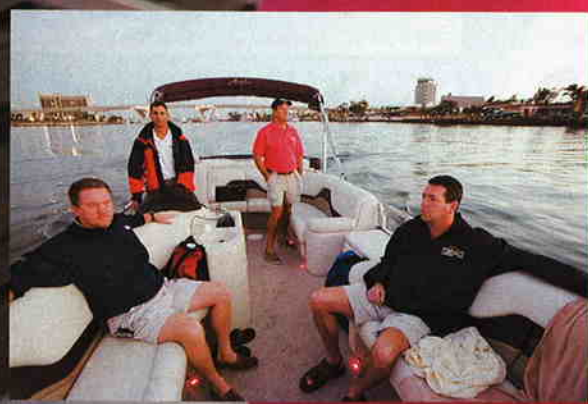


Avalon's Next Run

Ft. Lauderdale to Bimini, Bahamas

By James Wolf,
Avalon President and CEO

Not on My Lake. It didn't take the group too long to realize they were in unfamiliar territory. Cameras from both boats were going and the giant MS Zaandam cruise ship passed the 27-foot pontoon.



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When Doug Haskell of North Shore Marine called last November to suggest we take a pontoon boat from Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., to the Island of Bimini in the Bahamas I thought he was joking, or perhaps he'd gotten an early start on the holiday egg nog. Cross an exposed piece of the Atlantic on a 27-foot pontoon boat? Yeah, right! While we've had a few successful journeys in the last few years—Baltimore, Md., to Key West, Fla., in four days; Chicago, Ill., to Mackinaw, Mich., in 12 hours; and 300 miles down the Mississippi, the notion of a jaunt through the Bermuda Triangle did not appeal to my sensible side and I suggested he find another crew.

Then, later that

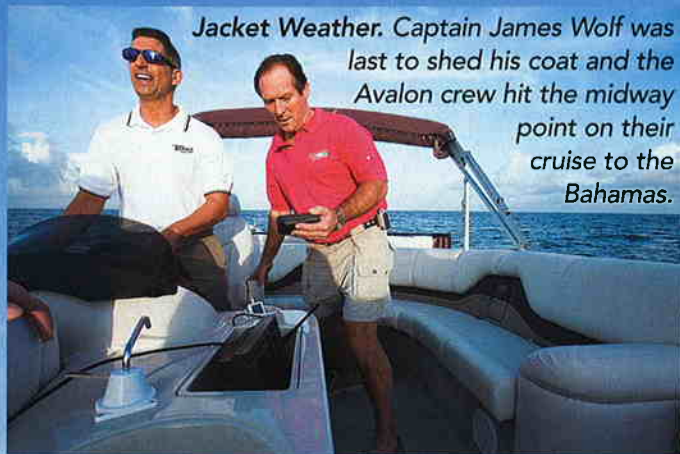
week, I saw a show on the Discovery Channel about the perils of the Bermuda Triangle and those who've vanished trying to navigate in, over, through, and around that mysterious part of the Atlantic. The show reconfirmed my initial response. However, my adventurous side was intrigued and I started to reconsider—what if we did it? What if we attempted it and failed? What if we attempted it and succeeded?

Getting the Crew Together

Our plan still seemed a little on the crazy side, but life is too short not to try crazy things, right? A little adventure never hurt anyone and we were now hell bent on getting this trip done. We started to look at crew and schedule. We agreed that it would be nice to take along a few other Avalon and Tahoe dealers to provide them with a great boating



Day Break. After waiting for a few weeks for the weather to cooperate, the Avalon crew began its journey January 24.



