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WESTERN
FLORIDA**

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CRUISING GUIDE TO WESTERN FLORIDA

SEVENTH EDITION

By Claiborne S. Young



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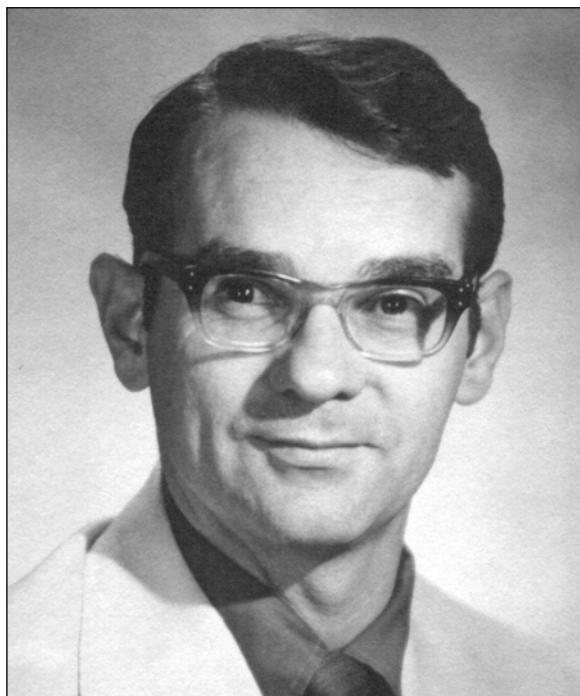
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**This book is dedicated
to the memory of my dear friend
and frequent research assistant
John S. Horne.**



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Introduction

It has been said of Florida's western coastline that the good Lord cursed it with shallow water but then, in His wisdom, blessed the land with great beauty. This old saw is entirely apt. There is really no better summary of these memorable waters' cruising characteristics. While, to be sure, there is almost always a channel to which mariners can look for decent depths, soundings of 5 to 6 feet are considered quite respectable in Western Florida, where they might be looked at askance along the Sunshine State's eastern coastline. But, for those cruisers who find their way past the shoals and shallows, the shores that open out before them are some of the most unforgettable they will ever experience.

Vast stretches of the Western Florida coastline have been spared the plundering hand of modern development and can only be described as idyllic. I have only to close my eyes for a few moments to bring to mind the almost eerie beauty of the Little Shark River, with its tangled cypress shores reflected against brown waters and set amidst an almost palpable silence. The wide expanse of the Ten Thousand Islands, with their myriad anchorages and almost secret backwater recesses, calls to mind the adventurous outdoor yearnings in all of us. Consider for a moment the lovely waters of Pine Island Sound, with its old, stilted fishing houses that recall the days when salty men worked long and hard to harvest a life from the sea. Or you might want to reflect for a moment on serene Gasparilla Island, with its dreamlike inn, named for an infamous buccaneer whose story seems so

much larger than life. Then there are the legendary man-killing turtles of the Myakka River and the almost-shocking elegance of the Ringling estate overlooking Sarasota Bay. Still not convinced? Well, how about the singing ghosts of Manatee River and the incredible edifice of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, spanning the entrance to Tampa Bay. And, lest we forget, there is the natural splendor of the Big Bend rivers, with names like Withlacoochee, Steinhatchee, and Suwannee, drawn from another time. While, tragically, we must acknowledge that portions of the Western Florida coastline have fallen to the bulldozer and the blight of high-rise condominiums, there is still so much that is fair and beautiful.

Cruising captains can rejoice in the many paths open to them in Western Florida that slip quietly from the hustle and bustle of mainstream, modern life and into the quiet and rewarding recesses of natural splendor. My explorations and chronicling of the waters set about Western Florida, stretching back for some seventeen years now, make up one of the most rewarding undertakings in my writing career. I sincerely hope that each and every one of you will have the same opportunity to experience the wonders of this storied coastline. Let's weigh anchor and get started.

