By Avalon & Tahoe Pontoon
President & CEO
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Anniversary Excursion

Avalon/Tahoe celebrate on the Pacific





It was just another random mid-November workday when the phone rang. On the other end of the line was Doug Haskell, a Tahoe dealer and owner of North Shore Marine in Devil's Lake, Mich. "What's up Doug?" I asked. Haskell responded with, "You know, it's time to stop talking about it and time to just do it. Let's get 'er done."

Haskell and I have a long history and I knew immediately what he was referring to. It had been 10 years since our first pontoon boat excursion from Baltimore, Md., to Key West. Fla., in November of 2004. It was on that trip when we first began using the expression, "Let's get 'er done." Baltimore to Key West was just the first of many more trips to come. Chicago to Mackinaw Island in August of 2005, 300 miles down the Mississippi River, Fort Lauderdale to Bimini Island in January of 2006, and Key West to the Dry Tortugas in October of 2009.

As the past five seasons had come and gone we had pondered and brainstormed the when, where and how of our next big adventure, although the timing was just never right. Too busy growing the business, too busy building better boats, too busy taking care of the customer, too busy to set a date and make it happen.

The Game Plan

Within 20 minutes Haskell and I had the plan. Since it was already November, we needed a warm weather destination. I've always wanted to get a pontoon to Avalon Harbor on Catalina Island, which sits 30 miles off the coast of Los Angeles and is the town for which our company is now named, but I told Haskell I didn't have a lot of time between now and the end of the year.

"I'll drive it and you fly it; this will save you five or six days of drive time," responded Haskell.

He suggested the 2015 Avalon 27-footer with the twin 300 horsepower white Mercury Verado engines. We finalized some details and ended our conversation with a familiar, "Let's get 'er done."

By the end of the day the plan was complete. The crew would consist of Haskell; Travis Conners, a Tahoe dealer from Indian River, Mich; Duane Dinninger, the head of engineering and operations for Avalon & Tahoe Pontoon Boats and me. We had the dates: Tuesday, December 9 through Saturday, December 13 and we had the trip plan. We would go from Marina Del Rey to Catalina Island to San Diego to Newport Beach to Long Beach to Redondo Beach to Santa Barbara to the Channel Islands and back to Marina Del Rey. Four days, 500 miles, four-man crew, Avalon 27-foot Ambassador and two 300hp Verados.

The Drive

Haskell picked the boat up from the factory on Thursday, December 4 after attending a dealer training session. We loaded the boat with a few essential supplies for a few days on the water including some snacks, sunscreen, water, sodas, a few changes of clothes, two extra props, etc. We also loaded the necessary safety supplies, which consisted of: Type V PFD lifejackets, a few flare kits, strobe lights, submersible VHF radios, anchor and line, handheld GPS units, compass, three handheld spotlights, a 10-foot radio whip antenna, a hard wired VHF, a SPOT location tracker and an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon). Like any trip, we were hoping none of the safety equipment would be necessary, but knew it was a requirement when taking a pontoon trip that will take you 50 miles off shore.

Day One

We met at a launch ramp at pier 77



in Marina Del Rey, Calif. We loaded our bags, got everything situated and launched the pontoon at 1:45 p.m. Our first stop was Del Rey Landing on the north side of the channel. We filled our 90-gallon center tube tank, which is standard on the Ambassador, and then filled six, 5-gallon cans to ensure we would not run out of fuel on the longest leg of the open water trip from Catalina Island to San Diego, which is over 90 miles. As a general rule of thumb, we like to plan on a 1/3 tank reserve from a safety perspective to accommodate for any unforeseen issues. We knew at wide open throttle we would be burning approximately a gallon for every 9/10ths of a mile. At optimum fuel economy we would be burning approximately one gallon for every 1.7 miles at a cruising speed of 33 miles per hour.

