

Unexpurgated Blog of the Amazonian Cruise of Mina2

October 2012 to February 2013

by

Tim Barker

Position 22:57S 043:06.4W
Date: 9 November 2012

Mina2 Amazonian Cruise 2012

I would like to announce that the **Mina2 Amazonian Cruise 2012** started today as scheduled. But it hasn't. We are still strapped to the dock in Rio de Janeiro and we're not likely to be leaving any time soon. Strong winds are forecast from the north (the direction in which we are travelling) for the next few days.

Being a horny-handed Antarcican for whom 60+ knots of wind and mountainous seas are situation normal, it never occurred to me that a mere half-gale on the nose would be a barrier to starting our cruise, but apparently it is. The crew have been grumbling already, and we haven't even started yet. Apparently, they do this for fun and starting a cruise being bucketed around trying to fight your way to windward is not considered fun. Pathetic. For the moment, I'm pretending to go along with them, so we're kicking our heels, presumably until there's so little wind we'll have to motor round South America.

So who are these wimps ...

Meet The Crew

Lawrence "The Elf" Wells. Well known to regular readers, Lawrence used to be one of my favourite boat-buddies having sailed countless thousands of miles on Mina2 over the years. Veteran of the fantastic roller-coaster Force 9 ride up the South Atlantic from the bottom of South America last March, he now seems to have gone soft. It's probably his age, which is considerable.

Sally Livsey-Davies. The most experienced sailor ever to have stepped on board Mina2. I first met Sally sailing down the coast of West Africa in 2009 when she was a guest on board Phil'n'Norma's lovely MinnieB. She ran a sailing school in Northern Ireland before becoming one of the few female professional skippers on luxury yachts (including a couple of Oyster 485's, so she already knows more about Mina2 than I do). She's sailed zillions of miles including many Transatlantic crossings. To cap it all, Sally is a Yachtmaster Instructor Examiner (I suspect she taught Tom Cunliffe all he knows). So she'll keep us all on our toes, but at least we won't have any difficulty in identifying, from the lights or shapes, a dredger (port dredge deployed) that is simultaneously towing a couple of pair trawlers.



Lawrence and Sally either side of Susy who has been providing us with help and advice

Sally and I are getting to know each other. A couple things I have learnt about Sally so far is that after one caipirinha she giggles a lot. And after two she's dancing on the new cockpit table. Also, she is very keen on hygiene, verging on obsessive, which may be a problem on Mina2. You can't even THINK about chicken, let alone touch one, without scrubbing one's hands in bactericide several times. And she's Welsh, but no-one's perfect.

... and now the good news ... yes, **Pet Officer Snoopy** is back with us again! There was an expectation that after his Antarctic exertions, he might not be up for another long cruise and instead would spend the winter hibernating in the DS's undies draw back in London. But the plucky little fellow would have none of that and we're all delighted to have him back on board. What's more he has a new friend. On being introduced to PO Snoopy, Sally confessed that there was a stowaway on board. Somewhat sheepishly she went to her cabin and produced **Jolly Wodger**, a splendid little fellow who is, like Sally, tremendously experienced with more than 125,000 sea miles under his keel. I was concerned that PO Snoopy might have his wet nose put out of joint. Not a bit of it. PO Snoopy snapped to attention, gave his new shipmate a smart salute and they are now the best of friends, bunking up together in Snoopy's bowl.



Pet Officer Snoopy and his new mate Jolly Wodger

There has been a prelude that has got us here in Rio ready for our cruise. I came out to Bracuhy at the beginning of October and spent 10 days getting the boat ready before the Downstairs Skipper flew out, arriving like the Queen of Sheba, expecting a well-deserved two week holiday cruising round the Bay of Ilha Grande before making our way 60 miles east to Rio. It was not to be. We headed out into the bay under motor and were half way to our first idyllic anchorage in a small bay when the engine conked out. Rusty old seamanship skills were abruptly brought into play as we entered the small bay under sail, swung the boat round and dropped the anchor. We spent the first evening of our holiday changing fuel filters, bleeding the fuel lines and, eventually, managing to get the engine going again.

But the following day, we had hardly got out of the bay, motoring to our next idyllic anchorage, when the engine conked out yet again. With the batteries running low, I started the generator and that too failed. Things weren't going well. We put the holiday on hold, and the moment the wind picked up we sailed to a boat yard and got a mechanic out to help diagnose the problem. It transpired we had a very bad case of diesel bug. Diesel bug is a fungal/bacterial growth that, once present in the diesel tank, spreads rapidly. With a sticky toffee like constituency it immediately blocks all the fuel lines and filters and has to be eliminated. The rest of the story is a little dull and technical, but suffice to say we HOPE that we have now solved the problem. Time will tell. Notwithstanding this on-going crisis, the DS and I did manage to get to some wonderful places in Ilha Grande, so her holiday was salvaged to an extent before she flew on to Buenos Aires to see her mum (99 last September).

Lawrence and Sally joined me three days ago and our major task before we left was to provision for the next six or seven weeks. Armed with an 11-page shopping list, which Sally had drawn up, we headed for the supermarket. Six hours later (checking out our six full supermarket trolleys took an hour in itself), I was presented with the printout. It was three metres long and had a very large figure at the bottom. With a flourish, I presented my American Express card which, when swiped, put the Amex anti-fraud computer into meltdown and the transaction was unhelpfully declined.

Luckily Visa were more accommodating. The goods were delivered to the boat this morning and it has taken most of the day to divide, vacuum pack, label and stow. Mina2 is now a few inches down on her marks.



The biggest provisioning trip in the world – this is only a small part of it

So here we are, “storm”bound in Rio and champing at the bit to get going. At the moment the forecasts indicate that we will have a weather window in three days time. I jolly well hope so.

Our Amazonian cruise will be in two parts. This, the first part, will be a cruise with Lawrence and Sally right up and around the coast of Brazil, past the Amazon (we'll be sticking our nose in but won't bother to venture very far upriver). So long as we don't get too delayed too much, the plan is to divide the cruise into five longish passages of between 250 miles (about 2 days) and about 1000 miles (7 to 8 days), stopping off at some really interesting places on the way. Our first destination is Morro de Sao Paulo which is a delightful resort town just south of Salvador. Our final destination will be Kourou in French Guiana at the top of South America where Lawrence and Sally will return home for Christmas.

After Christmas, I will be joined by the DS, my sister Linda, and my bro-in-law John for a cruise along the Guianas – French Guiana, Suriname and Guyana before heading into the Caribbean to visit Trinidad, Tobago and finally Grenada where we will be joined by son Peter before laying Mina2 up in Grenada at the beginning of March.

Position 22:18S 040:56W

Date: 13 November 2012

Off – At Last

At 1400 yesterday, we left the fuel pontoon in Rio and set sail at last for Morro de Sao Paulo, 750 miles north. Hurrah!

Although it's been frustrating not getting off three days ago when we originally planned, in reality we weren't fully ready and we now set off with everything in rather better shape.

On our last evening, we went out to dinner at a churascaria a Brazilian institution where you pay a fixed price and then a queue of waiters ply you with every type of meat you can imagine which is carved off skewers straight onto your plate. It is a vegetarians nightmare, but we loved it.

We had also invited along Susy who is another Brazilian institution, certainly in yacht cruising circles. She and her husband circumnavigated the world way back in the 1970's way before the easy navigation by GPS, and have since lived on the same boat, *Samba*, in Niteroi on the other side of the bay from Rio where Mina2 has been staying. Susy adopts any passing yachts and provides all the help and advice you could possibly want. It would be a load more difficult without her friendly support. But it isn't just passing yachts she adopts. She is foster mother to all the stray cats and dogs around the yacht club who follow her around like the Pied Piper. When we arrived back at the club at the end of the evening Susy said "I must go and feed my bird, she'll be waiting for me". Sure enough, sitting at the entrance to the long pontoon was what I quickly identified as a Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax* from memory) and as Susy strode down the pontoon towards *Samba* she was talking to the heron which followed her. Susy then produced a bag of finely cut chicken and cheese which the heron wolfed down. Absolutely extraordinary.

The strong northerlies that had delayed our departure had finally abated and the wind had swung round to a favourable southwesterly which we revelled in as we sailed out of Rio harbour and out into the open sea. It wasn't to last long. After four hours the

wind died and we were motoring. We are still motoring 24 hours later. And it's raining. But at least we're on our way.

Tropic Watch (as opposed to Autumn Watch). Today I was surprised to see a couple of Black-browed Albatross – in the Tropics at 23 degrees South. Hasn't anyone told these birds that they belong in the Southern Ocean?

