

SMALL BOAT SAILING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Key West to the Dry Tortugas

Mike Wick

When Blondie Hasler and Francis Chichester first decided to race single-handed across the Atlantic, they discussed transmitters and decided not to carry them. If they needed help, they should “Die like Gentlemen” When I was a boy, back in the fifties, my parents owned LUCAYO, a William Hand designed motorsailor built in the Bahamas. They would pack up their three boys and set off into the unknown heading toward the Bahamas. No Coast Guard, a radio that almost never worked, filled with tubes and the size of a small table. In later years, after we boys were off to boarding school, they signed on Blunt and Marion White as crew and sailed to the Dry Tortugas. I was busy with other things, but I had a vague memory of their trip.



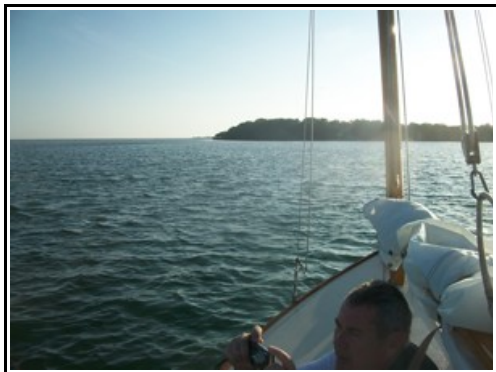
Last summer, Kevin MacDonald and I were sailing buddies in the Southern Chesapeake, mostly side by side, in the boats that we'd built. In the Chesapeake afternoon chop, I often envied the comparative luxury of Kevin's Marshcat, LITTLE T. with its greater freeboard and luxury accommodation. We had a favorite cruising ground, based around Crisfield. There are many nearby destinations, Winona, Deal Island, Smith Island, Tangier, Manokin River, Fishing Bay. We racked up many miles, pausing at Janes Island campground for an occasional shower and some

well cooked seafood in Crisfield between trips. Our outings sometimes swelled to flotilla size and then shrank to just two boats as friends with other boats came and went according to work and family schedule.

This winter, Kevin had some vacation time that had to be used in February, and he proposed a trip. I leapt at the chance to go South in his boat, way South. I thought of the Dry Tortugas. Seventy miles West of Key West with a



welcoming National Park of Fort Jefferson, best known as the Civil War era prison of the doctor, Samuel Mudd. One major attraction of that particular destination for me was that, a third of the way out, lay an atoll like group of islands that would provide a perfect pit stop. A group named the Marquesas. The name itself was enough. In my imagination, I was halfway to Tahiti. We could split the passage into four legs, out and back with rest stop in between. Open water with a moderate degree of challenge.



Christmas brought a chartbook for Kevin, and a SPOT satellite transmitter for me. My brother gave me a foam cone-shaped damage control plug for any round holes we might make in the hull. It came along but remained untried. We planned a two man open boat trip, but I made a cardinal error. Forgetting that it was January and a slow news day in many people's sailing schedule, I shot

a query to the 'People and Places' sector of the WoodenBoat Forum. It was the law of unintended consequences. The response was immediate and dramatic. Lots of hits and lots of advice was given; sometimes absorbed and sometimes rejected. We took on many virtual companions. Our crewlist grew beyond our expectations.

Put yourself in the shoes of well-meaning forum regulars. Two unknowns hatch an idea for what could be a dangerous commitment and ask if it is a good idea. It's a dilemma. You don't exactly rush to the keyboard and type out in Calibri 14 "YOU GO, GIRL". There are thrill seekers out there already. Hugh Horton had made it to the Marquesas in his Bufflehead, but not all sailors have the skills and experience of Hugh Horton. What if our real purpose for entering the forum was to seek a way out of a bad idea, not encouragement. Forumites probably knew that we are both builders, but skillsaw and router skills don't count much when it comes to encounters with deep blue Gulf Stream Rocks.



The best advice we got from the forum was from Breakaway. He advised us to formalize the decision making process by choosing a point on each leg where we would review the forecast and make a final decision about a crossing, "Go forward or go Back". This routine minimized our chances of exposure to a sudden change of weather or circumstances and reduced the chance we would be saying "If only we". We called it "point of no return" and chose Halfmoon Shoal on the way West and Rebecca Shoal on the way East. We listened to the weather, still audible beyond the Marquesas, and asked ourselves and each other. "Should we keep going?" As

it turned out, Both ways, the forecasts were encouraging, and we chose to keep going. We had a two week vacation and lots of supplies which allowed us time for waiting out our weather window at each of four legs in Man O War Harbor, Key West; Moonie Harbor, Marquesas, (both ways); or Garden Key Anchorage, Dry Tortugas. As luck turned out, the best weather was right at the beginning; we sped out and back quickly and were left several days at the end of the trip to tour the lower keys, North and South of Route One.

Safety in a small catboat is never absolute. Preparation is the key. Safety starts with a sound and seaworthy boat. Marshcats were designed by Joel White to be just that. I could go on for hours about the wholesome behavior of LITTLE T in all conditions. Kevin had built strength in every rib and plank. She rode a little low with crew, supplies, and water, but she has generous freeboard. Decks, washboards, and coamings turned away most of the spray and water. We had two muck buckets for emergency de-watering (they are faster than pumps). Dry bags for gear and electronics double as buoyancy bags when securely fastened to the ribs. We had redundancy in GPS and VHF, flares, of course, and the SPOT transmitter. We had practiced capsize drills in smaller boats, we felt that capsizing a catboat was unlikely, and we felt that we should be able to survive every emergency. No small boat voyage is completely without danger, but we felt that by waiting for our weather window, we would get out of it all right.

Kevin drives hard; we made a quick trailer leg and launched in haste to grab the fair weather while it lasted. We said our cell phone "goodbyes" and activated the SPOT. Without Wi-Fi

connection, we had little idea how many on the forum were watching our every step . Stalwart Supervisors were John Boone, Phil Maynard, John Bell, Steve Brookman, Marshcat, Dave Brown, Thad. They were reading our updates, the forecasts from Key West and the weather observations from sea buoys off Sand Key and Loggerhead Key, and they were sharing the information with everybody on the forum. Unlike the early OSTAR, you aren't alone anymore. Not in 2012.

As I write this , it is my turn to haunt the web. I watch the Everglades Challenge and fellow forumite, John Bell in his Core Sound 17 BANDILOOP, I appreciate how lucky we were with our weather. Had we chosen early March instead of February, we would have strained our supplies and our weather windows. Scott Widmeir, in his PD racer, capsized off Venice and activated his SPOT. He self-rescued and immediately turned it off again, but lots of us still knew about his dilemma. SPOT, EPIRB, VHF, GPS, and drysuits all help us in a bad situation, and we have lost much our opportunity to “Die like Gentlemen”. I'm glad. I doubt my gentlemanly commitment. When we were at Fort Jefferson they announced that, from Kknowledge dating back to the early eighties, we are the smallest boat to have made the passage. I hope this doesn't initiate a spat of fourteen footers making their way West from Key West.



Addendum

My wife and I have cataract problems and share the same eye doctor. He is a keen sailor, and we talk more about sailing than about eye problems. During my appointment last week, I told him all about our trip and the way the SPOT beacon reassures family and friends. He gave me a long look and said: “You know, Mike. Your wife is really special.”