

BRINGING LYRA HOME by Ken Preston

This is the story of how I met a boat, fell in love with a town, adopted a family or two and sailed away. It was just supposed to be a simple . . . "buy boat, load up, sail home" kind of thing but it didn't work out quite that way.

I've always planned to sail off over the horizon some day, you know, cross oceans, see tropical islands, find flying fish in the cockpit. . . but one way or another I got to be rather old, fat and tired without ever quite managing even to find the boat to sail away in. This past Spring I stumbled on an ad for the perfect little solo ocean crossing sailboat at quite an attractive price. Two emails, a phone call and an airline ticket and I was set to fly to San Diego to buy her on the following Saturday. On Friday she sold to somebody else. I was stunned (and still have a cheap ticket to San Diego), but I assumed that one way or another that wasn't the boat for me. I don't know that I became fanatic about finding another equally good. . . don't recall ever deciding that I HAD to. . . but the fact of the matter is that I posted a new motto on my office wall . . . "Go Sailing Now, get old and die later. . ." and I spent a good bit of time thereafter doing internet searches on "Boat for Sale, Sail, 27', Diesel etc etc". I became quite familiar with what was on offer and climbed all over boats from Seattle to Oakland (my more or less normal working range). At length an old Albin Vega 27 named "Lyra" turned up, a boat on my short list for quality of construction and ocean sailing pedigree. She was equipped 3 years ago for a major cruise, with gadgets and vital equipment that I'd never even imagined putting on such a boat, radar, water maker, VHF, wind vane, autopilot, on and on and on. She was described in excellent condition, ready to continue her interrupted voyage. Her only problem in life was that she'd come to rest in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. For quick orientation, that's on the Pacific Coast of Mexico, 300 miles Southeast of Cabo San Lucas or, roughly speaking, 1000 miles SSE of San Diego, California. Home for me is Seattle. That's another 1200 miles NNW.

I had enough frequent flyer miles for one trip to see her so I went.

PUERTO VALLARTA, ON THE CHEAP

Arriving in Puerto Vallarta, I'd expected to find a "Mexican" hotel, small, cheap, the sort filled by truckers and traveling salesmen, no view, no pool, no air conditioning, small, hard beds and only one towel in the shower. The cab driver wouldn't take me there. . . said something about ". . . only for women to go with their customers. . ." or at least that was the gist of it. Instead I ended up at a "Mexican" hotel near the beach, "The Gaviota" which was \$38 per night instead of the \$20 in my budget, but a nice view out the balcony window. Still no AC, but a for real-if-small pool and genuine hot and cold running water, for a lot less than the Gringo hotels on the Avenue. Tired as I was, I couldn't just go off to bed though, not on my first night in a new town. From somewhere I dug up the energy to shower and wander out into the early evening of Puerto Vallarta's old town. Ah. Tacos on every corner and halfway down each block, music on all sides (some canned, some very fresh), beautiful people and exotic scenery. I ate in three different taco stands, wandered down to the waterfront and found the

“Malecon”. . .the waterfront promenade that is the hallmark of the town. There are all sorts of whimsical and beautiful bronze statues, deliberately striking architecture, and block after block of restaurants, bars, galleries and boutiques on one hand, the gently breaking Pacific Ocean on the other. It’s tourist heaven. . .but also, obviously, the whole town and all the visitors from Mexico City and Guadalajara are out to promenade as well. Carefully chaperoned young women smile at brilliantly combed young men, kids want to sit on statue laps or climb on pedestals. Vendors pass through the crowd with jugs of coconut milk, flan and sweets of all sorts, and the booths of painters and roast corn sellers and makers of jewelry and sandals break the river of people into smaller streams with eddies spinning around mimes, statues and one beautiful young woman painting extraordinary landscapes on sheets of glossy white paper, with no more than cans of spray paint, crumpled paper and a palette knife. All told it was a magical evening and I walked on and on, seeing things for the first time (often the best time) but finally came to the end of my energy and wandered at length back to the hotel and bed.

In the morning, after “huevos a la Mexicana” in a small all-night place named “Comida Economica” (cheap food) I caught an early bus from the old town toward Marina Vallarta. The busses in Vallarta run everywhere all the time and only cost \$4 pesos a ride. . .about 40 cents. The thousands of people who work in the hotels come from all over the city on those busses and I’d hit the peak of the commute. Since I’d gotten on right in the center of old town there were still a few seats left, so I made myself comfortable. In a few more blocks every square inch of bus was filled. One more stop left us with people hanging out both front and back doors and thereafter the driver stopped for nothing until we reached the hotel zone and began letting people off to go to work. So full was the bus that, sitting on the right side, I could not make out even a clue as to what was on the left side, toward the bay, as we went along. So of course, I rode right on by my stop at the Marina and had the full grand tour and a bit more. Finally, having walked back a mile or so from a stop near the Navy station I found the broker at home on his shiny new power cruiser and we set off in his van for Nuevo Vallarta to find the “Lyra”.

FIRST INTRODUCTION TO THE LADY

Walking down the ramp to meet her for the first time I was horrified. She was lying in Nuevo Vallarta marina, a sad tale of its own, left to rot slowly away in the wake of a bankruptcy following the devaluation of the Peso ten years ago. But the surroundings weren’t the problem. Her dodger and weather cloths were still on and the dark blue sunbrella hardly showed at all under the layer of guano. Mostly used pelican dinners.. Her decks were almost as thick in the white stuff with an additional layer of parking lot dust adding a filthy red brown hue. Her rigging showed heavy staining (stainless steel is an oxy-moron I think) and the sheets and halyards that were still rove off were waving frayed ends in the light breeze. A wreath of brilliant green weed spread out all around her water line. From 20 feet away she was a floating wreck. I’d just blown my whole store of frequent flyer miles to see something worse than was common at home. Anger, disappointment. . .but at least a little common sense left. All of that was superficial, or might be. I already knew she’d been laid up over a year, so what did I expect?

I went aboard, gingerly opened the hatch and stepped below. The world changed. There was a faint whiff of diesel in the air, but no mold or mildew. Freshly laundered upholstery, perfectly ordered book shelf, tidy installations of electronic equipment, bags and bags of sails, self steering gear carefully stowed with yet another solar panel in the forepeak, cushions, towels, bedding, all ready for someone to return at any moment and get under way. I dug into the engine compartment and found the old Volvo really quite clean, with fresh golden oil on the dipstick. But it wouldn't start. I ran the batteries down a good bit trying to get her to fire then gave up and sat and stared. In the cockpit Mike, the broker (with his Canadian accent undiminished by 8 years in Mexico) watched and frowned. I had been a live enough prospect to actually fly to see the boat but it was obvious I wasn't very happy yet. In fact I was about to fall over from jet lag and general exhaustion. We returned to town, spoke small nothings about boats and decisions and the like, shook hands and parted with considerable mutual doubt. I spent the evening, not so much wandering through the town seeing the sights as just quietly grumping to myself. I toured the various hotels up and down Francisco Madera Street and settled on a move to the Hotel Hortencia, small, family owned and operated, clean and cheap at \$20 per night.

In the morning I returned to the boat alone. I tried to pay the bus driver the same \$4 pesos required for any other ride around, but Nuevo Vallarta is a good bit further North along the road and the price is more. We straightened that out and preserved my reputation for honorable transactions and set off down the road. Much better rested this second day, I soon had the motor running like a fine sewing machine, satisfactorily burping cooling water into the bay and making only a small black smoke. Without really serious inventorying, I nevertheless pawed through most of the lockers and bins and pulled sails out of bags and rain gear out of closets for inspection. Above decks all was dirt, filth and sun burn, but clearly restorable. Belowdecks she was as sweet a boat as you're likely to find. By 2 in the afternoon I was finished. Still undecided mind you, but ready to leave her for the moment.



AND THEN I MET KATIA

To that point I was just another tourist in another new town, not a new boat owner nor yet in love with the city. Ah, how things do conspire. Looking for peace of mind and clarity on the decisions to be made I walked out of downtown and up the hill beyond the Tunnel freeway. A concrete stairway up the hillside lead to a maze of trails through smaller poorer homes, a tiny shop selling sodas and sweets and, where the view was best, some magnificent houses built 3 or 4 stories high with cascading flowers and amazing architecture, a remarkable neighborhood. In one of the poorer sections, brick buildings with many doors and odd angles, filled with dogs and kids I came across a tiny little girl in a brilliantly colored skirt playing with her Mom, climbing up and down a low brick wall and teasing a dog. I asked to take her picture and she told me "no" but her Mom argued in my favor so she smiled and said "ok". I didn't hesitate or take time to frame it perfectly, let alone ask her to say cheese. . . basically threw up the camera, generally centered the smile and fired away. That was that, but the die was cast. I made my polite goodbyes and wandered on for several hours more up the hill, back down through town, down the Malecon again, on and on through the afternoon and evening.

