

#### **Day 4 (5/21/2010): A Perfect Day 6 Nautical Miles**

The night had been long for me; very long. The only positive aspect was that I was still alive and got to witness perhaps the most beautiful night sky I have ever seen. Dawn came with clear skies and light to medium winds at around 8 knots from the ESE. I was tired from the ordeal of the night, but the morning light seemed to rejuvenate and miraculously I felt no more pain. Matt was relieved to see that I was feeling better as well. Lindsay had slept through it all, and felt badly that she had, as much because she had missed the beautiful sky as for being able to do anything for me. It is nice to know that your kids care about you.

After a delicious breakfast of Lindsay's now famous eggs we loaded up the dinghy and headed back to the fort for some snorkeling around the seawall. Being on college/island time we didn't hit the beach until after 10:00 so all of the tourists were already there. Most were in the fort and so few people were venturing along the wall to snorkel yet. We didn't really feel crowded at all. It was still strange to me, though, to have sailed so far in our little boat only to see day trippers that had only a few hours ago finished their Starbucks at the docks of Key West. It didn't seem fair somehow. But then, they also could not fathom the deeper more enriching experienced that we were having. Same place and time. Two totally different experiences.



*Camping Area with Fina Lee in the background*

Our snorkeling started from the small beach by the fort's outer wall, or moat. We made our way along this wall at a leisurely pace all the way around the fort to another small beach about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the circumference of the fort. The further we got from our starting point the better the snorkeling got. There were fewer people at the far end, but

much more wildlife. It was simply amazing to swim along such an old structure; like diving on Atlantis. The intermingling of fish, coral, and the ruins made for an almost surreal experience. There were several breakdowns along the wall that created openings into the moat area that were guarded by barracuda that were frozen in suspension.



*Beach and snorkeling along outside of moat*

After reaching the far end of the wall, we walked back to the beach along the top of the moat wall and gained yet another perspective of the fort and the water surrounding it. Back at the beach, the sand was hot and it was now fairly crowded with tourists so we decided to pack up and venture into the visitors center to see if there was any snorkeling areas out at Loggerhead Key that were better than what we had seen the day before.

The ranger at the visitor center was very nice but distracted by a radio call that yet another boat of Cubans had just been spotted heading toward the Dry Tortugas. Waiting was no problem though as the room was cool with air conditioning. We talked with him a bit about the Cuban influx and he explained the one foot rule again. Our ranger friend told us, like the ranger of the prior day, that the number of refugees has increased significantly over the past several months to a level not seen since the heydays of Castro. The rangers seemed quite puzzled as to why.

We also learned from the ranger about all of the things we should have done upon arrival, but had not yet done. These included:

1. Self register the boat at the park's dock and pay a fee of \$5/person
2. Hail the park service for clearance whenever we wanted to go visit Loggerhead Key. There is now a restriction that only 25 people can visit the island at any given time. It's not strictly enforced just yet and there never

seems to be enough people there to approach this limit, but to be legal it is good to get “official” permission to visit the island.

3. When anchoring at Loggerhead Key, only anchor in the sandy spots; not in coral. This seems obvious, but that may be why the park patrol had circled our boat the day before.

In addition, we learned that the park service intends to install mooring balls in the main anchorage as soon as they have money in their budget. They also post the weather forecast in the “weather house” on the park dock, which is nice since we could not get VHF reception so far from Key West, the nearest transmitting station. We found it to be a bit dated, however, as they don’t necessarily update it every day.

So with all that newfound knowledge we focused back on the all important snorkeling recommendations. The ranger told us that by far the best snorkeling in the Dry Tortugas was at Loggerhead Key in an area called Little Africa, so named by the shape of the coral formation. It is located on the west side of the island which is the back side as observed from Ft. Jefferson. Although Little Africa was on the lee side of the island, our ranger friend advised against trying to anchor on that side. First and foremost, the park service only wants folks anchoring on the fort side of the island, I guess so they can see you. Secondly, there are a lot of shoals that extend way out from either end of the island and makes the distance, and resultant time, very long to get to the other side by boat. He said that even the park rangers run aground occasionally on the ever shifting shoals. Maybe he just said that to discourage us from taking our boat to the far side, but with the island being so narrow we figured it was much more efficient to anchor on the fort side and walk across anyway. To get to Little Africa, one merely needs to anchor out from the lighthouse and walk across the island past the light house, through the backyard of the now empty light keeper’s house to the white sandy beach where you will find the nirvana of snorkeling.