Loaded with fuel and anticipation, we finally cruised out of the harbor at 2:30 p.m. As we passed out of the jetty we had a clear view of the Palos Verdes Peninsula that sits 10 miles south of Marina Del Rey and beyond that Catalina Island in the distance. To our starboard side were the hills of Malibu.

At this time there was a 10 to 15 mph wind blowing in from the West, two- to three-foot surface waves and four- to six-foot swells running at 15 to 17 seconds apart. Dinninger was at the wheel and we were all a little timid at first as we got used to the wave patterns. As we looked at the horizon we could see the swells coming and the elevation changes can be very intimidating. It's not like boating in the Great Lakes or even the ocean waters off of Florida or in the Bahamas. It took us a good 20 to 30 minutes to get comfortable and to get our sea legs.

The sky was clear and the sun was high, but we knew we only had a few good hours until sundown. Our plan was to spend the night in the town of Avalon on Catalina Island, although we had yet to get a hotel room. We had a basic idea of what we wanted to accomplish in the time we had to do it; however, it did not make sense to plan too far ahead, as history has proven to us that anything can happen on these types of excursions and flexibility is the key.

The Weather

On all of our previous excursions we had always run into significant weather events where we had to make changes to the original plan. This was Southern California where there is an average of 284 sunny days per year. In my decade of boating off of Southern California I can only remember a handful of significant weather events, so when making the original plan and picking the dates we felt very confident the weather would be a non-issue. As luck would have it, we picked the one week out of the past five years where they were calling for a "major" weather event. The conditions were scheduled to begin deteriorating over the next day with a major storm, "The Pineapple Express," to hit in 48 to 72 hours.



As with similar weather events on past trips, we knew we would have to pay very close attention to the weather as the hours and days passed to ensure we did not put ourselves in the eye of a major storm. It's one thing to be on a 27-foot pontoon boat 50 miles off-shore in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, but it's a totally different situation to be there in the middle of a tropical storm. We might be nuts, but we surely are not crazy, nor reckless.

After the initial 30 minutes of getting used to the wave patterns and getting the feel of the new twin motor application, we started building some confidence and picked up the pace to 28 to 30 knots from the 18 to 20 knots we had been traveling. We had done it, the logistical planning was behind us and we were now in full execution mode. Haskell glanced over and said, "Let's get 'er done!"

Company Namesake

With the storm fast approaching our main goal was to spend some time in Avalon Harbor. The current ownership group purchased Playbuoy Pontoon Boats in 2000 after it had been in business since 1981. In 2004 the group decided to rename and rebrand the company. After several months of trying to find the right name, the group decided on the name Avalon Luxury Pontoon Boats. The town of Avalon is an amazing and beautiful place and we felt that it was a good fit for a new pontoon brand.

Branding is about image and the image of Avalon is one of amazement and beauty. Most people would mistake the town and island as being on the coast of Italy or Spain. Not many know that it sits a mere 30 miles off the shores of Los Angeles. In addition to needing to spend some time in Avalon Harbor, our next goal was to put some miles on the boat and hit it hard for a good and long Pacific cruise.

Catalina Cruise

As we approached the Isthmus—the narrowest point on the island—we backed down to a comfortable five to six knots and began cruising the amazing coastline of Catalina Island. We took advantage of our slow cruise by enjoying the sunny California skies, the deep blue Pacific waters, catching up with one another and making reserva-





tions for the evening. The Avalon Hotel in Avalon seemed like the most logical spot. Arriving on an Avalon in Avalon and staying at the Avalon was a "trifecta" for us! It was now approximately 4 p.m. and the sun was going behind the 2000-foot mountains that shoot straight out of the Pacific. The Garmin GPS showed Avalon Harbor was 12 miles to the southwest. At our slowed and relaxing pace we were scheduled to arrive a few minutes before 6 p.m.

