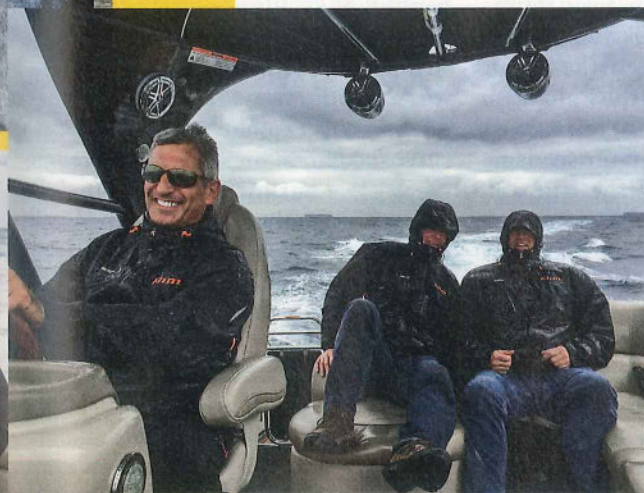


THE PACIFIC BY PONTOON

Four men challenge pre-storm seas on a pontoon boat adventure off Southern California.

By Jim Wolf



The skies were cloudy and the waves were large on day three of our journey, much larger than the previous two days. The winds were blowing a steady 20 knots, and the Coast Guard had issued small-craft advisories for the entire area. After fueling up with 50 gallons, we cruised out of Newport Harbor at 8 a.m. As we hit the end of the break wall, we went on plane.

We took a few waves over the bow as we cruised at a steady 10 to 12 knots. The swells were building and running eight to 10 feet at 12-second intervals. The surface waves were five to six feet, and we were in following seas. We were very surprised, as the typical wave pattern would have had us going directly into the waves, so we were lucky to be rolling with them instead of against them. The wind was blowing hard and coming from the bow port side of the boat. We navigated each wave with a hand working the throttle the entire time.

We were half a mile offshore as we passed Huntington Beach and picked a direct line toward the Point Vicente Lighthouse on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The route would take us 4 to 5 miles offshore, and we scrapped the idea of heading into Long Beach Harbor, as that line would have required us to hit the waves head on as we left the harbor. The conditions went from bad to worse as we passed an offshore oil platform. At certain points, the surface waves merged with the now 10- to 12-foot swells, and deep valleys developed between the waves. We had to back off the throttle a bit and were chugging ahead at an 8- to 10-knot pace. We took a pounding. Wave spray came over amidships. No music. No conversation. All eyes were on the waves as we battled the swells.

The Plan

The phone rang on a mid-November workday. It was Doug Haskell, Tahoe dealer and owner of North Shore Marine in Devil's Lake, Mich. "You know," he said, "it's time to stop talking about it and just do it. Let's get 'er done." Haskell and I have a long history, and I knew immediately what he was referring to. It had been 10 years since our first pontoon boat excursion, from Baltimore to Key West, Fla., in November 2004. It was on that trip we began using the expression "let's get 'er done." It was the first of many trips to come. Chicago to Mackinac Island in August 2005. Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., to Bimini Island in January 2006. Key West to the Dry Tortugas in October 2009. As the past five seasons had come and gone, we had pondered and brainstormed the when, where and how of our next big adventure; however, the timing was just never right.

By the end of the day the plan was complete. The crew: Haskell, Travis Connors (Tahoe boat dealer from Indian River, Mich.), Duane Dinninger (head of engineering and operations for Avalon & Tahoe Pontoon Boats), and myself (president and CEO of Avalon & Tahoe Pontoon Boats). The dates: Tuesday, Dec. 9 through Saturday, Dec. 13. The trip plan: Marina del Rey to Catalina Island to San Diego

to Newport Beach to Long Beach to Redondo Beach to Santa Barbara to the Channel Islands and back to Marina del Rey. Four days, 500 miles, four-man crew, 27-foot Avalon Ambassador and two 300 hp Mercury Verado engines.

