

Sailing Back from Hawaii: Twice the Fun for Half the Price

By Paul Kamen

If you are planning to ship your boat back from Hawaii after the 2014 Pacific Cup, you are about to miss half the fun and pay twice the price.

Yes, I'm going to make the case for sailing your boat back to California, even if it's as small as a Moore 24. You will more than double your enjoyment of the North Pacific in summer, and you'll save the cost of shipping your boat home. But first: If you only have three weeks off work for the Pac Cup, stop here, because you can't do the return trip with a small boat on a tight schedule. To enjoy the passage you'll need to allow 30 days, and before that you'll need a couple of days after the awards banquet at Kaneohe (July 25) to re-provision. This means that you cannot count on being back at your desk before Monday September 1. If that's okay, read on.

Why sail the uphill part of the trip when ships built like floating parking lots are ready to whisk your boat and trailer back to the mainland? Well, why do you want to sail to Hawaii in the first place, when there are airliners ready to get you there in five hours? The reasons are the same: It's fun, it's an adventure, and it's a tremendously satisfying achievement when it's over. And you save airfare and shipping costs.

But how hard is it? And how uncomfortable? (and how dangerous?) Not nearly as much as you might think. I sailed my Merit 25 back from Kauai in 1986, after racing in the Singlehanded Transpac, and it was thoroughly enjoyable. My time was 26 days, with zero use of engine power.

The big difference between the race over and the cruise back is the change of pace. You're not racing, you're not pushing the limits of your gear, and you're not sailing on the edge of a catastrophic wipe-out for days on end. When you're cruising home, the constant apprehension that something important might break is almost completely gone. You can sail conservative, kick back and read some really long books (I polished off *Moby Dick*) or learn to play a musical instrument (Rod Park taught himself to play the banjo on his SC-40 in 1980).

I am assuming you will do the trip singlehanded. These boats are small, and singlehanded gives you a kind of emotional freedom (not to mention "hygienic freedom") that you'll never find with even one other crew on your boat. But more significantly, being alone for nearly a month is just plain good for you. Consider that most aboriginal cultures have a tradition of "going walkabout" or something similar. It's a prolonged solo journey during which we recalibrate our psyche. This is a normal part of human experience and we should all be doing it more often just to stay healthy.

So much for pop-psyche theory. In practice, you'll need at least two good autopilots, a pile of books and audio, and enough minutes left on your satphone to phone home frequently.

More practical tips, tricks, and caveats:

- 1) Remember that YOU ARE NOT RACING. This can be a difficult concept, and it was hard for me the first couple of days out. I wanted to sheet in and go close-hauled right into the tradewind seas at 4.5 knots. Slam! Crash! Barf! (except the barf part, thankfully). Relief came when I reefed

way down, switched to the storm jib, and went three knots close reaching instead of 4.5 beating. The slamming stopped, and I could enjoy the ride, relax, set the fishing line and open a book. At three knots and change it takes about a week to go far enough north to get out of the trades, and on my close-reaching course I was actually a little west of my departure longitude when I could finally shake out the reefs and go close-hauled again.

2) Nearly all boats will self-steer just fine on a beat or close reach. You just need a good way to lock the tiller and make small adjustments. My personal favorite is the telescoping Forespar hiking stick, working in conjunction with those keyhole hiking stick handle sockets made for the purpose, installed on the inside faces of the cockpit coamings to hold the ball at the end of the stick. You can adjust the hiking stick length in very small increments, and you can unhook it temporarily to dodge a ship without losing the setting.

3) Learn to enjoy light air. The easiest route home, if the weather is normal, is to go more-or-less through the middle of the high. This means a lot of light-air sailing, sometimes in lumpy swell conditions. The trick is to configure both sails to be very flat but with a lot of twist. Use full backstay to bend the mast, and add topping lift or a lifting vang to support the boom to get lots of twist in the main. The sail will just kind of swish from side to side instead of banging and crashing. Set a non-overlapping jib, sheeted to the spinnaker ring on the mast, for the same effect up front. In a good cross-swell I've had the speedo up to two knots with no wind at all.

4) Bring a spare autopilot. The on-deck tiller actuators have a piston that goes in and out of a cylinder, and when the piston goes out, air goes in, and that air has a lot of salt spray mixed in with it. The actuator will die before you are home, so you need two. Three would be better. You really do need your autopilot to work for the last half of the trip, or it will be no fun at all.

