

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006

The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 3 (5/25): Heading into the Unknown

Total Mileage: 15 nautical miles.

The morning dawned beautifully, and we all woke refreshed and recharged. The only thing dreary was the weather. Soon after dragging out of bed, the light grey overcast skies started releasing a warm gentle rain. We had adapted quite quickly to Bahama time so did not hurry out of port. Our plan of the day was to fish along the edge of the Gulf Stream as we made our way a short distance to the north end of Bimini to position ourselves for the 70 mile crossing of the Great Bahamas Bank, a much further distance than the Gulf Stream crossing but in a totally different environment. There would little current, no ships, and the water would only be around 15 feet deep. The only thing we would have to worry about would be hitting a coral head. Enroute to the north end of Bimini, we planned to stop for a snorkel at the famous road to Atlantis, a particularly interesting rock formation. Under about 12 feet of water, these rocks are purported to be the remains of an ancient road; the road to Atlantis.

By mid-day the rain had moved on and the skies lightened. Although there was still a haze, we decided that we had been in port long enough. There were adventures to be had out there.



Nestled at Weech's just prior to departure

After one last walk to the local straw market for some Bimini bread, we cast off our lines and headed out. It was fun to watch the dock master and owner of a large sailboat that was docked directly behind us (see photo above) panic as I backed the Rhodes rather quickly but deftly out and around the expensive yachts. Using the linkage that connects the tiller to the motor, I was able to turn on a dime despite a rather strong current. As I shifted into forward gear, I could hear the dock hand yelling, "Hey, mon. Take it easy, mon. You doesn't have to go that fast."

All the owner of the other yacht could say was, "How'd he do that?"

As simple and basic as Alicetown was, it was still civilization; civilization that we would not encounter again for another 9 days.

Leaving the harbor was a snap with the new channel markers. Just outside the entrance channel, we saw a small cruise ship posing as a sailboat anchored. We got a good laugh at seeing smoke billowing out of the top of one of the masts; or should I say it was a smoke stack disguised as a mast. We made sure to sail past it under the longing gaze of the tourists that were trapped on the deck like bilge rats, waiting for their tender ride to town.



Look closely and you can see smoke. It was a hazy windless day.

But alas, there was little to no wind so we fired up our trusty Yamaha. It was time to try our hand at fishing. We had brought two poles in our ambition to catch lots of fish. We put lures on both and off the stern they went. I had only installed one rod holder on my stern rail, so Matt held the other in his lap. We eagerly watched the poles expecting a hit the moment we put the lines in the water. Sure enough, after less than 15 minutes we got a hit.

Wheeee! How exciting! Matt was holding the rod with the fish so Joe reeled in the line on the other pole while I steered the boat. Looking off the stern, it was a sight to

behold. At about 30 yards off our stern, we couldn't tell what it was, but that fish jumped at least six feet in the air as it tried to free itself from our bonds. I felt like we were living one of those fishing shows. I could almost taste the fresh fish dinner! How would we cook it? Grilled, pan fried sautéed in butter? Yum.

As we got the fish in close to the boat, Joe put on our fish handling gloves and readied himself to grab and pull the fish aboard. None of us had any experience with offshore fishing, so it must have been a sight when we first saw up close, a large barracuda. I couldn't get Joe to get anywhere near the 4 foot fish. We knew that barracuda were not good for eating, not that anyone would want to eat a fish as fierce and ugly looking as a barracuda anyway.

With Joe hesitating and Matt telling us that we were a couple of wimps (easy for him to say, he was on the other end of the pole), I grabbed a pair of fishing pliers and reached down to pull the hook from the fish's mouth. Whenever I would get near, that barracuda would open its mouth and show me his multitude of very sharp teeth. After several attempts, I got the pliers on the hook, but they slipped back to the line as I lurched back from the gapping barracuda mouth. The weakened line then snapped and the barracuda was gone. We felt badly about letting a fish get away with a hook still in its mouth, even though it was a barracuda. We vowed to be more aggressive about the hook extraction next time.

