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A Pacific Northwest cruise on a 17-foot trailer sailer epitomizes the amphibious possibilities when statute miles are allowed to slip under the centerboard

by Marion Blue



From Sea To Shining Sea

With a hull speed of 44 knots, towing our Montgomery 17 from Portland, Oregon, to Bellingham, Washington, had taken only half a day. Stepping the mast, rigging the motor, and securing the rudder took no more than 30 minutes. Within moments we would launch *Wind Child* for our three-week cruise of the San Juan and Gulf Islands.

By this time we were seasoned trailer sailers. Our first day sailer, a 13-foot Pirateer, had followed us from Colorado to Minnesota. There we had found *Wind Child*, a 17-foot luxury liner that looked like a bathtub toy when compared with other Lake Superior sailboats. Still, she had proven her worth in a summer of exploring the Apostle Islands.

Then we had towed her behind our six-cylinder Jeep to Portland. Our 2,000-pound

Wind Child (including gear on board) tows easily. Launching and loading usually is no more than a 30- or 40-minute chore, but while in home port we prefer to keep her in a slip where impulsive urges for an evening sail are uninhibited by extended preparation.

During our year in Portland we kept the vessel in a slip on the Columbia River, where we learned not to sail a small cruiser against a five-knot current in a light wind. Now, before we moved to Virginia and added another 3,000 miles to her accumulated 2,500 land-sailing miles, we were taking that long-awaited island cruise to the San Juans.

Cruising in salt water — with tides and longer distances between islands — would be new to us. Although we expected adventure, we didn't realize just how varied that adventure might be.

In fact, we were immediately faced with a decision. The wind had been rising all day, the sky had gone gray and we gazed across unknown waters. Our choices were to stay at the dock overnight or launch into uncertainty. Finally, we received some good news from local sailors. The island in sight had a protected bay on the lee side of the present wind. Even better, a local yacht club had built a campground and picnic area onshore that made it a pleasant place to visit. Before the storm could worsen we started our four-horse Evinrude and, within an hour, were anchored in the quiet waters of the eastern bay off Lummi Island.

Our first chore after anchoring was to inflate our Zodiac to take our chihuahua, as well as ourselves, to shore. Small-boat cruisers should scale their pet to the boat; don't try to live



aboard a 17-foot cruiser with a Labrador. Our Zodiac is also small — eight feet — with a roll-up floor so we can stow it easily in the bag and put it on the quarter berth if necessary. Except in storms (which fill the Zodiac with water) or very light winds (when the Zodiac slows *Wind Child*) we tow the dinghy. The dinghy is easy to inflate and to launch from the bow.

Back at the boat, we began organizing our gear. We're always so eager to get under way that we don't stow gear so much as throw it on the V-berth. That night we combined organization with finding what we wanted to eat for supper. I passed our galley out the companionway to my husband who started the evening meal.

We generally prefer to cook in the cockpit where we have more room and can stretch our legs. If the weather is rainy or blowing, we drape a tarp over the boom and tie it to the toe rail. On a hot day, the tarp serves as an awning.

Our galley is a one-burner Chefmate. It runs off a small propane canister inserted inside the stove. The flame lights with the flick of a switch — a real luxury. Because canisters are difficult to find, we have to guess how many we'll use and take them along. We usually eat

Wind Child, our Montgomery 17, delights us when cruising such wild and pristine areas as the San Juan Islands. (Inset): Since space in the galley is limited, whenever possible we prepare meals in the cockpit, either under a rain tent or out in the open.

one-dish meals of canned stews, chowders, spaghetti and chop suey. On Lake Superior we had varied the diet with a great deal of pasta and other dehydrated foods because we had a lake full of potable water at our disposal. On salt water, we had stocked up on items canned in their own juices.

We also enjoy non-cook meals: canned tuna on crackers with canned fruit for dessert, for instance. Thanks to the variety in grocery stores, we can buy canned cheeses, salads and breads that require no refrigeration (bagged bread and chips crush quickly in compact quarters). For breakfast we usually use the stove to heat tea while we stoke up on granola bars — cereal without milk.

