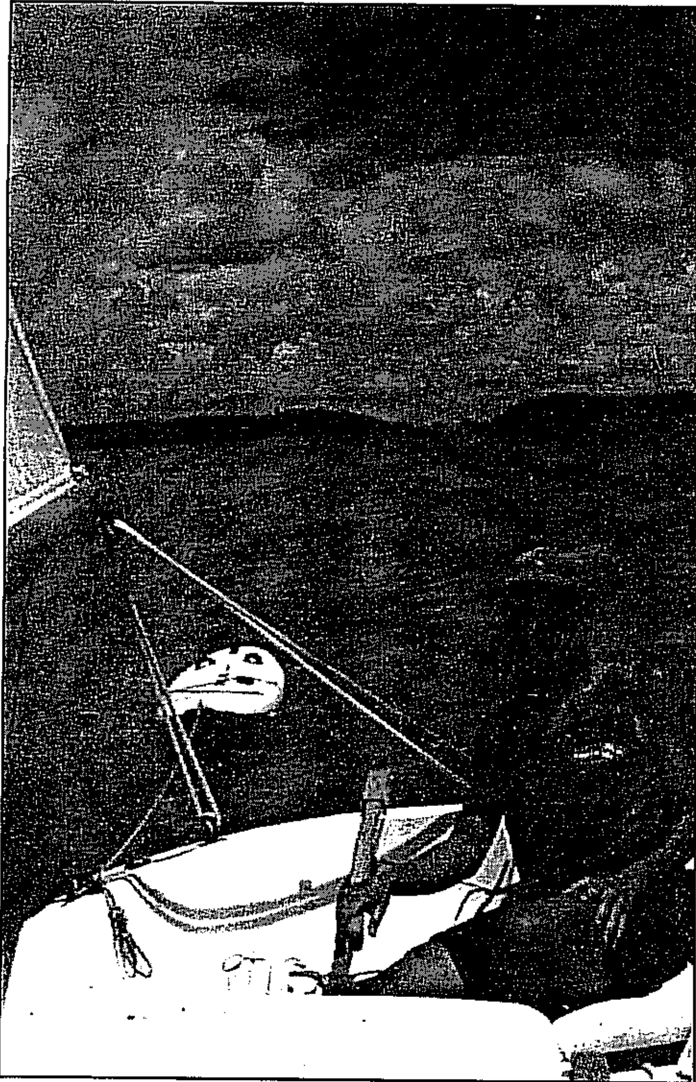
PSYCHED UP, NOT OUT



Are you itching to hit the high seas in your boat, yet just can't bring yourself to sail out of harbor? If so, you may be suffering from Small Craft Apprehension (SCRAP). Although many articles in SCA have focused on preparing your boat for the rigors of a voyage, preparing your mind can be equally important. SCRAP seems to afflict many new voyagers, but is fortunately a treatable condition. After overcoming SCRAP, I logged approximately 500 miles over the course of two summers while single-handing my Com-Pac 16, *Nini*, from the Florida Keys to the Bahamas.

