

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 10 (6/1): Flirting with the Gulf Stream and a Near Disaster

Total Mileage: 25 nautical miles.

I awoke in the middle of the night to flashes of distant lightening. Despite our cozy anchorage near shore, the boat rocked in the wavelets that formed in the harbor from the 15+ knot winds. It was 0300. I turned on the radio and got much the same forecast as the evening before. However, it didn't say the Gulf Stream was dangerous to cross. I tried to go back to sleep for a couple more hours.

I awoke 30 minutes later and checked the weather radio again. Still the same forecast. I was looking forward to daylight so I could actually see the weather for myself.

Finally, the sky lightened and dawn broke to grey skies with storm clouds in the distance. Optimistically, there appeared to be a sizeable break in the clouds to the east and the weather forecast had moderated to scattered thundershowers. I woke the boys and we ate a hasty breakfast while preparing to depart. We discussed our options and all agreed to nose out into the Gulf Stream and see how it looked; maybe make an attempt to cross. While the wind was brisk, it was out of the East and would not have as great an effect on the Gulf Stream. So at 0615 we pulled anchor and departed.

Just after leaving the protection of Honeymoon Harbour I realized that we had forgotten to refill our extra fuel tank from our spare fuel can. I knew that one 6 gallon tank might not be enough to get all the way across, and the last thing I wanted was to attempt to refill the tank in high seas in the middle of the Gulf Stream. So we turned back into the bay where the water was calmer.

The wind was blowing fairly hard from the east at what I guessed to be around 15+ knots and there was a fairly strong cross current in the small harbor. I pulled as far into the anchorage area as I dared and pointed the boat into the wind and throttled the motor to just counter the wind and current and hence remain stationary. The boys were struggling with getting the can set up to refill so I left the helm for just a minute while I gave them a hand. Big mistake.

I had grossly miscalculated the effect of wind and current and when I looked up the boat was well into the shallow end of the bay nearing a rocky lee shore. Looking overboard the rudder had somehow kicked up and it appeared that we were in only a foot of water! Of course, the gin clear water makes everything look shallower, but we were not in a good spot at all. The wind and current continued pushing us rapidly toward the rocky leeward shore. The bottom was scattered with rocks and old shells. Not good. I knew that using the motor was risky because the prop was right near on the bottom and might hit a rock; but it was either risk the prop or risk running aground or be blown onto a rocky leeward shore.

I throttled up the motor and we just began moving back toward the deeper end of the anchorage when I heard a sickening "Clang" that shook the whole boat. The prop had struck a stone.

"Oh Crap!"

The boys looked up.

The impact was so strong that it killed the engine. I had most certainly damaged the prop, and we started drifting back toward the rocks. I fired the engine back up and when I put it in gear, the vibration was simply terrible. I ran it for only a few moments to push the boat out of harms way.

Meanwhile, I had dispatched Joe to the bow to prepare to deploy an anchor. I was really glad that I always kept an anchor at the ready. As soon as we got back into 3 feet of water, we let go the anchor and took a collective sigh of relief.

Pulling the motor up showed that the prop had bent and the rock had actually broken off a piece of one of the blades, thus greatly unbalancing the prop and causing the vibration. I was glad to have packed a spare prop. It was worth tenfold what I had paid for it. My care in packing a plethora of spare parts had paid off. I shuddered at the thought of what our predicament would be had I not packed the spare. Within minutes I was in the water and quickly replaced the blade while the boys finished filling the tanks. A quick swim under the hull revealed little damage other than a few minor scratches in the gel coat on the bottom area of the keel where the boat had scraped over the rocks.

Still, I kicked myself for having forgotten to fill the tanks before we left in the first place. I would have saved my prop, avoided risking a grounding, and saved an hour and a half of travel time. But \$70 for a prop and a little bit of time is a small price to pay relative to what could have happened.

The whole incident shook my self confidence I must admit, and I worried that it was a bad omen. Perhaps God was trying to tell me something? I truly understand how mariners are such a superstitious lot. Nevertheless, we were in a clear spot in the clouds and we decided to make a go for it.

