

THE LAND-LUBBER AND THE RUSTY SAILOR

Amador Muriel is used to sailing; he even left a small sail boat in Boracay 10 years ago. So when Mars and Cora Custodio purchased a 13 ft sailboat to compliment his pontoon power boat at his lake house in Hopatcong, he asked Amador to help him sail.

Apparently, it didn't go so well a week or so earlier. This prompted Amador to buy a 2-man rubber dinghy to practice on with Mars, and gain lost skills. But Mars was not available to sail till Tuesday or later. And Amador, eager to try out the dinghy, invited me to help him put it together and do a test sail.

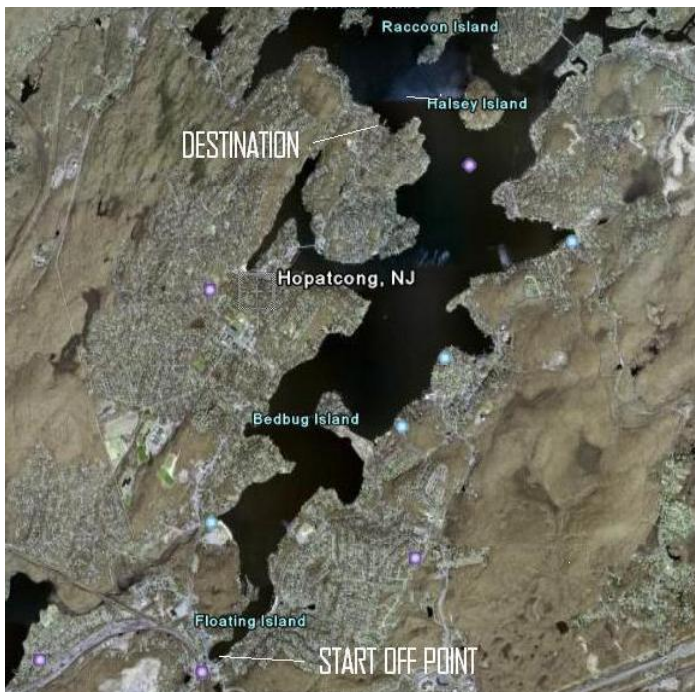


Since I never did any sailing, but still harbor illusions of having seaman's skills after working years ago in the Marine firm of Johnny Reyes's older brother, I jumped at the opportunity.

It even was more exciting when Amador said we'd surprise Mars by sailing up into his pier.

Early Sunday, we drove to Lake Hopatcong, and after donuts and coffee at a Dunkin' Donut shop, asked around where we might be able to launch a boat. No, we couldn't do it from the public lakeshore park. But a private boat slip allowed this for twenty bucks, including car parking.

The picture above shows the progress after about an hour of work and assembly.



Alas, it was only much later we realized our folly.

The google-earth map on the left, made the next day after the adventure, shows the tremendous distance we had to travel.

The picture below, taken from Mars' powerboat, was our view for the 5 hours we were sailing.



The rubber dinghy was inflated by an air pump drawing power from the car's cigarette lighter. Once pumped up, it appeared pretty sturdy, especially after the aluminum cross braces for the mast base and rudder transom were tied and/or clamped in. The mast supported a triangular sail formed by two telescoping aluminum tubes (boom and spar) connected at one end, with the spar being hoisted up the mast, and the boom free to swivel to catch the wind when held to the correct angle. All these descriptions were what I had to cram into my head from the instruction book, plus more: you cannot sail into the wind, but have to tack (zig-zag) at not less than 25 degrees. If the wind gets too strong, just let go the boom so it flaps with the wind, otherwise you'll capsize. And there always are the oars, to paddle if need be.

From where we launched, Amador was not too sure how far up the lake was Mars' house, but he knew it was on the left shore. We set sail at 10:00 am, after leaving wallet, phone, camera in the car. Thankfully, Amador brought his cell wrapped in plastic and placed in the watertight pocket in the dinghy.

To make a long story short, we struggled all along the way. The wind was erratic; there were hundreds of power boats zipping by that made waves. A few times, water spilled into the dinghy and wet us. Then there was a regatta of sailboats skimming fast in a closed course which we had to avoid. I was laying on my back, propped by an flotation bag, holding the lanyard to control the sail, while Amador, behind me, controlled the tiller. Since he was sitting more upright, I'd have to warn him when I was shifting the boom from left to right and vice versa else it would hit his head, as it did a few times.

