The 2013 Texas 200

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Introduction

First off, I want to apologize in advance for the length of this account. It's just way too much detail. That's all there is to it. It's simply too much. I blame this on a series of 20+ hour flights to the Middle East that I took during the months that followed the Texas 200. I had just way too much time on my hands and I was still excited by having completed the Texas 200 and wanted to share. Plus, I'm an engineer and am very detail oriented, so I wanted to provide an account that would give potential Texas 200 participants an in-depth, up-close-and-personal look at what it's like to do the Texas 200. So, here it is: everything you could ever want to know, and then some, about my decision to buy a sailboat and take on the challenge of doing the Texas 200.

For as long as I can remember, I have dreamed of owning a sailboat. Sure, I had owned and sailed a number of smaller beach dinghies for many years; but my dream was to own a "real" sailboat -- a monohull keelboat, something with standing headroom in the cabin and comfortable sleeping accommodations, a functional galley and a decent head. It is not about becoming a member of a yacht club, or doing the Wednesday night round-the-buoy races. No, for me the dream has always been about owning a sailboat so that I could go cruising and exploring. Blue water. Exotic destinations. Idyllic anchorages. Casting off the chains of adult responsibilities and the work-a-day life, and setting out to explore the world for a year or two. You know the dream I'm referring to –Joshua Slocum, Larry and Lynn Pardey, Jim Moore, and Tania Aebi. Yep, that's the one.

This dream has been with me for over twenty years, and it hasn't much changed during all that time. It has just been sitting out there, not connected to my reality, calling my name from afar, but not getting any closer to happening. So I decided to do something that I probably should have done years ago – adjust the dream to

better align with my reality. Rather than an “all or nothing” approach to cruising - where I seemed to be perpetually stuck on the “nothing” part - I decided to start with a more practical version of the dream, something that would get me part way there, something I could actually enjoy and not just daydream or read about. I could still keep the ultimate dream alive, but at least I would be actively cruising and exploring in the meantime.

It reminds me of a day about eight or nine years ago that I was sitting in Philadelphia, about eighty miles from the ocean, desperate to go surfing. The surf forecast was iffy at best, but I was aching for a session, so I packed up my board and drove an hour and a half to one of my favorite surf spots at the Jersey shore. Keep in mind that for surfers, the dream is all about the perfect wave. For most of us, ideal surf conditions include long-period swell that is being generated by some distant storm, many hundreds of miles from shore. The lines come rolling in toward the beach, and as they approach the shoreline they stand up, nice and clean, reach about six or maybe eight feet in height, and peel cleanly down the beach, for hundreds of yards at a time. Anyway, back reality: poor conditions at the Jersey shore.

I pulled up to the dunes that run along the beach, jumped out of the car and anxiously climbed the wooden staircase that led up the side of the dunes to get my first view of the waves. As I reached the top of the stairs, I was disappointed by the all-too-common sight of tiny little waves rolling in to beach and breaking in a far-less-than-desirable fashion. As I was mentally processing the lousy surf conditions, a surfer was coming off the beach and climbing the stairs with his board to get up and over the dunes, after what could not have possibly been a good surf session. I guess he saw the disappointment on my face, because as he passed me he paused, made eye contact, and said, “Get out there man, you’ll still get the feeling.” And that’s exactly what I did. It wasn’t the best surf session I had

ever had; in fact, the conditions were not great at all. But I got out into the water, paddled around, caught a few little waves, and had a blast. And that is exactly what I was setting out to do now with my sailboat dreams – adapt them to my reality - and get the feeling.

It all happened one day in while I was working at my office in Austin, Texas, sometime in September 2012. I was taking a break from work and playing around on the Internet for a few minutes, doing some daydreaming about sailing – and I somehow came across the Texas 200 website. I learned that the Texas 200 is a week-long group sail along 200 miles of the southern Texas Gulf Coast. It involves small sailboats, from approximately fourteen to twenty-six feet in length. It is not a race – basically it is a group cruise. The event takes place in the bays that parallel the Gulf of Mexico, and even includes the option to sail one leg out in the Gulf itself. Due to the remote location of the event, it is necessary to pack all of your provisions on board from the beginning. The daily sailing route is loosely plotted, but all of the anchorages are identified in advance so that all twenty or thirty participating boats wind up in the same spot each evening. The Texas 200 has been held for about five or six years, and most of those who complete the event report that it is very challenging; many go as far as to say that it is a life-changing.

Reading the descriptions and the accounts posted by prior years' participants, it looked and felt like cruising. Somehow it managed to feel a whole lot like the experiences of the cruisers whose accounts I had spent so much time reading. You might think that it must have felt like a lesser experience, that somehow it was less intriguing than those blue water experiences. After all, the true cruisers are gone for months or years, crossing the Atlantic or circumnavigating the globe. How could some week-long cruise along the Texas coast even come close? It's not even in the same league, right?

Wrong. I found the Texas 200 somehow even *more* exciting and intriguing than the accounts of the 'round-the-world cruisers. That's because it hit me right away that I could actually do the Texas 200. It was real. I could read two dozen more circumnavigation stories and they would all have one thing in common: they are really cool experiences that do not involve me. They're just books. Dreams.

After two decades of reading cruising stories and knowing that they would be major long-shots for me, I sat there reading Texas 200 accounts and realized that I could participate in that event and have an amazing cruising experience – and in less than ten months! I was stoked.

So, with this revised version of cruising in mind, I set out to determine what this sailing compromise would look like, and how I could make it happen for me in the very near future. First off though, I needed a boat. I knew that practical and financial considerations would limit me, but I sensed that it would somehow be possible. I wanted a boat with a small cabin, something I could overnight or weekend on, and something that would allow me to do some cruising, gunkholing and exploring. And of course, something suitable for the Texas 200. After a little research, I realized that the category of boat that I was thinking of had a name – "Pocket Cruiser." I loved it. It rang true and seemed the perfect match for my current economic, geographic, work and family situation.

The plan was set in motion…

Buying a Boat

Now I needed to start to lay out a plan to get myself a pocket cruiser. The first step was to identify and analyze my sailing options in Austin, Texas. Although the inspiration was the Texas 200, I would likely do most of my sailing closer to home, so I started with looking at sailing options in and around Austin. I am not from Austin and had only been here two years at the time, so it was something I would have to spend a little time digging into. I thought this was important, since the decision about what type of boat to buy certainly has to take into account the type of sailing you are planning to do.

I quickly learned that despite being landlocked in Texas, Austin offers a surprising number of sailing options. First, and closest to my home, is Lake Travis. Formed in 1942 when the Colorado River was dammed up a few miles outside of central Austin, Lake Travis has what I would describe as a "main basin" that measures roughly one half mile wide at the narrowest point to nearly two miles across at its widest, and is approximately four miles long. It is deep, with water that drops off from the beach right away and gets to over one-hundred feet deep in the middle. There are numerous public and private boat ramps to access the lake, and at least a dozen marinas where year-round boat slips are available. The water is clean and people commonly sail, swim and waterski on Lake Travis. My house in Austin is about a fifteen-minute drive to the nearest boat ramp and marina, so the location is about as good as it gets. So far so good.

There are also several other lakes in central Texas that are similar in size to Lake Travis, and are reported to be deep, clean, and good for sailing. Canyon Lake and Lake Belton are two of them, and they are each located about an hour's drive from Austin and have a number of boat ramps. Both of these lakes are located further from major metropolitan areas than Austin, so there would likely be less boat

traffic. And they both have several state parks along portions of their shores, so there would be options for overnighting or camp-sailing.

Most interesting of all though is the Gulf Coast of Texas. That's where the modified cruising dream really gets good. About a 3 ½ hour drive from Austin at its closest point, the Texas Gulf Coast offers several hundred miles of prime gunkholing, bay sailing and open ocean sailing options. From Port Isabel, near the Mexican border, all the way up to Galveston, over 300 miles to the north and east, there are a string of bays that range in width from less than ½ mile to over twelve miles wide, that run parallel to the Gulf of Mexico, separated from the Gulf by a thin chain of barrier islands. All of the bays are connected to each other throughout this 300 mile stretch, with the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) running the entire distance through these bays. This area is mostly remote and undeveloped, and includes the Padre Island National Seashore, which is the longest undeveloped barrier island in the world (70+ miles of pristine beaches), as well as the Laguna Madre, which is a 130-mile long bay that is classified as a national wildlife refuge, with 75% of its shores protected by the refuge.

Although mostly rural, this region also includes several developed coastal areas, including South Padre Island, Corpus Christi, Port Aransas and Galveston. All of these developed areas offer access to hotels, marinas, restaurants, bars and other amenities.

Along the coast, there are several inlets that provide access from the bays to the Gulf of Mexico, providing options for sailing in the relatively shallow, protected bays as well as open ocean sailing out in the Gulf. Overall, this section of the Texas Gulf Coast appeared to me to be a veritable pocket cruiser's paradise.

I must say, although I was happy to have a big lake to sail on only fifteen minutes from my home in Austin, it is the extensive coastal cruising and gunkholing options

along the Gulf Coast that got my juices flowing, brought my sailing dreams to the forefront again, and motivated me to get serious about the purchase of pocket cruiser.

With the dream now tweaked to align with my reality, I was seriously motivated to make it happen – so I got started on putting together a list of requirements and considerations for my new boat.

First, the money. Unfortunately, it does not grow on trees. I put my budget at about $4,000 for a boat, motor and trailer, including any work that I would need to do to get them in good working order. I wanted a monohull fiberglass production sailboat, preferably something that would be easy to find spare parts for, and other owners with whom I could share experiences and other information. I know, your basic fiberglass production boat is not that sexy, but I needed something practical and somewhat mainstream or it just was not going to happen. I was willing to buy a boat that was thirty or more years old, but due to my limited time, I needed something that was either ready to sail or needed only limited work. If I brought home a real project boat, I knew that I would have to spend many months (or longer) getting her ready to sail, and that was not the idea. I had waited long enough. I wanted to sail, and now. I had less than ten months to do my research, find a boat and get it ready to sail in the Texas 200, so I needed to get moving. I had a target date: June 9, 2013 – the first day of the next Texas 200.

Due to the very shallow nature of many of the bays along the Gulf Coast, I wanted a boat with an extremely limited draft. From what I learned in my research, there are many sections of the bays that are only two or three feet deep, some areas even less than that, and I wanted to ensure that I would not limit myself from exploring many of those areas (or find myself grounded on a regular basis!). This meant finding a boat with no more than eighteen inches of draft, but preferably twelve inches or less.

Another issue, at least in the short term, was going to be weight. The combined weight of the boat plus trailer needed to be no more than 1,800 or 1,900 pounds, due to the relatively small tow vehicle that I owned at the time of my search. I figured I could sell my current tow vehicle and get something larger, but again, with my current financial situation, this was not likely to be a real option in the short term. So the weight limit was going to have to be taken into consideration.

In order to get in and out of marinas, expand my cruising options, and provide for safety for myself and my family in the event of an oncoming front or medical emergency, I also wanted a small outboard motor. This seemed to be pretty standard for the type of pocket cruiser that I had in mind, so it was just a matter of finding a reliable motor without blowing the budget. Unlike the boat, which could easily be thirty years old and still have a lot of life left in it, I wanted the motor to be considerably newer than that. After all, one of my reasons for having a motor was to ensure I could safely get to a marina, a protected anchorage or my vehicle in the case of approaching severe weather or a medical emergency. A twenty-year old motor on its last leg was not something I wanted to take a chance with.

I wanted a boat with an enclosed cabin that provided sleeping options for myself and my wife, as well for my young daughters (who were one and three at the start of my search). I realized that this was going to be tough given the small size of the boats I was looking at, but I thought it would likely be possible given the initial research I had done on these types of boats.

I did not plan on keeping the boat in a marina, at least not initially. In part this was due to the cost of a slip, which were going for about $200 to $250/month on Lake Travis near my home. But, almost as important was the fact that I wanted to trailer sail with this boat. I wanted to explore the other lakes in the region, and I wanted to get down to the coast as much as possible. With the boat sitting conveniently in a slip fifteen minutes from my home, I figured I would never get out and do the

cruising and gunkholing that I longed to do. Therefore, the boat would need to be capable of being launched and easily set up by two people, but also have the possibility of being set up alone, for those times when the sailing bug bites but no one else is available or interested.

Based on my initial research, I put the pocket cruisers into three main categories. First were the 25 to 27-footers. These boats were essentially the largest of the trailerable sailboats, and were also considered to be on the large side of the pocket cruiser category. While tempting due to their size and the comfort they would provide, it quickly became clear that my budget would limit me to the oldest, most needy project boats, and the weight and draft would also be issues. So I crossed them off the list pretty quickly.

The next category was the 21 to 23-footers. Like the larger boats, the boats in this category are available from well-known manufacturers, boast active owners associations, and offer a lot of the advantages of the larger boats. However, the price, weight and draft issues were still proving to be somewhat hard to overcome, and so I soon found myself focused on the next category – the 16 to 19-footers.

As I started to do my research on the 16 to 19-footers, I quickly learned that there were boats in this category available from many different manufacturers, many still in operation, some long gone. However, pretty soon I found myself researching and comparing the same eight boats. I do not know really know why. I was not using some complex algorithm; in fact, I did not really even have a formal list of search criteria. I was just browsing and daydreaming online for the most part. It must have just been a combination of the overall look and lines of these boats as I glanced at their images online over and over, combined with the fact that they seemed to be fairly common on the marketplace. Their prominence in the market gave me a sense of security, knowing that spare parts and active owners associations would be easy to come by.

The eight boats that I was focused on were: the Compac 16 and 19, Montgomery 17, Catalina 18, Sanibel 18, Hunter 19, O'Day Mariner, and the West Wight Potter 19.

I cannot say that I utilized the most scientific of methods, or that I was as thorough as I could have been, but after a few months of reading reviews of these boats and comparing their specifications, I decided to hone in on the O'Day Mariner. I'm sure I could have purchased any one of these boats and been quite happy with my decision. In fact, there were only a couple of differences between these boats that really pushed me toward the Mariner; otherwise, they are very similar and I'm sure any one of them would make for a fantastic small pocket cruiser.

Like the other boats in this category, the Mariner has been around for a while and has a solid reputation. Since 1963, more than 4,000 Mariners have been produced, and although O'Day stopped producing the Mariner in 1979, it is still in production today, being made by a company called Stuart Marine in Maine.

The O'Day Mariner (drawing by Brian Gilbert)

The hull of the O'Day Mariner is the same hull as the Rhodes 19, which is a very well-respected racing-oriented boat designed by naval architect Philip Rhodes. The swing keel version of the Mariner draws only ten inches of water with the keel up, making it one of the best options in terms of limited draft. There are two other benefits of the way the keel works on the Mariner, in addition to just the shallow

draft. First, the keel swings up. At least one of the other boats that I was considering has a daggerboard that is raised and lowered vertically. While not a major issue, it would present more of a risk of damaging the boat if the daggerboard hit a solid object or the boat ran aground on a shoal under sail. With a swing-type keel, this risk is somewhat mitigated, since an underwater strike while underway will push the keel back and swing it up some, lessening the impact to the boat, and making it less likely that the keel would get stuck in the mud or sand. Also, the swing keel on the Mariner retracts fully into the hull. With the keel up, the hull of Mariner is smooth and free of obstructions. This will be beneficial if (more like when!) I find myself grounded on a shoal somewhere and need to walk the boat off into deeper water.

In addition to the 165-pound swing keel, there are about 200 pounds of lead ballast fiberglassed in to the sole of the boat, adjacent to the swing keel compartment. With a total of 365 pounds of ballast (on a 1400-pound boat), and 4' 11" of swing keel down, the boat is reportedly very stable and not too tender.

Another feature that drew me to the Mariner, as compared to the other boats I was researching, was the size of the cockpit. Nearly all of the other small pocket cruisers try to provide as much cabin as possible, presumably to provide a big(ger) boat feel in the cabin, but the cockpit suffers as a result. After all, these are pretty small boats. If you go for too big a cabin, there is not going to be much space left from which to sail the boat. On the other hand, the Mariner has a cockpit that is over seven feet long, something that even a few 30-foot boats cannot claim! Knowing that most of the time sailing is spent in the cockpit, I really liked this aspect of the Mariner.

The Ample Mariner Cockpit (photo by Jim Watson)

Even with so much space dedicated to the cockpit, the Mariner's cabin is still quite respectable in size, providing for a V-berth that is over six feet long and two quarterberths that provide both sitting headroom (not for me, but for most people) and sleeping accommodations for two children or pre-teens. (The Mariner literature claims that it sleeps four, but the two quarterberths really are too tight for an adult to sleep comfortably in my opinion).

Like the other boats in this class, there is space for a porta-potty under the v-berth, which is nice for overnighting or weekending aboard. From a safety standpoint, I was pleased to learn that the Mariner has sealed foam floatation located under the v-berth, the quarterberths, and in other locations throughout the boat, to ensure that it will not sink even if completely filled with water.

As part of my online research into the Mariner, I also came across the Mariner Class Association. For fifteen dollars, I became a member of the Association and even further convinced myself that the Mariner was the boat for me. I learned that

there are about four hundred members located throughout the United States and Canada, and that many of them are active with the Association. There is a wide range of information on Association's website, but what really impressed me were the forums. There were a wide range of topics actively being discussed, including general questions, maintenance, restoration, and even cruising and racing stories. It seemed that this group of Mariner owners was extremely helpful and willing to share their experiences with one another on a wide range of topics. That really attracted me to the boat. I figured I would be buying a boat that was at least twenty years old, and having access to such a wonderful support network made me feel good. Several of the other boats that I was considering have similarly active and supportive owners' associations, and I would strongly suggest that this be considered when purchasing a used boat that will need a fair amount of work.

In addition to the forums, the Association website also provides access to the "Notice to Mariners" newsletter, which is produced quarterly and provided on the website for members to download in PDF format. Every single issue is available on the website, dating back to the very first issue in 1966! These newsletters are full of tips, tricks, maintenance and restoration advice, and stories. What a treat it would be to have access to nearly two hundred such newsletters, written by Mariner owners over the past 47 years.

What sealed the deal though, was the Association's President, Nathan Bayreuther. Before joining the Association, I emailed him and asked if he or the other members had any "Mariner-specific" purchasing tips, common problems to look out for while inspecting a prospective Mariner, etc. Nathan replied to my email the same day, and included a PDF of the "Mariner Buyer's Guide" that he and other members had developed over the past few years. This is normally only available to dues-paying members, but he included it in his email to me and offered to answer any questions that I may have about the Mariner. Of course, he offered some positive

comments about the Mariner and strongly recommended that I purchase one. And that is exactly what I did.

Through the Mariner Association website and a number of other online resources, I searched through cyberspace for a used Mariner in my price range. Buying a new one was out of the question, since they were going for about $25,000. However, it seemed that my budget was going to be just fine if I searched for used Mariners in the 1970 to early eighties model years. The problem turned out to be availability. It turns out that used Mariners are not all that easy to come by – and even less so in the southern USA.

For about two months, I tracked all of the available Mariners for sale in the United States, and I could not find one any closer than Miami, which is about a twenty hour drive from Austin. There were several available throughout the two month timeframe in the northeast, mainly in New Jersey and Massachusetts. I even found a few in California and Washington State. I decided that I really could not justify anything over about a twelve or thirteen hour drive, something that could be done, up and back, in a weekend. And then I saw one in Missouri. It was a 1970 and was in my price range. A quick check on Google maps and I found that it was located about a twelve-hour drive from Austin. Close enough.

I spoke with the owner and it sounded like it might be worth seeing. But, I did not really like the idea of driving twelve hours each way to see a boat that might not be worth it, so I asked him for a favor. I asked him to take a bunch of pictures of the boat, inside and out, and email them to me. He was happy to do it and after a few more days of reviewing photos and talking with him a few more times, I decided to hit the road and see the boat. I grabbed a buddy of mine and asked him what he thought about joining me for a weekend road trip to see a boat. He thought it was a bit weird, and he knows absolutely nothing about boats, but it was my money and so he said he would go for a ride.


The boat as advertised online by the previous owner.

We headed up to Missouri on a Saturday morning and pulled into town at around 8pm. We checked into a motel and headed out for a bite to eat and a few beers. At 9am on Sunday morning I met the owner at his house, where the boat was being stored on its trailer.

At first glance, I was not overly impressed. The boat looked every bit of its forty-two years old, and it just looked plain tired. The light blue gelcoat was heavily oxidized and had the characteristic white haze over most of it. The cockpit and topsides were dull and had more than a few stress cracks. Over the course of 42 years, someone had drilled a number of holes in the cabin top, some of which were caulked over; others were wide open. The four wooden handholds on the cabin top were nicely placed and added a nice touch to the overall look of the boat, but they were completely rotted out and just about fell apart in my hand when I pulled on them.

There was a fair amount of original mahogany trim on the coamings and the companionway, but it had clearly been ignored and displaying the ash gray color of neglect. However, this original wood was not rotted at all and I could already imagine the touch of class it would add to the boat when refinished and varnished.

Removing the hatch boards and crawling into cabin was also a bit disappointing. The inside of the cabin was damp and smelled of mold and mildew. The original v-berth and quarterberth cushions were in the boat and intact, as the owner had told me, but they were damp and clearly infested with mold spores. I estimated that they would not likely be salvageable. The rest of the cabin was in relatively good shape, though. The wood that covered the porta-potty space and other storage spaces was in very good shape and would need almost no work. Similarly, the original wooden rudder and tiller were in good working order and would need only minor work. The ten-foot aluminum boom was also stored in the cabin, and it was in surprisingly good shape for its age. Things were starting to look up.

Back out in the cockpit, I had the owner help me raise the mast. The process was fairly easy for the two of us, and I had already learned from the Association forums that singlehanded mast raising was possible with the Mariner. This was a plus. Like the boom, the mast was in very good shape, and a quick inspection of the forestay, backstay, shrouds and the spreader bars also revealed no major issues. They all looked quite good, actually.

The owner pulled the sails out of the garage and we laid them out on his front lawn. The main and jib were originals from 1970, but had been sent to a company called SailCare for refurbishing about three or four years prior, and they looked to be in good condition. The brass piston hanks on the jib were in good shape and the spring-loaded mechanism worked on all of them. The main sail had nylon slugs spaced about every eighteen inches along the luff of the sail, and they looked to be in good condition. There were no tears or patches anywhere on the main or jib.

The 120 lapper/genoa also looked to be original, or close to it, and was not in as good shape as the other two sails, but it had no patches or tears, and would

clearly be functional. Like the jib, its brass hanks were all in good condition and worked fine.

In terms of running rigging, the main and jib halyards were a bit tired, but both the main and jib sheets were in pretty good shape. The genoa had no sheets, as they were shared with the jib. All of the blocks on the boat, boom and mast were original, but in good working order.

To finalize my inspection of the boat, I spent a fair amount of time in the cabin and on the ground under the trailer, thoroughly inspecting the hull, cabin and cockpit for any signs of blisters, cracks, repairs or other structural issues. I was very happy to find nothing at all in those areas. The owner reported that the boat did not leak, and based on what I found during my inspection, it seemed that would be the case.

The trailer was probably as old as the boat, and was as big and heavy as you would expect a trailer from the early 1970s to be. There was clearly some rust on the springs and a few other areas, but the hubs and tires looked relatively new, and the owner confirmed that they had been replaced three years prior. The wiring and lights were clearly not in working condition, contrary to what the owner claimed when I spoke to him on the phone. Overall, tough, it seemed to be a functional trailer that I could get at least a few years out of without any need to do anything.

At this point, I was torn. It was about 10:30am, and I needed to make a decision. My buddy had slept in at the motel, so I bought myself some time to think by heading over to pick him up and check out. By about 11am we were back at the owner's house and I had to make the call. From what I had seen, the boat had clearly not been well maintained, but it was in good shape where it mattered. There was a fair amount of TLC that would be needed to bring her back to good

condition, but there were no major projects or components that would be needed. So I made him an offer.

He was asking $3,500 for the boat and trailer. I offered him $3,000 and after a few minutes, we agreed to a final purchase price of $3,150. He also had a 1978 Johnson 6hp outboard that he offered to sell me for $400. I had already decided that I wanted a newer, more reliable motor, so I passed on his offer and figured I would work out the motor issue later.

During my inspection of the boat and conversations with the owner, my friend stayed in the truck, listening to music. He really has no interest whatsoever in boats, and I guess he just figured he'd stay comfortable rather than standing around on the owner's front lawn watching me do the inspection. When I went over to the truck to let him know that I had purchased the boat and would be getting it ready to be trailered, he looked a bit surprised. "That thing looks like it's a hundred years old and it's sitting up on a trailer on his front lawn. You don't even know if it floats, and you're gonna buy it?" He must have figured either I knew what I was doing or I was a fool – and I wasn't sure which way he was leaning on that one, so I didn't ask.

I asked the owner for the location of the nearest hardware store, and raced down to get a new set of trailer lights and the associated wiring. About an hour later I had it all installed and operational, and we were ready to hit the road. With the boat in tow, I wanted to go slower on the ride home, and it took almost fourteen hours; we pulled in to Austin at 2:00am Monday morning.

The long trip home – a gas station somewhere in Oklahoma

I got a few hours' sleep with the boat parked in the street outside my house, and by noon on Monday I had found a boat storage yard about ten minutes from my home (and five minutes from the nearest boat ramp on Lake Travis). By mid-afternoon she was safely parked in the yard, where she'd receive some TLC in the coming months before embarking on the maiden voyage.

Recently installed at the storage lot in Austin (with my oldest daughter Ana)

Restoration, Repairs and Preparation for the Maiden Voyage

So, it was early December and I had a boat. The timing was pretty good in my opinion, since winter in Austin is a little too cold for sailing, but pretty much perfect weather for working on boats. There was a decent amount of work that needed to be done to get her ready to sail in the Texas 200, and with my fairly demanding job (which includes a decent amount of business travel), and two daughters under three years of age, it wasn't like I could spend days on end working on my boat. I decided to give myself about four months - through the end of March - to get her ready for her maiden voyage. My plan was to then try to sneak in a maiden voyage and a few shakedown sails in April and May, and be ready for the Texas 200 in early June.

The work that I completed during this time was completed in two locations. The first was the boatyard. Since the boat was too big to fit into my garage, and I had no way of getting it into my backyard, I kept it in an outdoor boat and RV storage yard about ten minutes from my home. It was basically just a big grass lot, surrounded by a security fence, with about 50 or 60 boats and RVs as residents. There was no protection from the sun and no access to power or water. It was just an open grass lot. Any work on the boat itself, or on components that could not be easily transported to my garage, was done at the lot. Since I was doing the work during the months of December through April, the temperatures were quite nice. There were a few chilly days with high temperatures in the forties or fifties, but for the most part I had beautiful Austin winter days with daily highs in the sixties.

All of the items that could be removed from the boat were transported to my garage, where it was a little easier to work on them. At my garage I obviously had access to power and water, which were necessary for some of the work. I also had access to light, and that came in very handy, because my garage-based work

was often done between the hours of 10pm and midnight, once the girls were asleep and my wife and I had a chance to clean up from dinner and wind down for a little bit.

I did not have a lot of free time, so I would sneak in an hour or two of work one or two days a week after work, or a few hours on the weekends. During this time I was spending one or two weeks per month in the Middle East (for business), and I was still traveling in the US during my weeks at “home”. So this was about the best I could do.

The first thing I did was inspect every component of the boat’s running rigging, standing rigging and hardware, to ensure that any worn, corroded or otherwise weakened components were replaced.

I found that my boat had a few clevis pin rings that were twisted or opened, which represented a risk of working their way free under way. There were even a couple clevis pins whose rings were replaced by the previous owner with paperclips! They were rusted away to nearly nothing and almost broke apart in my fingers as I worked them loose.

Are there really paperclips holding the mast up?

All of these bent rings and paperclips were replaced. I also found that one of the shroud turnbuckles on the port side of the boat was slightly bent. While it appeared to me to be in otherwise good condition, I replaced it with a new one. In addition to replacing a part that could potentially fail under sail and cause damage to the mast, it also allowed me to maintain the slightly bent turnbuckle as a spare.

Another item I noticed on the mast was the connection of the spreader bars to the mast. They each connect to the side of the mast by way of a small stainless steel bracket that is riveted or screwed to the mast (3 rivets or screws per bracket). Both of the brackets were in good condition, but they were a bit loose and I could see that the previous owner had replaced a few rivets with screws that did not fit all that well. I decided that I wanted to replace all of the rivets and screws with new rivets. After inquiring on the Mariner Association forums, I decided to use aluminum rivets (as opposed to stainless steel), since the consensus was that this

was not a high stress area and there wasn't a need for stainless. I purchased myself a pop rivet gun and some rivets and I got to work. Drilling out the old rivets and screws was quite easy, and installing the new rivets was even easier. After a total of no more than thirty minutes I had all of the old hardware out and the new rivets installed. The bracket seemed to be well-fastened, so I re-installed the spreader bars (sans paperclips) and moved on the next work item, which was the installation of new rubber boots at the other end of the spreader bar where the shrouds passed through a notch in the spreader bar. I purchased the boots online at D&R Marine, which stocks a wide range of parts for the Mariner, and they fit like a glove. Another notch on my belt.

One of the characteristics of the Gulf Coast that makes it so challenging are the consistent 20 to 25 knot winds that are common during the summer months. These winds tend to blow day and night, and so even a sunrise start to the day doesn't provide much relief from the strong winds. Another characteristic that adds to the challenge is the shoal water that exists along much of the Laguna Madre and other coastal bays. Texas 200 veterans report that this combination of high winds and shoal water often results in damaged rudders. My boat's rudder was the original heavy mahogany kick-up rudder from 1970. In general, it was in good condition; however, there were a few items that needed attention prior to the Texas 200.

First, the gudgeons were only attached to the transom with two of the four bolts on each gudgeon (one bolt on each side of each pintle, rather than the two that can be accommodated by the stock gudgeon plate). I removed and reattached both gudgeons, using four new stainless bolts and lock nuts on each one. I added a new half-inch pressure treated plywood backing plate on the inside of the transom to reinforce the lower gudgeon. The bolts for the upper gudgeon actually pass through two layers of fiberglass. The first is the back/outside of the transom, and

then there is approximately one inch of dead space before passing through the second, which is the back of the cockpit. I decided that these two sturdy layers of fiberglass would be of sufficient strength and so no backing plate was used. I used 3M 4200 fairly liberally on both the outside and inside of the transom when reattaching the gudgeons to ensure a good seal and no water intrusion.

For anyone who has never used 3M 4200, it is essentially the standard for bedding and sealing deck hardware. It is both an adhesive and a sealant, and is extremely resistant to the harmful effects of the sun and the marine environment in general. In fact, if you ask around or search through the online do-it-yourself sites, it is hard to find anyone who is not really pleased with this stuff. There is another 3M product, 3M 5200, that will basically do the same thing – only it will be more permanent. The 3M 5200 product is mainly an adhesive, and it is a very strong one. I have never used it, but the online consensus seems to be that if you use 3M 5200 you will basically be creating a permanent bond. It will reportedly take a chisel to get hardware off once the 3M 5200 is fully cured, and you will have to dig into the wood or fiberglass surface and do a lot of damage to do it. It sounds like a fantastic product, but I am still not familiar with it since it is just a bit too permanent for my liking. I have been very impressed with the 4200 and plan to continue to use it on my boat for similar applications. One final comment: the 3M 4200 is fairly easy to apply, but it is a bit “goopy” and somewhat stringy while wet, and it can be very tough to clean up the extra bit of product that seeps out from around the hardware you are trying to attach to the boat. I found that acetone was a lifesaver in terms of both leaving a clean finish to my work, and cleaning the 4200 off my hands.

