

Out the Gate to Monterey Bay

Captain Lewis Keizer



We looked for a long time before we found Sandpiper, a well-maintained Ericson 27 berthed in the Alameda Estuary in San Francisco Bay. We didn't want something light and fast to race in the San Francisco Bay chop. We needed a tough little coastal cruiser. Why? Because our home Port is Moss Landing in Monterey Bay, which is more like an ocean than a bay.

1 Sandpiper at Grand Marina in the Alameda Estuary

The blue water of Monterey Canyon leads long Pacific swells into green water complicated by wind waves to create perpetually rough seas that pound the beaches surrounding Moss Landing. Conditions are much smoother over at Santa Cruz and Monterey, but these are expensive harbors with long waiting lists.

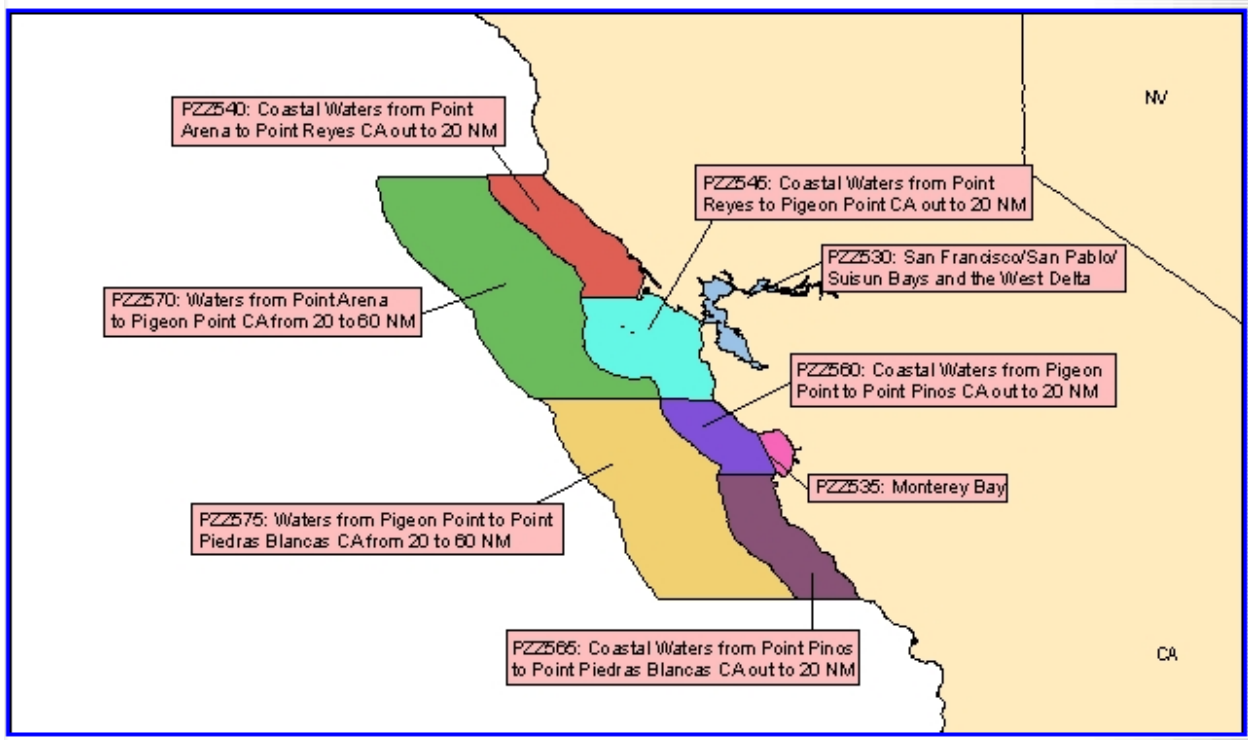
Since Sandpiper was designed for coastal cruising, with high ballast-to-displacement ratio and a classic racer-cruiser lead keel encapsulated in a long transition fin, she would stand up comfortably to wind and challenging sea states. She would keep us safe and comfortable in the sloppy stuff. With new Yanmar 20 hp diesel, Furuno RADAR, strong new dodger, refrigeration, new upholstery throughout, Autohelm ST2000, custom galley, new bottom, and hardware to set up a self-tacking jib, we were willing to pay a premium price for her.

Summer was coming to an end. After a few fun cruises on San Francisco Bay, it was time to move Sandpiper to her new home in Monterey Bay. Since I had never made the run out the Gate from San Francisco to Monterey Bay, I enlisted the help of my Elkhorn Yacht Club friend David Conner. I would single-hand the boat and he would serve as guide and advisor. We could make the delivery in two day-sails, stopping overnight at Pillar Point Harbor, or simply motor-sail through the night—depending on conditions.

San Francisco to Half Moon Bay

From Grand Marina to the Bay was a forty-minute motor trip down the Estuary. The three-bladed prop easily pushed Sandpiper at hull speed with the Yanmar turning 2400 rpm. Twenty horsepower was what the previous owner had needed to push the boat against the Sacramento River current for vacations in the Delta. That would serve me well for coastal cruising.

