

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 12 (6/3): The Long Drive Home and Some Final Thoughts

Total Mileage: 775 nautical miles (but it was all in the car)

We had arrived back to Homestead after 500 nautical miles at sea; tired but happy. We had made it there..... and back..... safely. The Bahamas Adventure was nearly over, and what a long, great trip it had been. Two and a half hours after pulling up to the launch ramp, the boat and truck were packed and we were ready to go.

Upon arriving back at the launch ramp I knew that we had one more step to complete; clearing customs and immigration. I immediately made the call to the U.S. Customs Office for clearing instructions and was placed on hold. I stayed on hold for over an hour. I had read that getting through to the Customs office is a pain on the weekends. It was. Finally, we got a friendly customs agent who gave me a clearing number and instructed us to report in person to the customs and immigration office within 24 hours. Rats. I had hoped we wouldn't have to appear in person. The nearest customs office was located near downtown Miami. We decided to get a hotel and stop by the next morning. With our boat in tow, it was quite a challenge to find a place to park, as the customs office was located at the end of the pier where the cruise ships load and unload. While there were two ships in port, one which looked just like the one we saw anchored off of Great Stirrup Cay, we were lucky that passengers weren't boarding or disembarking. It would have been a real zoo. As it was, we were in and out of the office in a matter of minutes.

Joe was able to contact his brother and spent the evening with him while Matt and I enjoyed a Cuban dinner at a local restaurant and then fell into the luxury of a hot shower and real bed at the hotel. We didn't even turn on the TV. As soon as my head hit the pillow and I was fast asleep. Matt was already gone. I don't know when Joe got in, but he was there when we awoke in the morning. Poor Joe had stayed out until 1:00 am. Joe didn't mind.

The next morning, Day 12, after checking through customs and immigration in downtown Miami we began the long journey home. We were all eager to get back to Knoxville, so we made the trip in one day. It is odd to think that in the 14 hours it took us to cross back the 80 nautical miles from Bimini to Homestead, we would drive more than 700 miles; much further than our entire voyage that had taken 11 days.

The trip home was uneventful except for two things. First, I had remembered how expensive the tolls were on the Florida Turnpike so I used the regular highways for awhile; just long enough to realize how the Turnpike was worth the money. Second, we stopped in Atlanta at a restaurant called Foco de Chao, Matt's favorite, for a final meal together. It was a feast.

As time has passed I sometimes think about what we did. Some have told me it was foolish. Some have said it was an incredible feat. Some have looked at me with admiration, and some just shake their heads. But none will ever really know what it was like. Only those that have made the journey themselves will ever really know what it was like.

Addendum

Some Final Thoughts and Reflections

I thought it might be useful for anyone else who endeavors to take such a trip what I found useful and not so useful. It may be most useful for those planning such a trip in a small vessel like the Rhodes22.

Planning was the key to making this trip successful. I researched all I could find on the internet; I emailed for advice from anyone I found that had made the trip; I bought charts and guidebooks and read them twice; and I spent much time creating my own personalized provisioning checklist. I knew that the only way to gain experience is to get out there and “just do it”, but I also wanted to be as educated and informed as possible to avoid (or at least minimize) foolish mistakes. I would especially like to thank those on the Rhodes22 listserve who provided me with valuable candid advice; and to Stan Spitzer, the President, owner, chief cook, and bottle washer of General Boats, the maker of the Rhodes22. As Stan puts it, the Rhodes22 will make to Hawaii, but that doesn't mean that its passengers will. Stan's many years in the boatbuilding business has resulted in a vessel that can do many things for many people; not the least of which is to sail to the Bahamas and back (although Stan would tell you that he would never do it).

Some of the things that I learned on this trip are listed below in no particular order. There are probably many more, but these happen to be the first ones that popped into my head.

- The built-in ice chest easily holds 30 lbs. of ice, but lasts only 3 days (block ice would have lasted much longer).
- I can motor for 12+ hours on one tank of gas (6.6 gals)
- I never even came close to using up all the battery power that I carried. I had 3 deep cycle batteries and never got below 85% full the whole ten days. The only time I plugged into power was in Alicetown on the second day after the initial crossing.
- The autopilot was worth its weight in gold.
- The remote control for the autopilot was “nice to have” but non-essential.
- Wiring the autopilot to my GPS was worth the effort.
- Dead reckoning is an essential skill and fun to practice, but a mapping GPS is sure wonderful.
- Even with a mapping GPS, you can still run aground.
- It is true, do NOT rely solely on a GPS. It should be augmented with good paper charts; or rather the paper charts should be augmented with a GPS.
- Color coded “sippy” cups were a good idea. It was the little things that made the trip so much more enjoyable.
- The fewer dishes and utensils you take, the fewer you have to clean, but it is very nice to have the right pot or pan or utensil for the job.
- Joy baths really do work.
- Thunderstorms in the open water are scary.
- Don't trifle with the Gulf Stream. It is to be respected.
- The ocean is a really big place.
- Planning pays, but be prepared to deviate from those plans.....and just plain be prepared.

