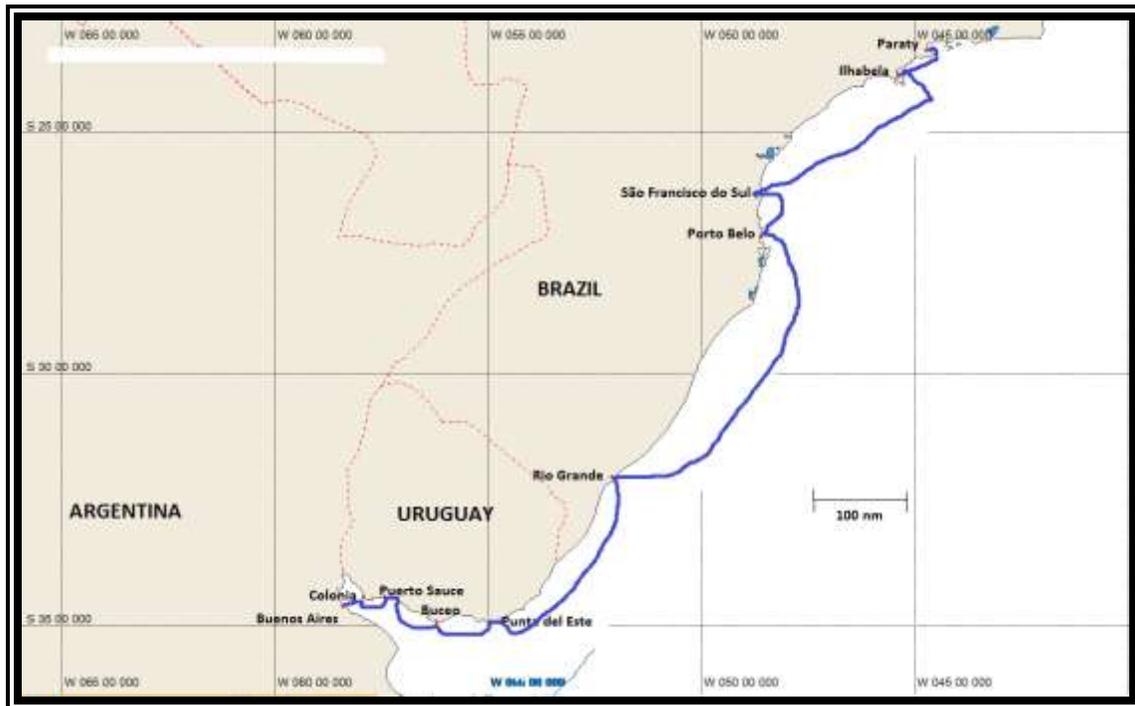


Three Drunks In A Boat
(To Say Nothing of the Skipper)
with apologies to Jerome K Jerome

Mina²'s South American Cruise
2010

by Tim Barker



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By tradition most of the RCC boats that sail the South Atlantic don't have any form of self-steering and some of them don't even have an engine, so I felt a bit of a wimp baulking at the idea of hand-steering *Mina²*, my Oyster 485, half-way down the coast of South America when the autopilot died. But in Paraty, a delightful old colonial town mid way between Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, there were worse places to be holed up whilst I waited for old mates Lawrence, Tom and Richard to fly in from the UK. They were to join me for the next two weeks whilst we dived south 1,000nm to Uruguay. On their arrival at the marina, I embraced the three reprobates with tears in my eyes, mainly because buried in their overweight luggage were all the new spares necessary to get us back on the high seas again.

The following morning I bade a tearful farewell to the Downstairs Skipper, as she flew back to Buenos Aires to see her mother, whilst I was left with a bunch of drunks to negotiate the long and dangerous passages south to Uruguay. It was going to be tough and probably quite unpleasant.



The colonial town of Paraty

I had split our cruise into seven passages ranging from a nice day sail of 50nm, up to a three-day passage of 450nm between Porto Belo and Rio Grande. I had tried to select stopovers which would be of interest to the Drunks so that they could get to see a bit of Brazil, as well as get some good sailing in.



