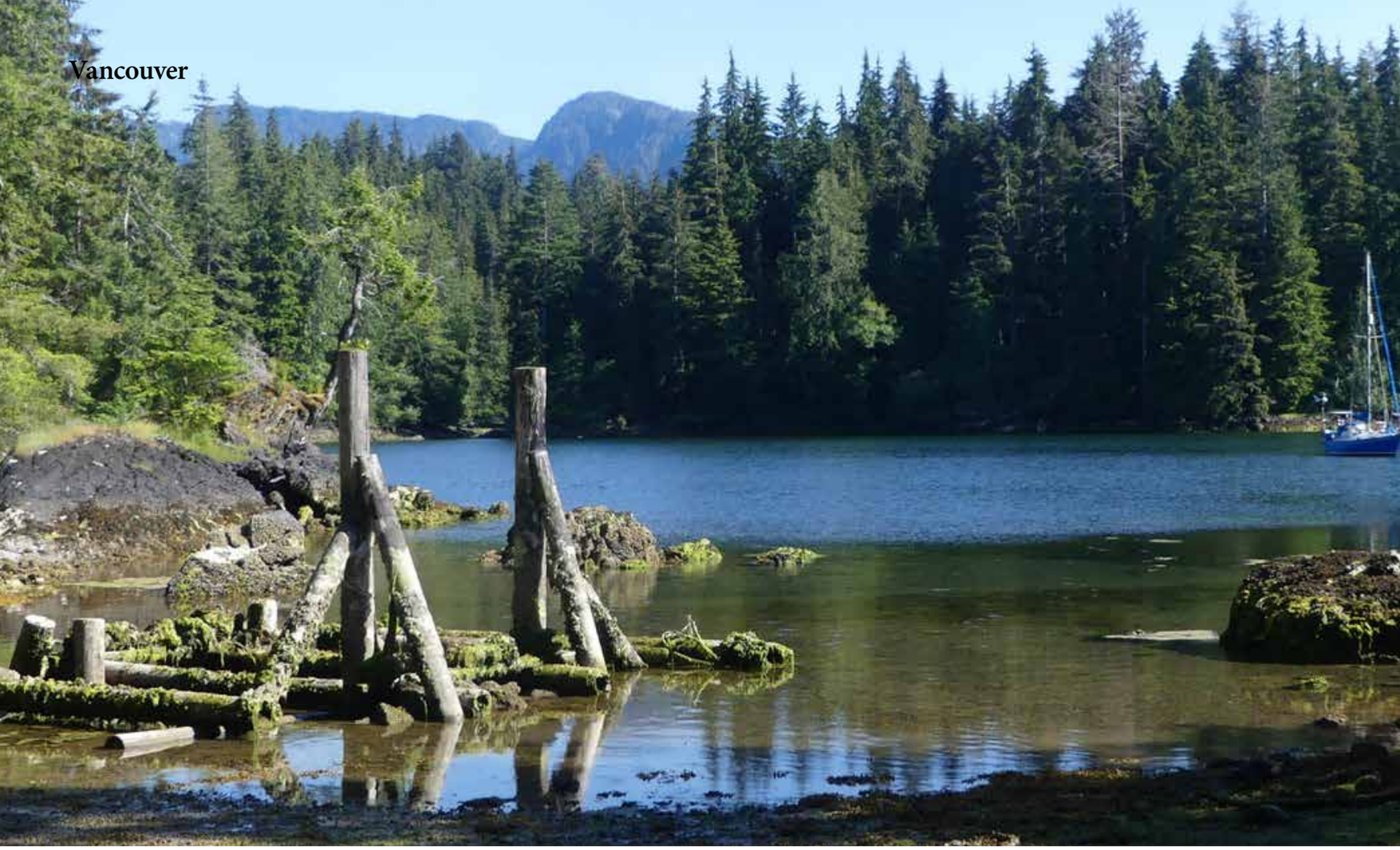

SAILING WITH POSITIVITY

Nick Coghlan and his wife Jenny faced all sorts of challenges as they explored the west coast of Vancouver Island

ABOVE
Pamphlet Cove, Drake Island

RIGHT
Jenny ponders the Covid self-test instructions before finding out she was positive

PHOTOS: COGHLAN

On the intricate, sometimes challenging 300nm passage north from our home waters, inside Vancouver Island, we'd made only one stop at anywhere resembling civilisation: the rough-and-ready logging village of Port McNeill (Proud Home of the World's Largest Burl). We'd splurged on junk food at Gus's Pub, which was packed with raucous hockey fans there for the Stanley Cup finals on TV. Now, at anchor on a quiet evening at remote Bull Harbour, off the northern tip of the Island, we paid the price.

