

My 2017 Texas 200 Thoughts

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"Crosswins"

Fatigue builds over time until all reserve energy seems sapped. By mid-morning the second to last day this little exchange with myself began to reoccur regularly, "Should I adjust that line? Does that need to be stowed better? Should I wade ashore and visit folks? Naah...it's too hot, too humid, and I'm so worn out, I'll just sit here in the shade and rest". Many of the participants are older like me. Being fit and healthy at any age is important when taking on the physical and mental exertions of an event like the Texas 200.

I'd like to address my write up to those who may be contemplating taking on this little adventure. 2017 was my first. My advantage perhaps over many "newbies" is being an old beach bum. Literally. I was raised on the coast of tropical Angola, Africa, which is not unlike the hottest, most humid, saltiest, sharpest feet cutting stuff, sandiest, nastiest wound infecting bacteria, critter infested, and most miserable conditions the Gulf Coast can offer. Except for the wind. I learned about high winds surfing in Cape Town, and sailing in Hawaii and in the intermountain west on the leading edge of weather fronts as they push east. Small boat excursions in all kinds of boats and weather started as a young lad and have continued all my life as I travelled here and there.

I want to emphasize to new comers a few pointers other than what I've already read about how to prepare. Although no doubt there will be some overlap. My 2017 Texas 200 posted four-part videos sort of cover the journey. And that's what it is. A five-day journey with not much time to sight see. You'll be working most of the time. And it's hard work.

My preparation entailed all the things so strongly recommended by others. Read everything, create lists, make up spreadsheets, conduct dry runs in the driveway, and start modifications early to make life safer and more comfortable aboard. A bimini with shade curtains is a must - for me anyway! Thanks John Alesch for that idea.

Be absolutely ready a few weeks before the event! Just know you'll need fairly deep pockets. This isn't a cheap budget affair. At least you'd best not cut too many corners.

You truly are on your own. I would have it no other way. Logistics planning is up to you. Modifications to make, what to take, where to stay, where to launch, where to dock, where to catch a bite, emergency moorings along the way, marinas that offer the goodies you may need, pull out points, alternate routes for this or that reason (weather and wind direction perhaps), and anything else you can think of - it's all up to you. Start the research early, build and book early. Dry run as many times as practical.

Just FYI, Raymondville is a few miles from Port Mansfield but a whole lot cheaper!

I read a comment in one article that is truly pertinent. While it is a do-it-yourself kind of deal, there is just enough up-front help and company on those five days to make it very pleasant. The comment pointed out that while most may think long and hard about setting off on this route alone, the in-company aspect is reassuring enough for even the most inexperienced and timid to venture a try. So true.

The Texas 200 is a well-organized event in my book. There's plenty of information and support online at the Texas 200 Facebook (which to my pleasant surprise is quite searchable). Those who volunteer and are tasked as Board Members and work behind the scenes are marvelously dedicated, welcoming and real. There's no pretense or showmanship here. The old salts tend to sit back and let the "newbies" chat online to their hearts content. Then once in a while will add something relevant or realistic to keep folks on the right heading.

A trip like this isn't for wimps either. It's no cake walk. Get your head right. I read of the anxiety other "newbies" have felt as they prep and venture out the first day. For some the worry lingers just under the surface the entire trip. Good! Keeps you on your toes that way as you gain experience. The goal is to learn from that experience so the next time will be more relaxing. Just know it'll come at you minute by minute and can change super quick from pleasant to trouble for ANYONE! Life can be sparkling water and full sails one second, then just that fast, not be! Never become so complacent you see yourself as invincible.

"You May Die", was the 2016 Texas 200 burgee slogan, but you probably won't. Keep it in mind though as you enjoy the ride. Just keep your head a few steps, and in some cases a long way, ahead of your present location and condition. Watch the windward horizon. Learn to read the environment indicators like where the shallows are, where the passage is, what the clouds and sky color indicate, what the wind and chop and current and heading are saying. What's that coming? Am I being pushed leeward too much? Can I clear that mark? Tack now or push on? Is the wind building? Should I reef? Go ashore and fix that?

Get it done!

Once you've been through that cut, crossed that bay, set your heading for that point and made it, or not, sailed that channel, or seen what surrounds that waypoint, the next Texas 200 will be all the easier as the route is now familiar. That was my greatest pleasure on this year's trip being my first – to actually see the map details in real life. Study the landscape as you approach and pass, look back at it carefully, commit it to memory for the next time. To this day I can picture in my mind's eye the various key markers I used in every bay, lagoon, coast hugging or island hopping experience I've sailed from my earliest youth.

I hope it's not presumptuous of me to make the comments I do. Salt water practically runs in my veins and messing around with small boats of all types has been my love since a child. So, nothing surprises me when it comes to conditions. Enduring them is quite another thing. Experience teaches among other things what they could become, and how well you are up to handling them. If you can't imagine it watch YouTube!

As you enjoy the Texas 200 videos look beyond the pictures though. *Feel* the conditions. Look at what folks are wearing and how much energy they are expending. There's a reason for that! Know that most Texas 200 videos are taken when all is well and folks are at rest in some way. That's when you have time to grab the camera and shoot video. But imagine lugging all that gear that you see in the picture up to the camp, and setting it all up in oppressive heat and humidity and all that when super fatigued. Or, setting those sails and reefing and anchoring and bailing and repairing and...The day doesn't slow down or cool down until after the sun sets and then not really until early morning hours! Enough said.

