

Red Port wine

A simple sailing rule to live by while in the Bahamas

by Dave Gibson

The first time that I sailed across Lake Superior was twenty-five years ago. Back then, from Isle Royale we set an easterly course for Sault St. Marie. Navigating by compass, long before the advent of global positioning systems, on our second night we strayed into shipping lanes. Giant freight ships heavily laden with taconite (iron ore) lumbered their way through the waters.

A good thing to know when sailing in the dark is the color and location of the running lights of oncoming vessels. The green light is on the right or starboard side of the boat and the red light is on the left or port side. A good way to keep them straight is to remember the phrase "red port wine." That way you will always know that the red light is on the port side and the green light is on the starboard. If you see a red and a green light it means the approaching ship is coming straight at you and it's time to work out your avoidance strategy!

Unless you and another boat are traveling in the same direction at the same speed, every ship on the ocean is or was on a collision course. The real question to be asked of vessels in the general area is at what point do our paths converge? Most of the freighters pass easily and from a safe distance. In the middle of the night one gets closer than the others. After over two days of sailing everyone is exhausted, and with 30 thousand tons of steel bearing down on us we get the port and starboard lights confused and instead of heading away from the freighter we are going towards it. We try to reach him via the radio but can't. Sailboats don't usually show up on ship's radar and we are but a sea flea whose halving wouldn't even register with this behemoth. We now can look up and clearly see the ship's rails as it draws ever closer. Motor at full throttle, we bounce across its bow and narrowly avert disaster by a mere 100 yards.

The next morning nearing Whitefish Bay, a heavy wet fog has set in. It was near here that in 1975 the Edmund Fitzgerald floundered in stormy seas. Carrying a new shipment of taconite pellets from Superior, Wisconsin, on its way to Detroit, the 729 foot freighter was caught in an early November snow storm with waves up to twenty-five feet and gale force winds in excess of ninety miles per hour. Another ore carrier, the freighter Arthur Anderson was within sixteen miles of the Fitzgerald as they ran for safe harbor along the Ontario shoreline. Passing quite close to the shoals of Caribou Island

at around 6 p.m. on November 10th, the Fitzgerald may have damaged her hull there. Captain Earnest McSorley of the Fitzgerald reports to the Anderson that the radar is not working. Two hatches are damaged and they are listing. At 7:10 p.m. the Anderson informs the Fitzgerald about the position of a nearby ship and asks McSorley about his situation. In the Edmund Fitzgerald's last radio contact to the Arthur Anderson the captain solemnly states, "We are holding our own." He and twenty-eight crew members now lie on the bottom of Lake Superior's icy blue tomb.

As we slip through the dense fog, with visibility at fifteen feet, we detect the rumbling engine of a freighter. Sound carrying easily through the soupy mist, it is hard to judge its proximity. With last night's close encounter fresh in our minds, we get on the radio hoping to alert the ship of our location. This time we reach someone who, with the weather being what it is, can't see us visually and doesn't detect us on radar. We sail blindly, albeit in radio contact, until the chugging of the engine gradually fades away. In an eerily strange but true twist, the freighter that we had been communicating with was none other than the Arthur Anderson!

It is now 2007 and several sailing trips later with a bigger boat and none sunk to date, we embark from Tampa for the Bahamas. Bottle-nosed dolphins are everywhere along the Florida coast. They would sometimes travel with us for five minutes at a time swimming around, under, and ahead of the boat. Riding the bow wake or simply springing out of the water for the pure joy of it, the dolphins were always a constant source of amusement and a highlight of any day. I once saw two dolphins repeatedly jump a boat's wake in unison. A sea turtle surfaced just off our starboard side. We dodge hundreds of crab pot floats along the way. Only two hours out, we noticed that our speed had dropped from 7 knots to 4 knots and attributed it to abating winds. Time passes when I see something trailing us. A line attached to a large cage with a cinder block inside it has wrapped around our keel. We put the motor in neutral and do a gentle turn dropping it off at its new location. We stay in marinas the next two nights and move south toward the Everglades. Entering Little Shark River, a common night hawk swoops by. I feel like Martin Sheen in "Apocalypse Now" except the Viet Cong and tigers on the shore are alligators and no-see-ums. A dastardly insidious blood thirsty speck of an insect that inflicts a bite that causes small welts that can itch for days. They attack without mercy as we scramble below deck to secure the screens and break out the bug spray. We are glad to pull anchor



the next morning having survived with our sanity.

A few overnights spent "gunkholing" in the Keys follow and we're soon to Angelfish Cut - one of the few paths through the reefs of the Keys and our gateway to the Bahamas and the Bermuda Triangle. Our depth finder, being smarter than we are, reaches 588 ft. and stops registering knowing that at that depth the risk of running aground is minimal. Atlantic flying fish scatter with the approach of our boat and soar amazing distances recharging their flight with a slap of their tail. The water is midnight blue and the Gulf Stream pushes us along at 10 knots. Tonight the moon will be full.

During the night we are passed by several cruise ships and freighters. As long as we follow the simple rule "red port wine", we are able to keep a reasonable distance from oncoming vessels and we pass like ships in the night. We arrive the next morning in six foot seas and clear customs in West End, Grand Bahama, Bahamas.

