

MAKING OUR WAY AROUND SOUTH FLORIDA

The view from the helm as we entered the inlet at Marco Island for fuel.

RESORT HOPPING BY CENTER CONSOLE

By BILL LINDSEY

PHOTOS BY BILL LINDSEY AND MARIE BUSHY

As the executive editor of *Southern Boating*, a large part of my job is to make sure all the words on the page appear where they should be, that they are spelled correctly, and that they are accompanied by the correct photos and art. In between all that, I attend boat shows and introductions of what we are assured will be New & Exciting Models. Please note the distinct lack of adventures in the above list. As a result, when the publisher agreed to allow me to spend the better part of a week cruising around Florida, I began making plans before he could change his mind.

The plan was simple: we would travel around the southern portion of Florida, beginning in Fort Lauderdale, running north to Stuart, then head west across Lake Okeechobee to Fort Myers, where we would hang a left to the Upper Keys, and then return to Fort Lauderdale.

The trip would pass through offshore waters of the Atlantic, a river, a freshwater lake, the Gulf of Mexico, the lobster-pot strewn waters of Florida Bay, mangrove-lined channels leading from the Atlantic to Biscayne Bay, the ICW, and finally, back into the Atlantic.

The route promised some great scenery, but to make the trip a bit more "sporting," we decided to make it in center consoles. Because I'm not nuts, each day would begin and end at a first-rate, waterfront resort. Unfortunately, it took two years to make it happen, what with hurricanes getting in the way. Finally, this past April, we pushed away from the dock and made it all the way around.

The route was divided into four legs: from Fort Lauderdale to Stuart was Leg One, the second would take us from Stuart to Fort Myers, crossing Lake Okeechobee

in the process. Leg Three ran from Fort Myers south along Florida's west coast and across Florida Bay. The final leg ran from the Upper Keys to Fort Lauderdale. Our group was made up of three boats: a 23' Albury, a 24' EdgeWater, and a 31' Jupiter. Two boats were equipped with heads, two had twin engines, and none were what the typical person would consider using for a trip that would extend well over 500 miles. But that was the whole idea – to prove that you can do a lot more than just fish from a center console. The first requirement was to stock up on sunblock, ice, water, and snacks. Hats and long-sleeved shirts were also strongly suggested. Cameras in waterproof bags were a must, as were current charts, the latest Dozier's *Waterway Guide to Southern Florida*, and an updated navigation cartridge in the chartplotter.

LEG ONE FORT LAUDERDALE TO STUART

Heading out of Port Everglades before turning north, the weather was perfect for a run outside, with calm seas and a gentle breeze pushing the occasional cloud around the sky. After clearing the Port's markers, we set out a few trolling rigs and cruised north, staying about a mile off the beach. The first section of this trip provides a lot of similar scenery in that condos and high-rise hotels uniformly line the beach from Fort Lauderdale well north of Boca Raton and Palm Beach.

There are many inlets along the way, and several of them are great mini-adventures. As one example, we made a stop in Palm Beach to visit Peanut Island. Accessible only by the water, it is a popular picnic spot among local boat owners, but back in the 1960s it was one of the most important

islands in the world. When John F. Kennedy was president, he often spent time at the Kennedy compound in nearby Palm Beach. In order to provide the ultimate in protection during a time when nuclear war was a distinct possibility, Peanut Island was equipped with a bomb shelter. Now that the island is part of a park, the bomb shelter is open to the public. The island also houses a museum with a fascinating display of *U.S.S. Maine* memorabilia. In fact, there is so much to say about Peanut Island, we'll cover it in depth in a future issue of *Southern Boating*.

