



A Perfect Union

Cruising the picturesque waters of British Columbia and world-class fishing aboard one of Westwind Tugboat Adventures' vintage vessels

By Steve C. D'Antonio

"Steven, I think you caught a fish!"

If someone had predicted just a few months ago that my wife, Sandy, would be addressing me with this phrase, I would have bet the family boat it could never come true. You see, I'm not a fisherman. No one in my family is a fisherman, and I come from a long line of men and women who were not fishermen. Sandy shares a similar non-fisherman ancestry. As a result, we never taught our children to fish and thus assumed they would carry on the long and carefully preserved tradition within our families of being nonfishermen. We're simply not members of the select fraternity of men and women who brave wind and wave while bobbing around the ocean in a small boat, awaiting the ever-elusive bite. That is, until we set foot aboard Westwind Tugboat Adventures' historic *Union Jack*.

Sandy D'Antonio



The author proudly displays his 30-pound "Tye" Chinook salmon.

PLANES, FERRIES AND AUTOMOBILES

I've always believed that in order for a destination to be really worth visiting, the trek there must be particularly arduous. Traveling from rural southern Virginia to a small town in British Columbia, Canada's westernmost province, proved this axiom all too true. After 18 hours of underway time aboard one passenger car, three commercial aircraft, a bus

and a ferry, Sandy, our two children, James and Katie, and I arrived in Prince Rupert, our port of embarkation, late on a Monday afternoon. "Exhausted" would be an apt description of our condition upon arrival; however, we'd anticipated this level of effort (our journey began at 2 a.m.) and thus arrived a day early in order to rest up before our adventure began.





After checking into the Crest Hotel, which offers views of Chatham Sound, Prince Rupert's sizable fishing fleet and the fog-enshrouded mountains of Kaien Island in the distance, we walked just far enough to have a delicious meal and then collapsed into deep slumber back at our room.

At breakfast in the hotel's restaurant the following morning, we watched as bald eagles flew by every few minutes at eye level, looking for all the world as if they were commuting from home to work. Unbeknownst to us, this was simply a portent of things to come. We would see scores of these magnificent birds while cruising British Columbia's straits, fjords and coves over the next few days.

I suppose you could get used to seeing these magnificent creatures, as I've grown accustomed to seeing ospreys in my native Virginia, but there remains something spine-tingling about watching an eagle soar, glide, fight or grasp an unwary fish that swims too close to the surface. This was but one of the many delights we would experience while traveling aboard *Union Jack* during the week to follow.

Established early in the last century, the town of Prince Rupert, just south of the Alaska-British Columbia border and 2.5 hours north of Vancouver via a twin-engine turboprop, is a trove of Canadian industry and history. Originally the vision of Charles Hays, the president of Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, the town became the western terminus of Canada's second transcontinental railway. Hays had big plans for Prince Rupert, a strategically located deepwater port rich with fish and lumber resources.

Unfortunately, his grand scheme for this small northern British Columbia fishing village suffered a stifling blow in its earliest stages: Hays made the mistake of accepting an invitation to return from a European financing excursion aboard a well-known Royal Mail Steamer in April 1912, *RMS Titanic*. This unfortunate turn of events took Hays's

dreams for Prince Rupert to the bottom of the cold North Atlantic.

The town's fortunes have ebbed and flowed since then, but mostly flowed, first with railroads, then with commercial salmon and halibut fishing and forestry work. During WWII, shipyards in the area built coastal freighters and minesweepers. The population of 17,000 that once included or catered to the needs of fishermen, rail workers, lumberjacks and tens of thousands of soldiers now services a growing ecotourism and passenger-ship industry. The residents, while friendly and helpful toward strangers, possess an air of independence one often encounters in rugged, frontier-like areas. Surrounded by water, mountains and unspoiled beauty, Prince Rupert is still very much the frontier.



