

Confessions of a Trailer Sailor, Channel Islands

June 18, 2022

Sometimes a long day isn't a bad thing. When our planet tilts towards the south, the sun springs up by five AM and hangs around until well past eight, it can be pure pleasure to while away those hours cruising in a small slow sailboat.

A Southern California downwind tour from Santa Barbara to Oceanside with visits to Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara and Catalina Islands in sailboat Minnie was the plan, but first there were a few logistical challenges to meet. We had a very slow start towing Minnie, a trailerable Catalina 22 which is outfitted for cruising, through congested Los Angeles freeways arriving at Santa Barbara Marina on the first sunny day after a long stretch of June gloom. Stepping the mast, preparing the rigging, testing new wiring for steaming and anchor lights and setting her free to float again took us into the golden evening hours. To be on the water again, off the freeway, back in the boat, even just dockside on this beautiful summer evening was pure joy. The following day we drove the van and trailer home to San Diego as there were no economical options for storage in Santa Barbara and we would not be ending the trip there regardless. The third day we returned to Santa Barbara by train to complete provisioning perishables and fill the new "Rough Country" 12-volt, 48-quart refrigerator/ freezer, powered by a Yeti 1500 watt battery bank, which can keep the little fridge powered up to six days without a recharge. The Yeti battery bank can be charged by shore power, or while cruising with a 110-watt solar panel.

The morning of the Summer Solstice felt like a perfect time to depart for Santa Cruz Island, part of Channel Islands National Park. In the Santa Barbara Channel, the southern flowing California Current comes around Point Conception to meet the northern flowing Southern California current, which mixes warm and cool waters creating one of the most biologically diverse environments on the California coast. Early departures are essential to cross the channel as winds can increase rapidly and cause steep waves to form in the western section, away from the shelter of Point Conception. This occurs just about the time you reach the shipping lanes. During the Covid lockdown traffic in these lanes was nearly absent, it is now back in full force with ships serving both the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach which are the first and second busiest ports in America. Our new handheld AIS, VHF radio by Icom is helpful to gauge how far registered ships are from Minnie, up to a twelve mile radius, but it is still difficult to estimate by sight the distance and speed of the approaching ships. We have "hove to" in the channel, to wait for a ship to pass to proceed again when we thought it was safe, only to realize that we had not checked the chart carefully enough and there was indeed a "dog leg", or a slight directional change in the shipping lane that resulted in us seeing the bow of the ship for longer than was comfortable. As we crossed in front of the bow, about a mile off, the ship changed course, and not away from us! The ship's captain responded courteously to a quick call on the radio, acknowledging our position. In general we try to pass behind the ships, but timing it is a bit nerve wracking.

On this Summer Solstice Day with hours of daylight to spare we made for the anchorage at Cueva Valdez, not to spend the night, past experience has taught us better, but just to visit the “pirate” caves again and to swim in the crystal blue water. One of our cherished resources for sailing the Channel Islands is an inherited old edition of “Cruising Guide to the Channel Islands” by Brian Fagan. It was written prior to the availability of GPS and we have been adding the GPS info as we go. We have been delighted by the great descriptions of the anchorages, but also by the descriptions of how crowded these anchorages used to be. Cueva Valdez was described as commonly holding up to fifteen boats anchored bow and stern with the beach teeming with children playing on hot summer days. This day, as usual for us, there was one other boat in the anchorage. The only time the antique edition steered us wrong was off Santa Rosa Island at Johnson’s Lee anchorage, the guidebook described anchoring off a pier which we never found. We hailed a well weathered fisherman on the only other boat out there to inquire about a pier, he looked like he was turning back the pages of his memory and said, “I think there used to be a pier here when I was a little kid”, then he looked up and pointed out what was left of the pilings.

There are several scenic semi-protected anchorages along the north coast of Santa Cruz Island. We settled at Pelican, a more protected and particularly beautiful one with only one other boat anchored on a single hook. It was a family from Ventura that had been exploring these islands since the 1970’s. The captain remarked that every year there are more boats in the marinas that never leave the slips and less boats visiting the islands. Our old cruising guide noted up to forty boats anchoring there! Over the next couple days several more boats arrived, all setting bow and stern anchors closer to the western cliff, apparently a Santa Barbara Yacht Club custom. Pelican Bay was the site of an old resort that catered to sportsmen and early Hollywood royalty, it was owned by a couple who had been eking out a living on the island since the early 1900s. “Diary of a Sea Captain’s Wife” by Margaret Holden Eaton is a charming and brutal description of their life on the island.

