

2nd Trip to Key West (12/12)

Mike Wick

I drove to Kevin's house on Friday night so we could make an early start. We left Frederick at 5:00 to beat the traffic around Washington and drove South 1240 miles pretty much non-stop. We arrived at OceanGate Marina at 2:00 and grabbed some sleep in the boat. We settled with the Marina A quick breakfast, and the television told us that the weather window was good for another go, so, before 9:00 Sunday, we were launched and off. The



harbormaster was a little skeptical about the passage, but when we told him about the February trip, he just shrugged and said "Timing is everything". He's right. We were under pressure of time this vacation and had planned for a figure-eight loop around the lower keys, but, really, both of us were primed to go to the Dry Tortugas passage again. As long as we had the weather, we really wanted to repeat our February passage.



In a light breeze from the NorthEast, we rounded Key West and were swept down on Kingfish Shoal by a strong South going current. We just barely missed the shoals around Cut "A" Range Markers but, by reading the water, worked North enough to fetch the gate South of Mule Key that begins the Lakes Passage. There's lots of shallow water on Lakes Passage, but it is mostly fairly uniform in depth except for Gates off Mule Key, Archer Key, and Boca Grande, and the channels are well marked and easy to see.

There was quite a crowd on the protected beach on the northwest corner of Boca Grande Key, mostly highspeed flats fishing boats, nosed up on the beach. We entered Boca Grande Channel in a light Easterly with deceptive visibility. We approached Gull Rocks and were within a mile and a quarter without seeing any sign of the Marquesas, although they are quite large and high. Then the fog lifted and there was land everywhere to the North of us. There are random braincoral bricks about a half-mile off The Marquesas, so it is good to keep a sharp lookout and maintain some offing. are a grand archipelago of mangrove islands surrounding a large, well protected Mooney Harbor. We had

been warned about mosquitoes, but there is no fresh water, so no bugs. In fact, in two trips we've found no bugs anywhere.

It is tempting to anchor inside Mooney Harbor, but we were anxious about the second leg, tomorrow, so we anchored outside, just to the West, good protection from the usual Easterly winds. Key West is far enough South so the trade winds are well established, and the winds vary from NorthEast to South East most of the time. We ate quickly and turned in. Kevin said "Whoever wakes first wakes the other. "



A beautiful night with great stars, but, Monday morning, I woke first at 2:30 and woke Kevin. We had anchored a little too close to land and at low tide, had some trouble with grounding on our way out, but a nine-mile flasher on Cosgrove Shoal guided us to the deeper water, and we were on our way in a light Easterly. I was steering by Orion to keep us South of the Quicksand, but a strong set to the North brought us back on the shallow bank. At one point, I heard the tide rushing over a shoal spot, but our catboat has plenty of water,

everywhere on that bank. The problem is that the Quicksand is a bombing and strafing range for the Navy boys at Pensacola, and there are unlit, rusty targets at random places throughout. In February, we had found some in the dark, and again, just at dawn, I saw an unlit and twisted pillon close onboard to starboard. Sunrise is always is a comfort, after an early start.

Beautiful day for the big push, wind southeast and mild, Rebecca shoal abeam at 0930. More than halfway to our destination. At 1100 we sighted YANKEE FREEDOM III, the daily ferry from Key West, passing to the north of us. We had both my Garmin 76 Cx and Kevin's more basic GPS. Either set had plenty of information for this kind of trip. We just kept adjusting for tide, observing the set on passing crabpots and the plot on the little screen. By 1230 we had made landfall on Fort Jefferson, then the lighthouse on Loggerhead Key, then East and Hospital Keys. By 1330 we were anchored off the dinghy beach in the Garden Key anchorage, a bit tired of our own cooking, rushed for our wallets



and waded ashore to buy our lunch from the ferry. A fifty mile passage at 4.8 knots, moving average. We were glad to have left early and were halfway.



