

Catch of the Day

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This is a true story from the continuing adventures of *Four Seasons*. As Dave Barry says, we are not making this up.

On Tuesday, December 3, about 9:30AM, we were just a little north of Cabo Colnett and about 10 miles offshore when our friends, John and Suzie following along 5 miles behind us on the trawler *Cabaret* announced that they had caught a 12-pound Albacore Tuna. Shortly after that, we announced that we had caught a 535-pound jet ski.

I first noticed a dark speck about a mile away just off the port bow. I put the glasses on it, and it was a funny looking thing—a boat, I thought, but I couldn't quite make it into a boat. Now it looked like a whale carcass. It would appear briefly then disappear for quite a while and I had trouble holding it in view. I called the Admiral up to the pilothouse, and after studying it for a while she announced, "It's dolphins." But that wasn't right either. After a little while longer, Donna said, "I think it's a jet ski." Intrigued, we diverted course to go over and find out.

It was a Yamaha WaveRunner, with current California registration, a Lake Mead sticker, and nobody aboard. The ignition disconnect lanyard was still attached to the jet ski but not to an arm, and after carefully scanning the horizon for bobbing heads, we concluded it had drifted out to sea from ...where? We were almost 10 miles off shore in one of the most desolate spots on the West Coast of the Baja Peninsula. (Later on, Donna had this horrible thought: what if there was someone in the water, frantically waving, as we towed their jet ski away? But we had looked around carefully and found nothing.)

We decided we had to take it with us somehow. We informed *Cabaret* that we had won the fishing contest by 523 pounds. Naïve as we are, we thought we would be able to track down the owner and find the boat it got away from by using the marine radio and the ham nets. Putting out the word broadly enough would surely yield someone who knew someone who had lost a jet ski. Little did we know.

Getting hold of the thing was more of a challenge than we expected. We lassoed it by the handlebars, but then what? I couldn't see any towing eye, and attempts to tow it by the handlebars just resulted in tipping it over and swamping it. We then spent a lot of time and took several ounces of green paint and teak chips off our swim step and bright work trying to pull the thing up onto the swim platform. Even though the seas were only 2-3 feet and quite benign while traveling, once we stopped, the boat rolled considerably. Dealing with anything off the swim platform is difficult in any kind of seas at all. Finally I found the towing eye, cleverly recessed and hidden way under the bow and we managed to get a line through that to tow it with. Even full of water from being swamped, it towed just fine at 8 knots.

So now we had a WaveRunner. What could (or should) we do with it? Donna got on the phone to the US Coast Guard, Lieutenant Driscoll, in Alameda, California and reported the CF numbers. (510-437-3701 is the Pacific Coast Emergency Search and Rescue number, and we can attest to the fact that it works.) We also suggested that he call the Mexican Navy to report it to them, in case there was anyone riding it that may have been hurt. We told him we were planning to anchor at Isla San Martin that night. Lt. Driscoll was able to trace the CF numbers to the owner, Hector, residing in Southern California, about 150 miles Northeast of Los Angeles. He called us back with Hector on the line in a conference call. Hector was astounded. He'd had three of these things on a trailer in front of his house, and the whole thing had been stolen in early November. This was one of them. Now the only question was, how do we get it back to him?

While we were pondering that, Lieutenant Driscoll called back to inform us that he had indeed contacted the Mexican Navy, and they had a vessel underway from Ensenada to our reported anchoring location. Maybe the Mexican Navy would take the jet ski back to Ensenada. That's what Lieutenant Driscoll implied they would do. So we called Hector to tell him that. (Ka-ching! Ka-Ching! The sound of airtime minutes adding up on the satellite phone at \$1.19 per minute, + tax.)

A little later, another call from Lieutenant Driscoll: The Mexican Navy is NOT coming. There was a mis-communication. So we still had to figure out how to get Hector and Yamaha reunited. Another call to Hector: He would be happy to drive down to Ensenada to get it. He goes there all the time. Ah, but see, the jet ski is not going to Ensenada now, it's going south along with *Four Seasons*. Perhaps as far as Mazatlan if not detached from *Four Seasons* fairly soon. But we could divert to San Quintin, only 12 miles away if Hector could meet us there. No problem, he says. He wants the WaveRunner, and he'll do anything, drive anywhere to get it. And just where is San Quintin, by the way? We tell him it's about 150 miles South of Ensenada, just off route 1. We finally agree on a plan: we will go to San Quintin and anchor there by noon on Wednesday, and Hector will drive down Tuesday night and be there to meet us. He will rent a panga to come out to our boat, and we'll make the exchange. OK. Sounds like a plan.

So we anchored for the night at Isla San Martin, just 12 miles northwest of Bahia San Quintin. John and Suzie on *Cabaret* anchored next to us. Suzie and one of their guests came around by dinghy, we talked for a few minutes and they headed for the beach. About 15 minutes later, we heard shouting and yelling, and here came Suzie back toward us in the dinghy at full speed, yelling "Here they come! Here they come!" We went outside and here came a HUGE 60-foot Mexican Navy speedboat, throwing a 6-foot wake, heading right for Suzie. She dodged, and they nearly ran her down making a big, wakey, 360-degree circle around us, where they finally stopped off our Starboard side. There were 6 guys on board. Apparently they decided to come after all.