The second rudder-related modification was the rudder downhaul line. The kick-up rudder has a downhaul line to keep the rudder blade in the down position while sailing. Although heavy, the blade is solid wood and floats, so it does not stay

down on its own while sailing. The rudder downhaul system consists of a steel cable that is attached to the leading edge of the rudder, a few inches below the waterline. That cable is fed up along the leading edge of the rudder head, behind the pintles, over a block in the rudder head and then forward along the underside of the tiller. The cable is then connected to a piece of line. That line fastens to a cleat on the underside of the tiller.

The first thing I did was to replace this line with shock cord that can be doubled or tripled and fastened to the cleat to provide a range of tensions on the downhaul cable. My plan was to set the tension high enough to keep the rudder blade down while sailing, but low enough so that any impact on the rudder or running aground would kick it up.

There was also work to be done at the other end of the downhaul system, where the steel cable was connected to the wooden rudder blade. That connection was made by some type of eye screw, but over the years it had become rusted and somewhat weakened. I removed the screw and replaced it with a new stainless steel screw that was set deep into the rudder blade to ensure a sound connection between the cable and the rudder blade.

Finally, while not absolutely critical to sail the boat in the short-term, I decided to completely refurbish the original rudder blade. It had obviously been neglected for many years, and the original varnish was gone in most places. It had large sections that were completely stained black by the water over the years. Other sections (above the waterline) were still in good shape, with the varnish still intact. The blade was solid, and I did not detect any signs of softening or rot, but I still thought it might be good to clean her up and get some protection on her.

I started my refurbishing project by using a wood stripper to remove all of the varnish on the rudder blade. Once that was done and dried, I proceeded to sand

the entire rudder blade (by hand!) down to bare, clean wood. For the most part, it came up beautifully. There were a few sections where the water intrusion and staining were too deep, and I figured if I tried to continue sanding to find clean wood that I might wind up with a rudder blade about an eighth of an inch thick.

With the sanding done, I proceeded to varnish the blade. Now, I use the word "varnish" because that's what we sailors say, but actually I used a product from Minwax called "Helmsman Spar Urethane", which is not technically a varnish. I had spent a fair amount of time online reviewing the sailboat restoration forums, and found mixed reviews on this approach. It seemed to me that the saltiest of sailboat purists were pretty dead set against it, since it's a hardware store product that isn't specifically designed for the marine environment. However, I found just as many opinions from other sailors stating that it was designed for outdoor use and in their experience had performed very well. Considering my boat would be stored on land, far from the salt air of the coast, and under a tarp (that is, not subject to the damaging UV rays of the sun), I decided to save some money and go with the urethane.

As per the recommendations of several sailboat restoration gurus in online forums, I thinned the first coat of urethane by about 50%, so that it could thoroughly soak into the wood and get deep into the grain. I thinned the second and third coats by about 30%, and coats four, five and six went on right out of the can, with no thinning. I used disposable foam brushes, which came highly recommended by more than a few websites, and they worked out beautifully. I allowed at least twenty-four hours of dry time between coats. I was doing this work in my garage and the temperatures were getting down into the high forties and low fifties at night, so I wanted to allow more than the recommended time to ensure each coat was totally dry before continuing.

With the rudder blade complete, I now moved up to the rudder head. The rudder head on the original Mariner consists of a block of mahogany wood sandwiched between two thick sheets of aluminum. While not in perfect condition, I decided that the overall assembly was basically sound and that the two pintles were in good condition and well-fastened to the rudder head. Just so that no one could say I did nothing, I drilled two holes through the entire aluminum and wood sandwich and installed two stainless steel bolts with large fender washers, to ensure the sandwich would not be separated while underway. I figured this would buy me some time before I needed to completely overhaul the rudder head.

Then it was on to the tiller. The tiller was also original and is a very attractive, long piece of wood (wood type unknown to me) in relatively good condition. I was tempted to strip it down and sand to bare wood, like I had done with the rudder blade, but I just did not have the time (and it was purely aesthetic), so I gave it a quick sand with a very fine finishing sandpaper, and added two coats of urethane to the existing varnish. It came up nicely and will certainly do me just fine for a few years.

The final thing I did to the overall rudder assembly was to install a rudder blade uphaul line. I wanted to ensure that if I partially beached the boat, or found myself in some other similar situation, that I would be able to keep the rudder blade up and not risk damaging or breaking it. After considering a few options, I settled on the following approach: I drilled a hole in the trailing edge of the rudder blade, about a third of the way down the blade. I tied a length of 3/16" line through that hole into a bowline knot, and ran the line up the back of the rudder head, over the top and about eight inches along the top side of the tiller. There I installed a simple cam cleat with integrated fairlead. The line can therefore be used to both raise the rudder blade up and cleat it off and hold it there while anchored in shallow water, backing down a boat ramp, etc.

The mainsheet assembly also made the to-do list. While the original arrangement was fully functional, I was not happy with it and decided to modify it. The original mainsheet arrangement on the 1970 model of the Mariner utilizes what is known as a “Crosby Rig”. I have no idea who Crosby was or why he chose this setup, but I did not like it. It consisted of what appeared to me to be a bridle-like arrangement at the back of the cockpit, near the transom. This triangular arrangement of blocks and mainsheet line feeds up to the back end of the boom, over a single block, along the underside of the boom, and over another single block at about the mid-point on the boom. From there, the mainsheet line travels down to the swing keel housing (on the cockpit floor) where it goes through a single block with a cam cleat.

I’m told that this arrangement is better for racing, since you can get the boom hauled closer in to the boat’s centerline and down (to flatten the sail). However, I’m not a racer, so that argument doesn’t carry much weight with me. As a casual sailor and wannabe cruiser, all I can see are too many lines cluttering up the aft portion of my cockpit. Later model years of the Mariner come with mid-boom sheeting, and I learned from the Association forums that many early-model Mariner owners had made the switch from the Crosby Rig to mid-boom sheeting. So I decided to do it.

The boom side of the deal was easy. I removed the single blocks at the middle and end of the boom, and replaced the mid-boom block with a new fiddle block. On the cockpit side, what I needed was a fiddle block with a becket and cam cleat. That would provide me with a 4:1 purchase, which is what most Mariner owners use for mid-boom sheeting. However, I ran into a small snag. The existing block and cam cleat was bolted into the swing keel trunk using four stainless screws that thread into a plate of steel located on the inside of the keel trunk. Other Mariner owners had purchased a new stand-up block system and drilled and tapped out

new holes in the plate of steel in the keel housing. I had neither the tools, experience nor time to learn about drilling and tapping – so I found another way.

The existing assembly had a single stainless steel padeye that was bolted to the keel housing, to which the rest of the assembly was connected. I simply used a hacksaw to cut the assembly away from the padeye, which took all of five minutes. Rather than buying a standup block system, I just purchased the fiddle with becket and cam cleat, and used a shackle to connect it to the padeye on the boat. In order for it to stand up I just purchased a steel spring from West Marine for $2. Mission accomplished.

I also decided to add a jib downhaul to my boat. I do not have roller furling for my jib or genoa, so this addition would provide me with an easy way to lower the headsail while singlehanding, and for the Texas 200 it would also allow myself and my crew to lower the headsail from the safety of the cockpit in case of heavy seas and/or high winds. I installed a small swivel block at the bow, about one inch to the port side of the chainplate where the forestay and headsail attach. I installed a small eye strap to attach the block to the deck. The location of the eye strap at the very front of the bow made it tough to get a backing plate on the underside of the deck. I considered several options, including no backing plate at all, and finally settled on a piece of thick fiberglass that I had recently cut away from an old icebox under the cockpit. I used a hacksaw to shape it to fit the odd shaped spot under the deck, and installed the eye strap and backing plate with washers, locknuts and 3M 4200 to seal it up and keep water out. This section of the deck is all fiberglass (no wood core of any kind), so I did not have to do anything more elaborate than that to seal things up.

To run the line back to the cockpit, I added three small fairleads on the port side of the cabin, and a small cam cleat on the port side of the cabin about an inch forward of the cockpit. I chose to run the fairleads on the side of the cabin and not

the narrow side deck for two reasons. First, the side decks are fairly narrow and so the fairleads and downhaul line would get stepped on every time someone went forward. In addition to possibly crushing the fairleads, the person going forward could also easily trip on the downhaul line. The second reason is that I found a few posts in online sailboat forums that suggested that a vertical mounting (on the side of the cabin), as opposed to a horizontal mounting (on the deck), would be less likely to leak.

I use a 3/16" line with a small stainless carabineer that I attach to the head of the jib or genoa. This was a very cheap and easy project, and will add a nice safety feature to my boat, particularly when singlehanding.

Rigging the jib downhaul line to operate from the cockpit got me thinking about also running my jib and mainsail halyards back to the cockpit too. This is something that is done for safety reasons, so that raising and lowering the sails does not require leaving the cockpit. I chose not to do this, however, and here's why. First, they are not really that far forward of the cockpit, and they can be reached by just stepping into the cabin and standing at the base of the mast from "within" the cabin. On a small boat like the Mariner, you can stand inside the cabin, and the top of the companionway hatch will be somewhere in the neighborhood of your chest. I can stand in that spot and reach the halyard cleats on the sides of the mast with no problem at all. This requires movement forward of the cockpit by about two or three feet, and does not involve climbing up on top of the cabin, so it's a safe and relatively easy thing to do. Considering the minimal additional benefit of running the halyards back to the cockpit, and the fact that I had neither the spare time or the money to be doing this additional project, I decided to leave the halyards alone for now.

In order to provide for a spare mainsail halyard (to avoid the need to drop the mast while under way if something happens to the mainsail halyard), I rigged a topping

lift that could also serve as a spare halyard. To achieve this, I added a small swivel block at the masthead. I used 3/16" line and fixed one end at the end of the boom, ran it up through the masthead block, and then back down through a cheek block at the end of the boom, and then along the side of the boom to a cleat. This allows for easy raising and lowering of the boom, and also will serve very nicely as a spare mainsail halyard if needed.

There are several options for rigging topping lifts, including the use of a single line that is fixed at the masthead and passed through a cheek block at the end of the boom, and then fed to a cleat on the boom. As a topping lift, this would work very well and would provide a simpler rig with less line. However, it would not allow for the dual functionality of also serving as a spare halyard. For this reason, I rigged my topping lift as described above and have the peace of mind of knowing that I'm sailing with a ready-to-use spare mainsail halyard if the need arises.

On to the handholds. When I bought the boat, it had four wooden handholds attached to the cabin top. Between the mast and the forward hatch, was a small, single-loop handhold. About three feet further back, aft of the mast and adjacent to the sliding companionway hatch, was a slightly larger, two-loop handhold. All four of them were seriously rotted and needed to be replaced. I found the exact style and size handholds online and available in unfinished teak. My original plan was to replace them in exactly the same locations where there were currently mounted. I decided to varnish (urethane) the teak handholds using the same product that I had used for the rudder and tiller. Prior to installing them, however, I changed my mind. I felt that the two larger handholds made good sense; however, the two handholds located forward of the mast were placed right on the edge of the only convenient place to sit on the foredeck. In order to maximize the utility of the boat, and recognizing that I wasn't going to be embarking on any blue water adventures on this boat, I left those two small handholds in my garage.

I decided to utilize the same three bolt holes to mount the handholds, and used a large fender washer on the inside of the cabin to spread the load. I again turned to the 3M 4200 to literally seal the deal, and that was that. All in all, pretty easy.

I was left with a decision as to what to use to fill the holes in the foredeck left by the two forward handholds that were not getting replaced. In an ideal world, I would have used an epoxy product like MarineTex. However, time was tight, I did not have any MarineTex on hand, and I had noticed that the 3M 4200 product seemed to grip incredibly well and dry to a fairly hard consistency. So, I filled the four holes with 3M 4200, smoothed them over with my finger, and called it a day. After drying, I'm quite happy with my decision; I'm not sure the MarineTex would have been any better.

Although purely aesthetic, I had decided to refinish the mahogany trim on the boat prior to its maiden voyage as well. In my opinion, sailboats can be elegant works of beauty, particularly those with classic lines and well-maintained brightwork. I would imagine that most sailors would agree, and have surely turned their heads on occasion when they find themselves in the presence of an attractive sailboat. I think the Mariner has classic lines and an attractive appearance, and the mahogany trim on the earlier models certainly is a contributing factor – so I decided to take care of the brightwork before she made her debut.

There were two pieces of trim at the entrance to the companionway, each one about two inches wide and three feet long. These vertical pieces were what formed the track in which to slide the three hatchboards. These pieces of trim were in need of some serious TLC after years in the sun with no apparent maintenance. Then there were the cockpit coamings. They were also made of mahogany and were about an inch and a half wide and about seven feet long, running the entire length of the cockpit.

All of these wooden items were in good shape other than the finish. In order to complete the refinishing work in relative comfort, and to gain access to the underside as well as the topside, I removed the wood from the boat and set up shop in my garage. I decided to start with the companionway trim and the cockpit coamings, and only do the hatchboards if time permitted. After all, I would not be sailing with the hatchboards in place, so I wasn't as determined to get them finished for the maiden voyage, shakedown sails and the Texas 200. They could wait if needed.

I used sandpaper on a small sanding block to sand all of the items down to clean, bare wood – by hand. This did not take that long and I found it very enjoyable, actually. I enjoyed the smell of the wood dust, as well as watching the transformation from a dull, gray, sun-baked finish to the clean, bare wood that lay just beneath it. I would say that I had all four pieces sanded down and ready to varnish in about two hours total. I used a fine grit sandpaper to do most of the sanding, and then an ultrafine "finishing" sandpaper for the last few minutes on each piece.

Like with the rudder blade, I used foam brushes to apply the urethane, and I thinned the urethane by 50% for the first two coats. I then went to 30% thinned and then up to full strength right out of the can for the last two coats. I had read in many online forums that it was desirable to sand in between coats. I tried this after the first few coats, but was not happy with the scratches that I felt were being left on the surface. I had found one forum online that recommended using just a thick paper, like from a typical brown paper grocery store bag, instead of sandpaper. This was much more to my liking. I was able to smooth out any imperfections between coats, and slightly rough the surface of the wood, but I was not adding in any scratch marks. In all, I gave the bare wood six coats of urethane. It came up absolutely beautifully.

Due to time constraints, I did not refinish the hatchboards. I knew that I would essentially only be using them for boat storage and while trailering, so I wasn't too disappointed. They would just have to be done at a later date, after the Texas 200.

I reinstalled the refinished wood with the original screws, and used a dab of 3M 4200 around each screw hole to ensure that no water would leak into the boat through these areas, as well as to provide a tight and sound connection with the boat.

Although functional, I had decided to replace both the main and jib halyards. Each consisted of part wire cable and part line, and in both cases the line was on its last legs. I started with the jib, which was the worse of the two. The main problem was that the wire cable was running over a swivel block that was fastened to the mast, just below the connection point for the forestay. The block was not designed for use with such thin wire cable, and over the years it appeared that a space had been created on both sides of the sheave, into which the cable would possibly get stuck. I tested its operation a few times in the boatyard and found that indeed the cable was prone to get lodged between the sheave and the wall of the block, so off it came. I replaced the block with a new swivel block, and replaced the entire cable/line halyard with a new all-line halyard. I went with a ¼" low stretch line that was recommended by a local sailboat shop in Austin. In all, it cost me less than $100 for the line and block, and it took all of fifteen minutes to replace.

Like the jib halyard, the main halyard consisted of about half cable and half line. The line was a bit long in the tooth, and the cable had a few of the strands broken in a few places. It worked just fine, and in fact the operation of the cable over the masthead sheave was quite smooth. Given my time and money constraints, and the fact that I had rigged a topping lift to serve as a spare halyard, I decided to leave it as is for a while. That, too, would be a project for a later date.

Now onto the interior of the cabin. In general, the interior was dirty and a little moldy, but in very good shape. I decided to discard the existing v-berth and quarterberth cushions since they were covered with mold spores throughout. That left me with a solid fiberglass surface with which to work.

First, I needed to seal the holes in the v-berth and quarterberth compartments. The Mariner contains sealed foam floatation, and there are a total of ten holes, approximately one inch in diameter, that must have been used to blow in the foam at the time of fabrication. All but a few were missing the caps that are used to seal these holes, and I was afraid of sailing without first getting new caps. I did not want water to get into these floatation compartments in the case of a capsize. It took me a while, but I eventually found a place online that sold all types of plastic caps. I ordered the minimum order of 100 caps and installed them using 3M 4200. Unfortunately, my new best friend (the 3M 4200) let me down on this one. Apparently it doesn't bond well with the type of soft, flexible plastic used to fabricate these caps. It doesn't take much of a push or scrape to pop the caps off. However, the ever ticking clock forced me to leave them as is. I would have to order new caps at some other point in the future and replace the ones I had just installed.

Under the v-berth are two good-sized compartments, covered with varnished plywood lids. The forward-most compartment was missing its lid, so I fabricated one out of pressure-treated plywood. I stained the plywood to try to match the other lids (unsuccessfully) and applied several coats of urethane to seal and protect the wood. It appears that this forward compartment was used to store some type of container with water, since from that compartment a hose was fed back, under the v-berth, to a faucet and sink on the port side of the v-berth at the aft section of the v-berth. The manually operated faucet had probably not worked in twenty years or more from the looks of it. What's more, the entire set-up

seemed to be a poor one, since the factory-provided sink doesn't have a drain. I decided to remove the faucet and hose and just use the drain-less sink as a storage compartment. Like the other two v-berth compartments, the sink was also covered with a plywood lid. The two-inch diameter hole that was left after I removed the faucet was covered with a flush plastic cap that fit like a glove. That was $0.50 well spent.

The larger of the two compartments under the v-berth (the furthest aft) was set up to accommodate a porta-potty. I decided that I wanted some type of head on board, since I planned to do some weekending and multi-day cruising. However, there was no way I wanted to deal with a traditional porta-potty, which would require me to dump and clean the tank full of waste. Instead, I installed what I call my bucket-head. I bought a standard five-gallon bucket and fitted it with a toilet seat and lid from a camping supply store. I cut the bucket down about six inches so that it would fit in the compartment, and installed a plywood bottom on the bucket, through which I used three screws to fix it to the wooden block that is fiberglassed into the hull of the boat within the compartment.

The plan for this bucket is to use a bag system from a company called Cleanwaste. They sell individual kits called WAG Bags. Each little bag contains a large plastic bag with a small amount of "poo-powder" inside of it. The bag is fitted over the toilet seat and rests inside the empty bucket. The "poo-powder" is some type of magical cement-like substance that turns liquids into a solid in a matter of seconds. The bag can then be tied up and placed inside of another plastic bag that seals like a zip-lock bag. Both of these bags are biodegradable, so they can be buried at a campsite, or simply disposed of in the trash.

The system is not perfect, that's for sure, but I decided to give it a try since it seemed a whole lot more appealing to me than the "empty your family and friends' waste from the porta-potty" task that would follow every weekend trip.

The other item to address on the interior of the boat was the electrical system. When I bought the boat, there was a corroded power panel and a mess of old wires that were run throughout the interior, but all of these items appeared to me to be originals from 1970 and there was no way that any part of this mess of an electrical system was worth salvaging. I ripped it all out and decided to start clean. Of course, the lack of both time and money between purchasing the boat and embarking on the Texas 200, meant that a comprehensive electrical system would not be something we would have for the trip – or likely for the foreseeable future due to its complexity and cost. My plan was to simply use battery-operated devices and a small solar panel for my electronic devices – more on that later.

I wanted to clean, sand and repaint the entire interior of the cabin, but once again, I found my schedule to be too tight (Are you noticing a pattern yet?). So, I settled for just a thorough cleaning and scrubbing to get rid of the dirt and accumulated funk, and most importantly, to remove the mold spores. This actually left the interior looking pretty good, since its current paint job is in pretty decent shape. One of these days I'll get around to painting it with a few fresh coats, but for the time being I at least left it clean and functional.

Moving back outside of the cabin again, I decided to take a shot at the boat's hull. As I mentioned, the hull and gelcoat were in pretty good shape physically, but the boat had clearly been left to the elements for many years and was currently exhibiting the chalky white glaze of a heavily oxidized gelcoat. Like the brightwork, this was purely aesthetic, but I decided to put in the time since it would contribute significantly to the overall look of the boat. This may seem trivial or superficial, but I do think there are benefits to sailing on a clean and attractive boat. I was proud of all of the repairs and upgrades I was making, and I also wanted to be proud of the way she looked on the water as well.

I did some more research online, and it appeared to me that what I was going to need to do was buy a buffer and utilize rubbing compound to remove a thin layer of the oxidized gelcoat. I could then use the buffer to apply some type of wax and bring back the gelcoat's shine. I was a little nervous about the buffing process, since many of the online forums went into great detail about the proper way to use the buffer and mistakes that could be made. After hemming and hawing about this for several weeks, I finally decided to make one attempt at the easy way out.

I had come across several forum discussions regarding a 3M product called Marine Restorer and Wax. This was a "one-step" product that contained both rubbing compound and wax, and was advertised to work on heavily oxidized gelcoats. And, it could be applied by hand, so I would not need to figure out how to use a buffer. I figured it was too good to be true, but for $12.99 I decided to give it a try – maybe I would get lucky.

Well, I got lucky. It was amazing. I'm sure a proper restoration using buffers and two separate steps would provide for somewhat better results, but not by much. This product, applied by me by hand, brought the gelcoat back to what I would say was about 80% to 90% of its original beauty. Now, don't get me wrong, it wasn't easy – but it worked really well.

Here's how this product works: You start by applying the thick, creamy liquid with a rag on a small section, maybe two feet by two feet – maximum. You need to apply it with a lot of pressure, using short, straight, firm strokes. This is done for several minutes, to essentially buff off a thin layer of gelcoat. I imagined it as basically a creamy version of ultrafine sandpaper. Just before the mixture is completely worked into the boat, and before it dries up completely, you switch rags (for a dry one) and spend the next few minutes buffing it to a shiny finish using circular strokes, just like how you would wax a car. The whole process, for a two by two section, takes about ten minutes, and you finish exhausted. It took me several

weeks to do the entire hull, since I mixed this little workout into my overall work routine, doing only two or three of these two-by-two sections in any given work session. Overall, I would say it was about three hours of work and two bottles of the 3M Restorer product to restore the entire gelcoat. So, for about $25 and three hours of my time, I am extremely happy with the results. If you are faced with a similarly oxidized gelcoat, I would strongly recommend investing $12.99 into a bottle of this stuff and giving it a whirl. You might just get lucky.

When I get some time, I'm going to use the same product on the topsides, throughout the cockpit and the top of the cabin, since those areas are similarly faded and oxidized. I need to figure out how to handle the non-slip, raised cross hatching that covers much of the topsides, and I have faith that there will be plenty of advice online when the time comes for me to cross that bridge.

I also need to reapply the bottom paint, which is chipped off in a few places. For now, since I'm not going to keep my boat in the water, it's not a big deal. I could even go without bottom paint if I wanted to. However, I like the dark brown color and how it contrasts with the white bootstripe and light blue hull color, so I will likely repaint the bottom with the same color when I get a chance.

Finally, the motor. As I've mentioned previously, I decided that a small outboard motor was a must for my new boat. I did not purchase the 1978 model year motor from the previous owner of the boat since I had decided it was important to have a newer, reliable motor. With plans to use the boat with small children on board, I just wanted to ensure that this insurance policy was a reliable one. I spent some time looking for used motors in Austin, San Antonio and a few other nearby areas, but no luck. With the maiden voyage fast approaching, I was running out of options and so I made the decision to spend more than I had wanted to and just purchase a new motor. Just as I was beginning to stress out over the $1,000 price tag for a new motor, my mom decided to surprise me. My fortieth birthday was

fast approaching and she wanted to get me something special. After hearing about my ongoing boat restoration project, she had decided that the motor would make the perfect gift. And it was.

By utilizing the Mariner Class Association as a resource, I quickly learned from the other Mariner owners that something in the 3hp to 6hp range would be most appropriate. Due to budget constraints, I knew that I would be looking at something on the smaller side, and the price points of the different sized motors started pointing me toward the 3.5hp motors, particularly those made by Tohatsu/Nissan (Nissan motors are made by Tohatsu). They were very competitively priced and got solid reviews everywhere I looked. Compared to the 4hp motors by the same manufacturers, the 3.5hp models had several advantages. First was price. The extra ½hp cost several hundred dollars, and I just could not see justifying that extra expenditure. The next consideration was weight. The 3.5 hp weighs 41 pounds and the 4hp weighs 58 pounds. I know it's not massive, but 17 additional pounds hanging off the back of the transom was something that I thought was worth factoring into the equation. Finally, there was the gas tank arrangement. The 3.5hp motors come with an internal one liter gas tank, and do not offer the ability to connect an external gas tank. The manufacturer claims that the motor will run for about 45 minutes at half throttle on one liter of gasoline. The 4hp motors have the ability to connect to an external fuel tank. Obviously, the 4hp motor offered significantly more range before having to refuel, since the external tank could be 6 gallons or more if desired. However, I felt that most of my motoring would be five minutes out of the marina or away from the boat ramp, and then five more minutes getting back in at the end of the day. With an integral tank that provides for 45 minutes of run time, the 3.5hp would meet my needs most of the time. Most importantly, I would not have to deal with the dripping gas that is sometimes associated with the connecting and

disconnecting the fuel tank hose. I figured I would just keep a small one or two gallon gas can on board, which would allow me to add significant range if needed.

At the same time that I was trying to make a decision between the 3.5hp and the 4hp motors, I came across a new line of outboard motors that runs on propane. Manufactured by a company called LEHR, this line of motors had several attractive characteristics. First, they were more environmentally friendly since they operate on propane. That's the "green" factor. They also offered what I considered to be the enormous benefit of not having any gasoline on board the boat. One of the many benefits of sailing (as opposed to powerboating) is that you are not subjected to the noise of the engine and the smell of gasoline and exhaust fumes. Once you add an auxiliary gasoline motor into the mix, you bring to the sailing experience that which was supposed to stay out. Plus, I had already purchased a single burner propane stove, which is powered by the exact same small propane cylinders that are used for the LEHR outboards. So, I could have a single fuel supply on board the boat that would serve two purposes.

However, at the end of the day I wound up purchasing a 3.5hp (long-shaft) gasoline-powered outboard motor from Nissan. It basically came down to money. I found a sale on the Nissan leftovers from 2012 and so the price was right. The LEHR outboards currently only come in 2.5hp and 5hp models. I felt that the 2.5hp would be too little motor for my boat (and it is not offered in the long shaft model anyway). The price difference between the leftover 2012 3.5hp Nissan and the new 2013 5hp LEHR was just too much for me to absorb, given where I was on budget.

So, putting all that behind me, I placed the order for my new motor and within a few days I happily opened the box on my new 3.5hp Nissan four stroke outboard when it arrived via FedEx.

Of course, it's not as simple as just buying a motor and attaching it to the boat. You have to decide *how* you want to attach it to the boat. With my Mariner, there were three options. Due to the relatively low freeboard of the Mariner, the transom was actually designed to mount a long shaft (20") outboard motor directly to it. The other two options involved motor mounting brackets that attach to the back of the transom. The first, and most common with sailboats like mine, was an adjustable bracket that would allow for the motor to be lowered down to the water when in use and raised up completely out of the water when sailing, at anchor or in a marina. The second type of bracket is a fixed bracket, which essentially just provide a place to mount the motor behind the boat. Although the cheapest and easiest option would have been to simply mount the motor directly on the transom, I decided not to go that route. My sailboat is not exactly a luxury cruising yacht, and space aboard is at a premium. With the motor tilted up and forward while sailing, it would invade more of the cockpit than I was comfortable with. I decided that for a few bucks I could go with the motor bracket option and keep it completely out of the cockpit, even when tilted up.

Of the two motor bracket options, I sent with the fixed. I looked at several adjustable brackets and found them to be extremely large and heavy. It just seemed like way too much infrastructure for such a small boat; the proportions weren't working for me. On the other hand, I found a simple, clean and much lighter weight fixed motor bracket that seemed to be a much better fit. I figured the motor would not be completely out of the water when tilted up, but that was not a real concern since I was not planning on keeping my boat in a marina; the additional drag from a small portion of the motor's skeg was even less of a concern. I am not a racer and did not see the 1/20th of a knot speed reduction as likely to impact my sailing or cruising enjoyment.

Confirmation that I had made the right decision came by way of the Mariner Association, yet again. The exact make and model of fixed bracket that I was planning to buy was listed for sale by a fellow Mariner owner. It was listed as being in very good condition and would only cost me about half of what new ones were going for. Done deal.

So, after a little research and analysis, I had motor and motor mount decisions that I was happy with, and my credit card and FedEx did the rest. Easy, right? Well, not so fast. I still had to mount the motor bracket to the back of my transom. That proved to be a lot more time consuming than just attaching it with four bolts.

The first decision was which side to go with: port or starboard? That one was pretty easy. I wanted to eventually have three things hanging off the back of my boat. First was the rudder, and it was already there, dead center – easy enough. I also wanted a motor and a transom-mounted swim ladder.

To accommodate the center-mounted rudder, the Mariner's backstay is attached to the transom a few inches to port of the boat's centerline. I had learned from other Mariner owners that this would still allow plenty of room to mount and operate an outboard. The swim ladder would occupy the starboard side, and the few extra inches that the backstay was cheated to port would provide for a slightly less obstructed path for those using the ladder to climb gracefully back aboard after a dip in the water. So, it was settled: motor to port, swim ladder to starboard.

Now I needed to decide how to attach the motor bracket. I wanted to use marine plywood on the inside of the transom to strengthen the transom. It seemed that other Mariner owners had taken this route and that it worked out fine. In order to access the inside of the transom I was going to need to work around, or remove, a built-in cooler under the aft portion of the port side of the cockpit. I believe this cooler was originally surrounded by insulation, and contained some type of

insulated lid under the cockpit hatch which is utilized to access the cooler. However, 43 years of boat use had apparently resulted in the removal of all of the insulation and cooler lid; in addition, someone had probably stepped into the cooler at some point and had broken the bottom of it and cracked a large portion of the rest of it. Considering the state of the cooler and the fact that I needed access to the inside of the transom, I made the decision to just rip it out. This would provide me with a third cockpit hatch for storage, and would increase the amount of storage since it now would open up to the entire inside of the boat under the cockpit, not just the relatively small cooler.

The process of ripping it out wasn't pretty – or fun. I have a lot of hand tools, but very few power tools. I started by drilling a large hole into the cooler with my cordless drill. From there, I used a small hacksaw to manually cut out the entire cooler. The process took me about three hours of cutting, sweating, spitting and cursing. A lot of fun indeed. I estimate that I could have cut it out with a Dremmel-type tool in about ten minute. But, with a tight budget, I could not justify the expense and so I went at it manually.

Once I had the cooler out I did some measuring and drew four small dots on the transom with a pencil so that I could drill out the four holes for the mounting bolts. Not so easy. I had pictured all four holes being on portion of the transom that I could access. I planned to use a piece of plywood large enough to cover the entire area and it all seemed quite easy. Well, it turns out that only the bottom two mounting bolts fall into that "clear zone" that I was picturing. The top two bolts would actually come through the transom from the back and enter into the cockpit, that is, above the cockpit seats. That would involve the bolts penetrating the back portion of the transom, crossing through about one inch of dead space and then penetrating the portion of the transom that entered the cockpit. What I wanted to do was fill that dead space with plywood, so as to create a sandwich of sorts, so

that tightening down on the bolts would tighten all the sandwich components together and provide for a solid mount. However, due to the limited access through the rear hatch, and the angles at which I would have to work inside the boat, I just wasn't able to get up into that dead space to be able to fill it. I decided to just through-mount the bolts and use large fender washers on the cockpit side of the transom to spread the load a bit. I used as large a piece of plywood as would fit against the inside of the transom for the two bottom bolts, applied 3M 4200 liberally around all of the bolt holes, and tightened things down.

