

# Log of sailing catamaran Eclipse

Oct 2002 – Mar 2005  
Plymouth UK to Panama

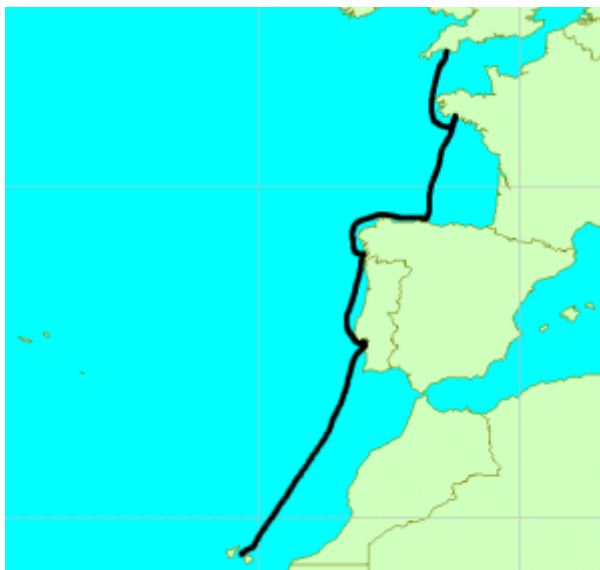


Richard Woods Jetti Matzke

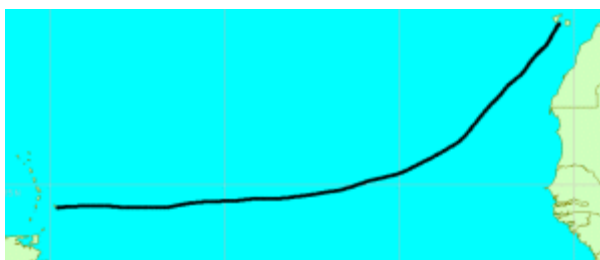
## Table of contents

Sailing Maps	page 3
Sailing south	page 8
Crossing the Atlantic	page 10
Barbados and the Grenadines	page 13
N Caribbean	page 17
The Virgins	page 22
Puerto Rico and the Bahamas	page 26
SE USA	page 32
The Chesapeake	page 35
New York and New England	page 38
Maine	page 40
Bahamas revisited	page 44
Cuba	page 49
Belize and Guatemala	page 56
Land Maps	page 64
Land Trips	page 66
Bay Islands	page 96
Panama	page 103
San Blas	page 115
Appendix	page 125
Photo Albums	page 159

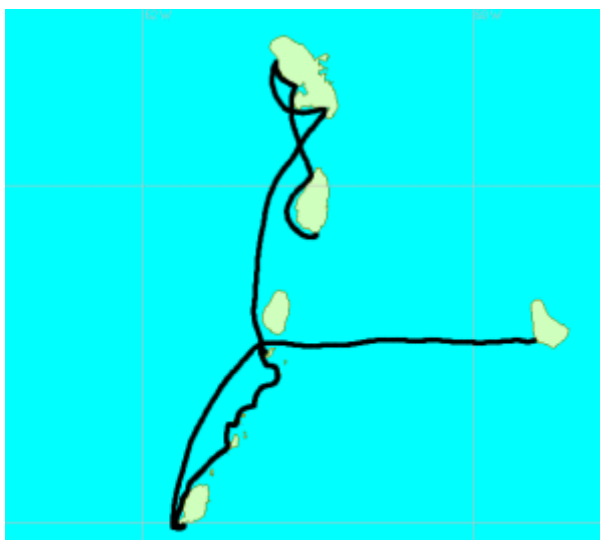
# Sailing Maps



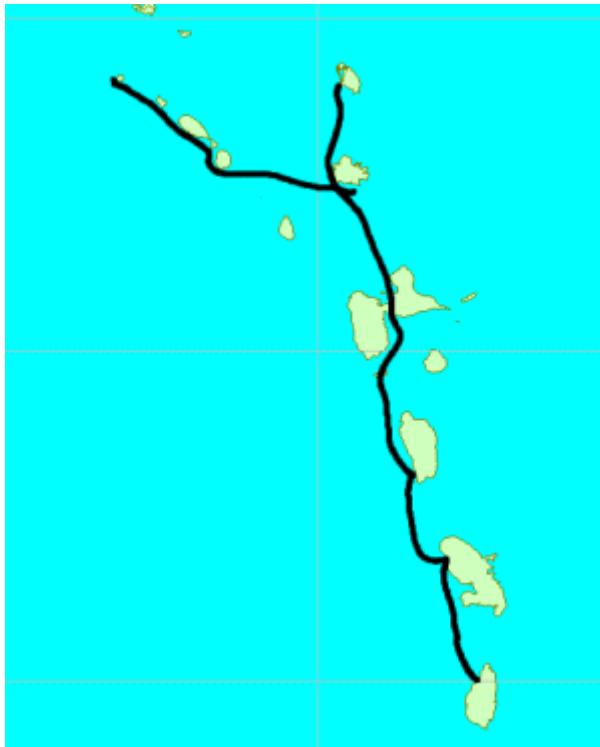
**Sailing South, Plymouth to Canaries Nov 2002**



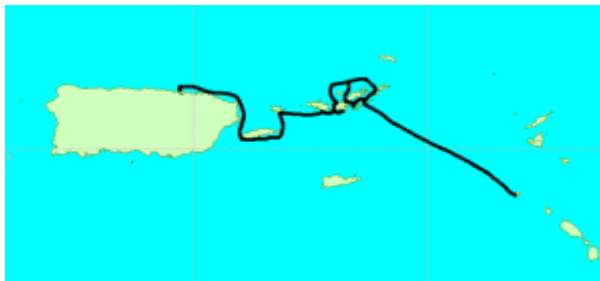
**Crossing the Atlantic Dec 2002**



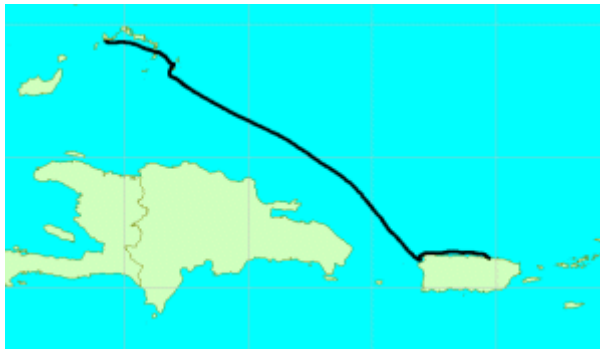
**Barbados and the Grenadines Jan 2003**



**The N Caribbean Feb April 2003**



**The Virgins to Puerto Rico May 2003**

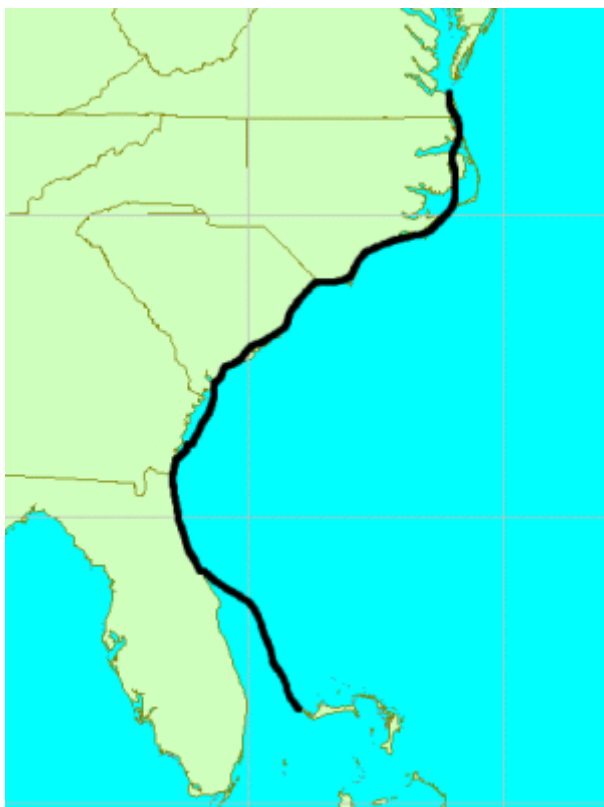


**Puerto Rico to the Bahamas May June 2003**



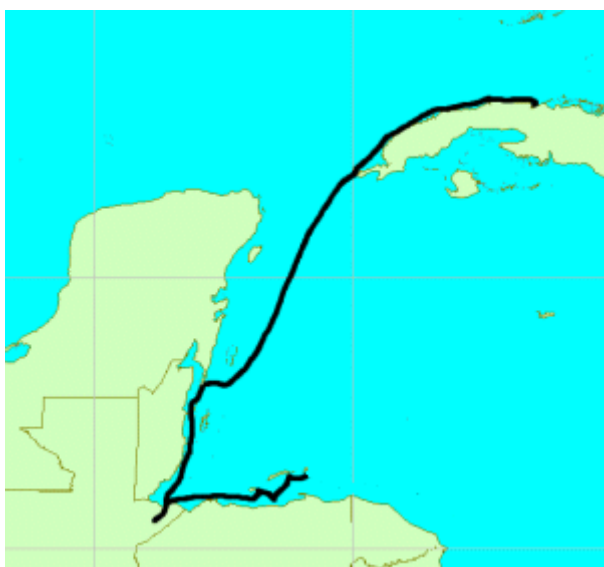


**The Bahamas June 2003**

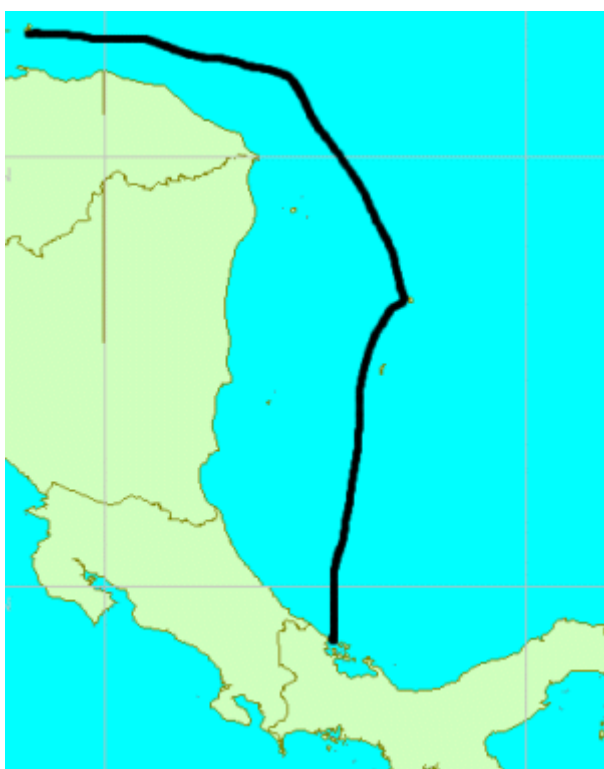


**SE USA July 2003**





**Belize, Guatemala and Bay Islands March Nov 2004**



**Bay Islands, Vivorillo Cays, Providencia, Panama Dec 2004**

## Sailing South November 2002

I am writing this in the Canary Islands, about 1800 miles from Plymouth, and I see we've now been away for exactly 4 weeks. It's probably no surprise to anyone to learn that leaving the UK at the end of October is not a good idea!

During our crossing of the Bay of Biscay we had over 40 knots of wind, but since I have a remote control autopilot we can sit below on watch and still see out all round, which in the cold and rain was great! We arrived in N Spain after a stop in S Brittany and spent a few days cruising (in the rain and to windward - of course!) round the coast to Bayonna.

I like Bayonna, but we only had time for a couple of days there and then we left and motored/sailed to Lisbon and got in just before the gales that partly destroyed the Route de Rhum fleet. The highlight of the trip so far was beating an Outremer 43 catamaran to windward over a 25 mile sail. We got into the next port over 1 hour ahead. The owner had previously said he bought his boat because it was so quick to windward!

We had to wait a few days for the wind to moderate before leaving Lisbon. But even so the seas were still high (4m plus) and there were frequent squalls. So we decided to miss out Madeira and head straight to the Canaries. We did over 190 miles the first day, but then the wind dropped and we motored for 200 miles.... but finished the trip with a good sail into Grasciosa. This is a nice laid-back little island with a small fishing village straight out of a spaghetti western, Clint Eastwood round every corner!



Then it was on to Arecife, where we saw a few catamarans in Porto Noas, but we only stayed there a day as west(!)winds were forecast. And then to Fuerteventura and a very bumpy entrance through the surf.

In fact this was the scariest part of the trip so far. We'd avoided the big breaking waves OK and were lining up for the harbour entrance. I'd just lowered the mainsail and we were motorsailing under jib. Ahead was a 9m monohull, while a 12m power boat had just left the harbour. Then, about 200m from the entrance we saw to our

horror a wall of water rising up beside us. We turned almost 45 deg to the wave but the top 1.5m broke over us. In fact the whole wave went over the top of the boom (2.5m above the water). We got rather wet!! No damage except a shaving mirror broke, but of course as I have a cruising boat I have a spare...

How big is a wall of water? I'd guess it was 4m high plus breaking crest. The boat heeled maybe 20 degrees on the wave slope and then we just carried on motoring. Glad I wasn't in the monohull, as that would have been rolled, the power boat would have been swamped.

It's the first time I've ever had a big wave break like that when sailing on a multihull. It gave me a lot of confidence in the Eclipse and in catamarans in general. Next day we sailed to windward in the rain to Las Palmas. Two things that never happen in the Canaries are: 1) rain - (its rained every day bar one since we've been here) 2) west winds. The ARC started yesterday in a flat calm, then last night they had a W gale.



We met up with Frank Schernikau on his 9m Skua - Swim 2 Birds- he's moored just behind us and had arrived in Las Palmas from Germany having sailed here via Morocco. Then he's also on off across the Atlantic, mind you, he's a tough skilled sailor - he once sailed a Hobie cat round Denmark - so in comparison he finds his Skua quite luxurious.



## Crossing the Atlantic December 2002

Pip Patterson from the Multihull Centre joined us in Tenerife on the 29th November. Next morning, heavily loaded, we left with a good F7 blowing, so ran downwind under just the genoa (sometimes even that was reefed). But that didn't prevent us from regularly doing 14 knots on the GPS with a peak of 16.5 (I prefer to rely on the GPS reading as at speed the log is in aerated water and often over-reads)

The wind slowly moderated, so over the next couple of days we hoisted first a reefed mainsail, then full main and then changed to spinnaker - but then the wind stopped, never to return. For the next 2000 miles the wind stayed light, rarely reaching 15 knots apparent, and was usually under 10.



Before leaving we'd agreed that we'd take the spinnaker down at night, but racing habits diehard and it wasn't long before Pip and I were changing from the small to the big spinnaker at midnight....

Sailing with 3 on board meant we kept watches of 3 on and 6 off which made the sailing very easy and usually even I could sleep for 4 hours at a time. We hand steered for about 1 hour leaving Tenerife, then the autopilot went on, not to be turned off until we arrived off Port St Charles marina in Barbados.

In such gentle conditions one doesn't spend much time actually sailing. It's quite a strange feeling to be reading or sleeping and realise that the boat is sailing along by itself, quite unaided. So we had plenty of free time.

While Corley studied Spanish, Pip and I tried improving our rusty astro navigation. It was a bit difficult as the 2002 almanac was in my (now broken) computer - but with the GPS we did, of course, know exactly where we were - which helped! We managed good noon sights, but using Polaris gave slightly random results, as we didn't have 2002 correction values.

A slight aside here, even uncorrected Polaris gives ones latitude within about 20 miles with no calculation at all. Landlubbers tend to think that one navigates by the sun, in fact the ancient sailors of all cultures used to navigate by the stars as its so much easier to find ones position with them with no need of complex tables or calculations.



Anyway, as we sailed south and west the weather slowly improved, but we still needed foul weather jackets at night even 700 miles from Barbados. Clearly its not just latitude that is important. As one sails west the sea has had longer to warm up and that makes a big difference. (Here in Carlisle Bay the sea temperature is 28C/82F)

200 miles from Barbados we spotted a sail on the horizon ahead. It could have come from anywhere, and have a crew of any nationality, but it turned out to be a Nicholson 35 from Cargreen, only 5 miles from my own mooring in Millbrook! We had a chat, and took photos of each other. That evening they were hull down behind.



With 150 miles to go it was clear that we wouldn't arrive in daylight. Apart from the obvious dangers of arriving at a strange landfall at night we also wanted to arrive during normal customs office hours, so decided on an arrival time of 0900.

I have often done a timed run-in at a race start, but never one that lasted 15 hours! The GPS helped, we kept adjusting our speed by reefing so that the GPS always gave 0900 as the ETA. Even so we were pretty pleased with ourselves when we tied up to the arrival pontoon at 0901, 50 days after leaving England. Of course, we then had to wait 3 1/2 hours for the customs to arrive - but hey we're in the Caribbean now!





Even now, looking back after only a few days at anchor, the days seemed to have merged one into the other. Our abiding memories are of the usual trade wind stuff:- flying fish, dolphins, sunsets, moonlight you can read by, and a long long downwind run.

However I think the thing that has pleased me the most is that nothing broke and Eclipse needs no maintenance, despite having now sailed over 8000 miles. Despite a relatively slow passage, we were all very impressed at how Eclipse sailed in light winds. With little more than ripples on the water, and certainly no white horses, we'd still be doing a steady 5.5 knots.

So there we must leave Eclipse, basking in the warm sunshine and clear waters of Carlisle Bay, Bridgetown, 18 days after leaving the Canaries.





## Barbados and the Grenadines January 2003

Life is full of strange coincidences, quite spooky really. While in Barbados we were invited to a party on the Sail Training Association brig Stavros S Niarchos which had also just made the Atlantic crossing. There were about 40 trainees on board, plus 6 full time crew. Climbing on board the first person I met was Jim Dickins, whose father keeps his Strider Club next to my mooring at the Multihull Centre! Next I met a "gap year" couple, Leo and Kate. Leo's father's boat is currently also ashore in Millbrook while Kate is a member of Cargreen YC (remember the Nic 35 we met in mid Atlantic? - same club) I found the Stavros a fascinating boat. Although only two years old it had been built on traditional lines - no winches or hydraulics.



Barbados is the third most densely populated country in the world, which is quite a shock when you've been at sea for three weeks. Also quite a shock for those anchored in Carlisle Bay was the noise! There are three night clubs on the beach, all competing to see who can play music the loudest/longest. The record was 6pm to 6am! At about 6.15am every day some locals would go for their morning swim round the anchored boats.

So just as we were at last getting to sleep we'd be woken by loud voices just outside. Very disconcerting until we realised where they were coming from! But the plus points were many. Including the incredibly cheap buses. We went all over the island - they even ran on Christmas Day. A friend took us up to the highest point of the island and we walked for miles through the forests while he pointed out the eatable and the poisonous plants etc.

I was last in Barbados in 1978. Then all the day charter boats were converted Baltic Traders (25US and all the rum you can drink). Now there is only one still operating, the "Jolly Roger" All the other day charter boats are catamarans. There must have

been a dozen day sailing up and down the island. A VERY profitable business, most of their custom coming from the cruise ships. 7000 people a day looking for entertainment...



Another coincidence... anchored in front of the yacht club were two Firebird catamarans - Phoenix and Express Service. The latter was the boat I sailed with Graham Goff in 1994 when we won the UK Micromultihull Championships. So the new owners were keen for me to go sailing with them. The Firebird was just as fun and fast as I remembered, and this time the spray off the lee bow was warm!

Leo and Kate wanted a lift to Grenada to meet up with their next boat. Rather than sail direct to Grenada we decided it would be more interesting to sail through the St Vincent/Bequia channel and on down the lee side of the Grenadines.

We left Bridgetown at midday and by 1am had sailed the 100 miles to Bequia, somewhat ahead of schedule. We dropped the spinnaker and cruised quietly down past the islands under mainsail alone. Dawn saw us off Carriacou, the first Grenadian Grenadine (the more northern ones belong to St Vincent. Almost every Caribbean island is a separate country and customs clearance is expensive and usually wastes a lot of time. But we have to be patient, its one of the penalties one has to accept when one is free to sail the world. Why should a customs officer be polite and efficient when with little effort he can be downright rude and obnoxious?)

So again we timed our arrival to suit the customs, which for once were very efficient and we'd cleared in within half an hour. Grenada is a very different island to Barbados. Known as the Spice Island one third of the world's nutmeg comes from here. The island is high and covered with rain forest. Prickley Bay at the south end of the island is the most popular anchorage, the bay is very crowded, and there were probably 60 yachts here for New Year. That's mainly because of the boatyard/shop/internet cafe nestling under the coconut palms.

But once the rain stopped (why do you think it's called a rain forest?) I upped anchor and moved round the corner to the next bay, which was almost deserted - despite the white sandy beach and palm trees. Later I was back in Prickley Bay to race a monohull in a local regatta.



Earlier I wrote about our "slow" passage. Since arriving I've asked boats how long they took to cross. So far I haven't met anyone who did it in less than 20 days. Most cruisers took 22-25 days. A Swan 47 took 22, Ruach the 9m ex Gazprom Russian built catamaran took 20, etc. So maybe our time wasn't so slow after all.



Lilian joined me for a few weeks as we cruised north through the island chain. 25 years ago I found that there were few cruising boats and nearly all the charter boats were large and skippered. Nowadays it's not like that! Everywhere is very crowded. That's interesting for me as a designer, but the Caribbean is no longer somewhere you go to get away from it all.



But having said that, if you sail only a few miles to windward you can usually find a near empty anchorage. Most of the increase comes from the bareboat charter fleets, and most of those are now catamarans. In Salt Whistle Bay there were 13 catamarans but only 12 monohulls anchored for the night.

I had first met Frank Schernikau sailing his Skua from Germany to the Caribbean in Las Palmas, and then met him again in Bequia. He had crossed the Atlantic in 13 1/2 days from the Cape Verdes and kindly invited me for a sail. Despite his liveaboard gear it was a fast sail and great fun, but all very different and much more uncomfortable than the Eclipse, or maybe I'm just too old!



Finally, I have written before about my strange encounters with dolphins. The photo shows not dolphins attacking my boat (as they did in Torbay), but rather it shows a line of dolphins making as much spray as they could and obviously herding fish towards another pod swimming towards them.



### Northern Caribbean February-March 2003

Many people think that its sunny all the time in the Caribbean, and that the sailing is easy. In fact as the photo of me beating to windward into Martinique in pouring rain shows, its not always like that! Also the weather and seas between the islands can be boisterous if not rough.



But the Caribbean its not all about sailing! When I was in Dominica I joined a party walking to the Boiling Lake. We got in the bus at 6am and started walking at 6.45am. Finished walking at 2.45pm (we were allowed a 1/2hr lunch break). Back on boat 4pm - a long day, but worth it! There were 6 of us, plus pregnant guide. 4 French plus English singlehander Barry and me.

Apparently Dominica has the largest such lake in the world. Perhaps it's easiest to quote from the guide book written by Chris Doyle and the "Bible" for cruising in the Caribbean.

*"The hardest and most unusual hike is to the boiling lake. A good local guide is essential as it can be hazardous. It is very muddy. The path takes you through rain forest, over mountain peaks, and into the Valley of Desolation where you hike for an hour and a half over bare earth in hues of reds, yellows and green. Steam belches all around and the rocks feel soft and impermanent. For some while you walk on a muddy ridge about 3' wide with precipices on each side. The wind blows and the earth sighs as it lets off steam."*

All true and very dramatic. But actually not as smelly as other volcanic areas I've visited.





The pool is 97 deg C at the edges and boils in the middle. We were very lucky as the weather cleared as we arrived and we could just see Martinique in the distance.



We felt a long way from civilisation, but were reassured to know that our guide carried a first aid kit, mobile phone etc. But then she told us horror stories about the 2

people who died when standing next to the lake and it blew out poisonous gas, and about those who got trapped overnight (although they were all unguided)!



After Dominica came Guadeloupe where I left the boat for a few weeks and flew back to the UK to catch up on drawing, do the end of year accounts and other office stuff. Then from there it was on to Antigua.

Antigua in late April is the meeting place for sailors of all types. For racers there's the Classics Regatta, followed by a Superyacht event and then the main Caribbean regatta - Race Week. While for cruisers Antigua is the meeting place for all those European cruising sailors who are sailing back to Europe for the summer.

So I had to be there! But first, "Antigua" is really two islands, Antigua and Barbuda. The latter few people outside the Caribbean have heard of, but in fact its nearly as big as Antigua, yet only has a population of 1600 as it is essentially a huge nature reserve. The guide book introduces the island by saying *"For the dedicated into-the-heart-of-nature diehard, Barbuda is heaven on earth.... it has many miles of brilliant turquoise water...the area is teeming with every kind of fish and is excellent for snorkelling ...there are endless pale pink beaches with nary a soul on them. The largest is unbroken for about 11 miles..."* etc, anyway you get the idea. So another "must see".



I buddy boated with a friend for a few days and we spent the time discovering that for once the guide book didn't lie! It was one of the few places I've seen on my trip so far where I'd like to live - not a very likely prospect though, unfortunately.

All too soon it was back to Antigua and the start of Classics Week. Boats of all sizes were there, as anything goes - providing it's a "classic", or might be one one day, or just looks like one. We went out to watch one race and I did my usual "how close can we get to a 130ft multi-million dollar yacht?" trick. I had practised during the 150th America's Cup regatta 2 years ago (see website for details, photos etc) so knew what to do.



Note the height of the boom above deck - and that's the mizzen!!

So, how close is close? Close enough to get spray on the camera from one yacht's bow wave! The J Class Velsheda led the fleet closely followed by a very well sailed schooner, Windrose, sporting a huge genoa and mainsail. Unfortunately as a schooner it couldn't point as high as the sloop Velsheda, but was quicker offwind.



That's not a coffee grinder! It's a coffee table!!!



After the excitement of the racing it was down to earth and another of those strange coincidences that keep happening on this trip. We went for a meal up on Shirley Heights, overlooking English Harbour and the "in" place to go on a Sunday night. We joined the hundreds of people crowded round a few tables when suddenly the guy next to me said "you're Richard Woods aren't you?" He turned out to be Simon Laight, son of Richard Laight, boss of Palamos Boatbuild (builders of the Striders, Banshees, Flicas etc in the 1980's). I hadn't seen him since he was 10, 12 years ago (when he was a baby Lilian and I used to baby sit him). He'd just circumnavigated S America as mate on a 90ft race boat and was off the next day to sail non stop to New York. If he'd sat on another table I'd never have known he was in Antigua.



Next morning I kept my appointment in the "cruisers corner" of Falmouth Harbour. First boat I saw was the 32ft steel Wylo which belongs to Nick Skeates, someone I've known for years, but rarely meet as he's always off sailing (4 times round the world so far). He sailed from the UK to Antigua purely to watch Classics Week, he'd only arrived a few days earlier and was off back to the UK immediately after the racing finished - see what I mean about someone who sails all the time! So in no time we had a crowd of cruising sailors on board - I counted 6 dinghies behind my boat at one time - swapping stories and lies and trying to avoid work, as one does.



## **The Virgins April 2003**

You'll remember that when I was in the Canaries I wrote that it never rained there, nor did it ever blow from the west. But of course it did for us! Although in the Caribbean it often rains, it never, ever, blows from the west, and there's never a complete calm. So guess what! When I came to leave Antigua I sailed back to St Johns to buy food and I sailed downwind into the harbour. That meant a westerly was blowing. Next day I was off to Nevis, about 40 miles west of Antigua. Rather dreading a long beat instead of a fast run I was only partially relieved to find I had to motor the whole way in a rather sloppy sea with not a cloud in the sky. With no wind and unbroken sunshine I got rather hot!

Initially I had thought of calling at Montserrat, but the volcano there was rather too active for my taste. A large plume of dust, at least 5000 feet high hung over the island and the decks and sea became covered with a light covering of ash. So I didn't stop. Nevis and St Kitts are two islands but one nation. I have to say I was rather disappointed with Nevis. It's a very small island totally dominated by an extinct volcano with a small town at its foot. Mind you, I did see most of it as customs clearance meant visiting three different offices each a mile apart. But there was a small sandy beach with palm trees and a hotel.



Next morning I sailed the 5 miles over to St Kitts, anchoring in Frigate Bay where one of the famous battles of the Napoleonic wars took place (due to a major blunder by two British ships - they hit each other! - the battle was a draw). I was even less impressed with St Kitts. So far it's the only place on this cruise where I have got oil on my dinghy when going ashore. So again I didn't stay long, but coasted slowly along past the island and on past Statia (another small island that is little more than an oil terminal - there were 7 tankers anchored off it) and onto Saba.

Now Saba is different! The island is about 2 miles in diameter and like Nevis is an extinct volcano. But it is 3000 feet high and there are sheer cliffs all round so there are no beaches or proper landing sites. How 1400 people live there I don't know, that they can survive at all seems impossible. All the houses are perched on top of the cliffs, with no fields in sight, just a few goats and a small fleet of fishing boats. I know that in other countries cities are often built on mountain tops, but it's always possible to

get down to the real world. On Saba there is only the mountain top. I spent the night in Ladder Bay, where one used to have to climb 800 steps to the cliff top (the customs house is half way up).



Watching the sun set into the sea it seemed like the end of the world, which in a way it was, as Saba was my last stop in the Leeward Islands for next morning at 4am I left for the British Virgin Islands. At first light I hoisted the spinnaker and dropped the mainsail. A glorious run followed and even though the wind moderated 20 miles off the Virgins I still made the 90 odd miles in 12 hours.

It's easy to see why the Virgins are the bare boat charter capital of the world, but how can I describe them to an English sailor? Imagine if the Scilly Isles were as big as the Solent, the weather was hot and sunny every day, there was no tide or waves and the wind was always constant in direction. On second thoughts, these days probably more English people sail in the Virgins than visit the Scillies so maybe I'll rephrase that and say the Scillies is like a small version of the Virgins (but with tide, fog, unpredictable winds, no all weather anchorage etc). Because of the angle of the islands to the prevailing winds one just reaches to and fro between them. It only takes a couple of weeks to sail round all the islands and do as much snorkelling and beach sitting as one wants. All in all an ideal vacation hot - spot.

As a result there are, naturally, hundreds of boats (about half are catamarans though). Many areas round the islands are protected reefs and anchoring is forbidden. But there is always somewhere. I'm writing this in Virgin Gorda, a mile from the world famous Bitter End Yacht Club (actually a hotel). From my chart table I can count 70 masts off

the hotel, yet I am anchored in a sheltered cove with only two other boats for company.

I was sailing along today in a light following wind when I spied a familiar looking boat on the horizon. I gybed over to get closer and sure enough, it was the Norseman 43 "Kinahu" that I had sailed on in the 2000 Cape to Rio Race. For over three hours we sailed close together. You will recall in my Cape to Rio report that I called Kinahu a slow boat. Today proved it. Eclipse' bottom is now very foul, I am using a small cruising genoa and a old Banshee mainsail cut down to the first reef, yet despite that, and never mind the fact that Eclipse is also 11 feet shorter, Kinahu did not pull away. One of those times I wished I were still using my racing sails. I am always surprised at the "speed" of the charter cats. Yesterday I easily beat a Belize 43 to windward in light winds, despite being massively undercanvassed.



