

Sailing *Pearl*, our Ranger 23, from San Francisco to Morro Bay

April 2011

John Dilworth and Carole Maurer

Several friends and family members have expressed an interest in the details of our recent trip, so I thought it would be best to write down the highlights while I can still remember them.

Sorry, the camera died, so the photos here aren't from the trip.



We bought *Pearl* about a year and a half ago with the intention of bringing her to Morro Bay (our home) when a slip became available to us in the Morro Bay State Park Marina. We picked the Ranger 23 because it seemed the ideal boat for this locale: a small bay next to a big ocean with the only nearby cruising destinations an easy day sail away. The R23 was small enough to sail in the bay, and also very capable for sailing out in the ocean for day sails and weekend cruises. While waiting for a slip we would travel north to work on the boat in Alameda and sail on San Francisco Bay, which we usually managed to do for a few days each month. An added benefit of this arrangement was more time than usual with our kids and grandkids in Berkeley, and the chance to sail with them sometimes, especially 14-yr old Maya, who seems to have inherited the Dilworth love-of-sailing gene. Maya and I did a couple of 3-day cruises together - once to the Petaluma river with overnights at McNear's Beach and Petaluma, and once to the Farallones on a long day with very little wind and lots of fog, bracketed by nights at anchor in Richardson Bay. She proved to be an enthusiastic, fearless, and competent sailing companion.

In January we got to the top of the waiting list and obtained a slip in Morro Bay. We started planning a time to bring the boat down. I very much wanted to do this downwind trip by sailing rather than by truck or trailer. Early April was the first window in our schedules, and the earliest we could expect a shot at fairly decent weather. It also coincided with Maya's spring break from Berkeley High, which began April 3. She'd said many times that she someday really wanted to sail to places like Mexico and Santa Cruz. We thought the latter might be doable. The main problem was likely to be the weather. April is the transition from winter to spring/summer weather patterns, and is a time of notoriously unstable conditions.

Monday, April 4 - a gentle prelude

During the week preceding the trip we watched the weather forecasts like a hawk. There was consensus among the forecasters that we could expect at least a couple of good days early that week, and a good chance the rest of the week would be ok as well. The three of us - Maya, Carole, and I - got underway that Monday afternoon, motored out of the Oakland Estuary and had a fine sail over to Sausalito, with winds in the central bay, funneled through the Golden Gate, in the 18-20 knot range.



Mark M. - a guy I had corresponded with on an internet discussion group for Ranger 23 sailors - invited us to stop at the small Sausalito non-profit sailing association of which he was the director. It was great to meet him in person after a year of email communications, and he fixed us up with a dock, keys to the restrooms, and an intimate BBQ party aboard the small trawler that the organization used as their office. Mark was there with his delightful family, and he also invited another sailing couple with whom we had a lot in common. It was wonderful visiting with like-minded sailors, and it kindled memories of the camaraderie we experienced so often back in the days when we were full-time cruisers. A great way to start our adventure.

Tuesday, April 5 - a rough beginning

About 8 o'clock the next morning, bundled up in our cold-weather layers, we passed under the Golden Gate bridge, bound for Half Moon Bay. There was a light northwesterly wind at first, that built steadily in strength. We were motor-sailing, with our 5HP outboard and full mainsail. The seas were probably 8-10 ft, and very steep. According to the current tables we were riding the last of the morning ebb, but our little GPS unit showed that we were going 9 knots -- 3 to 4 knots faster than we would've without a current, and this continued well after the predicted time for slack water. Probably the recent rains had added lots of water to the rivers that flow into the bay, and increased the amount of water trying to escape to the sea. The strong current flowing against the incoming seas, as well as the relatively shallow water, made the seas much steeper than they would've been in the open ocean. Even as the wind increased to the 10-15 knot range we continued to use the motor, because we wanted to stay in the deeper channel used by the big ships, in order to reduce the chance of breaking seas. We probably couldn't have maintained the necessary heading under sail alone. Because of the steepness of the waves I thought it would be prudent to travel all the way to the beginning of the channel (about 10 miles out) before heading south. But as we approached the first of the paired deep water channel buoys, about 5 miles from the gate, our outboard petered out. I looked back at it, and saw that the abrupt steep angle of the boat as we started to climb a wave caused the engine to practically submerge. I figured it had probably inhaled some water. I had no hope of being able to work on it with the extreme motion, so we raised the working jib, turned left, and started sailing across the bar. The motion of the boat was pretty bad, and Carole was feeling very queasy in spite of the motion sickness pill she had taken earlier, but gradually, as we escaped the influence of the current and as the water progressively deepened, the motion became less aggressive. Maya felt fine, and when I caught her eye to see how she was doing, I always got a big smile. She seemed to be enjoying it!

