

Cat5 Does the Everglades Challenge

Friday

I could see it marching towards me. It wasn't changing course and there was little point in me trying to either. I was already pinching as close to the wind as I could. I could turn into the wind and lose all control, or turn towards the beach which would grab and pummel me. As it got closer, I could hear the breaking wave hissing as whitewater rolled down its front face. Not knowing what else to do, I grabbed a shroud as the wave hit with a thump and swept over the boat. The catamaran carried on as if nothing had happened. I quickly hooked a safety tether onto my harness.

I hadn't even started the Everglades Challenge yet. I had arrived at the Fort DeSoto campground a few days earlier to prep the boat and rig a new spinnaker before the start. Faced with the task of getting the boat to the start line, I elected to take the opportunity to have one more shake down cruise and sail out Shell Key entrance and around to the start line. This was the first time I had all my gear strapped into the boat. The strap arrangement I had for the bags worked well, but I found the gear could be a little 'grabby' on the jib sheets when I tacked. Also, the spinnaker would self deploy into the water which required some quick jury rigging to secure.

The main delay in getting started on Friday was a giant man who introduced himself as Painen Dias. He spoke so quickly I didn't get all of what he was saying but I understood that his Watertribe name was currently backed up with a physical condition as he dropped his shorts to show me a massive bruise on his leg and backside. He told me of several ways in which to destroy a boat on the route, seemingly through personal experience. I felt like Chickenhawk being advised by an enormous rooster named Leghorn Foghorn. I expected at any moment for him to say in his big booming voice, "Ah say boy, now ah say, what you need to do now is..." I truly enjoyed his stories, but I was itching to get off the beach as I knew every shake down sail would identify something that could be improved. Later on, he would send me some great pictures of the boat for which I'm grateful.

My Dart 18 catamaran plodded through the surf at the entrance at Shell Key with a solid feel. The experience quickly demonstrated that a tether was going to be needed for this trip as the boat would sail slowly yet much faster than swimming without any steering input. Waves will pass over the boat almost as well as under it. The downwind run to the start line was an education in surfing, finding the best way to run down the waves without stuffing into the wave in front.

This is also when I learned about peeing in a drysuit. No, not in it, but when you're wearing one. Here's how it would go. Unhook trapeze, unclip lifejacket, unzip lifejacket, unbuckle top part of trapeze harness, pull it down. Pull the access zip open and arrange the plumbing. This is usually when the boat would bear up into the wind causing it to accelerate and start surfing across a wave. Grab tiller, bear off and slow the boat down. Ignore warmth in pants. Reorganize

plumbing and pee through the trampoline. Waves would instantly flush everything away. Zip, buckle, zip, clip, rehook and I was done. Hooking into the trapeze wire wasn't strictly necessary, but it kept me on the boat acting as a short tether, as the other tether was longer and would keep me with the boat but not out of the water. Later on, I learned to round up into the wind allowing the boat to sail docilely unattended while I went through the process, sipped some water and had some food.

The start line was like arriving at the coolest boat show ever. And no one was trying to sell you anything other than perhaps the concept that they weren't nuts. Of course no one was buying it. All of the boats had one purpose, to get their crew 300 miles south to Key Largo, but clearly there was little consensus on the best craft to do it in. There were clearly different camps of thought though. My Dart looked small and unprepared next to a veteran Prindle 19 and absolutely dwarfed by the Tornadoc, an Arc 23 and Carbon 20's. A home built 14 foot cat that I assumed was a noncontender was quite the opposite, having been designed and built by an accomplished boat designer and racer. I spoke briefly with an older gentleman on a blue Core Sound 17. His boat caught my eye as a capable looking cruiser, and I noted the rope lifeline rigged around the perimeter of the deck. It looked like a good system to clip into or hang on with.

Registration was simple except for the fact that I left my wallet in the car. The volunteer, Joe, I think his name was immediately handed me five dollars for the ACA fee stating that he had saved so much money by not racing this year. True that, and thanks my friend.

