

California

here we come!

A passage from Vancouver Island to Los Angeles



COSMIC DANCER V

Clive Woodman & Angela Lilienthal, Cosmic Dancer V – Sweden 38, July-August 2024

CRUISE LOG

The prospect of a cruising to a new area is normally met with unreserved excitement and anticipation. However, this year these feelings were tempered by a nagging uneasiness. We first arrived in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) in 2017, only intending to stay for a couple of seasons. Such was our enchantment with the area, that 7 years later we were still there. In so many ways it was the ultimate cruising ground. Thousands of miles of sheltered waters, benign weather conditions, more wild anchorages than you could visit in a lifetime, and unspoilt nature at its very best.

We were about to leave this cruising nirvana for what? A 3-year project to cruise a number of Central and South American countries, all suffering varying degrees of political instability, many having regions listed on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office "Avoid all but essential travel" list, and with yacht insurance only guaranteed for the first few legs.

"Are we doing the right thing?" was the question at the front of our minds as we landed at Vancouver airport. We had only come across 3 other RCC yachts in our 7 years of cruising the PNW and none of them had left the area. All 3 yachts were sold in Vancouver or Seattle and their owners moved on to other aquatic pursuits, possibly concluding that offshore cruising couldn't possibly get any better than what they had just experienced.

Perversely it was this fact that spurred us on. Whilst we conceded that it would be hard to find a better cruising ground, we weren't ready to consign ourselves and Cosmic Dancer to spending the rest of our days cruising the PNW. It would be delightful and safe, but there were still other challenges and adventures out there waiting to be had!

Any nervousness as to whether we were making the right decision was consigned to the back of our minds as we applied ourselves to the task of getting Cosmic Dancer fit for the passage that lay ahead. 3 months in the superb Blackline boatyard on Vancouver Island saw us replace all our through hull fittings, remove the keel, replace the 40 year old keel bolts, replace all our standing and running rigging, update our instruments, and a myriad of other tasks which had lain on the to do list for many years, but which could no longer be put off now that we were heading for the open oceans. The only thing we postponed was buying a new mainsail, a decision that we would later come to regret.