The geography of Western Florida's coast is varied and sometimes complicated. Southwestern Florida lacks a protected inland waterway, and pleasure craft voyaging up the coast are relegated to the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Moving south to north, as we will throughout this guide, mariners cruising up

from Marathon will be awed by the wild beauty of Cape Sable, the southwesternmost point of mainland Florida. This land is part of the Everglades National Park and safe from man-made changes. One port of call consisting of the anchorages along the Little Shark and Shark rivers are well worth every cruiser's attention.

North of Cape Sable, skippers can explore the myriad backwaters and anchorages of the Ten Thousand Islands. This wild region is also little developed and offers a fascinating overview of the Everglades' coastal ecology. Everglades City is the only developed port of call in this region.

Captains cruising north of the islands to the city of Naples have two choices. You can continue your offshore voyage around the Cape Romano shoals or cut inside via a well-buoyed inland route. This latter passage features many cruising possibilities, but it is not a part of the official Western Florida ICW, and depths can be a bit thin from time to time.

Naples offers a few marina and repair-yard facilities, but it's back to the open Gulf when time comes to head north again. With fair breezes or a humming engine, you will soon arrive at the port of Fort Myers Beach (featuring a very popular anchorage/mooring field) and, a bit further along, San Carlos Bay and the southerly genesis of the Western Florida ICW. Here cruisers can turn aside on the combined path of the Caloosahatchee River and the Okeechobee Waterway to visit the old port town of Fort Myers before beginning their northward trek up the ICW.

The ICW soon introduces visiting cruisers to the fascinating waters of Pine Island Sound, with its rich history and enough potential havens for weeks of exploration. By all accounts, don't dare miss Cabbage Key and Gasparilla Island.

A wide body of water known as Charlotte Harbor cuts northwest from the northerly headwaters of Pine Island Sound and leads intrepid cruisers to the town of Punta Gorda and two streams of note, the Myakka and Peace rivers. A detour away from the ICW to cruise up Charlotte Harbor and its feeder rivers can be more than rewarding, particularly for sailors.

The Western Florida ICW darts north again through Lemon Bay and several sheltered land cuts on its way to Venice, one of the friendliest coastal communities in Western Florida. Another trek to the north lands pleasure craft at the southerly beginnings of this coastline's most developed region. The city of Sarasota overlooks a bay of the same name along this stretch of the Waterway and offers full facilities for visiting yachtsmen.

Soon the Waterway skips past charming Anna Maria Island on its way to sprawling Tampa Bay. Cruisers new to Florida's west coast will probably have to exercise considerable self-control to keep from gasping as the broad mouth of Tampa Bay opens out before them for the first time. The Sunshine Skyway Bridge spanning the bay's mouth is one of the most impressive structures that this writer has ever witnessed.

Tampa Bay is the largest body of inland water along the Western Florida coastline. Its waters provide ready access to the extensive marine facilities associated with the fortunate city of St. Petersburg.

The Manatee River, an important auxiliary water on southeastern Tampa Bay, leads cruisers by the hundreds to the Bradenton and Palmetto city waterfronts. Here the prolific marina facilities are supplemented by one of the most fascinating live aquatic displays that you will ever enjoy.

North of the great bay, the ICW passes

through one of the most intensely developed stretches of coastline that I have ever explored. The westerly reaches of St. Petersburg combine with the teeming city of Clearwater and a host of beachside communities to form an almost unbroken chain of condos, private homes, waterfront businesses, and docks of all descriptions. The Waterway runs through a dredged passage between heavily populated barrier islands to the west and the built-up mainland to the east.

North of Clearwater, development begins to slow its frenzied pace a bit. The village of Dunedin is a delightful port of call with out-of-this-world dining possibilities.

Finally, the Western Florida ICW ends hard by the beautifully natural shores of Anclote Key. A quick cruise up nearby Anclote River will bring fortunate mariners to the colorful town of Tarpon Springs, with its strong Greek flavor and fascinating sponge markets.

