



My trip to Bimini Bahamas By Joe McFarland

Since the purchase of my 1972 Catalina 22 *Irish Rover* (hull 431) back in 2008, I've taken advantage of its trailering capabilities and have sailed this venturesome vessel through several of the Great Lakes in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the waters bordering

both east and west of Florida. During this time, I've wondered if it was at all possible to sail this boat to Bimini, Bahamas.

Many questions had to be answered and many more arose as the 2010's research progressed. At first it was simple, get the boat to Biscayne Bay (South of Miami, FL), find a marina to launch, store my vehicle and trailer, provision, and head out – No problem, I've done this many times. The two following sections briefly describe the research accomplished and provisioning acquired in preparing for this journey.

Research:

Online general crossing data – I was surprised there was not more. I did find a few “small boat crossing” blogs / stories which were very helpful – and later added my first (and only) blog requesting information ([www.sailnet.com - IrishRover431](http://www.sailnet.com-IrishRover431)). There were a few good videos on YouTube. I focused on the wind and waves in the background then noticed different sail plans. Most passages started out under full jib and main then dwindled to a reefed main only as the winds tended to increase in the afternoon.

Weather data – I used online almanacs to check the past five years weather patterns to better understand what I could expect for a December / January crossing. I was surprised to find that even though summer is hurricane season, winter can be worse. Wind patterns change more often and the Gulf Stream will get violent quick whereas hurricanes are much easier to predict.

Gulf Stream (GS) – Do heavy research on this if you know your going to be in it. I found it absolutely amazing on several occasions. I plan never to sail in it in questionable weather.

Sea trail to determine fuel range – My plan; pick a bad day to sail, at least 15 knot winds on the nose, completely provision the boat for the Bimini trip, Zodiac in tow, do not sail, use one full six gallon fuel tank until motor stalls, record the range in both miles and in time.

I rigged and launched the Rover in Lake Erie on November 7th. With the boat rigged and snug in my snowmobile suit, I left port and headed WNW 280 into a 10-15 knot wind with 2-3 foot Lake Erie chop. Maintained a 5 knot hull speed and with the auto tiller in check, I spent the next 6 hours below reading a book until the engine stalled. Recorded data, switched fuel tanks, and

made it to Lorain where I spent the night. The next day, and with milder conditions, I did the same trip back to Cleveland. Range was recorded in “worst case” conditions out and “favorable” conditions back. I would fuel the Rover for the Bimini trip at the worst case plus 20%.

Boat design – I think in general it's a bad idea to take a “small boat” into large bodies of water unless you have several back up plans; even then it may be dicey. I've had the Rover 8 miles South of Key West in 20 knot sustained winds gusting to 30 knots. Seas were tolerable at 4-6 rollers with some spray. Rover does not sail well in wind above 20 knots; center of effort is too high even for the reefed main only. Determined that either the Rover or I was not going to survive. We turned back as not to find out who would fail first.

Provisions / Equipment (Note: Some taken from Wild Irish – my 1972 30' C&C live aboard):

Ditch Bag with standard required safety gear plus – handheld GPS, two sets of batteries, signaling mirror, strobe light, matches, medical kit, horn, knife, and few other items.

Personal safety gear including self inflatable PFD w/ built in harness, double ended tether, boat jack line running bow to stern, hand held marine radio, portable EPIRB and knife all tethered to my PFD and stowed in pants pockets. I wore this equipment 100% of the time in both crossings.

Bimini Charts, 2011 Bahamas cruising guide, plotting tools, etc...

Garmin 441's chart plotter with depth sounder and sea temp – worth its weight in gold.

TackTick mast head wind gage and cockpit display – another nice item when wind is an issue.

Weather station – Barometer (a must), air temp, and humidity.

Two Danford anchors, two 150' rodes w/ chain lead, and one 12' Para Sea Anchor.

Tool box and misc parts to fix the important things. Duct tape, five minute epoxy, spark plugs, water impeller, extra pull rope, etc...

Zodiac with 2 HP motor.

Marine grade portable refrigerated cooler – a great item.

10 gallons fresh water. Solar shower.

31 gallons gasoline (three 6 gallon Johnson marine tanks,

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two 5 gallon steel military Jerry cans, one 2 gallon for EU2000 generator, one 1 gallon for Zodiac.

Propane BBQ (rail mount), propane cooking burner, four 1 lb bottles of propane, and my Coleman white gas stove (not filled to the rim this time).

USA flag, quarantine flag, and Bahamas courtesy flag.

