

# A ROOKIE'S VOYAGE

Story and Photography  
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Three AM and the anchor alarm wakes us for the second time, as the sudden blow is dragging our anchor in the thin sand again. We were going to leave the anchorage at first light anyway, but should we go now, in a 20 kt. wind, in the pitch black of deep night?

In the months we have owned our Fleming 55 “Sundancer” we have gradually built up our abilities and confidence, so that now the idea of making our way out of the Dry Tortugas and crossing 70 miles back to Key West Florida in the middle of the night no longer seems impossible, even for a couple who are captaining their very first boat.

Sundancer is very well-equipped for our adventures. On this night the thermal-imaging FLIR camera reveals that many other boats in the anchorage have a person up on deck, fussing with their anchors too. Using this camera we can carefully wind through the anchored boats towards the channel and clearly see the position of the channel markers.

Daylight is still three hours away and we cross an opening that is channeling the full tide of the Gulf of Mexico meeting the Atlantic; Sundancer remains comfortable, the hull deflecting the big waves away from the foredeck, and the stabilizers muting the rolling motion. Clouds break open and the path of moonlight on the ocean is breathtaking. This is why we're here: for moments like this – but how did we get to this point?

Two years ago we decided we wanted to try cruising. Living in Utah for most of our working lives, we had never owned a boat, even though almost every vacation had us in the water scuba diving or fishing. When Don sold his business we made two decisions, one wise and one rash. Wisely, we realized we had better start at the beginning so in January 2010 we attended two weeks at the Chapman School of Seamanship in Stuart, FL. We thought we would take this knowledge and charter a boat, but in those two short weeks we were hooked, so we started looking for a boat to live aboard and cruise to our adventures.

There are a million boats out there, but none of them inspired much confidence in us and frankly we thought most of the trawlers were pretty ponderous looking. However, the first time we laid eyes on a Fleming our first thought was “now there’s a beautiful boat!” When we chatted with Ray and Patrick (at Burr Yacht Sales) they didn’t waste any time talking about her good looks, instead they sold us on the engineering and attention to every detail in a Fleming. We decided we didn’t have time for a smaller “starter” boat and so in a leap of faith we bought a 2007 Fleming 55 as our very first boat. By the end of March we were on our own beautiful motor yacht!



Solitude on an unvisited beach

Two weeks of seamanship school is not exactly a lot of experience. Having purchased Sundancer through Burr Yacht Sales gave us a tremendous advantage. They may kid around about “Burr School” but it is no joke how much they taught us in the first two weeks. Experts from Burr spent several hours with us every day, going over every single system on the boat. By the end of two weeks we knew every line, hose, valve, breaker, filter, fuse, etc. etc. At the same time they gave us additional lessons in helmsmanship until we were comfortable handling her. Not much of a problem; compared to the klutzy school boats, piloting a Fleming was like driving a ballerina – light, responsive, graceful.

Nevertheless we had one more necessity to our training. Our insurance required that we have 50 hours with a Captain on board who would then sign off on our ability, and thus we started off on our maiden voyage from Edgewater MD south on the Intra-Coastal Waterway. In less than a week we had completed the required 50 hours and in the process learned

Left Page: Dawn breaking as we exit the Cape Fear River for an “outside” run to Charleston. Above: (clockwise from top left) two Flemings joined Sundancer in a crystal clear anchorage in the Exumas; helping to measure and tag endangered green turtles at Conception Island; Wild dolphins checking us out underwater in the Ragged Islands; Dolphins are our frequent companions

the nuances of the ICW and a lot of good etiquette besides! We continued on to Charleston by ourselves, and then back up the ICW to the Chesapeake, enjoying the delights of small-town America at every stop. Was our maiden voyage flawless? Of course not: we did kiss the bottom once or twice, tried to leave a dock once with a line still tied, and also proved what rub-rails are good for, but nothing required repairs when we got back to the “nest” at Burr!

So we kept going on our list of “firsts”: up the Chesapeake and down the Delaware Bay; our first day in the ocean was a breezy bouncy one up to Atlantic City for our first inlet with following waves yanking at our stern. Next day, on to New York – it really is a thrilling sight the first time you pass under the Verazano Bridge and then come into the harbor seeing the Statue of Liberty and the Mahattan skyline. What a great way to be a tourist: all over Manhattan during the day and back to our own bed at night. We continued up the Hudson River for about a hundred miles, thrilling at the sight of West Point, then back to New York City. We read all the warnings about Hells Gate on the East River, but it was easy for the Fleming’s twin 500 Cummins engines. And the passage down the East River is the best view of New York you’ll ever see: endless sky-scraper canyons leading into the distant green of Central Park.