The skipper before the trouble arrived ... being The Three Drunks.

Our first passage was an overnight sail of 70nm from Paraty down to Ilhabela, a very pretty island with massive mountains of volcanic rock covered with the ubiquitous rain forest and palm trees. Ilhabela is reputedly also home to the biggest colony of the dreaded *borrachudo*, a small insect with a big bite. You never see them coming and the first thing you notice is a pinprick of blood. Then the trouble starts. The itch is ten times as bad as a mosquito bite and they last ten times as long.

After a very pleasant 11-hour sail with the wind behind us, we picked up a mooring off the Yacht Club de Ilhabela, and even though it was only 0730 the Drunks insisted we kept the age-old *Mina*² tradition of an “anchor nip”. As we sat drinking the early morning tonic, Tom yelped. There was a telltale pinprick of blood on his arm. The first of the *borrachudos* had arrived and we all dived for the cans of Deet.

We dinghied ashore to check in with the yacht club for our overnight stay. Security was tight and the bureaucracy bewildering. To stay one night on one of their mooring buoys, why did they need to know exactly what frequencies all my various radios transmitted on, and how many flares, lifejackets and fire extinguishers we had on board? To get our passes that would grant us entry to the yacht club, they needed an ID number. We’d left our passports on board, but they seemed happy with the number of Tom’s Esher & District Senior Citizens Bus Pass, Lawrence’s membership number of the National Farmers’ Union, and the number of an out of date Visa card that I carry to hand over in case of muggings.

After a lazy day in Ilhabela we set sail for the two-day 235-mile passage to São Francisco do Sul. We were sailing along about 40nm offshore when into the cockpit swooped a massive moth. As it fluttered around, the Drunks went berserk waving their arms around and shrieking like a bunch of girls. Anyone would have thought it was a vampire bat.



The moth that caused pandemonium

This particular part of the coast is renowned for its lack of wind but we were lucky enough to have sufficient breeze to sail most of the passage. But it remained cloudy and cool and once out of the sight of land it was, as Richard said, pretty much the same as sailing across Lyme Bay. Pleasant enough nevertheless.

São Francisco do Sul, 10nm up a wide river, is one of the oldest towns in Brazil. Settled in 1660 by whalers from the Azores, many of the buildings, particularly on the riverfront, are old and attractive reminders of the town's colonial past. It has been made a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the buildings are slowly being renovated. We arrived in torrential rain, anchored off the riverfront, and went ashore for a long and rather good lunch of moqueca (fish stew) to get out of the rain.

We were now in the build up to Christmas and the town council had adorned the riverfront with elaborate illuminated Christmas decorations cleverly fashioned from discarded plastic water bottles. They included, rather incongruously in a place where the average temperature on Christmas day is about 30°C, delightful little snow men standing on beds of artificial snow.

The Drunks had taken to caipirinhas in a big way on health grounds. A caipirinha is the Brazilian cocktail made from limes, sugar and cachaça, the local firewater made from sugar cane. Tom, who is medically qualified (he's a dentist), authoritatively advised us that in the quantities they were drinking, they would be provided with their five-a-day; the sugar would provide them with all the energy they needed, and there would be little chance of contracting scurvy. The Drunks needed no further encouragement.



Seasonal decorations in São Francisco do Sul

Our visit to São Francisco do Sul was a pit-stop and after our leisurely lunch and a walk round the wet town we motored back out of the river and sailed overnight to Porto Belo 70nm south. Just after dawn as we were motoring in windless conditions, I was awoken by the sounds of panic on deck.

'No - turn left. He's indicating us to turn left'.

'We can't turn left or we'll run into his net!'

I was on deck in half a second to see a small fishing boat about 50 metres away with a man jumping up and down and frantically waving his arms. He had a long net out of the back of the boat and had been slowly motoring in a large circle, closing the net and trapping the fish. The Drunks had successfully navigated us right into the middle of his net circle. This would be the fisherman's biggest catch ever. But eventually we found a small gap between the fishing boat and the end of his net and shot out to freedom, much to everyone's relief.

