

Atlantic Coastwise Passage North to South from Norfolk to Palm Beach, Avoiding the Intracoastal Waterway and Marinas

The more passages we make up and down the east coast from Florida to New England, the less interested we are in using the terribly slow Intracoastal Waterway (ICW). We have therefore chosen to make offshore overnight passages and leap frog over entire sections of coast. But that is not the only way to avoid the ICW. The subject of this article is how to make daytime point to point offshore passages with stops every night at secure anchorages. In case you have not picked it up, we don't stay at marinas very often.

The ICW is a wonderful waterway, and we really enjoyed it the first few times we used it, however, we've been there, done that. Our boat has a deep draft which requires that we keep a constant eye on tides in order to pass the many shallow places. There are a few places where even using the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers updated depth charts and waiting for high tide that we have hit bottom.

In my opinion, the ICW is more of a destination than a route. To give it its due, when the weather is bad it is a way to keep moving comfortably if you don't want to wait. But it is slow and requires manually steering the entire way. There are fast boats, slow boats, tugs and barges using the ICW so you are either being passed or passing. Slow down, speed up, slow down, moving over to the side – not possible in many places with a deep draft – and wait for bridge openings. The radio is a constant chatter and a nuisance. Some veterans glibly announce one or two whistle passes. Some delivery captains, always in a hurry, are rude and, naturally, the captained boats are always the biggest ones making the biggest wakes. The slow boats want “a slow pass.” Many constantly bitch about being waked. If you want to hear cussing, listen to channel 16 on the ICW.

There are still a few stretches of the ICW that, for convenience, we use but wherever possible we leave the ICW and travel in a straight line offshore on autopilot. It is far more relaxing and enjoyable.

We have charted these passages on two different boats that have completely different top speed and draft. The daily routes are therefore, completely different. For simplicity, I will focus on the slower, deep draft route that is suitable for both types of boats. Congrio cruises at eight knots and has a six-and-one-half-foot draft so these daily passages are good for that criteria. The faster boat can naturally leapfrog over a few of the anchorage spots or start cocktail hour a little earlier.

I should mention that with our faster, shallow draft boat we could tuck into Ocean City, Maryland, the Rudee Inlet, at Virginia Beach, Virginia, and the Oregon Inlet, in North Carolina for overnight shelter. We will have to bypass them on slower Congrio.

We'll begin at mile one of the ICW in Norfolk, Virginia. As much as I do not like passing through Norfolk and waiting for bridge and lock openings along the Virginia Cut, the alternative route offshore Cape Hatteras is too far for a slow boat in one day, so we have developed an inside route that works for us. In the section headings below I will indicate the passage nautical miles from the previous anchorage.

Anchorage in the Norfolk Area - Mile 0

We have a couple of places to anchor near Norfolk and we choose between them depending upon wind direction. They are; Hampton Flats 36.9978N 76.3511W, and Lafayette River 36.9066N 76.3112W. Hampton Flats is closer to the Chesapeake Bay and the Lafayette River anchorage is quiet and sheltered in all wind directions. Many boats anchor at the Hospital Point anchorage 36.8458N 76.3003W near downtown Norfolk. We do not because of the constant boat traffic in that area. If you want to visit Norfolk, I recommend staying at a marina.

From Norfolk it is a long day of bridge and lock openings to reach the next anchorage. The route passes Coinjock Marina which is a great place but we keep moving on to a free anchorage just a few miles beyond.

North River – 53 miles

There are two anchoring spots on the North River. Select the northern one for wind with a north component and the southern one for wind with a south component. North anchorage 36.2353N 75.9291W. South anchorage 36.1978N 75.9400W. Both are exposed but you will be happy for the wind to keep the midge population in check. Be prepared to wash the bugs off your boat in the morning.

