

A 1,500 mile crossing of the Rockies by truck, followed by a 2,000 mile cruise from Seattle to Ketchikan and back via the Inside Passage

# Across the Rockies to Alaska



**COSMIC DANCER V**

Clive Woodman & Angela Lilienthal, Cosmic Dancer V – Sweden 38, May – Sep 2017

## CRUISE LOG

It was an unusual start to a cruise. Within the first 24 hours we had unbolted our keel, crossed the headwaters of the Mississippi and the Missouri, and 72 hours later were on the Pacific Coast sitting on deck surrounded by 350 naked revellers .... but we are in danger of jumping ahead of ourselves in the story!

The journey started from where we ended the previous season, Duluth, a city located at the far end of Lake Superior which prides itself in being the world's westernmost Atlantic seaport. Having sailed 3,500 nautical miles up the St Lawrence River and through the Great Lakes to reach Duluth the previous season, the remainder of our crossing of the American continent was going to have to take place on the back of a truck

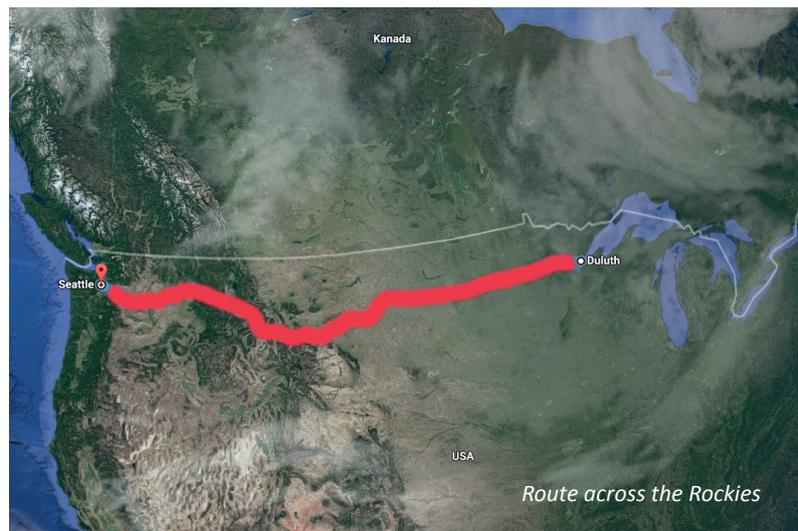
Preparing a yacht for a long overland journey is not a trivial task and is at least as time consuming as getting ready for a trans ocean passage. All removable rigging and fittings must be stripped off and packed, whilst anything that cannot be removed has to be bubble wrapped in situ so that 4 days of road vibration doesn't end up destroying it. Part of the preparations involved getting our air draught down to the legal limit. After long discussions with the boatyard it was deemed easier to remove our fin keel, than to remove the pushpit, pulpit, stanchions and all the other fittings that projected above deck level

It took us almost 2 weeks of preparation before Cosmic Dancer was ready to roll, with us following behind in a hire car. We had fondly thought that keeping up with the massive truck, almost twice the length of our yacht, would be no competition. We were mistaken. What the truck may have lacked in speed it more than made up for in endurance and we eventually arrived in Seattle some 24 hours after the yacht.

Once safely in the CSR Boatyard in Seattle, Cosmic Dancer was reunited with her keel and we moved back on board. The following morning, we woke to find ourselves surrounded by several hundred naked people busily body painting themselves in all the colours of the rainbow before setting out on the Fremont Summer Solstice Parade Cycle Ride, an event described by the organisers as an „...outpouring of artistic fossil-fuel-free fun as the painted cyclists entertain the crowd



*Ready to roll*



*Route across the Rockies*

*Crossing the Mississippi Headwaters*



*High pass in the Rockies*



with their boldness, bareness and enthusiasm!”

To be fair we had been warned by the boatyard, who clearly thought our sensibilities were in need of protection, that their contribution to this annual bacchanalian celebration was to provide the al fresco studio for all the body painting to take place. We’ve fitted out Cosmic Dancer in some unusual places in recent years, but to be surrounded by so many naked bodies as we busied ourselves in re-rigging the yacht was a first!

