

# **THREE FRIENDS IN THE BAHAMAS**

**By**  
**Karl Sydor**

Well, here we are again, Joe, Dick and me, planning our year 2003 man-trip. There was no doubt that we were going to try our trip to Port Lucaya, Grand Bahamas again. How many times has this trip been planned and abandoned, mainly for weather reasons? We had a hard time getting our schedules together and although we prefer to do our trips between May and June, this time it came down to the last weekend of July (Thursday thru Sunday). This worried me a little because the summer storms start developing in July and hurricane season generally becomes more active. Plan B was to head down to the Keys if weather again turned it's ugly head, but that was not the desired plan. Lucaya was dead in our sights this time.

Dick and Joe would arrive Wednesday afternoon and we would prepare the boat for an early Thursday morning run to Lucaya. My 34 Californian trawler with it's twin 210 hp Caterpillar diesel engines could cruise 14-15 knots with seas up to three feet. It was approximately eighty nautical miles from Hillsboro Inlet (Pompano Beach, FL) to Port Lucaya's Bell Channel marker (or ninety statute miles), so I estimated about five and a half hour run under decent sea conditions. However, to be on the cautious side, I decided that we needed to give ourselves as much daylight time as we could get, just in case conditions were not great and the possibility for a problem during the cruise that would cause us to lose time. So, we agreed that we would venture out the inlet at the crack of dawn. If everything went well, we'd be off Lucaya around lunchtime and have plenty of time to fish before going into port.

Since I keep my boat at my condo marina, it didn't seem like a good idea to be loading up there and cranking the engines up so early as to wake up the residents, and then lose time by taking the no-wake 45 minute trek down the Intracoastal Waterway from Deerfield Beach to the inlet. We decided to dock the boat Wednesday afternoon at the Lighthouse Point Marina, load provisions there, relax Wednesday night, sleep on board and leave from there Thursday morning with a five minute trip to the inlet. Around 1 PM Wednesday, I loaded my personal gear and took the boat from Deerfield to Lighthouse Point Marina by myself (I single handle the boat quite often) and was assigned our overnight slip by Wes, the dock master.

Dick drove in from Tampa and had volunteered to do the shopping for food and drink, so when he came into the marina mid-afternoon we unloaded his SUV with enough stores for a week. Dick and Joe are the gourmet cooks on all our trips; I help where I can, but my main job at mealtime is to stay out of their way. We picked up Joe at the airport late Wednesday afternoon arriving from New Orleans.

What a beautiful week it had been weather-wise, I was sure that Thursday would be great for cruising. As we listened, Wednesday night, to the weather forecast, they said the winds would increase, but there was no indication of stormy weather. That sounded like good news. Wednesday night consisted of our typical pre-cruise efforts of getting everything stored in it's proper place on the boat, having a nice evening dinner (at the marina's Dockside Galley) and cigars and after-dinner drinks to wrap up a pleasant evening.

Lucaya is almost due east from Hillsboro Inlet (actually 89 degrees magnetic). This would be the longest open water cruise I would have taken to-date with the Californian and my anticipation for this cruising experience was as great as my anxiety about things that could go wrong. To say the least, I was nervous, but as the skipper I needed to keep those concerns to myself. Surely, I had practically gone over the boat with a fine toothcomb to be sure everything on the twenty-year-old boat was in very good working order. I even checked every hose clamp personally, tightening those that needed it and replacing about three that either snapped when tightened or appeared to need replacing. The boater's issue is akin to Murphy's Law in that it isn't what you thought to check that goes wrong, but that which you didn't think of; the unexpected, of course.

5 AM Thursday came quickly and I arose to see Dick getting breakfast ready for us with the coffee perking. Perking hot coffee has a delightful smell on a boat early in the morning. I had figured that sun-up would be around 6:30 AM, so we gauged everything we did with the goal of being able to undo the dock lines at that

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time. My timing was a little off, and it took a few more minutes for the sky to start to light up, but we were ready. The only problem was that the wind appeared to be over 15 knots and maybe closer to 20; that was not good news. Well, here we go again, almost a repeat of the previous year. The only difference was that it was not raining. The three of us looked at each other and the flags that were flapping pretty much straight up in the wind and we asked the question, "What do we do?" There was only one answer in unison, "Let's do it!" So, with the engines already warmed up, the lines were untied and we headed for the inlet. We waited for the bridge to open and were out of the inlet by 7 AM. Yes, we were finally on the way to Port Lucaya!

Well, the anticipation of making it in five and a half hours was quickly dashed. The winds had kicked the seas up to four to five feet. The Californian is not a deep vee hull; running it at cruising speed would cause it to pound too much, so I cut the speed back to about 12 knots. The seas got a little better at times and I kicked it up to 14 knots, but quickly it would return to the deeper seas and I was forced to cut back. I would say we averaged 10 to 12 knots. I had expected the seas to come from the south to southeast (since that was the direction of the wind) and would cause us to roll, but to my surprise the waves came right at our bow from the east. This caused us to cross over the top of waves that sometimes were between five and six feet, causing the bow to drop into the trough between waves. This pounding and crashing was beating us up, but we were determined to make it.

