

“Get ’er out on the ocean. If it’s gonna happen, it’s out there!”

— CAPT. RON



OPEN WATER

An offshore adventure provides an introduction to life at sea.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY PIERCE HOOVER

The title character played by Kurt Russell in the movie *Captain Ron* may have been a nautical numbskull, but he was right about one thing: There’s no substitute for time at sea. Generations of aspiring mariners developed their sea legs before the mast, their characters forged by a tradition of harsh discipline and the unforgiving ways of the sea. My nautical rite of passage was similar — minus the press gangs and floggings of earlier times. A childhood spent poking about lakes and bays in fishing skiffs and sailing dinghies provided a love for all things nautical.

EVENING LIGHT on Florida Bay heralds the beginning of an overnight passage.



TRIP PLANNING includes a detailed plot of the intended route. Aids to navigation are noted and subsequently used to verify position (bottom).

But my true education didn't begin until my teen years, when I signed aboard a schooner bound for England. Gales, becalming and a harsh but ultimately fair skipper taught lessons that could not be found in any book or classroom setting.

This sink-or-swim approach to offshore cruising isn't for everyone. Fortunately, there are now more benign and less risky ways to accrue some time at sea — for example, the hands-on learning programs offered by the Florida Sailing & Cruising School. When my son Nash was 11, I enrolled him in the school's Basic Powerboat Handling (P-101) course. He soaked up the lessons like a sponge, and at the end of three days of total immersion, he came away with a basic understanding of everything from engine room systems and boat handling to charting and the Rules of the Road.

This same program launched many adults into a cruising career. After following up with the school's second three-day course, P-102, they graduate with a solid foundation in the skills needed to anchor, dock and explore coastal waters.

There's a big difference between following the markers — with Sea Tow and the Coast Guard just a radio call away — and following a compass to a destination 100 miles across the horizon. To facilitate the transition,

the Florida Sailing & Cruising School staff created P-103. This intensive eight-day experience gives participants an opportunity to venture beyond the jetties and into everything open-water cruising entails.

With Nash becoming a teenager and assuming ever-greater responsibilities aboard our own boat, a program such as P-103 seemed like a good way to expand his nautical knowledge. Sure, Dad could continue to provide his usual (sometimes shouted) pointers, but a more formal program under the watchful eye of a professional captain would boost learning to the next level.

So, one Sunday in October Nash and I found ourselves back in North Fort Myers, Florida, at the docks of Southwest Florida Yachts — the parent company of the cruising school. On our last visit, a vintage Grand Banks trawler served as our floating classroom, and we took it out into the Caloosa River each day to practice the basics of boat handling and line-of-sight navigation. This time, we'd follow the river out to the Gulf of Mexico, then turn south to begin a 100-mile passage to Key West.



Though the route was straightforward, the logistics would necessarily be a bit more involved than just topping off the tanks and tossing some sandwiches in the fridge. In fact, the entire first day of the P-103 cruise

is spent at the dock, where participants engage in what may be the least exciting — but ultimately one of the most essential — elements of any extended cruise: planning. From menu planning to spare parts inventories, the myriad details involved in operating a complex powerboat in an offshore environment are best managed when listed and tracked. As the scope of the cruise expands, so too should the checklists.

Equally important is route planning. Though we live in an age where one could plot a transatlantic course with a few swipes on a touch screen, there are still good reasons to return to the old school and do the paperwork — especially when venturing into unfamiliar waters or contemplating a trip that will draw on a significant portion of the boat's fuel reserves.

So, Nash's hopes for a quick departure were postponed as he found himself in the salon with a chart and dividers in hand. Capt. Chris Day, who would be along for the duration of the trip, taught Nash the basics of plotting and route planning during last year's P-101 course. This time around, Day asked for a far more ambitious plan, one that not only included ranges and bearings to every waypoint between Fort Myers and Key West, but also took into account weather forecasts, estimated run

The most important lesson blue water teaches is the need to accept more personal responsibility. When you head offshore, you have to solve your own problems.

times and fuel consumption data for various operating speeds.

Armed with the details generated by this planning exercise, Day then asked Nash to fill out a detailed float plan. This is a detail some skippers might feel tempted to skip — or at least minimize. But as we would be more than 50 miles from land at the midpoint of our passage, common sense dictated we provide at least one responsible source with a document detailing our route and expected times of arrival.

Then, with spares checked, provisions stowed, checklists revisited and plans double-checked, it was finally time to cast the lines and head for open water. But even as the San Carlos sea buoy slipped astern, there was still work to be done. Though we enjoyed the convenience of GPS and touch-screen plotters — something only dreamed of back in the twilight days of sun sights and logarithms — Day remains a firm believer in the redundancy of paper charts.

Open on the dashboard adjacent to the autopilot was Nash's carefully plotted course. At the top of each hour, he was tasked with marking our current position on that chart. At first, Nash questioned the need for this seeming redundancy, but emphasizing the importance of this information was as easy as turning off the plotter and asking "Now what?"



PAPER CHARTS remain a fail-safe backup to electronics. In open water, it's standard practice to record the boat's course on a periodic basis.