I had waited for a weather window to deliver Sandpiper. One source I found useful was the NOAA site at <http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/marine/zone/west/mtrmz.htm> which provides conditions and forecasts for specific segments of the coast. It looks like this:

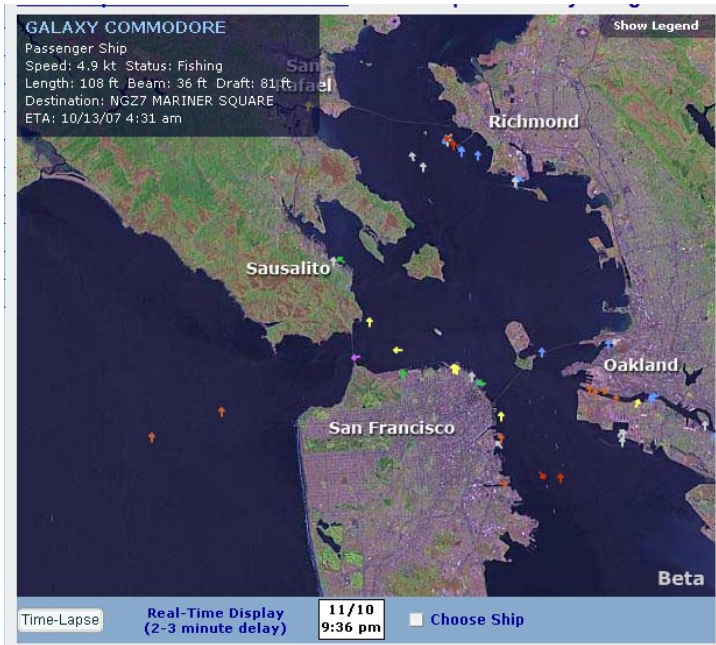


2 Click on your cruising areas for detailed NOAA conditions and forecasts.



However, as David Conner pointed out to me, the most reliable reports of current conditions (wind, waves, swell) is found by checking Buoyweather.com. Here is the URL for the buoys monitoring the Central California coast. <http://www.buoyweather.com/wxnav6.jsp?region=C&program=Maps>

3 Click on the red dots for buoy reports.

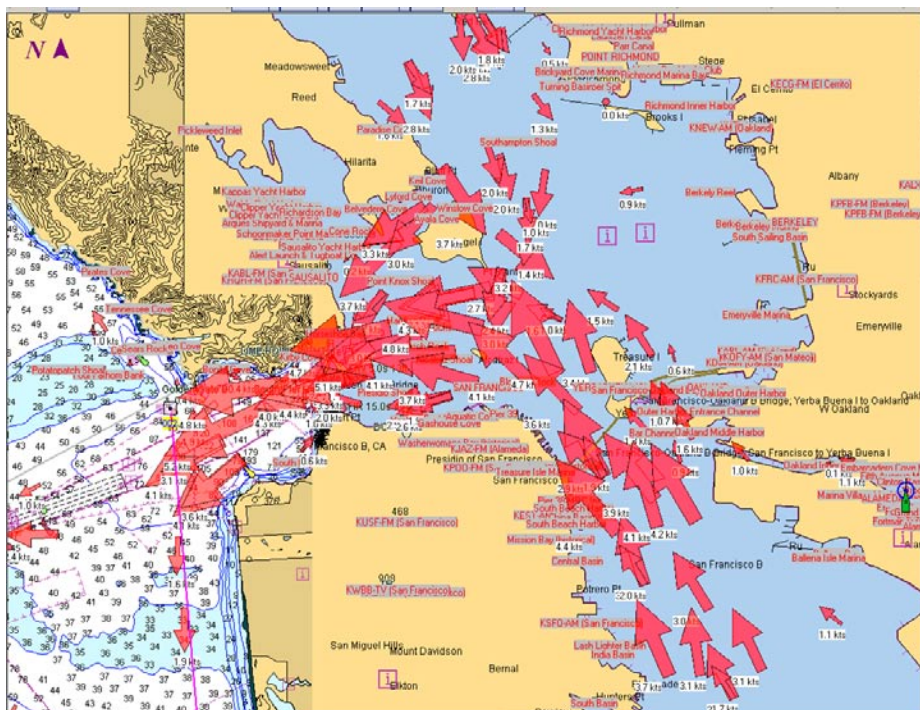


We used A.I.S. to get a heads-up on ships headed through the Gate from many miles out to sea so we could use the shipping lane to get out safely. If you don't have A.I.S. on board, use this internet site, which shows you real-time how the big guys are moving, where they have been, and where they are heading:

http://www.boatingsf.com/ais_map.php.

4 Touching an arrow (ship) gives you all its data above.

Sailing around San Francisco Bay requires strategizing the strong currents that ebb and flow. The strongest currents surge out a mile along the San Francisco waterfront to and from the Golden Gate Bridge. Use them to add several knots of SOG, and avoid trying to buck them.



5 We rocketed out the Gate at 11.5 knots—that's 5 knots SOG over hull speed!

We were going out on full-moon spring tides, which meant they would peak well over five knots at max ebb under the Golden Gate Bridge. It is good to go out the Gate on an

ebb, but not at max ebb! Yet that's what our boat delivery schedule required. High winds were not forecast, but there was a cross-swell from high winds farther out in the ocean running over 6-8 foot NW Pacific swells. Visual checks as we passed the Gate confirmed NOAA and Bouyweather reports that there was not much wind on the ocean. Seas would be confused and lumpy, but the Ericson 27 could handle it if we could. So we shot out the Gate at nearly twice our hull speed over the bottom.



6 Max ebb, lumpy, but little wind, so we motor-sailed full speed ahead out the shipping lane!

On the north side adjacent to the Marin Headlands is the notorious Potato Patch—the four-fathom bank. NOAA always adds forecasts for wave heights at the four-fathom shoal on max ebb, which can reach 10-12 feet with very short periods. Sneaker waves can build and suddenly rise up to roll even large vessels. These conditions occur when wind and Pacific swells oppose the ebb to build steep seas on an ebb.

