

My First Rodeo



*Words by Darton Devin
Photos by Sara Quinn*

My Very Own Island

Anchored off Cape Henelop, DE. 360nm total so far. Recovering slowly from head injury yesterday. Was checking chart (phone) while approaching bridge before Cape May Harbor and wild jibe caught left side of head, temple, ear, knocked me to cockpit floor. Do not believe I was unconscious, if so not more than a couple seconds, recovered steering, made way to nearest marina face dock then to Cape May Harbor. Had a friend call to check my AODs. Today, headache, bump on head, very tired, left eardrum is likely ruptured, constant ringing in ear, jaw hurts, difficult to eat solid foods. This is dangerous. Doing it alone may have been a poor choice. I would like to go ashore, but it is not imminent. I worry about anchor constantly after events a few nights back. Will try to eat well and rest today, a light nausea at times.

How I got into this adventure is not entirely clear, even to myself. I can say that I have a certain attraction for difficult situations, and so perhaps this was bound to occur at some point. Whatever the case, all that follows happened, and I wrote it down so I wouldn't have to do it again.

Two years ago I was living with my folks back in Rhode Island, trying to make a home for myself and with grand ideas of starting a bike cooperative in a rather bike-unfriendly area. Becoming frustrated at my lack of direction and half-assed attempts to do something meaningful, I found myself cruising Craigslist and Ebay for cheap boats. Always on the lookout for good deals on old beat-up things, I bid on a sailboat for \$163, and got it. It may not have been a very well researched investment but I figured I didn't have a whole lot to lose on the deal.

The vessel, an 1975 Ericson 23-II fin keel, turned out to be in fairly good shape. The previous owner had the boat for the past twenty five years and, by the looks of it, sailed it maybe a couple times a year. Everything was there: the sails weren't destroyed, no holes in the deck or hull, no serious leaks, not even blisters. I won't mention what a terribly uninspiring name the boat originally had, to me it became *Rodeo*. I paid for dry storage slowly realizing that this was probably one of the bigger commitments I've ever made and, if I failed, the nautical life was likely dead to me. I began reading everything I could about sailing, singlehanding, and boat repair. After scraping off the decades of accumulated bottom paint and barnacles I repainted, cleaned out the inside, looked at all the rigging, and contemplated how I might make the boat go. The first step in that direction was to buy a reliable outboard. I subconsciously put off the reality of actually sailing the thing by building a stitch-and-glue nesting pram dinghy for a tender over the winter. I mean how could I sail without a dinghy anyway?

Months later, reassured by my moderate success with the nigh-finished dinghy and my use of fiberglass and epoxy, I splashed the boat for the first time. Using only paper charts and binoculars, a good friend and I made the journey up the coast to where I was hoping to squat an anchorage for the summer. I assumed those little asterisk things on the chart are bad, so we tried to stay away from those. To learn from mistakes you must first make them; I mistook an exposed rock in the water for one on the chart without properly accounting for the tide. I had time enough to yell "Oh shit!" from the bow as my friend unknowingly steered us straight into a barely submerged outcropping of barnacled stone.

My heart sank as I wondered whether it was better to let the boat sink where it would be completed submerged or try to beach it and possibly incur a small fortune of debt in salvage costs. The keel, followed by the rudder, ground against the rock as the sails flailed about before eventually taking us clear. I dove below to look for the water gushing from the keel, eager to show me I was definitely not ready to own a boat. Surprisingly, we weren't taking on water and feeling in the keel as well as I could through the bilge access I could find nothing amiss. Later at the boatyard I had the boat pulled out and was shocked to find only some cracked gel coat and a small chunk missing from the bottom leading edge of the keel. The yard owner told me "It always feels worse than it is." That has turned out to be true for almost all of the more harrowing situations I've found myself in with this boat, and is probably true in general for a life lived such as mine.

We made it, anchored, and congratulated ourselves on a job well done. Realizing a couple days later that the state of Rhode Island is not partial to people on boats without money, I had to sail back to CT singlehanded and put the boat in dry storage as I figured out what the hell I was doing with my life. That trip back down is a story in itself, but most memorably involved watching the port side chainplate work its way farther and farther out of the deck. Held in only by the bolts that had ripped out of the rotted bulkhead beneath, they struggled to pull themselves completely free of the deck. That very near-dismasting was followed by another grounding upon approaching the boatyard from which I was finally pulled to the dock through 2' water (the boat has 3'8" draft) by some friendly drunken bros. I had again bested the sea and a warm bottle of champagne was passed around the somewhat rattled crew. Scared and overwhelmed, I left the boat on the hard and spent the summer in Oregon, vowing to come back in time to really get it ready and set off on a proper voyage.

