

# DESTINATION DELTA



**I**t's California's version of European canal cruising, with a touch of southern Bayou boating. It's a chance for aspiring Bay Area cruisers to get their feet wet. It's warm water, stiff breezes and a long list of small towns and salty bars.

The Sacramento and San Joaquin River Delta is right around the corner from the Central Bay, but it can feel like sailing into another world. This hot, lazy, inland maze is composed of 1,100 square miles of bending cuts, shallow sloughs and reed-lined inlets that are ideally suited to spring and summer getaways.

Experienced Delta cruisers recommend giving yourself a full day to transit

*Many Delta anchorages offer sunny skies, warm water and relaxation.*

*photos latitude / john*

from the Central Bay up to Benicia, Pittsburg or Antioch — the unofficial gateways and staging areas — followed by another full day to make your way deep into the Delta. Sailing conditions can vary dramatically from day to day, and can be challenging when strong headwinds combine with river currents bolstered by an ebb. Dotted with windmills, the Delta is famous for its big, steady summer breezes.

Playing the currents can make a huge difference in the speed of your trip and the amount of fuel you burn en route.

Ironically, it's best to return to the Bay on a flood, because bashing into steep ebb chop is no fun — and it's hard on the gas mileage. But you should be able to sail getting to the Delta and up the main rivers.

As the name might suggest, the Sacramento River goes all the way to our state's capitol, and it's the more populated of the two rivers, with towns like Rio Vista, Isleton and Walnut Grove. By contrast, the San Joaquin wanders through state parks and wildlife areas before ending up at Stockton.

Many first-time Delta cruisers worry that it will be too shallow for their sailboats. Not to worry, say the old hands.

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— THE GREAT ESCAPE



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The two rivers are major shipping channels, and many of the sloughs have enough water to accommodate a decent-sized draft. But good charts, reliable depth finders and keeping a keen eye on the tides are all required for a drama-free trip. Those in the know say it's pleasantly easy to get lost in the Delta's labyrinth of rivers and tributaries. Remember, "If you haven't run aground, you haven't been around." And groundings are usually in soft, forgiving mud.

We'd like to think of the Delta as an excellent training ground for aspiring cruisers. A trip to the Delta requires planning and provisioning, using your VHF and other instruments, and practicing basic, but for most sailors, seldom-used skills like anchoring. Even keeping watch for monotonous hours at the helm while put-putting from point A to a distant point B is a seemingly mundane but important ability to hone.

We asked our *Lectronic Latitude* readers to share their Delta tips and strategies. Excerpts appear below. (Thanks to everyone out there who took the time to write in.)

"The first time I went to the Delta in 2007 I swore I'd never go back," wrote Brian Forster. "We went for the Mandeville Fourth of July fireworks (a zoo, but great fireworks), but it took two days to go up there, three days to come back, and my future wife got heatstroke and a ride in an ambulance. Nevertheless, I have been back almost every year since and have done the Delta Doo Dah twice. What's the difference? I know what to expect now (plus I haven't gone back in July).

"First of all: It's a long trip, especially coming back. There's no getting around it. The hardest, most boring part is Middle Ground from Pittsburg to Benicia. I have learned to work the tides, leaving early from either Pittsburg (short first day, long second) or Benicia (long first day, short second). Many people do it in one long day, but not me.

"The key is to leave before the wind starts, otherwise you'll be hobby-horsing on the ebb. One of the best bits of advice I got was to motorsail on a reefed main.

The motor will do most of the work, but the sail helps steady the boat through the water. I also use the traveler to hyper-extend the main over to the windward side. That way, I'm 'motor-tacking' with very short tacking angles.

