

Pillar Point and the Pysht River — worth the risk.

The anchorage behind Pillar Point, 26 miles west of Port Angeles,, on the American side of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, looked scary to us before we tried it. Now, it's our favorite.

by Elsie Hulsizer

"Is it really Pillar Point where you anchor?" asked our friend Lyn after a trip to Barkley Sound. "We looked at the chart and couldn't believe you would go in there. It looks scary."

The anchorage behind Pillar Point, 26 miles west of Port Angeles on the American side of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, looked scary to us too before we tried it. Now, it's our favorite when going out the Strait. Spectacular

sandstone pillars rising straight up from the water's edge, eagles and ospreys diving for fish, a beautiful river valley to explore in the dinghy, and a convenient location for an overnight stop on the way to Barkley Sound -- all these make Pillar Point worth the risk of a semi-exposed anchorage.

Anchorage are scarce in the Strait and in the 17 trips my husband Steve and I have made out the Strait to the

West Coast of Vancouver Island, we have tried almost all of them. On our first trip, we went directly to Victoria to clear customs and stayed there for two nights. From Victoria we sailed to Port San Juan (on the Vancouver Island side), finally reaching Barkley Sound on our fourth day out. Victoria was fun but our stop there added a day to our trip. And at Port San Juan, ocean swells kept us awake most of



*Mergansers at the mouth of the Pysht River.
Left: Bridge crossing about a mile upriver. Water so calm it was like motoring through green reflections.*

At sunset, the pillars stood out against a pink sky. We would be in Barkley Sound by the next afternoon – just two long days from Seattle.

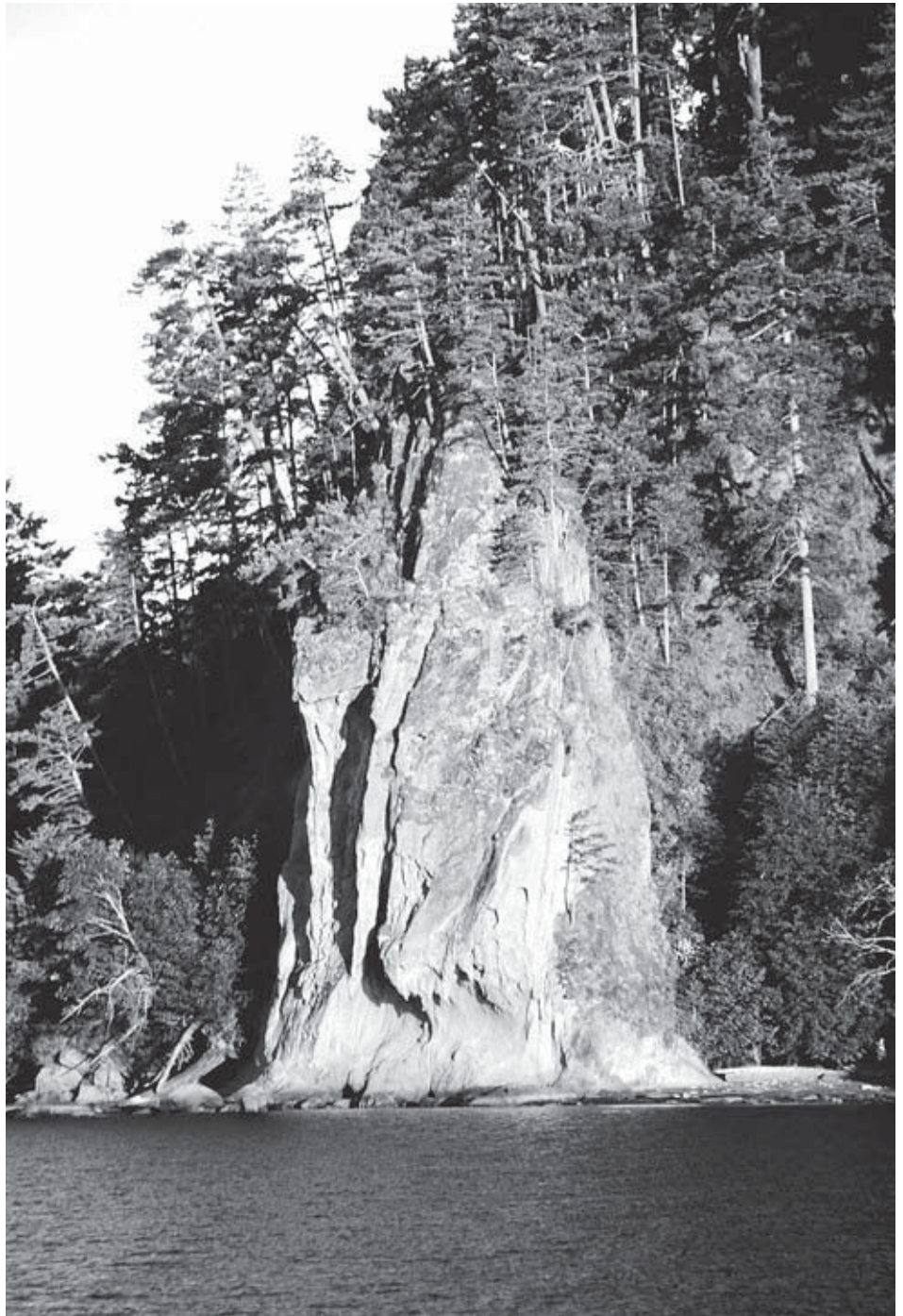
the night. The next year we stopped at Port Angeles the first night, Neah Bay the second, and checked into Canadian customs at Ucluelet on the third day. That route gave us two good nights' sleep, but put us into Port Angeles in the early afternoon when winds and currents were still good for sailing. We had started our trip on a spring tide weekend, counting on the strong ebb tide to give us a boost. By stopping at Port Angeles, we weren't taking full advantage of the tide. We looked for an anchorage further west.

