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Photos courtesy of Ventana Surfboards and Supplies



WOODEN SHIPS

John Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* inspired Ventana Surfboards to create responsibly sourced works of functional art including scraps from his chartered fishing vessel the Western Flyer and Santa Cruz Guitars. Here's how Steinbeck's spirit endures on the 85th anniversary of his initial voyage in the form of wooden surfboards, guitars and ships.

By Jimmy Leslie, Soundtrack Sensei

Steinbeck was a Nobel Prize-winning author famous for epic Americana, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *East of Eden*, and *Cannery Row*. The latter brought worldwide fame to the Monterey Bay, where Steinbeck spent his formative years. In March of 1940, Steinbeck and his running partner, marine biologist Ed “Doc” Ricketts, embarked on an adventure aboard the sardine seiner *Western Flyer* from the Monterey Bay to the Sea of Cortez. Their chronicle yielded the 1941 book named after the body of water, which is also known as the Gulf of California. *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research* is an early essay on ecology as well as a story of adventure and philosophical exploration. In 1951, Steinbeck’s travelogue was published. The *Log from the Sea of Cortez* is notable for many reasons, including being an inspiration for the modern environmental movement.

“We in the United States have done so much to destroy our own resources, our timber, our land, our fishes, that we should be taken as a horrible example and our methods avoided...”—John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

Boaters, surfers, and guitar players are some of the most passionate people on the planet. They’re also some of Lady Nature’s most stalwart stewards. This story is about how a few accomplished and dedicated craftsmen are creating historically groovy surfboards, guitars and boats from remarkable reclaimed and repurposed materials including precious old-growth wood offered up by our primary resource—the sea.

VENTANA SURFBOARDS & SUPPLIES: ORIGIN STORY

“I was a mate and then a captain on a sailboat in Monterey,” recalls master artisan Martijn Stiphout as we marvel at his meticulously handcrafted fishing skiff made entirely from recycled and reclaimed materials, much of which is wood from the *Western Flyer* and offcuts from the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. We’re outside in front of Stiphout’s house in Corralitos, California, which is located about 20 minutes inland from the Ventana workshop just south of Santa Cruz.

“I sailed on a *Wyliecat 65* for eight years,” Stiphout continued. “We did research and educational programs for the public through the Monterey Bay Aquarium, everything from white shark and jellyfish tagging to trash studies, which was a big eye-opener. I had always used trash as a medium for building things to save on costs. Studying marine biology in school and working with the Aquarium on the Derek Baylis drove home the impact of trash on the ocean. That’s when I started building my first wooden surfboards. I helped my dad build a wooden kayak and a wooden rowboat, and then we took a journey down to the Sea of Cortez in Baja, California. The first time I read Steinbeck’s book I was in a little fishing town. On my 30th birthday I found out that I was laid off from my sailing job. So, I had extra time to think about my future life. When I came home, a college friend said, ‘Dude, let’s start a surfboard company.’”

Their partnership didn’t last, but a few years later David Dennis, a product manager at Microsoft and an avid surfer, came onboard applying his business background and establishing the environmental angle as a core value creating products using recycled materials primarily for ocean lovers and surfers.

“Surfers talk a good environmental game, but most surfboards are made from toxic foam and are basically disposable,” explains Dennis. “We made a commitment to make Ventana Surfboards out of wood, while never cutting down a tree. We realized that using reclaimed wood was the core story, and we could get materials from places with deep wood stories, like the *Western Flyer* and Santa Cruz Guitars.”



SANTA CRUZ GUITAR COMPANY

Santa Cruz Guitars is the premier custom acoustic guitar shop, and its captain, Richard Hoover, is widely considered to be the Stradivarius of modern acoustic guitar building. He also has a self-described “wood problem,” meaning he loves wood like most folks love chocolate. He has a vault full of the tastiest morsels that he uses to make singular instruments. Much of it is reclaimed from rivers and seas. Such “sinker” woods tend to be spectacularly beautiful, as minerals from the water have leached into the grain.