Back into the water our lines went. Not long after the barracuda catch, one of the fishing lines again went wild. You could almost see smoke as the line flew off the reel. This time the hit was on the pole that was in the stern rail mounted holder. I barely got to the pole and began reeling before the line ran off the spool. After a couple of minutes of intense fighting the line went slack. The lure was gone. We never did know what was on the line as the fish never broke the surface of the water (not that we would have known what kind of fish it was if it had). But it was big. Real big. We all decided that it had to be a record breaking marlin. At least that's our story.

The only other thing we caught was a rock. Unfortunately, the rock wouldn't budge; nor would our lure. Almost losing our rod and reel, we finally gave up trying to retrieve the lure. If only I could set an anchor that well! The rock was too deep to dive down to so we finally had to cut the line. We were sad that we lost yet another lure, but were even sadder that there was now a foreign object in these beautiful clear waters. Our hopes for a fresh fish dinner began to fade.

Discouraged, we gave up fishing for the day and turned our sights toward Atlantis. The rocks were not hard to find. There was a commercial catamaran full of tourists parked right over the top of them. We carefully motored up behind the catamaran where we saw a nice red buoy. In my confident captain's voice, I commanded,

"Matt, prepare to snatch the mooring ball."

"Uh, dad, I don't think it's a mooring ball."

"Of course it is. What else could it possibly be?"

"Dad, whatever it is, it has a line leading to the stern of the catamaran."

My eyes followed the line and it did indeed lead to the catamaran, and two guys on its stern staring at us with hands on hips.

Apparently, the tourist boat had let out a buoyed line so that the tourists would have something to grab if they were pulled past the boat by the current. Humbly, after trying to recover by telling Matt that I actually just wanted to see what type of knot they used on their buoy, I had crew set our own anchor and peered down into the depths.

What a disappointment. The rocks were easily 15 or more feet below the surface and it was plain to see that they were nothing more than a rock formation. We couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. The barracuda was more exciting than these

rocks. We were so disappointed that we didn't even get into the water; unlike the lemmings on the catamaran that were all bobbing around like sea lions. I wanted to throw some fish to them, but of course we hadn't caught any.

So after what felt like a day of failures, we decided to press on and sail (or more aptly motor since the wind was on our nose) part of the way across the Great Bahamas Bank to click off some of the 70 nautical mile crossing.

The sun was beginning to get a little low, but we figured that we had an hour or two to motor toward our goal of the Berry Islands. We could reduce the next day's crossing to about 60 miles; still a long day. I entered the waypoint for the northern edge of Great Stirrup Cay into my GPS and plugged it into the autopilot. I was sure glad that I had spent some hours wiring up the autopilot to accept signals from the GPS before our trip. The autopilot worked like a charm whether I entered a compass bearing or a waypoint from the GPS. The boat tracked perfectly. Maybe too perfectly on this day.

The sky had continued to clear and the sun began sinking into what would later be one of many beautiful sunsets. We relaxed in the cockpit as the GPS and autopilot did all the work of keeping us on a rumbline to Great Stirrup Cay. As the sun dropped toward the horizon and Bimini sank into the sea we decided that we had gone as far as we dared as we did not want to endure the fatigue of another overnight passage.

Nearly out of sight of land, it felt strange to be setting an anchor in less than 15 feet of water. It felt even stranger to look up after setting the anchor and see a large vessel bearing down on us like we were parked in the middle of the interstate. I couldn't believe it. Here we were out in the middle of nowhere and yet there it was; a large fast moving cargo vessel. And it looked like it was bearing right down on us.

Looking at my GPS and the chartbook, I noticed that we were anchored nearly right on top of the layline between North Bimini Island and Great Stirrup Cay. My chartbook was very handy in that it showed laylines between the islands complete with distances and headings in each direction. I remembered reading in one of my guidebooks that these laylines tended to be more heavily traveled, and that if you anchor out on the Banks, you should be sure to anchor well clear of these lanes. Why had I not remembered to check our position before setting the anchor? At least I had caught the mistake now instead of getting run over in the middle of the night.

