

Chartering in the San Juans and in the Mediterranean



Comparing a San Juan skippered charter with a bareboat flotilla charter in the Greek islands By Marianne Scott

It was raining softly when I approached *M/V David B* at its Squalicum Harbor (Port of Bellingham) mooring. It was early October and I wondered if the whole weekend getaway aboard this crewed charter was going to be drowned by water drizzling from the sky. But almost by magic, the heavens cleared, and the six passengers, along with captain/owner Jeffrey Smith and first mate/co-owner Christine Smith were delighted with the gentle fall afternoon. The sky was a mix of puffy bluish-grey clouds, with sunlight silvering the edges.

After we stowed our stuff into our cabins, Jeff gave us the mandatory safety talk. Life vests, survival suits under the bunks, lifelines—the whole story. He then warned us that when

he started the engine, the old best (more details later) would let out a big bang. “No,” said Jeff, “it’s not a gunshot. Just a bit of backfiring.”

He handled the 65-footer deftly and backed her (is a vessel called the *David B* still a “her”?) out into Bellingham Bay in a southwesterly direction toward Lummi Island. The passengers gazed out the windows, walked the deck and got acquainted. I met Brian and Deborah Genge from Bellingham, who were on their third *David B* voyage. Deb’s mother, Joan Palmer, hailed from Chico, California, while Sharon Wilson and Gene Crocker had flown in from Oakland. This congenial group was enthusiastic about the tiny cabins and the many islands we passed—Cyprus, Blakely and a host of smaller landmasses, with the sun highlighting

the dark firs, cedars and madronas.

Christine served up delightful snacks; coffee, tea, wine, beer, soft drinks—all available whenever we wanted—it’s a self-serve fridge. “Although we don’t have a specific itinerary,” said Jeff, “tonight we’ll anchor by Spencer Spit on Lopez.”

We passed a couple of “bird islands”—Viti Rocks—covered by hundreds of pelagic cormorants. A family of Dall porpoises came to play in our bow wave. As the sun set, we watched Christine dropping the anchor. It was a job—sporting safety glasses, she unsheathed a hefty steel bar, loosened a gear in the massive green anchor winch and the chain rattled down with gusto.

With Jeff navigating—although he’s happy to have guests steer—Christine’s hands were perpetually

Photo above - The magical island of Santorini, Greece.

busy preparing food. Her preference is for local and organic, and her baking is all from scratch. Sourdough rolls and breads accompanied each meal. In fact, her sour dough starter has survived for six years and is re-born each day. “I keep a bit of it in the fridge and feed it with flour and water,” explained Christine.

We gathered in around the table, and everyone tucked into salmon, roasted broad beans and garlic mashed potatoes. Christine prepared all this on a wood-fired stove which graces the main cabin. It looks like something our grandmothers might have used—although it’s new. We all marveled at her mastery of this range,

as thermostats control neither the stovetop nor ovens. But the chocolate-chip cookies were perfectly baked, the kettle and coffee pots are always on and the main lounge was cozily warm on this cool October evening.

The *David B*—a mini-cruise ship

When you climb aboard the wooden *David B*, you discover a good bit of maritime history. The vessel began life in 1929 as a tender and was built at the Lake Washington Shipyard in Houghton, Washington for the Libby, McNeil and Libby Co. That company ran a cannery in Bristol Bay, Alaska, in the settlement of Ekuk on the Nushugak River.

At that time, a law prevented fishboats from having an engine onboard and their size was restricted to 32 feet. To get around these constraints, the cannery bought several tenders that would tow up to eight sail-equipped fishboats to the fishing grounds. For a week or longer, fishermen would spread out their gillnets load their salmon onto a barge and the tender would drag the load back to the cannery. The fishermen slept under a tented bow; a tough bunch.