We do carry a cooler with us, but it is only stocked with cold drinks the first few days after a marina visit. Cold cola becomes quite a

Our 10 Commandments Of Trailer Sailing

■ **1. Play "Captain for a Day."** This way, each person avoids doing the same thing every day, and it assures that each is fully versed in every aspect of boat handling in case of an emergency. Whoever is captain makes decisions regarding emergency boat handling and planning approaches to anchorages. Except when in actual danger, or if asked, the crew keeps his/her mouth shut. If a person is unwilling to perform dual roles aboard, pocket cruising is not for him or her.

■ **2. Plan food according to your trip.** In Lake Superior we ate dried pasta and dried sauces, because fresh water was ample. In Puget Sound we ate canned items for which we shopped carefully, counting the number of meals for the entire trip and stowing it aboard before we left. Always carry a little extra. Plan to buy nothing on the trip; whatever you buy will be a treat, not a necessity.

■ **3. Accept the fact that you're not always going to be comfortable.** Pocket cruising is mini-tent camping on the water. While sailing, you often will be crowded in the cockpit and people will generally need to shift to the high side on each tack.

■ **4. Leave your criticisms ashore.** The farthest we can get from one another is 17 feet, except for brief trips ashore. People must be able to wrap their personal space around them so they can't see out, nor let others see in.

■ **5. Cruise with a dinghy.** A dinghy can provide a swim platform and acts as a "spare room" if someone needs privacy. It also offers exercise and recreation in an anchorage. I've even gotten up in the pre-dawn when unable to sleep and rowed to shore for some walking and exploring, without disturbing anyone else on board.

■ **6. Don't assume a small boat doesn't need proper safety equipment.** Even if you're short on space, you need all the standard bigger-boat gear, and don't forget appropriate charts and guides. Don't assume that because you have shallow draft, you can find shelter anywhere. Know where you are and where the nearest shelter is located.

■ **7. Don't let your enthusiasm invite more people on trips than you can adequately handle.** We do not plan more than a few hours' sail with more than three adults (or two adults and two children) on board — and then only in good weather.

■ **8. Don't hesitate to be cautious.** The standard rule on our vessel is that the first time anyone thinks "reef," we do it. The first time anyone mentions striking sail and seeking shelter, we do it. No arguments allowed — by captain or crew — if peace of mind or safety is at stake.

■ **9. Don't abuse your small size.** I've seen small boats snug up to private docks or take up a large space along a dock where they could move up six feet and make room for an extra boat.

■ **10. Take pride in your vessel.** Keep her well stocked and clean. We never fail to have people come over to us and talk about our little boat so far from home. Once, to our amazement, the skipper of a 50-foot cruiser came trotting up the dock asking, eagerly, if our boat was a Montgomery and did we mind if he looked at her. There's an inescapable delight in doing something out of the ordinary.



treat after a week of warm fruit juice.

A significant change for this trip included the addition of extra water jugs. We don't have a water tank aboard, so we purchased four collapsible jugs to augment our two-gallon jug. That gave us a total of two five-gallon and three two-gallon containers. We could use the lighter-weight jugs on islands where the water supply involved a long walk and fill the larger ones at the boat; for close water supplies, we would take all the jugs to shore in the Zodiac.

Another extra item for this trip was an additional gas can for our Evinrude. Many pocket cruisers prefer not to use any motor. We prefer that as well, and actually went without a motor for most of a year. But frequently we find ourselves gunkholing in very small inlets or rivers, or maneuvering through crowded harbors when the motor is a blessing. We've also outrun some ominous clouds in that pre-storm stillness when no wind would fill a sail. Once we were faced with paddling *Wind Child* a half mile out of a narrow, windless inlet; I would have preferred to motor out and spend the paddling time sailing. Without our motor, our first night in the San Juans probably would have been spent in the safety of Bellingham Harbor rather than the peace of the Lummi Island anchorage.

By our first morning in the San Juans we were well organized and eager to get under way. Our first encounter with tides came quickly. We were well-heeled in a 12-knot wind south of Lummi, near Vendovi Island. It wasn't until we had been under sail for a full hour that we realized our position between the islands had not changed. We double-checked our tide table. The tide was definitely going out! Shouldn't that mean we were riding with the tide? I even checked our rudder to see if we were tangled in a fishnet or some other hidden menace. Everything said we should be scooting away to the west.

