

# It Was Never a Dream

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By Russ Sherwin, Copyright 2002-2010

On the rare instances that I thought about retirement at all, it was some vague image of puttering around in a workshop making birdhouses or something. One morning I was abruptly confronted with the fact that I had, sometime during the night, turned 63. “How did that happen?” I mused as I took my morning shower. Time to get serious here.

Donna and I have had boats of one sort or another for a long time. It started in 1985 with her saying, “How much do you think it would cost to get a small boat for water skiing?” My reply of, “Oh, I suppose about \$5000” launched us (figuratively speaking) on the present course. The first boat was a 21-footer, intended for water skiing, but after skiing about 5 times, we found we liked camping out in it better. We had a porta-potti, 5 gallons of water, a Coleman stove and a 90-lb German Shepherd named Shadow. We were livin’! Over the next 10 years there followed a succession of other boats: a 26-footer named *Four Seasons*, a 32-footer named *Four Seasons II*, and finally, in 1995, a 16-year old 44-foot twin-engine trawler that we named – don’t get ahead of me now – *Four Seasons*. We also acquired a second German Shepherd, Heidi.

After we got the trawler, a different perspective emerged. Instead of having a boat that could go 30 miles an hour, this thing could, under ideal conditions, get up to 9. But we were no longer captive to inland waters in the California Delta as we had been. This beast could, theoretically, go ocean voyaging. Now there’s a scary thought! Gradually, we began spending the bulk of our time in San Francisco Bay instead of the Delta. Now we were constantly in sight of the Golden Gate Bridge, the gateway to the Pacific Ocean. Wonder what’s out there?

One day, when we were returning to the marina from a weekend on the Bay, a big trawler that we’d never seen before came in right behind us. And on the bow was a beautiful German Shepherd! We docked, watched where they docked, and went around to visit the dog. We assumed there were people aboard too, but we mostly wanted to see the dog. His name was Yankee and his folks were Frank and Maude Ruffin. They had just purchased *Horizons*, a 54-foot Krogen, and had brought it up the coast from Southern California. We learned they were planning to head down through the Panama Canal and ultimately across the Atlantic Ocean. Over the next couple of weeks we talked to them at great length about long distance ocean voyaging. This was the turning point. They didn’t have any more boating experience than we did. If they could do this, so could we.

We had never been on the ocean in our own boat, or on any small boat. After 3 trawler-years of Donna fervently wishing I didn't want to go, and me secretly wishing I didn't either, we took our first tentative baby steps "out the Gate". Since we didn't know exactly what we'd be faced with, we put the two dogs in the kennel. We left early one Saturday morning, bound for Half Moon Bay, 20 miles south. The seas were pretty rough going west under the bridge, and we got tossed around a good deal. We came very close to turning around that day, and if we had, this story would not have been written. But when we turned south a few miles out, things got better. With entire colonies of butterflies in our stomachs, we made it to Half Moon Bay, anchored, and spent a sleepless night worrying about getting back. The next day the sun was bright, the seas were flat, we had a gentle breeze at our stern, and dolphins played around the bow of the boat. We were enthralled!

The hook had been truly set. We planned another trip, this time from San Francisco to San Diego and back. We worked on the boat, provisioned it, read all the books and magazines we could get our hands on, talked to people who had done it, and finally, in September of 1999, a year after our first timid foray to Half Moon Bay, *Four Seasons* passed under the Golden Gate bridge bound for San Diego.

This time, we had Cody and Heidi aboard. After stops at Half Moon Bay and Monterey, we anchored at San Simeon. This is a California State Park, the site of Hearst Castle, built by Randolph Hearst in the early part of the century. It's a spectacular spot, a great beach, and a fair anchorage. We decided to go ashore. As we putted toward the beach in our 5-hp inflatable, the two dogs, unable to contain themselves at the sight of land, jumped off and swam the rest of the way. I remarked to Donna that "this was likely to be a wet landing", since I could see breakers on the beach ahead. It was an understatement. We were dumped head over heels (there's another more descriptive phrase involving teakettles) and lost the camera, both our glasses, hats and whatever else we were carrying. The dogs raced up and down the beach like mad things while we solemnly observed the 4-foot surf and our trawler bobbing gently beyond it.