As the ship approached, we could see that the vessel was a cargo ship (more like a large boat), and it passed just to the north of us having obviously seen us and altered course. Not feeling at all good about this situation, we pulled anchor and motored a couple of miles south to get out of the "shipping" lane. Of course, not another vessel passed by for the remainder of the night, but I had no regrets about moving.

Setting the anchor was an easy affair. There were no shores to worry about or boats to swing into. I thought that this would be a good spot to try out the riding sail that I had fabricated before the trip. The idea was to fasten it to the end of the boom and it would help keep the boat from swinging on its anchor rode, and allow us to position the boat at a more comfortable angle to the waves. It would be a good project after we got settled for the night.



Backing down on the anchor. There was a nasty chop that got worse later that night.

Finally anchored, the sun was now just touching the horizon so we wasted no time breaking out our dinner. Because it was so late, and because we had no fish, I knew that the best course of action would be to keep dinner simple. However, we had only had a light snack for lunch and 18 year old boys eat a lot more than “light snacks”. They wanted something of substance, and I was dying to try out my new “magma” gas grill. So out came the hot dogs.

I’m not sure it is the best idea to use a grill for the first time out in the middle of the Great Bahamas Banks with 1-2 foot chop bouncing the boat around, but despite the challenges of balancing, the grill performed flawlessly. Neither the rocking of the boat nor the fresh breeze came close to putting the flame out. I love that grill! Now, if only we had some fresh fish to put on it instead of hot dogs.

After hot dogs and apple sauce were consumed, we quickly developed a good system for cleaning up our dirty dishes. Matt would fill a large bucket with sea water and add Joy detergent. While Matt was preparing the dish soap, Joe would do a quick rinse of dirty plates and utensils over the side of the boat. Although we never lost anything over the side, it was a bit of a dangerous step. Matt would then wash the dishes in soapy salt water and hand them to me who would rinse with fresh water in the nifty Rhodes sink and then wipe dry. This system was used throughout the trip and it worked well.



Breaking in the Magma during beautiful sunset.



Skies cleared as the setting sun cast a pink glow on distant clouds

With the final light of the day fading into shades of red and orange, the pop top enclosure was put up, cockpit bed made up, and everything stowed for the night. It might sound cozy, but it was anything but. Remember the 1-2 foot chop? After the sun set and darkness fell inky black with no moon or stars due to cloud cover, the wind picked up and began blowing out of East at around 10-12 knots. That's 10-12 knots across 70 miles of shallow water. I had read accounts of others that sailed these waters before me say that the Banks could be very uncomfortable if there is a good breeze blowing across them. Wind blowing over shallow water over long expanses produces steep choppy waves.