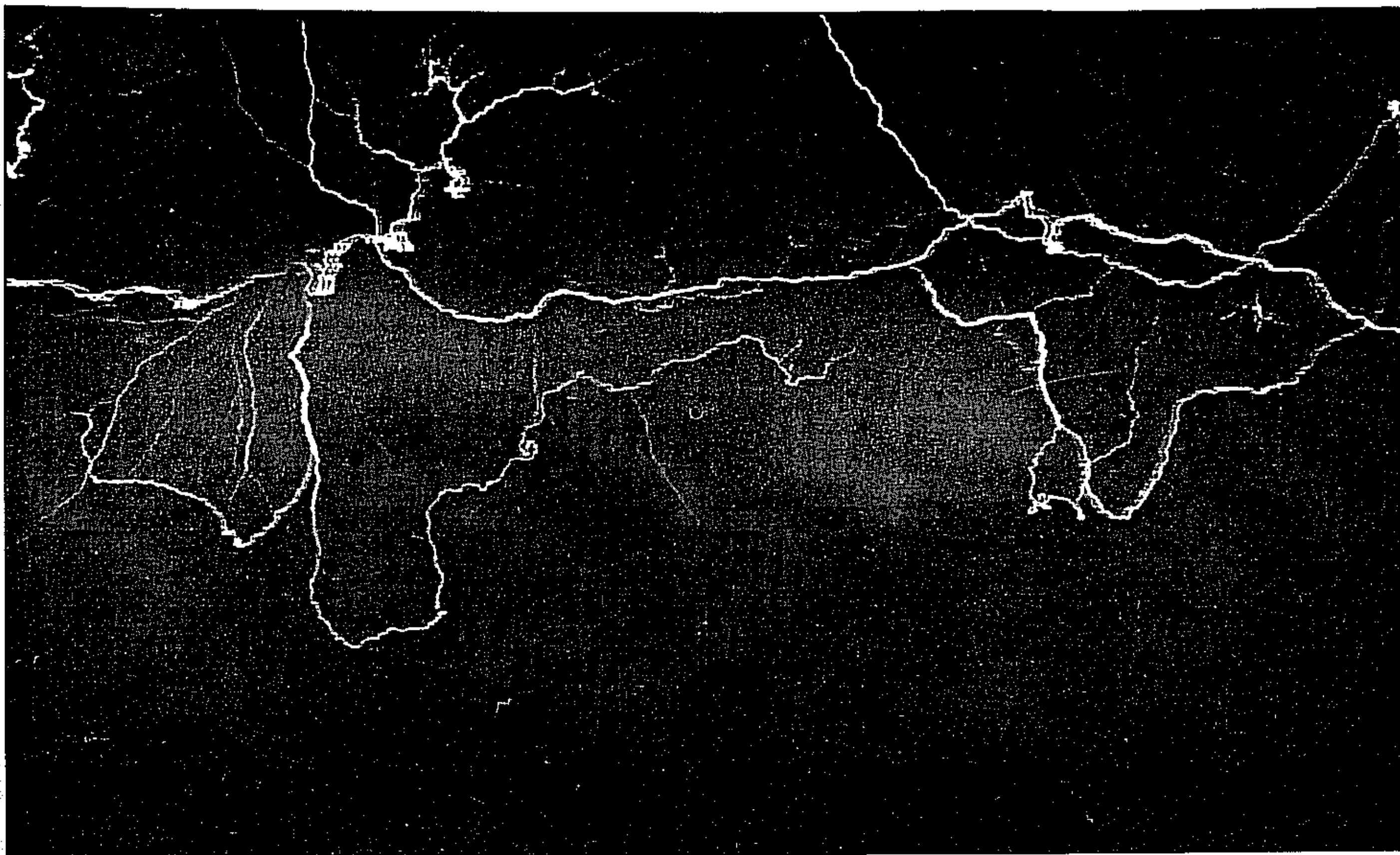
The purpose of my travels was to collect data on lizard behavior for my Ph.D. dissertation; at least, that's what I told my advisor! In truth, I'm a sailing fanatic and was inspired by Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World.* The first summer I sailed to the Bahamas, I was much more knowledgeable about lizards than voyaging by sailboat over open waters. Most of my sailing experience had come from 14 years of windsurfing rather than sailing a displacement hull. I faced countless roadblocks before I even set sail, and I made countless screw-ups at sea. However, the joys I experienced during many stages of my journey more than compensated for the low points. Below, I discuss the hurdles I faced, the strategies I used to overcome these obstacles, and what I would have done differently if I had the opportunity the first time around.

Negating the naysayers

Geno, an experienced sailor of larger boats, eyed my boat skeptically. "You couldn't pay me all the money in the world to sail with you to the Bahamas in that thing!" Expect to hear comments such as this when you announce your plans. Similar were my boyfriend's morbid words of discouragement, "Life goes on even when your partner is dead." Come on folks, can't you think of something positive to say? Even my bank, through some sort of strange cosmic influence, sent me an application for life insurance the week of my departure. This was the first time I had ever received anything about life insurance. Yes, I felt that the forces of the universe were against me. In fact, of all the people with whom I discussed my plans, only one was even remotely positive—a Kiwi sailor working at West Marine who encouraged me by saying that if he could cross the Gulf Stream at 2 a.m. drunk after a night of partying, in a 25-knot northwesterly no less, then I could most certainly do the same under more favorable conditions. The bottom line is to focus on the positive, even if very little of it is coming in your direction. Don't let the negative attitudes of others creep into your psyche in the form of self-doubt. And if your significant other or close friend is supportive and agrees to accompany you, consider yourself very, very lucky.

My boat could be even smaller.

