

A former minesweeper turned luxury small ship takes passengers through BC's gorgeous Gulf Islands. By Suzanne Morphet

# Enchanted Voyage

*A guest aboard the Pacific Yellowfin finds some thrilling subjects for the camera. Opposite page: The wheel room (top) of the Pacific Yellowfin with its handsome varnished wood. The former minesweeper's wood exterior (middle) and a grizzly bear gazes curiously at the Pacific Yellowfin as it passes (bottom).*

Two black fins slice through the water. "Orcas!" someone yells. Our guide and deckhand, Dominic Giossan, quickly readies the speedboat while the rest of us grab cameras and zip up lifejackets.

"They're hunting," says Colin Griffinson, the captain and owner of the Pacific Yellowfin, as we leave the mother ship and pursue the sleek black whales. A few minutes later, Griffinson cuts the engine and we watch as three orcas – not just two – repeatedly dive and surface, oblivious to our presence. They swim so close to our boat that we can hear them forcefully exhale, then see their warm breath condense into white mist.

It's our first morning cruising British Columbia's Gulf Islands, and already we've got a taste of how remarkable this place is, and how quickly our small group can react to whatever nature delivers.

A cruise on the Pacific Yellowfin is like no other I've been on – and that's partly because the boat itself really is unique. Built in 1943 in Maine by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, she was designed as a junior minesweeper to protect harbours off the east coast during the Second World War.

According to Griffinson, the Yellowfin "is the only H.C. Hanson freighter around" (H.C. Hanson was an American naval architect). None of her sister ships has survived.

After the war, the California Department of Fish and Game put her into service as a tuna and sardine research vessel for about 10 years. Then she spent a mysterious interlude in the Caribbean during the Cuban Bay of Pigs invasion before languishing as a houseboat on the Sacramento River for a couple of quiet decades. In the 1980s, millionaire oilman Pete Whittier bought the Yellowfin and began the process of converting the 34.7 meters (114-foot), 415-ton boat into a luxury yacht.

Griffinson first spotted her at the Olympia tugboat races in Puget Sound, WA. "It was love at first sight," he recalls, and upon meeting Whittier, "I thanked him for starting the restoration on my boat." The surprised Whittier eventually agreed to swap the Yellowfin for another boat that Griffinson had already restored.

In 2003, the Irish-born Griffinson – who's been around boats all his life – undertook a major overhaul of the Yellowfin, including a custom interior redesign by the late Robert Ledingham, Vancouver's renowned "doctor of design," who worked with leading architects such as Arthur Erickson.

Today, the Yellowfin is the picture of nautical perfection, its wooden exterior painted a soft lemony yellow, while its interior glows with varnished mahogany, polished brass and Persian carpets. The four guestrooms – two staterooms and two deluxe cabins accommodating eight to 12 guests – come with modern conveniences such as private bathrooms, flat-screen TVs and DVD players, as well as old-fashioned comforts such as hot-water radiators.

Guests dine either in the main saloon with its gleaming

wooden refectory table and open kitchen, or on the fantail deck, which can be made weathertight for those rainy west-coast days and cool evenings.

Stored on the top deck are all the ship's "toys," including a fleet of mini-motorbikes, mountain bikes, kayaks, water skis, golf clubs, even a 12-metre inflatable water slide. There's no chance you'll grow bored on this craft.

And if you're even mildly curious about how this boat runs – it has a soothing *pocka-ta, pocka-ta* rhythm – then a trip down to the immaculate engine room is a must. Painted bright green with red knobs, the ship's original twin 300 hp Atlas Imperial diesel engines look like they're ready for Christmas. Ship engineer Jack Dixon is a character in his own right; he's spent more than 50 years on the water and can knock off a crossword puzzle in minutes.

In fact, the captain and his eclectic four-person crew are a big part of what makes cruising on the Yellowfin special. Dominic, the guide, has a master's degree in law and speaks half a dozen languages. Milan, the talented chef, spends winters in Whistler, where he works at the highly acclaimed Bearfoot Bistro when he's not snowboarding. Jessica, the stewardess, is known for both her bubbly personality and her enormous bloody caesars, made with organic Schramm potato vodka from Pemberton, BC.

