

A Case Study

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Twelve foot seas and 25 knot plus winds... are we there yet? Are we having fun yet?

There was a boat left on the Baja side of the Sea of Cortez in a small three boat cove during the November cruise and it needed to be retrieved. The first attempted crossing back to San Carlos had resulted in the sail tearing and becoming useless while the motor ceased functioning. The original crew had rounded up a fresh motor and mains'l to carry from San Carlos back to the boat. Sailors "Y" and "Z" (original crew) had asked assistance from other club members "A" and "B" to sail back across and deliver them to their boat. In turn A and B had recruited "C" to be a spare crew to make the watches a little easier. All had arrived in San Carlos ready for some new adventure.



When you looked skyward you saw the Mare's Tail clouds that tend to mean you are in for a blow. Even so the next day the happy campers went to acquire some sea legs and day sailed out about two miles from the Bahia in rough conditions to take a vote on going or not on that day. The consensus reached was that it would be better to wait and see what tomorrow would bring. Getting a good weather report was going to be helpful in assessing the next day's decision process so the wait was put to good use. There had been a Catalina 34 observed blasting its way back into the Bahia from the Northwest with a handkerchief for a headsail. That was a very convincing argument for waiting as well.

The next morning the sailors gathered for a weather check. It was found that the prediction was for the seas to be abating and the winds lessening later in the day. So, with conditions looking to be improving and a reportedly two day window of opportunity approaching it was decided that the group should go. The next issue was – exactly when would be the best time to start.

"Let's see here, four knots average speed, 83 nautical miles and two hour watches... uh, 10:00 sounds about right."

At the appointed time, having stowed victuals (5 cases of beer, a bottle of Bailey's and so forth), of the group sailed. While the conditions were pretty much the same as the previous day, you can have a lot of confidence if you believe that the current uncomfortable conditions are temporary. In fact, the crew felt good about going out in anticipation of better seas ahead. All the while you are enduring a very bumpy ride you can be telling yourself it's the right thing to do. Keep in mind, too, that the conditions that led to the first boat being stranded on the opposite shore was in similar conditions and this felt like an act of completion.

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About four or five miles out sailor Z was the first to fall victim to mal'd'mer and was to spend the rest of the journey on the cabin sole trying to maintain a state of rest. The wind was freshening continuously during the day and the seas built from the eight footers near shore to ten to twelve feet rolling under the keel before nightfall. These waves were all piss and vinegar with many foaming tops and spraying water and salt everywhere. The wind often clocked sustained speeds of 26 to 28 knots and often the lower 22 to 25 knot winds saw gusts of 30 knots on the instruments. It was sailor B who next had a short bout of cookie tossing and went below to self medicate and take a short nap. The nap seemed to help because this sailor came back on deck for a watch a short time later to soldier on.

Please insert here that buckets of cold water were dousing the occupants of the cockpit on watch at semi-regular intervals. By the time the boat was 20 miles off shore everyone was cold and very wet – there is a reason for the expression "dampened spirits" in the vocabulary and it would apply to this group in varying degrees. The only "dry" one was sailor Z on the cabin floor, although, to be sure, everyone coming below dripped a little water on him. Despite this sense of spirit everyone had their game face on and was willingly continuing with the trip.

During the last of the day the GPS unit being used was getting fluky. Another unit was produced and since it was new, no one knew its

operation without the instruction book. Sailor A tried reading it from the safety of the cabin but soon started sensing a queasiness settling in and handed the booklet to sailor C in the cockpit to see what could be learned. Sailor C wearing glasses now so full of salt as to be unable to see anything as distinct as letters or words gave up after about five minutes. From the cabin sole sailor Z said he had another GPS and somehow managed to produce it before returning to a coma-like state. The seas were very large and the wind screaming.

As sundown approached around 17:30 there was a temporary rumor that seized on the earlier forecast that said that perhaps conditions would ease after the sun went down. It was soon proven false and never discussed again.

