

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006 The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 4 (5/26): The Loong Trip Across the Great Bahamas Bank

Total Mileage: 76 nautical miles.

Off we plunged headlong into 2-3 ft. chop and headwinds while still eating breakfast and not bothering to put the pop top enclosure up. It was a long restless night and we were all ready to get this crossing over with. We would spend over twelve straight hours slogging through waves and head winds. No land in sight. There was nothing to look at but each other, and an occasional power boat flying past us in the distance doing what looked like 20 knots. Damn those power boats.

The GPS and autopilot took the chore out of navigating to our destination, Little Stirrup Cay. The only problem was that this destination was over 70 nautical miles away. Once the course was set, there was nothing to do but trade watches and wait. After passing some of the time telling stories to each other, we read. And read. And read. Unfortunately, there is only so much reading one can do in a 12 hour period; especially when the boat is bouncing through wave after wave. It's like trying to read in a moving car. Of course, due to the sleep deprivation from the night before, naps were a popular activity.



Joe is supposed to be on watch!



Matt falls asleep with his sippy cup still in his mouth.

By mid-afternoon, we started wondering. “When is this trip going to be fun? When are we going to get to sail?” I assured the boys that after today, we would start heading south and that with winds out of the east we would be on a beam reach for the next four to five days. Little did we know that the wind would shift to the southeast a mere two days later. I remembered reading that this is the way of the Bahamas. The wind almost always clocks from Northeast to East to Southeast to South. And so it went.

As long a slog as it was, I was very happy about the decision to leave the pop top enclosure up for the day. It acted as an excellent dodger by blocking all of the wind blown spray, and kept most of the cockpit area wind free. Combined with the bimini, we were kept dry and out of the hot sun all day long. It was also nice not to have to set the pop top enclosure up that evening. I felt that we had burned extra fuel due to the windage, a factor that would come back to haunt us later in the trip, but it sure made the passage more comfortable.

One thing that surprised me during our Great Bahamas Bank crossing was the lack of marine life; either above or below the water. We saw no birds and no dolphins. Looking into the water, we saw nothing but a bottom covered with sand and sea grass. I had expected to see coral heads everywhere, just like it showed on the charts. I expected to see dolphins riding our bow and frolicking in this shallow water haven. Nothing doing. Just a long boring day. But at least I was on my Rhodes, in the middle of an adventure, and in the Bahamas no less. Life could be a lot worse.

At long last we could just make out land in the distance of the vast ocean desert. We were still several hours from our destination, but the sight of land gave us hope; and something to talk about. Even though we could see our exact position on the GPS and charts throughout the crossing, it was very reassuring to see land again.

Two hours later, we began paralleling the northern coast of Little Stirrup Cay. At this point there were several options for anchorages, but we decided to push on a little bit further to Great Stirrup Cay (known by the cruise lines as CoCo Cay). Great Stirrup Cay offered what looked like a better more protected anchorage, and we were all in agreement to suffer through another hour of transit for the reward of a better anchorage. I remembered this island, as I had once visited it with my family when we were on a big ship cruise to Nassau. It would be interesting to see the island from a different perspective.

Fortunately, there were no cruise ships to contend with on this evening, but upon turning into the bay we saw a private fishing vessel anchored for the night. It was nice to have the company of another boat even though we never communicated with it. After circling around a bit, we set the hook well off from the cruise line's private island but close enough to check out any action. From our anchorage, we had a fine view of the beach and a sea of lounge chairs. A cruise ship had apparently departed shortly before our arrival, because we could see a few workers on the island cleaning up. Then, just before dusk, we witnessed one of the cruise line's dirty little secrets.



Great Stirrup (CoCo) Cay without the cruise ship tourists.

As the sun began setting into the west (of course), we observed large billowing clouds of dark acrid smoke rising from the island. All we could ascertain was that they were burning the mounds of trash left from the day's cruise ship visitors. We were south of the island so the wind was blowing the polluting smoke away from us, but I was sad to see the pollution in such a beautiful and otherwise pristine place. I wondered what the passengers of the ship would have thought had they seen it. Their only perspective was that of an idyllic tropical island with lots of fun activities, food, and natives walking

around with trays loaded down with “CoCo Locos” to deaden their senses. Perhaps they wouldn’t have cared even if they had seen it.

We had departed the anchorage from hell near Bimini at 0630 that morning and arrived here nearly 13 hours later. It had been a long day. We ate a simple light dinner and fell into our bunks. As we lay there in the growing darkness, we discussed where our next port of call would be. Should we loop back around Little Stirrup Cay to Bullocks Harbor for fuel, or should we roll the dice that fuel could be found further south in these sparsely inhabited islands? I knew that Chub Cay had fuel, but I also knew that the marina was being rebuilt and the availability of fuel there was iffy. We all agreed that we didn’t want to backtrack. We also agreed that we didn’t want another 76 mile day for awhile. So we decided to take a chance that fuel could be had further south; a choice we would live to regret.

This anchorage was much calmer than the prior night so we all slept soundly and didn’t wake the next morning until well after sunrise. We never even heard the fishing boat depart.