West End is a small village a mile away from the marina at Settlers Point. I use a free bicycle to explore town a couple of times a day while our boat is being worked on for alternator problems. Our local mechanic's name is Audley and "Audley" enough, our boat isn't fixed today either. This is island time. The most striking thing about town is the empty conch shells that make-up its shores. Discarded everywhere they have in some cases formed peninsulas from years of conch divers cleaning their catch. Ruddy turnstones bob amongst the shells as a lizard scampers by. A barnacle encrusted sea turtle shell bakes in the sun. One afternoon as the fishermen were returning, we were able to obtain some fresh conch, which we fried up that evening for the best meal we'd had in some time. A few days later we purchased three pounds of lobster tails for forty dollars and I greedily enjoyed my first all-you-can-eat lobster dinner.

Apart from riding to town, hanging out at the pool, and taking a nap, snorkeling is about the only thing happening during the day. At the Old Bay Marina, submerged pilings of an old dock off their beach afford the best viewing opportunities. The water is shallow and lined with swaying turtle grass and sea urchins. Careful to stay near the surface, I reach the dock's foundation which is teeming with a colorful array of tropical fish. An enormous puffer fish spins his pectoral fins in

figure-eights, motionless under a shady timber. Fluorescently striped pinfish mingle in the branches of a sea fan as a school of angelfish glides over a cushion star. I give a small jellyfish a wide berth. Out of the corner of my eye I spot a great barracuda. Barracudas rarely attack humans but have been known to be drawn to shiny objects such as jewelry. Their pointed teeth can extract a sizable chunk of flesh if the fish is so inclined. The firing of my underwater flash might just qualify as shiny and I decide to exit the water. Of the half a dozen times at two locations that I snorkeled in the Bahamas, I always saw barracudas.

Relaxing one evening after five days in port, I hear loud festive noises emanating from the Straw Bar. The rhythmic throbbing of drums, cowbells, and whistles assault the sky. This is known as "junkanoo." With its roots traced to West Africa, it originated as a celebration of freedom marking three days of no work for the slaves around Christmas time. A national festival, it is held every Dec. 26 and Jan. 1. Ornate costumes are crafted with care and adorned with crepe paper, feathers, and studs attached to a wood or cardboard backing. Groups of up to one thousand members annually take part in what amounts to an elaborate dance-off. Costumes usually consist of a head-dress, shoulder piece, and skirt. Performing their infectious dances, the pulsating beat permeates the soul. A session or song lasts up to fifteen minutes. Frenzied into an almost trance-like state each time, the artists graciously perform three such sessions with guests of the resort and it is only March 5th.

After a stop in the party town of Lucaya, we venture west to Bimini. On the Great Bahama Bank, waters rise over 2 1/2 miles to an expansive 25 meter deep plateau that surrounds the island. During the last ice age, sea levels were 120 meters lower than today; exposing a large land mass. Ancient underwater ruins have reputedly been found here and some believe Bimini to be the location of Plato's "lost city of Atlantis." Its waters are a translucent turquoise when we arrive at sunset. A five foot wide southern stingray leaps from the ocean twice.

On the whole, Bimini ended up being somewhat of a disappointment. Its shores are littered with glass and debris along with shipwrecks old and new that have washed ashore. I come upon an old rusted freighter that has found her final resting place lodged uncomfortably against the rocks. I thought that the people were for the most part unfriendly and at a restaurant within Big Game Lodge, in a blatant display of modern-day regional discrimination, a sign read: "BIMINIS ONLY." Not far from that sign one demanded: "NO PEEING" to use the edited version. Another on a tavern door announced "NO POT SMOKING." I started out

greeting people with a hearty good morning and a smile but after four days was reduced to a nod and a "hey." Rats overrun Alicetown in the evening. The biggest event of the week is on Thursday when the supply ship arrives from Nassau. Everything the people will need for seven days is on that freighter and you better buy early if you want certain items like milk and eggs. Bicycles, golf carts, motorcycles, trucks, and cars zoom back and forth the 10 block long town heaped deep in produce and goods. The excitement of renewal and a full larder fills the air. The next morning a sprawled rat lie dead by the curb assumedly unable to avoid a tire in the motorized commotion. An afternoon of good bonefishing was Bimini's only saving grace and by the end of our stay I joked that I would brave ten foot seas to get out of here. My wish would soon come true.

A few hours out of Bimini the winds are blowing at 16 to 22 miles per hour with gusts of thirty. The seas are steadily rising until we are surrounded by ten to twelve foot swells. These are the angriest seas that I've ever been in. From the stern, rollercoaster waves push us first up one side of the trough and then down the other. With a reefed mainsail and a severe heel, when a gust comes up we must throttle back and try to steer away from a beam wind or water crashes across the starboard deck. Our feet taken from under us, we have no choice but to endure the unsettling ride. One of the violent gyrations of the boat throws my dad into the aft rail and lifeline! Things are getting serious and we strap in for our own safety. Fighting the Gulf Stream this time, our WSW course has slowed us down to a miserable two and one half knots. Hours creep by as wheel time, towering seas and fearing for your life grind at you. After sixteen hours I can see a glow on the horizon that can only be the lights of Miami.

Freighters crisscross our route and at one point I find myself sandwiched between two of them doing my best to avoid each. The rough crossing has taken its toll on all of us. Weary, I let my guard down and allow a freighter within our vicinity. I start to steer in the wrong direction and feel disoriented until I utter out loud several times, "red port wine" and right our craft's course. I had hoped that experience was my teacher on Lake Superior, but fatigue momentarily dulled my senses and only because of a rudimentary rule did I adjust and never come dangerously close to the freighter. We follow our lighted markers in with the nautical guideline "red, right, returning," but that is another story. Spent but alive, we drop anchor at 2 a.m. happy to be back in the USA.