In the afternoon, we wandered around in the cool shade of the fort, talking to tourists, the rangers, and stretching our legs. One ranger remembered us from our February visit and was interested in general in small boat passages. Then we waded back aboard and anchored for the night of wonderful stars in the anchorage. Jupiter was close to the Pleidies. We woke in the morning, on these trips we always seem to be able to sleep from dusk to dawn, even if it is more than twelve hours. There was a lovely reaching wind, so feeling the

pressure of time, we turned to each other and said, “YEP”. By eight we were on our way again. When you are on top of the mountain, you shouldn’t turn down a gift from the gods. It turned out not to be quite the gift we hoped for. A beautiful broad reach near hull speed brought us most of the way to Rebecca Shoal again, but then it fizzled and left us becalmed near Halfmoon Shoal in the late afternoon. We tried our best but knew we had to use the outboard and adjust course North to come in on the Marquesas from the North. That was the best nighttime approach and we aimed to snug in for the night on the northwest corner of the Islands. It was well after dark when we sighted the one second flasher on the tower between New Ground and the flasher on Ellis Rock we would use as a turning mark for our approach. We were anxious to anchor for the night with lightning all around us, but we had to make a careful approach to avoid various obstructions that were on the chart, submerged platform ruins and a mile wide circle of pilings. We got closer to the flasher on Ellis Rock, but it wouldn’t appear. We were within a quarter mile of our waypoint and still couldn’t see the light, so we decided that it was time to believe either the buoy had been struck or the light had failed. I couldn’t see to steer, I am scheduled for cataract surgery in a month, so I held the flashlight and had Kevin steer first East along a latitude line then then South along a Longitude line to clear all the charted obstructions. Even with this precaution, I still sighted two large rusty pylons close to port, even though Kevin couldn’t find them with his light. Still, I knew they were there, and they made me anxious. I got my training as Navigator of a deepdraft Navy Freighter, and this one foot draft catboat was a different kind of piloting altogether.

We were at anchor and in our sleeping bags, well into the night, when I asked Kevin what the time was, and he said “nine thirty.” It didn’t seem like nine thirty. Next morning, Wednesday, I woke with the calm of dawn and looking around called Kevin. No pylons, no pilings, no flasher, but a beautiful double rainbow to the west. No rain but high humidity. My obstructions had disappeared with the night, but Kevin forgave my anxiety. The strenuous part of our trip was over.

We caught a whisper of Southeasterly through an intricate channel into Mooney Harbor and sailed as far as we could around the harbor, a chance to breathe now we are down off the mountain. Once we had found all the parts of that sector that we could float in, we went outside and found a nice beach to swim and explore off the boat for a bit. In the interim, the wind had picked up rapidly and we used the chance to tuck in a single reef on the beach. A fast crab across Boca Grande Channel brought us in a little North of Boca Grande, and



we found the lakes passage a little too shallow for upwind work with any centerboard, so we ran off to the north and searched for an anchorage. First we tried Cottrell Key, off the Northwest Channel leading into Key West, but there were dive boats and mooring balls, so we figured they didn't want any catboats interfering with their diving. We crossed the middle ground and found a nice little anchorage just off Fleming Key with company but nowhere as much company as you would find there in February, when the snowbirds had had more time to really flock South. The Insurance companies insist they have to stay North of Norfolk until the first of November to keep them away from hurricanes, but after Sandy, it seems as if that wasn't the right plan, this year. There is something to be said for having boats that can easily be trailered, instead.

Thursday brought a calm morning for inspecting the fleet in Frankfort Bight, and a run to the truck for some changes of food and clothes, then we took advantage of the brisk norther to run East along the weather shore of Stock Island, Boca Chica, Geiger Key, into Saddlebunch Harbor. The wind was quite stiff and Saddlebunch offered little protection from a North wind, but we finally found a good lee up next to the Route 1 Bridge tucked under Snake Key. There was traffic noise but no waves. We slept fine.

Friday was overcast and windy; a typical norther, so we made a fast passage back to Oceangate marina and headed for home. 210 miles in six days.





