

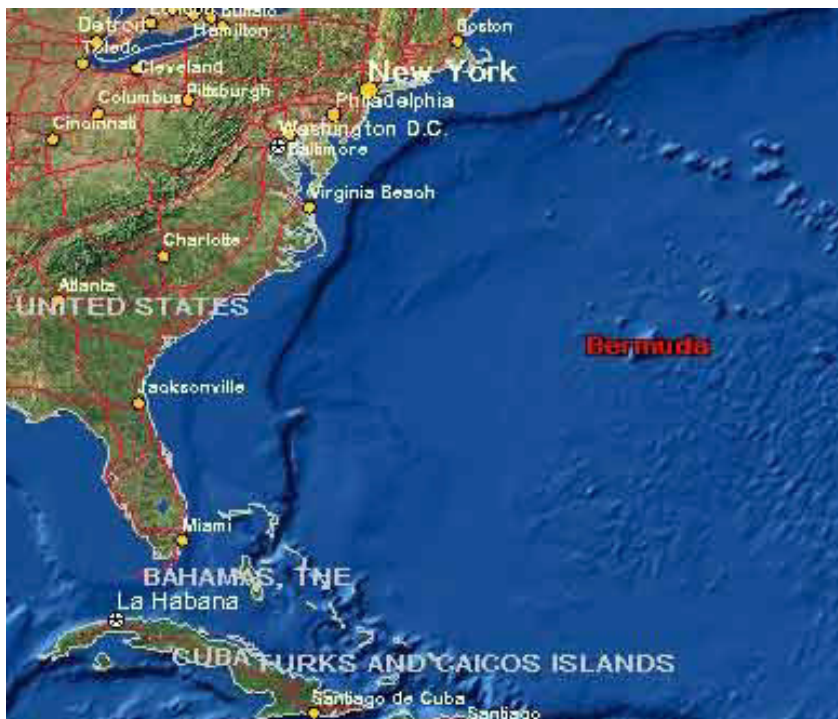
BLUEWATER MERIT BADGE

By James Calore

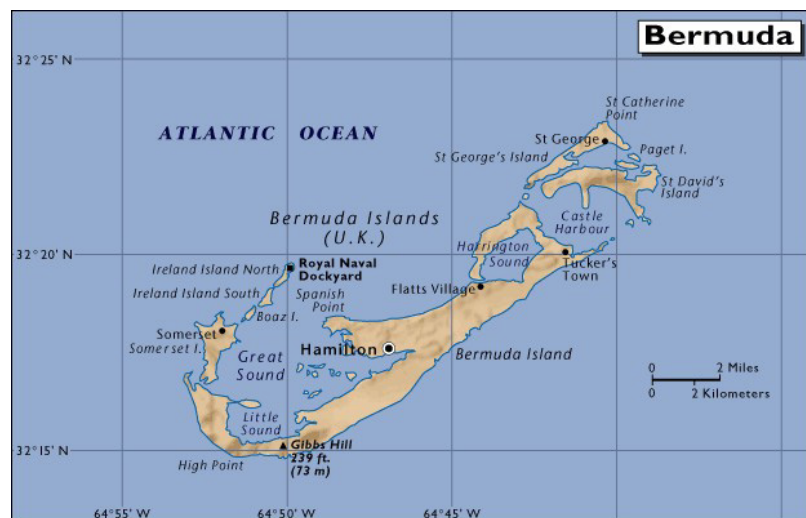
Talk about an emotional roller coaster...

At first, we were excited having been asked to crew on our first ocean voyage, only to be replaced two weeks later in the midst of making plans. Then my partner dropped out altogether, but soon after I was able to hitch a ride on another bluewater trip. Up, down, down, up...hold on!

Ray from Rochester, my frequent sailing, party and adventure partner and I were sipping Coronas waterside at a nearby outdoor canteen in Riviera Beach, Florida where we had come to spend the day with a newly retired couple about to cross the Atlantic and we were hoping to sign on as crew. The Super Bowl was about to start, but the pub owner was experiencing satellite dish difficulties, walking inside then out, adjusting knobs and relative positions of every item in the vicinity of the small screen television set attempting to clear the ghostly images - and keep his customers.



We had spent the afternoon onboard *Iona*, Jack and Crissy's late 1970's Camper Nicholson 35 foot sloop. Together we went over the boat's instruments, storage capacity, sleeping accommodations, safety equipment, etc. Both sides



were gauging each other's answers to subtle but important sailing questions as we moved about the boat. The decision would be made soon, it was late January and their sailplan was to leave Charleston, SC in May for Bermuda, re-provision and re-crew and set off for the Azores, then finally the Mediterranean. An ambitious plan for offshore neophytes from Michigan for sure, but they were determined, this was their dream and we were their insurance - seasoned and capable, if somewhat

limited offshore experienced sailors. Ray and I were hoping to earn our bluewater merit badges with this ride. A symbiotic relationship (you know, the fish and the sea anemone), a win – win situation for all.

