

Chicago to Mackinaw Island – Aug. 16th & 17th, 2005

As a manufacturer of pontoon boats we strive continuously to improve and make our product as durable and as user friendly as possible. There is no better way to do this than to test our product in a way that most boaters would not. A lot of boaters look at Pontoon boats as leisure craft - used solely to putt around the lake, when in reality they are much more versatile. In the past most folks would have had two boats at the end of the dock: a runabout for sporting activities such as skiing and tubing as well as a pontoon boat for relaxing and fishing . We believe that a pontoon boat can meet all of these needs and we set out to prove that they can also be used for long “Open Water” excursions. In November we took a pontoon boat from Baltimore to Key West in 5 days. This time around we wanted to test our new 2006 models a little closer to our home state of Michigan. Most boaters are aware of the annual Chicago to Mackinaw sailboat race so we decided to take the same path with one of our pontoon boats. Chicago is a great city, Mackinaw is a great Island, Lake Michigan is a Great Lake and Avalon - Tahoe Mfg. Inc. makes great Pontoon Boats.

To cross Lake Michigan in a Pontoon boat you need a sense of adventure along with the following: a well built boat, an experienced crew, safety equipment, decent weather, and lots of fuel. Pontoon boats are all that we manufacture and have been doing so for over 27 years. For this adventure we chose a 2006 27 foot Avalon Excalibur with three pontoons. We used a 25ft. furniture package which left two more feet of deck out front, put an optional 80 gallon tank in the center tube, and an optional 36 gallon tank on the starboard stern. The boat comes standard with a 36 gallon tank bringing the total fuel capacity on the rig to 152 galloons. We installed an optional inverter, and upgraded the pontoons to a 27” diameter with our optional “Open Water Package” which includes 30% thicker material, additional welding and bracing.

The crew consisted of Jim Wolf (President & CEO) of Avalon – Tahoe Mfg., Inc. and Doug Haskell (Owner / Operator of North Shore Marine in Manitou Beach, MI), both of whom are lifetime and avid boaters. Also on board was John Linn - photographer for Boating Life Magazine. For safety equipment the crew had: lifejackets (Type V PFD), Flair Kit, Strobe Lights, Submersible VHF Radios, Handheld GPS units, 3 handheld spotlights and an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon).

We set aside the week of August 15th and hoped for one good day during that week to complete the trip. We started watching the weather the previous week and the weather was looking very good for Monday and Tuesday (lots of sun with light winds). The forecast for the later part of the week was heavy winds, rain, and big waves. We decided to launch on Tuesday morning, August 16th. Our plan was to depart Chicago at approx. 7:30 am and arrive into Mackinaw Island later that evening. With ideal conditions we planned to complete the 350 mile

journey in approximately 12 hours with an average speed of 30MPH. We had a lot of gear and weight on board for the venture and the top speed with the Yamaha 300 HP 2 stroke engine was a little over 40 MPH.

On the evening of Monday August 15th, we all met in Chicago so that we could get an early start. Yamaha also provided a Technician (David ?) who would run some tests on the engine prior to our departure. As the motor was new, we would be required to follow the Yamaha break in procedures, some of which were completed at our Alma, Michigan factory after the motor was mounted.

On Tuesday morning we arrived at Diversey Harbor at 7:00 am and launched the boat. This was her maiden voyage as the boat that had just rolled off the production line at 5:00 PM the evening before. The Yamaha Tech ran some tests and we were ready to go. We wanted to get some photos of the Avalon Excalibur with Chicago as the background and asked a local fisherman if our photographer could ride in his boat to take some photos. The fisherman agreed and we spent about 45 minutes getting some running shots of the boat.

As we were getting the photos we noticed a little cavitation of the engine due to a last minute change we had made at the factory. We are continuously trying to improve our product and as such had raised the transom by approx. 3" in order get more speed and better performance out of the engine. Because of the slight cavitation we experienced, we decided to lower the transom back down an inch or so to drop the propeller deeper into the water. We took the boat out of the water and in the parking lot of Diversey Harbor and removed the engine, adjusted the transom & then remounted the engine. When the final tweaks, tests and adjustments were complete we departed Diversey Harbor at 10:45 am and the boat and motor were both running smoothly.

The wind was blowing out of the West at 5 to 10 MPH so we started our journey heading straight up the Illinois Coast. We had another couple of hours of engine break-in where we were required to keep the engine below 4000 RPM or approximately 20 – 25 MPH. Once we had completed the break-in period when we were a little north of Waukegan, WI and decided that it was time to change course for the crossing of Lake Michigan. We charted a new course bearing 22 degrees that would take us, at a north east angle, 125 miles across Lake Michigan to Ludington, MI. Based on our average speed of 30 MPH we estimated a little over 4 hours remaining until our first fuel stop in Ludington at approximately 4:30 PM.

