

Just buy a boat and go...

One couple's 12-year voyage
around the world.

By Christine Muir (& Keith Hunt)

Stranded in the USA by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Christine & her partner Keith re-evaluated their lives and chose adventure. They bought a 44' sailing yacht and spent every leisure hour of the following year getting to know the boat intimately. Exhausted and broke, they resigned perfectly good, well-paid employment to become 'modern' boat bums, with no fixed plan except possibly 2-3 years - or three weeks if they hated cruising/killed each other/killed someone else.

This is the story of their exploits sailing the seas - sometimes in uncharted waters - and the wonderful like-minded cruising community they encountered. Not content with just exploring the oceans of the world, we took overland trips through New Zealand, Australia and SE Asia.

They dodged pirates and hurricanes - and fought cancer along the way.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to everyone mentioned in this book – and all those who have inspired us along the way. Their help and advice have been invaluable and much appreciated by us both.

And special mention goes to our families for their support and encouragement.

Finally, thanks to Keith – for giving me the opportunity to become a sea gypsy – and for putting up with me during the process!

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About the Authors

Christine Muir: Born mid-1950's in New Zealand, finished schooling in Perth, Australia and subsequently lived there for 18 years before moving to Southampton in England, Great Britain. National loyalty depends on what sport is being played!

Previous sailing experience: Nil until she met Keith in 2000. He talked about sailing off into the sunset - so Christine said "Why not?" Took a dinghy sailing course but decided that 'cold, wet and miserable' all at once was a really bad idea.

Sail Training Courses: Royal Yachting Association (RYA) Day Skipper Theory and Day Skipper Practical; RYA Sea Survival Course (in case the worst happens); RYA VHF Radio Licence, Ham Radio Licence.

Keith Hunt: Born early-1950's in Wales, where his rugby roots lie, but lost his Welsh accent years ago! Moved to England for university and stayed there.

Family: Children Emily, Robert and Charlotte who kindly sent their teddy bears with us on our travels.

Previous sailing experience: 30 years on dinghies and small day-sail yachts. Couldn't understand why Christine didn't enjoy dinghy and small boat sailing in the freezing waters of Southampton...

Sail Training Courses: Royal Yachting Association (RYA) Yachtmaster Ocean (Theory and Practical). RYA Sea Survival Course, RYA VHF Radio Licence, RYA First Aid Certificate.

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1 - How it all started

It all started when my brother invited me and Keith, my new partner, to his second wedding which was to be held at the Musket Cove Resort, Fiji in September 2001 - and we accepted! Keith had never been to that side of the world, and it would give me a chance to catch up with my family. Keith and I had been together about a year - both of us looking for love a second time round.

I had been on my own for about eight years - I'd moved to Southampton, UK from Perth, Western Australia after my marriage of 18 years broke up - and was finally ready to let someone into my life. Although I'd been born and brought up in New Zealand, when I was 15 my family moved to Australia and I thought of myself as an Aussie rather than a Kiwi. I was now leading a lively existence in a small cul-de-sac affectionately referred to as 'tarts corner' - both my neighbours were ASF's (Affluent Single Female), NK's (no kids) and we were all looking for a LTR (Long Term Relationship).

Keith was born in the early-1950's in Wales, where his rugby roots lie, but he lost his Welsh accent years ago, having moved to England for university and stayed there. He was just getting over his divorce and was struggling to come to terms with the growing distance between himself and his three teenage children Emily, Robert and Charlotte. Keith was working long hours as a management accountant for a paper manufacturer - and commuting three hours a day to a job which he was finding increasingly frustrating. He was looking for emotional support and a new start.

During our 'courtship', we had talked about our interests; Keith explained that he had been a sailor for 30+ years and was currently renovating a 19' yacht. I asked him what his dream was and he replied "Oh, it would be great to sail off into the sunset..." Being a brazen antipodean, I replied "Well, why don't you?" Of course, it's never that straight forward - until we got the invitation to go to the wedding in Fiji...

We planned to fly to New Zealand, spend 10 days exploring the some of the North Island before heading off to Fiji for the wedding;

returning to the UK via the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas – about three weeks in total. All went well - we spent a lovely time in New Zealand sightseeing and catching up with my family and friends. The wedding party then congregated in Fiji at the Musket Cove Island Resort for about five days - we fell in love with this tropical paradise.

The Resort had been developed by Dick Smith, a keen sailor and, as part of the complex, he established a marina off the beach - and encouraged the sailors to enjoy the Resort facilities. A walk along the beach brought us to a small spit of land at the end of which was a 'tiki' bar. The bar, with its sand-between-the-toes setting, provided a relaxed atmosphere where the cruising folk congregated for sundowners. One evening we joined them for a beer and a chat. To my surprise these were just ordinary people who had decided to give up the corporate rat race and sail the oceans for an indefinite period - no rushing around the world, ticking off places as you went, with deadlines set by some rally organisers. This was a different way of life. There was no point-scoring, just a 'can do' attitude full of fun and friendliness.

We were fascinated and barraged them with questions – where have you sailed from? what about pirates? how do you finance it? what about storms? ... I expected a treatise on boat design, power generation, watermakers and a myriad of details - but the general consensus was "Don't worry about all that - if you have an urge to go cruising, just buy a boat and go! Don't over-think it; you'll never regret the decision, no matter what happens."

As we talked to them, I realised that they weren't the intrepid sailors that I'd read about in books – they were just ordinary people living extraordinary lives.

After the wedding celebrations were over, Keith and I departed for Las Vegas to break the long flight back to the UK. Las Vegas was unexpectedly fun – the Americans certainly know how to put on a show. We drove out to the Grand Canyon - the helicopter flight over the gorges was amazing; but back on the ground, I discovered I was very afraid of 'edges'! It was an awful long way down...

Back in Las Vegas, it was time to fly to the UK. We had an early start; packed the bags and went to the lobby to check out.

The concierge, hearing our 'foreign' accents asked, "Are you guys intending to fly today?"

"Yes", I replied.

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"Well, I don't think you'll be going anywhere today," and pointed to a huge TV screen. What we saw looked like a film – a plane flying into the side of the Twin Towers building in NY. Like everyone at first, we thought it was a disaster movie - but as we all know now, it was very real.

Our flights back to the UK were re-scheduled for 10 days hence. Like most people in the wake of 9/11, Keith and I used this time to take stock of our lives and our dreams. Having just met those amazing cruisers in Fiji we naturally started to talk about 'sailing off into the sunset'.

By the time we got back to the UK, we'd been gone five weeks in total – and we both realised that our jobs were increasingly meaningless. Keith enquired about redundancy – and got it – and was inspired to do some contracting work closer to home. He was also advised that he would begin receiving a private pension when he turned 50 – whether he wanted it or not. With this he now had three income streams – work, pension and rental income. From all the articles we'd read, it seemed that we would need a cruising budget of approximately US\$1,000 per month – this might just be achievable!

Keith also realised that his children's loyalties were being divided between their parents – and it was tearing everyone apart. Perhaps if Keith wasn't physically there, they could settle down and get through their traumatic teenage years... Emily was about to start university, Robert would soon be following, and Charlotte was at a delicate age in her early teens.

As both our parents were dead and Keith's children needed some space in their lives, we had a window in ours - time for some adventure!

2 – Just buy a boat...

Keith had been taking me sailing at weekends during the summer around Southampton Waters and the Isle of Wight on his small yacht, but he recommended I do a dinghy Sailing Course at the local Activities Centre. I found the course useful - but it also involved having to deliberately overturn the sailing dinghy and learn how to right it. Despite wearing a wetsuit, I soon decided that I didn't want to do 'cold, wet and miserable' all at the same time...

The following Christmas I bought Keith a hand-held GPS - at the time a new technology - and discovered I was living at 50° north of the equator - at 50° south of the equator, I would have been living in Antarctica! What on earth was I thinking? I definitely needed to move back to warmer climes...

We started seriously thinking about going cruising - Keith already had his Coastal Skipper's licence, so he enrolled to do the Yacht Master Offshore course. He also had his VHF Radio Licence and First Aid Certificate. I had also done First Aid, so enrolled at night school to get my Skipper's ticket.

We started looking on the internet for yachts - and tried to figure out what our needs and costs would be. We visited the numerous boat yards around Southampton and tried sitting in the saloons of various sized yachts - getting a feel for the space between the saloon berth and the navigation station. It needed to be large enough for two people to live in - having lived on my own for years, I felt I still needed my own 'space'. In view of my almost total ignorance about boats and boating, I had to rely on Keith's experience and advice. He recommended that, for only two people to be able to handle the weight of the sails, a ketch (one with two masts and therefore smaller sails) could be up to about 54-55 feet. For a single-master the length would be shorter - up to 44-45 feet. I also wanted at least three sleeping cabins and two bathrooms - in case we had visitors.

After 6-7 months of fruitless searching, Keith re-visited our search parameters and lo-and-behold, *Poco Andante* came up and was on her way to Southampton - our home port! A successful tour with the

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broker and talks with current owner helped us decide that *Poco Andante* was everything we'd hoped for – looking spotless and with all the kit you would expect from a blue water sailing yacht. She'd already crossed the Atlantic at least twice...

She was 44 feet long with a centre cockpit which was high and deep – narrow enough that I could brace myself across it but more-or-less long enough so Keith could stretch out and sleep. The instruments were arranged inside the bimini, forward of the companion way, rather than on the steering binnacle – a very practical arrangement. A lot of boats have these instruments mounted on the steering column and they can only be seen whilst hand-steering. For long distances, standing behind the wheel and hand-steering full-time would be out of the question.



From the cockpit there was a 5-step companion way ladder leading down to the saloon, with the navigation station immediately to port (left) and the galley to starboard (right). The galley included deep twin sinks - good for washing dishes when the boat was heeled on an angle - a 3-burner gas stove with oven and grill on gimbals, a fridge and freezer and microwave. Continuing aft, the main sleeping cabin had its own separate heads and hand basin/shower. On the other side, aft of the navigation station was a pilot berth fitted out with a tool chest, and multi-storey lockers for the spare parts. The saloon had at least 6'6" head room – and a U-shaped dinette on the left around a dining table which had fold-down sides; there was another sitting area on the right of the aisle leading forward. This doubled as a very comfortable sea berth. All the seats had lots of storage beneath, and there were bookshelves and more storage cupboards above and behind the seating. Forward, a bi-fold door led to the separate heads (toilet) and separate shower on the left and a wet-locker-come-hanging storage cupboard on the right. The

forward V-berth could sleep two singles or convert into a double berth with sail storage beneath. The off-white and American cherry timber combination made the interior light, bright and airy – just what we had been searching for.

Keith was delighted to discover that the engine bay, lying beneath the cockpit, was huge – and accessible by three removable doors in the galley and another three in the pilot berth. The domestic batteries were secured in here – as well as the fridge compressor and inverter.

The decks were clear with wide gunnels giving easy access to the mast and foredeck. The raised coach roof sides and armoured safety glass windows provided plenty of light to the cabins below – and top opening hatches for good ventilation. The anchor locker was huge; well-equipped with two anchors, plenty of chain and rode – and a good windlass! On the aft deck was an enormous lazarette locker providing storage for all the miscellaneous equipment required for blue-water cruising. Two solar panels and two wind generators were mounted on a solid stainless-steel gantry which also had a swim ladder.

We promptly made an offer and by 5pm the deal was done, subject to survey and test sail. I organised a small increase in my mortgage to top up our combined cash to cover the purchase cost. A week later the surveyor confirmed she was a strong, sea-worthy boat and would be ideal for blue water cruising. We were the proud owners of *Poco Andante* – now the hard work began.



Poco is Spanish for 'little', and *Andante* is the Italian musical term meaning 'at walking pace' – our interpretation was 'slightly slower than walking pace!' We loved and retained the name as a fitting description of the life we wanted to lead.

3 - A steep learning curve

It was now June - we spent the rest of the summer sailing her at every opportunity. This was a much bigger boat than Keith had ever sailed - and I was still a novice. I really wanted to sew a big green 'L' sign on the mainsail so everyone on the Solent would know I was learning - it felt like learning to drive on the M25! There was all this equipment on board that we didn't know about - watermakers, Hydrovane self-steering, autopilots, to name just a few. Each weekend we'd take out the instruction book for another piece of kit and try to learn all about it - we soon discovered that some things needed more sea-room than the Solent provided. This was certainly true of the autopilots - the Hydrovane was a real mystery. And what on earth did 'pickling' the watermaker mean?

During the long winter months, we emptied every locker and sorted through all the equipment we had inherited. It was an extensive inventory - Nick, the previous owner, had a thorough filing system and maintenance log which proved very useful. I was given the mundane job of painting inside all the lockers and bilges - 'head down, bum up' just about covers that task... But at least when we re-stowed stuff, we'd know where things were located.

The four anchors (one CQR, one Bruce, and two Danforths) were sent to be re-galvanised - together with our 90m of anchor chain - which Keith blithely cut off from the 200m of rode (that's the rope bit after the chain).

I would later spend eight hours on a freezing cold February day learning how to re-splice the rode to the chain - while Keith worked in the comparative comfort of the engine bay inside the boat!

The sails were sent to the sail maker for cleaning and any minor repairs. The mast and rigging, weighing two tonnes, were sent by road to a local rigger for servicing.

The life raft was sent for service, and we were able to see what it looked like - and what was packed inside.

The existing 56hp marinised diesel Ford Transit engine had been unreliable, and we found we could get a 75hp 'lift out/lift in'

replacement – and re-use all the existing attachments. This was one of the best decisions we ever made...

During the next few months, I went on a VHF Radio Operator's course and a week-long practical sailing course on the Solent. Keith and I had agreed that, despite our sizeable investment to-date, if either of us wanted 'out', we would do so with no questions asked. During my practical course, Keith spent a very worried week - the weather never dropped below Force 8. He was very relieved when I successfully completed the course – and was still enthusiastic about going sailing! Later on, Keith spent a week doing the practical course for his Yacht Master's Offshore ticket – and we both found the 'Safety at Sea' course to be informative and useful.

We both had 1st Aid training (albeit quite a few years ago) but were pleased to learn how to put stitches in when our friend Chris had a nasty gash in his mouth one weekend.

All the dentists were shut, but Keith's neighbour was a dentist and kindly agreed to open his surgery for an emergency visit. Poor Chris was sitting in the dentist's chair when the dentist called us in and asked if we'd like to learn how to put in sutures – great for us, but somewhat unnerving for our friend!

But when I tried to buy sutures at the pharmacy it wasn't possible! A subsequent visit to a podiatrist resulted in unexpected success – he gave me a handful of suture packs for our First Aid case.

My GP provided us with a comprehensive list of items for the First Aid kit – the underlying logic is that it can take about three days for help to reach you in the middle of an ocean so, if you can keep someone alive and out of pain for three days, then they might survive! It's a live or die world out there... The GP couldn't provide opiates for pain, but she did advise that a combination of Dihydrocodeine with Paracetamol and Ibuprofen would have the same effect...

We also underwent about 12 weeks of vaccinations.

The process of transitioning from being land lubbers to cruisers could now begin. A major decision was to keep Keith's 3-bedroom house to provide rental income, and to sell my one-bedroom house to provide us with a 'cruising kitty'. We each gave notice to our employers and began sorting out what we were going to need on board, what would need to be put in storage and what was to be disposed of. We had no idea how long we might be gone – three

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months or three years - 12 years was outside our thinking! But we figured that if, God forbid, *Poco Andante* sank to the bottom of the sea and we managed to survive the experience, we'd still have a house and chattels! All the white goods were sold, but things like furniture, photo albums and expensive clothing would go into storage.

With no spare time for leisurely cruising, we decided to head south towards the Mediterranean; wisdom advised that we should cross the Bay of Biscay before the end of August - it is one of the five most notorious pieces of ocean in the world. We were rapidly running out of time. Once the mast, rigging and sails were back on, we took *Poco* to Hythe Marina, close to my house. We could now put back on board all the equipment we'd taken off - and move on board ourselves.

4 – ... and go!



After 13 hectic months of preparation, the day finally arrived for our departure from Southampton. Our first voyage was all of five miles – by moonlight we headed for Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight and picked up a mooring before falling into a dreamless sleep. The effort of the previous 18 months was just catching up – we were exhausted – both physically and emotionally.

Keith and I had been so caught up in all the minutiae of getting ready to go that we'd forgotten about the emotional ties we had to our current life. Now we needed courage to break these and embark on our adventure. We had no preconceived ideas of what this new life might bring – or what our final destination was - but it was time to start to find out!

We used the trip to Plymouth over the next couple of weeks as our 'shakedown' cruise – resolving small issues, making notes of bigger tasks to be done – but at least we'd taken the first big step. Keith's initial plan was to aim for the North Brittany coast of France with the

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possible thought of meeting up with long-standing sailing friends who were on their annual sailing vacation. In the end we were so late in the sailing season that they were already on their way back to the UK. Sailing is governed by the wind and the sea – and to avoid hurricanes, storms and other unforgiving elements, choices have to be made each season. In general, in the northern latitudes, sailing is confined to the summer months – while in the equatorial latitudes it is wise to avoid the hurricane/cyclone prone regions.

After an overnight passage across the Channel our timing was good – we arrived at the entrance to the Chenal du Four with a favourable tide adding to the boat speed and rushing us through. It was just another 10 miles to Camaret, our first foreign port. We arrived at about 1.30am and dropped anchor just outside the harbour, only 36 hours after leaving the UK. We hadn't had much sleep – Keith was doing most of the helming and I found sleeping almost impossible with the boat careering around in what seemed to be difficult conditions – something we would no doubt get used to over time.

Camaret is a small Breton village protected by a long sea wall and guarded by the 17th century Tour Vauban. The town was in party mood; the Marine Rescue organisation was holding its annual fundraising festival with music, dance and delicious local fare. A lovely introduction to what was to come. We stayed at Camaret a few days and prepared for our first 'long passage' – an estimated three days to cross the Bay of Biscay.

The Biscay crossing, cited as one of the five worst sea trips in the world and often beset by storms, was a daunting prospect for newcomers like us. Although the weather forecast looked good, we prepared for the worst. Keith even rigged the parachute anchor ready for deployment in the event of a storm. This is a safety device which enables a boat to hold its position at sea – facing into the wind and waves – and would allow us to wait until conditions improve. Hot meals were prepared, all loose objects stowed.

In the end we had three days of glorious sailing in 15 knots of wind – there was a bit of Atlantic swell, but it was not too bad. We were running the engine for an hour a day to keep the fridge/freezer cold and the batteries charged.

About halfway across our electronic chart reader began to play up and was proving unreliable – this was a bit of a worry. We had done

a lot of research into computerised navigation software – listening to the salesmen and reading their blurb. In the end we had opted for MaxSea with a chart reader that allowed us to buy the electronic charts for different sailing regions of the world. The MaxSea software also allowed us to import weather grib files and overlay them onto the charts and run a movie of the forecast over the next 7-10 days. After many re-boots and fiddling around, I fortunately managed to get the chart reader to work before we made landfall at Gijon. The paper charts were OK but having invested in the electronic ones I wanted to make sure they worked!

During the crossing, I was trying to gain confidence in my sailing and helming skills – Keith was encouraging me with advice and guidance. We still didn't really know how to get the Hydrovane wind vane to steer the boat reliably – and even the electronic autopilot was baffling. We were hand-steering 24 hours a day – and I just couldn't see how this was going to work out. We were using the well-tested 'watch' pattern – two hours on and two hours off. I found that two hours just wasn't enough time to get a solid sleep. After three days of this we arrived exhausted and demoralised – could I actually keep this up?

At last, we made landfall at Gijon, Spain and spent a few days catching up on rest and sleep – and researched better watch-keeping patterns for two-handed sailors. One of our reference books (inherited with the boat) recommended a six-hour watch pattern at night – this would allow the off-watch person to get at least five hours solid rest. This sounded more like it! However, this schedule depended on using an automatic steering system – it became a priority. We would have to work out how to use the autopilots.

Gijon was a lovely landfall with a well-protected marina. It turned out that there was a cider festival being held that weekend –this part of Spain is cider-country. There is a local tradition of pouring the cider from the bottle held at arms-length over one's head and the glass at an angle down by one's hip! Not a lot of the cider ends up in the glass – most pours onto the street! Once I'd tasted the cider I could understand why – it was really cheap and really rough – the gutter was the best place for it!

After a few days recovering from the Biscay crossing and having caught up on a huge load of laundry we set sail heading west across the north coast of Spain, exploring the Rias – steep sided inlets with

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high rocky cliffs and generally a small fishing village nestled at the base.

Worryingly our chart reader died completely; after many phone calls/emails to the UK, the supplier agreed to courier a replacement unit to us at our next stop, Cudillero. Frustratingly, we waited in Cudillero for 10 days - it turned out the UK supplier had sent it by post - and two days later than they'd said.

Cudillero is the most picturesque fishing village on the Asturian coast. The houses, painted in a rainbow of pastels, cascade down to a tiny port on a narrow inlet. The port is protected by a large sea wall and nestles beneath the towering cliffs. The surrounding coastline is a dramatic sequence of sheer cliffs and fine beaches. The harbour had lines laid along the sea floor to provide fore and aft moorings for the fishing boats.

After a day or two, *Akane*, a German yacht, arrived and picked up one of these moorings. We had anchored close by however the bottom was fine silt and the anchor did not hold very well. After we'd dragged twice, he beckoned us over and we rafted up alongside him.

Akane had Hans Jürgen and Caren on board, and they were taking a year out to cruise down to the Med from their home port of Hamburg. They were in their 30's and, unlike us, didn't have an independent income to allow them to cruise for longer. A day or so later, we were joined by another German yacht *Tadorna* a small folkboat with a young couple in their 20's; Bartek, a doctor, and Yvonne, an interior designer - again taking a sailing sabbatical. Paul and Marianne on *Zilver*, also in their 30's, were also sailing down the west coast of Europe - we'd first met them in Gijon. They were confined to day-sailing as they had their beautiful black labrador *Mais* on board with them - he needed daily trips ashore...

This was our first real encounter with the cruising community, and it reinforced our decision to go cruising. Just like the cruising folk we'd met in Fiji, here was a group of like-minded people with a zest for life. It's difficult to put your finger on what sets these people apart. Although they are of different backgrounds, nationalities and beliefs, they have something that connects them. Is it their openness, friendliness or their eagerness to help? Or is it the similarity of purpose, the self-reliance? Nevertheless, the socialising was great fun!

About 100m from our mooring, they were building a new slip way and dock – noisy pile drivers and machinery working all hours of the day and night whenever there was a low tide. Late one afternoon, shortly after we had all returned to our boats after a day of dining and drinking ashore, one of the Spanish guys called out to say we had to move as they were doing an underwater explosion at 6pm that night! They were concerned about the safety of our yachts as we were in the direct line of fire. They took a great deal of trouble to warn us – however they didn't seem to be worried about the local fishing boats! *Zilver*, *Akane* and *Tadorna* decided to leave Cudillero and sail on westward; however, Keith and I still had to wait for our parcel. In the end we motored out of the harbour, waited for the explosion - signalled by a huge fountain of water and a flurry of startled sea birds flying up into the sky - and came back in again at 6.30pm!

Another major hiccup occurred when one cell in one of our bank of five domestic batteries decided to die – this caused the other batteries to drain. Keith tested each battery and managed to figure out which one was 'dud' and wired it out of the loop. The other four batteries gradually recovered, but we now had to be careful about electricity consumption.

I realised that it was about time for me to wax my legs and underarms; I'd brought the wax (which could be heated in the microwave) and the strips. Doing my legs in the cockpit worked OK, but when I went below to the aft heads to do my underarms (using the mirror), I discovered a problem. Although the ceiling height in most of the boat was quite high, our cabin only had about 1.8m head room. When I went to rip off the waxing strip, my hand hit the ceiling half-way through! A painfully slow removal followed and thereafter I did my armpits in the cockpit, too!

The daily hike up the steep path to the Post Office through this picturesque village provided great exercise! Finally, in the first week of September, the parcel arrived and the replacement chart reader was successfully installed - we were free to resume sailing.

5 - Our first taste of cruising

Cruising life began in earnest at this point - we had no definite plan, just enjoying the freedom and camaraderie of our fellow cruisers. September was upon us, and we thought that it would be good to get into the Mediterranean before winter set in. We were still in the Bay of Biscay and needed to speed up a little. The day sailing was easy and we had settled comfortably into this new way of life.

Even when not sailing, daily chores needed to be done. Our loose daily routine was to carry out chores in the morning and relax in the afternoon. Laundry was usually done by hand in large plastic builders' tubs and strung out to dry on a temporary clothesline strung around the boat on the rigging - I became expert at pegging well enough that the laundry didn't get blown overboard!

Boat maintenance was also important including daily engine checks. Battery charging and maintenance was an art we were gradually mastering - *Poco Andante* had separate starter batteries for the engine and we would use these to run the windlass, as pulling up the anchor required a lot of power. Doing this while the engine was running kept the starter batteries more-or-less fully charged. Balancing the input from solar, wind and engine with the demand for domestic output required more attention, particularly in Europe where the solar panels weren't as effective.

There were many items that seemed to breakdown at the wrong moment - all needed repairing. 'Jack of all trades' seemed to be the main skill needed! It wasn't as if the boat was in a bad state of repair - just that the constant use takes its toll.

We had a small watermaker producing 10 litres an hour using low power consumption. If the wind was blowing and the sun shining, we could produce enough power to run this all day. We often talked about fitting a larger watermaker but space and high-power consumption were negative factors - the power-to-water output ratio seemed to be the same for a small unit as a large unit.

Trips ashore for sight-seeing, exercise and shopping for fresh produce were often in company with other boat crews - ending up in a bar somewhere.

Early one morning, with a brisk easterly wind behind us, we decided to test the electronic autopilot. With great trepidation, I dialled in the magnetic compass course required and pressed the 'On' button. Nothing happened! Out with the instruction manual again. It suggested using the remote control to see if that did anything - and sure enough, the wheel turned. I used the remote control to gently steer *Poco* onto the desired course and then switched control back to the main unit - lo-and-behold, it worked. The wheel made small adjustments in accordance with the movement of the waves and the wind - and "Look Mum, no hands!" This was a real 'Eureka' moment for us. This magic piece of equipment became our next crew member - and was baptised 'Handy Andy' the Autopilot.

Our next major stop was La Coruña. We discovered some lovely places around this part of Spain - it is still largely an undiscovered part of the country. Our batteries were getting worse and losing charge very quickly - presumably the autopilot was contributing to this - Keith decided it would be wise to change batteries there.

La Coruña is a large, popular harbour with a small marina - with no vacancies at that time. Anchoring off was a financial blessing but it did mess up Keith's plans to swap out the batteries!

Some of the other yachts we had met earlier turned up. We also met some new boats; *Nechtan*, a lovely ferro-cement ketch owned by Tom, a Scot, and Sue, an Aussie. This fun couple, in their 40's, were migrating to Australia the traditional way - by sail! Their zest for life was contagious.

We finally got a berth in the marina and re-fuelled ready for the next stage - and I was able to hang the washing out to dry; the weather had been too wet and windy for the previous two days. It was then a search for replacement batteries - in the end Keith could only find large truck batteries and only four fitted into the battery box. A real nuisance as this meant we only had 440-amp hour capacity, rather than our previous 600-amp hour - but at least the new batteries would hold their charge!

Cape Finisterre (on the NW tip of Spain) was another sailing milestone - contrary to its reputation, conditions were so benign that we motored most of the way around. At Ria de Muros we anchored

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outside the harbour of Portosin - just off a lovely little beach. Another weather system came through and we ended up staying for five days - the west coast of the Iberian Peninsula bears the brunt of the full Atlantic swell. Even after the wind eased, we decided to wait a further 24 hours for the seas to subside. We did manage an Australian-style barbecue on the beach one evening and about six boats turned up.

6 – ‘Henry’ the Hydrovane

Fine weather came and we headed for our next major stop, Vigo. Conditions were favourable for learning how to use the Hydrovane; this great device is a self-contained autopilot which uses the wind to steer the vessel and uses no electricity. It had its own small sail and rudder fixed to the very rear of the boat. Having carefully read the instruction manual, I went to the aft deck and turned the counterweight into the wind direction. With Keith on the helm, he asked me to ‘engage’ the steering mechanism. Immediately I did so, *Poco* immediately started to do a 180° turn – the sails started flapping, the boom swung across – and we were going in the wrong direction! This wasn’t what we expected. I disengaged the Hydrovane, took a deep breath and we sorted out the boat.

Back to the instruction manual... It didn’t seem to help much; Keith figured out that we were supposed to ‘tie off’ the main rudder once the Hydrovane was engaged. This meant we needed to get *Poco Andante* sailing in more-or-less the right direction without us having to move the main helm much – in other words, we needed to get the sails and main rudder ‘balanced’. Keith’s dinghy sailing experience came to the fore – taking the helm, he got me to adjust the main sail and genoa until the helm barely needed touching. This took quite some time – in the end we had to put one reef in the main sail. Finally, Keith felt that the boat was balanced – now time to try the Hydrovane again. Warily Keith gave the instruction, and I engaged the mechanism – the small sail started to roll slowly from side to side – this in turn made a small adjustment to the auxiliary rudder – and wow! It was working.

Over the next few days, we learned how to fine tune the counterweight when the wind shifted slightly – but here it was, steering the boat – and not using any electrical power. What a huge relief. Setting the Hydrovane was certainly an ‘art’ rather than a ‘science’! It was promptly christened ‘Henry’ and became a much-loved fourth member of crew.

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After stops at Ria de Muros, Ria de Arosa and Isla de Cíes, we arrived at Vigo - an unremarkable industrial town with an historical heart. We took the opportunity to visit another Internet cafe - and I finally got our website working - even though it wasn't quite how I wanted it. When I checked our phone bills over the last month or so I got a shock - they were over £400 (about \$800)! That was a big learning curve - we soon figured out that the best solution was to buy a local SIM including data in each country. These are usually valid for a month at least and can be topped up if necessary.

The weather pattern in this part of the world was a little different from the UK; the air temperature was around 24°C. In general, it would be bright and sunny for two to three days then a couple of days of wet and windy southerlies, followed by a day or so of heavy 3-4 metre swells. We settled into a pattern of sailing when conditions were good, then hole-up until it was fine again. The wind was mostly either 10-15 knots or blowing a gale. The coast is very exposed and doesn't offer many harbours sheltered from huge waves from the Atlantic breaking on the shore. The weather forecasting seemed to be accurate - we didn't often get caught out. We were doing 30-40 miles a day, leaving at about midday and arriving at the next destination in the evening. The social life was great, with lots of people willing to share a beer and a tale in the evening.

I borrowed a pilot book for the Moroccan coast - Morocco and Japan were two countries I'd wanted to visit all my life. The pilot book gave me ideas!

7 – Let her fly...



We sat out bad weather at Viana de Castelo and between showers explored the town. Like many of the towns in Atlantic Portugal, its heyday goes back to the age of discovery and the renaissance - when Portugal opened the routes to Africa and the Far East. There are many historic buildings all dominated by a large cathedral on the hill above the town. We took a bus to Oporto with Paul & Marianne off *Zilver*. Oporto was developed with the aid of the British - as a concession for being allies against Napoleon. The famous port houses - Crofts, Taylors, Sandemans, etc. - were still active and we had a fun tour around one, with a couple of free glasses of port thrown in.

From Viana we headed for Figueira da Foz; the wind freshened to 30+ knots and the swell built up. Although there was no real difficulty as we were running in front of wind and waves, this was our first major blow and tested me a little. The sailing was very invigorating, and we touched 10.3 knots surfing down the waves; I felt very insecure and kept asking Keith if we had too much sail up. He tried to reassure me that the boat was very 'comfortable' with one reef in the main and a small genoa set - however one small broach did send a few things flying down below. I wasn't very reassured! At least the dolphins were also having fun - they put on a great display

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with some four or five swimming abreast and catapulting together out of the face of the waves.

Now dark, and after the trying passage, we finally and thankfully arrived in Foz only to be met by Portuguese officialdom; they made us temporarily moor alongside a rough harbour wall and fill in forms, etc., before allowing us to go to our marina berth. The wind was still blowing strongly and there was very little manoeuvring room - the berths were close together. I was at the bow ready to throw a rope to some willing helpers but as I cast the line, I fell back and disappeared down the anchor locker! Luckily a helping hand guided us in, hopped on board and helped haul me out - it was a painful fall resulting in a huge black bruise on one thigh and what felt like a couple of broken ribs. Not fun after a hard sail - and pretty painful for the next six weeks or so.

Foz is a modern town and has a very pretty harbour with long sandy beaches. Close to the marina was a lovely market - Paella was on our menu the next evening, made in the wok. Keith was finding the wok very useful for cooking - from stir-fries to traditional Spanish/Portuguese dishes. Keith did most of the cooking on board *Poco Andante*...

After a few days at Foz we moved to Nazaré - world renowned for its big surf. It has a lovely working fishing harbour with a small marina in the corner. As well as its surf, the town is famous for its sardines and as the fish auction/quay was next to the marina, it was interesting and fun to visit these in the evenings for a stroll. Captain Mike, the English harbour master, was trying to start a tradition of visiting yachts painting their names/logos on the harbour wall - a little bit like Horta in the Azores. It started in the year 2000; with Bartek and Yvonne (*Tadorna*) and Paul and Marianne (*Zilver*) we continued this new tradition and spent a fun afternoon with cans of paint and artistic licence.

By now I was gaining in confidence in both my sailing skills and *Poco Andante*; it was time to try flying the gennaker. This is a large, light-weight sail designed for sailing downwind in light airs - hopefully these conditions would become more prevalent as we headed southward. My abiding memory of the gennaker was from our first ever weekend out on *Poco* with some sailing friends - they took hours to work out how to do it. Keith now explained to me that the first attempt had involved sorting out which ropes to use and

how to raise and lower the pole –and, he promised, it would be much more straight-forward this time. The wind was light and from behind with relatively calm seas - perfect conditions. With the electronic autopilot on, we gamely dug out the sail and the sheets - and worked out what to do; I would be at the mast, raising the pole, and Keith on the halyard raising the gennaker, still in its ‘snuffer’. Once the pole was at the right height, I was to go back to the cockpit to control the sheets and let Keith know when I was ready. “Let it fly!” I shouted. He raised the snuffer and at last our white/pale blue/dark blue gennaker was flying – I was very proud of myself! Luckily the conditions stayed benign and we made good speed.

Next, we tried to get ‘Henry the Hydrovane’ working with the gennaker in the light airs – but no matter what adjustments we made, it just didn’t seem to cope with dead downwind sailing. At least ‘Andy’ the electric autopilot was keeping a good course – it was a great boost to my confidence.

8 - Fire!

We arrived at Cascais, just outside Lisbon, and anchored just outside the marina. Space was very tight and when Keith finally got the anchor down, a boat in front of us complained that we were too close! Since anchoring is a case of 'first in, best dressed' and we couldn't see any other space available, Keith agreed that we would go into the marina. During the night I woke and realised our cabin was full of black smoke and raised the alarm "FIRE"! A yacht's worst nightmare! We quickly got dressed and instinctively, Keith disconnected the batteries. We had no idea what the source of the problem was; as a precaution, we hastily removed all the diesel and petrol cans from the aft locker onto the marina pontoon. There was no sign of flames, but we still had no idea of the cause.

The smoke cleared and it appeared to have stopped; after a few hours of keeping watch with extinguisher in hand, we went back to bed. In the morning, Keith investigated further - his initial thought was that the automatic bilge pump was the problem, but that turned out to be OK.

My keen sense of smell traced the worst of the burning to beneath our bed in the aft cabin - there was also some evidence of scorching to the cabin sole. When we continued to trace the source, it was apparent that a cable leading from one of the wind generators had burnt out; there was no fuse or circuit breaker on that line! Keith dismantled the Aerogen and discovered that the slip rings had failed - these prevent the cables from twisting around each other as the wind changes direction. Eventually the wires twisted so much that it caused the short circuit and subsequent fire. He called the Aerogen agents in the UK and they were very helpful and explained how to change the slip rings and immediately couriered a new set to us care of the Post Office in Lagos where we would arrive in about a week or so. In the meantime, Keith re-wired that circuit and installed breakers. A salutary lesson in how quickly these incidents evolve.

Cascais is about 10 miles from the centre of Lisbon and has great facilities. We spent six days here with many of our new-found cruising friends - their fun-loving spirit was so infectious. One day we all hired a minibus to go exploring and stock up on supplies. A visit to Sintra was a must with its incredibly well-preserved Moorish castle. At lunch time, the search for a restaurant was interesting - after leaving Sintra we took it in turns to select left, right, etc. at each intersection. When we had done two turns each we went to the nearest restaurant! We arrived on the doorstep of a small family eatery and, much to the surprise of the proprietor, who looked exactly like Manuel from 'Fawlty Towers', he had ten hungry mouths to feed. We made his day - he'd never had people from so many different countries before - six nationalities from 10 people! We had a great traditional Portuguese meal of soup, salt cod, veal, and flan.

Lisbon is set on a wide glittering river with steep cobbled streets, palaces, churches - and a castle. The buildings are decorated with painted ceramic tiles in a variety of colours, notably indigo. A leisurely stroll around Lisbon was followed by sitting at a bar enjoying freshly grilled sardines. The views from the hilltop of red roofs created a rambling vista. I was particularly impressed by their Wall of Remembrance; a lovely modern arch with a perpetual flame set in an azure pool, as well as the nearby monument to Henry the Navigator, honouring his part in Portugal's maritime discoveries.

We finally left Lisbon and sailed 60 miles to Sines for an overnight anchorage before heading south again to round the SW corner of the Iberian Peninsula to the Algarve. Between Sines and the Algarve there are few harbours - just a rocky coastline for 60 miles. We finally had some settled weather - 14 knots of wind from astern - and sailed under poled-out genoa and main all the way at an average speed of 6.5 knots - weather warm and sunny.

Our decision to sail quickly from Lisbon to the Algarve was a good move - some of our cruising companions ended up stuck on the Atlantic coast for two weeks due to bad weather.

9 - Winter storms approaching

Just off Cape St. Vincent the wind increased to Force 7 (25-30 knots) - the pole came down and we put a couple of reefs in the main. As always, the wind wasn't really the issue - it was the seas which were now starting to build to around 3-4 m. Thankfully we were only three hours away from our destination, which was a small fishing harbour sheltered by the towering cliffs of the SW corner of the Iberian Peninsula. As soon as we rounded the Cape the seas abated and we had a pleasant end to the day and anchored within the harbour of Baleeira.

The following day dawned bright and sunny with a gentle breeze on flat seas. The easy sail to Lagos, about 20 miles further along the coast, was a welcome relief. Off Lagos we spotted a replica Caravel, a 15th century Portuguese trading vessel. After we dropped sail and began to motor up the river to Lagos Marina, the Caravel entered behind us. The riverbanks were lined with people waving and school children were singing as we entered - what a welcome! It may have been the boat behind they were interested in - but taking some of the glory was fun! On arrival we discovered that there was a festival that weekend, centred on the 'Age of Discovery' and the caravel was playing a major part.

The people of Lagos had put a tremendous effort into their first Festival of Discoveries and all the school kids and many of the locals dressed up in period costumes, and the town squares were decked out as a 15th century town. Lots of medieval music and plays, belly dancers, the odd 'public execution', and stalls selling medieval food, etc. This went on for three days and culminated in a large firework display just where we were berthed.

Lagos marina was expensive so as soon as the Post Office was open after the weekend we collected our post. This included the spare part for the Aerogen wind generator. Aerogen were excellent - Keith had ordered the part on the previous Tuesday, and they had dispatched it that day and it had arrived by the following Tuesday. We then departed for Portimão six miles away.

Following a short sail, we arrived and anchored off the town. There is a large marina at Portimão; it also has a safe anchorage, with good holding in the river, however it was congested with moored boats. The weather forecast was not good and included a NW gale coming through. We decided to stay at anchor and laid a second anchor - aligning ourselves to the NW and pointing up stream. The moored boats were a hazard especially as the anchored boats had large swinging circles. The gale came during the night, but from the West - so *Poco* was now broadside on to the wind and seas. Keith stayed up on anchor watch and checked the barometer hourly. The gusts, at around 37 knots, were thankfully from the NW. The anchors held and after an uncomfortable night the wind abated and at 9am we decided to go into the marina. This was a very good learning exercise and gave us trust in our anchoring system, although at the height of the storm, the thought of lifting the anchors and moving was a daunting prospect - Keith's 'watch and wait' approach turned out to be the best solution in this case!

The next morning, we sailed for Cadiz, Spain - about 120nm away. Our night-time approach to Cadiz was very confusing, made even more so as fog descended. We used the radar in earnest for the first time and slowly crept up the entrance. We arrived at 4.30 in the morning and tied up at the Puerto de Santa Maria Yacht Club, to the north of Cadiz. A bus trip to Cadiz one day for some sight-seeing was on the agenda plus arranging to hire a car for a day - this allowed us to visit Seville and to stock up on cheap wine and beer and other Spanish products before we got to Gibraltar.

Seville is a very pretty city, and autumn was a good time to visit, with avenues of orange trees lining the streets laden with fruit. The Cathedral is huge with an interesting Moorish Tower to climb - it is also the final resting place of Christopher Columbus. Our time in Seville was too short and I would love to visit it again sometime.

After our major shop - six trolley loads from car to boat - we set sail for Cape Trafalgar, about 30 miles away. This time we were cursed with head winds and a long tack took us 10 miles out in 20-25 knot winds. The seas were lumpy and uncomfortable; tacking back in closer to the shore the seas were less of a problem. There were many shoals to navigate through, so we motored the last 20 miles around the Cape; this was probably a good move as we hit a 3-knot foul tide on rounding the Cape. These were the first real tides we had

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encountered since leaving France. A slow plod took us to Barbate. The wind was blowing SE at 16-17 knots with a large swell; it was dark, and we could hear the breaking waves on the beach. Like many of the Atlantic coast harbours, Barbate has a long mole protecting the entrance - but we don't think the designers had quite got this one right. I was on the helm and lined up the entrance between the red and green buoys; Keith went forward to prepare the lines etc. At the last minute I saw waves breaking off the end of the mole and shouted for him to get back to the cockpit. He didn't quite make it, and a huge 'greenie' swept across the side of the boat knocking Keith off his feet and into the scuppers. Rather scary!

10 – Do we turn left or right?

Monday 10th November brought a pleasant 10 knots from the West, and we sailed with a fair tide towards Gibraltar. As usual Keith took the opportunity to trail a fishing line. Finally, “Hurrah” he caught a fish - the first since leaving England. It was a fine Spanish mackerel weighing about 1.5kg. Throwing the line over again yielded another two about the same size. Fresh fish for tea at last – and some for the freezer.

Gibraltar was a major landmark in our voyage - our electronic charts only got us this far, so we had sailed to the end of our known world! We booked into Queensway Marina but had to clear Customs and Immigration first. This wasn't a problem – Keith even declared our 100L of wine and 160 cans of beer - which raised some eyebrows. In theory, Customs can require any alcohol beyond the legal allowance to be stored in a locker which they can put a seal on then check that the seal is still intact when you clear out of the country. This time, though, we got away with it, but the creation of a ‘bonded locker’ was added to our ‘to do’ list.

Queensway Marina was very handy - close to the town, good facilities and was a meeting point for other cruisers. We were moored close to Chris and Fiona from *Three Ships*, an adventurous couple from North Wales involved with an outdoor activities centre there. They had crossed the Atlantic several times and had spent a couple of seasons in the Caribbean and were members of the Ocean Cruising Club.

The OCC say in their prospectus:

“To be a part of the OCC is to be a part of a group of people who have said 'yes' to adventure and who will welcome you if you choose to do the same.

The people in the Ocean Cruising Club represent the distilled essence of the cruising community, a potent combination of accomplishment, experience, idealism, eccentricity, generosity and humility.

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The sole qualification for Full membership, entails stepping aboard a boat and making a continuous ocean passage of at least 1000 nautical miles, measured by the shortest practical Great Circle route between two ports, in a vessel not more than 70 feet overall length. Associate Members join aspiring to do the same and being inspired by those who already have."

This philosophy seemed to exemplify the attitude that we were slowly adopting. Chris and Fiona actively encouraged us to cross the Atlantic - in response Keith and I convened a 'boat meeting' and talked about our options. Over the course of the previous few months, we had gained confidence both in our sailing ability and in *Poco Andante*. And we had settled into the lifestyle and were keen to continue our adventure. Other experienced cruisers we spoke with said that once into the Mediterranean, people spend years exploring the area. Often there was no wind at all - or too much. If we had the courage to 'turn right, instead of left', we felt we could always explore the Med at a later time. We were still relatively young - and still had money in the bank; perhaps we should broaden our horizons? Chris and Fiona were full of encouragement.

Keith was concerned that it might be too late in the season to cross the Atlantic - after all, the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) leaves from the Canary Islands in late November to arrive in the Caribbean for Christmas - and it was already mid-November. When we discussed the possibility of crossing the Atlantic with some of the professional yacht skippers, they recommended leaving in January or February, when the season is more settled. This meant we could get to the Canary Islands in time for Christmas - perhaps Keith's children would visit... Reading that Moroccan Cruising Guide had also whetted my appetite for more exotic destinations.

The decision was made - we were off to the Caribbean! I now knew which electronic charts we needed for the next two legs of our travels - NW Africa and the Caribbean.

11 – Tsunami in Gibraltar!

Even in such quiet and pleasant surroundings strange things can happen. At 3.30 one morning we were awoken with an almighty bang and the boat lurched violently. We quickly got dressed and leapt on deck. It was a warm still, clear night with stars all around; all seemed peaceful until the sound of breaking waves broke the tranquillity - a second large wave appeared from seaward and crashed into the harbour wall. Keith hastily checked our mooring lines; two had parted - the bang we heard was one of our mooring springs giving way. He re-secured our lines, and we pulled ourselves further away from the pontoon - we were moored stern-to the pontoon by two large mooring ropes. The sudden surge woke others and they, too, re-secured their lines. The night was a long one with surges getting stronger and the constant lurching chafing the lines dramatically.

When daylight broke more secure solutions were sought, everyone checked and adjusted lines; Keith finally settled on four stern lines - two crossed - two spring shorelines from the centre of the boat to the shore - and two main bow mooring lines. This arrangement kept *Poco Andante* at least one metre from the pontoon. Luckily there was a free space next to *Poco*, so we also used that spare mooring line to our bow. Even so, the forces on all the ropes were huge as each swell came in.

By mid-morning it reached its peak; 3 metre waves were crashing into the marina and breaking over the sea wall, flooding the restaurants, shops and apartments. Boats were continually breaking free, some large motor yachts suffered considerable damage as their ropes chaffed through or just through sheer pressure. Collisions with the water and power towers on the pontoons were frequent, with sparks and fountains erupting - until the marina finally shutdown the power.

By mid-afternoon it was a bit quieter, and the report came through that there had been an underwater earthquake 400 miles west - and a mini tsunami had travelled at 90 mph and hit Gibraltar.

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The port was closed for most of the day, but surprisingly the BBC News did not acknowledge these fun and games. This occurred soon after the invasion of Iraq – I wondered if the apparent censorship was due to the sensitivity of the British Armed Forces...

12 – A long slog to Casablanca

After 10 days or so in Gibraltar our charts and pilot books arrived; we departed Queensway Marina to refuel and anchored for the night off the end of the airport runway, ready for an early start to Tangiers. The weather was good with very little wind; we motored the 30 odd miles across the busy strait - and caught two fish on the way.

Although the entry into Tangiers was straight forward, finding somewhere to tie up was not! We soon discovered the meaning of the phrase in the cruising guide '*Morocco has little or no facilities for yachts*'. After motoring around a bit (and being waved off one likely spot by some military gentlemen) we saw a few sailing boats tucked in the corner and a local guy waving us forward. What was presented to us were six boats squashed together tied fore and aft to a rocky breakwater and a couple of buoys. The guy used his legs and arms to force a space about 1m wide between two boats and indicated for us to motor forward and squeeze ourselves in – *Poco Andante* is 4m wide! After much heaving and pushing we had found somewhere to stop. This was the local yacht club...

The harbour had a 1mm film of diesel on it - plus what appeared to be all the rubbish of Tangiers. Ahead of us was the container marshalling yard where Customs inspect for drugs, stowaways, etc., and lots of barking dogs. Behind was the fishing fleet of Tangiers. The officials were efficient and entry was easy. We decided to stay for a day and move on, however that night the weather closed in, and it blew and rained for four days and nights – we were trapped again!

Our first visit to the town was held in trepidation – I had read so much about rogues, pickpockets, conmen, etc. – I was very nervous. Initially, everyone seemed friendly, apart from one persistent fellow; we tried to avoid him, but he became very abusive and, in our manoeuvrings, we became lost in the very narrow winding souks. Thankfully another seemingly-friendly guy guided us back to the main 'street' - he then demanded huge amounts of money for the privilege. Keith gave him a small amount; although grumbling, he

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did leave us alone. These couple of incidents spoiled our enjoyment of the city and we headed back to the comfort and security of the boat.

Undaunted we tried again next day, this time making ourselves look disreputable – Keith unshaven, unkempt clothes and carrying an old shopping bag - I had figured out that wearing a backpack was a dead give-away that we were Westerners. I used a scarf to cover my blonde hair – this seemed to work, and we were able to visit the colourful Kasbahs and souks without trouble. Keith even got his sailing shoes re-soled for a modest sum.

The Berber ladies in their colourful costumes adorned with silver filigree ornaments on their head-dress, sweeping skirts and embroidered shawls of abstract patterns, would come to the market to sell their chickens. One such lady held live chickens by their necks between the fingers of each hand; their bodies were tucked under her ample arms. When a prospective customer had carefully selected which one he or she wanted, money would change hands and out would pop the victim – its neck wrung there and then! I was pleased we had filled the freezer with meat before leaving Gibraltar...

Eggs were another matter, though. In a stall about 1m wide, a gentleman had several small mountains of eggs. When I produced our egg tray, he looked at me momentarily, turned on a light bulb at his elbow, and began selecting eggs from one particular pile. He held each egg up to the light before placing it in our tray – I realised he was checking to make sure they weren't fertilised, appreciating that, as Westerners, we probably didn't want the embryonic eggs.

Shopping in the colourful souk of Tangiers was a far cry from Tesco's in Gibraltar – the bread was freshly baked and beautifully soft; the bushels of dates and olives were inviting – and the delicious macaroons were a surprise and became our favourite treat.

Eventually fine weather returned, and we set off for Casablanca. The pilot book had said there was a new marina being built in 1998 and that until then Casablanca was closed to yachts. I'd asked the Port Captain at Tangiers, and he said the port and marina was open, so off we set. Unfortunately, the wind wasn't as forecast and we had a long 36 hours tacking into a 20-25 knot wind with a 3-4m swell, breaking over the bow. Keith got completely soaked while putting extra lashings on the anchors which were bouncing about. Casablanca didn't seem to be any nearer after countless tacks. Eventually the wind moderated, allowing us to motor sail the rest of

the way; this gave us some respite. As we sailed toward Casablanca, I was amazed to see a huge mosque on the shoreline – it had been built in 1993 by the previous king and was a massive 210m tall. Inside it could seat 25,000 worshippers – and a further 80,000 could be accommodated outside. From a distance it was certainly impressive.

We finally arrived at Casablanca at around 6.30am after a long hard couple of days. At the entrance to this large commercial harbour there was a 4m cross swell which we negotiated and set off to look for the yacht haven – creeping past the container port, the naval port, the fishing fleet and near the end saw some masts. The VHF burst into life warning us off - the harbour control forcefully exclaimed that there was no space for yachts, and we must go back 11 miles to Mohammedia! This was not an inviting prospect! After explaining that conditions outside were not good and we were tired, they agreed we could anchor in one of the disused container berths overnight - at last we got some rest and sleep! We weren't allowed ashore as we hadn't cleared Customs or Immigration at this port - Morocco requires you to check in with the authorities at every port.

Mid-way through the morning a man in his small boat came alongside offering his services. We were very short on cooking gas so reluctantly asked if he could get a gas bottle filled for us – Keith was certain that he would never see our gas bottle again! However, later that day he duly returned with the full gas bottle and, although we paid over the odds, the service was worth it – our faith in humanity was renewed.

Early next morning we set off for El Jadida - a fortified city built by the Portuguese at the beginning of the 16th century. It has a small fishing boat harbour with a good reputation for welcoming and secure berths. The area around El Jadida, on the NW corner of Africa, was notorious for its wrecks and reefs - we approached with caution. One particular wreck of a freighter stuck out as a dire warning. Apparently, the master of the vessel, unable to face the dishonour of running aground, shot himself rather than face an enquiry. Our entry was uneventful and soon we found ourselves rafted up alongside another yacht and the lifeboat.

The port officials – Port Captain, Customs, Immigration, and Harbour Master - all paid us a visit; the Port Captain was a large man wearing a voluminous white djellaba and heavy black boots. He stepped aboard, planted himself in the cockpit and started to issue

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orders to his minions; they clambered on board and started to poke around inside our saloon. The Port Captain then demanded whisky and cigarettes. We had bought a carton of cigarettes and some bottles of cheap whisky purely for this purpose, but when it came down to succumbing to bribery demands, I just couldn't relent! His brusque and unfriendly manner got my back up and I stubbornly refused to give him anything. He became very loud and insistent - in the end we pleaded poverty and gave him a bottle of cheap Spanish wine. This did seem to placate him, and he stamped our papers and we were now permitted to go ashore... This was our first encounter with corrupt officials and my attitude to this behaviour never improved, but in the future we rewarded kindness and efficiency with gifts occasionally.

The area for yachts is attached to a restaurant and sailing school. It was looked after by Ahmed a lovely old Berber, who had been there for 40 years. He has become so well known in the cruising community that he gets a mention in the Pilot book for the region. Facilities were very basic but we felt secure there so, with Ahmed's help, we planned to leave the boat for a week and travel inland. Ahmed would actually sleep in our cockpit each night to guard the boat while we were away - for a small fee, of course!

Unfortunately, the wet weather in Tangiers and the soaking off Casablanca led to Keith getting a bad case of bronchitis. I prescribed our first medicine from the on-board supplies - the course of antibiotics cleared it - but left a very debilitating cough. We delayed our trip until Keith felt he was fit enough to travel. In the meantime, we explored El Jadida, which has a wonderful Portuguese walled city, completely intact after 400 years. Everyone was friendly and it was easy to walk around the town and shop in the colourful souk.

13 – Taking the Marrakech Express

Eventually Keith was feeling better, so we took the early morning train to Marrakech - along with Kathmandu, Marrakech was one of THE hip destinations of the sixties... The 3½ hour train trip, via Casablanca, through the rugged terrain was very cheap and comfortable. We arrived mid-afternoon. Now streetwise, we avoided all the touts - it was interesting to note they only assailed the 'foreigners' with offers of help. When I suggested to one of the taxi drivers that a heavily pregnant Moroccan woman carrying heavy bags was more worthy of his help, I was given a very dirty look.

We picked up a taxi outside the station and headed to our hotel close to the central square. The hotel was traditional Moroccan style with courtyards and 'sitting' rooms adorned with colourful tiles. It rained for the first couple of days, but it was good just to lie in a real bed with a more-or-less unlimited supply of hot water and central heating.

While at breakfast one morning I overheard another couple arranging a trip into the desert. This sounded very interesting - I accosted the travel agent who arranged for us to do the same. It included hire of a car with local French speaking driver for two days, crossing the Atlas Mountains to the northern edge of the Sahara where we would stay in a luxury hotel.

The northern foothills of the Atlas Mountains are spectacular - they really reminded me of Western Australia - red soil, barren landscape and low scrub. And then the mountains - it was late autumn and the mountains were snow-capped. The southern slopes were more reminiscent of the Grand Canyon - great valleys obviously carved out by the wind with rivers running at the bottom - and well-camouflaged villages carved into the slopes. The area was surprisingly fertile, with many oases growing date palms as well as the usual fruit and vegetable plots. Life seemed good with no real signs of poverty, although they mainly used donkeys rather than tractors. The fruit and vegetables in Morocco were really tasty - and organic!

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Our route took us through the World Heritage site of Aït Benhaddou, in Ouarzazate. This is a fortified village on the old caravan route between the Sahara and Marrakesh and is a great example of Moroccan earthen clay architecture and has featured in many films.

At about 5pm, after a 400km journey south from Marrakech, we arrived at Zagora - a small town on the edge of the Sahara. Keith was kitted out in the indigo turban of the Berber men, and we were introduced to our next mode of transport - camels! It turned out that our trip included an overnight stay in a Bedouin tent in the desert - not the luxury hotel I had expected - and we had to travel for two hours by camel to get there... I was a bit nervous - but figured that, if all else failed, I would walk on my own two feet.

The lurching gait of the camel was rather disconcerting and uncomfortable, but the clear light from the setting sun on the starkness of the desert was a sight worth the trip. The trail passed through many small villages comprised of square rammed earth houses, most with livestock, and adorned with incongruous satellite dishes!

We both survived the journey and were duly installed in our own Bedouin tent - woollen blankets for walls and rugs on the sand for a floor. Low mattresses were laid out for both sitting and sleeping. The camp was served by four Berber men - one watched the camels, and the others cooked a delicious chicken and vegetable tagine for dinner - and they later provided the musical entertainment. The other 'guests' were a group of about eight American students on a long weekend break from Granada where they were studying Spanish language and culture. There was one other American girl who was studying 'Resolution of conflicts in the Middle East' (very optimistic!). She was living in Morocco for six months to study Arabic before going back to Washington. We thought she was an obvious candidate for the CIA if ever we'd seen one...

The men served hot mint tea which they call 'Berber whisky' - and sang Berber songs. They accompanied themselves by playing on bongo-style drums. It was very impressive. And so, to bed - we froze! Despite being fully clothed and with about 4-5 blankets on the bed, it was cold! We only managed to get a couple of hours sleep. I came to the reluctant conclusion that I was getting too old for this

type of lark! But the trip was a fantastic experience, and I was delighted to have seen some of Morocco.

When we eventually got back to El Jadida, it was with considerable relief that we found *Poco Andante* still there and safely intact. We collapsed into bed, exhausted after our holiday - only to be roused about one hour later by the lifeboat. They had been called out to help a local fishing vessel and we were rafted outside them. We hastily got dressed and were about to motor forward to another berth when the captain of the lifeboat asked if he could borrow our torch as they didn't have one on board... Reluctantly we handed over our expensive Maglite - thankfully, they did return it the next morning. The fishing vessel was safely recovered, and no one was injured - engine problems, apparently.

When we moved *Poco* back to our previous berth, we tied up to another yacht which had been rafted 'inside' of the lifeboat. On board were two men aged about 30 who didn't appear to know much about yachts and spent a lot of time drinking and smoking (something?). They spoke of having done several trips to the Canary Islands. They departed one afternoon when, in our opinion, the weather forecast was not very favourable. A short time later we saw the lifeboat leave harbour as well. We didn't think much about it until we saw the lifeboat return together with the yacht in tow - now with a very mangled pulpit. The yacht tied up alongside *Poco Andante* and the guys explained that they had run aground on the reef outside the harbour. They complained vigorously about the damage the lifeboat had done to their pulpit as it rescued them from the reef! We kept our thoughts to ourselves, but we certainly had our suspicions as to the cargo they might be taking over from Morocco to Spain... They left again the next day - taking one of our fenders with them! I was glad to see them go but annoyed at losing the fender.

In general, our visit to Morocco was very enlightening. The Moroccans appear to have no notion of 'projects' for the common good so the roads, footpaths and public buildings were in disrepair and facilities for visitors were very limited - amenities for yachts included, although there were a number of planned developments. I came to the conclusion that their main problem was that they put great store in personal wealth and are largely a cash society. Standing in the queue at the bank was very enlightening - you could see huge amounts of cash moving back and forth. And one businessman

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calmly popped a stack of notes about 15cm thick into the hood of his djellaba and walked out of the bank.

After a couple of days to do laundry and provision, *Poco Andante* was ready for the 360-mile trip to the Canary Islands.

14 – Christmas in the Canary Islands

When we decided to depart, the weather was forecast NE winds 10-16 knots – this was perfect for our next trip; Keith duly cast off and I carefully steered our way out of harbour, past the dangerous reefs and waved farewell to El Jadida. We had a lovely sail under main and poled-out gennaker all that day and night. The next morning the wind dropped to 5 knots – we wallowed around not getting anywhere fast. It was fabulous when a pod of about 20-30 dolphins joined us – these intelligent creatures always lifted our spirits. They were really playful – nudging our Hydrovane rudder and jumping around the bows. Later in the day, Keith saw a turtle swimming north – it was about 1 metre across and just pootling along.

After three days it was 'Land Ahoy' and we arrived at a little island NW of Lanzarote called Isla de Graciosa. A new marina was being built which at that time had limited facilities. The harbour master was very apologetic about the lack of facilities – and provided free berthing. This was great as it gave us the chance to clean off the grime from Morocco. News gets around quickly in the cruising community and free berths brought a number of long-term cruisers to this barren island – this must have benefited the small town of La Sociedad. Keith took the opportunity of the clear blue water to dive and check the hull – we had been concerned that our questionable neighbours in El Jadida might have attached some illegal cargo to *Poco Andante*.

The week before Christmas we sailed across to Las Palmas, still in the vain hope that Keith's children might take advantage of low-cost flights from the UK and come to visit. Keith was feeling really homesick – it became apparent that his three children weren't going to join us. I phoned my sister in New Zealand and was upset to be told that Carol had been diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's Disease. Keith and I both ended up feeling very down – this didn't usually happen to both of us at the same time.

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We hadn't seen any signs of the cruising community making overtures for Christmas - we were thinking it would end up being a quiet, boring and unhappy Christmas and New Year. On Christmas Eve we saw a Norwegian yacht called *Breeze* in the marina which we thought was the same boat we'd met in La Coruña several months ago. No one was on board, so we left a note inviting them to join us for Christmas dinner - and, lo and behold, when they responded on the VHF as requested, it turned out to be a different couple with a similar yacht - still Norwegian and still called *Breeze*. They introduced themselves over VHF and accepted our invitation. In the end our first Christmas away proved to be enjoyable with a complete Christmas dinner, UK-style. In the evening, at Christmas pudding time, courtesy of a UK friend who had given it to us as a farewell gift, our boat neighbours, a lovely French couple, joined us to sample the delights of this Christmas fare - and brought with them a bottle of French champagne!

It's great how a group of strangers can come together and become instant friends - in the 'real' world this takes time. One downside of the cruising lifestyle is that you are away from your own family and friends, however the cruising friends that you make along the way are all in the same boat - they've all been through similar experiences to arrive at that point and, in a way, become your new 'quasi' family. In years to come, impromptu Christmas feasts became the norm.

Christmas turned out to be just the start of the party season. The following week was a blur of boat preparation - and impromptu visitors and drinks aboard. By New Year's Eve, also Keith's birthday, we were in full swing. Celebrations started at 3pm with champagne - a birthday gift from the Norwegian couple - and continued via telephone calls to family and friends, to a buffet dinner at a Chinese restaurant and a pub crawl around Las Palmas, fireworks at midnight and finished with a yacht crawl until 4.30 in the morning. Not much was done on New Year's Day! The cruising community really do know how to party...

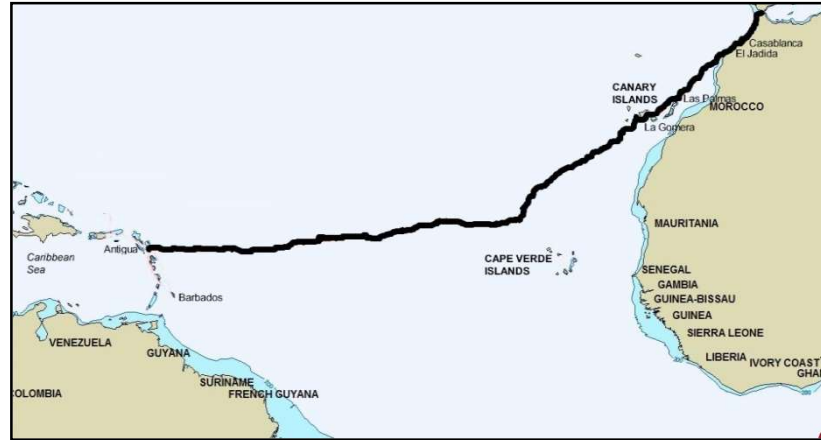
After this, preparations were well under way for our trip across the Atlantic. We were shopping daily until January 5th - when Las Palmas closed down to celebrate the arrival of The Three Kings. This culminated in a grand parade through the streets with floats, bands, etc., all throwing sweets into the crowds and the grand finale being

the Three Kings in full Oriental costume arriving on camels. For us this was the start of 2004's adventure.

With *Poco* fully provisioned our plan was to sail to La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands; this was Columbus' departure point. After a last-minute check Keith discovered the deck light wasn't working – three hours later and four trips up the mast, it was finally repaired. By now we were both so exhausted, that departure was postponed another day...

We had prepared for an estimated 24-day crossing; *Poco Andante* had been cleaned from top-to-bottom, including polishing the hull above the waterline. Keith dived and checked the anodes, rudder, propeller, etc. All the winches were stripped and serviced, the engine had an oil change and service, and we checked all the ropes and every moving part on the boat. We bought supplies to last approximately four months - we heard that the Caribbean was very expensive and hoped our supplies were sufficient. Provisions included 12 dozen cans of beer, 80 litres wine, lots of bottled water, 80 litres of milk, an entire Serrano ham, 120 main meals (in either dried or canned form), a freezer full of meat, 4 dozen eggs, 10 kilos potatoes, assorted other vegetables and fruit including green bananas, and lots of biscuits and snacks. Just to mention the main items...

15 - Third time lucky?



Finally on 8th January, five months after leaving the UK, we left Las Palmas to cross the Atlantic – 2,300 nautical miles! This would be the longest passage by far that either of us had ever undertaken – a daunting prospect.

We had been warned about ‘wind acceleration zones’ around the northern tip of Las Palmas; the wind whips around the steep volcanic mountains. But we were still unprepared for the wind to go from 10 knots to 30 knots within less than a minute! Before we could do anything, there was a terrible popping noise – a quick inspection showed that the mast slides on our mainsail had popped out of the track. We hastily put two reefs in the mainsail and sorted the boat out. Once past the tip of the island, the wind abated and sea conditions became benign. Keith decided to continue a further 100nm to La Gomera for repairs - so much for our first attempt to cross the Atlantic!

La Gomera is picturesque and sunny – whereas Las Palmas had always seemed to have a cloud over it. The island is steeped in sea-faring history; Christopher Columbus stopped here to provision for his three expeditions to the New World. La Gomera has a plentiful

water supply and one of the wells used by Columbus is still in use today.

Our forced stay in La Gomera, to replace the mast slides was very relaxing and enjoyable. Keith decided to change our good mainsail for the lighter-weight spare older one – preserving the newer one for emergencies!

Once again, the day of departure dawned with apprehension; the relaxed attitude of our first departure from Las Palmas three days earlier had disappeared.... We visited the local internet café and collected the latest 7-day forecast. The forecast was good, so at 11am 13th Jan we left, motoring past the transatlantic rowing boats, with their crews loading supplies. They would be leaving a week later to row the Atlantic - how must they be feeling? *Poco Andante* had a lovely send off by the other boats. The wind was a light headwind; we motored past the island in the hope of picking up the stronger breeze forecast. Things were going well, and we were now feeling relaxed.

About an hour later, while still in sight of land, for no apparent reason the genoa started sliding down the furling gear! Keith and I went forward to try to figure out what had happened – and could see nothing wrong. The ring in the top of the sail was still there – and when we used binoculars to check the halyard, still at the top of the mast, the shackle appeared to be intact. Luckily the seas were smooth as Keith now needed to go up the mast to retrieve the halyard. Going up the mast was tough work at any time, but at sea was not much fun. He was always pleased that *Poco Andante* had mast steps! Half an hour later, with the halyard back on deck, he re-attached the shackle to the head of the sail and hoisted the sail again. When we checked the manual for the furling gear, we figured out that there had been another stainless-steel linking ring which must have failed.

That was our second misadventure – was someone trying to tell us something? To cheer us up we had a visit from a pod of dolphins and a few pilot whales which lifted our spirits. The sail problem was soon behind us as *Poco* close-reached south to pass the last landfall, a small island called Hierro. We passed this in the early hours and then there was nothing but open ocean for the next 2300 miles.

We sailed southwest for seven days, mostly broad reaching in light and variable winds, often raising the cruising chute by day and reefing the main and genoa at night. Although the wind was around

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10 knots during the day it blew up to 18+ knots at night. Basically, our route followed the old sailors' adage – go south until the butter melts, then turn west.

I found that we quickly settled into a routine. We had decided to keep a diurnal sleep pattern, and this meant two six-hour watches at night; Keith taking the 8pm to 2am shift and me taking the 2am to 8am watch. This worked really well for us – mainly as we weren't hand-steering, and the weather was settled. We could doze in the cockpit during our watch – we set an egg timer for 15-20 minutes to enable us to have a look around. Our last sighting of a ship was two days out and we didn't see any other vessel for nineteen days! I got excited one evening as a 'bright square object' flew over high in the sky; I figured this was the International Space Station crossing the heavens from one horizon to the other in about 3-4 minutes.

There have been numerous incidents of the off-watch person coming on-watch only to discover that the night-watch person was not onboard. Apparently, it is most common for male bodies to be found drowned with their flies down. Keith and I made a promise to each other that, while on night-watch, we'd wear a lifejacket and harness – and never leave the cockpit without waking the other person. This promise meant that the off-watch person could sleep without having to worry. Our strong point in the cockpit allowed free movement around the cockpit as well as down to the navigation station and galley (to make a hot drink). It was a promise we both kept conscientiously.

At the morning change-of-watch we would 'wake up' the boat; alter the sail plan, if necessary, shake out reefs and fix anything broken – and then have 'breakfast' together. Chafe was a constant problem and swapping sheets end-over-end and putting new tape on chafe points became a daily chore. I would then have a morning 'siesta' – sometimes sleeping, sometimes just resting on the bed – while Keith took watch. We'd have lunch together before Keith retired for an afternoon siesta.

Late afternoon we'd have a game of cards together in the cockpit with a glass of wine (or beer in Keith's case) before Keith cooked the evening meal and we tidied up afterwards. Our watches then started again after our main meal in the evening... the highlight of the day!

We found that the inactivity reduced our appetite and one meal a day supplemented by snacks was sufficient. Keith baked bread and

cakes - and we had fresh meat, fruit and vegetables most of the way across.

It was during this long passage that Keith was undertaking the practical component of his RYA Ocean Yacht Master qualification. He was required to navigate the traditional way - using an accurate watch and a sextant - for a passage of at least 600nm. This involved taking at least two sun sights a day to calculate latitude and longitude and plotting them on the paper chart. I took over doing the electronic navigation and logbook entries - a role I continued to perform for the rest of our years at sea.

In fact, it was during this time that our roles on board evolved. In general, Keith, being the more experienced sailor, set the sail plan. We both went to the mast to raise and lower the sails - and Keith did most of the boat maintenance, with me acting as 'plumber's mate'. My role included trimming the sails, the 'housework', computing, and communications (the higher pitch of female voices is more easily heard over the radio...). When anchoring, I took the helm while Keith did the heavy foredeck work.

The down-wind sailing created a rolling, corkscrew motion from the ocean swell, and moving around the boat required great care. We found trying to sleep on our cabin berth became impossible due to the constant lurching motion. Putting the saloon berth cushion on the floor in the centre of the boat was most comfortable. We made a nest with padding all around - and hot-bunked at watch changes.

