

"UCHUCK III, The Wild West Coast by Sea"

By Ron Kirstein

Day 1

I recently responded to an opportunity to travel from Victoria to Gold River (some 365 or so kilometers) by water. This rugged stretch of open ocean has a history for devouring ocean-going vessels.

We were invited to participate in the return of the M.V. Uchuck III to its home base, Gold River. The M.V. Uchuck III is a working coastal freight vessel that is 136 feet long that works providing service to Nootka, Esperanza and Kyuquot Sounds.

Day one, we boarded at Point Hope Shipyards on the Inner Harbour in Victoria. It was weird to be the cause of 'raising the blue drawbridge' instead of the usual getting-stuck-in-the-traffic-jam that occurs when it goes up. Exiting the Inner Harbour, we turned west and headed up Juan de Fuca Strait. In a short time, we passed by the Race Rocks light station,



Uchuck III leaving the Inner Harbour - Raising the Draw Bridge- Victoria BC

(Photo courtesy of the Ron Kirstein)

We sampled Glenda's treats (butter tarts to die for, banana bread, cookies and muffins) for our afternoon teas. The salt air made us hungry and the excellent food really hit the spot.

As we moved further up the coast we came upon a large pod of Killer Whales that entertained us for some time. To our good fortune, they were headed in the same direction we were and Captain Fred slowed to their speed for a while. Orcas always captivate their audience and seemed to approach the Uchuck just to have a good look at us. On a number of occasions, we discovered large colonies of sea lions covering the rocks along the shoreline. If you take this trip, be sure to bring binoculars and a good camera with a telephoto lens.

We passed a number of light stations along our voyage. On the first day, we saw the ones at Race Rocks, Sheringham Point, Carmanah, Pachina and Beale. On day two we passed Amphitrite, Lennard, Estevan and Nootka.

one of the oldest lights on the West Coast of Canada. Most of the year a very large herd of sea lions resides on these rocks, but since they have now begun their spring migration, only a few were left. Next, we passed the shoreline of East Sooke Park where a rugged trail followed along the ocean, then came Sooke Harbour, French Beach, Otter Point and Gordon Beach, all recognizable from the sea. Once we reached the end of Juan de Fuca Strait we could see the lighthouse at Cape Flattery (USA side), where a large cruise ship was just entering Juan de Fuca Strait. After we passed San Juan Inlet and Botanical Beach, we were now on the outside of Vancouver Island. Soon, we started noticing huge caves carved into soft limestone cliffs, facing the open ocean. I made a mental note to come back later and explore this coastline more extensively in a smaller boat we can nudge right up to shore.

Lunchtime arrived and, to our delight, we tried the on-board food. Glenda's chili was awesome and I heard great reports of her homemade soup as well. Our lunch consisted of hot food and delicious 'bun-wiches'.



Carmanah Light Station

Nine hours after our departure, we turned into Barkley Sound and docked at Bamfield. Bamfield is a small village on the southern side of Barkely Sound. Most of the access around the town is by a boardwalk along the water. We stayed at Imperial Eagle Lodge where we were treated to a wonderful salmon dinner. (Before dinner, we had a close encounter with a large grey heron that was standing on two grass-covered logs near the dock).

After we ate, we went for a stroll down the boardwalk. Along the way, we met an elderly man with two wiener Dachshund dogs. Two of the men on board also met him and were invited over for brandy and some great stories.

What an event filled day!
We retired early because we knew we had another big day ahead.

Day 2

We left promptly at 8:00 a.m. the next morning. This crew was always right on time. Leaving the sleepy



Bamfield in Barkley Sound
(Photo courtesy of the Ron Kirstein)

The next part of the journey took us past Pacific Rim National Park. We knew there were plenty of sandy beaches along the Esowista Peninsula, but were surprised at the number of them throughout the whole trip. We passed Tofino and the large islands of Clayoquot Sound where we met up with one Grey and one Minke Whale. We passed the Lennard Island Light Station near Tofino, then the Estevan Point Light Station.

community of Bamfield, we headed out into Barkley Sound and the Broken Group Islands where Captain Fred turned into Theipval Channel, which was very narrow. The 136 Uchuck seemed too big for this narrow channel, but for our skillful Captain, this was not even a challenge. With land so close on either side, we were treated to rare close-up views of wolves and bald eagles. Emerging from these Islands, we passed the community of Ucluelet and the Amphitrite Light Station.



Our neighbours on the water were several whale-watching, fishing, and sailing boats. We saw the coast guard out on exercises and a tug towing a barge absolutely loaded with logs. It was amazing how fast that tiny tug could pull such a big barge.

The Uchuck at Sea
(photo courtesy of John Forde)

As we entered Muchalaht Channel we passed Nootka Light Station and nearby Friendly Cove, a national historic First Nations site. Then we passed Resolution Bay, where Captain Cook did repairs to the HMCS Resolution. As we moved up the channel we passed a number of fish farms. We stopped at one of them and watched the crew load aboard two piles of wooden pallets. It was neat seeing the crew in their 'working' action. It was difficult to dock here as the wind was from the wrong direction

The ride was just as relaxing as it was entertaining. On the bus trip we even spotted a large black bear and deer.

Our adventure to Gold River and back was an ecological delight. The days were long, but full and enjoyable with tons of time to take it easy and absorb the fantastic scenery. With snow-capped mountains, green forests, white sandy beaches and all kinds of wildlife, what more could we ask for? The weather was very warm and sunny (which I take credit for), and the seas calm.

and so was the current. We watched prawn boats bringing in their catch from traps spread along the Inlet. Then roughly 10 hours after Bamfield, we arrived at the docks close to Gold River where a number of vehicles were waiting to take us to our overnight accommodations. Once again, we slept well.

Gold River is an idyllic little community surrounded by snow-covered mountain peaks, waterfalls and the Gold River Canyon that flows 13 km down to the docks. Gold River is a recreation paradise where Steelhead fishing and caving are most popular. We stayed at the Ridge Motor Inn and ate next door at the Ridge Pub. The accommodations were great and the hospitality superb.

The next morning we were off on our Bus leg of the trip to Courtenay and the train station where we caught the Via Rail Train to Victoria. I have traveled the island many times, but travelling on the train gave the trip a whole new perspective.



Beautiful Gold River

(photo courtesy of Ron Kirstein)

The highlights of the trip were the absence of domestic responsibilities, our passage through the Broken Group, seeing wild wolves for the first time, and, of course, our time with the Orcas. Everything was on time and on schedule. The trip was a pleasure indeed.