We arrived in Porto Belo at 0645, a delightful bay with a number of beautiful anchorages, in one of which we dropped the hook for another chilled out day.

Tom and Lawrence had been sharing the bunk cabin and Tom, who is fastidious in matters of personal hygiene, had his day spoilt by discovering that he and Lawrence had identical underpants and had inadvertently been sharing a pair.

Meanwhile Lawrence had been in a state of excitement. It was his 68th birthday.

What a fuss.

We had to start the celebrations the previous night at 2200 (midnight UK time) by singing "Happy Birthday" several times, followed by "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow" and

drinking toast after toast to his health and happiness. The following morning Lawrence was up early, bouncing around like Tigger and opening all his presents. Richard, in his usual grumpy mood after being woken prematurely said 'If he's a sixty-eight year old, why does he behave like a six-to-eight year old?'

We were scheduled to leave for the long three-day leg down to Rio Grande at midday. But by the late morning the skies opened and it was chucking it down in biblical proportions, so we decided to hunker down and leave at first light the following morning.

The passage to Rio Grande was 450nm long, not just because we like a long passage, but down this stretch of coast there are no safe havens at all, so if you get caught out in thick weather – probably blowing you onto the inhospitable shore – you're stuffed. The four day forecast was that for the first 18 hours we would be beating into a moderate wind, and thereafter we would have the wind directly behind us. Not ideal, but it wasn't threatening.

After six hours of motoring, the wind filled in, as promised, bang on the nose. We were expecting around 20 knots of wind. We got it, and it was quite pleasant. The wind picked up to 25 knots and it started getting a little wet and lumpy. The sky all around us turned grey, then black. The wind continued to strengthen and the sea to get higher. By this time we were more than 30nm offshore. We reefed right down until a full gale was shrieking through the rigging, spray whipping horizontally across the deck. The wind speed over the deck was gusting nearly 50 knots. One thing that *Mina*² is good at is shouldering her way into strong winds and big seas, but for all of us it was distinctly uncomfortable. However, we toughed it out and after a few hours the wind began to abate slowly.

A consequence of the unexpected conditions was that none of the Drunks had felt inclined to drink any alcohol for 24 hours and they were now showing signs of withdrawal symptoms - crashing headaches, the shakes and vomiting. The vomiting was actually suffered by only one of the Drunks, and that may have had more to do with the sea conditions. But no names, not least because I've been paid quite a lot of money by Richard not to expose the sufferer's identity.

The following morning, conditions could not have been more different. The wind had eased, the waves had subsided, the sun was shining and the wind had backed round to the east allowing us to romp merrily along on a beam reach. Perfect conditions – for the moment.

The cherry on the cake was that we caught a large plump dorado (I think) which would probably do us for about three meals, starting at lunch time.



Lawrence catches lunch

I had appointed Richard as Entertainments Officer. Due to a deep-seated insecurity he likes titles and took his responsibilities seriously. At home he's very keen on Am Dram (or, in his case, Ham Dram) and he had brought along the score and libretto of HMS Pinafore for us to perform. I was lucky enough to be cast as the Captain of the ship, Captain Corcoran. At rehearsals all the crew sang jolly songs about what a good captain I am, and gave me three cheers and stuff. It was brilliant. It was the only time I was treated with any respect on board. It was just a shame it was only play-acting.

The problem is that just because, between them, the Drunks have more than 100 years offshore experience and over 60 years of yacht ownership, they think they can sail. They strut around like they own the boat, helping themselves to my booze and when they were not completely ignoring me they were countermanding my every decision. Richard was particularly bad. He was already Entertainments Officer and Shitmeister (he was responsible for opening and closing the holding tank), but he objected to the title of Watch Keeper and insisted everyone called him Watch Leader (despite the fact that with a one-man watch system there's no one to lead).. Two days into the cruise and he'd promoted himself to Watch Captain and within a week he was throwing his not inconsiderable weight around, had taken to wearing my smart naval cap with "Cape Horn & Patagonia" in gold letters on it, and calling himself Admiral of The Watch.