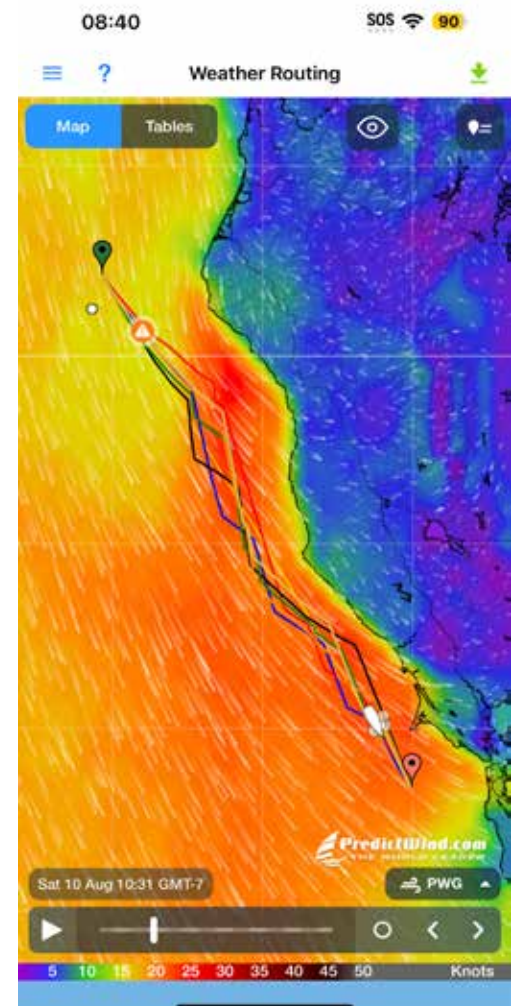
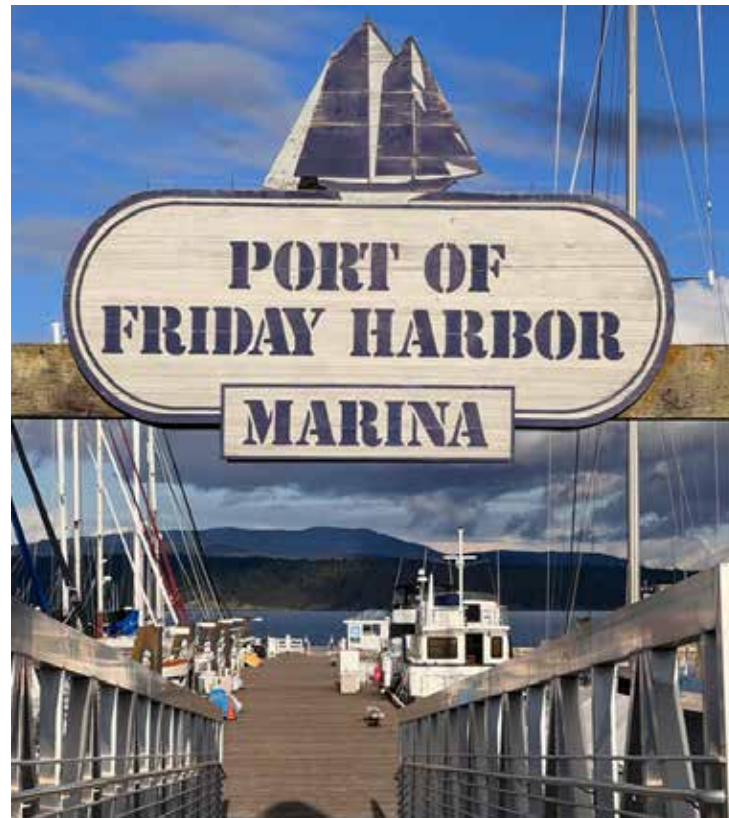
We launched on 25 Jul and our first week afloat was spent frantically sailing backwards and forwards across the border between Vancouver Island and the US San Juan Islands, picking up last minute parts, renewing cruising permits, and reminding ourselves of offshore safety procedures and drills that had atrophied in 7 years of predominantly inshore sailing. By the 2nd of August we were in Oak Bay on the southwestern corner of Vancouver Island and deemed ourselves and Cosmic Dancer as ready as we could be for the off - California, here we come!