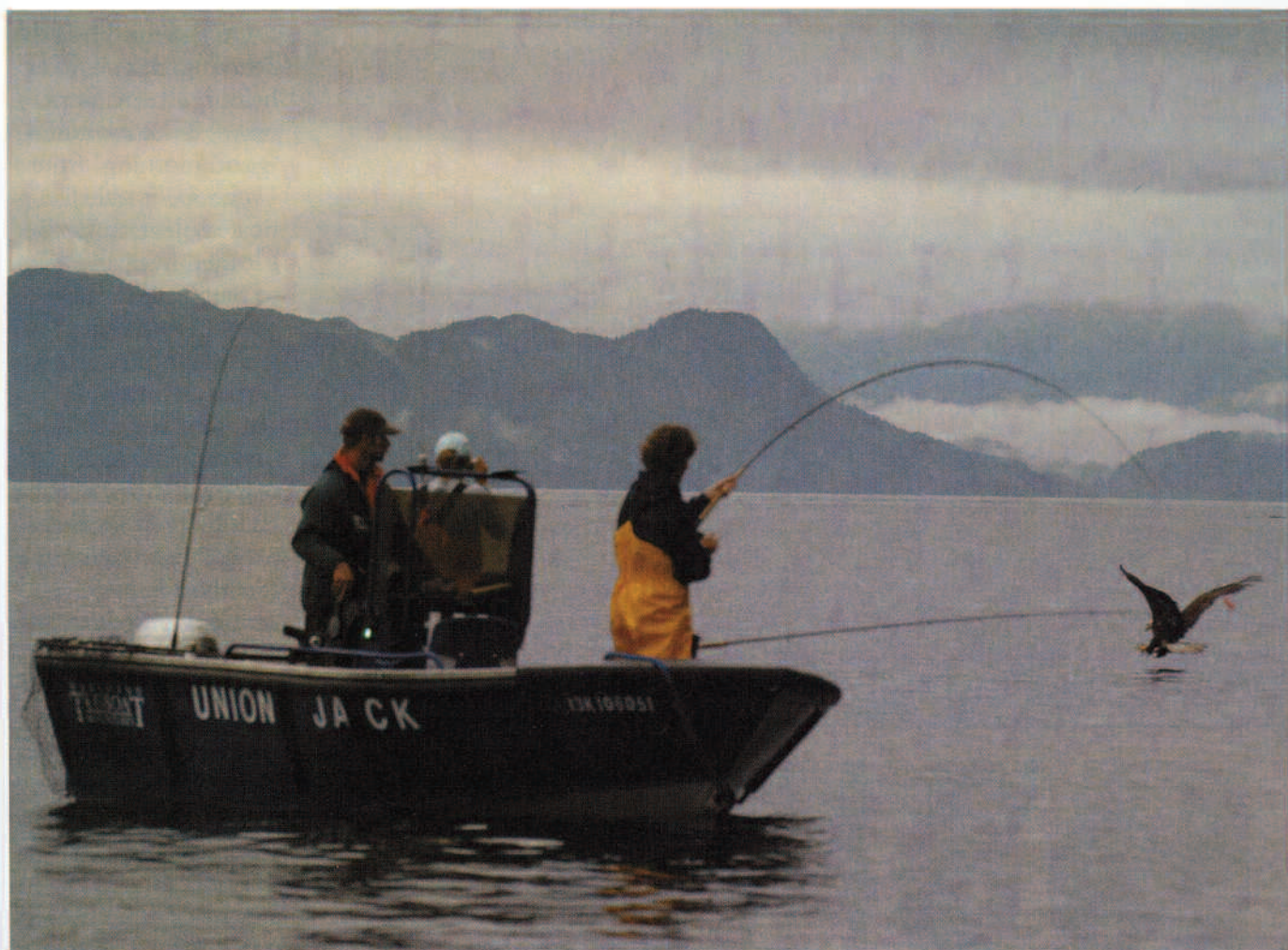
Still on a roll, Katie caught a 14-pound "yellow-eye rockfish" on our third day out.

FOLLOW THE FISH

"Katie, stop touching the rod—you'll never catch a fish that way!" came the admonition from our fishing guide and Westwind Tugboat Adventures' general manager, Wayne Kellett. Sandy and I

exchanged wary glances, each knowing what the other was thinking. "This guy is serious about catching fish." Katie, my 10-year old daughter, was certain that her fish needed to be coaxed onto the hook through her expert manipulation of rod and reel, in spite of the fact that she's hardly fished a day in her life and certainly never for Pacific salmon.

Several hours later, however, after she'd managed to catch three fish while the rest of the family hadn't scored a single hit, Wayne's tone had changed considerably. "You go ahead and touch that reel any way you want, darlin'—you're doing something right!" By the end of the day, Katie had trumped us all, catching her limit of salmon, eight in all, for the duration of the excursion. By the close of the first day of fishing, her 14-year-old brother, James, had managed to catch only a nickname: "JB," or jealous brother.