I should note that the plywood decision was also one that I analyzed and struggled a bit with. I had seen a lot of posts online about using marine-grade plywood and then applying different products to seal it, including epoxy and different types of paint and varnish. For reasons related almost entirely to my lack of time and a fast-approaching launch date, I decided to use pressure-treated plywood from my local hardware store, and I did not coat or paint it with anything. I'm not sure if it's going to last me five years or fifty, but it was a risk I decided to take given the circumstances. At the end of the day (several days actually), I was happy with the way it came out. I think the bracket is sufficiently sturdy to provide for safe operation of the motor with very little flexing of the transom in the process. Time will tell.

With the boat and motor now set, I moved on to the trailer. The lights and wiring were purchased and installed on the day I purchased the boat, so they were in good shape. I was a little worried about the grease in the hubs, since that's a classic point of failure for boat trailers. With no experience in that area, I decided to turn to a professional on that one. I paid $75 to have a technician from a nearby trailer store repack the grease on my bearings. This gave me peace of mind. However, just to be safe I purchased a grease gun and cartridge of grease to keep in the truck while trailering. The only other thing I did was buy a spare tire,

something the previous owner did not have with the trailer. Other than that, the trailer was old but in working condition. So I left it at that.

The last thing that was done during this four-month period of repairs and restoration work was to name the boat. My wife and I spent a little time during a few brainstorming sessions to try to come up with something, and we finally did. In advanced recognition of all of the big adventures that we planned to have on our little boat, we decided to name her Odyssey. But not like that. We decided to name her with the Spanish word for Odyssey – which is Odisea (pronounced OH-DEE-SAY-UH). We are a bilingual family, me being an American from New Jersey and my wife being a Mexican, from, well, Mexico. We are both bilingual and so much of our life has this component to it. Odisea sounded exotic in Spanish, and a quick glance at the word "in English" revealed the word "sea", which we liked. We had a few other options, but we liked this one the best, and that was it. I have no idea if she had other names during her 43 years. There was nothing painted on the boat, and the previous owner did not mention a name. The boat gods will have to forgive us if there was a prior name that we're not aware of – but from this point on she'll be known to the world as Odisea.

And so, after four months of work, I had my boat looking pretty good and ready to launch for the maiden voyage. I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed the restoration process, particularly my time in the boat yard. There's something about rolling up your sleeves and doing this type of repair and restoration work on a boat that is very pleasant and rewarding. At the boatyard I had the chance to work outdoors in nice temperatures, away from the house and out of the office. My day job is in an office, and also involves a lot of travel around the US and abroad, and so I spend a lot of time in taxis, rental cars, airports, airplanes, and hotels. It's a somewhat stressful, fast-paced environment, and the opportunity to put on an old t-shirt and jeans, and work with my hands outside under the warm sun was a very nice

change of pace. Just about every time I worked on the boat at the boatyard, I found myself reminded of the famous quote: “There is nothing — absolutely nothing — half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.” I don’t know how working on a boat that’s sitting in a grass lot could prove to be satisfying, but it is, simple as that.

The work was done by late March; so far I had kept to my schedule. I now had two months – April and May – to get her launched, do a few shakedown sails, and purchase and organize all of the equipment, gear and provisions that I would need to do the Texas 200.

Maiden Voyage and Shakedown Sails

A week or two after the repair and restoration work was complete, I found an opportunity to schedule the maiden voyage. The friend who accompanied me on my road trip to Missouri to purchase the boat was also to be my companion on this voyage. He had pointed out to me from the very beginning, while we were looking at the boat on the trailer in the previous owner's front yard in Missouri, that we did not even know if this thing floated yet. Technically, he was right – so it was time to see if she floated.

Lake Travis is only about ten minutes from the boatyard, so one Saturday morning we hooked the trailer up to my truck and took her over. At the marina where we were going to launch her, it took us about an hour to get the mast up and the sails and motor on. My friend has nearly no experience on boats (in fact he cannot even swim), so I was basically leading this charge with only limited assistance from him.

I backed the trailer down the boat ramp until the stern was just barely floating. The plan was to start the motor while still connected to the trailer so it could warm up for a minute or two. I would then release the boat from the trailer and motor across the marina about two hundred feet to an empty slip. My friend would drive the truck and trailer up the ramp, park it, and then join me in the slip. Simple, right? Well, not so fast.

I chose this particular Saturday because the forecast called for a fresh breeze all day, in the range of fifteen to twenty knots. I knew I would only get her out two or three times before the Texas 200, and I needed the shakedown sails to shake things down. It wasn't going to do me much good to try her out in a five or ten knot breeze.

Well, as we were setting the boat up that Saturday morning the breeze was indeed filling in. The problem is that mother nature did not see the same forecast that I did. By the time we backed the boat down the ramp, the wind was easily at twenty knots.

I did not think much of it so we continued with our plan. After a few minutes of warming up the motor while still attached to the trailer, I cast off the line and backed away from the trailer. The wind was blowing me directly across the two hundred foot channel and toward the slips full of boats. I waited a few seconds until I was blown clear of the trailer, and then slipped the motor into forward – and she stalled. I threw her back into neutral, pulled the cord to start her, waited a second or two after she started again, and then put her in forward again – only to stall again. With the wind blowing the way it was, I was very quickly bearing down on the boats across the channel. One more time – neutral – start – forward – stall. At this point I was only about twenty feet from the slips and bearing down fast. I left the motor and scurried along the port side, frantically fending off the different boats as I blew directly onto them. Luckily, a guy on the docks came to my assistance and we managed to wrestle my boat into an open slip without causing any damage to my boat or anyone else's. Not a good way to start things off.

About a minute later my friend came running down the docks. He had seen it all play out while parking the truck, and assured me that it wasn't a pretty sight. We now had the boat tied up in a slip, but the wind was still building. I would say it topped out that morning at about 25 knots, gusting regularly to about 30. The lake was full of whitecaps and not a single boat was out. The wind was screaming through the rigging of the twenty or so sailboats near us in the marina, and the few sailors we talked to said they had no plans to go out that day.

Of course, I desperately wanted to get her out. After all, I had owned her now for four months, and had spent a lot of time getting her to this point. Most importantly

though, there was the need to redeem myself for the embarrassing launch which many folks at the marina had the benefit of enjoying. But, after about an hour of thinking it through and waiting to see if the wind would somehow ease a bit, I decided not to go out. I was not particularly worried about sailing in such winds. I had two reef points in the main and could even sail without a jib if I needed to. My worry was getting out of the marina! The motor obviously was not working correctly and my fear was getting partway out of the marina and having it stall again. With the strong winds I was going to have a repeat of the frantic fending off that I just went through.

The marina manager said she would charge me $25 for the slip for the night, and the winds were projected to drop significantly for Sunday, so we tied her up good and called it a day.

Sunday afternoon was “Maiden Voyage – Take Two”. We headed over to the marina about 2pm. The winds were extremely light, but I really wanted to get her out and get the sails up and see how she sailed. I warmed the motor up for a few minutes, and put her in forward while still tied up in the slip, to see if she would stall again. There were no problems today, and so with nearly no wind and a working motor, we did what we were supposed to do the day before – motor out into the lake for the maiden voyage.

Unfortunately, just as we got out into the lake the wind pretty much died altogether. We raised the sails, and they would partially fill, but we were sailing at less than a knot. After about an hour of hoping for wind and trying to keep the sails full, I dropped the sails and decided to just motor around the lake for a while. After all, I needed to get twenty hours on the motor before I could use her above half throttle, so I figured I would start the clock on that effort.

Although it was barely a maiden voyage, I did learn a few things. First, there was a small leak around the swing keel bolt in the cabin. This was very common with the Mariner and amounted to about a pint of water in the 24 hours the boat was in the water. It was essentially a very slow drip. There was a lot of discussion on the Mariner Association forums about fixing this leak, but I was not worried – a leak of one pint every 24 hours was not going to keep me from doing the Texas 200. I also learned that my motor mount was sturdy enough to motor without any flexing of the transom or other issues. Also, although the mount is fixed, the motor does sit completely out of the water when tilted up. It is only by about two inches, but it's out of the water. Now, when sailing on a starboard tack it will definitely dip into the water a bit, but that did not concern me.

A few weeks later I had the opportunity to take Odisea out on Lake Travis again. This time it was going to be with another boat and a few guys from the Texas 200 group. There wound up being four guys and two boats, so I sailed my boat with one of them as crew. This time I conquered the boat ramp and marina like a pro (well, maybe not a major leaguer, but at least I didn't embarrass myself again). I had decided that my problem last time was engaging the motor while idling too low. By engaging the motor in forward with a bit more throttle, there was no stalling or other problems. Also, there was probably only fifteen knots of wind, which helped to slow the drift toward the occupied slips.

We had a great sail on Lake Travis that day, with fifteen knots of wind, gusting to eighteen or twenty. We sailed under full main and the working jib, and it was a blast. Just as all the reviews and other Mariner owners had claimed, she was a dream to sail. She heeled nicely, not too tender, not too stiff. Even with eighteen to twenty knots of wind at times, and heeling at fifteen to twenty degrees, there wasn't even a bit of weather helm. In fact, it was perfectly balanced; I could hold the tiller with one finger, even in upwards of fifteen to eighteen knots of wind. I

assumed (and in fact hoped) that there would be some weather helm under stronger wind conditions, since this would provide for an element of safety – since it causes the boat to round up into the wind if not tended to by the helmsman.

Although we were just out for a sail and to relax a bit, I tried to ensure we sailed on as many points of sail as possible, since this was one of my very few shakedown sails before the Texas 200. So we played around a bit, reaching and running, coming about and jibing, to put her through as much as possible. I was tempted to do more, to practice putting in and then shaking out a reef, changing headsails, heaving to, and more, but it just did not feel right. This was my first sail on Odisea. It was a beautiful day, about 75 degree air temperature, fifteen to twenty knots of wind, and a new boat to sail. And so that's what we did – we just sailed.

The next opportunity I had to sail was when my mother came to visit for a few days in early May. My wife and I left the girls with her for the day and headed up to Belton Lake, about an hour from Austin. My wife had only been on a sailboat once or twice before, and was a little apprehensive about the whole thing. Unfortunately, the wind was not going to help ease her into sailing on this day – it was blowing a solid 20 knots and gusting even higher. There are many boat ramps on Belton Lake, and I chose one that was in the lee of the land, so that at least our launch would be calm. We launched at a ramp in a small cove of protected water in the lee of the land. Unfortunately, as soon as we got out of the cove and into the lake, the wind was blowing pretty hard. We had the full main up as well as the jib, and it was just a bit too much for my wife. We were heeling over pretty good, maybe 20+ degrees, and she was nervous. After about twenty minutes I decided to call it a day. I fired up the motor, dropped the sails, and motored back to the cove where we launched.

Once back in the cove, it was quite calm. The weather was fantastic, sunny skies and about 80 degrees. We had packed a lunch and had a rare break from the

girls, so we decided to anchor off the beach and enjoy a picnic lunch aboard our new boat. We probably spent about two hours at anchor, enjoying our lunch and a few cold beers in the sun. Although it wasn't spent sailing, we both enjoyed the day and were happy to at least have a little time together.

My mom also wanted to go for a sail, and I still needed to get some experience with the boat, so two days later I took a vacation day and headed back to Belton Lake. This time the wind was much lighter – about 8 to 10 knots. It was a beautiful day, in the low 80s, and skies were sunny. It was a weekday, so there was nearly no one on the lake. It took us about 45 minutes to set the boat up and we launched without a problem. After motoring out of the small marina where the ramp was located, we put the sails up and kicked back. The winds were very light, but we were making three or four knots, and life was good.

After about an hour I decided to swap headsails and try out the genoa. When I bought the boat the previous owner mentioned that the mainsail and jib had been refurbished a few years prior. The genoa, however, had not, and it showed. I was a little worried about it until I had the chance to raise her and let the wind fill her up. She looked great. All of the wrinkles that were evident while folded in the sail bag were gone, and she looked great on the boat.

The sheets for the genoa are run differently than the jib sheets. The jib, since it is much smaller, has the sheets run on the inside of the shrouds, through a swivel block on the cabin top, and to a cam cleat that is fixed on the cabin top, right at the front of the cockpit. The 120 genoa, however, flies on the outside of the shrouds and the sheets are fed through a stand-up swivel block mounted to a car that slides on a track located on the outside of the cockpit coamings. The sheet is supposed to be fed from the clew of the sail, back through that block and then forward to a winch. However, the previous owner had removed the winches, which were old and mounted in a configuration that I do not entirely love. So, the

only way to fly the genoa is to run the sheet through the block and then back about one foot to a cleat where it can be tied off.

For now, this is how it will have to stay, while I gain some experience using the genoa and decide what's the best way to set up the sheets. The layout of the boat really doesn't lend itself to installing winches, and I would like to avoid it if possible. I'm hoping that the genoa will prove to be workable with just a block and cam cleat, like the jib. For now, and certainly for the Texas 200, it will be block and existing cleat. It will have to do.

My mom and I had a fantastic day on Belton Lake that day. We sailed for about five hours, basically running downwind the length of the four or five mile lake, and then tacking back upwind for a few hours to get back to the marina. The only thing I really tested that day was the Navionics software on my iPhone. This software was still very new to me, and I wanted to practice using it. It turned out to be extremely user-friendly, at least for the basic functions that I planned to use. I plotted a course on the lake and practiced following it for a little while. After a while, it became clear that the software was functioning well and it was so easy to use that additional practice seemed unnecessary. So I put it away and got back to lounging in the cockpit.

So, there wasn't much shaking down this day either – just a leisurely sail with my mom, catching up on things, and enjoying the sun and the sound of the wind in the sails and the hull slicing peacefully through the water.

The sail on Belton Lake with my mother proved to be the last one before the Texas 200, as I thought it might. There were a lot of things that I would have liked to practice, but it just wasn't going to happen. Instead, I would rely on my twenty-plus years of sailing experience, lots of advice from the Texas 200 "veterans", and solid preparation. If something needed to be figured out while on the Texas 200, I

would have to just figure it out. And if something broke, I would need to make sure I was prepared with the spare parts and tools necessary to make repairs underway. And so that is what I focused on for the few remaining weeks prior to the start of the Texas 200 – preparation.

Equipment and Provisions for the Texas 200

As with any cruise, there are specifics that will be unique to each one and need to be considered as part of the preparation. There are several aspects of the Texas 200, as well as the preferences of myself and my two crew members, that we considered when preparing for this year's event.

Before I get started, though, let me introduce my two crew members. First off, why even have crew? Wasn't singlehanding an option? After all, it's not a very big boat. Well, yes, singlehanding was certainly an option, but given the duration of the trip and the fact that my boat would be very new to me, I did not want to singlehand. It was certainly possible, and many others have done it; I just did not want to try it on this first one. So, after talking with a few potential crew members in February and March, and not coming up with a match, I put up a Hail Mary on Facebook. Actually, I did not really think it would result in finding crew, since exactly zero of my Facebook friends live in Texas. I just could not imagine anyone getting on a plane to come live aboard a small sailboat with me for a week in the hot Texas sun. So, mainly just to announce my plans, I put up a post that started out with "Anyone up for a little adventure?"

Much to my surprise, there were several responses within the first few hours that seemed like they could possibly be serious. One of the very first was from Chris Maynard, a good friend from college that I had not seen in about ten years. Chris lives near Boston, and the last time we saw each other was our weddings, about twelve years prior (his wedding) and then ten years prior (my wedding). We had only been in touch a handful of times by phone and Facebook during that time. Not long after Chris posted his response, another good college friend (and fraternity brother), Ignacio Granados, showed some interest. Ignacio lives in Mexico City and he and I had seen each other a handful of times over the prior

four or five years, during which I was living in Mexico City. In addition to being friends of mine, Chris and Ignacio are actually friends themselves; in fact, they were friends before I had met either of them. There were several others whose posts seemed at least semi-serious, and so I sent Chris and Ignacio private messages to gauge their interest before responding to some of the others who had posted after them. Within twenty-four hours both Chris and Ignacio assured me that they were dead serious and that I should count them in. Neither of them had any real sailing experience; in fact, Ignacio had never really even been on a boat much smaller than a cruise ship before. I assured them that it would not matter, that I would show them what to do and we would be fine. A few more emails back and forth and the deal was sealed. Texas 200 and mini college reunion, all in one. This was going to be a cool trip.

Now, with the crew set, there was some preparation to do. First off, here is what we would be dealing with: We would have three adults aboard a relatively small sailboat for five days and four nights. Our cruise would occur in mostly remote areas of south Texas in the Gulf of Mexico and in the numerous bays that parallel the Gulf. The four anchorages on this year's Texas 200 contain no access to electricity, fresh water, stores, restaurants or any other type of service. We would be passing relatively close (within several miles) to several marinas and towns along the way; however, the Texas 200 is not a leisurely beer cruise. In order to sail 200 miles in five days, and do so in a manner that allows us to reach the designated anchorages each night with the rest of the fleet, I calculated that we would need to sail approximately nine to thirteen hours per day, depending on wind speed and direction. There would be approximately fourteen hours of daylight each day, so there was not going to be any extra time for detours. Therefore, I knew that we would not have the luxury of straying from the course for several hours on one or more days to reach the marinas or towns along the way.

However, there was one exception that was going to provide us with a significant benefit - the 2013 Texas 200 route includes access to one marina (and adjoining restaurant) that is located immediately adjacent to the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) on the Texas 200's course on day three. Based on the location, I estimated that this marina would be reached approximately half-way through day three, which was perfect -- it fell exactly at the halfway point of the trip. In addition, given the miles to be sailed during day three, I estimated that we would have up to about ninety minutes to spend at the marina and adjoining restaurant, without running the risk of having to sail at night, which our boat was not equipped to do and something that would be extremely dangerous on day three's route, given our experience and the obstructions, shoals, and commercial ship traffic in sections of the ICW. This marina allowed us to plan for one very important that we could not pack five days' worth of from the beginning - ice! Based on other multi-day, hot weather experiences involving coolers and ice, I estimated that we would have ice for about a day and a half, then very cold water for about a half day after that, and something ranging between cold and cool water for the last half day. This would allow us to enjoy the luxury of cold drinks and some perishables for nearly the entire trip.

Finally, there was the weather. Temperatures along the south Texas Gulf Coast in June are normally in the mid-90s and mostly sunny skies are the norm. The water temperature in the Gulf of Mexico and adjacent bays is normally in the low to mid-80s. Tropical storms and hurricanes are not likely, but thunderstorms and squalls are common.

Overall, we were in for a remote, shoal-ridden, windy, hot, and humid experience. Between the sun, the heat, the wind, groundings, capsizes, sunken boats, broken noses, concussions, and a wide range of equipment failures, only about 75% of

those who start any given Texas 200 will actually finish. So, with all that in mind, here is a description of what we packed and did to prepare for the trip.

Equipment/Gear

The most important equipment that we had on the boat were the spare parts and tools necessary to ensure that we could handle just about any eventuality and continue the trip. As with the food and water, we would need to have everything with us since the opportunity to purchase spare parts or hardware along the way would be extremely limited, if not non-existent.

One of the Texas 200 veterans recommended that every captain make a checklist of all key components of the boat, and then make a plan for how to sail without each one of the components, or for how to repair or replace them while on the trip. For several months leading up to the Texas 200, I did exactly that, and the following is what I included in my supplies for the trip.

I brought spare rope of several sizes, including a roll of twine and fifty feet each of 3/16" line, 1/4" line, and 5/16" line. This was in addition to one hundred feet of 3/8" anchor line for the primary anchor, fifty feet of 3/8" line for the secondary anchor, and several twenty-foot dock lines that we had on board and that could be used for other purposes if and as needed. This would allow us to replace any halyard, sheet, downhaul, outhaul, topping lift, the swing keel lowering/raising line, or anchor line if needed. It would also allow us to replace portions of the standing rigging if needed – the forestay, backstay or shrouds.

Both of the anchors are eight-pound Danforth-type anchors with six feet of chain, each sufficient to serve as the primary anchor should one of them be lost for some reason.

In terms of hardware and related items, I packed several spare clevis pins, shackles, a shroud/stay turnbuckle, mainsail slug, sail tape, two spare battens, zip ties, rivets, and a variety of screws, bolts, nuts and washers. Overall, my spare parts kit was designed to replace just about any portion of the boat that could fail on the trip. My toolbox and related equipment was limited but included the basics: hammer, screwdrivers of several sizes, adjustable wrenches, wire cutters, pliers, needle nose pliers, several small hacksaws, a cordless drill/screwdriver with both wood and metal drill bits, several knives, a wide range of bungee cords, a roll of duct tape (of course!), and a rivet gun.

One thing that I did not have a chance to inspect, and for which my spare parts and repair plan was somewhat weak, was the swing keel cable. The Mariner has a 165-pound swing keel that extends to about 4' 11", and retracts up fully inside a housing in the hull. It swings on a single bolt, and is raised and lowered by means of a winch in the cockpit. Due to the weight of the keel, it lowers with gravity – no downhaul is needed. So, the winch in the cockpit is essentially an uphaul. There is a steel cable that connects to the trailing edge of the keel, about halfway down the length of the keel. I have never seen that connection point, but I understand from other Mariner owners that it is simply a hole in the keel with the steel cable somehow connected to or through it. I do not know if the cable or connection mechanism on my boat is original or if it has been replaced. The only way to see it is to lift the boat off the trailer by about five feet and drop the keel – or to drop it in very clear water and dive under the boat with a mask on.

I had planned to take my boat to a local sailboat shop that has a lift and pay them to lift it off the trailer so that we could inspect the connection between the keel uphaul cable and the keel, but it just did not work out. I waited too long, and when I finally tried to schedule a time to take it in, there just wasn't any availability. I was

away from home on business travel a lot during the weeks leading up to the Texas 200, and it just did not work out.

So, my plan was to hope for the best and bring the spare parts needed to make a repair if needed. I figured it would be impossible to reattach the wire if it broke while under way. There would be no way to reattach a broken steel cable to the keel while under the boat with goggles on in a bay full of choppy water. My plan was to use 3/16" or ¼" line to replace the steel cable if it broke. The keel only weighs 165 pounds, so the line could handle it. The line could be fed down through the hole in the cockpit where the steel cable currently passed. It was about a ½" diameter hole, so I figured I could tie a nut or washer to the line to weight it, and then drop four or five feet of line through the hole and dangle it under the boat next to the keel. I planned to use my goggles to swim under the boat, find the line, untie the weight, feed it through the hole in the keel, and then tie some type of crude knot. This did not seem impossible, but I'm sure it would have been extremely challenging in a choppy bay in brackish bay water that is nowhere near clear. But, that was my plan. I just hoped I did not need to put it to the test.

Plan B was going to be to sail with the keel down and stay in the ICW for the entire portion of the Texas 200 that was remaining at the time of cable failure. The boat draws 4'11" with the keel down, and the weight of the keel itself will keep it down and allow for perfect sailing. We would have to avoid approaching the shallow-water anchorages and just anchor off in deeper water each night. One of the nights is at an old dock at the old WWII military base, and that was reported to have at least seven feet of water at the docks, so we'd make it in there with no problem. At the end of the event, at Magnolia Beach, we'd have to enlist the help of the other participants to figure something out before the boat could be put back on the trailer, but at that point we would have finished the event and so I did not really care how it played out at that point.

After spare parts and hardware, I would say that a set of functioning sails comes next in order of importance. You might even argue that this should come first; after all, it's a sailboat, right? For this trip, my plan for sails was simple: bring all three sails that I own – not much else to it.

The mainsail includes two reef points, which I was told would be very much a necessity given the expected winds of twenty to thirty knots. The mainsail has three battens in it – one that is twenty-four inches long and two that are thirty inches long. The battens that came with the mainsail appear to be originals from 1970, and are made of wood. I broke one of them during a test sail on Lake Travis, and so decided to purchase a completely new set of fiberglass battens. I installed the new battens and used sail tape to close the opening at the leech of the sail to ensure they would not blow themselves out during the trip. It just so happens that the batten that I broke was one of the thirty inch battens, so I was left with one twenty four inch and one thirty inch batten. Although old and made of wood, they were not in bad condition and I packed them as spares for the trip.

In terms of headsails, I have a working jib and a 120 genoa. Although this trip was likely to involve sailing with two reefs in the main and the working jib, I brought the genoa in case of light winds or some type of failure with the main during the trip.

In order to repair any tears in the sails, I included a roll of sail tape with my other supplies. I had only limited experience with sail tape over the years, but ten minutes of research on Google told me that I would be able to figure it out if the need were to arise during the week.

In addition to the boat's sails, I brought an eight foot by ten foot heavy duty white poly tarp to serve as a boom tent. The tarp has aluminum grommets sewn in about every eighteen inches along the length of all four sides, and could be easily jury-rigged and fastened to the mast and boom to serve as a small mainsail if

needed. This wasn't the most complete "quiver" of sails, but I was not in any position to purchase additional sails and so I would have to embark on this adventure with what I had.

For safety purposes, I purchased a hand-held marine VHF radio. There are two safety-related purposes for this type of radio. First, it allows for communication with the Coast Guard and other boaters in the case of an emergency. This provides not only safety for myself and my crew, but also for the crew of the other thiry or more boats that were expected to be participating in the event. While an extreme emergency can be radioed to the Coast Guard, it is much more likely that myself and my fellow Texas 200 sailors would encounter minor emergencies, groundings and equipment failures that could be remedied with the help of one another along the way. This of course, requires that each of us have and constantly monitor a VHF radio, and so I wanted to ensure that I would form part of the safety network in that regard, both for my own benefit and that of my fellow sailors. In addition, most of the boats in the event would be using small handheld models like the one I purchased. These are extremely limited in range, and so having a network of boaters spread out across the waterways each day would allow us to relay potential emergency messages to the Coast Guard if needed.

The second safety-related feature of these types of radios is that they provide access to the NOAA marine weather forecasts, which are updated every few hours, twenty-four hours a day. Given the remote location of the Texas 200 event, the first leg that we planned to do out in the Gulf of Mexico (weather permitting), and the several large bays that we'd be crossing during the week, regular access to accurate weather forecasts was going to be important. While this was not a blue water sail hundreds of miles from land, it was also not a leisurely sail on a small lake close to home. There are sections of the bays, particularly during the first two days, that are many miles from the nearest town,

and several of the bays themselves are over ten miles wide. The outside leg (in the Gulf) was even more potentially serious. From inlet to inlet, the outside leg was about thirty five miles long. With an anticipated boat speed of about five knots, that meant we'd be sailing outside for about seven hours. If a weather event came up on us during that time, we could be as many as seventeen miles from the nearest inlet, with only two options – go out to sea in a very small sailboat to try to survive the storm, or approach the beach and try to safely abandon ship in the surf before the boat was capsized or pitchpoled and broken up on the beach. Neither of these two options were very appealing, so it was critical to have a good weather forecast that day in order to make the decision to sail outside, or to stay inside where it would be safer.

I did a fair amount of research on the available makes and models, features and reviews for handheld VHF radios, and quickly decided that you could do a Master's thesis on the topic if you were so inclined. However, that wasn't an option. I put in as many hours as I could, which wasn't that many, and decided on a mid-range Cobra VHF radio (model HH 475) that has six watts of power, is waterproof/submersible, floats, and can use either its rechargeable lithium-ion battery or standard AA batteries for power. There were plenty of other features such as Bluetooth connectivity with my cell phone, call playback and something called "burping", but for my purposes on this first voyage I did not envision myself utilizing many of the extras.

While doing my research, it seemed to me that all of the handheld VHF radios had either a five-watt or six-watt maximum. Given that these radios have a relatively limited transmission range, I felt that the additional watt of power was the way to go. So six watts it was. That narrowed it down. For those who are unfamiliar with VHF radios, the small handheld variety can only transmit over a distance of a few miles, only up to as many as six or seven miles under ideal conditions (as I

understand it), due to their low power and location relatively close to the surface of the water (antenna height affects transmission distance significantly).

Almost all of the marine VHF radios were waterproof and submersible, so that proved to be essentially a “standard” option with all of the models that I looked at.

The ability to operate on AA batteries was a very important feature for me, since at the time of the Texas 200 I was not going to have any type of onboard electrical/charging system. Most of the handheld VHFs that I reviewed did not offer this option, so that limited the pool of candidates fairly significantly. I planned to have plenty of AA batteries with me on the trip, so that I would not run the risk of being without the VHF radio. As far as I can tell (the owner’s manual is vague on this topic), the radio I purchased will float if the lithium-ion battery is installed, but may not float if using the AA batteries in place of the lithium-ion battery. I was not too concerned about this, since I planned to have the radio tethered to my life vest and also stored within a pocket on my life vest.

Another note that may be of interest to those in the market for a similar radio, I noticed that a number of the handheld VHFs would only transmit at their maximum power (five or six watts) when using the rechargeable battery pack that comes standard with the radio. While specifics seem to be hard to come by in the literature, there is evidence that the use of AA batteries limits the maximum power transmission to about three watts on many of the models that have the AA option. The Cobra radio that I purchased indicates in the owner’s manual that the use of fresh AA batteries will allow for transmission at six watts, which was another benefit of the radio that I selected. Given that I did not actually complete my Master’s degree in VHF radio technology, I would suggest you do some of your own poking around on the Internet. This is just a few of the things I learned during my time on Google.

There is another safety-related item that I considered, but ultimately decided not to utilize on this trip: a float plan. The US Coast Guard recommends completing a float plan and leaving it with a reliable person who can notify the Coast Guard in the event that you fail to arrive at your destination or other scheduled stops along the way. I think the idea of a float plan is a good one; however, for this trip, I just could not think of a way to utilize a float plan that would not either restrict our ability to plan and execute our daily route, or result in a false alarm, where our contact(s) would send the Coast Guard looking for us when we were not actually in trouble. If we put together a plan that included our stops for each evening, then we'd need to stick to that plan, or find a way to notify our contact of any change. In an ideal situation, with full cell phone coverage and/or VHF radio contact with one or more designated contacts, we could have reached out to our contact(s) each evening to confirm that we had safely and successfully reached the planned anchorage, or advise our contact(s) that we had decided on an alternate anchorage for one reason or another. However, the Texas 200 veterans had reported that cell service did not cover the entire route, and my handheld VHF radio only has a range of a few miles. Therefore, the idea of notifying someone each evening was not going to work. The other option would have been to ask several participants to look out for us each evening in the designated anchorages, and to contact the Coast Guard should we not arrive at an anchorage by some set time. However, this would limit our ability to change routes for one of several possible reasons, and would have too high a probability of causing a false alarm to be reported. So, I also tossed that plan out the window. I could not think up a third option, so that basically killed the whole float plan idea. So, instead of having the "safety net" of a guaranteed Coast Guard call if we failed to arrive at an anchorage or to check in with someone by a certain time, I just planned to have as many other safety measures in place to guarantee our safe arrival at the Shrimp Boil on Magnolia Beach on the last day of the event.

