

FROM BALTIMORE TO KEY WEST ON THIS?

Avalon Pontoon tests its mettle with a one-of-a-kind endurance adventure



It must be human nature. Some people seem to be cursed with the need to ponder the ever-present “what if?” In this case, the question was: “What if we took one of our pontoon boats from Baltimore to Key West?”

The quandary came from Jim Wolf, president of Avalon Pontoons, and Greg Knight, executive vice president and director of sales and marketing for Michigan-based Avalon. The idea was to do something extreme and unusual to round up some publicity while actually doing something to test, and hopefully prove, the

By Michael D. Telleria

“We don’t recommend others do this kind of trip on a pontoon — we did it so they wouldn’t have to. We just wanted to show that if our boat can handle this, it can handle anything.” *-Greg Knight, Avalon Pontoons*



THE CREW AND THE CRAFT — From left to right: Jim Wolf, president of Avalon Pontoons; George Sipel and Doug Haskell of North Shore Marine; Greg Knight, executive vice president and director of sales and marketing for Avalon. The boat: A brand-new 2005 Avalon Excalibur 25 Elite.





RUNNING ROUGH — Far right and top: Even though the National Weather Service posted a gale-force wind warning for the area where the crew was headed, the ride was smooth out of Baltimore and past the Key Bridge. Directly above: A little while after passing under the bridge, however, the conditions began to worsen. After not being able to get a fix with either one of the gps units, the driver constantly poked his head outside the plastic hoping to see a landmark.

SURVEYING THE DAMAGE — Right: Avalon's Greg Knight taking notes. Far right: The crew assesses the damage and decides to pull the boat out of the water and truck it down to Morehead City, North Carolina, where they would pick up the trip sheltered by the confines of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW).

reliability of their product.

There wasn't much to how they decided what boat to use — they only had one available: a new, 2005 Avalon Excalibur 25 Elite. The 25 is a three-tube pontoon with a capacity for 16 people. An Evinrude 225 E-TEC was used for power.

The idea was to keep the boat as stock as possible, so the only optional gear that was added included a 72-gallon fuel tank (bringing total capacity up to 108 gallons) and some electronic navigation gear. Since their intention was to run flat out the whole way while only making stops

for fuel, the extra fuel capacity and navigation gear were essential. They also outfitted the craft with a full enclosure to battle the early winter chill and whatever spray they might encounter — this proved to be a blessing and a curse at the same time.

The challenge was set and the crew assembled on November 13, 2004, at a marina in the inner harbor of Baltimore. In addition to the two gents from Avalon, there was Doug Haskell and George Sipel from North Shore Marine in Michigan — these two fellows trailered the boat from Michigan to Baltimore. Also aboard was Brad Kay, editor of *Pontoon & Deckboat* magazine — although he was only on board for the first day. They also had a land crew consisting of a guy and a truck, which followed along by land in case they



needed to pull out at any point — having this contingency in place turned out to be a good idea.

ROUGH START

This is what the marine weather statement from the National Weather Service for the Newport /Morehead City area of North Carolina, which is where the crew was headed, said: "Gale warning for the coastal waters and sounds. Minor flooding possible late Saturday over southern Pamlico Sound. Wind 25 to 30 knots with gusts up to 40 knots — waves 5 feet."

Even though this is the kind of report that keeps commercial fishermen glued to their barstools, our intrepid crew decided to give it a go. It was easygoing

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at first with the 225 E-TEC turning 5,100 rpm and the gps showing 38 mph — like they said, this was meant to be a throttles-to-the-wall journey.

Less than an hour after departure, however, the waves in the Chesapeake started to build, but Knight said the boat performed well in the following seas. At first only a few big waves came over the front, which made things interesting.

Things went from interesting to spooky as the crew was unable to get a fix on the main gps on the boat or on the handheld. While trying to figure out where they were they slammed into the backside of a huge wave, which crashed over the bow and collapsed the front tarps. Water was pouring through, the waves and wind were building, they didn't know where they were and the only other boat they saw the entire time was a Coast Guard cutter about three hours earlier.

With the enclosure damaged and the weather building, the crew made the wise decision to put the nose into the wind and seek out the nearest port. They finally got their gps working and identified Flag Harbor near St. Leonard, Maryland, as the nearest sheltered area.

