

Cheryll and Rich Odendahl Roaming around the “Mini-Loop” of South Florida February/March 2012

“Roam” had been stored in the fine care of Rich's dad in Leesburg, Florida since we returned home after our Fall cruise from Myrtle Beach to Sanford, Florida. You may recall that Rich's dad and stepmother Dee completed a 14-year circumnavigation in 2000. We trailered Roam to a ramp near Fort Myers. After launching, the truck and trailer were stored in a nearby yard. Our friends, Bob and Nancy Orr, graciously hosted us at their Sanibel Island home for the first two nights of our cruise.



Rich and His Dad in Leesburg



**Roam Rests Comfortably
at the Orrs' Dock on Sanibel Island**

Roam was one of eleven boats attending the First Annual Ranger Tug Sunshine Rendezvous. We hung out with the other tug owners, compared notes and made some new friends during our week in Fort Myers Beach. Much time was spent roaming the miles of sandy beach and slowing down to the Florida pace.



Ranger Tug Owners in Fort Myers Beach

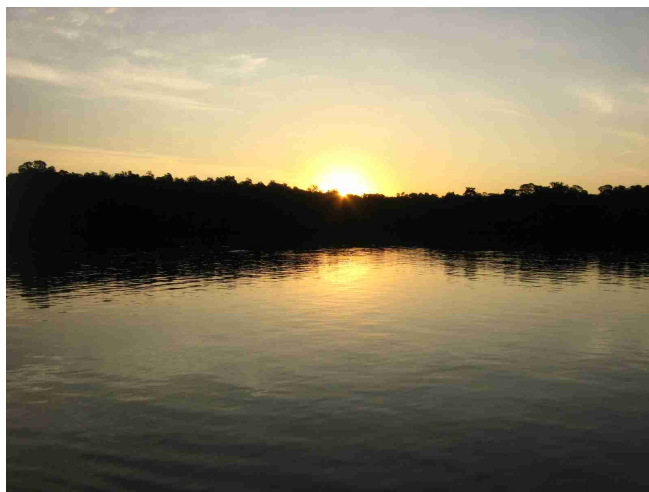


Tugs Take over the Marina

Our next stop was in Naples. Neither of us had ever visited Naples. We found it to be rather “hoity-toity;” a place where the upper class look down upon the peons. The seemingly endless chain of private jets come and go, and the high-end shopping and luxury prices have been imported directly from Fifth Avenue in New York. One night at the Naples City Dock was plenty, and we departed the next day for Marco Island. We spent a couple of nights in Marco Island sorting out what we thought was an electrical grounding issue, and then headed for the Everglades. Everglades City is out of place in modern times. We docked at the Rod and Gun Club for a brief, but wonderful romp through history. This was where the movers and shakers came for winter hunting and fishing in the early 20th century. It’s still maintained as a restaurant and marina. After lunch and a stroll around town, we moved to an anchorage in nearby Russell Pass. It was our favorite spot of the trip as dolphins patrolled around our boat in the secluded mangrove.



Rod and Gun Club in Everglades City



Sunrise Anchored in Russell Pass

The navigation charts warn that no boats over 18 feet in length or with high windshields should attempt the 27-mile Wilderness Waterway from the mouth of the Little Shark River through the backwaters of the Everglades. Rather, it's intended for small fishing boats and canoes. This is due to shallow water, narrow canals and overhanging foliage. Roam draws just 26 inches of water and is equipped with bow and stern thrusters that enable it to spin around within a boat length. Ted, who helped us with the electrical problems in Marco Island, had done the trip in his dinghy, and suggested that we give it a try aboard Roam. Rich's blood pressure crept up as the readings on the depth sounder grew smaller and then shrunk some more. Roam's skeg came within 6 inches of the bottom in a few places. This was definitely only to be attempted at high tide. Ironically, as we neared the end of the waterway, we found ourselves wishing for low tide so that we could fit under a low bridge. It was going to be close. Rich lowered the VHF radio antenna and tilted the mast. Cheryll went up on the bow to see if we would clear as we slowly idled up to the span. Roam slid under with inches to spare. Ranger Tugs seem purpose-built for this fantastic adventure. We spent two nights at the marina near the National Park Visitor Center in Flamingo. Manatees, alligators and crocodiles all circled our boat in the marina basin. Rich wanted to check the bottom for barnacles, but chose not to go for a dip, or even stick his toes in the water. What a wussy!