After a brief lunch, we were back outside, motoring north to Stuart. We had lines out, but the ballyhoo apparently weren't very tempting, as we pulled into the inlet with no gamefish in the fish boxes. Our destination in Stuart was Pirates Cove Resort & Marina. Located in the Manatee

Pocket, just off the ICW and a short ride from the inlet, it features a fuel dock, ship's store, ample dockage, a resort-style hotel, and a restaurant. The dockmaster and his staff are very helpful and knowledgeable in terms of places to go and things to see by boat. They spend their free time on their boats, so they are a great source of information on places to fish, day trip advice, or where to go dine by boat. You can easily spend a week here, using the resort as your base of operations to explore new waters every day.

Adjacent to the hotel lobby is the restaurant and lounge. The lounge features live entertainment almost every night. For even more variety, within easy walking distance of the docks are a handful of restaurants serving everything from steaks to seafood. If you need supplies that are not carried by the ship's

store, chances are you can find what you need at nearby Lewis Marine and West Marine. If you take a cab, you'll arrive almost as soon as you fasten your seat-belt. If you choose to begin the trip by trailering your boat to Stuart, the public ramps are located just down the road from Pirates Cove.

Stuart is a boat owner's paradise, with miles of protected waters to explore on both sides of the inlet. Just inside the inlet is a shallow area that is a popular weekend hangout. To the south, along the east side of the ICW, are anchorages that offer easy access to the beach. This area has plenty

that carries Florida's turnpike up and over the waterway. This section of water has become a popular hurricane hole and many of the area's marinas and boatyards have begun offering memberships in hurricane clubs. These guarantee a safe haven in the form of a secure slip or a covered facility in the event of storm warnings.

After passing beneath the I-95 and turnpike bridges, the waterway – officially designated the Okeechobee Waterway – narrowed a bit and homes and businesses quickly gave way to dense vegetation. We passed several early-morning rowers, several of whom, despite the fact that we

of a lock at 9:41 p.m.

The massive doors were open as we approached, so, after the line handlers waved us in, we idled inside. Lines were quickly tossed down to us and were made fast to bows and sterns. Within a few minutes, the "back" doors closed; as soon as they were sealed, the doors in front of us began to gradually open. A brown torrent rushed in, high above the water level. A manatee in the lock seemed to be watching as we took in line to keep pace with the steadily rising water. Within just a few minutes, the process was complete and the doors before us slid fully open. With a

was heavily rural, with long stretches of open fields to either side. The fact that we could run at a quick pace was appreciated as we passed a sailboat running along at a blistering 12 knots or so. However, a yacht coming towards us soon had our group slowed to a crawl. Insistent hand motions (why he didn't call on the VHF remains a mystery) drew our attention. When we got within a few boat lengths we saw what he was pointing at – about 2' of a tree was sticking out of the water. All along the riverbank were trees and vegetation in the process of skidding down to the water. Obviously, this particular tree had made its

down and focus on the Now.

The lock leading into Lake Okeechobee suddenly appeared before us (ok, we "saw" it approaching on the chartplotter). As we drew closer we could see the doors at both ends were wide open, beckoning us in. This was the easiest lock of all to traverse, as we just idled on through, coming out into the wide-open spaces of the lake.

There are two choices for going across the lake. You can either hug the southern bank by taking the Rim Route or you can cut across; the Rim Route is by far the more scenic. At 700 square miles in size, this is the fourth largest lake located wholly

Albury's chartplotter was equipped with a brand-new navigation cartridge, we followed in his wake.

The lake is a beehive of activity, even in the middle of the week, as boats running to and from the Gulf make their way across and bass fishermen chase "big uns." It is not uncommon to see a large motoryacht followed by a tiny aluminum johnboat followed by a huge sportfisherman. The sheer size of the lake – from the center you can't see the shore – means there is ample room to maneuver. The only time you may see any kind of a traffic jam is at one of the locks. Be aware that there will often be



A view of the marina at Pirates Cove in Stuart as seen from the hotel.



Getting an early start on the second leg, we headed out from Stuart at 6:30 a.m.



Waiting at 7:00 a.m. for a lock to open on the Stuart side of the waterway.



Inside the first lock of the trip, watching as the water level rises.

of waters where you can run up on plane, making it a pleasure to travel by boat.

