

19 DAYS WET



by San Diego Captains

Assen Alexandrov - August, 2005

I had long dreamed of crossing an ocean—any ocean—but I had never had the opportunity. Lately, there had been a few offers to deliver boats here and there, but nothing serious, and they were looking for people who had done it before because of the insurance cost if the crew had no previous crossings. It was clear it would be hard to find a boat, and even if we did, it wouldn't be anything special—but we couldn't afford to be picky.

In our marina, there's an office of an organization that helps disabled people—they teach them how to sail, take them for trips around the bay, and even race. They have a few small dinghies that I barely fit into, but they also have one relatively large boat which they use to participate in several regattas each year. That's the one we had our eye on.

The guys turned out to be cool, and our offer wasn't bad—free delivery of the yacht, with them only needing to cover food and plane tickets.

For two months, every evening after work, we stayed to help them prepare the yacht for the race, which takes place in mid-July. After that, it would be our turn—in early August, we were to bring her back to Californian soil. Two months passed installing electronics, laying new wiring, radar, a digital chart plotter, some sort of electronic hedgehog with antennas that was supposed to find me if

I fell overboard, a new mast, pumps, compasses... It was a nice boat before it fell into our hands. With 300 struggles and hundreds of hours of work under headlamps, we managed to get it barely ready for the race at the last minute—it was 2 a.m. Two days remained until the start.

I was ready for the trip—yeah, I looked a bit like a calf at a new gate, but that's just how I look sometimes. None of the three of us had done this before, and we had no idea who we could take for crew. Everyone I asked among my friends got excited about it, but no one actually agreed to come. Now they're whining, but that's another story.

We knew the boat, and we knew that if we had any problems with it, it would be our fault.

We were the ones who drilled, cut, moved, tightened... so if something gave out, we had no one to blame. Only the mast almost fell at the start—but more on that story later.

There were many unknowns in the equation, and the less time we had left, the more unknowns appeared. The crew part was easy—if no Bulgarians wanted to come, we decided to take Americans. I spread the word here and there that we needed a crew, and within three days we had about 150 offers from guys who had nothing

better to do than chase the wind. Out of those 150, how we picked the worst... I don't even know—but that story's coming too.

One of the main unknowns for me was what to bring so that I'd have at least a small chance against the beasts swimming around Hawaii. I knew some things, had read others, and asked around about what to expect. The answers were all over the place. Some said I had no chance against anything over 110 lb. Others advised me to bring light gear and small lures to avoid hooking big fish as much as possible. Third ones—the smarter ones—were sure we'd hook something serious but weren't convinced we could stop it, let alone bring it to the boat. I'll say it right now—they were probably all right.

We reviewed our arsenal, but browsing doesn't catch fish, and we were broke. We needed at least 5,000 bucks to gear up properly, but we'd already spent plenty on other things and there was no way I'd get to fish with what I really wanted. I changed the lines on my three Penn Senators—loaded them respectively with 60, 50, and 40 lb test—checked the rods, picked some of my crappiest silicone skirts, but also packed the biggest ones I had. I knew I had little chance against serious fish. That I knew. But I had no idea what was waiting for me.

In desperation, I decided to borrow one of the rods lying around one of the yachts in the marina. I'd written before about a little red

Penn reel I had cleaned with a wire brush—yep, that’s the one I grabbed. A rod about 20 years old, 6 feet, rated for 20–50 lb. The reel was decent, but aside from hanging my underwear on it near Hawaii, it wouldn’t be of much use in those waters.

I packed four rods and two gaffs into the tube I planned to travel with, grabbed the PENNs, and thought I was ready. I thought so—but the fish had other plans.

The luggage was ready, our crew was already waiting for us in Hawaii, the boat was in one piece—or at least that’s what they told us over the phone. We caught our flight and... horror. I was staring through the tiny round window of the small American airplane, not believing my eyes. Not a single ray of sun anywhere. My brother and I looked at each other like scolded kids. I spent three hours scanning the skies for sunlight—nothing. My brother got so annoyed he had to ask whether this was normal or just today. One older flight attendant was kind enough to explain that **SOMETIMES** it was sunny, unlike today.

What do you mean *sometimes*??? I had brought silicone skirts for sunny weather, and a few for fog and clouds. That woman had no idea how important it was for me to know whether the sun shines out there on the ocean or not. Whoever I asked about the ocean conditions gave me a different answer—windy, sunny, rainy, no

fish offshore, only by the shore. Some people hated it, others loved it. The flight attendant had no clue about fishing.

Midnight California time—9 p.m. Hawaiian time—the nasty little rattletrap landed on the island. We had arranged for a friend of ours, who happened to be on vacation there at the time, to pick us up from the airport. First impressions—very warm and humid, lots of Asians, and my fishing rod tube was nowhere in sight. I waited nervously by the baggage carousel. All sorts of ugly little suitcases and bags rolled by, but not my beloved tube. I smoked a cigarette—or maybe more than one—until we found our driver (she had rented some tiny piece of junk), and then I resumed waiting for my rods.

I found a victim. “Alohaaa! Where the hell are my rods???”

He looked at me like he understood Bulgarian. I asked him where my rods were, and he just stared blankly. The poor guy looked Filipino, with an airline company ID badge. I passionately explained that I was missing my rods and I wasn’t going anywhere without them. He blinked cluelessly. Finally, he got the hint, grabbed his radio, and mumbled something in their dialect. Man, I was ready to eat that flower lei the driver had hung around my neck, just imagining my rods were lost.

My brother grinned, the Filipino guy grinned. Why were they laughing??? I turned around and saw another guy—also Asian—

holding the tube by four fingers and smiling as he brought it over to me. A huge weight lifted off my chest—the rods were safe.

Out of the whole situation, I never figured out why that airport, just 2 miles from Pearl Harbor, was staffed by so many Asian Filipinos. I didn't dare ask.

I grabbed the tube, slung it over my back, and dragged my duffel toward the tiny Pontiac our friend had rented. The luggage wasn't light—about 132 lbs per person. We had packed almost everything into two duffels each, plus the infamous tube. The little peanut of a car barely fit the bags and sagged to the ground. I lit a cigarette and stared into the dark Hawaiian streets.

Typical American scenery—single-story buildings, warehouses, and big highways where, surprisingly, there was a MINIMUM speed limit, not a maximum. These folks clearly weren't in a hurry, as we would later confirm. The airport was no more than a half hour's relaxed drive from the marina. The highway was nearly empty, and we were making good time. After about 20 minutes, the scenery started to resemble Golden Sands in its prime—large hotels, cafés, little restaurants, and meandering tourists. And that's a good sign—if there's foot traffic, you're in the right place.

To the right, we started seeing masts—boats, various vessels, and large passenger tubs. On the left side of the road, it was a classic tourist trap. We had no idea where the boat was, but we certainly

wouldn't forget where we were going—the marina had a proud name: HAWAII YACHT CLUB. There was no way to miss it, but finding it wasn't easy either. We turned down at least six side streets that all dead-ended into the ocean. We solved the problem by turning on our GPS and relying on my brother's navigation skills, who, besides having two captain's licenses, a sailing instructor certificate, and navigation courses, also had extensive experience from past jobs delivering pizzas and parking cars at the Omni Hotel in Chicago.

A massive hotel, a solid parking lot, and hundreds of meters of docks lined with boats like pharmacy bottles. To my surprise, I didn't see any impressive boats—not sailboats, nor noteworthy motor yachts. I started feeling a bit disappointed.

We stopped in front of the marina. The gate was locked, no buzzer, but right next to the entrance stood an overflowing and stinking dumpster. Apparently, there weren't enough Mexicans around here willing to work for six bucks an hour.

My brother, being the better-looking one, decided to go in and check who was where—and most importantly, where our little boat was. Five minutes later, he came back grinning ear to ear with the yacht's captain, who had been enjoying a beer at the club bar. Finally—someone to unlock the boat for us.

So the two of them showed up—the captain, who was the only one from the race crew who wasn't disabled. We were fine, but we were just the return delivery crew back to California.

The first news wasn't too bad—they had only cut one halyard (the rope that holds one of the sails up the mast), the radar worked when it felt like it and showed whatever it wanted, the navigation was a joke—the screen had weird black spots from the water sloshing inside, the man-overboard alarm was constantly beeping, the compasses (two analog, two electronic) all pointed wherever they wanted with deviations between 15 and 36 degrees, the rudder bearing—what a fancy name—was banging hard and could tear its housing, the boat leaked like a busted bucket... and that was just the first impression.

The good news was that the third pirate of the crew was somewhere around, reportedly chasing the bartender every five minutes for more beer—but at least his luggage was already on the boat.

We threw our gear onboard and headed to the club's bar. A wild party was going on—live music, beers, singing, and dancing. I slept like the dead.

In the morning, we had arranged to grab a coffee with our humble driver and take a quick spin around Hawaii. She was flying out in the afternoon and we didn't have much time, so she took us

straight to Waikiki Beach. Nice little beach, full of cafés and taverns, cheerful tourists, boats, umbrellas, and the bluest water I had ever seen. We settled into a buffet breakfast—\$12, right on the beachfront at one of the oldest and most famous hotels on the island. Everything was going according to plan—except our ride was leaving in two hours. We said goodbye to our friend, grabbed our butts, and headed straight to the boat.

The racers were there—bearded and happy with their 4th place finish in the race. They had to attend some sort of post-race showcase for the boats—a public spectacle. That gave us around four hours of free time to explore the island and scout shops and workshops we'd need to prep for crossing half the ocean.

We grabbed a taxi and went hunting for a rental car. After about two hours, we found a beat-up Kia with a tired engine but a decent air conditioner. If you ever find yourself renting a car in Hawaii, avoid getting a white Kia—my brother drove it, and that's never a good thing. He has a very... unique way of driving rental cars.

Four hours were more than enough to tour the island of Oahu—the most populated island with the most touristy flair. We took the highway, which was full of lazy islanders, and after about an hour we were on the other side of the island. Small houses, old clunkers

parked on the streets, surfers, and narrow roads. That was it. The scenery ranged from steep cliffs and jungle to flat fields full of cows and calves. Turns out Hawaii wasn't all that special, and a quick drive confirmed it.

The good thing was that we saw the windward side of the island, the waves, and got a sense of what we'd face for at least the first 3–4 days at sea. The constant winds there blow at about 16 to 30 knots and stir up a pretty serious swell, but at least it was warm and no storms were expected in the next ten days. It rained at night, and the clouds sometimes came in with wind up to 35 knots.

That didn't sit well with me—we'd be bashing against wind and wave, but my real problem was fishing. In weather like that, on a sailboat, fishing is nearly impossible—the boat is too tilted, bouncing, constantly getting splashed, and stopping is hard. Let alone trying to reverse if we hook something big—and that was exactly my plan.

It took us 50 minutes to get back to the civilized side of the island, where the original crew and the boat were waiting. The odyssey was about to begin.

A quick briefing on how to use the weather fax, the satellite phone, and how to connect with the guy on shore who would be giving us weather forecasts for the ocean ahead.

We took over the boat, said goodbye to the part of the crew that was leaving that day, and arranged to meet the captain and the guy who knew the electronics the next morning for further explanations on what worked and how.

Inside—and out—the boat looked like it had already crossed an ocean. Full of sails, foul weather gear, canned food, and water. It stank of stale salt water and sweaty racers. We spent the next five hours reorganizing it pirate-style and cleaning what would be our home for the next three weeks.

Anything not welded, screwed down, or glued came off the boat. Soap on the floor, walls, ceiling—and a freshwater bath for everything that could hold water: mattresses, clothes, sails, ropes... It leaked like a cracked soldier's canteen from at least six spots. Quick cigarette break, then we hit it with silicone to plug up the holes someone had neglected to fill with resin or sealant.

Before the race, a lot of drilling had been done—and not just by us. I personally knew at least eight people who spent their days walking around with drills in shifts. Two hours and a kilo of silicone later, we managed to stop some of the leaks.

There was no point organizing everything just yet—we still had to shop for water, food, fuel, spare parts...

The fourth crew member called. Sounded like a regular American with the last name Czernitsky. But he turned out to be one of ours—third-generation Slovak, smart like all the folks from our region, hardworking and able to understand what he was told without me needing to explain or repeat more than three times.

We didn't have much time. The agreement was to bring the boat back before the end of August without breaking too many things, not to use the racing sails—only the delivery ones—not to run the engine too much, and not to push the boat too hard.

Time for shopping. We met the fourth member, fired up the junker, and hit the stores. We were expecting to spend at least 20 days at sea, by our estimates. The math was simple—5 liters of liquids per person per day, at least five different meals, fuel for about 1100 nm of motoring with the diesel, and spare parts for anything that could be fixed out on the ocean.

Water was easy—just four large shopping carts filled with Gatorade, juices, colas, and water. The bill was around \$750.







The poor junker looked like its tires were going to burst. The trunk, seats, and all the space in between were crammed with bottles—but at least the drinks were sorted. That was the easy part of the shopping. The hard part was just beginning—how to store and secure 150 gallons, or over 600 liters, of fuel when the onboard tank held only 15 gallons.

We had seven jerrycans on the boat, each holding five gallons. That left about half a ton of fuel to handle, and then we'd be set. The problem was, the captain—also my twin brother—is Bulgarian

and doesn't spend money on nonsense, and the disabled organization didn't have extra cash either. Each jerry can cost \$25, even with the discounts we used in the stores, and that was way too much for our budget.

Fuel, food, water, and plane tickets were covered by the disabled sailors' organization, but that didn't mean we were going to spend \$500 on jerry cans when we figured we could solve the problem for ten bucks.

The Americans looked at us like we were aliens. They had no idea what it means to be an immigrant with ideas—but it was time they started learning. Next stop: a car wash full of big Hawaiian guys. The boss wasn't there, and no one knew where he was. Five bucks and one of my brother's business cards were enough to grab the attention of the most decent-looking guy working there. He said he'd give the boss a call once he returned.

The Slovak was mumbling something in the back seat—he wanted to fish during the trip, but didn't have any gear. Like any proper guy, he came up with the idea to buy a reel and some skirts and was ready to drop about \$600. If only we all had his kind of problem. We had to wait for the lazy car wash boss to show up anyway, so we had time to wander around.

As expected, we wandered into their biggest fishing tackle store. Nothing special inside—big reels, thick lines, and hooks built for world records. The guy had no idea what he was looking for or what was worth buying. At that time, I thought I had a decent idea of what he needed.

A quick walk through the shop was enough to make one thing clear—if you had money, you had a chance to stop some beast in the ocean. The top shelf was around \$550 per reel, and in that range were gold Penn and Shimano models, though on the smaller side. The day before, I'd spotted a local sharpening his hooks with a file and sorting his gear for a morning fishing trip. After the first five questions, I felt like crying—my gear was, at best, half as strong as what the locals were using.

Penn reel the size of a kid's drum (no one in California uses those), main line of 650 meters of 120 lbs. test, 20-inch silicone skirts with 400 lbs. leaders, and hooks starting at 12/0 going up to sizes I was afraid to even ask about. Just for comparison—my fist fit between the shank and the barb of one of those hooks.

30-size reels weren't going to cut it—we needed something with serious capacity. You can't just stop a boat if something bites, and a large spool was definitely needed. Two-speed reels were a must. I'm a 140 lbs., my brother's the same, and the rest of the crew was

even smaller. A single-speed reel would tear our shoulders apart—that much was obvious to everyone.

If you've never seen a hungry gypsy in front of a kebab shop, now was the time. There was no point in asking anyone anything. After spending almost two days on the island, I knew the locals were so lazy and slow that we'd waste a whole day waiting for the fat guy behind the counter to figure out what we wanted and why.

I found it. A Shimano TLD 50 LRS with two speeds. I had spun and flipped all sorts of reels—big and small, gold and black—but this one was the best value for the money. Over \$500 flew out of my pocket. The line gave me some trouble—the local guy insisted we needed at least 120 lbs., while I was stuck on 80. I didn't know the specs by heart, but I was sure it couldn't hold 40 lbs. of drag or about 20 kg, let alone 75 at full load. Then again, it's a mistake to ignore local advice, and that was starting to itch at me.

Twenty minutes, and a compromise—100 lb Ande, 1370 ft. The fat guy spooled it up to 110%. I stood there wide-eyed watching him—ankle-deep in line, carefully loading it onto the reel with at least 11 lbs. of tension.

"Hey man, how am I supposed to wind it up the same way the

machine does? Where am I going to find 11 lbs. of tension to spool it this tight?"

"Well, that's your problem. I just work here—you're the one fishing with it."

Jeez, what a character. He just kept winding until the line nearly touched the frame—this guy was nuts. I was about to tell him off, but at that moment another guy walked in, asking about shark fishing in the Molokai Channel. Our guy dropped everything and started explaining in detail how to rig up, how to bait for sharks, what gear to use, safety tips, expected catches... and everything he said made perfect sense. Lazy as he was, the guy clearly knew his stuff.