The summer passed quickly, as they always seem to do in retrospect. I trucked back across the country to RI and began work in earnest on poor old *Rodeo*. First, of course, was replacing the rotted out bulkhead. Luckily I was in correspondence with the guru of Ericson 23s and had been advised that this was a common problem. The options were to replace and reinforce the bulkhead, or get another stainless steel plate to mate the chainplate to the deck/hull joint. I went with the new bulkhead, as I had more tools suited to woodworking rather than metalworking. Repairs shaped up slowly as the dinghy I'd started the previous winter was never quite done, the rudder needed the cracked gelcoat removed and to be completely glassed over with epoxy, and the keel never seemed to stop its tiny little weeping from all the groundings. Eventually, as the cold weather started coming on, I realized it was now or next year as epoxy doesn't set so well outside in a New England

winter.

Rodeo splashed again late September with more work to be done than ever. In the next week or so the galley area and table were finished, the wiring redone, a solar panel installed, some rigging replaced, and a downhaul added. I planned for a shakedown which ended up as my good friend and I drinking beer on the dock while trying to figure out why the outboard wasn't working properly. Turns out in my excitement to get going I had started the motor not fully in the water and the impeller burned out due to lack of cooling water. A few days later I had replaced the impeller, but the fuel-line fittings were leaking. Eventually, all back together and functioning, I took *Rodeo* out singlehanded for a little test run. Three hours later I motored back into the slip, and after not running aground I decided I was ready to go.

My thinking in leaving with so little experience and so little knowledge of the boat or its capabilities, was that whatever happened I probably would not die. The US east coast is, for the most part, extremely well developed. The infrastructure having been tweaked to cater centuries of boats passing up and down creates a situation in which, by my estimation, it would be hard to die within sight of shore. This would be true doubly so at the beginning of the journey inside the Long Island Sound. Perhaps this was foolhardy or overconfident, but the fact that I am still alive validates it a little bit. Anyway, if something terrible happened it would make a good story and I could find some other adventure to go on. Either way, it couldn't be worse than the regret of never trying.

And so on a brisk day in early October, the voyage began. I had been stockpiling dried goods from dumpsters and food banks for the past few months and taken pains to get a decent selection of beer and chocolate for the hard times ahead. I'm still eating some of those stockpiled goods as I write this, and just tried sardines for the first time the other day. Sardines I've had sitting around for over a year at this point. They didn't have the heads attached like I always dreamed they would, I'm still not sure if that's a disappointment or not. Part of the plan in leaving rather late in the season was a hope that there would be more empty moorings, docks, and anchorages for me to clumsily hole up in. I didn't want an audience to my poor seamanship, and would prefer to meet as few other "pleasure" vessels as possible.

I left a float plan with the boatyard, detailing a rapid journey as far as Great Kills Harbor, Staten Island; New York. Everyone who asked how far I was going got the same response, "South." At that time my sights were set on the keys, but no do-or-bust situations yet. Just getting to the next safe anchorage is stress enough for a first time singlehanded sailor.

First day went well. Little wind, but had some luck w/self steering this morning, gave up quickly as winds became variable, eventually got a southerly breeze after noon and made 5Kn. Knotmeter is definitely broken. Approx 20-25 nm today, MIM to North Cove, Old Saybrook/CT River. The attraction to sailing is that it is the most frustrating, rewarding, boring and exhilarating activity one can do. My sail trim is atrocious, course setting is barely adequate. Success though, I am really doing it.

And so it began. In retrospect I was probably over prepared, or just lucky, because I have very few "I almost died" anecdotes to relate even through the exaggerating golden lens of far removed hindsight.



Learning to Fly (a sail)

If you haven't traveled by sail before you may be surprised to learn that it is slow, maybe a little faster than walking, but definitely slower than riding a bike. So when I only made it about twenty nautical miles the first day, I had some mental work to do to steel myself for weeks, if not months, of long, cold, rainy days tied to the tiller. Luckily, Long Island Sound is a forgiving arena in which to learn the basics of sail propulsion. Protected from the larger chop of the Atlantic, with plentiful anchorages, moorings, and places to spend money along both shores, it's a haven for the yachties of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. What this means to a small dirty boat on a budget is that there's a good chance of borrowing a mooring for a night or two and going unnoticed, even on the shoulder season. Thankfully, a lot of the well refined manners cultivated among New England yacht clubs remain. Even if someone motors out on the launch to ask whether or not you're a member of a reciprocating yacht club and you reply no, they'll let you stay the night with a strong recommendation you do not overstay your welcome.

