



Sweat, Tears *and* Fiberglass

A determined couple tests the limits of their sanity and finances when the refit timeline of their old sailboat keeps extending and the cruising dream seems out of reach.

Atticus an Allied Seawind 30, at anchor off of Fort Jefferson in Florida's Dry Tortugas National Park after completing their first overnight sail.

For the dreamer who feels like she is up against a wall. For the would-be ocean crosser who mostly just crosses his fingers that he'll still have beer money this week. For the small boat owner who has nothing to look forward to but the far-off promise of anchorages beyond the horizon. For you, sailor of average means, I have almost no advice. Personally, I am flabbergasted when I reflect on just how much time, money and tears I committed toward achieving my own dream. Yet from the pages of sailing magazines to the lips of yard rats I have been constantly bombarded by bumptious descriptions of cheap refits, brief yard stints and lighthearted challenges accepted with a shrug, all resulting in glamorous, jubilant sailing. I have since discovered that the majority of these galling anecdotes are, for lack of a better word, rubbish. It is in this light that I dedicate this story to you, prospective budget cruiser. It's a tale of anguish, self-doubt and dumb perseverance. It's a testimony to let you know that you are not alone.

It was a blazing bright morning in a dirty boatyard in Key West, Florida. *Atticus*, our 1963 Allied Seawind 30, was moored to the concrete seawall, with most of her deck gouged with gaping green cavities where we had recently replaced rotted balsa core with polyurethane foam. Inside I was doing the dishes from breakfast as my girlfriend, Desiree, put on her work clothes.

"Bud, what's wrong?" I tried again, hoping to quell the argument before facing another itchy, sweaty day in the yard.

"Nothing," she said, swinging open a locker door, pulling out a container of baby powder and proceeding to coat her forearms and neck in a white film, preparing for another day of grinding fiberglass. Suddenly Desiree exploded into a fury as she accidentally dropped the container, releasing a cloud of white powder into the air.

"Uuugh! Are you kidding me?" she screamed into the ether, and bent down to clean up the mess.

"It's OK. Let me do that. You need to just take a seat and calm down," I said, reaching out to reassure her.

"Uuuuuugh," she moaned, pushing my hand away.

"Bud, will you just talk to me? We need to push through this project, we've only got a few more areas to glass over and then..."

"And then what?" she said, her eyes finally meeting mine. "Another god-awful job, in the sun, sanding or grinding, struggling, hitting a brick wall. Finding new problems. I can't ... I cannot handle another person walking by and asking us, 'Are you guys still here?'"

"We're almost done with the worst of it.

Then we'll be out there, sailing. Living our dream! One day this will all be a memory. A story. A sentence. Someday we'll look back and have nothing more to say than, 'The boatyard was difficult.'" I saw her begin to soften. "You might even look back at these



days nostalgically."

"Nostalgically?" she roared, baby powder wafting into the air with each truculent gesture. "What am I going to miss? Wasting my youth, the best years of my life, in this hell hole?"

"We're not going to be here forever,"

I implored, the cabin now engulfed in a white cloud. "Try and remember why we decided to do this in the first place. We're going to see the world! Cuba, Fiji, Thailand, wherever you want!"

"You said that a year ago," she yelled.

Desiree stormed out of the boat into the punishing sun and over to our makeshift workshop. She stared angrily into space for a moment, already beginning to perspire, her breathing slowly settling to a normal

pace. She closed her eyes, let out a long, steady exhale, her shoulders slouching down. Then she turned, grabbed her respirator and grinder, and walked back to the boat.

