



Southbound Navidad

By Wendy Hinman

On a mission to reach Zihuatanejo, Mexico in time to celebrate Christmas with friends, we rode a “screaming norther” south from the Sea of Cortez. It was our first season of voyaging, the first Christmas of many we’d celebrate aboard—something we could have hardly imagined when my husband Garth Wilcox and I set off in the summer of 2000 with an open-ended plan.

With less than ten days to travel an estimated 727 miles, we worried whether we’d have enough wind to sail. We had enough wind, and then some. Our first days resembled Disneyworld’s famous E-ticket ride, *Velella* surfing rollers that belied the sea’s typical tranquility. Yeehaw! As we steam-rolled south at speeds of eight and nine knots, our trolling-generator

spinner leapt out of the water, pirouetted like a diver off a high dive, then vanished into the waves forever. All that remained trailing behind us was shredded line. Our concern shifted from making time southward to keeping the boat from suffering more casualties.

After making excellent time for four days, when we rounded Cabo Corrientes we faced a completely different weather scenario. Warm, moist air overwhelmed us. We shed layers, stripping down to nothing whenever we could. The boat ghosted along almost silently under spinnaker, save for the occasional creak of lines or the rush of water cutting away from the bow. The wind grew progressively lighter until we sat becalmed. Not a ripple disturbed the water—a much toastier version of Puget Sound’s convergence zone. We hid under our sailing awning, desperate for a patch of shade, as the hours marked our lack of progress. Sweat trickled down our backs. The scent of lush tropical vegetation and our overripe bodies tickled our nostrils. Still no sign of breeze. We had hundreds of miles to travel, but little fuel and no wind to harness to get there. Nothing but an industrial port lay between us and our intended destination.

In our mad dash to push offshore, I’d given little thought to Christmas decorations. That last year of preparations seemed to require anticipating every possibility. But we soon grew tired of getting ready and wanted to just begin our adventures afloat. I hadn’t imagined spending our first Christmas at sea alone, sweating under blistering sunshine without much to mark this most special of days. I was anxious to arrive and spend it in the company of, if not family and old friends, at least the friends we’d made along the way.



We dropped anchor, checked in and went in search of whatever decorations and gifts we could find before stores closed. We found a ten-inch wire tree with surprisingly authentic-looking cloth needles, tiny hand-painted glass balls, and two-inch candy canes. Paired with ribbons, foil-wrapped candies and miniature stockings, the boat took on a festive air. Our decorations took only minutes to arrange—something I redid often whenever a powerboat wake knocked over our tiny tree—and would stow nicely behind a stereo speaker for next year's celebration.


We hardly missed the scent of pine boughs to mark the season. After a sweaty session shaping sugar cookies into snowmen and wreaths, baking and decorating them, we caroled around the bay by dinghy. We


Capitalizing on sailing skills and patience honed after years of racing Puget Sound's frustratingly calm waters, we coasted into Zihuatanejo Bay in the early hours of the 23rd. Phew!

would go on to celebrate Christmas in New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands and Hong Kong, yet none stick in my mind quite so strongly as this first one on our voyage.



Wendy Hinman is the author of "Tightwads on the Loose: A Seven Year Pacific Odyssey," about her 34,000-mile voyage aboard a 31-foot boat with her husband, Garth Wilcox, to whom she's still married and still happens to like. She is currently working on her next book, another adventure about her husband's childhood circumnavigation and shipwreck at the age of fourteen and building a boat for their next adventure. For more information, visit www.wendyhinman.com.





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