On the south side adjacent to the Cliff House and beaches are shallows of 30-40 feet running out to several miles that gradually deepen to 60-90 feet. Seas and sneaker waves build here also. That is why it is not good to turn south until you are at least three miles beyond the Golden Gate Bridge, especially during a strong ebb.

Normally small vessels cross shipping lanes perpendicular to the traffic. When it's not a strong max ebb, experienced locals who know the eddies near the shores sail wherever they want to, including the Potato Patch. But David suggested that the best way out of the Gate headed downhill would be to navigate straight out the shipping lane, then keep to the south boundary. Sailing too close to the Bridge piers could sweep us into a sideswipe collision through Venturi flow, which speeds a boat and sucks it in. We needed to go out through the shipping lane in the middle of the Bridge or close to it, rather than trying to keep too far to the south shore where breaking waves could roll our boat.

Once out the Gate, we veered left to stay on the shipping lane boundary and far away from the Potato Patch to the north. We kept heading West until we were more than three miles out before making our turn south. The depth sounder was showing only 60 feet when we finally made the turn, and we still passed over shallower areas on our way to Half Moon Bay.

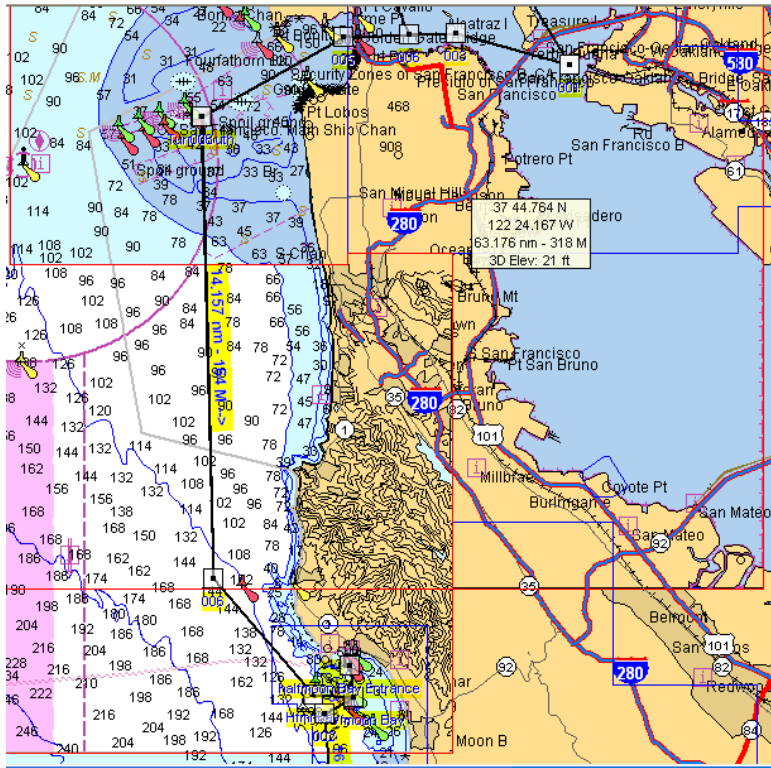


7 Sandpiper veering left to follow the south border of the shipping lane out to a pre-set three-mile waypoint.

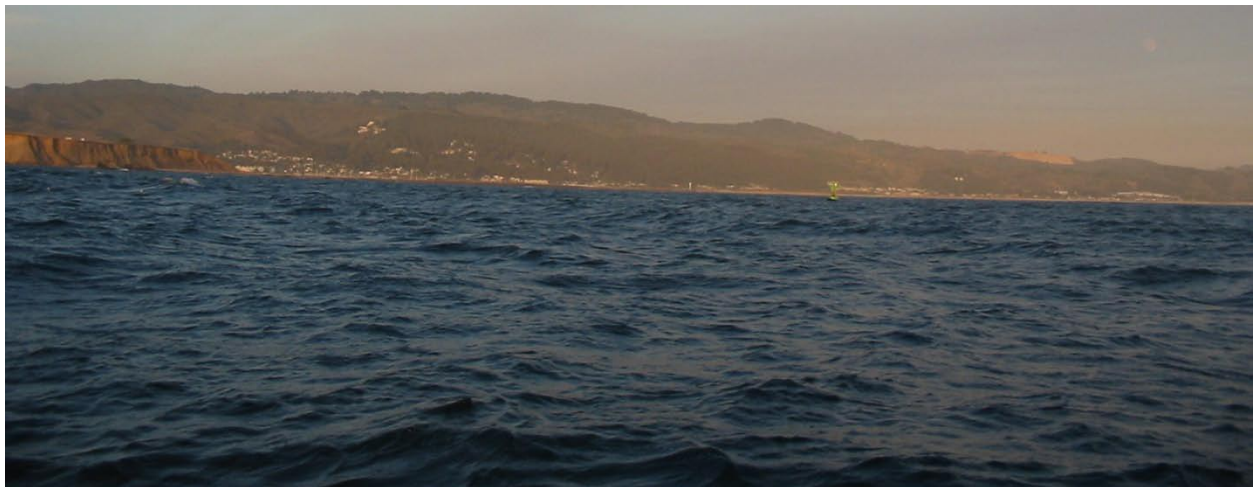
We hoped to move beyond the steep six-foot cross-swells that assaulted us when we got into deeper water. The Ericson 27 never got a drop of water in the cockpit thanks partly to the dodger, and mainly to its gentle, seaworthy motion allowing big following and beam seas to pass under. We never got seasick on the six-hour motor-sail, but we had to hang on tight a few times. We could have gone out about five miles where the depth reaches 90-100 feet and had an easier sea, but then we would have added at least an hour to the trip. There were no crab pots to foul our propeller, as the season had not yet begun, so three miles out was a good route.