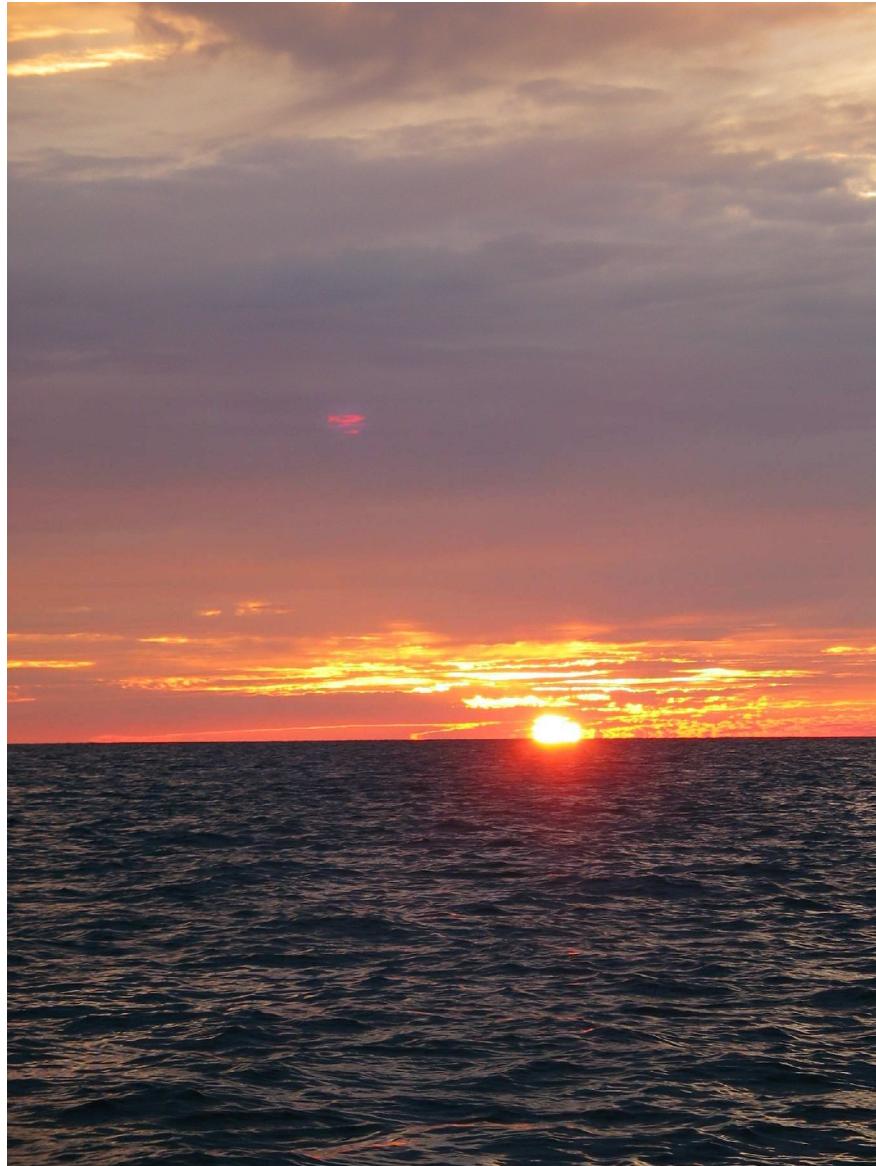
The accounts were right. As the night wore on, the wind continued to build and it felt like we were trying to sleep on a roller coaster. The motion of the boat was not at all the smooth up and down one gets from the gentle rollers that come off the open ocean. It was more like riding on one of those bucking broncos that sometimes sit in front of neighborhood grocery stores.

I had fabricated a riding sail at home before the trip and thought that this was the perfect application so we endeavored to put it up before settling in for the night. I thought that it would help keep the Rhodes from swinging and hunting, as well as keep the nose into the wind. While it kept the nose into the wind, it also sailed the boat back and forth through a wide arc. Back and forth, back and forth. The motion was very consistent as I watched on my GPS. It was an unsettling motion because the side to side sensation could be felt along with the bucking up and down. Perhaps the sail was too big, or maybe I had it set wrong, but it didn't seem to fulfill its intended purpose and it was too dark and I was too tired to play with it any more that night. I should have just taken the darn thing down, but by this time I was too tired to be bothered, so suffered through a night of bobbing and swaying.

I never attempted to set the riding sail again for the reminder of the trip. Whenever I suggested putting it up in other anchorages, the boys would remind me how miserable the night was when we used it, and they blamed the sail. Never mind that we had anchored in the middle of the Great Bahamas Bank during a windy night. They mutinously refused to help me set it up, and I must admit that I too remembered the misery. In retrospect, I think that if I had played with the rudder and boom position, the riding sail would have worked much better. Lesson learned.

There is a silver lining to every cloud, and ours was finally seeing the silver light from the dawn of a new day. No one slept worth crap, but attitudes were positive and we even got a good laugh from telling and listening to the tales of each other's dreams during the short periods when we slept at all. My dream was of being on a dock with my daughter and being rocked up and down while trying to keep her from falling into the water. The best dream was Joe's. He dreamt that he was in a Starbucks, and the coffee shop started rocking so violently that all of the customers started spilling scalding hot coffee all over each other.

The best thing about that night was that it didn't take long after first light the next morning to weigh anchor and get under way. A good thing, too. We were in for a long day of motoring.



The first of many beautiful sunsets on this trip