The *David B* performed her functions for about 25 years until the law changed and fishboats installed engines. The tender was hauled onto a beach and stayed there for 40 years until she was barged to Seattle. Two Lopez nautical characters, Keith Sternberg and Jeremy Snapp, bought her and in turn sold the old boat to Jeff and Christine in 1998 for \$15,000. Over the next eight years, the couple restored and revamped the vessel and spending nearly half a million doing it. And that doesn't include the sweat equity of some 10,000 hours.

It's a good thing that Jeff has had over 20 years experience on the water and with boats. He spent eight of those on the schooner *Zodiac*, worked on tugs, ferries and freighters, and earned a 500-ton inland waters master license and a 200-ton coastal master ticket. He knows how to build and repair things, run engines and do joinery. Although Christine was new to marine life 13 years ago, she now calls herself an engineer, chef and naturalist. She's authored a book, *More Faster Backwards—Rebuilding David B*, published in December.

Several photo albums show the work that has been completed: new deck beams and decks, cabins for eight with a private head and sink (although they only host six passengers at a time), a dining area on the



Photo above - Autumn light highlights a San Juan Islet. Photo bottom, left - Part of Turn Point Lighthouse in Boundary Pass. Photo bottom, right - *David B*'s guests around the dinner table. Jeff and Christine Smith are on the right.



Photo right - A marvelous view of Mt. Baker from the *San Juan Islands*.

aft deck—the list goes on.

Yet the boat looks traditional and historic. Jeff introduced me to a new term: steampunk. When you google that term, a variety of interpretations appear, ranging from old time clothing to vintage instruments to jewelry and the science fiction of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Jeff explains the term as “the use of objects and equipment that look historic, even Victorian, but with modern guts.” Thus, the brass fuel pressure gage, tachometer and barometer on the bridge have a vintage look, but contemporary innards. The cook stove is another example of the genre.

But what is truly original on the *David B* is the behemoth engine below decks. It's a Washington Estep Diesel, built by Washington Iron Works, painted a bright green with red and brass highlights, its three cylinders offer a comforting rumblesound—reminding us of old steam engines put-putting along. I noticed that both Jeff and Christine descend frequently into the bowels of the boat. “Yes,” said Jeff. “For the engine to work well, it needs to be oiled every four hours.”

Whales galore

After a calm night at anchor, we dinghied into Spencer Spit, a state park, hiked among the mountains of driftwood, gazed over the lagoon with its chartreuse-colored algae, and read about homesteader families Troxell and Spencer, who arrived here in the 19th century following arduous treks west.

After another scrumptious lunch, we motored further south through Lopez Sound and reentered Rosario Strait. Jeff was monitoring the VHF



Photo above -The David B in Reid Harbor, Stuart Island.

and caught the chatter from several whale-watching boats. He pushed *David B's* big engine to its maximum seven knots through the water, only to be slowed to 3.5 knots over the ground by the strong currents. Turbulence, waves, vortices, whirlpools and eddies surrounded us but didn't much shake the heavy vessel. “Gee,” muttered Jeff, “by the time we get there, they'll all be gone.”

But they weren't. As we came around the south end of San Juan Island, we first spotted a pod of harbor porpoises, and then at least

a dozen orcas sliced their dorsal fins through the dark water. They spouted, dove and surfaced and stayed in the area. Suddenly, the VHF crackled again. “Humpbacks.” Again, spouts and the characteristic hump rose above the water. The second hump was much smaller—it was a mother and calf. A fluke emerged from the dark water, just once. Slowly, mom and baby moved north in Haro Strait.

Just as we thought we'd been

spoiled enough, we spied a group of harbor porpoises next to the tall black fin of a male orca. “Is he hunting them?” I asked. The marine mammals moved in unison, without scattering or panic. “They're playing,” we concluded, in awe.

Stuart Island's Reid Harbor

After anchoring, we continued discussing our delight in the marvelous wildlife we'd witnessed that afternoon. “I wish we could guarantee such a spectacle to our guests every time,” said Christine, a bit wistfully.