I had set up waypoints on my GPS-enabled laptop PC running Nobeltec VNS 8.1. It was not connected to the Autohelm ST2000, but sitting securely under the dodger on the sliding hatch it gave us a course to motor-sail. Beginning with the turn south near the first red shipping lane buoy, we had a straight run to a waypoint outside of the red buoy that marks the Colorado Reefs north of Pillar Point. Then to a waypoint outside of the green buoy that marks the end of the Kings Rock reefs one mile beyond Pillar Point.

There we would turn east to the next green buoy, then north to find the entrance to the first breakwater of Pillar Point Harbor.



8 Straight run to deep water outside red buoy of Colorado Reefs.



9 Finally out of the shallows approaching Pacifica.

After passing the red buoy marking the Colorado reefs, we turned toward our next waypoint beyond Pillar Point. The big white golf ball sitting on a tee is a huge RADAR

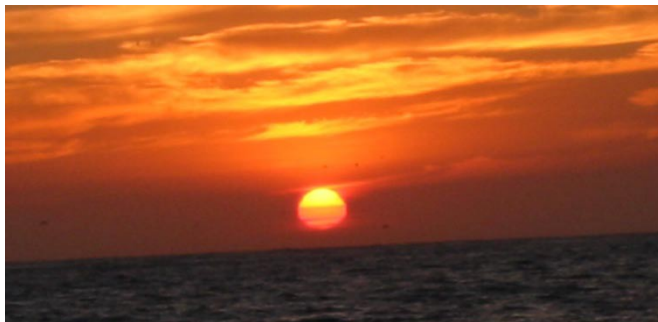
dome that identifies Pillar Point. Here is a photo as seen from the south leaving the harbor, but it can be seen from the north approach as well.



10 The Pillar Point golf ball.

The sun was getting low in the sky and we had to decide whether to motor-sail through the night or stop off at Pillar Point Harbor. I had paid for a week of broadband access from my Verizon Wireless cell phone, which was connected by USB to my laptop for high-speed internet access anywhere I could get a cell phone signal. That means at least 3-5 miles offshore, which is very useful when the weather is an issue.

As it turned out, small craft warnings were already in place for a storm front that was moving down from the north. Seas and winds would build all night. So we radioed the Pillar Point Harbor Master on VHF channel 9 to get a side tie and see how things looked tomorrow.



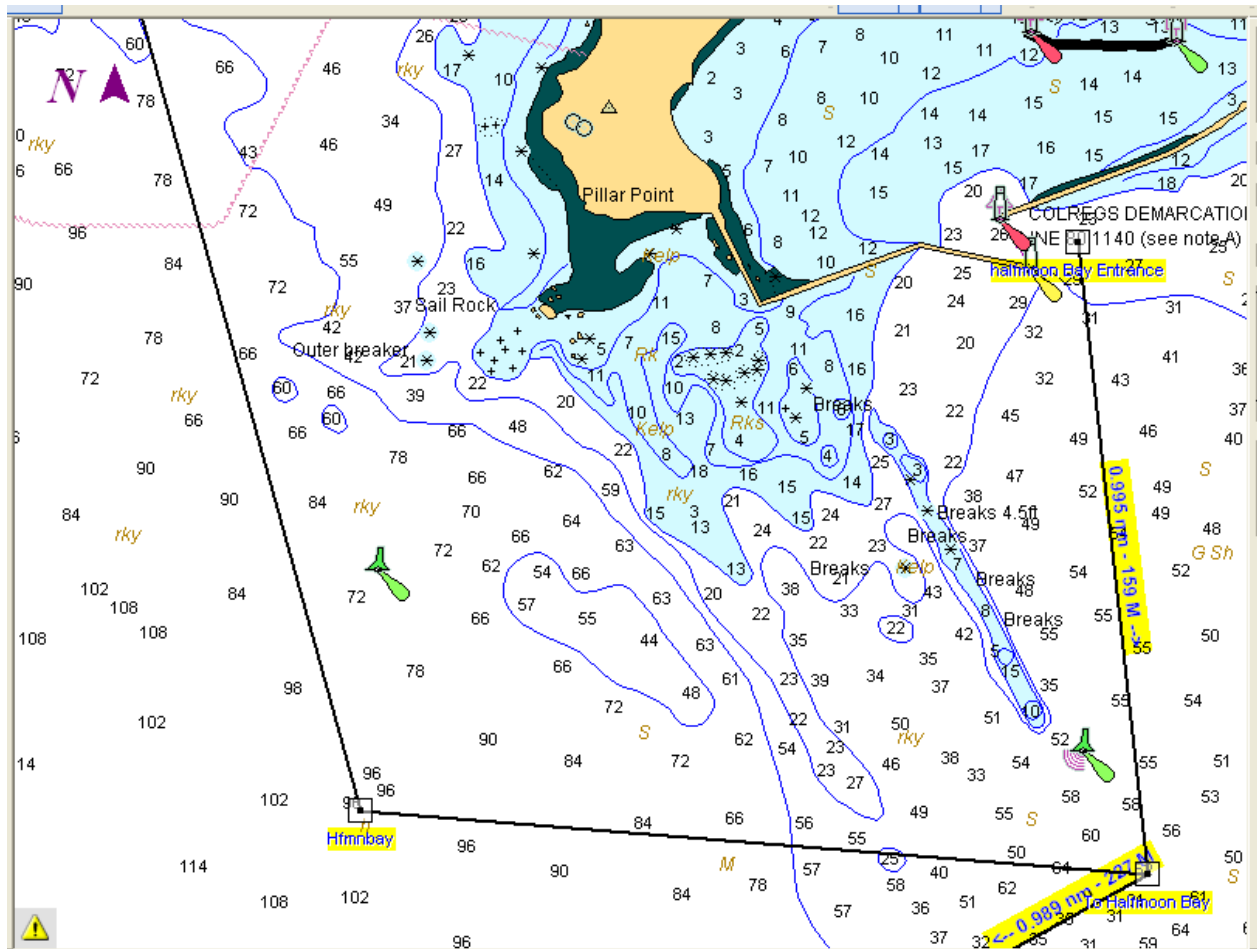
11 Red sky at night did not turn out to be a sailor's delight.