The safety inspection was like a question and answer session beside the boat. I was determined that I wouldn't have to make any more last minute purchases or changes to pass muster, so I was well prepared. I later heard comments that the inspections should have been more rigorous and participants should be required to physically show that they have the safety items that they say they do. Incredible! If a participant needs a nanny to make sure they have all the safety items on a list, they surely shouldn't be on the ocean. I was vetted by the race director by phone before being permitted to participate. I could have lied about my experience to get in, but I didn't need to. If a participant lies to get in and lies about safety equipment to set off the beach, I don't think any blame can be attached to the race organizers. Nobody ever said the Everglades Challenge is safe. The waiver specifically says you could die. Did people think that was in there to be funny? I'm sure lots of people are naive enough to think they can safely complete the challenge without experience or safety equipment, and feel justified in doing what they have to do in order to participate. I just don't think the race organizers have the responsibility to investigate every participant to find out if they are truthful and ready for the challenge. At some point people have to be responsible for themselves and not hold others to blame for their own decisions. Then again, that's becoming the new American (and Canadian) Dream. Experience misfortune, blame others and sue them. Win a settlement and live on the proceeds. Rant finished. For now.

Getting to the start wasn't the end of the preparation. There seemed to be a thousand minor issues that needed adjustment. I had converted a plastic ammunition box into a dry box with battery for powering led lights at night. The original idea was to zip tie the lights to the shrouds. After the banging and that I experienced getting to the start line, I decided they needed to stay in the box until needed. The spinnaker's turtle bag got lashed down extra, as self deployment was not something I wanted to deal with in large waves. My new friends Crazy Russian and Zippy Chick had troubles getting to the start line, so I helped them out with my empty trailer. Their catamaran had travelled from New York to Florida in a couple of duffle bags and then inflated on the beach. Disassembling it to take it down the road would have been a lot of extra work but we could easily pick it up and set it on a trailer. I would have been dubious of its chances of success, but crew and boat were respected veterans of the event, so I knew that they would be hot on my heels. I could have pattered with the boat all night, but the park was closing, so it was time to go have dinner with new friends and have great sailing talks.

Saturday

I shared a campsite with Taserbait, and given the early start expected, but both decided to sleep in our respective vehicles. His Ford F150 was a reasonable choice, but my Kia wasn't. Between the excitement of the challenge and my cramped accommodations, I slept fitfully, and was ready to go before dawn. Painen Dias was to drive Taserbait's truck to Key Largo and I would drive Taserbait to the start line.

We came across Andyman on the road into the park. He was stopped with the mast up just short of the overhead electrical wires. He had been working all night to acquire and install a new mast after the original one had been damaged yesterday while taking the boat off the trailer. The plan today had been to rig the boat near the campground and drive straight to the beach. His crew, who I won't name but it rhymes with GreatBog had scouted the route earlier and had reported no overhead obstructions. We helped lower the mast, and they continued on their way.

As it turned out, we had lots of time for last minute preparations. The coast guard had advised 'small craft exercise caution' and the start time had been delayed. Apparently some years ago, the event had started during a small craft warning. Some of the boats were not prepared for the rough seas, and had to be rescued in the busy shipping channel. I wasn't in a hurry. I knew exactly what lay beyond the calm glassy water by the beach, and tied in the second reef. After a second delay, it was announced that the start would be at 10 am. Participants who wished to bypass rough Tampa Bay had the option of 'Plan B', which would enable anyone who wanted to drive their craft to a point south of the bay would be allowed to. Those who stuck with 'Plan A' could bypass the first checkpoint and hit 'okay' on their spot as they passed the area.

10 am came and so did the ships. Our new instructions stated we could go as soon as the ships had cleared our path. The ships in this channel are deceptively fast. You will see them in the distance and not think they are a concern. It seems like as soon as you turn your back, they are terrifyingly close. I lifted the beam, and heaved backwards. The boat inched back. Again; a few

inches. It was more than a boat length to the water. I tried turning the boat to break out of the ruts the boat had settled in, and to let the mainsail flap. Still, the sharply pointed hulls clung to the sand. I put some sea grass under the skeg to slide over. Instead the skeg stuck to the grass and began to plow even more sand in front of it. I knew the boat was a bear to drag across sand, but I'd never had this much trouble before. I knew I'd be exhausted inching the boat down the beach, so I rigged a snatch block onto the rear beam and set my anchor into the beach. Now the boat was moving, but my short anchorline required me to reset the anchor and haul two more times. I quickly restowed the anchor and walked the boat out past the shoals and unfurled the jib.

