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Pocket Cruising: A Sailor's Brain Under Power

Turns out there's still plenty to pay attention to, even without halyards and sheets to tend.

A lifetime of sailing — offshore, inshore, racing, cruising — gives a person an interesting pattern of thoughts and concerns any time he's on a boat. It would take another lifetime, probably in the care of an analyst or a shaman, to unravel that onboard personality and tease out the individual elements, but quite a few of those elements involve the persistent urge to make a sailboat go faster, or to handle the water better.

Any racing sailor will confirm this: Your mind ticks around the attention clock, checking on sheet and halyard tension, headstay tension, cunningham, outhaul, jib leads, traveler; you're always feeling for rudder angle and trying to reduce drag; you're thinking about heel angle, fore-and-aft trim; you're studying the instruments to see what effect each move has. Then you're thinking about how to get where you're going — when to tack or jibe, the effect of current and leeway, how best to steer through the wavetrain. And all of this is layered on top of the more basic but also absorbing routines of seamanship and safety.



The schooner Amistad is astern off New Haven harbor. Check out that nice flat wake.

So when we started cruising our 26-foot powerboat about 13 years ago, it took just a few minutes on the first leg of the first run for me to start feeling very strange. We were going 12 knots — about twice as fast as what I was used to in cruising sailboats — and exactly in the direction we wanted to go. (It might even have been directly upwind.) We were level, shaded, and comfortable. We would be at our destination in about three and a half hours, and after those first few minutes I was... well, I was bored. And disappointed, and even sort of embarrassed. There seemed to be nothing to do but steer and watch the gauges and the chartplotter.

My rationale had been ironclad: With work and family life as they were then, it made sense to trade the challenges and pleasures of the sailing voyage for the convenience and speed of the power voyage. I could deal with my sailing jones by racing Lasers. I'd understood that power-cruising offered no particular challenge unless the engine crapped out, and required little skill compared to sailing, especially with most of the piloting chores being handled electronically. But I hadn't figured on the boredom. Or the constant engine noise.



Warm, dry, protected from the elements, able to go directly upwind... what the hell!?!

All I can say now, quite a few miles later, is that the boredom faded away pretty fast, because the convenience and ease of running a powerboat did nothing to damage my attention clock; it just changed some of the items my mind visits. Other things evolved, too, during the same years. Before the changeover I had always been focused on crossing the water as fast as possible in whatever boat I was in — offshore racer, one-design dinghy, or motorboat. But as the creaks and squeaks of age made themselves persistent and unmistakable, I began feeling more of a closeness to the water itself. I no longer cared so much about speeding across it. I became content — no, deeply happy — just to be on it or in it; to swim and row and idle around, to watch it and learn about it, and help take care of it.

As for the engine noise, there's no way around it. You have to take the bad with the good sometimes. It's not much worse than sails slatting in a calm.

Ticking Around the Attention Clock

With all that as background, and at the risk of attracting the interest of the mental-health trade, I'm going to give an example of an inner monologue that might occur during a summer run eastward in my local waters – in the mind of a sailor without sailing to do.

Time: 0800 Conditions: Hazy, a few southeasterly zephyrs; calm; slack tide, starting eastward ebb.

[Underway from Stony Creek, Connecticut, east of New Haven] Good water flow out the exhaust. Check. Wife happy, check. Full mug of coffee, Check. Full fuel, clean heat-exchanger, belts tight, clean bottom, full water. Sweet. Enough food to feed eight people for a month, even though it's just the two of us for four days. Check.

Funny back-eddy on this end of the anchorage. Look at how Dan's boat is riding up on its mooring. Note time. Should make a fast passage. Clear of anchorage, increase to 1300 rpm; let the engine warm up to operating temp. Nudge the throttle a bit to get the transom lip up on the surface. There we go. Jeez, zero boats around. All alone on the Sound. Love it. Still a bit of head current showing on that bell. Turn on VHF to monitor Channel 16.

Man, those are some nasty rocks. How is it that those particular rocks still spook me after all these years? It's not as if I don't know where they are. I need to come up with a better coffee-holder. Engine sounds great. Temp's up to 180. Let's get up to cruising speed... 2000 rpm. Nice... 12 knots over the bottom, so the current must be just about slack. Look at that wake. That's the slickest wake I think I've ever seen. Never get tired of looking at it. Wife still happy. Check. I like that lunch hook arrangement, with the coil over the rod holder. Maybe this weekend I'll put an eye-splice through the last chain link. Oh, and I need to make new fender pendants, too.



Without sail control lines to fool with you begin to look for marlinspike projects, just to keep your hands busy.