Jacket Weather. Captain James Wolf was last to shed his coat and the Avalon crew hit the midway point on their cruise to the Bahamas.



experience while continuing to build upon our solid dealer relationships. As a manufacturer we regularly solicit ideas for improvement from our dealer base and what better venue to do this in than on the open water? We also wanted documentation, so

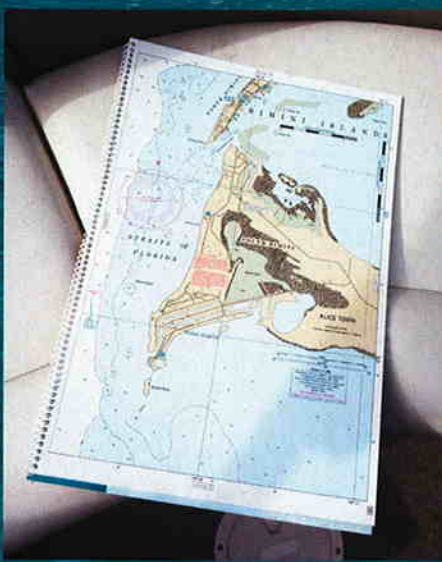
The Trip

We met at the boat at 6:30 on the morning of Tuesday, January 24, in Fort Lauderdale and stocked the boat with provisions. We also loaded the necessary

safety supplies, which consisted of lifejackets (Type V PFD), a flare kit, strobe lights, submersible VHF radios, anchor and line, handheld GPS units, compass, three handheld spotlights and an EPIRB

we'd need a photographer.

Our final crew ended up being Doug Haskell (Tahoe boat dealer from Michigan), Rich Currier (Avalon boat dealer from South Carolina), Bruce England (Tahoe boat dealer from Georgia) and John Linn (a professional photographer from Minnesota).



(Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon). Hopefully none of the safety equipment would be necessary, but is always a requirement when taking any type of boat trip—particularly a trip through the heart of the Bermuda Triangle.

We departed the marina a few minutes before 7:00 as the light of day was starting to appear. The ride to the Port Everglades Inlet was less than a mile where we saw the first few glimpses of the Atlantic Ocean. We also saw a very large cruise ship, flanked by tug boats, passing through the inlet and heading straight towards us. The ship was heading to the turning basin and cruise ship terminal located on the west side of the Intercoastal Waterway. We obviously gave the MS Zaandam cruise ship (operated by Holland America Cruise Line) the right of way and waved to the passengers as the eight stories of steel passed us on our port side. The ship threw off a nice sized wake and we had to maneuver

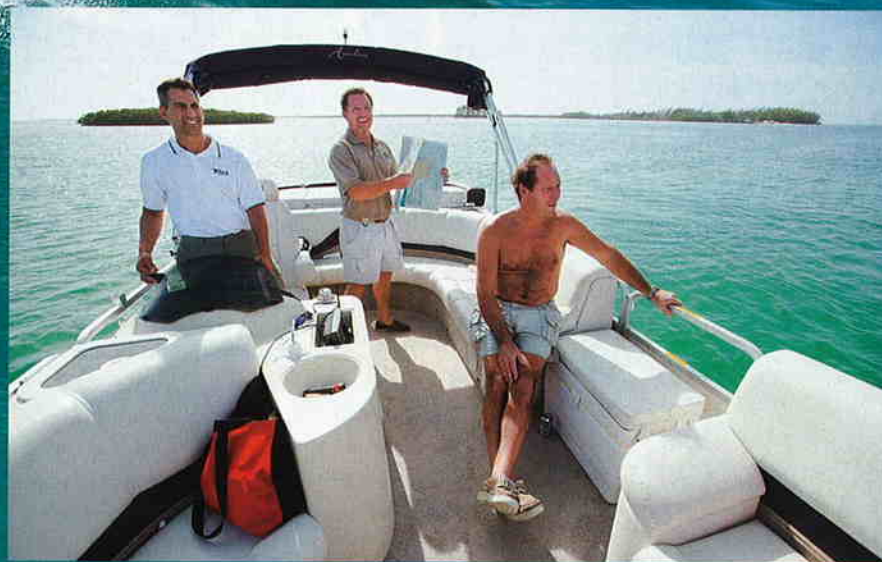
through the swells, taking on only a slight spray of water.

As we moved through and out of the inlet my first thought was that the waves were larger than I had expected from the weather reports. The storms over the past few days had left the Atlantic full of choppy waves. The wind was light and variable, our course was set, and we motored on a straight line going due east away from the mainland. The most comfortable speed was approximately 15 knots—at this rate we were looking at a four-hour or so ride to our destination. After cruising for 30 minutes or so we watched the sun rise from behind some puffy cumulus clouds and the sight was truly amazing.

