

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 9 (5/31): Storms on the Banks

Total Mileage: 88 nautical miles.

We woke at the crack of dawn and immediately set out on our crossing of the Great Bahamas Banks. The skies were partly cloudy with a light wind of around 6 knots, and light to medium chop. By late morning it was clear that thunderstorms were developing in our area. The only question was where, and how big they would be.



Eating lunch on the run in the middle of the Banks

As the morning wore into mid-day, the following seas increased as did the wind. The good thing was that we were sailing, but for some reason, and for the first time the entire trip, the auto-pilot was having trouble keeping its heading. I discovered that the rudder had popped up slightly which had caused excessive helm that was exacerbated by the heavy following seas. After I made sure the rudder was down all the way, the auto-pilot functioned much better, but I noticed that the rudder head seem to be flexing excessively. Not sure if it was a loose bolt or whether the high density plastic rudder head had begun to fatigue. It gave me something else to worry about besides the darkening skies.

Then we heard it. A loud clap of thunder. It was much too close. There were three separate storms that I could see; two behind us and one in front. I decided to deviate our course in hopes of avoiding them. Unfortunately, at a cruising speed of just 6

knots I quickly came to the realization that we were not going to out run any storm if it decided to pass over us. But try we did, zig zagging our way across the middle of the Banks. First, we altered our course bearing from South Riding Rock (where we wanted to position ourselves for the Gulf Stream crossing) to South Cat Cay; then back to South Riding Rock; and finally back to Cat Cay. The zig zagging cost us time and fuel, and it ultimately failed in its objective.



Ugly Storms and no sight of land. No escape!

The storm was upon us. The sky suddenly opened and a downpour of rain literally flattened out the choppy seas. It was a strange and eerie sight. But it wasn't the rain that made the hair stand up on our necks. It was the lightening and thunder. There were several claps and flashes, but fortunately none were on top of us.

I must admit that I was somewhat fearful during the storms. I felt very small, and very vulnerable in our little 22 foot sailboat. I think that one is never closer to one's God than when in the large ocean, in a small boat, during a storm. After a few hours which seemed like an eternity, the storms passed and the skies lightened again. We had had enough of the Banks and decided to maintain our current heading toward Cat Cay which was the shortest route to land. It placed us a bit north for the crossing, but at the moment we didn't really care.

The Great Bahamas Bank is a very big place. It felt bigger than the Gulf Stream; perhaps because we saw no wildlife and only one other boat in the far distance during the entire day. The rudder situation seemed to improve after the storms passed which lifted yet another worry and the remainder of the day was comparatively docile.

It was a long day but we ultimately made it across. In all, we had spent over 12 straight hours of passage making, several hours of which were highly stressful. We were exhausted (or at least I was) by the time we approached the east side of Cat Cay.



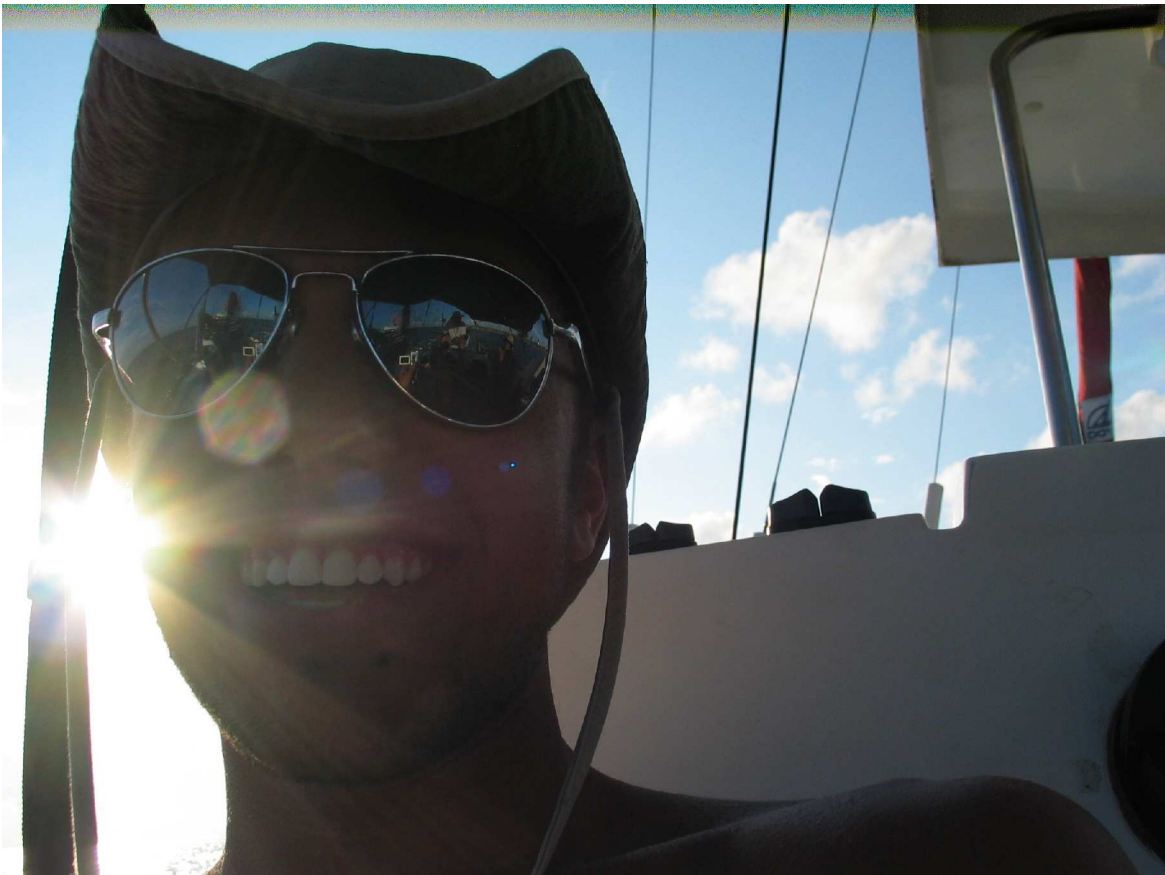
Lighthouse viewed from east side of Gun Cay