Time: 0820. Little bit of a fair current on that lobster pot float. Speed's up to 12.5 knots over the bottom. Used to get 12.5 in slack water, but now it's 12 even. The engine's got another 500 hours on it since those days. The Coppercoat bottom is even slipperier than the old paint. Only difference was the bio-diesel we used to run. That animal-fat bio had a wicked high cetane rating. Wonder if that made the difference? Temp: 180. Good.

Time: 0840. Hammonasset. What a word. Wonder what it means? And how did that huge sand beach form in the middle of the shoreline right there? Where did the sand come from? It must have to do with Meig's Point [looking at plotter]. The point runs northwest to southeast; makes it a lee shore in the prevailing southwesterlies. Would that do it — wind and waves pounding on rock? Or was it mostly just the ebb tide carrying sediment against the point? Need to check that out. Hammonasset. Ham and asset. Ham and eggs. Man, those guys had a long pull in 1777 when they rowed from here to Long Island and then portaged over the North Fork to raid Sag Harbor.

There are the fishermen — half a dozen boats off Six-Mile Reef. A pretty quick run out from Clinton or Westbrook. Blues, striper, blackfish? All of the above? Maybe should keep a rod on board. Nah. Just one more obsession. Temp: 180. Good. That's a nice center-console there. Man, flag-blue makes just about any hull look good. Maybe a Regulator? Twin Yamaha four-strokes. It'd be fun to have a fast center-console. Nah. Can't cruise in 'em. Can't sleep in 'em... but it'd be pretty cool just to have one to bomb around in... Maybe should paint this boat flag blue when the gelcoat fades.

Time: 0900. [Doing some knee bends] This engine noise is still too much on a long run. No room in the engine box for more insulation... the new mounts didn't help a bit, at least at idle... There go two of those little tugs — Nordic Tugs? — cruising west in tandem. Maybe two retired couples — old friends? Be a nice way to go, nice and slow, sipping fuel, plenty of comfort. Hmmm. We're losing the horizon to the east, and the sun's deep in the haze. Yellow haze. Crap [turning on radar, turning on iPhone AIS app]. Temp: 180. Good.

Time: 0915. Frikkin' fog. Better slow down a bit. Get the horn up here. If I ever have to blow this thing, somebody's gotten way too close. Jeez, why do people still call on 16 for radio checks? Don't they know about [Sea Tow's automated radio check service](#)? Nice and easy. Wife happy? Check. Compare helm compass to GPS course-over-ground. Still pretty accurate, just two degrees off on an east-west course — can't steer much better than that — and spot-on north-south. Not worth trying to tweak it. Wonder if I should run down to the Long Island shore. Nah, might as well stick it out. Better current here, fewer fishermen, and I can see commercial traffic on radar and AIS. Temp: 180. Good. Just have to watch the radar. Maybe should get a better radar someday. None of the connections will fit, though, this thing's so old. Amazing how a \$4 app on an iPhone turns out to be one of the most useful piloting tools.



Queequeg keeps a lookout in the pea soup.

Time: 0945. What makes fog thicken and thin like this? The sun warming things up, sure, but also changes in water temperature underneath? Bits of breeze blowing through? More breeze building now, and look at that big tide line. Foam, twigs, weeds, Mylar balloon, plastic bottle, plastic bag. Come on, humans! Gotta do more to help the [International Coastal Cleanup](#). And let's stop and net some of that crap up [calling wife: "Queequeg, the net, starboard side!"].

Time: 1030. Nice! The fog's lifting just in time for us to squirt through Plum Gut without an Orient Point ferry bearing down on us in 50-yard visibility. Man, it would be so cool to see a 3D view of the bottom around here with the current flowing over it – 324 feet, 211 feet, 64 feet, 188 feet, 36 feet. Is there just a jumble of huge hollowed boulders down there? Temp: 180. Good. Let's follow that ferry through. Big rips in here now... short chop. Whoop – 15.5 knots over the bottom [steering through the steep gullies and working the throttle]! How the hell can those fisherman deal with rolling from gunnel to gunnel in that rip? Plum Island. Ohhh, conspiracy theories. Probably be a resort on it someday. Hope they never take down that water tower. Great mark to aim for. Look at that sloop hobby-horsing into the rip. Barely making any way against the ebb. Old Ericson... the 3200? Can't mistake that Bruce King cabin trunk. Nice boat. I bet his engine is just about firewalled. Roll your jib out, man! Get a boost! Fog's pretty much disappeared around the corner – I think I can even make out The Ruins over there. Could use an egg sandwich. Or just some gorp. And more coffee. Sweet wake! Maybe should tighten up the steering cable just a bit after we anchor. Temp: 180. Good.