Skip ahead now. . . that was back at the first of May. Weeks passed. I made no offer but no other suitor approached the boat. The owners became increasingly certain I'd never buy, but whenever we talked I never quite backed out either. I studied everything I could find about the trip home from Mexico in a sail boat and it was basically all bad. Many people never do it. They sail south with the fine following wind, sea and current in the Fall of the year, spend the winter sailing along the Mexican coast, in the Spring they move up into the Sea of Cortez and before hurricane season starts in June they're safely North of La Paz, headed for a haulout at San Carlos over on the mainland side. The "Lyra", at 27' and 28 years of age was not a good candidate for either sailing home or being worth the cost of freight. The owners called one night to finally confirm that I would not be buying. I rehearsed my fears to them: The boat is lying in Puerto Vallarta, it's hurricane season and I need her in Seattle. To truck her directly from Puerto Vallarta to Seattle would require an enormously expensive tour of Mexico, more than she is worth. The hurricane season is on now and nobody can take her out of Vallarta until it's over in November. Then to sail her just to San Diego in the States (where a cheap ride up Interstate 5 is easy to find) is a trip of over 1000 miles and straight upwind against powerful prevailing Northwesterly wind and currents. If I couldn't manage that trip through fear, incompetence or really severe weather, the only real alternative would be to take her up the relatively protected Sea of Cortez to San Carlos, a much easier trip more like 600 miles of upwind travel and not exposed to the open Pacific, but with a truck ride at the end of it worth about half the boat's value. I don't have that sort of money and the risk seemed enormous to me. More weeks passed while I dithered on but finally, in a moment of weakness I suppose, I typed up and emailed off a ridiculous offer. . . and they took it.

VOYAGE PREPARATION

And so I came to be in Puerto Vallarta at the end of September to make careful inventory, see to bottom paint, wax, canvas cleaning, sail repairs and so forth. . . and gener-

ally to make ready for a 1st of November departure to the North. The boat was hauled out at "Opequimar", a superb boat yard with travel lift and access to cranes in the Marina Vallarta. In and around the yard are subcontractor's shops for welding, stainless work, machine work, engine and outdrive repair, North Sails' loft, a carpenter shop as well as crews of painters and riggers. . .everything you could want including a great little bar-café-chandlery called "Desperado Marine and Yacht Club. . ." What a place. It swarms with activity all the time. Boats are in and out for every sort of repair and maintenance and every chore is attacked head on with enthusiasm, shouting and efficiency. I saw a 54 foot sport fisherman come out of the water after lunch one day, have its bottom pressure washed, scraped and wet-sanded, props and shafts scraped and polished, zincs changed and 200 blisters ground out ready for repair by 10:00 the next morning.

What a change they had made in my lady since my first visit. Topsides had been buffed and waxed, canvas washed, bottom scraped, sanded and painted traditional bottom-paint red, sitting waiting for launching and a voyage. I ordered a third row of reef points for the main from the sail loft, went carefully through every bin and compartment on board except the heads, made lists of everything I'd possibly want from Seattle for a trip up the coast, cleaned where appropriate, lubed and greased and generally fussed over things all day.

LA FAMILIA RUBIO

But the fun came in the late afternoon on Saturday. That picture of the little girl had turned out to be the best photo of my life. . .to date anyway. Her smile was incredible, the pose was delightful, the two dogs, odd bit of scrap metal and so forth all faded into the background of exquisite happy little girl. I'd had a big enlargement made and framed and brought it along on faith. The second evening there I took the photo and began retracing my steps through memory. The stairway was easy to find and at the top the fork in the paths was the fork to the left. . .which lead indeed to the little shop, thence another fork to the right below several houses and on, one bit at a time until I was standing at the corner of the house where the photo was taken. Nobody in sight. I knocked on the nearest door and when the lady came, suddenly forgot most of my Spanish. . .but finally managed to open the envelope, show the picture and explain my mission. Well, it turns out the lady was an aunt and the little girl (Katia from this point on) was playing within sight. . .so was summoned and ordered to deliver me to her mother, around the corner and down a hallway in the back of the building. A large family group was gathered on a porch overlooking the town, a wonderful view, though the porch was precariously perched over nothing. I dug out the photo, made a quick explanation and handed it over. It was an Instant success. I was a Conquering Hero. Tostadas, ceviche, tacos, sopa, soda and more appeared. . .I was asked to sit and visit. As usual, my Spanish went on beautifully for a bit and then I ran out of vocabulary to deal with the increasingly complex conversation. No matter. The photo went round the building, more people dropped by to look at it (and me). . .more food appeared. The evening became delightful. I was a hit. I was also in love. Katia was 4-1/2, her sister Sofia was 6, their brother Victor was 14 and the whole family was delightful, from Grampa Benjamin (86 years old) on down. You would have thought I'd

brought a million dollar bequest not a ten dollar photo. . .but I begin to suspect that's simply Mexico. Anyway, I wasn't a stranger in Puerto Vallarta thereafter and the next few evenings were great fun before I had to return to Seattle to work and wait for the end of hurricane season on the Mexican coast.

AND TIME TO GO

Fast forward again to the end of October. With the end of hurricane season supposedly only days away and tickets bought for a flight on the 27th, I watched with horror as a serious hurricane bore down on Banderas Bay on the 24th and 25th. Winds to 165 miles an hour, huge waves, enormous damage. It made landfall 40 miles north of the boat, tearing up the town of San Blas, ripping out the Malecon in Puerto Vallarta and wrecking the ground floors of all the waterfront businesses. The police were patrolling 4 blocks back from the waterfront in motor boats. The Navy found almost all its boats several hundred yards inland as the high tide receded, beaten and broken. I arrived the next day, sky blue, light breeze, normal operations at the airport, hurried to the marina and found. . .leaves in the cockpit. Wow. The dock I had been promised to tie to when I launched was gone, there were broken floats and piles everywhere, but really, almost no boat damage in the marina, no fatalities in town and only very few injuries. Already rebuilding was starting up, but the bus system was radically upset. . .no old-town or waterfront routes running, and things were definitely on a combat-zone basis, with the Army and Navy standing guard over the darkened battered waterfront neighborhoods.

At the boat I struggled against pouring rain in the morning and the mid day heat after the clouds cleared off to make the installations of things I'd brought and repairs as I found the need. . .loose wires here and there, innumerable tiny things that needed to be patched or seized or cut and spliced again. . .this was serious voyage-preparation, or at least my best effort at it. My one major addition to the boat's gear was a CARD, "Collision Avoidance Radar Detector". It operates on the same principle as a speed trap radar alarm, but there are four receivers and they report to an instrument in the nav station that shows what quadrant the radar is coming from and simultaneously gives an audible alarm. . .either "low" or "wake the dead". . .my favorite setting. I'd built a little hardwood bracket to sieze to the aluminum radar mast right aft. . .routing the cable through the lockers to the nav station amidships was some fun and I got to do it a second time when I realized I'd left the compression ring off the through-deck fitting. Oh well. By and large preparations went forward well and in 3 days I was close to ready. A glitch arose when the propane jug came back filled but I couldn't make the stove run. In the end it turned out to be a dead regulator, but it took several hours to get back through the solenoid shutoff circuitry and make the solenoid work again to find that the real stopper was the regulator. By then it was too late to buy another, though Vallarta is the best place on earth for buying propane equipment. Everybody was closed. In the evenings I visited with my friends on the hillside. Sofia walked me through her homework, especially a test she had a perfect score on. . .Katia was her smiling self. We ate and visited on and on, comparing life stories, interests and ambitions til we stretched my Spanish and their English beyond available vocabulary. They were appalled at my intention to sail alone to San Diego but on the 30th of October they



borrowed somebody's Sam's Club card and took me to buy major groceries for the trip. Victor and I loaded 30 gallons of water and \$200 worth of cans and such on board. (see *photo opposite page*) The boat sank below the bottom paint forward, with perhaps an inch and a half inch of paint still showing aft. Then I went for diesel. There were 9 gallons in the keel tank, 5 gallons in a jug in the lazarette, 8 gallons in a rubber bladder too, and finally, after quite a bit of thought, 15 gallons more in a used toilet deodorant jug on the back seat of the cockpit. There was no sign of red paint around the waterline when we were finally set to go. (see *photo next page*) On the second of November I ran out of excuses. We were ready and the world was waiting. I was two days behind schedule to start. I ordered my "despacho", port and immigration clearances. That's a commitment, since, having been cleared, one must sail within 48 hours. Checking the weather report at Desperado Marine in the evening I found another tropical depression forming 300 miles south of us and moving northwest. H'mm. Next morning I ate a leisurely breakfast at the counter at Desperado Marine (a very busy place in the early morning as the sport fishing fleet buys sandwiches and beer for the day's work ahead). This was my last great Mexican food for a ways, the diet was changing to cans!

UNDER WAY AT LAST

I checked the weather the morning of November 3rd, nothing much to fear it seemed, so at 0800 started the engine and by 0825 left the last buoy of Puerto Vallarta astern. Sigh. It was hard to leave. I'd decided to make the first leg of the trip toward Cabo San Lucas no matter what the final route might turn out to be. I'd seriously considered four separate routes and had charts and guidebooks available for all of them. . .The

“default” solution was the traditional motor and sail route up the outside from Cabo to San Diego by way of any number of possible anchorages along the way. One could run that route without needing to ever be more than 2.5 days offshore, in theory at least. On the other hand, it was basically a matter of praying for calms and motoring like crazy whenever opportunity offered. Wind was guaranteed to be dead on the nose all the way. An alternate solution was to stand directly offshore to about 120 degrees west at about the same latitude, 20 degrees north, at which point one could expect (from the pilot charts and “Ocean Passages for the World”) to find northeasterly breezes and a chance to make northing up the coast then, perhaps after a thousand miles or so on starboard tack, a return to the coast at about the latitude of San Diego.