"I can't believe it. It says I'm positive!" Jenny had thought she might be suffering the after effects of an undercooked hamburger at Gus's, but – just in case – she tried one of the three Covid test kits we were carrying on board. A second test confirmed the diagnosis.

The tides called for a pre-dawn departure in order to catch high slack at Nawhitti Bar, the wide but shallow gap between Hope Island to starboard and Vancouver Island to port, after which we would be in the open Pacific. Steller sealion bulls barked at us as we raised the anchor in the dark and, with no wind but a growing swell from the open ocean, felt our way towards the quietly clanging bell buoy on the bar.

By mid-afternoon, Jenny's headache was gone. "In any case, it's not as though I'm going to infect anyone except you," she said complacently.

ABOVE
Sea otters, Quatsino Sound

BELOW LEFT
Local resident, Sea Otter Cove

BELOW RIGHT
On the beach, Sea Otter Cove

The wind came up and soon we were surfing downwind in sparkling seas past Cape Scott. The rugged west coast of the Island (the 'outside') now awaited us. We threaded our way through an intricate, narrow and surf-bound channel into Sea Otter Cove and tied up at one of the four hurricane buoys maintained by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

We spent days exploring on shore as strong winds lashed the shoreline outside. At any one time, we could see up to four black bears roaming the beaches of Sea Otter, so landing had to be effected judiciously; they are especially hungry in the early summer before the salmon start running. On shore we found not only the remnants of a glass fishing float from Japan (a rare find these days) but several large, deflated rubber Pokemon toys. We supposed these must have washed ashore when the *Zim Kingston* had lost a dozen containers overboard →

PHOTO: DAVE HUTCHISON PHOTOGRAPHY/ISTOCK

in heavy weather off this coast a few months earlier, an event covered in the regional news. One day we bushwhacked through low forest to north-facing Lowrie Bay where we found more debris on its windswept sand beach: a large intact halogen bulb, probably from an Asian squid boat and used for night fishing.

It blew 40kts, but the heavy mooring buoy held solid. Once the winds were gentler and the sun was out again, we headed on to the most northerly of the five great Sounds (inlets) that cut into the west coast of the Island: Quatsino. It was another run in a steady breeze to the Kains Island light that marks the entrance to Quatsino. The knowledge that was no land to starboard until Japan was oddly exhilarating.

Winter Harbour

Winter Harbour is a tiny community a few miles inside the Sound, on a well-protected inlet of its own. Last time we had been here, in 1984, it had been crammed with 150 or more salmon trollers. Now there were just a few sports fishing boats; the processing sheds of the BC Packers company were abandoned and closed up. The salmon have nearly all gone, overfished. The population in summer is maybe 50 – sports-fishermen, or holiday-home visitors from Port Hardy (a two-hour drive on a rough logging road) – but it goes down to just two or three in winter.

Like other settlements on the west coast, Winter Harbour is centered on a boardwalk, 2km long in this case. There is a single shop that is open in the afternoons only (in summer), a fuel dock and a garbage drop; fresh water is available; very occasionally a pub opens. Rafts of dozens of sea otters (each holding 'hands' with another) drift in and out of the bay with the tide, dispersing only when the town's resident orca comes in for a cruise; black bears again meander along the tide line.

An exceptionally strong high over the British Columbia mainland spelled strong outflow winds in Quatsino Sound, but the fetch is limited. So we had little trouble reaching our first anchorage up the Sound, at Koprino Harbour. These days there's a cruising guide to almost everywhere, even these remote waters, but you have to conclude that the authors of this guide had made only a cursory visit. Soundings were incorrect and we found ourselves in a much more snug corner of East Cove (ie close to shore) than we would have liked; we ran a line to a tree to keep us from drifting into deep water.