And of course I met Philippe and his family on their Outremer 43 - again! That makes it Spain, Portugal, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Antigua and the Virgins. "We can't go on meeting like this". Especially when this time we were moored stern to the shore and, being alone, I had quite a run around to make sure the anchoring and swimming ashore with a line went smoothly - especially with friends watching! That was on Norman Island, apparently the inspiration for R L Stevenson's famous book Treasure Island.



My last stop in the BVI was on Jost Van Dyke. The customs office here must be one of the world's most scenic. You walk up a brilliant white sand beach; go between two coconut palms and into a beautifully painted wooden building to meet a smiling officer. For once I didn't mind clearing.



It was only a short sail from here to St John, one of the US Virgin Islands and the first place I had to use my expensive US visa. Most of St John is a National Park and thus is undeveloped. There are dozens of boats and hundreds of tourists at the west end, but as always I sailed 5 miles to windward and the crowds disappeared. I spent a couple of days in a deserted bay relaxing and snorkelling before sailing over to the cruise ship capital of St Thomas. Immediately I knew I was in the US! BIG cars, HUGE outboard engines, noise and crowds. Also my first experience of seaplanes. Not only did I have to look around for passing boats but now I also had to keep an eye in the sky.





### **Puerto Rico and the Bahamas May 2003**

Mark Williams, an Eclipse builder from Puerto Rico, joined me here and together we sailed to the Spanish Virgins (actually American). After a 20 mile sail we arrived at the small island of Culebra where again I had to clear US customs. I filled in lots of forms - the most I've ever done anywhere! and paid 37USD (the most I've ever paid), what for I never really understood, but I THINK I can now travel anywhere in the US without contacting customs again (but I may be wrong!). Culebra was familiar to Mark as he used to fly small cargo planes there, so he knew the best bays to visit.

One of the Spanish Virgins is the island of Vieques, which to us was a highlight. That was because for the last 60 years it's been a US live firing range. The navy moved out on May 1st and we arrived May 5th. So we were fairly confident that we were the first yacht to visit. Very definitely the first British yacht.



We anchored in a lovely white sand bay, but didn't dare go ashore or even swim. The signs saying, "unexploded ordnance" put us off a bit! All around were blown up tanks, scrap guns and the remnants of military occupation. In years to come it will probably be as developed as the rest of the Caribbean but for now it's a step back in time.



After months of sailing into crowded anchorages and of seeing sails all around it felt very strange to be the only boat in sight.

And then it was on to PR proper. As Mark lives in the capital San Juan (in the north) and I wanted to see his boat, we went there rather than following the usual "cruisers route" along the south coast. The entrance to San Juan was a real surprise for me. I

thought I was back in Plymouth! We sailed past a 17th century fort, just like Plymouth's Citadel, and on past a big grassy bank, just like Plymouth Hoe. But whereas in Plymouth the Hoe ends with a Holiday Inn here there is another fort. And of course Sir Francis Drake is the big baddy whereas in his homeport of Plymouth he's a hero!



Mark and his family entertained me royally in Puerto Rico, taking me to all the sights, not to mention feeding me, doing my laundry while I sent emails, etc etc. I thought the capital, San Juan, a fascinating place, almost "any town USA" but not quite - for a start most people's first language is Spanish.

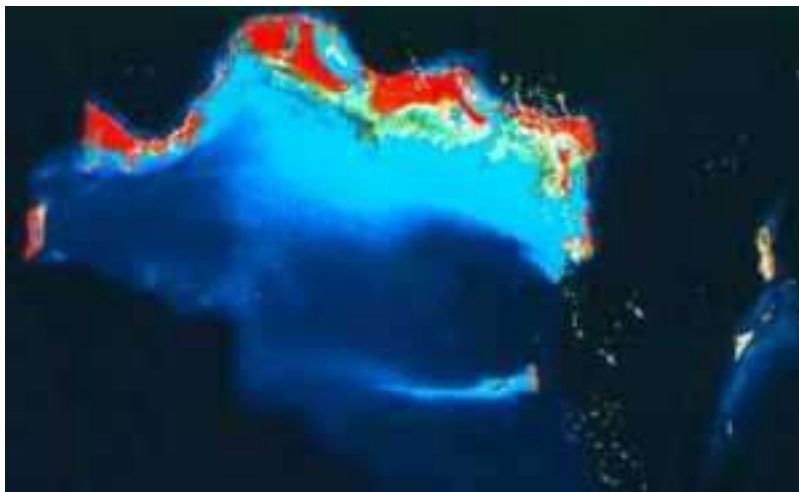
Furthermore, everything is surprisingly old! Mark and Sica run a shop "Spicy Caribbee" located in the heart of the old city. Amazingly, when I looked up San Juan on my World Atlas CD there was a picture of their shop! That's because it was built in the early 1500's and thus is one of the oldest buildings in San Juan (if not in the New World). I realized that before it was destroyed by bombing in WW2 Plymouth probably looked much like San Juan. Of course there are plenty of "no go" areas in San Juan, just like there are in Miami, Amsterdam or even Plymouth. But such areas are so obvious and easy to avoid that I never felt threatened despite the dire warnings I'd had.

But eventually I managed to drag myself away. Mark, ever a glutton for punishment, agreed to sail with me for another week. Something I was very glad about as the next leg of my trip was 350 miles to the Turks and Caicos Islands (the where? aren't they in the S Pacific?). These islands are geographically part of the Bahamas but politically completely separate and now a major tax free haven.

But first we had to get there. The usual strong easterly trades were blowing and we had a very fast sail along the north coast of PR. As always when sailing downwind I had the auto pilot on and only the spinnaker hoisted. After a couple of hours I realized the autopilot was having too much fun and I took over steering. After all, I had built Eclipse to sail, not just to live on. And indeed I did have fun as well. Handsteering in big waves and a strong wind is always enjoyable and usually quicker than leaving the autopilot to do the work. As a result, 6 1/2 hours later we had anchored for the night at the NW tip of PR, 60 miles from San Juan - not bad!

A police launch woke us at 5am wondering what we were doing (the west coast of PR is the main landing site for illegal Dominican Republic migrants). But never mind, we planned to get up early anyway. The trades were still blowing but with a 2-3 day sail

ahead we didn't push hard and so sailed under main and genoa. Late that evening we saw the coast of DR in the distance, while nearby to the east was one of the deepest parts of any ocean. At over 8900m deep Mt Everest could fit in the hole and not poke out above the surface. Next day the wind slowly moderated, so much so that at one stage we spent 7 hours motoring. The Bahamas banks extend many miles south east, although not high enough to become land. It seemed very strange to be sailing in water less than 10m deep when over 60 miles from land.



The Turks and Caicos from space. The pale blue is 6', 2m deep; the dark blue is several miles deep!

After another night at sea early the next morning gave us our first sight of the Turks and Caicos, Salt Cay. 5 miles further on was Grand Turk and we anchored off the main (only!) "town" exactly where the charts and pilot said the customs office was. Wrong! We learnt that we had to go back to the south end of the island to clear in. A very expensive, very slow, taxi ride took us to the wrong building. But eventually we paid our 5US and were officially entered and given a week's cruising permit.

Mark bought a ticket home and then we visited the museum. One never knows, sometimes small museums are very disappointing (like the ones in Martinique) other times, like here, there's just too much to take in. Maybe it was because we were the only visitors that day and so we had the curator as a personal guide. In any event it was all really interesting. The museum is home to the remains of the oldest shipwreck in the New World, not actually one of Columbus' ships but definitely one that sank before 1520. Ancient wrought iron cannon, scary surgical instruments, the rudder pintles etc etc - and that was just downstairs...

Next day in no wind we left the Turks and headed for the Caicos. The waters round the islands are incredibly deep, as I've said, but the Caicos group of islands rise up from a shallow sandbank. The join with the deep ocean is abrupt. Within a couple of boat lengths the water depth goes from 3500m to 30m and then 2m. Imagine being a fish swimming on the bottom and looking up at a sheer 3500m high cliff - no wonder they call it "The Wall". But more incredible was the fact that we could see the sea bed at 30m (over 100ft). Imagine being able to see the bottom all over the Solent or even mid Channel. Sailing in Holland or the Thames estuary would never be the same again.



We sailed 50 miles over the Caicos bank, the wind slowly rising until we were doing a steady 9 knots on the GPS. "Too scary" I thought as the water was only 2m deep and there were coral heads everywhere. So down with the sails and on with the engine as we entered Sapodilla Bay on Providenciales. This island we thought a huge disappointment, as it was one big, dusty building site. There's no income tax or any other personal tax at all on the island, which obviously encourages many rich people to build houses there. But surely there still has to be some quality of life? It can't all be about money.

Mark flew home and I sailed onto the Bahamas proper. In a strong SE wind I sailed to the nearest Bahamian island, Mayaguana, but there was too big a swell to go to the main harbour. Instead I went round to the north side, where the swell was still bad enough, but worse was the thunderstorm that night. Normally I don't worry about them, but this one was special and I have to say it counts as one of the 3 worst moments of the trip so far (after the big wave in the Canaries and nearly being run down by a fishing boat in mid Atlantic). The wind blew from all directions and at one stage got up to over 40 knots, but I could see or hear nothing but the rain (which at least flattened the seas). Totally disorientating, while I've never seen so much lightning so close and for so long (over 3 hours).

The Bahamian islands themselves are not much to look at. Most are under 100ft high and covered with low shrubs, there are no proper trees. It's the water and beaches that make the Bahamas special. Every island is surrounded by a brilliant white sand beach, so bright it hurts the eyes. The snorkelling is amazing, with lots of "aquarium fish" (far more than in the West Indies), incredible corals and crystal clear visibility.

I day sailed through the islands eventually reaching Georgetown in the Exuma chain on May 31st. This is a mecca for US cruisers, over 400 boats stayed here last Christmas. I can see why, it's pretty and a very safe anchorage whatever the wind direction. But now as the hurricane season approaches most cruisers have left, leaving maybe 50 boats in the whole harbour.

So most people missed my triple celebration! First, Eclipse had her second birthday. Then as we entered the Bahamas 10,000 miles came up on the log. Finally, I counted up all the cruising I'd ever done and realized that the Bahamas was the 40th country I have sailed in - and I haven't sailed in the Pacific yet!

My brother flew in for 10 days of "real" sailing. He's an expert dinghy sailor (Olympic trialist etc) but rarely sails on any big boat and had never cruised or lived on board before. Tony is also a saxophone player and needed to practise several hours a day (is that why I ended the week with a bad earache?). However, initially he felt he had to steer while the boat was sailing and it took him 3 days to realise that the autopilot could do the job just as well.

It was 120 miles to Nassau where Tony would be leaving which gave us plenty of time to sail up through the Exuma Cays and see the sights. I've already said that the Cays (pronounced keys) are not much to look at in themselves. But there's plenty to see all the same. Some days we'd sail "outside" ie in the rougher deep water to windward of the Cays. On others we'd sail in the flat water on the lee side, but where it was shallow and reef strewn. Very few people live on the Exumas outside

Georgetown and we saw very few other cruising boats - a real change from the Caribbean.



There are three "must see" Cays in the Exumas. We've all seen the Thunderball Grotto even if we hadn't realised it, for its stars in the Bond film of that name, as well as in Splash etc. It's an underwater cavern, just off Staniel Cay, and is easily reached at low water by ducking under a limestone cliff. The local dive shops feed the fish so there were hundreds of them, also, of course, more than just a few other swimmers! I just wish I could take better underwater photos.

The Bahamas were a mecca for drug smugglers in the 1970's until the government got its act together and cleared them out. The most notorious of them was Carlos Lehder who bought Normans Cay to use as his base. Although all is quiet and peaceful now the evidence of its previous history is very obvious - a semi submerged drugrunners plane lies in the anchorage. It rained the whole time we were there, but hey, we're English and so rain didn't stop us from snorkelling over the wreck. We moored the dinghy to the tail fin of the plane - that was a first! The plane was still surprisingly complete although almost buried in sand. The current round it was strong otherwise we'd have been able to sit in the pilots seat (shades of the Red Baron!)



The Exumas have always been home to villains, for the next stop was at the "Pirates Lair" home in the 1700's to Edward Teach - better known as "Blackbeard" - amongst others. It was tricky navigating into the anchorage with a very strong current trying to push us onto the rocks. One assumes the pirates were warped in. No way could we have sailed Eclipse into the bay. (Although the tidal range in the Bahamas is not great the currents between the Cays and rocks can run at several knots.)



Finally, at the north end of the Exuma chain lies Allan's Cay, home to dozens of iguanas. These are apparently a species unique to the island; they were very curious and came out to see us as soon as we landed (lots of people feed them despite warnings about being bitten if they do).



How the other half live - Paradise Island Nassau

Then it was a 25 mile sail across the banks to New Providence. We didn't fancy stopping in Nassau, which is not just the capital of the Bahamas but also a major package tourist and cruise ship destination. So instead we sailed past the hotels and ships to Lyford Bay. Allegedly this is one of the most exclusive residential areas in the world (it looked the part) so we knew we'd fit in! Actually the bay was beautiful and well protected. The marina staff were welcoming and there was a good supermarket nearby. With a day to spare we eventually got into Nassau for a days sightseeing and shopping (after waiting 90 frustrating minutes we discovered the buses only ran every 2 hours).

## SE USA June July 2003

I planned to be in S Florida for the last week of June so after Tony left I headed north to the Berry Islands and then West End on Grand Bahama. A cold front was forecast to move south over the area. Not quite the weather I wanted! Fronts on the US east coast are the equivalent of low pressures in Europe. Had it been called an "active front" I probably wouldn't have left.

I started with a strong south wind but that went round to the NW as the front approached. Big squalls and torrential rain reminded me of the Lisbon-Canaries passage which we did in November in the aftermath of the "Route de Rhum" gale. But this time I had the Gulf Stream behind me, running at nearly 3 knots. So I made good time until I could see the light show off the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, where, at 3 am, the wind stopped and I started to motor. By dawn there was a thick fog, no wind and a glassy sea. At 8am I had a close encounter, not with an alien, but with a tug and barge. Fortunately we both had radar.

Closing the coast it began to pour with rain and so altogether it became the most unpleasant sail I'd had since leaving Europe. I might as well have stayed in the UK; it was real English Channel sailing! So much so that when I eventually anchored I seriously thought about lighting my solid fuel stove but then thought "NO! I'm in the "Sunshine State" and its midsummer's day!" So I had a hot soup instead...

I had arrived in the oldest continuously inhabited European city in the USA. The name may come as a surprise, for it's not Jamestown or New Amsterdam, which you might expect, but rather its St Augustine, Florida, which was founded by the Spanish in the early 1500's. (And like San Juan was somewhere else that Francis Drake attacked in the late 1500's)



Furnace for heating shot last used to fire at Sir Francis Drake

I spent a week in the St Augustine/Jacksonville area seeing friends and doing boat jobs before sailing off NE towards Cape Hatteras and the southern Chesapeake. I wanted to avoid doing much sailing in the Inter Coastal Waterway, mainly because I'd done most of it before. So I knew I'd have to motor much of the way and that lots of it was boring while there would be hundreds of jet skis and speedboats to avoid. However the ICW does cut the corner at Cape Hatteras and I did want to cruise in the Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds.

So when I left St Marys I headed out to sea hoping to make Georgetown in S Carolina in one go. At first there was no wind so I motored, then in the space of a few hours I went from motor to spinnaker to full plain sail to reefed genoa and no mainsail - all with no loss of speed. Big thunderstorms were approaching and so I decided that Charleston was a better bet than Georgetown even though it meant another 100 miles of ICW. Arriving at dawn I had a short rest and then spent the rest of the day motoring, so I was only a few miles short of Georgetown that evening.

Next day I went up the Georgetown river which is probably the prettiest part of the ICW, with lots of cypress trees, ospreys etc; the next stage is boring though, as it leads through the back of suburban Myrtle Beach - just miles of peoples back yards.



July 4th was spent avoiding jetbikes during the day and watching fireworks at Cape Fear in the evening. It was then onto Beaufort in N Carolina which is the nicest town I'd been to. With hindsight I should have stayed longer... But I was keen to press on and next day motored through the canal towards Oriental and the Pamlico Sound.



Lightning struck just after taking this photo



That's when disaster struck!! There had been daily thunderstorms since I'd arrived in the US and my main concern was always the line squall that proceeded them. So when I saw two squall lines approaching I slowed down and prepared to anchor until they passed. But almost immediately I was hit by a flash of lightning.

The majority of lightning hits are actually near misses and normally only the VHF and wind instruments get destroyed. In my case it was different - I suffered a direct hit. There was a huge bang and sparks flew off the top of the mast (later I found the masthead lights and VHF aerial had vapourised while only the wind speed bracket remained.)

People on shore saw the strike and told me it was very dramatic. The engine stopped and then would only run on one cylinder. The fridge died and the only instruments I had left were a hand held VHF and handheld GPS. The autopilot was not actually connected as I was hand steering but it was near the rudder and I have to assume that the lightning earthed through the rudder stocks as the autopilot case had a large hole burnt in it. Later I found scorch marks on the headlining under the stanchion sockets so presumably the life lines went live as well. My personal organiser, the barometer, clock radio and of course the compasses were also confused. Clearly I had a major problem but at least I could still sail.

After recovering my composure I sailed the remaining few miles to Oriental and got a tow into harbour by another English singlehander. Fixing the engine was the main priority as I still had a lot of canals and rivers to get through. Fortunately that was quickly repaired and I was off again. The next few days were very hot and humid - on one day the radio warned listeners to stay indoors in air-conditioned rooms - I of course was motoring across a calm Albemarle Sound (I drank a gallon of water that day).



Eventually I arrived at the town of Chesapeake and the Great Landing lock. This was a nice (free) stop so I stayed 3 days, then had a few hours motor down through the Norfolk navy base to anchor off the town. Next day disaster struck again. The engine refused to start and I had to sail through the docks to Willoughby Bay. Once there I was towed into Rebel Marina by owner Dave, who sails a Heavenly Twins catamaran. Two people had rightly recommended this marina, as it was a really friendly place. It appeared the engine failure was another one due to the lightning strike so after getting the engine repair organised I had nothing to do for a few days.

Long time friend Jetty had flown over to sail up the east coast of the USA, but for the first 8 days of her visit we never left the dock...

## The Chesapeake July 2003

We realised that we would have a very frustrating week if we just sat on the boat waiting for the engine to be repaired so we hired a car and explored the east coast of the Chesapeake Bay. This is a very rural area, probably little different now than it was 100 years ago. Definitely not the America I'd got used to. Indeed I even saw my first farm (growing peanuts) since leaving the Bahamas.

We also had time to visit the re-enactment town of Williamsburg. This colonial town has been recreated with 88 original buildings and dozens more reconstructions. All the guides are dressed in period costume and profess to know nothing newer than 1770...

However, for me the highlight of my time in Norfolk was a visit to the Maritime Museum and in particular to the small craft section. There I saw a 1920's International Moth (very different from the ones I used to sail!) and a pre WW1 International Canoe. Those of you who, like me, have a copy of Tony Marchaj's first book will know the sailing hydrofoil Monitor which was built in the 1950's and allegedly sailed/flew at 30 knots.



Much to my surprise the Monitor was also in the museum. A short video showed it being assembled and sailing. Probably not at 30 knots, but certainly it was fast and stable. It was all fascinating stuff and we only left when the museum closed for the night.

Sadly we were still dogged by thunderstorms so each evening I'd disconnect all the electrics and put them in my "Faraday cages" (actually the pressure cooker and oven) Probably this was only a psychological move, but I was taking no chances. We still had no fridge and found that, even with ice, it was very hard to keep any food fresh for more than 24 hours, which was especially annoying as the nearest shops were nearly 2 miles away.

Eventually, though, the engine was repaired, but we still didn't leave as the marina was organising a fun race and crab feast for the following weekend. About 40 boats and 300 people took part. Although we were first to cross the finish line, paid our

penalty (I had to give three reasons why monohulls are better than catamarans) and bribed the judges (Jetti cooked them cakes during the race - as per normal Woods Designs procedures) we still didn't win the race. But the music and food were excellent!

So after 10 days at Rebel Marina we left and had a great sail on the first day running north under spinnaker at up to 9 knots on the GPS. Heavy rain and thunderstorms (again!) as we approached Annapolis reduced visibility to only a few hundred yards, so it was a good thing I'd been there before!

I like Annapolis; there are lots of boats to look at, it's a nice old town and there are plenty of free, safe anchorages. Best of all we found a fridge repair man.



After a few days in Annapolis we left one misty wet morning and motored north to the end of the Chesapeake and then through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal into Delaware Bay. (The Americans are lucky; they can travel nearly the whole 2000 mile east coast without ever going out to sea). We anchored to wait for the tide to change and a storm front to blow through. In fact it got windy enough to have breaking waves on the foredeck even at anchor.

Next morning it was up at 5am to catch the tide south. We motored and then sailed and almost made it to port before the first thunderstorm of the day. After a choppy beat round Cape May (into the first real waves for 1200 miles) we anchored off the town. This has lots of nice Victorian era wood houses, but we found it all very touristy with no proper shops at all. It's very hard to live in the US without a car!

Thick fog kept us harbour bound for another day, but it appeared to clear next morning, so it was on north into the Atlantic Ocean and up the New Jersey coast. But the fog came back with a vengeance and we sailed all day with the radar on until we reached Atlantic City, the Las Vegas of the east coast. There we anchored in a very safe lagoon and that night watched the light shows on the casinos. Then it was on again to Sandy Hook, which is only 10 miles south of New York. This we found to be a very nice town with a good anchorage behind the breakwater and shops, laundry, theatre, cinema etc all within easy walking distance.





I knew the winds would be light on the US east coast, but I still didn't expect to have to motor nearly all the way from Norfolk to New York. However it was a passage making part of the trip and it is the area north and east of New York that I really wanted to see. To be honest I can't recommend the coast from Florida to Norfolk to sailors, indeed I can see why the vast majority of boats are power boats. There is nowhere to sail to, the channels are too narrow for sensible sailing and of course there are the thunderstorms...

So as we sat in Sandy Hook we prepared to travel through New York, another of the world's major cities I've been to by boat.



## **New York and New England August 2003**

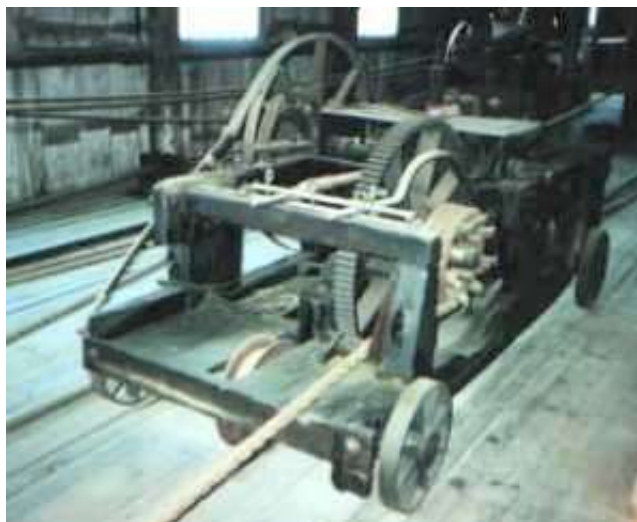
Catching the tide correctly at the aptly named Hell Gate (at the junction of the Harlem and East Rivers) determines when to sail through New York. The pilot book warns that you must pass through here about 3 hours after low water. Fortunately for us that meant leaving Sandy Hook at a civilised 9am, and we managed to sail most of the way up The Narrows, towards what became an increasingly dramatic skyline. As we passed under the Verrazano suspension bridge the skyscrapers on Manhattan Island came in sight and, slightly to the left, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Rain was threatening and the visibility was not great but for once it wasn't too hot. Off Battery Point we spent some time taking the obvious photos, dodging trip boats etc but decided not to sail the extra mile to Ground Zero. Those who know my web site well will have seen the photo of a Mira sailing close by the Statue of Liberty. Now there are exclusion zones round all the major landmarks and the only sensible yacht moorings are some way up the Hudson River.



Then at 3pm we started to motor up the East River past all the places I'd heard about but never seen. Under the Brooklyn Bridge, past Wall Street and the United Nations buildings, with the Empire State building surprisingly all by itself and not really in Manhattan at all. Between the Lower East Side and the Bronx the tide was really running hard, in fact at one point we had 9.5 knots on the GPS even though we were only motoring at 4. So we shot through New York and out the other side in little more than an hour and anchored for the night in Little Neck Bay, the first bay in Long Island Sound. Immediately a boat came up to us - "Oh no! Someone wants money or will tell us to move" but instead it was "Welcome to Little Neck we hope you enjoy your stay."

After a gentle day sail to Northport Bay (a day when we never used the engine, for the first time since leaving the Bahamas!) it was on to New Haven, not much of a harbour in itself, but home to Yale University. Both Jetti and I wanted to visit the Peabody Natural History Museum with its amazing collection of dinosaurs including the only "real" brontosaurus skeleton in the world. I'm afraid you'll have to go there yourself to find out why all the other ones are false!

45 miles further on was Mystic, famous for its working maritime museum and boatyard. We were able to anchor just north of the Seaport Museum and rowed ashore to spend the whole day walking round the boat yard, visiting the whaling ships and dozens of other exhibits. One hall, which I found fascinating, was an undercover ropewalk from the 1850's. Although there are the remains of an old ropewalk just opposite the Multihull Centre in Millbrook I had no real idea how ropes were actually made. Having seen all the equipment I still don't quite get it - but I know it involved a lot of walking backwards!! Then in another shed, dedicated to small yachts, we saw a dayboat built for F D Roosevelt before he contracted polio, a grp dinghy built in 1949 and one of the very first propeller driven steam launches.



Leaving late next morning it was foggy again with visibility less than 2 miles. We were going to Block Island, which marks the east end of Long Island Sound but didn't actually see it until we were only a mile off. Radar helped! It was a Saturday, so it was very crowded and we spent 20 minutes motoring around just looking for somewhere to anchor. Like most people we chose the sheltered western shore - but next morning an unforecast easterly gale had boats dragging all around us. So instead of going ashore we spent the day on anchor watch, for the rocks were only yards from our stern.

Newport, the self styled "City of Sails" was a big disappointment. Although there were lots of boats to look at - especially six 12 metres out on day charters, and many old buildings in the town, there was no sign of the water from the main street and no real boating businesses (no proper chandlers for example), just lots of non-boating tourist shops. As a case in point, the Museum of Yachting had lots of old black and white photos of pre war race boats and not much else, while the section dealing with the OSTAR and transatlantic races had not one photo of a trimaran! It was all very disappointing, especially when compared to the Mystic and Norfolk museums.

We then had a great sail under spinnaker up the Buzzards Bay to Onset, a charming little town with a beautiful, but very crowded, sandy beach. A few miles further on is Cape Cod, which is a huge curving peninsula, but once again it is possible to cut the corner by going through a canal. The Cape Cod Canal is only 10 miles long and so, with a very fast current under us, it didn't take long before we were reaching north in the Atlantic Ocean once again.

## Maine August September 2003

As we sail along there are three ways we choose the next port. First, it must be a safe anchorage, second, there should be food shops within easy walking distance (surprisingly hard to find in the USA!) and finally it is chosen if it is a scenic/historic place or just has lots of boats for me to look at!

Obviously as I come from the "real" Plymouth I had to visit the landing site of the Pilgrim Fathers regardless of the shops (there were none) and anchorage (fortunately we were the only boat anchored in the only safe spot). Going ashore we left the dinghy tied to the stern of the replica Mayflower and walked a few yards to see "Plymouth Rock". This is a bit like the "Mayflower Steps" in Plymouth UK, ie its just a tourist attraction and has no real relevance to historical truth! I thought Plymouth USA with its sand dunes and shallow waters was more like Holland than SW England (of course many of the Pilgrims originally came from Holland so they would have been quite at home there).



Its not really practical to buy all the charts and pilots you need before going off on a long cruise - especially when you plan to coastal sail as I am doing. Charts are heavy and bulky; while you never know quite where you will sail to, so don't know exactly which charts to buy. But of course the main reason for not buying in advance is that charts are very expensive! So it's very common to swap charts with other cruisers as you go along.

I have been very lucky on this trip as I was able to borrow the Spanish, Portuguese and Caribbean charts I needed from Jane - who did a world cruise a few years ago with husband David before working as my office manager. Since leaving the Caribbean I have been sailing with charts borrowed from Alan and Glenda Morris. Alan is an Australian who sailed to the UK a few years ago, settled in Millbrook, married and helped build the prototype Savannah 26 before sailing to the Caribbean and USA. HE got the charts from Ian and Brownie, also Millbrook based catamaran sailors (a 45 ft Kelsall).

So my US charts are at least third hand. I spend ages planning my route - reading the pilots and studying the charts. I decide on the ideal harbours and check their exact location on a chart, only to find a big anchor sign showing that Ian or Alan had been there before me. Indeed often as we sail along I find their waypoint positions already marked very close to the course we are sailing.

Back to the sailing. The last newsletter had us disappointed tourists in Plymouth. A day sail north of Plymouth is Boston and just north of there is the popular sailing area of Gloucester, Marblehead (which, as the guide book warned, was far too crowded for us) and Salem (well known for its witch trials). But just round the corner from these famous three is the small village of Manchester, which we found delightful (despite anchoring during a thunderstorm's line squall - again).

It boasted not only a very pretty anchorage up a small creek, but also a big supermarket (which was close enough to the docks for us to be able to use the shopping trolley to wheel our groceries to the dinghy). It also had a laundrette and a library just around the corner and an efficient, cheap rail link to Salem and Boston. So we stayed a few days!

As I began sailing north I kept hearing phrases like "When you get to New England" which confused me until I learnt that New England is not a State but actually a vague collection of mainly coastal states. So it is a bit like saying "the home counties" or "the Alps". But essentially, everywhere north east of New York is classed as part of New England.

However it's easy to see WHY the area is called New England - just look at the place names! Its one reason why I found it difficult to keep track of all the places we went to, the names are just too familiar. For example, Hampshire is the county I was bought up in, while Plymouth, Portland, Falmouth and Portsmouth are all UK ports that I've frequently sailed to. (Manchester doesn't really fit in though, as the original is about as far from the sea as you can get in the UK!)



Anyway, on leaving Manchester we beat into a 20 knot wind to Little Harbor, near Portsmouth in New Hampshire where we dried out for the first time in nearly a year and then sailed on to Portland - Maine at last! We had finally arrived in our long sought after cruising ground with lots of beautiful peaceful islands and where every anchorage was better than the last.

As we sailed along we passed small fishing villages and sometimes saw traditional schooners under full sail. We weaved our way past numerous rocks and small islands. I was pleased to see that Maine didn't have the waterfront ribbon housing developments that I'd seen for the last 1500 miles. In many ways it was like the islands in the Baltic that we'd seen on our way to the USSR in 1989. Only in Maine there are more deciduous trees and it's generally less rugged than Sweden or Finland. Also unlike the Baltic Maine is tidal and I had to pay attention to tides for the first time since leaving Europe.



Unfortunately the lobster pot buoys became a real problem. Each fisherman is allowed to set 1200 pots and since there are over 1000 registered fishermen that's over a million buoys (count them in the photo above!). We saw them all but only caught a few (thank goodness for daggerboards and lifting rudders!). In some areas the buoys were just too dense to sail through with a 20 ft wide boat, usually though they were scattered like white horses in a F5. Apart from the pot buoys the other major downside we found to cruising in Maine is that winter seems to start in August! We had to light the cabin heater every evening and sailed in full fleeces, foul weather gear and hats even if the sun was shining. But maybe we've turned into tropical softies!