Really an ideal place to practice boating skills, Long Island Sound does well to prepare you for fluky winds and dealing with tidal currents along its length. One thing it cannot prepare you for though is NYC and what has long been appropriately referred to as Hell Gate. On land, Hell Gate may have been a popular hiking destination, or perhaps an interesting rock formation to have a nice basket lunch, a beer and a game of cribbage with friends surrounded by natural beauty. When you come upon something called Hell Gate in the water, and rather than a pair of boots to maneuver you have a small, old, underpowered and relatively untried sailboat (with probably the slowest hull speed of any vessel in the vicinity), Hell Gate becomes a worrisome obstacle, to put it lightly.

The way Hell Gate works is that the entirety of the long Island Sound funnels down to a narrow channel which passes directly through New York City. New York City with recreational boaters, boat cops, high-speed ferries, tugboats, barges, tons of trash and, according to my VHF radio, the occasional human body. Mix in a current exceeding five knots that switches back and forth every six hours, and you have quite a white knuckle ride for a noob. Now I must say hitting almost nine knots with a hull speed of less than six is pretty exciting, but exciting in the way driving a two-wheel drive pickup truck on an inclined ice rink is exciting. This was truly the first time I really had the necessity to "holdfast" as there's no way to stop, slow down, or for most of it, take a leak or eat a sandwich.

Southbound, cruising along through the city, I watched the people go hurriedly by. Deeply engaged in whatever it is people do in NYC, some stopped to glance over at the small boat swiftly drifting by on its thin path through the jungle. I listened to the latest report of people sighted near such and such bridge, lots of pan-pans and securitays, but thankfully no maydays. The thought flashed through my mind of coming alongside some unfortunate soul who, at the end of their tether, pushed over the edge by the inhumanity of so much concrete and steel, decided Davy Jones' Locker was a better resting place than a pile of cardboard or an abusive home and leapt from the George Washington, or perhaps the Verrazano, only to see a small dirty boat round a bend upriver carrying a lone figure making their own escape into the refuge of the sea. Perhaps that gives them a reason to stay, a glimmer of hope, an impetus for them too to hold fast. After I help them out of that swirling maelstrom of wet and cold uncertainty of civilization, we sail off together towards the unknown, towards uncertain doom, uncertain safety. Most importantly, we sail off together buoyed by the visceral and undeniable feeling that life is not best experienced in cubes, on flat ground, or connected to the grid. It is lived best in the in-between, in the far and forgotten, and in the unnamed where no one knows where you are including yourself; a place that feeds the soul.

But that kind of thought train gets put on hold by the very real danger of New York harbor's shipping area. Tugs and barges moving about with a nice three-foot chop and a soon to be opposing current are the last challenge before the sweet relief of exodus into the Atlantic. For me it was the first real sight of the Atlantic, exposed at last. Realistically, it was motoring head-on into some chop and rain for another three-or-so hours before finding refuge on a borrowed mooring in Great Kills harbor.

Pulling into Great Kills harbor, I was reminded of the lasting effects of New England's most recent natural equalizer: Hurricane Sandy. Masts stuck out from boats sunk at their moorings, hulls leaned against the sea wall across the harbor, and the more seaward marina had yet to rebuild their docks, the entirety of which had been picked up and tossed into splinters ashore; and this was a year later. I spent over a week on an inconspicuous mooring in the middle of the harbor, ducking every time the yacht club launch sped by ferrying owners to their boats to ready them for winter haul out. I wandered far on my little three-speed folding bike throughout Staten Island, searching out free trial gym memberships just for a shower and trying foods I can't pronounce in Russian groceries. It was getting colder though, now approaching November, and before long I was antsy to continue on. I realized the longer I stayed the scarier it would be to leave. I dallied an extra day or two to volunteer at an SCA beach cleanup project on Great Kills and walked away with the leftover fifty sandwiches from the free lunch. Thus provisioned, I set out once more into the blue.



Water Ways

Motored mostly from Ventnor NJ down to Townshend Inlet. Was hoping to sail a bit but wind direction was not as predicted. Ran aground due to shoaling in the channel, twice softly, once while trying to poop and another harder grounding coming into this horrible anchorage.

New Jersey has something it calls the NJ intracoastal waterway. Do not be fooled, those familiar with the real ICW, starting in Norfolk, VA, will be sorely disappointed if not demasted and run aground in any attempt to ply these waters. Unless of course, you draft less than four feet and have a total height of under thirty five feet. In that case, if you pay careful attention to the tides, you just might make it. As with New York, much of New Jersey felt the force of Hurricane Sandy. Inlets were drastically changed, sandbars shifted and many waterways were left in need of a solid dredging for anything drawing over a couple feet. Furthermore, Atlantic City is a terrible place. The glam and glitz of high stakes casinos provide a rather stark contrast to the projects and slums that surround them. Neighborhoods even I, by all appearances homeless person, was advised not to cross on foot. Ironically, as inhospitable as I found it, it was the first place I came along other sailors of a similar vein. Two people about my age had just purchased a C&C 35 and were moving it to New York City in hopes of dropping anchor somewhere close enough to avoid exorbitant housing costs. Also, these fellows informed me that they had regularly been squatting fuel docks and "anywhere we could tie up" with fair results. Seemed bold to me, but then again the worst they can do is tell you to leave. I did hear the coast guard hailing their boat all day the next day, but never found out why.