A third possibility was to go from Cabo up the Sea of Cortez to La Paz, Loreto, Mulege and finally San Carlos on the mainland side again, where, as noted before, an expensive but still marginally reasonable truck ride could be had. Finally, the outside choice was to fall off and find the Northeast trades, again in about 120 West, and run down the latitude to Hilo, which of course, would leave another windward passage for the following summer. The obvious thing was that the first leg of each trip was from Puerto Vallarta to Cabo, so a decision was postponed. After only a few hours motoring from Vallarta a fine little breeze came up and that first

leg to Cabo was the best ocean sailing passage of the trip, 300 miles straight line, about 400 as I beat across and only about 15 hours of it motoring in calms.

With the electric autopilot still handling the chores I started the first effort to hook up and use the wind vane, a Navik made by Plastimo in France. I'd studied the book and carefully lubed the various moving parts ashore so the startup went well. For a few moments. Looking aft as the vane took over I watched (in horror) as the little bell crank on the vane itself came loose and hung dangling from the spring loaded ball joint connector and two tiny stainless bolts dropped free into the bay. The autopilot took over and I took the wounded piece downstairs. There were three large bags and a jar of mixed stainless fasteners on board and I went through the whole lot. Nothing was close, all way too big. Out came my old eggbeater drill and in half an hour I had larger bolt holes through bell crank and vane, bolted up with the two smallest bolts on board (threads totally smushed below the nuts) and was ready to try again. That was the last whimper from the wind vane. It steered wonderfully whenever there was a breeze thereafter, though I still only half understand its mechanisms.

I started on the offshore tack, starboard, and held on to it through the first night. Second day was on the inshore tack, making a lot of northing, then offshore again in a failing breeze the second night. After midnight the wind died off, the self steering got in irons. We motored for many hours that night and the following morning right on the rhumb line. That was the good news. In the morning, having run the CARD, autohelm, nav lights, compass lights, and cabin lights as needed during the night, I had 7 volt batteries. The alternator was not working. In fact, I now know it hadn't worked since I'd known the boat. The solar panels were carrying the load and they didn't come close to managing all night with all that going on. Dire thoughts and hand steering ensued. In the afternoon of the 3rd day we got a breeze from North of Northwest that let us lay Cabo on one tack, even with the wind a point free. The night got a little violent with the sea rising with the wind. We were beating under a double reefed main with 6 rolls in the small jib. At one point I let go of the overhead hand holds for a moment and was pitched across the cabin, bruising my elbow on the edge of the bookshelf to leeward. By that time, in fact, I had one toenail ripped off, a cut on the back of my hand and two pretty good creases in my bald spot from arguing with the mast beam. I spread towels on the upholstery to protect it from the blood stains. H'mm.

After midnight I began to make out the sky glow from Cabo, still many miles off and decided to harden up on the wind to keep a little in hand in case we were headed as we closed the coast. Good thing. Should have done it sooner. That night I got my first ever flying fish in the cockpit (had seen many during the day). This fellow landed on my foot as he came aboard, fluttered a moment or two and lay still. I got out the flashlight and had a good look. . .what a beauty. . .then picked him up, fluttering again and put him back over the side. I wasn't tempted to keep him for frying by the way. That propane system had beaten me after all. One of the joints I'd disturbed chasing down the problem hadn't gotten properly sealed up again and all the gas leaked off the first day. I resigned myself to whatever would come out of a can cold for the rest of the trip.

The situation with the alternator was a serious matter. Obviously, in a calm I'd have to hand steer. There was no where near enough electricity to run the autopilot. In fact, with the small solar panel going full blast all day it just barely would keep up with the masthead tricolor light and the radar alarm running all night. I used flashlights for all domestic and navigation purposes and puzzled over why I couldn't get the big panel on line through the controller. Each morning the batteries came back a little less. Without electricity I'd have neither nav lights nor the radar alarm, a sitting duck on the North South Freeway. . .not to mention the exhaustion of trying to hand steer through whatever calms might offer. I considered options and none of them looked good. Closing the coast at Cabo I just hoped for a brilliant electrical mechanic waiting on the dock.

It was not to be. Cabo completely floored me, even after Puerto Vallarta, which is after all quite a resort city itself. Cabo seems from the water to be an entirely new and enormously rich enclave of North Americans on vacation. The boats are mostly huge sport fishing machines. The marina is immaculate and everything is of the best quality. The offices are as fancy as any in San Diego. The hotels are huge and gorgeous. Everything costs WAY more than it's worth anywhere else. The place seems to exist to let vacationing folks spend their money as quickly as possible. For a small, poor disabled sailboat it must be the worst possible landfall. To enumerate. The "check-in-check-out" fees to the port captain are the same \$36 as elsewhere, not nice, but not horrible. On the other hand, the fee to the agency to get the work done for you is \$92. Do it yourself of course. . .but it takes a day each way with a taxi on the payroll much of the time, just on account of the separation of the various offices necessary (migracion, capitania and bank). To begin with I didn't have two days to spend on the matter and the slip rent was \$41 per night (for a 27 foot boat). The clincher of course was the boatyard, where, as you'd expect, I found decent workmanlike people. . .but no electrical tech available for at least two weeks. . .I was in line behind too many boats. I bought my six gallons of diesel and left in less than an hour. Too tired and worried to start immediately, and still not sure where I was going, I went to anchor in the outer bay and slept til dawn.

OFF FOR SAN DIEGO

By morning I still wanted to try for San Diego rather than San Carlos, so, given the state of the electrical system, there was really only one choice. I'd proceed to Magdalena Bay, about two and a half days up the coast at my rate (given calms and motor-ing). I'd been to the bay one time before by truck and knew there was quite a good little town on the Eastern edge, Puerto San Carlos (not to be confused with the other "San Carlos" up in the Sea of Cortez). Not more than 30 miles from there on a good paved road is another, much larger town or small city, Ciudad Constitucion. . .In one place or the other I'd certainly be able to find somebody with skills/tools/pieces to fix the problem. I have enormous faith in Mexican mechanics. They have to deal with old equipment every day and if an off-the-shelf solution isn't possible, they'll invent something that is.

That decided, I fiddled with the vane gear a bit, tightened the two halves of the coun-

terweight so it wouldn't wobble and bind and filed off a little bit of plastic from its yoke for a bit more clearance for bumpy conditions. . .re-rigged the reefing gear somewhat and so forth. At 0800 I got the anchor aboard and stowed below and started the engine with the hand crank. I had always suspected I'd love having a diesel you could hand crank and the old Volvo proved the point. Decompression lever up, hand crank in socket, start turning slowly, get her spinning, spin as hard as you can, swing the lever down and pull the crank free as the engine fires the first time. What a machine! Exactly zero battery drain. There was just enough breeze to put the main asleep on centerline, so I set it too and we steamed out of the harbor toward Cabo Falso four miles away.

I'd been dreading rounding Falso for six months. It sticks out into the Pacific and breaks the long sweep of the Baja coast. According to all reports I should have had 30 knots of wind, rough seas and been driven back two or three times before finally making it around. In fact the sea was glassy or slightly rippled, the sun was shining and the motor was purring sweetly below while the solar panel worked on saving up enough current for the night's light requirement. I steered by hand and the lay of the coast, but dreaded the coming night. . .with its demand for staying alert and steering by hand and compass. Halleluja then when the breeze filled in, even though it was basically dead ahead, I could just make good a course 30 degrees too far East on the inshore tack. The coastline falls away rapidly from the course in this part of the trip, so I stood inshore on port tack all day. At 1700 I tacked offshore for the night and, my goodness, the wind gradually freed and built during the night and I was able to sail within 15 degrees of the course on the offshore tack with one reef pulled down. During the morning of the second day out the wind died off and the Volvo started again with me back to steering by hand directly on the rhumb line for Bahia Magdalena. After several hours of the hand steering a light breeze came up from directly ahead. It wasn't enough to be worth tacking into but it inspired the question. . .would the wind vane work and let me off the helm? It didn't take long to set up the system and see and I watched absolutely delighted as the vane took over and confidently steered perhaps 10 degrees either side of the course, which honestly, is a good deal better than I managed most of the time. The breeze did fill in a bit during the night but I wasn't tempted to shut down the motor. We were making 4.5 knots steadily on a direct line into the wind and to my next chance at an electrical genius. I let the vane carry on through the night. The wind probably reached 10 knots at times and the steering improved though the ride, directly into the chop, was a bit rough. Sometime during that night quite a swell rolled in as well, but the system ran perfectly.

About midnight I suddenly had a serious panic attack. I absolutely knew I was closing the beach on a long slant with sea room in hand, but nonetheless, I suddenly believed completely that I was about to throw her on the rocks at any moment. I struggled with mental control, dug out the chart again, checked my plotted course and worked back through the dead reckoning. Finally got the GPS to find enough satellites to report our position and plotted it. We were a couple of miles off course to the offshore side, fifteen miles from the rocks and running almost parallel with the coast, aimed at a point about 6 miles off the mouth of Magdalena Bay, which should show up about an hour



after daylight in the morning. Bit by bit I put my mind back at ease, watched the stars move for a while and managed three different one-hour naps during the rest of the night.

