PASSAGE TO SAN FRANCISCO
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(*Following a four-year circumnavigation from 2006 until 2010, Ellen and Seth are now based in Hawaii. Over the past six years they have cruised most of the Pacific rim from Alaska to Mexico, in addition to completing a second Pacific crossing followed by a three-month cruise through the French Polynesian islands.*

Celeste *is a 40ft wooden cutter, designed by Francis Kinney and built by Bent Jespersen in Sidney, BC in 1986. Although classic above the waterline, she sports a fin keel and a separate skeg-hung rudder.*

All photographs were taken by Ellen or Seth, as was this issue's dramatic cover photo. Visit their impressive blog at https://gonefloatabout.com/ for many more.)

The West Coast of the United States is not known for its idyllic sailing grounds. From Washington's Juan de Fuca Strait down to San Francisco, and even beyond, the coast is a rock-strewn lee shore, indented by only a few harbours with difficult bar entrances. The most notorious of these is the Columbia River, infamous for its enormous breaking waves. The northern West Coast is known for fog, strong, cold winds, confused seas and a south-flowing current that eddies weirdly at Cape Mendocino and other headlands. In short, it's a place most sailors just want to get past in order to reach the warmer climes of Mexico and the idyllic cruising in the Sea of Cortez.

Sailors in the Pacific Northwest, contemplating the passage south, all agree that the trip isn't easy and that the longer you wait in the year the worse the passage will be. They also tend to concur on calling in at San Francisco Bay, a milestone after which the hops are shorter and the weather milder. That's pretty much where consensus ends.

Celeste sails past one of Southeast Alaska's many waterfalls

Regarding the detail of the passage, there are as many theories as there are sailors, which is appropriate given that every day is different out there, every boat is different, and each person's passage will be a unique experience.

The theories run along several lines. One topic is the latest date by which a sailor must round Cape Flattery, the headland at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, gateway from the Inside Passage to the North Pacific and the northwestern tip of Washington State. On this issue there is the least controversy, with most sailors agreeing that it's a bad idea to go later than 1st October. Another point of friendly debate is whether or not to make a direct passage from Neah Bay, the harbour just inside Cape Flattery, to San Francisco, or to break up the passage at various harbours along the Washington, Oregon, and Northern California coasts.

Related to this is the question of how far to stand offshore before turning south. One school of thought says to stay close – only 5 to 10 miles off – so that you can duck into port quickly when a gale is forecast, and cross the bar before it becomes dangerous and the Coast Guard closes the harbour. Another is to go well offshore – as much as 200 miles – on the theory that the swells are better behaved in the deep water beyond the continental shelf, the wind potentially more consistent, sea room great enough to run before a storm, and crab pots non-existent should you encounter a calm and have to motor. Yet another idea is simply to sail the rhumb line between Cape Flattery and Cape Mendocino, the next big cape one has to round before reaching San Francisco. This puts you between 20 and 60 miles offshore at any given time, not ideal for ducking into harbour or for running before a storm, but – at around 700 nautical miles – the shortest and thus potentially fastest route. All of these theories are correct, of course, depending on conditions, forecasts, each individual boat, and each individual sailor's preferences. So the story of the passage that my husband Seth and I made is simply one example of the many possible ways to tackle this trip.

Seth and I originally intended to make this voyage in 2016, setting off right at the end of September as soon as we'd completed our boatyard work in Port Angeles, Washington. Our cold-moulded wooden cutter *Celeste* had spent the previous three years in Alaska, including a voyage to the Arctic and two winters in Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands. As many people know from the television show *Deadliest Catch*, Dutch Harbor sees major storms every year, and one of these had damaged *Celeste*.