The temperature fell with the sun and everyone was colder and wetter for it. After a short rest it was time for sailor C to take a watch again and he decided to put on his full foul weather suit before going up. This was complicated because he had to crawl over sailor Z to get to the gear he needed and then spend several minutes in the dark of the v-berth first finding his flashlight and then his gear. By the time he had gathered everything together he felt the urge to respond to the confusion of his inner ear and he barely made it to the companionway before asking sailor B to move her feet so that he could make a deposit on the cockpit floor. Once he took care of business sailor C washed the floor and donned his outfit to go out on his watch. While not fully functional for about a half an hour he at least felt drier.

Sailor Y, happy fellow that he has the good fortune to be, never lost his lunch but from time to time was seen staring hard at the horizon.

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There had been a moon for much of the night but when it left the scene around 02:00 the night was very dark. There was no more horizon and the distinction between sea and sky disappeared. For the entire trip the boat's speed had maintained a steady 5.5 to 6.3 knots on the meter while the GPS said terrifying things about the Velocity Made Good (VMG). As most sailors know, in stormy conditions you want to keep the boat speed in a controllable range and there are several methods to accomplish this.

As it was the boat was under single reefed main alone and other than trailing a drogue not much more could be done under the circumstances. The boat raced along as if it had a single digit PHRF rating while the watch strained to see if there was anything out there to be run into.

The ETA was turned to hogwash shortly after departure but this became very clear in the dark as the boat arrived just off the Baja shore a little after 02:30. There is an island to contend with there and the crew discussed the options for waiting off shore until sun rise. Several theories were discussed on which tacks and approaches to take with a clear discussion of the hazards of each possibility. A decision was made and the watch changed to execute the decision. Back out to sea the boat went.

By now the boat was easier in motion but only slightly. The wind was dropping to around 20 knots and the seas were a little less in the lee of the Baja peninsula. That is not to say that it seemed that way but rather to say the crew was more used to it. The "On" watch was contemplating what a fast forward button would be worth at this point.

The math was rehashed a few times to be certain that the earliest moment to tack back was achieved in minds numbed by the journey. When the moment arrived the boat was turned and the cove was perfectly in line awaiting the crew with its reefs visible a short time later. The crew had seen some degree of tired, cold, wet, queasy, hungry and, perhaps, anxiety but was in good spirits as the boat came to rest against its anchor rode at around 06:00.



Now, you may take this tale as one of things gone wrong. That is, decisions made and regretted but that would not be the case. Certainly there were circumstances encountered here that were somewhat difficult to deal with, but overall the boat arrived safely with good decisions on operating along the way. The sick crewmen dealt with their issues and didn't require others to come to their aid in any extraordinary or continuous way. The boat was controlled to the edge of good sense and arrived in good condition at the end of the sail.

While one may find fault with the decision to leave at the time they did, it would not be the case that all of the crew would not have done the same thing again. Consider the math; at the estimated 4 knots to cover the 83 miles it would have put the boat at the anchorage around sun up (20.75 hours) with lots of time to get organized and set up the boats for the return. The average speed turned out to be closer to 5.5 knots and that put the boat there in the darkest hours. It rarely works out that you will have the fastest time and more often happens that you travel at slower than your estimate... it just didn't happen that way this time. More over, the crew was to be split into the two boats for the return trip so it was better for conditions to be eased for the return.

The food issue was bypassed for the most part because no one (except sailor A) was really looking for anything to eat. Had the voyage been longer perhaps that might have changed. In any case, there was an ample supply of power bars, fruit and such to be without concern for any potential food shortage.

Having set a watch schedule at the outset it was quickly confused by having a crewman down almost immediately. The way this worked out was fine for a couple of reasons. Most of the time there were at least two people in the cockpit and up to three resting below. This meant that even if one active crew was less than great another was available to act. To be sure there were some exciting moments but everyone (with one exception) was ready to act if only for short periods on watch. It would be conjectured that even the downed crewman would have acted for self preservation had the need arisen. Additionally, the possibility of having a discussion about options put the best ideas in perspective at all times. When one is muddled by lack of sleep or queasiness having a chat helps to correct any bad perceptions.

Doubtless it is possible to have another opinion about this voyage but at the end of the considerations it should be remembered that the boat was built to take care of its occupants and the crew will tend to make good decisions in its own best interest.

See you all at the dock ready for the next adventure.

