



PHOTOS COURTESY REANNE HEMINGWAY-DOUGLASS

Rick Huizi onboard the *Kentucky Colonel*, leads north in B.C. waters.

Alaska

In 21' Mini-Trawlers?

When three men's hearts are bigger than their boats, dreams can come true

BY RÉANNE HEMINGWAY-DOUGLASS

As we cruised the Inside Passage to Alaska in the summer of 2003, we kept hearing from other boaters about three men travelling in three 21-foot Ranger mini-tractors.

The three men—Rick Huizi onboard the *Kentucky Colonel*, Nate Streitmatter onboard *Wren* and George Unterseher on *Molly B*—were the talk of the north coast. They were rousing the most curiosity we'd seen along the Inside Passage in recent years. However, we always seemed to miss them by a day or two.

It wasn't until we were homeward bound after five months in the Gulf of Alaska that we finally made contact with them in Ocean Falls. My husband, Don, and I were moored at the public dock on a rainy September evening when the three boats pulled alongside.

MAKING WAVES Over the years that we've been cruising in B.C. and Alaskan waters, we've encountered many a small boat: there was a young Alaskan couple with two small children who made the round trip from Skagway to Glacier Bay in their 15' runabout; a Kitimat couple who launched their 18' cabin cruiser every summer for a diving expedition on B.C.'s outer coast; and even a Vancouver trio of SeaDoos that went all the way to Skagway in 1999 "just to prove it could be done."

By the time we caught up with the three mini trawlers, everything was

locked for the season—Eva's Holy Grill restaurant, the gift shop at the ferry dock, the café in the lodge—and we were so happy to meet them and hear their stories that we invited them for supper onboard *Baidarka*. They were having the time of their lives and proving "the pleasure of cruising is often inversely proportional to the size of one's boat"—an adage Don is fond of quoting. The evening wore into the early morning hours and we plied them continuously with questions as they recounted their "history." We were most interested in their ability to bring their dreams to fruition on a reasonable budget, in a small but well-built boat.

After he retired from the army in the

One slip for three: *Kentucky Colonel*, *Wren* and *Molly B*.





Kentucky Colonel's pilothouse contains all the electronics needed for the Inside Passage trip.

1990s, Rick Huizi worked with Howard Smith (Smitty), founder and original owner of Ranger boats, located in Kent, Washington. In 1994 he bought a fibreglass hull from Smitty and spent 15 months finishing it himself, with the idea this trailerable boat had great cruising potential.

Designed by marine architect Ray Richards, the Ranger 21 trawler which started its life in the 1980s as a Bristol Bay 5/8 scale with its tiller off the stern, gradually changed form over the years. Three feet were added to the boat's length and the stern was redesigned to a more

open seiner-type configuration. Rick convinced Smitty to reduce the boat's Yanmar diesel power from 27 hp to 18 hp (what he calls the sweet spot), as well as change the prop size from a 14" to 13".

The tiny trawler's pilothouse, which contains all the living space, takes up a third of the boat's 6.4-metre length; the rest is open cockpit. No need for an expensive slip or covered moorage—*this* diesel trawler fits in a garage.

When Rick's long-term friends, Nate and George, saw *Kentucky Colonel* they each decided they wanted the same

Wrangell Narrows, at 21 miles long, is a challenge no matter the boat size.





The *Kentucky Colonel* stowed neatly in Rick's garage until the next trip.

model and, within a couple of years, all three had begun cruising. In the summer of 2003, the trio undertook what had long been a dream of theirs—a two-months' cruise to Alaska along the Inside Passage.

Rick's experience as an army aviator, Nate's career in the diesel engine business and George's woodworking expertise combine to make a unique team.

And, although they don't always cruise together, their talents and skills complement each other when they do.

BUILDING DREAMS Division of labour for their Alaskan trip was decided early on by mutual consent. Rick, as statistician, normally planned the itinerary, calculated the necessary fuelling stops, fed weather information to the other boats and troubleshoot computer problems. He worked out an itinerary that would

>> THE RANGER 21

When Howard Smith (Smitty), founder and builder of the Ranger 21, decided to retire in 1998, Fluid Motion LLC, a Kent, WA company owned and operated by John Livingston and his family, snapped at the opportunity to continue production of the classic Bristol Bay design. As the mini-trawler's reputation for seaworthiness and reliability has grown, so have its sales. In 2004, alone, the company built and sold 40 of the rugged little boats.

In addition to the Ranger 21, the company has added the Martini—a stretch version of the displacement hull that incorporates more traditional "Down East" styling. The new model comes equipped with either a diesel or a 24-volt water-cooled electric motor. Although originally the Ranger 21 was popular for lake and inland waterway exploring, buyers now see its potential for longer cruising. Its reliability and ease of trailering have created an expanding market in the Northwest and we're sure to see more of them along the Inside Passage. For further information, check out the company's website: www.martiniboats.com.

normally have them at anchor or dock by early afternoon each day, depending on the stretch of water they had to navigate. Although they had hoped to make it all the way to Skagway, their late start made them set Petersburg as their most northerly point.

Nate served as chief mechanic and George helped maintain the Rangers in Bristol fashion and volunteered to tow his own dinghy, no mean feat when crossing gnarly bodies of water. Each man took nightly turns at cooking and clean up.

Insurers usually insist that Alaska-bound boats be back south of Cape Scott by September 1 and, when we asked why they waited until July 18 to leave Puget Sound, George answered with a wry smile: "We had to wait for Rick to get home from the Bahamas."