Another item that is for safety as well as comfort is electricity. As I already mentioned, my boat does not have an electrical system - so we'd have to make a plan. The easy part of the electricity planning was for light. I bought a battery-powered LED camping lantern that I planned to hang in the cabin, cockpit or tent at night, as needed. It could also serve as an anchor light if needed, and I planned to simply haul it up the mast with the topping lift or mainsail halyard if needed. I also bought several small LED flashlights. Both the lantern and the flashlights are powered by standard AA batteries, of which I bought about twenty spares in case they were needed. In addition, one of my crew (Ignacio) brought with him two additional small flashlights that were solar rechargeable. So, we were covered for light.

The final AA-compatible device that we planned to use was a small speaker system that would allow us to connect an iPhone or iPod and have tunes along the way. It was a speaker that Ignacio had purchased, and it operated on three AA batteries. We did not really know how effective it was in a wide open space like a sailboat cockpit, or how long the batteries would last, but we brought it anyway and figured our supply of twenty AA batteries would allow it to be a workable option for music for the week.

I must say, I was somewhat torn on the whole idea of listening to music anyway, so if it did not work I was not going to be heartbroken. One of the most desirable aspects of the Texas 200 was the opportunity to completely disconnect from society, radio, TV, news, Internet, Facebook and the busy work-a-day lifestyle that I lead. Sitting around listening to music on a boat surrounded by the natural sounds and rhythms of the wind, water and birds was not exactly what I was envisioning when I planned this trip. One of the truly beautiful aspects of sailing, as opposed to cruising on a powerboat, is that you have the opportunity to avoid the drone of the internal combustion engine for a few hours, or in this case, a few

days at a time. When the sails are up, all you hear is the wind flowing over the sails, and the hull slicing and sloshing through the water. With any luck, you can do all that with a few seagulls singing their songs in the background. For me, it's about as peaceful and natural an experience as one can have – and a stark contrast from the daily grind that most of us experience. But, for better or for worse, we had a plan for tunes and it was nice to know we at least had the option if the conversation dried up or the sounds of nature got old.

The more complicated electrical issue was my iPhone, which was necessary for the use of the Navionics software. I have an iPhone 5, which has reportedly experienced issues with non-Apple charging devices, due to Apple's continued insistence on making all types of compatibility and interoperability difficult, if not impossible. I often launch into anti-Apple tirades, usually with regards to iTunes and their proprietary mp3 encoding and the difficulty that has caused me on several occasions. I'll avoid spiraling into one of those tirades here – I'll just go on the record as saying that I'm not a huge fan of Apple and their proprietary tendencies.

Right now, for this trip, my concern was the charging of my iPhone 5 via solar panel and/or battery pack. After doing some research, I found a solar panel and battery pack option that appeared to be a viable solution. There is a company called GOAL ZERO that offers several solar solutions, including one that includes a seven watt solar panel with a battery pack that it can charge. There are a number of options for charging devices, which I liked. First, the solar panel can be used to charge devices directly during the day while in sunlight. Charging can occur either by using a USB port (as with the iPhone) or by using the twelve-volt cigarette lighter adapter (which would also allow me to charge the VHF radio's lithium-ion battery if needed). The other option is to use the solar panel to charge a battery pack, which itself is made up of four rechargeable AA batteries. Once

charged, the AA battery pack can charge an iPhone using a USB connection, and it reportedly has enough power to fully charge an iPhone twice. The other option with the battery pack is to take out the AA batteries and use them as batteries in other devices, like the VHF radio or our lantern and flashlights. My research indicated that this product was compatible with the iPhone 5, so I figured I was set.

Unfortunately, I waited too long to order it, and when it arrived and I tested it, I found some issues. In my tests, the panel would only directly charge the iPhone 5 when in direct and full sunlight. If the sun was going in and out behind clouds, or if the day was somewhat hazy, the iPhone 5 would not accept the charge at all. The panel continued to provide charging capability, but the iPhone 5 would stop charging and display a message about the charging device not being compatible. The other issue was the AA battery pack was not accepted at all by my iPhone 5. So, with very little time until the trip commenced, I was left with a solar option that would only work for me if I charged my iPhone directly from the panel in full, direct sunlight. I had tested it several times in my driveway, and it charged the iPhone fully in about eighty or ninety minutes in direct sunlight, and the Texas coast in early June is usually sunnier than you'd ever wish it to be, so I figured it was a workable solution.

Ignacio also decided to also buy a solar/charging device so that he would have the ability to charge his own iPhone, which he wanted to use to take pictures and video, and for playing music. His device was ordered from Amazon even later than mine, and only arrived a few days before we began the trip, so no real testing was possible. It appeared to have a major drawback right out of the box though, since the solar panel was only about a quarter the size of my seven watt panel, and it claimed to require ten to twelve hours of direct sunlight to charge its internal battery, which could then be used to charge devices via a USB port. However, with seemingly a hundred last-minute details to work out before we departed, the

solar issue was put to bed with these two panel/charger systems, and we just hoped for the best. (Hope is a good strategy, right? ☺)

While we would clearly be hoping for sun to keep our iPhones charged, we would also be trying to hide from it all week, so as to not get too burnt and dehydrated. My boat does not have a bimini or other type of cover to provide shade while sailing. I have tentative plans to install a bimini, but this will require a few modifications to the mainsheet system, since it is currently a mid-boom mainsheet system and is located roughly in the middle of the cockpit. My plan is to move the mainsheet to the end of the boom, but this will require the installation of a bar over the tiller on the transom, to allow the full range of motion for the tiller. For now, though, we would be sailing in the sun.

Although we would have to sail in the sun, I purchased an eight-by-ten white poly tarp to use to provide shade in the cockpit while at anchor. There are two possible configurations for the tarp. The first is as a boom tent, to provide cover from rain, sun and dew formation while sleeping in the cockpit. This simply involves placing the tarp over the boom and fastening it along the cockpit coamings with bungee cords or short lengths of line.

The other configuration involves the use of two poles, to provide for shade while seated in the cockpit at anchor. For these poles, I purchased two extendable painting poles from Home Depot. They extend to about six feet long and should serve the purpose well. I say “should” because I did not have time to rig up the poly tarp with the poles prior to the Texas 200. In addition to their use in providing shade, they have both also been modified to serve as whisker poles for poling out the jib when running wing and wing; also untested as of the start of the Texas 200.

For sleeping, we prepared for several sleeping arrangements. On the Texas 200, there is reportedly a mix of those who camp in tents and those who sleep in (or on)

their boats. We were prepared for all of these options. First, we brought a large dome tent. All of the planned anchorages allowed for easy access to the beach or, at one anchorage, a large grassy area well-suited to tent camping. In terms of sleeping in or on the boat, we had the following options. For sleeping in the cabin, we had the v-berth available for one person. The v-berth on the O'Day Mariner is over six feet long in the center, and provides for comfortable sleeping. The Mariner also has two quarterberths. While probably quite comfortable for children, they are a bit small for adults in my opinion. However, they do have well over six feet in total length and the forward-most three feet or so are open to the cabin and allow for sleeping without too much sensation of being in a coffin. In terms of ventilation, my Mariner has a standard-sized forward hatch over the v-berth as well a large companionway opening. Due to the high probability of mosquitos and other flying creatures of the night, I fitted both of these openings with screens. To achieve this, I installed industrial strength Velcro tape on the inside of the cabin at both openings. I then cut grey plastic screen from Home Depot to fit each of the openings, and fitted the edges of each of the screens with the same Velcro tape. When installed, they provide a perfect seal against intrusion of flying critters; when not in use, they roll up to a relatively small and easy-to-store size. So, with the v-berth, quarterberths and screens, we had the ability to all sleep in the cabin if we wanted to, or if weather conditions forced us to. It would not be ideal, but it was possible.

In terms of sleeping on the boat, the cockpit of the Mariner has two benches that are each approximately seven feet long. This is one of the really nice attributes of the Mariner and rivals the cockpit size of many larger sailboats. While sufficiently long, the cockpit benches are not incredibly wide, so sleeping there is do-able but not perfect. I have a large mosquito net that is sized for a queen-sized bed, and that can be hung from the boom and fitted to cover both benches. In order to save

space, we decided not to bring the net though. We reasoned that we had several options without the net, given the cabin space for three and the tent, and so the net did not make the final cut when we were leaving things behind to minimize clutter on the boat.

In terms of padding for the sleeping surfaces, all of our options would require something. For the tent, we were faced with beaches that were mostly hard-packed shells or oyster beds, and then the one night on grass. In and on the boat would involve sleeping directly on hard fiberglass, since my boat does not have any cushions for the v-berth, quarterberths or cockpit. Therefore, we each brought simple foam sleeping pads designed for camping. While small and easy to stow, they were likely going to prove to be significantly too thin to provide for comfort on the hard fiberglass or packed shell beaches. Custom-fitted cushions for the v-berth, quarterberts and the cockpit are all available from Stuart Marine, the current manufacturer of the Mariner. However, the pricetag for all of those cushions is well above what would be possible for the Texas 200 (or the foreseeable future for that matter!).

For our clothing and personal items, we each carried a large backpack or small duffle bag. Due to reports of deep, shoe-stealing mud on many of the shoals and anchorages along the Texas 200 course, we each brought two pairs of shoes. This would allow for a backup pair for each of us in case a shoe or two was lost to the mud. I also packed a pair of typical beach flip-flops, just because I cannot seem to go anywhere near the beach without them. They're like required equipment for me I guess.

We also brought bathing suits, shorts, and T-shirts, as one might imagine for a boating trip where the water temperature would be in the mid-80s and air temperature in the mid to high 90s. However, the Texas 200 veterans strongly recommended sailing with long pants and long-sleeved shirts, due to the hot sun

and numerous victims of sunburn over the past six Texas 200s. Therefore, we each included thin, light-colored pants and long-sleeved water shirts for use during the week.

We each included two hats in our gear as well. With the anticipated heat, sun and high winds, we decided on large brimmed hats that included some type of chin strap or other means of keeping our hats from blowing away in the high winds. I packed one such hat, and also brought two baseball caps with me. Chris and Ignacio each had large-brimmed hats and spares.

We each also packed two pairs of polarized sunglasses of the large, wrap-around variety, to provide as much protection as possible. We reasoned that a spare pair would be very wise to have, since there would be no opportunity to purchase spare sunglasses along the way, and they are an essential item for the trip. Our glasses were each fitted with croakies to ensure they stayed on our heads and did not wind up in the drink.

In terms of sunblock, we purchased two large containers of SPF 60, one large container of SPF 50 and one tube of SPF 100. In addition, we each had a relatively high SPF (45 to 50 SPF) lip balm for the week. We packed significantly more than we thought we needed, since the opportunity to buy more was not going to be likely.

Since this was a one-way trip, with my truck and trailer waiting for us 200 miles up the coast, we pretty much knew we had to sail rain or shine. So, we each packed a raincoat, and I also brought three cheap plastic rain ponchos. We did not have true foul-weather gear, but I figured that we would be just fine with raincoats since we were in deep south Texas in June, where the weather would be warm even in the rain. Plus, we had the ability for one person to be in the cabin at all times, so if one of us got cold or just too drenched, we had a way to escape to dry quarters to

warm up or change clothes. I had never sailed for any length of time in the rain, but I figured we could figure it out if necessary.

Navigation Instruments, Charts and Preparation

This trip would be the first time I would ever really need to navigate a sailboat. All of my prior sailing experience over the past twenty-five years was out and back from either the beach or a marina, and never really included anything further away from either of those points of origin to lose sight of them. In fact, with only one small exception, which I'll get to in a minute, I had never sailed for more than about seven or eight hours on any one occasion. Navigation for me simply meant staying within sight of the beach or marina, in deep water, and heading back to that point at the end of my sail. In fact, I do not think I had ever seen a nautical chart, and I had only ever sailed by compass on a few occasions on larger keel boats. I certainly had not ever used SatNav or GPS equipment, and did not even know what dead reckoning or piloting involved. It was simply not part of my sailing experience.

Now, the one exception to my "out and back" experience was a bareboat charter that I did with six or seven friends in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, back in the summer of 1998. Looking back now, on the eve of my fortieth birthday and as a much more responsible person, I find the whole experience quite interesting – somewhat shocking actually. I was on the island of Mallorca, off the coast of mainland Spain, in the Mediterranean Sea, taking a few courses toward a Master's degree at the time. Back in 1995 I had taken the American Sailing Academy (ASA) Basic Coastal Cruising course while living in San Francisco. It was the first time I had ever been on a sailboat over sixteen feet long. Over the course of a week on a sloop-rigged Pearson 30, I fell in love with sailing larger cruising sailboats. What's not to love? Five consecutive days aboard a large (to me) sailboat in the San Francisco Bay. Good wind. Lots of sun. Temps in the 70s. It

was incredible. However, life took me in a few different directions after the sailing course ended, and by the summer of 1998 I had not actually done any sailing aboard anything other than a sixteen-foot Hobie Cat again.

So, at the age of twenty five and not really thinking much about risk or consequences, or anything else beyond drinking and spending time on the beach, I decided I was qualified to bareboat charter a sailboat with a few friends (none of whom had any sailing experience). So, we made our way down to the marina district in Palma one day and inquired about chartering a boat for a half day or day. I was able to find a forty-foot Beneteau sloop-rigged sailboat that was available for day charters, and they were willing to let me have it! I had brought my ASA Basic Coastal Cruising credentials with me, and after a brief review of my paperwork they agreed to give me the boat. I think it had something to do with my insistence that I had been sailing all my life and the confidence I was surely oozing during the negotiation – trying, of course, to impress my friends and pull off something that I really was not qualified to do.

Toward the end of the Spanglish conversation, I finally came to understand that their definition of a “day charter” was twenty four hours, from noon to noon. They were not willing to do a day charter for six or eight hours during the same day, but we quickly decided to accept the terms of the charter that they were offering. So, a few days later, we all showed up at the marina to start our twenty four hour cruise. I do not recall checking, or even thinking about, nautical charts of the Mediterranean. Nor did I check the marine weather forecast. I have no idea if the boat had a compass – I’m sure it must have – but I do not recall using it. Similarly, I had no idea what type of electronics - SatNav, GPS, or other navigational equipment - might have been on board. I would not have recognized them or known how to use them anyway, so I did not even bother checking.

I made sure the marina operator showed me the basics in terms of location of halyards and sheets, as well as how to start and operate the diesel engine. We looked around and found an anchor and that sealed the deal - as far as I was concerned, that was all that I would need. Despite only having five days experience (in the ASA class) aboard anything larger than a sixteen-foot beach sailboat, no experience whatsoever on a boat over thirty feet in length, no nighttime sailing or anchoring experience, and a crew of party-going twenty-something landlubbers, I was confident we would be just fine. What could possibly go wrong?

We motored out of the marina, just like I had done in class (twice!), and once out in the Mediterranean we set the sails and headed down the coast. I decided to hug the coast, to stay in sight of land, and really had no idea what would be ahead or how we would handle things once the sun went down. I knew it might be a bad idea to leave sight of land (something I had never experienced before) so I just stayed a mile or so from the coast all afternoon. Somehow - luck, I suppose - we came upon a small, protected cove sometime around dusk. I do not remember if the cove was open to the Mediterranean or if it was a lee shore or in the lee of the island, but it seemed calm and "protected" at the time, so we went for it. We motored in (having no idea of depth or possible obstructions), threw the anchor over (into an unknown abyss, bottom type unknown) and settled in for a late afternoon swim and an evening meal aboard the boat.

I do not recall the details of the remainder of the evening, but it definitely involved music, beer and wine – all three in respectable quantities I'm sure. I recall waking up early the next morning, maybe 7am-ish, and noticing that the boat was significantly closer to the rocky coast than when we anchored the evening before; but we were still afloat and did not appear to be hitting the bottom, so life was

good. I started the engine, hauled up the anchor and motored out into deeper water. Crisis averted.

The sail back to the marina was in light winds and was very uneventful as I recall, and sometime after 11am we identified the entrance to the harbor where the marina was located. We found an empty slip and docked the boat before the noon deadline, thereby successfully completing an overnight cruise in true twenty-something, irresponsible (but lucky) drunken college student fashion. And that is the extent of the navigation experience upon which I started my planning and preparations for the 2013 Texas 200 – clearly I had some work to do!

As part of this trip, I was going to be sailing a total of 200 miles, through a number of different bays and waterways, as well as a thirty-five mile leg out in the Gulf of Mexico, over the course of five days. The easiest leg of the trip, from a navigation standpoint, was going to be the thirty-five mile leg in the Gulf of Mexico. I planned to stay about three-quarters to a mile from the coast, well within sight of land, the entire way. This plan had served me very well back in 1998 in Spain, so I decided to stick with what was working for me. This would put me in deep water, provide some sea room in case something went wrong (so that I would not find my way into the breaking waves too soon while making a repair or getting the motor started), and would allow me to easily locate the jetties at the inlet where we would re-enter the bay. However, the rest of the bays and waterways along the trip were full of islands, shoals, reefs, and oil rigs, and would be challenging for a navigation virgin like myself. Several of the bays were ten miles or more in width, which meant that there was a good chance that I would be sailing out of the sight of land in one or more directions. This was something that made me very nervous and I did a lot of research and asked a lot of questions of the Texas 200 veterans to prepare myself.

In terms of charts, the Texas 200 veterans recommended a brand of fishing maps that were waterproof and based on fairly significant local knowledge and input. These maps contained all of the features of typical nautical charts, including all buoys, markers, obstructions, wrecks and water depths. They came highly recommended by a number of people who had sailed prior Texas 200s, and so they were a must. One of the veterans also created a full set of charts, probably over a hundred and fifty pages in total, that were a combination of NOAA nautical charts and Google Earth satellite imagery. I went to the library and took out several books on navigation and chart-reading, and spent several twenty-plus hour flights to and from the Middle East (on business) studying the books, fishing maps and charts. Over the course of several such roundtrip flights during about a three month period, I asked a number of questions of the Texas 200 veterans to clarify any doubts that I had along the way (and I had many!).

I bought a small nautical compass that mounted with suction cups, which provided me with a number of mounting options in and around the cockpit of the boat. I had no idea how to really use a compass, but the truth is, it did not seem all that complicated and I practiced a few times on some day sails on the local lakes near my house in Austin. It did not seem all that tough.

After a lot of research and inquiries of the Texas 200 gang and the helpful members of the O'Day Mariner Association, I purchased the Navionics navigation app for my iPhone. This provides for a whole host of features, many more than I would use on this trip or probably ever, for that matter. The key feature was basically the ability to see a point on a digital chart that represents the location of the boat. Given my lack of experience with navigation and piloting, I figured this would be the only real way for me to know where I was in those portions of the large bays that were outside of the ICW and other marked channels. As with the compass, I was able to practice with the Navionics software several times prior to

the Texas 200. As long as you have a working iPhone (or iPad or other device), working software, GPS enabled, and sufficient power, this software will make your life extremely easy. You can see exactly where you are at all times, with your position overlayed on nautical charts. You are given your course and speed, and you can plot routes which can then be followed very easily using the software. It's cheating, really, but that was fine by me.

Given the significant ease with which this software would make navigating on this trip, I decided to have two separate backup plans, to ensure that this type of navigation would be possible for the week. First, Ignacio purchased and downloaded the same Navionics software to his iPhone. Second, one of the Texas 200 veterans offered to lend me his spare GPS to have with me for the trip. I did not have time to practice much with the GPS that I received on loan, but I spent a few minutes one evening in my living room pushing buttons and determined that it would be pretty simple to operate if needed.

So, in summary, my plan for navigation was to study the charts for as many hours as my busy schedule would allow me prior to the event, and to use the Navionics software to track our position and heading for the week. The compass was there as a backup; as an absolute last resort, we could simply follow the ICW for the entire week, since the excursions out of the ICW and across the numerous bays were not required. I had decided that an entire week inside the ICW would be quite boring, so I did not want to have to fall back on this plan, but it was an option that existed if I needed it

Liquids

Based on the high temperatures and direct sun exposure, we estimated one gallon of drinking water per person per day. This recommendation came from several Texas 200 veterans and was consistent from several of them, so we planned to

follow it. We also wanted to bring additional fresh water to allow ourselves for occasional rinsing and limited "bathing" along the way. Although we had plans to stop at the marina on day three, we planned to bring nearly all of our required water with us from the outset, just in case we found ourselves taken off course or if for some reason the marina was closed or we could not stop for some reason.

We were originally going to bring a mix of water and Gatorade, but later decided to bring all water and to purchase Gatorade powder mix, so that we would have maximum flexibility for the use of our drinking and bathing water along the way. While not the most environmentally friendly way to do it, we decided to pack 17-ounce plastic bottles of water. We did the math on the total number of gallons we needed and then bought ten cases (twelve bottles each) of 17-ounce bottles of water. For the bathing-related fresh water, we bought three, one gallon bottles. In addition, we brought a few sodas as a luxury.

Then there was the issue of our morning coffee. We had decided to simplify our days and limit the gear on the boat by not bringing a propane stove and related cookware. This meant that our original plan of making a pot of coffee each morning was not going to be. Instead, we decided that we could live with one can of Starbucks coffee per person per day. Although I'm a big fan of my morning cup (or two) of hot coffee, I figured I would survive a week without it.

Due to the experiences and recommendations of many Texas 200 veterans, we decided not to bring any beer or other alcohol with us. On any given year, we were told that as many as 25% of Texas 200 participants do not finish the event due to factors that include sunburn, heatstroke and dehydration. The recommendation from the veterans was to bring very little, if any, alcohol – so we did not.

<u>Food</u>

I had originally decided to use a single-burner propane stove to heat water for coffee and cook basic one-pot meals in the evenings (canned stews, pastas, soups, etc.). However, as we stood in my garage a few days prior to our departure, going through all of the gear that would have to be accommodated on board our small boat, we decided that we'd leave the stove, propane tanks, and cookware behind. The decision was based in part on the need to reduce the amount of equipment on the boat, but also on the fact that we'd likely have very little time each evening to cook meals – not to mention limited energy and interest, given the long days of sailing in the hot sun each day. So, our plans for food were made based on our having no ability to cook, and a medium-sized cooler which would allow us to keep some perishables for the week. Here is what we brought:

- Apples – one per person per day
- Bananas (several ripe and several green) – one per person per day
- Mandarin oranges – one large bag, approximately two per person per day
- Peanut butter – one large plastic jar
- Ritz crackers (two boxes, with small stacks of crackers in small sealed packages)
- Beef jerky – one large stick per person per day
- Peanuts, raisins, almonds and M&Ms, to make trail mix - fairly large quantities of each, to make almost a gallon of trail mix
- Yogurt – one per person per day
- Clif Bars – two per person per day

While not the most interesting of menus, all three of us felt that it would be more than sufficient in both nutritional terms (carbs and protein) as well as variety and taste. Although we packed food for an entire week, we knew that there was a high likelihood that we would be stopping at the marina and adjacent restaurant around mid-day on day three. Our plan was to restock on some basic food items and

snacks at the marina, if and as needed, and to treat ourselves to a sit-down lunch at the seafood restaurant if time permitted.

Trip to the Coast and Practice Sail

After months of preparation, the time had finally come. I was really going to do the Texas 200. It was Wednesday, June 5th and Ignacio was set to arrive in Austin. Chris was set to arrive on Thursday.

For Ignacio and Chris, this was both an interesting adventure and a mini-reunion. Neither of them had ever done much sailing, and they were intrigued by the idea of trying to live aboard and sail on a small boat for a week. We had all been pretty adventurous guys in college, and it appeared we were up for another adventure twenty years out. Not much had changed.

First thing Friday morning we packed up the boat and the truck, emptying my garage of all of the gear that I had been slowly accumulating and setting aside for the prior four months. We had to drive from Austin down to Port Isabel, which is located along the Gulf Coast near South Padre Island, just north of the Mexican border. This was going to take us somewhere between six and seven hours. I had reserved a slip at a marina in Port Isabel, and wanted to get down and get the boat set up and launched on Friday.

I knew from the accounts of prior years' Texas 200s that something was going to go wrong. It was inevitable. I just did not think it would be so soon. We were about an hour or so outside of Austin, just barely underway on our little adventure, when I stopped to get gasoline along the highway. I noticed that the trailer hub on the left side was leaking grease, which was splattered all over the rim and tire. Of all the work that I had done over the prior four months, I only left one thing to the professionals – and they blew it! I reached down and sure enough, the hub was able to be turned freely with my bare hand. I took it off and, luckily, there was still a fair amount of grease inside the hub and the bearings looked well-lubed. The problem was going to be screwing the hub on tight enough so that it would not

continue to leak. I did not have a wrench large enough to fit around the hub, so I tightened it by hand and started scratching my head.

With that, Chris and Ignacio came out of the convenience store and saw me with my hands covered in grease and a worried look on my face. I'm sure they were feeling confident about the week ahead of them! Chris reached into my toolbox and used a hacksaw to cut a small notch in the edge of the hub. He then inserted a flat-head screwdriver into the notch, and used a large crescent wrench to tap the screwdriver and tighten the hub. And it worked. He got it about a quarter of a turn tighter than I had with my bare hands.

I got out my grease gun and added some grease to the hub, and then we wiped the entire rim and trailer down to remove all of the spattered grease. We would need to stop again in about thirty minutes to see if additional grease was leaking out, and so things needed to start out clean and free of grease.

Fortunately for us, that was the only drama on the trip down to the coast. By about 6:00pm we arrived at the marina and we proceeded to find the boat ramp so that we could get her set up and launched. Setting up the mast and a few other things took less than thirty minutes, since we weren't going to be attaching the boom or the sails. We just needed to get her off the trailer and into the slip. By about 7:00pm we had done just that, and then we spent a few minutes messing around at the slip, loading a few things onto the boat, and ensuring she was tied up good for the night.

As we were getting ready to leave, a guy from the adjacent RV park (which looks right over the slips) came outside to see what we were doing. I explained to him that we would be occupying the slip for a few days in advance of a cruise we were doing. I told him a little about the Texas 200, and explained that the three of us were going to live and sail aboard our boat for five days, cruising from Port Isabel

up to Port Lavaca – about 200 miles. At that point, he broke eye contact, looked down at the boat, and said, “On that?” This comment, as you can imagine, caused Chris and Ignacio to lose a little confidence in their captain, who had assured them that this would be a great idea.

Over dinner and a few drinks later that evening, we had more than a few laughs regarding the “On that?” comment. I reassured my landlubber friends that we would be perfectly fine, and that in prior years more than 75% of all those who start the Texas 200 actually finish it. That did not help much. They now accused me of holding back critical information until it was too late. Who, me? ☺

By about midnight we were checked into our motel, where we cranked the air conditioning, trying to suck in all the cold, dry air while we still could.

Saturday was going to be our only day to sleep in, so we did just that. Our plan for the day included a practice sail in the bay, as well as a trip to a supermarket to buy all of the food that we would need for our week aboard. We got moving around 10:00am and walked down the street to a little Mexican place for breakfast. Over breakfast, I gave the guys a little classroom-style instruction on sailing, mainly focused on the points of sail and some basic terminology.

After breakfast, we worked our way over to the marina. It was time for the practical training portion of the class: Sailing 101. Chris had been on small sailboats - Sunfish and the like - a handful of times, so he wasn’t a total newbie. Ignacio, on the other hand, had only been on large powerboats once or twice in his life, and he had never been on a sailboat.

I motored us out of the marina and into the bay, and then had them raise the sails while I stayed at the helm. We sailed out in the bay, staying within about two miles of the entrance to the marina, since the weather was not great and there were a few storm clouds out over the horizon. The wind was in the fifteen to twenty knot

range for the duration of our three-hour practice sail, similar to what was forecast for the following week when we'd be doing it "for real." I did not put together a formal class or even anything too serious. I just went sailing and talked my friends through everything that was happening, and let them take turns working the sheets and taking the helm.

We mostly tacked, but I also showed them what a jibe was (and how the boom got its name!). We started sailing with the full main and jib, and during our time on the bay we practiced how to put a reef in and then shake it out. There was a bit too much wind to fly the genoa, so we did not do a headsail change. I just had them practice dropping and raising the sails a few times, with me at the helm of course - barking orders like a good captain.

I also explained to the guys how we would handle a man-overboard situation. First off, I told them that if they found themselves about to fall overboard, that they should not try to grab on to lines or stays in a desperate attempt to stay on board. I told them that the bay was not full of piranha, and that they could do much more damage to themselves and/or to the boat by trying some desperate attempt at stopping something that was already happening. Instead, I explained to them how to move about the boat safely, crouched low and using the handholds, mast and bow pulpit when going up to the foredeck. I told them that if they were going overboard, to let it happen, and focus more on falling cleanly away from the boat to stay safe and not get hit by the boat or tangled in a line.

If one of them went overboard, I explained that one of us would immediately throw them one of the seat cushions. Even though we would all be wearing lifejackets throughout the trip, I thought it would provide an extra measure of comfort for the man in the water to also have a Type IV PFD to float on. We did not practice a man overboard drill, but I told them about it, and explained that I would stay at the

helm and direct them as to how to handle the sheets, and how the pickup would work.

Now, if I went overboard it was going to be a different story. I told them to quickly throw me a seat cushion, for one of them to take the helm and maintain control of the boat, and for the other to drop both sails as quickly as possible. I also instructed them on how to start and operate the outboard motor. Chris had prior outboard motor experience so I felt confident that this part of the plan would not be a problem. With the sails down and the motor started, they were to retrieve me under power.

In the case of a problem with them retrieving me, there was a backup plan, too. I had decided to keep the handheld VHF with me, stored in my lifejacket pocket and tethered to my jacket as well. If my retrieval went terribly wrong, or they capsized the boat, or drifted off over the horizon for some reason, I would be able to radio for help with the waterproof VHF that I would have with me.

Overall I think the practice sail went well. We worked pretty well as a team after only a few hours together, and I think it made Ignacio feel a lot more at ease with this whole thing. Having never been on a sailboat before, he really had no idea what to expect. He had asked me about seasickness a few times in the days leading up to the launch. I told him that it was extremely uncommon in the bay, but that it would be much more likely out in the Gulf. He felt fine in the bay and I think that put his worries about seasickness on the back burner.

There was already one lesson learned from the practice sail, too. I had purchased a large brimmed hat with a nice chin strap to keep it from blowing off in the wind. I used this hat for the first time on the practice sail, and quickly learned that fifteen knots of wind will blow a floppy-style large brimmed hat right down into your eyes, which is quite annoying and essentially renders the hat useless. My large

brimmed hat was entirely too floppy and I could not use it due to this problem, so I wound up sailing the entire week with a standard baseball cap. This did not provide any protection for my ears or neck, so I resorted to using large quantities of SPF 60 and later SPF 100 sunblock on my face, ears and neck. Chris and Ignacio each had hats with large, firm brims, and these worked very well in the windy conditions we experienced during our trip.

After our practice sail, we left the boat tied up back in the slip and headed back to our motel. It was getting late, and we still had to find a supermarket and get all of our provisions for the week aboard.

After a few quick showers, we headed out and found ourselves wandering the aisles of the supermarket, thinking "What are we going to eat all week?" Actually, we were each fairly well prepared to answer that question. I had made a list a few weeks prior, and it was clear that Ignacio and Chris has also dedicated some mental energy to the question. So, we bought the food and drinks that I previously listed, and then moved on to first aid considerations.

I had previously purchased a small first aid kit for the boat. It contained only the basics, though – Band-Aids, gauze, tape, scissors and some alcohol swabs. We added a few things to this kit at the supermarket, including: iodine, vinegar, Benadryl, and Dramamine. The iodine was Ignacio's idea. He wanted to make sure we were covered in terms of disinfectant. A good idea. The vinegar was a recommendation from the Texas 200 veterans. Apparently it helps ease the pain of jellyfish stings. None of us had any allergies, but we decided to pick up some Benadryl just in case. It would be very dangerous to find one of us with an allergic reaction to something along the way, with a throat swelling and closing up, many miles from the nearest hospital and no way to get there fast. The Dramamine was in there for the Gulf leg of the trip, just in case. Finally, I had also packed a bottle

of Advil with my toiletries, so we were covered for painkillers. So, with those items in hand, we crossed “first aid” off the list and moved on.

