



Dale Gantz photos

When author Richard Henry Dana sailed in these waters aboard the brig *Pilgrim*, from 1835 to 1836, he rounded these points several times — in both directions. In his classic book *“Two Years Before the Mast,”* Dana described conditions aboard the southbound brig as it rounded the most feared and respected of these points:

GET THE POINT

As far as 5 miles south of Point Sur (above), you may encounter 30 knots of prevailing wind. However, the winds may be only 10 knots immediately north of the point.

“We passed Point Conception at a flying rate, the wind blowing so that it would have seemed half a gale to us if we had been going the other way and close-hauled.”

Around the same point but northbound, he painted a far different and more vivid picture:

“Everything was confusion on deck; the little vessel was tearing through the water as if she had lost her wits, the seas flying over her, and the masts leaning over at a wide angle from the vertical. The wind had hauled ahead during the squall, and we were standing directly in for the point. So ... we wore round and stood off again, and had the pleasant prospect of beating up to Monterey ... against a violent headwind.”

Given the fickleness of the weather, a boater can experience either face in both directions. Generally, however, the passage down will range from tolerable to outstanding, while the passage north will range from tolerable to miserable.

Fortunately, you can greatly increase your chances of making a trip north that is closer to the “tolerable” end of the scale than to the “miserable” side. Rarely will you have a passage north as pleasant as the one Dana had going south. It is enough to say that chances are good that you won’t have a passage as miserable as the one he had going north.

The key lies in your understanding the geography of the Pacific Coast between Point Conception, the southernmost of the major points, and Monterey; in monitoring the weather frequently each day; and in timing your departures based on that weather information.

physical shape of the California coastline produce the conditions Dana described so graphically: ideal conditions for southbound boaters and challenging-to-horrible conditions for northbound boaters. Even in the more benign summer months, the winds often blow with vigor, sometimes reaching 20 to 30 knots during afternoons. In winter, wind velocities often exceed 30 knots, and waves can reach 15 feet or more.

Because the California coastline runs approximately north-south, the prevailing winds strike the coast at an angle and slip off, resulting in a flow of wind down the coast. When this north-west flow strikes a point of land, it accelerates. In approaching and rounding Point Sur — 27 miles south of Monterey — for example, we’ve often seen 30 knots of prevailing wind 5 miles south of the point, but only 10 knots immediately north of it.

The winds and sea conditions at Point Conception and Point Arguello can be even more daunting because of the unique geography of these two points. While the coastline follows a general north-south line from the Oregon border, it bends southeast at Arguello, from a heading of about 170 degrees to 110 degrees, and then bends again at Point Conception to approximately 90 degrees. These abrupt bends in the coastline allow the winds to blow freely past Arguello and Conception with nothing to deflect them, doubling and frequently tripling in speed as they accelerate past the two points.

To compound the effects on a boat off the coast, the winds blowing for thousands of miles

1. Monterey
2. Point Sur
3. San Simeon
4. Point Arguello
5. Point Conception
6. Goleta
7. Santa Barbara



GEOGRAPHY AND WEATHER

The prevailing winds and the



across the open Pacific Ocean have developed some significant waves. As these waves bounce off the coastline, the intervals between them decrease and their smooth surfaces become confused, creating uncomfortable sea conditions for a boater heading into them.

However, the winds blowing so fiercely around Conception, Arguello and Sur gradually diminish within a few miles of the points. At Santa Barbara, about 40 miles east of Point Conception, rarely does the northwest wind blow forcefully. Rather, Santa Barbara sailboaters worry more about getting enough wind to have a race.

Despite the strong prevailing winds that can blow along the Central California coast, they're not quite as bad — even at Point Conception — as Dana reported: "... the sailors say, it begins to blow the first of January and blows until the last of December." Actually, strong northwest-lies blow for only a few days at a time and then die out to light or no winds for one to three days. When these calmer conditions develop, it is time for sailors to get under way, moving on until the weather window closes again. If the good weather window lasts only a single day, boaters

may get no farther than the next harbor, but, if it lasts two or three days, they may make it all the way to Monterey or other points north.

As you would expect, summer months typically have more days of fair weather than do the other months (although coastal fog is more common in summer). Nevertheless, we have found many good weather windows in every season.

When weather permits, a passage in autumn — when coastal fog appears only sporadically — can be both comfortable and scenic. While you may have to spend more time waiting for weather windows to appear, spring and winter passages also can be beautiful, with little fog.

PASSAGE-MAKING

If you're making this passage north, against prevailing winds and currents, you must follow some simple rules to cruise in relative comfort and safety:

1. Monitor the weather closely for several days before your departure. Your VHF radio will receive NOAA weather reports just about everywhere along the coast of Central California. If you have weatherfax aboard, you can supplement these

LIVIN' ON THE EDGE

Point Conception is a beautiful piece of land, but the fierce winds that blow around the point are as ugly as they come.

local weather reports with up-to-the-minute weather charts.

