10 BOAT-BUYING SECRETS: WHAT THE INSIDERS KNOW

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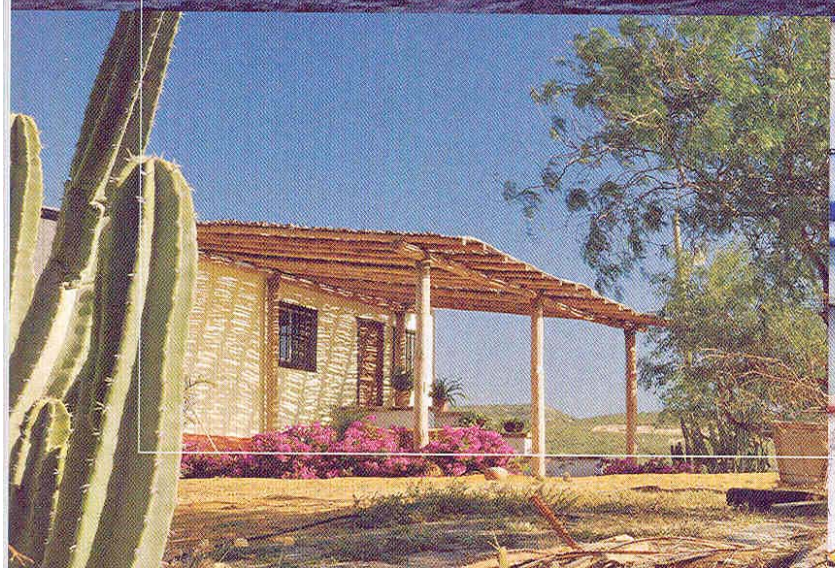
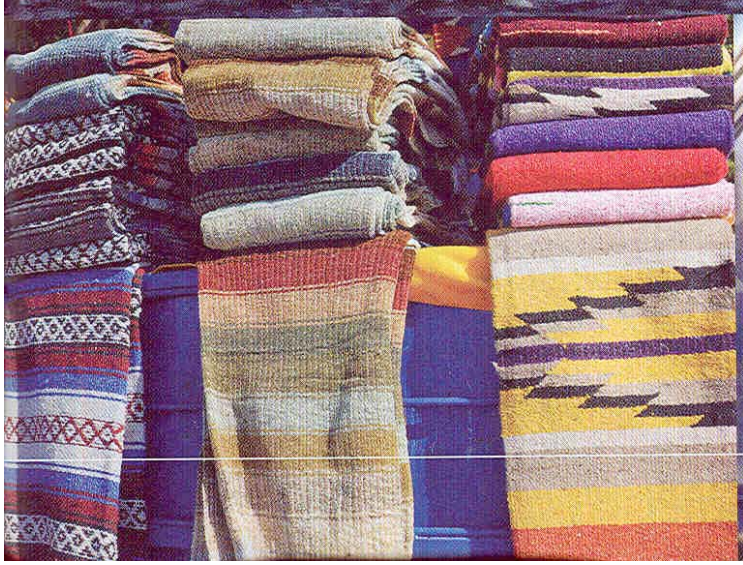
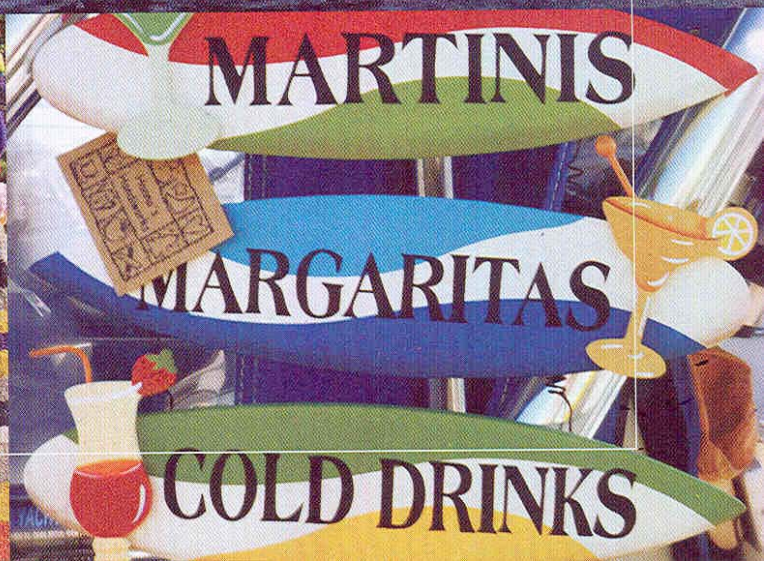


