

Islands by bike

Slow the pace with a bicycle tour of B.C.'s Gulf Islands

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JERRY PAINTER / JPAINTER@POSTREGISTER.COM

Julie, Sam and I picked Victoria, British Columbia, as our launch point for four days of bicycle camping during the first week of August because it's one of the world's most beautiful cities, it's ultra bike-friendly and our daughter happens to live there.

Our itinerary included stops on Salt Spring Island, Pender Island and Galiano Island. We slept on the ground and mostly ate one-pot meals purchased at tiny island grocery stores.

Bicycle camping is not for everyone. First, you must enjoy biking and enjoy camping. It's similar to backpacking as far as the amount of gear you haul, except you tend to go where most car campers go. We stayed in provincial parks generally next to other people who arrived via cars.

With bike camping, the journey is part of the experience. You notice every hill — up and down — and stop and chat more with people along the way and, on a whim, sometimes stop to taste the blackberries or allow yourself to be enticed by a European-style bakery. We also waved at and exchanged brief words with other bikers, such as the bike campers we met blasting downhill on Salt Spring Island as we slowly worked uphill in

the opposite direction, "That's your last hill before town!" they called to us.

When taking the ferry between islands, pedestrians and bikers get preferential treatment. You get on first and off first, and they only charge you a pittance compared to the fee for ferrying your car.

Riding up to strangers on your bicycle with panniers stuffed with camping gear always seems to be an easy conversation starter. "Where are you from? Where are you going? What do you think of all these hilly islands?"

We probably averaged about 25 to 30 miles a day — a fairly easy distance by most tour biker standards. But we were there to enjoy more than just the biking. We also went hiking, beach combing and swimming. By contrast, on a bicycle camping trip across Italy, we averaged closer to 60 miles a day.

Part of each day included a ferry ride. It was important to be mindful of the ferry schedules because in some cases the ferry only shipped out twice a day to your particular destination.

Two of the campgrounds we stayed at were right on the shoreline. One, Montague Provincial Marine Park, was

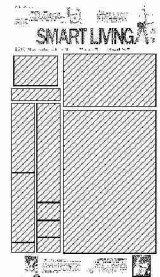
adjacent to a picturesque harbor — a challenging nine hilly kilometers from the ferry. Sailboats and trawlers of all sizes came and went. Boats from Victoria, Vancouver, B.C., Seattle and ports up and down the West Coast anchored at Montague.

Because the nearest restaurant (and town for that matter) was a few miles from the harbor, a pub sent a bus to the harbor to transport potential customers inland about four or five times a day. Most pubs on the islands are restaurants where a variety of beverages are served. Minors, fortunately, are welcome. So at 7:50 p.m., we boarded the Hummingbird Pub bus — a repainted ancient 1970s school bus especially equipped with a loud stereo system. When we sat down, the driver was playing Fats Domino. A few people quietly sang along to "Blueberry Hill" and "Ain't That a Shame."

The Hummingbird Pub was a delight with fresh seafood and hot sandwiches. It beat our one-pot meals all to heck. After a couple of hours, the same crowd gathered on the bus and rode back to the harbor and campground. On the return trip, the group sang "Ain't that a shame, you're the one to blame" with gusto and volume.

Another fun part of bicycle camping British Columbia's Gulf Islands is that we didn't feel like loners. On every ferry trip, we were joined by several other bikers, many of them loaded with camping gear. Most were headed for provincial parks or some of the fancier private campgrounds.

We ran into a pair of biking women snacking at a bakery shop on Pender Island. They were on a weeklong, fully supported tour with several other bikers doing essentially the same route as us. Their clothes, gear and souvenirs were hauled in a sag wagon. They slept in comfy bed and breakfasts or small inns and ate dinner in restaurants each



night.

"I could never do what you're doing," one woman said to my wife, Julie.

I could never afford what you're doing. I thought to myself.

I asked Julie and Sam what things they liked most about the bicycle tour, and both men-

