

The Professional Captain

Some Cruising Chronicles of Captain Don Fleming



Captain Don Fleming is well known on the Hudson River and the Sound for his on-board training in docking, maneuvering, navigation, and electronics. He holds a USCG Master of Oceans license for power and sail up to 100 tons and has over thirty years experience as a professional captain. For additional information visit www.captaindonfleming.com or call 914-941-3998.

“Cruising through New York Harbor: Harlem River to Hell Gate and Long Island Sound”

Many boaters on the Hudson travel over to Long Island Sound and areas beyond for an annual summer cruise; others only think or dream about it. My column this year is focused on sharing some of my own cruising experiences perhaps to help some new boaters who have never taken the trip, and maybe to recall some good memories for those who have. Last month I discussed cruising through New York Harbor the long way: around the Battery and up the East River to Hell Gate. This month it will be the short cut through the Harlem River, Hell Gate, and the remaining segment of the East River out to Long Island Sound.

I have been through the harbor hundreds of times in my own boats and in clients' boats. I often take clients on intensive training cruises to the Sound. We focus on hands-on navigation and electronics in some of the area's more intricate channels and harbors. It's a great way to gain the skill and confidence needed to safely navigate beyond the Hudson. In addition, for those who may be interested, I also offer a three evening classroom session on charting and electronics called the “Long Island Sound Navigation Briefing” which will start in late April at the conference center in Haverstraw Marina.

Running through the Harlem River

The short-cut through the Harlem River, while less spectacular than rounding the Battery, saves about thirteen miles by eliminating that part of New York Harbor. This route takes about two hours at 20 knots from Haverstraw Bay. If you want to follow the chart as you read through this, I would suggest MAPTECH's chart # 8 “New York Harbor and Approaches”, which gives the entire route in one view. ChartKit Region 3 is less desirable but still useable. It covers the same area in several chopped up segments and omits the Harlem River.

The Harlem River is about seven miles long and nearly two hundred yards wide with deep water throughout except the last mile where it gets shallow along the banks. It's a fairly simple and straightforward run with no navigational buoys in the entire river. The main concerns are the bridges, the no wake zones, and the current and debris. You'll run along side the Major Deegan Expressway, pass by Yankee Stadium, cruise through several industrial areas, and travel under a total of fifteen bridges. You may even pass one of the famous green and white Circle Line Tour Boats circumnavigating Manhattan. If you do, beware of its wake, which can be larger than it first appears. The lowest

bridge is twenty four feet at Mean High Water (MHW), and none of the bridges will open for pleasure boats, thus eliminating the run for sailboats, large motor yachts and sport fishing boats with tall towers. Obviously, be sure of your clearance.

The first interesting part of the trip is actually entering the Harlem River at the Spuyten Duyvil Railroad Bridge. The opening is located about two miles north of the George Washington on the east side of the Hudson. You will notice the much larger Henry Hudson Parkway Bridge arching directly behind the low lying railroad bridge. The Spuyten Duyvil Railroad Bridge, which is hailed by name on VHF Channel 13, opens on request most of the time. Tell the operator the name of your vessel, which side of the bridge (Hudson or Harlem) you are on, and request an opening. He'll respond by telling you the time of the next opening. If a train is scheduled there can be a delay, usually no more than about ten minutes. It's a good idea to cruise up to a few hundred yards of the bridge before hailing as the operator will not respond to your call until he can actually see your boat. If the bridge is already open, it's still good to call for permission before proceeding.

Once the bridge fully opens, enter through the starboard channel. The current can be swift at times in the narrow passage. If you feel the current pulling you to the side, simply steer to the middle and calmly apply a little more throttle.

Once through the bridge you can pick up speed briefly, if you want to, but you will have to slow down for the first “No Wake Zone” in about one half mile at the Columbia University rowing shell docks



on the starboard side just below the tennis bubble. After that, you can speed up again to the Broadway Bridge, the lowest automobile traffic bridge on the river at twenty-four feet MHW. Sound one prolonged blast on your horn as you approach, slow down a little, and stay well to starboard around the blind bend. From there it's a straight run of about another half mile to the Fordham Road Bridge which has another posted “No Wake Zone”. Take the starboard channel here and for every bridge throughout the remainder of the passage. Keep a sharp lookout for debris and be courteous of your wake as you approach rowing shells and other small craft.

The next posted “No Wake” zone is another half mile at a small boat club on the starboard side. The boaters at this club tend to get “down-right upset” if you rock them, and I don't blame them. The rest of the run is pretty much the same thing with “No Wake Zones” posted on most bridges. In addition, recently there have been some construction areas around the Third Avenue and Willis Avenue Bridges resulting in one or another channel being closed

and several temporary "No Wake Zones". Exercise caution, follow the detour signs, and dial-back the speed as you proceed through. The final "No Wake" zone occurs just north of the Triborough Bridge on the port side where the NYPD Patrol Boat Marina is located.

