



Hurricane Tomas and the Gulf Stream dominate a voyage from Cape Cod to St. John

Sea Witch Fetches the Virgins

by Rick Meisner

There are peculiar things that happen on every major ocean voyage. Heavy weather, contrary winds, mechanical and other system failures, crew dynamics—add the possibilities up and there are a myriad of gremlins that will mark the voyage with their own personal stamp.

I remember every one of my offshore passages, but not by the date or even by the destination or boat. The memory jog for me is more often some “gremlin event” that colors the whole journey. “Remember that 55-knot storm off Hatteras in the middle of a “good weather window?” Or, “Remember the time we had no air, little fuel, and couldn’t find a way through the Gulf Stream?” Or, “How about that

time the autopilot quit in big seas with over 400nm to go?"

I remember them all, and this most recent voyage, as navigator aboard the 53-foot ketch *Sea Witch* from Cape Cod to St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands, is no exception. Years from now, when someone says, "Remember the time we were close-hauled on starboard tack for 1500nm?" I will smile and say, "*Sea Witch*, sailing to the Virgins, 2010."

GEARING UP

Here's how the journey shaped up. Seeing how I was putting my own boat, *WildHorse*, on the hard for the first time in five years, I agreed to navigate and crew for my friend John Stephenson, owner and captain of the Pearson 53 *Sea Witch*. John is the image of a modern day pirate—right out of central casting. Tall, with a robust, 230-pound build, he sports earrings, long black hair held in place with an omnipresent bandana, and beaded braids at the end of his locks. Oh, and yes—he adores rum.

John is a stout-hearted romantic who loves boats, the sea, women and his swashbuckling ways. More important, he is gritty-brave, a first-rate sailor who knows his vessel from stem to stern, and who commands her with great skill and uncanny instinct. If you knew a full gale was in your near future, John would be your first choice as shipmate. (For the record, if you were headed into a nasty, bucket-of-blood waterfront bar at midnight with the goal of lying low, Pirate

John would be the last companion you would select.) In a bizarre twist of fate, John and I met offshore over the VHF, then were forced into the same port by the same storm. We've been friends ever since.

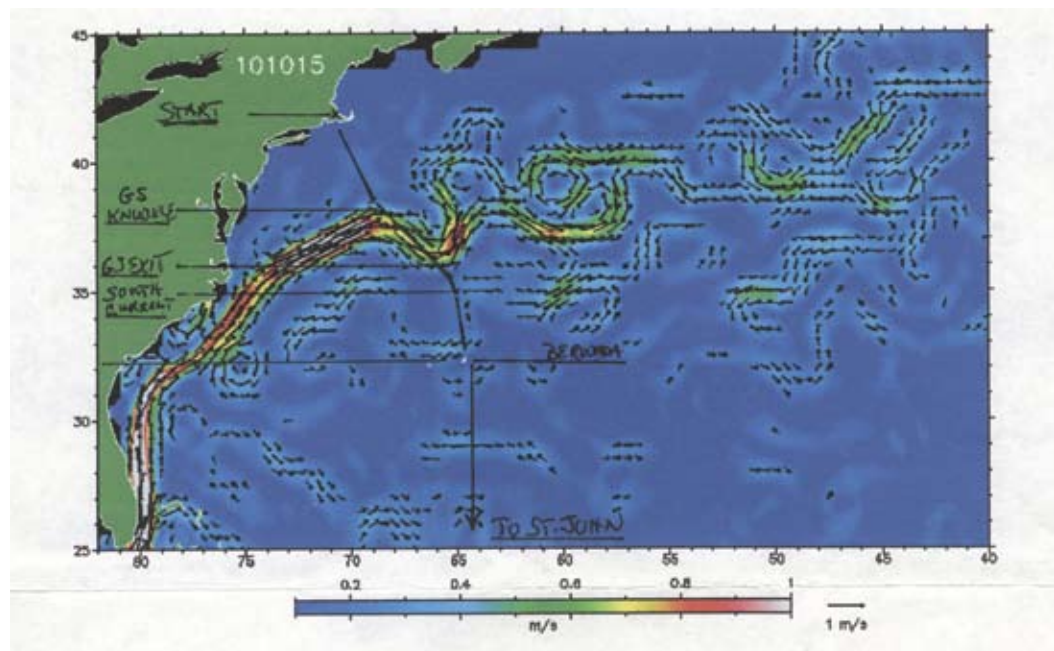
As John wanted to leave the Cape on the first good weather window after mid-October, I started working closely with Chris Parker, chief meteorologist and popular weather broadcaster for the Marine Weather Center (www.mwxc.com). The dominant weather features for our voyage became quite clear: a tropical depression soon to be known as Hurricane Tomas was as yet unpredictable but likely to cross our path south of Bermuda, and a massive low pressure system headed for New England was going to dominate local weather for some time. Preceding the big system was a more modest front that Chris thought we might be able to ride as it departed New England, and at least fetch Bermuda. It would be a short window, so we had to be ready.