We'd already spent over an hour in the store. The reel was FULL, and we had another kilometer and 600 meters of line on the spare spool we had to buy—they didn't sell it in smaller lengths.

"Hey Pole, are we getting any skirts? I've got a rod that's half of what that reel needs, but it'll do the job."

We did. 3-meter, 400 lb leaders—this guy wasn't messing around. Some hooks that didn't even have size numbers, and swivels as big as clothespins. \$45 each, custom made for our kind of fishing. I didn't dare say anything. The size was only about 8 inch—much

smaller than I expected—but the colors blew my mind. Everything from black, purple, gray, yellow, and pink to green, blue, and brown—they had it all.

The Slovak was thrilled. Me? I felt like reaching for the rum. What kind of monsters were swimming out there, and what were we about to face?

Then the call came from the car wash. Back to the car and straight there.

The main idea was how to store another half-ton of fuel without spending unnecessary money. It wasn't too complicated, but we needed some luck—and luck meant finding BIG plastic barrels, the kind the car washers used for storing their cleaning chemicals. Strong plastic with two openings, easy-to-use caps, and sturdy. To us, they were pure gold, but for them, it was just trash once they emptied them. The barrels were bulky and a hassle for them to fit into cars and take to the dump. Man, what a stroke of luck!

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The boss was there, glaring suspiciously at the four scruffy pirates clutching ten-dollar bills, eagerly eyeing where their barrels might be.

First question: What were we going to use them for? No way we were falling for that—tell him it's for a yacht and he'd skin us alive. Not everyone here owns a yacht, and most folks who mess around with such things have money.

We stayed silent or mumbled—well, we wanted to try something, but weren't sure if it would work. Didn't they have smaller ones? (I knew they didn't—the standard sizes were only 35 and 55 gallons.) And where could we toss them if they didn't work for us? This guy had no idea who he was dealing with. If we could fool Mexicans, this guy was definitely biting.

After ten minutes of stalling, we grabbed the barrels, paid five bucks each, and crammed them into the Kia. The scene was complete—four scruffy, sunburnt pirates smoking in a rental car, the small barrel squeezed into the back seat, the large one tied down in the open trunk, blasting U2 and speeding off toward the number one beach in the U.S.

Upon arriving at the marina, confusion set in—what were we going to do with these barrels, how would we secure them on something bouncing around in the ocean for twenty days, and how could they possibly have been only \$5 each? Someone had found similar barrels at the Pepsi Cola factory—an intense blue color but an ugly price of \$50 each. Sure, they had them—but we weren't paying that kind of money.

It was time to crash another cash register (the one at the liquor store had already been through enough). We lucked out again—one of the crew's mothers had a discount card for a grocery chain. Great, but what exactly should we buy?

Food for twenty days, five meals a day for four people is no joke. The Slovak winked at me—he said he could cook. I hoped he wasn't joking, because if we messed something up, we'd be eating him... Two hours and four shopping carts full of cans, pasta, instant soups, salami, crackers, coffee, various sauces... and a total bill of \$1100 later, we felt ready for action. The cash register froze around \$750. I knew it would happen again.

It took us four hours to load, transport, and unload all those cans, bags, and jars. Initially, we threw everything onto the boat, but

first, we had to collect the scattered luggage from around the marina dock. Everything was dry and smelled of soap.

The day was ending, and we weren't even close to finished. Organizing the water and food took much longer than I had anticipated. We wanted the boat to be heavy, nothing on deck, and most importantly, once it started bouncing, we didn't want things wandering around below deck looking for us. By 2 a.m., we were almost done—the mattresses were in place, the water tank was full, the bottled water stuffed into the lowest spots and secured tightly enough to withstand a 110-degree tilt (you never know). The food—more precisely, the cans—was packed into every available spot: under the bunks, sink, cooler, and even in the toilet beneath the broken shower... The boat was sitting about five to six centimeters deeper in the water.

At 7 a.m., coffee at the yacht club bar and a leisurely morning cigarette in the garden. By this time, we were already walking around in race gear—short Bermudas and shades.

We still had plenty to do—nobody had paid attention to the vehicle yet, and we had at least two more days of problems to deal with, plus I needed to dip my backside into Hawaiian waters.

The poor Kia had another six hours of action ahead, and everyone was holding their breath, hoping the tires wouldn't explode. With

the pedal to the metal, we blasted off to Walmart—two hours and over \$600 spent on sleeping bags, blankets, a small camping grill, pans, pots, and whatever else you could imagine needing for twenty days of camping. The essentials were in place—batteries, trash bags, waterproof bags... A lot of organizing awaited us.

By noon, we returned the poor Kia to the parking lot, full of gas and smelling like a race car with overheated brakes. Loading was almost complete, but we still had to figure out how to secure the fuel barrels conveniently for refueling and stable enough to remain still even if the boat listed to one side. Anyone who's ever had to tie down a barrel without handles on a boat's bow knows exactly what I'm talking about.

It took us two hours to shove the smaller barrel behind the engine in the boat's center. We planned to place the fuel containers, unused sails, water, the empty fishing rod tube now filled with one-liter bottles, and some luggage behind it. The large barrel wouldn't fit by just five or six centimeters. After about three full days in Hawaii and over fifty hours of work, we were ALMOST done organizing.

We untied the boat and dragged our butts over to the local marina gas station. We filled seven jerrycans with five gallons of diesel each, plus 30 gallons into the small barrel. The boat sank another

two centimeters deeper. It took us nearly two hours to tie down the barrel and the jerrycans securely.

We sat blissfully on the boat, puffing on cigarettes, soaking up the sun, and making plans for the big launch—or more precisely, where to even start with this boat. We didn't need most of the electronics—we weren't in a race, and no one was paying us for what we were doing, so there was no rush to get home. All we really needed was a compass and a bucket to scoop saltwater out of the ocean. The rest, as one of the crew said, was just fancy extras.

But lounging around like that wasn't going to get us anywhere. That nagging feeling of forgetting something kept creeping in stronger. Right then, the Slovak's buddy showed up. Great—more wandering around. We had a long list of things needed for the boat that we hoped to find at a nearby store. No such luck—other than a few bolts, two pumps, some metal cables, and one or two reels, the place had nothing. Looked like we'd have to head back to my favorite shop after all.

The moment I walked into the store, I knew it would be easy. The shop was about a 20-minute drive from the marina for reasons I still don't understand, but as soon as the door opened, I got it. Two of the sales guys there I knew from San Diego—and they

knew us by name. Unlike Hawaii, in San Diego you can find almost everything in at least three different stores, plus plenty of small shops, each specialized in something.

The guys explained that around here, only WEST MARINE was decently stocked. The rest were useless. We were looking for a belt for the engine, oil, filters, an oil change pump, ropes and blocks, a chart for that part of the world, a battery for the sink, spare hoses, a solar shower, bulbs, and fuses... and the clowns at the previous store had none of it.

A quick look around the shop and I already knew where everything was. I knew the prices, what they carried, what was good and what was junk. So did our friends. Twenty minutes and a bit of help from them was enough to fill two carts with everything we needed for the crossing. My brother and I exchanged a look—and decided to try our favorite trick from our delivery days.

"Excuse me, I have a question. If I buy something from this store, can I return it in San Diego if I don't use it?"

Drums rolling. Confusion among the cashiers—a Polish girl, a Russian, and a German. No matter how much they looked at each other, I knew it could work, even if they bent in half. They said they'd ask.

Ask what? This was one of our tested moves—used many times before.

"The manager said he's not sure if they'll take the returns in San Diego if the items are wet or if the ropes have been cut and aren't on a full roll."

She didn't know who she was dealing with.

"Well, then call the San Diego store and ask them."

She gave me a weird look. What was there to look at? Just make the call—that's her job. One of our guys jumped in, grabbed the phone, and explained briefly that the twins were here doing their usual trick—buying potential spare parts just in case.

How were we going to pay?

Oh, now it was possible. We paid with the magic phrase: "Just charge the card." What else? About-face—and attack for two more carts of supplies.

Ropes left over from spools and on sale, blocks, shackles, battery clip pumps, radar reflectors, bulbs, flashlights, flares, jackets and boots, epoxy resin that could even be applied underwater in case

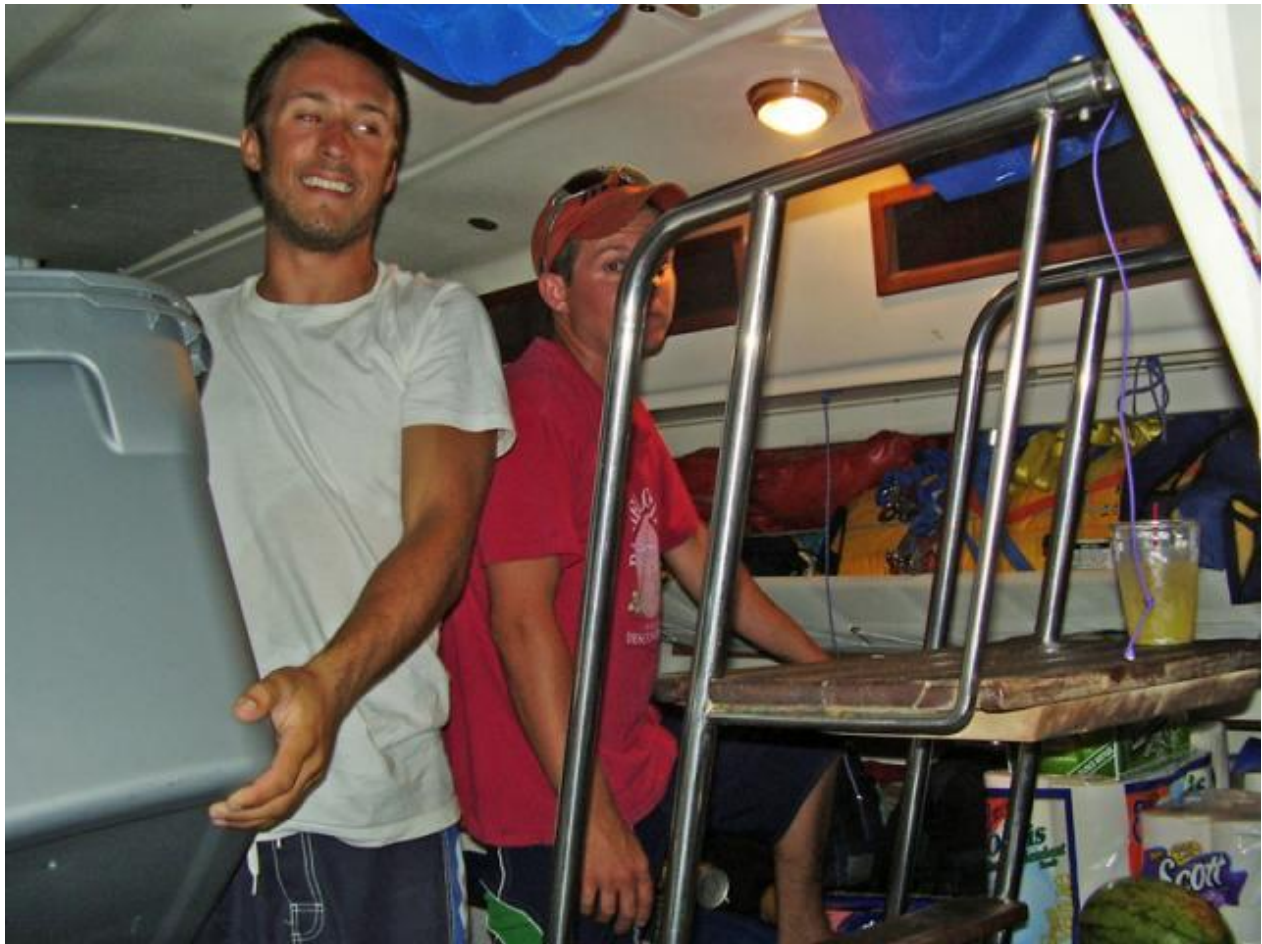
we hit something hard and floating, cutters for steel cables, and crimping pliers for making loops on those cables.

A lot of the stuff I had in mind was missing—which wasn't great—but what we did get wasn't bad. There were no thick neoprene suits, which would've been useful for the other two crew members in case the boat went down. They cost around \$460 and were available in San Diego, but not in Hawaii. I had one, and so did my brother, but the other two would just have to cross their fingers. At least the water wouldn't be too cold for the first 15 days, so hopefully they wouldn't need them if something went wrong.











Loaded up with almost everything we needed for the trip—and everything else we could think of—we hauled ourselves back to the boat, reorganized all the gear, and sat down to take a break.

Man, I'm telling this like it's a fairy tale. It sounds easy now, but back then, it wasn't.

We were just sipping soda, sprawled out on the boat, wondering what else could go wrong—and then, of course, something did. The little punk who was supposed to be the fourth member of our

crew dropped the news that he MIGHT not be coming with us. Said he'd found some buddies heading straight to Seattle, had raced with them before, knew them well, and they needed a replacement because one of their guys had chickened out.

The little brat thought it was a good idea to tell us this one day before departure...

It felt like a gut punch. The boat didn't have an autopilot, and it would be seriously tough for three people to sail her back to California on time without breaking anything. The other option was to run with reduced sails the whole way so we wouldn't have to do any heavy-duty maneuvers during storms—but that meant a 50-day journey.

We didn't have that kind of time. And now, we didn't have a fourth crew member.

The brat packed his bags, bought his plane ticket, and left.

We had said we'd return that boat, even if it meant just me and my brother sailing her back alone. The Slovak was still with us—he didn't care who left or stayed—but none of us really knew what was waiting out there in the ocean.

Looked like we urgently needed a fourth man.

Just as we were thinking about how to find one—and more importantly, where—one of the big boats cruised past us. I started counting in awe: six barrels of the large kind, plus about twenty five-gallon jerrycans, and who knows how many more barrels inside the boat. This guy was clearly confused about something. Not even five minutes later, the same scene repeated itself. A boat slightly larger than ours came into view with four large blue barrels strapped down in the cockpit. These folks were clearly gearing up for a motor-powered crossing, which was fine, but the worrying part was that even the least stocked among them had at least 200 gallons of fuel. Meanwhile, we had 80—on a good day. Our big barrel was still sitting there on the dock, washed and dry, ready to be loaded. The bad part was, we had no place to put it, let alone tie it down.

Frustrated by the fourth crew member bailing and a bit shaken by how much fuel our neighbors had, we decided to muscle that big barrel into the boat. That's right—we kicked it in. Five minutes later, it was on board, but there was no way it could just sit in the middle of the boat.

The space from the engine to the mast was about three meters. To the left of the mast, we had a small sink and a little stove mounted on a gimbal that let it swing and stay nearly level depending on the

boat's motion. To the right of the mast, we had food and most of the water. On either side were two bunks, and above them: life jackets, the life raft, the first aid kit, and the grab bag.

There was NO WAY to place that barrel in the middle without creating a fire hazard from possible diesel spills, or blocking access to emergency equipment in case we had to abandon ship.

The only viable idea in this case was to kick the barrel even harder, almost to the bow of the boat, and wedge it between the sails, the toilet, and the bathroom—which we weren't planning to use. After three hours, we had removed the small elevator used to help disabled sailors get into the cockpit, the anchor, and all the sails—four spinnakers (the balloon-like downwind sails, usually colorful), the racing mainsail, four racing genoas of different sizes, a large transport genoa, a number three genoa, and storm sails (both genoa and main, about 10% smaller than standard).

Fortunately, at the bow of the boat there was an aluminum tube—purpose unknown—and two steel wires running along the sides near the hull. By 2 a.m., we had tossed everything inside and finally went to bed.

At 7 a.m.—coffee, a cigarette, cold shower, and time to tie the barrel. Almost three hours later and about 1000 ft of rope, we were done. The barrel was secured, the sails stuffed around it, the anchor and the elevator below it, a few sleeping bags and rope bags filling out the picture—a true work of nautical art in tying a barrel to the bow of a boat.

Then my brother's phone rang. The guy who would be giving us weather forecasts said he had a friend—a woman—who wanted to cross the ocean and was looking for a boat.

A WOMAN ON BOARD.

She was going to come and check out what the boat looked like before deciding. The boat couldn't have been more spartan—one toilet, a small sink and gimbaled stove, four bunks, and five ceiling bulbs.

But when it came to safety, we were loaded to the max: a man-overboard tracking system, a satellite phone, a life raft, a satellite

distress beacon, a long-range radio capable of 800-mile reception (plus a standard one), a medical kit fit for a small Mexican town, life jackets, and two cold-water survival suits. We also had a water desalinator capable of producing five liters per hour while the engine was running, and a fax machine continuously pumping out satellite images of the area (the whole ocean), along with a contracted shore-based weather forecast service.

While we waited for the lady to show up, my brother climbed the mast for a quick inspection of everything hanging up there and to rerun the cut halyard. We rigged the small transport mainsail and the number 3 genoa (about 60% smaller than the number 1), ran some of the missing lines, replaced the sink... we were ready to go.