After four hours, we were tired, we were hungry; it was about 2 pm when Amador finally called Mars but no one answered. Amador mused about how we may have to head for shore to eat something else he might enter a hypoglycemic condition, but then he never felt it coming. And really, it was not that simple to just head for shore because that would be the backyards of private houses.

Finally, we were at the middle of the lake at a point where Amador was sure Mars' house was on the far left shore. The wind was directly against us. We tacked, zigzagged, but always ended up going in circles. So we decided lower sail and paddle, into the wind. We must have looked totally pitiful because a powerboat came alongside and asked if we needed help, but we said we were ok.



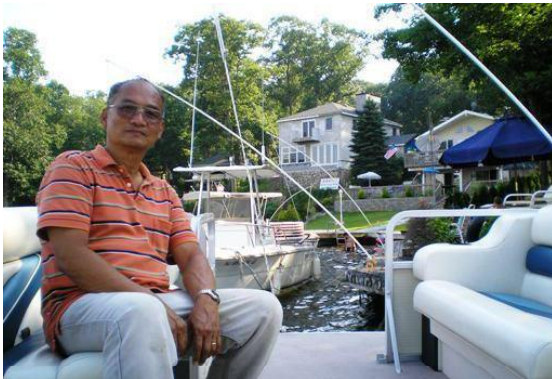
Picture on left is a while later with Amador and Mars.

Since I had just passed with flying colors my heart stress test, I felt I could paddle away, and that's what I did, especially since Amador's paddle somehow had gotten lost. He tended to the tiller. When we got near the shore, he wasn't too sure if indeed Mars' house was in that area. So

we approached an old lady at the nearest pier and asked for help: that we hang around in their pier while we call/wait for our friend, and if we can't make contact, we dock our dinghy there while we walk to the road, get a cab, retrieve our car at the far end of the lake, then drive back and load back the dinghy. She was most helpful, as we climbed out of the dinghy and after 5 hours, stood on terra firma. Amador called another number, and pretty soon had Mars' son on the line, who in turn called his dad, who then called back on Amador's cell. His first message: I can see you. We were 3 houses away from Mars.

We paddled over, hauled up the dinghy to their pier, and gratefully accepted the food and drink at the dinning room.

Mars and Cora had been there since yesterday, and had Nora dela Serna as house guest. They indeed were surprised at our audacity, or perhaps foolhardiness. Mars drove us back to where we had parked Amador's car; it was a full 4.2 miles per odometer, and we retrieved the car, then settled for an afternoon of relaxing camaraderie, but not before traversing once again the lake in less than an hour, but this time on Mars' powerboat.



Yours truly, in above photo on the powerboat ("party boat" technically as it has a 90 hp outboard pushing the flat deck perched on two pontoons.) On right is Mars walking down to their pier where the powerboat is berthed on the right and the sailboat on the left.

We lingered on till dark, reminiscing about the good old UP days, and I am sure Lisa, had she been there, would have contributed much more to the lore we bandied about, but no way could she have ridden in the dinghy.

We then convoyed for dinner at a nearby restaurant before all heading back home to NJ and NY respectively.

Amador and Mars still have their date to sail the dinghy, then the real sailboat in a few days. I will be in LA then.

Danny Gil <ferngil@aol.com> 8 Jul 2007

PS, here's rejoinders from those mentioned in the tale above:

From Amador:

In sum, hilarious!

It really started because I was challenged by my lost skills, after 25 years of disuse. The dinghy sailboat is inferior to my stolen Klepper Aquarius kayak sailboat, which I sailed for five years in Moriches Bay, LI, where we owned a poor man's seaside cottage, scene of outdoor life with my earlier set of friends, most of whom have now retired.

Faith in physics kept us afloat. But the adventure has now encouraged me to resume sailing with progressively bigger dinghys and sailboats. I even intend to sail in Lac Leman, or Lake Geneva, this summer, using a German-made Klepper Aquarius. Why? Sailing renders my sugar normal because of the steady application of soft labor while on a boat. I should not have given it up.

There's life at 67!

From Mars:

We will learn how to sail no matter what. We will be propelled by Amador's obsession. It was a good day all around. Amador was sun-burned and Danny looked very invigorated. Mars

From Johnny:

Subject: Isa Pang Wannabe Adventurousome Sexagenarian

Pasale namán diyán!

Regards. Johnny

From Mars:

Lake Hopatcong is only about an hour away from Princeton. Summer in Hopatcong! I will call you and Mila when the next attempt at sailing will occur so you can join us. Maybe you will be the one to teach us. Mars