The approach to the breakwater entrance can be done only from the south because of the Kings Rock reefs, which extended out about a mile south from Pillar Point. Only locals try this at night unless they have GPS and RADAR because the buoys are hard to spot. In our case, we needed to find the first green buoy marking the outer breaker, then the next one marking the end of the Kings Rock reefs. In the gathering dusk it was still feasible, but GPS and our strategically placed waypoints got us in.



12 Aha! The green buoy off Pillar Point Harbor!

Here is the route for getting into Pillar Point Harbor entrance.



13 Routes for getting in and out of Pillar Point Harbor.

When we finally got on a northerly heading for the breakwater entrance, we could see the green beacon tower on the port side of the entrance with the golf ball behind. Line them up as you get near and you are on course for the protected outer moorings and anchorage.



14 The outer breakwater at Pillar Point Harbor.

15 The red marker to the starboard side of the entrance.



An inner breakwater protects the actual harbor. After crossing the large outer anchorage, we came to the inner harbor, which is quite shoal except where the berths are tied. We were careful to enter to starboard of the red marker on the end of the inner breakwater. You can also enter to port of the green marker on the port end of the breakwater. We side-tied, checked in with the very helpful harbor staff, and headed for the Ketch Joanne Restaurant above the parking lot. Friendly waitresses brought us excellent food, and we returned to Sandpiper for the night. I strongly recommend Ketch Joanne Restaurant especially for its hearty breakfasts featuring thick, smoked slab-cut bacon with lots of eggs, potatoes, and other proteins and carbs needed by cruising sailors.

The next morning we found ourselves smothered in thick fog and cold wind—a bad combination. Small craft warnings were up for high winds, seas had built to 10-12 foot swells with 4-6 foot wind waves, and we decided to abort the delivery until the weather moderated. We moved Sandpiper to a berth and battened her down. My wife made the drive from Santa Cruz to pick us up, we delivered David back to Moss Landing, then I drove us back up to Mountain View to take care of pressing business.

Friday night when I played jazz with my Yacht Club Band at the Elkhorn Yacht Club, I put out the word that David couldn't make the next leg with me. Live-aboards Todd and Paul volunteered to keep me company, so on Sunday morning we roused them out of their boats, drove them up to Pillar Point Harbor, fed them a huge Ketch Joanne Restaurant breakfast, and we got Sandpiper ready for the trip.

Half Moon Bay to Santa Cruz Harbor

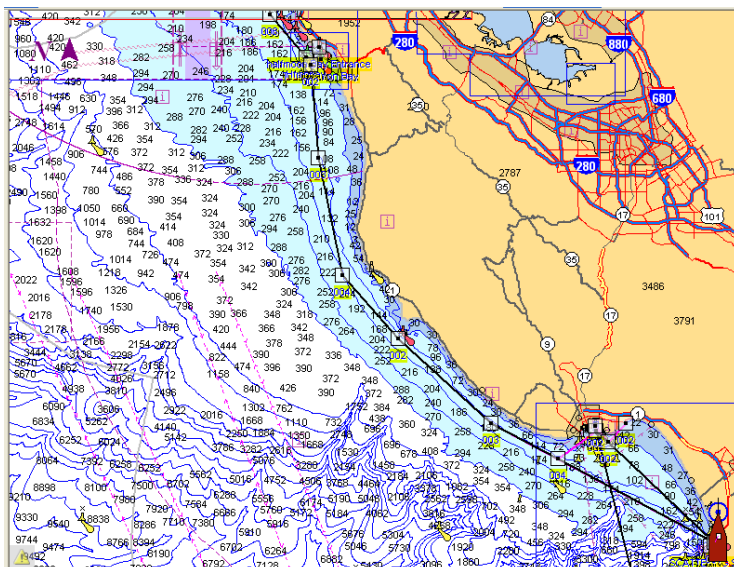
Seas were calm and there was very little wind. The buoy reports confirmed it, so we put up the main and motor-sailed south.



16 Paul



17 Todd



We stayed about three to five miles offshore. Our route and waypoints followed the California Central Coast at an approximate 20 fathom line.

18 Our major landmarks were the lighthouse at Pigeon Point, the buildings on the point at Ano Nueva, the cement stacks at Davenport, and the big sandbank that marks the turn into Monterey Bay.

The Pigeon Point lighthouse is used by NOAA as the northern border of its new coastal forecast range to twenty nautical miles out that follows down to Point Pinos at the south end of Monterey Bay. Pacific waters here tend to be more windy and lumpy than out of Half Moon Bay. When cruisers make the turn into Monterey Bay, yet another forecast area, the big Pacific swells follow them, but the wind moderates.



