Three Lucky Escapes to Japan

Transpacific Crossing from California to Japan

Francis Hawkings

Awarded the Challenge Cup

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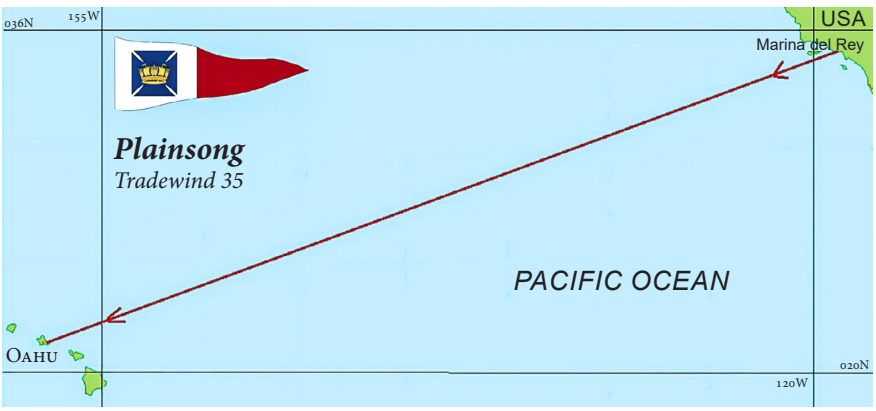
If you want to go to Japan, starting from California, it makes sense to go via Hawaii. And all the more so if you have a son-in-law who is keen to do a Transpac but who, as a British passport holder, was ineligible for a Japanese visa because of Covid entry restrictions at the time.

The best time to sail from Hawaii to Japan is March or April, suggesting a winter passage from California to Hawaii. I had been preparing for this trip for a long time and, as our late January departure date approached, I was feeling pretty smug about my countdown to cast-off. To plan a long cruise you have to be a little O, if not fully OCD, and I had lists, lists of lists, a Gantt chart, the works; and I was bang on schedule. All that remained was the routine replacement of some engine hoses.

I happened to be on board with the engineer as he went about his work. As he took off the old hoses he gave me one of those looks that says 'I don't like what I've found here and you are going to like it even less.'



My engine is a venerable but trusted Perkins for which you can no longer get many Perkins parts. But you can get Volvo alternatives and a part was duly shipped from the factory sooner than you can say 'new heat exchanger' in Swedish. But it turns out that although the Volvo parts are replacements, they are not identical; which means that everything downstream from the Fedex delivery needed to be custom fabricated: adaptors, newly welded pipe diverters, a different layout for the hose runs, etc.

The first week of delay was not a big deal because we had plenty of time, our wives were, amazingly, glad to keep us a little longer and the offshore weather pattern was bad in any case. The second week of delay was a disappointment because the weather window was perfect. And by the third week of delay I would have been tearing my hair out if I had had any. But then, magically, on 10 February the engineers finished an immaculate job and, by chance, I managed to get a last-minute Coronovirus vaccination. We were ready to go!

I am always nervous before a long ocean passage and as we did our shopping for fresh provisions early the next morning (Michael, tactfully: "I think that's probably enough tofu"), I had an onset of apprehension. Plus leaving your wife, or rather leaving your wife behind, for a five or six month absence is not a trifling undertaking. It wasn't easy for either of us to say good-bye on the dock. I was reflecting on the unfairness of the fact that the love and support our non-sailing spouses give us is the very thing that enables us to leave them behind; until I realized that, actually mother and daughter couldn't wait for time together while their sailor husbands were away.

The geometry of a passage from Southern California to Hawaii is pretty straightforward. The North Pacific equivalent of the Azores High sits off the California coast; it is bigger and further north in summer, smaller and further south in winter. You need to describe an elegant arc around its lower limb to maintain an adequate breeze while optimizing your suntan. This year, with a newly installed satellite phone, I was using PredictWind weather routing software which I found extremely helpful and which, gratifyingly, gives a splendid second-hand sense of competence as you pick your course across the otherwise blank slate of the ocean.

