

Carl's Bahama (Mis?) Adventure of 2011

The 230 Mile Odd Sea

Day 1 (5/23): The Aborted Crossing (AKA Seasickness)

Total Mileage: 47 nautical miles

After spending the night tied up to the seawall with the wind blowing in off the bay at about 10-15knots, we set off to look at the gulf stream and see what we thought about it. The NOAA forecast called for scattered clouds and medium to variable winds ranging from 5-10 knots in the morning, rising to 15 in the afternoon, moderate chop in the bay, I forget the forecast for how big the waves were supposed to get offshore.



Looking back as we motor into Biscayne Bay



Looking forward as we motor into Biscayne Bay

Sailing out into Biscayne Bay, we were immediately glad we had not been so foolish as to sail in unfamiliar shallow waters in the dark. About halfway across the bay, I heard the ominous sound of the keel dragging, quickly followed by the rudder. I avoided running aground for awhile by sailing more to port to get around where I remembered the shallow water was on the chart, but after awhile the shallows caught up with us and we ran aground. Dousing sail and jumping out, I was able to push us back out to deeper water and we sailed on. As we approached the inlet to angelfish creek, this was repeated 3 more times before we were able to find the channel and sail beyond the barrier islands.

As we started out into the gulf, spirits were high and a sense of anticipation could be felt by all aboard, our vacation had finally begun! Motoring out into the stream, the waves began to get gradually bigger till we were seeing 3-4 foot waves, with the occasional 6 foot swell. The girls were having a grand time riding on the bow, squealing at the rollercoaster ride, especially when a wave would wash over the deck and absolutely soak them.



Megan and Brooke riding the wave rollercoaster.

The seas seemed a bit rough, but I thought going out a bit should give us a taste of the conditions, and let us better know what we may be in for. My original plan was to motor out a bit into the gulf stream, then sail northward with the current using it to push us along toward our destination. Then motor into the wind on the last leg of our journey to Bimini. As there was a steady east wind, I felt that although these waves were somewhat large, motoring into them seemed to be working just fine. The ride so far involved mostly a pitching motion that everyone onboard seemed to feel somewhat comfortable with, I held a little conference with my crew and we decided as long as conditions remained like this and did not worsen, we would continue on.

This is when I made an awful mistake, I decided to see how sailing in these conditions would go (this is after all a sail boat, right?) one thing I failed to notice up to this point, was the waves were not coming only from one direction. The wind on our nose was making waves that travelled directly west, but the gulf stream was producing waves travelling in a more northeasterly direction. While this ideally should push us toward our destination, the building waves coming from the east made for an incredibly uncomfortable rolling motion that within a few minutes reduced first Brooke, then all the girls to a retching misery. Everyone immediately took some Dramamine, but it was too late, the next hour or so for the girls were spent in an absolute fog of sickness. After a few minutes of this, I had pity on them and started up the motor again, turning west into the waves.

After motoring for another hour or so, I realized we were proceeding much slower than I had previously thought. In 4 hours, we had only come 14 miles from the barrier islands! Our lack of progress, the seasickness and the much too high waves, forced me to conclude that tonight would not be a good night to attempt the crossing. Megan did not take the news well at first, her thoughts were that we had endured so much to this point we should just press on and get it over with. She was quick to agree after hurling over the rail a couple more times though.

It was amazing how different the motion was as soon as we turned around, a much gentler motion was felt, the girls stomachs settled right down and we sailed at about 5 knots directly downwind, 6 with the motor pushing as well. Initially I tried a broad reach, hoping to further reduce the drunken motion of the boat, but this reduced our speed to about 1 knot, so I set the sails to wing on wing and tried to balance them there, as it seemed to give us the best speed. After a while, I was beginning to feel the effects of two and a half days on the road and an all day fight with the sea, I was falling asleep. I realized Megan would have a much easier time with just the motor, so we lowered the sails and I slept as she motored back to the barrier islands by angel key. Anchoring out by Swan key (which BTW is just south of old Rhodes key and I thought maybe the name was a good omen...ok, I was grasping at straws here, but in my defense it had been a long day) .We ate spaghetti and I crashed for the night, not even remembering falling asleep the next morning, the score was gulf stream-1 us-0.