And we did—well, just to the gas station, where we stuffed the big barrel with 50 gallons of diesel. I tried to shift it, but it wouldn't budge. We hoped it would stay that way during the trip—and it did. It didn't move even a centimeter, not even during the nastier days with waves up to 20–30 ft and breaking crests. But more on that later.

The lady showed up around 4 p.m. She looked like a character—and she was. She had a flight booked but decided to cancel and come with us instead. Said she could sail (yeah, right), had raced on big boats (probably at making coffee), and wasn't afraid of anything—which, to be fair, turned out to be true. Even in the

worst weather we hit, she slept like a baby strapped into the cockpit. I had never met someone like her.

Her luggage was in the yacht club cafe, and it didn't take her long to toss it onboard. We decided to leave early the next morning. A short dinner on the grill by the dock, farewell to the sunset, and off to bed.

I lay there thinking, "Tomorrow begins my first ocean crossing. The crew: a third-generation Slovak, a female mix of German, Russian, maybe some Polish—and who knows what else—and two Bulgarian pirates with high hopes for a good voyage. What awaits us?"













The fishing gear that came with the boat wasn't bad by my standards—but not by local ones. At the tackle shop, they advised us to use silicone skirts about 18–20 cm long and leaders of at least 300 lb. The hook sizes were shocking—for that size, I usually use 6/0, 8/0, maybe up to 12/0. In Hawaii, no one bothered with those puny numbers—they started at 12/0 and went up to sizes big enough to fit a one-liter bottle through the gap.

I asked the expert at the shop about the general rule for matching hook size to the head size of the silicone lure. The rule was simple: when you place the hook against the head of the skirt, the widest part of the head shouldn't be smaller than the hook's bend. In other words, the hook shouldn't stick out too much—it should stay mostly hidden inside. Otherwise, it's too big, heavy, sticks out awkwardly, disrupts the lure's natural movement (makes the rear sink), creates drag at the tail, and just looks unnatural.

The guy gave me a strange look and said it was a good rule, but only relevant when fishing for picky fish or in waters where the fish aren't as aggressive or plentiful.

OK, fair. So what could I catch with those silicone lures in this part of the world?

Any kind of tuna, sharks, various types of marlin, wahoo (basically a saltwater pike with nasty teeth), and more.

Mmm, yeah... clearly, these fish weren't picky—but I threw him another question.

“Do they bite on purple and black?” “Yes.” “Pink?” “Yes.” “Blue and white?” “Yes.” “Then what *don't* they bite on?”

Twenty seconds of deep thought followed.

“Well, they'll even bite on strips of tinfoil or chip bags tied to the hook with rubber bands.”

“Then why are you making me pay \$45 a pop for these raggedy things, man?”

He laughed—said it was better to use the real stuff and then switch to whatever you have left if the fish tear it up. The 'real stuff' turned out to be \$90 for two silicone skirts. Couldn't get more real than that.

I had a pretty good idea of what I was in for—or at least some idea—so I had stocked up on the ugliest, cheapest skirts from our stash, plus everything big we had in our tackle box. My mistake was that the leaders were way weaker than what they used here, and the hooks were tiny in comparison to Hawaiian sizes. Another big mistake was leaving my artificial birds in San Diego—the ones

you tie between the main line and leader to bring fish up from deep water when the ocean is calm.

These birds mimic flying fish, which followed us for most of the trip and are a major food source for big predators in this region. Some models are very simple—just a plastic spindle with a hole down the middle and little wings at the front. When trolled in choppy water, they dart side to side erratically. In calm seas, they vibrate nicely across the surface, mimicking a fleeing baitfish—which, of course, is the silicone lure trailing behind.

They also help lift the lure to the surface at slower speeds, even when it's 150 meters behind the boat. That lets it bounce over the water and create a trail of bubbles made by the lure's flat head. This is important on a sailboat, where the speed is relatively low compared to powerboats, which pull lures fast and leave a clear white wake from their propellers. You don't get that on a sailboat, so you need alternative tricks to add action to the lure.

Now, if you ask me why I forgot those birds in San Diego, I couldn't give you a good answer. But they're a must for ocean fishing in this part of the world.

Could we have bought some from the store? Sure. But the problem is—they don't sell them.

WELCOME TO HAWAII.

I had also packed a few silicone lures with small, flat plastic heads that created a lot of action when trolled slowly, and two marlin lures with huge hooks—basically identical to what they used locally—both in similar black and purple colors, though one had a hint of yellow and pink. That one, however, had a pointed head, which isn't great for calm water.

The champion of the collection was a 50-centimeter black-and-purple skirt with a concave plastic head and 4–5 holes in it. That's the so-called jet head, which lifts the lure above the surface and leaves a distinct trail of bubbles when the water is calm.

The rest of the collection included all kinds of small silicone lures, feathered monstrosities in various colors, blue-and-white 25 cm skirts with big heavy heads, and a few wooden spindles with a single large hook on the rear.

I didn't bring any crankbaits of any size, no flying fish replicas or deep divers—but in my opinion, what we had was still enough to feed ourselves in the ocean for three weeks.

Our rods, though, were a different story—basically junk. But that's what we had. The best ones were rated 20–50 lb, one was 15–40, and another 10–50. I had written earlier about how I cleaned up a small Penn reel with a wire brush—I brought that too, just in case. But now its rod was in for a surprise: I planned to mount the Slovak's big reel with 100 lb line on it.

That rod had no roller guides, a plastic reel seat, and was rated 20–50 lb. I knew it was wrong, but also knew a decent rod for that reel would cost around \$300—just in California. In Hawaii, first, they didn't have good rods, and second, the ones they did have started at \$400.

They weren't bad rods, but they were designed for fighting big beasts from a chair—which we didn't have.

We started with two Penn Senator 114XLWs, one Penn Senator 114H, and one Shimano TLD50 two-speed. The lines were: 40 lb on the little Penn, 50 and 60 lb on the bigger ones, and 100 lb on the Shimano.

I knew all the reels had new line, with a minimum of 550+ meters

on the Senators and 420 meters on the big gun. The lines could have been heavier, but I couldn't see who was going to haul them in or work with them on a boat full of ropes and blocks.

We had all the leader lines we could want, my fillet knife, pliers for unhooking fish, sunglasses and boots, silicone gloves, at least ten pairs of sailing gloves, several tubes of good diameter, small sharp tail-cutting knives, and two gaffs.

The gaffs—or "gaffs," as they call them here—were stuffed in the rod tube. One was just a backup, not suitable for serious fights. We learned that after an encounter with a shark that decided to show me who was boss—turned the thing into a corkscrew in five seconds flat, and gave me blistered calluses. We fixed it up with some hammers and pipes, but it still haunted me two years later—I didn't trust it. The other was an AFTCO, 180 centimeters, no barb, razor-sharp, and known as one of the best gaffs in the world.

The boat didn't have a fish finder, water temperature gauge, fridge, big grill, fighting chair, or a decent fish-cleaning table.

In some of the photos, you'll see fish with gaffs in them, heads being cut, guts, fish trailing behind the boat tied through the gills, fillets ready for the grill, and some already sizzling. I know a lot of you hate seeing dead fish—even in photos—but keep in mind, this was the best food available to the crew for 20 days.

We killed and ate plenty of fish, but also carefully released those that weren't edible or were surplus. We never released a fish that was fatally wounded—though we did toss perfectly good fillets into the ocean if they'd sat too long. We ate what we could, but never looked at fish for more than 16 hours straight—after that, we'd chuck it to the sharks.

I only killed what I knew we'd eat or what seemed like enough for our needs. The mid-sized ones of all species had it the worst. The big ones and rare types were released—even if there was a risk of someone getting hurt in the process. Everything worked out in the end, but more on that later.

Early Hawaiian morning. The action begins.



The odyssey began at 6 a.m. Hawaiian time. The time difference messed with us the whole trip—Hawaii is three hours behind San Diego, and half the time someone misunderstood what time it was or when something was supposed to happen.

The weather forecast didn't show anything unusual—waves up to 4–5 meters, wind around 35–40 km/h, sunny and warm. Thanks to the fax and satellite phone, we had a clear picture of what was

coming for the whole trip, and to our amazement, the forecasts were spot on.

The boat had been inspected multiple times and stocked as if for a 60-day crossing. The crew couldn't wait to hit the open ocean.

The marina, despite its proud name—HAWAII YACHT CLUB—was nothing special, and neither was the channel connecting it to the ocean. It was no more than 20 meters wide, had no lights on the buoys, and rocks were clearly visible just 5 meters from the boat. A big tree trunk stuck in the shallows and some Hawaiians in canoes completed the picture.



The marina was located on the opposite side of the prevailing winds, as was everything worth seeing. The windy side of the island wasn't anything special, but it was still about 10 hours by yacht, and we had to choose between a longer but calmer route behind the island or the Molokai Channel, which had a reputation as the windiest place around these islands.

The Slovak had gone fishing with some local guy about a week earlier, and as soon as we left, he pointed out the spot where

everyone chased the big fish. It was full of powerboats and nicely sheltered behind the high hills on the western part of the island.

The decision, as you can guess, was made quickly—a good chance to catch some fish and a good opportunity to see how the boat handled in light conditions. I was at the helm, and it was clear to everyone which way we were heading.

By 8 a.m., we were about 400 meters off the beach of Oahu. We had reefed the mainsail down to the last notch and were cruising at our standard 15 km/h. It was time to fish. My hands were trembling, but the weather wasn't ideal. I waited about an hour to duck behind the terminal where the tankers dock and pump fuel, and then I dropped three lines.

"Dropped" might be putting it lightly. The big gun had the drag tightened all the way—I knew I couldn't snap the line with it, and the reel was under warranty. It was tied to the backstay and wedged between the boat's railings. I let it out about 100 meters behind us with a light green and pink silicone skirt, 12/0 hooks rigged with a chain, and a 120 lb leader. The idea was to hook something worth the effort while we were still sheltered behind the island, so we'd have a chance to fight it. We weren't going to fish for at least three days once the weather picked up, and that was already getting on my nerves.

The second line was set about 20 meters behind the boat with a wooden plug and a single hook, but a much lighter leader—80 lbs. The third line was there just to confuse the fish—a dark silicone lure with small hooks, a 60 lb leader, and the proven black-and-purple color. It had great action in calm water, which we expected in the island's lee, and it was about 60 meters out. Its role was to attract fish to the big lure, or if there was a strike, to hold the school around the stronger hooks of the main rod for at least 10–15 seconds.

I didn't even bother rigging the fourth rod—I knew I had no chance of stopping a serious fish with 700 meters of 40 lb line, and figured it wasn't worth the trouble. Sounds crazy, but there was no point in killing anything at the start of the trip—we had nowhere to store edible fish, no freezer or ice, and four days of heavy weather ahead.

The color of the water was sky blue, depth at least 300 meters, and there were barely any waves. We were nearing the area where all the boats gathered—three buoys where the locals toss food into the water to attract fish. It was one of the island's favorite fishing spots. I was hoping for at least one strike, and I wasn't surprised when the big reel started screaming. Yes—screaming. It was unwinding so fast that even with gloves on, it was hard to flip the

drag lever into strike position. I couldn't move the rod or pull it out from where I'd wedged it.

The fish was on the surface, pulling against about 15 kg of drag. I wasn't worried about the rod—it was nearly horizontal and clamped to the reel seat, and I had lightly tightened the reel seat rings with pliers.

I lunged at the rod and gave the thumb bar a solid slap—it snapped perfectly into strike position. The line was peeling off like mad. I turned off the clicker to stop that insane screeching and shouted—as I always do in moments like this—"Drop the sails!"

Next moment—silence. The rod sprang upright and the reel stopped. My turn now. I pulled the rod from its holder and gave it a solid hookset, hoping the fish had only mouthed the lure and hadn't yet been properly hooked. It was still there—but only the lure. No tension, no sign of the beast.

My brother got the message without me saying anything and tightened the sails again to bring us back to speed. I cranked like a madman and kept my eyes on the surface. The lure popped up about 120 meters behind the boat, splashed once, and left a 5–6 meter trail of bubbles.

I reeled in another 30 meters, set the drag to free spool, and let the silicone sink. Then I flipped the clicker back on, waited 10–12 seconds, and switched straight to strike.

"Bite again, you beast!"

I was gripping the reel with both hands, hypnotized by the spot where the silicone lure should have been. I started counting in my head—101, 102, 103, 104... By 110 it was clear—nope, not this time. I jammed the rod back in place, grabbed the middle one, and gave it a hard yank upward. The boat was moving fast enough to lift the skirted lure almost out of the water. Another six or seven seconds of waiting—nothing.

"What's going on?"

I turned around to find the Slovak looking puzzled—he'd been inside the cabin and was very curious about what I was doing.

"Why aren't you staying with your rod? Am I supposed to work all of them myself?"

Apparently, he didn't know what to do—even though he'd told me he'd fished before, both here and on the East Coast. I had to explain in great detail what to do when a rod gets hit. It took about two hours, during which nothing much happened.

I swapped out the middle lure for a larger one with more splash and a small teaser rigged ahead of it. We had about four more

hours before we'd reach the windy area, and then the rods would come in.

Something didn't feel right—the forestay at the bow was swinging unnaturally. I turned to check the hydraulic cylinder on the backstay—it looked fine, but the pressure was at 1000 instead of the usual 2500. A quick check of the hydraulic fluid and a little tightening—nothing major, everything seemed okay.

We had about two kilometers to go before clearing the island. The wind was picking up, and the swell was clearly noticeable. I pulled in all the rods and stashed them at the bow near the fuel barrel. Quick change of clothes, and I jumped back behind the helm.

We exited into the ocean. The swell was rough for a light boat like ours—it was constantly splashing over us, and the cockpit stayed filled with a few inches of water. Not even an hour had passed before trouble started. The forestay was swinging again.

“Pressure check?!” I shouted, as I always do when things get serious. “Seven hundred!” “Son of a... Tighten it!”

My brother started pumping like mad. The others stared, wide-eyed.

I looked at the mast—it was bending like a bow, right in the middle. “Talk to me.” “Two thousand five hundred.”

I turned to see what was happening behind me. The backstay looked fine, but the stern was covered in oil. I didn't even want to look at the pedestal.

“Check it!” I yelled. “Zero. Zero. Zero. Zero.”

I had never seen my brother move so fast—he grabbed the tiny hydraulic lever with both hands and pumped like crazy. There was no time to explain anything. I quickly checked that the others wouldn't fall overboard, spun the wheel, and charged straight into the swell.

One of the hydraulic cylinders had blown—the one holding the forestay that kept the mast from tipping forward.

“What's happening?!”

Slovaks sure are curious.

“The mast is falling! Give me blocks and ropes, a knife, pliers—and help my brother!”

I don't know if he thought I was joking, but I think he got the message once he saw my brother dive headfirst into the cabin. How he managed that, I still don't know.

It was a bad situation—we couldn't head into the waves because the forestay had no tension and the mast was swaying forward and back. It could smash the cabin or rip out its step. That would be a

sweet disaster—the mast could punch through the hull in less than a second. Then we’d be in for a long swim with some big fish.

We were running with the waves, which was the better option. I hadn’t let the back sail loose, so it was keeping the boat fairly balanced—but barely.

Within seconds, the captain showed up with a rope in his teeth and two blocks. A quick dive into the cockpit between my legs, a few strong knots, and a bit of Bulgarian profanity—and the problem was ALMOST solved.

Instead of a hydraulic cylinder, we now had blocks and rope. Still far from enough to get us back to shore, which we could now see about 7–8 kilometers away.

We rerouted two halyards to the stern of the boat, tightened them with the winches, and lit a cigarette.

I glanced at the lady—she hadn’t made a sound or moved an inch. Didn’t flinch, didn’t gag, didn’t complain through the entire three minutes. She was clearly a badass.

About an hour later, we were behind the little island, fired up the engine, and I set the rods back out.

Trolled for three hours. One hit on the middle rod—screamed for six seconds. Pulled it from the holder, reeled in, and...

"Plastic bag!"

The lady jumped up, dashed into the cabin, and came back with a bag in her hand.

"Sweetheart, this is what we caught. We won't need this bag."

Laughter broke out—she finally decided to do something, but it was clear she'd need some instruction on what to do and what I meant with my version of English. The Slovak, ever the prepared Eastern European, had brought a Bulgarian–English dictionary, but that wasn't going to help much either.

Nine hours later, we were back at the marina.







The problem wasn't small, but it didn't seem difficult to fix—or so my brother and I thought. We pulled out three big flashlights and began inspecting everything. The rear hydraulic cylinder was beyond repair, but we figured we could rig up a Bulgarian solution using a few blocks and some strong rope. The downside was that we wouldn't be able to adjust the mast's angle; it had to be tensioned to a single position and left that way. That could cost us the mast in rough weather—there was no way to tension it properly and then tweak it mid-voyage. We dismantled everything and went to bed with a bad feeling—the odyssey was off to a rough start.

