



Moorage Mayhem

The hunt for the elusive marina slip STORY & PHOTOS BY DIANE SELKIRK

Twelve years ago, when we bought our first boat, finding a slip in Vancouver was pretty easy. We called around to four or five marinas, then narrowed our choice to one that was close to our home or one that was further away but cheaper. Being young first-time owners with more time than money, we opted for the slightly longer drive.

Ten years later, we needed a new slip. But this time, rather than looking for moorage for a 30' boat, we were looking for a slip for a 40' catamaran with a beam of 23'. After the first few calls we started to get worried. A couple of marinas offered to add us to long waiting lists. One marina that did have a slip available quoted a price that sounded suspiciously similar to our mortgage. The rest of the places we called just politely laughed at us. With our boat's temporary moorage running out, we were beginning to contemplate more radical options—like anchoring in False Creek (the crackdown hadn't started yet) or keeping the boat in

Nanaimo and visiting on weekends.

We were pretty sure our moorage problem had everything to do with our extra hull, and two years ago, it probably did. This year, most marinas in Vancouver are operating at full capacity. Waiting lists have become the norm, with several stretching out of this decade and into the next. For boats over 35', the search for a slip is taking on grail-like proportions.

WHAT HAPPENED? Brokers report that boat sales have been booming for the past few years. Not only are more boats being bought, but bigger boats are the most in demand. While marinas used

In recent years, marina development has been limited to small water lots that are often built as part of condo developments in Coal Harbour (above) and False Creek.

to consider boats over 45' big, many are now routinely getting calls looking for slips in the 60 to 80' range.

While sales have been booming, marina development has not. Most of the larger marinas have been around now for several decades and were originally designed to accommodate vessels in the 20 to 40' range. The marina development that has occurred in the past 10 years has been contained to smaller water lots, which are often part of condo developments in False Creek and Coal Harbour. While these marinas can accommodate larger boats, some are strata title, and a 35' slip can go for as much as \$275,000.

NO ROOM AT THE INN The result is that finding a slip in Vancouver is a pretty tough and expensive proposition. When I started researching this



Slips for boats 24 and 30' can sometimes be found at the Ladner Harbour Authority Float (above). However, at False Creek Fisherman's Wharf (left) boats must be rafted three deep to maximize space.

“ ASIDE FROM A FEW SMALL SLIPS HERE AND THERE, ALL THE MARINAS I SPOKE WITH WERE FULL. ”

story, I began by calling my way across the North Shore looking for a 40' slip for a hypothetical boat. I knew Mosquito Creek was undergoing a major renovation, so I started there.

The newly developed and still empty “A” dock was a lovely thing to behold, and I was eager to talk to manager Donny Mekilok about moorage possibilities. “We’re jam-packed and ‘A’ dock is completely sold out,” he told me. While Mosquito Creek is making an effort to make the most of its space and create room for big boats—it plans to accommodate boats up to 400’ on the breakwater—it hasn’t been able to make much of a dent in its waiting list. “We have 250 boats on the list, although most of them are probably on every list in town.”

Gerry Blair, owner of Lynnwood Marina, had much the same story to tell. Lynnwood had been hit hard by the winter storms, with roughly \$1 million worth of damage to boathouses and pilings. “We’re rebuilding now,” he said. “We’ll increase the number of boathouses from 105 to 140 and focus on the 60 to 100’ boats. But we are already completely full.” Blair estimated the waiting list at three to five years and even longer for boats larger than 60’.

The answer was the same at Reed Point and Thunderbird Marina, and waiting lists grew even longer when I called downtown.

NEW MARINAS? About such high demand, I had to ask the obvious question: Why are no new marinas in the

Even after recent renovations, Mosquito Creek Marina is jam-packed, but plans are in the works to accommodate boats on the breakwater.

works? My enquiry netted a variety of answers. Marinas, it seems, are very tricky things to build. With land values soaring, there are plenty of alternative uses for waterfront property. Even if a company decides it really wants to build a marina, the process requires permissions from all levels of government, and many development plans never get past the local level. Concord Pacific's current effort to build a marina in False Creek is one well-publicized example—community members have contested the proposed 22-slip strata marina at every turn. They're concerned that the marina would house large powerboats that would disrupt views and take up too much of the fairway. The City of Vancouver has listened to these concerns, and through its Blueways program has, in the past, reinforced comments that False Creek has enough marinas.

