

Georgian Bay Solo Cruise, or Lessons learned in a Group of Seven Painting.

By David Ross, W6208

Being retired and sailing solo I have the luxury of choosing a weather window which, for this cruise, was absolutely necessary. The plan was to sail 23 kilometers south with the north wind through the shoals of northwestern Georgian Bay on the first day, explore Charles Inlet on the second day and sail north, on the south wind, back to my starting point on the third day. What could be simpler?

In early August the forecast looked good. I trailed Peregrine (W6208) to Wright's Marina in Britt, Ontario. Britt, population 280, is a quiet village whose main business is servicing cottage owners' needs for docking and marine supplies. I readied the boat in the early evening and slept on it on the trailer. I was a little worried, never having sailed in Georgian Bay and never in an area with as many shoals. My worries intensified when one of the Marina staff said that the three large cruisers on the hard had all ripped out drive shafts on the shoals.



Moonlight over Byng Inlet near Britt, Ontario

The chart for the area came in three strips, when laid end to end covered about 9 feet. It showed that I was going to be sailing a slalom course with the gates 500 to 800 meters apart. What I also hadn't appreciated is that some of the gates were less than 50 meters wide and came complete with shoals awash just outside some of the gates. I had earlier ruled out going the offshore route, 2 or 3 kilometers outside the shoals, because I wanted to enjoy the nearshore scenery.

While slow to develop, the wind started to fill in from the north, as forecasted. I started just after 10 am and ghosted along westward, praying for more wind. I'd put a reef in the main and deployed my masthead float because the forecast called for gusts to 30 kmph. It took an hour and a half to get down the five kilometers of Byng Inlet to Georgian Bay. Fortunately the wind picked up as I got into the Bay.



As the inlet widened, I felt like I'd entered a composite of every Group of Seven painting of Georgian Bay. Wooden lighthouses, granite rocks and wind curved pines came thick and increasingly fast. As I started through the slalom course there wasn't much time to enjoy the sights. The waves were very confused because of the profusion of shoals and rocks with breaking waves. Some of the buoys had shoals not more than 10 yards to their sides. As I

passed each pair of buoys I scanned anxiously for the next pair. Most were theoretically within line of sight but with the jumbled waves it wasn't always easy to pick them out or keep them in sight once they'd been sighted. And in some cases there were shoals less than 100 meters off the straight line course between buoys so very little room for error. With the narrow path I was restricted to a dead run which meant an uncomfortable pendulum effect as the boat was thrown about in the waves.

As I twisted and rolled down the course one or two power boats an hour passed me. A few were considerate and slowed to reduce their wake but the majority didn't seem to care what happened to an old guy sailing a 16 foot dinghy.

At about 2 pm I picked the spot where I would leave the marked channel to turn into Charles Inlet where I planned to spend the next two nights. Charles Inlet is a 2 kilometer long cut in the granite, about 200 meters wide at its mouth. There were no markers, the entrance was no more than 75 meters wide. I short tacked in, thankful for about 10 feet of visibility in the clear waters.

As the inlet opened out a gust hit the boat from the east and I dumped to windward. My masthead float kept the boat from turning turtle. I swam around, hung off the centerboard, and righted the boat. Only to be hit with another gust on the still cleated sails and go over again. By now my heartbeat was way up, I was starting to shiver and breathing hard. I uncleated the sails and pulled the boat up. I climbed in and much to my relief a small runabout started towards me.

The good Samaritans in the runabout helped me to the small cut in the granite which was to be my anchorage and camping spot overnight. They offered dinner and a night at their cottage which I eagerly accepted. We agreed that they'd return after their picnic and pick me up. I dried my clothes on the rocks, bailed the boat and quickly warmed up, out of the wind and under the hot sun. The runabout people were very delayed in returning and, on returning, sheepishly rescinded their invitation, due to their concern that bringing a wet, unknown sailor in from the Bay might frighten the visitors at their cottage!

Shortly after they left, a kayak set out from the only cottage on the inlet and made its way to me. After sizing me up, Cheryl offered dinner and a bed at her cottage. I accepted, paddled Peregrine to their dock and spent the night there. An interesting evening ensued. Cheryl was from Buffalo and leaned hard right Republican, I lean left. Cheryl smoked, I don't. An interesting evening ensued. We didn't talk a lot of politics but I'm glad to report that Cheryl did agree that taxes on billionaires should not be lowered. Cheryl was a generous and concerned person, I couldn't have been more grateful.



Prehistoric snake backbone transformed into quartz

I spent the next day exploring the Group of Seven painting that was the inlet, camera and fishing rod in hand, paddling in one of Cheryl's kayaks. I could have spent days in the delightful wilderness. Cheryl won the argument about whether I'd stay at her cottage or go back to my camping spot that night.



Dawn on Charles Inlet, Georgian Bay

The next morning's forecast was favorable, wind light at first, then increasing from the south. Cheryl towed me through the shoals and I turned north at 9 am. The waves were only slightly smaller than on the way down. The sound of breaking waves was constant through the three days I was on the Bay.

All was well for an hour or so until the wind began to drop. It finally got to the point where I took an hour to get between two pairs of buoys less than a kilometer apart. At times the gasps of wind started coming from the north west and I worried about drifting onto one of the many rocks as the sails banged in the confused waves.

By 2 pm I'd covered about 10 of the 23 kilometers back to Britt. I began to consider my options. Sailing in the dark was out of the question as none of the buoys were lit. One possibility was paddling the boat in through the shoals to spend the night on the closest dry rock. The other was to press the help button on my satellite GPS messenger. I decided I'd give it until 3 for a decision. At about 2:30 I felt a little freshening of the breeze, from the south.

The breeze was light for an hour or so but I was making progress at about 3 kmph, meaning I'd get in around 7 pm, with lots of daylight left. As I approached the turn east up Byng Inlet the wind really picked up, as the thermal set in. I planed most of the final 7 km. back to the marina and arrived, elated, at 5 pm.

I'll finish with, as the subtitle to this account noted, lessons learned. In no particular order:

1. Remember to ALWAYS uncleat the sheets before trying to right the boat, no matter how cold the water is.
2. Bring oars as well as a paddle, if not a motor. I'm resisting the motor for now.
3. Bum savers are worth installing, mine are garden kneeling pads velcro-ed to the boat.
4. Beauty is everywhere, we're so lucky to have a small boat that will take us there.
5. No more solos in big, dangerous open water. They make for a great story but...

And a huge thanks to Cheryl for her generosity and cooking.