In October 2015 a typhoon from Japan curved northeast through the Aleutian chain,

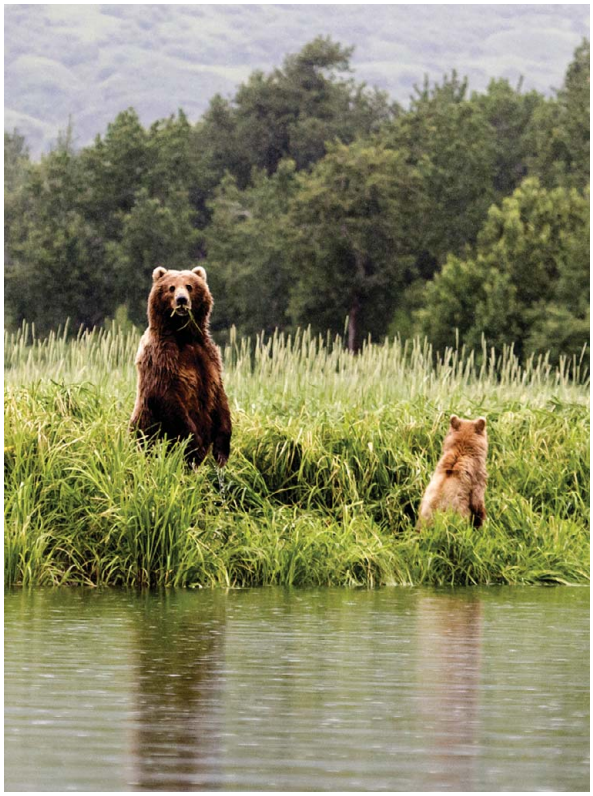
Part of the damage sustained in Dutch Harbor. Note the distorted turnbuckle (bottlescrew) at far right

A cold winter in Washington State

bringing rotating winds of more than 100 knots to Dutch Harbor. Fortunately the only storage for sailboats there is in the water, so *Celeste* was not blown over on the hard but merely caught her toe-rail under the dock. One of her chainplates and the turnbuckle (bottlescrew) on one of her shrouds were bent, the jib track was mangled, her jib cars were pulverised, part of her toe-rail was splintered and several stanchions were bent. Seth and I patched up the essential repairs before setting sail again in the spring of 2016, but there was much more to be done once we reached the well-stocked chandlers and boatyards of Washington State. In addition to the remaining repairs there was also some deferred maintenance, such as a new cutlass bearing and fresh varnish.

As is so often the case, the more we did the more we found to do – including entirely new standing rigging – and our launch date kept getting pushed back. We missed the 1st October deadline, but we hoped we might still find a window to go before November. At the time we were not as adamant about the 1st October date as many West Coast sailors. We knew the weather would deteriorate, but we had sailed in some pretty terrible weather in the Arctic and knew *Celeste* could handle it, and we had yet to learn just how fast and how badly conditions could deteriorate off the West Coast.

We learned soon enough. October seemed to be one big low pressure system, with high winds knocking trees on to power lines and heavy rain falling for 28 days out of 31. November was worse, with the GRIB files featuring big purple and red blotches slamming into the Oregon and Washington coasts one after another. By December Seth and I had resigned ourselves to the reality that the only way we'd reach San Francisco that year was by car.