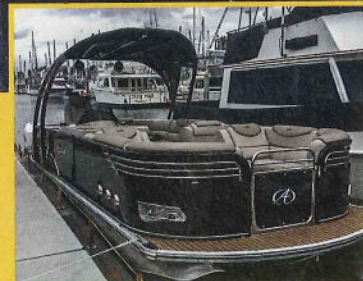
Day One

Loaded with fuel — 90 gallons in the center tube and six 5-gallon cans in a locker — and anticipation, we cruised out of Marina del Rey at 2:30 p.m. We knew at wide open we would be burning approximately one gallon for every nine-tenths of a mile. At optimum fuel economy, we would be burning approximately one gallon for every 1.7 miles at a cruising speed of 33 mph. As we passed out of the jetty, we had a clear view of the Palos Verdes Peninsula 10 miles south; beyond that was Catalina Island in the distance. To our starboard side were the hills of Malibu. We had a 10 to 15

The task wasn't going to be easy, but four men — from left (opening photo) Doug Haskell, Duane Dinninger, Jim Wolf, Travis Connors — cruised the Pacific off Southern California in an Avalon pontoon boat. Despite some inclement weather, they had a good time.



Despite being miles from land on the run from Catalina to San Diego (this page), the group was relaxed and confident in the pontoon's ability to get them where they needed to go, such as Catalina (opposite page, top) and Newport Harbor (opposite page, bottom).



ESSENTIALS

We loaded the boat with a few essential supplies for a few days on the water:

- Snacks
- Sunscreen
- Water
- Soda
- A few changes of clothes
- Two extra props, etc.

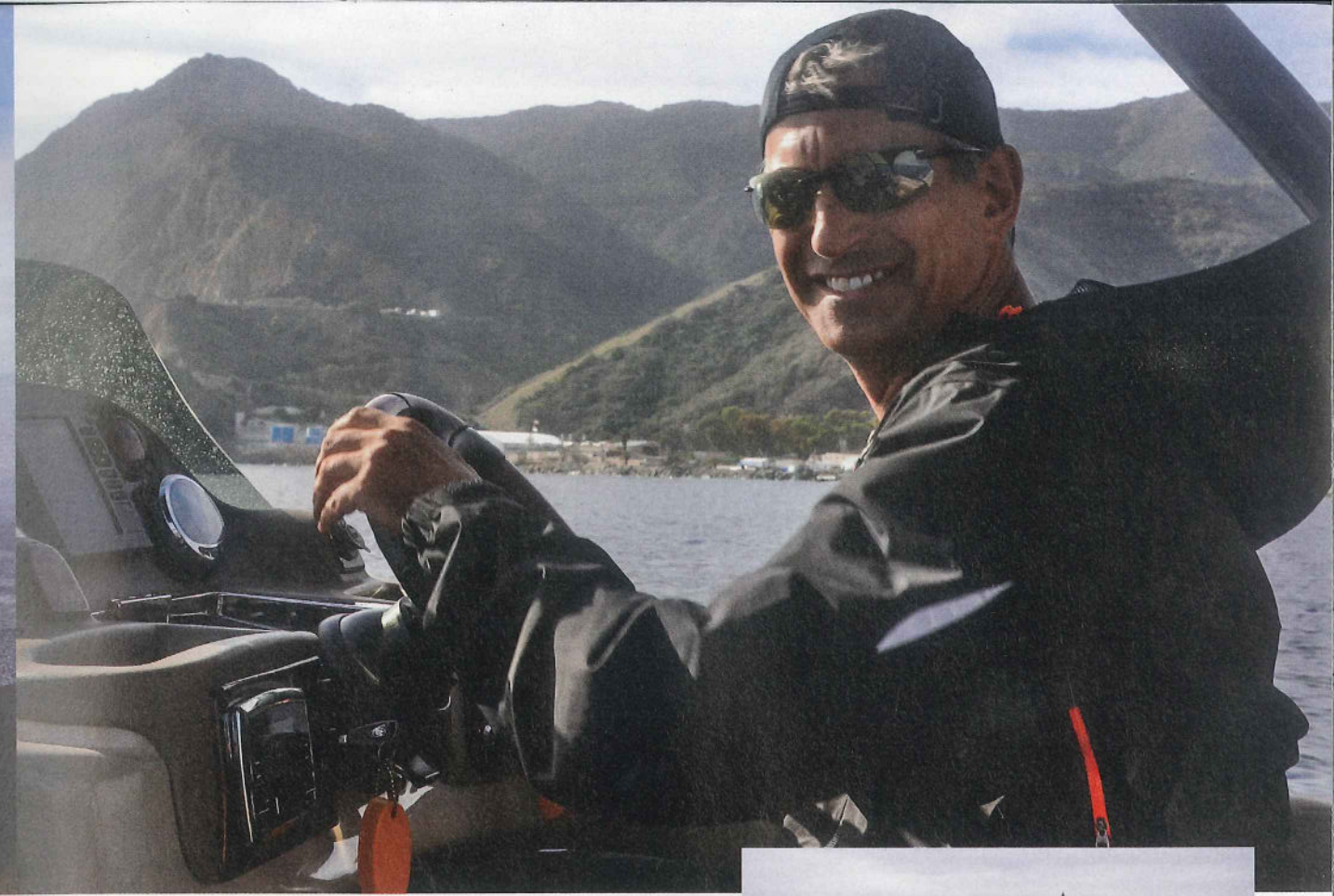
We also loaded the necessary safety supplies, hoping not to need them but wanting to be prepared for a pontoon trip that would reach 50 miles offshore:

- Lifejackets (Type V PFD)
- Flare kits
- Strobe lights
- Submersible VHF radios
- Anchor and line
- Handheld GPS units
- Compass
- Three handheld spotlights
- 10-foot radio whip antenna
- Hardwired VHF
- SPOT location tracker
- EPIRB

mph wind blowing in from the west, two- to three-foot surface waves and four- to six-foot swells running at 15 to 17 seconds apart. Dinninger was at the wheel, and we were all a little timid at first as we got used to the wave patterns. As we looked at the horizon, we could see the swells coming, and the elevation changes were intimidating at first. It's not like boating in the Great Lakes or even the ocean waters off Florida or in the Bahamas. It took us a good 20 or 30 minutes to get comfortable and get our sea legs. The sky was clear and the sun was high, but we knew we had only a few good hours until sundown. Our plan was to spend the night in the town of Avalon on Catalina Island, although we had yet to get a hotel room. We had a basic idea of what we wanted to accomplish in the time we had; however, it didn't make sense to plan too far ahead, as history has proven to us that anything can happen on these excursions. Flexibility is the key.

The Weather

On all of our previous expeditions, we had run into significant weather events that mandated changes to the original plan, but this was Southern California, which averages 284 sunny days a year. In my decade of boating in Southern California, only a handful of significant weather events occurred, so we felt confident that weather would be a non-issue when we made the plan and picked the dates. As luck would have it, the forecast called for a "major" weather event the week of our trip — the first in five years. The conditions were scheduled to begin deteriorating over the next day, with a major storm, the "Pineapple Express," to hit in 48 to 72 hours. We knew we would have to pay close attention to the weather as the hours and days passed, to ensure we did not put ourselves in the eye of a major storm. It's one thing to be on a 27-foot pontoon boat 50 miles offshore in the middle of the Pacific, but it's a totally different situation to be there in the



middle of a tropical storm. We might be nuts, but we surely are not crazy or reckless.

After the initial 30 minutes getting used to the wave patterns and getting the feel of the new twin-motor application, we started building confidence and picked up the pace, to 28 to 30 knots. We had done it, the logistical planning was behind us and we were now in full execution mode.

Despite the fast-approaching storm, our main goal was to spend some time in Avalon Harbor. After all, Avalon Luxury Pontoon Boats is named for the town — an amazing and beautiful place that we felt was a good fit for a new pontoon brand. Our next goal was to put some miles on the boat and hit it hard for a good, long Pacific cruise.

The Avalon Hotel in Avalon seemed like the most logical spot for us to stay. It was the name. Arriving on an Avalon in Avalon and staying at the Avalon would be a trifecta! It was now about 4 p.m., and the sun was going

behind the 2,000-foot mountains that shoot straight out of the Pacific. The Garmin GPS showed Avalon Harbor was 12 miles to the southwest. At our recently slowed and relaxing pace, we were scheduled to arrive a few minutes before 6 p.m.