Putting the boat back together after the road journey was only marginally less time consuming than preparing for it, but by 22 Jun we were back in the water and ready to go. It would have been difficult to better our first taste of sailing in the Pacific. The sun came out the morning we sailed from Seattle, and apart from a few hours darkness at night, it stayed out without a break for the first 6 weeks of our cruise. The Pacific high had well and truly established itself over the top of us giving us cloudless conditions, azure blue skies, calm seas, and at times even a little wind as an afternoon sea breeze filled in.

The first few days saw us sail out from Puget Sound into the San Juan Islands. Once fiercely disputed between Britain and the United States because of their strategic position, they are now an idyllic sailing paradise. There cannot be many cruising areas in the world that offer such a wealth of wild anchorages in such a compact area. You could cruise the area for a fortnight without visiting the same anchorage twice and never having to sail more than a handful of miles each day.

From the San Juan Islands we headed to the Gulf islands off the SE corner of Vancouver Island before crossing the Straits of Georgia to sail into Vancouver. When it comes to spectacular approaches from seaward, Vancouver ranks right up there with Rio and Cape Town. The skyscrapers of downtown Vancouver set against the backdrop of the snow-capped Rockies made for an unforgettable experience.

*Fremont Solstice Parade Nude Bike Ride*



*Gulf Islands British Columbia*



After a few days enjoying the hospitality and wonderful setting of the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club we continued northwards to 2 of the gems of the Pacific north west coast, Princess Louisa Inlet



*View from the  
Royal Vancouver  
Yacht Club*

and Desolation Sound.

Princess Louisa Inlet is considered by many to be the „holy grail“ of cruising in these parts. Lying at the head of Jervis Inlet, which itself extends 46 miles into the coastal mountains, and with its entrance guarded by the Malibu rapids in which tidal currents can flow at up to 9 knots, Princess Louisa Inlet is not the easiest place to reach.

However once through the rapids the rewards are rich. Princess Louisa Inlet is about five miles long, a third of a mile wide and the mountains that flank it on either side are over a mile high. The view as you reach the head of the Inlet is beautifully described in Wylie Blanchet’s classic sailing book „Curve of Time“, essential reading for anyone contemplating a cruise in the area:

„... Then suddenly, dramatically, in a couple of boat lengths, the whole abrupt end of the Inlet comes into sight - heavily wooded, green, but rising steeply. Your eye is caught first by a long white scar, up about 2 thousand feet, that slashes across... and disappears into the dark green background. Again, another splash of white but further down. Now you can see it has movement. It is moving down and down, in steep rapids. Disappearing .... reappearing ... and then in one magnificent leap plunging off the cliff into the sea a hundred feet below. As your boat draws closer the



roar and the mist come out to meet you“.

We spent the night tied up to a wooden float just at the foot of the falls with only a few other boats and a seaplane for company, these being the only 2 ways of reaching the area as there are no roads. The following day we kayaked in the mist of the falls and explored other smaller



*Princess Louisa Inlet*

falls around the edges of the Inlet before once again braving the Malibu Rapids and continuing northwards to Desolation Sound.

Rounding Sarah Point to enter Desolation Sound provided yet another memorable moment. After a 25 mile haul up the Malaspina Straits with nothing more exciting to see than mile after mile of heavily forested coastline, suddenly we found ourselves in an amphitheatre of snow-capped mountains as the full splendour of the coastal range opened up in front of us. It was simply breathtaking.

We found it difficult to reconcile what we were seeing with Captain Vancouver's description of the same view back in 1792, when as the first European to fully explore these waters he said, „...there was not a single prospect that was pleasing to the eye“, whilst giving it the dismal name that it retains to this day. Vancouver's statement has not stood the test of time. Today Desolation Sound is one of the Northwest's most dreamed about and sought-after cruising destinations.

As we slowly explored the area it was easy to understand its popularity as a cruising area. Perfectly sheltered from the worst of the Pacific weather, and with a surprisingly benign summer climate in which the water temperature can get up into the mid 20's, Desolation Sound has hundreds of miles of interlinked channels and wild anchorages all waiting to be explored by



*Getting some exercise*

*Desolation Sound*

the cruising yachtsman. Every time you turn a corner in the winding and often narrow steep sided channels, a new mountain vista opens up in front of you, together with another set of channels leading deep into the mountains. An enticing prospect for the cruising yachtsman with time on his hands, but after a while cruising here one could also begin to understand Vancouver's dismay.

