

INTHESTREAM

Novice sailor Tammy Kennon thoughtfully examines a cruising life's learning curve.

"Here we go!" I said, looking east over open water.

The wintry sun lit the sky ahead a soft apricot, warm and inviting, yet my stomach was a rollicking mess. All that lay between me and paradise was the Gulf Stream -- and my fear of it.

"Doesn't look so bad," my husband Chip responded. "A little bumpy."

I'd been reading for years about this warm river in the ocean that runs between Florida and the Bahamas, and how it can be an aquatic nightmare. Boats much larger than our 38' Cara Mia had been tossed about -- or worse -- in this same stretch of water.

"Gulf Stream, here we come!" I said, caught in the crackling arc between dread and excitement.

Even though we were heading into challenging water on our first offshore passage, we had done our homework. The problem, we learned, is not the Gulf Stream but north wind. When strong

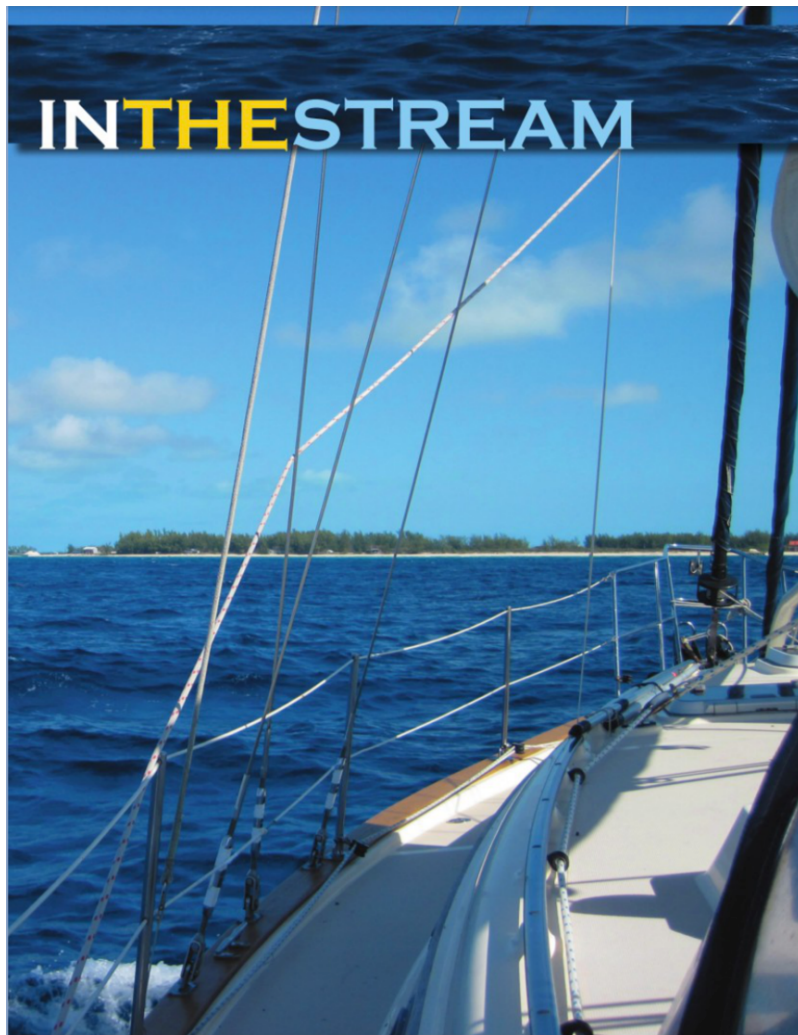
wind from the north crashes against the powerful north-running current, the sea turns into a rowdy monster. So for almost a month, we had been waiting in Miami, chanting the spell known to tame the beast: No North Wind, No North Wind.

At last, the spell took hold, and a three-day weather window opened, plenty of time to make the 9-hour jump from Miami to Bimini.

We set off with forecasters promising a light wind from the south and smooth waters. I wanted to feel confident, but I didn't trust them. Just yesterday they had failed to predict a storm system that had swooped up from the Gulf of Mexico wreaking havoc on the Biscayne Bay and amping up my already jangling nerves.

But now, as we left the coastline, the wind played along with predictions, wafting softly from the south. Unfortunately the water was not so cooperative.

"This is a mess," I proclaimed, taking the wheel for my 9 a.m. watch. The water was popping up in mounds all around us, like



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someone had thrown a huge blue blanket over a herd of raucous kangaroos. The boat was bobbing, rolling, weaving randomly, and although it was not dangerous, my nervous stomach grew restless.

"You want me to take the helm?" Chip asked an hour into my watch.

"Do you mind?" I asked. I leaned over the port rail and hurled my ginger ale into brilliant cobalt blue water.

My stomach lurched and careened with the boat as the hours ticked past. We traded short watches, taking turns steering through the bumpy water and going below to see which of our belongings had noisily tried to jump ship. Our stowing abilities and my stomach were failing this first offshore test.

After my lunch of dry saltines, I sat down on the cockpit bench, still slightly queasy, when a flash of silver caught my eye. As I watched, dozens



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of tiny fish swooped up out of the water and bounced across the surface, twinkling silver flashes, skittering 30 yards before disappearing again. "Flying fish!" I shouted, too late for Chip to see.

I scanned the water, hoping for another sighting, when something even more

was part planning and part patience. We had channeled our fear into productivity, learning the weather pattern would minimize the risk and cooling our heels until it materialized.

But looking back across the Gulf Stream, my stomach still felt hollow. Mother

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You can follow her adventure at ploddinginparadise.blogspot.com

startling caught my eye: a bump, dark and low on the horizon.

"Land ho!" I should have thought to shout, but didn't. Instead, I sat in shock. Could it be that after years of frightening expectations I had made it across the Gulf Stream with no great sailing yarn to tell, nothing more exciting than a flock of flying fish and nothing more traumatic than yacking over the rail?

I wanted to beat my chest and declare that I had conquered the beast and my fear of it, but, in fact, I knew our safe crossing

Nature is capricious, and I knew that no matter how many times I entered her playing field, I'd be caught once again in that super-charged arc between dread and excitement. It was part of her allure.

Well, that and the reward of paradise on the other side. This side. Nine hours and 33 minutes after leaving our mooring, 87 days after leaving the home dock, we tied up in crystalline, turquoise water under a warm Bahamian sun.

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