AH, BAHIA MAGDALENA, LA FAMILIA ROMERO AND RESTAURANT MIRA MAR!!! The mountains of the coast came up with the dawn and presented me with a neat puzzle. Which dip in the range actually marked the mouth of the bay? Decided at last and stood directly inshore, passing from the open ocean to the bay, leaving behind the high rolling swell for the short little chop of a light breeze in a protected bay. I had no ambition to find and follow the buoyed but twisting channel into Puerto San Carlos at that point. Instead I held to the left hand side of the barrier Island that makes the Northern half of the bay and anchored in a couple of hours off the picturesque little village of Puerto Magdalena. This is a fishing village of about 300 people. . .70 houses more or less, two or three houses set up as little grocery stores and one with a palm-frond shaded front porch that is the Restaurant Mira Mar. What a wonderful place. The steep hills around are burnt and dry with scant desert vegetation, but the sea is beautiful blue green and the village seems bright and cheerful from the bay. There is shelter from essentially any wind and the bottom is good holding. The anchor was no more than down when a passing panga (open high speed fiberglass fishing boat) invited me ashore to eat lobster at the restaurant. To be sure I'd understood the skipper hoisted a live and lively lobster up for me to see.

It took a while, but finally I had everything put away in decent order and the dinghy

pumped up. Not having seen a sign as yet I pulled the dink up on the beach a ways and tied it off to a beached lobster trap and walked straight up the beach to the first home with somebody sitting on the porch. Bingo. . .Restaurant Miramar, lobster on hand, dinner will be ready when you like! Gracious, what a change from cold canned soup and crackers. That dinner was magic of course, fresh lobster over charcoal, home made salsa and frijoles and an endless supply of hot flour tortillas washed down by COLD beer. I was falling down tired by then, probably didn't make the best possible impression on my hosts, but smiled at Jose, Christina (the lady of the house) and their two kids, Daniel and Francisco and did my best to make reasonable conversation. Full and happy I took only a short walk along the beach nodding and giving "buenas noches" to everyone I passed. . .then rowed back to the boat, pulled the covers over my head and slept til daylight. . .probably 11 hours straight.

Before heading for the beach the next morning for breakfast I loaded up all my must-be-cooked groceries, 20 pounds of potatoes, 5 of onions, a sack of green chiles, a good bit of garlic, 18 eggs and so forth. They were soon to be spoiling in the heat and I had no way to cook them aboard. I presented them to Christina and explained the lack of a stove. At breakfast (huevos a la Mexicana, at Christina's table of course) I explained my alternator problem and Jose assured me we would have no problem getting something working. He was certain of finding the parts in Constitucion and thought we might be able to get the mechanic to come to the boat if I took it to San Carlos. At that point I was sure it was entirely beyond my abilities but since this was a Sunday morning it wouldn't matter for a while. I returned aboard for serious study of the various owner's manuals and the incredible "12-Volt Doctor's Handbook". By noon



I was confident I'd followed the troubleshooting instructions perfectly, found one minor discrepancy, fixed it, still no results (DARN), but finally came to the end of a long branch of the trouble shooting flow chart where it stated unequivocally that "the problem is in the alternator". Very well then, knowing that, I can take the alternator to town and find the mechanic, much less of a problem. Well. . .that was before I finally figured out what was involved in getting the alternator off the old engine. First the air cleaner comes off, then the starter motor, then finally you can get to the inside bolt for the alternator. Took til after two in the afternoon, but with only one new major scrape on the back of a hand and it made an excellent opportunity to check and replace the starter belts out of spares on board. Jose was visibly relieved that he wasn't going to have to convince a good mechanic to leave a busy shop to come out and work in the confines of a small boat. Friends passing by convened a consulting committee that settled on the choice of a shop called "Taller Electrico Torres". "Taller" is Spanish (or at least Mexican) for "workshop" and Torres turned out to be the owner's name. Opinion was general that he was as good as anybody we'd find anywhere and his shop was really quite convenient in San Carlos. Jose volunteered to run me into town in his panga after his morning work, pulling his lobster traps out in the Pacific. He has a pickup truck parked in San Carlos to run errands with, so the whole project started to look very workable. He named ten in the morning for a start. Chuckle.

I was starting to feel familiar with the family, played marbles with some of the local kids (very poorly, but it HAS been over 50 years after all, and once upon a time I was pretty good at it). I didn't understand the rules of their games either. . .sort of a series of different games to settle various issues, leading to the final shootout outside of a scribed ring in the dust. My thumb was weak and my aim lousy so I never posed a threat. Interestingly, it soon became obvious that unlike our marble playing, these kids always ended up with all their own marbles at the end of the game. Anyway, toward supper time I asked if I could have dinner with the family instead of on the porch by myself. Brief hesitation then a warm welcome and instructions to come back at seven or so (an hour after dark more or less). I did, and since it was between the hours of 6 and 10 in the evening the generator plant was running and there was electricity. All over the village people watched TV from Mexico City. The melodrama was extreme. A very handsome and distinguished older gentleman was seduced by an incredibly beautiful young vamp while his gracious wife and lovely children worried at home. A confrontation ensued. I missed almost all the dialogue, but the story line was explicit. Jose and the boys stared intently. Christina was quietly indignant. How could he???

After a bit we were joined by the village school teacher, or rather half of them. He's from Isla Cedros, perhaps 25, very earnest and obviously the boys' hero. He takes the kids from 4th to 6th grades. There are 31 kids in the school here in the village. From 7th grade onward though school is on the mainland. Jose and Christina have a 14 year old daughter in school at her grandparents' home in Ciudad Constitucion.

Toward dinner time, an hour or so later, Christina managed to quietly pry the boys loose and get them fed and headed toward bed and set the table in the formal room for three. . .Jose, the Schoolteacher (yes, I should know his name, darn) and me. We sat

down stiffly and ate a perfect restaurant style meal for three. Christina joined us briefly, eating what looked suspiciously like a tuna fish sandwich. H'mm Conversation lagged, I was nearly sleeping in my plate and we'd already been through almost all my vocabulary anyway. Jose's English vocabulary was pretty well limited to waiting tables in the restaurant, so really, the chance of extended philosophical discussion was limited. At the end I tried to pay the bill and was politely rebuffed. No bill. I was a guest. Gracious. .

In the morning after another glorious uninterrupted night's sleep I found lots of chores to do aboard and didn't go ashore until after the 10:00 time Jose had named. However, it was obvious that out of the 23 or 24 pangas that work out of the village, only 3 or 4 had returned from sea and Jose's "Anabel" was not one of them. At 11:00 I began to worry a bit, though the weather was fine and the wind had dropped to flat calm. Paddled ashore in the dinghy and found Christina. She was obviously amazed that I would worry. She looked at the time and assured me Jose would be back within an hour or two. Oh well, it would still be much quicker and easier to wait and ride the high speed panga across the sand flats rather than follow the long channel in the much slower sail boat. I went for a walk. Down at the shore a panga was beached and being unloaded by two kids and their dad. . .it was the next shipment for one of the small grocery stores. . .and was really quite a lot of stuff and weight. There were bags of potatoes, stems of bananas and boxes of other fruits, a huge carton of eggs, bags of flour, sugar, rice and masa, a large chunk of recently deceased cow and another of pig, cases of tins of one sort or another, jugs of cooking oil, little packets of spices and the like, cartons of soda and canned and bottled juice, a mop and a selection of brooms and on and on. I helped lug it from the waterline up to the nearest approach of a pickup waiting in the sand, whence it traveled the 100 yards or so to "Pili's" (short for Pilar) house, which has a small room off to one side that is the Tienda. Pili turned out to be Jose's sister and smiled delightfully when I introduced myself. Of course by that time they all knew my name and the tale of my voyage and alternator. Word travels fast in Magdalena.

Jose returned from sea last of all that day, shortly after noon, with a good load of fresh lobsters aboard and hungry as a bear. First came the offloading and weigh in of the catch at the coop's beach side shade/shelter. Thence to the house, shedding rain gear but still wearing the normal bright white rubber sea boots. A short time to scrub up and then he settled down at the table in back of the house by the kitchen and called me over. Christina brought us both huge plates of eggs and ham scrambled with pico de gallo and a stack of fresh hot flour tortillas. I hadn't thought I was hungry, but a week or so on cold canned goods does wonders for your appetite and I polished off my plate with ease. By one o'clock we had eaten, washed and loaded the panga for the trip to town. We took a drum and another of the 15 gallon plastic jugs for gasoline, a large propane tank (I could barely lift it empty), and a small one to exchange for full ones (no chance to fill mine, it's purely an exchange operation in San Carlos), a monster ice chest for the week's ice supply and a pretty good shopping list of necessities from the hardware store in town. Then we were off, literally flying over the small chop with the 65 horse Yamaha shoving the light boat from crest to crest without touching

much of the water in between. It was rough but soon over, needing perhaps half an hour for the whole 12 mile run into town. We passed diagonally across the sand flats, running at times very close to the shining white sand dunes to the north and other times crossing the buoyed channel on a long slant. In town it was only a short walk from the beach landing (through foul smelling ankle deep mud) until we were picked up by a taxi and dropped off at Jose's truck. There was a short disagreement with the starter and battery connections, then we were off. Senor Torres turned out to be a slender young man with a surgeon's hands, working at a small bench in an open sided shelter under a tin roof. His primary tools were screwdriver, wrench and a home made circuit tester consisting of a car battery, battery charger, chunk of extension cord, 2 ice picks for probes and a light bulb to prove the flow of current one way or another. He heard my explanation (considerably amplified by Jose) of the problem, and in ten minutes had all the parts of the alternator spread across his bench and tested. It would not require rewinding (which he would have done if need be) and he asked for an hour to complete the repairs. We left and did our other errands around town and returned before 3:00 with the truck loaded with gas, propane, ice and bits of hardware. The last screws were going back into the alternator housing and Sr. Torres was smiling. . . a very good alternator he assured me. The repairs, parts and labor cost \$36 and, after a quick stop in the only internet café in town to send notes home, we were on our way. The trip back to the village on the island was the reverse process: take the heavy goods to the landing, wrestle them into the boat, find a taxi, have him meet us at the house in ten minutes, park the truck, hide the keys at the neighbor's place, back to the boat and thence home. Jose dropped me off at Lyra as we approached the village. I offered to help off load but he laughed and assured me there was lots of help ashore. I installed the alternator, got the belts tight on the second try and fired her up. 29 Amps on the gauge. Wow. Three cheers for Taller Electrico Torres.

