

A Detailed & Personal Cruise Log of Dimitri's Voyage to the Upper Florida Keys (Elliott, Sands & Largo) – December 27 -> 31, 2013

Day 1 – Friday, December 27, 2013

My daughter Larissa decided to accompany me again on this event as she had done two years ago the last time we were in this area. We left Tampa about 7:15 AM on Friday and got down to Homestead around 12:30 making pretty good time. This year we would skip Alligator Alley and Miami and use route 41 in both directions. My impression from two years ago was that this is the better route for pulling a heavy trailer. After lunch, there was the usual holiday traffic jam on Route 1 heading into the Keys but we didn't have to stay in it for long before reaching the marina. Dave and Teresa were about an hour ahead of us and blowing up their dinghy and getting ready to sail from the boat ramp when we reached South Dade Marina. We raised the mast, launched Lucky 7 and motored out of the South Dade Marina into the Glades Canal which would take us to Manatee Bay in Barnes Sound. Once out into the Bay, winds were brisk, around 12-15 out of the ENE. This was not the best weather for Short Key beach protection so Dave steered the group to the North side of Thursday cove which was well protected from ENE and the eventual predicted wind shift to the East. Stin was anchored at the entrance to Barnes sound to make sure that everyone got the message as to the change in plans.

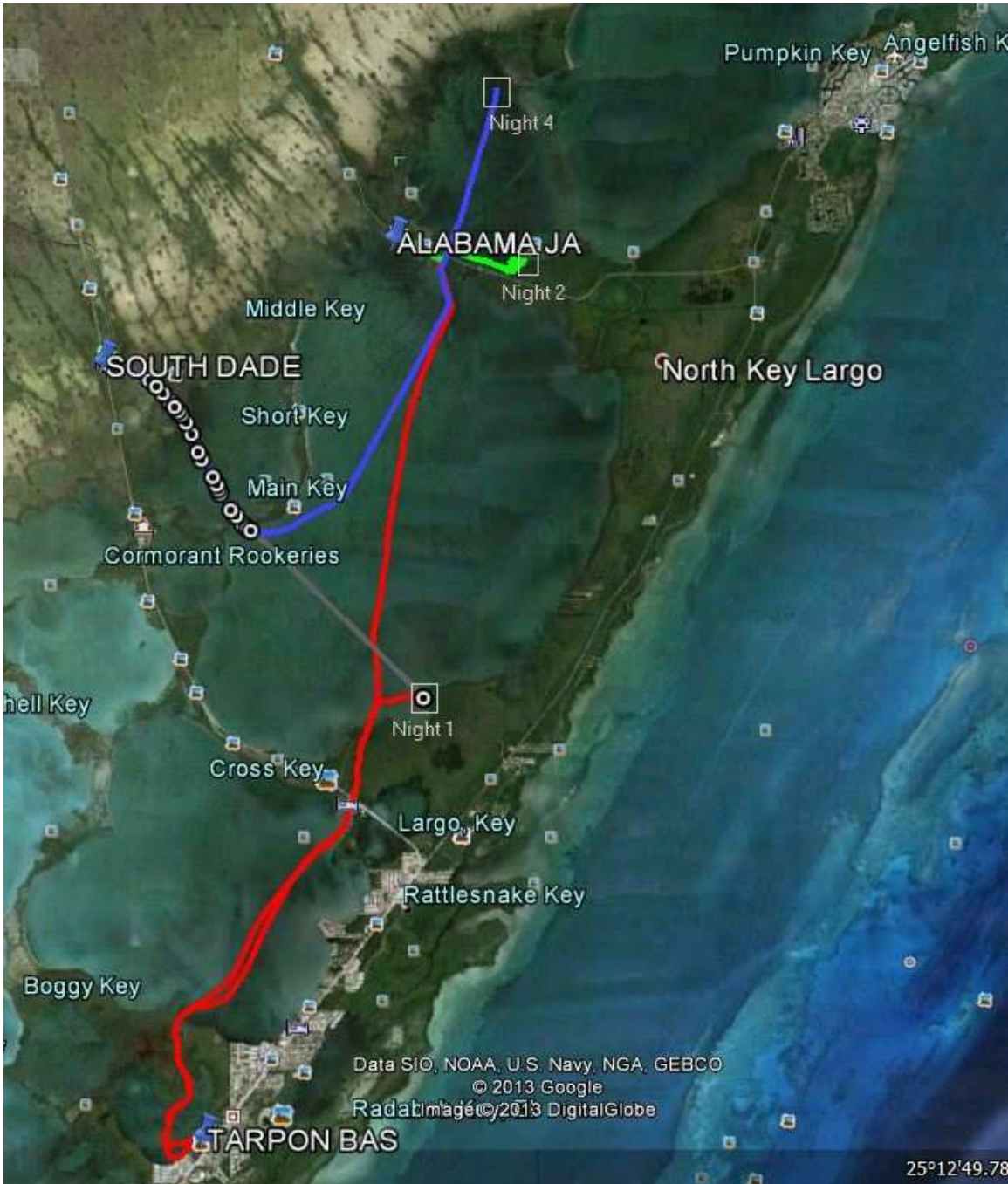
As it was getting late in the afternoon now, we were too lazy to raise the mainsail but it wasn't really necessary as there was enough wind to do close to 5 knots with just the Genoa on a close reach. The first night we would raft up with 2 other 26X's (Dave and Tom) as well as Stin on his WWP. We were nicely protected from the wind and it was windy enough and not close enough to the shore to have any issues with bugs either. After a bit of socializing, we



