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Crossroads

Voices & views of island life

CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

Bahamas Visions

Firefly leaves the Antilles to cruise the vivid waters of a beautiful island chain.

By Poupette Smith

Shall we shorten sail?" I ask, wiping spray off my face.

Firefly is galloping along at a fast clip, heeling over more than necessary. Like a truck with failing brakes, our boat shows signs of being out of control; she lurches, submerging her bow into the troughs of a lapis-lazuli Caribbean sea. Puerto Rico's mountains are but a fading smudge behind us as Leo and I head toward our next group of islands: the low-lying Bahamas.

Reefing the main, we are amazed by the sudden increase in our comfort level. I let out the fishing line, eager to catch tuna or dorado, both abundant in these tropical waters; Leo assembles our generator, ensuring that we can power our navigation lights, fridge, radio, and other equipment.

This passage will be short - only three or four days - and brightened by a full moon that makes night watches pass quickly. Still, we find it hard to adjust to open-ocean sailing after months of short, leisurely hops around the Antilles.

Once again we are all alone out here, and I am filled with my usual departure emotions - a curious blend of nostalgia and excitement. Not yet able to fully embrace what lies ahead, I let my mind wander untethered, through a hodgepodge of recent memories and the images they conjure. I see the ox-driven carts and the pickled pig snouts from one island; the archaic, though still-productive, rum distilleries of another. I see Statia's elusive blue beads, Nevis's shy green vervet monkeys, and Martinique's vanilla pods - their precious essence earned only with the help of the humans who pollinate the flowers by hand. I am overwhelmed with feelings of wonder, sadness, and joy.

Our port of entry to the Bahamas will be Great Inagua. Among the largest of the 700-some Bahamian islands and cays (only about five percent of which are inhabited), Great Inagua lies isolated at the southern tip of the arcing 700-mile-long archipelago. Low, flat, and practically featureless, the island is barely visible from five miles away. The first thing we discern are clumps of casuarina trees, which cower submissively, leaning westward, away from the prevailing trade winds. Soon we can make out Matthew Town's tall, cylindrical, chalky white lighthouse, and to our right, miles of unbroken beach with sand as creamy and pale as Irish butter. And shortly after that, we begin to see bottom contours, spotting the dividing line between indigo open ocean and the shallower turquoise shelf.

We visit this sleepy outpost only briefly, just long enough to have a look at the crumbling colonial architecture, the mounds of salt by the salt pans, the Haitian trading smacks, and some of the myriad rare birds: burrowing owls standing guard at the entrance of underground nests; rainbow-colored parrots emitting raucous cries; pink flamingos, which, taking wing at sunset, resemble roseate javelins piercing the sky in pursuit of a sinking ball of fire. We leave before being eaten alive by the island's voracious mosquitoes.

To the northwest, the islands lie closer together, and as we sail past a series of barren, deserted cays, we're mesmerized by the colors of the water around us. I scamper up the ratlines (a rope ladder made for climbing the rigging), and from my bird's-eye view I practice what is called "eyeball navigation": Calling out "starboard" or "port," I guide Leo, who steers to avoid dangers beneath the surface. This skill is essential - and good light is imperative - if *Firefly*, with her seven-foot draft, is to progress unharmed through an island chain where six-foot-deep channels and eight-foot-deep harbors are considered ample. Studying the water, I look for the telltale shades of color that enable me to gauge depth and assess the bottom - whether rock, coral, sand, thick weed, or sparse grass - so as to choose a safe way through unmarked waters. Abundant wrecks bear witness to the demands of piloting in these seas, where minimal soundings, unpredictable currents, and a scarcity of detailed charts frequently conspire to thrust mariners onto isolated coral patches and reefs.

