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# Currents

March 2008

**Photo Shoot in Mexico**

## By Richard “Dick” Drechsler

Setting out aboard *S/V Last Resort*, we anticipated a six- or seven-hour motor-sail to Coral Marina, just north of Ensenada, Mexico. The primary purpose for the trip was to visit our friend Spike Webb, who was experimenting with using a model seaplane as a platform to take aerial photographs, and we would be the first sailing vessel he would attempt.

Our trip started out uneventfully and it looked like we were going to be motoring all the way. But shortly after we passed Mexico’s Coronado Islands, the wind picked up to around 13 knots. I decided to haul out the spinnaker and give it a try. We were still getting used to our new spinnaker – a 1336-square foot expanse of fabric wrapped around a RollGen – and we had some trouble rigging it. But, once it was unfurled and dialed in, it looked like we were in for a really smooth ride.

We got pretty relaxed, so Sharon decided to head down below for a nap. Well, no sooner had she gone to sleep when the wind picked up and we started getting headed badly, so I decided to jibe. Just when the sail started to come over to the starboard side, the sheet let loose and there I was, holding a line to nowhere. I quickly led the port sheet around the bow and tried to haul it in. But I couldn't control the sheet without help, so no more nap for Sharon! Once we got that sorted out, she went back to try to get that nap in, after all.

It didn’t last too long. We were getting pushed toward land by an increasing header, so I went forward and rigged the port sheet. My wrestling match with the spinnaker and wind started going absolutely crazy and at one point I had to circle *Last Resort* around a full 180 degrees to

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keep the spinnaker flying down wind. So once again, Sharon was roused out to help get the sail furled. Once that was done, we were able to settle down again.

We were settled in for an easy-going motor-sail under a laid-back breeze, when we noticed that the bilge pump was running almost non-stop...not a good sign. I tore into the bilge and found we had a pretty good flood going. I immediately began checking all the thru-hull valves and didn't see any water running until we got to the engine. The waterless packing gland for the propeller shaft was spewing out seawater. Yikes!! Luckily, I was able to push on the bellows and get the water flow to stop, but it started back up if we pushed our Gori prop into overdrive. We reverted to motoring at 2000 RPM.

Happily, during all this diversion the wind had built up to 18 knots and increasing...yippee! We immediately put up the jib and before we could get to the engine to shut it down, we were motorsailing at 9.7 knots! That's a record for us. We were heeling so badly, it was a struggle to get the engine shut down fast enough. Once we did that, we were still doing over 8.5 knots. But now there was another problem. We had left the RollGen with the spinnaker furled around the flexible foil in place, hoisted on the halyard, thinking we could simply unfurl it tomorrow for the photo shoot. It was never meant to be left aloft in winds this strong, so while I worked my way forward with the boat heeled over at about 25 degrees, Sharon worked on the halyard. We wrestled the sail down on deck and got it bagged. With water washing over the bow, there was no way I could open the hatch to lower it below, so I decided to just lash it to the deck.

Now that we were sailing comfortably, we were breaking all our speed records. With things under control, I turned my attention to the leaking prop shaft. This was a really serious problem that needed a solution, so I put a call into the Catalina dealer on the satellite phone and left him a detailed message.

We reached the Coral Marina after shaving a good hour off the normal transit time for this passage. The Santa Ana winds were roaring through. Based on weather reports and from our previous experience, these winds would blow themselves out. There'd be nothing left by morning. We were concerned about the viability of aerial photography when there's no wind to fill the sails, but even more importantly, we weren't going anywhere until we could fix our mechanical problem.

Shortly after we arrived the Catalina dealer called and explained that the collar on the waterless shaft seal needs a periodic adjustment. When I set out to do the job, I discovered that the space between the teak and holly floors and the sub-floor was soaked. We had to pull up the floors so we could dry everything out before getting started. The repair was a simple matter of removing two sets of double hex nuts from the holes in the collar. At least, it sounds simple enough, right?? Well, it would have been if we had had the right hex wrench. With a set of twenty on board, you'd think we'd have the right size. Fortunately, some very pleasant people happened to be walking down the dock and I was able to borrow their hex wrench set, plus get some really detailed advice on the adjustment from their delivery captain. The adjustment was pretty straightforward. I was able to move the collar a full 1/2 inch aft, closer to the bellows, which eliminated the problem.

The next day when the photo crew arrived at 0900, the water was as smooth as a bathtub. There wasn't even a zephyr. After our struggle to get the boat down to Mexico for this occasion, I was not about to be stymied. I came up with the idea of running the boat in reverse to keep the

sails full. The only detractor was a tell-tale wake streaming “forward” of the bow. At the end of the day, a light breeze sprang up and we got some sensational aerial photos.

Spike’s aerial photography is accomplished using a specially modified camera mounted on a remote controlled airplane and costs a tiny percentage (\$300.00) of what you’d pay for piloted aircraft to accomplish the same thing. (See [www.spycamair.com](http://www.spycamair.com).) Spike’s specialty prior to shooting *Last Resort* had been for architects and builders. But being a sailor, himself, he was eager to use his model seaplane which was deployed from a dinghy following our boat, launched and retrieved from the sea. We were able to get an immense collection of shots from various angles. Later, we got a kick out of seeing what tiny specs we appeared to be, standing on the bow before a spinnaker as tall as a seven-story building! On their website, Spike explains that “The quiet operation of our specialized aircraft enables us to photograph without ground recognition from low altitudes. We specialize in close-up aerial photography utilizing the latest in model airplane and high resolution digital camera technology. Our drones are able to accomplish their assignments without FAA flight restrictions. Our experienced piloting skills enable us to take photos that would be otherwise impossible to obtain. We are not limited to low altitude flight, as our aircraft can operate above 1,000 feet with the same superior photo accuracy and reliable results.”

On our return trip we were blessed with favorable wind, again. We started out with northeast Santa Ana winds gusting to 26 that kept us moving, at one point sailing at 9.0 knots on a beam reach. About mid-way through the trip the wind shifted to north-by-northwest, right on the nose, and we had to tack several times to make landfall. This trip was marked by a lot of reefing...both the main and the jib. We would have periods of 20+ knot blasts and then periods

of 10-to-15-knot winds. Overall, it was a terrific day of sailing and we anchored for the evening at the Coronado Islands.

The next morning, we were no sooner awake than we were rocked pretty violently by a wake. When we went up to see who was rudely speeding through the anchorage, we discovered it was none other than a Mexican Navy patrol boat. They were heading to the garrison on Coronado Island and I guess they wanted to take a look-see at us. Before we weighed anchor they "buzzed" us again. We gave them a friendly wave, but were glad they didn't stop by for morning coffee!

The highlight of the day was when we found ourselves traveling a few miles behind a nuclear submarine into the San Diego Bay channel entrance. By the time it was all said and done, we watched the Navy security vessel and a Coast Guard harbor patrol boat take up positions to screen the sub from any other vessels. We watched the whole process from close aboard. At one point, two Navy tugs pulled alongside the sub and one of them stretched out a boarding ladder to take on eight passengers. Then, the second tug attached lines to the sub and began the process of ferrying it to the dock. At one point Navy security thought we were a little too close and they squawked at us to keep our distance. There's something about watching our servicemen and women at work that gives you a lump in your throat. Although we now have some glorious pictures of *Last Resort* in front of the picturesque Baja coastline, we couldn't have had a better welcome back to our home waters.