We had the sun and clouds in front of us, and the southern Florida shoreline behind us, with only a handheld GPS and compass indicating we were on the right track. It was a clear day with good visibility and we were all surprised that the shoreline stayed in view for a good hour of continuous cruising. The Miami skyscrapers were the last peek at civilization we saw before delving further into the horizon.

You Are Here

The waves started building a little larger as the winds started to kick up at around nine. As the miles passed we saw nothing but an occasional flying fish or a passing freighter far off on the horizon. We had the GPS with the Navtronic map set of the Southern Atlantic waters—essentially a handheld map showing our position, direction



Stamp Book. Getting the passport stamped wasn't the most expensive part of the trip. While on the island the crew also purchased a used propeller for \$300 when they discovered they didn't have a spare.

and speed. According to the GPS and compass we were indeed in the Atlantic crossing through the Bermuda Triangle and heading for Bimini in the Bahamas. Were it not for the electronic map and compass we would be lost. With no land in sight and the sun flying straight overhead I wondered how the explorers managed devoid of the navigational tools we have today, particularly the safety equipment and communication devices. Even with all of these modern conveniences, we were still on high alert for any sort of engine or vessel trouble.

When we were 15 miles out, we saw land for the first time in two hours. The wave height decreased and we increased our speed to 25 knots, anxious to reach the shore. The water was a deep dark blue and the land mass grew as we approached. There were no skyscrapers or prominent landmarks on the horizon; however, we did see a few pleasure boats off in the distance and birds flying overhead.

At approximately one-half mile from shore the water changed from the deep dark blue to a brilliant light blue in color indicating that we were moving off of the Continental Shelf whose depths reach 33,000 feet—the world's deepest. It was now approximately 11:30 a.m. and the sun was bright and warm. We just stayed the course and let the GPS guide us into the cut between North and South Bimini.

We pulled right up to the break wall that paralleled the facility and tied up. The second floor open air restaurant looked inviting, but that would have to wait. A security guard greeted us and gave us the lowdown on proper protocol and delivered a stack of paperwork to fill out.



Lunch Time. The adventurous group (from L to R) consisted of Bruce England, James Wolf, Rich Currier and Doug Haskell.

The gentleman processing the paperwork took notice of the fact that we were on a 27-foot pontoon boat and started asking some questions. He wanted to know what the weather was like on the way over, how long it took, why we were on a pontoon boat, what size engine we had, were any other boaters coming this way, etc. He then proceeded to ask about different kinds of motors and what horsepower would work best on the boat that he was refurbishing. After having a nice chat and paying the fees, I was free to go back to the vessel to release the crew from quarantine.

Island Tour

It was now approximately 12:30 in the afternoon and we were all glad that our quarantine period was over and that we were free to move about the island. We grabbed our cameras and valuables and set off on foot. I gave the security guard \$20 and asked him to keep an eye on our boat.

We entered the Tackle Box Restaurant and Bar and grabbed a table for five. There were plenty of open tables, yet the walls were standing room only adorned with photos of sunburned happy fishermen proudly displaying their catch of the day. Some of the marlin in the photos were 1000 pounds or greater. It was now about 2:30 after a great lunch and we decided that it was time to get rolling on

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our long trip back to the mainland.

We departed as quickly as we entered and headed due west on a course that would take us back to Ft. Lauderdale. The sun was high in the sky and the seas pretty calm near the shore. We decided that we would go all out for as long as we could to get some distance behind us.

Spare Parts Needed

Everything was going perfectly smooth and we were now six or seven miles from the island that was growing smaller in the distance. We were trimming the motor trying to find that optimal position for the prop when we heard the engine rev. I quickly backed off of the throttle thinking that it was nothing more than some cavitation



due to trimming the engine. I put the engine all the way down and hit the throttle only to experience the same high rev with little to no forward propulsion. We knew then that we had spun the hub on the prop and would have to change the prop before we could proceed. The prop still grabbed at idle speed and we were limping along at six mph down from 35 mph a minute ago.