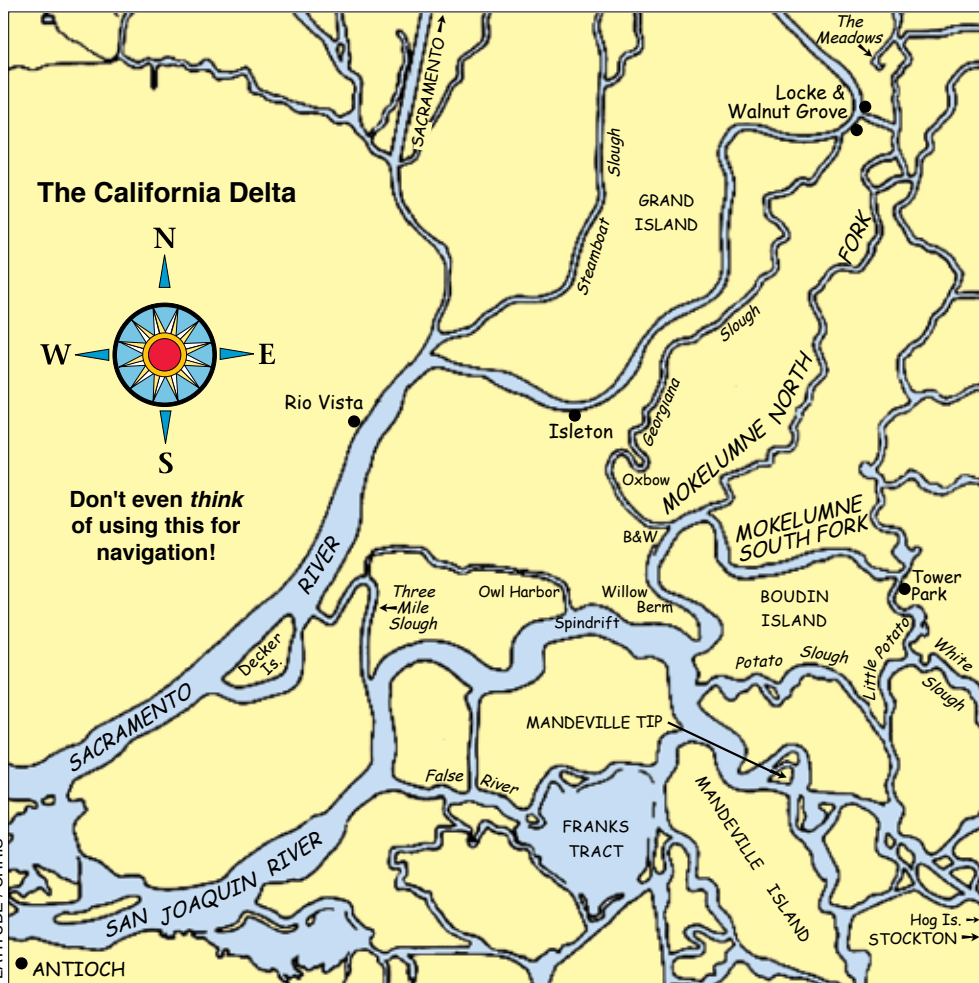
"Speaking of the motor, you will be using it a lot. Going up is one thing — doing the Delta Ditch Run last year was a blast, as we flew the spinnaker for miles and miles! But coming back is another thing. Make sure your motor is reliable. And the heat! Yes, that's part of the reason we go, but be prepared and don't underestimate it.

"So why do I keep going back? It's like a week-long camping trip with the relaxation, fun and camaraderie that goes with it. When you've spent days at anchor doing nothing but reading, swimming, telling stories with friends, watching wildlife, napping, hanging out in a hammock — I hang a sky chair from a halyard above the foredeck — you'll unwind like you won't believe."

"I've been going up to the Delta for over 45 years now," wrote Tim Stapleton. "I remember when it was just a slow backwater (oh, wait a minute, it still is).

"One of my favorite places to tie up is at the east side of Hog Island. Several benefits: It is right off the San Joaquin shipping channel (across from the old Lost Isle). It has deep water and is a 5 mph zone! But you can see the comings and goings on the channel, if you wish, or go deeper. And there are trees there that provide afternoon shade."

"Pittsburg Marina has a really nice bathroom with great showers," according to Max Perez. "Very clean; maybe cleaner and nicer than my shower at home. They also have a well-maintained pair of fuel docks. The fuel wharf at Willow Berm



# — THE GREAT ESCAPE



**Rail down on the Delta — It's all the wind and chop of a summer in San Francisco, without the cold and fog. Playing the tides can make the difference between bashing into an ebb or gliding on a flood.**

minishing mothball fleet). Pay attention to the charts, come into the slough at something other than dead low tide, favoring the left (west) shoreline all the way. Anchor somewhere before Goodyear Slough, dropping the hook in good mud in 20 feet of water quite close to the west shore.

"The east side of the slough is very shallow at low tide. Get the dinghy in the water and explore miles and miles of sloughs. Watch for migratory fowl, beavers, river otters and muskrats. Swim in late summer; the water is pretty chilly earlier. Laze around until a not-too-long trip back to the Bay on Sunday, hopefully catching San Pablo Bay in early morning before it kicks up too much. An alternative is to head into Benicia Marina Saturday afternoon to get a jump on San Pablo Bay Sunday morning."

