



This page: Captain Colin Griffinson in the wheelhouse. Opposite page: The Pacific Yellowfin cruising through the Gulf Islands.



THE ONLY TIME I HAPPILY TURN INTO AN early morning person is onboard small boats. It's something about the salt air, distant cawing gulls and the aroma of the crew's brew wafting into my stateroom. The first guest awake, I hug my steaming latte, cradle a just-baked banana muffin and settle into my favourite vantage point aboard the Pacific Yellowfin – a hefty 19th century barber shop chair in the wheelhouse, a prop from the movie *Mississippi Burning* that serves as the captain's chair.

I'm on a four-day cruise around southern British Columbia's Gulf Islands on Canada's west coast and we have just spent our first night off Galiano Island. Just as I smell bacon sizzling I spot our guide, Dominic "Dom" Giossan, lower the first of a pod of kayaks into Montague Harbour where we're anchored. I drop everything and slide into a red one, gliding across glassy waters that ripple as seal heads pop up for a peek. A bald eagle hovers above lush forest and blindingly white beaches are tinged pink with the first rays of sun.

In style!

Cruising Canada

AN ULTRA-EXCLUSIVE, HISTORIC CHARTER YACHT IS NOW OPENING UP FOR INDIVIDUAL BOOKINGS, SO LUXURY TRAVELLERS CAN EXPLORE CANADA'S RUGGED WEST COAST IN STYLE. Margo Pfeiff WAS ONE OF THE FIRST ONBOARD.





In that soft sepia light the creamy-coloured Pacific Yellowfin looks every bit the retro character she is. A sturdy 1943 coastal freighter built in Maine by the US military, she is living a new life as a lovingly refitted luxury yacht with four traditional staterooms, all varnished mahogany and teak, and polished brass portholes, but with 21st century mod cons. For the past decade this 35-metre vessel has been plying the Inside Passage along BC's coast exclusively as a charter yacht. But this year, for the first time, the Yellowfin is also taking individual travellers for the kind of pampered experience once only enjoyed by the likes of Pearl Jam, Uma Thurman and the Saudi Arabian oil minister.

I had boarded the previous afternoon at the 1880s Britannia Heritage Shipyard

in Steveston near Vancouver's International Airport. The other passengers were two Vancouver families – Marc and Karen with their teens Sophia and Jack, and Cyndie and Gus with five year old Javeen. We chugged from the mouth of the Fraser River into Georgia Strait to the rhythm of the original engines' charmingly old fashioned "pocketa-pocketa". Champagne was offered, but there was a universal call for the ship's signature Bloody Caesars spiked with Pemberton BC's smooth organic Schramm's potato vodka, delivered on the sunny front deck in glasses the size of vases just as a pod of harbour porpoises surfaced portside.

The Pacific Yellowfin offers active, small group trips with the four staterooms comfortably holding eight passengers, up to 12 if there are kids.

When engineer Jack Dixon tours me around, he points out a floating toy box of mountain bikes, mopeds, golf clubs, fishing rods, skeet shooters, kayaks, a waterslide and wakeboards, as well as a speed boat and hot tub.

Up in the wheelhouse captain and owner Colin Griffinson is grinning like a kid as he spins the very big wheel of his beloved boat. "I'm not ashamed to say it," he says in his lilting Irish accent, "I have wooden boat disease!" The Dublin-born master carpenter had already refurbished a 22-metre salmon seiner, his family's home, when he saw the Douglas fir, cedar and American white oak Pacific Yellowfin at the Olympia, Washington tugboat races in the 1990s. It was love at first sight.

Originally dubbed JMP64 – a Junior Mine Planter built to protect east coast

harbours from a German invasion – the 450-tonne vessel saw only a few months of military service before the war ended and she was sold to the California Department of Fish and Game for tuna research, hence her name. Then came a mysterious early 1960s CIA connection that saw her in the Caribbean during the Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco (the operative suspiciously dying in a California house fire three weeks later). After retiring to the Sacramento River for decades as a houseboat, she was discovered by millionaire oilman Pete Whittier who nursed her back to health as his private yacht. It took years, but in 2000 Griffinson finally convinced Whittier to trade boats – and caps! – and since then the passionate Irishman has sunk roughly US\$2 million into refitting her, the

only vessel of her kind still in existence.

