

When a windsurfer dude buys a big cat and heads offshore for the first time, a gale off the Mexican coast opens his eyes to the thrill of bluewater sailing



Baja or Bust

ON MY WAY TO NEW ZEALAND TWO years ago, I realized I had a six-hour layover in Los Angeles. This would not do. I go stir-crazy waiting around airports, so I picked up a sailing magazine, found the boat of my dreams for sale—which happened to be docked in San Diego—and called the owner to arrange for a visit. I arrived at LAX, hopped in a rental car, and drove south.

It turns out that the owner had gone to work in high-tech right out of college in the early 1990s. Within a few years, he

was a multimillionaire who spent \$30,000 a month on cars and clothes and living large. He sank a goodly sum into a 42-foot Fountaine Pajot Venezia catamaran. From his point of view, the money would never stop rolling in. He was wrong, of course. When the dot-com bubble began to burst in 2000, he foolishly bought more high-tech stock. On margin.

Within several years, everything was gone except the cat. That's when I turned up. The asking price was still more than I'd ever considered spending for a boat—any boat. I told him I'd think about it and flew to New Zealand. We e-mailed over the next month, and against all my better instincts, we came to terms. A few days later, I was in San Diego arranging for a survey, signing papers, and handing over money. Lots of it. I was now the proud



Jackie Reeves and Matt Bronson (left) mug while *Jangada* takes it easy in a sun-filled Baja anchorage. Matt Bronson (top right), at ease on watch; Eric Sanford (middle right), checking out the masthead; and Chris Lamia and Regina Clarfella (below right) all enjoy the ride south.



owner of a big, fancy, expensive cruising cat. Of all the frightening things I've ever done in my life, and I've done some scary stuff, buying that boat was definitely the most terrifying.

For one thing, I was a bit shy on sailing experience. But I was big into windsurfing. I could discern the difference between a mast and a boom and an anchor, and I'd chartered a few Venezias in the past and knew how they performed. But now I owned one and was responsible for it. I suddenly realized how little I really understood about serious cruising boats and all their complicated systems: watermaker and diesels, autopilot and radar, chart plotter and GPS, fuel and propane, saildrives and props, batteries and alternators. Not to mention all the actual sailing gizmos. I was overwhelmed to





the point of seasickness, and I hadn't even left the dock yet.

When I was younger, I'd climbed big mountains all over the world. First, I prepared myself and my gear, training and organizing and getting myself mentally ready. The only way to actually pull off a difficult ascent was to focus on one step at a time. If I ever stopped to consider the big picture—looking up at 3,000 feet of granite on El Capitan in Yosemite, the 5,000-foot North Face of the Eiger, or the 24,000-foot Pumori, in Nepal—I would've had a heart attack. So I applied the same procedure to sailing the boat, making one move at a time to isolate my fear and control my mind. I guess overcoming the fear factor worked because I concluded that I wanted to sail

my boat—rechristened *Jangada* after a type of rattletrap Brazilian fishing boat—to Mexico's Sea of Cortez.

I called a friend of mine, a professional skipper with 30,000 miles of offshore-sailing experience to his credit, to see if he'd join me (read: baby-sit me) on the journey south. He said he would. Just to be sure, I enlisted another pro with even more experience. Six other friends decided that they should come, too, so soon I had a full boat. A week before departure, I got a call from my first skipper saying he couldn't make it; neither, as it turned out, could the other guy.

I gathered my totally green crew to tell them the news. Matt, an old skiing and windsurfing buddy who only skis if the grade



Peace and solitude in Baja's Bahía Balandra, near La Paz on the Sea of Cortez, were just some of the rewards for *Jangada's* crew after a boisterous sail from California.

is steeper than 45 degrees and only windsurfs if the wind is blowing at least 30 knots, didn't hesitate. "We don't need those guys," he said. "We can take her south ourselves. How hard can it be?" That was easy for him to say; it wasn't his boat.

Three frantic 14-hour workdays flew by. We went out sailing to test all the electronics, practice anchoring, tweak the rig, and get used to each other and to the boat. As luck would have it, the typical sunny and warm Southern California weather turned nasty, with cold wind and rain. We hardly noticed, though. We were excited and ready to get going. The weather was forecast to remain unpleasant and perhaps even deteriorate into gale-force conditions. We went to sleep early as the rain beat on the deck.

