

# Winter in Sidney, British Columbia

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I knew it must be time to take Gracie for her walk, because the rain had started again. It was 37° (Fahrenheit) and the wind was blowing 20 knots. The Canadians make it sound and feel even worse by using Degrees-Celsius and Kilometers per Hour, so by their standards, it was 3° and 36 Kph. I remember conditions like this in Wyoming and Colorado 40 years ago and it reminds me why I escaped. The winter before I fled to California, dragging my worldly possessions behind me in a U-Haul trailer, the temperature reached -39° F. (Incidentally, -40°F is the same as -40°C.)

Gracie, aka Amazing Grace, is a 4- or 5-year old classic reddish-brown and tan German Shepherd. We know little about her, having gotten her from German Shepherd Rescue in Kent, Washington. They got her from the pound that got her from somewhere in eastern Washington. I'm sure she had in mind signing on as the Principal Dog in Residence on a 2000 acre sheep ranch, not as deckhand on a 46-foot boat, but when you're a dog, you take what you get. She has adapted well so far; after all, *Four Seasons* is about the same size overall as a good dog run, but warmer, and with better food and great sleeping accommodations.

Gracie is full of energy and does not tolerate long periods of inactivity. At some point, at least once every day, she goes insane and begins wreaking havoc on personal items like boots. You ignore this gathering mental collapse at your peril. Nothing will do but to go for a walk. A long walk, wherein we sniff each and every bush and post for new messages: doggie e-mail. I don my boots and coat, zipping it up to my nose and pulling the hood down over my forehead. Gracie is an accomplished extortionist who requires a constant stream of treats to keep her on the straight and narrow path of obedience. We cannot manage the treats, the leash, the poop-bags and the flashlight with gloves on, so we alternate slobber-coated half-frozen hands in coat pockets as we walk.

Exactly one year ago, in February of 2003, *Four Seasons* was berthed in Marina Ixtapa in Mexico where the temperature reached 95° F by 11 AM every day. A nippy morning in Ixtapa is 75°. And it was here, while sipping Margaritas in Carlos and Charlie's by Zihuatenejo Bay, that Donna first said, "Maybe we should go to Alaska next year". "Yeah, maybe we should", I agreed, munching on my fish taco and gazing out at the sailboats drifting by. Her reasoning was sound. Once we go through the Panama Canal and into the Caribbean, we are unlikely to come back, and we really "should" see Alaska before then, or we won't.

This triggered a chain of events that culminated in our arrival in Sidney, British Columbia in September, 2003. It was necessary to do this, we keep reminding ourselves, because coming up the coast from San Francisco to British Columbia is much easier in the fall than in the spring. So spending the winter here is the price we pay to be able to leave for Alaska in late April, 2004. We installed air conditioners when we designed this boat, not heaters. Alaska? Naw, we're not going to Alaska! We're going south to Mexico, the Caribbean, possibly the Med – not Alaska. All the Canadians that we met in Mexico assured us that Sidney/Victoria was the “banana belt” of BC and we would “just love it there”. Of course, most of them stayed in Mexico. I'm sure they are all snickering behind their Margaritas this winter.

They were right, of course. Sidney and Victoria are truly beautiful. We were just enthralled when we arrived in September to see the hanging baskets of flowers all along the dock, and along the streets. Everything was abloom and the residents were about in shorts and T-shirts just like we were used to in Mexico. A tent top covered the Customs dock, and it was usual to have impromptu get-togethers at the tables there. We found people we knew from the Bay area. It was going to be great! Then, about mid October, one by one the flower baskets came down, the tent top was taken off, leaving bare support poles, the residents started wearing jackets and long pants, and we sensed a change. Sure enough, In late October, the rain started. The temperature dropped from mid-sixties to mid-forties. The Canadians never stopped smiling, though the normal greeting changed from “Great weather, eh?” to “Miserable weather, eh?”, but always with a cheery wave and a grin. (This relentlessly positive attitude is disorienting to a Californian: we get all set to glower at someone, and they smile at us! They even make eye contact, something for which you could be shot in LA, and say Hello! Good Morning! Or, best of all, Cheerio, Love!)

Our time here is defined as pre-Gracie and post-Gracie. Pre-Gracie, we could ignore the raging elements outside. We were relatively snug in the boat, as long as BC Hydro kept delivering a steady stream of kilowatts to us and the TV still worked. We had little need to go out in it unless we ran out of wine. Post-Gracie, this is not the case. We go out three times a day, morning, afternoon and evening, rain, snow, sleet, or whatever. Fortunately, it was pre-Gracie that the worst of winter hit. A hard freeze came that left us without water for five days and without electricity for 1. Along with it came about a foot of snow. And then we acquired Gracie.

For a free dog, Amazing Grace has been expensive. Before we got out of Washington State, we had spent close to \$1000 on the adoption fee, vets, baths, pills, food, crates for the boat and the car, blankets to keep the dog hair off the furniture, combs to get the dog hair out of the dog, leashes, collars, tags, flea treatment, treats, life vest and an overcoat. (The overcoat was just not her thing; she refused to wear it. She looks stunning in her new life jacket, however.) Then came the private training sessions (2) and the professional training classes (5-weeks).

All of our friends are on some sort of diet. The Atkins, the low carb, the no-fat, the high protein, whatever. We have, since Gracie, embarked on the German Shepherd exercise plan. It involves maintaining marginal control of a 75-pound animal who is determined to chase anything dog-, bird-, or cat-shaped that she encounters while walking 2-3 miles a day. This has dropped our weight significantly and improved our muscle tone, especially in one arm.

Our biggest challenge is learning how to go potty on the boat. Well, two of us already know how, but the third one doesn't. We have been successful in training two other dogs, so we know it can be done if we just follow our own advice. It involves immobilizing oneself in front of the dog at the potty place until she gets it. She doesn't get to leave, and neither does the trainer. With the last dog, it took six hours. But the true test is still to come. This is a nice place to live when it's tied to a dock, but Gracie has not come to grips with the idea that it moves! Even the human components of the crew get very landlocked after 4 months in a berth, and it's hard to pry us off the dock and out into the open water. But fair weather will come eventually, and then we all have to develop, or re-develop, our sea legs. I think she will begin to see the point when we catch our first salmon. (See: Gracie's Story)

***The End***