When the seas were large, moving around the cabin involved lurching from one grab rail to another - and bracing yourself in the galley to cook a meal or boil the kettle. And going to the toilet involved sitting down - and hanging on to avoid being launched off at an inappropriate moment. Bruises were inevitable - although it seems that women sailors suffer more than men when it comes to bruising. We also suffered the occasional burn while trying to get something out of a hot oven on the gimbal. Keith also suffered a nasty cut to his eyebrow when the spinnaker pole fell on him! This bled like a stuck pig and required the application of a female sanitary napkin from the First Aid box - brought specifically for occasions like this. They are perfectly designed to absorb blood!

Our first flying fish on deck was after seven days out - *Poco Andante* was now in the tropics; an 18-knot wind had set in from the northeast - hopefully the trade winds. We reached our planned

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latitude of 19°N, gybed and followed the rhumb line west towards our destination, Antigua.

Antigua is a great landfall, but it is in the middle of the island chain. In hindsight, Barbados would have been a better landfall – it is further east and at the southern end of the Caribbean chain. From there it is easy to sail north and experience Windward Islands of the Caribbean.

The favourable wind stayed with us for six days, shifting from NE to E and sometimes SE. Trade wind sailing was not the 'set the sails and forget them' experience I had read about – although gybing more than once a day was unusual. The next five days brought very light winds - under 10 knots; this was frustrating as our average speed dropped considerably. Collecting flying fish from the deck each morning was a million miles away from the corporate world – I was living a truly unusual life.

I particularly enjoyed the night watches – seeing the moon rise and set – followed by the sun rise was magical. The constellations moved across the black night skies – no light pollution here! One phenomenon I was enjoying at night was the impressive phosphorescence. You could see stars in the crest of the wake - and the tracks of the fish glowing in the water - magical! When flushing the toilet at night you could see what look like stars swirling around the bowl and, if you pumped vigorously, you could get a glowing whirlpool going and fluorescent pipes! It's amazing what you find amusing when living the simple life... Sometimes I would see some large glowing shape appear from the depths – and wonder what strange creature it must be.

As you cross an ocean, there are no 'time zones' – local time is determined by sunrise and sunset. It was necessary to adjust the clocks on board periodically. We generally aimed to have the sun set at about 7pm.

One night, Keith was off-watch and sleeping on the cabin floor of the main saloon. He awoke shocked and startled when something hit him in the head – leaping up in horror, he discovered a flying fish flapping around his berth. It had flown all the way from the sea, up past the centre-cockpit, and down the hatch and through the cabin!

As we got closer to our destination my excitement was growing, however when we were three or four days from Antigua the seas started to build; rain squalls and stronger winds became

commonplace. I'd read about the ferocity of the squalls in this region; when I saw the first menacing black cloud building behind us, we dropped the main sail and waited to see what the squall would bring. The sea hissed like an angry serpent and the dark cloud descended - this drama merely resulted in a brief rain shower but no real increase in wind speed! The squalls kept coming - every 2-3 hours - but after the first few, we re-set the main and brazened out the remaining.

As *Poco Andante's* mainsail lines were not fed back to the cockpit, dropping the mainsail or putting in a reef involved putting on safety gear going forward to the mast. The temperature was now so warm that safety gear involved putting on knickers, cap, deck shoes, lifejacket and safety harness - and sunglasses! With the rolling seas, we'd swing our way to the mast clinging on to the lifelines and rigging, towing our safety harness lines clipped to the jackstays. These are webbing lines attached fore and aft each side of the deck which provide secure attachments to prevent you being swept overboard.

It was surprising how quickly the wind conditions would change. Although the winds got up to 25-30 knots at times, this was giving us fast sailing, but the boat was rolling more - I was starting to look forward to our arrival. We also started to see more dolphins and birds - a sign that land was not too far away.

On the 23rd day we spotted our landfall thirty miles away. Unfortunately, our timing wasn't too good - our arrival into English Harbour was going to be at night, but thankfully with a full moon. One option was to heave-to outside the harbour until daybreak - but conditions were becoming more blustery and I was anxious to arrive. After 23 days and 15 hours the last 100 yards was the most nerve wracking!

Entry into the anchorage was easy, but the bay was packed with boats. We spotted a space and dropped anchor, albeit a bit close to *Milliways*, a catamaran from the Hamble, Southampton; the owner stuck his head out to check what was happening. Keith explained we'd just arrived from the Canary Islands, apologised and agreed to move in the morning.

All-in-all, the crossing was easier than I'd expected - mainly wearisome at times. We'd experienced harder sails across the English Channel. We ate well, read lots of books and usually managed a game of cards with our sundowners. It is often said that ocean

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crossings are tedious, but the reality can be very different. Daytime was full of the activity of checking the boat systems and fixing, replacing or repairing failed items. Watching flying fish skipping over the waves for hundreds of metres was one entertainment. At night the ocean came alive - phosphorescence sparkled in the water. The heavens stretched from horizon to horizon, all the constellations and the Milky Way clearly visible. Some nights the moon was so bright I could read by its light - and moonbeams became a reality.

Statistics: Total journey 2548 miles; time taken 23 days 15 hours (average only 106 miles per day); engine hours 62.9 mainly for battery charging (average 2.5 hours per day); fuel used approximately 120 litres.

16 - Arriving in Antigua



After a sound sleep, we awoke to the serene tropical paradise at English Harbour on the Caribbean Island of Antigua. Having arrived in the night and anchoring rather close to the vessel in front, we had promised we'd move *Poco Andante* in the morning. It took four attempts to re-anchor - the bottom was hard and the holding not brilliant. *Poco* was finally anchored firmly - and we prepared to enjoy the delights of this idyllic location.

Keith and I spent the first two weeks recovering from the Atlantic crossing - and carrying out repairs at anchor. English Harbour is an 18th century naval dockyard, famous as Admiral Lord Nelson's first shore-based command. Very picturesque with a white palm-fringed beach and warm turquoise blue water. The weather was changeable with lots of sun interspersed with showers and a nice cooling breeze.

We slowly began joining in with the cruising community here - rum punches went down smoothly! There were mainly US and UK boats - all of whom were very companionable - sundowners in company became a way of life.

Poco's sails had taken a bit of a battering and the watermaker had packed up during the crossing, so these were priority items, plus a myriad of small items that needed attending to. Antigua had a very

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efficient system regarding repairs, etc.; everyone listened to and communicated on the VHF radio. You call on Channel 68 and change to another channel to discuss requirements, etc. Many of the businesses monitored the VHF as well as the phone. It's easy and free. Events, weather, parties, happenings, etc. were announced on VHF. You could also check who else was in harbour.

Refrigeration for cold beers and wine was becoming a constant problem for us. The engine-driven fridge compressor was chewing up drive belts since we'd replaced the engine, and we were relying on the 110-volt compressor which was extremely power-hungry. Most people spent their time at anchor, so conservation of power and water is a major concern.

Our watermaker had failed on the Atlantic crossing and the local expert diagnosed a cracked membrane – a replacement was ordered. *Poco Andante* carried 600L in the main tank plus another 100L in jerry cans - we didn't actually run out of water and had enough for regular showers. In a harbour or marina, you could usually purchase water if need be - or you can collect rainwater. Once the watermaker problem was solved we would be self-sufficient in water again.

When we first arrived, we had anchored next to a catamaran from Southampton called *Milliways*. Heather and David had her designed for world cruising. They had been there for two-three months after their Atlantic crossing and were repairing their fuel tanks and waiting for some bits to be flown out from the UK. One evening they introduced us to the joys of the Antigua and Barbuda Royal Navy Tot Club.

The Tot Club is a philanthropic club that carries out social activities and 'good works' in and around English Harbour; charitable giving for schools and local groups, clearing paths and maintaining monuments, etc. The members meet every night at 6pm and continue the Royal Navy tradition of toasting the Queen with a tot of rum. Most of the members are yachties and live 'off island' as it's called, with a sizeable following of expats and ex-Navy folk. Sundays are 'keep fit' days and involve a bit of work; for the two Sundays that we were there Keith helped paint a monument to the Devon and Dorset Regiment that was stationed there in the 18th century.

A new problem we encountered was marine growth on the bottom of the well-used dinghy. Keith was busy one day scrubbing

this on the beach when Mike from *Altair* turned up to complete the same task. His solution was to turn the offending dinghy over and cover it with a medium-strength bleach solution. Intrigued, with his suggestion, Keith followed suit. The next stage was to visit the nearest bar for a cold beer. They then returned to the beach and washed off the now-dead growth. Job done! Mike and Jill from *Altair* were completing a Caribbean 'circuit' before returning to the UK. We shared the same home port and have been thankful for their useful tip ever since.

Above our anchorage off Galleon Beach is a place called Shirley Heights. This was named after one of my ancestors - Shirley was my family name. Most Sunday nights they have steel bands, barbecues, etc. The views are tremendous overlooking the island especially as the sun goes down - I drank in the view and toasted my forebears, thanking them for discovering such a glorious spot.

During our two week stay, we met lots of people and continued the party spirit, culminating in a barbecue on *Poco Andante*. It was great to talk to the more experienced cruisers and get their advice and recommendations; one major decision was where to spend the following hurricane season. The insurance companies, and common sense, dictate that the yachts are moved out of the hurricane region (between 10° and 23° north or south of the equator) during June-November. In general, it was safe to be within 10-12° north or south of the Equator. Most cruisers were heading to Grenada, Trinidad or Venezuela - all close to 10°S. One American yacht suggested cruising the East Coast of USA - this really tickled my fancy. I realised that having 'no fixed plan' opened up more possibilities!

We contacted the US consulate in Antigua on VHF and the Consul enquired where *Poco* was anchored; it turned out she walked her dog at Galleon Beach each day. We arranged to meet at the beach bar for more information - this could only happen in Antigua! It transpired that we would require a 10-year multi-entry visa - these could be issued in Barbados. Very helpfully, she advised us how to make an appointment, what paperwork would be required and had all the information about flights from Antigua to Barbados - but these would have cost at least US\$400 each. We decided to sail down - 250 miles against the prevailing winds. No problem - I made an appointment online for the next week (beginning of March) to allow plenty of time to get there.

17 – A side trip to Barbados...

The first 24 hours of the trip to Barbados were pretty grim - wind on the nose, lumpy seas and driving rain - we ended up motoring much of the time. Eventually conditions became calmer, and we ended up having an easy sail. In Barbados the Customs & Immigration mainly accommodate cruise ships - they insisted that yachts tie up at the cruise ship terminal and clear in. We came alongside this huge harbour wall - with only the top of *Poco's* mast sticking up above it. Luckily a passenger from one of the cruise ships offered to catch a line and tied us up. Keith then clambered up the harbour wall and made us secure. Our rigging was dangerously close to the mooring warps from one of the cruise ships. I opted to stay on board in case any problems ensued.

Clearing in took around an hour and we were then allowed to move around to Carlisle Bay - a lovely bay with clear turquoise water, white sandy beaches and beach bars for the cruise ship passengers to enjoy. There were even 4-5 brand new moorings available, and the resort actually asked us to pick one up - partly to protect the environment, but also because the yachts make a lovely backdrop for the holiday makers' photos!

We had a great time in Barbados - the people were incredibly friendly and happy. We spent five days enjoying the local facilities - we took our books to the beach and lazed on the loungers, swam, read, and snorkelled. There were two sunken wrecks just off the beach teeming with fish, etc. - I even saw a turtle grazing on the sea grass. Whilst waiting for our US Embassy appointment we toured the Mount Gay Rum distillery and strolled around Bridgetown.

One morning, while washing the dishes I glanced out the window and saw a boat moving past quite close. I made a comment to Keith and didn't think much more about it - until a few minutes later, when something else caught my eye. I suddenly realised that it wasn't the other boat that was moving - it was us - by then *Poco Andante* was about half a mile out to sea! Keith rushed forward to check our lines - we were still attached to the mooring buoy, but when he looked

further, we appeared to still have the mooring anchor attached as well. Meanwhile, I hastily started the engine. Keith let go the mooring and we went back in and anchored. We still have no idea why the mooring moved – we’d been sitting happily on it for five days and conditions were benign. Keith reported the incident to the resort so they could recover their mooring – and learned not to trust moorings he didn’t know! After this incident, if we picked up an unknown mooring, Keith usually snorkelled to check its condition and whether it looked strong enough to take our 19 tonnes.

We were finding that life in the Caribbean suited us - it was a great relief to realise that, at last, *Poco Andante* was our home, and all the boat systems worked together, enabling us to live the perfect lifestyle. When sailing, the wind was free, and anchoring was free. The two wind generators and two solar panels were producing enough power to run the boat systems – and the watermaker was keeping up with demand. At last, we were living well within budget.

The day of our appointment at the US Embassy finally arrived and we joined about 20-30 locals in the queue. We presented our papers and had a brief interview; the staff were very efficient and polite - and by noon we had our 10-year multi-entry US visas. We now needed to head north to make use of them.

18 – Sailing the Caribbean

The next day we set sail north to Fort-de-France, Martinique, about 110 miles away. We got stuck there for three days waiting for good weather but enjoyed ourselves, nonetheless. Eventually the weather improved, and we went ashore to clear out. It was approaching lunch time and the officer in charge was not interested - in fact, he basically sent us on our way empty handed.

We left in a brisk easterly breeze; sailing in the Caribbean can be idyllic - our sail from Martinique back to Antigua was no exception. Two days of 15-20 knots in the lee of the islands and 20-25 in the open passes. We also saw our first whale which was a surprise. There are plenty of safe anchorages along the way.

After two days rest in Antigua, we sailed overnight to St Maarten /St Martin. As we approached the island, we had a call from a yacht called *Pipe Dream* - they had lost their engine and had no charts or pilot book and were on their way to St Maarten to make repairs. Acting as pilot, we helped this unfortunate guy into the anchorage. Little did I know that the next year we would be in a similar situation off St Maarten...

St Maarten/St Martin is an island about seven miles square; one half belongs to France and the other to the Netherland Antilles (Holland). There are three currencies; the French side is just like a small French town; good food, cheap wine and uses Euros. The Dutch side uses Guilders or US\$ and has all the chandleries. The whole island is duty free; communications are good, and their main industry is yachting. Prices are very competitive and nearly everything is available.

The island is separated by a huge lagoon; everyone zooms around in RIBs, and it was great fun to put the 15hp outboard engine on ours and join in. To make navigation interesting, the French adopt the European buoyage system with the red marks on the left - and the Dutch side uses the American system where the red marks are on the right! It is also a major harbour for 'super' yachts with some

wonderful boats to behold, both sail and power. Some had helicopters and one even had a Porsche on board.

St Maarten is a stopping point for many cruisers to refit or just to catch their breath. The cruiser community is strong with a great VHF Radio Net on Channel 14 - with news about barbecues, potluck dinners, boat jumbles, etc. With such good chandleries we were able to get most of the bits we needed. There always seemed to be something that needed replacing - after all, *Poco Andante* was being used 24/7.

Keith took the dinghy to a small island in the lagoon to scrub the bottom. Here he met Peter and Toni from the British catamaran *Tigger* who were cleaning their dinghy as well. Peter and Toni had designed *Tigger* and had her built to their exacting specifications for extended world cruising. We would meet them again and again in some weird and wonderful locations over the next 12 years!

St Thomas, American Virgin Islands, would be our 'Port of Entry' into the US. We were so accustomed to the friendly officials in most of the Caribbean islands that the brusque attitude of the US officials took me by surprise. We felt really unwelcome and, with mountains of paperwork required, started to think that our decision to cruise the East Coast of US that summer may not be a good one. However, they eventually allowed us to enter.

Our anchorage was off the cruise terminals and watching the cruise ships arrive, sometimes four at a time, was a spectacle. We also re-discovered the joys of 'real' supermarkets with cheap and plentiful produce - Keith celebrated with a large American steak and chips - sorry, 'fries' - while watching the 'floating pizza restaurant' and 'floating bar' tour the harbour!

There was a price to pay for all that protein - the next day Keith was stricken with acute abdominal pain - and became convinced he had appendicitis... With the cost of US healthcare, this would be a bit of a nightmare - would he be fit enough to survive a flight back to the UK?

One of the books we had inherited with *Poco Andante* was '*Where there is no doctor*' - a fabulous book aimed mainly at African cultures but with very clear diagrams of how to perform a wide range of checks and procedures.

Armed with the book in one hand and an empty drinking glass in the other, I approached the prone Keith. He looked rather alarmed,

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but the prodding, pressing and listening to his abdomen resulted in my diagnosis of wind! Keith was exceedingly sceptical, but nature ran its natural course and after a few days all was well again. (Amusingly, when we flew back to the UK about six months later for his daughter's graduation, Keith insisted on getting the GP to check his abdomen! Happily, he agreed with my diagnosis...)

We experienced our first fouled anchor in St Thomas - a local yachtsman knocked on our hull to warn us that an Austrian boat had dragged its mooring overnight and was now very close to us - there was no one on board. He had been trying to raise the authorities with no joy. Luckily the owners of the dragged boat returned and, with no comment or apology, slipped the mooring and headed off out of harbour - leaving a mess behind. Now free, the mooring swung back and ended up wrapped around our anchor chain. Luckily our windlass was powerful enough to lift the mooring anchor - and a quick flip with our boat hook set us free. However, the sinker took our boat hook with it! After re-anchoring Keith donned snorkel gear and managed to retrieve the said boat hook from the bottom of the harbour.

19 – Our first visitors!

We left for Culebra, an island off the US territory of Puerto Rico - we had been granted a six month 'personal' visa for the US in St Thomas - we now needed a 12-month Cruising Permit for *Poco Andante*. For some unknown reason, they didn't issue these in St. Thomas... After the short hop from St Thomas, we anchored in the protected harbour at Dewey, the main town of Culebra. The Customs man was based at the airport and the short walk there was refreshing. The officer was very friendly and helpful - he had organised his office with one wall displaying examples of the seven completed forms required and laid out the blank ones below for you to complete.

With Cruising Permit in hand we went to the Dinghy Dock, the local haunt for cruisers, for happy hour and met up with a group of Americans who gave us lots of advice concerning our trip north. After a few days we headed for Fajardo, about 24nm away on mainland Puerto Rico, to meet our first visitors since we left the UK. Pat and Paul flew into San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, and took a taxi to Puerto Del Rey Marina on the east coast. We'd checked into the marina figuring it was easier for them to embark there - and for us to fill up with fuel and water for their holiday. We planned a trip around the Spanish Virgin Islands, with short day sails and lots of time in unspoilt picturesque anchorages.

Our first stop was Vieques, a small island about 25 miles SE of Puerto Rico. This island had been used as a US military base and firing range over the years and was only relinquished a year or so prior. At Ensenada Sun Bay we anchored in a beautiful cove lined with a white sandy beach fringed with palm trees. *Poco Andante* was the only boat there on the first night! Idyllic and picture-postcard pretty...

One still evening we took the RIB around to the next bay Bahia de Mosquitos which is famous for its bioluminescence. The phosphorescence is caused by thousands of one-celled micro-organisms called dinoflagellates that glow when the waters are disturbed. It was stunning - not only were there 'sparkles' when the

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water was moved, but an overall glow like underwater lighting as the propeller churned up the wake. Keith went in for a swim and his whole body glowed! As he climbed back on board, he briefly sparkled as the micro-organisms were caught in his body hair. Difficult to describe but amazing to behold.

Ashore there was a small town, Esperanza, where I managed to buy bread. The shoreline was littered with the usual collection of beach bars and souvenir shops - and the local museum offered about six computer terminals for internet access. Really useful - and a great surprise in the middle of nowhere. The main means of transport was horses and many of them grazed freely on the island. This area of the Caribbean is also a nesting-ground for sea turtles. Many of these were spotted swimming along, with signs of their nests on the beach.

Pat asked one of the dive companies in Esperanza where they took their daily expeditions, and they told her Isla de Chiva - a reef off the island. We sailed there and dropped anchor for a couple of hours while everyone went exploring. There were giant elk horn corals, stingrays, moray eels and some hungry looking barracudas, which scared Pat and Paul! After lunch, we sailed east again to our next stop, Bahia Salinas Del Sur, a deserted bay with a tricky entrance through a coral reef. The bay was used by the military as a bombing range and the beach was littered with unexploded shells. There were signs all along the beach warning of unexploded ordinance. We swam from the boat and snorkelled off the reef; there was colourful fan coral, brain coral and the usual small but colourful reef fish. We even came across an unexploded torpedo stuck in at 45° complete with tail fin and propeller - scarier than sharks!

20 – Calamity in Culebrita

After a night or two there we set off for Culebrita, a small island about 10 miles northeast of Vieques. Our cruising guide said there was a fantastic safe anchorage on the SW corner of the island – but so small that there was room for only about two boats. When we arrived, it was certainly fantastic – clear turquoise blue water – but there was already one yacht there. We carefully picked our way through the reef to the small anchorage ‘hole’. The other yacht gave up trying to get his anchor to hold – and after several failed attempts we decided to follow suit! It was back out through the reef and across the one-mile channel to the larger island of Culebra. We negotiated the entrance to a safe anchorage and eventually picked up a mooring inside the sheltered lagoon. Snorkelling there was interesting, but the bottom was covered with turtle grass, so the water wasn’t as clear.

Early next morning, before breakfast, we returned to Culebrita and were pleased to discover we were first there and had the anchorage to ourselves. It was well worth it – the water was glorious – warm, clear, turquoise and just like the postcards! Our tourist information mentioned a natural ‘Jacuzzi’ pool on the north end of the islet, so we followed the path over there. We came across a lovely lagoon with surf breaking across the reef entrance. On one side Atlantic seas crashed against house-size boulders and on the other a sheltered natural pool formed by coral reef. We watched for a while and felt brave enough to go for it and scrambled into the pool. The water ‘fizzed’ as the breaking waves filtered under the boulders into the pool; the resultant effect was just like a Jacuzzi! We lay there in the sunshine and enjoyed 15 minutes of sheer relaxation.

It came as a huge surprise. “Look out!” I shouted as a freak wave broke completely over the top of the huge boulders (it was later reported that yachts at sea had suffered knockdowns as this monster raged through). The wall of water flushed us all out of the pool and tumbled us across the coral-covered rocks into adjoining pools.

Both Keith and I had grown up enjoying surf beaches, so we knew to stay low until the surge eased. I wedged my sandaled foot between

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two rocks to try to stop myself being swept further. It felt like being in a rock-strewn washing machine – and I was gradually running out of breath... At last, the swirling water eased a little and I surfaced to grab a lungful of air before being swamped again as a second wave followed – another trick learned as a child in the surf. The strength of the water eventually forced me to surrender my foothold (literally!) and tumble into the next pool – losing my sandal in the process.

Finally, the water settled, and I scrambled to my feet, anxiously looking around for the others. Keith was about five metres away and he looked OK, but I couldn't see any sign of Pat and Paul. I carefully clambered up the rocks and finally saw Pat sprawled across the rocks about 10 metres away. Paul had made it to the beach. It looked like carnage; there was blood flowing down their bodies, legs and arms. They answered when called and were obviously very shaken. We quickly reached them, and I realised they were in severe shock. Pat kept saying she thought she was going to die, and Paul was just stunned and silent. A quick once-over revealed that most of the bleeding was coming from coral cuts which didn't look too deep – except the back of Pat's hand. I could see a flap of skin about 3cm wide hanging off the back of her hand near the wrist – and the bones tendons and flesh were startlingly white. Not a pretty sight! Keith quickly whipped off his T-shirt and wrapped it around Pat's hand so she wouldn't see the mess. Paul's chest and thigh had big gashes. Keith and I exchanged private glances and wordlessly agreed that the wounds would need medical attention – but from where?

While the adrenalin was still pumping, we gathered together those belongings which hadn't been swept away and 'frog marched' them back towards the dinghy. I knew that we should use that adrenalin rush to get them back to the yacht before shock paralysed them. As we got them on board *Poco* the clouds were building and the sky darkening. While Keith started the engine and raised the anchor, I got them to take hot showers for warmth, then lie on top of clean sheets spread over the saloon berths and started cleaning their wounds – applying Betadine and sterile dressings. I forced them to drink cups of hot sweet tea and put on warm clothes. Shock was well and truly setting in – shivers and shakes, tears and misery.

Once they were settled, I hastily pulled our electronic charts up on the computer and set a course back out through the reef and across to Culebra using our previous track. Keith steered his way out into

deep water while I checked our cruising and travel guides for information about the nearest medical facility. According to our books, the nearest was back on the Puerto Rico mainland – about six hours away through coral country! The day was getting on and visibility was poor – not a good combination. We had no mobile phone reception so couldn't ring the hospital on the mainland for information – all I could try was the VHF.

“Pan Pan, Pan Pan, Pan Pan” – Silence! No response at all! Again and again, I made the call – trying to sound really calm so our injured guests didn't panic. Finally, the VHF burst into life – *Heart of Texas*, another cruising yacht, had heard my call and had a satellite phone. They advised that there was a hospital at Dewey on Culebra and gave me the phone number. When I explained we had no phone reception they kindly phoned the hospital to advise them we were on our way...

Now we had a destination – but the weather was closing in; a tropical storm was building. Keith motored at full speed. We worried about the channel into Culebra in the poor light and, just as we approached the entrance, the heavens opened; visibility was down to less than 20 metres! From the computer I sent each course and distance to the GPS repeater in the cockpit, Keith steered by compass, relying on making eye contact with each buoy as we reached it. At last, we got through the narrow entrance to the bay and headed the mile or more up to town.

Keith and I discussed the options – we knew from our previous stay that the holding at the anchorage was good, but the wind was picking up. We decided that Keith would have to stay with the yacht, and I would take Pat and Paul to the hospital. I went below and helped them put on heavy-weight wet weather gear – Keith and I were already wearing our lightweight 'oilies' – then I was back on the helm while Keith dropped the anchor. Getting Pat and Paul into the dinghy was a bit of an effort – they were both still very shaky on their feet. I steered the dinghy over to the 'Dinghy Dock' – actually alongside the local bar – to be greeted with laughter and catcalls about 'space invaders' and the like – the tipsy clientele thought we were wimpy for wearing our bright yellow oilies. They were silenced when I asked the way to the hospital – to be told it was about 500 metres away at the top of the hill...

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Pat, Paul and I eventually limped exhausted into the small cottage hospital, but it turned out we would have to wait – during the couple of hours it had taken us to get there, some poor guy had fallen off his motorbike in the stormy conditions and needed emergency treatment. Pat and Paul were only ‘walking wounded’. The young female Spanish doctor finally called them in, and I explained in my broken Spanish what had happened. Pat’s hand needed stitching and so did Paul’s thigh – thankfully my emergency first aid treatment got five stars from the doctor, which was pleasing. Paul couldn’t bear to watch Pat being stitched and asked me to stay with her – not that I particularly wanted to watch it either! I spent the time talking to Pat to take her mind off what the doctor was doing. I then had to do the same thing for Paul...

I had taken the hand-held VHF with me to try to call Keith but there was so much interference due to the storm that I couldn’t get through. It was several hours later that we carefully walked down the hill to the dinghy – only to discover it had about 150mm of rainwater inside. I bailed it out and finally got us all back on board *Poco Andante*. Keith and I sent Pat and Paul to bed and dosed them up with antibiotics and sleeping tablets given to them by the doctor to help them sleep. At last, we had a chance to talk about what had happened. Keith needed stitches to his shoulder and my ankle had a nasty gash – we used some adhesive sutures from the First Aid kit – and we were both scratched all over. By the time we’d finished cleaning ourselves up, we looked like yellow patchwork from the Betadine. Still mildly shocked ourselves, with the adrenalin wearing off, we crawled into our bunks and slept!

As a footnote, about a year later we caught up with *Heart of Texas* and were able to thank them in person for their help.

21 – Farewell Puerto Rico

After a few days to recover from this harrowing experience we sailed back to Fajardo. We all agreed to hire a car and explore El Yunque, the only tropical rain forest in the US, followed by San Juan, the historic capital of Puerto Rico. The rainforest was spectacular – full of the sounds of tree frogs and birds, and with colourful flowers and green ferns and trees.

We had been told by many US people that Old San Juan was interesting, but weren't too sure how it would compare with some of the wonderful cities of Europe. It wasn't disappointing – the narrow hilly streets are cobbled with blue bricks which were brought onto the island as ballast in the early sailing ships. The architecture is very 'Spanish' with balconies and courtyards. The old fortress was worth the tour – well-preserved and with spectacular views over the city and the harbour.

After a few more days, Pat and Paul flew to New York and Keith and I stayed on to explore more of mainland Puerto Rico – including visiting the Bacardi factory, as a tribute to one of Keith's former employers. The tour was 'plastic' compared to our tour of the Mount Gay distillery in Barbados – and was very marketing-oriented. Then it was off to the Arecibo Radio Telescope/Observatory in the heart of Puerto Rico. The geology inland was fascinating – lumpy hills called Kaarst – limestone outbreaks with some huge underground caverns. The Radio Telescope was the largest in the world at that time and was fascinating. An amazing feat of engineering – with a 700-ton receiver suspended over the huge aluminium dish, and all aligned to within 0.1mm. The visitor centre was informative and included a film of *'a day in the life of ...'* featuring the scientists, engineers, cleaners, cooks, maintenance staff, etc. We really enjoyed our visit there – unfortunately the telescope collapsed in 2020 following the failure of one of the cables.

We spent a week at anchor off Fajardo, catching up on cleaning, laundry, etc., and ferrying 300 litres of water in jerry cans by RIB to replenish our water tanks.

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A visit to town for shopping was an expensive experience - we bought lots of DVDs and invested in the (new then) wireless technology so we could access the internet from the growing number of 'hotspots' around.

After our first season in the Caribbean, it was time head north for the hurricane season. The Americans recommended going directly as far north as we could - apparently the cruise back down the east coast of the USA would be slow, with both the winds and the currents against us. We thought this was a great idea - if we arrived in Maine in May *Poco Andante* would have a full year to get back to the southern end of the Caribbean before the next hurricane season...

The ocean voyage from Puerto Rico to Bermuda would probably take about eight days - directly through the 'Bermuda Triangle' - followed by about six days to Maine. Wind and sea conditions for the trip would probably be better later in April than earlier, so we returned to Culebra to make sure we and the boat were both ready for another ocean passage.

22 – Through the Bermuda Triangle

It was farewell to the Caribbean on 29th April - after spending nearly three warm, sunny and fun-filled months there. As we motored out of Culebra one of the other yachts called us on the radio asking “Why are you leaving? I wouldn’t go - the lumpy seas would make me sick!” Was this a good idea?

We had spent the previous three weeks firstly in a lagoon a couple of miles outside Culebra town doing some varnishing work. Of course, the work was interspersed with snorkelling, sightseeing and generally lazing around. We then moved closer to Culebra town so that we could provision for our trip north to the USA. There was a good cheap ferry from Culebra to mainland Puerto Rico, a one-and-a-half-hour trip away. Complete with four holdalls and our trusty ‘granny’ trolley we loaded up with essentials at the large supermarket just out of town. We also topped up the water tanks from the ‘Dinghy Dock’ - the local bar.

Next, we had to wait for a weather window... We were looking for a high pressure just forming over Bermuda; this, theoretically, would give us easterly Trade Winds up to Bermuda and settled conditions when we approached the island. A few days of waiting and a few happy hours at the Dinghy Dock gave us time to study the weather maps downloaded from the internet. Finally with one last drink at the bar, and promises to return, we decided to leave the next day...

The wind was blowing the forecast E 18-20 knots in the harbour. Once we rounded the island, *Poco* hit the full brunt of wind and waves. After being in harbour for a month-or-so this was a bit of a shock! A short discussion ensued; do we turn around and wait for another week or carry on? The decision hinged on ‘Henry, the Hydrovane’ - if he could keep our course then we would continue! The Hydrovane is a type of automatic steering mechanism which sails the boat at a particular angle to the wind. Fortunately, Henry coped really well - so on we went. For the first three days we were

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close-hauled with 18 knots of wind. It's not much fun living at 15-20° of heel and being lurched about the inside of the boat every time you went down below. Crashing through the seas breaking over the bow revealed a leak in the V-berth hatch – getting salt water on the berth mattresses was very annoying! We had yet to find the ideal sealant for this hatch. As an interim measure, we used duct tape to minimise the leaks. (It wasn't until we were in Australia and introduced to a sealant used on high-rise building window installations that we achieved a permanent solution for this very exposed hatch!)

Then we had a pleasant four days of beam reaching with 10-15 knots followed by a yuck day of 20-30 knot head winds; we ended up motoring for the last six hours to get into port in daylight. Sailing-wise these conditions weren't a problem - we'd set Henry as we cleared Culebra and didn't touch him for three days. Then we let out the sails and adjusted Henry a bit; the next day the pole went up; three days later it came down and we were close hauled again.

A small depression developed over Bermuda which we hit 30 miles out. Bermuda Coast Guard monitors the radar and had picked *Poco Andante* up, which was reassuring. They were able to talk us into St Georges Harbour to avoid a cruise ship just leaving. Although our electronic charts appeared to be accurate, we didn't have a cruising guide showing the entrance to Bermuda. The island is surrounded by a huge reef, with lots of wrecks, and the channels are fairly narrow.

Bermuda was colonised by British shipwrecked sailors. It is really a gem of a place – everyone was really friendly, and the town of St George is very pretty and dates back to the 17th century with lots of original houses all adorned with white roofs, their main water catchment area. It was also a little cooler than the Caribbean which was refreshing - but still sunny and warm.

St Georges harbour was a hive of activity at this time of year, with sail boats arriving and preparing for the trip to Europe across the Atlantic via the Azores. We spent a few evenings with a couple of these folk, helping with repairs to their self-steering gear and solar panels, using *Poco's* good facilities - and enjoying their company.

23 – North by North-West



Bermuda was a welcome break for us as we waited for the right weather to continue our journey north. This weather window came sooner than expected so we had to cut short our visit and head out. Bermuda is in the 'Horse Latitudes' where a high-pressure system with no wind can settle in for weeks. Ancient mariners, running out of water, often sacrificed their horses in order to survive. We were waiting for such a High as this creates settled weather all the way up to Maine. Not having any horses to throw overboard, we just made use of our 75hp engine and motored for two days through the calm centre of the High until we hit the westerlies on the other side.

A major navigational hazard is the Gulf Stream current that can flow up to 3 knots easterly, taking the warm Caribbean water in a clockwise path around the North Atlantic to the UK. Monitoring the water temperature was an excellent navigational aid in this part of the world. What a shock crossing the Gulf Stream was – approaching the Stream we were in tropical waters, around 24°C, with lots of

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flying fish and jelly fish with sails set like fleets of model boats. There was a jump to 28°C as we entered the Gulf Stream which was about 50-60 miles wide and flowing at 2-3 knots. The water temperature then dropped to 16°C in the space of 2-3 miles reaching a low of 8°C as we approached the US coast. This brought cold winds and grey seas - a big shock having to put clothes on again!

Two hundred miles out we hit our first major fog bank - no wind and visibility down to one mile. We were now running short of diesel - the price of diesel in Bermuda was so expensive that Keith refused to completely fill the tanks. We decided to run the engine for six hours in the hope that we'd motor through the centre of the high pressure to pick up wind on the other side. Luckily, we picked up a light 5 knot breeze from the south, so we set the gennaker and achieved 3 knots through the water. Over the course of the night, the wind strength increased and we made better speed. I was on watch and Keith was below asleep; he woke to my call through the hatch for some help to change the sail. Six months previously, raising the gennaker at all was a cause for major debate; now I was at the helm in 20 knots of wind, full main and gennaker, doing 8.5+ knots through the water! I'd certainly come a long way...

24 – Maine – but not in May!



We had been unable to buy any Cruising Guides for the US in the Caribbean and relied on our electronic charts for the passage to Maine. The *'World Cruising Handbook'* by Jimmy Cornell advised that Portland was the recommended 'Port of Entry' for Maine – but we wanted to start our exploration further north. Our Lonely Planet guide to the USA showed that there was a ferry which travels between Bar Harbour, Maine and Halifax, Nova Scotia. I figured there had to be Customs and Immigration there! I set our course for Bar Harbour. Still under gennaker and low on fuel, we needed to 'eyeball' the fairway buoy at the entrance to Bar Harbour to check the accuracy of our electronic charts. Despite the fog, we were delighted to find it exactly where it should be and could now drop the gennaker, start the engine and change course for our destination.

We slowly headed toward the harbour – but visibility was down to about 400m. The town map in the Lonely Planet guide showed what looked like the ferry terminal, but when we approached it, there was no sign of activity at all and certainly no sign of any other boats. We turned back and I tried calling on the VHF radio – hopeful rather than expectant of any response, we were delighted when we heard a deep male voice "This is the Bar Harbour Harbour Master" – quite a mouthful! I enquired about where we could anchor and he said,

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"come in the entrance until you see the wall – and you'll find some moorings you can pick up". The fog was now so thick that we couldn't even see the entrance – but thankfully he could see us on radar and gave us a heading to come in on. Sure enough, when we could see the harbour wall, we also saw the moorings.

The Harbour Master called again "*Poco Andante*, do you need to clear into the US of A?" "Yes, please!" "Come ashore and I'll take you around there". So, despite being cold and tired after our six-day passage, we had to launch the dinghy, attach the outboard, gather our paperwork and head ashore. The Harbour Master kindly drove us around to the ferry terminal, which was the one we had identified, and pointed us in the direction of the offices with an offer to come back to pick us up when we had finished!

We entered the deserted terminal building and poked our noses into various offices until we found the Customs and Immigration people; it turned out that the ferry service wouldn't start for that season for another two days and they were just setting up their offices and checking the systems all worked. We were their first clients of the year! They were surprised to find a British yacht arriving so early in the year – it turns out that the US leisure sailors don't start their sailing season until June or July...

One of their staff kindly drove us back to the Harbour Master's office and we returned to the yacht for a well-deserved drink. The Harbour Master later offered us the use of his Cruising Guide to the East Coast – on the condition that we posted it back when we had finished with it. Such generosity was overwhelming – and not at all uncommon.

What a surprise we got the next morning when we awoke to a gloriously sunny day – we could see the 'bar' extending out from the harbour, culminating in a huge granite mini-mountain. It turned out that the ferry terminal was in the second harbour on the other side of the bar, so I hadn't been far out in my reckoning. There were some lovely classic yachts in the harbour and the hills were covered in pine trees.

Our stay in Bar Harbour was a great introduction to Maine. It was lively, everyone very friendly and willing to spend time to stand and chat – it was still early in the season – Maine doesn't wake up from their winter until the first week in June. The population then trebles until September when all the vacationers go home. Lots of stores,

leafy streets, white-clapboard houses, etc. This, we thought, was great - if all the towns of Maine were like this, we would enjoy our stay. After three days of brilliant sunshine, we set sail to explore the coast and islands... thousands of them. All with well-buoyed passages through the cuts - and lobster pots everywhere. This kept us on our toes. Our first anchorage in 'backwoods' Maine was Somes Sound a Fiord-like inlet - typical of this coast. Very picturesque. A 10-minute walk around the village 'did' Somes Sound. Two churches and a bookshop were its claim to fame! The next day took us to Southwest Harbour, a working harbour with lobster boats and lobster piers where you could buy fresh lobsters everywhere.

Southwest Harbour was also the first place where *Poco Andante* could come alongside for diesel - we'd managed to get a couple of jerry cans filled up in Bar Harbour, but we seriously needed to fill the tanks. However, when we got there, a) the tide was way down and we couldn't get in, and b) the fuel dock was still not fully functioning due to the icy cold of winter - again, we had to resort to jerry cans to get 360L of fuel.

From here we headed for Penobscot Bay a huge inlet dotted with islands and harbours. Many of the rocks were covered with seals basking in the weak sunlight. By now the sun had given way to light drizzle and fog... lots of this in Maine. Wildlife and wilderness are what Maine does well. Eagles and ospreys fly overhead, seals and dolphins swim freely and seabirds everywhere. Further offshore whales could easily be seen - lots of whale watching trips 'guaranteeing' sightings were a testament to this.

We visited Stonington which has an opera house in the middle of this tiny town! Castine - another brief wet visit (it was Sunday, and we didn't see a soul!) then across to Camden, a very lively town. We spent a few days here and, interestingly, met a lovely couple who were touring the US in an RV. Comparing our lifestyles revealed huge similarities - managing fuel, electricity and water. Then it was on to Rockland - after a 10-minute walk around this sleepy town we decided to move on to Boothbay...

Boothbay harbour is protected by outlying granite islets - some with the typical picturesque lighthouses that one sees along this coast. We anchored in the lee of one of these islands and enjoyed splendid views of the shoreline culminating in a magnificent white

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clapper-board church with soaring steeple bathed in the setting sunlight.

We loved Boothbay - a lovely mix of a working lobster port and tourist area. We were welcomed and entertained by the lobstermen there and learned so much from them about their work and lifestyle. Keith had his first ever Maine lobster dinner followed by copious quantities of 'Mud Slide' - a frozen smoothie of vodka, Kahlua and cream; I couldn't partake due to my allergy to shellfish but enjoyed the Mud Slides.

We left Penobscot Bay and did our own Whale Watch Cruise - sailing/motoring 25-30 miles out in sunshine and clear visibility. We were not disappointed. Two huge fin backs 12-15 metres long were 'hunting' and gave us a great display - rounding up schools of fish and then lunging at them from the depths. Keith was on the bow taking photos and I was on the helm when I saw a huge whale approaching *Poco Andante* right on the beam. It turned on its side and the whale and I exchanged looks before it silently swam down beneath the keel and appeared on the other side. It is scary to think what would have happened if it had flicked its huge tail. We decided that we wouldn't do our own whale watching after that!

New England teems with 'heritage' - it seems that every house/town has a plaque or story on public display. Everything looked pristine in the early summer sunshine. Tales of 'first settlers', sea captains, 'famous politicians', revolution, and civil war abound. There was a huge sense of community spirit and community pride - which was reflected in clean and tidy towns, manicured gardens, lots of public spaces, statues, wonderful buildings and enviable large houses. New England is a really prosperous part of the US.

From the sailing point of view, it was great - the seas were flat and there are lots of anchorages. For some reason the American sailors avoid anchoring and prefer to pick up moorings - these are numerous and, by our standards, expensive just for the mooring - and with no facilities ashore.

The winds were light - or from the wrong direction - so we motored a lot. Fog was always close at hand but the channels are well-marked, and visibility was rarely less than half a mile so it was no real problem.

25 – ‘Live Free or Die’

Next stop was Portland, the largest port in Maine - a big city at last. We took a local bus to a huge shopping mall and did a small re-supply and enjoyed just wandering around window shopping. After a few days with improving weather we arrived at Biddeford, another tiny village. We had now left the rocky coasts and were entering the sandy coastlines of southern New England. Anchorages were starting to get scarcer and the tides stronger.

The next port of call was Portsmouth, New Hampshire. A lovely city where we enjoyed a visit to Strawberry Banke, an historic village where early American houses are open to the public. We also met Captain Chuck Quinlan who was moored close to us off the Naval base there. A very colourful character who had sailed extensively including being part of a US Admirals Cup team, several transatlantic races under his belt, etc. He kindly took us on a car tour of Portsmouth and showed us all the sights of historic interest including the site of the first battle in the Revolutionary War. Taking advantage of his generosity, we loaded up with beer and wine at the local store. The State is known for having no State Tax - so it was a good place to stock up on cheap diesel as well.

I asked Chuck why all the vehicle number plates in New Hampshire were emblazoned with ‘Live Free or Die’ which we found intriguing. He explained that the phrase comes from a toast written by General John Stark, New Hampshire’s most famous soldier of the American Revolutionary War on 31st July 1809. General Stark had to decline an invitation to an anniversary reunion of the Battle of Bennington due to poor health. Instead, he sent his toast by letter:

“Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils.”

This has now been adopted as the official motto of New Hampshire.

Poco Andante was anchored in a channel behind an island which had very strong currents and large tides, so we had laid fore-and-aft

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anchors. The area was strewn with lobster pots - we were not surprised when the bow anchor snagged a pot. No real problem - except that the lobster was undersized - so no free lunch. After clearing this snag, we headed for Gloucester, an old whaling town, for a brief stop on our way to Boston where we were looking forward to spending some time.

26 – Massachusetts - is one place I have seen

Prior to Boston we stopped off at Salem. Together with Marblehead, just across the promontory, this is a huge boating area with thousands of moorings. At anchor again, we spent a lovely couple of days here touring the historic sites of the 'Witch Capital of the World'. I was amused by two adjoining plaques – the first commemorating 'The Witch Gaol' – and the second commemorating the fact that the first plaque was originally located elsewhere! And to top all this, a few doors down was another plaque commemorating the fact that 'nothing happened here'... I was also interested to discover that Salem had been a major sailing port and is considered one of the most significant seaports in Puritan American history.

One benefit of being on a cruising yacht is that one can often visit large cities for longer periods than if one was paying for hotel accommodation. Often, the harbours are the focal point of a city and provide facilities for visiting yachts. Boston is a prime example of this. The Cruising Guide indicated an anchorage area just off the Boston Harbour Hotel, right in the heart of downtown Boston. However, when we got there, the area was filled with moorings. I radioed the Harbour Master who explained that some of the moorings belonged to the local Yacht Club, but we were welcome to pick up one of the green public mooring balls at no charge – or anchor in the area marked on the chart. As the public moorings were all occupied, we carefully laid our anchor right on the edge of the marked anchorage field. The next day we received a visit from the Yacht Club tender requesting payment for the mooring. We refused – and after a heated discussion, we pointed to our anchor chain and our anchor ball day mark. He finally accepted that we were not occupying one of their moorings and left. A few hours later, the Harbour Master came aboard to chat and gave us a big 'thumbs up' for our accurate anchoring – and flying the correct signals. We gathered there had been ongoing 'discussions' between the Yacht Club and the Harbour Master...

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It transpired that the Transat Race, the single-handed race from Plymouth, UK to Boston was just about to finish so we stayed up to greet the finishing competitors. It was great fun cheering the boats as they arrived – *Poco Andante* was positioned just at the point where they stopped to drop sails before proceeding to their berths 100 yards away. We got up at 2am to welcome Mike Golding in and even got a wave from Ellen Macarthur as she helped manoeuvre some of the boats in a RIB. We were a bit disappointed that she didn't come over to say hello as we were the only boat in the harbour flying a British flag – and were from her home port. We were also disappointed with Boston's reception of these intrepid sailors - there didn't seem to be a great deal of interest or fanfare for the remaining competitors when they arrived.

Our anchorage also gave us ringside seats to the once-a-year 'turnaround' cruise of the USS *Constitution*, a revolutionary Man of War. It sails down the harbour, complete with an 'all guns' broadside - an amazing sight – and then ties up to its dock facing the other way, hence the term 'turnaround'. The event also commemorates the Battle of Bunker Hill, which was fought on June 17, 1775, during the Siege of Boston in the early stages of the American Revolutionary War.

We enjoyed strolling around Boston admiring the architecture of some of the older buildings. We also walked the Black Heritage Trail past homes, businesses, schools and churches of a thriving black community that were part of The Underground Railroad - a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century. It was used by enslaved African Americans primarily to escape into free states and from there to Canada.

We also visited Harvard with its beautiful buildings and grounds and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and, of course, the site of the Boston Tea Party.

Just as we were raising the anchor to leave Boston, the VHF announced an exclusion zone in the harbour and boats needed to get Coast Guard permission to move around the harbour. We duly sought, and were given, permission to leave, and had just got under way when *Poco Andante* suddenly lost all power on board! We hastily picked up an empty mooring and Keith discovered the deck wash pump motor had burnt out and tripped our fuse box – a quick reset and we could proceed. At this time four minesweepers, including one

British, came by sweeping the harbour – an interesting sight but most puzzling! So off we went – about a mile down the harbour we were approached by the Harbour Police launch with his blue light flashing. Our small delay had put us within the 1,000-metre exclusion zone for an LPG tanker coming into harbour. We were directed down a reserve channel, which looked very much like a container wharf to us – and told to wait until we got the all-clear. The minesweepers, exclusion zone, etc. all come under the heading of ‘Homeland Security’ – the continuing US reaction to 9/11...

At Plymouth we had to anchor a long way offshore (due to shallow waters) and dinghied ashore to visit ‘the rock’ – a piece of granite engraved ‘1620’ – much revered by the Americans. This was supposedly the first landfall of the pilgrims. We walked around the town which seemed composed of many weather-board houses – one amusingly numbered ‘84½’. Apart from its historical significance, there was not much more to warrant a long stay in Plymouth. Our anchorage provided poor protection, and we endured an uncomfortable night’s sleep.

We made an early start to transit the Cape Cod Canal. The currents through the canal can get up to 5-6 knots; we timed our arrival at the entrance to ensure we had a following current. This was our first real canal – and was somewhat disappointing. The sides are low and bushy – rather than high imposing walls like the Corinth or Panama canals. But its bridges were imposing to go under – from our perspective we were sure the top of the mast wouldn’t get through – despite it being about 18m (60ft) high and the bridge clearance being 150m (500ft)! When you looked up, the perspective was misleading, and I always found it a scary experience...

Martha’s Vineyard is a pretty holiday island in Nantucket Sound. The capital, Edgartown is full of beautiful white clapboard houses – very picturesque. Oak Bluffs has a collection of weird and wonderful houses with bright colours and features like turrets and towers.

From Martha’s Vineyard we went to Hadley Harbour, a lovely harbour on Naushon Island in Cape Cod Sound. It is located on the north end of the Elizabeth Islands and is owned by the Forbes family. The Forbes family is a wealthy extended American family long prominent in Boston, Massachusetts. The family's fortune originates from trading between North America and China in the 19th century. These privately-owned islands retain their wild-and-free feeling. We

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took our inflatable dinghy through the well-marked channel scoured by strong tides to Woods Hole. We were fascinated to see that many of the channel markers were adorned by enormous osprey nests – many with chicks still being fed by their parents. Woods Hole is famous for its Oceanographic Institute, whose most famous member is Bob Ballard, the guy who discovered the wreck of the Titanic and the 'black smokers' deep in the Pacific. They have some great exhibits, and we thoroughly enjoyed our visit there.

27 – American Independence Day

After our lovely weekend at Hadley Harbour, we sailed over to Newport, Rhode Island. The wind was a gentle SE, and we were welcomed by 12m ex-America's Cup sailing boats that were out in the bay. They certainly looked magnificent. Although there are many boats moored at Newport, there is a large anchorage off the Ida Lewis Sailing Club. This is a smaller sailing Club than the prestigious New York Sailing Club next door; there was lots of rivalry between them; the Ida Lewis scoring points for raising and lowering the Stars and Stripes first every day - complete with canon to mark the occasion.

We decided to stay in Newport for the 4th of July celebrations and do some shopping for boat bits, etc. Newport's old quaint streets are just great for ambling around with many small stores selling all sorts of things. Close to the harbour is one of the oldest baseball parks in America. Fourth of July fell on a Sunday with a steady build up the week before. Keith and I decided to try and celebrate in traditional US fashion. Firstly, on the Saturday evening we went to a baseball game which, for entertainment value was excellent, although skill level, compared to cricket, could have been better. It is as complicated as cricket but a bit faster with innings only lasting 15 minutes or so. Each of the nine innings was interspersed with family entertainment: sack races with the mums, community singing, and quizzes etc. A great family day out.

Sunday the 4th dawned, and we were up early to dress ship overall - i.e. fly signal flags to the top of the mast from the bow and stern - very pretty. We were pleased with ourselves when we realised we had beaten the Ida Lewis Sailing Club - although, to be fair, they managed to get all their flags in a tangle. At lunch time we took our Fourth of July picnic over to Fort Adams to join the local population. The day was sunny, and we had great fun people-watching and chatting with the locals, some of whom were participating in the parade in Bristol the next day.

The tradition was to have a huge fireworks display to mark the 4th and this year's display in Newport was going to be bigger than

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normal. The *Queen Mary II* was due to arrive and had donated an extra \$20,000 to the pot. Her arrival was magnificent, and she dominated the skyline for the whole evening. Her original intention was to go to New York but was refused entry due to security reasons...

We partied into the night. At 2am, as we motored back to *Poco Andante*, a little the worse-for-wear, Keith spotted an inflatable and outboard floating past. Concerned there may have been an accident, he quickly went and checked it out however there was no-one on board, so he towed it back to *Poco*. We were planning to leave early the next morning for Bristol, about seven miles north of Newport, to watch their famous parade. We contacted the Coast Guard and Harbour Master to report the unmanned - and unmarked - dinghy. No one claimed it - we had a successful salvage!

The weather on the holiday Monday was yuck - lots of rain and a little windy. We arrived and anchored off Bristol and went ashore to watch the parade. It is the 'oldest' parade in the US and bands from all over the country turn up for the honour of marching - it lasted five hours. The rain however spoilt the occasion; this was a real shame for all the visiting bands.

In the evening, we motored to the Brewers Sakonnet Marina at Portsmouth where we waited for next day's lift out. We had a busy week to put the boat to bed and pack for our trip to the UK for Emily's graduation. It was great to catch up with all our family and friends in the UK after a year away - and a proud moment when Emily received her scroll as a Physiotherapist. Keith also achieved his RYA Yacht Master Ocean qualification - he had to undergo an oral examination and prove his sextant navigation across the Atlantic Ocean.

We returned from the UK with some dreadful virus, and both felt rather unwell, but couldn't let this delay our work schedule on the boat. Haul out is an opportunity to do work on the boat while it is out of the water - all the 'under the waterline' fixtures and fittings can be checked and new antifoul paint applied. After working solidly for about two weeks the boat was finally ready to go back into the water - we could resume our trip south.

28 – Mayday in Connecticut



It was now nearing the end of August; we had just passed 38°N and the weather was cooling down. In New England they call the cruisers 'Snowbirds', migrating south for the winter – the Hurricane season had been extremely cruel that year and had slowed the migration down a little.

The 150-mile trip from Newport to New York was uneventful. There were a few stops that we wanted to make. They included Mystic and a trip up the Connecticut River. Mystic was a lovely surprise. We anchored about a mile outside and took the dinghy ashore. Our main aim was to have a pizza at the restaurant made famous by Julie Roberts in her film *'Mystic Pizza'*. This was delicious and definitely warranted the slogan *'a slice of heaven'*. The boardwalk along the river front of this delightful town leads to the Mystic Seaport Museum which was picturesque and full of nauticalia. Visiting yachts can stay here but we chose to anchor outside.

From here we went to Essex, Connecticut, just inside the entrance to the Connecticut River. This river is navigable into the heart of the state and is unspoilt with very little industrialisation. Much of the banks are National Park. We set off up the river and travelled 25 miles past wooded banks, rocky outcrops and picturesque villages. The scary thing was negotiating the numerous bridges and overhead cables! There is a mixture of bridges: bascule - where part of the

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bridge hinges up to near-vertical; lifting bridges - where a whole section of the bridge moves vertically; swing bridges - where a section of the bridge rotates on the horizontal axis; and fixed bridges - which don't move - and need to be high enough for *Poco Andante* to pass under! The moving bridges are operated by 'tenders' who you contact via VHF. Amazingly, they generally prioritise river traffic.

We returned to Hamburg Cove where we met *Sunset* - who had seen us in Hadley Harbour over two months earlier. The evening was warm and gentle, so it was so nice to share a 'sun downer' with Linda and Rod. After this we had an invigorating swim in the fresh water of this delightful spot.

After topping up our fuel tank we then set off for the 70-mile trip to New York. We had a great sail with a pleasant breeze that allowed us to fly the gennaker most of the way. We anchored overnight at Milford - apparently famous for its oysters, but Keith didn't try any.

As we sailed down Long Island Sound, we heard a call on VHF Channel 16, the emergency VHF channel, advising that there was an unmanned vessel going round in circles and requesting assistance. The caller described the location as "just off Highway 95 at Naugatuck Bridge". The Coast Guard responded asking their usual catalogue of questions:

- How many people are on board?
- Are they wearing their life jackets?
- What is the lat/long of the vessel?
- Do they have emergency assistance insurance?

This catalogue of questions had amused and dismayed us all the way down the East Coast - if the vessel had emergency insurance, they were immediately advised to contact them for assistance! We never heard an instance where the Coast Guard actually responded to a call.

The call continued "There are no people on board - there are people in the water - and the motorboat is circling them. Yes, they are wearing life jackets. Can you please come and rescue them!"

"What is the lat/long of the vessel?"

"I don't know - it is in the water below Naugatuck Bridge just off Highway 95."

"Well, what is your lat/long?"

"I don't know - this is Traffic Patrol vehicle 898 on the Bridge - Can you please come and rescue them?" Now, considering that VHF radio has a range less than 25-odd miles, the Coast Guard must have been able to identify the location...

Coast Guard: "Say again, how many people are on board?"

The Highway Patrol officer sounded more and more agitated: "None, now - they have managed to reach the shore - but the vessel is still going around in circles and is a danger to navigation. Can you please come and rescue the vessel?"

The Coast Guard repeated their spiel: "How many people are on board? Are they wearing life jackets? ..."

There was a long silence - then a different voice came over the VHF "Coast Guard, this is the Stratford Fire Boat - do you want us to attend?" The Coast Guard responded with audible relief "Yes, please."

29 – New York! New York!

Highly amused, we continued our glorious sail down Long Island Sound to New York, arriving late and anchoring to the north of City Island for the night. Our cruising guide mentioned that this was a free anchorage, but unfortunately there was no apparent way of getting ashore. We took the dinghy to a boat yard, but they didn't know of any public slipways – and they locked their gates every night after work; using their dock was no use to us. (The difficulty of getting ashore and the proximity of stores and shops to the landing places epitomises one of the problems when cruising the US, as the Americans are so accustomed to using marinas.)

We visited the local library for maps, help, etc. but they weren't accustomed to tourists – especially those arriving by boat; no joy there. We wandered the streets looking for a public landing. One local gent tending his garden offered some assistance, which we accepted with pleasure. Dom and Carol were so helpful – offering us sustenance, producing a map and suggesting that we try the Harlem Yacht Club just a few blocks away. How right they were and what a fabulous find the Harlem Yacht Club turned out to be!

Keith and I introduced ourselves to Jack, a committee member who happened to be at the Club when we arrived and explained our need for a dinghy dock. Over a drink at the bar with us, Jack consulted with the Vice Commodore, Erwin, and they offered us the use of a Club mooring for a very reasonable sum. Over the course of the next week or so, Gene, the Club's friendly and expert bar tender, introduced us to many of the members and we were made welcome by all. The Club is proud that it was only the second yacht club established in America – and is still going strong.

We were invited to join in many of the activities, social as well as sailing – including the opportunity for Keith to go out with other members for race evenings. I didn't really think my sailing skills were good enough to go racing – and felt that expectations of me would be high due to all the miles we had sailed. I'm still not an 'instinctive sailor' – although not bad at trimming sails!

City Island is about an hour by subway out of downtown New York and turned out to be a great base to explore the city. The public transport system into New York City was great – a short bus ride and then about an hour on the clean and safe subway which runs through the Bronx and Harlem.

We managed to ‘walk’ New York – an exhausting exercise. Central Park, Museum of Natural History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, ‘ground zero’, Wall Street, SoHo, Little Italy, Chinatown, Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island! Just to add interest to our visit -the Republican National Convention was being held at Madison Square Gardens. The whole city was buzzing - and full of demonstrators, cops, ‘men in black’ and military.

To provide some relief from the sightseeing schedule, Keith once again tried to get our engine-driven fridge compressor working, while we had access to workshops and drive belts. Unfortunately, during one attempt, a weld broke on the mounting plate which then moved, causing the engine thermostat housing to crack. So, the search was on for Ford engine parts – an easy task in the USA, you’d think. But, no – our engine was made in Europe, and the parts are not compatible! So, Keith ordered the parts from the UK. Eventually they arrived and we were mobile again – big relief – but the engine-driven fridge compressor was still not working...

By now, the remnants of Hurricane Frances were due to cross the area, so we postponed our departure. The Harlem Yacht Club carefully checked that all the boats were safe on their moorings. During the height of the storm, in winds in excess of 40 knots, the bridle on our mooring parted - luckily, we were on board at the time. I quickly started the engine and Keith put out an anchor, but over the course of the next couple of hours, *Poco* began to drift; the holding wasn’t fantastic. Keith decided to repair the mooring with one of our own bridles. Unfortunately, just as we picked it up again, a wave caused a big surge, and Keith got his hand caught between the mooring line and the cleat! With 19 tonnes of boat pulling on him, this was extremely dangerous and exceedingly painful! I instinctively began to climb out of the cockpit and go forward to help, but Keith waved me back – it was obvious from the look of agony and alarm on his face that he was caught and needed the boat to move forward to release the strain. I quickly motored forward, and Keith managed to free his hand – and stagger back to the cockpit clutching

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his bleeding hand to his chest. We both feared what we would find under his glove... Luckily, he still had all his fingers, but the skin on the pad of his little finger had been scraped off nearly down to the bone. Yuck! Unfortunately, he hadn't finished securing the mooring line - so I radioed the Yacht Club launch for assistance. They roped in some poor unsuspecting member, who was enjoying a quiet beer after a round of golf, to help me secure the boat on the mooring - and insisted Keith go to the hospital to get checked. My diagnosis was that there was nothing to be done - just wait until the skin re-grew. After several hours and hundreds of dollars, the hospital's diagnosis was the same as mine - and they wanted to charge another small fortune for some powerful pain killers. As we already had some on board, Keith declined.

During all this, storm-force winds were still raking the bay - in those conditions, I needed to stay on board in case of another incident. All around, boats were breaking free from their moorings and the Yacht Club launch was working hard to keep up with the chaos. I prepared 'just in case' navigation to take *Poco Andante* out into Long Island Sound and motor up and down until Keith returned. Luckily the mooring held and about six hours later the winds eased - and Keith returned with the verdict that he would live! It certainly could have been a lot worse...

To give the seas a chance to settle down after the storms - and Keith a chance to get over the worst of his pain - we decided to wait another day before leaving. Following up an earlier invitation from Dom and Carol to share a bottle of wine and some tales of our travels, we called by their house and were promptly invited to join them for dinner that evening. What a fabulous time we had. Perfect 'al dente' pasta with Dom's home-made sauce - served with some home-made wine... It turned out that Dom and Carol have a wine cellar, complete with five barrels for ageing the wine. They crush their own grapes and make the most spectacular wine. We tasted the various vintages and were really impressed with the volume and quality of the output. The evening was over too soon - we felt privileged to have met such a lovely couple.

30 – Homeland Security gone mad...

Our next obstacle was just around the corner - we left City Island to sail past Manhattan, on our way south. Part of the route through New York City goes past Roosevelt Island, a narrow islet sitting between Manhattan to the west and Long Island to the east and linked by the Queensboro Bridge. The passage on the west side of Roosevelt Island was our preferred course - the Queensboro Bridge has a clearance height of 40m - enough for us to pass under; the eastern passage requires the first bridge (which only has 12m clearance) to stop all the road traffic and open for the boats. Because of our decision to delay our departure, we hadn't realised that we were trying to leave on September 11 - the anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Centre. Just as we reached 'Hells Gate', a whirling bottleneck at the northern entrance to the East River, the Coast Guard suddenly announced that all vessels must pass Roosevelt Island using the eastern passage. However, when I radioed the bridge tender, he refused to open the bridge in case Emergency vehicles needed access!

In the meantime, *Poco Andante* had been joined by more yachts, all trying to get through and all calling the Coast Guard and the bridges on VHF. Amazingly, the Coast Guard wouldn't respond on the radio - they launched their big RIB and, complete with machine-gun armed guards, raced around the yachts to talk to them. The area is known as 'Hells Gate' because of the strong 5-6 knot currents and turbulent waters that sweep you through; most of the yachts were struggling to stay under control. Finally, the Coast Guard agreed that they would provide an armed escort for the yachts down the west passage - and told all the yachts to form an orderly line. Well, that was never going to happen! All the yachts were being swept past downtown Manhattan at different speeds and meantime the Coast Guard cutter was leading the parade - it was very amusing. When they reached the end of the passage, all the yachts headed in different directions. We crossed the Hudson River and managed to sail past the Statue of

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Liberty and Ellis Island before heading south around Cape May and into the Delaware.

After two days and a night at sea we anchored off a marshy inlet to catch some sleep and wait for a favourable tide to get through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.

31 – Coke, anyone?

We entered the Chesapeake Bay at the northern end of this huge estuary. The Bay is 200 miles long and up to 30 miles wide in parts. It is the largest estuary in the US. The west side is bordered by the mainland states of Maryland, Virginia and Delaware and is protected from the East by a long peninsular. As a cruising ground it is much revered by American sailors - although quite shallow in parts, it has many protected anchorages and places to visit. Unfortunately, we had to be very selective due to time constraints. The dark and muddy waters, although tranquil, were uninviting; so was the weather - almost no wind and a fine drizzle.

We motor-sailed for most of the day, content just to reach our destination, Annapolis. As dusk approached, we anchored in a tree-lined creek almost in the centre of the city; tired and damp we had an early night. Next morning the sun was shining, and we took the dinghy to the small dock in the centre of town and were welcomed by a poignant reminder of Annapolis' unsavoury past. The bronze Kunta Kinte Alex Haley Memorial is dedicated to the African slaves and their descendants. Alex Haley is the author of *Roots*. This book tells the story of Kunta Kinte, an 18th century African, captured as an adolescent and sold into slavery in the United States. The simple bronze composition was that of Alex Haley sitting on a park bench reading his book to children lying enthralled at his feet. I was really impressed and very touched.

All around us vendors were selling T-shirts that described Annapolis as a 'drinking town with a sailing problem'. It is also home of the United States Naval Academy - did the two go together I wondered? The Academy was attractive in its own way - white marble buildings resembling a traditional university campus the size of a small town. Each mid-day there was a muster of all 4000-odd midshipmen, including a military band, saluting the colours and marching - a stirring sight.

We had planned to visit some of the more isolated parts of the Chesapeake. Intrigued, our next passage took us about a third of the

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way down the Bay to a small fishing community on Tangier Island. The Cruising Guide mentions that the forebears of the people on the island spoke Elizabethan English, and their descendants retained the original accent from the West Country in Britain. The island is also the centre of the Blue Crab industry and renowned for its produce – and a ‘dry’ island – no alcohol. After a long day we arrived just at dusk and decided to risk the channel into the harbour - the pilot book said it was about 2.2m deep; *Poco Andante* draws 2m. We got safely inside and laid anchors fore-and-aft to keep us to one side of the channel. One of the locals, Billy, came alongside asking if we had a spare beer – we later decided he was the town ‘hop head’ after he offered us marijuana or coke, which we declined! He stayed, talking in the weird-sounding local accent, over quite a few beers, for a couple of hours and later went off and returned with a bucket full of the local Blue Crabs. Eventually we wished him good night – thoughts of the film ‘*Deliverance*’ came to mind...

32 – Hurricane Ivan

Our adventures on Tangier Island weren't over - next morning we woke to find the wind had come up in the night and changed direction; it had pushed us to the side of the channel and *Poco* was aground! High tide wasn't due for another 5-6 hours... Keith laid a kedge anchor off to our side to stop us being blown further aground and, over the next few hours, as the tide rose, we gradually winched ourselves into deeper water. Very embarrassing – but what a relief to get off! In the end we were very pleased to get away from Tangier Island...

We set off towards Norfolk, the start of the ICW (Intra Coastal Waterway) – an inshore passage all the way to Miami - only to discover that sea conditions were rapidly deteriorating. The tail end of Hurricane Ivan, that had done so much damage in the Caribbean, was starting to move towards the Chesapeake. Studying the charts and the Cruising Guides, while listening to the weather forecast, we decided to run for shelter on the south side of the Chesapeake – still about 25 miles away. During the afternoon, winds and seas increased, and conditions were very uncomfortable. The dinghy we had salvaged in Newport that we were towing came adrift - good practice for a 'Man Overboard'... In these conditions, this was rather risky, but we finally got it secured again and continued on our way.

We entered the Rappahannock River with conditions still pretty rough and lightning on the horizon; Keith was hand-steering against the wind, seas and current. Finally, we rounded Corrotoman Point into a smaller inlet which we hoped would prove a safe haven for us to ride out the storms. What I hadn't realised from looking at the one-dimensional charts, was that the area was flat as a pancake – one disadvantage of marine charts - and *Poco Andante* was the tallest thing around. Within an hour the most amazing electrical storm passed overhead - with one bolt of lightning hitting the near shore; the thunderclap was deafening! Keith disconnected every electrical device he could and battened down the hatches against the driving rain... and prayed!

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We were pleased with our decision to choose this particular anchorage - the bottom was mud with good holding and there was plenty of room for us to put out all our chain. We waited two days for the last of Hurricane Ivan to pass. It certainly made us appreciate being out of the tropics - I'd hate to experience the full force of the hurricanes and tropical storms that seemed to be galloping across the Caribbean that year. In Annapolis we had come across a notice detailing the boats in Grenada during Hurricane Ivan - and their current state; damaged, sunk, safe, etc. I was dismayed to see how many of them we had met in our travels...

33 – Cruising the ‘ditch’



Our good friends Doug and Shirley were flying from the UK to Miami on 10th October for their Silver Wedding Anniversary and were planning to cruise with us – we needed to get our skates on! Our plan was to take the ICW for some of the way starting at Norfolk, Virginia and finishing in Florida.

Hampton Roads, Norfolk, a huge naval base with aircraft carriers, submarines and a vast array of other naval vessels lining the quaysides, is on the southern side of the Chesapeake Bay. Just as we were motoring past the Naval Base, our DSC (Digital Selective Calling) VHF radio came to life and sounded a loud alarm indicating we had received a Mayday call. It is every mariner's duty to monitor the emergency Channel 16 and respond in the event of a Mayday. I went below and dug out the instruction manual to work out how to retrieve the information about the distress caller - DSC broadcasts the position and identity of the vessel in distress. While I was retrieving the information and readying my response to the distress call, the Coast Guard sent out a request to any vessel that had heard the

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Mayday to report to them. I called them up and identified myself – and advised them of the details of the distress vessel – including its name and position by lat/long as determined by the DSC radio. After a pregnant pause, the Coast Guard asked for the information again – then asked for our position and, reverting to type, asked for the height of our mast. It was apparent that they were unsure how DSC operated – and still used the triangulation method to determine the position of the vessel in distress. We heard no more from the Coast Guard about this incident. Hopefully, the US has now caught up with technology!

Portsmouth is the start of the ICW. We spent a couple of days here just unwinding and sightseeing prior to our ‘mad dash’ south. Hurricane Jeanne was still a threat, so we timed our trip to, hopefully, miss her. The ICW is a huge canal over 1,000 miles long from Norfolk to Miami – and then a further 150 miles to Key West. This ‘ditch’ is supposedly dredged to at least nine feet (three metres), but there was an argument with the Corps of Engineers (Military) and the individual States as to who should be responsible for keeping it dredged. In the meantime, it was silting up badly and was only 3-4 feet deep in parts, with little help from the tides to keep it open. With our 2-metre (6’6”) draft we were limited where *Poco Andante* could go.

The other limiting factor is the height of bridges; although nominally there is a 65ft (19.8m) clearance on fixed bridges, closer to Florida this has been forgotten by modern bridge builders... We had carefully measured the boat (in US measures) when it was out of the water in Rhode Island and calculated that *Poco Andante* was 57-feet high above the waterline plus about 1½ feet for aerials – hopefully flexible! The cruising books advised that you could only count on doing 50 miles a day due to bridge openings and difficulties in night navigation.

Our first taste was a short trip of 12 miles to Great Bridge – we had been told this was a good place to re-provision with food and drinks. We tied up to the bank, alongside a picnic/barbecue site. It was only a short walk to the local supermarket, so we decided to stock up on essentials – wine and beer – plus a little food and hardware. The US hospitality continued in earnest; after enquiring about borrowing the supermarket trolleys to take our provisions back to the boat, we were offered a lift by the supermarket manager instead. The prices and

service were so good that we decided to return for a second load. Much to my embarrassment the manager recognized us and again offered his services! He was intrigued by our exploits and spent a short time aboard exploring our yacht.