19 The Pigeon Point Lighthouse.

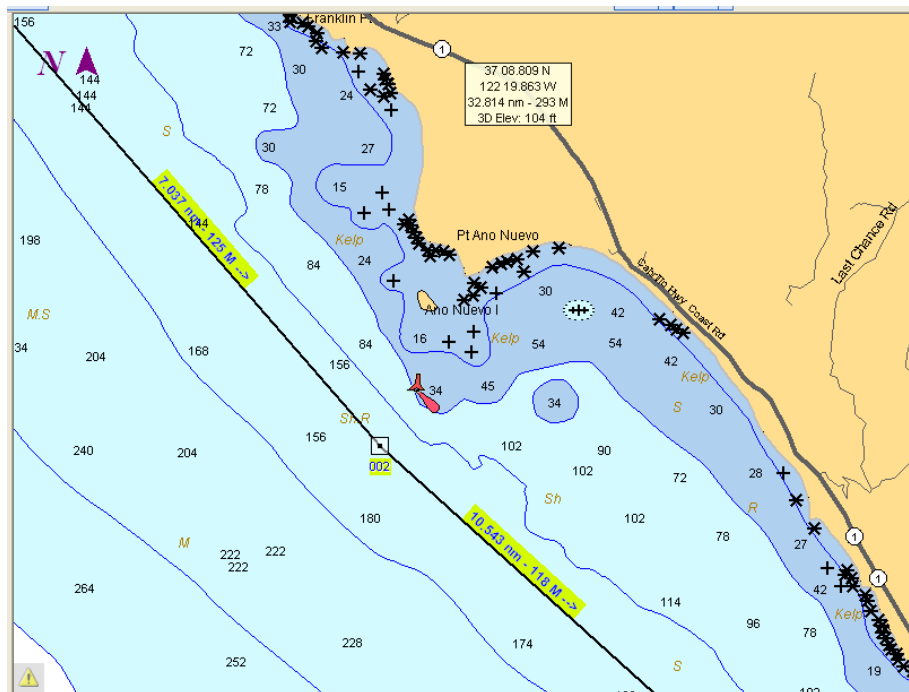
To plan the trip from San Francisco I checked the NOAA forecast areas for Point Arena to Pigeon Point (including Half Moon Bay and Pillar Point), for Pigeon Point to Point Pinos, and for the separate Monterey Bay area. They are really three different forecast areas. Especially for a trip north, where new weather systems usually make their appearance, or for plans to run all night, all three areas should be examined. Again, the best information about what's really going on out there with wind and seas comes from the buoy reports at Weatherbuoy.com.

Almost as soon as we had Pigeon Point on our port beam, the wind came up and the seas began to get lumpy. By the time we sighted Point Ano Nuevo, winds were steady. Sailors will tell you that rounding Ano Nuevo can be a real wind-bash, but not for us that day. It is usually best to pass well offshore to avoid the highest winds.



20 The research buildings at Point Ano Nuevo as magnified with telephoto lens. We stayed much farther out than the photo indicates. Notice how far out the red warning buoy is placed.

There is a little protected bight that fishermen use to shelter from NW weather. Pleasure boaters also duck in to anchor or heave-to for a little rest. You can see where it is on the chart around the rocky point. You should respect the red warning buoy even if you can't see the rocks. They are there!

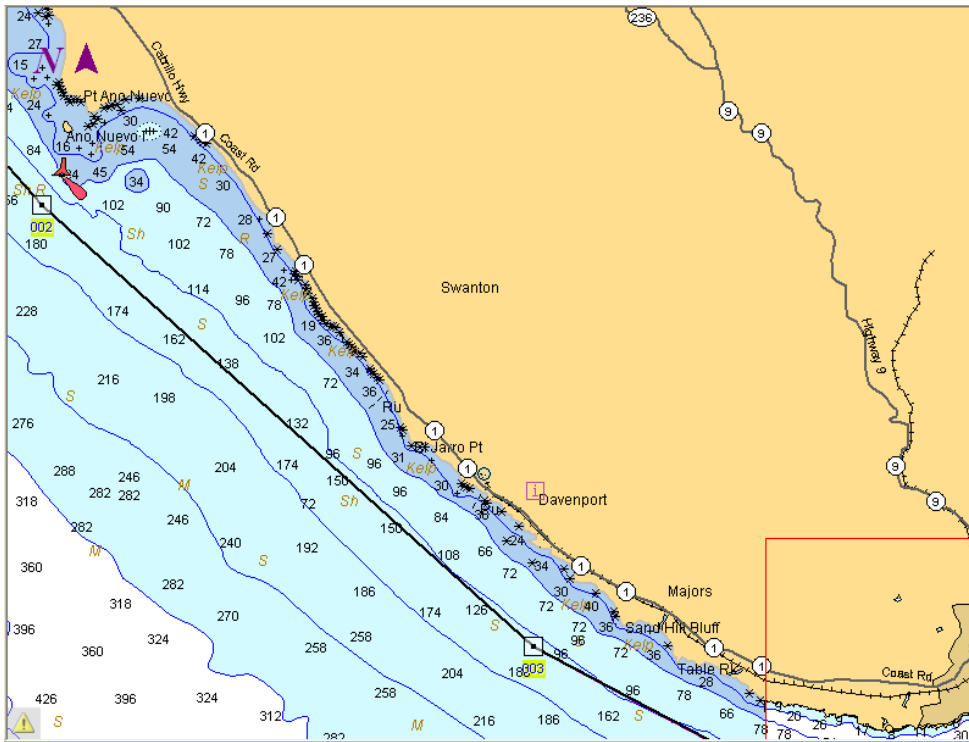


21 If you want to shelter in the cove south of Point Ano Nuevo, watch out for the kelp.

Our next waypoint brought us to within sight of Davenport, the old whaling port that is now a small town with a large cement plant. That plant is an excellent landmark for cruisers.



22 Telephoto shot through haze. The tall cement buildings are easily identified through binoculars.



23 The big sand hill past Davenport points to the portal to Monterey Bay. You can veer to port and follow the coast to Santa Cruz Harbor or continue on a heading for Monterey Harbor.

