

I should have known

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The signs were in clear view, all of them, too many not to pay attention. I was determined to sail my new (new to me that is) boat from the Connecticut River to Wickford, Rhode Island, where I live.

No, I had never sailed the boat, never sailed Long Island sound, and never sailed on April 30th so early in the season.

Before casting off, the person prepping the boat told me to get four new fuel filters and was willing to show me where they went. I should have known that the fuel tank was full of sludge from having sat for two years; and I should have expected the filter to clog and stop the engine.

I knew the sails needed to be replaced and was told that twenty knots of wind would rip them. I should have known that we'd sail into a storm, experience winds over 20 knots and that we would rip a sail.

April 29th, a clear, warm, and beautiful day, we cast off with a captain on board to take us down the Connecticut River and tie us up for the night at the mouth of the river, so that we could leave at 4:45 am, at first light.

At about 2:30 am the wind shifted, picked up, and bounced us off the dock the rest of the night, while the wind howled through the rigging. There was no sleeping and only the concern of what was to come. There was no first light at 4:45 due to the weather. At 5:15 we could see the channel, and we headed out, bravely.

We were cold; and then we hit the waves. A north east storm had blown in. It was coming directly from where we were going, and the waves were big. I quickly realized how seaworthy the boat was, and how well she handled the big waves. In those conditions it did not take long for my son Chris to get sea sick and remain so for the next 12 hours.

As a sailor, I am familiar with always being off course and always adjusting to course. John, who was on the helm steering, called out, seeing strange water directly ahead. It was a shoal (shallow water). We were off course and made a quick turn to prevent a collision with the shoal. The small, hard to read, hand-held GPS returned us to course. Disaster averted.

The engine died, and we were being pushed towards shore off Mystic, Connecticut. Quickly, I hoisted the sails for the first time ever. Considering the 6 to 8 foot seas and being the first time raising the sail, I felt a sense of accomplishment. I made sure the boat had forward movement as I went below to change my first fuel filter in my life.

I did it. Although I was supposed to prime the engine, I did not, as I knew not. It started anyway. I went back on deck to inform the crew we would motor and sail at the same time. That way, if, or I should say when, the engine filter clogged again, we could still make headway and be safe.

Sailing finally, my boat, my new boat, my old-fashion, gaff-rigged boat with the old sails (soon to be replaced). I was aware the wind was howling and was at least 20knots, the number the sailmaker said would tear the sails.

He was wrong. Only one sail tore. The sail tore and then the gaff, the big piece of wood at the top of the mast, came off the mast and was swinging in the wind. That was dangerous and could have easily killed someone. Finally, after a long struggle, I was able to secure the gaff and the ripped sail. My heart was pounding.

Now I was rattled and wondering why I was out in a storm, in April, with a new boat, with old sails, with my children, freezing cold, and navigating in unknown waters with a small hand-held GPS. I knew we'd make it, but I should have known it was going to be an adventure.

The kids wanted to stay close to shore. No, we had to stay offshore in case of engine or sail problems so that we did not get pushed ashore and damage the boat. I was also aware we had no life raft, it was too early in the season for rescue boats to be in the area, and any problem was going to be serious. One could not survive long in the cold water.

It took 10 hours of slogging into the wind, wet, cold, tired, and seasick, to reach Narragansett Bay. At the entrance to the bay, the engine died for the third and last time. Luckily, I was able to change the filter again, and we headed in with only one spare filter left.

Cathy, my wife, was on shore with some sailors at the entrance to Narragansett Bay. She was looking for us, and the sailors had told her that no one, no one in his right, mind that is, would sail in that weather, against the weather, and we were sure to have taken refuge in a port along the way.

Shocked, they saw a black schooner, short one sail (the ripped one), come around the corner. The real sailors were amazed. They would not have done it, and we had. They knew better. If only we had known.

The bay was such a welcome relief. The waves went from 8 feet to 2 feet. Changing course, the wind was no longer right in our face. Why, in spite of being cold and exhausted, it felt good. We sailed up the bay for two hours, enjoying the chance to sail, engine off, and enjoying the now gentle movement of the boat.

We took the sails down without incident as we entered Wickford Harbor, waving to the family on shore. Of course, this is my first time driving the boat and heading towards a dock. Truly, I had no idea how she handled docking.

Our assigned dock had a boat in it. I saw an empty dock, it was after five, and in April few, if any, boats are out. I lined up and headed cautiously into the empty slip. As we entered the slip, the yelling and the swearing started from one dock over.

What was yelled can't be put in print. Suffice to say, we were taking their slip, and that was not going to happen.

Quickly, I put her in reverse to back out. She's big and heavy and does not stop in an instant. The irate yellers thought I was ignoring them. The yelling and swearing became louder, and I'm trying to back out, now with full throttle. Success. We back out and did not hit the dock nor did the shouters throw anything at us.

I found another empty slip and navigated slowly into it, and, hearing no yelling, my crew jumped off with the dock lines and tied her up.

Tied, safe and secure we shut the engine off. Land felt so good, and the relief was overwhelming. We made it, we made it in spite of huge risks, and problems. The tension slowly started to drain from our bodies.

We were too tired to wash the boat. So we left her and all the salt and went home for a warm shower, and a beverage of choice as we told the story.

We should have known, we should not have gone. We did. We had guides, unseen guides, guiding us and keeping us one step ahead of disaster.