

ELIZABETH
POWELL
CROWE

Staycation at Shell Island

By Elizabeth P. Crowe

As we walked south towards the Gulf of Mexico, my friend Brian mused, "You know, this is what Florida was like when we were kids. And this is all you did on vacation here: walk to the beach and go swimming."

Sea oats, sand dunes, laughing gulls. The gentle rush of the Gulf and seashells. No one in sight but our little party. It was like another time, a lost place. Just 10 miles to the north as the crow flies, Panama City was bustling along like the port city it is, but here on our "Staycation Cruise" you couldn't see or hear that.

Our group, Mark and Libbi Crowe, Juliette and Brian Phillips and their son Jake, Donna and Chuck Howard and Capt. John MacPherson (USN, Ret.) were enjoying the beginning of another relaxing day in St. Andrew's Bay. Various combinations of the four families have sailed the Caribbean together in years past. This year, given the airlines' fee frenzy and the dollar's weakness, we decided to cruise our own Panhandle coast, visiting places that

the locals enjoy. We all live in Navarre, Florida, so a jaunt to Shell Island and Crooked Island south of Panama City was pretty close to a "staycation".



Shell Island is Florida as it used to be.

The Howards' *Zephyr* (a 32-foot Catalina sailboat) and our *Crowes' Nest* (a 26-foot Crownline cabin cruiser) served as our transportation and living arrangements. We decided to cruise with both the sailboat and the power boat to give us the most flexibility.

Zephyr took off first from the Howards', with Chuck, Brian, John ("Cap'n") and Jake aboard on June 21, (from 30.446149, -86.923522) as she had to sail around the Fairpoint peninsula (Navarre, Midway and Gulf Breeze). The channel markers in Santa Rosa Sound are not lighted and navigating the channel is tricky even in daytime, so a night sail was not on the agenda. The first night they an-

chored off Juana's Pagodas at Navarre Beach (30.384334, -86.863511), a local icon. The restaurant and bar is located next to the county park and boat ramp called Navarre Beach Ramp. But as the distinctive rooflines of the pagodas are what you see from the channel, everyone calls the anchorage and ramp "Juana's".

"We sailed all day to wind up 10 minutes from home," Chuck joked.

Donna and Juliette drove over to Juana's, and Chuck brought them aboard on the dinghy. While dinner aboard was delightful, the guys found that the band plays until 1:30 a.m. on Saturdays. Loudly. Not always well. It would have been wiser, they decided, to anchor on the other side of the causeway, nearer the Navarre Beach State Park.

The next day, they headed to the Intracoastal Waterway on the far side of Choctawahatchee Bay. They anchored at the US 331 Bridge in Destin and found the Balls Out Sports Bar, where the local crowd was like characters in a Jimmy Buffet song. After a few beers, they went back to *Zephyr*,

where they got a call on the mobile phone from Cap'n's wife, Bonnie.

"There's a huge red blob out in the Gulf of Mexico, 25 miles south of Destin, headed your way," she said. "Ya'll are about to have an interesting night."

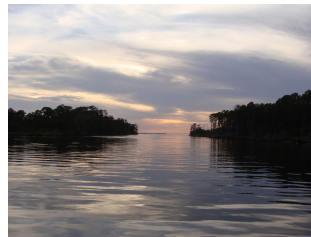
No kidding. The boat tossed, turned, danced and bobbed in the severe thunderstorm. Carnival rides wish they were that exciting. When they pulled up the anchor in the morning, the chain was literally wrapped around the anchor. By morning all was calm. Dead calm. So, the *Zephyr* started motoring up "The Ditch" (30 22.825N 86 07.161W) as the ICW is called between Destin and Panama City.

Meanwhile, *Crowe's Nest* put in at Juana'a at 7:15 a.m.. We made it to the ICW in about three hours, passed *Zephyr* in The Ditch, and got to St. Andrews State Park about noon.

We anchored at a lovely spot that was shallow enough to walk to the beach, then a short walk to the Gulf. We ate our lunch on board and then went swimming. We met some locals who told us this spot, near "Camel Back Shoal 2" (30 06.457N 85 41.118W) was the most popular with local boaters, sail and motor, as the water drops quickly from the wading area to 21 feet. They also told us the best place to eat nearby was Treasure Island Marina (30 08.879N 85 44.840W). It has three restaurants, and they all agreed the one that is low-

est in price and physical location has the best food. We will try that next trip.

Around 4 p.m. *Zephyr* came into St. Andrews Bay. We hoisted anchor and followed, rafting up near the Shell Island dock just across from Beacon Beach Marina (30 05.426N, 85



"The Ditch" from Destin to Panama City is smooth and protected.

