

Sailing Around the Delmarva Peninsula

“A vacation?” I thought as the week progressed. “This is no vacation. This is an endurance test!” We had each taken time off from work the last week in June 1980 for our sail around the Delmarva Peninsula. The Delmarva Peninsula is made up of bits of three states, DELaware, MARYland, and VirginiA, running roughly north and south between the Chesapeake Bay on one side and Delaware Bay and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. We’d had our Cape Dory 36 just over a year and were eager to see her perform in the ocean. Hank had sailed down the coast from Connecticut crewing on someone else’s boat, but my only experience in the ocean was being bodily tossed by the breakers at the beach and some foggy ferry rides in Maine, Canada, and Delaware. This would be new for me.

Planning

We spent our spare time during a couple of months in the spring studying charts which were spread around the living room floor, reading current and tide tables, and planning our course. Our Interlude was still not completely outfitted. We had no self-steering mechanism, for example. So we decided to stop each night except the one night we would be on the ocean. After pinpointing what we thought would be logical anchorages, we supplied copies of the itinerary to our children and neighbors. A good exercise but, as it turned out, not accurate. On reviewing the list afterward, we discovered that we had stayed at only one out of eight anchorages on the night we had planned. Well, it was a learning experience; and lesson number one was not to count on an exact schedule when depending on Chesapeake winds. By passing through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal at the north end of the Chesapeake Bay, one can circumnavigate this peninsula, a little over 400 miles. That is, this can be done if one has some time and in the absence of a good wind, a dependable engine. The Chesapeake Bay is a marvelous place for sailing, and the winds can be great at times. But at other times....yes, a little diesel power comes in handy. We thought allowing eight days to cover 400 miles with a day to spare for unplanned complications was reasonable. We couldn’t lollygag around, but neither would the schedule wear us out. We would enjoy seeing parts of the bay we had not been to before, and experience the excitement of sailing in the ocean, even if it was only for a short run along the coast.

Off We Go

We loaded the boat Friday night and set the alarm for 0530 before turning in for a good night’s sleep at the mooring in West River, 12 miles south of Annapolis. Before 0700 the next morning we had finished breakfast, cast off our mooring line, and were motoring out into the river. The prevailing wind in this area in June is southerly, and we decided to sail in a counter-clockwise direction; so we would not have to tack while out in the ocean. We were delighted to begin the journey down the bay with a brisk northwesterly wind, clear blue sky, warm sun, and a promising weather forecast. Our destination that night was supposed to be Smith Creek off the Potomac River, some sixty miles from our mooring. The wind lasted for three whole hours. By 1030 it had died, the temperature had risen, and the sun was glaring down on us unimpeded. Ah well, 40 miles was not too bad for the first day. We started our engine, lowered our foresails, and headed into the Patuxent River and Solomons Island. Because we left West River too early that morning to get diesel fuel, we filled up here and were anchored by 1530. Actually, we rationalized, it was a good beginning. The short sail gave us a chance to get adjusted to the movement of the boat and to recheck our gear and supplies. All seemed to be in order, and we once again set the alarm for an 0530 rise for another early start.

Day Two

The second day started out much like the first. The wind was coming out of the west as we weighed anchor and raised sail by 0700. We headed for Cape Charles, just inside the entrance to the bay on the east side. But once again, after sailing about three hours, the wind died. We changed course and headed for the Piankatank River. We were now in Virginia waters, and this river is on the west side of the bay just south of the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers. We noticed one big difference between this part of the bay and the Annapolis area. There were not nearly as many pleasure boats, or were there as many buoys. So while we spent very little time and attention on traffic, we spent much more time navigating. There are two lighted towers about 50 to 60 feet

high, Smith Point south of the Potomac River entrance, and Wolf Trap south of the Piankatank, which helped us considerably in taking our bearings. We arrived at the entrance to the Piankatank just as the sun was getting low on the horizon. We were glad we were sailing during the longest days of the year. The Waterway Guide warned that this was a tricky entrance and advised using a compass heading to enter the river. Good advice! The wind came up on our port beam with accompanying rough water. The fading light meant poor visibility. The unlighted buoys were far enough apart that we were unable to see more than one at a time. The channel was narrow with a few turns, and twice during that passage we came upon large areas of fish stakes that were not shown on the chart, and, of course, were also not lighted. We had taken down all of our sails earlier that day when we started motoring. We wished now that we had left our mainsail up in case our engine quit in the narrow channel in the heavy weather conditions. So far it had never failed us. We held our breath and fought to hold our compass heading as we strained in the fading light to watch for obstacles and buoys. Finally we were in the lee of the land in quieter water, and we followed the markers up into the river to find a sheltered anchorage. We dropped our anchor in 17 feet of water at 2130, had dinner with candlelight and wine in silver goblets, and no alarm was set for the next day. We deserved it all!