LEG TWO STUART TO FORT MYERS

While we easily could have spent much more time at Pirates Cove, we were on a mission, so at 6:30 a.m., accompanied by a 20' Albury, we were the first boats to leave the dock. With the water as smooth as glass, as soon as we cleared Manatee Pocket's no wake area we got up on plane and made great time to the first lock.

Along the way we passed many grand waterfront homes before the waterway narrowed as we approached the bridge

had promptly slowed to a crawl in response to the No Wake signage, gave us the "You're #1" salute.

Less than an hour from pulling away from the docks at Pirates Cove, we arrived at the first of five locks standing between us and Fort Myers. The locks monitor VHF13 and operate from 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. If you plan to make the crossing from Stuart to Fort Myers in one day, plan to be at the first lock no later than 7 a.m. Is this an absolute must? Assuming you don't dawdle much later than 8:30 a.m., probably not, but an early start is the best insurance against an unexpected delay that could cause you to be on the wrong side

"Thank you" tossed to the line handlers, we were soon again on our way.

Those in the group who had not before traversed a lock were amazed by the speed and ease of the process. The trick to locking through seems to be to pay attention to the lines. While a loose line is not the worst thing that can happen, if the water level is being dropped, a bit more attention is called for. Those who whip a fast half-hitch around the cleat and then sit back to enjoy the scenery are rudely brought to attention as the line goes taut and the boat begins to tilt to the side.

After clearing the lock, we all got back up on plane. This portion of the waterway

transition into the water and its roots had come to rest on the bottom. This could have been a nasty surprise and was a reminder that, no matter how mesmerizing the scenery may be, keeping an eye peeled for what is ahead is Priority One.

If you think you've seen all that Florida has to offer, you need to make this trip, or at least the Okeechobee Waterway portion of it. Where else can you see railroad bridges that raise vertically and others that pivot to allow commercial traffic to pass? If nothing else, the lush landscape and lack of tacky fast food restaurants alone makes it a "must-do." At the risk of sounding New Age philosophical, it is a great way to slow

within the U.S. and is the third largest freshwater lake in the U.S. The maximum depth is 15' and while it is fairly well marked, it is comforting to have a chartplotter to augment your charts and guidebooks. However, portions of the Rim Route were closed when we made the trip to allow contractors to clear hurricane debris from last year's storms, so we followed the markers across the lake.

If you choose the "straight across" option, there are several gaps in the markers, making the chartplotter your best friend. Don't even think about running across at night without a chartplotter and a current-issue nav cartridge. Because the

small boats around the dams and spillways, so keep your eyes open for traffic.

There are many options available for dining and for overnight stays on and around the lake, including Roland Martin's marina and the Pier II Resort. Roland's facility offers a fuel dock, ramps, a ship's store, and a restaurant. While it is not directly on the lake, the historic and very scenic Clewiston Inn is one of the nicer places to stay in this area and it features a very popular restaurant. It is a short cab ride from nearby marinas.

Moore Haven's River House is another overnight option, located directly on the water just past the Moore Haven Yacht

Club. If you choose to start the trip at the lake, and will be trailering the boat to the water, Moore Haven would be a good choice, with ample public ramps and overnight lodging available.

The run from the lake to Fort Myers offers a different type of scenery. There are more homes along the waterway on this side. As you get closer to Fort Myers, the homes appear with more regularity. There is a great fuel dock about 30 minutes running time out of Fort Myers.

Just as you must pass beneath the I-95 and Florida Turnpike bridges as you head west on the Okeechobee Waterway, you

location on the water and its newly-renovated marina made it the obvious choice for this leg of the trip. My only concern was that its many amenities would be too much of a temptation to continue the trip.

Virtually all areas of the property, from the common areas to the rooms and spa, have been recently upgraded following the last two storm seasons. A wide selection of restaurants, shopping, tennis, and more mean you never need to leave the grounds to enjoy yourself. This resort is popular among boatbuilders hosting media introductions of new models. The same reasons they like it so much – great docks, a

all in good working order and open for business.