And onward south, towards the cold and wet and hurricane potential of the Mid-Atlantic. Days grew shorter and much stamina for sleep was needed to endure long damp nights. I rose before first light to boil water in order to prepare my little solace for hours of stiff necked, sodden, grimacing-at-the-rain progress. Sipping green tea so as to savor the heat, *Rodeo* and I advanced slowly south. Far too late in the season for detouring into the Delaware and Chesapeake bays, we opted for the unpopular choice of hopping down the Delmarva, a cleverly named peninsular landmass consisting of a bit of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. Much of the southern section is sparsely populated protected beaches, infrequently, if ever, visited by cruisers. Altogether it's a beautiful area, home only to a few weathered shellfishers and duckhunters. Not often surveyed, I found myself navigating by depth sounder, anchoring behind an abandoned coast guard station, poking through nautical refuse washed ashore, and wondering at a rusting hulk of a shipping barge that seemed way too far inland. I was later told it was a popular barbeque spot full of old toys. Rocking horses and goods that never made it to their intended overseas destination. Accessible only to very shallow draft boats, it was a bit too far to row, and I left its mysteries unexplored.

Possibly the best sailing day so far. 37nm, 95% by sail. Was able to rig sheet to tiller and rode in comfort for probably 6 hrs with one tack and very little adjustment on a broad reach. Coming back in, I met a number of dolphins, some of whom did the fully airborne leap, we made eye contact. An absolutely beautiful marsh with glassy water and a light breeze from just the right direction put me well inland and to anchor just outside of the channel with a nearly full moon and a blazingly bright Venus.

Continuing on down the DelMarVa, you will eventually reach the beaches where feral ponies saunter about on a small island cut off from the mainland by a shallow river. Chincoteague is the home of the famous Misty of Chincoteague, a fantastical pony designed to sell children's books. Exploring the adjacent, unabashed tourist town of the same name, my November arrival showed rows of storefronts closed for the seasons. Some owners left so abruptly with the last of the tourists that there remained tattered novelty t-shirts on sidewalk displays, some blown off to be scavenged by the less fortunate or clog storm drains farther downwind. After a rather uncomfortable attempt at anchoring out during approaching gale force winds, I contacted the dockmaster of Chincoteague and was told I could wait out the weather at the town dock, free of charge. He "has the power to allow me to do that." Seeing as there was only one other boat in a docking area meant for eight or more, it didn't seem likely to be contested. Also, it was right behind the public library which, as all the transients lacking funds know, is the cool place to hang.

After wandering for a couple days through streets filled with the refuse of a "successful" tourist season and little else, the storm passed over and all looked good for heading on down to what had become my most anticipated destination where I would meet my first crew, Norfolk, Virginia. A couple friends had been somehow convinced that coming out to spend time with *Rodeo* and I on the coast of North Carolina in November would be fun. Luckily by this point I had acquired the vague trappings of someone who knew what they were doing, hopefully to the point where I wouldn't unknowingly put us all in serious danger. We were meeting right at the top of the infamous Intracoastal Waterway, which officially begins in Norfolk, VA, and travels the length of the east coast in a somewhat well marked and maintained channel all the way to Key West, FL. Some would contend that the ICW really starts up at the Manasquan River in New Jersey, but I challenge those to give that upper portion a try in anything with a fixed keel and see how they fair.



IC Double Crew

The beauty of the ICW for many recreational boaters is that you can simply motor all the way from Virginia down to Florida with little concern for wind, waves, and tides. Not that tides don't play an immense role on one's ability to progress in a preferred direction within the ICW, (Georgia is prone to 9+ ft tides twice daily generating currents of up to six knots in some inlets). What I'm saying is that if you have 200+ horses gently nuzzling your sleek single-wide along, you're probably more concerned about making it to the next marina before happy hour than how fuel efficient it is to motor against a six knot current for a couple thousand nautical miles

So here we were at the top of the ICW. After deftly picking up the new crew with a drive-by at the pagoda and another night at the free city dock, we had before us the choice of taking either the Virginia Cut or a less popular route, hand dug by none other than George Washington's very own slaves, the Dismal Swamp Canal. The Dismal Swamp itself was viewed as rather worthless land by white settlers, as it was too swampy to cultivate and the technology at the time before the Canal's construction was shovels. Occasionally horses pulling bigger shovels, but mostly slaves with shovels. The Swamp later became a haven for escaped slaves, persecuted Natives, and even whites who fled forced labor and the law. The loose collection of the oppressed was referred to as the Maroons and they organized a number of raids on surrounding colonizer homesteads.