Now it's once again back to the open waters of the Gulf as mariners pass through the northernmost reaches of Western Florida on their way to the Panhandle. Look at any map of Florida and you will quickly understand why this region is called the Big Bend. While shallow water and rocky bottom strata are everywhere in evidence, the various rivers along the way offer some of the most beautifully natural cruising in all of Florida. The Withlacoochee and Suwannee rivers are absolute "must-stop" ports of call in this region (always assuming your craft has a shallow enough draft).

Finally, our quick travelogue comes to an end at the snow-white lighthouse marking the entrance to the St. Marks River. This "Panhandle river" offers some marina facilities and yet another beautiful shoreline, not to mention a historic site of particular interest.

Now captains and crew must turn west on the deep and clear waters of the Florida Panhandle. A few more miles will bring you to St. George Sound, bounteous Dog Island and its excellent anchorages, the charming village of Carrabelle, and, perhaps most importantly, the easterly tip of the Northern Gulf ICW. For more information on this region and the inland and offshore waters west to New Orleans, please consult this writer's *Cruising Guide to the Northern Gulf Coast*.

The Western Florida coastline is blessed with a set of marinas and repair yards second to none! Thankfully, almost all these facilities have now fully recovered from damage caused by the memorable 2005 hurricane season. Of course, as is true in all of Florida, many of these marinas have now been converted, at least partially, to boat-a-miniums. Thankfully, a new Florida state law now requires marinas to keep a minimum number of wet slips "for rent." Nevertheless, advance dockage reservations are now more of a necessity than a nicety.

In the past, this writer has always shied away from any listing of overnight, transient dockage rates for marinas. These sorts of charges change at such dizzying speeds that any such tabulation would be long out of date by the time the ink in this book was dry on the paper. *However*, we have now instituted a very simple transient dockage fee-rating system. All marinas that provide overnight transient berths will be rated, "above average," "average," or "below average." Hopefully, this simple system will give you at least some idea of what to expect when it comes time to pony up your overnight dockage bill.

Anchorage along the Western Florida

coastline are prolific and many are 100% memorable. Overnight havens range from the incredibly isolated confines of Russell Pass (near Everglades City and Indian Key) to a certain Clearwater anchorage that's surrounded by walls of concrete, glass, and steel. In most regions, Western Florida cruisers can pick from a wide variety of overnight stops to suit their own preferences for shelter and isolation. Just be sure your chosen anchorage has enough low water depth and swing room for your vessel! Check out this info in our new "Anchorage Summary," found at the beginning of each chapter and within the body of this guidebook.

As this account is being tapped out on the keyboard, anchorages on all the waters of the Sunshine State are in something approaching legal limbo. In 2006, the State of Florida passed a tougher version of an earlier law, which basically disallows local anchorage regulations by cities and counties. Some communities, such as Marco Island (see Chapter 1) have chosen to ignore at least the spirit of the new state anchoring law. A county court ruled in October 2007 that Marco Island's anchorage regulations were inconsistent with Florida state law. The city is appealing the verdict, and a decision one way or another by a higher Florida state court may be the determining factor for everyone's right to anchor on Floridian waters for many years to come. Stay tuned to the Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net (<http://www.CruisersNet.net>) for developments in this dynamic saga.

And, this would seem the time to announce yet another new feature for this seventh edition of *Cruising Guide to Western Florida*. Each chapter now begins with both a "Marina Summary" and an "Anchorage Summary" section.

Within the body of these two summaries, essential facts such as water depths, swing room (for anchorages), and availability of transient dockage and fuel (for marinas) is given. We believe this data will allow you to make a quick assessment of marinas and anchorages within your cruising range, and make an intelligent decision about which facilities and havens fit your own preferences and your vessel's requirements. The reader is then referred to the exact pages within the body of the chapter where they may read a detailed account of the anchorage or marina in question. We believe this new feature will vastly simplify the process of choosing marinas and anchorages. No longer will our readers have to wade through detailed text to make a selection. Please let us know if you find this new feature useful by sending an e-mail to me at CruisingWriter@CruisersNet.net.