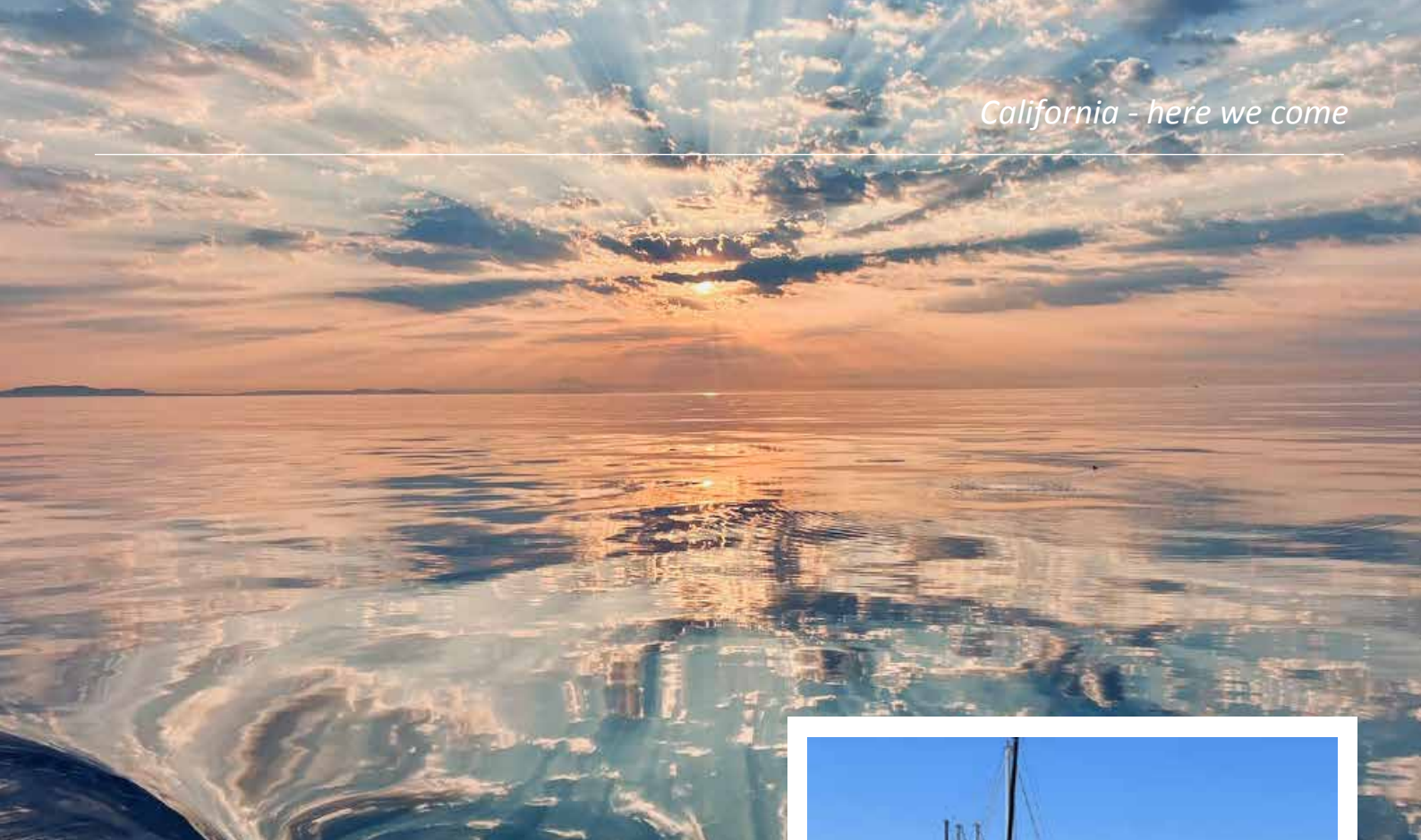
At first sight the 1,300 NM passage we were about to undertake looked like it should be a veritable walk in the park. We would be under the influence of the summer North Pacific High for the entire voyage, giving us a downwind sleigh ride down a coastline famed for its “sun, sand and surf”. If ever there was a surefire recipe for shorts and t-shirt sailing, this was it, or so we naively thought!

The reality turned out somewhat different, with many PNW cruisers who have gone on to circumnavigate the globe, describing their first leg down the Oregon and California coasts as the toughest part of their circumnavigation.

The first warning signs that things might not be as easy as we first thought came when we started perusing the weather models months prior to departure looking for patterns and trends. It soon became apparent that even in high summer, it would be impossible to complete the passage without encountering winds exceeding 30-40 knots at several points. These are typically caused by the Pacific high coming into collision with the many rugged headlands of the Californian coast, creating fierce wind acceleration zones that often extend up to 100 mile south of these capes.

The second misconception was that we would be able to day sail down the coast north of San Francisco, stopping each night in a different harbour. Whilst this is possible, most of the harbours on the Oregon and northern California coast involve crossing shallow river bars, which the Coast Guard frequently close to recreational craft when conditions over the bar are hazardous. Once inside these harbours you can find yourself trapped for days or weeks waiting for the bar to open. If we had the luxury of an entire summer to explore this coast it would have been delightful to stop in these small harbours. However, we didn't, and if we were to reach Los Angeles in the 5 weeks available to us before we had to return to work, then we couldn't risk day hopping. We reluctantly concluded that the passage from Cape Flattery to San Francisco would have to be done in one non-stop 750 NM leg.





Our first challenge was to cross the Juan de Fuca Strait from Oak Bay to Port Angeles so that we could clear into the US before attempting our passage down a length of coastline largely devoid of official ports of entry. Although we didn't plan on stopping, we wanted to keep the option open should weather or other circumstances dictate.

Sandwiched between Vancouver Island and the snowcapped mountains of the Olympic Peninsula, the Juan de Fuca Strait is a natural wind funnel which in summer invariably experiences thermally accelerated 25-35 knot inflow winds by early afternoon. An ebb tide opposing these winds can result in small boat breaking conditions. It is not by accident that the classic 750 NM "Race to Alaska" uses the 40 NM crossing of the Strait as a pre-qualifier for the full race, reckoning that any boat which can survive the crossing is likely to be able to make the rest of the trip.