On a related note, one strategy that helped me maintain a positive attitude about my impending trip involved reading about journeys that were much more treacherous than the one I was planning, particularly those undertaken by smaller boats. In many cases, the individuals who completed these journeys were not expert sailors, providing further inspiration. Some of my favorite accounts include Tim Batstone's *Round Britain Windsurf*, Frank and Margaret Dye's *Ocean-Crossing Wayfarer: To Iceland and Norway in an Open Boat,* and *Alone Against the Atlantic,* Gerry Spiess' account of crossing the Atlantic in his 10-foot boat. Thus, when people tell you that you are crazy, you can counter with, "but not as crazy as X, who sailed across the Atlantic in a four foot punt," or whatever the record is these days. Also keep in mind that when you complete your journey, people will now tell you



Story and photos by Val Simon

that you are their hero and living their life-long dream (seriously, people told me this!). Apparently, the line between insanity and heroism is a thin one.

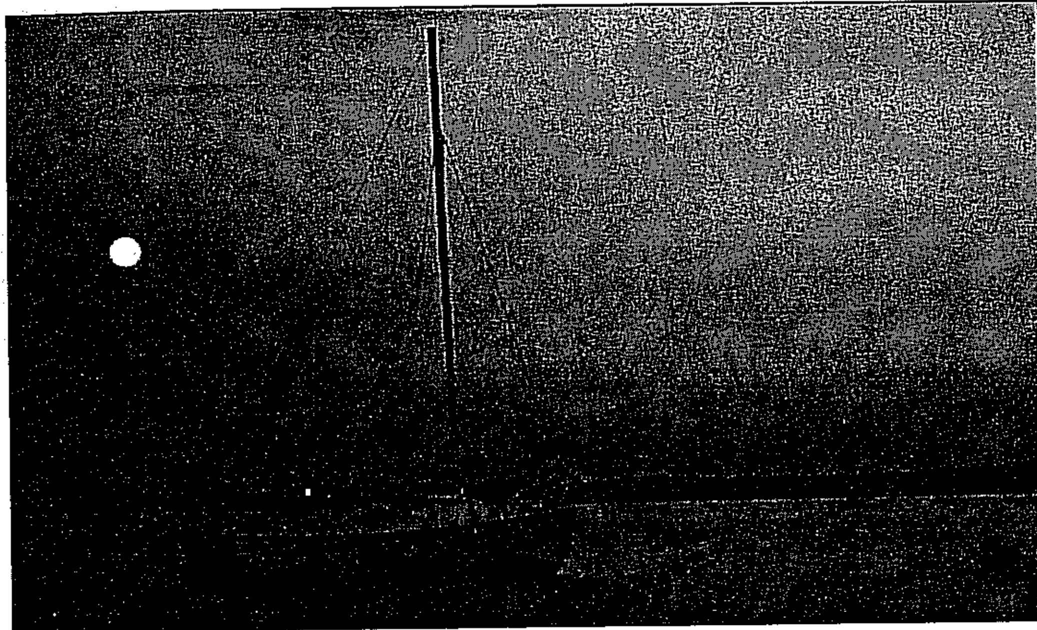
Turning panic into plans of action

There are many potential dangers at sea that can haunt the thoughts of the would-be voyager. Storms, lightning, large swells, and unwieldy cargo ships whose captains are unable to see small boats are just a few on the list. How can one deal with these dangers without hitting the panic button? I followed the advice of the *Annapolis Book of Seamanship* and developed a plan of action for each dangerous scenario I was likely to encounter. I committed these to memory before even setting foot onto my boat. Taking a boating class and reading the Book provided me with the knowledge I needed for the specifics of my plans of action. Having a plan of action certainly helped reduce the confusion and uncertainty associated with many of the dangers I encountered.

Of course, even better than committing plans of action to memory is practicing their execution before departure, close to a safe harbor. During my own journey, I regretted having limited experience sailing through storms. This began to change one day when I was sailing along the east coast of Andros. The weather was beautiful and I was sitting back, enjoying my peanut butter sandwich while *Nini* cruised along at 3 knots. "Ah, this is the life," I thought to myself. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of a waterspout on the other side of my sail within a few miles of my boat! While the waterspout dissipated by the time it reached me, the large thunderstorm it was associated with did not. I quickly doused the jib and reefed the main. My only option was to fire up the outboard and sail into the wind and oncoming waves to avoid crashing into the reef just 2 miles downwind. Every time I opened my eyes, another wave sent mounds of spray into the cockpit. After a half hour spent in the "rinse cycle," the storm passed, but my anxiety about waterspouts remained. For the rest of trip, I caught myself repeatedly examining innocuous clouds for long periods of time. The anxiety I felt during that first storm would have been much reduced if I had practiced sailing in similar conditions when the risks were not as high (i.e., no reefs within two miles).