Next morning I kept a sharp eye open for the Port Captain, Gregorio, to turn up at his office on the hill above the North end of town. It is clearly not something one is supposed to acknowledge openly when in the area, but the fact is that Gregorio, besides his official role as Port Captain, collecting harbor fees and issuing despachos (\$36 again to clear in an out) is also quietly in the business of bringing diesel, water and beer from San Carlos out to passing yachts. He keeps several drums of diesel waiting, crystal clean but yellow and heavy, (not the green light diesel from Puerto Vallarta nor yet the bright red stuff from Turtle Bay) and I'd watched him ferry 450 gallons out to a sport fisherman the previous evening. So anyway, I wanted to fill my 15 gallon jug again, which would leave me with a full cargo of fuel, even though it only needed 10 gallons or so. . .this is a bare coast and there are not many places to find more fuel. Shortly after 0800 I saw him working around his panga down on the beach, so rowed ashore with my jug and the boat's paperwork. Formal introductions, though they were almost pointless. . .he knew every detail of my voyage and needs, knew about the alternator, had heard that the repairs had been successful. . .and was simply waiting to get my paperwork done and bring out my diesel. Goodness. Between the restaurant Mira Mar, Pili's grocery store and Gregorio's handy fuel/water/beer service, I'd make a pretty strong argument in favor of just pulling into Puerto Magdalena when you are passing through. If you feel you just have to go to the city for something a panga ride

should be easy to arrange.

ON TO BAHIA TORTUGAS (TURTLE BAY)

I'd said all my goodbyes the night before so at 10 o'clock with the dinghy back in it's locker, fuel and papers complete, being, as they used to say "in all ways ready for sea" I got the anchor aboard and stowed below and was under way motoring in a glassy calm, generating electricity like crazy. Passing two anchored sardine boats halfway to the mouth of the bay I realized that one of them was a Ballard power scow, originally built, no doubt, for hauling salmon in Bristol Bay. The decline of the salmon fishery has thrown many good boats on the scrap heap. This one, the "Norma Jo" has found a good home and a new trade in Mexico. Not a bad retirement, though she had 20 pelicans sitting on her rail.

Twenty odd miles north of the mouth of the bay I took departure from Cabo San Lazaro, the last prominent hill in the range that had defined the coast til then. To the North the coast was low white sand dunes and swept away far to the East for a while. Passing Lazaro four miles off felt very much like sailing off into the deep sea, even knowing that the mountains would turn up again in a day or so, just South of Bahia Tortuga (or Turtle Bay). As long as the calm held my course was direct on the rhumb line. I had no taste at all for a low lying coast with offlying sand bars and mysterious shoals. If the wind came back I'd tack inshore during the day, offshore at night, trying to keep at least 15 miles of searoom all the time.

That was a very good day, confident now in the electricity, the motor ticking along sweetly, sky blue, frigate birds chasing flying fish, quite a bit of southbound traffic of all sorts and a north bound cruise ship, all passing comfortably far off. I reflected much more cheerfully on the trip so far, the whale that had rolled and spouted within 50 feet of the boat just before Cabo, dolphins by day and night (streaming sparklers in the water around the boat when it was dark), many shooting stars, one of them enormous, leaving a glowing trail behind it in the sky and, well above



the horizon, bursting into a shower of green sparks, for that matter, the “green flash” right at the moment of final sunset, two nights running, while still close to Puerto Valarta. Confidence was increasing. The boat sailed, I didn’t get seasick, the motor ran and now we had electricity for autohelm, nav lights, compass, cabin. . .life was good.

Next afternoon, still half a day out of Turtle Bay, the calm continued and the engine began loping a bit. The change from the perfectly regular ticking along brought me wide awake and worried. Before dark it was clear we had a major problem. The engine would slow painfully to almost stopped then take off running again for a bit. . .perhaps five minutes. . .but the running periods got quickly shorter. I studied the engine manual. An hour before dark I decided to try draining fuel filters, something I’d never done on the boat before. I pulled back the throttle and stopped her. The silence was (for a change) not at all pleasant. It’s quite a trip to the fuel filters from the deck. They are under the cockpit right next to the aft end of the engine. To get there you unbolt the cockpit floor entirely and put it somewhere else. At that point you stand with each foot in a very clearly indicated position. . .one slightly ahead of the other amongst the various hoses, shafts and ducts in the bilge. The Racor is bolted to the bulkhead just back under the deck edge. It hadn’t been fiddled with in a long long time. Everything was really tight. I scraped my head again on the edge of the deck and scraped the almost healed scabs off the back of my hands fiddling with wrenches and pliers under the deck. The drain effort yielded a cup of diesel, a drop of water and a cloud of black flecks of something in the fuel. The hand-primer worked, the vent showed clear diesel and the engine started and ran sweetly again. It was almost dark as I bolted down the cockpit floor and cleaned up the mess.

She ran til about half an hour after dark, then dispensed with the intermediate “loping” stage and died of her own. It was still calm then and rather than drifting through the night I decided to try the filter exercise again in the dark. It was not successful and at 10:30 a small breeze having come up, I began getting her underway, close hauled on the starboard (offshore) tack, not making much, but still in the right direction. I will omit to describe here the flashlight clamped in the jaws until they spasmed and spat it into the bilge, the screwdriver lost in the pile of grease under the reverse gear, won’t even discuss the attack by the engineroom hatch on the back of my head when a particularly good roll freed it from its lashing. Certainly you don’t need to know how long it took me, blindly flailing around with the main halyard to finally free it from whatever it had fouled aloft. All just good clean fun. By one in the morning we were effectively under way again but Turtle bay arrival slid off into the indefinite future.

The breeze, thank goodness, held and though not really good progress, still kept us moving the right general direction. I stood offshore all night and back inshore the next morning, neither tack offering much advantage. The wind held from NW and built up nicely during the day, becoming a little rough by evening. GPS showed we would arrive off the entrance in the dark at the rate we were going, so in the evening I shortened sail and stood offshore until 0200, thinking to tack inshore then and make full sail again in the morning with the bay in front of us. Oh well. During the night the wind and sea came up significantly and before dawn shifted into the East, putting the bay dead

to windward ten miles away. We thrashed our way inshore as the wind built into a pretty stiff breeze. As we neared the mouth of the bay we went from 2 reefs and most of the jib to 2 reefs in the main and 6 or 7 rolls out of the jib. . .bashing through the whitecaps very convincingly however. Nonetheless, closing the shore I became more and more inclined to try one more time with the filter to see if we could motor directly through the center of the entrance rather than beating between unfamiliar rocks without a local chart. Hatch off, filter (by now expertly) drained, the engine fired and ran with just a trace of hesitation, I rolled up the rest of the jib, sheeted the main amidships and motored ahead. Directly between the points of the entrance, perhaps 15 minutes later the motor stopped again. I unrolled a bit of jib and hove her to right there, flung the unbolted hatch in the basement and bled the filter in less than five minutes. She started and ran again, limping, but going. The anchor went down in Turtle bay, really only 24 hours "late".

