

Nikki's Panhandle Cruise (Gulfport to Cedar Key)

by Bruce Bingham

Day 1, May 18, Gulfport to Madeira Beach

The day of our departure from Gulfport was a meteorological slugfest with southwesterly winds at 25 knots, frequent heavy rain squalls, and fiercely breaking waves on Boca Ciega Bay. Larry Lynch and Carole Sharp had tried to head south that morning to attend a wedding (or something) in Pine Island Sound, and had been forced to turn around. I bumped into Carole in the Boca Ciega parking lot shortly after their return to the club, and it was raining buckets. She related the havoc the weather was playing at the mouth of Pass a Grille inlet. It raised a huge question in my own mind as to whether I should push *Nikki* into these conditions.

I drove over to my friend Brian's to do laundry and to wait for the arrival of my Canon camera from the repair facility in Virginia. I had no intention of leaving for a cruise without this vital piece of equipment. After all, the point of the voyage was to take pics of everything and anything of the slightest possible interest. Without photos, the trip would have no point.

The long awaited box arrived by FedEx at 3:00 pm ... just as I folded the last piece of laundry. I was in my car headed for the boat within minutes. By then, the weather had cleared substantially with moderating winds and waves. Sean was waiting at the club where he was working with the SPOT locator that was being kindly loaned to us by Bob Macintyre, a fellow BCYC member. The two diddled with the small orange instrument for about an hour until they were satisfied that they had figured out the basic functions and operations that would keep

us in touch with a selection of friends by transmitting out location as well as sending emails to let all know that all was well (or not).

Nikki was at the dock and ready to go. Sean had already loaded his gear aboard when I arrived. By 17:20, we were cast off and headed westerly across Boca Ciega Bay which was still riled up from the



New marina being built near McDonalds at Madeira Beach

previous weather. At the intersection of the Intracoastal Waterway, we decided to "stay inside" rather than drive headlong into the residual high waves in the Gulf of Mexico. We turned northward into the channel.

We were able to motor sail for most of the short distance we traveled during the first afternoon. But both Sean and I were so exhausted from the effort to push off, we decided to drop the hook two miles north of the Madeira Causeway Bridge (Tom Stuart Causeway also called Welch Causeway) at 1920. The remainder of the night was calm and uneventful, although there was lightning in the far distance.



Nikki ready to at Boca Ciega Yacht Club



Nikki's forepeak stowed for sea

Day 2, May 18, Madeira to Cedar Key Channel

I am always the first one up and on my feet every day. There is no exception ever. I pulled the anchor at 0700 and headed northward, entering the Narrows of the Waterway that was a scant half mile from where we had dropped the hook. It was dead calm. Sean appeared through the companionway hatch just as the sun was peeping over the trees.

We decided to stay in the waterway rather than turn left and enter the Gulf at Clearwater because it would have added several unnecessary miles. And



Downtown Clearwater at Memorial Causeway

since there was little wind, it would have served no purpose. We motored to Tarpon Springs and Anclote Key with the autopilot where we began to feel a hint of a breeze. At the north end of Anclote Key, we responded to an increasing wind from shore by setting the main and Genoa, and shutting down the



Nikki storms along on a beam reach.

engine. We were hard on the wind, and were just able to point high enough to clear the two barrier islands that are the last of their breed until Cedar Key 50 miles to the north. I set up the wind-vane steerer, and off we went.

We were astounded to see the water as clear as it was. The bottom passing under us



Nikki's first sunset at sea

was very distinct for many miles and as deep as 20 feet. Within the hour of our clearing land, the wind had freshened to about eight knots, and we were scooting along at 4.2. The seas were very gentle, and *Nikki's* motion delightfully comfortable.

The wind increased throughout the day and *Nikki* kicked up her heels. By sunset, we were doing a solid 5.5-6 knots on a beam reach. At times, we would hit 6.3 knots for sustained periods.

It would be like this all night. The stars covered the sky like a blanket.

Day 3, May 19, Open Gulf to Cedar Key Channel, then to Cedar Key

At 0115, we sighted the outer mark of the Cedar Key Channel and began heading in. The wind was right on our stern at 12-14 knots, so I decided to reduce sail to only the partially furled heads'l so as not to go storming into the very tight and complicated channel at high speed. Sean navigated while I steered. By 0300, we could see the lights of the town of Cedar Key, but before deciding to go no further, we ran hard aground right in the middle of the channel. We dropped anchor and turned in totally exhausted, making no attempt to get off of the bar. I did, however, row out an anchor with the hope that it would keep us in one place rather than floating higher on the bar as the tide advanced. The anchor rode vibrated noisily in the swift current for the rest of the night.

At dawn, we could clearly see what I call "the snake's nest" of islands and shoals that guard the entrance to Cedar Key. I've been here before, and

knew what we were getting into. It's a great big invitation to end up aground.

We were already free of the bottom when I awoke, and the current had ebbed, so the boat was ready to go without a struggle. I sat around and had my coffee while I waited for Sean to stir.

At 0735 he was awake, and we got underway and made our way to the town waterfront where we dropped the hook just off the boat landing.



Cedar Key's waterfront

The water at Cedar Key is the color of weak coffee ... not pretty ... but the porpoises seem to like it and were visible everywhere. They were not shy, and came very close to the boat. We saw a mother with two little babies that were no larger than three feet.

We spent most of the day walking around town and taking pictures. That's all. Cedar Key is kind of quaint, and there are a lot of beautiful old homes to see. The waterfront also boasts what I call "pirate restaurants." They're cute, but I can't speak for the food quality. They might be just mediocre for all I



Cedar Key's main drag, east end

knew. When I travel, I rarely spend money eating out. There are also lots of very nice gift shops along the main drag and even a tattoo parlor or two in case you looking to be branded in a weak moment. But that's not my thing either.



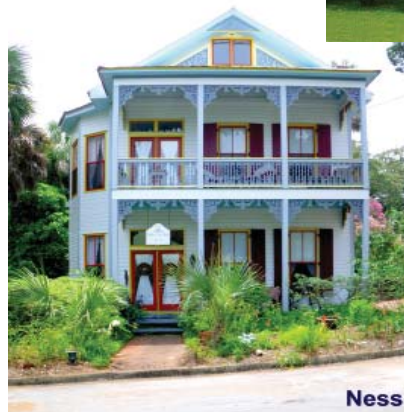
Cedar Key's main drag west end



The Rusty Rim Pub on the main drag of Cedar Key



Ness



Ness

Cedar Key homes beautifully restored



Ness

More Cedar Key Photos



A Cedar Key waterfront panorama



A Cedar Key shop porch



Lawn planter



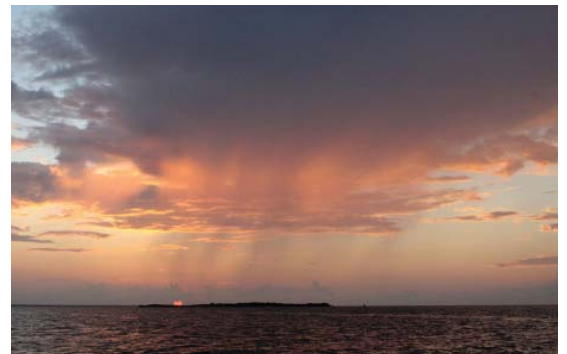
Phony fisherman



Cedar Key small boat basin



Backyard boat (Ness)



Rainy sunset over barrier island (Ness)



Anchorage neighbor



“CuNim” cloud over barrier island



Passing sailing kayaks

More of *Nikki’s* Cruise of West Florida, the Big Bend and the Panhandle will follow.