

Boat Buying During A Pandemic

Buying a boat during a pandemic, especially one sitting at a dock a thousand miles away, was not part of the grand plan. The grand plan was to put Asterix, my current boat, up for sale in the summer of 2020, figuring that it would take six months or more to sell it and by then the pandemic would be over. The boat sold in six weeks. The pandemic is still around.

At that point it was August and I still planned on waiting until the spring of 2021 to go boat shopping. A few months later I was on a Zoom video call with a boat broker in Portland, Oregon, taking a virtual walk-through of another sailboat. A surveyor's report, with 203 photos and 3 videos, arrived by email and dropbox a couple weeks later. I discussed the report with the surveyor over another Zoom call. Emails flashed around the internet, and by December I had bought a 1987 Sabre 30-3 named Acadia. More emails and another Zoom walk-through with the boatyard in Portland followed. COVID travel restrictions and such precluded any in-person discussions.

When I was much younger a boss told me never to give money to anyone unless they are close enough to reach out and grab them by the throat. At this point I was melting down my credit card without ever having so much as touched the boat or met anyone in person. New rigging, engine overhaul, bottom paint, all arranged and paid for what was essentially a bunch of electronic files on my computer and a picture pinned to a cork board.

The boatyard ran out of projects when my credit card threatened to burst into flames, so a plan was formed to bring the boat up to Juneau. Hal Geiger signed on for the whole trip. Dan Monteith would crew from Tacoma to Ketchikan, where Steve Parker would join the boat. A boat transport company was hired to transport Acadia from Portland to Olympia, where I met the boat on July 20th, arriving at the boatyard shortly before the boat transporter. The boat was splashed that afternoon and the mast stepped and rigging and sails bent on the following day.

Provisioning the boat and getting everything organized took another day and I finally got underway and sailed the boat to Tacoma to pick up my crew on the 22nd.



Finally underway, heading to Tacoma to pick up crew

Dan and Hal arrived in Tacoma on July 25th and we headed north on the 26th, going up the west side of Vashon Island and traveling 59 miles before stopping in Port Townsend on a windy night for some takeout Thai food.



Port Townsend

The next day was a short 32 mile hop to Friday Harbor in preparation for the jump into Canada. Everybody else must have had the same idea because when we got there mid-afternoon we were number 8 on the list for a 30 foot slip for the night. After motoring around for a while we tied up to the breakwater and went into town for some beer.

Due to COVID, Canada had closed many of the regular ports of entry and added some additional requirements, like quarantining on the boat. We could only clear Canadian customs in person in Vancouver, Victoria, Sidney, or Nanaimo. We chose the Friday Harbor to Nanaimo route because it kept us in the US the longest, allowing an extra day to get off the boat and walk around a harbor.

As we crossed the international border we hoisted the Canadian courtesy flag on the starboard halyard, with the Q flag below it. A few minutes later I noticed a government-looking patrol boat trailing us about a half mile astern. No call on the radio, no blue flashing light, just a dark grey RHIB slowly gaining on us. It turned out to be the RCMP, some friendly smiling folks who checked all our paperwork and confirmed that we were transiting through Canada to Alaska (the magic words are “innocent passage”, almost as effective as “these are not the ‘droids your looking for”).

Going up along through Trincomali and Stuart Channels to Nanaimo, we ran Dodd Narrows, just south of Nanaimo, at close to max flood. At one point the GPS had us moving at 19 knots over the ground. We covered 55 miles that day.

On our arrival in Nanaimo we were met by a couple of Canadian Border Agency officers who also checked all our paperwork. They were a little confused when I gave them an itinerary that only had us traveling 50-60 miles a day. We had to explain to them that 60 miles in a small sailboat is a long day sailing. Then they said we couldn't tie up to any docks overnight, only long enough to get fuel and water. Beyond that we would have to anchor out. We spent our first night in Canada anchored in Mark Bay, looking across the harbor at Nanaimo.

Since tying up to a dock at night wasn't an option, we decided to run overnight from Nanaimo to Port McNeil, 162 miles north, starting the next day.

The next morning brought extreme heat advisories from Environment Canada. Out on the water we went through sunscreen like General Sherman went through Georgia. Nightfall found us south of Campbell River. We jogged and drifted off the mouth of Campbell River part of the night before entering the channel and passing Campbell River at sunrise. By the time the sun was fully up we had passed Seymour Narrows at near high slack tide and were well on our way through Discovery Passage and headed for Johnstone Strait.

We arrived at Port McNeil at dusk in the fog, anchoring in the bay off the marina. The next morning we pulled up to the fuel dock for diesel and water. The Port McNeil IGA took Hal's phone order and delivered several bags of fresh groceries to the fuel dock. Hal was slightly unclear regarding quantities when he was phoning in the order, so there were some surprises in the bags.