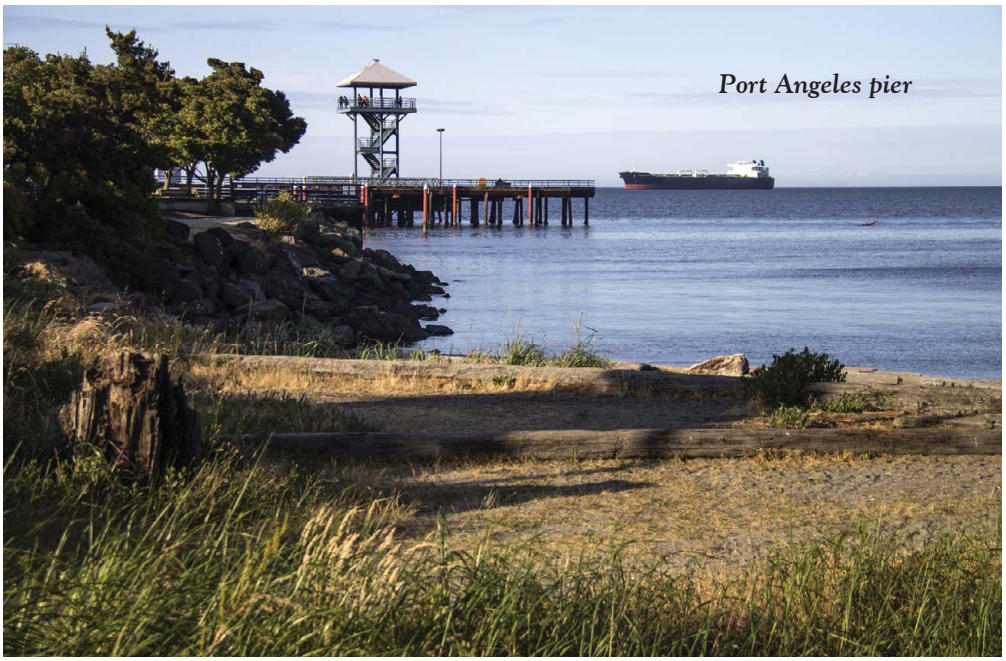


Kodiak bear and cub

When spring finally arrived in late April, we decided to take advantage of the fact that we were still in the Pacific Northwest and spend another summer exploring more of Alaska. We sailed as far as Kodiak Island and gunkholed around there before turning around, which meant that we were running late again. On reaching the Inside Passage we sped south, mostly sailing non-stop day and night with only occasional pauses in deference to the strong tidal streams. Some of our friends thought we were nuts – after all, it still felt like summer in British Columbia even in mid-September. But we knew from the year before how important that 1st October deadline was – we were positively determined to have rounded Cape Flattery by then.

We reached Port Angeles again by 22nd September, said hello-goodbye to our friends there, dealt with some much-needed marine toilet maintenance, and checked the weather forecasts, heaving sighs of relief at the prediction of steady 20–30 knot

Making haste through the Inside Passage



Port Angeles pier

northwest winds. We cast off for Neah Bay on 28th September. The prevailing wind in the Juan de Fuca Strait is westerly, often with some force, which essentially doubles the 60 miles between Port Angeles and Neah Bay. We were blessed with a dead calm on our departure day and motored over glassy water the whole way, reaching the anchorage just in time to be positioned for the strong northwesterly which we hoped would carry us all the way to San Francisco.

September 29th dawned grey and gusty, with the kind of cold, horizontal rain that tells the Pacific Northwest that summer is over. The wind was blowing 15–20 knots from the southwest, which meant we faced a wet beat around Cape Flattery and then a close reach down the coast until – we hoped – the wind veered into the northwest. Between the southwest wind and the east-setting current flowing into Juan de Fuca Strait we had a slow, choppy start. By the time we'd finally rounded the Cape, our

Sea stacks at Neah Bay

The sun came out and the seas lay down as we rounded Cape Flattery

foulweather gear was dripping with spray and rain and our nerves were a little frayed from dodging shipping traffic in the intermittent, low-lying fog. But we'd made it! We'd rounded Cape Flattery two days before our deadline. As if Neptune was celebrating with us, the skies cleared almost as soon as we'd rounded. The seas lay down as soon as we got out of the worst of the current and the wind diminished enough to make our close reach quite comfortable. We had a lovely view of the famous cape ... and then we were off to San Francisco!

Due to the prediction of steady northwesterlies, Seth and I had decided to sail the rhumb line route between Cape Flattery and Cape Mendocino. If the GRIBs were correct, we would not encounter more than a fresh gale (force 8), and that from a favourable direction. We wouldn't have to duck into a harbour and, as interesting as the ports of Washington and Oregon no doubt are, we wanted to take advantage

A brown pelican, denizen of the California coast

of the weather window to do a non-stop passage. We also had a bit of a schedule, having signed up for the Cruising Club of America's bi-annual members' meeting and dinner, which was to take place in San Francisco on 12th October. Furthermore, with such good wind in the forecast, there seemed no need to go far offshore and add many more miles to the trip – we would be sailing, not motoring, so were much less worried about catching crab trap lines (autumn is Dungeness crab fishing season on the West Coast) and, while the smoother seas beyond the continental shelf would doubtless be more comfortable, we didn't think it was worth it in exchange for adding two days to the passage.