- There is nothing quite so nice as an ice cold coke or beer after being away from civilization with no ice for a long period of time.
- The basic law of sailing/cruising that you have heard about is in fact true: the wind almost always blows from the direction in which you want to go.
- Whenever you impose a “schedule”, that is when sh&@ happens.
- Whenever you impose a “schedule”, that is when the weather will turn to sh*%.
- You really get to know someone when you live together on a 22 foot sailboat.
- Fishing is not like it looks on those sportsman TV shows.
- A protected calm anchorage at the end of a long day is a blessing.
- Mosquito netting is worth more than its weight in gold when it gets buggy.
- A good anchor is essential for a good nights sleep. Make that two good anchors.
- Did I say that a thunderstorm with gusty winds and ground (that is water) strike lightening is scary?
- No air conditioning, roly anchorages, windless buggy nights, dinner from a can after failing to catch a fish, warm drinking water, long boring open water passages interrupted by short periods of terror.....Yes, it was worth it!!!

Some of the equipment that I was especially glad I brought on the trip.

Auto pilot. I installed it just before the trip and it was worth its weight in gold. Even with three of us to share duty at the helm, having the autopilot made our long 8-12 hour passages soooo much easier.

Mapping GPS. I used the Garmin 76CSx with Bluecharts. Even though it was fun to plot our course on the charts using traditional methods, it was absolutely wonderful to be able to look at the GPS and know exactly where we were at all times, almost instantly. I had wired the GPS into my autopilot so was also able to have the autopilot steer to a waypoint instead of just a compass bearing; great for everywhere except the Gulf Stream crossing where we had to compensate for the current.

A good reliable outboard. Actually not an “extra” accessory, but worth commenting about. I have the 9.9hp Yamaha high thrust and was very happy with it. I hate to admit it, but we motor sailed or just purely motored in excess of 85% of the time. This high percentage was due either to the wind being directly on our nose, or the necessity to make as good a time as possible to get across large expanses of water (Gulf Stream and Great Bahamas Bank). Generally, I could run at a high idle or half throttle and be at hull speed for hours on end. I found that the engine could run 12+ hours on 6.5 gal of fuel (equal to around 70-75 nautical miles). I might have been able to get better mileage had I backed down a little more, but there were times that I wanted speed and power much more than fuel efficiency. Of course, the power of the 9.9hp was more than enough to overcome any wind/wave/current conditions that we faced. Also, I had heard that fuel in the Bahamas was bad and tended to gunk up engines. I didn't find this to be the case, but then we were not there for an extended time and I did change the upper and lower unit oil as soon as I got home.

Pop-Top Enclosure. It really is multi-functional. In addition to being used at night (although we didn't use it every night), it provided shelter from the rain; protection from mosquitoes; and acted as a dodger from time to time. When crossing the Great Bahamas

Bank, we had a 10 knot wind with a steep chop right on our nose. It took over 12 hours of motoring to get across and we kept the enclosure up the whole time. It not only shielded us from the incessant wind, but also blocked the spray that flew over the bow whenever we crashed through a wave. Yes, the windage cost us fuel, but the comfort was worth it. I had also brought a nylon tarp to use as a large sunshade and nighttime enclosure for the cockpit, and for additional rain protection. We found that it was a real pain to set up and tie off. The bimini with improvised side curtains made from clipping towels on it gave enough sun shade, and the boys finally gave up trying to use the tarp and just tucked it around themselves on the couple of occasions when it rained at night. I will probably continue to try methods for tying the tarp over the cockpit. One thing that I did learn was not to buy a cheap tarp. If you use a tarp, invest in a lightweight nylon one.

Mosquito Netting. I bought a very large piece from Campmor just before leaving even though no one really talked about bugs in the Bahamas. Well let me tell you, when the wind stops blowing and you are anchored close to shore, they will find you. We would tie the top to the boom and simply drape it over the cockpit, tucking it under seat cushions and using towels to seal gaps near the cabin door. A screened in boom room would have been better, but this was an inexpensive and compact solution.

Bimini. It was essential protection from the mid-day sun and of some use in the rain, although we put it down when we were hit with gusty squalls while underway. To keep it out of the way when not in use at anchor or dock, we would lash it to the boom (otherwise it would lay across the cabin top, impeding entry in and out of the cabin).

Cockpit filler cushions. Being able to convert the cockpit to a full sized bed was essential to the comfort for three; one in the cabin (me) and two full sized boys in the cockpit. We didn't even attempt to use the V-berth as it was filled with provisions and it would have been too hot in the Bahamas. I kept quite comfortable in the cabin with the pop-top windows rolled up and a small 12v fan (the one with the suction cup on the bottom). Again, a boom room would have been nice but the evenings were comfortable and the need for privacy was never an issue.