The Pacific Yellowfin offers a mix of both scheduled cruises and private charters on the West coast, but – and this is what really makes the Yellowfin unique – there's no set itinerary, only "samples."

"Every trip is different, depending on the tides," explains Griffinson. "Can we get in and out of the anchorages? What are the fish doing? Where are the whales? Is it an active group? That all gets thrown into the mix, and then we manufacture a trip out of that."

A three-day Gulf Islands Culinary Cruise might look like this: you board at the Sidney marina (near Victoria) and enjoy a champagne welcome reception, then head north to Galliano Island, where you'll kayak around Montague Harbour with its white shell beach and abundant bird life.

The next day – if it's a Saturday – you'll probably find yourself browsing Saltspring's famous weekly market, where the governing motto is "Make It, Bake It, Grow It." Wander among stalls run by aging hippies and youthful new agers, while chef Milan shops for fresh baked bread and local artisan cheese to take back for lunch on board.

That night, you may dine at Saltspring's Hastings House Country House Hotel, rated Top Canadian Resort by Zagat Survey from 2004 to 2012, before retiring to your comfy quarters on ship.

On the final day, Captain Griffinson might head east to Saturna Island, with its preponderance of parks. Cycle or motorbike to East Point in the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. Enjoy a gourmet picnic lunch and explore the



# The Best of Bogotá

With a snazzy Design hotel, robust nightlife and rich cultural pickings, the Colombian capital is taking its turn in the limelight

By Elissa Richard

The people at Colombia's national tourism board have been working hard to transform the nation's reputation abroad. Their current campaign assures tourists that "the only risk is wanting to stay," and that seems to be working, as the country attracted close to two million visitors – mainly from North America – in 2013.

In Bogotá, the country's ever-growing capital, handsome hotel towers and sophisticated shopping malls have sprouted up just blocks from seedy urban slums where impoverished Colombians, many from the countryside, still fight to eke out a living. It was seemingly only a matter of time before the city,

The Pacific Yellowfin's engine room (top left) shows its gleaming fittings; BC's Gulf Islands (middle photo); one of the Pacific Yellowfin's spotless and cozy staterooms (below); Seals (below) enjoy the fine weather while they can. Captain Griffinson holds a giant crab; a bald eagle skims the surface of the water; mouth-watering oysters are part of the delicious fare served aboard the Pacific Yellowfin. Milan, the talented chef aboard the boat prepares another delicious meal; one of the chef's dazzling creations.

sculpted sandstone shoreline, colourful tidal pools, and a lighthouse dating from 1888.

My cruise aboard the Yellowfin began on Quadra Island, one of the northernmost Gulf Islands. Our group of five consisted of a yacht broker from England, a scout from Butterfield and Robinson, the bespoke travel company, a Dutch couple, and myself.

And what a trip it was. Griffinson led us on a hike through moss-draped forests for a swim in a mountain lake, took us fishing for salmon, prawns and crab, and introduced us to oyster farmers Delia and Scott. We searched for black bears Scarface and Rosie, we watched dozens of bald eagles and black-headed Bonaparte's gulls dive-bomb for smelt in the tidal rapids, and we feasted on bountiful seafood ourselves.

We did as little or as much as we wanted. It was "our" boat, after all, and our pampered holiday. And we enjoyed that biggest of all luxuries, perhaps – we completely lost track of the time.

## IF YOU GO

Gulf Island cruises begin from a variety of locations. The Pacific Yellowfin is easily accessible by scheduled or chartered plane from Vancouver. A 25-minute flight also gives you a spectacular view of the Gulf Islands from the air.

### RATES

For three-night stays, per person based on double occupancy, not including transportation to and from the vessel but including all meals, use of ship's equipment at the crew's discretion, and wine and beer with meals. All pricing is in Canadian dollars and is subject to 5% GST. Crew gratuity is not included (10% to 15% is customary). Captains Stateroom \$5,250; Owners Stateroom \$5,250; Bears Cabin \$4,500; Orcas Cabin \$3,750

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