We tried twice to get the boat back out through the surf, and both times were thrown violently back on the beach. In our ignorance, it was fortunate we weren't killed by the motor landing on top of us. This wasn't going to work. We needed help. We had brought no money with us, there being nothing to spend it on at San Simeon beach, so Donna borrowed a quarter from the nice man mowing the lawns around the deserted activity center and called the Park Rangers.

They agreed we had a problem. Out there was our boat, and here, on the beach were the four of us. But they had no suggestions. Time passed. More people gathered. We all stood on the beach and gazed upon the inaccessible *Four Seasons* out there in the anchorage. San Simeon Cafeteria, a few miles down the road, sent us a bucket of chicken to eat via the rangers. Two people in a motor home gave us hot chocolate. The rangers made cell phone and radio calls to various people. We were making friends fast, and now had a group of 10 or 12 "advisors". But we were still on the beach.

After five frustrating hours, along came Doc. Doc runs a part-time rental kayak concession at San Simeon. He's also a full time tile setter. He has a garage in which he rigs and stores kayaks, and his first thought was to take us one at a time out to the boat on a kayak. Until he realized that the two dogs cavorting around our feet were not the Ranger's dogs, but ours. The next plan was for us to bed down on the floor of his garage until morning, when the surf would "certainly be lower." This surf was "unusual". He prepared the garage for us, showing us "how a man cleans house" by starting his leaf blower and hosing out the place. Then he had another idea. Doc is part of an organization of volunteers called North Coast Ocean Rescue, based in the nearby town of Cambria. All of these volunteers have full time jobs, but they respond to ocean rescue situations when necessary. Doc called them and explained the problem. It was nearing 5 o'clock and some of them were off work. This was the first time they had been called to rescue someone standing on the beach, but, sure, they would give it a try.

The guys that arrived looked as if they had just stepped out of an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. They sized up the situation, launched their inflatable and, timing the surf, effortlessly took first Donna and Heidi, then Cody and me, through the surf out to the boat. Then they made a third trip towing our now disabled inflatable, whose motor had been drowned three times in salt water and was no longer willing to run. By now it was dark, but we were home at last.

The next morning we were on our way down the coast again, next stop: Port San Luis, near San Luis Obispo. There are five mooring balls available just inside the breakwater, and as we pulled up to one of them, I put the starboard engine in reverse and heard a loud whine, followed by a clunk and the engine stopped. I tried again, same result. We maneuvered around on the port engine and got tied up, then assessed the situation. We had lost the starboard transmission. Thinking the trip would surely end here, we dejectedly went to bed.

We determined that there were mechanics in town that could fix the transmission, but none would come to the boat. Too busy. Finally, Nick Howell in Morrow Bay said if we could bring it to him, he'd see what he could do. So Donna and I unbolted the 145-pound transmission from the engine, hoisted it out of the boat onto the dock, then into the water taxi for a 30-foot ride to the wharf, used the fishermen's fish winch (25¢ for 15 minutes of winching) to hoist it up to the wharf 30 feet above the water and into the trunk of a rental car. We delivered it to Nick's shop in Morrow Bay where Nick stopped what he was doing and dismantled it on the spot. A broken gear tooth.

Nick ordered parts, got the wrong parts, sent them back, got the right parts, got too busy to work on it for three days, then finally finished it. Nine days after we arrived, having gotten well acquainted with Fat Cats restaurant on the wharf, we put the repaired transmission into the rental car, back to the wharf, down the fish winch, into the water taxi and into the boat. By 8 PM we had it installed and tested.

During the next week we saw whales and dolphins almost every day as we motored south. We had mostly fine weather, calm seas, and enjoyed ourselves immensely. The boat and our repaired transmission were performing flawlessly. We anchored overnight in Smuggler's Cove, on Santa Cruz Island off the coast of Southern California near Ventura. As we pulled anchor the next morning, the sky was bright blue, not a cloud to be seen, the sea was flat and we expected a calm, 10 hour ride to Santa Catalina Island. About 4 hours out, the Coast Guard marine weather station started talking about the possibility of thunderstorms near Catalina. Where, we asked ourselves, were those going to come from with no clouds? Then we saw some wispy things forming above the island. They grew darker. Then there was a monstrous flash all the way from God down to the water. Gulp!

