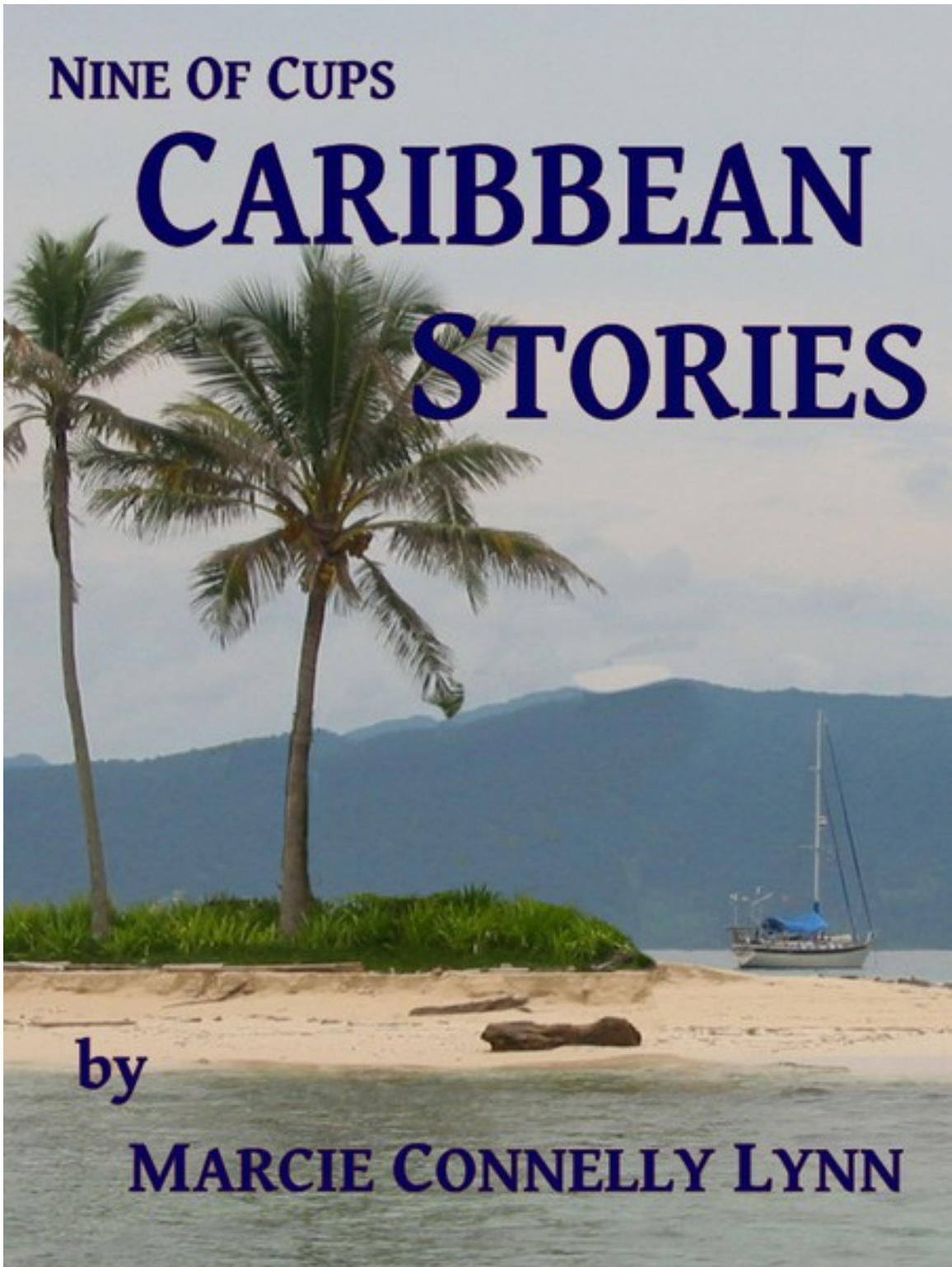


**NINE OF CUPS**

# **CARIBBEAN STORIES**

**by**

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# **Nine of Cups Caribbean Stories**

by Marcie Connelly Lynn

Please don't give this digital book away or share it. This is one of the ways we support our cruising kitty and our liveaboard lifestyle. We've priced it inexpensively - think of it as buying us a beer. Thanks!

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## Introduction

Writing has always been a part of my life. Whether it was a 10-year-old's diary, creative writing classes in college or conjuring up some marketing copy, I've always written. It only seemed natural when we moved aboard *Nine of Cups* to keep track of our travels by keeping journals. The journals became articles which I submitted to *Caribbean Compass* and those articles are now part and parcel of this book.

We really weren't sure how far we'd venture on *Nine of Cups* or how long we'd enjoy the sailing life. It was a serious gamble. Selling up, moving aboard and sailing off seemed like a dream back in 2000. Nearly 14 years later, it's still a dream ... only we're living it. We said from the beginning that we'd only live this life as long as it was fun. It still is. Despite some of the challenges in living aboard a boat and dealing with the vagaries of wind and weather, our decision to sail has been one of the best in our lives. 70% of the earth's surface is water; there's no better way to see it than on a boat.

We hope you enjoy this first book of a series about our world travels. Part of the pleasure of sailing and traveling is sharing the experiences with others. Come with us and enjoy the ride.

*Marcie*



*Nine of Cups under sail*

## The Top of the Caribbean... Climbing Pico Duarte

Arriving in cruiser-friendly Luperon, Dominican Republic after eight weeks in the dry Bahamas, David and I yearned to explore the interior of this lush, green island. After a few days at anchor, we decided where better to start than at the top.

Arrangements were easily made at the Luperon marina to watch the boat and take care of the ship's cat while we escaped for a five-day trip to climb Pico Duarte. Our host and guide, Dimi, met us at the marina in his "safari" truck, a 4-wheel drive vehicle with only two working gears and no speedometer, and off we went.



*Dimis truck crossing the river*

Pico Duarte, at 10,032 feet (3,087M), is the highest peak in the Caribbean. Located in the Armando Bermudez National Park in the central region of the Dominican Republic, the mountain is part of their National Park System and a protected area. The tiny village of La Ciénaga is the base camp for the mountain and about four hours away from Luperon by truck. We traveled a couple of hours via highways, but the final leg was a very rough, dirt road and finally a narrow, poorly maintained log bridge into the village. We arrived slightly shaken (but not stirred).



*A thatched-roof casita provided the first night's lodging*

Our first night at the base camp we opted to stay in a small, but private thatched *casita* rather than the larger dormitory-style facility. The amenities here included toilets (no toilet seats or paper) and potable water from a spigot. Our hut had a cement floor. We



*Thankfully, we stopped every now and then for a break*

brought air mattresses (only one held air for an entire night... glad it was mine!) and two blankets. After sweating through each night on the boat in Luperon, we found the temperature at base camp, in the high 50s, very cool and refreshing. We ended up pinning the two blankets together to make a double sleeping bag sort of arrangement.

We rose by 7am the next morning, had breakfast and were introduced to our local guide (a requirement for climbing the mountain) and three other local people who would cook, tend the mules and be our companions for the next three days. Seven people, two heavily laden pack mules, four riding mules and we were off to climb a mountain.



*Our guide and mule wranglers*

The trail to the top is about 24km and we hiked all but 5km on the first day in anticipation of reaching the summit bright and early the next morning. The area has three rivers, just deep enough to get your feet wet while riding mules, and we crossed them all. In general, the mules were sure-footed, even when it rained (and it rained frequently). The steep, rutted trails became deep and thick with slippery yellow mud. Riding along the trail single file, taking in the natural beauty and awe-inspiring views was enjoyable as well as contemplative. The *mulos*, however, needed constant encouragement, and there was seldom a quiet moment with the guides constantly shouting, cajoling, whistling and clucking to urge them on.

Thankfully we stopped twice for breaks at designated rest stops. After riding the mules for several hours, it was wonderful to rest, but difficult to dismount and walk. Remounting for the next leg of the trip was even more difficult as our tender boat butts were not at all used to the saddles. David opted to walk for a while, if only to give his hemorrhoids a rest!

The views were stunning throughout the trip. The forests are lush and green with oversize ferns and elephant ears, reminiscent of Jurassic Park, which was filmed in this area. Tiny, delicate orchids lined the trail and brightly colored butterflies and birds were everywhere. In some spots, it wouldn't have surprised us at all to see a dinosaur appear on our path. Actually, being an arachnophobe, I would have preferred a dinosaur to the tarantulas we saw.

We ended the first day's journey at La Compartición where we slept for the night. Dimi and "Mama", our diminutive cook, prepared dinner over a huge, smoke-blackened wood stove. Considering the facilities available, we ate gourmet...beef tips and rice with champignons. Rum was the drink of choice. We sat around a huge campfire after dinner, listening to the night sounds and chatting in our limited Spanish with our Dominican companions.

Without electricity, night came early! Our sleeping accommodation was the wooden floor of a casita used by all. We cordoned off a small area for our gear and settled in. We were warned that rats also shared the facilities and heard them scurrying during the night...no close encounters, however. The night went from cool to very, very cold (30's). We went to bed fully clothed and snuggled up. We could see our breath in the night air.



*Summit of Pico Duarte*

Around 5am, we were given a cup of hot chocolate to fortify ourselves and set back upon our mules again for the final climb to the summit. Only Pedro accompanied us as our guide (he got the short stick, I guess). It was pitch black and David brought up the rear of our trio with a flashlight in hand. “The mules know the way,” they said and they did, but it was eerie traveling in the dark. The mules took us as far as Vallecito de Lilis, then we hiked the rest of the way on foot... a bit strenuous, but not particularly difficult. It was misty and foggy on top and quite cold, and just barely light by the time we reached the summit. A bust of Juan Pablo Duarte, father of the country, sits on top along with a cross and the Dominican flag. Due to the fog, our aerial view was very limited, but no matter... we made it!

We were back down from the summit by 8:30 and headed to Valle de Tetero, another campsite. This area is beautiful with large open *campos* and dark purple mountains in the background. The camp setup here was the same except the *casita* was smaller, so we slept in a small utility room on a concrete floor. Dinner was a shish kebob affair served with delicious *maro* (rice, corn and beans). Outhouses were available, but water for washing ourselves and the dishes was found in the nearby river.



“Mama”, our diminutive cook, washing the dinner dishes

While at this campsite, we came upon *Piedras Indigenas*...stones carved by the native Tainos hundreds of years ago and left for us to ponder and admire.

Our final trek back to La Ciénaga was a long, long day and it rained constantly. Spanish moss hung from the trees and after a shower with a gray sky above, it provided a supernatural look to the dense foliage as we rode through.



*Spanish moss lends a supernatural air to our surroundings*

I grimaced a time or two as pieces of dangling moss brushed against my face, worrying that the ever-present insects and other critters might be attached to the moss, but my luck held out. We wore foul weather jackets over jeans, but were soaked through and caked with yellow mud from head to toe by the time we arrived at the base camp. Tired, drenched, muddy and totally exhilarated.

Including the side trip we took to Tetero, we traveled about 63 km round trip on mules. (I fell off the mule only once.) I must note that as we were descending the last day, a young German hiker passed us. She had been up and down in the same day in the rain without a mule...and she wasn't even breathing hard. On the other hand, we believe we hold the record for the *slowest* ascent of Pico Duarte by a middle-aged couple, but then who's to argue?



## *Hole in the Head*



*Anchorage at Luperon, Dominican Republic*

As we entered Luperon Harbor in the Dominican Republic, a voice came over the VHF. It sounded like God telling us to “Anchor to the trades!” Turns out it was sailing legend Bruce van Sant giving us a heads up on the trade winds and though there was no wind to speak of this early in the morning, we anchored towards the east, and followed his directions accordingly.

A week or two later at sundown as we were sitting in the cockpit enjoying our post-dinner lethargy, the sky blackened and a squall moved in from the east. It looked like it was going to miss us and it did...the first time through. The storm passed and then because Nature is known to play tricks on presumptuous cruisers, it whipped around and came at us from the west with almost no warning.

This was not just any little blow; we clocked gusts at 60+mph. The anchorage was crowded and the VHF blared with various warnings from cruisers, mostly akin to the fact that the whole fleet seemed to be dragging. Down below, the dirty dinner dishes and pans crashed on the floor and unlatched lockers and drawers emptied their contents on the sole in a grand, uproarious fashion. The contents of the dink went with the blow and we watched as gas tank, oars, and PFDs flew out into the water, quickly disappearing into the now pitch-black night.

An hour or so later, calm was restored weather-wise, but the anchorage was in turmoil. Several boats

had dragged and needed to re-anchor. Dinghies were gone missing, solar showers were in the drink and drying clothes had flown off the lifelines. It was moonless and except for emergency maneuvering, it was pointless to try to recover anything in the dark. We waited till morning.

Everyone was on edge and at first light, cruisers ventured out and began combing the mangroved nooks and crannies of the harbor, rounding up lost gear and consolidating it in one location for owner identification and retrieval. We recovered all of our lost dinghy items. Only a couple of dishes broke and once the sole was washed down, the boat seemed fairly shipshape again. That is until David went to the forward head to take care of some “business”.

He had left a stubborn outboard engine lock soaking in oil on the forward head counter. We hadn't had occasion to use the head since the blow. As he sat down, he noticed the lock laying on the floor in a pool of oil littered with large shards of white porcelain, the type of white porcelain you might find, for instance, in a toilet bowl.

It appears as the boat heeled over during that 60+ mph gust, the lock not only flew, but made a clean entry and exit through the toilet bowl leaving a huge hole in its wake. What to do? There were no new heads available in Luperon. Ever resourceful David managed to glue the pieces back together as you would a fine vase, except he used 5200 adhesive and then covered the damaged area with duct tape. It worked just fine until we were able to order a replacement head in Puerto Rico, but it certainly gave new meaning to the phrase “hole in the head”.



*A real hole in the head!*

## Bottoms Up In Saba



*Saba switchbacks – Heading “up” to The Bottom*

Approaching Saba (that’s SAY-ba), shrouded in a thick mist, you wonder if you haven’t taken a wrong turn somewhere and you’re heading into the middle of a Grimm’s fairy tale. This would certainly be an excellent place to hide a princess. Rising abruptly out of the sea to nearly three thousand feet, this tiny Dutch Antilles’ island appears to be all “up”. Steep-to on all sides, there’s really no comfortable place to anchor, so picking up one of their Marine Park moorings is beneficial to the environment as well as the visiting cruiser.

Less than 25,000 tourists a year visit Saba and few of that number are cruisers. It’s out of the way and doesn’t seem to have as much appeal as some of the more popular islands like St. Bart’s. So what could possibly be the attraction in stopping at a 5 square mile volcanic mountaintop? The people and the sheer delight of height.

On arrival at the dinghy dock, a most exhilarating trip from the mooring field, all you can see is “up”. There are steep, rugged peaks and domes surrounding the tiny port of Fort Bay. Saba is entirely

surrounded by a protected Marine Park and exceptional diving is available through the dive shops here.

A switch-backed road, so seemingly vertical it nearly takes your breath away, is lined with rock walls and leads you up to The Bottom. Yup, The Bottom is at the top. Well, not really the top. Actually, the highest point in Saba is Mount Scenery at 2,877 feet ( 877m), but that’s a different topic. The Bottom is the “capital” of Saba and its administrative center. It’s a pleasant, quiet little town where the houses are neat and tidy; most are painted green and white and blend harmoniously with the remnants of the island’s 300 year old history.



*“The Bottom” seen from the top*

Sabans are an interesting lot and unlike any other folks we’ve met in the Caribbean. The population of about 1200 claims Dutch as its official language, but everyone speaks English with a distinctive accent that’s not quite Dutch. The people are friendly, outgoing and very tenacious. Garvin Hessell, our local guide, was quick to point out that Sabans are independent, industrious and innovative and based on what we saw, he wasn’t exaggerating. Just consider that whenever they’ve been told something was impossible, they just did it. An unbelievably steep road constructed over a 20 year period by the locals runs from the sea to the towns above; and their airport, opened in 1963, barely has a runway ... in fact, it’s the shortest officially used runway in the world!

The older women hand-make a fine, distinctive thread work called Saban lace. They also make a rum-based concoction known as Saban Spice, bound to knock your socks off. Saban houses sit precariously on the hillsides at impossible angles. They make the most of their land and steeply-terraced farms dot the rugged terrain. Vibrant orange flamboyant trees abound and black-eyed Susans, the island's official flower, sway colorfully in the gentle breeze.

