

Florida Sea Base Coral Reef Sailing

Trek Log: Jul 24-Aug 2, 2012

7/24/12 Day 1

Up at 2am, grab gear and sack breakfast...meet at Atkins' House at 3am, loaded and on the road by 3:15am. Dropped at SeaTac and said good-bye, checked 3 bags and moved on to Security. Ben had a credit card knife in his wallet (oops...gone), otherwise, easily into the gate area.

Some carried breakfast to eat, others bought airport fare. Derek bought a fruit cup at Starbucks that was drenched in vinegar, yuk! Sit and wait for our 6:10am flight to Phoenix. Boarded people, but apparently Southwest put our bags on the wrong plane, 20 minutes later we're off. Only 1 screaming baby.

1h 50m layover in Phoenix and ready to board for our flight to Ft Lauderdale. Ben has no boarding pass, apparently he gave both passes when he boarded in Seattle. Quick ID check and we're good to go. Another screaming baby (lucky us) and one poor gal hurled in the seat behind Dean.

We traveled in Class A's, which worked out great. Had Eagle Scouts come up and introduce themselves and others stop to talk about Scouting experiences.

In Ft Lauderdale picked up a 12 passenger van for sightseeing. No we don't want the extra liability coverage, yes, we're sure we don't want it. No really, we want to decline the extra coverage, that's right, we don't want it. Thank you.

On to Clewiston, on the south shore of Lake Okeechobee (never saw the lake). Boy is the land flat and wet; canals and lakes everywhere. And Hot. And Humid. Welcome to Florida.

Grabbed dinner at the Florida Café, Cuban fare. Only one guy there spoke English (not the regular waitress). Ben & Carson got to try their Spanish and we had a nice, fairly inexpensive dinner. Staying at the Best Western of Clewiston, two adjoining rooms with AC. Tired and to bed about 11pm, which is only 8pm Washington Time.

7/25/12 Day 2

Up at 5:45 am, oops, the clock in our room was an hour fast. Everyone up 6:45am and had breakfast at BW, great full breakfast included with the room.

Drove on to Billie Swamp Safari, we'll be staying there tonight in one of the Chickees. Should be interesting. The heat index today was 102 deg F. Very humid. Anyway, we saw alligators, turtles, caiman iguanas, tarantulas, scorpions, ferrets, alligator snapping turtle, baby alligators, Asian water buffalo, American bison, African ostrich, wild boar, sand hill cranes, rosette spoonbills, raccoon, little lizards, bluegill, zillions of tiny fish, egrets, vultures, horses, cows, some kind of African antelope, Florida panther (cougar), what else? Some of these were in cages and pens at the site, others were roaming wild.

The nutter Collin, gave a talk at the reptile house and displayed a pigmy rattlesnake, diamond back rattlesnake, corn snake and a cotton mouth and it was all pretty good. I must say I would not want to run into Collin in the Jungle, he was probably more comfortable with snakes than people.

First airboat ride with Raymond (Seminole Indian), fun, fast, got to see gators and other animals. Next, a Swamp Buggy ride with Isaiah (Seminole). Most of the track was dry, but in a month should be in a foot of water. Florida is very flat, everything seems to be at sea level, and every depression holds water. Second airboat ride by Robert (Southern Boy) "Would y'all like some education, or just a ride?"

In the compound itself, large tortoises in a pen and also smaller, more frisky ones next door. Baby alligators in a pond with a gumball machine dispensing gator pellets for a quarter. Had a critter show too. Saw some of the animals and got to hold a baby alligator.

Had lunch at the Swamp Café on site and got to try gator bites and frog legs. For dinner we went off site to Osceola's Pizza and Games, still on the Reservation. We were the only ones there at 6:30pm, a couple others did show later. Played some pool and video games and had wet pizza and soda for dinner.

Back to Billie's before 9pm and bedded down in our Chickee. It had screens on the windows, lights and a ceiling fan, but it was hot. Hot and humid. And hot.

7/26/12 Day 3

Slept in the Dorm Chickee last night, hot, humid, no breeze but surprisingly, no mosquitoes and few other bugs; just a few little black flies. Up at 7:30am, cooled off some, must only be 85 deg F now. Just another beautiful day, great sunrise, and still, no bugs. Little lizards everywhere. Not feeding the gators this morning, so off we go, on the road by 8am...breakfast where?

Had brunch in Miami (or close by) at an IHOP. Tiny place and very busy.