Quickly, the waves went from calm to a confused chop. My course lay directly downwind, which is terrible for catamaran rigs, so I tacked downwind to keep the sails drawing. The boat seemed to be wallowing in the waves, so I rounded up and shook out a reef. The boat was able to pace the waves better with more sail up and had a more predictable motion. I tacked around the flooded Passage Key which was only visible for the surf it produced, and headed for the tip of Anna Marie Island. There were breakers off the point, but I weaved through them, tapping the rudders on the sand on the way through.

The shortcut turned out to be a mistake though. But rudders had tipped up, but neither would set back down. Cat5 steers badly with the rudders up, and puts a lot of strain on them at the same time. This had to be fixed, so I headed to the beach. One rudder had a control wire pop off, which was easily fixed. The port side was a different matter. The rollers that engage slots in the rudder had popped out of position and were jammed solidly. The springs holding the rollers had obviously taken a hit and were bent out of shape. I got out my leatherman and screwdriver, and started worrying the nuts and bolts off. As I worked in the surf, tourists stopped by to take selfies in front of the boat. One offered to call for help, which I thanked her for but declined. Once I got the thing apart, it became apparent that the anti seize compound that I'd liberally spread around the mechanism was a mistake. Silver paste stuck to my hands, under my fingernails, on my drysuit and anything else I touched. Two sailors came over to help, but wisely maintained social distancing when they saw the grey mess. Finally everything went back together. The mechanism worked well but still would not pop up from hitting bottom. I'd have to be careful to raise it manually before hitting the beach.

Anxious to make up for lost time, I headed out through the surf. The wind was from the northeast, and while light near the shore, there was plenty a mile offshore. The wind conditions were perfect for a run down the coast. I was cruising along at around 8 knots most of the day. The boat felt solid and stable in these conditions, but cross waves would break on the windward hull and splash me in the face. I was wearing a balaclava that was soon soaked, but took some of the sting away of the repeated splashes. Crossing one bay, I noticed an unusual rig sailing in my direction, so I altered course to have a look. It turned out to be Southern Cross with her New Zealand crew. We couldn't chat much; I was passing too quickly, and my hearing wasn't at it's best after having wave after wave smack the side of my head. We waved instead, and carried on with our respective voyages.

Time seemed to stop as my world shrunk into the tiny sphere of existence around my boat. There was no world outside, no job, no unfinished tasks... only now. As the day turned towards evening, I saw Safety Dance further inshore. Too far to go visit, so I kept my course. Gradually, the wind increased, so gradually that I didn't notice. Experienced sailors will nod here. I was a fool to not see what was happening, but I was intoxicated with the speed and the flow. Earlier, when I watched my speed creeping past 10 knots, I was anxious that I was pushing too hard. Now, I was doing a steady 14. I completely lost myself in the experience. Cat5 flew along, sometimes launching off the waves, sometimes piercing through them but never slowing. Waves smashed into my face constantly and I would take a body blow from the occasional larger one. Suddenly there was no me and a boat. We were one entity, fiberglass, dacron and aluminum became an extension of myself. I reflected that this could be an experience I'll never get to enjoy again, it was so perfect. I knew I should reef the sail before dark, but I didn't.

