

Early Explorers of the Sunshine Coast

The mainland coast of British Columbia, from latitude 49° N (the Canada - U.S.A. border) to 54°40' N, was the last navigable continental coastline of the globe to be thoroughly explored. It was finally charted in the summers of 1791, 1792, when three maritime expeditions — each hoping to find the elusive northwest passage from Europe to the riches of the Orient — brought the first European explorers to the northwest coast of America.

All three expeditions, two from Spain and one from England, explored the waters off the Sunshine Coast — their footprints are the names they gave to many of the important landmarks in our area.



José María Narváez
(ca. 1768-1840)

José María Narváez—1791. Narváez of Spain, sailing from a small naval base at Nootka on the west coast of Vancouver Island, led the first European excursion into the central part of what the Spanish called El Gran Canal de Nuestra Señora del Rosario la Marinera, now known as Georgia Strait. This is the body of water in front of you as you look across to Vancouver Island from the Davis Bay wharf.

Narváez sailed as far north as Texada Island during a three week period in July of 1791. He has the honour of being the first European to cruise along the Sunshine Coast, on July 10-12, 1791. He was also the first to set foot on solid ground here after anchoring off Mission Point near the mouth of Chapman Creek (he named it Rio de la Aguada — River of the Watering Place) to replenish his fresh water barrels at the banks of the river.

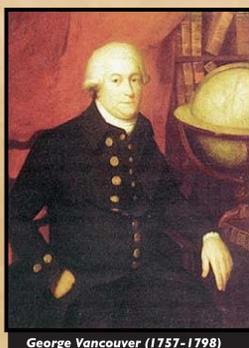
See the Narváez heritage sign south of here at Mission Point to learn more about the accomplishments of this courageous but largely forgotten explorer.

Capt. George Vancouver—1792. English explorer George Vancouver is best known for his exploration and meticulous survey of the northwest coast of North America from northern California all the way to Cook Inlet, Alaska in 1792, 1793, and 1794. He established once and for all that there is no northwest passage between latitudes 39° N and 61° N.

In June of 1792, when Vancouver was 34 years old, his ships Discovery and Chatham emerged from Juan de Fuca Strait and anchored in Birch Bay, just south of the 49th parallel. It had taken the 145-man expedition over 14 months to get there from England. It was from this anchorage that Vancouver and a crew of 30 left on a memorable 11-day survey of the southwestern coast of British Columbia using two small longboats.

Vancouver first entered the waters off the Sunshine Coast in the afternoon of June 15, 1792 and he and his crew camped for the night near Gibsons harbour. On June 16, Vancouver sailed along the coast between Gibsons and Pender Harbour and had this to say about the land in the area of Sechart:

This part of the coast is of a moderate height for some distance inland, and it frequently jets out into low sandy projecting points. The country in general produces forest trees in great abundance, of some variety and magnitude; the pine is the most common, and the woods are little encumbered with bushes or trees of inferior growth.



George Vancouver (1757-1798)

Vancouver was the first to chart in detail Howe Sound, Jervis Inlet, and Burrard Inlet — Narváez had not entered these important waterways during his cursory survey the previous year.

Vancouver's exacting survey of the entire northwest coast was ultimately completed in 1794 and his two ships returned safely to England in September 1795. However, by this time Vancouver was in ill health and he died less than three years later, at age 40, on May 12, 1798.

Dionisio Alcalá Galiano & Cayetano Valdés—1792. The Spaniards Galiano and Valdés, officers in the Alejandro Malaspina scientific expedition, were ordered to continue exploring the area Narváez had visited the previous year. They left Nootka in May of 1792 bound for Georgia Strait in two new 46-foot schooners built in Mexico — Sutil and Mexicana — and returned four months later, becoming the first explorers to circumnavigate Vancouver Island in the process.

In what must have been quite a surprise, just as Galiano and Valdés entered Georgia Strait, they discovered George Vancouver's two ships anchored in Birch Bay just south of the 49th parallel. The ships had arrived there only a few days earlier following a long voyage from England. Then, on June 21, it was Vancouver's turn to be surprised. Returning from his survey of the Sunshine Coast in two longboats, he caught a glimpse of the Spanish ships off Point Grey (the present day site of the University of British Columbia), then rowed directly to them for a cordial morning rendezvous where the commanders openly discussed their mutual discoveries.

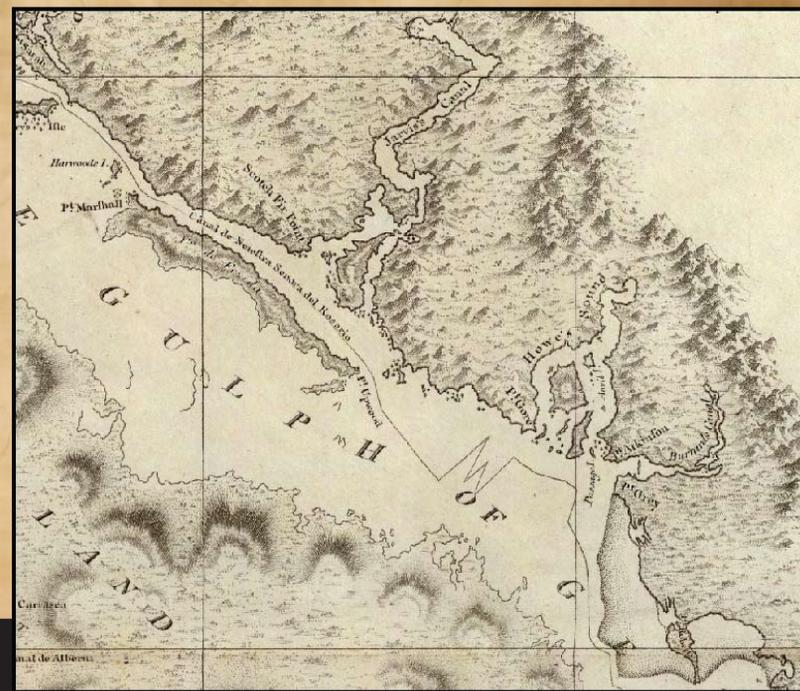


Dionisio Alcalá Galiano (1760-1805)

Because Vancouver shared with Galiano and Valdés the chart he had made of the area around the Sunshine Coast, including Howe Sound and Jervis Inlet, the Spaniards did no further exploration of the area, choosing instead to explore the east coast of Vancouver Island. It would be almost 70 years before the Sunshine Coast was surveyed again.



Cayetano Valdés (1767-1835)



Detail of George Vancouver's chart showing the coastline of the southwest mainland coast of British Columbia. This chart was the first to show the extent of Howe Sound, Jervis Inlet, and Burrard Inlet (the site of the city of Vancouver).