Back at the boat, we ate a lunch of almond butter sandwiches and prepared to depart. I thought about the \$20 that I had placed in my swimsuit pocket and lost earlier in the trip. It would have been nice to pay our fees with it. Some lucky snorkeler or beachcomber will be happy anyway. So I grabbed some more cash, and after a quick trip to the dock to pay, and a radio call to the rangers for clearance to visit Loggerhead, we were all set and legal.

We motored the short distance back over to Loggerhead Key and quickly found a decent area of sand in which to anchor, this time just to the right (north) of the lighthouse and ranger’s pier. Still, we were challenged to get a good anchor set and it took us two tries before we felt comfortable enough to leave the boat unattended.



### *Landfall at Loggerhead Key!*

Although we could anchor fairly close to the island, the wind and current would make swimming a bit dicey so we loaded up the dinghy and motored in. No other boats could be seen on this day so we had the island completely to ourselves. Gathering up our possessions, we left the dinghy on the beach and headed inland to the lighthouse.

As we walked past the lighthouse an eerie scene unfolded. It appeared as if the lighthouse keeper had just picked up and left one day. Or died. Or perhaps there was a plague. Our imaginations ran wild. There was a rusty looking John Deere Gator parked next to the lighthouse; tires flat. A bit further the forlorn light keeper's house was in dire need of repair with torn window screens and a shutter laying askew and flapping quietly in the wind. An old wrench was painting a rusty pattern on the corner of a concrete pad. The gas grill on the porch has long since seen its last BBQ. The sign on the front door said "KEEP OUT", and meant it. We had no desire to go inside. There are ghosts here.

Leaving behind the buzzing flies and mosquitoes at the light keeper's house, the scrub brush opened up to a beautiful pearl white sandy beach. What a difference from the ruins from which we had just come. Looking left, then right, the beach stretched for about half a mile on either side of us. And we were the only ones there. Lying before us, submerged in the crystal azure waters, we could see the rough outline of something. I guess it could be Africa; with a little imagination. The area has small buoys around it to make sure no boaters disturb this pristine underwater area. They were the very same buoys that we had seen from our dinghy the day before. We were eager to jump in. But first we took a moment to take in the pristine beauty and let sink in exactly where we were.

Here we stood. On the western most point of the Florida Keys more than 70 miles from the nearest civilization of Key West. Clear blue skies kissed the clear warm

Caribbean waters that were lapping up against the white sandy beach of a deserted island; our own deserted island. A striking lighthouse as our backdrop and a pristine coral reef lying before us, put there by God for us to enjoy, cherish, and protect. Enough poetic prose; into the water we go!

Incredible, fantastic, stupendous! These words fail to adequately describe the snorkeling experience of Little Africa. Unfortunately, Lindsay's "underwater" camera quit working after just a few underwater pictures so we were compelled to commit the beauty and experience to memory. We were so mad! But, it's probably just as well. Taking pictures of a coral reef is like trying to capture the grandeur of the Grand Canyon; better left to professionals. Swimming in an aquarium is the closest I can come to describe our snorkeling experience. This massive fish tank had more species than could be counted. Perhaps the most interesting thing we encountered, though, was the largest lobster I had ever seen. We were a little afraid of this beast and its monster claw. It certainly wasn't afraid of us. The guardian of the reef.



