

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006 The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 5 (5/27): Cruise Ships and Private Anchorages

Total Mileage: 11 nautical miles.

What a difference a quiet anchorage makes on one's outlook in the morning. Throughout the night, very little wind and no rolling or bucking disturbed our slumber. We all woke refreshed and happy in the knowledge that we would not have to face another 70 mile day for some time. Then we poked our heads up and saw the largest cruise ship that I had ever seen. Even though it was anchored on the other side of the island, it loomed above the ocean like the rising of Atlantis. It wouldn't be long before the place would be crawling with tourists.



Sleepy heads.

Having been at sea for some time now, our biological clocks had us retiring shortly after dark and usually rising shortly after sunrise. And though we slept in well past sunrise on this morning, most of the ship passengers were still on the ship when we arose. We relaxed and casually ate our breakfast while watching the beach slowly fill with "cruisers." I pulled out the binoculars to do a little "scenery watching", but was interrupted by the familiar sound of gnats buzzing around me. Actually it wasn't gnats. It was jet skis. The first batch had just been launched and I knew as one of the only items of interest in the bay, that we would very shortly be buzzed by curious jet skiers. It was time to move on. Even though there was very little wind, only a breath, we raised sail and slowly made our way to the exit. I thought we at least owed the tourists a view of a pretty sailboat. I could almost hear the wistful thoughts of the sunbathers gazing out at us. Unbeknownst to them, they were being held captive on that island and on that ship.



Waking to the sight of a huge cruise ship



As nice as it looked, I was glad to be on my little boat...and free.

Once out of the bay, the wind all but died and we fired up the outboard once again. To our fortune, our ambitions only had us traveling a short distance to an interesting anchorage and island called Hawksnest Cay. As we motorsailed down the coast, we saw one fishing boat in the far distance, but otherwise had the Berry Islands to ourselves (notwithstanding the 3,000 cruise ship passengers that were stranded on CoCo Cay). The skies had cleared to partly cloudy, light winds at around 2-5 kts, temperature in the mid 80s, gin clear water, and deserted islands. We had arrived. This time for real.

Once again we put out a couple of fishing lines to catch the perfect mahi, or tuna, or anything. After about an hour we finally got a bite. A really big bite. So big, in fact that it took the lure right off the end of the line. We agreed that it must have been a record breaking bill fish. Another \$6.00 lure gone.

Once again my trusty mapping GPS guided us around a rock outcropping and into a large shallow bay on the leeward side of Hawksnest Cay. We were the only ones there. And it was only 1230 in the afternoon.



Hawksnest Cay. You can see the sea grass, poor holding.

Setting the anchor was a bit of a challenge because we were located in a very large sea grass bed. I dared not move any closer to shore so I dropped anchor in an area that looked like the grass was less dense. After backing down on the anchor, I jumped in the water and swam another anchor out 180 degrees from the first anchor and hand set it in a small spot of sand. I then swam back to the first anchor and was surprised to find that only a few inches of the flukes had penetrated the sea grass bed. We were anchored in about 6 feet of water, so I was able to stand on the end of the anchor and try pushing down on it to get a better set. It was amazing how dense the sea grass roots were just below the seabed. I pushed and pushed before finally getting only about half the flukes buried.

The day was young, so after a light lunch on board, we finally broke out the inflatable dinghy. Before the trip, I spent quite a bit of time debating whether to bring a heavy duty hypalon inflatable (the kind with the roll up floor and motor mount on the stern). It had come with my boat, but I didn't have a dinghy motor and it didn't really row all that well. I looked and looked for a used dinghy motor, and even considered buying a new one, but I had already spent way more than I had budgeted for more important gear like the autopilot and mapping GPS. In the end, I had elected to bring a much lighter duty recreational inflatable called a SeaEagle. It is double ended and equipped with two sets of oars.

Given the size of the Rhodes, combined with the shallow water in which we could anchor, I was quite satisfied with the choice of dinghy. I didn't have to fuss with another outboard motor and worry about how/where to store it. The SeaEagle dinghy folded up easily under the cockpit seat, whereas the other dinghy would have had to be tied down on the bow and would have been a hindrance when not in use; which was quite often given the long passages we made. In fact, we rarely ever used the dinghy for human transportation. Instead we would load up the dinghy with our "toys" and swim or wade to shore, dragging the dinghy behind. There was probably only one day during the whole trip that it would have been nice to have a motorized dinghy to explore the area and get to and from a remote eatery. All in all, going with the simple, lightweight oar powered dinghy was the best trade-off for us.



It was easier (more fun) to swim with the dinghy than paddle it.