Although sailing through my first significant thunderstorm was not exactly fun, I was impressed by the stability and toughness of *Nini* in these conditions. This mindset greatly increased my confidence during future encounters with

inclement weather. In fact, one of my favorite moments of the trip occurred when I was sailing through a mild squall line in the Gulf Stream. The way that *Nini* surged through the waves with a flurry of spray was exhilarating rather than terrifying, as I had finally figured out how to sail through threatening weather fairly comfortably. Many sailors have stressed the importance of knowing the limitations and abilities of yourself and your boat before your voyage. I agree that this is vital for one's safety and confidence, and that prior experience in adverse conditions is one way to gain this knowledge.



Time is sanity, not just money

Having a large window of time to prepare for and conduct your voyage is necessary for preventing unnecessary hardships and preserving mental and physical strength. The need for a large window of time stems in part from the variable nature of conditions that can be present in large bodies of water, a phenomenon I experienced during my trip. The first time I crossed the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas, the conditions were perfect: a steady wind from the south propelled me along at 4 knots, and the water was smooth and sparkled from the abundance of warm sunshine. I spent more time peering into the water to look at sea turtles and fish than thinking about the fact that it was the first time I had ever been out of sight of land. The 50-mile trip to Cat Cay took 15 hours, and I thought to myself, "What's all the hype about? The Gulf Stream isn't that bad." It must have been a case of beginner's luck. Fast-forwarding to a year in the future on a return trip to Florida found me with a broken outboard in a dead calm until a frenzy of violent storms emerged over the skyscrapers of West Palm Beach at the very end of my 44-hour ordeal. I literally had to paddle my boat with a flimsy plastic oar for 10 hours to make any progress against the current. At the worst point, I could only manage one degree west of the north-bound current. Talk about feelings of futility! I also had an unsettling encounter with a cargo ship during the night, similar to the Bolduc's Gulf Stream crossing discussed in SCA issue #3. I noticed two closely-spaced lights to the south, suggesting that I was looking at a boat from the side, presumably passing me. I thought little about it until I noticed that the lights had grown larger, yet were in exactly the same location. As they continued to grow larger and farther apart, I realized that the boat was drifting north with the current, sideways, directly towards me! Having reduced mobility at that point, there was little I could do except make myself more visible to the ship. The boat turned out to be an enormous freighter that was close enough to be blotting out the horizon by the time it changed direction to avoid me. I thanked my high-powered spotlight many times that night.

The most favorable scenario for crossing a busy body of water such as the Gulf Stream, it seems, is to avoid the heavy cargo-ship traffic at night. The best chance of doing so is to wait for ideal conditions before departing so that the crossing can be performed relatively quickly. On one occasion, I set out from Florida when the conditions were too rough and decided to return to wait for better conditions, which did occur within a few days. Of course, even when the conditions were forecasted to be favorable, they often were not, so I had to be mentally and physically prepared for the worst at all times.