Sailing downwind along the north and east coast of Santa Cruz Island is spectacular, the following sea sometimes teases and feathers above Minnie’s waterline. We don’t have a special sail for downwind runs so we set up “wing on wing” by sheeting the head sail out with a whisker pole. To form a “guy” the lazy jib sheet is clipped into a carabiner lashed at the beam that also serves as part of the preventer system. With this small boat we really feel the following sea against the rudder, but with close management of the tiller Minnie makes a respectable downwind run. Rounding the points is interesting with expected wind and heading changes so we prepare ahead to bring the mainsail around with a controlled gybe and continue on a broad reach leaving the headsail on the whisker pole. For the approach to Smuggler’s Cove on the protected south side, we begrudgingly took the sails down and fired up the 6-horsepower engine as “island blockage” calms the prevailing wind close in on this side of the island. We had an idyllic summer evening after a glorious sail enjoying the calm conditions, hot sun, clear warmish water and lingering daylight. There were just a couple small points of concern. Raging offshore winds can kick up after sundown here, so setting the anchor well and laying plenty of scope is critical. Minnie carries fifty feet of five eighths inch chain and one

hundred and fifty feet of line. Since Minnie is almost always the smallest sailboat at island anchorages, and the other sailboats mostly, thirty to fifty feet plus, carry all chain with a windlass, we have noticed that because of the rope scope vs the chain scope of the larger boats, Minnie moves quite differently at anchor on a single hook, especially in light wind. Another concern was the imminent forty two nautical mile open ocean crossing to Santa Barbara Island, Minnie's farthest to date. We made sure the handheld electronic navigation devices were fully charged, checked our "ditch bag", verified our planned route, thought about stocking the kayak dingy with food and water, and decided against sleeping in our wet suits.

Pre-dawn Rod discovered that all the boat's electrical system was not functioning. Prior to the trip he had passed a new electrical wire through the mast to serve the anchor, steaming, deck and running lights, which had also been replaced with LED bulbs. Because of the stepping of the mast the wiring connections between the mast and the deck suffer from excess movement and this wear and tear can cause fraying. He located a blown fuse, replaced it and we were on our way.

We departed Smuggler's anchorage just before first light with a gentle east wind. It was a long slow trip, checking navigation, practicing knot tying and times tables, assisting the sails with the motor to maintain headway above 4 knots, always wondering, "What happens if that 1.5 mile rock is not where it is supposed to be?" To our delight, just before noon it was "land ho", we spotted the twin peaks of Santa Barbara Island, exactly where they were rumored to be. With clearing skies and increasing wind we sailed into the anchorage on the lee of the island. Access to the island is very limited by steep cliffs, there used to be a ladder, but it has fallen into disrepair, and the only accessible landing was occupied by a motley gang of raucous sea lions. Their "locals only" vibe was not very inviting, nor the thoughts of running their gauntlet to access the island, or spending the night at anchor worried that we could be boarded by invading pinnipeds. The long hours of summer sunlight beckoned, we answered the call and decided to head straight to Catalina which offered more civilized anchorages. Midway on the crossing, wing on wing we were visited by a playful, lovely creature. It stayed with us for a half an hour, flirting with Minnie's fin keel, speeding ahead and circling back to join us again, twirling under water alongside us to show off its sixteen-foot-long fluorescent white belly. I have never seen a creature like this before, perhaps it was a small Minke whale or a very large bi-colored dolphin, either way it was an absolute to delight to be in the right place at the right time to share the ocean with this beauty.

Our trusty cruising guide for "Cat Harbor" cautioned us not to anchor in the lane reserved for the landing of the sea plane that has not arrived for many years. Compared to the cacophony of the anchorage at Santa Barbara Island it was a pleasure to awaken to the golden fog crowned hills of this protected and quiet anchorage on Catalina's west side. One of the lovely things about Catalina Harbor is its proximity to the hot showers and hamburgers of Two Harbors on the opposite side of the isthmus, which is also served by direct ferry service to the mainland. We planned to pick up a friend who was joining us for the next leg of the journey. There was a little excitement to break up the morning calm when a Grand Banks trawler came speeding through the

mooring field with the harbor patrol boat in hot pursuit. The trawler was going fast into the shallows, it was like a cowboy movie with the harbor patrol trying to rope in the trawler. Finally, the harbor patrol had to “head him off at the pass” and go in front of the trawler to get it to stop. We learned later that the trawler driver thought that he was heading for the harbor exit. He must have put “Two Harbors” into the GPS and failed to notice the three-quarter mile wide land mass in front of him.

