

Preparing your Boat for a Trip to Nassau By Chuck Purse

We are blessed to be located in the midst of one of the best boating and fishing regions of the world. Not only do we have the Florida Coast, Keys and internal waters to enjoy, we also have the virtually limitless Bahamas not far away. A note of caution however — successfully cruising around the Bahamas can be rough going with depths constantly changing as the sand shifts and a lack of available repair services. With the assistance of Captain Rusty, we've been prepping Coquina for a trip to Nassau, about 180 miles away.

Captain Rusty is an old friend from New England. He's been boating in Florida his entire life and currently works as a charter captain in Naples, FL. His advice and check list have been invaluable. I've been boating a long time too but the majority of that time has been on fresh water with a shoreline in site. Preparing to do the round trip through the Gulf Stream, past Bimini and Tongue of the Ocean to Nassau and back is a different level experience.

Many boaters heading to the Bahamas will go in groups. They meet at Hillsboro or Haulover Inlet at say 8:00 AM on a Saturday, wait 15 minutes and go. A few of the boaters might know one another. Others will go together as part of an organized Club. Going as a group has clear benefits, it can also be a pain. What if others in the group aren't as well prepared as you are? Helping others in your group get prepared a few weeks prior to departure would be time well spent.

We've decided to trust the boat, get as prepared as possible, bring four able and experienced boaters and go on our own. If timing works and we meet up with others crossing at the Hillsboro Inlet we'll join the group. Hopefully they will cruise at a similar speed to ours, but if we prefer to press ahead or fall back we will.

Captain Rusty's checklist is as follows:

- 1) Check your flares and fire extinguishers to make sure the expiry date hasn't been reached. Replace if needed.
- 2) Get a flare gun if you don't have one. It's for safety and protection. Consider having some mace on board.
- 3) If you don't have a portable search light, get one. Newer ones can be submerged which is good if a prop is fouled.
- 4) Check that there are properly-sized USCG approved life jackets for everyone on board.
- 5) Check your dock lines for signs of excess wear. Replace damaged lines and have a few extras on board.
- 6) Your handheld back-up VHF radio should be submersible, have a GPS locator and fresh batteries.
- 7) Obtain an MMSI number from BoatUS and link it to your fixed and handheld VHF radios.
- 8) Your back-up GPS plotter should be checked, configured and have fresh batteries. Have all relevant paper charts and guidebooks onboard.
- 9) Schedule a 100-hour service on your motors and generator well before your trip so that repairs with lead times can be completed prior to departing.
- 10) Replace any weak batteries; check bow thruster, bilge pumps, and windlass; inspect and exercise through-hull fittings, etc.
- 11) Bring a spare bottle of engine oil per engine, one bottle of hydraulic fluid, and enough fuel additive (Ring Free) for your trip.

- 12) Bring an extra fuel filter per engine and eight extra spark plugs. Store them in plastic bags so seals do not dry out and corrosion is avoided. Make sure you have needed wrenches to replace these items.
- 13) Inspect your inflatable life raft, throwable devices, second anchor, first aid kit, emergency whistles and horns to make sure all are on board, workable and available.
- 14) Make sure your marine insurance approves going to the Bahamas and upgrade your tow boat insurance for at least the duration of your trip.
- 15) Don't forget passports, up-to-date boat registration, and to use CBP Roam if possible.
- 16) Make sure you have enough food and water for everyone on board for a couple extra days in case of a break down.

Being properly prepared is critical when you're in international waters. Problems can occur quickly and compound rapidly. Building experience and confidence as a boater particularly in ocean waters takes time and patience. Having an experienced team on board is very important, but without the right equipment working properly, risks rise dramatically. Try to find a Captain Rusty to help you prepare for whatever trip you plan.

Happy Boating!

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