



Completing the Circumnavigation of South Florida By Chuck Purse

South Florida is actually an island!

The nine day voyage began early in January, 2017 when we completed the first leg from Hillsboro Inlet to Stuart, FL about 85 miles north of the Club. We waited for a good day so that we could make the run in open water rather than the using the time consuming Intracoastal Waterway. We stayed at Sunset Bay Marina in Stuart, one of the prettiest places on the East Coast. The sunsets are indeed beautiful and all the needed services are available at a reasonable cost. Stuart offers a broad array of dining choices and the adorable Old Colorado Inn.

The next day took us up the St Lucie River toward Lake Okeechobee. The Okeechobee Waterway runs 155 miles from Stuart westward through Lake Okeechobee to Ft Myers and the Gulf of Mexico. This Waterway separates the southern portion of the State from the northern part of the Florida peninsula. The crossing includes beautiful countryside, incredible wildlife, and five locks to navigate as you make the 15' climb up to Lake Okeechobee. The lake itself is impressively large with only the southern shore visible as you cross. Be careful to stay in the channel especially when the lake level is low to minimize the chance of bouncing off the bottom!

That night we stayed at Roland Martin Marina in Clewiston, FL bordering the southwestern corner of the the lake. This historical sugar town is worth a one night visit. We arrived in time to play golf at Clewiston Golf Course which was a pleasant surprise. Dining options are limited though we enjoyed a late lunch at the Marina Tiki Bar and Grill followed by dinner at Sonny's BBQ.

An interesting feature of the Okeechobee Waterway are the locks you will encounter. We learned that larger boats will often be called in first to better handle the wash created when lifting. It's good to have a couple pairs of work gloves to protect your hands while working with the stabilizing lines that are lowered to you by the lock staff. You might have to wait 15-30 minutes for a locking cycle to be completed. Finally, the locks at the entrance and exit of Lake Okeechobee may be left open when the lake water levels are adequate.

We departed early the following morning to tackle the longer half of the crossing down the Caloosahatchee River to Ft Myers. The dairy farms and mangrove patches that border the route showcase sleepy cows and the occasional alligator. Civilization appears about half way through the trip as well as heavy boat traffic once you arrive in Ft Myers. We stopped to have lunch with family and then decided to continue on to Naples that afternoon because of some windy weather and rain that was forecast.

In Naples, we found great refuge at Naples Sailing and Yacht Club. This state of the art facility offers dining, very nice facilities and an attractive pool for visiting boaters. Naples has grown significantly over the years and now offers a broad array of dining and leisure alternatives. We enjoyed golf and meals with friends during our stay, taking advantage of three extra nights in Naples due to bad weather. Our longest stretch of open water was ahead – the 112-mile run almost due south to Marathon in the Florida Keys.

We allowed five hours for this leg of the journey including 30 minutes for lunch half way through. The ride was nice until the last ninety minutes when we hit the widest part of Florida Bay. The shallow depth and increasing wind pushed up a 2-3' chop that made the ride a bit uncomfortable. The waves made seeing and avoiding the innumerable crab and lobster pots a serious challenge. Fortunately, watching the Keys appear on the horizon added to the excitement as we made our way to Faro Blanco, a relatively new harbor on the north side of Marathon Key. We stayed two nights there enjoying the brand new Hyatt Place and the laid back scene. We had looked forward to doing some deep sea fishing during the trip and were fortunate to connect with a local guide that took us to two ocean-side reefs where we caught a handful of yellow tail snapper – more than enough for dinner that evening. A local restaurant handled the cooking and the fish was prepared three different ways which added to our fun and sense of accomplishment.

The final two days of the trip brought us back toward Miami and ultimately to Hillsboro Club. The 120-mile run from Marathon to Miami Beach was a blast. The Intracoastal Waterway runs along the northern side of the Keys providing a protected and beautiful trip. With azure water like you expect to see in the Bahamas and a multitude of uninhabited islands and mangrove lined passages, we thoroughly enjoyed the journey. The final stretch through Card Sound and Biscayne Bay led us to the magnificent Miami skyline. Navigating through busy Miami requires some nerve and we were pleased we had experienced this harbor in prior trips. We stayed at Miami Beach Marina which is wonderfully located only a short walk or Uber ride from the fancy hotels and restaurants that clog the coast. We treated ourselves to an upscale stay using Hotels Tonight.com – an app that comes in handy on a trip like this. Dining options are vast in this town – we decided to dine once again at Pane et Vino, once of the best Italian restaurants on this side of the Atlantic.

The wind was blowing hard from the east on our final day, so we took the inside route back to Hillsboro Club. Passing through Ft Lauderdale harbor we marveled at the huge cruise ships and fancy yachts. There are five or six waterside restaurant options along this route. Taking advantage of tying up for lunch adds a fun event to a day of cruising, but call ahead to confirm the dock is open on your preferred day.

Completing the circumnavigation of the south Florida Peninsula was a dream come true and the highlight of our Florida boating experience to date. Mixing in visits with family and friends along the way added to the fun. Paying close attention to the weather, checking your engine oil levels, and planning ahead to pick your marinas, hotels and restaurants = a carefree experience. We are fortunate to have Hillsboro Club as a wonderful home base from which to create lasting boating memories like these.

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