

SAILORS WHO HAVE HEARD IT ALL

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Meghan getting ready to anchor in Aquatic Park, downtown San Francisco — one of the rolly-est, noise-inducing anchorages on the Pacific Coast!

by Meghan Cleary

I'm sure everyone who moves onto a boat or embarks on a cruise goes through this, but we each have to figure it out for ourselves. When you first move aboard, there are all these *sounds*. You have no idea where they

are coming from, but you know that one is the halyard slapping on the mast, so you go up on deck in the middle of the night in your bathrobe and tighten it. Then there's another one: a random *loud* grinding noise. After poking your head around all the nooks

and crannies fore to aft, you realize it's the bilge pump doing its job. Check. Then you try to sleep again, but now you hear a low humming noise that shuts off intermittently. Days later you find that it's the refrigeration system. The process of systematically ridding



Velella moored in Johnson's Lee, Santa Rosa Island, where the lovely natural silence magnifies every unidentified creak.

your house of unnecessary noises and explaining away the other ones takes weeks, and when you're cruising, moving through different waters and climate zones, it can take months. Our experience moving onto a 35' Young Sun cutter, *Velella*, fit the formula to a T.

The first time we dropped the anchor, the new noises were terrifying. We have an all-chain rode (nice and strong, sets well), which scrapes against rocks on the bottom as the boat swings, transfers the sound up the chain, and sounds like timpani drums right in the V-berth where we sleep. I freaked out about us "dragging anchor" for a long time before I was satisfied to hook a rope snubber onto the chain to dampen the noise and ignore it.

Being at anchor introduces a host of other noises, too, as the boat rolls around in the gentle swells. After the sails and sheets are tucked away, the memory of the loud engine fades, the cooking is finished and dishes are cleaned, and you settle in to bed to read, you start noticing them. First it's

this *tap . . . tap . . . tap*. noise coming from somewhere behind you. I always get up and dig around the cupboards for anything loose, and then realize it's the handle to the toilet, left at just slightly the wrong angle so it taps the wall as we rock side to side. Crawling back into bed I notice something rolling — damn it. I *always* stuff rags into the dishracks to inhibit noise, so what was it this time? A loose pen on the shelf can deprive one of hours of sleep.

After two months of cruising the Pacific Coast between Seattle and Los Angeles, we've done a pretty good job of slowly eliminating our home of potentially noise-making arrangements. But when we got to southern California, something new (there's always something new) started keeping both of us up. It sounds like bacon, like *pounds* of bacon being sizzled up in our kitchen at any hour of the day or night. And it just sort of keeps going until you notice it's not there anymore. We can tell it's coming from outside the hull, which makes me nervous because I can't see or do anything about

it, and the first time we heard it on the hook, I decided it was the big hunk of kelp that was hanging on to our anchor chain and slapping the sides of the boat. Yes, that must be it. (But then why did we hear it aft in the engine room, too? Never mind, it's the kelp, let's go to bed.)

I'm difficult to convince of anything I can't prove, and when the sound came back with no kelp in sight, I was at a loss. We had overturned everything, gone through every possible explanation. Prescott saw a ton of large fish in the area and decided that it must be fish bumping in to the hull as they eat the little crumbs that come out of the sink drain. I wanted to believe him, really I did. But the sound was like popcorn, and I couldn't believe that there were that many fish bombarding our boat at night!

When we got to Marina del Rey in the middle of Los Angeles, the sound came back with a vengeance. I oscillated between being curious and being worried about it, and I finally started to stay worried about it. Thankfully,



Velella anchored in shrimp-filled Morro Bay, California, a wonderfully protected haven from the ocean swell.

we were within Internet range again, and I elatedly Google searched the very vague: “crackling noise under boat.” Sure enough, up came multiple descriptions of exactly what we were hearing. And it was not our boat at all. It was shrimp.

No kidding! I couldn’t believe it and had to look up a YouTube video to verify that shrimp actually made the noise we were hearing. I didn’t know they were even capable of making noises, but apparently they do, a very loud sizzling bacon sound to be precise, in order to attract mates. (Crabs do this, too, by snapping their claws.) And of course we hear it crystal clear through the noise-conducting hull.

But, now I can sleep easily (with ear plugs) knowing that all that’s going on below us is a little mating ritual — not so different than living in an urban apartment with noisy neighbors, right? Anyhow, on a sailboat, you learn something new every day, but never believe a sailor who says he’s “heard it all.”

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