

Sarasota to Sanibel, Florida on Latitude - March 1-10, 2011

March 1:

Latitude is a 20 year old Catalina 30 which we have now chartered for two years running to explore the west coast of Florida. We departed from the Waterfront Hotel (formerly called the Holiday Inn Marina) at 1300 after a morning provisioning and checking out the boat systems. This included a trip to Walmart to purchase a fishing license, rod and bait for Diane. The marina is in the NNE corner of Sarasota Bay not far from the Sarasota-Bradenton Airport.

We motored out the channel from the marina to open water then raised the mainsail and sailed across Sarasota Bay and under the Ringling Causeway Bridge at about 5 knots.



We then entered the Inter-coastal Waterway ("ICW") at about 1430 where we had to drop the sail and resume motoring. Over the next 3.5 hours we had to request 4 bridge openings as we made our way south past Siesta Key and Casey Key crossing Little Sarasota Bay and Blackburn Bay. We had a very brief dolphin sighting in almost the identical spot as last year. We arrived at the Crow's Nest Marina at Venice Inlet at 1800 and were asked to tie up at the fuel dock. During the afternoon we had been communicating by phone with our friends Gail and Dick who were visiting Bradenton from Winnipeg and had arranged a dinner rendezvous at the fine restaurant at the marina. They arrived at about 1900 with their friends Peter and Esther. All six of us gathered around the salon table below decks and enjoyed a glass of wine and some cheese and crackers expertly prepared by Admiral D. At about 1945 (well after dusk) I was startled to look out the window and see a huge power boat looming over us about 10 feet away. I scrambled on deck and exchanged pleasantries with the captain. He had just come in off the gulf after a nine hour journey from Marathon in the Florida Keys and needed a dock. The only place he could fit his Marquis 720 was exactly where we were positioned. Realizing his predicament, we lined Latitude around to the inside of the fuel dock to allow him a spot on the outside. The husband and wife delivery team could not have been more pleasant and they kindly gave us a full tour of the \$3.2 million boat later that evening. In addition to lavish accommodations, it had twin 1,100 hp engines. It was brand new and was being returned to Destin, Florida from the Miami Boat Show. Dinner at the Crow's Nest was superb, though the snow crab legs seemed a little smaller than last year. Our guests headed back to Bradenton by car at about 2230 and we turned in.

March 2:

We had a late noon departure from Venice due to a taxi run to pick up some missing essential items. We steamed out into the Gulf and raised the sails and set a compass course of 168 degrees to hit the outer markers for the Boca Grande Pass into Charlotte Harbor. For the second day in a row Diane prepared delicious roast beef sandwiches which tasted better than any gourmet dinner ever could. We were making a respectable 6 knots on a beam reach with a 15 knot East wind under sunny skies until about 1500 when the wind began to die down and we started the motor to assist the sails. We had to be quite alert to avoid the many crab trap buoys set throughout this part of the Gulf coast. About 1700 the wind came up quite stiffly and 30 minutes later we reached the outer "safety fairway" into the Boca Grande channel with the sun quickly sinking behind us. The wind in the narrow channel was dead on our nose so we motored into some fairly large waves and evaluated our mooring options. The spray from the waves crashing over the bow left us coated in salt. We had hoped to tuck in between Punta Blanca and Cayo Costa but due to worries about our light and the low tide we diverted to Boca Grande Yacht Basin two nautical miles north of the Charlotte Harbor entrance. We were very relieved to get through the very narrow channel into the harbor and tie up to a dock at Whidden Marina in a very sheltered channel. We had a nice dinner at the Miller Restaurant next door to our marina.

March 3:

Whidden Marina is such a unique mooring that it almost deserves its own travelogue. Several times over the next day we heard it described as one of the last remaining relics of the "old Florida". It was established in the 1920s and has been passed down in the same family ever since. The current two elderly matriarchs make Ma Clampett look like a New York socialite. In fact, the whole operation is so run down that a comparison to back country homesteads is inevitable. That said, old Mr. Whidden knew what he was doing when he built the place with 4' x 4' posts and over-sized nails. It is also an outstanding protected mooring. The wind was howling at over 25 knots when we came in last night and continued the same today but barely a ripple at our dock. The structures have survived many hurricanes, but sure could use some love, paint and attention. They also have a museum and general store, both of which are mostly full of junk. The current generation seems to make a living as fishing guides.