And we also had the excitement of seeing two or three large Humpback whales. They come from Antarctica up to the Abrolhos Islands (about 200 miles north of where we are) in the Austral winter to breed and these would have been making their way south again. If we have time, we're hoping to stop briefly at the Abrolhos Islands to see if there are still any there.

Anyway, must dash. Hope to send you something else tomorrow.

Position 19:02S 039:12W

Date: 15 November 2012 1145 UTC (0845 local)

Making Progress But Could Do Better 4/10

After 24 hours of motoring, at last the wind filled in. We have since been sailing in mainly moderate winds from the beam or behind us and we have quickly settled into the routine of a long passage. Being in the tropics, the nights are long with 11 hours of darkness, so we take it in turns to be on watch – three hour watches between 6pm and 6am when it's dark, and four hour watches during the day.

At sea, generally, the air temperature is much the same as the water temperature. Just along the coast from Rio is Cabo Frio – Cape Cold – named because the cold current from the bitter south rises to the surface here. With the water temperature at just 15C the first night was distinctly chilly and had us digging around for our fleeces, but since then the water temperature has risen dramatically to more than 26C, so even at night, the breeze is balmy warm. It can also be pretty wet. If you think that because Brasil is hot, it is also sunny, then think again. Having spent a number of months sailing down the coast of Brasil and now back up again, my experience has been that most of the time it is cloudy with regular downpours of heavy rain. But at least it's warm rain. And our night sailing is often illuminated by flashes of distant lightning reflected off the cloud base.

As we head north we are following the coast line. About 20 miles offshore we are too far away to see land, but there is no sense of isolation here. Oh no. We are on the same course as all the other commercial shipping that plies its way up and down the coast, so a constant lookout needs to be kept for any rapidly approaching leviathan that may be on a collision course, or one that is creeping up on us from behind. But their courses tend to be predictable – unlike the fishing boats. The sea off this coast is shallow – perfect fishing grounds for the fleets that come out of the fishing ports every night. A couple of nights ago it was particularly bad with hundreds of them criss-crossing all around us. Being small wooden boats, few of them show up on the radar and as they ply backwards and forwards with their trawls or nets out, their course is erratic. It's a nightmare as we slalom our way through the fleet and we have already had a couple of encounters much closer than I would have liked. If that wasn't

enough, Brasil is blessed with rich offshore oil and gas reserves and the coastline is littered with enormous production platforms. But at least they don't move. They are the size of small towns; incredibly brightly lit and often with a tall tower belching out orange flames - you certainly don't have difficulty in seeing them. But all of them have numerous support vessels in attendance that meander around creating yet another navigational challenge.

Our navigational skills, and indeed all our seamanship skills, are not just being challenged but assessed as well, I suspect. Having a Yachtmaster Instructor Examiner on board is a two-edged sword. Having spent her entire professional life making sure that everything on board is done correctly, to the highest standards and at the right time, Sally must be appalled at the incompetent amateurism that surrounds her on Mina2. Lawrence and I are in a constant state of nerves, fumbling with our knots and trying to remember which way round the winches the ropes have to go. I can see Sally looking at my rather untidy splices with disdain – the only splice I do really well is splicing the mainbrace which I do regularly. With Lawrence at the helm, in the past I might have said “Larry, right hand down a bit, old boy”. Not now. Now I find myself barking instructions like “Starboard 30 Mister Wells, if you please”. Lawrence, of course, hasn't a clue what I'm talking about and we find ourselves shooting off to the left into the net of some passing fishing boat. I fully expect Sally to start coming up on deck with a clipboard and marking us out of 10.

Position 18:33S 038:57W

Date: 15 November 2012 1910 UTC (1710 local)

Abject And Unreserved Apology

It would appear that I have committed the most terrific faux pas. By referring to Sally by the title that I revere most highly – Yachtmaster Examiner Instructor – rather than complimenting her which was my intention, it seems that I have exposed her to ridicule not just by her friends and family, but by the entire worldwide readership of the Mina2 blog. Even though my earlier blog stated a simple fact, that Sally was a YEI, and the rest of the piece simply highlighted the incompetence of Lawrence and me with no detrimental references to Sally at all, she got the hump big time. She had words with me. Well, actually she didn't have words with me. In fact ever since I hit the “Send” button she hasn't spoken one word to me (apart from when I asked her “What will you have to drink?”). Instead she sits around refusing to do the washing up or clean my heads, moaning “My reputation is ruined”.

So, for the sake of crew harmony, I am very happy to issue an abject and unreserved apology to Sally. I will never again refer to her in the blog as a Yachtmaster Examiner Instructor, but instead will refer to her as the Woman of Experience or, simply, as The Pro.

Position 15:32S 038:33W

Date: 18 November 2012 1400 UTC (Noon local)

Wind and Barnacles Cause Further Delays

About 400 miles north of Rio are a ring of tiny islands about 30 miles off the coast called the Abrolhos Islands. Low-lying and barren save for a handful of palm trees planted in the 19th century to provide sustenance for mariners who were shipwrecked on these treacherous shoals, the islands are now a protected nature reserve. Below the surface of the shallow water are rare corals which provide a rich ecosystem for exotically coloured fish, so the islands are a famous dive site. But they are equally famous for being the spot to which Humpback whales in their hundreds migrate annually from their feeding grounds in Antarctica in order to breed, the cows then returning the following year (or is it two years later?) to give birth to their calves. In July to October they are thick in the water but my research suggested that there were likely to be quite a number still around now in mid-November. Indeed, on two separate occasions on our way north from Rio we had seen Humpbacks swimming south.

It had been our intention to do a pit-stop in the Abrolhos Islands for a few hours to enjoy the spectacle of these magnificent whales tail-slapping, breaching and spy-hopping all around us. There was also now another imperative for stopping there. Ever since we left Rio we have been having a few problems. Our log, which measures the distance we have sailed, is not working. Our bowthruster which is a propeller right at the front of the boat which helps us to manoeuvre under power in confined waters is jammed. Our main propeller is not working properly (for the aficionados, the inexplicable cavitation that we have suffered for the last three years is now considerably worse), and our overall boat speed is sluggish. We needed to dive under the boat and find out what the devil was going on down there.

So at 0600 on Friday morning, having sailed deliberately slowly throughout the night to avoid arriving during the hours of darkness, we sailed into the shallow bay of the Abrolhos Islands and picked up one of the mooring buoys that are laid there for passing yachts and dive boats. Notwithstanding the need to investigate the bottom of the boat, first things first. Sally, The Pro, was to be initiated into one of the great Mina2 traditions – the Anchor Nip. Whenever we tie up or anchor after a passage, regardless of the time of day, we all enjoy a small tot or three. By 0630 The Pro was giggling like a schoolgirl. By 0700 she was unconscious.

A little later in the morning I got into the warm clear water with some goggles on to identify the problems. Just 10 days parked in the petri dish-like water of Rio, the bottom of the boat and the propeller were covered with a forest of small sharp barnacles. This explained (I hope) all the problems. They had to be removed, but it would take more than someone with a snorkel and goggles to achieve. At best it would take a diver quite a lot of time and some very hard work with a sharp scraper to dislodge these little critters. And at worst the boat will need to be lifted out of the water. The only place along 2,500 miles of coast where such facilities would be available is in Salvador which is just 40 miles north of our next destination. Taking Susy, our saviour in Rio, at her word that if we had any problems we should let her know, I've emailed her and she is kindly looking into the possibility of getting a diver or a lift out of the water next Thursday. This will put us back an additional couple of days but it can't be avoided.

We stayed in Abrolhos for 24 hours because strongish northerly head winds had again been forecast for a short while and as we were in a conveniently protected bay it

seemed sensible to stay there until it blew through. We awoke yesterday morning to find that the wind had indeed swung round to the west, so we cast off the mooring and set sail again. Since then we have been enjoying very good sailing and we are scheduled to arrive in Morro de Sao Paulo sometime tomorrow morning.

It's not just good sailing we've been enjoying, but good eating too. Lawrence, Hunter Gatherer supreme who would put Bear Grylls to shame, caught a nice small tuna yesterday which went straight into the pan for an excellent lunch. Then, of course, he got silly. "Ti-im, have we got a harpoon?" "No, Lawrence, we don't have a harpoon. Why?" "There's a whale over there and we could have it for dinner".

Actually the last bit about the whale is a fib. Having seen no whales in the Abrolhos Islands, we were told by the nature reserve ranger that there were still plenty to the north of the islands through which we were to head. In the event, and in the area of the greatest concentration of Humpback whales in the world, we saw precisely none.