To make matters worse, the slow, steady grind of the refit throttled back even further when we were forced to look for employment after burning through our meager life savings. We found work aboard charter catamarans, and for the next year split our time between making money and working on *Atticus*. We needed a reminder of why we were doing this, and that happened when we received our new sails from Super Sailmakers. The overhauled rig was up, the new running rigging all in place, and we were eager to take *Atticus* sailing for the first time. We bent on the stiff new Dacron and motored out the channel toward the Atlantic. Two years of expectation and dreaming hung over our nervous bodies as we made ready to hoist the sails. As with any benchmark experience, Desiree and I were so full with anxiety and anticipation that we lost ourselves in mindless bickering. But as Desiree steered *Atticus* into the wind, I looked up to the portion of sky around the masts that, for the last two



About half of the balsa core within Atticus' decks was rotted when the couple first bought the 50-year-old sailboat. They spent months replacing these sections (left), and the result (right) was worth it.

years, had stood as a great blue reminder of how much further we had to go, how much more work we had ahead of us. As I began to raise the sails, those taunting sections of blue were slowly replaced by the blinding white of fresh Dacron. The moment felt alien, as though it were my first time sailing, to have *Atticus* finally appear so complete. I looked over to Desiree, an expression of overwhelming incredulity on her face.



Toward the end of their refit XXX and Desiree spent many weekends anchored out at Jewfish Basin, their favorite Lower Keys getaway, which helped them to temporarily forget about their busy lives only 7 miles away in Key West, Florida.

"Kill the engine," I yelled over the rhythmic throbbing of the diesel.

And then there was silence. Silence that filled my soul with pure and absolute joy. The world became nothing but white and blue and the subtle long *swiiiiisssbbbbb* of the sea against the hull. My heart raced and my palms sweated. My astonishment left me out of breath, panting to take in the flood of emotions I felt, the thrilling levity, the hard-won pride. The silence was broken when I heard Desiree laughing out loud in disbelief. I looked over to see her smiling, staring up at our canvas banners of triumph as they steadily pulled us through the water.

"Happy?" I asked.

Her eyes, glossy with excitement and tears, lowered from the sails to meet my gaze. She nodded and smiled.

It was all over in the blink of an eye. Soon Desiree began to feel seasick, and I became ornery and overbearing with my insistent instructions. We quickly settled back into reality, but the elation we had experienced for those precious moments would prove to be the fuel we needed to carry us through to the end of the refit — and the beginning of our lives as cruisers.

"Is it level?" I yelled, while lying on the side of our dinghy trying to keep my headlamp and face out of the drink.

"Starboard needs to come up a bit," I heard my father say over the dark transom. He had flown into Key West a few days prior to help us with the final touches on *Atticus*, nearly a year after we hoisted the sails for the first time.

I pushed the leg of our new Monitor windvane up an inch with one arm and desperately clung to the bulwark with the other, blood rushing to my head from being upside down for so long.

"Another half inch," encouraged my dad. We were preparing for our longest journey yet aboard *Atticus*: 180 miles north to Sarasota, Florida, where we planned to spend the holidays with our families before sailing to Cuba, the first stop on what we hoped would be a circumnavigation.

With a frustrated grunt, I managed to move the mounting bracket another half inch.

"That's it!" my father exclaimed. Blindly, I grabbed for the drill, aligned the bit with the hole in the mounting bracket, and began to drill through the transom. We finished installing the last leg of the windvane, and I crawled back into the dark

cockpit where I collapsed in exhaustion, stretching out my sore back.

"Do you really need to leave tomorrow?" asked my father. "You're tired and you're going to start making mistakes. Why don't you give yourself another day to finish these projects?"

I raised my head up, feeling the knots in my shoulders, and saw the light from Desiree's headlamp on the dock as she sped along dismantling our storage shed and organizing a mountain of stuff that still needed to be stowed aboard. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"There's a front on its way," I responded. "We'll barely squeeze past it if we leave tomorrow afternoon. And if we don't make this weather window we'll have to wait another week minimum."

"So what? Just leave next week," he said.

