

San Juan Islands Kayak Adventure - September 13-18, 2023

By Ed Johnson

My move from Maryland to central Oregon this summer, made possible a decades long bucket-list adventure to the San Juan Islands of the Pacific Northwest. One of my kayaks, a Current Designs Nomad GTS, a 19ft “gear hauler,” made the cut for the move cross-country specifically for this type of adventure.

Living in Maryland I’ve been fortunate to paddle many rivers, lakes, bays and coastal Atlantic waters from Canada to Florida. My new home (Bend, Oregon), lies east of the Cascade Mountains and less than an hour drive to fabulous mountain hiking, biking, camping, skiing and even a few kayaking spots. That said, central Oregon is NOT a kayaker’s paradise like the mid Atlantic where a 1-2 hour drive provides a wide variety of paddling opportunities for novices and experts alike.

A visit to the local REI in Bend provided me a list of several nearby kayaking locations used by recreational kayakers (mountain lakes and flat water of the Deschutes River). I thanked the staff member for the tips but they must have noticed my disappointment. As the conversation ended they suggested I visit Tumalo Creek Kayak and Canoe (TCKC) two blocks away. I did.

I walked into the shop minutes before closing time and was immediately impressed by the huge inventory equipped to serve the recreational kayaker, whitewater and SUP enthusiast. Clayton was manning the shop located beside the Deschutes River. He was engaging and I shared with him a little of my paddling history and experience. I wasn’t sure if he was joking when he said “there are only about 10 *active* sea kayakers in Central Oregon.” I replied “well now there are eleven!”

I mentioned that a San Juan Islands kayaking adventure was on my bucket list. Clayton’s eyes widened and with a wide toothy grin he said, “we just happen to be leading two trips to the San Juan Islands in two weeks! One is a 4-day trip and the other a 6-day trip. With your background I think you would love the 6-day trip.”

My wife Donna (not a kayaker) and I had only arrived in Bend two weeks earlier. We were still unpacking and far from settled into our “new” home. “Wow,” I said to Clayton, “I need to give this some serious thought and check with the ‘boss’, but I am definitely interested!”

Donna read me like a book after I told her of my conversation with Clayton. “You must go” she



Fig. 1 Map of the Salish Sea & Surrounding Basin, Stefan Freelan, WWU, 2023.

said, “don’t wait until next year you have time now. GO!”

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I love Donna!

The San Juan Islands are an archipelago in the Salish Sea of Washington State and British Columbia, Canada. The Pacific Ocean sloshes back and forth through the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the west, the Strait of Georgia to the north, and Puget Sound to the south (Fig. 1). Tides are big; 9-foot swings are common. Currents are significant (1-2 kts) and narrow passages can become impassable for all but the strongest and skilled paddler. The water is cold year-round (<60 degrees F). It's an unforgiving environment and not for beginners. It is a kayaking gem for the prepared paddler.

I began getting my kayaking gear together and made plans to meet up with Clayton and his employer, Geoff (owner of TCKC), at Washington Park in Anacortes, WA the evening of September 12. I would camp in Washington Park (\$27), a nice quiet campground with hot showers, just 1.5 miles from the Anacortes ferry terminal where we were to rendezvous at 8:30am the next morning. There I would meet the other two TCKC clients Bruce and Sonnie. This would be their seventh multi-day sea kayaking trip in the San Juans with TCKC. For the next 6-days we would have a fantastic trip experiencing this Pacific Northwest kayakers paradise.

The five of us hopped into the TCKC van with our 5 kayaks on the roof and drove onto the ferry that would take us to Lopez Island. Forty minutes later we disembarked and drove 10 minutes to Spencer Spit State Park where we unloaded and parked the van for the duration of our trip.

Fig. 1 Map of the Salish Sea & Surrounding Basin, Stefan Freelan, WWU, 2023. Our ferry had been an hour late leaving Anacortes. I sensed some anxiety in Clayton for the delay. He was eager to get on the water and paddling. We needed to get through Obstruction Pass before the ebb tide. We were successful and arrived at our camp site on Doe Island about 5pm. I sat in my camp chair beside my tent as the twilight was replaced with starlight. I laughed out loud with joy as my eyes adjusted revealing the nighttime beauty. Wow! This is spectacular I thought. Clayton joined me; "pretty awesome eh," he said.