I mentioned in an earlier blog The Pro's obsession with hygiene. Well, I'm afraid it's getting out of hand. She's taken it upon herself to impose all sorts of regulations, one of which is that if you enter the galley area you must vigorously scrub your hands with bactericide. As I have to pass through the galley to get to my Master Suite, this means that I am scrubbing my hands about 30 times a day. I used to take some macho pride in my horny calloused rough'n'tough sailors hands. But with all the scrubbing they are now pink and soft. They look like girls hands. It's humiliating.

And when I was cooking dinner the other evening and something fell out of the pan onto the galley floor, I invoked the "ten second rule", picked it up with my fingers and lobbed it back into the pan again. The Pro was horrified and we jolly nearly had to scrap the whole meal because of the inevitability of "cross-contamination", whatever that is.

On other hygiene matters, we have another slight problem. Mina2, being a luxury ocean-going expedition yacht, has two heads (loos to the landlubbers). One is en suite with the Master Cabin and available for the private and exclusive use of the Skipper (who, for the avoidance of doubt, notwithstanding what some other people on board might think, is me). The other head, for'ard of the mast, is for the ratings. Well, yesterday, my head blocked. Solid. As I write this, I can almost feel the chill dread of fear passing down the spines of those of you who own boats. For you know as well as I do, the only way of unblocking a head is to dismantle the pump, detach the pipe work and, in the process, find yourself covered in unspeakable fluids and solids. This is something I would rather not do at sea (actually, I'd rather not do it at all) which leaves me with a dilemma. There is a tradition on ships that the Captain can only venture for'ard of the mast below decks with the permission of the ratings who live in squalor there or – and here's the let out – for inspection. So since the catastrophe happened, the crew have been bemused on my insisting on an inspection of their heads every few hours (and I have to say, in comparison to mine, it is immaculate). But if Sally were ever to find out that I was actually USING their heads rather than just inspecting it, she would throw a fit. So I'm relying on you all never to mention it. Thanks.

Position 13:23S 038:56W Paradise Beach – Morro de Sao Paulo

Date: 19 November 2012

Hell in Paradise

Blimey, where do I start? A lot of water has passed under the keel since my last blog, and a fair few disasters along the way as well. Where did I leave you? Oh yes, we were en route on the two-day passage from the Abrolhos Islands to Morro de Sao Paulo, the fashionable beach resort 35 miles south of Salvador. Lawrence, Sally and I were enjoying some really good sailing, and in my off-watches my sleep was only interrupted by the thought that when we got to Morro I would have to get to grips with that blocked aft head.

Half way into the passage, as the batteries started running low, I turned on the generator. After a while I smelled smoke, opened the engine room door and was nearly bowled over by the clouds of acrid diesel smoke that billowed out. Something was horribly wrong. I wasn't clear what the problem was – with all the various problems I've had with the generator over the years, it always turned itself off BEFORE bursting into flames - but one thing that was clear, was that we couldn't use the generator again until I'd fixed it. Until then the only way of recharging the batteries was by running the noisy, diesel-guzzling main engine.

After a couple of days of great sailing, we arrived at Morro de Sao Paulo and dropped our anchor near to a couple of picturesque fishing boats. The anchorage is opposite a paradise beach, but the downside is that the anchorage is also the motorway for the dozens of tripper boats that rush past flat out throwing up a wash that has the boat rocking and rolling almost continuously. I suddenly found all sorts of pressing things that had to be done immediately, like emailing the generator manufacturers in New Zealand to discover why the generator had suddenly gone into self-combust mode, but eventually I ran out of excuses. I had to tackle the blocked head. Armed with rubber gauntlets, tools and a large bucket I started taking everything apart.

Whilst I was otherwise occupied, Sally and Lawrence busied themselves lowering the dinghy into the water and getting the outboard attached. That evening we were going ashore, the first time since Rio the week before - and we were going to celebrate.

Not. The outboard wouldn't start. Lawrence who knows a thing or two about motors stripped it down to its component parts and declared it dead. No spark. It would require a specialist to get into the guts of the motor and fix it. We couldn't just row over to the paradise beach and leave it there all evening whilst we walked into town – it would disappear. And there was no question of rowing it the half mile to the town against the strong tide. The celebration meal ashore would have to be postponed. Dinner on board again.

Meanwhile, after a couple of hours sweating in the tropical heat in the enclosed space of the head, up to my elbows in calcified excrement whilst periodically being thrown from one side of the head to the other by the wash from the pleasure boats, I received what I thought was a welcome distraction. "Tim" shouted Sally "come up on deck". I assumed it was to view a spectacular sunset or somesuch. Then, in a considerably more urgent tone was the next, much louder shout. "TIM – GET UP HERE -- NOW!"

I threw myself up on deck to find that the two fishing boats that had been anchored so picturesquely nearby had decided to leave, one being towed by the other and without consideration for the strong tide that was running. They had both managed to wrap themselves round our bow, and the long metal gantry for the trawl that was sticking out from the side of one of them had got between our shrouds. If we couldn't get it out, the weight of the fishing boat being swept by the tide could break the shrouds and our mast would fall down. We all heaved away, disengaged the trawl from our rigging and the fishermen went on their way without a backward glance, like nothing had happened.

After that little excitement, I returned to my head repairing duties to conclude that the blockage was in the seacock – and about the only way that could be cleared was by craning the whole boat out of the water and tackling it from the outside. Meanwhile, I would have to continue “inspecting” the for'ard head of the ratings.

Too exhausted to write more. But from now on, things can only get better, can't they?

Position 12:58.674S 038:31.284W Bahia Marina - Salvador
Date: 25 November 2012

Enjoying a Shitty Time In Salvador

We took a day off in Morro de Sao Paulo which is a delightful beach resort. After the catalogue of gear failures we needed the rest and it was good to get off the boat, albeit paddling (no outboard) ashore to catch the ferry to the beaches. But one day rather than the three scheduled days was all we could allow ourselves, and the following morning we headed off for Salvador 35 miles (a day sail) to the north to get our multiple gear failures sorted.

I signed off the last blog “But from now on, things can only get better, can't they?”
Hahahahahahahahaha !!!!!

We were motoring towards to Salvador when the boat stopped moving through the water – the engine was still running and we were in gear, but the propeller had stopped turning. At the same time we smelled the now familiar smell of acrid smoke and for the second time in three days, smoke was belching from the engine room. But this time it wasn't the generator but the gearbox of the main engine. Now we effectively had no engine. A bit of a problem. But thank God we're a sailing boat. The wind filled in (albeit from the wrong direction) and we were having a really good beat towards Salvador which would have been highly enjoyable if it weren't for the frenetic activity. Without an engine, we would need help getting into the marina and alongside. When I had passed through Salvador going south 3 years ago, I remembered there was a Mr Fixit called Marcelo who, unusually, spoke English. I badly needed to get hold of him but didn't have his contact details. So I sent an email to Phil and Norma of *Minnie B* and David and Suzanne of *Suzy Too* who had been on the Rallye with us. Within minutes the Rallye network had swung into action. Emails were flying round the globe. Eventually Jean from *Havanita* and David & Suzanne had emailed me with Marcelo's mobile number which I called from the satellite phone. I can't tell you my relief when Marcelo answered. We would be in Salvador in

half an hour. Marcelo would be waiting for us to tow us in and then get all our problems sorted. Which he was, and he is, bless him.

That was Wednesday evening. Major work was needed and it started at the crack of high noon the following day (this is Bahia in Brazil, the most laid-back state in the most laid-back country in the world. They say they have an equivalent word for the Spanish “manaña” but it doesn’t have the same degree of urgency). Just getting the gearbox off to analyse the problem was a major engineering feat that took hours. A diver went down, cleaned the hull of the barnacles and, in the process, freed up the bowthruster, checked the anodes and (poor chap) cleared the blockage from the aft head seacock. Given the amount the diver was able to do below the waterline meant that we didn’t have to be craned out of the water, which was just as well as the next available slot was on 4 December!

Three days on and the two dysfunctional bilge pumps have been disassembled, faults identified and are hopefully being rectified. The outboard motor has been taken off for repair. And I have managed to get the generator working again. The hopefully repaired gearbox will be returned on Monday and tested.

I had the unpleasant task of dismantling all the hoses from the blocked aft head and got that working again, only to find it almost immediately blocked again, so I had to go through the whole process one more. As I passed through the galley area with buckets full of unmentionables, The Pro’s hygiene paranoia went into hyper-drive. She watched me like a hawk and any surface on the boat I touched twixt head and deck was meticulously scrubbed with bleach. The whole boat now smells like an operating theatre.