The wind continued to build, and the trip to Half Moon Bay from that point was quick - we probably averaged about 7 knots, and it was starting to look like we might be there in time for lunch! I began thinking about how to manage our arrival with no motor. It's necessary to sail south of the harbor entrance, because of a reef extending from the famous Maverick's surf spot at Pillar Point. After you've gotten around the reef you sail back north to the entrance, which is a narrow channel between two jetties. We would need to jibe around the buoy marking the reef, then sail upwind, tacking through the narrow entrance into the outer harbor, where there should be plenty of space to anchor under sail. That's what we did. However, the winds funneling past Pillar Point became very strong - probably around 30 knots - so I was very glad that I'd recently modified the boat to allow quick and easy reefing of the mainsail from the cockpit. We jibed, reefed, beat, and anchored all with no real problems, and great relief. There hadn't been much margin for error.

After a little time anchored in the howling wind of the outer harbor, decompressing and eating some lunch, I decided to take a look at the dead engine. The first step was to try starting it, and it fired up on the first pull - something it almost never wants to do! So we radioed the harbor office, got a slip, and motored into the marina in the inner harbor. Carole and I were very relieved to have this day safely done, and tried to explain to Maya why from our perspective this had been a rather difficult and unusual day. Since this was her first real ocean sailing, she just assumed it was business as usual, and it was just fine with her!

Wednesday and Thursday, April 6-7 - mission impossible

The weather forecasters were apparently having trouble predicting the conditions for the rest of the week. Apparently there was a trough of low pressure approaching, but acting very unstable, so it was hard to say what would happen. We went to sleep that night with the wind whistling through the rigging (Maya expressed amazement at how noisy the wind could be), and little windwaves slapping noisily against the hull.

When I awoke at 6:10am it was very still outside. I felt a surge of hope, and switched on the weather report (broadcast continuously on marine VHF radio). "Half Moon Bay Buoy," they reported "at 6am: winds 27 gusting to 37; seas 11 ft." "Everyone go back to sleep," I announced, "we're not going anywhere today." Why it could be so calm in the harbor and so windy a few miles away was puzzling, but undoubtedly due to wind shadow and funneling effects caused by the high hills of Pillar Point.

Later in the morning we listened to the weather forecast again, and the prognosis was for a series of lows causing very cold and windy conditions for most of the next week. Reluctantly, we decided we couldn't wait around that long, and arranged to leave the boat there and go home. We planned to return and resume the trip the next time our schedules permitted, which was about a month away. Hopefully by then the weather patterns would have stabilized.

Maya's dad David drove down from Berkeley to fetch us, and that evening we drove our car (which we'd left in Alameda) down to Santa Cruz to spend a night with Carole's daughter Kathryn and her family on our way home. BUT, in Santa Cruz I got on the computer and checked the forecasts, and found that once again they had changed. Now they were saying that after one more nasty day, conditions would improve. The next morning it was the same story. We decided to resume the trip on Friday. By this time, Maya had made other plans for the next few days, so wouldn't be rejoining us.

