

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

And off he went in a small boat across the Gulf Stream bound for the Bahamas...never to be seen again. Actually, a better way to put it would be, "Sailing There and Back; A story of long boring passages interrupted by short periods of abject terror". In reality it wasn't all that bad. In fact it was wonderful! The worst part about the trip was the fear of the unknown.

The story actually began two years before the trip in the fall of 2004 after I had just settled into ownership of my wonderful Rhodes22. After a few overnights on my local lake in eastern Tennessee, I knew that I wanted more from this nifty boat. And I knew that this boat could handle anything I had the nerve to attempt. So I hatched a plan. I would take a few coastal cruising trips to expand my horizons and gain some experience. Each trip would be a bit more ambitious than the last. I would sail the Outer Banks. Then I would sail the Gulf Coast near the Panama City area. Both destinations were less than 10 hours drive from home. My next step would be to stretch my horizons to destinations farther away. First it would be a trip to the Florida Keys. Then I would venture further out on a trip to the Dry Tortugas. And finally, my ultimate goal and crowning glory would be to sail to the Bahamas.

I hoped to reach this goal before 2010. What a great process it would be! But life does not always unfold the way that you expect or plan, and when opportunity knocks you have to answer, or regret it for the rest of your life. And so it knocked during the dog days of summer, 2005.

In the waning days of the summer of 2005, my daughter excitedly announced that she was accepted into an internship at Dolphin Encounters based out of Nassau, Bahamas. The internship would be the first week of June, 2006. My wife and other daughter would accompany her for the week. I could accompany them, or maybe.....just maybe I could parlay this situation into an opportunity for my son and I to do something that my wife and daughters would likely not enjoy: camping on the boat totally away from civilization for a week or two. My son was graduating from high school and the following summer would very likely be the last opportunity to have him with me for such an extended time. What about joining my wife and daughters in Nassau by way of sailboat instead of airplane?

My son was game, and my wife just rolled her eyes. The seed was planted. I ordered several cruising guides on the Bahamas and bought some charts. Pouring over all the options, I quickly realized that traveling all the way to Nassau would be a bit ambitious in the time that we would have, but not entirely impossible. After much research, I decided that I needed a plan that would provide the most possible flexibility. I had never made such a long trip and there would be many variables, not the least of which would include weather, personal ambition, and a general lack of experience in such matters as long distance cruising. I ultimately decided that the best place to go on a first trip to the Bahamas was Bimini. From there, I could just hang out in the Bimini Islands, or cross the Great Bahamas Bank to the Berry Islands, or sail on through to Nassau depending on my mood and the weather. I read everything I could find on crossing the Gulf Stream, and the area that I would be sailing. Yes, it could be done in a

22 foot sailboat. In fact, many had made the trip in much smaller vessels. Yes there were risks, but these risks could be mitigated with careful planning, preparation, and the proper gear.

So the plan was hatched to “go for it”. Originally, a friend of mine was going to go with us, but chickened out at the last minute, so we added my son’s best friend and sailing buddy to round out our crew of three. Both my son and his friend are good sailors. Both competed on the high school sailing team and would go on to sail in college. So with able crew, and a window of opportunity that might never present itself again, I was committed.

Day Minus One (5/22): The trip down and launch

We left from Knoxville, Tennessee on Sunday evening, a day after my son and his friend graduated from high school. We wanted to run the gauntlet of Atlanta before Monday morning rush hour and peel off some of the nearly 1,000 miles to our destination of Homestead, Florida. Even though we had laid everything out several days before our departure, the actual packing process always takes longer than you expect, and we ended up leaving two hours late. The late departure was due in part to my desire to fit a makeshift mast support. During past trips I had noticed a great deal of flex in the mast when going over bumps in the road. To add a little more support, I had bought a piece of 4x4 to fit into the mast support bracket on the cabin top. It took a bit of fabricating, but in the end it worked pretty well by providing another point of support.

Finally packed up and secure, we pulled out at around 1900 hours. The months of planning and provisioning were over. It was time to execute the plan. Our first leg would take us on a 4 ½ hour drive to Macon, GA. Even though I was tired from trying to get everything packed up, my excitement carried me through the 2330 arrival to our hotel. Thankfully, boat and trailer were fine. The mast support did a good job of keeping the mast from bobbing and flexing.