The meeting was going well on all sides, except for the TV reception, which was spotty at best. We learned to listen to the powerboat party off to our right and when that crowd whooped, we focused on the fuzzy picture in front of us hoping to see what had just happened. Life was good. We were down from the Northeast, Ray from upstate New York and I from New Jersey, basking in balmy South Florida winter weather, talking offshore sailing surrounded by snowbirds temporarily marina-bound, most headed to the Bahamas as soon as the current weather pattern cleared. It was where we wanted to be.

We had all met by chance the previous summer in Annapolis - first in the harbor as mooring mates, then later ashore where we bumped into each other - literally, in a crowded shoreside tavern. As cruisers do, we discussed our future sailing plans over drinks.

Well, Jack and Crissy actually did what they said they would and now have reached South Florida from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, about to depart for Bimini in the Bahamas - a training run for them - and were here hoping to line up a crew for Bermuda.

Unfortunately, Ray called me sometime later the next month to inform me that we were replaced with friends from Mackinac Island as crew for the offshore trip, leg one of

on next year and here I am, alone, holding the brown end of the stick. Then, as life would have it, and life does tend to play with us from time to time as sort of a way to remind us

“One crewmember with a sharp knife jumped over the stern rail onto the swim platform and a minute later handed up a thick slab of meat into a waiting tall kitchen bag.”

their cruise, and my coveted ticket to bluewater experience. (They offered space as crew on the next leg to the Azores as an alternative but, due to time restrictions, that was not possible.) Back to square one. My mental coaster had just left the heights of “I’m in!” and screamed to an emotional stomach-throwing race to the bottom of “I’m out?” - my high spirits plummeting with the sudden dive.

My sailing partner Ray postpones, saying he’ll focus

who’s actually in charge here, three guys from the Upper Chesapeake Bay were making plans to depart in early June for Bermuda on a Catalina 36 foot sloop and were looking for a fourth. What luck! My coaster was chugging up the next steep climb. Wahoo!

The tasks were divvied up and a schedule for departure, barring severe weather conditions, was agreed upon. Food, drink and extra fuel were laid in the day before; the 4-man emergency survival raft



Rainy day departure... but sunny dispositions!

and EPIRB operation were demonstrated and stowed as we shoved off. We motor sailed in a drizzle, a gray overcast morning departure timed to catch a favorable tide through

the engine, up with the sails, we were silently gliding onward, powered by forces that have pushed countless ancient mariners across oceans to their destinations -

with a northerly blowing," all the experts say, it can raise very high, very steep walls of water in such a confused sea state that survival can sometimes be in question. We had researched the present and future forecasts for the exact location of the gulfstream (it meanders) and the mysterious "eddies" that spin off it. Warm eddies spin clockwise and cold eddies counter-clockwise. End up on the wrong side of these spinning platters of water and you could be sailing in place for several hours or days! We noted the GS location and logged it into our GPS.

"No fuss, no muss. Flip the tuna over and take the other side. Filet and release. We ate like kings a few hours later, fresh baked tuna steaks that fairly melted in your mouth."

the C & D canal. Despite the dismal weather, nothing on this day could dampen the upbeat enthusiasm of the wide-eyed excited crew.

ours lay over 635 nautical miles to the southeast. My unpredictable coaster was now on cruise control.

Fish on!

Some twelve hours later we celebrated our course change at the mouth of the Delaware Bay off Cape May, NJ - 140 degrees, next stop Bermuda! The sky cleared and on my first ever night watch, I had the moon off the starboard bow with the planet Mars just below. The wind picked up. Off with

Watches were set up two hours on, six hours off. My shifts fell the same time every day, early morning, late afternoon and nighttime. We soon fell into a rhythm. Each pre-shift started with a chart plot to check position, fire up the gimbaled stove for coffee, climb into your damp foulies and boots, slide into your safety harness and head out into the cockpit with a cup of steaming java for a briefing from the current watch. Clip in, scan the instruments, feel the sea and boat working together. Awesome! It was everything we imagined. Ray would have loved this... too bad cell phones don't work offshore.

The deep-sea rod and reel, trailing a feathered spoon on 50 lb line, was singing a high-pitched song, getting louder by the second. Everyone jumped into action. Was this fish ever strong! And all he wanted was to go to the bottom – some thousand feet below. It was a monumental battle, ebb and flow, gain line, and give it back. Finally, after 45 minutes of muscle-fatiguing isometrics with this determined marine torpedo, we were able to land it on the stern swim platform. It turned out to be an exhausted 65 lb yellow fin tuna. One crewmember with a sharp knife jumped over the stern rail onto the swim platform and a minute later handed up a thick slab of meat into a waiting tall kitchen bag. No fuss, no muss. Flip the tuna over and take the other side. Filet and release. We ate like kings a few hours later, fresh baked tuna steaks that fairly melted in your mouth garnished with salt, black



Moon-splashed first nightwatch

Two things happened before we reached the gulfstream, that infamous river of warm water that skirts Cape Hatteras shooting northward opposing the cold North Atlantic Labrador current. "Never, never, never cross the 'stream



Flying fish meets unexpected sailor

pepper, garlic and lemon slices. Mmmmm.

