

Elsie Hulsizer

The Accidental Author

Elsie's new book, "Glaciers, Bears and Totems," is just the latest account of a long history of sailing adventures by Elsie and her husband Steve.

By David Schmidt



For most sailors, making one solid cruise up the west coast of Vancouver Island and into southeast Alaska would serve as a proud high-tide mark on their sailing and life resumes. Most sailors, however, are not Elsie Hulsizer (64), a Seattle-based writer, photographer and a retired environmental professional, who has made 21 trips to these areas since 1980. Hulsizer and her husband, Steve, have sailed together for the entirety of their 40-year (and counting!) marriage, with voyages as diverse as cruising New England's finest DownEast islands, sailing from Boston to Seattle via the



Panama Canal, and making myriad, successful West Coast trips to points north.

But Hulsizer's sailing-related adventures are not limited to the ocean. She has written two cruising-inspired books, *Glaciers, Bears and Totems: Sailing in Search of the Real Southeast Alaska*, and *Voyages to Windward: Sailing Adventures on Vancouver Island's West Coast*, both of which should be in the canon of any cruiser contemplating a trip to either of these fabled areas. Interestingly, Hulsizer does a great job of blending her degree in oceanography with her sailing expertise, yielding writing with strong science and environmental content. Additionally, Hulsizer actively

promotes her books locally with speaking engagements and slide shows, usually at sailor-friendly bookstores. Anyone who is interested in following in *Osprey's*—Elsie and Steve's 1978 Luders-designed Annapolis 44—wake, or anyone who simply loves great photography and sailing tales, should attend.

I caught up with Elsie one drizzly Monday night at Piccolino's coffee bar in Ballard's Sunset Hill area—her land-based home for many years—to find out more about her adventures and her path as a writer/photographer. And be sure to mark Elsie's next presentation on your calendar: January 10, at 1900 hours at Elliot Bay Books.

Tell me about your sailing background. How old were you and how did you get started?

I was 12 when I first remember going out sailing. My Dad had built an 18-foot Blanchard Knockabout. I grew up in Three Tree Point on Puget Sound, so we sailed there. We would all go cruising on the Knockabout—all six of us! It was cramped, but we set up a tent on the beach. It was great!

Was it love at first tack?

I don't remember! [Laughs.] But it was an instant love of the water! I was always drawn to oceans and boats. I had a rowboat when I was a kid... little boats are a great way to start out on the water.

How did you get involved in adventure cruising to places like Vancouver Island and Alaska?

When my husband, Steve, was in the Navy, we were based in Newport, Rhode Island for a while. We bought a 21-footer and sailed it out to Nantucket and the Vineyard, and we also made trips up to Penobscot Bay. Then, we lived in Philadelphia and sailed on the Chesapeake on a Phillip Rhodes-designed 32-footer, an early fiberglass boat. When Steve got out of the Navy, we took a year off and sailed to Seattle—through the Panama Canal—in 1978. After we got to Seattle and got settled into jobs, we went cruising in the San Juans. It felt tame compared to our trip. Then, someone told us about Barkley Sound, and we went there the next year, and we never went anywhere else! Alaska was the next natural stop.

Do you primarily identify yourself as a sailor, a writer or a photographer?

I'm retired now, so I tell people that I'm a writer and photographer who writes about sailing and where we go sailing.

How has your background in oceanography affected your sailing? Or has it?

It definitely has. I bring with me knowledge of what we're sailing on and through. I love sea life. One of my favorite things is to take the dinghy and row along the shore at low tide and look at growing things. In Glacier Bay I enjoyed watching life coming back after the glacier retreated. I'm interested in the process of how glaciers retreat. My

degree gives me the courage to write about this stuff.

What do you think are the biggest hurdles facing a first-time cruiser to Vancouver Island?

Assuming that someone has sailed on Puget Sound and in the San Juans, the biggest thing is the perception of being out in the seas and the wind. The logistics are somewhat complicated to do it right. Lots of people don't do it right, but they still get there—they just get there slower and are more miserable.