The next morning, after a hot coffee and a smoke, we started looking for a place to buy that kind of cylinder—or someone who could fix it. Apparently, it was possible... but it would take 25 days and come with no warranty. Hawaii is a strange place. Buying a new one was out of the question—three months wait and only via special order.

We grabbed a cab and headed straight to our favorite store. I already knew where everything was. We had spares, but we were now buying spares for the spares. The largest turnbuckle they offered went straight into the cart, along with 20 pulleys, shackles,

and hooks. It was going to be a serious setup, like for a boat twice the size—but we had to be careful with the rest of the rigging so we wouldn't collapse the mast ourselves.

The boat was heavy, packed to the brim with all sorts of stuff (I have pictures, but not here—you'll have to wait). That was both good and a little dangerous. For a light boat like this, designed for racing in bays or short ocean sprints, it's usually not a problem to load some extra things aboard. The problem was, we didn't just load some—we loaded everything we possibly could and crammed it all into the lowest parts of the boat. That was great for stability—she wouldn't roll or lean much in waves—but it put extra strain on the mast. With every gust of wind, instead of leaning and reducing the load, the boat stayed upright and the mast creaked.

By 10 a.m., the problem was resolved. We had tensioned the forestay to a "medium" setting, swapped out the headsail for the smallest one we had, checked the yacht once more, and cast off—for the second and final time from the Hawaiian marina.

The wind was strong, small boats were doing pretty turns right at the marina entrance, and whitecaps started about 400 meters offshore—but we knew what to expect. I set out the rods, trolled all the way to the point, tried everything—but nothing bit.

Apparently, Hawaii only had tough fish and plastic bags.

For three days and nights, we bashed against the wind and waves. The boat leaked from everywhere, everything was wet and miserable. It was impossible to brush our teeth—I tried, but had to wedge one foot between the stove and the bunk, hold the mast with one hand, and pump fresh water with the other. I was short one hand to actually brush my teeth, and after a few tries I gave up—no point in risking a fall just for a shred of civilized life.

We slept in our clothes. Trash bags—at least two nested—served as pillowcases. No hot meals, just emergency coffee and sandwiches that could be eaten with one hand.

On the third night, the lights on board gave out—they were full of water dripping from the cabin ceiling. Despite good wiring and insulation, everything was rusted and soaked with saltwater. Even my supposedly waterproof flashlight filled with water. We let it go for a swim.

The electronic compasses quit too, along with the instruments for boat speed, wind speed and direction, and the depth sounder...

Screw it, we'll sail the Bulgarian way. At least we still had Coca-Cola.

"Hey Pole, pass me a Coke."

Three minutes of silence.

"I don't know what's going on, but they're empty."

"What do you mean empty?! They were full when I bought them!"

"Well... I don't know."

I jumped in, got into the cabin, crouched beside the bunk under which the Coke was stored, and guess what I saw? Water—what else would you expect in a boat that leaks like a busted canteen? I reached in and pulled out one empty Coke. Then another. Then another... You can guess the rest. The Coke was stored on the port side of the boat, and for three days we'd had wind from the starboard bow, which tilted the boat left. All the water had pooled under that bunk. The salt had eaten through the pull-tabs on the cans, and the shaking had done the rest. I checked at least 30 cans—they were all empty. The same issue—corrosion right at the opening tab. So now I had nothing to drink, and I was tossing empties into the night. First mistake: logged.

The fuel drum, however, didn't budge an inch the whole trip—and that was way more important than my Coke. The guys tore into me, joking about how I'd arranged the Coke stash and now I'd be surviving on tea. How was I supposed to know the saltwater would eat through the cans so fast? I never had that problem in the Black Sea, and no boat I've ever been on leaked like this.

Early morning somewhere in the ocean. The waves had started to settle, washing over us every three minutes instead of the usual twenty seconds. The wind was easing, and it was time to dry out. Hot coffee, some soup, and time to fish. We swapped the small jib for a bigger sail, sipped our coffee—the best tasting coffee anywhere—and I brought out the rods.

By some unwritten rule, offshore fishing never brings anything good—no action, no fish. And there was no action to speak of. The boats around us weren't fishing vessels, and there wasn't a soul within 50 kilometers. We needed to find something shallower than this abyss. An underwater mountain would be ideal—that's where the small fish gather to eat plankton that rises with the currents clashing against the seamount. Small fish attract bigger fish, and the big fish—we eat them.

The plan was clear, but the nearest seamount was far. A check of the navigation system showed we had at least a day to reach one—perfectly positioned on our course—with a depth of about 2,000 meters.

We were trolling four lines. One was the Hawaiian abomination from the shop expert, which I had cast far back. At 80 meters we had a 25 cm purple/pink/gray lure, at 50 meters a green and yellow, and right behind the boat a purple and black.

Their size was just right for dorado, which can reach up to 50 kg, various tuna, and small marlins.

The big one started to scream. I jumped up, thumb on the strike position—but it kept peeling line...

"Hey, Pole! Get over here—we've got dinner!"

Our guy grabs the rod and starts reeling. It's coming in heavy—but it's coming. The boat is stopped, the sails are flapping. My brother is steering, I jump below deck and grab the big gaff—my trusted hook from a tested maker—and wait. I wait... but the Pole's taking his time. Meanwhile, the grill is hot, the pliers are beside me, and my big filleting knife is ready.

He brings the fish to the boat and shouts, "Color!" just like I taught him, and pulls as hard as he can. I look over and see a small tuna—one of the tastiest kinds—about 25 kilograms. These things can grow up to half a ton. No way we're letting this one go—it's the perfect dinner after nearly four days of sandwiches.

He gets it to the boat. I grab the leader, which could handle a small calf, and pull it in. My brother drives the hook into its back.

"Not there, man!"

Wrong spot, but I was just giving ideas—no way he could aim for the head with the boat rocking like that. He pulls the gaff out, takes aim again, and lands a perfect hit to the head.

The Pole's beaming, I've got my knife in hand, my brother cleans the gaff, and the lady's at the helm. Filleting wasn't the most pleasant task, but that smell of grilled fish—oh man, unbeatable. A little soy sauce, a few lemons, salad, and potatoes baked in foil with butter... mmmmm, nothing like it.

We reeled in the rods for the night, left only one big purple-and-black lure in the water near the boat, and settled in. Tomorrow promised to be a very memorable fishing day.







Nothing much happened overnight, just as expected—except that the weather allowed the other two to steer the boat, and my brother and I finally got some sleep.

The morning started as usual—coffee, a cigarette, and tuna sandwiches. The wind had almost died down, or at least that's how it felt after the wet hell of the first four days. We were about 650 nautical miles north of Hawaii and about 10–15 miles from the underwater mountain we had our eye on. Finally, we got out of our wet clothes and opened the yacht to let it dry out a little. We still had fish from the previous day, so this wasn't about food anymore—it was for fun.

We put out all four rods—the purple/black one about 100+ meters behind us, at 65–70 meters a green/pink, at 30 meters a yellow/green wooden plug, and at 25 meters a big green/black skirt.

My hopes were on the second and third rods. I didn't expect anything serious this early. The boat speed wasn't enough for a good action on the lures, the wind was low, and our sails weren't big or ideal for such conditions. It was too early to start the engine—we still had at least 3,000 kilometers ahead.

I hadn't caught anything for four days, caught nothing in Hawaii either, and yeah... I was a bit edgy. I had no real idea what might be swimming in these waters—or more precisely, how big it could be. So I decided to check if the lines were tangled, if the hooks were clean... just fiddling really, couldn't stand sitting idle.

I started pulling in the fat rear lure by hand, no reel—just dragging it in like a rope. I'd pulled maybe 10 meters when something yanked it out of my hands. The hit was so strong there was no time to react or do anything. The belly of the line was slack, the boat speed was too low, and I had no way to hold the line tight enough to set the hook. I crouched by the rod and waited, shouting that I'd had a strike.

Everyone knew I didn't joke about these things. The Pole/Slovak sat next to me and stared out at the horizon. No matter how much we stared—or cursed—we'd missed our chance.

I had already explained what to do when a strike hits, how to act to provoke a second strike, why it's done that way, what to expect from different kinds of fish, how to fight them, tire them out, keep the crew safe, who does what, how to gaff, unhook, tie loops, use clubs and knives... He nodded and looked like he was listening and understanding, and I thought I really knew my stuff.

THE BIG ONE starts to scream—not click or creak—but scream.

"Pole, it's yours!"

"You take it."

He's insane. I take it. The line was peeling off at a speed I never thought I'd witness, let alone experience. The drag was halfway to strike, the rod was wedged into the boat's railing, and the tip was nearly horizontal. I slammed my thumb to the strike position and waited, hoping it would slow down. I yelled, "Drop the sails, start the engine, clear the deck!" and stared into the distance where I imagined the beast to be. Nothing in sight. I glanced at the rod tip—it kept bending. One thing was clear: this was a big tuna, and we'd need luck to stop it—but first we had to stop the boat.

"Stop the boat!"

"Stop yelling, I know what I'm doing," my brother snapped.

He did know, but I wasn't sure if the others remembered everything I'd explained in the past couple of hours. I turned and was pleased to see the sails were down, the spaghetti ropes on deck, and my brother had started the engine and put it in reverse.

I looked at the rod tip—it kept bending. Half the line was gone, and it was still flying out at the same speed. I shut off the clicker to

stop the screech and pressed my thumb between strike and full drag. I nudged the drag lever forward gently to hold it, but I was ready to slam it to full at any moment. The fish kept pulling, and the line kept flying. Damn, we were going to lose it.

I gently nudged the lever again to make sure I could crank it up fully if needed. The line kept peeling. I tried moving the rod, pulling it toward me, or dislodging it from where I'd wedged it—no chance. The fish was still running hard, just like it did right after the strike. This was a monster, headed deep with no signs of stopping.

I focused on the reel—I didn't care about the rod tip anymore. That was the helmsman's job, and my brother is cool and capable in moments like this. About 250–280 meters of line were already gone. There wasn't much left, and the worst part was—it wasn't slowing down.

"Full drag—I need someone here!"

I slapped the lever fully forward and gripped the reel with both hands. It kept going. I stared at the spool—there was nothing else I could do. The spool was nearly bare, the bottom was visible. I had less than 40 meters left. The beast was still running.

I needed someone to help me brace the reel when the line ran out. It was tied to the spool with a strong knot, using brand new 100 lb

test. I had no chance of saving it if the belt securing it to the rod failed. It was the strongest reel on board—no point tying it to another and tossing it overboard.

The last 40 meters. I was gripping the spool with both hands, not taking my eyes off it. It STOPPED. So suddenly, it startled me. I didn't dare move or touch the handle. I didn't dare pull the rod or try to dislodge it. I didn't even dare breathe.





It had dived deep—or at least that’s what the rod angle suggested. The line trailed at about 70 degrees behind the boat. I was convinced it was a tuna—the kind that starts fighting back the moment you do. Time stood still.

Very carefully, I pulled the rod toward me and freed it from its resting place. I grabbed the handle. I didn’t want to crank it, but it wouldn’t come back on its own. I knew I was in high gear, but I’d struggle through it for a bit, just to reel some of the line in. I turned the handle slightly—just half a rotation—and the beast took off again.

Damn, I was out of line. I was gripping the reel with both hands, nearly ready to cry. Then it stopped. If I get this thing in, I’m gonna smash its skull.

There was no time to mess with the high gear. I pressed the button and switched to the better second speed. I wedged the rod between my legs—yes, the jewels are okay—and started cranking. Five meters reeled in. I kept going. Ten meters. The color started coming back to my face—purely from the effort.



I reeled in about 30 meters, the rod was nearly horizontal and ready to go somewhere the sun doesn't shine... then it ran again, peeling off about 15–20 meters—but this time, in bursts.

Ah, this might not be a tuna—they rarely behave like that.

I dropped to first gear and cranked. It was coming in more calmly now, without much pull. This isn't a tuna.

It veered right, and my brother had to turn the wheel to keep the line straight in front of me. The beast surged again, pulling off maybe 10 meters, then stopped.

Whatever you are—you're coming in, and I'll deal with you.

I kept staring at the bottom of the spool, still clearly visible under the line. It's like seeing your own guts.

Second gear, slow cranking, no jerking the rod—just like cranking up a well bucket. I reeled in about 100 meters, pushed the lever back to a spot between full and strike, and took a breather.

It was clear—we were in for a serious fight, and we had to conserve strength, while slowly exhausting the creature. I gripped the rod with both hands, hanging onto it while the beast pulled steadily. Then it started drifting right again.

What the hell are you, fish?





I had reeled in enough line to feel a little more relaxed. That first run was serious, and I was worried it might bolt again. I nudged the lever back to strike position and methodically reeled in another 60 meters, slowly turning the handle in second gear.

I figured I had recovered enough line to give it a little test—see if it still had any fight left. I grabbed the upper part of the rod's handle with both hands and gave it a sharp pull toward me.

Even though I had over 250 meters of line out, I could clearly feel the beast react—it was pissed. It took off again. Not as fast as the

first run, but it still pulled like a freight train. It stopped after peeling off another 60 meters. I was ready to slam the lever to full drag, and my brother had already cursed at the situation.

It was still pulling—hard. The drag was set to about 15 kilograms, but it didn't seem to care. I felt like someone was yanking me backwards, and I knew I couldn't keep this up forever. I leaned on the support cable, gripped the reel, and started reeling again. I didn't stop until I'd taken back at least half of the line it had run with. At that moment, I knew it couldn't spool us and was getting tired.

I paused for a short break and eased the drag lever back slightly from strike position. No sense in tearing its mouth or snapping a rod—or worse, hurting myself—and losing the fish at the end of the fight.

But the end wasn't near, not even close. The beast, having recovered some strength, bolted again. I barely managed to pull the rod out from between my legs and save myself... I cranked the drag back to strike and stared at the reel.

It was diving again, heading straight into the deep without a single turn. Could it still be a tuna?

Only way to find out was to keep reeling and stay patient. I glanced around—Slovak was snapping pictures like a madman

with three different cameras (which is why I even have photos of all this), my brother was locked onto the line, and our lady crewmember had already brought out the gaffs, pliers, and even my fillet knife.



Then something strange happened. The line began to slow...

slower and slower... then stopped. The rod started to rise. OH MAN, this beast wasn't a tuna after all. It changed direction, veering off to the right. I reeled like a maniac, unable to guide the line with my fingers—just pulling as fast as I could to avoid slack.

A huge belly formed in the line—too much slack in open ocean. I slapped the reel into high gear and kept winding like a lunatic.

The rod was supposed to be soft—much softer than what we needed—but it felt like it was about to launch me off the boat. The beast had rushed toward us on the right but now changed its mind and headed for deeper water. That caught me totally off guard.

In those few seconds, I had retrieved only line—no pressure, just slack coiling up in the center of the spool. I had no idea what I'd do once it got close and I had to start laying it evenly by hand.

The strike was sudden. The fish was still there, which was surprise number two. So maybe it *was* a tuna—but it sure wasn't acting like one.

Worst part? It had taken its break—swimming freely, unpressured—while I'd been frantically reeling. Then it hit again, diving deep and stripping another 100 meters before stopping.

Someone was going to die out here—but it wasn't going to be me. Not without a fight. I braced the rod between my legs, switched

the reel to low gear, and resumed the grind. Please don't run again.

It had been about 30 minutes since the battle began, but it didn't look like it'd end anytime soon. The only upside was that the mess of line I'd retrieved in the middle of the spool had now been played back out and was being spooled evenly again.

"You gonna make it?" my brother asked.

"I think so. But I don't know what *it* has planned."

He was doing everything perfectly, but I guess I looked bad enough for him to worry. I had that rod pinned between my legs, and it wasn't pretty.

The end felt close—again. The reel was nearly full, and somewhere just below the boat lurked something I was ready to spend the night catching with an American reel shoved... well, you get the idea.

"Color!"

Whoa—it was close. The Slovak shouted just like I'd told him to when he saw the fish.

And it must've scared the crap out of the fish—because it turned left and shot upward. I knew that trick by now. I dropped the gear back to high and cranked as fast as I could.

"HOLY SHIT, it's huge."

Even my brother looked impressed—and that meant something. I still couldn't see a thing. I was laying line, balancing like a circus act, and fighting to keep the rod from flipping me overboard.

I stopped reeling, crouched a bit, and scanned the water.

MARLIN.

You could clearly see the huge tail lying sideways in the water. Holy hell... who was going to land this thing?

An hour had passed, and the marlin was now about 20 meters behind the boat. I tried to put more pressure, angled the rod to the side—and the fish dove right under the boat.

Not good.

Before I could even shout, my brother slammed the throttle forward. I immediately eased the drag to near free spool, waited for the boat to pull slightly ahead, then slammed it back to strike.

The plan worked. The marlin dove instead of swimming under us, and while the sudden pull nearly launched me out of the cockpit, at least we avoided disaster.