Our confusion was compounded when another boat closer to Lummi scooted past us and



out of sight. We fell off the wind to follow their route; and we soon made good time back to the west, our confusion still with us.

Our next tidal encounter came a few days later south of Sucia Island. We heard a sound like a waterfall but no island nearby was tall enough to produce falling water. Then we saw the ruffle; I quickly checked the chart and discovered the water was deep enough to float a tanker. Could it be a fish frenzy?

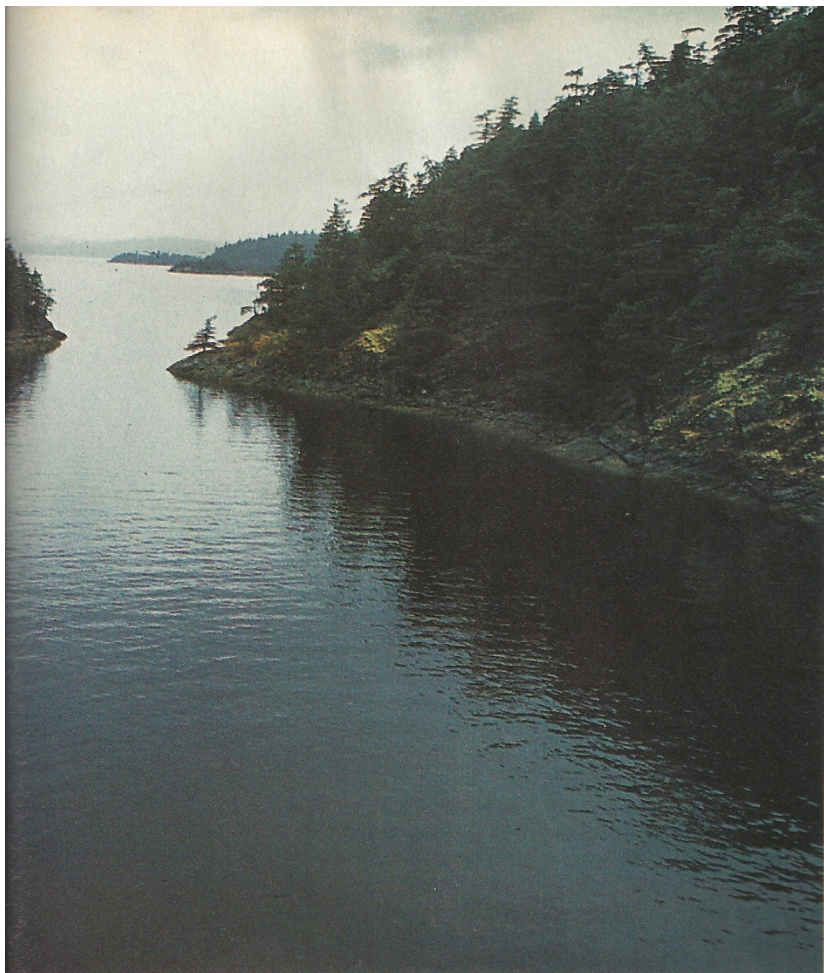
About that time, the tidal rip caught us and carried us into the middle of the chop while we spun in three slow 360-degree turns. Fortunately, we were drifting in a light two- to three-knot wind so we were in no danger. The experience may not have been as dramatic had we been sailing with more wind — or it might have been worse. We let the rip play with our

boat for a few minutes then started the motor when the current began dragging us closer to the island.

We didn't find a store until we cleared Canadian customs at South Pender. Our first purchase was a tidal chart that showed us what we had begun to suspect: in and out has nothing to do with the flow of tidal currents around those islands. And in a small boat like ours, currents in excess of three knots are crucial piloting considerations.

Leaving Pender posed a problem. As often happens to small boats, we were penned in by a 190-foot schooner that had nestled in behind us. The schooner's bowsprit, almost as high as our mast, lay between us and open water. While *Wind Child* looms large on the highway, she shrinks in the water; large boat owners tend to disregard her personal space. Generally we try to stay out of their way. Thanks to the cooperation of other boat owners, we were able to weave our way hand over hand along boats and docks to get out. We probably contributed to the myth that small boats can get out of anything.

With a tidal chart to guide us, our speed picked up quickly: We rarely went backward or stayed in one place when our sails were full.