The step-up ascent leads you through an elfin rain forest and is lush with elephant ears, ferns and climbing vines. We climbed leisurely and snacked on wild Surinam cherries on the way, our faces and hands red with evidence. Small anoles (*Anolis sabanus*) unique to Saba scurried across our path and two harmless red racer snakes, luxuriantly sunning themselves, never moved as we passed by (we figured out later they were probably mating). At the very summit, there's a rope handhold to assist hikers in their final 20 foot scramble to a commemorative monument and, fog permitting, an incomparable view of the Caribbean.

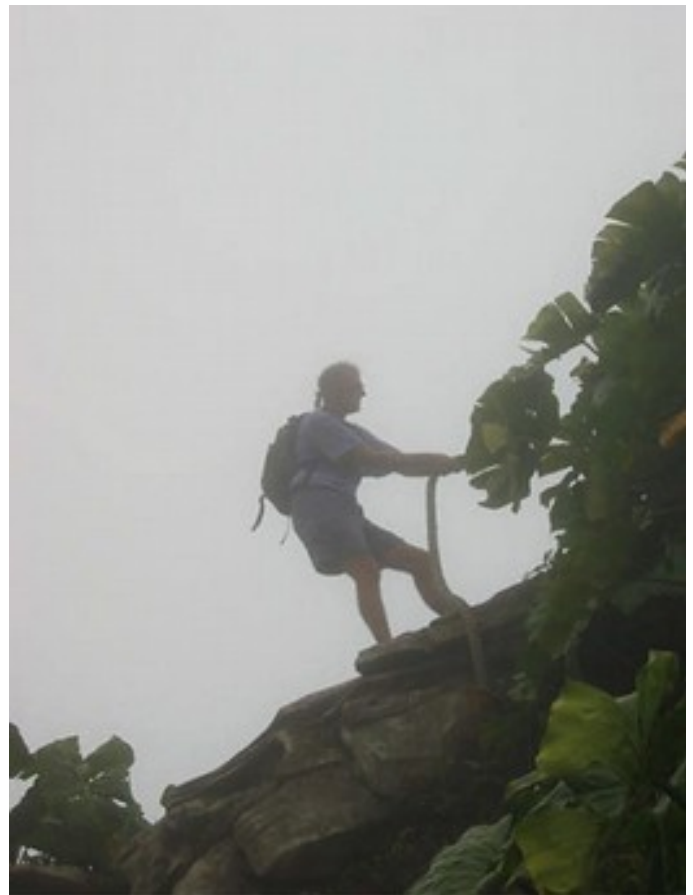
We give the island and this hike particularly high marks since there's an added bonus: not only can you claim you've climbed to the highest point in Saba, but you can also boast you've reached the highest point in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Now that's an upper!



*Zetty (Miss Saba) and Marcie (Miss Nine of Cups)*

Windwardside is the island's social center with several boutiques, artists' shops and restaurants. It's also the location of the small, but informative Saba Museum. Lunch at a local restaurant was served by a stunning young lady with a captivating smile. Upon chatting with her, we learned she was none other than "Miss Saba" and represented the island in regional beauty pageants. Looking at the picture of the two of us taken by David, I was left with only one redeeming thought: She'll be "Miss Saba" for a year or two, but me? I'll be "Miss Nine of Cups" forever!

Just outside of town, we picked up the access trail to the 1,067 hand-carved, mossy, slippery stone steps that lead to the summit of Mt. Scenery. (It may have been 1,068 steps, I lost count at around 752.) Realizing the labor-intensive effort involved in creating and maintaining the steps, we asked why they did it. "We thought tourists might like it." They were right.



*A rope handhold at the summit of Mt. Scenery comes in handy for the final 20' scramble*

## Exploring St. Kitts ... Gibraltar of the Caribbean



*Incomparable view from the top of Ft. George*

We anchored off Basseterre, St. Kitts at the very roly Deep Water Port, a stern anchor the only reason it was even moderately tolerable. On approach, we had seen massive Ft. George perched on the top of 800-foot Brimstone Hill and looked forward to exploring it firsthand. Taxis were lined up expectantly ashore hoping to entertain off-season cruisers and an island tour was arranged as soon as we set foot on the pier.

St. Kitts is a fascinating island and Percy, our guide, knew his stuff. He exhibited an obvious pride in his island home and his enthusiasm for its history was contagious. First, we drove through the city of Basseterre, Percy pointing out churches and historical monuments. The downtown area is alive with restaurants and shops, many of which surround the Piccadilly Circus-like rotary which boasts a huge green town clock in its center.

Once out of town, we saw Carib petroglyphs at one location and then further up the coast, Bloody Bay, the site of a massive Carib slaughter by rarely combined British-French troops, reminding us of the violent manner in which “civilization” was brought to the Caribbean.



*Wingfield Plantation, an exemplary botanical garden*

Wingfield Plantation, built in 1680, is an old sugarcane plantation, which has since been converted into an exemplary botanical garden. The grounds are lush and green, flourishing with local flora due to the 65” of yearly rainfall. A 350-year-old samaan tree is the centerpiece of the garden with enormous sprawling limbs and red-pink fluffy blossoms in bloom. An old bell tower remains intact, previously used to signal the beginning and end of the workday. There are a couple of small shops here with local artisans displaying handmade batik fabric and crafts.

Volcanic stone lines many of the beaches, a reminder that Mt. Misery, at 3,792 feet, though currently inactive, is still part of the mountain chain that only recently erupted in Montserrat.



*Sugarcane train*

We saw a sugarcane train wending its way along the 36 miles of narrow gage railroad track on the island. The sugarcane plant, native to Asia, was first brought to the Americas by Columbus in 1493.

The Dutch traders introduced cane to the islands, which became the major commerce by the mid-1600's. There's about 12,000 acres of sugarcane still under cultivation in St. Kitts. The cane juice is primarily used in the production of local rum.

As we began our ascent of Brimstone Hill, we were told to watch for monkeys. They are, unfortunately very shy with visitors. Though we could hear them chatter, we never got a clear view. We continued the circuitous climb via sharp switchbacks knowing the piece de resistance, was still ahead...the long-awaited "Citadel" of Fort George.



*Brimstone Hill Fortress*

There is a welcome center with a good, on-demand video presentation available as well as a gift shop, snack bar and small museum to visit. All of the grounds are open to the public and the vistas of Nevis and the surrounding area are breathtaking. Ascending a steep stone staircase to the very top is rewarded by access to the expansive ramparts, which are in remarkable condition, overlooking the bastions below. The enormity of the fort becomes evident here and with such a commanding 360° view, it is understandable why the fort was dubbed the "Gibraltar of the Caribbean".



*Huge green town clock in Piccadilly Circus-like downtown Basseterre*

Though only 65 square miles, St. Kitts has lots to offer the visiting cruiser in the way of sightseeing, though mariner facilities are limited. Its history well preserved, the Kittians are hospitable and delighted to share their unique island heritage.

## Strangers in Paradise...New Old Friends in Nevis

Mom always told us “Don’t ever go home with strangers!” Did we listen? Not this time! And we’re all the better for it. We were anchored in Basseterre Bay, St. Kitts and had gone ashore for a previously arranged island tour. Meandering our way around the island, we finally arrived at the highlight of the tour: the top of Brimstone Hill and massive Fort George.



*Gaby & Emil, our gracious Swiss hosts in Nevis*

We delighted in the views and after wandering around the fort and the small museum, our guide pointed us in the direction of the snack bar for lunch. While sipping beers and eating burgers, we chatted with a Swiss couple, who lived on nearby Nevis and had taken the ferry to St. Kitts for the day. After nearly an hour of enjoyable conversation, our guide nodded that it was time to go, but not before our new Swiss acquaintances extended us an invitation to join them for a couple of days at their plantation home in Nevis. An unexpected invitation and one we thought better to decline until they added the magic words: “You’ll have your own guest quarters with hot showers and you can even bring your dirty laundry

and use our washer.” How could we say no? We planned to meet them in two days on Nevis and would call to confirm our arrival.

We checked into Customs at Charlestown and wandered around a bit before making a phone call to our perspective hosts. Unsure of what to expect, David and I had agreed we would call, casually tell them we had arrived and invite them to meet us for a drink. We were hoping to avoid putting them on the spot in case they were regretting their 2-day old invitation. Emil answered the phone on the first ring and with noticeable excitement in his voice, explained they had seen us coming into the anchorage and raced home to make sure they didn’t miss our call. They had even scoped out the best and closest anchorage for us, as well as safe dockage for our dinghy. We moved the boat a few miles north to Oualie Beach and caught sight of Emil and his Suzuki *Sidekick* waiting for us at the dink dock.



*Ruins of sugar plantations along the Atlantic coast*

It seems impossible to have spent barely an hour with total strangers, and then feel totally relaxed with them at their home two days later, but our hosts managed it without a hitch. There were none of the usual awkward “new acquaintance” lapses in conversation, but rather a steady, pleasant flow of “old friend” chatter as we learned about each other’s lives. Emil had worked with UNICEF and Gaby was a nurse, both retired now and living several months of the year in Nevis. They had done extensive worldwide travel and shared their experiences while alternately soliciting cruising tales from us. No glazed-eye looks or yawns of boredom as we each related our adventures, but rather mutual rapt attention.

Not only did we have our own guest quarters as promised, we had our own little bungalow apart from the main house. This tidy, charming cottage with two beds, a sitting area and a large bathroom suited us perfectly. A large overhead fan spun lazily and the light breeze through the open shutters kept the room cool and fresh. We slept like logs and awakened to the sounds of tropical birds, goats and howling monkeys.

We found to our delight that Gaby was a gourmet cook and the meals she seemingly prepared with ease were outstanding. Steak au poivre and fresh salad, tropical fruits and interesting local vegetables were all served unceremoniously, but with a fine Swiss flair. I sat at the worktable in her homey kitchen, sipped wine and traded stories as we prepared meals. The air was peaceful and relaxed. When asked if we'd spend another night with them, we answered yes without hesitation.



*Plantation house in Nevis*

Their single level main house was not particularly large, but it was open and spacious, styled after the sugarcane plantation houses of the past. White, with dark green shutters, the house sat majestically on a hill in the middle of a huge yard, which was lush with blossoming flowers and trees. A thick hedge lined the entire perimeter and a graceful stone staircase led up to a wraparound open-air verandah. While the hedge provided seclusion from the road, the verandah afforded us an unobstructed view of the bay, the Narrows and St. Kitts in the distance.

Emil offered us an island tour. We visited the ruins of various sugarcane plantations along the desert-like Atlantic coast. Several other plantations have been restored and we stopped at one high on a hill that had been converted into an inn and restaurant. Many of the old buildings were refurbished and melded well with the new additions. We had a beer and strolled through its exquisitely landscaped gardens. As we wandered, we could hear the chatter of shy green vervet monkeys and we saw them swinging through the trees.

We also visited the Nevis racetrack built parallel to the sea. Though the track happened to have donkeys and goats grazing on it when we saw it, about ten Sundays a year, there is thoroughbred horse racing here. It's a small track and sometimes there are only two horses competing in a race. Nevertheless, it is considered a major social outing on Nevis, and everyone, but everyone attends.



*This time of year only the goats and donkeys graze, but ten Sundays a year, this is the place to be in Nevis*

After two days and nights, not wanting to overstay our welcome, we said our farewells midst hugs and promises to stay in touch. Emil drove us back to the dock and helped us launch the dink. As we sailed past their house, we could see them holding a large white sheet and waving it from the verandah... bidding friends, not strangers, a fond farewell.

## Guadeloupe - A French Sampler

Only 40 miles past bleak and smoldering Montserrat, the harbor of Deshaies (Day-hay), Guadeloupe is very inviting. The town is built right on the water's edge. The harbor is well protected and the view from "le mouillage" (the anchorage) is awesome. On a Friday afternoon, we anchored and headed to shore to check in before the weekend. At 3PM, Customs/ Immigration was closed.



*Lovely, inviting Deshaies waterfront*

We awoke the next morning to a light breeze, which delivered a delicious fragrance to the anchorage. The smell of fresh croissants and rich French coffee wafted through the air and we were ashore in minutes to sample the wares. The main street of Deshaies reminded us of a very rural, very French little town. We bought coffee and fresh pastry at a boulangerie and sat at a table on the sidewalk and watched the world go by.

Most of the basic services a visitor might need are available: Internet, bakery (boulangerie), butcher (boucherie), diesel and gasoline by jerry jug, a reasonably stocked grocery store (SPAR supermarche), library (bibliothèque), auto rental (louer a voiture), phones, pharmacies and friendly people...even an ATM! Nearly

everyone walking around town had a baguette of bread in their basket and a bottle of wine under their arm... including us. When in Rome...

Once again, we climbed the hill to the Customs office, but it was closed for the weekend we were told. In frustration, we stopped in at the Police Department and explained our problem (very slowly in high school French to a patient gendarme). He replied in French, "Oh, well, don't worry. You can only do, what you can do. If you can't clear in, you can't clear in." The word "nonchalant" came to mind. We finally ended up checking in at Basse Terre later in the week without any hassle at all.

About a 1-1/2 km walk from the anchorage was a botanical garden. The next day was a Sunday afternoon and since most things in town were closed, we decided to hike up the very steep hill to check out the gardens. We didn't expect much in a small town, so we were pleasantly surprised to find a delightful setting with over a mile of bricked pathways and several new species of flowers, trees and plants we hadn't seen or been able to identify previously. In addition to flora, the gardens had pink flamingos and, in a separate aviary, several varieties of parrots and parakeets which perched on your hand and ate seeds from a cup provided by the park.



*A small path from town led across a suspension bridge and into the forest*

Though our time in Guadeloupe was limited (getting out of the proverbial hurricane zone was on our minds), we wanted to do more than smell the coffee and sniff the roses. We rented a car for two days and drove inland to the Guadeloupe National Park to find the Chutes du Carbet...three sets of impressive waterfalls approachable



via well-kept trails. We saw #2 and #3 on two separate hikes, but the access to #1 was closed. A sturdy suspension bridge gave access to one of the trails and walking across it reminded me of the “fun house” in the old amusement parks.

On Day 2 of the car rental, we drove to Pointe a Pitre across the Route de Traversee, which cuts directly through the middle of the island of Basse Terre and through the National Park. It’s steep and curvy with lots of switchbacks, great views and crazy bus drivers.

Pointe a Pitre is Guadeloupe’s largest city and a wonder to explore. We found it hard to get away from the markets. There was just too much to see, smell, taste and buy. Fishermen, lined up along the wharf, sell their fish right from their boats. Crayfish, lobster, tuna, ray, shark, octopus, crab, squid, red snapper...you name it, it was there. We decided a “smell” chip for the digital camera would be a neat idea, so that you could smell as well as see the scenery.

Fruit vendors were decked out in their traditional Guadeloupian madras dress complete with turbans. The vivid colors, smells and sounds of the marketplace were absolutely splendid. Each vendor competed for our attention, but they were friendly and smiling. We bought cabbage, green bananas, breadfruit, flamboyant melon and something new, pomme d’amour (love apples...oooh la la!).



*Caribbean fruits and colorful vendor*

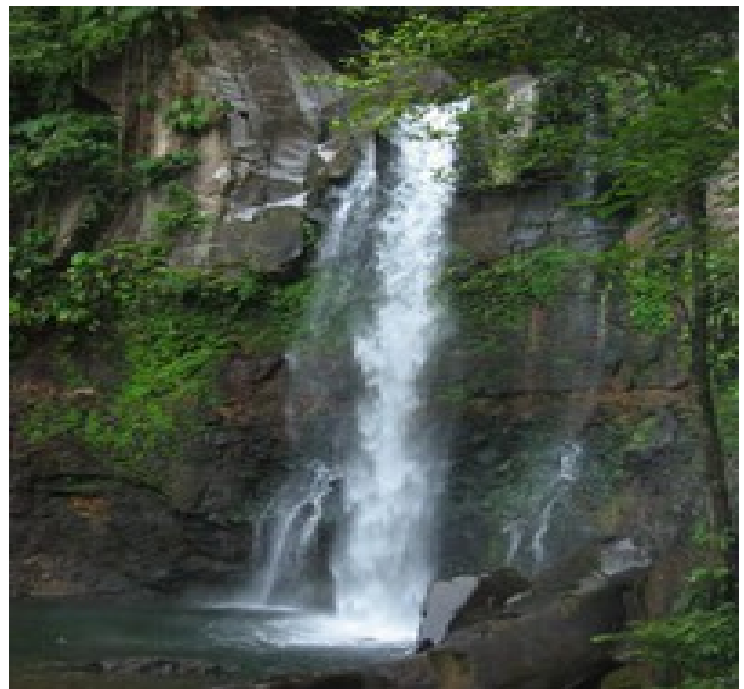
A spice market further down the street lured us in. We saw aisles and aisles of every spice imaginable including a local favorite, Colombo (a curry mix), which we purchased along with a locally made mortar and pestle to grind up the peppercorns we also bought. Across the

street, fabric stores displaying all color combinations of the vivid Guadeloupian madras were abundant. Any number of small sidewalk cafes displayed billboards with specials for lunch and tiny boutiques offering fine French wines and cheeses beckoned us in.