A whole new meaning to the term "flyfishing": One of *Union Jack's* guests reels in a fish as a bald eagle gets one of its own.

The philosophy at Westwind Tugboat Adventures, now in its 30th year of operation, embodies several tenets. Fishing is, of course, high on this list; however, as my family and I can attest, you don't have to be a fisherman to partake in this type of adventure. Fun, in my opinion, takes precedence over fishing, but in this case, they're synonymous, because Westwind knows how to make this an all-around pleasurable experience, even for neophytes like us.

Union Jack's crew will wake you at 5 a.m. and coax and cajole you into rain slicker and boots while plying you with steaming coffee, fresh-baked rolls and other inviting morning treats. You are then carefully loaded into Westwind's custom-designed and custom-built 18-foot aluminum fishing catamarans and raced out to the fishing grounds. Because *Union Jack* moves to a different location each day, she and you are able to follow the fish, a decided advantage over stationary fishing lodges.

Westwind's skiffs provide a wonderfully stable platform for fishing and offer a dry ride while under way. As a boatbuilder, I was duly impressed with both their design and their construction; a great deal of thought and years of experience clearly went into this design. These boats are also, not surprisingly when you take *Union Jack's* condition into account, thoroughly maintained and spotless.

Thanks to this approach, your transit time from the mothership to the fishing grounds is short, and you'll find yourself fishing by 6 a.m. I know that dedicated fishermen aspire to this, but initially, I was thinking, "I must be crazy." I'm certain Sandy was thinking, more creatively, "How did I let my husband talk me into this?!" That is, until someone in your boat catches the first fish, whereupon all thoughts of fatigue, of being too hot or too cold, of wishing you'd eaten more or less before leaving *Union Jack*, evaporate, and even the most reluctant fishermen focus on their rod, their reel, their bait and their fish. The next one will be yours, you just



On the third morning aboard, after hearing the pleasant wake-up knock and “good morning” from *Union Jack*’s able hostess, Jeanne Hollis, I leaned over and said to Sandy, “You can sleep late, honey. Don’t feel like you have to go out every morning.” She shot back, in a more lucid a.m. response than I’ve ever encountered in all the years I’ve known her (Sandy is *not* a morning person), “Why, so you can catch my fish? I don’t think so!” The die was cast; she and my

children had become fishing aficionados, thanks to Westwind and the crew of *Union Jack*. A well-practiced and generations-long family tradition had come to an end, albeit a pleasant one.

Even for a nonfisherman, the science and art behind salmon fishing proved to be fascinating. In one day, Sandy, James, Katie and I mooched, worked our lines at 30 pulls and got good rolls from our cut plugs (in addition to the ones we acquired from Bill’s ample meals).

Union Jack’s staff made this easy and fun, again, even for novices like us. The first lesson involved learning how to “mooch.” Mooching is the primary means by which salmon are caught by sportsfishermen. As the name implies, it’s getting something for nothing, but in the fishing vernacular, it means to loiter or walk slowly. With an 18- to 24-foot tidal range, the currents on this part of the coast are appreciable. The experienced salmon angler can read these currents and choose locations where the fish might take advantage of them in order to catch a meal of their own. Drifting or motoring slowly over these sweet spots, the bait, a properly cut piece of herring known as a “cut plug,” will spin or roll as if wounded, and salmon love wounded—and thus easy-to-catch—baitfish.

If you or your guide has cut the plug with the proper two-angle slice, if you have a good roll and if your guide has placed you well over a location



Top: An eagle leaves its perch at Pierce Point to scout for fish. Above: *Union Jack*’s bridge offers skipper Dave Hollis a commanding view.