"After pulling in the locals said they were amazed that we were out in those conditions," Knight said, adding that the locals said they only get weather like that one day out of every six months.

TWO OPTIONS

After repairing the broken canvas and saying bon voyage to a rather shaken Mr. Kay, the rest of the crew had a choice to make: wait out the weather or truck it on down to Morehead, North Carolina, and pick up the trip from there.

The decision was made to pull the boat and truck on down to Morehead, grab some sleep and start



fresh in the morning — this time protected by the confines of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW).

On day two (Sunday, November 14) they got an early 8:30 a.m. start. Even though the wind was still blowing pretty good, the protected waters of the ICW in this area were much kinder than the chopped-up conditions of the Chesapeake the day before.

This is where the boys began to learn what everyone who transits the ICW learns — pay attention! The mile-marker system of navigation is pretty straight forward to understand, but it's easy to get sidetracked with all the scenery and end up going up a river, blowing at full speed through a no-wake zone or running aground on a shoal — all of which our crew experienced to one degree or another.

MINOR SETBACKS

The crew was only about 30 miles down the ICW out of Morehead when they accidentally got pointed up the New River headed toward Jacksonville, North Carolina. About 15 minutes later they figured out their error and had to backtrack. All in all that little misadventure cost them about an hour — they were much more thoughtful of minding their charts thereafter.

This first slip-up led directly to the next. The distraction of trying to figure out which channel to take to get back to the ICW landed them on a shoal. A full 10 minutes of trying to back the boat off using the engine eventually ended up with two shipmates having to shed a few layers of clothing and jump into the chilly water to dislodge the boat. This one cost the

UNDERWAY AGAIN —

After hauling the boat out of the water and trucking it down to Morehead City, North Carolina, the boys were greeted with the comfortable confines of this much more sheltered part of the ICW — but they would soon learn there were obstacles besides bad weather and rough water to overcome.

ZIPPERS, GETTING LOST AND SHOALS —

Before trucking on down to Morehead City, the crew luckily found this little spot to get the enclosure repaired. It was only about 30 miles out of Morehead before the crew took a wrong turn heading up the New River toward Jacksonville, North Carolina. A little while later the boys discovered a shoal, which required Haskell and Wolf to jump in and push the boat off.





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NIGHT AND DAY CHALLENGES— At night the salt spray would cake the plastic windshields, making it impossible for the crew to see. This left them no choice but to bundle up, unzip the enclosure and run in the cold. During the day, the afternoon sun would create a glare on the plastic that made it nearly impossible to see.

REGULAR SITES— While running at night was always a challenge, some of the sunsets on the ICW made going into the night a pleasure. Another common sight was the gas dock. Even though the boat had a fuel capacity of 108 gallons (thanks to the added 72-gallon fuel tank), the crew’s nearly constant running kept the demand for fuel high.

crew another 20 minutes.

“We were quickly getting the feel for the lay of the land and realized that this trip might not be as easy as we planned,” Knight admitted.

They ran the rest of the day worry free and made only two stops for food and fuel. As the sun dropped over the western horizon, the crew prepared for its first experience with night running.

NIGHT MANEUVERS

The running lights were on and the crew was alert. Even though they’d been running since 8:30 that morning, the chill air freshened their senses.

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The crew quickly fell into a rhythm. One person manned the wheel while another manned the spotlights, another manned the binoculars and another manned the gps and radar. There’s virtually no night traffic on the ICW this far north at night, but vigilance is always key.

They only encountered two other boats traveling the ICW while going from Georgetown, South Carolina, to Charleston — with the Francis Marion National Forest to starboard almost the entire way.

The crew pulled into Charleston City Marina at about midnight and had to wait until the gas dock

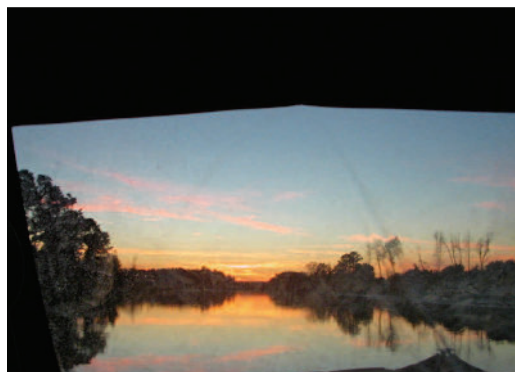
opened the next morning before striking out. Again, they learned that running straight through with only quick stops for gas and food isn’t always possible.

