

feature Dry Tortugas



From Key West to Dry Tort



It was 8:45 on a rainy October morning, and I was on my way to Bishop International Airport in Flint, Mich. Before I left the Avalon/Tahoe Pontoon manufacturing facility in Alma 45 minutes earlier, I checked the weather

for Key West one last time. As luck would have it, the day of my departure was also the day the forecast took a turn for the worse.

As I paid attention to the wet and slippery road, my cell phone rang. It was Doug Haskell, a Tahoe Pontoon dealer from Devil's Lake, Mich. "Have you seen the weather?" he asked. I just laughed and said, "Here we go again."

Doug was in Central Florida, about three and a half hours from our scheduled rendezvous at Ft. Myers Beach. He had left the previous morning from south Michigan and was towing the 26-foot Avalon Pontoon that we planned to take for a ride around the Keys. Bruce England, a Tahoe Pontoon dealer from Atlanta,

had left his home around 5 that morning and had just crossed the Florida border.

Built for Fun

Our pontoon had just come off the production line the previous week. It is a stock boat except for three addi-



Three men test the limits of an Avalon pontoon fresh off the production line

BY JIM WOLF,
PRESIDENT AND CEO OF
AVALON/TAHOE PONTOONS

tional fuel tanks. We had the standard 80-gallon tank that comes mounted in the center pontoon. We also had the 36-gallon tank that comes standard on two-tube models mounted in the port rear corner and two additional 45-gallon tanks mounted in the privacy station area toward the rear of the boat. The guys at the plant did a great job integrating all the tanks and even installed a knob on the dash so we could easily monitor and switch between them.

Aside from the 206-gallon fuel capacity, our boat also has the Rough Water Package (aluminum tubes are .110 inch thick instead of .090 inch and all seams are joined with continuous welds), the Watersports Package (triple-tube setup, aluminum under sheeting and high-performance lifting strakes on all three pontoons), captain stand upgrade (includes a built-in stainless steel refrigerator, retractable wine rack and sink), double Bimini top (two 10-foot Biminis for maximum shade coverage), wakeboard tower (with Infinity tower speakers), colored wall skin upgrade (we chose

ugas in a Pontoon



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black walls), sport graphics and simulated teak wood on the front deck instead of carpet.

Powering the decked-out Avalon is a 250 hp Yamaha four-stroke with digital shift controls. Yamaha was excited to team up with Avalon/Tahoe on this project, and all of us were excited that the boat would be powered by such a reliable and maintenance-free engine.

Change of Plans

As I neared the airport, I gave Doug the updated forecast. "OK, so now they are calling for the cold front to come in Saturday afternoon instead of Sunday. Saturday we are looking at 10-knot winds shifting to the northwest and increasing to nearly 15 knots during the afternoon. Seas building beyond the reef 2 to 4 feet with scattered showers. Sunday, north winds near 20 knots and gusty. Seas beyond the reef 4 to 7 feet, even higher in the Gulf Stream." We both knew that our plan needed to change and it needed to change fast.

Originally our plan was to spend Thursday night in Ft. Myers, then depart on Friday morning and be in



From left to right: Avalon dealers Doug Haskell and Bruce England with Avalon president and CEO Jim Wolf, safely tied up at the marina.

Key West by sundown. Saturday we would travel the 70 miles from Key West to Dry Tortugas National Park. After hanging out all day we would spend the night on the boat, go back to Key West on Sunday and maybe spend a couple of extra days kicking around the Keys before returning to Ft. Myers.

After the last look at the weather, our thought was that we needed to

step up the plan by a day. We didn't want to be in the open waters of the Dry Tortugas when the cold front came in and the wind and waves picked up. This was supposed to be a fun adventure, not a deadly one.

With the front coming in Saturday afternoon, we had to make it over to the Dry Tortugas and back by then. Instead of burning all day Friday going from Ft. Myers to Key West, we decided that we would drive straight to Key West and depart Friday morning for the Dry Tortugas.

Moment of Truth

The next morning in Key West, we purchased our fishing licenses and nonresident lobster permits, then headed over to City Marina at Garrison Bight where Doug had dropped the boat the night before. When the dockhands at the marina heard our plan to take the 26-foot pontoon to the Dry Tortugas, they said we were crazy to attempt that journey with our rig, especially with the impending storm.

After topping off all the tanks we backed the Avalon down the ramp and put her in. We were all anxious to

1513 to Present

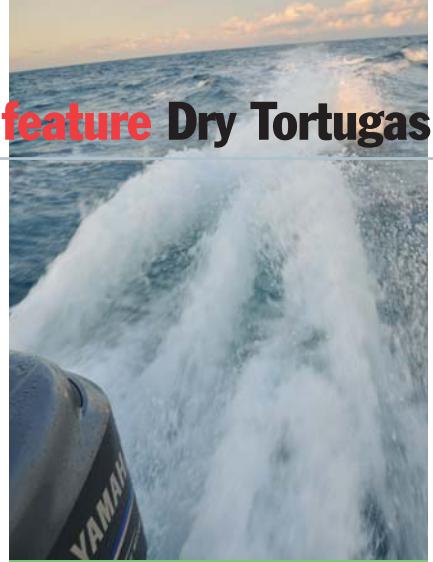


Almost 70 nautical miles west of Key West is a cluster of seven islands composed of coral reef and dry sand called the Dry Tortugas. Along with the surrounding shoals and waters, they make up Dry Tortugas National Park. The area is famous for its bird and marine life, legends of pirates and sunken gold, and its military past.

