

December 2, 2003

Monday, November 17, we departed Cartagena for Florida. After pulling up the anchor, we headed out the Boca Grande (small craft) entrance passing between the two Boca Grande channel markers around noon. Our sail to Florida was to be through the Yucatan Channel, the same route used by Spain's Fleet of Galleons during the 17th and 18th centuries.

The first leg of our passage was from Cartagena to the eastern end of New Bank (N15\*55'; W78\*34'). Our plan was to stay east of the many reefs that dominated the western part of the Caribbean. The first 1-½ days we had winds NNE 20-25 knots and seas 6-8 feet. As we were sailing to windward, we took quite a bit of spray and water over the decks. Sailing to weather also required certain muscles, and the first day we definitely were not in condition.

By early Tuesday evening the seas finally mellowed and the winds died down to NNE 12-15 knots. Now KUHELA, under beautiful clear skies, was gliding peacefully through the water. What a contrast to just 24 hours earlier! Early Wednesday afternoon the wind shifted to the N, but the perfect sailing conditions continued with a favorable ½ knot current. Then in the evening we became caught in a westerly current of 1-½ knots and ended up losing most of the easting gained since departing Cartagena.

At 5 a.m. Thursday, after a few hours of wind shifts and rain, we came about as the current was setting us too far to the west. It was important to come back east so as to clear the banks. At 9 a.m., taking advantage of the light winds and calm seas, we started motoring straight north, directly into the wind. Just before noon, with the winds finally coming around from the NE, we started sailing. Throughout the afternoon and evening we either sailed or motorsailed depending upon the conditions. We passed the light off New Bank around 10 p.m.

The second leg of our passage was from New Bank to Cabo San Antonio off the western tip of Cuba. No sooner had we cleared the bank Thursday evening than the weather changed. The winds increased to 20-22 knots, seas built to 6 feet, and we were hit with torrential rainstorms early Friday morning. For three days, Friday through Sunday, we sailed with these winds and with seas caused by opposing wind and current. This made for very uncomfortable conditions, especially on Friday, when the wind shifted to the NNW and we pounded into the waves. It was like riding a "bucking horse." Luckily Saturday, with the wind shifting back to the NE, the ride became more comfortable. Now we were sliding between the waves, with only a rare wave hitting the side of the boat. Early Sunday morning we passed Grand Cayman and the illumination from the island could be seen off our starboard side.

Our biggest weather concern during the entire passage was the Yucatan Channel. At this time of year cold fronts came down on a regular basis out of Texas into the Gulf of Mexico. When this happened steep seas were created in the channel from opposing wind and current. The best time to travel through the Yucatan Channel was just after one cold front passed and before the next cold front occurred. This allowed for a three to four day sailing window. Looking at our weather information, the optimal time for us to pass through the Yucatan Channel was no later than sunrise Tuesday morning.

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With the winds and seas finally starting to subside Sunday evening, we began to drive KUHELA toward this goal. Our intention was to not let the boat speed drop below 5.5 knots in order to make the Yucatan Channel in time. On Monday, with seas 2-4 feet and with wind fluctuating between 7 to 15 knots, mostly from the NNE, we either sailed or motorsailed. Only for a few hours Monday evening as we approached the channel did the seas become choppy and uncomfortable. Otherwise we had calm seas and almost no wind in the Yucatan Channel. About 2 a.m. Tuesday we rounded Cabo San Antonio off the western end of Cuba and headed NNW for 16 miles until passing the nearby reef. Now we were officially in the Gulf of Mexico and out of the Caribbean Sea.

Once pass the reef we set a course for the Dry Tortugas. The plan was to sail by the Dry Tortugas before heading north in order to gain easting in case the weather changed. Also, there were fewer crosscurrents along this route. We had little wind, flat seas, and no swell our first day in the Gulf. We motored until 10 p.m. Tuesday when the winds finally came up from the ESE. At 3 a.m. Wednesday we passed north of the Tropic of Cancer and were no longer in the tropics.

Wednesday we sailed with 15-18 knot winds, first from the SE, then ESE, and last E. All day we kept an eye on the weather as a cold front, the first northerner of the season for Florida, was moving down into the Gulf of Mexico and Florida sometime Friday, or possibly even earlier. Winds were expected N 25 knots and seas 11-13 feet. The temperature was to drop to 40 degrees. After passing the Dry Tortugas at 6 p.m., we decided to alter course slightly and sail more toward Fort Myers during the night just in case the storm arrived early or the winds shifted to the north. Once we received the favorable outlook from the weather report early Thursday (Thanksgiving Day) we changed our track back to St. Pete Beach, now only 124 nautical miles away. The storm wasn't expected in the Tampa area until 6 p.m. Friday.

Our last full day at sea started out with winds E 20 knots and ended with almost no wind. In the morning we definitely felt the "G's" as we moved fast through the water, intent on getting home before the cold front arrived. Around noon, with lighter winds, we were having the "dream" sail. With nightfall we could see the illumination off the Florida coastline. At 4 a.m. Friday, November 28, KUHELA arrived at the sea buoy off the Pass-a-Grille channel, and two hours later she was tied up at her boat slip, glad to be home.

In all, we sailed 1400 nautical miles in 10 days and 18 hours, sailing almost the entire distance on the starboard tack. We did a lot of windward work, and so passed a lot of water over the decks. Before this passage we visualized mostly favorable currents, especially from the Gulf Stream. Instead, we ended up having more counter currents, especially on the leg from New Bank to Cabo San Antonio, Cuba. We encountered more ship traffic this passage, especially near the Yucatan Channel. Last, we were extremely "lucky" with the weather, both in the Yucatan Channel and along the Florida coastline. A delay of just 12 hours in either place could have made quite a difference. Our plan now is to enjoy our condo in St. Pete Beach until May when we push off for the Mediterranean.



*Kuhela Moored at "Home Port"  
Captiva Cay, St. Pete Beach, Florida*