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FLOTILLA

FREEDOM



The flotilla-style charter offers the freedom and independence of solo barebones chartering while providing support, structure, and community.

WORDS & PHOTOS: **NORRIS COMER**

Pop open your trusty dictionary and flotilla is defined broadly as a fleet of ships. Dust off that neglected thesaurus, and synonyms include armada, squadron, and argosy. However, the term flotilla in the sphere of recreational chartering refers to a specific kind of experience. Straddling the categories of solo barebones chartering and more curated experiences with a hired skipper or a cruise ship, the flotilla model can offer the best of both worlds.

Of course, like all charters, there's an element of freedom in that you don't have to spend a year and a large pile of money getting your own boat ready for that bucket list adventure. Many veteran boaters swear by the chartering lifestyle, especially those who can't or don't want to leave it all to cross vast blue expanses for months on end. Why charter a boat to do the Mediterranean circle this year and repeat with Australia the next? Write the check, work with the company, and show



Mother Goose flotilla underway on wild British Columbia waterways.

up for the keys, no harrowing trans-ocean crossings required.

There are countless chartering companies in the Pacific Northwest and abroad, and many of them offer flotilla or flotilla-like experiences. I was fortunate enough to hop aboard Leg 6 of the Mother Goose Flotilla 2018, one of Bellingham, Washington-based Northwest Explorations' iconic seasonal adventures. The crew took me under their mother goose wings, sharing behind-the-scenes insights on how an ace

flotilla operates. The journey was a sweet taste of that flotilla freedom lifestyle.

FLOTILLA 101

Like a traditional solo barebones charter, the flotilla gives the helm of the yacht to the client. The client is in control of his/her boat and free to operate the vessel as desired (within compliance of the charter company's operating procedures, of course). The big benefits of this include flexibility and independence. In other words, if the client wants to go solo for a special evening for two, he or she simply picks a nearby secluded bay and chills the champagne after dropping the anchor.

However, like a full-service charter, the flotilla experiences offered in the Pacific Northwest and beyond feature a lead boat crewed by experienced mariners and knowledgeable staff who are on standby for support. Curious about the anchoring situation for the night? The lead boat's skipper will clue you in and maybe even offer a tie alongside. The marine toilet acting up? The lead boat's mechanic could be the hero who rises to the occasion.

Also, importantly, the lead boat follows a set itinerary typically established over many years of trial and error and local knowledge. For clients new to an area, this is a huge benefit to getting the most out of a trip, like exploring a foreign city with a bona fide local. Clients are allowed to follow the itinerary and lead boat as much or as little as they want, within reason. The chartered vessel does need to get from Point A to Point B (or back to Point A again) by the end of the charter, so skippers plan their trips with the starting and ending points in mind. No leaving the boat with the keys for a valet to pick up.

MY MOTHER GOOSE

My experience isn't any different than a client's as I am scooped up from the

ferry terminal in Ketchikan and whisked to the fleet docked in one of the local marinas. I arrive to a cozy scene aboard our lead boat and my new home *Deception*, a Grand Banks 49. Including us, our flotilla of six boats ranges in size from the 36' Grand Banks Grand Adventure to the 58' Kadey Krogen Inception. All the clients and crew, roughly 15 people, make for standing room only around a table of appetizers that include locally made crab dip and smoked salmon spread. Of course, the wine bottles are open, and an excited buzz thickens the air. A map of our route hangs from ceiling to floor, displaying the 736 miles Leg 6 will cover across two international borders and the vast wilderness like Alaska's Tongass National Forest and British Columbia's Fjordlands Conservancy.

"Alright, settle down, settle down," chimes in Captain Rich Fitzpatrick, a trim, silver-haired man with a friendly I-know-my-stuff authority about him. "We're hosting a potluck tomorrow for purely fun reasons, tonight we have some business to address." Several paper packets are handed out: orientation information, itineraries, charted routes for the next day, and more. The salon hushes as the group tunes in.