Getting home was not a matter of hopping a commercial flight; Rick had recently completed a three-month, round-trip cruise in *Kentucky Colonel* from Florida to the Bahamas, single-handing all the way! Another dream accomplished in his mini-trawler.



George, on *Molly B*, waves goodbye as he leaves to head north.

The problem of having enough diesel had already been solved on Rick and Nate's vessels. Each had custom-made and installed his own fuel tank with a capacity of over 76 litres. George, whose factory-installed fuel tank holds 45 litres, carried two 19-litre jerry cans of diesel to augment his supply. At a cruising speed of six knots and using 1.5 to 2.3 litres of

fuel per hour, this would give the boats a range of about 240 miles. With these preparations, the trio was able to cross both Queen Charlotte Sound and Dixon Entrance without running out of fuel.

TROUBLE SPOTS A few problems stayed their initial progress. The second day out, they discovered the visual navigation suite (VNS) program running on *Kentucky Colonel* was malfunctioning; linking

to totally unrelated tide stations. Because of this, they miscalculated the time for slack at Deception Pass, between Whidbey and Fidalgo islands, and shot through at nearly maximum velocity! Rick was to spend many hours on his cell phone (when coverage existed) with the VNS company's tech support trying to work out the bugs in the program.

South of Nanaimo, Rick's bilge pump began "24-hour service." A hoist on the blocks in Nanaimo revealed a thru-hull leak, which they easily plugged with epoxy. But by now they had lost a day.

As they plowed northward through the Rapids—Yaculta, Dent and Whirlpool—Rick's engine began losing power. Nate and George helped him replace the fuel filters. No improvement, so they removed the fuel pump. But then, as Rick was installing the replacement, he dropped a one-of-a-kind fuel fitting into the bilge. There was no way to retrieve it without removing his fuel tank—another delay.

Stops at Shearwater/Bella Bella, Klemtu and Hartley Bay allowed them to refuel.

The weather improved as they cruised through B.C.'s Inside Passage, and with their autopilots connected to their computer, they could sit in the cockpit, have a cup of coffee and enjoy the scenery, which they found more and more spectacular as they made their way north. On August 10, just over two weeks after leaving Puget Sound, they pulled into the Cow Bay Yacht Club in Prince Rupert—great timing for little boats whose maximum cruising speed is six knots.

Leaving Prince Rupert, they crossed Dixon Entrance into Alaska and anchored in Foggy Bay, a popular stop for boats that can't make it to Ketchikan in one day. While they were preparing dinner, George asked how Nate and Rick were able to determine where they were going after they'd crossed the U.S. border. "These Alaskan charts are awful," he complained. Rick took a look at George's computer and quickly realized he'd never installed the Alaska charts. George had been running for hours on the general world chart that comes with all navigational software.

Ketchikan is not a restful stop in high season. Three to five cruise ships disgorge thousands of tourists each day, small

tenders ignore speed limits as they streak across Tongass Narrows and noisy float planes take off and land all day long. The guys had enough in one night and were ready to head to quieter waters. Before they left, a fisherman stopped by to ask if they'd come all the way from Seattle in "those small boats" and told them they must be nuts.

"You know," Rick told us. "There's a difference in the way Canadians and Yanks see our trip. Americans tell us we must be crazy as hell. Canadians smile and say, 'That's a wonderful way to make the trip.'"

The city of Wrangell, however, gave them their due. At the dock, where the Rangers drew their usual crowd, a group of fishermen stopped to chat, asking questions about the boats and how far they'd come. Later, as Rick, George and Nate walked around town the news had spread. People stopped them on the street complimenting them on their boats and their navigational skills. It was in this town that all three found the real and rugged Alaskan mentality.

In Petersburg, they visited the Fisherman's Memorial and gained an understanding of why the folks in Wrangell thought so well of them. One of the plaques in the park is dedicated to a boat that went down in a 1999 storm with a father, son and daughter aboard. "It gave us a greater sense of respect for the waters we have been plying," Rick wrote, "and for those who, unlike us, have to earn their livelihood here."

Misty Fjords National Monument would fulfil the last goal on their itinerary before they said goodbye to Alaska. Here, the majestic granite mountains, waterfalls that tumble vertically from snowfields and lakes above, mist that floats in and out of the fjords and unspoiled wilderness caused Nate to comment, "It was the only place on our cruise that's not spoiled and scarred."

MEMORIES *Baidarka's* ship clock struck eight bells. It was midnight and we'd been talking for six hours. We all needed to make an early morning departure from Ocean Falls, but I had to ask Nate, George and Rick one last question: "What stands out as your most memorable experience?"

They were unanimous in their replies: Alaska, itself, of course—majestic, beau-

tiful, forbidding, rugged and challenging for small boats, with people who are self-reliant, optimistic and willing to help each other and strangers. But also, the many boaters they met who are living their dreams. It was the trio's trip of a lifetime, and they all plan to return.

In Rick's words: "Our boats have shown tremendous workmanship and toughness. With judgement, skill, perseverance and a lot of blind luck, we took our small ves-

sels where we'd not gone before and were richly rewarded for the effort."

Réanne Hemmingway-Douglass is the author of the classic survival story Cape Horn: One Man's Dream, One Woman's Nightmare. She and her husband Don have documented over 6,000 places to anchor or tie up from the Mexican border to the Aleutians. They are currently working on the seventh of their cruising guidebooks, Exploring the Gulf of Alaska. 🌐