based on your **Right** The beauty experience and boating resume. The **only** of chartering is that requirement is hands-on experience as a skipper you get to enjoy all per on a similar size and type of yacht as you the best parts of boat-wish to charter. However, charter companies ing without any of the nies would prefer to see the following: Basicbad. Here are some Sail or Power Course (CYA approved) some tips to help make your to the advanced level, Coastal Navigation: charter experience Course and a VHF Restricted Operators Cer even better. tificate. Some companies will ask the skipper to write a navigation quiz to verify their knowledge and/or a practical test like docking the boat. Some companies require one member of the crew to have some basic boating experience.

2 Chartering companies typically have three season or personal arrangement with man- they may be included for charters a week or seasons they base their prices on. For exam agement. Ask. more. Some charters provide guidebooks and binoculars free of charge. ple, if you book in May or October there will be a considerable discount.

3 Example of prices ranges for a week in 10 percent and 20 days, 15 percent off. If you outboard. Some companies charge extra. high season—\$1,200 for a Catalina 27 (sleepsbook three boats or more there is a group four), \$2,190 for a Hunter 35 (sleeps six), discount and if you book two cruises in one 3 All charter companies offer a qualified \$4,500 for a Beneteau 50 (sleeps 12), \$3,200 year, a 10 percent discount. Repeat custom-skipper or instructor for hire whether you ers are often given a 5 percent discount. need assistance for only a few hours to refresh your skills or for the first few days of a well below the \$1.2 million price tag to pur 6 All charter vessels come equipped with all bareboat charter to ensure you're comfort chase, plus the care and feeding! essential safety and navigation equipment able handling the vessel and its navigation. charts, first aid kit, dinghy and galley domes Prices range from \$25–35 an hour to \$250–

4 Some companies have a minimum of tics. Ask if your charter comes with bedding/500 a day.

For more information see *Pacific Yachting's* chartering section on page 103 and classifieds on page 140

- 9 Most charter companies can offer a tailor-made power or sail course for individuals, couples or families through their cruise and learn packages. Course books will be sent and should be studied prior to departure. For example, an all-inclusive five-day Gulf Island Basic Sail (CYA) / Competent Crew (ISPA), Cruise & Learn course with Nanaimo Yacht Charters is \$1,299 plus tax, or a seven-day Desolation Sound CYA Advanced Coastal Skipper, Cruise & Learn is \$1,499 plus tax.
- 10 All charter companies offer guests the option to pre-board (the night before) if desired, ranging in price from \$84–99 with exception of Mid-Isle Cruiser Boat Rentals, which is free.
- 11 Most companies offer a free transfer from ferry, airport or floatplane terminals.
- 12 Most companies offer provisioning for a minimum of four people, typically \$25–27 per person plus HST, or charge 20 percent or \$50 plus cost for personalized lists. Another option is to shop online and the grocery store will deliver. Thriftyfoods.com does this.
- 13 Charter companies/sailing schools also offer trips of a lifetime such as circumnavigating Vancouver Island, being a part of Swiftsure International Yacht Race or the Vic-Maui Yacht Race (almost half price discount for Maui return).
- 14 Many vessels are owned by individuals or corporations who put their boats in a yacht management program run through the charter company, and in return receive 55–70 percent of the charter income (minus the costs of yacht's upkeep) plus have the right to reserve dates for their own use.
- 15 All charterers must purchase insurance (\$30–50/day depending on size) plus put down a substantial damage deposit (\$3,000 plus), which is returned provided the boat is free of damage (some companies dive before and after your charter).
- 16 Charterers departure/return is usually at 10:00 unless pre-arranged. You are asked to re-fuel upon return, tidy the boat to a similar state as it was found in and put used linens/bedding into a laundry bag.
- 17 If you're new to chartering you can start by joining a flotilla so you can sail under the guidance of a lead boat.