

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006 The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 1 (5/23): The Adventure Begins: The Overnight Crossing

Total Mileage: 90 nautical miles

As we pulled away from the fuel dock I looked skyward. There was a light overcast, but no storms on the horizon to worry about. As we exited the long channel from Homestead's Bayfront Park Marina, we were met by a large expanse of water that is Biscayne Bay. It was at that moment that I fully realized that we were not in Kansas anymore; we were no longer on Ft. Loudon Lake in Tennessee. This was the big time.



Heading out the long channel from Homestead

At this juncture let me introduce my crew: my son Matthew and his best friend Joseph. Matt and Joe had just walked the stage of their high school graduation and found themselves on my small boat bound for the Bahamas just two days later. Sadly, Matt and Joe were bound for different colleges so this trip would probably be the longest time they

would get to spend together for several years. I don't know if they realized this fact, and I didn't want to spoil the moment with any reminders. We would live in the moment.



Matthew



Joe



Captain Bill

Matt and Joe actually started sailing together when they were around 14 years old. Our local yacht club holds sail camp each summer, and the boys gained a solid foundation of sailing fundamentals there. I was very happy when, following their sail camp experience, they got the sailing bug and joined their high school sailing team where by the time they were seniors, they shared the position of co-captains. My son also had the benefit of crewing on two Boy Scout high adventure sailing trips, one in the Florida Keys, and one in the Bahamas. In fact, it was Matt that suggested that we sail to the Berry Islands and revisit some of the cool places he had been. Joe's sailing was limited

to high school racing, and he had never experienced overnight cruising. So, while I had two young men that were well skilled in sailing dinghies, they lacked experience in the sort of cruising we would be doing. This trip would be a learning experience, and they were eager to learn. My hope was that this trip would stir their desire to go off on their own adventures someday. And maybe take me with them.

I wasn't really sure how three men in a 22 foot boat would fare. While we had talked a lot about the trip, we had only taken one overnight shakedown on the lake before the big trip. Fortunately, after the first couple of days it was clear that it would be no problem. The old saying, three is a crowd, most certainly does not hold true for the Rhodes22. However, the secret lay in utilizing the cockpit for sleeping quarters at night. I found throughout the trip that having three aboard kept the conversation lively and the extra pair of hands was very helpful during times of stress. A fourth would have been a stretch on such a long trip.

The afternoon was nearly perfect. The wind was light from the E NE at what I estimated to be 5-7 knots. Since we were heading east into the bay, the first half of the afternoon we were forced to motor into a slight chop. The bay water was surprisingly clear and we could see the bottom until we got out toward the middle. We finally turned south toward Angelfish Creek and raised sail. The motor was only turned off for a short time, though, as we lost some speed and I really wanted to get near Angelfish Creek as soon as possible. So we motor sailed our way down the bay.

To our delight, a pair of dolphins joined us for a short time; swimming along our bow and then skirting off. A good omen, I thought.

From the middle of the bay, the distant land masses looked indistinguishable. It is amazing how everything looks so clear on the charts as compared to the vagueness of the distant shoreline. We took some bearings for fun and practice, but I was sure glad to have my mapping GPS to confirm our location. I set a bearing in the autopilot for the mouth of Angelfish Creek and lo and behold it came into view some time later. The entrance to Angelfish Creek is otherwise difficult to see until you are right up on it. We noticed a large sailboat that had been coming up behind us in the bay had missed the entrance and had to turn around.

It was decision time. Do we venture into the Atlantic and see what conditions look like in the Gulf Stream, or do we anchor for the evening and wait till tomorrow morning for a day crossing, or tomorrow night for a night crossing? I checked the NOAA offshore forecast and it called for 8-12 knots out of the northeast with seas 2-3 feet or less. No Gulf Stream advisories.

The weather window looked pretty good except for the NE component of the wind. Every guidebook I had read advised against crossing when there was any northerly component to the wind direction; the reason being that wind blowing in a direction that is counter to the current can develop steep and potentially dangerous waves. However, on this evening, the winds were forecast to remain light and it appeared that the Gulf Stream was not too bad.