Figure 1 - Sunset looking SW across Thursday Cove

debated plans for the next day. At the time, winds were still North of East so it looked like a slog to go NE into Biscayne Bay and so the group decided we would go South into Jewfish Creek which connects Barnes Sound to Blackwater Sound. We planned to go to the free Dinghy dock in Tarpon basin and possibly spend the second night down South.

Day 2 – Saturday, December 28, 2013



After a nice breakfast, the four initial boats started South on the red track you see in figure 2. It seemed that laziness to raise mainsails abounded with the Mac boats as all three of us sailed with head sail only. I motor-sailed much of the way south to charge my batteries back up. Sailing mostly on

Figure 2 = Days one, two and five

broad reach south, we arrived in Tarpon Basin only to find that the Dinghy dock was

completely packed full of dinghies and there were no public facilities or ice to be seen. The only one who ended up docking was Stin with his smaller boat. The three Mac's explored the Basin a bit and then decided that it would be better at Alabama Jacks so we changed our plans again and headed back North without ever stopping in the basin. Stin would catch up with us later. Also by now, the winds had clocked out of the East as predicted, allowing us to sail on a close reach in Blackwater Sound and a beam reach in Barnes sound. We never needed to tack a single time on this whole cruise as we planned all our directions with the pending wind shifts. As we made our way back out the tricky cuts through the shallow basin, Larissa made us a couple small sandwiches since we knew we would be getting an early dinner at AJ's. The three of us kept with headsail only sailing and I was pleased that the investment in my new sails seemed to have paid off as I gained ground on the other two identical boats to mine and made it to AJ's first. In Dave's defense, he was only flying a 100% jib and also towing a light dinghy whereas I had about 130% of a 150 Genoa unrolled. But still, the luff pads seem to hold a decent shape. On the close reach through Blackwater sound, I sheeted the headsail inside the shrouds for better pointing and then when turning another 20-30 degrees down in Barnes Sound, I sheeted back outside and opened up the sail a bit more. Again, it was windy enough to do 5 knots with just a partial headsail so that made for a nice sail to AJ's. Once arriving there on a Saturday afternoon, the place was packed and they also had part of the dock blocked off with a construction barge. There wasn't a single parking spot available and I saw another Mac 26X further down the canal which would turn out to be Randy and Tiffany on their 26X who joined the cruise on the second day. Now there would be 4 26X's...even more than 2 years ago. Just as I was pulling in, a large powerboat took off and so I quickly turned around and grabbed his spot at the dock right in front of the restaurant. Dave and Tom pulled up and rafted up to me and then Randy



rafted to them. We had 4 identical boats rafted up 4 thick!

As usual, AJ's was a lot of fun with the live bands and the food was good. But the really old dancing ladies from 2 years ago seemed to be gone. ☹️ We had a nice dinner, and I had the conch chowder and chicken salad with two bags of ice for dessert. We

then debated what to do for the second night of the cruise. Winds were forecasted to shift SE overnight so we decided to go to the SE part of Little Card sound, just through the



bridge at AJ's, set anchor for the night and then head North to Biscayne Bay tomorrow since winds were now favorable for going NE. As usual, we probably spent too long at Alabama Jacks so by the time we got to the anchorage, it was just getting dark. This would turn out to be a bit of a problem since I couldn't see the grass flats very well and that has turned out to be problematic for my ground tackle.

