

The First Trip Down the Baja

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Summary of Trip from Ensenada to La Paz, Jan. 15 to Jan. 27, 2001

A Note About Sea Conditions, Dogs, Logbooks, and Weather: This trip spanned almost two weeks, from Monday, January 15th to Saturday, January 27th, 2001. We used Walt Hack as our weather router. There were no major storms affecting us, but his advice seemed to indicate better conditions than we found. He was predicting 15-25 knot winds, and we frequently found 25-35 knots. He was predicting 8-10 foot seas, and we found 12-15 foot following seas in many cases. In the trip report, I report all winds as we measured them on the anemometer, which is Apparent Wind. The wind was almost always directly on the stern, so actual wind is that stated plus about 6 knots of boat speed. This trip was rougher than we expected, but the Nordhavn handles seas of this magnitude very well and we were fairly comfortable, once we got used to it and got over our initial nervousness.

We kept the paravanes in the water all the way from Ensenada, and this cost us about 0.6 of a knot in boat speed, or about 10%. Looking at it another way, they cost us about 20% in fuel. They are definitely worth it though. The paravanes take out most of the roll, and the pitching is gentle. In addition, I think the paravanes help with the yawing you get with large following seas. One of my main concerns on the trip was the possible failure of the autopilot and the difficulty of steering the boat manually in these seas. It would not be fun. The autopilot works really hard, and you can hear the motor whining to try to correct for the yawing. It performed flawlessly, however, and we certainly became believers in the Simrad-Robertson autopilot. I installed a rate compass instead of the usual standard heading compass for the autopilot, and this helps immensely in following seas.

We did not keep a very good log during the first portion of this trip because of disorganization, dealing with fuel line problems, and nervousness.

Ensenada to Isla Cedros Village: The trip started from Marina Coral on Monday, January 15, 2001, at 1400. We had planned to leave the previous day, and had picked up Dennis Lawrence from PAE to serve as crew on Saturday. The marina office had not completed our paperwork, however, due to the Port Captain's office being closed the previous Thursday and Friday because of storms. At least that was their excuse. We could not leave until we had our clearance papers, so we stayed over Sunday night and spent Monday morning getting fishing licenses. This is another story, but it took 4 hours to get fishing licenses. The paperwork was completed at 2 pm, and we were saddled up and ready to ride. We stored the car in the underground parking of Hotel Coral while we were gone.

We left the harbor and immediately found winds of 30 knots and seas of 6-8 feet, which was more than we expected, but we knew these would be on the stern quarter once we rounded Isla Todos Santos, so we kept going. We were excited, nervous, a little scared, and a little seasick. The dogs were upset and tried to be with us in the pilot house, constantly underfoot and uncomfortable. A couple of hours after we left, the large VHF antenna fell with a crash out of its upper support and had to be tied up.

Night fell quickly -- too quickly for us, as we had never done an overnight passage before and here we were going 50-60 miles off the coast of Baja in, for us, heavy seas. We were slowly adjusting to our new conditions, and Russ had just taken over the watch at 10 pm when he noticed that the Racor vacuum was creeping up. It was 5 in-Hg, and was reminiscent of a similar problem we had been fighting since the boat was new, that of clogged fuel lines. From previous experience, I knew that this boat runs with essentially zero vacuum, and anything approaching 10 in-Hg causes the engine to starve out and quit. However, we thought we had solved that problem, and, since we had taken on fuel at Ensenada, we got sidetracked into thinking that we had bad fuel and were clogging filters. So we started changing filters, but to no avail. After changing a filter, the engine would run about 2 or 3 hours, then vacuum would start to build. Using the satellite telephone on board, we placed calls to PAE, and to Dick Gee of Alaska Diesel about the problem. Dick was very helpful, spending a long time with us going through various scenarios, but no resolution was at hand.

We soldiered on through the night and all the next day fighting this problem, stomachs in knots all the way, and finally arrived and anchored at the North end of Cedros at 10 pm. We had a good night's sleep and decided to go into Cedros Village the next day to sort things out. Since this is a port, we had to go up to the Port Captain's office and check in. Very pleasant people there, who did our paperwork for us quickly and efficiently, and did not charge us any fees for it.

It was here that Dennis talked me into changing the secondary fuel filter on the engine. I knew this could not be the problem since the secondary filter is downstream of the engine fuel pump and has nothing to do with vacuum on the Racor side, but he had been nagging for hours that it was the only thing we hadn't tried, so we did it. In the process we broke the o-ring at the top of the filter. Having no replacement, we felt that we were now in deep doo-doo, because now the engine would not run at all. However, Donna saved the day, coming up with a rubber band that was about the same diameter as the o-ring. We installed it and it worked.

