

# **Little Titanic**

A Journey through Japan's Inland Sea  
and Beyond

**By Amy Chavez**

Little Titanic: A Journey through Japan's Inland Sea and Beyond (Moooo! Books, 2005)  
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### The Dinner Roll

June 1-3

If I were an astute modern young person, I'd sue the toy companies that make plastic boats for the bathtub and blame them for giving me the false impression that I could get to another part of the world in a piece of floating fiberglass. Now that I think about it, my boats always sank in the bathtub.

From the time we set off from Yakushima, we started the serious part of the ocean crossing. Things would be different from now on--no more overnight stops, no more chances to fuel up, stock up on food and fresh water, and no showers. We'd sail continuously all day and all night doing a 3 on 3 off rotation, which meant sleeping 3 hours, then steering at the helm 3 hours, giving everyone a chance to rest between shifts. We would not distinguish between day and night and we'd continue the shifts on a continuous basis. Since this was my first ocean crossing, I would take my shift with Paul until I felt comfortable enough to take the helm myself a few days later perhaps. At that time, we would still do 3 on 3 off shifts, but with three separate shifts, we'd each get 6 hours of sleep in between being at the helm instead of the current three.

Chichi Shima is a Japanese island under the jurisdiction of Tokyo. The only thing we knew about the island was that it had an immigration office and that was the only reason we were headed there instead of Guam. We left Yakushima at night in the rain. The rain hadn't stopped since we had arrived in Yakushima three days earlier.

My body did not take kindly to the new 3 on 3 off schedule. It seemed I was just starting to settle into a good sleep when it was time to get up again. Usually, in a 24 hour period, you only get up out of bed once. But getting up 8 times in 24 hours is, well, tiring, and going through the same old process of brushing your teeth and making coffee is a little too much routine for anybody. Besides, on the boat you never sleep very soundly since you always have to be ready to jump up and help if the person at the helm needs it. You sleep alert for shouts or bangs that might signal a call for help.

On the second day, we sailed through a couple of small storms that kept us busily pulling on ropes and reefing the main sail, but eventually the wind died back down after about 30 minutes each time and we were back to smooth sailing. It was just enough to get the adrenaline going, but not quite enough to be scared. You can see these storms coming and what really struck me was how fast they come up. The wind starts getting strong and suddenly, just 10 minutes later, you're in the woes of rain, wind and heavy gusts. One minute you're sitting on the deck drinking wine and eating cheese and saying, "Wow, isn't this fantastic!" and the next you're reefing down the sails and the skipper is yelling "Damn it Huey!" It's that fast. Wine is left undrunk and cheese is tossed downstairs back into the galley because you must attend to the boat's needs.

On June 3rd, 400 km (250 miles) off the coast of Japan, Paul and I were doing the 11:00 to 14:00 shift at the helm while the skipper slept for three hours. I had fixed some hot tea in the galley and brought it up to Paul. The seas were relatively calm and the wind blowing

from the northeast at about 60 degrees. We both had heavy wet weather gear on as we had been sailing through three days of rain. I looked out at the sea to observe the weather conditions. The day was grey and nothing much was going on weather wise. There were white caps, which meant the wind was over 15 knots, but that was nothing to worry about. But then the wind picked up and started to get gusty. I don't like gusty, an unpredictable element of wind. Strong consistent wind can be dealt with, but gusts are tricky.

I watched the wind meter nervously. The wind was blowing at 18 knots and occasionally jumping over 20 knots. "Shouldn't we pull in the head sail Paul?" Paul's face was etched with tension, with deep furrows in his forehead. "Not yet," he said, his eyes never leaving the wind meter. I looked at the barometer: 980 hectopascals.

The wind meter kept rising 23...24...25 knots. I was glad I wasn't the one steering. The boat heeled more and more but Paul just glided confidently over the big swells adjusting the wheel ever so slightly as we came off each swell. This was the kind of weather real sea men long for--just rough enough to be exciting but not enough to be dangerous.

But within half an hour, the wind meter zoomed up to 30 knots and held steady. "Call the skipper up here," Paul said.

The skipper was already up, in the middle of a 10-minute groggy wake-up routine that involved a lot of yawning, grunting and face rubbing. He looked out of the cabin through squinted eyes. "What's up mate?" he said, diverting his eyes to the floor of the cockpit in an attempt to hide his sensitive eyes from direct light.

"We're going to pull in the heady," Paul said. "The wind is up over 30 knots." I was relieved that Paul had called the skipper up since I knew very well that the wind was too strong for me to pull on any ropes, even if they were winched. "Yeah, hang on mate," said the skipper. "Let me just finish making some toast and I'll be right up."

Finish making toast?

The wind continued to creep up the meter 30.....32.....34 knots.

Toast? Damn.

35....40.....

"Get your ass up here!" I yelled inside my head.