BUST

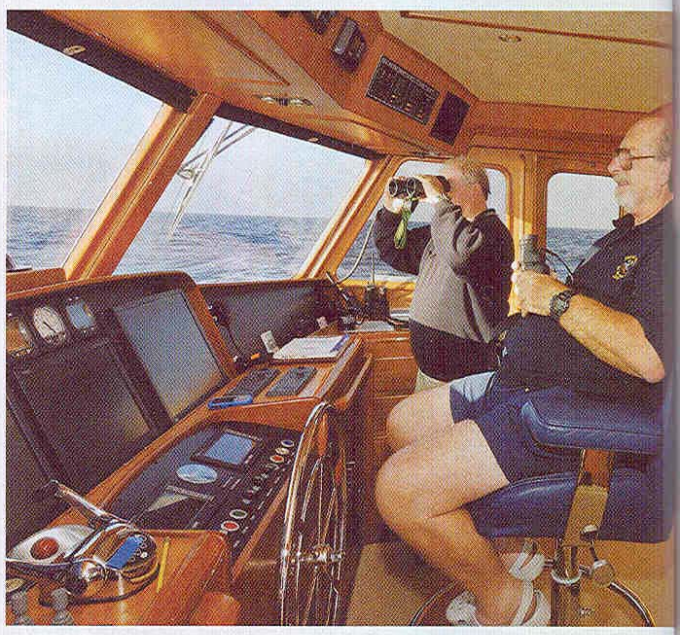
A tenacious fleet of powerboats conquers the Pacific on a 917-mile run from San Diego to La Paz.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE SASS, SR.





A couple of years ago, Bruce Kessler wondered if he could introduce more boaters to the exciting world of long-range cruising. Kessler, a former Formula One driver and film director, had enjoyed his own globe-circling adventures aboard his oceangoing cruisers *Zopilote* and *Spirit of Zopilote*. He wanted to encourage less-seasoned boat owners to join together and attempt one of his favorite passages, a 917-mile ocean voyage from San Diego, California, to La Paz, Mexico. This past November, he made that happen. The owners of 50 boats signed on for Kessler's FUBAR (Flotilla Underway to Baja Rally) Odyssey, an event specifically organized for powerboaters, including those with little, if any, offshore experience.



ON THE GO. *Bruce Kessler (above, right), and volunteers pre-arranged for everything, from speedy immigration clearings to fuel deliveries (below).*

Kessler understood the benefits of flotilla cruising in part through his involvement with the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally in 2004, which saw 17 long-range power vessels venture from Ft. Lauderdale to Gibraltar under the watchful eye of Jim Leishman, one of the founders of Pacific Asian Enterprises, the parent company of the Nordhavn boat brand. Kessler's docudrama film of the event, *Living the Dream: Small Boats Crossing a Big Ocean*, has been a favorite at yacht clubs and cruising organizations everywhere. But his FUBAR was created for a broader segment of the boating community, one that includes boats and crews not necessarily meant to cross oceans.

While participating boats were required to be in safe, sound condition and have a minimum range of 450 miles while running between 8 and 9 knots, the FUBAR fleet consisted of a cross section of today's popular power cruisers, including motoryachts, sportfishermen and trawlers. The smallest boat was a 28-foot Skipjack built in the late '70s; the largest was a 96-foot motoryacht complete with captain, crew, owners and their pampered guests. I spent most of the 13-day voyage as a guest of Tony Fleming aboard *Venture*, his Fleming 65, which also served as an escort vessel. Kessler was my shipmate and was constantly on the radio or his Blackberry phone, trying to stay in touch with captains who had questions. While some participants had extensive offshore experience, many had never before been on an overnight passage.

