

# PAN-PAN, PAN-PAN, PAN-PAN! PANDA MANIA!

Sailing the San Juan Islands  
July 31 – August 6, 2005

## CREW:



Uncle Don Rogers – Skipper  
Judd Rogers – First Mate



Tyler Rogers – Quartermaster & Photographer



by  
Ben Rogers – Scribe

**DAY 1—July 31**  
**Anacortes to Guemes Island**

The brothers descend upon SEA-TAC airport from Boulder, Washington DC and Reno. Don and Judy are themselves returning from a college reunion in San Diego. Judd joins Don on the drive to Anacortes. Ben and Tyler chauffeur Judy. Judy's mother Marge has recently broken her hip and Judy will soon need to be with her—meaning the boys will only enjoy the company of our token female for but one night. Testosterone levels will soon skyrocket, unchecked.

Don and Judd shirk their first responsibility of the trip (checking out the boat) and instead feast on Thai food. Ben, Tyler and Judy—having fasted—are probably not the best candidates for provision gathering. Grocery stores, credit cards and grumbling stomachs are typically a perilous mix, but with Judy's help the boys manage to buy exactly enough food—down to the very last peanut M&M.

We behold Panda Mania in all her glory. A drunken sailor checks the boat out to Don and Judd and she's ours—if we can manage to back her out of her slip unscathed. Ben and Judd are instructed to: (1) hold onto ropes that will leverage the big hull through its first turn, and (2) jump aboard. Ben and Judd manage #1, but in the end remain dockside. It is the first and final instance of insubordination all week.

We anchor off Guemes Island. Soon a skiff approaches with three passengers—Bud and Dawn Ashback and a picnic basket brimming with bounty. Don and Ben take a Henry Ford approach to cracking all the crab while the others sip Fat Tire and nibble on Bud's monstrous smoked salmon. We make merry and eat well in the cockpit. Bud tells the story of a client with “one foot in the grave and one foot on a banana peel.” He offers us a fisherman's wisdom. Being a lawyer, this consists primarily of ways to foil the “fish cops.” For example, if the bastards approach when you've got a fish on, cut the line rather than be caught red handed with barbed hooks. If they say your boat doesn't have registration numbers on it, tell them it's not your boat. When the Ashback's climb down from Panda Mania, we don't know whether to be impressed or concerned: the oars of their skiff are actually shovels.

## **DAY 2—August 1**

### **Guemes Island to Sucia Island**

Ben acquaints himself with what will become one of his favorite things about sailing—urinating off the side of the boat. The sea is flat and calm. Tyler rows Judy ashore in the dingy and we wave goodbye. Dawn has brought us Bud's rods and lures. We motor across to Matia Island and accompanying Puffin Island. On the way there we pass a navigational buoy covered in cormorants, which are in turn covered with flies. Some of the more opportunistic of these buggers hitch a ride with us, tormenting us for the next hour. At Matia, we catch rare glimpses of oyster catcher birds and an otter. Seals nap on the rocks. Tyler gets a good look at his very first bald eagle.

We anchor in the bay and the boys row ashore while Don stays behind. A real page turner has his interest: the boat manual. The boys work their way around the corner of the island, prodding sea anemone and misplacing lens caps. A stone skipping contest marks the first event in a triathlon to determine who will have to sleep in the "rat hole". Judd nabs the yellow jersey.

After a lunch of turkey sandwiches and beer we motor (MAN OVERBOARD!—a surprise drill testing our mettle is performed in just enough time to keep our bumper victim from going hypothermic) to Sucia Island. We pick a lovely spot in Echo Bay and do what we always do when arriving in a new port—swim. Judd finds a 40-foot rope of kelp. We break off one end and use it as a trumpet.

That evening, a propane explosion blows the lid clear off the barbeque. The blast fails to expedite the slow cooking of our teriyaki chicken. Don is forced to drink more Maker's Mark. The triathlon is completed with rounds of Boggle (winner: Judd) and hearts (winner: Ben), and so Tyler cozies up in the rat hole. It will not be his last night there.