Pillar Point was in the right place. But although the U.S. Coast Pilot talks of anchoring at Pillar Point, the anchorage is open to the north and east. We thought it was too exposed. What we didn't realize is that the curve of the point forms a hook that stops the swells from the ocean and the height of the land blocks the west wind.

By our fourth trip to the West Coast of Vancouver Island, we had spent enough time in the Strait to know that the wind always blows from the west in good weather. So when we motored for a whole day in a flat calm and heard on the weather radio that only light westerlies were expected that night, we decided it was a good year to try Pillar Point.

We approached the anchorage carefully, keeping a close watch on the depth sounder. A tide flat extends out from the mouth of the Pysht River and kelp beds line the shore to the east – leaving only a narrow band for anchoring. We chose an anchorage off the mouth of the river. From there, we could look southwest across green marshland to the Pysht River valley and west to sandstone pillars standing like ramparts guarding the anchorage. At sunset, the pillars stood out against a pink sky. But best of all, we were in Barkley Sound by the next afternoon – just two long days from Seattle.

A year later we returned. This time the westerlies howled down the strait kicking up a steep sea. We beat to windward all day, tacking back and forth across the Strait, slamming into the waves. Then the tide turned, setting

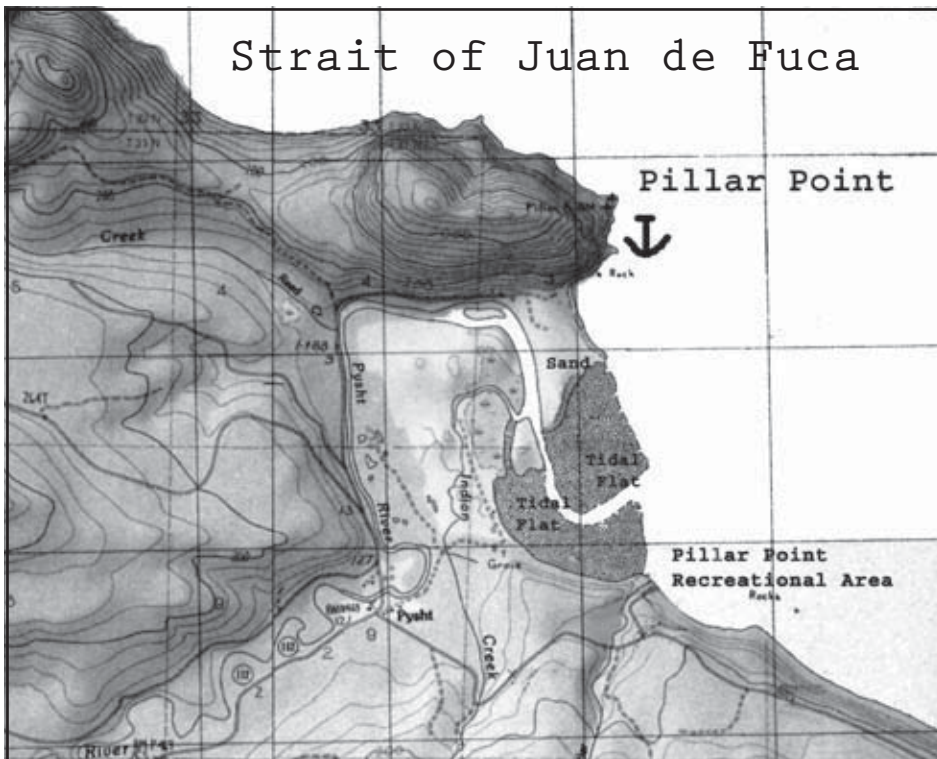


current as well as wind against us and slowing our progress to less than three knots.

I was nervous about approaching Pillar Point in those seas, but I didn't want to stay out in the Strait either. We sailed in, ready to make a quick retreat. But when we rounded the point, the wind slackened and the swells diminished. We anchored close under the pillars to get out of the seas. That evening we watched the sunset from a quiet anchorage while swells rolled by in the Strait. When I awoke the next morning after a good sleep, I knew we were on to a good thing.

