

## The Professional Captain



## Farewell to Newport

Captain Don Fleming is well known on the Hudson River and the Sound for his on-board training in docking, maneuvering, navigation, and electronics. He holds a USCG Master of Oceans license for power and sail up to 100 tons and has over thirty years experience as a professional captain. For additional information visit [www.captaindonfleming.com](http://www.captaindonfleming.com) or call 914-941-3998.

Thunderstorms hit Newport with a vengeance the previous night and Jan and I were counting our lucky stars DUET was safely secured to a sturdy thousand pound mooring right in front of Bannister's Warf in downtown Newport. The storms cleared out the oppressive heat wave that plagued the Jazz Festival and brought in a welcomed cold front and drier air. It was so hot at the festival that year that only the coolest thousands of diehard hipsters braved the heat whose only relief was the hot wind blowing in from the southeast and the cool tunes of the various talented musicians performing.

After a day of laundry, grocery, and maintenance chores, with our weekend guests departed, we sailed out of Newport in the brisk, cool, dry air, bound for the small island at the tip of the Elizabeth Islands chain known as Cuttyhunk. The wind was fresh at twenty plus knots on our port beam, and after a fast reach down of Narraganset Bay, we turned east to round the Brenton Reef Sea Buoy "R 2". The breeze hit us on the nose, and we started beating to windward across Rhode Island Sound.

Normally, sailors as well as power boaters try to avoid heading into strong head winds and seas, and we're no exception; but with a short run of approximately twenty miles to the island, we were looking forward to some exhilarating close-hauled tacking, especially after the recent heat wave. DUET was prepared with her Genoa head sail furled, her staysail rigged to her inner forestay, her mainsail reefed and her centerboard dropped down from our six thousand which served the dual purpose of keeping the seas down (with the current and seas from the same direction, rather than opposing one another) and putting us in position to pick up the stronger favorable current later in the day as we approached the entrance to Buzzards Bay. It was a great few hours as we left Newport off our port quarter, crossed the Sakonnet River and approached the entrance to Buzzards Bay.

Soon we could make out the Buzzards Bay Light Tower looming on the horizon to the southeast like the giant offshore oil rig from which it is designed. Thoughts of previous runs down the Bay at the starts of various Marion to Bermuda races reminded me of several adventures and exploits eight hundred pound lead keel, giving us eight feet of total draft as we cut our way through the two to three foot waves and twenty-five knots of apparent wind with higher occasional gusts. Great sailing for a short run; miserable conditions for a long one; we were loving it.

### Crossing Rhode Island Sound into Buzzards Bay

The bright blue sky offset by streaks of high thin cirrus and low puffy white fair weather cumulus clouds and brilliant sunshine sparkling off the deep blue ocean swells tipped by white caps presented nature at its finest. It was warm and it felt good to be alive. We could see the mansions on Newport Neck a mile to the north on the inshore tacks and enjoyed picking out our favorites through the binoculars. The Breakers, the grandest of Newport's summer cottages with seventy rooms, built by Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1895, of course, dominated the coastline. We could also see Rosecliff, not quite as ostentatious as The Breakers, but more beautiful in its own right shimmering with its white marble façade against the breaking surf. Modeled after the Grand Trianon at Versailles in 1902 for Nevada silver mine heiress, it was used in the opening scene to the movie "True Lies" when Arnold Schwarzenager invaded the grounds, James Bond style, in scuba gear, to dance the tango later in the main ballroom.

We intentionally started out into a mild adverse current (perhaps material for some future articles). As we crossed the entrance we began to pick up some protection from the coastline of the Cape Cod and the Islands as well as the aforementioned favorable current. At the light we were five miles west of Cuttyhunk Island which we planned to approach on the most direct route around its northern end, keeping tiny Penikese Island to our north and heading directly for green can "1 W" just off the southern tip of Penikese.

This would avoid the southern approach, often used by those coming over directly from Block Island, which requires entering the back end of Vineyard Sound and passing the Sow and Pigs Reef off the southwest corner of Cuttyhunk where the famous QE II scraped bottom back in the mid eighties by cutting the corner a little too close. Moreover, it would also allow us to avoid the narrow and shallow Canapitset Channel between Cuttyhunk and Nashawena, the next island in the Elizabeth Chain which is not a nice place in rough seas.