Santa Cruz always brings something truly unique to the NAMM Show, the annual convention in Anaheim, California, where music manufacturers showcase their wares. Last year, Santa Cruz unveiled the Vault Series, made from its most precious wood. When Hoover and company have used every iota suitable for a guitar, offcut pieces become available for Ventana Surfboards to repurpose the reclaimed treasure.



Martijn Stiphout with his 15' Skiffhout boat handcrafted using materials from the Western Flyer and Santa Cruz Guitars

As it turns out, Stiphout also built a 15-foot skiff, which is an even more elaborate example of Ventana's wood collaborations, bringing the story back full circle to Stiphout's front yard where our conversation resumes.

“Suddenly I had access to all these different types of ‘trash,’” says Stiphout. “Most of the beautiful wood used in my boat comes from offcuts at Santa Cruz Guitars and a mahogany conference table from Poke House headquarters.” “They contacted us to say that we should use it,” adds Dennis. “So, they gave it to us, and then they contracted us to build them a beautiful surfboard out of it.”

This January at the NAMM Show, Santa Cruz Guitars showcased its collaboration with Ventana, and that's where I found out about the correlation between the two eco-minded companies. Their ultimate display of custom cool consists of Luthier Burl 6'0" board and an H Cutaway guitar. Both include sinker redwood reclaimed from Santa Cruz beaches and rivers as well as pieces of the original Western Flyer. The surfboard echoes decorative aesthetic elements from the guitar. The one-of-a-kind set pair is now available for \$50,000.



“The small bits of Western Flyer in my fishing skiff are mostly on the steering console or on the throttle console,” says Stiphout. “So, the Suzuki symbol is inlaid in white oak from the Flyer hull, and the forward/reverse indicator on the throttle is from the Flyer as well.”

THE WESTERN FLYER RESTORATION PROJECT

This whole story comes together on the 85th anniversary of Steinbeck's original excursion, its legacy living on both figuratively and literally.

"The original Flyer was made famous out of Monterey Bay, but it was built in Tacoma, Washington [in 1937]," informs Stiphout. "It was also re-discovered there." "It was sort of half-sunk at the dock in a harbor," adds Dennis. "Somebody bought it decades ago and changed the name. It was thought to be lost forever, but a Monterey local named Bob Enea took it upon himself to track it down by the serial number, and by doing so he realized that a boat called Gemini was actually the Western Flyer. In 2015, John Gregg, a Steinbeck fan and owner of a large part of the Moss Landing marina in Monterey Bay, purchased the boat and funded much of its restoration along with donations from lots of people, including Ventana."

"Refurbishing took place in Port Townsend, Washington led by shipwright Chris Chase," says Dennis. "And then last year they sailed the finished boat down to Moss Landing. During the refurbishing, they would send us batches of Douglas fir and oxidized white oak from the original materials as well as Alaskan yellow cedar offcuts from the rebuild."

"Over 90 percent of the hull planks had to be replaced," informs Stiphout. "But over 90 percent of the superstructure—the pilot house—is original. They took out all the unusable wood and replaced it with the yellow cedar. They laid an entirely new keel, which used to be white oak but is now purple heart walnut. The pilot house remained intact, so the bunks that Steinbeck and his wife and crew slept in are original, as is the dashboard."

"On the original journey they ate a turtle and later felt bad about it," adds Dennis. "The refurbished vessel includes a tribute turtle made by Martijn from original Flyer wood that they placed in the exact spot where the real turtle was killed."



Ultimately, the refurbished Western Flyer is reborn as a research vessel with voyages mostly used for school programs educating urban children that aren't usually exposed to the ocean. But anyone can come take a look at it.

"They have days set up when folks can come and take a tour," says Dennis. "It's great that the Western Flyer is living on again for future generations to learn about the ocean."

Stiphout adds, "What's neat is that on March 16th, the Flyer is sailing out of Monterey Harbor, which is exactly 85 years after Steinbeck left. They're having a big send-off celebration and heading down to the Sea of Cortez to retrace the original voyage." "It's a gorgeous, 77-foot fishing boat," adds Dennis, "and they've been selling spots on that trip to raise funds to support the Western Flyer Foundation's mission."

