

# Cruising Without Power

John S. Letcher, Jr.

To many sailors today, the idea of a cruising sailboat without an auxiliary engine is practically a contradiction in terms. In less than a century the internal combustion engine has so pervaded the sport of cruising that what was a technological impossibility until 1886 is now almost universally regarded as an essential part of a cruising boat.

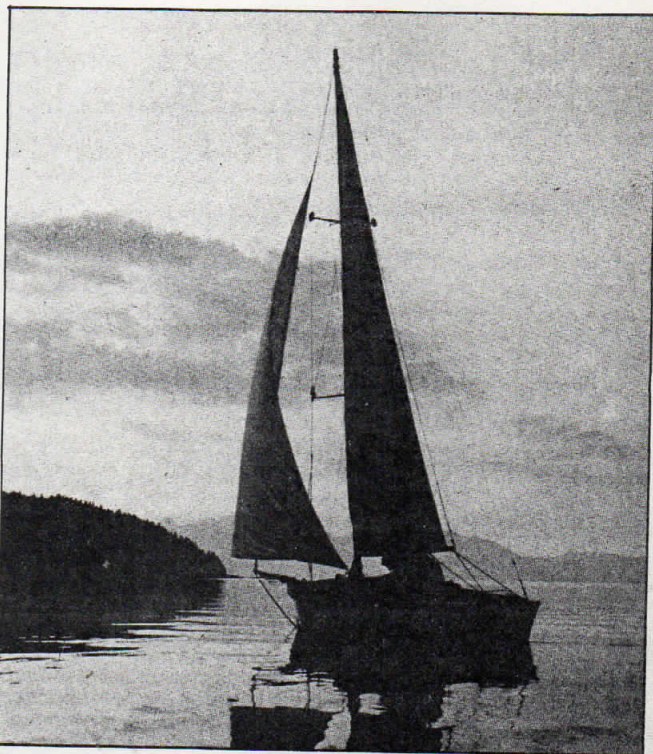
A whole generation of sailors has grown up on boats that invariably power their way from the mooring out to open water before raising sail, and back in at the end of the day. They are hardly aware that there is any other way to go sailing. Anyone who has cruised much with an engine can recall countless situations in which he would have been in deep trouble if his engine had quit, and so he is likely to think of engineless cruising in terms of an endless succession of such horrifying experiences.

We forget quickly. A century ago our waters were dotted with sailing workboats of all sizes and types, all engineless, from the great deepwater ships and coastal schooners to the tiny smacks and sprit-rigged punts. They didn't have engines, and so they knew how to get along perfectly well without them. Think of the great early years of yacht cruising, when engines were unavailable or unheard of. People simply set out in their sailboats and went from place to place, along coasts or across oceans, enjoyed themselves, and wrote some of our favorite books about their experiences.

Consider these *advantages* of the engineless boat. In one blow, we have gotten rid of the heaviest, most expensive and troublesome piece of gear on board. This boat can cost about 25% less initially than a 5-hp-per-ton auxiliary with the same space inside and similar sailing ability. She can cost 50% to 75% less to operate and maintain. She will never lose a day of sailing because of engine trouble. Her skipper will never smell oil in his bilge, will never have to spend an hour upside down in a cramped compartment bleeding lines, changing oil, swearing, or whatever else you have to do to find out why it isn't working. He will never be immobilized by a dead battery, or by a jib sheet or dinghy painter wrapped around his propeller. He will never have the horrifying experience of having his engine quit just when he is counting on it most.

I got off on the right track through two lucky breaks early in my sailing experience. The first was finding a book that actually encouraged this atavistic approach. It's one of my favorites, *Cruising Boats Within Your Budget* by John J. Benjamin (Harper & Bros., New York, 1957). Benjamin strongly recommends cruising for your first year or two without an engine so that you'll learn to maneuver under sail and never be in the unseamanlike position of relying on the auxiliary.

Well, I didn't take his advice; *Island Girl* came with a 5-hp outboard. The second lucky break was that that outboard had some terminal illness, and I never got it to run for more than five or ten minutes between major overhauls. I kept nursing it along hopefully, but at the end of my first season I realized that I had been *de facto* engineless all summer, and had done a darned pleasant lot of cruising in spite of it. So I



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*Island Girl* didn't make it to a harbor on this evening in Glacier Bay

took the motor home and left it.