We set out from Oak Bay just before first light to avoid the worst of the afternoon head winds. A spectacular sunrise and a calm crossing were the reward for our endeavours, followed by a wonderful traditional American breakfast in a family run diner adjacent to the marina in Port Angeles.

Another 0300 start saw us leave Port Angeles to get the most out of the west going tide and avoid the 30 knot incoming sea breeze forecast for later in the day. The first part of this leg was difficult, short tacking in thick fog between the shore and the in-





bound shipping lane, in a stomach churning wind against tide chop, but none the less still making 8 knots over the ground.

By 1000 the sun had burnt off the fog, the wind had died to nothing, and the seas had flattened to nothing worse than a gentle swell rolling in from the Pacific. We carried the fair tide to within 5 miles of Neah Bay where we were faced a decision, push on against a foul tide and strong headwinds forecast for later in the afternoon, or bank our gains and stop for the night in Neah Bay.

We chose the latter and were vindicated. Within 15 minutes of dropping anchor the wind had increased to 25 knots and breaking waves could be seen on the seaward side of the breakwater. We celebrated a judicious decision with an early afternoon G&T followed by an afternoon snooze!

The following day we left Neah Bay in near windless conditions but nonetheless still encountered heavy overfalls on the ebb tide as we exited the Juan de Fuca Straits. Once out at sea everything calmed down and we found ourselves beating into a light southerly wind. This soon died and it took a further 8 hours of motor sailing to get out into the offshore north westerly air stream.

By nightfall the wind had filled in and we were enjoying a fast 7-8 knot broad reach in 15 knots of true wind. However, it was a pitch-black night with no stars, moon or shore lights for reference and no visible horizon. Together with a quartering sea this made steering a challenge, especially as this was our first taste of offshore sailing at night in several years.



Dawn saw us about 80 miles due west of the entrance to the Columbia River broad reaching in about 10 knots of wind and grey overcast skies. The wind increased as the day went on and by nightfall the genoa had been rolled away, to be replaced by a staysail and 2 reefs in the mainsail.

Even with this reduced sail plan we were finding it hard to keep the yacht under control at night in the confused quartering seas and no visual steering references other than a wildly swinging compass card. The decision was made to put in a third reef.

No sooner had we secured the reef than we realised that in the process the staysail sheet had become jammed under the self-tailing arm of one of the mast winches. Trying to free the sheet with the sail set proved impossible, so we rolled in the staysail, only to have it jam in the half-furled position. A trip onto the foredeck with a head torch revealed the source of the problem, but no ready solution.

Our masthead RCC burgee halyard had become entangled in the top staysail furler bearing and jammed it. In calmer conditions we might have attempted to “unwind” the half-furled staysail with a series of gybes, or to send someone aloft to disentangle it. However, in the prevailing conditions and with only 2 on board, both would have been borderline suicidal. We had a problem!

In the absence of any other viable solution, Clive went forward to the foredeck to pull laterally on the offending burgee halyard and staysail leach, whilst Angela repeatedly coaxed what little movement she could get out of the furler from the cockpit, at the same time hand steering. Even with 3 reefs in the main, the wind and sea state was more than our autopilot could cope with.

Eventually, the burgee halyard popped free, we fully furled the staysail and were then able to free the jammed sheet. A lesson learnt, next time reef before night falls, although it was a lesson we had no immediate need for, since the triple reefed main and a staysail was to remain our sail plan for the next 96 hours.

Dawn on the third day saw the following entry in our ship's log:

Another grey, cold morning with temperatures struggling to break into double figures. Today is “Welcome to California” day as we crossed that state line last night. But where has the fabled California Sunshine gone? This feels more like a gale filled winter crossing of the North Sea than high summer in California.

It was not until day 6 of the passage that we saw the sun for the first time and were able to shake out one of the reefs in the main, but the relief was short lived. By evening it was time to put the third reef back in. No sooner had we sheeted the main in, than we noticed that whilst reefing the leach tape had become detached from the sail above the third reef point.