5) Storm tactics. It's very unlikely that you will encounter any real storms between Hawaii and California in August, especially after you have sailed north for a day or two. But you might run into some really nasty gradient or synoptic wind associated with fair weather. These can blow at 30-35 knots for days on end, and kick up some pretty big seas - just like along our coast in spring. You might even have to ride out a 40-knot night. Heaving to or lying a-hull are not good options: It seems fine 'till that one-in-a-thousand breaking crest comes along, and a little boat can be rolled to 90 degrees or beyond.

The simple and safe mode for a small light boat in big waves with breaking crests is to run downwind under bare poles with the autopilot driving. The only problem is, you might not want to go six knots towards somewhere southwest of San Diego. The solution - one that I had not worked out in advance - was to tow four plastic milk crates (West Marine "Space Cases") as drogues. Speed dropped from six knots to two, and I got a decent night's sleep. In the morning the wind was down a little and I went back to beam reaching, at first hand-steering to dodge the breaking crests, then back to autopilot as the wind slacked off a little and the waves lost their teeth.

6) AIS is your best friend. Back in '86 we had funky "radar detectors" and needed the illegal strobe light on top of the mast. Automated collision warning is far better these days. You will sleep soundly with AIS.

7) You will sleep even more soundly if your boat has foam flotation (especially if you've been watching the wrong movies). For a light boat with cored hull construction, installing enough foam to render the boat unsinkable is a lot easier than you might think. Rule of thumb: Add enough foam to hold up the ballast. Some blocks of dock flotation foam, carved to fit under the foredeck, under the cockpit and in the bottom half of the cockpit lockers will usually get you there. A boat with 1,000 lb. of ballast only needs 16 cubic feet. And, filling up the bottom half of a cockpit locker with foam just makes it easier to reach the gear stowed inside. It's amazing how little the foam costs in terms of useful space.

If you are seeing a lot of debris and worried about a collision at speed, you might also want to sleep with your feet forward.

8) Approach the coast high. I suggest working up to at least 41 north while still a few hundred miles out, so you have room to run off if the northerly gradient wind is blowing hard down the coast.

9) Provisioning for one person is actually pretty simple, especially if that person is you. Here's how a typical dinner worked on my boat: 1) Heat up half a pot of seawater on the one-burner butane stove. 2) Put an un-opened can of ravioli in the pot of water. 3) wait 30 minutes. 4) Take out the can, now heated all the way through, open and eat from the can. 5) Lick the fork clean and put it back in the galley rack. (Back in the day, the empty can went overboard. Let your conscience be your guide.) Finish off with a powerbar or two for desert.

10) My favorite swimming hole is the North Pacific. When you sail through the middle of the high, there will be days when you are staring at your reflection in the ocean for hours. Go for a swim with your snorkeling gear. Swim away from the boat and look back to see how clear the water is. Drop a penny and watch it sink for a mile. It's awesome. (But leave the helm locked over to one side, and trail a long line...)

11) Some of the safety considerations are a little different from the double-handed race. You don't have much use for a Lifesling, for example. What you do need is a way to climb back on the boat unassisted. The usual strategy is to tie one end of a length of dock line to the stern cleat (or stern pulpit base) with the other end tied to the toe rail maybe eight feet forward of the transom. The rope is adjusted to have just enough slack for the middle to reach the water, forming a swim step at the waterline. Along with this system, size your tether so that if you go overboard you will drag right alongside your rope boarding assist line. One long tether secured on deck just behind the mast seems to work well; there 's enough length to let you pee over the stern, go to the bow, and reach most of the cabin without unclipping. But if you go over the side you'll be right next to the boarding line, and if your boat is small you will slow it down enough to have at least a good chance of hauling yourself back on board using the waterline-level rope step.

Why are we really doing this? Lots of good reasons, and some silly ones too.

For years after your trip, when you work on your boat at the dock or in the boatyard, you will overhear passersby talking about the various boats they see as they walk by. One voice will say, "in 2014 that boat sailed all the way to Hawaii!" You get to shout back from your cabin, "and back!"



Fig-1
Twilight Zone, a Merit 25, at the start of the Singlehanded Transpac. The dome replaced the sliding hatch.



Fig-2
Typical Pacific High weather: Smooth water and a light headwind. Note the dome, the harness tether attached near the mast step, extra ventilator cowls, and anti-chafe gear on the aft lowers.



Fig-3
Phoning home from 400 miles out. The flotation foam lashed under the foredeck is visible, and the milk crates full of canned food are the same ones used as drogues during the really heavy stuff.

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