Fortunately though the cold weather did mean that we were blessed with excellent visibility, only on one day did we have fog, amazing for an area where usually it's foggy every other day. Maybe the cold was putting people off, but I was very surprised



at how deserted Maine was. I had expected to see dozens of boats and crowded harbours, but in fact we saw very few other boats and could always find a quiet anchorage each night.

I've written before about the calm conditions on the east coast of the USA. I had expected more wind in Maine, but it was not to be. Looking back at our log I see that for all except maybe six days since Cape Canaveral in Florida the wind was under 10 knots. It's a good thing that fuel is obscenely cheap in the USA! (it is still less than what we were paying in the UK in 1980!).

We decided that Somes Sound on Mt Desert Island (the only true fjord in the US outside Alaska and only 50 miles from the Canadian border) would be our turn around point. There we met an English yacht (coincidentally sailed by friends of Bill who had helped my after my lightning strike). I learnt that they too had been hit by lightning but as they have a more sophisticated boat than I do their damage was much more expensive - 18,000 USD and counting. Like me they were also finding that equipment that had apparently survived the lightning strike began to fail later.



Wooden Boat magazine has been selling my Pixie and Quattro beach cat designs for nearly 15 years, but I have never met anyone from its staff. So our last significant port of call in Maine was to their headquarters in Brooklin. Set in an amazing 90 acre waterfront site that must make all other magazine editors really jealous, they were running a summer camp during our visit. A healthy mix of yacht design, boat building, sailing school etc had dozens of students from all States and many from abroad. I spent the evening talking to some of the design students. While walking back to the dock from the students' hostel I heard loud noises in the woods, the next morning the editor told me the bears had been more active than usual due to the cold weather!

I counted up and have now anchored (but not necessarily been ashore!) in 12 states in the USA, plus PR and the USVI. As there are only 8 other states that have a coast line I feel I have now "done" the USA! (OK, OK, I know there's a coast on the west side as well!)

## **Sailing South and the Bahamas revisited October 2003 January 2004**

It is a long way from Maine back to the Bahamas, but it should have been an uneventful trip as we were basically retracing our steps. And indeed so it was, until that is we reached Block Island, at the east end of Long Island Sound. It was there that we first heard about hurricane Isobel. Our plan had been to sail down the outside of Long Island but now we had different priorities for the first estimates of Isobel's track had it passing directly over New York.

We still had a few days but clearly we had to find a safe anchorage fast. After some quick phone calls we found that Port Washington had some available moorings in a reasonably protected harbour. Fortunately as the week drew on Isobel tracked progressively further west, but even so it was clear that all of the eastern seaboard was going to get a hammering. As Isobel approached it produced the most evil looking sky I have ever seen. So we counted ourselves lucky when Isobel by-passed Long Island Sound making little more fuss than a typical English winter gale.



We were not sure what we would see as we sailed south, we thought some harbour entrances might be closed or at least drastically altered, so, after passing through New York and once more stopping at Atlantic Highlands, we sailed non stop into the Delaware Bay and thus back to the northern Chesapeake. Here we began to see evidence of major damage. In Annapolis the moored boats were mainly OK, it was the land that took the brunt of the hurricane. The water had surged to 7ft above normal and over 600 water-front houses were destroyed. It was the same story in Chesapeake City where many trees had blown down, often onto houses. The power was still off in many areas even two weeks after Isobel had struck. At Rebel Marina – where we had spent time in July, owner Dave had heroically got into a dry suit and swam (well tied to the shore!) to drifting boats, ensuring they stayed afloat.

When travelling down the ICW we met a familiar looking boat – it was a Scylla. Built in strip plank cedar by Doug Larson in little over a year it was launched in July at Duluth, Minnesota (about as far north and west in the Great Lakes as one can get). A couple of days after launching Doug was sailing south, bound for Georgia and beyond.

After travelling 750 miles down the ICW we eventually arrived in the Jacksonville/St Augustine area in N Florida where once again long time Strider owner Bob Cole kindly lent us his mooring so that Eclipse would be in safe hands while I flew back to the UK for a month and Jetti went to her family for Christmas.



I arrived back in the USA on Thanksgiving Eve (not a good time to travel in the USA!) and a few days later hauled Eclipse out of the water (for the first time in a year) at the St Augustine boatyard – the only catamaran friendly yard in N Florida - for a bottom paint and to fit new electronics. At long last Eclipse was back to its pre lightning strike state!

Europeans think of Florida as the “Sunshine State” and so believe it is always hot and sunny. I had already discovered that Florida is a pretty miserable place to be for much of the summer – it is far too hot and humid and there are almost daily thunderstorms. Fortunately in winter thunderstorms are rare, but the weather is very changeable as cold fronts moving south pass over the area and the temperature can halve overnight. While I was in the yard it was bitterly cold and very windy and I lit the cabin heater every night.

Despite the cold the job list shortened and after 4 days hard work Eclipse went back in the water and I sailed the 250 miles to West Palm Beach, just north of Miami. There I met Pip and Debbie Patterson from the Multihull Centre who, with their two teenage boys, had flown over for their Christmas break and were to sail with me to the Abacos Islands in the northern Bahamas.

Although the Pattersons are all experienced sailors we were a bit worried about the number of people on board and the weight of all the stores. We were, after all, 5 adults on a 32' boat already carrying food bought for cruising Cuba and the Bahamian out islands, as well as a Christmas tree, decorations, Christmas lights, presents etc. But we need not have worried, Eclipse swallowed us all and we were all able to hide in our own corners when required.

The crossing to the Bahamas from Florida is only about 50 miles (half the Plymouth to France distance), but as the Bahamas banks are only about 10 ft deep we thought it best to arrive in daylight. Accordingly we left at 9pm, but the wind picked up steadily and we had to first reef and then roll the genoa away for a couple of hours to avoid arriving early. It was still bitterly cold and Pip and I had to wear our full “English Channel winter woollies” even at 27 deg north.

Dawn found us on the edge of the bank just north of West End, Grand Bahama. We carried on across the bank in a steadily increasing wind to Great Sale Cay where we rested and then daysailed on east through the Cays towards New Plymouth (yes, yet another Plymouth!) Here we cleared customs and paid 150 USD for our cruising permit. New Plymouth is a very pretty little village on Green Turtle Cay and we spent a couple of days safely anchored in Black Sound.

To be honest I hadn’t been that impressed with the Exumas on my trip north – even though many claim them to be the prettiest of the Bahamian islands. So I wasn’t expecting the Abacos to be as good as they were. It is certainly an area that I would recommend people to visit. There are miles of flat, well sheltered water, with pretty villages, lots of safe anchorages and few coral heads to trap the unwary. So we were surprised to see very few cruising boats.



I’ve spent the last three Christmas’ on Eclipse anchored off white sandy beaches. In 2001 it was in the Scillies, in 2002 it was Barbados, while this year Christmas Day was spent on Great Guana Cay. Long may this tradition continue! But wherever one is anchored Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas without eating roast turkey and Christmas pudding, falling asleep watching a video etc. So we did all that and more.

The traditional Bahamian Carnival or “Junkaroo” is held on Boxing Day (December 26<sup>th</sup>) and again on January 1<sup>st</sup>. We watched the Boxing Day Junkaroo at Marsh Harbour, which was a low key affair with only six floats, although the noise and enthusiasm of the “gumby drum” drummers made up for the lack of numbers.



Hopetown is a beautiful little village with a (very crowded) true “hurricane hole” harbour. It also boasts a world famous lighthouse. Built in 1863 it is still in use and the keepers wind the clockwork mechanism daily. The actual light and lens weigh about 4 tons yet, floating in a bath of mercury, we found that it only needed a light finger touch to make the light rotate. Don’t worry – we tried it in daylight not at night!



But perhaps the best Abacos harbour was left till last. Little Harbour at the SE end of the island chain is a small cove with a pure white sandy beach and a narrow shallow entrance. It is home to the famous Johnston metal sculpture artist-colony where besides the foundry and gallery the family also run a funky beach bar. But to show there is always a flaw in perfection, one of the gallery exhibits is a set of “hurricane proof” dinner plates – all that remained of the gallery when a hurricane passed overhead and the resulting water surge washed over the whole bay.

Half the Bahamian population live in its capital, Nassau. It’s a major tourist centre full of package tourists and cruise ship passengers. We thought it a bit seedy and run down, but as it is home to the only international airport on the islands we had to go there. The Pattersons flew back to the UK and Jeti arrived a couple of hours later.

After a day shopping we left Nassau and zigzagged our way south, stopping off first at various harbours on Eleuthera. We found the people there to be really friendly and it is an island seemingly untouched by tourism. Almost deserted, we only met four other cruising boats during our week there. In a lull between two northers we motored the thirty miles across Exuma Sound to Norman Cay in the Exumas, home to the sunken plane my brother and I had swum around in June. After Norman Cay we spent a couple of days anchored in the lee of Hog Island while a strong Norther passed by. Again this was a place I'd visited in June, only this time the pirate lair was dry and the anchorage crowded.

As we swung on our anchor we saw, only a few feet below us, what is probably the oldest living organism in the world. Stromatolites are blue-green reef-forming algae that first appeared on earth 3.5 BILLION years ago (the earth is only 4 billion years old). They were the dominant reef building organisms for 3 billion years and being primitive plants they produced oxygen, eventually making enough for life as we know it to develop.

Stromatolites were thought to be extinct, but in the 1950's some were found in Shark Bay, Australia, and then about 20 years ago the ones at Hog Cay were discovered. Relatively "young" they are thought to be a mere 2000 years old.

Even with the regular northers I found the weather to be better in the winter than it had been in the summer - one reason why there are so many boats cruising the southern Bahamas over Christmas. There were 40 anchored in Georgetown in June, but 140 in January. Georgetown in the southern Exumas is the last major "town" in the Bahamas so we spent some days there stocking up on food and fuel and preparing Eclipse for the isolated Jumentos and Cuba.





## **Cuba “Been There, done that – Given away the T Shirt” February 2004**

We are cruising because we enjoy sailing and because we like visiting new places and seeing different cultures, which of course are the reasons why most other people cruise, but not - it appears - several hundred cruisers in Georgetown. They motor (rarely sail) down the ICW, summon up courage to cross the Gulf Stream to Nassau and then it's on down the Exumas to Georgetown - daysailing all the way. They arrive around Christmas and head north again at Easter. In between they stay safely at anchor and play volley ball, go to water-colour classes, have bible study on Sundays etc. Altogether it's a real US retirement village - but afloat. We found Georgetown in winter a very strange place, and not the cruisers harbour we were expecting.



So we only stayed a few days, mainly waiting for the southerly winds to abate. We met up with a couple of German boats, also Cuba bound, and finally left for the Jumentos Cays through Hog Cay Cut which, even with our shallow draft, we had to negotiate at high water. The Jumentos are a chain of small Bahamian islands (cays) spread out in a 90 mile crescent; most are fringed with white sand beaches and transparent water (its common to be able to see the bottom at 100ft). The most southerly, Ragged Island, is the only one that is inhabited and is a mere 60 miles north of Cuba.

The Jumentos are supposed to be deserted but we often had boats sharing our anchorages. Midway down the island chain is Jamaica Cay where someone tried to develop a resort. It was difficult to see how it could succeed when it's almost inaccessible except by private yacht. When we got there it was abandoned, except for goats and chickens. Next day we sailed on to Johnson Cay, the only Jumentos anchorage which is safe in southerlies. We stayed there until at last the wind went round to the north, filling our time fishing, snorkelling, having BBQ's on the beach etc.



We had a fast sail (over 12 knots on the GPS) to Puerto Vita in NE Cuba. We didn't know quite what we were letting ourselves in for, but we certainly didn't expect to hear a voice on the VHF when 16 miles out to say "yellow catamaran number 99 come in please". No, our time wasn't up, the Guarda Fronteras just wanted to know where we were going, but I joked that the coast guard must have a very good telescope to read a sail number at that distance. Later, having anchored under a Guarda station and through binoculars seen a soldier watching me watching him through a telescope (very embarrassing!), we realised that that is exactly what they do have.



Jetti had a fishing line out and just as we were making our approach to the harbour she got a strike, a very nice Dorado which fed six of us when we later had it cooked in the marina restaurant (and only 3US a head! If nothing else Cuba is a cheap place to visit). Unfortunately the throttle cable on the engine snapped just as we were approaching the dock. I leapt ashore to fend off and got my first reprimand. No-one is allowed ashore until the doctor has given a clean bill of health – and a marina pontoon counts as ashore!

After the doctor's visit we had visits by a vet (we have no pets so her visit was quite short – but she still had lots of forms to fill in) Then it was the Agriculture department who gave our vegetables a "vegetative sanity" certificate. Then Customs and immigration – not forgetting the sniffer dog. A fairly thorough search of the boat and a check on our seaworthiness by the coastguard followed. Finally, the Port Captain

issued us a cruising permit. As everyone filled in the forms in triplicate – and they had no carbon paper - it all took a long time! Eventually, after an hour or so, it was all over and the marina band serenaded us new arrivals and we were free to go ashore.

As cruisers we are able to sail anywhere in the world - which is a real privilege. So we accept the bureaucracy involved. Cubans are clearly more thorough than most for, apart from the obvious drug searches etc, they are also on the lookout for goods being bought in as “presents” and also for Cubans trying to escape. That’s why the boat was always searched before we left a port and why we weren’t allowed to use our dinghies without permission, while at one port the Guarda shone a spotlight on us all night. Still it did mean we felt very secure, knowing someone was watching over our boat at all times.

Having said that, I’ve now sailed in over 40 countries and my worst immigration and custom experiences have still been in the UK. In Cuba we were surprised that only a few ports and no areas ashore were deemed “off limits”. That’s unlike Finland, for example, where “aliens” have to follow very specific routes.

The Puerto Vita marina manager, Ernestina, was very friendly and helpful (as everybody who’s been there agrees). Since there were 6 foreign boats in the marina at the same time (very unusual) she arranged a couple of coach tours for us. Its not often we are able to travel inland so we jumped at the opportunity.

We discovered that the east end of Cuba is hilly, with several really protected natural harbours. In fact I can’t think of anywhere else I’ve sailed where the harbours are so safe. It’s a bit of a waste really as they haven’t had a hurricane in NE Cuba in living memory.

We also visited Holguin, Cuba’s third city, which is a large market town. First impressions were of crowds of people, all apparently very cheerful and, we were to discover, all very polite and friendly. But it looked poor (some areas desperately so) and neglected. Poverty is of course relative. We learnt that the average wage is 10US a month; a doctor earns 25US a month. But it is illegal to charge more than 10% of ones wage in rent. So a doctor pays only 2.50US rent a month. Health care is free for all, and education is excellent.

But it is all a bit bizarre. America and Cuba are near neighbours, but don’t get along (!). Yet all Cubans want dollars, which means working in tourism. Although basic foods, rent etc are cheap and bought in pesos, to buy anything else (a TV for example) you need dollars. We changed 20US into pesos, but a month later still had 10US left – it’s hard to spend much when one can buy enough fruit and veg for a week for only 1US. So currently an 18 year old waiter who can earn 20US a day in tips alone, earns about as much a day as a fully qualified teacher earns in a month! Something has to change!

Few people own cars, the majority one sees are either Russian built Ladas or pre revolution American “gas guzzlers”. There is, however, a huge variety of public transport available, ranging from rickshaws to ox carts to horse drawn buses. Then there are open trucks and the occasional old US school bus. Modern cars – Toyotas, Fiats etc are usually reserved for tourist’s hire cars.



We spent a week in Puerto Vita and then left to day sail along the north coast to Havana. With strong NE winds we made good time, either staying in small harbours (where the Guarda would row out to inspect our papers) or anchoring just inside the reef. As we sailed west the terrain changed and we were back to the flat cays and mangroves that we'd got used to in the Bahamas and along the east coast of the USA.

A strong norther was predicted so we ducked into Cayo Guillermo's new marina. Marinas are new in Cuba – it seems they are being built for the day charter trade and (presumably) military use. The emphasis is on restaurants and on preventing Cubans reaching the boats, not on facilities for cruising yachts. Guillermo was no exception. We found the entrance buoy OK (in water only 6 ft deep) but dared go no further as the sun was in our eyes and all we could see was a lee shore with breaking surf ahead.

By chance the only other cruising boat in the marina was also British and over the VHF John said he'd run aground in the entrance the day before and had had to be towed off (fortunately without damage). So we decided to wait until an escort boat could show us the way in. As the channel is only 50 ft wide and crossing the bar we had only 4 ft under our keels we were glad we did. When we got in we were told the channel would be dredged "tomorrow" – ah manana!!

When the weather improved it was on to the tourist centre of Cuba – Varadero. Here we found classic white sand beaches, coconut palms and of course hotels and tourists. But to my surprise there were also Fountaine Pajot charter catamarans. When I first started designing catamarans the longest catamaran in the world was 75 ft, and there was just the one. Here in Cuba, of all places, I counted six 90ft catamarans plus many more smaller boats (ie only 45ft or so). The average Cuban never normally sees yachts so presumably thinks all sailboats are catamarans. "Mummy, what is that funny boat over there, it only has one hull, why doesn't it fall over?"

But Cuba packaged up for tourists was not really what we had come to see, so we left to sail to Havana. As we approached we saw townships of Soviet style housing blocks and then on the skyline ahead modern looking offices and department stores. It is deep

water right up to the shore and so we sailed close by, keeping out of the strong east going current. We passed several men lying on inflated tractor inner tubes resting after snorkelling for lobster.



The old city of Havana is fronted by another “Plymouth Hoe”, ie a grassy bank and 16th century castle overlooking the water (also just like San Juan in PR). Six miles past the city we entered Hemingway Marina and tied up behind Aleisha the English yacht we’d last seen 1500 miles to the north in Soames Sound, Maine.

We wanted to see more of inland Cuba so hired a car for three days. As with many things in Cuba that’s not as easy as it sounds. After three hours traipsing round Havana hotels getting hot and bothered we eventually found a Toyota that was available. However the walk did mean that we saw a lot of the old city. Sadly many of the buildings are in urgent need of repair, but slowly its being done and the restored areas are magnificent. We were there on St Valentine’s Day, so we saw several weddings – ornate affairs with the bride arriving in an open Cadillac to much blaring of horns etc. Everywhere there were people enjoying the weekend, a real bustling, vibrant city. With very few shops the main activity on a Saturday is people watching rather than spending money.

We left Havana to explore the mountainous western end of Cuba. Following the coast road we picked up hitchhikers at every town we passed. It’s a way of life for most, and we found we needed them to tell us where to go. There are no road signs and the only motorway was half built (we had to drive “up” the “down” slip road to get onto it. Then approaching Havana on our return we found it ended quite abruptly with a brick wall “so that’s why everyone turned off at the last junction!”)



But the scenery was spectacular, the Valle of Vinales was beautiful and dominated by dramatic limestone formations looking for all the world like huge bowler hats dotted among the tobacco fields. Locally they are called “Mogotes” (haystacks) and one contains a cave system open to tourists. Although not large it was fun to walk through and then take a boat trip down the underground river.



Almost as hard as finding a car was finding somewhere to stay. All the hotels were full and so we stayed in people’s homes. The first night was an approved house, the second, “fly shack” wasn’t...





Once safely back to Havana we sailed in a convoy of 4 boats for the next 150 miles to Los Morros, at the western extremity of Cuba. Another new “marina” ie a single dock – totally exposed to the north but with great facilities ashore (except there was no water during our visit). The fact that we cleared customs and left through the reef at 1am probably gives a fair indication of conditions on the dock when the wind went round to the north!



I find its impossible to write about Cuba in a few words – you’ll just have to go to see for yourself, and if you do, try to get away from the hotels and beaches.

So after a month in Cuba it was onto Belize and a 50th birthday cruise with my twin sister Diana and brother Paul.

## **Belize and Guatemala March April 2004**

As we left Cuba and sailed south past Mexico, the Yucatan Channel was in a playful mood. The 12' – 14' wave height was as predicted (remember we left Cuba in a hurry, some 12 hours earlier than we had planned) and so, as we were sailing downwind (under just a half-rolled genoa) we expected to have some good fast surfing in following seas. Instead the waves came from the beam, and for 36 hours the boat crashed and lurched its way along; mind you, it would have been even worse had we been in a monohull.

On our second night we were 50 miles off Cozumel, Mexico, which is a major cruise ship destination. Several passed us going east-west as we sailed south. One was clearly on a collision course. Eventually I called it up and the watch-keeper agreed - somewhat reluctantly - that they would alter course. It seemed odd to me, a sailing vessel on starboard tack in open water has right of way over nearly everything. If nothing else it proved that one must always have someone on watch.

All things, good and bad, must come to an end and eventually the seas and waves moderated. We didn't hoist more sail though, for once again we were approaching an unknown shore in the dark. So it wasn't until morning of the third day that we made our landfall off the pass in the reef at San Pedro, north Belize.

The north end of Belize is shallow, typically only 8ft deep. San Pedro is on Ambergris Cay and like most of the other sandy cays; we found it undergoing a rapid development with lots of new small hotels and restaurants. The population has doubled in 5 years; even so it was a nice town, with unpaved sand roads and golf carts instead of cars.

During our stay in San Pedro the wind was a constant strong easterly, up to 30 knots at times. Although the reef gave protection from the swells, the noise of the wind wore us down and after a few days we sailed 15 miles south to Cay Caulker and anchored in the lee of the island, much quieter! Cay Caulker is probably what San Pedro was like 5 years ago. It's laid back and friendly and has some great beach bars and restaurants. Let's hope it stays that way.



Most people come to Belize for the diving (it has the second longest barrier reef in the world) but to me it also seemed an ideal place to windsurf and would be a fantastic place to have a sailing regatta. Flat water, almost no tide, constant winds and sunshine - perfect.



Tourism is a mixed blessing though, as on the one hand it brings much needed prosperity and an alternative to subsistence fishing. But it also leads to overcrowding on the favourite cays, which can lead to the destruction of what people come to see. The cays nearest to resorts are the ones that suffer most. For example Goff Cay was packed with day trippers, whereas Rendevous Cay, only a few miles away, was completely deserted.



My twin sister, Diana, flew over from the UK with brother Paul to celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. They took a water taxi from Belize City to Cay Caulker. This was a fun trip in itself as the water taxis are 40ft speed boats that roar round the islands at 40 knots.

They wanted to make the most of the week. That's the trouble with tourists! It's all go, go, go!! So once they'd unpacked, we were away to go snorkelling off sandy cays covered with coconut palms or go manatee hunting in the mangroves (only we didn't see any); we even did a bit of sailing! But the highlight had to be the visit to the Mayan city of Tikal in Guatemala.

Although only 130 miles from the marina where we left the boat, Tikal was a 6 hr drive; the roads in Belize are good, those in Guatemala aren't! A huge contrast in prosperity was evident as soon as we crossed the border. We saw women washing clothes in rivers, cowboys herding cattle down the dirt roads and everywhere dogs desperately trying to be run over.

Unfortunately we also saw evidence of the "slash and burn" farming policies still being practised. However, we were told that now that the military is no longer in power there is less corruption and that more care is being taken of the environment. Mind you, when the Mayans built Tikal over 100,000 people lived there, and all the land was cleared. It took only a couple of hundred years for the jungle to take over and cover the ruins completely.

We checked into our hotel in late afternoon and then left to view the ruins at dusk. What we hadn't appreciated was that, although the hotel was in the jungle, it was still a 30 minute walk to the main Tikal site. But we made it in time to see the sunset over the temples, which look absolutely incredible poking out above the tree line, and with the screams of the howler monkeys overhead we knew for sure we were in a jungle. Most of the day trippers had already left. We shared the top of Temple IV (the highest at 228ft) with a German couple but later, as night fell, we explored a completely deserted Great Plaza. Paul was especially pleased when we saw orioles nesting and a couple of toucans. A great end to a birthday!



Next morning was a real contrast! The whole site was crowded, but in compensation we had a guide who told us not just about the history of Tikal but also about the

wildlife and the jungle. In daylight the immensity of the structures was more apparent, and it was nice to be able to wander around without being pestered by people trying to sell trinkets. Carlos said that it was a deliberate idea to restore only a few of the ruins so that the rest of the site would look like it did when the first explorers saw it hidden in the jungle. It must have been amazing to have been the first to view it. Sadly we had to leave in mid afternoon, our 24 hour stay just wasn't enough time to do it justice. We should have allowed at least a day and a half.



After Diana and Paul left we kept sailing south, usually out on the reef, only returning to the mainland to shop or to catch up on emails. We found the further south we sailed the deeper the water got, at times we were sailing in 150ft, despite being well inside the reef. But it also got progressively more humid. Although only 120 miles away, the south end of Belize has four times the rainfall of San Pedro.



During our last week in Belize the weather changed. We were on our way to the Sapodilla Cays, the most southern end of the barrier reef, when the wind suddenly

went round and blew hard from the south. It looked like it would stay that way. We knew that there are no safe anchorages in a southerly wind on the outer cays, so reluctantly turned round and headed for the mangroves on the mainland. It was just as well we did so, for the wind and rain over the next few days were miserable.

There are only two main charter companies in Belize with maybe 30 boats (all catamarans) between them. Away from the charter bases we saw very few boats, so we can well believe those who say that there are only 40 cruisers in Belize at any one time. In fact on many days we would sail with no other boat in sight.

So why aren't there more boats in Belize? In a word – hurricanes. There are no good hurricane holes anywhere in Belize, and a big one hits every other year causing massive destruction to land and sea. Off St George Cay, for example, which is supposedly a good snorkelling area, we found the reef had been destroyed by a hurricane in 2000, while Ranguana Cay is now much smaller than the chart indicated (so it's not just humans who destroy reefs).



I liked Belize (except for Belize City) and I would certainly recommend it as somewhere to charter – but not during August - October! It's better than the BVI or Grenadines; the reef keeps the ocean swells at bay, so the water is always flat, you don't need to sail in shallow water or among coral heads unless you want to. There are some fantastic coconut-fringed, white-sand islands with great diving, etc. It's also a cheap place to provision, and the sailing grounds cover a huge area - nearly 120 by 20 miles. What was something of a disappointment though, was the snorkelling. As I've said, it seemed that many of the shallower reefs have been destroyed. Despite the crystal clear water, we thought we had more fun snorkelling in the Bahamas – especially on Jamaica Cay. Presumably the diving is still good because the hurricanes do not affect the reefs that are in deeper water.

So with the hurricane season approaching, we have decided to go to the Rio Dulce (Sweet River) in Guatemala for the summer. Apparently it has a number of cheap, secure marinas and is considered the best hurricane hole in the whole Caribbean. I must do some work on the boat as it's now sailed over 15,000 miles in 18 months. We also hope to find time to travel overland, but work comes first!



### **The Rio Dulce and Marios Marina April - Nov 2004**



Eclipse is in Marios marina, the largest of about 1/2 dozen scattered round the small town of Frontaras about 20 miles inland from the coast. There are probably about 400 boats all together as the area is very secure in every sense. It is the only really safe hurricane hole in the Caribbean, while we were happy to leave the boat under Max's watchful eye.



Despite torrential rain, getting to the marina was a dramatic motor up the river as we passed through a deep gorge with 300ft high cliffs on each side.





Only a few people live on the river, as it's only accessible by boat. Although the water taxis have large (90hp) outboards, canoes are still the main form of transport for the locals.



Venturing further up stream, past the marinas and town of Frontaras, the river opens out into the large (30mile x 10mile) Lake Isobel. It's guarded at its seaward end by an old Spanish castle.



Although the marinas are considered safe, that is not true of Lake Isobel and when we sailed there we did so in a convoy with 2 other boats. The main reason for sailing there was that the jungle comes right down to the lake. So we anchored off the edge of the jungle and then in dinghies went further up the river looking for, and finding, howler monkeys.



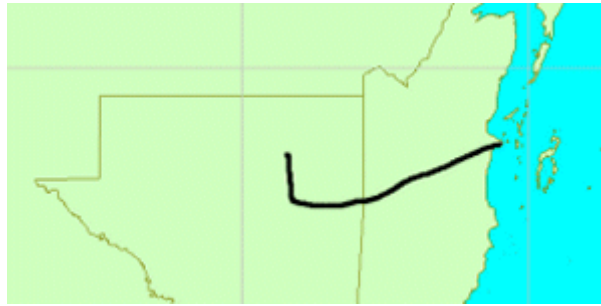
When not working on the boat or travelling inland in Central America I spent most of my time in the office, see above, working on articles and new designs. As it's cheap to eat out, we spent many evenings in the Cayuco Club, see below.



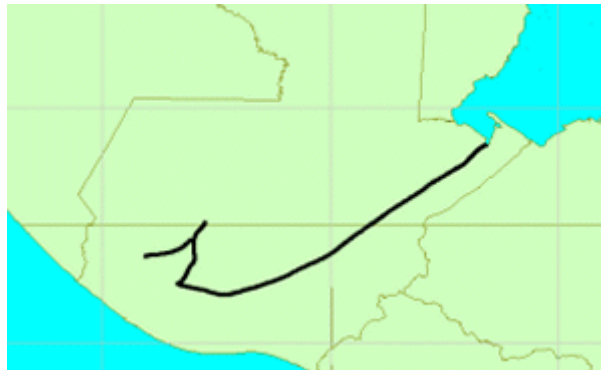
The main downside to the Rio Dulce is that it is incredibly hot and humid especially in the summer. We found it very unpleasant even with big fans going 24 hrs a day; we should have bought an air-conditioning unit. Fortunately few people get malaria here, mainly because everyone is careful to spray up and we keep taking the tablets. Dengue fever, which is caught from daytime mosquitoes, is more of a problem, especially as there is no cure and no preventative treatment.

So that's where we hid all summer!