So we progress. We hope to leave on Tuesday. Marcelo, who had been boasting that his team worked throughout the weekend yesterday broke the news that he had given them all the weekend off, so God knows. We will now be at least eight days behind schedule so we will be missing out on our planned stopover in Jacare and will head straight for Fernando do Noronha.

As no work will be done on the boat today, Sunday, we too are taking a much needed break and are about to head off to get a ferry to the nearby island of Itaparica for the day.

Position 13:03S 038:20W

Date: 29 November 2012

Crew Mutiny As Cruise Plans Are Shattered

Some readers of the this blog sign in for a little light hearted banter about the jolly antics of the Mina2 crew as we wend our care-free way up and down the Atlantic. Well, you’re going to be disappointed. Care-free it ain’t, and jolly we’re not. Not by a long chalk.

Our saviour, Marcelo, on whom we were totally dependent for the numerous repairs that were being carried out on our unscheduled stop in Salvador, turned out to be arguably the most unreliable and untrustworthy man I’ve ever had the misfortune to

deal with. When running a business it's always a good idea to set the clients' expectations at a realistic level and then, at worst, deliver those expectations and, at best, exceed them. Result – a happy client. Marcelo's philosophy is a little different. He promises everything and fails to deliver on every single point. Throughout the week he has said such and such will be delivered by 2pm, or "my men will start work tomorrow at 8am". On no occasion has anything happened within an hour of the promised time; often it has been delivered more than three hours later and, on several occasions, it has never been delivered at all. So we have spent most of the last week grinding our teeth waiting on the boat for something that wasn't going to happen.

My objective for this part of the Amazonian cruise is to take Mina2 3,000 miles round the coast of Brazil to French Guiana in time to get Lawrence and Sally back home in time for Christmas. The plan was for five long passages, interspersed with four stopovers in beautiful places of four or five days each. 22 to 27 days at sea and 13 to 18 days ashore. You can't cut the number of days it will take to sail the 3,000 miles, so any slippage reduces the number of days available to experience this Amazonian coast. We had already been delayed by three days at the beginning of the cruise by bad weather, and took another day in the Abrolhos Islands for the same reason. Because of the incompetence of Marcelo, what should have been a four day repair stop in Salvador has turned into 7 ½ days. So basically we are by-passing Jacare entirely and now only have the prospect of one day or two at the most at the other two stopovers – Fernando de Noronha, the tiny island 250 miles off the northeast tip of Brazil considered to be the Galapagos of Brazil, and Ilha Dois Lencois, another island just beyond the Amazon delta with spectacular sand dunes .

As each day of frustration cut yet another day from our dwindling "holiday" time, the effect on morale of skipper and crew was profound. We were not happy bunnies. The final straw came on Monday morning when my back went quite badly. Those that know me know that I have had a chronic back problem for decades and perhaps once a year a disc slips and I am totally immobilised for a while and in considerable pain. The only solution is to take to my bed for a day or two, and swallow a "killer cocktail" of drugs that turn my body and brain to jelly. I sleep most of the time, but after a day or so I can start to move around again, albeit carefully. But I was not the only one on board with back problems. What Sally had confessed to Larry and me a few days earlier was that a month before we were to set sail, she had been hospitalised for two weeks with a severely trapped nerve. She knew that to back out of the cruise at the eleventh hour would be to destroy the plans of many people, so she was determined to tough it out. At the airport flying out to Rio she was transported to the plane in a wheelchair. So as not to give the game away, she left at the Rio hotel the crutch she had been using. A true pro.

But our dire situation, with the boat in bits, and with both Sally and me in delicate health, was the final straw for Lawrence. The following morning, whilst my brain, under the influence of my recreational cocktail of drugs was still like scrambled eggs, Lawrence came to me. I knew trouble was up as he didn't touch his forelock (what's left of it) in his usual deferential manner. "I didn't sign up to sail the boat single-handed 3000 miles nursing a couple of cripples" he said bluntly but hurtfully. And in fairness he had a point. Although we were now north of the area where we were likely to be hit by very strong winds, it would have been unreasonable to expect him to do all the heavy pulling and lifting whilst Sally and I washed down our painkillers with

caipirinhas mixed by Lawrence. But his defection at this stage would be disastrous so, before he stomped off to pack his sun tan lotion and his sequined sun-bathing thong, I applied my tried and tested technique for diffusing tricky personnel issues on board. I lied through my back teeth. I told Lawrence that I knew my back, and I guaranteed that by the time we set sail again, I would be pulling up the 40kg anchor with my bare teeth and twirling the spinnaker pole round my head like a drum majorette on amphetamines. Sally also said that her back was infinitely better than it was and, come the crunch, she would be on the foredeck wrestling the shredded sail onto the deck along with the rest of us. Lawrence wasn't happy but he agreed to stay and see how things panned out.

Meanwhile, still laid up in bed, I had a succession of people peering into my cabin through the hatch, showing me bits of broken boat and telling me how incredibly expensive they would be to replace. I felt like a French king holding court in my bedchamber being told in bite size chunks how the Peoples Revolution was developing.

The evening before (Monday), the gearbox which had originally been promised to be returned repaired over the weekend eventually turned up. "We've taken the whole thing apart" said Marcelo, "we have repaired the seal which was causing the oil to leak, inspected all the other components and everything is like new". As it was brought on board it was leaking gear box oil all over the place, so back it went to the work shop. The next day, Marcelo announced that on the second dismantling and inspection they had discovered that the clutch plates (about the first thing you would look at) were totally worn. Replacement clutch plates would cost a zillion dollars and could be imported within three weeks. But by sheer good fortune he had an identical and virtually new gearbox which he could install straight away in exchange for my knackered gearbox. And all for the very same price. A bargain. He had me over a barrel and we both knew it. Also delivered, two days after it had been promised, was the completely serviced outboard engine for the dinghy which had refused to start in Morro. Lawrence put it in the dinghy, tried to start it and – nothing. Now screaming blue murder at Marcelo over the phone, I sent it back again.

If I had made the mistake of trusting Marcelo, I would have left Salvador with a gearbox and outboard that were in no better condition than when we had arrived, having parted with eye watering amounts of money.

Position 09:44S 035:17W

Date: 1 December 2012

What A Difference A Day Makes

As if in compensation for the misery of our week in Salvador, we have so far been rewarded with a fantastic sail north to Fernando de Noronha and there's nothing in the forecast to suggest it will change. We are heading northeast up the coast and with the prevailing winds this time of year being northeast to east, we were expecting to have to tack up the coast adding time to the passage. In the event the wind has been from the east or southeast enabling us to lay our course, albeit sailing close to the wind which means that life is spent at a permanent 20 degree angle of heel. But the wind has been a steady 15 knots, the deep indigo coloured sea slight to moderate and we

have been making good speed in the right direction slipping through the water on our now barnacle-free hull. Small flying fish zip around disturbed by our bow wave, flittering over the waves before plopping back into the water. The weather has been brilliant – almost constant sunshine but interspersed with puffy white clouds, it is almost like trade wind sailing.

The night sailing (it is dark for 12 hours a day) has been equally brilliant, with clear star-studded skies before the full moon rises, shining so brightly you can read a book by it. With the water temperature now over 28 degrees, even at night the breeze is balmy warm – no need for anything more than shorts and T-shirts. What a contrast to last year. But down below it is like a Turkish bath and the many fans we have to circulate the air are working overtime.

Unlike down in the south, there has been very little bird life except that the night before last I noticed some fluttering around the boat and a flock of about six Brown Noddy's, a type of tern, landed on the dinghy, the mast and the lifelines. They are quite large and quite aggressive birds with long sharp beaks. I was surrounded. As they communicated with each other with crow-like screeches, I was suddenly and chillingly reminded of Hitchcock's film "The Birds". It wasn't a relaxing watch as I waited for their attack. But in the event, all they did was to deposit great lumps of shit everywhere. The following morning after the Brown Noddy's had left, I detailed Lawrence to clean up the mess. He searched high and low for the numerous scrubbing brushes we have on board, all of which had mysteriously disappeared, so he had to clear up the mess with his own toothbrush. That's the last time he calls me a cripple.

Sealife is also conspicuous by its absence. Apart from the three or four Humpback whales that we saw well south of the Abrolhos Islands, we have seen nothing except for the fin and tail of a large sailfish swimming past a couple of days ago. Talking of fishing, Lawrence replenished our dwindling stock of strong fishing line and lures in Salvador and, as I type, he is standing on the aft deck with his tackle out, hoping for some action.