Parking places had been scarce when we arrived, but we were lucky enough to find one right in front of the market. As we returned to the car we noted ours was the only car left and a local gendarme was writing us a ticket for parking in a “No Parking” zone. We expressed our apologies, smiled, looked liked tourists and though he grimaced, he let us go. Timing is everything!

Sugarcane was being harvested and trailer truck upon trailer truckload could be seen on the highway and along the roadsides. The production of “Rhum Agricole” is a major industry in Guadeloupe and the rum produced is highly prized in France. We stopped at a small rum factory for a tour and a sample or two. The smell of the freshly cut cane is somewhat sweet, mixed with earth smells. There were huge vats of molasses and the smell was overpowering at times, when mixed with the heat and humidity of the day. We found the clear white rum to be closer to white lightning in our estimation, and begged off any purchases.

We were back to the boat by dark, wishing we could stay longer and sample more of the country “Frenchness” of this hospitable island. The best we could do was buy more croissants and wine to savor and reminisce in the days to follow.



*The Chutes du Carbet waterfalls*

## Marvin the Magnificent

We had chartered several times in the Caribbean before buying our own boat. As we approached St. Lucia this time aboard “Nine of Cups”, memories of those days a decade earlier came to mind, but none more clearly than our escapades with a scam artist we dubbed Marvin the Magnificent.

Back then, everything seemed a challenge. We had chartered a boat and started out in Rodney Bay and just getting to Soufriere seemed like quite an adventure. We were inundated with boat boys yelling out commands and trying to help us anchor. In frustration, we finally gave each of them some coins, so they would just leave us alone, and we proceeded to drop the hook.



*Approaching the Pitons in St. Lucia*

We headed to the pier at Soufriere and again were overwhelmed with dock boys shouting at us where to tie up the dinghy. Midst all the younger boys, a ragged middle-aged man stepped out of the crowd and with authority motioned us to tie up near him and grabbed for our painter. This was our first introduction to Marvin.

Marvin was a little worse for the wear. He wore an old ragged tee shirt and bright orange cut-off jeans, fly broken, a piece of twine holding them in place, but low on his hipless torso. He wore long dreadlocks and had enough scars on his face and arms to make us wonder whether we should consider another place to tie up. But his voice was pleasant as he informed us that he would provide the necessary security for our dinghy for only a couple of dollars for the day.

“Do we really need security”, we asked?

“Only if you want your dinghy here when you come back”, he countered.

Oh, well, we’d help the local economy by employing Marvin. We paid him in advance (bless the fools!) for his services and left to explore the town.

We meandered through the streets of Soufriere looking for a place to buy our requisite postcards and souvenirs. As we rounded a corner we caught a glimpse of Marvin, our security guard, sauntering down the street. Hmm. We caught up to him and asked who was guarding the dinghy.

“No problem. I have partners who watch the dinghy. Don’t worry.”

He was most reassuring, but we walked back to dinghy to check on it. Sure enough, three 12-year old boys were sitting on the pier by the dinghy and seemingly all our security issues were under control.

Our luggage had been lost en route to St. Lucia and we had allotted time each day for the last three days to make the necessary calls to locate it and extract promises from the airlines that it would be delivered immediately. We found a phone booth and David called while I strolled past a few boutiques and window-shopped. He was “on hold” and I sat on the nearby wharf waiting. Along came Marvin again and sat down next to me. We chatted.

He was 42 and on the dole, he told me, living with his godmother. Times were tough and dinghy security was about the only job he could find that suited his schedule. (I didn’t ask what type of a schedule he maintained nor why). He did the up-front soliciting for the security jobs, he explained, and his “partners” actually performed the guard duties.

I mentioned I was looking for a bakery. Well, in exchange for a loaf of bread, he said he’d gladly show me an excellent bakery. David, still “on hold”, watched

me walk away with Marvin close by my side. It wasn't until several minutes later that it struck him that his wife had taken off with a rather unsavory stranger heading into a town we didn't know for some unknown purpose. With final assurances that the luggage would indeed be delivered immediately, he hung up and trotted off in the direction he had watched us go. No need to worry, Marvin and I were munching on fresh baguettes and on our way back when he met us.

We had a bit more shopping to do and then it was time to head back to the boat. Marvin had begged off after the bread indicating he had to get back to his guard duties. Upon our return to the dinghy, however, Marvin was nowhere in sight. The three-man guard contingent had increased to six, all of whom were sitting in or diving off the dinghy as we approached. They looked at us expectantly.



*Marvin the Magnificent*

“You need to pay us now”, they demanded.

“We’ve already paid Marvin. You need to get your money from him”, we responded, knowing that two dollars split seven ways wouldn’t go far. We also had the sinking feeling that maybe Marvin might not have planned to split the money with his “partners”.

“Marvin says you pay us. We need two dollars” they insisted.

“Nope.” We were sticking to our guns.

“How ‘bout you throw some coins in the water and we’ll dive for them?” they countered.

This did not seem like a good idea, but they were already diving in and we had bunches of EC coins. They dove for coins and we made our departure. As we neared the boat and looked back on the shore, we could barely make out a skinny man in bright orange cut-offs helping another dinghy tie up to the dock.

## ‘Guanas in the ‘Zumas

Tiny Allan’s Cay in the Bahamian Exuma Islands is home to just one kind of animal: iguanas. On approach in a dinghy, these curious creatures come out of the underbrush to greet perspective guests. Touching foot on shore requires an act of courage for visitors since these 3-4 foot long lizards know no fear of humans and apparently thrive on company. Luckily, they don’t like water and disperse with loud hand clapping and/or shouting which makes an exit with all limbs attached an attainable feat.



*Allan's Cay welcoming committee*

## Bats and Fêtes in Tobago

Not many of our fellow cruisers were heading to Tobago, but it sounded exotic and was off the proverbial beaten path, so we thought we'd give it a try. Sailing southeast from Grenada, Tobago is only about 85 miles... an overnight beat against the wind and current. We left St. George's in early evening and arrived in Scarborough midday the next day. Not a bad passage, but we'd been very spoiled by short daytrips and fine beam reaches between islands for the past few months.



*Tobago vista*

Scarborough is not the preferred anchorage as evidenced by only two other boats in the small designated anchorage area, but it was fine for a check-in point with Tobago Immigration and Customs and offered a central transportation hub from which to tour the rest of the island and plan our visit. Large banners and posters throughout the downtown area informed us that we were in time for the annual Tobago Heritage Festival taking place in July at various locations on the island. Though everyone is welcome, we were told the festival is for Tobagonians rather than tourists. It is a celebration of their rich history and cultural traditions showcased in storytelling, dance, music and food. Events included goat races, an Ole Time Wedding, Carnival, concerts, feasts, and a local pirogue (dugout canoe) race.

Our first trek was to the furthest point of the island serviced by bus, Charlotteville. Getting most anywhere on a bus from Scarborough is quite easy. Tobago is primarily rural. Chickens, goats, sheep and cows wander along the streets unfettered. Life is slow and uncomplicated and the scenic 1½-hour ride to Charlotteville, along the southern coast through Roxborough and Speyside reflected the island's pace. On arrival in the tiny town, we found not much more than a couple of streets with a few restaurants and snack bars, but lo and behold, there was an internet café!



*Charlotteville bus stop*

A marked hiking path led to Pirate's Bay. The easy 20-minute hike, afforded us a spectacular view of the town from our elevated vantage point. A steep stone stairway led to a small pristine beach below. We could see several boats anchored in the deep water and later met cruisers in town enjoying rotis and beer at the local hangout.



*Ship's cat, Jelly, exhausted by all the Carnival festivities, went to sleep with her costume on*

The Ole Time Wedding took place the following day in Moriah. The wedding ceremony is a combination spoof on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century upper class overlaid with African customs and music. Everyone gathers to witness the mock ceremony then follows the groom, in stovepipe hat and tailcoat, as he escorts his bride through the village streets, dancing and singing to the beat of the tambrin drummers and fiddlers.



*Old time wedding character*

On the north side of the island, Plymouth was the host town for Tobago Fest's Ole Time Carnival, so we opted to motor-sail around and anchor there to be close to the festivities. The anchorage in Plymouth is pleasant and interesting. So many tarpons leapt from the water one evening, the water roiled around us. Pelicans, laughing gulls and brown noddies congregated on every vacant vessel and held major, very raucous, conferences.

While waiting for the Carnival to begin, we took a walking tour of the town. Ft. James, built in 1650, its canons still watching over the harbor, is small but picturesque. Several vendors offered us bamboo carvings and local crafts as we walked the grounds. A couple of blocks away is Plymouth's "Mystery Tombstone", the 18<sup>th</sup> century grave of a young woman and her child with a riddle for her tombstone's inscription.



*Blue devil in the Carnival parade "picked"  
David's pockets for coins*

The Ole Time Carnival is not just an event. Like most aspects of the festival, it is a celebration of tradition and cultural heritage. Though very small compared to Trinidad, Tobago's celebration maintains most of the conventional elements of Carnival. Plymouth, usually small and quiet, burgeoned as everyone from the island converged for the celebration. The music was loud and we were serenaded throughout the entire night by a cacophony of sounds, beats and discordant tunes. J'Ouvert began around 5am...we think. The fete from the night before never ended, so it was hard to tell when the morning party began. The street parades the following day were elaborate and entertaining. I especially enjoyed the look on David's face as red and blue street devils playfully picked his pockets for coins. The evening held the finals of the tambrin drum competition, as well as the island's calypso competition. Excellent entertainment held under the stars.



*Tobago pan band*

Plymouth was a ghost town on Sunday morning, its inhabitants recuperating from the previous night's Carnival festivities. In a local brochure, we had read about the Arnos Vale Waterwheel Park, a nature preserve and restaurant on the site of an old sugar plantation and decided to take the 2½ mile walk to find it. We enjoy long walks, so we took our time and explored a small eco-farm along the way, feasting on ripe mangoes provided by the owner. The rustle of the breeze through the bamboo stands caught our attention as the trees clacked together. We caught sight of a colorful mot-mot and also a cocrico, the national turkey-like bird of Tobago. The roads here are narrow and curvy and pedestrians do not seem to have any right of way at all, but again it was Sunday after Carnival and the traffic was light.

From the road, a replica of a waterwheel and a sign for the park were barely visible. There didn't seem to be a restaurant or nature preserve evident at all. There were no cars in the car park and no one was around. We thought the place might be closed. We walked along a thickly-forested footpath and on past an empty guard shack and finally arrived at an elegant, wooden entry way. We tried the door and surprisingly, it was unlocked. We peered inside and were amazed to see tiny white lights highlighting beautiful wooden floors and a gracious foyer. Still, there was no sign of life.

We moved on past a little museum room and a boutique; both doors locked, rooms darkened. Gazing across a long, covered wooden walkway, we saw tables in the distance set with linen. While migrating towards

the tables, I noted lots of birds in the eaves. Well, wait a minute, they weren't birds! They were bats...hundreds of them. Disturbed by our presence, they flew and swooped low, barely missing my head. Midst my shrieks of horror and David's shouts to calm down, a young man materialized out of nowhere and with no facial expression at all stated calmly, "Fruit bats. Staying for lunch?" Why not? The "trial by fire" was walking the gauntlet through the bats to our dining table!



*Walking the gauntlet of flying bats to our dining table*

Unscathed and all alone in an elegant rain forest setting, we enjoyed a superb gourmet lunch topped off with homemade coconut ice cream. The original waterwheel remains intact and is incorporated as the centerpiece of this lovely restaurant. Paths, lined with giant elephant ears, ginger lilies and heliconia, meandered through the reserve and highlighted the view from the wooden-terraced dining area. Midst all of the beauty and splendor, I must admit that I did keep a watchful eye on the bats hanging from the eaves.

Back to the boat and time to move on to Trinidad, but pleased that we stopped here and briefly sampled some of what Tobago has to offer. The logo of the Tobago House of Assembly has the inscription "*Pulchrior Evenit*", Latin for "She Becomes More Beautiful". It certainly holds true for this island and her people.

## Trinidad's Asa Wright Nature Centre



*Several marked hiking trails meandered through the center of the reserve*

Having left Charleston, SC in January, Trinidad was the end of our first major passage. We determined it would be a place to get some work done and settle for a couple of months before heading to the western Caribbean. Beyond the hoopla of Carnival, we were pleasantly surprised to learn there was so much to see and do in Trinidad as a respite from the boat work.

We visited the Caroni Swamp and took a self-directed walking tour of downtown Port-of-Spain. We wandered through the markets and the botanical gardens and the zoo, thoroughly enjoying each. However, of all the places we visited in Trinidad, the one that exceeded all expectation was the Asa Wright Nature Centre.

We'd heard some good reports from other cruisers. Jesse James' tour services offered an overnight stay at the Centre and, along with four other couples, we left early one morning for a 1½ hour van ride to the Center. Nestled in the hills of the Arima Valley, we reached the 193-acre preserve mid-morning. Once a cocoa, coffee and citrus plantation owned by Dr. Henry and Mrs. Asa Wright, the main house provides reception, the dining room, parlor and a verandah for the guests. Separate bungalows offer rustic, but comfortable accommodations.

Asa Wright sold the house and estate in 1967 to a group familiar with the property who wished to protect the area and promote eco-tourism. It is now considered one of the top five eco-tour centers in the world. The wonderful old house was originally built in 1908 and its huge verandah was the most popular meeting spot for relaxation, chatting, drinks and observing the wildlife. Tea and cocktails were served there in the late afternoon. Very civilized!



*Jacobin hummingbird – How much closer can you get?*

Only about 7 miles from the Venezuelan coast and geologically part of South America, Trinidad shares many of the same bird species found in South America, several of which are resident at the center. Many marked hiking trails were outlined on maps and regularly scheduled interpretive tours by the knowledgeable center rangers were available. Up the road a short distance, a wonderful little lake was

available for a refreshing swim. The highlight of the center for us was watching the abundance of birds and wildlife which came to feed at dawn and dusk just below the verandah.

Throughout the islands, we have been impressed by the variety of the plants and flowers we've seen. Some flowers, like hibiscus, are most everywhere, but here many species and varieties were new to us. Hanging vine-like plants called Old Man's Beard were very distinctive and Monkey Ladder, which grows profusely under the forest canopy, are easily mistaken for snakes and got our attention several times. The tiny red seeds of the riccou are used for coloring food and rouging the face. Laura from the sailboat *Windswept II* and I couldn't resist a go at the natural cosmetics.



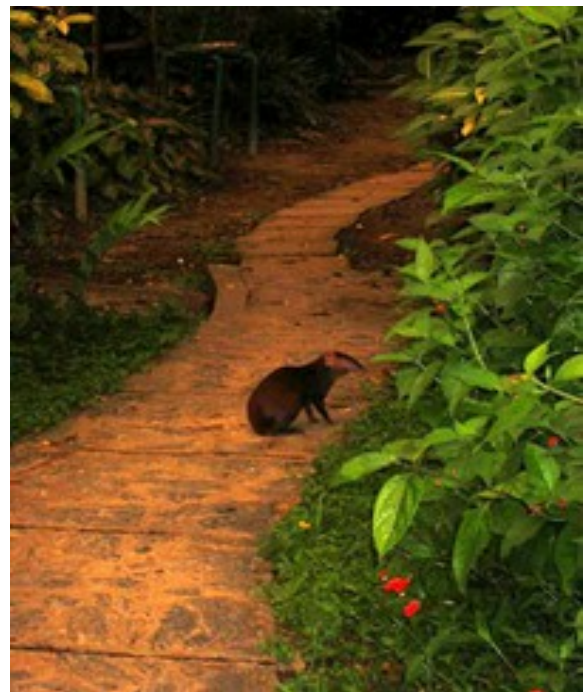
*Laura and Marcie try out the natural cosmetics*

Flowering plants were everywhere attracting hosts of humming birds and vibrantly colored butterflies. We also spotted several of the local lizards called matte which were about 3 feet long. We gave them right of way! Having an experienced guide greatly enhanced our knowledge and appreciation of what we encountered.