Of course there were consequences. I've sailed a lot of miles offshore, but I'm not that good, and small mistakes were compounding. It got dark, but more importantly, it got cold. The constant splashing in the face was taking a toll. My drysuit was working well to keep me dry, but it doesn't have any insulation. I decided that although experienced watertribers would sail through the night, I wasn't one of them. Cold, hunger and fatigue were chipping away at me, and I was in no shape to take more risks. As I came to this conclusion, I spotted a red and green entrance light. I altered course to intercept. As I checked the chart to see what entrance I was headed for, realization came of the trap I'd put myself in. I had turned upwind to make the channel, but now I had to pinch close to the wind to follow the channel. The increase in wind speed was too much for the amount of sail I had up, so I rolled up the jib. With the single reefed main, Cat5 weathercocked into the wind and drifted backwards. Downwind was nothing but shoals, so I unfurled the jib to tough out a beat into the channel. I almost dumped it on the way in after a tack when the sheet didn't run free, but I managed to keep it upright. For all that though, I wasn't going to make the channel which was dead upwind now. I decided that going over shoals forward and with some control was better than backwards and out of control, so I turned around to face the breaking waves. I tipped up the one rudder and went through the breakers. To my relief, the bottom was sand, and I touched bottom lightly before blowing into deeper water near the beach. I pulled Cat5 up the beach and set an anchor for the rising tide. I pressed the 'Okay' button on the Spot GPS tracker to let people know I was safe. It responded by displaying all the lights briefly before going dark. Cell phone; no signal. Ah well, one thing at a time.

I hauled the bags up to the high tide line and noted I was on a beautiful uninhabited beach with no lights in sight. A closer look at the chart showed that I'd been driven ashore onto Cayo Costa and that I was probably in a state park. I was no longer cold after the effort to pull the boat ashore, so I cooked up some food and a hot drink. All in all a minor misadventure that had turned out quite well. I even got a cell signal so I could let my shore contact and the race director know that I wasn't currently tracking, but I was okay. I decided on a few hours sleep when the next high tide would help me get off the beach. I unzipped my drysuit and with relief

wiggled to get my shoulders out of the opening. Nope. I was just stiff from sailing all day. Still no; I couldn't get my shoulders out of the damn suit. The new heavy duty wrist seals were tight, and I was becoming claustrophobic. I briefly considered the rescue knife on my life jacket as a way out, but decided that there had to be a better way. Finally, I gave up and fell asleep in my bivvy sac. I woke up an hour later hating that drysuit more than anything. The sleep must have been needed though, because when I looked closer at the zipper, I found it stuck a few inches short of open. Some dish soap lubricated the zipper and a minute later I was free. I woke before dawn and made breakfast and prepped the boat. I now knew I wasn't going to be the fastest single hander, but I was going to complete this challenge.

Sunday

Getting off the beach in daylight was much easier, and I soon was cruising along about a mile offshore. The gps tracker hadn't recovered it's senses yet, but I felt that some time opened up in a dry bag would help. I took a direct route across San Carlos Bay to Cape Romano. I avoided Cambaxas Pass that other sailors had recommended as a shortcut as I didn't want to experience light fluky winds in tight quarters. As I saw the large condo buildings on the islands, I turned to come in close to the Cape and discovered the next trap that I had bumped into. The northeast wind had clocked around to the east and was blowing offshore. What should have been a minor course alteration became a major challenge. Again, I found myself beating hard into a headwind.

I reefed the mainsail down to its second reef and bashed into the waves. After a while, this seemed too much, so I furled the jib sail. In the daylight, I was able to get the boat sailing again under the scrap of sail, but it was no good. I would get some speed up and smash into a wave stopping the boat. By the time I got Cat5 moving again, another wave would stop me again. I looked downwind to the horizon, and I chose the lesser of two evils. I unfurled the jib. The full jib unbalanced the rig compared to the double reefed main, but there was no choice. The boat had terrible lee helm, trying to take off downwind, but the powerful rudders kept their bite and did their job. And now I had speed. Instead of bobbing and stopping for waves, I was back to the over or under game of wave transiting. The over the wave part was the most punishing. Cat5 would accelerate up the wave and mostly clear the water before dropping with a crash into the trough. It was the most insane sailing I'd ever done in my life. I was grateful for the new standing rigging holding up the mast, and the new sails with the power to keep the boat moving and take the hours of punishment.