The other dynamic was a huge, southeast-flowing Gulf Stream meander that was imperative to hit

and ride, as it not only afforded a fair passage through the Stream, but also would shoot us well along our course. A personal reflection here: it is my view that any fall passage to the Virgin Islands should "aim" at St. George's Harbour, Bermuda. It is typically off the rhumb line, but not so far as to be a course handicap. And what do you get for this slight deviation? Just the only safe harbor in the North Atlantic for a radius of 700nm or more. You can always wave at Bermuda with affection and pass her by with a fair forecast, but when the weather goes ugly, or if you just need a rest (or fuel, or water, or a repair), there is pure joy in fetching Town Cut, St. George's, and the friendly, clipped tones of Bermuda Harbour Radio.

SLIM AND DIM

With *Sea Witch* loaded to the gills for her seven-month sojourn, and with Chris Parker advising we had a short-duration weather window, we threw off our mooring lines at 1430hrs, Saturday, October 23, 2010. Pirate John guided the big ketch





Top, Pirate John at ease on the afterdeck; bottom, Dennis off watch in the cockpit. Opposite, "The Nest," top; catch of the day, bottom

down Buzzard's Bay in a dying northwest breeze, through Quick's Hole, across Vineyard Sound, splitting Gay Head and Noman's Land, before finally turning to our course of 168 degrees magnetic, which targeted the northwest corner of the big Gulf Stream meander. If we could hit this "knuckle" dead on and keep a SSE course, we could have a record Gulf Stream crossing.

With our late departure, night came fast, and with darkness also

lay the Gulf Stream meander and a lot of south component wind, along with beam-forward seas. We made for a series of waypoints defining a course that would hit the meander at its northwest corner, then slide southeast for over 100nm, popping out of the meander around 36 North, then making for a south-flowing surface current that extended nearly to Bermuda. This course put us on starboard tack, close-hauled in big seas with southwest wind at 20 to 25

came a very uncomfortable ride. Even with *Sea Witch's* 35 tons and her centerboard extended to increase draft to 12 feet, the light wind and leftover beam seas produced a sickening yaw through 50 degrees, over and over. Cooking was impossible, and after a quick, lukewarm pepperoni pizza, I was lucky to survive the first night!

My own weather sites, along with Chris Parker's counsel, all pointed to the manic nature of the (now) Tropical Storm Tomas. Our nav plan became a no-brainer. We would fetch Bermuda and hide out until Tomas decided his path. But in front of us

knots. We wanted our 168 degrees magnetic course badly, and simply had to accept the steep heel and exaggerated motion that came with it.

Sea Witch is a big, hefty girl and with her long waterline can lope along at 9 knots forever, given enough wind. She is a cutter-rigged ketch with many sail plan options, and sitting in her enclosed cockpit in big seas with green water sluicing her decks and cockpit windows, it was tough not to smile just a little. This is a boat you want to be on for a long haul in big weather.