We observed our first agouti, an indigenous rodent related to the guinea pig. They were abundant at the center, but somewhat shy (except at feeding time). They're herbivores, brown and furry with round pink ears and stand about a 1 ½ feet tall. They sat up on their hind legs in clear view just below the verandah and nibbled the lettuce and veggies set out for them.

After a buffet dinner in the dining room, we opted to take a night walking tour to view the center's nocturnal residents. Slathered with insect repellent and flashlights in hand, we made our way along a paved drive listening, looking and waiting. We heard and saw bats and huge moths soar by. Tiny tree frogs chirped and croaked. Night birds screeched, upset by our unwelcome presence during prime hunting time. Bright red land crabs scuttled along the sides of the road and bugs abounded.

We were awake and on the verandah sipping tea and coffee by 6am, waiting for the morning birds to take advantage of the feast which had been set out for them. What an absolute delight! We had brought a fairly good "bird book" with us to identify the birds we saw and to document them. In all, we were able to add fourteen birds to our sighting list. Toucans, mot-mots, tanagers, honeycreepers oropendolas, hummingbirds... it was nearly overwhelming. I must say that we had never been birdwatchers in the past. It's not that we don't enjoy birds, we just never took the time to sit patiently and observe them. Either we're getting old or we're finally beginning to appreciate the finer things in life... maybe both?



*An agouti searches for breakfast*



## Trinidad's Chacachacare

It's a mouthful and I heard it called "Catch-a-canary" more than once. But it's easy to get to and well worth the quick 5-mile trip. Chacachacare is a haven of calm, quiet and natural beauty contrasted to the crowded waters and hectic atmosphere of Trinidad's main cruisers' port of Chaguaramas.



*Marcie & David with Boca lighthouse in background*

Three months in a marina in Chaguaramas and it was time to head out. We picked Columbus Day for departure, not trying to be presumptuous, just looking for good vibes. We had all but forgotten how good it felt to have the wind in our faces and we were anxious to swim in cool, clear water and sip morning coffee while watching a sunrise from a fine anchorage.

A leper's colony until about 35-40 years ago, the island of Chacachacare was abandoned when the "cure" for leprosy was found. The houses still remain...some even had plates on the tables and linen on the beds when they were abandoned, we're told. (Incidentally, since we knew so little about leprosy, we did a little research. It seems that a cure was never actually found,

but rather the symptoms can now be treated rendering the patient non-contagious.) Though the jungle is reclaiming its own, the remains of the houses can be visited and provide a good day or two of exploring along with a visit to the lighthouse on top of the hill.

We wandered through many of the abandoned buildings. All were decrepit and dilapidated ... not just from the years of neglect and the weather, but from vandals who had broken out windows, pulled up floorboards for campfires, left piles of trash everywhere and topped it off with graffiti. Nature, as if ashamed by the disorder, was working assiduously to reclaim territory as quickly as it could. Walking in some areas was challenging due to the undergrowth and David, machete in hand (purchased in the DR and never used till now), cleared a path to allow for more exploration.



*Nature is reclaiming the area, but remnants of the past linger like the Chaca Chapel pictured above*

The Nun's Residence was a huge dormitory-style building. Though crumbling, it was interesting to walk through and imagine this convent still inhabited; women dedicated to the care of the lepers. The building formed a traditional cross with a chapel at one end. We were able to appreciate the arched windows, one of which still had two small panes of green stained glass left in tact in the upper corner. In addition to the Nun's residence, there was a deserted village and a doctor's residence. All had succumbed to time, weather and vandals. The view of the bay from these vantage points, however, was incredibly beautiful.



*Vandals haven't been kind to the old buildings*

The road to Boca Lighthouse is paved and all uphill. Even in the early morning, the 3½ mile round trip trek was a hot, sweaty venture, but delightful nonetheless. The island is teeming with flora and fauna. Colorful butterflies including Blue Emperors fluttered by us not to be outdone by the huge iridescent dragonflies. Hordes of leaf cutter ants filed up and down and across



*“Nine of Cups” look small when viewed from the vantage point of Boca Light high above the bay*

the pavement, seriously intent on getting leaf parts from here to there. Birds chirped and we could hear the sound of vulture wings not far above ...waiting for the weak one among us to become separated from the herd on the slow trek up to the lighthouse. The lighthouse keeper still maintains his vigil in this active lighthouse, but he was “sleeping in” on our visit and only his dog greeted us on arrival. A tire swing hung from a sturdy branch and beckoned the little kid in each of us to take a turn at soaring through the air. We could barely see the anchorage from this vantage point and the boats looked small and toy-like.

The world is so very different here. We swam each morning, afternoon and evening. We gloried in the sunsets and sunrises. The water was calm each morning with nary a ripple and we could see Nine of Cups’ full reflection on its surface. We ventured to Chacachacare on our way to Venezuela to try out newly installed gear and get our sea legs again. We thought we’d stay a day...five days later, we were still hanging on the hook enjoying the good life!



*David's seldom used machete came into good use when walking along the trails*

## In the Outs...Enjoying the Eastern Out Islands of Venezuela

In addition to an extensive coastline, Venezuela has 72 islands and hundreds of islets in the Caribbean... many only accessible by boat. We spent over a month and a half visiting the eastern out islands before ever heading to the mainland. Without exception, we found them to be a delight. The few inhabitants were friendly, welcoming and courteous. The politics of the mainland were never evident in these outlying areas and even the cosmopolitan island of Margarita showed little evidence of the political unrest apparent elsewhere in the country. Though each island and island group shared many traits, each had a personality all its own which we endeavored to discover and explore.

Our informal entrance to Venezuela was via Los Testigos (the Witnesses), a small island group about 95-nautical miles from Trinidad. This fishing village of 160 people boasts a school, a church and a Coast Guard station. The climate is dry, the breeze is constant and the cacti thrive. Great frigate birds circle the skies and dive for fish. The snorkeling is excellent right off the boat. Anchored in Balandra Bay off Testigo Grande, the anchorage was cool and calm with a gentle rock.



*Cups and cacti – View of Nine of Cups taken from a sand dune in Los Testigos*

A quick dinghy ride gave us access to a small beach and blinding white sand dunes towered above us. Because the heat is so intense in the afternoon, we climbed in the early morning. The long, hot, steep climb up was made more challenging by the soft, deep sand...good exercise for the legs and calf muscles! For every two steps forward, we slid one step back. The view from the top was stupendous and coupled with the quick, invigorating glissade back down, was ample reward for the previously expended sweat.

Sunsets are spectacular here. Every night is a show to rival the night before and even the elusive green flash made an appearance. After three months in Trinidad, it was a pleasure to dive off the boat for a swim or to sit quietly in the cockpit and just enjoy the solitude. The sky was bright and full of stars each night. Orion shone brightly, prominent among all the rest. The full moon, reflecting off the white dunes, was brilliant and provided a “moon path” from the shore to our bow.



*The high rise skyline of Porlamar, Isla de Margarita*

Leaving Los Testigos, we sailed a quick 50 miles to Isla de Margarita, the largest and most populated of the off shore islands. Welcome to Venezuela...welcome back to civilization. Margarita is a popular recreation destination for Venezuelans, as well as cruisers. It is not only beautiful, but also very accessible via plane and ferry and more importantly, a duty-free port. The main anchorage at Porlamar typifies its cosmopolitan nature with high-rise buildings, luxury hotels and classy gambling casinos visible from miles offshore and therein lies its uniqueness.

Margarita is busy and hectic: customs clearance, provisioning to do, supplies to buy, friends to meet at

Jak's; but it provided an excellent opportunity to provision less expensively than we had ever experienced before and we took advantage. We managed to fit in an island tour, but we craved the remoteness we had found previously and after two weeks of city-living, headed for Blanquilla about 50 miles northwest.



*The palm trees noted on Doyle's chartlet*

The chartlet of Blanquilla in Doyle's *Cruising Guide to Venezuela* shows an anchorage off Playa Yaque with two palm trees. I'll be darned ...we spotted those two palm trees as easily as could be, but had a hard time concentrating on the task of anchoring because the scenery was so perfect. Picture in your mind a beautiful, deserted (almost) Caribbean island with palm trees swaying, cool breezes blowing, salt-white sandy beaches, crystal aquamarine water that allows you to view your anchor settling in 20 feet...that's Blanquilla. The 6 x 5 mile island is flat, low-lying and seemingly desolate...populated only by a Coast Guard station, a transient fish camp, shy wild donkeys, lizards and cacti.

We took several hikes across the island: one to the small outpost at Carenton Bay and another across the salt flats to view the natural arch bridge in Americano Bay. The paths are well worn and lined with sand burrs and cacti, which David swears are magnetized and jump out to grab you without warning. Only the braying of elusive donkeys breaks the silence and though "road apples" provide evidence of their numbers, we caught only a fleeting glimpse of two in the distance keeping a wary eye on us, apparently resenting the intrusion. We stayed for a week without a plan. Blanquilla is an enjoyable place to just "be".

We decided on a circumnavigation of Margarita and anchored off the south coast at Isla Cubagua for a few days. Noted for its history of pearl diving and a tremendous earthquake and subsequent tidal wave in the 1541, we went ashore at the fishing camps on the northwest coast. Our welcome could not have been more spontaneous or delightful. Young children, some barely toddlers, rushed into the water to greet us. With a strong surge driving us into the shore, we were hard put to land the dinghy safely without knocking one of them down.



*Bearer of the prized murex shell*

An aged *abuela* appeared, assuring us we were welcome and could leave the dinghy without concern while we hiked to the ruins at Nueva Cadiz. In return, she asked for milk and cereal for the children, which seemed a fair trade. After our hike, we returned to the boat for the promised supplies that were anxiously awaited on shore by our growing fan club. In addition to the requested items, we brought crayons, paper and large bags of popped corn to share. We were rewarded with smiles, hugs and a beautiful murex shell, timidly presented to us as a gift by the youngest girl. The final addition to this overwhelming hospitality came when, Iris, mother to four of the children, offered us a red snapper caught by her fisherman husband that morning. When asked if we could pay, she smiled and said, "You already have!"

Back to Margarita for some last minute provisioning (and well, yes, to fill every available nook and cranny with rum and beer!). It was time to get serious and head to Puerto La Cruz for a needed bottom paint job. The necessity of civilization calls, but the allure of the remote islands we visited remains incredibly strong; it's why we continue to cruise.

## Laguna Grande...A Touch of the Surreal

After over a month of cruising and exploring the out islands of Venezuela, we began a short, but circuitous trek, from Isla Margarita to the mainland port of Puerto La Cruz. Several cruiser friends had shouted the praises of the Golfo de Cariaco along the way, so we decided to include a stop there in our itinerary.

We had been warned that some areas of the Golfo, especially the entrance, were more safely transited during daylight hours. Accordingly, we planned the trip so as to enter in early morning.

The Golfo de Cariaco is 35 miles long and never more than 8 miles wide. It is bordered on the north by the hills of Peninsula de Araya and to the south by mainland Venezuela. Both sides of the gulf offer spectacular scenery, wonderful anchorages and delightful gunkholing opportunities. Since our time was limited, we chose Laguna Grande as a starting point, thinking we'd day sail and drop the hook in a different spot each night.



*The water was so clear and calm, I could easily photograph dolphins underwater as they cruised by*

The very best part of sailing in the Golfo de Cariaco itself was seeing dolphins...lots of them. First we saw one, then two, then there were dozens of them. They played in our bow wake, glided under the boat, coasted along side and danced all around us. The water was so clear and calm, I was able to take photos of dolphins not only right beside the boat, but some actually

underwater! Smaller than the usual gray-blue dolphins we were used to seeing all along the Atlantic coast, they appeared to be the most joyous, sociable group we had ever come across. It was sheer joy just watching them. We stood in awe at the bow as we watched six and eight and ten of them jump in unison in front of us. Their timing was so perfect, it appeared as if this aquatic troupe had choreographed their intricate water ballet performance in an effort to wow us and that they did.



*Laguna Grande viewed from top of a nearby hill*

The panoramic entrance into Laguna Grande sets the stage for an almost surreal setting. The hills are bright red clay contrasting sharply with a shore outlined in bright green mangroves and dazzling azure water. A crisp blue sky with lazy white clouds overhead completed a perfect picture. The colors were so vivid and the water so calm and clear that the reflection in the water was just as brilliant as the real thing and doubled our sense of awe.

Our first morning there was spent in the cockpit, silently sipping coffee and gazing appreciatively at the lush ambiance in which we found ourselves. We saw only one other sailboat anchored further down the lagoon that first day, but it soon departed, leaving us alone for the next three days (we could easily have spent a month here). We saw a couple of local pangas pass by, fishing and hunting iguanas in the mangroves. We gave one boat some water and crackers. Otherwise, we savored the quiet, the tranquility and each other.

The rusty red hills rise rather dramatically from the water to about 600 feet. We dinked ashore and decided to climb to the top of one. The climb was somewhat arduous and fairly steep with lots of shale and cactus to

negotiate. We stopped frequently, ostensibly to take pictures, but, truth be told, I was really just catching my breath. The climb was well worth the effort; the views from the top were incredible. Laguna Grande is quite large and there are several little bays, inlets and islands, all hidden from the anchorage, but clearly visible from our vantage point on the top of the hill. A cairn, built atop the hill by previous explorers assured us we weren't the first, nor the last, to make this trek. From the top, we could barely make out "Nine of Cups" peacefully at anchor in our little mangrove-fringed bay. To the left and right sprawled the numerous other bays, nooks and crannies of Laguna Grande. The entrance to the lagoon, directly in front of us, appeared much wider than it did when we entered. The hazy coast of the mainland appeared a shadow in the distance.



*Nine of Cups at anchor at Laguna Grande*

After a quick, scramble back down, we took a dip to cool off. On shore and in the shallow water, we discovered scallops and clams to be harvested and



*Our shell collection increased substantially*

noticed oysters clinging stubbornly to the mangrove roots. David scavenged for an evening appetizer, while I collected shells. I was most enthralled with the number of sea urchin shells lying haphazardly along the shore. We'd seen many in our travels, but not in this abundance. Here there were tens of them tinted pink, lavender, green, white and yellow. Some were vibrantly patterned in dark greens and whites reminding me of a Navajo geometric basket design. As I collected several to take back to the boat, I couldn't help but wonder how these fragile shells had made it to shore unscathed, while I would have problems making it to the dinghy and back to the boat without smashing at least one.

We took the opportunity to gunkhole the entire lagoon with the dinghy one day. The scenery throughout the entire area was candy to the eyes and unlike anything else we'd seen in Venezuela. Tiny islets and deserted sand beaches were waiting to be explored. Huge flocks of pelicans, perched precariously atop cacti, would watch us approach, then suddenly take flight as we passed some invisible threat boundary. Sometimes we went ashore or waded in the shallows, but in other areas the cacti were so thick, landing and hiking didn't seem prudent options.

After four days, the rest of the gulf gone unexplored, we left Laguna Grande just after dawn. It was calm and cool, no wind. The water was like glass as we glided out of the lagoon into the gulf, then cruised along in the morning haze. The dolphins were there to greet us again and followed along for miles as we made our way out of the gulf and began the short passage back to reality.



*David scavenges for our evening appetizer*

## Los Roques – Venezuela's Prized Archipelago

Archipiélago Los Roques is comprised of about 40 named islands and another 250 unnamed islets, sandbars and cays. In 1972, it was established as a Venezuelan National Park. We'd heard of Los Roques long before we arrived there. It seems every cruiser coming east had stopped there and raved about this glorious group of islands. We missed their New Year's Eve Party that is said to rival any in the Caribbean. Many cruisers had visited several times and had nothing but positive to report. It was a "must stop" place on the way to or from Bonaire.