Anyone in a hurry shouldn't have a pocket cruiser. Our hull speed is less than five knots under perfect conditions, which rarely occur. While often we cover 20 to 25 miles in a day, I prefer not to be concerned about schedules. For that reason, pocket cruisers must be particularly laid-back. If the wind is too light or too heavy, staying put might be nice; if the wind comes directly from the next island on your agenda, either change islands or wait one more day.

Most of the anchorages we discovered in the Gulf Islands were well worth visiting for an extra day, particularly because our shallow draft (21 inches, board up; 42 inches, board down) made it possible to get far inside many isolated spots. On Prevost Island we anchored nearly half a mile up a fjord where otters and seal played. Two bald eagles were pulling at a fish they held on the shore. One large vessel anchored near the mouth, where shallows brought her to a halt.

Generally speaking, the Gulf Islands have fewer powerboats, which means fewer wakes, an important consideration for pocket cruisers. We began seeing some of the same people island to island, mostly sailors who were serious cruisers. One of my favorite stops was on DeCourcy Island where we anchored near

Small, protected inlets like the one above abound in the San Juans. (Inset left): Mt. Constitution on Orca Island offers sweeping views of the region. Our dinghy (inset, below) affords our daughter her own "room" when she cruises with us.

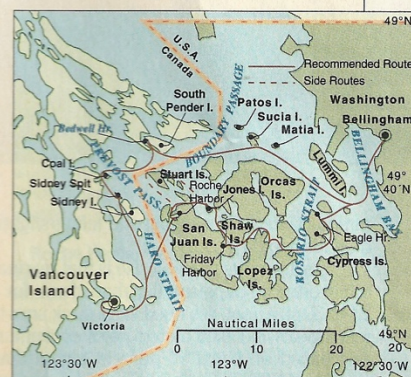
shore in Pirate's Cove. The island offers all the luxury we needed — water and places to walk — with none of the inconveniences of towns, roads, or noise.

A shallow draft is also a convenience in crowded anchorages. On Jones Island, in the heart of the frequently visited San Juan Islands, the outer fringe of the anchorage resembled a boat sales lot. We were able to weave between the large vessels and find ample anchoring room alone, near the shore, where we were well sheltered and within easy paddling distance of land. An unexpected bonus came when we hit heavy fog north of Chatham Island on our way to Victoria. We maneuvered close to shore where we were out of danger from other boats until the fog had passed. The only disadvantage was that we lay directly under the island's foghorn, which

A Two-Week San Juan Islands Cruise

The following itinerary accounts for 14 nights, but this time frame obviously would be affected by weather and tide, and sailors' inclinations to linger in one place or hit and run at another. All stops, except Cypress Island, offer potable water; most offer other services as well.

Bellingham Bay to Fossil Bay on Sucia Island: about 20 miles. The expanses of open water are large enough for great, long tacks. The water is heavily populated with seals, porpoise, and orca. If you need



quick protection, Doe Bay on Orcas Island is accessible to small boats. Although there usually are boats on mooring buoys, silence prevails. The long, fjord-type arms of the island are a must for at least one leisurely sunset; a good place to spend two nights.

From Sucia to Bedwell Harbor on South Pender Island is an easy 12-mile sail. This is Canada, so you must go through customs (make sure your pets have up-to-date shot records). An overnight stay will present an interesting mix of people and boats. However, if you're short of time and the weather is in your favor, you can make it to the next stop, Sidney Island to spend the night.

South Pender to Sidney: eight miles. On this trip, you can either enjoy lovely sailing in the open water or you can strike sails and gunkhole around Coal Island. The narrow passages and wooded slopes of the small islands are well worth the motor noise to see. Sidney Spit is a popular overnight anchorage; smaller boats can weave through the long line of mooring buoys to snug in closer to shore. The island offers terrific trails through a refuge for an evening walk; the available water has an interesting flavor.

From Sidney Island to Victoria is about 19 miles; the open water provides a great chance for a heavy-duty sailing day.