Easy 'camping' meals …

By dawn on 30th September the wind had come into the west and we were rollicking along on a beam reach. *Celeste*'s combination of fairly light displacement (for a cruising boat), long overhangs, narrow beam and rounded hull shape makes her a lively ride – her motion has even been known to make some of our Southern Ocean sailor friends a little ill. So we felt no shame in eating quick and easy 'camping' meals on these first two days of the passage – no time in the galley and no dishes to wash. Next day, when we were about 60 miles off Oregon, the wind veered into the northwest and began to build, gradually and steadily. Soon *Celeste* was in her element, rushing ahead with the wind on her quarter. She loves a strong wind from astern – more than 20 knots and her motion smooths right out.

The wind continued to build next day, and reached its peak at about 0500 as we passed Cape Mendocino 20 miles off on a moonless, partly cloudy night. We were not quite far enough away to avoid the unpleasant, swirling currents and resulting steep, choppy waves. Our Cape Horn wind vane had been working beautifully throughout the passage until a big wave crashed full over *Celeste*, clean over her cabin top. The wave broke off one of the blocks that led the control lines from the wind vane's rudder to *Celeste*'s tiller. We spent the next half hour with me at the helm and Seth struggling with a head-torch, fasteners, and screwdriver to repair the problem, but then the wind vane took over again and steered us the rest of the way to the Golden Gate.

Our northwesterly eased over the final two days of the passage and we noticed a significant increase in air temperature. Gone also were northern birds – the murres, rhinoceros auklets and northern fulmars – and instead we began to see those comic denizens of the California coast, brown pelicans. In the late afternoon of 4th October, five and a half days after leaving Neah Bay, the Marin Headlands loomed out of a bank of fog – the perfect, quintessential San Francisco landfall. Reddish brown in the evening light, they meant the end of the big West Coast passage, the completion of a tough trip.

The wind died with the sunset and we started the engine for the first time since Neah Bay. The fog remained thick over the Golden Gate, cloaking that narrow strait and its famous red bridge in a damp quilt. Between the darkness and the fog,

Approaching San Francisco Bay and its characteristic fog

Seth furls sail as we approach the Golden Gate

the visibility was reduced to practically nothing. Even with an excellent radar, chartplotter, AIS and foghorn, plus my local knowledge as a native San Franciscan, it would probably have been more prudent to heave-to and wait until morning to enter the Bay, but we went ahead anyway, excited to have arrived and looking forward to waking up in the city the next morning.

The moon over San Francisco

A time-exposure of the Golden Gate in fog at night as seen from Celeste's deck

The tide was with us, shooting us under the bridge as our radar picked out the ships going in and out. Everything was going well, with the radar targets lining up with the AIS-identified container ships, tankers, and freighters. We were keeping well to our side of the channel, out of everyone's way. Then a radar target appeared that had no corresponding identification on the AIS. What was it? It looked large enough to be a ship, and prior to AIS and the requirement that all commercial ships have transponders we would have known for certain that it was, but we were very stressed until we actually saw it looming in the fog. It was most definitely a ship. We passed each other with no problems, but it was a tense moment and I still do not know why the ship was not transmitting on AIS. It was a little lesson, though, in how technology – when it fails – can sometimes make things more confusing than they were before, and why it's important not to neglect simple skills like listening for foghorn blasts.

But then we were through, under the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco Bay. Suddenly we were motoring under clear skies – the fog was stopped up in the Golden Gate and hadn't spilled into the Bay. The moon shone big and bright overhead, the city's lights formed a sparkling skyline, and the Bay Bridge was outlined in a million twinkling bulbs. We turned north for Richardson Bay, the free anchorage area off Sausalito, opposite the city of San Francisco. Once the anchor was down and holding, the sail cover on, the lines coiled, and the cabin tidied, we opened a celebratory bottle of champagne and toasted our arrival in one of the world's great coastal cities.

This article first appeared in the American magazine *Ocean Navigator*.