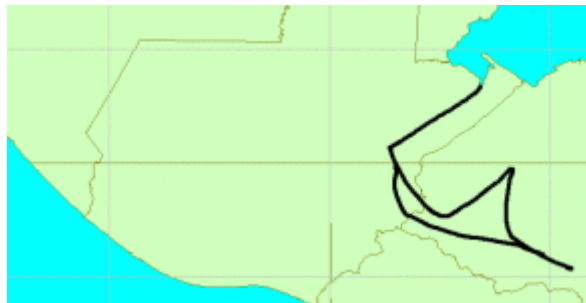
## Land Trip Maps



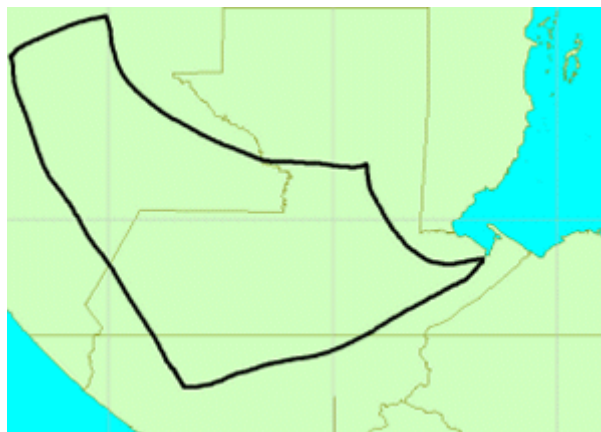
Belize City to Tikal



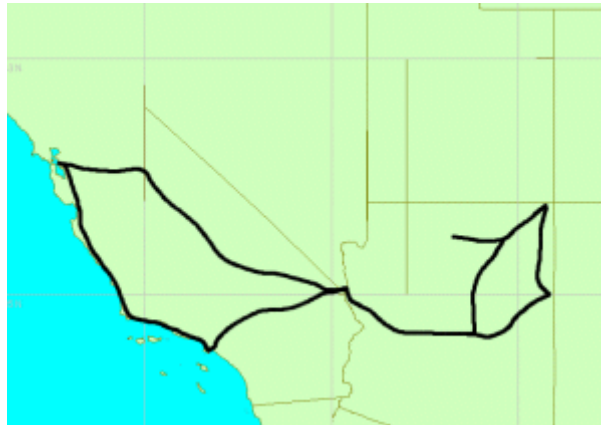
Rio Dulce to Antigua, Chichi and Atitlan



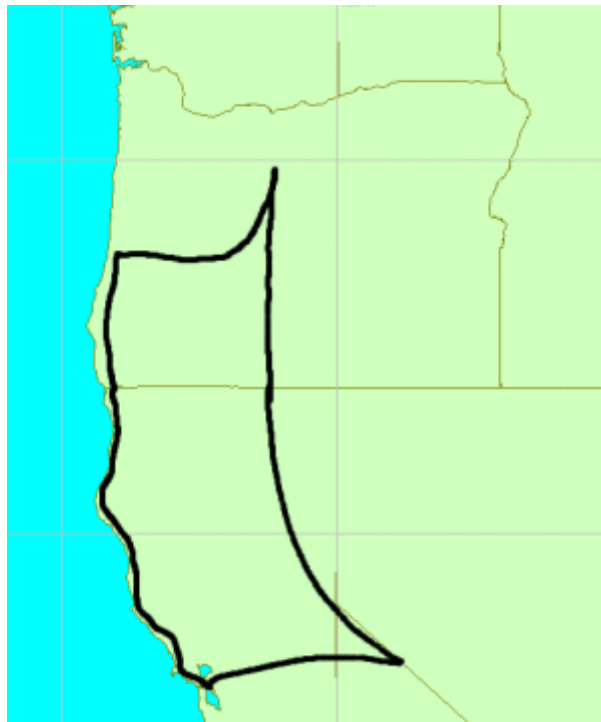
Rio Dulce to Copan and Honduras



Rio Dulce to Chiapas and Palenque



S California, Nevada, Arizona



N California, Oregon, Nevada



## Land Trip 1 Guatemala May 2004

Jetti and I now have a good system going. When at sea, I plan the route and study the tide times and harbour information. On land, it's Jetti's job to work out the best places to visit, check out bus times and reserve rooms in suitable hotels. Notice the word hotel; it's not one I often use as I can't afford hotels in the UK, but in Guatemala they are cheap - 5US (3GBP) a night is not uncommon. Usually though, we go a bit more upmarket, but still have never paid more than 60US (35GBP) for a double room.



When travelling inland, we normally use public transport. This in itself is an experience - and not one for the faint hearted. So called "chicken buses" (photo above) are the norm. They are usually old American school buses from the 1950-60's. Why are they called chicken buses? Well, that's for two reasons. First, because their drivers like to play "chicken" with other drivers on the road, so it's best not to look when the driver overtakes on blind hairpin bends! The second is because the buses don't just take human passengers. I once spent an hour crowded in the back of a bus sharing a seat with a woman with two live chickens dangling on her arm. Buses are usually packed. I counted 50 seats on one bus that had a sign saying "max 84 passengers". I think they were all on board.

But despite these drawbacks we use the buses, as they are a very cheap way to travel and to meet local people. We can travel all day for 5US (3GBP) while at every terminus there are lots of enthusiastic helpers to carry our bags and ensure we get on the right bus. All in all, it's a life enriching experience. Our first trip took us on a 6 hour ride to Antigua (note, the "U" is pronounced, unlike the Caribbean island of the same name), the old colonial capital of Guatemala, and built on a plain below the Volcan Agua. The photo shows the great view we had of it from our hotel room.





We spent most of our time walking the cobbled streets or sitting in the park, people watching - that is when we weren't eating at one of the numerous restaurants. Antigua was about the only place in Guatemala where we have been pestered by locals trying to sell us souvenirs. Normally we are left well alone, which makes a pleasant change after the West Indies.



An earthquake in 1773 destroyed much of the town, including the cathedral, which is why the capital was moved to Guatemala City. The old town remains though, and has been much restored in recent years. It's now a World Heritage Site and so is a real tourist "must see." The cathedral looked impressive from the front, as the left picture below shows, but on walking inside it all seemed very small. It wasn't until we walked round the back and saw the remains of the main nave that we realized what an impressive building it must have been when first built. Restoration began in the 1960's, but was dealt a blow by another earthquake in 1973 which demolished yet more of the building.



But Antigua's most striking colonial church is the Church of La Merced. Originally built in 1548 it was also destroyed by the 1773 earthquake. However, it was rebuilt in the 1850's complete with a front facade covered with an amazingly intricate design of carvings and statues.



We also visited the Convent Las Capuchinas built in 1736 for nuns from Madrid, again being slowly restored. We spent some time there, as the gardens were a peaceful haven from the bustle of the town.



Our two nights in Antigua were followed by a trip up through the lush green hills to the village of Chichicastenango. We arrived just as the priests were blessing the shops and restaurants, for it was the feast of Corpus Christi.



However, we had really come to Chichi to see its famous Sunday market. We found crowds of locals, with all the women wearing the traditional brightly coloured woven

Mayan dresses. Most of the market now caters to tourists. Had we got there at dawn though, we could have joined the locals and bought chickens, vegetables, beans and rice. Instead we bought colourful fabrics for new cushion covers for Eclipse's saloon.



When we tired of shopping, an hour's bus trip took us to Lake Atitlan, a beautiful lake fringed by three volcanoes, thus looking something like a Swiss lake without the snow or cowbells. After a 20 minute boat trip, we arrived at the amazing hotel Casa del Mondo. Perched on the side of a cliff, it was built as a retirement home by an ex-pat American who then decided to turn it into a hotel. Again our room looked out onto a near perfectly shaped volcano.



Although it was much cooler higher up (5000ft), we just sat and looked at the view, as we found the hills were too steep for sailors to climb. It seemed incredible that the locals farmed the near vertical fields. As in most of Central America, it all has to be done by hand. Partly because most farmers are too poor to own tractors, but mainly because it is impossible for machines or even horses to reach the fields. But at least we now know where pineapples come from!

We had planned to stay two nights but stayed three. Had there been access to the sea, we would have stayed forever. So much so, that we are now very tempted to visit Lake Nicaragua, which is indeed accessible by sea. But that's for another time. Now it was back to the boat for some more drawing and writing.

## Land Trip 2 - Honduras

Our second trip, a few weeks later, was into neighbouring Honduras, as we wanted to see the Mayan site at Copan. At the site entrance was a flock of macaws, the first we had seen outside pet shops. Once again, whilst trying to take photos and videos, I was reminded of the phrase, "Don't work with children or animals." Footage seen on TV always makes it look so easy.



As in Tikal we used a guide, without whom we'd have just wandered around aimlessly. The Copan temples were much smaller than the ones we'd seen at Tikal, and once again some structures had been renovated and some left as they had been found. But what made the site special was that it was full of amazing carved stones or "stellae." The lower right photo shows a typical one that was about 10ft (3m) high.



The Mayans played a game somewhat akin to soccer. Five players a side would try and hit a rubber ball onto one of the carved macaw-head targets, using knees and



elbows instead of feet. Apparently a similar game is still played in some areas today, although I doubt whether the losing team is sacrificed to the gods as they sometimes were 1500 years ago...



Every stone on this 100ft (30m) high stone stair case, below, is intricately carved with symbols telling the history of Copan which had not been properly translated when the staircase was first reconstructed. Now archaeologists realise they assembled some of the stones in the wrong order. We were told that it is the biggest such carving in the world, bigger than anything in Egypt for example.



Many of the stelae are considered too precious and delicate to stay outside, so a visit to the museum was essential.



An imaginative entrance led us down a "serpent's body" tunnel to be faced with a true scale replica of the Rosalila Temple, found in 1989 buried under the central building of the Acropolis.



It was dedicated to Moon Jaguar, Copan's 10th ruler in 571AD. We learnt that most of the Mayan structures were originally painted with this bright red paint. They must have looked very dramatic when first viewed in the jungle. All around the museum walls were amazing carvings. It seemed incredible that the Mayans had no metals, so everything was made using flint and obsidian tools.



After dragging ourselves away from the museum, we spent the night at the Hacienda San Lucas.





This family home of the local Spanish "Grandeess" had fallen into ruin in the 1980's. It was restored 4 years ago, had only two rooms, no electricity and only a wood powered kitchen. But the food and service were wonderful. Jeti and I tried making tortillas, much to the amusement of the kitchen staff. Like many things it's much harder than it looks.



There was a fantastic view across the valley to the Copan ruins, but another reason for staying at San Lucas was because on the grounds was a "Birthing Stone". It proved impossible to photograph the almost worn out carvings, but it was a stone labour couch used by Mayan women for centuries. Our young guide took us through the woods and showed us a parrot's nest, coffee bushes, and was clearly very knowledgeable about everything around him. He was also very confident talking to strangers, not bad for someone who left school at 4th grade - he is now about 14.

Given the options, it's better to be rich than poor, but I still can't decide whether it's easier being poor in a poor country or a rich one. And there's no doubt about it, Honduras is a poor country, even more so than Guatemala. Eclipse is on the Rio Dulce, which is the rich man's playground. It's quite common to see helicopters fly in to private landing strips on a Friday evening, and see large powerboats roaring down the river at weekends.

But we have also seen fathers doing a "school run" across the river using dugout canoes. These are still a major means of transport in all of Central America, but it looked a bit incongruous when we saw a lone paddler suddenly stop, reach into his pocket and pull out a cell phone. Likewise, Antigua has ASDL internet access, something we don't yet have in Millbrook.

It's hard to appreciate the poverty in the countryside until you've seen it. We heard that a US school offered a local school its old computers when they upgraded theirs. *"Great!"* was the reply from the teachers, *"but it may be a little premature, we'll need electricity first. If you want to help what we'd **really** like is some plywood and nails so we can make walls round the classrooms and thus keep the pigs out."* And this in a region Ronald Regan thought so threatening to US security that he authorised the CIA to carry out covert operations in order to subvert the governments.

Why bring this up? Well, our guide showed us his "house" in the jungle. Elsewhere it would have been condemned even if it were used as a garden shed. Water came from a stream 200m away, obviously there was no sanitation or electricity, indeed it didn't even have watertight walls, but it's where he and his sister had lived all their lives



I said in an earlier report that travelling by bus was a life enriching experience. Well that's certainly what we had leaving Copan. At the time the details were hazy, but piecing it together later we decided that the driver of the pick up truck ahead of us fell asleep. He then swerved into the oncoming traffic and hit a 10ton truck carrying oranges. The truck ran off the road and the pickup stopped in front of us and was hit by our coach.

Oranges went everywhere, the truck was probably a right-off, the pickup certainly was and our coach wasn't going to go anywhere in a hurry again. But of course more serious were the injuries to the pickup's occupants. Fortunately one passenger got out unaided, but covered in blood. We dragged another one out of the back but he was clearly seriously hurt. That left the driver. It took 5 of us 20 minutes to get the door off to try and reach him, but it was obvious that he was still trapped and in considerable pain.

An ambulance with cutting gear arrived about 1/2 hour later, but by then we had left in a replacement bus, which took us to Gracias, the original Spanish capital of Central America. Somewhere we don't really want to visit again - but the drive to and fro made up for the grimy town.



The castle behind the hotel was relatively new and was probably built as a country home for the local commandant rather than as a proper fort. The small church looked well kept though.



A different route home took us to another border crossing and then through a high, dramatic mountain pass to Chiquimula where for the first time we stayed in a real backpacker hotel. It was very cheap and basic (12US, 7GBP for our double room).



### Land Trip 3 - Mexico

We have just come back from another week off, only this time we went north into Mexico. First we took the chicken bus to Flores, about a three hour drive. It's a much quicker trip than it used to be as the road is now asphalt the whole way. But unless we missed something, Flores was a disappointment and not really worth visiting. It was also very hot there as it's not much higher than the Rio Dulce, and it seemed to us to be just a dusty building site rather than the "Venice of Guatemala" that we had been expecting.



They were either putting in cable TV or main drainage (both seemed equally unlikely!) as every house had a trench in the road leading to the front door. The town is small, it only takes 20 minutes to walk all round it, so after finding a bar that was open, we spent the afternoon sitting out of the sun and looking out over Lago de Peten Itza. Even in the cool of the evening the town seemed deserted, apart from other bemused tourists like us.



We had an early night, which was just as well, for we had a long journey the next day. Our bus left at 5am so, as I always want breakfast before anything else, we were up at 4am.... Then into another chicken bus, but this time one that slowly bounced and lurched down a very rough dirt road for several hours. After a 7am coffee break we eventually arrived at the border post at 9am.



In theory there is no fee to leave Guatemala, but the customs officer asked us for 5US each. One passenger queried it, but was told he couldn't leave without paying. A nice little earner - 150US in 15 minutes. We think the bus driver got a cut. But it didn't spoil things too much as there then followed the highlight of the trip, a great boat ride through the jungle down the fast flowing Rio Usumacinta to the Mexican border.



From there a minibus drove us the 100 miles to Palenque. This part of Mexico is very different from the "Clint Eastwood shoot out in the desert at El Paso" that we've grown used to in the movies. Scenically it actually wasn't much different from Guatemala, and, although this is one of the poorer areas of Mexico, it was clearly wealthier than either Guatemala or Honduras. Indeed it was the first time we could say that we might have been in rural southern Europe.

This Chiapas area is also "Power and the Glory" country, for those who read Graham Greene, and the site of the 1994 Zapatista uprising led by Marcos when thousands of Indians lost their lives. The legacies of those troubles are numerous military road blocks and T shirts emblazoned with a ski-masked Marcos.





We had come to Palenque to see some more Mayan ruins. It was very different from Tikal (which is all in the jungle) and Copan, (which has only small buildings, but intricate statues and carvings). It was easy to see why it was so popular. It had a bit of everything and it was all out in the open, with dramatic views all round. Mind you, it was very hot work climbing all the staircases, and much more organised for tourists.



We spent some time in the museum, where the highlight was some amazing Jade burial masks. Then it was back to our air conditioned, thatched room at the nearby hotel.



Next day we had another all day trip to San Cristobal de las Casas. Fortunately, Mexican buses are much more luxurious than the ones we'd got used to in Guatemala, yet were not much more expensive. We sat in the front seats and had a panoramic view as we drove, ever upwards, through the mountains. Our day was broken up by 3 great stops. The first of which was at the waterfall at Agua Misol-Ha, where we did little more than stretch our legs and admire the pool and waterfall.





Not much further on was Agua Clara set in a beautiful gorge. We spent longer here; walking over the rope suspension bridge and watching the local "ferry" take tourists for a ride.



Our final stop was at Agua Azul where the river opens out below some large rapids resulting in a shallow area where we went swimming in the warm aquablue water (along with lots of other people of course!).



Higher and higher into the mountains we went (up to 8000 feet), where we found we needed sweat shirts for the first time in a month. Finally in late afternoon we arrived in San Cristobal, where we found a basic hotel, as all the better ones were full. There was no air conditioning this time, but it didn't matter as now the nights were cool, but the concrete slab of a mattress kept us awake, as did the fireworks which went off all night (to celebrate a saint's birthday).

Next morning we set out to explore. We found the town was built in the usual Spanish colonial style and had a main square with a café in the bandstand.



Unfortunately, unlike Guatemala and Honduras we found evidence of the western disease everywhere - graffiti. One of the cathedrals had the usual ornately carved front facade (but unpainted this time). The other had its interior walls completely covered in gold leaf. If you are at all interested in 16th century churches then Spanish colonial America is the place to go!



We took a short bus ride to San Juan Chamula with its famous church (and not much else apart from very dirty beggars). Here traditional Mayan beliefs mix with Christianity in a beautiful candle lit church. Pine needles were strewn on the floor and round the walls were old statues of saints in glass cases that are carried through the streets during festivals.



Our final visit in San Cristobal was to the Na Bolom (House of the Jaguar) museum. Founded by Franz and Trudi Blom, it is more of an education/research centre than a museum and is dedicated to the Lacandon tribe, who were the only Mayans to escape major confrontations with the Spanish Conquistadores.



Hence, although only a few hundred of them remain today, they are the nearest living descendants of the original people of Central America. We were told that the Lacandons used a cross (below right) as a religious symbol. It totally confused the Spanish when they arrived. But their cross is not a symbol of death, instead it represents the world. The top points to sky, the bottom to earth while the arms point to sun rise and sun set - it all seemed very logical to me.



It was another all day trip back to Guatemala. Despite needing two taxis and a minivan to get from border post to border post, crossing the border back into Guatemala was efficient, and we spent only a few minutes in the very crowded border town (the Saturday market was in full swing). It was a dramatic trip to Antigua from there, on a chicken bus going through gorges and over mountain passes, but with a real manic driver at the wheel who tried to race another bus until we were almost pushed off the road by an oncoming truck. Then he saw sense and slowed down.

We had spent a couple of days in Antigua a few weeks ago, so, as this time we were just passing through, we stayed in a flea-pit hotel (it was the nearest one to the bus station). So we had a good meal in the best restaurant in town to compensate. It's not often that a meal costs more than a hotel room, but at 12US a head for the meal (the hotel was 15 US for us both) we weren't complaining.

After a final short minivan trip to Guatemala City we got in our coach for the five hour trip back to the boat. To our surprise we saw that it was air conditioned AND had a video player!! - just like the UK - wrong!! For neither worked. It was a long time before the driver believed our complaints about the heat and allowed us to open the bus windows.



#### Land Trip 4 – USA California, Nevada and Arizona

We left Guatemala on July 30th for a two hour flight and landed in a hot humid country where waitresses spoke Spanish and dollars were accepted everywhere. It was only the fact that the air conditioning worked that proved we weren't in Guatemala anymore, but in Miami airport. As an American, Jeti walked straight through immigration whereas I had my usual two hour wait to clear in, so we missed the connection to California.



But eventually, 18 hours after leaving Guatemala, we arrived in San Francisco where we spent a couple of days seeing the local sights in the Bay area: the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, Fisherman's Wharf. We used the cable powered trams, which are familiar to everyone, because of the movies like "The French Connection". However, I was surprised to find that San Francisco is actually quite a small place. That is because it is built on a peninsula at the mouth of the "Bay", which is a bit of a misnomer as it isn't a bay at all, but rather a huge natural harbour. Instead, most Bay residents live in the neighbouring cities of Oakland and San Jose.

The Bay however is huge, at least twice the size of the Solent. It is a great place to sail, although there is nearly always a wall of fog at the entrance so the Golden Gate Bridge is usually hidden from view. Inside the Bay it's clear skies, for it almost never rains in California during the summer. Despite the lack of rain San Francisco is not hot, generally temperatures are around 70-75 deg F, (22-25 deg C). If you can cope with consumerism and earthquakes, then northern California appears to be a great (though expensive) place to live. That might help explain why, unfortunately, we saw more homeless beggars in San Francisco than we had in Cuba, Guatemala or Honduras.



We then hired a car and drove south along the coast road towards Los Angeles. It's a dramatic drive that took two full days. The road goes through Monterey (with its aquarium) and past Malibu (with its surfboards).



Midway we stopped to visit the Hearst Castle. This country home (above right) perched high on a hill overlooking the Pacific was a lifelong hobby for newspaper tycoon Randolph Hearst. It took over 28 years to build, but he only lived in it for the last two years of his life.



It was full of antiquities from Europe and Egypt. The basic tour we went on only allowed us into one guest house (there are several) -below left and centre - the main dining hall and the swimming pools.







The outside pool, bottom left, was rebuilt three times before Hearst was satisfied, while the indoor pool is probably the most magnificent in the world, even the floors (below right) were inlaid with gold leaf (so maybe the streets ARE paved with gold in California!)



Then it was on to Santa Barbara where I joined 10 others to race on Profligate (below), a 63ft catamaran owned by Richard Spindler, the editor and publisher of the excellent (free!) local sailing magazine Latitude 38.



The King Harbor race is an 80 mile coastal race to a marina near Los Angeles and, with over 130 starters, one of the most popular in the S. California calendar.



This was my first sail in the Pacific. Maybe once a year we get weather in the UK that we enjoyed during the race - 15 knots wind, flat seas, bright sun and a perfect "T shirts and shorts" temperature. But apparently it's like this every day during the summer in southern California. So we had fun, but unfortunately we didn't finish the race as the wind dropped at dusk so we motored the last 20 miles (but at over 11 knots that didn't take long). Meantime, Jetti flew over the fleet in a private plane belonging to one of my Wizard builders.



I wanted to prove that I had been to southern California, so after the race we drove through Los Angeles looking for the most famous place name in the world. LA seemed to be just a big 12 lane highway, which didn't really matter, as we couldn't see much anyway because of the smog hanging over the city. We eventually spotted the sign in the distant hills, so it was out with the cameras.



We then drove inland to Las Vegas, which I thought a very strange city partly because it is in the middle of the desert, hundreds of miles from the next town. It was 110 deg F when we got there, but even so it was much more pleasant than Guatemala as the humidity was very low.



America is the land of fantasy, and most of the casinos are replicas of famous buildings. A replica Manhattan complete with Statue of Liberty jostles next to a ½ size Eiffel Tower, while Venice's St Marks Square is next to Paris' Arc de Triomphe. I thought it all very odd - where were the casinos shaped like a space shuttle or a covered wagon? It seemed that American architects have a Europe fixation and ignore their own culture. (Remember the Statue of Liberty was a present from France.)





After an evening walking "The Strip", enjoying the free attractions and losing one dollar in Caesar's Palace, we left the next morning and drove on through the desert, past the Hoover Dam and along Highway 66, which was the original road across the USA from Chicago to California.



After another night in a hotel we drove to the Grand Canyon for Jetti's birthday. Last year we celebrated by sailing through New York City, this time we flew over the Grand Canyon.



Again it's somewhere familiar to every one, but it is even bigger than I expected, with not just one ravine but several. The most dramatic part is where two rivers meet. What I thought was weird, though, was that the land all around was completely flat for hundreds of miles and then suddenly there was this deep gorge dividing it into two. It must have been a real shock for the first people to see it when they were thinking they had an easy trip across a flat desert.



Then we drove further into Arizona to the 25,000 square mile Navajo reservation. I cannot believe that anyone would choose to live here. It is a desolate place, a huge, red, sandstone desert. On the way east we stopped to see some dinosaur footprints and got caught in a sand storm. We had to stop, as we couldn't see across the road. Red dust got everywhere inside the car, even with all windows closed. I decided I'd seen enough red dust to last the rest of my life!



Some of the sandstone is harder than the rest and this forms the strange hills and spires. In the Marble Canyon area the Navajo converted some of the overhanging rocks into stone houses. The Navajo language is completely alien, but it made a change from Spanish (which I also don't understand!)





Crossing the Colorado River once more we drove on to Monument Valley, again familiar to everyone as it was the back drop to many John Wayne/Houston westerns. So my question: Where did all the earth go?



Further east we visited Canyon de Chelly where an Indian tribe used to live in houses built half way up the cliffs, which seemed impossible to get to, so why did they do it? We also visited Hubbell; the oldest continuously operated trading post/shop in the USA and still looking very much like it did 150 years ago.



We made a brief stop at the Meteor Crater, a hole 700 ft deep and a mile across, made by a 50m (150 ft) diameter meteor about 50,000 years ago. It's not the largest such crater in the world, but it is the best preserved and was the first one to be confirmed as being made by a meteor. As the guide book says: *"imagine 20 football games being played simultaneously in the crater floor watched by two million people from its sloping sides..."* From the rim it was impossible to see the 6ft by 5ft US flag flying at the bottom. Jetty is standing in front of the largest piece of the meteor that has been found. It must have been quite a bang when it landed! So it's just as well it's a flat desert for miles around.





Next on our whistle stop tour was Bad Water in Death Valley, the lowest point in the USA at 282 feet below sea level. If Las Vegas felt hot then Death Valley WAS hot!! It felt like being inside an oven, but despite the temperature it was still more comfortable than being on the boat in the Rio Dulce.



Once we got away from the crowds at Bad Water we stopped the car and listened. We heard nothing. Not a bird or animal, while there was no wind to rustle the non existent vegetation. The quietest place we had ever been.

Death Valley was much bigger than either of us had expected and it took most of the day to drive through but eventually we arrived at the foothills of Mt Whitney, the highest point in N America at 14000 ft. It's no wonder there are so many earthquakes in California when there are such massive changes in geology within such a small area.



That evening we visited the gold prospector's ghost town of Bodie. Set high up in the hills it had the reputation as being the most violent place in the West and must have been a miserable place in winter. As someone wrote, when learning they were going to Bodie, "Goodbye God, I'm going to Bodie".



Time and fires have destroyed most of the buildings, so only 5% of the original town remains. But that included some houses, shops, a church, and the school, all of which were just as they had been left 75 years ago. Even the bank strong room and safe were still there, though the bank itself has long disappeared.



However, to me its real claim to fame was that it was the first place in the world to have electricity brought in by a power line rather than from an on-site generator. The museum exhibits included the first electric motor driven by this remote power (below). Apparently the engineers tried to keep the transmission lines straight, as they did not think high voltage electricity could go round corners.



Next day we drove through the Yosemite (Yo-sem'-it-ee) National Park. The entrance is at nearly 10,000 feet, so we were above the snow line (not that there was much snow still lying, it was after all over 90 deg in the foothills). It's somewhere everyone should try to go to sometime in their life.



The main attraction is the "incomparable valley", seven miles long and a mile wide, full of tall pines and a beautiful river, surrounded by huge white granite mountains, of which the 3600 ft high El Capitan was easily the most impressive. The 620 ft high Bridalveil Falls are aptly named as the wind swirls about the cliff, thus lifting the water and blowing it from side-to-side in a delicate free fall.



As we left Yosemite and came down off the Sierra Nevada, we passed farms and drove through old mining towns. I thought the countryside west of the mountains was very similar to the UK, with rolling hills and trees, except that all the grass was brown, as it never rains in California in summer. Despite that, even I could see that farming was easy and very productive on the flat, fertile land. California has a beautiful climate and so, having crossed deserts and mountains, the early settlers must indeed have thought they had found the promised land - and there was "gold in them thar hills!" Eventually, after driving over 3000 miles in 10 days, it was back to San Francisco and some sailing - hurray!



For I couldn't leave San Francisco without sailing on the Bay. Fortunately, some friends offered to take me out. First I had a great sail on Stuart Kiehl's 30ft trimaran "Even Kiehl". For once there was no fog hanging over the Golden Gate Bridge. A couple of days later I sailed again, this time on Jitterbug, a Catana 43. Much to my surprise in Jitterbug's marina I found a Banshee. Originally built in N Ireland it was shipped to the Pacific a few years ago. A couple with two young children live on board, planning to cruise south.





## Land Trip 5 - N California and Oregon

After a few days in the Bay we got back in the car and headed north towards Oregon. The fog came back with a vengeance and it wasn't until Tomales Bay that we could see that N California has some beautiful bays and river valleys.



But we didn't linger too long here as we were on our way to the Oregon border, famous world wide as the home of the great redwood forests, the tallest trees on earth. Furthermore, they are probably the oldest organisms alive, apart from Stromatolites, which you will recall we anchored near when in the Bahamas.



Although much of the original forest was cut down years ago, the redwoods still line each side of the "Avenue of the Giants" for hundreds of miles. From a distance the trees don't look that big, in fact they look remarkably slender; an English oak looks much more massive.





But it's deceptive; Jetti is standing next to a fallen trunk, which must be 20ft diameter. They really are HUGE trees!! So we were surprised to learn that they have very small root structures. Some of the trees are especially big and in one park we found the classic Drive-In tree. It was 315ft tall and 2400 years old, quite amazing, and despite a hole big enough to drive a car through (we did that several times!) it is still alive and growing.



Driving ever further north, we found that this part of the coast has few harbours; instead there are miles of sand dunes and pine forests.



We had a lunch stop at the picturesque Cascades on the MacKenzie River.



Later, leaving the coast, we made our way inland for we were now on our way to the Three Sisters mountain range, which is in an active volcanic region (Mt St Helens is also part of this range). However Mt Hood (at over 10,000ft it's snow covered even in mid summer) and Mt Jefferson in the distance, below, haven't erupted for nearly 100 years. Even so little has grown on the lava left from the last eruption, which stretched out for miles in every direction



Then it was on to the Deschutes, a tributary of the mighty Columbia River. Maupin is small village, miles from anywhere, entirely dependant on the river and, especially, on white water rafting. Something I'd not tried before, so we chose an all day trip that would include Category 4 rapids. Despite (or maybe because of) our lack of experience, our guide was the only one to fall out.



In the photo we are at front of the raft, trying to avoid getting too wet, as the water was much colder than we were used to!! I found it fun, but not as good as sailing! I also had a go at body surfing through the rapids. I came out only slightly bruised (Jetti was too sensible to try!)

Next day we started heading south again to visit more of the volcanic mountains that make up the central backbone to Oregon and N California, first stop the Crater Lake.



The photo doesn't really do it justice. It's 7 miles across and we only got a real idea of its size when we peered over the edge and saw a little speck on the surface - which turned out to be the sightseeing boat. There is a small island in the lake that is actually a volcano in a volcano. Crater Lake is over 1900ft deep, hence the dark "ocean" blue, (It's all to do with light refraction and water depth).

But it was far too cold and windy to stay admiring the view for long, so we left and drove on south to the next volcanic area – The Mt Lassen National Park. The volcano, below, may look snow covered but in fact it's a very white rock. Others were climbing to the peak, but that looked too daunting for us.



Instead, from the lake at the foothills of Mt Lassen we walked for a couple of hours to the Bumpus Hell volcano. Yes, yet more bubbling mud and smells! But also where the first explorer lost first his footing and then his actual foot in a scalding mud hole. No wonder he called it Bumpus Hell!



On our last day we drove to Lake Tahoe, both a winter ski resort (it's at 7000ft) and a summer playground. As we drove along there was a strong east wind and I made plans for sailing on the lake. Sadly by the time we arrived the wind had dropped and there didn't seem a lot of point in motoring around, even if it would have been on a catamaran.

After a short trip to the UK it was back to the boat in Guatemala to go sailing once again. After a few days preparing we left Marios Marina in mid November.

### Where the hell is Roatan?

Asks the front of the T shirts. The answer on the back is "between Utila and Guanaja". The real answer of course is that they all comprise the Bay Islands, about 30 miles off the N coast of Honduras, and about 120 miles east of the Rio Dulce, Guatemala, where we had spent the hurricane season.

Unfortunately sailing east along the Honduran coast is renowned as one of the worst sails in the Caribbean as it is to windward, in trade winds accelerated by the high mountains of the Honduran shore and against an adverse current. Furthermore there are no good harbours apart from those in the Bay Islands. So we weren't looking forward to the next 300 miles, especially since we hadn't been sailing for 6 months.