We hove to, dropped the main on deck, and effected a temporary repair with sail tape. By then it was dark, and rather than risk having to deal with the consequences of our repair failing in pitch darkness, we decided to remain hove to until dawn and get some much needed rest. The plan didn't work. Shortly after midnight an ocean-going tug with a long tow was closing on a steady bearing and demanded that we get out of his way. We obliged, and once under way there seemed little point in stopping, even though we didn't re-hoist the main until dawn.

Within minutes of raising the mainsail, a rogue wave pooped us, followed seconds later by another wave on the beam which knocked us down. No damage was done, and the temporary sail repair survived this baptism of fire, so we concluded it would probably be good enough to get us to San Francisco.

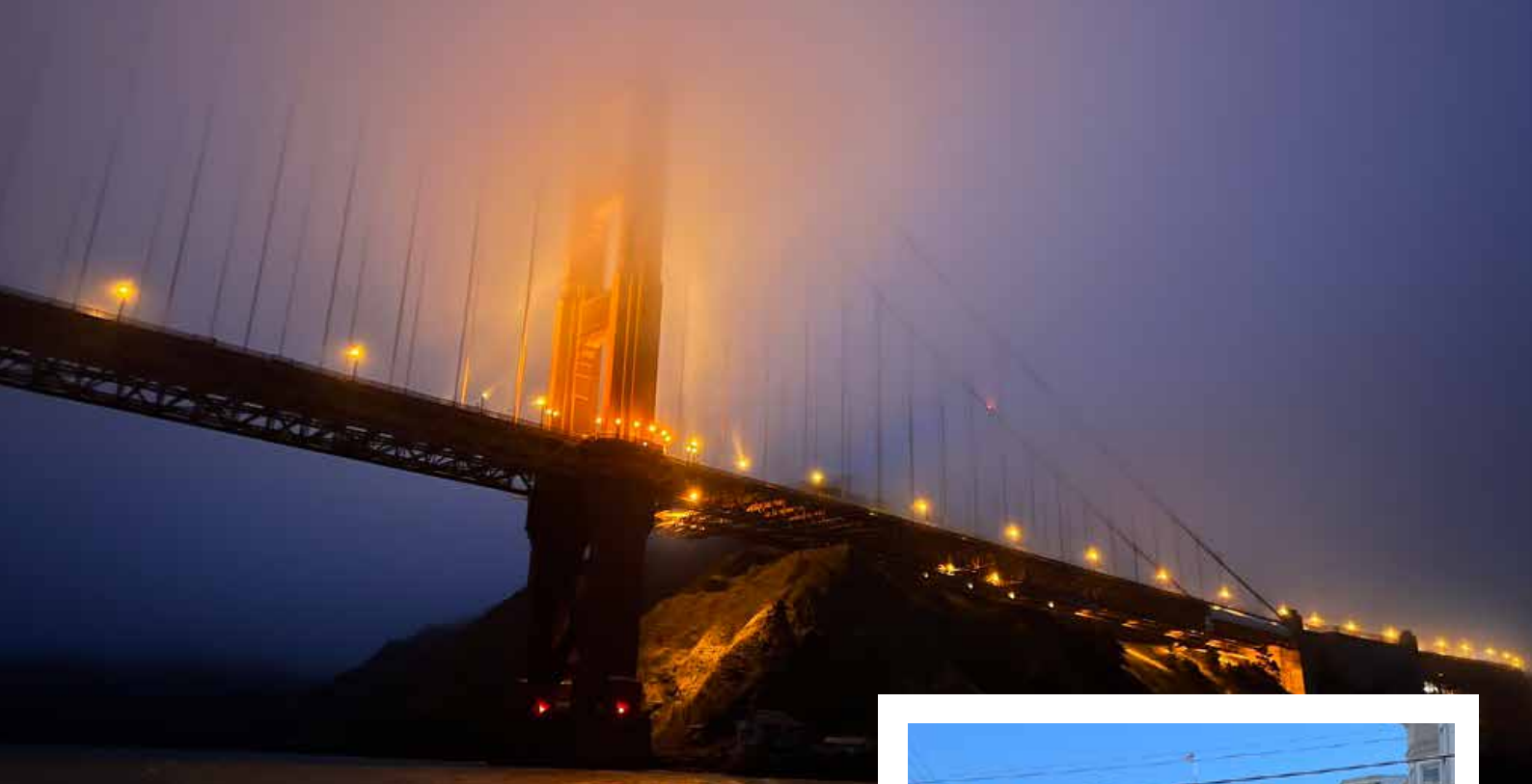
By now we were within 110 miles of San Francisco making good 7-8 knots, but the fat lady had yet to sing. During our daily battery charging session the engine spluttered and died. Thinking it was an air lock caused by rolling and a half empty tank, we refilled our tanks from jerry cans, bled the engine, and all was well for another 5 minutes before the engine died again. Further investigation revealed a blockage in the shut off valve at the top of the tank, a problem which couldn't be resolved without removing the valve, something which if attempted with a full tank and current sea state would have resulted in most of the fuel being spilled into the engine compartment.