Anchoring turned out to be a nightmare this evening requiring about half a dozen attempts to set my aluminum Danforth design G-11 that always works so well on Florida's West Coast and also didn't give me any trouble two years ago down in this area either. But two nights in Little Card Sound with grass flats as well as trouble anchoring near the reef this year made me decide to get a new kit for the next time I visit the Keys. In the mean time, I will try sharpening the flukes somewhat with a grinder since I've read that might help some with setting in grass. Poor Larissa was getting sore hands from all the attempts. Finally I used the depth sounder to look for where the bottom grass was coming in clumps instead of dense and was able to set the anchor for the night. I ran an anchor drag alarm on my iPhone all night too just as a precaution but we stayed put for the night even though I had now moved so far offshore that the waves were a bit on the high side for the early part of the night until the winds clocked further to the SE and I was better covered. It may have been good to be further off shore because we heard from Tom later that he was closer in and had some bugs that night whereas we had none. The other interesting thing this evening was that it was a very clear night with lots of stars when we anchored. A little bit later in the evening, a shower came over and rained moderately hard for a short time but then 20 minutes later, I looked outside and the stars were back out in force again so quite the isolated little shower. We would get a bit more rain tomorrow it turned out.

Day 3 – Sunday, December 29, 2013

In the morning, I noticed another Macgregor Powersailor had joined the anchorage in the night, this time a 26M with a custom light blue paint job on a white hull. We thought it might be Jean-François from Canada but found out later that it was Ian from Key Largo along with his SUP board and two dogs.

After having breakfast, Dave started heading north and everyone else soon followed. Most everyone was headed towards the Elliott Key Tide Station beach at University

Docks north of the shut down Elliott Key Marina. But since it was early in the day still and the beach was only about 13 nm north of the sound, and I had never been to Homestead Bay front Park, I decided to follow Stin and catch up with the others later in the afternoon. We were all using both our sails today as the winds stayed favorable with the moderate SE breeze. We were heading NE through Card sound towards Cutter Bank on a nice beam reach when a rain shower appeared out of nowhere and swallowed up the boats behind me. I got my rain gear on just as a moderately intense rain shower overtook us and caused us to have to batten down the hatches. Luckily, there was not much of an associated wind squall with the shower so sailing stayed good until I passed through Cutter Bank and past the Arsenicker Keys turning NW towards Homestead with the DDW wind on my stern requiring some gybing and eventually motor



sailing for the rest of the way to the Homestead entry channel (see purple track line on second map). This day had the poorest visibility (around 5 miles) with a few more light rain events as we pulled into the fuel dock at Homestead Bay front Park and got a little gas and ice to be on the safe side. I didn't even realize we had passed Stin somewhere along the way because he arrived after us. He mentioned the museum at the Biscayne Bay Park headquarters across the canal. So being in the exploring mood, we moved over there to the public docks and saw some of the exhibits as well as purchasing some souvenirs from the gift shop for the rest of

my family that didn't make it down. The rain sprinkles seemed to have stopped now as we set our sights on the tide station beach on north Elliott Key near Sands cut. The blue track shows our path across Biscayne Bay. By now, the slightly diminishing winds had clocked totally out of the South so once again, a very nice beam reach with both sails got us across the bay in just under 2 hours (about 9 nautical miles). The winds were starting to die out more and that would turn out to be a problem later. When we arrived, we found most of the boats were stern-to on the beach, only Ian had anchored out and used his SUP board to get to the beach. That would turn out to be a smart move. Dave helped me get my stern anchor to bite onto a coral rock and the gang was just lighting up the campfire on the beach about an hour before sunset. We cooked our usual popcorn, hotdogs and marshmallows on the fire as the bugs started coming out in droves to have their dinner (us!). Everyone was dousing themselves with bug spray, Ian had buried his



legs in the sand and even the smoke from the fire wasn't helping much. When Teresa decided to call it a night shortly after 7 PM with a bunch of big logs still burning in the fire, I knew it was bad ;) Everyone else followed suit, we kicked some sand onto the mostly unburned logs and retired to our boat. I have