The next morning, several guests ensconced themselves in kayaks and explored Reid Harbor, which in contrast to the summer months, was empty of boats. A hike to Turn Point Light Station on Boundary Pass gave us a good workout (about six miles or 10k) and allowed us to burn off the chocolate mousse dessert of the night before.

Late Sunday afternoon, we returned to Bellingham and got a spectacular view of Mt. Baker in the waning sunlight. It had been a memorable weekend getaway. As Brian Genge put it, “It's been totally relaxing but adventurous. Great whale watching. It's fantastic being on the water, good food, vigorous hikes, no schedule, no structure, diverse passengers. Next summer, we'll join the *David B* in Alaska.”

I agree. I had a marvelous skippered charter experience, and as much as I like to sail our own boat through home waters, it was delightful to have someone else set the



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Flotilla Chartering in the Greek Isles

Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, wrote, "Happy is the person who has the good fortune to sail the Aegean Sea. Nowhere else can one pass so serenely from reality to dream."

Perhaps this is the reason that last year, Victorians Andrew McBride and his wife Michele, along with her sister, Barb Lewis, and friends Bill and Cathy Diguistini, signed up for a two-week flotilla charter voyage that began and ended in Athens and covered a number of Greece's most spectacular islands. The flotilla included five sailboats plus the "mother ship" and ranged from 39 to 65 feet in length.

I've never sailed in a flotilla but what Andrew told me about joining a group of yachts rather than going it alone makes for a friendly adventure with many advantages. "When you've never been to the Mediterranean, it's really helpful to have a

lead ship with experienced crew who know local waters," he said.

Organizing a Flotilla Cruise

This is how it works. Andrew and Bill contacted Poseidon Adventures (www.poseidoncharters.com/), and signed up with Steve Parry who represents the company. They told him the size sailboat they were looking for and the number of guests aboard.

They opted to sail "bareboat," without crew or provisioning. They also learned that to charter a yacht, at least one person aboard must have intermediate cruising certification sailing skills, as certified by US Sailing, Power Squadron, or the Canadian Yachting Association.

Andrew has CYA Intermediate Cruising certification and Bill has Power Squadron certification, and Michele and Cathy have earned a Pleasure Craft Operator Card, also known as a Canadian Boating License. All have also sailed for many years, so they easily surpassed the necessary qualifications.

Poseidon Adventures owns no yachts but Steve arranged for a boat from a Greek partner charter company, Vernicos Yachts. Other people from the US, UK and Canada also signed up for the cruise, so Steve ordered additional charter yachts and



that's how a group becomes a flotilla. All boats, with the exception of the mother ship, were Beneteaus.

The sailors flew to Athens to start the cruise. Several arrived early to make sure they saw the Parthenon and other Athens sights.

Steve skipped the 65-footer, *Margarita*, (which had 10 guests aboard and included meals—a crewed charter.) Each morning, he held a briefing and advised on safety, provisioning, mooring techniques and itineraries. "Steve was the primary source for weather information," said Andrew. "Our Greek was

not up to listening to the weather report. But Steve speaks Greek—very handy on those islands where English speakers are rare."

Each boat is furnished with basic necessities: charts, plotter, pilot book, GPS, safety gear. Guests are encouraged to bring binoculars, masks, flippers and a hand-held VHF. Andrew also brought an additional hand-held GPS. Still, there are challenges in the Med. "There's certainly a lack of markers," said Andrew. "And charts can be off by half a mile. At one point, we had to pass through a very narrow channel but we were safe following



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Steve without having to rely solely on the charts."

The first night, the group dined together ashore and became acquainted. They learned that swimming in harbors wasn't recommended as no pump-out stations had been installed. Fortunately, in the open sea, the water was clean and clear.