Not wishing to negotiate the narrow San Francisco entrance without a working engine, we elected to head for Drakes Bay, an open anchorage some 25 NM north of the San Francisco Bar buoy. We wouldn't be able to make the anchorage before dark, fog was forecast overnight, and we didn't relish the prospect of closely rounding Point Reyes, statistically California's windiest headland, without an engine. However, it seemed to be the least bad option, since remaining in the busy traffic separation schemes surrounding the approaches to San Francisco with no engine and the wind forecast to die overnight, would have been even more unseamanlike.

Just in case this wasn't enough to deal with, our AIS showed fleet of about 40 sailing yachts heading from San Francisco to the same anchorage. It was clearly a passage race and a crowded anchorage was the last thing we needed entering for the first time at night, in the fog, without an engine!

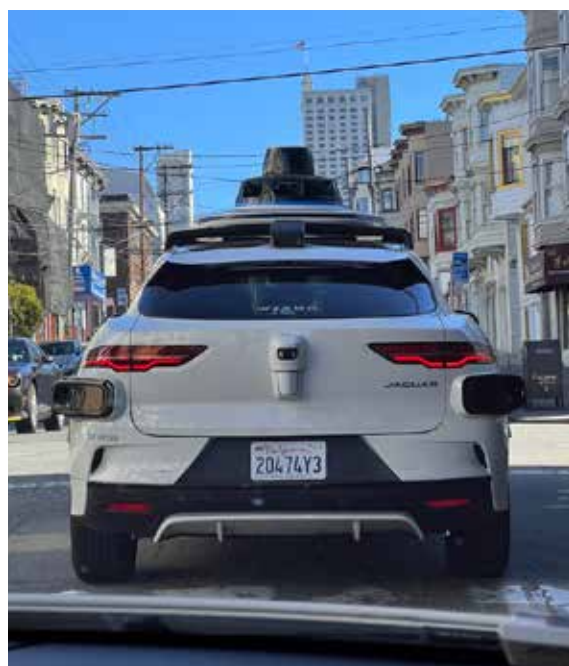
Short tacking into the anchorage in a dying wind took an eternity, but we made it shortly before dawn. It was with a certain amount of trepidation that we dropped anchor and prayed that Mike and Hilde Gill's 2016 Cruising Club Bowl winning log, which had been our go to "bible" for much of the trip, would just once prove to be less than 100% accurate in its prognosis. We did not fancy replicating their experience of it ".... taking three attempts to get the anchor to penetrate the kelp and set properly". The anchor gods must have been smiling on us that night, the anchor set first time, and the fat lady finally obliged with a resounding chorus as we set about demolishing the remains of a bottle of Famous Grouse!





In the calm of the anchorage, we were easily able to clear the fuel blockage and set sail the following night aiming to pass through the Golden Gate at dawn on the last of the flood tide. Sadly, it was not the memorable moment we had hoped for. The fog was so thick that the only thing we saw of it was the bottom of the bridge as we passed under the famed arches.

We went on to enjoy a fantastic week in San Francisco Bay, first in Sausalito which was delightful and more than lived up to the lavish praise heaped upon it in the Gill's log, and subsequently in the quirkier suburbs of Oakland and Emeryville, both of which had their own attractions. We did all the usual tourist things, and one that wasn't, taking a ride in a Waymo, one of the world's first fully autonomous driverless taxis, a truly fascinating experience and glimpse into the future.