Thus we were quite happy (if a little bored) to mainly motor sail in a light northerly wind from Livingston, Guatemala, to Puerto Este at the east end of the western-most Bay Island of Utila. This is a safe harbour with an easy entrance so we sailed, rather than motored in.

Before setting out we had heard mixed reports about the Bay Islands. One cruiser we met said it was the most beautiful place he'd ever seen. Others said it was just a hippie/backpacker hangout, and that Roatan in particular was dangerous and thievery was rife. But all agreed that the mosquitoes and especially the sandflies were voracious.

We had a good first impression, though, when we came to clear in, as it only took 20 minutes and cost 5USD (Guatemala was about 50 USD to clear in and the same to clear out). Otherwise we weren't that impressed with Utila, true it may be the cheapest place in the world to get scuba certified, but there's not much else going for it. As a major diving centre we had certainly expected the water to be clearer than it was.



So after a couple of days it was on again, with a day sail to Cayos Cochinos, which is a small group of islands forming a Marine Reserve where no anchoring is allowed. Fortunately a hotel has put down some free moorings for cruisers. In high season as many as 20 boats use them, but in mid November we were the only boat there. We found the Cochinos to be much more tropic-islandish. The two bigger islands were high and tree covered, while the six or so small cays were covered in white sand and coconut palms, so quite pretty if you like that sort of thing.





One of them, the smallest (only about 5 acres) is home to several hundred people who fish way out to sea in old dugout canoes. There is no electricity, or, for that matter, fresh water on the island, so they were all desperately poor but quite friendly. Some of the Bay Islanders speak Spanish, some English, but with very upper class cultured British accents, just like the queen - quite strange. We could never tell until we spoke to them which language we would have to use.



Because of what we had heard, rightly or wrongly, we missed out stopping in the main Roatan harbours. Instead we stayed in Old Port Royal at the island's east end. We were the only cruiser anchored in a very safe bay, with only one house visible on shore. Roatan is suffering an influx of (mainly American) ex pats and we had passed a long ribbon of big homes along the water front, just like in Florida. We stayed a couple of days, basically until the rain stopped - for it had rained on 10 of the 12 days since leaving Guatemala.

In 1998 Honduras was hit by hurricane Mitch. Ten thousand people died and much of the country was destroyed. Particularly hard hit was the next island we visited, Guanaja. Even 6 years later dead trees and destroyed homes were very much in evidence. But things were looking up. Guanaja is a pretty island with friendly people, and not much spoilt by wealthy newcomers.





We spent a couple of days on a mooring at Graham's Place on Josh's Cay. This was a true Caribbean dream island. Better still, it's owned by an American whose hobby seems to be running a hotel without guests. It was great for cruisers; we had free water, free moorings, free ice. And since we were there for Thanksgiving he even supplied us cruisers with a free Thanksgiving dinner! Definitely a "must visit" place for anyone in the area.



Unfortunately, the weatherman on the 8am cruisers net on 8188 said that now was the time to head east as the tradewinds would only be 15 knots. So we motored back to Bonacca Town for some last minute shopping.

The vast majority of Guanaja residents live on this offshore cay. Even so, it's a tiny town with no cars or roads, just walkways and canals, like a mini Venice. Clearing out was as easy as clearing in and at only 2USD was the cheapest we've found so far. Honduras certainly knows how to make cruisers welcome!

I guess the weatherman was right, as we never saw wind over 25 knots as we beat for 44 hours to the corner. But it was not a nice sail! Still we did better than Columbus, who took 4 weeks to sail along this coast. Not surprisingly he named the final headland Capo Gracias a Dios (Thank Christ!) once he'd rounded it.



We didn't go as close inshore as he did; instead we headed for the Vivorillo Cays, 35 miles off the mainland. Two little deserted coconut palm treed islands inside a protecting reef and a favourite resting place for cruisers and shrimpboats.



Next stop, 190 miles south of here, is the Colombian island of Providencia. Moderate NE trades were forecast for the next few days so we were hoping for a nice beam reach.

But of course that's not what we had...

It all started off well enough, maybe even a bit too slowly to ensure a daytime arrival in Providencia. However, by late afternoon we were sailing in a big cross sea towards an unmarked, barely awash, coral reef which on the chart had the ominous words "position uncertain". We would be rounding it in the dark, and with no moon, we made very sure we kept well away!

All went well for Jetti's night watch but by dawn it was clear that the weather had changed. Big black cloud banks stretched from horizon to horizon and the wind was beginning to gust strongly. As the day wore on the clouds got more menacing and from time to time big squalls came racing towards us. In one the rain was as heavy as we've ever seen it, the whole sea flattening and turning white. We even saw a waterspout, fortunately a couple of miles away.



In the next squall the anemometer high wind alarm (set at 30 knots) went off repeatedly, despite the fact that we were sailing downwind at 8 knots. Reefs in, reefs out all day and then about 2pm we saw the high hill of Providencia appeared dead ahead (in these gps days landfalls are always dead ahead - a nice change from days of old!). Nearly there we thought!

But we had one last squall to contend with, which was the worst of the lot. One big wave hit us broadside and everything went flying. Even a cup broke, the first time that had happened since leaving the UK. Fortunately, as often happens, after the squall passed the wind dropped to nothing and we motored the last 5 miles into Catalina Harbour at the north end of Providencia.

This has an easy entrance with lighted buoys (that makes a change!) and is very protected from the prevailing winds. We anchored in 8ft next to 3 other yachts, determined to have at least a week's rest before sailing on to Panama.

## **A Man, a Plan, a Canal**

### **Panama.**

It's not just a palindrome, indeed it's not even just a canal, rather, with over 1700 miles of coastline, Panama is a major cruising destination in its own right.

However all that was still 250 miles away, and for now the wind blew hard in Providencia. Fortunately Catalina harbour is very safe and sheltered in the prevailing N-NE winds so we felt happy to leave the boat during the day securely anchored in 6ft of water while we explored the island.



Some days we took walks around the island, finding deserted beaches and quiet restaurants. There is no mass tourism here, (that's on Providencia's sister island, San Andres, 60 miles further south) so generally only local people use the beaches and thus of course they are empty during the week.



One Saturday all the weather bound cruisers went to the far end of the island (all of 6 miles away!) to join in a local beach party. Apparently these are monthly events designed to preserve and encourage local culture.



There was traditional sailboat racing with 6 crew per boat, all hiking hard. Bare back horse racing on the beach and a “Battle of the Bands”. Combining all this with lots of food and drink made it a fun day for everyone.



Eventually the wind began to moderate, and we left Providencia under just the genoa. Although Panama was over 250 miles away, we still had to judge our speed carefully as we wanted to arrive in daylight; so we didn't increase sail even when the wind dropped. We arrived on a Sunday afternoon, but didn't clear in until Monday morning, although that didn't stop the Port Captain charging us an extra USD40 for overtime (in cash, no receipt).



We had arrived in Bocas del Toro, a town at the entrance to a large lagoon in NW Panama, and somewhere that several people had told us we just had to visit. It was not much to look at as we arrived, but once we got ashore we saw its appeal. It was bustling with backpackers and surfers but especially with ex pat Americans buying land and houses.

All the buildings are wood and so, since the town has twice been destroyed by fire, despite its age (note the wooden spoked wheels!), the local Fire Brigade made sure their fire engine was kept in immaculate condition.





We did some boat maintenance and office work for a week while we stayed at anchor in a west wind, which felt very strange after nearly a year of constant easterlies. But as Christmas approached we decided to celebrate in one of Bocas' two marinas. And since we knew Eclipse would be safe, we could leave it to travel inland. Bocas was very hot and humid, and we'd quickly discovered that it has two seasons. The tourist brochures describe them as the Dry and Green seasons. We thought it more accurate to call them "Wet and Very Wet"!



Bocas is on a peninsula and although there are cars in town and even an airstrip, to get to the rest of Panama one first takes a 20 minute water taxi ride on a very bouncy lake boat, which is not really designed for open water (Oh for a power cat!) to the terminus at Almirante. One of the least scenic places we've been to! And looking much the worse in the persistent rain.



I've written before about the differences between rich and poor. Panama is a prosperous country for most. But for many, especially the indigenous Indians, it is still a subsistence farming/fishing way of life, with only shacks for houses and no proper sanitation. We learnt that the general rule before swimming off a beach is to count the outhouses lining the shore.



As always we were keen to get into the hills and thus find cooler weather. A five hour bus ride took us to David (*Dav-eed*), Panama's third city, somewhere we found dry, cool and prosperous, a total contrast to Almirante. After a night there and another two

hour bus ride, we arrived in Cerro Punta which is at 6000 ft and where we found the cold we had been looking for. Unfortunately we also found more rain.



Despite that we enjoyed the cool and also the novelty of wearing sweatshirts for the first time in three months. On the spur of the moment we rashly decided to walk the Volcan Baru trail to Boquete the next town, not just 10 miles away, but also the other side of the volcano. Had we planned it better we would have sent our overnight bags on ahead, instead we had to carry them.



We got a lift in 4x4 taxi to the trail head and ranger station. Usually a 4x4 is bought as a status symbol. Here they are essential as the track was very rough. Large exposed concrete drain pipes were laid across the streams and big boulders littered the path making even walking difficult. The track climbed more and more steeply, at least a 1:4 gradient, but fortunately, as we got higher, the weather cleared and we had a great view looking back across the valley.



So we paid our 5USD park fee, were shown the puma footprints left from the night before and at 8.30am started off. As always we were lulled into a false sense of

security. *"This isn't too bad"* we told each other. But the path got gradually steeper and muddier. Slipping and sliding we fought our way ever upward through the jungle.



It made us realise just how tough it was for the early explorers. We had a path to follow and knew where we were going. Furthermore, we knew the noise in the distance was made by howler monkeys rather than by some man eating beast. Above all, we were pretty confident that we'd survive the day. One hundred years ago at least one-third of the settlers died of yellow fever or malaria.



We keep hearing that the rain forests are destroyed and that all the jungles are cut down. Well, to us it still seemed very green and lush as we climbed the pass to 8000ft. Eventually, after several hours walking; we reached the midway point and the viewing spot.



In theory you can see the Caribbean from here, but it was too cloudy for us. We did

hear more howler monkeys though, and could also see that we still had a very long way to go...



After a short lunch stop we started the descent. At times it seemed almost sheer and for about a mile it was a real scramble. We were so glad we weren't doing the hike in the other direction!



We kept re-crossing the river, sometimes over stepping stones, occasionally over rickety hanging bridges.



For the last couple of miles the trail levelled out and the going became soft rather than boggy. Then at 2pm we reached what we thought was the end of the trail. Farm buildings appeared and we began walking along a dirt road.

*“Boquete must be just round the next bend – after all the last sign said Boquete 3Km”*  
Half an hour later we passed another sign *“Boquete 4km”*

We’d now been carrying our bags and walking/scrambling steadily for nearly 6 hours and the prospect of another couple of hours of the same was daunting. But we had no alternative except to carry on until at long last we reached the ranger station. No phone, so no taxi. *“Only 40 minutes walk downhill to Boquete,”* the ranger said.

Two hours later we got a lift in the back of a pickup carrying carrots. Five miles further on we were dropped at the outskirts of Boquete. From there a 5 minute taxi ride took us to a cheap hotel.

Next day we didn’t move.

Then it was back to the boat and Christmas dinner in the marina restaurant.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> we got our Zarpe (clearance papers) from the Port Captain and headed off east towards the canal and the San Blas.



**Providencia to Bocas del Toro**



## The Waiting Game

Bocas is at the head of a ten mile long lagoon that gradually shallows as one sails east. Thus, as we left Bocas in a strong west wind, we felt we could only safely sail fast for about an hour. The shallowest parts of the lagoon are less than 8ft deep, amongst a maze of islets and reefs with only a narrow, hard to spot, gap to the open sea. So we lowered the mainsail and sailed on cautiously, at one point we even rolled away the genoa yet were still doing two knots under bare poles, which felt plenty fast enough. In late afternoon we had cleared the last shallow reef and headed out to sea towards Salt Creek, where we anchored for the night, close to shore, having weaved our way through yet more coral reefs.

Next morning the wind was stronger still, and we ran downwind under genoa alone in a very steep confused sea, presumably caused by the river currents running out of the Bocas lagoon, to the isolated riverside village of Tobobe. Tobobe has no road access and is twenty miles by sea to the next village; it was a real step back in time, the village looking much as it must have done when Columbus passed by.



Villagers paddled out in their canoes, a few had fruit and fish to sell, but most just hung onto the boat, staring.



Jeti made them a cake and traded toys for bananas. After 2 days the village harbourmaster came past in his dugout canoe, took our details and asked for 20USD harbour dues. Or maybe he was just a conman – we didn't get a receipt, and we are still not sure, in any event he was very convincing.



The 130 mile sail to the Rio Chagres, just west of the Panama Canal, would be our longest sail for the next two months, so we stayed at Tobobe until the rain stopped and the wind moderated. We left in another westerly (they are common during the rainy season) and so, for the first time since leaving Guatemala six weeks earlier, we were able to sail downwind in open water. Sadly, after fifty miles the wind dropped and then veered round to the east, so it was back to windward bashing. At midnight I woke Jetti with the words. “It’s your watch, and by the way – Happy New Year!” Two years ago New Year was spent at anchor in Grenada, last year it was in Nassau, but this was the first New Year when we’d actually been at sea. Where will we be next year?

The river Chagres is one of the main Panamanian rivers and had caused huge problems when building the Panama Canal until it was eventually dammed, thus helping to control the water level in Lake Gatun. The river entrance beneath the ruins of Fort San Lorenzo is very narrow and in the dawn light it seemed impassable. But fortunately a local boat was entering as we arrived, so we followed it in, through a 60ft wide gap between two rows of surf and inside a reef. It reminded me of entering Bigbury on a bad day but at least there was no one on surfboards here! Once inside all was quiet and calm, and we found that the jungle came right down to the water on either bank. We motored up river for about three miles and anchored only a boat length from the shore in 45ft - the shallowest place we found. Blue and yellow macaws flew overhead, while as dusk fell howler monkeys began their roaring; that was a familiar sound, but what was making that other noise?



A couple of canoes had passed us during the day so that night we debated about turning on the anchor light – it would warn approaching boats of our presence, but what would it attract? In the end we compromised and left a cabin light on. Next morning on the cruiser’s radio chat session someone reported seeing a large snake swimming past his boat. So the discussion started – could they/ would they climb onto a boat? Maybe transom steps and a boarding ladder are not such a good idea after all! It was certainly not what we wanted to hear anchored in the middle of the jungle.

We were still trying to get to the San Blas for Christmas(!), so all too soon we were on again, bashing into a 25 knot NE wind, past the breakwaters and anchored ships that mark the entrance to the Panama Canal. As dusk fell we dropped anchor in Portobello, thirty miles nearer our goal.



And that's when the real waiting started. Except in strong westerlies, Portobello is a really safe anchorage and has two claims to fame. First, it is where Sir Francis Drake is buried. Second, it is officially the wettest town in all of North America. Like Drake, Eclipse's home port is Plymouth. There Drake is a hero and spent part of the wealth he gained on the "Spanish Main" building houses and making Plymouth's first good water supply (his reservoir is still there). In Panama, as elsewhere in Central America, he's considered a villain. Travelling round the Caribbean I'd seen forts built by the Spanish to protect their colonial towns from Drake – in San Juan, Havana, St Augustine - he certainly got around! And don't forget he also claimed San Francisco for England, was the first commander to sail round world and he played bowls before beating the Spanish Armada (his bowling green in Plymouth is still in use today). Yet after all that, he died of yellow fever aged 54 and is buried in a lead casket off Drake's Island at the entrance to Portobello.



Four hundred years ago Portobello was the main despatch point for all the gold and silver taken from the South American mines, and we learnt that in its heyday silver

ingots were left lying in the streets as the warehouses were completely full of gold. Now it's run down, while the four forts guarding the harbour were partly dismantled to build the Panama Canal. Fortunately the Customs House was recently rebuilt, but there is still no proper museum and nothing to indicate that for two hundred years Portobello was the most important town in Central America. Despite that, we liked the town. There were several small restaurants and four shops, all run by Chinese.



Day after day it rained and the wind blew hard. Officially the rainy season was now over, but clearly Portobello deserved its place in the record books.

One day though, we took a one hour bus ride to a “real” supermarket, the first we’d seen in over a year of cruising. On another day we did a double take, for coming round the headland we saw a square rigged ship. It looked too big to be the Golden Hind and as it came closer and anchored, I spotted the Australian flag flying astern. I had just finished reading “Blue Latitudes” and so quickly realised that it was the replica of Cook’s Endeavour. But it made us realise how vulnerable the bullion ships were as they waited for their cargo. No wonder they needed four forts for protection. Next day the locals called it the “ghost ship”.



Since leaving Bocas we had been looking for somewhere to leave the boat when we fly home at Easter. In Portobello we learnt of a new marina, Panamarina, just a few miles further east. After a week at anchor I could wait no longer and in a still strong wind (25-30 knots) and big steep seas (probably reaching 14 ft) we sailed round the corner and checked out the marina.

It is run by a French couple and looked OK, and so we booked Eclipse in for late March. Eclipse will be the first English yacht to stay there.



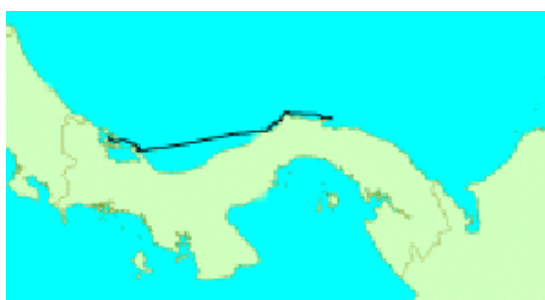
Then it was on a couple more miles to Isla Grande and Puerto Lindo, reputedly the safest yacht anchorages on this coast. Twenty five other cruisers certainly thought so.

More waiting.

Eventually, after eleven days, the wind began to moderate, and we left to sail in a steadily decreasing wind to Escribanos. Another narrow entrance between two reefs took us into a shallow river, only 5ft deep, where we spent a quiet and peaceful night. Then finally a short fifteen mile sail next morning to the very crowded anchorage at Provenir, the clearing in port for the San Blas.



At last we'd got there.



**Route Bocas to Porvenir**



## Cruising in the The San Blas

We spent nearly 2 months in the San Blas archipelago, more correctly known as Kuna Yala (Land of the Kuna), which is an autonomous region of NE Panama. It's an area not much bigger than the Solent or San Francisco Bay yet comprises nearly 400 islands. The vast majority are covered with coconut trees and surrounded by white sand beaches, however only 40 or so are inhabited. Although the islands are small, the surrounding reefs are extensive. Thus, even when the prevailing NE trade winds blow hard, the water stays flat and smooth. Furthermore, we found that there is usually no need to sail more than 10 miles from one island anchorage to the next.



It could all make the San Blas the charter capital of the world. I thought it a better place to go for a week's sailing holiday than either the Grenadines or Greece for example. Not only was the sailing easy, but we also found that the snorkelling was consistently better than in Belize or the Bahamas. Understandably, the local people - the Kuna - don't like the idea of tourists invading their lands. So there are no hotels except for a few basic ones run by the Kuna themselves. Although large cruise ships no longer visit the San Blas a couple of smaller ones, taking 50 passengers each, still do. If you don't have your own boat, going on one of these is probably the only sensible way to see the islands as even chartering is discouraged.



There are about 50,000 Kuna, half of whom live outside the San Blas, mainly doing menial jobs in Panama City. Apparently they are the second smallest race of people in the world (after the African pygmies). I am only 5ft 8in tall, and it felt strange to be able to look down on all the men and to be head and shoulders above all the women. Indeed I decided that one reason why the area is such a fascinating cruising ground is because of the Kuna themselves, who are resisting the influence of "stupid white men" to a remarkable degree.

Even to the extent that on several islands the islanders have voted not to have electricity as they felt it would change their life style too much. There are drawbacks to their policy of non-integration, though. For example, there is a lot of in-breeding, as evidenced by the number of albinos we saw. Despite that, everyone looked very fit and healthy.



Although most of the men speak Spanish and wear western clothes, the women can often only speak Kuna and usually dress traditionally in their world famous "Molas". These are multi-layer stitched fabric panels made using a "reverse appliqué" technique. They are usually about 18in square and we soon realised that there are two types.

The traditional ones have intricate, abstract designs, whereas the modern ones, made for tourists, tend to be more pictorial. But all involve hours of work. At every corner we would see a Kuna lady sitting, head bowed, busily stitching away. Even I could appreciate the skill involved and we thought them well worth the 10-15 USD they cost. So we bought a few! Our favourite is a traditional mola illustrating an eclipse. It now takes pride of place in Eclipse's saloon.



For hundreds of years the Kuna have run a successful, stable democracy. Everyone over 18 can vote for the village chiefs who are elected for life; however, the chiefs themselves can only be men and only married couples can take part in village discussions. There is very little crime and residents of one island have to get permission to leave it before going to another, presumably to keep the island populations reasonably constant.

Although no one owns any land, every coconut tree is owned and many islands have temporary caretakers looking after them. We quickly learnt that although a Kuna lady may wear "funny" clothes, live in a bamboo hut and have a gold ring in her nose, she is still a shrewd businesswoman who knows exactly what we could afford and what her molas are worth.



Getting to the San Blas is difficult, and even for a yacht the San Blas are remote. A few tourists fly in on small planes, while for the Kuna getting to "civilization" usually involves a 30 mile trip in a small boat along a rough lee shore, followed by a 3 hour coach to the city of Colon. This is the route all the supply boats have to take, so of course it also makes it difficult to get provisions in the islands. We had thought that Tobobe and Isla Grande were the end of the line until, that is, we got to the San Blas.

Other cruisers had warned us that it was hard to buy fuel and food, but as veterans of Cuba we felt they were probably exaggerating - but they weren't! Even essentials like bread and milk were difficult to get. Most vegetables were impossible to find and chicken, the staple meat of Central America, was very expensive. Thus the Kuna live primarily on a diet of coconuts, rice and fish. Canoeists did occasionally come by offering fish, but usually they wanted to sell molas or undersized lobsters. A lost opportunity I feel.

Enough social studies; back to the sailing.

Provenir, the entry island for the San Blas is a very small island, with only a short airstrip, hotel and immigration office. So it was difficult to find anywhere to anchor safely, especially as before we had got the anchor properly set we had two canoes tied up alongside, both full of Kuna ladies trying to sell us Molas.

We smiled, indicated we were tired from our journey and then politely ignored them by going below. After about 10 minutes they left, as another boat was coming to anchor. We had been warned about the pushy Mola sellers, but this was the only time in 2 months that they were this tenacious.



Even on the short sail from Provenir to the West Lemon Cays we realised that the San Blas were something special. Everywhere we looked we could see coconut trees and white sand covered islands - the archetypical desert islands were all around us. It didn't take us long to decide that we had to spend as much time as possible in the islands. There are effectively three rows of islands in the San Blas, each row running roughly east-west and each about 4 miles from the next row.



Accordingly, we decided to first sail to the West Hollandes as they were the furthest to windward. After that everywhere else should be off wind in flat water - ideal sailing! Possibly the 8 mile beat puts other cruisers off, which is why we only saw one other boat there, but we found the West Hollandes to be a good anchorage with an easy no-reef approach. We also discovered that the snorkelling was excellent along the edge of the reef between the two main islands.

Regretfully we couldn't stay long as my sister Diana would be arriving a couple of weeks later for her annual sail, so we decided to do quick tour of all the islands to find best spots to take her. Thus we only stayed a day before sailing on in the flat water in the lee of the Hollandes reef to the East Hollandes.



This is the most popular anchorage in the San Blas and with good reason. It is a very protected group of several small islands, so one can always find somewhere sheltered to anchor, even when the current over the reef runs hard and the trade wind blows. The whole group is surrounded by a reef, which offered yet more excellent snorkelling. The pure white sand and clear shallow water resulted in some fantastic blues and it was easy to see why one anchorage was called the "Swimming Pool".



As a result it's extremely popular with cruisers and there is a regular Monday night "Potluck Party" where stories are swapped, beer drunk and garbage burnt. All in all, it had my vote as the world's best anchorage.



On Tuesdays most boats leave, but we stayed on, as we wanted to spend more time snorkelling over the reefs. As a result, we got caught by the harbour master. We paid 5USD to cover anchoring for one month - not bad value! We even got an official receipt. Later he invited us for a meal in his house, and we discovered that eating out

in the San Blas is a unique experience: our meal was a large bowl of cold rice and 5 fried fish heads.



We were now running short of fresh food so sailed on, first to Green Cay, where a number of long term cruisers hang out indefinitely. We anchored and then swam out to check that the anchor was set properly before swimming to the beach. Hardly had we got out of the water when another cruiser dinghied over and told us he'd give us a lift back to the boat. "Why?" we asked. "Crocodile," he said. We took the lift! That evening we saw it swimming past our boat. We learned later that there is another crocodile living in the Middle Hollandes.



A few days later we sailed the three miles to Nargana. This is an island with a fairly good shop and where we were also able to get fuel. Nearby is the Rio Diablo, and we had a good dinghy trip up this narrow river, although we found that the mouth had a very shallow bar. After about one hour motoring, we came to a sign saying "no motors after this point".

That's because the water was now fresh and after rowing a few hundred yards further the river passed over some gravel beds and we could collect water clean enough to drink. Allegedly there are monkeys here, but we didn't see any, instead we saw lots of birds and big butterflies.



Diana arrived, sans luggage, and we made another circuit of all the islands - the Hollandes, Salar, Lemon Cay - that we had enjoyed during our first couple of weeks.



One day as we sailed along we noticed a canoe behind us. A couple of hours later we anchored and eventually the Kuna ladies sailing it caught us up. They said they had followed us all day, so after all that effort Diana and Jetti felt they just had to buy some more molas.



At the end of Diana's stay we became one of the first cruisers of the year to visit Carti. The Carti group is somewhat off the beaten track (ie they are 5 miles downwind!) These are tiny islands, but with some very friendly people living in seemingly very cramped conditions. Walking round Yanatupu, we found it a real rabbit's warren, with narrow sandy paths between the houses and with every available square inch used.



The houses are very simply built from tree trunks lashed together. Split bamboos form the walls and the roofs are thatched. But why no diagonal bracing? After a few years most houses take on a pronounced lean. As I said earlier, the Kuna are very short, so we were constantly ducking the low-hanging eaves. We saw no litter, and everything was amazingly clean, as is typical on all the traditionally run islands.

On Tupile, we found a tour guide who promised us an inland adventure, and so we hired a canoe, which took us some miles up a jungle river.



There then followed a one and a half hour walk through the jungle to a remote village of a small cluster of houses and a school, apparently miles from the next village and surrounded by banana and coffee plantations. We were to have lunch here, so we were invited into a house. Inside we found a bare floor, no furniture of course, and our lunch chef cooking on an open fire.

The Kuna sleep in hammocks, which are stowed in the roof during the day. It is always cool in the houses, as the bamboo slats let air through but not the rain. We thought the guide was joking when he said the main course for lunch was iguana. But he wasn't. Diana seemed to enjoy the meal more than I did.



Next day Diana flew home to the UK, while we went back to the incredible blues of the East Hollandes for another week or two.

We decided to stay in the Kuna Yala until after their independence day on Feb 25th. We sailed back to the Carti island group where they would be re-enacting the events of 1925 when the Kuna fought against the Panamanian police to win the right to govern their own lands. As we were the only tourists presen we were given chairs and thus felt like the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh must do when presiding over native displays.



The festivities began with a parade through the street (no plural on this island!), followed by a display of dances from each island. These seemed to be quite formal affairs, although we gathered that more casual dances take place regularly. As they danced the men played Pan Pipes and the women maracas. Each dance was quite long and it must have required a lot of stamina, concentration and breath control.



Then came the highlight of the day, as groups of young men, some playing the part of the Panamanian police, others the heroic bow and arrow wielding Kuna, re-enacted the events of 80 years ago. Sometimes the Panamanian soldiers would maltreat the Kuna, sometimes it was the other way round, but at least that way all the participants got their turn to be violent.



To an outsider it seemed very confusing, especially as our translator got more and more excited as the day wore on. At the end of each battle the losers would be carried off and thrown in the sea. I'm not sure why, but I got involved as well. I was the nominal American who was given a new wife (at least that's what I hoped I got!).



To recover from all the excitement we spent a few final days relaxing at the East Lemon Cays. Again the snorkelling on the reef was superb, but for me the highlight was to be invited to sail on one of the local canoes. The simple dugouts are normally paddled around an island, but then sailed between the islands. Despite old bed sheets for sails, they are surprisingly fast. I also found the canoe to be surprisingly stable. It is steered by simply holding the paddle over the side. There is no lee board so all the canoes make amazing leeway. I can understand that it takes some lateral thinking (pun intended!) to come up with an outrigger canoe or even a catamaran, but the Kuna have the materials to make a Viking style rudder and Thames barge leeboards, so I can't help but wonder why they never have.



Finally it was time to leave. The wind had blown from the NE all the time we were in the San Blas so we were looking forward to a good 40 mile reach back to Panamarina where we were to leave the boat. Sadly the day we left was a flat calm and we had to motor the whole way.

It then took a couple of days to de-commission the boat before we were able to leave for Colon, where we hoped to get a lift through the Panama Canal. The Canal Authorities insist that every yacht transiting the canal has a pilot, helmsman and 4 line handlers. So as most boats are sailed by couples we hoped to be able to get a ride quite easily.

# Appendix

## Woods Designs Sailing Catamarans

Woods Designs specialise in the design of sailing catamarans for both home and professional builders. Founded in 1981 we now boast possibly the largest and most comprehensive range of catamaran designs in the world. Designs range in size from 14' to 70' and types include beach catamarans, open deck cruising catamarans, bridgedeck cabin cruisers, racing catamarans and trailable boats. Boats can be built in a range of materials of which the most popular include sheet ply, cold moulded ply, strip plank cedar and foam sandwich. Like most designers we do not offer plans for catamarans built in steel or aluminium.

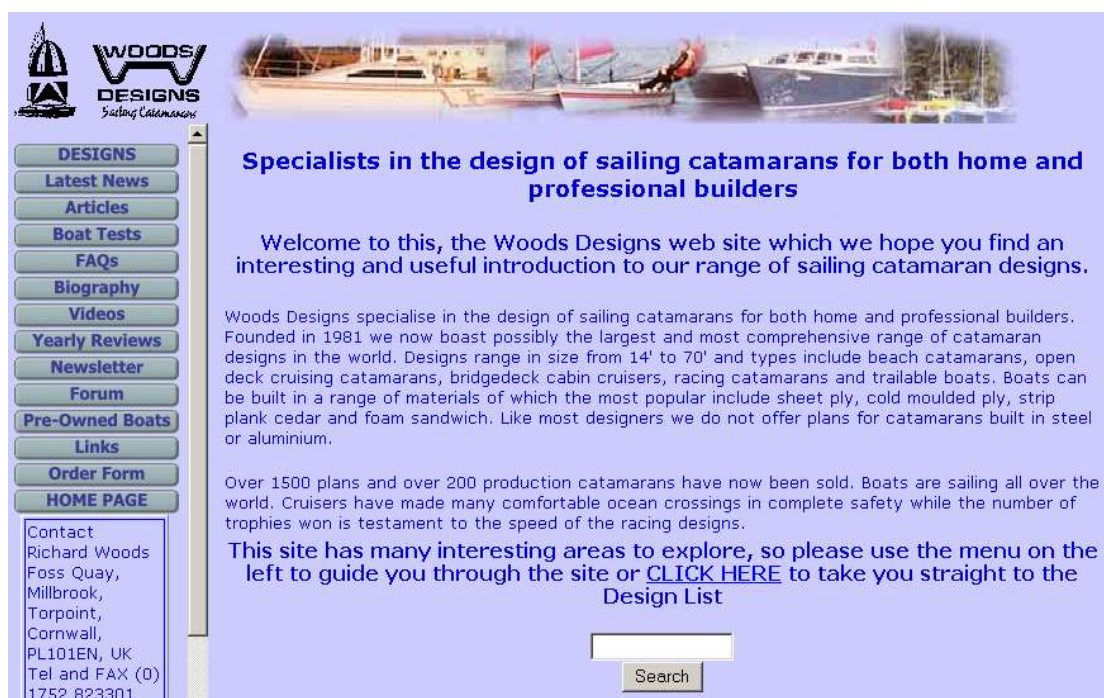
Over 1500 plans and over 200 production catamarans have now been sold. Boats are sailing all over the world. Cruisers have made many comfortable ocean crossings in complete safety while the number of trophies won is testament to the speed of the racing designs.

