

Boating Tips



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

Delivery From Hell!

It all started two years ago when a client asked me to move his houseboat around Bethel Island on the Delta. "Not a problem," I said. The boat in question was a 43-foot Gibson houseboat with one (small) four-cylinder engine for power. They wanted it moved from Bethel Harbor to Sunset Harbor. Whoa, I thought... I'm going to earn my fee today. This could be a tough boat to drive and dock.

Sure enough, as soon as we left the dock I knew something was wrong. The (ancient) outdrive would not lock down in reverse. Basically, if this happens you are screwed, because every time you try to get power in reverse the outdrive flips up. This results in no reverse thrust and could very possibly lead to loss of control of the boat.

I decided to continue the delivery anyway, because I've learned the secrets of how to handle a situation like this. At the end of the trip I docked the boat in a wicked current with no reverse. No worries!

Fast Forward Two Years Later...

The new owner calls me and wants me to move the boat again, this time all the way from Bethel Island to Redwood City. The first thing I told Dan, the new owner, is that this was going to be a two-day proposition. The first leg of the trip would be from Sunset Harbor to Benicia Marina with a stop in Pittsburg for fuel. The next day I would complete the trip to Redwood City (Docktown Marina). We agreed on the terms and set a date.

I remembered the issue with

the outdrive and asked him to test it prior to my arrival to see if it flipped up in reverse. He reported back that it did not, so I figured we're good to go. The dock lines consisted of two spools of 3/8-inch halfway rotted triple-spliced line. (I've seen worse.) The fenders had seen better days as well. Hey, this is not a beauty contest... I've got a boat to deliver!

So I get the boat halfway out of the slip and put some power on reverse in another wicked current. Wouldn't you know it... the outdrive flipped up and I'm floating down Taylor Slough about five feet from the sterns of boats in their slips with no reverse. With the help of a stranger on the dock, I landed the boat without doing any damage to it or anything else.

Luckily, the bow was facing into the current so I got a good shove off on my bow, put her in forward and was on my way. Dan saw the whole thing and thought I was going to abort the mission right then and there. Not a chance... Yet!

The wind was blowing out of the northwest at 10 to 20 knots. The boat was all over the place. It felt like the outdrive was only down halfway. I checked it to make sure it



From left, Dave Branford, marina crewmember, and Assistant Harbormaster Patrick Gonzales of Benicia Marina.

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was in the full down position, so at least I had forward!

As usual, the seas were a little rough east of the Antioch Bridge, but not enough to abort the voyage. I made it to Pittsburg where Dan was waiting for me at the fuel dock. The engine died on final approach, but I managed to nail the landing anyway.

The engine started and I fueled up. I got away OK and was once again on my way to Benicia. The waves were tolerable and the wind was blowing at about 15 knots out of the west. I made it to the Benicia Bridge with no significant problems and hoped the Carquinez Straights would be kind to me and this under-

powered monster of a houseboat. Not!

The wind came up and was blowing the boat all over the place once again. The waves came crashing over the bow and slamming into the forward-facing sliding glass door with significant force. The floor beneath my feet was soaked.

I knew this *pleasure cruise* was over for the day. I had to find shelter and *fast*. Luckily, I was a half mile from the marina when the “you know what” hit the fan.

I ran for the breakwater to the marina and powered down once inside and safe from the current and let out a sigh of relief when all of a sudden I lost power. (The engine quit again.) The boat drifted toward the west wall of the breakwater, but ran (softly) aground about three feet from the steel wall. Whoa. That was close!

The owner calls me from the fuel

dock. He can see me helpless in the channel. The guys from the marina (Assistant Harbormaster Patrick Gonzales and marina crewmember Dave Branford) came by in a Boston Whaler they use to pump out boats in the marina.

I had already commandeered a “dock line” and fashioned a tow line with it. I had it attached to the center cleat on the bow and ready to deploy when they arrived. These guys did a great job getting this big houseboat off the bar and then depositing it perfectly at the fuel dock. Style points guys!

Enough for today. Dan drove me home and I went to bed early that night anticipating the voyage ahead. He assured me he would change the plugs and ignition wires in the meantime.

The next morning at dawn I embarked on the final leg of the trip.

The boat was running much better with the new plugs and ignition wires. The sun was shining, the wind was calm and the seas were calm. I glided through Upper then Lower San Pablo Bays with ease.

Then about a mile from the Bay Bridge I got seriously waked by the Vallejo ferry. The engine sputtered for 10 minutes or so and then died. I called the owner and gave him the bad news. Then I called Vessel Assist on my portable VHF radio. I drifted with the outbound tide for 15 minutes or so and then got the engine going using flood procedure. (Throttle all the way down, turn the key.) I'm on my way again. Cancel Vessel Assist!

Things went pretty smoothly between the Bay Bridge and the San Mateo Bridge. I passed three or four ships at anchor outside the channel. By now it was 2:30 p.m. and the tide was almost all the way out in Redwood Creek. The wind came up south of the bridge out of the northwest and I had to fight the helm for the remainder of the trip.

I had been told that it is really dicey getting into this marina at low tide. This is an understatement! About 100 yards from my destination, I ran (softly) aground again. It wasn't like I missed the channel. I had nowhere else to go. This time I thought it was really bad because the tide was still going out.

I used the knowledge I've gained over the years to un-ground the boat safely and do an about face with about 5 feet to spare on both ends.

Next I headed to the nearest marina with a guest dock, Redwood Manor Marina but ran into a sand bar on the way and softly grounded the boat again. (My bad.) Once again, I got off with no assistance.

Finally, I docked the boat safely. Dan soon found me. The boat ended up about one-half mile from its destination, but both of us were pleased with the results given what I had to work with.

The next day the boat was moved to its new home at high tide. I figured the whole trip was about 90 miles. All in a (few) day's work. HA!

Kevo's Tip:

These types of houseboats are (generally) not designed to take rough seas. It doesn't take more than one wave to ruin your whole day. Keep your houseboat in calmer waters like the Delta. If it has to be moved and you have to take it through areas known for high wind and waves choose your battles wisely.

Be safe & happy boating!

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

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