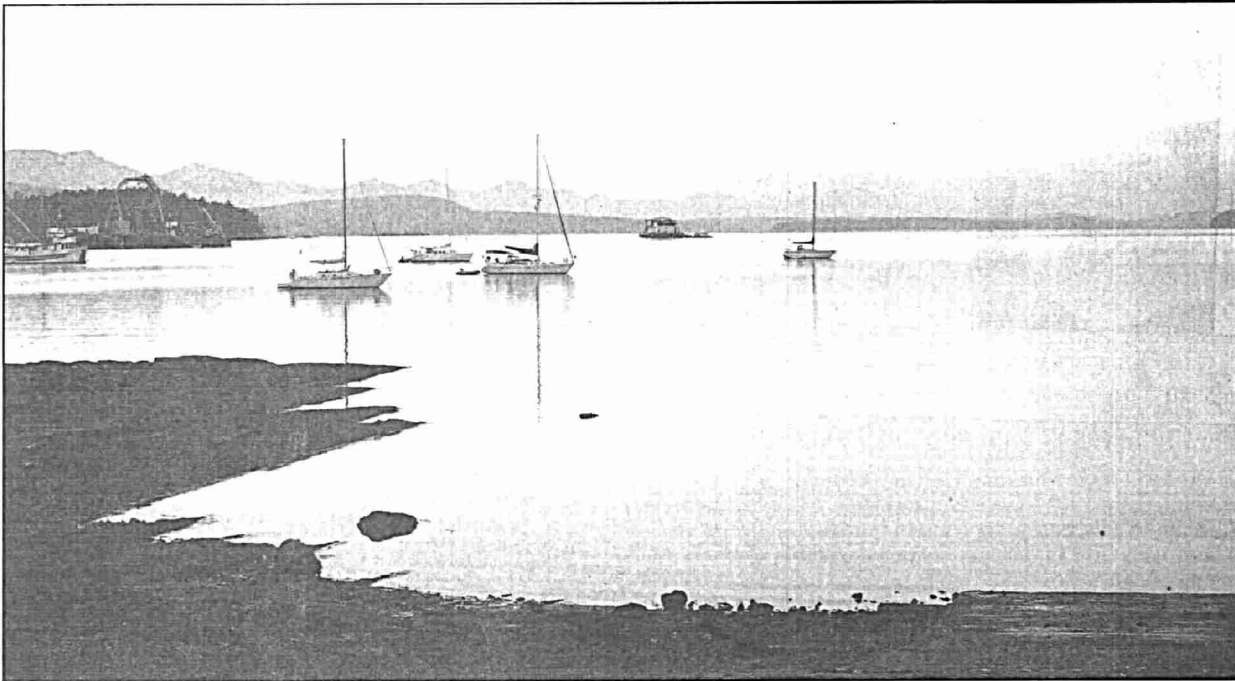
tioned the Galloping Goose Lochside trail through downtown Victoria and beyond.

These trails, exclusively for bikes and pedestrians, take you more than 30 kilometers from downtown all the way to the ferry or out into the surrounding countryside with

paved routes and bridges.

They are used by commuters, tourists and exercisers, and used a lot. We shared the pathway with dozens of bikers. What a wonderful enhancement to a beautiful town.

Idaho Falls could learn from this city.



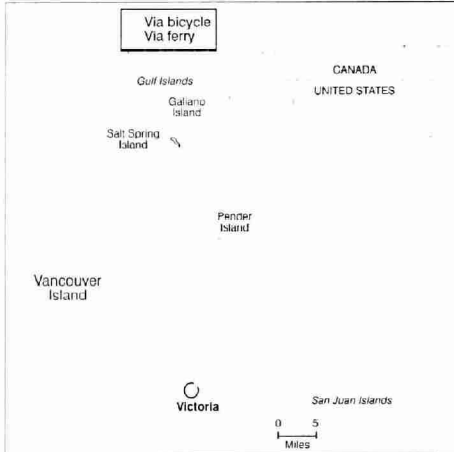
Boats moor in the protected Montague Harbor on Galiano Island next to Montague Provincial Marine Park.



Julie Painter rides her loaded bike along the quiet island road to the town of Ganges on Salt Spring Island.



Cars load onto the ferry at Swartz Bay on Vancouver Island for the trip to Salt Spring Island.



The route went from Victoria to Salt Spring Island to Pender Island to Galiano Island and back.

Helpful Web sites

The Greater Victoria Cycling Coalition:
www.gvcc.bc.ca/touring.shtml

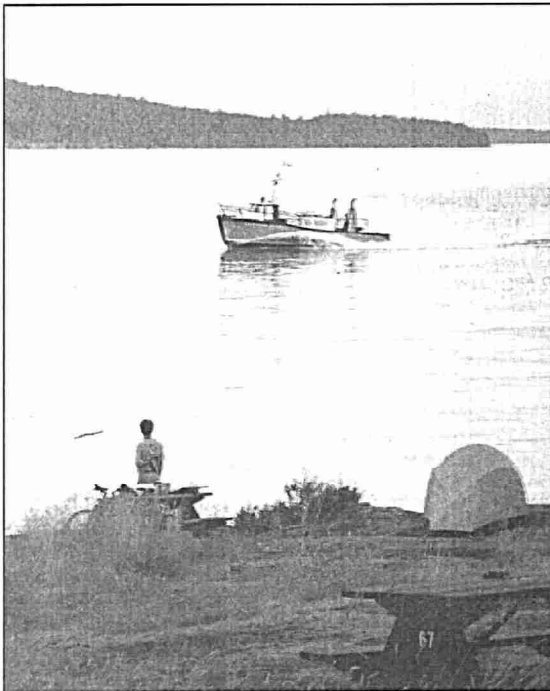
About cycle tourism on Vancouver Island:
www.cyclevancouverisland.ca/
The place to go for ferry information:
www.bcferries.com/



Blackberries were just beginning to ripen during the first week of August and were often too great a temptation to pass up. Here, Sam Painter stops to munch on a few berries on Salt Spring Island.



Tide pools near the shoreline campgrounds often featured a variety of sea creatures such as this tiny crab on Galiano Island.



A bicycle camper watches a boat cruise by from his campground at Ruckles Provincial Park on Salt Spring Island.