Day Three

The next day the late risers woke to blue skies and sunshine. Over breakfast we discussed the pros and cons of heading directly out to the ocean rather than stopping overnight at Cape Charles as we had originally planned to do. We decided to wait until we were under way and could tell more about the wind conditions before making up our minds. Then, while going through his routine check before raising anchor, Hank discovered the engine was down a quart of oil. We hadn't lost it; there it was in the engine pan. An oil leak! We had only three quarts on board. Hank added one to the engine, searched in vain for the source of the leak, and suggested Cape Charles as our next stop. That way he could check the engine again that evening and decide whether to continue our trip out into the ocean or turn around and head back up the bay to our home mooring and the engine man. As we left the Piankatank, our heading to Cape Charles was directly into the wind which was now coming out of the southeast at 12 knots. We fell off to a tack under full sail. Once again we spent a good bit of time navigating, using our handheld compass and binoculars, and carefully checking the buoy numbers. Cape Charles entrance is well marked but is fairly narrow. And shades of yesterday, as we started our engine and lowered our foresails, the wind came up to 18 to 20 knots across our starboard, and we worked to stay in the channel until we could turn downwind and then into the harbor of refuge. After setting the anchor and getting everything squared away on deck, Hank checked the oil level in the engine. We really had not motored very long that day, and the oil stick showed "full." We had dinner and turned in for the night, still uneasy about the mysterious source of the leak. The weather forecast the following morning sounded good: no storms predicted, and a southeast wind again.

Day Four

We had not made up our minds about continuing the trip or turning back, but we wanted to be able to say we had been in the ocean. So after getting under way at 0710, we continued tacking down the bay and under the Chesapeake Bay Bridge on an ebb tide. The current at the entrance to the bay was 1.3 knots outbound. Just beyond the bridge we tacked out, following a series of four red buoys leading us to the open ocean. I am not sure what changes I expected once we were out there. Gradually the chop typical of the bay was transformed into large swells, and the color of the water became lighter and almost transparent because it lacked the algae found in the bay. I was busy steering, watching the bridge disappear in the mist, and wondering what we should do. Hank was below, quietly studying the chart. Soon he came up and speculated aloud, "If we continue our trip as planned, we would fall off now to a heading of 42°. Why don't we just ease the sheets, fall off, and see how it feels." I could tell; we were not going to turn back. We were going to go all the way! A short time later while I was still at the helm, a school of dolphins came frolicking up to the port side of the boat, dove under, and continued swimming off our starboard side. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. They were so close that I could see a nick on the fin of one of the dolphins and the texture of their gray skin. Part of me wanted to run and get the camera, but more of me wanted to stay and not miss anything. I felt as though we were watching a show, and should be charged admission. We agreed it was a good omen, and we held our heading. So much time

