

there And Back Again

***Over eight months
and 2,000 miles,
a Bay family proves
that it doesn't take a
fancy boat or a big
budget to have the
adventure of a lifetime.
You just have to go.***



■ ***by Nica Waters***

■ ***photographs by Jeremy Waters***

I SNEEZE OLD BAY INTO MY ELBOW, THEN SMILE A thank you to my friend Jon as he places a cold beer precariously on a pile of crab shells. The screened-in porch at Fishing Bay Yacht Club is perfect this evening, the late June breeze coming across the water unseasonably cool. Fireflies compete with distant anchor lights, chocolate-smearing kids happily chasing the former while adults wistfully contemplate the latter. “Welcome back. I want to hear all about your trip,” Jon says. A pause. “You know, I don’t think I could ever do that. I could never be that brave. ¶ I look along the dock to *Calypso* in her slip, her peeling paint a testament to work we never got around to on the cruise. A Kalik bottle full of shells tilts near the boom gallows. Pride fills me as I realize, again, how our 28-foot boat took all four of us all the way to the Dominican Republic and back in eight months. There are stains on the deck from the last mahi-mahi we caught, sea beans tucked under the cushions. ¶ “Sure you can,” I respond after cracking my next crab. “You have the boat, you just go.” ¶ That’s what we did. We just went. We left our slip at Fishing Bay Yacht Club (FBYC) the morning of October 14, 2009, and returned June 5, 2010, sailing through 2,000 miles, three countries, and many, many memories. A lot of people plan and plot and dream but never “just go.” There are too



many reasons not to. For us, it was simply that there were too many reasons we just had to go.

Calypso is a 28-foot Bristol Channel Cutter we have owned since 1992. Before we had kids, my husband Jeremy and I spent three years wandering the Bahamas and the Eastern Caribbean, making it as far south as Venezuela before turning the bow north. For 11 years after returning, those memories mingled with diaper talk and children's soccer games. When will we go again? Not now, not now. Later.

We weekendend all over the Chesapeake Bay. Maddie, our 9-year-old daughter, took her first steps under the chart table on her first birthday as we were anchored off of Oxford, Md. Julian, our 11-year-old son, first steered the boat as we

were reaching gently from FBYC over to Gwynn's Island. Weekends at anchor fed our souls, reminding us that life is not only yard work and mortgages. Still, we talked about going cruising again, still we said, "Later, later." Finally it was our 15th wedding anniversary, December 27, 2008. Over dinner, suddenly, later became now.

"Why not go cruising again?"

"Hmm. Why not, indeed. The economy stinks, we hate our jobs, we could rent the house, we could homeschool the kids, we have the boat, the kids will soon be too big (and need more schooling than we can provide). Damn, let's go."

And we did, almost that simply. Of course, the months in between were a whirlwind. We organized the boat, provisioned her to the brim.



*For us, it was simply that there were
too many reasons we just had to go.*

We rented the house, farmed out the pets, talked to the school about homeschooling. We quit our jobs. Good-bye parties were held, kids consoled, the boat hauled for one final round of scrubbing and checking. On October 14, 2009, after a fabulous weekend at the Turkey Shoot Regatta on the Corrotoman River and a last-ditch two days of scrambling back at FBYC, we turned our bow southward.

**October 14 to November 26, 2009
Fishing Bay Yacht Club to Double-Breasted Cay, Abacos, Bahamas**

I took a big breath, rolled up my pants legs, and took off my (only pair of) socks. No sense in getting those wet. The deck was like a giant ice cube,

and my breath puffed clouds into the air. “Here, I’ll catch your line,” called Tim Fisher, a high school friend of my dad’s from Annapolis who, with his wife Pam, was headed south too. “Want to raft up?” Pam chimed in, “We have a heater on board. Come over as soon as you are tied up.” Fifteen minutes later we were snuggled into their cabin, thawing out and laughing. “Wow,” said Maddie, “they even have a shower on board!”

We were in Belhaven, N.C., and, just a week after we left, we were freezing cold and tired of the rain. It had rained every day. We all wore all of our clothes all the time, and were still shivering. The condensation in the cabin each morning could have been collected and made into coffee water. So much for sunsets on tropi-

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Clockwise from far left: Big Sand Cay, Turks and Caicos; the Waters and Clarke families posing in the Turks and Caicos; Julian Waters jumping down a waterfall in the Dominican Republic; Calypso at anchor in Alabaster Bay, Eleuthera, Bahamas.