After storing our provisions in the motel room, we headed over the bridge from Port Isabel to South Padre Island to find a restaurant. We settled on a Italian place right on the other side of the bridge and had a nice meal and a few drinks to close out the day.

Sunday was a long day for me. There was a captain’s meeting scheduled for 7:00am in the parking lot of the motel where many of the guys were staying. It was necessary for all three of us to attend, since there was a waiver that every member of the crew needed to sign in order to participate in the event. The waiver contained all kinds of “doom and gloom” language, very similar to the one I had signed nearly twenty years prior when I went skydiving with a few friends. We also picked up our Texas 200 burgees at the meeting. But the main purpose of the meeting was for one of the organizers of the event to run us through the ground rules for the week.

For the most part, the message we received was “you’re on your own.” This had been a common theme on the Facebook page for several months leading up to the event. Several of the Texas 200 veterans took turns posting messages reminding the rest of us that we were completely responsible for our own welfare, and that we needed to ensure we could self-rescue in the event of a capsize or other problem along the way. They also emphasized that this was not an organized event, and there should not be any expectation that the Texas 200 is responsible for your rescue should something go wrong.

They also informed us that we should all utilize VHF radios, and that the protocol to talk with one another during the week would be to hail on channel 16, and then switch over to channel 68 to talk. Emergencies should be called in directly to the

Coast Guard on channel 16, and that TowboatUS was also a possible resource in some areas.

Finally, we were given instruction on the plan for the day. We were all to drive our trucks and empty trailers up to Magnolia Beach, about 200 miles north, so that they would be there waiting for us when we arrived by boat. A business owner in Magnolia Beach had agreed to provide us with fenced-in parking on his property, and we should all plan to park our vehicles at that location. We were informed that the bus that we had chartered was leaving from that location to bring us back to the starting point at 2:00pm that same afternoon. So, we had better get on the road by about 8:30 or 9:00am to ensure we did not miss the bus.

After the meeting, the three of us headed back to the motel, packed up nearly all of our things, and headed over to the marina to store things on the boat. We agreed on how and where to store things, and I left Ignacio and Chris to handle the storage while I hit the road to drive north.

The drive north was pretty uneventful. About the only interesting thing was a tire blowout on the vehicle in front of me. At one point on the drive, I found myself in a three-vehicle caravan of Texas 200 participants. I was the third vehicle in the caravan, and at one point I noticed that little black things, not stones, but what turned out to be pieces of a tire, were sort of raining down on my windshield. Before I even realized what the pieces were, the left tire on the trailer in front of me blew out. I slowed and followed the vehicle into the shoulder. After we stopped, the driver said he wanted to get off at the next exit, which was just up ahead, so that he could change the tire in a safer place. I told him I would follow him just in case he needed anything. It turns out the first vehicle in the caravan was driven by his father, and he had already taken the exit and was waiting for us. As soon as we stopped, they got right down to business and had the tire changed in less than five minutes. It was like watching a pit crew. Quite impressive.

I arrived at the parking lot in Magnolia Beach at around 1:30pm, parked my vehicle, and went inside the convenience store to get a few snacks for the bus trip back. The business where we were parking our vehicles is a gas station and convenience store. The owner said he would give us all free parking for the week, as long as we would consider fueling up and buying some of our snacks from him. Fair deal I thought.

At about 1:45 the bus arrived. We all piled on and at 2:00pm sharp we headed back to Port Isabel. I was exhausted from a series of business trips prior to the event (including one to the Middle East just days before), and all of the preparation and travel down to Port Isabel from Austin. As a result, I promptly fell asleep and managed to sleep just about the entire five-hour drive to Port Isabel. We arrived back at the main motel at about 7:00pm. All in all – a pretty boring day for me, but I got some much needed rest on the bus, so that was good.

While I was gone, Ignacio and Chris stowed all of our gear and food on the boat, and ran a few last minute errands for a few odds and ends. I understand they also took a few naps, went swimming and went out for lunch and ice cream. A little more interesting than my day on the road.

We decided to treat ourselves to a nice meal on Sunday night, since it would be our last cooked meal for a week. Without a car we were a bit limited, so we walked to a touristy seafood place on the water and had our fill of fried fish and beer. We had to be up at 5:00am on Monday, so we headed back to the motel by about 10:00pm and called it a night.

The Texas 200 - Day 1

After months of preparation, the big day had finally come. Like a kid on Christmas eve, I barely slept the night before. I was just too excited. The alarm went off at 5:00am - but I was already awake, waiting for it. The three of us got a couple of quick showers, since it would be our last opportunity for five days. We packed up the few remaining items in the room and headed out. Chris took our bags and walked them over to the marina to start loading them on the boat, while Ignacio and I walked three blocks up the main road to a supermarket to buy ice. It was important to buy the ice at the last possible moment, since it was going to be about two and a half days until we reached a place to buy more ice along the way.

Ignacio and I bought thirty pounds of ice and reached the boat by about 6:00am. We wanted to be loaded up and cast off by the time the sun came up, which was about 6:30, so we quickly loaded up the cooler and finalized the stowage of the gear in the cabin and cockpit lockers. He and Chris had done most of the stowage the day before, but there were a few items they weren't sure about and they wanted to consult me rather than guessing at it. Within about fifteen or twenty minutes we had things pretty much set.

For a small boat, the O'Day Mariner has a surprising amount of storage space. We were easily able to store all of the gear, spare parts, tools, food, water, and clothing necessary for three adults to live aboard a nineteen-foot sailboat for five days. Even with all of these items on board, it was surprisingly easy to store it all and still have room to spare.

Here is how we arranged things on the boat:

In the v-berth, I had hung two storage nets along the sides of the hull, one to port and one to starboard. These nets were used to hold much of our food, as well as a few other items, including ziplock bags, extra trash bags, and our charts. This was quite convenient, since we could see all of the individual packages through the netting, and there was no need for additional storage containers that would slide around while under sail. We planned to sail most or all of the week with the jib, and so the genoa and two empty sail bags occupied the forward-most portion of the v-berth. Also up front was a spare life jacket, the tent, our backpacks of clothing, the poly tarp and the hatch boards. There were also a few cases of water up front, at least for the first two days. With the weight of the three of us back in the cockpit, I wanted to put some water weight forward to balance things out a bit.

Under the v-berth are two compartments with plywood tops. The forward-most compartment was filled with bottled water. It held approximately forty 17-ounce bottles, as well as several containers of the Gatorade powder. Aft of that compartment is a larger one used for the head. This contained our bucket-head, and in the space around the bucket we stored head-related items, including baby wipes, the Cleanwaste bags, toilet paper, sanitizing gel, as well as one of our bailers.

On the port side of the head is the small compartment that was once a sink. The compartment is now used as just a storage area, and measures about twelve inches across and four inches deep, and is also covered with a plywood lid. We decided to store our toiletries, sunblock and insect repellent there.

Immediately aft of the v-berth are two quarterberths. Above each quarterberth is a portlight (plexiglass window), and below each portlight is a tray about three feet long, five inches wide and two inches deep. These two trays are very easy to access just by stepping into the cabin and crouching down, and so they contained a number of our readily used items, such as cell phones, solar panels, batteries,

the speaker, all of the Clif bars, as well as the screens for the hatches and the spare battens (both long and skinny and fit well in these trays).

The quarterberths have about three feet of their length located inside what is the cabin, and the rest is contained further aft, under the benches of the cockpit (in what is essentially the “coffin” portion of the quarterberth). On the port quarterberth, we placed our cooler. It was bungeed to the tray under the window so it would not fall over, and was a very convenient location. Aft of the cooler, under a portion of the cockpit, we had a milk crate with miscellaneous food items. We also stored the toolbox and a plastic bucket with the cordless drill, rivet gun, and a few other odds and ends. There were also two or three cases of water back in that quarterberth.

We left the seating portion of the starboard quarterberth empty, since that would allow for one person to enter the cabin and have a place to sit with nearly full sitting headroom. My plan was to leave this space open to provide for some respite from the glaring sun. I was not sure exactly how difficult it would be for us to be in the sun for fourteen hours a day, and I wanted to ensure that we could rotate out of the sun for an hour or two at a time if absolutely needed. With a crew of three, we had the luxury of having one person being totally free of sailing responsibilities pretty much at all times, so this “shade rotation plan” would be easy to enact.

Aft of the open seating section of the starboard quarterberth we stored a few cases of water and the rest was open. There were also two wooden paddles that were stored in this quarterberth, although they were pushed far aft and were really only accessible from the starboard cockpit locker, which accesses the very back section of the quarterberth and the storage space even further aft of that.

Under the cockpit in the middle of the boat, on each side of the keel housing, we stored our fenders, of which we had two.

Out in the cockpit there are three hatches. On the starboard side there is large hatch that accesses the aft-most portion of the quarterberth, beyond where anyone's feet would be since the quarterberth is about eight feet long. The remaining portion of that compartment is direct access to the hull of the boat. In order to provide for some organization, so things would not be lost by sliding down the hull and under the cockpit (which is possible), I purchased and placed in that compartment three plastic buckets. Believe it or not, we did not even fill all of the buckets; one of them was empty after we packed everything on board. The other two contained food, including the peanut butter, crackers and beef jerky.

On the port side there are two hatches. The forward-most hatch is exactly the same as the starboard hatch. The aft portion of that compartment contained our 2.5 gallon plastic gas can, which was bungeed to the inside walls of the compartment to keep it from moving around. Immediately forward of the gas can was a plastic bucket which was our "rope bucket". It contained our docklines and all of the spare rope, as well as the bungees that we used as sail ties for the mainsail. Forward of the bucket we stored the two anchors. Both anchors are eight-pound Danforth type anchors with six feet of chain. One has a hundred feet of 3/8" anchor line and the other has fifty feet of the same line.

Aft of this hatch is a smaller hatch at the very back of the starboard cockpit bench. This hatch is almost the exact size of the plastic buckets we were using, but also provides access under the entire back portion of the cockpit, to the space between the cockpit floor and the sole of the boat. We planned to use the bucket as our trash can, and when the bucket was full we would empty it into the large black plastic trash bags and store the trash bags in the space between the cockpit sole and the hull.

In the cockpit, we each had a seat cushion (Type IV PFD). There was also a small two-cup organizer with suction cups that we planned to utilize for sunblock and other miscellaneous items while we sailed. We would also be mounting a small compass with suction cups, likely on the bulkhead or on the companionway hatch. At the start of the trip we just left it sitting in the tray below the starboard portlight. Other than those items, the cockpit was completely empty and available for us to adjust seating as needed.

With everything properly stowed, we focused on getting underway. But first, we needed to get one last check of the weather to make our final determination on the day's route. The route of this year's Texas 200 was in the bays that parallel the Gulf Coast – "on the inside" - for days two through five. Day one was the only leg of the route where there was an option to sail either in the bay or "outside" in the Gulf of Mexico.

The inside route, in the Laguna Madre, was protected from the open ocean by a thin barrier island. This was therefore the safer route. If there was a problem with the boat, or a sudden squall came up during the day, the inside route would be the better place to be. Although it averages about five miles wide in that section, a disabled boat in the Laguna Madre will eventually just wash up on a beach somewhere. And in the case of a sudden squall, the shallow, protected waters of the Laguna Madre would not build to anything more than a few feet – quite manageable in our boat. If for some reason the boat were to sink or someone was to go overboard, the worse that would realistically occur would be a long swim (or drift) to a beach on one of the shores of the Laguna Madre. The water temperature was in the low 80s and we had decided to wear our lifejackets at all times, so swimming or drifting a few miles to shore would not really present much of a risk. Of course, there are crocodiles in these waters, but I preferred just not to think about that.

The outside route in the Gulf of Mexico, on the other hand, was riskier. To get there, we would have to sail or motor about four miles from the marina to the inlet at the south end of South Padre Island. Once outside, it was approximately thirty-five miles until the next inlet, known as the Mansfield cut. With a likely boat speed of about 5 mph, we would be on the outside for about seven hours. During this time, we would have a higher risk of something happening to ourselves or the boat.

The first potential issue is extremely light air. If we got outside and a few miles up the coast, and for some reason the wind died, we would need much more time to reach the Mansfield cut. We were not equipped (or experienced) to sail at night, and so the risk would be running out of daylight and not being able to locate or enter the Mansfield cut. I figured that this would not represent a huge risk, since we would still likely have our navigation software, and could navigate with the software and get ourselves up the coast and through the inlet in the dark. We also had enough gasoline on board to motor approximately eight hours, which would have been enough to get us there with daylight to spare. Even if both the motor and navigation software died on us, which would be extremely bad luck, we'd still have a shot at finding and entering the inlet since the inlet entrance buoys are lit. And even if we could not do that, all we'd have to do would be give ourselves some sea room and heave-to or sail in circles all night outside the inlet. So, while light air presented a risk, we pretty much had our bases covered on that front.

Then there was equipment failure. If for some reason we could not sail the boat, we could always motor. The risk would be an inability to sail or motor the boat, in which case we'd eventually get blown onto the beach and have major problems when the boat entered the surf and capsized. However, we had two paddles on board, planned to maintain about a mile of distance between us and the beach, and had a VHF radio that we could use to call the Coast Guard or TowBoatUS.

Even if the boat capsized or took on enough water to sink, we'd still be OK, since there is enough flotation in the boat to keep it from sinking below the waterline. In that case, all we'd have to do would be hold on to the boat, call the Coast Guard, and watch our tax dollars spring into action. So, once again, we were pretty much covered.

The biggest risk, therefore, was a sudden squall. If a storm kicked up and started blowing at thirty or forty knots, even for a brief period, we could be in real trouble. We could be blown toward the beach and eventually have to abandon ship prior to the boat entering the breaking waves. The boat would be lost and we would have a risk of getting injured in the process of jumping out of the boat and into the surf in heavy weather. If the wind were to blow us out to sea, that could be a problem too, since we'd encounter heavier seas offshore in the deeper water, and we could be blown many miles offshore in a long-lasting storm. My 19-foot sailboat is far from a blue water cruising boat, so this would not be a desirable situation, to say the least.

So, with those risks in mind, we needed to make a decision: inside or outside? We had already decided that we really wanted to sail on the outside if at all possible. We were going to sail on the inside on days two through five, and we wanted to have the opportunity to sail in the Gulf of Mexico at least one leg of the trip. The Gulf would be a much different experience than the bays, and we badly wanted to get out there and experience it. But it all depended on the weather. Like any ocean, the Gulf of Mexico can look and feel almost like a lake on calm days with light winds and limited swell. However, it can also present an entirely different face if the winds are up and there is some swell being generated from an offshore storm or low pressure system. We had been tracking it for a few days and the reports had been favorable, but we needed to tune in for one last forecast as we were leaving the marina to make the final call.

So, standing in the cockpit, still tied up in our slip at the marina, we tuned the VHF radio to the NOAA forecast. For the most part we heard good news - the forecast was the same as it had been the day before – light winds in the morning, building to fifteen to twenty knots by early afternoon. The winds were projected to be out of the southeast, which was about a best case scenario for us. The coastline in extreme south Texas follows roughly a north-south alignment, so this would mean sailing on a beam reach to broad reach all the way up the coast. Seas were predicted to be in the two to four foot range. Piece of cake, right?

Well, not quite - that was not all. There was one thing about the forecast, and the cloud formations that we were witnessing in the dawn light, that we did not like. It was the possibility of scattered thunderstorms. The forecast indicated that these thunderstorms could contain localized winds of up to 30 knots, which could certainly present a real challenge for us out in the Gulf. In addition to the risk of the wind itself, the seas could easily build to eight or ten feet or more depending on the size, intensity and location of the squall. That would be a major issue. And then there was the lightening; but that would be an issue on both the inside or the outside, so I did not let that consideration come into the “inside or outside” discussion.

Storm clouds over the Gulf as we headed toward the inlet

So, there we stood, fixated on the robotic text-to-voice marine weather forecast coming from the “woman” on the VHF radio. As we listened to it repeat itself a few times, we scanned the mostly cloudy sky around us and wondered about the dark storm cloud that was sitting just outside the inlet, over the Gulf, at exactly that moment. Which way was that storm moving? How many more would we encounter? Would we get lucky?

I decided to cast off our lines and start motoring out of the marina and into the Laguna Madre, since the real decision point lied about a mile outside the breakwater of the marina. I was nervous and wanted to buy some time. As we motored out, we contemplated the weather forecast and the skies, and tried to make a decision. Chris and Ignacio did not really understand all the risks and implications, so I talked them through things as I saw them, and I told them that I wanted a group decision on this one. As captain, they had already indicated that they would accept my decision, but I did not feel good about making the call on my

own. So, I just did my thinking and analyzing out loud, so that they could hear and process it all right along with me.

After about fifteen minutes of motoring, we found ourselves out in the Laguna Madre at the decision point. Turn left and head north up the bay, on the inside, or continue straight and go out into the Gulf through the inlet that lie about three miles ahead? I throttled down and put the motor in neutral, and brought things to a head. It was decision time.

Ignacio did not seem to have a preference. He was going to be OK with whatever decision was made. Chris at first seemed to be right on the fence with Ignacio, but then he indicated that he was willing to take the risk – he wanted to sail on the outside. I was on the fence myself, but once Chris expressed his desire to go outside, I made the call. We came all this way. Days two through five would be on the inside. Today we are headed out. They quickly concurred. And that was that.

At that point, we were a few miles from the inlet and, although the wind was light, it was right on our nose. I did not want to lose an hour tacking our way to the inlet in light air, so I put the motor back in gear and motored toward the inlet. We motored under the causeway that connects Port Isabel to South Padre Island, and from there we could see the inlet. We could also see that we were headed directly toward a black storm cloud that was sitting outside in the Gulf. And then it started raining. There was no increase in the wind – in fact, it pretty much died with the rain – but the rain and storm cloud did not make us feel all that confident about what we were about to do. But we pressed on.

It took us another ten minutes or so to motor out of the inlet and into the Gulf, and during that time the weather took a turn for the better. It stopped raining, and the storm cloud that had been sitting out in the Gulf had actually been blowing toward the coast (with the prevailing winds), and at this point was basically crossing over the barrier island and entering the bay. The sky was still somewhat cloudy, but we were no longer headed directly into a black storm cloud. That made me feel a lot better about things.

Once we were out in the Gulf, I asked Ignacio and Chris to raise the mainsail. The winds were light – about five knots – so we raised the full mainsail with no reefpoints set. With the main up, I beared off to the north. As I fell about thirty degrees off the wind, the mainsail filled and I turned off the motor. This is one of those moments that I just love about sailing. Of course there is the obvious – silencing the drone of the outboard and doing away with the smell of the exhaust. But there is also something about how a boat handles under sail that I just love. When a sailboat is under power, it is very predictable and stable and well, boring I guess. In contrast, the moment the sail fills and the boat takes off under sail power, you can feel the force of the wind on the sail, and the resulting pull on the boat, as it heels over and gets underway. Rather than the flat, even pushing feeling that you get under motor power, the boat seems to bob and rock a bit as it is propelled forward by the sail. It's a small thing maybe, but it is something I quite enjoy.

So, with the boat now underway, we raised the jib. I considered raising the genoa, but I was still a little nervous about a possible squall, so I figured I would go with the jib since the wind was supposed to be filling in later in the morning. We were only doing about three knots in the light wind, but we had started our sail on the outside. I was still nervous about the decision, but it felt good to be out there and under sail.

The winds were coming out of the southeast, over the starboard quarter, which put us on a broad reach headed almost due north, as predicted. We were about three quarters of a mile to a mile off the beach as we started our journey north, and I planned to head just a bit more offshore to stay about a mile off the beach for our thirty-five mile sail up the coast. Overall things looked pretty good. The black storm cloud that was messing with our minds earlier had now passed completely over South Padre Island and was in the bay – now likely worrying the boats that had decided to sail on the inside – which would be nearly all of them I guessed. Winds were light and the sky looked pretty good ahead. I was a little worried that the winds were too light to get us to the Mansfield inlet before sunset, but the forecast indicated they would build to ten to fifteen knots and it was still early yet.

The one thing that was noticeably different from our practice sail on Saturday was the sea. We were on the outside and there was no mistaking it. The seas were probably at three to four feet and were running in the same direction as the wind – that is, coming at us over the starboard quarter and headed toward the beach. We were close enough to the beach and in shallow enough water that the waves definitely had some shape to them. They were good-sized, wide rollers that came at us with a period of about five to six seconds. As they passed under us we would fall into the trough between waves, and then lose sight of land for a second or two, until we rose up the face of the next one. There was nothing dangerous about them – but it was a very noticeable difference from the bay.

I had spent a lot of time sailing in the Atlantic Ocean during the previous fifteen or more years, and Chris had also been out on boats in the ocean on a number of occasions. For us, it was noticeable, but really nothing new. On the other hand, Ignacio had only been on boats a few times in his life, and it had always been on lakes or bays. This was his first time out in the ocean – and it showed. I would

not say that he looked worried about the seas, but you could tell from the look on his face that it was maybe a little more than he expected it to be.

Within the first few minutes on the outside, Ignacio went below for a minute or two to get something to drink. When he came back out into the cockpit, he said it smelled like gasoline down below, and that it made him feel a little nauseous. We had refueled during our motor out to the inlet earlier in the morning, and a little bit of gas got on a rag that was now sitting on top of the gas can. The gas can is stored in a locker under the cockpit, and that locker feeds directly into the cabin since the entire underside of the cockpit is open to the cabin.

Well, that was it for Ignacio. The gasoline smell in the small cabin threw him over the edge and he could not recover. He did not look good, and within about five or ten minutes, he gave us the warning, “I’m gonna be sick!” I directed him to the back of the port side of the cockpit, the lee rail, and he scurried over and let it fly. It was going to be a long day for him.

We made up a bottle of Gatorade for him, so that he could nurse it and keep himself hydrated. He was not feeling well and so he did not say much. He was just trying to keep it together. Chris and I, on the other hand, were feeling good and were ready for some breakfast.

Earlier in the morning we were too preoccupied with getting the boat loaded up and getting underway. Once underway, of course, we were busy talking ourselves through the whole “inside or outside” thing. So we had not eaten anything. But now we were on the outside and under sail, and there really was not going to be much to do for the next seven or eight hours. So we settled into a little breakfast – yogurt, bananas and Clif bars, washed down with a cold can of Starbucks coffee. Not exactly a home-cooked meal, but it was just fine by me.

As planned, we all had our lifejackets on. I also had the VHF radio tucked into a zippered pocket on my lifejacket, and tethered to the jacket as well, just in case. My iPhone was stored inside its waterproof case and also tethered to my lifejacket and stored in a pocket. I had previously created a route in the software for the outside, so I turned on my iPhone to check it out. The route was a simple straight line, set about a mile or so off the beach, and stretched the full length of the thirty-five miles from inlet to inlet. The software was simple to use and worked beautifully. It showed the location of the boat, the direction we were sailing, our current boat speed, and our estimated time of arrival at the destination for the route. With the winds still very light and our boat speed at only three and a half knots, it showed about ten hours to go. Even if the wind never picked up, we'd be fine. Ten hours of sailing would put us at the inlet at about 6:30pm, which was two hours before sunset. No worries.

For the next few hours, the winds remained light, but they were definitely building. By about 10:30am they were in the 10 knot range. That brought the boat speed up over four knots. By 11:30 they filled in quite nicely, I would say in the twelve to fifteen knot range, and the boat hit the five knot mark. Ignacio still felt sick, and he made use of the lee rail about every hour or so for the first few hours. Chris and I kept bugging him to sip at his Gatorade so that he would not risk dehydration.

These first few hours had us sailing parallel to the developed section of South Padre Island, which is a good-sized resort town most famous for the crowds it draws for spring break. A number of low to mid-rise hotels and condos line the beach, starting right at the South Padre Island inlet that we came out of, and extend north along the beach for about six or seven miles. After that, the hotels abruptly end. A few miles after that the road ends too. From our position about a mile off the beach, we could not see the road; however there was a line of telephone poles that presumably ran along the road. A few miles beyond the last

hotel, the telephone poles stopped. I knew from my research on Google Earth that the road dead-ended into a sand dune. The remaining twenty-five miles of the barrier island, all the way up to the Mansfield inlet, were completely empty. No roads, no buildings -- just a thin strip of sand dunes, shallow marshes, beach grass and low scrub brush separating the Gulf of Mexico from the Laguna Madre. In fact, that emptiness continues for about another seventy miles on the north side of the Mansfield cut. That section is a national park known as the North Padre Island National Seashore. We started out the day sailing by scores of hotels and condos, but that would all soon end and we would be headed for no-man's land.

By about noon the wind was blowing at fifteen to eighteen knots, and the seas were up a bit too – in the four to six foot range. Throughout the next few hours, they continued to build, and by the time we approached the inlet we were sailing in six to eight foot seas and twenty knots of wind. The sailing never got more difficult as the wind and seas built throughout the day. The sea surface was slightly choppier, but we kept the full main and jib up all day and she handled perfectly. For the last few hours of the day we managed to sail at about five and half knots, right at the boat's theoretical hull speed.

We saw a few dolphins throughout the day. They would approach the boat, as they had done in the bay during our practice sail, and stay with us for a minute or two before disappearing under the surface and heading off in some other direction. We also saw a big sea turtle out in the Gulf. It surfaced about twenty feet from the boat. I have no idea what kind of turtle it was, but it was beautiful - dark green and maybe three feet across its back. We tried to scramble and get a picture of it, but it only stayed at the surface for a few seconds before slowly diving back down and out of sight.

In addition to enjoying the sights and sounds of a nature, one of the other things that I really enjoyed about the first day of our trip was the change of pace. The

buildup to the event was fairly hectic, particularly the few days leading up to our departure from the marina that morning. Now we found ourselves sailing along at five knots and there was no rush and not all that much to do on the boat. We were just enjoying the sights and sounds, the conversation, and the fact that the pace had slowed down considerably. It was a true luxury to be able to travel this slowly and enjoy the experience to the fullest. I am sure Ignacio would disagree a little, since he was seasick nearly the entire time we spent out in the Gulf, but even he seemed to be enjoying the experience and the natural beauty that surrounded us all day.

There was something else that I was really enjoying, too, and that was that we were actually *traveling* by sailboat. I had been sailing many hundreds of times in my life, and on many different types of boats. I had sailed in numerous rivers and bays, in addition to the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, as well as the Mediterranean Sea. However, those had always been brief sails out and back from the same location. The point of those sails was to go out and essentially do a loop or two in the water and then come back in. It was like leaving your house and going for a walk. We were not actually going anywhere. Today, however, I had my first taste of traveling somewhere in a sailboat. It may sound odd, but there really is a difference and I was truly enjoying it. We never looked back once all week, since the whole point of the cruise was to go forward, exploring the Gulf and the bays, and looking for the next buoy, or the next turn, to eventually get to the destination at the end of each day. And I was enjoying it.

At about 3:00pm we sighted the buoys that marked the entrance to the Mansfield inlet. As we approached the entrance to the inlet, I had to make a decision. Did we want to enter the inlet under sail, motor-sail, or motor alone. The winds were perfect for an entrance under sail; however, since I was not familiar with the inlet, the winds were up around twenty knots, and the seas were holding steady in the

six to eight foot range, I decided to play it safe and drop the sails and enter under motor power.

As a very democratically-oriented captain, I informed Chris and Ignacio of our options for entering the inlet, along with my recommendation. They quickly agreed and so we fired up the motor. I had them first drop the jib, while we were still sailing on about the same tack. Once the jib was down, I turned the boat out to sea to get us pointed into the wind, to depower the main and so that the boom would be over the cockpit for dropping the main. This is when we really noticed the seas. Since we were sailing on a reach to broad reach all day, we weren't beating into the wind or sea. Now, motoring directly into the wind and sea, it was a different story. We could feel the full effects of the twenty knots of wind, and powering up and over six to eight foot seas in our little nineteen-foot boat was a little daunting. The seas were not breaking over the bow, but they were coming darn close. It was the first time that we realized what a rough day it was on the outside. We had a really nice sail all day, with the wind and sea on the quarter. Had we been beating into them all day, we would have had a very different experience.

With the sails down, I turned the boat around and motored toward the inlet. I told Chris and Ignacio that there was a slight risk of encountering heavy rollers, or even worse – breaking waves – as we entered the inlet. I was not familiar with this inlet, and with the heavy seas we really could not see over the rollers that were headed into the inlet to see if they were breaking or not.

I explained to them what the risks were. Basically, as you run with the sea, the rollers can "pick up" the back of the boat as they roll under you. On small waves this can be quite fun. The back of the boat lifts up as the wave passes under you, and you get a little push forward and slide down the face of the wave. However, larger waves present a serious risk. As you get picked up and start to surf down

the face of the wave, the boat starts to pick up more speed. If the boat picks up too much speed, you run the risk of broaching. I explained to them that broaching involved going so fast down the face of the wave that the bow of the boat would get somewhat buried, and that would turn the boat to the left or right, rolling it over in the process. With big rollers this was a real concern. If the waves were breaking, it was even more of a concern, since a breaking wave will "grab" more of the boat and push it along even faster, or just break over the back of the boat and swamp the cockpit and possibly sink or capsize the boat.

As we got closer to the jetties, I could see that the waves were not breaking. That settled me a little bit. The rollers also did not appear to be too big in the inlet. We motored through, at about half throttle, and the rollers passed harmlessly beneath us. We could definitely feel them pick up the back of the boat a bit, giving us a little boost as they passed under us, but we were in no danger of broaching and it was easy to maintain control of the boat with my little 3.5hp outboard.

Once we were about a third of the way through the jetties, the rollers diminished significantly, and we were back on flat, relatively calm water. The jetties at the Mansfield inlet extend about fifteen-hundred feet offshore, to keep the shifting sands of the barrier islands from filling in the inlet. So, we were now sailing in calm water, but to our left and right we could see that we were still out in the Gulf, and the waves were breaking onto the beach on both sides of us. It was a pretty cool sight.

Although the Mariner is not a blue water boat, I was impressed with its stability and the way in handled both sailing and motoring in the conditions that we experienced during the last hour or two of our sail on the outside. Also, the last fifteen minutes or so, when we were operating under motor power alone, allowed me to test something that had been worrying me a little since I bought the motor. A 3.5hp motor is on the small side for a boat like the Mariner. Several fellow Mariner

owners have indicated that this size motor is typically sufficient in calm water in good conditions, but that it might leave the boat underpowered in high winds, large seas and/or a strong current. Even with a loaded weight of about 2,300 pounds, the 3.5hp outboard was plenty powerful to maneuver the boat in (and into) six to eight foot seas, with winds in the fifteen to twenty knot range. It also did fine as we left the Gulf and made our way into and through the inlet. And this was all done at about half throttle. I recognize this was not a thorough test, and it did not involve much of a current in the inlet, but I must say that I was pleased with its performance and feel better now about my decision to purchase that size motor.

I had studied the charts and Google Earth, and knew that we were looking for a small cove on the south side of the inlet, just a few hundred feet inside the jetties. With the wind coming out of the south-southeast, this provided for a protected anchorage that was in the lee of the sand dunes that formed the barrier island. I motored us toward the end of the southern jetty, and found the little cove that I had seen on Google Earth. As I entered the cove, Chris was on the bow, looking for any obstructions or shoal water. I had Ignacio pull up the swing keel, and I untied the shock cord under the tiller that kept the rudder in the down position. This would allow us to motor into about two feet of water.