The routine aboard has been adjusted and cabin space is at a premium. ...provisions have improved, if not in quantity, than quality, although expenses have increased as well. I find myself craving that uninterrupted personal space more often. But again as, always, it is the contrast that makes the spice of life so spicy...

Eight horses of two-stroke fury pushed us along a narrow corridor lined with trees just beginning to shed their leaves in all those incredibly vibrant blazing colors. The ditch expels itself in North Carolina's Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds, fairly large bodies of water enclosed by the outer banks islands. The ICW itself follows a more canal-like inland track while the crew and I, itching to get the sails up after two days of putt-putting, looked forward to the relative freedom offered by a route through the sounds. My companions proved quick learners despite my inability to easily articulate those actions which I had become accustomed to doing alone. Having to reconfigure my movements in the cockpit, including not having to steer with one leg while I finagled with the jib halyard and downhaul, was a change that after some initial discomfort I came to appreciate.

If I may digress momentarily, I'd like to expound upon the depth of relationship one can develop with a vessel, even over a relatively short time. I had cars brought back from the brink of the scrap yard that I'd spent months sleeping in, wrenching and bleeding over, and troubleshooting waste vegetable oil systems in while traveling alone across the vast expanse of central North America. I came to love those cars, to feel a certain attachment and investment beyond that of actual time and money. I felt at times that with that vehicle I was more than what I was alone, while at other times it had become a ball and chain to me. The way I felt about *Rodeo* was tenfold those emotions. *Rodeo* to me represented an ideal, an opportunity at a whole new way of life. I'd spent months doing repairs, reading piles of books on seamanship, and accounts of long distance solo voyages. I even sought out books read by the authors of those accounts during their voyages in order to better understand the mindset of a really salty person. I scoured the internet for tips on singlehanding, anchoring, weather prediction, and more. I dreamt about sailing and talked about it constantly. In my mind I had built up romantic imagery far removed from reality. Those emotions, those dreams, were not all just within me but now had become imbued into *Rodeo* itself. Days and days of cold rain, damp sleeping bags, and watching every single sunrise and sunset by poking my head out the companionway of this small vessel while clutching the small warmth of a cup of tea gave me the sensation that now *Rodeo's* fiberglass flowed in my veins and my blood sloshed in its keel.

And so after having formed this intimate bond, enhanced by the relative seclusion of my travels, turning over the tiller to another, no matter how trusted they may be, was not without a slight twinge of fear. After a couple days, with my faith in humanity reinvigorated by patient companions, I was thrilled to experience the joys of being on a vessel underway without a hand on the tiller. Standing on the foredeck, loosely gripping the forestay and watching the sun and clouds make playful shapes on a well trimmed genoa is truly a feeling of bliss. Lying in the v-berth, eyes closed and listening to the quiet gurgling of the hull moving swiftly through the water is another. I realized that a huge portion of life underway had yet to be explored, a portion most likely taken for granted by many and could at times be commonplace enough to call boring. But to me it was a series of slow revelations of freedom. I could do whatever I wanted and my crew was keeping watch, steering, navigating, and spreading good cheer. What a feeling! So we sailed on, new worlds of experience and understanding opening inside one another on our little 23' planet called *Rodeo*.

There is a major shift in attitude and accommodation as one enters the ICW. In contrast with the stiff lipped yachties of New England and the upper Mid Atlantic, sailing past the Mason-Dixon results in the discovery of open arms and, more importantly, open docks in a great many of the small towns along the way. Elizabeth City, which is first encountered upon leaving the ditch, bills itself as the most hospitable town on the ICW. Following a stay at the docks there, we traveled out to Manteo and rode out a storm moored along the waterfront pavilion. Further on down in North Carolina, we had the good fortune to visit Oriental, "The Sailing Capital of North Carolina." A town of maybe one thousand, it boasted three times as

many boats as residents (apparently everyone there had three boats). The small town dock was crowded, but gave access to wireless from the coffee shop across the street and friendly conversation from elderly passersby.