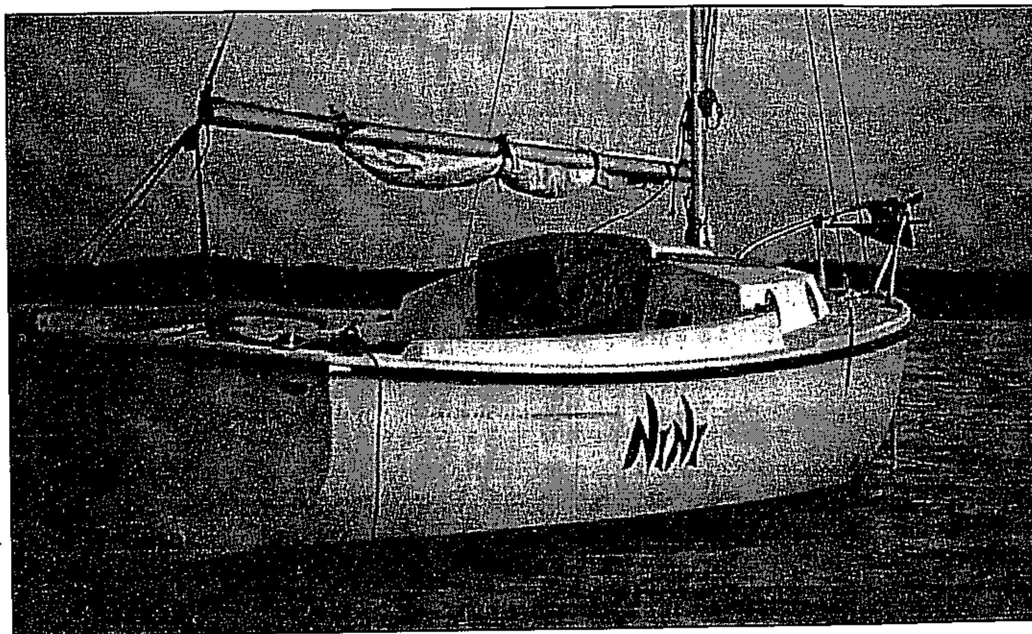
The preparations and advance planning necessary for my first Gulf Stream crossing were extensive and exhausting in and of themselves. Stowing everything on board was surprisingly time-consuming and rushed, causing me to feel weary during my departure the next day.

The next time around I gave myself much more time to prepare, and felt more rested as a result. I also found that it was helpful to spend at least a few days sailing my boat prior to commencing my voyage.

This helped ease the transition to living aboard, which is quite a psychological leap from home life. In addition, the extra time allowed me to acclimate to the motion of the boat. This was particularly important for preparing for heavy weather, when there is a greater danger of getting tossed around—or overboard.

Safety equipment for security

Speaking of falling overboard, reading about the surprisingly vast number of people lost overboard while heeding "nature's call" highlighted to me the importance of wearing a combination flotation vest/harness when beyond swimming range of shore. Wearing a harness gave me the security to stumble to the foredeck to drop anchor or change sails while my boat was pitching wildly about. The harness did have one drawback; namely, it sometimes snagged on objects lying around in the cockpit, causing a breathtaking off-balance adrenaline surge as the rope yanked me backwards. However, not wearing a harness in a small boat on a large body of water seems almost suicidal, and folks less slothful than me in their cockpit organizational skills probably will not have such a problem. I also donned a helmet when the weather turned ominous, and was glad to have done so after getting whacked in the head by the boom on a few occasions. In my opinion, these two basic safety measures were important because of their preventative nature as well as their contribution to the sailor's peace of mind. I also had the usual array of other safety equipment, and a VHF radio.



Ha, ha! My motor broke!

During those moments when everything seemed to be going awry, my best option was to maintain a sense of humor. Becoming angry wastes valuable energy that can be better spent on other tasks. When I had to resort to paddling my boat with a plastic oar, I was initially infuriated and spewed invective against NOAA and their inaccurate forecast. This quickly left me feeling drained. After my mood had hit rock bottom, I focused instead on the absurdity of the situation. I thought about how the situation could become even more humorous, such as harnessing those dolphins off the bow of my boat to pull me to Florida. This line of thought was much more productive than the angry one; however, even the cheerful repetition of "Row, row, row your boat" drove me crazy after 10 hours! As someone once told me, without the lows in life there would be no highs. And the lows are always useful for memoirs!

As you have read, I experienced many of the potential difficulties inherent in sailing a small boat across open waters. Nevertheless, the benefits of a small boat were obvious once I arrived in the Bahamas. The shallow draft of *Nini* was ideal in many situations. For example, when a squall with strong winds hit Gun Cay, I was anchored close to land that sheltered me from the gusts. Meanwhile, the larger boats had to contend with dragging anchors for two hours. Nini's shallow draft also allowed me to sneak into many remote areas inaccessible to larger vessels.

One unexpected bonus of sailing a boat 10 to 15 feet shorter than everyone else's was the generous attitude of other sailors who thought that I was miserable and in need of delicacies such as conch fritters, grilled pork, and fine wine. I played the part by looking as ragged and seasick as possible (just kidding!). Sailors and locals alike were friendly and welcoming, which contributed to the outstanding experience I had in the Bahamas. Other highlights of the trip included snorkeling in a secret harbor filled with sea turtles, trolling for fish while paddling my windsurfer dinghy, and enjoying sunset after beautiful sunset.

So, I encourage everyone to overcome SCRAP and start sailing to distant ports! You'll be glad you did!

By Val Simon