

SUMMER CRUISING

# THE EASY WAY TO ALASKA

A 10 DAY TRIP FROM WASHINGTON TO ALASKA WITH AN  
ASPEN POWER CATAMARAN, A TRAILER AND A THIRST  
FOR ADVENTURE BY [PETER A. ROBSON](#)





**W**E GAZED IN AWE at the grizzlies grazing and foraging for clams on a sandy beach in remote Kutzeyma-teen Inlet on British Columbia's North Coast. As we drifted just offshore aboard

our 28-foot Aspen Power Catamaran (reviewed in *PY* November 2011), it was hard to believe that our little craft was here in one of the most remote corners of the Pacific coast, yet it had taken almost no effort or advanced planning to get here. It was simply a matter of loading the boat onto its trailer, enjoying a scenic two-day drive north through B.C. from Everett, Washington, loading up with groceries and launching the boat in Prince Rupert.

For most boaters, a cruise to Alaska is the trip of a lifetime, involving plenty of research and planning and a month or two of time to travel through B.C.'s challenging Inside Passage to get there. Not so for Larry Graf, Aspen Power Catamaran's founder, designer and builder. He had 10 days between finishing his latest Aspen 290 and delivering it into charter in the San Juan Islands. Why not take it to Alaska first, he thought.

**ROAD TRIP** It was a rainy evening in late May as I waited at the weigh station on the Canadian side of the Canada-United States border south of Vancouver. Before long, through the mist I spotted Larry's Chevy 3/4-ton pickup truck, seemingly dwarfed by the twin blue hulls of the Aspen towering over it. After showing his "Wide Load" paperwork to the highways official (the Aspen is 10 feet wide and needs a permit), I was introduced to fellow traveller, David Seidman, a veteran writer for *Boating* magazine and a longtime buddy of Larry's who had flown in from New York for the trip. We piled into the truck and set off toward Hope. It was immediately clear that ▶

PETER A. ROBSON

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Larry's Chevy 2500 4x4 with its Duramax transmission was well up to the task. It was almost as if we didn't have 18,000 pounds of boat, truck and trailer to deal with. Acceleration was excellent and Larry had no trouble matching the speed limit.

**THE TRAILER** The aluminum trailer, explained Larry, is a \$9,200 option for Aspen purchasers. It features eight-inch box frames, 16-inch tandem mag wheels, self-dampening torsion suspension (instead of leaf springs), LED lights and perhaps most significantly, electric over hydraulic brakes. To ensure good traction, Larry had about 500 pounds of bricks tucked away under a mat in the aft end of the pickup's bed. Larry said he likes to see the rig configured so there is five to eight percent of the weight of the trailer and boat on the tongue, with the towing ball set up so the trailer and boat are both completely level.

**THE FRASER CANYON** We stopped for dinner at a truck stop in Chilliwack, and then turned up the Fraser Canyon (Hwy 1) at Hope. The Coquihalla (Hwy 5), the primary route used by commercial trucks, would have been faster than the often narrow, winding and hilly Highway 1, but Larry wanted to show David some of the spectacular

scenery along the Fraser Canyon. Unfortunately, it was well after dark by the time we hit the Fraser Canyon. At 22:30, we stopped for the night at a pullout just south of the famed Hells Gate Canyon. We'd travelled 320 kilometres (200 miles) from the border in four hours, including our dinner stop.

One of the benefits of travelling with a trailerable cruising boat is being able to sleep aboard while on the road. Larry unhooked a 10-foot ladder from the trailer and we simply climbed aboard. The Aspen had all the amenities one would expect in a

## WE WERE IN AWE OF THE SHARP, SNOWCAPPED MOUNTAINS AND DEEP, LUSH RIVER VALLEYS

28-foot cruising boat: a galley, head/show-er, convertible saloon table/double berth, a quarter berth in the port hull and, unique to a boat of this size, a queen size berth in the bow. Staying aboard, in spite of the rain, was both comfortable and easy, made even cozier by the built-in Wallas diesel heater.