Now at least we were back to the original problem. We stayed overnight at Cedros Village, and I laid awake all night going through scenarios that would lead to a solution. In the morning, I had it. We left Cedros Village, and with Dennis and Donna in the pilothouse, I went down in the engine room to do my experiment. I loosened the fuel delivery hose going to the Racors on the Racor end. The vacuum dropped. I waited for it to build up again, then loosened the other end. The vacuum stayed high. Eureka! There had to be blockage in this hose. We changed it, and the vacuum stayed low all the way to Turtle Bay. A post-mortem on the hose showed a flap of rubber in the direction of flow, which would gradually close tighter and tighter until it choked off

all the fuel. Relieving pressure by stopping the engine would allow the flap to spring back so fuel would flow again. At this point, I was confident we had solved the problem, and we bypassed Turtle Bay, which wouldn't have been much help anyway, and kept on going.

This was a total distance of 234 nautical miles in 34 hours of traveling time, counting a number of stops or slow-downs for the fuel problem, for an average speed of 6.8 knots.

Cedros Village to Bahia Santa Maria: We left Cedros Village at 0700 on Thursday, January 18, 2001. No sign of the fuel problem. We had solved it for good, and the rubber band in the secondary filter was holding. We bypassed Bahia Tortuga, our fall-back anchorage if we still had problems, and elected to go on to Cabo.

The wind was NE, on our stern quarter at about 15-20 and remained that way all day. At midnight, it increased to 30-35 for a few hours, but seas were following and not too bad. We had originally laid out the course to go straight across the bight from Bahia Tortuga to Bahia Santa Maria, but because of the fuel problem, even though solved, we decided to stick closer to shore by Punta Abrejos, and San Juanico, then to Santa Maria. This adds about 6 hours to the time, but we felt more secure.

Between 10 pm Thursday and 4 am Friday, the winds increased to 30-35 knots and it was pretty rough. The seas were steeper, and with the swells on the starboard quarter and more beam-to than before, the boat wallowed a lot and the pitching was sharper. The dogs were very upset, and nobody got much sleep. By daybreak, however, things had smoothed out considerably. The remainder of the day was not as rough, and we made it to Bahia Santa Maria at around 7 pm and anchored for the night just off the fishing camp.

This was a total distance of 285 miles in 36 hours for an average speed of 7.9 knots.

Bahia Santa Maria to Cabo San Lucas: We left Bahia Santa Maria at 0730 on Saturday, January 20, 2001. This was our best day of the entire trip. We had very calm seas, winds of less than 15 knots all the way, and only long, slow swells. At about 10 am, we got a call on VHF from Captain Rip Knott aboard the 62' Nordhavn *Sans Souci* which was following us, gaining slowly. Just before noon, they pulled abreast of us, fairly close off our starboard side, and Captain Knott took a whole roll of pictures of *Four Seasons* going along the shore of Bahia Magdalena. Quite impressive! These are our favorite pictures of the trip.

We sat out on the bow with the boat on autopilot for several hours during the day, and saw many whale spouts off in the distance, none close enough to really see. We had a great night, traveling with *Sans Souci* who gradually pulled ahead of us, and a Mason 54 Cutter, *Final Straw*, that Dennis had sold originally. It was a clear, calm night, and we made such good time we had to drop the engine speed to 1700 rpm at 0100 in order to get to Cabo at daybreak.

Rounding Cabo San Lucas rocks at sunup was quite a thrill. There were hundreds of sportfishing boats heading out for the day, and we ran through them for the last hour, even before it started to get light. Then the sun came up, and as we rounded the rocks, we got some pictures of us on the

bow with the rocks in the background. Heading into the harbor, we saw a whale spout just off the starboard side, and we saw a large sea turtle floating a few yards off. We secured a berth at the new Marina just at the harbor entrance, and took a deep breath. We had made it alive in a Nordhavn held together with a rubber band!

Since this is a port, we enlisted an agent to do the paper work checking in and out, which cost about \$85. Dennis left to fly home, with our thanks for his valuable help in getting us here. We found **Sans Souci** in a berth in the older marina, and met Captain Rip Knott who gave us the pictures he had taken. He was enroute to France with the boat and a crew of four. The owners were not aboard.

