

Bloopers

Sailing to Maine



What could go wrong? A small set of treasured memories.

Checking in at Wells Beach

Sailing to Maine for the first time aboard my sturdy 27' Folkdancer, in the late 1970's, my family was concerned. So, I committed to checking in. Having donated the impenetrable rusty hulk of an engine to a friend for a mooring, we were dependent upon the wind for all propulsion. Thus, we anchored along the shore at Wells Beach, Maine on a beautiful calm day. As we rowed in to call, before cell phones, we noticed significant ocean swells. Approaching the long shallow beach, the swells suddenly steepened into breaking waves more than 100' from the beach. We threw our weight to the bow of the fiberglass dinghy and surfed in. Call made, and despite a query on my voice tone (are you all right?), we headed back hopefully. Wading out through the icy surf to hip-deep water, we repeatedly leapt aboard the dinghy from both sides and rowed madly outbound. Alas, it was not to be. Mostly the boat spun and was driven shoreward by an early breaking wave. The last failure flipped the dinghy, scattering oars under the moonlit sky, and temporarily trapped my leg under the dinghy's seat. Drenched in the cold water, we gave up and spent the night ashore.

A better choice: Refer to the chart before going in, nothing is as simple as it seems. Once ashore, carry the heavy dinghy a couple of blocks inland and launch in protected waters. Then row the mile out the harbor channel protected by breakwaters. Even better, notice the swells and row inland via the channel! Later, I purchased an inflatable dinghy which is much less tipsy. Still later, an outboard☺

Asian candy

In 1994, sailing aboard a friend's Bristol 45.5 sailboat, Lauren age 5, John and I departed from Falmouth MA with Jack and two other friends for a direct passage to Spruce head Island, Penobscot Bay. After work, after driving from Boston, and after dinner, we left the harbor in the late evening. While motoring through the canal in the early pre-dawn hours, Jack brought out some Asian sesame seed candy to pass round. John and Lauren declined.

Clearing the canal in the early morning hours, we found strong northeasterly winds and chop. The Bristol pitched and rolled, and the inflatable dinghy lashed to the

foredeck bounced enough for its wooden floorboards to break free and fall overboard. By dawn the autopilot could no longer handle the seas and the crew fell ill. I am not normally subject to seasickness but this time I was down for the count - as were Jack and his two friends. This left John and Lauren to sail the boat. Lauren ran around fetching things for people and John hand-steered on past Provincetown.

Weather forecasts were not as good in the 1990s, so we weren't sure, but to all appearances the northeaster was not going to abate anytime soon. Jack and the other two friends had flown from California for this trip. Turning in was a hard decision to make. However, it wasn't seamanlike, safe or practical to continue on as we were. Thus we turned into Boston, reaching quite comfortably, arriving in the early afternoon.

A better way: eat familiar, relatively bland foods when headed offshore. We suspect the unusual candy had sat for too long in the store and gone bad. Don't have a tight schedule, don't start tired, and have plenty of crew. Today we stock Stugeron on-board to ward off seasickness. Its remarkably successful – although not sure what it could do for food poisoning.

A week or so later, with a good weather forecast, we delivered the boat to Maine with local crew but without the California owner.

Mast-step bolts

As a child, John's family chartered a Ballard 30 foot sailboat in Quisett MA for a two week sail to Maine and back. Hurrying home from Boothbay, she was tacking into south westerly winds of 15 knots with 3 to 4 foot seas while the youngest brother David, age 6, was sleeping below. During one tack, David fell off the berth landing on the cabin floor with his head hitting the mast step bolts. Bloody and in need of stitches, the crew changed course for Richmond Island. Anchoring, and then leaving the two older brothers age 10 and 12 in charge of the boat, the parents and David rowed ashore, found the hospital, got the stitches, and, spotting the anchor light, returned onboard by 11 PM.

A better way: Install and use lee cloths. They keep one in one's berth despite tacking and steep angles of heel. Over the years, John and I have made and installed lee cloths on six boats - four of which were ours. Closing off the ends with bags creates a handy cradle too!

Container ships in the night

On a ladies cruise to Maine, (in the old days I had more vacation time so John would join me underway), my new watch captain and Lauren, age 8, spotted a containership on the shipping lane to Boston. She was an experienced sailor who spent a year sailing across the Atlantic twice and then cruised throughout the Caribbean - yet couldn't figure out whether the container ship was coming closer or going further away. At night containerships are festooned with many lights; it's hard to spot the red and green bow lights and the white masthead light. Lauren decided it was time to call me while the ship was still well away. We figured out how to avoid it and continued onward.

