

Divided Sky – Caribbean

Posted: April 11, 2013



Grenada

Our first port of call in the Caribbean was Prickly Bay, Grenada. We arrived on 27 January 2013, the very day of a party at Roger's Barefoot Beach Hut on Hog Island, which was only a short sail from Prickly Bay after customs and immigration clearance. Our scheduled rendezvous with a friend's son at the BBQ was accomplished, but only by the skin of our teeth!

The definition of cruising is: "working on your boat in exotic locations." This was exactly what we did whilst in Grenada. The first week was dealing with necessities: fuel, water, propane (we ran out the day after we arrived, as Jeanne was heating coffee water to go with baked scones), laundry, fresh provisions, finding internet access, and ordering a new prop and line for our tow generator from the USA. Then we dealt with repairs: sail-maker, canvas-maker for new cockpit cushions, new batteries, haul-out for removing our garden of barnacles (Who said that we weren't gardeners?), and then anti-fouling, tightening the rudder bearing, greasing the winches, polishing the topsides, and cleaning the boat.

In between the boat jobs there were some pleasurable excursions to the local Workboat Races plus sightseeing around the beautiful, lush island with its unusual Mona monkeys, nutmeg factory and chocolate factory all on our tour. The locals were extremely helpful and friendly and the facilities for yachts were excellent, with many items being duty-free. We hauled the yacht at Spice Island Marine Services in Prickly Bay, a world-class facility conveniently situated next to De Big Fish restaurant, Budget Marine Chandlery, and Turbulence Sail Repairs.

There even was a Grenada Cruisers' Net every morning on the CH 66 VHF radio to announce events and help cruisers find what they might need around the island. Local transport was easy and cheap (\$1AUS into town), with a twice weekly cruiser shopping bus from various dinghy dock locations, with stops at the chandleries, bakeries, food stores and banks for \$4AUS (10 Eastern Caribbean dollars). We managed to leave a wake of cash behind us everywhere we went.

There were numerous local foods and dishes to try: Roti, Oil Down, Crab Back, Jerk Chicken, fish cakes, Lambi (conch), breadfruit chips, plus lovely fresh fruits and vegetables. Rum was cheap and Carib beer was okay too. The local market in St. Georges was a colourful and busy place to shop, but there was also a large IGA and Foodland. Small local fishing boats sold crayfish in the anchorage boat-to-boat, and we managed to score a 1.2kg lovely cray for around \$17 (friends said that we paid too much and should have bargained more!)

The weather was perfect – around 28c every day. Swimming was delightful in the warm, turquoise water, at any number of possible lovely anchorages. Why leave?



Bonaire

A fast passage with strong easterly trade winds found us at Bonaire in 3 days from Grenada. This environmentally conscious island country (one of the Dutch “ABC” islands along with Aruba and Curacao) had placed moorings (\$10US per day) for cruising yachts along the shoreline to protect the reef areas. Considering that Bonaire is meant to be one of the three best dive sites in the world, this made sense, and also made it easy for us to venture ashore without worries about the yacht dragging anchor over the coral.

Bonaire was a laid back island with a population of about 11,000 people. The focus was on scuba diving, wind surfing and kite surfing. We found another activity there – Cactus liqueur drinking at the Cadushy Distillery with the owners who were planning a trip to Australia. Also, many of the yachts here were bound for Panama and the Pacific, so we were beginning to link up with a variety of people who we were likely to see again later.

Provisioning here was excellent. Colin found packages of 17 meaty, frozen pork chops for \$16.95US and frozen Mahi Mahi (from Vietnam?) @ 5x220g for \$11.95US. Dutch products were abundant, with jarred fruits and vegetables looking lovely on the shelves.

An interesting fact about Bonaire was in their tourist brochure. The question was raised: “Why were the beaches so white in Bonaire?” The answer was that parrotfish, which nibbled on the white coral, excreted one ton of fine, white, sandy poo per year per parrotfish. Bonaire had a lot of parrotfish!

