

What Really Happens on a Passage

by Don Dodds

Has anybody out there ever read a story or an article about a passage? Remember how it sounded adventuresome? Remember how all they talked about was the weather, navigation and fixing broken equipment? Ever consider that strange? I didn't either until I was on one, then I realized why. That's all there is to talk about on a passage. It is a lot like taking a bus ride from LA to Boston except you can't get off in St Louis and the scenery never changes.

Every morning when you get up it's the same old seascape. Night and day all one can see is bumpy water. It's boring. More accurately, a passage is long periods of boredom punctuated with short bursts of extremely inconvenient activity. Boredom is difficult to write about and not very entertaining to read so, the reader misses the boredom. If the real truth about passages were known, few people would try one. Following is the truth about passages.

The Beginning

The trip began in London on October 1. Not London, England but London, Kiribati on Kiritimati Island where under the mid-morning sun two yachts, the "Bird of Time" and "Leisurely Leo", were making the last preparations before getting underway to head north to Hawaii.

As is often the case, both boats were impaired due to damage sustained on their previous passages. The Leisurely Leo was using their jib halyard as a forestay because of a roller furling failure, and the "Bird of Time" had a questionable autopilot. We, aboard the "Bird", had just finished repairing and field calibrating the autopilot the day before. I hate going to sea with the boat in less than prime condition, but sailing in half-patched ships, at least in the remote

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areas of the Pacific, is part of the cruising way of life.

The thought of the autopilot failing again nagged unpleasantly at the fringes of both Debby's and my minds. For if it failed and we had to hand steer, there would be little time for rest as we had to cross the equatorial current on our way north. This current can drag a boat to the west as much as fifty miles per day. All we had to do was lose roughly a hundred miles to the west and we would have to fight our way against both wind and current to Hawaii. Certainly not life threatening but exhausting and we both preferred a fast, pleasant, uneventful trip to Honolulu.

Leisurely Leo got underway first and headed north. They left the Bird turning in large circles in the lee of the island as we cleaned and stowed our anchors. Stowing the anchors and rodes without cleaning the brown slime that grows so quickly in the tropics adds a nautical but not too pleasant aroma to the anchor locker. We worked for almost an hour scrubbing the nylon line and chain before we eventually brought the boat around beam on to the 25 knot east wind and laid a course to follow Leisurely Leo now some 6 miles away to the north.

It would take about an hour to get from behind the island into the full force of the trades and the chop of the two-knot westbound equatorial current rushing around the northwest corner of the island. We were hand steering to conserve strain on the questionable autopilot and like Leisurely Leo; we were running under double-reefed main and staysail. When we rounded the shoal on the northwest end of the island, we set a course hard on the wind of 45 degrees (NE). Hawaii was actually a little west of us, but when dealing with the above-mentioned current it is prudent to head east to go west. A few turns on the winch trimmed the sails in flat and we charged through the prevailing noserlies. Somehow or other, no matter where we sail, we always seem to have the wind on the nose.

We stood one-hour tricks at the wheel until sunset, which helped to pass the time and take some of the bite out of the short 10-foot seas, at least for the helmsperson. The off-watch person sat silently, lost in their own thoughts, watching the atoll drop from view off the starboard stern quarter. Both sets of eyes instinctively clung to that last solid element in our otherwise fluid surroundings. Unfortunately, since it was a low-lying atoll it was gone within a couple of hours. Sooner if we had not known where to look and with extreme,

almost desperate concentration pick out its shadowy form along the gray blue horizon. Both of us felt but neither of us spoke of its loss, we simply turned our attention to watching Leisurely Leo, the only other relief in the otherwise constantly changing always the same seascape. We watched our progress as we slowly gained and then passed the crippled Leisurely Leo.

By sundown, our friends were on the horizon south and west of us. It was sort of a moot point as to whether they would drop below the horizon before the gathering darkness would hide them from our view. In any case, we would be alone on the sea again. As we prepared for the evening watches the seas calmed a bit and we decided to put up the small jib, no need to tarry in an empty sea. The rest of the preparations consisted of setting out buckets in strategic locations, engaging the autopilot and reporting into the ham radio net. Seasickness is a reality with us for at least three days. The length and severity vary from trip to trip but you could always count on filling a bucket or two sometime during those first few days.