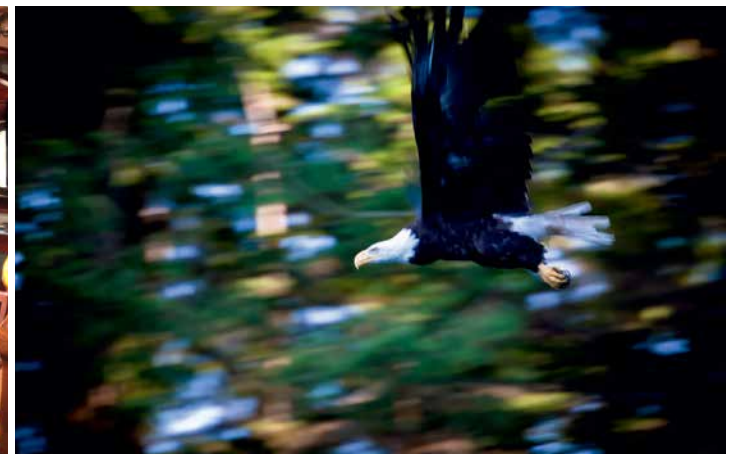
The Yellowfin's beat is around the Gulf Islands, north throughout Desolation Sound and further north to the Great Bear Rainforest. "She was built with a seakindly hull to carry heavy loads with stability," says Colin. "That, along with the fact that we only sail sheltered Inside Passage waters, makes her a great cruising yacht even for people who fear they'll be queasy. No one ever gets seasick."

The characters who now man the Yellowfin are as intriguing as the boat. Among them is Czechoslovakian chef Milan Kocourek who creates a lavish first night dinner in the open galley of organic filet mignon and a dessert of deadly-delicious olive oil cake and lemon curd. Served on the fantail deck at a round

Below clockwise from top left: A rare spirit bear, which is a type of black bear with a genetic mutation; The best room onboard, the Captain's Stateroom; A bald eagle; The dining room. Opposite page: Fresh crab for dinner.

wooden table stylishly supported by two old propellers, the surroundings are Old World luxury, but the atmosphere is of a cosy, casual ski lodge. Milan has worked in Vancouver's best restaurants and currently cooks at Whistler's top rated Bearfoot Bistro and Araxi restaurants. A snowboard addict on the winter hills, he creates culinary magic during summers on board the Yellowfin, his wakeboard propped up on the deck awaiting a pull by the speedboat.

After our morning paddle we motor across to Saltspring, the biggest of the Gulf Islands, for their weekly Saturday morning market. It's a lively event on the waterfront in the funky main village of Ganges, a gathering of farmers, New Agers and greying hippies offering everything from island-made cheeses >>



MARGO PFEIFF



and breads to chair massages, kale chips and bags made from recycled t-shirts. A sitar player sits crossed legged amid the booths setting an ethereal mood while on the beach a pair of Trumpeter swans watches over their babies.

After an onboard lunch of deconstructed sushi that we reconstruct ourselves, we drop crab traps into the water en route to North Pender Island. While the others head off fishing, Karen and I disembark with Dom on a pebble beach among driftwood logs for a hike up Mount Norman. It's a steady climb on a scenic route among cedar and red-barked arbutus trees. At the summit Dom hands out celebratory hydrating liquid electrolytes – chilled local microbrews from Victoria. Born in Spain, the 50 year old diplomat-brat grew up in cities around the

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world and completed his Master's degree in law. But he never practiced a day in his life, preferring instead a career guiding and organising extreme adventures in every corner of the planet. He's a walking guidebook and encyclopedia, and it's an experience to hear him describe a place in a perfectly enunciated regional accent, be it Italy or India.

