

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 11 (6/2): Crossing Back

Total Mileage: 80 nautical miles.

I wasn't scared of the crossing, but I was nervous; as any mariner is before setting out on a journey. Surprisingly, I had no problem waking up. I actually had not slept that well thinking about the expanse of distance we would have to cross on this day. The night before, I remembered listening to a Jimmy Buffett song being sung slightly off key at the local bar located next to the marina as I drifted off to sleep, and but a moment later, or so it seemed, I was listening to blaring Cuban music from my alarm clock radio as I groped for the snooze button.

After waking the boys we quickly and quietly stowed everything and prepared to cast off. It was 0400. They say it is always darkest before the dawn, and whoever "they" are, "they" were quite correct on this night. The sun would not rise for several hours and the pre-dawn night was thick with a moonless dark and a blanket of quiet. Stepping softly on the docks, the boys cast off the dock lines for what would be the last time in these Bahamas. We idled away from Weech's Dock with quiet reverence, not wanting to disturb the other slumbering sailors, and turned our small vessel outbound toward the great Gulf Stream.

Guided by the lights of Alicetown we ever so slowly made our way along the waterfront toward the outer harbor. We crept past the channel marker that signifies the entrance to the inner harbor, but we still had to navigate around the sandy shoals that guard the harbor entrance. We no longer had the aid of the city lights (if that's what you call them) and could see nothing in the fog of darkness except the glow of our running lights. Not having the new channel markers in my GPS charts, and not having radar or a night vision scope, we relied on my spot light to pick out a visual of the channel markers. The conversation between captain and crew went something like this:

Captain: "Do you see anything?"

Crew: "Yes, there's a marker dead ahead."

Captain: "What number is written on it?"

Crew: "Can't tell"

Captain: "What color is it?"

Crew: "Dunno."

Captain: "What shape is it?"

Crew: "It's either a can or a nun."

Captain: "Great."

Crew: "Wait a minute, we just passed a buoy. It looks like we are outside the channel"

Captain: "What!"

Crew: "I don't think we're in the channel any more."

Captain: "Not good. Not good."

Crew: "Wait a minute. There are the blinking lights of the channel entrance marker just head. It looks like we're between them."

Captain: "Whew!"

After clearing the shoals, I set the autopilot on a southwest heading to make some way in a southerly direction before hitting the brunt of the Gulf Stream which would push us north. My plan was to run in a southerly direction until we hit the Gulf Stream, then run perpendicular to the Stream during the crossing, and then head back to a southerly bearing again after crossing out of the main thrust of current; the "Z" pattern.

The stars were brilliant and it was really cool watching the sky lighten and the sun rise behind us as the twinkling lights of Bimini faded over the horizon. We were once again out of sight of land. Only one ship could be seen and it was headed north away from us. With no looming crisis, I turned the helm over to my able bodied crew and went below for some rest. I dozed comfortably for almost three hours. The best part about my nap was that I awoke not only refreshed, but also well into the crossing.

The sun was well above the horizon when I arose, and we had good visibility and relatively calm seas as we motored along. A check of my GPS revealed that the Gulf Stream was indeed pushing us northward at a substantial rate. I resisted the temptation to turn south against it, and resolved that we would just have a bit farther to travel south once we hit the coast of Florida. By my estimates, we would hit Florida somewhere north of the Miami harbor entrance, but (hopefully) south of Ft. Lauderdale. It would be a long slog back to Homestead after finishing the crossing.

Minutes dragged into hours and boredom became a factor for all aboard. Most of our books had been read, and we had talked about all the subjects that we cared to. So we spent much time staring blankly into the abyss called the Gulf Stream and Atlantic Ocean. We did troll a fishing line but gave up after awhile. The wind was out of the east which made the apparent wind close to zero making it very hot onboard. Thank goodness for the bimini. I began to feel what it must be like to make a long ocean crossing. I decided that long distance passage making did not appeal to me. Although it might sound romantic in the books read in the comfort of your favorite chair at home, long passages are a challenge in boredom. Sailing near land masses is much more interesting. Unfortunately, sometimes you have to pay the price of a long passage to get to paradise.

