


125° W

# Riding the 125°W: Making the Passage South

By | **Captain Nonnie Thompson**

Photo: Dreamstime





For the adventurous and the well-prepared, making a rhumbline along the 125°W longitude line can be the best advice for making the passage south. David and Captain Nonnie Thompson followed this course as they set out to move their boat – and their home – from Seattle to San Francisco.

➤ **The inland waters** of Washington, British Columbia and Alaska offer a lifetime of comfortable cruising protected by deep water and tall mountains. For a little challenge as summer unfolds, a trip out the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the west coast of Vancouver Island promises remote harbors and startling wildlife. And when time and talent allow, a push north to the Queen Charlotte Islands reveals a deeper wilderness and native Haida lore.

But if you're tantalized by sailing south on the expansive Pacific Ocean, grilling tuna caught fresh from an azure sea, and savoring star-cloaked skies, maybe it's time to steer out the Strait – and turn south, heading to the open sea.

Making the passage south, whether headed to California, Mexico or beyond, you'll find ocean voyaging with all the trimmings within 50 miles of the coast. While the rewards are plentiful, good planning, compiling local knowledge and charts, and choosing vessel, crew, and timing carefully are essential.

The Pacific Ocean can be a vicious enemy or a passive friend and we had heard many renditions of this passage. Many blue-water cruisers, even the ones who have successfully navigated long ocean passages,

have agreed: the stretch of Pacific from Neah Bay to San Francisco can be one of the most treacherous passages a boater undertakes. One friend in a San Juan 28 reported, "50-knot gales and 25-foot breaking seas" before he hustled his young family below and sealed the hatches. Another took his new wife offshore and into such a blow that when they arrived in San Francisco, she left the boat (and him) and never looked back.

There can be periods of boring calm on this passage – but suspense is always present.

After a summer of cruising the balmy San Juan and Gulf Islands and the fog-bound sounds of western Vancouver Island, my husband David and I planned a September passage from Victoria to San Francisco Bay. We were moving to the Bay area for work and, like sea turtles, carrying our boat-home along with us. We had done this trip ten years before, in reverse, south-to-north. With our then-young daughter, we had harbor-hopped from Maine to Seattle. It was 1996 and our weather and local savvy was restricted to VHF, SSB, and rumor.

During our decade of sailing in the Pacific Northwest, modern weather routing had improved and we had become familiar with patterns, tides and currents. For advice for the passage, we made calls to friends, weather services, and noted local legends. For historic wind, precipitation and waves patterns, we studied the *Sailing Directions Planning Guide*. Charts, forecasts, and ➤





1. Leaving Victoria, B.C., we pass Trial Island, covered with sea lions. 2. An ominous sunset greets us as we approach 125° West. 3. Greg, Betsy and Sally share a moment in the cockpit before their first night at sea. 4. Hot cups, clearly labeled, are lined up and ready for the night watch.



first-hand advice encouraged us to turn the helm seaward. In the end, we distilled local knowledge to its no-nonsense essence: "Sail out the Straits to the 125°W longitude line and hang a left."

Moored in Victoria after our summer of cruising the Northwest, we prepared to make the jump out into blue water. We stocked up on provisions and dragged the last spare parts to the dock. We welcomed our crew from Seattle via float planes: friends Betsy and Greg, and David's sister Sally. Our Able Apogee 50, *Bittersweet*, sat a little lower in the water with the extra gear and full tanks. The only item offloaded was our yellow lab, destined for a friends' backyard! We downloaded a personal weather report from Commanders' Weather Corporation in New Hampshire and got the green light to head south. Then we coordinated the current and wind for the Straits, colluded on a departure time, and checked out of Canada one more time. After a final dinner in town and a good sleep dock-side, we shoved off.

All hands were on deck as we motored out of Victoria Harbor with an ebbing tide. The sky broke into patches of pale blues and grays, seaplanes buzzed overhead, and the wind lay down. We were happy for time to find our sea legs and our wits, with some getting-to-know-you hours for our crew, as we left our shore lives behind. With five spunky, middle-aged adventurers, conversation sashayed from the lighter side of kids and jobs to tall tales of mythic proportions.

David gave the *Bittersweet* "safety gear and basic handling" lecture, while I distributed life jackets, harnesses and tethers. For the crew of five, we planned on watches of three hours on and three hours off, two and three crew members per watch. Either David or I would always be on deck for decisions and referrals. We knew that a consistent schedule and resting when off-watch would be important to the stamina and comfort of the crew. Food, water, rest and humor are essential underway. All contribute to well-being under physical, emotional and mental strain – especially humor. Knowing that seasickness can disable laughter as quick as a dementor's kiss, we distributed the Patch to ward it off.