had gone into the planning of this trip. We were relieved that we had decided to go on. We settled down to an hour on and an hour off at the wheel. As the hours passed we regretted more and more not having installed a self-steerer before the trip. This would be our first all-night sail. The distance from Cape Charles to Lewes, Delaware, just inside the Delaware Bay entrance, is 142 miles. Following the coast, we stayed between four to seven miles out. The haze cleared, and the wind blew a steady 10 to 15 knots out of the southeast, which put us on a broad reach. Hank used his radio direction finder for the first time except for some practice in the bay. He was elated to find that it was relatively easy to keep track of our progress. We enjoyed the long day-lit evening, and we were opposite Chincoteague at 2045 as the sun set. We put on our running lights. I began using part of my hour off the wheel to take short naps. I am not much of a night person, and I knew I would need some sleep to get through the night. Because of the gentle motion of the boat, it was easy to drop off to sleep even when the engine was running for a short time in the middle of the night. Hank, on the other hand, was wide awake. Except for a few short rest periods, he spent all of his time away from the helm checking and rechecking his navigation and keeping a close watch on the boat's performance, the sails, and the rigging. Visibility during the first part of the night was good. We had almost a full moon. We had seen four or five other sailboats during the day, but we now seemed to be alone except for a fairly large group of what we guessed to be fishing boats farther out than we and silhouetted on the horizon. As the hours passed, clouds obscured the moon, and the wind decreased to the point that we were making only two knots. Hank started the engine to gain some speed and motored for perhaps an hour. He did not feel comfortable about motoring when visibility was so poor, so when I came up to relieve him at the helm, we turned the engine off again and raised the sails. We had just finished trimming them when I heard a bell. The next moment an unlighted buoy appeared not more than six feet off our port bow. If the engine had been running, we may not have heard it. It was the buoy Hank had been looking for. Well, we certainly were on target. We could have had a collision out there. We were convinced we did not want to motor under those conditions. The wind came up again while I was at the helm to about 15 knots. We were now almost directly down wind. I had the feeling of sailing in a dark closet. I could not see the horizon ahead of us nor could I anticipate the large swells coming up behind and lifting the boat. I found myself turning the wheel in larger and larger arcs, trying to hold us on a compass heading. I finally called Hank, who was taking one of his few rests, to come and take the wheel and settle us down again. His night vision must be better than mine. He got the boat under better control, and I took over again for another try. I searched again to see if I could make out the horizon and discovered just to the port side of our bow some green and white lights. Another fishing boat? I held my course, using the lights as a steering aid. It really did work. I was able to keep the boat fairly steady in spite of the continuing swells. As the minutes went by I expected to come up to the boat whose lights I saw, but I did not seem to be getting any closer, nor did the boat seem to move. After more minutes had passed, the lights did cross our bow and disappear on the starboard side. But then another set appeared on my port bow. Once again for several minutes I used the lights to keep the boat steady. Eventually they too moved off to our starboard and were gone. Now there was just a hint of dawn, and I could barely see the faint line of the horizon.

Day Five

Hank appeared to relieve me, and I asked him to watch for any boats off our starboard. I went below for some sleep. When I came back an hour later with some hot coffee, he said he had not seen any boats anywhere. We were now off Ocean City, a possible anchorage if we decided to stop. But we elected to continue into Lewes instead. In searching for the "moaners," the whistle buoys marking the approach to Ocean City, we found that during the night we had sailed farther out than we intended. We headed toward shore until we reached those wierd-sounding buoys that reminded me a little of fog horns. The morning was bright and sunny, and the wind was calm. We continued under power again to the entrance of the Delaware Bay. We were still losing oil, so when the wind came up shortly before noon, we turned the engine off. Soon the southeast wind was up to 15 knots again. Our plan was to anchor in the harbor of refuge just inside the entrance to the Delaware Bay on the west side, but it was too exposed. We decided to go into Lewes and Rehoboth Canal instead. Our immediate problem was that we did not have a detailed chart of the canal. The only other boats around were power boats, and the captains did not know the depths in the canal. Hank tried to get the information by radio but was

unsuccessful. Our chart showed that Roosevelt Inlet had a narrow entrance with a 12-foot depth and with submerged jetties on either side of the entrance. We lowered our sails and started the engine once again. I held my breath while Hank took the helm and kept one eye on the depth finder while proceeding at the lowest speed possible and still control the boat in the cross wind. He tried staying in the middle of the entrance until the depth finder showed five feet, which is what we draw. Just then a large fishing boat headed out, going along the east side of the channel. Hank immediately headed for that side and deeper water. Inside the entrance the water was calm, and we proceeded up the canal in depths of 10 to 14 feet. After asking directions for someone who might fix the engine, we tied up at the shop's dock. We found that we would have to wait until 0800 the next morning for help, but that we could remain at the dock overnight. That was a relief. The public dock was full, and there certainly was no space to anchor in that busy canal which was home port for several large sport fishing boats. We finished our on-deck chores, and I was ready to follow Hank who I envisioned stumbling down the ladder to collapse on the closest bunk. He had gone without sleep for 31 hours. I at least had had several short naps and felt pretty good. But no. The first thing he wanted to do was to find a place to get some ice cream! We bought a pint, found two spoons, and finished it off. We did have an early dinner and were asleep before dark.