The sun was beating down, the water was a little choppy, but manageable, the engine running great, the music on the IPOD running through the stereo system was cranking and we were well on our way to Mackinaw Island. Now it was just a matter of staying on course and enjoying the ride. After another 30 minutes or so we lost sight of the Wisconsin coastline and we would spend the next 3 hours crossing Lake Michigan with no land in sight. With no cell phone service we had

no means of direct contact. We did however, have a marine radio in case of emergency but you need another boat with a radio in the vicinity to hear you. In our case, we saw one freighter cutting down the center of Lake Michigan during our entire crossing. The freighter was moving swiftly in the opposite direction and as quickly as it came into sight, it was gone. We had visual contact with the ship for 20 – 30 minutes and other than the occasional seagull flying over, it was just us, the sun and the water.

During the crossing you only have to be concerned about a few things, mainly you just want to keep moving. If for any reason we ran into trouble and became stranded we had one last line of defense, the EPIRB. If you flip the manual switch on the EPIRB and/or the EPIRB ended up in the water it would automatically send a signal to a satellite which would, in turn, trigger an alert to the US Coast guard. The EPIRB would send our approximate location to the Coast Guard who would send out one of their own to check on the distress signal. It was nice to have this type of technology on board just for peace of mind.

The boat, the motor and crew ran without a hitch across Lake Michigan. The two stroke engine occasionally required us to fill the oil reservoir, the crew occasionally made adjustments to the course and the boat cut through the water with ease. We also had to monitor our fuel and switch between the three tanks when necessary. As we ran low on one tank we would have to switch to another in order to keep gas flowing to our 300 HP engine as we pushed towards Michigan's west coast. The 27" pontoons allowed us to ride high and dry and the 1 – 3 foot waves were no match for this well built rig. Our standard in-dash GPS and a handheld backup helped us chart our course and we tracked our progress on the digital screen. We crossed the imaginary line that divided Wisconsin and Michigan a little north of Milwaukee to the West and a little north of Grand Haven to the East. At that point in the trip we were approx. 40 miles from land in any direction.

About 25 miles from Ludington we caught our first glimpse of land. We had not seen land for over 3 hours and we were now well within striking distance of our first fuel stop. We had burned the 80 gallons in the center tank and were getting down on the first of two 36 gallon tanks. We started to see a few fishing boats then some sail boats and more and more life as we got closer to our first stop. We got a visual fix at the Ludington Lighthouse which marked the entrance to the Ludington Harbor. We arrived into the harbor at exactly 4:30 PM. We filled up at the Ludington Municipal Marina with 102.688 gallons of fuel at \$2.98 per gallon for a total cost of \$306.00. We also got a bag of ice for the cooler bringing the total bill to \$308.01. The time stamp on the MasterCard receipt read "Aug. 16, 05 16:50:44".

We pulled out of the Ludington Harbor at approximately 5:00 PM and we were setting our sights on our next stop which I wanted to be Round Lake in Charlevoix, MI. I am personally very familiar with this area as I have been

boating on Lake Charlevoix for over 20 years and have always enjoyed Round Lake. Our major concern at this point in the trip was the ability to refuel as fuel docks would be closing. I called Ward Brother's in Charlevoix which is a family owned fishing charter and fuel dock. I asked for Captain Don who has taken my family on fishing charters a few times over the past 15 years. Captain Don was not available and I explained our situation to the woman on the line. She put me on hold and a man came to the line and I again explained our situation that we needed fuel to make our final push to Mackinaw Island on our non-stop journey. He stated that they had a charter that left at 4:30 PM and would return at 9:00 PM. He would radio the Captain and have him fill us up at 9:00 PM even though the fuel dock closed at 7:00 PM. I thanked him and told him that we would be waiting at the dock at 9:00 PM.

The second leg of our trip would take us 130 miles from Ludington to Charlevoix. The engine was now well broken in and we started running at full throttle or 40 MPH or 5700 RPM and then would back down to 5200 RPM or 35 MPH. We followed the Lake Michigan shoreline and used our GPS to set our course. We varied from approx. 1 mile to 3 miles from shore at any point in time. The topography of the shoreline was interesting to watch as the miles passed by. There were several sand dunes that would shoot up into the air by several 100 feet. Occasionally we would spot some vacation homes, and passed a few small towns. Our GPS gave us an ETA of 8:00 PM into Charlevoix at our current cruising speed.

Approximately 60 miles into this leg of the trip, or 70 miles from Charlevoix, the winds and waves began to pick up. The wind started blowing 10 – 15 MPH out of the SW or directly at our stern. As the waves built to 2 – 3 feet we were forced to pull back on the throttle so that we would not stuff the nose of the boat into the back side of a wave. We were now traveling at 4200 – 4500 RPM and our speed varied between 23 – 28 MPH. This loss of speed would push our ETA to approx. 9:00 PM. The waves continued to build and we continued to make our way one mile at a time.