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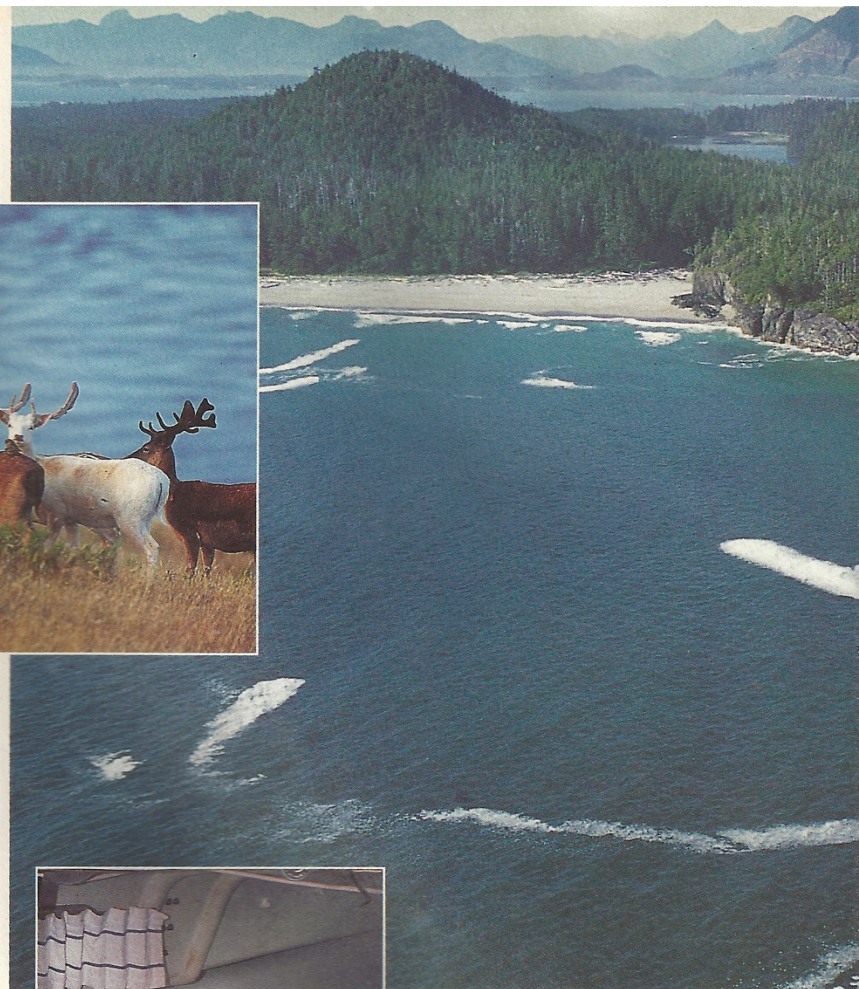
rattled *Wind Child's* rigging and left us slightly deaf for two days.

A disadvantage to small size is that marinas often offer no slips smaller than those for a 28- to 30-foot boat. We need extra dock lines to reach cleats and extra cash to pay the minimum rate based on boats 50 percent bigger than *Wind Child*. We have always been the smallest boat at these marinas.

In Victoria we docked among some workboats and some heavy-duty sailing boats. When we donned our best and strolled into the Empress Hotel, we were politely shown to the small bar not requiring a black tie. Pocket cruisers sacrifice space for nice clothes to such practical items as food and water. In fact, except for foul weather gear, clothes aren't a priority. I usually pack one pair of jeans, one short- and one long-sleeved shirt, a pair of shorts and a couple of sweat shirts. If it's winter, I add extra socks and a pair of sweats. After that gear is loaded, if I have room in my one duffel, I double up on some items. During an unexpected December freeze when we had trailered *Wind Child* to the Florida Keys, I wound up wearing everything I had — literally. That had never happened before, even on Lake Superior. So much for our warm Florida Christmas. At night, even in freezing weather, we need no cabin heater. A small cabin stays cozy with two warm bodies below.

Although packing light doesn't win us any fashion awards, this generally is not a problem. While the Empress Hotel might have found us a little short of elegant, we were stylish on the fishing pier where a small stand was whipping out fresh fish and chips served in newspaper for \$3.50. It was our best meal of the entire trip.

