

José María Narváez

First European Explorer of the Sunshine Coast

For three memorable weeks in July 1791, at the age of only 23, José María Narváez (ca. 1768 - 1840) of the Royal Armada of Spain 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. Narváez captained the Santa Saturnina, a 33-foot schooner, and was accompanied by a smaller longboat. The mostly Mexican crew numbered about thirty-two hands.

The commander of this historic expedition was Lieutenant Francisco Eliza; however, he remained behind in Discovery Bay (on the southern coast of Juan de Fuca Strait) on the flagship San Carlos while Narváez made his important discoveries.



José María Narváez
(ca. 1768-1840)

Although not as well known as the three distinguished explorers who arrived one year later (George Vancouver, Dionisio Alcalá Galiano, and Cayetano Valdés), Narváez has the honour of being the first European to visit the site of the present day city of Vancouver where he explored English Bay (though not the inner reaches of Burrard Inlet).

Narváez was also the first European to cruise along the Sunshine Coast, on July 10-12, 1791. In fact, he was the first to set foot on solid ground here — not far from where you are now standing — after anchoring off Mission Point near the mouth of Chapman Creek (he named it Rio de la Aguada — River of the Watering Place) so that he could replenish his fresh water barrels at the banks of the river. This is the first recorded landing of an explorer on the southwestern mainland coast of what is now British Columbia.

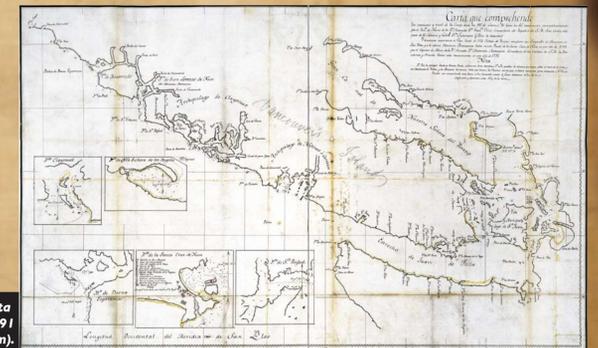
The results of Narváez' brief survey were incorporated into a manuscript chart prepared by the expedition's cartographer later the same year. This chart also shows southern Vancouver Island, Juan de Fuca Strait, and the San Juan Islands. The chart is usually referred to as the Carta que comprehende from the first three words of its rather lengthy title. It was this chart which mortified Capt. George Vancouver (his word) when it was shown to him the next summer — by Galiano and Valdés, who were continuing exploration of the area first sighted by Narváez — after he had arrived to survey what he expected to be unexplored territory. Visit the heritage sign on the Davis Bay wharf to learn more about Vancouver, Galiano, and Valdés.

Narváez' chart shows anchorages indicated by small anchor symbols near Chapman Creek (Rio de la Aguada) as well as off the western shore of Thormanby Island (Isla de San Ignacio). Most of the names given by Narváez to landmarks in Georgia Strait are no longer used because of overwhelming British influence later on. However, three important islands still bear their original names: Texada, Lasqueti, and Ballenas.

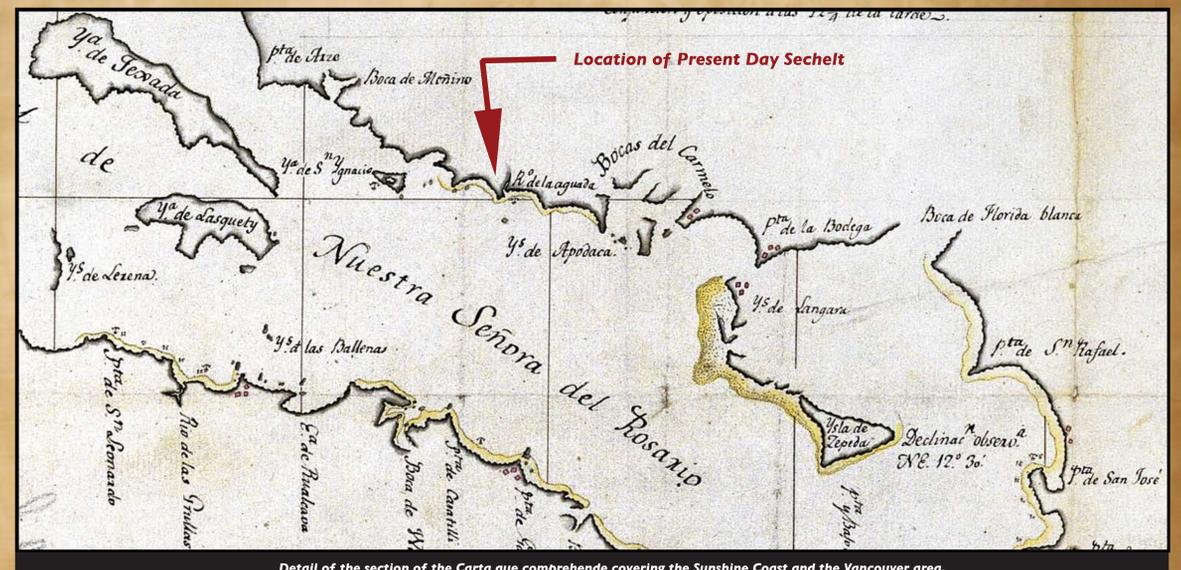
Narváez had a long and distinguished career in the Spanish navy. He worked out of the naval station in San Blas, Mexico and retired as a junior captain in 1831, almost 40 years after his historical sail around Georgia Strait. He died in Guadalajara in 1840 at age 72.



Narváez' ship Santa Saturnina and longboat shown off the Sunshine Coast. Courtesy of artist Steve Mayo.



A reduced image of the entire Carta que comprehende which was drawn in 1791 (the actual chart measures 103.5 cm x 63 cm).



Detail of the section of the Carta que comprehende covering the Sunshine Coast and the Vancouver area.