During this idle day in Santa Cruz we paid a visit to Ernie Rideout, who at age 93 is something of a Santa Cruz boating legend. He had been sailing small boats both in SF Bay and Santa Cruz most of his long life, and is still an active racing skipper. He won the Santana 22 class national championship for the second time at age 90. Ernie shared with us stories of sailing boats smaller than ours, starting with a 19 ft wooden "Acorn" class sloop in the 1930's, up and down the coast between SF and Santa Cruz all those years, for much of that time without the benefit of the modern materials and technologies that we take for granted now. It was an inspiration to us, and validated our sense that sailing a little boat like ours on a trip like this was not a reckless endeavor.

That evening Helen and Doug (Helen is my sister who also lives in Santa Cruz) gave us a lift back up to Half Moon Bay, where we spent the night on the boat. There was an icy wind blowing, and it was very chilly in the boat's little cabin, which we kept reminding ourselves was quite luxurious



compared to a pup tent! We were able to make it warm and cozy by firing up a little Coleman Sport-Cat Catalytic heater, powered by a disposable propane cylinder (of course we turned it off before going to bed).

Friday, April 8 - finally, some moderate conditions

Although the air was still extremely cold, in the morning the wind had eased up. The sun was shining most of the day, and our 50 mile sail to Santa Cruz from Half Moon Bay was quite pleasant. The seas had moderated to 6-7 feet, and we enjoyed NW winds of 15-20 knots until we reached Davenport in the mid-afternoon. We spotted a couple of whale spouts, but never saw the actual creatures. Then we entered a band of clouds accompanied by winds from just about every direction, as well as a period of flat calm. This was evidently a minor specimen of these unstable low pressure troughs that had been passing through and making the weather so hard to predict. At one point the wind blew briskly for a half hour or so from the southwest, and we found ourselves surfing down the ocean swells while close-hauled! When we rounded the point at the head of Monterey Bay and turned east toward Santa Cruz, the wind - luckily light - was coming from the East right on the nose. Very unusual! Although the motor had been running smoothly since the dunking, it had seemed to become much harder to start. That afternoon it took about 50 pulls (Carole said she counted!) until I was able to get it going, and we motored to the harbor.

In spite of all the Tsunami damage sustained by the harbor at Santa Cruz, they were able to accommodate several visiting boats. We were tied up on the inside of a long extension to the fuel dock. On the other side was a very classy-looking 80 ft. motor yacht from Friday Harbor, WA. When the harbor patrol guy came by to sign us in, he looked at our little boat and said, "Well, you guys are brave!" And looking down at the dock on her way back from the shower, Carole said that next to that mega-yacht our boat looked like a bathtub toy.

That evening we had a wonderful dinner with Kathryn and Yosi at Johnny's Harborside Restaurant, and returned to the boat for the night.

Saturday, April 9 - an exhilarating ride

Helen wanted to join us for the trip across Monterey Bay, so at 1pm the three of us left the harbor for the 22 mile crossing. We told Doug, who was going to meet us in Monterey for dinner, that we would probably arrive around 5 or 6. As it turned out, we got to the harbor entrance at 2:45, an average speed of 8 knots, under reefed main and working jib! This is because we were beam reaching in 25-30 knots of wind, and surfing on 11 ft. swells. Fortunately, the swells were nice and long. It was still a very wet trip, as whitecaps occasionally would break by the side of the boat sending sheets of spray over the crew, but it was a thrilling ride. Helen, who has not done much sailing, took the helm for the last hour or so and very quickly got the knack of steering to maximize our surfing down the long swells. We had a reef in the main and the working jib up, and were often clocking 10 knots, and occasionally got as high as 12.7! Helen is a horse person, and said steering the boat in these conditions was a lot like being a good rider: you have to be very sensitive to what the horse (or boat) is about to do, and respond to an action as it happens, rather than waiting and reacting after it has already developed. She probably could've been a boat whisperer!

We got a slip in the municipal marina, which was very nice - it had been totally rebuilt since Carole and I last visited there in 1993. Eventually Doug showed up and we all had a terrific meal at a great seafood restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf that Doug had been patronizing for years.