So after many long hours, light could finally be seen at the end of the tunnel. With the help of the many tall skyscrapers, we were able to see Miami some 25+ miles out. It was comforting to see them, but also frustrating. It seemed to take forever to draw closer to those bloody buildings. Hour after hour they seemed to stay the same small size. We considered taking a dip in the Gulf Stream break the monotony and just to say we did it, but lethargy had set in so it never happened.

As we drew near the coast, radio traffic picked up tremendously. Listening to the radio gave a welcome relief to the boredom. Probably the most interesting was a mayday from a motor boat that was sinking with 6 people on board. We couldn't hear the vessel, but could hear the Coast Guard as it tried to locate the distressed boat. They obviously didn't have a GPS. We never heard what happened. I guess it would make the news if they perished. The incident really reinforced the fact that we are all quite vulnerable on the sea.



The Gulf Stream. Miami barely appears on the horizon



Running down the Florida coast toward Biscayne Bay

The Gulf Stream had indeed pushed us north of Miami Harbor, but at least we had made good time getting across. Turning south, we were finally able to put up our sails, but continued motor sailing on account of light winds and the many miles that still lay ahead of us. We ate a lunch of crackers, cheese, salami, and warm Gatoraide, and began talking and dreaming of the great meal we hoped to have that night.

We finally entered Biscayne Bay through a channel to the south of Key Biscayne that I remembered was called “Stiltsville” after the number of houses built on pilings about 10-20 feet above the water. The channel was busy and we experienced the effects of several very rude large power boaters that didn’t even try to slow down as they passed us. Yes, we were back in civilization though the term is a bit of an oxymoron given the behavior of our fellow citizens.



Miami lies just past the tip of Key Biscayne



Stiltville

I had looked forward to a sail down Biscayne Bay since before the trip even began, and we were actually able to do it for an hour or so. But thunderstorms cropped up to the north of us so I made haste and started the motor again to beat the storm back to Homestead. As we motor sailed down the bay, I noticed that the autopilot seemed struggling more than usual just like when we were in the middle of the Great Bahamas Bank. Looking over the stern, I found a large clump of seaweed that we had likely collected while crossing the Gulf Stream. Clearing the seaweed and making sure the rudder was down all the way fixed the problem, but it also appeared that the rudder was twisting and the rudder head was flexing. I made a note to check the rudder head (made of high density plastic) to see if it had become fatigued or if one of the bolts that held it together was loose. A few days later, after I got the boat home, I found that a couple of bolts that hold the rudder to the rudder head assembly had in fact become loose. No wonder, given all the stresses and strains we had put on it over the past two weeks.



The Home Stretch

The distant storms kicked up some wind, but missed us and we finally pulled into Homestead marina at 1745. We had been traveling steadily for nearly 14 long hours and covered approximately 80 nautical miles.

Our arrival was unceremonious. There was no brass band waiting for us. No welcoming committee. Just a deserted launch ramp. From the perspective of an onlooker, we could have just as well been coming back from a day sail, but everyone had already gone home for the evening. Even the fuel dock was closed. The only real welcoming sight was our truck and trailer, silently waiting where we had left it. Thank goodness.

As soon as the boat kissed the launch ramp dock, the boys jumped off and ran to the public restrooms. Upon their return, they confided that they wished they were back in the islands where the facilities, although “rustic”, were much cleaner. The boys were very proud of the fact that they never used the porta-pottie during the entire voyage. Not once.

Meanwhile, I fetched the truck. Climbing into the driver’s seat, I turned on the air conditioner and paused a moment to reflect. I remembered my thoughts as I sat in the same spot eleven days ago wondering what adventures we would experience; if we would return the same people that had left. I was the same person, but much richer now. And

then again, maybe not entirely the same person after all. I turned off the air conditioner. It seemed too cold and unnatural. I rolled down the window and felt the fresh breeze coming off of Biscayne Bay, put the car in drive and headed to the ramp.



HAPPY SAILING!!!