Along the Wilderness Waterway



Everglades Crocodile

We had to backtrack 27 miles on the Wilderness Waterway to anchor in the mouth of the Little Shark River. The forecast was good, and the plan was to leave very early the next day for our long crossing to Key West. After a comfortable night at anchor, Rich's attempt to start the boat at 5:00 AM was unsuccessful. Apparently, the electrical problems had not been completely resolved. We were 40 miles from the nearest town, and far from cellphone range. Out came the flashlights, tools and wiring diagrams. After half an hour of diagnosis, he was able to get the diesel started with the use of the thruster battery and some jumper cables that he fortuitously carries in the tool kit.

The anchor was weighed and we headed 75 miles downwind to Key West. There was a moderate breeze out of the east, and we completed the passage in about nine hours, surfing down the waves as we dodged the buoys that mark tens of thousands of crab pots and lobster traps. In Key West we made some new friends at the dock, and David helped Rich solve the electrical problem for good. After chasing several hidden wires around the bilge, Rich found that the boat had originally been wired such that the starter motor had been incorrectly connected to the house batteries rather than the engine battery. Fixing that was easy, however, the house batteries had been damaged by our repeated attempts to start the engine with low voltage and had to be replaced. It was expensive to replace them, but we were trouble-free for the balance of the cruise.



Jiffy Pop at Little Shark River



Adapting to Retirement is Difficult – Not!

From Key West, we flew by seaplane 75 miles west to the Dry Tortugas to see Fort Jefferson. This is where Samuel Mudd, the doctor who set the broken leg of Abraham Lincoln's assassin, was jailed. The flight passed over the Marquesas Islands at an altitude low enough to see massive sea turtles, along with several boats abandoned by Cuban refugees on the remote, uninhabited atolls. The pilot explained the US policy on Cuban immigration is that any Cuban who manages to set foot on US soil, above the high tide line, is rescued by the Coast Guard, taken to the mainland, and granted legal US resident status. Those intercepted at sea are returned to Cuba. This policy has come to be known as "Wet-foot, Dry-foot." We spent over three weeks in the Keys, and the Coast Guard was on the marine radio nearly every half-hour, requesting that we report any sightings of overloaded rafts "in the interest of safety." It's a very competitive version of "cat and mouse."



Seaplane to Dry Tortugas



Approaching Fort Jefferson

The sunset celebration in Mallory square was fun, but we felt that we didn't really fit in with the Key West crowd. Maybe we were too sober. Perhaps we're too heterosexual. It's possible that we were too employed to be real "Conchs." Wait a minute. We're not employed. We're retired! Did we fail to mention that retirement is the best?



Mallory Square Sunset



Key West Houseboats

Our next stop was at the Harbour Cay Club in Marathon. It was highly recommended by friends and fellow Tug-nutters Jim and Lisa Favors (<http://trailertrawlerlife.com/>). While private, Harbour Cay Club warmly welcomes a limited number of visiting yachtsmen. Ranger Tug owners Mike and Jess Rizzo were also there with their boat "Illusions." (<http://illusionsmikeandjess.blogspot.com/>) The club has great facilities and very generous members who lent us kayaks, bicycles, and even a car to go grocery shopping. We gathered faithfully each afternoon at 5:00 at the tiki hut known as the "cone of knowledge" for happy hour, good conversation and an invariably beautiful sunset. After a week's stay and on the eve of our scheduled departure, they threw us a farewell dinner. It was so nice that we decided to stay longer when a cold front brought strong winds and big waves for several days. We spent an extra week relaxing and working on boat projects. Roam had her oil changed and bottom scraped clean of barnacles. Rich polished the brass and whipped the ends of the dock and fender lines. There were some lobsters living in the cracks in the seawall under our boat, and Mike caught a few with his gloved hand using only a mask and snorkel. Cheryll closely bonded with Jess and didn't want to say good-bye after two weeks. It's tough to leave good friends. Cheryll especially didn't want to leave just before the start of the Marathon Seafood Festival. But there was a break in the weather, and the winds were forecast to moderate for only a few days. We untied Roam from the dock and sadly took our leave.