Chris pointed me to a second cove, just a bit further inside the inlet. He said it looked calmer and more protected, so I motored out of the first cove and down a hundred feet or so to the second. He was right. Somehow the cove that I had studied on Google Earth had split into two, with a sand bar now separating the two. I motored into the second cove, and toward the beach. It was well protected from the wind and the water was flat. I could see that the water was now getting very shallow, and so I killed the engine and tilted it up. We coasted in and just “kissed” the beach with the bow of the boat. We all hopped off into about a foot of

water with a nice hard sand bottom. We had made it. Day one's sail was a success.

The first night's anchorage (photo credit Google Earth)

Chris held the bow of the boat for me, as I went into the port cockpit locker for the anchor. I wanted to anchor the boat, as opposed to trying to beach it. This was for two reasons. First, was the tide. There is only about a foot of tidal swing in this part of the world, so it is not really worth paying too much attention to. However, I had no idea if it was high tide or low tide, and I did not want to risk beaching the boat only to find us high and dry the next morning. The second reason was an account I had read somewhere about sand, stones and shells working their way into the swing keel trunk, between the keel and the trunk, and essentially wedging the keel against the trunk so that it would not lower itself. This had happened to a Texas 200 participant a year or two before, on a smaller O'Day sailboat with a similar centerboard/keel arrangement as the Mariner.

So, with the boat in about two feet of water, I walked the anchor up onto the beach and set it just above the waterline. Once the boat was swinging on the anchor, I could tell that the wind was somewhat side-shore to the beach, and I felt that we would risk swinging up toward the beach and hitting bottom. So, to avoid this, I set the second anchor off the stern of the boat, keeping it from swinging too much toward the beach. I watched how this played out for a few minutes, and decided it was good enough. I wanted to get away from the boat for a minute and stretch my legs on the beach.

I would not say that I was tired of sailing, but we had been on the boat for about nine hours, and it just felt good to reach the anchorage and be able to wander around a bit. We were at a beautiful, remote anchorage, surrounded by nothing but water and sand dunes for miles in all directions. We were in a very protected and calm area, yet just over the sand dunes were the breaking waves of the Gulf of Mexico. We could hear the low roar of the crashing surf from where we were standing.

For the first couple of minutes on the beach, we all noticed that our legs were sort wobbly, and the beach seemed to be swaying a bit. I guess after seven hours out in the Gulf, we needed a little time to adjust to firm land again. It was kind of an odd feeling, but it passed within about ten or fifteen minutes or so.

Ignacio came back to life almost as soon as he hit the beach. He was seasick for just about all of our seven hours in the Gulf, and vomited about once per hour during the entire time. He was not totally incapacitated – he just sat in the cockpit and kept to himself for the most part during the sail. Now he looked like Ignacio again. He was walking around and filming the boat and the surroundings, and he looked happy again. Ignacio works in the TV industry, as a film and TV editor, and he had brought a video camera with him on our trip so that he could make a documentary. We had been filming ourselves ever since he and Chris arrived in

Austin, several days before. Of course, Chris and I had to do most of the filming in the Gulf; Ignacio just wasn't feeling up to it.

At this point, it was a little after 4:00pm, and we were alone in the anchorage. We did not know how many boats had entered this year's event, although there were about thirty boats listed as being registered on the Texas 200 webpage a few days before the event. From reading prior years' accounts, I expected only to see a handful of boats at the anchorage. Very few people choose to sail outside, due to the inherent danger and the fact that many of the boats are in the twelve to sixteen-foot range.

Those who sail on the inside tend to stay at Port Mansfield, which is located on the Laguna Madre. I knew from reading past accounts that every year a few boats would sail the inside route, and then come out to anchorage at the jetties, which is located about five miles from Port Mansfield. However, with the prevailing winds coming out of the southeast, the sail from Port Mansfield to the jetties was usually directly into the wind, which meant tacking the entire five miles up the cut.

About 5:00pm we saw another boat coming in the jetties from the outside. It was a Prindle 18 catamaran, and it was coming in under sail. They pulled up right next to us and beached the boat. I recognized the owner of the boat as Brian, the guy whose trailer tire blew out in front of me on Sunday. He approached us and I could see that something was wrong; he was agitated and upset. He explained how he was sailing alongside his father's boat for most of the day, but that he had pulled ahead of his father in the last few hours, and that they had been in VHF radio contact after that. However, he said that about four miles before reaching the jetties he lost both visual and radio contact with his father. He said he was going to climb to the top of the sand dunes and try to raise his father on the radio. I noticed that he had a small handheld VHF like mine, and I asked him how many

watts his radio was. He said it was either a 3-watt or 5-watt radio, and so I offered to lend him mine, since it was a slightly more powerful, 6-watt radio.

At about the same time we were having this conversation, a Coast Guard jet flew low overhead, coming from the mainland and headed out over the Gulf. The plane appeared to do a quick loop overhead, and then headed back toward the mainland. This appeared to really worry Brian, since he assumed that something had happened to his father, and that maybe his father had gotten off a mayday call to the Coast Guard. About five minutes later the Coast Guard jet came flying low overhead again, and did another loop south of us, in the area where Brian had lost contact with his father.

Brian said that he thought the winds were well over 20 knots on the outside, and that the seas were easily six to eight feet. He was worried that his father might have capsized with moderately high winds and seas. At that point, Brian and his brother-in-law, who was crewing for him, took the radios and headed off toward the Gulf on foot. During the next hour, they came and went, and asked me to watch their boat at one point. We really did not know what was going on, but learned about an hour later that Brian's father's boat had capsized about two miles off the coast, and that the wind and seas had eventually landed them on the beach. Brian's father and his crew member were fine, but the boat had apparently broken up in the surf and much of their gear was lost. They were sailing a 23-foot monohull sailboat known as a Laguna, designed by Jim Michalak.

Sometime around 6:00pm another Texas 200 boat came into the inlet and joined us in the anchorage. This was a MacGregor Venture 22, with a crew of three adults and two children. They appeared to be having a fantastic time.

That was it for the "outside" crew. Four boats had taken the outside route, and unfortunately only three of us made it to the anchorage. However, there were two

boats that had taken the inside route and decided to tack up the cut to join us at the jetties. Both boats were home-built Mayflys. One was a fourteen-footer and was being singlehanded, and the other was a Mayfly 16 with a crew of two. I would guess it took them at least two hours to tack the five miles up the cut. So, by about 7:00pm there were five boats at the anchorage.

The crew of the other four boats had all decided to set up tents and sleep on the beach. We decided to sleep on the boat that night, so rather than setting up our tent, we wandered around a bit and explored the sand dunes adjacent to the jetties, and enjoyed a beautiful sunset later before moving aboard the boat for the night.

Sunset at Camp 1 – me and my little boat

We were a little concerned about the potential for mosquitos at night, so we prepared to do what the O'Day Mariner brochures all claim that three adults can do – sleep inside the cabin. I did not think it was possible, but decided to give it a

shot. I planned to sleep in the v-berth, which I knew would be no problem. Chris and Ignacio each prepared to sleep in a quarterberth. We took the cooler and a few other items out of the quarterberths and placed them in the cockpit. We all got in the cabin at about 10:00pm, and I put the screens into place on the forward hatch and the companionway. Then Chris and Ignacio wiggled their way into the quarterberths, which was quite amusing to watch from the (relative) comfort of the v-berth. We were all pretty tired from the long day, and I think we were all fast asleep within about five minutes of hitting our bunks.

The Texas 200 - Day 2

We woke up at around 6:30am on Tuesday morning, just as the sun was coming up. The cabin was warm, but not too uncomfortable, with the outside temperature probably in the high 70s at that time of day. The uncomfortable part was the hard fiberglass surface we had all slept on. It was painfully obvious (pun intended) that our sleeping pads were not going to provide us with comfortable sleeping on this trip. They were just too thin, and the fiberglass was just too hard. In spite of the hard sleeping surface, however, we each agreed that we had slept pretty well.

Ignacio and Chris had to wiggle their way out of the quarterberths, which I (again) found amusing. The quarterberths on my boat are long enough for an adult to sleep fully stretched out. That's not the problem. The limitation is in their width and height. If you lay down in the quarterberth, your head and chest will be in the open area of the cabin, and it is not too bad, actually. However, from about your waist down to your feet, your body will be in a compartment under the cockpit, up against the side of the hull, and it is relatively limited in size. It's sort of like a coffin. That's the part where some wiggling is necessary. As Ignacio put it, "If you want to turn over, you need to make a plan."

It appeared that everyone else at the anchorage was also awake; tents were being taken down and stowed, and everyone was moving around, trying to shake the cobwebs out and get moving. The two Mayflys were the first to leave, and we were only a few minutes behind them.

I walked out to retrieve the stern anchor, which was set in about three feet of water about twenty-five feet off the stern. I then got back on the boat, raised the jib, and pulled up the bow anchor. The wind was still blowing from the southeast, and had eased overnight to about five nights. I handed the anchor to Ignacio and took the helm to steer us out of the anchorage and into the cut. With only five knots of wind

and just the jib up, we slowly eased into the cut and headed toward the channel in the Laguna Madre, which was about five miles in front of us. We were sailing downwind, very slowly, and it was perfect. The sun was behind us and was still very low in the partly cloudy sky, and the combination of soft light, calm protected water, light wind and a downwind heading made for a very peaceful and beautiful way to start our day. The Mansfield cut is only about five hundred feet wide, and on both sides is surrounded by the sand dunes and marshland of the Padre Island National Seashore. It is teaming with birds and other wildlife, and the nearest road or building is over thirty miles away. All you could hear was the hull slowly slicing through the water, and the birds singing their songs. Not a bad way to spend a Tuesday morning.

We used this lazy downwind sail mainly to wake up and stretch out and relax a bit in the cockpit. It was so peaceful that it seemed inappropriate to do much else. I stayed at the helm, and Chris and Ignacio eventually got themselves moving and brushed their teeth and washed up a bit with fresh water. I would not describe what they did as a shower, but there was some rinsing going on.

We eventually put the mainsail up, and with our downwind heading we poled the jib out to the starboard side, let the main all the way out on the port side, and sailed wing and wing down the remaining several miles of the cut. We spent the last thirty minutes or so in the cut having breakfast, and the menu was the same as Monday's – cans of iced coffee, yogurt, apples, and Clif bars. Very easy to serve, no cooking involved, and quite satisfying actually.

The last mile or two of the "cut" is not so much a cut through land as it is a marked channel through the Laguna Madre. That part of the Laguna Madre is about four miles wide, and to look at it you would think it would be a sailor's paradise – a protected bay, four miles wide, and more than fifty miles long. However, a quick glance at the charts indicates otherwise. Most of the water in that section of the

Laguna Madre is less than two feet deep. The miles of water that we were seeing on the left and right of us was marked as one to two feet deep. That was pretty obvious if you looked closely, too, since there were more than a few birds standing and walking in the water.

As we slowly approached the end of the Mansfield cut, we prepared to make a right turn into the ICW. With water depths of two feet or less in this area, it was the only place to sail. We were still running with the wind, wing and wing, with the main out to port and the jib poled out to starboard. All we had to do to make the turn into the ICW was take the whisker pole down and pull the jib over from the starboard side to the port side. With the winds still at only five to ten knots, this did not require much effort, and did not upset our leisurely morning sail.

We were now sailing on a broad reach, with the wind over the starboard quarter, headed north toward what is known as the land cut. Although the Laguna Madre spans nearly 115 miles, from Port Isabel where we started, all the way north to Corpus Christi, it is not a contiguous body of water. About half way up there is a section where the mainland essentially meets the Gulf of Mexico, with just a soft and wet marshland where the Laguna Madre otherwise is located along the rest of the coast. The ICW continues through this twenty mile section, and is known locally as the “land cut.”

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the breeze filled in as expected. By late morning the wind was up to fifteen to eighteen knots, and we were moving along quite nicely. With a partly cloudy and somewhat hazy sky, the sun never really got too strong, and the temperature only reached the mid-eighties. Much like our first day in the Gulf, the conditions were quite comfortable and we were not suffering from the sun and heat nearly as much as we thought we would be on this trip.

From a navigation standpoint, Tuesday was going to be even easier than Monday. We weren't going to need the Navionics software or a compass all day. Our sail down the Mansfield cut was well marked, and the rest of the day would be in the ICW, which is also very well marked with a series of buoys and fixed markers at regular intervals. Our anchorage for the night was in the lee of a small island in Baffin Bay, and was located only a few hundred feet to the right of the ICW. All we were using for navigation was the charts, and those were only utilized to follow the buoy marker numbers in order to gauge our progress.

As we sailed in the ICW, I decided to install the boom vang, something I had not found the time to do prior to the event. I had never sailed with a vang before, but I was familiar with the concept and knew how to install and operate one. I used a spare fiddle block and a new block that I purchased to rig up my first vang. I used a length of ¼" line to create a 3:1 purchase, and tied one of the blocks to the lower portion of the mast, just above the cabin top, and the other block to the vang fastening point on the bottom of the boom. Before I tensioned it, I took notice of the fairly significant twist in the mainsail as we sailed on a broad reach in about fifteen knots of wind. I tensioned the vang and that brought the boom down considerably and flattened the sail out very nicely - exactly what a vang is supposed to do. With the twist gone, the sail was not dumping so much wind and our boat speed increased noticeably. I did not check my GPS for a before and after comparison of boat speed. Rather, I compared our boat speed with that of the Mayfly 14 that was next to us at that time. For most of the first few hours, we were sailing near the Mayfly 14. He had left the anchorage about ten minutes before us, but we eventually caught up with him and passed him, ever so slowly, over the course of about two or three hours. Once the vang was installed and tensioned, we advanced against his progress in a very noticeable fashion; within about an hour we could barely see him behind us in the ICW. After years of poo-

pooing boom vangs as unnecessary clutter, I was now hooked. I will never sail without one again.

At around noon, we saw that we were approaching the land cut. Like the Mansfield cut, the land cut is narrow, approximately 350 to 400 feet wide. It was an easy sail since we had the wind over the starboard quarter, protected water, and low marshland over which the wind could travel uninterrupted. We saw a number of dolphins in the land cut, and as they had done on several occasions on Saturday and Monday, they fell in behind our boat for a few seconds, and then disappeared under the water and went on their way. We were able to get some good video on Tuesday, including one shot that captured dolphins only a few feet from the side of the boat.

Sailing through the Land Cut (Photo credit: Ignacio Granados)

At some point during our time in the land cut, Chris went below and got something from his bag. He and Ignacio both had shit-eating grins on their faces as they presented me with a large, inflatable killer whale. They had purchased it on Sunday while I was driving the truck up to the finish line, and they said it was going to be our boat's mascot for the week. It was awesome. We were instantly transported back to our immature college days. Chris spent some time inflating it, and then he rigged up a bridle and a line from which to tow it behind the boat. He launched her from the back of the boat and she settled in nicely about twenty feet behind us. We could only leave her out for a few minutes, since she did not exactly skim effortlessly across the top of the water. It was more like a partial nosedive, and she essentially served as a sea anchor, robbing us of about half of our boat speed. So, we took a few pictures and had a few laughs, and then brought her in and set her up on the bow to look out for killer dolphins.

Jasmina being launched!

Chris suggested that we name her, and we were each tasked to come up with some names that we would then vote on. After a brief discussion, she was named Jasmina, after a bartender that Chris met a few days back in Port Isabel. Jasmina (the bartender) was noteworthy for her supreme command of the many cocktails that one can order at a bar. Chris had apparently asked her for a ginger ale, to which she responded, "What's in a ginger ale?" Classic.

With Jasmina (the killer whale) watching out for obstructions from the bow, we settled in to our positions in the cockpit to relive old college stories and tell bad jokes. Somehow, after nearly twenty years, our old college jokes were still funny – at least to us. In fact, we spent anywhere from ten to thirteen hours each day on the boat together, with not much to do other than talk – and there was not a moment of dead air all week. We never ran out of things to talk about. Of course, the conversation was not exactly high-brow philosophical or political analysis. We did not get into the meaning of life or world peace. It was mainly old stories and jokes – but it worked, and we were all quite comfortable with it. For an entire week!

One thing that did get old after a day and a half, though, was sitting. With only a small seat cushion between us and the hard fiberglass cockpit benches, our backsides started to get a bit sore. In order to give our butts a break, we did two things. First, the helmsman moved from a seated to a standing position. I found it quite comfortable and steady, actually, with the tiller swung up at about a forty-five degree angle, one foot down in the cockpit floor and the other foot up on the cockpit bench. The other standing option was in the companionway. On the Mariner, you can stand on the floor of the cabin and the top of the cabin will be about at chest level, which makes it a very comfortable place to rest your arms. In addition to these two options, there was also the possibility of standing on the

cabin roof at the mast, and that's something that I also did when I just could not bear to sit any longer.

The ability to stand at the helm was helpful for giving the backside a rest, but it also wound up being very comfortable in terms of having increased visibility while in tight quarters. I did not anticipate either of these situations before the trip, and essentially we got lucky that the tiller was able to accommodate the required tilt upward (about 45 degrees). Since the rudder downhaul line runs along the bottom of the tiller, it needs to be longer as the tiller tilts upward. Since we were using shock cord, this was no problem at all. However, this unforeseen benefit of the shock cord that I had installed was somewhat outweighed by the fact that the rudder would not kick up when we hit shoals, which happened several times on the trip. As I previously mentioned, my plan was to tension the shock cord around the cleat on the tiller just enough so that it would keep the rudder blade down while sailing, but let it kick up if something struck the rudder blade. Well, that worked well in theory, but not so much in practice. In order to keep the blade down, we basically had to tension the shock cord to a point where it would not allow the blade up, even when we hit a shoal. Each time we would hit, the helmsman would have to scramble to get the shock cord unwound and off the cleat, which took a few seconds (during which the rudder was scraping along the bottom).

In order to rectify this situation, I am going to install a quick-release cleat that I saw on several of the boats during the Texas 200. I saw it used for the boats' leeboards, but I think it would work perfectly for my rudder downhaul line. I'll take the shock cord off and put a piece of 3/16" line under the tiller. The only part I need to figure out is how to allow for the tiller to tilt up so that the helmsman can steer while standing. I'll have to give that one a think, as they say.

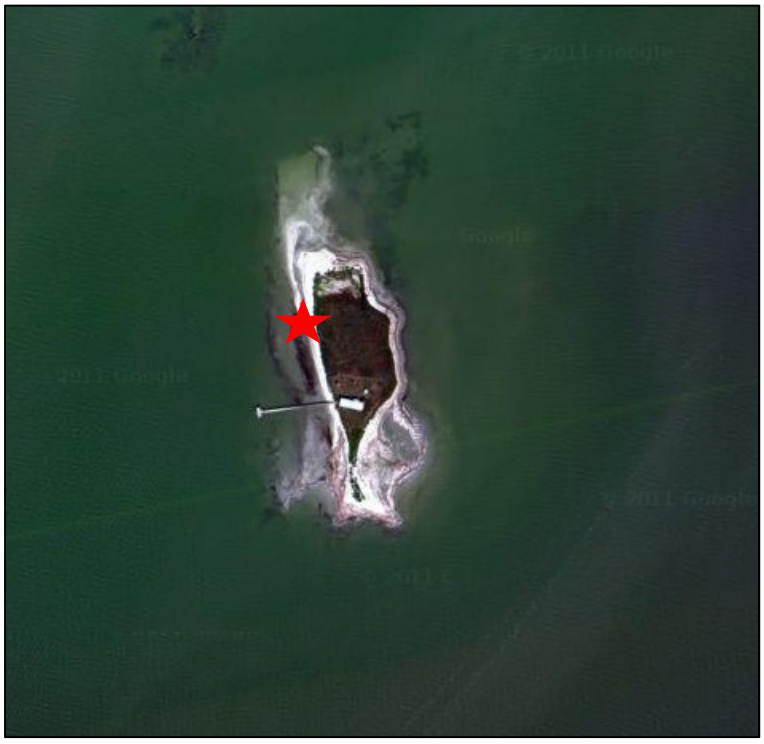
Anyway, back to the trip through the land cut...

With time to kill, I also tested out a small piece of hardware that I had not had time to work with on my shakedown sails. The previous owner had installed a metal tab on the transom, right below the tiller. The tab has a notch the width of the tiller cut out in it, and can either hang down on the inside of the transom, or be flipped up to lock the tiller in position. When I first tried to use it to hold the boat's course, it seemed like it was worthless. I would hold the course for about two seconds before the boat would veer off to the left or right. However, after a few minutes it occurred to me that sail trim should also be considered. Sure enough, that did the trick. To hold a course, I set the tiller in the notch in the tab, which fixes the tiller pointed straight ahead. Then I would see which way the boat wanted to go. If it turned toward the wind I would play with the sail trim to slightly depower the mainsail and ensure the jib was powered up fully, and that would bring the boat off the wind a bit. If the boat started turning downwind, I would slightly depower the jib and increase the power of the mainsail. Essentially, more (relative) mainsail to turn the boat upwind and more jib to turn downwind. I found that I could quickly balance the two sails and keep the boat on whatever course I wanted. I didn't do extensive testing in different conditions, but I found this to be fairly effective throughout the rest of the trip. With the tiller locked in and the sails balanced, I could regularly get the boat to hold its course for thirty seconds or more. That would be more than enough time to take down or put up a headsail, put a reef in the main, or grab something from in the cabin. Of course, this was all unnecessary with a crew of three, but I was glad to know it worked since I planned to singlehand my boat as well.

At some point in the late afternoon, we exited the land cut and re-entered the Laguna Madre. We were still sailing In the ICW, and we still had water on both sides of us that was mostly less than two feet deep. About seven miles north of the land cut, the Laguna Madre meets Baffin Bay on the left (west) side. Baffin

Bay is a large bay, about thirteen miles long and four miles wide. It is slightly deeper than the Laguna Madre, with average depths in the six to seven foot range. About halfway across Baffin Bay, just to the right of green buoy number 221, is a small spoil island where we would be spending the night.

There are a number of spoil islands adjacent to the ICW in the Laguna Madre. Since the Laguna Madre is so shallow, nearly all of the ICW is dredged to a depth of about twelve feet. The sand, mud and shells that are dredged from the Laguna Madre have been deposited in a way that forms small islands, known as spoil islands. The island that was identified for our anchorage and camp for day two was about five or six hundred feet to the east of the ICW, and the water depth between the ICW and the island was in the three foot range, so it would be easy for us to approach the anchorage with the swing keel about a third of the way down. Sometime around 5:00pm we approached buoy 221, pulled the swing keel partially up, launched Jasmina on a twenty-foot line behind the boat to escort us in, and headed toward the anchorage.



Camp 2 at unnamed island in Baffin Bay (photo credit Google Earth)

Since most of the boats had taken the inside route on Monday and anchored in Port Mansfield, they had about five miles fewer to sail than we did on Tuesday. Therefore, the anchorage was full as we approached. I wanted to approach under sail, just on principal, but it was not meant to be. As we approached the anchorage, I headed toward the middle of the collection of boats, since I did not really know if I would wind up to the north or south of them. With the wind coming from the southeast, it meant that my final approach would be straight into the wind, unless I could approach the island at a very low angle. With the swing keel up most of the way, and the wind blowing pretty hard, we were slipping to the left pretty significantly. Given that the final approach would be somewhat of an unknown until the last minute, and I would be doing it with twenty or more boats looking on, I decided to avoid a potentially embarrassing situation and just bite the bullet and enter under motor.

I asked Chris and Ignacio to quickly drop the sails while I started the motor, and we motored in the last two or three hundred feet. The only space left was on the north side, at the very tip of the island, in water that was only about eighteen inches deep all the way out fifty feet from the beach. I had to stop the motor and raise it up before that point, so we drifted in to that area. Chris was on the bow and he jumped over when it started to get really shallow. He promptly sunk in about six inches of mud.

We knew from the prior years' accounts that many of the anchorages have muddy or shell-covered bottoms, so we planned to approach all of the anchorages with shoes on, just to protect our feet when jumping out of the boat.

Ignacio and I got out, also sunk into the mud, and slowly trudged toward the beach, trying not to lose our shoes in the process. I use the term beach very loosely here, since it was really just crushed oyster shells on the island, and mud in the water. Not very pleasant at all. I took the anchor up onto the beach while Chris held the bow to the wind, and after a little scraping and digging with my sneakers, I got through the shells and found some packed mud for the anchor to sink its teeth into. The problem was the depth of the water, though. I had to let out nearly seventy-five feet of anchor rode in order for the boat to float freely and not occasionally bounce off the bottom. After monitoring the boat's swing for a few minutes I decided it was good where it was.

The anchorage at Camp 2 (photo credit: Martin Houston)

With the cramped conditions and hard sleeping surface inside the boat the first night, we quickly agreed that we would set up the tent for night two. Since the long, muddy walk to the boat wasn't all that pleasant, we decided to offload the cooler and much of the rest of our gear too. The plan was to set up shop on the island for the afternoon and evening, and limit the number of trips to and from the boat.

We walked around for a few minutes looking for a good spot to set up camp, and there really wasn't one. The entire island smelled like dead fish, and it only took us few minutes to figure out why – it was covered with dead fish. Go figure. There was a small pond of dark green, stagnant water near our end of the island, maybe twenty feet in diameter, and it smelled awful. That did not help the aroma of the island either. We were tired and just wanted to set the tent up so we could lie down and relax, so we picked a spot on the "beach" and set it up. The island is very small, about six hundred feet long by about two hundred feet wide at its widest point. So there was not a whole lot that we could not see from just standing where we were. We loaded our stuff inside, along with plenty of mud and broken

shells, and climbed in to relax. The smell was overpowering, but we did not have much choice, so we just sucked it up and tried to make the best of it.

I decided to go for a walk to socialize a bit, since we only got a chance to meet the crew of four other boats at the first night's anchorage. The anchorage/camp environment at the Texas 200 is very laid back and interesting. It is a nice mix of people sleeping on their anchored boats, like sailors regularly do, and people setting up tents and making fires like you would see at a campground. It is a laid-back atmosphere, with the sun fairly low in the sky at the end of a long day of sailing. I had the opportunity to meet lots of people, and the wandering and socializing helped take my mind off the god-awful smell of the place. At some point Chris and Ignacio joined me, and we wandered even further south, past the main camping area, and toward a small fishing shack and dock that had been built on the island. It had private property signs posted, but looked to be empty at the time so we wandered down to check it out.

There was not much to see, but the thought of sitting on the floor of our mud and shell-covered tent smelling the sweet aroma of dead fish was not all that enticing, so we decided to cross over the dock and walk down toward the other end of the island. I noticed that there were a number of seagulls hanging out on that side of the island, but I just figured it was because our end of the island had been invaded by twenty-five boats full of sailors. As we got closer to the seagulls, who were all sitting on the ground, they all started squawking and flying in circles low to the ground. They made one hell of a ruckus, and did not seem to be all that happy with our invasion of their part of the island – and then we saw why. This section of the island was covered with seagull eggs. The eggs were sitting in little depressions in the crushed shell beach that resembled the shape of a nest. Each "nest" had one or two eggs in it, and there were dozens of them. We checked a

few out up close, and then decided to head back to our side of the island, since the mother seagulls did not appear to be warming up to our presence.

As we crossed back over the dock and into “our” territory, the seagulls made their way back to their nests and stopped making a fuss. The sun had set and it was getting dark, so we passed through the camp and headed into our tent, in spite of our strong desire not to. It was pitch dark within minutes, and we passed out cold. It was probably only 9:30 at night.

Camp 2 at dusk (photo credit: Ignacio Granados)

The Texas 200 - Day 3

Morning could not come soon enough. If it were not for the fact that we were exhausted after two long days of sailing, we probably would not have slept at all. I set the alarm on my iPhone for 6:00am, since we wanted to be packed up and sailing by 6:30am on Day 3. This was going to be our longest day, since we had about fifty miles to sail to get to the next anchorage, and we planned to stop at a marina at about the half-way point to get more ice and treat ourselves to a nice lunch. So, with visions of a meal in a restaurant, and the foul smell of dead fish motivating us to get up and out of there, we got up right at 6:00am and quickly packed things into the boat so we could get underway.

Though I am not really a sailing purist, I do like the idea of getting into and out of anchorages without using the motor. I was disappointed that I did not reach Camp 2 under sail, so I was determined to *leave* Camp 2 without firing up the iron genny. This of course proved to be extremely easy, since the winds were blowing at about ten knots, directly away from the island, across open water and toward the ICW. I raised the jib while still at anchor, pulled the anchor in, and the rest was almost automatic. "Motors are for pussies" was my way of expressing my desire to enter and leave anchorages under sail alone, and I got a chance to remind Chris and Ignacio of my feelings toward motors twice each day. Even though it was easy to achieve on this particular morning, I was still happy that no fossils fuels required burning to get out of Camp 2.

With the wind out of the southeast, and our course bending a bit toward the northeast on Day 3, we enjoyed a beautiful sail up the ICW on a beam reach. It was about twenty-five miles from the anchorage to the Marker 37 Marina, all of it along the ICW. This portion of the sail was in the Upper Laguna Madre, and was very similar to what we experienced on Day 2. There were a number of small spoil islands along the way, and the bay was fairly wide – about two to three miles most

of the way. The wind was in the ten to fifteen knot range all morning, and the sky was somewhat hazy and cloudy, which kept the heatstroke and sunburn at bay. We saw a number of dolphins throughout our five hour sail up to the marina – so many that we almost got tired of seeing them. Well, not quite - but almost. We also saw a number of pelicans throughout the day, as we had on prior days. Pelicans are a big, beautiful, majestic bird and they seem to like flying in formation, low to the water. It is quite an experience to have a small flock of pelicans fly close to the boat, just a few feet off the surface of the water.

Sometime around noon we arrived at our mid-day pit stop. I did not know exactly how the marina or adjacent restaurant were configured or how we would need to approach and enter from the ICW. All I knew was that they were immediately adjacent to the ICW at buoy 37. Since entering a marina under sail ranges from difficult to flat out impossible, I had to accept that the canvas would come down and we would need to fire up the outboard for the approach. As we approached the marina under power, we could see that there were several Texas 200 sailboats already tied up at the dock in front of Snoopy's – which is a seafood restaurant next to the marina. It appeared that the Marker 37 Marina was set back a bit from Snoopy's, and we did not notice any sailboats there – so we decided to tie up to Snoopy's dock like the other sailboats. The approach was quite easy and the empty space was on the end of the dock, behind three or four sailboats that were already tied up, so getting ourselves up to the dock and tied up only took a minute.

Once we were tied up, the clock was ticking. We wanted to get a meal and replace our supply of ice, as well as charge the video camera and iPhone batteries, all within about one hour (although we decided that we could go up to as much as ninety minutes maximum). It was about noon when we arrived, and we knew we still had another five-plus hours to sail. With sunset at 8:30pm, that left three spare hours. If we used a maximum of ninety minutes for our pit stop, we'd

still have a ninety minute “cushion” for the rest of the day to ensure we did not find ourselves sailing at night.

Since we were tied up outside of Snoopy’s restaurant, we decided to go in and have lunch as our first order of business. We ordered our meals at the counter and found our way to a table near some other Texas 200 participants. Ignacio and I plugged in the video camera battery and iPhones to get them juiced up again, and we sat down to relax and enjoy what would be our only “real” meal of the week.

