

CRUISING WORLD

Rediscovering a Florida Favorite

From Deserted Islands to
Famous Cheeseburgers,
Adventure Awaits on the
Waters of Charlotte Harbor
and Pine Island Sound

Passing Through

A father's fascination with sails is handed down during a weekend's cruise

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PIERCE HOOVER

THE WIND HOWLED through the rigging, and rain splattered the overhead hatch.

Lying awake in the stern cabin, one thought ran repetitively through my mind: "This is going to be a great weekend for sailing."

And it was. Sometime after midnight, the leading edge of the cold front passed to the south, and yesterday's gray skies and blustery northwesterlies were supplanted by the

cool, dry air and moderate, steady northerlies that are so typical of post-cold-front conditions in wintertime Florida. There wasn't a cloud in the cobalt-blue skies by the time the sun lit the condo towers flanking the Burnt Store Marina in Punta Gorda.

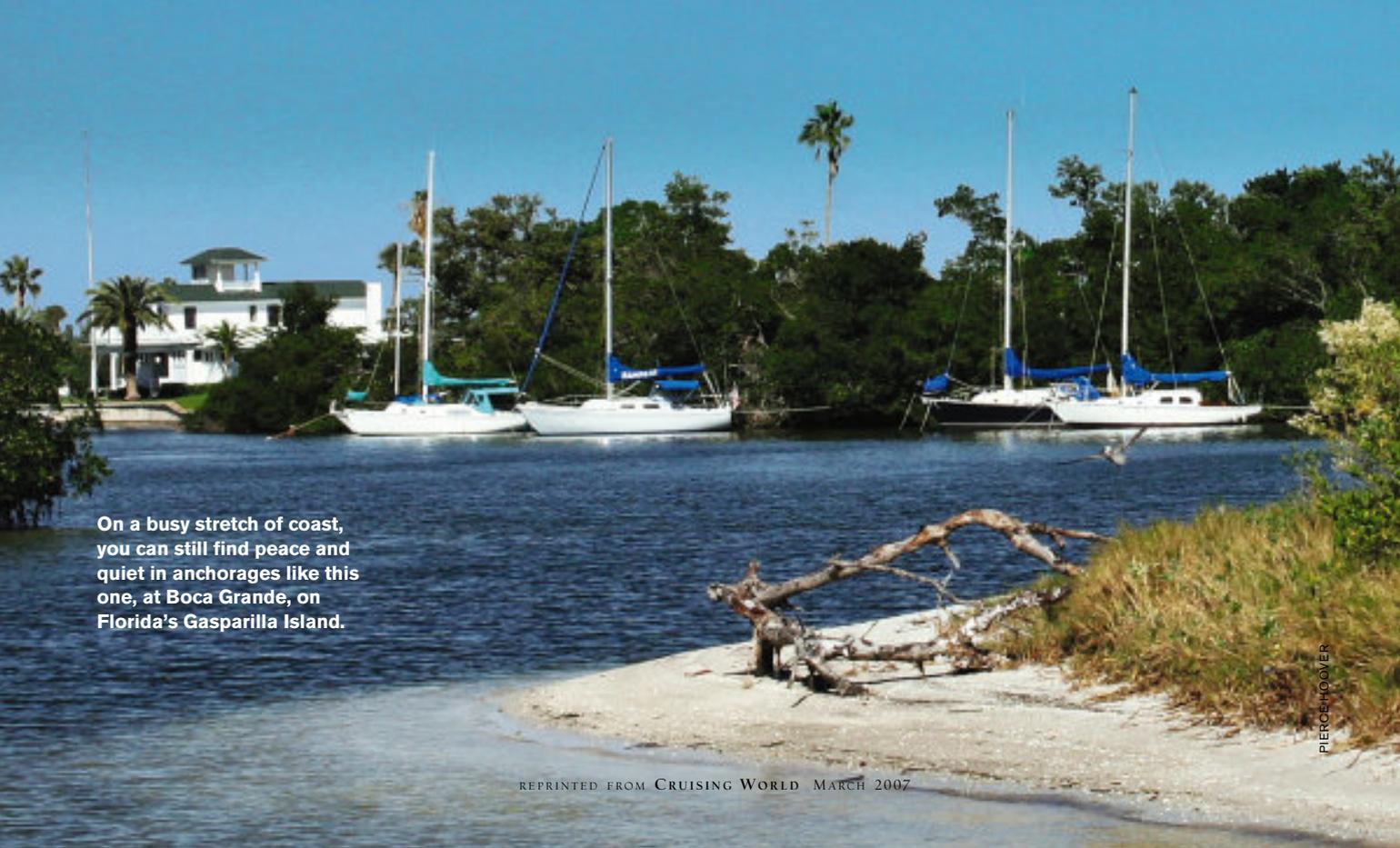
Though you couldn't tell by looking, it was in this same spot, some 27 months earlier, that the Gulf Coast saw the beginning of an onslaught of hurricane activity unlike any in recent memory. Though