The benefit of a flotilla cruise is, of course, safety in numbers. The FUBAR fleet included seven escort vessels, a surgeon, a translator, a director of navigation, a cultural attaché and none other than Jim Leishman and his family — a crew of seasoned sailors — aboard *Pacific Escort*, a Nordhavn 55. Kessler and a staff of volunteers pre-arranged for speedy immigration clearings, fuel deliveries and transient slips where available. Yet beyond all the planning and coordination was FUBAR's focus on having fun. Throughout the voyage, beach parties, guided tours and visits to resorts were organized to encourage everyone to get to know each other and to share their new experiences.

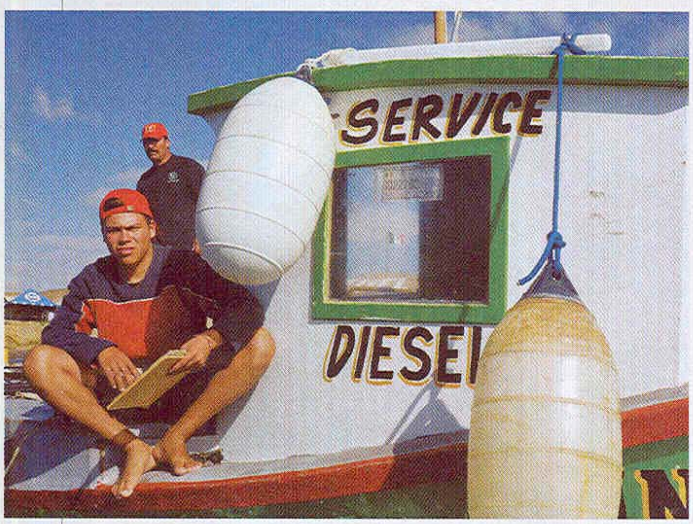
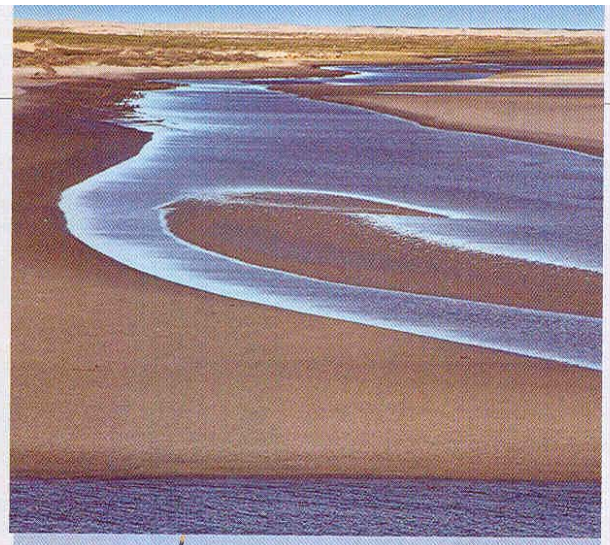
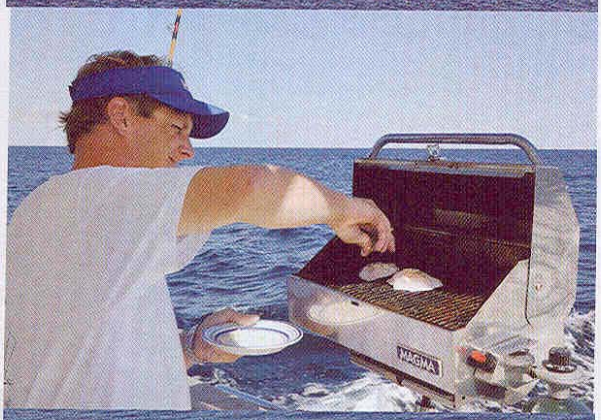


ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE STANKIEWICZ

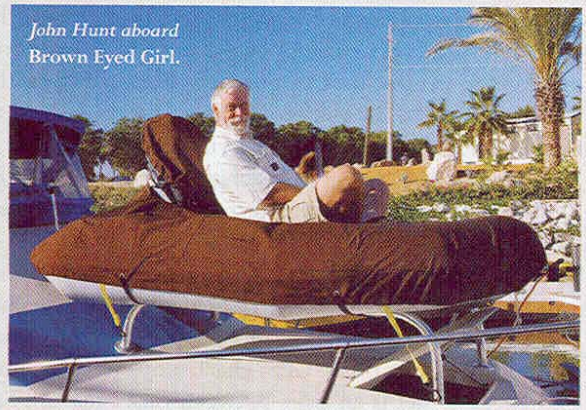




Due to prevailing nor'westerly winds and seas, the 800-mile southeast run down the outside of Baja was the kinder, gentler part of this trip. (Returning on the uphill leg would be a different story, better known to the boaters who have made this run as the "Baja bash.") The biggest challenges in reaching Los Cabos, or the southernmost cape, are the barren nature of the coastline, the lack of protected anchorages and the scarcity of fuel and repair facilities. The two-week trip required three overnight passages — Ensenada to Turtle Bay, Turtle Bay to Santa Maria and Magdalena Bay to San José. A good radar and GPS/chart plotter are a must, and because fuel is an issue between Ensenada and San José, all boats traveled at an efficient 8 to 9 knots the entire way, even the speedy sport-fishing yachts. This desolate, 725-mile stretch is without any marina facilities, so adequate ground tackle, fresh water and overall self-sufficiency were important.

Not until Los Cabos is reached does the terrain become more inviting, and with the twin cities of Cabo San Lucas and San José comes civilization, including modern marinas, fine restaurants and luxury resorts. For these crews, the real prize for making their way down Baja came after they turned the corner and headed into the Sea of Cortez. In stark contrast to the desert land it touches, this body of water is teeming with life. The famous, fertile sea is a fishing and diving Mecca, and

OUT AND ABOUT. *Low tide in Santa Maria (top); James Leishman grills the grouper he speared moments before; Eric Leishman gets in some board time; rally participants hit the beach for a sunset party.*



John Hunt aboard Brown Eyed Girl.

The Little Boat That Could

Brown Eyed Girl, a Skipjack 28, was definitely the smallest boat in the fleet, but it may very well have received the biggest smiles and most thumbs up from the FUBAR participants. Its crew of three retired fire fighters from Southern California won the hearts of everyone for their spunk, determination and sense of humor in meeting the challenges of this long, offshore voyage.

Because these three musketeer mariners had made the trip before on this 28, they provided inspiration to less-experienced owners on much larger yachts.

Brown Eyed Girl's owner, Larry Lucore, and his two shipmates, Dan Meritt and John Hunt, are avid fishermen, and they rarely missed a chance to wet their lines once south of Turtle Bay, where the yellowfin tuna and dorado were biting. Running at 7 knots, the Skipjack's newly installed 270-hp Cummins MerCruiser 4.2L diesel drove them nearly three nautical miles for every gallon of fuel burned, and with 298 gallons onboard, they had a safe range of 750 nautical miles.

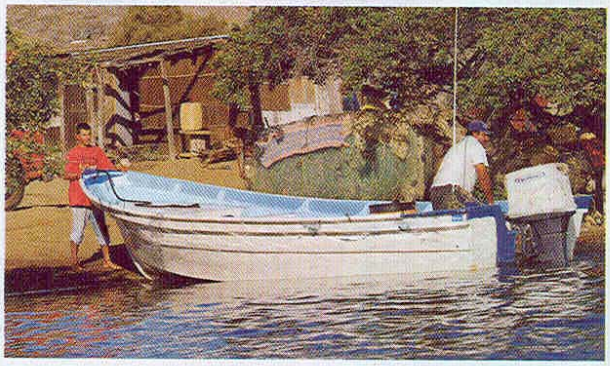
Lucore, who owns a home in Punta Chivato on the Sea of Cortez, planned to spend the winter fishing in Mexico with friends and family and then trailer his boat home to California. "We've trailered her to Florida and then crossed the Gulf Stream to fish and cruise in the Abacos," he mentioned casually.

