Embrace the glow of slow, and find peace wherever you sail

INTO THE QUI

THE ART OF ORGANIC COASTING

STORY AND PHOTOS

Coasting is less a sport than art, and those who wander under sail spend a good deal of energy seeking an elusive balance of mind, body, boat, sea and subtlety that elevates it from the merely functional to a certain state of finesse.

The way we address time is first among such matters. Time is bliss, time is stress, and time well spent is a treasure. The most favorable allocation of the hours has less to do with getting places quickly, for speed in sailing terms—the 5 knots we're pleased to average—is practically irrelevant. You can schedule meetings and colonoscopies, but you can't schedule a cruise. Investing in quiet and quality seems more profitable.

Over a lifetime of sailing, the last three decades aboard a 26ft International Folkboat, our ambitions were chronically optimistic, but at length my wife, Leigh, and I came to see that such adventures were enhanced the more deliberately we embraced organic coasting and what we call the "glow of slow."

The tipping point was our third cruise to Nova Scotia. Leaving Maine astern, we whispered along at 4 knots. It was as civil a velocity as there is, but with 200 miles to go we felt compelled to motorsail, which left us and the sails restless as we plugged noisily eastward. We made Lockeport in time to wait out rain and fog. Then it was a lively 78-mile run to Lunenburg, where we arrived in the dark and were closers at the Knot Pub. Leaving early and arriving late wore thin after a while.

Leigh and I had just three weeks for the cruise. The weather went south, we had laydays we couldn't afford, felt off-balance and made our way back to Maine in a dungeon of fog and a snotty southeasterly. While we can profit from challenges, there were way too few idle hours and a nagging sense we could have made more of our precious sailing time.

Piling on the miles under power when there's no wind is one thing, but motoring when a sailing breeze is up is beset with contrary implications for the drowning out of nature's subtle vibrations, diminished quality and mechanical tension. Beating to weather is no more to be avoided than a mountain climber would take a chairlift to the summit. The satisfaction of organic coasting is in the artful execution of it.

In our search of a more elegant sail style, we jettisoned *Leight*'s genoa for a hanked-on blade jib that sheets inboard, points higher, eliminates sail changes, is decidedly handy and facilitates sailing close-hauled and in close quarters, which adds drama and intensity to coasting.

The 40-odd miles between the Cows Yard in far Downeast Maine and Swan's Island is often a slog, the summer winds late in stirring, invariably on the nose and fickle as fate. As we powered westward on glassy seas one bright August morning, making for the distant spike of a lighthouse on Petit Manan Island, the tide turned against us and a smart southwester blew up. The bow swung east of south before the sails quieted and *Leight* put her shoulder to the task.

The speedo flashed 5 knots. Five knots toward the Azores, I mused. Our destination was 25 rollercoaster miles to the west, and double the distance tacking into it. *Leight* settled into her pace, spray flew, the jib was sheeted in and the arc of the main shallow. Ignoring the GPS distance readings, we made a production of lunch, serving up cheese, crackers and sardines southbound, and apples, cashews and chocolate bars as we slanted northward.

I read, Leigh read, we held *Leight* to the fang of sea and



When you're in no hurry to get anywhere, the sailing life takes on a slower, more gentle rhythm—"a state of productive indolence," says the author

paid little attention to time. On Leigh's watch, I cleaned the cabin, for we'd left in a hurry. When I was "on," Leigh looked up Wilson's petrels in her bird book, checked the weather and made hot chocolate. Hopes of fetching Schoodic Point left us wanting as the afternoon matured. We plugged doggedly along and evening shadows were lengthening by the time we made Great Duck Island, where off to starboard the peaks of Mt. Desert Island morphed into a purple mountain majesty. As the velvety vastness of night settled in, we soldiered on, islands black on black. Hours later, after short-tacking through a mere tickle of a backdoor passage, we made Burnt Coat Harbor on Swans Island, Hockamock Head lighthouse flashing its sober warning, and barely a word between us.

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The glow of slow means less noise, reduced fuel consumption, less time in port to top off the tanks, fewer mechanical problems, reduced exposure to fried food, gift shops and more options. Quiet days succumbing to the natural rhythm of things, ghosting along at but 2 or 3 knots, have proved some of the most civil sailing we've known.

We levitated over a sky-blue sea, breeze soft as whispering lovers

Leaving the mirrored stillness of Seal Trap on Maine's Isle au Haut, only a few feeble breaths of air scrolled the glassy reaches of East Penobscot Bay. The sails hung slack, and it took a good while for the sloop to gather way and awaken the rudder. We eased magically along, tide billowing and knotting, the GPS flashing 1.8 knots. There was a pregnant stillness to the scene, as the mate slacked the outhaul and joined me to leeward to help coax the mainsail into a fat arc of draft.