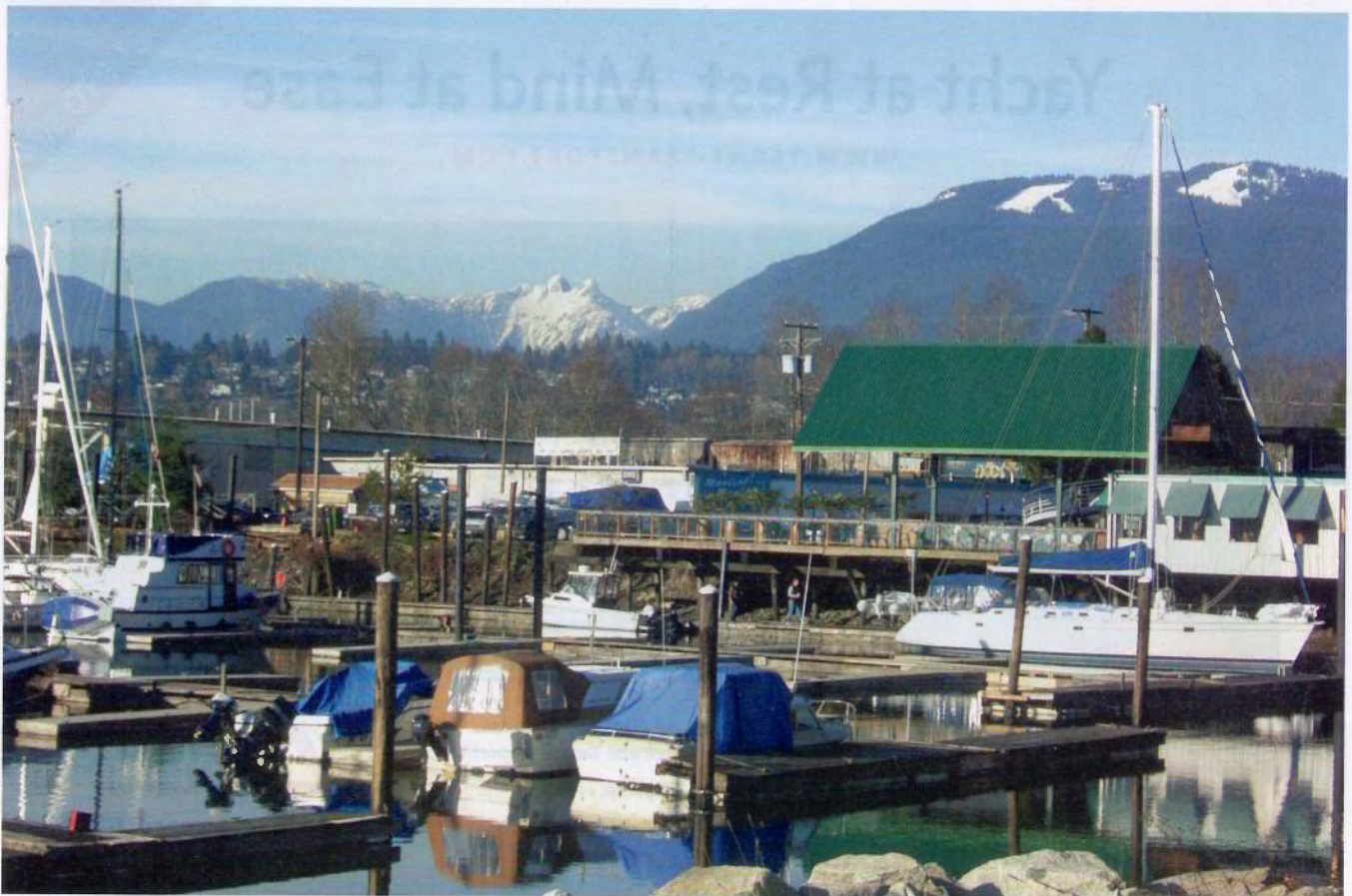
MAXIMIZING WHAT WE HAVE With no new marinas being built, those that already exist are struggling to make space. The marina

managers I spoke with described the myriad ways they've tried to fit in as many boats as possible. Looking to the crowded East Coast for design ideas, some marinas have been reconfiguring docks to maximize space. False Creek Fisherman's Wharf manager, Art Childs, is even rafting boats three deep. "Our big boat dock, which was designed to fit six boats, currently holds 18."