When asked about the cramped spaces aboard *Brown Eyed Girl*, Hunt, who sometimes wore his Jamaican dreadlock wig to beach parties, showed me how he would wedge himself into the small, inflatable dinghy mounted on the foredeck for an afternoon nap. Said Hunt, "The hardest part of the trip, though, has been trying to keep the coffee pot steady over our one-burner cooktop."

many FUBAR participants planned to follow in John Steinbeck's wake, exploring the fascinating area throughout the winter months.

FUBAR attracted an eclectic group of individuals with such diverse backgrounds it seemed difficult to imagine everyone getting along so well, especially when all did not go as planned — there were times when the Mexican way of doing things left much to be desired. It was impossible to satisfy everyone in such a large group — over 200 people — and Kessler and his staff of volunteers had their hands full throughout the trip. But the benefits of flotilla cruising kept everyone together, figuratively and literally.

Most boats were different in their size, shape, equipment and cost, yet each crew began the trip determined



to get themselves and their boat to La Paz. Not everyone made it there. Out of the 50 boats that left San Diego, 48 arrived safely in Los Cabos after nearly two weeks at sea, the two early dropouts occurring only because of crew-scheduling conflicts. Two more crews chose to remain in Los Cabos when the rest of the fleet departed; a third went directly to Puerto Vallarta. In the end, 45 boats arrived in La Paz.

There a celebration dinner was held for nearly 300 participants and volunteers at the luxurious Costa Baja Resort & Marina, where Bruce Kessler was saluted for having the vision and determination to organize such an ambitious event. Thanks to him, his staff of volunteers and key sponsors, including the Del Ray Yacht Club and Mexico Department of Tourism, a group of everyday boat owners were initiated into the exclusive club of oceangoing passage makers, and some old salts were able to make new friends. Judging from all the laughter and high fives exchanged throughout the meal, it seems everyone had the time of their lives. ✤

LOCAL COLOR. *Fishermen launch a panga in a small village near Santa Maria Cove (above, right); the view west as boats head south.*

FULL HOUSE. *After the run from San Diego, the FUBAR fleet takes over the inner basin of the new Puerto Los Cabos Marina in Los Cabos.*

A Taste Of Offshore

David and Shirley Baylor planned on joining the FUBAR Odyssey when they first learned of it from Kessler, and they even bought a bigger boat to make sure they could successfully do the trip. But their dream voyage almost never got started when the shipment of their Carver 570 from the Pacific Northwest was delayed. After many nail-biting weeks, *Shirley B II* was finally off-loaded from a freighter in Ensenada just one day before the FUBAR fleet arrived. "This didn't give us much time to provision and get the boat ready," said David, a retired electrical engineer and one of the founders of DirecTV. But when I visited with the Baylors in San Jose, they were both very relaxed, as if the stress was well behind them.

While the Baylors were not new to boating (they owned a Carver 42 before trading up to the 57), they had never made an overnight passage and were especially appreciative of the company and support of the FUBAR flotilla. "Everything's worked fine except for the failure of our main GPS/chart plotter, but we have a backup" said David. Now that he's had a taste of offshore passage making, David is looking forward to doing more long-distance cruising. He is already planning to upgrade his electronics package.

Shirley enjoyed the social togetherness of the FUBAR event and likes to point out how boating in general has enriched their lives. "My husband is a very busy man, and the only place he seems able to relax is on our boat. And I've been fortunate to enjoy the company of many new people I wouldn't normally have met if it hadn't been for our involvement with boating."