

K E V O ' S

Boating Tips

San Francisco Bar Pilots

I was stacking wood at the house on a cold winter day when the call came in from the San Francisco Bar Pilots Association. We were on for 1400 hours at Pier 9 in SF. My appointment was to accompany a bar pilot to meet a container ship 11 miles offshore and navigate that vessel into what appeared to be a “postage stamp” of a dock in Oakland.

My real mission for my column was to experience what these exceptionally skilled captains encounter from recreational vessels (and other

commercial vessels) as they enter port and to communicate to the recreational boating community the dangers involved with encountering these vessels in close quarters.

So we embark on *Golden Gate*, which is a 65-foot aluminum boat set up like an airplane with seating for six. Three pilots sat on each side with an aisle between, a galley and sleeping quarters for four down below. The seas were calm and we had four pilots, the skipper of the pilot boat and his first mate.

Eleven miles out we met up with a 104-foot steel vessel, which stays on station for four days straight.



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

They use this vessel to transfer pilots (and the occasional journalist) to the ships as they approach the shipping lanes of the three approaches to the Gate. This vessel had (most) of the comforts of home, because pilots sometimes have to wait for arriving ships.

I saw our ship from a distance. Damn! Even from 10 miles away the *Hatsu Crystal* looked big! With six minutes to go before our scheduled rendezvous, the crew and the pilot



The container ship *Hatsu Crystal* underway.

I was assigned to sprang into action. The skipper navigated the pilot boat around the stern of the ship and alongside the starboard side doing 9 knots. (Remember this vessel is over 100-feet long!)

Now comes the fun part. I get to jump from a platform on the deck of the pilot boat to a (rope) ladder hanging down the side of the ship. They told me you only get one chance at this. If you fall, the chance of survival is... (Not good). I missed the first shot, but nailed it on the second upward surge. Whoa, that was hairy!

Now comes the hard part: climbing a rope ladder with wooden planks as stairs straight up the side of a huge ship while she is underway at 9 knots. (Don't look down!) After that it was through a hatch in the side of the hull and 20 feet straight up a metal wrung ladder through a watertight hatch. Are we there yet? Not a chance. The elevator was out so we had to climb about 12 stories (in a hurry) up the stairs to the bridge.

I must admit I was huffing and puffing when I arrived. This apparently amused the captain of the ship, Harald Kaiser, as he chuckled at my respiratory condition when we were introduced. I expected the captain to be somewhat "stand-offish," but he was nothing of the sort. He welcomed me, gave me the run of the bridge and went on with the (very important) business of making sure his ship arrived in port with no mishaps.

I started snapping pictures immediately. Having access to the "wings" of the bridge gave me a great point of view to shoot some awesome photos. The bar pilot, Captain George Livingstone, went about his business with the paperwork for the trip in.

Approximately 6 miles west of the Gate I got what I came for: a small sailboat on the outside of the Gate on the north side was impeding the path of an outbound oil tanker through the gate. He saw us coming and radioed that he was changing course to the south right under the Bridge! Our vessel responded with everyone picking up binoculars to see what for us was too far in the distance for the naked eye. I was the last to sight the sailboat (rookie). We also changed course to accommodate the tanker needing a wide berth to exit the Bay.

Next, a sailboat decided it would be a good idea to try to outrun this bad boy across the Bay from Pier 39 to Alcatraz. This vessel would not change course upon our approach, so we gave them five blasts on the horn to indicate we were unaware of her intentions. (This is the "danger" signal.) Having heard this signal before, I put my fingers on my ears but didn't hear anything. The ship was so freaking long and the horn is located on the bow that I didn't even hear it! Within seconds the sailboat reversed course. HA!



Captain Harald Kaiser of the *Hatsu Crystal* and SF Bar Pilot Captain George Livingstone.

It should be noted that bar pilots consider it dangerous to the safety of the ship to stop dead in the water. They have no control and could easily run aground. They always want to maintain "bare steerageway."

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We were met by three tugs at the Bay Bridge. This put clearly into focus the importance of having bar pilots onboard to ensure safe dockings in port. The bar pilot had to communicate and orchestrate a 180-degree turn in a ridiculously small area called "the turning basin."

The pilot knew the names of all of the tug captains and everything went like clockwork. I can't imagine any foreign (or domestic for that matter) skipper being able to communicate so concisely and clearly to the captains of these vessels (not to mention the local knowledge of the waters). It was truly amazing to witness this group of trained professionals put this puppy at the dock flawlessly.



Captain Livingstone Bio:

Before joining the San Francisco Bar Pilots in 2007 Captain Livingstone's 27 years at sea saw him sailing a variety of ships, and harbor and ocean-going tugs. He holds licenses as Master of Towing Vessels, Oceans, Unlimited; First Class Pilot, and Unlimited Tonnage for the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors; and First Class Pilot, Unlimited Tonnage, on the waters of San Francisco Bay from

sea to and between the Dumbarton Bridge, Stockton and Sacramento. He is a certified United States Coast Guard-designated Towing Examiner and co-author of "Tug Use Offshore, Bays & Rivers" (Nautical Institute, London, 2006).

Captain Kaiser Bio:

Captain Kaiser started his career in 1972 as a navigator on minesweepers and submarines in the German navy. He obtained his captain's license in 1990 and worked



as second mate on chemical tankers. In 1997 he became captain on chemical tankers in the worldwide trade. From 1999 until 2006 he was captain of various container ships. The last three years he has been captain on the bigger container ships.

Vessel Stats for the *Hatsu Crystal*:

Length: approx. 1,200 feet (LOA)
HP: 93,000
Max RPM: 65 (that is not a typo)
Max Speed: 25.2 knots (nor is this!)
Bow thruster: 3500 HP

Kevo's Tip:

The *Hatsu Crystal* will lose sight of an approaching (small) vessel within 1,800 feet of her bow. The small craft will also be lost on radar. Think about that: 1,800 feet. That is SIX football fields! These ships are very limited in their ability to maneuver.

Next time you see a ship approaching in a shipping channel, give her a wide berth. Trust me... the bar pilot captain and ship captain will definitely appreciate it.

Be safe & happy boating!

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ✍

