

The Circumnavigation of ORINOCO FLO

by : ROB WARD

Marigot Bay, St Martin – Anse- des Colombiers, St Barts

(A couple of days in the Caribbean)

We arrived at St Martin's by way of a stonking 13 knot close reach under jib and reefed main to Barbuda from Antigua. And after a Crayfilled Barbuda (where we did not get murdered) a spinnaker reach hitting 16 knots without the benefit of the main.

St Martin's was a necessary stop; no-one recommended it and I don't know if I would. But that doesn't deter cruise liners from disgorging upwards of 6,000 people in a day into Philipsburg where the straight main road, about the size of an English village but laid out like Southport, has duty free shops selling booze - Jameson, £3 a bottle - emeralds and European luxury goods at knockdown prices. I mean I was knocked down by a pair of large American women with eyes as hungry as weasels and minds locked onto a waypoint called 'Spendfun.'

'First we'll do this side of the street and when we get to the end we'll do the other side, right?'

'Could you pick me up first, madam', I muttered in the gutter, but they'd tripped into Gucci for a dozen pairs of too-tight glass slippers.

..the most remarkable cruising cats...

We went there *because* it is so Western, so American - though divided into French and Dutch halves. 'The least Caribbean of the islands', according to Anne Hammick in the RCC pilot to the Lesser Antilles. We knew we could get Acetone, polyurethane paint, resin and glass. And I wanted to see Mel Clarke, with whose sufferings at the end of his build of three 63' Shuttleworths at Portishead I had come to

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Part Three

A Look at The Caribbean

Much of this has been taken from letters to friends which accounts for a certain familiarity of style but I hope conveys the immediacy of the moment as it does for me in preference to a remembered account - Rob Ward 6/4/94.

empathise. His boat *Bandaloop* is home and he has a mooring in the Lagoon. He and Val provided full local knowledge and fed all ten of us one night. *Bandaloop* blew everyone out - it is one of the most remarkable cruising cats built. Two years on from completion it is possible that Mel is at last beginning to enjoy that fact.

But getting out of the lagoon where we moored half ashore on Great Cay was a relief. It was hard to work in the morning when we woke. It was impossible to work when the day got hot and we were too tired to work at the end of the day. Andy stood under a Manchineel tree and came away with welts like burns from its toxic sap. The lagoon was not super healthy. The water a bit stagnant (though many Barracuda call it home) and most of us spent one night calling for Huey or summoning O'Rourke. However we managed to beef up the daggerboard-rudder sheath with some carbon and kevlar. When *Orinoco Flo* pours down a wave at 12 or 15 knots and the self-steering corrects, it puts hefty stresses on the bottom leading edge of the rudder sheathes and this is what I reinforced. We took the opportunity to tighten up the trampoline, clean the rudder bearings and check the mainsail slides (Mel had the same system of Ertalon slides on Cardan joints

and a loose screw had jammed his main in the hoisted position). We discovered all was well.

Getting out of the Lagoon was a major step forward. Marigot had a Yamaha agent. As predicted, he knew nothing nor cared a jot about service: flog ëem and forget ëem. However Phil was able to find an omniscient outboard engineer to discuss our rope-wrap and stretched timing belt. The fellow offered him the tools to withdraw the flywheel too but we had no belt - 'How about the Yamaha Agent?' Oh *purlease!*

Getting out of the Lagoon is a bit of a thrill. You pour out the 40' gap with or against the tidal stream when the bridge is raised at bang-on 6am, 11, 4 & 6pm. Imagine what it would be like with a 63' cat with a 37' beam like *Bandaloop*. I met Peter Spronk, a welname in cat building, in Simson Bay building his own, 'last', catamaran. He was pleased to have a chat, generous with his time and applied his very dry Dutch wit to effect on the subject of 'Hi-tech'. Peter thinks that 'hi-tech' is a mistake in the 'Third world' as he calls the Caribbean, and builds his cats in wood epoxy - high quality Bruynzeel ply. Unlike some very forceful prophets of 'low-end tech' he goes for attractive compound curves with double-diagonal planking in 5mm ply and his

bigger cats look as futuristic as most... more than any 12 years ago when I first spotted his 65' open bridgedeck charter monsters in Tortola. A nice guy with many wise ideas but quite devoid of dogma.

