



Cruising to West End

Over the past three days my son, a friend and I completed our first cruise from Hillsboro to the Bahamas and back. We travelled 72 miles across Open Ocean and the Gulf Stream to West End and stayed at Old Bahama Bay Resort. This article covers key elements of the trip together with the planning required beforehand.

As we prepared, we learned that watching the weather is critical. Northerly winds of over 10 mph combined with the Gulf Stream moving north at 4 mph will rapidly create "elephant waves" of 5-6+' with very short periods. These conditions are both uncomfortable and dangerous. Any loss of power or other mechanical issue can quickly lead to serious problems. Often, boaters will have to wait a day or two at each end of the trip for a "window" to complete a crossing.

The crossing took us two and a half hours going over and nearly three hours coming back due to the effects of the Gulf Stream. We had westerly winds of under 12 mph both going and coming which made for relatively benign conditions. The waves were mainly 1-3 feet though quite calm within 15 miles of the Florida coast.

The trip was a blast. We loved the Old Bahama Bay Marina & Resort. The staff was friendly and attentive and our rooms were updated and tasteful. In particular we enjoyed the caring help of "Mr. Raymond" who looked after the activities desk. He helped us find our fishing guide, Marvin, who took us 14 miles north of West End to Memory Rock where we snorkeled and caught two yellow tail snapper for dinner one night.

We learned about clearing customs in both The Bahamas and the States. The formalities in the Bahamas are straight forward and the cost to clear customs was U.S. \$150 cash for the boat and three passengers. Importantly, we learned to fly a yellow quarantine flag when coming into a Bahamian harbor for the first time.

Returning to the States is more complicated. The government has created the Small Vessel Reporting System "SVRS" to automate what can be a cumbersome process. To avoid having to check in personally at the customs office in Ft. Lauderdale, each passenger needs to register with Global Entry. Only with a valid Global Entry card can you apply for an SVRS number. The SVRS numbers for each passenger plus the vessel must be registered online by filing a Float Plan through the SVRS website. Though time consuming at the beginning, it's a quite easy process going forward. Upon returning to the States, I called into a customs office number and spoke with an officer who asked for my float plan number and then posed normal border patrol questions. Once satisfied, the office gave me a confirmation number to show that our re-entry to the country had been approved. No personal appearance or boat inspection was required.

In terms of safety equipment, it's important to have a life raft as well as offshore life jackets. We found inflatable jackets from West Marine to be a good choice to save space. We also purchased an EPIRB for the boat and personal locator beacons for each passenger.

Be sure to provision your boat with a couple days of water and easy to prepare food/snacks. Also, if possible install an auto pilot - it will make the trip much more relaxing for the captain.

Completing the trip from Hillsboro Club to West End, The Bahamas was an important milestone for us as we continue up the learning curve for boating in South Florida. Not only was it exciting and rewarding, it helped to create life long memories for me, my son and his friend.

New frontiers now include trips beyond West End into the Abacos, cruises south toward Key West or Bimini and west through Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico.

Happy Boating!