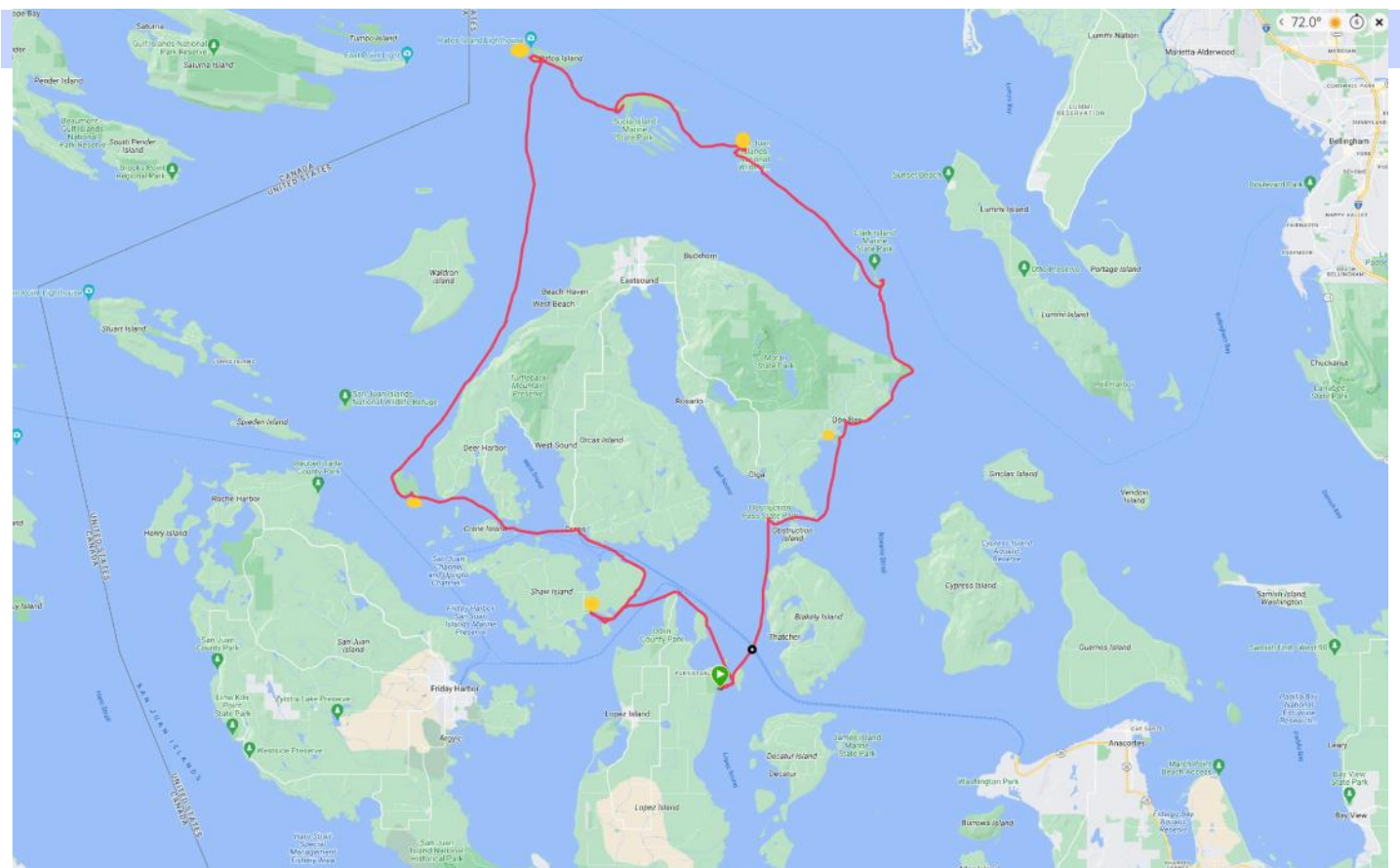
Bruce retired from the US Forest Service about 20 years ago, and Sonnie is a retired registered nurse. They are experienced kayakers and campers. Their favorite and regular kayak adventures are the Pacific Northwest (US and Canada) and the Sea of Cortez (Baja, Mexico). I was captivated by Bruce's forest fire fighting stories. He was a dedicated civil servant.

My conversations with Geoff suggest that he has mellowed from his admittedly youthful risk-taking days when he sought-out whitewater, big waterfalls, powerful whirlpools and unsupported month-long sea kayaking expeditions. On this San Juan Islands trip Geoff was the perfect guide. Each morning he queried the group. A typical exchange would go like this: "How are you feeling this morning? Here's what I suggest we do... lets stick to the plan I described last evening. We'll launch at ___ hrs paddle to ___ for a break, reassess the current, and if it is as predicted we should have a ___ kt push to tentative camp site at ___ island. If we encounter a head wind or less favorable current we can fall back to plan-B and camp a ___ island. Is everyone okay with that?"

Geoff's leadership style was decisive and deliberate. He kept us informed of the decisions he was making and why. His voice was calm and confident. He and Clayton were observant of our energy level, need for rest, water, and food. We were all questioned throughout the day as to whether or not we were comfortable with proceeding as planned. Geoff and Clayton worked well as a team. I felt safe with them and confident in their ability to assist with rescues and manage mishaps.