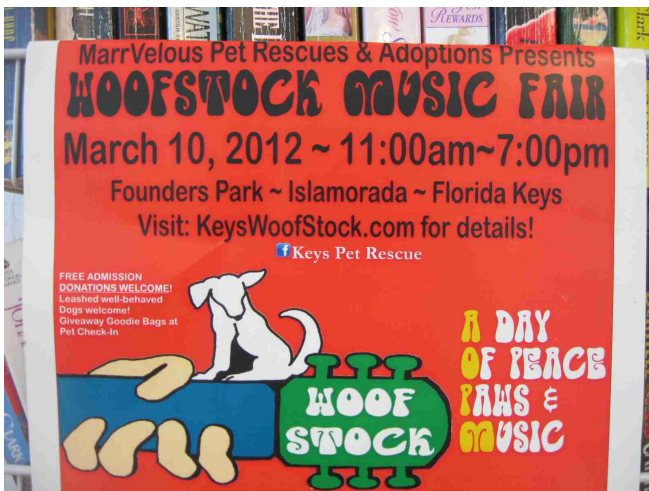


**Jess and Cheryl Enjoy Happy Hour
with Wine and Pool Noodles in the Canal**



**Goodbye to Jess, Mike and Everyone at
Harbour Cay Club, Marathon**

It was time to start working our way east along the north side of the Keys. We spent one night tied to a mooring ball at the Lignumvitae Key State Park. At 11:00 PM, fireworks lit up the windshield from a distant, unknown festival on Islamorada. The following night was spent at the Plantation Yacht Harbor Resort. After missing the Marathon Seafood Festival, Cheryl was thrilled to find that yet another festival was in process at the adjoining park. Her excitement waned when she found that it was called "Woofstock"; a festival for dogs. She went to the craft fair, but did not buy any rhinestone-studded dog collars or beaded neckerchiefs. Continuing east, we hopped along the waterway, anchoring in a bay off Key Largo, then on to Boca Chita in Key Biscayne National Park. From Boca Chita, the skyscrapers of Miami were visible in the distance, but we were not anxious to get back to civilization.

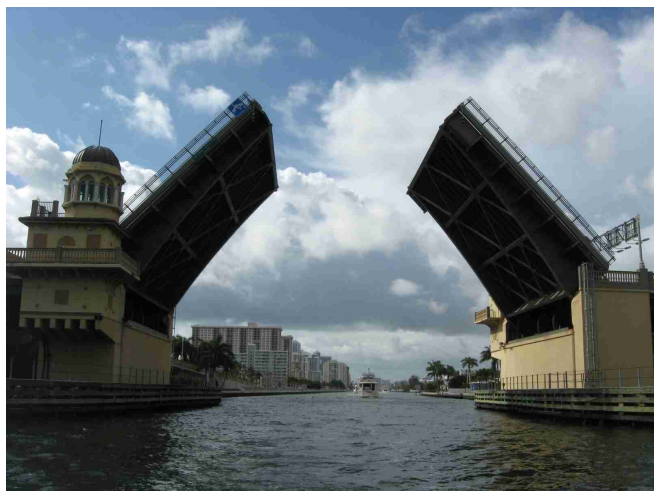


"Woofstock" Poster



Boca Chita Key Harbor

The crew of a border patrol boat stopped and questioned us as we approached Miami. The Coconut Grove area reminded us of a Latin American capital city. There was very little English being spoken as a first language. Close to a million Cubans and their descendants are concentrated in the Miami area, and they exercise disproportionate political power. Any future president who advocates reversal of the privileged “Wet-foot, Dry-foot” policy can count on losing the swing state of Florida. Rich considers this to be politics at its worst.