It was at that point that I looked at Doug and Doug looked at me and we realized that in all of our planning and preparation we had failed to put a secondary prop in the boat. We were still moving, but slow and we turned the boat around to head back to Bimini. When we got close to the shore we started calling on the handheld radio to reach someone who could help us out of our predicament.

As we putted back, trying to reach someone on the handheld, we considered some questions: What if we were in the middle of the Atlantic when this happened? What if we had completely spun the hub and the boat would not move? What if we can't find a replacement prop? What if we find a prop, but it takes too long?

We knew that another storm system was due to move into the area later that night. We listened to the marine weather and late that evening the waves in the Gulf Stream were expected to pick up to nine to 12 feet. We knew that if we didn't get a replacement prop in time we would not make it back to the mainland. We kept trying the radio; however, we could not get through to anyone. We then pulled out the 12-foot whip antenna and the fixed mounted radio. It wasn't hooked up so Doug had to manually hold the contact wires under the dash while Bruce worked the radio. We were able to reach a few folks on the island; however, nobody had any solution. We kept calling for the Bimini Game Club Marina, but no one answered.

We pulled back into the new marina development at 3:45 and quickly went to work. We spoke to the dock hand and told him that we needed a Yamaha prop with a 19- to 21-inch pitch ASAP. He made a few calls to see what he could find. While he was trying to find a prop, we took the prop

off so we would be ready if and when a new one showed up. The "no see 'em" bugs were bad and we were getting eaten alive under the pounding hot sun. We decided that we should also gas up on fuel just in case. A native on a moped showed up with a used prop. We put it on and it worked. We paid \$300 cash for the prop and headed out of the marina.

Return Trip Take Two

It was now 4:45 and I was mentally preparing myself for some nighttime driving. Crossing the Atlantic on a pontoon boat is difficult enough; crossing the Atlantic at night with pending storms is, well, some might say, not smart. We had almost two hours of daylight remaining and wanted to get some miles behind us before we encountered any inclement weather.

We started out for the second time on a due west course heading straight towards Ft. Lauderdale with 51 miles to go. The boat ran well with a very used and expensive prop. We were going wide open at an rpm of 5100 and 35 to 37 mph. We had plenty of fuel and the seas were pretty calm with only a slight chop. The boat ran great and the miles clicked away. Before we knew it we had reached the halfway mark and had not

encountered the Gulf Stream waves that we had anticipated. The ocean was much more forgiving than it was on the way over.

We continued at wide open throttle and we were having a blast. We did not see a single boat once we left Bimini. We were dashing across the Atlantic on our pontoon boat trying to outrun bad weather and darkness. We had a smooth ride most of the way back. At around 6:15 we spotted the shoreline and started to see a few boats here and there. We were still ten to 15 miles out as the sun was setting behind some large, ominous clouds. We stopped for some pictures and then continued on. When we were about eight miles from land the waves started to kick up and we were forced to slow down a bit. We continued on at a nice clip and worked our way towards shore. There were now many boats around and we knew that we were out of harm's way.

Looking Back

In that stretch of water ten or so miles from shore when radio and cell phone contact starts to black out, the landmarks disappear, and it is just you and the open ocean, you begin to wonder, what if? Now, back in a zone of safety, we were feeling a great sense of accomplishment. We contin-

ued on course towards the inlet and as daylight faded to black we were within a few miles of the inlet. The glow of the shoreline was a welcome sight.

Our reliable handheld GPS had guided us right back to the inlet from which we had departed some 12 hours earlier. On the way in we started to race a 26- to 28-foot V-hull fishing boat. We were going wide open at 36 mph, hitting the waves in the channel. We were only 20 to 30 yards from the other boat and we could see them being tossed around like rag dolls.

Our triple toon was steady as she goes and we could only imagine the conversation that the crew in the other boat must have been having. Is that a pontoon boat keeping up with us? Little did they know that we were just returning from a little cruise to Bimini. 🌞

PHOTOS BY



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John Linn began his photography career as a freelancer in 1996. Since then, photography has taken him around the world, producing stunning images for leading publications and national advertising accounts. He is now a partner in the award-winning marketing firm