It was now 0745 as we headed into the Gulf Stream and the great unknown. Seas were running 3 feet or so, but they were not the steep chop that we experienced on the Great Bahamas Bank so it really wasn't all that uncomfortable. What was uncomfortable was that the weather began deteriorating again as soon as we got offshore. The clouds started closing in all around us. Ahead of us were darkening skies that seemed to be moving toward us, and to the southeast was another dark ominous storm that seemed to be catching up to us from behind. We were 2 hrs. and 12 miles out into the Gulf Stream.



Storms close in around us out in the Gulf Stream

Had I been in a larger sailboat, perhaps we would have felt more comfortable, but given our size I felt very uneasy messing about in the Gulf Stream with the winds, waves, and lightening that accompany these storms. So as isolated and scattered as they might have been, it sure looked for the world like the entire Bahamas were about to get it. I made the decision to turn back to a safe harbor: Alicetown. Discretion is the better part of valor.



Bad Karma. We turn back to Alicetown

Upon turning back, the stress melted away and I actually looked forward to lounging around in the Bahamas for one more day. As we pulled into Alicetown harbor some two hours later (it was now just past noon) we just barely beat a large thunder storm that whipped up whitecaps and soaked everything we had not put away.

While we had imposed somewhat of a schedule on ourselves (everyone has to eventually return to the States), enough flexibility was built into our trip that we did not force our hand and push the crossing. It is always the boat that travels under a schedule that gets itself into trouble. You read about it again and again. It is true. We heard the next day that a 45 foot sailboat had gone missing in the Gulf Stream and the Coast Guard was asking if any vessels had seen or heard from it.

Although Weech's had been good to us, I thought we might try a different marina so I tried to hail Blue Water Marina for a berth. I had researched where the Conch Cruisers (a trailer sailing group of mostly MacGregors that sail out of Florida) had stayed there the week before. The marina was supposed to be quite nice, even having a swimming pool. After several attempts, I finally got an impatient sounding person asking what type and size our vessel was. When they found out I was a 22 foot sailboat, they informed me that they didn't have any space. Funny thing. If they didn't have space

why did they bother asking what I was and how big I was? Hmm. Not a sailboat friendly place I guessed. We stopped by the facility later that day just to check it out and found that the docks were concrete (hard on your boat), and the swimming pool was wimpy. Maybe I was just jealous.

In contrast, when we pulled up to Weech's Dock, the dockmaster was waiting and directed us to a nice berth. We had tried to hail Weech's on the VHF, but like last time never got an answer. It didn't seem to matter. "No problem, mon." Some say that Weech's is not as nice a dock because it is more in the main tidal current of Alictown Harbor, but I never found it to be a problem. You just have to watch your lines and make sure you have your fenders placed correctly. Weech's is unquestionably the marina of choice for sailboats. When we arrived, there were no less than four other sailboats already there doing just what we were doing; waiting out the storms. It feels good when you know you made the right decision.

After settling in and paying our dock fee (much less than anywhere else in Alictown) we treated ourselves to a nice hot Bahamas style blue plate special at Capt'n Bob's. We felt much better after filling our stomachs, but all felt very lethargic. Perhaps it was the stress of the day, or perhaps we were just worn down from successive days of long grueling passages. We napped and lounged on or near the boat for the remainder of the afternoon.



Weatherworn and tired...but relaxed

While we were hanging out, a young Bahamian boy befriended Joe and tried to get him to dive into the water by our boat. I think he was trying to trick Joe into leaving his iPod on the dock. I made a quiet bet with Matt, who was sitting in the cockpit chilling, that Joe would lose his iPod. But Joe resisted the dare so we never found out. He was a cute kid, though. I hope he was as innocent as he looked.