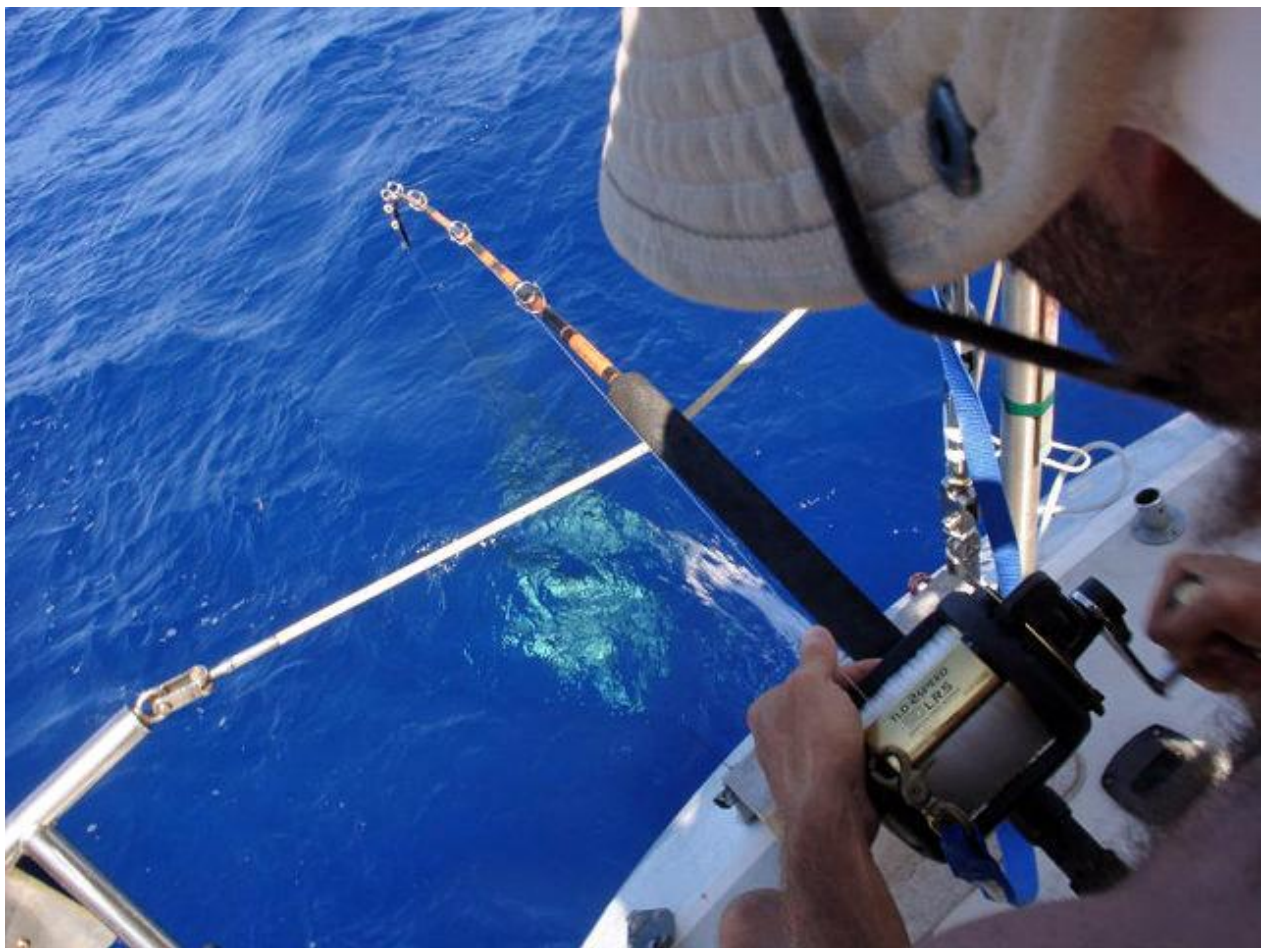
"We're going to fight this one for at least another hour," I warned.

"And I don't want to kill it."

That was my wish—but who cared? I had to say it out loud.

There was no way we were bringing this beast to the boat while it still had strength. No gaffs, no cutting the line. We needed it tired, worn out, calm as a lamb, just floating there while we removed the hooks from its rock-hard jaw.

Who was going to do that, I had no idea. But someone had to.





Forty more minutes passed while the marlin would pull out a few meters here and there—tight drag or not. We played with it just enough to tire it out and prep it for a clean release. It was risky; we didn't know how well the hook was set, where exactly it had latched, or what kind of stress that bill was putting on our heavy leader.

During that whole time, the marlin was circling like a trapped beast. A few times, it darted under the boat or tried to dive. I was yelling like a madman because we couldn't see where it was going unless someone stood at the stern—and my brother had to stay at the helm. At least, that's how I saw it.

My back, shoulders, and wrists were on fire. My thumbs were toast—like a beginner bassist after their first gig—raw from guiding that thick mono. After another twenty minutes, I finally had it at the leader. At that point, there was nothing left to do but wait.

The marlin just hung there, dead weight on the hooks, like a bag of cement—probably trying to turn its head toward the deep. My brother got the idea without me saying a word. He nudged the throttle and we started creeping forward, dragging the marlin behind us.

Its head was about a meter from the rudder blade. I was terrified it might lash out, wrap the leader around the rudder, or worse—dive into the prop and tear everything to hell.

It was exhausted. I could feel that in every part of my sore body (check the photos—you'll see what I mean). There was nothing more I could do until someone grabbed the leader and shook that big head.

The boat didn't need steering at that speed, so my brother jumped in to try the release. He grabbed the leader and gave the marlin a test shake—no loops around his hands, just clean, solid pressure. No reaction. He yanked upward, and the marlin moved with him.

We both knew it was dangerous, but neither of us wanted to kill that fish. He knelt down, pulled in the last section of leader, and grabbed the marlin by the bill.

My hair stood on end.

"You got it?" I yelled.

"Well, what do you think?"

Oh man, this can't be real. He pulled the fish's head above the water while holding its bill tightly. The hooks—bless them—were lodged firmly in the upper part of its mouth, right at the start of the bill. One had pierced through and was sticking out the top, while the other was just lightly snagged. He pulled it in close, unhooked the top one, and grabbed the lower one with two fingers. That's when I nearly soaked some of my already aching body parts.

The marlin slowly started turning its head in the direction of his hand, bringing the now-free hook dangerously close to his wrist. My brother isn't exactly new at this, but this was his first marlin—

and mine too—so I had to jump up and shout something. I can't remember what I said, but he just turned around grinning, still holding onto the marlin's bill.

"Stop yelling, man."

Easy for him to say. How was I supposed to watch all this without being able to crouch and help? I still don't know how he managed to hold the fish's head like that, but somehow, he did. With his left hand, he grabbed the hook and yanked it out in one swift motion. He gathered the two hooks together and tossed them to me. I was so happy I nearly dropped them right on his back—but let's skip that part, it still annoys me.

The marlin was free, the hooks were out, and no one had gotten hurt—yet. Now it was easy—we just needed to revive it a bit to make sure it would survive. I grabbed the big helm, shifted into forward gear, and waited to see what the long-nose would do.

It seemed to enjoy it—just lying there, exhausted, while my brother held its bill and tried to dip its head as deep into the water as possible. The next ten minutes were all about pictures, admiring the marlin, and smoking a well-deserved cigarette.

My brother was completely wiped out, lying on his stomach while gripping the rough bill of the fish, which, in return, did him a favor—kicked with its tail, and he let go. Slowly and majestically,

the marlin swam off into the deep, its rhythmic tail beats clearly visible in the crystal-clear water. I pushed the throttle forward, lit a smoke, and basked in the glory of the most incredible fish we had ever caught.





















If you noticed in the pictures, my brother is wearing different sunglasses than mine—but only in those particular shots. That’s what he grabbed in the heat of the moment. The spares were right where we’d left them, and he was the first to snatch them—he even had to go hunting for gloves. We had a helmet too (and no, it’s not funny), but he refused to wear it, claiming his head was thick enough. You can clearly see the helmet hanging from a wire to the right of the fuel drum—black in color. If I were the captain instead of him, and someone had to lie face down next to a live marlin in

the middle of the ocean, they'd be wearing a helmet. Even if word got around that I was crazy.

There used to be this photo of two anglers hauling a catfish into a boat—the guy in front gazing lovingly at it, while the one in back was cranking hard with a bent rod and the line passing just a meter above the first guy's head. The catfish was at the surface; all it would take was a lost hook and two screams—but at least someone would be around to pull the hook out of his head. Me? I don't want to be pulling hooks out of my brother's head.

In some of the photos, it looks like the rod was abandoned—the drag almost set to free-spool—while the fish still had the hooks in, and my brother held the leader. That wasn't a mistake; it was a small safety precaution in case the marlin decided to bolt.

This might sound funny, but it was a strict rule on board if I was nearby and the captain was listening to me. Every time someone picked up a gaff or a knife, or even swapped out a lure, it was announced out loud so everyone knew something sharp was in the cockpit and to watch where they sat or stepped. We taught them how to pass a gaff, how to hand over a knife, and everyone was expected to sit down somewhere safe until the person using the sharp item had it secured and out of the way. If you look at the photos closely, after we unhooked the marlin, we hung the hooks behind the wire stay—far away from any future action.

Yes, it's long, and maybe a bit hard to follow for some. Maybe it even sounds silly. But I'm not a doctor, and nobody was in a hurry to make me prove that.

So, back to the story. The marlin swam off happy, we were laughing like lunatics, and the lady on board just stared, wide-eyed.

We still had some meat left from the tuna that was good enough to eat, the wind was dying down, and the weather was becoming perfect for fishing.

I had no intention of switching out the lure that caught the marlin, but we needed more lines in the water.

I put the big one back out at around 100–120 meters behind the boat. Then a second line went out at around 65 meters, with a green and pink 30 cm silicone skirt. A green/black one of the same size went about 10 meters back, and then the Dodo Killer—black/purple/pink/gray—was dropped 25–30 meters behind the stern.

I've already explained the idea: one lure splashes to attract fish from the deep; two more, with different sizes and colors, trail slightly behind; and the big gun goes way back—far enough that the skirt hops along the surface but the thick line doesn't drag too much in the water.

We raised the big genoa and the full main. The wind was light, so we ran the motor along with the sails. The large skirts needed at least 15 km/h of speed to perform well, so the engine also helped charge the batteries after four nights of pure sailing.

I started explaining why we used these colors, how the lures were spaced, their sizes, the drag settings we used... and the Slovak listened with interest.

Not even two hours had passed when one of the reels started screaming. I turned just in time to see the second rod bend and its reel start peeling line. I looked toward where the skirts should've been—and saw something skipping across the water. Hits on the second and third rods, just as expected.

It was my brother's and the Slovak's turn to fish—I was sore everywhere, especially... well, from gripping the rod. I hadn't brought a fighting belt and was now painfully aware of how big a mistake that was.

I eased off the throttle, turned around, and pulled in the closest rod while the captain and Slovak got busy hauling in lunch.

We'd hooked the toughest fighters in their class—dorado.

Dorado are known for putting up a hell of a fight, making amazing jumps after they bite—and often attacking with a leap out of the water.

The lady brought out the gaff. I locked the helm, and the boat cruised on almost a straight course. I grabbed the gaff and waited for them to bring in the first catch. The rope and dehooking pliers were ready, as was a bucket (an incredibly important tool!) for blood and guts.

There was no mercy—we'd kill and eat.

The first fish came close, darting hard left and right, leaping from the water, and shaking its head like a bulldog latched onto a slipper.



I slammed the gaff into its head, gave a sharp yank, and pulled it almost completely out of the water. The fish clearly didn't like that—it started thrashing and kicking like crazy, blood flying everywhere. My hands were shaking from the tension, but I was starving, and this fish was going straight on the rope.



The dorado has stunning colors when it's alive—once it starts to

die, it turns a grayish-blue, a far cry from its usual vibrant yellow. It wasn't hard to tell when it was ready to be brought aboard, and I had no intention of flinging it onto the deck at the feet of our two anglers with a gaff still stuck in it. We waited about two minutes, then my brother ran a rope through its gills, tied the other end to the rail, and tossed it back in the water to trail behind the boat until it was time to fillet.

The Slovak was still fighting his fish, pulling it in and shouting with excitement, his drag set to about half. I asked if he remembered what to do when it got close—how to bring it to the gaff, how to lower the rod, adjust the drag... He said he remembered.

He brought it in, lowered the rod, and lined it up perfectly for my brother, who nailed it with a textbook gaff shot right under the gills. I was the paparazzi with the camera.









We waited for it to die. All that blood, the dorado trailing behind us, and the splashing of the other one had me nervous—could attract a shark or two for lunch.

The Slovak pulled out the grill—bought for \$22 from some store—slammed it right in the cockpit, my brother subdued the dorado at the stern, and I grabbed the knife. After about an hour, we had enough fillets for lunch, dinner, breakfast—and even enough to host guests.







We ate like kings—tomato salad, various sauces, grilled dorado and potatoes in foil with butter, lemon wedges, toasted bread on the grill, and some onions. MAN, what happiness.

Everything inside was wet, the humidity was unbelievable—and that's dangerous at sea. I took the helm while the rest of the pirate crew bailed out the water that had pooled inside, wiped everything down, and washed what they could with fresh water. The boat started to look like a refugee camp after we hung all the rubber gear, mattresses, sleeping bags, clothes, shoes, and boots out to dry.

It was a day to remember, and I found it hard to sleep—so I decided to steer for a few more hours. The pirates went to bed with full bellies in the now-dry boat and listened for submarines. I smoked a cigarette and sipped my coffee—SOMETIMES LIFE IS GOOD.



I steered for about 4–5 hours while the others listened for submarines. The weather was sunny and warm, the ocean looked like a lake, and there was hardly any wind. We cruised along with the little motor for hours, recharged the batteries, the water desalination system worked perfectly, and we refilled all the bottles we had on board.

I woke the sleeping beauties shortly before the regular radio check-in at 5 p.m. There were about 20 boats near us—some were

600 kilometers ahead, others had just left Hawaii. Most had already entered the high-pressure zone where there's no wind and were motoring. One guy had run over a fishing net floating freely in the ocean and was having issues with steering and the net tangled around his propeller. Another, with a trembling voice, described how a giant cruise ship nearly ran him over and how he had to fire off some distress flares. A third boat passed within 10 meters of a large whale and narrowly avoided a collision... All kinds of fun stories like that.

A clear voice called out to one of the boats:

“Hey man, I’m about 300 meters behind you and catching up. Can you slow down a bit so we can do a crew swimming competition?”

Silence.

“Where exactly are you?”

“About 300 meters behind you.”

“I’m gonna kick their asses.”

Roaring laughter over the radio. Not even three minutes later, it started again:

“Kicked their asses. My crew’s sitting around playing cards in the cockpit, totally zoned out, and I thought I had a decent team that

was keeping watch. As punishment, they're all going swimming. We're waiting for you."

My brother grabbed the radio and gave our coordinates, temperature, wind speed and direction, wave height, and a fishing report.

SILENCE for about five seconds.

"Repeat that—I didn't catch it. You caught *what?*"

"One marlin, a few dorado, and a tuna."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all. We've got pictures too. My brother is crazy about fishing, and we've been reeling them in like maniacs."

For the rest of the trip, we kept catching and releasing at that pace, while the others were hooking a fish maybe once every two or three days. We ended up explaining in great detail how to catch fish and what techniques worked. We gained a reputation as the "fishing sailboat" with plenty of ideas on how to reel in the big ones.

The night was calm and clear. Early in the morning, some squalls hit us with strong wind and heavy rain, but nothing serious.

For two days, we cruised along, caught dorado, stuffed ourselves, and swam. It was like a full-blown resort.

On the third day, things got interesting. It turned out we were east of all the other boats. We had caught a bit of wind and saved a lot of fuel, unlike some of the others who had been motoring non-stop for the past few days. A forecast came in for steady winds of about 50 kilometers per hour. We wouldn't have much time left for fishing, so we had to make the most of the good weather.

The ocean remained flat as a pan, almost no wind, but we were cruising at a steady 10 kilometers per hour. We were trolling a large silicone skirt way behind the boat, hoping to land something bigger than the feisty dorados. The water was full of flying fish gliding across the surface every time we approached. I'd never seen so many or watched them glide so far—some flew for 100 to 150 meters just above the surface. Dorado would leap out of the water chasing them, creating big ripples across the smooth surface.

We were catching at least one or two dorado every hour, despite trolling oversized lures meant to avoid them.

Dorado double their weight in a year and have feeding frenzies where they'll bite almost anything—regardless of color, size, speed, or distance from the boat. Or at least that's the theory. In practice, they were going crazy for one specific lure: a pink/purple/gray

silicone skirt with a small blue/white one tucked inside. It was a custom modification, and it caused us quite a bit of trouble trying to explain over the radio what it actually looked like.