Venetian Causeway Drawbridge



Approaching Downtown Miami

We arrived in Fort Lauderdale just in time for the end of Spring Break as thousands of muscular boys and bikini-clad college girls sunned themselves on the white sand beach; downing copious quantities of light beer and tossing footballs. The college that Rich attended did not give Spring Break, so this was his first ever. All he had to do was hit middle-age and retire to end this unjust deprivation. Retirement is the best! Rich also entered a 5K charity fundraiser run and won his age bracket. He never comes close to winning anything in Michigan, so this had to be either a statistical anomaly or evidence that Florida runners are slow. (<http://www.marchforcancer.org/>)



Rich Accepts the Medal for Winning his Age Bracket



Fort Lauderdale Spring Break

Cheryll flew home from Fort Lauderdale to deal with family issues, and our friend Jon Fruth had a friend drive him over from his condo in Fort Myers to join Rich for the final 225 miles of the journey. Roam cruised north along the Intra-Coastal Waterway, past the mansions and mega yachts of Palm Beach. Rich and Jon peered through the dense foliage that had obviously been placed to protect Tiger Woods' house on Jupiter Island from the paparazzi.

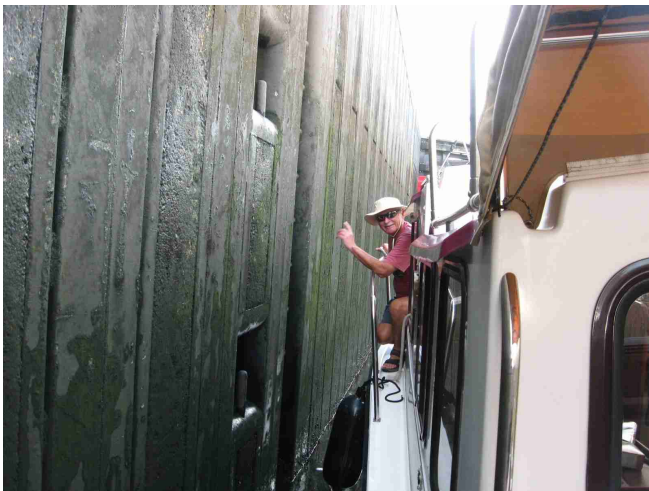


**West Palm Beach Mega Yachts
Crammed into the Harbor**

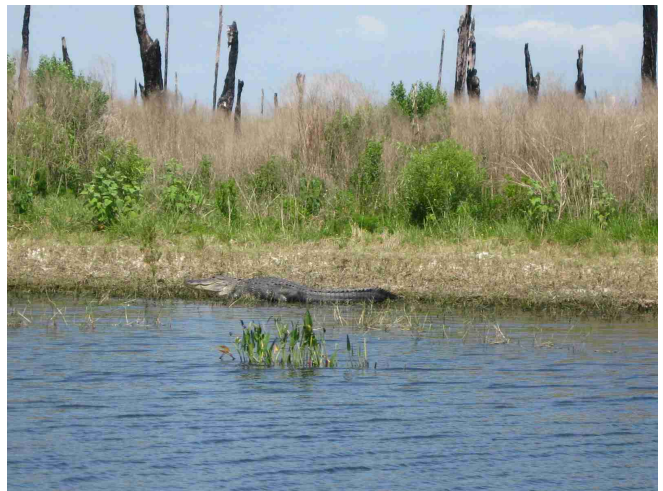


Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse

Roam's helm was turned hard to port at the St. Lucie River entrance and the start of the Okeechobee Waterway. The waterway is 150 miles across the middle of the state, back to Fort Myers where the truck and trailer were stored. Lake Okeechobee is twelve feet above sea level, so we transited two locks going up and three going back down. There were 100 alligators along the edge of Lake Okeechobee; 98 live gators and two deceased carcasses that a flock of vultures found to be quite a tasty treat.



**Jon Handles the Bow Line
as We Enter the St. Lucie Lock**



Gator on the Shore of Lake Okeechobee

In Fort Myers, Jon helped Rich put Roam back on her trailer for the long drive back to Michigan.



Jon Cooking Dinner while Med-Moored in LaBelle, Florida



Cheryll and Rich's Tan Lines

Cheryll is already making plans to attend next winter's 2nd annual Tugnuts Sunshine Rendezvous. Stay tuned!

Our world-wide trip reports are at:

<http://www.odendahls.com/>

The adventures of Roam can be found at:

<http://odendahls.com/roam/>