Foggy Port McNeil

From Port McNeil it was a 56 mile run to Millbrook Cove, a nice secure anchorage that we shared with several other boats.

Shearwater was our next stop. We anchored near the eastern shore for the night after a 63 mile run. The next morning we topped off our fuel tank at the Shearwater Resort fuel dock and continued north.

The 69 mile run from Shearwater to Khutze Inlet was fairly easy. We anchored on the spit near Meldrum Point in the company of another sailboat, the owner of which tried to dissuade us from anchoring there. Watching him pour buckets of water into his cockpit made us wonder what he was up to. It was a windy night and the conflicting winds and tides were an issue at that anchorage, leading to the anchor line getting wrapped around the keel at one point.

Another 63 miles the next day brought us to Klewnuggit Inlet, anchoring in 30 feet of water at the head of Exposed Arm near an old logging wharf. I'd anchored there bringing Asterix up and knew it to be a protected anchorage out of the wind.

From Klewnuggit Inlet to Prince Rupert is only about 47 miles but our evening arrival in Prince Rupert the next day was some of the roughest water of the trip and once we got into Prince Rupert harbor we realized that there few places for a small boat to anchor. We tucked ourselves into Russell Arm, a small cove on the north side of the harbor, just as the light was fading. The anchor was in 25 feet of water and our swing circle brought us to within 100 feet of the rocky shore in 10 feet of water. Fortunately the holding was good and we spent a relatively quiet night there.

Our original plan on leaving Prince Rupert the next day was to go as far as Brundige Inlet on Dundas Island, but the weather was conducive to pushing on to Ketchikan, an 83 mile run, so we did.

Dealing with US Customs in Ketchikan was an updated version of the unpleasant experience that I had bringing Asterix up in 2014. Calling them up by cell phone from north of Dundas Island, I was told to download an app and upload my pre-arrival information. After downloading the 70 mB app twice and failing to get it to run both times, I called customs back to report the failure. Oh yeah, the app doesn't work with newer versions of Android OS. I was told to use a different app. Another 40 mB download, but it loaded. I started entering data, and the 3rd screen informed me that the app will only accept airports and land border crossings as entry points and directed private vessels to download the other app that didn't run on my phone. More phone calls ensued. It was getting late, past normal working hours for Customs. I suggested that, in accordance with federal law, I would vouchsafe that we would all stay on board the boat until the next morning and clear customs then. They didn't like that idea, and an armed border guard showed up at the marina after we tied up to clear us back into the U.S. on August 5th.

Dan left the boat in Ketchikan to head back to work. He was replaced by Steve Parker for the remainder of the trip. Steve showed up with some frozen home-cooked meals, so any potential mutinies due to my cooking were avoided. Ketchikan became a multi-day layover, with the Blueberry Festival happening the weekend we arrived.

We stocked up the boat and left Ketchikan mid-morning for the 35 mile run to Thorne Bay, arriving late in the day to find it nearly deserted. The city appeared to be shut down due to COVID. The

harbormaster's office was closed due to the pandemic and city offices were on a reduced schedule. We tied up to the dock and spent the night without shore power or water,

The next day we moved on to Coffman Cove, 35 miles north, where our overnight stay ended up being a couple days due to weather conditions. The layover allowed us to visit the local aquaponic greenhouse for some fresh vegetables and get caught up on the local politics.

A strong westerly breeze moved us along from Coffman Cove to Wrangell Narrows a couple days later. Wind gusts out of some of the bays topped 30 knots, keeping us alert. The wind calmed down by the time we got to the southern entrance of Wrangell Narrows but our arrival timing was off, leaving us to motor through much of the narrows against the current before tying up in Petersburg on August 10th.

Our Petersburg layover also lasted longer than anticipated due to nasty weather in Fredrick Sound. If the commercial fishing boats didn't want to go north neither did we. The forced delay allowed us to eat at the Salty Pantry (recommended) a few times.



Hanging out in Petersburg

From Petersburg we sailed north 72 miles to spend the last night before Juneau anchored in a small cove just inside Tracy Arm on the north side. The cove is well protected from drifting bergy bits and we anchored in about 25 feet of water. There were a number of larger cruising boats anchored nearby, including a very futuristic looking catamaran.



Tracy Arm, hobnobbing with the tourists

The next day we sailed on to Juneau. As we passed north of Grand Island I spied a familiar set of sails. Asterix, my old boat, was sailing out of Doty Cove headed to Juneau as well.

We arrived in Juneau on August 15th, after a 21 day passage from Tacoma.