Since then, we have anchored there seven times. In our Annapolis 44 sloop, *Osprey*, we can leave Seattle in the early morning at slack-water-before-the-ebb and reach Pillar Point before nightfall (assuming we start our vacation on a spring tide weekend). The ebb runs longer on the American side of the Strait, so we can ride the tide farther than if we had gone first to Victoria and then out the Canadian side.

One additional advantage to anchoring at Pillar Point instead of farther west at Neah Bay is that when we leave Pillar Point, we can head



Strait of Juan de Fuca

Pillar Point



Pillar Point
Recreational Area

Both the U.S. Coast Pilot and the Canadian Sailing Directions say, "good anchorage can be had in 9 to 12 fathoms about 0.8 miles southeastward of Pillar Point..." However, we have found the most protected spot to be tucked in close to the pillars in about two fathoms at low water—closer than you think you should be. Two or three boats can fit in offshore of the pillars, with others nearer to the river. Canadian Chart, 3606, Juan de Fuca Strait, shows a few more details than the American chart of the same area. Neither chart shows the river entrance. For that you need the USGS map.

A gentle swell comes into the anchorage and when the wind dies, boats can roll to the swells. A stern anchor might prevent rolling. We've never bothered with one because the swells usually die at night.

Although the chance of a strong easterly in the summer is just about nil, it's still wise to check the weather radio before anchoring at Pillar Point.

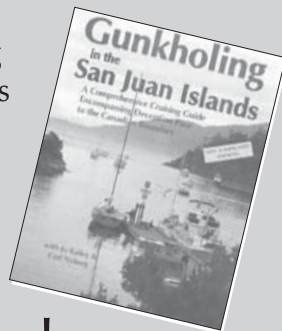
Anchoring at Pillar Point Pillar

Pillar Point is recognizable from the Strait by its shape, a square block of land, which rises to a height of

700 feet, higher than the neighboring shores. The pillars are at the point itself and rise to a height of 100 feet.