Diane spent a good part of the day dueling with little pin fish which were very adept at stripping her hook of its bait. She caught quite a few but threw most of them back but kept some for bait. The harbor was on the edge of the town of Boca Grande (you do not pronounce the “e”) on Gasparilla Island. This is one of the many exclusive hide-aways of the very wealthy on the Florida coast and the town is quite charming. We decided to stay an extra night to explore the town and dry out from our adventures the day before. This also gave us time to sort out some plumbing issues which had arisen with the head. We walked on the expansive Gulf beach and through town a few times before having dinner onboard. We discovered that our small 5 pound propane tank had expired while Diane was making some coffee and were then doubly disappointed to learn that there was no source of propane on the island. We were on power so watched a DVD movie on our small HD TV – who said we were roughing it.

March 4:

We headed out into Charlotte Harbor at about 1010 and headed south making a very respectable 5.5 to 6.0 knots under just our tiny 90% jib with a strong ESE wind. Unfortunately at Cayo Costa we had to adjust to a SSE course making sailing impossible. This was very frustrating as we saw the north bound yachts charging past us like fast trains on their foresails alone. At about 1130 we had made it to marker “60” and the entrance to Cabbage Key, the location of a restaurant famous for its “cheeseburger in paradise”. There is no road to the island, but it is reached by several large ferries from Captiva and Useppa Islands and many independent boaters like us. We were told that on busy weekends they serve lunch to as many as 1,000 people. We were fortunate to get an outside dock and went ashore for lunch. Some reports say that Jimmy Buffet composed his famous song “Cheeseburger in Paradise” about Cabbage Key, but our waiter was a little more circumspect. He says Jimmy did play guitar at and visit the island often in 1970’s but that the song is likely an amalgam of many islands. What is factual is that Jimmy invited the entire wait staff of the restaurant to attend and sit in the front row of a concert he did locally and dedicated the song to them. I can attest that the cheeseburger was quite excellent, but not quite as good as the mahi mahi burger which Diane ordered. Another of the big draws inside the Cabbage Key restaurant are the thousands of dollar bills pinned and taped to the walls and ceiling. At the end of each season the ones which fall off are donated to charity. In this photo I really am pinning one on, not stripping the wall.



After lunch we headed south again in the ICW under diesel power and crossed Pine Island Sound where we were joined by a pod of about ten playful dolphins. I grabbed the video camera and got some good

footage from the helm while Diane tossed out some of her Pin Fish bait, which they seemed to appreciate. At the south end of Pine Island Sound we were able to again sail for a short while before heading into San Carlos Bay at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River. We crossed to the far side of the bay through a series of small islands and were excited to see an Osprey skimming five feet above the waves and crossing ten feet off our bow with a nine inch fish in its claws. We found safe harbor at the Port Sanibel Marina hidden away at the end of a one mile long twisting channel through the mangroves and past Connie Mack Island. This is an outstanding, quiet little harbor only minutes from the main road and bridge to Sanibel Island but nestled in a tranquil setting. We were welcomed warmly by several couples on the dock and before long a communal dock dinner was being organized. We provided wine, cheese and salad while Keith and Theresa (and their in laws John and Darlene) from Alabama provided veggie dishes and Ken and Peggy from Kingsville, Ontario cooked chicken on the back deck of their 64 foot power cruiser. A good time was had by all.

March 5:

We enjoyed our welcome in Port Sanibel so much that we decided to stay another day and invited friends John and Barb from RCYC to drive up from Naples to join us for dinner. During the day we restocked with food, drink and propane and had several long walks including one through the very exclusive Jonathon Estate gated community on nearby Connie Mack Island. As some will know, I have been suffering from tendon problems in my foot and had been prescribed a full leg boot by an orthopedic surgeon I consulted in Sarasota. I had been feeling a little sorry for myself until we encountered this peg-legged fellow.



We also tracked down an eagle nest with two young in it high in a pine tree and got a few photos (see bird watchers guide at end of blog).

John and Barb arrived at 1600 and we again had wine and cheese in the cockpit in glorious weather. Our early 1700 reservations at the Lighthouse restaurant gave us an opportunity to get the best table in the house on the balcony overlooking the mangrove swamps and another osprey nest. The meal was

outstanding (three sea bass orders and my scallops and shrimp) and we were entertained by a colourful sunset. A brief rain shower blew through as John and Barb headed for home so we hunkered down and watched another movie.

March 6:

Forecast for today included thundershowers, high winds and a small craft warning so we decided to tough it out for one more day in our little slice of paradise. After morning laundry Diane hooked up for a shopping excursion with our mooring slip neighbour Sherie who owns a Jeanneau Lagoon 36 foot catamaran with her Cincinnati based husband Randy. They have owned it for over ten years and use it for their winter vacations each year.