A balmy departure from Southern California

Actually, it was not all sunglasses and sunscreen this time. Our sweet, balmy, Southern

A fine dawn en route to Hawaii

California departure day from Marina del Rey became more like the UK in October; on day two we got 24 hours of 25-30 kts, an aggressive sea and plenty of cold. And while the wind direction soon became persistently favorable, through a combination of grey skies, damp nights and amazingly accurate spray it wasn't for well over a week that we saw the last of fleece and long johns. For Michael, a recently former Royal Navy officer, watch keeping was a way of life, even as he suffered stoically through the seasickness rite of passage. We quickly slipped into an easy complementarity. Although Michael can navigate a destroyer, I could teach him the art of setting self-steering gear. The state of his stomach meant I needed to cook bland and simple meals, which is the height of my cuisine in any case. And, being a Millennial, he could advise me on how to connect my Bluetooth ear buds.

Meanwhile, *Plainsong* was performing exceptionally well. I swear that a new yankee and staysail and a better-tuned rig have added a knot to her speed. We all

And fine breezes

know that Tradewind 35s are not fast, but what used to be a cause for celebration, a sustained period of six knots, for example, had become somewhat routine. I was pleased with all the improvements over an extensive refit, though the few issues we encountered (a leaking window seal, a couple of deck leaks) were mostly associated, annoyingly, with recent work.

But these were small niggles. I had recently installed an EchoMax active radar detector which proved very useful, typically way ahead of an AIS warning, because they were compulsory in the recent Golden Globe race (but mostly because the Commodore has one). In fact it also seemed to pick up aircraft, whose bullet-straight vapor trails gave us a reassuring sense that we were heading in the right direction for Honolulu.

Every voyage has its mysteries (as well as its in-jokes) and for us the puzzle on this passage was a harmonic musical note that developed as the wind played through the rigging, or a spar, or – we couldn't figure out what. It disappeared in Hawaii and never reappeared again.

This passage wasn't the trade wind idyll that I had hoped to deliver for Michael. But the wind and the grey which made the passage harder work, along with the position of the North Pacific High which allowed us to sail a very straight course, made for a fast and workmanlike passage. After almost 18 days, much quicker than my 23 days when *Plainsong* was almost new in 1993-4, we surged through the Ka'iwi Channel between the islands of Molokai and Oahu with a stiff breeze and breaking sea behind us, hove to off Honolulu until daylight and then sailed the remaining 20 miles or so to the Ko Olina marina northwest of Honolulu for that lovely 'Ah…' feeling that one gets at the end of a passage.

I had stayed in the public Ala Wai Boat Harbor in downtown Honolulu in 1994 and didn't like it (and it has gone downhill even more since then). As I had not been able to get a berth in the somewhat better, private Kewalo Basin Harbor in Honolulu, we ended up berthed in Ko Olina, a relatively new, also private marina in a vacation resort and golf area some 30 to 45 minutes' drive from downtown. Michael went home after a few days and despite Ko Olina's air of vacation fantasyland I thoroughly enjoyed its peacefulness (give or take the flight path to Honolulu airport) during the four weeks I spent there prepping for my next leg and doing some hiking and sightseeing.

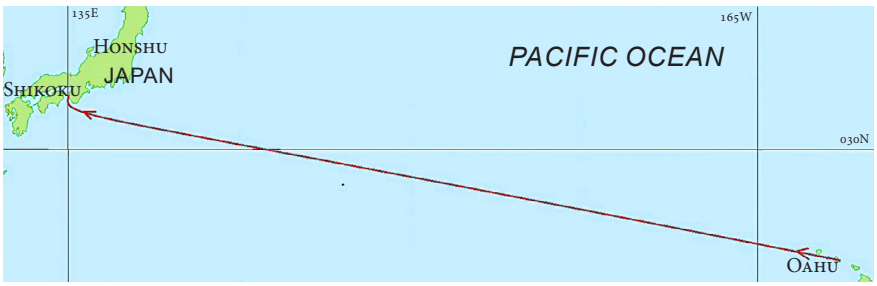
Even though it is the most developed of the Hawaiian islands, Oahu is still very beautiful. The Bishop Museum in Honolulu is an excellent museum of Polynesian and Hawaiian history and culture, bringing home just how much Hawaii looks to the west and southwest across the Pacific rather than east to the US mainland.

