

Reflections of a First Time TX200er

John Hippe --- September 2016

As this was our first TX200, I wanted to write about our preparations, experiences, and learnings for next time in the hope that it will help other first-timers – especially those who are not used to sailing in the Gulf waters.

By way of background, I have done quite a few one and two week voyages alone and with my girls (13 and 14) on Lake Superior and one trip to the San Juan Islands so we are used to longer journeys on our Wayfarer.

Being strong believers in self-reliance when sailing, we are well prepared for the conditions we will encounter on our trips. We carry two oversized anchors, PFDs, VHF radio, GPS, charts, EPIRB, ditch bag, spare parts, and tools. In addition, we can reef down and/or heave-to in a blow, and also have an outboard. Whenever we plan the day's passage, I am aware of routes, destinations, and possible bail-out points if conditions warrant.

Our boat, the Wayfarer turned out to be a great boat for this trip. The Wayfarer was originally designed in 1957 by Ian Proctor to be a versatile boat that could be raced or cruised. It has a length of 16 feet and beam of 6 feet which provides plenty of space. There is plenty of storage space in the bow and in a lazaret in the stern and a relatively roomy cockpit. Unloaded it draws only 8" with the centerboard up. The kick-up rudder still has purchase when raised so one can still steer in that position. I am in the process of building a John Welsford designed Pelegrin which has a full keel. This new boat will be ideal for the Great Lakes but would not be suitable for the TX200.

Being a Great Lakes sailor, preparing for and doing the TX200 was quite a bit different from what I am used to.

First, of course, was the heat. As I told a number of people during the week, I am used to having to keep warm when sailing and often sail in a dry-suit. Thinking about keeping cool presented a new challenge. We took everyone's advice and wore long light clothes – at least I did. Our mistake, however, was two-fold. First, we had a lot of cotton clothes. They never dry out! We spent the entire week damp. In the future, we will have light-weight, non-cotton clothes such as you can get from REI. I had one pair of these pants and they performed quite well. Second, was not keeping dry clothes for camp. I am used to simply laying clothes out for a few hours in the sun to dry them. Not on the Gulf Coast. Dry clothes for camp need to be sacrosanct.

Some other additions we will make in the future will be to have a UV resistant balaclava to protect the face from the sun – much better than constantly putting on more sun screen. We will also add a Bimini. Sailing up north, I would say that this addition would be unnecessary for the conditions we normally see, but sailing in Hell Texas, ☺, this would have made our week much more enjoyable. On some days, the heat was not too bad but when the wind dropped and the heat rose, it was quite uncomfortable. Having a source of shade would have been most welcome.

The second difference in preparation was around sailing in company. I am a solo sailor and feel that I am quite self-reliant. My girls, when they sail with me, are usually simply passengers. Sailing in company was a new experience for me and I have to admit that I found myself becoming somewhat complacent in my morning preparations.

Typically I will listen to NOAA for weather updates, review charts, and have waypoints set in the GPS with possible bail-out points noted on the chart if things become hairy. On this trip, however, I didn't always listen to NOAA. I allowed myself to rely on what others told me. Other sailors are a great source of information, one should always seek additional information. Trust, but verify.

Another area of complacency was around the use of charts and GPS which resulted in our missing camp on Day 3. As I wrote earlier, I always have waypoints entered into my GPS and know where I am going on the charts. On one leg, my GPS went out. No problem, I thought, I still have my chart. Unfortunately, instead of having NOAA charts, I had only brought Hook 'N Line maps. The reference to aids of navigation on map F116 were completely inaccurate. Map F115, which we used on day one had the ICW markers correct – the red and green square signs marking either side of the channel. On map F116, these were mysteriously missing. Instead, the only references were to red nuns and green cans which did not match up with the marker signs and I never saw any nuns or cans, though I may have missed them as I was mostly watching the signs. My mistakes here were threefold. First, I should have had proper NOAA charts with me. With NOAA charts I can check on any updates regarding changes to the aids of navigation and mark them on the charts. Second, I should have been tracking my progress on the chart, noting distance traveled. If I had done this, when my GPS went out, I would have known where I was and would not have missed camp on Day 3. Third, when this happened, I should have contacted someone on the VHF. Instead, I simply followed a boat in front of me that I knew was doing the TX200. When I saw boats behind me turning off, I rationalized what they were doing rather than investigating. We were never in any danger but we did miss the camp.

The third difference from sailing on the Great Lakes, is sailing downwind all day on relatively flat water. This was exhilarating but quite different from sailing on the Great Lakes where the wind velocity and direction are quite changeable during the day, and where wave heights can easily build to 3-5 feet or more. On the first day of the trip we were having fun watching our speeds routinely exceed 6 knots. Our fastest, I believe, was about 8 knots surfing down the back of a wave. We have done this before but not for such a sustained period of time. Where this became a bit dicey was when we were approaching the turn off for the jetties. In preparation, we started to reduce our sail area. We first threw in a reef in the main. No problem. We then decided to add another reef. This didn't work out as well. The problem was that the boom would drop too far and I had difficulty getting it raised back up to the proper height. This resulted in bottom part of the luff to be out of the track and the stress was being taken up at the point where the bolt rope exited the slot and not on the cringle for the reef point. I had added this new set of reef points just prior to heading out for the trip. While everything was properly installed, the slight difference in how it all worked meant that it took me three times to get the sail set properly. The challenge was exacerbated by our jib down-haul jamming during this process. We were able to get the jib down but it required my climbing out on the bow to manually pull the jib down. I had not had difficulties with the jib down-haul previously but did rework its set-up later when at camp. My mistakes here were in waiting too long to reef and not having practiced setting the second reef prior to the point at which I needed it.

The girls and I really enjoyed ourselves on this trip and are strongly considering returning next year. We met fantastic people and got to sail in a new environment. Each adventure provides new challenges and opportunities for learning.