Here is a telephoto of the big sand hill landmark where Highway 1 has been blasted out of the hills over the beach. The sun is about to set, which causes the unusual lighting.



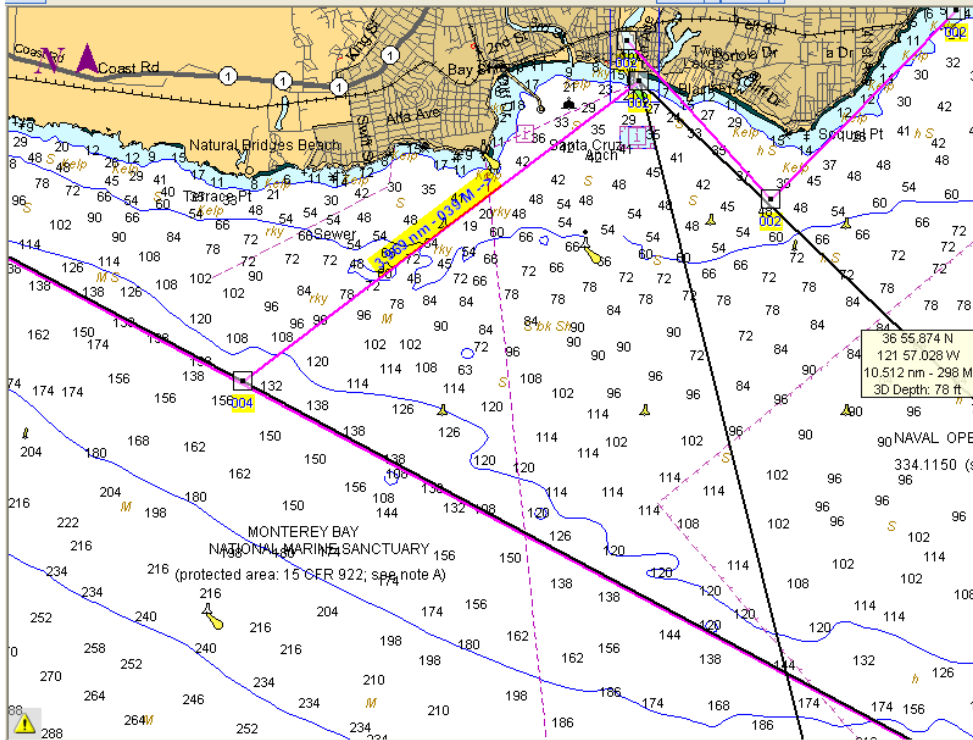
24 If you have any visibility, you can't miss the sand hill. Now you are nearly ready to make the turn into Monterey Bay.

By the time we made our turn into Monterey Bay, the sun was setting, cold winds and confused seas were arising as the land breezes came down on us, and we had decided to side-tie at Santa Cruz Harbor for the night. I would drive Todd and Paul back to Moss Landing and single-hand Sandpiper down the next day.

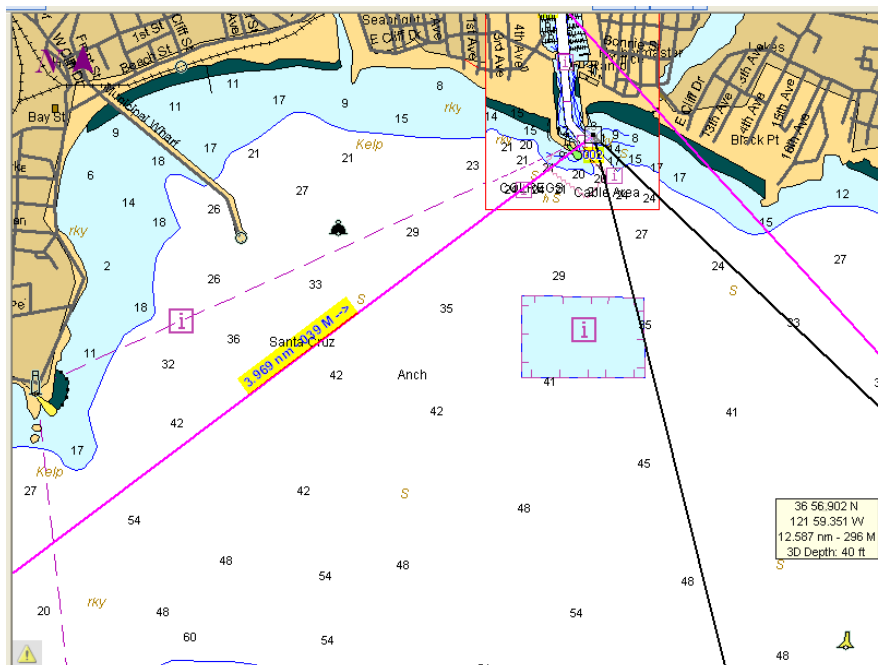


25 Pretty but cold! We didn't need two more hours of this, so we put in at Santa Cruz. Cruising's supposed to be fun, right?

With running lights on, we made a night-run for Santa Cruz Harbor. Very confusing with all the lights, so we were glad to have laptop chart plotter with GPS and a nice screen dimmer for night vision. Our run took us past Lighthouse Point and the Santa Cruz Wharf to the harbor entrance, which I always mark with a waypoint.



26 Instead of staying on our heading for Moss Landing, we made a straight run from our waypoint to the Santa Cruz Harbor.



The night-duty harbor guard told us to pick out a side-tie in the lower harbor, which we did. Here are details of making the entrance into Santa Cruz Harbor.