Yesterday, Sally noticed a smell of diesel in the saloon. We picked up one of the sole boards and found a pool of diesel swilling around. Not only does diesel smell nauseating in the confines of a pitching boat, but if you get it on anywhere you step, it is dangerously slippery. So we heaved the boat to to stabilise us whilst we carried out the clear up. Lawrence took a bucket full of diesel up on to deck to throw it overboard. He had obviously got some diesel onto the sole of his shoes, slipped, and the bucketful of diesel was spilt all over the aft deck. Meanwhile Lawrence was lying upside down in the cockpit with blood pouring from his mouth. Pretending I was more concerned about Lawrence than the state of my aft deck, I had a look at him and told him that his split lip was only superficial. His major concern was that he hadn't knocked out any of his multi-million dollar Gucci-branded teeth implants. But he was OK. His dazzling smile will remain perfect the moment his plastic surgeon ties up his lip. Seriously, we were very lucky that he had nothing more serious than a cut lip – it could have easily have been more serious. With the deck swabbed down with volumes of hot soapy water, and having identified and fixed the crack in the diesel tank inspection port that was the source of the leakage, we continued on our way.

All the repairs we had carried out in Salvador seem to be holding up. One of the frustrations of things going wrong on boats is that you spend a lot of time and money simply getting everything back to where it should have been in the first place. However in this case we have had one excellent result. Those who have sailed with me over the last couple of years will recall that our propeller has been suffering from cavitation. This is where the propeller occasionally loses its “grip” on the water and it manifests itself with a periodic screeching sound. I could never work out why it had suddenly developed this problem and nor could any of the experts who had confirmed that cavitation was the problem. When we set sail two days ago, all of a sudden the cavitation completely disappeared. All the experts had been wrong. We never did have any cavitation. All along it had been the sound of the slipping clutches of the gearbox. It makes my blood run cold to think that we have spent the best part of two years cruising the most treacherous waters of the world with a gear box that could have packed up at any time.

Position 04:16.5S 032:33.3W 25nm South of Fernando de Noronha
Date: 3 December 2012

Approaching Fernando de Noronha

After five days sailing 750 miles from Salvador we are now in the final approach to Fernando do Noronha, the small island 250 miles off the northeast tip of Brazil.

By any standards it has been a good passage. Apart from the first 12 hours when we were motor-sailing east to get us clear of the coast, we have not needed to use the engine at all. Since then, whilst we have been sailing close to the wind most of the time, we have been able to lay our course, and have been making good speed. The wind has been a consistent 15 to 20 knots most of the time, with just the occasional squall with the wind rapidly increasing to 35 knots for quarter of an hour or so to keep us on our toes.

Having complained in the last blog about the lack of wildlife, shortly afterwards we were joined by a large pod of Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins who entertained us for 15 minutes or so cavorting around the boat. Spinner dolphins are famous for being the only dolphins which leap vertically out of the water, spinning about their longitudinal axis. These ones put on a more conventional display for us, but it was great nevertheless.

Since our escape from Salvador, we seem to have been in a surreal fantasy world where nothing (apart from the diesel leakage which was quickly sorted) has gone wrong with the boat. Long may that last. But because of the delays we will only be able to stay in Fernando de Noronha for a day and a half, so we’ve got a busy time ahead of us.

And not least because tomorrow is a day of Great Importance ...

Position 03:49.977S 032:24.374W Fernando de Noronha
Date: 4 December 2012

The Ancient Mariner

We've been a bit busy the last couple of days hence the lack of blogs. This blog was written on 4 December

Today, Lawrence Elfinstone Wells is 70 years old. No, I've not got that wrong – 70. I thought that when you got to that age you were barely capable of breathing, but that's what it says in his passport.

Normally I discourage birthday celebrations on board: if allowed to get out of hand the crew tend to have far more fun than is good for them, and it takes the attention away from me. But I hadn't reckoned on The Pro. Sally, as you will by now have gathered, is completely obsessive and once she had latched on to this "event" there was no stopping her. Honestly, she couldn't have been more excited if it were her own 40th birthday (now that really WOULD be a remarkable event). For days now I have been subjected to numerous conspiratorial questions and ideas, all conducted in a whisper, about presents, hand-made cards and, of course, The Birthday Cake. She had deviously gleaned from Lawrence that he was partial to lemon drizzle cake, so yesterday evening, whilst Lawrence was locked in his cabin during his off-watch as usual, there was frenzied activity in the galley as the cake was mixed and baked.

You can imagine my horror when I discovered that for this damned cake she had used all of the sugar reserved for the caipirinhas. If she can't buy some in Fernando de Noronha, there'll be hell to pay.

"We'll have to hide the cake somewhere where Lawrence won't see it. What about your cabin?" said The Pro. All the draws and cupboards in my palatial Master Suite are full of my own personal supply of whisky, so I said "I know, I'll stick it in my head". Sally went ashen-faced and started shaking. "Not in your loo" she whispered. A little louder she repeated "NOT in your loo" and then she shrieked "NOT IN YOUR LOO". God knows what Lawrence must have thought the conversation was about. Sally really must get a grip on her paranoia about this hygiene nonsense. What could possibly be the problem of putting the wretched cake in my loo for a few hours? In the event, we hid the cake back in the oven. Lawrence would never find it there. Despite having sailed the best part of 10,000 miles on Mina2, I doubt if he even knows we have an oven.

The celebrations actually started at 2100 the evening before (midnight UK time) when I was made to feel obliged to sacrifice the last of my Balvenie Doublewood malt whisky to drink Lawrence's health whilst music blared out from the speakers of every song on Sally's copious iPod with the word "birthday" in it.

We arrived at the anchorage at 0600 and our anchor nip on this occasion was the finest champagne generously supplied by the management, and again another round of singing "Happy Birthday" and "For He's Jolly Good Fellow". We then had an hour's much-needed kip before the day proper began.

Lawrence's day started as usual with 50 press-ups and 100 crunches before taking his tanned and bulging pecs off to the beach for a 4-mile run. This may be one of the reasons why he doesn't exactly appear to be 70. He returned to a Full English breakfast of fried eggs, British bacon, sausages and tomatoes, all laid on a bed of

potato rosti (it was meant to be sautéed potatoes, but something went wrong in the par-boiling department). We then had the palaver of the present and card opening and the adornment of my saloon with a glittery banner provided by Lawrence's daughter, Keely, saying "Happy Birthday – 70 year old". Later in the day, after exploring the island of Fernando do Noronha, we returned to the boat for the ceremonial unveiling of The Cake complete with two candles in the shape of "70". Larry was absolutely thrilled.

Future blogs will give details of what we've been up to in our fleeting visit to Fernando do Noronha

Position 01:47S 040:52W On passage to Ilha Dois Lencois

Date: 8 December 2012 – 2100 local time – 2300 UTC

The Iron Skipper Shows Signs of Weakness

Apologies for the lack of blogs, but I've been under the weather the last few days. OK, it was a bit more than that. One hour out of Fernando do Noronha I started developing flu-like symptoms. High temperature, aching bones, "prickly" skin, back ache, headache, pain behind my eyeballs. I was alternating between sweating so profusely I could have (and probably should have if I had had the strength) wrung my sheets out, and shivering so violently I'm surprised that the uncontrollable chattering of my teeth haven't knocked some of my fillings out. This was no man flu. I was feeling like death. The actual death bit didn't last much longer than 24 hours (although it felt like about four days) but a further two days on I am still slightly nauseous and feeling pretty below par and quite weak. And I'm still spending most of my off-watches sleeping my recovery, hence the lack of blogs.

I'm pretty convinced it is heatstroke rather than the even more inconvenient malaria or Dengue fever (which can kill you). Being a veteran Antarctic, I don't do heat very well, and I've suffered from it before on a couple of occasions with similar symptoms. Meanwhile in London, the Downstairs Skipper who has quite sensibly been assuming the worst, has been envisaging cancelling her first Christmas in London for years and flying out to some jungle clinic to administer to me.

Meanwhile, the ship has been run smoothly in my effective absence by Sally and Lawrence who have administered to me tirelessly, providing cups of weak milkless tea, small bananas and apples cut into small pieces – just to get anything down me at all. The one thing I had no difficulty in getting down me was water and I must have been drinking about 5 litres a day (normally I only have water in my tea, coffee or whisky). Sally and Larry, the Dynamic Duo have been brilliant. They even tried to persuade me not to stand my watches – but no chance. I have a strict rule that only if you have fallen overboard are you excused watches. This was to stop namby-pambies feeling a little seasick and asking some other hard-working member of the crew to stand a double watch – it simply wouldn't be fair. I hadn't envisaged having to apply my strict rule to me. Talk about being hoist by one's own petard. Sally and Larry did twice, collectively, persuade me to go down below, three hours in to a four hour watch. At the time, whilst they were in their swimmers I was wearing jeans, three layers and a jacket and was still shivering so violently that I couldn't see the instruments, let alone focus on an approaching ship, so I was pretty useless.

