Cruising with Friends in the South Sound

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by Lisa Mighetto
When I first heard about this contest, I assumed I would write about something exciting, like my husband's grand adventure sailing around Cape Scott in a 26-foot boat in July, or our August trek to the Columbia River Gorge for the International 14 and Tasar races. But as I thought about it, I realized that our most memorable boating experience this summer was an ordinary trip with friends through the South Sound over Labor Day weekend. While this trip did not include the exhilarating and sometimes unnerving waters of the North Pacific or the Columbia, it offered what we have come to appreciate most about boating: camaraderie with fellow sailors and the joy of seeing familiar places in a new light.

We were three couples in three Macgregor 26x sailboats. We had planned our trip weeks in advance, arranging to meet at our homeport at Swantown Marina in Olympia. Hammersley Inlet, a narrow, forested waterway leading to the town of Shelton, was to be our first destination. We were very quickly reminded of the first rule of cruising: be flexible, because things rarely happen exactly as planned. One of the couples, sailing from Lake Washington to meet the other two boats in Olympia, almost lost their dinghy engine when a boat wake knocked it loose from its mounting. So we spent our first half day at Tom's Outboard in Olympia, flushing the engine, changing the oil, and enduring jokes about the owners confusing their engine with their anchor. Even so, while waiting, we were able to tour the square rigger Lady Washington, which was docked in Olympia for Percival Landing Days. If not for the dinghy engine mishap, we would have missed that magnificent replica and example of maritime history.

By the time we got underway, there was not enough daylight left for exploring Hammersley Inlet. The tide was too high to squeeze under the Harstene Bridge as planned, so we cruised around the east side of Harstene Island, taking the long way to our first anchorage at Jarrell Cove. Our new route took us past Boston Harbor.
and through Dana Passage— one of the most picturesque and scenic spots in the South Sound—which we also would have missed if things had gone as planned.

Every night we learned more about the dynamics of couple cruising. It was our anniversary, and we when we pulled into Jarrell Cove and spotted an open mooring buoy, my husband and I looked forward to a romantic dinner and a quiet evening alone. Although we assumed the other boats would also take a mooring buoy or drop an anchor, both quickly pulled up on either side of ours, preferring to raft to us. The same thing happened the next night as we dropped our anchor, soon finding ourselves the middle boat in a raft of three. Our 26-foot Macgregor does not afford much privacy in any case, and with three of them together it was impossible to find a moment alone. Each morning I woke up to not one but six companions, including a large, friendly and sometimes wet and muddy golden retriever puppy that belonged to one of the couples. Two lessons came from that experience: Love your friends/ love their dog and it is difficult to appear cheerful first thing in the morning, with my hair looking like an albatross's nest and before coffee. By the second evening, however, I truly came to appreciate this togetherness. After eating a group dinner and watching the moon rise from my cockpit, our companions pulled out a banjo and a guitar and sang into the night for several hours. It was an enchanting evening, and we thought we sounded great. But then again it could have been the wine.

The general merriment continued the next day as we explored Case Inlet. We stopped in Allyn, a charming town that offers shops and pubs within walking distance of the dock. Locals directed us to a waterfront restaurant that served Moose Drool. We

Top: Setting off for an exploration of Jarrell Cove, Harstene Island.

Middle: The boys and their toys, gathering around the GPS.

Bottom: Strathspey, Murrelet, and Somerstime rafting in Jarrell Cove.
enjoyed introducing our friends to this Montana ale—a rare find in the South Sound and one of our favorites.

On the third morning of our cruise, my husband and I woke to a sound that no sailor wants to hear: a sickening thud on the hull. We were in Vaughn Bay, a lovely and protected anchorage infamous for its shallow waters, especially at low tide. When I opened the bow hatch and peered out, I saw that we were so close to shore I could have jumped off the boat and landed on the spit. I’ve read many times that there are two kinds of sailors: those who have run aground and those who will run aground. My husband has always dreaded Joseph Conrad’s vivid description of hitting bottom in the book, Heart of Darkness: “After all, for a seaman, to scrape the bottom of the thing that’s supposed to float all the time under his care is the unpardonable sin. No one may know of it, but you never forget the thump—eh? A blow on the very heart. You remember it, you dream of it, you wake up at night and think of it—years after—and go hot and cold all over.”

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We knew it would happen to us eventually, but didn’t want it to happen to our friends in three boats rafted together. As my husband and I crept into our cockpit at 5:00 a.m. to assess the situation, feeling responsible and very worried, we discovered that one of our companions was already up and had been keeping watch. He had determined that the tide had already hit its lowest point and that we would soon be out of danger. Fortunately, all boats had centerboards that could be retracted. We returned to bed, happy in the knowledge that we had friends looking out for us.

Later that morning, we said goodbye to one couple, who headed north, and raced the other boat back to Swantown Marina in light wind. We lost the race, but as we watched the other boat pull ahead in the distance, we realized how fortunate we are to be able to sail the South Sound and to share its quiet beauty with such good companions. While this weekend did not include the high drama of the open ocean or the thrill of competitive racing, for us, this is what sailing is all about. Sometimes friends are the story—and it just doesn’t get any better than this.

Lisa Mighetto is a member of the South Sound Sailing Society. She and her husband Frank keep their boat Murrelet in Olympia.

Lisa’s story: “Cruising With Friends in the South Sound,” was one of the winners in 48°North’s “I don’t want summer to end” story contest.

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