That was the champion lure. They hit it regardless of position—close to the boat? Fine. Paired with another one in almost the same color and size? Still only bites on the champ. Way behind the boat? Fine. Slow trolling? Perfect. It worked like it was made to order—if we wanted fish for dinner, all we had to do was toss it in the water and wait an hour or two. The bite was guaranteed.

The dorado were attacking the lure from all directions.

Sometimes, you could see them leaping through the air, passing by other silicone skirts, plugs, and lures without even glancing at them. The water was so clear that we could spot dorado jumping about 60 meters off the side of the boat, charging straight at the lure. They'd dive deep, then attack the skirt, biting down and launching completely out of the water from their own momentum.

It was an incredible sight—especially when we reeled the lure close to the boat. As a dorado approached, we'd yank the rod sharply, and in most cases, it would miss the target, make a gorgeous turn, and charge again.

In many cases, we could see dorado freely swimming behind the one that had taken the bait. Since they're schooling fish, once you

catch the first one, the others follow. I regretted not bringing my lighter rods, the ones I could've used to catch them with crocodile spoons, spinners, little silicone lures... but even the heavier gear got the job done just fine.

We caught a lot—and released most of them. We always had enough dorado fillets, and it was just plain fun to mess with them.





We received a forecast for slightly rougher weather—winds up to about 50 kilometers per hour, some waves, and a few hurricanes forming to the east of our position. They were far off, but they already had names, which is never a good sign. Storms only get

named when they're serious and memorable, and that meant we needed to steer clear.

The weather was still fine. The boat was running smoothly, we had cleaned and washed her as best we could, dried everything, and even did some laundry.

We decided to head north to catch the wind and ride it back toward the coast once it picked up. The crew was split into two shifts—me and the lady, and then the captain and the Slovak. I was hoping the girl could handle the helm in rough weather and that the Slovak would adapt quickly so we wouldn't have to stay on deck around the clock. Only one of those wishes came true.

We left the woman at the helm and went to sleep. Until then, there had been no democracy on board—no one complained, no decisions were challenged, and there were no unnecessary questions. Everyone understood that if things went south with the weather or if the boat had problems, my brother and I would be at the helm while the others were just dead weight.

At 3 a.m., I woke up to commotion—lines flailing, blocks rattling across the deck, winches groaning. I jumped up and almost collided with my brother in the dark. The Slovak was stirring and looking for his foul-weather gear. A steady wind was blowing—but that was a relief. At last, we'd get a break from the engine noise.

We quickly suited up in our storm gear, got outside, and things escalated fast.

The wind brought waves—much bigger than expected. The lady had decided the weather wasn't going to get worse and let us sleep. Great judgment. To snap us awake, we had to reef the mainsail all the way and hoist the storm jib up front. Damn sleeper. I still don't get how she made that call on her own.

Dawn was breaking. The sky was completely overcast. Winds were at about 30 km/h, and the waves were between 4 and 5 meters. My brother had already been steering for three hours while the rest of us drank coffee and discussed what we'd do when the real storm hit.

It hit at 7 a.m.—winds over 50 km/h, waves over 8 meters with breaking crests, and a secondary swell 2–3 meters tall, perpendicular to the main wind-driven waves. My turn at the helm.

It was ugly. The cockpit was flooded, waves crashing over every 2–3 minutes, the boat rocking hard from the cross-swell while we surfed the wind swell, occasionally reaching speeds of 30 km/h.

At 8 a.m., we turned on the radio for the daily report. As expected, we were at the far rear of the weather system, furthest east of all the boats, with the strongest wind and the best position to ride it

out. Many of the boats were still trying to reach the windy latitude, hoping to catch the weather. Others were still getting slammed by swell without wind and trying to figure out what was going on.

I was happily steering, working the helm like crazy to dodge breaking waves, surfing down crests... when my brother came out holding a piece of paper.

"Can everyone hear me?"

(God, I hate when he starts with that.)

"The strongest hit is approaching. We can't outrun it, but it's heading in a good direction for us." *(So far, so good, but...)*

"However, we've got a little hurricane headed our way, and it'll smack us in about 36 hours if we keep this speed and course. The hurricane is called Amanda, and she's packing 80+ knots of wind—around 130 kilometers per hour—with waves up to 16 meters. Time for brown underwear."

Now, I already knew about the brown underwear thing, but the two American oddballs didn't. So I told them the joke. Here it is:

A bloodthirsty pirate ship is sailing through the sea. Drunken pirates, thirsty for blood, slurp down rum and scan the horizon for loot.

"Ship on the horizon!" the lookout yells from the top of the mast.

"Cabin boy, bring me my red shirt!" the captain shouts.

They toss it to him, they board the enemy, kill everyone, grab the treasure, and happily go back to drinking rum. The cabin boy sneaks up to the captain and asks:

"Captain, why do you always ask for the red shirt before a fight?"

"Simple," says the captain. "If I get wounded and start bleeding, the crew won't see it if I'm wearing red. That way, they don't panic."

"Ships on the horizon!" the lookout screams again. "English! At least six of them, closing in fast!"

The captain looks around nervously and shouts:

"Cabin boy, bring me my brown pants!"

So I told them the joke quickly, hoping they'd understand what we were in for if we ran into the forest ranger's cigarette butt (*that's another joke, but enough with jokes already*). They looked back and forth between me and my brother with blank faces. I was staring blankly too. And my brother? He was grinning.

What the hell is he grinning about?!

"Will we be in trouble if we run into Amanda?"

She finally woke up and started asking stupid questions.

"Well, yes. Generally, a wave that's 30% of the boat's length with a breaking crest is enough to flip it if we mess something up. Right now, the waves are a bit bigger than that. And the ones coming with Amanda are almost as tall as the mast."

Like monkeys at a car race, both of them immediately turned their heads to look at how tall our mast was. I didn't even want to look. I already had enough trouble keeping the boat on course and riding the crests—I didn't want to think about anything else. My brother was in the same boat, figuratively and literally. He knew that with those two blockheads, we weren't going to get very far, and we couldn't helm the boat 24/7 through serious weather without rest. Three or four days we could handle. Maybe we could survive a day—or at most 24 hours—of dancing with Amanda, but not a minute more, and only if nothing broke.

Without saying a word, he ducked back inside to play with his gadgets, hoping to come up with a way out without shitting our pants.

"What are we going to do?"

The Slovak was back with more questions.

"You got your brown underwear with you?"

He stared at me, unsure whether I was joking. But I wasn't.

Whatever's meant to happen, will happen.

The captain came out of the cabin, looking deep in thought—not that it was surprising. He said he had an idea, but it would require us to go around the back side of the storm. Not a bad option, and definitely better than dancing with Amanda.

The other boats had the same information, and some of them asked if we were aware of what we'd face if it caught us. How could we be aware? We'd never been hit by something named after the Hawaiian meteorologist's grandma—or whoever spotted it first.

It took half an hour of explanation to help them understand how to turn on the crest of a wave without snapping the mast or getting stuck sideways with no speed. They were wide-eyed but intent on surviving, so they listened carefully and repeated what each person had to do.

And we did it—we picked up speed between two waves, just before the next one could catch us, I spun the wheel, the sails flapped loudly, and we leapt over it. We ran north with the wind and the waves at a speed of 300 beaten souls... soaked and hungry, but at least moving in the right direction.

The waves were rising, the wind intensifying, and the crests approached with the roar of a freight train. All around the boat, we could see huge patches of foam left from the breaking waves. The sun was shining, but I wasn't in the mood to admire the beautiful view. After checking the ropes, mast, course, and securing the boat

in case of a capsized, my brother and the Slovak tucked themselves inside to rest before the blow that was coming if our plan didn't work.

I was out at the helm, strapped to the boat, almost hanging off the backstay from the rocking. The girl had made sandwiches, some coffee, and had laid out bottles of drinks. We were going to live outside for at least two or three days. She couldn't steer, couldn't tighten ropes, and couldn't handle navigation. She had strapped herself to one of the seats with safety harnesses and was sleeping like she was at home in front of the TV.

This girl was either crazy or had no clue what was coming for us.

By late afternoon, I could no longer feel my shoulders, knees, or wrists. My neck was stiff from constantly turning to watch every wave and figure out how to ride it. I had salt in places I don't want to talk about, and my eyes were tearing from the wind and sun.

I had tried a few times to steer while sitting, but it was impossible to turn the wheel fast enough, and after flooding the cockpit a couple of times, I gave up on those experiments. I wasn't going to last much longer on my nearly iron leg, and I really didn't want to wake my brother.

The wind had picked up to over 45 knots, the waves were over 8 meters, and our speed ranged from the usual 15 km/h to over 30

km/h when I had to surf the waves. It was clear we were right in the most "optimal" part of the current weather system, and there wasn't much room to escape.

"Optimal" only in the sense that the boat was capable of handling even higher speeds, but that would require an experienced crew and some serious pushing—and the risk of breaking something was much higher. And yeah, I really love that kind of thing.

My brother popped his head out, grinning from ear to ear. Just seeing that smug smile, I knew he was about to hit me with some bad news.

"Got any coffee? Man, look at you all stiff up there. How's the weather?"

"What kind of coffee do you think I'll give you right now, huh? Just tell me where we are before I snap."

Apparently, Amanda had veered slightly back toward Hawaii, and we were moving in the opposite direction. So we *might* miss it. The second he said "might" in the same sentence, I saw red. But hey—he's the navigator, the captain, the guy giving orders. I'm just the urinating autopilot, coffee drinker (when there is any), and cigarette smoker—if the waves weren't soaking everything.

"Oh, and I forgot to mention—Amanda isn't alone. She's got company. Two more hurricanes are trailing just behind her, but we're *okay*."

"And when I was in Honduras, we nearly got hit by one... and in Florida, we missed another one by a hair. I'm just a hurricane magnet."

Clearly, the girl didn't know when to shut up. She must be crazy—and she's jinxed. We might have to consider her a sea tax.

My brother read all that in my eyes, chuckled, and disappeared inside to get dressed. You really can go crazy stuck with lunatics in the middle of the ocean.

The weather had calmed down—if you could call it that. The wind and waves had become steady, and we'd gotten used to the mess. The captain took the helm and started steering us down the waves, while the Pole/Slovak sidled up next to him, and the lady went below to catch some more sleep.

For the next 3–4 hours, we taught the American how to steer—how to ride the waves without flipping us over and how to keep the boat on a steady course. He picked it up quickly, but he needed someone close by to correct him if he messed something up. There was hope that he could become another person we could rely on at

the wheel—or at least someone who could circle back if one of us fell overboard.

The evening passed without incident. The boat was soaked, the cockpit was being flooded every 2–3 minutes, the cabin lights were full of water, and there was a 10-centimeter puddle on the cabin floor. Nothing broke, and there were no signs of damage. I slept for two hours, still wearing my boots and jacket.

The morning forecast was good—Amanda was gone, the other two hurricanes were trailing her but heading in the opposite direction, and we had three boats within about 50 kilometers of us. We kept heading north throughout the day.

I took the helm while my brother slept, and I continued teaching the Pole how to handle the wheel firmly. We took a few photos with some small waterproof cameras, but the worst of the storm had passed, and the pictures didn't really capture what I'm writing about.

The day went by with lots of steering, eating instant noodle soups, and chewing on dry sausage. We were heading into what was forecasted to be the last night with that kind of wind—at least according to the satellite images, reports from nearby boats, the info from our contact in Hawaii, and all the other gadgets we had on board.

At 8 PM, things started to get interesting.



















It was around 8 PM, the storm was dying down, everything was soaked, and we were hungry and sleep-deprived. I was at the helm, the lady was dozing in the cockpit, and my brother and the Pole/Slovak were sleeping inside.

I knew what was coming, but I hadn't imagined it would be this nasty. I knew the storm would end with one final blast, but I had no idea it would hit that hard. I was sleepy, dreaming of warm food and a bed that wasn't being drenched in salt water—at least if it were fresh water, it wouldn't have been so bad. Lost in these

thoughts, I happened to glance over my shoulder one more time to check what was going on behind us.

What I saw wasn't pretty—no, not even close—but since I've started telling this story, I have to see it through. The entire sky behind us was BLACK. The clouds were shaped like a horseshoe and came with heavy rain. We had caught the best wind to run with, but now the wind was gearing up for its final act.

The waves were still too serious for our little boat, and there was no way I could let the lady steer, nor was there any point in pulling her out of her thoughts. I wondered what she might be thinking about.

BOOM—like something fell on my head.

The girl jumped, I jumped, and from below came the unmistakable sound of a skull smacking the cabin ceiling. I hunched down like a turtle and didn't dare move my head. The female crew member looked at me with pancake-wide eyes, clutching onto some rope for dear life. Five seconds later, my brother had popped open the hatch.

"Where did it hit?"

"Uhh..."

Yeah... I couldn't even say my own name.

With a loud slam, my brother shut the cabin hatch, switched on some flashlight down below, and started getting ready for the next hit.

BOOM. CRACK. What the hell was that?! I've been chased by storms in Bulgaria, had lightning strike within half a kilometer of the boat, taken beatings from the weather—but this was somehow louder. Fear makes your ears ring.

The hatch opened again and my brother jumped into the cockpit, turned around, and slammed it shut once more. I stared, wondering when the Slovak was going to show up.

"Tied in?"

"Tied."

"The other one's staying below. I checked the yacht's grounding—it all looks OK."

Great. So I'm tied into the cockpit, steering, waiting for lightning to strike us. My brother's helping, the lady's just hanging out, and the Pole/Slovak is playing tourist?

"Bro, wouldn't it be better if you went inside, so at least one of us is mobile if we get hit?"

(I really ask some dumb questions sometimes.)

"I'm staying here. Drive if you can—if not, I'll take over."

"But bro..."

"Just drive."

So I drove, lit up like a Christmas tree, flying down the waves like the storm itself was chasing me.

CRAAAACK.

Now *that* one hit really close. I looked at my brother—he just adjusted the brim of his hood. He knew there was nothing we could do. I knew it too. We were way too close to run from all those lightning bolts hitting just behind us. He didn't want to go inside, and I wasn't going in either—not until this show was over. I really wanted to argue with him about his decision, but he was playing captain, and there was nothing to be done. This wasn't the time for a mutiny, and no time for arguing. He was the captain, which means he's always right.

(That also means *I'm* always wrong, but that's another matter.)

It was already dark. The wind picked up to about 40 knots (over 60 kilometers per hour), and the waves had no intention of calming down. We were surfing in the pitch black, just waiting.

And we got what we were waiting for—a powerful gust, a breaking wave crest, and the cockpit filled with water. I was at a steep angle to the wind, the sail started vibrating violently, and I was worried we'd tear it. That's the last thing we needed.

“I need help.”

“Say the word.”

Someone had to watch the wind direction and call out how much I could run with it. Another had to monitor wind speed and our own speed. I’d listen for oncoming breakers and steer.

There was no room for error, but I also couldn’t lift my head to see where the wind was coming from, how it was shifting, how strong it was—all while steering. There was a nasty risk of losing control of the boat, getting broadside to a wave and capsizing, or tearing a sail or breaking the mast if we got planing and turned hard into a gust with flapping sails. Up to 35 knots we could manage, but the gusts were trouble—and the waves were heard before they were seen, only visible when they slapped our stern.

CRAAACK.

Oh right—those damn thunderclaps.

“Let it go, let it go, let it go!”

“32, 35, 38... 12, 14, 16...”

I was riding the waves, just as my brother had advised, while the lady called out the wind speed and our own speed. Everything around us was **green**—breaking waves with phosphorescent crests chasing us every five seconds. We were surfing down them,

the cockpit full of water, the mast creaking, lines whistling...

idyllic. The lady was calling out stats like my secretary, and the faster we went, the higher and thinner her voice got from excitement. She's nuts.

I must've regretted a hundred times that I didn't have a camera that could capture any of this. It could've been the basis of a great handbook on *how not to do things in the ocean*.

For three hours we slid along with the waves, lightning crashing all around, everything glowing green, and the sound like racing locomotives. After those three hours of torture, the sky started to clear up, the wave crests smoothed out, the wind died down—and then the rain started. How the hell it started raining from a sky that looked clear to me, I still don't understand. It poured like mad, and we were barely moving under the tiny amount of sail we had left. The beating was over, and now it was bath time.

I dragged my wet ass into the cabin, and my brother and the Slovak took over the night watch.

I woke up at 5 a.m.—no wind at all, the Slovak was smoking a cigarette, and my brother had gone to bed. I dropped the forward sail, fired up the little motor, and with a hot cup of coffee, pointed us toward shore.

That's a bit of an exaggeration—wherever I turned, it was all *shore*, technically, but the closest one was still about 2,000 kilometers away.

A beautiful morning. Calm sea, dawn breaking, the boat washed clean by the rain, and everything looked like it would be a perfect day.

Yeah... right.

“We have a problem.”

Now what again? I was just about to go to bed and let the girl get some sleep.