Sunday, April 10 - almost a summer day



This day was sunny very mild, and for the first time since leaving SF Bay we saw a number of other boats out sailing around for fun. It was an ideal day for the upwind sail around Pt. Pinos at the south end of Monterey Bay, and then down the coast a few miles to Carmel's Stillwater Cove. The winds were in the 8-12 knot range for this pleasant 15-mile leg. The cove, on the shores of the Pebble Beach golf course, is a lovely spot, very well protected from the northwest winds and swells, and lived up to its name. We were the only boat there on that calm and peaceful night.

Monday, April 11 - the long leg

The 70 mile trip from Stillwater to San Simeon Cove was the one leg of the trip that we didn't think we could cover in the daylight hours of a single day. To give ourselves a greater margin, we arose at 3:30am, and departed the cove in the dark, around 4. A couple of fishing boats were working the waters of Carmel Bay outside the cove, and all we could see of each one was a single extremely bright orangish light. Not having radar, and without being able to see their running lights, it was very difficult to tell how far away they were or what direction they were going. I think at we got quite close at times. Eventually, though, we got out of their territory and into the open ocean. As dawn broke and the sun rose we could see the distinctive contours of Pt. Sur ahead. We motored for the first couple of hours, and eventually the wind started filling in from behind. Interestingly, we were sailing on port tack, meaning the wind angle was slightly off the land, so the mainsail was on the seaward side. For this day, since the forecast was for moderate winds, we used (for the only time on this trip) a larger 150% genoa, rather than our 95% working jib. This sail was poled out on the opposite side, and we sailed all day in this "wing-and-wing" configuration, except for an hour or two in the early afternoon when the wind temporarily died away and we motored.

Again, it was a chilly day, but our wardrobe kept us comfortable: long underwear (polypropylene or merino wool), a substantial fleece layer, both top and bottom, and foul weather gear - for this gentle day acting as a wind breaker and extra insulating layer, rather than as protection from spray. We also wore gloves and warm double socks, and through experimenting came up with a headgear arrangement that we were very happy with: a baseball cap with visor covered with a stocking cap pulled down over our ears, and if we needed a little more wind protection, the foul weather gear hood over all of that. The baseball hat's visor was the solution to the problem of the hood drooping down over our eyes. Carole came up with that idea, and I thought it was brilliant!



We were generally sailing about 1-2 miles offshore, but we could see some interesting sights on land. For one thing, there was a notable lack of traffic on Hwy. 1. That was because of the recent slide north of Big Sur, which was clearly visible from the sea. Even before daylight we saw very bright lights -- evidence of the round-the-clock efforts being made to clear the massive slide. At another place further down the coast there was a broad swath of brilliant orange that was probably half a mile long. It was either a huge patch of poppies, or some other wildflower that same color.

Several times were visited by schools of dolphins. At one point, though, we saw two fins that were a much different shape: orcas! They approached our boat under water, and we could see the white color of their bellies as they came alongside, evidently checking us out by swimming on their sides. But they soon disappeared astern. These were not nearly as big as the orcas we had seen when cruising in British Columbia years ago. We checked our whale book, though, and what we saw matched the description of females or immature males.

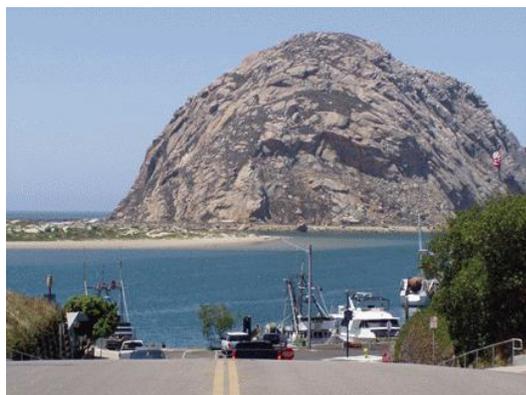
Because of the big jib we had been making good time even with the lighter winds. By mid-afternoon the wind started increasing and our speed was back up in the 7 knot range. We made it to San Simeon by 4pm - way before dark.