The 20' skiff that had accompanied us for the run from Stuart dropped out at this point. While it was a good choice for the protected waters of the Okeechobee Waterway, its passengers might not have been as comfortable keeping up with the other boats as we entered the Gulf.

LEG THREE FORT MYERS TO DUCK KEY

The three remaining boats left early in the morning because we wanted to make several stops along the way yet still arrive

passed. We entered several that were flanked by deserted islands and beaches populated only by a few early-morning joggers. We all agreed that this section of Florida is one we could easily spend several weeks exploring.

All the boats were running strong and all aboard were having a great time, but the sight of wheeling birds lifted our spirits even higher. We'd kept fishing tackle standing by throughout the trip, trolling ballyhoo in the Atlantic, using spinning rigs and spoons in the lake, but so far no one had landed a fish. Roger, the most persistent angler in the group, slammed his 24' Edge-

the beach as a result of the cold front. It was somewhere off Naples that we began to notice the lobster pots. If you want to be picky, they could have been crab traps, but all we knew for sure was that there were suddenly a huge number of multi-colored floats to dodge and weave around. They were seemingly everywhere, and as a result, we all kept a sharp eye out for these prop-catchers.

South of Naples the coastline suddenly converts from a forest of condos to a forest of, well, trees. Hints of civilization come in the form of Flamingo and Everglades City. Everglades City lies south of Naples and

the mysterious calls of the Swamp Ape. A cousin of Sasquatch, sightings of these creatures are reported in this area on a regular basis. Supposedly, they also have a rather distinct, rather unpleasant smell. Local wisdom says that if you can smell them when you hear them, they are very close to you. In that set of circumstances, you want to make sure you are with a group of people who can't run faster than you can.

If Swamp Apes aren't enough adventure for you, after you exit the bay, plot a course to Flamingo Marina deep in the heart of Everglades National Park. Located at the



Making good time between the locks on the Okeechobee Waterway.



Approaching a rotating railroad bridge on the Okeechobee Waterway.



After spotting baitfish on the surface, we stopped to do some fishing off Fort Myers.



Hawk's Cay Resort in the Florida Keys features a saltwater pool on the side of the inlet.

will pass under the bridges carrying I-275 and US41 when you arrive on Florida's west coast.

Cruising the waters of Fort Myers is interesting in that in some areas you won't see other boat traffic while other spots resemble driving on I-95 due to all the boats going past. With many islands to visit and a wealth of waterfront restaurants, it is a great place to explore by boat. In fact, in order to really get the flavor of this area, a boat is a must.

Our first stop was a waterfront restaurant. After leisurely refueling on grouper fingers, we headed to that evening's destination, Sanibel Harbour Resort and Spa. Several of us had been here before. Its

location right on protected water but within a few miles of the Gulf – make it an ideal choice for those traveling by boat.

If you do manage to pull yourself away, the area is rich in history and scenery. A bridge at the end of the drive leading to the property takes you to the beaches of Fort Myers. In addition to shelling, for which the Southwest coast of Florida is famous, this area is home to many dining and shopping opportunities.

When we were planning this trip, we had been concerned that we might encounter difficulty in finding fuel or accommodations due to storm damage. Happily, this was not the case at all. The marinas, boatyards, fuel docks, and resorts that we saw were

in Duck Key before dark. If we had wanted to, we could have made the run straight to Duck Key in about half a day. The Sanibel Harbour Yacht Club is a massive new marina located next door to the Sanibel Harbour Resort. It is a members-only facility with dockminiums slips and a dry storage building. Members can get fuel and enjoy resort-style concierge service. Since no one in our group had less than half a tank, we opted to fuel up in Marco Island after we'd gotten out in the Gulf and had some west coast mileage under our bottoms.