One of the more memorable and surreal experiences of this section of the journey was an experiment in fog navigation. The mid-Atlantic is prone to fog during a good portion of the winter and spring. Warmer air masses moving up from the south and hitting the colder ocean can cause this phenomenon, according to Wikipedia. Anyway, one of my favorite aspects of fog is that when you can see the fog you're not in the fog and therefore it doesn't seem foggy, while when you are in the fog, you can't see shit. We awoke one morning to the sight of some patchy fog banks in the distance and thought "oh fog neat, but it's not foggy over here." I developed the idea that by the time we got over to where it was foggy, the fog would have burned off and it'd be all clear. So on we went right into a fog bank, reducing visibility to about the length of *Rodeo*. When this happens you have a few options: get out of the channel and wait for the fog to clear, find some other boat with better navigation to follow through the fog, or just make a go of it. Well, you can imagine that sometimes in the ICW you can't just get out of the channel unless it's by running aground, and there's not always another boat to follow. Here is the grand opportunity to put modern technology to work; with visibility null, we stationed a lookout on the bow and I steered with my eyes glued to a free navigation app on an iPhone. GPS was accurate to 10' or so and, I have to admit, it went beautifully. We actually ended up with another boat trusting enough to follow us for an hour or so. Ironically, as soon as it cleared they passed us and we later saw them aground and stuck fast.

After a week or so of hopping down the inner outer banks, my crew was nearing their departure date at the drop off point of Wilmington, NC. Located on the southern end of the state, a good bit up the Cape Fear River, Wilmington does not offer readily available free dockage. Connections were made and we were able to slink into a waterfront restaurant's dock posing as members of quite a bit higher income bracket than we actually were and promising to patronize the establishment. After days of great beer, cross town explorations on the trusty folding bikes we'd all brought along, and an over-indulgence in "New York Style" pizza by the slice, I was forced to say goodbye to my trusted companions and sail onward towards the sun, damp and alone.



Alone Again

What an incredible day, beating into 15kn wind tacking back and forth in small channel, 2+kn currents. Good distance covered, passed 600 St m of ICW. Solstice stars brilliant, Orion with full bow and bioluminescence in the water is incredible. Signs of Manatee, wild hog, 75 and sunny. Glorious Earth...

Days passed as routine set in. It soon became warmer and although I was becoming more confident in my abilities by the day, I soon began to pine for further companionship and all the comforts that come with lubbing land. Luckily, I had two more friends who agreed to come join me for a bit once I got to Miami, so that we could sail the Keys together. As I steadily moved south the new year turned. I found bioluminescence and nine ft. tides in Georgia, and discovered that Jacksonville is an absolutely hideous sprawl. Florida catered to cruisers and for the first time I got a little understanding of the culture of liveaboards. Virtually everything outside the main channel of the ICW that wasn't somehow restricted was home to gatherings of boats of all description: huge catamarans with no rigging, rusting steel schooners, 30' fiberglass sloops covered in gas cans, tarps, ropes, dogs, house plants, laundry and the accompanying bric a brac of a boat that never moves. The people I found living aboard these boats ran the gamut of personality from reclusive to overly friendly, but the demographic was almost strictly white men, mostly older and retired. Some seemed frugalist escapees from the burdens of navigating property ownership, debt, and societal expectations, others seemed as though they just didn't get on very well with other humans and found some solace in a life apart. Whatever their reason for seeking life afloat, there were multitudes.

Then there were of course those like myself, who were on the move. These boats were quite obvious. They may be anchored temporarily in amongst the liveaboards, but were almost always free of superfluous gear hanging off the lifelines and rigging, barnacles, and crusty anchor rodes. These were the boats that took my attention as we passed each other back and forth on our way down the ICW, me typically under sail being passed by them under power, only giving them the opportunity to pass me again on the morrow by putting in much longer days at the tiller.

Understanding Jimmy Buffet

Been sleeping too much lately... Thought I would be lonely today, but it's only being in civ that makes me lonely. Nothing but water, wind and life that doesn't live according to the Gregorian Calendar or a book about a controversially fictional character sent from an ethereal plane. That's fucking weird... strange world, but heaven is surely here, we will realize too late

Rodeo and I eventually made it down to Miami, where I was able to meet my crew and resupply, pushing a grocery cart full of chips, fruit, beer and ice the four or five blocks back to the town dock. We took off immediately and made our way over to the abandoned Miami Marine Stadium. The one time venue, abandoned after hurricane Andrew in 1992, consisted of a manmade inlet harboring a number of dilapidated vessels and a huge concrete seating structure along the water's edge. A haven for graffiti artists, urban explorers, partiers, addicts, and skaters, the stadium offers a unique feel, having no stage but the small artificial harbor of abandoned vessels and the few liveaboards. We managed to find a few forgotten coconut trees among the weeds and secured so many coconuts that I still had a couple on board to sweeten the deal when I sold Rodeo a month later.