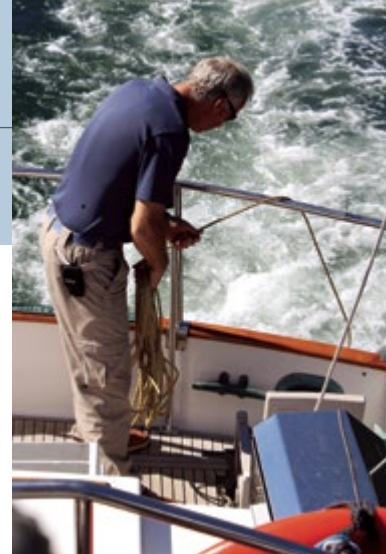
Captain Fitzpatrick is retired from a 30-year career in the Navy during which he commanded three different ships including an 820' helicopter aircraft carrier. He fell in love with Northwest Explorations when he ran into their booth at a Seattle Boat Show.

"I've commanded an aircraft carrier and been the Navy's military aide to President Bill Clinton," says Captain Fitzpatrick, who at one point was the guy who carried around the nuclear launch codes (aka "the football") in the president's entourage. "And I'm having more fun now than with any of those." He holds a

Below: The flotilla rafted up in Culpepper Lagoon, B.C. The lead boat *Deception* often deploys a shore-tie anchor and invites the other boats to raft up for socials.



Left to Right: The goslings follow *Deception* through the Fjordlands; A view from a shore trip near Culpepper Lagoon, B.C.; Captain Fitzpatrick is usually dealing with line in his endless mission as Mother Goose.



100-ton US Coast Guard captain's license and has been a flotilla leader since 2012.

Captain Fitzpatrick isn't a crew of one, however. Jordan Pemberton, first mate and mechanic for the flotilla, also introduces himself. The neatly-trimmed beard adds 5 to his 25 actual years of age.

"We're going to have a great trip," says the young sea salt. "Just always use your situational awareness. Especially as we go south, there's going to be more logs in the water as they are pretty aggressive with logging down there."

Pemberton has a long, personal history with Northwest Explorations. He is the grandson of Brian Pemberton, the recently retired Northwest Explorations owner who purchased the company in 2004 when it was called Grand Yachts Northwest. Jordan has spent the last 15 years working on

Alaskan and British Columbia waters, 13 with Mother Goose and two on commercial tugboats. He is also a proud graduate of Skagit Valley Tech School and holds a suite of ABYC mechanic certifications and a U.S. Coast Guard 100-ton captain's license. The cherry on top? *Deception* was his grandpa's boat and the start of his nautical career at age seven.

The third member of the *Deception* crew and flotilla leadership is Hannah King, the naturalist.

"I'm very excited to be here with you all!" King introduces herself with an enthusiastic wave. "This is my second year on this leg and some of my absolutely favorite spots are on the route." She will be providing narration about the wildlife, geology, history, and more along the way on VHF Channel 1a if anybody wants to tune in.

King is a graduate from Saint Louis University with degrees in Biology and Public Health. She followed the call of the sea to the Pacific Northwest where she worked as a kayak guide, environmental educator, and naturalist in the San Juan Islands. She then crewed on a local educational sailboat down the West Coast to Baja – where she accrued some hair-raising nautical yarns complete with 18-foot waves - before falling in with Northwest Explorations. Now she's on all year round.

"Hannah is modest," interjects Captain Fitzpatrick to the gathering. "She has the most demanding job. The naturalist does it all: organizes trips and activities ashore, serves as fully-trained crew, does more than her share of the cooking and cleaning, writes the trip's blog, takes our pictures, and more."

The clients themselves are a varied bunch, ranging from a couple who have done a Mother Goose leg for the last six summers (making this their seventh) to first-time goslings. Some have a couple of kids in tow and others are older couples making the most of their retirement. A few of them have sea salty resumes, others contemplate leaving the dock tomorrow with a touch of anxiety. They all are aboard *Deception* this night for the same fateful reason; the allure of the North and call of the sea.

Orientation ends and cabin lights of the fleet go out one by one. I treat Hannah and Jordan to a celebratory (and responsible)

round for good fortune at the 49er bar in Ketchikan before hitting the berth.

