

A Rookie Goes Cruising at Cedar Key

by Annette Grefe

When I bought my Wayfarer, *Epiphany*, from AnnMarie Covington in August of 2016, one of things that attracted me was the tale she told of the Wayfarer rallies and cruises. Last year I was still learning the basics of handling my boat, and my work schedule also interfered with longer trips. But after the Old Brown Dog Regatta last November, I was ready to go cruising! I was able to talk my husband, Dave, into tagging along. A bad back keeps him from sailing, but he is a great doggy daddy to our two babies, Jazz and Sienna, and very supportive of my new-found passion for sailing. I was very happy that AnnMarie, who has been my sailing mentor from the day she first introduced me to *Epiphany*, offered to be my crew.



Dave and I stayed at the Cedar Inn, a dog-friendly motel just a block or two from the boat ramp. It's a bit run-down, but the folks there were very friendly and allowed us to park the trailer in their space. The other Fleet 15 members - AnnMarie Covington, Phil Leonard and Ken Butler stayed at a nearby condo; Patty Kuntz, Lee Steelman, and John Cadman, at a different one right next door, and Al Schonborn at a motel further out of town.

On Monday night, we gathered for a nice dinner at 83 West Restaurant, drinking margaritas, reviewing the events at Lake Eustis and planning the next day's sail. AnnMarie showed us her nautical map app, iSailor. After ooh-ing and aah-ing over that for a while, we decided to plot a course for Seahorse Island, about 3 miles away.

The next morning brought mostly sunny skies, temperatures in the 60s and 70s, and steady winds ranging from 5-8 knots. *Epiphany* was the first to launch, followed by Ken and Phil in *Green Ninja*, and John and Patty in *Snowdrop*. Uncle Al and Lee joined in later. It was my first time on salt water, and my first time navigating channel markers. That wasn't too difficult, though my attention was often diverted by several groups of dolphins playing in the vicinity. Sometimes they were so close, we could hear them surfacing before we saw them. One pair swam so close to our port side, I could have touched them with my outstretched hand. We were flying along on a broad reach most of the way, while anhinga and pelicans decorated the channel markers, drying their wings in the breeze.

Close to Seahorse island, the iSailor app told us that there would be too many sand banks to approach the island directly so we veered off to the southwest, still following the channel markers. A cute little lighthouse and tempting beach came into view, but the map still indicated many shallows. We decided to heave-to for lunch -- another new skill for me. I had no sooner started in on my sandwich when we heard the crunch of centerboard against sand bank. AnnMarie's quick reaction and a few paddle strokes got us back into safer waters again. But there were lines of shore birds everywhere - and we couldn't quite tell if they were swimming or standing... So after a few conversations on the walkie-talkie with *Snowdrop* and *Green Ninja*, we decided to forgo landing on Seahorse Island and try Atsena Otie Island instead. This island is right across from Cedar Key, so in case the wind should die down, as the forecast had threatened it might, we could always paddle across the channel. So we headed back, again on a broad reach for most of the trip.

As we drew closer, we could see that the dock that had looked so impressive and inviting from a distance was in quite a state of disrepair. We didn't let that bother us and decided on a beach landing - another first for me! Ken and Phil were already there, and the rest of the group arrived soon after. What a treat to stretch our sore backs in 70 degree weather, under blue skies with sand in our toes and palm trees all around, and four beautiful Wayfarers anchored on the shore! I found a huge whelk and then set out with

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AnnMarie, Phil and Ken in search of any remains of the pencil factory that was supposed to have been on the island. But all we found was a beautiful old cemetery, lots of live oak trees with abundant Spanish moss, and even more abundant mosquitos, so we beat a hasty retreat back to the beach.

Returning to Cedar Key, AnnMarie and I decided to anchor *Epiphany* by the condo - another first for me. Dave and the dogs had spent the day exploring the town and getting a few groceries. After a nap, we joined the other Fleet 15 folks for a wonderful dinner at their condo. Ken had made a yummy white chili, and we happily plotted our course for the next day.

That day - Wednesday - promised winds ranging from 8 to 10 knots, so we decided to circumnavigate Seahorse from the north side. Once again we were greeted by groups of dolphins - one pair played in *Epiphany's* bow wave - crossing back and forth several times. What a thrill!

Uncle Al and Lee were in the lead. We headed to the northern side of Seahorse Island this time. At one point the course seemed to diverge from what AnnMarie had plotted out on the iSailor map, but we followed the group, again at a nice reach most of the way. At one point, a flock of white pelicans crossed in the distance, just before we turned westward. Al and Lee took off in a southerly direction, while we followed *Snowdrop* further west to try to avoid the abundant sand banks our map indicated. Soon we seemed to be in the open Gulf, with nothing but water for 270 degrees around.

We realized then that we had actually sailed north of not only Seahorse but also North Island, and debated whether to continue on around Seahorse or cut between North Island and Seahorse. *Green Ninja* decided to brave the shallows between the two islands; *Snowdrop* and *Epiphany* pressed on ... and on... and on... It seemed like the sand banks radiating out from Seahorse would never end. I sure gained a tremendous appreciation for the pilots of old who had to map out new channels all the time in ever-shifting sands, without the benefit of internet and ultrasound.

Those 8-10 knot winds never materialized, and just as we finally rounded the last long line of birds on the water, the wind all but disappeared. We were on a run but had to paddle and scull to make any headway. Finally, seeing that *Green Ninja* had made it through the shallows just fine, we decided to take a bit of a short cut ourselves. Our gamble paid off - at times we could see the bottom, but we never touched it and eventually reached the channel again, just as the wind kicked back up and we were able to follow *Snowdrop* and the dolphins back to harbor.

That night, after watching a glorious sunset on the west side of town, we ate at Tony's Seafood, famous for its (very rich!) clam chowder.

Thursday morning started out very foggy. We drove over to Cemetery Park, a cool board-alk park in the marsh with a fitness trail, benches and lots of birds to watch, including a pair of nesting ospreys. AnnMarie met us there on her bike. Once the fog lifted, we really did have stronger winds. John was sailing with his wife with a reef in the mainsail, and Phil and Ken decided to try some kayaking and biking instead of sailing. AnnMarie and I decided to try for Snake Island but we had no sooner reached the first channel markers when the wind really kicked in. We thought it the better part of valor to turn back - a good thing, too, as AnnMarie later noticed that one of the rivets holding the spreader on *Epiphany's* mast had come out. With Phil's help that was quickly repaired. Dave, the dogs and I spent the rest of the day shopping the town's cute little gift shops and art galleries, reading, napping and watching the sunset again before heading back over to the condo for a final cookout. Ken's apple pie was a great way to top off a wonderful stay at Cedar Key!



Cedar Key, FL
Photos by Annette Grefe