You can see more about our designs, order videos, books and plans by visiting our web site

[www.sailingcatamarans.com](http://www.sailingcatamarans.com) email [richard@sailingcatamarans.com](mailto:richard@sailingcatamarans.com)

or by contacting us at:

WOODS DESIGNS, Foss Quay, Millbrook, Torpoint, Cornwall, PL10 1EN, UK



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**Specialists in the design of sailing catamarans for both home and professional builders**

Welcome to this, the Woods Designs web site which we hope you find an interesting and useful introduction to our range of sailing catamaran designs.

Woods Designs specialise in the design of sailing catamarans for both home and professional builders. Founded in 1981 we now boast possibly the largest and most comprehensive range of catamaran designs in the world. Designs range in size from 14' to 70' and types include beach catamarans, open deck cruising catamarans, bridgedeck cabin cruisers, racing catamarans and trailable boats. Boats can be built in a range of materials of which the most popular include sheet ply, cold moulded ply, strip plank cedar and foam sandwich. Like most designers we do not offer plans for catamarans built in steel or aluminium.

Over 1500 plans and over 200 production catamarans have now been sold. Boats are sailing all over the world. Cruisers have made many comfortable ocean crossings in complete safety while the number of trophies won is testament to the speed of the racing designs.

This site has many interesting areas to explore, so please use the menu on the left to guide you through the site or [CLICK HERE](#) to take you straight to the Design List

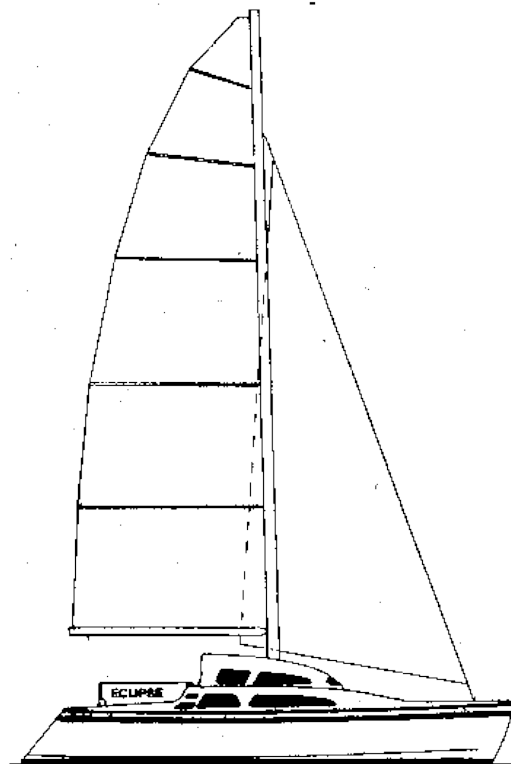
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## Eclipse - 32ft Performance Cruiser



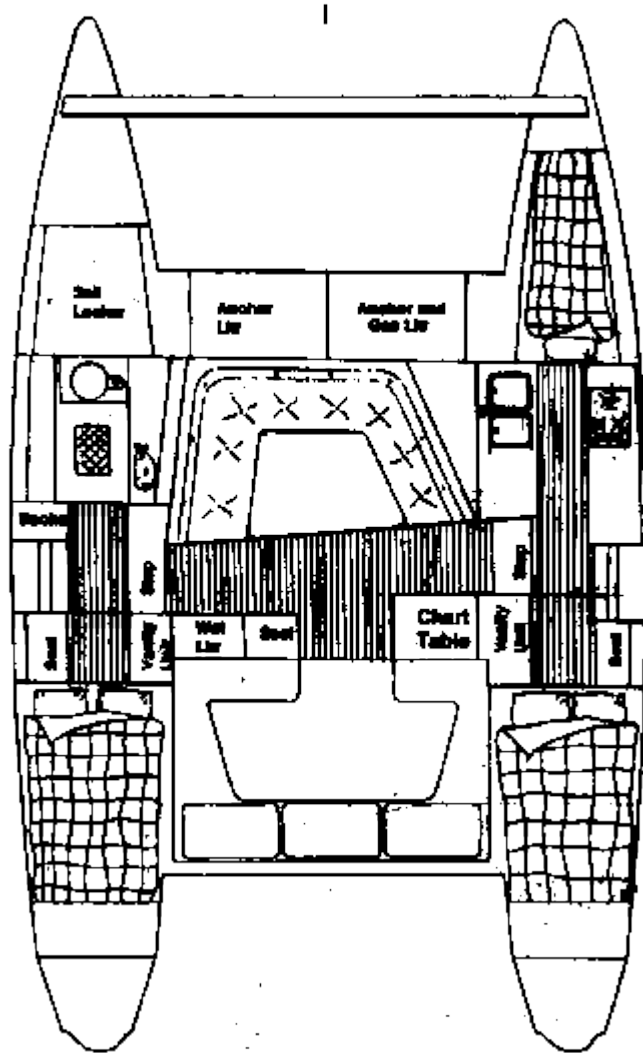
We built the prototype ECLIPSE for our own use and it has exceeded all expectations. It has proven to be a successful race boat, yet at the same time it has sailed over 16,000 miles and been a live aboard cruising home for over 3 years.



ECLIPSE features standing headroom throughout and all round visibility from the saloon. Seven people can sit comfortably in the saloon, while the galley is large with 1.6 sqm (over 15 sq ft) of work surfaces, a separate hob and large eye level oven and grill.

The aft cabins have large dressing areas and wide double bunks with sitting headroom.

The heads compartment is over 1.5m (5ft) long with shower and large vanity unit.



Options include daggerboards or low aspect ratio (LAR) keels and tiller or wheel steering. Engines can be a 9.9hp 4 stroke outboard or twin diesels (LAR version only)

The pronounced knuckle and high bridgedeck clearance means bridgedeck slamming is a thing of the past.

Load carrying has proven sufficient for ocean cruising for a couple, while the performance is astonishing for a cruising boat. So far a top speed of 21 knots, while its capable of 8.5 knots to windward tacking through less than 90 degrees. It has proven to point higher than IMS race boats 20' longer.

## THE FACTS AND FIGURES

strip cedar round bilge hulls, ply decks or grp production boat

LENGTH O.A. 9.9m

LENGTH W.L. 9.45m

BEAM OA 5.9m

DISPL (empty) 2.5T

DISPL (loaded) 3.7T

HEADROOM 1.9m saloon, 2m hulls

DRAFT 0.5 - 1.7m (daggerboard version)

(0.9m LAR keel version)

SAIL AREA 57sq m

David Harding of Practical Boat Owner magazine (the UK's largest yachting magazine) wrote an excellent boat test on the Eclipse which appeared in the May 2004 issue. I can't reprint the whole article here for copyright reasons, but I think I can use these excerpts.

*"Even in the light airs of my first outing, the Eclipse's 615sq ft (57sq m) of sail made sure that she felt comfortable. In 10 knots of breeze and a slight chop, when some cruising multihulls would have bobbed about aimlessly, we recorded up to 6 knots of boatspeed to windward in the flatter patches and tacked through about 100°... "*



*"...I was keen to see the boat in a bit more breeze, so we headed out again a few months later into a south-westerly Force six that followed several weeks of gales. Not surprisingly, the seas off Penlee Point were still on the lively side. We made good progress upwind nonetheless, with 5.8 to 6.3 knots showing on the log most of the time on port tack. The extra breeze brought our tacking angle down to between 80 and 90° and, with the seas at a more comfortable angle on starboard tack - as they*

*often seem to be off Plymouth in a south-westerly - we picked up to nearly 9 knots at times.*

*Inevitably in those conditions, sailing downwind was the most fun. Had we shaken out the reef, we'd easily have exceeded the 13.2 knots we achieved surfing down a wave, but we kept the slab tucked in, ready for the reach back up Plymouth Sound. In terms of handling qualities, the Eclipse was as undemanding as you could wish for. I counted remarkably few thuds from under the bridgedeck and found the boat quite happy to sail herself upwind with the traveller eased down the track. Tacking was fast and positive, though the daggerboards must have resulted in more positive handling - and better upwind performance - than could be expected from LAR keels..."*



David sailed with me in the Round the Island Race (1700 starters, over 50 multihulls). We won our class, but David's comments comparing our performance with that of the monohulls are interesting.



*"We were five minutes faster than the first Sigma 38 and, in the latter stages of the race, we found ourselves in close company with the leading Mumm 30s. They had gained on us around the back of the island, where our need to gybe the angles downwind pushed us out into the tide. In situations like that, boats with conventional, poled-out spinnakers can hug the shore more closely. We were not surprised to find ourselves level-pegging with the Mumms on the two-sail reach from Bembridge to the fort; what nobody had expected was to see us pulling away from them on the windward leg back to the finish line off Cowes."*



Summing up he wrote:

*"Something worth saying is that the Eclipse makes you realise the value of a designer's practical, hands-on experience. Everything works: the hulls, the foils, the rig, the deck layout and the arrangement below decks. And while the boat is more expensive - at least in ready-built form - than most single-hulled alternatives of similar overall length, don't forget that her accommodation and performance put her on a par with monohulls a good deal longer....Whatever your inclinations, it's hard to deny the practicality of a cat such as the Eclipse for long-distance sailing. Or even for a quick whizz around the Isle of Wight".*





## Extracts from my 2002 Newsletters

### MAY

The prototype Eclipse was launched on May 31st. Still needing linings, unfinished below and missing cockpit seats it has now been test sailed about 100 miles.



We are all very pleased with its performance so far. Hands off sailing at 7.5 knots to windward for long periods. We beat a Sigma 38 (production cruiser racer) to windward in 15 knots apparent. 9.5 knots easy off wind on gps running as if on rails. Tacks as fast as I can get from one hull to the other. And no bridgedeck slam.



When launched Eclipse floated about 70mm high at the stern and 50mm high at the bows, but since then I have fitted the dinghy in davits which has helped trim. Most of the stores, and of course all the crew, will be aft which will help trim the boat correctly.

Still to make are the cockpit seats. Interior lining is the other major job (Oh and fitting the 6 disc CD player and solid fuel stove chimney!)

### JULY

It's been another busy month, fortunately this time that meant going sailing! Testing and trying out my new Eclipse and also finishing off the interior. Most of that is now done, save a few corners, plus carpets and table.

I've been very pleased with its performance, it certainly seems to be in the Banshee/Sagitta speed range.

For example, on a 40 mile beat from Plymouth to Falmouth in 20 knots of wind I easily beat 3 Sigma 33's despite sailing singlehanded. (I say "easily beat" because when I was steering and had full rig I overtook them very easily, I then reefed and put the autopilot on and still beat the first one in by over 15 minutes.

So I was taking it easy, they of course had all their crew on the rail). A Moody 40 and Bavaria 37 left at the same time, they disappeared to lee and were out of sight behind in only a couple of hours sailing. Sigmas are well known as fast boats to windward and have been one of the mainstays of UK monohull racing fleets for the last 10 years or so.

On the trip home, again with autopilot on, I did 15.5 knots under spinnaker. On a later sail with my (elderly) parents on board we did 17.5 knots in flat water.

And all very comfortably and easily - no bridgedeck slam and finger light steering at all times.

My brother is a keen Laser sailor and with his help and the masthead spinnaker up we did 8.3 knots in 4 knots apparent wind (10 knots true) and later 8.5 knots to windward, tacking through 80 degrees on the compass, or 32 deg to the apparent wind.



The photo shows the log reading 8.31 knots (left) in 11 knots of wind (right)

## AUGUST

At last I was able to get away and have a proper sail in the Eclipse. We sailed up to the Solent to watch the 150th Anniversary Americas Cup Regatta. Two of us sailed Eclipse the 130 miles to the Solent, Lorrie had just crossed the Atlantic on a monohull, but this was her first sail on a catamaran. The wind slowly increased as did our speed, until approaching Portland Bill and its famous race we touched 21 knots with regular steady non surfing speeds in the high teens



The main race was the re-enactment of the original 60 mile Round the Island race that started the whole Americas Cup saga. The race started in glorious sunshine and 20 knots of breeze - ideal conditions, as you will see some of the boats were very big!!

Joining in with the IMS/IRC racing monohull fleet we were rather surprised to find ourselves sailing faster and outpointing a 50' ketch, see photo below



We let them go in the end, but it was obvious the 15+ crew were not impressed to be beaten by a catamaran 20' shorter crewed by 3 people, plus 3 month old baby! Peter spent the whole time sleeping on the saloon seats, quite oblivious to everything

Later we chased the boats back up the Solent on the run to the finish and in particular had fun trying to beat Extra Beat, the only boat I've seen with 6 spreaders. We almost made it! It wasn't clear quite what sort of boat she was, the 6 spreaders implied a racer, but she only carried an asymmetric spinnaker.

We also met a stray Gemini 105 catamaran which disappeared rather quickly into our wake. Maybe they weren't sailing it very well. But unlike us they had empty davits, no solid fuel stove and probably didn't have a generator, boatbuilding tools etc on board

**Lorrie Wood**, (no, not a relation, notice the lack of an S at the end of her surname), an American sailor, worked in the office for a few months. I allowed her out from time to time to sail on the Eclipse.

Lorrie writes-

*"Catamarans don't go to windward, don't tack well, and go turtle every chance they get, right? They might be OK for daysailing, but they aren't proper bluewater cruisers, isn't that what you heard? I had heard it all too, but still thought I should give it a look. I read the information on Richard's web pages and was convinced that he, at least, thought they were safe and his designs looked sensible too.*

*So I sailed over to England, and have been sailing on the Woods 9.9 metre Eclipse for the past few months. I am entirely persuaded it is the fastest, most comfortable, and safe boat I have been on. The Eclipse's stability is great and I don't miss heeling one bit. We sailed fast and comfortably in sea conditions that I have experienced on monohulls and wouldn't have called comfortable. She has reached speeds in excess of 20 knots but it hardly felt like it.*

*After two Trans-Atlantic crossings on larger monohulls (38' and 44') and as a professional crew on sailboats in the 70'-80 range I can't believe the difference two hulls make. While as a cook I can not say enough about the galley, which even has a window to look out. I do get a bit of the mal-de-mer at times when working in the galley or when hanging upside down to work on an engine while inhaling diesel fumes, but that was not the case here. I never felt a twinge of seasickness even while preparing dinners underway. I don't miss rolling and heeling a bit. After spending a full week aboard without putting my foot on dry land I had not a bruise nor bump. What they say is true, "It's no bruising, cruising." That's not only what I heard, that's what I now believe. I am a thoroughly convinced catamaran convert."*



## A Christmas Cruise

When Lorrie first started working for me I think she thought "research and development" was a joke for the benefit of the taxman and really I just wanted an excuse to go for a sail. But after a 70 mile beat in a bitterly cold NE wind, gusting up to 54 knots apparent, she began to realise that a designer's life is not always easy. Someone has to test a new design and push it to its limits in bad weather, and who else should do that but the designer? So she was a bit reluctant when she heard of my plans for Christmas.

The Scilly Isles lie out in the Atlantic, 30 miles west of Lands End, and are the most western part of England. As the prevailing winds tend to be SW - NW getting to them for most UK sailors is more challenging than sailing across the English Channel to France. (But sailing to the Scillies from France usually involves a reach both ways - which is why there are always more French boats in the Scillies than English ones.) Furthermore, the Scillies lie at the junction of the English Channel going east and the Irish Sea going north and so is a place of frequent fogs and unpredictable weather.

They cover an area of over 50 square miles, yet comprise only five inhabited islands (the largest is just 3 miles wide) but there are hundreds of rocks - most of which dry at low tide. They have a fearsome reputation as ship killers. From Sir Cloudesley Shovell who led his ships (and 2000 men) onto the rocks in 1707 (all drowned), to the tanker Torrey Canyon (the first major pollution incident caused by a supertanker) and most recently the Ceta (ran aground on St Marys, 20 miles off course with the helmsman asleep at the wheel), wrecks there are a plenty... The pilot guide for the islands warns "Apart from the obvious dangers of any group of islands strewn with rocks, mostly unmarked, large areas of shallow water and strong and often unpredictable currents and tide races, it also lacks an anchorage that is secure in all weather.."

So it seemed to me like the ideal place for a Christmas cruise!

The winds for the few days before Christmas were favourable - a light north-easterly. Midwinter in the UK means only 9 hours of daylight. Even in summer, day sailing is always more pleasant than night passages. In winter the chill sets in by 3pm, so we limited ourselves to 40 miles a day. Sailing my Eclipse we had a gentle sail to Falmouth, then a short sail in a F7 to the Helford river (often judged the prettiest river in England). Next day the wind had dropped and we motor sailed round the Lizard (the most southern point of England) and across Mounts Bay to St Michael's Mount. Some may say that this is just a large rock topped with a house (originally it was built as a monastery in the 1100's) but its actually one of the most dramatic and impressive homes in England.

So far we had been lucky with the weather but when we got up next morning there was thick ice on deck. Seawater doesn't freeze so easily and thus it's easy to wash off ice. Down below the solid fuel Dickinson stove ate up charcoal and Coalite faster than you can say Santa Claus but kept the saloon at around 23 deg C (75 deg F).

We made slow progress towards the Scillies. One benefit of sailing over a holiday is that there are few ships. We saw three on our trip out and only one on the return.



Normally you can expect a dozen or more to be in sight at the same time. A pod of dolphins joined us as we approached the islands, and then two seal heads appeared as we picked up our mooring. We arrived in the Scillies on the 23rd, and had a walk round Bryher's white sandy beaches on Christmas Eve.



Unfortunately it was too windy - over F7 - to get off the boat on Christmas Day, so we were forced to sit on board, roasting chestnuts on the fire, watching old movies on the TV and stuffing ourselves with roast turkey and all the trimmings. So just a normal Christmas Day really!



I wanted to get back to Plymouth for some dinghy racing, so we started our sail home on the 26th. There was still a big sea running and the wind strong so we started with two reefs. But the NW wind slowly moderated and we had to motor the last 20 miles back to the Helford. The forecast wasn't good for the next few days, NW F7 at best, so we decided to press on and so left the next morning, again with 2 reefs and half a jib. This time the wind didn't drop but fortunately we missed most of the rain whilst the worst squalls were shortlived (the highest gust we saw was 42 knots apparent when sailing downwind at 13 knots).

We got back to Millbrook an hour before dusk, having averaged over 8.5 knots for the last 45 miles with a top speed of 17.5. And we hadn't seen another sailboat the whole trip (can't think why not!?) Roll on summer!

## Sailing Reports 2002

### May

In early May I raced my Eclipse for the first time. To set the scene... The Plymouth-Falmouth-Plymouth race is the first coastal race of the year and is open to both multihulls and monohulls. 40 miles down the coast to Falmouth on Saturday. Sunday race 20 miles back to Fowey and Monday Fowey to Plymouth. Over the years the multihull fleet has increased (to 12 this year) but the "club racer" monohulls have all but disappeared leaving only the committed monohull race boats (45 this time). When I first did the race 15 years ago on our Banshee I remember getting back to Plymouth, mooring up, tidying the boat and eating lunch before the second boat had even finished. This year the Banshee was rated slowest multihull. On Eclipse we were rated second slowest, nearly 40% slower than the fastest trimaran. I was sailing with Joe and Mel who had only sailed catamarans for 1 hour before the race. But they are very experienced dinghy and monohull racers.

**Saturday** Not a cloud in the sky all day, but no wind at the start (not good for the fast boats). We made multihull racing history by protesting a trimaran BEFORE the start. They accepted their penalty turns. Once clear of Plymouth Sound we settled down to a long spinnaker run. On Eclipse we "knew" that there was no wind out to sea and we guessed that the sea-breeze would pick up and swing west with the sun later in the day. So there was no point in going inshore. It also made sense in the light winds to sail the shortest course.

Keeping the apparent wind at 135 deg we did very well for the first 20 miles and as predicted the boats that went out to sea gybed back in well behind us. It seemed that we were second or third multihull on the water and there were probably only 8 monohulls ahead. But then the wind started to head. It took us an hour of frustration to realise that the asymmetric was slowing us down so we changed to our masthead drifter. Then we were at least able to keep station, but not until several multihulls had overtaken.

At the finish we still had our main rivals in sight though, so weren't surprised to learn that we won on handicap. On a domestic note we discovered a fault with the fridge thermostat when Mel tried to make coffee and found that the milk was frozen. That evening we watched the TV forecast for Sunday which gave 20 knot NE winds but at least it would remain sunny.

**Sunday** The wind funnels in Falmouth harbour, but fortunately was northerly not NE. That meant a running start to the first turning mark and then almost hard on the wind to Fowey. We started with a reef and small spinnaker, again trying to sail as straight as speed would allow to the mark. But the wind wasn't as bad as we'd thought so once on the wind we shook out the reef.

In flat water all the multihulls were sailing fast. Ideal for the trimarans and they powered ahead into the far distance. We were pulling past most of the monohulls (which had started 10 minutes before us). The genoa wasn't cleated the whole race as Joe played it constantly, while Mel was equally attentive on the mainsail traveller. But

the Banshee behind was hot on our trail. At the Fowey harbour buoy they were only 6 minutes behind us, so ahead on handicap.



Fortunately, due to Joe's clever wind spotting (and a bit of luck) in the flukey shifts going into Fowey we were able to extend that gap to 12 minutes. Result, the fast trimarans were first and second and we were third. That evening we invited the other two Millbrook boats for a meal. The rain came at last and the temperature dropped so while Mel finished preparing the risotto and rhubarb fool, Joe vacuum cleaned the carpets and I lit the fire. We then discovered a social faux-paux - only 6 place mats for 8 guests! Fortunately they were too polite to comment.

**Monday** A cold NE wind at about 20 knots meant another windward sail in hats, gloves and full oilskins. Again all the multihulls began pulling past the monohulls. As we neared the entrance to Plymouth we were in company with a J29, a J92, a X-Yacht 99 and a SJ320. The faster multihulls ahead seemed to be sailing a strange tactical course. We counted one boat doing 8 tacks to our one, so soon we were catching them up. However, as expected, as we neared the land the wind started to die and very slowly some of the monohulls overtook and just piped us at the finish (but of course they had started 10 minutes before us).

Even so, its good for the monohull sailors hanging over the windward rail to see smaller multihulls sailing past them, upright and in comfort with dinghies in davits. *They* certainly no longer believe that multihulls don't go to windward! So we finished 4th on corrected time, but less than 1 minute behind the third placed boat. That result meant we had the second shortest corrected time over the three races. All in all pretty good for our first race series.

## **JUNE**

The Round the Island race is billed as the biggest yacht race in the world. (In 2002 there were 1,641 starters, including 50 multihulls in 3 classes). The race is about 50 miles round the Isle of Wight starting and finishing in Cowes.

But first I had to get there. Cowes is about 140 miles from Plymouth. The first 80 miles was downwind, F4, under spinnaker. Sounds ideal, except being England there is always a catch. This time it was that visibility was 1/2 mile at best. One of those sails when I was glad I'd fitted radar to my Eclipse. Interestingly the radar picked up the tidal race off Portland Bill very clearly, even if it missed a couple of yachts that passed close by.

After a couple of quiet days up the far reaches of the Medina (the river that exits at Cowes) I picked up my usual "dream team" crew of Mel and Joe, while joining us this time was David Harding from Practical Boat Owner. I once did the race with only 2 on board which is very hard work. We felt that 4 crew would be of great benefit especially during the later stages of the race, and so it proved.

The tide ebbs strongly in the Solent and the main tactic for the first 15 miles is to catch it right. The trick is to sail as close to the Island shore as possible, but staying in the main channel until Yarmouth, when one cuts across to Hurst Castle and so get shot out of the Solent past the Shingles bank in the strongest tide. Although an anathema to cruising people, the idea is to stay in the rough water as that's where the strongest tide is.

I think everyone in the world has seen a photo of the Needles at the entrance to the Solent. What isn't visible is a wreck less than 2m below the surface less than 100m off the lighthouse. Spurred on by my crew we were one of the first boats to cut the corner and sail between wreck and lighthouse. It was worth doing as we overtook 3 boats that had gone round the outside. As we started the run down the back of the Island, we were feeling pretty pleased with ourselves - despite Joe's expression,...



Apart from Maiden (ex-Grant Dalton's 120' Club Med, which had just sailed 697 miles in 24 hours - so doesn't really count!) we were first catamaran and ahead of both the 10m Dragonflies and several F27's and F24's, while the vast majority of the other cats were out of sight behind. So on the run round the back of the Island we became lazy. We put the spinnaker up, but then had lunch, sat back and admired the view. That is until the first monohulls (Mumm30's) started catching us by dodging the tide close inshore. Following the boats behind when one's ahead is always tricky, but we started copying them and realised how much there is to gain by going really close in.

The race was now beginning to hot up again. 4 Mumm30's, 2 Cork 1720 sportsboats and ourselves were all converging on the Bembridge Ledge buoy in line abreast. The first Mumm and us gybed for the mark. The second Mumm attempted to gybe, then broached and we had a very good look at it's bulb keel and propshaft (That "multihulls don't go to windward" book also said that monohulls don't capsize). They were lucky that we didn't cut them in half. In the ensuing chaos 2 more Mumms overtook and we nearly got a Cork bowman in our cockpit. Eventually we rounded the mark safely and then had a 4 mile close reach to the next turning mark.

Close racing now ensued with everyone luffing to try and keep clear wind. Getting bored with that we decided to go low and slowly pulled through the lee of the Mumm ahead. Much mutterings by their skippers! We rounded the fort with only one Mumm30 ahead. It was now a flat water beat to the finish, in a wind that had increased to around 20 knots.

Back to "that" book. How does its author explain how we overtook the Mumm30 to windward? (lots of very audible mutterings from the Mumm skipper) especially as they are pure racing boats with no creature comforts, kevlar sails, 8 crew hiking hard etc. We had 4 crew, solid fuel stove, big freezer etc. We also had a bit of fun forcing a couple of the big (60' plus) monohulls to tack as we skirted Ryde Sands. But sadly as we approached the finish we found our own private wind hole and all we'd gained over the last 7 miles was lost 1/2 mile from the finish. But eventually, we crossed the line at 4pm with around 1600 boats still behind us.

So what of the results?

Well, suffice to say that Maiden finished in 3hr 20 min, while we took 7 1/2 hours. But on corrected time we won our class by over an hour! So we could have anchored for lunch and still won!

The MOCRA site also has a link to ratings so you can see which boats are which, as well as all their dimensions. (so well worth looking at wherever you sail)

I've now done the race 5 times, and been first in class twice and second once. Despite the win, the real highlight of the race was definitely overtaking the top Mumm30 to windward. They were not amused, but it's why I like doing these sorts of races. I'm tired of people who say multihulls don't sail well.

## **August**

In mid August there was another "Round the Island" race. This time it was two handed. About 100 monohulls and 5 multihulls took part, including the Banshee Backlash, fresh from the Round Britain Race, and my Eclipse. Not much wind, in fact it was the worst possible conditions for multihulls as we were all undercanvassed with full sail, but had too much for masthead drifters.

Despite that we did well on a close spinnaker reach down the Solent and by Hurst Castle we were still ahead of a 8m Dragonfly and not far behind the Farrier trimarans. Backlash was some way behind. After passing the Needles and coming onto a beat we did even better, overtaking many of the monohulls that had started 1 hour before us and also overtaking a F24. But then it all started going horribly wrong and I still haven't worked out why. We just couldn't stay ahead of monohulls that we had beaten easily a month earlier. Worse still the trimarans pulled ahead and even Backlash started gaining.

As it was a slow race we arrived at the forts, effectively the channel markers at the east end of the Solent, at the top of the ebbing tide. Everyone bunched up and it took 10 minutes or so to break clear. A long bout of short tacking along the sand spits then followed. That's OK as we can tack as fast as a monohull, but we weren't happy to be forced aground by one boat and having to tack away (when on starboard) by a non



racing port tacker! And I was definitely unhappy with myself to have totally misjudged the approach of a ferry which cost us 200 hard won yards from a Dehler 41. So by the finish I was pretty disappointed. Backlash was only 20 minutes behind so easily beat us on handicap. So I was VERY surprised to discover later that Backlash had won the race and we'd come second.

## September

A couple of weeks after the Round the Island race I sailed my Eclipse round to Torbay (about 40 miles from Plymouth). Nothing to write home about, except for the fact that while drifting along, minding my own business, I was accosted by a pod of maybe 12 bottlenosed dolphins. I think dolphins like multihulls because there are two hulls to play with. Their favourite game seems to be to swim as fast as possible diagonally from stern to opposite bow and get as close to the bow as possible. Usually they do it in pairs, one on each side, thus meeting under the bridgedeck. I remember once a dolphin misjudged it completely and hit the bow quite hard. You could see the other dolphins laughing at him.



This time though it was different as the dolphins behaved in a way I'd never seen before. It was almost as though they were trying to scratch themselves as they rubbed their bodies up and down the boat, sometimes they'd bump the bottom quite badly, it felt a bit like when you start to dry out. They were even getting under the daggerboards and lifting them up 500-600mm (18" - 24").

We've all heard the stories of killer whales attacking yachts, but this was the first time I'd seen dolphins do something similar. I was very glad the dolphins were "only" 3m (10') long. They kept it up for about 45 minutes, right up to the entrance to Brixham harbour. Now the weird thing was that the next day, off Bigbury on my way home - some 20 miles from Brixham, I met the same pod and they tried to do the same thing again. (I knew it was the same ones as one was disfigured) There were other yachts around at the time, but they only picked on me. It didn't last long this time, partly I suspect because it was rougher. So what was all that about?

## Eclipse Crosses the Atlantic Part 1

*(Note the following four articles appeared in Practical Boat Owner magazine. You can get a back copy by visiting their web site [www.ybw.com](http://www.ybw.com))*

In June 2002 my 32ft catamaran Eclipse won her class in the Round the Island Race and was second catamaran to finish (first was Maiden!) - although I was helped by an all star crew including PBO boat tester David Harding. In July I moved on board full time and then in late October I set off south and west "until the butter melts".