"We usually head up to the Delta from Alameda around Labor Day, and we've learned a few things over the years," wrote Pete Butler and Bethany Smith. "While we can make it up to Potato Slough in a fun day, it takes longer to come back. We usually wind up spending our last night on the hook at China Camp in San Rafael. The Port Chicago Reach and the eastbound entrance to San Pablo Bay can be rough in the afternoons, so if your boat doesn't go to weather well in chop you might consider spending the previous night somewhere like Pittsburg, Decker Island or Benicia.

"Time between marinas is often limited by ice supply and holding-tank size, so spend some time before you leave figuring out how to solve both of these problems. There are lots of places to resupply

Marina is huge and easy to tie up to.

"If you are approaching a dredge with contradictory indications of which side to pass (diamonds on one side vs. sign with arrow saying 'pass this side' pointed the opposite way), just hail them on the VHF, which is better than guessing.

"Benicia Marina is a few blocks from town, where there are shops to get supplies. They have a great yacht club as well. This may be a good first stop depending on where in the Bay one is sailing from."

**T**here are 30 bridges spread across the Delta. Some cruising forums caution against putting too much faith in charts when determining bridge heights, relying instead on the scale posted on the bridge itself, or calling the tender to ask what the current vertical clearance is. Each bridge has its own telephone number, or can be reached on VHF channels 9 or 16. See [www.deltaboating.com/bridges.htm](http://www.deltaboating.com/bridges.htm) for information on Delta bridges.

"Most bridges on the Delta's rivers and sloughs are operational," said Bud Kerner. "They either lift, swing or are the bascule type. The main bridge is the Helen Madere Memorial, also known as

the Rio Vista Bridge, which spans the Sacramento River.

"The Three Mile Slough Bridge and the Mokelumne River Bridge are also operational 12 months of the year. The other bridges typically operate from the first of May to the end of October. Their approximate hours are 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week.

"The Potter Yachters put on two organized sailing events in the Delta each year: the Delta Sail in May starts at B&W Marina on the Mokelumne River and overnights at the Spindrift Marina on the San Joaquin. The Bridges Sail is in October, and takes the boats through seven bridges on the rivers and sloughs. It starts in Rio Vista and overnights at the Oxbow Marina on Georgiana Slough. It's approximately 50 miles of sailing and motoring through the Delta."

"Short on time?" asked Al Fricke. "Catch a Friday flood with a downwind/beam reach ride to Suisun Slough (just past the steadily di-

LATITUDE / LADONNA

## THE DIRT ON DELTA BRIDGES



Most of the drawbridges on the Delta's busy waterways are tended during the day, and an opening can be requested on VHF Channel 9 or by sounding one long and one short blast on your horn.

A few — such as the bridge on the North Fork of the Mokelumne River, leading to The Meadows — require at least 24 hours' notice for an opening. To make an appointment, call CalTrans at (707) 374-2134 or USCG Station Rio Vista at (707) 374-2871. Many bridges open to schedules, and opening times may change with the seasons. Most Bay Area tidebooks have drawbridge info, as do *Franko's Map of the California Delta* and *Hal Schell's Delta Map and Guide*.

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## WHAT'S DOIN' IN THE DELTA

Check out [www.californiadelta.org](http://www.californiadelta.org) for more on Delta events throughout the year.

### Fourth of July Fireworks and Doin's

- San Joaquin — Fireworks at Mandeville Tip County Park, presented by Hilton Hotels.
- Antioch — Near downtown's Riverview Lodge. (925) 757-1800.
- Pittsburg — Fireworks over the water. (925) 432-7301.
- Stockton — All American Water Feast, featuring food, music, entertainment, a carnival and fireworks over the water at the Stockton waterfront. (209) 464-5246.
- Rio Vista — Fireworks on display at the city waterfront.
- Suisun City Marina — Live music, crafts, food, a kiddie carnival and evening fireworks over the harbor. (707) 429-2628. More information can be found at [www.sacdelta.com](http://www.sacdelta.com).

### Other Doin's to Mark on Your Calendar

- July 29 — Benicia Waterfront Festival. California's former capitol celebrates its historic

waterfront with two days of live music, craft beer tastings, food, vendors and kids' activity area. Go to [www.beniciamainstreet.org](http://www.beniciamainstreet.org) or call (707) 745-9791.

- July 30 — Courtland Pear Fair, a staple of summer in the Delta. 'Prepear' yourself for pears. Info, [www.pearfair.com](http://www.pearfair.com).