Avalon is a city of 3,700 year-round residents and a tourist destination. Ferries run every few hours to and from San Pedro, San Diego and Santa Barbara. As we approached the harbor we saw the distinguished round-columned building known as the Casino. The Catalina Casino has been the focal point of Santa Catalina Island entertainment and culture since it opened over 80 years ago in 1929. For nearly three generations, the Catalina Casino has been the venue of choice for great entertainers, live theater productions, and first-run motion pictures. Dominating the Avalon landscape from its regal perch along the harbor, the casino exemplifies the style and romance of Catalina Island.

Avalon Arrival

With all the history, legacy and fate that surround this place, it felt good to finally arrive in the harbor as we approached the city of Avalon. This is, of course, where Natalie Wood mysteriously died after falling overboard from a boat moored in the harbor. The sun was down and we were cruising slowly when it all came into view. The mountains, the town, the bell tower, the casino, the green Welcome Dock, the Marlin Club, the boats bobbing in the harbor, the patrol boat, the sea, the air, the water, the moon…it was all there. At that moment it brought chills down my spine and a smile to my face.

As we snapped pictures, we were glad to arrive after the long day of travel and adventure and it was time to be on dry land. People arriving at Avalon Harbor by boat are required to idle outside of the harbor and wait for the harbor patrol boat to assign a mooring and collect a fee based on the length of the boat. The officer pulled up and assigned us to B16 and collected our $30 fee for the night. We collected our personal items for the night, secured the boat and called the water taxi for a hop to shore.

As we walked up the Welcome Dock loaded with duffle bags and gear, we could all sense the liveliness of the island and the weariness of our legs and bodies. It had been a long day. I was up at 4 a.m. Michigan time along with the other two fliers—the equivalent of 1 a.m. PST—and Haskell had been up for nearly three days with only a few hours a sleep at rest stops along the way. After a little trial and error, we found Whittley Street and walked up the road which was at a 50 to 60 degree steep angle from the shoreline. In Avalon, you rise as fast as you walk and it's all uphill.

Night On The Town

After meeting at 7:45 p.m. in the hotel lobby, we took a leisurely stroll through town and ended up at Steve's Steakhouse for a great meal and an even better view of the harbor. As we ate, a full harvest moon was slowly rising above the Pacific. After dinner we spent some time at The Marlin Club Bar where we played some pool and chatted with the locals. A local boat captain named Bob gave us some advice after hearing of our vessel and our plan.

"Go north tomorrow towards Santa Barbara and then follow the waves back south towards L.A.," said Captain Bob. "Don't go to San Diego or you will fight the waves all the way back. That's suicide, I've seen it all before."

We did, but then again we didn't, know whose advice to follow and collectively agreed to not decide until morning.

Day Two

We met at 7 a.m. in the lobby for a quick breakfast with some good conversation with the staff, which led to an offer by the owner to use her personal golf cart for a quick sightseeing expedition. Avalon was the trip and Avalon was the reason Haskell drove 2,300 miles and why we needed to be here. I knew that a quick trip around the town would be more than worthwhile so we took her up on it.

It was 7:15 a.m., the "Pineapple Express" storm was approaching, we had yet to decide north or south, we were on Catalina, and we had coffees in hand as we jumped onto the golf cart, and within minutes we were 1500 feet above sea level. Even I had forgotten how high in elevation you can get so quickly.

Soon we were on the northeast side of the harbor looking down on our Avalon floating with the other boats below. We cruised along the top edge of the city looking down on the scenery below as we worked our way up to the house with the ice cream cone-looking roof. We were hoping to get a little higher, but the road turned into a dead end. We worked our way back down and out the south side of town and along the shoreline. The waves typically pick up mid-morning so we were burning precious time.







Back On The Water

We parked the cart back in front of the Avalon Hotel and hurried inside to grab our bags and to say our farewells to the accommodating staff. We walked down the steep hill and worked our way to the foot path running along the water. It was a cool 56 degrees, but the sun was now doing its job of warming up the trade winds. We jumped on the water taxi with bags in tow and were quickly back on the boat. The tide was rolling the boat as we topped off the fuel at the fuel dock. Forty-three gallons of fuel later we were heading out of the harbor.