At a little after 9 a.m. on day three (Monday, November 15) the crew set back out into the ICW with a target of St. Augustine, Florida, which was 305 miles away. They ended up on another sandbar at about 9 p.m.; about an hour later a light bulb in one of their two spotlights burned out. They admitted that it was pretty difficult navigating into St. Augustine at night and ended up pulling into the municipal marina at midnight.

Day four took the crew from St. Augustine to Stuart, Florida, where they promised to pull into Evinrude’s testing area so Evinrude techs could do some diagnostic tests on the engine. On the way there, however, they learned that it’s always better to have more fuel than less. After already passing Daytona Beach and switching over to the other tank, they decided to plot out the next fuel stop. This is when they noticed that there wouldn’t be any major cities for quite a ways — and it was too late to double back to Daytona. They set their sights for Titusville — and luckily rolled in on fumes.

HOME RUN

They pulled into Stuart at about 5 p.m., so the Evinrude techs would have to wait until morning to have their fun taking down some numbers on the E-





TEC. Since it was late in the day, the crew decided to catch a night in a hotel for some much needed rest as they were planning on making the final push to Key West, which was about another 300 miles away, the following day. Because the Evinrude techs didn't finish up until mid-afternoon the next day, the crew was looking at a full night and morning of running.

Before it got dark, the crew began to notice the increasing frequency of manatee zones, which can sometimes be hard to spot. They actually learned this the hard way with a \$70 ticket from a county sheriff who dinged them for going a little too fast while going through one of the zones — they were more careful to mind the zones after that.

A little later they approached Singer Island, which is just north of West Palm Beach. It was getting late and the marina there closed at 9 p.m., so they decided to make a fuel stop so they wouldn't be stuck waiting for gas later on. After some inaccurate local knowledge and their third grounding (requiring another jump in the water to push free), they did make it in time to fuel up.

This is when they decided the numerous slow-speed zones were slowing them down and that they would cruise out to the ocean and follow parallel to the coast for a while — apparently the experience of the Chesapeake was no longer fresh in their minds. After about only 15 miles and an hour in 3- to 4-foot waves, they turned back into the ICW.

Soon they were plying the waters along Miami and, again, badly in need of fuel if they were going to make the final push to Key West. It was 2:30 a.m. and they figured the easiest way to gas up would be to find a launch ramp, have their land crew meet them there and haul the boat to a gas station for a quick pit stop,

which is exactly what they did.

They continued to follow the ICW, which hugs the Florida Keys on the Gulf side. They quickly discovered that with less land for guidance, they had to pay much more attention to following the lights of the channel markers.

They were greeted with a windy morning and waves building 6 to 8 feet. They slowed it down to 12 to 15 mph and took it one wave at a time. They hadn't been this spooked since starting out in the Chesapeake.

Finally, after a total of 1,168 miles, 122.5 hours, 1,800 buoys and 600 gallons of fuel, they pulled into the marina at Key West at 10:30 a.m. on day five — and they received more than a few stares. It's not every day a pontoon boat pulls into Key West.

"Our gear was strewn everywhere and tourists were looking at the boat trying to figure out why anyone would have winter coats and gloves lying in the sun," Knight laughed. "If only they had known where this 25-foot pontoon boat had come from!"



WEATHER WORN — The crew saw plenty of damage from the previous hurricane season, which was one of the worst on record. They also saw how rough the Gulf side of the ICW can get, which forced Wolf to once again pull out his foul-weather gear.

Avalon Excalibur 25 Elite

Builder

Avalon Pontoons, P.O. Box 698,
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www.avalonpontoons.com

Specifications

Length	25 ft.
Beam	8 ft., 6 in.
Number of tubes	3
Dry weight	2,173 lbs.
Fuel capacity	36 gals.
Maximum power	250 hp
Base price:	\$34,995*

* Price can vary depending on options and location — price does not include trailer



KEY WEST IN SIGHT — After almost 1,200 miles, 122 hours and 600 gallons of fuel, the crew rejoiced while pulling into Key West on a pontoon boat — a round of beers and some grub at Key West's well-known Half Shell Raw Bar was certainly in order.