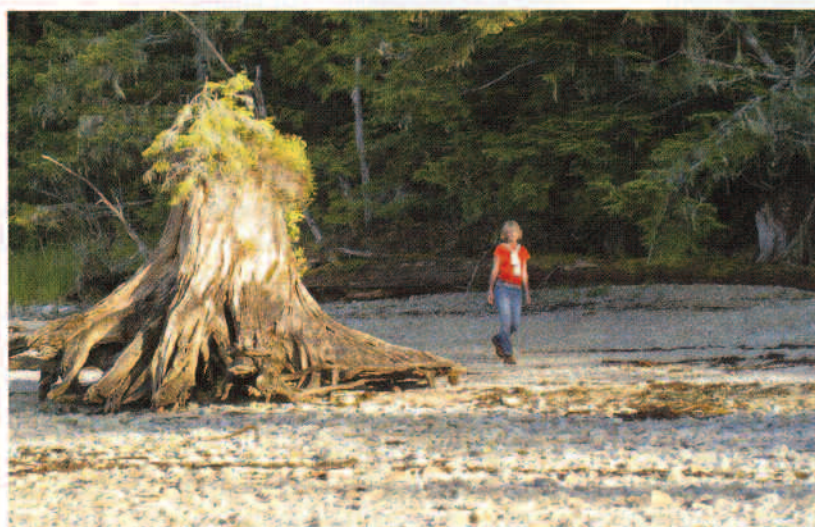
know it! The children caught this fever on the very first day of the trip, while Sandy was a slow learner, requiring two days to be transformed into the consummate femme fishing fanatic. As the official family photographer, it took me two days to get into the fishing groove as well (it’s difficult to fish with a camera in your hand), but I made the attempt anyway. On more than one occasion, my camera had to be lifted off my shoulder as I reeled in a fish.



where he or she believes salmon would lie in wait for a meal, your chances of getting a "fish on!" (a bite) are excellent. Of course, you must also be working the right number of pulls in order for this to occur. That is, you are rolling your bait at the correct depth. Too shallow or too deep, and the salmon just aren't interested. A "pull" represents the amount of line pulled from a reel when grabbing the line at the reel and extending one's arm full length, about two feet. Thus, if you are working "twenty-five pulls," your bait is rolling at about 50 feet. Wayne always seemed to know just how many pulls it would take to entice the salmon onto our hooks. Finally, just to keep things more fair between fish and angler, the hooks we used were not barbed. This practice facilitates releasing fish that are too small or of an undesirable species, but it also makes it easier for "the big one" to get away, which occurred more than a few times on our trip.

A fortunate few—in fact, only one among the eight guests aboard *Union Jack* during our week-long passage—may even, during their stay aboard, be inducted into the vaunted Tyee Club. Tyee, a native word meaning "The Chief" or "large," are salmon of the Chinook variety, which weigh 30 pounds or more. Noted for their energy and fighting characteristics, it's an exciting moment indeed when any one of your group manages to get one of these monsters into the boat, claiming for himself or herself the coveted Tyee pin. These fish can be up to 90 pounds, and landing one may take anywhere from half an hour to several hours.

In addition to fishing and fun, the folks at Westwind have injected several other elements into



Top: British Columbian rain forest, the result of 150 inches of rain per year, a verdant panorama. Above: Massive stumps stranded on beaches are a common sight, a result of the region's active timber industry. The author's wife, Sandy, gives scale to their size.

the mix, helping passages with them to become memorable events. You don't have to be a romantic to revel in the ambience of cruising aboard a 60-year-old, flawlessly maintained wood tugboat while partaking in legendary fishing and feasting on culinary delights beyond description...but it helps. *Union Jack* is a head turner to be sure. Her beauty, however, is more than skin deep. With a crew of four and passenger accommodations for eight, this



85-foot timber vessel presents a warm and friendly environment. A fireplace, oceans of varnished indigenous wood, polished brass and an ample library make life aboard comfortable, to say the least.

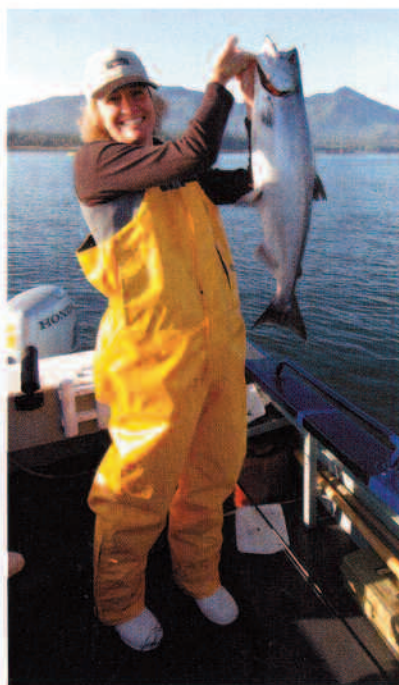
Union Jack's huge, slow turning diesel (see the sidebar for more info on this engine and *Union Jack's* construction) imparts a