Next up was Pamphlet Cove on Drake Island. It was hard to imagine, in this secluded and silent spot that there had once been (around 1917) a hotel, a shop and post office here. They were all run by a colourful Quebecois called Ned Frigon. He was married to a strong-willed native woman called Lucy Moon, known as 'last of the Longheads' (a reference to the custom of the local First Nation of binding women's heads). Lucy would regularly attack Ned with a carving knife, but the marriage survived. All that now remains is the skeleton of an old wooden crib for boats; there is no trace of Ned's popular bar.

Moving deeper into the Sound, we anchored at Hecate Cove, so as to be able to take a walk to Quatsino village, on the Sound's north shore. Founded by Norwegian settlers in 1894, it's now as quiet as Winter Cove. Although there's a road, it is not joined up to the outside. There is a beautiful, tiny church called St Olaf's that is still used occasionally. This began life as a one-room school; once the school-age population became too large, a bigger school was built. But that in

ABOVE
Heading into Quatsino Sound

BELOW
In Quatsino Sound

turn was closed in 2008, absent a critical mass of children. The story is a typical one on the west coast: the local school shuts and communities go into terminal decline, unable any longer to attract young families.

Riding the rapids

The innermost reaches of Quatsino (which comprises about 60 miles of waterways) can only be reached through a set of tidal narrows. We followed the usual practise of approaching the rapids, which in this instance run at speeds up to 9kts, with the last of the opposing current. You then transit the narrowest passage at slack – which lasts for a couple of minutes – so that the building current washes you out of the far side. There is very little risk of meeting any opposing traffic in these quiet parts.

Through the narrows safely, we anchored off Coal Harbour. We were now so deep into the Sound that it was only 20km overland, by a good road, to Port Hardy on Vancouver Island's east coast.

ABOVE The wharf, Winter Harbour

ABOVE RIGHT Julian Cove

BELOW LEFT Among the museum's display of telephones, Coal Harbour

BELOW RIGHT A 50-year-old de Havilland Beaver undergoing engine maintenance, Coal Harbour

Coal Harbour was, in World War II, an important base for Royal Canadian Air Force floatplanes that had the job of overseeing British Columbia's northern approaches and guarding against Japanese submarines. This, it turned out, was a real threat: the lighthouse at Estevan Point, further down the coast, was briefly (but ineffectively) shelled in June 1942. The old aircraft hangar still stands and it houses one of the best little museums in the province. The eccentric 85-year-old curator waves you in (there is no fee), and then gets back to his day job of running an air taxi service out of the front office; he flew de Havilland Beavers well into his 80s but was grounded after one too many crashes. Among the exhibits are the world's largest collection of chainsaws, a gleaming rotary engine from a Beaver, a telephone handset in the shape of a killer whale, and a stuffed black bear with a shotgun.

Following the War, this same hangar was used to render whales. This was the last active whaling station on the west coast of North America; 4,000 whales were processed here between 1948 and 1967, when it closed down.

At Julian Cove, we were surprised to meet two other sailboats, but they were just leaving. Listening on the VHF radio, we understood that they comprised an informal flotilla, all cruising together, from Maple Bay (just opposite our home island of Salt Spring). We're frankly sceptical about flotilla cruising: it often results in an uneven match of skills/experience. This particular group went on to have at least one unforeseen and unwanted adventure, on which we eavesdropped by VHF a week or two later. The forecast was bad but the lead skipper thought he knew better. The other two trusted him; a boat was nearly lost.

Back at Winter Harbour, we needed to wait a few days for a weather window to round Cape Cook, the next major headland to the south. It's known as the Cape Horn of the west coast; that's hyperbolic, but it still deserves a lot of respect.

One afternoon the word went round the village that the pub might open for a few hours. It seemed this was a rare occurrence. Jenny was very excited; her quarantine period, she pointed out, was now over.

"No." I had to firmly admonish her. "Remember what happened at Gus's. We've only got one test kit left, and it's 350 miles until we get back home."

She was still complaining as we got up again once more at dawn. But we faced Cape Cook down; and that last Covid test is still unused.