From Great Bridge we went to Coinjock, through the marshlands of Virginia into North Carolina. Hurricane Jeanne was getting closer, so we tied up in the small marina there. While generally wandering around and chatting to the other crews, we soon found that several of the boats had had the same idea and were waiting for the storm to pass - including a 40-metre motor yacht called *Norwegian Queen* owned by a paper mill/insurance magnate. Later that day we were honoured to be invited to a 'crab bake' held by *Norwegian Queen* for all the boats in the marina. This turned out to be quite a hoot and lots of fun - one of the highlights of the season.

A quick recipe for a crab bake: Take 2 barrels of fresh blue crabs (ensure you keep the lid on to stop them from escaping); this allows 10-20 crabs per person! Cover lots of picnic tables with paper (which makes cleaning up afterwards easier), allow one corn on the cob per person and cook as normal. Make up two gallons of Clam Chowder (to the chef's secret recipe... very tasty). Serve corn and chowder as appetisers. Put lots of beer on ice. On a gas ring boil up two gallons of water with a little vinegar plus a dash of seafood seasoning. When boiling add the crabs (ensuring you are not bitten - and chase any that escape). Boil crabs for 15 minutes (keeping lid firmly closed). Strain crabs and empty onto the centre of the table. Enjoy...

We had expected to stay in Coinjock for a while, but listening to the forecast indicated that Hurricane Jeanne was slowing and dissipating so we decided to continue south. From Coinjock we crossed the Albemarle Sound and entered the Alligator River, anchoring for the night in the middle of the North Carolina Swamp. It was like being in the middle of a prehistoric film, surrounded by tree stumps and seething swamp in every direction. A primordial vista - you could almost feel the coal being made there and half expected alligators to swarm the boat! We then entered the Pungo River canal - aren't the names great - which took us through Cypress Swamp into the Pimlico River.

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We had planned to seek shelter at Oriental, but the land was flat and marshy providing poor shelter, so we crossed the river and anchored in Adams Creek which was a little more protected. Hurricane Jeanne was now getting closer and next day, seeking better protection, we ran up to New Bern, further up the Neuse River. We tied up at the Sheraton Marina next to the hotel of the same name and made use of all their facilities - what luxury!

As the hurricane warning was still in force, we were keen to find out the marina's procedure during the build-up of the hurricane. The marina manager sauntered down the pontoon, "Where are you heading?" he asked. We explained that we'd come to seek shelter from Hurricane Jeanne and were heading south. Reassuringly he told us that Jeanne had just been downgraded to a tropical storm and went on to outline their hurricane procedure - which was to take all the boats out into the Sound and anchor them there! He reassured us that they were not evacuating the marina on that day - the winds would be strong but manageable.

Hurricane Jeanne came with storm force winds and lots of rain but, thankfully, nothing major. We hunkered down and made forays into New Bern, whose claim to fame is the birthplace of Pepsi Cola.

34 – Miami bound

Time was now pressing and the deadline for getting to Miami was getting closer... Tropical forecasts looked good - no hurricanes on the horizon. We decided to make haste to Charleston, South Carolina and wait there until the last possible moment before taking the direct route out to sea to Miami. After the weather cleared, we headed for Beaufort, North Carolina and anchored just inside the spit overnight. Early the next morning we left the brown swampy waters of the ICW behind us and were in the Atlantic again. The 36-hour trip from Beaufort to Charleston was uneventful with a pleasant reach all the way. We anchored just off the city marina for the weekend.

Charleston was lovely - lots of interesting walks, but HOT, damned HOT. The locals reckoned that the steam rises out of the ground there; I can believe this! Saturday night we treated ourselves to dinner at Bubba Gump's Shrimp Restaurant, which was great fun. I even won a prize in the Forrest Gump trivia quiz - presented by a Tom Hanks look-alike! Keith really enjoyed the shrimps, too.

Monday morning soon came, and we set off for our last leg to Miami in light winds and glorious sunshine. As soon as we got offshore the humidity dropped and the climate was pleasant again.

The trip to Miami was over 400 miles and crosses the Gulf Stream on the way. After the second day the wind rose to 20-25 knots. With a reefed main and genoa, we reached south and just off Cape Canaveral we hit the Gulf Stream. Tall, square waves from all directions greeted us - it was very uncomfortable. The best tactic was to keep close inshore for flatter water, but we had Cape Canaveral to round - so it was 'grin-and-bear-it' for 24 hours. During one of the worst bits our 'salvaged' dinghy (which we were still towing) flipped over and broke free - it had become a bit of a liability, and we certainly weren't prepared to turn around to retrieve it in those conditions, so we let it go. I tried to call the US Coast Guard to warn them about the abandoned dinghy - and to ask the whereabouts of the current limit of the Gulf Stream - but after repeated failed

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attempts to contact them I gave up. My faith in the US Coast Guard dropped even lower...

We finally rounded Cape Canaveral and came inshore; two miles off, the seas slackened and the current eased and we finished our trip to Miami doing 7-8 knots in a deep blue sea, under white and fluffy clouds - joined at last by some dolphins!

We arrived at the Miami Beach Marina with 36 hours to spare before Doug and Shirley arrived. This gave me just enough time to clean the boat inside and out, do some laundry, rearrange the storage, and get the lie of the land. Next day we made it to the airport, by bus, and were delighted to meet Doug and Shirley - complete with my new British passport - their flight arrived just as we did. They managed to stay awake until bedtime, courtesy of a walk around the Art Deco area of Miami Beach. Next day, after grocery shopping, we checked out of the marina and headed south towards the Florida Keys. The first exercise was a 'Man Overboard' drill - instigated when Doug's hat blew off! Hat successfully retrieved, the route took us through the city and along part of the ICW and under the last of the bridges towards Key Biscayne. The Florida Keys are shallow; we found this out the hard way by running aground twice before we found the 'deep' water into this little harbour. Doug and Shirley had their first taste of coconut-fringed beaches and diving off the back of the boat into warm blue water.

The aim was to get to Key Largo before the 13th when Doug and Shirley were celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. We had hoped to stop at an intermediate anchorage on the way but another grounding in the main channel scuppered this idea. It was a long sail to Key Largo - but at least we saw a few turtles on the way.

Key Largo, the start of the Keys proper, was a little disappointing. The whole of the north Keys are thin strips of land covered with mangrove trees joined by causeways and bridges forming US Highway 1. We anchored off Rodriguez Key but found that it was too far to the coral reef national park and the bus transport along the Keys a little hit-and-miss. However, Doug and Shirley found a nice 'resort' hotel where they spent their anniversary night - enough said... Keith and I, on the other hand, went shopping and found a really great outlet store to stock up on clothes! We both had new wardrobes for the coming year - and I even found a dentist to replace a lost filling. The weather was overcast and rainy when Doug and

Shirley rejoined us; we sat out another day before moving anchorage to Long Key, where we were able to get ashore to view the mangrove-fringed beaches close at hand.

We had been travelling along the Hawk Channel, which separates the Keys from the reef. From Long Key we took a side trip out to Sombrero Reef where we enjoyed snorkelling on coral reefs - complete with barracuda and nurse sharks - and lots of jelly fish, much to Shirley's horror! That night we arrived at Bahia Honda, probably the nicest anchorages in the Keys, just off a palm-fringed beach, with lovely walks in the state park; we decided to stay an extra day. This break from civilization for a while was all well and good - but shopping was high on Shirley's agenda, so it was off to Key West.

Key West was very different from the parts of the US that we had already visited; laid back, with a party atmosphere and a touch of the Caribbean/Latin in the air. The favourite past-times were eating out, watching the sunset, 'pub crawling', or just walking around. We did all of these, including a visit to the local shopping malls. Sadly, after two weeks Doug and Shirley had to leave us and took a shuttle back to Miami airport.

The week following their departure was Fantasy Fest - a week-long party culminating in Halloween. An unbelievable experience - and difficult to describe... People of both sexes, all shapes, sizes and ages strolling through the streets wearing not much at all - although some body paint was (sometimes) applied to strategic bits of the anatomy! The body painting artists set up business in shop fronts along Duval Street, where a lot of the action took place - and the process itself was viewed by all the passers-by. Partying started on the Monday with many of the bars and restaurants holding 'themed' parties e.g. toga, foam, 'Ho' and Pimp' parties, etc., and 'climaxed' on the Saturday evening with a formal parade through Key West including 70 floats. Unfortunately, the 'hot' nature of the previous days' photos must have burned out our camera - which promptly died during the parade... The whole experience was amazing fun!

Interspersed with the fun of Fantasy Fest we took advantage of the large US supermarkets to re-stock the boat ready for the next few months in the Caribbean. Keith and I spent one morning 'planning' our trip to Cuba - nearly 30 ports of call - an estimated 2-3-month trip, with limited availability for anything. The provisioning involved taking the RIB through the numerous channels and catching

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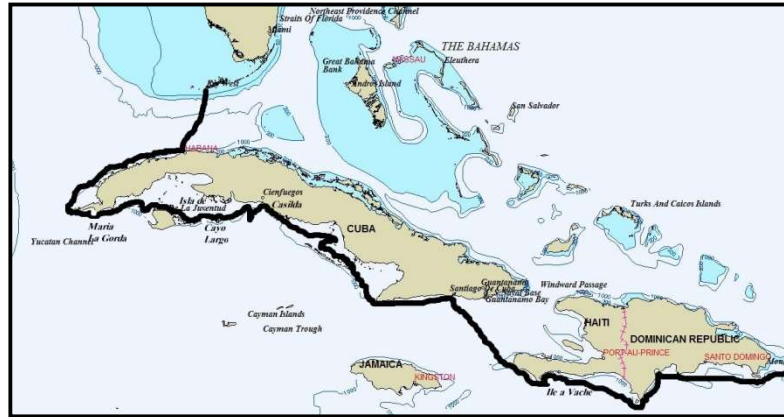
a bus to the out-of-town supermarket. We discovered that a full supermarket trolley could be packed into two back packs and our 'granny' trolley. Thankfully, the liquor store had its own dinghy dock, so this part of the provisioning was a bit easier.

After Fantasy Fest a new wave of people invaded the town – they could be seen walking around with stuffed parrots on their hats – and some wearing pirate costumes. A barman explained that they were 'Parrot Heads' attending the annual Jimmy Buffett convention. Jimmy is a singer/songwriter whose music portrays 'island escapism'. After listening to some of his tracks, we even bought a CD.

We also found a business centre whose address we could use to order various bits and pieces - including about 20m of Sunbrella canvas, to eventually replace our bimini and sail covers. I also posted the Cruising Guide back to the Bar Harbour Harbour Master, as we'd promised all those months ago.

Fully provisioned and ready to go we slipped out of Key West and bid farewell to the US. We left with fond memories of our trip along the east coast. It was a short 90-mile trip to Havana but was a huge cultural shift.

35 – Cuba



Cuba is a country to stir the emotions - frustration, sometimes anger, always friendliness, laughter and music. A country of dramatic scenery, beautiful clear waters, coral reefs, taxing navigation and sailing.

To understand Cuba, you need to know a little of its history and politics. Castro, Che Guevara and 81 loyalists in a small yacht landed on the Southeast coast and a bitter struggle ensued. Only 16 survived and lived for three years in the bleak and inhospitable mountains of the Sierra Maestra. Their movement grew and eventually they overthrew the Batista regime - whatever your political opinion one must admire the determination of this group. The country enjoyed reasonable affluence during their association with the USSR, enabling Castro to build schools, hospitals, roads and provide the basic needs to all its citizens. We did not see poverty in Cuba; all children went to school, housing was free, basic food was free (bread, cheese, rice, beans, etc.), health care was free. As a Marxist regime, just about everything was controlled by the state; bureaucracy was rife, 'make jobs' were everywhere. Wages were egalitarian; around

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US\$15 per month (400 Cuban pesos) whether you were a doctor or the guy who checked the milk output of cows!

The collapse of the USSR was a blow to the economy - and the US trade and travel embargo was an even greater blow. To overcome this Castro had created a 'Special Period' where tourism was high on the priority as a way to earn much-needed hard currency. He even created a special currency called the Convertible Peso - on a par with the US dollar. The regime set about to extract as many US dollars from the tourists as possible. They were also paranoid about a possible US invasion and about Cubans fleeing the country - so there were tight restrictions on boat traffic throughout the country. Castro's death in 2016 has resulted in an improvement in the relationship with the USA. How this develops in the future will be interesting to see.

The Cuban people are lovely. 'Friendly' is not strong enough to describe them. As an example, one day we were walking along a quayside and made a chance remark about a lovely fish that the local fisherman was carrying. The next moment he insisted on giving it to us - it fed six people that night.

We found that there are three ways to holiday or visit Cuba - all very different and each has its own delights:

- The all-inclusive package holiday at a resort.
- The independent traveller away from the tourist areas.
- The self-sufficient holiday spent on a deserted coral island.

We tried all of these. They each gave totally different views of Cuba and all equally valid. A favourite phrase of ours was "Is this the real Cuba?"

1. The All-Inclusive Experience.

All around Cuba are special holiday resorts mainly set in the most beautiful parts of the country. They are large, modern resorts with lovely beaches, pools, restaurants, bars, etc. Tourists have paid up front - and all food and drinks are included in the price. Extras are paid for in Convertible Pesos and are very expensive by international standards. If you turned up at one of these resorts, there was no mechanism to pay for anything - or if you could, the cost was high.

The staff assumed that if you were foreign then you must be all-inclusive! We enjoyed several days playing tourists at these hotels.

Cayo Largo was one resort where we spent a fun Christmas and New Year with the yacht *Ed Hunter* - two young handsome Norwegians, Erik and Anders, sailing from Fort Lauderdale to the Caribbean then planning to sail back to Norway. Erik and Anders thought they were in heaven - anchored off a white palm-fringed beach with free food, free drink and bikini-clad girls. For a week the lads enjoyed partying into the nights - and long lazy mornings - until one night, Erik fell asleep at the resort nightclub and a helpful staff member offered to help him to his room. In his tipsy state, Erik forgot where he was and said he wasn't staying at the hotel! There was no problem, but the lads were too embarrassed to return the next day...

2. The Independent Traveller.

This was the most difficult but could be the most rewarding Cuban experience. The authorities, although not discouraging, make life difficult - especially if you're on a boat. At every port you were boarded on arrival by the Guardia Frontera to complete the formalities - this can take some hours. Upon leaving you must also check out and be searched. This makes early starts impossible. It's not only cruisers who have a problem. At Vinales we met a lovely young Dutch couple, Vincent and Roos who were on a six-month cycling trip; Cuba then on to Mexico and Central America ending up in Panama City. They had also been forced into long journeys in order to reach the next 'Casa Particular' - these are private houses that can take in guests - the only accommodation allowed for independent travellers - or the expensive all-inclusive tourist hotels.

As an independent traveller you could get onto the local Peso economy and eat street food - the roast pork sandwiches at 5 pesos (20 US cents) were particularly tasty. Shopping in markets for fruit, vegetables and meat was an experience. Bread was almost impossible to buy - it is free to Cubans as part of their food allowance - if you were lucky, the bread distribution centres would sometimes give you some for free. Unfortunately, in the markets, not much was available; every day one has to search for everything, and it was great excitement to find cheese, smoked chicken and even eggs! In the large towns there were 'Dollar' shops, where only the Convertible Peso was accepted. These were Government-run stores stocking a

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small selection of canned and packet goods, beer and rum. The prices were very expensive compared to the US, so we preferred to use our on-board provisions. We had stocked up in Key West with over four month's supply.

Travelling this way brought home the daily struggle and friendliness of the Cuban people. In some of the isolated communities like La Esperanza and Pilon it was quite common to be invited into peoples' homes for a meal. Sandra at La Esperanza was particularly obliging and did some shopping for us, organised a car and cooked us an evening meal. She did not expect anything and was overwhelmed by our \$20 farewell gift.

3. The Self-Sufficient Holiday.

For the cruiser this was the real Cuba - anchoring off a deserted white sandy beach, behind a coral reef teeming with fish - lobsters, snapper and hog fish all easily harvested.

Most of the anchorages were behind cayos (islands) sheltered from the prevailing winds and often protected by coral reefs. Although the beaches were accessible by dinghy, often the islands were covered in low lying dense scrub or mangrove, so exploration was limited. Monkeys, iguanas and other creatures wandered around. On Cayo Campos we lit a huge bonfire and barbecued freshly caught lobsters together with potatoes and sausages - all consumed with lots of rum!

The only other people around were the State fishermen - who spent 20 days at sea and 10 days ashore. They would often come over and chat, offering to share their catch and provide ice just for a glass or two of rum or beer. We got a bucket full of prawns at Cayo Algodon Grande, fish and lobsters at Cayo Zaza de Fuera, and lobsters at Cayo Paraiso. Lobsters were caught by free diving, so snorkels, flippers and masks were prized possessions and made great 'trade' goods.

At Cayo Cantiles we visited the monkey sanctuary - a 'conservation station' with four Cubans on the island - only to find that there were no monkeys! And the conservation work consisted of keeping a path clear into the scrub...we never found out why they kept the path clear. It didn't go anywhere, and no tourists came to the island! Another example of the 'make-work' regime. We saw a few of these stations on the outer islands - often near major passes

through the reef - so we suspect they were really just lookout posts. Cuba was paranoid about possible invasion by the US and expected another Bay of Pigs attempt... They have little defence capability and rely on the fishermen and others to provide early warning. At Nueva Gerona we accidentally witnessed military manoeuvres where a heavily camouflaged fishing boat loaded with troops was escorting a camouflaged torpedo on a make-shift raft propelled by two 5 HP outboards!

Our introduction to Cuba was in Havana - during the crossing from Key West we had tried to notify Marina Hemingway of our anticipated arrival by VHF radio but had received no response. However, when we arrived, we were greeted by a total of seven officials and a sniffer dog. They took about an hour to give us our clearance. We later heard that this was amazingly quick - some cruisers take up to five hours to be processed. They even offered not to stamp our passports - in case we needed to re-enter the USA. We were delighted to have a Cuban stamp in our passports - in fact it was the first ever stamp I got in my brand-new British passport!

Havana is a large bustling city attractive in parts but has huge scope for renovation of the once-magnificent buildings. Old fifties-style Buicks and Chevrolets give Havana its extra appeal. Outside of the cities horse (or bullock) carts are the main means of transport - as well as the imaginative 'Camel' buses on the back of articulated trucks - so called due to the hump in the centre carriage.

Our welcome to Havana was made much more enjoyable by Mark & Eva. Mark is the son of my ex-boss. Before leaving the USA, we'd had a massive shopping spree on their behalf for all those bits and pieces not available in Cuba - these made life more pleasurable. On their shopping list was a satellite TV receiver (so they could enjoy foreign programs), a sandwich maker (not approved of in Cuba due to the heavy voltage requirement), and a selection of tasty and spicy sauces (to improve the local bland diet ingredients). It was great fun unpacking everything and hoping they approved of our choices... They also took us to a great 'paladar', the Cuban private-enterprise restaurants which were generally far superior to the 'state-owned' restaurants.

Havana looked as one imagines Beirut must have been during its troubles - a mixture of derelict buildings with some signs of

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restoration here and there. The Bacardi building, a remnant of the 1920's and survivor from the pre-Castro era, has a spectacular façade. The Bacardi company began in Cuba in 1862 – and Keith worked for them briefly in Southampton just before we went cruising, so of course, we had to have a drink on the rooftop balcony.

Across the harbour stands the impressive Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña. Construction began in 1763 following the short-lived capture of Havana by British forces in 1762. The British had overrun the El Morro castle in a 44-day siege, and when Cuba was returned to the Spanish under treaty terms it was decided more protection was needed. The fortress was completed in 1774 after Spain invested an incredible amount of money into building it. According to Spanish historians, King Carlos III asked for a telescope with which to look at the fortress, arguing that a building so expensive could surely be seen from Madrid. It was so well-designed that it has never been attacked by invaders, making it a great success. As a result, it has had a fairly quiet military history, although it was used as a military prison under pre-Revolution dictators Machado and Batista. In 1959 La Cabaña was taken over by Communist rebels, and the fortress became the headquarters of Che Guevara and the revolutionaries. The new residents were equally bloodthirsty, executing Batista's officers and adding another chapter to the grisly history of the fortress.

After a week's acclimatisation we 'checked out' of Havana and headed west before turning south to explore the south coast. We were told *Poco Andante* had to check in and out of every port - and any marina - with the Guardia Frontera. The sailing, pilotage and navigation were certainly testing. Charts and pilots are reasonably accurate, but the hurricanes during the previous six months had changed some of the topography, moved sand banks and removed some of the buoys and beacons. Inside the reef, the water was shallow and with our 2-metre draught this often caused problems.

At Cayo Paraiso the horseshoe-shaped bay beloved of Ernest Hemmingway had been changed to just a small islet with a sandbank; all navigation marks had been wiped out.

Around Cayo Levisa it had shallowed considerably - Keith had to launch the dinghy to find a way through, after running aground so often - although usually you could just reverse off. We soon learned to read the water colours - in general, pale turquoise blue meant

sandy bottom but possibly shallow – as the water deepened, so did the shade of blue. Green or brown indicated coral reef, depth unknown and difficult to determine in very clear water – and should be avoided. This experience stood us in good stead over the following years as we spent a lot of time cruising in coral country.

In Cuba, as the water was so clear, you could often see the bottom – even in twenty metres of water – and eyeball navigation became the norm. Keith would be on the bow pointing in the direction of likely deeper water – and saying, “Tell me when the depth sounder reads zero!” I later admitted that it had read zero most of the time, but as we were still afloat, I didn’t worry him!

One time, we were aground just off a channel. Keith was about to put the kedge anchor out to pull us sideways into the deeper water when a local ‘dive’ boat appeared. They kindly took our line and pulled us clear – we now had someone to follow to the next resort.

After anchoring off, we went across by dinghy to thank them and discovered they were in the process of trying to install a new air conditioning unit for their guests. Their installation was hindered by the fact they had no screws or tools! Keith dashed back to *Poco Andante* and retrieved his tools and a supply of assorted screws. The Cubans thought this was a treasure trove – and were quite unbelieving that we had so many riches on board. Keith spent the afternoon drilling and fixing – all the while we were being plied with copious generous mojitos! We left them with a mixed handful of screws for the future – and a hangover for ourselves.

“Where do you get your fuel?” Keith asked. Apparently, it was supplied by the Government on a regular basis regardless of whether the resort actually had any clients. He leapt at the opportunity to negotiate a price with the crew. Our jerry cans were surreptitiously placed on the pontoon in the dead of night – and miraculously filled by morning... In general, getting diesel was not easy – we often had to rely on the generosity of the local dive or fishing boats to sell us a few gallons. Where it was available it was expensive and complex to arrange. At Cayo Largo it took all day to legally obtain 240 litres!

As we were rounding the western-most tip of Cuba, our charts showed the Faro Roncali lighthouse together with its light pattern. It was nighttime as we approached so I was on the helm. I could see an entire area lit up on what looked like the western tip, but there were so many lights, I couldn’t distinguish the Faro Roncali light pattern.

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I was so concerned that I fired up our radar to check that my navigation was correct – and it was. So, I continued on our course. As we got closer, it became apparent that the lighthouse was there, but the paranoid Cubans had enclosed it with tall fences like a concentration camp, with watchtowers and spotlights illuminating the interior and exterior. As a result, it was almost impossible to make out the lighthouse lights!

Once safely around the cape, we turned east along the southern coast of Cuba, into the prevailing wind and seas. If we strayed outside of the reef, we hit the long Caribbean fetch causing 2-3m head-on seas. Winds were affected by the local topography and could blow up to 25 or 30 knots in the afternoon. It was not much fun to be caught in this - hence short hops inside the reef became the preferred strategy, even though the navigation was a little taxing.

The south coast was a real mixture of deserted islands - generally of the mangrove rather than the sandy beach/coconut tree variety - and some 'tourist resort' places. The tourist hotels had telephones and internet access (sometimes) however Cubans are not allowed to stay at them - although they are allowed to work there! We found these resorts useful for trying to contact the outside world and also as a relief from the struggle of everyday life in Cuba.

The Cuban people are wonderfully friendly and helpful – but their life was very hard caused, in part, by the US trade embargo. They are healthy and well educated – it was delightful to see the children in their pristine school uniforms – however to get the basic necessities of life was a daily grind. Transport within towns was by foot or horse-and-cart and the different stores are scattered all over town. One shop might have eggs one day but none the next, bread at another location, while the vegetables are home grown and sold at the front of people's houses. I got really excited one day when, out for a walk up a mountain, I saw someone with a bucket of potatoes for sale; much to his amazement I bought the lot. Plastic bags for the produce were very rare and I soon learned to carry my own recycled supply of grocery bags and egg trays; otherwise, whatever you bought got poured into your handbag – including fresh meat! Sometimes at anchor we'd hear the squeals of an animal being killed – at market next day we'd see the butchered meat for sale - with the creature's head on display to illustrate the type of meat and its freshness. Using the word 'butchered' was a slight misnomer; hacked into

unrecognisable hunks and with a scattering of flies would be a more accurate description. We were really pleased that we'd stocked up so well before leaving the US. It was a luxury to be able to return to the boat for meals – although the local pizzas were great.

Having a car was a privilege – if your government job provided a vehicle, you were under obligation to pick up any hitchhikers along the way! Private cars were the remnants of the pre-Castro days and were kept going by any means possible. Although the Cubans were very competent at repairing these 1950's vehicles, they were not familiar with repairing modern engines and technology. It was unfortunate for one cruiser who was having problems with his diesel generator. He employed a local mechanic to repair it - when it was returned, although working (badly), he discovered that the mechanic had merely by-passed the modern control system!

When anchored out at some deserted island we were often visited by local fishermen on some truly amazing home-built boats; reinforced concrete was a common building material but some of the most bizarre vessels were the 'pneumaticos'. These comprised a tractor tube cut in two, tied at each end and inflated. The two 'U' shaped tubes were secured together using deconstructed wooden shipping pallets – this provided a stable sitting platform between the tubes and a gap used to dive through when lobster fishing. We saw these many miles from shore, being paddled with an oar fashioned from a palm frond.

One day, two guys rowed out of nowhere on a pedalo to offer lobsters and fish for sale. The going rate was US\$1 per lobster. After two months even Keith was getting sick of eating lobster and got really excited one day when a shrimping boat came close and, for half a bottle of rum, he got about three large buckets of prawns on ice! Another time he got two lobsters and two fish for half a bottle of rum - the cost of the rum was also about US\$1... The commercial fishing boats go out for 20 days a month – and they're not allowed to take any alcohol on board – so they welcome the rare opportunity to trade for beer or rum. After a couple of months our beer supply was getting low and the rum bought in Havana became the main drink of choice...

One day, early in our stay, at Puerto Esperanza we hired a car and driver to visit Vinales - a local town that had banking facilities. This entailed a drive through the mountains that form the spine of Cuba

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and are worthy of a visit. We also heard that there was a well-marked walk from a local sight, through the hills, back to town and decided to include this on our itinerary. Our driver thought we were nuts - a car is an expensive privilege, but for us it was a chance to stretch our legs.

It was on this walk that we met the previously mentioned Roos & Vincent, a Dutch couple cycling around Cuba. They'd only started their adventure a couple of weeks previously and Roos was finding the cycling difficult and was very homesick. When we explained that we were cruising, Vincent was full of questions - it turned out he had done some sailing in Holland and was keen to do some blue water sailing himself. In the end we invited them to join us for about four days to cruise to the Isle de Juventud further along the south coast. Rather daringly, considering we'd only just met, they agreed to meet us three days later at a place called Maria La Gorda - a 120-kilometre bike ride for them - on a dead-end road! Their relief at seeing *Poco Andante* at anchor when they duly arrived was apparently considerable... They'd cycled - while we'd had a wonderful down-wind sail with gennaker - our last down-wind sail until we reached the Virgin Islands, at least another 2-3 months away.

Maria La Gorda was a dive resort with about 20 chalets, two small restaurants and a small shop - set in the most crystal-clear turquoise water we'd seen so far. We anchored in about 7-metres of water and could see the star fish on the bottom! The coral was colourful with loads of tropical fish - and snorkelling was great - the water temperature was about 28°C. After ferrying Roos & Vincent, their two mountain bikes and four panniers on board via the dinghy we all enjoyed exploring the dive sites for a couple of days.

Soon it was time to move on; we left around 10pm one evening and set sail for the Isle de Juventud with stops along the way at some deserted islands - departure time was determined by the need to arrive during the afternoon to navigate through the coral reefs. Unfortunately, our first leg involved rounding an exposed headland; immediately the seas became confused and *Poco* had the wind on her nose - we hadn't taken this into account when planning to give our visitors a taste of cruising... Vincent suffered a nasty bout of sea sickness and their much looked-forward-to night sail was not a good experience! However, upon arrival at the deserted island, the miracle

cure for sea sickness of 'sitting under a tree' worked and we were all able to enjoy exploring these pristine mangrove cays.

When in Nueva Gerona on the Isle de Juventud Anders and Erik on *Ed Hunter* turned up - two valiant young Norwegian guys who had just finished their National Service and had used their lump sum payment to fly to Florida, buy the best cruising boat they could afford and explore the Caribbean before possibly sailing it back to Norway. *Ed Hunter* was a 28-foot Morgan of considerable age. Apart from a new engine which they needed to have fitted before they even left the US, it had very few facilities. Although it had a gas cooker, they couldn't get any replacement gas bottles in Cuba so ended up purchasing a small domestic gas oven that fitted Cuban gas bottles.

In centuries past, real pirates of the Caribbean slipped into the coves of Isle de Juventud, on boats bearing illicit booty. Today, visitors to the island usually come to dive off the south-western tip, Punta Francés, staying at the island's one hotel. And tour the island's panopticon prison, Presidio Modelo (now an eerie museum), where Fidel Castro was incarcerated in 1953 for attacking army barracks - an event that triggered the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

With Roos and Vincent, and Anders and Erik, the six of us had many meals and drinks together on board *Poco Andante*. We all agreed to spend Christmas, two weeks hence, together at Cayo Largo, a resort island - which turned out to be fabulous. We spent the weeks island hopping and enjoying the freedom from bureaucracy on uninhabited islands along the way. We celebrated Christmas on an abandoned jetty off a picture-postcard white sandy beach complete with palm trees!

By now we were getting concerned about our slow progress along the south coast, but bad weather held us there until after New Year. Mind you, we were enjoying free drinks and meals at the 'all inclusive' resorts - and making use of their internet cafes and swimming pools...

After celebrating Ander's birthday on the 30th and Keith's on the 31st of December, we eventually got away on 3rd January - intending to do a long slog along the outside of the reef to Santiago de Cuba but bad weather forced us back into the coast - and yet another all-inclusive resort.

By now Roos & Vincent had been with us a month and were ready to continue their own adventure so we waved them goodbye at

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Casilda. We also said goodbye to Erik and Anders who had decided to take *Ed Hunter* west towards Mexico.

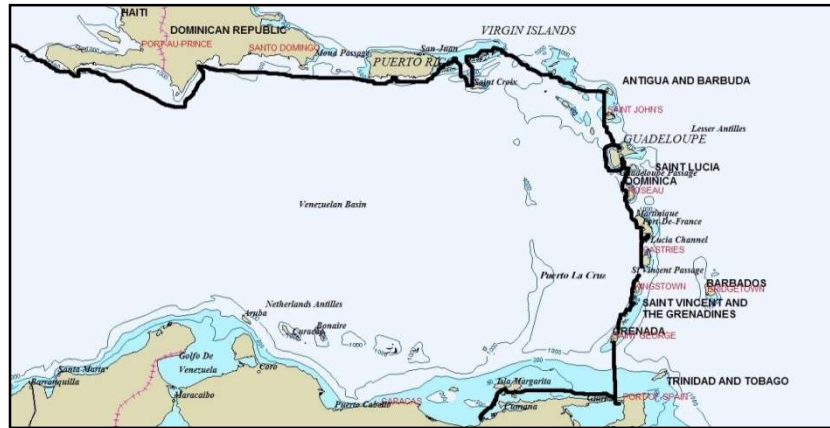
At last, we got some good weather and day-sailed along the southeast coast where we were to check out of Cuba at Santiago de Cuba before crossing the Windward Passage to Haiti, by-passing Guantanamo Bay... It was great to experience a few nights anchored off deserted islands undisturbed by visits from the Guardia Frontera. These few days made us realise how much we had missed the freedom to cruise and anchor where and when we chose – it was definitely time for the sun to set on Cuba!

One evening, Keith said he was going spear fishing. After setting the anchor light, I went below to tidy up and commented “I thought you were going fishing!” And the reply was “I already have – it only took me five minutes to catch our dinner!”.

At Maria del Portillo we once again received a visit from the Guardia who reminded us we had to check out at Santiago de Cuba. Not a problem. There was a Canadian yacht at anchor close by and the guys on board explained that they had been there a couple of months – apparently across the bay was another all-inclusive resort and they had been enjoying free meals and drinks in return for doing some much needed maintenance at the resort!

By now our visas were running out and we headed east but couldn't face going into Santiago de Cuba – so we just sailed on past Guantanamo Bay to Haiti!

36 – Back to the Caribbean!



We left Cuba mid-January and sailed 200 miles east, arriving in Île à Vache, Haiti 36 hours later. We had been told by another cruiser that there was a harbour of refuge on Île à Vache – vaguely situated on the SW corner of the island. When we arrived, the topography didn't look quite right. I studied our charts and the nearest place that looked likely to be a safe harbour was on the NW corner of the island. In the meantime, a flotilla of small fishing craft sailed out to greet us and they were keen for us to stop at their village - we approached but we couldn't see any entrance through the coral reef. By this time, we were tired and becoming anxious as to where we could spend the night – or were we about to give up and continue on to the Dominican Republic? Just in time, Keith spotted a 'modern' power boat in the distance, disappearing around the headland on the NW corner – desperate, we took this as a positive sign – and decided to follow its track and see where it went. As we rounded the NW corner of the island, Keith fortunately saw the vessel enter a very secluded gap in the island and disappear from sight. Although our charts did not show this particular harbour, it was exactly where I'd expected to see one from the chart. We agreed to risk the entrance and 'felt' our way

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in and discovered a secluded bay with a fabulous anchorage complete with mooring balls.

Port Morgan, named after Captain Morgan, the pirate who used this superb anchorage as his base, had been created by two French cruisers who had arrived a few years previously and fallen in love with the place and stayed. They invested over US\$2 million in a hotel complex, restaurant and marina. Apart from the hotel, there was no electricity or cars on the island. Even though the island was very remote, we still needed to check in with Customs and Immigration. Fortunately, the owners had an 'arrangement' with the authorities on the mainland; they could send our passports and ship's papers across by launch, without us needing to accompany them. A couple of days later we received our papers back with all the necessary permits - a very useful service, as Haiti is an extremely dangerous country.

Île à Vache is around 16 kilometres long by 5 kilometres wide. There were about 4,000 inhabitants, mostly living in small primitive villages: subsistence farming and fishing, plus a little tourism from the hotel being the main income. These very poor people were extremely friendly and helpful - and superb sailors. They built their sailing skiffs on the beach and used them for transport and fishing around the island. We had been told of their many needs and, in particular, were recommended to take some gifts of writing materials for the local school. We enquired at the hotel and were told the name of a local school master who was trying to set up a new school. Schooling is expensive and often the eldest child is the only one of the family to be sent to school. He or she is then expected to teach the rest of the family after school. At the edge of the nearest village, we asked to be taken to Joseph's house and were duly escorted along the dirt path, through coconut palm groves, past small one-roomed hovels to Joseph's home where we donated our small offerings. His thanks and hospitality were enthusiastic and after a coconut or two (the local beverage) he proudly showed us the new school he was building.

One day, Keith was working on the dinghy and was hailed by a local man at the jetty who had a badly swollen ankle and was obviously in considerable pain and unable to work. As there were no medical facilities on the island, he asked Keith for help. All we could do was strap the ankle and provide him with anti-inflammatories and

painkillers and explain these were a 3-day supply and he should rest during that time.

While we were at Port Morgan, we met a group of Americans from 'The Discovery Channel' who were preparing a documentary on Captain Morgan; they were diving on the local reef - it was thought that the pirate scuttled his captured ships there. (Eventually Captain Morgan was so successful he was 'bought out' by the British government and made Governor of Jamaica.) There was great jubilation after one exploratory dive - they discovered a canon which was from the pirate era. This created a buzz of excitement in the bar that evening with dreams of untold wealth and the creation of a Disney-like theme park, heaven forbid! The reef around the island is strewn with wrecks, old and new, and the diving and snorkelling were superb.

A few days later, the wind picked up and even the hardy fishing fleet stayed in harbour. We waited a few more days for the wind to abate and when the fishing fleet left, we joined them. Once outside the sheltered harbour, the seas were still quite lumpy, but the wind was reasonable and once we were underway, all was fine.

It was our plan to stop at the Dominican Republic, the country to the east of Haiti. On route, we had been recommended to sail south of Isla Beata. This involved a long detour in some fairly uncomfortable conditions - and, after 36 hours of horrible sailing, we were dismayed to see a reasonably large fishing trawler come through the pass north of the island! We could have saved an awful lot of time and discomfort if we'd known the pass was safe...

After another 18 hours slog towards the coast, we dropped anchor off a beach to get some much-needed sleep and rest. Keith and I discussed what to do next and decided to give the Dominican Republic a miss - we had heard that bureaucracy and corruption was rife in the DR - and after two months of Cuban bureaucracy, we just couldn't face that again. From what we could see, the contrast between Haiti and the DR was striking - it was very apparent that the tourism boom had hit - the local fishermen were in modern power launches and hotels were springing up along the coast.

Although the prevailing winds in the Caribbean are usually from the East, the gentle cold fronts coming through were giving us fair wind and seas. Keen to get to civilisation, we headed out to sea. It took us four days, including one overnight stop, to cover the 400

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miles to Boqueron on the south-west coast of Puerto Rico. We had to cross the Mona Passage - usually notorious for its boisterous conditions; due to light winds we ended up motoring across. We were now running low on fuel and arrived with only three hours running left in the tank.

After nearly three months in the back-of-beyond, Boqueron seemed the height of civilisation. It was just like being in Key West again - telephones that worked, stores with produce on their shelves, bars and restaurants at reasonable prices. We checked in with Customs and Immigration at nearby Mayaguez and then visited the local supermarket. Fresh produce at last - even apples! Steak, salad and chips were back on the menu...

After a couple of days, and with a full tank of diesel again, we headed around to Ponce where we heard there was a Cash-and-Carry supermarket close to the harbour. This would allow us to conveniently top-up our supplies after Cuba.

The southern coast of Puerto Rico is mountainous with lots of small coral or mangrove islands - these provided good protection, with many useful anchorages. Our first stop was La Parguera, where a group of yachts, who were together in the DR during hurricane season, were cruising in company. It was starting to feel like home again. La Parguera was a delightful sleepy town, whose main claim to fame was 'Dick's Bar' - a meeting place with free internet. We were tempted to stay here, but our computer couldn't link up to their network and I really wanted to send out an email to everyone and update our website, so we moved on.

Ponce is an industrial town; noisy and commercial. One day to restock the larder and we moved on to Salinas, another favoured stop for the cruisers. Why? I'm not sure... No phone or internet, but lots of little bars and a wonderful safe anchorage in mangroves. There is a resident population of manatees (dugongs) - it was lovely to see them swimming around. These were the first I'd seen, and I was surprised to see how big they were - the size of a large hippo. As always, I tried to get some good photos, but they weren't very obliging. You can't help being impressed by wildlife photographers who get such great shots.

Culebra was our next stop - we'd spent a lot of time here in our first season - and finally, after nine months and 5,000 miles we had

completed a circumnavigation around the East coast of America and the North Caribbean. What an amazing time!

After a spell in Culebra, we headed off to cruise the rest of the US and British Virgin Islands. Our first stop was St Croix, the largest and most isolated USVI. The anchorage at the capital Christiansted was a bit 'lumpy' but the town itself is very pretty. The fort constructed using African slave labour in the 18th century is of yellow-rendered Danish-style walls and now considered a National Historic Site.

There is a lovely little island just off the main dock which has a pleasant resort - an afternoon there revived our spirits. The snorkelling around the island was also better than we expected, with turtles, rays and shoals of snappers and other coral fish in abundance. We caught a bus to Frederiksted, the second largest town, which gave us the opportunity to see the rest of the island. After a short walk through the town, we retired to a local bar for a spot of lunch and a beer. The place was deserted but for two women playing a noisy game of dominoes at one table. When we entered, the younger (middle-aged) woman went behind the bar and took our orders. She introduced us to her mother and invited us to join the dominoes. Neither of us had really played since childhood so they were immensely amused by our slow and hesitant play. In typical Caribbean style, they slapped the tiles down with gales of laughter. It was a fun few hours - and when it was time to go, the mother showed us where to catch the local bus back to *Poco Andante* on the other side of the island. It was a great way to spend the afternoon - and we have very fond memories of St Croix as a result!

From St Croix we sailed 40 miles north to Coral Bay, the second largest town on St John. It is a fine anchorage and lovely harbour, not much in the way of amenities, though. One general store, a couple of bars and a post office-come-general-meeting-place with good internet. The 'Skinny Legs' bar served great food - a really simple menu - and surprisingly for the US, no 'French fries' - just potato crisps with every meal. Our new wi-fi seemed to work well here so we decided to stay and completely re-write our web site using Dreamweaver. This was a major undertaking - I needed to learn the program almost from scratch. It eventually took me five days of solid work to re-create everything. Hopefully, though, this would make future updating easier. After all that hard work we treated ourselves to dinner and entertainment at 'Skinny Legs'.

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Most of St John is National Park - unspoilt forest, deserted beaches and lots of lovely walking trails with hummingbirds, butterflies and tropical plants everywhere. It never ceased to amaze me how different each island in the Caribbean is - they may only be three or four miles apart, but the history, politics and geology makes them all unique.

37 – Afternoon delight in the BVI's

After the US Virgin Islands, we moved across the bay to the BVIs (British Virgin Islands). This is pirate country... All the infamous pirates held out here in the 17th and 18th centuries accosting passing boats. Some of the islands are still named after some of these - Norman Island, Dead Chest Island and Jost Van Dyke are but a few. There are lots of anchorages and small bays with stunning beaches. The snorkelling/ diving is some of the best in the Caribbean. The BVIs have strived to preserve this and have succeeded. Most of the islands are close together so short sails of an hour or so are the norm, hence it is the place to charter a boat. As a consequence, many of the popular spots were full, although there was still plenty of room for the independent sailor. On the downside, the charter boats have pushed prices up and many of the best spots were full of moorings, although these certainly added to the fun. It was entertaining to sit on deck in late afternoon, rum punch in hand, watching their attempts to pick up a mooring!

One day a charter boat with a group of about six young things came in and tried to pick up a mooring. Although one guy managed to hook the mooring on only their third attempt, they were still going too fast, and he couldn't hold onto the boat hook. Eventually he had to let it go and stood on the deck with a bewildered expression, watching it float away. Keith shouted, "Just jump in and swim after it!", but to no avail. The boat hook was slowly beginning to sink as it filled with water, so Keith grabbed his face mask and dived overboard to the rescue. He returned it to them by dinghy - and recommended a much slower approach on their next attempt...

The other thing that amused us was watching the US charter couples come into these areas - the man would invariably be on the helm while the petite stick-thin woman was on the bow, wrestling with an anchor twice her weight, boat hooks, ropes and the mooring. This generally entailed a lot of shouting - not all of it amicable! After one of these altercations, the boat was still not attached to the mooring, so Keith kindly launched our dinghy and went over to offer

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his assistance. When he asked the woman to throw him the line so he could attach it to the mooring ball, she did so, with relief – unfortunately, she hadn't secured the other end to their boat, so the line ended up mostly in the water, but thankfully some in the dinghy!

These episodes reinforced our decision for me to take the helm while Keith handled the heavy work of mooring/anchoring. It made much more sense to us as he is stronger. We also worked out a hand-signal system for communicating between the bow and helm – this avoided lots of shouting.

One of our favourite places in the BVI was Great Harbour on Jost Van Dyke; Foxy's, the beach bar, was famous for its partying, and the beach and scenery was stunning.

A dinghy ride away is White Bay with its wide sandy beach and the original 'Soggy Dollar Bar' - so named as there is no place to tie up and most people anchor off and swim ashore through the surf, with money in pocket. Said soggy money is then hung up to dry behind the bar in exchange for a 'Pain Killer'...the local rum cocktail.

We also enjoyed Norman Island; the snorkelling around here was great, especially off the Indians and Pelican Island. The BVI National Park has laid day-use-only moorings for diving and snorkelling, which makes a short stop really easy. We also saw the wreck of the RMS *Rhone* a famous dive spot.

The Baths on Virgin Gorda were fun, although crowded by cruise ship visitors.

From here we ended up at the Bitter End Yacht Club for a few days' rest. There was free wi-fi internet available, so Keith was able to listen to the Wales vs Ireland rugby match live while sitting on the beach. Very surreal! Wales had had a great year - about time too!

38 – Boat maintenance in exotic locations...

Someone once said that “cruising can be described as boat maintenance in exotic locations” - this is very true!

Although we enjoyed our time in the BVIs we found that it was a little expensive and the communications were not very good compared with the US Virgin Islands. We had promised ourselves three weeks or so in St Maarten for boat maintenance, so we motor-sailed around to Spanish Town to check out. On the way, our engine made an awful loud graunching noise, and we lost all drive; I immediately switched off the engine and we sailed up to drop anchor. A quick dive determined that there was no rope around the propeller, but we certainly had no drive.

We decided that our best bet would be to sail around to St Maarten for professional help – both labour and parts would be cheaper there. This was a 75-mile trip across the Anegada Passage – Sod’s law made sure that the wind was on the nose again! 33 hours later, after what should have been about 15 hours, we anchored under sail outside Simpson Bay Lagoon, St Maarten. Next day, after checking in, Keith used both the 15hp and 6hp outboards on our rib to ‘shunt’ *Poco Andante* through the narrow channel, past the lifting bridge into the lagoon.

When we arrived, I realised that it was the day before Easter, and everything was shutting down for four days. Keith booked a mechanic for the next week, and we spent a few days cleaning the boat and starting our seemingly endless ‘to do’ list. It was also really great to catch up with the cruising community, after having spent so much time in recent months in Cuba and the ‘charter boat’ world so abundant in the BVIs.

A mini re-provision (rum and beer) and major maintenance were the main projects of our three-week stay. Our main sail and genoa were put in for repair - the main was showing signs of UV damage; we had part of it reinforced and the genoa had a long tear on the luff. We also wanted to update our refrigeration.

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We heard on the grapevine that there was an Australian guy who knew all about marine refrigeration – Rob of ‘Rob Marine’. Keith arranged for him to come on board and help him figure out what to do with the engine-driven unit which was chewing up fan belts – hence we were stuck with just the 110v fridge which gobbled up power. After exchanging a lot of ideas, his eventual advice was to get rid of the engine-driven compressor and replace the bulky storage plate in the freezer with the largest slim-line evaporation plates we could fit in the space and a second to replace the dividing wall between the fridge and freezer – these would be powered by compact 12-volt compressors which would easily fit in the already-ventilated locker beneath the freezer. Unfortunately, he only had the smaller one in stock. We installed this unit between the fridge and freezer compartments. In the end this arrangement worked an absolute treat. We would still need to run the 110v occasionally for the freezer, but the much more efficient 12-volt motor meant cold beers again! Eventually this was so successful that in Trinidad we ripped out the redundant condenser in the freezer and replaced it with an ‘L’ shaped evaporation plate along the other two walls of the freezer and a second 12-volt compressor in the locker beneath. One of the best decisions we had made – in fact, the freezer evaporation plate was so successful at keeping the freezer cold, that the over-flow cold air chilled the fridge section; we only had to run the 12v fridge unit occasionally – and the 110v AC unit only to freeze new provisions.

A week after our arrival the mechanic came out to diagnose the engine drive problem. He figured the drive plate (the mechanism that connects the engine to the gear box) had failed – and suspected it was caused by us hitting a rope or something. We had struck a rope off St. Croix a month or so earlier, so we put the failure down to this. Luckily, we had a spare drive plate on board, and he detached the gear box from the engine and installed the replacement – in situ.

We were sad to leave St Maarten; we had made a lot of friends there. A major disadvantage of this transient lifestyle is the parting of ways.

From St Maarten we sailed over to Statia (actually St Eustatius but called Statia), a tiny island with a big history. Statia was a major trading centre for the Caribbean. They remained neutral during the wars between the British, French, Americans, Spanish, etc. These wars meant that, although trading with the enemy was forbidden,

trading through a neutral island was OK. Statia got very rich from this - until the Governor ordered the guns of Fort Oranje (Statia) to fire a salute to an American frigate in 1776. This turned out to be the first official recognition of the sovereignty of the United States of America - which really annoyed the British. Admiral Rodney invaded and looted the island as a result!

Today Statia is still a major trading centre and supplies the Caribbean with fuel from its oil terminals. The main town has some lovely buildings and the views up to the volcano are stunning, however the anchorage was very rolly and one night there was enough.

The next group of islands are the friendly St Kitts and Nevis. We anchored off Pinneys Beach in Nevis - once again, a rolly anchorage. We had a lovely stroll around town stopping off to watch the local cricket match - everyone was very friendly.

From Nevis it is a short hop to Antigua, however it was a dead beat to windward. We tacked our way to the island in 18 knots of cool South Easterlies until half-way across. In the lee of Antigua and, with flatter seas, we started the engine and motor sailed.

39 – Rum run in Antigua

It was great to be back in English Harbour – the first landfall we made after our original crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. This time, it was the start of Antigua Classics Week; instead of checking in with Customs & Immigration immediately, we took the RIB around to Falmouth Harbour entrance, about a mile away, to watch the spectacle of the start of the first race. There were some stunning boats - from the J-class *Ranger* and *Valsheda* to *Ibis*, a tiny Whitstable oyster smack - 114 years old and sailed from the UK by three enterprising young men. Although these intrepid three never won a sailing race, they stole the show by winning prizes for entering into the spirit of the regatta and by entertaining everyone with their fine Irish music.

After checking in we renewed our acquaintance with the Antigua and Barbuda Royal Navy Tot Club. The Tot Club is a philanthropic club that carries out social activities and 'good works' in and around English Harbour; charitable giving for schools and local groups, clearing paths and maintaining monuments, etc. The members meet every night at 6pm and continue the Royal Navy tradition of toasting the Monarch with a tot of rum.

It was through the Tot Club that we got an invitation to help crew on *Star Clipper*, the only square rigger in the regatta – this was great fun. The major Caribbean sailing regattas are sponsored by various rum companies which put on daily beach parties and supply free rum punches, etc. The parties usually start in the afternoon with games on the beach and often spill over to the wee small hours... Oh! to be young again - we couldn't keep up the pace.

An innocent invitation one evening by Mike Rose, the Chairman of the Tot Club, to help him pick up some rum the next day was accepted by Keith. Mike and Dennis Taylor, a new Tot Club recruit, collected Keith the next morning and they set off on a tour of the island. They went into the wilds of Antigua to the Bolans Village Post Office to collect some rum. Mike purchased two gallons of this fine brew at US\$10 a gallon – and was handed one free bottle. However, it turned out that they were not allowed to leave until the 1L-bottle

had been consumed - imbibing of said stuff is mandatory! It was now clear why Mike had asked for volunteers! An eventful trip back to base followed - including Dennis, after heated negotiations, buying an entire tray of pineapples from a local vendor. This led to Keith's entry into the pineapple trade when he auctioned them at the Tot Club during the evening... The Antiguan black pineapples are small - about the size of a grapefruit - tender, juicy and delicious.

Keith was able to make an appointment at a local dentist for the following day to replace a lost filling. Unfortunately, this turned out to require root canal treatment; painful and expensive - but he thought the bigger disaster was losing his crewing spot on *Ocean Phoenix*, a Farr 60, in one of the Antigua Race Week events!

40 – Down the Windward Isles

Festivities over, we left Antigua and headed south to Guadeloupe, the largest of the French West Indies islands. We pulled into Deshaies - a delightful place where we enjoyed a visit to the Botanical Gardens and a fresh-water swim in the rocky pools of the river. From here we visited Les Saintes a small group of unspoiled tropical islands off the south coast. Of the eight little islands, only two are inhabited, and we anchored off picturesque Terre-de-Haut. This charming village is dominated by the rocky crags that tower above the harbour. As with all of the French Caribbean islands, you get the feeling that you have turned up to a French seaside resort. We enjoyed rambling around the small streets and enjoyed a meal at La Mouillage, one of the many French restaurants.

Dominica, the next island down the Caribbean chain is another independent nation. Its appeal had nothing to do with its beaches or food or idle days spent under a palm tree. Rather, its abundant nature, scenery and wildlife. In the past, cruisers had avoided Dominica, due to the aggressive nature of the boat boys and high crime rate. This was now a thing of the past due to education - and the formation of a cooperative; dealing with these guys was now a pleasure.

We anchored in Prince Rupert Bay, Portsmouth harbour in a picturesque location. To the south of us was a large black square rigger *The Black Pearl* from the movie 'Pirates in the Caribbean'. Unbeknownst, we had just sailed into a movie set! They were shooting 'Pirates 2' on the island. The island is nearly all virgin rainforest, and the views and walks are magnificent. A guided trip up the Indian River at 7am one morning was magical - seeing a hummingbird sitting on her nest was amazing. There were also some 'Pirates' sets perched on the banks which had been built ready for filming the following week.

It was getting close to my birthday and Keith had promised me a meal in a French restaurant - so it was off to Martinique. Les Anse d'Arlet, a sleepy town in a wonderful palm fringed bay was the

choice for my 50th birthday celebration. We had dinner at a restaurant right on the beach with the waves lapping around the table legs. Very romantic! The cooking was wonderful and the setting superb.

The sail from Grande Anse to Rodney Bay, St Lucia, about 30 miles, was close hauled but in a fresh wind we made good time. We were not impressed with St Lucia... The Customs officials were rude and officious, the anchorage at Rodney Bay was noisy with reggae playing all night, and the boat boys were a pain. But at least we managed to buy the extra 'L' shaped refrigeration unit from the chandlery there!

Marigot was our next stop; a lovely anchorage in a mangrove lagoon but spoilt with incessant and sometimes rude boat boys.

Next day, a 'must-see' place is the Pitons across the bay in Soufrière - spectacular half-mile high peaks which feature in many films. We had planned to anchor off the beach tied to palm trees; again, abusive boat boys put us off staying - we just continued going south to St Vincent, the next island!

The next island, St Vincent, was a pleasant surprise - breath-taking scenery, lovely friendly people and friendly(-ish) boat boys well, not as bad as St Lucia.

The anchorage at Chateaubelair was stunning. Huge cliffs covered in a tangle of greenery and palm trees. When evening arrived, all you could see for 360° was the sparkling of stars overhead in the clear night sky, glistening phosphorescence on the water and fireflies dancing in the foliage. We sat on deck for hours soaking up the atmosphere.

This was an overnight stop on our way to Wallilabou or '*Port Royal*' as you may know it from the '*Pirates of the Caribbean*' movies. The sets were still intact; it was fascinating to see the plastic walls and fasciae with just scaffolding behind. For fun we even watched the DVD on board and then went ashore exploring - noticing the various bits we recognised. We had a lovely meal at the restaurant inside one of the sets.

There was an air of quiet affluence on St Vincent; many islanders have returned home from the UK bringing their property wealth. This, coupled with the tourists visiting the Grenadines, had helped the economy.

Long a favourite of cruising folk, the anchorage at Admiralty Bay, Bequia is excellent; the facilities were not over-developed, and

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everything was close at hand. The island is small enough to walk around; we had some lovely walks including a trip to the Hawksbill Turtle Sanctuary, a nursery and sanctuary.

From Bequia we went straight to Palm Island, a large exclusive resort island to meet up with some UK friends who were there on their honeymoon - and had a lovely few days visiting with them.

Palm Island is part of the Grenadines; a group of small palm-fringed white sandy beach islands, many of them only have resorts or exclusive homes - such as Mustique, home of the rich and famous.

We took the chance to visit the Tobago Cays and Mayreau - mainly deserted with lovely swimming and snorkelling.

Union Island, the largest island in the group, was one of our favourites - like many of the islands, the people were friendly and chatty. Clifton, a bustling small port, is the main anchorage, sheltered within a lagoon. We met many old and new friends here including Cor and Olga from the Dutch boat *Future*. Together Cor and Keith repaired two wind generators for 'Happy Island', a bar for the yachties on a small island in the middle of the lagoon built entirely out of discarded conch shells. Anything to get a free cold beer!

On the west side of Union Island is Chatham Bay, one of the nicest anchorages in the Caribbean; a lovely, deserted beach, lovely walks and good diving and snorkelling off the boat.

From Union Island south to Tyrrel Bay, Carriacou and our first encounter with meteorological tropical waves and squally heavy rains... The abundance of rainwater gave us a chance to do some laundry and fill up the water tanks. These tropical waves last about two days and seem to occur at six-day intervals. Occasionally they turn into Tropical Storms and then Hurricanes. The number of boats at each island was gradually building as everyone headed south seeking shelter from the forthcoming hurricane season.

A weather window appeared allowing a quick hop to St Georges, Grenada, 30 miles south. The island had been devastated by Hurricane Ivan a year earlier. The effects were clearly to be seen. Not a single house or building was left unscathed. The evidence was everywhere. Mountains of corrugated sheeting from roofs appear at every corner; the sports stadium, partly ruined itself and built with a \$100m loan from the World Bank, was now used as one of these huge dump sites.

Grenada was slowly rebuilding. Everyone was trying to help - some a little misguided, in our view. USAID was 'beautifying' the lagoon, despite 80% of the population having no roof on their houses! While we were in St Georges the high school went up in flames - tragic, considering Grenada had so much re-building to do already.

We also took the opportunity to take a couple of trips inland to look at the rain forest. Tragically, the National Park, picturesque one year ago, was flattened and any tree left standing had been stripped of its leaves - although signs of regeneration were everywhere. In the more protected valleys, it was lovely to see nutmeg and cocoa growing in native surroundings - and the waterfalls provided a refreshing dip after the long walks. One surprising fall-out was the shortage of eggs - apparently most of the chicken population had been blown out to sea or eaten!

41 - Hurricane Emily

From St Georges we sailed around to Prickly Bay on the south side of the island. This is the jumping off point for the 90-mile sail to Trinidad. Tropical Waves were coming over with greater frequency - not a good omen. Many cruisers were gathered; some heading to Trinidad, some to Venezuela, and a small number staying... Social gatherings were the norm and new friendships made - between each Tropical Wave a group would depart.

On 21st June after a rainy and squally weekend we left for the overnight sail to Chaguaramas, Trinidad. This is often a tough slog to windward against an unfavourable current and confused sea. Our trip was no exception. We had double reefed the main and, with staysail and reefed genoa, *Poco Andante* beat into the seas. As we approached Trinidad the wind and seas abated, and we motored the last 20 miles into Chaguaramas.

We checked in with Customs and Immigration before going round to TTSA (Trinidad and Tobago Sailing Association). This bay appeared to be an excellent anchorage with plenty of space - and close to all the facilities. However, we soon discovered why there was so much room. After a peaceful afternoon the local bar/disco started their practise. I have never heard such loud music - you could feel the vibrations through the hull, even though *Poco Andante* was a quarter of a mile from the epicentre! After a nearly sleepless night, we went back to Chaguaramas Bay and picked up a mooring (which we had to pay for) ...

With so many yachts spending the hurricane season in Trinidad, the social life amongst the cruisers was really active. We learned to play Mexican Train dominoes - a variation using dominoes with up to 12 spots. Great fun - Keith managed to win the 'yellow jersey' on his first afternoon's play! (Since Trinidad we've introduced yachties and friends all over the world to this game - and they've nearly all found it as much fun as we do.)

There were 'potluck' barbecues at Coral Cove Marina on Sunday evenings; turtle watching trips, supermarket runs and informal talks.

One afternoon Keith and I entertained about 40 cruisers with a talk about the challenges and rewards of cruising Cuba.

Chaguaramas was geared up to cater to the re-fitting needs of all the yachts which came there. Port of Spain, the capital, is about 20 minutes away and has whole streets specialising in fabrics while others make made-to-measure mattresses for the weird and wonderful berth shapes usual on boats. The people are helpful and friendly and everything you could possibly need can be supplied. We decided to order some parts from the UK and US, and they arrived within a week - direct to the local Customs office for duty free clearance. Very efficient.

Amidst all this, Tropical Storm Emily was building and heading our way - theoretically too early in the season and too far south. Yachts began arriving from the north as they sought safer harbours. The barometer started falling and the air was still. All the boats were taking off their sails and clearing their decks in anticipation of a big blow. Keith decided that our mooring wasn't a good place to spend a hurricane - it wasn't really robust enough for our 19 tonnes. I carefully read the manuals about what direction to expect the wind from - and studied the charts to check our options. In the end we motored about three miles to a bay across the harbour. About six other yachts had the same idea and we all spent the afternoon dropping sails and making preparations.

In true 'Sod's law' style, our genoa wouldn't come down, so Keith had to climb the mast to release it. Just as the sail came rushing to the deck, the heavens opened. Keith was still tied off at the top of the mast - and I was trying to man-handle the now-wet sail into the V-berth through the deck hatch. By the time he got down, Keith was drenched! As an extra precaution, we laid out a second anchor in tandem to our main CQR - this held firmly but was a devil to recover the next day. At one stage, Keith was leaning on the top lifeline for support when it collapsed under the pressure! Another job to add to the 'to-do' list - in the meantime we spliced it together with a piece of rope...

By 4pm the still air had an ominous feel to it - the wind picked up during the night but wasn't too bad until about 6am, when it started gusting up to about 35 knots and the seas started to build. Our choice of harbour had been good - only one or two waves about one metre high came through. However, the gusts were causing problems to

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other boats with anchors dragging - one had a hectic few hours trying to re-lay an anchor in 30 knot winds and eventually motored into the wind for 1½ hours just to stay in place.

At last, the wind and seas eased, and we put the boat back together, bailed gallons out of the dinghy, and headed back to Chaguaramas. Tropical Storm Emily went on to become a hurricane and hit Grenada - they really were having a bad time - before heading north-west toward the Yucatan peninsula.

We finished our shopping, installed the second 12-volt fridge compressor and 'L' shaped evaporation plate for the freezer and attended to a few of the jobs on our 'to do' list. Many people were leaving their boats in Trinidad and departing to their respective home countries for the summer, while others, like us, were heading to Venezuela for the hurricane season.

Exploring the Caribbean Islands had been great fun; such a mixture but all with lovely anchorages and fair sailing winds. We would certainly like to go back to Guadeloupe, Dominica and St Vincent to see more.

We hadn't expected a culinary delight in the Caribbean - and we didn't get one! Real West Indian food is far from 'haute cuisine'. Lots of fried chicken and stews of various types - many of the dishes emanate from the slave era. 'Popular' ingredients include cow head, pig snouts and ears, chicken feet, fish heads, etc. These are turned into soups and stews and served with starchy tasteless vegetables such as breadfruit, christophene, pumpkins, yams, tania, dasheen, eddo and plantains. Keith figured they invented hot sauces, which are delightful, to add flavour to these. The fruits, however, are great - bananas, paw paws, mangoes, pineapples and many others.

Callaloo, another variety of taro, has an elephant-ear-shaped deep green leaf. You see it growing prettily along streams - it was plentiful and sold everywhere. We had tried dishes made from the leaves in many restaurants but were always disappointed, so Keith decided to make a soup out of it and took it to a potluck dinner one day. We were surprised that everyone loved this muddy-green coloured soup!

42 – Wet season in Venezuela

Many cruisers recommended we spend the hurricane season at the marina at Bahia Redondo, Puerto La Cruz, on the northern coast of Venezuela. It sounded ideal, but first we had to traverse the passage between Trinidad and the Los Testigos islands, off the north coast of Venezuela, which had a bad reputation for pirates. Consequently, we sailed well offshore without navigation lights during the night passage – and kept a very keen lookout.

Next off to Isla Margarita – a duty-free island just north of Puerto La Cruz which had the reputation of being a real party island. The anchorage had a very dodgy reputation for petty thieving – we secured the boat well, padlocked all items on deck and ensured that all hatches were fully secured – something we surprisingly seldom did. Keith and I spent a great day out at the Parque el Agua (Water Park) – there was a very high-water slide which took me a lot of courage to go down! But once I'd tried it, I wanted to go again. We had a great time.

Isla de Cubagua was our next overnight stop – we'd heard on the cruiser 'grapevine' that the island was considered unsafe. I was wary when I saw a group of local boats there, but we anchored, nonetheless. Eventually one came over to check *Poco Andante* out – he had a couple of young children on board; I passed them a drink and snack as a peace offering and chatted. In my halting Spanish, I asked the father if he thought it would be safe for us to stay the night. He indicated a very reassuring "yes" – we hoped he would pass that sentiment on to the other fishermen...

The island has been used by the local native Indians since the 24th century BC as a source of oysters for food and pearls. The island was 'discovered' by Christopher Columbus in 1498 and became the first land in the Americas inhabited by Europeans. In 1528 Cristóbal Guerra founded the city of Nueva Cádiz, the first settlement to hold the title of 'city' in Venezuela, unfortunately it was wiped out by an earthquake and tsunami in 1541. Today the ruins – buildings constructed using the empty oyster shells – are a National Monument.

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We passed a quiet night and headed out the next day for Isla Caraca del Este. This was the second anniversary of our departure from Hythe in Southampton – what a fantastic distance we had come; both literally (13,470nm) and figuratively.

Isla Caraca del Este also had an unsavoury reputation – I was pleased to see another sailing boat in the small anchorage. Although neither of us recognised the boat, it was comforting to have company. I awoke early to a perfectly still morning – the water was like a lake. *Poco* was anchored amongst some craggy islands with no obvious landing places. We decided not to explore the area and leave direct for Puerto La Cruz. Later we heard that the other boat stayed another night; the owner got up in the night to relieve himself and saw his dinghy floating away. Assuming the painter had come adrift, he jumped in to swim after it. When he reached the dinghy and stretched in to retrieve the painter, a man leapt up from inside and chopped at his arm with a machete! Although he managed to get back to his own yacht and motor to the mainland for help, it was a very scary incident. Keith and I discussed the risks and decided that it was probably safe to stay one night in a dodgy anchorage, but by the second night the locals had sussed you out and were ready to take risks... I don't know if our logic made sense, but we certainly applied it to suspicious places thereafter.

Finally, we made it to the marina at Bahia Redondo – together with about 100 other yachts seeking safe harbour for the hurricane season. About 60% of owners secure their yachts and return to their home countries for the 5-6 months – this is often to appease the wives who have gone cruising under sufferance!

Keith's house in the UK was rented out and, having nowhere to stay, it was difficult to return to England. Once again, we stayed on board *Poco Andante* and planned some work on the boat – many projects that required electricity, water, time and expertise. The list was enormous and included:

- *Paint (Awlgrip) coach roof, decks and cockpit – Us*
- *Paint non-slip decks (Decolay) – Us*
- *Replace wire/rope halyard (stay sail) – North Sails*
- *Replace wire/rope halyard (genoa) – North Sails*
- *Replace topping lift – North Sails*
- *Re-thread old genoa halyard as spare – Us*

- *Replace lifelines – North Sails*
- *Varnish internal bulkhead below companion way – Us*
- *Replace cockpit bimini – Orient Canvas*
- *Replace cockpit cover – Orient Canvas*
- *New plastic sides for cockpit bimini (including rear panel) – Orient Canvas*
- *Repair gennaker (small holes only) – Us*
- *Replace top of gennaker sock bag – North Sails*
- *New extension to bottom end of gennaker sock (to reach deck) – North Sails*
- *Repair mainsail (reinforce leech tape) – North Sails*
- *Replace UV strip to genoa (all new Sunbrella) – North Sails*
- *New stay sail (and deck storage bag) – North Sails*
- *Add one ring of packing to stern gland – Us*
- *Clean water tank – Us*
- *Measure water tank capacity (600L) – Us*
- *Service winches – Us*
- *De-scale gas water heater – Us*
- *All fire extinguishers - re-fill and service (Marina)*

I had purchased the Sunbrella canvas while in Key West and was recommended Orient Canvas to do the job. Unfortunately, a lot of the other yachts were also having canvas work done – we had to join the queue. Eventually they turned up and agreed US\$1,400 for all the canvas work. In the meantime, North Sails were making *Poco Andante* a new staysail (US\$1,050) and repairing our other sails and replacing the lifelines (US\$1,600).

All this in a country where the official exchange rate for US dollars was vastly different to the black-market rate. However, where there's a will, there's always a way! One of the local entrepreneurs had a system whereby you could deposit the US dollars into his bank account in the US, and he would turn up with the agreed equivalent in Venezuelan Bolivars - North Sails, Orient Canvas and the marina needed to be paid in Bolivars. I put out the call over the VHF radio to contact 'Charlie Alpha' – his call sign. Despite repeated calls, I never got a reply, but within a day or two, he turned up at the boat and discussed our needs. It was rather daunting to transfer the equivalent of US\$4,000 into the bank account of someone you have only met

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once; however, his services came highly recommended. The exchange rate he offered was far superior to the official rate. About a week later he turned up - unannounced for obvious security reasons - with a brief case FULL of cash. My proficiency in counting cash came in useful as I counted 8.6 million Bolivars, in small notes... As an aside, the reason this method was financially viable for Charlie Alpha was that local business needed access to US dollars to purchase plant and machinery - they did this using Charlie's bank in the US and paid him for the privilege. Corruption made the transaction difficult through legitimate channels.

During these hot and humid months, we continued to slave away through the sweltering hurricane season - think 30°C+ and 98%+ humidity. The main job was to paint the topsides (everything above the toe rails) and non-slip deck areas - the shiny Awlgrip paint was starting to show hairline cracks, and the non-slip paint was becoming dangerously smooth. But painting all the decks and cabin tops is a huge and fiddly undertaking. First thing in the morning we'd wipe the decks dry of the overnight dew, have a quick breakfast, then start preparing the topsides - sanding, filling and masking. After 4-5 hours work, in the heat of the day, we'd head to the marina pool to re-hydrate and recover. Then, as the afternoon started to cool, we'd return and do some more work. Once the preparation was finished, we'd paint in the morning and return to sand again in the afternoons. In all, we had to apply one coat of primer and three coats of 2-part Awlgrip. They all required sanding between each coat - and we could only work on one third of the surface area at a time (so we could still manoeuvre around the boat). It was hot and exhausting work - I'd usually work in just a bathing costume and a bandana (to keep the sweat from dripping on the deck and into my eyes). Unfortunately, our budget didn't extend to paying someone else to do this expensive work.

We did take some time out to join the inaugural Bahia Redondo regatta - and came 10th out of 17 boats. Tom and Nicolette on *Katanne*, a Nauticat 34, our neighbours in Bahia Redondo crewed for us. Also, one of the American skippers was a qualified examiner for the American Amateur Radio Licence and offered any cruisers the opportunity to sit their Ham Radio Licence exams at the marina. I took up the challenge and was delighted to pass the exacting test. I didn't manage to master the Morse code element due to all the

painting work we were doing, which was a disappointment. The Ham Radio Licence opened up the range of frequencies I could use when using *Poco's* powerful long-range radio. This would be useful when crossing the Pacific Ocean.