I wasn't able to get very close to shore as I entered Gullivan Bay. Even as I approached relative shelter, I couldn't make very good progress to windward, and I sailed a lot of miles for nothing. Everytime it came time for a tack, I was so stiff and sore that I didn't know if I could do it. Necessity provided everything needed to move my aching body across the tramp and trim the jib. I realized as the sun got lower that I wouldn't be able to enter Indian Key Pass into checkpoint 2 before dark. I didn't think I'd get much progress in a narrow channel in the dark, so I opted for a second night off of the water. As the waves subsided, my speed increased and I

was able to trapeze out over the water for a while. I cut too close to the edge of a channel, and broke the port rudder mechanism a second time. I anchored in mud close to Coon Key and hauled my gear and broken rudder ashore.

I also discovered that some of my supposedly dry storage solutions were not up to the job, so I hung everything out to dry including the contents of the first aid kit. The rudder was easier to fix after the experience of the first time, but also harder because I didn't have the adrenaline pumping like I had the day before. If I had been at home, I would have given up until I had the proper tools to do the job. That wasn't an option on that oyster beach, so I cursed the nuts and bolts into cooperating. I pulled out the Spot and shook some more water out of it even though it had appeared to be dry that morning. I had a thermocell running which keeps the bugs away by heating a pesticide saturated pad. I put the Spot on the warm thermocell in the hopes of baking the last of the water out. I knew this was going to be a challenge like nothing I had experienced before. I knew things would go wrong. I knew I would fix it and keep going.

After fixing the rudder, the long day, warm food and general lack of sleep found me asleep on top of my sleeping bag. I don't know how long I was asleep before I was awoken by rustling near my face. I opened my eyes. "Rat!" I declared. "Eek!" it replied and scurried off. I had been told animals will chew through containers to get to food and fresh water. The tide had come up, so there was no stashing food back on the boat, at least without swimming, so I piled everything close around my bivvy sac, hoping my human-ness would be enough to intimidate intruders. This is the opposite to what I would do in my home in Ontario, as it would be comparable to adding garnish to the meal in bear country. There's no bears on the Florida Keys are there? Whatever. I was too tired to care.

Monday

My phone alarm woke me at o'dark thirty. It's not that I was all that motivated, but I was anchored over a tide flat and the tide was heading out. I had oatmeal and coffee for breakfast as I packed up my bivouac. I waded out in my drysuit to pull the boat in a little closer for loading. By the time I finished loading, the water was draining off the flat rapidly. It was a case of go right now or wait another 10 hours for the tide to come back in. I went right now.

The morning was cool, but the wind was steady, and I had the pleasure of watching dawn emerge and the sun come up as I was sailing. I had learned to wear a heavy rain jacket over the drysuit. It provided a layer of insulation but more importantly has a waterproof hood to keep the waves out of my ear. It was still an upwind run to the entrance, but the waves were small and no impediment to progress. The pines on the islands around the entrance reminded me of west coast sailing. For all the problems I had experienced so far though, this coast had been relatively kind to me. Once inside Indian Key Pass, the winds fell light. I shook out the reef and for the first time in a while was under full sail. Cat5 doesn't have daggerboards like many other catamarans to prevent sideslip while sailing upwind. Instead, she relies on her sharply pointed hulls and a skeg to dig into the water. Short tacking in confined spaces was a mixed blessing for

this type of boat. I couldn't 'point' as high into the wind as more modern boats, but I also don't need as much water to float without a board sticking down into the water. Either way, I had a long upwind grind ahead of me.

With winds getting lighter, I pulled out my borrowed SUP paddle. I experimented with different tactics. Standing up wasn't the best as the paddle wasn't long enough for me to paddle and straighten up. I settled on kneeling on one of the hulls and pinning the tiller extension under my legs to steer. The sun became hot, and for the first time while sailing, the drysuit came off and got stashed under the straps. Even though the tide was starting to rise in Chokoloski, there was a tidal current against me. I remembered Painen Dias telling me that the currents swirl around this area, and are difficult to predict.

I was just deciding to tie up to some mangroves and wait for a favourable current when I saw a sail ahead. I couldn't believe it. Another solo entry. A boat 30 years newer. There's no way I should be anywhere close to that racing machine, yet there he was. Common sense flew away in the light breeze and I continued paddling. Initially, he seemed to be adrift, but he trimmed sails and got underway. We paced each other for a few miles, sometimes I got closer, sometimes fell behind. Eventually, I got into a narrow section with current against me, while he got into a wider, windier section. I continued to plug along on my own.