Once under the Triborough you round the bend to starboard and run down the last mile to Hell Gate. As mentioned earlier, stay in the middle here as the river is silted in along both shores, and head for the tall and thin pedestrian foot bridge connecting Manhattan with Wards and Randalls Island.


Running Through Hell Gate

The famous or infamous Hell Gate is actually quite picturesque and exciting. Small in size: only about one half by one half mile square, it

is bordered by the FDR Drive in Manhattan on the west, by the northern tip of Roosevelt Island on the south, by Halletts Point in Astoria Queens on the east, and by Wards Island in the Bronx on the north. You'll see the entire Upper East Side of Manhattan opening into view as you come down the Harlem River.

The area gets its reputation because of the swift, swirling currents that result from the confluence of the Harlem and East Rivers. At maximum, the current can run up to five knots creating whirlpools and rapids that are quite severe. For more information on tactics and timing a run through swift currents and related issues, see last month's article on rounding the Battery by visiting www.captaindonfleming.com, click on "Cruising Articles" then click on "Cruising Through New York Harbor: destination Long Island Sound".

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Most planning powerboats can usually traverse the area with little more than a bumpy ride. The main danger is collision avoidance. The Atlantic Coast Pilot, the official government guide, warns:

The crooked channel, the strong tidal currents, and the heavy traffic in Hell Gate require extra caution on the part of the navigator to avoid accident or collision. Vessels navigating Hell Gate on a rising tide sometimes find it necessary to pass starboard-to-starboard because of the strong currents.... This situation may arise when one of the vessels does not maneuver readily or is handling a tow.

The above usually occurs between tug and barge units or large commercial vessels meeting head-on. You can hear them setting up the maneuver in advance on VHF channel 13. Pleasure boats are expected to keep clear.

The passage from the Harlem River through "The Gate" is essentially a large one hundred and eighty degree blind, hairpin turn around Wards Island and up the East River. The safest way to negotiate the area is to keeping well to starboard and to be certain you can clearly see vessels coming around the blind bend. Again, last month's article has more details.

Study the chart and plot your courses and waypoints carefully before proceeding. As a general guide, I would suggest that as you enter from the Harlem River look for Flashing Green, 35 ft. Fixed Light "1" on the north end of Mill Rock, which is the small island in the middle of "The Gate". Leave this marker to starboard and head directly over to the baseball field in Astoria Queens less than a quarter mile away, where you will find Flashing Green, 33 ft. Fixed Light "15" attached to one of the night lights in the ballpark. This marker is part of the main East River Channel. Leave it to starboard and swing gradually in a northerly direction under the second span of the Triborough Bridge. On the way across to Fixed Light "15", notice Flashing Red, 25 ft. Fixed Light "14" on the south end of Wards Island which will be over on your port side. On the return trip you will want to leave this marker to starboard as you round Wards Island into the Harlem River in the opposite direction.

If you are coming up the East River from the Battery as in last month's discussion, hopefully carrying the current in your favor, head over to Fixed Light "15" as soon as you get to the northern tip of Roosevelt Island, and continue from there as described above. You can also leave Mill Rock to starboard and head up the Harlem River, if you have the bridge clearance, to complete a circumnavigation of Manhattan.

Running North Out of the East River to Long Island Sound

Once through the Gate, it's about a two mile run on a northeasterly course to Rikers Island, home of the famous prison. Remember you are leaving the East River as you head for the Sound and reverse the "Red Right Return" rule keeping the greens on your right and the reds on your left. Proceed between the two small islands known as North Brother and South Brother which are just south of Rikers. Be sure to keep the two Red and Green junction buoys (top color is green on both) on your starboard side as they are marking junctions with side channels running into a basin near LaGuardia Airport. Study the chart and plot your courses and waypoints carefully through here as it's easy to get confused by the side channels.

Once you round the top of Rikers you will turn onto an easterly course and head out the last four miles of the East River by continuing to keep the green buoys, which are descending in number, to starboard. You'll cruise by La Guardia Airport with the planes landing low overhead as you steer towards College Point with its Flashing 29 ft. Fixed Light "CP". From there you head under the Whitestone Bridge for green can "1A" directly north of Flushing Green, 48 ft. Fixed Light, "1", at Whitestone Point on

the Queens side on the far side of the bridge. These are the starting markers of the East River.

From there head for the Throgs Neck Bridge by again keeping well to starboard to avoid another major blind turn at Throgs Neck on the Bronx side where you'll notice SUNY Maritime College and may even see their training ship "The Empire State". All the commercial traffic

heading down Long Island Sound into New York Harbor is coming around this blind turn, so give it a wide berth. When you pass under the bridge you will see Long Island Sound open up on your port side. And it is quite a sight to see!

Back to reality for now. Good Luck with your spring commissioning. Take

the time to make sure your boat is in top shape for the beginning of what will hopefully be a fun filled and adventurous season. See you next month when we'll continue into Long Island Sound.

The above comments are general suggestions. They are not intended to be used for navigational purposes. Individual captains are ultimately responsible for setting proper courses and safely navigating their vessels by relying on their own knowledge, judgment and experience to determine the correct action in any given situation.

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