Although weather reports are only predictions, they're the best indicator of future weather patterns we have — unless you are an expert at reading weather signs in nature. Only those who are desperate to get from one point to the next should begin a northward passage when strong prevailing winds are blowing or are forecast.

2. Make all passages around Conception, Arguello and Sur either at night or early in the day. Although you can never be certain of good conditions, regardless of the time of day or the predicted weather, rounding major points late at night or early in the day decreases the chances of your boat getting pounded by wind and waves.

3. If you have time constraints for making this passage, take full advantage of weather windows, when winds and waves are light. Continue under way until you encounter heavy weather or reach your destination.

4. Because heavy weather always looms as a possibility along this coastline, regardless of

turn into Cojo Anchorage. You won't gain much by continuing to pound into the winds and waves that build in the afternoon and early evening.

On one of our early trips from Southern California, before we had radar or a GPS, our boat began to pitch a little in the increasing winds and swells as we neared Point Conception. In the fog that had settled in shortly after 1 a.m., together with the darkness, we could see little beyond the bow of our boat until 6 a.m., when a hole in the fog revealed the light on Point Conception almost directly abeam of us. Our speed had fallen from 6 to 4 knots, but we continued powering toward Point Arguello — optimistic that we would clear that 12 mile distant point by midmorning, despite the deteriorating conditions.

When the fog lifted at 7:30 a.m., we were astounded and disappointed to find ourselves still abeam of the light at Conception. The headwind, steep 9 foot waves and current had conspired to halt all our boat's forward motion.

Our response to these conditions? We turned to starboard and slipped into Cojo Anchorage until conditions would allow us to round the point that Dana called the "Cape Horn of California."

As we passed Government Point (south of Point Conception), the winds decreased to 20 knots and the seas flattened to 2 or 3 feet. By the time we were in the anchorage and had the anchor down, the winds had dropped to 15 knots and the seas were flat — except for a wind wave of about a foot. Our boat sat almost motionless among five cruising sailboats, two trawlers and a huge oil rig service boat that were securely anchored in Cojo.

We spent the day resting up, then left Cojo the next morning at 3 o'clock, after the winds had diminished, in order to get around both Conception and Arguello — 12 miles northwest of Conception — before sunrise.

PORT SAN LUIS (AVILA)

The 35 mile trip from Arguello to Port San Luis, the next popular boat haven, may be sloppy, if large seas are running. In that case, you can tuck in behind Point Sal, about 20 miles north of Arguello. Approach this anchorage cautiously and only from the south, not the southwest or west, because wash rocks 660 yards south and west of Point Sal await unwary boaters. Even when waves are running, these rocks are not immediately apparent.

When we were there last summer, the captain of a fishing boat working off the point cautioned us about the wash rocks and told us the best anchorage lies east of Lion Rock — the



Dave G. Houser photo

OH YES, OH NO
When heading north, the Monterey Bay Aquarium (above) is a welcome sight, because it means you've passed points Arguello, Conception and Sur. While the passage north is often difficult, the passage south is usually much easier.

the forecasts, identify the safe havens before leaving your last port in Southern California. Fortunately, many sheltered coves and harbors dot the Central California coast.

COJO ANCHORAGE

If winds pick up as you approach Conception or Arguello, you can stop at Refugio or Gaviota — 21 and 28 miles west of Santa Barbara, respectively — to get out of the maelstrom. However, usually, you will be able to get within a mile of Point Conception, where you can

large, appropriately named rock immediately southeast of Point Sal. The captain drops his anchor when the ocean comes into view between Lion Rock and Point Sal.

Port San Luis, a capacious, well-protected harbor, has no slips, but a visiting boater can usually secure a mooring for the night from the harbor master. Another option is to anchor in the good sand bottom between the county wharf on the east side of the harbor and the Union Oil pier — a mile west of it.

MORRO BAY

Depart from Port San Luis early in the day to avoid afternoon winds that often howl down the coastline from Point Buchon to Port San Luis. In exiting the port, go all the way out to the entrance buoy, almost 2 miles off the Port San Luis lighthouse, to clear the rafts of thick kelp growing along this coast.

After passing the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, we go outside the Point Buchon buoy, set a course to keep ourselves about 2 miles offshore and run parallel to the coast from there to Morro Bay. Majestic Morro Rock is visible from Point Buchon on most clear days.

Like many harbor entrances along the Pacific Coast, the entrance into Morro Bay, with its shallow bar, presents a challenge in a large swell. The sharp turn to port immediately past the breakwater adds to the challenge. Call the Coast Guard at Morro Bay for a status report on the conditions at the bar when large seas are running. With careful planning, and a bit of luck, we've never had problems in the dozen or so times we've crossed this bar.

