



Canada

GEOGRAPHY

Cruising to School

On the Canadian side of the Strait of Georgia that runs between British Columbia's Vancouver Island and the American state of Washington lie a group of islands known as the Gulf Islands. Life here involves some adjustments, as this reading explains.

The *Mistaya*, drenched in the golden rays of early morning, bobs gently at the wharf. The music of wind chimes carries on the salty breeze from a sailboat riding at anchor. A seal noses in and out of the barnacle-encrusted pilings. The pungent [strong] scent of low tide wafts across the quiet harbor scene. It is through this rich sensory world, in British Columbia's scenic Gulf Islands, that *Mistaya*—a water taxi that serves as a school “bus”—will soon glide: past ferries and fishing boats, instead of harried commuters; beneath flights of geese, instead of traffic lights; between craggy islets and through deep blue narrows, instead of clogged city streets.

Cruising to school by boat through an island paradise may *sound* romantic: after all, many Canadians save up for years to sail these enchanting waters. But don't try to tell that to Sarah Brooks at 7:15 a.m. When I first saw her last spring, she was trudging down the dock toward *Mistaya*, a half-awake tenth grader who has to get up at 5:30 to make the connection. First, she catches a school bus near her home at the far north end of Galiano Island. But Galiano has no high school, so the bus drops her off 45 minutes later on the island's south end, where she boards *Mistaya* for the 30-minute ride to Ganges, on larger Salt Spring Island. With an intermediate stop, the afternoon boat ride home takes almost twice as long. In mid-winter, Sarah barely gets home by dark. “Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it,” she sighs. . . .

Nearly 80 teenagers from the four “outer” Gulf Islands ride the boat to school every day, and the number increases each year. . . . The daily boat ride can be exciting, especially for those, like Sara Quist of Galiano, who only have to make the 10-minute hop to Mayne Island [near Galiano Island] for junior high school. “It's fun,” she says, “especially going fast over the big ferry waves in Active Pass.” Her enthusiasm was not dampened by the time she missed the school bus, and then the water taxi, on the day of mid-term exams. The boat had to be called back later for a solo run, and Sara had to pay \$75 out of her own pocket.

But, for high schoolers who make the much longer trip to Salt Spring Island, the novelty eventually wears thin. And there are real disadvantages. Because of the boat schedule, “you can't take part in extra-curricular activities after school,” says Sarah Brooks. I'd like to be on the volleyball team and in drama, but I can't unless I board on Salt Spring Island.” . . .

Around 3:30 p.m., to the accompaniment of rap music, *Mistaya* pulls in at Galiano Island, and the last students disembark. Jack Hughes [the boat's

owner and captain] switches off the blaring tape deck in obvious relief, and swings his bow towards Ganges. It's been a long day for him, too, but he doesn't seem tired. "I've been doing this for years," he says, "and I still love seeing the sunrises and nature in all its glory." . . . There is always something interesting to see out on the water, and most adults think the Gulf Islands students are unusually lucky.

But back at the Galiano Island pier, the kids are just getting onto their school bus. They've been under way for almost an hour, and they're not home yet.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why do students living on the Gulf Islands have to commute to school by boat?

2. Do the high school students or the junior high school students have a shorter commute time to school? Explain why.

3. How does the environment of the Gulf Islands affect students' school experiences?

4. What choice do students have for going to school other than commuting by boat?

Activity

Imagine that you are a commuter on the *Mistaya*. Write a letter to a friend in the United States describing the physical geography of your commute, including landforms, animal life, and weather.