As we headed south, we hugged the beach, watching the sun rise above the condos and checking out the inlets we

Water to a halt a few feet in front of a section of boiling water and in no time had several lines out. He worked the water for half an hour, but while we could all see the fish, they avoided the lures. On this trip, if we wanted to catch any fish, it looked like we'd have to go into a seafood market and ask them to toss us a snapper.

About an hour out of Fort Myers, we pulled up to a fuel dock in Marco Island. The manager told us that he had been seeing a steady increase in boat traffic over that of last year. This made sense, especially in light of all the rebuilding activity.

With a full load of fuel on all the boats, we got underway again. We headed a bit offshore to avoid the chop building near

east of Chokoloskee Bay. It is a small, very rural town that offers airboat rides at Speedy Johnson's Fun Cruise, overnight accommodations at the Ivey House Bed and Breakfast, and meals at the Oyster House restaurant.

Stay in the channel, paying close attention to the markers. You may see locals whizzing around in flats boats, but don't follow them when they veer away from the channel.

Make the time to stop in to see this unique slice of life from a time gone by. It is a great antidote to the condos that run right to the Gulf's edge just a few miles to the north. If you are still in the area after dark, you might be lucky enough to hear

water's edge, Flamingo Marina is still recovering from last year's storms, but it is open on a limited basis.

The marina store and fuel dock are open daily from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m., but there are no longer any overnight accommodations available. The facilities were severely damaged by last year's storm and are being demolished. Overnight dockage is no longer allowed, either.

Not to be outdone by the Swamp Apes to the north, the park is home to a growing population of boa constrictors and pythons. Pets that were released into the wild by well-intentioned owners, these snakes have no natural enemies and many have grown to enormous sizes. Last winter

observe the animals interacting with marine biologists. This is not a cheesy “swim with the dolphins” program, but rather it is real science taking place in a very nice, lushly tropical setting.

As was the case in Fort Myers, there is no real need to leave the Hawk’s Cay property, but it actually makes a great base of operations to explore the Keys. The King of all tourist destinations, Key West is at most a two-hour drive south. There’s no way to get lost, as A1A only goes north and south, and a rental car can be arranged by the on-site agency.

Other nearby attractions include the Holiday Isle Tiki Bar in nearby Islamorada, great fishing in the Gulf or the Atlantic, some of the best diving in the U.S., as exemplified by nearby John Pennekamp State Park, and enough water to explore that you could easily spend several weeks just cruising around, taking in the sights.

LEG FOUR DUCK KEY TO FORT LAUDERDALE

We pulled away from Hawk’s Cay around 10 a.m. after a leisurely breakfast. The tranquil setting had us all in Island Mode, slowing down to enjoy the scenery. We meandered northward, running about half a mile at most from the shoreline, paralleling A1A.

After a while, the VHF crackled, “Follow me, I know a great place for lunch,” led us on a mini-adventure in Upper Key Largo. Equipped with a jackplate, the 23’ Albury essentially lifted its skirt to make its way through the skinny water of an inlet that led inland from the Atlantic. Carefully picking our way behind the Albury, we found ourselves in a wide channel that led through a mangrove inlet to the Gulf side. There we got back up on plane, following the Albury into another mangrove inlet that eventually led us to Gilbert’s, a locals’ favorite water-

ing hole and restaurant.

The setting was pure Florida Keys – a grouping of sailboats and trawlers bobbed at anchor across the way, some of them looking as though they may well have been there long enough to have become connected to the bottom. A bridge carrying A1A over the water served as the launching point for a group of kids who kept diving off, swimming to the docks we had tied alongside, and scrambling back up to hurl themselves back into the water.

After lunch we headed back out towards the Atlantic side. We entered Biscayne Bay, staying in the channel as we made our way north. Two of the people in our group had not been in the bay before, so they were pleased to finally see Elliott Key, home of a pretty cool park and the site of the annual Columbus Day Regatta. Held on the weekend closest to Columbus Day, it involves a huge fleet of sailboats and an even larger spectator fleet. The racers range from sleek rocketships to those better suited for long passages, many actually towing tenders in their wake. It is a weekend that can’t be believed until you experience it, and even then it defies description.