In this guide, I have endeavored to include all the information captains may need to take full advantage of Western Florida's tremendous cruising potential. I have paid particular attention to anchorages, marina facilities, and danger areas. All navigational information necessary for a successful cruise has been included, and these data have been split apart in their own subsections and screened in gray for ready identification.

Each body of water covered in this guidebook has been personally visited for the very latest depth information. However, remember that bottom configurations do change. Dockside depths at marinas and inlets seem to be particularly subject to rapid variation. The cruising navigator should always be equipped with the latest charts and "Notice to Mariners" before leaving the dock.

The grayscale chart reproductions presented

in the body of this text are designed to locate anchorages and facilities and give the reader a general knowledge of the coastline. They are *not* intended for and should *never* be used for navigation.

This guide is not a navigational primer, and it is written with the assumption that you have a working knowledge of piloting and coastal navigation. If you don't, you should acquire these skills before tackling the coastal waters.

The waters set about the western coastline of the Sunshine State have a wide variety of navigational characteristics. As a general rule, cruisers can expect far shallower depths than those found in Eastern Florida or on the Panhandle. This exacting nature of Western Florida's waters frequently calls for careful navigation with a close watch on the sounder. Powercraft, in particular, should not be in so great a hurry to reach their intended port of call that they spend the better part of a day contemplating the value of good coastal navigation from the vantage point of a sand bar.

Tidal currents often flow swiftly along the inland waters of Western Florida. All mariners should be alert for the side-setting effects of wind and current. Sailcraft, particularly when cruising under auxiliary power, and single-engine trawlers should be especially mindful of the quickly moving waters when traversing the many narrow channels so typical of this coastline.

As development has gone forward in Western Florida, many homes, modest and palatial, have been built along the banks of the ICW. Some of these have their own private docks. In order to prevent having their boats rocked and their lawns sprayed with salt water by each passing vessel, residents have petitioned for and been granted "minimum wake" and "no

wake" speed restrictions in ever-increasing numbers. I have tried to detail the major "no wake" areas, but be warned: new regulations are being put into effect constantly, and you can just about bet the old homeplace that more of these restrictive zones will be in place by the time of your visit. These regulated zones can slow your cruise considerably, particularly if you pilot a planing-hull powercraft. Be sure to allow plenty of time in your cruising itinerary to avoid frustration.

During the last decade, other slow-speed zones have sprung up along Florida's various coastlines for a very different reason. The fascinating, gentle sea cow known as the manatee was threatened by injuries from high-speed props as the boating population of the region rose dramatically. Numerous "idle-speed" zones were established in the frequent habitats of these docile creatures. Some restrictions are in effect only from November 1 to March 31, while others are year round. Please observe all manatee signs.

Within the last five years, the number and length of manatee no-wake and idle-speed zones has multiplied exponentially. Many stretch along the most traveled portions of the Western Florida ICW. Power cruisers should now include extra time in their cruising itineraries for these slow-speed sections. Frankly, with this increase, even those power captains sympathetic to the plight of the manatee may be a bit frustrated. You can only grin and bear it—slow-speed manatee zones are now part and parcel of cruising all of the Floridian coastline.

Just so you are clear on the meaning of the different types of manatee slow-speed zones in Florida, here are the official definitions according to the Florida Marine Patrol. A manatee idle-speed zone is "a zone in which boats

are not permitted to go any faster than necessary to be steered." A manatee slow-speed zone is "a minimum wake zone where boats must not be on a plane and must be level in the water."

There are those in the cruising community who would argue that the danger to manatees is now past, and the proliferation of manatee no-wake zones is no longer justified. We will not take a definitive stand on that issue within these pages, but I would enthusiastically refer the reader to the Web site of Standing Watch (<http://www.Standing-Watch.org>). These good folks have rendered great assistance by representing the cruiser's interest in the Florida state legislature (and elsewhere) and, at least in this writer's opinion, have done all of us who take to the water a great service!