A better way: Today, with AIS, there would be no doubt as to containership's course, speed, and point and time of closest approach. AIS would reveal whether we could keep a steady course or must alter course to avoid the containership. Also, watch captains should understand the necessity of calling for help early if there is any doubt as to how to proceed. Radar with MARPA provides some AIS-like data but not the ship's name which is essential for VHF communications.

Our rule is that if the ship is going to pass within 2 miles of us, at 30 minutes before the time of closest approach, and its not clear whether she will pass in front of us, I may call on VHF channel 13 to discuss options.

Bouncing Around

Sailing home to Marion from Penobscot Bay on our Express 37 Songlines with a strong four person delivery crew, including a co-owner, an all American racer, and a casual sailor from work (John could not come), we took off in moderate south westerly winds anticipating an over-night sail to the canal. The conditions freshened and waves built til each wave rolled over the bow striking the mast with blue water.

Seasickness drove the co-owner and the casual sailor to their berths.

Steve and I were fine - hand-steering the tiller driven boat (no autopilot) - but starting to look at each other and discuss options. It would clearly be the two of us, watch on and watch off, perched on the windward rail 6' above the water for many hours to come. With a wide stern and narrow bow, Songlines was built to surf down waves – not plow into them; we were slow. Around then, the outboard gas tank stowed under the tiller tipped over and sprung a leak in the cockpit. Now we had gas fumes too. Steve burped – an early warning signal of seasickness – so

we tacked for shore on a tight reach aiming at York Harbor 30+ NM to the west. We safely arrived in the late evening and sailed onto Boston the next day – leaving Songlines for the work week.

A better way: The fuel tank needed to be tied down more effectively. Gas, or diesel, fumes and large seas aren't a seaworthy combination. Also, having planned to spend the night tacking into the southwesterly wind, a course favoring the shore would have been a good safety measure. The weather forecast did not predict the actual wind strength. Sailing near shore reduces fetch and lowers wind strength, thereby lowering the wave height. Near-shore sailing would also shorten the time to reach a safe port once we decided to stop.

Day mark limitations

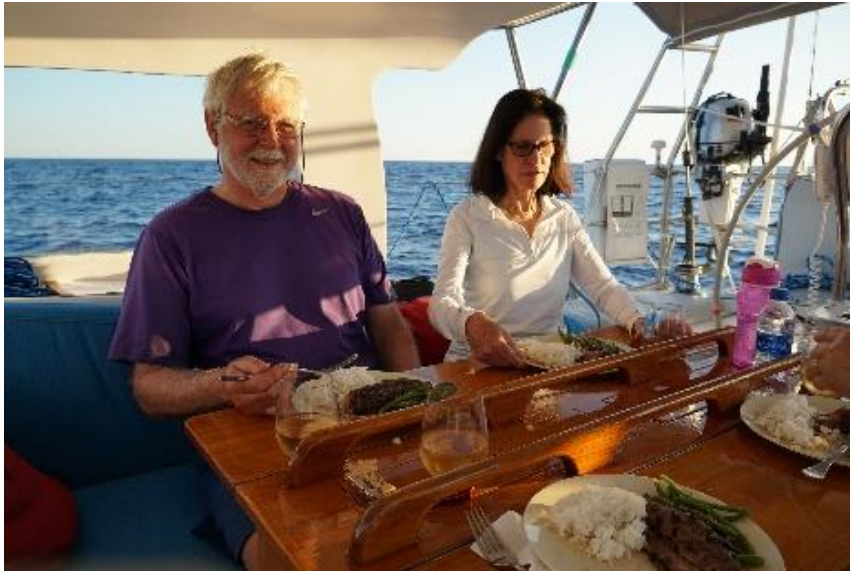
Having joined Down East Race week for the first time, we were particularly interested in watching our fellow racers tack and jib around marks of the course. In Maine, the course marks include day marks, rocks, and islands, as well as buoys. One beautiful wooden boat was closely rounding a day mark (submerged rock). I turned to John and said we do not have this level of local knowledge; we need to stay much further away. What no one can see is how far the rock extends beyond the day mark's location.

Pre chart plotters, the wooden boat erred by turning too soon. She hit the ledge with an audible bang, her bow went down, her stern came up, we saw the keel, and then she slid off to the side. At first she continued racing. Then, she announced her retirement on the VHF and turned toward her boat yard. Finally, she called the yard for pumps to be sent out by motor boat as quickly as possible. With help from pumps, she did make it to the travel lift before she sank.



A better way: Respect the marks in Maine! They can hide very large, quite immovable, ledges. Also keep paper charts in case the electronics shut down. We also like them for long-range planning.

A food shortfall



Down East Race Week travels from island to island. Many are uninhabited; others have no stores. One time a friend, a native of NE Harbor Maine, chartered a sailboat for the race but underestimated how much food his crew could consume.

