

Point Reyes National Seashore

Beckoning boaters beyond the Golden Gate Bridge

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LESLEE JAQUETTE

SIR FRANCIS DRAKE GOT AROUND. He hunted pirates in the Caribbean and he rounded the Horn. In 1579, the great English sailor also explored the Central California coast, landing at Point Reyes only 26 miles northwest from today's Golden Gate Bridge. After navigating possibly the foggiest and windiest point on the coast, the crew of *Golden Hind* anchored in the lea of 300-foot-high cliffs in an enormous, protected anchorage that is now known as Drakes Bay.

On a perfect day last May, I set forth with Neil Riley and Mike Clausen of Bay Island Yachts of Alameda, Calif., on an Arrow-

Cat 30 to discover what Drakes Bay and Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS) have to offer 21st-century boaters. Due to its

speed and seakeeping abilities, the New Zealand-designed power catamaran completed the trek in 90 minutes, less time than it would take to drive a car there.

On the roomy, smooth-running family cruiser, we ran under the gate on an easy day-escape to this preserved peninsula that feels remote and still looks much as it did to the global navigator. After we dropped the hook in Drakes Bay, Riley observed as he nodded back toward San

Francisco, "There are 7 million people there and we are the only boat here."

AHOY, POINT REYES PENINSULA

Point Reyes National Seashore is a triangular piece of real estate that juts into the Pacific Ocean. Located on the west side of the San Andreas Fault Zone, the 65,000-square-acre park appears poised in time, ready for the "big one" that will make it an island.

The Coast Miwok peo-

Golden Hind, an ArrowCat 30, was the only boat for miles in pristine Point Reyes on the day of the writer's visit.





Sir Francis Drake originally named Point Reyes Nova Albion, or “New England,” because of its resemblance to the Cliffs of Dover. It was renamed Point Reyes by the Spanish explorer Vizcaino in the 1600s.

ple lived here for thousands of years before Drake clambered ashore and named it Nova Albion, which means New England in reference to its resemblance to the Cliffs of Dover. About 25 years later, Spanish explorer Don Sebastian Vizcaino named Point Reyes in honor of his arrival on the Feast of the Three Kings (Los Tres Reyes). Later, after the missionaries arrived and the Miwok population declined, the peninsula became known for its dairy ranching, which continues under a park-lease arrangement.

Like an anteater snout poking 10 miles out into the ocean, Point Reyes’ rocks and killer fog took a toll on coastal mariners until the Point Reyes Lighthouse was con-

structed in 1870. Since the lighthouse is accessible by land, visitors can hike down and up 300 steps to enjoy stunning views of the headlands and migrating gray whales.

BOATING TO POINT REYES

Riley and Clausen fired up the ArrowCat 30’s twin Suzuki 175’s for our trip to Point Reyes. Running at 30 mph, we passed Alcatraz, the San Francisco waterfront and ran out under the Golden Gate Bridge. Enjoying perfect conditions with sun, and no wind or channel surf, we followed deep water out past the Bonita Lighthouse. From Stinson Beach we stayed inside the Bonita Channel buoys, heading northwest up the coast across Bolinas Lagoon.

At the helm, Riley dodged dozens of crab-pot buoys floating in 80 feet of water. The weather was so clear we could see the Farallones 20 miles to the southwest. When we turned the corner at Bolinas Point, I had a difficult time absorbing the vastness of the seashore.

Less than an hour from civilization, Drakes Bay is a 20-mile-long arch punctuated with sand stretches and high bluffs. On this stellar Friday, we spotted only three people walking the beach and no other boats.

As we ran toward Alamere Falls, I recalled the words of Riley’s buddy boaters and Point Reyes regulars Sharon and Vaughn Hampton of Grass Valley, Calif.

“It’s the perfect day out-

ing or weekend getaway because it’s close, yet totally away from the hustle and bustle of the bay,” said Sharon, who has spent a dozen weekends here on their 51-foot bluewater cruiser. “With only the old fishing pier, cattle on the highlands and sea lions hauled out on the beach, it’s like stepping back 100 years.”