Do we go ahead and cross tonight? We held a short meeting. I warned the crew about the perils of wind with a northern component, albeit light. But spirits were high, and the boys were 18 after all, and could handle anything. Immortal. Masters of the universe. So we decided to poke our noses into the Atlantic and see what it looked like.

As we began transiting through Angelfish Creek, we were met by a fairly swift incoming current that slowed our progress over ground to about 3.5 knots. As we made

our way through the creek, I noticed that the rather large sailboat that had missed the creek entrance had fallen in behind us. They had gained on us, but instead of passing us, the vessel simply slowed down and followed us through. I thought this strange because it was certainly a much larger boat with much more equipment; depth sounder, radar, etc. Did they not know that I didn't have a depth sounder beyond my centerboard? That I had never been through this passage before? I decided then and there that I would not make the foolish assumption that any other boat knew any more than we did, and blindly follow them; as this boat was doing to me.

At any rate, I was glad to see another sailboat. I didn't hail them, but felt some comfort that there would be another boat crossing with us, even if we would probably fall out of sight of each other. Unfortunately, the feeling of comfort faded after we exited Angelfish into the Atlantic and the big boat took a turn south and faded into the horizon; obviously bound for the Keys.

Gut check time. It was 1830 and if we wanted to anchor in the protection of the Bay before darkness fell, we would need to turn back now. Waves were not too bad, but we were not really into the full Gulf Stream yet either. No storms, but that didn't mean they couldn't crop up en-route. Conditions looked fairly good. When do we commit?

I don't know what it is about not wanting to retrace steps, but none of us really wanted to backtrack and wait five or six hours before moving on. According to the guides, it was at least 4 hours too early to depart. We figured that we could sit and wait until 2200 to leave, or just keep going and simply slow down as we neared Bimini to insure a daylight landfall. The weather window looked good and we were pumped up for the trip. We had momentum so all agreed to go for it then and there.

So off we went.



Heading into the Gulf Stream with Florida sinking into the early evening horizon

Spirits were high as the sun set behind us, and we enjoyed a meal of Wal-Mart chicken tenders and potato wedges as the boat motored eastward under the command of the autopilot. Our plan was to head in a southeasterly heading until we entered the Gulf Stream and then head due east and finally northeast to take advantage of the Stream's current. It's called the Z pattern crossing.

As darkness descended upon us, all that could be seen were the distant lights of Miami. The overcast skies blotted out the stars and there was no moon. So much for a beautiful star filled or moonlit crossing. As the lights of Miami faded over the horizon, we lost all reference to the horizon. The only light outside the boat was the beautiful sparkling of phosphorous that dappled the water in our little boat's wake. We felt very small in a universe of nothing but water.

I whispered a little mariner's prayer. "Please watch over us. The sea is so large and my boat is so small."

We had previously agreed to take three hour watches. Joe was to take the first shift, Matt would take the second, and I would take the third, and hopefully last. I settled in against the leeward bulkhead and closed my eyes to rest.

Being too excited and apprehensive, I could not sleep but rather tried to rest my eyes and relax my mind. I instructed Joe to wake me if he saw the lights from any ships or anything unusual. As I lay there with my eyes closed, I could hear the drone of the outboard and felt the boat rise and fall as it seemly galloped through the waves. As time passed, I sensed an increase in the frequency and amplitude of the wave action. The seas were growing, and so was the wind.

I don't know how long I had been laying there before Joe nudged me.

"Mr. Wickman, I think you better get up."

"Wh What?" I blinked into full consciousness.

"There is a ship out there and I can't tell which way it is going."

"Did you take some bearings and see if the lights are moving relative to our boat?"

"Kind of. But I couldn't tell anything"

The next 30 minutes were spent trying to identify the lights and ascertain the ship's direction of travel. As time went on, the bearing changed very little. We determined that the ship was either moving away from us or toward us. The lights were certainly not getting any fainter. Not good.