We spent Sunday, Monday and Tuesday nights at the marina at about \$85 per night, then took on 323 gallons of fuel at \$1.20 per gallon, the least expensive we found anywhere in Baja, and went out to the anchorage area to secure a mooring ball Wednesday night. The mooring ball is \$20 per night, owned by the Hotel Hacienda. You moor fore and aft between two balls which have lanyards attached. Pretty easy. While there, we saw hundreds of 12" jellyfish in the water around the boat.

While in Cabo San Lucas, we enjoyed many of our favorite restaurants including "The Shrimp Bucket" in town, where we had Molcajete, a stew-like dish with shrimp and vegetables served in a heavy cast iron bowl, and "The Office", a small place on the beach East of Hotel Hacienda that serves spectacular lobster. We decided to go back to "The Office" for dinner on the beach Wednesday night while on the mooring ball, and took the water taxi over, after they assured us that they could take us back to the boat after dinner. They (or we) misunderstood, and after dinner, we looked for a water taxi and they were all gone. "Oh no, Senor! They stop at 6!" our waiter told us. We had to take a cab back to town, then walk out to where the pangas tie up, to find one lone guy on a panga who agreed to take us back to our boat.

This was a total distance of 175 miles in 24 hours for an average speed of 7.3 knots and a total fuel burn of about 350 gallons. Total distance traveled since Ensenada was 694 nautical miles. Total travel time was 94 hours. The main engine hours were 98.6 and generator hours were 82.8. If we estimate that the generator burns about 0.6 gallons per hour, then it burned 50 gallons of fuel and the main burned 300 gallons. The main engine burn rate was about 3.05 gallons per hour. Engine rpm was 1800 most of the way except for the last 6 hours into Cabo San Lucas when it was 1700. We ran the generator mostly for the watermaker, but some for heat, hot water, and clothes washing.

Cabo San Lucas to Los Frailes: We left Cabo San Lucas at 0800 on Thursday, January 25, 2001. At 10 am, the autopilot started acting up, giving error messages of "Lost Compass Heading". At 1030, it quit entirely, with the boat going into a starboard circle. I found a broken wire under the closet where they had been spliced. There was water here from the washing machine (a separate problem) and the wires were in the water. I fixed the wire and everything was OK again.

We arrived at Los Frailes at 1500 after a fairly pleasant trip with 15-20 knots of wind and small seas, mostly on the nose. Anchored with the paravanes out and had a peaceful night. Total miles were 47.3 and total time was 7 hours for an average speed of 6.7 knots.

Los Frailes to Ensenada de los Muertos: We left Los Frailes at 0700 on Friday, January 26, 2001. The winds peaked to about 35 knots briefly and seas were about 4-6 feet on the nose. We anchored at 1415 and things were calm until just before midnight when we got a “Corumel” wind from the Southwest, gusting to 37 knots by 3 am. We stayed up on anchor watch all night, but had no sign of dragging. Two other boats were in the anchorage with us.

This was a total of 37.5 miles in 7.2 hours for an average speed of 5.2 knots. Much of the trip was at 1600 rpm to reduce bouncing. Seas were a little rough.

Ensenada de los Muertos to Marina de La Paz: We left Ensenada de Los Muertos at 0650 on Saturday, January 27, 2001, heading for La Paz. It was a fairly rough trip with winds of 25-30 knots on the nose most of the way, and correspondingly rough seas. Once again, we slowed to 1600 rpm much of the way. We arrived at the head of the La Paz channel at 1430, and found that the charts for this channel are quite accurate, as opposed to the remainder of the Baja charts, which are off by ½ mile or more. We followed the channel down to Marina De La Paz, and pulled into the slip which had been occupied by **Number One**, Mike Ford, until just a day before, at 1530 hours. It took three tries to get into the slip because of current and wind, but Bob and Carol from the 36' Union sailboat **Apophoge** were on hand to help.

This final leg was 64 miles in 8.6 hours for an average speed of 7.4 knots.

We had achieved our goal of making La Paz. The total trip from Ensenada was 842 miles and the total traveling time was 116.6 for an average overall speed of 7.2 knots. This is with paravanes deployed all the way.

What did we learn?

- We can do overnight passages, though they still are not our favorite thing.
- Baja charts are inaccurate by ½ mile or more, worst in the Sea of Cortez.
- We need to keep a much more complete log book.
- We need a lot more handholds inside the boat!
- We can deal with engine problems and solve them.
- We can accommodate crew, at least one person, on long trips.
- We can handle moderately rough seas with only moderate discomfort.
- We need to have quick, easy meals prepared that take little or no cooking.
- The dogs can survive.
- We like this life!

The End