With the increasing development have also come bridges with restricted opening hours. While, again, this is not as large a problem here as on Florida's east coast, sailcraft must contend with a host of regulated spans. Plan your hours around the opening times to avoid long delays. If you are forced to wait, be wary of the strong tidal currents that are often found on these waters. Stay alert and study the movements of any other vessels that might be waiting for the bridge.

Fortunately, a move is now underway by the state of Florida to replace all bridges crossing the ICW with 65-foot, fixed, high-rise spans. While it will take many years before this ambitious goal is fully realized, more and more swing and bascule bridges are disappearing. Check out our bridge listing at the beginning of each chapter to see what new high-rises are already in place. Passing cruisers should also be ready to avoid a considerable collection of construction barges and equipment wherever

new bridge construction is underway. And, for the next several years at least, the list of these building projects will be anything but short.

All navigators should have a well-functioning depth sounder on board before leaving the dock. This is one of the most basic safety instruments in any captain's arsenal of aids. The cruiser who does not take this elementary precaution is asking for trouble. An accurate knotmeter/log is another instrument that will prove quite useful. It is often just as important to know how far you have gone as to know what course you are following.

Western Florida skippers will find it most advantageous to keep the current chart and a pair of good binoculars in the cockpit or on the flybridge at all times. With these aids on hand, problems can be quickly resolved before you have a close encounter of the grounding kind.

The modern miracle of satellite-controlled GPS (Global Positioning System), particularly when paired with a color display screen to make a GPS chartplotter, is yet another powerful navigational aid. GPS is more important when navigating the waters of Western Florida than on any other coastline that this writer has ever reviewed (with the possible exception of the Florida Keys). With the lack of a protected, well-marked, intracoastal waterway from Cape Sable to Fort Myers, and similar cruising conditions to the north along the Big Bend, a GPS suddenly becomes an invaluable, almost necessary tool that many navigators will not want to live without.

Since we have been talking about electronic navigation, please note that this guide includes *Approximate* latitude and longitude positions of marinas and anchorages. All of these lat/lon positions are presented strictly for

informational purposes; they must *not* be used as GPS or Loran way points!

Please also note that lat/lon positions for anchorages in this guide are given to help generally locate an overnight haven. With very few exceptions, mariners need not drop the hook at the exact location given. Within most creeks, bays, and other sheltered bodies of water appropriate for anchorage, there will likely be many places where you can rest comfortably and safely for the evening, swinging tranquilly on the hook.

There are several reasons why. Loran C and GPS readings give mariners a straight-line distance or bearing to the intended way-point destination. Straight-line tracks do *not* take into account such vagaries as shoals you will need to avoid, peninsulas you will be unable to cross, or islands that just seem to get in the way.

In this guide, lighted daybeacons are always called “flashing daybeacons.” I believe this is a more descriptive term than the officially correct designation “light,” or the more colloquial expression “flasher.” Also, to avoid confusion, daybeacons without lights are always referred to as “unlighted daybeacons.” Similarly, lighted buoys are called “flashing buoys.”

Weather along Western Florida is very different from what might be expected by cruisers from more northerly climes. Springs are warm to downright hot, and often humid, with relatively frequent thunderstorms. Nevertheless, this season is considered one of the best cruising times in the region. In the absence of any major storms, there is usually just enough wind for a good sail, and many days are clear and sparkling. Of course, cold fronts and other weather systems can mar this pattern of good weather, but most mariners will find spring

cruising along the Western Florida coastline to be a genuine delight.

The long, hot, humid summers can leave cruisers used to cooler climates breathless from the heat. From June through September, and sometimes well into October, there are many days of calm air. Sweltering sailcraft are forced to plod along under auxiliary power. As if that weren't problem enough, frequent afternoon thunderstorms can, and often do, get violent. St. Petersburg and Tampa Bay bear the unenviable moniker of “Lightning Capital of the World.” Truly, summer cruising along Western Florida should be planned with a ready ear to the latest weather forecast and radar report. No matter what the weather folks say, though, if a dark cloud comes over the horizon, abandon everything and race for the nearest shelter.

