

Day 2 (5/19/2010): To the Dry Tortugas! 42 Nautical Miles

I woke up early at 0600 followed shortly by Matt so we went ahead and departed at 0630 with Lindsay still asleep in the cockpit. We quietly slipped out of the anchorage under mill pond calm conditions. Once underway Matt napped with Lindsay until around 0830 at which time he took over while I napped. It was a very uneventful morning.

The sea remained calm with no wind to speak of all day. It was quite a contrast to the day before and days leading up to the trip.



Reading en route

We munched on snacks for breakfast and lunch and finally the tip of the lighthouse peeked over the horizon. We had been out of sight of land for several hours and it was good to see a landmark again. Our fuel consumption had been very low thus far so I cranked up the engine a bit to maximize our speed as we were excited to get to Garden Key and Fort Jefferson. We finally rounded the point by the fort at around 1400. We had arrived! And we had used less than one 6 gallon tank of fuel. I had packed onboard nearly 30 gallons because I knew there were absolutely no refueling opportunities and didn't want to get caught short in such a remote area. It looked like we wouldn't even use half of it.



Sleeping en route



Land Ho!

The anchorage was busy but not crowded and there were a wide variety of boats there; everything to well worn fishing vessels to a multi-million dollar mega yacht. We, of course, were by far the small boat there.

The water was crystal clear and we easily found a good sandy spot to anchor. There are actually several places to anchor around the fort but by far the most popular is just off of the park service docks (which are reserved for park service and tour boats).



Fort and Tour Boats

The holding is good if you make sure and drop your anchor in a sandy spot. We of course had the advantage of anchoring on the periphery of the anchorage in shallower water so had a bit more privacy than the other boats. It always amazes me how boats tend to cluster together in an anchorage.

After a quick lunch we were eager to get in the water so we had a refreshing swim around the boat before doing anything else. Man, what a paradise! I felt like I was back in the Bahamas again. Crystal clear water that looked shallower than it really was rushed up to meet me as I jumped from the boat. Ahhh. The cool but not cold water cleansed the sweat and grit from my body and relaxed my soul. I could have easily just float around the boat for the rest of the afternoon.



Gin Clear Water



After satisfying our desire for the water, the dinghy was inflated, the motor mounted, and we set out for the fort. Because of the shallow waters and the configuration of the anchorages around the fort, having an outboard on a dinghy is a very nice luxury; especially when there is a current to contend with. We made very good use of it throughout our visit in the Dry Tortugas. There is a nice beach area to the left of the docks for landing so we followed the lead of the other dinghies and pulled our's up next to them.



First trip to the fort

After all of our messing about we approached the fort and found that all the tourists were gone and we were able to walk right in without having to pay anything, which was a good thing because the \$20 that I had put in my pocket had fallen out while I was frolicking in the water earlier. Overall, the fort was interesting but it was hot and windless inside. Also, I had a strange feeling the whole time I was inside. I couldn't see my ship. Mentally I knew it was safely anchored, but I just couldn't shake that little uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was secretly relieved to get on top of the fort and see Fina Lee happily bobbing at her anchor. She looked so little out there amongst the bigger boats.



Perfunctory Photo by the Sign



The front of the Fort



Cannon placements in lower section of fort



Looking out from cannon placements (can you see Fina Lee?)



Interior of Fort Jefferson



Big Guns!