*A national park sign welcoming us to Los Roques*

We set the sails as we left our anchorage in La Tortuga, pointed the boat in the right direction, shut off the engine and sailed the 85nm for 16 hours straight without an adjustment. What a delight! The entrance at Boca de Sebastapol, marked by a lighthouse, is narrow and certainly required our attention. We found that reading the water, however, was fairly straightforward with such vivid and distinct color variations between the

deep water and the reefs and shallows, it was hard not to find our way.

The huge coral reefs and mangrove islands provide ample opportunity to explore and tuck in. We were tired and dropped the hook just west of Buchiyaco. It was so peaceful and calm there, we never left the boat the first day and stayed a second just to explore the little reef that encompasses the island. The windward shore had a wonderful collection of jetsam to investigate as well as a white cross marker for "Jorge". We aptly named an artistic upright grouping of coral and shells the "Moai of Buchiyaco". We had a grand time in the middle of a nowhere reef.

All of the islands are close here and an hour or two places you in a whole new neighborhood. We moved on to El Gran Roque, the largest settlement in the Roques with a population of about 1200. It is very distinctive on approach with its large 380' hills contrasting its low-lying neighbors and the sea. The Guardacosta is located here as well as the Inparques Nacional (National Park) office. Since we were *in transit* to Bonaire, we opted to bypass the check-in process, fully aware that we might have to alter this plan if requested. We lucked out – no problems.



*View of Gran Roque from the lighthouse 380' above*

Our anchorage was just off the waterfront in about 10' of clear water. We could see the sandy bottom and watch as the anchor caught. Colorful large fishing boats with names like "Carmen del Valle" were anchored near us and served as the local gas stations, dispensing fuel via hand pumps from 55-gallon drums.

There are three lighthouses on the island that we could see as we drew near. We trekked up a well-worn path to the oldest of the three, simply named *faro holandés* (Dutch lighthouse). Though the lighthouse itself wasn't particularly remarkable, the view from the hilltop was stupendous allowing a first hand 360° glimpse of the island and its environs.

Gran Roque is a colorful little town. We wandered through a warren of sand streets lined with brightly colored houses and shops. There are an unbelievable number of posadas (little bed/breakfast inns) aptly named Casa Cabellita (Seahorse House) and Estrella del Mar (Star of the Sea); the establishment names carved on impressive hanging signs. There are no vehicles other than golf carts. Diesel-driven generators produce electricity. We read that this was the Caribbean of 30 years ago, but the presence of an airstrip and the ATM machine belied this notion.



*Colorful houses and shops line the sandy streets of El Gran Roque*

We left Gran Roque and headed to Sarqui, an uninhabited little island just a few miles away. Sarqui has a long, white sand beach that just beckons you to walk it. As usual, nature thrives on these isolated, arid islands though we wonder how. There have reportedly been 92 species of birds sighted here in the Roques, lizards abound and the only native mammal is a fish-eating bat. All the Turk's Head cacti we never found in Grand Turk were resident here. We found some interesting shells including a West India Star we hadn't seen before. We came upon a pair of black lizards that appeared to have a fascination with an odd piece of painted wood lying in the sand. They were involved in a mating ritual and our presence went unnoticed.

From Sarqui, we moved on to Dos Mosquises, which was considered to be a sacred island in times gone by. The first inhabitants of the Roques (roquenos) came to fish and hunt turtle as early as the 1300's. Now there is a turtle-breeding station there, part of a scientific foundation associated with the University of Caracas, which studies the ecosystem. We were welcomed ashore and given a tour of the facility. A small poster-filled kiosk provided interesting information about the archeological dig which had been conducted here that had rendered significant pre-Colombian relics and artifacts.

We had our first "boarding" by the Venezuelan Coast Guard while anchored at Dos Mosquises. They pulled up beside us in a motor launch and requested permission to board...all seven of them! They asked to see our boat documentation and *zarpe* and then conducted a safety inspection which consisted of them naming an item in Spanish, us guessing what it might be and David doing a scavenger hunt aboard to come up with the item... like fire extinguishers, medical kit, flares, etc. They recorded all the information on a very official form and found that the carbon paper was in backwards...so we waited as they recopied everything onto another form. They were extremely polite and friendly. We told them how long we had been in the Roques and how much longer we expected to stay. They answered, "No problema" and offered us any assistance they could provide.





*Fuzzy white baby boobies show no fear as we approached to take photographs*

Cayo Elbert is a quick 5 miles away. Many of the islands are fairly similar in their appearance... sand dunes and long, sweeping white beaches edged by green-blue water. However, on Cayo Elbert there was a booby nesting area where we found hundreds of fuzzy, white baby boobies in different stages of development from eggs, to hatchlings, to those in flight training. The nests were depressions in the purslane-covered ground, lined with twigs and grass. The Spanish named them “bobo” (stupid) because they showed no fear and were easy to catch. As advertised, the birds were not timid at all. We spent the better part of a day photographing them.

We’ve heard that “time waits for no man”, but we could have easily stayed here for weeks without blinking an eye. The natural beauty and pristine remoteness of these islands is a magic of its own and time doesn’t matter. But the next set of islands beckoned and we listened and moved on.

## Free Donkey Anyone?

On visiting Grand Turk in the Turks & Caicos islands, one notable observation is that all of the houses have fences. According to poet, Robert Frost, “Good fences make good neighbors!”, but come on now on such a tiny island, is this really necessary?

It appears that if you want to have a garden it is; otherwise, donkeys eat your yard. Donkeys? Lots of them! As very tangible reminders of the salt-raking industry of Grand Turk’s past, donkeys still roam freely on the island and can be seen most everywhere. With lots of local help, the island’s official donkey keeper rounds up the equine vagrants about every six months and corrals them on a “ranch” in the northern part of the island. If adopting a donkey appeals to you, providing a good home is the only criteria for ownership!



*Get yer free donkey here*

## The Magic of Las Aves

Las Aves are two separate little archipelagos comprised of about 16 islands and islets and several barrier reefs. The more easterly group is called Aves de Barlovento (windward) and the westerly group is called Aves de Sotovento (leeward). Their name comes from the large number and variety of birds that call these islands home. Because of its out of the way location, there are no theme parks here, no day tours or fishing excursions. In fact, there are no settlements here at all except a Guardacosta station in Sotovento and some transient fishing camps.



*Sugar white sand on Curricai beach*

After a couple of weeks in the Roques, we were ready to head into the “more remote” island category. Our first anchorage at Isla Oeste in Barlovento was extremely rolly and the wind

howled for the two days we were there. We moved to an anchorage in Sotovento off the little island of Curricai that was much more sheltered from the waves, and though the wind continued to howl at 35+knots, we felt more snug and secure.



*Scenic lone palm of Saki Saki and a convenient post to tie up the dink*

The beach on Curricai is long and sweeping. We could walk the entire perimeter of the island in less than an hour. A small fishing camp was situated here, but the fishermen were gone most of the time. When they were in, they offered fresh fish for sale or traded battery charges for lobsters. Excellent trade, we thought! Otherwise, a lone palm, some lizards and crabs and the fishermen’s pet pelican seemed to be the only full-time inhabitants. We noted that several Portugese Man of War had washed ashore on the windward side. Seeing their

vibrant purple gelatinous masses lumped on the shore made us think twice about swimming excursions in that particular area.

We were once again boarded and inspected by the Venezuelan Coast Guard and again impressed with their friendliness. They checked our week-old paperwork from a previous inspection in Los Roques and decided just copying the information was sufficient. They chatted briefly, offered assistance on Channel 16 should we need it and told us we were welcome to stay as long as we wished. What better welcome could anyone expect.

Curricai has several neighboring islands, all within dinghy range, and whenever the wind died down sufficiently, we set out to explore them. Saki Saki, about a mile away to the northwest, has a lighthouse and a drifting sand dune beach. One scenic palm stands alone midst the cry of gulls, pelicans and boobies. The lighthouse is functional, but not particularly attractive. The beach is white sugar marked with crab and bird prints. It is uninhabited by man, but his mark is there: a convenient stake in the ground for dinghy tie up and, of course, the endless jetsam on the windward shore.



*Fishing camp at Isla Ramon pictured through mountains of conch shells*

A bit to the south lie Isla Ramon and Isla Palmeras, so close the distance between them is swimmable. Conch shell mountains, 20 feet high dot, the shore. The stink of a rotting whale carcass that had washed ashore caught our attention long before we discovered its location. The fishing camp on Isla Ramon is very active and the boats come and go frequently. We watched them set their nets one day and marveled at the efficiency and alacrity with which they worked...an artistry unto itself.

Evenings are the best in the Aves. There is no ambient light save the moon and the stars. We watched in anticipation each evening as the sun was swallowed by the horizon, gratified time and again by a dazzle of reds, pinks, oranges and purples and that evasive flash of green. Our location provided another bonus in that we were able to see both the North Star and the Southern Cross. Without the moon, the night skies were so velvety black and the stars so vividly brilliant in contrast, we sat mesmerized for hours at the sheer beauty and vastness of it all. I'd read that there are more than 10 billion trillion visible stars and I'm certain they were all present and accounted for in the boundless Aves sky.

The constant 35-45 knot easterly trades continued to blow and limited our activities. We needed diversions. Our friends, Joanne and Ken on "Rusty Bucket", were anchored nearby and suggested a windward beach clean-up of Curricai, which was littered heavily with flotsam and jetsam that had washed ashore. We picked up innumerable bags of trash...mostly plastic bottles and shoes... finally completing about one mile of beachfront. After our daylong effort, we dug a pit and burned the fruits of our labors in a huge bonfire and celebrated a job well done.

Ken suggested a signpost would be an excellent way to commemorate the project. A piece of bamboo was found for the signpost and Ken used collected driftwood pieces to carve signs. We spent another afternoon assembling and erecting the sign, careful to take compass readings to insure the signs pointed in the right direction. (We knew how critical

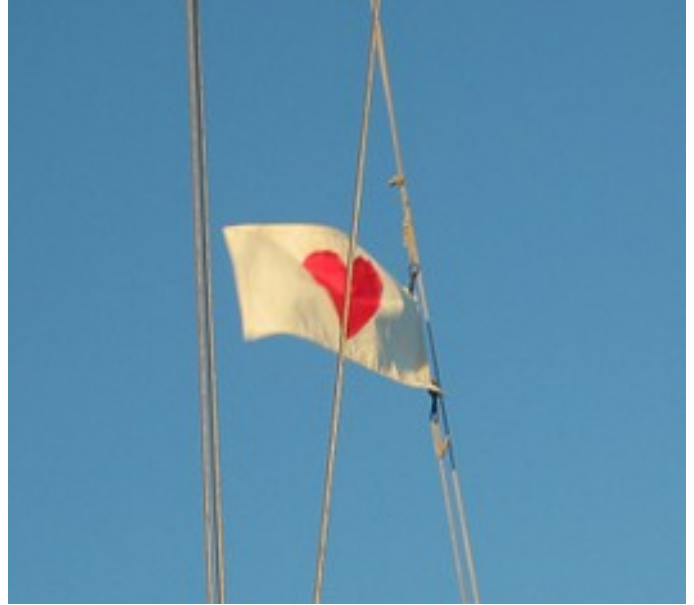
subsequent cruisers would be!) Not many tools were available, but a machete, a plastic scoop and hands did the job of digging the post hole. David, being the tallest, got the job of screwing the signs onto the post. Months later in Bonaire, other cruisers stopped by to inform us that the sign was still standing, but the beach was in need of another cleanup.



*Sand-covered David & Marcie pose next to windward beach cleanup sign*

Hanging on the hook certainly didn't prevent us from celebrating Valentine's Day and planning a gala event for the anchorage...all two boats. Dressed in appropriate red finery, we celebrated aboard the "Rusty Bucket" with champagne, Bloody Marys, card playing and epicurean delights heretofore unimagined in the Aves.

We exchanged handmade Valentines and flew heart burgees fashioned from old sails, scraps of red cloth and old jacklines for the hoists...even the cat sported a red ribbon around her neck.



*Valentine's Day burgee*

Four weeks in the middle of nowhere. The magic here is found in the simple nature of its beauty. Big skies, quiet solitude, green flashes and a celebration of the cruising life...far from the madding crowd.



*St. Valentines Day in Las Aves*

## The Drier Side of Bonaire

Noted for its world-class diving sites, the “drier” side of Bonaire is many times forgotten. The salt mountains of the south, the largest pink flamingo sanctuary in the Caribbean and the wild and barren Washington Slagbaai Park in the North all contribute to a side of Bonaire that some mistakenly overlook.

Though diving is what comes to mind when thinking about Bonaire, we were expecting non-diving guests and needed to plan activities that were not water-based...somewhat of a challenge for a sailboat moored next to an island...but hey, we're good hosts! After a day of wandering around downtown Kralendijk...clean, bright and alive with shops and restaurants...we checked out possibilities for island exploration at the tourist information office, rented a van and set off to explore.



*View from the turnout at Gotomeer*

The island of Bonaire is shaped like a boomerang. The northern part is rough, hilly, arid terrain and the location of Washington Slagbaai National Park, our first day's endeavor. Equipped with a picnic lunch and lots of water, we left mid-morning in our non-air-conditioned van and headed north along the leeward coast. The whole island is only 24 miles long by 7 miles at its widest and much of the road we traveled was one-way. Our chances of getting lost were drastically diminished.

Our first stop was Gotomeer, a large salt pond and pink flamingo sanctuary. There's a small turnout for vehicles above the lake that affords an impressive panoramic view. There are twice as many pink flamingos in Bonaire as there are people and you can easily distinguish the hundreds of slender pink bodies contrasting with the blue lake water below. In addition to the view, the turnout area was the home of countless iguanas, birds and whiptail lizards, which were obviously used to handouts. The entire pack hustled towards us en masse as soon as stale crackers were offered.

Traveling through Rincon, the oldest town in Bonaire, a smaller well-signed road leads to the entrance of Washington Slagbaai Park, a 13,500-acre game preserve. The uniformed rangers were pleasant and knowledgeable, but cautioned us seriously about exiting the park no later than 5PM.

“What happens if we're late?” I asked.

“We lock you in.” was the simple reply...no smile.

The park roads are not paved and provided a challenge for the driver and test of endurance for the passengers. The 34 km ride took more than 5 hours including several stops to view the scenery and rest our bones from the bumpy ride. There are blowholes, a lighthouse, outstanding scenery, a climb up to Brandaris (the highest point in Bonaire at 241 meters) and a multitude of beaches to explore. We could have spent the entire day at Playa Kokolishi with its large rock formations and natural coral “benches”, but the clock was ticking and we kept moving.



*Sharing lunch with a whiptail lizard*

We opted to have lunch at the park entrance under a large dividivi tree, which provided both shade and seating. The whiptail lizards with their iridescent turquoise tails, backs and feet, provided endless entertainment. There were hundreds of them and they weren't shy in the least, insisting upon their share of the lunch. These toothless beggars clambered at our feet for any snacks available and with very little inducement, would climb up our arms or legs for a proffered treat.



*Iguanas, though herbivores, weren't my cup of tea*

Without a doubt, the best part of the park visit was the host of animals we saw. Lizards, iguanas, goats, parrots, trupials and a myriad of other vibrant birds delighted us throughout the visit. The iguanas are colorful, numerous and large...about 4-5' long from their snouts to the tips of their long, striped tails. They're herbivores and enjoyed our banana peels as a snack. Knowing they were herbivores, however, did not preclude me from shrieking and beating a hasty retreat when one became a bit too aggressive for my comfort level.

The park map, provided by the rangers, showed both long and short routes. After a couple of hours, we keyed in on the "short" route without hesitation. We entered the park just before Noon and barely made it out a few minutes after the aforementioned 5:00pm. The disgruntled rangers were waiting for us to close the gates and politely accused us of "lollygagging"...a first in our cruising careers. Exhausted and dehydrated, we returned to the boat for cocktails and sustenance and planned a day for heading south.



*Salt mountains dominate the landscape*

The southern terrain is low-lying with wetlands and mangroves. The most distinguishing features are

the enormous mountains of salt piled along the shore. Many of the islands we've visited once produced salt, however Bonaire is the only one that continues to do so. Cargill Salt is one of the world's largest salt producers and manufactures about 2,000 tons/hour for export, primarily for use in water softeners and ice control applications. As we drove along, the blue-green of the sea on one side contrasted sharply with the rust-red water of the salt pans. Modern windmills, used to pump water from one saltpan to another, dot the countryside and seem incongruous with their surroundings.

