

CAPT'N KEVO'S

Boating Tips



Navigating South Bay

The Rossi's berth their boat at Bair Island Marina in Redwood City. It's a 38-foot Bayliner just like ours. Like most of my clients, they've become friends. They knew the dangers of navigating in the South Bay and hired me not only to teach them how to handle the boat competently and confidently, but also to learn the correct navigation techniques for their boating area. They had heard many a harrowing story about boats running aground.

Over the years, many of my clients have inquired about navigating in the South Bay and all have one concern in mind: running aground. I've instructed in and delivered

boats to just about every marina in the South Bay. There are many hazards to beware of in this area, but running aground is by far the most likely peril. But don't let that keep you from exploring and delighting in all the South Bay has to offer!

When you do decide to go farther afield for a change of scenery and head to the South Bay – where the sun is shining when the city is clouded over – keep these tips in mind for a safe trip south down the Bay.

Things are pretty straightforward from the Bay Bridge to the San Francisco International Airport (SFO). There is plenty of water in most areas of the Bay between these points with the exception of the east

shore. If you stay in or beside the main shipping channel, you'll have plenty of water.

Find San Bruno Shoal on your chart – it's east of SFO and runs parallel to the channel – and stay at least a half-mile west of it. There is very infrequent shipping using the channel, so don't hesitate to use it.

The first three marinas you will encounter are Oyster Point, Oyster Cove and Brisbane Marina. There is one set of entry buoys for Brisbane and Oyster Cove and another set for Oyster Point. You must stay within the parameters of the day marks (buoys and poles) or you risk running aground. This is especially true for Oyster Cove. Brisbane and Oyster Point are much easier to approach, because the water is deeper just outside the breakwater.

From here on things get a little more challenging. The next marina is Coyote Point. If you are navigating in the channel, the best approach is to stay in the channel until you are one-half mile before buoy number 8 red. Make (approximately) a 90-degree turn to the west at this buoy and you will be right in line with the approach poles at the entrance to the harbor.

Just south of the entrance is a man-made, low-lying semicircle of concrete debris. Take a close look



Bair Island Marina Dockmaster Ian Turner.

at your chart and you can see the areas marked as “Piles” and “Bkw” just before the marina entrance. This area is especially treacherous at high tides when the rocks are just below the water’s surface.

Be sure to account for drifting off-course if the prevailing winds (from the NW) are up – apply a heading correction to starboard to keep you on course.

Heading south from Coyote Point requires attention to navigation as well. Head out to buoy number 8 red before turning south toward the San Mateo Bridge. From this point on it is important that you navigate within the confines of the channel or you may run aground.

Always navigate through the main span of the bridge. This is the main channel. One often-overlooked hazard to navigation lies right beside and immediately south of the main span of the bridge. This is what’s left of the original bridge and it extends from the west shore to just before the main span. It is about four feet off the water and at night there are no markers or lights indicating a hazard. I’ve heard many a story of boats ramming into this relic from the past at night without warning.

Now is the time – if you haven’t already – to get out your binoculars and dust them off. After you pass under the San Mateo Bridge, it is unlikely that you can see the next marker with the naked eye. Even with binoculars it takes some study to find the red 12 day mark a little over two miles down the Bay. Refer to your chart to know where to start to look for it.

What to do if you don’t see the channel marker? The key to safely finding your way to the next marker lies in looking downrange at the Dumbarton Bridge. There are two huge electric power line towers sticking up from either side of the



From left, HA!, Arrow the dog and Neal Doten of Doten Consulting.

main span of the bridge. All you need to do is line your boat up between these two towers (better yet, keep the east tower off your starboard bow) and keep heading toward them.

After about two nautical miles, you will spot red marker number 12. This stretch is another critical area, because the west side of the channel shoals VERY quickly; don’t stray west of an imaginary line between the main channel of the bridge and marker 12.

When abeam of the red 12 marker, you can see the port of Redwood City in the distance and it seems like the best route is directly toward the harbor. In reality, this is a false route and you will most definitely run aground.

The problem here is that the channel continues to the east-southeast and then swings to the southwest to enter Redwood Creek at red marker 2. To the average recreational boater, it looks like the channel is taking you away from Redwood City. The purpose of the arc is to allow large ships to make the turn into the Port of Redwood City without running aground.

You will also see the line of chan-

nel markers that direct you when in Redwood Creek and headed to the port. Be careful that you don’t confuse one of these red markers with the entrance marker (red 2). I can’t stress this enough that if you cut the corner to these markers, you will run aground.