Several line-caught rockfish join our crab bounty on the way back to the boat. "Some trips we catch our own meals then watch Milan prepare it," says Colin. "We can pull up salmon, trout, halibut, prawns and crabs, fill buckets clam-digging or pick our own wild oysters – a one nautical mile diet!"

On our last day we jump into the speedboat shuttle to Saturna Island for a bicycle ride along a quiet seaside coun- >>

"Some trips we catch our own meals then watch Milan prepare it. We can pull up salmon, trout, halibut, prawns and crabs, fill buckets clam-digging or pick our own wild oysters – a one nautical mile diet!"



Main image: Fisgard Lighthouse.
Inset: Baby harbour seals.

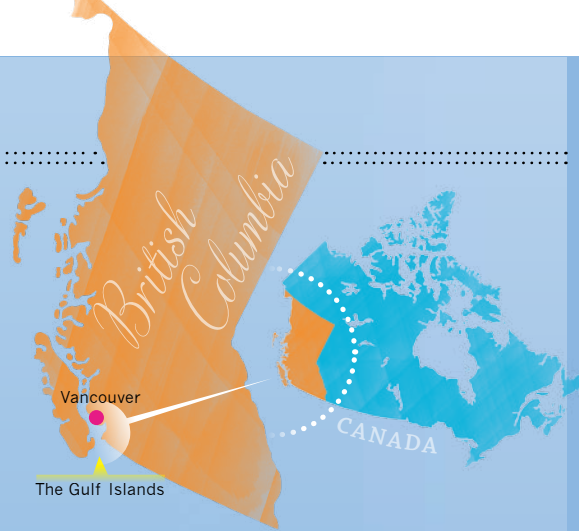


try road with views of the distant snowy profile of Washington State's Mt Baker. We arrive at the East Point Lighthouse to a picnic table set with a lunch spread including chilled BC wines. Taking the long way back to the Yellowfin, we putter alongside colonies of seals and sea lions lounging on rocks, but the whales so often seen in this area remain elusive, even to whale watching boats whom Colin checks in with regularly. Then, after a swim alongside the Yellowfin, it's time for champagne in the hot tub.

As we finish our last supper, Jack Dixon emerges from his pristine engine room where he likes to play opera and bluegrass over the sound of the engine. Dixon studied applied mathematics at university for several years before running off and spending more than 50 years

aboard tugboats and freighters along the coast. Though retired 11 years ago, he has spent that time working on the Yellowfin, "He's a genius," Dom had told us. "He can do a crossword puzzle in minutes."

Now he's come to share another of his hobbies – reciting from memory vaudeville monologues, humorous stories composed in the 1930s to keep patrons in their seats while scenery was changed on theatre stages. For 20 minutes, with just the light of the sunset and only a single voice for entertainment, we laugh at a hilarious story about a couple who had taken their son to the zoo, only to see the lad eaten by a lion. Perhaps not politically correct now, but for 20 minutes on board this 70 year old ship we had been transported to another era without even raising the anchor.



THE CRUISE

Pacific Yellowfin operates full charters only during July and August. Travellers can book individual cabins on cruises that take place in June, September and October to the Gulf Islands, Desolation Sound and the Great Bear Rainforest. Included in the rates are all meals with wine and beer, and use of the ship's toys at the crew's discretion.

The four-day/three-night Gulf Islands cruise is priced from US\$3,800 (about A\$4,135) per person, based on double occupancy.

The six-day/five-night Desolation Sound cruise is priced from US\$9,500 (about A\$10,338) per person, based on double occupancy. pacificyellowfin.com

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies direct from Sydney to Vancouver daily. Return economy fares start from A\$1,772 and Executive First (business class) fares from A\$8,121. Flight time is just over 14 hours. aircanada.com

Depending on which cruise you choose, you will likely be flown directly to the Pacific Yellowfin on a float plane from the Vancouver float plane terminal in Richmond, a short shuttle from the main international airport. Cruises may also depart from the Britannia Heritage Shipyard in Steveston, also near the international airport.

