

A SHORT STORY FROM OUR FRIEND AND NYC CHARTER MEMBER GUNNAR WICKMAN

I lived on Kauai Hawaii for nearly 30 years. My first land fall was Hanalei bay in 1974; it had taken us almost 3 days to sail there from Oahu on a old 40' wooden ketch with no engine. We had not taken along any food to speak of so when we got ashore the three of us pooled our resources and ordered one fried egg and one order of hash browns at the then Sunrise Café. We left as we arrived, hungry. Since then I have sailed between all the Hawaiian Islands a number of times but I have never again seen the channel between Oahu and Kauai as calm as the summer in 1974.

Carl, a friend of mine owned a J-24 named Juice which we sailed in local races and occasionally sailed to Oahu or Maui to race. Taking a J-24 across the channel to Oahu is not what this very capable vessel was designed to do. We, the crack racing crew, had long ago gotten tired of the long sail (92 nm) to the Ali Wai Marina from Nawiliwili or Hanalei Bay which was traditionally done at night so that one would arrive in daylight. No matter how we tried to avoid lots of wind and big seas they somehow always found us. ¶With this said, getting a delivery crew together was pretty difficult as time went by. Jim (another fellow sailor) chartered Juice from Carl for a race from Oahu to Kauai. Jim in turn asked me if I could make sure that the Juice was on Oahu in time for the race. The race was some weeks away and when a \$100 dollar bill appeared, the deal was struck.

Since our last trip across the big water (in a lot of wind and big seas) Carl had the foresight to have two reefs sewn into the delivery main as well as one reef in the 100% jib just in case. For those of you who have raced J-24's you know that you do not reef these boats except with a flattening reef that only flattens the sail, the sail area stays much the same. Even since the delivery date was a several weeks away I contacted at least four fellow sailors as potential crew then spent the money and forgot about the whole thing, at least until Jim reminded me that the dead line was only a few days away. I contacted my potential crew and one by one they had other commitments all of a sudden. Hmm, did they know something I did not? The skies were clear with trade winds around 15-18 knots. What could scare these seasoned sailors away from a pleasure sail? Perhaps it was time to check the weather forecast. It turned out that the prediction was NW 20-25 knots and large seas. Doable, but it would be hard going and I would definitely need at least one person to hold the tiller while I tended to sails, etc. I had my reputation at stake as a person who does what he has promised and the delivery money had, after all, been spent.

As luck would have it I ran into Teri who said she had a friend who wanted to go sailing for the experience. No, she was not an experienced sailor, but hopefully she did not listen to local weather forecasts. At this point anyone would do, experienced or not. Teri made the call and my to be crew would meet me at the boat in Hanalei the next afternoon. I had some time to borrow an inflatable life raft, get a supply of Granola bars remembering being hungry was a negative experience at best, and since cooking any hot food on a J-24 in bad weather would probably be impossible Granola bars was the perfect solution.

There are three things that will sink a J-24 in bad weather every time. The cockpit seats, unless secured, will open and fill the boat with water when taking on breaking seas. I knew that. Done. Number 2: the forward hatch, unless cross latched to stanchions, can open when encountering breaking waves over the bow; Done. Number three: the main hatch will also float away and has to be lashed down in offshore conditions. Done. What could go wrong?

Now I settled down on the beach to wait for my crew person to arrive. I nodded off and awakened to a girl my age asking if I might be the person looking for a crew for the crossing to Oahu, she obviously had not checked the weather.

The old saying, "don't judge a book by its cover," comes to mind and my first impression of Cynthia was that she would be the first I would talk to at a party but probably the last I would pick for a stormy sailing adventure. Well, I was wrong, and she turned out to be perhaps not fearless but she never complained once during this crossing.

We left Hanalei Bay in the late afternoon with the usual trade winds and reasonable seas; the forecast had once again been wrong, thought I. With full delivery main and the 100% jib not reefed, an hour later we went by Kilauea light house and were on course to Kaena point on Oahu some 65 nm away on a close reach, making good time even if the wind was building. No reason to reef since we were in the groove even if somewhat overpowered and no weight on the rail. Darkness comes quickly in the tropics probably even faster when the weather is questionable. This is probably hard to prove scientifically but that was my take at the time just the same. Now it was pitch dark and the motion and wind was building rapidly. The waves were on our beam and when we reached a crest I had to let the main sail flog as not to tip over. This was the time I chose to introduce Cynthia to the finer points of steering a 24 foot fin keel vessel in 40-50 knots of wind with seas topping 40 feet which makes the tops of the waves break and the boat slide down the face of the wave sideways in a fashion. I traded places and went to reef the headsail. Later she told me that the visibility was so bad that she could not see or hear me once I passed the cockpit. Next, I took in the 3rd reef in the mainsail and that went well. As I settled back in the cockpit I shone a light on were the jib was supposed to be. It must have caught a wave, since all I could see was bits and pieces of what was once a jib with a reef. I suggested to Cynthia that she had earned a Granola bar and if tired she could go below and try to get some sleep on the windward side, which she did. Not for long, mind you, since the motion and the water below decks made it impossible to get any rest. Even with no headsail and a 3rd reef in the main I still had to "flog" the main every time we reached a crest so that we would not roll over. The last thing I remember, just as we were a few miles of the lee of Kaena point, close to dawn, was a cruise liner that in spite of the conditions looked as if it was docked at a wharf as it passed us to the south. Later on I got confirmation that my assessment of waves and wind was pretty close. The Coast Guard had called for gale warnings that night which I was unaware of.

We delivered the boat on time just as my friends were getting ready to call the Coast Guard. This may have been the slowest crossing ever at 28 hours.

Cynthia and I have been married for 30 years and have recently relocated to the Pacific Northwest where we purchased a 36' wooden gillnetter converted to yacht standards.

Sincerely,

Gunnar Wickman,
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