After an invigorating crossing we lowered the sails at can "1 W" and motored through the channel into Cuttyhunk Harbor and eventually into Cuttyhunk Pond to pick up a mooring for the night.

## Welcome to Cuttyhunk and the Elizabeth Islands

The Elizabeth Islands, for those who may be unfamiliar with the area, jut out from the western end of Cape Cod at Woods Hole and arc westward nearly fifteen miles dividing Vineyard Sound and Martha's Vineyard to the south from Buzzards Bay to the north. They are mostly remote, sparsely populated, and in their natural state. Most are privately owned by the Forbes family with one of the largest, Naushon, primarily consisting of a sheep ranch. They are inaccessible by land to cruising boats or anyone else for that matter, and they offer some incredible scenery and a few excellent "this side of nowhere" anchorages under certain favorable conditions.

Cuttyhunk, at the western most tip of the Elizabeth Islands, welcomes outsiders, making it one of the few remaining places where one can go ashore or stay aboard and truly get away from it all, should the mood strike. It's a small island with a large hill in the center, surrounded by sand dunes on the north and west and beautiful sandy beaches to the south and east. It has a great sport fishing tradition going back to the turn of the last century, but has retained its quiet, remote beauty by offering little by way of modern marine conveniences and marinas.

The outer harbor offers very good protection in all conditions except a northwest blow across Buzzard's Bay and the inner pond is pretty much a hurricane hole. We had not actually been there in over twenty years, having bypassed it since then in far too much hurry; and we were anxious to see how and if it had changed. There was not much there back then except a few homes, one small dock and a single restaurant up the hill, and we were happy to see that the building boom that has ruined many remote places such as this had not done appreciable damage over the passage of time.

At first we were disappointed to find The Pond itself so tightly packed with moorings that it seemed like a parking lot. After tying up and upon further reflection, we realized that the increased crowded conditions were inevitable and maybe not so disastrous. At least there was now room for more boats inside when really bad conditions hit the area. A few times years ago, we came in late and were hard pressed to find a spot to anchor.

### A Surprise Treasure from the Sea

We remembered the island locals coming by in a large outboard powered wooden rowboat selling fresh oysters, clams and other delicacies in the late afternoon, and were happy to see the tradition was still alive.

In addition to the mobile raw bar, early in the evening a newly arriving sailboat decided to pick up the mooring close on our stern. The two couples aboard a private charter from Boston overshot their mooring, coming to a stop about a foot behind us as I gently fended them off. Remembering my earlier days of less than graceful landings, I was not overly concerned as I could see they were not really out of control. The captain was visibly embarrassed and apologized profusely as I made little of his mishap.

After they had settled down for the evening he called out to me from astern asking me the improbable question, "Hey, what are you guys having for dinner?" In spite of my previous gallant behavior, I thought this an odd question; but I nevertheless replied in a friendly manner that I was not sure what we were having.

He proceeded to tell me a somewhat convoluted story that started with their entering the harbor and being overtaken by a local fisherman who was in the throws of a nicotine fit. He hailed them asking if anyone aboard had a spare cigarette, and the wife of our newly arrived neighbor tossed the guy an entire spare pack. The fishing captain caught up with them soon after and gave them several pounds of cleaned and filleted stripped bass that had literally been swimming the previous hour.

They, in turn, were now offering a few pounds to us for our dinner. No doubt, in recognition of my previous act of chivalry. Moral of the story: "Be nice to people."

Jan marinated the fish in Italian dressing quick's time while I got the gas grill rigged. That stripper was absolutely the best meal of the entire summer's cruise.

"Stay the course, mate." See you next month from wherever the wind blows us.

*The above comments are general suggestions. They are not intended to be used for navigational purposes. Individual captains are ultimately responsible for setting proper courses and safely navigating their vessels by relying on their own knowledge, judgment and experience to determine the correct action in any given situation*  
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