Cash (I don't think Bimini knows what a VISA card is).

Three panel solar bank w/ regulator and two deep cycle marine batteries (group 24).

Nine days food, beer, wine, and rum.

Fenders, dock lines, shore power cable, garden hose, etc...

12/31/10 Friday

1400 - After a lengthy on-line meeting in my hotel room, I set out as usual leaving the hotel after a week of work at a customer's facility.

People around always wonder who the patron idiot is with the boat stowed in the back parking lot; a comment well justified given the fact it's always below freezing and usually snowing during this time of the year. In this case it was Indianapolis, Indiana at the Holiday Inn Express.

It's always a nice chat during checkout as the Blazen-ator and Irish Rover sit hove too outside the hotel's lobby. At last they know their "idiot". However after my story is told, the persons have a much better understanding (if not a want) of what will soon be my holiday season.

Finally, on the road and headed south to the sea. On my always wonderful drive to FL, I had missed the traditional New Year's countdown. Not long after though there was a BANG! Not fireworks, horns, nor bells; no this was from the rear of my vehicle. One of the two (smaller borrowed worn out) rear tires had delaminated and was beating my inner wheel well with a vengeance. I was hurried to slow and regain control of the somewhat weaving rear end. At a nearby vacant parking lot, I switched the tires back to the two new standard size tires and was on my way once again. (The test was for vehicle tow data and better gas mileage – and yes it worked well despite the mishap).

1/1/11 Saturday

0400 – Tired, I stopped at a truck stop and went to bed for a few hours; six in all. My tentative plan was to arrive in FL, launch, spend Saturday night at bay and (if the weather was favorable) head to Bimini 2200 Sunday 1/2/11.

For the two weeks prior to this trip, I recorded the weather & seas daily using three weather stations (NOAA,

Weather Underground, & Passage Weather) as my guide. In this two week period, there were only two days which would have allowed for a favorable passage. These two days were not even consecutive and I realized there was a slim to zero chance of me ever leaving the FL coast.

To help solidify my thoughts of abandoning this adventure, I was informed that a married couple from my home port had to abandon their sinking Beneteau 461 "Secret O Life" on 12/20/10 east of the Bahamas due to bad weather and a mechanical failure. They were rescued by the German freighter "Overseas Maremar". They also left this...

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by things you didn't do than by the things you did. So throw off your bowlines, sail away from safe harbor, catch the trade winds in your sails, Explore, Dream, Discover"

My decision to cast off all lines would be tough.

1500 - Arrived in Miami, FL and headed to the nearest boat store for last minute supplies. I was very excited in knowing a high pressure front was on its way and would be present for the week or so bringing great weather for the passage over and back (hopefully).

At the store I patiently walked each aisle scanning for any items which would assist in my journey. About an hour later and ~\$300 to the wind, the Rover and I were ready. Two new 6 gallon marine tanks (to replace the two questionable ones currently onboard) one Weems & Plath 360 anchor lantern (to conserve power at night anchorages), more fishing lures (yes, I'm a guy who has lots of fishing gear and never catches anything), and a few other miscellaneous items; kind of like grocery shopping when your hungry. (Yes, Hungry for Adventure).

While at the store, I spoke with 3-4 workers / locals about where the best place would be to suit my boating and storage needs. The answer was Matheson Hammock Park Marina not too far from here. I asked about the crossing to Bimini. Their responses were casual, no talk of terror or mischief. I didn't say I was going in a 22 foot sailboat... Maybe I didn't want to spoil the good weather.

With the Blazen-ator's GPS set, I was on my way to the short drive to the marina. Miami is not a city I recommended driving in, around, or even near – especially with a boat in tow. Horns, traffic lights, cell phones, and auto ticketing traffic strobe lights blinking all along the way. It was like being in a Disco Tech.

1700 - Arrived at the marina (unknowingly) just in time to miss the fee collector at the entrance gate yet find the Dock Master on the way to her car. What Luck! Mary-Kate was more than helpful during my entire stay in FL and a very nice person in general. She directed me to the