In the years since, this early-formed attitude has stuck: Cruising is more challenging and more fun without an engine, and certainly cheaper and more independent. So I largely ignored the auxiliary power aspects while learning about boats, and found better and better ways to get along through old-fashioned equipment and seamanship. I keep my future options open by denying that this is purism, that there is anything essentially *immoral* about a 5-hp-per-ton auxiliary. It is pure practicality. For the kind of cruising I want to do, I'll enjoy it more without an engine.

There are many wonderful experiences that I would surely have missed had I had an auxiliary at the time. Of course, there have been a thousand small ones — the exhilaration of tacking through some tight spots; a clever piece of navigation in the fog; the serenity of gliding into a new harbor silently with the last of the day's breeze and light; the challenge of occasional night sails in coastal waters; the satisfaction of knowing that people on shore are watching admiringly, expectantly, appreciatively, as the first yacht in years actually *sails* into their harbor. So many times the silence of a slow sail has paid off in terms of animals and birds seen, heard and not frightened off by the noise of an engine. But from all these experiences, one stands out that seems best to show both the depth of frustration involved, and the height of reward. This was *Island Girl's* arrival in Alaska.

I sailed her alone from Los Angeles to Honolulu in 1963, when I was 21. I spent part of that summer and the next cruising among the Hawaiian Islands, and then set out in late July to sail singlehanded direct to Sitka, Alaska, 2,600

John Letcher is a naval architect in Southwest Harbor, Maine. His voyages in the 20' *Island Girl* and 25' *Aleutka* have taken him and his wife Pat to many parts of the Pacific and up the East Coast to Maine — without an engine. Departing Maine last September, they are enjoying a leisurely cruise on *Aleutka* down the coast with their three-year-old daughter.

miles north-northeast. The passage was ruled by weather which came in weeks — a week of close-reaching into the fresh northeast trades; a week of calms in the Horse Latitudes; a week of steady southwest winds in which we climbed steadily into cooler latitudes; a week of gales between 45° and 50° North; and finally a week of settled cool weather, the first week of September, which carried us across the Fifties and to a thrilling landfall on the snowcapped mountains of Alaska's outlying islands.

The day I closed with the land, the wind turned to the north, and I had to tack up the outer coast of Baranof Island to reach the waters for which I had detailed charts. I was certainly ready for a quiet night's sleep in the security of one of the hundreds of harbors that lay ahead. It was a beautiful, clear day in which to enjoy the rugged headlands and islands, the spectacular bays and waterfalls past which I sailed.

All day as I plotted new positions on the chart the race with nightfall was on, and all I needed or asked was for the gentle headwind to continue. But just at sunset, when I was only a mile outside the first good cove, the wind fell very light, the ebb tide began to carry *Island Girl* seaward, and it became clear I had little chance of getting in before dark. I gave up in great disappointment, and used the little remaining wind to head out to sea for a 38th night on the ocean. That evening I wrote in the log, "Next summer I will have an outboard motor, and my next boat will have inboard auxiliary." That's to show the depth of frustration. I hove-to a few miles offshore, drifting away from the hard-won coast in the fresh north wind that came up after dark.

In the gray morning the coast was out of sight behind curtains of rain. The barometer was falling and another storm seemed imminent. I stood inshore cautiously, swinging back to the south to avoid large areas of offlying ledges. Late in the morning I reached the coast again. Craggy cliffs and huge dark spruce appeared out of the mist, and I recognized North Cape, my three o'clock position of the afternoon before. Now the wind fell light again, but continued long enough to get me into the mouth of Cameron Pass, the beginning of a well-sheltered inside route for the last 30 miles to Sitka.