Norwalk, Connecticut in the Long Island Sound was as far north as we would get on this trip. Hurricane Earl threatened a direct hit on Long Island at the same time we had an important date back in the Chesapeake – a Fleming Rendezvous at Burr. No hurricane would keep us away. Imagine 50 Flemings in a magnificent flotilla crossing the Chesapeake Bay! We met a lot of Fleming owners then, and realized what a wonderful group of people we had joined. Many have become good friends that we hope to stay in touch with, and we found later that we would in fact share adventures with these great folks as our wakes crossed on various cruises.

So ended our first season as boat owners. We had spent from March through September on our new boat, and by December we were back on board heading south again! Now came many more “firsts:” Such as, waking up before dawn with the dock lines frozen and a sheet of ice on deck as we cast off from Coinjock NC in the company of two other Flemings. And crossing the Albemarle Sound when the snotty waves kept everyone but our three Flemings away. And deciding as we were leaving Beaufort Docks on a solo trip south on the ICW, to make a U-turn and go for the ocean passage instead. And deciding that it was time to experience our first hours running after dark from Charleston to Fernandina Beach. This was all new to us and very exciting.

The first of February we were ready to cross to the Bahamas, and we thought it prudent to get a Captain for this rite of passage. It was a good decision. Our captain not only had forty years of experience, he was also a very good teacher. It was like going to graduate school. We practiced all kinds of safety drills, learned some alternative ways of doing things, and learned how to read the waters and navigate without the markers that we had become accustomed to in the U.S. When he left us we felt much better prepared to push ahead into more unknowns.

We spent four months in the Bahamas. First we stopped at a half-dozen of islands in the upper and mid Exumas to snorkel and dive in the air-clear water, where we met up with several other Flemings. We learned how to get a memorable loaf of bread at Black’s Point; holed up from a big blow at Cave Cay and discovered the owner’s miraculous vegetable gardens in the baking soda soft white sand; snorkeled in Thunderball Cave and attended the annual James Bond party on Staniel Cay; explored Norman’s Pond Cay and met the marine biologists on Lee Stocking Island. We ventured out to Conception Island, a tiny speck in the Atlantic without any really protected anchorage where we spent among perhaps the best days of our entire trip helping some researchers catch and tag endangered green turtles. We left the “known world” and worked our way through the seldom visited Jumento Islands. For three weeks we didn’t see a building of any kind and spent only about 7 hours on land. We were so out of touch there that we were perhaps the last Americans to find out that Osama bin Laden was dead. The most peaceful, isolated islands you can imagine. Fishing, snorkeling, diving, and watching a perfect sunset every perfect day. Not a hint of artificial light in any direction to dim the billion stars scattered on a black velvet night.

We were inspired to do crazy things sometimes. From Duncan Town at the southernmost edge of the Bahamas we went further south, to about 45 miles off the coast of Cuba where we found the edge of the world: we watched the depth sounder drop from 45 feet directly to



*At anchor near an isolated, uninhabited Cay in the Bahamas*

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1,200 feet – we turned the boat around, found some sand to set the anchor in, used the tanks we filled from our on-board scuba compressor and both of us jumped in to dive this amazing wall. As soon as we hit the water we were surrounded by dolphins!

By the time we left the Bahamas in June we had also visited Long Island, Cat Island, and Eleuthera, and found ourselves a completely unvisited little Cay inhabited only by a huge flock of nesting Brown Noddys which behaved as if they had no reason at all to be concerned by a couple of humans – leaving no doubt that they had never seen one before! A delightful private bit of paradise before the return to the U.S. East Coast and our trek back to our safe haven in the Chesapeake.

All through these adventures our lifeline by telephone led to the experts at Burr who talked us through many other kinds of “firsts” step by step (such as changing the impeller on the engine raw water pump) and patiently answered hundreds of questions, both profound and trivial.

Early in our rookie voyage a dockhand asked where we were headed, and when we answered “don’t know yet,” he said plaintively “can I go too?” We have arrived at the completion of our second year, and find ourselves awaiting delivery of a new boat: a Fleming 65 to give us a greater range for exploring. Keep an eye out for us on our new boat “Avanyu” – we could be anywhere! 