custom made lead weighted screens on both my hatches and usually, they keep the bugs out. And I only had the hatches open a small amount but the biting midges (aka No see'ums) were getting through as we watched our evening movie. I sprayed the visible parts of the screens with bug spray and we kept swatting them but more were still getting in. Finally, even though it was quite warm and humid this night, I sealed up all the hatches and we slept under sheets to try to protect our bodies. I left the TV on for about an hour after the movie was over because the light attracted the bugs to the cabin ceiling where I squashed them with paper towels. I killed hundreds of them if not thousands! Once the numbers got down to reasonable levels, I sprayed my arms and face one last time and then crawled under the sheet and went to sleep. I remembered opening the hatches in the morning and getting swarmed by the same type bugs when we stayed in the Elliott Key marina two years ago. This island is obviously infested with these bugs.

Day 4 – Monday, December 30, 2013

As suspected, the morning wouldn't be any better and the tiny bugs were still relentlessly trying to carry us away. I sprayed myself again and hastily grabbed our chairs and popcorn popper off the beach, jumped on the boat and weighed anchor to get offshore. Everyone else did the same and there would be no socializing on the beach this morning, all plans would be made on VHF channel 71. The bugs still clinging on the boat, hundreds of them on the underside of the bimini canvas and I think they were also hiding in the fuel lockers. We did a couple high speed runs to try to blow them off the boat but ultimately, we had to use our legs as bait and keep killing them. I looked like I had chicken pox with so many bites on my ankles. It felt good to douse my legs in the clear waters and the lady on Tom's boat (Wing was her name I believe) went for a full swim in the water most likely to try to mitigate the stings on her legs. We dropped a stern anchor several hundred yards offshore and made breakfast. Slowly during the day, the numbers of bugs greatly diminished, but I still had to kill a few more in the cabin the next night even though no more were coming into the boat. Unfortunately, despite the nice beach (rare to find on the bay side of the keys), I don't think too many people, if any, will ever want to go back to this place...which is a shame because it is so beautiful.

Overnight, the winds had subsided completely and the seas were completely flat. We were definitely going to go coral reef diving today and started making our plans over the radios. I had really wanted to go see Boca Chita up close and so that was my initial plan, but with all the bug excitement and a hot breakfast, time was clicking away. Stin said that he had made it through Sands cut some years ago and was going to try again to get to the outside that way. The tide had been high about an hour earlier and was now starting to rush through the cut. I looked at my charts and realized I would have to make a big detour around shoals to get to Boca Chita and this would kill too much time. This was



Figure 3 - Picture Larissa took of the current in Sands cut

the mistake I had made two years ago, getting to the reefs too late in the day to dive them so I changed my mind and decided to follow Stin out the cut. Even though the cruising guides advise against Sands cut, the tide was mostly high and I have a shallow draft boat although if Stin hadn't lead the way, I may not have tried it. It was a fun ride with about 5 knots

of current as we rocketed to the outside over the final shoal where the water depth got down to about 2 feet momentarily. This is definitely not something to try unless the tide is pretty high. Dave decided to go back south along the inside and Randy and Tom did some wake boarding on the flat water and said they would meet us at the reefs later. Ian took off to the North to do his own exploring and we wouldn't see him again on this cruise.