**THE LONG DAY** The following day, the rain let up and David got to see some of the stunning scenery along the Fraser Canyon. We turned onto Highway 97 at Cache Creek, then onto Highway 16 at Prince George.

We stopped for the night at a quiet, well-maintained RV park, Shady Rest, a few miles east of Houston. We'd been on the road for 14 hours and covered just less than 900 kilometres (560 miles). It had been an easy drive with a number of stops along the way for food, gas and stretching.

Our second full day on the road was an easy 420-kilometre (260-mile) five-and-a-half-hour drive (including pit stops) to Prince Rupert. Once again, the road was in great condition and driving through the Coast Mountains was a real thrill. None of

us had driven this well-maintained highway before and we were in awe of the sharp, snowcapped mountains and deep lush river valleys. Still, after arriving in Prince Rupert, seeing the ocean once again and smelling the salt air, we were ready to go boating.

**PRINCE RUPERT** According to the odometer, the truck had covered 1,768 kilometres (1,099 miles) since leaving Everett. The drive took a total of about 26 hours, though the actual driving time, without stops, >



Stopped for fuel at the junction of Highway 16 and Highway 37 north to Stewart, B.C. and Hyder, Alaska. Left to right: Larry Graf, Peter A. Robson, David Seidman.

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is estimated at about 18 hours. We'd used 393 litres (104 US gals) of diesel at a total cost of \$531. Average mileage was 4.5 km/L (10.5 miles per US gallon). This translated to an average cost of \$0.30 per kilometre (\$0.48 per mile).

I'd visited Prince Rupert a number of times in the past, first as a deckhand on a fish packer and later to write about the

area's commercial fishing and logging industries. I've always had a soft spot for the place with its small-town, frontier look, friendly locals, and the character of the fishing-based waterfront. And despite the reputation for rain, today the sun was shining and the wind blustery.

We shopped for groceries, beer and fishing gear, then stopped at what had been

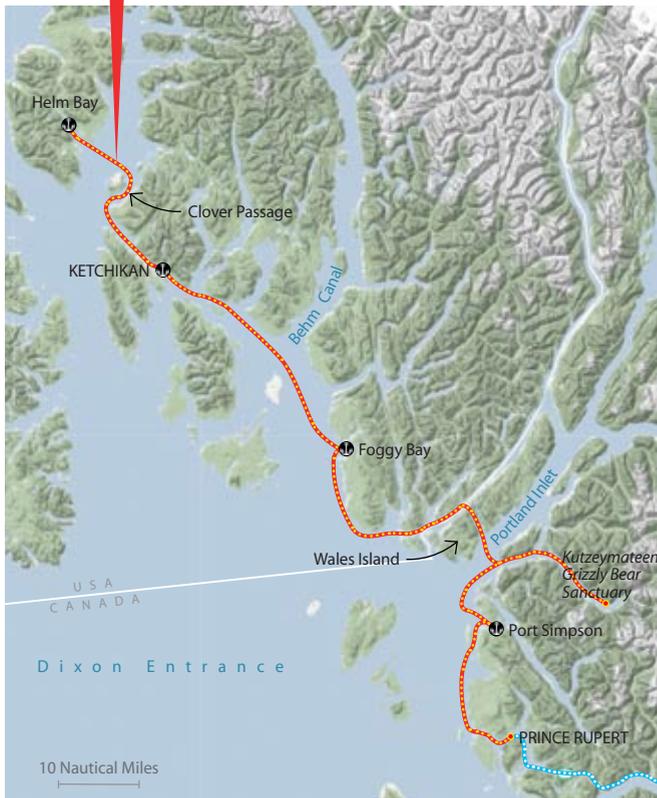
**TOP LEFT** Launching the boat in Prince Rupert. **ABOVE LEFT** A young grizzly digging for clams near the head of Kutzeymateen Inlet. **ABOVE** Our first overnight stop on the boat in picturesque Port Simpson.

my favourite local seafood restaurant, the historic and rustic Smiles, in Cow Bay. After lunch, we launched the Aspen, fuelled up, washed off the road grime, and steamed out of the harbour into a 15 to 20 knot westerly. It was hard to believe after only one full day on the road, Alaska was little more than a stone's throw away across Dixon Entrance.

