

PLACES: The Florida Keys aboard *Solace*

by D.J. Platt

It takes most cruisers about three months to get from the Great Lakes to the warm southern climes of the Florida Keys where they may winter or jump off to the islands of the Caribbean. For some, the trip is an annual ritual, and they enjoy the journey as much as the destination. Others, finding the voyage up and down the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) tedious, choose to leave their boats in the south, returning to them each winter. We hooked up our 1988 O'Day 240 and trailer in early February and towed them from Toronto to Florida in four days.

Our destination was the Florida Keys. This string of low lying islands, some of which were originally joined to the mainland by Henry Flagler's railroad in the 1930s and now by US Highway 1, starts at Miami and continues to Key West running in a southwesterly direction. Often ignored by cruisers bound for the Caribbean, these islands are a destination in their own right. The Keys offer a tropical climate, well marked and charted waters, good access to marine services and the opportunity to cruise in any style ranging from luxury marina/resort docks to anchoring in solitude. The Bay side, shallow and protected, hosts the ICW to Key West. The Hawke channel, on the Atlantic side, is separated from the ocean proper by a barrier reef. Five bridges, of the many along the 150 mile length of this island chain, provide sufficient vertical clearance for sailboats to pass between Florida Bay and the Atlantic without dropping masts.

South Dade Marina, a minimalist facility located just north of Key Largo and two miles west of the ICW at the end of a mangrove lined channel, is our starting point. Highway access is directly off US 1. Popular with trailer and dry sailors, it provides secure storage for vehicles while owners are cruising the Keys or Bahamas. Arrival was timed for the morning to give us the day to set up, launch and provision the boat. The ramp is excellent and soon *Solace* is bobbing in saltwater for the first time. The rest of the day is spent bending on sails, stowing gear and shopping for provisions and charts.

Departure day brings overcast skies and 15-knot winds, gusting higher, from the southeast. Impatient to begin and reasoning that our planned route will take us





LEFT TOP DOWN— Reaching in Florida Bay

Boot Key Dinghy Dock

Anchored in Matecumbe Bight.

ABOVE—Bahia Honda Harbor
Photos by D.J. Platt



into the lee of Key Largo, we cast off and motor out of the channel. Tempting small channels lead off in various directions and we hear disembodied fisherman's voices although we see no one. The channel brings us to Manatee Bay and Barnes Sound where we encounter a two foot chop on the bow that subsides as we near Key Largo. Rounding the first ICW marker the genoa is unrolled and *Solace*, seemingly as eager to be on her way as we are, reaches off to the southwest at 5.5 knots with dinghy in tow.

The sun comes out as we emerge from the first mangrove cut at Jewfish creek. For the first time the water takes on the tur-

quoise hue associated with shallow water in the tropics. A pod of four dolphins swims up to look us over and, curiosity satisfied, slide off beneath the waves. For freshwater sailors on their first saltwater day, this was a thrill. Flat water, a beam reach and a crew revelling in tropical weather and their first sail in four months keeps *Solace* surging

past potential anchorages in Tarpon Basin and Buttonwood Sound. Approaching Tavernier, we decide to call it a day. There is a marina here and the decision is taken to tie up to a dock for the night. This is when sticker shock strikes. This place charges \$2.25 a foot! In his home waters, the skipper has been known to whine bitterly at



ABOVE—A catamaran in Florida Bay.
RIGHT—A South Dade Sunrise

paying \$1.60. Realizing that marinas in the keys have a captive market we decide to accept that things are different here.

The next idyllic few days are spent sailing southwest in sunny 80 degree weather and dodging Florida bay crab pots. Wind is consistently from the east to southeast and we anchor in the lee of the Keys at night. We diligently watch each sunset looking for the fabled green flash but never see it. We do poke *Solace's* bow out into the Atlantic for a couple of hours, transiting underneath the Channel 5 bridge, but decide we prefer the Bay side for now.

We make our way to Marathon, the boating capital of the Florida Keys. Most of Marathon's boating activity takes place on the Atlantic side but there are a few smaller marinas on the Florida Bay side and we luck into a gem. Banana Bay, a small 34 slip marina and resort, has a vacancy. We glide through the opening into a slip in the palm and mangrove lined basin and are met by the dock master, Captain Larry, and a volunteer who take our lines.



Within half an hour we have been invited to happy hour by one couple on the dock and offered the loan of bicycles by another. Captain Larry takes us on a tour of the facility in a golf cart pointing out the pool, hot tub, ice machine and showers. He even drives out to the highway to point out how we can get to restaurants, grocery stores and marine services. While here we meet

liveaboards whose stories are all remarkably similar—they stopped in for a week the first time and kept coming back. Our planned two night stay turns into five as an extended norther sets in bringing squalls, 30-knot winds, small craft warnings and a windchill of 60 degrees F to the normally placid Florida Bay. The locals break out parkas. We tough northerners

head for the hot tub.

After the norther blows itself out and things return to normal we leave Banana Bay. Inspired by a casual conversation with Cory, a liveaboard who works at West Marine, we have decided to experience Boot Key Harbor. If Marathon is the boating capital of the keys then Boot Key Harbor is its beating heart. To get there, from the Florida Bay side of Marathon, sailors must go southwest two miles, go under the Moser bridge and sail back northeast three miles to the harbor entrance.