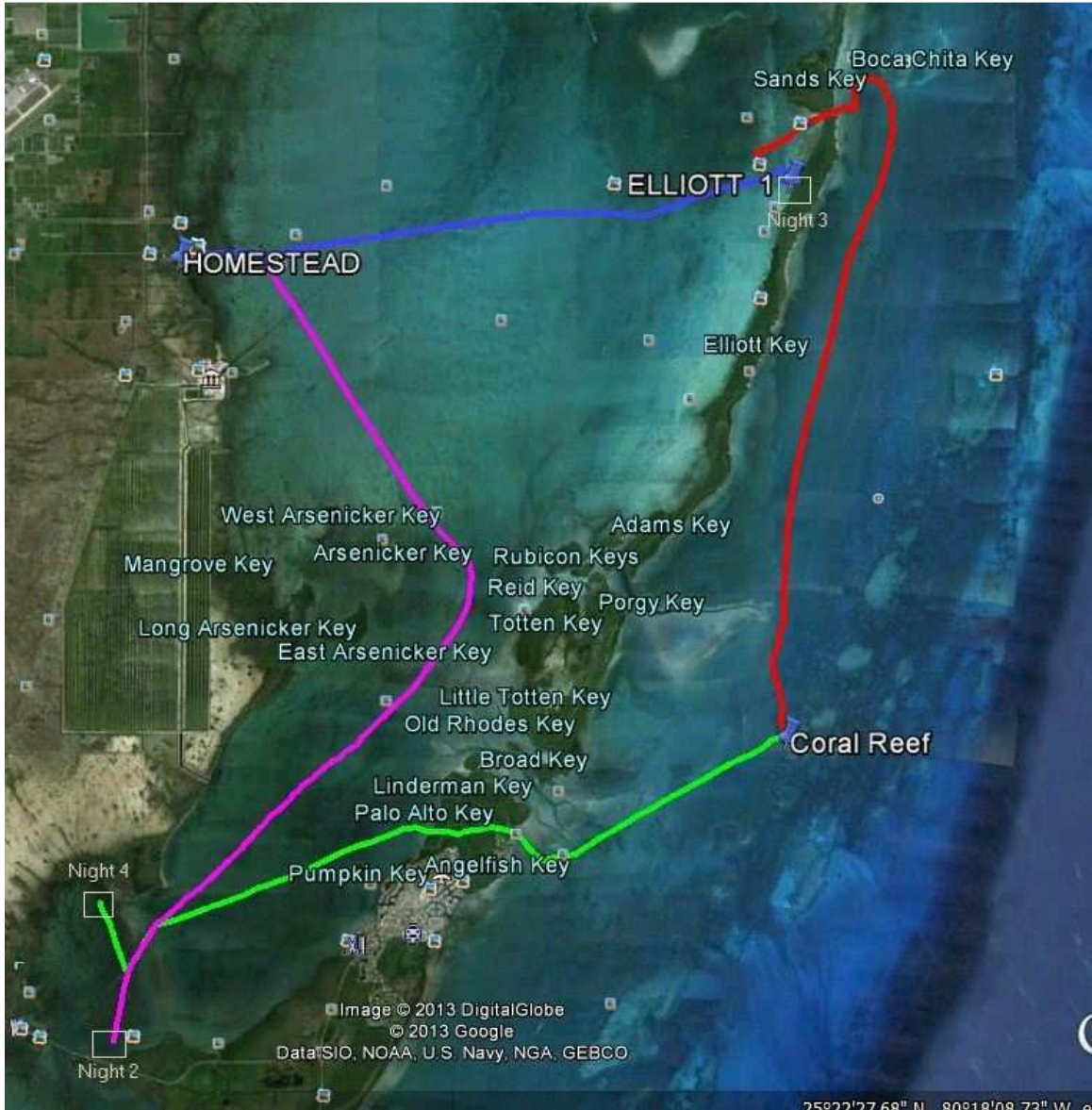


Figure 4 = days three and four

After the speedy ride through the cut (the red track shows our path through the cut and then south), we circled a bit northward to raise sails and take a couple high zoom pictures of the top half of the lighthouse that you could see over Boca Chita Key. This would be as far North as we would go on this cruise, perhaps we will visit Boca Chita harbor and the keys north of there some other time. Due to the high zoom and boat motion, they didn't come out so well but you can get the idea here. There is also a nice picture of

Stin's WWP 19 crossing in front of the cut that we had just gone through with a

powerboat having just come through the cut in the background.

Although the winds now showed some signs of coming out of the North, it was a very weak sleigh ride on the outside going about 13 miles south to some very nice reefs off Hawk Channel that I had marked on my GPS two years ago. I had both sails up initially but there wasn't enough wind to make it down there in time so I motorsailed with the Genny open



lowered the main and during the ride to the reefs. Larissa made us some nice sandwiches en route and we enjoyed the sunshine as the weakened cold front that had now passed through brought us some less humid air from the north. When we were about 1.5 miles from our



destination and passing the entrance of Caesar's creek channel, we saw Tom and Randy coming through as they had

not tried Sands cut. The four of us (3 26x's and a WWP 19) found the coral heads and tried to anchor without disturbing any coral. Once again, my anchor would not bite in the

13 foot deep water and we ended up having to tie onto Stin's potter... See the picture that I took from swimming over the reef.

Although sharpening the flukes on my Aluminum Danforth might help some with grass, it probably isn't going to help me as much with digging into the hard bottom around a reef so I need to get either a Delta or a Rocna plow type anchor with a lot of chain. This will also entail installing a bow roller since there will be no place to stow an anchor like that but this is definitely on the must-do mod list before going back to the Keys again. I hope the ground is softer and less weedy in the 10,000 islands next week. We had a great time snorkeling, took a lot of great pictures of which I'll only display a couple here. Randy and Tom anchored off of an adjacent coral head and also had some crew who went into the water.



