

Day 3 (5/20/2010): A Day at Anchor 6 Nautical Miles

Not having anywhere far to travel we woke to a leisurely morning that welcomed us with cloudy skies and light sprinkles. First order of business was Lindsay and I taking the dinghy to shore to use the toilets before the tour boats arrived. The park service has several composting toilets next to the camping area that are available for use by campers and boaters (at least those that don't have regular marine heads with holding tanks). They lock up the bathrooms for the 3-4 hours or so that the tour boats are there, but the tour boats welcome anyone aboard to use their bathroom during their stay. At least they welcomed Matt when he walked on trying to look like one of their passengers. He took a major dump so they may have changed their welcoming policy since we were there. Well, enough potty talk. This was our first full day in the Dry Tortugas and we meant to enjoy it, cloudy or not. Rain or shine.



A look toward Loggerhead Key from the fort

One quick navigational note. At least for the time being, the southeast channel is now open and navigable! The southeast channel is located between Garden Key and Bush Key (we called it Bird Island because of the thousands of migratory birds that were roosting there during our stay). This channel occasionally shoals up whenever hurricanes pass through or for whatever reason so is not considered an "official" channel, but I could clearly see what looked like pretty permanent channel markers for it so maybe it will be maintained into the future. The big tourist boats used it and so did a few of the larger yachts. Certainly there is plenty of depth for our small craft. It saves some distance getting into the anchorage, but when you are on the tail end of a 70 mile journey a one mile shortcut seems pretty insignificant so we never did take that route.

The light rain showers continued throughout the morning so we just relaxed in the cockpit underneath the bimini and a tarp that expanded the cockpit coverage. Between the bimini, the tarp and our pop-top enclosure we stayed dry and comfortable. Breakfast was a concoction that Lindsay invented while at school in Miami that was most excellent; a mix of scrambled eggs with pesto, wilted spinach, and Monterey Jack cheese. To this main course we added muffins and pineapple and topped it all off with a long and leisurely cup of coffee. Wow. Very relaxing. I was just about ready to siesta when the caffeine kicked in. Definitely on island time, by now it was around 1300.

We picked up the cockpit, weighed anchor and headed over to Loggerhead Key where I had heard (or read) there was great snorkeling.



Stormy looking skies but we're going anyway



Watchful eyes on stormy skies



Loggerhead Key draws near and skies start to clear

A quick 30 minute trip found us just to the left of the lighthouse about 30 yards off the beach. The bottom was very rocky (or corally?) with areas of old dead coral that looked like rocks interspersed with patches of sand. The sand was our target. The wind was blowing from the East putting us to windward of the shore. It was not a good anchoring situation but I had heard that it is extremely shallow with many shoals on the back side of the island and a very long way to go all the way around to get there. I also heard later in the trip that the rangers don't want you anchoring on the far side of the island as they want you where they can see you.

The water was very choppy and it took three tries before we felt good about our anchor set. Meanwhile, with the bobbing motion of the boat, Lindsay began to feel the onset of seasickness so I quickly took her to the beach in our trusty dinghy while Matt stayed aboard to make sure the anchor was set. I had Matt dive on the anchor just to make sure we were well set since we would be leaving the boat without an anchor watch and a lee shore. Pulling away with Matt in the dinghy and Lindsay waiting on shore, the Rhodes looked like a hobby horse bouncing around in the rollicking seas.

While Matt had been checking on the anchor, he commented how cool the bottom was with all the formations and multitudes of fish. However, the water was rough here and the backside of the island promised better pickings so we plucked Lindsay off the beach and used the dinghy to snake our way through the shoals around the south side of the island to the calmer and shallow west side. There was only one other boat anchored in the vicinity of the island. It was just south of us, a large sailing catamaran, but we couldn't see anyone on board. Either they too were off exploring or taking a siesta. We pretty much had the place to ourselves.

As soon as we turned the corner to the leeward side of the island, the water became much calmer and everything seemed much more settled. Lindsay started feeling better in the calm water so we started looking for a good place to snorkel and maybe beach the dinghy. Sadly, all we saw were acres and acres of dead staghorn coral. It was very depressing, and we wondered what might have caused the die off of what would have been beautiful formations.

We slowly worked our way about halfway up the island until we reached an area that had small buoys surrounding it. Not knowing what the markers represented, we were pretty sure we shouldn't go inside so we turned around and made our way back to the boat. Little did we know that these buoys marked a very special area that we would discover later in the trip.

I must say I was a little relieved to turn the corner of the island and see the boat still bobbing in the same place we had left it. What I was not so comfortable with was seeing a park ranger boat diverting its course to check out our boat. We were about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from our sailboat and could see them slowly approach and then circle our little ship. Maybe they were checking to see if everything was okay, but I suspect they were checking to make sure we were a legitimate U.S. vessel and that we were anchored properly. They seemed to look at our anchor for awhile but I couldn't be sure. While we didn't know it at the time, it is strictly forbidden to anchor in any coral formations, either live or dead. While it is obvious that anchoring in live coral is a no no, I didn't think it really mattered if the coral is dead. Not true. The reason for this rule is that even dead coral can act as a foundation for new coral growth. This growth can be so small that the untrained eye cannot see it, but it is very fragile and extremely important to protect. A good rule.