We approached the gulfstream at dusk; since we previously marked its location on our GPS we were aware of its approaching presence. We were concerned it would sneak up on us. We need not have worried. The sight was surreal. A curtain of vertical lightning hung before us, striking at different spots from overhead to the sea surface like a crazed supernatural pinball display. It was eerie. We steered around the biggest cells and picked our way through. After a couple hours of this hair-raising experience we watched the sea temperature rise on the instrument readout panel 15 degrees. We started peeling layers of clothing off. It was now hot and humid, not the chill-to-the-bone climate we had dealt with since leaving the East Coast. Daybreak showed the ocean a deep purple color in which it seemed you could peer into for hundreds of yards. Yessir, no mistake about it, this was the gulfstream – and on a good day. Thank you Neptune.

The walls that delineate the gulfstream on both sides from

the ocean can be legendary. This trip they were tame. We were thankful. Mornings we kicked the flying fish off the deck, which had collided with our sails during the night, and marveled at the squadrons of dolphins that regularly sped alongside us

performing precision drills and jumps— they seem to sync with the movements of our boat. The wind was holding nicely around 20 knots and we were loving life.

Our plots showed the ‘stream was pulling us northward. We noted this in the log and maintained a southeasterly heading. The wind was building but the sea remained comfortable. We released a ‘message in a bottle’ accompanied with a dollar bill for incentive, hoping some far-off islander will pick it up and respond someday. We saw whales breach, man ‘o war jellyfish sailing on the wind and hailed several huge commercial ships along the way (they didn’t always respond). We braved a night of squalls, which taught us to run with the storms rather than try to maintain an absolute heading. (You can always correct to a new rhumb line afterwards.) At exactly 500 miles

offshore, we stopped for a swim. The chart said the bottom was miles away and even though we were all supposed to go for a dip, only one was able to control his runaway imagination and jump overboard. He was back in a New York minute breathlessly saying, “I felt like something was eyeing me from below!” It was spooky.

The wind built, we took a third reef in the main. Thirty knots now. As the swells grew in size, the boat would race up one side then surf down the wave faces on the other. I can tell you winged keels are squirrely to control during this surfing maneuver. Each watch was much more tiring now. We hand steered all the way, usually not a problem, but this was the toughest going so far. After a watch during these conditions, you were exhausted, arms, shoulders and neck throbbing in unison from muscling the helm for two non-stop hours.

“Hey! Everyone on deck – island watch!” We were closing fast on the little speck of land



Message in a bottle - with incentive!

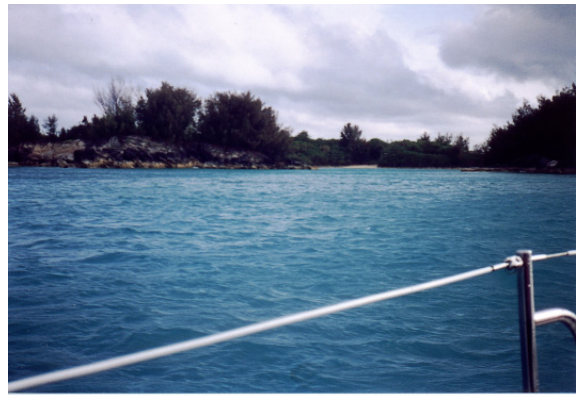


Hoisting flags: Bermuda courtesy & Q

somewhere amid the vastness of the great Atlantic Ocean known as Bermuda. Whew! We won't have to learn Portuguese after all! It's official, there were Bermuda Longtails swooping overhead welcoming us to this gorgeous island paradise. Up with the Bermuda courtesy flag and the Q flag, skirt the reef and head through the cut into St Georges Harbour. This was exhilarating, we made it! Now, one thing I know is that it's traditional for voyagers making this landfall to first clear customs, find a spot on the wall to tie up the boat and head directly to the White Horse for a beer – no

matter that it was ten o'clock in the morning. After all, we've got to uphold traditions!

Looking back, I'd say the preparations made prior to the trip were the difference. It made everyone feel comfortable even in the worst of times. We knew we had a life raft, ready to deploy stocked with 7 days of food and water, an EPIRB registered with the Coast Guard and a medical kit that included drugs, instruments and instructions to handle most emergencies offshore. We went over the sequence of events, should we need to abandon the boat, and everyone was assigned a job. These items we rented for the trip except the medkit, which was loaned to us by a doctor friend. Fortunately, we needed none of them.



St Georges Harbour cut, the White Horse awaits

Another emotional roller coaster is about to leave the dock. Having earned my bluewater merit badge, Ray not to be outdone, is busy outfitting his Contessa 32 foot sloop for his bluewater experience. We'll do it together, for there are a lifetime of lessons to be learned navigating a small boat offshore, and fully knowing I've only taken the first baby step, it still puts me in a position to, unmercifully, rag on Ray!



Racing an approaching gale into St Georges Harbour



Up against the wall!

James Calore, while not attending meetings in waterfront taverns, normally can be found sailing the Chesapeake Bay in his Tartan 34C sloop AKELA.

Comments?

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