

# Journey — on the — Inside Passage

*Story and Photos by Richard Pellerin*



Tackling a challenging flight  
with many lessons to be learned



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This is truly the land of the primal alliance, where the earth meets the sea in a manner quite unlike any other place. If you love steep slopes carpeted in lush forest green with waterfalls tumbling hundreds of feet down vertical rock faces into crystal clear pools of water and occasional hanging glaciers calving off, then sooner or later you'll hanker to take on the Inside Passage between Seattle and Glacier Bay, Alaska.

These days I usually make the trip alone and live in the plane when necessary, sleeping with my head where the copilot's seat normally would be. I cover the cockpit with a 6-foot-by-9-foot tarp that stretches from the engine forward to the two bow cleats.

If I'm overnighing on an airport I put my Avon two-place inflatable, a 1.2 hp outboard, survival suit, etc, out under the wing. When I'm on a lake I'll inflate the raft and place all my water-proof gear in it.

I fly the trip using a yoke-mounted GPS and the Seattle, Vancouver, Kitimat, Ketchikan, and Juneau sectionals. If I fly low enough I avoid the Vancouver TCA and am given only minimal off-route vectoring by Victoria Terminal. Heading north I need to be squawking and talking, not blithely flying along silently with the transponder on 1200.

## NO NONSTOP

I don't plan on going nonstop from Bellingham to Ketchikan to avoid landing in Canada, or going nonstop on the reverse leg, either. I would be at serious risk of getting down to only fumes in the tanks, or worse. Besides, to do so would rob me of experiencing one of the most enjoyable aspects of the trip—meeting the Canadians.

I usually clear Canadian customs at Nanaimo for a minimum of hassles. I can get fuel at the Nanaimo airport or at the harbor. Fuel availability can change, so I consult SPA's *Water Landing Directory* for the latest info prior to beginning the trip.

I fill the tanks in Nanaimo and plan on about a two-hour trip up the inside shoreline of Vancouver Island en route to Port Hardy. Passing Campbell River, I usually take a short cut across the mountains (weather permitting) to Kelsey Bay on Johnstone Strait. This is the only time

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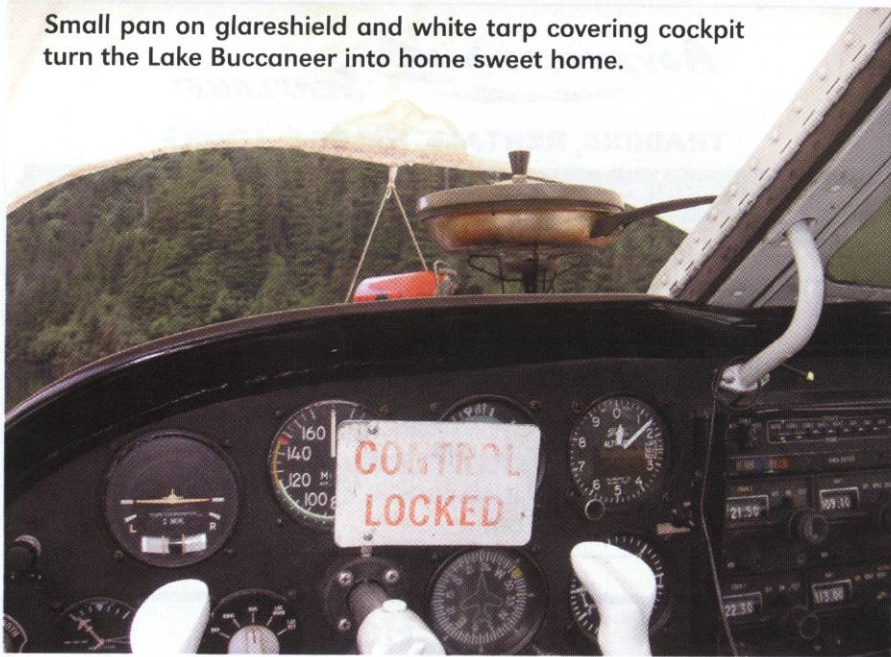
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on the entire trip that I ever leave the water beneath me. In bad weather I stay over the salt water and fly around Chatham Point.

Civilization and the coastal plains end at Campbell River. The rest of the way to Glacier Bay, the mountains drop abruptly into the sea. Beaches where I could set the plane down on anything but the lowest tides are few and far between. Only beyond the panhandle do I find level terrain to land in the event of an emergency.

Arriving at Port Hardy, I have several options. In my amphib I can land at the airport or in Hardy Bay to refuel. If it is late I stay in town. Prior to Prince Rupert the only place I can fuel en route is at Bella Bella Campbell Island airport (expensive since it has to be barged in) or the dock at Bella Bella Shearwater. If I'm heading out to Sandspit and the Queen Charlottes 80 miles offshore—a side excursion I made twice last year alone—I fill the tanks all the way up. They only sell 100 LL in 50-gallon drums, and I get to buy all of it no matter how much I take on. I don't even want to think of what the price per gallon would be.