Spare Parts: I chipped the prop on my motor during one harry moment and having a replacement prop made it a non-event. I brought all kinds of spare parts that I never used, but it was sure nice to know that they were there. I would never take a trip like this without an extensive stash of spares.

Some Additional Comments on the AutoPilot Installation and Use

I installed the Raymarine ST1000 several weeks before the trip so was not able to fully test it out before departure. Not the best idea since one should never depart on an expedition with untested equipment, but I figured that if there was a malfunction I could just go back to manual steering. Fortunately it worked like a charm. I also got the S100 handheld remote. The remote is quite cool with a real "wow" factor when you play with it and show it off to your friends. You can literally sit on the bow of the boat, feet dangling over the edge and steer. And, hey, if you fall overboard you can turn the boat around to come back to get you (as long as you do so before the boat gets too far away). ☺ But in all seriousness, I think they are over priced right now. I got mine for a really

good price on eBay, but still feel like I paid more than the functionality of such a device gives you on a small boat. It is awfully fun to play with and show off though!

Installation of the autopilot and remote was fairly straightforward. I did have to buy two extension rods and mounting bracket for the tiller which added to the cost. I elected to install so that the autopilot rod connected on the bottom side of the tiller with the mounting socket directly into the gunwale. This configuration worked out really well. The trickiest part was making accurate measurements. One pleasant surprise was that when I drilled my hole in the gunwale, the fiberglass was so thick that virtually none of the mounting socket protruded through the fiberglass. I didn't have to install a backing plate. These boats are built really well.

For wiring, I decided to install the tiller pilot plug inside the cockpit cubby instead of in drilling a big hole in the seatback directly below the autopilot. I really hate to drill holes in fiberglass if I can avoid it. So, I removed the piece of plastic that is screwed in front of the top shelf part of the cubby hole and made it into a panel of sorts. I wanted a 12 volt socket in the cockpit so it would be more convenient to plug in my GPS, spotlight, MP3 player, etc, so into the piece of plastic I installed a quality 12 volt socket along side the autopilot plug. I also made a cutout for an RS232 port that I planned to use to connect my older model GPS into the Autopilot as a backup. I later abandoned the RS232 port idea and opted to directly wire a power/data plug for my newer Garmin GPS. It made for fewer wire connections and much easier hookup to the GPS. (I kept the RS232 plug that I had made and could install it if needed with my old GPS unit in a pinch). Anyway, the whole installation turned out pretty neat with everything tucked well inside the cubby protected from weather and clumsy crew. In addition to running the 12 volt wiring from my circuit panel in the cabin to the cubby, and wiring the Garmin power/data adapter, I had to wire the remote control transmitter to 12 volts and to the autopilot (it is actually just one data wire). Raymarine's instructions were straightforward, but I had to diagram it all out for myself since I was adding in some extras. I came off the same 12 volt circuit breaker for the remote transmitter, the autopilot and 12 volt socket for simplicity purposes and so that the whole system could be shut down with the flip of one breaker switch.

In the sea trials of the Bahamas, the tiller pilot performed flawlessly. Only when the rudder had kicked up slightly and was having trouble turning the boat, or when I accidentally knocked the pilot off the tiller, or when I activated a waypoint that was waaaay off from the current heading, did the pilot over-range. But for the entire trip through all sorts of sea states, the tiller pilot never had a problem keeping us on course. It operated hour after hour in the hot sun, and in the driving rain. My overall impression is that it is a pretty rugged piece of equipment.

The S100 performed extremely well also. Sometimes it would take a few seconds to find and sync with the tiller pilot when everything was turned on, but the delay never was remotely an issue (no pun intended). The only problem that I encountered was that following a very heavy downpour when everything got soaked, moisture formed on the inside of the display of the remote. It still operated but was very difficult to read. Two days later, the display faded out and I was unable to use the remote on the last day of the trip. I was spoiled and missed it. And here is my plug on customer service at Raymarine. When I got home I emailed them about the problem and they promptly replied to send it into their warranty repair service center. Three days later a brand new unit was waiting on my doorstep. I also found Raymarine very helpful and quick to respond when I emailed their tech support with some questions regarding the installation and operation of the tiller pilot.

Power consumption was minimal during operation, and the pilot could operate all day with minimal drawdown on the battery. The pilot and remote system drew a constant 0.1 amp when in standby mode due, I guess, to the LCD display on the tiller pilot and the transmitter on the remote. The handheld unit runs on two AA batteries that I had to change one time during the trip which surprised me, but I used that remote a lot.

So I will repeat what others have said. An autopilot is wonderful to have if you are making long passages or single handing. Going out just a few hours, you probably would have limited use for one although some would argue that there is a lot to be said for being able to focus on your spouse or date instead of having to keep your hand on the tiller...