Like so many European maritime explorers of his era, his holy grail would have been to discover the illusive northwest passage providing a shortcut from Europe to the trading markets of the Far East. What for us today is an enticing cruising prospect, was for him yet another Inlet leading deep into the mountains which had to be painstakingly explored in the hope that it might lead back through to the Atlantic. When we reached the head of one of these inlets we could afford to marvel at the rock walls and waterfalls that confronted us. For Captain Vancouver that same splendid view must have been yet another bitterly disappointing dead end, just increasing the prospect of having to return home without having found the prize that would have guaranteed him fame and fortune.

We had originally intended heading straight north from Desolation Sound to the Broughton Islands. However, after a couple of days in Desolation Sound it became clear that this would not be sensible. Our ageing service batteries, which after the expense of trucking across the Rockies

*Roscoe Inlet*



*Totem guarding the entrance to Desolation Sound*

we hoped we could „squeeze one more season” out of, had decided otherwise. The strain of anchoring almost every night without any shore power to charge batteries, and then recovering around 40-50m of chain every morning was starting to prove too much for them. It was clear new batteries couldn't be delayed for another season, so a diversion to Campbell River was called for.

Just as we had got this problem sorted another snag arose. We were no more than 20 minutes out of Campbell River motoring in mirror calm conditions when ominous clouds of white steam were spotted coming from our engine case. The engine was quickly stopped, sails hoisted, and the source of the problem identified - a split hose on the „hot” side of the fresh water cooling system. The split part of the hose was cut off, the shortened hose rejoined to the engine, topped up with coolant and we were on our way again. A few hours later a second split in the same hose started issuing steam. Clearly time for a replacement hose and a return visit to Campbell River to get it.

With this problem fixed, we once again set off northbound into an area where Vancouver Island is linked to the mainland by an umbilical cord of closely interlocked islands with a myriad of narrow channels threading between them. This area, known as “The Rapids”, forms a natural barrier between 2 of the North West's prime cruising grounds, Desolation Sound to the south and the Broughtons to the north.

On first reading the pilots for the Rapids area you might come away with the impression that it would be sheer madness for any small pleasure craft to venture into this area. The reader is regaled with horror stories of narrow passages through which the tide can roar at speeds of up to 16 knots, of whirlpools



*Echo Bay*



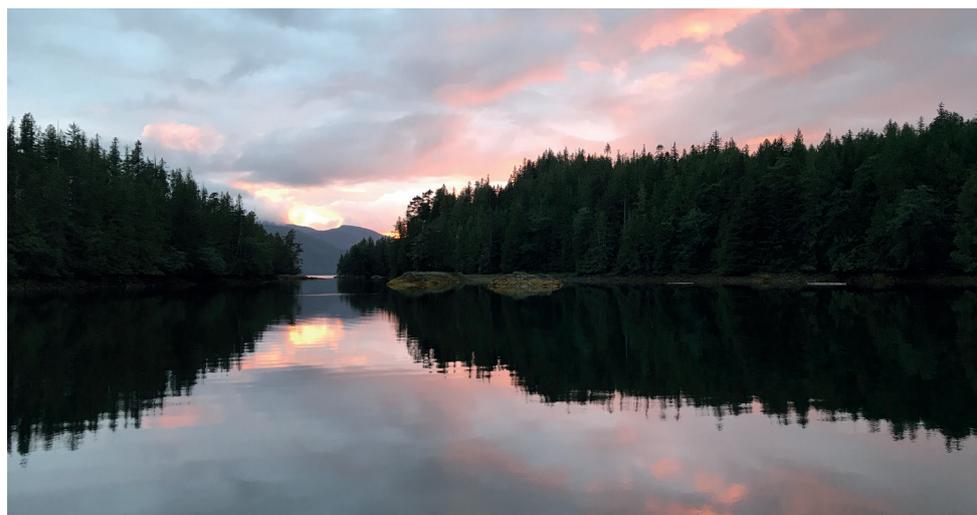
*Another quiet anchorage*



which threaten to suck you into their deadly eye, of standing waves and vertical walls of white foaming water which stretch across the entire channel, and of rocks which shake and vibrate because the pressure of water bearing down on them is so great. The pictures which accompany these terrifying tales are no less frightening. The pilot goes on to say that these rapids can only safely be transited at slack water, a fleeting window of opportunity which for many of the rapids is said to last little more than a few minutes, and woe betide the yachtsman who gets his timings wrong and misses the window.