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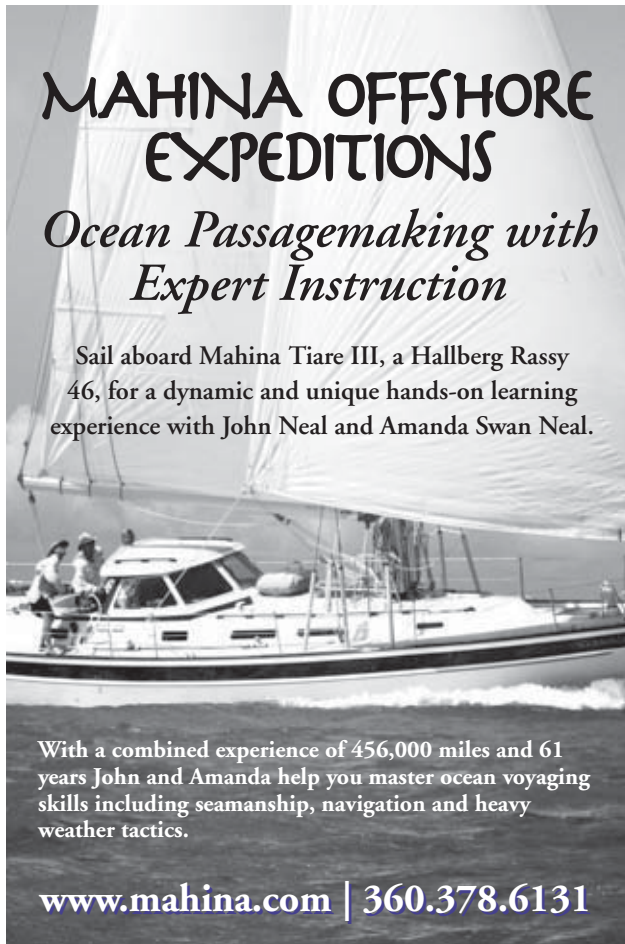


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north across the Strait and then sail the rest of the way along the Vancouver Island shore, avoiding the tide rips off Neah Bay.

Pillar Point is so rugged and wild and the scenery so spectacular that when we anchor there, I feel as if our adventure has already started, even if we aren't yet in Barkley Sound. A trip to shore or up the river in the dinghy confirms that.

Pysht River

From the first time we anchored at Pillar Point, we talked about exploring the Pysht River in our dinghy. But after a long sail from Seattle, we never had the energy to pump up and launch the dinghy, which we keep on the cabin top when sailing out the Strait. So one Saturday in May 2004, we decided to approach the river from the land.

We stuffed the deflated dinghy and its outboard in the back of our Volkswagen and drove from Seattle to the Pillar Point Recreation Area. We brought with us the USGS map for Pysht, which shows a broad tide

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flat intersected by the river. To make sure we could get over the tide flat in the dinghy, we timed our arrival at the launching ramp for just before high tide. But once on the water, we struggled to find the river mouth. A long way from shore the outboard kept striking bottom with a grating noise that set our teeth on edge. When we spotted a crab pot buoy that looked like it might mark the channel, we headed toward it. Steve gunned the engine and suddenly we were in deep water. We motored along a sandy beach while a flock of Merganser ducks watched us from the shore, the green heads and

white bodies of the males standing out against the gray sand.

A line of old wooden pilings ran up the middle of the river and we followed them around a bend. Tall maples dripping with moss overhung the channel. Sunlight filtered through the leaves. The water was so calm it was as if we were motoring through green reflections. We followed the pilings for more than a mile, then turned back.

Just before the river mouth, waving marsh grass drew us into a side channel. We passed a derelict barge on the bank, its machinery rusty and broken. Like the pilings, the barge told of a time when the Pysht River was an active log storage and transport route.

At the river's mouth, we beached the dinghy and walked along a sandy shore strewn with driftwood and shells-- a beachcomber's paradise. We looked out across the water at the sand-colored pillars, standing tall against the green forest. The Pysht River had given us another reason to stop at Pillar Point.

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