Many marinas report that they've been getting rid of slips in the 18 to 26' range

because most of these owners only keep their boats in the water for six months of the year. The marinas then rebuild these slips to fit larger vessels. Some have even begun to refuse to renew the leases on older, unused boats, hoping to give absentee boat owners the nudge to either sell or become active again.

Lynnwood Marina, having suffered extensive damage due to winter storms, plans to increase its number of boathouses for boats 60 to 100'.



MOORAGE RATES With all these changes come rate increases. This year's rates are higher than ever before, with many increases in the 10 to 20-percent range. Managers are quick to point out these hikes have often followed years of no increases, and are typically the result of significant upgrades. Dave Harris of Reed Point Marina said they have rebuilt the boat-

houses to meet new, more stringent environmental standards. "We've been refurbishing the entire marina," he said. Other marinas are using their full docks and full coffers to add amenities such as improved restaurants, spruced-up clubhouses, new docks, upgraded electrical systems, state-of-the-art pump-out systems and higher environmental standards.

HUNTING FOR MOORAGE So while boaters are likely see some great improvements at city marinas, the news isn't as good for those still looking for a slip. My search for a 40' slip took me out of Vancouver and up the Fraser River. At River Rock Marina a few 34' slips were available (at time of writing in February), and I found the occasional 24 to 30'

TIPS FOR FINDING A SLIP

SO THIS IS the part of the story where I'm supposed to give ideas and offer hope for people looking for slips.

1. As soon as you decide you want a boat, get on a waiting list. All the marina managers I spoke with suggested this. The assumption is that it's the same 200 to 300 people on all the lists in the Lower Mainland, meaning the chances of moving up the list are better than you think.

2. Follow up. Many leases are up in April, and boats tend to move around this time of year.

3. If in the market for a used boat, look for a boat that comes with a slip. Craigslist (<http://vancouver.craigslist.org>) had a few

dozen boat/slip deals in February, and many brokers will help look for the combination.

4. Call around to boat brokers. Some still have deals with marinas: If you buy a boat with them, you get a slip. This agreement is becoming less common, though, and many marinas say they can only accommodate these arrangements when possible. If you want to buy a larger boat, some marinas recommend subletting your smaller slip, then getting on their internal waiting list for a larger one.

5. Make sure you have liability insurance. This will increase the number of marinas that will take you.

6. Consider dry land storage for winter.

Many communities work to make space for transient boaters—you may need to move your boat two or three times over the course of the season, though.

7. Get creative. Look for sublets, and search out private docks (we found our slip by driving down side roads on the Fraser River and knocking on doors). Look to the south (the area outside the Seattle-Tacoma corridor is reported to have moorage available).

8. Contact your local government. Everyone I spoke with from city to federal level was certain there had to be slips available. Officials need to know if the spaces are not out there. —DS



space in Ladner and Point Roberts.

The jump over to Vancouver Island didn't yield any better results. Canoe Cove in Sidney has a long waiting list, even with a \$50 list fee. Van-Isle Marina is full—the empty slips that someone saw from the road and told me about are already committed. Victoria's Inner Har-

bour is undergoing a redesign, and while the dust hasn't settled there, the word is the freed-up space will be of greater benefit to transient boaters than those looking for permanent slips.

Nanaimo is reporting similarly full docks. Stones Marina has 69 people waiting for a 45' slip, and they have

Stones Marina in Nanaimo has already expanded to the limits of its lease, and yet there are still 69 people waiting for a 45' slip.

already expanded the marina to the limits of their lease. The Nanaimo Harbour Authority is doing its best to make room for transient boats in the summer. But aside from a few small slips here and there, all the marinas I spoke with were full.

My final hope came when I received multiple tips to contact Ladysmith. The Oak Bay Marine Group recently doubled the size of its Ladysmith Marina to more than 400 slips. The marina isn't even fully functional yet and already 300 people are on the waiting list. After Ladysmith, I was left to search points further north, further south and the Gulf Islands.

Everyone I spoke with was certain that if boat owners look long enough and are flexible enough, they will find a slip. In my two-week long search for a 40' slip, I followed up on 37 leads. I found one possible slip, but it was snatched up before I could confirm its existence. 🍷