We could easily have spent months in San Francisco, but we wanted to get round the most southerly of California's exposed headlands, Point Conception, before the risk of autumn storms set in.

Leaving San Francisco is difficult and not just for the reasons alluded to above. The afternoon winds funnelling into the Bay through the Golden Gate are even more extreme than those in the Juan de Fuca Strait, often exceeding 30 knots. San Francisco is the only place we have visited where the price of a permanent marina berth is determined by its orientation. Such is the ferocity of the sea breezes, that an east (downwind) facing berth can be half the price of a west facing one, on the grounds that the former can only be safely entered for a few hours a day before the winds kick up.

The sea breeze dictates that in summer you need to pass through the Golden Gate early in the day, whilst at the same time ensuring you depart late in the flood or at slack tide since a strong ebb tide meeting the Pacific swell over the Bar can result in hazardous conditions for small craft, even in relatively light winds.

The combination of these 2 factors dictated that we had to leave the San Francisco a mere 8 days after arriving. However, unlike the first leg, the harbours south of San Francisco generally don't have river bars and can be safely entered under most normal conditions, so day sailing down the coast is practical proposition, even if time is limited.



Once south of San Francisco weather and wind conditions were more predictable and we were able to stop for all but one night of the passage. Typically, the mornings would be calm, with a strong sea breeze picking up as the day progressed. On days where we had a headland to round, we would set out early, motoring if necessary, so that we could get round the headland before the sea breeze reached full ferocity. If there was no headland or acceleration zone to traverse, we would normally wait until the sea breeze had filled in before setting sail.

Our stops on this leg encapsulated some of the best and worst of cruising in southern California. Morro and Santa Barbara were both utterly delightful harbours showcasing the Californian dream at its very best. Conversely, Monterey, with its Cannery Row of Steinbeck fame, stands testament to the worst excesses of mass tourism and unsustainable fishing. Others, like Half Moon Bay, San Simeon Bay and Avila Beach were good passage anchorages, but surf on the beach or the ferocious afternoon sea breezes meant that we couldn't get ashore in these places.

Once round Point Conception our final challenge was to find somewhere that we could lay up Cosmic Dancer for a few months whilst we returned to Europe for work and to await the end of the hurricane season in Mexico.

Our attempts to sort a berth in advance had all ended in abject failure. On numerous occasions we initially got a promising response from a marina, forwarded the requested registration and insurance documents, only to get rejected once they realised the age of the yacht and the length of stay that we were requesting.





We never got an unequivocal explanation from any of the marinas as to why our application had been rejected, but our suspicion based on anecdote and personal observation, is that they are trying to deter what has clearly become a serious problem for some marinas on the west coast of USA and Canada, namely owners bringing an ageing and derelict craft into a marina, nominally for a short stay, and then abandoning it, leaving the marina saddled with the cost of disposal.

On arriving in person at a marina for a one or 2 night stay where the marina staff were able to see that neither we nor our craft, were derelicts, we got marginally more favourable responses to requests for a longer stay, but even then many marinas wanted to see a full out of water survey with all reported defects remedied, before they would grant us a longer term stay.

Francis Hawkins (RCC), a long-standing resident of Los Angeles, was magnificent both in the advice and hospitality he showed upon us during this period, and with just days to go before flying home we finally managed to negotiate layup ashore in Ventura without the need for a survey. It was a little too close for comfort, even for a pair of sailors who habitually leave such things to the very last minute! Yet another challenge we had not anticipated when planning this cruise.



With Cosmic Dancer safely laid up ashore, we had a couple of days to explore Los Angeles and reflect on the previous 5 weeks. It certainly hadn't been the walk in the park we initially thought it might be, but it provided us with more than enough excitement to sate the desire for new challenges alluded to at the start of this article! Most important of all, any nagging doubts we might have had about the wisdom of leaving the PNW, had been dispelled. It had been wonderful to get out on the open ocean again and rediscover the thrill of sailing to new places. We return to Europe fired up with enthusiasm for the next chapter which will see us heading south into Mexico once the hurricane season is over.

Cosmic Dancer



Crew:

Angela Lilienthal and Clive Woodman



THE PASSAGE