As the channel opened up, a boat came by and snapped some pictures. I was grateful to see them later on Facebook, as I didn't have the time to set up and use my camera very much. Sand got into the rangefinding sensor, so many of my pictures were quite blurry.

I then noticed that I had missed a shortcut that I had marked on my Navionics. The channel ahead was very narrow, so I decided to sail over to a sand bar, walk the boat through the shallows, and carry on through Chokoloski Bay. Another moment of complacency took its toll. I left the sails sheeted in as I walked it through the shallows. A gust of wind caught the sails and lifted the windward hull above my head. I grabbed on and shouted "NO!". Neither action being effective, I watched my first capsize. This is when I remembered that the drysuit was just tucked under some straps. Miraculously, only one thing fell off the boat which I scooped up and stowed under a strap. Righting involved walking to the masthead and walking back to the boat pushing the mast up as I went. It was the easiest recovery I'd ever done. I deployed the anchor to get myself organized and gear stowed properly. After a cruise boat passed by, I pulled the anchor and had to spend some time cleaning the clay/mud off the anchor and tie it down. I looked up when I heard someone say, "What's your plan there bud?" I looked up to see another cruise boat idling ahead of me. I vented my frustration a little when I yelled, "I'm adrift!". It seemed obvious to me that I wasn't at the helm of the boat and working on the anchor. I'm sure the boat captain was frustrated with stupid tourists who can't control their boat. Either way, a collision was avoided and I got underway after he passed.

I watched a monohull pass through the shortcut I was aiming for, so I decided to go for it. I sailed back and entered the channel. My port rudder dug in, so I let it float up, as the starboard rudder also popped up. It was too shallow to get either one down, so I carried on. Even once I

got back into the marked channel, it was too shallow for the rudders to stay down. As I'm dealing with all this, I see the CL16 monohull that I noted earlier was having its own problems as it seemed to be stopped in the shallows. I later met the skipper, Waterstrider, who stopped briefly at the checkpoint and carried on. Despite the shallow water, I made good time to Chokoloskee.

As I got close, I saw the Nacra catamaran getting ready to leave. I was about to make acquaintance with the infamous Chokoloskee mud. I stepped out in my sport sandals, and the mud wrapped around the soles. The straps had already pulled out of the soles at the back, and this gave all the advantage the mud needed to take its toll. I stepped out of the sandal and found myself half barefoot. I reached into the mud and poked around, but the damn thing may as well have been on the moon. The mud of Chok doesn't give up her prizes. While this was going on, I let go of Cat5 and she sailed further onto the mud. A gust of wind hit, and lifted the rudders out of the water. I think she might have capsized again but the mud had too much of a hold on her. I carefully waded to the boat and secured her with an anchor. Wading ashore, I could feel bits of oyster shell under my unprotected foot. I expected to feel a slice at any moment. The people on the beach nodded and showed me where the sign in box is. Everyone seemed to know enough not to talk to someone who had just experienced the mud.

I was surprised to see Andyman and Natedog there with Safety Dance. When I asked what had gone wrong, he said he had his competition right where he wanted them. He explained that the boats ahead were windbound out at Cape Sable, while they had a motel room with cold air conditioning and a hot shower. I had planned on leaving in a few hours when the tide peaked, but they invited me to a shower and some floor space for a nap. Since I had to figure out what to do about my missing shoe, I took them up on their offer. The shower had a heat lamp which was glorious and soon my wet clothes were under it. I showered in my clothes to get the mud off, then hung them up as well. Warm dry. Now food. There is a Cuban restaurant just down the road which serves excellent meals. Andyman and Natedog were already familiar with the menu, and I didn't go wrong when I followed their cue.