DRAKES BAY AND DRAKES ESTERO

On our tour of Drakes Bay we passed the entrance to Drakes Estero, the shallow nursery behind Limantour Spit that is guarded by a bar marked by a line of breaking waves. I stood on the bow to get a better view of what opens up into a 2,000-acre estuary comprised of five bays roughly arranged in the

shape of a hand. Only human-powered vessels are allowed in the estero to decrease the impact on the birds, marine mammals and sea life that thrive here. Each year the estero is closed to humans for seal haulouts from March 1 to June 30.

Other months a dinghy or kayak exploration of the estero is one of the highlights of this destination. Riley's main warning is to enter the estero on a flood. Otherwise, the bar crossing can get a little hairy. Once you're inside, he suggests snooping into the finger bays to look for bat rays, leopard sharks, brown and white pelicans, osprey and even some of the only free-roaming tule elk in California. Afterward, Riley said he likes to beach the dinghy for a hike on the Sunset Beach, Estero or Bull Point trails.

As we slowed to anchor, I recalled Vaughn Hampton's description of one "bear of a trip" when the wind was howling 40 mph with 6-to 8-foot waves. "The beauty of it is that Drakes Bay is a big hook and that 99 percent of the time once you are inside you tuck in behind the bluffs and you get a flat, calm, delightful anchorage with great holding."

A DRAMATIC YEAR-ROUND DESTINATION

In the winter, Drakes Bay is also rife with drama, starting when the sea elephant males claim pieces of beach and accumulate harems with up to 40 females. "These big beachmasters are all scarred up from where they punch



Mike Clausen of Bay Island Yachts takes a relaxing dinghy ride in Drakes Bay.

each other with their tusks," said Riley, who describes the big males as the size killer whales. "From the boat it is fascinating to watch the sea elephants and sea lions courting, pupping and breeding."

After anchoring, Riley and Clausen launched the inflatable off the stern of the ArrowCat for a row around the Pt. St. Joseph Fish Company fish station and Coast Guard Station. We observed a rookery of probably 150 sea lions sunning on the beach near where we landed at the Kenneth Patrick Visitor Center.

A riot of wildflowers covered the hillside as I hiked up a short trail to the top of the bluff. I was overwhelmed by the sweeping panorama that includes the historic Point Reyes Lifeboat Station and Chimney Rock, located about 3 miles east of Point Reyes Lighthouse.

On my walk back to the beach, I met Law Enforcement Ranger Eric

Peterson. He said that the biggest issue for boaters in Drakes Bay is keeping away from the marine mammals. Besides that, he agreed with Riley, that

our spot in front of the visitor's center or tucked in behind the lifeboat station are the two best anchorages. Yes, he has seen all sizes of motor- and sail-

What Boaters Need to Know About Point Reyes National Seashore

- Drakes and Limantour esteros are closed from March 1–June 30 each year for marine mammal protection.
- Dogs are prohibited on national park beaches.
- Ask an experienced boater to show you how to transit Drakes Estero and Tomales Bay entrances.
- Listen to weather forecasts and check tides before attempting entrances.
- Gray whale watching is best from January through April.
- Tidepooling is a rare treat. The only minus tide remaining in 2008 is November 11.
- Visit the area and Point Reyes Lighthouse by car to get the "lay of the land." Nearby accommodations include Ten Inverness Way B & B.
- Bring your hiking boots. Access trails from all along the shoreline.
- Fish en route when salmon fishing resumes along the coast.
- Look for northern elephant seals hauled out on pocket beaches surrounding the Point Reyes headlands in early winter.
- Obtain a free permit for beach fires from many park visitor centers.
- Kenneth Patrick Visitor Center and Drakes Beach Café are open weekends and holidays 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call (415) 669-1250.
- For the Point Reyes National Seashore and Tomales Bay State Park Boating Guide, call (415) 663-8054.

boats here, but usually only one or two boats at a time or the occasional boat rendezvous group.