When we hit a port, we like to sightsee and not spend all our time doing laundry, taking showers, and scrubbing down the boat. Victoria was a place to visit the museum, prowling the



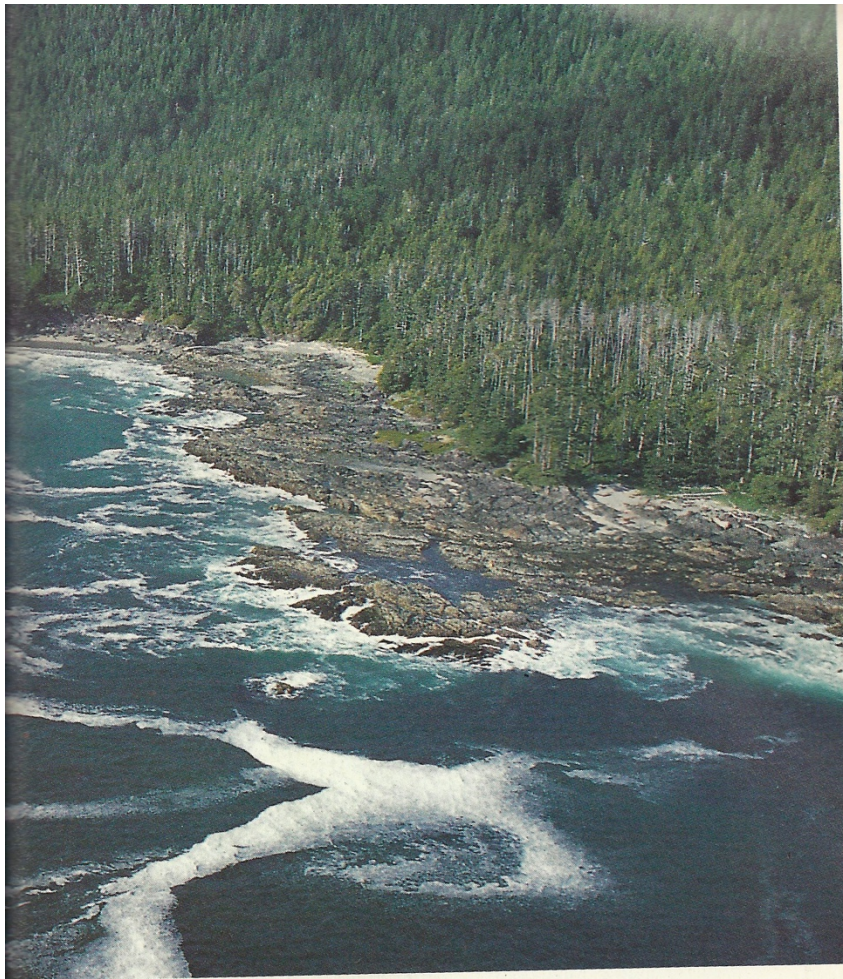
waterfront, look over the fishing fleet and take a buggy ride — not visit the laundromat. For that reason we try to keep up with cleaning details while we cruise. We take sun-showers in the cockpit as often as our water supply will allow. We do our laundry by squirting it with a non-phosphate soap — such as Joy, which foams even in salt water — and dragging it behind us in a net scuba bag while we sail. Then we hang the clothes on the lifelines to dry (it's a good idea to leave your sailing whites home). Nightly, after we anchor, we take 15 or 20 minutes to scrub down the decks, cockpit, cabin, and cushions so we stay clean. We save a thor-

ough cleaning — everything out of the lockers — for our return home.

Every person on board a small boat must contribute the clutter patrol. If someone pulls out the suntan lotion, it must be put back where it belongs after use and not left lying on the seat. Otherwise, no one would be able to take a step after the second day out from port.

Most items serve double duty. Suntan lotion is also face and hand cream. Dish soap, boat soap and laundry soap are all one and the same. The pan in which we cook is the dishpan. My towel is your towel. Much "civilized" behavior has to change slightly. At home, no one would dream of using the toilet without shutting the door. On our pocket cruiser, where the head is under the V-berth, people learn to look the other way. At night, to avoid disturbing sleepers, we use a bucket in the cockpit.

The head is probably the biggest inconvenience on our pocket cruiser. The holding tank is good for about eight days, pump-out stations unfortunately are rare; we found only one on our three-week cruise of the San Juan and Gulf Islands. We finally bought a hand pump (Guzzler) that we use to pump the tank into a bucket we can haul to onshore facilities. It isn't fun. On the other hand, the head is an



Neil Rabinowitz

inconvenience I'm not willing to do without. Bad weather, guests, and a hundred other circumstances make a head necessary.