As for me I think it's just fine to pop a pain reliever or Aleve or sleep aid to get that REM sleep you really need.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to try to simulate the conditions locally as best you can before the trip. Load up your boat, sail in heavy wind and chop or seas. Be smart and use common sense, but do it. Beach, anchor, launch and retrieve alone. Go out on a super-hot day with no wind. Sit becalmed in one place in the sun, for hours, fully clothed head to foot, with gloves on, wearing the stinkiest clothes you can find from your laundry basket, not having shaved or showered or brushed your teeth that morning, and work at something physical the whole time. And while you're at it eat and drink and handle a radio, GPS and map only with one hand. Then imagine that map flapping in a strong wind as you try to unfold it and read it using just one hand. Prepare yourself, your gear and your boat to meet that. Crew too. I'm not even going to address how important NOT getting sunburned is.

Now nothing ruins a trip faster than a crew member who isn't up to the challenge. Attitude is everything. Being willing and happy to do what is required, WHEN it's required, is a prerequisite. For me one indicator is that if laughter doesn't come easily between you and your crew you may have a problem brewing. When I lived on Kawaii I recall watching skippers unceremoniously put crew ashore who weren't cutting it before they headed off on that next long leg across the Pacific. They had obviously already shown their skipper enough by that time to merit being disembarked at the pier, kit bag in hand with nowhere to go. Crew has to be as well informed and committed as you are. Anyone can be taught to sail, but no one can instill right thinking in another.

That said, having crew aboard is wonderful for a couple of reasons. The company aspect aside, those extra hands free of the tiller are able to move about the boat, help navigate, communicate on the radio and handle all aspects of sail, anchor, food and camp prep, stowing stuff and whatever – it sure helps. My brother Nick played that role and I just loved having him aboard. My funnest time this trip though was when an enthusiastic eleven-year-old girl came aboard for shade and a dry ride on one leg and entertained me with her energetic tale telling.

Lastly, don't forget the potential need to meet the worst conditions both underway, at anchor and at camp - when tired and weak and hurting and not thinking clearly. Have a plan! But above

all, visualize yourself finishing from the day you decide to participate. Then fight off doubt, pain, anxiety, fear, and panic. Just suck it up. It'll pass.

After that pep talk remember a seemingly innocuous chain of unrelated events can build to that crisis crescendo that is least expected. My favorite movie along these lines is Robert Redford in "All Is Lost". If you haven't seen it, watch it. Only one word is spoken the entire movie, it's four letters, starts with an 'F' and I'll leave it to your imagination. He yells it once at the top of his lungs at that very moment when out of exasperation he realizes that everything he did to plan and prep and execute per plan has been thwarted by events – he's going down!

Know your boat. Very well. I've owned many and built quite a few. There's no perfect craft for all circumstances. Each is designed for something pretty unique. That's why I've owned so many. There for a while each season it seems I wanted to try something different. Cabin, no cabin, blue water or shoaling, load or speed, crowd or solo, trailering or mooring, and on and on. However, some boat types are far better suited to the Texas 200 sailing circumstances than others. Plenty on the Texas 200 Facebook page on that. Pick your boat for the environment and conditions you'll face, or use the one you have and adapt.

For me currently it's trimarans. Cockpit seat with footwell for the bum hips. A well-balanced light large enough boat that'll sail in about anything Texas 200 will throw at you (there is a limit to every boat – know it!). She's stable, fast enough to allow for a later start (my preference at this age), points fabulously and is responsive enough with sail options to get out of any tight spot. Is fun, even exhilarating, and is a big enough platform to carry a small engine, plenty of gear, mount shade and sleep aboard. Having a large cockpit to spread out during the day is wonderful. Being stable enough to stand and walk all over helps the old body stretch during long trips. Only two downsides to my Cross 18 is her 16" draft empty and dagger board foil. Other than that, she is ideal. I wouldn't trade her for the world. The message here – use a boat you know well and enjoy using. She is your partner on this journey you best be compatible.

I'm no expert on navigation. But the Hook-N-Line Fishing Maps are a must. Got mine on sale from Austin Kayak. <http://www.austinkayak.com/search/Hook-N-Line>

As is also a replaceable battery handheld GPS and VHF radio.

Pour over the maps before the event until you practically memorize the waypoints between camps. Enter alternate routes in your GPS and become familiar with radio use protocols and operation long before setting out.

In closing I want to express my love for the "middle of nowhere" feel to this event. Despite being fairly close to civilization and land out-there-somewhere most of the time, there is a unique spirit that accompanies a crew sailing for hours across expanses of water out of sight of land or other boats. The shore is so low-lying it doesn't take much to put it over the horizon and out of sight; and leaving late usually makes you the only sail out there. Be prepared for this characteristic. I love this aspect of the Gulf Coast and the event. But that may not be the case

for some who aren't familiar with it. Decide early whether you'll wake before dawn and sail in-group as much as possible, or venture off the beach so late that you're the only human around. A fast boat helps with the latter.

I want to express my sincere thanks to the organizers and everyone who helped me online and via email and in person this year. Especially Matt Schiemer for his tireless efforts as President of the Texas 200 Sailing Club. My brother Nick was a wonderful help as crew and navigator. We had a great time. Peter Lange was more than generous by selflessly helping "Crosswins" anchor and dock on several occasions. And dastardly Dave Gilbert, the pirate, belies his intelligence by exuding his kid-like enthusiastic spirit day and night. He's got some lucky kids. I sure enjoyed having Mace and Josey aboard "Crosswins". They are tough!

And lastly, as suspected, Chuck Leinweber is that rarest of all breeds, a true gentleman's gentleman. Thank you for setting this whole thing in motion 10 years ago Chuck!

You'll make a whole new set of friends. That's a promise!

I absolutely loved the event and encourage anyone even remotely thinking about it to get serious. I certainly intend to be back. It's a life memory you'll treasure forever. Do it!