The next day, the whole flotilla untied from the dock and sailed to Aegina, where they stopped for lunch and a temple hike to the temple of Aphaia. "Steve would give information on the good places to go," said Andrew. "Very helpful. He also provided the opportunity to have joint dinners, but we usually often wandered off by ourselves and found some delightful places. Overall, we generally usually prepared breakfast and lunch on the boat, but ate out for dinner, and we learned much about Greek food."

One of the things the flotilla skippered had to learn was the Med mooring method. "You throw out the anchor at the bow and back into a slot," said Andrew. "A plank from the stern to the quay serves as passerelle. I found walking that plank more difficult than mooring the yacht."

Every day, the yachts left port about the same time and arrived roughly together. Steve would

speed ahead of the flotilla and then assist the boats in. "It really helped," said Andrew. "Hydra, for example, is only a small harbor and it's very popular. But Steve had already gone around and found spots here and there. We were pretty spread out, but it all worked."

I asked how expensive Greek harbor moorage was. Andrew laughed. "Well, one night we were asked for €1.70. Less than \$2.50. The rest of the time, we weren't asked to pay anything. No wonder Greece is bankrupt. We would have gladly paid North American rates for moorage. But we did pay €5 for water when we needed it."

Greece is said to have 4,500 islands. The flotilla visited some of them in the Saronic Gulf and the central Aegean Sea on their 330-mile round trip. Stopovers included Paros, Poros, Hydra, Milos, Ios, Paros, Mykonos and Kea and Ios. On certain days the winds were good enough for some good-natured racing; on some days the gunnels were in the water, while during other days the yachts turned into motorboats with masts. "It's a bit like Washington and British Columbia," said Andrew with a grin. "Too little or too much."

One of the highlights of the journey was an overnight visit by ferry to the famous island of Santorini. Steve's crew remained with the yachts on Ios to ensure fridges stayed open and bat-



The Greek island of Hydra is always crowded with both yachts and local fishing boats.

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includes the \$800 per boat flotilla fee. Fuel ran a total of \$300 and on-board food and drinks \$600. Add to that eating out most dinners of about \$60 per couple. All in all, the cost per person for the two weeks aboard was around \$2,420. Of course, air fare and staying before and after the cruise adds to the total.

My crewed San Juan getaway aboard *David B* differs markedly from a two-week bareboat charter in the Aegean. But as the old saying goes, "comparisons are odious." Rather, what these two adventures have in common is the elation of being on the water surrounded by nature, clean air and friendly company. We are all fortunate when we can experience such joys. *www*



The flotilla heads out towards the next Greek Island.

teries were topped up.

Santorini is the remnant of a volcanic caldera created by an enormous explosion that took place about 3,600 years ago. Today, the volcano is still active. "It is absolutely beautiful," said Andrew. "There are the lava-based black sand beaches. The white houses clinging to the sheer cliffs. There was little or no moorage for yachts so we stayed overnight in a hotel where the rooms were in caves. Really neat." The friends rented a car and explored the architecture, vineyards and the ancient city of Thera. "The place has been occupied by so many successive conquerors," said Andrew. "It has thousands of years of history."

Andrew recalled one event anchoring off Delos. "It was a challenge dropping the hook there because of a rocky shelf. We watched as one Croatian-registered yacht of about 50 feet just lowered the anchor. No reverse, no setting the hook. They didn't have a clue and happily went ashore. Soon the yacht began dragging and came within three boat lengths of ours. Steve rescued it, thank heavens."

So what was the consensus about flotilla sailing? "It was the best sailing vacation ever," said Andrew. "We all got along. Warm weather. History and culture. Great people and restaurants. You know, these islanders live differently. Their work is their life, but somehow, it's more casual. More laid back.

"Flotilla cruising is great for a place you don't know anything about. I would have hesitated doing it on my own. This was low-risk learning to do new things in new places. Anyone who can handle tight marinas at home can cruise in the Greek Islands. I'd be quite comfortable going back now."

What about cost? For the 40-foot Beneteau the Victorians chartered, the cost per person was \$1,800, which



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