When we pulled past the entrance to the park’s marina it was quiet and peaceful, with just a few boats at anchor here and there and none in the park’s marina. You can camp overnight if you are so inclined, but our group was spoiled by the resorts we’d stayed in along the way, so the idea of sleeping on the ground in a tent was not well received. For the adventurous, however, this is a great place to get away from it all.

Accessible only by boat, as are most of the better things in life, Elliott Key is a great South Florida day trip destination. In fact, each of the islands in Biscayne Bay is well worth exploring, but we had a limited amount of time, so we made mental notes to come back at a later date. Pressing on,

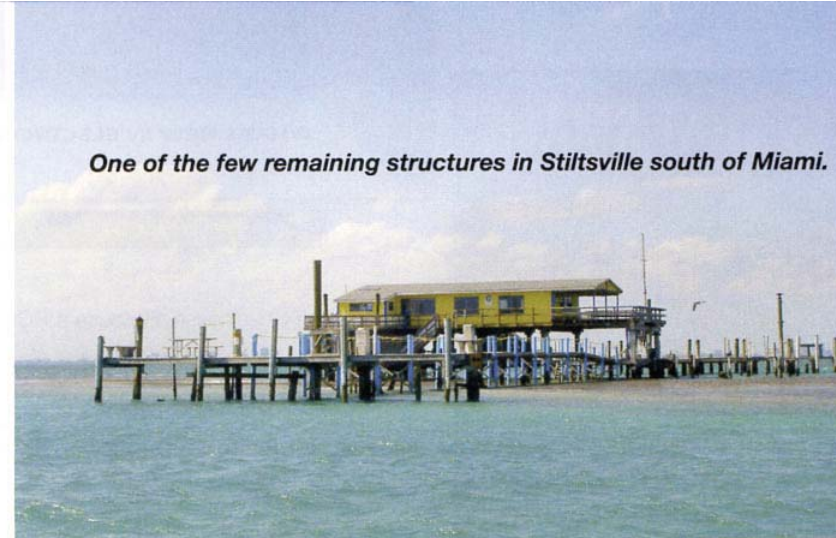


we soon passed the Feather Beds and then arrived at Stiltsville.

Stiltsville is all that is left of what was once a thriving offshore “city” first populated by fishermen and later by a diverse group of individuals and organizations. Federal law precludes making repairs to any of these facilities, which explains why there are so few left. It is just a matter of time before they are all gone forever. Go see them while you can. They have appeared in countless TV shows and movies, but pulling up close to one of the few remaining structures is an experience not to be missed. Be careful to stay in the channel while you are sightseeing, or your stay in Stiltsville may be longer than you intended.

As you pull abreast of Key Biscayne and the Miami skyline fills your windscreen, you have the option of continuing north via the ICW or by heading outside. The ICW offers a great opportunity to see how the other half lives, passing by the mansions of Star Island and a parade of beautiful homes and condos as you go north through Bal Harbour, Aventura, and Golden Beach.

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One of the few remaining structures in Stiltsville south of Miami.

We could have taken the ICW all the way to Fort Lauderdale, passing through Port Everglades in the process, but we opted to go outside at Haulover Inlet. The idea was that we would make better speed in the ocean by bypassing the numerous no wake zones we’d encounter on our way to Broward County. However, 4’-6’ seas meant it took us almost as long as if we’d taken the “scenic route.”

With the trip finally done, we all had a chance to look back and see if there were any changes we’d make. In all honesty, there weren’t many; the boats had all performed well, providing comfortable, secure transportation. The reaction by the various marina staffers we encountered was uniform in that they all said, “You’re going all around the state in a center console? Can you do that?” The

answer is simple – Yes, and subject to the weather and your choice of crew, it’s a great way to travel.

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