Avalon is a city of 3,700 year-round residents and a tourist destination. Ferries run every few hours to and from San Pedro, San Diego and Santa Barbara. As we approached the harbor, we saw the distinguished, round, columned building known as the Casino. The Catalina Casino has been the focal point of Santa Catalina Island entertainment and culture since it opened more than 85 years ago, on May 29, 1929. For nearly three generations, the Casino has been the venue of choice for great entertainers, live theater productions and first-run motion pictures. Dominating the Avalon landscape from its regal perch



along the harbor, the Casino exemplifies the style and romance of Catalina Island.

Avalon Arrival

It felt good to have finally arrived in the harbor and city of Avalon, a place of history, legacy and fate. This is, of course, where Natalie Wood mysteriously died after falling overboard from a boat moored in the harbor. The sun was down and we were cruising slowly when it all came into view: the mountains, the town, the bell tower, the Casino, the green Welcome Dock, the Marlin Club, the boats bobbing in the harbor, the patrol boat, the sea, the



On Catalina Island, they left the Avalon moored and headed to town for, among other things, a golf cart tour of the island.

air, the water, the moon. It was all there, at that moment, and it brought chills to my spine and a smile to my face, but as we snapped pictures, we knew it was time for dry land.

Boaters arriving at Avalon harbor are required to idle outside of the harbor and wait for the harbor patrol boat to assign a mooring and collect a fee based on boat length. The officer pulled up, assigned us to B16, collected our \$30 fee for the night and led us to our mooring ball where we tied up. We collected our personal items for the night, secured the boat and called the water taxi for a hop to shore.

From our hotel, we took a leisurely stroll through town and ended up at Steve's Steakhouse for a great meal and an even better view of the harbor. As we ate, a full harvest moon slowly rose above the Pacific. After dinner, we spent some time at the Marlin Club Bar playing pool and chatting with the

locals. Bob, a local boat captain, heard about our vessel and our plan and told us to go north toward Santa Barbara and then follow the waves back south toward Los Angeles.

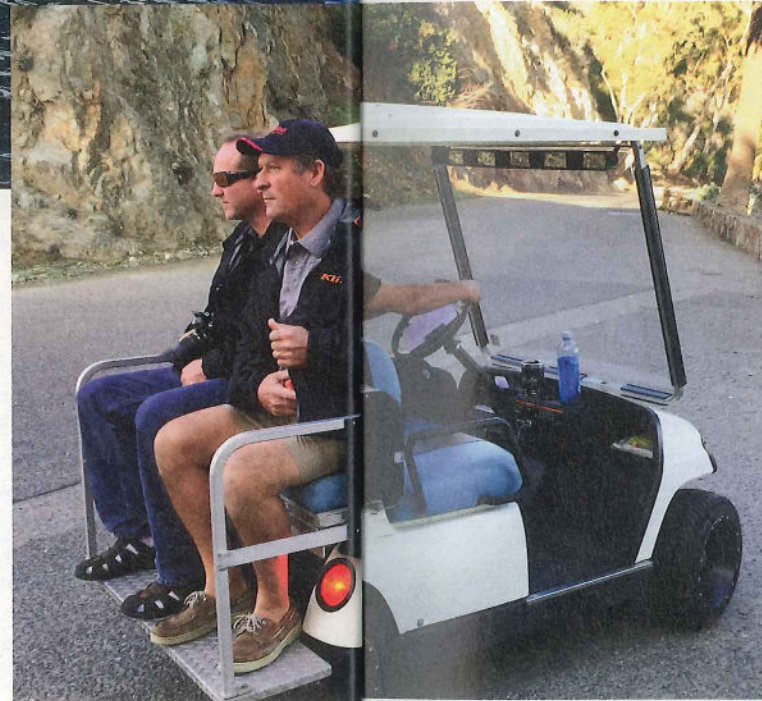
"Don't go to San Diego or you will fight the waves all the way back," he said. "That's suicide. I've seen it all before." We did — and didn't — know whose advice to follow and collectively agreed to not decide until morning.

Day Two

It was 7:15 a.m. The Pineapple Express was approaching, we had yet to decide north or south, we were on Catalina and we had coffee in hand as we jumped into the golf cart the hotel owner had offered to let us borrow.