The charge on the batteries was an important part of the pit stop, and one that was not originally anticipated as being necessary. The battery for the video camera was one of two that Ignacio had on board the boat. He bought a third battery before the trip, so that he would have three fully-charged batteries for the week. However, he left the newly purchased battery at my house in Austin, so he only had two for the week, which was not going to be enough. There was no way to charge those batteries from the solar panels, so our only option was to find a power outlet on this stop – which we did. The iPhone batteries were another story altogether. Ignacio’s iPhone was the least important of the two. It was being used to augment our video-taking ability, and was also the source of our tunes for the trip. My iPhone was a bit more important, since it had our navigation software running on it.

Ignacio’s solar charger proved to be useless on the trip. We charged it at the motel before the trip started, and it charged up the iPhones once or twice on the first day without any problem. However, during the remainder of the trip it never achieved a full charge again, despite days of sitting in the sun. My solar panel also proved to be an issue, particularly with my iPhone (which is an iPhone 5). The iPhone 5 reportedly has an issue with compatibility with chargers from certain manufacturers. I knew this before I went, and tests of my solar panel were

positive. However, what I did not know until we were alone on the water, was that my solar panel would only charge the iPhone 5 if it were in full sunlight and putting out its maximum power. Most of our days were hazy and somewhat cloudy, and that limited the output of the panel. For some reason, the iPhone 5 would not accept the solar charger at that partial power level. It was full sun or nothing for the iPhone 5.

After lunch we walked over to the marina to get more ice and a few other odds and ends. Our ice had lasted almost exactly as we predicted. We had ice on Day One, icy cold water on Day Two, and water that was somewhere between cool and cold for the first part of Day Three. So, we bought thirty pounds of ice, another dozen or so bottles of water, some root beer, beef jerky… and beer! Although the Texas 200 veterans had talked me out of packing any beer at the start of the trip, we felt that we were handling the heat and dehydration risk very nicely, and decided to grab a six-pack of Corona for the rest of the trip. Chris does not drink, so this would leave Ignacio and me with three beers each.

Back at the boat, we loaded up the cooler with our drinks and ice, and then decided on one last treat before we headed out – a shower. We had noticed a hose at the far end of Snoopy's dock, so we grabbed our bottle of biodegradable camp soap and headed over to sneak a couple quick showers on the dock. Just like we had done in the parking lot of a Little Caeser's exactly twenty years before, Chris and I took turns pointing the hose at each other while the other lathered up with soap and took a quick shower. Ignacio stood by filming us for the documentary he was going to make. And then we had one additional person get involved – the owner of Snoopy's. He was a grumpy looking guy in his early 60s, and he came over and grumbled something about putting the hose back when we were finished. I asked him if he had his boat there at the marina, and that's when he let me know that, no, he was not a customer of the marina, he was the owner of

Snoopy's. I did not want him to cut off our showers, so I tried to soften him up a bit by appealing to his capitalist side. I figured that since he was the owner, he might be interested in knowing that we were part of the Texas 200 and that the three of us and about twenty other people had just eaten lunch in his restaurant, and that it was a very nice stop that was planned each year of this event. He softened up pretty good with that information laid out for his consideration. I am not sure if he found my description of the Texas 200 interesting or if it was the dollar signs from the twenty seafood lunches he just sold us, but his level of grumpiness went way down and he wandered off.

After the three of us completed our dock showers in front of the patrons of Snoopy's, we piled back in the boat to continue our day's journey. I do not recall exactly how long our total pit stop was, but it was somewhere in the neighborhood of ninety minutes or so.

Like we did earlier that morning at the camp 2 anchorage, we left Snoopy's under sail alone. No motor for this exit. Just like the camp 2 exit, this one was also pretty easy. The wind was blowing at about fifteen knots, and it was blowing away from the Snoopy's dock and toward the ICW. We untied the lines and as we drifted away from the dock we raised the jib. The wind caught the jib and pulled the bow of the boat out toward the ICW and we were off. Once in the ICW we raised the main and were on our way.

Within a few minutes we crossed under the Corpus Christi Causeway and entered Corpus Christi Bay. For the first time since Day One, we would be sailing in deep enough water to plot our own course and not be restricted to the ICW. Corpus Christi bay is about ten miles across and is deep by Texas Gulf Coast standards – with about ten to twelve feet of water throughout. We had two main options for crossing the bay. The easiest and safest would be to stay in the ICW, which intersects with our destination on the other side of the bay – the Port Aransas Ship

Channel. There was no way that was going to happen. It's a longer route by several miles, and, more importantly, just plain boring. The other way would be to cross the bay to the east of the ICW, cross through a pass between two islands known as Stingray Hole, and pick up the Aransas Ship Channel. This was our preferred route for several reasons. First, it is not the ICW. That gains it some points right out of the box. Second, it is the shortest route, which is important on a day that already had us sailing fifty miles. Third, you have to cross through a place known as Stingray Hole. How could we pass that up?

Stingray Hole is a pass between two islands that is about a third of a mile wide and connects Corpus Christi Bay with the Port Aransas Ship Channel. Seems easy enough, right? Not so fast. While Stingray Hole does have a total width of about a third of a mile, most of that is less than three feet deep. There's an S-shaped channel that runs through it and averages about six or seven feet deep, but it is only about 175 feet wide at its narrowest, and, more importantly, it is not marked. And to add insult to injury, due to the shallow water and its location immediately adjacent to the ship channel, it is prone to breaking waves when a ship passes by in the channel.

Texas 200 veterans talk a lot about Stingray Hole. Some insist that it is no big deal and go through it without thinking too much about it. Others claim that it is extremely challenging and represents a real risk – particularly if you find yourself part-way through and a large tanker passes by in the channel – thereby forcing you to sail through breaking waves as you negotiate your way through. One Texas 200 participant capsized his boat in Stingray Hole in 2008 (he was able to recover the boat and finish the Texas 200, though). When the topic of this well-known pass was brought up a month or two before this year's event on the Texas 200 Facebook page, I believe it was this unlucky guy who posted, "Just thinking

about Stingray Hole makes my scar tissue itch." With all that "mystique" surrounding it, we just had to give it a try.

One of the keys to success was going to be entering the area with limited sail up. This piece of advice came from a Texas 200 veteran who recommended not entering under too much power. Another key was to try to avoid passing through when a tanker is passing by. That one would be tough, but you could at least try. Finally - and this was a big one – you would need to be following a route plotted on a GPS in order to ensure you find the channel.

My plan was based on the use of the Navionics software to get us through. Several weeks before the event, I had programmed a route that would take us across Corpus Christi Bay and through the narrow channel in Stingray Hole. I planned to enter the area with a double reef in the mainsail, to keep from being potentially overpowered in a tough situation. I also planned to sail through on the upwind side of the narrow channel, so that my risk of grounding would be greater in a place where the wind would help me back into deeper water.

The sail across Corpus Christi Bay was fantastic. It was mid-afternoon and the wind was building. For most of the sail, it was in the fifteen to twenty knot range, and was a beam reach. The sky was a bit hazy with a fair amount of clouds, so the sun wasn't beating us up too badly either. We were free of the ICW and sailing across a large body of water. About two hours after entering the bay we found ourselves on the final approach to Stingray Hole. We put our shoes on, just in case there would be a need to jump overboard to push us off a shoal. We also put a double reef in the main. We had been sailing with the working jib most of the day, and we left it as is. My plan was to have Chris at the helm, Ignacio ready to pull the swing keel up, and me navigating us through with the Navionics software.

Given all the hype about this place, things on the boat were a bit tense as we entered Stingray Hole. The tension eased slightly when it became clear that there were no tankers close enough to cause breaking waves. We just worked our way through, with me monitoring the software and giving instructions to Chris at the helm. I do not think Ignacio moved a muscle. He had the swing keel uphaul line in his hand, and was poised to raise it quickly on my command. Left, left, straighten it out, hold there, hold, hold, now right, a bit more, more right, hold, hold – and that was it. Extremely anticlimactic at the end. We were through and into the Port Aransas Ship Channel without any trouble at all. All that drama and buildup for nothing.

Oddly enough, this marked the beginning – not the end – of the toughest part of the day. As soon as we entered the ship channel, we needed to turn right (to the east) to follow the channel up to Port Aransas and then around to our destination at Quarantine Shore. This put us on a close reach and immediately trying to cling to the upwind side of the channel. The channel is fairly wide – about 500 to 600 feet – but it is surrounded on both sides by extremely shallow water, par for the course along the Texas coast. We quickly found ourselves pinched up and beating to windward to try to hold a line on the windward side of the channel. There was a large tanker coming at us right down the center of the channel, about a mile in front of us.

Unfortunately, when we first entered the channel, we were distracted by the fact that we had just come through Stingray Hole without issue, and we crossed the channel a bit before turning to windward to hold a line on the upper side of the channel. This put us almost on a collision course with the oncoming tanker, without much of a chance of improving our line before it would pass us. We tried desperately to climb upwind in the channel, but we were pinched up too much, and kept stalling slightly. After about thirty seconds to a minute of trying to hold the

line, we had to make a call. If we held our position, we would likely pass to the right (upwind) of the tanker, but it was going to be close. Any error at the last minute would put us on a collision course and force him to bear off to avoid hitting us. Our other option was to sail across the channel to the downwind side, passing in front of the tanker, and passing him on the other side, where we would easily clear him. The disadvantage of that option was that we would totally lose our line and be stuck on the downwind side of the channel, clawing to stay in the channel the rest of the way. Given the risk of collision, I told Chris (who was still at the helm) to turn in front of the tanker to clear him on the other side. We passed safely in front of the tanker and easily cleared him on the other side of the channel.

Odisea passing in front of the tanker (Photo credit: Awdree Green)

However, it was immediately apparent that we would not be able to hold a line that would keep us in the channel, so we had to tack to get to the other side of the channel. The reason we found this so unappealing has to do with one of the basic rules of sailing: whenever two or more sailboats find themselves close to one another, it becomes a race. There were three boats that came through Stingray Hole and into the ship channel together: In front was Kevin Green and his

daughter, Awdree, on their MacGregor 26. We were right behind them. Behind us were the guys on the MacGregor Venture 22. Kevin was able to point slightly higher than us and passed the tanker on the upwind side of the channel. When we crossed the channel and were forced to tack, we passed behind the Venture 22, who was previously behind us. Now we were third out of three boats. All of us were trying to do the same thing at this point – sail the four remaining miles of the ship channel on the upwind side, without losing the line and having to tack. The other two boats were pointing slightly better than us, and it appeared they would be able to hold the line and sail the rest of the channel without tacking. We, on the other hand, were struggling a bit. The entire way through the channel we found ourselves slipping ever so slightly across the channel, from the high side to the low side. In order to limit the slippage, we found ourselves pinched up very tight, which stalled the boat slightly and cost us boat speed. As a result, we lost a little bit of ground to both of the other boats through the remaining four miles. We never had to tack, but the last half mile or so was close. We were sailing at the very extreme downwind side of the channel, only fifty feet from the edge. We knew that if we could just claw our way to the bend in the channel we would make it without another tack, and have a shot at gaining on the other two boats on the final leg.

The ship channel bends about thirty or forty degrees to the west, which put us on a beam reach for about two miles. It then would bend another twenty or more degrees, putting us on a broad reach for another two miles. Finally, there would be one more bend and we'd be on a dead downwind run for about the last mile to the Camp 3 anchorage at Quarantine Shore.

Odisea – headed toward Aransas Bay (Photo credit: Awdree Green)

It was clear that our upwind performance through the first four or five miles of the ship channel was slightly inferior to that of the other two boats. We lost a little ground during that stretch, and found ourselves firmly in last place amongst the three boats. We held out hope for the last five miles though.

As soon as we made the turn, things started to look up. We trimmed the sails for the beam reach and took advantage of the fact that we now held the inside line – sort of like entering a turn in the inside lane during a car race. The advantage that the other two boats had by holding the upwind side of the channel now put them on the outside as we all entered the turn. We were still behind them, but in a slightly improved position given the turn we had just made.

We slowly gained on the two boats during the two miles of the beam reach and additional two miles on the broad reach. In fact, by the end of those four miles all

three boats were running about neck and neck. And then we opened it up. As soon as we started our turn into the downwind leg, I went forward and poled the jib out to the starboard side. I left the main on the port side and so now we were running wing and wing for the last mile. This made a huge difference, and almost immediately we started pulling ahead. Within about five minutes we had a clear lead over both boats and it was visibly growing. We raised the swing keel to reduce drag, since it was not needed to sail dead downwind, and this helped us even further into the lead. After nearly two hours of being behind in our informal race, we were thrilled to have pulled ahead, and it was now clear that we would arrive first at the anchorage.

In the final half mile we took Jasmina off of her perch on the bow and set her out behind the boat again, for what became our signature approach to the anchorages. We dropped the mainsail with about a quarter mile to go, and made the final approach under jib alone. I took the helm at this point and Chris assumed his position on the bow. As we approached the beach at Quarantine Shore, Chris jumped off – this time onto a hard shell bottom – and slowed the boat to a stop in about a foot of water. It was about 6:30 or 7:00pm. Another successful day on the water.

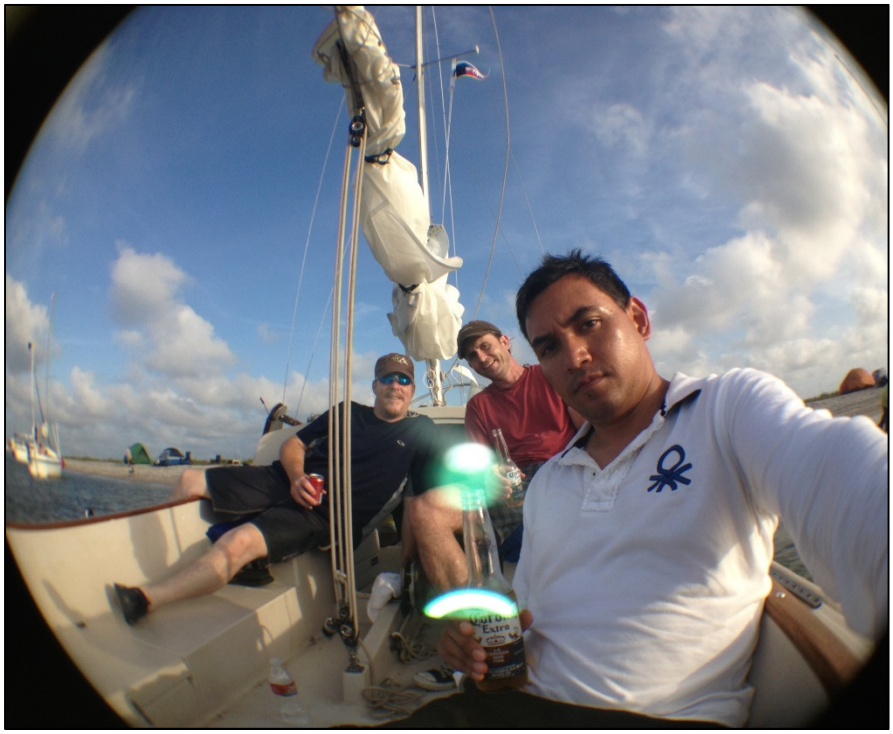
Camp 3 – Quarantine Shore (photo credit Google Earth)

Right away we were pleased with Quarantine Shore. The beach was not exactly the fine white powder that you'd find in say, Cancun, but it was a whole lot better than what we just went through at Camp Two. To begin with, walking in the water was pleasant since it was a bed of hard oyster shells. We always wore shoes in the water due to the unknown conditions, and with shoes on this was just fine. The beach itself was not actually sand; rather, it was ground up seashells. But, it did not smell like dead fish, so that was a step in the right direction. Quarantine Shore is a crushed-shell beach that is nearly a mile long. Behind the beach is all marshland and low scrub brush, so you cannot really wander that far off the beach, but overall we found it to be a very pleasant place to spend the evening.

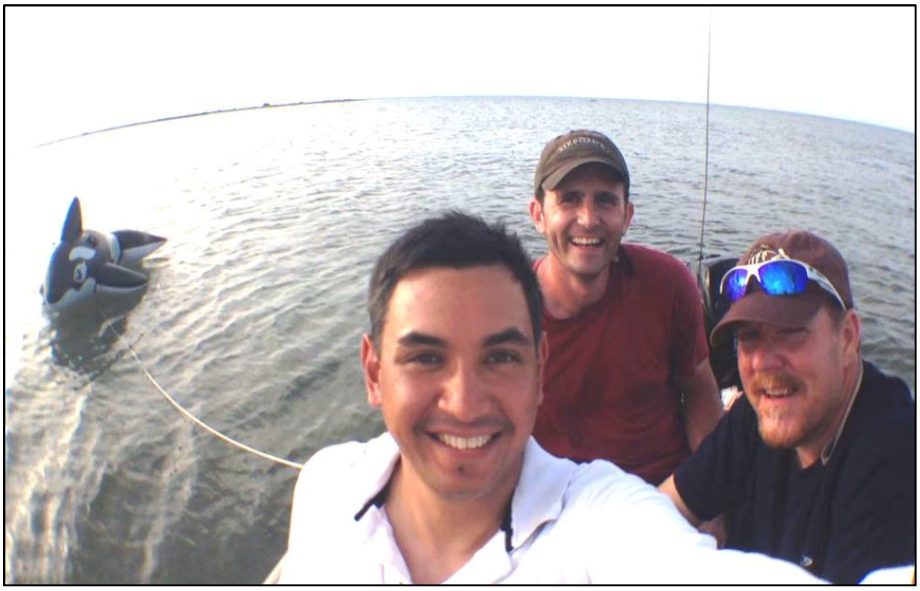
Walking the beach at Quarantine Shore

The first thing we had to do was anchor the boat off the beach, and that proved to be a little challenging. I really did not want to beach the boat, again due to the risk of broken shells wedging up inside the swing keel housing and causing it to jam. The problem here was that the wind was a bit sideshore, and that the bottom and the beach were entirely made up of shells – not great holding ground for my anchor. I decided to do what a few others had done, which was to walk the anchor up the beach and over into the scrub brush, essentially tangling the flukes of the anchor in a small bush. That held very well, and I had 100 feet of anchor line, so it was easy to keep the boat about thirty feet off the beach in about eighteen inches of water. However, the sideshore winds were causing it to blow somewhat down the beach, not out away from the beach. After trying a few things, we finally found something that worked: I walked the second anchor out about thirty feet from the boat, up the coast and about thirty feet from the beach. Feeling around with my feet, I was able to find a patch of sand in between all of the shells, and I set the anchor by hand in about two feet of water. I ran that line back to the bow of the boat and tied it off on the same cleat as the other anchor line. The two of them

were placed perfectly. The boat stayed right where we wanted it and did not swing at all. It took a few minutes, but we were now set for the evening.



Enjoying a cold beer at Quarantine Shore



The Crew, with Jasmina, at Quarantine Shore

After our less-than-enjoyable night in the tent the night before, we decided to try to sleep on or in the boat at Quarantine Shore, so that meant we really did not have anything to set up – we just had to kick back, relax, walk the beach and socialize a bit. By about 7:30pm we counted twenty-one boats at the anchorage. Just like Camp Two, some were beached and some were anchored out. I decided to do a "camp walk", so I headed up the beach in one direction to the first boat, and spent about an hour just working my way back down the beach, boat by boat, talking with the guys and sharing stories. Everyone seemed to be doing really well. The somewhat lighter than expected winds were translating into fewer incidents of broken equipment and other problems. It also meant that the overall experience was just a bit less grueling than it has been in prior years. Sailing in fifteen to twenty knots of wind is certainly much more pleasant than dealing with twenty-five or more knots. Especially when it's ten hours a day for five days.

I enjoyed getting the "nickel tour" of many of the boats on my walk, too. Some of the boats on the Texas 200 are made of wood built by their owners. In fact, I would estimate that it was somewhere between a third and half of the boats at this year's event that fell into this category. The rest were fiberglass production sailboats like mine. Of the production boats, most were sloop-rigged monohulls, and there was the Prindle 18 catamaran taking up the lone spot in the multi-hull category. I must admit, I do not know anything about building wood boats, so I was a little lost during many of the conversations. These guys are real craftsmen and they know their boats. They exchanged stories about different designers and what plans they had used for their boats, and which ones they were currently working on. With no exceptions that I could see, these boats were all designed for the shallow waters of coastal Texas. They are flat-bottomed boats that float in only a few inches of water. Their leeboards and rudders are designed to kick up when they hit something, and the boats do not weigh too much – all good features

to have when you are gunkholing on the coast and come across an oyster reef or some other extremely thin water. These boats were mainly in the fourteen to sixteen-foot range, but there were a few that were even bigger. The boat that capsized in the Gulf of Mexico on the first day was a twenty-three-foot home-built boat. There was also a twenty-five or thirty-foot folding schooner. Yes, I said folding. It was essentially built as two separate boats, and then hinged together in the middle so it can be folded up for easy trailering. Of course, the mother of all homebuilt boats was El Gato Gordo, a thirty-two foot catamaran built by a Texas 200 veteran, Gordo Barcomb. After completing five prior Texas 200s, he decided not to do the entire event this year. However, he did join the group on the fourth and fifth days, and I got a chance to tour his boat. What an achievement. And built with his own two hands in his backyard.

Here's a peek at a few of home-built boats that completed this year's event.


12
PILGRIM

The other half of the boats were the typical small fiberglass production sailboats like mine. I know the craftsman crowd find these boats to be far less interesting, and they are right – there is not nearly as much character with production boats. However, I was impressed with the different boats that were on this year's trip. They ranged in size from a sixteen-foot O'Day Daysailor up to a twenty-six foot MacGregor 26. Here's a peek at some of the production boats from the event: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After spending the early evening walking the beach and talking to many of the participants, we retreated back to the boat to settle in for the night. And a beautiful night it was. The winds had moderated a bit, but there was still a nice breeze blowing through the anchorage to cool things down a bit. There was not a cloud in the sky, and being so far from the ambient light of a major metropolitan area, the stars were just amazing. We spent about an hour or two that night just laid out across the cockpit, enjoying the rocking of the boat, the breeze, the stars, and a few cold beers.

There were no bugs so we decided to try a different way of sleeping on the boat. I set up shop in the v-berth, with the forward hatch and companionway open to keep the breeze flowing through. Chris and Ignacio each took a bench in the cockpit. We rigged the white poly tarp over the boom and tied it off along the gunwales of the boat in order to keep dew from forming on Chris and Ignacio. I slept well in the v-berth, and in spite of the relatively narrow cockpit benches, Chris and Ignacio had a much better night in the cockpit than they did the night before at Camp 2.

The Texas 200 - Day 4

Once again, we needed to set an alarm to wake up at the crack of dawn. In fact, this was going to be our earliest day. We decided to set the alarm for 5:30am so that we could be up and out at first light, even before the sun came up at 6:30am. This early morning business was starting to get a little old, but we did not really have much of a choice given the amount of sailing that has to be done each day to reach the anchorages before sundown.

In addition to a long day of sailing, the reason for such an early start on Day Four was also so that we could get to our destination as early as possible to explore for a bit. Camp Four was at Army Hole, which is an abandoned World War II Air Force Base on Matagorda Island. The island is about thirty-eight miles long and ranges from a half mile to over four miles wide. It is bordered on the east by the Gulf of Mexico and on the west by Espiritu Santo Bay. There is a wide range of wildlife on the island, including deer, feral hogs, coyotes, jackrabbits, alligators, rattlesnakes and a wide variety of birds. There is an old lighthouse that dates from 1852 near the northern end of the island, about three miles from Army Hole. The lighthouse site includes the graves of some of the islands earliest inhabitants.

Army Hole itself consists of a small port with five or six boat docks that are still intact, as well as a number of old runways and military buildings. There is no electricity, water or other services on the island. There are no permanent residents and the island is only accessible by private boat. I had read a bit about Army Hole in the months leading up to the event, and I wanted to have a few hours during the afternoon of our arrival to explore a bit. The lighthouse seemed like a good afternoon hike. At a distance of about three miles from the docks, it would be a 45-minute to an hour hike in each direction, and we could walk along one or two of the old runways on the hike to and from the lighthouse. I mentioned a little about Army Hole to Chris and Ignacio, and they agreed that it was worth

getting up at o'dark-thirty to try to get there as early as possible to explore a bit. And so it was that we decided to set the alarm for 5:30 am.

After the alarm went off, we slowly started to get up and get organized. We had not offloaded anything onto the beach the day before, so it was really just a matter of getting the boat somewhat organized and hauling the two anchors up. Somehow we managed to putz around for forty-five minutes or so, because it wasn't until about 6:15am that we finally got underway. Once again, I let my feelings for motors be known to all those who would listen, and we left the anchorage under jib alone. We were the second boat out. Pilgrim, a beautiful cat-ketch sailed by Travis Votaw and his grandson, had left about fifteen minutes before we did. We later learned that they got an early start because they were planning on sailing 79 miles that day, bypassing the stop at Army Hole and going right to the finish line to haul their boat out. I'm not exactly sure why, but that was their plan.

The wind was very light when we left, and that suited us just fine. As the week progressed, we had settled into a morning routine that included a slow, easy start to the day. We did not do anything in the anchorages each morning prior to departing. Our first order of business was to get the anchors up and get sailing. Then we would settle in to our point of sail, hold the course, and get into bullshitting, telling jokes, washing up, brushing our teeth and having breakfast. With ten or twelve hours of sailing in front of us each day, we took it very easy during these morning hours – sort of like having breakfast in bed and slowly waking up on a lazy Sunday morning. Only in a sailboat – and while sailing. As much as I really did not want to get up at the crack of dawn each day, I must say that I really enjoyed the early morning portion of our days. The setting was perfect – the sun low in the sky, not too bright or hot yet, the temperature in the low 80s, light winds, and calm water. We would ease into our daily routine of telling jokes

and reliving 20-year-old college experiences – many of which one of us had forgotten about completely. I can think of worst ways to spend a few hours in the morning.

Our plan for the day started with a ten-mile "freestyle" sail across Aransas Bay. This portion of the bay was relatively deep, about nine to eleven feet, and that meant we weren't forced to sail in the ICW. We could wander around a bit, and pick lines that made sense in terms of wind direction and sail trim. Eventually we would come up upon a string of islands and reefs that cross the bay, and be forced to enter the ICW to get through them. For now though, we were following a compass course across the bay that had us sailing on a broad reach, with about eight to ten knots of wind over the starboard quarter. It was easy going.

By this point in the week, both Ignacio and Chris had spent a fair amount of time at the helm, and were getting fairly proficient. On this morning, Ignacio wound up at the helm and was guiding us across the bay. Since the bay was too wide to see points on land, I picked a compass course and told Ignacio to hold that course. Other than an occasional slip-up, he was good at holding the course, and so after a while I relaxed and fell into the rhythm of the joking and easy conversation. The winds were very light and we were only sailing at about three knots for the first three hours or so.

At one point, Chris went below and put the hatch boards in place so he could make use of the bucket-head. With him down below doing his business, and Ignacio at the helm, I took the opportunity to clean the cockpit. We had been pretty organized with our things, but by the fourth day there was definitely room for a little cleanup in the cockpit. We had little bits of trash and plastic and a few empty water bottles strewn across the cockpit. There was also a fair amount of mud, sand and crushed shells in and around the cockpit after several days of jumping in and out of the boat at the anchorages. I used a small rag and water

from the bay to wash down the cockpit and clean things up. It made a noticeable difference and left us feeling like we were getting a fresh start. With my fifteen minutes of housework done, it was back to laying around and talking.

A bit later in the morning, in the middle of a conversation, Chris yelled, “Oh shit! – look out!” I was seated facing the stern of the boat, so I quickly turned my head and saw that we were sailing straight toward a small island that was less than two hundred feet in front of us. I directed Ignacio to turn the boat sharply to port, and starting pulling up the swing keel just in case. We missed the island - no harm, no foul as they say - but I had now discovered a weakness with Ignacio’s work at the helm. When I told him to hold a compass course, he focused his eyes ONLY on the compass, to make sure that he was not straying off course. And he did very well. The problem was, it did not occur to him that he also needed to look ahead from time to time to ensure we were not going to hit an oil rig, another boat, or, say, an island. Lesson learned.

Shortly after our near-miss with the island, we adjusted our course to get up into the ICW. The course that I had plotted for us for the day would have us in the ICW for about eighteen miles on this leg of the journey, since this portion of the bay had another string of islands and reefs that crossed it, and I did not want us to risk running aground. Later in the day, we would exit the ICW and head across San Antonio bay, freestyle, where we would eventually come across yet another string of islands and reefs, and thread the needle through a small opening in the reefs known as Panther Reef Cut. We would then continue across the bay and come up on another string of islands and reefs, and cross through them at an opening known as South Pass. That was going to make for some interesting navigation and sailing. For now though, we would be in the ICW for a bit.

Unfortunately, we had an ongoing technical difficulty that prevented us from leaving the ICW and trying our luck with Panther Reef Cut and South Pass. As

was the case with Stingray Hole, these small channels pass through the reefs and are not marked with buoys. We heard reports of some informal PVC pipe markers, but they were not guaranteed to either be there or be accurate if they were there. The only safe way to get through was to follow a course that I had previously plotted in the Navionics software on my iPhone. The problem was I was running out of power and there would not be enough battery to get us across the bay and through the two passes. The days had been hazy and mostly cloudy all week, which meant that my solar panel was only providing a limited amount of juice. For some reason, which I did not realize until we were on the trip, the iPhone 5 does not accept this particular solar panel unless it is operating under full, bright sun and generating the maximum power. I was able to get a full charge at Snoopy's during our pit-stop on Day three, but by mid-day on Day four I was down below 25% battery and that meant we were going to have to sail in the ICW for a few hours, instead of crossing the bay and weaving our way through the passes.

We accepted the situation and stayed in the ICW, where it was fairly easy to sail since we were just following the buoys. However, as the wind started to build in the early afternoon, it changed direction a bit and was now coming much more out of the east, a change from the southeast winds we had until this point. With the winds out of the east, and the position of the ICW, we had to sail close hauled and point as far up and into the wind as possible. This meant that we found ourselves in exactly the same situation as the day before in the Port Aransas Ship channel – we were trying to hold a line on the upwind side of the channel, but this was forcing us to pinch up and stall too much, so it was a struggle. We passed several oncoming barges during the next few hours, as well as one that was travelling in the same direction that we were. This was extremely challenging since we were struggling to hold a line on the upwind side of the channel, and it seemed that the

barges were so wide that they occupied 80% of the channel. There just was not much room for us.

At one point, we had lost a long, slow battle with the wind and found ourselves on the downwind side of the channel, and we did not have a clear idea of where the channel boundary was. No sooner did we realize that things were getting sketchy and we went aground in the mud. Going aground in mud does not involve a sharp jolt or loud thump – it is more like putting the brakes on in a car – there is no real sound, you just come to a smooth stop. We quickly got the swing keel and the rudder up, and I tried to lower the motor, but it was too shallow – the propeller stuck right in the mud. With the swing keel and rudder up, the boat was floating, but we were being blown further out of the channel and across the mud flats, so Ignacio and I jumped out and started pushing the boat toward the channel. As it got a little deeper, I had Ignacio jump back aboard and I kept pushing from the back of the boat. Once I was in about three feet of water, I gave one last push and hauled myself aboard as Chris dropped the outboard and got it started. We motored about four or five hundred feet, straight across the channel to the upwind side, where we reset ourselves on a line that we would once again have to struggle to hold. With the boat now in decent shape we killed the motor and focused on holding our course.

This went on for a while, and at times was not too bad; it just was not all that interesting to be stuck in the ICW all afternoon. With the heavy barge traffic, I had the VHF radio tethered to my lifejacket and tuned to Channel 16 to monitor their radio communications. We found the local barge captain dialect to be quite interesting, as it was a hodge-podge of nautical terms, numbers and something sort of approaching English, all spoken in short bursts, and in deep southern accents. To us, it was completely unintelligible. It went something like this:

Barge Captain #1: “Bubblegum 432 - Peppa Duck 18 – Starboard - Ohh-verr.”