Remnants of the past are profuse in Bonaire. Slave huts, constructed in the mid-1800s, line the beach opposite the salt pans. Built to provide minimal shelter for the slaves who worked the salt ponds and collected the salt, they remain standing as an integral part of Bonaire's history.



*Donkeys aren't shy in Bonaire*

Donkeys, once used to help cart the salt to the waiting ships, run loose. They're everywhere and are also considered a part of Bonaire's heritage. Observing the "Watch Out for Donkeys" street signs (written in local Papiamentu), we stopped frequently

to let donkeys cross the street in front of us. Many times they waited at the window in hopes of handouts and we learned to save apple cores and banana peels for just such occasions.



*Pink flamingos abound in the salt ponds*

The Willemstoren Lighthouse stands sentry at the most southern point of the island before the solitary road turns north again allowing a view of the windward coast. Unusual sculptures line the shore, a combination of imagination and the endless supply of jetsam. Pink flamingos are plentiful. Wild donkeys and goats comb the scrubby landscape for food. Midst this flat, barren setting lies Lac Bay, a mecca for windsurfers. Whether you opt to participate or just sip a cold beer and watch, the scene is colorful and lively. Across the bay at Cai, a long, bumpy, dusty ride away, mountains of conch shells line the beach. A sign reminds visitors to leave the shells intact ... these, too, are part of the heritage Bonaire is striving to maintain.

Two full days to explore Bonaire was barely adequate and we could have taken closer to a week if time was not an issue. Unquestionably, diving is extraordinary in Bonaire, but the "drier" side is not to be missed.

## On the Smaller Side ... Klein Curacao



*A thatched hut provides the Visitors' Center for tour boat excursions*

A little more than midway between Bonaire and Curaçao, lies the little island of Klein Curacao, not much in the way of amenities, but a great respite from the hustle and bustle of the populated islands. There is a hut there with a couple of transient fishermen sometimes in residence. A couple of day-tour boats hit the beach with tourists once or twice a week, but time it right and it's all yours...a delightful little Dutch haven worthy of a day's exploration.

We had guests visiting us in Bonaire who wanted to sail, but the easterly trade winds would have made the trip back to the Aves a long, rough motor sail at best. The thoughts of visiting a remote little island sounded exotic to our guests, so we opted for a quick 27-mile downwind sail to Klein Curacao and hoped we'd have no trouble getting back.

The trip, under four hours anchorage to anchorage, was indeed fast. There are two large mooring balls for the tour boats and we anchored between them in 20' of clear, blue water. Our guests, anxious to start exploring, couldn't wait for

us to launch the dinghy and dove off the side and swam to shore. We more subdued and less ambitious cruisers took our time, tidied up and made shore with the dink an hour later. After Bonaire, the snorkeling is less than exciting, but the water is clear and warm.

You can walk the perimeter of the island in about an hour...three hours if you like to beach comb. The shelling was reasonable, the water was warm and the surf on the windward side was spectacular. There is an interesting wrecked freighter on the windward side laying on the reef, its rusted hull broken in two. The surf crashes through its middle as if to establish its ownership. Not far down the beach, another wreck, "Carolina of Pampatar", a Venezuelan fishing boat, was a clear reminder of the how easy the reef and weather can claim even the most experienced of us.



*Parted hull of a rusted freighter*

The most remarkable structure on the island is an old, but still functioning, Dutch lighthouse. Its red painted walls are peeling and chunks of mortar lay haphazardly on the ground. Windows are missing and doorjambs and window casings show the results of weather and wind. Though dilapidated, it looked safe enough to attempt a climb. We skirted missing floorboards on the entry porch and gingerly climbed the circular steps, appreciating the views from each window as we gained height and lost confidence in the prudence of



our venture. The last six feet was a vertical scamper via a rickety ladder to the top. Barely room for one, we took turns on the ladder and were rewarded with a magnificent view of the island and surrounding sea, a hazy Curacao barely visible in the distance.

The night sky was glorious. Though the glow on the horizon distinctly showed the way to Curacao, without local ambient light, the southern sky was crisp and clear. Every star made an appearance for our awestruck guests and their first view of the Southern Cross was definitely a memorable one.

Countering the downwind trip, the return took eight long hours with 25 knot winds on the nose and 8-foot seas. I offered seasickness meds all around, but I was the only taker and, curiously enough, the only one to get seasick. Green-faced and discomfited by my lack of sea legs after nearly four years as a liveaboard, I watched Fay happily reading below while munching cookies. I was reminded, however, that she and Doug had only a week to enjoy this little paradise before returning to a hectic life in the U.S...for us, this is everyday life. I'll choose paradise and a little seasickness any day.

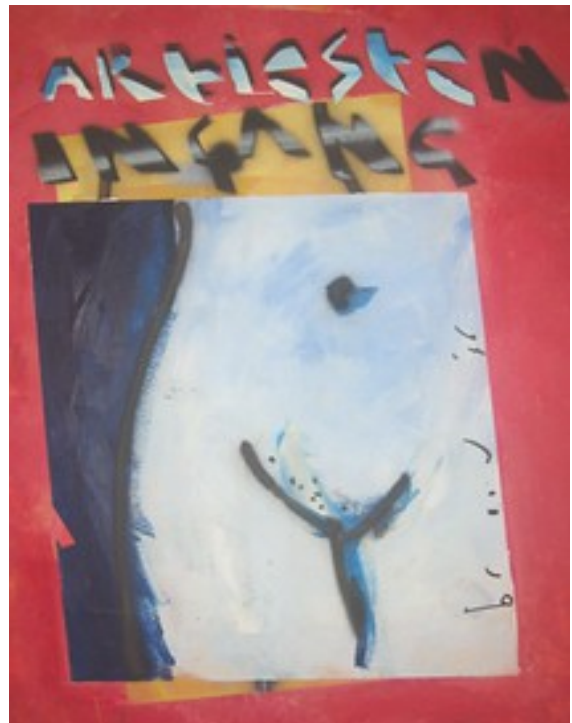


*Though dilapidated, the circular climb up the steps of the Curacao lighthouse was worth the effort*

## Brooding in Bonaire



Herman Brood, bad boy Dutch musician and artist, loved Bonaire and spent lots of time on the island before his death in 2001. Upstairs at the The Ribs Factory in Kralendijk, you'll find Brood's pop art murals on the walls and stairwell. Enjoy art with your lunch and on a clear day, catch a great view of Klein Bonaire.



## A Free Ride in Curaçao

After a couple of months in Bonaire, a visit to Curaçao was a welcome change. A quick 40-mile downwind sail and we were searching diligently for the entrance to Spanish Waters. We'd repeatedly been assured it was there along with a nude beach that stretched along the narrow entry channel. With Table Mountain properly situated and even with waypoints, the first-time entry required a leap of faith. Once negotiated, the path to the Sarifundy anchorage is somewhat circuitous, a bit of a trial for sailors who've been hanging on a mooring for two months instead of sailing. The re-learning process for us forgetful baby-boomers is always a challenge.



*Looking from picturesque Breedestraat towards the "Swinging Old Lady"*

Though the anchorage is not close to town, economical buses run on a convenient schedule every day and service most of the island. Sunday dawned warm and sunny and since the buses were running, we opted to make a foray into Willemstad, the main city on the island, about a 25-minute ride from the anchorage.

Willemstad is separated into two parts, Punda and Otrobanda, by the waters of St. Anna's Bay. The two parts are connected by the historic Queen Emma's Bridge, the "Swinging Old Lady". The whole town is easily accessible by foot. Following the canal from the bus station on the Punda side takes you past the "floating market", a delight to the eye as brightly colored Venezuelan boats line up along the wharf with open stalls of fresh produce and fish for sale.



*The Venezuelan "Floating Market" is a feast for the eyes*

Though sharing the Papiamentu language and much of the same heritage and history as Bonaire, Curaçao is much more cosmopolitan and thus very different in nature. The center of town is a maze of alleyways, nooks and crannies, all teeming with street vendors, little shops, restaurants and boutiques. A carillon mounted on one downtown building chimed on the half hour and could be heard blocks away, beckoning us to find it. We walked for hours, ate in quaint little outdoor cafés and generally appreciated the unique aspects of the largest island of the Netherlands Antilles.

Without a doubt, the waterfront street, Handelskade, on the Punda side, is the most

memorable sight in Curaçao. Dutch Colonial architecture is prevalent in the bay side mansions originally owned by wealthy 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century merchants. The area is well preserved and is now occupied by restaurants, shops, banks and other commercial properties. Legend has it that a popular governor some 200 years ago complained that he got a headache from waking up to all the white houses along the waterfront. In deference to his wishes, the islanders have painted their homes in bright pastels ever since.

The Queen Emma Pontoon Bridge, affectionately called the “Swinging Lady” by locals, was built in 1888, to allow traffic to pass between the two parts of the city. There was originally a toll in place that was charged to only those who could afford shoes. The poor folk borrowed shoes so as not to be embarrassed and paid the toll. The rich, too stingy to pay, hid their shoes and crossed barefoot. The bridge is now free to cross as are the ferries that transport people across the 500’ wide bay. The bridge opens as many as 30 times a day to allow water traffic to pass and visitors line the walls watching the show. The bridge tender actually starts an engine and “drives” the pontoon bridge to an open position. The process takes about 30 minutes each time. Last minute pedestrians on the bridge scurry as the bridge begins to move regardless of their presence.

Though Willemstad offers several museums, with limited time we chose the Kura Hulanda, touted to have the best African collection in the Caribbean. This museum is dedicated to the history of slavery, slaves and the development of Curaçao through the centuries. It houses a tremendous number of artifacts including a full size replica of a ship’s slave hold. The second floor balcony of the museum affords a picturesque view of the orange-clay tiled roofs and dormered shutters of the surrounding city buildings, typical of Dutch Colonial period architecture. Opened in April 1999, there is also a large, very plush hotel attached to the museum that is rated as one of the top 100 small hotels in the world. Though we considered the rooms a bit pricey for an overnight, we enjoyed two-for-one happy

hour pina coladas with friends in the pleasant courtyard.

While shopping for souvenirs, we ran into Sandra, owner of Curaçao Creations. Curaçao has extremely friendly people and Sandra was the epitome of hospitality. We chatted for quite awhile as she told us about life in Curaçao. While discussing the ferry rides across the river, she shared a Papiamentu idiomatic expression with us: *kab’i boto*. Literally it means “head of the boat”, but figuratively in Papiamentu it has evolved into meaning “getting a free ride”. It seems in the olden days before the bridge, people paid a fare to take the ferry across the bay. If you sat up front in the boat, you got wet and didn’t have to pay the fare...hence, a free ride in Curaçao. Whether you sit up front or not, the ferry rides across the bay are now free.



*Orange clay-tiled roofs fill the horizon as viewed from the balcony of Kura Hulanda Museum*

Curaçao has lots more to offer which we didn’t get a chance to see. The bright blue liqueur, Curaçao, is made here exclusively at a distillery housed in Landhuis Chobolobo, an old country mansion. There are several other country houses to visit, an ostrich farm, an aquarium and caves to explore all accessible by bus or rental car. As for us, we were pleased to have had a few days here and like many cruisers we know, appreciated a free ride.

## Cartagena the Beautiful...A Walking Tour of the Old City

From the moment you sail through the Boca Grande channel and spy the stately blue Madonna standing serenely in middle of the harbor, you can tell you've arrived somewhere special. The cityscape looms in the early dawn, a misty blend of cathedral spires and high rises. Welcome to Cartagena!



*Club Náutico office, clubhouse and restaurant*

Anchored off Club Náutico, we could scarcely wait to get to shore and begin our explorations. Cartagena is a city that beckons you to explore her, walk her walls and feel her culture. We chose an early Sunday morning when there was little pedestrian or vehicular traffic, light was good for photography and, most importantly, the temperature was cool.

From either marina, Club Náutico or Club de Pesca, a 10-minute walk across the Puente Román puts you inside the outer walls. Once over the bridge and through the open portal, there is a pleasant stroll

along the bay on Calle del Arsenal. Parks line the bay side and several restaurants and shops line the opposite side of this brick-paved street. Following the street past the Convention Center, we came upon our first glimpse of the fine artwork judiciously placed throughout Cartagena. *Los Pegasos*, two huge bronzes of a winged horse family, a richly detailed rearing stallion and mare with foal, are located at the head of the bay.



*Magnificent bronze statues, "Los Pegasos"*

Puerta del Reloj (Clock Tower Gate) is just across the street. One of the three spires dominating the city's horizon, its yellow tower is integral to the massive city walls and guards the main entrance to La Ciudad Amurallada (Walled City), also called Centro Histórico or just Centro. Passing through its wide, shadowy portals, there are vendors selling cigarettes, candy, books and the ubiquitous lottery tickets. Once inside the wall, we arrived in Plaza de los Coches (Carriage Square), former site of the slave market, now a wide-open plaza with horse-drawn carriages lined up to whisk tourists around the city streets.

Along the route, there are several places to access the city walls via ramps and stairs. We opted to walk the walls first, take photos from several vantage points and then backtrack to specific streets, plazas and points of interest. Begun in 1586, the



*Puerto del Reloj  
( Clock Tower Gate)*

walls succumbed to the forces of nature and were rebuilt numerous times, finally completed as a fortification some 200 years later. Wide and high, in some places as much as 20 feet high and 50 feet wide, there are canon placements and sentry boxes strategically placed. We watched a soccer game going on below, a Tai Chi class on the top and two lovers snuggling close in one of the small nooks in the wall.



*Beautiful city walls of Cartagena afford long leisurely walks*

We walked for miles it seemed (a total of about four around the city's perimeter), awed by the breathtaking views of Boca Grande and the azure blue Caribbean on one side and the tightly packed, historical city on the other. As we strolled, we noted those areas that would require closer investigation like Plaza de San Pedro, the Cathedral, Teatro Heredia and the Santa Clara Hotel.

Located under the northern section of the walls, the graceful arches of Las Bóvedas (The Vaults) teem with activity. Used in the past for munitions storage as well as prison cells, the area is now occupied by souvenir shops and vendors. As the walls curve south and then east, the magnificent Castillo de San Felipe comes into view high on the hill overlooking the city, an enormous Colombian flag flying proudly above its ramparts. We overheard one cruiser comment, "I've seen the Pyramids of Egypt, but they didn't impress me as much as this!" Photo opportunities are excellent from the wall, providing an unobstructed panoramic view. With your eye on the castle, you could almost miss Circo Teatro, a now abandoned, dilapidated theater-in-the-round also used decades ago for bullfights.



*Circo Teatro, the old abandoned theater-in-the-round*

Vivero, the WalMart of Cartagena, appears suddenly and the walking portion of the walls end abruptly, but not before catching sight of "India Catalina", a most graceful Indian maiden sculpture by Elation Gil. Located in a small roundabout just

outside the walls, she stands proudly on tiptoes gazing up at the castle. A smaller gilded version of this statue is equivalent to “Oscar” and is awarded for film excellence in Colombia.



*Massive Castillo de San Felipe overlooks the old city with the graceful India Catalina in the foreground*

Though not part of the walled city, a visit to San Felipe is a must. Walking southeast over the bridge past “India Catalina”, the castle becomes more immense with every step. A short walk brought us to the entrance. Admission is nominal and after a steep climb to the top, you can enjoy outstanding 360° views of the city and its environs below. Living history emanates from every stone and I swear you can feel the steps of the thousands who have passed this way before you. We ducked into tunnels and felt our way down darkened stairways, then sat in the shadow of the ramparts and sipped cool water while trying to imagine the labor and materials expended in the building of this massive fortification.

Back down to sea level, we took a little side trip a couple of blocks south of the castle to see “Zapatos Viejos”, two huge bronze work shoes erected as a monument to a local poet who wrote a sonnet to “Old Shoes”. There are several vendors here selling souvenirs, but the best surprise was a man with a

three-toed sloth who offered us a chance to hold this complacent, cuddly little critter.