The shore looked close from the boat, but when we started swimming it took much longer to get there than we thought. In retrospect, we could have anchored a lot closer, but not being familiar with the anchorage and afraid of running aground I had erred on conservative. As the trip wore on, I got much bolder about anchoring in shallow water.

Matt and Joe headed into shore with the dinghy loaded with snorkeling equipment while I put the finishing touches on our anchor set. They were excited to get off the boat after having spent the past 2 ½ days passage making. So was I. Before they reached the shore, Joe discovered what was probably the best find of the day; a live conch. Joe is a big conch fan, but didn't have the heart to bring it back to the boat for dinner.

Hawksnest Cay was an idyllic setting. We had the whole place to ourselves. One interesting feature was a large shallow lagoon that was enclosed on the ocean side with rocks and on the bay side with sand. It was a perfect wading/swimming hole. It also must have been a good place to gather conch because later in the day we saw a local Bahamian wading in the lagoon with a large sack. Next to the lagoon was a beautiful little maritime forest of pine and other scrub trees. It was here that I encountered my first Bahamas lizard. I was relieving myself when I was quite startled to see a small lizard with a curled tail jump out toward the end of my "stream". Apparently, he was checking it out to see if it was fresh water. It wasn't. These lizards were fairly numerous on all of the islands we visited and looked quite cute with their buggy eyes and curly tails.

After doing our duty backpacker style (digging a cat hole and covering) we set out to hike around the north end of the island. My guide book said that there was a water cave on the island, so that gave us a mission; as if just walking on this interesting island wasn't enough.

Before coming to the islands, I thought that they were made up of old coral. Instead, what I found was mostly volcanic rock. Hawksnest Cay is actually a volcanic formation and I found that the rocks were jagged in places near the shoreline. This would not be a problem but for the fact that I was barefoot. In my haste to hit the beach, I had neglected to bring any shoes and was too lazy to swim all the way back to the boat for any. So, my wonderful son shared his shoes with me. Whenever we had to traverse a particularly jagged area, he (or I) would cross with the shoes and then throw them back to the other to make the crossing. It slowed us down a bit, but then the island was small and there was no hurry. The rock formations were really neat looking and I regretted that I had not brought my camera for what would have been some very artistic shots.

As we hiked along the edge of the island, I noticed that the area seemed very arid. The vegetation was dry and the soil rocky and sandy. It was amazing that anything could grow there at all. I also became aware of how hot it could get on land. The sun beat down on our backs and reflected up off the dark rocks. It felt like walking in an oven. I wanted a drink of water, but there was nary a drop to drink. Again, in our haste we had not brought any water. I also started wondering if the SPF70 suntan lotion that I had applied earlier would hold off the intense Bahamas sun. It did for me, but not for my son, who in his machoism had only put on SPF30.

After traversing all the way around the rocky ocean side of the island, our toils were rewarded when we came upon the water cave. Where was my darn camera! It was wonderful. It looked like a lava tube that led out into the ocean. It was very short with the ocean visible through the other end, and the temperature was very cool inside. We sat there enjoying the coolness of the shade and water until we realized that with each wave, the water level was rising. So we departed, not that there was any risk of being trapped, but because we were getting hungry and thirsty.

One of the interesting finds in this water cave were what we thought were fossils; hundreds of trilobites all over the rocks. Upon further investigation we found that they were not fossils, but were in fact living creatures. Cool.

On our way back to the boat there appeared a man and woman in sea kayaks who stopped for a gam (a visit for those not familiar with the term "gam"). It was nice to talk to people after being out of contact with humanity for several days. Granted, we had not

just reached the New World after a six week ocean crossing, but it felt just a little like it; if only in our imaginations.

During our gam, they related how far it was to travel all the way back around the northern end of the island to get to Bullocks Harbor where there was the only fuel to be found in the Berry Islands. Of course, if we had a better dinghy, we could just motor a short few miles across the bay and walk across the narrow island to town. Oh well.

I knew that there was another place in the Berry's to get fuel, a place called Chub Cay Marina, but it was closed for a complete rebuild. The kayakers confirmed this fact, but thought that we might still be able to get fuel there. Based on that information we elected not to make our way all the way back to Bullocks, and instead take our chances and continue on our journey down the eastern side of the Berry Islands.

