

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 2 (5/24): Exploring Alicetown

Total Mileage: 12 nautical miles.

As the sun rose, like a well laid plan, we brought the boat in line with the famous channel range markers that help boats stay in the channel and off a large sand shoal that guards the harbor entrance. As we neared shore, I noticed some channel markers to the north of us; much closer to the harbor entrance. Could the Biminities have dredged a new channel? It certainly looked like it. I didn't want to take a chance so we took the old way in. Longer, but at least I knew it was an established route. As we passed by the channel markers and watched several fishing boats zip out between them, it became clear that the markers were in fact marking a new channel. Very nice. It takes all the guesswork out of getting into Alicetown.

Bimini at last! I tried to radio Weech's Dock to get my slip assignment, but got no answer. Was it too early in the morning? By now it was 0800. Maybe a bit too early for Bahama time. I found out that the way to come into dock at Weeches is to just motor up and a dock hand will motion you to where they want you to tie off. Much more laid back than some of the more snooty docks further up the harbor, I found Weeches to be the only dock that was truly sailboat friendly. They welcomed and found a spot for us. The docks were made of wood instead of concrete (easier on the boat), and there was shore power that I was able to negotiate at a bargain rate since I was only recharging my batteries (basically, the dockhand told me to "pay for however much electricity you think you used, mon."). Weeches was also where almost all of the other sailboats hung out so there was a bit of camaraderie there. Besides, they have an awesome talking parrot.



Weech's Dock



Resting at Weech's. There was plenty of room at the docks.



Looking south toward the harbor entrance.

Mr. Weech himself greeted us with the paperwork required to submit to Bahamas customs and immigration. After filling out multiple forms that asked for the same information over and over again; and after verifying in the forms that we did not, in fact carry the plague or small pox on board, I headed over to the pink customs building. When I stepped on the dock for the first time, the ground seemed to move. We had been on the boat in transit for over 18 hours straight. It had been a long trip.

Upon arrival to the customs building, only a few hundred feet away, I found only one fisherman in front of me so there was no real wait. The customs officer was very friendly and we actually had a short chat about the islands. After he stamped my passport and several papers and put them in a stack, I was sent next door to the immigration office. Again, they were very friendly, and in fairly short order took my paperwork, filled out some more paperwork, separated me from my \$150 in cash, and issued me a cruising and fishing permit that was good for 90 days. She also gave me a survey form to drop off before leaving the islands. You don't have to clear out of the country, but they now want to know how you liked your stay. All in all it was a very smooth experience. Both agents warned me, however, not to try to clear in during a busy holiday weekend. The lines get very long and they work at their own pace. It could take hours to clear customs and immigration on those days.

Happily, I swaggered back to our little ship, lowered the quarantine flag, and hoisted the Bahamas courtesy flag. We were legal.



Fresh off the boat. Customs building in the background; pink paint already peeling.



Yellow building behind boys is Immigration. Golf carts are the main mode of xport.

Although exhausted from our crossing experience, we were all too excited to nap just yet. So we took a refreshing shower at Weech's and headed into town for a bite to eat. Joe was feeling quite hungry after his bout with seasickness the night before. We came across a hole in the wall called CJ's Deli (actually, most of the places in Alicetown were holes in the wall) where locals were hanging out. There we ate the best fried eggs and worst hash browns I have ever tasted. The coffee was good, though, as were the conch fritters.

Bellies full, and with the late morning sun warming the streets and docks, we returned to the boat for a short siesta. OK a long siesta. Two hours later we rolled out of the boat and returned to CJ's for more conch fritters followed by a walkabout town.

It didn't take long to see everything. To me Alicetown is a bit of an enigma. Tied along the docks are million dollar fishing boats and yachts...not to mention not so expensive sailboats, and yet the town itself has a real run down, and down on its luck look and feel to it. There were many buildings in disrepair. In many cases it was difficult to tell if a building was simply in a very slow state of construction, or if some storm had gutted it and no one had gotten around to repairing it. Yet, mixed among these ruins, were neat pretty little bungalows and quaint little churches; set next an empty lot that was full of trash. I had to wonder if Alicetown didn't experience its heyday during prohibition when rum and money flowed freely in the streets just 55 miles from Miami. Perhaps the saddest sight was to pass the gutted out ruins of the Complete Angler. The Angler was Ernest Hemingway's old haunt and it had a really cool bar full of memorabilia. What a loss. It would have been one of the highlights to our visit to Alicetown.