And, as normal in this lifestyle, barbecues, partying, and swimming in the pool were still regular events... work hard and play hard was certainly true.

43 – Now this is extreme travel!

A few of the other cruisers who had stayed on through the wet season took the opportunity to visit Machu Picchu and the Nazca Lines in Peru. I was very envious but, in the end, we ran out of time to embark on this long trip. Having finally finished the painting and still waiting for our canvas work to be started, Keith and I decided to see a little more of Venezuela, starting with a visit to Angel Falls - what an adventure this turned out to be. At 975m Angel Falls are the highest uninterrupted waterfall in the world and are on the Churún River, a tributary of the Caroní, 260kms southeast of Ciudad Bolívar on the Atlantic side of the continent.

The first leg of our journey was a coach trip to Ciudad Bolívar. We had been advised to book the excursions to Angel Falls at the airport there. Fellow cruisers had warned us about coach travel in South America - although the seating is comfortable, the air conditioning is not. The temperature was cold, at around 10°C, whilst the outside temperature was around 36°C - thankfully I had made sure we were wearing our thermal clothing! We later learnt that the original air conditioning units were often swapped out to be sold - and replaced with refrigeration units normally found in sea containers!

Next morning we rose early to catch a small Cessna aeroplane that had seen better days. The young pilot seemed to be competent, but I raised my eyebrows when, above the endless savannah below, he took out his mobile phone to call his girlfriend - apparently reception is good 2,000 feet up! The flight took about an hour over savannah, virgin jungle and river basins. Not the place to have an emergency landing... We circled above a small settlement in the Canaima National Park and landed safely on the grass runway. The settlement was inhabited by the Warao Indians, the only ones allowed to run these excursions through their territory. This had been a major change by the communist government under the leadership of Hugo Chávez. Apparently, Chávez was the only president who had visited the Canaima National Park, the premier ecological and tourist site in

Venezuela. Unsurprisingly, the local Indians were full of praise for their leader.

The settlement was close to the Laguna de Canaima fed by the Hacha Falls waterfalls. These waterfalls are often called the Golden Falls because of the colour of the water cascading over the escarpment stained by tannin. The lagoon, also a golden brown for the same reason, was tranquil and characterised by three solitary palm trees rising out of the water. A small dugout canoe took a group of about 10 of us across the lagoon for a closer look at these majestic cascades before we hiked to the impressive Salto de Sapo Falls. It is possible to pass through the cascade to a narrow path behind these falls. The sight, sound and power of the water assail the senses. On one side there is solid rock festooned with moss, ferns and multi-coloured algae; the other a curtain of water sparkling as the dappled sunlight penetrated the gloom. Needless to say, we were soaked - but it was a great introduction to the main attraction - Angel Falls.

After an early breakfast we were taken to Ucaima Port, a collection of rickety pontoons and stages, to embark on our motorised curiara - a long dugout canoe seating about 10 passengers plus the driver and guide. There followed a 5-hour river trip through virgin rain forest up the tributary with amazing views of the unusual Tepuis. These flat-topped mountains rise out of the forest, some over a thousand metres high, and are so remote that many have yet to be explored.

First stop Mayupa Rapids where we disembarked and hiked to a meeting point further up the river while the local Indians ported the canoe across the rapids. Whilst waiting for the canoe, we had the opportunity to try some Indian sports - including target practice using a tradition blow pipe. It was surprisingly long - about 45cm (18 inches) - and accurate! A stop at a small waterfall to refresh ourselves and after a light lunch we continued along the wide and fast flowing Churun River to Ratoncito Island and our camp for the night opposite Angel Falls.

The camp was just a covered platform festooned with hammocks - bed for the night for the twenty or so intrepid travellers. Keith decided to go for a walk along a small track to stretch his legs. After 30 minutes I began to worry and mentioned my concerns to the guide. "I'm sure he'll be back soon," he replied. "We lost a Frenchman last year and it took us three days to find him!"

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Thankfully, soon after, Keith emerged from the jungle unaware of the dangers he had escaped.

After a dinner of barbecued chicken - cooked by skewering ten whole birds on a vertical pole and cooking in a blazing fire - we sat on the riverbank and gazed at the impressive Auyán Tepui with Angel Falls cascading down. The Falls would be tackled in the morning. We had a disturbed night as rain pelted down and the people on the periphery of the platform had to move their hammocks inwards.

Morning sunlight greeted us, as did the rising waters; after all the over-night rain the Falls were now a raging torrent - not the relatively small cascade that I had seen the previous evening. After a light breakfast our group boarded the canoes and crossed the river. It was a two-hour hike through wet and steamy jungle towards the base of the Falls. The guide led us to a rocky outcrop - a vantage point to see the magnificence of the Angel Falls. He apologised that the rain during the previous night made it too dangerous to go to the pool at the base of the Falls - the close lookout point was enough! You could feel the deep roar of the water pounding into the pool - the wind and spray made it difficult to stand as thousands of gallons of water cascaded down. It took my breath away.

The return trip to the Indian settlement was speedy; the rain had increased the flow of the river, and we careered past the rocks and rapids that were now passable after the night's downpour.

We returned to Ciudad Bolívar by light airplane and arranged the next leg of our journey - a long-distance coach to the Andes some 1,400km to the west. The 24-hour bus trip took us mainly through the green and fertile sweeping savannah plains, the Gran Sabana. One million hectares of elevated grassy terrain teeming with wildlife - outside the cities, the countryside looked tranquil and sparsely populated.

We stopped for a couple of days of R&R and acclimatisation in the 'foothills' of the Andes. The coach dropped us off at a small village where we took a taxi ride to Los Frailes, a monastery which had been converted into a hotel. The monastery had been built in 1642 using local stone, recently refurbished, and has lost little of its charm. The bedrooms were the original cells for the monks, and dinner was served in the original refectory. Perched on the edge of the Andes at 3,000m it was a great place to catch your breath. We spent our time

walking the deserted hills through fields of wildflowers that you would normally see in an English country garden.

Refreshed we took a local bus to Mérida, a hustling touristy metropolis. The Mérida Cable Car (or Teleférico de Mérida) is located in the city of Mérida at an altitude of 1,577 metres, and its terminus is on Pico Espejo, at 4,765 metres. It is the highest and second longest cable car in the world. The Cable Car comprises four cable cars connected in series, covering 12.5 kilometres over rugged terrain between the city of Mérida and the Espejo Peak.

Each section of the route has two lanes, and in each lane, there is a cable car that can transport 36 passengers. The cable car moves at a speed of 5 metres per second (18km/h) thanks to the suspended cable that was run by an engine. There are two different engines: the first is in the La Montaña station which serves to the section between that station and the La Aguada station. The other one is located in the Loma Redonda station and serves the rest of the section to Pico Espejo.

The cable car took us to the High Andes where we were to spend a couple nights at Los Nevados, a small sleepy village. From the top of the cable car, we mounted a couple of mules which took us on a five-hour ride through the mountains to Los Nevados. We stayed two nights here soaking up the view and relaxing after months of hard work. It was amazing to see the condors soaring on the thermals along the valley below and swooping in to land just beneath one's feet.

There are only two ways of reaching Los Nevados – by the cable car and mule path – or by a 4WD track. We booked seats on the local bus, a Jeep that had definitely seen better days, to return to Mérida. This was the most hair-raising 'bus' ride you can ever imagine. The 3m wide 'road' is carved out of the loose shale hillside providing a rocky ledge full of hair-pin bends - a cliff one side and an unobstructed drop 4,000m down to the river below. (During our time at the Grand Canyon in 2001, I realised that I'd developed a phobia about 'edges' – and this route down the Andes had lots of 'edges'. From what I'd read in the Lonely Planet guide, I opted to take the far-right hand seat in the Jeep – so I would be furthest from the steep drop!)

Following the previous days of rain, the trail had become impassable in places due to landslides; the local road repair truck

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eventually turned up and began the task of repairing the road ahead of us. The passengers included locals and Spanish-speaking tourists, and the atmosphere was very chatty – if you’ve ever spent time with Spanish speakers, the volume can be rather loud... Every now and again the talk would stop, and all eyes would be on the road ahead as our driver manoeuvred past a hazard – with the steep drop off to the left side it was rather scary – and conversation would resume once the danger was passed.

After a very slow hour or two, our driver decided to overtake the road repair truck and go on ahead – I was horrified! After another few miles there was an almighty ‘bang’ and I saw something fly out from the bottom of the jeep and roll down the road. There was a lot of Spanish conversation, and the driver pulled over; one of the passengers leapt out and ran back down the road, re-appearing with a suspension spring clutched in his hand! After this the ride was fairly uncomfortable and shortly the driver pulled up and all the passengers, except an elderly man with a sleeping child on his lap, climbed out and started to walk forwards while the jeep continued slowly. We didn’t quite understand what was going on but followed suit – after a kilometre or two we arrived at a village where our fellow passengers were ensconced in a café enjoying cups of coffee and empanadas – and the jeep was up on jacks having the offending part welded back on!

On our way again, an hour or two later the accelerator cable jammed down - which made it difficult for the driver to change gear. When he needed to stop, he’d change into low gear, pop the bonnet, climb out and manually release the cable! It seemed to do the trick, but everyone burst out laughing when, having finally reached a tarmac road on the outskirts of Merida, the jeep was flagged down by the Policia Nacional as part of a security checkpoint. Out jumped the driver, up came the bonnet and, with a pull on the cable, the vehicle came to a stop. The Police peered at the passengers, saw us ‘foreigners’, smiled and waved us on.

The trip down to the town normally takes 3-4 hours along this track – but on this day the journey lasted a little over five hours. Sailing around the world was one thing – but I vowed never to do ‘extreme’ travel ever again!

Back at the marina, early one morning, I awoke to the strong smell of diesel and woke Keith to check what was wrong. The smell wasn’t

coming from *Poco Andante* but from the water – our berth was about 100m from the fuel dock and the entire marina was covered in a thick film of diesel. It turned out that the fuel trucks we'd been hearing drive past our berth every night for the last few months had been illegally off-loading their diesel into local fishing trawlers who were then selling it on the black market to vessels from Trinidad and beyond. The diesel in Venezuela, at around 7 cents a litre, was one of the cheapest in the world. On this particular night the Policia Nacional had raided the marina to catch the smugglers in the act – the smugglers scuppered their vessel at the fuel berth with the pumps still operating – and made a run for it! Apparently at least one was caught and subsequently convicted, but the fuel berth was out-of-action for a week or so...

Surprisingly overall, we found Venezuela to be a country self-sufficient in food – with lovely meat, fish, fruit and vegetables. Being the home of the humble potato, they tasted lovely, and the chocolate was the best I have ever tasted.

The fear of most visitors is the high level of violent crime; during our time, there were reports of six cases of pirate attacks on cruisers in four months. Like any dysfunctional society, there are bad elements, and they see cruisers as soft – and lucrative – targets; it paid to be cautious. Our experience at that time was otherwise – with friendliness, helpfulness and courtesy from the locals. From all accounts, things have changed considerably in recent years. Venezuela is a bit of an enigma – it has the world's largest known oil reserves but is now one of the poorest nations due to corruption and governmental mismanagement and US embargoes. A real shame...

After four months of back-breaking work through the sweltering heat of a tropical wet season, I was glad to be on our way. The marina was slowly emptying – with some boats heading north for another season in the Caribbean and others west towards Panama and beyond. Keith and I had decided to follow the latter group and take the 'one way' step of going through the Panama Canal and across the Pacific – a huge decision for us both. Over the previous two years we felt we had gained in confidence – in both ourselves and *Poco Andante*. We were enjoying the freedom of our new lifestyle as well as the excitement of the travel.

44 – An ABC Christmas



We finally escaped Puerto La Cruz – I was so pleased to be on our way again that it brought tears of joy to my eyes. First stop was Los Tortugas – one of several groups of islands along the north coast of Venezuela. We spent a lovely few days exploring this stark but beautiful uninhabited island chain. It was a relief to be living back at anchor rather than tied to a marina berth.

We were weathered in at Les Aves. During the strong winds, one of the local fishing boats got swept onto the reef – we watched the other fishing boats raise it and nurse it into the lagoon. This was a lesson in expert seamanship. Within 12 hours they had the boat re-floated and temporary repairs made to the hull. We couldn't, but we were so impressed with their skill and hard work that Keith took them over a crate of beer to congratulate them!

Our next destination was Bonaire- the B of the ABC islands – Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao – also known as the Netherland Antilles or Dutch West Indies. We loved Bonaire - it had a real 'European' feel. In the main, it is a featureless island with low lying salt pans interspersed with small mountains of white salt and the original slave huts line the shore, and pink flamingos feed in the shallow salty waters.

Bonaire's jewel is its diving and snorkelling. The water was crystal clear blue and the snorkelling and diving superb. It was like being

anchored in a tropical aquarium. Keith partnered up with Charles from another yacht called *Blue Moon* and they managed to go diving nearly every day for ten days. The reef was great; lots of colourful fish and the amazing Christmas Tree Worms – so called because of their spiral shape topped by two ‘crowns’ shaped like Christmas trees. These tiny creatures abound, their multi-coloured fronds wave in the ocean currents and disappear in an instant if anything touches their feathery gills. The garden eels were also a delight to behold. These small eels live in burrows on the sea floor and get their name from their practice of poking their heads up from their burrows while most of their bodies remain hidden – all facing the same way and swaying in unison like fields of wheat in a breeze.

The diving was safe, easy and accessible. Not since Cuba had we seen such a variety of sea life. The whole of Bonaire was geared up for diving and snorkelling, with well-marked dive sites and easy entry from land or sea. Just off our boat there was spectacular snorkelling and diving – in fact, the mooring we’d picked up was used as a decompression stop for one of the Dive Schools; we often had divers sitting under *Poco Andante* and we’d hear their bubbles bouncing off the hull!

On Christmas Eve many of the cruisers gathered and enjoyed champagne and nibbles at a local beach resort bar. Christmas Dinner was a fun ‘potluck’ ashore, and on Boxing Day all the yachts formed a ‘dinghy drift’ over to Klein Bonaire ending with a great snorkel and stroll along the beach. A lovely way to end our stay there.

Curaçao, the next island in the Netherland Antilles, is just 30 miles away. We entered the huge natural harbour of Spanish Waters mid-afternoon and met up again with the westward-heading group of yachts. New Year’s Eve was approaching, and we were keen to check out the party scene (as it is also Keith’s birthday). Something was certain – with all the fireworks on sale and the street parties, the people of Curaçao go in for New Year in a big way.

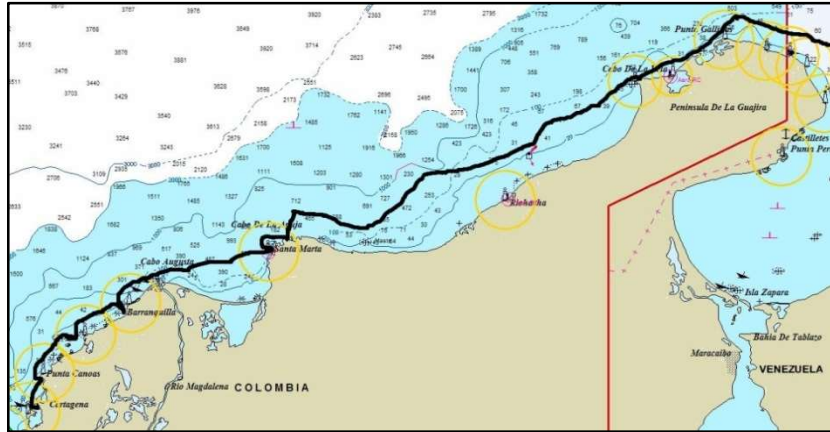
New Year is an important festival for the businesses and people of Curaçao. It is very much a family event and a time to drive out the ‘bad spirits’ of the previous year – the aim is to ensure that they do not spill over to the new. This is generally done using fireworks! Throughout the build-up to New Year, businesses held staff parties outside their offices culminating with the encircling of the buildings with firecrackers and letting them off. 200,000 firecrackers were the

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norm, with some up to a million – deafening! The next day all the streets were littered with the red paper remnants of the millions of firecrackers...

Another Curaçao New Year tradition is the consumption of vast quantities of 'Olie Bollen' deep fried sweet dough filled with fruit and spices. Lots of calories - but very more-ish. Armed with a birthday cake and Olie Bollens, we headed for a local restaurant. Normal celebrations ensued and at midnight the fireworks... The whole island exploded with rockets, firecrackers, etc., spectacular! It's said that the small island of Curaçao spends more on fireworks for New Year than the whole of Holland... that I can believe.

45 – Uncharted waters...



Celebrations over, it was time to head west. Most cruisers sail the 600 miles direct from Aruba to the San Blas Islands in Panama. Mountainous seas and gale force winds are commonplace, and that trip is ranked amongst the worst five passages in the world. The weather in this region is notorious; with a semi-permanent low just to the north, the wind is squeezed by the high pressure over the continent - 40 knot winds and high seas are the norm. Sailing tactics depend upon either going north around the low - or just waiting for good weather, which could be a long wait.

We had heard that the land effects often keep the winds more moderate closer inshore, but few people take this route from fear of the Colombian reputation - and no support from insurance companies who put Colombia off limits. One boat, *Pizazz*, had written an article about cruising coastwise to Cartagena and it sounded intriguing. This is the route we decided to take.

We talked to many of the cruisers in Curaçao, trying to interest them in coming with us...but we were on our own – the insurance companies don't like yachts going to Colombia! Charles from *Blue Moon* was interested; he had Emanuel and Bigna on board as crew. They were on an extended holiday between college and jobs - and

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were planning to back-pack around Ecuador. However, at the last moment, Charles decided to leave his boat in Curaçao and fly back to Switzerland to join Maria, his wife, and go skiing. Over a few beers we offered to take Emanuel and Bigna with us - they readily accepted.

Our departure was timed to coincide with a weather window of light-ish easterlies. To take advantage of this we left early the next morning. We set the gennaker in 8 knots of wind, however by midday the wind increased and before we could get the sail down a panel ripped from end to end. Back to the poled-out genoa...

The next planned stop was the lagoon at Sint Nicholaas, Aruba - the last of the ABC Islands. We passed this at sunset - the anchorage, surrounded by an oil refinery, was not inviting. The wind was 12 knots easterly and *Poco* was sailing nicely at 5 knots. We decided to keep going and settled down for our first night at sea; with four on board watches were easy and the weather kind. The military base on Monjes del Sur was only 60 miles so we decided to stop there to repair the gennaker sail.

We arrived at Monjes Del Sur at 9am. Although they didn't respond to my calls on VHF, they waved and indicated for us to tie up to the jetty just below the Coast Guard station. It transpired that their VHF was receiving but could not transmit; they asked if they could borrow one of our VHF radios so that they could check and fix theirs. The artificial bay was a lovely, protected anchorage, created by linking two islands with a causeway. It is a military/coastguard outpost of Venezuela. About 12 men spent 30-day rotations here - they were pleased to receive a visit and, including the necessary form filling, were more than helpful.

I put the sewing machine on the quayside, ran an electric cable from the boat, and made some running repairs to the gennaker, much to the amusement of the military onlookers.

After a day or so we left at sunset heading for the Colombian coast, planning to anchor at Cabo de Vela, 80 miles away. Our tactic was to keep within the 100m depth contour to avoid the really big rollers. We had a lovely night sail but had to motor when the wind dropped. When the wind freshened, with a perfect following breeze and with the repaired gennaker set, we decided to bypass Cabo de Vela and to keep going to the Five Bays, a further 127 miles west. We settled down for another 24 hours at sea - the only comment in the log was '*another calm night watch*'.

The morning brought its own problems. Bigna popped her head up and said "Bad news - the forward heads are blocked. What should I do?" These are words cruisers dread - it is quite common for the hoses to become clogged with calcified deposits caused by the chemical reaction of salt water and urine; thorough flushing can only defer the calcification process. A quick inspection confirmed our suspicion that this was the cause of the current problem. Keith took charge. "Emanuel and Bigna you are now in charge of the sailing - Christine and I will repair the toilet!" Very glamorous. From experience we changed into bathing costumes and, with practised skill, the offending pipes were extracted through the various lockers behind/below/above the toilet; a contortionist would have no problem! We put the blocked hoses into large garbage bags and carried them to the aft deck. With deft 'whacks' of a hammer along the length of the hose, the debris was dislodged and washed out by trailing the pipe behind. The unit was then reassembled and back in working order within an hour or two. Keith and I gingerly climbed down the swim ladder on the transom to wash up and then had a well-earned beer, all doing 6 knots under gennaker.

As we approached the Five Bays the wind started to strengthen to around 26 knots and the seas started to get a little lumpy - about 3-4m. We checked out the first two bays but decided on the third, Guayraca Bay, anchoring at 4pm in 10 metres of water after a very pleasant sail.

The anchorage was in a lovely bay surrounded by mountains and with views to the snow-topped Andes - rather weird when you're in the tropics! A notable characteristic of these mountainous anchorages is the tremendous williwaws, caused by the katabatic winds that come storming down through the mountain valleys with tremendous force. At around midnight, one such blow - of 40+ knots - sent us dragging towards the opposite shore; we put out a little extra anchor chain and we finally stopped dragging. However, Keith spent an anxious night in the cockpit just in case! The next morning one of the local fishermen came over and recommended we move to the west side of the anchorage which was much calmer.

We were now on Colombian soil. Sorry - no stories of bandits, no drugs - just ordinary friendly fisher folk. In fact, Guayraca Bay is a favourite holiday spot for Colombians and backpackers. It is in the heart of Santa Marta province - an area steeped in history. The

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surrounding mountains are littered with 'lost cities' - many only discovered in the last 30 years. This area was the centre of culture for South America and the builders of places such as Machu Picchu came to Santa Marta to learn their trade. Unfortunately, the Spanish, in their thirst for gold, destroyed most of these towns and cultures.

Reinaldo the local fisherman cum amateur archaeologist showed us around and arranged a meal for us next to the Coast Guard station. Seeing a foreign yacht was unusual and it felt like a party atmosphere - the generosity of everyone was great. Emanuel and Bigna spent an afternoon with some Colombians on the beach and came back a little shaky after trying the local beverages. In all we spent three days here just relaxing and playing cards. Bigna was an expert at a variation of Rummy which she taught us - we now call it 'Swiss Rummy' in their honour - and still play it regularly. It was great to add another '2-person' game to our repertoire.

The wind that brought us in blew stronger and we were pleased to be in relative shelter. The wind eventually eased and the seas outside looked calmer, so we headed out to move around the headland to Taganga, mentioned by a local as a good anchorage. This was only 10 miles away - if conditions were bad, we could make a dash for it. It transpired that the wind was less than twenty knots, so we had an easy sail.

Taganga is another holiday destination and is a great protected anchorage. A local fishing boat guided us in and indicated an anchorage off the Casa Blanca Hotel in 5m on a sandy bottom. Our biggest difficulty was getting local currency. Surprisingly, there is no market for US dollars and the only place to get pesos is from a bank. There was no bank in Taganga. Emanuel managed to persuade a businessman from Bogota in a powerboat to change US\$10 so at least we could get a beer. A visit from the local Coast Guard boat reassured us that the area was well monitored and, apart from recording *Poco Andante's* boat details and crew list, we didn't need to formally check in. Fortunately, we were all on board at the time of their visit and still had our Q flag and Colombian courtesy flag flying.

With no cash there was little to keep us in Taganga. The next leg was 65 miles - across the mouth of the Rio Magdalena and then around the point to Punta Hermosa. The Rio Magdalena runs about 1,500km down the western part of Colombia. We left at 6.30am only to hear a call on the VHF radio from the Coast Guard asking us, in

English, to delay our departure as there was a large tow in the vicinity. After a little discussion they agreed we could alter course to pass north and seaward of the hazard. Off the light brown muddy river mouth there were lots of tree trunks being swept out from the river and we had to keep a sharp lookout. As we crossed the west end of the river mouth there was an amazing demarcation line between the river's muddy waters and the blue Caribbean – it was as if someone had drawn it with a pencil.

We then turned south and headed for a lagoon, unmarked on our chart, relying on *Pizazz's* waypoints. The sun was setting as we spotted the breaking waves, and it soon became obvious that their waypoints were ambiguous. With Bigna and Emanuel on the bows we felt our way around the outside of the lagoon and entered on the south side. An easy entrance once you know how!

The lagoon was surrounded by 'beach huts' with local bars and restaurants. Not a place to spend lots of time - there appeared to be some rogues on shore. Keith managed to change some dollars from 'Jabba the Hutt' as we called him - a very large local bar owner who seemed to spend all day - and night probably - lording it half-naked in a hammock. We were asked 'to pay our respects to El Jefe' before sitting in his bar. The beer was good, and a price was agreed for a meal – and the food was better and a lot more than expected. When we got up to leave, the bill was much higher than expected, too! Heated negotiations with Jabba and his 'heavies' ensued, and Emanuel and Keith sent Bigna and me to go ahead and get the dinghy ready for a rapid departure. Having handed over all their pesos - proving it by turning out their emptied pockets - Jabba finally accepted settlement and Keith and Emanuel came urgently to the dinghy. We all felt rather intimidated by the situation and decided this would be a good time to up anchor and hurriedly depart - before we had an unwanted night visit for the rest of the payment! We were later informed that this bay is definitely considered bandit territory.

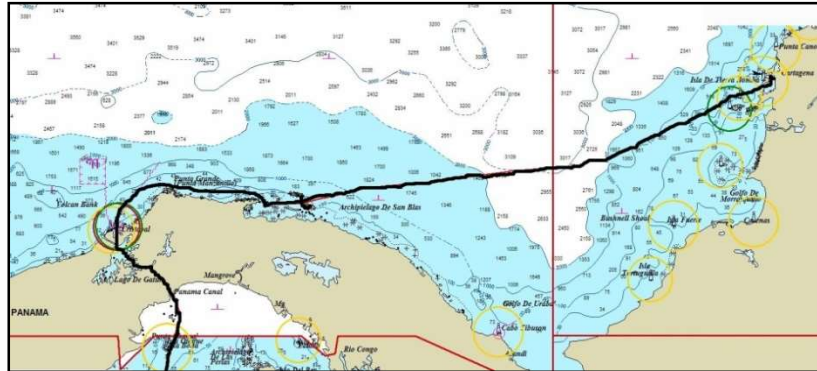
The next leg was to Cartagena - another 60 miles west. Our evening departure turned this into an overnight passage. It was blowing easterly 20-25 knots; we sailed downwind under genoa alone and were anchored off Club Nautico in Cartagena by 9am the next morning. Emmanuel and Bigna left us here to continue their journey overland – they had been delightful company.

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We were really pleased that we'd chosen the coastal route to Cartagena - the sailing was great and so were the people and the scenery. The boats in Cartagena who had done the 'direct' trip all had horror stories to tell of 30-40 knot winds and 4-5 metre seas! Cartagena was delightful. Another impressive Spanish Main city - the major three being Havana in Cuba, San Juan in Puerto Rico and Cartagena. The city had largely been untouched by urbanisation. The walls, castles and churches were intact and many of the houses and streets hadn't changed in 200 years. It was a very safe city to wander around in with many restaurants and bars and shops - and the streets were remarkably clear of rubbish. You could still get lunch for US\$2, although the tourist restaurants were quite expensive.

The anchorage was good, and Club Nautico catered well for cruisers with water, showers, laundry and internet readily available. Our experience in Colombia was very positive and, in some ways, we felt a lot more comfortable there than in Venezuela.

46 – Panama – an exercise in logistics



After Cartagena and a brief stop in the Rosario islands, again waiting for a weather window, we set sail for the two-day passage to the San Blas islands. The San Blas Islands of Panama are an archipelago comprising approximately 365 islands, stretching for about 100 miles across the north coast of Panama, east of the Panama Canal. Only 49 islands are inhabited. The islands are home to the Kuna people.

San Blas and its surrounding area is a haven for ecotourism because of its pristine environs with no road access. The area is also popular for sailing, as it is known for its beauty and lack of hurricanes. The San Blas islands are unique and a trip back in time. The Kuna Indians fought for their independence from Panama in 1925 - although they are now a type of independent state of Panama. The Kuna Indians live simple lives on the islands close to the mainland. They have maintained their traditions and, when we were there, had not been tempted by consumerism. Sadly, things are bound to change - they already had their first road and mobile phone mast...

These small shy people - photographing them is very difficult - are friendly and industrious. The Kuna Indians have a matriarchal society and often the eldest child, regardless of gender, is raised as a

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female and taught the women's skills. The women (and some androgynous 'men') are highly skilled at sewing the unique 'molas' - reverse appliqué designs which are very appealing - their main cash earners. The molas are made using layers of different coloured fabrics which are then cut out to create the image. The cut-outs are then carefully blind stitched.

The women are fierce sales ladies - if you don't have the correct money to buy what you want, they are inclined to give you your change in the form of more molas of lesser quality, often made by their children!

The men go fishing and tend the coconut plantations - and stand around sorting out the problems of the world - nothing changes! - in the Congresso, a large hut in the centre of the village.

Unfortunately, *Poco Andante* had arrived at Porvenir to check in to Panama at the same time as the Blue Water Rally boats - which were waiting to check out. The Blue Water Rally boats complete their circumnavigation in an astoundingly fast two years! The poor Immigration Officer had an old manual typewriter and some well-worn carbon paper and was trying to appease a lot of impatient and stressed-out Rally yachties. After queueing for five hours - a very social atmosphere - the poor man was still processing boats. Keith and I, and a few other independent cruising yachts, volunteered to return the next day - he was most appreciative!

In all we spent 3 weeks here just enjoying the tranquillity and visiting the odd village. The offshore islands are typically palm-fringed beaches surrounded by young coral reefs with lovely anchorages.

We planned to arrive in Colon at the end of their carnival - Ash Wednesday - nothing gets done during carnival! We spent the festivities in Portobelo, another of the Spanish Main cities. Portobelo is steeped in history and is the final resting place of Sir Francis Drake. The city was also held to ransom by Captain Morgan; in its heyday there was so much gold and silver that ingots were stacked up in the streets! But alas it is now a run-down sleepy town, although the tradition of 'beating out the devil' on Ash Wednesday got a bit frantic.

Men dressed in white robes - the 'Congos', representing the black slaves, wielding long sticks chasing 'Devils', with painted bodies and scary masks cracking hide whips. It appeared very realistic - and

seemed to get out of hand when they started whipping the spectators. We beat a hasty retreat. In more recent years, it has apparently been 'formalised' – presumably as it was getting out of control and causing numerous injuries.

Leaving Portobelo, we soon arrived at Colon. We had just entered the gateway to the Pacific - unfortunately the traffic lights were red - otherwise the temptation to keep going, along with the large freighters and container vessels, would have been too great! Our experiences of Panama so far were those of a slow grinding bureaucracy and we expected the same in Colon - aptly named in the biological sense.

The Panama Canal Authority requires all vessels to undergo an Admeasurer inspection - this confirms the overall length of the vessel. Once an Admeasure Certificate has been issued to a vessel, it is valid for that vessel for life.

All vessels are also required to have four line-handlers (one each fore and aft, port and starboard) as well as the helmsman, and a 'transit adviser' - in effect, a pilot. They also need 4 x 40m lines and lots of fenders - these can be rented locally.

Sailing boats are put on the bottom of the 'transit' list, and we were shocked to hear that there was a four week wait - however the schedules seem to change daily; our date for transit was 31st March. It is possible to 'jump the queue' however this requires paying considerably more than the going rate. Some US yachts chose this option... Normally small groups of yachts were squeezed into the schedule when a smaller ship was due to transit - the yachts occupied the remaining gap in the locks. These transits usually happen during the night, so the large ships have the benefit of daylight.

It was interesting that, at that time, approximately 450 yachts were transiting each year - this gives an indication of the number of blue water cruising yachts that are circumnavigating the world at any one time.

We used the wait time to fully provision for six months in the Pacific; some cruising friends who had crossed the Pacific earlier recommended we go out and do our usual 3-4-month provision - then go out and do it all again! Apparently, prices and availability in the Pacific made provisioning prohibitive. We even bought a couple of laundry baskets; these were filled with canned vegetables and

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stowed under the saloon table - all our other lockers were full - around 2,500 items!

Catering for the actual Canal transit is a major challenge in itself. Each yacht has to feed six people - helmsman, four-line handlers and the pilot - for dinner, breakfast, lunch, snacks in between, and endless fluids. All this at a moment's notice in the lulls between hectic activity on deck. This is complicated by the fact that each yacht has generally taken below all the usual paraphernalia from the decks - to leave clear deck space for the working line handlers. The cabins end up being full of horseshoe life buoys, man-overboard-packs, water containers, fuel containers, sails, outboard engines, etc., etc., etc. Despite this, you still have to provide sleeping space for all the extra bodies - thankfully the pilots get taken off at night and return next morning...

Both Keith and I really wanted to transit the Canal as line-handlers on someone else's boat before taking *Poco Andante* through. Many yachts are manned by couples and need three extra bodies on board to fulfil the requirements of one skipper and four line-handlers. It was well worth the experience - as our helmswoman, I was really pleased to be able to get my bearings while on someone else's boat...

Just before the start of the first lock, the yachts left the main channel and tied up to a huge mooring buoy. After much discussion about boat lengths, weights and hull material, the pilots work out which boats should be rafted together. Very strong bow and stern lines plus springs (lines crossing from bow to stern) make the yachts behave like one large catamaran or trimaran.

After casting off from the mooring, the raft of yachts practised manoeuvring. In general, the yacht with the larger motor became the main propulsion and the other yacht stood by - ready to provide astern or forward thrust to help move the bow or stern around. It was useful to practise this manoeuvre outside the locks - there is a lot of turbulence when the tugboats go past, causing a severe strain on each yacht's fairleads and cleats. After some practice this worked really well.

Each lock is 110' (about 34m) wide and 1,050' (320m) long. From the Caribbean side the Gatun Locks raise the boats 26m in three steps, each about 8m high. As you enter the first lock, the raft - only about 8-13m wide, the width of the yachts tied together - moved slowly towards the right side of the lock and two men who work for the canal throw 'messenger lines' to the bow and stern of the yacht on

the right. These are light lines with a ball on the end. This is passed through the loop already formed on the end of the much heavier - about 25mm diameter and a minimum of 60m long - rope at each right-hand corner of the yacht.

The raft then gently moved forward and towards the left of the lock and two more messenger lines were thrown down to the bow and stern of the left yacht and similarly tied off. The raft now moved forward into the centre of the lock with the walls towering up the sides - all lit up like a Christmas tree.

When the yacht reached its correct position along the lock, a whistle was blown and the canal men started hauling up the heavy lines. When they got to the top, they put the big loop over a bollard and the line handlers on the yachts could start to tighten them up - carefully keeping the raft in the centre of the lock and facing straight ahead.

At last, the lock doors were closed behind and within 10 minutes approximately eight million gallons of water filled the lock - all by gravity! There is a fair amount of turbulence and, of course, as the boats rise up, the line handlers on the bows and sterns of each yacht have to take up any slack in the lines to keep the raft in position. Eventually the water stopped entering and the boats end up about one metre from the top of the lock wall.

After a short pause the gates into the next lock were opened. Once the water settled, the ship in front went into gear and began to move forward. The ship is kept in position by cables passed from four 10-ton locomotives called mules, attached to their bows and sterns. These mules drive forward with the ship - keeping it centred in the lock. The turbulence from the propeller wasn't too bad - the ship was about 180m long and our raft was about another 100m back.

When the ship was secured in the next lock, our heavy lines were dropped off the bollards and we all had to quickly bring the slack on board. The light messenger lines were still attached and, as the raft slowly motored forward, the men on the canal sides walked forward with us until we were in position in the next lock - and the whole process began again.

The three Gatun Locks took about an hour and a half to get through - and then we were in the Gatun Lake - 25.9m above sea level. The yachts untied from each other and motored about two miles to pick up a mooring buoy on the lake for our overnight stop.

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By now it was about 12.30am and we were all relieved but tired. The pilot was collected by a launch, and it was time to break out the celebratory alcoholic refreshments. The party was cut reasonably short as we all had to be up and ready to go at 6am!

The next morning, we cast off from the mooring and started to motor the 21 miles through the lake to the start of the down locks. Gatun Lake is formed by a man-made dam topped-up by the tropical rains which keep the lake full - enough to provide the 26 million gallons of water required for each transit. The yacht channel passes through some of the smaller islands in the lake. The wildlife was remarkable with howler monkeys and alligators in abundance.

Eventually the yacht channel re-joins the main shipping channel - it was amazing to see the huge container ships at such close quarters. And it was amusing to see the people on the cruise ships photographing the yachts.

The Pedro Miquel Lock is a single lock at the other end of the Gatun Lake and takes you down 27 feet (9m). Just before entering, the raft is re-formed and motored into the lock - this time there was just a small sight-seeing vessel in the lock secured to the side walls with long lines. The gates closed and down we went - with the line handlers gradually letting out their lines as the water level dropped. Going down is much easier than the up-locks.

Once through, we stayed rafted together and motored another mile to the last two locks, the Miraflores Locks.

Once again, the down-locking was straightforward, and we had a chance to wave at the web camera aimed at the last lock - although we weren't sure if anyone would be watching! (A friend of ours did capture an image for us!).

At last, we were through, and the rafts were separated - each boat motored towards the Bridge of the Americas - and into the Pacific Ocean. What an achievement - and what a relief!

The custom is for the transiting yachts to pay for the line-handlers to return to Colon by bus - all of about 70kms (~50 miles) - nowhere near exciting a journey as by yacht - and much cheaper at about \$5.00 per person.

Acting as line-handlers was a fantastic experience and we were able to enjoy our own transit much more than if we had been taking *Poco Andante* through on our maiden voyage. The Norwegian yacht *Checkmate* and the New Zealand yacht *Minaret* were rafted up either

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side of us – so, in the end, *Poco Andante*'s line-handlers didn't have to do much work! When our transit finally happened, all went smoothly – thank goodness – and Keith's catering arrangements were superb, as always.

47 – Stop! Thief!

One of the downsides of Panama was security; one morning we awoke to find our dinghy, complete with 15hp outboard, had been stolen! Despite being up on the davits and secured with a chain, the thieves had managed to cut it away and we had slept through the whole incident... I duly reported it over the VHF to the Harbour Master - a report was required for the insurance claim. Keith emptied the entire lazarette locker to locate our spare 'fold-up' dinghy. Thankfully it hadn't perished during its time in the tropics and inflated OK. With the little 2½ horsepower outboard we were able to get to shore and report to the Harbour Master's Office - although I found the small, soft-bottomed dinghy felt much less stable than the RIB we were accustomed to. The Harbour Master was very kind - and very amused by our boat name which he interpreted as 'Dead Slow Ahead' - our version of *Poco Andante* is 'slightly slower than walking pace'.

That afternoon we received a call on the VHF to say that our dinghy had been found drifting through the ship anchorage - spotted by an alert look-out on one of the ships waiting to transit the Canal. A short while later the Coast Guard vessel circled *Poco Andante* with our dinghy in tow, looking the worse for wear. The Coast Guard vessel overstepped the mark and misjudged coming alongside; he then promptly started reversing towards us - with our dinghy, all its flotation tubes collapsed, now being swamped by his wash! It was like a comedy of errors, but tragic for us and the dinghy. In desperation Keith asked them to throw him the painter, but they missed! In frustration, they departed, and Keith climbed into the spare dinghy and rowed across the anchorage trying to catch the RIB which was drifting away on the tide. When he finally managed to secure it and tow it back to *Poco*, the RIB, which was now nearly completely submerged, was in danger of pulling Keith under himself.

I shouted across the anchorage to any other boat that could help and luckily someone popped his head up, realised the problem and

went to Keith's rescue. We finally got a rope attached and were slowly able to winch the RIB on board.

The poor thing had been stabbed 14 times through the three flotation tubes; the tube attached to the transom had been carefully cut away to allow the thieves to slide the outboard off sideways - it had been locked on - the seat, oars, stowage bag and all the contents of the anchor locker were missing. They had obviously tried to sink the dinghy to destroy the evidence, but the rigid hull had kept it afloat.

We now faced the dilemma of what to do - a trip to the city revealed that it would take six weeks to import a replacement dinghy - and we didn't like any of the ones immediately available. The other bits and pieces were replaceable. Having already been delayed waiting to transit the Canal, we didn't want any additional delay. Thankfully, we were able to source some Hypalon sheet material and the correct two-part glue - so we decided to repair the tubes ourselves.

We hung the dinghy up from the mast for a day or so to drain as much water as possible from the inside of the tubes and then set about finding the holes. The thieves must have used a knife about 25mm wide so we figured circular patches about 100-125mm in diameter would ensure they covered the entire area. After some head-scratching, I suggested we try to place the patches on the inside of the tubes - figuring that the air pressure would help them adhere - then, when the dinghy was completely airtight, external patches could be added for strength. This method worked a treat although, in the long-term, the patch beneath the rowlocks struggled under the strain of rowing and developed a slow leak.

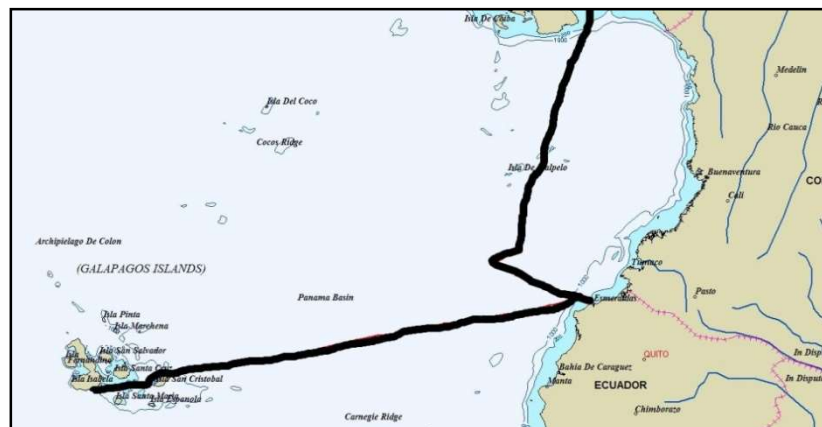
We ordered a brand new 15hp Yamaha outboard, and another cruiser donated an old dinghy seat which could be adapted to fit our Avon. The shops didn't stock wooden oars, which Keith preferred, so we survived using the oars for the spare dinghy until we could buy some new ones. The anchor and chain were easy to replace. The insurance company were great and even covered the materials and our time to do the repairs. We later wrote an article about the repair which was published in the sailing magazine *Cruising Helmsman*.

Poco Andante was now in the Pacific at the beginning of her next major adventure. The Pacific crossing is a daunting prospect - we would be on our own and out of touch for long periods of times.

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Thankfully the boats we had met in Panama formed a loose fleet - with a purpose and common bond which would last a lifetime. This self-help group gave us the confidence to complete the 6,500 miles to the next major stop New Zealand...

48 – A slight detour...



Talking to fellow cruisers and swapping stories at sundowner meetings at bars and on boats revealed very different experiences during the 900-mile voyage to the Galapagos from Panama. Motoring in light winds predominated - with the occasional squall, but the wind direction varied considerably. In the true spirit of adventure our trip was the most bizarre.

Poco Andante left Panama and motored for three days with the occasional glimpse of whales and dolphins to break the monotony. Heading for the recommended 84° West crossing-of-the-equator, just south of Malpelo Island we encountered a strong easterly current that forced us south into the cold Humboldt Current. Thermals and fleeces on - despite being in the tropics - and no wind! *Poco's* motoring speed-over-ground dropped to 2-3 knots, we were going through fuel like there was no tomorrow - and were getting nowhere. We decided to turn west to get back on our rhumb line. It was like hitting a wall; speed dropped yet again, and it became evident that we were not going to have enough fuel to cover the last 400 miles to the Galapagos. With only enough fuel remaining for emergencies we decided to wait for wind. The engine was turned off and sails set in the 4-5 knot head wind. We quickly came to a complete standstill!

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Looking at our GPS you could see that we were actually going backwards at 4 knots east - totally the wrong direction...

The decision had been made for us - we were being swept towards the coast of mainland Ecuador in this unusual ocean current. A quick look at the chart, and consulting Jimmy Cornell's '*World Cruising Handbook*', I noted that Esmeraldas, 150 miles away, was a likely place to buy fuel. Turning *Poco* around, we were now speeding along at 7.5 knots in only 4-5 knots of wind. We covered the distance in double quick time and arrived off Esmeraldas at dawn the next day - flying our 'Q' flag to indicate that we were not intending to check in.

As *Poco* approached the well-buoyed river entrance, we frantically searched for a fuel dock - without much joy. Holding up an empty fuel can to the local fishermen signalled our plight and they pointed to the fuel dock tucked away in the far corner of the fishing boat harbour.

The dock didn't look very inviting to tie up to - we decided to anchor in the middle of the harbour. Luckily an enterprising local, Ernaldo, was quick on the scene in his dugout canoe. He then paddled Keith ashore with nine empty jerry cans. While Keith was gone, the local officials decided to visit *Poco Andante*, wanting me to complete entry formalities. It was Good Friday - the possible delay and overtime costs made me reluctant to stay. In order to delay proceedings, I offered coffee (and beer) which seemed to work - and I spoke about how beautiful their country appeared, desperately hoping Keith would return! My charm must have worked; they agreed to give us three hours to complete refuelling.

An hour later, Keith returned with nine full jerry cans - which only left about twenty centimetres of freeboard on the canoe - unloading was a very precarious operation! After one more trip - we gave Ernaldo a well-deserved US\$10 tip - we were ready to leave; and we'd only been two hours.

The tide was rushing out, so we were keen to leave before it got too low. Patting ourselves on the back for achieving a quick turn-around, we headed out of the fishing harbour and I carefully lined up the leading marks heading for the open sea - when suddenly *Poco* came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the channel. We'd hit mud! Full power in reverse - and a quick prayer - pulled us off. After some frantic hand signals with another passing fisherman who pointed me

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to deep water, *Poco Andante* carefully crept to deeper water and back towards the Galapagos Islands.

49 – On to the Galapagos Islands

Three days later we crossed the equator for the first time. Keith toasted King Neptune with a beer and I with a tot of rum!

The following afternoon, while Keith was off-watch and having a siesta, I was in the cockpit and heard a ‘thump, thump, thump’ sound coming from a long way off. Considering *Poco Andante* was hundreds of miles from anywhere, this seemed strange. Slowly a dot appeared on the northern horizon gradually getting larger. I hastily prepared for visitors by putting on a top (!!!) and getting hold of the hand-held VHF radio. Eventually a helicopter appeared above – large and white with ‘US NAVY’ painted on the sides – its side door was open, and a huge telephoto lens was pointed at *Poco*. Considering we were in international waters and flying the correct ensign, this seemed very intrusive. Rather annoyed, I called them on the VHF on Channel 16 “US Navy, this is British sailing yacht, *Poco Andante*. Can I be of assistance?” rather cheekily. To their credit, they did respond saying they “were in the area”. We figured there must have been a Naval war ship just over the horizon and they’d seen us on radar and were checking us out – or they were just out for a ‘jolly’.

The rest of the trip was uneventful and luckily our diversion to Esmeraldas allowed us to skirt the foul current. *Poco*’s adventures and 300-mile detour had been relayed to the other yachts on the same passage via regular links on the SSB radio. They were very thankful and chose different routes and avoided these strange currents – we believed they were caused by the El Niño effect that year. In the end we were at sea for 11 days and covered 1175 nautical miles - for a trip that should have been much shorter.

Galapagos – one of the treasures of the known world welcomed us. Wreck Bay on San Cristobal was a lovely safe anchorage; you could see most of the wildlife that the Galapagos is famous for here. There was an anchoring charge for yachts whose Gross Registered Tonnage is greater than 10 tonnes - *Poco Andante* was registered as 19.35 tonnes. We paid US\$150 and could stay as long as our visa allowed.

In order to protect and conserve the unique nature of the Galapagos Islands, it was only possible to go sight-seeing as part of organised tours. The crew from another yacht joined Keith and I for an excursion inland with guide Fernando. We thoroughly enjoyed the trip to the tortoise sanctuary, to a volcano lake with flights of frigate birds overhead, and to the coast where marine iguanas and huge sea lions lazed about on the black volcanic rocks. The trip concluded with a wonderful lunch prepared by Fernando's mother at his home. They proudly displayed guest books going back to 1986 – it was fascinating to read the comments of previous boats that we knew.

During the passage to Galapagos, Keith had lost a filling in one of his molars, so the search was on for a dentist. While walking up the hill towards the supermarket with Rob and Gemma from *Orinoco Flow*, we saw a sign for a dentist. The building looked tidy and clean, but the front gate (a grill) was shut. While we peered at the sign to determine the opening hours, a young woman rushed towards us from a bar across the road. It turned out she was the dentist and offered to see Keith there and then. The rest of us continued to the supermarket and said we'd call back on our return – but Keith caught up with us about 30 minutes later. He'd already had the filling replaced – at a total cost of US\$20. The workmanship was obviously of a very high standard as the filling has never required further attention.

While still at Wreck Bay, Keith put on his scuba gear and cleaned the barnacles off the bottom of the boat – and really enjoyed the company of the playful and inquisitive sea lions who visited! They just loved to show off their underwater skills and were very playful, blowing bubbles in your face, doing back flips and somersaults. Needless to say, the bottom took a long time to get scrubbed! I was in the dinghy scrubbing the waterline and was also interrupted by a sea lion pup who wanted his back scrubbed – the best way to clean the boat! A quick explore around our anchor also showed Keith the wonderful variety of sea life – including a 2-metre-wide stingray.

The sea lions like to sun bake – the boats with sugar-scoops at their sterns sometimes ended up with three of these enormous creatures lying on the steps – although picturesque, the smell they left behind was not welcome!

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We had one sunbathing on one of the tubes of our RIB warmed by the sun – precariously balanced on one side and miraculously staying on even when another boat went past creating wash. How it managed using just fins and tails was amazing.

Galapagos certainly lived up to its reputation of being a haven for wildlife. A trip into the barren volcanic hinterland was a treat - with giant tortoises wandering around, penguins, tame birdlife and, of course, the unique marine iguanas, blue footed boobies, seals and sea lions - all unafraid of humans.

Rob and Gemma, (*Orinoco Flow*), were keen to do some diving and organised a day out on a local boat for themselves and Keith. (Unfortunately, I can't dive due to difficulty clearing my eustachian tubes, but I enjoy snorkelling – and can act as dive boat for those who are diving.) Rob, a doctor from the US, and Gemma, a nurse from Australia, are expert divers – in fact, Gemma is a Dive Master – and, usefully, they had a compressor on board. Rob and Gemma were sailing from the US to Australia with the intention of settling there.

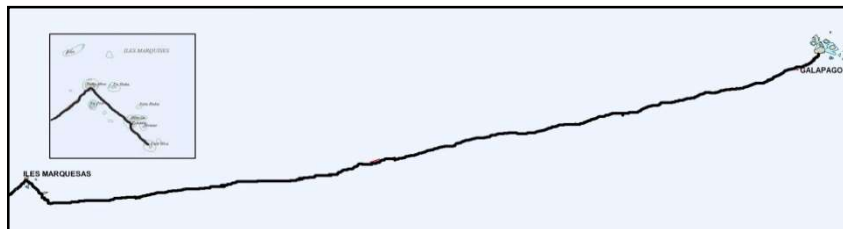
During their dive they saw hammerhead sharks, turtles, seals, sea lions and other tropical fish – against a colourful backdrop of marine lichen painting the underwater walls of the island.

After a week on San Cristobal, we sailed overnight to Puerto Villamil, Isla Isabela. Isla Isabela was beautiful – a peaceful anchorage and blue-footed boobies abound. The Galapagos penguins perched on the rocks about 300m away and occasionally swam past the boat. The local sea lions were huge – but not as playful as the ones on Cristobal.

We explored Isabela together with two couples from two other yachts. After about an hour in a truck we reached the slopes of Sierra Negra – an active volcano still steaming after erupting the previous year. We then mounted horses for another hour heading around the rim and towards Volcano Chico – a lava flow from 1979 – and walked across this barren moonscape for a view to the north of the island.

Another day, a group of about 4-5 yachts got together and hired a power boat for a breath-taking trip along the coast to Cabo Rosso weaving at high speed through lava tunnels and channels to a lagoon where we snorkelled with green turtles and penguins. On the way back we saw a pair of Manta rays flying through the air – magical.

50 – The longest passage...



The passage from the Galapagos Islands to the next island group in the Pacific, the Marquesas, would be our longest – 3,000nm. The sailing would be long and hard - each boat adopted its own strategy. The main influence was the position of the South Pacific high and the location of the ITCZ (Inter Tropical Convergence Zone). We had the benefit of our Inmarsat C which gave us a daily update of these weather systems. We decided that we would sail west for three days and then take a more southerly course to pick up more wind. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned and we ended up becalmed for several days.

We were also soon joined by a school of Mahi Mahi - these glorious creatures with their golden and blue scales, sheltered in the shade of the hull. As well as looking superb they also taste fantastic.

We also made the mistake of keeping our sails up to try and pick up any wind there might be. We believe this actually resulted in UV degradation to the sails - and chafe as well. In the end we succumbed and motored north for a day and picked up some more easterly wind, and that drove us steadily westwards.

At this time of year which was March/April/May, there was a steady stream of boats crossing the Pacific most of which kept in touch via an informal SSB radio net. This entailed checking in with that day's 'net controller' on a pre-agreed frequency, at a prearranged time. You reported your position, course and speed, and weather conditions. When all the boats have checked in, you can then call up other boats for chats about fishing, recipes, etc. - or tap into the

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expertise of the cruising community if problems arise. We were very fortunate in that we had a surgeon and a dentist in our 'net' group in case of medical problems, and lots of other experts on boat systems.

One of the boats had, Brett, a dentist, and Debbie, a teacher and classical guitarist. They were from Australia on a boat called *Interlude III*, and they started a 'quiz time' which made life very interesting, especially considering that the boats were spread out across 3,000 miles of the Pacific Ocean (some boats had left long before us, as usual). Yachts took turns to be the 'Quiz Master' and could set their own questions. Sometimes radio reception wasn't that brilliant so both the questions and the answers would have to be relayed. Not surprisingly, questions were kept simple and only one or two questions a day asked - but it was fun! The prizes were provided by the Quiz Master boat - and entailed anything from home-baked goodies to bottles of rum. It was interesting collecting the prizes at the next anchorage - or sometimes months later when you were both in the same anchorage at the same time!

Three of the yachts crossing the Pacific that year had children on board and a separate quiz was held for them - to coincide with their home schooling. They had to learn how to say "Hello", "Thank you", "Goodbye" and "Yes" and "No" in the language of the next group of islands they were going to. They also had to speak their answers on the HF radio! Nancy and Molly on the catamaran *Jade* spoke Mandarin as their first language and English as their second - Arni, their father is English and their mother, Cam, is Hong Kong Chinese. The two young Chinese girls became really good friends with the blond-haired 6-year-old twins Marita and Hedda from the Norwegian boat *Blue Marlin*. It was delightful to hear the youngsters speak on the radio - English is the official language for ship-to-ship communications. Molly and Nancy (the Chinese girls) taught Marita and Hedda their favourite Mandarin nursery rhymes and, at various islands across the Pacific, they'd jump up and down on *Jade's* catamaran trampoline chanting the songs.

In general, the mothers were involved with teaching the curriculum while the fathers took watch, the formal schooling usually only occupied mornings. When they were ashore, the afternoons were spent following up their own particular interests with educational guidance from the parents. The benefits the children were gaining from the family's experience were invaluable.

The kids were polite and sociable beyond their years – they played together well and enjoyed learning about their world.

One of the Australian yachts had three girls on board. They were on the last leg of a circumnavigation lasting several years but were getting low on money. They needed to get back to Australia for the start of the new school year the following January. The eldest daughter would then be going to a real school to study for her matriculation, the middle girl was about to start High School, and the youngest was in her last years of Primary School. Both the parents and the girls were concerned how they would adapt to going to school in Australia and making new friends. We tried to reassure them that their life skills and experience would stand them in good stead. A couple of years later we heard that they had settled back into 'real' life and their educational levels were well advanced for their years. The youngest daughter, who had only ever been home-schooled, had found going to school a challenge at first, but eventually settled down.

The long crossing was not without its dramas. The skipper of one of the yachts suffered complications following surgery he'd had in Ecuador before departing to cross the Pacific. His condition worsened and they put out a Mayday call. Luckily a passing freighter on its way to Tahiti made a detour and he was taken on board. But his wife had to stay with the yacht, as there was only the two of them on board. She had to continue to the Marquesas and then on to Tahiti single-handed. In order for her to get some sleep at night, one of the other yachts, which was about the same size and speed, stayed within visible range of her. At night she would put the yacht on autopilot and get some sleep and the other yacht would keep a lookout. Quite scary. But it did emphasize how important it was that both Keith and I knew how to handle the boat single-handed if necessary. I found it a struggle to raise the sails to the fullest extent that Keith could - but I could get them up eventually.

One of the guys on a British boat suffered bad cuts to his hands when his fishing line 'imploded' after catching a large shark. They were on passage from Panama to the Marquesas – an estimated four weeks at sea. They were still about three weeks from the Marquesas when the accident happened. Peter and Margaret diverted direct to the largest of the Marquesan islands, Nuku Hiva, where there was a hospital. Amazingly, a French neurosurgeon was on duty and was

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able to carry out a tendon graft from Peter's ankle to his hand. Remarkably, over time, he regained more than 90% use of his hand.

Most boats suffered gear failure of some sort; *Poco Andante* blew out the bottom end of the mainsail when hit by 40 knot squalls, but we put one reef in and were able to continue until we could make running repairs. The motor on our auto pilot failed - worn brushes - during the first week; luckily, we were able to rig the small emergency tiller pilot.

The Hydrovane didn't like direct downwind sailing. However, the small emergency tiller pilot couldn't really cope while flying the gennaker and so we had to rely on a poled-out genoa instead.

Gear failure was a constant worry; our newly purchased swivel block on the end of the boom burst open, the watermaker didn't seem to be making water, and two carabineer clips failed under the unrelenting forces - resulting in flogging sails. The ocean passages certainly took a toll on the gear as well as the crew.

Overall, the weather was good - we had steady easterlies for the first 10 days then were becalmed for two days - this gave us time for a swim off the back, 1,500 miles from the nearest land. We also had visits from schools of dorados, dolphins and killer whales. We spotted a pod of around ten killer whales about half a mile away swimming north. Surprisingly two of the pod peeled off and came over to check us out. I think they realised that we weren't edible and returned to the pod. Their markings were amazing.

Another yacht crossing the Pacific that year was *Uterus*. Benjamin and Henrietta are a young Norwegian couple who had sold up everything in Norway, driven down to Gibraltar and bought themselves a yacht with the aim of sailing around the world. They called the yacht *Uterus* - which we all thought must mean something else in Norwegian - but they explained that they had chosen the English name for three reasons: a) it was warm and wet, b) a place of safety, and c) the start of a new life. Their logo was a uterus with a small yacht inside - and they were a fun couple!

Two Norwegian yachts *Blue Marlin* (the one with the twin girls on board) and *Uterus* were sailing within sight of each other and decided to celebrate Norway's national day together - Benjamin and Henrietta left *Uterus* under autopilot and dinghied across to *Blue Marlin* in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and lunched together on a blue marlin they had caught earlier! We couldn't believe it - you need

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to have a lot of courage to actually leave you boat in the middle of the ocean – and a lot of faith in your autopilot!

51 – Man Overboard drill

The last few days were a little tiring with a squall every hour or so - we had to be alert at all times and hand-steer when the tiller pilot couldn't cope.

At last, after more than 3,000 miles and 25 days at sea we sailed into the stunning Marquesas. It was unexpected. I didn't expect them to be tall. You sort of think of Pacific islands as flat, with palm trees. But these were actually volcanic.

Fatu Hivu was glorious with tropical rainforest, trees laden with grapefruit, bananas, mangoes, etc. As far away from anywhere as it's possible to get, Fatu Hiva is a marvellous 'stop the world and get off' kind of place. The iconic Bay of Virgins is one of the most dramatic anchorages in the world - so small that late-comers have to anchor in up to 30m of water. A case of 'first in, best dressed'.

After five days of rest and recovery, we headed for the smallest of the inhabited Marquesan islands, Tahuata. We'd intended to stop at Baie Hanamoenoa but when we got there it seemed to be full of boats - so we and *Orinoco Flow* decided to carry on to the next bay, which was delightful, and we had it to ourselves.

There's relentless pressure to cross the Pacific before the next cyclone season. It makes it a long hard sailing season - even though we had decided to wait it out in New Zealand rather than Australia. We had no time to linger - it was onwards to Nuku Hiva.

When we were a few miles off, there was a call on the VHF from one of the other yachts, a single-handed sailor without an engine, to say his dinghy had come adrift and could we keep a look out for it. Amazingly we spotted it but by the time I called him on the VHF we'd lost sight of it again; but I was able to give him a rough idea of its location. Once again, we peered out, trying to see a 2½m grey object on a grey lumpy sea against a backdrop of grey cliffs. This made us realise how remote the chances of seeing a real 'man overboard' would be... Eventually we spotted it again and were able to motor over and retrieve it - the painter had broken and was now

only a metre or so long. We manoeuvred really close to him and Keith was able to pass it over and we continued on our way.

Baie Taiohoe on Nuku Hiva was full of yachts taking advantage of the amenities the main town had to offer – they were also waiting for a weather window for the long passage to the Tuamotus, the next island chain further across the Pacific.

All the boats crossing the Pacific ended up with a yellow sticky stain around the bows – presumably caused by algae or bacteria. Unless you scraped it off while it was still wet, it hardened and became tough to remove. Cleaning this off was an arduous job that we all attended to upon arrival.

The roly anchorage was becoming unpleasant but our departure for the Tuamotus was delayed by bad weather. There were SSB radio reports of strong gusts, blown out sails, and impassable entrances into the atolls, so we decided to wait for better weather.

Desperate for a good night's sleep we decided to nip around to Daniel's Bay, five miles to the west, where the protection from swells is a little better. There was a slight lull in the weather, so we quickly weighed anchor and headed out - we still encountered 25 knot winds and large seas – thankfully they were from behind and manageable.

Luckily a yacht was ahead and, playing follow-my-leader, we approached the entrance. Suddenly, the yacht ahead of us turned around and headed back out to sea! Whether the entrance had scared him, or some other reason, we will never know – it just made us even more cautious.

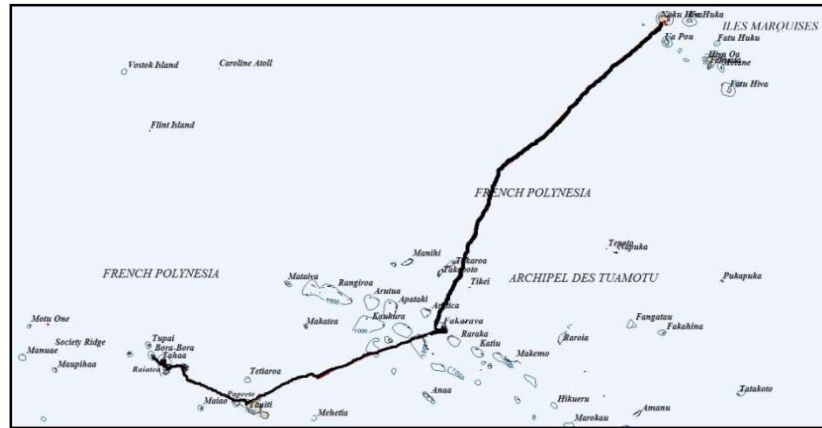
The entrance to Daniel's Bay is tricky; we chose our wave, surfed in towards the steep cliff - and then made an acute right hand turn into the lee of these cliffs - similar to many harbours on the west coast of Portugal and Spain. They have the same problem. They've got the entire Atlantic fetch coming in, so they have harbour walls to protect the harbours. As you come in, you must make an acute turn left or right. But the opening needs to be wide enough to allow the vessels in, so you've always got this risk when you're broadside on before you get behind the harbour wall.

Daniel's Bay had become a waiting room; there were nearly 20 boats waiting for good weather, some running out of fresh supplies. The locals were very friendly and generous and would trade fruit for other items. After one visit for water, we ended up with a sack of pamplemousse (really delicious extra-large grapefruit), a hand of

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bananas plus some roasted nuts (variety unknown). We spent five days here. It was quite amusing – the bay was used by the American version of the TV programme *Survivor*, about the exploits of groups of TV stars, cast adrift on deserted islands. But it turns out there was an airport, and civilisation was less than five miles away!

52 – Bartering for Black Pearls



The weather finally moderated, and a mass exodus of yachts headed for the Tuamotus. The Tuamotus is the largest group of coral atolls in the world. Each of the 78 atolls are similar, they are a low-lying ring of coral reef surrounding a deep blue lagoon. 21 have only one pass into the lagoon, 10 have two passes and the rest no passes at all. Variable currents, sudden storms and poor charts make cruising by yacht extremely hazardous. The seas were still confused after the two weeks of bad weather, but the wind was perfect. Under full sail *Poco Andante* headed west 500 miles to Ahe.

Four days later, as we approached Ahe, we calculated that our ETA would be early evening - in the tropics there is little twilight so darkness would soon fall. For safety it is important to enter these atolls at slack water or with a following current - and preferably with the sun behind to see the colour of the water. Good daylight is essential to avoid the numerous coral heads.

Anchoring is an art - fortunately coral atolls bring with them super clear water so we could actually see the hazards around. We always tried to ensure that the anchor lay in sand to prevent damaging the coral - and also to assist with good holding. We usually sought a depth of at least 5m but as we approached a possible spot in

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which to drop the anchor, we would check that the turning circle didn't have any 'bommies' - large, isolated coral upstands - in its path.

Being prudent, we decided it would be too risky to enter Ahe, so we altered course to Kauehi a little further west and south - and arrived early the next morning. This was a good move; the entrance was wide, although the overfalls and counter current were a little unnerving. We had a restful few days here - snorkelling and chilling out - the snorkelling was excellent.

We also joined a guided tour around the island by a local pearl farmer for all the cruisers - the highlight being a high-speed ride in an open-topped 'ute' complete with patio chairs for seating! There was only one good road - which was their new airport runway. Our tour driver was delighted to take the opportunity to get up some relative speed and took us on a 'drag' run up the runway. We also had a tour around the empty new airport terminal of which the locals were very proud.

All this was a warmup and sales pitch so that we would buy lots of their world-renowned black pearls from him - the final stop was the communal hall. We were served fresh coconuts, and the pearl trader emptied a briefcase full of pearls onto the table. We then started to sort through them and gathered together the raw pearls for creating necklaces, bracelets, earrings and rings. These were traded for bottles of rum, snorkelling gear, sunglasses, etc. Unsurprisingly lots of the famous Polynesian black pearls changed hands and were squirreled away to make future creations.

It turned out to be mid-summers day - this is a cause for celebration in Norway. Benjamin and Henrietta on *Uterus* organised a barbecue on a deserted motu, a palm-fringed small island, at the west end of the atoll. The setting was lovely and the company great with good snorkelling in the anchorage.

After a couple of days, we moved to Fakarava, a day sail away. Fakarava is the second largest atoll in the Tuamotus and is renowned for its snorkelling and diving. True to form they were superb. A dive on the pass was a must. Keith dropped off into 30m of water and allowed the current to sweep him towards the atoll. As the depth reached about 20m he was met by a wall of sharks - stemming the current waiting for the small fish to provide them with dinner - amazing. Then the drift current dive took him along a multi-coloured

Christine Muir (& Keith Hunt)

coral bottom with myriads of fish swimming against the current. In the lagoon the snorkelling was equally beautiful with healthy, well-populated coral heads - all at our anchorage just inside the pass.

53 – Shredded sails

From Fakarava we decided to go straight to Tahiti; we needed to prepare the boat ready for our next visitors Carol and Trevor, my sister and her husband from New Zealand. This was a two-day passage - we left late in the afternoon with a gentle 10 knots of breeze and the forecast indicating a gentle sail to Papeete. As ever, it never pays to be complacent. At 2am I was on the helm and Keith was asleep below. He responded to my shout, "Keith, the genoas gone!" He jumped out of bed and glanced at the wind speed as he donned his life jacket - it read 35 knots. I was battling with the helm and, sure enough, the genoa was in tatters. First job: furl the remnants; second job: drop the mainsail. Next, gather your breath and put the small staysail up. We settled the boat down and didn't see the wind drop below 30 knots for the next 36 hours. Averaging seven knots even with this small sail we made good time - but both suffered falls and bruising in the boisterous conditions and became exhausted hand-steering through the squalls.

The approach to Papeete was easy, through the main shipping channel and around towards the anchorage. We received a round of applause from our cruising friends as *Poco* paraded past. They could see the state of our tattered genoa - trailing strips of canvas from the furler - indicating the tough passage we had just endured. With relief we anchored off Taiana Marina.

It was lovely to be in Tahiti; there was an air of affluence with French influence everywhere, especially the large supermarkets just a few minutes' walk away - these appeared to have been plucked from the heart of France complete with all the produce. Heaven - but at inflated French prices!

Our main task was to sort out the genoa, repair the autopilot and get the boat ready for visitors. One of the other cruisers came over to help us get the poor genoa down - you had to unfurl the tattered sail before you could get it down. I unpicked the UV strip which had only recently been fitted in Venezuela - it could be used on a new sail. Then Keith laid the dinghy alongside the yacht, and we loaded

the sail – it was so large that Keith could barely see over it. The sail was dumped unceremoniously into a rubbish skip at the marina.

In its place we fitted a Yankee sail to the furler – a sail very similar to the genoa but cut higher at the bottom. In fact, reverting to a true cutter rig, yankee and staysail, worked so well we left it on until we reached New Zealand – where we had a replacement genoa made.

The other item that needed attention was my supply of HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy). Since leaving the UK I had been on patches, being unable to tolerate the tablet form. A friend in the UK had posted 6-monthly supplies to me at assorted places on our travels. It was now becoming too difficult to arrange a supply to be sent to me in Tahiti. An alternative was to buy some locally. I visited a local pharmacy and in bad French explained my predicament. The pharmacist checked their books, but the HRT patches were not available – in fact, they had no alternatives on offer. When I enquired what the local ladies used during menopause, the pharmacist just gave a very Gallic shrug! With no solution I was going to have to go 'cold turkey'...

My sister and her husband, Carol and Trevor duly arrived for their two-week holiday. They had flown in from a very cold New Zealand winter and arrived to a warm and rainy Tahiti. After settling in, we planned a trip to the dance competition – part of the Bastille Day celebrations. It rained and rained; Thursday's competition was postponed to Tuesday, Saturday's was postponed to Thursday... a bit of a disaster for the organisers! This was not normal balmy Pacific weather. One night was so blustery that it blew away one of the removable clear plastic cockpit side covers.

As an escape, we had coffee and croissants at the local bar for breakfast and watched France vs Italy in the Soccer World Cup Final. There was disappointment on the faces of the clientele when France was unlucky and lost on penalties. The multi-national crowd made for a raucous fun time.

Monday was brighter so we left Tahiti and sailed to Moorea, an adjacent island which was the setting for the film version of South Pacific. An easy trip in 10 knots of wind - we anchored just inside the reef.

Wednesday night was dance night at the next anchorage so we moved into Cooks Bay and anchored off the Bali Hai hotel and had a fun evening joining in with the tourists.

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Trevor hired a car for a tour of the island; visiting the sights and lookouts was a great treat for us.

We then moved around the corner to Opunoho bay. We had heard that the local sting rays were very tame, and an early morning trip was planned - arriving before the tourists. Keith was armed with some squid to feed them; little did he know that this is their favourite food - he was mobbed by these friendly creatures! Carol and I were not so sure but took some great photos.