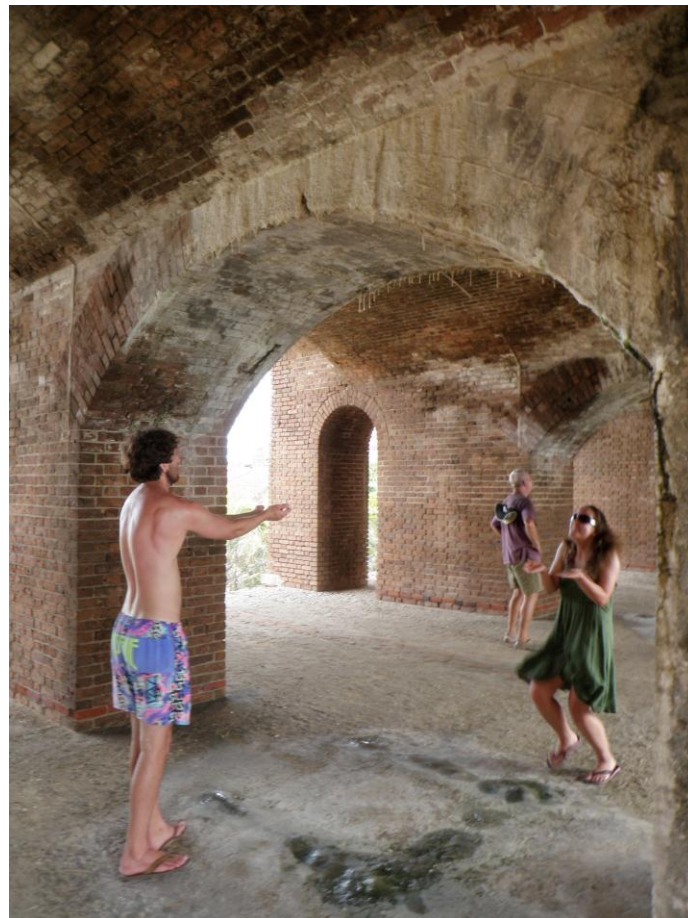
Looking in from the top



A looong corridor



Exploring the Fort



Catching drips from stalactites



Hot and dry outside



Cool and damp inside



*Dr. Mudd's cell – Lindsay is the picture of despair
(I think she is ready for the tour to end!)*

While one is free to wander about the fort, there is a self guided tour that leads you through the more interesting areas and provides some explanations and stories. It is amazing to think that something so massive was built so far from civilization. The tour

was cut short, though, as Lindsay experienced the onset of a migraine headache. It was the worst headache she had ever experienced and made her sick and dizzy. Knowing that the symptoms were a side effect of the anti-seasickness patch she was wearing, we decided that the cure was worse than the disease, so to speak, so she took the patch off and resigned that she would rather deal with the possibility of seasickness than that terrible headache. She felt badly for a very long time and was still not feeling well until later in the evening. I think that being so far from Key West and medical facilities made me feel a bit insecure as well. I mentally started thinking of a contingency plan for getting back to civilization if her condition worsened. I noticed that Mathew was doing the same.



Lindsay feeling bad (with Loggerhead Key in background)

Despite her headache, Lindsay really perked up as we stood on the upper ramparts and beheld the surrounding scene of beautiful blue placid waters and the lighthouse of Loggerhead key in the distance. A cooling breeze and the sighting of dolphins made us all feel much better.

After the perfunctory tour of the fort and picture by the sign, we took some time to look at the broken down boats recovered from Cuban refugees that had landed in the Dry Tortugas. I was amazed at how rudimentary these boats were. It must be desperate people who would venture out into the open ocean in these small rickety craft. I had read before our trip that there was usually a Cuban boat or two beached next to the fort, but what I wasn't expecting was how recently they had arrived. The park ranger that had taken our "touristy" picture by the sign (for probably the thousandth time) explained the one foot on land laws regarding the refugees. He was very interesting and patient in answering our questions. Apparently, if a Cuban refugee is found with at least one foot

on land they are processed as a political refugee and taken to the mainland for processing. If they are caught in the water then they are immediately deported back to Cuba. Very strange rule. So a cat and mouse game is played out whereby the Cubans try to get to U.S. land before they are intercepted by the coast guard. The nearest U.S. land to Cuba is the Dry Tortugas so many of them land their boats there, mostly on Loggerhead or Garden Keys. The ranger also pointed out that for some reason the influx of Cuban boats has increased dramatically over the past several months. They are getting several a week now.



Would you get in a boat with this guy?



A Cuban boat recently recovered



The Cuban fishing vessel *Laura* quietly slipped out of Havana Harbor in the darkness of late Friday evening May 7, 2010, and after a 27 hour journey across the Straits of Florida, landed on Garden Key early Sunday morning May 9, 2010 with 4 refugees aboard (3 male, 1 female), successfully escaping communism in their home country.

Later in the day they were sent to Key West FL for processing by Customs and Border Patrol agents.

They now begin a long process to gain full citizenship status in the United States of America.

After our walkabout we decided to skip snorkeling in favor of cooking dinner before dark; especially given Lindsay's uncertain condition. So we headed back to the boat where I dropped Matt off to start the preparations and took Lindsay back to shore to use the composting toilets near the camping area. As we motored the dinghy back toward the "dinghy beach" we witnessed a most amazing thing. A huge stingray (or manta ray) with at least a 6 foot wing span jumped five feet out of the water. Wow! I felt like we were living in a National Geographic documentary.

Dinner tonight was Indian food with rice and salad. It was tasty and best of all gluten free. My daughter has celiac disease which is a condition of intolerance to gluten so we had decided before the trip to have all of our meals gluten free. She and I are also vegetarian so this meant that we would have some interesting meals, but they were all actually pretty good; this one included.



Another delicious meal in a priceless setting

With light winds out of the southeast we witnessed another breathtaking sunset that entertained us with a kaleidoscope of changing colors while we finished dinner and cleaned up. Two bottles of wine and great music in the cockpit made for the best night of the cruise so far. We talked and laughed well into the evening. Lindsay was feeling better, and that made us all feel better.

We finally settled into bed at around 2300 to a sky that began clouding up; as we drifted off to sleep looking forward to another day of adventure. The bimini was put up but we didn't bother with the pop-top enclosure because it was still so warm. Sometime in the night we got a light sprinkle of rain but nothing bad enough to wake us from a very peaceful sleep.