Stars twinkle as we tinkle, our piss stimulating phosphorescent microorganisms on the water's surface. Life gets no better.

### **DAY 3—August 2**

#### **Sucia Island to Stuart Island**

It is 6 a.m. Uncle Don rouses the drowsy crew and brings them on deck to see the wind push across the water. “This is what I live for,” he says. “Days like this.”

And so we slip from the open hand of Sucia Island, motoring out between two of her fingers into open water. We consult the Beaufort Scale. The further we get from the island, the less it looks like a Beaufort 4 (moderate breeze; small waves, becoming larger; fairly frequent white horses). For our virgin sail raising, we’ll be in a Beaufort 5 (moderate waves, taking a more pronounced long form; many white horses are formed; chance of some spray). The winds are about 17-21 knots.

Judd, the most experienced of the three deckhands, is asked to attach the jib while leaving the staysail attached above it—some kind of race technique. In the dipping bow, Judd takes waves to the face as he clips away. Soon he is pale and somewhat ecstatic from the onset of seasickness. Then he is just pale, but the jib is up. (Man overboard! And yet another suicidal bumper is pulled just in time from the sea’s icy clutch. Don nods approval.)

We trim the sheets, jibe, tack. “Prepare to come about!”

“Ready!”

“Ready!”

“Helms to lee!..Go!”

But the jib is too much sail for the high wind and so we must negate Judd’s sacrifice and put the smaller staysail back up.

It’s smooth sailing on the leeward side of Waldron Island. Tyler and Ben take to the dingy and bob on the open water so that Tyler can snap photos of Panda Mania. They decide that surviving a shipwreck in a tiny lifeboat would be incredibly lame. We round Turn Point of Stuart Island and set anchor in Reid Harbor. It’s a 2-beer lunch for Don. So we all nap.

Mid-afternoon, we rub the sleep from our eyes and board the dingy. We are four men in a tub—the water inches from our gunnels. Tight turns would capsize us. Gawkers on nearby yachts appear concerned or maybe just entertained. We arrive safely ashore and tie up. We follow trails through the island’s shaded forest and arrive at Turn Point for the second time in the day. From the lighthouse, we watch birds feeding. Seals and dolphins linger near the shore. We turn to go.

“Orca!” Don cries. And so it was that three brothers and their uncle came to watch a few dozen killer whales patiently make their way past Turn Point. Their rhythmic rising to exhale, inhale. Their bodies and fins like slow saw blades, cutting the surface. We witness breaching (sky hopping)—one whale bursts into the air just a few feet from a whale-watching boat, splashing them. The final pair we see includes a calf, who gives us a farewell dorsal fin slap.

We hike back to the boat, refill our water jugs. While motoring back we pass the boat of the woman with whom we watched the whales and her shipmates ask us to verify her tall tale. “27 Orca,” we tell them. “It’s true.” Tyler whips out his digital camera. He has megapixels to spare, leaving no one in doubt.

While Ben makes spaghetti, the charter company’s resident drunken sailor stops by on his high tech dingy. We don’t have to ask him twice—he’ll surely swill some of Don’s Maker’s Mark.

A game of hearts and then to bed—for Tyler, it’s another night in the rat hole.

## **DAY 4—August 3**

### **Stuart Island to San Juan Island**

We troll our way out of Reid Harbor without so much as a nibble on our lines on our way to Roche Harbor. A friendly guide joins our boat. His name is Judd and he claims to have penned the book on Roche Harbor and gives us a brief background of the McMillan family limestone empire. This Judd's story checks out, though when prodded for additional details he turns defensive and refers us to the book, which, he's quick to remind us, he wrote.

Upon arriving, we follow signs and radio instructions to every corner of the harbor. Finally we spot it. "We need to dump!" Tyler yells across the water to the dockhands, within earshot of people eating ice cream. We learn this service is free. Ben learns he has a real proficiency wielding a shit sucker. We happen upon a recently vacated dock space and slide Panda Mania in. Fresh water and power to recharge our systems—it's all free. Roche Harbor knows it can earn our money in other ways.