Even in Hawaii, where Covid precautions were still in full force, I felt that by being able to set off on a Transpacific cruise, in an irrevocable way I had had a lucky escape from pandemic lockdown. And I had two more lucky escapes to come. But first I had to figure out how to get into Japan. The rules at the time said that if you had been in any of a long list of Covid-affected countries within 14 days, you

could not enter Japan. I figured that a long ocean passage ought to take care of that. And so it proved. I have never used an agent before, but for Japan this year I did. Japan's officialdom for cruising sailors is relatively complex even in normal times, but during the Covid crisis the requirements were especially difficult and constantly changing, as different prefectures introduced or relaxed different states of emergency. Despite being at sea for so long, I was still required to do 14 days' quarantine on arrival (which, rather strangely, meant that the boat had to stay put for a fortnight wherever we arrived but that there were very few restrictions on me). So we had to find somewhere that was a port of entry, had yacht facilities and was open to a two-week stay. It wasn't easy, it turned out, to find the conjunction of these three things and in fact my destination changed several times while I was en route.

In all of this, the agent, Kirk Patterson, was invaluable, not least because multiple government agencies were involved: Coast Guard, Quarantine, Immigration and Customs. In the end, together with the excellent marina manager at Tannowa Yacht Harbor, southwest of Osaka, Kirk was able to negotiate my arrival at a marina which is not a normal port of entry but which would accommodate me through my quarantine and beyond.

But Kirk is much more than just an agent. He provides a consulting service for all aspects of cruising in Japan and, although I didn't use his full range of services, throughout my passage to and time in Japan he was an on-going source of help, information, good advice and moral support.



I left Hawaii on my own on 27 March and for the first two and a half weeks enjoyed the beautiful trade wind sailing that Michael and I had not found before Hawaii. The dawns were stunning and the sunsets were exquisite; the wind blew, gently, and the waves were very well behaved. I took care of the boat in the morning and read a book in the afternoon. I got used to the solitude, though with a satellite phone, and therefore unlimited texts, 'solitude' in the 2020s takes on a rather attenuated meaning, and came to terms with the beautiful enormity and emptiness of the Pacific. I slept in 60 to 90 minute increments at night and felt remarkably untired. The going was not my fastest but I was making around 800 miles a week in the right direction and feeling pretty content. My biggest concern was that I

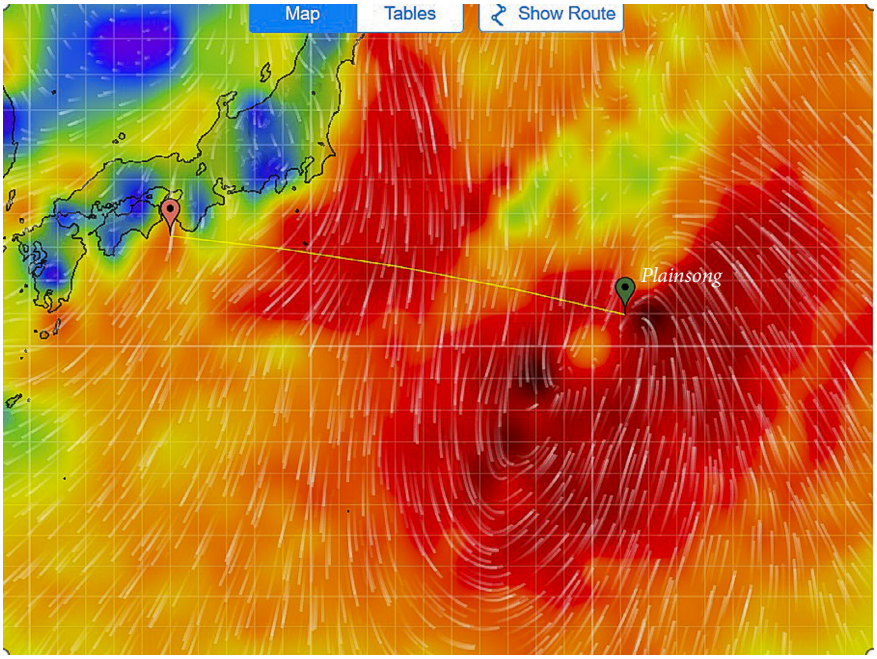
was about to finish Barak Obama's excellent memoir *A Promised Land*. Until, that is, lolling on my bunk on 13 April, about 10 degrees deep into the Eastern Hemisphere and well over the International Date Line, I heard a loud crack on deck. I didn't hurry unduly to get up but would have done if I had realized what the problem was: I had lost my windward cap shroud. It turned out that water had seeped under the port chainplate, which is in effect a D ring bolted through the deck, and corroded the nuts holding the bolts on the underside of the deck; eventually the nuts disintegrated and the bolts pulled up through the deck. Heart attack, bleak thoughts of being dismasted thousands of miles from anywhere, etc.