Barge Captain #2 (in response): “Insaad 57 – Bog 16 – Ohh-verr”

It made no sense to us, but they always seemed to understand each other just fine. At one point, we were losing the battle of the “pinch”, and were about a third of the way into the channel, measuring from the upwind side to the downwind side. There was a barge coming at us, maybe a half mile away, and we needed to make a decision – the same one we had to make the day before, in a very similar situation. Do we try to hold the upwind line as best we can, and have the barge pass us in the space between our boat and the downwind side of the channel? Or do we play it safe and pass in front of him, hugging the downwind side, thereby giving him the entire channel to pass us in? Chris was at the helm, and I was standing at the mast with the VHF radio in my hand. It was clear we were not going to be able to hold our line and give him the room he needed to pass us on the downwind side, so I hailed him on the radio. I did not know the local dialect, so I was hoping he would understand me in plain old English.

Me: “Sailing vessel Odisea to approaching oncoming barge. We’re going to change course and pass you on your starboard side. Over.”

Barge Operator: “Copy that, sailboat. I appreciate it. Over.”

It was perfect English - no code, no numbers and nothing was difficult to understand. Sure, he spoke with what sounded to my New Jersey ears to be a thick southern accent – after all, we were in Texas - but it was perfectly intelligible. I do not know who he came up upon after passing us, but it must have been someone from his clan, since he switched right back to the “Bubblegum 432” business again.

One of the many barges we passed on our trip

Not long after our encounter with the barge, we came up on a few large cruising sailboats that were motor-sailing toward us. They were really nice boats, in the forty to fifty foot range. I have no idea where they were headed, but it would have to be in the ICW for a while, since the bays adjacent to us at that point would not have the depth required for these large keelboats. As we approached them, I still had the VHF radio on, and I heard them hail us, or maybe each other, and indicate that there was a crocodile about two hundred feet outside of the channel. Sure enough, out on our port side was a crocodile, slowly swimming along next to the channel. It was hard to gauge his size, since all that was showing were his nose, eyes and a bit of his back, but I would guess it was in the eight to twelve foot range. I had no idea that there were crocodiles along the Texas coast, and this put a serious damper on my desire to stop the boat at some point and swim. That plan was definitely on hold for a while.

Sometime around 6:00pm we started to make our plans to turn out of the ICW and head across Espiritu Santo Bay toward Army Hole. From the charts and the Navionics software, I could tell that we would need to make about a 110-degree

right turn just before green buoy number one, on our right hand side. This would put us in a narrow marked channel between two spoil islands, and then take us out into the bay, where the markers would lead us all the way across to the docks at Army Hole – about five miles from the ICW. With the wind blowing from where it was – out of the east-southeast – it was going to be tough to make that turn and get through the narrow channel, since it essentially involved turning directly into the wind and then tacking up the narrow channel. I figured that once we cleared the other side of the spoil islands, we could more easily tack our way across the bay. It was not going to be necessary to stay in the channel once we were out in the bay, since the bay was about four to six feet deep all the way across.

As we approached the marker, I kept my position at the mast with the Navionics software in hand. Ignacio was ready with the swing keel uphaul line, and Chris was at the helm. I called out the turn and a few more tacks, but after about four tacks it was pretty clear we were not going to make it. The wind was blowing right down the channel at about fifteen to twenty knots, and the channel was just too narrow for us to make any headway. We were holding our ground, but we were not advancing up the channel at all. Two sailboats in front of us had tried to tack up the channel as well, right in front of us, and they quickly gave up and fired up their motors to get through. Chris really wanted to keep at it, to see if we could possibly do it, so we hung in there and gave it a few more tacks. About ten minutes later, we went aground on the right side of the channel and had to raise the swing keel to drift back out in the channel. We agreed to give up on the tacking idea and Chris fired up the motor.

We kept the sails up and motored through the channel to clear the spoil islands. The other two sailboats had kept their sails up while motoring through the channel, and once out in the bay they both set off on different tacks (one port and one starboard) to get across the bay. We got out into the bay and then put ourselves

on a starboard tack. With the relatively strong winds and about a two or three-foot chop coming right at us, it did not look too promising. It was going to be a long slog across the bay the way things were looking. At this point, it was about 6:30pm. We had already been sailing for more than twelve hours, and I estimated it would take us as much as maybe two hours to tack across the bay. With sunset at 8:30pm, I did not want to risk being out there at night, and we also still wanted to explore Army Hole a little.

Just as we were about to make the decision to drop our sails and motor the five miles across to Army Hole, the other two sailboats made the decision easy for us. They both did exactly that. With all guilt now set clearly aside, we motored into the wind and dropped the sails. I am not a huge fan of motors on sailboats, but this is exactly why I have one. I figured it would take us about an hour to motor across and that would still leave us with more than an hour of daylight to explore a bit of Army Hole.

As we started to motor across, we noticed that Kevin and Awdree Green were following exactly in our footsteps on their MacGregor 26. They also tried to tack up the channel, but quickly ran into trouble and found themselves grounded on the south side. They fired up their 50hp motor and easily got themselves back into the channel, where they did not waste any time dropping their sails and joining us in the motor across the bay. Of course, with a 50hp motor, they blew by us in no time, and were quickly out of sight and across into Army Hole.

Kevin and Awdree Green – showing off with their 50hp outboard

Right behind the Greens was Michael Johnson in his 22-foot South Coast sloop. He too appeared to follow the approach we had all been taking, but he ran into issues once he got out into the bay. He hailed Kevin on the VHF and indicated that he was having motor trouble, something related to his propeller. He raised his sails again and then proceeded to head back through the channel and into the ICW. He indicated by radio that he would not be making it to Army Hole and was going to head back. I never did see him again on the trip and do not know how he made out with his motor.

As we motored across, I told Chris and Ignacio that we would need to stop and refuel at some point. My motor has a one quart internal gas tank, and that will allow it to run at ¾ throttle for about 45 minutes or so. We were looking at about an hour of motoring, so one refueling stop would be necessary. Somewhere after the half-way point across the bay, I stopped the boat and put the motor in neutral. The refueling process in a choppy bay is not pretty, and involves at least a few drops of gasoline getting into the bay. We screwed the pouring spout on to the

gas can and then Chris and I poured together. He held the can itself, and I held on to the end of the spout, to keep it located right over the top of the motor to avoid any spillage. We poured slow and steady, and all was going well until – RRRRIP!! Chris' pants split right down the back, from about the waist down to his right knee. We had to hold very steady and keep refueling, so he did not move for about thirty seconds while we topped off the motor's small internal gas tank. Unfortunately for Ignacio, he was sitting right behind Chris and was filming our refueling as part of the documentary that he was going to make. That was the first unfortunate thing for Ignacio. The second was that Chris was not wearing any underwear! Ignacio let out a deep groan and an "Ohhh God" and quickly turned away. Lucky for me I was focused on filling the tank, and did not see anything. Ignacio later checked his video camera and confirmed that he had captured the "incident" on tape, which was guaranteed to make it into the documentary.

After the little incident, Chris went below to get changed and I got us back underway. As we motored across Espiritu Santo Bay, we came across the largest collection of oil rigs that we had seen on the trip thus far. We had seen a few scattered rigs here and there on prior days, but this collection of rigs in front of us numbered somewhere between fifteen and twenty, and were spread out across the bay between us and Matagorda Island. Two or three of them were quite large, but the rest were all very small. All of them were sitting on large, brown steel columns that lifted them high above the bay. All I could think of as we approached them was the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. I could not help but see them as a sign of the past, and hope that we are going to transition to more sustainable and environmentally friendly fuels sooner rather than later.

As we cleared the oil rig "farm" and approached Matagorda Island and Army Hole, the chop decreased significantly, since the entrance to Army Hole was in the lee of

the island. We saw that there were already several boats at the docks, but the guys were waving us in so there must have still been a slip available. I took the helm and motored us in slowly, and Chris made his way to the bow to attach the a dock line to the cleat. Ignacio had another line and was positioned at the back of the boat. I entered the dock area and turned 180 degrees to the right, around the breakwater, and entered the area where the slips were. The wind was blowing across the slips, and all of the leeward spots were taken. That meant that I would have to tie up on the windward side of the slip and be blown into the dock all night. I did not really have a choice, so I picked one and went for it. Two or three of the guys came out to help us in our approach, and it went very smoothly. Once we got in I asked Ignacio to fend off for me while I got out the bumpers. Due to the configuration and height of the dock, I could see that the bumpers were not going to work. I solved the problem by taking a line across the slip and to a cleat on the dock upwind of us. I used that line to pull the boat off of our dock, so no bumpers would be needed – problem solved.

Camp 4 – Army Hole on Matagorda Island (photo credit Google Earth)

With the boat tied up, we could finally breathe and relax. Time: 7:30pm – more than thirteen hours after we started sailing early that morning. Our plans to tour a bit of the abandoned Air Force base were basically shot, but it felt good to be there anyway, and we took the opportunity to socialize and get to know some of the guys. The first person we met was the guy who helped us into the dock – Gordo Barcomb.

I was happy to finally meet Gordo. Although there were several Texas 200 veterans who helped me get prepared for the event, he was the one who most helped me in the months leading up to it. He answered my questions in depth, and offered to review my plans for equipment and food to provide me with feedback based on his experience. He also sent me his old GPS so that I would have a spare in case my iPhone or Navionics software died on me for some

reason. So, I now had to chance to thank him in person for all of his help – and to ask him for more! At this point on the trip, our solar panel debacle had left us with two dead iPhones – mine and Ignacio's. I knew that Gordo had recently built a thirty-two foot catamaran with all the bells and whistles needed for cruising, so I asked him if we could plug our iPhones in to charge for a bit. He was happy to help and offered to give us a tour of his new boat in the process.

Gordo's boat – El Gato Gordo – is a home built, thirty-two foot catamaran. Like the rest of the home-built boats on the Texas 200, it is made of plywood and uses wooden masts and poly-tarp sails. Gordo's boat has two masts, one on each hull. Other than that, it is similar in many ways to many production catamarans of its size. The port hull has two private berths, one forward and one aft. The starboard hull houses the captain's berth forward, a galley in the middle, and a head aft. Between the hulls is basically a wide open, plywood-floor deck with a few lawn chairs set up in random positions. A good portion of the deck, over the helm, is a fixed, plywood roof to provide shade from the oppressive Texas sun. The helm utilizes wheel steering, and the iron genny is a 9.9hp outboard. I do not know how much it weighs, but it only has an eighteen-inch draft, so it is well-suited for the thin water of the Texas coast where Gordo lives and sails. We plugged our iPhones into a USB-to-cigarette lighter adapter and accepted a beer from Gordo while we got the grand tour and listed to Jack Johnson playing on the Margaritaville channel on the Sirius radio system that Gordo had on board. Right from the deck, we could peek into the open hatch over the galley and see a large pot of baked beans boiling on the stove. Gordo explained to us that after participating in the last five Texas 200s, he was taking this year off. However, he did not want to completely miss it, so he decided to sail down from his home base in Clear Lake to meet the Texas 200 crowd at Army Hole on Day Four and sail with us to the finish line at Magnolia Beach the next day. In addition, he decided

to host a barbeque at Army Hole, and he brought baked beans, potato salad, hot dogs and cold beer for all of the participants. I do not know if it was wood or charcoal, but he had started a fire in one of the old camping fire rings, and he and a few others would be cooking up and serving hot dogs and the rest of his feast a bit later in the evening. Gordo is a great guy – very warm, friendly and fun-loving – and he provided us with the perfect welcome to a fantastic anchorage at Army Hole.

The Docks at Army Hole

After our tour of El Gordo Gato, we wandered off for a bit to take advantage of the last few minutes of daylight and see a bit of the old base. We followed a few other guys who had wandered in the direction of a few buildings, and around back we found a collection of old equipment adjacent to a concrete runway. The runway was very interesting – it was a made of concrete, and the joints between the thick concrete slabs had cracked and allowed thick grass, shrubs and cactuses to grow between them. It appeared to be at least a half mile long, and was quite an

interesting sight with all of the growth on and around it. There was not much time to really explore, so we just took the time to appreciate our surroundings and stretch our legs. As darkness started to set in we headed back to the docks to continue with the socializing and find our way to the barbeque.

The barbeque was another nice touch on this amazing journey. It was happening about two hundred feet from the docks, in a flat, grassy area that is used for camping. It had an entirely different feel than the anchorages of the first three nights. This felt more like a campground, with the grass surroundings, the metal ring that formed the fire pit, and the picnic tables placed at each campsite. A few guys were working the fire and serving up hot dogs on toasted buns. There was a picnic table under a metal awning next to this fire pit that was still in very good shape, and that is where the beer and sides were located. In addition to the slight change of scenery, and the camaraderie with the other participants, there was a very practical benefit to the barbeque too – real food! We had been living on Clif bars, trail mix and peanut butter all week, and the grilled hot dogs, beans and cold beer were a much appreciated treat. A hot dog never felt so much like a good, hot meal than on this night. I am not sure how late the festivities went on since we retired somewhat early.

Chris and Ignacio had decided to sleep in the tent, and got it set up at some point before the sun went down. It was set up in an area with several other tents, in the same grassy area where the barbeque was being held. I decided not to join them, since I was enjoying sleeping on the boat. I enjoyed the slow, steady rocking of the boat at anchor. This night would involve less rocking, since we were tied up at the docks in a well-protected area, but it would still involve some movement, and would rock me to sleep like a baby. I set myself up in the v-berth again, and put the screens on the forward hatch and companionway opening to keep out the mosquitos, and called it a night. Although there was a decent breeze outside, not

much of it was getting into the cabin. I decided that I needed to invest in a wind scoop for the forward hatch, and maybe a small battery-operated fan to convince the air to flow through the cabin a bit. I did not get into too much of this planning though, since just as I expected, my head was on my makeshift pillow for about thirty seconds before I was out.

The Texas 200 - Day 5

The final day of the event brought with it the opportunity to sleep in a little and take it easy. Whereas the first four days averaged about forty-five miles per day of sailing, Friday's sail was to be only about twenty-five miles. For most of the boats in the event, including mine, this could be done in about five hours. The Texas 200 was designed with this shorter last day to allow for all participants to arrive at the finish line at Magnolia Beach by early afternoon, pull their boats and get them packed up, and be ready to participate in the shrimp boil festivities when they started at 4:00pm.

We decided not to set an alarm and just allow Day Five to start whenever we all woke up and got moving. It would be in stark contrast to the prior four days, when we pressured ourselves to get up and out by 6:30am to get a jump on the long day ahead of us. However, with sunrise at 6:30am and the other participants getting up fairly early, we were not able to sleep much past about 7:00am. I woke up and wandered across the docks to the camping area and found that Chris and Ignacio were already awake and stirring inside the tent. We took a very laid-back approach to the start of the day, washing up and brushing our teeth on the dock next to the boat, and then easing in to our first breakfast that was not eaten while under sail. It was a beautiful morning, temperatures once again in the low 80s, with partly cloudy skies and light winds – in the five to seven knot range I would guess. I think we all enjoyed the change of pace, and it was a great way to start the last day.

All three of us had hoped to explore Army Hole a bit upon our arrival the day before, but there just was not much time since we got in about an hour before sunset. So, we decided to take a little time Friday morning and explore. We headed back to the runway that we had found the day before, and spent some time goofing around and filming a bit of it for the documentary. We really wanted

to hike the three miles across the old base to the lighthouse after learning more about it from a few participants the day before. Apparently, the lighthouse keepers' graves are located in a small cemetery adjacent to the lighthouse. We could also explore the abandoned military base a bit more, since we had only explored a small portion of it in the limited time we had been there. Finally, there was the option of hiking about two miles to the beach on the Gulf of Mexico and taking a dip in the Gulf.

We really wanted to take a day and do these things, using our boat as a base. We discussed taking Friday as an exploration day and spending another night at Army Hole. We could sail the five hours over to Magnolia Beach on Saturday and easily have the boat pulled and be on the road by 4:00pm. It is about a four hour drive to Austin at most, so we would be home at a very decent hour. Both Chris and Ignacio had flights on Sunday, so we would not have to change their departure plans at all. We had plenty of food and water for the extra day. The ice that we had purchased at the Marker 37 Marina was melted and was already passing from cold water to just cool water, but that did not matter. The only perishables we had in there was yogurt. The rest of our food and water supply was completely fine without ice, and we could certainly survive on warm water and Gatorade for a day.

At one point in the conversation I thought that was what we were going to do, but then we started to back off of that plan a bit. We were really happy to have taken on the challenge of the Texas 200, and we wanted to finish the event properly, along with the other participants. And then there was the shrimp boil on Friday afternoon. It may not sound like that big a deal, but it is the celebratory event at the finish line of a pretty grueling event – and we wanted to sail Day Five according to plan and earn our right to drink beer and eat shrimp with the other participants. After a bit more discussion it was decided – we would finish the event and celebrate with the gang on Magnolia Beach.

With the decision made, we headed back to the boat and got ourselves ready to go by about 10:30am. Most of the boats had left already, but there were still a few remaining boats at the docks and so we did not feel too bad about our lazy morning and late departure.

The wind was still pretty light, in the five to seven knot range, and it was blowing out of the SSE, meaning we would be running downwind as we headed away from Army Hole and over toward Port O'Connor and then Magnolia Beach (aka "Maggie Beach").

The route from Army Hole to Maggie Beach that nearly all of the boats would take started with about a five-mile run across Espiritu Santo Bay to the ICW, the same way that we and many other boats approached Army Hole the day before. Once across the bay, you turn right (to the east) in the ICW and sail about four miles to where the ICW exits out into Matagorda Bay. From there it is about a fifteen-mile sail up Matagorda Bay to Magnolia Beach.

A review of the charts and Google Maps, however, indicates that a much more interesting route can be taken from Army Hole over to Matagorda Bay. Rather than backtracking across Espiritu Santo Bay and then sailing in the ICW (boring!), there appeared to be a few possible routes through some islands that separate Espiritu Santo Bay from Matagorda Bay, to the north and east of Army Hole. I brought this up with Gordo and he told us that he was familiar with one possible route through the islands, and he showed it to us on the chart. He warned us that some of the channels through those islands are extremely shallow and that we would likely run aground a few times, but that it was all mud and that we could easily walk ourselves back into deeper water. It sounded a lot more interesting than the backtracking and ICW route, so we quickly agreed that would be our plan – weaving our way through the islands.

We had to motor to get out of the marina-like area where we were tied up. Once out of our slip and around the breakwater, we quickly raised the jib and killed the motor. The breeze was light and was blowing directly away from Army Hole and out into Espiritu Santo Bay, so we ran out and away from the docks under jib and then under both mainsail and jib, wing-and-wing, the way the gods intended sailing to be done, out toward the islands.

The path that Gordo sketched out for us took us past a large island known as Grass Island and then over to the east through a few shallow turns and past an unnamed small island, and eventually up into a relatively deep channel called Saluria Bayou, which led out to Matagorda Bay. As we approached the tip of Grass Island and started our turn to the east, I took down the whisker pole and brought the jib over to the port side, where the main was. Chris took the helm and I got out my iPhone to fire up the navigation software. We then assumed our battle positions, which consisted of Chris at the helm, me as navigator with the software leading our way, and Ignacio ready on the swing keel uphaul line. We followed a narrow channel around the north side of Grass Island and then turned to enter an area between the island and Saluria Bayou. It was marked as one foot deep on my software, and sure enough, as we entered the area we could see a few fisherman wading out right in our path.

As we approached the fisherman, the rudder kicked up and the boat came to a stop. We quickly dropped the sails and got off the boat to walk it across. Out in front of us, about five hundred feet ahead, was a relatively deep channel that fed into Saluria Bayou. We watched a few powerboats go through with no problem, so we knew it would work for us. The three of us walked the boat through a shallow, muddy area about a foot deep. As we approached the deeper water, Chris and Ignacio got back on board and I gave us a shove out into the deeper section. I then jumped on and quickly made my way up to the bow of the boat to raise the

jib. We needed to sail essentially dead downwind to stay in the small channel that would take us to Saluria Bayou, so I figured the jib would be a quick and easy way to do that. Once we reached Saluria Bayou, about ten minutes later, we turned to the east, putting us on a beam reach, so I raised the mainsail as well. The navigation software indicated that the Bayou was about six or seven feet deep, so we put the swing keel down to get some "bite" and avoid drifting, since we were now sailing on a beam reach with the wind coming over the starboard side. We enjoyed an easy sail through the Bayou toward Matagorda Bay.

During the half hour or so that it took us to sail through Saluria Bayou, I could not help but notice the stark contrast between us and the numerous powerboats that were racing by us in both directions. While we were sailing along, talking and laughing and enjoying the sounds and smells of the natural environment around us, these guys were screaming by at top speed, unable to talk above the roar of the engine, gripping the handholds tightly so as to not fall overboard at 40mph. Wherever they were going, they would certainly get there a lot sooner than we would, except that we were not really in a hurry to get anywhere. That's the beauty of sailing. As soon as you lift the anchor and get underway, you're there.

Just as we were clearing the mouth of the Bayou and entering the bay, we could see El Gato Gordo out in the bay, about five hundred yards in front of us, motoring toward us. I hailed Gordo on the VHF radio and he told us that they had been out there for over an hour, motoring around, looking for a way to head up to Magnolia Beach, without success. That area of the bay is only about a half mile from Pass Cavallo (a natural inlet between Matagorda Bay and the Gulf of Mexico), and the currents bring in significant amounts of sand from the Gulf, which have blocked most of the Pass and also created shoals in what used to be a relatively deep section of Matagorda Bay. The shoals are continually growing and moving, and that makes most charts only somewhat useful in navigating through them. Gordo

had given up, and he motored past us and back into Saluria Bayou, and indicated that they were going to give up on finding a way through the shoals and head back to Espiritu Santo Bay and through the ICW to make their way to Magnolia Beach.

I was pretty sure we would be able to make it through the shoals, since my boat only has a ten-inch draft; El Gato Gordo is a much bigger boat that requires about eighteen inches of water to operate. Also, my boat is relatively light, and with three of us on board, we could ground the boat and easily walk it off into deeper water again if needed. At that point, it was about 1:00pm and I estimated we had about three hours of sailing to get to Magnolia Beach, so we had some time to goof around for a bit. We had already completed our crossing through the islands and so we needed something else to do before we headed north on what would be an easy downwind run to the finish line.

All week I had wanted to go swimming. We had been surrounded by water for five days and still had not gotten wet except for a brief walk through the mud on the approach to Saluria Bayou, to get ourselves off a shoal. But that was only about knee deep and it certainly did not count as going for a swim! We were currently sailing out in Matagorda Bay, about a half mile from Pass Cavallo. With that inlet so close, the water in that part of the bay was the aquamarine-colored Gulf water, not the darker, muddier waters of the Laguna Madre and other bays we had been sailing through for the last few days. In addition, I estimated that we were sailing in about six to ten feet of water, with a nice sand bottom. Also nicer than the shallow, muddy bays that had made up the majority of the past few days' sail. In other words, we were sitting in just about the best spot all week to go swimming. I mentioned all of this to Chris and Ignacio, and suggested that we swim for a bit prior to heading north to the finish line. They quickly agreed.

We dropped the sails and anchored in what proved to be about ten feet of water. After waiting a few minutes to ensure the anchor had grabbed properly and was

going to hold us, we were set. Since Jasmina was technically a water toy that you can sit on (well, maybe a child can sit on), we launched her off the stern with about twenty feet of line. I also tied a seat cushion to one of the dock lines and set that off the stern about twenty feet back as well. I was not sure about the tide or current, but we were very close to an inlet and I could see that there was at least a bit of a current running. The last thing we needed was to all jump overboard and be quickly swept away from the boat. I went overboard first and told the guys to give me two minutes to see how bad the current was. It seemed to be running at about a knot, and was quite manageable. We had the two safety lines off the stern to catch us if we drifted back too far, so I figured we would be fine.

Now, one more thing to check – that we could get back in the boat! I had not yet installed a swim ladder on the boat, so reentry into the boat was going to basically entail pulling yourself up and over the transom, which is the part of the boat with the lowest freeboard (closest to the water). Before the guys jumped in, I wanted to see if I could get myself back in the boat without their help. I made my way over to the transom and, although it was not pretty, I was able to haul myself aboard without too much trouble. So, with the current and reentry figured out, I gave the thumbs up and they came tumbling off the side of the boat and into the bay to join me for a swim.

After a few minutes in the water, Chris went back aboard the boat for a few minutes and then rejoined us in the water. About two minutes later I figured out why he did that – he had gone to retrieve another prank that they had purchased for the trip: super-soakers! He passed one over to Ignacio and they quickly launched into a full-scale attack on me. I remember thinking to myself, “Is this what mutiny looks like?” I guess maybe a Fisher-Price version, anyway.

Chris attacking me with the supersoaker. Mutiny!

We swam for a while, about an hour or so, and then decided that we should probably get back on board and prepare for the home stretch. In spite of a long week on a small boat with almost no creature comforts, it was clear that none of us wanted the trip to come to an end. We were searching for ways to stall things a bit, to delay the inevitable. In spite of our best stall tactics, we managed to get ourselves back underway about thirty minutes later.

Most of the sail up Matagorda Bay to Magnolia Beach was going to be parallel to the coast, in relatively deep water, with the wind at our backs – it was going to be a very nice and easy way to end the trip. However, first we had to find our way through the shoals and out into the deeper portion of the bay. It was possible that we would also have to turn back through Saluria Bayou like Gordo did, but somehow I knew we would find a way through.

We had studied the charts, and I had the Navionics software up on the iPhone, but we knew that both of those sources would only be partially reliable due (literally) to the shifting sands. With the sun shining brightly overhead, I determined that our best bet was going to be navigating by the shade of the water. In deeper water,

like where we were swimming, the water was a somewhat deep aquamarine color. In shallower water, the water color was a lighter green, bordering on the color of sand in the shallowest areas. Since we would be navigating through the shoals on a mainly downwind heading, I decided to sail under jib alone until we were out into deeper water. The wind wasn't blowing very strong – only about 10 knots or so – but I did not want to risk running up onto a sandbar with the mainsail up and the boom way out over one side of the boat, where it would be harder to drop quickly.

As we got under way, we assumed what had become our standard positions for navigating through tricky areas: Chris at the helm, Ignacio on the swing keel downhaul and me navigating with the software and working the sheets. The only modification for this particular situation was that I was standing up on the bow, with the iPhone in my hand and a clear view of the water in front of us in order to navigate by water color. I think we were probably a lot luckier than good in this case, but getting through the shoals proved to be quite easy. I gave Chris turn-by-turn instructions based mainly on water color, with a little consideration for what the Navionics charts were indicating, and we made it through unscathed. In fact, the rudder was down the entire time and never touched bottom once. That means we never sailed through water less than about two feet deep. As we exited the shoal area, I asked Ignacio to drop the swing keel slowly, to serve as a manual depth-finder. He was able to lower it all the way, indicating at least five feet of water, and we were off to the races.

We headed upwind briefly so that we could raise the mainsail, and then fell off and into a beautiful downwind sail, wing-and-wing, with the mainsail over the port side and the jib poled out to starboard. Once we were comfortably headed north along the coast, I got out the iPhone to determine our exact course to Magnolia Beach. I had been telling Chris and Ignacio that I thought we had about a two hour sail up the bay from where we had been swimming, but at this point I admitted to the them

that I hadn't really planned out this final stretch of the trip, and, therefore, I really did not know how far Magnolia Beach was, or even where it was really.

After a few minutes playing with the software, I found Magnolia Beach, and it was much further up the coast than I had imagined. I plotted a quick route in the software and at our current speed (only about 3 knots in the light wind), it calculated that we would need about four hours of sailing to get there. Oops. I checked it again and made sure I was not making any errors, but it was correct – we were about twelve or thirteen miles from Magnolia Beach and the winds were light. It was already after 3:00pm and the shrimp boil was set to begin in one hour, so we were going to be a bit more than fashionably late to this one. We weren't happy, but there was not much we could do about it either. That is kind of the deal when you are cruising on a sailboat. You do the best you can, but at the end of the day you are at the mercy of the wind and the currents, and so you just settle in and enjoy the ride. And so that is what we did.

Chris and Ignacio had done some laundry earlier in the day, while we were anchored at the swimming hole, and so they strung out their wet clothes on the boom and whisker pole, and Ignacio got some tunes going on his iPod and we just laid back and enjoyed the easy downwind sleigh ride to the finish line.

Drying out the laundry on the run to Maggie Beach

It was slow at first, probably for about forty-five minutes or so, but then the wind started building and our boat speed got up over five knots for the remainder of the trip. We enjoyed those last few hours, retelling more of our long-forgotten stories from college, and reliving some of the more memorable moments of our trip together that week. It was the perfect ending to a great trip and a really enjoyable week together. The conversation was still flowing freely; after spending every waking moment within about fifteen feet of each other for an entire week, we were not sick of each other and, in fact, I think we all had a great time.

As we approached Magnolia Beach on the port side, we prepared for one final approach and we all wanted it to be a beauty. It was the final thing we would do together on the trip, and we were going to do it in front of all of the other Texas 200 participants, whose boats we could see lined up along the beach in front of us.

The wind was coming over our port quarter and it was blowing about fifteen knots. We were about a half mile off the beach (which was to port) and about a mile or so from the destination. We took the whisker pole down and jibed the main across to the starboard side as I turned the boat slightly toward the beach, to put us on a port tack. Given my feelings toward motors on sailboats, there was no way we were going to be approaching Magnolia Beach under anything other than sail power. We removed Jasmina from her perch on the bow and set her out behind the boat again, to scare off the killer dolphins as we made our way toward shore. I took the helm and Chris headed up to the bow and attached a dock line to the bow cleat. Ignacio once again manned the swing keel uphaul line. On our downwind run over the previous few hours, we had the swing keel completely up, but now as started to head toward the beach we were going to be sailing on a broad reach and then, finally, a beam reach for the last few hundred feet. I wanted to make sure we had some "grab" for these reaches, so that we did not drift down the beach while heading in. According to the Navionics chart, the water was fairly deep in front of Magnolia beach, and was even about three feet deep immediately in front of the beach.

We approached the rest of the boats on the south (upwind) side, and headed in toward the beach. It was about 6:00pm and we could see that the festivities were well under way up on the beach ahead of us. As our broad reach turned into a beam reach, I eased the sheets to keep our boat speed relatively slow. About two hundred feet from the beach, I asked Ignacio to bring the swing keel up completely, and I turned the boat upwind a bit, eased the sheets, and let her glide slowly to a stop just inches before hitting the beach. Chris stepped down off the bow into about an inch of water. It was perfect. He did not even get his ankles wet. We had stuck the landing!

Chris held the boat in place while I quickly dropped the sails and got the anchor out. I set the anchor in about three feet of water, about thirty feet from the beach, and we left Odisea and Jasmina tugging at the anchor line while we headed up the beach to join the party, which was already well under way.

As we approached the crowd, we were greeted and congratulated on our finishing the event by many of the participants, and then we were quickly ushered over to the serving station, where we loaded our plates up with shrimp, sausage and corn. There were also coolers of Shiner Bock beer provided by the event's sponsor, Spoetzl Brewery. We cracked open a few cold beers and settled into our food and the conversation. As the sun slowly set over the beach behind us, we relaxed and enjoyed a few hours of story-telling with the rest of the participants. It was a very nice way to cap off a beautiful week of sailing.

The Shrimp Boil at the Finish Line at Magnolia Beach (photo: Monte Copeland)