On the second evening, at after-race cocktail gathering, he mentioned that they had run out of provisions. Something about a few crackers and cheese left aboard... We had just returned from racing to Bermuda and still had weeks of emergency stores. So, we gave him two grocery bags of food and one bottle of Goslings rum from the case in the bilge. The next day, he returned the gesture by having a crew swim over a bottle of wine. The water was in the high 50s.

A better way: Keep enough dry and canned goods on board to supplement expected consumption, and potential delays due to bad weather, for several days or better. John says to never underestimate the crew's capacity to imbibe wine and rum.

Fog



In the days of LORAN (pre-GPS), we were racing down the Deer Island Thorofare in deep fog. We found plotting the Loren positions on the paper chart to determine our position to be too slow. By the time it was recorded and then plotted, we had tacked again and were heading into unknown waters. We turned to dead reckoning and then caught every buoy; we saw no land or rocks on the entire 5 mile passage despite it narrowing to 600' upon occasion.

A better way: Today, we have a GPS driven chart plotter at the helm. The helmsman has no doubt as to our position. Even better, we run AIS integrated into our chart display so we can see approaching boats and determine if they are hazards. Finally, to catch those fishing boats hiding their locations, we run radar – although sometimes the offshore fishing boats will temporarily turn on their AIS transmissions until we've safely past.

The engine stops

Early in Starlight days, our J42, I was skippering another Ladies Cruise to Maine. We stopped to pick up fuel and water in Wickford, and then motored out Narragansett Bay on a sunny, light air day. Continuing west along the southern Rhode Island coast, the engine stops. Why is that? Once going, with air and clean

fuel, diesels run forever. There was no seaweed in the raw water filter and it had not overheated. Ah ha! The racor fuel filter is empty! How could this happen?

A crew had filled the auxiliary bladder tank rather than the intended main fuel tank. Thus we emptied the main tank and with the valve connecting the bladder to the main closed, the fuel didn't flow. I called John at work with the cellphone. How do you bleed the engine one more time? Once bled, we proceeded on to Marion where we could refuel for the trip north.

A better way: Learn your engine! On my first cruising sailboat, I had thrown the engine overboard. Having acknowledged that the engine was necessary to run Starlight (power the myriad electronics, refrigeration and motor through the Cape Cod Canal), it was still early days in my figuring out all-things-engine. Also, I didn't observe the new watch captain while she opened the diesel tank fill. The two fills, both labeled diesel, were quite close and while I pointed to the main tank fill, I didn't stay around long enough to verify which was used.

The boat stops

In 1986, we were sailing out of St. John, New Brunswick in the Bay of Fundy on a 250nm offshore passage intended to qualify for the Marion Bermuda race. With a favorable current, our Sabre 34 was moving at eight or nine knots over the bottom in a dark and moonless night. Flying a deck sweeping genoa and full main downwind, we were suddenly stopped in the deep waters. All hands rushed to the stern, dropping it down, and causing the piling up waves to run up and over the reverse transom beginning to fill the cockpit. Looking closely, we found a buoy with a 6' tall pole with radar reflector poking out the port side forward of the keel. It had caught on our keel.

Furling the genoa, clawing the full main down off the spreaders, and finding the rig cutters, we were ready for the next step. John – harnessed to the boat – stepped down the boarding ladder into the water and, fishing with the boat hook, managed to lift the stainless steel offshore lobster pot cable up enough to get a line under it. With the line, we could winch it up further to reach with the boat's rig cutters (a safety item kept aboard in case the rig falls).

A better way: Install and run radar. The night was too dark to see the unlit buoy's radar reflector.

Another Stop



Least you think rope cutters attached to the propeller shaft are sufficient to ward off lobster pots, here is the sorry tale. Sailing along Merchant's Row, we caught a pot on the propeller shaft. There was a small current tugging on Starlight so the line ran tightly down from the propeller shaft to the bottom – leaving no possibility of a boat hook grabbing the line.

Oops! Well, we have cutters! Just turn on the engine and back up. Surely that will cut the line. Instead, the line wrapped tightly around the propeller shaft with many turns until the engine stalled – perhaps 10 seconds of operation. What might have been a quick dive overboard with a nice sharp diving knife (another essential supply for Maine – be sure to get a serrated blade on one side), turned into an arduous series of dives as the knife cut a few turns each time. We wanted the shaft clear before our temporary anchor gave way.

A better way: Ideally you have a happy swimmer with a mask, wet suit, and a sharp diving knife tied to her hand and NOT make matters worse by turning the propeller shaft. Without a swimmer, calling for assistance is a good bet.

Jil Westcott