We mosey down the docks, gawking at the opulent yachts. We get our bearings and decide to lunch at Madrona Grill overlooking the bay. After sating ourselves, we visit the Dreyer's Ice Cream stand, where a single scoop is the equivalent of a triple. (Perhaps the Kiwi behind the counter was having trouble with conversions?) Tyler is forced to wait so long for his scoop that they hook him up with a bowl the size of a child's head. There's ample time for him to eat it, though, as Don leads us on what can only be described as an 'inventive' and possibly 'illegal' route to the famed, though poorly marked, McMillan mausoleum. At the hilltop grove we sit at the stone dinner table and reflect on death, burial preferences and egomania.

Next we visit the sculpture garden—a treat to wander through and ponder—followed by a Bocce tourney in the park. We play three games, each time with different teammates. Tyler, unable to taste victory no matter his partner, is once again relegated to the rat hole. First though, he must oversee our re-provisioning at the overpriced grocery. Under his careful supervision we stock up on cookies and beer.

Dozens wait in the customs line as we pull away from our choice dock space, and Tyler and Ben feel somewhat better about accidentally leaving behind their passports: who wants to wait in line just for a jaunt in 'Canadia'? We already have beer.

Don navigates what the charter company deems a 'no-go' canal and we anchor among the crab pots, rag baggers and stink pots already dotting Garrison Bay. The boys partake in their ritual swim. Don makes Greek salad. The evening competition is Texas Hold 'Em. Tyler goes broke (and so must wash the dishes), followed by Judd. Ben looks over his big stacks at the older, wilier player and thinks he'll just muscle him out of the game too. But Ben's stacks shrink to stubs when the young Jedi mistakes too many of Obi Don's good hands for bluffs.

Don wakes with a start at 4 a.m., unable to sleep. He soon knows what's nagging him and rises from his cozy bed. Fumbling through the main cabin, he claims the \$40 prize from under the dozing noses of his opponents and returns to his cabin for sounder sleep.

**DAY 5—August 4**  
**San Juan Island to Lopez Island**

We awake early to motor out of Garrison Bay before the tide ebbs and leaves us aground. Haro Strait is calm and dotted by a couple cod boats. For days we have postponed discussion of *Dogs With Gills*—Ben’s novel which he so humbly suggested as the voyage’s assigned reading. We spend the morning drifting south, sipping tea and talking about fatherhood, abortions and Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Later that morning we sail around in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, putting our new sailing knowledge to work. When the wind calms we tag along with a couple of whale-watching boats tracking an unidentified mammal with an undersized dorsal fin and a big body. We motor north through the pinball paddles of Cattle Point and Iceberg Point to Mackaye Harbor—a sleepy place with rusted old fishing boats and a rotted dock. A dead seagull does nothing to dampen Judd and Tyler’s will to swim and they splash right in.

Later that afternoon, Panda Mania is visited by three drunken (shit-faced) crab potters in a small outboard. They buzz past us but drop a float for one of their pots and so turn around to retrieve it from the water. There are three men and a dog aboard—all of whom seem to be enjoying beer from cans. One of the men looks like Tom Selleck if he gained 50 pounds and lived underground for a few years. Another looks like a retired and balding Santa Claus without front teeth. He’s a frisky one, always strip-teasing with his shirt to show off his snow white gut, that shakes when he laughs like a bowl full of jelly. The third man, who does not get off the floor of the boat, may very well be dead, but seems in good spirits nonetheless.

Them: “Whoooo-ho!”

Ben: “Hey there.”

Them: “Betcha didn’t expect that!”

Ben: “What?”

Them: “Ever seen this before?”

Ben: “Seen what exactly?”

Them: “Eeerrrrrrrrroh! Whoooo!”

Don: “Do you have a cigar?”

Them: “Aaah!”

Don: “Do you have a cigar?”

Them: “Mmmm!”