*Marcie's new three-toed friend*

We headed back into the city across the bridge, Puente Heredia, and along Calle de La Media Luna. Shops, restaurants and businesses of all types line this avenue until it passes Parque del Centenario (Centennial Park), the city’s largest park, easily identified by its eight ornately arched entrance porticos. Straight ahead, the Clock Tower Gate admitted entry back into the city. This time as we passed through Plaza de los Coches, we took advantage of the sweet offerings of the vendors here in the area known as “Portal de los dulces”.

Practically everywhere we walked, there was something to see and experience. As we wandered down narrow brick-paved streets, dozens of balconies overflowed with vibrant flowering plants trailing down the walls. Colorfully dressed women, balancing fruit baskets on their heads, sang out their offerings, “Aguacates, mandarinos, sandias y piñas” and donkeys slowly pulled carts filled with everything and anything. Spanish colonial architecture adorned with intricate wrought ironwork lined every alley and passageway. Thick, heavy wooden, oversized doors with decorative bronze door knockers shielded charming courtyards beyond.

Each plaza in the city has a draw of its own. The beautiful Plaza de San Pedro with the San Pedro de Claver church at its heart, boasts a huge statue of the saint, as well as an incongruous collection of scrap

iron sculptures, appropriately named “Las Chattaras” (scrap iron). The Museum of Modern Art (Museo del Arte Moderno) is also located here as is a host of artisans and vendors. San Pedro, a fine restaurant just opposite the church, is a great place to stop for a bite or a refreshing iced coffee.

Plaza de Santo Domingo was our personal favorite for lively street color and sheer energy in motion. One entire side of this large plaza is bounded by the beautiful Santo Domingo Church. The nude bronze figure of “Gertrudis”, quite ample in her proportions, lies in splendor at one corner. The center of the square offers open-air seating for several restaurants. The local cruising guide mentions, “walking the gauntlet of street vendors” and this is no exaggeration. Every possible item for sale is offered here... cigars, t-shirts, sunglasses (name brand knock-offs), paintings, hats, emeralds, bead and coconut shell jewelry and hair ornaments. It’s nearly overwhelming at times, but part of the experience. No one is rude, just persistent. Mariachi bands stroll from table to table. An old man wanders through with an ancient Victrola on his shoulder and one 78rpm record he can play for you. Another man offers you a small live turtle from his boxed cache. Good boat pet? I think not.

Just off the plaza, Calle de la Factoria beckons those interested in looking (and buying) world-class emeralds at discounted prices. This street is lined with window after window displaying “green ice” and hawkers on the curb try to lure you in to hear their special “promotion just for you”.

The ornate dome of the 16th century La Catedral comes into sight as soon as you round the corner. Though under renovation, regular Masses are still held here and, for a nominal fee, local multilingual guides offer tours of the cathedral as well as its underground catacombs.

The requisite tribute to Simon Bolivar is found at Parque de Bolivar, a beautiful park with shade trees and benches surrounding the statue of the hero on horseback. Sip an icy cold, fresh *limonada*, rest and watch the world go by. The park is surrounded on one side by Palacio de Inquisición (closed for renovation while we were there) and opposite are several upscale shops and the Museo del Oro (free

admission with English placards explaining the exhibits), displaying a fascinating collection of pre-Colombian Sinú gold jewelry and artifacts.

Plaza San Diego is a nice spot to end the day. A park surrounded by the School of Fine Arts, antique shops and restaurants and the exquisite Santa Clara Hotel, formerly a Clarist convent. Visit the Santa Clara, for a drink or a Sunday brunch, and enjoy the tranquil atmosphere of their lush, verdant courtyard enveloped in the centuries old convent walls.



*An old city street with a view of the ornate dome of La Catedral*

A day or two will only serve to whet your appetite for more exploration. Admittedly, we have only skimmed the surface of what the old city holds in store. Cabs are cheap here, but walking is safe and allows the opportunity to take it all in and savor the rich flavor of the place. Without reservation, we can say that Cartagena is the most beautiful and fascinating city we have visited in our four years of cruising and it’s all within walking distance.

Authors Note: A decade later, Cartagena still remains as one of our favorite cities to visit.

## Islas de Rosario ... Cartagena's Getaway

Just twenty miles southwest of Cartagena lies the idyllic coralline archipelago of Islas de Rosario (Rosary Islands), a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of city life and a quick refresher trip for those attempting to relearn the intricate art of sailing after two months on the hook in Cartagena. The standard chart kits furnish only sketchy information, but a hand drawn chart we obtained from Club Nautico provided all we needed for negotiating the area. We obtained the necessary cruisers' permit for the Rosarios from our agent in Cartagena at a cost of 3,000 pesos/person (\$1.10).



*A large salt-water tank at the entrance  
to the aquarium*

There are several appealing anchorages in the Rosarios, but with limited time, we chose the one closest to the aquarium on Isla San Martin de Pajares, deep and calm, surrounded by reefs.

The limited access was marked by two cement posts, one slightly askew from a boat nudge we guessed, and our 7-foot draft skimmed through with inches to spare. We anchored in 35 feet and were barely settled when the Guardacosta stopped by to ask if we had permission to anchor. When we showed them our newly issued permit, it was obvious they weren't sure what it was, but it looked so official, they accepted it and left us alone. Next came the vendors for fish, jewelry and woodcarvings...all friendly whether we purchased or not. Having been denied our daily swims by the uninviting anchorage waters in Cartagena, we enjoyed a long overdue dip in the clear, warm, crystalline waters

Interspersed with the reefs surrounding the anchorage, are little islands and islets, each supporting at least one or two private homes, ranging from small, brightly colored, thatched-roofed huts to impressive weekend villas. No other boats were in sight when we entered, and during our stay, only one other boat arrived. Life is good.



*Though we see dolphins frequently, it was fun to  
watch them perform on cue*



Our first night was such a pleasant change from the city noise and constant wakes caused by the water taxis racing through the anchorage day and night at breakneck speeds in Cartagena. We could hear a generator humming somewhere on shore and in the distance the sound of some unidentifiable musical tune, not blaring, barely loud enough to pick up the deep bass, not the melody. Every once in awhile a dog barked or a rooster crowed. There were very few lights on shore, but the glow on the horizon to the northeast clearly pointed the way to Cartagena.

Lightning lit up the sky, but the water was smooth as glass, allowing only that soothing, lapping sound against the hull. Occasionally, we could hear surf breaking on the reef that surrounded us. It was so quiet at times, there weren't even any boat sounds. I mentioned this to David and as if to prove me immediately wrong, the boat responded with a new "ah-yuh" kind of squeak we had never heard before.



*Watch those toes...Nurse sharks a little too close to the toes for my taste*

It's not hard to spot the aquarium with its huge shark weather vane rising clearly above anything else on the island. Touted as the Caribbean basin's most beautiful aquarium, Acuario San Martin is open daily, primarily catering to the tour boats that arrive from Cartagena and other towns along the coast. There is a small canal with a wharf that allows convenient dinghy tie-up. Other cruisers told us that we could enter for free, however we found that if you wished to watch the show, there was an entry fee of 10,000 pesos each (\$3.50) which we gladly paid.

The presentations were short and in Spanish, but we were able to glean the salient points. Lots of sharks, sea turtles, rays and dolphins swam in separate holding areas and though we see dolphins frequently, it was fun to watch them perform their tricks on cue. One presentation included nurse sharks climbing on a platform for food, much too close to the presenter's toes for my taste. Even the egrets and boobies had a role to play and were rewarded by fish chunks, tossed and caught in mid-air. You can also make arrangements to swim in the large fish (non-human-eating variety) holding tanks and with the dolphins after hours if you wish. You can roam along the paths of the island, which is actually an eco-resort, and wander past natural bird habitat areas. Boobies and egrets are everywhere, as well as a huge flock of hissing geese, which seemed incredibly out of place. We also saw several chacalacas, which required our bird book to identify. There is a small snack bar, restroom facilities and a gift shop along with several educational exhibits also on display.

After a couple months of city life, the Rosarios were indeed a welcome change and highly recommended for an easy weekend getaway or an overnight stop on your way to or from Panama.

## In the land of the Kunas

As soon as we mentioned we were heading towards the Western Caribbean, cruising friends offered varying tales of the San Blas Islands and the Kunas. Nose-ringed women with heavily rouged cheeks who had mastered the art of the mola (“what’s a mola?” we asked); curious, indigenous people in dugout canoes called ulus who peeked in your portholes and asked for gifts; brown-skinned men who rarely spoke English and sometimes no Spanish; families that lived in thatched huts and had maintained the ways of their ancestors throughout countless generations. It’s all true and, oddly enough, more exotic than the tales would lead you to believe. This is Kuna Yala, land of the Kunas known as the San Blas Islands, independent state of Panama.



*Morning mist hovering low in the valleys*

The San Blas Archipelago is composed of approximately 365 islands and islets, only 50 of which are inhabited. Part of Panama, the San Blas Reservation was declared an independent state in 1925 after a successful indigenous revolution. San

Blas Indians is a general term for four separate groups of indigenous people that live there. The largest group is the Kuna with a total population of over 55,000 and they call their land Kuna Yala, which translates not surprisingly to “Land of the Kuna”.

A calm, easy overnight from Colombia’s Islas Rosarios positioned us just off Punta Perme and the Kuna village of Anachucuna. Our approach at dawn revealed hills, lush with green palms. The morning mist was caught in dense clouds hovering low in the valleys. This location is further east than most cruisers start or end their treks of the San Blas, but our goal was to see and experience more than the usual cruiser hangouts would allow.



*Anachacuna Village*

Having slept little the night before, we opted to nap when we arrived and the Kunas patiently waited until they saw life aboard before approaching our boat in the early afternoon...but then they came in droves. The Kunas signal their presence with a faint whistle or a throat clearing and they wait to be acknowledged. First came the men to collect the *impuesto*, the arbitrary tax imposed by the village chief for anchoring in his territory. Once the finances were cleared up Nine of Cups quickly became the weekend’s chosen family destination spot and the ulus were filled to capacity. Some groups were just



One of hundreds of perfect islands

drive-bys, others offered molas or fruit for sale and those with more courage asked to come aboard. Andres, with whom we had spoken briefly in the morning, was climbing aboard with his family before we had the chance to think about it and we hastily decided “what’s the harm?” and welcomed them aboard.



*Kuna family visiting Nine of Cups*

They came bearing gifts...a bag of limes and a few small, round, red unidentifiable fruits or vegetables about the size of plum tomatoes which we later identified as pifas, a palm fruit. Once all nine of them (three adults and six kids) settled into our tiny cockpit, the fun began. First, candy for the kids. Then, did we have any books for the kids? Yes, I had one, but only in English. “No problema.” Then, could they have an orange? Yes, I peeled a mandarin and gave everyone a section. Could they look below? No, I answered emphatically, reasoning that it was messy and six people tromping through would be a bit much.

I found three little barrettes that were much appreciated by each of the little girls. Did I have more barrettes? No. Could they go below to look? Again, no! While David was busy talking with Andres, I scooted below for a second to get some requested shampoo and in a flash the two women followed me down. They quickly surveyed the saloon and looked around in amazement at all the “stuff”. Kids in a candy store. They saw dirty plastic cups in the sink...could they have one? OK, sure. Then they saw a plastic bowl...could they have it? No, I needed that. What about some crackers? No, I don’t think so. More candy? Actually, I had just seen them fill their pockets with lollipops. A squeaky cat toy? No! Then I corralled them and motioned for us to go back up the ladder into the cockpit.



*A collection of molas*

As we sat, sometimes in silence just looking at each other for several minutes, one of the women took a long string of red and yellow beads from her arm and began to tie them on my wrist. She wrapped the strand seven or eight times around, working each carefully and tying it off nicely. Soon I was adorned in the way of Kuna women. The children became restless, our guests decided to leave and we decided to go ashore to introduce ourselves to the chief.



*Ulus on the beach*

Ulus lined the beach and our inflatable looked out of place midst the dugouts. Once ashore, we were greeted by some of the folks we had chatted with earlier. Women quickly gathered their wares and offered molas and carvings for sale. We wandered the narrow paths between the neat rows of thatched huts and noted a tiny store with basic staples. There had not been many yachts through here and curiosity was high.

We were led to the sailah's hut and he greeted us with the reserve you would expect from a chief, asking where we had come from and how long we would stay then introducing his wife who had molas for sale. There were a few chairs in the village... those white plastic-molded type... and two were hastily brought for us. This being our first introduction to molas, we pondered and finally chose one to purchase. I had brought a compact with a mirror in it as a gift which was received with smiles by the chief's wife.



*Marcie's young friends at Kanirdup*

Another beautiful day dawned and we set out for Caledonia (Kanirdup), a larger village, about 20 miles away. It was here that we ran aground, but, of course, that's another story. Once properly anchored and introduced to the chief, we were on our own to explore the village. Children followed, daring each other to touch us. The bravest held our hands as we walked. We heard *rubia* (fair-haired) whispered by



*Kuna women in traditional dress*

some of the men. As we walked, the number of children increased until it seemed the whole village was following in Pied Piper fashion.

We visited the school and were asked to take pictures of the kids. We printed them on the boat on plain bond paper and brought them back to the island. Kuna women who had previously declined having their photos taken, saw their kids' pictures and now sought us out for photos.

Perhaps of all the places we stopped on our slow trip to Colon, Mamitupu was the highlight. Pablo paddled out to our boat shortly after we anchored and surprised us with his welcoming gift of limes and his British accent. He'd lived for seven years in England before returning to his native village. It didn't take much coaxing for us to accept his invitation to visit his home and meet his family.



*Pablo and Asinta*

From Pablo we learned more about Kuna life, customs and culture than we could have imagined. For example, Kunas live, die, get married and get buried in their hammocks. Who could have known?

For the three days we visited, he answered our questions patiently and offered insight into Kuna ways. Pablo's beach hut was our usual meeting place and it could not have been a more beautiful setting for learning more about our host.

Pablo maintained two homes, one on the beach and one in village. We met his wife, Asinta, and then followed them to their village hut one day to meet their infant grandson and other members of the family. As always, the time we had allowed was too short, but it was time to move on.

We stopped at island after island in the San Blas, many uninhabited. Some had thatch huts for transient Kuna farmers who tended gardens, but for the most part we were left to our own devices. We hiked and picnicked amidst rich, lush tropical foliage and fragrant, blossoming flowers. This land of the Kunas is nothing less than Paradise.



*Land of the Kunas – a tropical paradise*

## Taking the High Ground in Kuna Yala



*Kuna Yala – Land of the Kuna*

Heading from Cartagena, Colombia to Panama, we decided to start as far east as practicable in the San Blas Islands with the intent of stopping at some of the less visited anchorages.

We prefer out of the way places. “Off the beaten path” locations provide an extra little thrill of adventure and a chance to experience and explore a place we hadn’t already read about. We enjoy meeting other yachties, but that’s not the reason we cruise. Besides, when you’re the only sailboat anchored in a tiny bay, you can be sure people will notice you and perhaps want to learn more about you as well. The opportunity for a cultural exchange is significantly increased.

The paper chart clearly indicated “Unsurveyed” and our cruising guide clearly stated “Not for navigation”. We thought, however, our eyeballs would suffice on a clear, sunny day. I was on the bow and David was at the helm. I saw the water turn from dark to lighter blue, but the guide showed a minimum of 12’ close to shore and we were still in 40’ according to the depth meter...then in a second, it showed 5’ and we draw 7’...yup, we were aground in deep sand in Caledonia (Kanirdup) in the eastern San Blas. We noted that David’s fishing line complete with a new Rapala lure was also snagged somewhere behind us and couldn’t be reeled in.

The grounding must have rumbled the earth because a sound wave went out to all the Kunas within 20 miles and soon there were twenty plus ulus, the hand-carved dugout canoes of the Kunas, surrounding the boat. Visions of “Wagon Train” raced through my mind, but the natives were friendly. In fact, several of them leaned against the boat with a great show of effort and strain and pushed with all their might in hopes of moving us. They succeeded only in pushing their ulus away from the boat, but the effort was noted and credit was given.



*Two young Kunas in half an ulu*

Now there are all sorts of things to do when you’re aground and we started going through the list...easiest to hardest, of course. We both hung off

one side of the boat in an attempt to move the boat by reallocating some weight. No luck, but the locals loved it and applauded heartily.