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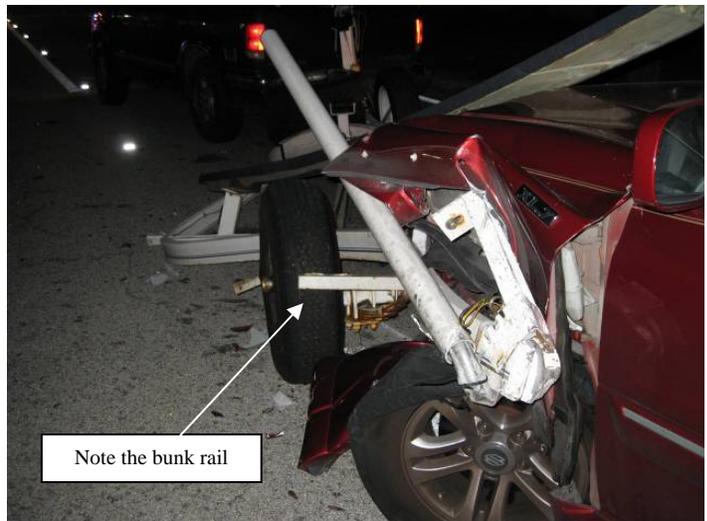
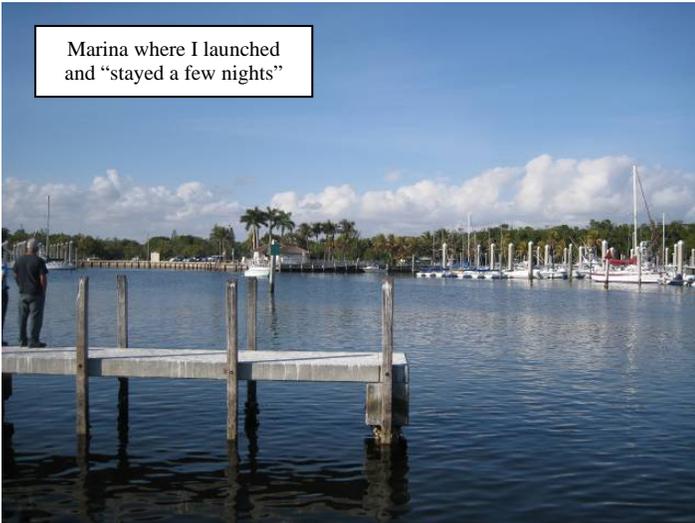
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launches and where to store my vehicle & trailer at no cost. Note: The park is closed at night and has 24 hour security. Also Note: Park marina rules dictate no overnights on any boat.

Rigging the Irish Rover on a perfect 80 degree day surrounded by boats and boaters with blue skies above and blue waters below, just "Give me an Old Milwaukee, cause it don't get no better than this"!

before coming to a stop. Long story short; RAV4 totaled, trailer totaled, Blazen-ator damage including bent and torn trailer hitch, bumper damage, fender and trim damage, and severed front brake line. To make matters worse, fire ants ate my left leg while in discussions with the police. "Serve and Protect me from these demonic ants!"

Accidents do happen and in this moment in time many positive events did transpire; the trailer was hit dead center where the main frame rails went around the car and not through it; the one bunk was deflected up over the car by the windshield, if it had gone thru it may have been messy; the trailer in tow acted as a cushion absorbing most of the kinetic energy of the car, if the car would have impacted the Blazen-ator direct, it would have destroyed the two vehicles, injured all persons, ruptured the 31 gallons of fuel, and most likely ended in the worlds most spectacular "Car-B-Q"; But seriously and most important; of the 5 persons in the RAV4 and myself in the Blazen-ator, nobody was injured. Material items are replaceable, life and limb are not. Our Angels were indeed watching over us this day.



With the Rover launched and secured at the "wall", I made the final trip for provisions. I left the trailer in tow since I was to store the mated pair in a grassy field at the park. Made my way back into the "sea of psycho drivers" now night and bound for Shell for gas and Publix for food. I loaded the Blazen-ator with 31 gallons of filled fuel tanks and several bags of groceries then headed the 3 mile return leg back to the marina.

1030 - Another BANG! On a six lane divided highway, a driver of a RAV4 failed to see the 20+ stopped cars (myself included) and attempted to park her car on my empty boat trailer. She got just past the trailers rear axle

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2300 - Back at the marina, I met one of the night security staff named Joshua; a very nice guy and very much down to earth. We talked for what seemed like an hour at the dock. He gave me more info on the trip over. At one time he was a passenger on a trip to Bimini and took interest in my objective. I gave him my float plan (Mary-Kate had it too) and soon I would be underway.

1/2/11 Sunday

0130 - The time came roughly twenty hours ahead of schedule due partly to the "fender bender" but more so the weather. On the leading edge of a high pressure ridge and with a 15 knot wind pushing 2'-3' seas out of the east, I logged the barometer and pursued my now reanimated plan to motor the trip to Bimini. It would first be six miles across Biscayne Bay before heading into the open sea.