A quaint little Methodist church.



Looking back at the Gulf Stream. Sure looks calmer than the night before.



One of the two main roads on Bimini freshly paved. It is barely wider than a cart path.



A cute little bungalow for rent if you tire of sleeping on a boat.

While Alicetown certainly has seen better days, it is still quite quaint in its own way. Very unassuming, this town does not put on airs for anyone like you find at many places in the Florida Keys. Alicetown has a real outpost feel to it. It is clearly a community that caters to sport fishermen that come over from the States. There were a lot more men on the streets than women. A real man's town.

It's strange that we would yearn to be back on the boat after spending over 18 hours and 90 nautical miles on it, but the weather was nice and there was a fresh breeze so we decided to head out for an afternoon sail to the nearby shipwreck of the Sapona, a great snorkeling site. The Sapona is a concrete ship that wrecked on the Banks just south of Alicetown just after the turn of the century. Its greatest claim to fame is that it was used as a massive warehouse to store and distribute liquor to the rum runner boats during prohibition. Later, after prohibition ended, the US Air Force used it for target practice. In fact, the famous Lost Patrol that was lost in the Bermuda Triangle was en-route on a practice run to this very ship when it disappeared. Whoa! Wait a minute! We actually sailed through the Bermuda Triangle! At night!

We snaked our way between islands and anchored about a hundred feet from the shipwreck in 15 feet of gin clear water. It was strange to look into the water and see the entire anchor rode and anchor. Sure made checking the anchor set easy. We then enjoyed some great snorkeling in and around the structure. I stayed on board for anchor watch while the boys snorkeled (you can't be too careful). Then it was my turn, and I really enjoyed the serenity of swimming among all those fish. You could even swim into the hull of the shipwreck. Being all by myself inside of the dark hull was especially eerie. I don't know why, but a scene from the Little Mermaid came to mind. You know, the one where the shark almost catches the little mermaid. But this was no cartoon.



The Sapona. You can see pock holes where WWII planes shot at it.

Evenings are one of my favorite times to sail, and the sail back to Alicetown was one of the nicest evening sails I have ever experienced. We were in no hurry to get anywhere, and it was nice to know that we had a secure berth for the night. In retrospect, I wish that more time had been spent on this trip to just aimlessly sailing. But then we would not have gotten to see so many places in such a short period of time. It's a tradeoff that I think I will make on the next trip.



I'd like to say this is our evening sail, but it's actually the sunrise view from our dock.

After we nestled back into our slip, we did some more exploring of the island. As I mentioned earlier, Alicetown is not your typical town. At the far southern end of North Bimini Island is the terminal for Chalks Airways. Chalks has been in operation since 1911 making it one of, if not the oldest airlines in the world. Unfortunately, one of their airplanes crashed the prior year as it was bound for Bimini. I was curious to see what the terminal looked like. It looked sad. There was a ramp leading into the water next to an old deserted looking building, and a concrete parking area that was filled with derelict boats and cars. There were no seaplanes in sight. I cupped my hands around my eyes and placed them on the window of the deserted building to see what the place looked like inside. Much to my surprise, a pair of eyes looked back at me. I jumped back in surprise. A woman was actually working at the check-in desk. She politely waved to me. Funny thing. I never did see any seaplanes land the whole time I was in Bimini.

Back at Weech's we took another shower and dressed for dinner (shorts and clean T shirts) and headed to the nicest restaurant in town, the Big Game Club. Sadly, the restaurant was closed that night, so we found the bar and quaffed a couple of Kalik beers and ate more conch fritters. We had the whole place to ourselves. The guidebooks were right about the town being empty during the week. One could see how it could be quite

crowded on the weekends, though. Dinner was a pleasant relaxing affair, and we had a grand time discussing plans for the rest of our trip.

After dinner we settled into our boat for a peaceful night of sleep. We were securely tied to a dock in a calm harbor so I slept quite well indeed.