Although I had plotted the course on my paper chart and kept that handy, the GPS was our main guide for piloting the boat towards our destination. Dick had his handheld GPS as our backup and monitored our progress. It rained lightly on and off, but nothing heavy. The wind and seas were our biggest challenge. Moving about the boat was also a big challenge. The Californian is a sedan cabin trawler, so the bridge is atop the cabin with a ladder that has seven steps practically straight up from the cockpit. The three of us were usually on the bridge at the same time (there are two pedestal seats and an L-type lounge on the bridge), but going down and up the ladder was dicey. The ladder has solid handrails to hold onto, but when they're wet, it's a challenge to keeping your grip tight. I found out later that Dick had accidentally slid down the ladder during the cruise and skinned his chins.

We took one-hour turns piloting the boat. In between my turn I would go below and check out everything I could to be sure nothing was coming loose or water rising in the bilge. I'd do this about once every hour. This included checking out the engine compartment, as best I could, by opening the door that's below the steps from the salon down to the forward cabin that houses two small staterooms. Although there were a lot of rattling noises, I heard nothing that sounded alarming. A boat traveling at 12 knots may not sound fast, but add the roar of the diesel engines, the crashing noise into the waves, the wash of the water going by, the rattling of things in the cabin, and you have a lot of noise around you. At one time, Joe and I thought we heard a louder rattling sound, but I hadn't found anything to substantiate it and passed it off as part of the cruising noise in general.

We finally made it to Port Lucaya Marina by 3 PM, an eight-hour cruise instead of five and a half. We passed on lunch during the cruise for obvious reasons. Feeling pretty well beat up, we were in no mood for fishing. All we wanted to do was get into port, dock the boat, clear customs and immigration, and sit peacefully having a beer without the boat pounding and rocking. It was a relief to be there; we had made it to Lucaya and in one piece!

Lucaya (or Port Lucaya as they prefer to be called) was much different than I had expected. From the aerial picture the Port Lucaya Marina provided on their website, it looked like downtown Fort Lauderdale. It was much different though. Yes, on the beach they had the high-rise resort hotels and the surrounding area did have newly built condominiums, but Port Lucaya Marina was island-style, laid back and that pleased me. I wanted an island-relaxed atmosphere and that's what I found; I was very happy. Getting through customs and immigration was easy, because they recently located an office right at the marina. I wasn't happy paying

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the \$150 for the privilege of being in the Bahamas, but when I found out that the 34 foot 6 inch length of the Californian just missed by 6 inches from having to pay \$300 for boats over 35 feet, I calmed down.

Choosing our slip was more difficult because I had not anticipated that their main docks only had 50-amp electric service and I needed two 30-amp outlets. This posed a dilemma since we liked the slip location they assigned to us. The only alternative was to move to a slip that was closer to the hotel and we weren't happy with that alternative. There were no 50-amp splitters to be had to get us out of the jam, so we moved the boat to the (what we then thought to be) lesser slip. Well, destiny played a hand in our troubles; it turned out the this slip was far better because the barbecue pits were right near the boat and the pool and showers were just a short walk away. To put it mildly, we really lucked out!!

Although we had plenty of provisions to cook out that night, all we wanted to do was relax so we chose to find a good restaurant. Port Lucaya Marina is surrounded by the Market Place, which is home to many excellent island restaurants, bars, and jewelry and island clothing stores. We were delighted; it was as if we needed to go no further than walking distance for anything we wanted. After having a few beers and walking around to see the sights, we landed in Shenanigan's Irish Pub for dinner. Before Joe left New Orleans, someone had told him that this was an excellent restaurant. Well, we weren't disappointed. As an Irish pub, it had all the different kinds of beers you could desire and because it was in Lucaya, it had a Bahamian island menu. We drank, feasted and enjoyed the views. Of course, as always, time soon came for after dinner drinks and cigars, the celebration of having made it to Lucaya.

Before the evening ended, our conversation drifted to going out to fish the next day. We had wanted to take an afternoon or evening to further discover the island, so why not take Friday for touring the island and relaxing further, and go fishing on Saturday. Well, that suggestion didn't have to wait long for a unanimous vote. We'd had plenty of "ocean" for the day and keeping our feet on land was very inviting. I was delighted with the idea because I had wanted to see Freeport, which was just west of us. We fueled up the boat Friday morning to make it prepared for going fishing Saturday and after returning to our slip I decided to check engine oil levels.