The overnight sail to Huahine Nui was not the smooth trip we expected. Although it started off well, the wind came up unexpectedly. Just as we were about to eat dinner a gust disrupted proceedings, and we had to put a deep reef in the main. This flurry of activity was looked on with trepidation by Carol and Trevor, but *Poco Andante* settled down and we had an easy but noisy sail, arriving at dawn. We entered the reef and found a lovely anchorage off the beach.

After breakfast Keith zoomed to Fare, the local town, in the dinghy to get some fresh supplies. In the village he saw an information board advertising a vanilla plantation in the next bay and decided that would be worth a visit. We moved around there before breakfast the next day and took the dinghy ashore. François was a bit surprised to see four people walking up his drive on a quiet Sunday morning however he gave us a warm welcome and a great tour of his plantation. As well as vanilla he showed us lots of native fruits - we came away with a bag full of lovely tropical fruit and some fresh vanilla.

The final hop to Raiatea was a gentle sail in 10-15 knots and we tied up alongside at the Apooiti Marina, ready for our guests to disembark and arrange their flight back to Tahiti. Following a farewell dinner, we wandered into the local dance contest and were treated to a wonderful display of gyrating hips and colourful traditional costumes. This was a great finalé to a lovely two week visit with Carol and Trevor.

We had a few jobs to do so we hung around Raiatea for a couple of weeks, enjoying the food and company of fellow cruisers. The replacement motor for the autopilot arrived and seemed to solve the problem. The local sail loft let me use their sewing machine to make a replacement clear plastic panel for our cockpit. Work was delayed when the loft closed early to allow the ladies to rehearse each

afternoon – their village dance team had made it to the finals! We had enjoyed the dancing so much we went back for a second visit and cheered on our sewing ladies. We also booked tickets to see a dance troop from Bora Bora, which is reputed to be the best in French Polynesia.

We heard that a replica of Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon Tiki*, captained by Heyerdahl's grandson, had just completed the trip from Peru to Raiatea and was due to land at the most sacred site in Polynesia. The Norwegian yachting contingent - *Uterus*, *Necessity* and *Stormsvalen* - were excited by this; we joined them early one morning to go out and meet *Tangaroa* (the *Kon Tiki* 2). It was an impressive sight - a Balsa raft, complete with Satellite Communication dome, wind and solar generators and other mod cons!

Even more impressive was the Polynesian welcome they were given. More than a thousand people participated in the traditional reception, starting with a welcome speech. The crew of the *Tangaroa* were garlanded with leis - the fragrance of the Frangipani blooms wafted in the air. They listened respectfully to the harmonious singing which greeted them – and rubbed noses with the welcoming committee in the traditional Polynesian manner.

After the religious blessings, they presented the High Priestess with a stone carried from Peru - a piece of granite carried from Norway as a link to the *Kon Tiki* expedition. The ceremony is meant to remind the population of times long gone, when guests brought stones to the great sacrificial grounds of Taputapuatea. The old temple ruin Marae Taputapuatea is the most important traditional temple in Polynesia. Regarded as French Polynesia's most sacred isle, Raiatea is the old cultural centre of the Polynesian islands. We found it interesting to see the marae - the focal point of Polynesian societies and a place where their culture can be celebrated - being used in its traditional way and that it was still a cornerstone of the island culture. It was heart-warming to see the same Polynesian welcome that would have been given to the sailors of old. After the formalities the marae came to life with traditional singing and dancing and feasting, the women wearing colourful dresses and the men in warrior garb.

We departed Raiatea for the next island along - Bora Bora, just a short morning sail; the fishing was successful – Keith caught a small tuna. The weather was fine and sunny, with little wind; we motor

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sailed most of the way. Arriving in good light, we anchored off a lovely reef for the afternoon. This is a tourist snorkelling spot and most of the fish were accustomed to being fed. Keith took some scraps of tuna with him and was immediately mobbed by reef fish; Angel Fish, Sergeant Majors and many others. They were unafraid and were taking scraps from his hand - a special experience.

Bora Bora is said to be one of the most beautiful islands in the world. It is certainly dramatic with its rising peaks, perfect beaches and water every shade of blue. We had been impressed by the investment in navigation marks throughout French Polynesia - and the position of those in Bora Bora made navigation easy through the multiplicity of reefs.

We celebrated the third anniversary of our voyage in this idyllic setting - what a wonderful time we had experienced so far.

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the wind dropped to nothing, but the rain started - not in buckets, but in bath loads - but still no wind. The old sailor's adage of 'wind before rain, soon sailing again; rain before wind, sails to mend' was echoing through our minds. "What's happening here?" I wondered.

Wham! The wind hit as if someone had turned on a giant fan; it felt as if we were in the middle of a tornado. I hastily turned into the wind and Keith quickly dumped the main and furled the yankee. I steered onto a downwind trajectory and, as the boat settled on her course under engine, Keith reset the autopilot to take over the arduous task of helming.

With no clear direction, all we could do was trust the autopilot and motor, hoping *Poco Andante* would sort herself out. This continued for several hours, well into the night. Wind speed was 40 knots with 60+ knot gusts. Thankfully the sea was reasonably flat - it appeared that the wind was so strong it was flattening the sea. Eventually the wind dropped to below 30 knots and the direction became more consistent. We set a handkerchief-sized foresail and bowled along at seven knots.

These blustery conditions lasted through the day; next morning we approached the unmarked channel into Suwarrow. Our entry coincided with a lull in the wind - however this quickly changed to a 30-knot squall just as we entered the pass between the reefs. Thankfully Grahame from *Minaret* was watching our approach from the shore, with his VHF; he talked us through the winding entrance in deteriorating visibility.

There were about twenty yachts in the now-tranquil anchorage however they too had witnessed the storm - without the benefit of sea room. Three boats had snapped their anchor chains - and one was on the beach, hoping to float off with the next high tide. A few had suffered damage to their windlasses and bow rollers. Many anchor chains had been wrapped around the numerous coral heads that littered the anchorage. In hindsight we were lucky to have been at sea during those conditions, but it was all worth it - Suwarrow is a very special place.

That afternoon the weather cleared, and we ended up having a great 10 days here - rectangular in shape, with a turquoise blue central lagoon, some 19km long and 8km wide. As a tropical island it has everything that one would expect - a surrounding coral reef with

numerous islands dotted with coconut palms. The lagoon was teaming with fish and small sharks.

Thousands of seabirds nest on this atoll and, turtles and coconut crabs abound. It was made famous by the recluse Tom Neale (1902-1977) who wrote a book called '*An Island to Oneself*'. There is supposedly buried treasure here which has yet to be found.

The real treasure is the natural diversity. The atoll, part of the Cook Islands National Park, was looked after by one Cook Island family, John, Veronica and their four sons aged between five and 12. They were very welcoming and great company - always willing to take you out on their fishing and gathering trips. As custodians and caretakers, they spent six months a year here; they were dropped off at the start of the season with their supplies and taken home to Raratonga at the end of six months. With four growing lads Veronica soon found out that her supplies were dropping fast, and they were reliant on cruisers to supply them with top-ups. Their potluck barbecues, every two or three days, were magical.

The trips to the outer islands were worth every bit of the US\$50 National Park entry fee. The visit usually included a trip to the nesting sites, and you could play 'David Attenborough' wandering among the millions of nesting birds - Frigates, Terns, Boobies and Tropic birds - all unafraid of humans. In the lagoon turtles abound and sharks were constant companions. The main diet on the island is fish and coconuts so fishing and coconut harvesting is a daily exercise. John was amazing - climbing 30m coconut palms to cut down the ripe coconuts, whilst Veronica wove a basket from the palm fronds to carry them home. The coconut is an amazing food product and can be used in a variety of ways; green ones make a very refreshing drink, the grated flesh of brown ones is great for coating fish before cooking, and the spongy flesh from newly sprouting ones is great for making coconut pancakes - a Suwarrow speciality.

Chris from *Magic Carpet* entertained us all with his guitar - several of the yachts had instruments on board. The evening jam sessions were great fun.

Suwarrow has no ciguatera - a neurotoxin which builds up in the flesh of reef fish and if consumed can make you very ill. The fish was good to eat and plentiful. All you had to do was troll an attractive lure behind the dinghy and dinner was soon caught. However, it was difficult to control what you catch - one time Keith had a massive bite;

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the catch dragged the dinghy towards the reef! He motored to deeper water and slowly brought in the line, only to find a very unhappy grey shark on the end. It was half the length of the dinghy and was not welcome aboard! He cut the line and waved it a relieved goodbye.

The diving in the atoll is also excellent and Keith went on numerous dives with Rob and Gemma from *Orinoco Flow*. The pass diving was great with lots of very curious but harmless sharks.

After a few days, the yachts that had been there for a week or so decided to leave – Keith and I decided to stay a bit longer. Unfortunately, when the boats tried to raise their anchors, some of their chains were wrapped around coral heads from the stormy winds of the previous week. We spent nearly all-day snorkelling above each boat's anchor, directing the skippers where to turn to unwind the chain. Eventually they were all untangled and were able to depart.

We had our own excitement when we came to raise our anchor. Keith was leaning over the pulpit directing me which direction to turn to unwind our anchor chain from around the 'bommie' when his life jacket toggle got caught on the lifelines – and promptly inflated! The 'bang' gave us both a huge surprise before we collapsed in laughter!

55 – The Friendly Isles

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end; the 700-mile trip to Tonga beckoned. *Orinoco Flow* left and, the weather looking settled, we left the next day. The plan was to rendezvous at Rose Island, a small, deserted atoll 300 miles away with a reputation for amazing diving. We had two days lovely sailing, however, for the first time in three years, we both came down with a gastric bug, caught from one of the other yachts in Suwarrow, which wasn't much fun. The wind dropped on the third night, and we motored to try and catch up in the light winds. As dawn broke, the winds picked up and found us running in 25-30knot winds with 3-4m seas.

At 10am we were about 30 miles away from Rose Atoll and had a radio call from *Orinoco Flow* relaying their harrowing experience trying to enter Rose Atoll. On arrival they could see the seas crashing on the reef and the calm water inside. They lined up the entrance to the pass and headed on in. Unfortunately, the outflow from the atoll was so strong that their engine failed to stem the current and began overheating. They decided to get out but hit a coral head trying to turn around inside the pass. This was really frightening but they got out OK.

With this news - and the awful conditions - we decided to bypass Rose Atoll and head straight for Tonga. *Orinoco Flow* headed for US Samoa. The remainder of our trip was a tough sail with lots of sail changing; after trying various sail combinations, we finally set our fluorescent orange storm trysail - a really small loose-footed main sail designed for storm conditions. We were delighted at how well the trysail performed and how much more comfortable the boat was. As the winds eased, we just altered our foresails to match the conditions; the most unlikely - and colourful - combination being the orange storm trysail with blue gennaker.

Through this passage my menopausal symptoms were running rampant - hot flushes and raging emotional rollercoasters. Keith would toss a bucket of sea water over me occasionally, but the extremes of emotions were distressing to both of us. I couldn't seem

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to control the overwhelming rage that would suddenly rise in me – and the only person around to cop this explosion was poor Keith. The only good thing was that during the scary sailing moments, the adrenaline kicked in and over-rode my menopausal temper!

Our land fall in Vava'u, Tonga was going to be a nighttime event; at 3am we motored through the wide pass using radar - and moonlight - and dropped anchor behind *Minaret*. We had contacted Grahame on *Minaret* earlier by radio and he gave us a precise Latitude and Longitude to a sheltered and open bay with an easy entrance where they were anchored.

Vava'u is a mini archipelago with lots of limestone islands soaring out of the pristine blue waters – all protected by a barrier reef. Hence there is wonderful sailing with many anchorages in flat water. The beaches are lovely and the snorkelling and diving excellent - with the added bonus that hundreds of Humpback whales come here to calve then mate each year. We had one amazing experience of whales breaching and putting on a display only metres from our anchorage. It was amazing to see and hear these magnificent creatures from the yacht. You could actually hear the whale songs which was fantastic.

Tonga is also a popular charter destination and there are lots of tourist-type facilities.

Although beautiful, Tonga is still a long way from anywhere. Keith's son Rob was graduating from Imperial College London with a degree in Chemical Engineering. We were very proud – but disappointed that the cost and difficulty of returning to the UK from here meant we could not attend his graduation.

The Tongans are your typical friendly Polynesians - in fact Captain Cook nicknamed this group of islands The Friendly Isles. Tonga has a constitutional monarchy, and the current succession goes back a thousand years. Unfortunately, soon after we arrived, the King died, and a month of official mourning was declared. Many of the Tongans dressed in traditional black with woven-grass skirts on the outside - a sign of respect for the monarchy. All sports matches, parties and concerts were cancelled.

Luckily, we managed to attend the Full Moon Party on a deserted island just before this came into force. All the yachts took their dinghies to the island and were met on arrival by boat boys who would take the dinghies out to anchor for you. The beach itself was shaped like a natural amphitheatre formed by a small extinct volcano

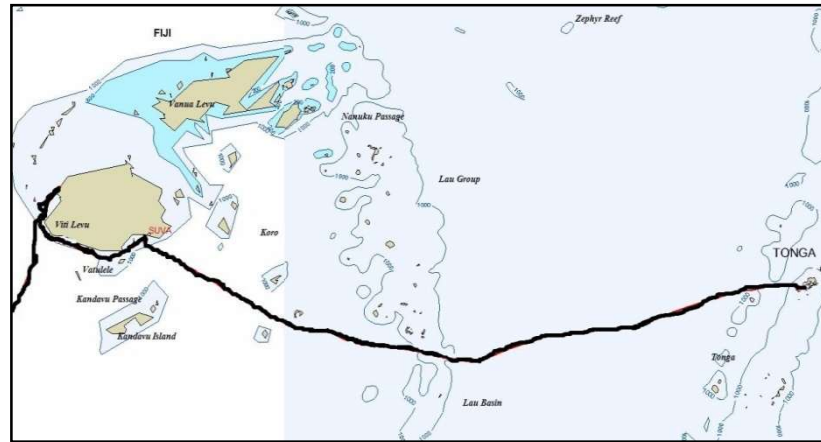
– the ground was covered in pumice which had floated up from an active volcano somewhere on the seabed. With all the dinghies, the bay looked like a busy car park and at the end of the evening we were amazed how they recognised which dinghy belonged to which crew. The party involved a ‘pig on the spit’ and the consumption of far too much alcohol, good music and lots of dancing...

The Tongans are also very religious and have great singing voices and a visit to church on Sunday was a most enjoyable experience, with amazing harmonies coming from the congregation. Even though we couldn’t understand a word the effect was uplifting.

The social scene amongst the yachties continued with regular parties, barbecues and get-togethers; compared to French Polynesia, eating out was affordable again. The protected anchorages were great for attending to boat maintenance and chores. Keith still bore the scars of the Aerogen wind generator blade that had cut his arm and decided to tackle its repair – a complete rebuild including new bearings gave it a new lease of life.

Tonga is also a place where we left many friends - those who decided to go to Australia still had many miles to cover - whereas those who were heading down to New Zealand for the cyclone season could linger awhile. We were in the latter group and could spend another week or so in Tonga before taking the short hop to Fiji.

56 – Clean teeth and new glasses...



On 7th October we left Tonga for the 3½-day passage to Fiji flanked by two pods of humpbacked whales. The sea around the Lau group of islands (Fiji) was covered in a layer of tan coloured pumice covering hundreds of square miles, the aftermath of a new island erupting between these island states. It had been reported that the layer was up to a metre thick and had abraded hulls and blocked engine intakes. Some of the football sized lumps made ominous noises as they collided with the hull. There was no way to avoid sailing through the area – we were just pleased that it was slightly less dense as we passed through, compared with a few days earlier.

The rest of our sail to Suva was a gentle broad reach - a welcome respite from strong winds. We had timed our arrival for dawn. The entrance through the coral pass is very narrow but we'd been informed that the blue leading lights made the entrance easy. An hour before dawn the moon disappeared as an ominous black cloud passed before it; the rain came down in sheets followed by 30 knots of head wind. Down came the sails and on went the engine; we were just outside the pass searching for the leading lights - they were nowhere to be seen. I radioed the harbour control to check whether

there was a problem. "No", came the reply, "but you can't see the lights because the cloud is so low!"

I had plotted our course through the pass and into the harbour and Keith was on the helm. He spotted a fishing boat which he presumed was in the pass so headed towards the boat. I happened to notice the depth sounder was reading 5m - a little shallow for a main shipping channel... After a rather loud 'conversation' (read argument), Keith eventually realised that the fishing boat he was heading towards was actually aground on the reef. Oops!!! Helm hard to starboard - a close shave!

Fiji has inherited its bureaucratic ways from its colonial past - endless forms to be completed by hand, in triplicate - none of which seemed particularly relevant. Armed with his big stamp, the official stamped the form, handed one copy back - and added the rest to one of the tall dusty piles of paper at the rear of his office - never to be seen again, we suspect.

Suva's weather was wet and windy nearly every day we were there. The shopping was good and the market excellent, with fresh fruits and vegetables. You could also stock up on kava here - kava is the local drink made by steeping ground kava roots in water; it tastes a little like sawdust but acts as both a mild sedative and a euphoriant. It is still the custom to present a gift of kava when visiting a local village. Following a welcoming ceremony, the chief gave you permission to visit his village/island. It was good to carry a supply just in case.

Our prime reason to visit Fiji was to arrange check-ups for our teeth and eyes - we had been told that the medical facilities there were excellent and inexpensive. Most of the practitioners had been trained in Australia or New Zealand. Our Cruising Guide recommended a particular dentist in Suva. We arrived at the address which was in an upstairs office. When we enquired about dental appointments, the receptionist burst out laughing "This is the HIV/STD clinic! The dentist has moved! Don't worry - I can show you the way." As it was lunch time, we offered to take her to lunch on the way - she was delighted and took us to a restaurant serving local cuisine and introduced us to Fijian cooking - the less said about that the better... As we walked along the High Street, she was often greeted by passers-by - who gave us 'knowing' looks which I found

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embarrassing! It was worrying how many people seemed to know her – hopefully not in her professional capacity...

The dentist was most obliging, and we were able to get appointments that day. The optician was a very trendy young man with immaculate hair – as well as getting new glass for Keith, I asked for a recommendation for a hairdresser. I had been cutting Keith's hair for a year or two but felt I had 'lost the plot' with his hairstyle. The barber/hairdresser was great and allowed me to sit on a stool to watch the proceedings and gave me some tips. Very helpful!

With clean teeth and new glasses, we hung around Suva waiting for the weather to abate; Suva Yacht Club was great for hanging out and had good facilities. It is one of the departure points for New Zealand, and discussions about weather windows were commonplace. On a morning report on the 'Rag of the Air' (the cruisers SSB net for the South Pacific) there was a request for assistance, by a Kiwi Yacht, *Ranganui* which had damaged its rudder in 40 knot winds. They had decided to turn back and head for Suva. Just outside Suva harbour their engine failed and they were taken under tow by an American yacht. Keith went out in the rib to help steer them through the pass and tow them into the marina for repairs. They had spent six days in 40+ knots of wind, hand-steering their 'jury-rigged' rudder most of the time. The couple were very relieved to get to Suva.

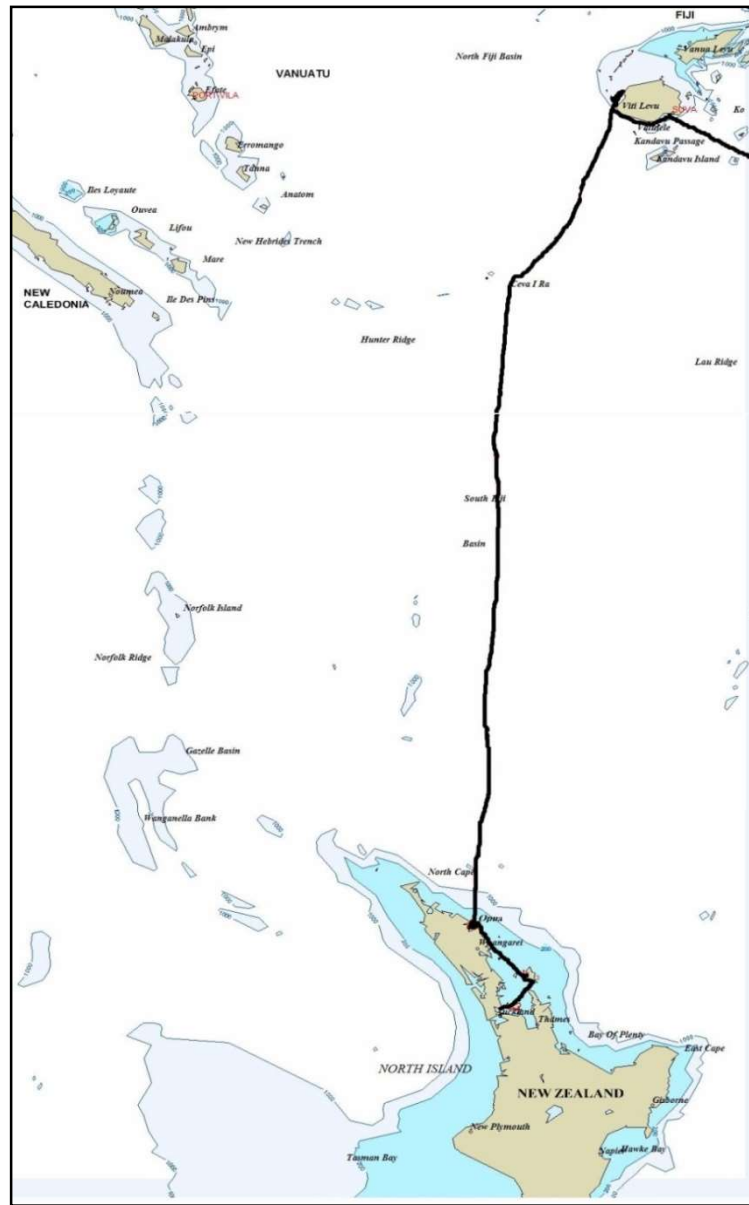
57 – Return to Musket Cove

Eventually the weather did ease a little, so we checked out of Suva – again, probably the most bureaucratic procedure anywhere. It was about 100 miles to Musket Cove, with the need to check in at Lautoka – a 30-mile detour to the north. The gentle sail to Mbengga Atoll didn't last long – it turned into a brisk 25knots. We anchored behind Yanuca Island for the night and hunkered down. Originally, we intended a gentle three-day passage stopping on the way. Heading out the next morning the fresh easterly turned into 35knots with relatively flat seas so, under yankee alone, we covered the next 70 miles in double quick time. We anchored just inside Navula Pass and made our way up to Lautoka the next day.

Cruising is full of lovely surprises; the breath-taking sunsets, the joy of seeing dolphins playing and the excitement of new places – hard to beat is the heartfelt meeting of old friends. The trip to Lautoka was one of these. A call on the radio brought us in touch with Chris and Fiona of *Three Ships* again; we had last seen them in Gibraltar three years earlier. Needless to say, it was fun to meet up with them again!

After checking in at Lautoka, another mammoth exercise, we headed to Musket Cove, probably the most yacht-friendly place in the Pacific. Other than Suva, Musket Cove was our only other stop in Fiji – for sentimental reasons. About five years after being inspired to 'just buy a boat and go' – we'd made it. It was strange to realise that on our last visit we were guests at the resort – and now we were the seasoned sailors standing at the bar, telling stories and hopefully inspiring other 'wannabe' cruisers.

58 – Waiting for weather



Musket Cove is the main launch pad for the passage to New Zealand and weather patterns are the main topic of conversation.

Time and tide wait for no man - or in this case, replace tide with cyclones - called hurricanes in the northern hemisphere. The early development of Cyclone Xavier north of Vanuatu was cause for concern - we needed to cut short our stay in Fiji. It looked like it was going to be a boisterous year for tropical storms.

A few days after we had arrived at Musket Cove a lot of boats left in a favourable weather window - some departing west towards Australia and others heading south to New Zealand. We wanted to enjoy a few extra days and decided to take the next opportunity in about a week's time. While we were in Tonga, we had been given some meteorological advice notes by a very knowledgeable fellow cruiser on a yacht called *Chameleon*. These notes were guidelines for selecting a good weather window for the notorious trip from Tonga or Fiji to New Zealand. The notes were very useful and during our departure planning we used them assiduously. There appeared to be a weather window on 28th October; we took a day trip to Lautoka to check out of Fiji - more bureaucracy. This left one day to get ready. A wonderful meal at the resort restaurant was a lovely way to end our stay in the islands.

The 'morning after the night before' was not conducive to an early start, so a leisurely breakfast was followed by a leisurely departure. The general plan was to sail the rhumb line, taking advantage of a high pressure, not too high, developing over the Tasman Sea. The only problem was that the weather system was creating a 'squash' zone at our current latitude. Radio reports from boats already on passage indicated this zone was around 70 miles wide - we prepared for a bumpy start. Sure enough, the first day was yuck - a beam reach in 35knots; fast, wet and lumpy. We were thankful to attach our clear plastic protectors to the sides of the cockpit to stop the spray.

The yuck conditions soon changed to a useful 20 knots from the ESE - this put us on a close reach under reefed main, full yankee and staysail. On a close reach, the wind is coming over the side of the boat, creating a lift and pushing the boat forward at a faster rate. It also means that the boat is heeled over (that is, at an angle off vertical), so I'd sit on the downward side with my legs braced across the cockpit - and gritting my teeth, as I hated being on a heel. However, I had to put up with it as it was the only way we would get south, but after so many years downwind sailing in the equatorial zone, this was a real challenge.

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These conditions prevailed for the next five days and gave us some very fast runs - we even broke our daily record one day, clocking up 187 miles in 24 hours! At latitude 24° South we reached a decision point - do we trust the conditions will hold and continue - or should we heave-to at the Minerva Reefs and wait for the next depression to pass south? The Minerva Reefs are a group of two submerged atolls and can be used as anchorages by private yachts travelling between Fiji or Tonga and New Zealand. Carol, my sister, was checking the NZ weather forecasting and sent us an updated forecast via satellite and the signs were 'go for it' - so we did.

The conditions held until we were within sight of the Land of the Long White Cloud - then the wind dropped... We ended up motoring the last hundred or so miles and arrived to a firework reception in Opua on Sunday 5th November - exactly 7½ days to cover 1,075 miles. We were very impressed with ourselves and our passage planning - and later discovered that *Chameleon*, whose weather advice we had followed, had left for New Zealand on the very same day as us!

59 – ‘Boat bum’ to ‘Businessman’

Approaching Opuia in the North Island of New Zealand was just like sailing into a south coast town in the UK - although the graceful albatrosses signified that we were in southern latitudes. As we nosed our way through the craggy outlying islands, we were greeted by large pods of spinner dolphins. These aptly named creatures put on an amazing display, leaping high out of the water and often careering and spinning around on their tails.

It took us a week to recover from the passage – I had jaw ache from gritting my teeth during the trip. I should mention that, although I was born in New Zealand, my parents had moved to Australia when I was 15. I worked out that I had spent a total of 31 days out of 32 years in New Zealand – I still had a brother and sister living there.

Opuia was the main port of entry for cruisers and there was a floating Quarantine pontoon that new arrivals had to tie up to until cleared by Customs and Immigration. Due to our arrival on a Sunday, they asked if we minded waiting until the following day for them to come to us – we were pleased to stretch our legs and get a good night's sleep!

At Opuia, there were lots of cruiser gatherings and ‘get togethers’ of the boats which had shared the Pacific crossing that year. At one of these occasions in a local restaurant, the adults all sat at one table, and the children Marita & Hedda from *Blue Marlin* and Molly & Nancy from *Jade* shared a table of their own. It was impressive to see these youngsters, aged between six and eight years, read the menu and order their own meals - in English, their second language. Their social skills seemed so much more mature than land-based children. One of them even had the courage to wave down a waiter and request more tomato sauce!

New Zealand is another major stopping point where cruisers leave their boats for the cyclone season while they go back to their home countries. Others find a cosy marina somewhere and settle in. Most buy a car and go travelling. We took a few trips in the Northland region including a stop at a very rustic set of thermal mud

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pools and a day at the Waimate North Agricultural Show – a very typical country show.

Our plan was to cruise down to Auckland via Great Barrier Island and visit Carol and Trevor, my sister and brother-in-law. The weather so far had been blustery and cold so sailing for pleasure was not high on the agenda. We had a lovely week or so at 'Earthsong Lodge' Carol and Trevor's luxury resort - wining and dining, playing tourists and helping out with a bit of landscaping around the Lodge.

The second part of the plan was to get jobs for a couple of months to top up the cruising kitty and help pay for new sails and the many minor modifications we had planned for *Poco Andante*. Luckily, Keith managed to secure a couple of months work as an accountant at the largest newspaper printers in NZ – after only a phone interview while we were still on Great Barrier Island!

It was time to say goodbye to the life of luxury and move the boat over to Auckland - about 50nm. There wasn't much wind, so we were quietly motoring along when I spotted black smoke in the main saloon. Keith went below to investigate and discovered the engine bay was pitch black! We immediately stopped the engine and put up some sails to give us some steerage – and diagnose what was wrong. It turned out the exhaust gasket between the heat exchanger and the main exhaust hose joint had blown – the entire engine bay, including fridge compressors, domestic batteries and inverter were covered with an oily black film. We had to wait for the engine to cool down before we could make emergency repairs, but in the meantime *Poco* was sailing towards land. In very little wind we tacked our way towards Auckland. At least the slow passage gave the engine time to cool down and Keith was able to find some gasket goo to make a temporary repair.

Just as we were approaching downtown Auckland the wind picked up and we hastily dropped our sails – only to see the local yachts sailing with full spinnakers! What wimps we were!

On 11th December we moved *Poco Andante* into Pier 21 marina – right in the heart of downtown Auckland. It seemed too good to be true – a lovely working marina with only about five 'live aboard' boats. We made a quick trip to the Tax Office to get the necessary permissions for us to work in NZ, and the next day Keith transformed from 'boat bum' to 'businessman' – sent off to work in long trousers, shirt and tie, jacket and shoes!

60 – Do we stay, or do we go?

Six months later, as the cyclone season came to an end it was time to decide – do we stay in NZ or resume cruising? By this time both Keith and I were still ‘temping’, although being lured by offers of long-term assignments – I was working as a Management Accountant with a tourism company and Keith still doing consultancy work at a large printing company investigating/improving their cost structure and sorting out other issues. The employment was enabling us to cover the cost of our stay in NZ, pay for some much-needed boat maintenance – and bank a little to fund future cruising. In the end we decided to stay another year until the start of the following cruising season – and take advantage of the ‘VAT/GST-free’ status provided to foreign vessels to do a mini-refit and other capital-intensive small projects. There was no problem extending our Temporary Import Permit for *Poco Andante* for a further 12 months...

We had spent so much of the previous three years away from ‘big cities’ – and as big cities go Auckland is a tiddler but has huge aspirations – it was fun to take advantage of all the happenings. Culturally there was always something going on – free concerts, festivals, cultural events, cinema, and theatre – all within walking distance of our berth. We even did some summer courses at Auckland University; I did web design and Keith did a writing course.

Work got in the way, and we only managed to get out of Auckland once or twice, so we decided to save up for the grand ‘Kiwi’ experience the following year. Our short trips revealed that once outside of Auckland life became very rural. We quickly entered agricultural land, water or virgin forest dotted by small communities. Keith discovered that to become a ‘dot’ on the map there only needed a crossroads and one or two dwellings; estimating whether there is anything of interest or a place to stop from looking at the map is difficult. There are also lots of ‘white’ roads on the map which quickly turn into un-sealed tracks.

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For an Easter break we hired a car and spent the weekend in Hastings close to Napier. Napier's claim to fame is that it got wiped out by an earthquake in 1931 when that part of NZ was lifted over 2m. The earthquake demolished the city. Unperturbed the local businesspeople set out to rebuild the city and commandeered all the architects in NZ to design and construct the entire city. They decided to follow the example of Santa Barbara, California, which had suffered a similar catastrophe. Santa Barbara had been re-built using the new Art Deco style of architecture - intermingled with the Californian Spanish Mission style. Napier, half a world away but with a similar climate, was rebuilt within two years, in mainly Art Deco style to follow suit. The city then went to sleep and was 'rediscovered' in the 1980s when a US property developer came to assess the city for further development. He observed that here was something special - a whole city frozen in time. The locals, inspired by his enthusiasm, created the Art Deco Society which now oversees all development and tries to preserve the buildings for all to see.

Hastings, about 15 minutes away, was also destroyed and rebuilt at the same time and its buildings are also of the same era, but without the Art Deco Society support - just a lovely city to wander around. We can't comment on the quality of restaurants though - despite all the motels being fully booked, very few restaurants were open over Easter; something to do with the unfathomable NZ labour laws.

A cross-country hike on the return journey took us through the Urewera National Park a totally unspoilt area of forests and lakes covering hundreds of square miles. We had hoped to stay in the Park, but all the accommodation was full. We did manage a two-hour tramp through the forest to a high lake.

We got up early to attend the dawn Anzac Day service at the Auckland War Memorial - it was Keith's first experience and he found it very moving. Then I had to take the Welsh rugby-mad Keith to Eden Park to witness the All Blacks playing France. It was quite amusing that we were seated near the French contingent and we found ourselves barracking for their team!

Although the cruising life had come to a halt for a while, the social life certainly hadn't. New friends and old often popped by for a visit. Nils and Marit from *Checkmate* visited before they returned to their yacht in Opuia after spending the cyclone season in their home

country of Norway. And we managed to catch up with Grahame & Lynne from *Minaret*, Arni & Cam with Molly & Nancy from *Jade*, and Rune & Idunn with Marita & Hedda from *Blue Marlin*. The girls were all enjoying going to a real school in Whangarei during the cyclone season. We enjoyed a great evening with Toni & Peter from *Tigger* – who subsequently decided it was safer to sleep on board rather than drive! And David & Heather from *Milliways* stayed with us on their way back to Australia – we hadn't caught up with them in person since about 2004. Gloria and Willy from *Linger Longer* had finally crossed the Pacific Ocean having delayed their departure the previous year after experiencing a challenging crossing of the Caribbean Sea.

Pier 21 Marina could have provided source material for a mini soap opera; Mark (UK) from *Heartbeat* came to NZ to recover from the death of his wife the previous year – and found love with Leanne, a lovely NZ woman who now had to learn about sailing. Roy and Dianne who bought a new Bavaria 39 for Christmas sailed her to Nelson (at the north end of the South Island of NZ), where they were building a new home to start a new life. Arnie and Jane (NZ) on *Shady Lady* adopted a foundling puppy but still hoped to go cruising in 2-3 years, while Richard and Jane (UK and NZ) on *Lionheart* were about to set sail for the start of their cruising life. Richard and Jane astounded everyone by getting married suddenly – it turned out that their RYA Examiner was also a marriage celebrant. When they finished their Skippers' exams, they produced their marriage licence and asked him to marry them!

And, of course, we spent time catching up with my family and old friends – although born in New Zealand, I had left 30+ years ago. My brother Peter and his wife Anita taught Keith how to barbecue. And we spent a real family Christmas Day with Pam and Shane – and Pam's brothers and sisters and their families – a great re-union for me; Pam is my old school friend, and we have kept in touch since we started school together when we were five years old.

Keith was enjoying his latest contract with Seafood Processors doing a costing exercise for them – but getting up at 5am was a challenge.

Although we borrowed Arne's (*Shady Lady*) car to do grocery shopping occasionally, we managed to survive our year-and-a-half in New Zealand without buying a car – a tribute to Auckland's public

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transport system. We really appreciated the availability and quality of the local food produce. Green lipped mussels, seafood, fresh fruit and vegetables - surprisingly, lamb was more expensive than beef. But the lamb shanks were delicious, and Keith enjoyed the beef steaks and seafood. With the profusion of Asian restaurants you do see some funny signs, though; I enjoyed the one offering 'Vegetarian Sweet and Sour Pork'.

Our outline plan was to work through the winter, finish the boat maintenance and save hard - and then fly to Australia for three months travelling by car, before returning to NZ and driving around the South Island for a month or so. Then get ready to set sail in April/May the following year.

In November 2007, we finally finished our contracts. *Poco Andante* needed a good wash down and we needed to test our new sails. One weekend we sailed 15 miles to Waiheke Island - one of Auckland's 'barrier' islands that protect the Hauraki Gulf. We soon discovered how unfit our upper bodies had become when we tried to hoist our new mainsail and genoa - they set beautifully. We anchored the first night in a small bay beneath one of Auckland's many volcanic islands and next morning, with no wind, motored to Waiheke. However, the trip back to Auckland was a tedious plod with winds up to 39 knots on the nose and short, sharp chop breaking over the bows.

61 – Walkabout to Oz



We left *Poco Andante* in the marina in Auckland for our 3-month to trip Australia. Although we had a rough plan, we figured the details would sort themselves out upon arrival. This was Keith's first visit to Australia, and I wanted to show him the real Australia before we hit the big cities of Sydney and Melbourne. I had lived in Perth for more than 14 years, so it made sense for us to start our travels there. We booked our flight to Western Australia and our first night's accommodation.

The airport bus dropped us off at 'Globe Backpackers' - clean, adequate and air-conditioned - it took me back to my youth-hostelling days. As a base to get ourselves organised it was right in

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the centre of town and the notice boards were littered with vehicles and equipment for sale.

Day One and the search commenced. First, we bought Australian SIMs for the phones – however a trip to the Royal Automobile Club didn't prove as useful as I hoped. The man at the bus ticket office was more useful, giving us details of the public transport system, maps, location of car yards and which local newspapers to buy. Armed with this we sat down and commenced our search by phone.

Our learning curve was steep. We hadn't owned a car for four years so were unsure of makes, models, etc. Seeing what other backpackers were using for transport was informative, but a walk through the car yards along Albany Highway was more useful. We loved the honesty of the car salesmen and, following their advice, came to the conclusion that we needed either a Nissan Patrol or Toyota Landcruiser - both chunky 4WDs. However, we needed to hire a car to buy a car...

Day Two was Melbourne Cup Day. The whole of Australia stops for this horse race - even in Perth the women were sporting their fancy hats - and betting booths had sprung up everywhere. On our way to the car hire company, we passed an Irish pub and popped in to watch the 'Cup'. It was midday and the place was deserted. By 12.30 it was standing room only - on chairs, tables anywhere that had a view of the screen. There were queues at the Tote outside and helpful young guys showing you how to bet. Needless to say, our 'pick' came well down in the field, but the atmosphere was superb.

With a brand-new hire car and honed search criteria we again toured the car yards. After a couple of test drives Keith started negotiations for a 1993 Nissan Patrol diesel with 'only' 260,000km on the clock. It was over our budget but looked in good condition. In the end Keith made an offer, but they wouldn't agree - so we walked away.

The evening was lovely and with the hire car I was keen to show Keith around. Perth is a modern city, clean with lots of greenery. The Swan River forms a lovely backdrop and from Kings Park you get a wonderful view overlooking the city. Over dinner we decided that we would give the asking price for the Nissan Patrol that we had seen that afternoon and would phone the car yard first thing.

While on the internet to check emails and transfer money there was an email from Tom and Sue (*Nechtán*). We had met Tom and Sue

four years ago and cruised with them in the rias of northern Spain. They then sailed directly to Australia and had bought a house in Perth. Their offer of a bed and bath came at just the right moment – aren't cruisers wonderful!

Next morning, we went to finalise the purchase of the Nissan Patrol; the car yard had just started to service the vehicle and so Keith had a chance to check her over underneath. To his (untrained) eye all looked OK and the mechanic made some favourable comments. The tyres looked good – almost brand new. A real Tonka Toy! What more could a man want...

While the car was being serviced, we visited the local K-Mart and started to buy camping equipment. By the end of the day, we had transport and most of our camping gear – and it was only Day Three. Knowing about the notorious flies in Australia, I recommended we buy a fly-screen room tent – canvas on top, but all four sides made of fly-screen mesh. This was big enough to take our dining table and chairs, cooking equipment and other miscellany. Separately we had a small 3-man dome tent to hold an inflatable mattress. This set up was often admired by fellow campers as they battled the onslaught of the Ozzie flies.

Day Four and we were ready to start our adventure – we checked out of our hostel and returned the hire car. We headed east to Stoneville, a leafy suburb just verging on bush, where Tom and Sue lived.

By Day Seven, the Nissan Patrol was packed and ready to hit the road. Since it was already November, I had decided that we should head north to Broome before the cyclone season began but take the inland route to show Keith the real outback.

After lunch we drove to New Norcia, 130km north, through vast fields of golden wheat and arrived in time to see the parrots roosting in the trees at a basic camp site. New Norcia is a bit of an oddity; this mission town of incongruous gothic architecture was built in the 1840's by the Roman Catholics to convert the Aborigines and ended up becoming a school and monastery.

After a quick tour, the following day we set off for the next town 500km north. We had just left town and there was a large sign which said, 'The Outback Starts Here'. Keith wasn't sure whether this was a warning or just a bit of marketing! This was his first taste of the outback.

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Paynes Find is a former gold rush settlement approximately five hours north of Perth. The townsite was gazetted in 1911, the same year the Paynes Find Gold Battery was constructed. The town is named after the prospector, Thomas Payne, who was the first to discover gold in the area and was the first to register a lease for gold mining with the Mines Department. The Paynes Find Gold Battery is now a tourist attraction and still operates today, making it the only working gold battery in Western Australia.

Cue is a near-ghost town built during the gold rush at the end of the 19th century when it was the centre of the Murchison Goldfields; in its heyday it boasted a population of around ten thousand. Now all that is left is a small settlement - current population is around 135 - with some of the most grandiose buildings to be seen anywhere in rural Western Australia. Although these are now a little rough around the edges, they have not changed in the last 50 years. There was even an old-style telegraph-cash system from the 1930's in the general store.

A 50km side trip from Cue took us to Walga Rock, the third largest monolith in Australia. A large cave in the rock contains Aboriginal paintings, including one believed to depict the Dutch ships that visited the region's shores in the 17th century. To think that these paintings have been continuously updated for tens of thousands of years is very humbling.

If Walga Rock represented the old Western Australia, Newman is the new. In the 1960's Newman was created to exploit the iron ore in the local mountain; now it is the biggest open pit iron ore mine in the world. In 2007, WA was in the middle of an economic boom led by BHP. Demand for iron ore from China was unprecedented and new mines were opening daily. This created a huge demand for labour.

What could they expect? Good wages and working conditions in the intense heat of around 45°C (113°F) in the shade. The mine is huge - the 200-tonne trucks look like toys from the viewing platforms. Everything here is on a grand scale; the ore is transported by rail to Port Hedland on driverless, automated trains 2.5km long - 250 wagons. Although this mine is huge, it is still insignificant in the scale of WA and is just a tiny pin prick on the map. How much more mineral wealth lies beneath the surface nobody knows!

We were in the Shire of East Pilbara, the largest shire in the world at 380,000km². It is slightly larger than Germany - and only 40,000

people live here, mostly in the towns. It also has some of the most stunning scenery in WA; the Karijini National Park is no exception. Keith and I spent a couple of days here exploring the gorges and swimming in the water holes, a welcome relief from the heat.

Oh, I mustn't forget to mention the flies; these magical little beasts appear out of nowhere and drove us to distraction. 'Beekeeper' head gear was a must - otherwise they were in your ears, nose, eyes, and the odd one down your throat! Where they come from nobody knows; they just lay in wait for some unsuspecting human. Keith reckoned they are part of a conspiracy to keep people from experiencing the beauty of the outback...

The heat could also play havoc with tyres. Driving along the corrugated roads in horrendous heat is not good for them, as we found out. Luckily, I had just turned onto a tarmac road when an uncomfortable feeling and wobbly steering wheel ground us to a halt. One of our nearly new tyres had blown out. This incident brought home the isolation and loneliness of this part of the world. Keith changed the tyre OK, and a couple of motorists that passed stopped to check if we needed help...

We had now covered around 1100km since leaving Perth and not a city in sight - just a few small towns. We still needed a replacement tyre and, although Tom Price at 100km was the nearest, it was in the opposite direction to our planned destination of Broome. We decided to risk the 330km drive, without a spare, to the next town of Port Hedland, the main port for the millions of tonnes of iron ore being exported. We arrived just before lunch on a Saturday and started to look for tyre places - apparently there were three in town; one was closed and the other two couldn't help us until Wednesday! Port Hedland is not the most glamorous place and the thought of spending the best part of the week there was uninspiring. We figured that we'd just driven 330km to get here, without a spare - another 600km on the main highway to Broome, the next town, was well within our capabilities...

Broome was a bit of a disappointment to me. It features in all the tourist magazines as the place to go. The local government had earmarked this town for development and had changed it from a sleepy pearl diving centre enriched by Japanese and Chinese culture to a sprawling holiday resort. However, the Cable Beach Caravan Park was luxurious with a lovely swimming pool; this was ideal as the air

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temperature was in the high 30°s and very humid. Distant lightning storms were heralding the start of the rainy season.

Our search for tyres was still on the agenda and early next morning we called into a shop on the recommendation of the guy in Port Hedland. No luck there but they did point us to competitor business. So off we went to Discount Tyres. 'Kiwi' the owner shook his head at our request for a replacement tyre. With a 'no worries' attitude, gave us the benefit of his undoubtedly technical expertise - resulting in us buying two tyres of a much higher specification - and keeping the best two of the originals as spares. He explained that in these temperatures 3-ply tyres soften and explode! They are alright in the cooler climates but in the tropics you need 10-ply tyres at least. A fellow customer nodded in agreement; it turned out he was from the military and was kitting himself out for a trip to Brisbane with the family - a round trip of 9,000kms. "How many spares are you taking?" Keith asked. "Oh, just the four - two for the car and two for the trailer," he replied. We had planned on a journey twice this distance, so our two spares seemed quite modest in comparison.

Broome was as far north as we could go at this time of year - the rainy season had started and some of the roads would become impassable. Relaxed now we had a good set of wheels again, we continued sight-seeing around Broome; this didn't take long, and we decided to head back to Perth the next day, this time taking the coastal route.

We wanted to eat up some kilometres - our next main stop was to be Coral Bay, 1200km away. Millstream National Park was 'sort of' on the way, but it looked a useful overnight stopping place - it cut off the corner but was 200km through the bush along unsealed roads. With our new 10-ply tyres and two spares we were full of confidence... The road passed through some lovely scenery and, except for a road grading crew - scraping off the top surface of the road to smooth out the corrugations - we didn't see another vehicle. We stopped for a swim in the river and, buoyed by our success, decided to press on and planned a stop at a roadhouse for the night.

We left lovely Pannawonica behind us and 8pm found us at Nanutarra Roadhouse - what a dump!

Now introduced to 'donga' accommodation i.e. an overpriced converted 40-foot container - not the luxurious en-suite motel I had

hoped for. However, we had no choice - the next stop was 230kms further on, and driving at night wasn't worth the risk of hitting a roo.

Coral Bay is basically two camp sites on the Indian Ocean coast and is famous for its coral reefs, easily accessible from the beach. It is a favourite holiday destination for the people of Perth. Keith wanted to check out the coral and also swim with the Manta Rays that inhabit this region. Next morning, he had a great dive on the reef among a huge variety of coral but not much fish life. Maybe we were starting to get too discerning - we had dived and snorkelled in some of the world's best locations during our travels. Still, it was good to get back in the water and out among the coral reefs - it made Keith a bit 'homesick' for our cruising life. Snorkelling with the Mantas was great - unfortunately they were a little deep, so close encounters were difficult.

It was Polling Day for the Australian elections. We had been listening to all the hustings on the radio during our trip; our interest was up. I was keen to show Keith democracy in action - Australia is one of the few countries in the world that has compulsory voting - and it also has preferential voting - with huge but easy-to-follow voting forms. Compared to the UK where voter turnout can be as low as 40%, I believe the compulsory voting provides a far more democratic outcome. The polling booth at Coral Bay was a tent on the beach and all the political parties were providing sample voting forms. Keith found it fascinating.

There was quite a gathering around the TV at the caravan park in Carnarvon that evening as the election results came in. Even the young people were interested in the outcome.

Apart from being big, Australia is also very old. The whole of WA was covered in water before life began and all the metals and stuff settled out of this mineral-rich soup leaving behind huge mineral deposits. 3,500 million years ago up popped some dome-shaped structures - stromatolites. Up to 60cm in height these are formed by single-celled organisms called cyanobacteria. These were the first life on earth and, it is thought, created the oxygen-rich atmosphere that supports us all. At Hamelin Pool there are living stromatolites and ever since he was a university student Keith had wanted to see these remarkable creatures. Most tourists pay a flying visit on their way to Monkey Mia, where the wild dolphins come into shore to the

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entertainment of the tourists, but Keith was excited by these lumps of boring bits of 'rock' bubbling away.

As we headed towards Kalbarri, we were pleased to discover some of the famous WA wildflowers could still be seen. Kalbarri National Park surrounds the lower reaches of the Murchison River. The river has cut a magnificent 80km gorge through the red and white banded sandstone.

Northampton is a small, charming rural town on the edge of the wheat belt. Registered as an Historic Town of importance in 1993 it is notable for buildings of historic interest including the Church of St Mary in Ara Coeli which was one of the many buildings in the Central West designed by the architect-priest Monsignor John Hawes.

In Geraldton, I just had to take Keith to visit the two very contrasting churches - the Roman Catholic St Francis Xavier Cathedral, also designed by John Hawes, is in stark contrast to the modern Anglican Cathedral. I remember being taken to see them when I was about 16 years old.

We stopped at Jurien Bay campsite and took a trip out to the Pinnacles, eerie stone pillars in the middle of 'the desert' south of Jurien Bay.

We were now getting close to Perth again and, as a finalé to our circuit of northern WA, Keith fancied taking the 75km 4WD track along the coast from Cervantes to Lancelin. We visited the National Park office to see if they had any directions. They kindly gave us a map of the track with directions but warned us that the directions were for the trip north - not heading south! Just as we bid farewell, they also warned us that if we got stuck the only way out was by helicopter. Turning off the highway we came upon another 4WD with three Swiss lads aboard so started out in convoy. Through narrow tracks littered with rocks and boulders, over sandy hills, and past the odd abandoned vehicle we went - trying to follow the impossible instructions. We found ourselves in the middle of a sand dune field. The Swiss guys had reversed out earlier, so we decided to turn around. This simple procedure took around thirty minutes as we frequently got bogged in the soft sand. We soon lost sight of our companions. After a couple more false turns we finally found the main track again. The whole journey should have taken three and a half hours however two hours had already passed, and we were still

less than halfway. Rounding another corner, we came face-to-face with the Swiss lads! They reported that the track ahead was blocked by a large sand dune... We searched for another way through but after a while decided that discretion was the better part of valour and turned around and took the 'long way' round on the main highway. The Swiss guys continued their search for a way through - whether they found it we'll never know...

On the open road again, we headed into Perth. One place that Keith was keen to visit was Rottnest Island, home of the Quokka. A pleasant cycle trip around the island and a friendly encounter with a quokka or two was a splendid way to spend a day.

It was time to start on the next leg of our journey. We'd been away a month, driven 6,000km and had so far only skirted a small part of this huge continent. It is only about 4,000km from Perth to Sydney 'as the crow flies' - but, of course, we'd never take the direct route! Western Australia has a lot more treasures to reveal and it would be six weeks before we crossed the border.

Southwest Western Australia was to be our next area to explore. I had planned to stop at Margaret River, the famous wine region, but a surly campsite owner put Keith off, so we continued on to the pretty town of Augusta, which has the unique aspect of being at the conjunction of the Blackwood River, the Indian Ocean and the Southern Ocean.

The uniqueness of this area is in its trees whose massive trunks tower 100m to the sky, straight and magnificent. Karri, Jarrah and Tingle trees form huge forests and the drive through is spectacular - there is even a wonderfully constructed tree-top walk where you can walk through the canopy of the Tingle trees. If one felt brave enough one could climb the stakes driven into the trunk of the 200m high Centennial Lookout tree, however, a downpour of rain gave Keith a good excuse to abort his attempt at scaling to the top of this giant.

We swept east around the stunning coastline with its bays and beaches to pay a quick visit to Albany, an historic whaling town. Prior to the British settlement at Perth this was the main gateway into WA.

From here it was back north through the breadbasket of Oz - millions of hectares of wheat interspersed with salt pans - providing a gold and white vista as far as the eye could see. Dusty towns with

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their huge silos and wheat mountains were the only sign of habitation in this area.

Wave Rock is about 15 metres high, 100 metres long and shaped like a breaking ocean wave. It is about 2.7 billion years old, making it one of the oldest rocks in the world.

Coolgardie was founded in 1892 with the discovery of quartz gold in the vicinity, which marked the beginning of a rush to the East Coolgardie field. Although Coolgardie is now known to most Western Australians as a tourist town and a mining ghost town, it was once the third largest town in Western Australia (after Perth and Fremantle). At that time, mining of alluvial gold was a major industry and supplied the flagging economy with new hope. Many miners suffered under the harsh conditions, but for a few, their find made the hard work worthwhile. Most men, however, left poorer than they had started off, with their hopes dashed.

Kalgoorlie is the quintessential mining town of Western Australia - an old brash gold mining town in the desert. The huge open cast mine dominates the town and can be seen at the end of every street. This town boomed at the end of the 19th century and is still booming today. The technology of extraction may have changed but the old buildings still reflect the struggle of times past. A highlight - for the males - is a pub crawl along the main street. Keith checked this out and can confirm that the scantily clad barmaids make lovely 'eye candy' for the miners after their long hard shifts.

After our outback driving experience in the Pilbara, we had decided to take the long route to Alice Springs, via the Nullabor Plain highway. However, after talking to a family from Queensland - they were touring Oz for six months - the Great Central Road came back on the itinerary. They had recently taken this route and confirmed that the road had recently been graded and was very drivable!

The Great Central Road is the little-known third route that crosses Australia from west to east through the middle of the continent. The North-South routes are sealed highways; however, the Great Central Road is about 2,500km of unsealed highway linking Laverton in WA to Rockhampton on the Queensland coast. There are no towns along this route, only roadhouses and Aboriginal communities providing the odd fuel stop. Permits to use the route are required by the Departments of Aboriginal Affairs in each State - Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland.

While waiting at Laverton for our transit permit, we wandered around this small, mainly Aboriginal, community. The town was named after a Dr Laverton, who had bicycled the 400km from Kalgoorlie. Whilst we gazed at his statue an old aboriginal man seemed to appear out of nowhere and produced a very poor splodgy painting. After addressing us with a few unintelligible words he turned away and promptly disappeared! I had heard of the uncanny ability of Aborigines to blend into the landscape – but didn't realise it worked in towns as well...

After a couple of hours our permits were faxed through and we set off. The sealed road abruptly changed to a wide red swathe cut through the immense, rich landscape of spinifex, mulga and stunted desert oak trees. The sky was cloudy, so the temperature was a bearable 30°C. My expectation was that this landscape was not going to change much in the next three days - however the reality encountered every shade of red and green, and stunning wide vistas. The track was in relatively good condition, so we were able to maintain a steady 80km per hour along most of the route. To avoid driver exhaustion Keith and I took turns to drive one hour on and one hour off.

Our first night's stop was at Tjukayirla Roadhouse, where we drove through some impressive steel gates into the campground adjoining the roadhouse – however there wasn't any other sign of security as the rest of the site was only surrounded by open bush! At night the proprietor locked and closed these gates. When Keith asked him about the obvious lack of security, he retorted that "Yeah. Just closing the gates seems to keep the locals out successfully". Here we met up with a German couple who were following the same route - this was reassuring as we could provide support for each other if necessary. After refuelling we made an early start however 11km along the road, we came across a local Aboriginal family whose car had broken down the night before. They had set up camp and were sitting around a small fire. Unconcerned, they gave us a note to take to the next roadhouse, 300km further on. Slightly bemused we left them with some spare food and water.

To keep ourselves amused we were counting the abandoned cars on the side of the road - in total we saw 159 - of all ages and sizes. They were mainly saloon cars, which could not cope with the rugged conditions; we were pleased we'd chosen to buy a 4WD.

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Having been advised not to stop at Warburton due to problems at the community, we stayed our second night at Warakurna Roadhouse, probably the most isolated place in Australia. The closest sealed roads - and towns - were 700km in any direction! The Roadhouse was a bustle of activity - the rains had started sooner and heavier than expected. As well as a few fellow travellers, there was a road-crew from Queensland, who had to abandon their work and head home until the next year.

We spent an interesting evening talking to an anthropologist who was living with the local Aboriginal community; she gave us a great insight into life in these isolated communities. She explained a bit about the Aboriginal culture - the most interesting is their etiquette for 'meeting' a stranger; the stranger should not make eye contact - and keep in the background until invited to join the group. It had taken three months for her to be accepted into the group - this was despite working and living within the community. This impacts on their ability to communicate and hence cultural knowledge is quickly lost. The main aim of the anthropologist was to teach the community basic nutrition - including teaching them about their own bush craft and survival skills! She explained that they learn by example and watching, hence they are easily influenced by TV and advertising; this has led to poor nutrition, spend-and-famine mentality, and behavioural problems - especially in the male community. They also appear a lot older than their age e.g. a twelve-year-old girl will look eighteen, a forty-year-old will look sixty.

Close to the Roadhouse is the Giles Weather Station where we spent an interesting hour or so talking to the meteorologists and watching the launch of the daily weather balloon. He advised that we should aim to reach the sealed road, just this side of Uluru, that day as further thunderstorms were expected.

The road was no longer a sandy track but had changed overnight to slippery mush with standing water in the dips - and driving became more difficult. Amazingly the vista had also changed - the trees had lost their dusty grey look, and the ground was a bright fresh green. The 'greening of the desert' had started! Our little convoy had now turned into four vehicles - including a German motorcyclist; for safety, we agreed to keep reasonably close and check that everyone passed safely through the deeper pools. When the water became deep, the guy on the motorbike gave his panniers to the other

German couple to take for him. Thankfully only one vehicle got stuck and had to be pulled out. This safety net turned an arduous trip into a fun experience – slip-sliding a 4WD or careering through muddy pools was a thrill a minute!

With a huge sense of achievement and a smile on our faces we arrived safely at the sealed road close to the Olgas by mid-afternoon. It had been an unforgettable trip and made us realise just how isolated most of Australia is - about four weeks after our trip two people died along this stretch of road. A young couple travelling with their 71-year-old grandfather had broken down. Foolishly the young couple decided to walk for help, leaving the grandfather in the car. The car was found, and he survived; the couple died of dehydration and their bodies were discovered later.

We'd been told by fellow travellers that, just before the Olgas, there was a communications tower situated on Crown land, so it was legal to camp there, whereas the rest of the land was Aboriginal, and camping wasn't allowed. One of the other vehicles decided to join us and camp overnight. That night we were invaded by swarms of flying ants – they were everywhere – and were dropping like flies leaving their wings like a carpet on the ground.

At the Olgas we were now in 'tourist land'. It was a strange feeling - from total isolation to hundreds of snap-happy Orientals pouring out of their air-conditioned coaches swarming everywhere - unaware of the majesty and dangers of the inhospitable outback surrounding them.

The Olgas are like giant boulders piled up in the middle of the desert - the highest is 546m - and are an impressive sight. After exploring the area, we returned to our camp site for the night and set out to visit Uluru (Ayers Rock) next morning.

Despite all the tourist hype, Uluru is still impressive. I persuaded Keith to walk around the base away from the coach loads of tourists. Unusually, it rained for part of our walk so we were able to see the multi-coloured patterns created by water flowing over the rock.

Interestingly, we didn't have to pay the National Park fees as the only facility for collecting them was situated at the eastern entrance for those arriving from the main road. The Visitors' Information Centre had an interesting display about the Aboriginal mythology and was well worth the time.

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We finished our day here and watched the sunset before setting off for Kings Canyon, a couple of hours north. Next day, we walked up to the rim of the canyon with its stunning views and hidden natural gardens.

The road to Palm Valley was hair-raising – at times I couldn't see the track over the front of the bonnet; Keith got out and walked ahead pointing to where I needed to steer! I decided at that point that real four-wheel driving is not for me.

The rain had followed us to Alice Springs – heavy downpours are such an unusual event there was spontaneous dancing in the street. We chose to visit the School of the Air and the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which were fascinating.

As we headed south towards Coober Pedy (about 700km away) we fitted in a quick stop at the site of the Henbury Meteorite strike. At Henbury there are 13 to 14 craters ranging from 7m to 180m in diameter and up to 15m in depth that were formed which were formed when a fragmented meteorite hit the Earth's surface.

Coober Pedy is a unique place - the town is surrounded by a lunar landscape as a result of opal mining and not much grows in this inhospitable environment. It is so hot that most of the inhabitants choose to live underground in disused opal mines. We spent our couple of days here in an underground hostel - which was very cool!

For \$43 per year, you could lease a 25m x 100m plot of desert and dig for opals. Many people have made their fortune this way, but most just scrape a living. Big business is not allowed in, and family plots are the norm. Spoil heaps cover the town, hiding the sumptuous homes below. It is also a favourite with Sci-Fi film makers and a number of film-sets litter the area.

The rain was now following us and had made the Ghan Way, another major unsealed road, impassable so we took the main highway south through Woomera, the 'NASA' of Australia and the UK. The museum there focussed on all the positives of space exploration - little mention of the atomic bomb tests conducted in the area...

In the middle of Australia is huge Lake Eyre – usually just a dry dust bowl but now filling with water. The local cattle stations were pleased with the breaking of the drought. On our trip south we stopped at a roadhouse; chatting at the bar with one of the locals gave one a sense of scale. He was upbeat at the sight of rain as he had had

to reduce his herd down to 2,000 head - just for breeding - and was finding life difficult. We chatted about his cattle station, "Yeah right, we got thirty guys working on the station." "How big is your station?" Keith asked. He paused, trying to think of the size and with a smile and twinkle in his rugged eyes said "It's about the size of Belgium, mate. And its 60km from the front gate to my ranch house - a bugger if you've forgotten to close the gate."

After a couple of days, we arrived at the south coast of Australia and at Port Augusta we left the outback behind and were now in the 'tame' coastal region around Adelaide and Melbourne. Driving through the pleasant pastoral scenes you could imagine yourself in any country of Europe, the eastern states of the US or anywhere with rolling hills, cows grazing, sheep in pastures, or vineyards. The only difference being the shady gum tree in every vista.

Adelaide is a very compact leafy city, but did not appeal as a place to spend the Christmas weekend. Where then? Scanning the map, we spotted a place called Port Fairy on Victoria's southern coast - this was a 'Christmassy' sort of name, I thought, so set this as our destination. At Port Fairy we rented a very nice spacious cabin for a few days and had a quiet, relaxing Christmas.

Our route from Port Fairy to Melbourne hugged the coast - lots of beautiful views. Along the Great Ocean Road there are many side tracks through small national parks. One such track brought us to Koala Cove, with resident koalas in the trees and glow worms in the stream banks.

Australian cities have retained their lungs; parks intersperse the high-rise office blocks and stores, and you're never too far from a beach. Melbourne is no different. A highlight of our stay in Melbourne was Keith's birthday on New Year's Eve. Slapping on the sunscreen we headed for Bells Beach, a mecca for surfies and home of 'Rip Curl' and 'Billabong' brands. Throwing off his years, Keith regressed to his old persona of surfie and caught a few waves and relived his youth!

While exploring the town to buy a T-shirt to commemorate the occasion, we were accosted by a television crew asking passers-by about their plans for the New Year. When we told them about our trip around Australia followed by resuming our cruising life they were fascinated. What was supposed to have been a two minute 'one-liner' turned out to be about 30 minutes with both the presenter and

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the TV crew asking us questions about our lives and lifestyle. We tried to convey the concept that it doesn't matter what one's dream is – the important thing is to have a dream at all. We never saw the actual program, but it made us realise again just how lucky we are.

Returning to the city we spent the evening on the banks of the Yarra River with thousands of others seeing in 2008. The firework displays were tremendous, and it was fun to let our hair down a bit!

From Melbourne we detoured through the Yarra Ranges and witnessed the devastation wrought by the terrible bush fires that had ravaged the area. The loggers were busy trying to salvage what timber they could and the drive through the forest tracks was treacherous if you met an oncoming logging truck.

We arranged to meet up with my niece who was holidaying at Mallacoota. It turns out that the town's 1,040 population swells to 6,000+ for six weeks a year during the summer school holidays. The whole town turns into a giant campsite as Sydney-siders and Melbourne-ites transport themselves from one suburbia to another. Their campsites usually include fridge/freezer, mobile kitchen, lounge suites, dining table and chairs – and often large screen TVs! This phenomenon continues along the SE Australian coast - all the way from Melbourne to Sydney...

From Mallacoota we headed north towards New South Wales. We had arranged to meet fellow cruisers Tom and Nicolette from *Katanne* at Batemans Bay, 250km north. Our marina neighbours in Venezuela, we'd last met them in Curaçao in the Caribbean two years earlier. We linked up at a beachside caravan park – allocated a campsite in the 'overflow' area which was lovely and quiet. The good facilities here allowed us to enjoy a great few days catching up on news and taking the odd trip into the hinterland, away from the crowds.

One of the two purpose-designed capital cities in the world is much maligned - Canberra (Brasília is the other). Yes, I agree it is easy to get lost; yes, it is the only city where they have to put direction signs to just about everything – to shops, garages and other places that you normally find easily in cities. In appearance Canberra is just trees, gardens and the odd government building - and walking around it is impossible. But the whole city, surrounded by rolling green hills, does have the ambience of a sunny Sunday afternoon in the park, not the hustle bustle of London or Washington.

We also visited the British Embassy to apply for a replacement passport for Keith – a very efficient service and they even offered to post it to the Consulate in Sydney, so we didn't have to wait around to collect it.

Enough of this serious stuff! What about the fun bits? Like a lazy day at the cricket, afternoon drinks at the sailing club and nightly barbecues with Tom and Nicolette... Yes, it was just a series of lazy afternoons in Canberra.

Parting, Keith and I headed west to Tidbinbilla, where we explored the Canberra Deep Space Communication station jointly run by NASA and Australia's CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation). This station monitors many of the major deep space, unmanned exploratory spacecraft currently plying the stars and planets. We were able to see live photos from the Mars Explorer, marvel at the signals still being received from outside of our solar system broadcast by the Voyager space craft – which was launched in 1977 and, having left our solar system, was now heading for the next star - and still sending data!

Cowra was an interesting lunchtime stop; scene of a tragic incident during WWII when a mass breakout of Japanese from the POW camp in this town resulted in a large number of unnecessary deaths. This incident is beautifully described at the Information Centre through an enthralling 'Pepper's Ghost' holographic presentation.

We had been so impressed by Tidbinbilla that we decided to go to Parkes which played a pivotal role in the first moon landing - and was immortalised in the movie 'The Dish'.

Apart from the 'Dish', our expectation of Parkes was of a sleepy Aussie town frozen in time. Spotting Elvis walking along the main street made me blink – but seeing a whole bunch outside the local pub was a surprise! We had stumbled across the annual Elvis Presley convention when sleepy Parkes comes alive. Started in 1993 to boost the town's economy, the festival now attracts tens of thousands each year for five days – contributing thousands of dollars to the region.

From global history to family ancestry took us along a tortuous mountain track to the historic mining town of Hill End. Following the end of the 1868 gold rush, Hill End never really entered the 20th century and is now the preserve of the Hill End Historic Society. Their extensive research has led to the creation of detailed records of

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most of the inhabitants of this town, including my maternal great, great, great grandfather who came over from Ireland in 1841 to set up shop as a butcher – and stayed through the gold boom. I came away with records and photos which will make interesting research when I get a chance.

We reached the Pacific Ocean at Wollongong. Our crossing of the continent complete - we had driven 16,888kms through some of the world's most inhospitable terrain. I sighed in relief - a little dazed but with a huge sense of achievement – and now focussed on the end game of our Australian adventure...

We arrived at fellow cruisers Brett and Debbie's house (*Interlude III*) - shattered and keen to get the Nissan ready for sale. We had already advertised her in the Sydney press so needed to get all the red dust out of every nook and cranny. Then a phone call - an interested buyer who was prepared to drive to Sydney from northern New South Wales – that sounded really promising. We packed up all our gear, waved a swift farewell to Debbie and Brett and headed for a rendezvous in Sydney... We agreed to meet them at a dis-used service station, easily identified on the Pacific Highway in the northern suburbs of Sydney. It turned out that the potential buyer, a young man, had brought his mechanic mate with him – but they'd never been to Sydney before. Keith was left behind with their vehicle and all our luggage while I directed the lads on a test-drive down the highway to a view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House – they were delighted as they headed back up the highway. After a short negotiation we had a deal – they also agreed to buy our camping equipment. Keith and I found ourselves abandoned on the side of the highway with our small mountain of luggage - just like a couple of bag ladies! We hailed a passing taxi and got dropped off at a hotel in Woolloomooloo and settled in to explore Sydney and the lead up to Australia Day.

Sydney is a pleasant city to wander around - as long as you stay out of the parks at lunchtime; hordes of lunchtime joggers make walking hazardous! Our *raison d'être* for arriving in Sydney at the end of January was to join in the Australia Day festivities on the 26th - and this we did. We caught a Sydney Harbour ferry and had a fun morning watching all the boats and people on the harbour – I was proud to be an Aussie. We then relaxed for a while at a free jazz concert before heading to Darling Harbour and joined the throngs

waiting for the fireworks, parades, speeches, etc. A great day and so lovely to see everyone letting their hair down and being Aussie!

On the plane to Christchurch, New Zealand Keith and I reflected on the whole trip and were really pleased that my selected route and method of transport had worked out so well. The trip around Australia is the dream of many Australians and we were so privileged to have accomplished it.

62 – Return to New Zealand



Landing in Christchurch was like arriving at a typical provincial 'south of England' town, complete with gothic architecture, pleasant parks and punting on the river! Shame about the earthquake...

We had flown here for a short tour of the South Island by hire car. Many of the New Zealand camping sites have small cabins for rent on a daily basis; using these gave us an economic and comfortable way to travel. Driving in NZ is like a Sunday excursion along winding country roads - little towns and villages built around farming communities. There is the occasional 'city' (larger town) to provide retail therapy for the needy. The east side of the South Island

is grassy plains full of sheep and cows and the odd vineyard or arable crop. The dramatic west coast is mostly inaccessible forests, snow-capped mountains, glaciers, wild rivers and fiords – all battered by incessant storms racing across the Tasman Sea.

New Zealand is renowned for its dramatic scenery, although there are some little historical gems to visit along the highways and byways. Down one of these small roads we stumbled across a lay-by with a replica of an early aeroplane. The plaque proudly explained that Richard Pearse is locally held to be the first man to achieve powered flight in 1902, some months ahead of the Wright brothers. Pearse's plane was technically far ahead of that of his rivals, but he did not believe his first powered flight was sufficiently controlled or sustained to justify his townsfolk's claim. He managed a rather desperate 100m, followed by an ignominious plunge into bushes!

Our trip around the South Island was glorious, sunshine nearly every day. The flora and fauna in the South Island are also unique and accessible; penguin colonies can be seen from the roadside, seals and sea lions bask on the beaches; unusual birds are commonplace. Each evening, at Oamaru, between 50 and 350 Blue Penguins climb from the beach to the top of a cliff where they burrow for the night. The Blue Penguins are the smallest in the world - they typically grow to between 30 and 33cm (12 and 13in) tall and on average weigh 1.5kg (3.3lb).

The Moeraki Boulders are unusually large spherical boulders lying along a stretch of Koekohe Beach on the Otago coast. They occur scattered either as isolated or clusters of boulders within a stretch of beach where they have been protected in a scientific reserve. These boulders have been exhumed from the mudstone and bedrock enclosing them and concentrated on the beach by coastal erosion.