It would be a foolhardy to dismiss these warnings as scaremongering, but it doesn't have to be quite as difficult as the pilot makes it sound! We made life an awful lot easier for ourselves by timing our passage through the area to coincide with neap tides when the streams in the rapids are a far less intimidating 4-6 knots and many can be safely transited for a period of several hours either side of slack water without drama. It changed the whole experience from being something to fear, to something that could actually be enjoyed as a challenging test of one's navigation skills,

Moreover, between the rapids there were some truly wonderful places to stop at whilst waiting for the tide to get through the next rapids. We spent one very peaceful night at anchor in the Octopus Islands and the second alongside a small charming family run marina in Blind Channel where we enjoyed a truly exquisite 5 star dining experience, made even more remarkable by the fact that we were totally cut off from the rest of the world - there is no road access- the only route in is either by boat or float plane.



With the rapids behind us, we spent a few days exploring the Broughton Islands and encountered a few scenarios beloved of Rule of the Road exams, namely who has right of way between a seaplane and a yacht, but which in 40 years of sailing we had never had to put into practice until then. Our only faux pas was when we unwittingly anchored in what turned out to be the runway for float planes flying in and out of Port McNeill. It is not every day that you get to look out of your cabin windows to find a plane whizzing past you at high speed just a couple of boat lengths away!

Heading north from the Broughtons, Cape Caution forms a natural boundary between the relatively gentle cruising grounds that lie to the east of Vancouver Island, and the altogether more wild and remote stretches of the Inside Passage that lie to the north of the Cape. Cape Caution attracts very deferential treatment in the pilots and sailing guides, a place to be avoided in anything but the very calmest of weather they say. We didn't get a chance to test the veracity of these claims as we had mirror calm conditions for our rounding of the Cape.

Once north of Cape Caution places to come alongside and replenish food and fuel are few and far between. Most nights were spent at anchor in places with often frightening names like Fury Cove, Breaker Passage, Windy Bay and Rescue Bay. Fortunately, the Pacific high continued to do its job and our nights at anchor were all blissfully calm with nothing worse than a few midges around sunset to trouble us, and even those were very benign compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

Between the north end of Vancouver Is-





*Cosmic Dancer and the Super Yachts in Prince Rupert*



*Early morning fog slowly burning off*



*Log barge in the Inside Passage*



*Spirit Bear*

land and Prince Rupert there are 2 inside passages. The inner, and more commonly travelled of the 2, leads well inland through high mountains and relatively narrow channels. The outer one winds its way through the lower lying offshore islands.

We had originally intended to take the outer of the 2 passages, but with a northerly gale forecast to blow for almost the entire week we decided the inner one would be a more prudent option. It was a decision we didn't regret. The inner leads seem to have their own microclimates when it comes to weather, with mountains, terrain and time of day dictating wind directions and strength rather than barometric pressure and weather systems.

Whilst the forecasts continued to predict 30-35 knot northerly winds for our sea area, some 35 miles inshore we enjoyed clear blue skies, mirror calm conditions overnight and in the early mornings, with just the gentlest of southerly inflow breezes in the afternoons. It was difficult to believe that we were in the same sea area as the forecasts, but with such stunning scenery surrounding us we were not in a rush to go outside and find out whether it really was blowing that hard outside!

An added bonus of taking the inside route was a sighting of the extremely rare and elusive White „Spirit“ Bear. A genetic variant of the far more common black bear, the Spirit or Kermode Bear is only to be found in the Great Bear Rain Forest and they number less than 400. We spotted one of these magnificent white bears foraging on the rocks at the foot of a near vertical slope. We could not fail to be amazed at the way this supposedly lumbering beast nimbly tripped from rock to rock never putting a foot wrong. Bouts of scavenging for shellfish on the rocks were interspersed with forays up into the trees, shaking the foliage for any food that could be dislodged. We were mesmerised for a good hour at the end of which it was easy to see why the spirit bear figures large in local Indian mythology.



