

Day 1 (5/18/2010): Departure!!! 27 Nautical Miles

The day started early at around 0600 with the sounds of boat lifts operating, and trucks driving down the pier (or is it a wharf?). I was a bit bleary eyed from a restless night of checking dock lines and fenders. Everything was fine. Kids woke at around 0830 and we ate a breakfast of muffins while listening to the NOAA weather report and contemplating our future.

The sky was mostly clear and there was a light breeze out of the SSE. NOAA weather informed us that the wind and seas would continue to moderate with lighter winds and fair weather for the next several days. We held a brief meeting and made the easy decision to go for it. We were headed for the Dry Tortugas!!!

Our plan was to sail out to the Marquesas Islands and anchor for the night. We would take the “southern route” which entails sailing inside the outer reef (until it peters out) and just outside the shallows that extend west from Key West nearly all the way to the Dry Tortugas. So with a good plan and improving weather I set about making final preparations for departure and dispatched the kids (err, young adults) on a mission to K-Mart for a few last minute supplies.

With everything stowed away and tied down I was ready to cast off. But where were the kids? They seemed to be gone an awfully long time. Were they lost? Did they get in an accident? Am I fretting? Yes.

Rather than fret any more, I busied myself by looking over our charts and watching the activities in the boatyard that was but a few yards away. One man was working on his engine; another on his hull. Forklifts were moving boats here and there, and two men were in deep discussion over who caught the bigger fish... or how high their repair bill was. I caught the light scents of warm pavement, motor oil, and paint solvent; smells of land that would soon be far away. At long last, I looked up to see the kids sauntering up the quay. I just wish I had a camera to capture what I saw. My son, in all his wisdom, my college son, was carrying a case of Red Stripe beer on his shoulder...with a big smile on his face. Bottles no doubt.

“How the heck do think we are going to keep those cold for a whole week?” I asked. “And bottles?” What was he thinking?

“No problem dad.” Matt replied with a smile. “They will all be gone in a couple of days.....or less.”

I was skeptical, but not wanting to be the anal retentive captain I allowed the beer booty on board and off we went. It was 1130 already but no worries. We’re on vacation!

Casting off the lines, we quietly slipped away from the marina without so much as the local stray dog taking notice. No bon voyage band and speeches for our open ocean adventure in a small sailboat. Oh well.

Leaving the sounds and smells of the boatyard behind, we turned our sights seaward. Though the seas were a bit bumpy at around 3 to 3.5 feet, it was very tenable and with the wind slightly aft of port beam the sails went up and the motor went off. We set a course in the GPS for the Marquesas Islands which showed us about 25 nautical miles away. After fine tuning the sails, we found ourselves sailing at a good clip of between 4.5-5.0 knots. What a glorious sail! With Matt at the helm and Lindsay looking intently for any signs of marine mammals, I popped the top of a Red Stripe and watched Key West slip past us. Life is good.

After a couple of hours of taking turns at the helm we hooked up the autopilot and simply enjoyed the scenery. Key West had long since passed behind us and all that we could make out were indistinguishable islands in the distance. They all looked alike. It’s amazing how different real life looks compared to the charts that I had poured over for

weeks prior to the trip. I could really appreciate how easy it might be to get disoriented out here and run aground. It is hard to imagine that there could be so much shallow water when there is so little land about.

Well, as it is with most cruises, the wind died down as the afternoon wore on. After some debate we finally got impatient and fired up the outboard. Amazing how loud it sounded after sailing in silence for so many hours. But our ETA kept getting later as we slowed with the failing wind. We wanted to get to an anchorage before dusk.

1730 found us rounding the bend at the far end of the Marquesas. I had originally planned to motor into Mooney Harbor, if that's what you could call it. I had plotted some waypoints before the trip to help snake our way into it, but when we arrived it was hard to tell where the outside water ended and the harbor began. The low lying islands were sparsely scattered around the large lagoon, and I just knew that there were sandbars waiting to grab me if I attempted to get in there. Lots of open space. It was all very indistinguishable. There were several boats anchored on the west side of the island group so we decided to follow the herd mentality and anchor over there. Maybe put the dinghy in and explore the area.