Unlike most designers I'm mainly interested in the final product - the sailing - rather than just in the design stage. I wanted to sail to the sun, but I also felt that it was time to promote my designs more in the USA and what better way than to sail there? I am not a tough go anywhere sailor. If I race I prefer to do it in daylight. If I cruise I prefer to do it downwind. Although I had crossed the Atlantic 3 times before (both on monohulls and catamarans) this would be my first time as skipper. Finally, although I can sail my boat singlehanded quite easily I don't like sailing without anyone on watch.

So while some people might sail to the USA across the North Atlantic I preferred to take the scenic route, via Spain, Portugal, Canaries, the Caribbean and the Bahamas.

But first, how did I convert a race-winning catamaran into a live aboard ocean cruiser? I had already sailed Eclipse 3500 miles since her launching in 2001 and spent several months living on board - including being the only yacht to spend Christmas 2001 in the Scillies. So I didn't have any major jobs to do. But I quickly wrote a four-page list of little jobs.

Of these probably the most important was to set the boat up for easy singlehanded sailing. I don't call any boat a proper cruising boat unless it is possible for one person to reef or lower sails, even downwind or in a gale at night. Eclipse has a big full battened mainsail and swept back shrouds. Most people consider such rigs a recipe for disaster, but its not necessarily true. To help tame it, I use Bainbridge Sailman 2000 slides, which are excellent, strong, low friction plastic slides. Even so, if I had a luff length much over 50 feet I would probably go for ball bearing cars on a full length "mainsheet track".

But the real key to easy mainsail lowering is to have a mainsail downhaul. This is an 8mm rope tied to the headboard. I lead it through alternate sail slides so that it doesn't catch in the rigging. It's tied off slackly to the gooseneck when the sail is fully hoisted. On releasing the halyard I pull on the downhaul and the top part of the sail drops. Works every time. I fitted single line reefing on my first two reefs. By using large ball bearing blocks attached to the clew and tack rings I reduce friction and chafe. Once the reef is pulled in I snapshackle the clew ring directly to the boom. Cunningham holes above each tack point mean I can use a 4:1 purchase to tension the luff. MUCH easier than using the tack hooks. When that's set up I release the reefing pendant, so there is no chance of chafe. Incidentally, Mike Golding told me to use spectra reefing pendants, as they don't chafe - and he's right.

After beating to windward in a gale across Biscay, I decided that I also wanted a big roller furling line on the genoa, so use an 8mm spectra line there as well. After all it's probably the one line that must never, ever, break. But its not just ropes that can chafe, sails wear out fast if they are allowed to rub on the shrouds. To prevent this, but mainly to improve boat speed, I always use a 4:1 boom vang and a barber hauler on the genoa. The boom vang rope is the only one on board in which I don't tie a stopper knot. That way if I have to gybe and release the vang in a hurry it can run out freely.

A boom vang is also a good safety feature. I have a friend who didn't fit one. He tried to prevent a gybe all standing and broke his wrist. As he was 300 miles from land at the time and had a young family on board it was a distressing and painful experience for them all.

Many cruisers will be surprised to hear that I regularly fly a spinnaker when single handed. Of course as I have a catamaran I don't need a spinnaker pole (see PBO for a full account of how to rig spinnakers on multihulls). I don't use a spinnaker sock as I find them frustratingly slow; instead I trip the guy in the "old fashioned" way and pull the sail down into the cockpit.

My racing sails are made in high tech spectra by Dolphin Sails, not what you'd normally see on a cruising boat and far too good to waste. So I acquired some cheap cut down sails for the Atlantic crossing. However I found that after 3 months the cheap sails had stretched more than the Dolphin ones did after three years, so I changed back to my good sails. Proof that it's never worth economizing on sails.

Although it is a major cost and lots of hassle, don't even think of going off sailing without a reliable engine. I know Slocum did it, but re-read his book and count up the number of collisions he had. (For a clue start on chapter 2!) These days the Pardeys are the great "no engine" advocates. But the first time I met them they were anchored at the mouth of a crowded creek in Annapolis, clearly unable to sail further in. A bit like anchoring off Hamble Point. Not very seamanlike... And remember you don't HAVE to use the engine just because it's there.

I only have a 9.9hp Yamaha 4 stroke outboard but it powers me at 5.5 knots in a calm and I can always make headway. But as it is an outboard I have to rely on alternative energy for battery charging. I find wind chargers noisy, heavy and dangerous (if you do fit one avoid the make with the downpointing tail as they are consistently the noisiest, to the extent I avoid anchoring near any boat with one fitted). Instead I use solar panels. I have four 50w panels, two over the davits and one on each side of the cabin roof. That way at least 2 are always in sun.

I took off the supplied regulators and fitted an ammeter and separate switches on each panel instead. That was an interesting experiment. I had thought that angling the panels would bring benefits. Not so, between 10am and 4pm my panels put out 12-14 amps in bright tropical sun. In the mornings and evenings even after turning the panels to face the sun the output is less than two amps, so its not really worth having swivelling panel mounts. The switches mean that if the batteries start to overcharge I can always turn off the panels.

One of main reasons for being paranoid about having enough electrical power is that I have a fridge freezer. It has transformed my life. I really don't know how I would cope in the tropics without one. Certainly I'd have to shop every day instead of once a week. I was lucky that for once I was in the right place at the right time and bought an Isotherm watercooled fridge very cheap! Fortunately I haven't dried out since leaving the UK, whereas in Plymouth Eclipse was on a drying mooring and I kept having to turn the fridge off. I have found that the best way to keep running costs down is to keep the fridge full. Anything will do, tins of fruit, even beer at a pinch!

Initially Eclipse had a 160L flexible water tank, which was fine for coastal cruising and singlehanded sailing. But with more crew and longer passages I needed to carry more water. I debated long and hard about fitting a water maker, but the more I read the more I got put off. It is not just the initial cost, but the maintenance has to be rigorous, while cleaning materials and spares are expensive. It is unwise to use them in port as dirty water can destroy the membrane. So using one would be fine in the clear waters of the Caribbean or Bahamas, but I wrote this up a creek in S Georgia with water so full of tannin I can't even see the dinghy outboard propeller. Another fact weighing heavily on my mind is that I've only once sailed on a boat with a watermaker. It broke down when we were in the S Atlantic and St Helena was the nearest land, 800 miles away. Fortunately we got it working again, but it was a very scary experience.

I know people who have had to bale water out of their tanks because the electric water pump broke down, so when I fitted an extra rigid plastic tank I also installed two completely separate systems, the one to the galley relying on a hand pump. That way it also means less water is wasted. So I now carry 250L plus 4 x 25L loose containers which is OK for 3 people for 25 days (if only drinking the water). In practice I've found refilling tanks not a problem. In the first 6 months I spent only £5 on water and never went thirsty. Incidentally, you can't count on rain water. It only rained for 5 minutes crossing the Atlantic, while in Georgia it rained most days but I could get water whenever I needed more fuel.

I have been surprised to find that many ocean cruisers carry the same size gas bottles as when coastal sailing, whereas I carry two 30lb bottles, each one lasting about two months. Usually the filling stations are out of town and a major hassle to get to, but in the two months breathing space I can usually meet someone prepared to take me. I also carry a cheap gas BBQ (in the tropics the cabin temperature is high enough anyway without cooking inside as well) and a portable camping gas stove for emergencies. Fortunately I also carry a spare regulator, which was needed when one died in mid Atlantic.

Crew comfort is vitally important and comfy cushions in the cockpit are essential. Think about it, when was the last time you drove a car with wooden seats? A three hour car drive is a long trip - but that's only one night watch. I spent a long time trying to design a bimini that would still allow me to sheet and view the sails - but without success. So I ended up with a parasol that I can "tack" from hull to hull, and it works really well!

I think its crazy to insist on the crew hand steering at all times. It just makes everyone really tired and that's dangerous. Many people still want to use a windvane, but I met

several cruisers who had problems with theirs (all makes) sometimes due to corrosion, or after a collision with flotsam or just by bad design. Even with a windvane you'll still want to use an autopilot when motoring. Considering the number of autopilots you can buy for one windvane it must now make sense to only use an autopilot. Over the last 25 years I've used more than a dozen autopilots of various makes, and I've found the most reliable to be Autohelm/Raytheon/Raymarine units. So they are the only ones I carry these days. Mind you I carry a spare - just in case! My main unit is an ST2000+ (it's done over 10,000 miles now) and the back up a ST1000+. I also have a remote control, which I find absolutely essential. I can sit below and steer to windward in a gale (I have all round vision from the saloon), or steer from the foredeck away from the engine noise when motoring, or even steer on the cabin top when navigating through coral reefs. If only they weren't so over priced....

So by August 2002 the boat was ready. In my next article I will discuss which charts and pilots to buy, the best free software to download, what food to take etc.



## **Eclipse Crosses the Atlantic Part 2**

In my first article I described how I converted my race winning 32ft catamaran Eclipse into a live aboard ocean cruiser and readied it for a planned cruise from the UK to the Caribbean and then on up the east coast of the USA to the Canadian border.

In this article I will outline what equipment I took and what other preparations I made.

Because I would be leaving late in the year it was essential I got good weather forecasts until at least the Canaries. Although I have a Navtex receiver, I prefer to look at weather maps and form my own opinions rather than just rely on text messages. So before leaving any port I always look online at [www.weatheronline.co.uk](http://www.weatheronline.co.uk). This is a truly excellent free site offering wind forecasts for anywhere in the world at six hour intervals for up to 5 days ahead. Simply click on "sailing" and choose where in the world you want a forecast. Another good site is the official ECMWF site, except that it only shows isobars and not fronts which seems a strange omission.

I have a Nasa target SSB receiver which works well with an active aerial (I have also used it successfully with a wire attached to a shroud as an aerial). With this I can pick up the BBC world service anywhere, listen to cruiser nets (very popular in areas with lots of US cruisers) but most importantly download the weatherfaxes from Northwood, Offenbach or Miami. I don't use the Nasa supplied software but instead downloaded a free copy of the Dutch Mscan Meteo. I use the lite version and like it as it has a spectrum analyzer which is useful for setting the white balance. I save the charts as gif files using the free Capture Express program.

I have found that although the stations transmit regularly, Navtex is not popular with Americans and that is because for years they have used "Metal Mickey", an automated voice recording that transmits continuous weather forecasts. Either on VHF if in range or by SSB. The VHF frequencies are special weather channels and not normally available on an UK VHF set. So last time I was in the USA I bought a waterproof handheld VHF (really handy anyway as a spare or in case of mast failure or even to be taken ashore as a link back to the boat) with all the weather channels for about £60. Of course just because they are continuous transmissions that doesn't mean they are any more accurate than the UK Met office!

Offshore, Metal Mickey still transmits but not continuously. Times and frequencies vary, but in the Caribbean and Bahamian waters I got good reception on 8765 or 13090 USB at 12-12.30 and 1800-1830 local time. The transmission takes half an hour as it starts in the NE USA and extends south as far as Trinidad and as far east as 55 deg.

The British Hydrographic Office charge very much more for their charts than do other countries (although to be fair they are up to date when you buy them - unlike the American charts). To buy all necessary charts for a world cruise before leaving UK is uneconomic. The obvious first option is to try and swap charts and pilot books with friends, and if that doesn't work I suggest waiting until you arrive and buy locally produced charts. But you have to arrive first, so I did start with some second hand

charts and also as pilot books I bought the new "Cruising Association" Handbook and "Atlantic Islands" by Anne Hammick.

Many of you, like me, will be using a PC on board. So here are a few freebies for you! A free chartplotting system is by Seaclear [www.sping.com](http://www.sping.com) (but you have to acquire your own charts). As a system it works with my handheld Garmin GPS connected to the PC's serial port. For a nominal charge (25US) the Brazilian "Navigator" [www.tecepe.com.br/nav](http://www.tecepe.com.br/nav) is a better system and some free charts are available. If you don't want to pay anything you can still get the sight reduction program, nautical almanac (valid until 2020) and lots of other useful stuff. Another free download program I use extensively is WXTide32 (version 2.6) a tidal program which gives the world tides for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately you may no longer be able to download the version I have, as the British Hydrographic Office wants royalties for tide data for UK ports (the only country in world to do so!). So as the program is free the author has removed the UK from ports on newer versions. There are other free tide downloads out there, but none have the UK data any more.

You can also download charts of the USA for free in GIF format at a number of sites. The resolution may only be 80dpi but on the screen they are quite legible - just don't try printing them out. I downloaded the ones that I might have to use in an emergency, while they also helped plan my trip. The US government is one of many who believe that if the tax payer has paid for something then it should be public domain and thus freely available. So apart from downloads you can also pick up free printed charts for most popular sailing areas in the US at most marinas and chandlers. Of course being free they are on cheap paper and have adverts on the back. But as cruisers we tend to only use each chart for a day or two so there's no real problem in that. Try [www.uscharts.com](http://www.uscharts.com) and [www.marineplanner.com](http://www.marineplanner.com) In the UK of course we pay the Admiralty to draw the charts and then pay them again to buy them...

But having said all that, to be honest you don't really need charts in the Caribbean (shock horror!). The islands are so big, and visibility so good that you can always see the next island (I once saw the Pitons on St Lucia from 90 miles away), while there's no tide to speak of, and few rocks or sandbars. So I ended up using a large scale chart that covered the whole area (ie Trinidad to Cuba) and just used the absolutely essential pilot books by Chris Doyle. His Yachtsman's Guide to the Windward Islands covers Grenada to Martinique while the Yachtsman's Guide to the Leeward Islands extends north from Dominica to the Virgin Islands. For the Virgins I borrowed a Moorings chart from someone who'd been on a charter which I found was all I needed.

However, when sailing in the Bahamas you will need all the help you can get, because unlike the Caribbean the islands are low lying and large areas are very shallow and reef strewn. So you need a chart pack. I used the Maptech Chartkit of The Bahamas and also the superb pilots written by Stephen Pavlidis. Again they are absolutely essential and a real labour of love. The Exuma Guide covers the Exuma chain while The Central and Southern Bahamas Guide covers most of the other islands. To fill in the gaps I used the less detailed Tropic Isle Yachtsman's Guide to the Bahamas (which includes the Turks and Caicos). Pavlidis is now writing pilots for the Caribbean so it will be interesting to compare them to the Doyle guides.

Once in the USA you can be spoilt for choice. I used The Intercoastal Waterway Chartbook by John and Leslie Kettlewell, the Chesapeake Bay Magazine Chesapeake Charts and the BBA or Maptech Chart Kits further north. The Skipper Bob guides are also essential. They aren't charts or pilots but listings of all good anchorages, free docks etc from New York to Miami.

In Europe we have now got used to the fact that we can just sail from country to country without contacting customs. But that's not the case anywhere else! In the Caribbean you will have to accept the idea of clearing in and out at every island. Fees are generally low, but frustration high! Every island has a different form so you can't prepare in advance. So the other excellent web site I use is [www.noonsite.com](http://www.noonsite.com), run by Jimmy Cornell's family (of ARC fame). Apart from cruising news headlines the most important feature of the site is a list of all the world's countries giving basic facts, their clearance ports, fees, port information, marina locations etc.

It is always worth doing a web search for cruising sites in the areas you visit. For example, there are good ones for the Portuguese coast (eg [www.manorhouses.com/ports](http://www.manorhouses.com/ports), surprisingly enough) while obviously there are lots to choose from for US, Bahamas and Caribbean cruising. If you want paper guides then the "Rough Guide" series are worth getting from a library, while I always visit the local tourist office and pick up any free land maps.

No visas are required when travelling in the Caribbean or Bahamas, but the USA (including the US Virgin Islands, Spanish Virgins and Puerto Rico) is different! Although you may have flown to Disney World without a visa (you fill in a waiver form on the plane) you need one if arriving on your own boat. Don't make the same mistake that I did! I got my visa in Barbados, not a problem, I just had to queue for 4 hours in a hot carpark. BUT my visa cost me 100US and only lasts a year. Had I got it in my normal "country of residence" (ie the UK) it would have only cost 70US and been valid for 5 years. Incidentally, a US Visa may say "indefinite" on it, but that actually means 5 years...If you arrive in the USVI without a visa they will fine you 160US and then throw you out.

You will also need a "Cruising Permit" for the boat. This isn't needed or available in the USVI, but can be obtained in the Spanish Virgins or at any other port of entry. It cost me 37USD and is valid for a year. You won't then have to clear customs again. But you will have to inform them when you move from port to port (I cheated and only reported in every 200 miles or so. I bought a mobile phone for business reasons, so I could easily call customs. But every time I called they insisted on calling me back, which could be a bit tricky if you were relying on public phones!). But I've discovered that other English cruisers have had different experiences. Being polite I guess one can say they are changing the system...

Finally, I didn't even try to get full insurance cover for my boat, partly because I knew that much of the time I would be sailing singlehanded and also because there was little that I couldn't fix myself for less than an annual premium payment. After all, I carry nearly all the tools I used when we built the boat, plus a generator and sewing machine, while sadly if the boat was a total loss there would be a good chance I wouldn't be around to pick up the insurer's cheque. So instead I opted for just a third party policy which is a requirement in just about every marina in the world. I chose

Pantaenius as they gave me a very good quote (£120). Furthermore, I knew from those less fortunate than I, that they would pay out promptly and fairly if I had to claim. So I also arranged medical cover with them as I felt that a personal accident was a bigger risk than losing the boat. A year's worldwide cover is about £250.

So at last my boat was ready and my crew organised. I knew where I was going and how to get there. What was left to do? Well, buying food for a start. There's no need to bother with the traditional buy lots of stores technique - a nice photo opportunity though it might be. After all, people eat in other countries as well! And eating local food is part of the enjoyment of travelling.

However, some things are just unavailable outside the UK. Proper teabags for a start, but also Marmite, Horlicks, Branston Pickle, Wagon Wheels etc. Fortunately these all last for ages so there's no problem stocking up. Because of the EU milk lake, milk is cheap in Europe and although UHT lasts months be careful about storing it as cartons quickly chafe through. The same applies to juice cartons as well of course.

Although it's tempting to buy big low cost bulk bottles and boxes, they are awkward to store after opening at sea so it's usually better to have many smaller cartons. But if you feel you must buy in bulk then tinned food, especially baked beans and tinned peaches (ie the usual loss leaders) will never be as cheap as in the UK. Finally on the topic of food, how come I can buy bananas cheaper in the Plymouth market than I can in the West Indies?

So there we were, all stocked up and ready to go; all we had to do was wait for a break in the autumn weather. In my final article I will tell you whether the reality of ocean cruising matched my expectations.

### **Eclipse Crosses the Atlantic Part 3**

This final article describing my trip from Plymouth to the Caribbean, then on to the north east coast of the USA and finally south to Central America is written after sailing 15,000 miles in 18 months. Mostly there have been two on board, but I was single handed for nearly 3000 miles, had three on the Atlantic crossing, and five for two weeks over Christmas 2003.

We left the UK in my 32ft Eclipse catamaran (see PBO 449) in late October 2002, and sailed as fast as possible to the Rias in north Spain. These would be a fantastic cruising ground in good weather - but not in November! With bad weather forecast we sailed non-stop from Bayonna to Lisbon. The Cascais marina is huge, and nearly empty. Unfortunately we found the visitors pontoons almost untenable due to surge, so we moved into the inner harbour while the "Route de Rhum" gale blew itself out. Then, in still very rough seas, we sailed straight to the Canaries. Apart from Grasciosa, north of Lanzarote, I can't recommend the Canaries except as somewhere to buy stores for the Atlantic crossing.

With two crew I work 3 on/3 off watches, but that doesn't give enough time to sleep, so on long passages I prefer to have three crew and thus a comfortable 3 on/6 off regime. Therefore long time colleague Pip Patterson from the Multihull Centre joined us for the Atlantic crossing. Although you may feel that you don't want to have strangers on your boat, there's usually no shortage of potential crew that you know, either family or fellow sailing club members. In any event, they will only be aboard a few weeks and the third crew really does make long distance sailing more enjoyable and far less tiring.

Like everyone else we wanted to be in the Caribbean for Christmas, and so left Tenerife on Nov 30th. Really it was too early, as the trades hadn't settled, so although we had good NE winds on our first three days (we had over 16 knots on the GPS several times the first day despite being heavily loaded), the wind slowly moderated; one day we even spent motoring over a glassy sea. So we were somewhat disappointed to take 18 days to Barbados, but I cheered up later when I learnt that most others who left at the same time took 20-22.

Many people are put off ocean sailing by the fear of bad weather and assume the Atlantic is full of the "gale force winds and mountainous seas" so loved by the media. As I explained in part 2 it's now easy to get reliable forecasts, while with unlimited time and the whole world to sail to there's no excuse for being caught out in severe weather. Thus my storm jib has never been out of its bag (my worst weather on Eclipse was a November day-sail from Falmouth to Plymouth in winds gusting over 50 knots). Ironically I've not used the masthead spinnaker and drifter since the calms of mid Atlantic. But what is probably more surprising to coastal sailors is that with careful planning I have only sailed to windward for 100 miles since leaving the Canaries (14,000 miles ago!)

So another misconception is that to sail oceans you need a serious ocean cruiser designed for the ultimate gale. Most people "out there doing it" realise that such boats are hopeless as a live aboard home, so it's been interesting to see the boats that people actually sail. It's certainly not Colin Archers or a junk rigged boat (I've only seen 2,



one was ex-Annie Hill's Badger), while surprisingly few people sail multi-chine steel boats. In fact the vast majority of cruisers sail 30-40ft, often elderly, GRP boats. Catamarans are the second most popular type, but then maybe sailing to the Caribbean is no longer considered ocean sailing?

Even after only a couple of months away I was finding that ocean cruising is not like going on several back-to-back 3 week cruises. You're living your life as well. That means sometimes you'll be ill, you'll need to visit friends, sort out business affairs etc., and above all sometimes you'll need a holiday from your holiday. Even I (whom many people consider a fanatical sailor!) find it hard to sail every day, day in day out. You need to treat it as a job, and have a day off at least once a week. Because you are living on board even as you sail along, average boat speeds will be lower than when day-sailing, just to stay comfortable. So although I have had some memorable sails, twice doing 60 miles in 6 1/2 hours, once off Puerto Rico and again off Cuba, I prefer to cruise at 6 knots rather than 9.

It also means that what you have in your loft at home you must now store on the boat. Not just the obvious things like a vacuum cleaner and sewing machine, but also the Christmas tree, spare bedding for guests, winter clothes etc. Finding space for all these "essentials" is always hard. For example, although I have over 600 books on a CD, an 8ft shelf for paperbacks and another 3ft long for big books (mainly pilot books), I still don't have enough bookshelf space.

Back to the sailing; after Christmas I went on to Grenada (my favourite Caribbean island) and then sailed north through the West Indies to the Virgin Islands. I found that the Caribbean is now very crowded compared to when I first sailed there 25 years ago. As a result many of the locals have become quite aggressive and my favourite cruising areas have been redeveloped. Although the Grenadines are still largely unspoilt I wouldn't visit the French islands or St Lucia again.

Most European sailors start going home from Antigua but I was going to the USA, so after the Virgins I split from the normal cruising crowd and went on to Puerto Rico and then the Bahamas. Immediately there were fewer boats, in fact it would now be rare to see a sail on the horizon and Eclipse would often be alone in a beautiful anchorage. It wasn't until I arrived in Georgetown in the Bahamas that I saw boats again, even the USA hotspots like Newport or the Chesapeake weren't as crowded as the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, after 6 months I was beginning to have boat problems. Although the basic hull, rig and deck gear were all working well the "domestics" weren't. I was already on my third water pump and had got through 4 water tanks, while my cooker looked twenty years old, not two. I sail a relatively simple boat, it seemed that cruisers on larger, more complex, boats simply sail from repair man to repair man.

I always say the successful cruises are the boring ones, completed with no fuss or drama. So I felt I had been doing well until, that is, July 7th. That day was not just my worst day sailing, but the worst in my life. I was motoring up the Inter Coastal Waterway (ICW) near Cape Hatteras in N Carolina when Eclipse was hit by lightning. The whole sorry saga is the subject of a separate article, suffice to say that I lost all my electronics, while the engine and fridge needed major, expensive, repairs. It took me

several months to replace it all, but at least I was still alive and still had a sailing boat. Apart from anything else it was an expensive disaster for, as you will recall from part 2, I only carry third party insurance.

I have to confess that, lightning aside, I didn't really like sailing up the east coast of the USA. It was far too hot in June/July and there was often very little wind. However it was a great experience to sail through New York, past the Statue of Liberty then on under the Brooklyn Bridge and past the United Nations buildings to exit into Long Island Sound. In 1989 I sailed through the Baltic to the USSR on a Strider so was familiar with sailing between rocky islands covered with fir trees. Maine, about 200 miles NE of New York, is like that, but for us "tropical softies" it was cold! But what spoilt it was the lobster pot buoys. There are 1000 registered fishermen in Maine, and each made full use of his 1000 pot allocation. In many areas it was impossible to sail without catching them in boards or rudders. Fortunately on Eclipse these lift easily, but sailing there would be a nightmare on a boat with a fixed rudder and exposed propellor.

When you tell your non-sailing friends that you're going to sail round the world they often ask "do you anchor at night?" You laugh at them, but in fact that is exactly what you will do. Despite sailing over a quarter of the way round the world and visiting 24 countries I have spent less than 30 nights at sea. Every other night I have indeed been at anchor as I always try to passage plan so that I don't have to sail more than 100 miles non-stop. Having said that, anchoring in a new harbour every day is actually quite stressful. I nearly always set two anchors, both large enough to hold the boat in any wind. I often anchor among (but not on!) coral heads or in abrasive sand, so use an extra thick warp to prevent chafe. Ideally I'd like stainless steel chain as the galvanising has long worn off.

It's not just a new port every day, but also a new type of cruising ground every week. The deep water and high West Indian islands of the Caribbean gave way to the low scrub islands, coral reefs and shallows of the Bahamas. But there the water is clear, sometimes you can see the bottom at 100 ft (imagine that in the Solent!). The ICW and Chesapeake are equally shallow, but visibility is only a couple of feet. Fortunately the world has few places with tides as high as in the English Channel. It made life very easy and it was a real relief not to have to worry about calculating tidal heights. The Caribbean, Bahamas and Chesapeake have no real tide, while even in Maine it's only about 10ft.

In early September we reached Soames Sound in Maine, only 50 miles from the Canadian border, our "furthest north" and began to retrace our steps back to the Bahamas. We thought it would be an easy trip back, but hurricane Isobel had other ideas. One reason for sailing north was to be out of the hurricane belt (roughly 12-35deg N). We were in Long Island Sound when Isobel struck the Chesapeake. Fortunately for us it passed over with no more fuss than a winters gale, but further south they weren't so lucky. When we returned to Annapolis we found that, although only a few boats had been lost, over 600 homes had been destroyed.

Christmas 2003 was spent in the Abacos, to me the best of the Bahamian islands. From there we sailed south through the Jumentos to Cuba, Belize and Guatemala. Again we saw very few boats (but several were British) indeed we reckoned there

were only 30 cruising boats in the whole of Belize. Most cruisers only visit the eastern Caribbean, but the Caribbean Sea has three other sides as well! So the "Forgotten Caribbean" is the subject for a later article.

Finally, ocean cruising can only be a dream until you think you can afford it. So a key question for everyone is "How much does it cost?" Well, fortunately the answer is "Surprisingly little." I know everyone's life style is different, so costs are hard to compare but never-the-less, living at sea is much cheaper than on land. You have no car expenses, no council tax, no heating, no TV license etc. Even if you spend time in marinas and eat out a lot you'll still spend less than cruising round the UK. You soon learn to eat out "three streets back" and, with plenty of time, you walk or take buses rather than taxis.

My boat is currently in a Guatemalan marina, which is a very safe and cheap place to spend the hurricane season. Even though it has no road access it's not primitive by any means, as it has a swimming pool, restaurant, cable TV, 24/7 internet access on board etc, and all for £100 a month!!

So in conclusion, I am sure that, if you can sail a small boat (say under 35ft) from Poole to the Channel Islands, you can sail it across the oceans. On a small simple boat you'll see the same sunsets and sit on the same tropical islands as those with a superyacht. Indeed with shallow draft and a short rig you can actually visit more places, for it is difficult or impossible to sail a boat much over 40ft in the Bahamas, along the ICW, or in the Chesapeake, Belize or Guatemala.

## Eclipse hit by Lightning!

### The Strike

In early July 2003, I was motoring my 32ft Eclipse catamaran (see PBO 449) into the Pamlico Sound, a fresh water lake on the East coast of the USA. For several days it had been very hot and humid and there had been regular afternoon thunderstorms. That particular day had started cooler and fresher, but at 2pm the familiar anvil clouds appeared. Up ahead I could see a rain squall and so, as another one was developing to the west, I decided to wait for them both to pass. But as I edged out of the channel prior to anchoring, there was an enormous "crack" right above me, and a strong smell of ozone (close up, lightning doesn't "thunder", it "cracks"). I didn't need the shower of melted masthead fittings falling on me to know that I had been hit by lightning!



The lightning strike occurred just after taking this photo

Clearly I had a major problem, so I anchored to recover from the shock (pun intended!) and assess the damage. Most obviously, the 4 stroke outboard was now running irregularly and would not restart after I stopped it. As expected I found I had no working instruments, radios or Navtex, while the ST2000 autopilot had a hole blown in the casing and was completely dead. I also found that my main steering compass now had a 30 degree error.

Going inside I saw that most of the circuit breakers on the switch panel had melted. None of the cabin lights worked. I found the filament bulbs had simply blown, while all the halogen lights had exploded (glass was everywhere) and the LED lights had completely vapourised. The main saloon dimmer switch and cockpit PIR security light had also failed. All my digital clocks were flashing error messages, including the ones on my personal organiser and electronic barograph. Investigating further, I found that the CD player and Isotherm fridge had also stopped working. Finally, scorched headlining under the stanchions gave me a clue to the route I think the lightning took - down the cap shroud, across to the lifelines and then out through the rudder stocks. A good thing it wasn't raining and that I wasn't holding onto anything metallic!

Some local fisherman had seen what had happened and motored over to see if I was OK. They said the strike had looked very dramatic, generating huge sparks off the mast head. They hoisted me up the mast, and fortunately I could see no rigging damage, although the wind speed, tricolour light and VHF aerial were all totally destroyed. But at least I was still alive and still had a sailing boat. Luckily it was an easy couple of miles sail into the nearest harbour. But it made me think: I could have been sailing offshore with the autopilot on, and navigating using the radar and chartplotter. Then "bang" and I would have had nothing. Not even a clock or a compass - even Columbus was better equipped than that! That's why I now always carry a sextant and a clockwork clock.

Fortunately the next day I found an outboard mechanic to fix the engine. Once he had replaced the CDI unit it started first time, but a week later the stator failed which meant another expensive repair. Although outboard engines are more at risk from lightning, most modern diesels have electronic control systems, so are also likely to fail after a strike. I learnt that it's also common for apparently unaffected items to fail several days later. For example, it was some time before I realised that my year old batteries were no longer holding a charge and so needed replacing.

I slowly began the expensive business of replacing all the destroyed gear. A portable GPS and hand held VHF for starters, while I found a fishfinder a great echosounder in the shallow murky waters of the US east coast. A new log and wind instruments could wait. The other major item was the fridge, the repair of which cost more than the original unit!