Dunedin is the second-largest city in the South Island of New Zealand (after Christchurch), and the principal city of the Otago region. Its name comes from Dùn Èideann, the Scottish Gaelic name for Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland.

The countryside is the star. The remoteness and wildness of the Catlins Coast is a mix between beach walks and forest walks. At Curio Bay you can explore the remains of a petrified forest. Slope point is also the southernmost point of the South Island. Bluff is the southernmost town in mainland New Zealand.

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Milford Sound has been judged the world's top travel destination in an international survey (the 2008 Travelers' Choice Destinations Awards by TripAdvisor) and is acclaimed as New Zealand's most famous tourist destination. Rudyard Kipling called it the eighth Wonder of the World. We did the Red Boat tour as that operation was one of the businesses that I did the accounts for in my position with Tourism Holdings.

Lake Wakatipu is known for its scenery and is surrounded by mountains. Two mountain ranges, the Remarkables and Hector Mountains, lie along its southeastern edge. We enjoyed a trip on the vintage steamboat, the TSS *Earnslaw* and were entertained during the trip by a piano player.

The Shotover River runs through Skippers Canyon made famous by the title of 'richest gold bearing river in the world'. My great-grandparents had joined the gold rush in its heyday and the family tells the tale of the heavily pregnant great-grandmother having to follow the narrow, winding trail to Queenstown along the Shotover River gorge on the back of a hand cart. The transfer to the start of the white-water rafting adventure followed this same route and it was amazing how unchanged by time the trail seemed. Our 21st century adventure pales into insignificance compared to the hardships endured by those early pioneers.

Queenstown, which claims to be the world centre for adrenaline sports, was great fun – Keith's highlight being a white-water rafting trip down the Shotover River. The trip started from Deep Creek over peaceful waters at first, before heading towards the exhilarating rapids of the lower canyon. The power of the water is enormous - it picked them up and tossed the raft around like a bit of flotsam. Although they tried to keep control, they often entered into a deep spin as the waves and currents swirled around them.

We gave the Bungee jump at Kawarau Bridge a miss and instead enjoyed a lovely Valentine's Day dinner in the historic village of Arrowtown. The town was established in 1862 during the height of the Otago gold rush and has a rich history to explore. The town is known for its picturesque tree-lined streets, restored cottages, and gold mining sites along the Arrow River.

Mt Aspiring National Park lies at the southern end of the Southern Alps, directly to the west of Lake Wanaka, and is popular for

tramping, walking and mountaineering. Mount Aspiring elevation 3,033metres (9,951ft) above sea level, gives the park its name.

The Haast Pass, one of the three principal road routes over the Southern Alps, takes you over to the stunning West Coast.

From there we went north to the Fox Glacier - a 13-kilometre-long (8.1mile) temperate maritime glacier. Fox Glacier is one of the most accessible glaciers in the world, with a terminal face as low as 300 m above sea level.

Similarly, the Franz Joseph Glacier is easily accessible. The névé or snowfield at the head of Franz Josef Glacier is over 2,500 metres above sea level and 20 square kilometres in area.

Aoraki/Mount Cook is the highest mountain in New Zealand. Its height, as of 2014, is listed as 3,724metres. The Mount Cook National Park contains more than 140 peaks standing over 2,000 metres and 72 named glaciers, which cover 40 percent of its 700 square kilometres.

Hokitika is 40 kilometres south of Greymouth, and close to the mouth of the Hokitika River. When we were there, there was a driftwood competition with some fantastic sculptures on the beach. On a clear day Mount Cook can clearly be seen from Hokitika's main street.

The Pancake Rocks and Blowholes are located at Punakaiki, in an area that is protected and forms part of the Paparoa National Park.

The usual South Island tourist route runs East/West across the centre of the island, which leaves the Northwest corner off the beaten track. This wild region, mainly Kahurangi National Park, is covered in native forest - the sub-tropical climate gives it a mysterious air, with huge trees covered in lichen and bromeliads, and dense undergrowth. Small lakes and clear rivers dotted with limestone caves makes exploration a must. This part of NZ was opened up less than thirty years ago and we enjoyed some amazing hikes.

From here we headed to the Abel Tasman National Park and Marlborough Sounds. We stayed with friends from the marina in Auckland, Roy and Diane, on their yacht in Nelson. They were building their 'dream home' overlooking the harbour - a fabulous setting to do justice to their innovative design. After helping to erect some steel beams we spent a lovely couple of days sailing around the Abel Tasman.

On our way to Picton, we passed by Pelorus Sound and the small town of Havelock - birthplace of Ernest Rutherford. Ernest

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Rutherford was a New Zealand physicist who was a pioneering researcher in both atomic and nuclear physics. Rutherford has been described as 'the father of nuclear physics', and 'the greatest experimentalist since Michael Faraday'. In 1908, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry 'for his investigations into the disintegration of the elements, and the chemistry of radioactive substances.'

In Picton, we arranged to take the Mail Boat through the drowned river valleys of the Queen Charlotte Sound and past idyllic bays towards Ship Cove. In the 1770's, Ship Cove provided safe anchorage, food, water and timber for explorer Captain James Cook and his ship crews on five separate occasions and saw some of the earliest sustained contact between Maori and Europeans.

From there, we climbed away from the beach through native forest including manuka, kanuka, five finger and tree ferns. The forest is home to many native New Zealand bird species: tui, fantails, silvereyes and tomtits. From Tawa Saddle, stunning views of the Queen Charlotte Sound spread out before you. The track then drops into Resolution Bay and follows an old bridle path into Endeavour Inlet, where we re-joined the Mail Boat for the return journey.

The short ferry trip from Picton to Wellington took us back to the North Island. In Wellington we checked out the National Museum and drove up to the Mt Victoria lookout for views of the city.

We had already seen quite a lot of the North Island but managed to tick off the last few including a drive to the dramatic Mt Taranaki volcano. As usual, it was clouded with rain.

Ohinemutu is a living Māori village set on the picturesque shores of Lake Rotorua. St Faith's church includes the Galilee Chapel with the vision of a Maori Jesus walking on the water of Lake Rotorua. We stayed at a campsite with centrally heated campsites - i.e. the grass is warm from the thermal activity beneath - and Keith even prepared our evening meal using geothermal energy. How Green is that?

We headed back to Auckland - Keith was keen to start work on *Poco Andante* in readiness for our next sailing adventure, while I was offered another temp assignment. Fortunately, I got my old job back with the same company I had left four months earlier - including looking after the accounts for Kelly Tarlton, a marine tourism centre.

This left Keith to attack the huge maintenance list on his own; it took nearly two months to get *Poco* together!

NZ was certainly a great place to carry out boat maintenance; all the skills were there and the prices reasonable. Having now tried both New Zealand and Australia, it is our opinion that the resources were much better in NZ – and the prices keener! Having parts shipped in from anywhere in the world didn't pose any problems – although most items were available locally.

The following extract from the maintenance log gives an indication of the work undertaken, mainly by Keith, with weekend help from me - during the cyclone season – a fairly typical list:

- *Replace aerial on West Marine Handheld VHF radio*
- *Bowman Heat Exchanger - skimmed, machined and new bolts at gasket end.*
- *Bowman Heat Exchanger - new boots (old to spares)*
- *Replace Forward Engine Mounts (R&D 800-012)*
- *Replace Aft Engine Mounts (Polyurethane from Ludowici Plastics) (made to replace previous similar since no low-profile mounts could be found to fit)*
- *Rotary Vane Pump repaired*
- *Link 1000 Monitor - installed to monitor domestic batteries - replaces Xantrex Control box in pilot berth aft engine bay door.*
- *Replace Engine Bay sound insulation*
- *Install Auxiliary Energy Control Panel to isolate solar/wind power*
- *New No.2 Genoa (by Simon Willis Sails)*
- *New Main (by Simon Willis Sails) - increased roach, fully battened.*
- *Altered main sheet arrangement using new triple and quad blocks*
- *New EPIRB (registered with OfCom UK)*
- *Additional MOB light*
- *Kipor 1000 generator (new)*
- *Replace Windlass Gypsy (10mm)*
- *Replace Solar Vent, aft Heads*
- *Aft Heads - remove, service, clean, reinstall*
- *Oven - replace door seal, knobs, trivets (all new from US)*
- *Replace galley freshwater pump*
- *Mount 2nd automatic fire extinguisher in engine bay*
- *New s/s shaft manufactured (but not installed - when we hauled out in NZ, discovered rudder would have to be dropped. Decided to postpone this until Australia.)*

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- *Change oil in gearbox.*
- *Engine Oil Change (Hours 2526)*
- *Top up batteries*

- *Haulout - Pier 21 marina, Auckland, NZ*
- *Replace over-temperature alarm (engine)*
- *Sand bottom, replace primer (Primocon 4L)*
- *Antifoul (Altex No. 10) x 2 x 4L*
- *Paint topsides - Primer International Perfection Undercoat (2 x 1L)*
- *Paint topsides - Awlgrip (2 x 1L)*
- *Replace boat name vinyls*
- *Replace anodes*
- *Galvanise aft Danforth Anchor*
- *Welding - Inmarsat Aerial Bracket*
- *Welding - New lugs for Outboard Engine hoist (on Aerogen pole)*
- *Welding - Base of Mast (reinforce kicking strap hole)*
- *Welding - End of Boom (reinforce main sheet hole)*
- *Welding - reinforce starboard gate struts*
- *Port Saloon Hatch - replace seal*
- *Port Saloon Hatch - re-bed Perspex*
- *Re-Launch*

- *V-Berth Hatch – re-bed entire hatch*
- *V-Berth Hatch - re-bed Perspex*
- *New Mercury 2.5HP outboard engine (sold 6hp outboard salvaged in Newport, RI, USA)*
- *Saloon window (starboard) - re-bed with new barrel nuts*
- *Re-paint deck non-skid paint (using NZ rubberised paint)*
- *New Handheld VHF Radio (Cobra)*
- *Replace anchor bow roller*
- *Re-mark anchor chain*
- *Service main engine - tappets, timing belt replaced, replace freshwater pump, oil filter, fuel filters (primary and secondary). Engine Hours 2538*
- *Replace windlass footswitch*
- *Replace Flares (1 x parachute red, 1 x day red, 2 x whites, 1 x orange). Old flares vacuumed packed for dinghy.*
- *Replace davit stainless steel chain and ropes*

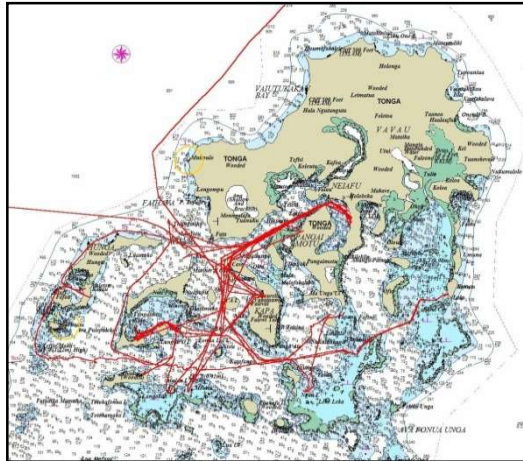
- *Top up batteries*

The new sails from Simon Willis Sails (NZ\$8,000), recommended by Grahame off the NZ yacht *Minaret*, were fantastic and we reckoned *Poco Andante* gained at least one extra knot of cruising speed. And another knot from the newly cleaned bottom!

The long stay in New Zealand had been great and worthwhile but even good things must come to an end. In NZ's case it was the weather that was the deciding factor - winter was coming - cold, wet, miserable and gloomy all at once!

Poco Andante was ready; all bright and sparkling, painted from top to bottom and, hopefully, all systems in working order for once - or so we hoped. We were ready and keen - and would both be glad just to be on the move again. It was time to finally say farewell to Auckland and head north to Opuia ready for our departure back to warmer waters.

63 – Knitting up the mast



As we waited in Opuia, we were anxiously listening to the weather forecast for our trip to Tonga – 1,100 miles northeast. “Winds peaking at 52 knots, average 37 knots,” squawked the automated voice on the latest wind reports – not the day to set out for Tonga – just the day to snuggle up and wait. We’d been waiting in Opuia a week for the right weather window.

By 25th May the Low-Pressure System passed, and a High began to form off Australia – perfect conditions, we hoped. Keith and I had enjoyed Tonga so much two years earlier that we decided to return for the start of our westward passage to Australia.

We completed the trip in eight days – our new sails and clean bottom certainly made a difference! We had SE 10-20 knots all the way and enjoyed a delightful sail most of the way.

A mishap occurred on the third day out; *Poco Andante* was sailing along in light south easterlies when a sudden gust hit. Immediately, the shackle parted on the main sheet traveller – sending the newly-fitted blocks overboard! We hastily dropped the main – it’s surprising how a minor calamity can turn into a major problem so quickly. Picture the boom swinging free, not restrained by the

mainsheet, Keith trying to get the sail down, and me on the helm trying to head up into the wind while trying to ensure Keith didn't get clouted by the swinging boom! Finally, the main started to come down - slowly at first then in a flurry; Keith became smothered in sail cloth and had the presence of mind to drop to the deck, put a lashing around the billowing sail, and crawl back to the cockpit so he could tame the boom. This done we looked up and saw why the main had come down so quickly - the main halyard had become detached from the sail and had now knitted itself in a huge tangle halfway up the mast! The wind, having done its dirty work, picked up to twenty knots - a bit too strong to make any attempt to sort out the tangle so we continued under genoa alone. Investigation showed that one of the new end caps for the traveller track was about 2mm shorter than the original model; this was enough to allow the traveller arrangement to fly over the top - and into the ocean blue. Two days later, the wind dropped sufficiently for Keith to climb the mast and untangle the mess. A jury-rigged mainsheet traveller was soon attached and *Poco* was on her way again.

I then attempted to contact Carol in NZ - my sister was flying out with Trevor to Tonga later that week to meet us - only to discover that our InMarSat satellite system was not sending out messages. Via SSB I made radio contact with Maritime NZ; after a few tests I ascertained that our system was working OK but there was a mix up by our service provider. Maritime NZ were great in relaying messages and via them I sent our shopping list to Carol for the replacement blocks for the mainsheet. Carol had initially been very worried to be contacted by Maritime NZ - she thought *Poco Andante* must be in difficulties - and was very relieved to hear we were OK.

We arrived in Nuku'alofa, Tonga the day before Carol and Trevor were due to arrive - and hoped that the email message to rendezvous 'opposite the fish market' reached them. 'Checking in' to a country can be a long, drawn-out affair - this certainly was the case in Nuku'alofa, especially as our arrival coincided with a National Holiday.

One also learns to keep the process simple. Keith was sitting in the Immigration Officer's car filling in the multitude of forms and declaring that there were only two people on board, no pets, etc. when a taxi pulled up alongside and out jumped Trevor, full of the joys of spring, announcing their arrival... The Immigration Official

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looked at Keith questioningly. "I'll check what's going on," Keith said, popped out of the car, discreetly indicated to Trevor that he was 'not associated with us', and jumped back in to complete the form filling. "Friends of the boat next door," he lied! (Adding guests or crew to the manifest causes problems if you aren't checking out of the same port - so it's easier for them to 'fly under the radar'.) Immigration formalities were soon completed so we could relax and give Trevor and Carol a real Tongan greeting. It took Keith a further day to complete the check in process. When he went to the office to pay our dues, he discovered he needed Tongan currency to pay the fees; undaunted, the very large Tongan official volunteered to take Keith to the bank. My enduring memory is the image of Keith perched on the back of the small scooter behind the huge official - a sight to behold!

Nuku'alofa is the capital of Tonga but had little to keep us there; our plans were to cruise the Ha'apai Island group and to spend Carol and Trevor's last 10 days or so in the Vava'u Island group before they flew back to NZ. The low-lying coral atolls which comprise the Ha'apai islands are largely ignored by tourists as they are difficult to get to and don't have much to offer sophisticated tastes - it was great to get a chance to explore them. Unfortunately, the wind kicked up and we ended up stuck at anchor at the Ha'apai group for 3-4 days before we could move on north to the Vava'u group. Trevor found the delay frustrating and boring - it was his first real experience of being weather-bound and confined within a relatively small yacht.

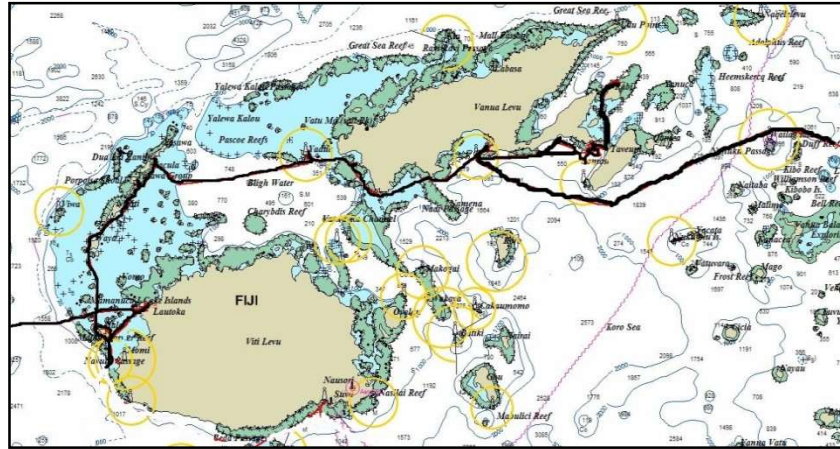
The volcanic islands of Vava'u offer many great anchorages, protected waters and some reefs to explore - as well as a reasonable selection of restaurants and shops. It was interesting to note how much prices had increased since our previous visit.

We had lots to keep us busy, though - our autopilot was playing up again - and so was our 240v battery charger (repaired by a local electrician). While we were in New Zealand Keith had carefully reviewed our power consumption and generation. Electrical power is one of the constant concerns of the cruising yacht. In general, he found that we needed to generate 100-120 amps each day to cover our needs - refrigeration, pumps, autopilot, instruments, etc. We had decided to invest in a small (1KW) portable generator. This, fed through our 240-volt battery charger, was a very economic and flexible solution to charging the batteries, compared to running the

main engine. We ran this when the wind and sun were insufficient. Our Aerogen wind generator generally powered our fridge/freezer the entire trip. The more powerful Fourwinds helped top up the batteries. However, the wind generators could be a hazard in themselves, particularly in strong winds – I found the noise they make exacerbated my perception of the wind strength and hence my anxiety.

While in Tonga, we also wanted to see the arrival of the humpback whales, which come there every year to breed. Just a few days after Carol and Trevor's departure, a pod of four whales appeared off our starboard bow as we were sailing between islands. It was a shame that Carol and Trevor missed this special event.

64 – This simple life?



With our 30-day visas expiring on 4th July, we checked out of Tonga for the 2-3 days sail to Fiji. A cold front gave us a boisterous ride for the last half day, although most of the way was in 5-10 knots. 'Andy', the electronic autopilot gave up the ghost completely, so we had to 'hand steer' much of the way. To cap it all Keith broke a tooth!

We arrived at Savusavu on Vanua Levu, the second largest island of Fiji. Savusavu has a lovely harbour, a reasonable place to hang out for a while - many cruisers congregate here, and there is a lively town with good shops. Our first task was to get Keith's tooth sorted out - this entailed a four-hour bus ride over the central mountain chain to Labasa on the north coast of the island. The bumpy drive was picturesque, passing through lush rainforests, mountain scenery and onto the sugar cane growing coastal plain. The bus passed through clean and well-maintained villages serving the copra industry - often picking up sacks of Dalo, a starchy root vegetable, and Kava root for sale in Labasa market. Keith's tooth was repaired efficiently and promptly - although he did suffer a few days later when his gums became mildly infected - maybe their hygiene was a bit suspect, or a 'foreign bug' got to him! Thankfully, it cleared up in a week or so.

We learned to take our own mouth wash with us on future dental expeditions - this allowed us to rinse thoroughly immediately after treatment.

Our next task was to sort out the auto pilot. Following a diagnostic check, a few emails and phone calls to the US manufacturers, it was ascertained that the flux gate compass was at fault and the unit had to be sent back to the US for repair. Easy enough, one might think! There was a DHL office in town, and it only takes four days to get to the US. We parcelled up the device, took it to Customs to be checked, and then along to DHL. Unfortunately, the staff at the DHL office put someone else's Airway Bill on our parcel and ours on theirs. In due course it transpired that the company who was to repair our unit received a box of clothes and other household items! It took three weeks to sort out this mess - in the end our parcel was returned to Fiji, and we started the process again...

Hanging around in Savusavu was no great problem; it allowed us to get back into cruiser mode and complete a number of jobs that we hadn't got around to doing - such as cleaning and re-water-proofing our canvas bimini, polishing the stainless steel, and a multitude of minor fixes.

We also met Morrison off *Lucky White Heather*, a first-time cruiser who was making a pilgrimage from NZ to his hometown of Glasgow on his newly purchased yacht. He completed a dive course in Savusavu. Keith was able to buddy dive with him on the reef at Cousteau just outside Savusavu - so called as the famous Jacques Cousteau family created a resort in this great diving area.

Once we were satisfied that the autopilot had arrived safely in the US, we 'escaped' for the weekend with *Lucky White Heather* to Viani Bay to dive the Rainbow Reef, one of the world's best reef dives. Teaming up with Bill and Linda from *Creola* we employed the services of local guide Jack Fisher. Jack piloted the boat out and anchored it on the reef - a nerve-wracking experience! Thankfully *Creola* volunteered for this exercise - *Lucky White Heather* and *Poco Andante* were left at anchor in the bay. *Creola* had their own dive compressor and could refill the dive tanks. Yes, Keith said the diving was superb - although it was full moon, so the currents were a little strong; fish life abounded, the coral was healthy and magnificent, sharks, sea snakes, turtles and other large fish were active. We even saw a pod of pilot whales and dolphins on the way.

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Our weekend stretched into five days, but eventually Keith and I had to check on the progress of the autopilot repair. An hour's trip to Taveuni, the next island, and a six-kilometre taxi ride into town found us in an internet café. The email with repair quote was there but, amazingly, the US company would not accept payment by a foreign credit card! So began a 4-5-hour battle with the over-night staff of Keith's UK bank to try and transfer some money to the US. Due to their security precautions and the 11-hour time difference they wouldn't do the transfer unless the 'day' staff could telephone him back within the next two hours. We were not sure what part of, "No we do not have a phone. No, you can't phone us in two hours", they did not understand, but they refused to do the transfer. In desperation, Keith emailed his daughter Emily who thankfully helped out and paid the bill for us. This was only the second time in five years that we'd had such a problem, which, I suppose was not bad. Somo Somo, the main town on Taveuni, didn't even have a bar or restaurant and the whole town closed at 5pm. Exhausted and frustrated, we hitched a ride back to the anchorage and endured a very rolly night. Feeling that the repairs could now begin in the US, we set off the next morning to Rabi Island.

Cruising is a life full of contrasts; *Poco Andante* always seemed like a protective bubble, providing us with all the mod cons that we all expect to have in the first world. There we were, sitting in a gorgeous anchorage, Albert Cove on Rabi Island, Fiji. Dotted on the wide sandy beach are three families living in third world conditions: grass huts, woven mats on the floor, one meal a day. But when asked if they need anything, you are met with a smile and polite refusal. The waters are full of fish, lobsters and octopus on the reef. There is no road - no interruptions except for the odd yacht and small cruise boat. The children were playing happily - it was the school holidays, so they had come to visit Grandpa. During term time they stayed in the main town on the next island along the coast. We made new friends on this island - we took them gifts of sweets, cakes and fishing gear, and in return received shells, coconuts and papayas and a chance to go fishing with the grandfather. After one foray he insisted on giving Keith the only small fish they had caught - how do you repay such kindness?

This simple life was in contrast with the complexities of living that followed us even here. A problem arose; the funds I had transferred

to Emily to reimburse her for the autopilot repair had not been received. Emails, via the InMarSat satellite, were sent back and forth; my sister logged into my bank account to confirm the funds had left; she telephoned Emily in the UK on my behalf (eventually she did receive the funds OK) - all instigated from this little bay on a remote Fijian Island.

Back at Savusavu, the autopilot parts finally arrived safely, and repairs were made - we had so much we wanted to see and do and had already been in Fiji for two months. We waved farewell to Savusavu and headed for the Yasawas, the western chain of islands in Fiji.

The Yasawas are renowned for their resorts, clear waters and stunning beaches, but our first stop was at Yandua, a little isolated island not often visited by tourists or yachts. Its main claim to fame being the only refuge for a crested green iguana - whose habitat turned out to be off limits! At least the warden had a photo of one on the side of his boat...

The next morning was a Sunday and after a hike across the hills we reached the village at Yandua which is very traditional - and had to postpone our Sevu Sevu, the ritual presentation of Kava roots to the Chief, until after the church service. It is a social blunder not to offer Sevu Sevu and basically all it involves is to visit the Chief's hut, chat a little, be very respectful and earnest, present your bunch of Kava roots, clap a lot, have tea, while the Kava is pounded and mixed with water, and then take a bowl of the ghastly stuff. It's like very weak cough mixture and is the colour of brown dish water and although neither alcoholic nor narcotic, induces a state of relaxation. Once you have completed the Sevu Sevu ceremony, the Chief grants you permission to wander round the village, take photos, etc.

Our stay here was too short as we needed to set off across Bligh Water, leaving at sunrise next day to arrive at our next destination in daylight. I nervously navigated out through the narrow coral channel in the low light of an early dawn, narrowly missing the reef at one stage. You really do need good light in these waters. The only good charts of the Yasawas were over 50 years old - some dating back to Captain Bligh's era (of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame) - and often did not include any latitude or longitude. Eleven hours later we arrived at Yasawa Island, with another nerve-wracking entrance in the fading evening light.

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The Yasawa Group of Islands is a popular holiday destination and we 'day hopped' to all the popular haunts - our weeklong cruise turned into a bit of a resort crawl; beer in every port, etc. Best resort on my list was the Octopus resort and most disappointing the eponymous Blue Lagoon.

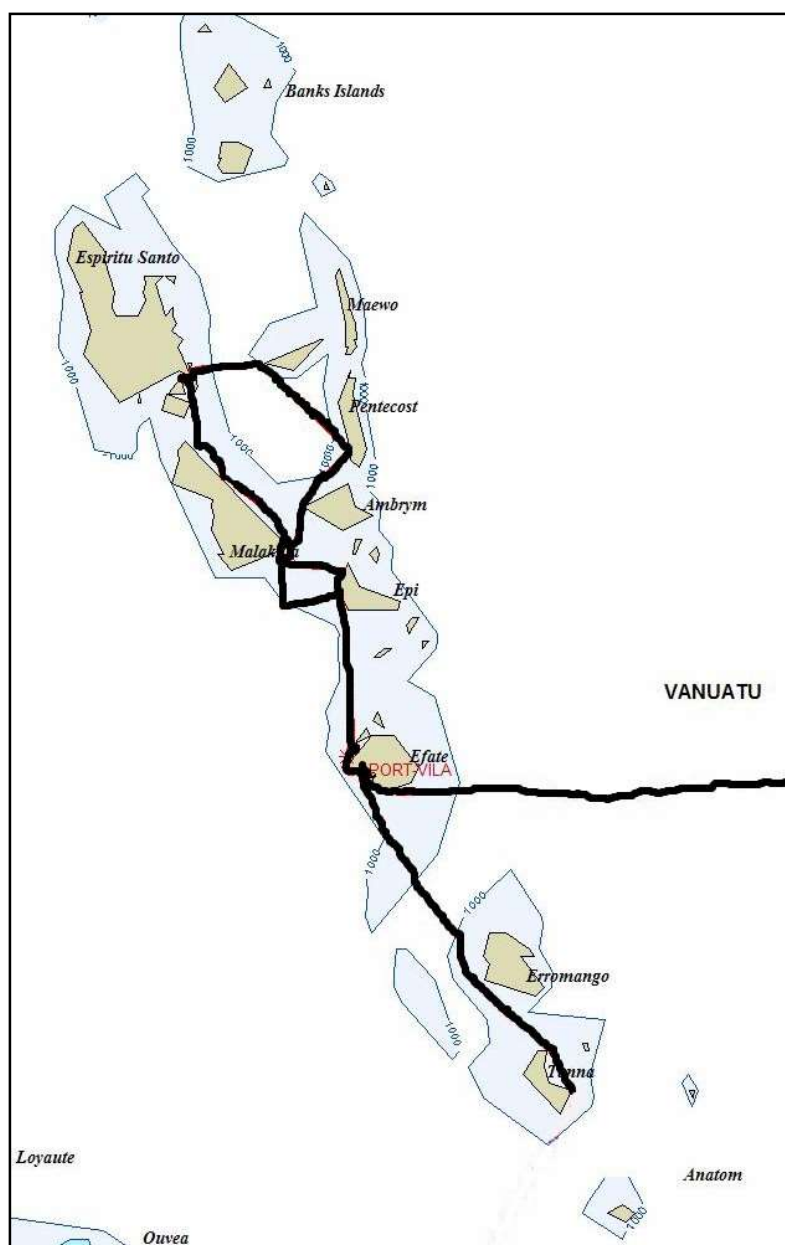
We ended our Fijian cruise at Musket Cove - this 'cruiser friendly' resort has been a magnet for yachties for years; this, our third visit, coincided with Regatta Week which is a great excuse for all the cruisers to party 'til they drop! Lots of free food, booze and silly events, culminating in a prize giving with some great prizes. There were so many happenings including: a 'pirate' invasion of Beachcomber Island, a nearby resort; beer drinking competition; tug-of-war; hairy chest and wet t-shirt contests on a sandy spit; treasure hunt around the island - we teamed up with the crew of *Libertee*; Hobie Cat racing; a yacht race around Malolo Island, etc. And those were just the daytime activities - there was no time to recover, though, as evening activities included Karaoke, Island Princess fancy dress contest for the men (Keith looked delightful in his Mermaid Princess outfit), a 'Why I hate sailing' contest for the women which I entered, and barbecues - all of which kept us in the party spirit.

We assembled a scratch crew for the Round the Island race; Patrick and Danielle, guests at the Musket Cove resort, and John from *Long Shot*. They helped crew *Poco Andante* in a very blustery sail around the island - she went very well and finished a credible sixth in her class. I was a little anxious as we touched 8.5 knots, close hauled with 45° heel and the gunwales awash!

Patrick and Danielle had to leave for home before the prize-giving night and, unbeknownst to us, Patrick had won the golf tournament and had donated the prize to us! A night in a 5-star luxury adults-only resort on the island. When the regatta finished, Keith and I packed a weekend backpack and walked the half kilometre along the palm-fringed beach from Musket Cove to Lomani Resort. When we presented ourselves with Gift Voucher in hand, we were given the 'Honeymoon' treatment, much to our amusement. We were greeted with smiles and a serenade by the staff. The Honeymoon suite had hibiscus flowers strewn around and every comfort one could expect - we luxuriated in it all. That evening when we turned up for dinner at the restaurant, we were seated at an elevated, candle-lit table set for romance. Next day, we enjoyed a massage each - included in the

prize - and basked in the horizon pool and the comforts of a 5-star resort.

65 – Vanuatu - *nam bilong mi* Christine



On 24th September we waved a sad farewell to Musket Cove as we sailed past on our way to Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu – about 4-5 days away (~520nm). The passage turned out to be fairly boisterous with shifting winds, mainly from the east, and lumpy seas at times. We had decided to go directly to Port Vila to apply for Keith's multi-entry visa to Australia - this would allow him to stay six months at a time. The whole process only took a week thanks to the help of the friendly staff at the Australian High Commission. Our stay in Port Vila coincided with a Trade Fair and we were able to watch the various activities and enjoy the dancing ensembles from the different island groups of Vanuatu.

Vanuatu, previously the New Hebrides, is a very new nation; they were granted independence from the French and British, who were joint governors of the Islands until 1980. This has left a very mixed legacy. The islands were not heavily colonised, and missionaries did not have a huge presence there, so many traditional ceremonies and religions still remain. Each island is different, with a variety of dialects, beliefs and customs.

On Tanna and elsewhere there is still a following of the Cargo Cult whose central belief is that all food and luxuries will just appear from the sky if you wait! They are still waiting for 'John Frum' to return laden with gifts - 'John from the USA' arrived in the 1940s and handed out vast amounts of Red Cross aid. We believe that some tribes on Tanna still see the visiting cruise ships as proof of the existence of 'John Frum'. We were occasionally asked about our religious beliefs in the islands - and once were asked whether they worship cows in the UK!

There are 83 islands in the group lying on a north south axis for 1,300kms. We had originally planned to spend most of our season in this jewel of the Pacific but had to cut short our trip after the delays in Savusavu. Nonetheless we made a fair attempt at visiting this wonderful country. Leaving the cosmopolitan and attractive town of Port Vila with its clear blue harbour *Poco Andante* headed north; first stop Epi, where a swim with a friendly Dugong (large sea cow) was the highlight; we then crossed over to the Maskelyne Islands off Malekula where we spent some time with the village on Avokh Island.

It is the custom for young men, aged about 20-30, to live together in a communal hut until they establish their own households. They

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gained respect from their peers by acts of hospitality and seamanship. In one instance, we were invited by a young man to attend a kava ceremony and feast. The young men laid out a veritable feast of freshly prepared fruits, fish, crab and prawns – washed down with kava. The men needed to acquire sufficient 'wealth' before they could be considered eligible by a prospective bride's family – and intra-island marriages were not permitted. Courting sometimes took many years as transport links to the neighbouring islands were difficult. A sign of wealth was to have a well-found dug-out canoe – and a sail was a mark of extreme wealth. In return for their hospitality, we donated our old stay sail and rope to the young men – it would be large enough to provide sails for about three of their boats.

Ni-Vanuatu people are extremely friendly and are keen to talk with you and learn; they view trading as the way of life and have little use for money. Outside of the main towns of Port Vila and Luganville there are very few stores. Trading with yachts is their main way of obtaining 'luxury goods' such as towels, drinking glasses, tinned and dry goods. And in return you get fruit, vegetables and beaming smiles. As in Fiji, kava is commonly drunk by the men but is not so ritualised. Unlike Fiji, the kava from Vanuatu is very strong; Keith found that after two cups he was in a very relaxed state – which lasted two days! Having put up with me suffering through the menopause as we crossed the Pacific, he's convinced that kava could be the cure for menopausal women!

The main difference between Fijian and Vanuatu kava is the method of preparation; in Fiji it is dried and pounded – in Vanuatu it is the green roots that are used. Traditionally these are chewed then spat into a bowl before mixing with water – thankfully they now more commonly use manual meat mincers to grind up the root – a little bit more hygienic...

The Vanuatu islands often resonate with the rhythmic sound of primitive Tam Tam drums, and one could imagine eyes peering at you through the lush green foliage on the banks, and strange thoughts run through your head... This is 21st century Vanuatu – it's been over 100 years since Reverend Williams' outline was carved into the rock at our anchorage before he was cooked and eaten by the natives! We dropped anchor and watched the fruit bats fly in to roost while we toasted Captain Cook for charting such a superb anchorage

that he called Port Sandwich – but who or what was in the sandwich, I wondered?

We found that most villages were very similar - with life revolving around farming. They have extensive growing areas carved out of the tropical rain forest and grow coconuts, bananas, manioc, sweet potato, papaya, taro and other less common plants. Copra is their main cash crop which is sold to the local traders. Cooking is done on open fires in communal kitchens and protein comes from fish, chicken, fruit bats and other creatures. Pigs and cows are slaughtered on special occasions – for which there seemed to be many excuses; births, deaths, marriages, circumcisions, dedications, etc.

A visit to a village started with a visit to the Chief; no ritual, just a chat with lots of laughing and smiling. Apart from their own local dialect most Ni Vanuatu speak French or English and Bislama - a sort of pidgin English - so you have to sort out a common language. If you're an English speaker you can sort of follow Bislama. If you speak aloud phrases such as *nam bilong mi* (name belong me - my name is), *taim i ren i kam* (time of rain is coming- rainy season), you'll see what I mean. We saw no Europeans living in the islands and the old colonial planters' stone or concrete houses were in ruins - when we asked whether Independence was a good or bad thing we got very mixed responses. Most villages had access to electricity, although often this was restricted to a couple of hours a day and only in the church or central meeting place. However, Digicell had set up a huge mobile phone network and most islands have access. Often cruisers were asked to charge phones and other devices - on one island a young girl paddled out to ask whether we could charge her iPod. DVDs were also in great demand. All very incongruous, but progress comes in strange guises. The main form of transport was the outrigger dug-out canoe, sometimes fitted with sail; these were everywhere. There are very few roads, and trucks and cars are an uncommon sight.

Luganville on the island of Santo was a major US military base in the Second World War and is now the second largest town in Vanuatu. They have turned this legacy into major tourist attractions; the most important being the world's largest diveable wreck, the *President Coolidge*, a pre-war luxury liner converted into a troop carrier. In 1942 it hit two 'friendly' mines and sank 100 metres from the beach. The 210m ship was loaded with 5,440 troops and

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equipment; all the troops bar two got off safely, but the equipment remained. Keith did two dives on the wreck - it was huge. Shells, guns, helmets, plates etc. covered the seabed; inside, the holds are full of light artillery, trucks, jeeps, medical and other supplies all slowly succumbing to the rigors of the sea. Keith is not a fan of wreck diving, but this dive was a must! Another was a snorkel off Million Dollar Point. When the Americans pulled out at the end of the war, they offered to sell off their surplus equipment and supplies to the local planters for a nominal amount; however, the planters, hoping to get the equipment for free, declined. In response, the Americans built a ramp and drove millions of dollars of equipment into the sea. Today, rusted generators, building equipment, jeeps, and drums full of who-knows-what still litter the seabed.

Santo was the furthest north we reached; turning south we visited the outer islands of Ambrae and Pentecost. Pentecost is famous for its land diving - AJ Hackett from NZ took this ritual and turned it into bungee jumping. During April and May when the liana vines are ready the young men from the south of Pentecost build huge wooden towers and jump off with the vines tied around their ankles as a right-of-passage. We were hoping to see one of these towers on our visit, but were told that they break them up for firewood at the end of each season.

Our anchorage just off the beach was in clear water but the bottom was black sand from the volcanic nature of the island. At dusk just as I was hoisting our new-ish anchor light (purchased in Fiji), the cord snapped and, Sod's Law, the whole mechanism bounced off the deck and into the sea. I had the presence of mind to take bearings from the shore to our position. Thinking it lost we used the mast-head anchor light that night. Next morning, Keith donned his snorkel gear and I pointed out the approximate position of the lost item. Keith took a big breath and dived for the bottom. I watched anxiously from the deck and, just as I was starting to worry, Keith popped up - with light in hand! Apparently, he had spotted the white unit clearly against the black sand. We washed it in fresh water and hung it out to dry - and that evening, when I plugged it in, lo-and-behold - there was light!

The anchorage was very relaxing, and we enjoyed a few days anchored off Wali village and went ashore exploring and interacting with the villagers. We traded for fresh fruit and eggs. One day, as we

were stretching our legs along the beach, we encountered a young lad about 10 years old emerging from the jungle wearing board shorts and a T-shirt. In one hand he was carefully holding some small green creatures – about 15cm long and 1cm in width. I enquired what these were, and he proudly displayed them, and we figured that they were stick insects with their legs removed – much larger than any we had seen before. He proudly explained that they were his contribution to the family's meal. In total contrast, in his other hand, he held a mobile phone – the disparity between primitive and modern was stark.

One evening Keith and I were on deck enjoying a drink while watching the sun go down. When darkness fell, we watched a series of lights parading along the beach. After some discussion we concluded that the locals were engaged in their own type of fishing. In the village the next morning I enquired about the lights and the fishing, hoping to indulge in some local delicacies; I was met with some puzzled expressions until one of the locals twigged and explained to me that the best mobile phone reception was at the point along the beach and everyone went there after the working day to conduct their business or talk to their loved ones. What we'd seen was the glow from their mobile phones!

The favourable winds we had enjoyed thus far in Vanuatu turned unfavourable and our gentle reach turned into a hard beat to windward; we dipped into and out of anchorages on our way south - eventually *Poco Andante* picked up a steady breeze and sailed back to Port Vila. We checked out and re-provisioned ready for our last stop in Vanuatu. It was a great surprise to see *Invicta's Reward* in harbour – this was the yacht that Keith had line-handled for going through the Panama Canal – and was part of our group of yachts that had crossed the Pacific a few years earlier. We dinghied over and were delighted to find John on board but saddened to hear that his wife Sue had decided that cruising was not for her. She had returned to the UK - while John had decided to continue to fulfil his dream. This special life is not to everyone's tastes – we often found that the wife/partner was sailing under sufferance to support her husband in following his dream. Others cruised part-time, letting the man do the long passages - either on his own or with crew – and flew out to join the yacht when it reached an accessible destination. The lucky couples, like Keith and I, were those who were both committed to the adventure and living life to the full.

Just buy a boat and go...

Tanna Island, the most southerly island, is famous for Mt Yasur, its live volcano. The anchorage is at the foot of the volcano – if the wind was blowing from that direction, the boats were soon covered in sticky black ash. Together with some other cruisers, we arranged an excursion to the rim of the continuously erupting volcano. The young guide - in thongs (flip-flops to the Poms, jandals to the Kiwis) - walked us up the final slope through the ash field, littered with huge volcanic boulders which had recently been disgorged from the crater. It was evident when you looked around that these were landing on a regular basis. As the sun gradually set, we peered over the edge into the red-hot cauldron, you could see the lava bubbling away – and periodically huge plumes of volcanic dust and rocks were shot into the air with tremendous force, glowing orange in the sky like gigantic fireworks. Each mini eruption was preceded by a deep rumbling far below as the ground shook - this added to the suspense. Tanna is probably the only place in the world where you could get so close and witness this geological event. Absolutely amazing – this was really living life in the raw!

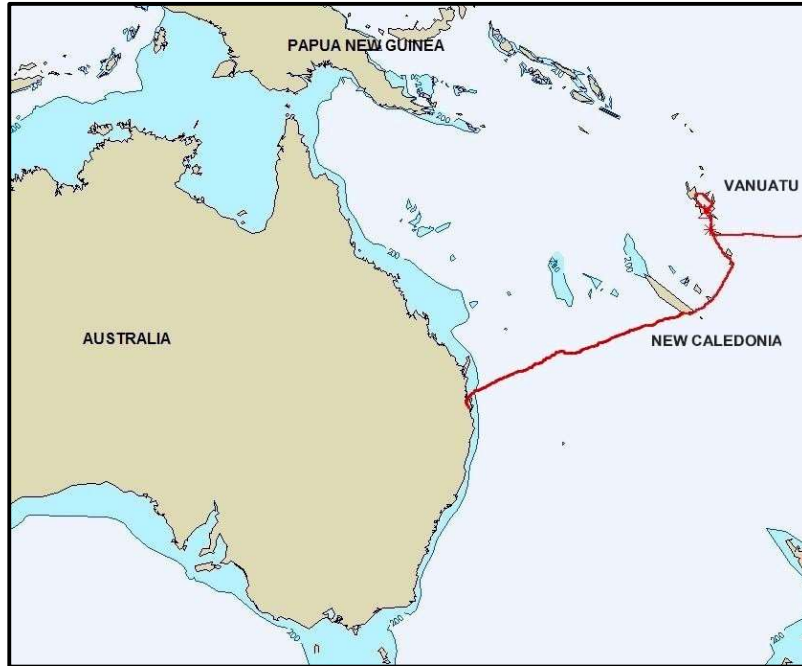
With nothing left to hold us in Vanuatu and cyclone season approaching, we raised our anchor and set sail for New Caledonia 400 miles to the west. New Caledonia is the last major island chain before Australia and was a good provisioning stop for the 800 miles crossing to Australia. We anchored in Baie des Citrons, a lovely bay that could have been plucked from the Côte d’Azur. What little I saw of New Caledonia upset my sense of justice. It appeared that New Caledonia had been plundered - first deforested and then scarred by open cast mines in search of nickel and other metals. The local Kanak people had been side-lined; the French Government had poured millions of Euros into the Noumean economy - very little of this money reached the outer islands or pockets of the indigenous people. Saying that, Noumea was a very pretty city, and everything was available here in the French supermarkets and chain stores.

There was little respite from the strong winds and storms that were battering Brisbane and then tracking across the Pacific towards *Poco Andante*. We hunkered down for a week at Amédée Island - a ‘day tripper’ island just inside the fringing reef of New Caledonia and waited for weather. The island's claim to fame is its tall iron lighthouse designed by Gustave Eiffel, manufactured in France and shipped over. Amédée's other secret treasure is its hordes of sea

snakes - when the last tourist boat left at 4pm, the place was deserted, and the snakes came out to play! These intriguing black and yellow amphibious snakes, mostly harmless, but with a nasty bite, loved the shade of the vegetation close to the beach.

Keith used the time to put on his scuba tanks and scrub the bottom of the boat while I cleaned the waterline - we had been warned that the Australians were particular about what wildlife you might be bringing into their waters.

66 – “What is your address?”



Eventually the weather in New Caledonia settled and we set off for Brisbane – we’d decided to go to Brisbane, rather than Bundaberg the more popular cruiser destination. Following the success of our foray back into the workforce in New Zealand, our plan was to pick up some contract work during the cyclone season. The first three days gave us fair winds and we beam-reached in SE 10-15knots - great sailing conditions with flat seas. The wind then dropped, and we motored all the next day, but soon more blustery weather came and sped us on our way. The start of the sixth night found us off the coast of Australia, negotiating a large fleet of fishing vessels - which was no fun under gennaker! We’d planned our arrival for mid-morning Tuesday at the Rivergate Marina on the Brisbane River. To avoid overtime charges for clearing into Australia, we needed to arrive

during business hours: between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. Australia was the most expensive country we had ever checked into and it also has strict quarantine and immigration rules.

Just as we entered Moreton Bay, around midnight, having manoeuvred our way through the fishing fleet, a huge container ship came up behind us. Five loud 'toots' of its horn gave me a sudden fright - I'd been so busy worrying about threading my way through the fishing fleet that I had failed to keep an eye out to stern! With discretion being the better part of valour, I steered *Poco* out of the main channel, we dropped the gennaker and motored the last 40-odd miles to Brisbane. At mid-morning, after six days and two hours at sea we finally arrived at Rivergate Marina and started the extended - and expensive - check-in formalities.

We then moved 17 miles up-river to Brisbane city. The trip upriver was in marked contrast to many of our previous landfalls; old warehouse buildings that had been converted into luxury accommodation lined the banks, while other land was occupied by modern architect-designed mansions. The skyline of the city was full of skyscrapers of different and colourful styles. There were free moorings within half a mile of downtown Brisbane which we took advantage of. We thoroughly enjoyed our first taste of Brisbane - everything was within walking distance or a short ferry ride - and the people seemed to enjoy life and the warm climate.

One of our first calls was to the Immigration Department to find out how Keith could apply for a work visa - an hour or two later we were armed with a load of forms and a long list of the paperwork that needed to be provided. It transpired that Keith could apply for the visa on the basis of being my partner - I have Australian citizenship, as well as NZ and British. To complete all the requirements, we would have to send to England and New Zealand for copies of our birth, marriage and divorce certificates, clearance by Police Departments, proof of our long-term relationship, etc. In order to receive what was obviously going to be a mountain of paperwork, we would need an address - we decided to check into Dockside Marina, about one mile from downtown Brisbane.

When cruising one of the hardest questions to answer is "what is your address?" Most cruisers have addresses for different reasons - an address in their home country for bank statements etc., a temporary one for receiving post and parcels - and one for where you

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are anchored or moored. By moving into a marina, we could use that as an address.

After sending off for all the necessary paperwork, we decided to spend Christmas in Brisbane and Keith's birthday (New Year's Eve) in Sydney so we could experience the famous fireworks off the Sydney Harbour Bridge. We had been disappointed by the last Australia Day celebrations in Sydney; the magnificent fireworks that day had been held in Darling Harbour, not the Harbour Bridge. Pippa, my niece, told us about standby relocations where you could hire cars for about \$1 per day to return the hire vehicles to their home depot. We found one for the trip from Brisbane to Sydney and had two days to get there - we stopped overnight at Nambucca Heads on the way down and negotiated our way through Sydney to Pippa's apartment where we were staying. She advised us to start queuing early to ensure we got a spot at Mrs Macquarie's Point, one of the best viewing points in Sydney Harbour. At 10am we joined the early crowd in an orderly line on the grassy park outside the entrance. There were already about 2,000 people ahead of us and new arrivals rapidly piling in. The atmosphere was friendly and fun - impromptu picnics, cricket matches and Mexican waves! We heard there were only two security guards checking everyone's luggage for drugs and alcohol - the wait would be endless! Eventually, at about 2pm, we reached the front of the queue and successfully cleared through to the Point. We picked our spot and spread out our rug and tried not to get too sunburnt while waiting. More and more people were crowding in; generally, the mood was tolerant, however some tempers were getting frayed. When the 'family' fireworks began at 9pm, the previously quiet, reasonably orderly crowd surged forward and all hope of us retaining our viewing point was gone - so much for crowd control! By midnight, some of the revellers were a lot worse-for-wear and becoming abusive and aggressive. Although we enjoyed the fireworks, the crowds were awful - we wouldn't do that again! However, we enjoyed the experience of seeing in 2009 at such an iconic event.

67 – Category C storm hits *Poco Andante*

After a few more relaxing days in Sydney, we collected a standby campervan and drove back to Brisbane via the picturesque inland route – the New England Highway. Upon our return there was a mountain of letters waiting for us - mostly documents concerning Keith's working visa application. With our paperwork complete and in order, we made an appointment with the Immigration Department for 29th January to present Keith's application. Before this Keith had to pass a medical examination - chest X-ray OK, blood and urine tests OK, everything else going well - however during the physical examination, the Immigration Doctor felt that Keith's spleen was enlarged. He told Keith to get it checked out by a GP who would then report back to the Immigration Department doctor. We were absolutely shocked - neither of us had thought the medical would be a problem – our healthy lifestyle included plenty of fresh air and exercise...

With my familiarity with the Australian health system, we first headed off to the Medicare Office to enquire about getting free medical treatment - visiting UK citizens are entitled to reciprocal healthcare in Australia. We owe a huge thank you to the lady who issued Keith a 'Reciprocal Health Care' card on the basis of our passports and honest faces.

Armed with the Medicare Card, we found a GP who referred Keith for blood tests and an ultrasound - we managed to organise this for the very next day, a Saturday. The GP visit cost \$61 but when we took the receipt to the Medicare Office, they refunded \$33.55 - this is the Australian Medicare system in action. Some doctors elect to do 'bulk billing' where they don't charge the patient – they just invoice the lesser amount to Medicare directly.

On the Monday morning at 9am, the GP rang to say he had the results of the tests - talk about impressive! - and Keith should go back to see him that day. The results were alarming - he told us Keith probably had leukaemia and referred him to a specialist and more blood tests. We were gob-smacked - talk about a bolt from the blue...

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We spent the Tuesday agonising over this news – ‘why me?’ tears, anger, dismay. All the emotions you could think of going in circles through our minds. After all, Keith had been diving just a few weeks before – and now he was faced with, at this stage, an unknown prognosis. The strength we had gained as a couple over the last seven years was holding us together – the trials and tribulations of our cruising life never prepared us for a blow like this. We talked things through endlessly – each of us on a seesaw of emotions – and assorted scenarios discussed and rejected. In the end we decided to adopt a really positive attitude to whatever was to come.

On Wednesday, we saw the specialist who confirmed that Keith had a rare lymphoma and talked to us about ongoing treatment. We didn’t have private health insurance, so he referred Keith to his colleague at the public Princess Alexandra Hospital – Brisbane’s specialist oncology unit – and arranged more specific blood tests. The next day we made our first of many visits to the hospital. Following the results of more blood tests they were concerned that Keith was so anaemic that he should have been bed-ridden – little did they realise that we had walked several kilometres to the hospital! Blood transfusions were organised for the Friday, the next day. After this we spent an anxious weekend trying to come to terms with what was happening – what would the prognosis be? Should we fly back to England? What would we do with the boat? We also had to pluck up courage to tell Keith’s children and our families...

After more tests and a bone marrow biopsy during the next week he got a diagnosis – Waldenström’s macroglobulinaemia, a rare form of lymphoma. Incurable – but then, Keith had always been an incurable romantic! – but hopefully manageable, which would be wonderful, since Keith had never been manageable!

I wrote an email to our doctor in the UK outlining exactly what had happened, the speediness of the tests Keith had undergone, and his treatment options. In reply, she took great care to answer my questions and explained that, if we returned to the UK, all the tests would be repeated by the Southampton General Hospital. Reading between the lines helped us make our decision – to stay in Australia while Keith underwent chemotherapy which would hopefully bring his lymphoma under control.

So, *Poco Andante* came to an abrupt and premature halt to her circumnavigation – while the rest of our cruising group continued west on their journeys.

We attended a talk at the Oncology Department to explain what chemotherapy entailed and the possible side effects and complications that could arise. The message was mixed, and my emotions came to a head. For the first time since his diagnosis, I had to come to terms with the impact this would have on me; fears of having to become his carer, possibly having to fork out huge amounts of money for drugs – and transport – and being unable to work made me collapse in tears. We found this really depressing and came away scared at what Keith would have to endure. Living on the boat was possibly a positive – we tended to have the hatches open all the time – fresh air and sunshine both bring benefits and could help Keith stay healthy as his immune system was killed off. We were determined to think positively – and tried to bring our outgoing sociability to all our encounters at the weekly Oncology Clinics.

The hospital arranged an appointment with the Oncology Social Worker – she was very good and understood our unusual circumstances. One-by-one we discussed them and came up with solutions. Transport – if necessary, the Patient Transport Service could help with this. The cost of drugs – charities could help if this became a problem, and if Keith was put on a ‘clinical trial’ the drugs would be free. She phoned Medicare to check Keith’s status, and they reassured her that there shouldn’t be any issue. With regard to Keith’s visa status, her belief was that, once Keith started a course of treatment, it would become a *fait accompli*. We came away from this meeting much relieved – all-in-all very positive.

Back at the marina, word had got around about our situation – everyone was very supportive and sympathetic – and offered help where they could. One couple from a cruising yacht asked us a poignant question, “If you were to sell *Poco Andante*, what would you have to look forward to?” This made us realise that many people diagnosed with cancer dream about their ‘bucket list’ and embark on some final adventures – we, on the other hand, were in quite the opposite situation. We had to give up our adventure and would have to lead a somewhat normal life!

Keith’s first hospital appointment after the diagnosis was a bit traumatic. A number of doctors came in and talked to us. One

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confirmed that Keith's disease was at an advanced stage – and she was surprised at his good general health, considering his low blood counts. She recommended that treatment should start as soon as possible. By the end of this meeting we felt that our decision to stay in Australia was the right one.

We spent the next week getting the boat ready for a prolonged period of inactivity – winterised the outboard engines, pickled the watermaker (literally using Sodium Metabisulphite pickling fluid to prevent microbes during long term storage), serviced the engine, and re-arranged the interior to be more comfortable for a long stay. Pippa came to Brisbane on business, and we had a delightful time looking after her young son Xavier. Rob and Gemma from *Orinoco Flow* who were now living in Gladstone came to visit – and Doug and Shirley from the UK announced that they, too, would come to visit. Brett and Debbie (*Interlude III*) came up from NSW. How lucky we are to have such great friends!

The following Friday, chemotherapy began. Luckily the initial treatment regime could be administered orally – and didn't require attendance at the hospital. With trepidation, Keith took his first dose of eight tablets of 'poison'. Nothing happened! Over the subsequent days this was repeated – after five days he started to have a metallic taste in his mouth. After seven days of tablets, he had completed his first course of chemo. By day eight he was feeling really 'yuck' and stayed in bed all day. Weekly blood tests monitored his progress – and blood transfusions were administered when required. After a three-week break, the next course began. Over the next couple of months, the accumulation of chemo began to take its toll – Keith was sleeping up to 12-15 hours a day and wasn't really feeling any better. When he was awake, he was bored!

The support from the other live-aboard boats in the marina was priceless – I often escaped to our immediate neighbours Mick and Sue on *Celia Mary* – a working couple who chose boat life over suburbia and were hoping eventually to move their boat to Tasmania for their retirement. Months later, when Keith was feeling better, he and Sue had a friendly 'My Galley Rules' cooking competition which raised the quality of the normal fare and provided some fun evenings which alleviated the boredom.

At his three-month review, including CT scan and bone marrow biopsy, we arrived at the appointment with a positive attitude –

Keith's spleen had gone back to normal size, and he hadn't required a blood transfusion for weeks – and he felt well. The actual results that day showed there had been a 20% improvement in his condition – which we thought was a major milestone. Unfortunately, the doctor didn't think this was enough – apparently, he had expected at least a 50% improvement... He felt they should adopt a more aggressive treatment – their experience showed that if they could achieve a 'deep' remission, in general it would also be a 'long' remission.

OK information was now creeping out of the woodwork, and we were starting to get more facts than we needed; like, Keith's bone marrow was so jammed with rogue cells that the first biopsy three months ago had so few 'good' cells that they couldn't get a useful sample! The second biopsy still showed an 80% 'rogue' cell involvement... With great trepidation we agreed Keith should try the new regime. This was a multi-stage effort; some intravenous biological agent combined with a couple of chemo drugs taken in tablet form.

His first visit to the 'Day Ward' was daunting – rows of treatment couches occupied by people in various stages of disease – young and old. The new drug regime was highly toxic – the 'Day Ward' nursing staff donned purple protective robes and eye protection to administer the intravenous drips. Saying that, the staff were delightful – encouraging and understanding – and surprisingly, the atmosphere in the clinic was very happy. We were no longer intimidated by the prospect.

At the end of April Keith and I had our interview with the Australian Immigration authorities to see if we could extend Keith's visitor visa – it was due to expire at the beginning of June. Thankfully, they granted him a bridging visa which meant we didn't have to leave the country immediately! They issued this visa pending further investigations as to the financial cost of Keith's health care before they considered whether to allow him to stay permanently... We were hoping that any negative decision could be deferred/delayed long enough for Keith to achieve a good response to his treatment. In a further month or so, he would qualify to apply for a work visa – which would alleviate his boredom.

Our good friends Doug and Shirley flew all the way from the UK to visit. We enjoyed showing them Brisbane and they discovered how big Australia is when they drove down to Sydney. We took them to

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the 'Gabba' to see a game of Aussie Rules Football - which was a novel experience! - as well as enjoying a typical Aussie barbecue. It was lovely to catch up with them and we really appreciated them visiting.

In late May we waved goodbye to James and Adelle on *Sula II*, another yacht in the marina. James was a Hydrologist and Adelle was a Nutritionist; they had both applied for jobs on different Pacific islands - and agreed that whoever got a job first, that's where they would go! Adelle got offered a job through AusAid in Tonga - that would be their first destination on the start of their cruising life. It was really great to be in at the start of their adventure. Compared to the 'grey' cruiser brigade, it was nice to see such young people realising their dream. We felt honoured to be part of their preparation and imparting our knowledge and experience to them. It also brought a pang of longing to get back cruising again and an even greater determination to finish our slow circumnavigation. The 'hiccup' of our enforced halt was a real pain.

After three months of the more aggressive chemotherapy, Keith was feeling much better - mentally alert and physically much more energetic. This was borne out by his blood tests - his red blood cell count was up to 10 - normal is 13-18 - the highest it had been since this whole episode started. And all this improvement without the benefit of any further blood transfusions - we hoped this meant he was responding well to the chemotherapy.

We enjoyed our daily walks along the Brisbane River to South Bank - the winter climate was very benign with 'Simpson' blue skies nearly every day - but these came to an end when I got a job. I found accounting work with a software company within walking distance of the marina. This helped to pay the marina fees - our cruising budget didn't really stretch to full-time marina berthing.

In July we received the response from the Immigration Department - Keith's application had been refused! He had 28 days to appeal - or leave the country... This was very alarming - the cyclone season would start in November, so we'd only have a few months to reach a safe haven - the nearest being New Zealand. But the letter of refusal also outlined the grounds on which it could be appealed. Keith spent a few days in the State Reference Library reading up on Immigration Law - and appeals thereof. We sat down and composed his appeal addressing each item paragraph-by-paragraph. Keith's research had shown that the cost threshold for

medical care was around A\$60,000 – and the expected cost for Keith’s treatment was around A\$34,000 paid by the State. We also pointed out that, if we had to return to the UK, we had nowhere to live as Keith’s house was rented out – and none of his children had established their own households. My support network was in Australia and New Zealand – and I was Keith’s nominated carer. We could prove our relationship was genuine and of long-standing – we dug out photos of us from our travels over the years. Keith’s hard work paid off – he won the appeal and was granted ‘Permanent Residence’ - a huge relief to us.

68 – Watch and wait...

After seven months of chemo, Keith was feeling fit and healthy enough to work - this would help relieve his boredom! Thankfully he got a short-term contract as a Commercial Analyst with Fosters Brewery – I knew all that beer drinking would stand him in good stead one day! Keith didn't tell them about the chemo as it only took up one day a month. With work colleagues unaware of his condition, the job became a welcome relief from the emotional intensity of coping with cancer. The money added to the cruising kitty was a bonus...

We continued to socialise – nothing new! Carol and Trevor, my sister and her husband, came to stay which was always fun. Rob and Jas, Keith's son and his partner, came from the UK. This was the first time any of Keith's children had been to visit and we were very excited, particularly since poor Rob, who had been working in the US, had to fly US-UK-Malaysia-Australia! Jas is from Malaysia, so they combined a family visit there before popping down to Brisbane for a few days. It was great to see them and the only disappointment was that the surf wasn't up at Surfers Paradise!

By the end of the year, Keith had his final course of chemo – now it would be watch and wait. The final hurdle was a further bone marrow biopsy in a few months' time; this would be an indication of the length or depth of any remission. The Doctors also talked about a possible autologous stem cell harvest. Keith's stem cells could be collected and frozen until they could be used in the future. Isn't medical technology wonderful!

Cruising yachts were now arriving after the Pacific sailing season – how envious we were. Brett and Debbie (*Interlude III*) had a great suggestion – “why don't you circumnavigate Australia!” This was a great idea - it would still allow Keith to have regular medical check-ups, and we would be cruising again...

In the meantime, we were reading about all the exploits of our cruising friends – the community is fabulous. Their many supportive emails left us with mixed emotions; pleasure, envy and regret. They

are all a truly remarkable group of people – they silently ‘just get on with it’, without recognition or publicity. Like Tom and Nicolette on *Katanne* who led a convoy of 27 boats through the Red Sea (‘pirate alley’) to the Mediterranean Sea with the aplomb that you’d expect from such an unassuming couple. Peter and Toni on *Tigger*, ventured up to Papua New Guinea, playing postmen around the islands of Melanesia, delivering essential parts to one island, and the proceeds from the year’s copra crop to another. James and Adelle on *Santana* (ex-*Sula II*) were enjoying their second season of cruising - Adelle was still working as a nutritionist in Tonga to improve the diet of those islanders - whilst James was busy rebuilding other people’s boats! They also sold *Sula II* in Nukualofa and bought a bigger boat *Santana*. What a great start to their cruising life. Ian and Emma on *Desire*, also from Dockside Marina, started their first season of sailing and were enjoying New Caledonia.

In April 2010, our second year in Brisbane, Keith was well enough for us to take a trip back to the UK – our first in six years. He arranged to visit his family and siblings – and we caught up with our UK friends. We wanted to talk to some of our fellow cruisers who had ‘swallowed the anchor’ – to find how they were adapting to life ashore – our fall back if Keith’s health deteriorated. Both Peter and Margaret (ex-*Sandpiper*) and Roy and Sue (ex-*Vindomar*) were missing the freedom of the cruising life – and missing the community spirit... Mike and Jill (ex-*Altair*) gave us some sound advice about finding interests outside of sailing – and for each person to find their own interest or hobby - apart from the partner.

We found it very enlightening - we had been concerned about what we would discover about ourselves and the state of the UK. We were pleasantly surprised to see that little had changed - even Tom, still propping up the bar at our local Ashlett Sailing Club, looked as though he hadn’t moved from the same spot in seven years! We were also spotted by other members, and the most surprising comment was “where have you been lately, we haven’t seen you in months!!” It just goes to show that other people’s lives move at different paces...

Our UK visits were very successful, and we managed to do almost everything on our list. We checked out Keith’s house and in general it was looking pretty good. We also visited the storage unit where all our terrestrial goods for the last seven years were stored. We opened the door, took one look - and decided it was way too hard to sort out.

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We checked out the soft furniture which seemed OK and there was no sign of damp, so we locked the door and walked away! We'd just have to keep on paying...

We enjoyed a relaxing few days in the UAE on the way back to Brisbane. The architecture in Dubai was amazing but it isn't a city one can stroll about - far too spread out. Keith reckoned the place is just huge shopping malls and hotels joined together by 12-lane motorways! The city is relatively young, so there's not much cultural history to explore. But the shops are amazing - if you have money and like designer 'stuff'.

It had been really great to catch up with all the family and friends. Especially those that had 'swallowed the anchor' - their advice/experiences on settling back down to normality were invaluable. As a result of their majority recommendations and our cogitations, and assuming all was stable and well with Keith, we came up with a plan to stay in Brisbane for at least a further 12 months - and then go cruising again! At this stage we were thinking of doing a 1-2-year circumnavigation of Australia. This would allow Keith to obtain his Australian Citizenship - four year's residency required in total - whilst still being within reach of the Australian medical system if required. If that all went well - and we felt fit and able - we could then consider resuming our circumnavigation back to the UK.

The other big decision we made was to move off the boat for a few months to enable us to do some painting and varnishing of the interior - a major inconvenience whilst living aboard. So, in June we moved into an unfurnished 2-bed/2-bathroom apartment at the Dockside Apartment Hotel, immediately adjacent to the marina - no excuse for not working on the boat. With lots of help from our marina neighbours, we emptied the entire boat with the exception of the spare parts and tools. *Poco Andante* was now lying about 20cm higher on the water - and the list to port had become even worse; the tools and spares lived in the pilot berth on the port side! The spare bedroom in the apartment was filled with seven years accumulated junk which we would need to sort through.

Life ashore was very different; a bit like camping - we slept on the floor on our boat mattress atop the V-berth cushions! There was so much space - it seemed like you had to walk miles to get to the bedroom or bathroom. The kitchen didn't have as much storage as

Poco Andante's galley, but it was wonderful having our own laundry facilities. I was given two 2-seater sofas from the office where I worked and an office table we used for dining and two cheap dining chairs we bought from Ikea.

We started work on the boat – all 17 of our windows needed to be re-bedded as the existing sealant was deteriorating; this was a particularly messy job. Keith painted inside the V-berth lockers and started on the varnishing. His initial attempts at varnishing the vertical surfaces were really frustrating – the varnish kept 'running'. Mick, our neighbour on *Celia Mary*, suggested we use a paint sprayer. It turned out Mick had been a car painter in a previous life and was able to advise Keith on what compressor to buy. It worked out to be cheaper to buy a unit than hire one – and just as well, since we ended up taking months to finish the job! The 'wet' season in Brisbane was particularly wet – we kept having to wait for fine weather. Mick and Sue provided huge help with sanding, masking and varnishing. We took all 37 interior locker doors up to the unit and set up a mini 'spray booth' on the balcony to varnish them. Keith applied at least five coats of varnish to the teak-and-holly floor throughout the boat. In the meantime, we managed to acquire a new microwave oven and a marine washing machine for the boat – courtesy of Debbie and Brett (*Interlude III*) when we visited them in NSW to view their new baby: a Sundeer 60' they had bought sight-unseen from the US and imported to Australia – a fabulous boat now named *Interlude IV*. We also imported a new replacement gas oven and hot water system from the US and UK respectively. Keith suggested we re-furbish the galley with new work tops; to help even up our 'list to port' - we installed 6mm composite granite benches on the starboard side. All complemented by new mixer taps in both heads and galley. And we bought a new made-to-measure mattress for our cabin – and sprung under-bed slats from Ikea – oh, what comfort!

In between all this, we sorted through every item we'd taken off the boat – and gave a lot to charity. It was therapeutic as well as practical to have such a good sort through. When we finally moved back on board, we actually had spare room in most lockers – ready to accumulate more stuff!

Since returning from the UK, Keith was struggling with continuous chest infections – airplanes are full of germs! As a boost for his immune system the hospital gave him a few months of IV

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treatment with human immunoglobulin which seemed to work. The blood tests indicated that his disease was stable - we hoped this would continue for a long time. We were very disappointed and dismayed when they told us that Keith's blood cells were still not well enough for an autologous stem cell harvest. We felt this severely limited his future options - the doctor spoke about Keith's siblings being donors - but they were much older than Keith and on the opposite side of the world. Apparently, the Red Cross can co-ordinate it all without them having to travel...

By the following November, Keith's blood test results were the best they had been for two years, and we decided that we should go cruising again at the end of the current cyclone season, April the next year - it felt like an awful waste of time to be sitting around Brisbane waiting for the next set of blood tests! The doctors, understandably, wanted very regular check-ups - however as Keith's condition seemed to be stable, we made the conscious decision to try to manage their needs to suit ours - extending the intervals between blood tests, so long as Keith had no apparent symptoms. We were also learning to interpret the blood test results ourselves.

We thought we would initially sail around to Darwin, north coast of Australia, to determine if we were fit, ready and willing to resume our long-term cruising/life goals - maybe finish a circumnavigation of Australia. If so, we could cruise the Kimberley Region of Western Australia the following May-June-July - we'd heard it is stunning there - and Darwin would be a good starting point. We finally had a plan - and something positive to look forward to!

Emily, Keith's eldest daughter, and her partner Jon decided to migrate to Australia, much to our delight. Emily, a physiotherapist, had secured a job in Port Stevens, NSW and they came to visit us in Brisbane before they headed south to their new life. They had spent time in Australia during their 'gap year' a few years before and, as keen sportsmen, were looking forward to the outdoor Aussie lifestyle.

In January 2011, heavy water flowing down the Brisbane River wreaked havoc in its wake. Over a 24-hour period the river levels gradually rose by several metres and the river was flowing at around 8 knots (very fast) with debris crashing down - marooned boats, pontoons, floating restaurants, containers, tanks, etc. The marina pontoons were coming under increasing pressure from the debris

and turbulence – and were in danger of breaking up. The authorities announced that the marina should be evacuated - but didn't actually provide any advice or assistance. It was very frightening. All the marina residents worked together, and the boats were released one at a time. Having spent hours helping everyone else to get away, we realised that *Poco Andante* was one of the last to leave – and there was no one left to help us! At one attempt to untie from the berth, the swirling water actually tipped *Poco* over about 60° - water was just about to swamp her and it could so easily have scuppered us entirely. Thankfully our young friends Ian and Emma (*Desire*) turned up and, seeing our plight, offered to help us manoeuvre *Poco Andante* to the outside pontoon. Trying to maintain control using long lines across the marina was not easy – a fit young kayaker helped by taking our long line upstream to the outside piling. It took us nearly two hours to slowly winch ourselves, against the current, out of our marina berth and manoeuvre ourselves to the outside pontoon. As the waters swirled *Poco Andante* was swung back and forth, attached to the outside post by one long line from the stern quarter. Eventually we were spat out into the mainstream and then had a very fast trip down river, reaching 10+ knots at times. At the bends in the river the currents formed maelstroms, and it was difficult to maintain steerage. Several times we thought we were going to lose the boat. Others weren't as lucky, and their boats littered the sides of the river. Manly Marina, on the coast and away from the flood area, kindly offered three days free berthing for the evacuated yachts and we were able to leave *Poco Andante* there. Our apartment - eight floors up, thankfully - became a bit of a drop-in centre for displaced boat owners looking for somewhere to stay.

