



Chip Ahoy's Singlehanded Maine Cruise

By Chip Ford

Twenty years ago I left the sea. After living-aboard, restoring, and sailing old wood boats, starting with a 48' ketch built in 1928 and ending with John Alden's own Malabar VIII, his 60' schooner built in 1926, I returned to landlubber status – I believed permanently.

In late 2002 I was invited out to San Diego for a week aboard "Entropy," a former schooner partner's Islander 36 she'd recently bought and moved aboard. I got bit again. Returning home, I decided that not only did I want, but that I *needed* a boat of my own.

My criteria was, I thought, simple: "Something small enough to single hand around Marblehead when I had the time and felt the urge, with a cabin so I could sail overnight if occasionally desired; fiberglass so it wouldn't demand the restoration and ceaseless maintenance of the big old wooden boats I'd spent six years working on, and; was inexpensive so I wouldn't need to dump a small fortune into it, a small 'fixer-upper' project that I could *sail* more than work on." A month later, for \$2,500 I became the proud owner of "Take Five," my 1974 Catalina 22 swing keel. When spring arrived it became "Chip Ahoy," its restoration began, and I was introduced to this great community of sailors.

Boy, was my "criteria" ever shortsighted. I should have known *me* better.

By the end of my first season (2003), I'd poured almost \$9,000 along with countless labor-hours into my small boat, but I sure could single hand it. My first cruise the second weekend in the water over the 4th of July was across Boston Harbor and down the Massachusetts coast to Scituate.

That first season revealed the shortcomings of single handing Chip Ahoy, so Season Two preparations were dedicated to readying my boat to better handle it alone. Already more distant destinations were forming in my mind. *I should have known.*

2004 preparations went into upgrading the 30-year old hardware, adding a roller-furler, running all lines back to the cockpit, adding a boom vang, adjustable backstay, tiller pilot, second battery and switch, and a number of other conveniences and necessities. Much of Winter 2003-04 was spent researching and charting the cruise that was growing in my imagination, the last piece of the Eastern Seaboard I hadn't cruised: the Maine coast as far north

(and east) as I could reach in a month. By July I had another \$8,500 and far more time invested. "Chip Ahoy" was ready to go.



Chip Ahoy and Chip Mate at the end of Day One - Misery Island, MA

Late-afternoon on Aug. 4, I slipped my mooring off the town dock. My previous day's early departure had been frustrated, as had been that morning's. The only way to break loose and get underway was to just go, so I went – even if only out to Misery Island in Salem Sound for the night. *I was on my way to Maine!*

I picked up an empty mooring in the island's sheltered cove and spent my first night of the cruise. The next morning at 9:00 I was on my way, heading for Cape Ann then around it and on to Newburyport before dark. With the wind 5-10 mph from the north, a lot of tacking was getting me nowhere fast on my course. As I approached the cape, I decided that to reach my destination any time near my schedule I'd reluctantly have to resort to Plan B: go through Gloucester Harbor and motor up the Annisquam River. This would cut off passage around the cape and save me a few hours.

By 3:00 pm the narrow, winding Annisquam emptied me out into Ipswich Bay with Newburyport but 9 miles north. Instead of the wind switching from the north as forecast, it had virtually died. Eventually I fired up the Tohatsu 9.9 and motor-sailed, then dropped sail the rest of the way to the mouth of the Merrimack River. I arrived at 7:00 pm, just in time for its current to switch to outgoing. The river's mouth is notoriously treacherous and lived up to its reputation as I powered through the chaotic 4-5 foot entrance chop. It took 3 more hours and a quick gas tank swap to cover the remaining 3 miles into Newburyport at full-throttle against a powerful 4-5 knot

current. In the dark I grabbed an empty mooring across from the town and spent a rainy night. That was my first experience aboard a C22 in strong river currents, a lesson which would become invaluable.

The next day the weather was miserable, so it wasn't until Aug. 6 that I flew out of there on the river's outgoing tide. My destination was Portsmouth, New Hampshire, about 25 miles up the coast. On arrival it would require motoring a few miles up the Piscataqua River, which I was warned has a stronger current than the Merrimack, so I planned my arrival accordingly. At my usual 4-5 miles offshore there was only a light northerly breeze. After 3 hours of tacking making negligible progress, I again resorted to the motor rather than depend solely on the sails to arrive on time to ride in on the current. I hit the river perfectly, the current carried me right into Portsmouth. When I sighted Prescott Park Dock, where I'd called ahead and arranged a city slip, the current was shoving hard. I crabbed across it using lots of throttle and was sure grateful for the waiting hands of other boaters who saw me coming.

The next morning I had the motor running and was ready to slip my dock lines just as a power boat crossed the current toward the dock. I watched as he rapidly slid sideways while giving his boat lots of power. There was no way I was going to pull that off with my outboard – and to fail would sweep me onto the nearby rocks. I was too late, so spent the day right there. I had work on the boat that could be done, so set about it.