The west side of the Marquesas Islands

Anchoring in this area was a lot more challenging than I had anticipated. Being the smallest boat out there, which I found to be the case everywhere we went, my plan was to anchor well inside the few boats that were already there and possibly swim in to the beach for a little exploring. However, as we crept toward the sandy beach the depth quickly dropped to seven feet, then six feet, and we were still a fair distance from shore. It was too far to swim and nothing but sea grass on the bottom; not a good anchoring prospect. So we worked our way along the 6-8 foot contour back toward the southern

end of the island until we found some sandy patches that promised better holding. We got a good set after a couple of tries. I noticed a bit of current so we set a Bahamian mooring (two anchors 180 degrees from each other) to make sure we didn't lose hold if/when the tide reversed. I was actually surprised that there was so much current given the wide open area. The tide seemed to move past us at around one or two knots. Although the anchorage is very exposed from every direction but the West, the wind had died down quite a bit so we experienced nothing more than ripples in the water. By sunset the air became as still as a sleeping baby.

Prior to the trip I had ordered a Rocna anchor to add to my arsenal of Fortress anchors but it had not arrived in time. I wondered if it would have done a better job at grabbing the scrubble bottom than my danforth styled Fortress anchor. Now that I have my Rocna I'll have to go back out there and test it.

By the time we got all the anchoring squared away it was well after 1800. We were tired and starting to get hungry so lost the motivation to inflate the dinghy and explore. One thing that my son, Matt, has taught me is the importance of doing your cooking before sunset. Everything seems much easier in the light of day.

Had I more time for this trip, I might have stayed another night and spent at least one day exploring these little deserted islands by dinghy. Though uninteresting looking from a distance, I am sure that there would be many fascinating things to see along the sandy beach or in the vast lagoon. Maybe even find some buried treasure! But despite letting our imaginations run away we were eager to continue on to the Dry Tortugas so resolved to save these islands for another trip at another time.

Dinner consisted of Mom's bean dip and salad, supplemented with chips, and of course beer. Yum. After a full day on the boat we were all ready to relax and enjoy the sunset.



Simple sailor's fare: salad, beans and beer

And what a beautiful sunset it was! For the first time this trip we were able to totally chill out and visit with each other. The content of our conversations are lost in my memory, but what I will always remember is the comfort we had in each other's company; catching up on each other's lives, laughing and contently watching the sun sink toward the sea. I call them kids but they are really young adults now; forming their own life adventures independent of the strings of influence from their parents. It was good to hear about them.



First Sunset

We left the bimini down and didn't bother to put up the pop top enclosure because the skies were fair and seemed to be clearing. It would be a good night for star gazing. And they were absolutely incredible despite the partial cloud cover. I think it was the first time in my life where I actually got to see the stars meet the sea. I had read about it, but no words or pictures adequately describe the experience of seeing stars from horizon to horizon. With the reflections off the water it was like sitting in a mammoth bubble of stars. You could almost imagine what it would be like to be in outer space. I could have stared at them all night but sleep crept up on all of us quickly and by 2130 we were all ready to crash for the night. Similar to my Bahamas trip a few years prior, the cockpit was converted to a large bed for Matt and Lindsay while I slept on the cabin.

Matt and I woke up at the same time. It was 0300. The wind had picked up and we could see lightening in the distance. Isn't it always the case that when you don't put up rain protection it rains? After watching the distant storm for a few minutes, which was a show in itself, we both agreed that it was moving away from us and went back to sleep. Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't but I think that both of us were just too lazy and

tired to put anything up. We were lucky. We woke up at dawn and were dry. Lindsay had slept soundly through the night. The seasickness patch that she put on the day before seemed to be working.



Looking for dolphin at sunset