With high spirits we began our westward voyage in search of adventure and favorable winds. I had always been under the impression that the Florida Keys were somehow more exotic, more primitive, and somehow less American than their continental counterpart. While there are small preserves and bastions of hippy renegades, on the whole the keys are pretty redneck. Sport fishing and drinking seem popular, along with driving oversized trucks on the one road that connects all the keys as far as Key West. The differences were, of course, not to be found in the people but in the world around them. The flora and fauna were drastically different from most of what I'd experienced during the trip thus far. The water became clearer by the day as we headed west and we frequently spotted sea turtles, man-o-war jellyfish, and many curious little fishes. The weather held at about 85 F and sunny every day and although the wind was a bit flukey, after months of damp, cold rain and avoiding gales, I felt like I'd finally somehow succeeded. I'd made reality finally match up with that grand plan I'd had in my head when I'd hit that bid button on Ebay so long ago: cruising about with good friends, drinking from coconuts, and soaking up the sun while sea turtles swam and frolicked about us.

It was finally starting to seem as if it was all worth it. We spent the days drinking cold beer, playing dungeons and dragons in the cockpit, and swimming. I had been in the habit of towing the dingy for a bit to clear up space on the foredeck. Now we took turns surfing in it behind Rodeo as we slipped along through the clear blue at five knots. We made our way to Key West and were greeted by a fleet of wooden schooners motor-sailing around the island full of tourists who more concerned with the quality of rum they were drinking than the vibrant ocean around them. Key West is supposedly home to the largest working fleet of schooners in the world and, if you can tune out the diesel engines, it is really a moving experience to be frolicking among them in awe aboard a little fiberglass sloop. Like all of the keys but to an even greater extent, Key West was absolutely packed with liveaboards in all available anchorages. Anchorages of which the majority had terrible holding and were only manageable long term with four sets of good ground tackle and the know-how to use it. We anchored as best and close as we could to a dinghy dock yet still had a row of about one nautical mile each way. While I am

an avid rower, I would soon find out the reason that out of upwards of a hundred anchored vessels in the immediate area, we had the only motorless tender

Key West itself a strange island. The southern-most point in the continental United States reachable by car, the island is a haven for those seeking a Jimmy Buffet paradise without having to walk too far from their hotel room, those whose retirement is Margaritaville. Juxtaposed against the shambling seniors in Hawaiian shirts is a surprisingly large gay population and a smattering of the mostly Caribbean ethnic diversity inherent to southern Florida. Understandably we spent most of our time drinking and strolling about, enjoying the perfectly sunny weather and good food. Our last night together found us "Donald Ducking" on the rooftop of supposedly the only clothing optional bar in the country. I don't remember exactly what happened after that but it must have felt extremely good to accordingly precipitate my vomiting on the dinghy dock after our row in the next day. After the shenanigans, I had to say goodbye to my crew and decide on what to do next at the end of the ICW.



Nearly The End & The End

The lackadaisical good feeling I had after the recent carefree days was not to last. As if on 1980s cinematic thriller cue, the moment I turned to walk away from my companions the sky, which had been growing darker throughout the day, broke open in a torrent of rain. The wind picked up into the beginnings of a gale and the sun began to sink as I made my way back to the dinghy. As I clambered into the small rowboat with my still exhaustedly hungover and now soaking wet body, I noticed the wind out on the water was picking up even more, kicking the waves up into an uneven chop of about two feet almost directly in line with where I wanted to go. For those unfamiliar with human powered boats, having the wind or current going the same direction as yourself versus against you is akin to skiing downhill versus up. As I made my way out of the dock, I tried to keep to the lee of a huge cement wharf so as not to have the choppy sea add more water to the ankle deep accumulation of rain already in my little rowboat. At this point it had become dark and, guided by the lights of the boats anchored near mine and a small headlamp, I waited for just the right moment in which I would dig deep with the oars and scoot out across the harbor right in front of *Rodeo*.