Well, Murphy's Law showed it's ugly head. As I was in the engine compartment checking the oil level in both engines, I had a chance to take a closer look around the engine compartment. I was shocked when I saw that the Racor fuel filter for the starboard engine was hanging by a thread from its bracket. The Californian has two fuel tanks, each feeding one of the engines independently. The Racor filter unit is about five inches in diameter and about twelve inches in height. There is a bracket welded to the top, inboard corner of the tank and the Racor unit is bolted to the bracket. One bolt had come completely loose and disappeared and the other was still there, but the nut was hanging on by a thread.

Wow, if that second bolt had come completely loose while at sea, we would have had a disaster on our hands. The glass filter housing would have probably broken and fuel would have been spilled in the bilge and then pumped out into the water by the bilge pumps. Thank God the nut held. Fixing it was easy. I have a box full of screws, nuts and bolts and found one to match. However, on Dick's suggestion I went through the entire engine compartment checking for any other loose bolts and hose clamps. I must believe that the unusual rattling sound Joe and I heard was, in fact, the Racor filter banging against the fuel tank as it dangled in mid-air.

That all done, we prepared to go touring ashore. After scouting out the Market Place further, we found a taxi and headed to Freeport. It was suggested that we go to the International Bazaar, which we did. It was like the Market Place but on a grander scale. I would have liked to go to the Freeport Harbor marina area, but at \$14 a taxi ride for each leg and after walking around the Bazaar for a couple of hours, we were ready to go back and relax at the pool before dinner. Before leaving the Bazaar, we found a good cigar store and bought

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three Cuban cigars for the evening. They cost \$18 each, but what the heck; it's not every day that we get to have the pleasure of a good Cuban cigar.

Friday afternoon consisted of beers while soaking in the pool and hot sun. Martinis were in order before dinner. Dinnertime was soon upon us and Joe and Dick got the barbeque fire going for grilling steaks and baked potatoes. Along with salad and wine, we completely enjoyed our meals and got ready for the Cuban cigars and after dinner drinks. Every evening the Market Place has outdoor music and entertainment and plenty of seating. We enjoyed it from a distance, though, while consuming more alcohol and telling tall tales while seated in the cockpit. I had to make a phone call home and it was close to 10 PM. I made my way to the marina office to place my call and must admit I had a hard time walking a straight line down the dock. Yes, we three friends were having a good time!!

Well, Saturday morning came and we woke to winds that seemed to be worse than in the two days we'd already been there. Standing in the cockpit we looked at each and questioned whether we wanted to go out in what might be rough seas. Since my boat's track record for catching fish is not great, we again were unanimous, but this time it was to stay in port. Joe said it very astutely when he said, "Look guys, we came here for a vacation and to relax, not get knocked around on the ocean. We can fish anytime at home, let's stay in port and enjoy the day around the Market Place and the pool". There was no argument from Dick or I. That said, Dick proceeded with another sumptuous breakfast of orange juice, bacon, eggs, toast and coffee.

I can't remember the details of how the day proceeded, but other than guzzling beer at the pool, Joe and I assisted Dick in making a decision to buy a matching pair of Omega watches for his wife and himself, that went into the thousands of dollars. After much encouragement from Joe and I, Dick made the purchase from Columbian International Jewelers (a well known jewelry chain in the Caribbean), but later Dick had buyer's remorse when he wondered what his wife, Sandra, would say about the expensive gifts. Obviously, he saved money versus buying them in the States, but would that satisfy Sandra. During the rest of the day and after dinner over cigars and liquor, the three of us tried to come up with approaches Dick should take with Sandra to get her approval of the watches. To make a long story short, after Dick got home, he relayed to us that Sandra loved the watches and suggested that Dick go shopping more often with Joe and I (I must honestly give Joe more credit for helping Dick than I did).

5 AM Sunday morning came only too soon. We cast the lines off and were out on the ocean headed for home by 7 AM. The wind was under 10 knots, the seas less than three feet and the sun was out. What a great day for a cruise! We cruised at 15 knots and made it back to Hillsboro Inlet in six hours. With refueling and going up the Intracoastal, we were docked in Deerfield Beach at about 2 PM. I had to check in with U.S. Customs by phone once I docked the boat. They gave me a confirmation number and told us to report to Immigration in Port Everglades. Although we didn't like the idea of this latest inconvenience, we drove to Port Everglades, checked in with Immigration, which took about five minutes, grabbed lunch and headed back to the dock to unload the boat and wash it down. By the way, Immigration took the number given to me by Customs; this is probably a cross check to make sure people are going to Immigration.

Well, all in all, this was a great trip. We finally made it to Lucaya and survived. If I had my choice, I would have liked to stay there for a couple weeks after the long and grueling cruise over, but Dick and Joe had to get back to business. Maybe next time I can stay longer. I really like Lucaya and look forward to doing this again, only with better seas going than we experienced. I think it's a great place and recommend it to all.