Our trip was blessed with nearly perfect weather. Air temperatures ranged from the upper 60s (daytime) to lower 50s (nighttime). Winds were mostly light and variable except for day-2 when we encountered a 8-10kt headwind for 2 hours as we did the crossing from Orcas to Clark Island. The wind seemed to cancel-out the 1.5kt current push predicted. We opted for plan-B, camping on Matia Island rather than going further to Sucia as planned. A 2-minute, nearly bare swim, at Matia Island camp satisfied my curiosity of "how cold is 60 degree F water." *Ca, ca, ca, COLD!*

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Clayton, was an enthusiast and knowledgeable guide. In the winter he is a professional ski patroller at Mt Bachelor ski area a short drive from Bend, OR. When our group was paddling, he and Geoff took turns as lead and sweep kayak. We were a tight paddling team. Onshore Geoff and Clayton were vigilant about checking tide and relocating our kayaks to higher ground, safe from rising water and ship wakes. Clayton and Geoff worked efficiently in camp too preparing nutritious and delicious hot breakfasts and dinners and cleaning up afterwards. Lunches were typically deli meat sandwiches with lettuce, tomato, pickles, apples, and chips.

Fig. 2 Six-day route beginning/ending at Spencer Spit (green arrow) on Lopez Island and moving counter clockwise. Yellow dots are overnights. Several times during our trip we saw porpoises. Two types of porpoises typically frequent the Salish Sea - Dall's and Harbor porpoises. We saw Harbor porpoises. We did not see Orcas (killer whales), which are actually related to dolphins. We saw harbor seals, fish, crabs, and beautifully colored starfish and an assortment of shorebirds (see video). Despite warnings, our camp sites were not raided by marauding raccoons as Geoff experienced in previous trips. Precautions were taken to avoid raccoon encounters. The one animal most annoying on this trip were the hordes

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Share your paddling adventures!

Do you enjoy reading about the paddling adventures, local and distant, of other members? Do you like getting new ideas for paddling trips?

Are you advocating for paddling access or amenities in your area?

Have you pondered questions relating to kayak gear? Variety is the spice of life, and of newsletters.

Please write an article reflecting your thoughts, experiences, and discoveries to share with our paddling community.

We all become a bit wiser and excited to be on the water again. We need your input to make *The Chesapeake Paddler* the best it can be.

Submit stories or ideas to news_editor@cpakayaker.com. We look forward to sharing your story.

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of yellow jackets that thrive on the food prepared at campsites. Their numbers were so intense that state officials deploy yellow jacket traps in the campsites. The population of yellow jackets seem unaffected by the traps which were all nearly full. Food and drink should be covered until ready to eat. The San Juan Islands are beautiful. The shoreline varies from rocky cliffs, to boulder strewn, pebble and sand beaches. Many shorelines are riddled with picturesque old logs. These can be a challenge to walk through especially carrying a kayak. Shoreline logs and braking waves require vigilant situational awareness. The high energy, cold-clear coastal water environment of the San Juans Islands, the surrounding islands and mountain views makes paddling in this region so rewarding. We were blessed with spectacular views of the northern Cascade mountains including snow covered Mt Baker (10,786ft). Much of the shoreline is privately owned. Some shoreline is not unsuitable for landing a kayak. Washington State Parks maintains many camp sites and equips them with composting toilets. Not all campsites have potable water and beginning in September less frequented camps have their water turned off for the season. Cell phone coverage is widely available but should not be relied upon. As always, VHF radios and satellite communication are highly recommended. Salish Sea tides are big and so are the currents. It's not a place for novice kayakers or even skilled kayakers with little or no experience in this environment. Weather conditions can change fast from good to gnarly. If you're not completely confident in your skills and those of your paddling partners, than seek out professionals with local knowledge and experience, at least for your first visit. You surely will enjoy your trip more. My experience with Geoff, Clayton, Bruce and Sonnie far exceeded my expectation of a San Juan Island adventure.

I'm looking forward to repeating the same or similar trip next year! Let's get busy planning! Checkout [my YouTube video](#) of this adventure. For more information and details about this specific trip offering, contact: Tumalo Creek Kayak and Canoe, Bend, Oregon (info@tumalocreek.com).

About the author: I joined CPA in 2000 as a beginner kayaker. I have benefited from CPA immensely over the years through formal and informal skill improvement opportunities. I am grateful to the past and present leadership of CPA, its trip leaders, and dedicated club members for sharing their knowledge, commitment to the club, and their work with local and state government to enhance access and promote the sport.

Trip Stats:

Day -1: Paddled 9.27 miles, camped on Doe Island, no potable water. Got water at Doe Bay resort the next morning.

Day-2: Paddled 12.59 miles, lunched on Clark Island, camped on Matia Island, no potable water.

Day-3: Paddled 9.25 miles, lunched on Sucia Island, camped on Patos Island, no potable water.

Day-4: Paddled 13.82 miles, camped on Jones Island, no potable water.

Day-5: Paddled 9.94 miles, got water at Orcas ferry landing, camped on Shaw Island (water usually available).

Day-6: Paddled 6.23 miles to take-out at our starting point 6-days earlier— Spencer Spit State Park.



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