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WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS ELLEN MASSEY LEONARD

A journey of contrasts from Alaska to the Sea of Cortez, taking in the stark beauty of the desert

Scrambling over loose red rock, threading my way between spiny cactus branches, I've started to wonder if this hike up the arroyo is really worth it. There's no trail up the dry river bed, which only flows – in torrential surges – during the hurricane season, in occasional floods of sudden rain. In the sailing season, from late fall to spring, the desert surrounding Mexico's Sea of Cortez is bone dry. At the end of the season, in the first weeks of May, the land is also

very hot, an omen of the summer hurricanes to come. Between the steep walls of this arroyo, the air is baking and windless. Hiking uphill in the heat among cacti and boulders seems, with each step, like a worse and worse idea. It's amazing what a classic boat owner will do for yet another scenic view of her wooden treasure.



Above: Celeste under sail at sunset, in the Sea of Cortez

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My husband Seth and I have owned *Celeste*, our cold-molded cutter, since 2013, when we were lucky enough to purchase her from her original owner, the man who had commissioned her. She is a custom design, drawn by Francis Kinney, the New York naval architect who edited Skene's Elements of Yacht Design and, during his tenure at Sparkman & Stephens, worked on many of the 12-Meter designs for the America's Cup. Kinney designed *Celeste* as an independent project for a sailor and businessman in British Columbia, Canada: she was to be a capable ocean-going vessel with classic good looks. Her owner wanted a modern (for the time – 1985) profile below the waterline, but a traditional appearance topside. So, *Celeste* has a fin keel and a separate skeg-hung rudder instead of a full keel. You wouldn't know it to see her in the anchorage, though – we're commonly asked if she was built in the 1950s. Her overhangs, curved sheerline and wineglass transom, combined with enough varnished wood to frighten off many a modern sailor, would ordinarily fit her in that decade of American yacht design.



L-R: Enjoying mango margaritas in La Paz; fishing boats drawn up on La Paz's beach

Built of four layers of cold-molded wood, most of which is western red cedar, Celeste is a stiff and sturdy seafarer. She's made two crossings of the Pacific and has carried Seth and me safely over 20,000 miles from the Arctic Ocean above Alaska (CB 358) to the coral atolls of the South Seas. We like to think she adds to the beauty of any anchorage, no matter how naturally stunning it already is.

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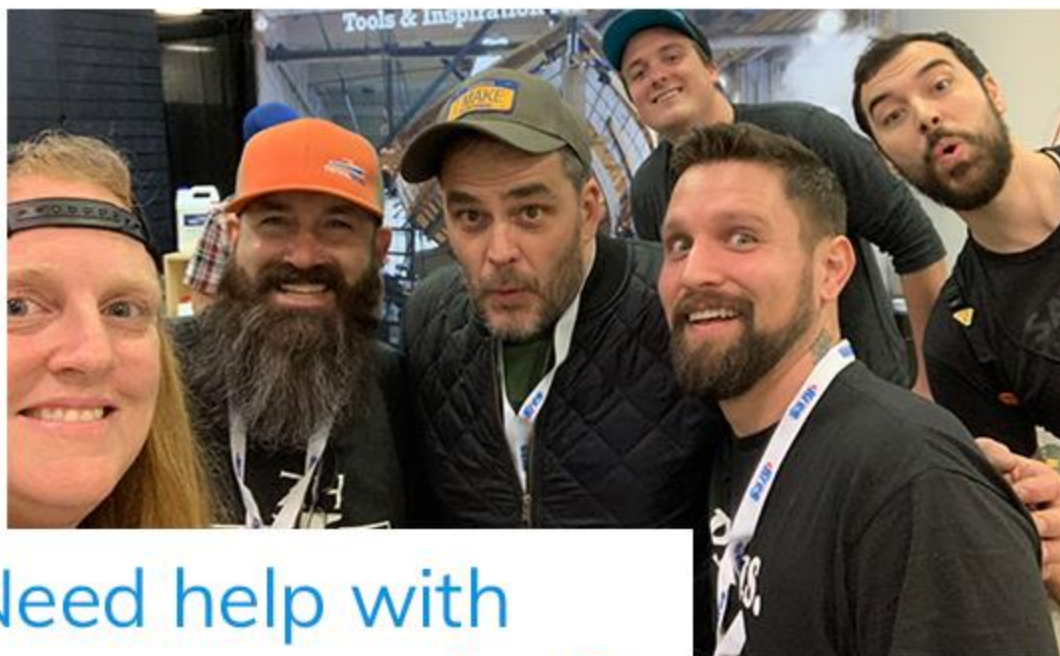
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