Avalon was the trip. Avalon was the reason Haskell drove 2,300 miles with a boat in tow. I knew a quick trip around the town would be more than worthwhile. I drove. Dinninger was my co-pilot. Conners

and Haskell sat in the rear seat, which faced backwards. Away we went. I knew the island well from my prior Southern California boating days and made the Casino our first stop. After a few photos, we headed uphill, and within 60 seconds we were 1,500 feet above sea level. I had forgotten how high you can get so quickly. Great



RIDING WITH THE DOLPHINS

➔ Ten miles from Redondo Beach we were out of harm's way (as detailed in the beginning of this story). With Conners at the wheel, we saw some marine activity about a quarter of a mile ahead. Soon, we were in the middle of a pod of 75 to 100 feeding dolphins. They were swimming slowly as they fed, and we spent the next 30 minutes chasing them around and taking photos. I took the helm so Conners could shoot some video. As we cruised, the dolphins cruised with us. We surmised they were very curious, as it was unlikely they had seen a pontoon boat in these waters.

views of the harbor, quaint adobe-style houses, winding streets, rugged hills, a pass by the clock tower and the Wrigley mansion, and a stop for some photos of the Pacific below. We had been cruising for 35 minutes and were running out of time and gas. We knew the waves typically picked up mid-morning — we were burning precious time.

The tide was rolling the boat as

skipping across the swells and heading south to San Diego. We knew San Diego Bay would be more interesting to see and a livelier place to visit than the small Santa Barbara harbor. The impending storm was now 24 to 36 hours away. At this pace, we would be to San Diego in time for lunch and have the open-water crossing behind us while the seas were in our favor. From San Diego, we would hug the shoreline back north to give us all a greater sense of security if the weather took a turn for the worse.

As we got closer to San Diego, we started seeing more activity. A few scattered fishing boats, a few more freighters, more planes and more helicopters. Five miles out, we ran into several rows of tightly aligned crab traps. It was an obstacle course for grownups on a highly powered pontoon. We located the large shipping lane and buoys, which guided us the last 2 miles into San Diego Bay.

In the bay, we ran all the way to Coronado Bay Bridge, turned around, fueled the boat, had lunch and by 1:45 p.m. we were heading out of the mouth of the harbor and back into the open Pacific. We set our course for Newport Beach (82 miles to the northwest) and, once again, played a game of dodge the buoys and kelp beds as we headed up the coast. We knew we only had a few hours of daylight remaining and needed to keep rolling.

At 5:45 p.m., we entered the channel of Newport Harbor. The sun had just set, the sky was rosy pink, and we were cruising in the no-wake zone and taking in the sights of Newport. Nice homes were perched on the cliffs and down on the beaches, and many were nicely decorated with Christmas lights.

I turned on the nightly news as I

got settled into my room at Balboa Bay Club and watched a long segment about the unprecedented tropical storm that was getting ready to slam the West Coast. Forecasters were calling for three inches of rain or more and wind gusts of 50 mph or stronger. The storm was due to hit Southern California the following evening. I chuckled as they started listing school and event closings due to the rainstorm. I thought to myself, "They wouldn't last a week in a Michigan winter." As we ate a nice Italian dinner at the Sol Grill, we reminisced about the day's travels and made our plan for the following day. We knew our trip would be cut short due to the storm, and we would have a tough ride back to Marina del Rey in the morning.

Final Push

At 2 p.m. — after 20 miles of rough seas (see introduction), a dolphin encounter (see sidebar) and lunch in Redondo Beach — we decided the time had come to make our final push, up the coast, to Marina del Rey. Conditions were deteriorating quickly, and the waves were building again. Haskell took the helm as we traveled out of the harbor. We followed the beach, passing by Hermosa and then Manhattan Beach. When we were 5 miles out, Haskell apparently decided we would end the trip with a bang. He went wide open in the four- to five-foot seas. We were banging hard. I was hoping we wouldn't bury the nose into a big wave at 50 mph. We were being tossed around like rag dolls, but Haskell was laughing and smiling like a little kid who had just received his first Big Wheel or bike. He turned, looked at me and yelled, at the top of his lungs, "Let's get 'er done!"