Silver Lake – 70 miles

Depart the ICW at mile marker 70 towards the east and take the Croatan Sound route past Roanoke Island to the Pamlico Sound. Anchor anywhere that is open at Silver Lake, Ocracoke Island. This is the main attraction and reward for taking this inland route. Ocracoke is one of the best places to anchor in any weather and the town justifies a stay of several relaxing days. Rent a golf cart for two hours and you will see the entire island but slow down and explore all the nooks and crannies. There are good restaurants and several places to obtain provisions. The Ocracoke Festival is usually the first or second weekend in June. It is not to be missed.

Beaufort, Cape Lookout – 65 miles

There are two options for anchoring in this area. I strongly recommend Cape Lookout Bight where you may anchor anywhere that suits you. There is a lot of room so no worries about the many other boats also anchored there on the weekends. Cape Lookout Bight is worth staying a few days to explore the National Park, lighthouse, wild horses, sand bars and abundant sea life including turtles, dolphin, seals, fish and birds. If it is late in the day and you do not have time to reach Cape Lookout Bight, it is possible to anchor overnight inside the Beaufort Inlet at 34.7036N 76.6865W. We have used this anchorage and although there is a lot of boat traffic during the day, it is quiet at night. Many boats anchor in front of Beaufort town on Taylor Creek but not us. We have anchored behind town on Town Creek but not since the big bridge was built where you now have to anchor nearly underneath it. With the paradise of Cape Lookout Bight so close, why put up with these crowded town anchorages? The town of Beaufort is a great spot to spend time and provision so for that, stay at the Beaufort Docks right in town and use a curtesy car.

Masonboro Inlet – 68 miles

The Masonboro Inlet is safe and easy to enter. Tucked just inside to the north of the inlet across from the Coast Guard station is a good anchorage at 34.1933N 77.8113W.

Leaving Masonboro Inlet, there is a major obstacle in the way called Frying Pan Shoals. The shoals extend about 13 miles offshore from aptly named Cape Fear. To go outside, around Frying Pan Shoals to the next anchorage south at Winyah Bay, is a 100 mile passage. There are two shorter alternatives, both end up at a halfway anchorage just inside the Cape Fear River Inlet at 33.8905N 78.0012W. This is a safe anchorage that we have used twice but there are a couple of complications that make it somewhat worrisome. First, is the strong current that runs in and out of the inlet. Although this anchorage is tucked far inside off the main channel it is close enough to cause some current concerns. Then, there are the large ships that pass awfully close 24 hours a day. In addition to the large ships, the ferries run into the nearby Bald Head Marina at an extremely fast speed making big wakes. The anchorage is exposed to the south so an alternative is Bald Head Marina which is very nice. We enjoyed a short stay there once and rented a golf cart to explore the resort area.

If you intend to use this anchorage or marina as an intermediate stop, it can be reached from Masonboro Inlet by either of two routes. The first is via the ICW and Cape Fear River, a distance of 23 miles. This route takes planning in order to run with the very strong current in the Cape Fear River and it passes a few shallow spots on the ICW near Carolina Beach. Going outside the Masonboro

Inlet and around Frying Pan shoals is a distance of 50 miles, twice as far as the inside route and twice as relaxing.

Winyah Bay – 100 miles from Masonboro Inlet, 70 miles from Cape Fear River entrance

Anchor at 33.2578N 79.2497W. This is a quiet, sheltered anchorage that is a long eight miles from the entrance channel. Some boats anchor in the entrance channel near the lighthouse. One boater told me he thinks it is a good anchorage but I don't agree. I have seen fishing boats anchored there. I have tried anchoring in several spots near the lighthouse and the bottom in the entrance channel is scoured by the strong current and it has large waves of silt, sand and rocks. I don't think it is worth the risk anchoring there, at least I would not get a restful night's sleep.

Charleston – 62 miles

There are several places to anchor in Charleston Harbor. We use 32.7571N 79.9144W. This is a little west of the commercial anchorage where we always see buoys, barges, dredges and workboats anchored. It can be rocky during the day because of yachts speeding in and out of Ashley River but it quiets down at night.