*Matthew at the Lighthouse*



*Lighthouse from the beach*



*Chillin at Loggerhead*



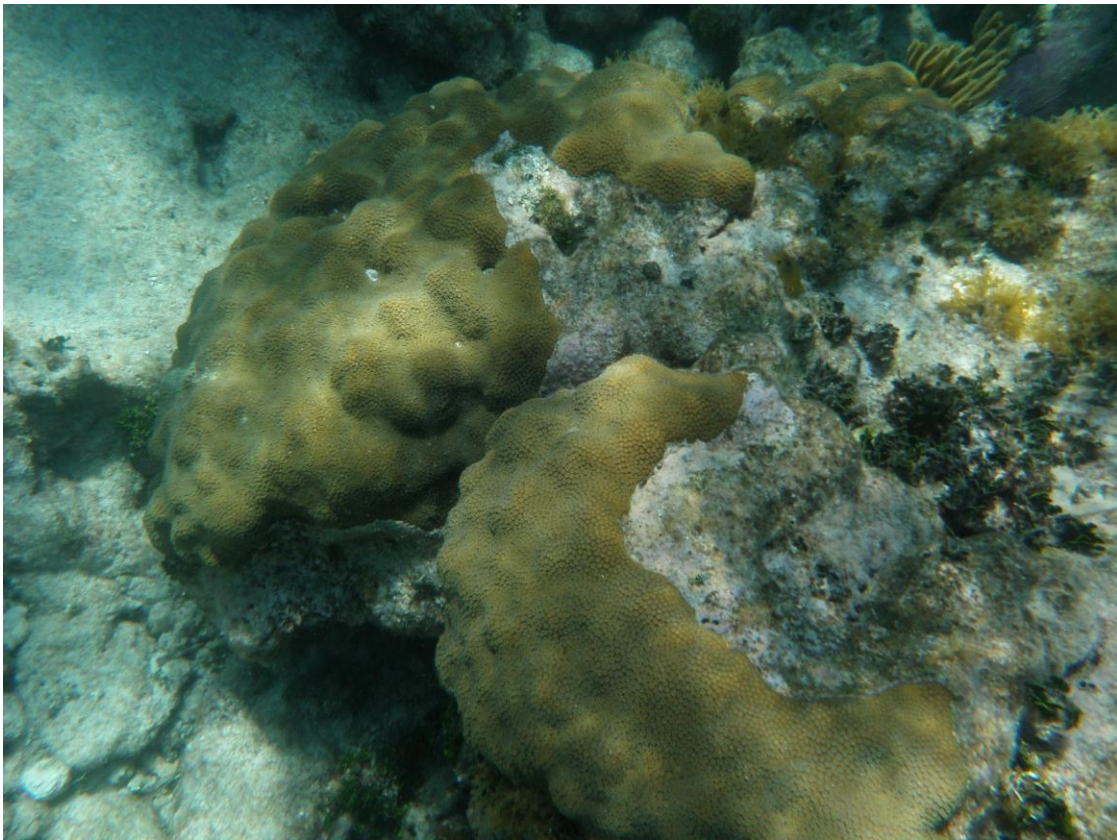
*Stepping into Little Africa*



*Finally Snorkeling*



*Snorkeling Acrobatics*



*Coral*



After snorkeling for about for an hour and a half our backs started feeling a bit pink so we took a break to relax on the beach. Lindsay and I decided to hike to the far north end of the island while Matt stayed at Little Africa to sun and meditate. It was a beautiful walk; not just because of the surroundings, but because it was one of those rare moments a father has with a daughter. No distractions; no issues. Just being together and sharing something special. I'll always remember that walk on the beach of Loggerhead Key.



*Walking the beach at Loggerhead*



*Paradise*



*View from the end of the Island (Little Fina Lee in the distance)*

Near the end of the island, Lindsay and I found the overgrown ruins of the Carnegie research facility that housed one of the first ever coral reef study efforts back in the 1930s. But for some concrete walls and slabs, all that was left was a weathered monument dedicated to the man who ran the operation. It was more evidence of the strange and eerie nature of this island.



*Ruins of the first marine coral research facility in the U.S*



*Lighthouse from the ruins*

As the afternoon got late we took one last swim around Africa. There were even more fish this time around; as if they had all come out to feed before giving way to the night and the creatures that take over after darkness falls. Beautiful purple sea fans waved goodbye as we reluctantly bade farewell and headed back to the boat. It was getting late. The sun was sinking. Time to head back to the protection of the fort.

Since we were to depart from the Dry Tortugas the following morning we decided to try a different anchoring spot. The wind had shifted to favor the side of the fort off the swimming beach from which we had staged our moat wall snorkeling that morning. There was plenty of sandy bottom and very good holding there, although more exposed if the wind were to shift to any north, south, or westerly component. By the time we had put the day's toys up and folded the dinghy for the next day's journey it was dark. We had broken Matt's rule of cruising and had to cook after dark.

Matt was the cook on this night and spaghetti was on the menu. The sauce was spicy hot. So hot, in fact, that we could not eat it. Maybe if we had a few more Red Stripe beers it might have gone down easier, but provisions being what they were we decided to feed the fish and dine on snacks. Tired from a long day of fun in the sun we settled down for some welcomed rest before an early departure the next morning. Never mind that a boat of drunk fishermen arrived late, anchored what seemed a bit close to us and proceeded to party and play loud music well into the night. We fell soundly asleep anyway.



*Yet another perfect sunset behind the fort*