Life was slowly getting back to normal. Keith was still working and even volunteered to act as Secretary to the local branch of CIMA – the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants. This afforded us some interesting evenings – and we made new friends outside of the sailing community. Keith tried to encourage me to become a member and sit the exams which would give me formal recognition of the work I'd been doing for years. I didn't feel my head was in the right place to undertake the study required – perhaps next year...

In February we had the opportunity to help Mick sail his boat *Celia Mary* down to Tasmania; Sue had already moved there at the end of December after getting a position in Hobart with the Tax Office. After

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a bit of a false start, together with another marina boatie, Kelly from *Laize Faire*, we had a good trip south with just a few stops for weather. Luckily one of these was at Port Stephens where we caught up with Emily and Jon. It was lovely to see them in their new life - and spend some time ashore. Then to Sydney where we were able to spend a night with Pippa and Xavier - it was great to see them and Pippa's new home. There were another couple of unplanned stops due to lumpy seas and fresh winds - one being Bomaderry/Shoalhaven where we spotted Brett and Debbie on *Interlude IV*. The cruising world is amazing - friends pop up everywhere! Eventually *Celia Mary* reached Eden, the setting off point for crossing the Bass Strait to Tasmania. Unfortunately, the extra delays meant Keith and I had to get back to Brisbane for work, so we left them to it - by now Mick and Kelly had learned about boat management and gained in confidence. The next bus to Sydney departed at 2am so after dinner and drinks at the local pub, Keith and I waited four hours on the side of the road until the bus arrived. From Sydney it was a flight back to Brisbane. The positive outcome was that *Celia Mary* successfully reached Tasmania a few days later; Keith and I discovered we could still go to sea - and Kelly bought a boat of her own!

Keith finished his latest six-month contract in April, and we hauled the boat out of the water for the first time in three years. The bottom wasn't too bad considering the last time she had been scrubbed was 2½ years earlier in New Caledonia. Unfortunately, we discovered that, after all our careful research of antifoul in New Zealand, Australia had since banned the one we'd chosen - so we now had to scrape all the antifoul back to the primer - very hard work - before applying new. However eventually it was done - as well as replacing our propeller shaft with the one we'd had made in NZ - and installing a new 'dripless' stern gland. Keith was delighted with this mechanism!

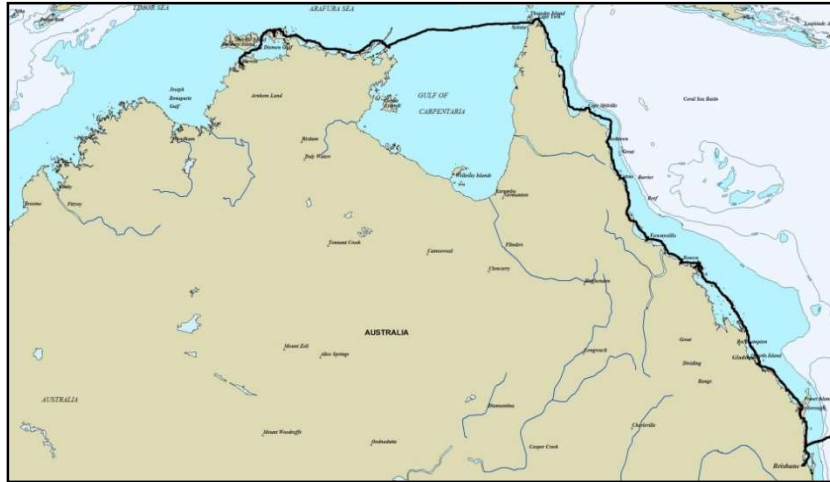
In May I resigned my position and helped with the haul out before starting the arduous task of cleaning the interior of the boat - eight months of sawdust had penetrated everywhere. We gave two weeks' notice on the apartment and immediately had to start cleaning that, so it was available for viewing. By this time, I was totally fed up with cleaning! We slowly moved all our stuff back on board and stowed it away and planned our departure. Keith discovered the joys of ordering our bulk provisions via the online shopping sites - and they

even delivered the 14 crates of grocery basics right to the dock! We went to Woolworths and bought about 18 kilos of chicken, pork and beef, packaged into about 300g per bag, and they froze it for us overnight. Ian and Emma of *Desire* kindly lent us their ute so we were able to do even more shopping – and collect the 15hp outboard from servicing.

We were delighted that so many friends and colleagues came to visit *Poco Andante* when she was clean and tidy. They all had very nice things to say... We had a hectic few days catching up with friends before our departure; and a lovely meal with Ian and Emma to thank them for their help during the floods – without their assistance we may not have been setting off cruising again!

On 30th June 2011, nearly eight years since we left the UK, we finally cast off from Dockside Marina in downtown Brisbane – two years and seven months since we arrived – and two years later than originally planned. Our stay in Brisbane had allowed us to top up the bank account as well as getting the boat up together. We'd learned how to live with Keith's cancer – and felt lucky to be setting off at all.

69 - Cruising the Coral Coast



It was great to be back cruising again – destination Darwin, some 2400nms away. We planned to get there by the end November - the beginning of the cyclone season. Darwin is definitely in the cyclone belt - but thankfully has a few protected marinas. We decided to risk it.

The first stop was in Moreton Bay, just outside Brisbane. The anchorage behind the wrecks at Tangalooma didn't seem very secure – this gave us our first introduction to the Queensland coast - strong south easterly winds and roly anchorages. It was also our first anchoring for quite a while - and Keith was frustrated by the anchor chain continually jumping off the windlass gypsy. On inspection he decided that the first 25 metres of our anchor chain was badly corroded from so much use over the years – and as a result the links no longer fitted snugly on the gypsy. Since we had some 90 metres of chain, he decided we could afford to lose some. On the way to Mooloolaba, Keith got the loppers and chopped off the offending amount and dumped it overboard - this improved matters no end.

We cut short our stay in Mooloolaba as the good weather continued - light winds meant that we motored towards Fraser Island. After a still night at anchor at Double Island Point, we entered the Sandy Straights through the notorious Wide Bay Bar. Cruiser tales abound about this regularly-moving sand bar with rolling surf and numerous shipwrecks. Our experience was far from this - with help from the local Volunteer Marine Rescue, who gave us specific waypoints to get through. We did surf a little as we entered the Straights, but it was an easy crossing. We took the tide through the shallow Sandy Straights and ended up anchored off Kingfisher Resort in Hervey Bay.

Keith organised a trip around Fraser Island; it is the largest sand island in the world - some 100kms long. The ocean side is a long beach that is used as a main highway - and if you were lucky, you could spot passing humpback whales. Surprisingly, although the island is one big beach, it is covered in sub-tropical rainforest - with towering pines and eucalyptus trees, huge freshwater lakes and streams - an amazing place. The tracks are treacherous and 4WD is essential.

Gladstone was our next main stopover - Rob and Gemma from *Orinoco Flow* had settled there after their trip across the Pacific a few years earlier. We were now in day-sailing mode and planning to get as far north as we could in day hops. Bundaberg and Pancake Creek were our intermediate stops before we pulled up in Gladstone Marina. It was lovely to catch up with Rob and Gem; we spent nearly a week there doing a bit of maintenance and helping them 'landscape' their garden, mainly by applying layers of mulch on their extensive garden beds. Rob, a doctor, also arranged for Keith to have the necessary blood tests for his first 'telephone consultation' with the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane in a couple of weeks' time. He also provided the necessary forms for Keith's next blood tests.

The period of light winds was replaced by steady south easterlies. To take advantage of these we headed north - the sandy islands of Moreton Bay and Fraser being replaced by rugged, rocky islands; submerged mountain tops from some long-lost mountain range, now covered in impregnable scrub. We were within the protection of the Great Barrier Reef and were hopeful of clear warm water and calm seas. When we arrived at Great Keppel, we discovered that there was a huge land and sea military exercise with the US being held on this

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10,000km² wilderness - the area was closed until the end of the month. Fortunately, this was due to finish in a few days and cruisers were stacking up waiting to transit the area.

While at Great Keppel Island Charlotte, Keith's youngest daughter, graduated from Nottingham University with a degree in Nursing. Once again, we were very proud - and disappointed at not being able to attend her graduation ceremony. Missing both Rob's and Charlotte's graduations - amongst many of the key moments in the children's lives - was one of the hardest sacrifices we made.

On the 1st of August, when the military exercises were finished, there was a mass exodus. The forecast was for strong winds for a few days, so most boats decided to hole up at Island Head Creek a few miles further north. After a calm night at anchor, we had surprise visitors. At around 10.30 in the morning a police boat turned up complete with armed Border Patrol officers, Marine Police and Coast Guard. We'd seen their Coast Guard cutter at anchor in the Creek and they were using the opportunity to check all the boats in the area - supposedly doing safety checks, etc., including breathalysing suspects. We were sitting in the cockpit having morning tea when they arrived; they must have seen an empty beer can from the night before as they insisted that Keith take a breathalyser test, much to his indignation. They then proceeded to check our safety equipment and documentation; eventually they left satisfied - and we could enjoy the quiet anchorage again.

It was a great sail to Middle Percy, a picturesque palm-fringed island. On the beach is a large A-frame building, built as a meeting point for cruisers; many visitors have left a memento of their passing; not to be out done we painted *Poco's* name and logo on a piece of driftwood and nailed it up for others to see. It was great to see the names of our cruising friends who had passed this way previously. While at anchor we had a visit from one of the other boats passing on an invite from the residents of the island to a 'goat stew' the next night, with a donation of vegetables being gratefully received. Armed with a bag of veggies and a bottle of wine we joined the other twenty or so guests at the A frame. Behind was a huge fire and large cooking pot, standing on the table was a lovely baby goat frolicking around. "Is that dinner?" Keith asked. "Unfortunately, not - the menu has been changed to roo stew." The hunting that day had not gone well; the wild goats on the island were too elusive, although a kangaroo

had succumbed. The evening wore on, beer and wine consumed, some volunteered to prepare the veggies, which were duly added to the pot. Part way through the evening, a bleat was heard from a backpack hanging on a post. The backpack owner uncovered a hungry Joey from the pack; it was passed to a willing visitor for bottle feeding. Conversation continued and after a few more beers it was revealed that the joey's mum was the 'guest of honour' at the dinner. Both Keith and I lost our appetites and crept back to the boat - we have eaten many different things on our travels - including kangaroo - but this was a bit too basic for comfort.

We were now in the Northumberland Island group - commonly known as the Whitsundays. Captain Cook named many of these islets after geographical locations in the north of England, such as Penrith, St Bees, Carlisle, Keswick, etc. We decided to stop off at Scawfell Island then Brampton. Brampton was another resort island now closed pending redevelopment following cyclone damage. There was one lonely caretaker on the island stopping looters from taking items. We couldn't see the attraction of this island - it was OK, but we had seen much nicer ones on the way so the development into a five-star resort didn't make sense to us. The only good thing for us was the island's good telephone and internet connection.

We had been listening to the ABC news during our trip and one item intrigued us - Australia's five yearly Census. They provided a phone number for people to call if they had not received a form - Keith and I were interested in how they coped with people like us. In Australia, there is a large population of transients: Grey Nomads, cruisers, back packers and workers in remote locations. As a test, I phoned the Help Line. The first question was the hardest, "What is your address?" Not surprisingly, they couldn't cope with "at anchor off Brampton Island" - after much discussion we settled upon 'Beach Road, Brampton Island'. Eventually I was given a password so that we could complete the on-line forms. When we did this, it was apparent that this transient sector of society has been overlooked - basically we were classed as 'homeless', and 'living on the streets' - which we're sure would not correlate - we were living in a 3-bedroom, 2-bathroom abode and our previous year's income was in the higher income level - interesting!

Keith phoned the Princess Alexandra Hospital for his consultation with the specialists - they had received his fax with the blood test

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results and confirmed his condition was still stable. Yippee! We were also pleased that our strategy for obtaining blood tests in remote locations – and subsequent phone consultations – appeared to be working. The doctor was highly amused to have his patient phoning from a yacht at anchor off a remote Queensland island!

We were now in the southern Whitsunday Islands and winds were forecast to move to the north. We awaited the return of the southerly air stream at anchor on the south side of Goldsmith Island. This was a lovely anchorage, hardly visited. At low tide the beach was covered in blue soldier crabs marching along the beach and large rays patrolled the shallows. The wind turned southerly in the middle of the third night, so we upped anchor under bright moonlight and moved five miles around to the sheltered north of the island. In daylight we moved to Shaw Island further north. This was a good anchorage to stop for a while – do some laundry and attend to some boat chores. I was really pleased with the new washing machine – especially the spin cycle which reduced the drying time considerably. The warm 20 knot winds also helped!

In settled weather we headed for Lindeman Island where we came across a humpback whale and her new calf – surprisingly close. Although we'd seen whales regularly on our trip north, they were usually too far away to get good photos; this pair were within a 100m. We stopped a while to watch these amazing creatures. It looked like Mum was using the protected waters to teach her new baby how to dive.

Following a lovely walk on the island we sailed past Hamilton Island and anchored in Cid Harbour on Whitsunday Island. Here we caught up with *Magic Carpet* – we had crossed the Pacific with them – it was great to catch up with Chris and Karen again. They were moving to Nara Inlet on Hook Island to ride out more northerly winds and we joined them for a great evening, swapping news over dinner.

It was a slow haul along the Queensland coast. The overriding impression on our trip north was that there are thousands of kilometres of coastline with no signs of human habitation. I used the time studying for the CIMA (accounting) exams – after Keith's nagging, I had finally decided it was time to get some formal qualifications for the work I'd been doing for years.

In all, we were disappointed with the Great Barrier Reef cruising. We felt that a bit of tourist development would go a long way and could be done without risk to the environment. There seemed to be a policy of herding everyone to the major spots - Whitsunday Island, Airlie Beach and the Cairns-to-Cape Tribulation strip. The rest, it seemed, picked up a few crumbs - and battled with the environmentalists to develop or expand their facilities.

I loved Bowen - a sleepy little town, waiting for the good times to happen. Lovely beaches, a happy-go-lucky attitude - the mining boom may or may not happen here...

Magnetic Island had a good anchorage, unpretentious, lovely walks; a great place just to chill - so we did! We thought Cid Harbour was the best anchorage in the Whitsunday Islands; a great walk to the summit, beaches OK, lovely surroundings - we came back here three times on our trip around the Islands.

Keith and I grew to love Cairns - a town with lots going on and good facilities and very welcoming. The Low Isles had the best snorkelling so far; it reminded us of the islands of the Pacific and Caribbean. And Hinchinbrook - visually a spectacular island, but unfortunately most of it is inaccessible. With a little imagination from the Department of Parks and Wildlife this could be turned into a great getaway holiday destination for walks and outdoorsy types.

We stayed at anchor off Cairns for three weeks - mainly to repair our refrigeration - the original evaporation plate had succumbed to galvanic corrosion. While there, we took a trip into the hills on the Kuranda Scenic Mountain Railway. The historic carriages meander through the World Heritage ancient rainforest to the pretty town of Kuranda - then we returned by the cable car which kissed the treetops on its journey down to the coast. Later, we hired a car and ventured inland to the Atherton Tablelands and even encountered our first duck-billed platypus frolicking in one of the many mountain streams.

We were day sailing with lots of stops, only averaging around 20 miles a day - we needed to get our skates on - cyclone season was creeping up on us!

Cooktown, Far North Queensland is named in honour of Captain Cook whose ship Endeavour limped in here after running aground on the Great Barrier Reef just south of there. If Cook hadn't successfully repaired his ship, then Australians would probably be

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now speaking French! Cooktown Harbour is small and estuarine - complete with crocodiles. We arrived at low water springs with a blustery NE wind creating a nasty chop. After trying to anchor three times - each time ending up on the sandbank - the local onlookers took pity on us and offered allowed us to tie up alongside a fishing boat. I now had sympathy with Captain Cook's plight!

Departing Cooktown, the last taste of civilisation for a while, our journey continued northwards, the next destination being Lizard Island. This is the most northerly destination on the east coast that most Australian cruisers aspire to reach - what a lovely spot. Well worth the effort - lovely anchorage, glorious walks and the company of many cruisers keen to party! Here Captain Cook climbed the mountain in search of an exit through the Barrier Reef. The view from the top of Cook's lookout is stunning, right out beyond the Barrier.

We spent a week there, just chilling, with the knowledge that, after leaving this idyllic spot, conditions would get tougher. Winds on the Queensland coast in the last quarter of the year are reasonably predictable - SE 15-20 knots. Our departure from Lizard was no exception, we were making good time so decided to leave behind Howick Island, a popular stop over, and press on to Ninian Bay. This is one of those places that, from the chart, looks like great shelter but in reality, was miserable. The bay is too shallow to tuck into therefore we had to anchor out in an exposed spot. The winds steadily increased to 25-30 knots during the night; at dawn we decided to run to Flinders Island for shelter. As we rounded Cape Melville the winds were over 30 knots - complete with heavy squalls in reducing visibility. Progress was slow and, as luck would have it, shipping was heavy - we decided to cut short our run and tuck in behind Cape Melville. We ended up staying here for three nights and rode out 50 knot winds. After slowly dragging anchor, Keith laid a second and *Poco* sat there comfortably until the winds abated. When we finally reached Flinders Island, we found a very protected anchorage and quite a few places of interest ashore - rock art, burial sites, etc. It was a shame we hadn't been able to reach it before the storms.

Time was now marching on. We pressed on to Portland Roads, 3-days away, mainly to get mobile phone reception. We had a few calls we needed to make - and we responded to a few emails at this small community - before setting off for Margaret Bay.

Ever northward we sailed - our next destination, Cairncross Island. This was just a stop-over before the final stretch to round Cape York - the most northerly point of mainland Australia. With a good breeze behind us we set off for this next staging post - however when we arrived the anchorage looked uninviting. We decided to continue to Escape River and arrived just as it was getting dark - it was also low water. We started to feel our way up the river - the only hazard shown on the chart and pilot being a rock on the starboard side. I spotted this and Keith, on the helm, gave it a wide berth; we felt confident proceeding ahead. All of a sudden, we came to an abrupt stop with an almighty Bang! *Poco* had hit an uncharted rock! Keith put the engine in hard astern and crept back. Thankfully we were off! A quick inspection below - all OK - no water flowing in - but where to go if the charts couldn't be trusted? Discretion being the better part of valour we turned around and found a suitable spot at the river entrance and dropped anchor alongside a myriad of pearl rafts. A safe but restless and uncomfortable night ensued. Keith couldn't dive to inspect the damage as we were in murky, crocodile-infested waters.

As you can guess, we didn't stay long here and headed out early the next morning to round Cape York. Although the region is mainly flat, you could see what looked like relatively undisturbed eucalyptus-wooded savannahs and tropical rain forests. This is the most northerly point of Australia, and we had sailed north for weeks past vast areas of unspoiled wilderness and could now turn west towards Darwin, a further 750nm away.

An easy sail found us in Seisia that evening - a lovely, well-protected anchorage where we could refuel - ourselves and *Poco* - ready for the wilds of Arnhemland.

70 – Crocs and shocks

With a fair breeze we left Seisia for the 250-odd miles passage across the Gulf of Carpentaria to Truant Island. The first day *Poco* was sailing with a useful 10 knots of breeze, but during the night the wind fell away so on went the engine. The wind didn't return for most of our journey across the Top End, as this part of Australia is affectionately called; the whole journey became a bit of a drudge. No wind, isolated and uninspiring anchorages, no other yachts, no coconut-palmed beaches - just hot and dusty scrubland dotted with craggy rocks with the occasional cute wallaby popping its head up.

Across the whole of the Top End, we were nervous about swimming; warnings about box jelly fish and crocodiles were everywhere. Although, neither of us saw one, their tracks on the beaches were everywhere so we were wary.

One highlight was the exciting trip through 'The Hole in the Wall'. It seemed like the whole of the Gulf of Carpentaria flowed through this narrow gap - 1.5km long and about 20m wide at its narrowest. This gap cuts a channel through the Wessel Islands and must be taken on the right tide. The approach is daunting - I was steering directly for a sheer cliff face until, at the last moment, the gap appears. *Poco Andante* was picked up by the strong current and zoomed through achieving 12.2 knots - we were through in 10 minutes and spat out the other end.

The lack of wind meant that fuel usage was much higher than anticipated; we had to find somewhere to refuel. Thankfully, an Australian Customs launch passed by; they called us on VHF to check our details so I took the opportunity to ask whether they knew where we could buy fuel. They suggested the Aboriginal community on Elcho Island, only ten miles away, and advised that we needed to get permission to land first and gave me the telephone number of the authorities on the island. Thankfully there was mobile phone reception as we got closer. I called the chief administrator of the island and got the OK to land and also got the number of the fuel depot and arranged to get some fuel. We anchored off the beach -

littered with abandoned 'tinnies' and outboards - and the local children were frolicking in the shallows and were amused by our arrival. The owner of the fuel depot helped by driving down to the beach to pick up and refill our containers. We stayed overnight and, with sufficient fuel, continued island-hopping to Port Essington, four days away.

The weather continued benign, but it was not without its hazards. One day, a solitary cloud appeared on the horizon; as it crept closer it became clear that this cloud was creating a huge turbulence, and we could see a waterspout developing beneath. This was unnerving as it crept closer. We ended up playing a cat-and-mouse game for about half an hour with this beastly - at one point it was so close that you could see the waves created by the gale-force winds at its foot. *Poco Andante* was now in the spawning ground for cyclones. The growing frequency of afternoon squalls and electrical storms was evidence that the monsoon season was creeping up on us.

Early settlers tried to create the first economic centre in Northern Australia at Port Essington - a large natural harbour rivalling Darwin - which was established 50 years later. Things hadn't worked out and this outpost was abandoned. We spent a week enjoying the area; there were many bays and creeks to explore - and the fishing was successful!

At last Keith was able to take advantage of the crystal-clear water to inspect the damage from our encounter in Escape River. Luckily it was, as suspected a big chunk about the size of his fist out of the front of the keel - nothing that half a kilo of epoxy filler wouldn't cure at the next haul out!

It was now late November and *Poco Andante* was booked into Bayview Marina, Darwin for the 1st of December. We finished our stay at Port Essington with a visit to a secluded eco lodge only accessible by sea or air. An afternoon propping up the bar was a nice way to end our trip.

Darwin was about 120 miles away - an overnighter. Tides in this area are notorious - up to 7-8m range - therefore timing was all-important. We left Port Essington at 9am and hit the tide to round Cape Don just right - with 8 knots of tide behind us we were swept into the Van Diemen Gulf and encountered 20 knots of following wind which helped us on. Through overfalls and steep seas, we ploughed on until we reached the centre of the Gulf - then, like

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someone turning the switch, the wind died - we were motoring again. As night fell you could see the storm clouds building and as luck would have it our autopilot died again! Keith quickly rigged up our backup tiller pilot and I gingerly started to navigate through the many hazards in the Gulf. Just before dark the heavens put on a magnificent display of lightning. We watched the development of a huge super storm cell directly above us - an amazing sight. Our first hope was that we could out-run it; our second hope was to go around it, but due to navigational limitations, we finally decided that prayer was the only option! The tiller pilot was struggling to cope with the tempestuous wind and currents - so it was back to hand-steering for me. The sky was as dark as a tomb and lightning crashing all around. Keith was convinced *Poco* would be hit - the smell of ozone was intense; the wind blew up to 40 knots, but thankfully the seas didn't build as well. We navigated through narrow passes with fast running, turbulent tides. I was steering by the compass with regular updates from Keith for course changes. The only time I could see the islands either side of the pass was during the frequent lightning strikes - there were no navigation lights. This seemed to last an eternity but in truth probably only lasted a couple of hours... The storm finally moved away and the last leg into Darwin passed comfortably. At dawn we anchored in Fannie Bay and ended our sailing for the year.

71 – Sweltering in Darwin

Darwin is a crossroads for many people – and we were at our own crossroad again. Our original plan had been to cruise the Kimberley region but after the boring and tedious trip across the ‘Top End’, we couldn’t face continuing on to the Kimberleys, which sounded much the same except for the addition of a few gorges, stunning anchorages, enormous tides and devoid of people.

Keith and I held a boat meeting and decided that if we could both find work that we enjoyed then we would stay in Darwin for the cyclone season, top up the cruising kitty and also arrange for Keith to have another blood test. If all was well, we would contemplate continuing on to SE Asia.

I arranged a flying visit to Sydney and successfully passed my five CIMA exams in a week – and found work as a Management Accountant for a large property development company in Darwin. Keith also got a contract with Toll Marine Logistics, mainly looking after their subsidiary in East Timor – which was to prove useful later!

The oppressive humidity of the wet season was truly amazing – although we’d worked through the wet season in Venezuela, Darwin was almost unbearable. We succumbed and bought a car – it had been nine years since we’d last owned a car. But it was just too hot and wet to walk in Darwin.

Bayview Marina was in a protected inlet and had an entrance lock due to the enormous tides – up to 6m range. This resulted in almost no breezes – and the heat was stifling. We bought a second-hand air conditioner and mounted it above one of our overhead hatches. Tarpaulins were spread atop the whole boat to try to keep dry – and we sweltered!

What we hadn’t expected was that Darwin would be so much fun! This is difficult to understand as the climate sucks – there are three seasons:

- "The Dry" (May-October) - NO rain, yes, none at all! And temperatures cool down to about 28°C;
- "The Build Up" (November-December) - 90% humidity, 36°C, thunderstorms, huge clouds;

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- "The Wet" (January-April) - torrential rain, dramatic thunderstorms and cyclones!

Keith's theory is that Darwinians figure that the climate totally sucks - so let's have fun!

Darwin was booming economically. It was host to a large number of capital projects mainly driven by a A\$17bn natural gas project, lots of mining nearby and other Government-funded projects. Unemployment was around 0.5 % so, to satisfy this workforce demand, large numbers of workers are 'fly in/fly out' which led to accommodation and skills shortages.

You may think that Darwin, being a capital city, is a teeming metropolis - think again! The Northern Territory, which is about the size of Germany or Texas, has a population of just 250,000 and 90% live in Darwin. This translates into lots of facilities and not many people to use them. It also means a small village temperament - you can stand in the supermarket and chat to the mayor - or have a beer with the Chief Minister.

Darwinians survive the wet season mostly by partying at the local hostelrys, holing up in air-conditioned homes, and watching the rain fall. We joined the local Dinah Beach Yacht Club, which holds wet season races. Keith helped crew one of the other marina yachts - which brightened up every-other-Sunday - tides are a limiting factor! The yacht club also has live music nearly every night - just a covered arena, a bar and bistro - and good company.

When the rain stops Darwin bursts into life - concerts, shows and events every weekend. Iconic places like the 'Deckchair Cinema' set up showing movies every night on the waterfront. This is like watching a movie in someone's back garden, complete with beer and barbecue. You can catch a film, under the stars, with fireflies twinkling and the occasional possum wandering around. We were told that sometimes a visit by a wayward snake causes a bit of a commotion! Sitting out on the beach watching the sunset and picking up a meal at the Asian-style Mindil Beach Market was also a great pastime. Beaches here were different; yes, there are broad, white sandy beaches, warm water, and occasional surf - however the water is occupied by crocodiles, jelly fish and other nasties! Swimming is confined to the swimming pools.

Courtesy of my employer, I got to go to Ladies Day at the Darwin Race Week - and had to buy a fascinator for the occasion! And we

both got to go to the Darwin Turf Club Ball - 2,000 people sitting down to a silver service meal under the stars, next to the beach, followed by a day at the races; Ascot eat your heart out! As an aside, Darwin racetrack is unique; many years ago, some bright spark came up with a solution to solve the dust problem caused by galloping horses. He decided to spray the course with used motor oil. This practice continues today, so jockeys, horses and some spectators get covered in the black oily mess after each race!

Kakadu National Park was the venue for Keith's 60th birthday and we enjoyed a fantastic long weekend there. It is certainly an amazing place and the aboriginal artworks astounding.

With stable blood results, Keith had gradually extended the intervals between his tests – we'd both invariably get nervous in the weeks before he was due for a check-up – and the six-monthly results were still unchanging. I was able to go back onto the HRT patches – which was a relief, especially with the combination of hot flushes and Darwin's tropical heat!

We also got to catch up with Keith's children when Rob, his son, married Jasmini. Jas's parents hail from Singapore but moved to Malaysia years ago. There were formal events in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Penang over a two-week period. It all went very well, and it was delightful to see all the kids – happy and flourishing in their lives.

72 – Ticking the box



Our latest plan, having survived the first Wet Season, was to stay and work in Darwin until we had saved enough funds to purchase a future house in Australia - with the proviso that we were both happy in our work and play. We were on track – but although the playtime was fun, the work became tedious; both Keith and I felt that our skills were being under-valued and under-utilised. It was a tough decision to give up a six-figure salary and the ‘comfortable’ lifestyle for a second time. But hey, what the heck! Life is all too short, and we weren’t getting any younger!

The decision was made – *Poco Andante* signed up for the Sail Indonesia Rally leaving Darwin in July 2013. While we were contemplating our future there were a few unfinished items to attend

to. Firstly – get Keith his Australian Citizenship; this would allow us greater options in the future. His time in remote Darwin entitled him to apply slightly sooner than the requisite four years of residency.

Secondly, we just had to tick the box and finish our circumnavigation of Australia - the easy way - by road. All that was left was the gap between Darwin and Broome. Keith took a break from his latest contract with the Northern Territory Government's Department of Remote Housing – and I resigned from my job. We purchased a tent and a blow-up bed and headed west. After Katherine we were in new territory. The drive west was through rich savannah littered with termite mounds and baobab trees. The landscape, much like Africa but without the large game roaming around, was full of Brahman cattle to supply steaks for the barbecue.

The road continued on and wound its way through the rich red escarpments, until it reached Kununurra. Kununurra was a worthwhile place to stop - not glamorous but it gave an inkling of what could be achieved in this remote part of the Kimberley. It had good agricultural land with rich alluvial soil close to town and was fed by some mighty rivers. The Ord River dam was completed in 1972 creating Lake Argyle, the largest man-made lake in Australia. This opened the flood gates for an irrigation scheme. The instigators designed it to create a food bowl in this region and to provide employment to the local indigenous population. Great plan, but for one small flaw! The soil and conditions were great for food production and, although there are many small productive farms in the area, one enterprising company noted that the climate was ideal for growing Sandalwood; thousands of acres of these trees were planted. This slow-growing parasitic cash crop, used in the cosmetic industry was, in 2013, only just being harvested for the first time - after 14yrs of waiting! A far cry from the plan that the visionaries of the Ord River dam were hoping for! Lake Argyle is also famous for the mining of coloured diamonds - yellows and pinks.

About 400kms south are the recently discovered Bungle Bungles. Until the late 1980's nobody knew of their existence - not a lost tribe or a new life form, but an entire range of mountains! Not easily missed, one would have thought... This mountain range consists of soft sandstone which has been eroded into beehive shapes with huge canyons across wide escarpments. They are remote; to get there we

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had the choice of a two-day hike, drive in by 4WD or fly. We chose a flying tour - not having a 4WD this time. Spectacular!

Touristy bits done in Kununurra, we continued heading west. After three days Keith discovered that the 'five-centimetre gap' on his map was actually around 2,000km. "Are we there yet?" became his mantra! Not much else to say about this trip. We arrived in Broome, after travelling through 3-4 small towns, mainly Aboriginal communities, and crossed our original path of four years ago. Last time we had entered Broome from the west, this time from the east. We stopped one night, had a great meal overlooking Cable Beach - then turned round and drove 2,000km back to Darwin. Mad or what?



That trip and our earlier short break, by air, to Tasmania completed our exploration of this huge and empty continent. Tasmania is a little gem lying on the southern part of the continent. After Darwin's heat, it was great to be cool again. The climate and flora are so different from the Northern Territory. Green, forested

and craggy mountains - much like the UK in topography. Not surprising, Tasmania was one of the first places to be colonised. A huge prison and town were built at Port Arthur in European style. The 'Separate Prison System' signalled a shift from physical punishment to psychological punishment. This was the forerunner of our modern prison systems, incorporating punishment by isolation, silence, and reflection. Many of the inmates became the forefathers of modern Australia once their time had been served - others filled the mental asylum as a result of their incarceration.

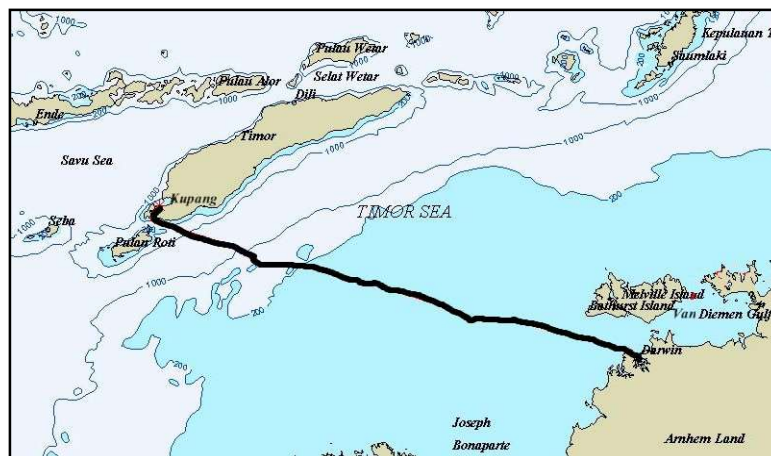
Tasmania has lots of apple orchards, breweries and other pleasurable indulgences. The State has a huge artistic community spawning the creation of the MONA (Museum of Old and New Art) gallery which has some huge and controversial modern art installations. I'm not sure that I would call them art - but they were very clever from an engineering viewpoint.

Before we left Australia, we wanted to visit Emily and Jon who had now moved to Perth; we spent a hot (42°C) week there around Christmas time. The only cool place was a dip in the sea followed by a visit to the air-conditioned shopping malls! We also enjoyed a farewell visit with niece Pippa and her son Xavier in Sydney.

Apart from these excursions, life just revolved around turning *Poco Andante* into a boat again after being our 'apartment' for 18 months. We reluctantly acknowledged that our poor dinghy which had survived the stabbing in Panama was finally beyond repair - we ordered a brand-new Zodiac dinghy.

Despite my reluctance, Keith insisted on a visit to the jumping crocodiles in the Adelaide River. This was really iconic - a leisurely boat trip complete with a bucket full of pigs' heads used as bait. Amazing to see these huge carnivores jumping and snatching the bait in close proximity; it gave us respect for these animals. It also illustrated why swimming is not advisable in the Northern Territory!

73 – Catastrophe in Kupang



The tenth anniversary of our departure from the UK coincided with the start of the 2013 Sail Indonesia Rally. It was a bright sunny morning with light winds. Over 80 boats started from Darwin on the day: the Saumlaki route contingent leaving early to catch tides through the Dundas Strait. Some others were left behind with gear failure, medical issues, etc. As always, it was sad to leave friends behind... Darwin had been our home for eighteen months and we had made some great friends there. The 400-mile trip to Kupang was a mixture of light winds during the day - which could be sailed - and motoring at night in calm conditions - all within sight of other Rally yachts.

It was dusk three days later when we rounded the first island in Indonesia, with only the 17-mile long Semaui Strait to navigate - we were looking forward to a well-earned rest and party time in Kupang. There were two sail boats ahead of us dropping sail to motor the last few miles to the anchorage. We decided to just furl our genoa and hold the main in tight and motor. Darkness was quickly descending. There is very little twilight in the tropics. And, as if by magic, a myriad of lights appeared in the narrow passage through to our anchorage. It seemed that the whole fleet of Indonesian squid boats were out to greet us that night. These are mainly made of timber and

come in a variety of sizes from a single dugout canoe with a lantern to large multi-hulled monstrosities – with poles sticking out both sides festooned with either huge incandescent bulbs or fluorescent tubes – all to attract the squid to the surface for catching with hand lines by crews of anything up to 40 men. These boats often had no navigation lights and the crew themselves were blinded by their own lights. The only sensible strategy other vessels can adopt is ‘keep clear’!

The new course brought with it a change in conditions; from a 15-knot beam reach to a 25-30 knot headwind; the wind was being funnelled down the channel between the islands.

“It will only be a couple of hours or so before we anchor” Keith said optimistically. The smooth seas turned into a short sharp chop and our engine laboured under the onslaught. We crashed on. Others, we heard on the radio, were heaving-to outside the straight. Wise move! Around 10pm, after a couple of hours of crashing seas, and worn out by numerous close encounters with squid boats, we were, thankfully only a mile or so away from our destination.

I called to Keith to listen – “bleep, bleep... there it goes again” - an alien sound... Keith was on the helm and dispatched me to check the engine. “It all looks OK”, I said. “Oh well, we’ll sort it out in the morning.” An alarm bell rang in Keith’s head - the oil pressure gauge dropped, the engine laboured and hiccupped. Just as he turned the key to stop the engine, realisation hit him in the stomach. No oil!! With the engine out of commission we quickly unfurled the genoa - thankfully by now we could see the end of the straight and the open water beyond.

Poco Andante had now entered the bay outside Kupang, so at least we had sea room. You could see the bright city lights and hear the sound of a disco, but we were now heading out to sea. Thankfully the wind conditions in the open bay were lighter and we weren’t fighting strong head winds anymore. We could see the anchorage, but the confusion of lights ashore made the boats at anchor invisible to the eye. Fortunately, some of the yachts had left their AIS on and we used these as a homing beacon – AIS is the Automatic Identification System which uses transceivers to send and receive information about other vessels. After a few tacks to get into shallow enough water, dodging squid boats, we eventually dropped anchor at around

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midnight. What a relief! Collapsing into bed, dreading what we would find in the morning, we slept fitfully.

Next day all hell broke loose in the anchorage as strong winds caused quite a few boats to drag their anchors - one of them brushed against another immediately in front of us. Keith jumped in our dinghy and went to help but I realized *Poco Andante* was dragging as well! I whistled Keith back and he put out all our chain and a second anchor; *Poco* finally held. The next day we slowly started dragging again but, without an engine, we couldn't move ourselves even with our 15hp outboard - the winds and current were too strong. Some kind cruisers gathered and manually raised both our anchors (without an engine we couldn't run the windlass!) and, with the help of several RIB's, shunted us closer to shore.

The call for help to the rest of the fleet brought welcome arms and minds to the problem... "Yes, sounds like the engine has seized." "This will need a new engine or complete rebuild." With all the attendant issues this presented, it sounded disastrous. Here we were - in Kupang, Indonesia - nearly as third world as it gets. Not even a jetty to tie up to. Would this be the end of our adventure?

Keith and I started to talk about an exit strategy. Should we abandon *Poco Andante* here and walk away? Did we have the resolve necessary to undertake the repairs here? Self-recriminations came; I should have checked the dipstick; we should have waited until morning; Keith should have turned the engine off sooner. We could have, we should have...

Over the last ten years we had battled through many difficulties and setbacks but were still in love with our lifestyle. In the end, we decided that we weren't ready to end our amazing adventure.

We contacted the Sail Indonesia Rally representative who recommended Matt, a local mechanic with pretty good English language. His verdict? A seized engine... The only way to tell the extent of the damage was to dismantle the entire engine. Keith went ashore with Matt to source a block and tackle and some timbers and beams to raise the engine. I stayed aboard - the wind was still quite strong - and sure enough, *Poco* started slowly dragging again. This time I was on my own - the dinghy was on the beach and Keith out of VHF range. I put out a call for help on the VHF radio, and once again the great cruising community came over and helped. As you can imagine all these male cruisers had their own ideas on how to

solve the problem – a mere female couldn't possibly know what to do! Two of them raised our anchor and put it into a dinghy, together with all our chain (65m) and most of our rode (that's the rope bit beyond the chain), and before I could suggest moving *Poco Andante* forward and using the dinghies to go astern to set the anchor, they had motored forward and laid out all 65m – in only 6m of water! Later, Keith and I managed to bring in most of the rode and laid a second anchor but felt very vulnerable when the wind turned and put *Poco* onto a lee shore. At least it was holding – just very worrying!

Three-to-four very dirty days later, Keith and Matt had disconnected everything from the engine and moved it onto our galley floor. Inspection determined that one of the rear engine mounts had failed and when the engine dropped it knocked out the oil filter – *Poco* had suffered instant total loss of oil. Once the head was removed, it appeared that only the big end bearing had seized and, although we had a good supply of parts, we didn't carry a spare set of bearings... Having diagnosed our problem, Matt went off to help other yachts with their problems, while we started sourcing spares for our Ford Transit engine. Lancing Marine, the company in the UK who supplied the original engine, were able to supply the parts – an Australian company also quoted but twice the price! We gave Lancing Marine the go ahead. As if engine failure wasn't enough, when Lancing Marine tried to put through the payment using Keith's UK credit card, the transaction set up an alarm with the UK bank's fraud squad! Unfortunately, by the time we were alerted, it was Saturday morning in Indonesia, and we had to wait until Monday to call the bank – a very frustrating, wasted weekend. In the meantime, we sent them my card details and the transaction finally went through on Monday and the parts dispatched on Tuesday – 13 days after the incident.

We had been advised by Sail Indonesia to use DHL in this part of the world – although we have since found that UPS and the local JNE couriers work just as well. Indonesia levies a 30% duty on everything and the only place to clear goods in is Jakarta or Bali. In the end, we decided to have them sent to Dili, East Timor – although a different country, it is at least on the same landmass as Kupang. We arranged for the parts to be sent to Isabel, the Toll Marine Logistics office manager in East Timor. Isabel was Keith's associate when he was

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working in Darwin. Our visas for Indonesia were 'single entry' only therefore we couldn't collect them ourselves. Matt the mechanic said he had business to do in Dili (the capital of East Timor) and would take the bus up and collect the parts from Isabel. As a local, he was also unlikely to be checked by Indonesian Customs. The parts arrived in Singapore on Thursday. We got all excited – but in vain – when Isabel went into the DHL office on, they said the parcel wouldn't arrive in Dili until the following Monday. So, yet another long, frustrating weekend! Then on Monday, DHL told Isabel she needed a Tax File Number (for some unknown reason) and that it takes three days to get one! Matt had been on standby to travel up to Dili - which is apparently about a 12-hour trip due to traffic/road conditions - but we had to call that off pending clearance. Then on the Tuesday Isabel went to DHL again and was advised it was a public holiday! Finally on Thursday the goods were cleared – but Matt couldn't book a ticket as everything for the Friday was full. On Saturday Matt reached Dili – too late for his rendezvous with Isabel but they finally met on Sunday morning. Parts collected, after a day for Matt to check out a possible business enterprise, he took the bus back to Kupang and thankfully did not have to pay the 30% duty.

On Tuesday morning we had a panic call from Matt to meet on the beach; when we turned up it transpired that we had ordered the wrong bearing sets! There was a mix up due to language problems between Big End and Main bearings. This difficulty could have been overcome with diagrams, but Matt's English was so good, we had assumed that his definition of Big End or Main bearings were correct.

After this frustration and disappointment, we got right onto it and ordered the correct parts that evening from Lancing Marine – it was now 27 days since the catastrophe. This time we decided to try the Bali route and use Sail Indonesia's agent Erna to intercept the parcel and forward it to Kupang. Again, the team at Lancing Marine worked speedily and dispatched the correct parts on Thursday. Once again, we spent another frustrating weekend checking the Tracking Number and cheering at every little change in progress. The goods finally arrived in Bali, cleared through customs three days later, then were dispatched to Kupang. The correct parts arrived, to our great joy and jubilation, 38 days after the incident. Matt organized re-grinding the crank shaft - with the help of a US\$20 incentive he managed to get this done by that evening...

Engine assembly started in earnest on Sunday - firstly the bottom end was put together. The next day the engine was put into place and the engine mount problem solved. Bill from the US yacht *Solstice* had kindly given us some engine mounts surplus to his requirements. Matt stripped these down, modified the profile and added some parts from a car suspension - we now had custom low-profile mounts. This was all completed on Tuesday. With the engine aligned and the starter motor installed we could turn the engine over to check oil flow, etc. - all OK. The head and other bits and pieces were fitted and the engine fired up again - briefly, without the cooling system connected. All good - and we had our galley back - we'd been having to climb over the engine to reach our sleeping berth. By Thursday we had a fully installed engine, and we fired it up - first attempt it burst into life! More cheers!! It was now 43 days since the incident.

We could finally raise the anchors to give the engine a bit of a sea trial. The engine ran OK, but *Poco Andante* wasn't moving forward very well. We struggled to cover 200 metres to a better spot and re-anchored. Keith dived in and realised the waterline was covered with growth and the propellor was encrusted with barnacles. The whole boat was filthy with oil and dust - yuck! Matt arranged a team of five lads to come on board and help clean the boat and scrub the hull. They attempted to clean the prop but, in the end, Keith had to put on his scuba gear and finish the job off.

On Friday 13th September *Poco Andante* was ready for a full sea trial and we set off for a trip to a local island and back - around five miles away. Despite the inauspicious date and a lot of trepidation, all went well, and we returned safely. Matt came back on board on Monday to do final checks and reset the tappets - and deemed us clear to leave. We parted with millions of Indonesian Rupiah (~US\$200) to settle the balance of his bill - about US\$1,000 in total.

We were then faced with a dilemma; our 60-day visa only had 14 days remaining - should we leave immediately and try to get to Bali where we could get a visa extension - or renew in Kupang. Charles, a local agent, assured us that we could get our visa 30-day extension through by Friday; with this assurance we decided to renew them in Kupang. This would relieve us of this worry further down the track and save us a mad dash to Bali. Thursday came; computer problems at the Immigration Department had slowed down the process. Friday came; still computer problems - all will be OK on Monday. Another

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frustrating weekend! On Sunday the Oyster Round-the-World Rally turned up - would this slow down our visa renewals?

Monday, we went to the Immigration Office with Charles to see the problem first hand. The guys there were very apologetic, but the computers were still not working. After a long discussion Keith and I announced that we would wait in the office until they were fixed... This seemed to help as the manager got on the phone to Jakarta and then the local telecoms company. The office was due to close at 4pm. The computer man arrived at 3.30. He reset the network, and the girls stayed on just to process our visas - including digital finger printing and photos.

We got back to the boat at 5pm and by 7pm, Monday 23rd September we were gone - 54 days after our arrival in Kupang!

What did we do during the long wait? We did manage to attend the opening ceremony for Sail Komodo with hosts of dignitaries and good food, dancing, and cultural displays. We also spent long afternoons in the bar - and felt rather alone after the rest of the Rally fleet departed. We cleaned the engine bay and all the parts - as Matt had dismantled the engine he'd put the parts in different buckets. Eventually I had to tell him we weren't a bucket shop - I'd run out - but managed to find yet another container for him. We sorted and cleaned all the bolts and put them in zip lock bags with the nut size and length marked - we hoped this would speed up the re-build. We cleaned all the oil out of the sump - and the rest of the boat! Barbara and Roger on *Lazybones*, our neighbours at the marina in Darwin and now on the Sail Indonesia Rally, kindly gave us a litre of CT18 Truckwash which they swear by - and I could see why! It was miraculous. *Poco Andante* had greasy hand and footprints everywhere but this stuff just cleaned it all away.

So, the start to resuming our cruising life didn't go quite as planned, but as they say "S**t happens!" At least we were stuck somewhere with access to a reasonable city, wi-fi (on board), a mechanic and the means to get the engine repaired. Keith also ordered new piston rings and once the engine was re-built it was as good as new. We were also lucky to have the funds to be able to do the job properly rather than a 'quick fix' job. And the labour rates were much cheaper than in Australia. Matt quoted US\$700 for his labour, plus the cost for him to go to Dili to get parts (about \$150) and machining the crankshaft (\$160) - pretty reasonable in the end.

We both found the delays very frustrating, and the boredom was incredible. We read, played rummy and Scrabble - I won the tournament 45 games to 34 - did boat chores, and went to the restaurant for lunch every couple of days - however the tides were occasionally unfavourable for that... And listened to the Imam call to prayer five times a day from the mosque about 200m from where *Poco Andante* was anchored - not musical at all... The definition of cruising - 'boat maintenance in exotic locations!'

During this time, Keith and I had frequent boat conferences to discuss our future plans - were we ready to give up the cruising life, or could we put this episode behind us? In the immediate future, we didn't have much choice - either go forwards or sail back to Australia. We felt that if we were to abandon our dream, Australia was not a good place to try to sell the boat... Onwards we would go - and reassess our thoughts when we'd had a chance to recover our equilibrium...

74 – There be dragons...



Once away we had to rush through 2,000nm in a month - this was all the time that remained on our 90-day Indonesian Sailing Permit for *Poco Andante*. We would have to be very selective where we stopped – and make several 2–3-day passages to cover the miles. 36-hours later, we did manage a flying - one afternoon - stop on Sumba so I could check out the renowned Ikat cloth they weave there. I've always loved fabrics and Ikat is an amazing cloth in which images are created on the loom by dyeing the warp (lengthwise) threads at the specific places where they will appear in the finished cloth once the weft (crosswise) threads are woven in. The images and/or patterns can be complex, multi-coloured, requiring very specific dyeing and weaving skills. I couldn't resist buying a couple of wall hangings!

Then it was overnight to Rinca – we had been told you could see Komodo dragons here – and if so, we could save time by not stopping at Komodo! Waiting on the beach were a group of truly scary scaly monsters. These huge leathery creatures were up to 3m long, with drooling mouths and long blue forked tongues flicking incessantly trying to pick up the scent of their next victim. They can move surprisingly quickly. We were on our own but felt brave enough to go ashore. As we stood on the edge of the beach a group of five started lumbering out from under the trees and heading towards us. We retreated to the dinghy and fended them off with an oar and a

long stick - discretion being the better part of valour, we departed to explore the rest of the area by dinghy. In one bay we spotted a makeshift camp - after collecting some tradeable fare (sweets and biscuits) - from *Poco Andante*, we paid a visit. They were a group of park rangers who were there to carry out a dragon survey - their camp was surrounded by these beasts; it was interesting to see that these guys were also wary of the dragons, and all had sticks to hand. The biscuits and sweets were much appreciated - when they raised the issue of Park Fees for our night's stay, we persuaded them that they had just eaten them...

A four-day passage took us to Lovina on the north coast of Bali. We stayed here for five days. Keith found a dentist to carry out a temporary repair on a broken tooth - the dentist said it really needed a crown, but our visas didn't allow time for that. It would be a further 900nm before we reached Nongsa Point, our check out port for Indonesia - we needed to cover some miles. In Bali we took a little time out - topped up the diesel and hired a car and driver for one day to do a quick sight-seeing trip to Ubud and the UNESCO World Heritage padi terraces at Jatiluwih. Bali is a special place and we have since been back several times.

After leaving Bali, a three-day passage took us to Pulau Bawean where we started to link up with the stragglers from the Sail Indonesia Rally; an overnight stop before continuing to Karimun Jawa islands.

At Karimun Jawa we met up with Tom and Colleen from *Mokisha* and had a fun day with them searching for fuel - this was ladled into our jerry cans from a barrel. Quality was very suspect, but with no choice you took what you could get. It was a long 250-mile motor from here to Kelayang on Pulau Belitung where we finally caught up with the rest of the Rally yachts. Belitung - one of the gems of Indonesia doesn't even get a mention in Lonely Planet - has a lovely anchorage; wide white sandy beaches dotted with granite outcrops, great snorkelling and accommodating beach bars. There was a cultural evening at the local stadium and barbecues on the outlying islands - a great welcome back to Sail Indonesia.

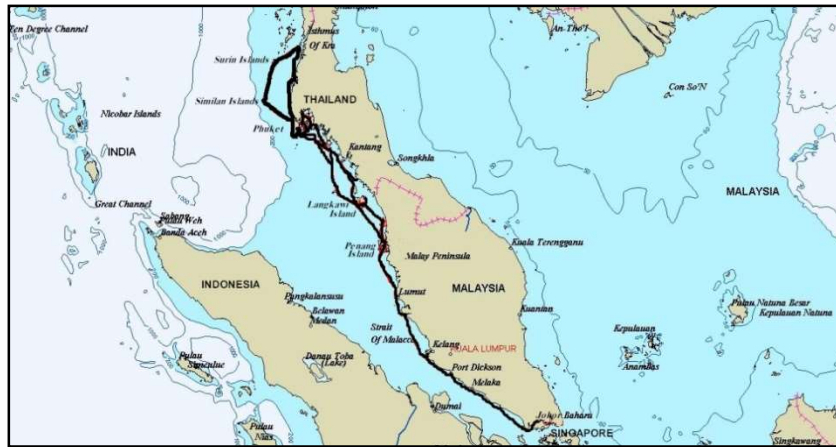
As *Poco* moved north the weather became more affected by the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) - with squalls, rain and thunderstorms as we reached the equatorial region. Our next anchorage was at North Bangka - a lovely but shallow anchorage -

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not much there but a lovely walk on the beach. It was a yuck motor-sail to Kentar, crossing the Equator soon after daybreak on 20th October - we celebrated by toasting Neptune's health ... *Poco Andante* was now in the Northern Hemisphere again after seven years 'Down Under'. Kentar is a remote little island, and we had our first visit by locals requesting 'alms'. We handed over the 25kg bag of sugar given to us in Darwin for such an occasion - plus gifts of clothing, school exercise books and sweets. We still had loads on board for future trades.

We were now getting closer to Singapore and shipping traffic was on the increase. The final event of the Sail Indonesia Rally was at a resort on the north coast of Bintan - we got there in two short 'day-hops'. The resort opened their doors to Sail Indonesia, organising a tour of the island displaying its culture - and a gala dinner second-to-none. A fitting end to an eventful Rally for us.

75 – Sail Malaysia Rally



Many of the Sail Indonesia Rally participants also joined up for the Sail Malaysia Rally, which was due to leave Danga Bay, JB (Johor Bahru) three weeks after the end of the Sail Indonesia Rally. The Rally cruises up the west coast of Malaysia to the northern duty-free island of Langkawi, just south of the border with Thailand.

From Bintan, Indonesia to Danga Bay, Malaysia was only 70 miles but included crossing the Singapore Straits. It can be compared to trying to cross a busy five-mile-wide freeway on foot - with ships passing every few minutes. We planned to spend our time in JB rather than Singapore - JB was much cheaper and only a few kilometres by bus from Singapore.

Tides were favourable when we left Bintan, and we expected to be in JB by nightfall. After travelling west along the Indonesian shore, we turned north to cross the Singapore Straits. Simple enough - just dodge the odd ship and in half an hour you are across. However, Indonesia had one last gift planned for us - as we were a third of the way across the engine faltered and slowed dramatically. I immediately took it out of gear and revved the engine - the engine seemed OK. Conclusion: we must have something around the prop. With little wind we were stationary and a hazard to shipping. As a last hope, I put the engine into gear again and thankfully *Poco*

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Andante started to move, albeit with a huge imbalance and vibration. At low revs it felt manageable, so we crawled across and threaded *Poco* through the myriad of anchored ships and coastal shipping until we reached the bridge crossing from Singapore and Malaysia. Here, with relief and in failing light, we anchored for the night. Next morning a quick swim revealed that *Poco* had a plastic sack around the prop which Keith was able to cut away. That evening found us snug in Danga Bay Marina, where we finally relaxed after three gruelling months in Indonesia.

JB is the second largest city in Malaysia after KL (Kuala Lumpur) and was in a huge developmental phase. A large number of people commute daily to Singapore - just one-km away across the causeway. Similarly, Singaporeans visit JB to shop, party and holiday. English is commonly spoken, and its facilities are similar to any large metropolitan city. Major supermarkets such as Giant, Tesco's and Cold Storage have a full range of produce. After Indonesia it was great to be able to buy what you wanted. Everything was at hand in Danga Bay, and boat bits could be repaired easily, although sourcing specialist chandlery items was still a problem. The marina itself was a bit rough around the edges and was scheduled to be closed and redeveloped, nevertheless we enjoyed our stay there and it gave us some much-needed time to carry out some maintenance and chores on board *Poco*. After the engine re-build and the subsequent month of motoring, the engine definitely needed an oil change and new filters!

Keith managed to get an appointment with a local dentist who had been trained in Scotland; she arranged for the temporary filling to be replaced with a crown. I also had my teeth checked and cleaned.

One memorable day, November 8th, saw us visiting Singapore Zoo. It was a 2-Ringgit (about 75c) bus trip to Singapore across the Causeway. Thousands do it every day - even so, we had to clear Customs and Immigration which was carried out very efficiently.

Singapore Zoo is laid out beautifully and we had a lovely day. Whilst we were in the Panda House, we decided that a soft toy Panda would be a lovely gift for our forthcoming grandchild, which was due in a couple of weeks - and to also include a photo of ourselves. When we arrived back in JB, we found a message from Rob and Jas that Rosie Sofia had been born that morning, whilst we were visiting the zoo - how serendipitous was that!

Sail Malaysia started a few days later with a tour of the Johor region, traditional dancing and feasting Malaysian style, followed by a party and reception at Danga Bay. This would set the scene for the next month or so. Cruising the West Malaysian coast is not difficult – the water is shallow, and the coastline is well protected; conceivably we could anchor anywhere. However, it hasn't got much to offer in the way of beaches and sights along the way. The main hazards are ships, trawlers, and fishing nets, plus numerous tugs and tows. Shipping can be a problem, but they tend to keep to the shipping lanes. Our strategy was to sail just inside the shipping lanes - to avoid nets - and use the north-going ebb currents to best advantage.

Sail Malaysia did a great job in making the trip up to Langkawi fun, organising events along the way at each of the marinas dotted along the coast. The first main stop was Port Dickson, a resort with a marina attached - swimming pool, bar, etc. The Rally organised various excursions. We went to KL for the day and acted like tourists – we'd already been there the previous year for Rob and Jas's wedding. There was also a cultural visit and a reception hosted by the local tourist board.

Pangkor Marina was the next main stop. This small marina is a working yard. James, the manager, works hard to help the yachties. Haul out is easy and it is a good place to leave a boat for a long period. We caught up with Peter and Toni from *Tigger* - we hadn't seen them since Brisbane, over four years earlier and it was great to catch up.

James from Pangkor Marina arranged a great tour of Pulau Pangkor, the island just offshore from the marina. A highlight was a visit to a traditional wooden boat building yard. The owner was a tribute to the skills of a bygone age - these large fishing craft were made of local hard wood and all hand built without the aid of plans - it will be sad to see these skills disappear when he finally retires.

Keith and I were keen to get back to Penang, where Rob and Jas were married just over a year ago. Anchoring in Penang is not easy; the town marina was destroyed by storms the previous year and the only other marina, Straits Quay was fully booked. *Tigger* had recommended the Jerejak anchorage, close to the Jerejak Resort jetty. This was a great choice - the guys from the resort were very welcoming and were happy to keep an eye on your dinghy, tied to their jetty. Although a little way out of town, buses ran every 15

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minutes or so, making it easy to get around. We had a great time revisiting old haunts and took in a few more sights.

A visit to the 'Chemical man' was on the agenda to pick up some phosphoric acid, acetone and other stuff. The shop was amazing; it was filled wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling with thousands of different chemicals - all for sale. The proprietor was well past retirement age and although there was no clear stock system, he knew exactly what he had and where it was. A unique guy - sadly he has since passed away.

As Keith's telephone consultation with Princess Alexandra Hospital was looming, we visited a local GP to see if we could arrange blood tests; he advised us to see Dr Leong Kin Wah, a haematology oncologist at the Gleneagles Hospital. The medical facilities in Penang, Malaysia are excellent and state-of-the-art with many of the specialists trained in the UK and USA. Costs are reasonable, language no problem and there are no waiting lists. We turned up at Gleneagles - the hospital was impressive! After registration at the Reception Desk, Keith was immediately given an appointment for that morning and blood tests performed. He was asked to return at 4pm for the results. Following a review with Dr Leong and a thorough physical examination, Keith was given a provisional 'no change' and 'stable' result pending the result of the final blood test. Great! One specific test had to be carried out in Australia - this was efficiently arranged. We were truly amazed by the efficiency and expertise of the staff there. Ten days later we had all the results and faxed them to the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane. The process was so slick that we were to use these amenities over the next year or so. With the results in hand Keith had a telephone consultation with the specialist in Brisbane who confirmed a small elevation in the 'markers' for Keith's disease - but not sufficient to give cause for concern.

After a few days we left on the final leg to Langkawi, anchoring in Kuah, the main town, to stock up on beer, wine and fresh produce. Langkawi was a duty-free island, and we were keen to take advantage of this - before moving *Poco* to Rebak Marina for the Rally final . Rebak Marina is a luxurious island resort with a well-protected marina - and we were able to shake off the dust from our travels and laze in exotic luxury. It had been a long five months and, on balance, a positive resumption of our cruising life.

76 – Honggs – and tourists!

Our visas for Malaysia still had 60 days remaining so we used the time to explore Langkawi – and made a quick trip back to Penang to get our visas for Thailand. Then we celebrated Christmas back at Rebak Marina and Keith's birthday and New Years Eve at Cenang Beach on Langkawi. In typical style, Keith celebrated by doing a parasailing experience – the guys had to make a big run-up! Followed, of course, by celebrating New Year's Eve.

We left Langkawi at the beginning of February 2014, after Chinese New Year. It's only 120 miles, about one day's sail to Phuket – our 'official' check in port in Thailand, however the Thai island chain begins a mere 25 miles north of Langkawi. The many cruisers that had gone before us recommended that we take our time to explore a few of the islands on the way. *Poco Andante* linked up with Roz and Kevin on *Santana*, an Australian couple taking a couple of years to cruise SE Asia, and experienced Australian and British cruisers Peter and Margaret on *Swara II* – with the aim to party our way to Phuket. We were all stocked up with duty free beer and wine ready for action.

The west coast of Thailand sits in the Andaman Sea – often said to be Thailand's greatest natural asset. This area has thousands of islands and glorious beaches, all easily accessible – a big draw for cruisers and tourists from all over the world. Some of these islands have been eroded by the sea to create caves at sea level which are called 'hong' which means room. These can be explored by swimming or, in larger honggs, by kayak or dinghy. In some honggs, the roof has collapsed allowing light to stream through into the central cavern.

Koh Muk hong was the next stop for a visit to the Emerald Cave, our first taste of tourist-infested Thailand. Giving credit, the Thai National Park Authority, try to control the huge influx of people – or cynically stand by and take the 200 Baht (\$6) entrance fee – they do provide moorings and friendly smiles at the main sites. Thailand's thriving tourist trade is supported by fleets of high-speed power boats, long tail fishing boats and large ferries taking thousands to the surrounding islands daily. Koh Muk was no exception. As with every

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other tourist site we visited, these various craft scream in, screech to a halt, disgorge their passengers and having barely arrived, off they go again to the next beach, hong or old film set. The process at Koh Muk was a highlight in its efficiency. The pleasure craft arrived; life jackets donned, the passengers jumped into the water, formed up into a line, each clinging onto the life jacket of the person in front and, like an orange crocodile, snaked through the cave entrance guided by a local. With squeals of delight the whole entourage is plunged into darkness as they pass through the cave entrance, emerging at the other side into an enclosed limestone 'roofless room', paved with a white beach and sheltered by mangroves, surrounded by towering cliffs, with no obvious way out.

There was no escape if you found yourself trying to fight this human tide; your only option was 'go with the flow'! We stood on the beach mesmerized by this influx, but after a few minutes, with photos taken, the crocodile turned and moved out leaving us to marvel at the peace and tranquillity of being alone in this magical place. We realised that these influxes of tourists were fleeting - thereafter we visited the most popular sites either late in the afternoon or early morning, when we had the places to ourselves.

With Koh Muk ticked off we headed to Koh Ngai for the night, a resort island, generally undiscovered by the hordes. *Poco*, *Santana* and *Swara II* anchored off the beach and we all spent a couple of days, snorkelling, walking and enjoying our first taste of Thai food from the restaurants and bars along the beach.

In 2000 'The Beach', starring Leonardo DiCaprio, was filmed on a small beach on Phi Phi Le. The Thai tourism authority then went into overdrive and created a 'must visit' place, fed by hundreds of power boats to ferry the gullible masses of tourists. We picked up a mooring on the south side of the island and dinghied to 'The Beach'. Rounding the point, with 'The Beach' in sight, we stopped - there was nowhere to land - wall-to-wall speed boats and thousands of tourists, not our type of thing! We detoured to an adjacent beach and gazed in amazement at the comings and goings.

Having learned our lesson, we returned to our boats and waited until the people went back to their hotels; we then enjoyed solitude and sundowners on the beach!

Phi Phi Don, a few miles away, is vying for the accolade of most beautiful island in the world - unfortunately out-of-control

Christine Muir (& Keith Hunt)

development and tatty surroundings detract from this once idyllic sand-strewn place. Amongst the beached wreckage of old long-tails we celebrated Kevin's birthday (*Santana*) - party time again!

77 – Cashew apples have a bite...

A day's motor sail took us to Ao Chalong where we officially cleared into Thailand - a straightforward exercise - and got visas for 90 days. Just as we entered the channel for Ao Chalong, we were hailed by a yacht passing in the other direction - lo and behold; it was John from *Invicta's Reward* - last seen in Vanuatu several years ago. He had a new lady in his life, and we were very pleased for him and vowed to catch up somewhere in Thailand.

We hung around Ao Chalong for a few days, stocking up with delicacies, such as bacon, pork and sausages - these had been difficult to get in Muslim Malaysia.

Our general plan was to continue cruising up the west coast to the border with Myanmar and then return south via the Surin and Similan Islands. The west coast of Phuket is bounded by lovely beaches, wall-to-wall sunbeds, night clubs, massage parlours, bars and restaurants. Interestingly, a common 'foreign language' was Russian - with most restaurants providing menus written in that language as well as English and Thai.

There are many great anchorages along the way encouraging a slow meander and lazy attitude. Meals ashore were a delight and it was often cheaper than eating on board. My favourite places were Freedom Bay and Nai Harn (Airport Anchorage). At Nai Harn we again met up with Roz and Kevin on *Santana* who were taking the same route and agreed to sail in company with *Poco Andante*.

After leaving Phuket and the tourists behind, we sailed north, firstly anchoring at the Naval Base at Ban Thap Lamu. The Naval Wives Club restaurant here came highly recommended - and we enjoyed their delightful fresh seafood. Further north we entered a wide coastal channel through mangroves bordered by deserted shining white sandy beaches. With few or no visitors, we often had these glorious beaches to ourselves.

Koh Phayam, just four miles south of the Burmese border, was our final island on our northward journey. This is a delightful place; there are two protected bays on the west and one on the east, hence there is good anchorage the whole year. Long Beach, where we spent

nearly two weeks, was very laid back - little bars and restaurants, a lovely beach, surf - it has it all. There were no cars on the island so scooters are the main form of transport. After much persuasion, supported by *Santana*, Keith got me to be a reluctant pillion passenger for a tour of the island. Apart from the screams and claw marks on his back we had a lovely day!

As well as rubber, Koh Phayam's main cash crop is cashew nuts - these were being harvested whilst we were there. Cashews are a strange crop - they are in two parts: the fruit (cashew apple) with the nut protruding out the base. Keith, in typical style, tried the apple which is very astringent and also bit into the nut - unbeknownst to us the nut is highly toxic and has to be boiled, steamed, soaked and dried before it can be eaten. This episode left him with a swollen lip covered in sores for a week - he found eating Thai chilli food was impossible until it healed!

These remote islands straddling the Thai-Burmese border are home to communities of Moken Austronesian people that live a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle heavily based on the sea. These sea gypsies are 'stateless' which leaves them marginalised and poor. Koh Phayam had a small community of Moken. We cruisers assembled a wide variety of clothing, schooling and other items for the village. It was an interesting walk of several kilometres through a rubber plantation. We were greeted by the village elders and children in the village hall. With no common language it was difficult to understand the lives of these reclusive people. We deposited our donations on the floor and left none the wiser. I understand that over-fishing by the Thai's had affected their livelihood and, with no government support, I was concerned for their future.

On Boxing Day 2004 the west coast of Thailand had been hit by a tsunami - although today there is little sign of its destructive impact except a few abandoned hotels. One enterprising group collected debris from the beaches and built a bar in the form of a galleon in Buffalo Bay, Koh Phayam - an interesting landmark.

Lotus eating cannot go on forever - we headed south to visit the Surin and Similan Islands. These two groups of islands in the Andaman Sea are managed by the Thai National Parks Authority. Despite the ubiquitous tourist boats, these were both worth a visit. The Surins have several groups of anchorages, often with moorings. Away from the tourist area, half a dozen yachts anchored at a lovely

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uninhabited beach bordered by healthy coral reefs and sparkling clear blue water. They had set up a barbecue and afternoon rest spot under a huge shade tree - this became the favourite place to hang out and while away the days.

The Similans, being closer to Phuket, were much busier; but there were plenty of moorings, however the waters around could be a bit choppy. One calm day Keith joined up with Helmut and Kerstin from *Lop to* for a dive - exploring some underwater sculptures and coral outcrops littered with a myriad of sea life. It was his first real dive since his cancer treatment.

78 – Messing about in boats

After the Similans we made our way back to Ao Chalong, visiting some new places on the way. An unfortunate incident at Patong beach left us with a chunk out of the bow, when a Jet Ski hit *Poco Andante* while she was at anchor! Hopefully the rider will not be so willing to 'play chicken' around yachts again...

On the east side of Phuket is huge Phang Nga Bay, littered with towering islands of limestone. This reactive rock is worn by the wind and rain to create surprising pillars strewn with caves, tunnels and hongs.

The most well-known of these is James Bond Island made famous by a couple of seconds in '*The Man with the Golden Gun*' forty years ago. Most of today's visitors weren't even born when this was made! The film set is photographed by thousands each day - another tribute to Thai Tourism marketing. A whole industry of speed boats, restaurants, and excursions has been built around this unassuming rock; we spent 10 minutes here and escaped - disillusioned. Avoiding the tourist traps in Phang Nga Bay is easy as there are hundreds of other delightful places to see; often we would have breakfast at one island, lunch at another and overnight at a tourist spot, which we often had to ourselves. This was an exploratory trip to work out an itinerary for Pippa and Xavier, my niece and great nephew's forthcoming visit.

Pippa and Xavi duly arrived. We pulled into Ao Po Grand Marina to rearrange and tidy *Poco Andante*. Our itinerary was not very adventurous but packed in visits to hongs, beaches, islands, etc. Xavi loved exploring caves and was a true water baby - he particularly enjoyed going fast in the inflatable RIB! So, entertainment for the six-year-old Xavi was easy. Highlights were the simple pleasures: barbecues at Koh Hong Krabi, seeing a dolphin close up, caves and hongs at Koh Phanak, a visit to Paradise Island Resort where we had great fun in the pool, and just generally messing around in boats. We all had a great week; the weather was good and company delightful. We were sad to see them leave.

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To drop them off we pulled into Ao Po Marina again and decided to stay a while to do some boat projects: replace the 10-year-old canvas work again; replace our anchor chain - now considerably worn; and maintain and refurbish the aft heads. These projects were underway when the sole of Keith's left foot became painful and infected, and he was unable to walk. We hired a car and paid a visit to Phuket International Hospital. After a brief examination an abscess was excised and a portion of sea urchin spine discovered - daily visits for wound dressing were ordered and total rest in between. Boat projects were halted midstream. Fortunately, despite Keith's compromised immune system, the wound itself healed quickly and after three weeks our projects were complete.

By now it was the beginning of June, and our Thai visas were due to expire. *Poco Andante* checked out of Thailand and headed back to Langkawi, Malaysia for the wet season. The trip south was fast - the weather had started to close in and exposed anchorages became uncomfortable. After a four-day trip we arrived in Kuah, Langkawi and met up with *Santana*, *Swara* and *Lop to* again.