For many reasons, Morro Bay is one of the gems for boaters making the passage along the coast. For one, it is the first place after Santa Barbara to take on fuel — a major consideration if you've motored nonstop for more than 100 miles, against headwinds and pounding seas.

Moreover, visiting boaters have several options regarding where to stop here. The first choice for most cruising boaters is Morro Bay Yacht Club, a club with friendly members, a dock and five moorings for visitors.

You can also anchor out on the west side of the channel in a small anchorage, with space for three or four boats, between markers #10 and #12. Be careful not to go too far toward the spit, which has shoaling toward the south of it.

SAN SIMEON ANCHORAGE

The next well-protected haven along the

Central California coast, a short 22 miles northward from Morro, is San Simeon Anchorage. Protected by a peninsula dotted with tall evergreen trees, this moderate-sized and picturesque anchorage — with a view of Hearst Castle on the hills above — can accommodate 15 or more boats.

The best anchorage is between the Coast Guard buoy and the beach, in depths of 15 to 20 feet. You can also safely anchor off the end of the pier.

When seas outside are particularly boisterous, you may feel some roll at anchor in San Simeon. However, the forests of kelp between the anchorage and the ocean dampen that roll, and you'll find this anchorage a restful refuge while you wait for a good weather window.

LOPEZ POINT ANCHORAGE

The 55 mile passage north from San Simeon to Point Sur, the last major point you must round, is particularly challenging. The distance to Monterey is 73 miles, and on this passage, you must round Point Sur.

We like to depart from San Simeon after mid-



Deidra Walpole Photography

night, when the winds have decreased and the seas have come down. By getting under way around midnight, we can round Sur well before midday, when the winds and seas typically grow increasingly ugly.

NOAA weather reports will help you decide when to attempt to round Point Sur. If you've misjudged the conditions or if the weather changes while you're under way, two anchorages along this stretch of coastline offer a respite.

The first is Lopez Point Anchorage, some 30

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TUNE IN TO MORRO

Morro Bay is a great place for boaters to visit: It's the first place to take on fuel after Santa Barbara, and there are several places to stop for moorage.

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miles north of San Simeon and a mile southeast of Lopez Point. A commercial fisherman told us he and his friends regularly anchor here in the lee of Lopez Point to wait for sea conditions to improve.

When we were there, we anchored in a water depth of 30 feet, about 100 yards off the dramatic cliff face. There are sea caves at its base, about a mile and a half northwest of the bridge at Hare Canyon and perhaps a half-mile northwest of Harlan Rock. The multihued strata of the cliffs here were a welcome diversion from wave after wave breaking over the bow of the boat.

When seas are big along the coastline, waves will wrap around Lopez Point, creating some roll in the anchorage — but a little roly motion is far easier to take than hours of unrelieved pounding into strong winds and steep waves.

On a trip northward from San Simeon a few years ago, we encountered unexpectedly heavy winds midmorning near Cape San Martin. After we convinced ourselves the conditions were not severe enough to warrant seeking an anchorage, we spent the next 12 uncomfortable hours covering the 30 miles from Cape San Martin to Point Sur. Those 12 hours were not well spent!

PFEIFFER POINT ANCHORAGE

If you get farther along the coast before encountering strong winds and steep seas, consider tucking in at the anchorage under Pfeiffer Point, 18 miles north of Lopez Point. Though the waves wrapping around Pfeiffer can

cause anchored boats to do a lively jig, this anchorage protects boats from prevailing northwest winds.

We don't find it as comfortable as the anchorage at Lopez, but northbound fishing boats have used it for years. Perhaps we're put off by the fact this anchorage is locally known as "Wreck Beach."

You can anchor inside the kelp to help minimize roll; a roll stabilizer or two would be even more helpful. Anchor 0.6 mile southeast of the point, about 300 yards offshore, beneath the colorfully striated cliffs and impressive homes above them.

The coastline at Pfeiffer, part of the magnificent Big Sur coast, will keep you happily occupied while you wait for the weather to improve. Because Pfeiffer Point lies a mere 6 miles south of Point Sur, it is an ideal point of departure for rounding Sur early in the day, when the waters around the point are likely to be calm.

After making a difficult passage along the Central Coast, Dana wrote almost rapturously about his arrival at Monterey:

"It was a fine Saturday afternoon that we came to anchor (in Monterey Bay), the sun about an hour high, and everything looking pleasantly."

Back then, the captain of the ship that Dana was on — a brig transporting cattle hides to the East Coast — had neither NOAA weather reports nor weather faxes to guide him. When the time came to leave a port, the ship left, and when a point needed to be rounded, it was rounded. 🌊

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