

BOAT RIDE TO BIMINI



A trip across the Gulf Stream offers an opportunity to test Beneteau's brand-new Swift Trawler 48 and a chance to see a storied island



Top: The Beneteau Swift Trawler 48 makes its way past the lighthouse at Gun Cay.

Even though I love a good boating adventure, previous experiences have made me picky about when, and with whom, I travel.

Decades ago, an editor sent me 100 miles offshore with two crazed fishermen who, when the sharks refused to bite, got drunk, pulled out a .44 magnum and started indiscriminately shooting seagulls that were eating the shark bait. The return ride in the 32-footer in 8-foot seas at full speed nearly broke my back. I swore that if I made it back alive, I would never step on a boat again unless I knew a sane person was in charge of the vessel.

Years before, barely out of college, I learned not to boat on a tight schedule when I left Nantucket without radar or Loran, and foolishly sailed into the fog because I felt pressure to be back at work the following Monday. That foggy five-hour jaunt put fear in my heart and my tail between my legs. After making no headway in the fog, I returned to Nantucket where I literally kissed the dock. Ever since, I haven't let a calendar dictate when I go out on a boat.

So, when I was asked to take a ride from Florida to Bimini on a specific day in March, with a captain I didn't know, on what appeared to be a fixed schedule, I wasn't keen on the idea. When I mentioned the trip to two experienced Florida boaters, they confirmed that March was not the best time to cross the Gulf Stream. "That's something you do in June," they told me and went on to explain that when the prevailing winter northerlies smash into the Gulf Stream's current, it becomes a very unpleasant place to boat.

But once I received more details about the trip, my concerns eased. A professional captain would be in charge of the Beneteau Swift Trawler 48, and I'd be traveling with two trusted colleagues, *Power & Motoryacht* Editor Dan Harding and *Passagemaker* Editor Jeff Moser. And, we would not leave unless the weather conditions were manageable.

In the week leading up to the trip, we kept an eye on the forecast. Winds were predicted to blow hard out of the north right up to our day of departure but then switch to the south and start easing as we crossed.

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The night before we cast off from Fort Lauderdale, any remaining misgivings disappeared when Capt. James Marshall of Reliable Yacht Deliveries sent out an email saying the wind would switch to the south and we would not leave until the wind speed lowered. Departure was set for 11 a.m. at the earliest. Someone asked if we could leave at 8 a.m. to maximize time in Bimini. Marshall decided we wouldn't leave before noon.

The next morning, Harding, Moser and I met Marshall and the rest of the crew at Marina Dania. We piled our gear in the bow cabin, which still smelled of fresh fiberglass, and familiarized ourselves with Beneteau's latest model. We'd be traveling with a 1989 Formula 242 SS that belonged to Beneteau America Powerboat Manager Justin Joyner and his father, John. Joyner would be driving it across with his dad and his

brother, Jonathan. The Formula would serve as photo boat and at the same time tick off a bucket list item for the Beneteau manager. "Justin's always wanted to go to the Bahamas in the Formula," his father told me.

But there was one glitch. The 33-year-old Formula needed a new alternator, and the repair was taking longer than expected. Joyner told Marshall to depart with the Beneteau when Marshall saw fit; his crew would follow on the Formula the next day. We topped off the Swift's tanks with 142 gallons of pricey diesel and headed down the Stranahan River. At 2:30 p.m. we entered the ocean.

The wind direction had begun to shift to the south, but it was still blowing 20 to 25 knots and the waves were 4- to 5-foot high. The Beneteau had no trouble with the conditions, but Harding and Moser got a saltwater shower on the flybridge, and Beneteau Marketing Manager Aurore Bordage and I got our backs washed on the cockpit settee when the large, teak swim platform shipped a load of water over the stern. The ride was manageable, but slow. Marshall sometimes had to back off the throttles to deal with some large waves, and after about 25 minutes of never getting the boat up to 10 knots, he turned the trawler back to Florida. He knew our late departure would not allow us to cover the 66 nautical miles in daylight, and he wasn't going to enter Bimini's channel in the dark.