38.999W). This nice facility is on the Tyndall AFB and is open only to retired and active military personnel. As we had a retired Navy Captain (John) and a retired Air Force Major (Brian), this was no problem. Beacon Beach Marina is where we got ice, gas and fresh water for the rest of our cruise. And, where we picked up and Donna and Juliette, who drove over to the Sand Dollar Inn on base and stayed on land at night.

Shell Island is a natural, undeveloped island between the Gulf of Mexico and St. Andrews Bay in Bay County. The only amenity on the island is a walkover from the bay to the Gulf. Bottle-

nosed dolphins play in St. Andrew's Bay night and day; the island's unspoiled beauty and wildlife are soothing. The island is about seven miles long and from two hundred yards to three-quarters of a mile across. It is filled with impressive sand dunes and secluded sugar-white beaches, a fresh water swamp, acres of woods. The water is great for snorkeling both in the bay and in the Gulf. At the eastern end of St. Andrews Bay, a pass used to give access to Crooked Island. Hurricane Opal, however, closed it up. You'd have to portage a canoe there now.

Sand dollars, moon snails, conch shells, and olive shells are just a few of the species we found on Shell Island. The waves along from the Gulf continually uncover and carry in new shells. As the tides rise and then fall from east to west and back, shells are left behind just waiting to be discovered. Whole sand dollars are often found in shin to thigh-high water and buried a bit under the sand. Though jellyfish and man-o-wars have been plaguing



Jake chills on *Zephyr*.

the beaches at Pensacola and Navarre all summer, we saw only one on this trip. Of course, it stung me.

The next day, we took

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Crowe's Nest out through the pass into the Gulf to go to Crooked Island. We waved to the tourists on the "pirate ship" and the dolphin spotting cruises going and coming. Nowadays, the Air Force launches unmanned drones for target practice around Crooked Island, so we couldn't get here until Wednesday of our "staycation", and it isn't available for overnight anchorages any more. We listened to the announcements from the base on VHF 16 for the times of target practice and went over on a day when the drones flew in the morning so the afternoon was free. It is still one of the best kept secrets for sailors, kayakers, and motor boaters and we spent a lovely June afternoon swimming, talking, and watching some expensive hardware fly above us.

Negotiating the shallow water and shifting sandbars of the pass took some careful piloting. The St. Andrew's Sound has a very shallow center (three to four feet) with deep water around it. Cap'n John crouched on the deck, hand signaling Mark as we anchored. The Gulf of Mexico was just beyond Crooked Island, Tyndall AFB just to our north. And yet, we felt we were in a remote area, not another boat or structure in sight if we looked south even though planes would buzz above us every now and then.

"Sixteen years ago, we used to anchor right here," John said. "We'd go to those grass flats over there to get

scallops. That was before there was a 'scallop season'. Only problem was getting ice."

After relaxing there for a couple of hours, we headed back to where *Zephyr* was anchored late afternoon and had a birthday dinner for Brian, complete with a cake. Thursday morning,



Captain said scalloping at Crooked Island was excellent.

John and Jake headed back to town with Donna and Juliette by car, while Chuck and Brian on *Zephyr* and Libbi and Mark on *Crowe's Nest* headed for The Ditch. *Crowe's Nest* anchored at "Spectre Island", *Zephyr* back at the biker bar for Thursday night.

Spectre Island (N30 24.182 W86 41.668) is a nice anchorage just off Eglin AFB, near the runway for the Special Ops planes at Hurlburt Field. "Spectre" refers to the unit that flies the AC-130 Gunships which take off and land nearby. The island provides a shelter from ICW wakes and wind on its south side and is a quiet anchorage at night. At green can marker 51, you slip between the sandbars to a nicely protected anchorage 12 to 15 feet deep. Military families have put up a marker in honor of Special Ops pilots

on the island, while Navarre Beach Yacht Club has installed two tables and a flag pole. It's a perfect spot for an afternoon of picnicking or a weekend of camping. We spent a pleasant evening cooking dinner, talking to another couple anchored there for the night, and watching the stars.

As thunderstorms started to form in the Gulf at dawn, we decided to pack it in and took *Crowe's Nest* out at Juana's right after breakfast. *Zephyr*, too, anchored there, but Chuck and Brian spent the night at home, coming back in the morning to take her around Gulf Breeze back to Chuck's dock.

The staycation was a complete success. We spent about one-tenth what we spent cruising the Caribbean the year before, connected with friends we haven't seen enough of lately, and enjoyed some of the best scenery and water available in the Gulf of Mexico.



Sunsets at Shell Island are idyllic.

Spectre Island is a perfect spot for a picnic or an overnight anchorage.