

Day 5: (Wednesday Nov. 17)

Bombardier finished up with the diagnostics by mid-afternoon. The boat, engine, and crew were now ready for a final push to Key West. As it was getting late in the day we stopped for Fuel at the Sailfish Marina in Stuart, FL. We put 92.01 gallons in the tank and then proceeded out of the river and into the intracostal. We started cruising for about 20 minutes and then started entering some no wake Manatee zones. It was dusk and we were cruising a little too fast through one zone when we were visited by a county sheriff. He was not too empathetic to our cause and proceeded to give us a \$70 speeding ticket. We had some good laughs with the officer and went on our way. We cruised the intracostal, slowing for Manatee zones every few miles.



When we got to Singer Island, just north of West Palm Beach, we decided to stop for fuel at another “Sailfish Marina” that was open until 9:00 PM. The marina was on the East Side of the Island while the intracostal went to the west. The channel had no markers and we had received information from a local that we had to stay near the mainland side of the channel.

As we passed under the bridge we went left towards the mainland and quickly came to a halt. We had run aground for the third time. Two crewmembers jumped out and gave us a little push back to deeper water. At least in Florida the water is warm and we were quickly on our way. We decided to proceed around the West Side of the island as it was well marked. We circled the island and found the marina.

The marina had sustained some hurricane damage and the gas dock was wiped out. They did however have fuel on the main pier that nestled up to the hotel and restaurant. It was 8:00 PM, we were hungry and ordered 4 appetizers to go. The restaurant was very nice and we wished that we could stay for a sit-down meal; however the Keys were miles away and we needed to put some distance behind us. As we departed, we were eating our appetizers and made a decision to go outside and follow the coast rather than travel the intracostal. We were all a little frustrated with the numerous no-wake zones and wanted to cruise.

As we were going through the channel to the ocean, a big freighter was coming in. The wake was not as big as we were expecting, however the ocean swells started coming over the bow and we were instantly getting bounced around from the spray of the waves. We made a decision to give it a shot even though the ride would not be nearly as smooth as the intracostal. We traveled about 1 mile out from shore where the waves were 3 – 4 feet. We got pretty wet as we traveled at 15 – 18 miles per hour. We passed the Breakers Hotel and could see several large mansions on shore. We listened to the Commitments (“Mustang Sally”) and turned the music up to pass the time. At the next inlet we decided the intracostal would be better than fighting the waves, wind, and spray that had now soaked everything and us on the boat. We traveled about 15 miles on the ocean side before we found ourselves back into the calm of the intracostal.

We passed a lighthouse and a few marinas as we entered the intracostal. We then were able to cruise at 35 miles per hour for 20 minutes or so before hitting more speed zones. We passed Boca Raton and began seeing more and more civilization including some very nice homes with the standard 30 – 50 foot boat parked out front. We started encountering more and more speed zones. When a no-wake zone would end we would travel ½ mile or so at top speed before hitting the next mile or two zone. The next 5 hours were very slow as we found ourselves in a continuous no-wake zone. The scenery made it all worthwhile, as we were amazed at the size of the homes and boats that we were passing. Fort Lauderdale was loaded with million dollar homes and 100 foot + yachts. As we reached the south side of Ft. Lauderdale we passed a huge boat. Octopus is the second largest yacht in the world (somewhere around 450 feet) fully equipped with two helicopter pads as well as a full size submarine. This is only one of many of Paul Allen's (Founder of Microsoft) boats. We also passed a huge Ocean freighter that was being loaded for another journey to some foreign land.

Around 2:30 am we finally had made it to the northern shore of Biscayne Bay where we were able to cruise wide open towards Miami. As we approached Miami, the neon lights and skyline could be seen about 10 miles away. As we grew closer, the size of the city became apparent and the buildings seemed to leap out of the sea. We passed Miami and with each passing mile the city began to shrink again. It was now 2:30 am and we needed fuel if we were to continue our push to the Keys. We found a boat ramp in Coconut Grove (10 miles south of Miami) with a gas station nearby. We pulled the boat out at 3:15 am and drove it 2 blocks away where we filled up at a 24 hour station. We filled up with 41.5 gallons and had the boat back in the water 25 minutes later. We were tired but knew that we had to push off for the last leg of our journey.



This would be another challenging portion of the trip as we had to navigate through and around several small islands and daylight was still 3 hours away. The GPS fix failed, as we were about 5 miles from the ramp. We changed the fuse and had it up and running a few minutes later. We found our first mark being a blinking red light about 6 miles in the distance. We had to rely on our GPS Chart-plotter to ensure that we did not find ourselves on top of a shallow area or worst yet, a plot of land.