At this point a further series of lucky breaks set in. First and foremost, the wind was pretty light and I hadn't lost my mast. In addition, because of the bounty of the cutter rig, I was able to cannibalize the nuts off the inner forestay, which I figured wasn't so critical to the rig's structural integrity. By a miracle, both sets of nuts were accessible and the same size; the threads on the cap shroud bolts were more or less undamaged; the fitting had come up cleanly and not enlarged the holes through the deck; and the through-bolts were welded to the D ring above the deck, so I didn't need a second pair of hands to hold anything on deck while I tightened the nuts below. Within three hours we were cautiously under way again. The following day I jury rigged the inner forestay using the stem head fitting. So we were back to full sail plan again and this arrangement saw us through another 2,500 miles and two gales. Having escaped from lockdown, this was escape number two.

Kirk put a damper on my rigging celebrations the following day by telling me about a typhoon that was forming in the vicinity of the Philippines, beyond the range of the GRIB files I was looking at. In the next few days this strengthened into what I subsequently learned from Wikipedia was Super Typhoon *Surigae*, the strongest Northern Hemisphere tropical cyclone to form before the month of May and one of the most intense tropical cyclones on record. For me, happily ignorant of that, the question was how to avoid it if, as is typical, the typhoon swung northeast away from the Philippines and out towards my course.

The question was made more tricky by the fact that *Surigae* hung around the Philippines and strengthened for about a week or so, which made it very hard for the forecasters to agree on where it might go once it got moving. Several forecasts predicted a relatively easterly course, in which case *Surigae* would pass south of me. But there were always one or two outlier forecasts suggesting a more northeasterly course, in which case the typhoon would be ahead of me. To thread the needle between these two scenarios I needed to be sufficiently far north to avoid the easterly path but not too far west.

The obvious solution was to sail northwest, young man. But there was a problem: to the north there was a fairly vigorous low which was producing gale force northerlies, northwesterlies and westerlies around its western and southern circumference. I couldn't sail far north or northwest because doing so would have taken me straight into these gales. I was boxed in.

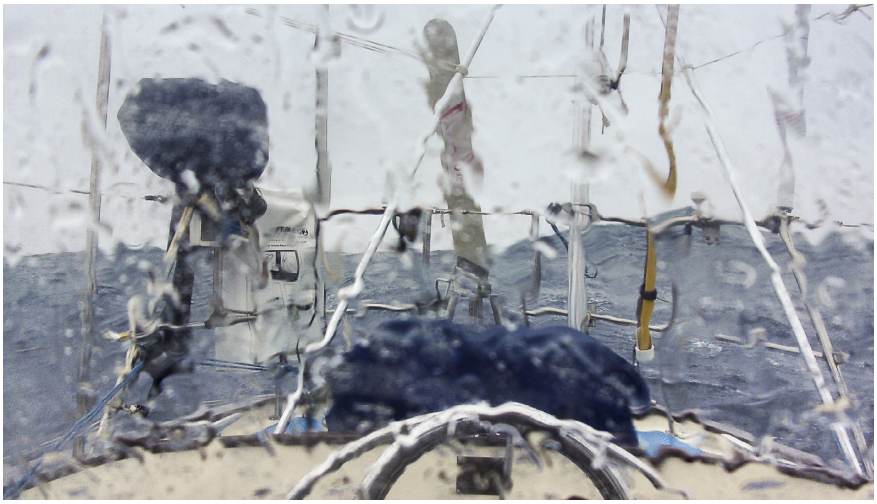


Not the forecast one wants to see (source: PredictWind)