Before long, the sea surface broke with the sharp black fins of orca whales and the graceful leap of Dall's porpoise. For hours, we watched their private performance. It was a stirring bon voyage to the Pacific Northwest waters. With a squall brewing over our bow, we were all keen to the possibilities ahead. By tea time, light rain pattered on deck and the motor droned. As we began to feel the rise and fall that was the heartbeat of the ocean under our keel, our aquatic friends headed east and we continued our path to the sea.

With Tatoosh Island on our port beam, we skidded around dramatic Cape Flattery and into the open sea and began our pursuit of the 125°W-longitude rhumbline. The sun set, the wind increased and the cold sea air blew in. Dinner came in shifts, as we huddled under the dodger. Scattered rain and voluminous clouds filled the western

Photos: Nonnie Thompson

sky. The sun set in rainbows and crimsons. "Red sky at night," we all clucked. When the wind had filled in to 15 to 20 knots, we set the jib and tied a reef in the main for the evening. As night settled, lights of passing ships dotted the sea and brilliant stars lit the sky.

By midnight, we had reached the invisible 125°W. A rising barometer, a clear sky and a second reef made for easy motion in a northwesterly swell. Orion stood tall above, its nebula an ill-defined gaseous mass. The wonder of the heavenly bodies distracted us from the eerie night sea. Dozens of Pacific white-sided dolphins rising in our bow wake brought hours of entertainment as the auto-pilot kept course and speed. Easy night broke into easy dawn.

Our second day out began with a pink sunrise over

land we couldn't see. The offshore waters took on the deep blue hue we recalled as truly ocean. By mid-morning, due west of Cape Shoalwater, the northern entrance to Willapa Bay on the Washington coast, we spotted seagulls diving and the sea surface foaming with a feeding frenzy. We sensed a feeding opportunity of our own.

On board, as always, was our lucky hand-line, discovered years ago on a Caribbean circuit. In a fishing shed in Bequia's Port Elizabeth, we found Mr. Wallace crafting his famous "handmade hand-lines with hand-sharpened

hooks." With passion, this spry, salty, sea-dog shared his fishing wisdom. Wallace equipped us with 100 meters of 180-pound-test monofilament line on a wooden spindle, 6-inch silver-and-pink silicone squid lures, and the confidence to fish successfully. No sooner had we departed for Tobago Cays when we had a 20-inch Barracuda on the line and dinner in the pan. For the rest of the trip, we feasted on wahoo, mahi-mahi, Spanish mackerel, and bonito, yellowfin, bluefin and albacore tuna – in sushi, seviche, salad, and on the grill.

Now, blue sky sparkled on an azure Pacific Ocean. We set Mr. Wallace's famous lucky line in a different sea – but with the same results. Before the line could be secured, we

“The Pacific Ocean can be a vicious enemy or a passive friend.”

had caught an elegant albacore, just big enough for several meals for five. Braced in the galley against the slowly rolling sea, I prepared the freshest tuna sushi for lunch any of us would ever have. As we broad-reached into the evening, we dined on grilled tuna and salad while a quarter moon rose between rain squalls.

Why do mishaps and emergencies always seem to happen in the night? In a moderate swell under dappled clouds at midnight, David checked the engine and found ▶