We got the hang of the nighttime navigation in the open Bay and found it more challenging than the narrow intracostal. It was difficult finding the markers at 6 – 10 miles out as the other lights on shore (radio towers) etc.... could sometimes fool us. We would think we were heading towards a mark, only to find out that we were going off course chasing the wrong flashing light in the distance. Our motto was “find the landing strip” and “one marker and one mile at a time”. It was very much like what a pilot would experience trying to land a plane. The flashing red or green would put you in the right flight path to hit a set of markers, maybe 4 or 5 rows of red and greens that could only be seen once you got about ¾ of a mile out. To get to the set of markers, you find the flashing light that was 6 – 10 miles out across the bay.

We spent the next hours until daylight chasing marker to marker and the next island to the next island. We maneuvered through several tight channels, making decent time as we had spotters with the hand held 1,000,000

bulb spotlight and navigators who were continuously monitoring the chart plotter. We got through the tough navigation points (Card Sound, Little Card Sound, & Blackwater Sound) and began cruising through the Florida Bay and Gulf of Mexico as daylight began to break.



We were now in the Gulf of Mexico cruising through the Everglade National Park. Markers were even further apart now and we navigated around some larger islands. There were several crab trap buoys that are the size of cantaloupe floating on the surface that had to be avoided. We zigzagged through the minefields of crab traps being careful not to get one tangled in the prop. We were wide open at 38 MPH with fairly flat seas. As the sun continued to rise it went behind some light clouds which made the rays burst out of the top. We were 6 – 8 miles off shore but could still see some of the large Key bridges to the east with the sun glowing upon them. We took some good pictures and video to capture the moment.



Around 8:30 am, as we got further and further from shore the waves began to build. We could see our destination about 25 miles in the distance and we knew that we would be in for a long ride. The waves kept building to about 6 – 8 foot seas. We were getting hit with a lot of spray and were in following seas. We slowed it down to about 12 – 15 MPH and took one wave at a time, inching our way closer to our final destination. We saw some pretty shallow sandbars and were concerned that we were cutting it a little too close. We analyzed the chart-plotter and determined that we would have to take the last islands wide to avoid shallow waters. We put our next destination to be marker (FL G 2.5S). The marker was 10 miles away and the seas were still building with some very large swells. We were careful not to get caught between the big swells and worked the throttle back and forth to monitor our speed in the big waves.

We were on a perpetual roller coaster and it didn't look like we were getting any closer to our destination. We had all been up for over 27 hours straight but did not feel the fatigue as the excitement was growing that we were now in our last miles. As we grew to about 5 miles of our marker the waves started to subside. We could now see Key West and the large cruise ships in the distance. The waters were shallow and we wanted to make certain we didn't do anything stupid to stop us short of our goal. We were trying to figure out which channel we should go for when we saw an inflatable coast guard boat moving towards us. We were still in pretty big seas and wondered if they were coming out to give us a sanity check. They came within 75 yards but kept on their way.

We saw where they had come out of the channel so we followed a similar path in. Once we got to the markers, we realized how shallow the waters were. We were still 1 – 2 miles away from the island and we saw a school of birds walking on a sandbar. We made sure we followed the water rule of "red right return", meaning keep the red markers on your right when returning to port.



The winding channel dumped us into a deep bay right on the outskirts of the island. We limped into the marina at 10:30 am on day 5. We had traveled 287 miles from Stuart the afternoon before for a trip total of 1168 miles. We made the trip in 122 ½ hours, burned approximately 600 gallons of fuel and passed some 1800 buoys and markers.

We tied up to the 2 hour parking dock in front of the Half Shell Raw Bar. It was 10:35 am and we had made it to Key West. The sun was now high and hot and the boat, crew, and gear were covered in salt. We were all glad to have accomplished the goal even given the fact that the Gail force winds cut 200 miles off the trip. We got on the boat in Baltimore not knowing what to expect but now knew that it wasn't as easy as expected. We had some trying times but

now knew that a crew with good teamwork could take a Tahoe / Tahoe anywhere they wished to go. At 11:00 am (opening time) we walked into the Half Shell Raw Bar and ordered a slew of shrimp and beer. As we sat there eating and drinking the boat was 20 feet away, tied up out front. Our gear was strewn everywhere and tourists were looking at the boat trying to figure out why anyone would have winter coats and gloves lying in the sun. If only they had known where this 25-foot boat had come from!