comforting *thump, thump, thump* while she cruises in and amongst British Columbia's thousands of small islands at a stately, trawler-like 8 knots. The scenery that passes by is spectacular: lush, green mountains dusted with snow at their peaks, foggy valleys and inlets, and mile upon mile of sparkling blue coves, fjords, bays and sounds. While showering one morning, I glanced out of the port and was simply overcome by the spectacle before me: A foggy blanket rolled through a pass between two snowcapped mountains, spilling out into a crescent-shaped bay, while rays of early morning sun refracted through low-lying clouds. It's not exactly what you expect to see while engaging in your standard morning routine, but it's commonplace aboard *Union Jack*.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the final, key elements of Westwind's award-winning formula: food and adventure. Unlikely though it may seem, there is a connection between these two features of a Westwind Tugboat cruise. Referring to *Union Jack's* chef, Bill Krutz, as a seagoing culinary genius would be an understatement, indeed. From a tiny galley, using a 1930s vintage diesel stove, Bill prepared some of the most memorable meals I've ever had the pleasure of consuming. Each meal, though served in casual family style at a single large table, was an event. Fresh salmon, halibut and



Although *Union Jack's* crew will clean all of your catch, you have the option of cleaning your own if you like; James decided to try it out. Sandy lands a 15-pound coho salmon.



snapper were served at nearly every sitting, along with a selection of fresh vegetables, beef, chicken or turkey and, of course, dessert. While *Union Jack's* provisioning list includes many items, plastic-wrapped loaves of store-bought bread are not among them. Bill baked every loaf, roll and muffin we saw during our stay aboard, and as full as I may have been, I made it a point to taste

these creations at each and every meal.

The adventure element becomes a necessary component in working off the calories imparted by chef Bill's gourmand inducing meals. On several occasions, we landed on desolate islands, in sheltered coves or at bleak and lonely lighthouses to trek and explore ashore at places with exotic sounding names: Squattery, Squawderree, Qlawdzeet, Refuge Cove and the Lucy Island Lighthouse, to name a few. The British Columbia coast receives approximately 150 inches of rain per year, making this area's forests incredibly dense and fertile. Once leaving the beach, you are quickly enveloped by a thick, but eerily beautiful, green shroud of cedar, fir and spruce, while the forest floor resembles a fern-studded, 6-inch-thick, green, felt carpet. Upon entering the woods, it's difficult to take more than three steps in any direction without encountering a tree trunk, and it's not unusual to see several small trees growing from the trunks or stumps of large older trees, both standing and fallen. I got the impression that if I were to thrust my hands into this incredibly rich soil, they might just grow roots.

During a bear-scouting excursion up the Kwinamass River led by *Union Jack's* skipper, Capt. Dave Hollis, and our fishing guide, Rick Jakimchuk, British Columbia's natural beauty unfolded before our eyes. Expertly piloting two of *Union Jack's*



aluminum cats up a shallow but rapidly flowing river required a deft hand; however, the effort proved fruitful. While the expedition members caught only a fleeting glimpse of a grizzly bear scurrying towards the forest, we soon came upon half a dozen bald eagles vying for a stranded salmon carcass. So intent were the eagles on feeding that we were able to nose the skiff to within half a dozen yards of their shoreside dinner.

Although this trek occurred well past 9 p.m., sunset was still hours away, thanks to our high latitude, affording those aboard the skiffs a once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunity. It was a memorable occasion, to be sure, and I'm certain all of the participants, including *Union Jack's* seasoned crew members, considered themselves privileged to have witnessed this wondrous spectacle.

FROM DRAFTSMAN TO FISHERMAN

The history of Westwind Tugboat Adventures and its founders, Bob and Kathy Jordan, reads like a novel. Bob comes from a long line of commercial fishermen who for generations worked the waters of the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas and, later, the salmon and halibut fisheries of Western Canada and the North Pacific. In spite of this history, his father urged him to choose a trade other than fishing, explaining to Bob that it was dangerous, unreliable work that would keep him away from home and family for months or even years at a time. Although he'd hung around fishermen and boatyards since he was a boy, Bob heeded this advice, initially, studying drafting and mechanical engineering while at university.