Preceding pages: Calypso sailing downwind (inset) and at anchor off Little Inagua, Bahamas in April 2010.



cal beaches. Nothing ever felt as good as sitting in *Querida Grande's* toasty cabin, even though we were worried about what we might smell like. *Calypso* is wonderful, but one of the space limitations is that we do not have an indoor shower. Was this whole thing a massive mistake?

We sat in the cabin for four or five hours, listening to the Fishers' tales of cruising in Europe and their section of the Bay. Part of my mind reveled in the three generation grouping. I know one reason my parents could (sort of) understand our wandering on the boat was that they had peers who did the same thing. I listened contentedly as all of us talked, sharing stories about life on board, 70-year-old Tim and 8-year-old Maddie swapping lamentations about not having enough bookshelf space.

And in the morning, when the sun finally came out and we all sat in *Calypso's* cockpit, hands wrapped around coffee mugs in the frosty air, I knew going cruising was absolutely the right thing to do.

Two hundred eighty square feet. That's what I figure our living space was, when I am being generous. Into that we packed four people and all our stuff, a toilet (the head), bunks for five people, the galley, a main cabin, and a chart table. Oh, and all the supplies and food and spare parts we would need, stuffed into every bit of space we could find. We had a refrigerator (but no freezer), a three-burner stove with oven, cloth napkins and porcelain plates. Our showers consisted of jumping over the side and lathering up, then rinsing off the salt water with fresh water from a converted garden pesticide sprayer.

Before you get visions of some kind of undulating prison cell, I should tell you that we were down below pretty much only to sleep and eat. Rather than stare at the same things every day, we watched as artwork on Mother Nature's walls constantly changed. We watched the sunsets and exclaimed over dolphins.

We walked beaches or ogled the boats in the anchorage. When the horizon stretched to infinity (or even to the closest beach), the space we lived in felt a heck of a lot larger than any interior blueprint. Even when it was raining we were outside, donning foul weather gear if it was cold or just reaching for the soap when it was warm. Our living space couldn't be measured by mere square feet—square infinities is more like it.

After negotiating the Intracoastal Waterway and leaving Lake Worth, Fla., to cross the Gulf Stream, by Thanks-

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giving we were anchored at Double-Breasted Cay in the Abacos. The morning of November 26 dawned bright and sunny, though the high clouds hinted at bad weather later. The crystal blue water enticed us in for a rare morning swim before we busied ourselves with the day. Julian had a sand fort to finish on the beach, Jeremy and Maddie wanted to explore the mangrove swamp by dinghy. I had a book to read and a serious Thanksgiving dinner to prepare. My only regret was that there was no one else in the anchorage to invite to share the feast.

By 4:30 p.m., the aromas emerging from the galley were intoxicating. Roast turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, peas, cranberry sauce all had their place on the counter. Two pies rested under fly-detering cloths. Clean, fancy clothes adorned squeaky clean bodies, and we all raised a glass to toast our incredible good fortune to be together, in a beautiful place, with a bounty of food. The rain dripping on the deck only enhanced the cozy feeling of togetherness. Life on board *Calypso* was one to be thankful for.

December 1, 2009 to March 1, 2010 Abacos to Exumas

"I hate cruising! I hate you for taking me cruising!" Maddie flung herself on the settee, hiccupping out her diatribe in between sobs. This latest outburst had been caused by some insignificant (to me) interaction with her brother, but the underlying sentiment was more pervasive. Maddie desperately missed her peers, missed passing time with people of her own mindset, and we had not shared an anchorage with a "kid boat" since leaving Beaufort, N.C., on October 24. Something had to give.

We were anchored in Royal Island, off of Eleuthera, hiding from bad weather along with six other boats, none of whom seemed particularly inclined to socialize. Jeremy and Julian had explored the abandoned resort a few times. The wind was too high to allow for dinghy exploration to the nearby beaches. Cabin fever was running high, and nothing helped Maddie's deepening funk. Part of the problem was certainly that we had left Hope Town, in the Abacos, after a Christmas week filled with friends and family from the States. Maddie had spent the time living in the rental cottage with my parents while Julian stayed on board with Jeremy and me, though we'd all shared complete days in company. We'd had noisy dinners with 30 people and beach walks with six kids in tow. Four weeks later, the loneliness was acute.

"Maybe we need to go straight to George Town?" I reluctantly posed to Jeremy. George Town, in the southern Exumas, would be a place to find kids, which would be great, but the hordes of boats and summer-camp atmosphere, which are just what a lot of cruisers are looking for, were definitely not our main reason for going cruising. Jeremy made a face. "Let's take *Calypso* over to Spanish Wells and get internet and let Maddie talk to Gabby. Maybe that will help."