Drove on down to Key Largo and checked into the Key Largo Inn, Key Largo's first motor inn. First floor rooms next to the pool. Headed for the beach at John Pennecamp State Park and swam to the old shipwreck recreation in about 7 feet of water. The wreck was an actual anchor and cannons from a different wreck brought here as a re-creation, pretty cool. Hot and sunny, and the water is very warm. Nice to swim and feels much cooler when you get out.

Back to the Inn and swam in the pool, ahh, fresh water. Out to dinner at the Pilot House around the corner. Was OK, but for the money, the seafood was not well prepared. Stopped at a Public's Market (grocery store) on the way back and picked up some key limes for the trip and some ice cream and 3 key lime pies for dessert. Sat out by the pool and we did our best to eat ½ a pie each. Got to bed by 10pm?

7/27/12 Day 4

Up around 7am and simple breakfast supplied by the Key Largo Inn; fruit, sweet rolls, muffins, coffee. Scouts had no particular plan for the morning, so we headed west towards Islamorada. Stopped to buy souvenirs on the way. Stopped at a beach just past Sea Base and waded and cooled off, walking out ¼ to ½ mile off shore. At noon, headed back up the overseas highway to a lunch stop at a café along the road. Great place to eat, specializing in croissants. Matt lost his wallet sometime after leaving this place

and getting to Sea Base. On the road and hit Sea Base at 1pm, parked and sent Mike and Derek in to check in.

Met our Mate (Land based Staff) for the week, her name is Emily. Loaded gear into carts and headed to the Quarter Deck. Took our picture under the Sea Base sign on the T-Dock, did our swim review, issued snorkel gear, did our snorkel review and instruction on the end of the T-Dock, put our boat gear into mesh bags, put our other gear in a locker, loaded our gear aboard the Blue Planet (our ship) and met Captain Lou. Got our provisions for the week (including ice) and brought them out and put on board. Next we put our Class A's back on, went to Flags at 5:45pm, ate dinner (meatloaf w/ mushroom gravy) and headed out to our boat.

Our Captain is Louise Orion, first year in the Sea Base program, but a very experienced sailor. She teaches sailing in her own sailing program for prospective sailboat buyers.

Blue Planet is a Hylas 47' Sailboat with a Jib and a Mainsail. The main mast is just over 64 feet tall. She has a 14 foot 3 inch beam, a draft of 6 feet, displacement of 32,000 lbs., just over 1,000 square feet of sail, and an inboard 55hp diesel engine. She has a recommended capacity of 6-8 crew. We had 9.

Where to sleep? Below deck on the Blue Planet was the Captain's Quarters (aft), a double bunk in the bow, a single bunk on the port side, 2 bunks in the Salon, one on either side, and the floor of the Salon. On deck, two could sleep on either side of the cock pit, one person could sleep across the back of the cock pit, and two could sleep on either side of the forward hatch on the bow. These last two spots were next to the rail and slanted towards the edge to shed water.

Picked up some shrimp for fishing bait, loaded with ice, topped off the fresh water tanks and had some quick instruction from the Captain. We cast off and left the dock.

We left through the channel leaving Sea Base, out under the Channel 5 Bridge between Lower Metecumbe Key and Long Key and set anchor in Long Key Bight for the night. Passage under the Channel 5 Bridge was interesting because we had to time it at near low tide because at that time the clearance is about 65 feet; just enough to admit the main mast and just bend the antenna.

First night aboard, 3 slept below and 5 above. There was a slight breeze and we were exposed to the current, so Capt'n Lou set a night watch, which ran from 10pm to 6am. The goal was to insure that our anchor held and that we had warning should any rain squalls come our way. The Scouts chose to rotate 1 hour shifts and set it up. The Capt'n set out snacks for the night.

7/28/12 Day 5

We had no set time to wake. Most of the crew up by about 7:20am. Night watch was interesting, of course very tired, but it was a silent personal time to observe. Lots of Mullet swam in the water around the boat probably because of the aft anchor light (white). A vast array of stars and only yourself and a pop tart for company.

Set up a schedule of 2 cooks for each meal and one person to clean the forward (crew) head. The Capt'n had her own head. Since no toilet paper is ever put in the head, it was important to clean the trash can often to keep the odors down.

First breakfast was French Toast and sausage. Below deck this morning, the temperature is 86 degF and the relative humidity 75%. It was hot below deck, even with all hatches open and small personal fans running. Somehow Carson and Matt still found use for a blanket.