27 Only GPS can help you find the harbor entrance lights at night. Too much competition!

Santa Cruz to Moss Landing Harbor

I returned to Sandpiper the next day, but now there was a forecast for possible thunder and rain coming in from the south! It didn't look too bad, so I paid fees, filled up with diesel (only need a few gallons after sixteen hours of motor-sailing), and made my way out into the Bay. Immediately winds came up with loud thunder and lightning. I was protected from rain under the dodger, but what about lightning? I turned back and reclaimed my side tie.

The next morning we had clear weather, so I motor-sailed to Moss Landing. I had found that by motor-sailing I could average above 6 knots, and I wanted to make the trip in as close to two hours as possible.

With any visibility, cruisers can see the huge Moss Landing electric power plant stacks from any point on Monterey Bay. To get home, just point your bow toward them.



28 They don't look this big until you get close.



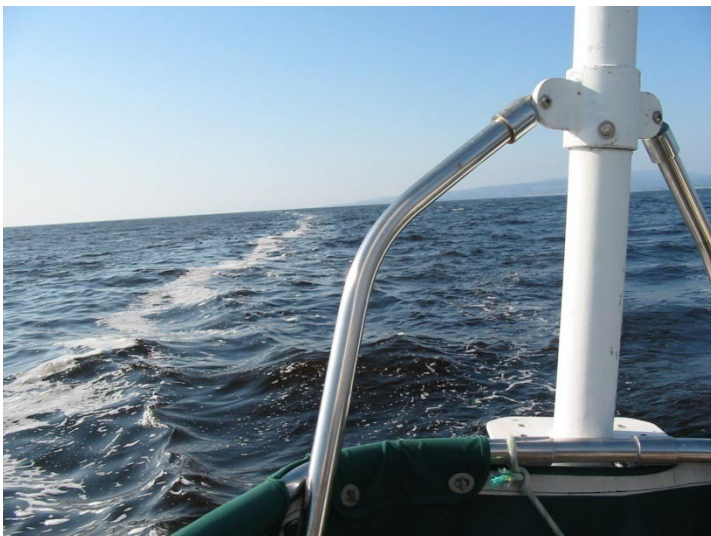
29 Leaving Santa Cruz.

As you approach Monterey Canyon, you leave green water and go into blue water, where the Pacific swell rolls inexorably toward the big stacks, where they trip over the

beach shallows, reflect from the shores, and create the lumpy seas that were the reason I bought Sandpiper in the first place. Here are photos of the white line of foamy spume that forms on the sea surface at the boundary between the green water of the Bay and the blue water of the huge Monterey Canyon that runs down its middle.

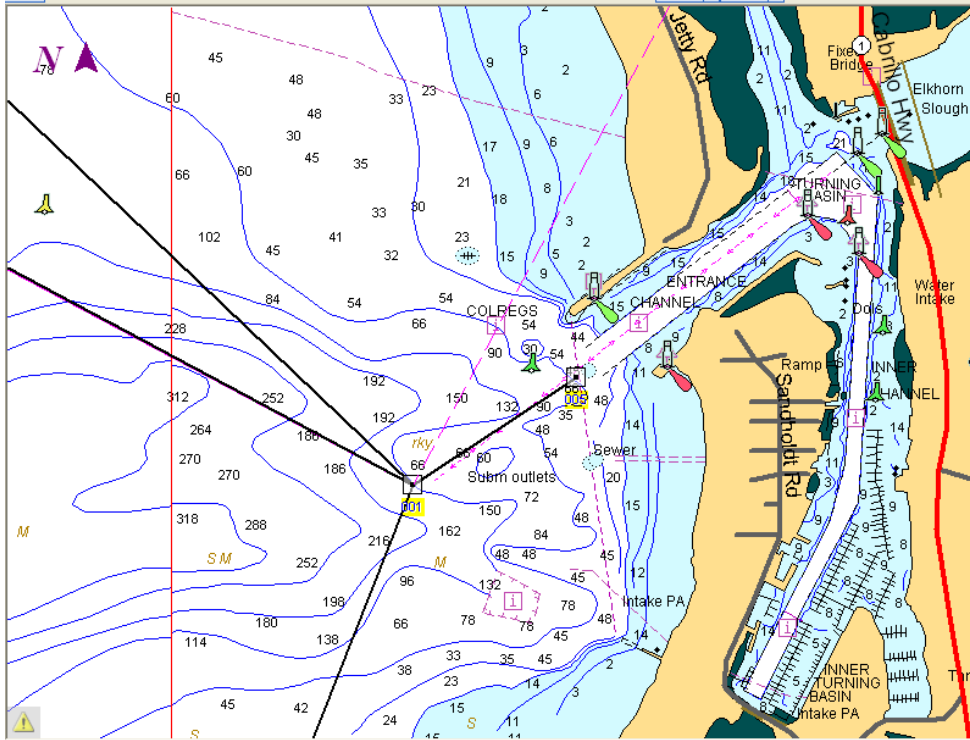


30 What the hell is that out there, Roy?



Here is the line up close. When you cross this line, you can start to drop your downrigger deep! You can set your depth sounder to a whole new range! And you can roll with the swells.

The approach to Moss Landing Harbor should be made outside the green can, unless you are a fast little power boat. Keep closer to the south side to avoid the reflecting seas from the north side that have been known to turn 80-foot vessels almost ninety degrees in a slow broach.



31 Stay outside the green can, then make your way down the channel between the green and red markers, but keep closer to the starboard or south side.

Here is a photo of the Moss Landing Harbor entrance. Note the green (north) and red (south) entrance markers.



32 When you get inside turn right for the main South Harbor or left for the small North Harbor and Elkhorn Yacht Club.