I left Portsmouth at dawn the following morning, Aug. 8, catching the current perfectly and heading for Portland, Maine, 40 miles north. Weather reports called for the wind to shift from N to SW at 10-15 in the afternoon, but instead it shifted to the SE at a good 15-20. I made good time up the coast as the seas began to build to 3-4 feet and more by late afternoon. I reefed sails at about 3 pm, still making 4-5 knots. I decided I wouldn't make Portland before nightfall, so began looking for a place to spend the night in Saco Bay, either in tricky Biddeford Bight or up the Saco River. I called around, reached Marston's Marina up the river in Saco, and arranged for a mooring. Little did I know then how important that decision and those arrangements were, that I was about to

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face one of the greatest challenges of my odyssey.

Soon after, the squall struck. The ominous black cloud approached from over the coast, some four miles to port, its sheets of rain slashing down diagonally in the darkening distance. It was heading right for me with determination. I dropped the main, left up just enough roller-furled Genoa for a storm jib, and started the motor. By the time I'd dug out and donned my foul-weather gear and safety harness the storm cell was almost overhead, the rain had begun. I stowed everything nonessential below and closed up the cabin just as it struck with fury, the deluge poured down.

My last good GPS waypoint before turning into the Saco Bay channel, an offshore sea buoy, was coming up – but I had no plotted route or waypoints into Saco. The buoy I was shooting for was lost to sight along with land, my chart book became soaked. I took a fast compass reading and did some quick dead reckoning from my saturated chart. At the buoy I made my turn blindly toward where I estimated the marker for the river's jetty entrance to be, and stuck to my compass bearing. Fortunately I had three miles before reaching it, and after about two the rain stopped, the sun returned, a rainbow appeared astern, visibility cleared, and my bearing proved to be pretty accurate, off by maybe five degrees once I spotted some of the entrance markers. There's just no substitute for knowing navigation when you need it!

Protected by Wood Island to port, Saco Bay calmed. I threaded my way through a lobster trap buoy minefield and, once inside the jetty and on the winding Saco River, the water flattened. About three miles up this idyllic river I found Marston's Marina. Randy let me tie up at their gas dock for the night, came aboard. After the ubiquitous "this far in that little boat?" he came aboard to share a couple beers, swap tales, and swat mosquitoes. The owners and dockhands couldn't have been more hospitable.

Due to a problem with the laptop computer and one of my handheld GPS's, I spent the next day on a mooring; on the marina's office phone with Garmin, and reprogramming the computer and GPS. I left Saco at 6:45 the following morning, Aug. 10, hoisting sail in Saco Bay by 7:30. The wind was light and variable, maybe 4-5 knots until about 11:00, when it picked up to 10-15 from the south for the rest of the day. I reached Portland at 5:00 pm.

Portland became the end of my

cruise north. From the first morning greeted by a nasty thunderstorm, to days of dire warnings of approaching hurricanes, first Bonnie then Charley, 7-9 foot seas or higher outside the harbor, and 25 mph or better winds, the weather was mostly miserable. I didn't dare leave for Boothbay Harbor and further "downeast." The marina was filling with boats seeking shelter or having turned about and headed south for home, two from Marblehead.



Waiting out the hurricanes - DeMillo's Marina, Portland, ME

If you've got to be landlocked, Portland isn't bad. My slip at DeMillo's Marina was expensive but protected, and handy to "Olde Towne" Portland. It wasn't how I'd planned to spend my month at sea or my money, but it could've been worse with hurricane warnings up.



Coffee with a storm anyone? - DeMillo's Marina, Portland, ME

At 10:00 am on Aug. 16th I broke out and headed for home, the wind again "light and variable," which had come to mean "no wind." Aiming for Saco, eventually again under motor, I did a little corner-cutting from my route in flat, oily seas, heading in a more direct approach, closer to shore than my usual 4-5 miles out. The effects of the hurricanes manifested themselves in a Sargossa Sea of churned-up kelp and seaweed as far as the eye could see, floating masses of it. Keeping the outboard's shaft uncluttered, the water intake clear, became a chore.

I arrived at Marston's Marina at 6:00 pm, spent the night at their gas dock again, then left at dawn the next morning, Aug. 17.



Marston's Marina on the Saco River at dawn - Saco, ME

Once out of the peaceful Saco River and through the lobster trap buoy minefield I hoisted sail in a brisk NE breeze and rounded the sea buoy. That perfect wind lasted all of 15 minutes before going "light and variable" again, and finally south. The "motor boat with a mast" plodded on. The two foot head seas became short and choppy as the day wore on. Again I cut corners closer along the shore where dodging lobster trap buoys became full-time, heading for Portsmouth in time for slack tide against a 10-15 knot wind from the south.

Off Kennebunkport a surface disturbance produced a whale, which surfaced 30 yards off my aft starboard beam, the second time just 20 yards directly off the beam. When I collected my thoughts and grabbed the camera, it'd disappeared. It's awesome to meet a beast of the sea that's considerably bigger than your boat up that close and personal. I just hoped it wasn't in a desperately romantic mood!