Saw a dolphin near this ship this morning. Pulled anchor and set out for Alligator Reef. We set the main sail and motor sailed because the winds were very light. We were not able to get a close mooring ball and did not see the wreck when we dove, but did see a lot of small fish and various coral, a large conch shell, and barracuda. Water clarity was pretty good, but had a slightly yellow or tan cast. Visibility about 20-30 feet or so. Water depth on the whole reef area is about 20 feet max, and this reef was 15-20 feet deep.

Set off again for Davis reef and dove again. On the way we were trolling for fish. While letting out one line, the reel made a birds nest and then a fish hit. The tangle was too hard to clear so Mitch held the line with the fish on it (didn't seem very big), Dean helped cut the tangle out of the reel and tie the line back on with a blood knot, and Matt reeled in a 2-1/2 lb. 17" Little Tunny (Bonito, small Tuna). We fileted the fish and ate it for dinner.

At Davis Reef there were a lot of different coral to see (brain, star, fan, Elkhorn and stag horn) as well as some fish. We also encountered our first sea turtle (Green Turtle).

Dinner was hamburgers and of course the Little Tunny.

No night watch. Anchored near shore protected by land.

7/29/12 Day 6

Our second full day on the water. The crew rises around 7:30am and breakfast was breakfast burritos.

First dive site was Pickles reef, named for a ship that wrecked here in the 1800's carrying mortar in pickle barrels. Our best dive so far, we didn't get close to the wreck, but saw brown and blue fan coral and lots of small fish. There always seems to be a few barracuda around.

Lunch is meat and cheese sandwiches. While motoring to the next dive site, Dallis caught a Caravelle Jack measuring 28 inches and weighing 12-1/2 pounds. Hard to bring in with the boat under way, but we were in a shallow reef area and the Captain couldn't just stop. We lost one of the small nets trying to bring in the fish and finally just grabbed the line and hauled it by hook over the rail and on deck, nearly hitting Matt in the head.

Our next dive site was Hen and Chicks reef. While half of the Crew dove, the others fileted the Jack, yielding quite a bit of meat. Just had time for a quick dip before leaving the site.

We dumped the fish carcass while under way. We motored back under the Channel 5 bridge and anchored off of Sea Base. Dinner consisted of the fish and some chicken fajitas.

7/30/12 Day 7

Our morning started off with a thunderstorm. Lightning and thunder and then some rain. We battened down the hatches and closed the canvas on the cockpit. We had cold cereal for breakfast and headed into dock at Sea Base. This is our mid-week shore day.

Emily met us at dock and we started with a briefing, telling us what we'd be doing and some pointers and rules. First was sailing, 5 man crews on 14 foot sailboats. Sadly, very little wind, so it was a long hot sit. Next we tried paddle boarding; stand on a surf-boardish thing and use a long canoe paddle to move about. Derek's first thought was "This is a stupid idea". We all got the hang of it and did have fun running across them or dumping others from theirs.

Break for lunch, meatball sandwiches.

Next was tubing. The morning crew had popped the tube, so a new one was purchased, inflated and off we went. The boat was a 20 foot or so Grady-White with twin 150 hp outboards. This was a blast, two at a time just off shore Sea Base. Everyone got to try it and the longer you stayed on, the harder the Captain tried to shake you off. That would be Captain Terri By The Way.

Next was a short van ride to Robbie's, where we paddled tandem kayaks along some canals and through the mangroves. No bugs! Just luck I guess. Final activity was feeding bait fish to some Tarpon that hang out at Robbie's Dock. The fish were 2-5 feet long and hungry. They could see the bait in your hand and would jump or splash to get it. If you weren't watching, the brown pelicans would sneak up behind you and grab the bait.

Back to Sea Base, 45 minutes of free time to hit the Ship Store or take a shower before flags at 5:45pm. Dinner was teriyaki beef and rice. Then free time, a movie (Hook) and then retire back to the ship and sleep at the dock.

7/31/12 Day 8

Awake and cast off of the dock before 8am. Decided to hold breakfast until we anchored for our first dive. We anchored on the Gulf side (considered inside) of Fiesta Key, along some new construction along the shore. Breakfast was pancakes and ham. The dive was a swim to shore and a search for Spiny Lobsters along the rock retaining wall. They were there! We found them alone, in pairs and triples, poking their heads out. A great chance to see lobsters, too bad season wasn't open.