When we returned to Marina Dania, the Joyners were headed out on the Formula to test the new alternator. They returned in less than an hour, laughing about their test ride. They'd taken the boat to the ocean where the waves had sent the Formula's bow high in the air. They agreed it would have been folly to cross the Gulf Stream in those conditions.

Early the next morning, we tried again. With 15 knots of wind out of the southeast and 2- to 3-foot waves, the Beneteau and the Formula crossed the Gulf Stream at 20 knots.

Harding, Moser and I planted ourselves on the flybridge where we used the two large Raymarine MFDs to monitor our speed and progress while Marshall drove from the cabin below. Instead of an optional Bimini top, the new 48 had the optional hardtop. Moser opened it up so we could enjoy the sunshine, and with the breeze in our faces, we watched the

Joyners. They were having a good time doing their best Don Aronow impressions on the Formula, sometimes launching completely off waves and landing in an explosion of spray.

At 28,000 pounds, the Swift wasn't jumping any waves, but unlike the Joyners, who had to stand most of the way, we got to sit, and the flybridge, cabin and cockpit gave the seven people on board plenty of room to spread out. The Beneteau was living up to its Swift name, too. At about 8 knots, a traditional displacement trawler would need about eight hours to get to Bimini. At a 20-knot cruise, the 48's semi-displacement hull was on track to get us there in three hours.

Beneteau advertises a 1,000-mile range at 8 knots with the standard twin 380-hp Cummins QSB6.7 diesels. Our boat had the optional 425-hp engines. Combine the 48's range with a 3-foot, 10-inch draft and suddenly the shallow waters of the Bahamas become an attractive destination.

Beneteau created the 48 by combining the proven hull from its Swift Trawler 47 with the layout of its Swift Trawler 41. The 48 replaces the 47. Instead of the 47's center lower helm station and forward galley, the 48 got a starboard helm station with a large aft galley. That layout proved popular on the 41, which is one of Beneteau's bestselling models.

Moving the lower helm to starboard freed up space to put a large C-shaped settee forward of the galley to port and allows passengers to enjoy the ride with the captain. A sliding side door gives quick access to the starboard sidedeck and the bow. Like other Swifts, the 48 has an asymmetrical layout where the starboard deck is wider, but even the port one was wide enough to navigate with a fender in hand. Because of the high bulwarks and thick handrails that run all the way from the cockpit to the bow, the 48 feels safe when moving fore and aft, even at sea. I prefer an additional inboard grabrail, but the outboard rails were sturdy and tall. The stainless-steel work on the Beneteau is impressive, especially on the stainless and teak ladder to the flybridge, which can be moved into a vertical position with a foot pedal to create more space in the cockpit. The ladder didn't just look strong; it also looked beautiful.

Like the 47, the 48 has a three-cabin, two-head layout, plus a salon settee



The Beneteau anchors at the site of the shipwreck *SS Sapona*.



that converts to a double berth with a privacy curtain. We entered the incredibly clear, turquoise waters of the Bahamas less than three hours after departing Florida. It was a good thing that Marshall had turned us around the day before. Not only did the channel markers not have lights, but had we persisted in the dark, our GPS would have steered us about 300 yards to the south and put us aground. In an apparent effort to accommodate deeper draft boats the channel had been moved by dredging through the shoals on the chart, but the chart had not been updated. Had we tried to navigate only by GPS at night, we would have gone aground in the old filled in channel. And even if we had been able to see the actual buoys at night, Marshall suspected that our “mental navigational alarms” would have been triggered since the buoys would have told us to go straight across a big shoal area on the chart. “How does a good navigator reconcile those differences?” Marshall wrote in an email after the trip. “A rookie navigator who only uses his GPS and a chart as so many do these days, would run aground.”

Having safely entered Bimini’s interior waters, we docked at the Bimini Big Game Club to check into customs. We soon learned that the Bahamian customs and Covid procedure could dissuade some people from boating to the Bahamas. The pre-entry online paperwork is daunting, but the Covid testing definitely complicated matters. Even though we had all passed our Covid tests in the U.S., uploaded our data to the Bahamian website beforehand and brought all our paperwork to the island, Marshall spent two hours checking us all in. He later told us the Bahamian officials were nothing but nice, but that they were unable to get our info up on their computers. Marshall got us in by showing all our paperwork on his own computer, which is when a Bahamian customs supervisor approved our papers.