.....45 knots, gusts up to 55.

The skipper came out of the cabin, mouth still full and chewing away, licking jam off his fingers. "Paul, you keep steering. Amy, you pull in the head sail while I release the jib sheet."

Damn, I guess I wasn't going to get out of this after all. What the skipper says, goes, so I winched the self-furler and pulled as hard as I could. Nothing happened. I pulled and pulled. Paul reached over, one hand on the steering wheel and yanked the sheet with his

other hand. The sheet didn't budge.

"Bugger! The sheet is caught on the jib mast." Again.

And now it had come off the self-furling drum. Paul tried to let it out some then bring it in, but it didn't work. The only thing to do was to climb up to the bow and untangle it manually. Suddenly the rope snapped out of my hands and out of the fastener. Now all of the head sail was out, flapping wildly in the wind, making the jib sheet irretrievable. The head sail made loud slapping sounds as it snapped back and forth against itself. The noise was unbearable, each slapping sound reminding us that at any time the sail could rip. And it did just that. "Bugger! Damn it Huey!"

"Come help me," said the skipper and soon I was making my way up to the bow on my hands and knees, my harness attached to the jack stays. It was the first time I had ever been in such high seas, and to tell you the truth, the bow rose up so high, I felt more like I was rock climbing. Once at the crest of the wave, the bow would crash down on the other side. I nervously pulled the sail down and helped the skipper tie it down to the boat.

In the meantime, the wind speed continued to increase. The main sail had already been reefed two times, leaving only the smallest area of the sail exposed. But even this was too much wind for the boat. The wind was so strong, it had already ripped the main sail.

The skipper went down into the cabin to get out the storm jib. A storm jib is smaller and stronger than a regular head sail or jib and offers very little sail area for the wind to catch but allows you to keep the boat pointing into the wind, a key to survival in rough seas. But once in the cabin, the skipper reconsidered. "I'll do it later when the storm has calmed down a bit. I've got a ton of lead hanging down below on the keel--this boat is safe as a house." It was true that the keel of this boat was particularly heavy. The whole boat had been modified to have a longer, heavier keel for racing. I noted the barometer had dropped to 965--very strong typhoon conditions--and that the wind was 55 to 60 knots. In another hour, the barometer was at 960 with gusts at 70 to 75.

We had now gone "bare poles" and waited out the storm in the cockpit and, believe it or not, tried to get some sleep. "Don't worry," said the captain, "she always heads into the wind. She's a good boat."

Do you remember the hotel beds with "magic fingers" where you put a coin in the box and the bed shakes you to sleep for five minutes? Well, imagine not magic fingers but Magic Johnson dribbling your bed down the court and dunking it into a hoop. Do you think you'd be able to sleep through it? There was no way I could sleep through this storm. The boat was being tossed in the waves and every now and then I'd hear a SLAM! that would then send the boat rocking furiously until it shuddered. It was like a Mack truck hitting the side of our boat, except I was smart enough to know that there are no Mack trucks in the sea. Those sounds were large waves crashing into the boat! Every five minutes or so a big one would crash over the boat, sending the boat rocking furiously. I call this toy boat status, because the boat responds to waves very much like the toy boat in your bathtub does.

Paul got ready to go out on to the deck to center the boom and secure the rudder. He went to open the hatch but I stopped him. "Aren't you going to put your harness on?"

He had forgotten, and turned back to put his harness on.

As I laid there in toy boat status, the boat going up and down with the swells and the occasional slam of the imaginary Mack trucks, I was glad to know that at least it would be over soon. SLAM! The skipper had told me before that storms never last more than 24hrs. And sometimes just two, so maybe this would be over in two hours. Besides, this was our third day of sailing through rain and being cooped up in the cabin except for the 3-hour rotations in the rain at the helm. SLAM! Surely the waves would soon die down, the sun would break through the clouds, and we'd be having dinner within a couple hours while watching the sun set. BIG SLAM!

I looked up and everyone was sitting on the ceiling. The boat was upside down.



**A picture from the Inland Sea part of the trip which shows the self-furling jib at the bow**



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## Japan Lite

Amy Chavez has been a columnist for The Japan Times since 1997. She lives on a small island of just 700 people in Japan's Seto Inland Sea. Visit her website to take a tour of her island and meet some of the locals  
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Other books and e-books by Amy include *Guidebook to Japan: What the other guidebooks won't tell you*, *Shiraishi: Island of Mists & Trances*, and *Goldilocks Goes to Japan and other legends gone awry*, all available at the Dollar Bookstore at  
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## Moooo! Bar

Amy runs the Moooo! Bar, a cocktail bar on the beach on Shiraishi Island in the Inland Sea. Come have a Moooo! margarita and join the herd!

Or make a virtual herd to the Moooo! Bar at  
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