It became extremely rough in that chop, spray blowing over the cockpit all day. I did a quick gas tank switch just before approaching Portsmouth, a drill at which I'd become very efficient thanks to necessity. I had to remove my glasses finally; the salt made visibility impossible and cleaning them non-stop, but seeing my chart and GPS then became a handicap. Old Chip Ahoy took a darned good pounding all afternoon and performed well.

Rounding the head of Portsmouth Light and heading east up the mouth of the Piscataqua River, the southerly wind now became most favorable so I fully unfurled the genoa and was cooking. I unconsciously joined up with a fleet of sailboats out taking advantage of the breeze – so much so that I forgot where I was heading and my time schedule to

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catch the current.

Oops, back on course I approached the bridge just beyond the city dock, still on time for a slightly outgoing current. From my experience the last time, I knew to aim directly for the red nun across the current, ignore the nearby green can warning of the rocky breakwater, and breezed into a slip at Prescott Park Dock perfectly.



Strong currents sweep beneath Memorial Bridge - Prescott Park Dock, Portsmouth, NH

Ah, the best of plans sometimes go astray; no, make that often. Again I was about to become landlocked. The next morning, Aug. 19, the fog was so thick that I couldn't see across the river. I put off my departure until it lifted, but by then the current was running too strongly. "Oh well, another day in Portsmouth," I thought as I shut down the motor, unpacked the "pup tent" and set it back up over the boom, pulled the dinghy back to the dock in front of Chip Ahoy, retied my dock lines and connected the power, and unpacked down below. The next morning was a replay, and relentless morning fog worsened until Aug. 22.

Prescott Park Dock, for \$25/day, provides water and electric but no other amenities. The city Dockmaster told me of public showers about a half mile over the fixed bridge above the fishing fleet harbor on nearby Pierce Island. Portsmouth has a recreation area, boat launching ramp and public swimming pool where I was able to shower, albeit cold water only.

Upon return to Chip Ahoy my unintended stay became provident. That afternoon NOAA and the National Weather Service issued grave "severe thunderstorm warnings" and a small craft advisory. "Golf ball size hail, winds gusting to 69 MPH, and downpours reducing visibility to a quarter-mile or less in rain and fog" were heading our way. Warnings were issued to mariners to head directly into port if they saw dark clouds.

The storm system blanketed most of

southern New England, from New York over Connecticut, Massachusetts and southern/central New Hampshire. It arrived over Portsmouth around 3:00 pm with a vengeance and lasted for four hours. It was but the first line of thunderstorms: the second, which arrived at 10:00 pm, was even more spectacular.

It awoke me with flashes in the distance. I didn't immediately recognize it as lightning, thought it was something going on in the city, maybe fireworks. Then the thunder began to roll. I've never witnessed such a display of ceaseless lightning, like a machine-gun firefight, one bolt following another split seconds apart if not simultaneously, exploding like artillery rounds. Having the tallest mast in the area, I sat below just waiting to be hit. The wind began to howl. My little "pup tent" over the boom held up throughout, I believe due to the bungee cords I use to secure it, allowing it to flex in high winds.



Fogged in on the Piscataqua River - Prescott Park Dock, Portsmouth, NH

This incredible fury went on until after 11:00 pm, as NOAA continued tracking it and issuing dire warnings. Fortunately I'd bailed out the half-full dinghy after the first storm, as we got another inch and a half more rain during that ferocious hour. The next day it was reported to have been one of the fiercest thunderstorms the area had ever experienced, its center felling trees, downing power lines, destroying a trailer park in nearby Hampton.

I departed Portsmouth at 5:45 on the morning of Aug. 22 and made it down to Newburyport, hitting the Merrimack River current perfectly. A day later I was home at my Marblehead mooring by 3:00 pm.

In Portsmouth on Aug. 21, I wrote in my log/journal: "It's sure been quite a vacation, very different from my anticipation, unfortunately timed with hurricanes, severe thunderstorms, rain and fog, the wind too often coming from the wrong direction, far too much motoring and gas consumption, and

much more time spent in ports where I intended to stop only briefly along my way to new horizons. I've probably now spent as much if not more time hunkered down in the cabin beneath the 'pup tent' as out in the cockpit underway. Even my tan is fading, a sure indicator of extended adversity."

In the journal's conclusion, I wrote: "It was a great experience, though unlike what I'd expected. But had it been what I expected it wouldn't have been the same challenge, more a test of endurance, patience, and perseverance than the straightforward sailing adventure I had anticipated...."

"But it was something I had to do, was compelled to attempt. It was another adventure, a new experience. I'm glad I did it. And I'm equally glad it's successfully behind me and that I'm back home.

"Now if the floor will only stop rolling ..."

This summer I plan to trailer up to Portland and pick up where I left off for another month of adventure. I still haven't reached the Canadian border you know.

Read the complete log of Chip Ahoy's Maine cruise with charts and more photos, or contact Chip Ford, at www.chipford.com



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- Catalina Direct
- Gus Sails
- Marilyn Boemer
- North Sails
- Quantum Sails
- Austin Kitchen
- Wimberley Glass Works
- Corral Reef Sailing Apparel
- Skull Creek BBQ
- Ploockey's Cajun Boiling Pot