This thing looks like something out of James Bond movies. It's gray, very sleek and low, steel hull, with a long pointy bow similar to off-shore racing boats. It's totally enclosed so it could roll 360 in the water and come up running. It's capable of 40 knots sustained speed through the water. It seems to be propelled by jets that can be rotated for maneuverability. John says it looks like a Vietnam gunboat. It is a serious boat.

They knew the story about the jet ski. We shouted back and forth across the 20 feet of water separating us, the captain using his limited English and Donna using her limited Spanish. We were uncertain what their plan was. So were they. After a while, they motioned that they were going to come along side. No, no no, we said, we'll have *Cabaret* bring you the jet ski with their dinghy. No, no, no, they said, we'll come alongside.

OK, fine. Never argue with people with guns. We prepared the port side of our boat, pulling in the paravane pole and putting out every fender we owned, and here they came, rafting up alongside us. Here's how I know it was at least 60 feet: it stuck out at least 10 feet in front of us and another 10 in back. El Capitan, Tieniente de Corbeta, Rogelio Rodriguez Aguilar, who looked to be about 18, came aboard to speak to us. We learned that he had joined the Navy at age 17 and had been in for 10 years. So that put him at age 27. At this point, we thought surely they would take the jet ski somewhere, probably to Ensenada, so we called Hector again to formulate Plan B. He had already started out, but maybe he wouldn't have to drive all the way to San Quintin after all. And we called Lieutenant Driscoll back to tell him the Mexican Navy had, after all, shown up. (Ka-Ching, Ka-Ching)

An interesting aside: It happened that John Raines, the guy who writes a lot of the guidebooks for Mexico cruisers, was passing by a few miles away as all this was taking place and Donna talked to him on the radio. He was aghast! "You are in possession of a stolen jet-ski in Mexico?!"

Capitan Aguilar had to get orders from Mexico City about the jet ski. The orders had to be filtered (as we understand) to him via Ensenada, which was his base. In the meantime, while waiting for orders, we talked to the crew. Well, made signs at them anyway. They did not speak a word of English. We looked over the boat, and Donna said "Que es?" (What is it?) and pointed to a circular metal structure about 3-feet in diameter in the center on the top deck. The deckhand put his hands in the shape of a machine gun and went, "ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka". "Oh", said Donna.

The process of getting orders took about 2 hours, at the end of which, he politely and with great apology, informed us he would be unable to take the jet ski to Ensenada. Mexico City had told him his mission was safety of life at sea, not returning stolen jet skis. Back on the phone to Hector: Cancel plan B, back to plan A. We'll meet in San Quintin. The Mexican Navy fired up the HUGE diesel engines, cast off the lines, and were gone, into the darkening evening, toward Ensenada.

And we still have a jet ski. Our biggest fear was having it stolen from us during the night, so we chained it up and padlocked it to our boat, then went to *Cabaret* for a delicious fresh tuna and lobster dinner.

Next morning we were at San Quintin and anchored by 10AM, waiting for Hector to show up. And waiting...and waiting...and waiting...Finally, a little after noon, we called him. He was not yet in San Quintin! The day dragged on. More calls to Hector. Considerable confusion on his part as to where he was. More confusion about how to get hold of a boat to come out to where we were, and by the way, where were we? We told him to look in the bay for four boats anchored there. He couldn't find the bay. Sigh. Finally around 5PM we got him to drive along the beach and we flashed a spotlight at him and he flashed headlights back. It was initial contact! However, his helper said the tide was too low to launch a boat and they would not be able to come out until morning. Uh-Oh!!!

Finally, in the dark, on this packed sand dirt road out to the fish camps, they found some guys with a panga that would bring him out to us, and they arrived at about 6PM (in the dark)—5 guys plus Hector in a panga. The English-speaking local who was helping Hector was the head of the San Quintin Tourist Office. They undid our tow line and the five of them brute-forced this nearly 600-pound thing up into the panga, nearly turtling it and nearly giving Donna a heart attack. They finally got it secured and set off back to the beach. There were no life jackets, no lights, no radio, just an overloaded panga riding about six inches above the water. We told Hector we'd call him in about 20 minutes to make sure he got back safely. We did, and he was on shore, happily reunited with his WaveRunner. The panga fishermen told him they had seen two jet skis running up and down the coast near here in the last few days. Who knows? Maybe Hector will get another one back.

Hector must have had quite an adventure himself. He had to drive down to San Quintin overnight, and turning off of route Mex-1 onto a dirt road to get to the "town" of San Quintin was probably his first clue to how much fun this was going to be. He has never been on the ocean, never heard the term "panga" in his life and had no idea how to get out to our boat, but he was determined to try. Things took much, much longer than expected, making Donna very nervous as night approached for two reasons. She didn't want to worry another night about the WaveRunner being stolen from beside our boat in the middle of the night, and we *really* wanted to leave at 6AM the next morning. We didn't want to delay another day for fear we would lose our good weather window to Turtle Bay. Meanwhile, poor Hector is following this guy in his truck down to and around the Bay on a packed sand beach road towards the fish camps.

After they left, we reported the final chapter of the saga to *Cabaret*. Suzie informed us that the panga had first gone to their boat instead of ours, and the fishermen on the panga were the same ones that had sold them fish the night before when we were at Isla San Martin.

Strange world.