We also cobbled together some activities to help, from letting Maddie make a fort in her bunk or hide up in our cabin, to moving the boat so the kids

could each Skype best buddies back home, and setting up a slide show with pictures of friends. Still, we were working on borrowed time, although when the sun came back out, the changes in scenery and snorkeling helped tremendously. Back home in Virginia, we were fortunate enough to live in a neighborhood where both kids have great friends. On the cruise, Jeremy and I were so sure we'd find other "kid boats" we'd even made a seven-figure bet with our kids along those lines. But it was three months in and so far nothing. When would we find the soul mates we had found so easily on our last cruise, where we'd fallen in with a couple of other boats our second night in the Bahamas and sailed in company with them all the way to Venezuela?

Missing friends and communication issues tangled together a lot during our time away. Back in the States, the internet and telephone were a key-click away. In the Bahamas, the price of a cell phone call to the States was upwards of \$3 a minute, and sometimes you can go weeks between Wi-Fi spots capable of handling something like Skype, let alone basic internet. Our main point of contact with far-flung friends was the single side-band radio, through which we could e-mail and talk to people. We were lucky on board, for sure; Jeremy can create anything and does "computer stuff" for a living, so we had an easier time than many with onboard internet where we could find it. Still, all the technical know-how in the world doesn't compensate for an unhappy daughter.

"*Calypso, Calypso. This is Osprey.*" The voice came over the single side-band radio at 6:25 a.m. I grabbed for the mike, trying not to jostle Maddie's feet in the process.

"*Osprey, this is Calypso.*" My voice cracked with sleepiness, or maybe it was excitement. *Osprey* was the Clarke family out of Annapolis—specifically John and Wendy Clarke and their two children, 12-year-old Kaeo and 10-year-old Kailani. (Many readers no doubt will recognize the name Wendy Clarke; she was executive editor of this

magazine for many years and author of its popular back-page column, *Off the Charts*, a chronicle of her family's adventures on the Bay.) We had met the Clarkes—though only briefly and glancingly—when they passed us on the ICW in November near Vero Beach, Fla., their two children waving frantically at ours as we simultaneously realized there were kids on each other's boat. And now it seemed that we might even share an anchorage with them. All we had to figure out was how to be in the same place at the same time.

Three days later we sailed into Cambridge Cay, in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park. By the time we had set the anchor, our kids were off in the dinghy with theirs, laughter ringing out across the water. There was very little of the wary circling so prevalent when adults first meet each other. For the first time in a long time, Maddie spent the afternoon laughing instead of crying. Julian had a companion with whom to build sand forts and discover the best stick for exploring. And it was with great gratitude that we shared a massive lobster with Wendy and Johnny in *Osprey's* cockpit that night as the kids snuggled down below with a movie. We'd found our cruising soul mates.

We spent the next couple of weeks exploring the Exumas, discovering perfect beaches and making more new friends. Shell collecting days morphed into evening discussions in one cockpit or another. Cruising plans—where to next?—was a constant topic, no matter who we were hanging out with. When we had originally hatched our plan, the Bahamas was our ultimate destination. We knew we could spend years exploring the pristine waters and secluded beaches of that island nation, and our six months was barely enough to scratch the surface. Heading farther afield held little appeal. But one of our favorite lessons from cruising is the need to be flexible. In talking with the Clarkes, who were trying to decide what they were going to do next, we found ourselves again and again extolling the virtues of the Dominican Republic. We

began to long for the cheap and plentiful vegetables (and beer); we also began to realize that exposing our kids to a completely different geography and way of life would be an invaluable experience. So it was agreed: Dominican Republic, here come *Calypso* and *Osprey*.

March 2010 Exumas to the Dominican Republic

Given the right weather, the effort needed to sail the 300 miles from the southern Exumas to the Turks and Caicos and then on to the Dominican Republic is not all that great. Still, the experiences we had rivaled any we had anywhere else on our trip.

"Thar she blows!" An echo from *Moby Dick* resounded excitedly through the cockpit. We were sailing from Salt Cay to Sand Cay, in the Turks and Caicos, a known winter breeding ground for humpback whales. Almost before we had picked up the anchor, we were seeing the spray and splash of whales. Jeremy climbed up the spreaders to get a shot of them, and the kids and I screeched with terrified delight as one longer than *Calypso* blew about 100 yards away from the starboard side. This was far better than seeing whales on TV.

Ninety miles, about as far as Annapolis from Hampton Roads, lay between Sand Cay and Luperon, a well known cruising haven on the DR's north coast. Still, those 90 miles might as well have been 900 in terms of culture and geography. English to Spanish, desert flat to mountainous green, make-your-own adventures to national parks.