By now it was after 3 PM and I had thought that I could get all the way back to Manatee Bay so that I could pull out in the morning so I started motoring towards Angelfish Creek (green track) and eventually also opened up some headsail since the north winds were in the process of increasing somewhat. For



some reason, I mistakenly thought it was only about 13 miles to Manatee Bay because I was having trouble with the predefined courses on my GPS which I found out later did not load because my filename was too long and I had also run

out of route memory. It was a simple fix but I couldn't figure it out at the right time. Anyway, the inbound current was strong at Angelfish and so I rode in at about 7.5 knots with only 5.5 knots of engine power, therefore about a 2 knot current. Not as strong as Sands cut in the morning but favorable once again. It's like we rode all the winds and the currents to be most favorable for which direction we were going, how often does that happen?





While passing Pumpkin Key, I wasn't sure where Dave and Teresa had ended up since they did not come out to the reef so I tried hailing him on the radio but got no response. So I called him on the cell phone and found out that they were anchored in the NE part of little card sound. Although I dreaded the grass flats in that sound already, it was rapidly getting dark and I thought better of my overly ambitious plan to make it all the way into Manatee bay and decided that I

would raft up with Dave again for our last night in the Keys. This turned out to be the right decision because not only did the sun set about 15 minutes after I got rafted up, but it turned out to be several more miles from there to Manatee Bay which I cruised the next morning. Stin caught up and also arrived a few minutes after us and then Jean-François from Canada also pulled in just as the sun was setting. There was also a catamaran which anchored close to us since the N to NE winds were starting to increase now and this spot was well sheltered from that direction. Randy and Tom were also supposed to raft up with us but apparently, they did not see us and overshot the anchorage going into Barnes Sound where they spent the night on a lee shore just east of the bridge. We were rafted up about a quarter mile offshore too since everyone had had enough of bugs the night before. It was a pleasant evening, the crew on the 4 boats socialized and we cooked ravioli and veggie burgers for our last dinner in the Keys.



Day 5 – Tuesday, December 31, 2013



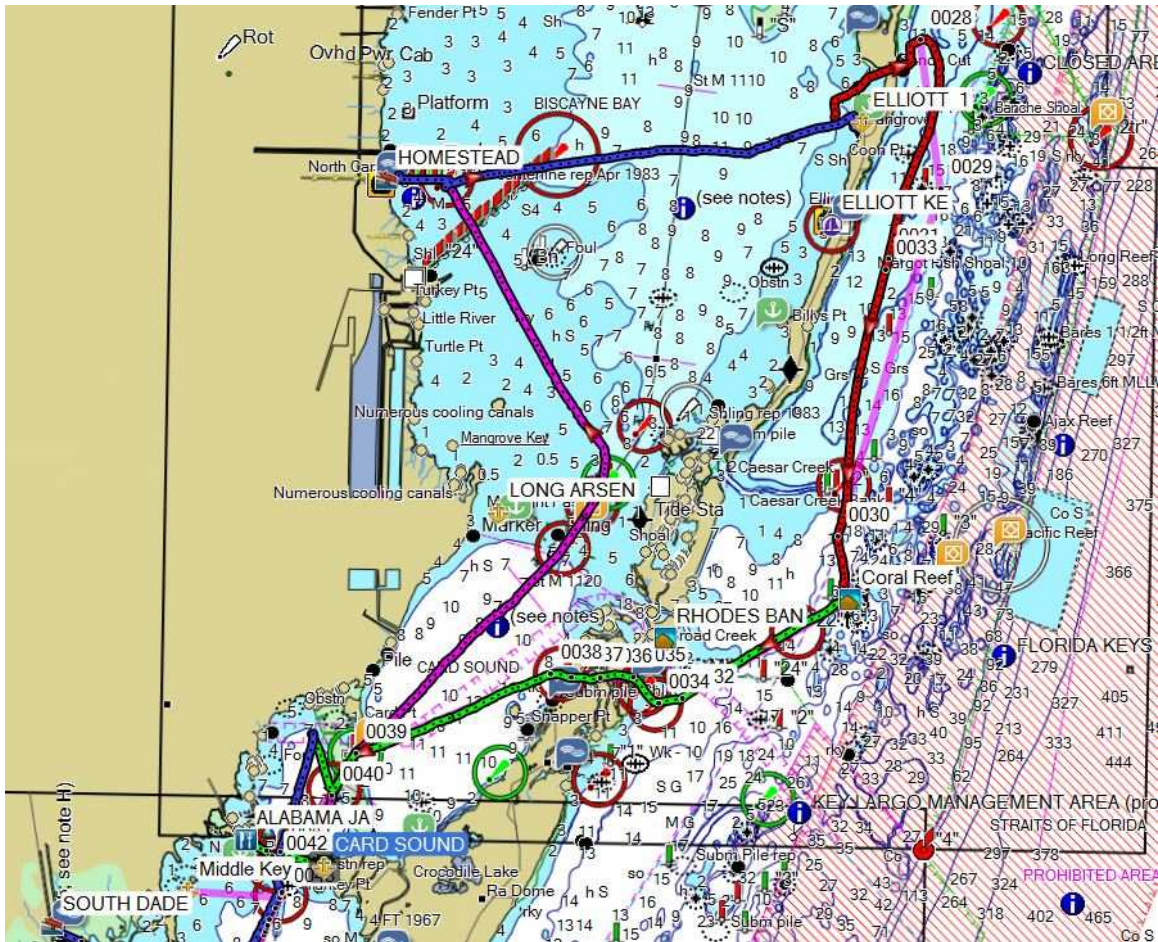
In the morning, we said our goodbyes and started heading downwind towards the Card Sound Bridge. It turned out to be almost 9 nm to South Dade Marina from there so once again, I was happy that I didn't try to make the whole trip the day before. Here is a rather fuzzy shot of the remaining rafters as I headed away.