I sat up, frustrated by my father's benevolent comment but unsure why. I gave *Atticus* a look over. She was nearly ready, but we still had a handful of unfinished projects. We were seriously rushing at this point, and we were exhausted. But I had a sense that the boat would never be completely ready, that we would always have some reason to postpone. We had to make the irrevocable decision to just go. Riding



Atticus's new suit of sails from Super Sailmakers included the colorful cruising chute and mizzen staysail. Having this light-air sail combo will hopefully lead to more sailing when the wind is down, instead of motoring.

a narcotic wave of excitement, I decided to take a stand.

"We're leaving tomorrow," I said, and walked over to help Desiree.

We worked late, slept little, and by early afternoon of the next day we were ready, the boat full to the brim with tools, gear and supplies that had previously lived ashore. *Atticus* sat lower on her lines as we motored to the fuel dock, my mind racing to think of things we might have forgotten. Water, food, handheld VHF, outboard tie downs ... my mind searched but could find nothing, no good reason to call it off. We took on fuel and settled with the marina.

"OK, ready to cast?" I called to Desiree who stood by the stern line.

"Whoa!" cried my father. "We need to get a picture of you guys! Three years living here and you're about to leave without a photo!"

Desiree and I looked at each other, both at a loss. We were so excited, frantic and downright scared that we had forgotten to appreciate the significance of the moment. I put my arm around Desiree as my father raised up the camera, the marina behind us and the boatyard beyond — our homes through the good and the bad of the last three years. Three years of exhaustion,

insecurity and blind, stupid hope. My father took the picture and I looked back to Desiree to see a tear in her eye.

"I really thought this day would never come," she said with a slight tremble in her voice.

"I know," I said as I tightened my hold on her, feeling her hot wet cheek against my shoulder.

"Thanks for pushing us through it," she whispered.

I chuckled, my eyes watering, "Thanks for not leaving me."

The trip up to Sarasota went about as smooth as a first passage can. We had moderate following winds and relatively calm seas. We passed through a squall line at one point but the wind and shower were brief. *Atticus* broke through the veil of rain just as the sun was setting. A dramatic scene of vibrant reds, greens and blues rose above us, all projected upon a colossal wall of cumulonimbus. The beauty magnified by our isolation, the seemingly endless sea absorbing each color from the sky into a florid blend which *Atticus* noiselessly cut through on the way north.

We arrived safely, and although the boat had successfully weathered its first

offshore passage, we still had several projects to complete and purchases to make before heading off to the lands beyond Walmart and Amazon. Fear of the inaccessibility of boat goods and supplies led us to frantically amass a large quantity of spares, canned foods, medical supplies and last minute hardware, all of which cost vastly more than we had expected. The plan was to take six months to explore Cuba and Central America and eventually Panama where we would have plenty of time to find jobs before completely running out of money. But by the time *Atticus* was finally ready, our cruising kitty had dwindled to the point that we could only afford to cruise for two months on a tight budget.

We now saw two possible options. The first was to sail until we ran out of money and then find jobs wherever we happened to be. But this option seemed so reckless that we suffered through sleepless nights mulling it over. *Would we be able to find work in another country on such short notice? What work would we do? What if we ran out of money?*

The other option was to stay and work in Florida for yet another year. The thought literally made me sick. The last month had seen Desiree and me push

ourselves to the limit, working late into every evening, fueled by our lusty desire to finally see this pipe dream become a reality.

"Maybe we're both just being emotional," I said sitting in our dimly lit cockpit, the Sarasota skyline all around us. "All the excitement of finally leaving Key West is clouding our judgement."

"You're probably right," she said.

"We'll just put our heads down, and in a year, we'll be able to cruise comfortably with less stress," I said, nearly convincing myself.

Desiree turned from the city lights and looked toward me. I could see her exuberance slipping away as we discussed our employment options. I thought about how she looked as we were leaving Key West, abjectly terrified and yet so proud to be meeting this challenge head on. It hurt to see that spark in her eyes fade away, and I could feel the same disappointment.

"Bud?" I said, her dismayed eyes looking up to meet mine. I paused for a moment, thinking, and then made up my mind.

"Screw it," I said and smiled.

She stared at me, looking long and hard, bemused. Then slowly she returned my smile.