But she is not perfect; no boat is. A previous owner had removed her port settee and sea berth in favor of cabins and a huge entertainment center. The spacious aft cabin is the master and there is a starboard forward cabin with two bunk berths and a full head to port. The V-berth is a big double, but John had it packed from deck to sole. What does all this mean? Just that there is NO proper portside sea berth. And what 25 to 35 degree tack were we on? Why, starboard, of course. So the prospects of any off-watch comfort below were slim and dim, in that order.

THE HURT LOCKER

The wind blew in our face at 20 to 25 knots without respite, producing a relentless starboard tack and uncomfortable heel. With 8- to 12-foot cross seas, there was a war zone noise factor below that made the low side cockpit perch the only modestly comfortable spot on the whole boat. We did all we could to improve comfort by reducing our heel, but we also had to maintain speed because there was nasty weather behind us, and the longer term forecast for Bermuda was not good either. After dousing the mizzen, reefing the main and dumping the traveler, we finally settled on a rig of reefed jib and main, with a scrap of staysail to cre-

ate a double slot. We needed the sail power to drive *Sea Witch* through the seas, but our severe course to fetch the Gulf Stream knuckle made the sharp heel relentless.

And *Sea Witch* made us suffer, even as you just knew she was happily in her element. At one point, we dubbed the forward head, on port across from the two bunk berths, the “Hurt Locker.” It was impossible to make a business call on this head without significant physical pain. It also featured a fixed hull port light which, given our heel, was below water and slamming like thunder every time *Sea Witch* came off a wave and dug her shoulder in. When I saw it begin to weep, I told John. He said not to worry, it had done that before. This comment was not comforting. I shared this head with our third crew, Dennis Kerr, a barrel-chested sailor from California.

After a trip to the Hurt Locker, here’s a typical dialog between Dennis and me: “How was it?” “Brutal, man, don’t go in there.” “But I have to.” “I’m telling you, man, just don’t go in there!” Of course, eventually you had to go in there, and indeed, there was hell to pay. Not only were bruises and contusions common, but the psychic pain of watching that port light take those thunderous hits, weeping all the while, was enough to grease the skids of any stubborn G.I. tract.

So, on our third day out, when Chris Parker forecasted a backing wind that would force us off to the ESE, we cheered the thought of tacking over on what would be a header. But then Chris said: “Don’t be tempted to tack to the SW, because the



wind is going to go east nearer Bermuda and you’ll get caught on the wrong side—hold off your tack until you’re sure you can fetch the island.” There would be no port tack for *Sea Witch*, and no comfort for her crew. Starboard it was and starboard it would be, right down to 33 North, or

about 40nm north of St. George’s.

THE NEST

Learning the cold, hard truth gave a kind of desperate inspiration to *Sea Witch*’s crew. We simply had to create a comfort zone below, on the low side. There was a scant five-foot





Left, taking on water in Charlotte Amalie. Opposite, entrance to Cruz Bay, St John

length of cabin sole just inboard of the entertainment center that we had rejected as ridiculous, but which now deserved a second look. The space lay just forward of Pirate John's massage chair, a 500-pound leather-bound chamber of delight he used when chartering *Sea Witch*, and just aft of the bar. Coming off watch that night, I saw the crumpled form of Dennis Kerr, lying fully clothed on some blankets he had strewn in this sad spot. But he looked semi-comfortable—at least he was not “hanging on” while trying to sleep. Rousting him for his watch, I quickly improved this improvised berth by throwing down a couple of pillows.

By daybreak, after all three of us had a turn, we proclaimed our cabin sole berth “The Nest.” “Don't worry guys,” I said (stupidly), “South of Bermuda we'll get the easterlies and we won't be needing The Nest.”

Meanwhile, I was quite pleased with our progress. Tomas was headed for Haiti and the D.R., and all the forecast models agreed he would then track west and pass south of Bermuda. We were happy to sit this one out in the shelter and beauty of St. George's, letting Senor Tomas blow himself out and move

east of 065 West, which would clear our path down to St. John. And best of all, our stubborn, close-hauled perseverance had produced a direct hit on the Gulf Stream's big meander, which we rode for over 120nm, achieving a 2- to 3-knot boost, the big ketch slamming along at 10 to 12 knots, now more in rhythm with the big sea state.