As far as the sailing goes, it's an opportunity to practice what they have already learned but in more challenging conditions.

What about Alaska?

The biggest hurdle to sailing in Alaska is getting the time to do it right. You need three months, at a minimum, but you'll want four or five months to do it right. We usually leave Seattle in mid-May and then head south from Alaska during the first week in August—that's when it starts raining more and getting colder. Alaska isn't a

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*Eagles perched on a bergy bit
at entrance to Tracy Arm.*



step up from Vancouver Island as far as the sailing; it's the scale of things and the distances involved that are the big things. If anything, sailing Vancouver Island is more challenging than Alaska.

Besides distance and the time frame involved, what are the biggest differences you see between cruising Vancouver Island and cruising Alaska?

Rain! Expect it in Alaska. It rains the same number of inches per year there that it does on Vancouver Island, but in Alaska it's rainier in the summer. Also, the mosquitoes can be bad. Provisioning isn't a problem in Alaska, but a lot of the produce is on its last legs. You learn what keeps.

What inspired you to start writing adventure cruising guidebooks and sailing articles?

It was kind of a quirk. I was working on a photo book on the west coast of Vancouver Island for a class that I was taking in photography and writing. [The writing] was difficult for me, but I had a really good professor, and I learned that I could write... I can even write fiction! This project led me to write *Voyages to Windward*. What started out as a photography book with some writing, became a writing book with some photography. It was



Haida totem in Kasaan Totem Park.

an enjoyable process, so I decided to do Alaska as well.

What do you consider to be your most ambitious voyage?

Sailing from Boston to Seattle was my biggest adventure. Since then, it's been the Alaska trips. There's a *lot* of planning that goes into an Alaska trip. The boats need to be prepared and you need to be ready.

Any close calls?

Sailing back across the Dickenson Entrance one time... we listened to the U.S. weather report, which was calling for small-craft conditions. We should have listened to the Canadian forecast instead! We got caught in 40-45 knots and short, steep waves. Our dinghy got flipped and the pad-eyes tore off. Gone! We knew that *Osprey* could handle it, it was just uncomfortable and wet and cold. And, of course it was pouring rain.

Can you tell me about some of your most beautiful moments of cruising up north?

Anytime I'm up close to a glacier! Glacier Bay and the Tracy Arm Fjord in Holkham Bay are both spectacular. Also, Fords Terror—there's no glacier there now, but it's beautiful to see glaciation and how the glaciers have carved into rock.

For you, what is the bigger reward: the sailing, or the destination and the people you meet?

The people. For Steve, it's the sailing. We're probably a good combination!

Any advice for first-time cruisers headed to your favorite northern haunts?

If you're going from Seattle to Alaska, the biggest advice is don't delay on the way up. Save the beautiful B.C. anchorages for the trip back south.

Some people say that the real Alaska starts in Petersburg. I think that it starts in Ketchikan. There is a real change that takes place north of Petersburg—you realize that it's an adventure. Things are different. For example, the marinas there are for the fishing fleet, not for cruisers. There are no happy-hour tents ashore, there's no Internet and there aren't fancy showers. Boaters are an afterthought in Alaska; the entire tourism industry is based on cruise ships, and the boating industry is focused on fishing. But this doesn't mean that you can't have a



Sparse cover of low green foliage near Reid Glacier tells us the land is in the early stages of plant succession.


great time and meet great people. It's what cruising is all about.

Anything else?

Yes—people shouldn't hesitate to visit the native communities in Alaska. They still have their native culture there and they practice it. They're very friendly, and cruisers shouldn't feel uncomfortable there. [The native

peoples] want to tell you about their culture, and they're pleased to tell you about their lives.


For more information on Hulsizer and her presentation dates, or to order her books, point your mouse at <http://home.earthlink.net/~ejhulsizer/index.html>



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