

Live-aboards on Gorge stay free but ruffle feathers



Mike has been living on his boat moored in the Gorge for the past few months. His cat Monkey lives with him.

Roszan Holmen/News staff

By [Roszan Holmen - Victoria News](#)

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Monkey the cat scans the water for seals with the focused attention of a hunter.

Her owner, Mike, keeps a long-handled net nearby, just in case Monkey ends up in the Gorge Waterway.

So far, it's never happened.

“When she lived at my house, she used to look at raccoons right through the sliding French doors,” he said. “She has no fear.”

About eight months ago, Mike, who didn’t give his last name, traded in his house for a 43-foot boat, a small motorboat to get to shore, and an electric bicycle to run errands in town.

“I don’t need a four-bedroom house with a half-acre lawn to mow,” he said. Monkey is now his sole living companion aboard Skipjack, anchored past the Selkirk trestle bridge.

At first Mike tried living at the marina below Wharf Street, then at Westbay Marina, but said he didn’t like the politics and found the moorage rates “retarded.”

Life on the Gorge without rent, or the associated amenities, suits him just fine.

“I can do without,” said Mike, who grew up in View Royal. “You look after yourself.”

Though off the grid, he’s well set up with a generator to run a small kitchen, fireplace and flat-screen T.V. in his cluttered, but cosy space. He fills up a tank of water in town for his sink, shower and toilet.

His life on the Gorge doesn’t sit well with everybody, however.

Semi-permanent boats like Mike’s anchored by Banfield Park in Vic West have attracted a lot of negative attention recently at the local and federal level.

Transport Canada investigated complaints that the boats present a navigational hazard, but found they posed no problem.

The conflict is not unique to the Gorge Waterway. All up the B.C. Coast, there is a jurisdictional battle over what level of government is responsible for abandoned, derelict or live-aboard boats that anchor in sheltered waters and stay there.

Sooke Mayor Janet Evans is lobbying to bring the issue to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities. In Oak Bay, police suspected transients on live-aboards as the source of a number of thefts at the nearby marina.

Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca MP Keith Martin recently tabled a motion in the House of Commons. “This is a problem that has been going on for years and it’s getting worse,” he said. “You just can’t plunk your boat wherever you want to.”

Dumped boats leach toxins and obstruct other watercraft, he explained.

“I took a rowboat up the Gorge and saw these boats ... it’s a hazard.”

Martin’s motion, however, specifically addresses abandoned boats.

When people live aboard the boats, the issue becomes more complicated.

In the Gorge, most of the boats have owners who visit. Four people live full-time on the water.

Mike disregards the concerns of the politicians. The moored boats cause less pollution than the harbour

ferries driving back and forth, and less than run off from the roads, he said. The boats do not interfere with marked navigation channels, he added.

Sitting on his boat's transom one evening in July, Mike fishes a Pacific Pilsner from his backpack.

"As you look at the sunset – it's perfect," he said. This is his life most evenings, listening to the radio and enjoying the view.

"I've done lots of things in my life that put me in a different category than other people," he said, listing a crazy party past and three divorces. Life on the Gorge is good, he said. "If I'm sick of it in five years, I'll move back on land – if I get bored – but I'm not sure I will."

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For the record

Vancouver has finally been given jurisdiction to limit boat moorage in False Creek after fighting a legal battle for more than a decade. The City of Victoria, however, is unlikely to press the issue anytime soon.

"Council has really been focusing on its top seven priorities," Mayor Dean Fortin said. The boats don't make the list, he noted. "You have to stay focused."

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