I had to clear out in Philipsburg and went there in the bus from Marigot...a great way to meet people. Albert from Anguilla (still drunk from last night, but charming with it) spelt out in detail just when and where to find a party in Anguilla and the best strategy for keeping it cheap. ('Sandy Bay on Sunday...and you don't pay to go in. So if you feel tired after an hour or two - and you do sometimes - you can leave and you don't lose out.'). He was less keen on St Martin's. He used to live there but he '...had to keep dogs. If you lie down in the street here you might not wake up. There's no crime in Anguilla' which, (Anne Hammick,) 'has to have the most expensive cruising permit in the Caribbean'.

Charm and willingness....

Clearing in and out were pretty humiliating processes. I cleared in at the Police Station which used to be the place...it's all been changing. There is a window to which you are directed. You take a number - mine was 57. After half an hour you are summoned to the window where people from all over the archipelago are trying to obtain work permits, visas to remain another 90 days, pay parking fines....whatever. My good fortune was compounded by following a very irate German yachtsman. He wanted more than a ninety day visa.

'You don't understand. I am waiting for parts and the date of arrival is indeterminate. I must

have more than ninety days'. He was told to go to immigration and return the following day. This was evidently not his first crack at it so,

'You tell me tomorrow. (Heavy sarcasm,) So! then there is another form and tomorrow again. And who do I see? This man here? This man?'

Clearly, my call at the window was going to be anything but sweetness and light. So good to be white at times like this. Positively perspiring charm and willingness to oblige but knowing that a pilgrimage in bare feet to Ras Tafari would be more fun, I asked with no cynicism,

'May I clear a yacht in?' The reply was made with a beatific smile (I *had* made his day - so good to know): "Over there"

Over there was a sergeant's desk. Communications were made through a small slit in the soundproof glass just above waist level.

'May I clear a boat in please?'

A reply was made which was inaudible. He hadn't stooped to speak through the slot and I had not stooped to listen. I repeated my request. He repeated his answer, now clearly a negative one. Now hunched over and speaking through the slot I said, 'I'm very sorry but I just can't hear what you're saying. It's quite noisy out here' and you're mumbling and I don't want to be told to bugger off somewhere else, not after nearly an hour.

'You got to clear in at the commercial port, you know where that is?'

'I'm sorry. I just got here. I don't know where anywhere is'

'You know where Ah Foo's store is?'

'Who?'

'Ah Foo'

'I beg your pardon?'

A form was passed through the slot. I signed it. Passports were not taken. The details were not read. A stamp made it official. I was out of there sharpish but not before seeing a brisk young American charter-skipper thanking the sergeant profusely for sending him on the very long, very hot, walk down to the commercial harbour to clear in. Smug Mode!

But that's where I had to clear out. Oh what a change. Modern office. Lady with computer. Sent up four steps to...you guessed it:

a window with a slot in it. But this slot could only be talked through on your knees. I almost smiled. But the questions got more insistent (computers thrive on information) and I got less and less complacent. For, where was *O-Flo*? In France. Where was I? In Holland - on my knees. Where, exactly was the boat? Er, on the other side of the Lagoon. Gross tonnage? Net tonnage? (What's that?) Registration document? What! But after a while I got a pretty piece of paper with a signed stamp on it and a lot of Dutch full of Gee's and double Ee's. Laser printed. I was told to pay two dollars & go next door to Immigration. I paid and left without doing so. The police had entered nothing on the crew list and another hour on my knees was more than I could take. A gunboat did not open fire on us as we left Marigot under motor and in the bus whom did I meet but designer Michael Pocock with his wife Pat returning from a shopping run and a circumnavigation in *Blackjack*. I expect you've heard of QIL, the radical monohull he designed for Mary Falk, the single-handed yachtswoman - and others, no doubt. I've always liked the thinking in his designs and I hope he has fair winds up the coast of the US and across the Atlantic to the UK in August, September. He made encouraging remarks about my plans to sail westward across the Australian Bight (going southabout Australia), a passage he had completed the year before in February.

