

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Small is beautiful; Private boat gives visitors a closer look at the less-frequented Gulf Islands

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to the Times Colonist / Wendy Sprung from Toronto captures the Gulf Islands on film from a high bluff on the south side of Saturna Island that is now part of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve.

Colour Photo: Courtesy Kevin J. Smith / Bonaparte's gulls fly past two black oystercatchers on the rocky Belle Chain Islands. Colour Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to the Times Colonist / Vivien Frow of Qualicum Beach steers the Maple leaf during a jaunt around the southern Gulf Islands.

The Gulf Islands may be in our backyard, but for many of us, the only ones we see are those we can reach by B.C. Ferries or look down at wistfully while flying to Vancouver. Unless you have a boat and know where to go, the true nature of the Gulf Islands remains elusive.

Kevin Smith has a boat -- a 28-metre schooner -- and having grown up on Saltspring Island, he knows where to go. So it was with great anticipation that seven of us joined Smith and his four-person crew aboard the Maple Leaf in April to explore the "other" Gulf Islands.

Spring is one of the best times to be on the water anywhere. New life is bursting forth and in the southern Gulf Islands -- where we would be spending six days -- a seasonal chain of events gets underway with predators coming onto the scene, including sea lions, transient orcas and thousands of birds. As soon as we motor out of Port Sidney, the bird life is abundant. Buffleheads, cormorants and bald eagles all seem to be enjoying the spring sunshine as much as we are. However, our first truly spectacular visual treat is not wildlife, but wildflowers.

We anchored the Maple Leaf in a small cove off Prevost Island between North Pender and Saltspring Islands and jumped into two zodiacs to go ashore to a small, privately owned island. We landed on a white shell beach where a nearby hillside was a riot of colours -- pink sea blush, blue-eyed Mary, white fawn lilies and, here and there, mottled brown and green chocolate lilies -- all aglow in the late afternoon sun. Our exact location is a secret since our captain had promised not to publicize it. We considered ourselves lucky to be here and carefully walked in each other's footsteps so as not to step on a single precious bloom.

The next day we wondered how the flowers were surviving as we pulled on our fleece and raingear; it had suddenly turned cold and nasty. Hurricane-force winds were forecast for open bodies of water. We didn't go far before our captain decided to pull into a sheltered cove at Wallace Island. It was Friday the 13th, after all, and sailors are a superstitious lot. The previous evening we had raised our glasses to toast our voyage and -- to the captain's horror -- clinked our glasses together before he could warn us about the bad luck that would invite.

Now, the rain poured down, but we went ashore

anyway, led by Kevin and Tracey Moss, our on-board naturalist. As we walked along a soggy trail we came to a boarded-up house and an old flowerbed that was sprouting daffodils. Kevin told us the island used to be owned by the photographer who discovered Marilyn Monroe. When David Conover met Monroe, she was still Norma Jeane Mortenson and working on an assembly line at the Radio Planes Munition factory in Burbank, Calif. After the war, Conover and his wife Jeanne bought Wallace Island and developed a successful resort. Today, most of the buildings are gone and the island is a provincial marine park, accessible only by private boat.

Later, as we explored barnacle-covered rocks at one end of the island, Tracey gave us another piece of information to consider. This one had nothing to do with a sex goddess, just sex itself. Did we know that barnacles have one of the largest penis-to-body mass ratios of any animal? "A barnacle's penis can be 20 times the length of its body," she said with a hint of a smile. "It's very impressive."

We were even more impressed the following day when the sun returned and we found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of black-headed Bonaparte's gulls as we cruised south past Galiano and Mayne islands. The birds were there for the fish, dipping and diving in the water where huge schools of Pacific herring congregate to spawn each spring. Sea lions also welcome the herring and, as we passed the Belle Chain Islands and got within nose range of a dozen or more of the noisy mammals, someone suggested the islands might better be called the Belching Islands.

Until this voyage, Tumbo and Cabbage islands were just names on a map. Now we know them to be two jewels of the new Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. We hiked along a deer trail through a forest of arbutus, Douglas fir and Garry oak trees on Tumbo's southern bluff and breathed in the sweet scent of a forest in spring. Later, on Cabbage Island, we explored marine life at low tide, spotted a green sea anemone waving its tentacles and looked for the bright orange bills of the Black Oystercatchers that like to nest on rocky islets nearby.

Like most beaches on the B.C. coast, Cabbage Island has its share of cut logs that have gone astray from a logging operation and washed ashore. They're nice to sit on, but our captain pointed out that 95 per cent of beached logs in B.C. are strays and therefore unnatural. We try to imagine beaches without all the

logs and wonder what harm, if any, they've done to the shoreline ecology.

Certainly, the Gulf Islands and the birds and animals that live here are under lots of pressure; from development, pollution and boat traffic. Kevin doesn't do any fishing from the Maple Leaf on this part of the coast because he believes the fishery here is fragile. Some rockfish species live to be 170 years old, but are slow to reproduce and with the latest fish-finding technology on boats, could easily be wiped out, as nearly happened with the East Coast cod. "I don't want to be a part of that crash," he said one night over dinner.

Still, the islands and the ocean they lie in, give the impression of health and vitality. When we cruised past Mandarte Island we counted at least a dozen cormorants through our binoculars and many more gulls nesting on the rocky cliffs. Two bold harbour porpoises came by to check us out while we were eyeing the birdlife. When we got ashore at Rum Island -- now officially Isle-de-Lis -- we were thrilled to discover several native prickly-pear cacti, a testament to how warm, dry and diverse these islands are.

More than anything, perhaps, we are impressed with the sheer size of the place. Vivien Frow from Qualicum Beach said it was the first time she'd seen the Gulf Islands from anything smaller than a B.C. ferry. "You look at the map and it all looks so squashed up and tiny, but here ... it makes you realize how big the world is, when we see how big, how long the distances are between these islands."

The last island we visited was Russell Island, just across from Saltspring's Fulford Harbour. Smith told us that this island, as well as Saltspring, Portland and Coal, were homesteaded in the 1800s by Kanakas -- people from Hawaii. They came to work on tall ships owned by the Hudson's Bay Company and many of them settled here after they finished their contracts. As we unfurled the sails in a light spring breeze and took in the beauty all around us, we could understand their reasons for staying.

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IF YOU GO

Maple Leaf Adventures offers its ecotours of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve in April and October each year. The company, with a trip listed in Explore magazine's "100 Things To Do Before You Die," has been operating tours since 1986. Upcoming trips include:

Natural History Tours: Autumn in the Gulf Islands, Oct. 18-23, 2007; Spring in the Gulf Islands, April 15-21, 2008; Autumn in the Gulf Islands, Oct. 17-23 and Oct. 25-30, 2008

Nature + Special Interest Tours: Art at Sea in the Gulf Islands, April 8-14, 2008; Tall Sails & Ales in the Gulf Islands, Oct. 25-30, 2007; Tall Sails & Ales in the Gulf Islands, April 1-7, 2008

For information: contact Maple Leaf Adventures at 250-FUN-SAIL in Victoria or 1-888-599-5323 or visit www.MapleLeafAdventures.com

More options: An Internet search or a visit to a travel agent will turn up scores of other tours and trips to suit a wide range of fitness levels and budgets.