The Admiral of The Watch before lunch

..... and after lunch

One of the things that really irritated me were the constant inane questions from the Drunks, always delivered in a pathetic whine.

'Ti-im, where's the corkscrew?'

'Ti-im, how do I open this bottle of cachaça?'

'Ti-im, there don't appear to be any cans of beer in the fridge.'

'Ti-im, I've forgotten how to tie my shoelaces'

I mean, do I have to do EVERY damned thing on this boat. On those rare occasions when I had managed to retire to my cabin for a bit of peace, even with their befuddled brains they worked out a way of getting me back up on deck. All they had to do was stand in the cockpit and in a stage whisper say something like 'That's big – and it's coming straight for us.' Within a nanosecond I would pop up through the companionway like a Jack-In-A-Box to be asked yet another inane question.

We were now about 100nm into the 450nm passage – the one with no safe havens. Nowhere to go if there was unexpected trouble. And unexpected trouble was on its way. I had downloaded the latest forecast and all of a sudden very strong southerly winds were predicted to reach Rio Grande in a couple of days. These southerlies sweep up from Argentina and are often preceded by the legendary Pampero; the killer wind that hits you like a mallet and with speeds up to 100 knots. This coastline and the River Plate are strewn with wrecks, victims of the Pampero. Get caught up in one, and all you pray for is that you survive.

When we received this news, we had reached the point of no return – there was no way we could fight our way back 100nm against the strong winds and waves. So we were now rushing at the maximum possible speed with the wind right behind us in a desperate dash to get into Rio Grande before the front arrived. The boat was slewing around, surfing down the fronts of the waves at terrific speeds. We were rolling heavily and sleep was difficult.

The passage continued lively. Over the 2 days and 22 hours we were screaming along for most of the time at 8 knots or more in big seas. Apart from the ghastly first night when we were beating into a gale in heavy pounding seas, we had the wind from our side or

behind us, so it wasn't too wet. It was an epic harum-scarum roller-coaster ride. Great fun, tinged with apprehension that the front might beat us to Rio Grande.



Lawrence enjoys the lively conditions

We arrived in record time in Rio Grande and within an hour of tying up the wind had swung round to the south as predicted, and was blowing F9. We'd been lucky. We had stopped at Rio Grande for two reasons: first, it was the only safe haven in 700nm of coast, and secondly to go through the tortuous bureaucracy of clearing us and the boat out of Brazil. After just three hours sleep (making, for me, a total of about five hours sleep in two days) we all trudged off in the scorching heat to do the rounds of Immigration, Customs and Port Captain - all located at diametrically opposite ends of the town. The total exercise took more than five hours.

Once the front had passed through, the following afternoon we slipped our lines and set the sails. This was to be our last long passage of 250nm southwest to Punta Del Este in Uruguay. The forecast was for moderate to fresh winds from the northeast.

It was a beautiful evening gently sailing down the coast with the sun setting on our starboard bow. Well after dark, we saw a bright light on the horizon. Within minutes it was clear that, whatever it was, it was moving towards us very fast. Our AIS picked the vessel up and told us that it was travelling towards us on a collision course at nearly 25 knots. By now we had a very strong following wind, big seas, poled out foresail and strapped down mainsail. We were thundering along at nearly 10 knots and we would not be able to react quickly enough to get out of their way. At a closing speed of 35 knots even a glancing blow would be uncomfortable. Impact would be within five minutes. The AIS also gave me the name of the vessel. It was my old friend *MSC Musica*, a rather upmarket cruise ship that I had come across a number of times at sea and in harbours throughout the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. We now had four minutes to impact. I called them on VHF radio. No response. The profile was much bigger now and we could

clearly see their large bow wave reflecting in the moonlight. Three minutes to impact, I called them again. This time the radio crackled back “Mina² this is MSC Musica, go ahead, over”. I explained that I was the tiny pinprick of green and red light two miles dead ahead of him, and I had neither the time nor ability to get out of their way. “I see you and understand the situation. I am altering course to starboard now. I will pass you red to red, port to port”. A wave of relief came over me. His bow slowly turned away from us. I thanked the captain who wished us all a good cruise. The incident was over as he rushed past us less than half a mile away. It would have been ironic to have seen and admired the ship so many times before, and then to be run down by her.