The rangers finally sped off and I could see them pass waaaay to the south end of the island before rounding back up to the north. They probably know every sandbar in

the area, and if they had to go that far out to get around it would have been a half day trip to get to the back side of that island. I was glad we hadn't tried it.

When we got back to the boat, we tied off the dinghy and did some snorkeling in the immediate area of the anchorage. Matt was right. The snorkeling was great!! Except for the very choppy water we enjoyed nearly an hour of gazing into the undersea world. It was a cornucopia of sea creatures and plants. And yes, you could see new coral trying to take hold on the dead formations. A kaleidoscope of different fish species would swim through our area as they made their leisurely way along the shoreline. It was fun to hold onto a rope tethered from the stern and watch the fish world swim by, or actually swim with them and discover small nooks and crannies where tiny shrimp and an occasional lobster or eel would be hiding. But alas, we had gotten a late start on the day and the sun was beginning to sink toward the horizon all too soon, so we loaded up and headed back to the anchorage at Fort Jefferson. We didn't want to violate Matthew's rule of cruising: Always be at your anchorage in time to cook dinner and enjoy a refreshment before the sun sets. So we did.

This night we choose to get a bit further from the pack of boats in the anchorage so we worked our way a bit further from the fort and in toward bird island (Bush Key). I got us into about 6 feet (approximately 5 feet a low tide) where there was plenty of sand and just far enough from Bush Key that we would not be overpowered by birds and their excrement, both aerial assault and smell. Despite our anchoring out and away from the main anchorage, we were by no means in a private secluded anchorage. Several more boats came in later that evening and while not on top of each other, we could certainly see what was going on in their boats...which was actually kind of entertaining. Especially the two guys on the scuba tour boat (that was empty but for them) who lit a huge signal fire in their BBQ pit after they put too much lighter fluid in it. The heat blast from the flames could be felt on our boat. We laughed and Lindsay commented that it would help dry out our towels.

Before setting about to cook dinner we decided to relax a bit, watch the entertainment on the other boats and bask in what was left of the fading sun. So as we settled into what had become a routine of relaxation with liabation, I asked Matt to hand me a beer.

"We're all out."

"What?! Are you sure? Check the bilge."

"Yes, I'm sure. Don't you remember? We drank the last ones yesterday."

"Dang! Why didn't you buy more beer Matt!?"

Matt just smiled.

Damn. I guess I'll have to start dinner.

Dinner was veggie burgers, baked beans, pineapple, and a glass or two of chardonnay (the whole trip being vegetarian actually works pretty well as you don't have to worry about meat spoilage). And of course, dinner was enjoyed with a priceless view of another beautiful sunset over Fort Jefferson. The skies had cleared earlier so it was a tequila sunset as new clouds began rolling in.

As a weather note, the Dry Tortugas is so remote that NOAA Weather could not be picked up on our VHF radio consistently. Although there were forecasts posted on a bulletin board at the docks, they were usually a few days behind so of limited value. All we had for forecasting was extrapolating from our two day old forecast picked up in the Marquesas Islands and watching the sky.



Another perfect dinner

After dinner, the ambiance was just too nice so we popped the cork on a bottle of wine and all enjoyed a session of knot tying lessons conducted by Matt. Lindsay worked very hard and learned several new knots. I was just too lazy to participate, but did enjoy sitting back and witnessing the interaction between brother and sister.



The intrepid instructor and focused student



Lindsay finally gets the knot right!

The fun for me came to an abrupt end at around 0300. I woke with a terrible pain in my groin. It was a familiar pain; one that I had experienced several months prior when I had a kidney stone. It was back. I lay there praying it would go away, but it only continued to worsen. Matthew must have a sixth sense because he woke up to ask me if I was alright. At first I tried to hide it and say I was okay, but soon the pain became so intense that nausea overcame me and I made my way to the stern and lost the my dinner to the giant grouper that had been lurking below our hull. It made me feel better, but the pain started coming back so Matthew took my place in the cabin while I lay down (or rather sat up) in the cockpit. It was very unsettling to be so far from civilization and be in so much pain. I pretty much knew what was ailing me, but it was of little solace in my condition and there was that nagging doubt that perhaps it is something more serious. I considered relinquishing command of the vessel, and in fact did so to Matt with instructions that if I became incapacitated the ship was his. Of course, he being first mate that was all understood. Matt told me later that he was contemplating a contingency plan just like we did for Lindsay. Man I hate it when illness interrupts what would otherwise be a perfect trip.

If not for the pain and concern that it would not go away by morning, the quiet solitude in the cockpit would have been a beautiful experience. As I looked up I could see that the sky had completely cleared and the stars again reached down and touched the water. What at first looked like a cloud was actually the Milky Way, looking, well....milky. The silhouette of Fort Jefferson could just be seen through the reflection of stars and stretching my imagination I could see guards posted on the ramparts and tall ships in the harbor. But there was the pain again, interrupting my imagination. I didn't sleep much that night.