

### **Day 0 (5/17/2010): Launch Day!!!**

Over breakfast, we reviewed the latest weather forecast and while it didn't look good near term. Offshore winds were blowing 15-20 knots with seas 5-7 feet outside the reef and 3-5 feet inside. Conditions were a bit much for a 22 foot sailboat and a crew member prone to seasickness. My wife's words of warning began echoing in my head.

The good news, however, was that the wind and seas were supposed to settle down over the next several days. The situation looked hopeful enough to make a run at Plan A, with the knowledge that we might have to abort the run to the Dry Tortugas and just sail around the southern keys if the weather didn't abate. My wife's words of warning echoed louder.

"Matt, could you please hand me the ibuprofen?"

Our plan of the day was to take a leisurely trip to Key West, launch in the late afternoon and either get a slip or anchor nearby. The forecast was for winds to abate over the next 24 hours so we decided to play it slow and make a Dry Tortugas go/no go decision the next morning. If winds and waves were still too high we would just hang out around Key West and maybe sail up the Gulf side of the lower keys. Playing around in the southern keys would not be a bad consolation.

Matt had never been to UM, so we spent some time giving him a walking tour of the campus and Lindsay's haunts before loading up and heading south. Of course, having two college students meant that we didn't check out of the hotel until 1000 making our departure after the campus tour at around noon. But, no worries. We are on island time.

There was one more stop before heading down Highway 1. In Homestead there is a fruit stand on the outskirts of town called Robert Is Here. Lindsay had been told that they had the best smoothies in south Florida so of course we had to check it out. It looks for all the world like a cheesy tourist trap, complete with petting zoo and tropical birds, but it was filled with locals and had a real "old keys" feel about it. And the smoothies? Well we all shared the most incredible mango smoothie that I have ever tasted. So, with reggae music blaring on the radio, a mango smoothie in my hand, and my wonderful Rhodes22 behind me I was feeling the euphoria of chill island time. That cold dreary day in February seemed long ago and far away. Having my two college kids all to myself for the next week was icing on the cake.

The two launch sites that I considered in the Key West area were Key West's Garrison Bight Marina, and Oceanside Marina (which has recently changed its name to Kings Point Marina). I had contacted both before the trip to confirm that they had a usable ramp and available storage for the car and trailer. Garrison Bight was less expensive, but I had some concern about the parking. While they did provide parking at the cheapest rate, it was alongside a road in a non-secured area (though they did say they had a security guard). With Lindsay's possessions in the back of the suburban I was a bit uncomfortable with the situation. I tentatively planned to check each one out before selecting one or the other.

Well, as is par for the course it took longer to get down to Key West than I thought. It always takes longer to get to Key West than you think. It may be the two lane road, or all of the towns along the way, or maybe just the slower pace of the islands permeating into the odometer. It's a long way out there, but that just enhances the mental and physical transformation from land to sea; from fast paced sensory overloaded

mainland to easy laid back island life where time becomes less and less relevant the farther out you get.

As time ticked by faster than the miles I realized that we were not going to make it to either marina before the respective harbor masters would be leaving for the evening. I wanted to make sure that we could launch and pay up in the morning before we departed. Garrison Bight did not answer my calls or return my voice message. Oceanside did answer and I spoke with a most friendly dockmaster named Chris. Dockmaster Chris was very laid back and said it would be no problem; to just take our time and launch when we got there. He described the layout and said he would alert the night watchman of our impending arrival. At that point I decided that we would go with Oceanside as our debarkation point. Dockmaster Chris had filled me with good karma.

We finally rolled into Oceanside at around 1700 and just as Dockmaster Chris had said, the night watchman named Charlie was ambling around on his bicycle. Charlie the watchman gave us instructions for where to rig, launch, and store the trailer and auto. Charlie was also very friendly and made us feel welcome. The trailer would be stored in a fenced area behind a locked gate. The car could be left in the marina parking lot. The marina was a “dockominium” so there were always people coming and going and the grounds were watched over 24/7.