TURTLE BAY AND ERNESTO

Ernesto came alongside within half an hour. I'd heard of Ernesto before but the reality was bigger than the story. The son of "Gordo", who started the fueling business in Turtle Bay, his sisters run the water front restaurant and the fuel dock itself these days. He runs his panga, with jugs of diesel and gasoline, and dispenses weather, engine and marital advice with equal aplomb. I wasted no time. . .described my problem and suggested we start by removing and flushing the fuel tank. He tied his panga astern while I was still fiddling with the anchor and had the floorboards up and the first bolt loosened before the full scope of the job sank in. Half an hour later we'd revised our plans. The tank wouldn't come out without more of an effort than either of us could imagine under the circumstances. I showed him the fuel filter setup and he was obviously unsatisfied with my sump-draining efforts to date. He asked for tools and I came up with what he needed. The old Racor came off the bulkhead and up onto the cockpit seat. He spat out his Spanish faster and louder than I had any hope to understand but mixed it with enough English that I sort of followed his thought process. I held the filter base with the big wrench while he very very gently twisted the old plastic sump and spin off cartridge out of it with my biggest set of water pump pliers. I won't try to tell you how obviously disgusted he was with the contents. The whole plastic cup was coated with black rubbish of some sort and the spin off filter element was utterly plugged with it. The engine hadn't had a chance to suck useful fuel through such a mess. I produced the fuel filter I had in reserve, something I'd found on a shelf below decks before sailing and assumed was what wanted. Not so. It was a fuel filter indeed, but un related to our system. Sigh. We went ashore in his panga with pieces wrapped in a rag, looking for dinner and some way to clear out the filter. He left me with his sisters in the restaurant and disappeared up a dusty street with my filter. At first the sisters were in a panic over my arrival. They had 24 lobster dinners and numerous plates of hors d'ourves waiting for a large official party to arrive. There wasn't anything else readily available. At first the best solution seemed to be to send me to the other restaurant in town, but after further thought they realized that they'd made one extra lobster dinner just in case. I was the Case. They consulted the menu, showed me the prices, offered a special discount under the circumstances, so for the second time in a week I sat down to lobster. This time was rather different. . .the meal

had been ready for the group the last hour or more and the whole thing had gone cold, but a bowl of hot salsa and a platter of tortillas nice and warm made up for most of it. I didn't care. I'd only wanted a taco or three and a cold lobster suited just as well. By the time I finished the last bit of the last leg Ernesto was back with a large smile. He'd found a mechanic with an air compressor and a bucket of diesel and had washed and blown out the filter til it was nearly as good as new. We returned aboard and installed the thing. The engine ran like a new watch. For how long was the only question? Hope blooms eternal they say, and I was hopeful. Ernesto was less certain. He wanted to get a length of fuel hose and actually bypass the old tank entirely. I had at least the one big jug and the rubber bladder that offered good possible alternate tanks. For the time being though I was content with my clean filter. Surely (I told myself) that was the real problem. Sigh. During the night the East wind built to quite a blow and the anchor chain ground and clunked in the fairlead. I got up some time after midnight and rigged a preventer back to the only other solid anchorage on the foredeck. . .the mast. Nothing could keep me awake though and I was asleep again in minutes without even surging out more chain.

In the morning the anchorage was spiky with little white caps though the noise seemed a little less than the midnight before. Without serious thought I decided to lay over and began a lazy day around the boat, rather hoping Ernesto would come by and give me a ride to the beach. . .no way I'd paddle the inflatable in to the beach even if I finally managed to get it inflated without letting it blow away. Ernesto came but was obviously angry I hadn't left yet. "What about the wind?" I asked and he shook his finger at me to insist that it was a fair wind for me and not all that strong. I should get under way and depart immediately.

The sky was blue and the wind was Northeast. The course was Northwest. It wasn't all that bad, really, not more than a 2 reef breeze. I gave up dreams of walks ashore and tiendas full of warm sweatshirts, got the anchor aboard and the motor quietly ticking over. With the anchor secure below decks I passed close under the stern of a 40-foot sloop that had just come in from sea Southbound and asked how it looked offshore. They smiled and shook their heads. . .but agreed that the worst had been about 2 in the morning, which fit well with what I'd seen in the anchorage. Clear of the boats at anchor I nosed into the wind for a minute, hoisted the main with 2 reefs down and turned to run for the entrance with the wind dead aft, the first time this voyage. Clear of the bay half an hour later I laid a course toward Isla Natividad and beyond to Cedros and las Islas Benitos. It was a beam reach, and we carried the whole jib with the double reefed main. The vane gear steered without effort, there was almost no motion, just a steady surging ahead, with next to no sea making up under the lee of the land. The speedometer hovered between 5 and 5.2, as good as I'd ever seen her do, and really, with no effort at all. The ride lasted 20 whole miles, or a bit more. Then the wind folded up shop and left us bobbing on a bumpy sea 2 miles South of the West end of Isla Natividad. I handed all sail and set the motor again, listening for the first sign of a hesitation.

NORTH TO ENSENADA

The night of motoring toward San Quintin, almost due North now, was uneventful, though there was a lot of radar traffic and the alarm kept me awake much of the night. Toward dawn a ship's masthead light showing brightly without either red or green to show its course had me really worried and I cleared the lines for a quick tack to avoid collision. Half an hour later I finally realized it was actually a planet rising out of the sea and no real risk at all. I forgave it the lack of running lights.

In the small hours of the morning I began seriously plotting the route ahead and reading the descriptions of my port. My clearances from Puerto Vallarta and Magdalena both called for me to stop at Ensenada to clear immigration and customs outbound for San Diego, so I was obliged to stop there as I understood the rules. San Quintin, my intermediate destination, I knew to be a lush agricultural city with a sandy shoreline, not an easy spot to find I suspected, and with no services or good shelter readily available. The guidebooks spoke in terms of being careful not to anchor in the breaker zone by accident and suggested that the sailor should appeal to the occupants of the RV park ashore for whatever aid or fuel might be wanted. Ensenada was only another short stage up the coast. I began careful fuel calculations. If the calm held, could I go the whole way without refueling? In Turtle Bay two sport fishermen had been before me and drained the tanks. I'd been unable to buy more than 8 gallons of diesel and could have taken 12, so was 4 gallons below what I regarded as a full load...far more than the designer of the boat ever dreamed I'd want, but then, he hadn't been planning on a trip up the Baja coast I think. Anyway, figuring the thing from every angle I could think of, it seemed certain that I'd make Ensenada with 5 gallons, almost 15 hours, in reserve. I altered course 10 degrees to the left and carried on. After all, if real-life consumption seemed to be out of line I could always bail out for San Quintin and do whatever it took to get fuel there. If all went well I'd be in Ensenada, almost home, in only 2 and a half days.

That was rather a large "if" however. During the day the barometer fell noticeably and the sky filled with mares tails out of the North and a dull layer of cirrus clouds. I busied myself with rigging work, replacing the radar reflector's halyard and other bits of palm and needle work. My diary reflected on the coming full moon that night and the probability I wouldn't see it. Still it continued flat calm or only a bit of an air out of the Northwest again. I set the main sheeted hard amidships to help with the rolling but the engine continued to carry the load hour after hour. The breeze would have let us sail on a nice weekend at home, but had no strength for traveling.

My wind and weather never materialized that night but the motor died again and seemed very certain about it. The wind fell to nothing and we rolled enormously in a long greasy swell.

LESSONS IN FUEL SYSTEMS

I handed the sail and pondered the next move. After the trauma of using huge water pump pliers and wrenches on the poor old Racor and barely getting it to pull suction again I was certain it would not survive another disassembly. I tried draining the sediment bowl again, loosened it from the bulkhead and shook it vigorously, trying to dis-

lodge whatever was bound up in the filter element. All to no avail. The motor never ran more than 10 minutes after that and the calm was absolute. I determined to try Ernesto's tank-replacement scheme. I had 8 gallons more or less in the rubber bladder, almost enough to make Ensenada, and 2 gallons more in the 5 gallon jerry can. The bladder tank had its own fuel line ready to connect into the system. I moved it into the starboard seat locker and drilled a hole through the bulkhead to pass the fuel line. The Racor I cut loose from the system and left hanging from its useless main tank feed line, the whole works plugged with black gunk. Then I hit a wall. I had two pieces of 3/8" hose looking at each other over a half inch air gap and no way to marry them together. My spare parts included two dozen hose clamps, but not a single double hose barb. Time was on my side. The longer it took the longer I had. . .nothing else going on at all. I sat in the cabin staring at everything in sight, one thing at a time, looking for a hose fitting in disguise. Less than an hour later I found it. A Bic pen, with a white plastic barrel just a tiny bit oversize to go into the hoses. It took only seconds to pull out the ball point and ink reservoir and test the diameter. . .almost perfect. . .I cut off the blue cap end and added two hose clamps to be sure. The motor easily pulled the prime, I bled the system til clear diesel ran out of the injectors, rolled the motor over with the compression release off and said hallelujah when she caught and ran on the first try. Round one with the cleaned filter went to me. Round two, with the replacement tank was clearly Ernesto's. Round three, however, went to the Grinch. The motor ran wonderfully for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. Long enough for me to bolt up the engine room hatch/cockpit floor again and start writing a self-congratulatory log entry. Then I first smelled, then saw a puddle of diesel forming under the engine. Almost before I could imagine what was going on, the engine coughed and abruptly died. Out of fuel. I jumped up into the cockpit and threw up the port locker lid. The bladder was empty. Sucked dry. Every drop gone. I pulled up the engine covers and surveyed the pond of diesel, nearly up to the oil pan under the engine. Grinch wins. It really took only a few minutes of thought to understand the situation. I already had known we had three lines in the fuel tank. . .there was the fuel supply to the engine and the vent. . .but a third, critical to this discussion, was the injector fuel bypass line. I had no idea so much was involved, but clearly, the injector pump bypasses far more fuel than the engine burns. In this case the engine had simply pumped all 8 gallons out of my bladder tank past the injectors and into the old main tank. Having filled the tank (I had figured I needed to transfer about 6 gallons just before the shutdown) it then pumped the balance of my 8 gallons up the vent and main engine feed lines. The vent was higher, so nothing went out there. . . all the extra went through the idle Racor and into the bilge under the engine.