It was 9:30 a.m. and the seas were in our favor with a one- to two-foot chop and six- to eight-foot swells running 18 seconds apart. We fired up the Garmin, picked our line and put the hammer down.

We were quickly running at 42 to 44 mph, skipping across the swells and heading south to San Diego. We knew San Diego Bay would be more interesting to see and a livelier place to visit than the small Santa Barbara harbor. The impending storm was now 24 to 36 hours away and at our current pace we would be to San Diego in time for lunch and would be able to get the open water crossing behind us while the seas were in our favor. From San Diego our plan was to hug the shoreline back north, giving us all a greater sense of security if the weather took a turn for the worse.

I was at the wheel for the first 30 minutes or so and was impressed with the power and feel of our new twin motor application. The White 300 Mercury Verados were humming at a constant pace as Catalina faded in the background. Once out of sight, we knew we had a solid 90 minutes or so until we would see land again and all eyes were scanning the water and horizon for unknown hazards.

We passed by kelp beds and some floating debris, mostly balloons and an occasional floating piece of trash. We passed two large freighters that were tied up side-by-side performing some type of refueling operation. A plane here, a few helicopters there and four guys rolling at 40 plus miles per hour on a 27-foot Avalon pontoon. The ride was nothing short of amazing as we joked and laughed, reminiscing about the great steak dinner and the local characters we had met the night before.

We tracked our progress on the Garmin 50s as we counted down from 70 miles to go. When we were 25 miles out we passed a lone sailboat and we started seeing some mountains off the port side. We surmised that they were the mountains around Oceanside or La Jolla. We stayed on course and continued on at a rapid pace and as we got closer to San Diego we started seeing more activity including a few scattered fishing boats, a few more freighters, more planes and more helicopters. We knew we were getting closer and would soon be in San Diego. Five miles out we ran into several rows of crab traps. We passed the time pointing out the buoys which were in tight alignment and it felt like an obstacle course for grownups on our highly-powered pontoon. We located the large shipping lane and buoys, which guided us the last two miles into San Diego Bay.

San Diego Bay

San Diego Bay is 12 miles long and one to three miles wide. The harbor was busting with activity from pleasure boats, military boats, low-flying military to coast guard helicopters. A bizarre low-flying military plane was circling the harbor as the high rise buildings of downtown came into view. We cruised 10 miles or so into the harbor as we passed downtown and made our way to the Coronado Bay Bridge which at the time was 200 feet over the harbor so a large cargo ship could cross under.

Once we passed under the bridge a few smaller military boats were coming our way and at that time we collectively agreed we had gone deep enough into the harbor and it was time to find fuel and lunch before making our way north. After making a turn around one of the massive bridge pylons, we were heading the same direction as the two 30-foot military boats. We joked about racing them as we cruised at 25 mph with the two of them 50 yards off of our port side. Dinninger put the throttles down and we quickly doubled our speed and knew they would be no match for our Avalon!

We stopped a slow cruising boat and asked the skipper where we could find a fuel dock. He directed us to the fueling station on the west side of Harbor Island. Ten minutes later we were at the fuel dock, topping off the tank with 84 gallons of fuel. We came close to running the 90-gallon tank dry and were glad we didn't have to use the extra fuel cans. We were hungry; however, we didn't want to spend much time at any sort of sit down lunch so we asked the fuel attendant if there was any place close to grab a couple of burgers or sandwiches to go. He directed us down the marina behind the fuel dock to a building approximately 20 boat slips away. We idled down to the building and pulled down to an open slip right in front of the small deli. We tied up and walked up the steep ramp to the building, grabbed some sandwiches and quickly returned to the boat.

Whale Watching

It was 1:45 p.m. as we were heading out of the mouth of the harbor and back into the open Pacific. We set our course for Newport Beach (82 miles to the northwest) and, once again, played a game of dodge the buoys and kelp beds as we headed up the coast. We knew we only had a few hours of daylight remaining and needed to keep rolling. Seven or eight miles out of the harbor, we were on a good clip going over 45 mph. We were catching some

occasional air on the larger swells when Haskell said, "I think we passed a whale back there."