The next leg along the Georgia coast poses a challenge because of the exceptionally long distances from the ocean through the inlets and into safe anchorages. There are several options. I will list them in a table to indicate the distance between and the distance into the anchorage. It always seems like such a waste of fuel along this leg, most often we just avoid this section by doing an overnight passage.

The following chart shows distances from Charleston to the next inlet and from the inlet entrance to the anchorage.

	Passage Distance	Plus, Inlet to anchorage
Charleston to		7
Port Royal Sound 32.3664N 80.6413W	54	17
Tybee Roads and two anchorages	66	
St. Augustine Creek 32.0608N 80.9829W		13
Skidaway River 32.0056N 81.0186W		21

Note that the entrance to Port Royal Sound is north/south direction while the Savannah River is east/west hence the added miles into Port Royal Sound when southbound.

From either of the two Savannah area anchorages, it is possible to shave off about 18 miles by continuing along the ICW to the Wilmington River and out the Wassaw Sound. We have done it, as have many of the large yachts coming and going to Thunderbolt Marine, but I warn you to pass the Wassaw bar in calm weather at high tide.

From either Tybee Roads (Savannah River) or Wassaw Sound, the next destination will be St. Mary's River entrance and Fernandina Beach, with a possible intermediate stop at St. Simon Sound. Both St. Mary's and St. Simon are big ship channels and easily navigated. We have entered St. Simon Sound but never anchored near the entrance, although some do. When we entered St. Simon Sound it was because of bad weather and the entrance anchorages were not safe so we continued up the ICW to Fredrica River and anchored there.

To St. Mary's River entrance channel from:

Port Royal Sound anchorage - 110 miles

St. Augustine Creek anchorage via Wassaw Sound - 94

Skidaway River anchorage via Wassaw Sound – 86

The St. Mary's entrance channel is a big ship channel all the way to the anchorage. It is well marked and easily navigated even for a nighttime arrival. From the entrance channel to Fernandina Beach anchorage it is 7 miles

There are two areas to anchor at Fernandina Beach. The first at 30.6753N 81.4703W is more exposed but is a reasonably short dinghy ride to the town dock. The second is around the corner and up the Bells River in any spot where depth and weather conditions suit you. The Bells River anchorage is preferred when bad weather arrives. There is some current at either anchorage.

You are now in Florida and this ends the complicated Georgia coastline and many decisions about which way to go and how far. As I mentioned before, we usually just avoid Georgia entirely by doing an overnight passage.

Don't forget it is seven miles out the St. Mary's entrance channel, then:

St. Augustine – 47 miles

Ponce Inlet – 100 miles

Both of these distances above can be reduced by pulling into the St. River at Jacksonville and anchoring near the entrance for the night. We have never tried it but are tempted to.

I put these legs together for a reason. If you can't make 100 miles in one day then St. Augustine will be your intermediate stop, unless you stop on the St. Johns River. It is tempting to break up the passage by stopping at St. Augustine but, be forewarned that St. Augustine anchorage is full of moorings. We have

anchored just outside the mooring field but the bottom is not ideal, meaning it shoals. Boy, does it shoal! We once used the bottom of Congrio as a lead line. The current roars through St. Augustine. The last two times we stopped at St. Augustine we tied up at a marina. We try to avoid St. Augustine although, it is a great town and worth paying for a slip if you have never been there.

We usually leave the Fernandina Beach anchorage via the St. Mary's entrance before sunrise to reach our destination in daylight. It is easy to navigate, even if sharing the channel with one of the big pulp mill ships or a nuclear submarine from Kings Bay submarine base.

Because of current, traffic and local rules, anchoring in Ponce Inlet is limited to two places. The first, at Rockhouse Creek 29.0614N 80.9308W is a great anchorage in all weather. The only problem is that it is often very crowded. The last time we intended to anchor in Rockhouse Creek it was filled with dredge equipment so we continued to the second anchorage, which requires one bridge opening if you can't get under 24 feet and a short trip south on the ICW. It is at 29.0092N 80.9110W. You can also feel your way off the other side of the ICW if you choose.