But the rewards are worth it, for no poet, artist, or photographer could possibly do justice to water of such staggering color and clarity: The spectrum seems infinite, shades of shades for which names do not exist. Emerald greens metamorphose into ivories and pale yellows; royal blues turn sapphire, cerulean, and azure before lapping the shore in a finale of sky-dye pastels. Sometimes the transition between colors is sudden and well defined, a shock to the eye; at others, the transformation is too subtle to be noticed.

We drop anchor off yet another remote beach. I peer over the side and watch a stingray bury itself in the sand beneath us. A nearby coral head flashes blue, red, and yellow from resident tangs, bigeye, and grunts.

"Shall we launch the dinghy?" I suggest, per our usual arrival routine. We use the little boat to explore and to find the best snorkeling, but we also fill it with fishing gear so that we can get a start on dinner.

Swimming past a rocky ledge, I spot dozens of waving orangy beige antennae that belong to lobsters so big their heads alone wouldn't fit in our pot. But since crustacean season is closed, we must pass them by.

Soon I am cold, so I climb back in the dinghy and follow Leo.

"There's a cleaning station here," he says, popping his head out of the water. "A parrotfish is hovering with its head down, while several little wrasses pick off its parasites."

I think about the parrotfish's own role in the local seascape: Nibbling at coral, it digests algae and eliminates the rest, producing a bit more of that fine white Bahamas sand.

"Anything worth eating?" I ask.

"Lots of conch," says Leo, taking a breath and diving back down.

Conch meat is sweet and delicious, though I haven't quite mastered the art of cleaning it - a long, messy affair that always ends with slime sticking to my hands like chewing gum to the soles of my sandals.

When Leo reappears, he's holding a heavy, thick-lipped shell covered with tufts of grass. I grab the mollusk and turn it upside down; the bewildered little creature peeks out from the spirally pearl-pink entrance of his home, revealing two tiny marblelike eyes staring out from a black, leopard-patterned face.

"I can't kill this guy," I say. "He's much too cute. Besides, this type is always small. It's not worth the preparation. Aren't there any queen conch?"

As Leo swims off again, I try to interpret the movements of his back, head, and shoulders. I've learned that when all three are level, he's looking; when his head tilts, he's about to dive; and when one shoulder lifts slightly and his back arches, he's arming his sling and going in for the shot.

The irony of these hunts is that we both hate the killing; but alas, we are not vegetarians, and since buying seafood just means that someone else has done the dirty work for us, fishing has become a normal part of our cruising life.

"How about Nassau grouper?" says Leo, resurfacing at last. "If I can only get close enough; he keeps rushing into his tunnel whenever he sees me."

I love the thought of fresh grouper fillets, but Leo's lips are bluish, and I can see that despite wearing a wet suit, he's cold. I know from past experience that groupers are not always quickly caught.

"Why don't we try getting him by line?" I suggest.

We devise a plan, take bearings, then row back to *Firefly* for bait and a rubber fender. Returning to the area, Leo leans his masked face over the side of the dinghy, attempting to relocate the spot.

"Here," he says. "Stop!"

I drop the dinghy's anchor and attach the end of the rode to a fender onto which I tie a monofilament line fitted with a baited hook. Fish innards now hover tantalizingly in front of the grouper's hole. We row back to *Firefly*. The next morning when I tug on the fender, there is resistance; I am both thrilled by the catch and ashamed of our deviousness. Determining that our prey, tired after a night of struggling, is hiding inside the perceived safety of his tunnel-home, we position ourselves to pull horizontally. Heaving, I envision the green grouper and detest what I'm doing every moment I'm doing it; yet I continue hauling until the five-pound fish has been landed.

Delighted with a catch that will last several meals, Leo and I can't help feeling relieved that our next swim won't be encumbered by thoughts of seafood: We'll look up at the turquoise clouds, then, for the sheer pleasure of it, envelop ourselves in these Bahamian waters resplendent with color - the finest I've ever seen.

A licensed captain, Poupette Smith has contributed to Sail and Sailing, and has lived aboard Firefly for 13 years.

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