Once cleared for entry, we checked into the Bimini Big Game Club. It still had a bit of that simple charm that in the 1930s drew Ernest Hemingway to the island and in the 1960s brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Hemingway first came to Bimini in 1935 for the world-class fishing. For three summers, he fished, frequented the island’s bars, and wrote articles for Esquire magazine that brought Bimini some of its early fame as a fishing destination. In the 1950s he would write his posthumously published novel, *Islands in the Stream*. The first of the three acts in that novel is set in Bimini and captures Hemingway’s impression of the island and his quest to catch large fish in the Gulf Stream.

King spent most of his time on Bimini escaping the pressures of the Civil Rights Movement and writing speeches. In 1964, inspired by the island’s quiet shallows that he visited with local fishing guide and boat-builder Ansil Saunders, King wrote his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech on Bimini. MLK returned in 1968. Saunders took him out to the mangroves again

where they exchanged spiritual ideas about God and nature. According to Saunders, King told him on that visit that he believed he would not live to see his 40th birthday. Three days after leaving Bimini, in Memphis, Tennessee, King delivered the “Mountain Top” speech he’d written in Bimini. The next day he was assassinated. He was 39 years old. A plaque outside the Big Game Club commemorates King’s visit and tourists still ask for room 303, where King stayed.

After a quick lunch at the Big Game Club’s restaurant, we took the Beneteau 10 miles south to Gun Cay for a photo shoot. Even though a lot of people think of Bimini as one island, it’s a string of islands. A good chunk of South Bimini is taken up by the airport and most of the population lives on North Bimini.

Bimini was settled in the mid-19th century by wreckers. They eventually switched to fishing, sponging and growing sisal and coconuts. During Prohibition, some Biminities became involved in rumrunning. Today, most people go to Bimini to fish, dive, party, sit on the white, sandy beaches or pet stingrays. We saw some of those stingrays at Gun Cay, and after the video and photo shoot, returned to the Big Game Club.

The next morning, having to catch a plane home, Harding, Moser and I said goodbye to the Beneteau crew, who were off to the shipwreck of the *SS Sapona*. After getting a Covid test at the medical clinic, we rented a golf cart and made our way south through Alice Town on a road called “The King’s Highway” that had no semblance to an interstate. We checked out the rusted hulk of the shipwrecked *Gallant Lady* and an abandoned waterfront home, then rode north on another bumpy road called “The Queen’s Highway.” Despite the insanely beautiful colors of the surrounding waters and the bleach-white beaches, I found Bimini’s condition disturbing. It looked like a hurricane had wreaked havoc and that the island had not recovered. As we cruised north through Bailey Town and Porgy Bay, the landscape was dominated by dilapidated and boarded up homes whose yards were littered with derelict boats and broken golf carts.

When we entered Resorts World Bimini, the perfectly manicured lawns, well-kept bungalows, Hilton hotel, casino and spiffy beach with hundreds of perfectly aligned umbrellas were a stark contrast to the rest of the island. At the resort’s marina we found an army of sunburned, hungover spring breakers sprawled all over the grounds. The resort reeked of Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*, which he wrote while living on Bimini. Seeing the opulence of the resort made it as clear as the surrounding waters who The Haves were.

Two hours later, we were at the airport for our flight back to the States. I’d seen Bimini and I’d learned something about the Gulf Stream. Given the right conditions, crossing in March is doable, but it helps to have a good captain, patience and a solid boat. Fortunately, with Capt. Marshall, his cautious approach and the Beneteau Swift Trawler 48, we’d had all three. 🇧🇸

Clockwise from top left: A mural down the street from the Bimini Big Game Club in Alice Town; Harding and Moser enjoy the ride across the Gulf Stream on the 48’s flybridge; the beach at Resorts World Bimini