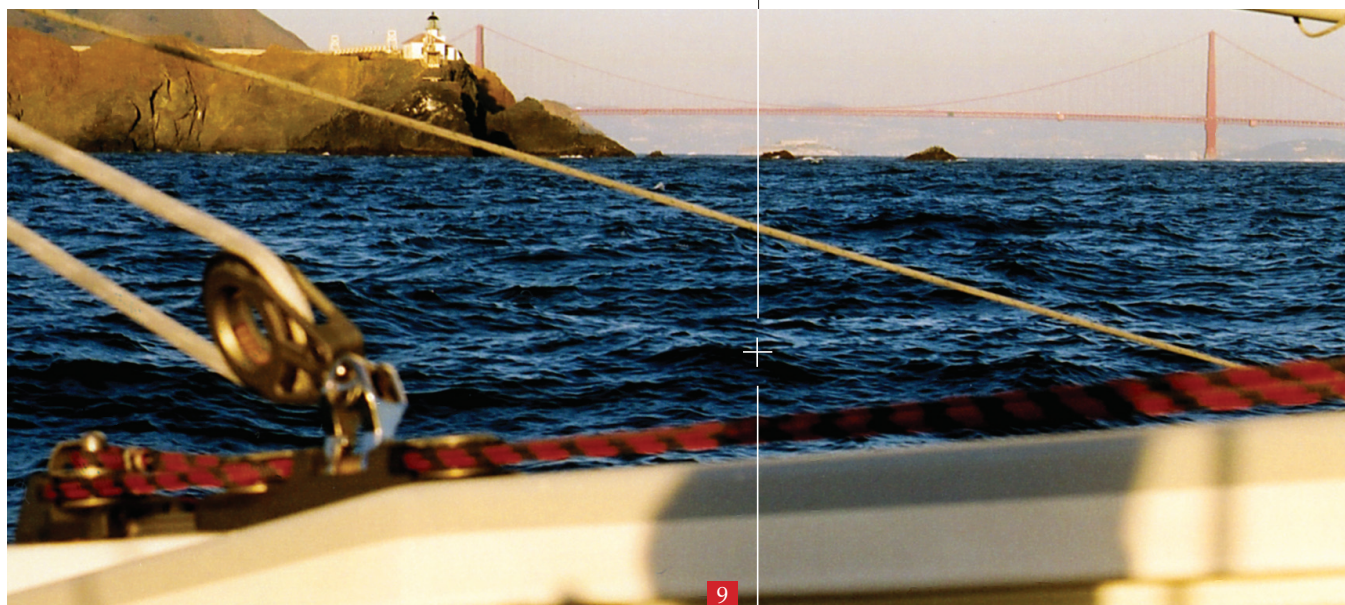
5. Pacific white-sided dolphins chase us down the coast. Night is the best time to watch these ever-present, agile swimmers as they glow with phosphorescence.

6. The U.S. Coast Guard station at Humboldt Bay stands ready as "Keeper of the Lost Coast."

7. David holds a plate of fresh albacore tuna rolls. 8. Sally steers *Bittersweet* toward Eureka, where she'll depart for home.







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9. The Golden Gate Bridge comes into view as *Bittersweet* approaches San Francisco Bay. 10. David preps still-warm tuna for sushi. 11. Bodega Rocks are home to a colony of sea lions.



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a leaky hose. Our thorough provisioning and a firm belief in carrying as many spare parts as possible paid off. David had the spare hose fittings and an extensive tool box. With a quick fix, we were able to proceed on through the night.

Underway, we continually inspect for damage and wear due to the extreme environment: salt, wind, sun and constant motion. But even with the best planning, sailors can't anticipate every contingency, every emergency. They have to adapt, they have to carry their self-sufficiency with them. Like the television character MacGyver, who could disarm a nuclear bomb with a paper clip and a pen knife, *MacGyverisms* can be life-savers for sailors. Knowledge gained by use and observation gives us trust in our craft, vital to our enjoyment. Experience allows us to tackle problems without panicking, relying on our self-sufficiency at sea, making us feel akin to the seafarers of yore.

But modern "conveniences" still tether us to our land lives. Cell or satellite phones take the place of sun sights and lead lines on the modern yacht. One of our crew yearned to sing "Happy Birthday" to her son. A change of course toward the Oregon coast would guarantee cell reception. Though it seemed a distraction to me and David, we were close enough to celebrate a birthday, then head back out to the 125° line. So, in the wee hours of our third day, we tacked to the southeast. With shearwaters and gulls, dolphins and whales, we sailed a new rhumbline to clear Cape Blanco.

During the calls to family, one of our crew learned she was needed at home. Now, connectivity allowed us to book travel to the East Coast and moorage in Eureka. Alternately sailing and motor-sailing, *Bittersweet* headed for land. As the sun rose over the Oregon hills, we acquiesced to our last true offshore day. And this last day served up a treat extraordinaire.

About ten miles from the coast, within view of the sandy hills and coastal range, we came upon dozens of humpback whales frolicking in the sea. They fed in a current directly in our path. We had a front row seat to hours of supple and unpredictable breaching, fluking, and rolling. When the humpbacks rose to blow a stinky spume and show lovely fins and tails, we heard their plaintive, delicate cry. We were mesmerized, feeling honored and connected, sharing a moment in time and place with these magnificent creatures.

