

## Dry Sailing From Coast to Coast

*“You know, normal people don’t do stuff like this”*

*- Kevin Shaw (a friend we saw in N.J.)*

We have all suffered from it. It’s a disease that affects many boat owners, but seems to particularly afflict sailors. The disease can take many forms. It can attack you in your dreams, or when staring off into space at work, or when your wife says “are you listening to me”. You’ve probably guessed it...the dream of your next boat. The fact is, no matter how happy you are with your current boat, you are always thinking about your *next* boat.

I recently found my elusive *next* boat. Unfortunately, it happened to be over 3,400 miles away in Newport, Rhode Island. I soon discovered that a symptom of this disease is that a little thing like distance will not be enough to deter the victim in pursuit of the dream.

My new boat is 31’ long, 10’ wide, and weighs about 4,600 lbs. But on its trailer, with the mast down and gear stowed, it’s over 45’ long and weighs about 7,500 lbs. I did the research, crunched the numbers and found a shipper willing to take the boat across the country in the middle of winter for only \$3,000. Sound too good to be true? You’re right. I sent a 50% deposit only to have the shipper disappear and not pick up the boat. I’m still working on getting my deposit back.

After contacting several other shipping companies, and talking with sailors that have had their boats transported, I learned that there are basically two types of shippers. There are the professional companies with large trucks and trailers that charge between \$2 and \$3 per mile, carry cargo insurance, and strictly follow DOT regulations. The other types of shippers are commonly known as Gypsy drivers. The Gypsy’s sometimes own their own small trucks or use rental trucks, usually don’t carry cargo insurance, and may not follow DOT regulations such as oversize load permitting and restrictions on night driving. The Gypsy drivers may represent themselves, but often work through “dispatching” companies with a pool of available divers. The advantage of these drivers is they are sometimes available immediately and will quote less than half what the “professional” companies charge. Many have had satisfactory experiences with Gypsy drivers, but stories like mine, when the driver didn’t show up and disappeared with my deposit, are not uncommon. I have also heard stories of boats being abandoned and impounded in remote areas because the driver was caught without proper permits and boats being damaged with no recourse for lack of cargo insurance.

Given the cost of a professional shipper, and a bad experience with a Gypsy company, I quickly determined that I would simply have to do it myself. After all, the boat came with its own trailer, how hard could it be? With some prompting from my friend and crewman Andy Vatter, we decided to fly to Rhode Island, buy a suitable truck, and tow the boat back to Seattle.

Andy and I caught the red-eye to Providence, RI on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009. I had a list of 6 trucks for sale prepared from the internet, but as luck would have it, the very first one we looked at seemed like the perfect vehicle for the job. It was a 1999 Ford F-350 with a 7.3 liter turbo diesel engine and a Category 5 tow hitch rated to 12,000 lbs. My concerns in buying a truck were twofold.

First was finding a truck I was confident could make the trip towing a large load. The second was the desire to sell it in Seattle for near the purchase price. The truck was in great shape so I made a quick cash deal for \$4,500 and off we went to check out the boat.

On the way to the boatyard, I contacted my auto insurance company to add the new truck and trailer to my policy. I found earlier that most, or perhaps all, car insurance companies will only cover the vehicle and perhaps the trailer, but will not cover the cargo (boat). Most will only provide cargo insurance if you are a licensed commercial driver. Some companies will offer insurance for your boat while trailering under your vessel insurance policy, but usually only if the boat is less than 27'.

My boat had been stored at a boatyard in Portsmouth, RI since early November. When I bought the boat in December, I made a deal with the yard on a list of items to prepare it for shipping. I was surprised when we reached the boat to find little if anything had actually been done. It was late Friday afternoon and everyone had left, so Andy and I spent several hours shoveling snow, securing the mast, stowing gear, dropping the rudder, and padding the trailer straps.

With the trailer hooked to the truck, the whole rig was 59' long, 10' wide, and 12' 10" high. Loads under 13' are OK on all interstate highways, but any load over 8'6" wide is considered oversized everywhere in the nation. Technically, you are required to get permits for each state you travel through. In our case that would mean applying for permits in 14 states at a total cost of around \$600. Another option is contacting a company such as Transnational Trucking Permits to get the permits for you for an additional cost. Some states have other requirements such as top marker lights, flags, oversize load banners, and restrict nighttime driving. Only loads over 10' require escort cars in some states.