The lure of the fishing trades, however, was irresistible, and Bob drifted into his first official industry job, working on the line at the Namu Cannery, when he was just 16 years old. In 1967, at the age of 17, he signed aboard a salmon seine netter as engineer, describing it as "the toughest job I ever had, and I loved every minute of it, especially the engine room." He did this for four years, took a year off to fish prawns on Australia's Great Barrier Reef

and then returned to Canada to fish for another six seasons. At this point, Bob realized, as much as he loved the trade, his father was right; it's a hard life with little in the way of rewards or long-term security.

In 1972, Bob met his wife-to-be, Kathy, a native of Australia. Interestingly, he didn't meet her while he was in Australia. Having developed an affinity for Aussie beer while down under, upon his return to Canada, he began socializing at Vancouver's Australian Club, which is where he first met Kathy. Their romance is a story, as Bob says, for another magazine: He chased her halfway around the world before they wed.

Bob then devised a plan where he could heed his father's advice while putting to good use all of the valuable experience and knowledge he had garnered during 10 seasons of commercial fishing. In a single year, he sold his home, bought a boat,



Photos by Steve D'Antonio



Top: James and Katie awaiting one of chef Bill's memorable brunches.

Above: An exceptional view of Steamer Pass from *Union Jack's* shower porthole.



Of Three Unions

Constructed by the McKenzie Barge and Derrick Company of North Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1941, *M/V Union Jack* represents one of the best examples of a dying art: an all-timber, diesel-powered work vessel.

Built from three huge yellow cedar trees as well as Douglas fir, ironbark and gumwood felled in the Nimpkish Valley on Vancouver Island for the Union Towing Company, *Union Jack's* primary mission was towing log booms from British Columbia's and Alaska's timber country to coastal sawmills. With the country in the grips of a world war (Canada is a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations, and as such, her involvement in WWII began in 1939), steel for shipbuilding was in short supply. The demand for lumber used in the construction of barracks, aircraft and small patrol vessels, however, was growing on a daily basis, and thus the need for this valuable raw material was ever growing, too. Building *Union Jack* from timber rather than steel, therefore, made sense, and the necessary skills for using it were in abundant supply. Most of western Canada's fishing vessels were still made from wood at this time and continued to be so until the 1970s, which meant Canada's shipyards were populated with a large cadre of expert shipwrights.

Union Jack's power plant is a marvel of mechanical engineering and design. A truly massive 400hp, 38,000-pound Union Diesel, manufactured in Oakland, California, turns her 72-inch propeller. Maximum horsepower is developed at a remarkable 390 rpm, where she cruises at 8.5 knots, burning a miserly 9 gallons per hour. Bob Jordan estimates that this engine was operational for most of *Union Jack's* commercial working life with virtually no down time, accruing an impressive 200,000 hours. Not many high-speed diesels can be expected to live this long, and, from what I observed, this Union Diesel is far from the end of her service life.

Skipper Dave Hollis made operating the *Union Jack* look easy; however, as an experienced boat handler, I could see that it required precise timing and skill. During our return to Prince Rupert, a small pleasure boat, crewed by a man and young boy, zipped in front of *Union Jack*, presumably for a better view of the historic vessel, as she made 6 knots through a narrow channel. Just as the small boat passed in front of our bow, her engine stalled, leaving her stranded directly in our path. If not for Dave's expert ship-handling skills and deft manipulation of *Union Jack's* helm and engine controls, tragedy would surely have ensued. As it was, our outboard skiff missed the paralyzed duo by a mere foot. For all of her attributes, *Union Jack* cannot stop on the proverbial dime, but her 11-foot-tall rudder makes steering response quick for such a large vessel.

In spite of her robust construction, when Bob and Kathy Jordan took possession of *Union Jack* she was in poor condition. Bob, with the help of a single shipwright, stripped off all the gumwood and felt, a herculean task by his description. The two then proceeded to replace nearly every hull plank above the water line and forward of amidships as they were all broken or rotted as a result of years of log boom and barge collisions, hard landings and entry of rainwater (freshwater promotes rot in wood while seawater inhibits it). Incredibly, this task was accomplished while she was afloat at the shipyard.

Today, *Union Jack* and her Union Diesel, along with all of the other various gear and equipment aboard, receive the best of care and maintenance. From annual haulouts for paint, varnish and engine overhauls, no expense is spared in keeping her in top operating condition. While she's no longer called upon to tow log booms along the coast in support of the war effort, *Union Jack* has found a new lease on life, bringing joy to those fortunate enough to see and cruise aboard her as she plies British Columbia's scenic waterways.