Our first day's run was not our most ambitious. To ease into the routine, we made a four-hour hop south, running just a few miles offshore on our way to Naples, where we spent the night at anchor. In preparation for things to come, we established a simple one-hour helm rotation and agreed on clearly defined duties for each crew member.

During day trips and short coastal hops, few skippers bother with a formal watch standing routine. But as voyages stretch from hours to days — and especially when overnight passages are involved — watch standing becomes a vital element not only of safe operation, but also of crew morale. When the comforts of shore are left behind, the routines of eating, sleeping, navigating and manning the helm become the reference points for daily life.

On day two, we left the security of populated coastlines and on-call towboats behind as we began a 100-plus-mile transit across Florida Bay. To ensure adequate fuel reserves, we throttled our semi-displacement trawler down to 10 knots and instituted a two-hour watch rotation.

In fair weather, an offshore passage can be a time of relaxation and reflection. But even when gliding across glass-calm waters, prudent mariners maintain a certain heightened sense of their surroundings. Day referred to this characteristic as “situational awareness.”

To a boater, situational awareness means keeping an eye peeled for prop-fouling crab floats, monitoring engine oil pressure and double-checking to make sure that shrimp trawler on the horizon isn't on an intercept course. It also means keeping a weather eye on the horizon and an ear to the forecasts.

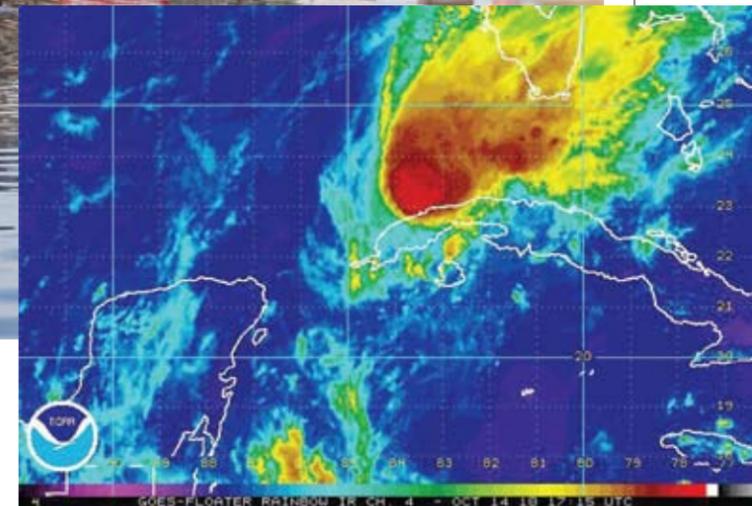
Mother Nature remains the one game-changer crews cannot control. Throughout history, skippers who ignored this fact have come to grief — or at the very least spoiled a pleasant cruise — by refusing to modify their plans when skies turned gray and the seas rose.

We were not immune. As the days unfolded, we experienced the minor incidents that seem to be part and parcel of any cruising

adventure. The anchor dragged, an impeller failed — and then Hurricane Paula set its sights on western Cuba. Feeder bands extended over the lower Keys, dumping nearly a foot of water on the streets of Key West and dashing our hopes of shore leave in the southernmost city. Of greater concern than our leisure pursuits, however, was the possibility of the storm turning north.

Some forecasts called for the storm to stall and dissipate before crossing the Straits of Florida. But even if hurricane-force winds didn't reach the Keys, the regions seemed destined for some nasty weather. And so, we

About a third of the people who take the class decide extended cruising isn't for them. Others gain confidence and return with a much clearer idea of what they are looking for in a boat and a lifestyle.



HEAVY RAINS flooded Key West, Florida, ahead of Hurricane Paula (top). The storm threatened, but ultimately caused no serious damage (above).

The P-103 Program

Offshore Powerboat Cruising (P-103) is the third in a series of hands-on courses offered by the Florida Sailing & Cruising School. During the course of a seven-day cruise, participants learn to act as skipper and crew of a twin-engine vessel of 36 to 50 feet in length, operating day or night in inland, coastal and offshore waters. This full-immersion experience was created as a follow-up to the school's P-101 and P-102 courses, which teach the basic skills needed to operate and maintain a large motoryacht and to cruise in inland and coastal waters. For more information on this program, visit flsailandcruiseschool.com.



CHART: NOAA

exercised the better part of valor, and Nash found himself once more plotting a course across Florida Bay.

This time, his plot work was executed with a meticulously sharpened pencil. Lines were more precise; numbers were double-checked. Sometime during the past week, an epiphany had taken place, and he understood that the charting wasn't just a homework exercise — it was our way home.

Sunset found us 40 miles north of Key West, running before a storm that ultimately disintegrated into rain-squalls before reaching the Keys. At 1900 hours, Nash came on watch, scanned the instruments, jotted our current position on the chart and then settled into the helm like an old salt. Of course, he still has a lot to learn, but the trip definitely lived up to my expectations, as it provided a controlled but fully engaged introduction to open-water cruising and laid the foundation for his boating future. ♣