Knowing the weather would be calmer the next day I had told Joshua it was my intent to travel to the edge of open water before making the ultimate decision of crossing. On my way out the marina, I noticed the Johnson outboard spewing steam where the water indicator drains. "Geeezzz Louieeezzz"- What Next!" I put the motor in reverse and throttled up until the white wash churned. Now back forward at idle but still no water, then full throttle where some water did appear. "Well some water is better than no water". I gave the Johnson my Ol' Evil Eye until the obstruction passed and full water flowed once again... 6 hours later.

As I made my east heading across Biscayne Bay the sea here was choppy, about 2-3 feet on the bow. I had expected this given the shallow water and did assume the chop would tire some once deeper waters were reached.

Navigating the final passage out was more than I had hoped for. The channel markers were unlit and I had only my chartplotter, depth sounder, and flashlight for navigation. Did I mention the stilt houses? No? neither did my charts. These behemoths enjoyed jumping to life at about 100 yards distant, the first spotted over the starboard bow with my overtaxed flash light.

With the auto tiller "Hal" set for the last mark (Bimini), I went below to continue with the charts. The chop was still very present and I had no desire to leave the protection of the cabin. I stayed down and waited having some light food and drink. After a period of time the deep water alarm sounded at 250 feet and I went up to see how things were moving. The seas had not subsided if anything, they were worse; about 3-4 feet still on the bow however the frequency (time span) between waves had increased some, so even though they were larger, there weren't as many.

Now well offshore and with all the preparation and planning I could possibly pack into the Rover and my person, the decision was made to continue onto Bimini.

Now, and for the first time, I would be heading solo into an unfamiliar open ocean in a moonless black night on a boat that may or may not be up to the task at hand. It was a numbing sensation, almost like a dream.

On and on the wind and waves held fast. I soon grew accustomed to the repeating cycles of several minutes of "normal" waves, then the heavy pounding of one particular wave which would leave the Rover shuttering for seconds thereafter. I was very concerned with this since I had never pushed her this hard. New sounds filled the cabin; pops, creeks, groans, and a not so frequent malicious sound that is hard to depict, but one like a deep throated long thud.

Below decks on the first inspection I found the bilge (what little of it there is) slopping in sea water. Normally this would not bother me much since I've had to bail many times after knock downs and in heavy rains while under way. The problem here was, I wasn't knocked down nor was it raining. I made this a priority to find the source.

Very quickly the source was located. The hydraulic pressure of the water as the boat was being slammed into the one particular wave would force sea water up the open thru hull where the swing keel support cable travels. I tried stuffing paper towels in the pipe but to no avail. I ended up raising the keel fully to somewhat block the hole. This left the Rover a bit more unstable but slightly faster I'm sure. I still had to bail (sponge) but now it wasn't as often.

In the process of identifying the source of the renegade water, I had also found the source of the deep throated long thud sound. This was more troubling since I could not counteract the problem less I turned and ran with the waves; and that was the wrong direction. The aft starboard side cabin sole where it laminates to the bottom of the boat, near the keel tunnel, was delaminated (more than usual) and it was visibly shifting on the hull during the heavy poundings.

Watching (and hearing) these two surfaces shift against each other was like dragging my fingernails over a chalkboard. I closed the hatch and again ran through the two back up options I had devised should the boat sink. They are as follows:

Option A: Grab the ditch bag, Zodiac, and if time permits, a bottle of rum. The wind and waves theoretically would have pushed me right to Biscayne Bay or maybe Charleston, SC should the GS really bear down on me. Hail for a ride on a passing boat or USCG during this time.

Option B: Grab the ditch bag and let it all go down. Activate up the EPIRB and hope I don't get eaten by sharks while awaiting rescue. Not high on my list of things

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to do anytime soon.

There were in fact two positive outcomes of sinking the Rover in the Atlantic, I wouldn't have to worry about acquiring a boat trailer and the gas mileage would have been great for the ride back to Ohio.

Five hours had past before the sun started to show its friendly glow off on the horizon. It was a relief knowing that if I did sink I could go into options A & B in the comfort of daylight. With the never changing wind and waves still crashing over the bow, I watched the sunrise through the cabin window – warm and dry inside my tiny world.