“The captain's in really bad shape.”

??????

“He just woke up and says his ear hurts like hell, he can't move, feels dizzy, nauseous, is clenching his teeth, and can barely see.”

The sentence wasn't even finished and I had already jumped inside. The sight wasn't something I can easily describe—honestly, it would've been better if one or even two people had broken a leg or an arm. My brother (we're twins) could barely keep his eyes open, looked like Sylvester Stallone, pale as a ghost, with the right

side of his face swollen. He was breathing in gasps, his eyes darting around like he'd been stepped on.

“Bro, it hurts bad. I can’t hear from the right ear.”

I felt like crying—and you can imagine what I must’ve felt like right then.

“We’ll fix it, don’t worry.”

I lied through my teeth, but there really wasn’t much we could do. The nearest hospital was about 10 days away, and everyone knows what a serious ear infection can turn into. Arms, legs, ribs, skulls, fingers, bones... those are minor. But an ear? I had no clue how to deal with that. I knew a few things, just enough to realize how serious this was.

“Briefing, goddammit—everyone to the cockpit.”

What, they didn’t understand Bulgarian? Oh, they understood me just fine.

“I need a lighter, some gauze, melted wax, and a clean towel.”

That part they *didn’t* get, so I had to translate it for them. And what about that Slovak guy who brought an English-Bulgarian dictionary—why hadn’t he learned the language yet?

The girl turned to start gathering the stuff—who told her she could leave? The briefing was just getting started.

It was a very short briefing—the girl was now the nurse and would take care of my brother. That meant no more steering the boat, making us coffee, or napping in the cockpit. The Slovak was tasked with a full inventory of our medical supplies and had to start reading the marine almanac on how to deal with this problem. He also had to keep a record of everything: what we were doing, what meds we gave, the patient’s condition, the symptoms—everything.

I got to play the role of Doctor Ouchie. I love those roles—don’t know shit, but I have to play the part anyway.

I grabbed the best flashlight I could find, peeled off my rubber pants, and squeezed myself inside. The boat was fine on its own; there was nothing to crash into.

“Let me take a look, bro.”

He turned his head, and I nearly puked. His ear was so swollen it looked like it had been crushed. His eye was half-shut, and he could barely move his jaw. There was nothing to examine—it was completely sealed shut from the inflammation.

I didn’t say anything, and neither did he. There was nothing to talk about. I stepped outside, and the tears started flowing.

I hadn't cried in three years—the last time was when some incompetent doctor casually mentioned they might have to cut off my leg to give me a chance to survive. Even then, I just gritted my teeth and planned my counterattack with my brother's help. But that was different. This time, it wasn't me—it was my twin.

“Was I reading?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“What?”

“I'm reading. I just need three more minutes. Do I have time?”

Oh, so he *could* read when he wanted to. Yeah, but not on this boat. Not when we're neck-deep in trouble.

The Slovak came out holding the almanac, and the girl blinked behind him, waiting for instructions.

“There's not much we can do,” he said (yeah, I knew that), “they recommend warm compresses on the ear and a good diet. No baths or any kind of intervention.”

WONDERFUL. COMPRESSES???

“Anything else?”

“This is just what can be done non-invasively. The medications are listed on another page.”

“Okay, you read the left column, and she reads the right one. Then you switch pages so both of you know what needs to be done. It’ll go faster that way.”

Man, how I wished I could read medical terms in that weird language. The two of them cozied up and got to reading.

“Captain,” she said, “they recommend antibiotics, every four hours after meals, top-grade stuff. He should be okay in about four days.”

And just like that—no mutiny or anything—I was suddenly the captain. The original was laid out below, and they’d clearly figured out who had to take charge.

I explained why we *couldn’t* use antibiotics. It was pretty simple—I’m allergic to them. Before one of my surgeries, they tested 22 different kinds on me, and I had a reaction to 17 of them. That’s the cherry on top. The last thing we needed was to give him something he might be intolerant to.

The good news was that we had all kinds of meds on the boat. The medical bag was the size of a small fridge.

A wet towel, the kettle on the stove filled with water and wrapped in the towel, a sturdy bottle with a tight cap, and high hopes.

That’s all we could manage. I explained to my brother what the

almanac recommended, what we were doing, and what we had available.

“Compresses, bro. Compresses.”

Yeah, I already knew that, but it was up to him to decide. As much as he was in pain, he didn’t want to risk any medication that could potentially create a more serious issue. As serious as this already was, there might be something *even worse*—MAYBE.

A bottle wrapped in a terry towel and filled with boiling water, a towel steamed over the kettle, and a cup of hot chocolate. That was our plan for the day.

It was getting close to the daily radio check-in. The girl, with her charming voice, explained the situation and asked for advice.

“Good luck” was the best we got in response.

I was steering like a madman (who knows where I thought I was going?), the girl played the role of a mother hen, and the Slovak reread the almanac for the umpteenth time to figure out what else we could do. That guy would make an excellent doctor in a crisis—I’m pretty sure he could rewrite the entire almanac.

And that’s how two days and two nights passed. I drove, slept, ate, and did a few other things up top in the cockpit, while the two foreigners took shifts below, switching out towels and compresses.

The situation wasn't improving at all—my brother was still swollen, hadn't slept in two days, had barely eaten anything, and was writhing in pain.

“Captain, if you keep this up, you're gonna run out of cigarettes.”

The Slovak was now concerned about me too. We had around 60 packs of cigarettes for the whole trip, which under normal circumstances would've been more than enough. The circumstances, HOWEVER, were far from normal.

“Well, then you stop smoking.”

He looked at me, nodded, and went back below deck. We were running low on cigarettes, but we had enough food to feed a whole battalion. Not that anyone wanted to hear about cooking, eating, or resting.

“Your brother's calling you.”

I jumped up, abandoned the helm, and rushed below deck.

“Give me the antibiotics.”

There was no need to explain anything—he already knew, and the decision was his. There was no way to refuse something like that. Before I could turn around, the Slovak was already ready with the pills, and the girl had a cup of hot chocolate in hand.

“This is the best we can hope for. If this doesn’t help, there’s nothing else. There are a few others that are also recommended, but this one’s the top choice—I’ve been reading for two days now.”

Man, the Slovak had really done his homework. By the time my brother swallowed the pills, he had already recorded everything in a notebook prepared just for this—what we gave him, how much, at what time...

If we get back alive—healthy, I’m not sure—but at least *alive*, I’m buying that guy a drink.

Has anyone played roulette recently? How about Russian roulette—with three bullets in the chamber instead of one? Yeah, *real* fun.

The sun was shining, fish were jumping, the ocean was deep blue... but who cared. For the next two days, we were taking temperatures, mixing potions, applying compresses, writing in the notebook, and basically playing hospital in the middle of the ocean.

On the third day, some improvement—he was feeling a bit of relief, started hearing slightly from the bad ear, and the swelling had gone down. Good news, right? Yeah, right. The *other* ear started swelling the same way, and the pain was moving from one

to the other. My brother looked like he'd been jumped by an entire Levski football hooligan crew.

We were pumping him full of antibiotics, feeding him warm mush like a baby duck, and crossing fingers—or whatever else we had left to cross.

On the sixth day, while I was at the helm, the hatch opened, and the Chinese guy stuck his head out wearing a sailor cap.

“What’s going on?”

Damn—*he’s* asking *me* what’s going on? Well, thanks, I’m doing just great.

“I can hear. It doesn’t hurt too bad anymore. I can move my jaw a little. Still a bit dizzy, but I’ll be fine.”

Man, I rolled myself a cigarette out of sheer joy. He’s gonna make it.

He looked like a ghost, had lost at least 5 kilos, his clothes hung off him like hand-me-downs, and he couldn’t pull a single rope—but he wanted to steer for a while.

“Are the fish biting?”

What fish? What are you even talking about? I felt more like hijacking a cruise ship and kidnapping the doctor onboard—and he’s asking if the fish are biting.

“I could go for some hot fish.”

Now we’re talking. “Alright, I’ll get you one right now.”

We were about 1,600 kilometers from shore. The water was the same deep blue as around Hawaii. A few dorados were jumping here and there, and flying fish zipped past.

Rods ready, lures in the water, engine throttled up, sails trimmed—we were hunting for dinner at full speed.

There was no point in changing the setup from the previous days. I used the same colors, same lure sizes, and same distances from the boat. No need to repeat myself—I already wrote that all down earlier.

We landed a dorado, hooked another one, but it was too small, so we released it. The grill was fired up before I even finished cleaning and filleting the fish. Potatoes in butter, toasted Arabic flatbread—it was perfect.

The captain was back in the game. He filled up on food, sipped some tea, and started tinkering with his gadgets again. No one had checked our position, speed, fuel usage... I wasn’t even thinking about any of that. I was just keeping an eye on the weather to avoid getting smacked by another squall, and pushing full throttle northeast.

About 30 minutes later, I realized we were slightly behind schedule (of course we were, since I was doing everything solo), but good winds were ahead. Two boats were nearby—about 300 kilometers from us—and the fuel tank needed topping up.

The captain went to bed and finally got some real sleep. The Slovak was snoring too. Our lady crewmember popped up on deck with a smile on her face. I handed over the wheel, finished my meal, and collapsed below to finally get some rest.

I wasn't in the mood for photos, so I don't have many from those moments. Here's how we transferred fuel directly from the barrel into the tank:









The last and only Coke on board.

We had been at sea for about two weeks, and none of us looked like ourselves anymore.

Here I am, early in the morning, sprawled out in full glory with my 62 kilos, waiting for my coffee—which, as usual, was taking its sweet time.



It had been a bit colder over the last few days, and none of us were in the mood for a shower. Our bathing setup consisted of a 25-liter

camping shower, which worked great in warm weather. We'd also bought soap that could be used with salt water, so we didn't reek—but still looked like we'd escaped from somewhere (especially me).

We were approaching a high-pressure zone again—a tricky situation where it really shows who has enough diesel, who's gunning their motor, and who can fix it when things go south. Ours was the size of a lawnmower, and when I revved it up to 2500 RPM, it sounded like a blender having a breakdown. But so far, it hadn't given us any trouble.

Early in the morning, over the radio, we heard that we weren't the only ones stuck—everyone else was motoring too. But unlike most, we had enough diesel to make it to Las Vegas, assuming we found a road to get us there. Most others had already blown through their fuel and were now relying on sail power alone. At least half of them had only 5 to 10 gallons left, while we were still nearly full—95 gallons plus a bit in the tank.

The ocean looked like a lake—no wind, no waves—terrible weather for fishing. I've never trusted fishing in calm water, and there was a good reason for that. We needed a much higher speed than we were doing in order to get the silicone lures bouncing properly, or a nice wave behind the boat to lift them up. Even the infamous flying fish imitations were sitting quietly in the tackle case tucked

under the bed. Being scatterbrained isn't easy—but I had a real talent for it.

My brother's ears were doing better, the crew was rested, the boat was running fine—and it was time to fish. The flying fish had almost disappeared, and the ocean's color was now shifting to blue instead of the amazing violet we'd seen over the previous two weeks. That was enough to make us change our fishing tactics. We couldn't measure the water temperature, and there wasn't much point anyway—morning air temps already told us that with those flashy lures, we weren't going to catch much.

Four rods in the water—the big cannon was about 150 meters behind us, rigged with the marlin-killer. At 65–70 meters, I had a thick, skirted green/black silicone lure with two single hooks and a chain, along with three small black/purple silicone trailers on the leader. This setup worked well at low speeds—the small lures created a clearly visible ripple in front of the large one and kept the whole rig near the surface. Every now and then, the big lure would leap out of the water, leaving a nice trail of bubbles from its drilled-out head. That one carried my highest hopes.

In third position (30 meters back), I ran a purple/pink, blue, and black silicone lure with a small blue/gray teaser inside, a double hook, and a light leader. The head was concave and would

occasionally blow out a large bubble behind the hooks every 15–20 seconds.

Right behind the stern of the boat (10 meters back), a very small feathery black/purple skirt with a double hook and 60-lb leader was fluttering about. I had left the drag on that reel much looser than necessary—I was expecting a hit on the third or close one, hoping that if something slammed into it, it would run right through the loose drag, triggering the others in the spread. The second and third lures had nearly the same colors as the first one, to match the presentation.

The bright Hawaiian colors were gone—no more jumping dorado, no more flying fish attacking my coffee cup. All hopes were pinned on a marlin hitting the long one, or maybe a confused bigeye tuna early in the morning or around sunset. With some luck, maybe an albacore. We were trolling at about 11 km/h, but we really needed to go at least 15. For that, we'd need a big motor and a gas station in the middle of the ocean—neither of which we had. So we were doing our best to bark up a fish with the gear we had.

Exactly as we were trolling, something happened that I had never seen before—nor had I ever heard of it happening to anyone else. About 150 meters to our port side, a tiny ripple appeared. It was so small it looked like it came from a rubber dinghy with a 3-

horsepower motor. I knew what it was, but I had no idea what kind of fish it could be. It was obvious, though—had to be a school of fish.

I jumped up to get a better look. I was scanning the area, but couldn't make out much. The ripple stretched for more than 400 meters, and the school was clearly massive. At the speed we were trolling, it was hard to tell which way they were going, and I didn't want to gun the motor or change course just yet. So far, nothing special, right? Yeah, that's what I thought too. My brother and I had seen big schools like this near the San Diego coast, and the ripple looked just like the ones made by schools of mackerel.

I kept our heading, hoping we'd close the distance at an angle—but two minutes later I realized they were headed straight for us.

There was no avoiding them—either something would bite or I'd spook the whole school. About 50 meters in front of the bow, the water stirred, and the fish dove. I watched, hoping they'd pop up again or at least strike the closest lure—it was the most suitable in size for the ripple I'd seen. I kept glancing around like a paranoid rabbit, but... nothing.

Or so I thought.

There was nothing ahead of us, nothing behind, but no one thought to look *under* the boat. Eventually, it hit me, and I froze—the school was right beneath us, just a meter below the surface.

Thousands—**millions**—of small fish were swimming in perfect formation, moving at the exact speed of the boat, arranged like medicine bottles on a shelf. The water was so clear and calm, it looked like a picture. They were about the size of a small bonito but with a less pointed tail and a blunter head. They were completely unbothered by the sound of the motor.

I just stared at them for about two minutes, and when they didn't bite, I figured I'd mess with them a little. I veered slightly to port—the entire school turned with me. I eased off the throttle—they slowed down. I turned starboard—they followed. These fish weren't as dumb as they looked. I glanced off the starboard side—nothing there. I stepped softly, like a ballerina, and peered into the water—still nothing. Just as I was about to shift back to port, the first fish showed up behind the boat. Ten seconds later, the whole school had shifted to my side.

These fish were *very* curious.

“What are you doing?”

“Just playing.”

“What are you playing at in the middle of the ocean?”

That was my brother—change course even a little, and he notices instantly.

"A whole pack of wild fish is trailing behind us, watching where I go."

"You better not eat whatever it was you had last night again—you've lost it. What kind of fish would follow *you* in the middle of the ocean?"

Well, how should *I* know what kind they were? I'd never seen anything like it. I've had similar things happen with dolphins—they often swim along the side where the crew is, and move if we move—but I'd *never* heard of a dumb school of fish doing the same.

Suddenly, the entire school dove deep. Well, almost the entire school. One fish stayed right under where I was crouched. It hovered there for about 20 seconds, then it too disappeared. I couldn't believe it—but it happened.

The fish were the perfect size for bait, and I was hoping there might be a tuna or maybe even a marlin around. The last lure in the spread was a bit bigger than they were, but the second and third were exactly the right size. I had high hopes for a fresh catch.

I glanced over at the tip of the big rod. It was just sitting there, slightly bent, and the line looked a bit taut. Great—probably some seaweed again. I grabbed the line by hand and started pulling it in.

Now, I have this bad habit: instead of using the reel to retrieve the line, I pull it in by hand like it's rope. It's quicker and easier—but if something actually bites, I'll be left wondering what hit me.

Nothing seemed to have bitten, but the lure was coming in with a bit of a zig-zag. About five seconds later, I realized it wasn't *just* the lure—something was coming with it. Oh crap, what do I do now? If I let go of the line, it might come loose; if I keep pulling, it might freak out and tangle itself in the slack line.

I really wanted to see what had managed to bite that hook and *not* pull any drag. True, I had the drag cranked down pretty tight, like on a gift-shop reel—but still, it should have bent the rod at least a little.

Whatever it was, it was almost up to the third lure in the spread and still squirming around. I stood there staring, trying to figure out what to do next. I started slowly letting out some line again, and the fish moved away. After almost a full minute, the line went slack again.

Okay then... this one's mine.

Now I was sure it was properly hooked and wouldn't escape easily. The hook's barb was about half a centimeter long—there was no pulling free from that. I cleared the other lines, secured their hooks, and grabbed the heavy rod.