He thought he had seen a "blow," but the rest of us were somewhat skeptical. We knew that there was a possibility of seeing whales, dolphins, etc., on this trip, but Haskell wasn't positive what he had seen.

We were at cruising speed and not sure if we wanted to burn the time to investigate, but after two minutes of discussion we decided it was worth a look to backtrack. As we got closer to the area where Haskell thought he had seen the "blow," we backed down to idle speed and put our eyes on the water. There it was, a hundred yards in the distance, we saw another "blow" and we were now in full whale tracking mode. We sped up to the area, slowed down again and watched. This time the big grey whale surfaced only 25 yards away. With cameras in hand we spent the next 20 minutes or so following the whale as it disappeared and reappeared every three to five minutes. Whenever we thought we were on top of it, the whale would disappear and surface somewhere else. We took some good pictures and had fun, but knew the sun was still moving and we had to get moving too.

Newport Harbor

At 5:45 p.m. we entered the channel of Newport Harbor. The sun had just set and the sky was rosy pink in color. Once past the 500-yard break wall, we were cruising in the no wake zone and taking in the sights of Newport. Nice homes perched on the cliffs, many of which were nicely decorated with Christmas lights. We started looking for fuel as we were considering fueling up and continuing the 31 miles to Redondo Beach in the dark. It was a few minutes before 6 p.m. as we pulled up to the fuel dock near the Balboa Pavilion where the Avalon Ferry station is located and the sky was now dark. The two attendants on the dock were impressed with the boat. The twin 300s, mood lights and wake tower were the main items of attraction. Needless to say, they were a little amused that we had started the day on Catalina and had arrived via San Diego. The attendants informed us the



pumps had already been shut down and neither of them had the keys to unlock them, but they would reopen at 7 the next morning.

On the dock was a large but young dog having a standoff with a seal who kept playing with and teasing him. Conners grabbed the GoPro Hero4 for a few underwater seal shots and the seal quickly thought it was food and nearly took it out of his hand. Running low on fuel and no fuel to be found, we inquired about a few hotel rooms for the night. The attendants recommended the Balbo Bay Resort and we were in business.

It was 6:30 p.m. as I entered the nicely appointed room. I turned on the nightly news as I was getting settled and watched a long segment discussing the unprecedented tropical storm that was getting ready to slam the west coast. They were calling for over 3 inches of rain with wind gusts up to 50 plus miles per hour. The storm was due to hit Southern California the following evening. I chuckled as they started listing school and event closings due to the rainstorm as I thought to myself, 'They wouldn't last a week of Michigan winter.'

As we ate a nice Italian dinner at the Sol Grill, we reminisced about the days travels and made our plan for the following. We knew that our trip would be cut short due to the storm and we would have a tough ride back to Marina Del Rey in the morning.

Day Three

After fueling up with 50 gallons, we were cruising out of Newport Harbor by 8 the next morning. As we cruised out of the channel we had an Orange County Sheriffs Patrol Boat in front of us and another one slightly behind us.

We were the only three boats heading out and I presumed they would turn around at the mouth of the harbor. As we hit the end of the break wall we went on plane. The skies were cloudy and the waves much larger than the previous two days. The winds were blowing a steady 20 knots and the Coast Guard had issued small craft advisories for the entire area. We took a few waves over the bow as we cruised at a steady 10 to 12 knots. The swells were building and were running 8 to 10 feet at 12 second intervals. Much to our surprise, both the sherriff boats had followed us out and remained 200 yards off our stern as we headed north. The surface waves were 5 to 6 feet and we were very surprised as the typical wave pattern should have had us going directly into the waves; however, we were lucky to be rolling with them instead of against them.

The wind was blowing hard and coming from the bow port side of the boat. We navigated each wave with a hand working the throttle the entire time.