You can see storm lines on radar, and we were able to determine that we could possibly avoid most of the storm by heading due east for a while. But at 7 knots, you can't outrun anything, so for two hours we skirted along the edge, getting huge flashes followed ½ second later by an enormous crash of thunder. A boat gets mighty small in conditions like this. Finally it passed behind us, diminished in intensity, and we turned back toward Catalina and the security of a mooring ball.

We were running out of time, having both taken the month of September off work to do this. We turned around at Dana Point, about 80 miles short of San Diego, but felt we had accomplished our goal anyway. The trip back up the coast was uneventful, and coming back under the Golden Gate Bridge in flat seas and bright sunshine, I felt a euphoric high. The last 20 miles from Half Moon Bay to San Francisco, so daunting only a year before, was trivial. We had made a trip of almost 1000 miles.

Instead of the end of the voyage, it became the beginning. We sold the house we had in Sunnyvale, California, sold most of our possessions, including the old *Four Seasons* and one car. In October, 2000, we took delivery of a new 46-foot Nordhavn single-engine diesel trawler which, in a burst of originality, we christened *Four Seasons*. Friends and family alike thought we were nuts and counseled against cutting ALL of the ties, but we explained that we couldn't afford the new boat unless we sold the house. And besides, who needs a house?

Reality inevitably intervenes when you're looking the other way. Two weeks after moving aboard the new *Four Seasons*, Donna received the dreaded "phone call". Her mammogram had turned up something that needed investigation. It was early breast cancer. After considering all the options, she elected to have a mastectomy. We were still determined to go cruising. We took the new boat down to Ensenada, Mexico, 90 miles south of the border from San Diego, then drove back up to San Francisco and, now homeless, stayed with friends while she had surgery. A week later we were back "home" on the boat. By mid-January, 2001, Donna was fully recovered, and we set out for Cabo San Lucas at the tip of the Baja peninsula. It seemed even more important than ever to "get outta Dodge".

The new *Four Seasons* is a serious sea boat capable of crossing oceans. Several just like her have circumnavigated the globe under the command of relatively inexperienced owners like us. Are we capable of crossing oceans? We don't know the answer to that yet. But, as of fall 2003, we have put almost 15,000 miles under her keel, cruising the first year down the coast of Baja to La Paz, then back up to San Francisco. In 2002, we left San Francisco in October, down the Baja peninsula to Cabo San Lucas, across to Puerto Vallarta and down to Zihuatanejo, back up to Mazatlan and across the Sea of Cortez to La Paz, then back to San Francisco for the summer. Last year, we did substantially the same thing, then, after resting in San Francisco Bay for a month, we headed north to Sidney and Victoria, BC.

It has been a steep learning curve. We've discovered strengths in ourselves and in each other we didn't know existed. We have discovered that we are very complimentary and synergistic in our skills. We have experienced seas higher than the boat, two additional lightening storms, gale force winds, thick fog, and 300-mile open water passages. We've been 80 miles offshore along the west coast of Baja where there aren't more than a few hundred people in a 200-mile stretch of coast. A lot of these things are better to have done than to do. But they build character and they make great dock stories.

**End**

## Final Update

### Prescott, Arizona, summer 2010

In May, 2008, after 28,000 nautical miles under the keel, we came to the end of the rhumb line. It's not that we didn't want to continue boating, but you have to quit sometime. Like football players, we decided to quit before we had to be dragged off the field. We have done most everything we can do. We've gone south from San Francisco to Mexico four times and Baja-Bashed all the way back up three times. The last time up the coast from La Paz, Mexico to Nanaimo, British Columbia, was on Dockwise's *Super Servant III* transport ship in December, 2007. We've gone up the pacific coast from San Francisco to Alaska and back and spent 2 years in Alaska and British Columbia.

So with great sadness we have sold *Four Seasons*. She has been a great boat and our home for almost 8 years. We had no major problems in our cruising life and we have seen almost 4000 miles of the Pacific Coast that would have been impossible any other way. The compass now points toward land.

Maybe this was never a dream, but it turned out to be.

## The End