To starboard, bold swells of cliff-buttressed shore rose to the spruce-crowned heights of Champlain Mountain 540ft above the water. Peace ran deep. Spruce nectars spiced the air, an amiable chuckle came from under the bow and telltales fluttered lazily. We levitated over a sky-blue sea, breeze soft as whispering lovers.

At length we brought the lighthouse on Robinson's Point abeam, where the narrowing channel compressed what little air was stirring. Swanning along at 2.7 knots, we watched the tidy village of Isle au Haut come abeam. A woman walking to the store waved to us, nuns and cans nodded, and the quiet was so deep we could hear the mud hissing as the tide advanced.

Aspiring to a state of productive indolence frames the glow of slow in a genial light. We once spent six days in Maine's stunning Mud Hole, fathoming its waters in our dinghy, wandering trails ashore, having picnics, drinking wine and feasting on clams fresh from the mud. We talked to eagles, read, took naps, sketched rather badly, lazed about, had spirited games of rummy for a foot rub prize and savored the pregnant quiet. How could time be spent better than that?

After all these years, discovery is as exciting as ever, and while it's tempting to keep to our well-worn cruising grooves, we're still chancing upon wild places the guides have nothing to say about. An hour's work in our dinghy, with a lead line, pencil and notebook, revealed the way into Maine's fiercely private York Island Harbor. Skirting shore and hugging half tide ledges, we had the rock-bound eel rut to ourselves and were privy to secrets and silence on a grand scale.

Solitude adds depth to coasting. Whether the lot of a singlehander, or a lone boat and crew tucked away in an emerald alcove, the perspective shift is stirring. It heightens the senses, quiets us and adds depth.

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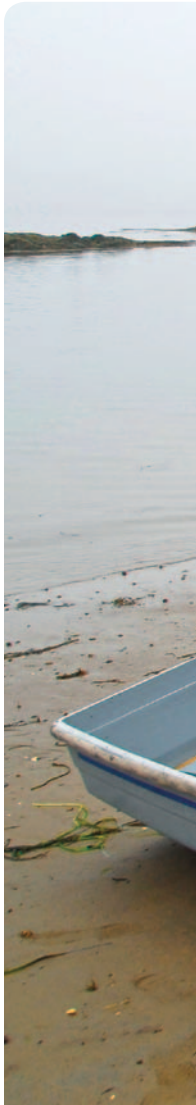
***Leight*'s modest size is a familiar quantity in the hinterlands** and has proved an asset in enhancing our otherwise completely unremarkable social capital. It was the darkest, dripping wet, thick-o-fog night ever as we sailed annoyingly



slowly toward West Head on Cape Sable Island, Nova Scotia. The engine out of commission, a fitful breeze astern, perils aplenty and roiling Fundy tide having lately turned against us, it was the last place we wanted to get caught out. But being pulled backward by the currents, we anchored in exposed waters and called the Coast Guard to let them know we'd proceed when we could.

It was then we were adopted by local retirees Baff Symonds and Leslie Smith, who were thrilled to tow us in at 2300. The next morning they were at the pier when we awoke, volunteered to get fuel and drove 15 miles to find a chap to fix the engine. We visited their homes, met families, heard local lore, toured about, shared meals and plowed common ground.

There's a physical side to organic coasting. No small part of a heightened experience rises from a state of fitness. Our moods are improved, we sleep better, make better decisions, are healthier, steadier on our feet and have more endurance. While motorized inflatable tenders are ubiquitous, a proper hard-shell rowing dinghy has many advantages. Quiet is foremost among them, as is their handiness, not having to schlep gas and the ability to have actual conversations while underway. We profit from the exercise, and find that walks ashore and onboard exercises maintain tone surprisingly well.

Leight's 9ft-long, 67lb dinghy, which I designed and built of 4mm Okume plywood and fiberglass, tows lightly. She is responsive to her oars, a magic carpet to wild places where outboard motors chew shear pins and birds take flight.

The sloop's simple systems, including a one-cylinder diesel, solar panels and modest electrical demands, complement organic coasting and never require the engine to charge batteries. The chilly Gulf of Maine waters make the bilge an adequate cooler and encourage us to delve deeper into the local food chain, becoming more travelers than tourists.

Organic coasting is possessed of notable depths. We sail more, motor less and treasure the depths of it. The quiet is possessed of an animal alertness that frames our adventures vividly, and like many of life's most pleasant pursuits it is best savored deliberately. S

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has sailed for 76 years, and cruised from the Chesapeake to Newfoundland. He sails out of Round Pond, ME. His book, -, is being cleared out for $10. It's about discovering the New England and Fundy coast in a wreck of a $400, 18-foot sloop. To get one, send your mailing address to

The hard-shell dinghy is unsullied by outboard power, the better to get closer to wildlife