My solution was to head in a northwesterly direction up to 28°N from 24°N and then sail due west. This was designed to keep me sufficiently far north to avoid the most likely path of the typhoon and yet not so far north that I was exposed to a full gale from the low. And indeed it did: I didn't experience sustained winds from the low of more than 35kts, with only occasional full gale gusts. But I did have to heave to for the best part of a day, costing me valuable escape time from *Surigae*, which was now, it was confirmed, tracking along the relatively easterly path and headed to pass south of me.

After almost two weeks of typhoon anxiety the denouement was forecast to come on 26 April. But at the last minute, weakening and now an extratropical cyclone of less than typhoon strength, *Surigae* jinked to the northeast. I stopped congratulating myself on having evaded its path.The wind steadily increased during the morning of 26 April and backed from southeast to northeast. The barometer was plunging. The rain became intense. By early afternoon I realized that storm jib alone was too much sail; eventually the Monitor, which is a remarkable self-steerer, couldn't cope, we gybed, and were lying uncomfortably crosswise to the waves, which by this stage were pretty big and angry (and, I will admit, a bit frightening).

Good storms are all alike; every bad storm is bad in its own way. The trouble with bad storms is that your normal defences (heaving to, running under storm jib, etc.) don't work and you are experimenting to find the right solution, but for real. I



Battened down

hand steered for a couple of hours while trying out different rigs. Storm jib was too much but *Plainsong* wouldn't run under bare poles and Monitor alone; she wasn't going fast enough and kept getting pushed crosswise again as the waves came up under her counter. The key was to move fast enough but keep the stern as straight on to the following sea as possible. I thought that a drogue would slow her down too much and didn't want to have the recovery challenge from a failed experiment.

In the middle of all this the rain stopped and a hole of blue sky opened above us amidst the low grey cloud all around. I wondered whether we were in what was left of the eye and feared a sudden shift of wind direction and an even more confused sea. But it kept blowing steadily in the low 40s and gusting, at its maximum, into the 50s while continuing to back through north. Eventually the right combination was a tiny triangle of yankee, barely more than the reinforced corner of the sail unfurled from the furler, plus a warp and chain streamed astern. By late afternoon the wind had reached northwest, the barometer was rising and the edge was coming off both the gusts and the waves. I knew that I could resort to the sailor's ultimate defence in these circumstances: a cup of soup, dry out and de-salt.

So on what turned into a bright sunny evening, albeit still windy, I felt confident that I could run south or slightly west of south all night and was celebrating the fact that nothing had broken or gone wrong. In retrospect, I estimate that I was perhaps some 120nm west of the eye at its closest point of approach; if it had not been for the low to the north before the cyclone reached me, I would have been more than 300nm west. It was my third lucky escape, both because I stayed in the better sector of a now-weakened cyclone and because later that day, according to Wikipedia, *Surigae* began to undergo 'explosive cyclogenesis' once it had passed me, with ten-minute maximum sustained winds of 70kts.

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I had about 1,000nm left to run. 24 hours after my *Surigae* moment I could resume my proper course to the west under well-reefed main and yankee. I told myself that now, with the typhoon threat passed, I didn't care what the weather did and revelled in some light air and diminishing seas in the following days. But even that promise to myself didn't prove strictly true. About 400nm from Japan, the Japanese authorities, through Kirk, starting pressing me more insistently for an ETA. It was made clear that once I had specified an ETA, I mustn't be late and it wouldn't do to be early. I was to behave, in other words, like a ship. It sounded more like a TA than an ETA.