Swimming back to the boat proved more challenging than leaving it. While the anchorage looked calm and tranquil from the beach, there was a gentle current flowing out of the bay that got stronger as we neared our tiny ship. Having anchored a bit further from the beach than necessary, there remained approximately 50 yards to swim once I could no longer easily touch the bottom. It was amazing how the current pulled me away from the boat as I swam. The 50 yard swim hence turned into 100 due to the angle I had to take. Needless to say, by the time I got back to the boat, I had to hang onto the stern ladder for a few minutes to catch my breath, relieved to have made it back. Of course, the boys had no problem and made quite a sport of the whole affair.

The sun was sinking toward the west (thank goodness) and as the temperature cooled we jumped into the water one last time to take our Joy baths. It really is amazing how well a "Joy bath" works at stripping all the sticky salt water off your body and leaving you clean and refreshed. Joy bathing was a routine that we would repeat every evening that we were not in a marina; which was most of the time. Once we were clean, the evenings were really quite comfortable.

At last, it was time to put the Magma into service as an outdoor cooking range. The boys decided that this night would be spaghetti night since we had not caught any fish, nor had the ambition to hunt for conch. The Magma grill, according to its instructions, can be used as a single burner stove, or even an oven. I was eager to see how it would work as a stove. However, when I opened the lid of the magnificent magma I found that we had left two hot dogs on the grill from two nights ago (when we cooked after dark in the open water of a roly uncomfortable anchorage). After finishing our "eeews" and gags, I quickly committed them to the deep, and we proceeded to have one of the most pleasant dining experiences of the trip.

After we filled a large pot with water, the magma wasted no time bringing it to a boil and we soon had delicious batch of pasta. Once the noodles were just right, we dumped in two jars of gourmet spaghetti sauce and let it simmer. The Magma did an excellent job in both boiling the water and keeping a low simmering heat without blowing out. While the main course was cooking, we enjoyed a first course of bagged salad with ranch dressing. I found that bagged salad kept quite well and provided an easy instant salad.

All in all, we were quite proud of ourselves for putting together such a tasty full course meal out in a maritime wilderness. The boys were so hungry that they licked their plates clean. Later in the trip I found out that Joe, in fact, licks his plate all the time; even at home. We gave him quite a hard time about this obsessive compulsive behavior until he pointed out that his plate was much easier to clean than ours. Licking plates henceforth became the order of each meal.



There were no leftovers



Not even leftover salad dressing!

After eating all the pasta, and fighting over who got to lick the pot, we finished our meal with apples and oranges. Maybe it is from reading too many old sailing novels about crews at sea for months getting scurvy, but those oranges tasted awfully good. Better than candy.

It was just dusk when we finished cleaning up and relaxed in the cockpit. I mentioned that the giant cruise ship was probably loaded back up and just heading down the coast, and that it will be something to see as it passes by us, all lit up with the twinkling lights of a thousand cabins. A lengthy discussion promptly ensued over whether the ship had in fact already left and where it was heading. In the end, we made bets as to when the cruise ship would pass by. I bet that it would pass by our harbor at around 2200. Matt thought that it had already left. Joe didn't care. He was too busy admiring the sunset.

Then, just after dark, we heard a distant explosion and looked up to see fireworks! That's right, it was Memorial Day weekend and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines was treating its passengers to a grand fireworks display over their private island. We had a clear view of it just over the horizon. To use my son's expression, "It was Sweet". They wasted no expense as the display went on for some time and ended with a grand finale. We felt smug that we got to enjoy the show from our very own little ship, without paying for an expensive cruise.

I think I won the bet, but we never knew for sure because everyone was sound asleep by 2200.

I feel compelled to say a word about sleeping arrangements as you may wonder how three men, with one who is 6' 4", can sleep comfortably on a 22 foot boat during an extended voyage. Before the trip, we had decided to use the V berth for the storage of supplies and use the cockpit as sleeping quarters for the boys. I would get the berth in the cabin. One of the things that I struggled with was how to protect my son and his friend from the rain when sleeping in the open cockpit. Before the trip, we tried cutting up a cheap plastic tarp and clipping the pieces to each side of the bimini. During a shakedown cruise on our nice calm lake a few weeks before this cruise, it took the boys over an hour to put the pieces together and even then it kept falling apart. It was quite a circus. I finally resorted to a nice lightweight 10X12 nylon tarp that could be either draped over or tied underneath the boom. We never did get a good system for tying it off so we finally gave up. Being resourceful and hardy 18 year olds, or maybe just lazy, they ended up simply sleeping out in the open and tucking the tarp around their bodies whenever it rained at night. When there were mosquitoes, they simply tied a big piece of mosquito netting from the boom and draped it over them and tucked the edges under the seat cushions. Very rudimentary, but it worked for them. I don't think that system would work for my wife and daughters, though!