We occupied our time selecting from various artists on the IPOD with over 7000 songs to choose from. The dash of the Excalibur has a standard IPOD jack that allows you to plug directly into the Clarion sound system. This convenient feature made the time and miles even more enjoyable.

We passed several islands and moved past the western tip of the Grand Traverse Bay. The waves and wind continued and we slowed down at 8:45 PM to take some pictures of a beautiful sunset. We were now 12 miles from Charlevoix and arrived into the Charlevoix harbor at 9:15 PM. The captain was at the dock and cleaning the recently caught Salmon, the light was dwindling, and the moon was rising. We filled up with 75.4 gallons of fuel at 21:39 or 9:39 PM. We had ordered ahead from the Villager Pub and ordered 3 Villager Famous Burgers (Cheese, Sautéed Onions & Mushrooms and Fries). We sat at a picnic table in the

park, ate our burgers and headed back to the boat. We geared up for a nighttime cruise to Mackinaw. We all put on warm clothing and got things organized for the ride. We had all safety gear accessible including lifejackets, spotlights, strobe lights, radios, etc.....

We headed out of the round lake inlet and into Lake Michigan. We immediately noticed that the winds had changed out of the Northwest and the waves had shifted and were hitting us straight on. It was apparent that the winds were building and now were pushing 15 – 20 MPH. The waves were building to 3 – 4 feet and it was dark. We cruised about 7 miles from Charlevoix at a speed of 11 MPH and using the GPS as our guide and a hand-held spotlight as our only source of sight. At this rate we would hit the Mackinaw Bridge in approx. 5 hours or 4 AM. We did have some concern regarding navigating the Straights of Mackinaw in these types of weather conditions and at night with limited to no visibility. The wind gusts kept hitting us in the face and the spray from the waves kept coming over the front of the boat. At this point we decided that the conditions had deteriorated so quickly that it was not worth the risk to continue. We decided to return to Charlevoix and lay up until the morning when we could at least see what was coming at us. We were not concerned about the waves or the wind, however we were concerned that we could not see what was coming at us and therefore had less control over the vessel. We are experienced enough to know when it's time to play it safe and this was the definitely the time for that.

As we rode the waves back to Charlevoix, we had to be very careful not to bury the nose of the boat in between the building waves. When we were approx. 300 yards from the inlet a wave did get us and washed over the front of the boat. The water ran through the boat soaking the floor. We arrived back into Charlevoix a little after midnight, grabbed a few hours of sleep and headed back out around 6:30 am. We spent some time taking photos in the inlet leading to Lake Michigan and finally departed around 7:30 am. The wind had subsided from the night before, however it was still blowing NW to NE at 10 – 15 MPH and we had 2 – 4 foot waves to contend with. We picked a good cruising speed of 18 – 20 MPH and headed to the Straights of Mackinaw.

Our GPS gave us an expected arrival time of 10:45 am to travel the 60 miles to Mackinaw Island. The waves pounded us as we moved forward however we stayed high and dry other than a little spray from time-to-time. The waves seemed to lay down a little bit and we decided to really put the boat to the test. Waves were still 2 – 3 feet and we started cruising wide open, making our way towards Mackinaw. We were watching for markers and spotting several lighthouses in the area. We navigated through the straights, sighting several larger power and sailboats. As we would pass them going wide open at close to 40 MPH in a pontoon boat, we definitely turned some heads and assumed that we were making for some interesting morning conversation on the passing vessels.

We finally caught a glimpse of the spans of the Mackinaw Bridge as we were about 15 miles away. We kept the boat at close to max speeds skipping over the waves, only slowing from time to time to go through wakes from the larger (50 – 60 foot) boats. We passed under the Mackinaw Bridge at 9:50 am on Wednesday 8/17/05. We had cruised a little over 350 miles in approx. 12 hours of running time. As we made our way slowly under the bridge we contemplated what to do. We brought the boat back to ideal speed and took the next 20 or so minutes snapping pictures and soaking in the view. The waves had laid down even a little more as we were being protected by Mackinaw and the other islands in the area.

At that point we decided that we had just conquered Lake Michigan and we wanted to go a little further to see what Lake Huron and the other side was all about. We wrapped up the pictures and took off going South-East at a bearing of 123 degrees for a 15 mile trip over to Cheboygan for fuel and oil. After our fuel stop we decided to continue going around the tip of Michigan and cruise approximately another 35 miles into Lake Huron. Near Rogers City as the winds and waves began to really build we turned back towards Mackinaw Island. We arrived back at the Island at 2:30 PM and decided to dock the boat and take a stroll.

The winds were still blowing and the waves were getting bigger, but the Avalon Excalibur kept us high and dry and had just given us a great ride. We had conquered Lake Michigan, got a little taste of Lake Huron, traveled over 450 miles, and had a bunch of fun and laughs along the way. We accomplished this adventure in 27 foot pontoon boat. Who would have ever thought of that?