But hopefully in the next day or two I will be as right as rain, and back to my usual scintillating form.

Meanwhile, we are three days into what was planned to be a 5 ½ day passage but because we're going so fast it will be 4 ½ days. We're travelling due west along the northeast coast of Brazil to a little island called Dois Lencois where a small community of about 200 people live, without electricity, surrounded by dramatic sand dunes and living off a diet of fish and the most enormous prawns you've ever seen (I damned well hope I have recovered by then – the idea of seeing these delectable creatures and not being able to eat them doesn't bear thinking about). Very few visitors come to the island because of its remoteness, and almost no yachts because it is not in any of the few pilot books and, looking at the charts, it looks completely inaccessible unless you were lucky as I was to meet a Brazilian couple who gave me the lowdown (and said it is one of the nicest places they visited down the entire coast of Brazil). The sail has been brilliant with a good steady trade wind from behind, we've been bowling along at high speed and after the first day and a half we picked up the strong west going current which is giving us an extra 1 ½ knots. Gentlemens sailing indeed (not that there are any gentlemen on board).

I'm mindful that I haven't given you a report yet on our fleeting visit to Fernando de Noronha. It was such a wonderful place that I want to give it proper credit, so a belated full report will follow when I have the strength.

Position 01:18.925S 044:52.886W Ilha Dois Lencois

Date: 10 December 2012

A Most Welcome Mutiny

I left you last, half way through our passage to Ilha Dois Lencois, suffering from heatstroke but looking forward to a rapid recovery. It was not to be. The temperature remained (not the roaring fever of the first day, but enough to make me feel rotten) but the constant stomach pains, headache and nausea continued. I was unable to take any food apart from the occasional small banana, and even that occasionally made me retch. As we approached Lencois, I was getting progressively weaker and weaker but still being pig-headed enough to insist on standing my watches.

I staggered out of my cabin to stand my next watch. At the companion way to the cockpit stood Sally and Larry. Sally grabbed my arm. "You're going back to bed Tim. You're not fit to stand your watch. You've got nothing more to prove. I'm sorry, but I'm taking over – I'm in charge". I looked at Larry pleadingly. "Sorry Skip, I'm with The Pro on this one". This was mutiny. "STAND ASIDE WOMAN. I AM THE CAPTAIN. STAND ASIDE OR STAND THE CONSEQUENCES!". Those were the words that were going through my head. What came out of my mouth was a pathetic whimper "Thank you Sally. Carry on." Never was a mutiny more justified, nor more welcomed. I obediently and gratefully turned round and went back to my cabin. My relief was profound.

Lencois was still about a day away, but the way things were developing, we were beginning to debate whether we shouldn't abort our visit there and press straight on

for the medical facilities in French Guiana a further 5 days sail away. There were no easily accessible medical facilities closer. Our concern was that there were no signs that my condition was improving at all. We had been assuming it was heatstroke but it could have been something tropical and much worse, and none of us knew how dangerous my continuing inability to eat could become, nor how quickly. It may sound over-dramatic now, but at the time we were even seriously beginning to factor in the possibility (however remote) of emergency helicopter evacuation.

At home, we are blessed with a fantastic GP, Frank Auty. I emailed him, giving him chapter and verse of my condition. He immediately emailed back with a comforting response. It makes you feel quite a lot better when you're told by someone you trust that you're not going to die quite yet.

So Ilha Dois Lencois it was then.

The gremlins that had been plaguing us since the very start of the cruise continued with their mischief. On passage the generator packed up yet again. Too exhausted to start pulling it apart, I decided we would simply run the main engine to recharge the batteries. The gremlins thought this too easy a solution so they broke the alternator that generates the electricity. This was now serious. Alternators can't be fixed and it's not the sort of thing you carry around as a spare – not even on the spare'd-out Mina2. We now had NO means of recharging the batteries. Like it or not, even though we are a sailing boat, modern boats are now absolutely dependent on electricity. Not just for the luxuries like refrigeration, showers and lights, but for all the navigation instruments, the chart plotters, radar, communications (not just sending emails and blogs but getting our weather forecasts as well); fresh water generation etc. So I was hauled out of my sick bed to fix the generator. Luckily, with a bit of creative thinking, Larry and I were able to go straight to the nub of the problem. It was the fuel line from the diesel tank that had blocked solid with, horror upon horror, the dreaded diesel bug. I thought we had got rid of the bloody stuff. I hoped (and continue to hope) that this was the legacy of the last infestation, and not the whole ghastly thing starting up all over again.

As we arrived at Dois Lencois, Sally asked whether I had turned off the pump that takes the fresh water from the tank to all the taps on the boat – to the galley, to the basins in the heads and the showers. No, I hadn't. The gremlins had broken the little drive belt on the pump. No problem. I carry a spare pump and we took the belt off the spare and fitted it. Simple.

Within half an hour, the gremlins had broken that one as well. We were now in a bit of a pickle. Without the pump, we could still access the water in the tanks by a foot pump in the galley, but it would be a bit like having the water mains cut off at home and having to access water from a standpipe at the end of the street. We had one last chance. I had one remaining drive belt from another pump spares kit, but it was much too large. However, shortening it with some cable ties, we've managed to get it working again, although only for short periods at a time and I think it's safe to assume it won't last the full passage to French Guiana.

One of the reasons so few yachts visit the island of Dos Lencois is that it is in none of the pilot books and, looking at the charts, it would appear to be completely

inaccessible, barred by sand banks and shallow water. But I had met a couple in Bracuhy who had shown me precisely how to get in and where to anchor. We hung around at the entrance waiting for the tide to rise and edged our way in. Once over the bar we were in deeper water and we made our way carefully up the wide channel in between mangrove swamps. Rounding a corner, an extraordinary large, high sand dune opened up before us. It was “The African Queen” meeting “Lawrence of Arabia”. Tucked beyond the sand dune on a long spit of sand was the small fishing village of Dois Lencois. We dropped our anchor in front of the village and, after the worst passage of my life, we found ourselves in paradise.

Position 01:18.925S 044:52.886W Ilha Dos Lencois

Date: 13 December 2012

Ilha Dos Lencois

Ilha Dos Lencois (pronounced Eelya Daw-ee-se Lensaw-ee-se) is probably the most extraordinary place I've ever been to. Along the northeast coast of Brazil, leading towards the delta of the mighty Amazon, the coastline is shallow and heavily indented with low-lying islands of mangroves. But one small archipelago of islands is renowned for having enormous sand dunes of incredibly fine silica sand. The outermost of these islands is Dos Lencois about three miles long and $\frac{3}{4}$ mile wide. Alongside an enormous dune that stretches the full width of the island is a collection of houses strung out along the beach, nestling amongst the shade of tall palm trees, and overlooking the protected channel towards the mangroves of the island opposite. In this village lives 90 families. Their way of life is simple in the extreme but I have not, in all my time in Brazil, seen a community which seemed so much at peace with itself and others, nor more contented. They had everything they could possibly want. Their houses, built directly on the sandy beach, were made of wood or, more often, just walls and roofs made from palm fronds. No glazed windows, they were simply openings which had a frond screen that could be pulled down for privacy or bad weather. The living area in the houses is open – no rooms, no walls. Beds were simple hammocks strung between the rafters. Wrap yourself up in your hammock and you had all the privacy you needed.

Until recently they had no electricity on the island. They now have a couple of wind generators (the trade winds blow a steady wind strong enough to provide a reliable supply). There is now basic street lighting and lighting in the houses. Not that one should resent their ability to better themselves but a few houses already had the ubiquitous satellite dish and television. I just hope that having the materialistic outside world thrust upon them does not make them dissatisfied with their seemingly paradisaical lifestyle.

They live off the sea and are a part of it. The tidal range (the height that the tide rises and falls) is unusually high at between 5 and 7 metres. Their fishing boats, both the small wooden canoes they use for netting in the channel and the larger fishing boats that go offshore, are anchored off the village and, as the fast flowing tide ebbs and the water recedes rapidly down the beach, the boats simply settle onto their sides awaiting the return of the flood tide.