As I got into the full force of the increasing wind it was all I could do to keep on track. Breathing hard, glasses heavily fogged, rainwater now up to my shins, I was moving so quickly now I would be there in no time. "SNAP!" as the left oarlock tore itself out of the combing and I spun around, totally losing all momentum and control. Now I was frantically trying to paddle on either side with one oar right across the wind and waves, water sloshing in over the side and *Rodeo* so close, still closer, and then sliding right by my home, my trusty companion. Being blown farther now into *Rodeo's* lee and holding my ground by frantically paddling back and forth in my half swamped little pram, I was losing energy. Adrenaline kept me paddling, and still so close, not close enough. Stopping for one second to look around, maybe I can just swim, I'll just jump in and swim and pull the rowboat. No, no, sharks feed at night, what if I can't do it, can I get back in the dinghy? I'm losing it, flailing now, blown backwards through the anchorage, only a few boats left between myself and the entire Gulf of Mexico with a storm still rising in intensity. Now I'm in the lee of another boat, the lights are on, I can see people inside, I'm shouting, "AHOY! HELP!" They don't hear me, they are watching TV. I'm barely holding in their lee and maybe I can get closer. Come on, yes, if I reach my oar out I can just touch their stern. I smack the rail trying to find purchase, nothing. I paddle frantically again and now I can almost reach it YES! I've got a hold of the cleat, I've got a hold of something, something that's held fast, something the wind can't take right now. I'm yelling "AHOY! AHOY! HELP!" They are so close, literally less than ten feet away and they can't hear me with the storm raging now and the TV on. "HELP!" And I'm banging on the rail, please just look over here, I need help. Finally one turns, and looks puzzled. "Hallo?" I'm so sorry, I say, I have no other options, my oarlock broke and I just need to get back to *Rodeo*. "You want paddle? (what the fuck are you doing out here rowing around in the dark in that little homemade plywood dink in a fucking gale?)" Their English was poor, but through hand signs and the showing of my broken oarlock, they finally understood. "Yes, I take you boat, one minute." They dropped their motorized RIB, which I'm sure cost more than my entire boat and everything on it, tied my bowline to their stern and motored me right back over to *Rodeo* in less than a minute. "You saved my life," I said, "Thank you so much." They calmly replied, "Goodnight".

I was more safe now, but not really safe. The holding here was terrible and even though I'd dropped my second anchor, it was only a lightweight Danforth and barely held against the changing current in light airs. I shivered in the companionway, changing into raingear and listening intently to the weather on my VHF while keeping my whole body alert of anything that would signify a dragging anchor. I was surrounded by other boats, all of which were more monetarily valuable than my own. I had no money, no insurance, and really no way to hit and run in the middle of a gale even if my conscience would allow me to. So I held fast to the rollicking *Rodeo* as gusts alternately whipped up and then flattened four feet of haphazard chop. Lighting and thunder picked up for added affect and the weather forecast even began a tornado warning(I'm not really sure what the best course of action would have been if a tornado had actually touched down, but I don't think 23' of fiberglass would weather it very well). As the storm moved through, the wind began to shift and *Rodeo* along with it. It was unlikely my ground tackle would hold, but what could I do? I probably could have done something, but as I deliberated, the tell-tale beeping of my ancient GPS let me know the anchor had indeed begun to drag.

As *Rodeo* began being swept sideways through the crowded anchorage towards a low bridge leading to an off limits naval area, the Danforth anchor only served to foul the Bruce. As we scooted along, somehow barely avoiding the dozens of craft around me, I was forced to cut loose the Danforth. As I let the rode drop into the water from the bow I looked back, thinking maybe I'll be able to start the motor and get out of here, go somewhere, maybe sneak into a marina just for the night. As I made my way back to the cockpit, I realized that even though I had miraculously been dragging within a boat-length of probably ten vessels, I was bearing down hard on one that was unavoidable, or at least their ground tackle was. Lacking time to start the motor, I quickly flipped a fender into position and grabbed the boat hook in an attempt to fend off and probably run aground rather than plow into someone's fairly nice looking boat. As we neared their port side I made ready with the flimsy boathook and my thong sandals to fend off. 10 seconds went by, 30 seconds, a minute. Here we were not six feet away from the other boat, I could easily see the inhabitant intent on something or other through the deadlight, and we were stopped somehow. My dragging anchor had actually fouled on one of this well-prepared person's four more appropriately sized anchors and was holding *Rodeo* and I just parallel of our new friend. Needless to say, the captain of the offended vessel was not as excited about this as I was when they noticed us tossing about within spitting distance. Uncom-

fortably, I hung out there for a couple of hours and eventually was able to motor over and reset my anchor.

The next morning luckily found only me a total wreck. Someone or the storm had made off with my Danforth while I was passed out, everything was soaked, I was totally broke, out of food, lonely, embarrassed, and altogether exhausted. *Rodeo* went on craigslist for enough money to pay off my debts and get home. I was headed back north a week later 4500 pounds lighter and without one regret. Looking back now, I think I learned a lot and I'm glad I went as far as I did. It pales in comparison to any real great voyage, but actually sailing (as in not using a motor) 70-80% of the ICW is probably a small accomplishment, although I certainly can't recommend it to anyone else. I sit here now reminiscing, and like much of my life, the good parts really outshine the bad, and the bad just make good stories. I still find myself cruising the internet for cheap dilapidated boats now and again. Land is comfortable, but having your own little island, even if it's only 23' and you don't go much out of sight of land, is a feeling not easily forgotten. Something about the wind and water and sky sticks with you, salts you, and that little bit of salt longs to find its way back, back the ocean.

...it's a good boat. I'm ready to end what I believe has become a sort of pilgrimage, a journey to find myself...



dartondevin@hotmail.com
currentsagainstus.wordpress.com