When buying a boat, we naturally focus a lot more on the boat than the trailer it's sitting on. Fortunately for me, Andy had the foresight to make an appointment at a trailer specialty shop about 20 miles away in Massachusetts to have it inspected before dragging it across the country. As it turned out the trailer bearings had little grease, the brakes were inoperable, and most of the lights didn't work properly. After another ½ day and a \$500 trailer repair bill, we were finally heading west.

The plan was to spend the first night at Andy's friend's house on the coast of New Jersey. Even though we didn't leave the trailer shop until about 2pm, we thought we could make it since it was only about 250 miles. This leg required traveling through Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and into New Jersey. Coming from out West, the Northeast States seem surprisingly small. What we didn't count on was that neither of us had any experience driving a rig that large and traveling through some of the busiest interstates in the country which, during rush hour on a Friday, can be frightening. There were traffic jams and accidents along the way which delayed our progress, but the highlight was traveling over the upper deck of the George Washington Bridge in New York at night and seeing the skyline of Manhattan just to our left. We finally made it to the Jersey Shore at 11pm where Andy's friends welcomed us like family and kept us up until 2am with many cocktails and New Jersey style conversation.

Of primary concern for this trip was the weather. It was a balmy 38 degrees in Portsmouth, but only 10 degrees on the Jersey Shore. We had two options; the northerly route taking us past Chicago, Minnesota, North Dakota, and on west or the southerly route taking us through Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona into LA, then north to Seattle. The North route was about 1,000 miles shorter, but very cold with unpredictable weather and two notorious mountain passes. The southerly route, though longer, promised better weather and roads. We made our decision that morning in New Jersey when a large weather front was forecasted to sweep through the center and southern part of the country. It looked like a window was open across the north, so the northerly route was chosen. Of course being from the northwest, our first thought was we better get snow chains if we are going to drive across the great white north, so our first stop was at an auto parts store. The store clerk looked a little dumbfounded when we asked where the tire chains were and responded that he didn't have any in stock. We found out later that tire chains are illegal on public streets in all states we drove through east of Montana. On the positive side, most public roads and highways are well plowed and heavily salted.

If we were in a hurry, we could have alternated driving while the other person slept and made the trip in less than 4 days. In our case, not being used to driving long distances, and with the stress of an oversized load, we decided it was best for us to stop at a motel for at least 8 hrs sleep each night. Sleeping each night and dealing with the unexpected, our trip took a total of 6 ½ days.

The rest of the trip went fairly smooth with the exception of several incidents along the way. The first was an error in navigation which took us through downtown Chicago instead of the highway that skirts around the city. Believe me; you don't want to take this route while towing an oversize load. The traffic was horrible and we were constantly surprised by signs for low overpasses. Driving past the Sears tower and looking out over frozen Lake Michigan we finally made it through the city without incident.

We continued north hoping to spend the night at Andy's brother's house in Dundas, Minnesota. We were averaging about 8 mpg towing the 7,500 pound trailer so one of the challenges we faced throughout the trip was to find diesel about every 200 miles. We were running low again just as we neared Dundas and managed to cruise into a truck stop running on fumes. We pulled up to a diesel pump only to find it inoperable due to the extreme cold. It was about -12 below zero at the time and the diesel had thickened so much it wouldn't flow through the filters. It was about 10:30pm and Andy's brother was kind enough to make the 10 mile drive to rescue us. We left the rig hoping for warmer weather in the morning. Returning at 11am, we found the diesel pumps were just starting to work. It took almost 1 hour to pump 35 gallons!

The only mechanical problem of the trip involved the trucks alternator which almost left us stranded on three separate occasions. The first incident found us a long way from nowhere when the dash meter showed a sudden decrease in battery voltage...a sure sign of a bad alternator. With the help of the GPS, we found our way off the interstate to a very small town in Ohio. We managed to make it to an auto parts store on Main Street just as the battery gauge was nearing zero. At first the grumpy parts clerk told us they would have to order the alternator from Toledo and it would take 2 days. This was the only parts store open on Sunday. I pleaded with clerk to look again, and as I stared at the parts counter with a blank look on my face for a few minutes, the attendant relented and rechecked his stock. A few minutes later he magically appeared with