Late that afternoon I eased the sheets to steal softly into an unnamed, deserted, wilderness harbor. A high, rocky islet nearly blocked the entrance, and inside the water was as smooth as a pond. The boat ghosted along hardly rippling the surface, profound silence replacing the incessant rush and splash of water that had filled my ears for over a month. I could hear now the sweet music of a stream falling down through the wet forest, a raven croaking further up the cove, drops falling from an overhanging spruce where a bald eagle marked my progress. The wild land embraced us, the anchor went down in a landlocked cove at the head of the bay, and peace was complete. What a serene way to end an ocean passage! I wouldn't trade the memory of that hour for all the diesel engines in Marblehead.

The following summer, perhaps for some budgetary reason, I didn't get that outboard motor. Instead I fitted *Island Girl* with a pair of oars, and found that they would move her streamlined two tons of displacement easily at about two knots. The oars served well for occasional auxiliary power on a 400-mile exploration — of the northernmost parts of the Inside Passage — Peril Strait, Lynn Canal, Glacier Bay and Icy Strait. Tides are strong and winds are often light in the channels, so we were caught out overnight twice, and on two other occasions we had to make unlighted harbors after dark.

In the spring of 1966 I married Patricia, and we started building a new boat big enough to carry us both on a long voyage. Since oars had served us so well on *Island Girl*, it was natural to forego my own promise of an inboard auxiliary, and make the simple, inexpensive choice of oars for

*Aleutka*. I'm sure this decision saved us at least a thousand dollars and a month of work at the very beginning. We could cruise for a year on a thousand dollars, and it would be a long time before the delays and frustrations due to lack of an engine could add up to balance a year of freedom — even assuming no delays or frustrations due to the engine.

So we took the year off for sailing, going down the West Coast from Seattle to California in the fall, out to Hawaii in the winter, and up to Alaska in the spring to spend the summer there. Three summers in Alaska were followed by another year off in which we sailed to Mexico, thence to Florida, up the Intracoastal Waterway to Virginia, and on to Maine. Very seldom in all these travels have we wished for more power than the oars. In fact I would guess that our rowing totals less than 100 miles out of these 17,000 — 60 to 70 hours of rowing in nearly four years of living aboard. It's mostly a matter of moving the boat a couple of miles to the nearest anchorage, or perhaps just a hundred yards to the next patch of wind.

*Aleutka*, designed with sails on the small side for the relatively strong, fair winds of an ocean crossing, and with twin keels for shallow-water coastal exploring, is hardly the ideal boat for going without power. Most 25-footers sail noticeably better than we do to windward and in lighter winds, and most would row more easily too. Still, she has done well enough to have given us a tremendous amount of cruising pleasure.

The ultimate test of the theory came, I suppose, in the Intracoastal Waterway. Friends we met in St. Petersburg, on the west coast of Florida where we entered the waterway, were very discouraging. No one had crossed Florida without an engine, they thought, much less gone all the way to Norfolk. But Patty and I decided to give it a try under sail, and see how it went. We could always sail out through any of the inlets and go north by sea if we had to.

The Intracoastal turned out to be some of the most delightful cruising we have done — something we would love to go back and repeat. Except for the Florida crossing via Lake Okeechobee, against the easterly tradewind, we had favorable prevailing winds all the way. The Waterway offers endless variety in sailing. In many places it winds its way up a tidal river, through a short dredged cut, then down another river to another ocean inlet. In other places it runs through broad lagoons or sounds behind sandy islands, and in a few stretches it is a long, narrow cut for mile after mile. Piloting is a continuous process. Everywhere it is passing through marshes, woods or towns, so there are always interesting shores to look at. For 90% of the way the water is wide or the shores are low, so there's plenty of wind and no sea. A boat with less than 3' draft can find a place to anchor almost anywhere.

We would sail if *either* the wind or tide was favorable; otherwise we would find a place to anchor and do something else. Some days we didn't move at all; on other days we reeled off 70 to 80 miles. The 1,120 miles took 45 days, an average of 25 miles per day. Drawbridges were the main obstacle; we logged 97 of them, and every one was exciting. Usually the bridge piers would block the wind, and concentrate the current, so that a burst of energetic rowing was needed to push us through. Otherwise we rowed a little, and mostly sailed, and really had a great time.

Cruising without an engine is a different kind of cruising life — slower paced, closer to wind and tide, more independent and peaceful, limited in some ways but much freer in others. Just don't let anyone tell you that in this day and age it's impossible.