The fish was coming in even at the reel's high gear while the boat was moving. Clearly, I had let out *a lot* of line. I wasn't pulling hard—just reeling steadily so I wouldn't spook it—and it was coming in, thrashing all the way.

It had been dragging along for a good 15–20 minutes behind the boat, poor thing—probably since I was still messing around with the curious fish. It turned out to be a small sailfish, or as it's sometimes translated, a "sail fish." It's the smallest member of the marlin family and, as I later learned once we were back on land, it's also a very tasty fish.

I brought it up to the boat and took a good look at its flat body and thin, needle-like nose. A beautiful little creature with a bronze sheen and a small, sharp tail. I didn't want to stress it out or kill it. There was no point in using pliers either—the hook had worked its way out just from all the thrashing and the long drag.

I leaned close to the water, grabbed the hook, and with one sharp twist let it go. The hooks were clearly good, but the greediness of that little thing surprised me. I couldn't imagine how such a small fish had managed to get that big hook embedded in its mouth. The size of the hook was at least five times bigger than what I would normally use for a fish that size. It hadn't even come out vertically through the jaw—it had to be removed almost horizontally. I had

no idea how that fish had opened its mouth wide enough or what kind of desperate silicone obsession it had. Apparently, this was not just a greedy little fish—it was a stubborn one with a serious silicone craving.

That night, I went to bed and left only the big silicone lure out, about 30 meters behind the boat. The idea was to attract a bigeye tuna, which typically bites at sunrise, sunset, or during a full moon. You need heavy tackle, thick hooks, dark colors, and—most importantly—it needs to be trolled very close to the boat. This fish is no joke—it's fast, runs deep, and travels in schools.

I'd told the guys on night watch to wake me up if there was a bite and not to fight it alone. No point in losing someone over a solo fish battle. But of course, I didn't say anything about not circling in place or to be careful with the silicone lure.

Some panic broke out at 3 AM—someone started the engine, gave it gas, and that was it. I got up for watch at 5 AM and the lure was gone. Someone had forgotten that when the wind dies and the boat stops, you have to check where the line is. Well, it had wrapped itself around the prop, and when the engine was started and the transmission engaged, it got sucked into the deep.

The marlin-killer was the first casualty of the trip.

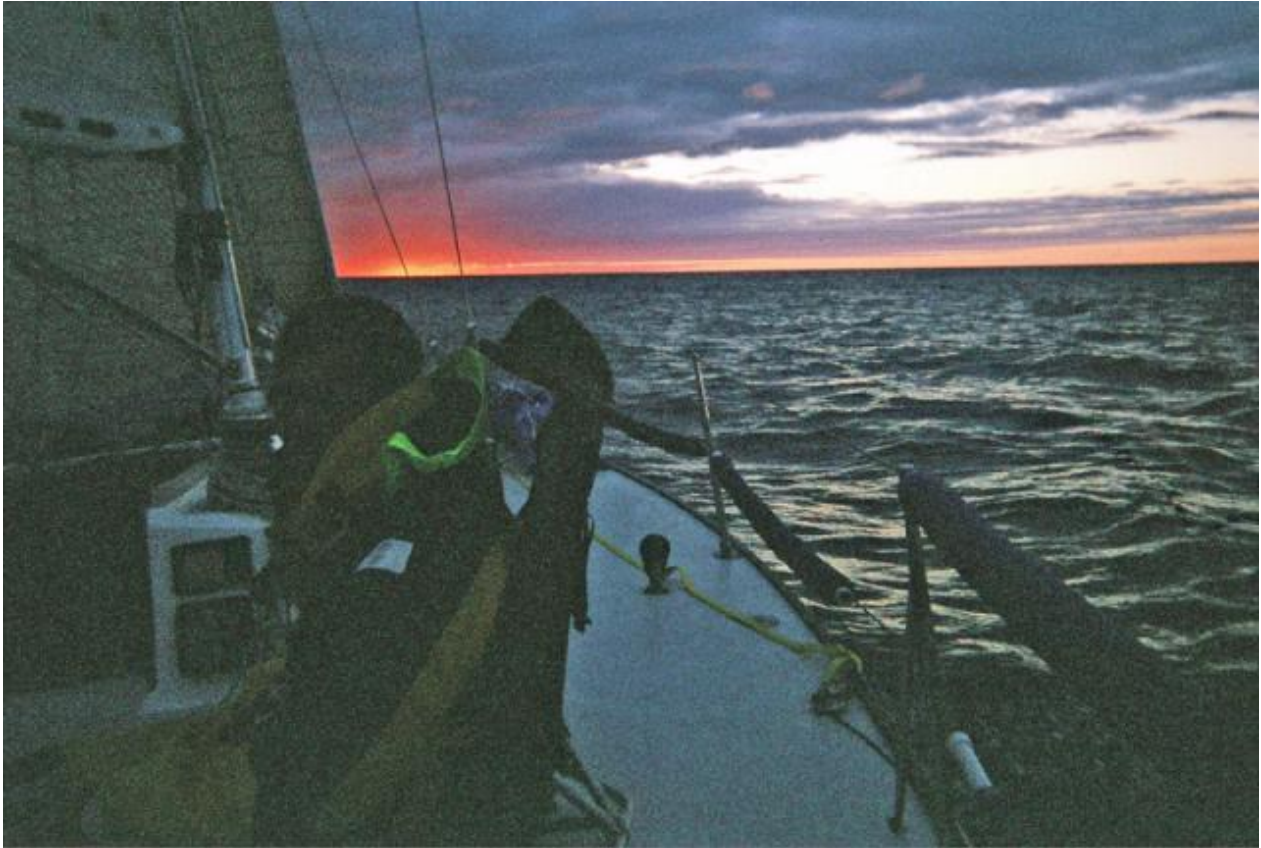
Bad news—we didn't have another one like it, and that lure *worked*. I replaced it with a similar one that had a pointed head—completely unsuited for the flat, calm ocean conditions. This was a serious loss—not about the \$60 lure, the \$12 hooks, the \$2 swivel, or the best leader you could buy in a tackle shop. The real problem was that we had no spare. And that was *not* good.

Two hours into my watch, the same thing happened again—the rod bent slightly and the line tightened, but there was no screaming drag or any real sign of a hooked fish. But this time, I knew the drill. I reeled in the other lines and started winding in this little guy.









So we were happily catching cute little marlins with the biggest lure in our arsenal, secretly hoping for something more substantial. The ocean was like a lake—its color a bit darker than at the start of the trip—but we were still getting the same nasty storm clouds rolling in with heavy rain and almost no wind.

All the gear was in the water—big, dark silicone lures with serious hooks, wobbling behind the boat. We were hoping for a stray marlin, some cold-loving dorado, a large albacore, or maybe a bigeye tuna at sunrise or sunset.

We were trolling four lures, hoping to catch at least one fish. Many people think the ocean is teeming with fish, but in reality, that's not true for most of its vast stretches.

Then one of the reels started screaming. I nearly lost it.

It let out a terrible screech—the kind that makes you want to crap yourself in your rubber pants. I had wedged the rod between the boat's metal railings, and it hadn't occurred to me that when the fish pulled, the wet rod handle would slide along the rail, making a sound like a spoon scraping a metal bowl—but way louder. No peace from these fish.

I looked back and immediately knew what kind of fish it was—it was pulling like crazy and had hit lure number two: black and purple with double hooks and relatively small feathers. No one moved—we just waited to see what would happen next, hoping more fish would bite.

And sure enough, no mistake about it—lure number three got yanked under and that reel started screaming too. Oh yeah, we got 'em.

We didn't know the size yet, but I was almost certain this creature was an albacore—only they hit those small, dark lures and pull like maniacs at the start of the fight.

The first rod was still screaming, the second hadn't stopped either, but there was no danger of them spooling out half a kilometer of line. We reeled in the other two rods, eased off the sails, and got ready to bring them onboard. But by the time we had the boat prepped, both lines had gone slack—yep, that's classic albacore behavior. They hit hard, then wait their turn.

“What's going on?”

“Well, what do you think? Two albacores—first one's big, second is medium. We've got them on the hooks and we're pulling them in. Bring the gaff and the knife, and someone fire up the grill.”

The Slovak looked at me like I was crazy—how could I possibly know the first one was big and the second one was medium? And how did I know they were even albacores?

This guy still hadn't learned. First, the leader hits—the biggest fish in the school—and pulls like hell. Then the normal-sized one bites and stays close to it. The rest of the school usually circles nearby in a tight loop. They won't strike again, won't make a second run unless you really provoke them—and they'll stick around for quite a while. Bit on a small, dark lure, pulled hard—it's 99% an albacore.

I explained it to him, and he just grinned. “The ocean's big, could be anything.”

Yeah, no. It doesn't work like that.

So we're hauling them in, I'm reeling slowly and carefully, making sure not to agitate the fish too much, while the Slovak decides to test the theory about not aggravating hooked fish. Let him play—he's young, still got a lot to learn (*snickers*).

I kept gently reeling mine in, avoiding sharp rod movements. Meanwhile, the Slovak gave his rod a good yank. The next few seconds were a surprise—for him. The fish shot deep, using every bit of speed it had. The Slovak's eyes bulged—he'd wedged the rod between his legs, and he was *definitely* not enjoying that decision anymore.

"There's no way your fish is bigger—mine's pulling way harder, look how it dove deep! Yours is just calmly cruising toward the boat," the Slovak boasted.

"Dude, yours is just pissed off. I'm playing mine carefully so it doesn't fight too hard. That one's going on the grill—your little peanut's getting released."

He kept grinning like he'd hooked the grandfather of all fish. Fine—let him pull, maybe he'll wise up a bit.

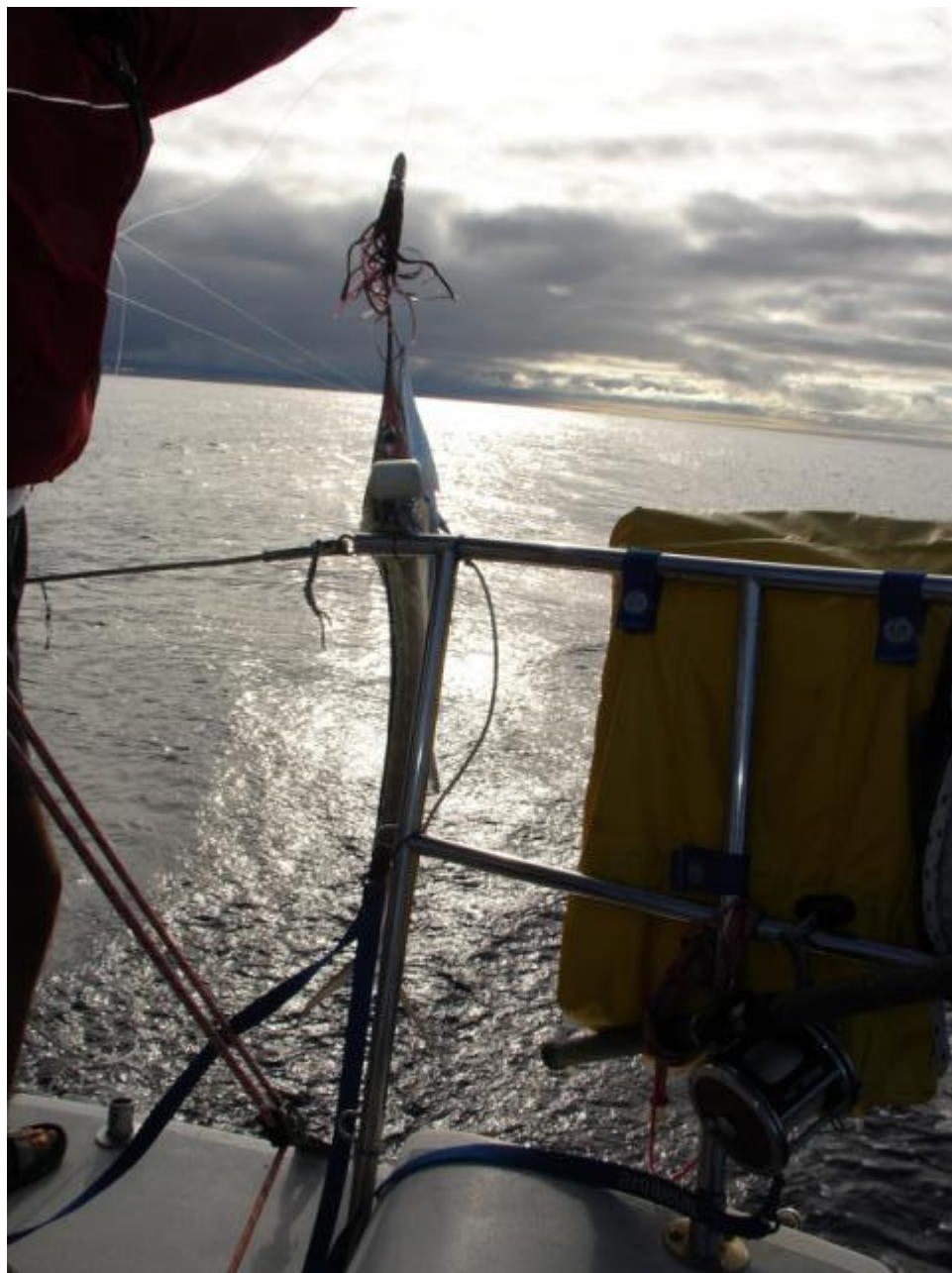
I brought mine to color—deep beneath the boat, I could already see the white flash of its belly. I needed about two more minutes, and it would be at the gaff. I waited for the Slovak to finish his rodeo so we could compare the two and decide which one stayed and which one swam free. He needed another 10 minutes to bring his fish to color.

We brought both fish close to the stern, lowered the rods, and got a good look at them. Just as I'd guessed, mine was the chunkier one, while his was more medium-to-large sized for an albacore.

While he played with his catch behind the boat, I gaffed mine, pulled it aboard, and unhooked it. My brother unhooked the Slovak's albacore and snapped a couple of photos. The grill was hot and ready.







We had our fish with potatoes, cracked open a couple of Heinekens with the Slovak, and started shooting the breeze. He kept asking how I'd known what we'd hooked, why the fish acted like that, how big they could get... real curious guy, that one.

I can recognize an albacore blindfolded—even when I'm filleting it. Its flesh pulses more than any other fish I've ever beheaded. It's like a jumping steak.

That night, I left only the big marlin silicone lure trailing close behind the boat. The evening radio check went as usual—with the big news that we were the first of the returning yachts to land an albacore. Questions poured in: how we caught it, what it bit on, how deep, how big... and what we fished for at night.

My brother gave a thorough rundown of the hows and whys, and wished everyone luck (boy, did they need it). We were still hoping for a bigeye—that was the only species we hadn't landed yet, and there was still a long way to go.

12:40 AM. Sudden panic. The engine drops RPMs. The Slovak's muttering something incoherent. I jump up—and what do I see? The only rod in the water, rigged with 100 lb test and set with brutal drag, was screaming like mad.

Unbelievable. Can't even get five hours of sleep around here—these fish just *won't quit*.

"Reel it in, Slovak."

"Ahh, no way! That thing's huge—*you* pull it in."

Oh, for crying out loud. Big, he says. We'd just pissed it off with that overly tight drag, so it bolted like crazy. My brother and I have landed these on 30 lb mainline with a big spinning reel and 300 meters of line. Sure, you stop them at 250 out, but you stop them. And you don't breathe. One wrong move, and you're left holding a steaming reel.

I grab the rod and instead of tightening the drag, I loosen it. The Slovak's blinking like I just kicked his puppy—"That's a huge mistake," he says.

Yeah, maybe for him. But not with 12/0 hooks, a solid trace between them, 250 lb leader, and half a kilometer of 100 lb mainline spooled on a two-speed Shimano. Not at midnight, half-naked, on a soaking-wet deck. No time to play games with this fish.

Five seconds later, the fish stopped. I dropped the reel into low gear and started winding. It followed the line like a good little soldier. It had taken out about 200 meters, but at least it wasn't

fighting anymore. Probably a bigeye, I hoped—but no, as soon as it paused, I knew: 99% sure it was another albacore.

Just my luck.

Five minutes later, the albacore was at the stern. A monster of its kind—the biggest I'd ever seen. I unhooked it and let it go. Didn't even pull it out of the water. I'm sure it's still out there, swimming strong. The tactic was working, just not for bigeye. But hey, we'd still landed a giant albacore in the middle of the night.

The next morning, we got some good news: the crew of the *Bly* had landed three bigeyes, and we were invited to dinner at the captain's house as soon as we made landfall.

Nothing much happened over the last two or three days—lots of wind, fog, cold weather, and no fish. I trolled everything I had, but nothing bit.

Once we hit shore, we learned that this was officially one of the worst fishing seasons in the last quarter century.

Well... at least *we* had our fun.

We made it back safe and sound to San Diego after 19 unforgettable days at sea. We caught fish, we took pictures, and we lived to tell the tale.

-- THE END --