TAKING FLIGHT

The fleet casts its dock lines off the next day at around 0730 hours with the goal of an 0800 hours full-flotilla departure. I shadow Captain Fitzpatrick, Pemberton, and King as the three move from boat to boat for a final round of check-ins. One by one, the boats peel off from the dock, the skippers tuned to their radios as Captain Fitzpatrick or Pemberton talk them calmly out of the marina.

"A scoch [a little] more of port engine, back on the starboard," says Pemberton as he guides a boat clear. There's an array of boating proficiency on display, understandable due to the various backgrounds of the clients and the natural process of learning a new boat.

After *Deception* gets underway, the crew and I talk shop. Classically overcast and foggy, Ketchikan passes by. It isn't an hour before we pass our first humpback whale, number one of what turns out to be dozens over the course of the trip. King hops on the radio and goes into naturalist mode, listing off whale facts that have me, a marine science major, taking notes.

Although we are on the final leg heading south to Bellingham, Leg 1 for Mother Goose leads the opposite way from Bellingham to Ketchikan, a long leg with over 20 days underway. Getting the boats up north early in the season is smart, for many of the subsequent shorter legs go from Ketchikan to Juneau or Sitka, followed by a leg back down to Ketchikan. The north-to-south and south-to-north legs are repeated with varying itineraries to offer plenty variation for clients.

At the end of each leg, the skipper and crew hop off and the new batch of staff for the next leg boards. In this way, the whole fleet is handed off as a leisurely baton pass as it zips up and down the Pacific Northwest coastline. Behind the scenes, the Northwest Explorations crew works overtime to turn around boats for new groups of clients in less than 24 hours.

Preparation for Northwest Explorations' Mother Goose Flotilla, named for the float-

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Top to Bottom: Naturalist-organized shore trips are popular and often rugged, post-anchoring activities; Flotilla members lead by Hannah King explore a river, many huckleberries were devoured.





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ing line of goslings that follow the mother goose, starts about two years before clients board their vessels for their charter. “We start to get calls about Mother Goose a year and a half or two years in advance,” says Captain Richard Fitzpatrick. “We try to go someplace different every year to offer something new and have gone as far north as Prince William Sound, Alaska. We usually operate primarily in Southeast Alaska, but we’re also often found on the

westside of Vancouver Island and out to Haida Gwaii.”

Sculpting the itinerary is part art and part science with different boats, varying destinations, and client demands to juggle. While the itinerary for the following season is being hammered out, work at the dock never ends.

“The behind-the-scenes preparation is something we love to shed light on for clients,” says Pemberton. “The true behind-

the-scenes players are working around the year and around the clock to prepare for these flotillas and other charters on the home front. It takes time; each boat has to be organized and has a very detailed list of items to be aboard.” Mechanics service engines, teams routinely clean and polish, personnel make sure the boats are equipped with desired goodies (fishing gear, kayaks, etc.), the office phones ring as staff work with potential clients from around the world, and more.

Interestingly, Northwest Explorations doesn’t own the boats of their fleet, rather the fleet is made up of privately owned vessels enlisted with the company. For owners who can part from their boats for certain months of the year, enrolling boats in the fleet offers many benefits ranging from the company’s diligent maintenance to tax breaks.

“Putting these privately-owned boats into our charter fleet is a revenue sharing arrangement; the owners make some money and we keep some too. Most of our owners live out of state and don’t use their boats for large chunks of time during the season, so this works out great for them,” says Captain Fitzpatrick. “It’s definitely a special situation and not for everyone.”

THE GOSLINGS UNDERWAY

The first anchorage of Foggy Bay after leaving Ketchikan is an all-fleet raft-up and shore-tie arrangement, a wise move with the deep and sometimes complex anchorages in the area. After King and Pemberton lead a group dinghy excursion to a set of roaring tidal rapids, the potluck is all smiles as the flotilla

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Top and Clockwise: Butedale, B.C. is an abandoned cannery micro-town turned renovating marina; The humble but delightful Bishop Bay Hot Springs beckon all boaters in the area; The flotilla rafted up in Bishop Bay, B.C., where many humpback whales were seen!



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skippers exchange stories of whale sightings and more that are already piling up.