The harbor entrance is a long one with low water flats backed by mangroves to starboard and marinas and restaurants to port. Burdine's, a popular local watering hole with docks out front, juts out into the channel. Immediately afterwards, a swing to port takes *Solace* through the permanently opened bridge. Past the bridge is an anchorage that holds about fifty boats today. The inner harbor is about one and half miles long, a quarter-mile wide, and packed with vessels of every description. A VHF call to the town marina office on channel 16 results in directions to a mooring ball in the field of 225. The town also provides a small number of dock spaces in the canal next to the marina office. Dock space is also available at other marinas in the harbor and a series of canals provide homeowners with docks. Town mooring balls are well set up with a separate float and line for easy pick up with a boat hook.

The cruising community in Marathon is close knit and varied. There are permanent residents living in the harbor, transients waiting for a weather window for the Caribbean, and snowbirds settled in for the winter. Within minutes of securing the boat, our neighbours to the north, noticing that we do not have a dinghy motor, have offered the use of their RIB. The next few dinghies going by drop over to say hello and brief us on area happenings. After a short row ashore the paperwork is completed and the flat fee of \$22.00 per day is paid. As is the case with many public marinas now, you should be prepared to produce boat title and proof of insurance. The marina, equipped to serve long term guests, provides weekly visits from a pump-out boat, Wifi, laundry facilities, a book exchange, TV viewing areas, community gathering spots, and a workshop.

While stretched out horizontally in the

cockpit sunshine contemplating life in Boot Key harbor, it occurs to us that we don't need to sail back over the waters we have already covered. Retrieving the truck and trailer and hauling the boat in Marathon will give us extra time we could use to visit the lower keys. We point our bow towards Bahia Honda State Park which is 12 miles to the southwest. The park is located between the original Flagler railroad bridge and the new bridge which carries traffic on US Highway 1. The original bridge has a cut on the Atlantic side which sailboats can use to enter the park anchorage. We have a wonderful sail down, doing between five and six knots on a broad reach with a 3-foot swell on the quarter. The anchorage is protected from the east but we were warned to set out two anchors and not to swim off the boat because of the currents, which are the strongest in the keys. There are some docks, but we were told they were not suitable for sailboats because of the depth in the channel which is marked as three feet on the charts. *Solace* draws three feet so, reasoning that at slow speed and with the wind on the nose we will easily get out if we touch down, we edge slowly into the marina channel about two hours after low tide. Nothing touches and we find ourselves in a lovely little basin, protected on four sides.

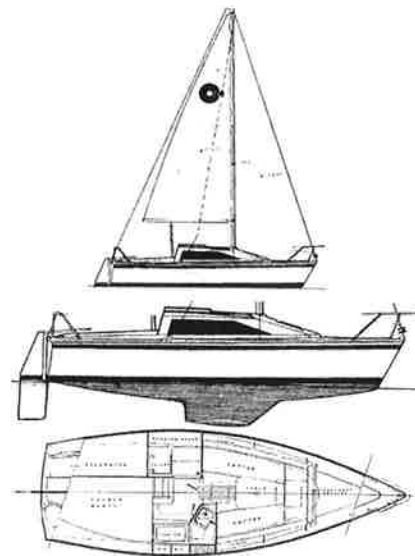
We wander round Bahia Honda State Park for a few days. This is a special place. From a vantage point on the old bridge high above the park and harbor, we can see that the current warnings were not exaggerated. Seaweed drifts out of the harbor a lot faster than I can swim and a large schooner at anchor in the harbor lies parallel to the wind in line with the current. Ospreys hover over the old bridge east of the cut, and frigate birds float over the seemingly endless Atlantic beach in the easterly wind. Brightly coloured tropical fish lurk around the perimeter of the marina basin. Leaving the harbor, we catch sight of an iridescent blue Portuguese Man of War streaming its deadly tail.

The date for haul out approaches and we point *Solace's* bow back to Boot Key Harbor. Today's fifteen-knot wind has us on a close reach in a 3-foot swell in the usual perfect winter keys weather. We are in no rush to bring our trip to an end and loaf along under genoa alone but still average four knots. To facilitate packing, we

get a dock at the town marina. This is not the place for anyone with misanthropic tendencies. Boaters from every mooring ball in the harbor walk by here every day and many seem to have time to talk.

We leave the dock and motor slowly through Boot Key Harbor for the last time. *Solace* is hauled out and her mast is down by 12:00. We spend another hour strapping everything down and are on our way by 1:00. Driving up US 1 provides a completely different perspective on the waters and towns that we have visited by boat. The view from elevated bridges reveals channels, inlets and potential anchorages not apparent from the water. Attractions that were beyond our pedestrian range are noted for next time. There will be a next time. The sheltered, shallow warm waters, tropical climate, and access to both sheltered gunkholes and marine services provide potential for outstanding cruising experiences. During our short time here we have barely scratched the surface of what the Keys have to offer.

David Platt is a long term sailor who took up writing to complement his photography when he retired. He keeps his boat on Lake Ontario in Bronte Harbour and occasionally trailers it further afield. He spends his spare time trying to convince his employed friends that being retired is not as easy as it looks.



O'Day 240

LOA 24' 7" • Beam 8' 3" • Draft 2' 8"

Displ 3600 lb • Ballast 1200 lb • Sail Area 246 sq ft