**ON BOARD** That night, after logging 35 miles from Prince Rupert in moderate beam seas, we pulled into Port Simpson and were given permission to overnight in this picturesque and friendly First Nations village. The next morning, we cast off and trolled for salmon (unsuccessfully) as we worked our way into Portland Inlet. I'd long wanted to visit the famed Kutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary, just around the corner, so we made it our next destination. The long, winding inlet had all the beauty of the many fjords along the B.C. coast, but the abundance of grizzlies on the estuaries made it very special.

We stopped by the floating barge of the park rangers and chatted with Tom Ellison and his daughter Sarah aboard their well-known charter yacht *Ocean Light II*; we filmed bears, ate our lunch on the hook, then sped out and across Portland Inlet. We spent the afternoon meandering through the backside of Wales Island and

## OVER SEA ROUTE



## OVER LAND ROUTE



PETER A. ROBSON X3; TOP RIGHT: LARRY GRAF



**ABOVE** Headed north into Revillagigedo Channel south of Ketchikan.

then west to Dixon Entrance and into Alaskan waters. Dixon Entrance, wide open to the Pacific, can be a treacherous piece of water, but fortunately, the sun was shining and winds were only about 10 knots. I kept my eyes out for debris from the Japanese tsunami, but didn't see anything except the usual driftwood and seaweed.

We'd read that vessels entering Alaskan waters could overnight in Foggy Bay if they couldn't make it in one shot to Ketchikan—the nearest customs clearance port. We'd had a leisurely day and it was getting late, so we ducked into Foggy Bay for the evening.

**ALASKA** We steamed up to Ketchikan first thing the following morning. It was a bit of a shock after travelling 194 miles from Prince Rupert, through untamed wilderness and seeing only two other cruising yachts. Four massive cruise ships were tied alongside the main part of town. Floatplanes were coming and going and the waterway was crowded with tour boats, commercial vessels and sport fishers. Still, we were in Alaska—and for many cruisers, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!

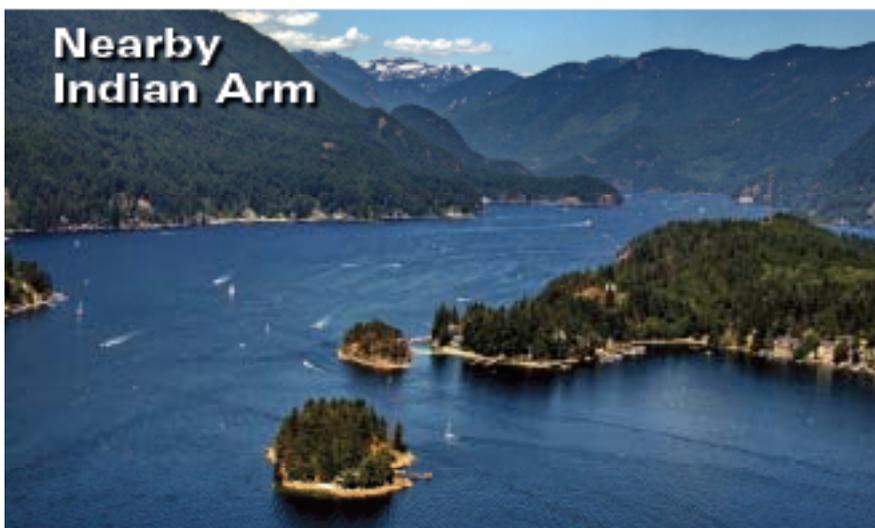
In short order we were tied up in Bar Harbor Marina where we cleared customs and set off to explore the city. We ate lunch, splurged on a charter seaplane flight to check out the area and spent the rest of the afternoon ▶



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checking out the plethora of tourist shops (many owned by the cruise lines).