The problem was that the forecasts for the next few days were all over the place, mostly light and contrary, and I needed to negotiate the Kuroshio current which would run at three knots or so for a while but which, like the Gulf Stream, was meandery and hard to pin down until you were in it. I had no real idea when I would arrive.

But I was making progress. Once I had passed the line of offshore islands running roughly south from Tokyo I could tell that things were changing. I was visited by a swallow which did a lap of the boat and headed back to the mainland, a magic moment between two voyagers. The sea, unfortunately, became encumbered with trash. And my AIS screen had changed from the beautiful blank of the open ocean to a chaos of up to 35 vessels or so at any one time. It was clear that I was reaching the known world again. In the end, I decided to do a sustained stint of motoring, my only one of the trip, to get across the north-south shipping lane in a controlled way since the wind was light and the visibility was poor and because this would put me within striking distance of a predictable 'E'TA. It was boring but it paid off: I was able to set sail again for my last night on the open sea. Sunrise on the morning of 8 May revealed, along with the intense coastal shipping, the

Landfall on the Kii Peninsula

beautiful green and grey shades of ridge after ridge of hills on the southernmost tip of Honshu, Japan's largest island.

My final 24 hours were both lyrical and absurd. During the day I sailed up the narrowing funnel of Kii Suido which separates Honshu from Shikoku, the next large island to the west. An ocean voyage turned into a coastal day sail as towns came into view, tiny white fishing boats surprised the life out of me in the haze and I swept between two islands on a fair tide, a smooth sea and a moderate breeze on the beam.

But given the times of these tides and my preference to sail through the narrow channels in daylight, in order not to be late for my TA I had to arrive way too early. But since I was way too early, I couldn't arrive (I wasn't allowed to anchor, since that would have been penetrating Japanese soil). So I spent the night hove-to off the entrance to Tannowa, drifting this way and that, avoiding coastal traffic, nearly mounting runway A of Kansai International Airport which juts out into Osaka Bay and discovering unfamiliar, small numbers on my depth sounder.

At first, as the wind piped up to an irritating 25 kts, I was annoyed at the bureaucracy; but by the time a beautiful dawn arrived, I couldn't care less; nothing

Timing my ETA – the approach to Tannowa

could spoil my good mood. Finally, after 42 days at sea and one hour's sleep in the previous 48, I moored alongside the Q dock in Tannowa Yacht Harbor at 1001 on 9 May. I was, to my shame, one minute late, because at the last moment I changed my mind about which direction to lie and had to switch the fenders.

The 'I can't believe I'm here' feeling didn't wear off for at least a couple of weeks. During that time I had made friends amongst the overwhelmingly welcoming and generous sailing community around Tannowa (where *Sunstone* and Tom and

Vicky Jackson (RCC) are still fondly remembered), ordered a new oil pressure switch from the UK, planned some sightseeing and a mini-cruise in the Seto Naikai inland sea between Honshu and Shikoku and learned to count up to two in Japanese.

I spent eight weeks in Japan until it was time to fly home. Since sailing from afar was the only way to enter Japan at that time, I was virtually the only foreign tourist in the country and found myself completely alone in UNESCO World Heritage sites in Kyoto and Nara, Japan's earlier ancient capital. My Seto Naikai mini-cruise took me around islands, through channels and across traffic separation lanes in this incredibly beautiful, protected body of water, amidst calms

Plainsong in Naoshima

A little perspective - a previous Transpac'er in Tannowa Yacht Harbour Bldg

and gentle breezes. It included the art and architecture island of Naoshima, which had been the origin of my original decision to take *Plainsong* to Japan; and it introduced me to yet more new friends. These new friendships deepened my experience of Japan immeasurably and will, I hope, become lifelong associations.

But these local stories will have to wait, like *Plainsong*, until next year. She is safely tucked up behind a breakwater in Tannowa, where I can just see her stern on the live webcam. Next year, all being well and if I can drag myself away from Tannowa, we will devote the season to coastal cruising in Japan and, I swear, master the Japanese for the remaining eight numbers between two and 10.