The weather cleared up in the afternoon, and the wind picks up



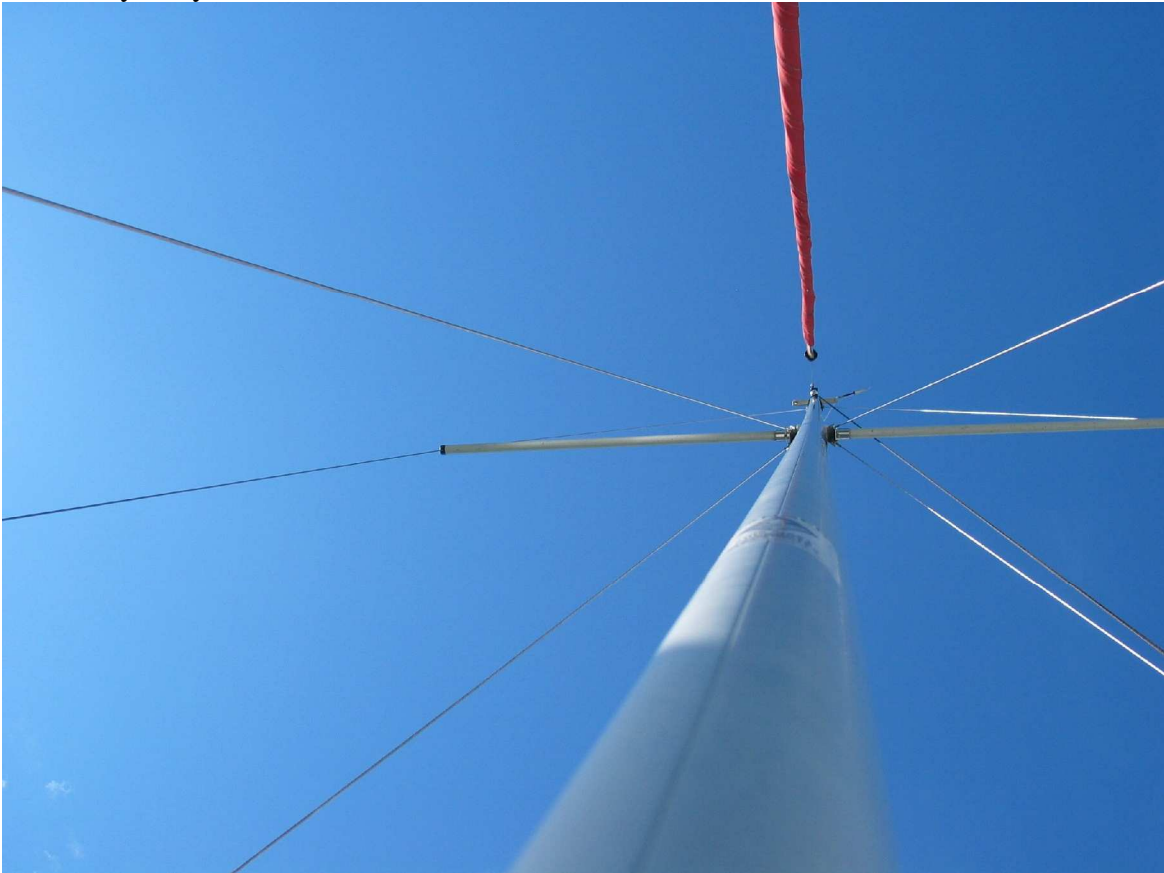
A local boy that befriended Joe

After a walkabout town (which didn't take long as there is not much to Alicetown), we decided that for a grand finale to our Bahamas visit we would eat at the nicest restaurant in town, the Big Game Club. After showers, we put on our best attire, clean shorts and Hawaiian shirts, and headed to the club. It turned out to be the finest meal of the entire trip. The food was excellent, but what I remember the most was that we got ice water...with ice in the classes. Ahhh, the luxuries of civilization. Besides keeping our water glasses full, the waiter kept bringing fresh muffins and Bimini bread. By the end of the meal we were thoroughly stuffed and satisfied. The worries and trials of the past two days simply melted away.

Strolling back to the boat after dinner, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction. When we first arrived at Bimini a week ago, I was a newbie; a rookie who was unsure of his skills and the protocol of the Bahamas. Now I was much like the other salty sailors with whom I shared the docks at Weech's; and actually felt superior to all the tourists that had either flown in or ridden as passengers on one of the high speed power boats. I now had first hand experience; both good and bad but immensely valuable. I had been tested and had passed (so far). I felt a swagger in my step.

Back at the boat I visited with the other sailors who all planned to depart the next day. Not taking their word for it, I tuned in to the weather report on local radio and checked NOAA on the VHF. All reports looked excellent for a calm crossing. The low pressure trough had moved on and the storms had passed. There would be little to no wind to help us on the way, but at least the seas would be calm.

I informed the boys that we would arise at 0330 for a 0400 departure. So, with full bellies heavy eyes, we all settled in early to get as much rest as possible. Unfortunately, a live band began playing at a nearby club, and while the calypso music added to the ambiance of the island, it also kept us awake way too late. 0300 would come very early to us.



Blue Skies