"Yeah!" she said with conviction.

"Screw it!"

We set sail from Florida's Gulf Coast on a chilly, blustery winter afternoon. The first couple days of our passage south were completely different than our trip north. Riding on the tail end of a cold front that decided to last longer than expected, we screamed along at 7 knots under working jib alone, surrounded by tall steep seas. I slept terribly, my anxiety heightened by the loud rushing sounds belowdecks as *Atticus* surfed down each wave. The sounds inside the cabin were so fierce I felt as though I were swirling inside a gigantic dishwasher. I knew if we were to sail around the world that *Atticus* would regularly encounter this sort of relatively common weather. But the first time experiencing it in a boat that we had refit ourselves gave me pangs of dread as I ruminated over the possible repercussions for any mistake we might have made.

I had almost drifted off when I was started back to consciousness.

"Bud!" Desiree cried out.

I forced my languid limbs to climb out of the lee cloth and crawl up the companionway. The outside world was pitch black, the moon and stars blanketed by the congested sky. The only light was coming from the faint chart plotter and the masthead light far above.

"Bud?" she said again, this time her voice obviously trembling.

"You OK?" I said, embracing her.

"I don't know," she said. She seemed to be having a slight panic attack.

"It's OK," I said, rubbing her back.

I could feel her tension easing slightly as the boat ploughed down another invisible wave and crashed violently into the next, the wind howling in the rigging, the bow pointed towards Havana and all of it racing into the inky-black unknown.

Desiree went down below, and I welcomed the cool night air as it carried away the sleep from my tired eyes. We were now crossing the Gulf Stream, and at



XXX walks out toward Africa Reef in the Dry Tortugas, preparing for a free-diving expedition after exploring Lighthouse Key (top). Desiree has the helm while XXX climbs back aboard after being towed astern under sail.

any given moment I could see half a dozen ships on the horizon. Time passed quickly as I constantly sighted the distant lights with our hand-bearing compass, ensuring that their bearing did not remain the same over time, the only way for us to determine the risk of collision without radar or AIS. With each light that disappeared over the horizon another would appear elsewhere, leaving me constantly on edge, afraid that one of these specks might grow

into an enormous steel bow towering over the masthead.

When first light began to break, I held my breath, scanning the horizon for Havana as the faint yellow band of sky slowly grew and the sea emerged from shadow. The horizon ahead was nothing more than an empty line, a mere transition from sky to sea. But then, just as the sun began to push above the horizon, I saw it. The faintest series of gray rectangles shooting up out of the glimmering sea. One of the most famous cities in the world, coalescing out of the orange haze.

I was seeing a country whose people spoke a different language, who inhabited a different culture than those from which we had departed. We had spanned that gap with nothing more than the sails above our heads and the ship beneath our feet. All of our fear and doubt now drifted behind like so much jetsam. We had done it. We were now cruisers. And it only took us three years to get there.

A good friend once told me that, "Experience is the thing you need right before you get it." Well the thing I wish I had known when we started on this journey is that life is not what happens once your dreams come true, it's what happens while you're working hard, while you're striving and struggling, day in and day out. I wish I could take back those three years of anxiety, insecurity and constant fear of failure, three years of comparing myself to others, and replace them with a sense of calm self-determination. Because as I learned in the end, refitting a boat is not a race, it's a mountain, the only thing that matters is that you make it to the top alive.

As *Atticus* sailed toward Havana in that dawn-colored sea, part of me knew that I would come to see Cuba as I have any other place, where people go to work, school, cook dinner, socialize with friends, just like anywhere else on the planet. But for that moment when Havana was nothing more than a monochromatic skyline, for that singular break in the routines of a human life, I felt like the voyager I had dreamt of becoming as a child. Ahead lay a mythical land somehow detached from the rest of reality, as though we had made our course for the second star on the right, the coastline of which was just now coming into view.

Now only one question remained: how in the world were we going to pay for this adventure? But that's another story.