Checking into the net was always a bright spot. The steady, friendly voices on the ham net are always reassuring. The crisp, professional way they handle each of the calls gives one a sense that all is right, that somewhere someone has control. A very comforting feeling when you are in a position where you have a minimum of control over your destiny.

The autopilot on the other hand was approach with trepidation. It simply sat there in the gather darkness shrouded in our anxiety, waiting, waiting to be turned on. Eventually the moment of truth could be delayed no longer, the circuit breaker was turned on, the wheel was engaged, the course was dialed in, the switch was ready to be pushed on. Everything came down to one push of a button--it would work or it wouldn't. The button was pushed, the wheel spun and the motor hummed silently below, the little black box had taken hold. Two sets of eyes turned from the wheel to meet and exchange a slight smile, the only outward sign of the relief both silently felt. Unspoken was the knowledge that it had to continue working for ten days. It was nine o'clock local time and Debby went below with her bucket, I settled down for my six-hour evening watch and the autopilot demonstrated it's continued presence by small, rhythmic adjustments of the wheel.

We were on a starboard tack, which allowed me to assume my favorite position. I garnered most of the cockpit cushions and built myself a nest on the

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forward cockpit settee. With the head cushion propped up on the cockpit coaming and my feet locked against the port settee, I could alternately watch the stars over head, catch short naps, or drop my hand to the auto pilot control if the motion of the boat or sails demanded a course change. Once in while, I would rouse myself from this snug position for a look around. I tried to scan the horizon every 15 to 20 minutes, which is contrary to getting a satisfactory nap but is necessary to answer the nagging responsibility of keeping the ship from being run down by a larger vessel. Thus passed the first three hours of my evening watch, as it would for the next ten days, neither asleep or awake but in that twilight state where time drags.

By midnight I usually have had all I can take of the now hard cockpit cushions, and go below to grab a diet cola and a snack. The combination of sugar and caffeine kept me on my feet for the remaining three hours of my watch. Often I would pace around the cockpit holding on to the end of the boom or the sun awning frame for additional support taking the motion of the sea with my legs.

Moving aboard a small boat at sea requires a step backward in the evolutionary process. One no longer walks in a normal manner, instead they use both arms and legs and sort of swing from handhold to handhold like a chimpanzee. The extra effort of the movement helps to keep me warm, as the night on its march toward the coming dawn gets cooler.

But the real brunt of the cold night had to be taken by Debby who relieved me at three in the morning. The brief wink of a cabin light signaled that she was again among the living, trying to assemble the necessary equipment to appear on deck. Within minutes, she was in the companionway. We exchanged greetings and I mumbled a brief status report before I slipped below into the already warm bunk. One good thing about a six-hour watch is that sleep is not long in coming once you get below.

The next morning even as consciousness returned, my senses instinctively searched for assurance that all systems were still functioning. Before my eyes opened, my ears were already feeding me information on the boat's condition. The rush of the water by the hull tells me we were making good time thru moderate conditions, but I heard no hum from the autopilot. I rose up on one elbow in the bunk peered up the companion way and into the cockpit. The wheel was still making its short reassuring motions.

Then with less urgency I struggled out of the bunk and poked my head out of the companionway for a quick look around. The suns low, diagonal rays just losing their early morning reddish hue were beginning to warm the air. Debby sat quietly watching the horizon looking tired. Bits of her nighttime armour against the cold were strewn about the cockpit. The seas had lengthened out a bit and the motion of the boat was easier even though we were still pushing hard on the wind. We exchanged a short greeting. I went back below for an instant breakfast before returning to relieve Debby and pick up my share of the daily routine of watch keeping.

The next two days passed with no change in course and only occasional adjustments to the sails as the wind changed force and direction. The process of reefing and shaking out a reef was by now almost automatic for both of us. Even the occasional headsail change had been optimized by adding a large pendant to the foot of the small jib. This pendant allowed the small jib to be hanked on without removing the regular jib. Thus, headsail change was reduced to hanking on or removal and stowage of the small jib.