There was one other boat - a Westsail 32 - already anchored in the spacious bay. We picked a spot in the lee of the cliffs on the north side, and dropped our anchor for the third time on this trip. In previous cruises with Maya I had already determined that the traditional way of anchoring a sailboat by dropping and retrieving the anchor from the bow left a lot to be desired on this little boat. The foredeck is very narrow, and seriously obstructed by the jib which was recently dropped there. Furthermore, we have no provision for storing the anchor or its chain and rope in the forward part of the boat, and I felt that encumbering that fine bow with unnecessary weight would be detrimental to the performance of the boat. The cockpit, on the other hand, has lots of space, and big lockers where ground tackle can be stowed. It also has removable lifeline sections, giving easy access to the water, and jib sheet winches that could assist in pulling out an anchor that was firmly buried. Also, in a larger boat with an inboard engine, once the anchor is dropped the engine is reversed to pull on the rode and set the anchor. The puny reverse on our little 5HP Nissan would be a pathetic way to set an anchor - you could never be sure that it wouldn't drag if the wind picked up later.

So we took to dropping the anchor off the stern, sailing or motoring downwind until the anchor digs in and the boat stops completely. If we're motoring, we can then rev up to really set the anchor. After that, we re-cleat the rode at the bow, the boat swings around into the wind, and we're set! To retrieve the anchor we may motor up to it while taking in rode from the bow, but when we're close I walk the rode back to the cockpit retrieve the anchor from there. It works great. Another plus is that if the anchor comes up with clumps of mud attached, it can be dragged behind the boat until it's clean before being brought aboard.



Tuesday, April 12 - the final leg



After a quiet night in San Simeon Cove, which is a beautiful spot, and the only place on this trip that we're likely to ever revisit in Pearl, we headed for Morro Bay. A windy day was forecast, so we went back to the working jib, and ended up having another fast downwind sail in what will be our new sailing territory. It soon became another 25-knots-of-wind kind of day, but it was sunny and fun. Whenever we'd look behind us, though, at the substantial swells and whitecaps, we were grateful not to be going north.

The swells built up to a pretty impressive size at the harbor entrance, and it was a relief to finally be inside the protected waters of the little bay we've come to think of as home.

We had one final hurdle to overcome. The Morro Bay State Park Marina, where our new slip is, has suffered over the years from silting, and the channel leading to it is too shallow for a fixed-keel sailboat at low tide. That was the state when we arrived around 2pm; high tide would be about 7. We tied up at the yacht club dock, which is in the deep part of the harbor, took showers, and walked down the Embarcadero for an early dinner of great Thai food. When we got back to the boat the wind was still blowing if anything harder than when we arrived. An additional complication was that the buoys marking the narrow, winding channel into the marina had all been swept out of position during the recent Tsunami, so we had an additional risk of grounding. We decided that it would be foolish to try the approach for the first time in such a strong wind, because if we did get into the mud the wind might make impossible to get off.

Wednesday, April 13 - the last mile

We decided to sleep on the boat and take it to the marina at first light, when there would be another high tide and probably calm winds. That proved to be the case, and by 7:30am Pearl was snug in her new slip. The journey was complete.

We were completely delighted with the Ranger 23's behavior on the ocean. She was always easy to sail, fast, stable, and quite dry for her size. We never felt a moment of apprehension about the boat and her ability to get us safely to the next port.

It's really nice having her 10 minutes from home, and it's a nice location. There are pleasant views of trees and hills from our slip at the back of the marina. We stopped by this evening (Friday, April 15) on our way home from Morro Bay and met for the first time the resident sea otter that we were told regularly hangs out by our dock. He was floating on his back a few feet from the stern of the boat.



Otter off end of dock



New scenic location - Morro Bay State Park