The next day, the last full day in Alaska for David and me, we fuelled up and set off to explore the area around Behm Canal, north of Ketchikan. Although mostly wilderness similar to the B.C. coast, we were surprised to come across a fleet of salmon sport fishing boats and miles of picturesque waterfront cottages in Clover Passage. It was as if we were

in the B.C.'s Gulf Islands or Sunshine Coast. We headed across to Helm Bay to drop the crab trap and explore ashore at one of the wilderness cabins available for rent in the Tongass National Forest. Once again, for the third straight day, the weather was clear and calm, which we understood from the locals, was a very rare event. We caught two nice Dungeness crabs and returned to our marina berth where we met up with

## THE NUMBERS

### IF WE'D BOATED TO ALASKA

Had we boated to Prince Rupert from Everett, the distance would have been about 650 miles. At an average speed of 16 knots, it would have taken us 41 hours. We'd have used at least 820 litres (250 gallons) of fuel at a minimum cost of \$1,066 (at \$1.30/litre). It should be noted, though, the Aspen has probably the most fuel-efficient hull for its size on the market today. It gets better than three miles per gallon at 16 knots compared to the average monohull, which gets less than a mile per gallon at that speed. Fuel costs in that case would be \$3,200. Had we travelled for 10 hours a day, with no stops, except overnight, it would have taken a little over four days by water from Everett to Prince Rupert, not accounting for weather, currents and waiting for slack at tidal rapids. But of course, no one in their right mind would want to race up the B.C. coast without taking time to enjoy all it has to offer.

### DRIVING TO ALASKA AND BACK

**2,198 miles** Total distance: Everett to Prince Rupert and return  
**786 litres (208 US gals)** Total diesel fuel used  
**\$1,061.10** Total cost of fuel (based on \$1.35 CDN per litre)  
**\$0.48** Average cost per mile  
**10.56 miles per gallon** Average fuel consumption

### BOATING IN ALASKA

**446 miles** Total distance covered  
**510 litres (134.5 US gals)** Total fuel consumption  
**\$584.26** Total cost of diesel  
**0.87** Litres per mile  
**3.32 miles per gallon** Overall fuel efficiency  
**\$1.31** Cost of fuel per mile



OPPOSITE PAGE Ketchikan is a busy hub for tourists visiting on cruise ships.  
 TOP Preparing for a charter flight over Ketchikan. Left to right: David, Peter, Larry.  
 ABOVE David with a nice-size Dungeness crab caught in Helm Bay.

Larry's son Nick and two old friends. Those four were to continue cruising in the area for another two days, then Larry and Nick would bring the boat to Prince Rupert and trailer it back to Everett. We celebrated our last night with an excellent dinner at the Bar Harbor Restaurant at the top of the docks.

**REFLECTIONS** It was raining when we departed for the airport the following morning. As I sat on the airplane I couldn't help but smile. We'd left the B.C.-Washington border less than a week ago, on Sunday evening, arrived in Prince Rupert on Tuesday afternoon, gone cruising Tuesday trough to Friday, and I was going to be home on Saturday. It was a heck of a lot of ground to cover in 10 days, but both the truck and boat worked flawlessly and it was an adventure we'll be talking about for a long time.

The trip demonstrated just how fast and easy it is to get to some pretty fantastic and remote cruising areas with a trailerable cruising boat. If one watches the weather, cruising Alaska in a small boat is no more challenging than anywhere else. And although we had an Aspen Cat, which had the added benefit of being brand new and super fuel efficient, any trailerable boat with amenities to live aboard will deliver the same experience. Perhaps next year I can talk Larry into a trip to the central coast of B.C. to see some of those white Kermode bears. ❧

PETER A. ROBSON '12

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