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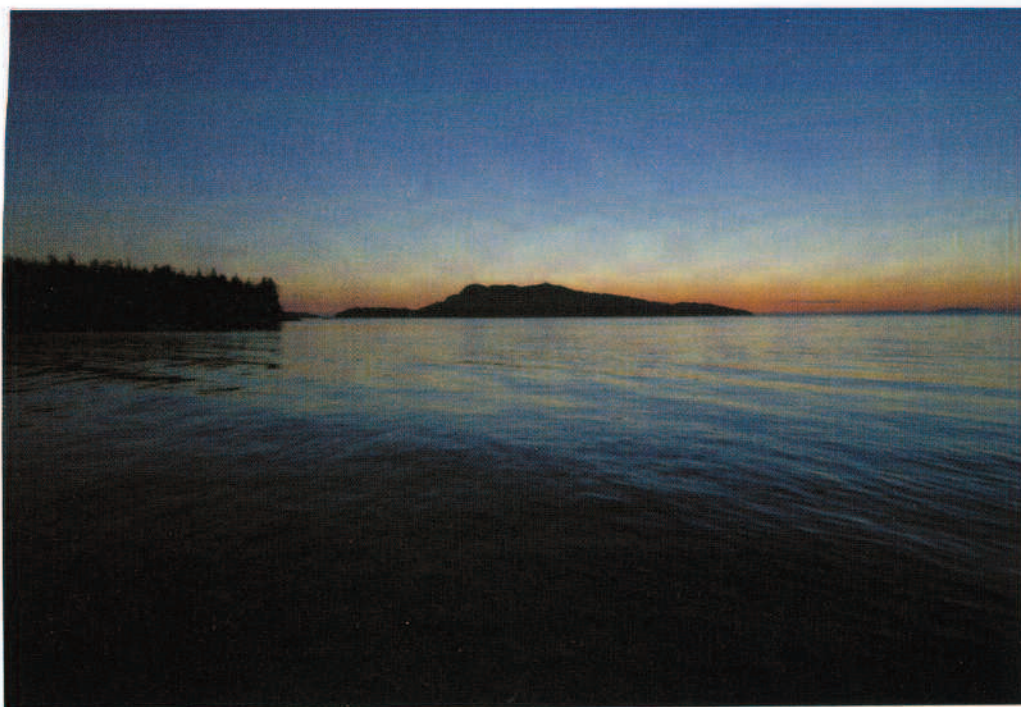


married Kathy and, with his new wife, started a charter business.

Sportsfishing charters in those days were not nearly as popular or plentiful as they are today. Paying the bills and covering expenses meant taking any work that came their way, including contracts from the Canadian Departments of Fisheries and Forestry, as well as scientific, oceanographic and seismic surveys. When I interviewed Bob Jordan for this article, his tone became noticeably nostalgic when relating the story of these early days. He said his dream

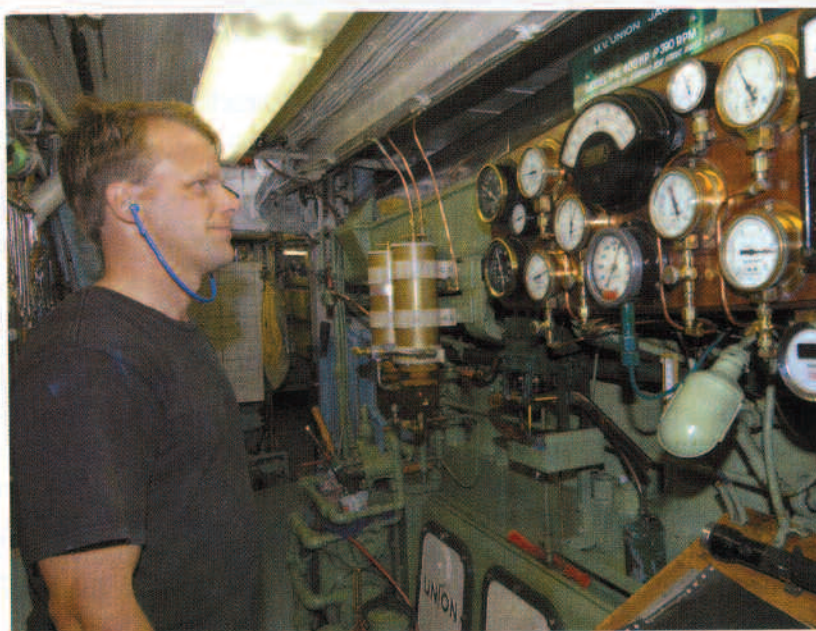
was to visit every one of the harbors, fjords and bays on the British Columbia coast. This work gave him the opportunity to attempt this, but he realized it would be impossible, so he's had to "settle for visiting just the most beautiful ones." With the establishment of his charter business, Bob had attained his goal: He worked but never left home—*M/V Point Hope* was his and Kathy's residence as well as workplace—he never left his family, and he and Kathy worked side by side.