Another option is to find Lake Namu on the Vancouver sectional. It's just short of an hour's flight up the coast from Port Hardy. I beach the plane and camp on the beach on the seaward side of the lake. Bella Bella Campbell Island airport or the dock at Shearwater are just 20 minutes away.

Ketchikan is the gateway city to

Alaska. This is the place to plan on a trip to the grocery store, and to refuel. Wrangell, Petersburg, Sitka, and Juneau also have fuel, as well as other locations in the panhandle listed in the flight supplement.

## TOMORROW'S WEATHER

I can reserve forest service cabins on remote lakes in advance, but I usually wait until the day I arrive. Tomorrow may bring weather that makes it impossible to get into the lake.

When filing a VFR flight plan I give myself a few extra days in case the weather does not allow me to return to

civilization when planned. The downside, of course, is that no one will come looking for me until I'm overdue. It's another reason to carry a 406 MHz EPIRB. The only other way to signal search and rescue is to carry a satellite cell phone. I would not rely on the ELT, or a VHF radio to try to contact airliners passing overhead.

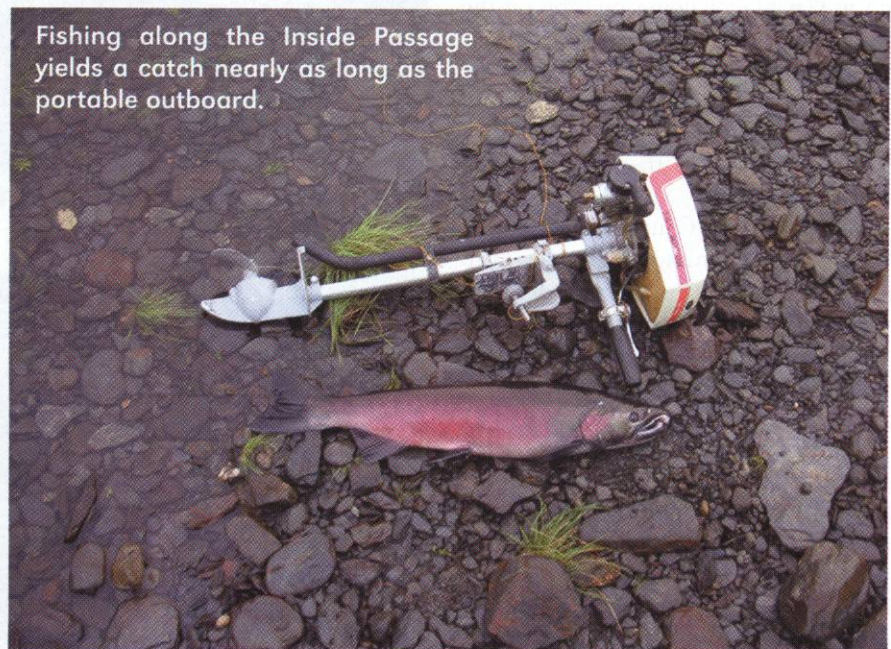
From Ketchikan I can proceed further into the panhandle all the way to Glacier Bay. Everywhere northwest of Campbell River the scenery is awesome.

Many of the lakes that I love to visit on my Inside Passage trips are situated in hostile terrain such that there is no possibility of a go-around once I've committed to landing. Finding them and getting into them in bad weather is challenging enough. But without a cloud in the sky (yes, folks, the sun does exist up there) it can be worse.

Light and shadows are the key words. Beware of steep-walled lakes that on bright sunny days have shadows cast upon them. That can get me into trouble in two ways. The first is that I'm committed to landing, and turn final into a sun that is blindingly bright and shining directly in my eyes. What to do?

If it's too rough or there's not enough room for a glassy water landing, I can quickly move laterally to pick up a nearby shoreline and flare with the shoreline as my surface reference.

The second way to get into trouble is to fly from bright sunlight into dark shadows. It can take as much as 10 to



Fishing along the Inside Passage yields a catch nearly as long as the portable outboard.

15 seconds for my eyes to adjust. Not very convenient when landing on a lake walled in by steep terrain. I avoid this by wearing dark sunglasses until I penetrate the shadows, then take them off. My eyes shouldn't have to adjust.