In the channel the tide rips one way and then the other like a water-borne pendulum, the clock mechanism being the moon, and it is by this clock that the community spend their day. As the tide starts to flood, the men come out in their wooden canoes that have evolved to meet their specific tidal role. With one man rowing on one side only whilst another paddles and steers at the stern, the canoe skilfully stems the rapid tide as they work their way across the channel whilst a third, normally the youngster, pays out a long net. Many of these nets may be laid by different canoes. And as the water slackens a few hours on, they return to retrieve their nets and their day's bounty. This will consist not just of fish, but also the biggest fattest juiciest prawns you've ever seen.

We negotiated the purchase of some of these prawns from the fishermen who had laid their net in front of our anchored boat. Sally marinated them in olive oil and masses of chopped garlic and that evening grilled them. Always when you cook prawns (well, in my experience) the skins turn red. These didn't – they remained white. Laid on a simple bed of rice, they were the most delicious prawns we had ever tasted.

One of the things we noticed about this community compared to others was how comparatively well dressed they are. We have visited many subsistence fishing villages up and down the coast of Brazil, and they look poor, wearing tattered and dirty looking clothes. Not these folk. Their clothes were kempt and clean (even those of the village drunk!). There was one family that was albino – completely white-skinned with white hair – a cruel genetic blow living under the incredibly harsh equatorial sun.

They see comparatively few strangers. There is one house that acts as a guest house – if there are any guests, and there is the occasional passing yacht. Whilst in no way unfriendly, they are very reserved and a wave from us would barely generate a response. But in their own company they were exuberant and joyous. In the late afternoon after the heat of the sun, all the kids would come out and play on the beach or splash around together in the water. It seemed just such a happy contented community.

The enormous dunes on their doorstep could have been taken directly from the set of "Lawrence of Arabia". (Dos Lençois means Two Sheets, because it's like two enormous sheets have been thrown over the island). Constantly changing rolling undulations contort the crests and hollows of ultra-fine sand into fantastic scalloped ribbons. The dunes do not play any part in the lives of the community – or they did not. We were mystified to see the odd local walk up the dunes, hang around a bit, then walk down again. We discovered that if you stand on exactly the right bit of dune you can sometimes, just, get a mobile telephone signal. Their lives are changing.

One of the great attractions for me was the bird life. Numerous birds waded, glided, swam and flew overhead and in the water – vultures, curlews, oystercatchers, pink flamingos and numerous others – they were all there. But without doubt the most spectacular was the Scarlet Ibis. With its long pointed beak, the Scarlet Ibis is not just scarlet from head to toe and from wingtip to wingtip, but it is positively fluorescent. To see one flying through the air is almost painful to the eye, so bright is it. We had heard of a tree where they all come to roost in the evening, the whole tree turning a

flaming fluorescent red. Sadly, we were unable to find it - it must have been quite a sight.

We stayed three days in Dos Lençois – we needed all of this time to repair the many additional things that had fallen apart – and I badly needed rest after my debilitating heatstroke. I very much wish we had time to spend a lot longer here, and the means to communicate more effectively with the members of this community. We all felt truly privileged to have visited this most extraordinary and beautiful of places.

Sally has taken on the challenge of writing the blog on our visit to Fernando de Noronha. Carefully crafted, it is now ready for publication. I loved it!:

Report on our stop at Fernando de Noronha (December 4-6th 2012) (rather a little delayed I'm afraid!)

Our batteries recharged with a more up-market anchor nip than usual – a touch of bubbly to celebrate Larry's birthday, we limped ashore with a still rather sick outboard engine and found a very helpful lady at the Visitors Centre who sorted us with transport to explore the island and a guide to take us snorkelling.

Fernando de Noronha 300+ miles off the NE corner of Brazil, and only accessible to most by small plane, is beautifully unspoilt having no hotels, only locally run 'pousadas' - typically family homes with a few extra rented rooms. No cruise ships are allowed to stop. It is a low key holiday destination extraordinaire, a little gem, totally unspoilt and heaven for divers, snorkelers, and surfers.

It did not take Tim and I long to realise that our rental 'car', the 'Yellow Peril', a buggy with huge wheels, rock hard suspension, 2 seats and space on the back for 2 more to hang on for grim death - was the best birthday treat Larry could have been given. For the next 2 days he relived his youth, pretending he was doing the Round Brazil Rally, but on Noronha's 'roads'. Well, the main road was really quite impressive, well tarmaced, straight and fast – and was called the Trans Noronha Highway! Every other 'road' we soon discovered had been made by no doubt very angry political prisoners when the island had been a penal colony. They had obviously vented their fury by making these 'tracks' as vertical, lumpy and pot-hole as possible out of uneven shaped 'cobbles' or lumps of granite. Le Mans style driving and these surfaces do NOT go together and we were soon crying for mercy from Stirling Moss!

When we stumbled upon our first beach we were in total awe. Some 'beach'! A mile or two long expanse of pristine sand, skirted by luscious forests and staggering towering granite pinnacles - with NO people and no developments – not even a beach bar! Brazil it appears awards 5 stars to only four beaches in the WHOLE country – and THREE of them were right here on this island! We sampled the water – at 28.5°C – a pretty decent temperature for the bath we had been looking forward to for 2 weeks!

One way and another, it seems this whole trip has been dogged by drama after drama – some very serious and certainly expensive to get fixed, some just mildly frustrating. On our way back to the boat that first night, Tim suddenly announced he had lost his glasses – serious stuff as effectively he was now blind, especially when trying to dodge ships on watch at night. We were more than concerned. He had no spare pair. Our very lives are at risk. A search plan was put into action. We retraced our steps which included searching a whole half mile of beach in the fast fading light!! Needle in a haystack chance! Totally laughable and a waste of time! But just as we were driving away some beautiful little local boy suddenly appeared with his specs! Unbelievable! The gods are with us all and particularly with Tim. It was more than time he had some luck.

As usual, when doing ‘a run ashore’ we had to continue our serious survey on the best capirinhas (cocktails of ice, loads of limes and cachaca (white rum)) in Brazil. A bar happened to fall into our path home and 2 hours later we started to find our way back to Mina2 in the dinghy at only 6pm but – in the pitch black, with no torches, no radio and a still very unhappy outboard engine! Capn Tim had us safe though, as we eventually found Mina2 before we drifted off into the bowels of the South Atlantic! A salutary lesson as we had no mobile phone either between us with which to call Falmouth Coastguard whilst we still had a signal! (For you land-lubber blog followers – the British CG at Falmouth is THE worldwide distress co-ordinating station-yes! They would have helped us even in Brazil!).

Next day at 0800 we rolled up at our guide’s house ready for the day’s snorkelling adventures. Kevin had been recommended as he spoke English. He was superb! We were taken to a series of stunning bays with blue, blue pools of crystal clear water – which would not have been out of place in films like The Lord of the Rings. We swam through huge shoals of sardines, many multi-coloured reef fish, turtles and saw a massive shark. Several of the 26 beaches are maternity wards and nurseries for egg-laying and newly-hatched turtles, so restrictions are in force as Noronha and its 21 islands is a massive National Marine Park, which in 2002 was added to the Unesco World Heritage List.

Sad to be leaving this amazing place, we started to weigh anchor about 5pm. Not to be. Again poor Capn Tim had to be tested. Our anchor was fouled on probably the only rock in the whole sandy anchorage. Well and truly. An hour later, in the now dark, and just as we were about to give up and thinking we would have to pay a diver in the morning as it was too deep for us, Lawrence suggested pulling from yet another angle andwe were free!! Thank goodness for a strongly built Oyster (yacht) and a big Rocna anchor- none other could have withstood the strain we had had to apply and come out totally unscathed!

Greatly relieved to be free of the sea bed, but sad to be leaving such a lovely island, we set sail west for our next destination 5 days and some 800 miles away.

Position 05:17.084N 052:35.389W Iles du Salut, French Guiana

Date: 18 December 2012

Final Passage To Devil's Island and a Visit From King Neptune

Sad that we were not able to stay much longer in Ilha Dos Lençois and get to know this extraordinary island, its wildlife and its people much better, we weighed anchor last Thursday for our final passage 630 miles northwest up the coast of Brazil and into French Guiana. This was where Sally and Lawrence were to leave me with a long maintenance list to get on with over Christmas. The passage took four days and it was very pleasant and uneventful, the steady trade winds from the east and north east wafting us to our destination. En route, we passed the delta of the mighty Amazon and even though we were 125 miles offshore, Mina2 was periodically pushed offshore and six hours later sucked back in again as the tidal effect of the enormous river inhaled and exhaled like enormous watery lungs. But once the tidal effect of the Amazon receded, it was replaced by an enormously strong northwest flowing current which sucked us to our destination at a rate of 2 knots (so even if the boat was not moving through the water at all, we would still be travelling nearly 50 miles a day).