The calm continued. I concluded there was nothing left to do but try to disassemble the old filter system yet again and try to blow out the waiting crud. After all, it seemed I could count on 20 hours more or less of running time after a clean out. Knowing what had to happen made it go quickly and less than an hour later I had the filter sitting on deck, blew vigorously through the fuel outlet port, watched in amazement at the brown crud filling my best cooking pot, rinsed the thing twice more in clean diesel and blew it out again and again. Finally it came clear and frothy. Yes, it was clean. . .but the issue was to get the ancient gasket and O-ring to seal up yet again to pull suction. I

scraped every bit of paint off both gasket and O-ring, rubbed them carefully with fresh fuel, screwed the whole works back together and ever so carefully tightened it all with the water pump pliers and the big wrench. Nothing broke. Installed the hoses and pumped the hand primer. . .100 strokes, maybe 150, enough to tire both hands anyway. . .suddenly the vent fitting squirted clear diesel again. I took the extra few minutes to bleed the injectors too and cranked the engine. She fired and ran the first stroke. My goodness. What a sweet sound. The calm continued glassy and the sun was bright as I wiggled the cockpit floor/engine room hatch back into place and nudged her into gear.

AND THEN THERE WAS FOG

I looked up just in time to see the world disappear into a dense bank of fog. We were about 58 miles southwest of Ensenada, not a trace of a breeze, engine running sweetly and visibility about one swell length. . .not more.

I'd never imagined having radar on a 27 foot sailboat, but this one had it and I knew it worked. With the engine and alternator both running I could use it all I wanted, . . .so, turned it on, ran through the ranges, concluded there was nobody within 8 miles of me anyway, and settled in to bring the dead reckoning up to date and check the GPS. About three in the afternoon, having run several hours in the fog, we motored out into brilliant sunshine and the mountains of the coast range South of Ensenada turned up right where I'd thought they'd be, having watched them all morning getting closer on radar.

Looking ahead and offshore both I could see other fog banks as well as the one we'd just left behind. No matter, I was sure they'd clear off as the afternoon burned on in sunshine. Ha. At 5 o'clock, nearly sunset and still 12 miles South of Cabo Punta Banda, we sailed yet again into very dense fog. I'd been dreading arriving in Ensenada and looking for a marina slip in the crowded breakwater harbor in a brightly lit night. Now with the sun setting we were running through fog with no more than 100 yard visibility as well. I checked the radar screen ever so carefully and convinced myself there was nobody closer than 2 miles and that contact was dead astern and not really gaining on us. I went downstairs and read through the guide books and studied the chart. Rather than going into the harbor it looked as though I should find a good anchorage off the suburb of La Jolla in the Southern corner of the bay. I picked GPS coordinates for four corner points off the chart (wondering why I hadn't bought more local harbor charts) and programmed them into the little machine, La Jolla 1, 2, 3, and 4. The engine was running quietly in the gathering dark, moving us at almost precisely 5 knots. We were 10 miles from the first turning point, just beyond Punta Banda. Two hours later, having gradually moved the range setting from 16 miles to 8 then 4 and finally down to only 2 mile range, with quarter mile rings on the screen, we'd threaded our way half a mile off Cabo Punta Banda, through the eye of the needle (or so it seemed) with the offshore islands on the left and the mountainous point on the right and come clear around nosing into the bay toward the Three Sisters Rocks and the anchorage beyond. I moved constantly from the helm, checking the compass and the autopilot back to the basement to stare into the glowing radar screen and check the

bearings on the GPS and thence back on deck again. Coming out of the cabin, still slightly disoriented from the electronic glow below, I was nearly knocked down by the sight of a mountain close alongside to starboard with two radio towers and a galaxy of blinking red lights, surrounded by fog on all sides, top and bottom, but the peak and its lights showing through clear air perfectly. It was Punta Banda, exactly where it belonged, but magically clear and eerily close by. The boat was running over an absolutely glassy sea but chugging up and rumbling down the high range of swells sweeping into the bay. Behind us a choir was singing Ladysmith Black Mombasa hits from ten years ago, or so it seemed. I'm not sure how it really works, but when you're tired enough and the engine has been running long enough then the rumble of the engine provides the rhythm and some of the bass notes, the rigging wires add something in the higher end of the choir and the gurgle of the water in the scuppers provides the chorus. Sometimes it sounds more like two old men quietly arguing, but more often it's a rich choir making really grand music. The almost perfectly full moon was high above us and the fog, though thick as can be at sea level, let the moon shine through from directly above and it threw moon-bows, great silver arches across our wake. I felt we could go on forever like that.

With another hour to run through the dark into La Jolla anchorage the fog began to thin along the shore. We passed Three Sisters Rocks in the murk but after that a light or two managed to shine off the shoreline and the buoys of absent fish boats began to show darkly on the swell ahead. I let Otto off the helm, took over myself, and cut speed back to 4 knots, easing in through the velvet night toward the shore, now outlined everywhere with the lights of town. When the depthsounder showed 25 feet I reached back with my left foot and nudged her into neutral and coasted quietly rumbling on toward the shore a quarter mile away while I shackled on the anchor and let it over the side. Seventeen days from Puerto Vallarta we were at anchor off Ensenada, the end of the journey all but in sight.

ENSENADA AND BEYOND

Next morning the fog was all gone and the sky blue and beautiful. I looked back up the coast we'd passed during the dark and fog with delight. . .the mountain peak of Cabo Punta Banda and the Three Sisters Rocks showed bold and beautiful. The relatively small echo from the islands in the bay turned out to have been really pretty substantial rock piles. What had looked on the 5" square radar screen like a needle to thread really was ample room. Nonetheless, I was still tickled with the performance. It was just over an hour from the anchorage to the harbor of Ensenada, well enclosed and marked with buoys and breakwaters. I carried right on past the heavy industrial port into the fleet of anchored and moored boats in the inner harbor. I'm not sure still how many "marinas" there are to choose from, but the most obvious were "Baja Naval", where there is a travel lift as well as some transient moorage. "Sergio's" marina and sportfishing site had more moorage and an eager arm-waving dock crew showing me where to park. I wasn't picky and suspected that the prices would all run about the same. The floats were nearly new and secure, though a restless bobble worked through the boats continually from the sea outside. My welcoming committee turned out to be the day-watchman and an independent expediter and do-er of chores who

introduced himself as Chewey, or maybe it was Chui. Neither of us had business cards, though he carried a laminated card from the tourist bureau identifying him as a licensed fishing guide and general helper. . .more or less. He owns a small sport boat in the harbor, but in the absence of a charter for the day he was happy to help me with my various chores. Besides the necessary visits to immigration and the Port Captain, which of course involved another trip a few blocks away to pay fees at the bank and a return after 13:30 to pick up the completed papers from the Port Captain and deliver one copy of the approved crew list back to immigration. . .besides that, my only agenda items were fuel filters, a warm sweater and something good to eat. . .

Amazingly, the first store I tried, a marine hardware store across the street from the Port Captain's office, had a selection of three different Racor filter units, ranging in size from quite large to monstrous. The smallest would not have fitted into the space available below. Sadly they didn't have the filter element I needed. Nor did the auto parts store they suggested six or seven blocks up town. However, the third, a "NAPA Industrial" store had precisely the right filter cartridge in a Lubefiner brand! They had only one copy unfortunately, but they called all over town looking for a second with no results. I may have bought Ensenada's entire supply of Racor 120/140 filter elements that day, and I carried it back to the waterfront like the crown jewels. That left something good to eat and both lunch and supper to find it in. Ensenada makes that easy. In fact, having eaten all I could manage at one wonderful fish taco stand I then found myself sniffing at another dozen stands and restaurants that even smelled better, and I was FULL. Goodness. I made appropriate notes to keep in hand for supper, which I will confess was a huge plate of Camarones a la Diabla. . .hot spicy shrimp, served with rice and frijoles and hot flour tortillas. After cold beans and hot sauce out of a can for the past few days, it was a lot like heaven, particularly with my new fuel filter aboard.

Actually, I decided to try to blow out my old filter one more time and keep the new one as a reserve. I had the moves down to a real minimum and all the sloppy mess figured out ahead, with appropriate buckets and cooking pots at each point to keep it all contained. There were no glitches and I pumped up the prime and bled the injectors and the little motor fired right up and ran absolutely smoothly. Chui and his son spent most of the day cleaning up the boat and fetching diesel. They were pros at cleaning teak and polishing stainless (the sides of the boat were streaked with rust below some of the stanchions and bolts, quite a hideous sight after only 3 weeks at sea). By sunset she was shining all over, new oil on the topside teak, engine oil topped up (she needed about 10ounces after 150 hours of running) and had adequate supply of diesel to reach Los Angeles if need be on board. I asked the night watchman on the dock to please wake me at 0200 for departure and went early to bed.