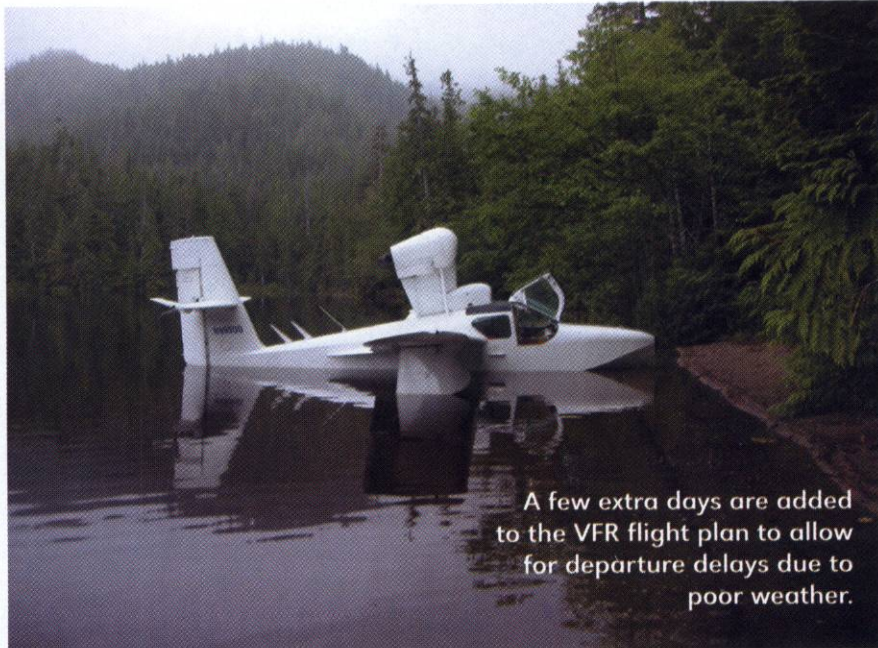
Another risky situation is departing from a tight mountain lake shrouded on all sides by steeply forested slopes. I will never forget leaving a lake that I had been fishing on to hop over to the next lake and the forest service cabin where I was staying. The lake I had been fishing was a mile long and emptied through a narrow notch into the lake with my cabin.

## Beaches where I could set the plane down on anything but the lowest tides are few and far between.

With the gull-wing door open I saw the notch clearly, and after securing things started a routine takeoff run on glassy water. Although late in the day it was broad daylight above the ridges. After rotating I looked down the lake to the notch that I had to slip through. It had completely disappeared, blending in with the green slope in the distance.

Had the surface been defined I probably would have chopped the power and spent the night right there, but I didn't have that option. Flying in this part of the world requires that I keep my head on my shoulders in tight situations and come up with a near-instantaneous and workable solution.

I knew the notch was on the right side of the departure end of the lake. I planted the starboard wing 20 feet off the steep, dark-green ridge bordering



A few extra days are added to the VFR flight plan to allow for departure delays due to poor weather.

the lake and flew out the notch while looking to my right the whole way, my heart in my mouth.

A seasonal hazard can occur in May or earlier if I choose to enter a lake, particularly a steep-walled one with hanging glaciers above it. Ice can persist well into the spring months and its presence on the water is discernible with any kind of wind on the water. The clue is that I won't see the water disrupted by a wave pattern as it normally would be.

Glassy water is a different story. It can be difficult to spot ice on the surface in glassy conditions. Ice, no matter how thin, has the potential to cut through a hull or floats like a hot knife through butter. I think twice about landing on a lake with ice, regardless of how scattered it is. I may be able to see and avoid it when landing, but the takeoff run is a different matter.

Another way to get into trouble is to take off late and then find myself flying along VFR in the dark. A good yoke-mounted GPS with moving map display is indispensable in this situation, as well as being able to call on basic instrument flying skills. On a moonless or cloudy night I will have no outside references. I stay in the center of the channel, carefully threading my way out to open sea. I fly a few miles offshore and only re-enter the inland waterways, again staying centered over the channels when nearing a destination airport.

But I never plan on VFR night flights. I could arrive at my destination

on a clear night only to find the runway hidden below a foggy inversion layer. If I'm ever forced to land on the water at night, I will try to point at lights on the shore and use a glassy water landing technique.

### DEAD HEADS

In any kind of weather I'm alert for debris on the water. When lakes are high immediately after heavy rains, I expect there to be dead heads floating well out into the middle of the lake.

Beware when water-taxiing near exiting rivers. The water off their points of origin may appear to be deceptively calm, but I may be delivered into white water, rapids, and waterfalls by the suction effect of the exiting river.

In Part II of my Inside Passage insights (March/April 2007 issue) I'll discuss how I've learned to cope with flying in low-visibility conditions. ■

*Richard Pellerin is an FAA medical examiner in Seattle. After winning a Green Beret at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in late 1968, he spent four months training with the Navy Seals in Key West, Florida. He then was posted to the Cambodian border, where he served as a camp medic for a year. He is an active climber, scuba diver, sky diver, sailor, and pilot. Visit his occupational web site at [www.fuamed.com](http://www.fuamed.com), where he says, "Just remember, if you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space."*