

Bill's Bahama Adventure of 2006 The 500 Mile Odyssey

Day 8 (5/30): An Unexpected Detour to Andros Island and Encounter with Pirates!

Total Mileage: 77 nautical miles.

We were up bright and early and planned to make the approximately 30 mile run to Chub Cay to refuel and anchor in position to head back across the Great Bahamas Bank the following day. We had not fueled since Alicetown in the Bimini Islands and had motored during most of our travels. I was down to around $\frac{3}{4}$ of a tank and would be well below half by the time we reached Chub Cay. I was eager to get going, but it was the Bahamas after all, so we didn't depart until around 0815.



Most days begin with relaxation in the cool of the morning

Once underway, we ran just offshore along edge of the Tongue of the Ocean in a southerly direction. Once again we had to motor because the wind was, you guessed it, right on our nose. After several hours, we finally turned back to the West as we rounded the southern end of the Berry's on the last stretch to Chub Cay and were able to put up the sails. The time was now 1300, or five hours since we departed Cabbage Cay as the approach to Chub Cay Harbor came into view.

As we drew closer I noticed some very large barges and what looked like dredging cranes at the harbor entrance. I knew that new marina was supposed to be opened based on all the comments we had heard from other cruisers over the past few days, but this development worried me. It appeared that the harbor entrance was blocked.

Just as I was about to hail the harbormaster, another boat came on the VHF asking for permission to enter and refuel. At first there was no answer from harbormaster. I found that throughout the Bahamas harbormasters and dockmasters often do not bother to answer when you call them over the VHF. Finally the harbormaster came on the radio and informed, in a rather haughty tone, that the harbor was blocked by the dredges and that they were not providing any services; not even fuel.

No fuel? Did I hear that right? No fuel? Crap! What about all the positive advice that we had gotten over the past few days? All wrong. None of these great advisors had actually been here, but they had “heard” that there was fuel. We had made a decision based on third hand knowledge, and now we were in a quandary. A quick assessment of our options revealed three choices: 1) sail/motor to Nassau to refuel, but that would blow our plans to get back to Homestead by Friday although I would get to see my wife and daughters; 2) make a run to the next closest harbor which was Morgan’s Bluff on Andros Island some 18 nautical miles away in the wrong direction; or 3) take our chances and actually sail across the Banks to Cat Cay or Alicetown. There was actually a fourth option which was to raid and plunder the marina for fuel, food, wenches, and any other treasure we could find, but we had no weapons.

We debated for quite some time while slowly motor sailing past the harbor toward the Northwest Channel Light. Our machismo finally got the better of us and we agreed that we would do what sailors do; sail. We would conserve our fuel and use it only if the wind completely died or we needed to get out of harms way. This was supposed to be an adventure after all. I didn’t much like the prospect of turning the 70 mile crossing into a 24 hour ordeal, but I relented and we proceeded on.



Abandoned lighthouse off Whale Cay en route to Chubb Cay

It was still early afternoon and we planned to sail till around 1800 when we would drop anchor and spend the night on the Banks; a prospect that wasn't all that appealing given the horribly roly night we had when we had come over. But the wind was light so maybe it wouldn't be so bad this time.

As we made our way up the Northwest Channel and the end of the Tongue of the Ocean to the edge of the Great Bahamas Bank, the wind continued to die. The going seemed painfully slow. Finally, the wind died altogether and we found ourselves drifting in a glassy sea with nothing but the sound of the sails flapping listlessly as the boat rocked in the barely perceptible rolling sea. We were in the doldrums.

I've heard the saying that you sail for enjoyment, but motor when you want to get somewhere. We wanted to get somewhere. It was time for a change in plan. I knew that we had enough fuel to make it to Morgan's Bluff which was named after the famous pirate, Captain Morgan, and of course everyone knows the rum. Little did I know that there actually were pirates at Morgan's Bluff.

After thirty minutes of getting nowhere, I made the captain's decision to fire up the iron genny and make a beeline to Morgan's Bluff to refuel. It was a 3 ½ hour detour (7 hours total if you count the return), but I calculated that we would more than catch up to our position under motor power even if a light wind returned, and with full fuel tanks we would increase our margin of safety and keep more options open. I regretted not making this decision in the first place.

My guide book painted a quaint image of Morgan's Bluff. It has a sizable outer harbor where ships come in to pick up fresh water that is distributed to the other islands in the Bahamas. Apparently, Andros Island supplies almost all of the fresh water in the entire Bahamas. There also exists an inner harbor that smaller boats can venture into to refuel and visit a local bar/eatery. That was our target.

Andros is a very large island and I am sure there are some very nice resort areas, but what we found upon arrival to Morgan's Bluff was a third world country. The outer harbor was marginally scenic, but the inner harbor was a wasteland. The so called bar was gutted out, and the only thing that resembled a dock was some broken down concrete at the end of the keyhole shaped inlet. Two very helpful Bahamians helped us tie up and then took off with our fuel cans. I sent Joe and Matt to follow them as I finished tying off and placing fenders in an attempt to protect my boat from the rough concrete.

As I approached the gas pump, which was located next to a dirt road some 50 yards from the dock, I witnessed two Bahamians dutifully filling all three gas cans to the very brim. And I mean to the brim. As I approached the small crowd that had gathered around to watch the cans overflow, I shouted "stop, stop, stop!" No doubt it was the most excitement they had seen all day. The total gas bill was over \$80! I had paid over \$7 per gallon; a personal record. Pirates! But at least they were smiling pirates. After the fill-up, they offered to give us a ride into town but we nervously declined. I'm sure their intentions were good, but I was having bad karma and was ready to get out of there.

As we left, Joe pointed up to the top of the mast with dismay. When we had docked, we failed to notice the limbs from several tall trees next to the dock overhanging and fouling the top of our mast. The limbs had taken out the wind vane. It was an expensive day indeed.

Pissed about the pirating, I mean price gouging, we got the hell out of there and headed to the Joulter Cays to anchor for the night. The Joulter Cays are located just to the north of Andros and a guidebook told of unique pink sand there that can only be found in two places in the world. The book didn't say where the other place was, but its uniqueness peaked our curiosity. Also, the Jouters looked like they might offer some minimal level of protection from wind and waves. By the time we neared the islands the

sun was beginning to set into the horizon and we were too worn out to adventure in any closer than a mile or so. The charts showed very shallow water in the area with numerous coral heads.

So we found a sandy patch in about 12 feet of water and set two anchors just in case the wind or current should shift in the middle of the night. Even with the protection of the islands (although they were far off) the anchorage was a bit rolly, though by this time in the trip we were more used to it. Don't get me wrong, it bothered us; just not as much as earlier in the trip.

After a meal of canned stew, crackers and applesauce, we were once again treated to a beautiful sunset. The following day we would attempt to make the long crossing back over the Great Bahamas Banks so we abandoned the idea of lingering at Joulter Cays to see the special sand. Maybe next time.

As we settled in for the night the knowledge that we had traveled 77 nautical miles made me weary; more so knowing that we would have another long day tomorrow. At this point in the trip, I was beginning to feel like we were on a schedule, and I didn't like it one bit.



The sun sets behind Joulter Cays; known for its pink sand beaches.