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Ferry News: Scanning the BC Ferries' Website ~ Patrick Brown

If you want to find out what's going on with BC Ferries, your first stop is their website (www.bcferries.com). This contains a wealth of information, including both the good news and the bad news for ferry travellers.

Service Notices

The web pages called 'Service Notices' tell you about the problems of the day. For example, take Monday, July 11, 2005. This was not a good day for BC Ferries. The *Queen of Saanich* had a broken exhaust valve and was tied up at Swartz Bay all day while a piston and cylinder liner was replaced, thus reducing the service between Swartz Bay and Tsawwassen. Another berth at Swartz Bay was occupied from July 11th to 13th by the Howe Sound Queen, normally on the Vesuvius to Crofton run. It had broken its gearbox. The Vesuvius run was taken over by the *Bowen Queen*, which had to be pulled off Route 9A, which provides extra summer capacity between Salt Spring Island and Tsawwassen. This left only one berth at Swartz Bay for all the Gulf Island services, so there were delays to all routes.

Meanwhile, up at Port McNeill, the *Quadra Queen II* missed a July 11th run to Sointula and Alert Bay because of engine problems. Not a good day for them, either.

And then there was the *Queen of Cumberland*, which had been forced to anchor off Sturdies Bay (Galiano Island) the previous evening when one of its propulsion legs failed. It was running slowly between Swartz Bay, Otter Bay, and Village Bay but could not be taken into Active Pass, where strong tidal currents prevail. The *Mayne Queen's* schedule was rearranged to serve the Swartz Bay to Sturdies Bay run for the rest of the week. It took until the morning of Sunday, July 17th to replace the leg on the *Cumberland*.

Further reading of the Service Notices revealed that the *Queen of Capilano*, sistership to the *Cumberland*, had to be robbed of one of its propulsion legs to repair the *Cumberland*. This resulted in interruptions to the service between Horseshoe Bay and Bowen Island on the afternoon of the 11th, and slower speeds for the *Capilano* thereafter.

Not On The Website

Both the *Capilano* and the *Cumberland* have four propulsion legs, one at each corner. Think of them as outboard motors which can be aimed in any direction. They can be removed or replaced through the deck of the vessel without drydocking.

When the two vessels were new, there were two spare propulsion units in case of trouble. Now it appears one ship must be robbed to keep the other going. Which begs the question—where are the spares?

Southern Islanders are often asking 'Where's the ship?' Even with the *Cumberland's* propulsion problems sorted out, there are long delays by evening time. Heavy loads are causing the schedule to grind down. Loading two overhead ramps takes time and by 6:30pm each night there is often an hour wait at Swartz Bay. This is especially gruelling for commuters stuck in a hot parking lot (when they could have been elsewhere doing chores). It is hard to take when one is repeatedly being robbed of precious summer evenings at home. Read on for some help.

Will I Have to Wait for My Ferry?

A new and fascinating feature of the BC Ferries website is enhanced information about conditions at the major terminals. Clicking on 'Sailing Details' for webcam images of the waiting lanes, updated every 60 seconds, will give you some idea of how many vehicles are waiting for the next ferry. Click on the small pictures to get bigger, more detailed pictures. To the right of the images are numbers indicating how many ferries you would have to wait for if you were there now (for both normal unreserved vehicles and overheights). Zero indicates you would get on the next ferry; 1 means you would get on the one after that.

For each of the next few sailings, you can find out the 'total deck space committed' which includes tickets already sold and reservations made. Graphs show commitments for the main deck (where the vehicle mixture includes trucks) and the upper deck (usually limited to vehicles under 7 feet in height).

There are also details on what time the ferries actually depart, so you can check on that too—all in all, the website now tells you everything that BC Ferries knows, so you can plan your travel!

Press Releases

A July 7 press release (also on the website) revealed the results of the investigation of the grounding of the *Queen of Oak Bay* at Horseshoe Bay on June 30. It turned out that a cotter pin had been left off an essential bolt in the linkage between the control system and the engine. Three weeks after the completion of an extensive refit, the nut vibrated loose from the bolt and the bolt fell off. (This is something like disconnecting

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the gas pedal from the engine on your car.) Safety devices shut down the engines, leaving the skipper with no power and no brakes.

BC Ferries President David Hahn assured the public that the equivalent linkage had now been inspected on all the other vessels in the fleet. There was no word, however, on whether the linkage on the *Oak Bay* had been inspected after the refit.

The Fuel Surcharge

BC Ferries had asked for a surcharge on ferry fares to cover the ever-increasing price of fuel, and had made application to the BC Ferry Commissioner (www.bcferrycommissioner.com).

According to a BC Ferries press release (also on the website), the Commissioner granted an increase of about half of what was requested, saying that the corporation should absorb part of the increased cost of fuel as a normal cost of business. The authorized increases will therefore be 4% on the main routes, and 6% on other routes. They take effect on July 25, unless circumstances change, and will run until March 31, 2008, unless the price of fuel goes down enough so that the surcharge is no longer needed.

BC Ferries had originally proposed to defer the annual fare increase, normally effective in November 2005. It now appears that there will be no deferral. ☞

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