- August 5 — Taste of the Delta. Stockton Yacht Club. A wine, food and music festival 1-4 p.m. Info, [www.tasteofthedelta.com](http://www.tasteofthedelta.com) or (916) 777-4041.

- Sept. 9-10 — Pittsburg Seafood Festival at Pittsburg Marina. Sample tasty treats from more than 40 vendors while listening to live music. Info, [www.pittsburgseafoodfestival.com](http://www.pittsburgseafoodfestival.com).

- Sept. 14-17 — Lodi Grape Festival & Harvest Fair. Celebrate everything grape as they've done since 1907. Info, [www.grapefestival.com](http://www.grapefestival.com).

- Sept. 16 — Delta Blues Festival, on the Antioch waterfront, free. Great boat-in venue! Info, [www.deltabluesfestival.net](http://www.deltabluesfestival.net).

you generally stay closer to the rocked levees than the weedy ones. If you can find a hole to drop your anchor in and swing safely, do it. The deeper the bottom, the better your anchor will set (fewer weeds down there) and the less water hyacinth you'll pick up. If you have to do the shore-tie thing, you're going to spend a lot of time clearing weeds.

"Speaking of weeds, make sure your raw-water strainer lid isn't frozen shut before you leave — you'll be checking it daily. There's also a good chance you'll be diving on your prop and raw-water intake to clear them as well, so bring a mask and snorkel. And keep an eye on your coolant temp while motoring.

"We used to drag our dinghy up there, but the last few times we haven't bothered and we don't miss it. Now we just bring lots of floaty toys.

"The Delta is full of wonderful places, but we've had the nicest times at Five Fingers, Potato Slough, tied up to that old barge behind Hog Island, and tied up to a tree in Georgiana Slough. Those are all beautiful spots."

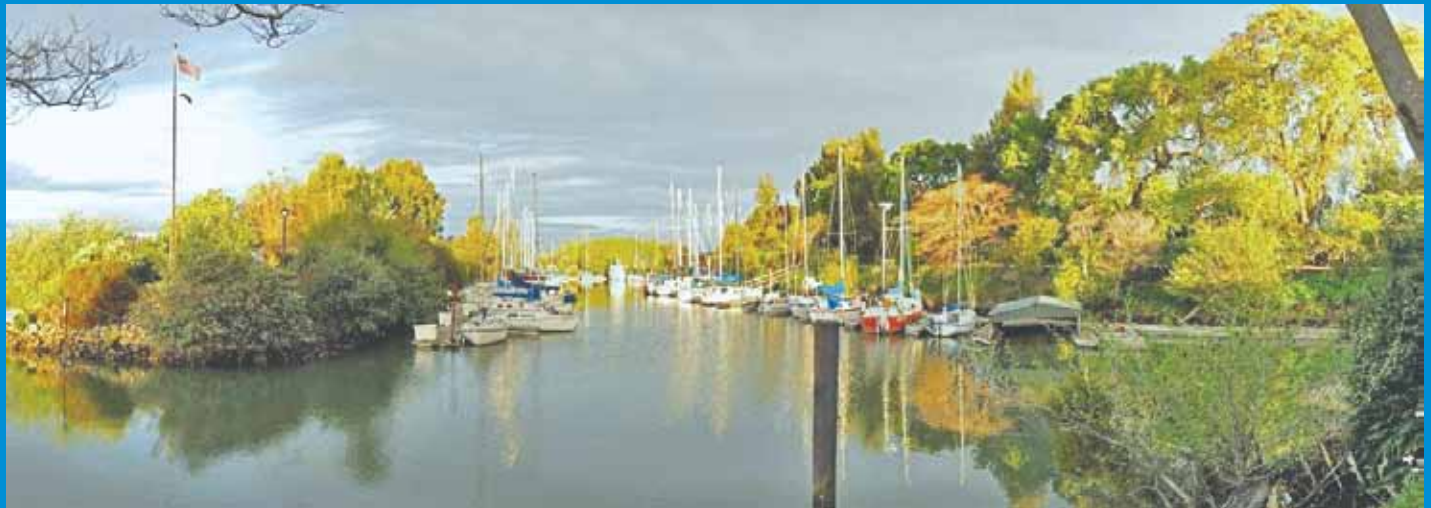
— *latitude*/timmy

and pump out, but we usually wind up hitting Tower Park, Walnut Grove and Pittsburg in the course of a weeklong

trip. Those are also good places to pick up guests for a night or two aboard.

"Avoiding the bottom isn't too hard if

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