Leaving the Ponce Inlet on the outside there are no anchorages for the next 106 miles around Cape Canaveral until you reach Fort Pierce. There is a good marina at Port Canaveral 60 miles away. While Fort Pierce Inlet is a dredged ship channel, the current is very swift and with strong East wind against an ebbing current, the waves in the entrance can be huge. Speaking of submarines, we once buried the bow of Congrio under six feet of green water leaving Fort Pierce. I am still in the process of replacing all the foredeck solar ventilation fans.

The last few times we have faced the inside-outside dilemma, the weather also contributed to our decision to remain in the ICW, besides, we were already well south on the ICW at the second Ponce anchorage mentioned above. Fortunately, the depth along this part of the ICW is adequate for six and a half foot draft, with only a couple of very shallow spots that can be passed by staying in mid channel. These are our overnight anchoring spots south of Ponce along the ICW.

Indian River 28.2581N 80.6714W – 51 miles

Fort Pierce 21.4570N 80.3035W – 52 miles

We have anchored many times at this Fort Pierce spot but it is not really that good. The anchorage is over old bridge ruins and there is debris on the bottom. Some boats prefer to anchor near 27.4690N 80.3239W. We have anchored there once but it is exposed and most often crowded. Other boats anchor near the entrance and endure the strong currents at 27.4637N 80.3157W. We have not tried it.

Instead, we prefer to skip Fort Pierce and continue another 19 miles south on the ICW and anchor at badly named Hooker Cove 27.1873N 80.2038W near the St. Lucie Inlet. Altogether, including to diversion off the ICW, this is a doable 73 miles from the previous Indian River anchorage. Although it is a long day steering the boat down the ICW, this is our last night of a long season up north and it makes the rum and tonic taste that much better in this very protected anchorage with great holding. You'll get a good night sleep here.

Palm Beach now is a short 25 miles away and the ICW is adequate depth all the way. The only drawback is the several bridge openings. Our winter marina is in Jupiter, which is even closer, so we always use the ICW from the St. Lucie area. Many large yachts use the St. Lucie inlet that undergoes constant shoaling but is dredged. We have never been brave enough to use it because at every opportunity the wind was churning up white water across the entire entrance. The next inlet south is Jupiter Inlet. This inlet is a little more straight forward and many boats use it every day in calm weather. We have not. Congrio lumbers along at eight knots and is not nimble enough to get out in front of, or away from, an unexpected large wave. With the Lake Worth ship entrance at Palm Beach so close, why take the risk? You can search Jupiter Inlet on YouTube and see why I won't use it.

I have mentioned running overnight, offshore several times. After running up and down the coast this is now preferred by us and is certainly more relaxing, if weather windows are carefully chosen. The Gulf Stream needs to be contended with. While riding the four to five knot current north is great, be prepared for lightning. The heat and energy generated by the Gulf Stream is a lightning producer. We have been chased out of the Gulf Stream by a steady barrage of lightning bolts, while only a mile or two inside the Stream there are none. Surprisingly, between the Gulf Stream and the shoreline, the current frequently runs opposite to the Gulf Stream from north to south. This is great when going south, but frustrating going north with the Gulf Stream so close at hand. Still we prefer slow over a lightning strike which, if you have not experienced it as we have, is not especially fun.

A couple of last comments about goings south in the late fall - we have even made the trip south in December and January. The days are very short. There never seems to be enough daylight hours in the fall. You must take this into account. The sun is low in the south all fall and winter. From early morning sunrise heading east out the inlets, heading south all day, to the late afternoon sunsets heading west into an anchorage, the sun will be in your eyes all day long. Our pilothouse has wide mullions between the windows that we strategically position between our eyes and the sun. We also have dark mylar sunshades that roll down each window. We do not know how anyone can tolerate the wide, panoramic, forward glazing we see on so many pilothouse windows, or worse still, open flybridges. Be prepared to stare at the sun for days, or hope for clouds.

An additional valuable resource for anchorages is the Active Captain web site and app. It provides user reviews of anchorages and marinas everywhere.