

A Mystic Adventure

Paul Gray

A few weeks ago I got a call from a friend of mine Al Bezanson. Al owns *Green Dragon*, a small wooden schooner that he has been sailing since 1963. During the summer months *Green Dragon* can be found cruising the coasts of Massachusetts and Maine. In early fall, Al brings her down to the Chesapeake for the Great Chesapeake Bay Schooner Race. She has been spending the winter in Norfolk, VA.

Al had scheduled his return trip north to coincide with the Wooden Boat Show at Mystic Seaport in Mystic, CT, but he had a problem. One of his crew members had to cancel. Could I help him out with the return trip? The plan was to head out of Norfolk, round Cape Charles, directly to Montauk and then head into Mystic. We would be sailing non-stop, 24/7. Al had estimated it would be somewhere around 60 hours en route. It would be very difficult with just Al and another friend Jay Irwin to handle. It would be a lot easier with three than two.

I checked my schedule and cleared it on the home front. It was set. We would leave Norfolk early on Friday, June 19 to arrive in Mystic sometime on Sunday.

The only thing I don't like about these kinds of trips is the logistics of getting to the start and home from the end. In this case Amtrak turned out to be the best option. On Thursday morning I caught an early train out of Trenton. And I mean early, 4:03am early! A short layover in DC let me stretch my legs and get some breakfast. We rolled into Newport News, VA around 1:00 pm where Al was waiting for me.

We spent the afternoon finishing preparing the boat and grabbed some dinner at a local yacht club to finalize our plans. Over dinner Al told me that he had decided not to go directly to Montauk. He didn't want to take *Green Dragon* that far offshore. Instead, we would stay coastal and run up along the coast and head into City Island, NY. From there we would head out along Long Island Sound to Mystic. It would add two days to the trip. I told Al, depending on timing, I may have to hop off in City Island, but we would see.

The forecast for the next couple of days was very good. 5-10 knot winds starting from the northeast and veering around to the southwest. Not bad at all. The NE winds would carry us down the bay and around Cape Charles. As the wind veered east and then south, we would reach along the coast. Other than the winds being a bit light, couldn't be better.

We shoved off at 8:00am on Friday. The winds were as forecast, and we motorsailed across Chesapeake Bay around Cape Charles and headed up the coast. The weather was perfect, and by early afternoon the sea breezes had kicked in, the engine was off and we were cruising along at around six knots. It was a perfect day of sailing.

As evening rolled around the wind got lighter and when the boat speed dropped to 4 knots we fired up the engine. We settled into our night watch keeping routine with each person standing a solo three hour watch while the other two got some sleep. My first watch was the 3:00-6:00am so I headed below and got some sleep.

I woke up a bit early and joined Al in the cockpit. There is nothing quite as breathtaking as coming on watch in the middle of a clear night. We were far away from any shore lights and the stars were blazing. The faint band of the Milky Way was visible from horizon to horizon. Every square inch of sky was jammed with stars. The view of the sky alone was worth the trip!

Al headed below and I stood my watch. I love night watches on nights like that. The sea was calm, the sky was brilliantly clear and there wasn't another boat in sight. It is a wonderful time to think and clear your head. Around 4:30 traces of sunrise could be seen and over the next hour I was treated to the wonderful spectacle of a sunrise at sea. I watched as the first sliver of sun appeared. In what seemed like moments the sun was up, it was light and my watch was over. We were getting close to Ocean City, MD and the early morning fishermen were heading out. I woke Jay, turned the watch over to him and headed below for some sleep. It had been a wonderful night at sea.

I woke around noon to find us off the mouth of Delaware Bay and a freshening wind out of the southeast. We shut the engine down and continued

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north. The wind continued to build until white caps were just starting to form. If ever there was a wind designed for our trip it was this! Enough wind to move us along as fast as we could sail, but not enough to have to worry about reducing sail. Hour after hour we rolled along at 6-7 knots. We cruised along past Cape May. Past Atlantic City.

Our plan was to reach Sandy Hook around 8:00 the next morning. We would catch the turn of the tide and run with it all the way to City Island. We were actually well ahead of schedule and would probably end up fighting the tide for a while. I don't think I have ever been on a trip where we ended up ahead of schedule!