You would think that these small activities would be a welcome change from the day's endless tedium, but not so. The break is somehow annoying. Temporarily pulling you out of the stupor, you have laboriously built around yourself as protection against the environment. I imagine it's a little like waking up a hibernating bear--from the bear's point of view.

Reaching the Counter Current

The next milestone of note was making it to the counter current, about latitude 5 degrees north. Midway through the third day we passed through the 200 foot wide zone of slightly disturbed water that marks the boundary of the currents and instantly showed improved progress as the current was now assisting us east and north.

You can imagine how excited we were to see the ruffled water; we talked about it afterwards for hours, reliving each detail of the emotional experience. The velocity of the remaining currents we had to cross dropped to about twenty miles a day, first east for a few degrees of latitude then turning back to the west again. This lowered the anxiety level for if the auto pilot failed now we could at least hope to for a break in the hand steering once in a while without losing too much easting.

Day 3 also marked the recovery from seasickness as well and the crew

stomachs were returning to normal. This, however, did not make eating a pleasure, eating aboard a small boat at sea is always more a necessity than a pleasure. It is always risky to get more resources than hands. Pick up your bread and a cup and your plate slides off. You can't set down your cup to rescue your plate so the bread goes under your arm or between your knees.

Sure, you can talk about fiddles, but serving anything with a viscosity less than three-day-old concrete on a plate is asking for a spill. The most effective dinning procedure was to put the food in a deep bowl, get a spoon and the bowl within 2 inches of the chin, brace your back against a bulkhead, a leg against the mast, and shovel it in as quickly as the mouth and throat can process it. We always seem to lose about five pounds a week on passages. Someone with a little enterprise could make a small fortune offering weight loss cruises.

The excitement of the counter current soon wears off and we again returned to our customary wave watching punctuated by the occasional new fix on the Sat Nav. A big event because it is physical evidence of making progress. Progress at sea is your most important product. Anyone who tells you that cruisers do not need performance in a sailboat is crazy. In fact, not only crazy but also dangerous. To my mind, they should be done away with or at least locked up. In any case, we returned to wave watching.

I don't wish to imply that wave watching is the only thing one can do at sea; on the contrary, you can watch clouds as well. A completely new field because it requires that you change the direction of gazing. This may sound complicated but its not, one simply looks slightly up from the normal wave watching position. Try it on your next passage; you'll like it. Cloud watching becomes more interesting as we approach the inter tropical convergence zone (ITC), or the Doldrums. The numerous small white clumps of cumulus clouds of the trades slowly change to large towering thunderheads and extensive banks of thick, dark clouds. We watched these changes on the forward horizon advance slowly until we were surround, by the new cloud form.

Into the Doldrums

By the evening of the fourth day, we had entered the ITC zone and were dodging these high, bellowing thunderheads, and their accompanying wind and rainsqualls. The wind was now sporadic and out of the south. The doldrums were nothing like the calm glassy sea I had read so much about, instead they consisted of few hours of 25 knots or greater winds followed by 12 to 18 hours of

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dead calm. Calm winds but not calm seas, the short bursts of heavy wind kept the seas running at six feet or greater.

The heavy seas meant that flying any light air sails during the calm winds was impossible because the motion of the boat rolled the air out of the sails. Similar to being passed by a powerboat on a calm day except the motion was more violent and continuous. The belly of the sail would fill one way and then slam back the other way producing violent flogging and slatting. The entire ship and rigging would shake. Not only structurally hard on the boat, it is frustrating and maddening. I was told of one skipper who became so annoyed at the constant slatting that he literally shot his mainsail with a shotgun. Before you criticize, walk a mile in his shoes.

Taking the sails down stops the flogging but is accompanied by an equally unpleasant rolling motion. On occasion, the motion of the boat and the sea will become synchronized and the roll changes from annoying to violent. When this happens equipment, parts and people fly around the boat taking random and unpredictable paths before they encounter a relatively fixed and immovable object. The result is usually damage to the boat or projectile. Since I on occasion was a projectile, I felt it prudent to search for an alternative solution to slatting.