The next morning, we were going, ready or not. Much to my amazement, the spirits of the crew were high as we pulled away from the dock at 0700 and headed off into the Pacific under gray skies, light drizzle, and gusty winds. We hoisted the sails and set off on a broad reach in 20 knots of wind and six-foot seas, crossed into Mexican waters from San Diego, and surged past the Islas Coronados.

Our original plan was to stop the first night in Ensenada to regroup and take a break, but with the bad weather (and the forecast for more of it), we decided to scoot south as fast as possible. In the afternoon, the wind started gusting to 25 knots, and the seas grew larger. By nightfall, the winds were a steady 25, gusting



Twins Celeste and Clara keep an eye on the skipper as he heads aloft for a photo session in 20 knots of breeze.



Garry and Beck Bell (left) tend halyards. Properly attired for chilly Pacific waters, Celeste and Clara (below) prepare to submerge their Doublemint grins.

to 30, with icy squalls whipping the tops off the 12-foot crests rearing up astern. We stood watches of two crew on deck for three hours.

At 0200, one of the crew woke me to say that the wind was gusting over 35 knots and suggested reefing might be a good idea. I scrambled into my foul-weather gear and safety harness as I felt *Jangada* climbing up over huge swells, her rigging groaning every time the massive waves first boosted her forward, then stopped her cold as her narrow bows dug deep into the backs of the next set. Three

of us struggled to take a second reef in the mainsail. Spray shot over the bows and doused us with torrents of icy water. I was having the time of my life. Really, I was. Luckily for me, everyone else shared my enthusiasm—or at least they pretended to, and that was good enough for me.

Steering *Jangada* that night was fiercely intense as the eight-ton boat thundered along before 30 knots of wind. She powered over massive black swells I couldn't see until I felt the wallop of each crest slam into the bows and white spray flashed in the darkness. Eventually, at 0600, there was a faint glow on the eastern horizon, and by then the adrenaline was really pumping. The wind increased to 40 knots, and our weatherfax confirmed what we already knew: We were caught out in a gale. The swells were becoming enormous. We watched as one 20-footer steamed up on our stern, and *Jangada* slowly pitched forward as if being shoved off a steep ski slope. Instantly, the speedo surged past 15 knots.

Instead of slowing down, I tried to make the boat go even faster. The exhilaration and power of a big cat racing down a massive wave is something you have to experience to be able to understand, and since I'm an adrenaline junky, I craved even more thrills. And faster we went, hitting 18 knots. The twin wakes off the stern looked like a water-ski boat made them. In two hours, we traveled over 30 miles, ripping down

the coast while dodging squalls and angry seas.

After the gale, we began to experience a more placid Mexico. The days drifted by. Sometimes we'd stop for the night; sometimes we'd sail right on through. Life on board the boat became simple, a matter of pleasant routine. While there are endless projects to keep one busy, living on a boat out on the ocean frees up a tremendous amount of time that's otherwise spent performing such mundane chores on land as answering e-mail.

Each day brought new experiences. I figured out how to use the navigation software on the personal computer, operate the single-sideband radio to get daily weatherfaxes, program the autopilot, manage our power consumption, trim the sails, tweak the radar, and complete a hundred other fun, interesting, and endlessly challenging chores.

Of course, as on any boat, all sorts of things broke. One of our three GPS units simply up and died; the watermaker developed a leak; the autopilot got water in it and stopped working when a large wave poured into the cockpit; the windlass went dead for 15 minutes (I guess it felt it deserved a break); one of the saildrives developed a leaky seal; the charger/inverter/equalizer/alternator started doing all sorts of crazy things; and we couldn't keep the BBQ lit (the 20-knot winds at some of our anchorages might have had something to do with it).

Rather than view these breakdowns as problems, I saw them as new and interesting challenges. Of course, this might be a very idealistic and naïve way of looking at things—very typical, I was told, of the new owner of a boat—but I was having a ball. We rebuilt the watermaker, dried out and remounted the autopilot control, talked nice to the windlass, and even figured out how to keep the BBQ lit in a gale.



I've now had *Jangada* for two years, and she's taught me plenty, since we've survived everything from two big hurricanes to such routine chores as bottom painting. I was frightened when I first bought her. I still am. What scares me now? Not having a boat.

Eric Sanford, photojournalist and editor at large with *Windsurfing* magazine, lives in Hood River, Oregon, where he windsurfs every summer day that the wind blows at least 20 knots.