So with logistics and pleasantries out of the way, we immediately set to the task of rigging and launching. With Matt and Lindsay’s help, and some delays from answering questions from interested passer bys, we were ready to splash the boat at around 1830. I jumped in the car and backed the trailer down the ramp; all the way to the end of the ramp. The boat wouldn’t float. The tide was out and the water was too low. Crap!

Upon inspection we observed that there was a curb at the end of the ramp that helps prevent trailer wheels from being pushed off the end. Good thing too, because there are several feet of sheer drop off at the end of the ramp. We were close to being able to float the boat off the trailer so I tried backing swiftly down the ramp and hit the brakes just as the trailer wheels hit the curb at the end of the ramp (crossing my fingers that the trailer wouldn’t jump the curb). The idea was to let the momentum of the boat slide it right off the trailer. Of course, by now there was a small crowd standing around watching and giving “free” advice. What is it about boat launching that attracts a crowd? The best advice came from a vagabond sailor named Clay who suggested that we park unhook the trailer and drive into Key West for dinner and give it a try later. So we did just that.

We ended up at a cool little Thai restaurant called Thai Life. It was situated on a small floating barge right next to the launch ramp at Garrison Bight Marina. Checking out the scene I was glad that I had chosen Oceanside. While the ramp was certainly usable, it was definitely located out in the open; next to a row of charter fishing boats; and we would have to wait to raise the mast until after passing under a low clearance bridge. Moreover, it was not immediately clear where we would be able to anchor or dock. I may try this launch site someday in the future, but Oceanside definitely gave me a better feeling. The food at Thai Life was excellent, if a bit pricy, but we were in Key West...watching the sunset on a floating barge while sipping a cold one. Life is good.

We made it back to Oceanside just after sunset, around 2015. The tide was still out, but the water had come up just enough that I was able to slide the boat off the trailer. Hooray!!!

Clay, the vagabond, was living and working on an old sailboat that had seen better days. So had Clay. He had offered a spot right next to his boat, but a damn power boater had slipped into the spot while we were at dinner. Clay was none too happy either. They had tied their boat so close to his boat that their anchor threatened to rip into his dinghy. He said he was about to untie them and just push their boat away. Don't mess with Clay.

We did find a spot way down the bulkhead near the fuel dock, but it was less than ideal because the concrete dock was high relative to our boat and there was an undercut with rusted steel reinforcements set back under the concrete cap. It was clearly built for much larger craft than our little sailboat. I slept nary a wink that night for fear of the boat getting caught under the dock with the steel girders ripping and slashing at the deck and hull. I awoke numerous times dreaming about it and readjusted the dock lines as the tide continued to rise. I was also jittery about the trip. The winds had died down as forecast, but the waves had yet to fully settle. We would decide our course in the morning. We had a big day coming up.



*Packed and ready for sea  
(note dinghy and anchor bag lashed on bow)*



***Chillin at Oceanside Marina***  
*(boat storage shed in background and bait/ice store further back)*

For future reference, I have jotted down the pros and cons of using Oceanside Marina (or Kings Point) for trailer sailors:

Pros:

- Friendly, flexible, and laidback staff
- Secure parking. The trailer is kept under lock and key in a fenced in area while the car is kept in a well lit parking lot. The whole complex has one entry gate and is off the beaten path so much less likely that an unsavory character would wander in (outside of the residents of course). Also there is an on-site 24 hour security guard that is very visible.
- Everyone there is boater oriented and sailboat friendly
- You can purchase block ice on site
- There is an excellent bathhouse with laundry facilities available if you stay overnight.

Cons:

- The bulkhead is crappy but can suffice for an overnigher. It also tends to be crowded. The closer you can get to the ramp the better as the dock siding is lower and it's a shorter walk to the bathhouse. It is first come first serve so impossible to reserve an exact spot ahead of

time. Bring extra fenders. Might have been able to get a regular slip but were not there long enough to need one.

- More expensive than Garrison Bight.

All told, I paid \$75/week to park the trailer and car. The \$20 launch fee was waived since I stayed overnight on the sea wall. It was expensive though at \$2/ft, or \$44.00 for the night. It came with electric and water hookup which we really didn't need. So the total bill came to around \$130 after fees and taxes. I probably could have done Garrison Bight Marina for less than \$100 but this place was awfully convenient and seemed safer.