“We enforce all Coast Guard, state and federal regulations for boating safety,” warned Peterson, who added with a smile, “This is a beautiful place; it’s gorgeous. There is a reason it is a national seashore.”

Back on board for lunch, Riley related several anecdotes shared with the Hamptons. In this very anchorage, the friends saw a gray whale the length of their sailboat dive under its keel. On another over-nighter, they awoke to find a sea lion pup sleeping in their dinghy. Riley recalled the dilemma. “Vaughn was wondering,



The Point Reyes Lighthouse was built in 1870 and was retired from service in 1975 when the U.S. Coast Guard installed an automated light. Below: Looking for decent anchorage? Try the area near the Point Reyes Coast Guard station.



‘How do you get a 300-pound animal out of a little boat?’”

TOMALES BAY

Trailerboaters looking for a super-protected anchorage can run into 12-mile-long Tomales Bay, with its entrance just north of Point Reyes off Tomales Point. Once you’re inside, it offers an abundance of wildlife, as well as access to parks with permit camping and sleepy backwater villages. Boaters can launch at Miller County Park (Nick’s Cove) on the eastern side and at the Golden Hind Motel in Inverness on the western shoreline.

The challenge is getting into Tomales Bay. A former rescue patroller on Lake Superior, Peterson underscored the dangers boaters must navigate at the mouth of Tomales Bay and Drakes Estero.

“Low tides reveal mud-

flats, tides can be off schedule and winds can pick up unexpectedly, producing a wind tunnel effect,” the ranger said. “If boaters want to use Tomales Bay, I advise they make the transit with an experienced boater.”

WALK THE SHORE WITH SIR FRANCIS

Before departing Point Reyes National Seashore, I left my ArrowCat 30 hosts long enough for a short jog on Drakes Beach. I enjoyed the warmth, the water and the light of this incomparable setting.

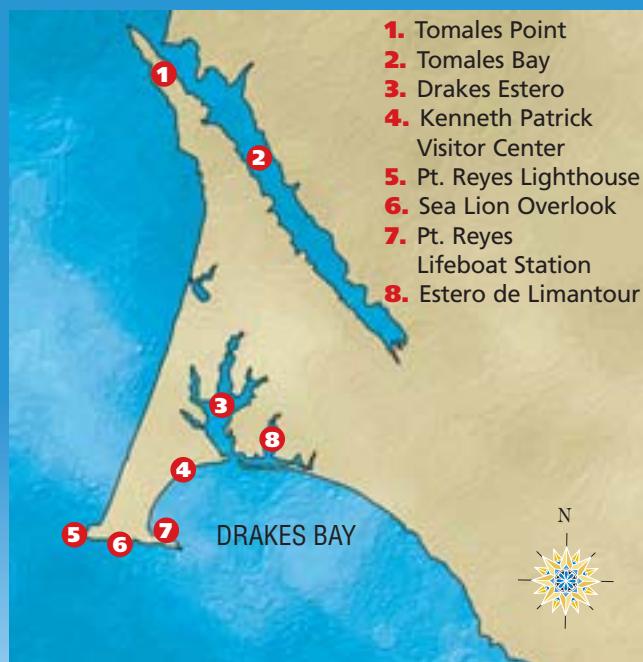
Here we were, the only boat anchored in the lea of one of Sir Francis Drake’s finest discoveries. By amazing grace and situated less than 30 miles from the Golden Gate, it remains very similar to the pristine state in which the great explorer found it five centuries ago. 🍷

Contact Information

ArrowCat 30: Bay Island Yachts, (510) 814-0400; www.arrowcatmarine.com

Point Reyes National Seashore: (415) 464-5100; www.nps.gov/pore

Ten Inverness Way B & B: (415) 669-1648; www.teninvernessway.com



Not to be used for navigational purposes