Punta del Este in Uruguay is the St Tropez of the South American Riviera. It is on a small peninsula on one side of which are the surfing waves of the South Atlantic and on the other the placid waters of the River Plate. Both sides are fringed with spectacular beaches of clean white sand stretching for several miles. But the Drunks had little time to enjoy this holiday paradise. They had drunk the boat dry and there was nothing for them to stay for. They packed their bags, caught the fast ferry to Buenos Aires 200 miles across the River Plate and flew back home to the UK.



The Three Drunks desert the now boozeless ship

In the two weeks that Richard, Lawrence and Tom were on board for the big push south, we had travelled from the tropics where the high mountains were covered with lush rain forest from which came the sounds of parrots and monkeys, and the long sandy beaches were fringed with palm trees. In the sky above circled magnificent frigate birds and vultures. As we moved south they were replaced by petrels of every variety that swoop over and round the waves, their wingtips almost touching the water. The landscape along the southern Brazilian and Uruguayan coast is of low undulating hills. Yes, less dramatic but, in its own way, equally beautiful. I had been surprised at the relative strength of

winds that meant we had enjoyed great sailing for pretty much all of the 1,000nm. It had been brilliant sailing but I doubt if the Drunks will remember anything of it.

However, the cruise was not quite over. If anyone suggested to me 20 years ago that one day I would sail from my home city of London to the Downstairs Skipper's home city of Buenos Aires, I would never have believed it possible. But we now had just 200nm to go. The DS arrived by ferry and the two of us made our way down the coast in short, easy hops to the delightful colonial town of Colonia Del Sacramento. Looking 27nm across the muddy brown waters of the River Plate we could just see the skyscrapers of our destination - the fabulous cosmopolitan city of Buenos Aires.



Colonia del Sacramento

Our great friends, Christine and Fernando wrenched themselves away from all the Christmas preparations at home in Buenos Aires and took the ferry over to Colonia to join us for the final leg of our long adventure.

We cast off at 1300 for the final passage across the River Plate. The wind was light, the brown river water flat, and we sailed gently and slowly across. Very tranquil.

We crossed the dredged shipping channel that marks the boundary between Uruguay and Argentina and with great ceremony it was The Downstairs Skipper who lowered the Uruguayan courtesy flag from the cross trees and proudly hoisted in its place the Argentine flag.



The Downstairs Skipper raises her national flag

Yachts in South America do not make a great show of their national flag. No large ensign flowing from a wooden staff, most make do with a tiny, faded and flimsy flag roughly tied to their backstay. It had been suggested to me that given the tension between Argentina and Britain over the Falklands Islands that I replace my five foot long British ensign with a pocket handkerchief sized one. Whilst I may do that later, I was not prepared to compromise my standards for my initial entry into the country. Indeed I reacted against the very thought of diluting my national pride by cranking the gramophone up to max vol and, whilst sailing into Argentine waters, playing some rousing renditions of Land of Hope & Glory, Rule Britannia and finishing with the National Anthem.

This might be considered somewhat provocative with Fernando on board. Fernando is a passionate Argentine nationalist who had already been through all my pilot books and charts, roughly scoring out any mention of the Falklands and replacing the offending word with “Islas Malvinas”. But, bless him, he clearly understood the importance of the moment to me and he uttered not one word in protest, not least because I had bound and gagged him, and tied him to the mast as a precaution.



Fernando the passionate Argentine - not a word of complaint

At 1730 on 21 December we tied up at the Yacht Club Argentino in their splendid headquarters marina conveniently placed in the centre of the DS's home city, and opened a bottle of champagne. A truly emotional moment for both the DS and me and the end of another epic cruise.



Celebrating our arrival in Buenos Aires, and Mina²'s mooring there