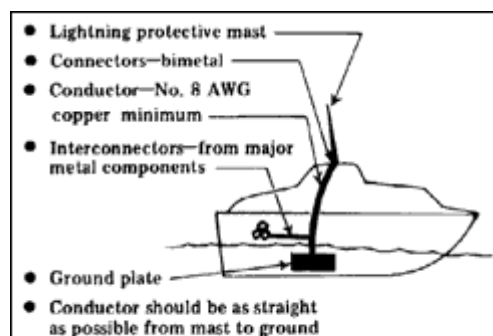
Like most English cruisers, I hadn't given lightning protection much thought before I left the UK, mainly because there are so few thunder storms in northern Europe. Indeed lightning protection isn't even a requirement in the RCD. But that's not the case elsewhere and it's clear that you will be at risk in many popular cruising areas.

### **Lightning Protection**

Since being hit by lightning is a real threat, what can we do to protect ourselves and our boat? Well, first off, there is no such thing as a lightning-proof boat, only a lightning-protected boat. Lightning protection is a hugely complex subject. I have discovered that there's widespread disagreement as to the best practices, so this can only be a brief introduction based on my very limited understanding. To find out more I recommend visiting [www.marinelightning.com](http://www.marinelightning.com), the web site of Ewen Thomson who helped me extensively with the preparation of this article. You may also want to look at Seyla Marine Inc's web site, [www.strikeshield.com](http://www.strikeshield.com) as they supply a number of lightning protection systems.

The essential components for such a protection system are an air terminal, a main conductor and a good "earth." The air terminal is a blunt (not pointed) rod mounted at the masthead and should be about 150mm above any other fitting. Some people claim the so called "dissipators", which look like chimney sweep brushes at the masthead, prevent strikes. But they don't, and thus aren't worth fitting. The conductor should be a copper wire of minimum 6mm (1/4in) diameter (that's thick!), run as straight as possible to the ground and crimped, not soldered, where necessary.

If you have a metal mast, you can use it as the main conductor with a cable from the mast step to ground. A wooden mast, and very definitely a carbon one, should have a copper conductor from the mast head. In fact, even with a big conductor, a carbon mast may not survive a strike. Carbon is a better conductor than epoxy, which means that when struck the mast will heat up unevenly and thus may generate enough stress to blow the mast apart. So just think what will happen to an unprotected carbon hull! The best possible ground is a bare metal hull, but as the epoxy paint forms an insulating barrier, even a steel boat will need to fit a grounding plate.



Despite being an ocean sailor, I was hit when sailing in fresh water. In part that's because, unlike the sea, fresh water is not a good conductor and so lightning strikes in fresh water are far more vicious than at sea. So when fitting a ground plate, reserve it solely for grounding a lightning strike and assume it's for fresh, not salt, water. Thus you will need several square feet of copper sheet, although, partly because lightning dissipates along the edges of a plate, a long narrow strip fitted fore and aft is better than a square one. Unfortunately you can't fair it into the hull because sharp edges work best at dissipating the discharge into the water. Don't use the sintered earth plate from your SSB. It is deliberately made porous and can explode if hit by lightning. Using the keel sounds an attractive idea, but again the paint acts as an insulator. It's also probably unwise to use the propeller as an earth as massive currents could run through the engine if you do. Don't use your seacocks since in some cases lightning has blown them apart.

When fitting your grounding plate(s) err on the side of safety, particularly as one of the other problems (especially if hit in fresh water) is damage caused by sideflashes. These are sparks that form between the lightning protection system and ungrounded conductors or the water. These side flashes are potentially the most hazardous as they often blow holes through the hull.

But as I said earlier, even with a good grounding system, the electronics are still vulnerable. To protect these you can use surge protectors on every circuit, but as you can't sensibly test out the system you have to assume the worst. I think it is safer and more reliable to completely disconnect all your electric circuits, for, as I found to my cost, simply turning them off at the circuit breaker is not enough.

For that reason I no longer have any built-in instruments and my fridge and watermaker have their own plugs and sockets. I can also physically disconnect all the masthead cables, including the tricolour and steaming lights. Fortunately the only proven defence against lightning damaging your electronic equipment is actually very



simple. It is to store it all in a "Faraday Cage" which is a fancy name for a metal box. I use the oven and pressure cooker, but you could be really prepared with a well grounded large steel box. I have heard that wrapping electronics in aluminium kitchen foil may also work.



Now when lightning threatens, I put my chart plotter, VHF, radar, camera, computer, etc in the oven. Then I disconnect the engine from the batteries and hand steer if at sea. Having to sail into harbour and navigate "properly" seems a small price to pay if it means saving my electronics and engine.

Finally, unlike you, I have already been hit, so there is one more thing I do when lightning threatens. I hide under the bed clothes. And maybe that's the lasting legacy of my lightning strike. One year on, my boat has been fully repaired, but (like the shell shock victims of WW1) the psychological effects of the worst day of my life still haunt me.

### **What Causes Lightning?**

Most lightning strikes occur in the late afternoon when moisture laden air has warmed sufficiently to have formed huge cumulus nimbus clouds, often reaching over 10 miles high.

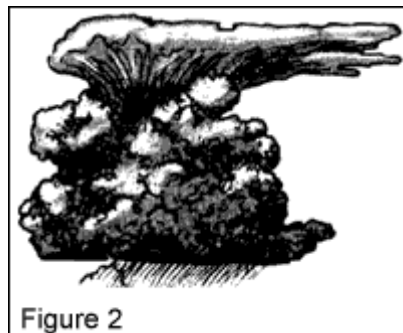
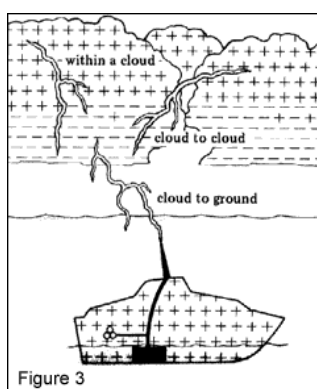


Figure 2

As the moisture rises, it chills and forms ice. These ice crystals rub against each other to create static electricity with the upper portion of the cloud developing a positive electrical charge, while the lower level becomes negative. Furthermore, since opposite charges attract as the cloud moves over the sea, it drags beneath it a concentration of positive charges which "infect" all that it passes over. These positive charges are desperate to meet the negative ones in the cloud and so always concentrate at the highest point available, which in our case is the masthead.

Lightning actually occurs when the differences between the positive and negative charges becomes great enough to overcome the resistance of the insulating air - in fact it's a bit like a giant spark plug. This built up energy may result in a discharge of over 100 million volts and increase local temperatures to 30,000 deg C.

But that's not the end of the story. All sparks create radio signals (indeed Marconi's original radio was a simple spark transmitter), so obviously a lightning strike generates huge signals. And these, together with the static charge accumulation resulting from non bonded conductors, means nothing electrical can survive a strike,



certainly not sensitive, low voltage electronics. So, even if you have a good path to ground and can keep the main discharge out of the boat's interior, you will probably still have damage. Even nearby boats that are not hit directly can suffer electronics damage from induced effects.

Finally, don't believe the "lightning never strikes twice" nonsense. In Florida I saw a J24 that had been hit 4 times. We were in a Chesapeake marina when a large cruising yacht on the next berth was hit. It had been hit in exactly the same spot the year before

### **What are the Chances of Lightning Striking Your Boat?**

Insurance company statistics are one place to look. I contacted Pantaneous UK who are one of the biggest insurers of ocean cruisers. They have 5000 boats on their books. 300 made a major claim last year, of which 14 were due to lightning. But having said that, I met only 2 other English yachts sailing the east coast of the USA in 2003. Both had also been struck by lightning, which is a 100% hit rate.

## Photo Albums

USA	page 160
Bahamas	page 178
Cuba	page 193
Belize	page 213
Bay Islands	page 228
Providencia	page 232
Panama	page 239
San Blas	page 261
Panama Canal	page 305



This waterside house on the Inter Coastal Waterway (ICW) has an outside swimming pool, as you can tell by the mosquito screens!



Many very rich people live on the banks of the ICW, and more houses are being built all the time



To avoid wash damage and to keep the hulls clean of fouling most boats on the ICW are raised up out of the water



A rare glimpse of a Manatee on the ICW





St Augustine, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the USA



Much of the ICW is marshy and in prevailing light winds motoring is the norm





After 1000 miles of ICW we reached the Chesapeake and approached the Naval Academy, Annapolis, in heavy rain



Sailing up the Chesapeake, north of Baltimore



Approaching New York from the south



I wonder where we are?



Now I recognise it





Because of security concerns you can no longer anchor underneath the Statue of Liberty. So there is only one place you can moor in New York - close to Ground Zero.

We sailed on through on the tide into Long Island Sound



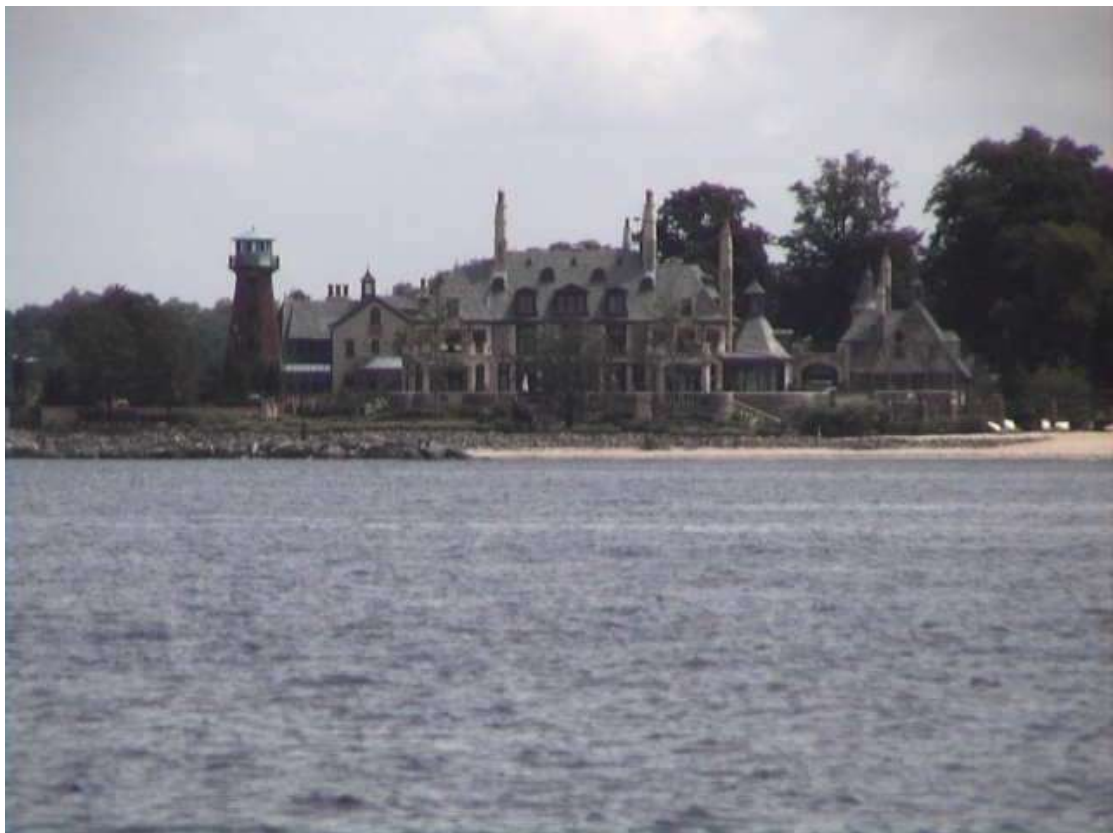


Ellis Island, where for years immigrants were processed





Wall St, Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge



A “Country Cottage” in Long Island Sound





A classic Gloucester schooner



Lighthouses are common in Maine



Much colder now! Even in August



Maine's rocks, fir trees and islands reminded me of the Baltic



We could always find a safe anchorage in the lee of an island



Another classic Maine schooner this time off Camden







We were glad to leave the curse of Maine - lobster pot buoys! - behind us as we headed south again



Passing through New York again, this time at dawn to catch the tide at Hells Gate



The Empire State Building



The Tall Ship museum off Manhattan

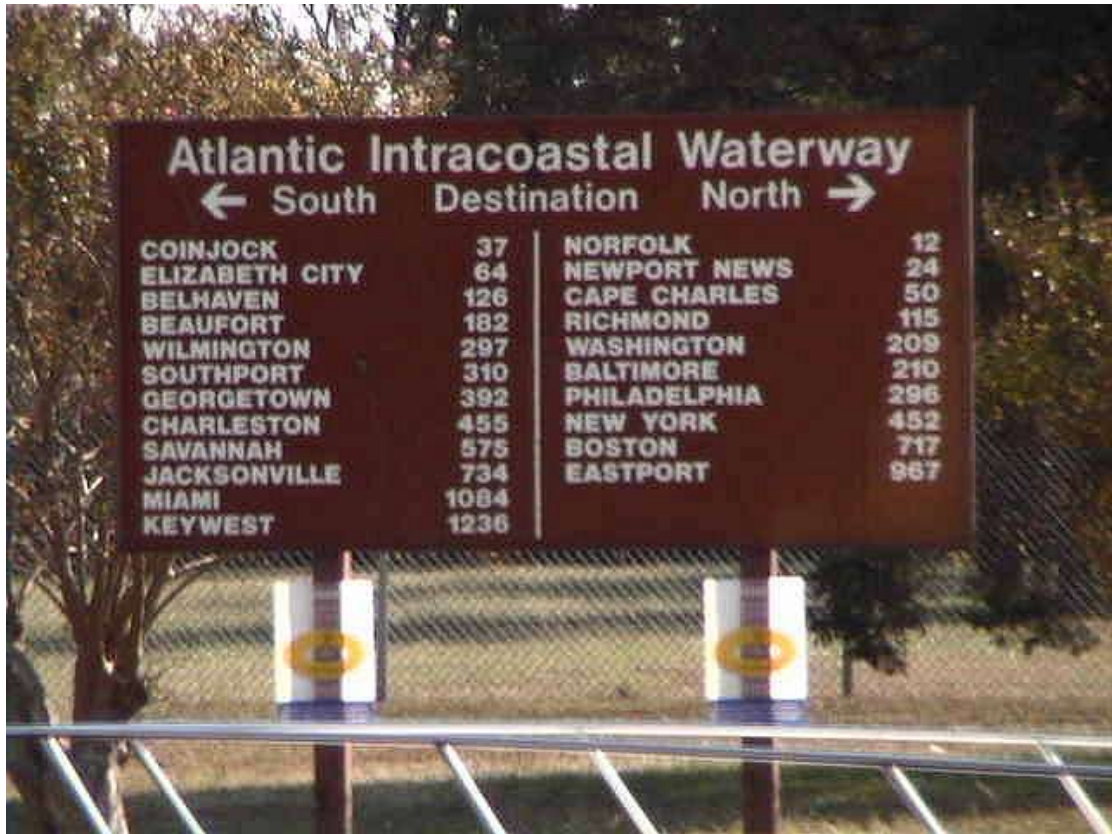




In Annapolis, a few days after Hurricane Isobel hit



Norfolk, at the north end of the ICW has a busy ship repair yard



Only 734 miles to go



The damage to docks and houses from Isobel was extensive



More expensive houses on the ICW



Safely moored outside Bob Coles house in the St John River, Florida





Christmas 2003 with the Patterson family in the Bahamas





The Junkaroo parade, Marsh Harbor, Bahamas on Boxing Day (Dec 26<sup>th</sup>)







Hope Town, Abacos, Bahamas and its famous lighthouse





Eclipse in Hopetown, one of the few hurricane holes in the Abacos





Most of the houses in the Bahamas are clapboard some, like this one, are well maintained



On our way to Nassau, capital of the Bahamas



Paradise Island Hotel



The anchorage in Nassau



The traditional working boats, complete with sliding seats, are still raced regularly





There are only a few hurricane holes in the Bahamas. Here we are leaving one on Eluthera. The flat calm lasted all day!



South of Nassau are the Exuma chain, lots of small islands with white sandy beaches









We dived onto the sunken ex-drug runners plane at Norman Cay







Georgetown, in the southern Exumas, is the Christmas destination for hundreds of US cruisers







On our way to Cuba we spent some time in the Jumentos, all three boats anchored here (below) sailed to Cuba







The mountains of east Cuba just in sight



Moored in the marina at Puerto Vita, NE Cuba



The marina office and restaurant complex, nice and cool on top of the hill!! It was very hot on the boat in the very sheltered marina - a real hurricane hole.







The sea is about 5 miles downstream from here. Ironically, given the harbours complete protection, there hasn't been a hurricane in NE Cuba in living memory





Jetti caught this Dorado just as we entered Cuban waters, The marina chef did a great job of cooking it for us!







One of the many “gas guzzlers” we saw in Cuba. Most modern cars are reserved for tourists. There are also a lot of old Russian built Ladas – now very rusty



Most tourists come to Cuba, stay in an all inclusive resort and sit on a beach like this



Cubans themselves either live in Bulgarian designed concrete boxes or in houses like this (this is one of the better ones)





We had some fast sailing along the Cuban coast. We passed several guard posts which would call us up asking for boat details and voyage plans. Occasionally we would meet fishing boats with canoes towing astern







Varedero is the main Cuban tourist areas and we saw several French built 80ft day charter catamarans ferrying tourists to a sandy beach for snorkelling and parties



This fisherman probably lives in one of the apartments below. He is sitting in an old lorry inner tube and snorkelling for lobster. Lobsters are only sold to tourists so he probably hasn't even eaten one himself





Havana's skyline looks just like any other capital city in the world



The old colonial fort guarding the entrance to Havana looks exactly like the one guarding Plymouth.







A new shopping mall in downtown Havana



The Russian embassy. Soviet concrete architecture at its best!





We hired a car and spent a few days in the interior. The Vinales valley was especially impressive.





This is Cuba's main tobacco growing area so the best cigars in the world are to be found here







Locally these hills are known as “Mogotes”, or haystacks





Tobacco is grown on small, very basic farms. This is a drying shed. Not surprisingly, many were destroyed in the hurricane that hit the region.







Back on the boat and heading west again along the north coast we stopped in several small ports. The port captain, customs and immigration would all visit us to clear us in and out at each port. Usually they would row out in an old, leaky dinghy.







Further west the wind dropped and the visibility improved and we could see the Vinales valley where we had driven a few days before. Aleisha, below, was another English yacht. We had first met them in Maine, they had also been hit by lightning off the US coast





Jetti enjoys fishing, but these 7 lobsters were bought from fishermen. Total cost 5USD





Alisha and Eclipse moored next to a Cuban gunboat at Los Morros marina, close to Cuba's most western point and our departure port for Belize







We entered Belize in the north, at San Pedro. We found this a rapidly expanding town and home to a bareboat catamaran charter fleet





Water taxis are the only means of transport between the islands, like Cay Caulker below







Tourists now come to Belize in huge numbers, but tend to all congregate on certain islands like Goffs Cay, below (we went to the deserted Rendezvous Cay only 3 miles away)





Rendezvous Cay























While in Belize we drove into Guatemala to see the famous Mayan temple at Tikal





The temples look amazing poking out of the jungle. Everyone takes the same photos as the only vantage points are from the tops of other temples







The main plaza at Tikal











After 6 months in the Rio Dulce we set sail in mid November and sailed 100 miles east to the Bay Islands, a few miles off the mountainous Honduras coast







We thought the eastern most island of Guanaja the nicest, even though it still showed the scars of Hurricane Mitch. No trees on the hills and wrecked ships in the bay





We spent a couple of days at Graham's Place, on Joshs Cay. A great laid back hotel, we even got given a free Thanksgiving supper!



All too soon it was on again east, into the prevailing winds for 200 miles. We didn't enjoy the sail to the Vivorillo Cays! But the palm treed islands were a great landfall and a foretaste of the San Blas. These Cays are a popular stop over for both cruisers and shrimp boats. There were 20 anchored off when we arrived

After a couple of days rest and some amazing sunsets it was on again, sailing a further 200 miles or so to the island of Providencia. This actually belongs to Colombia even though it is off the coast of Nicaragua





The small island of Catalina protects Providencia's main harbour







It is connected to the main island by a brightly painted foot bridge





Regular ancient supply boats visit the island. So we had no problem getting fresh food for the sail to Panama





One weekend we drove to the south end of the island to join in a beach party





There was traditional boat racing round the bay, horse racing on the beach, and food and drink for all







And of course there was a “Battle of the Bands”





On our last day we climbed the hill on Catalina, saw the old fort and looked out over the bay to “Morgans Butt” as its known locally. It's “Morgans Peak” on the maps.





Our first view of Bocas del Toro late on Sunday afternoon after a two day sail from Providencia







The town was much nicer than it first appeared from the water. It was full of backpackers and Americans. The backpackers were there for the surfing, the Americans were buying retirement homes. None of them seemed to mind the fact that it rained nearly every day







There are two marinas in Bocas. We stayed in the one below for Christmas. The bottom photo shows the other marina – too upmarket for us!





In a town of wooden buildings fire is a real risk, so despite its age, the fire engine is kept in top condition





Christmas Day 2004 Careening Cay Marina



Our marina was on Careening Cay, set amongst a real shanty town of waterside shacks





It looked very picturesque in the marina and restaurant, but once out of the grounds it was a desperately poor island







A local dugout canoe being restored



The restaurant grounds







Fortunately there was a concrete path through the village, crossing what was clearly an open sewer.





We got our clearance Zarpe after Christmas and sailed on to Tobobe, about 30 miles east of Bocas and a step back in time.







Few yachts go here and the locals were very curious, hanging onto our gunwales for hours, simply staring



There is no road access, no electricity, everything travels by canoe





We bought some food from the lady who paddled out to us. The man below said he was the harbour master. We hope that was true as we gave him 20USD harbour dues. No peaked cap, no receipt





The River Chagres, 130 miles further on has a very difficult entrance through surf. Once inside though, it was real Panamanian jungle all around





30 miles further on, and past the Panama Canal, is Portobello







This is one of the oldest and historically most important towns in all of Central America, so it was sad to see it so run down and neglected





For 200 years all the gold and silver taken from S American mines was brought here for shipping onto Spain. Four forts were built to protect the harbour.





The gold and silver was kept in this customs house, which – fortunately – has been restored. Sometimes there was so much gold the store was full, so the silver was piled up in this courtyard





Parts of the forts were dismantled to help build the Panama Canal (unnecessary cost cutting one would have thought!)



The Church is home to a Black Christ and its festival draws pilgrims from miles around.







One evening we were very surprised to see a square rigged ship come round the headland. It wasn't Drake, but a replica of Captain Cook's Endeavour





Portobello is officially the wettest place in N America. It proved it during our stay there. It was also very windy most days, so boats of all shapes and sizes came it to shelter, for Portobello is a very safe harbour in the prevailing NE winds



Portobello's other claim to fame is that it is the final resting place of Sir Francis Drake. His coffin lies off this island.



Every year I have to return to the UK in April and May, so we need to leave Eclipse in a safe Marina. Panamarina, just a few miles from Portobello seems just the place, so we checked it out on our way to the San Blas







At last the rain stopped for a couple of days and the wind moderated and we sailed on to Provenir, the entry island for the San Blas. It is a very small island, with only a short airstrip, hotel and immigration office. So it was difficult to find anywhere to anchor safely





Especially as before we had got the anchor to set properly we had two canoes full of Kuna ladies trying to sell us Molas tied up alongside. We pointedly ignored them completely and they soon left to bother someone else.

This confirmed our worst fears, as we had been warned about the pushy Mola sellers. Fortunately this was to prove the only time in 2 months that they were a nuisance





As soon as we had cleared in we left to motor a few miles to the deserted Lemon Cays









There are over 350 islands in the San Blas archipelago, only 40 of which are inhabited. There is usually no need to sail more than 10 miles from one island anchorage to the next. Here we are anchored at West Hollandes, which we found had some great snorkelling





Then we sailed on in the flat water in the lee of the Hollandes reef to the East  
Hollandes





A rainbow welcomed us to this very sheltered group of islands. As a result its extremely popular with cruisers and there is a regular Monday night Potluck party where stories are swapped, beer drunk and garbage burnt





On Tuesdays most boats leave, but we stayed on, spending some time snorkelling over the reefs. As a result we got caught by the harbour master (below). We paid 5USD to cover anchoring for one month – not bad value! We even got an official receipt. Later we had a meal in his house and discovered that eating out in the San Blas is a unique experience!









We were running short of food, so dragged ourselves away and sailed first to Green Cay, where we had a close encounter with a crocodile



and then Nargana. This is a “westernised” island but had a good shop and we were able to get fuel

Nearby is the Rio Diablo which is a good dinghy trip although the entrance had a very shallow bar



We saw lots of birds and big butterflies. Allegedly there are monkeys here as well but we didn't see any





After about one hours motoring up the river a sign says “no motors after this point”. That's because the water is now fresh. A few hundred yards further the river passes over some gravel beds and we could collect water clean enough to drink





Tanks filled, and it was back down the river





Instead of going to an island to shop we could have got food direct from a supply boat like this one.

Canoes did occasionally come buy offering fish, but usually they wanted to sell molas or undersized lobsters. We wanted fresh veg, bread and fruit but were surprised at just how hard these staples were to buy

We needed food because my sister Diana flew out for her usual winter holiday break. We took her to all the islands, Hollandes, Salar, Lemon etc that we had enjoyed during our first couple of weeks











Partly because it is difficult for tourists to get to the San Blas there are few hotels. This one, on its own island, looked ideal for those trying to get away from it all





The boat handling skills of the Kuna are legendary. The simple dugouts are normally paddled, but are usually sailed between the islands. Despite old bed sheets for sails, surprisingly fast - spot the trapeze! (Actually I think it should be called a “bell rope”)





It looked so much fun I just had to have a sail myself!  
I found the canoe surprisingly stable. The canoe is steered by holding the paddle over the side. There is no lee board so all the canoes make amazing leeway.  
I can understand that it takes some lateral thinking (pun intended!) to come up with an outrigger canoe or even a catamaran, but the Kuna have the materials to make a Viking style rudder and Thames barge leeboards, so I can't help but wonder why they never have.





It's not just canoes and yachts that sail the San Blas. A few brightly coloured supply boats sail between the islands and Colombia or go on to Colon

Although large cruise ships no longer visit the San Blas a couple of smaller ones, taking 50 passengers each, still do. If you don't have your own boat its the only way to see the islands as chartering is discouraged







One day as we sailed along we noticed a canoe behind us. A couple of hours later we anchored and eventually the Kuna ladies caught us up. They said they had followed us all day, so after all that effort Diana and Jetty felt they just had to buy some molas





Apart from molas the other Kuna woman's traditional dress is the wearing of leg beads, which the Kuna call winni, Diana had hers fitted professionally







There are two types of mola. The traditional designs are abstract, whereas the modern ones, made for tourists, tend to be pictorial. But all involve hours of work and well worth the 10-15 USD they cost. Our prize mola was a traditional one, below, which illustrates an eclipse of the sun. It now takes pride of place in the saloon.





The Carti group are tiny islands, with some very friendly people living in seemingly very cramped conditions with every available square inch of island used







Once on the islands we found it a real rabbit's warren, with narrow sandy paths between the houses. There is no litter, everything is amazingly clean, especially on all the traditionally run islands





The houses are very simply built from tree trunks lashed together. Split bamboos form the walls and the roofs are thatched. But why no diagonal bracing? After a few years most houses take on a pronounced lean.









We found a tour guide and hired a canoe which took us some miles up a jungle river. There then followed a one and a half hour walk through the jungle to a remote village







We had to dodge the traffic, below, as we crossed the “main road”, but eventually made it to the village





A small cluster of houses and a school, apparently miles from the next village and surrounded by banana and coffee plantations







We were to have lunch here, so we were invited into a couple of houses. As with all Kuna houses, inside we found a bare floor, no furniture of course, and our lunch chef cooking on an open fire. The Kuna sleep in hammocks which are stowed in the roof during the day. Its always cool in the houses, as the bamboo slats let air through but not the rain.





We thought the guide was joking when he said the main course for lunch was iguana.  
But he wasn't. Diana seemed to enjoy the meal more than I did







A last meal together on Yanatupu, no iguana fortunately!





Diana flew home to the UK and we went back to the impossible blues of the East  
Hollandes





A few days later we visited the East Lemon Cays, great snorkelling and a small community on the four islands. It all makes it one of the most popular cruisers anchorages





Although the islands are small, the surrounding reefs are extensive. So even though the trade winds blow hard the water stays flat and smooth







February 25<sup>th</sup> is the Kunan Independence Day and on the Carti group of islands they re-enact the day in 1925 when they beat the Panamanian police to establish the right to govern their own lands.

The day started with a procession through the streets





The majority of Kuna women wear traditional dress at all times. The men normally wear western dress, but today they wore red to symbolise the death of some of the 1925 protesters







Each small island has its own team of dancers and musicians. The men play pan pipes as they dance, the women maracas





Every one from the islands crowded into the square to watch the spectacle







No re-enactment would be complete without lots of fake blood. Between dances the Panamanian soldiers would maltreat the Kuna. Sometimes it was the other way round, so they all got their turn. Then the losers would be carried off and thrown in the sea.





I'm not sure why, but I got involved as well. I was the nominal “stupid white man” who was given a new wife (at least that's what I hoped for!)







The council chamber has seats for the populace and hammocks for the leaders.  
Below is the Kuna flag





The Kuna chiefs, above, and Prime Minister, below







After leaving Eclipse safely tucked up in bed in Panamarina we travelled to Colon and, after a few days waiting, got a lift as line handlers on Captain Woody's (back right) 10m (33ft) monohull





It takes two days to make the Canal Transit when travelling from the Caribbean to the Pacific. Yachts leave Colon in the evening and pass through the first set of locks, usually in the dark. Then they moor up in Gatun Lake ready to travel through the Canal the next morning.





The Panama Canal is a bit of a misnomer, for in fact most of it is a flooded lake that cuts through virgin jungle





All yachts carry a Canal pilot, seen here next to Woody

After leaving the locks behind we motored for hours through a large lake down a bouyed channel where all we could see were trees and more trees...







The hardest part of building the Canal was cutting through the Gatun hills, the backbone of Central America. To compound the problem the hills are made of a soft clay and landslips occur daily. As a result dredgers have worked round the clock every day since the Canal opened in 1914





Eventually we arrived at the Miraflores locks at the end of the Gatun Lake. The locks are about 1000ft long and 100 ft wide. So yachts are a long way from the lock walls, even when rafted up 3 abreast. The men on the shore throw heaving lines and it is the line handlers job to catch them, secure them to the boat and then control them as the water surges in or out and especially when the ship ahead starts its engines and the yachts are thrown around in the prop wash.



Although we had a ship in the lock at Colon, on the Pacific side only 5 yachts were in the lock, a very rare occurrence, as the Canal company lose money if no ship is using the locks.



As we sank down 35ft the locks appeared bigger and bigger, and remember there is at least 50ft of water underneath us even at “low tide”







Entering the last lock and our first view of the Pacific







The Bridge of the Americas is 198ft high, yet many super yachts cannot get underneath! It marks the beginning of the Pacific Ocean. Woody had left California 2 years ago to sail round the world. So he was on his last lap, and was really pleased to be back in the Pacific Ocean!

We moored the boat up, went ashore and took a taxi to the nearest hotel.

Then we had a bus trip to Costa Rica and flew home, to prepare for our next sailing adventure. But that, as they say, is another story...