As it turned out, a half hour after midnight the bumping of the boat against the dock in the harbor surge woke me. I was well rested after two full nights' sleep and eager to be on the way. San Diego is only 60 miles more up the coast, say 12 hours of running in the calm and the calm was continuing it seemed. If the Northwest wind blew up hard it could easy stretch to a day or more, but, given the calm conditions starting out I in-

tended to be in the harbor in the early afternoon to clear customs without paying overtime! At 0100 I dropped the dock lines and made a rather sloppy departure from the slip, but avoided hitting anything or anybody I shouldn't have. I'd been on the boat a month, but a week of that time had been spent tied to the dock doing preparation work and the next three weeks had been at sea, only going to anchor when I'd stopped. I simply didn't know how to drive the thing yet. At 0120 we cleared the harbor and came onto the course for the first leg for San Diego.

Everything continued according to plan until approaching Rosarita, about halfway to San Diego, when a little breeze came up from the East. Shortly it was worth using, so I set the main and unrolled the jib, leaving the motor ticking along as well, though not as hard and we were soon rolling along at better than 6 knots on the meter. The breeze hardened up nicely so I secured the motor and feathered the prop. We didn't slow down. Within ten minutes I was on deck shortening down the main. Ashore I could see great clouds of dust whipping down from the hills over the city and, though we were only about 3 miles offshore, whitecaps were springing up all over. With the whole jib pulling strongly and the main luffing a bit the wind vane held her steady for me while I pulled down the first reef. Before I could finish cleaning it up, the boat was hove way down, actually got her rail close to the water for a moment. I never even stopped at one reef but pulled down the second too. About then the first dust arrived from the beach and I actually had grit in my eyes and teeth. The boat was heeling steadily past 20 degrees and screaming along, the wind vane not quite holding her to the course. Another gust hove her down again while I was securing the second reef and I decided the whole jib was too much for her, wiggled back to the cockpit and rolled six rolls into the jib. The knot meter showed 6.2 knots. We were flying and still heeling too far for my comfort. I went back forward and took down the third reef, reducing the main to little more than a table cloth. She sat up then and only heeled between ten and 15 degrees. The knotmeter held steady at 6.2, occasionally dropping to 6 or even 5.5 for a moment in lulls. It lasted two hours like that, we sailed out of the Rosarita area on up the coast, the Coronado Islands offshore quite close at hand, and the bulk of Point Loma just beginning to show almost due North. Then suddenly the boat sat up square in the water, the boom slammed across the cockpit and the jib flapped sadly. The wind was gone. I shook out the reefs and unrolled the jib but it didn't help. We had gone from a 30 knot Easterly howler to flat calm in the space of a block or two. Looking back I could still see white caps. Ahead the sea was rippled or glassy. I put away the sails for the last time of the trip, fired up the engine and gave the helm back to the autopilot. At 1320, almost precisely 12 hours from the Ensenada entrance buoy, we passed Point Loma close abeam.

THE END

That's the story really. From there to the police dock for Customs clearance was another hour or a bit more against a pretty stiff harbor ebb. I tied up, called Customs, put the coat on the main and stripped the jib off the foil, had it all in a pile on deck when the young lady from Customs arrived (armed to the teeth with .45 colt, mace, handcuffs, radio and who knows what else on her belt). However, she was very pleasant, had me fill out the questionnaire, looked down the hatchway and asked if I had any-



thing to declare. I had no fresh fruit or vegetables but she did confiscate my canned chili, made in Mexico and containing pork. I gather the USDA doesn't approve of Mexican handling of pork. Goodness. I'd been eating the stuff straight out of the can for most of a month. That was it though. I took the last slip in the transient moorage for the night and called home. The next two days were busy enough, getting the boat ready to truck, mast out and wrapped up, everything stripped off deck and secured below, water tank pumped dry (she would be going over the mountains below freezing for at least a day) and everything else I could think of done. The people in Driscoll's yard were great help and cheerful about it. There were fun people to visit with and interesting boats to see. In fact, it looked like a mini-tall-ship convention, with the Sailing ship "Rose" (a magnificent replica of a British 18th century frigate), the Boy Scout Ship "Argus" and the replica

of Columbus's "Nina" all in the yard with me. With the mast out of Lyra, At the last possible moment I arranged for her fuel tank to be pumped dry, steam cleaned and closed back up again before the truck arrived. I paid the young man, called a taxi, went for one last evening walk along the beach and finally gave up. The trip was finished. Lyra made it home from Mexico.

A FEW TECHNICAL NOTES:

The boat is an Albin Vega, 27' by 8' by 3'9" in normal trim, probably more like 4'0 as she was loaded at the start of the trip. The design is a mid-60's family ocean

cruiser/racer that was quite successful in Europe. This is boat number 2,456, out of a total production run of about 3000. She was built in 1974 and, as far as I can tell, was owned by the same Mr. Pickard until 1999, when she was bought for the voyage to Mexico.

Her main mechanical equipment is a Volvo MD6B diesel with an upgraded (and repaired) alternator, four large batteries port and starboard in the cockpit lockers, two solar panels, a RACOR 120 fuel/water separator. . .and a hand crank.

The fuel tank is in the keel, a custom fitted plastic tank with a single 6" diameter hand hole cover with the necessary fittings (engine supply, vent and return line) all plumbed into it. The tank and the hand hole cover are very difficult to remove, but in theory it can be done without rebuilding the boat. Capacity is stated to be 9 gallons but I have not yet proven that. In addition we carried 28 gallons in 3 separate jugs, 2 below decks and the large 15 gallon jug strapped in the aft corner of the cockpit close to the fuel tank deck plate.

The water tank is a similar plastic tank in the forepeak, right aft of the chain storage. It holds 18 gallons and a bit, and communicates with the galley sink by a single line and a foot pump. For this trip I filled the tank with gallon jugs of bottled water and carried an additional 14 gallons still in their cartons. One way or another, we arrived with about 17 gallons in the tank and 6 gallons still in the carton, an adequate reserve. She has a PUR watermaker under the starboard settee but, given the problems with electricity on the trip, I never did get around to experimenting with it.

Radar is the smallest Furuno unit mounted (see the photos) about 7 feet above the deck right aft, with the display just forward of the galley at the foot of the companion stairs. It was only actually "used" once, entering Ensenada, but I'd been playing with it whenever there was adequate electricity and something to look at.

Anchors included the main, a 16 pound Bruce on about 200 feet of 3/16ths chain, a slightly lighter Danforth on a chain/nylon rode and a large Fortress aluminum anchor in a box in the bilge. . .never opened yet. The Bruce held her in everything we saw on this trip. It's lifted with a Lofrans double acting windlass on the foredeck.

The steering was almost entirely by machine, thank goodness. In calms when motor-ing nothing beats the Autohelm 1000, old but reliable. It isn't fast enough for sailing though and whenever there's a breeze of any sort I prefer to use the Navik windvane by Plastimo. It is a delicate and lightweight little machine with enormous power achieved through really superior design. . .absolutely top notch equipment, about which it would be hard to say too much good.

The GPS was the quiet hero on the trip, giving me precise positions, speed, track and distance to waypoints ahead, usually within a minute or two of turning it on. It is a Garmin hand held, "12", the least expensive unit they sell, and excellent in all regards. It ate 4 AA batteries on the trip. I used a total of 5 US charts covering the whole coast

except for about 10 miles of gap at one point. . .from Puerto Vallarta all the way to San Diego. I picked Lat-Lon coordinates off the chart with dividers and ruler to use for way points, but, except for the Ensenada approach with radar and GPS, made all my harbor entrances visually in daylight, only using the GPS to reach a point 5 miles or so offshore from each harbor.

The guidebook I referred to constantly when considering landfalls and actually entering from sea was Jack William's really excellent book on the Pacific coast of Baja. It is full of excellent aerial and sea level photos and good clear sketch maps, as well as having good rational discussion of the route all along. You can't do better. I also had an old copy of Charlie's Charts along, and consulted it with a certain amount of caution at times. Besides that we had several good general reading books on Baja. . .animals, plants, birds, sea life. . .that sort of thing.

The very noisy member of the crew was "the Squeaker". . .the CARD collision avoidance radar detector, which, until it developed a short on day 12 gave me excellent warning of approaching ships, often as many as 4 or 5 during a single night. My route, chosen to leave all the hazards along the beach (sand bars, rocks etc) at least 20 miles sea room had the unintended but perfectly logical result of putting me out in the North-South freeway for ships traveling from Panama to Vancouver BC and all ports in between. There are a lot of such ships, as well as a large fleet of cruise ships traveling just from Puerto Vallarta to San Diego. I haven't had a chance to trouble shoot the alarm unit yet, but rather suspect from how it failed, there might be a damaged wire below decks. We will see shortly when the boat gets home. One way or another, once it died my chances for any real sleep at sea dropped to zero. I slept in 20 or 30 minute naps now and again thereafter and arrived eager for a night at anchor each time.

We were 18 days total from Puerto Vallarta to San Diego, including time at anchor or in port for whatever reason. From the deck log, I extracted the following:

Hours under Sail----108.75 hrs

Miles through the water, under sail----510 miles

Miles made good on course under sail----about 300 miles (tacking against direct headwinds essentially always)

Hours motoring----149.25 hours

Miles made good under power----770 miles

Time drifting doing repairs when becalmed----less than 15 hours.

Cost to haul out and lower the mast in Driscoll's Boat Works, San Diego. . .\$375.

Cost to truck to Seattle (Dudley's Boat Transport) \$2000.

Cash expended for all purposes except airfares on the trip itself, about \$1650.