Another "must have" is safety gear. Even if not required, a small cruiser needs as much safety gear as a larger boat. We carry two anchors with 200 feet of rode on each. We have lifelines and safety harnesses, a radio, compass, and tools for working on rigging and the outboard. We also have our PFDs, running lights, a portable masthead light, extra flashlights, air horn, flares, and fire extinguisher. We carry a small weather radio so as not to run down our battery using the VHF for weather reports, which we listen to religiously.

We've sailed *Wind Child* for almost eight years now. Our longest cruise was the three weeks in the San Juans, and this was probably our favorite trip as well. We anchored or docked at more than a dozen islands in the U.S. and Canadian waters, as well as Victoria, where we picked up our daughter for a crew of three. We cruised beside orca larger than our boat and had porpoise pacing our stern so closely that we could touch them, especially because a smaller boat puts you much closer to the sea and her creatures.

The joy has been sweeter because of the

The Vancouver Island coastline is rocky, with strong tidal surges, but the inside passage where we cruised is predominantly calm. Herds of deer are a common sight when cruising this area, sometimes glimpsed swimming between islands. At left, our chihuahua appreciates the fact that we've scaled our pet to our boat, good advice for any pocket cruiser. He is quite happy cruising with us on Wind Shadow.

low budget needed for pocket cruising. Initial cost of a pocket cruiser is less than that of an automobile, even for one as sturdy and heavily rigged as ours. Maintenance is minimal; it's easier to sand a 17-foot hull than a 30-foot hull. Slip costs, which you can forgo altogether, and taxes are lower. And we can take her anywhere. For real gunkholers, it doesn't get much better than this.

Marion Blue is a free-lance writer/photographer from Norfolk, Virginia, who, since 1980, has sailed in such diverse regions as the Caribbean and the Pacific Northwest aboard boats ranging from a 13-foot day sailer to a 72-foot Chesapeake Bay skipjack. She cruises with her family, including "at least one pet," aboard *Wind Child*, a Montgomery 17 with more than 8,000 land miles under her trailer.

A Two-Week San Juan Islands Cruise

(continued)

if the wind cooperates. In Victoria Harbor, work your way east toward the large hotels towering in the distance, and you will find the public dock. Victoria is well worth a couple days (three nights) of prowling; the museum is a must.

Victoria to Roche Harbor on San Juan Island is about 20 miles and offers wonderful sailing across Haro Strait. This large expanse of water can get rough if the wind is strong; make sure you can handle the weather and that both compass and dead-reckoning skills are in working order. Otherwise, you should probably work your way back up to Sidney and cross in more protected waters in better weather. You'll probably arrive late enough in the day at Roche Harbor to make this a good place to spend two nights. Make customs your first stop. The beautiful gardens are worth a stroll; full services, including a swimming pool, make this a nice spot to lounge.

Roche Harbor to Jones Island is a short trip — about seven miles if you head straight for the island — but if you have time, you can increase your sailing time by going north of Stuart Island, then back south to Jones. The anchorage on Jones is in a bay on the north; a picnic/campground is populated by small deer that will munch on an apple from your hand. Make certain your anchor is secure; eelgrass is common.

From Jones Island to Friday Harbor is only five miles, but I recommend a stop here because of the many inviting stores and restaurants. If you want to stretch out your day on the water before arriving, sail around San Juan Channel if the wind is good; if not, take some time to gunkhole the collection of islands between Shaw Island and Orcas Island; many of these beautiful islands are off-limits to larger boats.

Friday Harbor to Spencer Spit on Lopez Island is only eight miles, but offers wonderful sailing. Because your route takes you east, northeast and south, the wind should cooperate in one of the channels. Spencer Spit has a large tidal flat with a large bird population. A campground onshore is popular with kids.

From Spencer Spit to Cypress Island, some 14 miles, is a lovely spot to spend your last night; you'll probably be alone. Eagle Harbor, on the west side of the island, offers ample protection for smaller boats; we enjoyed the sunset there with only some otters in sight. If you prefer marinas, however, Anacortes is only 10 miles from Spencer Spit.

From Cypress Island it is only 13 miles back to Bellingham Bay.