Day Six

Awakening to an early alarm once again, we scrambled the next morning to dress and get breakfast out of the way before the service man arrived to check on the oil leak at 0800. He was pleasant and did a thorough unhurried inspection of the engine, but could find no obvious reason for the leak. He advised our buying more oil and getting the engine repaired under warranty in Annapolis. *The leak, as it turned out, was from the oil pressure sensor connection.* Just before noon we made our way back down the canal in the rain. When we reached the entrance we could see that although we now knew where to steer, the winds were even higher than the day before, and we would have to move cautiously to keep away from the submerged jetties on the east side. What a relief to be out into the open bay again, raise our reefed sail, and be off. The steady downpour or rain made for poor visibility. We headed off on a starboard tack to locate the channel markers that run the length of the Delaware Bay. Although the bay is broad, much of it is shallow; and because we could not see the shores of either side in the rain, we elected to sail up the channel. As we picked up the first markers, we fell off on a reach, steering by compass heading when the buoys were obscured by rain. The Interlude was doing five knots, so we covered 40 miles in eight hours. We met a few sailboats coming down the bay, and tugs, barges, and freighters passed us going in both directions all day. Before 2000 hours we were anchored behind Marsh Island at the entrance to the Cohansey River on the east side of the bay. We immediately put in our screens and went below to escape the bugs and watch a beautiful sunset. We could hear the burbling of a swift current rushing by our boats. Our knot meter was registering 2.5 knots. Another long day, another late dinner, and bed.

Day Seven

Hank had checked the tidal current tables and found that we would have a favorable current up to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal if we left the anchorage by 0830. As we set the alarm for yet another early rising, that quiet voice in me that had been murmuring each time that alarm went off that week was getting much louder. Since when did I voluntarily go on a vacation where the alarm was set for an earlier rising than for a work day at home? I am lazy by nature and feel virtuous that I arrive at work on time each day. I deserve to sleep in on my vacation. Yes, this was an endurance test! And in a way we were in a race too. The engine problem was still on our minds, though the oil leak had slowed for no apparent reason.

Day Eight

The next morning the wind was coming out of the west. We clocked eight knots over the bottom on our reach up to the canal. The favorable two-knot current was a nice boost. We knew with the wind on our bow that we would have to motor through the canal. The passage itself was uneventful, shared with a freighter and a couple of barges. A railroad lift bridge was the only span too low for our 50-foot mast. However, we talked to the bridge tender on channel 13 and found that the span was raised to 135 feet. This would be a long day again because we wanted to reach Worton before stopping for the night. There are other anchorages in the Chesapeake

Bay closer to the canal, but for one reason or another we rejected them. Some were too shallow for our five-foot draft; one was open to the northwest, and some thunderstorms were predicted for the evening. Another was so far into the Sassafra River that going down to Worton wouldn't be much farther. As we came out of the canal in the middle of the afternoon, the wind died. The water was glassy. We continued motoring until we anchored in Worton at 1900. We had run our engine eight hours that day, and were relieved that the oil leak had remained minimal. We realized as we entered Worton that the water was unusually low. Normally it is an anchorage of seven or eight feet at low tide. That night as we lowered our anchor into a shallow six feet of water, we knew there was a possibility of our being aground later when the tide was at its lowest point. The threat of thunderstorms had us worried. As we turned in, I opened the locker where we kept the little alarm clock, smiled smugly, and remembered that we did not have to set it. We had decided to use our extra day to rest up in Worton. We were actually going to sleep later than 0530! Fortunately the predicted thunderstorms did not reach us, because we awoke in the middle of the night to that strange sensation of one sitting upright on the bottom. We were glad it was mud.

Day Nine

The next day was gloriously lazy. We puttered around at anchor, watched the weekenders arrive, invited a couple over for a drink, had a great dinner at the restaurant on shore, and rode out the only thunderstorm of the week at anchor and floating.

Day Ten

The last stretch on Sunday morning was 35 miles from the West River to our home mooring. (See the table for the trip data.)

We were hoping for a pleasant sail with perhaps a west, or northwest, or northeast, or east wind. What did we have? And off-again, on-again breeze from the south. We tacked when we could and motored when we couldn't. It was a typical summer Sunday in the Annapolis area; boats were out in full force. We knew these waters well, including buoy numbers and compass headings. Navigation was a breeze. We gave all of our attention to threading our way through racing boats, Navy sloops, fishermen, buoys, and the freighters at anchor. What a contrast. We were back safely in home waters. Our Interlude had performed well, and even the oil leak held off long enough for us to make it back to our mooring under our own power. The weeks of planning had worked out, and we had passed our endurance test.

Dee Victorian

TRIP DATA

Date	Destination	Hours		Distance N.M.
		Sailing	Motoring	
June				
21	Solomons Is.	3	3.1	40
22	Piankatank R.	3	6.51	60
23	Cape Charles	7.8	0	21.3
24	Ocean	15.83	1	87
25	Lewes, Del	8.5	6	55
26	Cohansy R.	8.5	0	42.5
27	Worten	3.5	7	62
28	At Anchor	0	0	0
29	West River	2.65	4.35	35
Totals		52.78	27.96	402.8