Weather during the autumn months of October through December would be a serious contender with the spring season as the best cruising time on the Western Florida coast, but for the minor issue of hurricanes. The season for these great storms stretches from June through November. Any student of the region's history can readily tell you of the many, many hurricanes that have battered Florida's Gulf Coast in years past. If the weather service detects one of these giants heading your way, hole up until all that sound and fury has passed. These things are not to be taken lightly.

Winters in Western Florida are short and sweet and are usually finished by March at the latest. Rarely does any part of the coastline experience freezing temperatures, except for the occasional exception along the northerly portion of the Big Bend. Strong northerly winds are part and parcel of the Western Florida winters and cruising skippers should be alert for these fresh blows. If such winds

persist for several days, they can sometimes lower water levels in north-to-south-lying bodies of water below charted levels.

The history of Western Florida is dotted with colorful figures and happenings like shells on a beach. It is my belief that no one can enjoy his or her cruise as he or she should without an appreciation of the heritage of the lands and waters through which he or she is traveling. For this reason, I have included a good smattering of Western Florida history throughout this guide. Wherever possible, the interested reader is referred to sources of additional information.

So there you have it, with all its beauty, splendor, and warts too. The coastline of Western Florida from Cape Sable to the Florida Panhandle is indeed special. Cruisers of every taste and persuasion will certainly find something that strikes their fancy. It has been my privilege to help introduce these unforgettable waters to you. I sincerely hope that soon you will have the chance to experience them for yourself. Bathed by a benevolent sun and washed by the warm Gulf waters, the Sunshine State's western coastline waits to greet you. Good luck and good cruising!

Things Change

If there is one constant in the world of cruising guides, it's that things change, sometimes before the ink is dry on the paper. I encourage my fellow cruisers to share information about what comes to light as being new, different, or just plain interesting during their time on Western Florida waters. Have you discovered a new marina? I want to hear about it. Has there been a recent change in aids to navigation? Please let me hear from you. Are the regulations in a particular anchorage different than those we quote in the guide? Send this data my way.

The easiest way to send this info is via e-mail. I can be reached at the following address:

CruisingWriter@CruisersNet.net

Perhaps the best way you can share your cruising news and, in turn, stay up to date on what's new and different along the Western Florida coastline, is to REGULARLY visit our newest web based service, the "Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net" (<http://www.CruisersNet.net>). This Web site, whose motto is "Cruisers Helping Cruisers," may turn out to be the most important new service to the Southeastern USA cruising community for many a year. And, best of all, it's FREE, with nothing to subscribe to, nothing to buy, and nothing to join! You don't need a user name, and you don't need a password!

The Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net allows the cruising community to exchange information in real time about what's changed, new, different, alarming, or just plain exciting, on ALL the coastal waters from Cape Sable to Carrabelle. For the first time (at least that we know of), cruisers plying the waters of the Southeastern USA will have a real-time web net where they may post all the cruising news that results from their travels. Now, if you find, for instance, that flashing daybeacon #4 in the midst of Tampa Bay is missing, you can simply send an e-mail to CruisingWriter@CruisersNet.net, and within 24 hours, this data will appear on the "Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net." Now, the entire cruising community can benefit from your discovery! What could be better?

Just imagine if you were planning a cruise from, say, Fort Myers to St. Petersburg. You call up The Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net, and discover that just last week, a fellow cruiser

has reported that the ICW route is (for example) shoaling along its eastern flank as it passes through Lemon Bay. Now, you know what to watch for, and this data is brought to you by those who know it best, namely, your fellow cruisers who have just navigated these same waters.

To visit the Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net, go to <http://www.CruisersNet.net>. Click the navigational buttons along the left side of our home page under the "Cruising News From"

section to access your waters of interest.

You might also choose to sign up for the Salty Southeast Cruiser's Net Alert List. Subscribers will receive e-mail bulletins about major and/or critical changes along all the Waterways traversing the various Southeastern USA coastal regions. There is also NO charge for this service. To sign up for the SSECN Alert List, just send an e-mail to CruisingWriter@CruisersNet.net containing the word "subscribe."