The Tortugas were discovered by Ponce de Leon in 1513. Sea turtles ("tortugas" in Spanish) provisioned his ships with fresh meat, but there was no drinking water — the Tortugas were dry. Since the days of Spanish exploration, the reefs and shoals of

the Dry Tortugas have been a hazard to navigation and the site of hundreds of shipwrecks.

U.S. military attention was drawn to the Keys in the early 1800s due to their strategic location in the Florida Straits. Plans were made for a massive fortress and construction began in 1846, but the fort was never completed because the invention of the rifled cannon made the fort obsolete. As the military value of Fort Jefferson waned, its pristine reefs, abundant sea life and impressive birds grew in value. In 1953, President Roosevelt set aside Fort Jefferson and the surrounding waters as a national park. The area was designated as Dry Tortugas National Park in 1992 to protect both its historical and natural features.



Safety First

Although spending four days traveling around the Keys on a pontoon sounded like a blast, it also took us through the Gulf Stream and out of sight of land for several hours. The three of us all have significant boating experience, and we knew that the Avalon is a well-built boat that could withstand some pretty harsh conditions. We also knew the Yamaha is an extremely reliable engine that would get us there and back without failure. But there's still a little craziness in taking a pontoon over 350 miles of open ocean, out of sight of land and out of contact with the people that knew our plans.

We did our best to prepare for the unexpected and spared no expense on safety equipment. On board we had Type V PFDs, a flare kit, strobe lights, an EPIRB, a hard-wired marine radio with a 6-foot whip antenna and a range of 14 nautical miles, submersible VHF radios, a first aid kit, a spare prop, a tool bag, flashlights and a SPOT GPS tracker. We discovered the SPOT system while poking around a West Marine store. It's about the size of a cell phone and, when activated, tracks your location at 15-minute intervals. It's connected to a Web site (findmespot.com) so friends and loved ones can track your progress and identify your exact location anywhere in the world.

see how she floated fully loaded and carrying the additional 1,500 pounds of fuel. The 27-inch pontoons appeared to do an excellent job keeping her high, dry and well balanced. The 250 Yamaha turned over quickly, and all was good to go.

As we backed away from the dock, we all looked at each other and, in unison, blurted out our team motto: "Let's get 'er done!" With that, we headed into the unknown.

On the Open Seas

With Bruce at the controls, Doug started dialing in the coordinates on the GPS, and I pulled out my camera and snapped some photos. We slowly motored through the no-wake zones around Key West, and soon we were free to roll. We took the Avalon up to cruising speed and settled in around 23 to 25 knots. We were running off the port rear fuel tank since consuming the fuel in this tank first would give us better balance from side to side.

As we headed due west from Key West, we traveled along the outer islands that are spread out over a 30-mile stretch. The Mule Keys are a group of scattered islets between 3 and 12 miles west of Key West. After that we passed Crawfish Key, Man Key, Ballast Key, Woman Key and Boca Grande Key. The U.S. government has placed most of this area off-limits as part of Key West National Wildlife Refuge. The islands were to the north, and we were running approximately 3 to 5 miles offshore.

After another 10 miles or so of open water we passed the Marquesas Keys, an uninhabited group of small mangrove islands. As these faded away in the distance, the GPS showed we were approximately 30 miles west of Key West and nearing our halfway point. The next time we saw land, it would be the Dry Tortugas.

Once we hit deeper water the waves began to kick up as we passed through treacherous Rebecca Channel and the ride got a little rocky. There was no land visible, but every half hour or so we would see another boat on the horizon

come and go. We came within 100 yards of a commercial fishing boat, and we were certain they couldn't believe their eyes when they saw three guys cruising by in a pontoon.

Arrival

About 10 miles from our destination, Doug spotted the 150-foot lighthouse on Loggerhead Key, 3 miles past Garden Key, which is home to Fort Jefferson. The sight of land was a relief. We reached the Dry Tortugas, the sun was beating down, the water was crystal clear and we still had all day to explore, play around and catch some dinner.

Fort Jefferson was impressive as it came into view. We backed off the throttle and took our time navigating through the shallow water in between small islands of white sand. The first order of business was to set foot on dry land and visit the fort. We followed the well-marked channel into Garden Key and passed the main visitor's dock where a large ferry (*Yankee Freedom II*) from Key West was getting ready to depart. Through the zoom lens on my camera I could see the bewildered look on the faces of the tourists.