Don: “Do you have a cigar?”

Them: “Huh?”

Don: “Do you have a cigar!”

Them:

Don: “Do you have a cigar!!”

Them: “Me? I’m a retired diver.”

Don: “Do you have a cigar?!”

Them: “Whoooo!!!”

And with that they speed off, Santa wobbling precariously on their bow, tossing empties into the bay. That night we barbeque kielbasa. Ben, having inadvertently regifted to Tyler the very cribbage board Tyler once gave him, bolsters his gift with cribbage lessons. Don's after-dinner quizzes concern American painters and the geography of the San Juan Islands. The fact that the names of the islands are printed on the back of his T-shirt doesn't help Ben at all. Hearts, as usual.

And in the end, a Roshambo session settles it: Brother Tyler has finally earned freedom from the rat's nest with a huge best-of-three win over Brother Ben.

## **DAY 6 – August 5**

### **Lopez Island to Shaw Island**

We pull up anchor and head out into the Strait of Juan de Fuca for some Beaufort 2, maybe Beaufort 3, sailing. The sun and gentle breeze do little to push Panda Mania, but make for pleasant on-deck conversation.

Don asks us if we're the types to set goals for ourselves. He's always been of the opinion that setting goals is a crucial part of a productive and fulfilling life, even if the goals aren't always met. But he's reading a book about the teachings of Buddha in which detachment from all things is argued convincingly and he's having trouble reconciling his belief in goals with Buddha's philosophy. Talk turns to career choices and grad schools and the like.

After good chats and soul searching, we set the goal of reaching Indian Cove. But the way there is dense with fog. Judd, whom Don has named Skipper for the Day, is charged with piloting us through to safe anchorage. Wanting no more demerits—he has 5 by this time—Judd places Ben on the bow to watch for shallow water and floating debris. But the calmness in the air and the vibration of the motor and the billowness of the jib piled on the deck soon put Ben in a more Buddhist frame of mind and he curls up in the warm sail and sleeps right through the duties assigned him by his less-enlightened Captain.

When we reach Indian Cove on Shaw Island, we anchor successfully and the boys go ashore to stretch their legs and get some supplies from the quaint general store a few miles inland. On our walk across the island we watch osprey diving for fish in shallow water. At the store we buy mountain blackberry ice cream cones and a can of black beans. We return to the boat. Under the tutelage of Ben and Don, Judd and Tyler have learned to play cribbage. They challenge their mentors to a game. And win.

Ben makes dinner, and though we feared it would consist solely of boiled celery, Quartermaster Tyler has wisely hoarded plenty of rice and cheese and vegetables (and now black beans) to make quite a feast. It is also Ben's turn to provide the evening's entertainment. To the surprise (distaste) of all aboard, he introduces a game devoid of competition. We are to work as a team to answer our way through a deck of trivia cards in a certain time. The concept is lost on a crew and not once do we finish our cards in time. A high point, at least in the eyes of this scribe, is a particular card Judd picks. He has to make us guess the name of the person on the card using only clues starting with a single letter of the alphabet. He picks 'c'. His clues, were they not a bit sailor-mouthed, belong on the side of the box as an example of how the game should be played: composer, costumes, cock-smoker.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you... Elton John. Goodnight, Shaw Island!

**DAY 7 – August 6**  
**Shaw Island to Anacortes**

Our last day at sea. We pack up our things and prepare to disembark. All that's left to do is motor out of the islands, across Rosario Strait and back to the marina. But the fog has rolled in. Ben is Captain for the Day. We motor as far as we can, then anchor in a bay. We don't want to be plowed into by a ferry or a shipping liner while crossing the Strait. Ben thinks there might be big demerits if that happens.

Lesson for the day: sometimes, when adversity stares you down, it's best to just look away for a little while. Go below deck and drink tea. Play hearts. Wait. Maybe the adversity will go away. Don't make things hard when you don't have to. That's what real men do. Buddha might even buy into a goal like that.

Because sometimes the fog clears and the way is clear merely because we are patient.