It was all under motor to St Barts and, at last, Andy hooked a fish with a lure newly-made from a shredded coffee bag. The victim was a 3 foot Barracuda with teeth like Dracula. In the Lagoon, a friend of Mel's had joined us for some moments whilst his children played and took the opportunity to show us his thumb which had recently been used for a sport his kids had called, 'Throw the Barracuda'. His lad had hooked the Barracuda and Bob had removed it very professionally from the spinner. The trouble started when the children wanted a picture of the Barracuda. Bob had reached down and as, he said, his hand passed the Barracuda's (very beady) eye, it whipped round and clamped itself onto his thumb.

He jerked his hand upwards with a loud 'Aaaarrggghh!!!' and the Barracuda held onto his thumb throughout the accelerative part of the arc. It was at shoulder level that the fibrous material in his thumb gave up the unequal struggle to maintain a largish Barracuda in Earth Orbit and by conveniently shredding permitted the Barracuda to take flight. Hence 'Throwing the Barracuda'. Bob's thumb? Think of red-cabbage coleslaw, sea anemones, things gory and raw - you'll get the picture. With this in mind I took care when raising the 'Cuda to Andy's groin for the obligatory photograph to grip it firmly behind the gills and before the tail and not, under any provocation, to lose my concentration. We steamed it in tinfoil with soy and lemonjuice and it was firm and white and we did not suffer from

want of an appropriate description) ran a Caterpillar diesel generator all night and some clots with speed boats are towing water-skiers through the swimmers. Could be Sandown Isle of Wight.

But it ain't!

Day 2 1994 Prickly Bay, Grenada.

Prickly Bay is deeply inset on the south coast of Grenada. At the entrance to the Bay a clean 3' offshore wave peels left over coral and sand. Paul, Andy & Kev have paddled over there for their 4th surf (so rare and precious is a wave in the Caribbean). On the beach of the Calabash Hotel, in front of which we lie to anchor, five men and a woman have just pulled in a net full of small fish

'Throw the Barracuda'

Ciguatera. Though rated as poor food it was lovely. Don't believe all you're told.

Our last gift from St Martin's was abundant news of our friends Rick and Jo who are (slowly) circumnavigating in *Kate Cooley* their 53' Wharram - with four children. This comes to mind because some inhabitants of the Lagoon, Bob and Judy (another Bob) showed me their last letter in which Henry, now ?11, had just hooked a 40 pound Dorado just before Cartagena. We await the pleasure!

St Barts is great. We just had tea...3 Parrot fish; 2 Squirrelfish; a Goatfish; 2 Bream of sorts and a Spanish Grunt. (We are 10). There is a pretty walk around the cliff from Anse des Colombiers.

There is a wave over very shallow live coral and the inhabitants who (Anne Hammick) 'don't go in for miscegenation'. All have serious (white) faces and long jaws. They are of Breton and Norman extraction but you can't help feeling that the Habsbourgs had a hand in the matter - so to speak. But who's complaining? The water's clean and the Bay pretty but definitely not (*pace* Anne Hammick) 'deserted'. Some Americans are getting raucous on a Jeantot charter cat near us. Last night a vast Charter liner (for

and some larger Yellow Jacks which leaped out as the net was gathered. The fish seem to materialise in the air like a thought, silver, and re-enter the water without a splash - lost, like a memory. It is only when they are gathered in the net on the beach that you can be sure of their existence. And then they are dead.

Those of us who are surfers aboard *Orinoco Flo* have had to be content to find the Caribbean on its own terms. Occasional dicey, fun surfs over live coral when our leeward anchorage was close to a swell-exposed point or bay. We've had waves in St Martin, St Barts, north St Lucia near Rodney Bay and here in Grenada. The real discovery has been inland: the high slopes of the Dominican rainforest and what we have learned of the precarious life of the natives.

[To be continued