Per my sea trial fuel calculations I was making better than that of the previously determined “worst case scenario”. Apparently not much better since I had to switch fuel tanks almost immediately after my log entry. Once outside to change the tanks, I noticed my head sail in the process of escape from its sail bag. Forward I must go. Note to self: Do not wear floppy floppies on the bow of a pitching boat in wet conditions and for God's sake, put on my foulies!

This sucked! I was soaked almost instantly, slipping & sliding everywhere, then received a friction burn on my grip as I lost the unscheduled bout with gravity. Now on my hands & knees I set forth stuffing the damn jib sail back into the sail bag. The one troublesome particular wave was now having its way with me. I hunkered down over the bag and used my shoulder for protection as it pounded away. Several times I came clear off the deck only to be slammed back down on my knees and now bare feet. “This is good weather in the Gulf Stream?!?!?” I crawled back to the cabin with my tail between my legs; Not even a warm cup of coffee awaited my return.



Now with the sun up and further into the sea, I had passed the point of no return; Bimini lie 25 miles ahead. Eventually the waves calmed and the pounding subsided. Sitting outside I could enjoy the pleasant view of nothing but the unscathed blue sky and the most magnificent blue (and I mean BLUE) waters of the GS. The water temp was now 75 degrees, a 15 degree increase from when I'd first cast off.



It was quiet on the water; no boat traffic was ever spotted. About 10 miles from Bimini I shouted “Land Ho”. But to my displeasure more in depth observation it ended up being a freighter who soon passed on out of sight.

The time did come when I spotted land and with it bought our great United States Coast Guard (USCG). “What the hell are they doing one mile west of the Bahamas?” Maybe it is easier to patrol the “stopping points” to the US vs. the entire US coast. Either way they were providing “Free Inspections” – man do I love free stuff!

On the radio the CG calls were continuous, “first boat description, followed by boat location, then prepare to be
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Calmer Seas



Welcome to Bimini



Near harbor entrance

boarded". Once in range and my number was up, I spied the red eight person inflatable (six on board) fast approaching. I stood on the port lazarette with one foot on the gunnel. With a grin on my face and arms opened wide, I welcomed them to Bimini! Always a good ice breaker but no smiles dawned. Four of them boarded – semi automatic side arms glistening in the sun and neatly packed in their black nylon holsters. I'm assuming SIG P226, 9mm, stainless steel, synthetic grips, 15 round clip, and possibly fully jacketed hollow points (very nice).

I asked if I could leave my outboard running since it decided to develop a problem were, if it stalled, it wouldn't start without choking and finessing the throttle. They had no problem with this and were most agreeable.

First and only serious question, "any guns on board?" "No" was the serious reply given. Then on with the "free inspection"! My ditch bag, actually a florescent orange watertight plastic box, was close by as it had been throughout the trip. I grabbed and opened it as the one younger officer chuckled at the writing atop the box lettered "ditch bag". I told them jokingly, I had a better chance of sinking than the 150' steel cutter they were housed aboard. Plus, there are two orange boxes on board; the other being filled with repair parts. Can't fix what's already 2300 feet below the sea.

Inside the box was all I had mentioned previously. Under the hand tray in the box and sealed in a Ziploc bag are my legal documents for both sailboats, Zodiac, "Safety at Sea" training cert, "Ohio Boating" training cert, my USCG Auxiliary "Sailing & Seamanship" and "Coastal Navigation" training certificates. I'm always quick to show these to the inspectors as it pays off with effort shown to improve my boating skills. Once drawn, a more relaxed feeling of "brotherhood" immersed. One of the officers was from Ohio and knew the Auxiliary branch well, stating it aloud.

After the inspection and my written warning issued, the

Guard was satisfied with the Rover and me. They were further delighted acknowledging I was a "safe boater" – my auto inflatable still on, jack lines & tethers attached, and EPIRB & marine radio in pocket. They "wished more people were as safe". I felt pretty good.

As for the written warning, my ditch bag always has everything in it... Apparently only 99.9% of the time. This one .1% time, the Rover registration was not there; what the hell?!?! Without this scrap of paper meant I couldn't enter the Bahamas!

One mile off the shore of Bimini my brain was racing with where my registration could be, I physically had it in my hand within the past 24 hours, I saw it there! Within minutes of the CG's departure, I found it along with the Zodiac registration in my wallet. I had forgotten (in the confusion of the fender bender) I had put it in my wallet to make copies for the Bohemian Customs & Immigration officers. I never made the copies but at least I had the originals. I did hail the Cutter and advise I had found the missing document. They were going to return and rectify the warrant granted I could wait ½ hour. I declined and advised I would handle this through the mail as previously informed.

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