In addition to parrotfish, there was a large population of flamingos on Bonaire. We were lucky enough to have seen many quite close up, after having looked at so many from a distance in Namibia and South Africa during our trip there in 2010. We also saw the largest iguana we’ve ever seen – a rival for Godzilla – with a tail about 7’ long.

We asked ourselves, “Why leave this lovely turquoise oasis?” But after three days we set sail for another very rolly but quick ½ day passage to Curacao.



Curacao

The Dutch historical influence was clearly visible in Curacao, especially at the capital, Willemstad, which resembled a colourful, Caribbean version of Amsterdam with its Dutch style buildings adjacent to old Fort Amsterdam. Col was enamoured with the swing foot bridge which connected the two sides of Willemstad across the river, and opened for river shipping traffic.

Most yachts anchored south of the capital in a large protected bay called Spanish Waters. This was where we put the pick down after locating the narrow, tricky entrance to the bay. Transport was very convenient from here. The \$1US local bus ran us into the main town to clear customs and immigration. From the dingy dock, a free supermarket shuttle ran every day at 9:30 am to the local Spar grocery store. As in Bonaire, prices were good on many Dutch items after we remembered to convert prices from Dutch Caribbean Guilders to US Dollars.

Panama

With a favourable wind forecast we set sail westward. Most of the journey was a thrill-seeking, white-knuckle roller-coaster ride thru valleys and peaks of 3-4.5m waves. We had never heard the term "hazardous sea state" until son-in-law Mike sent us an updated weather forecast for coastal Columbia, where we were at the time. But then we really didn't need to be told that the seas were hazardous, as we had already had salt water dumps from rogue waves on: our aft cabin bed and tinned food storage lockers (with 5 months of tinned food for the Pacific crossing); the galley (where our last fresh bread was being readied for lunch sandwiches); and us. Since the temperature was around 30c, the boat was a sauna, with everything inside wet and the boat totally closed up, including hatch boards, to prevent further dumps. Which, of course we didn't have.

The auto pilot was unable to handle the sea state, so we hove-to for the night. By morning, although the seas were higher, the conditions had improved as the waves were more consistently from the northeast, as was the wind. The auto pilot could handle the downwind run, so we carried onwards.

It was a total relief to drop the anchor in the turquoise waters of the San Blas Islands on the coast of Panama. The coconut palms and white sand beaches presented the image of idyllic destinations - - another exotic location in which to do boat work. All of the food lockers had to be emptied, washed, cleaned, and tins sorted by rust levels. Bedding, mattresses, pillows, rugs, rope lockers, all had to be washed and dried. No time could be wasted, as the family was scheduled to arrive shortly in Panama for the Canal transit. Even though the nearby reef called out to us for snorkelling, we could only delay for one full day, but two fabulous nights in calm water before the overnight passage to Colon at the entrance to the Panama Canal.

We were fortunate to have met a couple from Montreal who wintered in Curacao. They had a car and took us out for a day of eating, drinking and shopping. The drinking, of course, required a visit to the world famous blue Curacao liqueur factory where we sampled the multiple varieties of liqueur produced including traditional Curacao, plus Rum, Chocolate, and Coffee liqueurs.

It was hard to leave such a terrific island, with friendly people, charm, character, good food and drink and a safe anchorage, but onward we sailed to Panama.

We were last in the San Blas Islands in 1995, and noticed a marked socio-economic change to the local Kuna Indian culture since then. Previously we were inundated with gold jewelled (including nose rings) Kuna Indian women selling molas (reverse applique handwork) from paddled dugout canoes whilst the raggedly attired men fished from sailing dugouts. Someone obviously came up with the revolutionary idea of anchoring fees. Now the chief motors around to all of the yachts collecting \$10 per month to anchor. Only one mola-selling Kuna woman was seen, and only a single sailing dugout was spotted. Sad. Hopefully this "free" income source will not stop the women from their remarkable, traditional hand-craftsmanship, but it is bound to have an influence on the historically matrilineal, matriarchal society.

Our Panama Canal transit has been scheduled for Friday, 22 March 2013. We'll keep you posted as further adventures unfold!