As the evening's drinking glasses ebb and flow with wine, Captain Fitzpatrick, Pemberton, and King are rarely idle as they obsess over preventative maintenance and troubleshooting, simultaneously quick to exchange a joke with a client and dive into a bilge. At least one of them always makes a final round to check in with each boat at night, tool bag in hand. King pours over the next blog post in the wee hours of the night, teasing out the day's experience for the world wide web.

I take in our flotilla raft as the stars come out. The Perseid Meteor shower is underway and I catch sight of a shooting star. I chat with the crew about what kind of person is cut out for Mother Goose.

"We tend to attract very independently minded, down to Earth clients who really want to be here to drive their own boat while interacting with the group" says Pemberton. "With a few rare exceptions, they are great to work with. I feel very fortunate. For this amount of money, clients could be pampered in fancy hotels in Europe as a vacation, but instead they choose to drive their own boat with us here in the wilderness."

While the appeal of a flotilla charter is wide, it is geared toward clients with solid boating fundamentals for safety reasons. There's always a checkout before the trip to make sure the skipper can operate the vessel safely. It's also common (and responsible) for clients to beef up on their boat skills months before the start date. In the case of Northwest Explorations, multiday on-board intensives are offered in Bellingham during the off-season. Bottom line: clients don't have to be sea salts, but they shouldn't be completely green either.

"The first thing you do is call the office," says Captain Fitzpatrick. "We talk to you and see what kind of boating experience you have. If you don't have much, we offer multiday classes that will get you up to speed. Other people with experience may just want a day of docking practice. We want you to enjoy the trip and not be out there white-knuckled the whole time."

Flotillas have plenty to offer ace skippers as well. For our remote Pacific cruising paradises, advanced curveballs related to big Pacific weather, calving glaciers, bears, local tide rapids, U.S.-Canada border paperwork, tricky anchorages, and more are challenges for boaters of all experience levels. Experienced backup can manage those inconveniences so boaters can maximize the fun part of cruising; cruising!

"Going with the flotilla is a great option because we're there the whole time," continues Captain Fitzpatrick. "We're always going to be the first in the dock to help talk you in and tend to your lines. We'll help you get anchored, learn the electronics, and more. We're out there in the lead boat with a captain, mechanic, and naturalist. We'll collect garbage, provide water when needed. These are big, complicated boats and we want to do all we can to ensure that you enjoy your trip."

"The training we provide as a company is pretty unique," says Jordan. "It's an excellent resource for boaters preparing for a flotilla charter."

MANY MILES TO GO

The days pass in an almost dream-like state. Through a lay day stopover in the charming town of Prince Rupert and a marathon of off-the-hook remote paradise anchorages – Newcombe Harbour, Patter-



Left to Right: Mother Goose participants tend to be independently minded and enjoy tending their own lines, helm, galley, and more.

son Inlet, Bishop Bay Hot Springs, Culpepper Lagoon, Rescue Bay – the flotilla life becomes familiar to the point we forget the worlds we left behind.

After a typical start between 0700 and 0900 hours, Captain Fitzpatrick or Pemberton lead the charge from *Deception's* helm, quick to report deadhead sightings or provide advice for tricky narrow passages as the gosling ships file in behind. King is always alert—a whale spout, ruin of an abandoned cannery town, or striking granite rockface of a fjord sends her on the radio waves and reaching for her camera.

The fleet is a dynamic beast, and sometimes a boat or two peels off for their own solo detours. Like a mother goose, *Deception's* crew bids them follow seas with inward motherly concern. The wayward boats always rejoin the flock, sometimes with fishing stories in tow.

After an impromptu stop in Shearwater Resort for some shore time, we gather around a bonfire in Fury Cove. We're within a day's cruise from Port McNeill, my final port of call. The fleet has quite a way further to homeport in the States. Fireside chatter grows reflective as the sun sets west over a field of pristine tidepools. A forest fire smoke haze sets in and the sun is like a blood orange in the sky.

Eventually, it's just the crew and me, and we tidy up the beach to leave no trace. As crew of the flotilla, they both start and put out the bonfire. The middle part with the s'mores is the well-earned reward. **NWY**



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Left to Right: Captain Fitzpatrick in the dinghy after dropping off shore trip explorers, he is always only a radio call away; Naturalist Hannah King (right) and her mom, Peggy King (left) enjoying the adventure.