Catalina Island is a sun warmed rock of steep mountains surrounded by cool water with cliffs forming the entrance to the isthmus harbor. Significant winds can blow through the anchorage but nestled deep in the harbor it is difficult to know if those winds signal a gale blowing in the open ocean, or if it is just a localized Venturi. After meeting our friend Michelle, who arrived at Two Harbors from Los Angeles via Catalina Express ferry, we did the easy walk across the island to board Minnie and continue to idyllic Little Harbor, four miles south. It was blowing at least 15 knots in the anchorage, so we briefed Michelle on safety and use of the Lifesling, and put two reefs in Minnie’s small mainsail. We departed believing we were going to be in for a very exciting sail, but outside the harbor entrance, leaving the hot mountainous land behind, the wind calmed so much we immediately raised full sails and even had to employ the engine before we reached Little Harbor. We anchored bow and stern, closer to shore and dividing the space between the two large sailboats that occupied the anchorage. Later we learned that the previous night both boats had broken free of their anchors and bumped their deep keels in the shallows of the bay. The bottom is sand and gravel over rock so the holding can be sketchy. We passed some lovely days there, drunk on daylight, kayaking, and snorkeling the clear water, hiking, and napping, just loving the fact that we were here together, we’d made it this far, and it wasn’t over yet. Michelle had booked one of the campsites overlooking the anchorage for her stay, so each morning we kayaked to the beach to hook up for the day’s adventures and each evening returned her to shore. Having the campsite was a nice way to share the journey and keep everyone comfortable on the small boat. It also made some interesting sojourns climbing the hill barefoot to her camp after dinner and drinks aboard.

Eventually we made our way around the south end of Catalina to Avalon, where Michelle caught the ferry back to the mainland, and fourth of July celebrations were ramping up. With its steep hills, restaurants and beautiful boats in the harbor Avalon could pass for a Mediterranean port. Like many resort towns it is the kind of place where the residents have either three jobs or three houses. We met a couple very colorful characters that shared some of the island’s history with us. Marcelino Saucedo, author of “Dream Makers and Dream Catchers”, an octogenarian who told us about the Mexican families who settled on the island, did the dangerous work in the quarry, built many of the homes and supported the growth of the tourism industry during its Hollywood heyday. As kids they played baseball with the Chicago Cubs who did spring training in Avalon and worked as golf caddies for the rich and famous visiting from Los Angeles. And then there was “Lolo” whose barbershop is an essential stop on any visit to Avalon. It is an eclectic museum, a tribute to Catalina’s rich history of baseball, a repository of some of the elegant remnants of the long-gone Hotel Catherine, with photos of the retired World War Two planes and the pilots that brought in the tourists,

photos of the movie stars and the mariachis that entertained them. Lolo knew them all. The stories he told, you could not hear from anyone but a barber or a bartender. The look on Rod's face when Lolo brought out the straight razor was, "Mister Wizard, SAVE ME!". The haircut was indeed rough, the eyebrows were patchy, there was even a bit of bloodletting, but it was a vast improvement on how Rod looked when he arrived. We jokingly named Lolo "The Blind Barber of Avalon". Lolo is definitely not blind, but even he would admit that at ninety years old he does not see as well as he used to. Nonetheless my advice is, if you are in Avalon man-up and get a haircut, you will not be disappointed.

Avalon to Dana Point was a light wind sail with motor assist, we arrived at the free anchorage off Baby Beach just before the arrival of the Fourth of July revelers. When we departed for Oceanside the following day on the third of July, the anchorage was nearly full, requiring some tight negotiations to make our exit. Sailing South to Oceanside made the final leg of the trip, and a spectacular trip it had been. We were blessed with fine weather and wind, new connections made, and old ones reinforced. Minnie performed beautifully despite her little electrical glitches. Motor sailing the during the last hour off Camp Pendleton we kept company with an old humpback whale. He was slow moving and grizzled, not playful or showing off, he was going where he needed to go, and if we wanted to go along too, that was our choice. We parted company with him at Oceanside Harbor entrance buoy where he was spotted by a commercial whale watching boat. As we entered the harbor, we heard the whale watchers let out a collective gasp of joy and awe as they spotted "our" whale surfacing before another deep dive. It was a perfect ending to the journey.

Erin Quinn