Ketchikan waterfront



On reaching Prince Rupert we faced a decision – did we continue onwards into south east Alaska and try and find somewhere to overwinter there, or did we make our way back the relatively benign climate of southern Vancouver Island for the winter, before making a dash north to Alaska early the following season? All the boats we had passed in recent days had been heading south but did we really want to follow the crowd?!

Our attempts to find out about overwintering possibilities in South East Alaska had yielded little of substance. The pilots make no mention of it and almost all local yachtsmen seem to sail up to Alaska and back to Canada or the “lower 49” in a single season. We decided the only way to find out was to go and see for ourselves what was there.

We made a quick dash up to Ketchikan and spent a couple of days exploring options, only to discover that the reason almost nothing is written about overwintering in south east Alaska is because there really are no places where a deep keel yacht can safely overwinter ashore. Most local yachtsmen leave their yachts in the water for the winter rather than risk being blown over ashore in the fierce winter storms. We weren't really happy to leave Cosmic Dancer afloat for

the winter in one of the unattended marinas, so the decision was made to head back south.

The conventional wisdom is that you need to be well clear of Alaska and round Cape Caution before the end of August. We were soon to discover why. No sooner had we pointed our bows southwards than the Pacific high collapsed and the clear blue skies and light northerly winds evaporated, to be replaced by an unending stream of depressions and strong, wet southerly winds.

For the return journey by way of va-



riation we took the outer of the two inside passages, which offered slightly less spectacular scenery than the inner passage, but far better sailing conditions and more plentiful anchorages amongst the outer islands. It proved to be a fortuitous decision because only a couple of days later our engine started making a strange knocking noise.

As a precaution we sailed the remainder of the way back to Shearwater, the first place we could find an engineer to have a look at the engine. He diagnosed the valves as “probably needing adjustment before the start of next season” but said we would be fine to continue using it until then.

We continued southwards bound for Cape Caution, under motor once again as the southerly winds had temporarily died to nothing. The light knocking suddenly changed to a much more ominous sound which didn’t even persist for long enough for us to turn the engine off before the engine seized.

Ironically, in what should have been the most open and exposed part of the passage around Cape Caution the winds remained almost non-existent and we had to ghost our way under sail to Port Hardy on the northern end of Vancouver Island, before accepting a tow in from a passing yacht for the final few miles into the harbour. Once safely alongside we cut open our oil filter to find it full of metal shavings. It was clear that our engine had breathed its last and that the coolant leak we had experienced earlier on in the season had done more damage than we thought at the time.

Port Hardy is not the easiest place in the world to replace a yacht engine. The boatyard and ship lift that once served a vibrant pleasure craft marina are now closed, whilst the marina itself is largely empty. However, we managed to enlist the help of the local Caterpillar agent, sourced a replacement engine which was shipped up from Vancouver, and used his logging truck crane to lift the new engine into the boat. He was more used to working on heavy logging plant than a small 28 HP marine diesel, but between us we managed to get it fitted and running, even if he did need a little convincing as to why it was necessary to retain the anti-siphon valve on the coolant circuit!!



*Shearwater Marina*



*The new engine arrives in Port Hardy*

The remainder of the journey southwards was blissfully problem free and once south of Desolation Sound we once again found ourselves under the influence of the Pacific high, enjoying wonderful Indian Summer conditions for our last few days as we headed towards Sidney on the southern end of Vancouver Island where Cosmic Dancer was to be lifted out for the winter.

The end of our 2017 cruise was altogether more conventional than the start. With Cosmic Dancer safely laid up ashore in Van Isle Boatyard, we could reflect on an unusual and eventful season. In the days and weeks leading up to the initial truck journey we had increasingly found ourselves asking the question “We hope this is all going to be worth it? 1,500 land miles and 2,000 nautical miles later the answer was a resounding “Yes”. We were both agreed it had been an experience of a lifetime and even after only 80 days afloat we had fallen firmly in love with sailing in the Pacific north west. It is a place we will have some difficulty leaving when the time comes!



*Seattle to Ketchikan via the Inside Passage*