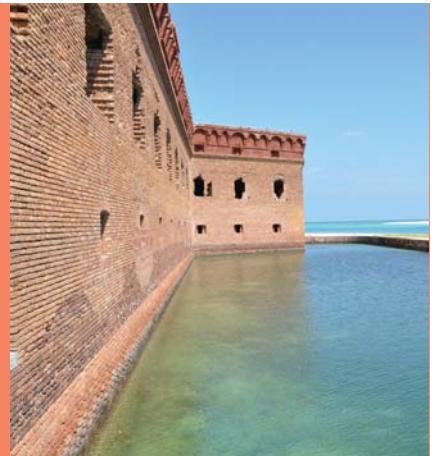
We decided to beach the boat directly in front of the fort where there was a sign designating the area for "dinghies." After startling a few unsuspecting snorkelers, we killed the Yamaha, stepped on shore and were struck with a sense of true remoteness.

We walked about 100 yards to the entrance of the fort and asked a park volunteer — Bill Hamilton — to take our picture in front of the huge brick structure. He took a few photos and was very curious to see our boat. We walked back to the boat as Bill gave us some history about the island, the fort, how often the ferries run, what to expect at night, where we were allowed to fish and snorkel, etc. Bill seemed pretty impressed that we not only attempted our journey, but that we actually made it. He works as a volunteer for one month a year and spends the rest of his time as the cap-

Exploring the Fort

The perimeter of Fort Jefferson is surrounded by a moat, and the 75-foot brick walls shooting straight out of the moat are an impressive sight. The fort is built in the shape of an octagon, the interior peppered with trees and grass. The inside walls of the fort have deteriorated, and you can see what used to be square rooms used for living or jail cells. During and after the Civil War

the fort housed prisoners from the Confederate Army as well as deserters from the Union Army. The most famous prisoner was Dr. Samuel Mudd, the physician who innocently treated the leg of President Lincoln's assassin. He was convicted of treason and imprisoned at Fort Jefferson. He was pardoned in 1869 for his heroic efforts treating prisoners and guards who contracted yellow fever.



tain of El Tortuga Dive Charters out of Panama City, Fla.

Ocean's Bounty

After a short stroll around the fort, we were all dripping with sweat and wanted to get back on the water to cool down. We motored out past the restricted fishing zone and picked a random spot to throw anchor. Then we donned our masks and fins and jumped into the clear, 80-degree water.

Bruce grabbed his speargun and swam off. Within five minutes he was back with a large hogfish thrashing at the end of the spear. Doug spotted some lobsters peeking out from the rocks about 10 feet down, so we grabbed our nets and pokers and soon had two impressive lobsters on board. We were excited to know we wouldn't be going hungry later that night.

We kept at it for a couple of hours and ended up with six large lobsters as well as three nice-sized fish for

The 26-foot Avalon pontoon easily made the journey before the foul weather came in.

dinner. As the sun started going down, we motored back to the fort, cracked a few beers and played some music. The sunset was perfect and made for some great photos as the sun slowly sank down over Loggerhead Key. Our thoughts turned again to the approaching storm, and we decided that we would depart at dawn in order to make it back safely. Stuffed from our seafood feast, we called it a night and rolled out our sleeping bags. Doug and Bruce took

the front 86-inch benches and I slept on the rear sundeck, which had a great view of the star-filled night.

The Plot Thickens

I woke up at 3 in the morning to the sound of waves lapping against the beach, except it sounded like the waves were right under me. The tide had gone out, and three-quarters of the boat was now solidly on shore. There was nothing I could do about it, but it was difficult to get back to



sleep as I worried how we would get the boat off the beach in the morning in time to beat the storm home.

At 6 a.m. we were up and securing items for the return trip. Most of the boat was now on the beach, but the quick and steep drop-off still allowed us to trim the motor all the way down. I took the controls as Doug and Bruce pushed from the front. In full reverse, the powerful Yamaha inched the tubes off the sand into deeper water. A few moments later we all sighed with relief as we floated freely a few feet from shore. Time was of the essence, so we headed out of the harbor right away.

The wind was blowing harder and the waves were much larger than the day before, but we had no trouble reaching a cruise speed of 25 knots. On the horizon we could see a dark storm in the distance. We were in 2- to 4-foot following seas, and I worried that we



might bury the front end into the backside of a wave. But the boat was running great and felt incredibly stable in the rough seas of the gulf. At our halfway point, we knew we would soon be in sight of the Marquesas Keys.

The building seas forced us to slow

down to 18 knots, and off to our starboard side we spotted a waterspout about 5 miles in the distance. This kept us preoccupied for at least 20 minutes, but next thing we knew we were passing the series of keys off Key West, so we cranked up the Infinity sound system and watched the miles go by.

The island of Key West was a welcome sight. We arrived exactly 24 hours after we had departed, dirty, tired and hot. We pulled into the main marina and as we walked down the pier we looked at each other and, in unison, said, "We got 'er done!"

Back at City Marina, we pulled the boat out and within five minutes the storm hit with a fury: pouring rain, gusty winds and cold temperatures. The conditions deteriorated throughout the day, so we knew that we had "got 'er done" just in the nick of time. **BW**

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