The solution, though logical, is not readily apparent, and I honestly must credit serendipity with providing the solution. On an earlier passage, we had sailed out of some twenty-five knot winds and into a dead calm. The already double-reefed main was pulled in tight, flat as a board it had no extra cloth to slat. This along with the staysail pulled in flat kept the boat from rolling with no flogging. The invention of penicillin and the transistor pale in comparison to the significance of this discovery. I hope no one was offended when I modestly turned down the Nobel Prize.

But enough of this aside, we were heading back to civilization and diesel fuel supplies, so whenever the wind dropped the boat speed below two knots we double reefed the main, pulled the staysail in tight and powered. Starting the engine greatly improved the length of our daily runs, shortened the time of our overall passage and broke up the monotony.

Sometimes we fought over who was going to start the engine. At one point Debby climbed the mast and refused to come down because she felt it was her turn not mine. However, we solved that problem by keeping a record in the log so everyone got the same number of engine starts. We have a fair and

democratic ship, Debby came down from the mast and we continued to watch clouds.

Now cloud watching has its practical side. With a little judicious planning, one can dodge the squalls and keep your shoes dry. We successfully dodged most of the squalls until late into the second night in the doldrums. I had expected bad weather earlier in the evening as my watch carried me into and under some very black, ominous looking clouds too extensive to avoid. But since passing under one towering hulk after another had produced no squalls, no heavy wind, in fact the present wind was quite gentle, less than 10 knots. I had relaxed. Sailing along without incident, I was making believe I was Humphrey Bogart in a gangster sailing movie. I don't think he made one but he would have if he could have seen my impression of him.

Night Squall

Suddenly without warning, out of the night came a wall of wind and one of those moments of immense confusion. It is difficult in the dark to tell exactly where the wind is coming from. I turned and tried to run off with it until its fury abated, but the wind's velocity increased, tearing at the sails, pushing the boat hard. The boat was out of control; it was impossible to tell in the pitch-blackness how long the squall would last. The confusion was increased by the dense rain, flying spray, flapping sails, and violent pitching of the boat. I released the jib halyard, crawled forward to pull it down to the deck and secure it to prevent it from tearing itself to pieces.

By this time, Debby was on deck and had released the main, but it was pinned to the mast and shrouds by the force of the wind. Adrenaline up, I drug the main down. Between the wind, and me one of the batten pockets was ripped out. Getting the two large sails down helped some but the wind was still about 45 knots, and the boat was running along on staysail alone, bucking like a horse in the steep, confused chop. Squalls are supposed to be short. The 45-knot winds continued for over three hours, with Debby braced on the floor of the cockpit and me hanging on to the sun awning trying to keep it as part of the boat. I kept muttering Squalls aren't suppose to last this long. In retrospect I am sure we were caught in one of those little cloud patches, they casually call the birth of a tropical storm on the weather channel.

Every half hour or so between bursts of fury, I was able to make a short foray out of the cockpit and tidy up the mainsail or other parts of the boat.

Finally, the winds abated a bit and the rising sun found us tearing along, running before the wind under just a storm jib. The wind was still above thirty-five knots with occasional gusts of forty. I no longer had to forcibly keep the sun awning as part of the vessel; things began to return to normal except now we not only had seas to watch we had **big** seas to watch. Twenty-foot seas, that was fun and different.

Breaking Seas

The seas kept building, were soon too steep, and began to break around the boat. I had read a lot about the danger of being caught by a breaking sea. The boat foundering under the weight of the water in the cockpit and/or the crew being injured and/or washed overboard with the wave. These dangers were supposed to be intensified by large cockpits. The Bird had a canoe stern and a very large cockpit. I mean a very large cockpit. On occasion, we have entertained as many as twelve people comfortably within the cockpit. While I contemplated all of these rumors and old wives tales I was sitting on the aft settee in the canoe stern which placed me only inches from the towering seas. An interesting and helpless perspective to say the least. All one could do was watch the monsters raise up behind, sweep toward and finally pass under the boat.

Breaking seas are of course a random occurrence. Eventually probability caught up with us. I watched the wave build behind as they had been for hours, I watched it rise high above the boat and then suddenly without warning, break. Break right on the stern. There is no stern. I called out to warn Debby or maybe I said, "Oh Shit" I can't remember, but I yelled something and braced myself for the rush of green water that was bound to flood over the cockpit. The hissing, churning water rushed at the boat like a slow motion movie. Everything slipped out of time. Those 5 seconds seemed to last 5 minutes. The eye caught each curl of water and foam as it was formed, and rolled down the wave front, yet there was no time to move, hardly anytime to hold on.