Enjoy your day and take your time; go all the way to the entrance marker. By the way, the red channel marker is paired with a green buoy number 3 that is offset a little way down the channel; you may have to look hard (get out the binoculars again!) to see it.

Once in the Redwood Creek channel, it’s time to wipe your fevered brow and pat yourself on the back for doing such a good job of safely navigating down the Bay. Stay between the channel markers all the way to the port.

The channel is dredged for big ships so you’ll have plenty of water at any tide, but be sure not to stray out of bounds (outside imaginary lines connecting the channel markers), because the dredging stops along that line and the bottom comes up FAST.

Just after passing under the

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power towers (a little over halfway to the port), on your starboard side you will see the entrance to Corkscrew Slough. It's not navigable for most vessels, but using a dinghy or a kayak – once you've found a berth for the night at one of the local South Bay marinas – you can explore as much of it as you wish.

Corkscrew Slough is well worth taking the time to explore. It gives you water access to a reclamation project where the focus is on restoration of wetlands. While navigating the slough, you will find an abundance of animal life.

You may see double-breasted cormorants, kingfishers, sandpipers, egrets and pelicans. Harbor seals line the slough banks to warm in the sun in at least two places once you get a little way into the slough. It's an idyllic area – bring a lunch and drift with the current while you enjoy the away-from-it-all environment.

Immediately after passing Cork-

screw Slough, you will see Westpoint Slough cutting off to your port side. Follow the privately maintained red and green markers if you wish to visit the new Westpoint Harbor. It may not be on your chart (if you have an older version), but you can see the masts from the Redwood Creek channel. The marina has an extensive guest dock.

Next you will pass the commercial shipping piers and may or may not be lucky enough to see a big ship berthed for loading or unloading. Stay clear of the ship(s) especially if you see their deck crane(s) operating or see other signs of activity.

Redwood City Municipal Marina is at the end of the port area. It offers transient berthing and sufficient depth at any tide for arriving or departing. Anchoring is permitted in the port area, but I wouldn't recommend it – it's a very busy place.

Before reaching the municipal marina, you can turn to starboard at the green marker 21 to pass the Marine Science Institute and head for Pete's Harbor. Be sure to follow your chart and stay mid-channel or slightly to the right of center as you head to Pete's.

Pete's Harbor offers guest slips

and has a restaurant with good food and a variety of historical nautical memorabilia for your viewing pleasure. Be careful when navigating the slough in front of the restaurant, because the tide runs at a good clip during flood and ebb.

If you are heading to Bair Island Marina (keep to port as you pass Pete's and go farther up Redwood Creek), you will have to watch the tide to ensure you have enough water. This part of the creek is not dredged. Your best tide window is to plan to arrive in the period from three hours after low to three hours after high. If you have a tide table that includes Redwood City, use the tide time offset indicated for Smith Slough (Pete's Harbor).

As you pass Pete's Harbor, stay in the middle of the channel until you are abeam the last waterway that enters Pete's (off to starboard). Then, the best guidance is to stay left of the center of the channel (favor the east shore of the creek) and make a smooth, gradual arcing turn as you follow the creek. Just before passing under the tall power towers (and at the end of the multi-story condos to starboard) turn hard right to enter on a straight course between the Bair Island Marina breakwaters.

Hopefully, before this you will have contacted Ian Turner, Bair Island Marina's Dockmaster (or his assistant, Meredith Higdon), to advise him that you would like a guest slip. That way you will know where to go in this very picturesque and protected marina.

You could continue even farther down the creek – maybe another 50 yards – to enter what used to be the basin for the Peninsula Marina. This is the marina shown on the older version charts. All of the docks have been removed and all that is left is a protected basin where you could



From left, Richard, Linda and Steve Rossi.

anchor with a great deal of peace and quiet. Shore access is not easily available in this basin, but you could always take your dinghy to Pete's Harbor if you wished to dine out.

Motoring another 50 yards (beyond the old Peninsula Marina entrance) would take you to Dock Town and the end of Redwood Creek (unless you want to explore farther by dinghy). I would not recommend this because this channel is also not dredged and has more extensive shoaling.

My thanks to Ian Turner, Bair Island Marina Dockmaster (650/701-0382), and Neal Doten, Doten Consulting, Ltd. (650/598-0276), for their help with this month's column.

Kevo's Tip:

Successfully navigating the South Bay comes with both challenges and rewards. Be sure you have up-to-date charts and study them before your trip. Coyote Point Marina is the last gas dock.

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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