



OUTDOORS

The Quest for Blue Holes

A SOJOURN ON THE SALISH SEA

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, December 1, 2010



The grey is here. Those familiar low-ceilinged clouds have set up camp for the winter, settling over us like a cloak of shadows.

But let me tell you a secret: there are blue holes.

That's right: blue holes. It's a meteorological thing. Often when it's funeral-grey here in the city of subdued excitement, sunshine (or at least a lack of falling liquids) can be found in the San Juan Islands, so close yet so far away.

Such were our thoughts as we motored out of Squaw Harbor aboard the good ship *Elenoa*, bound for the northern islands, those sanctuaries of carved sandstone and chattering eagles, set hard up against the Canadian border. The weather report was not promising but we were counting on the blue holes.

We had *faith*.

Our first port of call was Rolfe Cove on Matia Island, an anchorage surrounded on three sides by sensuous sandstone cliffs. Except for the eagles and seals, we had the place to ourselves.

We loaded our dry bags into the dinghy and traced the shoreline to Hermit Cove where we nosed in to a sliver of stony beach. The wind was rising as we headed up into the sparkling woods amongst fleshy madrones and yellow maples. Mushrooms of every description covered the forest floor, poking through the carpet of fallen leaves. At the eastern end of the island we emerged onto a headland and into the teeth of the wind. The Salish Sea was roiling.

In the morning we were surrounded by bull kelp washed into the cove by the night winds. The sun emerged, right on schedule and the water sparkled like Liberace's underwear.

We cast off the buoy and headed for Sucia, the next island in the chain. We rounded the north side of Sucia, pausing in a nameless little bight to eavesdrop on a pair of eagles having some kind of a heated debate in a weathered snag on the shore and pulled into Shallow Bay (empty of course) past a rock crowded with clamoring cormorants.

We loaded gear into the dinghy and motored to shore. Back on land, we hiked to the westernmost point on the island where we climbed down to a sandstone shelf exposed by the retreating tide. Vociferous birds were

everywhere, covering every offshore rock. A sea lion passed just offshore, breathing like Darth Vader. A family of otters scampered out of the water onto the shelf, checking us out.

In the golden light of day's end, I savored the moment, breathing with the sea.

Low clouds greeted us in the morning - time to move again. We headed for Patos, the last island in the chain.

We pulled into Active Cove on the far side of Patos just as the sun broke through the rough and tumble clouds, illuminating the beach, kelp tangled in the complicated embrace of the tides. A sweet light danced on the golden sea as twilight enveloped us, accompanied by an inexplicably warm breeze, smelling of memories and seaweed.

We returned to *Elenoa* in velvet darkness. One last night in the green islands, one last night on the Salish Sea.

We were woken by the enthusiastic snorting of speckled seals. Eagles cast shadows in a cloudless sky. The sails were raised and we glided off the buoy and out of the cove, accompanied by porpoises, toward home.