Suddenly the boat kicked up her stern and the wall of boiling water passed under and around us, but not on us. Time returned to its normal pace. It took me several seconds to realize what had happened. It must be like hearing a "click" when playing Russian Roulette. The boat had lifted. Her light displacement and full stern provided enough buoyancy to allow her to ride over the oncoming, breaking wave. We had splashed through the surf, slid down the

wave front, and hardly a drop of water had come aboard. I'm sure a heavier boat would have taken water. The more weight the more water. It will be hard to convince me that a light displacement boat isn't safe at sea.

The ITC stretched out north of us to Latitude 15 north. That was eight degrees, nearly 500 nautical miles, almost five days over 7000 minutes of ITC. Boredom returned. We altered course to due north to cross the zone at ninety degrees hoping to minimize our exposure to the alternate calms and squalls. In the interest of honest reporting, between the twice-daily changes to dry footwear we not only watched the water and the clouds but also played 137 games of solitaire and the odd game of cribbage, which really livened up those 7000 minutes.

Finally breaking free of the ITC at about 15 degrees north, we altered course again to 340 degrees and headed NW for Honolulu on a broad reach with the trade winds blowing from the East. I can still remember how excited we were to actually turn the wheel, well more accurately the auto pilot knob. Then we settled down to almost 48 hours of settling down until we sailed in behind the island of Hawaii.

A Crash Course in Diesel Mechanics

In the shadow of the big island, the winds and waves dropped; we were on the great Hawaiian Lake between the islands of Hawaii and Oahu. If you thought watching the water with waves on it was exciting, try watching it without waves on it. We began to motor-sail again and as the evening approached the motor started to run erratically. Now this is not exciting, it is not boring either, it is just irritating.

One thing I am not is a diesel mechanic. Out comes the engine manual, open to trouble-shooting, look up erratic running. Nice! Do you know that there are only 20 different items listed that can cause erratic running? What was worse most of them having no meaning to me. Everything from faulty stop control operation to broken valve springs. The faultfinding section (one page) leaves a little to be desired. Nearly overcome with despair I read the list, thinking, "what am I going to do about broken or sticking piston rings" (possible fault #19)?

After the second time through, I noticed that the majority seemed to deal with the fuel supply system. That made sense. Then I homed in on number 4, choked fuel filter. The night before I had drawn all of the old fuel out of the diesel heater holding tank back into the engine tanks to extend our motoring

range as far as possible. That fuel had been in the holding tank for over a year....

Shut down the engine, opened the Racor filter, (Thank god Racors are so easy to change) pulled out the filter unit and found that it had literally been crushed like an aluminum pop can by the suction of the fuel pump pulling the necessary fuel through the clogged filter. Popped in a new filter and presto a new smooth running engine with no need to change piston rings or valve springs or any other of that other unintelligible stuff.

The Last Trial

I think it is just me; but although I can be bored, I can never seem to relax at sea. I was beginning to think it was all over, just a cake walk into Honolulu, when the Sat Nav began refusing to get fixes on satellite passes. It had never done this before. It was too dark to see the horizon, so any star shots were out. We were due into Honolulu around 0600 hrs local time, and we had no chart of the harbor. We were relying on the coast pilot, an Earl Hinz's book on Paradise, a hand-traced copy of part of the Honolulu harbor chart we made while in Xmas island, and my dim memory of the Ala Wai from 15 years earlier. With this sort of ironclad information behind me, you probably wonder why I was nervous.

For the next eight-hours the Sat Nav failed to provide a fix to update our position. What was I to do? I did as the ancient Polynesian navigators did. It was too dark to see the jet contrails so I just sailed towards the bright glow in the night sky, the skyshine from Honolulu, until we were close enough to see the lights of the planes landing at the Honolulu airport. By the time light returned to the world we had Waikiki in full view, and when the Sat Nav furnished a good position we were right where we had expected to be. What's to worry...and that's what really happens on a passage to Hawaii.