During this cruising season our main preoccupations were health-related - and crossing the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean was the next 'big blue' for us and both Keith and I looked forward to a return to Europe - to enjoy all that it has to offer - and maybe start transitioning back to being land lubbers again. We also had to consider what medical facilities might be available on such a voyage for Keith's blood tests. The problem with the Indian Ocean was not the sailing but the politics of the Red Sea - and pirates keen to capture and ransom boats. The alternative is to round South Africa and embark on a 17,000-mile voyage back to Europe. This would be a 2-3 year undertaking at the rate we travelled. With the 'Sword of Damocles' of Keith's health hanging over us - and the fact that we had now been away for 11 years - could we survive another few years?

After the episode with the foot abscess, Keith's immune system went into overdrive - this was reflected in the next 6-monthly blood tests used to monitor his Lymphoma. We needed to take this into consideration when making future plans... Whilst we were in Penang for his check-up, I decided to check out my niggling health problems; over the course of the previous few months, I had been suffering upper abdominal pain - and was having difficulties eating

even small amounts of food. Taking advantage of the good medical facilities at the Gleneagles Hospital, Penang I underwent a series of examinations. This culminated in a gastro endoscopy - which showed a gastric ulcer, easily treated with a course of specific tablets - and key-hole surgery to remove my gall bladder which apparently had shrivelled away to nothing.

79 – The Golden Triangle



Following our cruise around Thailand we decided to haul out and carry out some maintenance at Pangkor Marina - a small but efficient yard with plenty of local expertise at Lumut, about a quarter of the way down Malaysia. After a few weeks of work, we left *Poco Andante* on the hard, with the decks prepared for painting the non-slip areas

(again!) - and instructions for Joe, the local contractor, to clean the bottom and polish the topsides.

In mid-August we set off for a six-week trip around SE Asia by plane, train and automobile. The trip was a huge success. Our travel arrangements were very flexible; the only thing we booked ahead of the trip was the flight from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok, six night's accommodation in Bangkok and a flight from there to Luang Prabang in Laos. The remainder of the trip was decided as we went along, and we booked flights and accommodation via the internet. We stayed in some very nice hotels, and all went smoothly.

Here are some excerpts from my travel diary:

Bangkok, Thailand. Highlights: Snake farm- Keith wore a Burmese Python scarf. Heavy! Counterfeit Museum - more than just handbags. Informative. Bridge on the River Kwai and the Death Railway. Fly to Luang Prabang.

Luang Prabang, Northern Laos. Fell in love with this old colonial town. Lots of beautiful temples. Food great. Keith went on elephant ride and bathed with them in the Mekong River - humbled by these huge beasts. Cooking classes for Keith, silk weaving for me; there are extremely skilful artisans in Laos (I could have bought so much!). I also helped out a few times at Big Brother Mouse, a volunteer organisation helping teach English to local students. Spent a day watching the boat races in front of our hotel - 20 teams of 50 oarsmen in 100-foot-long canoes, battling it out on the muddy Mekong River. This, as well as the early morning procession of 100's of monks collecting alms - both a spectacle. Fly to Vientiane.

Vientiane, capital of Laos. Not much here. Cycled to COPE a centre that provides artificial limbs for victims of land mines and other unexploded ordnance dropped during the Vietnam War. Still a major problem. Laos was neutral during this conflict but had hundreds of millions of ordnance dropped on them; many of them failed to explode and still cause hundreds of injuries each year. Fly to Phnom Penh.

Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Old French colonial town. Impressive Royal Palace and grounds. Cambodia still hasn't recovered from the Khmer Rouge's barbaric rule of four years in the late seventies. They murdered millions of people in sites called the killing fields. The main monument to this slaughter can be seen just outside the city. A well laid out park, with audio guided walk, culminates in a tall mausoleum filled with human

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skulls. The normal tourist trip to this site also includes a visit to S21 a school that had been turned into a torture centre for the Khmer Rouge. Everyone who visits must ask the question "Why did the world turn a blind eye to this barbarity?" Bus to Siem Reap – coach ahead of ours hit an agricultural cart.

Siem Reap, Cambodia. 1,000-year-old temple ruins covering an awe-inspiring 50+ square kms. We covered these on bicycles; the first day visiting the largest temples and the second on a 35km grand tour of the outlying sites and the third day recovering by the pool at our small, but lovely boutique hotel.

Battambang, Cambodia. We crossed TonLe Sap Lake, the largest inland waterway in SE Asia – a six-hour journey in a small, long tail ferry. The main channel was full of water hyacinths; not sure how the helmsman found his way through. There were frequent stops to clear the propellor of plant debris. Some channels were so narrow you had to stand in the centre of the boat to avoid being hit by branches. A very interesting trip. Halfway along we stopped at a floating village/town for light refreshments. Battambang itself was a little run down but the journey there was worth it. Bus back to Siem Reap. Fly to Ho Chi Min City

Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam. Large bustling modern city, very affluent. The War Remnants Museum was worth the visit, the displays showing Vietnam's version of events during the Vietnam War was explained in three languages: Vietnamese, English and propaganda.

The presidential palace has been restored to its original 1968 splendour complete with the tank that crashed through the gate to signify the end of the war. Fly to Danang, bus to Hoi An.

Hoi An, Vietnam. A delightful town turned over to the job of extracting money from tourists - a huge industry in Vietnam. I stocked up on new outfits, cheap but good quality and chic. Found a lovely restaurant next to our hotel. Ate there most nights as the food was so good. Cycled out to the coast and saw the coracles. Bus to Danang, train to Hue.

Hué, Vietnam. Learnt lots about the history of Vietnam at the Citadel a large 200-year-old walled city, heavily bombed but slowly being tastefully restored and with good information. Keith came down with a bad cold – hotel administered hot ginger tea – eventually resorted to antibiotics purchased from road-side pharmacy. Took a connection from Hué to Phong Nha National Park via the DMZ (De-Militarised Zone) and Vinh Moc Tunnels, a town that built a labyrinth underground to protect themselves from the incessant bombing. Worth the visit.

Phong Nha National Park, Vietnam. *The limestone caves at Phong Nha are the largest discovered in the world. The largest, only discovered in 2009, was so large it could house the Empire State building of New York in its main chamber – it was closed for the wet season. We visited a few others of equal magnitude - awesome. One such cave was a supply dump along the Ho Chi Minh trail. This was bombed almost daily but is so large and impregnable that only small scars are evident on the outside cliff face. Stayed at lovely Farmstay. Keith tried his hand at a bit of speleology; ended up covered in mud squeezed through narrow passages and jumping from high wires into muddy rivers - refreshing. Connection back to coast then train to Hanoi. Train hit farm wagon.*

Hanoi, Vietnam. *The end of our Vietnam visit. Loved this city with all its little shops; some selling just one item, like brushes or wire or bamboo scaffolding! Enjoyed a Water Puppet show. Temple of Literature. Historical village interesting. Fly to Bangkok then to Chiang Mai.*

Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Another old walled city in Northern Thailand. Met a guy from the East End of London, selling fresh fish and chips UK-style - unreal! In contrast, also visited a couple of tribal hill villages - certainly an eclectic mix. Fly to Kuala Lumpur.*

The notes above do not cover all the lovely people we met and the fun time we had just wandering around. Travelling through this part of the world was an eye opener - from the affluent first world cities to the small villages with paddy fields and oxen as their main means of transport. Getting around was a major undertaking - we came close to being involved in two major accidents during the trip. Between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, the coach ahead of ours hit an agricultural cart - sending its occupants flying. Our coach swerved and avoided total carnage. The road and weather were appalling. We decided to fly or go by train over larger distances. Even so, a similar accident occurred on a train trip from Dong Hoi to Hanoi in Vietnam - an agricultural tractor was hit by our train. Fortunately, no one was injured, however the train chef on board had a problem - the delay of over four hours while officials made their reports meant another meal had to be served. This difficulty was obviously solved when we saw him come through the carriage with a couple of brace of chickens under his arms. Once cooked, they provided much better fare than the boiled duck embryo eggs offered earlier on the journey.

Flying is a good way to get around, however its major downside is the likelihood of catching an infection from the crowds and re-

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cycled air - especially if, like Keith, you have a compromised immune system. Sure enough, halfway through our trip he picked up a chest infection that wouldn't shift despite repeated antibiotics. Immediately following our trip, by now the end of September, we went back to Gleneagles Hospital in Penang to seek advice and check Keith's immune system; his markers were up again, and a further course of stronger antibiotics was prescribed.

Around December he finally shook off these ailments however the next blood test results showed his markers were up further! Not a current cause for concern, but not what we hoped for...

80 – Struck by lightning!

We finally got back to *Poco Andante* mid-October and set about finishing the 'under-the-waterline' jobs. The day before she was due to be re-launched, poor *Poco* got hit by a lightning strike taking out many of the electronics. This resulted in a month delay while we sourced replacement instruments. Most were imported from the US with very little bureaucracy and delivered direct to the marina. This service was in stark contrast to the difficulties we encountered in Indonesia... There followed a backbreaking time to replace the items that had suffered – crawling through lockers and up the mast to pull through new cables, etc.

Whilst *Poco Andante* was on the hard we had a visit from a couple from *Dunwurkin*; they had a few queries about the marina facilities. During the conversation, I became certain I knew these people but couldn't place them – their voices seemed very familiar. They were new to cruising so it wasn't from this milieu. Over dinner with them one evening it clicked – Gill and Aidan were once one of my clients and colleagues in my previous UK existence. What an amazing coincidence!

We were excited to learn that Rob and Jas were bringing baby Rosie to Kuala Lumpur to visit Jas' parents. We hired a car and agreed to meet them all at Port Dickson down the coast for a few days luxurious R&R – followed by a few days back in KL with Swee Lee and Alaga, Jas's parents. It was delightful to catch up with them all – and get to play with our granddaughter.

Eventually *Poco* was refitted and ready to start the new season's cruise. *Dunwurkin* joined us for Christmas dinner in a secluded anchorage on the south side of Langkawi. A roast pork dinner under the towering cliffs was a delightful way to celebrate the start of the sailing season. We left Gill and Aidan exploring the many anchorages of Langkawi and *Poco* headed back to Thailand.

2015's New Year celebrations were spent under the cliffs of Rai Le Bay, Krabi, a mecca for free rock climbers, with Roz and Kev from *Santana* and their guests.

Just buy a boat and go...

For the rest of January we cruised the west coast, revisiting some of our favourite spots discovered the previous year. Thailand had suffered political upheaval since our last visit - the 'Generals' took control of the government and introduced some anti-corruption policies and other far-reaching reforms. The impact was clearly visible: visitor numbers were down. Beaches had been cleared of 'squatter' restaurants and bars - destroying the character of many of these places; some for the better but most for the worse. The number of cruisers was also down. The requirement to have an AIS Class B fitted frightened a number of cruisers away - AIS (Automatic Identification System) is a means of identifying boats and ships - and tracking their whereabouts. It transpired that, although there were notices everywhere, the policing of this had been largely ignored by the authorities. After leaving Phuket *Poco Andante* was basically on her own except for the fishing boats.

Thai fishing boats are very numerous and active on this coast - and needed to be treated with caution. We often saw them fishing in tandem, with their fishing nets slung between the two vessels - many hundreds of metres apart. We tended to give them a wide berth, but sometimes one vessel would approach us at speed, taking last-minute avoiding action. It was said that, if their fishing was unsuccessful, their superstition believed that they could pass on their bad luck to another vessel, if approached closely enough. Sometimes, however, we heard reports that some of these luckless vessels would engineer a collision with a Western yacht in order to force a compensation payout. The authorities tended to play down this fact - and support the fishermen in any dispute.

81 – Opportunity knocks...

This solitude and lack of ‘socialising’ gave Keith and I time to think about our plans for the next few years. I was keen to leap off and head for Sri Lanka, the first step on our passage back to the UK. Keith was concerned - there were a few boat jobs would need attending to before we set off on a 17,000-mile journey. Once back in Europe we had a few ideas to take us through to Keith’s ‘official retirement’ - and *Poco Andante* didn’t seem to fit into these plans. We had vaguely decided that, in the very long term, we would probably move to Australia for our old age. So, the big unknown was what should we do about *Poco*?

With this in the back of our minds, our strategy was to get her ready for crossing the Indian Ocean, leaving in January the following year and enjoy Thailand and Malaysia in the meantime. At the same time, we decided to test the market with regards to the possibility of selling her in Langkawi - at an acceptable price. Langkawi has quite a busy yacht brokerage industry. We had always believed that it could take a year or more to sell a blue water cruising yacht – not too many people have the desire, opportunity and the courage to sail off into the sunset!

One immediate concern was the age of our rigging - 12 years. Within SE Asia there is a shortage of riggers; Phuket had two companies and is a favoured place to have rigging replaced. We had been having problems with our furler and Keith decided to replace our forestay whilst getting the furler repaired. The forestay is hidden by the furling gear so Keith had been unable to examine it as part of our annual rig inspection - Keith could replace the rest of the rigging himself if required. We booked into Boat Lagoon Marina to get this work done.

Rolly Tasker Sails replaced the forestay and repaired the furler. The problem with the furler was a few corroded bolts. They did a good job and replaced all the bolts in the furler, replaced the forestay and checked and serviced the rest of the rigging. We were very happy with this.

Just buy a boat and go...

One afternoon we had a beer with one of our neighbours, Michael. It turned out that he was in the process of setting up a yacht brokerage and delivery service in Phuket. In the course of our conversation, we briefly mentioned our dilemma about what to do with our lives. *Poco Andante* was looking as good as new – recently painted, engine re-built, new dinghy, good sails and canvas – and good rigging. Maintaining the boat was a more-or-less full-time occupation when it is being used 24/7 – and by this time Keith was beginning to get fed up with the constant ‘to do’ list. The cruising life was beginning to take its toll – contrary to popular perception, it is not just ‘Margaritas on the Beach’ – it is a whole lot of hard work.

A few days later Michael came over and asked whether he could list *Poco Andante* on his website – using us as guinea pigs. Keith and I discussed it and decided, as a thank you for his help, and having nothing to lose, we would say yes – not expecting anything to come of it.

Having completed our other boat jobs, we left Boat Lagoon a week later and decided to meander slowly back to Langkawi. A week or so into our trip Keith had a call from Michael letting us know that he had a prospective buyer and could we get to Langkawi 10 days hence for a viewing. He had also made contact with a fellow broker there to help us. Now we were in a panic!

82 – All good things must come to an end...

A few days later we motored into Rebak Marina, Langkawi. The cleaning materials came out. Both Keith and I worked our 'butts' off and *Poco Andante* was soon looking fresh and clean. The prospective purchasers duly turned up, prodded and probed - and liked what they saw. A day later the negotiations began and before we knew it a deal was done 'subject to survey' - organised for four days later. By then we had to get everything not included in the sale off the boat and sort ourselves out!

Thankfully our UK friends from Pangkor Marina, Gill and Aidan on *Dunwurkin* came to our assistance - they had a 56' yacht with two empty cabins! We berthed alongside them and passed all our worldly goods to their spare cabins - this gave us a breathing space. *Poco Andante* passed the survey and was sold. Our expectation that it would take 12 months to sell was way off the mark - from go to whoa, all done in four weeks!

It suddenly hit me - what had we done? Our life for the last 12 years was no more - what on earth were we going to do? I cried - tears of both sadness and relief. Yet, in some ways, we couldn't keep the smiles off our faces - no more boat maintenance! It had all been so quick - Keith and I agreed - it must have been fate. All good things must come to an end...

The thought of packing up and immediately flying back to the UK was just too daunting - it was all happening so quickly - we were in complete turmoil. I suggested we rent an apartment in Langkawi for a few months while we sorted through our life and all our possessions. We needed to figure out what we were going to do next...

Our only deadline was September - five months away. We had to be on Sark, an island in the UK Channel Islands off the coast of France, for the wedding of Keith's daughter Emily. The thought of a long-haul flight back and the risks this entailed to Keith's health just didn't appeal - nor did the concept of stepping back into our old shoes. We had spent the last 12 years slowly circumnavigating two thirds of the globe - we thought it would be fun to complete the

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journey without flying. After a quick look at the atlas and a little research we came up with the plan to return to the UK overland.

83 –New career –‘Travel Agent’

We settled into our apartment in Langkawi. While I spent weeks ‘ripping’ our music and video collection to CDs, Keith researched the internet for our trip to Sark for his eldest daughter’s wedding - planned for the first week in September on Sark. We had already planned to get there overland, however now we would not be returning to Malaysia - and would need to ship back to the UK our 3 cubic metres of ‘stuff’ that we had accumulated over the last 12 years.

I devoured the website ‘The Man in Seat 61’ (www.seat61.com). This is the ultimate source of information for train travel anywhere in the world. Despite being called the Trans-Siberian Railway, we could, in fact, start our journey in Beijing. Getting from Malaysia to Beijing overland became much too difficult; at that time there were no passenger trains in Laos and we would be facing a long and tortuous bus journey from Vientiane to Hanoi. From Hanoi to Beijing would be a fantastic trip but such a long journey deserves more time - and we were beginning to run out of that. With reluctance, I decided that flying to Beijing would be the best solution.

From Beijing we could travel west overland all the way to the UK. Beijing is east of Thailand - where we finished our yachting journey - so at least we could genuinely finish our circumnavigation at sea level! We could take the train from Beijing to Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, then to Moscow. Then, of course, one has to visit St Petersburg...

To obtain visas for Russia required all bookings to be made in advance - a bit of a ‘Catch 22’ situation. We decided to take out Travel Insurance just in case we made all these bookings and then couldn’t get a visa! This was the first time we’d taken travel insurance in all our years of tripping around the world. Most insurance companies define a trip as ‘returning to your point of departure’ with a maximum duration of 183 days - not suitable for a cruising yacht! Topsail Insurance, the yacht insurance company we had been with for about 10 years, had recently introduced ‘Yachtman’s Travel Insurance’ which seemed to fit-the-bill. After exchanging emails and completing application forms, we took out the annual ‘gold’ cover -

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although it does exclude claims resulting from a serious pre-existing medical condition. But it would cover cancellation due to no visas!

I built a spreadsheet (we are two accountants, after all) to help us plan the trip, working backwards from Emily's wedding in September. I booked the return ferry trip from Poole (in the UK) to Guernsey to Sark – and booked accommodation on Sark. There! No-one could say we aren't organized! Now we had a deadline (1st September), it was a case of reading the travel guides and looking at the atlas...

Our original plan to attend Emily and Jon's wedding included a few weeks in the UK to catch up with family and friends, however now we'd sold the yacht, we wouldn't be returning to Malaysia and could use the additional days on our journey. Just how many days would we need in Beijing? Ulaanbaatar? Russia?

From the Seat61 website, we decided to use a British company that specialized in Russian travel including the train journey, *Real Russia*. I contacted them about prices, advice, etc. and they were very helpful. The Trans-Siberian Railway only departs on a couple of days each week so, if we decided to break our journey anywhere, we would be stuck for a few days. Ulaanbaatar is a 'must see' destination, so I enquired about a stop there – it's just an overnight train trip from Beijing. Yes, that would be possible – but we couldn't get an onward booking for another week! It turned out that the dates we planned to get there is the annual Naadam Festival – a national celebration of traditional sports and culture, including wrestling, horse racing and archery. What a fabulous coincidence – not a problem to stay some extra days! We booked accommodation for the days of the Festival and an extra few days so we could perhaps do a trip out to the steppes. And our hotel promised to get tickets for the Festival for us.

The next stage would be four nights on the train to Moscow – we decided to indulge and get a cabin just to ourselves for this leg of the journey. The cabin has its own washbasin, but we still shared the toilet at the end of the carriage. Each carriage has a samovar dispensing hot water (for tea and coffee) and a concierge to ensure everyone follows the rules! There is a restaurant car and a snack trolley. I was really looking forward to this experience! Train travel is so much more relaxing than air or bus – walking around, meeting new people, seeing the landscape roll past ...

The Trans-Siberian finishes in Moscow so we planned to spend 4-5 nights there to explore the city before taking a high-speed train to St Petersburg for another few nights. We hoped to go to the ballet in either of these cities.

Real Russia arranged to deliver our train tickets to our hotels in Beijing and Ulaanbaatar – and we were issued with vouchers for the hotels in Moscow and St Petersburg (which I booked through them for convenience). As Russian-authorized Travel Agents, they supplied us with the ‘Letter of Invitation’ and travel itinerary (in Russian) required to support our visa applications.

Neither of us has been to what used to be ‘Eastern Europe’, so of course Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were added to the route. Then I saw that Poland was just next door – and neither of us had been there either – I’d heard that it is beautiful – particularly Krakow. I had never been to Vienna, so that must be on the route. Then I saw that Budapest was just down the road from Vienna – perhaps that should be included? Why must we always compromise on routes? Anyway, we both want to return to Italy, particularly Venice, as Keith had never been there. Then we could meander across northern Italy to France before returning to Paris and the UK. Sounded good to me! Apart from the wedding trip to Sark and the train journey from Beijing to St Petersburg and departure from Russia, we wouldn’t need to book anything in advance and could play it by ear.

Our departure from Russia was originally planned to go to Tallinn in Estonia, however the political situation between the two countries was somewhat strained – so the train route between the two cities was cancelled! So we came up with a cunning plan – take a train from St Petersburg to Helsinki, Finland, spend a couple of days there and then take a ferry across to Tallinn! Well, why not?

The internet is ubiquitous – we use it to research everything these days. But we discovered its advice is not always up-to-date. We had an amusing time trying to get our visas for Russia...

These days it’s easy to log on, book a flight, print your boarding pass and hop on a plane to anywhere in the world. For any other means of transport, it’s a different kettle of fish – especially if you are flexible travellers that love the freedom of not knowing where you’ll be the next day. However, this freedom has its limitations. “We have no plan and we’re sticking to it” is anathema to most border control authorities, but the key to opening the door is obtaining the

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correct visa. Our experience for successfully getting a visa is: complete all forms diligently, provide all required information and documentation, dress modestly – and smile! It also helps to break the ice by talking knowledgeably about the latest cricket score, Manchester United's latest match or any other relevant sports. Then pay the fee and be patient. Of course, sometimes you can or must use a Visa Agent - but that takes the fun out of it.

In Malaysia, we'd done our homework using the internet to find out the visa requirements for our trip back to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway from Beijing, through Mongolia and across Russia. We were lucky enough to have two passports each - UK and Australian. This is a privilege that has been very useful.

Our research on the internet indicated that:

- One can only apply in the country where your passport was issued.
- Russia needs a visa – not easy to obtain and only issued in your home country. They need biometric scanning, full travel tickets and bookings before applying for a visa, travel insurance, and an almost endless list of other information.
- Mongolia issues visa on arrival (VOA) for UK passport holders, however Australian passport holders need a visa, obtained from an embassy (there is no Mongolian embassy in Malaysia).
- China needs a visa but not difficult to obtain, however it must be issued in the passport on which we were currently legally in Malaysia (in this case our UK passports).
- Once we arrived in Europe (we would be entering Europe at Finland) all would be good as we could use our UK passports.

So, the conclusion from our long hours of searching on the web was there was no way we would get a Russian visa, except by flying back to the UK or Australia! Maybe an Agent would be a good idea... I contacted a few Agents in Kuala Lumpur and the common thread was that they couldn't help us get a visa!

Was our overland trip about to fail at the first hurdle? A strategy was needed – we decided upon innocence! We would book all our travel, accommodation, get all the documents, letters of invitation, etc., fill out the necessary forms (obtained from the Russian

Consulate website), turn up at the embassy in KL - and hope. Our fall-back strategy was to fly to Australia and get a visa there.

Thankfully we were able to stay with our daughter-in-law's parents during our stays in KL - a big thank you to Swee Lee and Alaga for all their help, hospitality and fun evenings.

The Russian Embassy in KL was only open in the mornings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We arrived at 9.30 on a hot, humid Monday morning and knocked on an anonymous door set into the high, imposing pink walls surrounding the Russian embassy. Our expectation of a large operation was soon revised when we entered the packed 6x3 meter room. To the left was an alcove with about 6 chairs facing each other with about 50cm of space between them - this was the 'waiting area'. When a new arrival wanted to take a seat everyone had to shuffle across. The office was staffed by a security guard (probably from Nepal, by the looks of him) and a 'gate keeper' - Sabina, an imposing North Indian middle-aged lady with the accent to match - and a 'gift of the gab' that Billy Connolly would be proud of.

We signed in at the appointment book. The room was populated with hopeful faces. A smattering of Agents clutching handfuls of red Malaysian passports stood along the wall on the right, politely waiting their turn. Sabina kept up the most amazing banter as she waded through each pile of forms - Keith and I were in stitches! The process was slow - and the success rate was around 50%! We shrugged our shoulders and waited our turn. Sabina got up from her desk and sauntered over to the booking list - no automated ticket system here. Sabina scanned through the list and decided (based on some form of logic?) who would be next - all the time keeping up a banter as her gold jewellery jingled with every move.

"Not Kee Lim - he's always late. Li will be OK to wait. Ah, Christine. You're next!" We squeezed through the throng and proudly presented our completed application forms together with a small mountain of supporting documentation - all the boxes had been completed, everything signed. "Oh, this is good, very good. Sorry, we can't accept this - you have used the wrong form - as of last month all forms have to be completed on the internet! No problem it's exactly the same - just go to the Internet café down the road and do it there. You can do it..." We listened attentively; all the Agents were nodding in agreement. "The wrong form" they were muttering under

their breath. But there was more. "What Malaysian visa have you got?" she asked. "A 3-month tourist visa," we replied, showing our UK passport. "Oh, this is not good, not good at all. We can only process if you have more than a 90-day visa". Now there was a stunned silence in the room. "Not good at all" Sabina reiterated. I responded with our sob story (previously rehearsed) - "We need to get back to the UK for our daughter's wedding and would love to visit Russia" etc. etc. A sincere and understanding look appeared on Sabina's face. "Let's check with Olga, shall we?" We were led into the adjoining room where the real action took place. Olga sat behind a plate glass screen - her job was to process the visas and give the stamp of approval - or otherwise... Sabina explained our request to Olga (in Russian, which impressed us), who reiterated the need for UK passports to have a greater than 90-day visa. We heard the word 'Britain' and interrupted - "But we're applying on our Australian passports!" we pleaded. A small smile spread across Olga's mouth, "Sabina, these are Australians. The rules have changed for Australians..."

It was now 10.30am - the office closed at 12.30. Sabina, now all smiles, repeated that all was good with our forms but we need to submit on the correct form over the internet. We hastily hailed a cab and found an internet café. The connection was so slow, we didn't think we'd make it in time - so we took a few short cuts: did they really need to know our last two employers? Our parents' details (who were now deceased)? Entering the list of countries visited in the last ten years took ages - the hand-written form required only the last year; however the on-line form also needed the country and the entry date - so we just guessed these! The online form also restricted you to 50 entries - which reduced the number of entries we had to make. (As an amusing note, the 50th entry was to Cuba - an old communist ally of Russia.) When printed out, the print was so small in this section that it was illegible. I followed the on-line instructions for printing the document - including specific scaling instructions - only to discover that the printer in the internet café was running out of ink and we could barely read the form. Time was running out! Finally, I got some legible forms and raced back to the Embassy.

Sabina greeted us like long lost friends. "This is good", she said, as she commenced gathering together the copies of the relevant documents, discarding the items that were not needed (but had been

specified during our internet research). Last bank statement - not necessary; copy of travel insurance - not needed; separate list of places to be visited - not needed. One last glance at our application - "Oh, this is not good. Not good at all. The top of the page is missing - we can't accept that and I'm sure you had an entry against your last two employers in the last version!" Eyes like a hawk to be added to Sabina's profile. "You need the application number printed at the top of the page". The crowd of Agents nodded knowingly.

"No problem", Sabina said. "Come back Wednesday - you have all day tomorrow to get it right!"

We left, not disheartened but with a spring in our step. Yes, where there is a will there is a way... Getting a Russian visa in KL was a possibility! After our adventurous morning at the Embassy, we adjourned to a local restaurant for a well-earned lunch - including some serious alcohol. Then it was off to our appointment at the US embassy to get the Bill of Sale for *Poco Andante* notarised; apart from the exhaustive security search, this was uneventful. No Sabina characters here - although it was another internet experience just to get the appointment!

We eventually arrived back at Swee Lee and Alaga's house exhausted and enjoyed a relaxing evening with them.

Tuesday was form-filling day. All information was double checked and entered. The details of our last two employers completed and the list of countries visited in the last ten years determined. Setting up a spreadsheet, I waded through our multiple passports recording the name of the country and the 'in' and 'out' date stamps - then 'sorted' the data by date - from this I could work out dates of entry and departure. Finally, we printed the completed forms - carefully checking that the application number showed in the header.

Wednesday morning, we returned to the consulate. Our names in the appointment book, we sat and waited and chatted to the Visa Agents who seem to spend most of their lives in this office and sniggered with them when the novice Russian Visa hopefuls received Sabina's wisdom. Our moment of glory arrived. Sabina glowed with pride as she checked through our form "See - I said you could do it," she concluded as she granted us permission to enter the adjoining room where Olga ruled her domain. After a cursory glance at our paperwork, Olga gave us an 'invoice' which we had to take to the

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bank to deposit the funds directly into their account and return and present the bank receipt - all before 12 noon.

Luckily there was a bank close by; they were obviously used to the steady stream of visa hopefuls, so had the forms ready and quickly (by Malaysian standards), presenting us with the receipt. A brisk walk back to the embassy and we joined Olga's queue and submitted the receipt for payment. In return we got a receipt for our passports and were advised they could be picked up two weeks hence - not before 11.30 am. Yes! We punched the air with success...

Next step was to search out the Mongolian Embassy to check on their visa requirements. A quick internet search located the embassy within walking distance of our current location. Google Maps guided us on the short walk to the reported location, however it turned out to be a Hilton Hotel and office block! We had passed a police station on our way and returned to it for assistance - with the thought that they must have the location of all embassies for security reasons. No - the Mongolian Embassy did not come up. Returning to the office block we talked to the concierge, who informed us that the embassy had been demolished and recently replaced with the office block and hotel. We retired to the bar and investigated the internet further - we decided our only course of action was to trust that we could get a visa on arrival - as long as we used our British passports...

The next thing to tick off was checking out the Chinese embassy. The visa department was in a different location to the embassy and took a little searching out. At the third address we were directed to, we finally got hold of the Application Forms and a slip of paper with advice about requirements. Actually submitting the application would have to wait until our next visit to town.

Our first trip to KL came to an end and we flew back to Langkawi and continued to box up our possessions and prepare for our trip.

Two weeks soon passed; we turned up at the Russian Embassy an hour early - it felt very familiar. Sabina was in top form. "I don't do 'pick ups' until 11.30!", she stated. "You'll have to come back." We smiled, squeezed ourselves into a corner and took a seat. "We'll wait", I said. (In fact, we just wanted to watch the floor show!)

Sabina's latest gripe was the signatures on the form. "This is good, very good, but the signature has to be in blue pen. How can I check if the signature is genuine if it's not in blue pen?" She rifled

through the Agents' piles of applications, weeding out the offending sheets. "You'll have to get them signed again. It's the new Russian rule - all forms have to be signed in blue!" she iterated.

The phone rang: "Sorry I'm busy" was the curt reply. "Phone back at one o'clock - I may be able to help you then." "Oh you just want directions?" "Ahmed (one of the Agents), can you help out here?" passing the receiver to Ahmed who confidently gave instructions to the caller.

The entertainment continued. "This is not good," Sabina was saying to the next hopeful applicant. "You need to copy Asli's form (Asli is another Agent). Asli, show him your form." She glances at the form as she is about to pass it over. "This is not good, Asli. This is wrong!" The poor hopeful didn't know where to turn... he'll learn.

11.30 arrived and Sabina closed off new applications. The bedraggled unfortunates shuffled out only to return another day. She then leapt up and collected a pile of passports from Olga's office. We could see two blue ones in the pile of reds. Finally our names were called; one last form to sign and yes! Our trip was on! Nestled among all the other visas was a brand new one for Russia!

Another celebratory lunch before heading to the Chinese Visa office. In complete contrast, these offices commanded two floors of a new office block. The application floor was bedecked in ultra-modern furniture, smart screens and a multitude of ticket machines. I had already filled in the form and we had booked the required flight and hotels. Although we would have liked to have this visa in our Australian passports (lots of blank pages), the Chinese required us to use the passport with the current Malaysian visa. We presented our forms and UK passports; they were checked, we got a receipt for the passports and were told to return the following Monday. The whole process took just 10 minutes!

With four days to kill we had a pleasant time revisiting KL and its sights. Monday arrived. We turned up at the Chinese Embassy, presented our receipt, paid the fee, and collected our passports from the hundreds ready for collection. This took 5 minutes from 'Go to Whoa' - we had plenty of time to catch our flight back to Langkawi.

84 – The long way home...

Finally, it was departure day – 2nd July 2015. We were sitting at the end of the runway in KL feeling very smug... We'd been upgraded and were surrounded by empty seats - sleep shouldn't be a problem... One engine gave a cough and died! This was followed by an undignified tow back to the terminal - so much for our smugness! But good call, AirAsia; they had another plane standing by, so 3 hours later we were off again.

Arrival at 5am in Beijing was a doddle. The Immigration desk even had a keyboard where you could score the service from very bad to perfect. Ours was perfect. It's amusing to conjecture if all Immigration desks had this service: the US could offer 'obnoxious' to 'smiley'; or the UK – 'gruff' to 'welcoming'.

Shattered, we hopped in a taxi - then hopped back out again as he demanded ¥600 (~\$120) to take us to our hotel. After complaining to the police standing by, they helped us get a metered cab at ¥100 - this was more acceptable. My opinion that taxi drivers are rogues the world over had not been changed.

We enjoyed a good night's rest at our 3-star hotel, the Sha Tan – well located overlooking Jinshan Park and within walking distance of the main Beijing attractions. For breakfast, we sampled the local street food (dumplings) and, fortified, headed to Tiananmen Square - along with about 100,000 Chinese. I'd have to get used to these throngs. In a nutshell, the Square is big. The Forbidden Palace is huge with impressive architecture, and the Chinese population are all there. We didn't find the audio guide very useful, despite the Lonely Planet advice - there were plenty of information boards in both Chinese and English. We even managed to get the Seniors Discount - half price over-60. It was a good idea to get there early – and be patient. Take water - and/or brandy if you get xenophobic.

China is a very old civilisation and tends to do it their way. Many years ago, just after China emerged from Mao's regime, I was told by a long-standing expat from Beijing that "The Chinese do not think they are the superior race... They know they are." This doesn't lead

to arrogance but leads to a feeling of confidence. Certainly, China is a very confident nation.

If Beijing is anything to go by, we were impressed; very impressed. The ancient has been blended with the modern. Everything worked. Streets clean and maintained. New infrastructure was going up, not higgledy-piggledy like Malaysia, but in an ordered and planned manner.

The people were friendly and helpful and loved to laugh. Even though there was a huge language barrier we had some great moments. I noticed that Caucasians (Europeans) were still a rarity - we were often approached to have our photos taken with visiting families. They were very surprised that we couldn't understand Mandarin - in their minds, "everyone speaks Mandarin". So, they just kept talking to us anyway - gestures helped and we/they were often understood!

Beijing is a very green city with avenues of trees and lovely manicured parks and flower beds. Most had some sort of sculpture or square where the locals would congregate to play chequers or cards, dance and exercise. It was lovely to see northern hemisphere plants and flowers again.

One day we booked an excursion to the Great Wall at Mutianyu - certainly an impressive structure - and this is one section that has been restored. Our tour included the cable car trip both up and down, as well as lunch at a local restaurant. Keith walked all the way to the end of the open section - and received a medal for his achievement! The Chinese family that shared our table in the restaurant were surprised at our prowess with chopsticks - after all, we'd just spent 18 months or so in Asia...

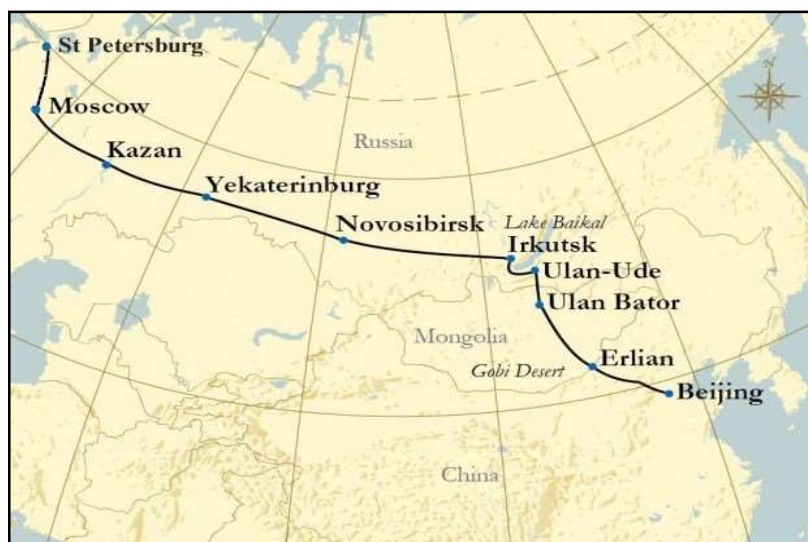
After visiting the ancient sites, all well-restored and maintained, we explored some modern architecture. The Olympic stadium was amazing as was the Centre for Performing Arts which housed a concert hall, opera house and theatre, all in one spectacular building.

We never had a bad meal anywhere. Be it fresh dumplings from a street vendor to Peking Duck at a quality restaurant, all was fresh, flavoursome and not expensive - although some of the dishes may be a bit odd to our western tastes if you are a serious foodie. We discovered a bottle shop across the road from our hotel so I was able to enjoy a glass of wine in the evening (which was surprisingly good!) and Keith a beer. I particularly wanted to try 'Peking Duck' and the

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Lonely Planet guide recommended a particular restaurant, however when we got there, it turned out we needed to make a reservation for the next night as they were fully booked. It was so popular that the restaurant placed stools on the footpath outside for 'wishful' diners to wait on. The Peking Duck was prepared at the table by the talented chef and was delicious. And I just had to order toffee apple – one of my favourite desserts – and the toffee was spun for us at the table. It looked and tasted superb.

85 – The land of Genghis Khan



It was time to move on - we had a train to catch - the Trans-Siberian Express. The first leg was the 28-hour journey to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. We had chosen 'soft sleeper' 2nd class - two sets of bunks opposite each other. Not comfortable but adequate. We shared the compartment with a Dutch couple a few years younger than us. Most of the passengers were travellers like us and there was a party-like atmosphere on the whole trip. Everyone had a story to tell and conversations sprang up everywhere - in the passageways, compartments or in the dining car.

The trip across China was through well-tended agricultural land punctuated with the odd town or small community. Building work was everywhere, often on a huge scale. Around midnight we reached the border with Mongolia. Here we had our passports taken and stamped by the Chinese. Whilst this was going on the train was taken to the workshop to have its 'wheels changed' - I chose to stay on board and observe this procedure. There is about three-and-a-half-inch difference between the Russian and Chinese gauges. For the technical-minded the carriages were marshalled into two lines of six and then each carriage separated. Two pairs of hydraulic jacks lifted

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the body of each carriage free. The old bogies were then run out and the new ones fitted. The carriage is then lowered onto the new bogies and the train is reassembled complete with four new engines and a Mongolian restaurant car.

Daylight brought us across the Gobi Desert which was barren and lifeless then onto the Mongolian steppes - vast open country with camels, horses, sheep and cattle grazing. What few towns we passed showed signs of their Russian communist influences; nothing to write about here.

By mid-afternoon we arrived in Ulaanbaatar and made our way to our accommodation - Gana's Guest House (supposedly a 'luxury' quadruple room with ensuite but pretty basic in reality). Access was across a very rickety foot bridge and up a 'back' alley.

Every year, around mid-July, all Mongolians let their hair down and immerse themselves in 'Naadam', a celebration of their culture that has been going on since the time of Genghis Khan. It is both a sporting festival and a cultural festival. Every province holds a Naadam of its own, but the most important is held in Ulaanbaatar. The preliminary events stretch over two weeks, culminating with the spectacular Opening Ceremony (Olympic Games like, complete with Presidential address) and two days of grand finals and all sorts of cultural concerts.

The games involve the 'manly sports' of wrestling, archery, horse racing and 'knucklebones'...

Wrestling - a huge 'Knock Out' competition start with 500+ competitors. No rings - just tussling on the grass, each bout lasting a few minutes. Lots of sparring followed by furious activity, then the winner does a little victory dance - and advances to the next round.

Archery - using traditional recurve bows to knock down 100cm cylindrical baskets set at a 50-60-meter range. The skill and accuracy were remarkable for both of the male and female competitors.

Horse racing - involves several different events but mainly racing over a 30-40km course set on the steppes 40km out of town. Most of the riders were children aged anything from 4-13 years old, many riding bareback. At the event there were numerous demonstrations of the superb horsemanship of the Mongolians.

Knucklebone shooting - a skilful team sport where the shooters take turns to flick a shaped antler 'bullet' at a pyramid of boxes - a bit

like miniature 10-pin bowling. The teams encourage the 'shooter' with haunting throat singing.

We attended as many events as we could - although the harsh steppe winds and brief rain showers cut short some of our visits.

The cultural events included parades of Mongolians in their regional costumes, folk singing, dancing - and more modern versions held in the central square.

Food during the event was restricted to 'Khuushuur' (pronounced hoorshure); this consists of a fried tortilla stuffed with mincemeat of various sorts. Drink? Why, fermented mare's milk, of course! A bit like unsweetened drinking yoghurt with a large dash of vodka.

Modern Mongolia is interesting - a young country emerging from the post-Communist era, with a huge heritage. The Mongolians are justly proud of this heritage - after all, they shaped the world that we know today. Statues and monuments relating to Genghis Khan are everywhere. Genghis and his heirs ruled for 200+ years (13th to 15th century) and had an empire that reached from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean (China to Germany). It was my misconception that the Mongols had a 'slash and burn' policy - how wrong I was! They were the inventors of diplomacy, religious tolerance and knew the importance of trade; they invented the concept of bank and promissory notes; they endorsed scientific understanding, mathematics and art. And they developed modern military warfare and weaponry.

The Silk Road was their main artery, enabling the movements of silk, spices, artefacts and ideas from the Far East to Europe. They built a network of safe havens along this road - every 30km there was an outpost that gave protection to merchants on the route. It is my conjecture that it wasn't the demand for spices that led to the voyages of Columbus and Magellan - it was the breakdown of the Mongolian empire in the late 15th Century (religious wars broke out and the Mongols' hold on the countries gradually disintegrated). This made the overland route too dangerous. All I can say is that history was repeating itself - one reason that we were doing this trip is that the sea route through the Red Sea was too dangerous from wars created by religious intolerance; the overland route was much safer.

Today's Mongolia was still emerging from the communist stranglehold after the Second World War. They changed to a democratic government in 1990, after a student uprising led by Zorig,

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a brave and courageous student leader renowned for his diplomatic skills. After rising to be Prime Minister in the new Government, he was assassinated in 1998. Mongolia is blessed with mineral resources and oil - and is using these to help them achieve a place in the world order again. Unfortunately, it appeared their technical skill level is poor - they still had a strong nomadic culture and relied on herding as their main industry.

The Mongolians were not great builders and there are no monuments or cities left behind as a reminder, just their ideas and influence on world history.

86 – From Russia with love...

Ulaanbaatar was still in party mood as we boarded our train to Moscow, about 6,000km away. A military parade and a civic 'send-off' were both competing with each other. One group of soldiers were being sent off to Moscow and a group of Korean delegates was on their way to Irkutsk. The train was new - probably less than 12 months old - and looked resplendent in its Mongolian regalia. We had booked first class for the four-day trip to Moscow and were looking forward to some luxury after our 'guest house' accommodation in UB.

Were we lazing in Pulman-style compartments, sinking in soft luxurious feather-down couches that convert to swan-down beds? Waited on hand and foot? Not quite! The reality was a functional bench with 50mm thick foam and a couch-back which dropped down to add to the mattress. No shower handy - and one toilet at the end of the car. The 'first class' element was that we were not sharing the compartment with anyone else.

It was clean and new. Our stewardess cleaned it every day and was on hand, but could speak no English, so communication wasn't easy. Catering was the biggest disappointment. A restaurant car was only attached when we reached Irkutsk - it was a very utilitarian Russian dining car - very different from the aged but opulent Chinese and Mongolian dining cars. We only ate here once - very expensive, mediocre and small portions. This reduced us to foraging through the small kiosks at each station where we stopped - usually only for 20 minutes, about once every 5-6 hours. We didn't starve, thanks to supplies bought in UB - bread, cheese, ham, instant noodles and fruit - however by the last day we were down to sharing a single packet of pot noodles with stale bread and Vegemite!

Overall, the trip was fast and efficient. The scenery and landscapes ever changing; although birch forests predominate, there were many small villages, rivers to cross and lakeside vistas. In far Eastern Siberia the villages were ramshackle with the inhabitants eking a living from small holdings interspersed with industrial towns. All along the way we were impressed by the extensive rail network, the

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vast amount of rolling stock and the extensive forestry operations - producing mile upon mile of processed lumber for construction and manufacturing purposes. As we got closer to Moscow the villages became obviously more affluent.

At Irkutsk we said goodbye to the Korean delegation and also to a large number of tourists who went exploring Lake Baikal, the deepest and largest (by volume) freshwater lake in the world, and the surrounding countryside, bathed in wildflowers at this time of year. The railroad passed the shores of this natural wonder so we had a good view of the lake, but unfortunately not enough time in our schedule to allow us to stop for a few days.

After Irkutsk the train seemed to empty out; besides us, there was only one other couple (Australian) remaining in our coach, with a number of empty coaches on the train.

Days went by - it was very similar to long sailing passages and both Keith and I found ourselves doing 'look out' every 15-20 minutes as we needed to do when sailing. On the fourth day we arrived in Moscow. The Mongolian soldiers in their uniforms formed up to head to their new posts as we headed for the Metro to get to our hotel - and a good night's sleep and a decent meal!

With a sense of adventure, we navigated ourselves through Moscow via the Metro to our hotel. The Metro, although straight forward and reasonably priced has a few quirks. The maps and station signs are all in the Cyrillic alphabet - still ok - but the big stumbling block is that station signs are few and far between. The trains run at high speed and the names flash past. Counting stops was the only way to navigate. The trains ran frequently - one every two to three minutes - so if you made a mistake, it didn't take long before you could correct your error. This lack of signage seems to be a Russian speciality. Saying that, the Metro has some remarkable stations, architecture-wise - another day, we toured about 10 stations all for the cost of one trip.

The Hotel Cosmos was a huge building - we were on the 23rd floor and had a magnificent view of the Cosmonauts Park across the road. This museum/exhibition was dedicated to the achievements of the Russians in the space race. On display were bits and pieces from their historic flights and scale models of most of their satellites and the space station. The displays were great but it would have been useful

if they used some of their space technology to get the videos, computers and cinema to work!

I discovered a free walking tour of the historic heart of the city of Moscow (not quite free, as the guide expected a tip, but good value all the same) which we enjoyed and gave us a good introduction to the city. Irene, the local guide, recounted amusing anecdotes about both the city and the people - including the reason why Russians don't smile at strangers. Apparently smiling is an expression of close friendship, rather than a polite courtesy. After the 2-3-hour tour we decided which places we wanted to explore further; the Kremlin and the Armoury were 'must sees'. We played tourist for a couple of days, ogling at the excessiveness of the Tsarist regimes that led to their downfall by the Bolsheviks.

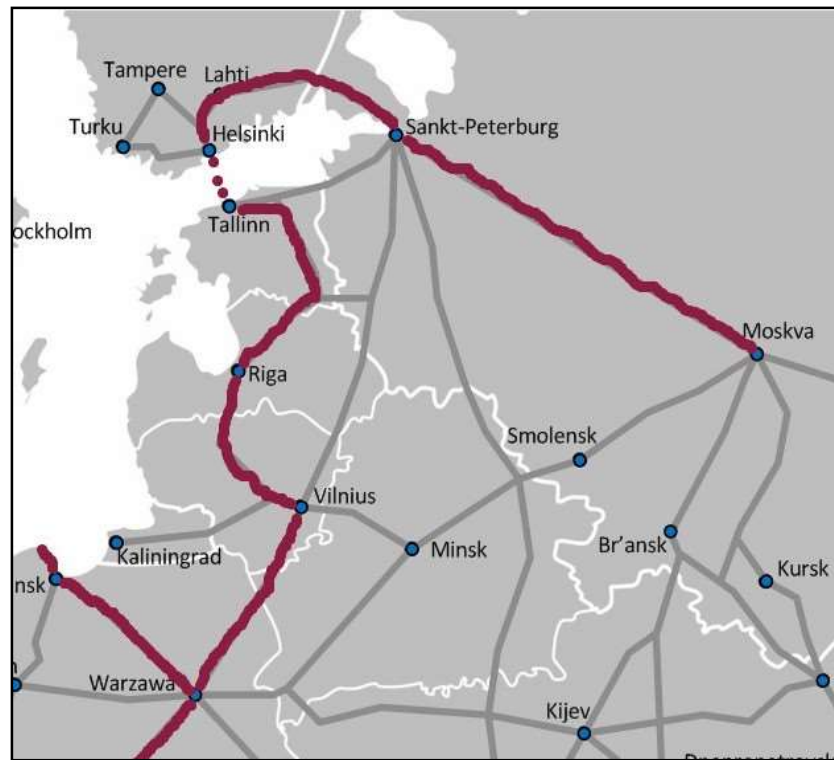
That said our next stop would be Saint Petersburg where we expected more of the same.

The fast, modern Sapsan train whisked us from Moscow to St Petersburg at 200km/hr. We arrived refreshed and ready to do battle on the Metro again. After one false start we changed trains and arrived at our downtown hotel. St Petersburg was in a festive mood - we often found ourselves surrounded by drunken sailors (no change here, I hear you say!). Eventually we discovered that it was Russian Navy Day - where ex- and current-Navy personnel celebrate their contribution to the nation.

We picked up a walking tour that took us through the extensive palaces, churches and historical facades. In general, Catherine the Great and Peter the Great had done an amazing job in building a fine city based on the big 18th and 19th century European cities of the time.

The Hermitage is the icing on the top - originally the Winter Palace, it is huge and overwhelming. Although the nobles had built up a reasonable art collection, the main collectors were the Soviets - pre- and post-war. As an indication of the size of the collection, one million paintings were evacuated from the city during the Nazi siege of St Petersburg (Stalingrad) during World War II. The collection grew after this with the confiscation of paintings from Germany - and other 'benefactors' within Russia.

87 – The Baltic States



Although our planned route was through the Baltic States, the train from St Petersburg to Tallinn was suspended due to frosty relations between Russia and Estonia. We opted for the high-speed train to Helsinki.

The immigration officer on board the train greeted us with a smile but worried us when he spent some time paging through our passports, looking at all our visas and stamps - many I'm sure he hadn't seen before. "You certainly like to travel," he commented and cleared us in speedily and efficiently.

We were now well and truly in Europe. Finland is proud that it shook off the Russian yoke in the late 19th century and fought to keep out of the Soviet umbrella. Peter the Great tried to create a mini-St Petersburg in Helsinki and much of the architecture around the main

square looked the same. Apart from this, the Finns have made it their own. The only downside was the high cost of living - we found everything was expensive.

Our walking tour was again very informative. We were enjoying these and decided to join one at every city we visited as they are so informative and good value. As always, we gravitated towards the harbour. There were many yachts dressed overall - we chatted to a Danish couple who were stowing their dinghy and found out they were part of the 2015 Baltic Rally and, like all cruisers, were celebrating their arrival at this major stop over. Another highlight was the food stalls on the waterfront - we discovered the salmon and vegies were superb, as was the reindeer with loganberry jam. A punnet of fresh berries polished off our feast.

On our final day in Helsinki, we joined our own Baltic cruise - the ferry from Helsinki to Tallinn in Estonia. This coincided with the twelfth anniversary of our departure from the UK. Our current cruise across the Baltic was a 2-hour trip - although cold and windy, it was pleasantly warm inside the ferry. We arrived late in the day and had difficulty in finding our apartment. A helpful receptionist from a nearby hotel phoned the contact number for us and helped us with directions. We decided to put off celebrations until the next day as we needed a pause to catch our breath. We visited the local supermarket just across the road for some supplies - what a treat! I hadn't seen such fare since I don't know when - and came back laden with cheese, meats, breads, cakes, beer and wine - all at reasonable prices.

Our walking tour guide next day was Maart, a student of political science who had just finished his national service. He was great and spoke of Estonia in a knowledgeable and light-hearted way. He was proud that Estonia had been independent for 24 years 158 days and 12 hours (at that date). The last time of independence was around 1300AD! This 'capitulation' to invaders has meant that the capital Tallinn has suffered little destruction - and many of the medieval structures remain. Walking through the streets and passages is a walk back in time. We even shopped in a pharmacy that has been in business since 1422 (purported, to be the oldest pharmacy in the world.)

Estonia has been overrun by Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Russia in endless succession. The bitterness towards the last two was

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noticeable - both occupiers shipped tens of thousands to Labour Camps, never to return. Hence independence is so celebrated. Now Estonia was looking West (even joining NATO) and towards the future.

With a population of only just over one million people and a liberal government, Estonia is pursuing a policy of embracing new technology. After all, Skype was developed by a couple of Estonian programmers! The government, newly free from oppression, has developed an all-encompassing IT system. Every Estonian has a special, unique identification card that allows them to conduct most of their civic functions online - vote, pay their tax (flat 20%), create a business, access their health records, schooling, obtaining pharmaceuticals and many other services. Scary for us sceptics. The prosperity of Estonia is there for all to see - and this little nation is one to watch.

We finished off our brief stay in Tallinn with a lovely meal at a restaurant set in a mediaeval cellar. We shared fish soup and a whole knuckle of pork and veges. This set us up for a coach trip to Riga, Latvia early next day.

The trip from Tallinn to Riga took us through well-cultivated fields of cereals interspersed by beech and pine forest linking small hamlets, all looking verdant in the summer sunshine. The second Baltic state, Latvia, looked much the same as Estonia on the outside but inwardly there were huge differences. Whereas Estonia capitulated to all the invaders, proud Latvia stood its ground. The city fathers adopted an interesting defensive strategy - not huge city walls, but rather a rule that all buildings surrounding the city must be built of wood. If an invader came then the whole town was set on fire! This worked and kept them semi-independent, although a few false alarms caused havoc! In 1938 everything changed - the Nazis took no prisoners and brutalised the inhabitants, creating concentration camps and rounding up Jews and partisans (Latvia had a large Jewish population). Eventually liberation came and the Soviets moved in. What few partisans were left fought a guerrilla war against them. In retaliation the Soviets adopted a policy of 'Sovietisation' which entailed knocking down heritage buildings and replacing them with concrete, unadorned structures. They also resettled the Latvians to Russia and resettled Russians into Latvia. In all 30% of the Latvian population was replaced or killed during

Stalin's era. Perestroika came as welcome relief for Latvia, but the wounds run deep. Today Russia is still feared to the extent that the displaced Russians in Latvia are not allowed to claim Latvian citizenship and obtain a passport. It is my opinion that it was due to these issues that Latvia had not 'found' itself yet. In a stark, black, Soviet building is housed the Occupation Museum, which graphically illustrated the impact of these occupations on Latvia's culture.

Having said that, there is a degree of affluence; the market, located in five old zeppelin hangars, was full of shoppers and lots of lovely produce. A walk around Riga gave us a mixed impression – Soviet-style buildings including a good example of a 'Stalin's wedding cake' building, mingled with original timber buildings and medieval warehouses. Things to do and places to see were minimal, so I took the time to catch up on laundry and other chores.

Lithuania suffered a similar fate to Latvia; however, the capital Vilnius was controlled by Poland and most of their history was imposed on them from that end of Europe. Russia played its part and imposed its building regulations on the country but left much of the mediaeval buildings intact. Vilnius claims to have the largest number of mediaeval buildings in Europe – many have been renovated with modern materials. The feel of the place is modern as many of the streets are wide boulevards which were created by the Germans and Soviets – by demolishing whole streets. The transfer of population was not as dramatic as Latvia, the walking tour was a little more interesting as a consequence and we felt that the Lithuanians were a little more playful. A group of artists went so far as setting up their own Republic on an island in the centre of Vilnius – all tongue in cheek but embraced by the locals. The *Republic of Uzupis* has its own constitution and National Day – on the 1st of April, naturally. Their motto is "Don't fight, don't win, don't surrender". On National Day the borders are patrolled, passports stamped and visas checked. An Uzupis visa is a smile. It has even been known for the village pump to flow with free beer on this day.

Excerpt from Constitution of Uzupis:

1. *Everyone has the right to live by the River Vilnelė, and the River Vilnelė has the right to flow by everyone.*

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2. *Everyone has the right to hot water, heating in winter and a tiled roof.*
3. *Everyone has the right to die, but this is not an obligation.*
4. *Everyone has the right to make mistakes.*
5. *Everyone has the right to be unique.*

In total there are 40 lines... It was written in July 1998 by Thomas Čepaitis (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania) and Romas Lileikis (President of Lithuania).

The food and beer were good in this lively city - the only downside was a graffiti problem. It was so bad that Vilnius' UNESCO's world heritage status was under threat.

There is no rail connection between Lithuania and Poland - Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave, gets in the way. This made the coach trip from Vilnius to Warsaw interesting. We skirted Kaliningrad along small country roads in our large modern coach and stopped at a border post in the middle of the forest for a passport check - it felt a bit John Le Carré-ish! I was surprised how flat that part of Poland was - it was easy to see how invasions could happen so quickly.

87 – From Puck to hell on earth



Although not classified as a Baltic State, Poland's northern coast is well and truly in the Baltic. This huge country is full of heritage so we felt that it was worthwhile spending a little time here. However, an unexpected email from old cruising friends Cam and Arni and their daughter Nancy from SY *Jade* provided us with the opportunity for a little diversion. We had last caught up with *Jade* in New Zealand seven years earlier. They were planning to be in Puck (pronounced 'push-ke' - Polish is such a unique language!) on the north coast while we were in Poland. Nancy was competing in the Junior World Optimist championship held at Puck that year, representing Hong Kong. Any excuse for a party - so we planned to curtail our stay in Warsaw and booked a ticket on a train to Puck. The Polish railway

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system is excellent, cheap and modern, with high-speed trains between major cities.

We arrived in Warsaw at lunch time and only had that afternoon and evening to explore the city. Warsaw had been completely destroyed in the war and has been gradually rebuilt - both the Nazi and Soviet occupations had left their toll. Today there are modern buildings replacing a number of the badly built Soviet ones. I had arranged a walking tour around the old Jewish quarter; this was mainly a talk about the Holocaust - none of the buildings remain. There was a poignant reminder of Mila 18 where the last of the freedom fighters chose suicide over capture. The rest were shipped to Auschwitz - a visit to which was on our itinerary. The 'old town' of Warsaw was rebuilt by the Soviets using modern bricks and layout - a bit Disney-ish in appearance.

Next day, an early morning train took us to Puck. Unbeknownst to us, this was a major holiday weekend and the venue for a large pop concert. We had struggled to find accommodation and ended up in a guesthouse in Wladyslawowo just up the train line from Puck. Both Puck and Wladyslawowo (close to a place called Hel!) are seaside towns protected by a 40km spit jutting out into the Baltic Sea. It is a popular dinghy sailing venue, with flat waters, little tide and good winds. It was great to see Cam, Arni & Nancy turn up at our guesthouse, complete with caravan in tow. We then joined them in the search for a campsite - just like old times looking for a suitable anchorage! The area around Puck was crowded and they ended up staying quite close to our hotel. And like all good cruisers we spent a lovely couple of days catching up, reminiscing, eating and drinking - with a trip to Hel thrown in for good measure!

With this lovely interlude complete we took another early morning train all the way south across Poland to Krakow. Luckily our guest house in Wladyslawowo was within walking distance of the station so getting there by 6am was easy.

The 8-hour journey to Krakow was pleasant enough and after a short taxi ride, we found ourselves in a lovely apartment in the old Jewish Quarter close to the city centre. I soon loaded up the washing machine; however, the instructions were in Polish and a few mishaps with the controls resulted in a 6-hour washing cycle - finishing at 3 am! Still, it was good to have some clean clothes again!

Krakow is a medieval city that has maintained many of its original buildings and traditions. Its fortune lies in its close proximity to a huge salt deposit and being situated on the main trading route from Hungary to Italy. Krakow's other claim to fame is the Jagiellonian University where Copernicus studied – the tour was fascinating. The rest of the city was equally interesting with many sites worth visiting. From the taller tower of the main cathedral, a fanfare is played by a trumpeter every hour. The fanfare is repeated from each of the four sides of the tower, but the last ends abruptly on a broken note to recognise when the original trumpeter/lookout was shot by an arrow from the invading Tartars centuries ago. All the trumpeters are active firemen!

Outside of Krakow are two worthwhile sites, the Salt Mines to the east, and Auschwitz to the west. Most tourists take excursions and split these visits over two days. If you are on a budget and have the time you can easily take public transport to these places. We were recommended to get to the salt mines by 9 am to miss the crowd, and pre-book the local Auschwitz tour. Due to time constraints, we wanted to visit both sites in one day and were unable to get an excursion so we arranged a car and driver, relatively expensive but easy as the company arranged all tours and tickets. The four-hour tour of the salt mine was impressive, despite only 5% of the mine being open to the public. Apart from the historical and geological aspects we were also impressed with the artistic caverns and statues - whole churches and chapels beautifully adorned, with everything carved out of salt.

In complete contrast, after an hour's drive, we arrived in Auschwitz/Birkenau Concentration Camp. This monument to man's inhumanity to man was very moving and poignant. The main thing that hits you is the sheer scale of the site; rows upon rows of austere low red brick buildings disappearing into the horizon, too many to count. Each one held around one thousand internees. Over 1.3 million innocents who were held in the camp were sent to the slaughter. A further 1-2 million (nobody knows the exact number) never reached the camp and went straight to the gas chambers, sorted on arrival at the railway siding. Although the largest, this was only one of many such camps across Nazi-occupied Europe. Walking around this place and listening to the guide created many different emotions, sadness, anger, pity and certainly a resolve to not see this

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happen again. But history keeps repeating itself even today and in recent history similar atrocities have happened.

After this we decided that we needed some cheering up and shared a bottle of wine and a traditional Polish meal followed by a classical music concert in one of Krakow's small concert halls.

88 – A mad dash through Austria, Italy and France



The next morning found us at the train station again ready to board the train to Vienna. The flat European plain turned into the undulating Alpine foothills as we approached Vienna. We were now in the heart of Europe; we understood the facilities and language (English was commonplace and Viennese was pronounceable), the transport maps were understandable and everything seemed to work. Our only problem was how do you buy Metro tickets? The information desk sold us two tickets which helped. We were booked into a hotel close to a metro stop so were planning to use the metro during our two-day stay. We never did solve this problem - ticket machines were few and far between, and you didn't seem to need a ticket to get into or out of the station - the whole system seems to run

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on trust. Although feeling guilty we were forced to travel for free most of the time!

Vienna is a large urban sprawl with an historic centre, so a hop-on/hop-off bus sightseeing trip was a good way to get around – and it included a walking tour of the centre. This was a good solution to seeing the city in a short time. The bus tour was ok but it felt a bit like taking a suburban bus - with a mediocre commentary. The walking tour was better, and you got a feel for the city. The statues, squares and buildings were impressive and full of historical meaning. I particularly liked the statue of Minerva in the Hofburg Square – Minerva, the goddess of Wisdom triumphing over Ignorance and Hunger. With the thoughts of Auschwitz and the current issues in the Middle East in mind this statue rang a bell and could be used as a mantra – “If we can overcome ignorance and replace it with wisdom, and overcome hunger and pull people out of poverty, will the world be a better place?”

Less of this philosophising...that's what travel does for you! We had a great time in Vienna, good food, friendly banter with the bar men, drinking out of the many pumps providing water direct from the Alps, good music and dance - what more could you want? However, we were running out of time to house sit for our cruising friends Mike and Jill in the UK – time to head south to Italy followed by a quick dash to Paris!

Next morning we were up at 5.15, no coffee! Not a good way to start the day. We asked the Hotel to order us a taxi to the station - the train to Venice left at 6.22. By 5.55 I was getting worried; the taxi had not turned up. The concierge didn't seem to care so we left the hotel and flagged down a taxi - we should have done this earlier. I asked the driver to step on it - and he flew. Luckily all the lights were green. Great driving and a big tip - we caught the train with minutes to spare. Our first and only near miss...

As we left Vienna and headed further south the scenery became more familiar; pretty little chalets and villages nestling in the foothills of the Alps - all 'picture postcard' really. Our thoughts were now focused on getting back to the UK and we both felt a little sad as we neared the end of our trip - but we still had some fire left! Just as well - as we were heading for Venice, 'tourist capital of the world!' I had organized our battle plan; book a hotel near St Mark's Square, deposit our large suitcases at the train station and wade through the

throng with just our backpacks. One night's stay would be sufficient - arrive early, stay overnight and leave late! Venice is all about wandering the narrow alleys and getting lost. All the world and his wife were there but my strategy meant that we could have a slow stroll to the hotel, taking in the sights. The hotel was tucked away, but had all the romanticism of Venice complete with balcony view. After checking in and dumping the backpacks, more sightseeing. A \$50 sundowner in St Mark's Square added to the experience! Yes, Venice was packed but still has magic. We chose piazza dining in the little square next to our hotel. Unfortunately, the rain came and we moved inside and ended up sharing a table with Jean from Colorado. One bottle of wine became two; three persons became five as the couple next to us joined in - it was a birthday for one and an anniversary for the others. The rain continued to fall but we were having fun. Eventually the evening came to a close. We gave one of our umbrellas as a birthday present to Jean (she had a long walk to her hotel). We sprinted across the square to our hotel and toasted our fortune with a scotch. It's often not the place, but the people you meet that makes the occasion.

Breakfast at the hotel was heralded by sunshine. We checked out; 6-hours sightseeing left so we picked up a tourist ticket for the water buses that ply the canals. Easy! Lots of photos. Hopped on and off and ended up at the train station. Collected our luggage and caught a train to Verona.

Verona is a lovely city - and very old! We arrived on a Sunday afternoon. The apartment we were renting had detailed instructions - the problem was we couldn't find his starting point. Advice from a friendly local didn't help, however we eventually located the place and knocked on the shabby door; no one at home. We were earlier than expected so sat on the wall of a roman forum and waited. We were joined by a Japanese couple. Eventually the owner arrived and let us in. The stairs were rickety but the apartment was lovely - modern, spacious and overlooking the square. Thankfully we were staying here for a couple of days and hoped to take in an opera (Verona is famous for its Opera held in the Roman amphitheatre.) This was not to be. The day we arrived was change over day - Aida had just finished (the set was still in the town square), and Nabucco by Verdi was due to start later that week. This was typical! So far, we had been unable to go to a major event anywhere due to bad timing!

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However, Verona is a lovely city to wander around and is on the list for a revisit someday.

We now had a mad dash to Paris, via Milan then onwards to London. The trip to Milan skirted the Alps and Lake Garda - again very picturesque. Yet again our plan for some culture was put on the backburner - La Bohème was playing at the La Scala Opera House. Great! I enquired about tickets and discovered it was opening night - and the only tickets available were €450 each! Too expensive! We consoled ourselves with a tour of the Opera House and managed to view one of the sets being tested on stage. We then amused ourselves checking out the local antiquities. Shopping for a tie for Emily and Jon's wedding at the famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping mall - very chic! And taking in an exhibition of Da Vinci's inventions such as helicopters, submarines, etc. constructed to his plans - this was fun!

The TGV was our next mode of transport - we left Milan at 8.45am and arrived in Paris at 3pm. The train from Milan arrived at the Gare de Lyon but I had booked a cheap hotel close to the Gare du Nord - our departure point on the 6.30am EuroStar train to London the next day. The hotel was just a couple of stops away on the Metro and once again we deposited our cases in the left luggage office. We anticipated that the hotel wouldn't have a lift - and didn't fancy carrying them up five flights of stairs, which is the norm in Paris' inexpensive hotels. Good move! Our only task for that evening was to find a good French restaurant within walking distance and enjoy French food again. This was more difficult than we thought - the hotel seemed to be surrounded by eateries from all over the world - Thai, Indian, Moroccan, and Mexican. Eventually, alongside the Quai de Valmy canal sitting sublimely in the sun was just what we were looking for - La Marine. With a bottle of wine and an excellent meal we concluded our trip across Asia and Europe. Just the English Channel to conquer!

89 – Circumnavigation complete!



At 5.30 the next morning we took the Metro to the Gare du Nord, collected our luggage, picked up a coffee and croissant - and settled down for a quick trip under the channel. By 9am we were in London and took the National Express bus to Southampton. We had planned to take the train but at £80 each it was exorbitant- the bus only cost £15 each. A local bus from Southampton dropped us off close to our friends' house in Lyndhurst in the New Forest. Mike and Jill are ex-cruisers - we had cruised with them in the Caribbean around 11 years ago! How good is that... We do love the cruising community - always willing to give a hand.

Just buy a boat and go...

Feeling rather 'shell shocked' after our arrival in the UK, we collapsed for a couple of days before heading to Sark in the Channel Islands to celebrate Emily's wedding to Jon.

After nine months of planning, we arrived bright and early at the ferry terminal in Poole. Our planned trip hatched way back in February, following the news that Emily and Jon were getting married in Sark in September, was coming to fruition. The original plan was to travel overland to the wedding from Malaysia during the wet season, fly back to *Poco Andante* in Malaysia then sail across the Indian Ocean. How plans change!

So, there we were on a Condor Ferry - and planning to cross our outgoing path aboard a 312ft high speed behemoth. Dawn was breaking as we left Poole Harbour. Twenty minutes out, at 50°34.38'N and 01°52.45W we crossed our outgoing track created 12 years and six weeks earlier. What an achievement - no big fanfare - a hug and a kiss were all that was needed and a quiet feeling of satisfaction and reflection.

It was lovely to see all the family together to celebrate Emily and Jon's wedding. All our hard work in keeping the lines of communication open had paid off. Emily and Jon had decided on a small intimate wedding - Emily and Jon (who live in Perth Western Australia) described it as 'eloping but with the parents'. Sark was chosen as it only required 3 days of residence before the wedding license was issued. All-in-all, a happy and joyous occasion.

Christine Muir (and Keith Hunt)



From L-R: Keith, Emily, Jon and Christine



From L-R: Jas, Rosie (2yo), Robert, Emily, Jon, Charlotte and Rachel

Postscript

After the wedding, we arrived back from Sark and met up with the letting agent who handed over the keys to Keith's house which had been rented out for the last 14 years. We opened the door with trepidation, but it wasn't as bad as we feared - nothing that a good clean, a lick of paint and new flooring couldn't cure. We set to with bucket and mop - and organized the transport of our belongings, which had been in storage for 12 years, together with our crates from Malaysia. Having unpacked most of it, I realised that it would be easy to clutter our lives with unnecessary 'stuff' - and having lived in a confined space for so long, I appreciated the space more than things.

Some ex-cruisers once told us that swallowing the anchor was like stepping back into old shoes - our problem was that they didn't seem to fit. We were embarking on a completely new adventure with a new outlook on life. Although we couldn't decide where to call 'home' our family and friends are dear to us.

The travel and adventure on *Poco Andante* have changed us. We were humbled by the generosity of people who have nothing, marvelled at nature's sculptures, frightened by the power of wind and seas - and angered by political turmoil.

We found that our love for each other had grown out of adversities and we make a strong team - we celebrated by secretly eloping!

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." – **Mark Twain**