March 7:

We awoke to a fresh easterly wind so we decided to tack up the Caloosahatchee River toward Cape Coral for a few hours. It was a glorious day for sailing and we enjoyed seeing what Latitude could do in the relatively sheltered waters of the river. We would have loved to motor all the way up to Fort Myers, but that would have left us with not enough time for our return trip. About noon we headed back down river and into San Carlos Bay again and began retracing our path north sailing in the channel across Pine Island Sound. I had decided to set a course for the Roosevelt Channel which is a protected bay between Buck Key and the most southerly point of Captiva Island. As we did last year, we have been using Tom Lenfestey's *Gunkholer's Cruising Guide to Florida's West Coast (Twelfth Revised Edition)* as our primary reference source. It takes some time to get into the style of this book, but once mastered, it has a wealth of information, obliquely cross referenced back to our paper charts. The Tween Waters Marina could not accommodate us so just as we were making plans to anchor out we were fortunate to learn that the Green Flash Restaurant will sometimes let boats tie up at their dock overnight if you have a meal with them. We pulled in to their dock and after several consultations among the staff we were given permission to moor for the night. After a quite nice dinner we headed back up the road to Tween Waters on foot, drawn on by the prospect of seeing the Friday night crab races. We were not disappointed. The place was crowded with people from 2 to 80 years old all cheering wildly for their favourite of the pile of two inch crabs (numbered on their shells) dumped into the centre of a big table. First crab to reach the perimeter wins.



Roosevelt Channel has a nice laid back feel and it put me in mind of the Doc Ford novels by Randy Wayne White which I have been reading. Doc Ford is a marine biologist and former CIA operative whose home base is set along this stretch of water. Having now sailed this coast I am enjoying the novels all that much more.

March 8:

We got an early start and headed out the channel and north again past North Captiva, Useppa Island and Cayo Costa into Charlotte Harbor. We then headed back out into the Gulf of Mexico, this time using some local knowledge picked up in port to cut close to Gasparilla Island in a narrow channel to avoid the long detour out the Boca Grande fairway. Winds were favourable early in the day and we actually hit a top speed of 6.8 knots under full sail. The wind died in the afternoon after we returned to the gulf so we ended up motor sailing all the way back to the Venice Outlet where we moored for the night.

March 9:

We had to have Latitude back at her home dock on March 10 and the forecast for Monday was looking very ominous. We decided the only prudent thing to do would be to head back to Sarasota today to be safe. We had a wonderful 15 knot south-westerly blowing in so we headed out to the gulf and had a rollicking broad reach under full sail all the way north past Casey Key, Siesta Key, Lido Key and Longboat Key to Longboat Pass on the south side of Anna Maria Island. There we saw a beautiful 45 foot, cutter rigged, sailboat try to sneak inside the markers as it beat south for the channel. As I predicted as I saw it approach and consulted our chart, it went hard aground and took 20 minutes of struggle to eventually slide off the sand bar. We also encountered shallow water in a few spots in the channel back to Sarasota Bay, but our 3' 6" draft saved us from any problems. We motored back into the Waterfront Hotel channel and docks just as the light was beginning to fail.

March 10:

We awoke to a deluge on Monday morning with thunder and lightning. We were extremely pleased with ourselves for hurrying home yesterday until we realized we still needed to unload the boat and transfer all our gear to the car (which the Waterfront Hotel staff had allowed us to leave in their parking lot). Suffice to say that I was thoroughly drenched by the time I had made the four trips required to get everything stowed for our drive back to Canada and a rendezvous with a yacht broker which had been booked ten days earlier.

A little background. While staying in our rented condo in Bradenton during the month of February we had looked at a number of used sailboats, a continuation of a two year search for a boat to buy for summer sailing in Canada. One which we had looked at in January was a 1998 Catalina 400, in rather sad condition. We quickly passed on it, but were very impressed with the layout and specs of the boat. Just before embarking on Latitude the broker had called to say that another C400, newer and in much better shape was coming on the market. We did not want to delay our cruise so agreed to see it on our return. Even after showering and warming up, I did not feel in the mood to get wet again and detour into St. Pete, so called the broker to cancel the viewing. Persuasive soul that he is, we ended up going to

see the boat, and the long and short of it was that we fell in love with her at first sight - but that will have to be the subject of another blog.

Florida bird watcher's guide:

You have read above of our regular bird watching during this trip. Below is a brief guide to the identification of a few of the birds we photographed or videoed.



Great Blue Heron (grey/blue with yellow beak; cropped from a video)



Great Egret (yellow beak and feet with black legs; cropped from a video)



Snowy Egret (black beak and white tufts on head) with Great Blue Heron looking on (cropped from a video)



Osprey



Bald Eagle



Bald eagle breakfast (hitch-hiking Sparrow, cropped from a video)



Brown Pelican (cropped from a video)



White Ibis (curved yellow beak and yellow legs). Sorry for the poor resolution – I had to crop this one from one of our iPhone videos.