Bob and Kathy's boat was rocked when tragedy struck in 1979. *Point Hope* and all of the couple's worldly possessions were consumed by fire. It was a huge financial and emotional setback, and as Bob related this event to me I could hear the emotion in his voice: "You learn what's important to you, trinkets or real memories; we lost everything, including our wedding pictures." Determined people by nature, the Jordans picked up the pieces and got under way without taking much time to mourn their losses. They heard about a boat that was for sale, a 37-year old wood tug that had been laid up for the past six years. The owner had recently died and the yard was looking for accrued storage and little more. Bob looked the boat over and found



Photos by Steve D'Antonio

Typical 11 p.m. twilight at Humpback Bay as seen from *Union Jack's* fantail.



A hands-on engine, the Union Diesel's instruments require careful monitoring.

that she was a derelict; she had no ports, hatches or bulwarks and was in need of a great deal of work. But he had time on his hands and plenty of desire. He asked the yard manager what he'd take for the boat, and the response was memorable: "There's this fellow who wants to use her as a barnyard for his goats, but we'd hate to see her go that way...so just make us an offer, any offer—we'll take it for sure."



Crew and guests prepare to bid farewell at the close of the voyage.


With that assurance, Bob offered \$15,000 Canadian, and he and Kathy became the proud owners of a tired hulk. After nearly a year of backbreaking work, most of which Bob performed himself (see the sidebar on *Union Jack's* construction and refit), *Union Jack* went into service as one of the few vintage, all-timber charter vessels, powered by her original 38,000-pound, 400hp Union Diesel. Although many "experts" advised Bob to pull this behemoth out of the engine room, warning him about its unreliability and operating expense, Bob, a romantic and lover of all old things mechanical, refused. Today, he admits that this was one of the best decisions he ever made, as the big, old diesel is part of *Union Jack's* mystique.

The insurance payout on *Point Hope* wasn't nearly enough to cover the purchase price and the cost of the refit of *Union Jack*, so it was necessary to book profitable charters without delay. Fortune smiled upon the Jordans when they managed to secure a contract from gas company BC Hydro. Bids were being accepted for a gas pipeline to be laid from the mainland to Vancouver Island at this time, and BC Hydro's bid was in the running. This would be a particularly difficult pipeline to lay, one of the deepest and steepest at that time, and thus detailed hydrographic and seismic exploration would be required. *Union Jack* became the platform for the

crews and equipment undertaking this survey. The project ran beyond the contracted charter period, at which time invoicing reverted to the daily rate, enabling the Jordans to pay off the boat and her refit with this single charter.

Since that time, the winds of fate have continued to blow favorably upon Bob and Kathy Jordan and Westwind Tugboat Adventures. The evolution of the business into high-end fishing and adventure cruising was completed in the mid 1980s. With a firm grip

on a successful formula, it was difficult for the Jordans to turn down a good offer when it came their way. Another boat, also a timber tug much like, but slightly larger than, *Union Jack* was on the market. In 1987, the motor vessel *Parry* was added to the Westwind "fleet." She, too, required much toil and labor in order to bring her up to Bob's lofty standards; however, he was by this time an experienced hand at rescuing wooden hulks from breakers' yards and goat farmers. After a \$500k refit, *Parry* went into service as Westwind's second vessel. Capable of accommodating 12 guests, *Parry's* appearance and atmosphere carry on the tradition started by *Union Jack*, historic yet warm and inviting, with an equally large, slow-turning diesel in the engine room.

Although fun and exciting, the days of taking on scientific and government charters are long gone. Westwind now emphasizes high-quality fishing, great food, adventure and, of course, ample amounts of fun. Moreover, if you always thought you wouldn't enjoy a passage such as this because you're not a fisherman, think again. 

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