The same lighthouse viewed from the west side (ocean side)



Happily leaving the storms behind



Clear skies return, as did our good spirits

As we arrived at the east side of Cat Cay, the afternoon had turned to early evening and it was time to look for resting place for the night. Cat Cay had a marina, but we didn't much want to stay there as it looked a bit too ritzy and not sailboat friendly. There was not a mast to be seen. There was one large yacht anchored to the east side of Cat Cay, but the holding didn't look too good to us and, more importantly, it was totally exposed to the 10-12 knot east wind that was blowing across the entire Banks. So we pressed on up to the northern end of Gun Cay where there was a nice crescent shaped anchorage called Honeymoon Harbour.



Early evening visitor looking for handouts at Honeymoon Harbour

Finally, at 1930 and after some 88 nautical miles, we arrived at Honeymoon Harbour. The anchorage at Honeymoon was smaller than it looked on the charts. In order to get to an area protected from the waves of the Banks and the surge from the Atlantic, we had to nuzzle well into the anchorage in scarcely three feet of water. It wasn't an ideal spot in that there was a nasty jagged leeward shore, but it was relatively calm given the growing winds.

This anchorage, while pretty, is not as well protected as touted. The ravages of storms have washed out a section of the crescent between the beach and a rocky promontory. The small bay has also shoaled up very quickly and has rocks interspersed throughout the sandy bottom. The bay became especially shallow near the rocky leeward islet. There was also a fairly strong current flowing through the anchorage and across the washed out area. The wind continued to blow a steady 15 knots so we were sure to set two anchors before nightfall. Once settled in, we set about the now almost automatic routine of fixing dinner and setting up sleeping arrangements for the night.



Cruising catamaran sailing into the sunset

As we finished dinner, we were treated to, that's right, another beautiful sunset that made for a great photo op as a catamaran sailed off into the sunset bound for the northern Bahamas. Another highlight of the evening was a visiting seagull that perched on our stern rail for some time waiting for a handout.

After dark, I spent the evening listening to NOAA weather radio which was announcing the formation of a low pressure trough over the Bahamas that would bring wind and heavy rain over the next 24 hours. Not good. As I lay in bed, I felt bad for the boys having to sleep out in the cockpit; wrapped in the tarp like two burritos. My thoughts soon passed from sympathy to that of concern, however. We had put ourselves on a schedule and the weather was no longer cooperating.

Joe wanted to get to Miami a day early to visit his step brother. It was just Wednesday night, and if we left first thing in the morning we might be able to make a run to Miami before the low pressure trough set in. If we made it, we could get a slip at the giant Miami Harbor docks and treat ourselves like royalty on Thursday evening; spend the night and have a leisurely Friday sail down Biscayne Bay back to Homestead. We would then take the boat out in the afternoon and drive part way back home that evening. And what would be the scenario if we didn't make it across?

The wind started picking up raising the pitch of song made in the rigging. I heard the light patter of rain drops on the cabin roof. It was comfortable and cozy in the cabin with two well set anchors. Poor boys.