Early in September 26 boats with 98 crew from 11 different yacht clubs, including 25 from the RSrnYC, met to cruise in company in Vancouver Sound, proving this year's ICOYC Cruise more popular than ever before.

The Royal Vancouver and Seattle Yacht Clubs combined forces to organise this event—and a magnificent job they made of it, with local skippers guiding the eight chartered boats around these remote and challenging waters. Preparations were immaculate, with full details of all the arrangements and detailed passage plans for each day circulated well beforehand.

Vancouver Sound is actually a mountain range rising to 8,000 ft, intersected by deep valleys scoured out by successive ice ages and now flooded to depths reaching 500 metres, providing hundreds of miles of idyllic cruising among a myriad of islands and inlets. Walls of granite rise near vertically from the water, with every surface covered by pine and fir trees, providing a stunning backdrop to every passage.

As you leave the city of Vancouver and sail further north, it becomes more and more remote and the mountains grow higher and the water deeper. However, the navigator must keep a sharp eye on the charts, as sea mountains occur unexpectedly, rising several hundred metres from the sea floor close to, and sometimes just above, the surface.

A second hazard are the logs—hundreds of them, from small branches to entire tree trunks. The highwater line of every beach is piled high with them and many are encountered at sea floating, sometimes vertically (dead-heads), low in the water and ready to damage your propeller should you hit one. So, a constant ‘log-watch’ is essential.

Another peculiarity of sailing in such deep fiords is the wind, which has only three options—dead on the nose, dead astern, or no wind at all. Typically for the first half of the cruise when we were heading north, the gradient wind was a north westerly, i.e. on the nose, and for the return half of the cruise it had switched to south-easterly—yes you’ve guessed it—on the nose again.

Our route took us from Vancouver to Gambier Island, then Pender Harbour and Egmont, before the final leg to Chatterbox Falls. After a lay-day at the falls we retraced our steps back to Pender Harbour, then Secret Cove and Snug cove on Bowen Island, before finally returning to Vancouver, after covering a total of 220 miles.

Both clubs have ‘outstations’ at prime locations up and down the coast of British Columbia, usually equipped with walk-ashore pontoons, power, water and toilet facilities and sometimes even washing machines and cooking facilities. The more remote stopovers were ‘au naturelle’, a pontoon or anchorage in an idyllic setting.

Our ultimate destination was the Malibu Rapids, gateway to Chatterbox Falls, at the head of the Princess Louisa Inlet, over 110 miles of sailing from Vancouver. The only facility there is a short pontoon—no human habitation, other than a small ranger’s cottage, and 34 miles from the nearest village store. This was the first time our hosts had risked taking a flotilla of non-local sailors to such remote areas. Because of this, crews were advised to fully provision the boat before starting the cruise—no mean task given a crew of 6 or 7 for 10 days!
There are no navigation marks or lights down Princess Louisa Inlet, so we proceeded in an orderly line, navigating by chart plotter, with an experienced Royal Vancouver skipper leading the way. Fortunately, the rapids are much quieter on the ebb than the flood and, with more light now, all the boats got through without incident and began the return to Pender Harbour as the rain passed through and blue skies returned.

An added bonus to these cruising grounds is the profuse wildlife. Grey seals are everywhere, with our first sighting just 30 minutes after casting off in Vancouver. Our early boats arrived at Gambier Island in time to watch a pod of orca’s attack the seals which were sun bathing on an adjacent log boom. All the action took place within metres of the moored boats, leaving everyone spellbound. Unfortunately, there were only two seals left by the time we arrived and no sign of the orcas, but we did see grey-necked herons, sea otters and one crew saw a whale as it dived close to their boat.

The people were incredibly welcoming – whenever we stood on a street corner examining our map, it was never more than 30 seconds before someone stopped and enquired if we needed directions. None more so than the members of the Royal Vancouver and Seattle clubs, who put so much effort into making this cruise such a success.

Ten Seattle boats made the 150-mile journey simply to join the cruise and then, had another 150 miles to get the boats home again afterwards.

By the time of the closing dinner, everyone knew everyone else, so it was a very jolly affair, with short speeches thanking our hosts who had opened all their facilities to welcome us and done a magnificent job of organising this event; especially John and Val Robertson and Chuck and Pam Lowry, the cruise organisers.

Would I go back again? You bet! Desolation Sound beckons, which is meant to be even more stunning than the unforgettable experience we have just enjoyed.

Graham Nixon