We were a half mile off shore as we passed Huntington Beach. We then picked a direct line towards the Port Vicente Lighthouse that sits on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The route would take us four to five miles offshore and we scrapped the idea of heading into the Long Beach Harbor as that line would have required us to hit the waves head-on as we headed out of the harbor.

The conditions went from bad to worse as we passed by an offshore oil platform. At points when the surface waves were merging with the now 10- to 12-foot swells it created deep valleys between the waves. We had to back off the throttle a bit and were now chugging ahead at an 8- to 10-knot pace. We then took a pounding with wave spray coming over midship. As spray poured down on us I was able to remain a bit drier behind the helm stand, but the other three guys were getting pounded with water as they sat on the rear lounge.

No music, no conversation, all eyes on the waves as we battled the swells. We knew that once we hit Point Vicente the coastline would curve to the east and we would be more protected from the following seas.

With each passing mile the hills and cliffs of Palos Verdes drew nearer and nearer. We rounded the point around 11 a.m. and the waves soon calmed to a more manageable height. The skies began clearing a bit and we began to

dry out a little as we watched the high surf pounding the rocky shoreline in the distance.

Riding With The Dolphins

We were now 10 miles from Redondo Beach and were out of harm's way. We laughed and joked about the pounding we had just endured over the past two hours and were all thankful the 20-mile stretch was now behind us. With Conners at the wheel we saw some marine activity 300 to 500 yards up ahead. Soon we were in the middle of a dolphin pod with 75 to 100 feeding dolphins.

They were swimming slow as they fed and we spent the next 30 minutes chasing them around as we snapped photos. I took the helm to allow Conners to take some GoPro video. As we cruised, the dolphins would cruise with us. We laughed as we surmised that they were very curious as they had never seen a pontoon boat in these waters. Conners was able to put the GoPro under the water and we captured some pretty cool videos. It was now 11:45 a.m. and we decided to pick up the pace and head into the Portofino Marina in Redondo Beach for a much-needed lunch break. As we approached the King Harbor pier we made a few loops around the buoy at the mouth of the



harbor to snap some photos of the barking seals who made the buoy their home. There were a dozen or so sea lions lying in a heap on the buoy as it bounced up and down in the swells. At 2 p.m. we decided the time had come to make our final push up the coast and back to Marina Del Rey.

The Last Leg

Conditions were deteriorating quickly and the waves were building again. Haskell took the helm as we traveled out of the harbor. We followed the beach, passing by Hermosa and then by Manhattan Beach. We took pictures of the airplanes as they flew low over the ocean on their approach to the LAX airport. When we were five miles out, Haskell apparently decided we would end this trip with a bang as he went wide-open in the 4- to 5-foot swells. We were banging hard and I was hoping we would not bury the nose into a big wave at 50 plus mph. As I sat opposite of Haskell, with Conners and Dinninger in the front bow benches, we were being tossed around like rag dolls. Haskell was laughing and smiling like a little kid who had just received his first Big Wheel or bike on Christmas morning. He turned, looked at me and yelled, at the top of his lungs, "Let's get er' done!"

We were still laughing as we entered Marina Del Rey where we had departed a mere 48 hours before. As the trailer was slowly pulling the Avalon out of the Pacific, a crew of three LA County Sheriffs were getting off of their patrol boat and walking slowly towards us as we were starting to clean out the Avalon.

I was wondering if they took exception to the fact we were now celebrating with a couple of much-needed cold beers while we unloaded the boat. I started telling one of the officers why we were there and started telling him about Avalon Pontoons.

He said, "I just looked up your company online when we saw you coming in. That is one incredible boat and we just wanted to come over to check it out."

We invited them onboard and the leader of the pack climbed up to take a look while the other two paced around the outside of the boat. After they left, we all agreed that we would have to plan another trip soon as this one was cut short due to the fast approaching "Pineapple Express" storm. After all, we still need to complete the last few legs of this originally planned journey!



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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