Katrina and Ivan are now remembered as the worst storms of the hyperactive 2004/2005 hurricane seasons, it all began with a fast-moving Category 4 system named Charley, which roared ashore just south of Burnt Store on August 13, 2004. It was the worst storm to hit the region in more than 30 years, causing some \$13 billion in property damage and affecting most every marina and waterfront resort in the region.

While subsequent storms earned national headlines and prompted international relief efforts in the following months, the residents of southwest Florida began the

quiet labor of restoring their little slice of waterfront paradise. Roofs were replaced, buildings and seawalls were rebuilt, and docks and marina facilities were restored and, in many cases, upgraded.

On this weekend, it would be our mission both to document the outcome of these efforts and, in the process, to rediscover one of Florida's finest cruising grounds. Ground zero for our explorations is Southwest Florida Yachts, which maintains a fleet of charter sailboats at its docks at Burnt Store. Our vessel of choice is the aptly named *Cool Change*, a 34-foot Catalina ideally sized for my other mis-



On a busy stretch of coast, you can still find peace and quiet in anchorages like this one, at Boca Grande, on Florida's Gasparilla Island.

sion: giving my 8-year-old son, Nash, a chance to take the helm of something larger than his beloved 14-foot Hunter.

Also on board is Christine Bruce, a friend from my college days who wants to reconnect with her childhood sailing roots and share the experience with her 12-year-old son, Zach. Both boys have packed the various forms of electronic entertainment that seem to be their generation's oxygen. My goal is to engage them in the act of sailing to the point where they'll forget about iPods, Game Boys, and DVD players, if only for a couple of days.

After acquainting the boys with the lines, terminology, and deck hardware, practicing a sail-raising drill, and taking a trial spin in the dinghy, we go below to roll out the charts and plan our route. Awaiting us just outside the marina basin is Charlotte Harbor, which boasts more than 100 square miles of protected, navigable water with depths of 12 feet or better. With the wind holding at 10 to 12 knots from the north, we can count on a light chop and an easy reach westward to Boca Grande Pass. From there, we'll make a quick midday foray into the Gulf of Mexico, then double back to catch the flood tide into Pelican Bay—one of my all-time favorite anchorages on this coast.

Half an hour later, we're in open water and making an easy six knots under main and genoa while the boys take turns at the wheel, ever vigilant for dolphins. It's Zach's first taste of saltwater sailing, and he's hooked. Nash, by contrast, considers himself an old hand, having cruised and fished this area in the past. His only regret is forgetting his favorite fishing pole.

Charlotte Harbor and the adjacent body of water known as Pine Island Sound are one of Florida's richest inshore fishing grounds. This aquatic bounty was once the source of



a thriving commercial-fishing industry, but today it draws recreational anglers from across the country, as evidenced by the parade of charter fishing skiffs that skim the mangrove shorelines of the often-bustling sound.

As we glide westward, a pair of low-lying barrier islands materializes on the horizon. I provide a quick lesson on range and bearings, then have the boys attempt to identify our position. To the north, the silhouettes of luxury homes and low-rise condos on Gasparilla Island identify the upscale enclave of Boca Grande. By contrast, Cayo Costa, the southern island, shows only trees. In between lies Boca Grande Pass, one of Florida's deepest natural inlets and a

former gateway for those seeking U.S. citizenship.