Exiting the Stream at 36.09 North, we made for a waypoint just to the north of a south-flowing current that had shown itself consistently on all the Gulf Stream charts. If we could hit it, we would be advantaged by a half to full knot of fair current down to 33.50 North, or within 100nm of Bermuda. Having this much invested, and with The Nest providing a modicum of comfort, we stayed our close-hauled course and, indeed, picked up fair current for an additional 90nm.

Late on our fourth day out, I judged us sufficiently east of our rhumb line, and the wind backing enough to the east, to tack over and sail directly for St. George's. We made the move with great anticipation, finally achieving comfort below, albeit with only a short time left to enjoy it.

WONDERFULLY CIVIL

At 0100hrs on the 28th, we lined *Sea Witch* up for her entry to St. George's Harbour via the narrow Town Cut. Even though we had a clear, starry night, we did not cut any corners, for the penalty of a mistake here is devastating. We ran down past Kitchen Shoals and Mills Breaker, then squared off at the “SB” sea buoy. There are two problems to overcome on a night entry into St. George's. First, not all the buoys are lighted, and second, everything else is, including all the airport lights. Add the town lights and the effect can be quite confusing. As the unlit buoys are sizable (some are massive daymarks), great care must be taken not to slam the boat into one of them.

We posted Dennis with a strong light as a bow lookout and made a ginger-slow, but textbook correct entry. We headed for Powder Hole, anchor ready, only to learn from Bermuda Harbour Radio that vessels now must proceed to the Customs Dock to clear in no matter the hour. We grumbled about this given our state of exhaustion, but having no choice we docked, completed the process, and were anchored in Powder Hole, rum and cokes

in hand, at 0400hrs.

Bermuda is a wonderfully civil and gorgeous set of islands. We looked forward to a three- to four-day stay, but it was not to be. With computer coverage, I was on Chris Parker's webcast every morning for the next 10 days, vainly looking for a decent weather window. Between Tomas taking his own sweet time clearing to the east, along with squally weather and dead south wind, no one was going anywhere. Quite a collection of cruising boats heading south were stacked up. And just as Tomas was finally clearing east of our course, the massive low was sliding south of New England, with a front extending all the way south of Bermuda, eventually connecting with the remnants of Tomas to form some truly ominous weather with counterclockwise circulation. It couldn't be, I thought. Wouldn't that mean west winds, and strong? The first premonition of continuing starboard tack hit me with a dull, depressing thud.

On November 9th, 11 days after our arrival, my discussion with Chris Parker produced a fine weather window. Chris was quite certain the low would trump the squally south winds we had around Bermuda, and high pressure was going to build up just north of the

Virgins. And with a course virtually due south to St. John, what would be our winds? "West winds, Rick. West winds and strong, 20 to 25 knots, along with some big seas. Chris had to add, "Your apparent air will put you on a close reach, starboard tack, pretty much all the way."

And so it was, for the next 840nm. *Sea Witch* remained on starboard tack, close reaching in big seas right down to 19 North, or just 40nm from our landing. The Hurt Locker was unmerciful, but we refined The Nest, stealing settee cushions and blankets to make a serviceable portside sea berth—on the cabin sole, under the entertainment center, forward of the massage chair and aft of the bar. ~

Author's note: *Sea Witch* made a fast passage to St. John from Bermuda. With no sign of any easterly trades,

and with forecasted strong westerlies, the big ketch made Cruz Bay in 114 hours, with an average speed of 7.4 knots. To prove her good breeding, *Sea Witch* waited until safely anchored in Christmas Cove to blow her transmission, and Pirate John was last seen busily sorting through his stores for a spare damper plate.

Rick Meisner sails his Valiant 42, WildHorse, out of Watch Hill, RI. He has extensive coastal and offshore experience and has captained WildHorse in several Newport Bermuda Races and Marblehead to Halifax Ocean Races. Meisner, a student of the Gulf Stream who has crossed it 14 times, is a former corporate executive with a master's in clinical psychology. He also runs his own art studio and has painted in oils for more than 35 years (see www.easthillsstudio.com).