the proper alternator. Andy and I did the work ourselves in sub-zero temperatures and wind. We were quite the town attraction...a large sailboat parked in the middle of town amid the snow drifts caused all passers by to slow for a good view. Of course I pictured this fast racing yacht fully rigged flying through the waves in Puget Sound, but to the local townsfolk it looked entirely out of place. We were offered help by several locals who did their best to try and revive our spent batteries (the truck had 2) to no avail. After about 4 hours we were back on the road with a new alternator and fresh new batteries.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> mechanical problem occurred in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. We stopped at a truck stop for gas and were unable to restart the truck. The batteries were completely flat. By this time it was getting really cold. It was about 4pm and -10 degrees below zero. This time we called a local auto shop that immediately sent a tow truck for us. We dropped the trailer at the truck stop parking lot which was a solid sheet of ice. It was a nice indoor, heated shop, and though they usually closed by 5pm, the owners took pity on us and stayed to diagnose the problem until almost 9pm. It turned out a glow plug solenoid was frozen shut causing excess drain on the batteries which in turn caused the alternator to burn out. We were given a ride to a local motel and were picked up the next morning. One of the most memorable parts of the trip happened when we turned on the national weather channel that morning in the motel at Fergus Falls. The blond weather girl happily announced that the coldest place in the United States at that moment was -17 degrees below zero with a wind chill of -30 degrees below zero...in Fergus Falls, Minn. As we left the shop to retrieve the boat from the frozen truck stop, Andy mentioned we would have to stop to scrape the ice forming on the side windows. A few minutes later he realized the frost was on the inside of the glass.

The third alternator failure occurred about 4 hours up the road west of Fargo, North Dakota. This time it turned out the alternator installed back in Fergus Falls was defective and was overcharging the batteries. We had it changed out at a Ford Dealership and were again on our way West. We made it all the way to Billings Montana before stopping for some sleep. It was here that we began hearing stories about the ice storm that had hit the Eastern States. It was the worst in 20 years and had shut down many major highways. This really brought home the fact that we have been very lucky with weather. We have experienced extreme cold and some snow blowing across the roads, but the skies had thus far remained clear and dry.

Of course there were other close calls along the way, such as when a 4' log rolled out the back of a fire department truck in the lane just ahead of us while doing 65mph on the interstate through Montana. The log bounced up to 8' in the air for what seemed like a minute only a few feet in front of our windshield before taking a lucky bounce to the left just missing our truck and the boat. We were generally lucky crossing the mountain passes. Other than 30mph head winds on the East side of the Rocky Mountains and a few hours of white knuckle driving on ice coming down the west side into Idaho, the roads were fairly clear.

In the 6 days since arriving in Rhode Island, the landscape across the northern U.S. for the most part was very flat and monochromatic brown or white with snow and ice. Coming down the west side of the Cascades felt like coming home. Suddenly everything was green and the air was noticeably more humid and warm. I have never felt luckier to live in Seattle where the sites are beautiful and sailing is truly a year-round sport.

There are many things I wish I knew before beginning this adventure. My desire in writing this story is to illustrate some of lessons I learned in case you are bitten by the “next boat” bug and your boat happens to be on the east coast.

- 1) **Weather:** Don't minimize the difficulty in transporting cross country in the winter. Looking back, we were exceptionally lucky. There were several large storms that happened just before and after we passed certain areas that would have left us stranded for several days or even ended our trip. The professional drivers advise waiting at least until March when the snow begins to melt and the trip is more predictable.
- 2) **Shipping Companies:** Beware of inexpensive estimates you may receive from a shipping company. I suspected the bid I received for \$3,000 was too good to be true. In fact, my final cost for transporting the boat myself was about \$3,500. These costs included airfare to RI (only \$240 for 2 people), motels, meals, gas, tolls, trailer and truck repairs and insurance, plus an additional \$600 for oversize load permits if you want to be strictly legal.
- 3) **Insurance.** This alone may be the best reason to higher an expensive professional company. Your insurance company may have a different take on the issue, but I found it impossible to insure the boat while trailering with the companies I spoke to.
- 4) **Trailer:** If the boat you are looking at comes with a trailer and you will have to move it any distance, pay as much attention to the condition of the trailer as you do the boat. Even if the boat is well taken care of, the trailer is often neglected.
- 5) **Diesel Trucks:** Diesel's are often preferred for towing because of better fuel mileage and reliability. If you are going to travel across country in a diesel vehicle, be aware that fuel is harder to find and more expensive, truck stops catering to semi's have a larger diameter filler nozzle that may not fit most passenger vehicles, and you must learn the difference between No.1 and No.2 diesel and on-road and off-road diesel.
- 6) **The Unexpected:** Many details on this trip took us by surprise; such as the fact that license plates in RI remain with the owner, not the vehicle. Our plan to buy a truck in RI would have been delayed a few days for new plates if we were not able to talk the seller into letting us mail the plates back from Washington. We may have also thought twice about buying a 2-wheel drive truck if we knew we couldn't use chains for most of the trip. In general, you can count on the unexpected details, breakdowns, repairs, and weather to add a day or two to your schedule.

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