In the 1800s, Cayo Costa Island was the site of a major U.S. immigration station that processed tens of thousands of settlers and laborers arriving from Cuba and Central America. With the closure of the station and the decline in the region's commercial-fishing trade, the attendant settlement languished. Lacking a bridge to the mainland, Cayo Costa never developed the resort infrastructure of such adjacent islands as Gasparilla, Captiva, and Sanibel, and it was virtually deserted by the time the U.S. government took ownership of the island in the early 1970s.

Today, it's a state park that's accessible only by private boat

Hoping to keep the Game Boys at bay, Pierce goes over the route (above) with his deckhands, Zach (left) and Nash. When it came time to rebuild after Hurricane Charley, the owners of Cabbage Key (opposite page) decided to keep things just they way they've always been.

or ferry. Between the island's western shore and the parallel strip of land known as Punta Blanca is sand-bottomed Pelican Bay, which offers depths of up to eight feet with good holding but must be entered across a sandbar to the north that shoals to five feet at mean low water. With our wing-keeled Catalina drawing just more than four feet six inches, we should have no problem

feeling our way inside on a rising tide, and we'll have all afternoon to dinghy ashore and hike the wooded trails and wade on the island's white-sand beaches.

Back aboard, the boys fulfill their assigned line- and anchor-handling obligations, then duck below to retrieve a handheld electronic device. I'm pleasantly surprised: It's the GPS. At least for the moment, waypoints have replaced gun-wielding aliens as a source of entertainment.

Christine and I use the fresh afternoon breeze to hone our skills with a series of short tacks up the harbor and across the bar, then sheet out to intersect the marked channel of the Intracoastal Waterway. South of Charlotte Harbor, the ICW enters the wide expanses of shallow Pine Island Sound, and here, deep-draft

mariners no longer have the freedom to roam from shore to shore. With the wind at our backs, we have no problem staying between the reds and greens, but we must soon make a choice.

To port, a side channel leads to the docks of Useppa Island. Southwest Florida Yacht's owners, Vic and Barb Hansen, maintain a membership at this upscale private resort, which allows their charter customers to enjoy guest privileges. From previous phone conversations with the dockmaster, I know that the resort is fully restored from the significant damage caused by Charley, with new docks, water, and electrical supplies. The venerable Collier Inn is also back in operation, and should we choose the Useppa option, we can count on memorable dining and posh,

low-key surroundings.

Being more of a cheeseburger crew, we maintain our southern heading a little longer, drop sail off Mile Marker 60, and power our way up the short channel to Cabbage Key. Much has been written about this charming island resort, which was founded as a private retreat for novelist Mary Roberts Rinehart and has been under the ownership of the Wells family since the late 1960s. One of several venues reputed to be the inspiration for Mr. Buffett's "Cheeseburger in Paradise" hit, the Cabbage Key Inn is a popular day trip for private boaters and excursion craft alike. The famous and not so famous sign and attach their dollar bills to the walls—to make an estimated \$70,000 coating—and chow down 2,000 pounds of prime burgers during peak season.

In comparison with its ac-

tivity in the summer months, Cabbage Key is relatively quiet when we arrive. The last of the day-trippers have departed; there are just half a dozen transients at the docks and perhaps a few guests in the vintage cottages scattered around the wooded property. Charley did a fair bit of damage here as well, but when it came time to rebuild, the owners decided not to upgrade. Instead, they restored things to exactly the way they'd been. And for all those who know and love this unique getaway, it was a welcome decision.

After securing the lines and rinsing off, there's time before dinner to stretch our legs on the nature trail and climb the water tower for an expansive sunset view of Pine Island Sound. From our elevated viewpoint, the charts and channels the boys pored over earlier are brought into perspective. After retracing our route, Nash turns his gaze westward to the open expanses of the gulf.

"What's on the other side, where the sunset goes?" he asks as we take in the view. "And can we sail there tomorrow?"

I have a mental image of a torch changing hands, and then I fast-forward a couple of decades, wondering what yet-undiscovered technology Nash will use to chronicle his own bluewater adventures. Today's destination has just become a starting point.

Pierce Hoover is the editor of *Cruising World's* sister publication *Power Cruising*.

PIERCE HOOVER



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