After the late night arrival, it was no surprise that on the following morning we got a little later start than I would have liked, but we only had around 10 hours to go. Besides, we were on vacation. With stops, the drive ended up being closer to a 12 hour day. Fortunately, the trip was uneventful, except for the tolls on the Florida turnpike. Lots of them. My trip planning determined that the fastest route to Homestead, FL involved driving the entire length of the Florida Turnpike, a toll road. Because I had a dual axle trailer, my tolls were about double those of a regular automobile and it ended costing me over \$50 in tolls. What I got for that price was a direct route with fewer exits and much fewer trucks. On the trip home, I tried driving up I95 for awhile and quickly realized why they had built that toll road. I got back on it as soon as I could. It was worth the \$50.

Since I knew we would get to Homestead late and leave early the next morning, I didn’t see a need in staying in a very nice hotel, so I had made a reservation at a Travelodge at \$60 a night. The hotel was clean enough, but the walls were paper thin and we could hear everything in the room next to ours. No big deal, but apparently it bothered our neighbors because they banged on the wall when we turned our TV on. I felt like we were in a low rent tenement.

The next morning, we slept in a bit since we had all day to launch and sail out to the barrier keys and wait till midnight or the next morning to make the Gulf Stream crossing. One of the keys to crossing the Gulf Stream is to watch the weather and time your crossing so that you arrive in Bimini during daylight. Since our boat only travels at 6 knots, you either have to leave in the middle of the night and arrive early in the morning, or leave early in the morning and arrive late in the day.

There is a big Wal-Mart in Homestead (no big surprise) that we visited for last minute provisions and perishable food items. It was lunch by the time we got out, but no worries, we had all day.

Somehow, it got to be almost 1400 by the time we pulled into Homestead's Bayfront Park to launch. I had done a lot of checking around before our trip and settled on Bayfront as the best location to begin and end the trip. It was located not too far from Angelfish Creek where we planned to enter the Atlantic and ride the Gulf Stream current up to Bimini. There were multiple ramps with plenty of parking. The park was said to be secure for leaving a vehicle and trailer. And it was cheap. We only had to pay \$10 to get in the gate. The only drawback was that the park closed its gates at sunset, but I understood that you could always find someone to open it if you left late.



We finally get to the launch site. Note the sign. My son is standing guard.

Bayfront Park exceeded my expectations. What I found was a huge parking lot and a multitude of launch ramps. Although we were not there on a holiday, it would be hard to imagine the parking lot ever filling up. The numerous concrete ramps were never

fully utilized at any time we were there. Each ramp had a long sturdy dock next to it; long enough that one boat could be tied at the end while another boat was launched or retrieved. There was also a nice fuel dock right near the ramps where we could get ice and fill our fresh water tanks. Perhaps best of all, they had a pullout area specifically for rigging sailboats! Not having been to any other area ramps I have nothing to compare to but I would definitely recommend this location and will use it again on my next trip. The only negatives were that coming back from Bimini you have to traverse the length of Biscayne Bay (this can also be a plus if the wind is right) as the Gulf Stream current will push you up to Miami harbor if you leave from anywhere north of South Riding Rock.



Packing into containers kept food organized. The cooler was too big to put on the boat, but everything we needed to keep cool fit in the cabin cooler.

With the boat loaded and launched, I pulled the truck and trailer around and into one of the many trailer parking spots. I sat in the truck for the last few moments and paused, soaking up the last few minutes of air conditioning. To think that the next time I would sit here, 10 days would have passed and I would be tanner, wiser, and perhaps a different person. What will go wrong before I sit here again? Will I bring back great memories or bad? What will it be like to be without air conditioning for 10 whole days?



Nice launch ramp dock!

It was after 1500 when at last we pushed away from the ramp. Excitement was high; more so with the boys than me, as I was feeling the weight of responsibility of being the captain of this small vessel. There were butterflies in my stomach. I knew I was pushing the envelope of my readiness for such a trip. But I also felt confident that I had done all I could to be prepared and had all of the equipment that I needed for such a voyage. I thought

As we finished topping off our water tanks and pulled away from the fuel dock, the dockmaster called out,

“You guys headed for Bimini?” I guess it looked pretty obvious with all the water we took on board (nearly 30 gallons). Whatever was to happen to us, we certainly were not going to die of thirst.

“Yep,” I replied quite proudly to my surprise.

“Have a great trip,” he replied. “The Mahi are biting at 300 feet.”

Ok, thanks.” My pride and desire to get going kept me from admitting that I had no idea what he was talking about. Was it that they were biting at 300 feet below the surface? Or at the 300 foot depth contour? It didn’t really matter because we figured that the fish would be so plentiful that they would practically jump into our boat. Besides that, we had two fishing poles.

Little did we know that when we got well into the Gulf Stream, the last thing on our minds would be fishing.