With daylight waning, we left the whales for an easy motor/sail into Eureka. Entering a new harbor, especially on a lee shore, good light and clear visibility were priorities. As we entered Humboldt Bay, we watched for landmarks noted on the NOAA and Charlie's charts: a few towers, mill stacks, range marks. We were an American vessel arriving from foreign waters (Canada), and would need to officially check in with Customs upon arrival. As *Bittersweet* entered the channel, the U.S. Coast Guard inflatable circled, then followed us on the hour-long trip to Woodley Island Marina. It was nine o'clock and pitch-black when we

Photos: Nonnie Thompson

By | Naomi Fast

# November At The Ocean

When the summer has made its visit and gone,  
I go to the misty, deserted ocean.  
Her gray tide beckons then; wind  
through shirring firs compels me,  
telling me to leave my ego with the parked car  
and just be alive,  
be the sand,  
be the wind spiriting my hair.

I flicker small on the sprawling beach,  
mirrored in the glossy sand,  
tasting the ocean's salty voice:

*Either let go your flaws and mistakes, or leave.*

I finally obey,  
watch my imperfections escape the glass of my mind;  
lose their stiff shape,  
swim,  
begin to resemble the ocean's beauty: her uncaptured thoughts,  
her florescent eyed energy that lurks below surface,  
her heartrending honesty.

We are not flawless  
like the silence  
of a seaside aquarium with its bored sharks  
behind glass.

We contain hungry fish  
that are neither silent nor tame;  
we have unknown depths,  
where our beauty glides in the dark  
like an electric eel  
stunning what it touches,  
slinking  
like black ink through water.

finally reached the dock. Local officials lined up to greet us: Customs, Immigration, and harbormaster. And our shadows, the Coasties, tied up and ordered a safety inspection of our vessel. Within another hour or so, we were cleared in, declared clean and legal and allowed to fall into our bunks for a collective sigh into sleep.

For the cultural adventurer, this turned out to be a lovely stop-over. Our homebound crew left early and the rest of us walked the one mile into charming, historic Eureka. A short tour of Victorian houses, antique shops, cozy restaurants, museums and mansions stretched our legs and minds. As we motored out of the breakwater, we appreciated the importance of this central town and the !Eureka! moment of those who "discovered" it.

We had been warned to stay well clear of the weather near Cape Mendocino, so with only 7- to 8-miles clearance, we knew we were too close. Under full jib, we sailed past the famous, fog-enshrouded cape. And the wind increased: eleven, fifteen, seventeen knots. I went below to plot our position. Twenty, twenty-four, thirty knots. I felt the boat accelerate and pitch. I glanced through the companionway. There, my crew mate straddled the helm, white-knuckled, breaking waves above and behind his head. With the cape-generated change in sea-state, we reduced the jib and bore offshore, away from the steep, jumbled seaway.

As we sailed through the afternoon and into the ensuing dark, the winds continued, then started to weaken. The rhythm below changed into an easy, peaceful rise and fall. The log entry for the next morning recorded the comforting "pretty quiet watch."

Closing on Point Arena, we were greeted by a great sunrise spreading out across a gentle sea. The stunning California coast came into view with the dawn: Sheer cliffs, beaches, river inlets, arched bridges. The water was flat and gray when suddenly, with a very loud "Pffffffft" and that distinctive scent, three humpbacks surfaced. We shut off the motor and drifted in their midst. They played and fed nearby, their majestic backs and tails and stinky blows gaining hoots from our crew. Eventually, with many photos and memories captured, we separated to resume our respective journeys. We had decided to overnight in Bodega. The entrance is well marked and charted and our visibility was 100 percent. We snaked past Bodega Rock, then with ranges and landmarks, made our way up the channel to Spud Point Marina, a quaint spot with a history of fishing and tourism. A grand hike to the cliffs of Bodega Head, a visit to the fish shop, and a good night's sleep made this a fun and productive stop.

After a mid-morning departure from Bodega, we sailed toward Point Reyes, just as the fog closed in. With full sail set in 18- to 20-knots, we raced blindly around the point, excited and apprehensive. We heard fishing boats and tracked large blips (freighters?) on the radar screen. Skirting the famous "Potato Patch," where any wind or swells can cause steep-sided, chaotic seas, we ran the Bonita Channel. With all hands, cameras, and champagne at the ready, we rounded the Point Bonita light and the Golden Gate Bridge broke through the fog to greet us.

Like a giant red smile on the face of one of the world's great cities, the Gate welcomed these weary travelers. The wind howled, the bridge glowed in the sunset. With blue-water thrills and a successful passage behind us, we shared a wistful moment. Then the champagne cork popped and we sailed at 12 knots, riding the tide into San Francisco Bay. ♦