The seas can build quickly off New Jersey. By sunset, with the wind speed and direction as constant as it was we found ourselves rolling though steepening seas. Not anything to worry about, unless you were trying to get some sleep in the starboard cabin berth. Al tried to wedge himself in when his watch was over, but was almost rolled out of his berth several times. He really needs to reinstall the lee cloths! Jay didn't have that problem as he was sleeping on the downhill side of the boat. I didn't have a problem as I was in the v-berth wedged between the side of the boat and the foremast!

Just before dark, we had reduced sail and fired up the engine. The forecast talked about thunderstorms overnight and we decided we didn't want to have to worry about dropping sail in the middle of the night in a thunderstorm. We had also been running on batteries all day and half the night and they needed a charging.

I was on the 12:00-3:00am watch. When I came on deck the winds had diminished significantly. Al headed below to his wedging. I knew the seas would start to lay down soon. I once again marveled at the stars. Not quite as brilliant as off the uninhabited coasts of southern Virginia, but still beautiful.

The course we had been on had been converging with the coast. I knew that by around 3:00 we would be off Barnegat Light. From there we would maintain a course parallel to the coast between two and three miles off shore.

The coast of New Jersey is not as barren at night as the coast of Virginia. Several times during the watch I had to alter course slightly to stay well clear of tugs and fishing boats. Al's boat is equipped with RADAR and AIS which makes that kind of stuff pretty easy.

As my watch ended we were close to our waypoint and the resulting course changes. I stayed past the end of my watch until we were settled on our new course. I woke Jay, turned the watch over to him. By now the waves had diminished quite a bit, I went below to sleep.

About an hour later I woke up. There was no sensation of movement at all. No pitching, no rolling. No movement at all. Nothing. I looked aft and saw Jay standing in the companionway (a favorite spot for all of us). I lay there for a few minutes. Where were we moving? We had to be, but I couldn't feel anything! I got up and walked aft to satisfy my curiosity. A quick glance at the GPS showed we were still cruising along at 5 and a half knots. I had a quick chat with Jay. The wind had died completely and the sea had gone completely flat. Not a ripple in sight. I had to laugh at myself. I had been woken by deteriorating weather on several occasions, but never before by a complete lack of weather conditions! I headed below for some more sleep.

I woke around 6:30 to find us off the Highlands at the southern end of Sandy Hook. Al was on the phone with an acquaintance of his, who was anchored in his schooner inside Sandy Hook. He was on his way to Maine after having spent the winter in the Bahamas. It had been a year since he had headed south. He liked the idea of stopping at the Wooden Boat Show and decided to join us for the balance of the trip to Mystic.

Since we were an hour and a half ahead of schedule we were fighting the last of the ebb tide current. We slowly worked our way up under the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and into the New York outer harbor. We continued north toward the East River, rendezvousing with Al's friend off Governor's Island. We crossed over to the Manhattan side of the East River so Al could say hello to some friends who worked at South Street Seaport.

By now the tide had turned in our favor and we shot along the river, passing Roosevelt Island and moving

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into Hell Gate. Hell Gate is a sharp elbow in the East River and has a terrible reputation. A friend of mine from Maryland was concerned when someone told her that our boat would be spun around in circles if we tried to go through there. Having been through Hell Gate a bunch of times, I knew differently. The big concern with Hell Gate, and the whole East River for that matter, is the tidal current. On a sailboat going a maximum of 6 knots, a 4 knot adverse current makes for a long day. Time it right and you can ride the current like a freight train to Long Island Sound.

We rode through the rest of the twists and turns of the river and rode the tide out on to the Sound. City Island is very close to the end of the East River and by 2:30 we had picked up a mooring at Stuyvesant Yacht Club on the west side of the island. The club launch picked us up, we grabbed showers and we were off to get a tour of Al's favorite City Island haunts. We had a great dinner at the club and headed back to the boat for a good night's sleep.

I had decided to head home from City Island and at 6:30 I said my farewells, hopped on the launch and headed ashore. I had a great breakfast at City Island Diner and grabbed an express bus to mid-town Manhattan. I walked two blocks to Penn Station and caught an express train back to Hamilton. I was home by 11:00.

Al and Jay continued on to Mystic with a stopover near Branford, CT. They finally dropped anchor on the Mystic River north of the Seaport around 2:00 Tuesday afternoon.

We all have pretty much agreed we couldn't have had a nicer trip.