"Buenos dias. Welcome to Luperon. I will take you to the waterfalls tomorrow at nine. Twenty dollars a person for everything." The rapid Spanish barely penetrated my night-passage-numbered, sleep-deprived brain, but I had enough presence of mind to agree. Some cruisers we had met earlier in our travels had raved about the "27 Charcos," a national park outside of Luperon where the main attraction is, well, 27 waterfalls. Of course we were going to go.

Those cruisers were masters of
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understatement. There is no way in the States, where liability waivers and insurance regulations subjugate personal responsibility, this experience could have happened. We all donned the required ill-fitting helmets and life jackets at the start of the trek up the mountain. The heights of lush greenery elicited sighs of contentment after months of the islands' desert-like flatness. The two guides assigned to us had their hands full helping all ten of us up through the waterfalls (yes, we *climbed* up through the falls), sometimes literally hauling us by our jackets. We didn't help much, as we were all laughing too hard to concentrate. When we reached the top, the real fun began. Hooting with delight, all of us, kids and adults alike, leaped and slid down those waterfalls we had just climbed through. No waterpark, with endless lines will ever hold much appeal for any of us after this.

Our 10 days in Luperon with the Clarkes and other friends flew by, filled with market explorations and dinghy rides to the harbor entrance, practicing our Spanish and enjoying coffee and breakfast empanadas while walking the streets. Endless cockpit conversations about who was going where next came to the inevitable conclusion when the Clarkes decided to head for Guatemala, while our cruising alarm clock reminded us it was time to head north. Our time together, at least for this round, was at an end.

April 4 to June 5, 2010 Dominican Republic to Fishing Bay Yacht Club

"Mom, Mom! Look! I found four helmets!" Julian's excitement was palpable. He proudly held out his shirt, stretched to capacity with his shell finds of the last half hour. They were indeed beauties. The question struck me once again:

Why do some islands have more shells than others? And why here, on this half-mile-square sand hump that probably is washed out with any good storm?

We'd arrived at Hogsty Reef in the Southern Bahamas—one of only four coral atolls in the Atlantic Ocean—the day before. The boat we were sailing with had declined to accompany us to the head of the horseshoe-shaped reef, likely wary of the ominous sounding write-ups in the cruising guides. We were well and truly on our own. We



The Waters family celebrating Thanksgiving at anchor in Double-Breasted Cay in the Abacos.

anchored in 10 feet of gorgeous sand about 200 feet from waves breaking on coral, the luminous greens and browns an indication of the shallows just off our bow. In case we needed a reminder of the dangers, the rusting hulk of a Liberty ship on one corner of the reef and the more recent remains of a workboat directly opposite served that purpose. The weather was being kind to us, allowing us to stay; any kind of winds and seas would make this anchorage untenable. We thoroughly explored the inside of the reef, taking the dinghy from corner to corner, creeping out next to the Liberty ship, then weighing down the tender with our shell finds. Night fell on a very contented *Calypso* crew.

Jeremy is an extremely skilled sailor who loves to push the envelope. Not that the rest of us are immune to the pull of a good adventure, mind you,

but the kids and I might, if given the option, choose a less challenging path. Not so Jeremy. He knows his boat, his limitations, and his crew far better than any of the rest of us, and he is usually willing to help the rest of us figure out how far we can go. This tendency sometimes causes tension, but usually it allows for amazing experiences. During our cruise, we sailed along routes with depths a few inches deeper than our draft or tacked in and out of tight spots just because we could. But the

crowning gift of Jeremy's sometimes exasperating attitude was the two weeks we spent sailing, mostly alone, in the far southern Bahamas on our way back from the Dominican Republic. Our time with our new sailing friends had, paradoxically, allowed us to be comfortable, once again, with only ourselves as company.

It would be another month or so of fast traveling—back through the Exumas and Abacos, back across the Gulf Stream to Florida, up the ICW—before we saw the Chesapeake Bay again. We leafed through log entries and looked at pictures, reminiscing and laughing. Maddie made a poster for her bunk that read, "It may be small, but it's home." It seemed that only during the last bits of our trip were we really comfortable with what we were doing; it was also on the homeward stretch that we all started talking about the next cruise. Jeremy and I made lists of what had to be done while the kids just said over and over, "When are we leaving again?"

And that remains the question, one that I know will be answered. It's only a matter of time.

Back at the yacht club, licking the Old Bay off my crab-spiced fingers, I listen to my friend Jon and others like him asking about our trip, all saying they wish they could do what we have done. You can, I tell them. You just go. ♪