It is amazing how confusing lights can look in pitch black. We had trouble telling colors and there seemed to be too many of them. Was it a cruise ship? Cargo ship? Barge? Why wasn't it moving perpendicular to us? Or was it? As another 20 minutes rolled by, our uncertainty and anxiety grew. Encountering a ship at sea at night is a scary thing. We tried to hail it on the VHF. No answer. The binoculars came out.

Trying to look through binoculars at night in bumpy seas is no easy task. But we tried. I altered course to put the ship off our beam, but didn't have much confidence in the maneuver. Just how far away was that thing?

Finally, we were close enough to make out the ship with the binoculars. Good...or maybe not, since being close enough to a ship to make out details in the first place is still too close for my comfort. It appeared that we were off of the ships stern quarter; hence the many extra lights and lack of a clear red or green. For all we could tell, the ship had been leaving the port of Miami and was traveling in the same general direction as us; slowly at first, and then speeding up. Some time thereafter, its lights disappeared over the horizon as it turned toward the south and sped on.

We were probably never terribly close to the ship, but that didn't keep our hearts from racing for sometime after the crisis passed. I found it was quite difficult to judge distances at night and would have probably bought a radar if a vendor had pulled along side us just then. But alas, we never felt a need for one again.

It is correct what you read and hear about ships. They appear on the horizon very quickly; out of nowhere. It is vitally important to keep a constant watch. Even during the day, our line of vision to the horizon was only around 8 miles so the time between seeing a ship and making sure to keep clear is less time than one would think. Even more so if at night and you have the added challenge of trying to ascertain which way it is pointed.

After the excitement of the ship encounter, things calmed down on our little vessel, but not so for the Gulf Stream. The wind continued to build out of the northeast and we soon found ourselves pounding through a steep 3 foot chop. Not terribly bad, mind you, but the fact that we were 30 miles from any land, in the middle of the Gulf Stream, in the middle of night with no moon or stars, made it feel more daunting.

Being the most experienced on the boat, I quickly found the most comfortable spot in the cockpit. Lying against the leeward bulkhead I was able to stay out of the wind and watch the boys try to stay dry from the sea spray. It was actually rather cool to sit there and watch the boat wake splashing jewels of phosphor in a sparkling green trail behind us. As beautiful as this phenomenon of nature was, however, it became boring and routine after a few hours and I realized that passage making could be a really dull affair. Minutes passed into hours as we sat quietly between conversations, deeply immersed in our own thoughts.

"Long periods of boredom interspersed with short bouts of sheer terror."
It really wasn't as bad at either extreme, but I understood that saying now.

Around midnight, Joe made the fatal mistake of going into the cabin for a snack. He was never quite the same for the remainder of the crossing. Shortly after emerging, he made the fateful proclamation, "I don't feel so good."

To which I replied, "Be sure to barf overboard and downwind."

Shortly thereafter, Joe assumed a position he would keep for some time; hanging over the leeward stern quarter emptying into the sea for all that he was worth. First to come was the beef jerky snack. Then the Wal-Mart chicken tenders and potato wedges. Then just dry heaves. Poor fellow.

I knew he would be great crew for the rest of the journey, though. Despite his affliction, he offered to assume his watch. And then promptly found the side of the boat again. We of course let him rest as best he could. I even gave up my cherished perfect leeward bulkhead spot to him.

Shortly after Joe fell seasick, Matt and I looked at each other and simultaneously reached for the Bomine. We knew that it was probably too late to take seasick medicine, but we both felt OK and figured it was better than doing nothing. We both knew that seasickness can overcome anyone at any time. Joe insisted on taking a Bomine too, but immediately threw it up. Poor fellow.

After what felt like an eternity of darkness, we noticed a very slight lightness in the eastern horizon. It was the lights of Bimini. It was only 0400 so we calculated what our speed needed to be to make the harbor entrance at daylight (Ok, we used the GPS) and slowed the boat down. As eager as we were to make landfall, I certainly didn't want to try to enter Alicetown Harbor in the dark.

So on we went. The waves lay down as we got closer to the islands. Joe got better, and we were greeted by a glorious sunrise over Bimini. We were tired from the all nighter, but felt a satisfaction mixed with relief that we had actually made it across the Gulf Stream. We had arrived!