I've given the impression that I got to shore, showered and was good to go. In fact I could relate to what I heard another sailor say when I heard, "Everything hurts". Without the danger of capsize or being blown offshore, the constant trickle of adrenaline subsided, and the hours of slamming into waves and freefalling into troughs reminded me of my age. I had cuts and bruises everywhere. One particularly painful cut in my thumb gave birth to a piece of oyster shell and felt much better. Bending down to pick up a drybag from the ground felt like a nearly impossible task. My hands were painfully swollen. I had liberally coated them with sunscreen, but it would be washed off by saltwater instantly. I took to wearing thin gloves most of the time because it hurt for them to be in the sun. Curiously, they didn't burn or peel like a regular sunburn. I attribute part of the problem to overly tight wrist gaskets in the drysuit, which I remedied later with a pair of scissors. I had no major injuries and I was reasonably hydrated, fed, and only mildly sleep deprived.

Back home, when I ride my motorcycle, I try to remember to take into account risk factors. Is it dark, is the traffic heavier than normal, am I tired, am I in a hurry, am I distracted? With two or more risk factors, I remind myself to be extra careful and to keep the speed down. Funny how I never really thought about that on the water. Of course a catamaran is a different animal. Seeking speed at times was of critical importance and caution would have left me drifting into the Gulf. In the future, I'll be more mindful of taking care of the nut behind the wheel, as well as the rest of the machine.

With the internet and social media, I learned of the missing sailor 'Sailorman'. He had been sailing offshore when race fans noticed his okay messages were showing him drifting with the prevailing winds, then stopped transmitting. There was all kinds of speculation as to what had happened. Later on, news arrived that the coast guard helicopter had located his vessel, but no one was aboard. A picture appeared showing a capsized blue hull. Was this the boat belonging to the gentleman I had spoken to two days earlier? I thought his boat had a blue deck, but this one had a tan coloured one. I still don't know. Either way I felt a connection with this man. I had sailed and struggled on the same waters on the same day. The thought weighed heavily on me. I wanted my kids to be inspired that I or anyone could go out to do amazing things. I didn't want them to be ashamed of me being reckless and leaving them. I didn't help that my Spot tracker hadn't responded to the heat I'd applied earlier. Andyman took a stab at it as well, hanging it under the heat lamp, but in the end, there was no help for it.

I had no spare shoes on board, so I started asking around. The marina manager said no they don't. A local who was sitting and chatting casually mentioned that Everglades City was four miles away and have anything I could want to buy. I started asking shore crews if they happened to be driving towards Everglades City, and the checkpoint captain immediately offered me a ride. Everglades City isn't perhaps the source of everything you'll need, but there is a gas station with a fishing store that seemed to have it's own brand of neoprene lined fishing boots. They were well made, in a variety of colours and in every size. They were also expensive but the only game in town, so I handed over my credit card. I left the box and left in what I came to call my Chokoloskee dancing shoes. Except for the fact that I have two pairs of rubber boots at home, they have been a great purchase and were much more suitable for Chok's mud.

I came back to the motel room to rest. Andyman and Natedog were discussing tides and wind, and what their competitor SOS was doing. As I nodded off, they were negotiating a departure time. A: "What time does the ebb start?" N: "Let me check; 2:30. No wait 3:30". A: "F_ that, let's go at 4". I awoke a short while later to the same discussion. A tide table in the kitchen was consulted. I checked my messages on my phone and thought it must be malfunctioning; the time showed 21:30. I sat up to see it was dark outside. Had these guys been talking wind and tide for 6 hours straight? I'll never know, I fell asleep again. I woke again around midnight. N: "They're going now". A: "Now? How soon can we leave?" N: "03:00" A: "We can't go sooner?", I fell asleep again.

Tuesday

I awoke to the 2:30 alarm and started packing. I didn't so much decide to keep going rather than I just didn't decide to stop. I pulled Cat5 close to the gravel beach and started loading quietly as there were a few tents that had set up while I was sleeping. Safety Dance was already loaded and away. I was pleased to see CrazyRussian, but I became worried when I saw ZippyChick huddled under a coat and sipping something from a thermos. She had the blank look of someone with hypothermia. She must have read my concern because she said, "I'll have a hot drink, and get moving. Dawn is only two, no three hours away, so I'll be fine." I've pushed my physical limits past what I thought was possible and I can recognize someone who is capable of doing the same, so I bid them a safe journey.

To be continued in Part 2