

DRIVING THE DITCH: FL TO THE CHESAPEAKE VIA THE ICW

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Can I do it?

If your boat can do the ICW around here for a couple of days at a time, it should meet minimum standards for a longer trip.

Boat requirements

- Able to motor +/- 8 hrs a day for a month or more
- Livable - galley, head, sleeping accommodations
- Good radio
- Anchoring system - easy to operate, since you'll use it every day
 - Able to hold in reversing currents/tides
 - Therefore, fluke-type (e.g., Danforth) not the best
 - Mud bottoms, so holding is generally good
- Draft
 - Less is better
 - Can do it with 6', but watch tides
- Mast height
 - 65' is controlling height on east coast, with exception of 56' Julia Tuttle bridge in Miami

Time

From here to Norfolk, statute mile (sm) 0 is about 1250 sm via the Okeechobee waterway, or 1440 sm via the keys.

So if in sailboat traveling 5-6 kt or about 7 mph on average and doing 50-60 sm days on average, it will take 21-29 days. Remember, you are going the speed of a riding lawnmower.

Put in some lay days for provisioning, laundry, etc., allow about a month. Or take 6 weeks and visit some really neat places.

How to get to the East Coast

- Tampa to keys (7 mile bridge west of Marathon or Channel 5 Bridge) then Hawk Channel
 - 65' bridges, no depth problems
 - 106 miles from Marathon to Miami
 - Inside the reef, so you get the wind but not the seas
 - 2 anchorages on Hawk Channel about halfway to Miami
- Tampa to keys, then Florida Bay
 - 5' depth
 - Good anchorages

- Tampa to Ft Pierce via Okeechobee WW
Lake levels may be too low
49' bridge (can get tipped over)
55' bridges otherwise

ICW vs. offshore

- Some go offshore all the way - Miami to Beaufort NC. 4-5 days. Must have offshore capable boat, skipper, crew
- Can do short hops offshore to speed things along in areas not too far offshore
Mia to West Palm for example. About 70 sm, so you can do it in 10-12 hours, with anchorages close to inlet at both ends. Skip 29 opening bridges.
Jacksonville to Savannah
Savannah to Charleston

Weather is important factor. Don't even think about it if you'll be in the Gulf Stream and there is any northerly component to the wind forecast
If going overnight, helps to have radar.

When to go?

Leave spring or early summer to miss hurricanes in Carolinas. Get there May or June.
Come back in Oct.

Charts and guides

- Chart Kit: East Coast of FL, East Coast GA to Norfolk
- Waterway Guides: Southern, MidAtlantic
- Skipper Bob's Guide to Anchorages
- Internet sites:
www.atlintracoastal.org
www.BoatUS.com/cruising/TomNeale
www.cruisersnet.net
www.nauticalcharts.noaa.gov
skipperbob.home.att.net/waterway.htm

Know your route each day

- Review Waterway Guide
- Mark charts
Shoals
Bridge opening restrictions
Red right returning vs. red dirt / sea green. There always will be a yellow triangle or square on an ICW marker and it always will be on the same side. Triangle on land side and square on sea.
Tides
Emergency anchorages
- My experience is that the language used to describe the possible problems is rather

scary. The Waterway Guide makes it sound like dragons and deadly whirlpools await around each bend. Be prepared but don't sweat it. Any competent boater with a reliable boat can do the ditch.

Know your tides, especially when anchoring.

Courtesy

- Know your right of way rules
- Slow down to let faster boats pass and ask for a slow pass. Then thank them
- Anchor like others do

How to enjoy the journey

- Visit places along the way
 - Keys
 - Miami
 - St Augustine
 - Fernandina Beach
 - Sea Islands of Georgia
 - Beaufort, SC (free day dock)
 - Charleston
 - Georgetown, SC
 - Barefoot landing, free dock at outlet mall
 - Beaufort, NC
 - Dismal Swamp, Elizabeth City (Rose Buddies) (vs. Virginia Cut
 - Norfolk/Hampton