One Kuna dove down and confirmed the good news...only the middle part of the boat was stuck, the front and back were free. Hmm...that would mean only the keel was stuck ...our lucky day! "A lot of sand or a little?" I asked. "Oh, mucho, mucho", he confirmed with a smile of reassurance, measuring with his hands a good foot or more. With that knowledge, we decided to launch the dinghy and give the boat a push or a tug on a halyard, generally moving to the "less easy" category of the "what to do when you go aground" list.



*Kuna Yala tropical scene*

In the meantime, more ulus arrived to observe the big sailboat with gringos aboard floundering around in the shallow water, stuck well in place and providing free entertainment. Ulus lined the starboard and port rails ... 30-40 now. They were three and four deep in some places and a quick scan of the horizon showed more arriving all the time. The men were all chattering in a mix of Kuna and Spanish, clucking their tongues and shaking their heads. The language barrier was not an issue here; we knew exactly what they were saying. "Hmm... they're really stuck. Too bad they're so stupid. Everyone knows this area is really, really shallow!"

So David launched the dinghy, put the motor on and I took the helm attempting to block out all the voices shouting at me except for David's. Mostly they shouted, "Go backwards" and as I was unable to do so because we were stuck (women drivers, you know), the tongue clucking and head shaking began again in earnest. After an hour or so, many lost interest and having had about all the entertainment they could stand for one day, they drifted back to their fishing tasks.

I could hear a motor vessel in the distance and looked up to see the Kunas disappear in a flash and the Panamanian Coast Guard (ever vigilant) in an inflatable launch on its way to check out the situation. They asked us what we were doing in this area since it was very shallow. "This is the way gringos anchor", I muttered under my breath, but aloud I explained we were slightly aground and were working at keding ourselves off. They decided they needed to help us.. First, they told me to back up. Then they proceeded to push the bow, pull a line, push the stern and tell me to back up again... surprisingly, none of these methods was effective. "Were my propellers turning?" they asked. The roar of 2000 RPMs and the thick brown swirls of sand surrounding us confirmed the props were working just fine. "Don't worry" we said to them, "we'll be fine!" They radioed in and told us a bigger boat was on its way.

Meanwhile in the cockpit, a hand of very ripe bananas hung from the boom crutch. Bananas were dropping rhythmically on the cockpit seats and floor. Unbeknownst to me, I managed to sit on one while sliding back behind the wheel after barely having had the chance to remove the previous one from between my toes. Stuck to my butt was a fine ripe banana which added greatly to the amusement factor for the group. Even David couldn't stifle a laugh as he mentioned as gently as possible that I might want to remove it.

A larger launch with dual 200hp engines arrived and after admonishing us that we shouldn't have come into the area because the water was too shallow, proceeded to help us. The reel whirred madly as hundreds of feet of fishing line played out

when they managed to back over our fishing line and tangle it in their prop. Goodbye Rapala, as we cut the line and they unfouled their prop. One officious fellow told us to tie a line to the bow which Marcie did. With a great fanfare and revving of engines, they shot off. Unfortunately, they had not secured the line to their boat, so the effort proved fruitless.

With a major collaborative effort, mildly reminiscent of the Keystone Kops, we managed to get off the sand and followed them to a proscribed anchorage. “This might be too close to land”, we said. “No, this is where you anchor.” We dropped the hook in 35 feet and hastily took out fenders as both launches prepared to tie up to our sides intending to board us and check our *zarpe* paperwork.

We produced the Colombian *zarpe* and our passports and the lead man, Edouino, carefully checked it and our passports, noting that David’s passport had not been stamped when we cleared out of Colombia. “Oh, I’m sure it has” and my heart skipped a beat as I promptly scanned the pages and finally found the right one. “Whew!” I made an exaggerated gesture of mopping my brow in relief, which elicited a welcome chuckle from the other three men. They asked the usual safety questions. “VHF, GPS, flares aboard?” “Si, si, si”. Then they wanted the boat documentation and were knowledgeable enough to realize that a hailing port of Denver, Colorado provided us little chance of making it back home without some heavy duty portage involved.

Paperwork completed and assured that we were legal and welcome, they shared cold beers with us, made small talk and prepared to leave. We thanked them profusely for all their help and efforts and one noted quite proudly, “It’s our responsibility to find solutions to problems here. We were glad to help. You can contact us on Channel 16 if you need anything further” and off they went. Coast Guard gone, the ulus began to reappear.

We were sunburned, hot and sweaty from the exertion of the day and a cool dip was just the thing to mellow us out. The water was magnificent and other than the huge jellyfish which Marcie

inadvertently swatted while making her entry into the water, we didn’t see any other fish nor any damage to the underside of the boat which was a relief. With great satisfaction, David managed to retrieve his Rapala lure. The end of an interesting day to say the least. As David noted “No blood, no foul.”

Like many sailing stories, however, this was not quite the end. In the early evening as the wind picked up a bit and we relaxed in the cockpit, the anchor alarm sounded. We watched the depth meter fall once again as we swung around closer to the island. Even the Coast Guard got it wrong. Anchor up again. We re-anchored a few meters out and finally felt secure.

Early the next morning, an ulu came to the boat, urged us ashore and ushered us to the chief’s hut. “Good Morning”, we said respectfully. “How come you anchored over there?”, he pointed, “it’s much too shallow.” Good news travels fast.



*San Blas jellyfish*

Lesson learned. In the scheme of things, going aground this time was not a big deal. I learned a new Spanish word: aground is *encallado*. I’m hoping that it won’t become a frequently used part of my Spanish vocabulary.



## Up the River in Panamá...Rio Chagres

The Rio Chagres, one of Panamá's nearly 500 rivers, is part of Panamá's extensive national park system and is located only about 8 miles west of Colón. In 1912, the Chagres was dammed to form Gatún Lake, part of the Panama Canal transit route, and now only about 5½ miles of the river is navigable. We hadn't planned to stop at all, but German cruising friends insisted the river was worth a few days and we have to admit they were decidedly right in their assessment. The Rio Chagres is beautiful!



*View of Rio Chagres from Castillo de San Lorenzo*

Sitting high on a ragged bluff, a fort, Castillo de San Lorenzo, guards the river's entrance and provides a good landmark for negotiating a route between a reef and a sand spit which also mark the entry. Once past the initial hazards, the river is deep, wide and offers lots to explore. Zydler's "Panama Guide" provides chartlets for the river that were more than adequate. We anchored at the "third bend" and though we discovered later that there were six other boats in the river, we felt completely and pleasantly alone.

The trip up the river was a delight to the senses. It was calm and smooth, nary a ripple on the surface other than the wake made by the boat. We ate dinner each night in the cockpit and tried to identify all the sounds we heard...chirp, peep, flutter, ker-plonk, buzz,

hum, squawk, whoosh, howl, screech, roar, tweet, ping, rustle-rustle, hoot. I'm sure we missed a few, but the jungle symphony was in high form and we were enthralled. We distractedly hummed "Whim-o-way" until we drove each other crazy.

It rains nearly every day during the rainy season (summer months), but it's usually only a shower, a welcome addition to the water tanks and a pleasant respite from the heat. The roar of the howler monkeys was exceptionally loud right after the showers and we likened it to the sounds of boys in the locker room after a tough game.



*Troops of howler monkeys swung from trees and sounded more like lions than monkeys*

The smell of wet leaves is pungent and familiar with a whiff of some sweet, spicy blossom drifting by every once in awhile. Despite the jungle noises, it is very quiet here. The buzz of the cicadas becomes white noise and unnoticeable after awhile. We spoke softly as it seemed that raising our voices would almost be a sacrilege. Jelly was on all-sense cat alert, perched on the top of the dodger, eyes wide, always on the lookout for caimans, bats, low flying, non-cat eating birds or maybe a small moth or fly.

The river is green, as is the dense wall of vegetation along its sides, but the greens are distinctly different. In fact, the number of shades, hues and shadows of the color green defy description. The water is sweet and fresh and it was the first time "Nine of Cups" had had a fresh-water bottom wash since last November's haul out! Though not for drinking, we used the water to bathe, as well as wash dishes and laundry. We took

daily dips in the cool refreshing water, being ever vigilant for the alleged caimans, but we never saw any. We never let go of the tether line to the boat as there's a 1.5 knot current. Watching the water whoosh by the dinghy, confirmed the current's pull toward the sea.



*The Gatun Dam controls the flow of water on the Rio Chagres and the water level*

We traveled up river in the dinghy for a close-up view of the huge Gatún Dam, one of the largest earthen dams in the world. We stayed close to the river's edge on the look out for jungle flora and fauna. We saw kingfishers, egrets and herons watching for a dinner opportunity. Kites, pelicans and great frigate birds circled overhead. Pairs of bright green parrots and lorikeets squawked their way across the river in their awkward, frenetic way. Brightly colored flowers were profuse and fragrant, providing a keen contrast to the lush green foliage. Butterflies and dragonflies were so abundant, it boggled the mind.



*Butterflies and dragonflies were so abundant, it boggled the mind*

Not far from the dam we spotted a small dock and tied up. We followed a soggy path up moss-covered stone steps to another somewhat overgrown path that led further into the jungle. After a close encounter with a spider the size of a Buick, we retreated to the dinghy at my urging, with the excuse we were not dressed for a jungle safari.

There are several tributaries to explore and we tried the Rio Indio, which nicely accommodated the dink. It meandered its way for a couple of miles back into the jungle area. The mud brown water appeared thick and dense. Delicate orchids dangled from the trees and long monkey vines conjured up Tarzan images. We never did see any caimans, but the highlight of the trip was the appearance of white-faced monkeys...a whole family of them including a mama with babe in arms. They went chattering through the canopy of trees, swinging from one branch to the next, oblivious to us...obviously on a mission to get somewhere in a hurry!



*Though dilapidated, the fort made for good exploring and great photos of the river*

We spent one afternoon visiting the fort, which is easily accessible from a sturdy wharf. There's a well-maintained dirt road from the dock all the way up to the fort. Though quite dilapidated, you can wander around the ramparts and check out some of the smaller structures. Several rusted canons are still in place and the sentry boxes are in tact. A caretaker is in residence at a small house nearby and sells fresh coconuts. The view of the sea and the river are fantastic and well worth the hike.

We went to the Rio Chagres planning to spend a night; we stayed a week and could have stayed a month. We can't imagine a better "remote" jungle adventure so close to civilization.

## A Lost Art

This is my second attempt at writing this ... the first draft was lost during a power glitch. That's the way it's been going recently. Everything's coming up lost and I'm concerned my mind will be next. Certainly my sense of humor is in jeopardy.

While sailing from Tampa around the west end of Cuba to Panama, we experienced a major issue with a broken rudder arm. Though quite important at the time, the incident is only ancillary to this story. During the confusion that ensued because of no steering, my eyeglasses were lost in the fracas. We figured out an emergency rudder solution, got the situation handled and then literally tore up the boat looking for my eyeglasses. Considering we were on a 45 degree heel to starboard, the search wasn't as thorough as it might have been and we were unsuccessful. I started using my prescription sunglasses all the time. Viewing a dark world was getting really old and night watch was quite the challenge. When we finally reached port, I was determined to find my missing specs.

We lay in bed lazily the morning after our first full night's sleep in port and it was wonderful. We discussed our plans for the day. David had lofty ideas of boat repairs and projects to get started. He suggested that perhaps sewing would be a good project for me since there were bimini and sail cover repairs to be made and the "Q" flag had somehow come up missing and I promised to make another.

I came up with all sorts of excuses not to sew ... too windy to get the bimini down; plus the hassle of removing it in the first place; plus we might replace it once we're in the marina; and since we didn't need the "Q" flag here in Panama because no officials came to the boat, I'd have lots of time to replace it (or maybe find the old one). No, my intent for the day was FIND MY GLASSES and the Captain could hardly disagree.

While drinking our morning cup of coffee, we usually play a hand of gin to start the day off right and get our brains working. But this morning, we couldn't find the deck of cards. Where were they? We looked and hunted

... couldn't find them. Something else gone lost. I added it to the growing list: glasses, Q flag, playing cards ... oh yeah, face cloths, too. We seemed to have lost every single one of them along the way. And the hookah hose that David uses with the compressor for diving and for which we looked unsuccessfully when our son lost his Blackberry overboard a month ago, but couldn't find. I'm sure there's more. Ah, yes ... my new gold ankle bracelet was no longer on my ankle and I wasn't even sure it was still on the boat. We'd been a captive crew for nearly two weeks ... wherever could all of this stuff be?

Before getting started on this scavenger hunt, I noted that David was looking a bit shaggy and in need of a haircut. Windy days are especially good for haircuts on deck. I went to find the barber's scissors ... guess what? You're exactly right ... no scissors in their usual place, a handy case just inside the aft locker. Now I was convinced a mischievous spirit was aboard, hiding my stuff and getting her kicks watching me hunt unsuccessfully to find it all.

After removing the whole case from the locker, and tidying the locker while I was at it, I finally found the scissors which had slid down behind some shoes. Up we went for an on-deck haircut. David less hairy and scissors back in their proper place, I started on a mighty search for the elusive glasses. Of course, without glasses to look for the glasses, this was more challenging, but I refused to put my sunglasses on below deck again.

Since we had thoroughly searched the area beneath the aft bunk around the rudder, the next most obvious place was below the nav station or in the nav station ... both sacred areas belonging to David and considered nether regions that I rarely visited, let alone explored. With his blessing, I began with the area under the nav station. I hauled out all his most accessible tools. I found the odd peanut and cookie crumb, lots of loose hose clamps (oh yeah, said David, I need a ditty bag for those whenever you're sewing) and screws, other miscellaneous stuff I couldn't identify which meant they were probably errant boat parts ... but no glasses. I cleaned out the area, re-stowed everything neatly and started inside and on the nav station desk itself.

It was quite an experience. I discovered charts of Africa, electronic parts templates, a huge collection of empty, various-sized Ziploc bags, loose pieces of tagua, a United Airlines headset, Spanish flash cards, a star map from Mystic Seaport, a driving map for Maryland/Delaware, miscellaneous chart plotting tools,

a couple of 3-1/2" diskettes (??), odd screws, bolts, nuts and shackles (all 316 stainless), but no glasses (or face cloths, hookah hose, playing cards, anklet or Q flag). I cleaned out the rest of the debris, wiped it down and restowed the nav station neatly.

Okay ... where next? While thinking, I noticed that my eyebrows needed plucking and the light was good, so I looked for my tweezers and they were exactly where they should be. When returning the tweezers to their proper place, I noted my vanity was really dusty. I began dusting it off and lo and behold, my glasses had slid behind one of the crevices and were wedged in there. There they were! Eureka! I was so ecstatic I decided to change the sheets on the bed. In digging around for a clean set of sheets, I discovered all the face cloths hidden beneath the bottom set of sheets ... oh my gosh. I had to move a hanging bag to straighten out the sheets ... what the heck was in that hanging bag anyway ... the hookah hose!!! I was on a roll. While changing the sheets, there was a fine, tinkling sound as something hit the floor ... my anklet.

Next on my to-do list was straightening out the provision crates and hammocks to make my list for our next provisioning trip. Much of the crates' contents had been tossed around during our passage. We thought we'd removed everything when looking for playing cards, but evidently not quite everything because under several packages of spaghetti, there they were ... the missing deck. David refused to stop working on the rudder repair to play a game, but the find was joy enough for the moment.

After that, things just kept popping up. The "Q" flag was easy. David finally remembered that the last time we used it was Charleston, SC when we dressed the boat for the arrival of the tall ships. Evidently we used the Q flag and never returned it to its usual place.

Finally, the Nine of Cups' mysteries were solved, things back in place AND several areas tidied up and clean. Guess I'll have to get started on those dreaded sewing projects after all. Where the heck did we stow the sewing machine?



*Leaving the Caribbean and heading through the Panama Canal*



*A tribute to a new ocean, the Pacific ... and a new adventure*

# Nine of Cups

## Caribbean Stories



The name “Nine of Cups” comes from a tarot card and signifies dreams come true. While wandering in Halifax, Nova Scotia, we came across a beautiful bronze gate with seahorses and a trident. We photographed it and later used it as the template for our logo above.

“Nine of Cups” is a 1986 Liberty 458 cutter

Comments and feedback are always welcome  
Contact us at [nineofcups1@yahoo.com](mailto:nineofcups1@yahoo.com)  
or visit our blog at [www.justalittlefurther.com](http://www.justalittlefurther.com)  
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