We were lazy headsailing again today but with winds starting to pick up over 15 again, it was plenty and we had a nice sail back into Barnes Sound and Manatee Bay. But as we turned from a

broad reach to a close reach going around main key point, somehow my jib sheet grabbed the winch handle release button and ripped it off the boat. So, that turned out to be a last minute casualty and now the winch handle won't lock in place anymore and will probably end up getting replaced.

We got to the Marina just as Randy and Tiffany had pulled out and then as we were pulling out, Tom and crew also showed up. We also ran into a guy named Doug from Homestead who was launching his 26X just as we were about to drive off. He apparently couldn't get time off from work to make it in time to join the cruise.

By the time we left the Keys, winds were NE to ENE again so we had pretty much gone through the whole 360 degree wind shift during our 5 days which is pretty typical of the Florida winter pattern. But most days (except for Monday) were cloudy and overcast so this is not that typical in this area during December.



Overall, another very successful cruise is entered into the log books. We made a great 5.5 hour time back to Tampa, and got home as the New Year's Eve fireworks were getting shot off all around our neighborhood.

Statistics and Closing Thoughts

Daily Boat Nautical Mileage:

Day	Miles
1	5.5
2	22.5
3	23.4
4	23.0
5	8.9
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Total	83.3

The attendees of the 2013 Keys' cruise were:

Name(s)	Boat Type	Boat Name
Dave and Teresa	Mac 26X	Hot Tub
Dimitri and Larissa	Mac 26X	Lucky 7
Tom, Wing & Ben	Mac 26X	Valkyrie
Randy & Tiffany	Mac 26X	Sea Savvy II
Stin	WWP 19	Lily P
Ian	Mac 26M	Shoal Idea
Jean, Sara and JP	Mac 26M	Abiro

It did turn out to be quite the MacGregor event with all but one of the sailboats being Macs (and 3 other white 26X's just like mine). I guess that is not so surprising since Mac's make such great shallow water cruisers. Next time I get down to these parts, in addition to having a new anchor, I would like to go further south into Florida Bay and explore the middle keys. It has been about 20 years since I've been to places like Islamorada. We didn't get far enough south this time to see the beautiful blue waters of Florida Bay that are south of Rock Reef (see my report from two years ago for pictures of that). I've also entertained ambitious thoughts about attaching the WCTSS 10,000 islands cruise to this Key's cruise but it didn't happen this year. It would require shuttling trailers from SE Florida to SW Florida so that a one way cruise could be made from the Keys which ends up in the Everglades/10,000 islands area. For now, I'll keep dreaming about that one and get my boat ready for next week's cruise.