The Western Flyer at its homecoming celebration in Monterey Bay, November 4, 2023. Photo credit: Jessica Soriano courtesy of Western Flyer Foundation.



Stiphout's current obsession is a 17-foot northeaster dory named Juanita made mostly from Western Flyer materials.]

Stiphout is planning a return trip to the Sea of Cortez as well. Back at the Ventana workshop, he's constructing a 17-foot northeaster dory named Juanita made mostly from Flyer materials. He says, "I started that project two years ago, and the original purpose was for me to go back on the 85th anniversary. But life got in the way."

Such worthy endeavors take time...

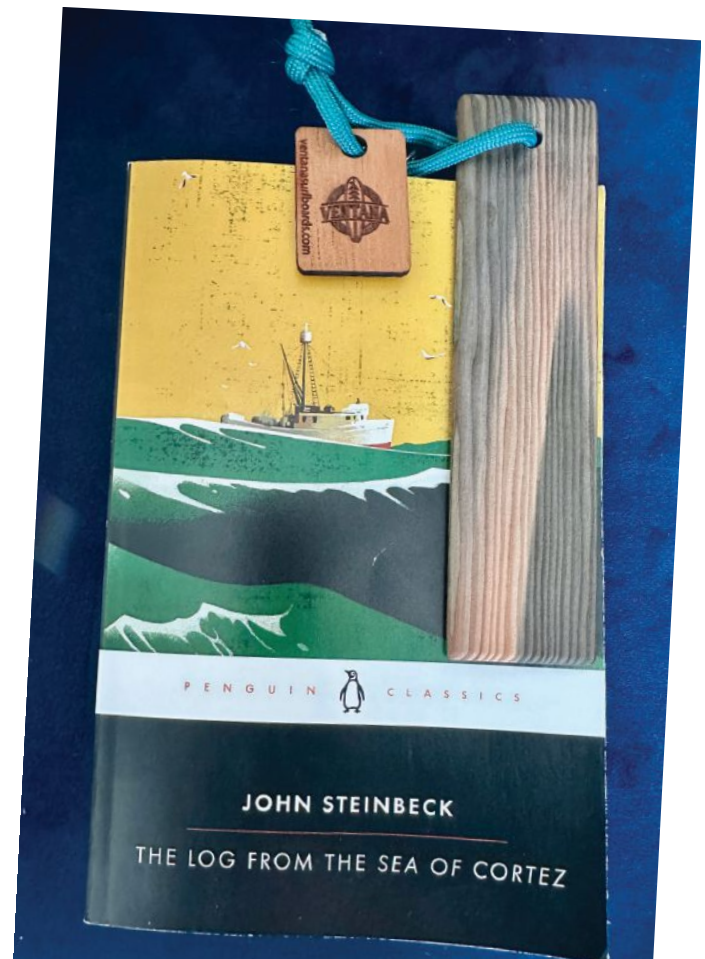
For cruisers interested in a custom handcrafted surfboard, boat, or any of the other supplies into which these two have put their passions, please visit ventanasurfboards.com. They also make banjoleles (banjo meets ukulele) and portable, pocket-sized guitar amps. One of their most popular items is a bookmark crafted out of wood from the original Western Flyer, and I'm stoked to put it in service as I dive into my copy. For more information on the boat and current activities, visit westernflyer.org. And you can find the Santa Cruz Guitar Company at santacruzguitar.com.

Sail On,

Jimmy Leslie, aka "Cap'n Less"



Keep abreast of Jimmy Leslie's many musical adventures by subscribing to his YouTube channel @JimmyLeslieGTR and checking out his modern/classic rock artistry at spirithustler.com. Got an opinion or idea to share? Please post a comment on social media or send an email directly to jl@jimmyleslie.com.



Ventana's bookmark from the Western Flyer on the cover of The Log from the Sea of Cortez.