Pulled anchor and headed out under the Channel 5 bridge again to the Atlantic Ocean side of the Keys (outside). We went back to Alligator reef, this time to anchor close to the light house. The water was spectacularly clear and shining blue above the white sand bottom. The sand consisted of ground up coral and shell bits, not typical soft beach sand. This was by far the best dive of the trip. Millions of colorful fish in schools in the shade of the light house, also saw a shark and a ray and of course barracuda. This was a shallow area, only 8 feet deep or so, and it was as clear and bright as a swimming pool. Carson ran into some fire coral on the light house structure and came away with burning rashes on his arms and forehead. Ouch.

Pulled anchor and headed for Cheeka Rocks for our 3rd dive of the day. Matt slept through this one. This site was only 3 miles away but the water conditions were quite different; murkier and yellow cast

again with reduced visibility. Still good and the rocks and coral formations were much bigger, so were the fish. Saw another turtle here. Also saw 2 rays that buried themselves in the sand. Everyone is exhausted.

We headed towards shore and anchored just west of Indian Key.

8/1/12 Day 9

Up again after 7am and had a breakfast of Egg & ham Muffins.

First dive was to swim ashore on Indian Key. This is a State Park of historical significance. Dean & Dallis stayed on the ship. We walked the pathways on the island and saw ruins and read plaques that told the story of the previous owners. Found lots of lizards on the island as well as dry land hermit crabs.

For the final dive of the trip, we went just off shore and grabbed a mooring ball at the wreck of the San Pedro. This ship sunk on the reef in 1733. The original anchor and ballast stones are still here along with some vintage cannons brought in to augment the site. There is also a plaque mounted underwater. Depth here was 20 feet or so, difficult to reach bottom. No reef to see here, just the wreck.

Tried to sail back, but just no wind, so motored back under the Channel 5 Bridge around 1pm. We docked again at Sea Base, unloaded gear and moved into a dorm (air conditioning!), went back and cleaned the boat (took about an hour), showered and got ready for flags, that's right, 5:45pm.

Next we got to play some games before Luau. We played some individual tug of war on wooden boxes and poison barrel with a group holding hands in a ring. That was fun.

Dinner was mahi mahi, crab cake, pulled pork and corn with a Key Lime Pie cup for dessert. Captain Lou came and ate and we got to say our good byes to her. She awarded the crew the Captain's Club, a patch we could buy signifying that we experience all parts of our adventure as well as showed awareness of weather and wind, ability to take care of the boat and work together. All crews present did skits, we did Quinn got hit by a Boat.

Awards were given to two crews for fishing, one crew caught the largest non-edible fish, a 7 foot nurse shark, and we caught the largest edible fish, Dallis' Caravelle Jack! We brought home a yellow flipper as a prize.

Some free time and lights out in the dorm at 11pm.

8/2/12 Day 10

Up at about 7am, some went to the 7:15am chapel service, everyone was at flags at 7:45am. Breakfast of biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs & hash browns. Afterwards, we went to the old chapel chickee next to the dock to do our reflection. We thanked Emily for her help through the week. It was a great week and our Crew all did their part off and on the ship. Everyone took home a Sea Base Blessing coin to remember the trip. Well, everyone except Carson who dropped his through the floor boards of the chickee. I imagine he'll be able to tell this story to his kids when he accompanies them to Sea Base one day.

We checked out last night, so all we needed to do to leave was pack up gear for our flight, clean out the dorm and catch our shuttle. We were able to leave by 10:30am and were off to Ft Lauderdale Airport.

Once there we checked bags and made our way through security. This time Matt tried to bring in some aerosol sunscreen, and the Security guys had questions about Dean's big battery. Let us in anyway. Most Scouts put Class A's back on and killing time before our flight. Ate some lunch and made our way to our gate. Flight wasn't until 6:35pm so lots of time to kill. The flight to Atlanta was rough most of the way, no screaming babies, but one gal did toss her cookies.

Waiting in the airport again, next flight at 8pm. Scouts either ate in the terminal or bought something for the flight. The plane was late, had some kind of maintenance issue and left about an hour late. Good flight into Seattle, 5 hours, pretty quiet and smooth. Arrived 50 minutes late.

Our rides were waiting and all of our bags made it. Home by midnight or so local time, 3am for us!

Recommendations we would make for the next Crew

The ships do have battery power which is recharged either by solar or when the engine runs.

Consider bringing your own mask and snorkel if you like them, Sea Base fins are good, but having a mask that fits you well and a snorkel with splash over protection would be nice.

The mesh bag issued for gear is plenty big if you keep your gear to a minimum as recommended. It is nice to have dry shorts and a shirt to change into while your suit is drying in the evenings.

You will need a carabineer for you water bottle, bring an extra.

A sleeping pad is a must, all of the places to sleep on deck are hard.