On the morning of the second day into the passage, there was an enormous commotion. The screaming "Man Overboard" alarm went off as did the ear-splitting fog horn. Sally and Lawrence scrambled onto deck to find at the wheel that monstrous old queen, King Neptune, with his mane of white flowing hair and long beard, and wearing a fetching grass skirt. Being a frustrated thespian and a show-off to boot, he was banging on about being "Lorde of the Domaignes Of All The Seas" and all pollywogs must pay homage to his Courte to enter his Northern Domaignes. It was like having Brian Blessed on board. Forfeits had to be paid: any Equatorial virgins on board (neither Lawrence nor Sally had Crossed The Line before) were to be shorn of all their hair. Lawrence looked unconcerned as he has very little hair left, whilst Sally looked positively alarmed and was only let off when she told Neptune that she already had an appointment for a haircut in Kourou. Neptune was cut off in his prime by the countdown as we approached the Equator and at the moment we left the Southern Hemisphere and re-entered the Northern Hemisphere, Neptune produced a chilled bottle of exquisite champagne, and toasts were drunk all round. Meanwhile, I slept through the whole thing.

As we've become used to, wildlife was sparse. We had a few terns round the boat, one of which hitched a lift on our dinghy overnight, and we were paid a visit a couple of times from small pods of Bottlenose dolphins. Meanwhile, Lawrence, hunter-gatherer supreme, rustled up an excellent lunch, having caught a smallish dorado. Absolutely yummy.

Yesterday morning we saw land, three small islands ten miles off the entrance to Kourou. This were the Iles du Salut, including Devil's Island, the notorious French penal colony made famous by the book and film "Papillon". At 1300 we let the anchor go in 5 metres of water in the well-protected bay, surrounded by palm trees and the cries of monkeys and parrots coming from the wooded slopes of the island.

Position 05:08.85N 052:38.822W Kourou, French Guiana

Date: 20 December 2012

Compulsory Evacuation From Devil's Island

The Iles Du Salut consist of three islands in a small triangle about 10 miles off the coast of French Guiana: Ile Royale, Ile Saint Joseph and the most famous and smallest of the three, Ile du Diable – Devil's Island. All of them are shrouded in a forest of tropical trees, fringed with palms. Over the constant chorus of cicadas, one can hear the raucous shrieks of monkeys and parrots. After chilling out on board after our four-day passage, we went ashore in the dinghy to the main island, Ile Royale. Leaving the dinghy tied to a smart floating quay, we could see large turtles in the water, lifting their ancient heads above the water for a gasp of air before submerging back into the murky silty water. An iguana a metre long slunk across the rocks as we made our way along the pontoon to the shore. We climbed up the heavily wooded slopes along well kept tracks which were constantly being crossed by large rodents which looked like a cross between a rabbit and a squirrel – but with no tail – called agouti. Chickens roamed freely through the woods, clucking and pecking contentedly. Also contented was a monkey, one of many we saw, who had found a newly laid chicken egg and was very carefully tapping it against a tree trunk until he had made a small hole in one end, from which he sucked the contents. We passed a number of old French colonial style buildings until we reached the summit where the finest of the buildings had been converted into a hotel with spectacular views from the welcoming bar over all the islands and over the sea to the mainland. It was all utterly charming.

In the souvenir shop we bought a couple of booklets giving a history of the islands. Reading them over a refreshingly cold beer, we were chillingly reminded that the islands were not always a beautifully manicured ecological park with enormously diverse wildlife. For over a hundred years the islands were the site of one of the most brutal penal colonies run by the French. Housing political prisoners, deportees, the most hardened and violent criminals and lunatics, the conditions were appalling and the life expectancy was short. If not in solitary confinement, the prisoners were forced into hard labour, breaking rocks to build the many buildings on the islands. There was no relief from the unrelenting scorching equatorial sun as all the trees had been cut down to avoid any prisoners from building a boat to escape. Those desperate enough to try to escape by swimming the ten miles to the mainland never made it. They were sucked away from the land by the strong two-knot current and eaten by the sharks which patrol the strip of water between the islands and the mainland. These were the Devil's Islands made famous by the book and film "Papillon".

Whilst almost no buildings remain on Ile du Diable, and few on Ile St Joseph, many of the old buildings remain on Ile Royale and are being restored: the hotel at the summit used to be the prison warders barracks and mess, and many of the prison blocks, the hospital church, mortuaries and cemeteries still stand as a reminder of the islands brutal past.

French Guiana is not a French colony or protectorate. Extraordinarily it is actually part of France – a "department" in its own right – and therefore it is part of Europe. Standing head and shoulders above its South American neighbours in terms of economic wealth, this wealth is largely derived from it being the home of the European Space Centre, an enormous complex surrounded by razor wire and electric fences and policed by a 2000 strong contingency of the French Foreign Legion. It is from here that all of the European Ariane and Vega space rockets, together with

Russian Soyuz rockets are launched, carrying cargoes of satellites for communications, surveillance and defence. Between them there are about ten launches a year. During a launch, the Iles du Salut are completely evacuated as the trajectory of the rocket passes over the islands. A French coastguard cutter anchored in the bay and we were told that a launch was to take place the following evening and we had to leave the following morning. So at first light we weighed anchor and Sally, Lawrence and I enjoyed our last sail together as we made our way the 10 miles over to the mainland and up the River Kourou to anchor off the town fishing quay.

Since leaving Rio on 12 November we had covered 2,850 nautical miles. On the plus side, we'd had fantastic sailing almost all the way and, despite the numerous delays, we had visited three of the most extraordinary islands: Fernando de Noronh, Ilha Dos Lencois and, finally, the Iles du Salut. However, we had also suffered more mechanical failures than in the previous 35,000 miles put together. It had been the breakdown cruise to end all breakdown cruises. On several occasions it looked like the breakages were show stoppers and that we wouldn't be able to make it to French Guiana in time for Lawrence and Sally to catch their planes home for Christmas. But it seemed as if each set back stiffened our resolve even more. We were damned if the bloody demons were going to grind us down. With a combination of ingenuity and hard work, Lawrence and Sally were invaluable in getting the show back on the road. Without their help and support, it would have been an impossible task. In addition, they carried me through my period of worrying and totally incapacitating illness (which some are now suggesting might have been Dengue fever, although I still believe it was an unusually extended bout of heat stroke). I owe them both a great debt.

So, for all of us, it was with a feeling of enormous relief that we dug our anchor in to the muddy silt of the River Kourou and opened a bottle of champagne for our last anchor nip together. We'd made it, against all the odds, and damn the demons.

Position: Kourou, French Guiana

Date: 22 December 2012

Rocket Launch At The End Of The Amazonian Cruise

Shortly after anchoring in the River Kourou in French Guiana, we went ashore to the rickety fishermens' pontoon to be greeted by friends of friends, Beth and John Melina. Both Sally and I had met them briefly when they were crewing Phil and Norma's Minnie B across the Atlantic with us in the Rallye in 2009. John and Beth sailed here from the UK and decided to stay. They have been living here for the last 10 years, John working at the Space Centre, and Beth teaching English to the French. As our fresh water pump had packed up more than a week before, so no showers on board, Beth immediately drove us (windows wide open) to their house where we took it in turns to luxuriate under their powerful shower. I can't tell you how good it felt.

We had been chased out of the exclusion zone in the Iles du Salut because of the Ariane rocket launch and, as dusk approached, Beth drove us to the beach which is the favoured viewing point for the launches. There was a party atmosphere as, in the last of the light, children played on the beach whilst the adults sat on the rocks quaffing bottles of French wine. Suddenly there was a collective gasp as on the far

side of the wide bay a brilliant light filled the horizon. Seconds later a long tongue of flame shot into the sky and arced towards us, passing overhead with a low pitched thundering roar that seemed to shake the ground on which we sat. We followed the candle-like flame streaming a spectacular vapour trail through our binoculars until we saw at the edge of space the two booster rockets that are strapped to the sides of the main rocket separating from the main rocket and falling away whilst the main rocket continued on its way into deep space to deploy its cargo of satellites (including on this occasion a British MOD satellite).

The rocket launch was absolutely spectacular, and quizzing John over dinner after the event, some remarkable facts emerged. The booster rockets that power the main rocket through the atmosphere to the edge of space are separated from the main rocket by explosive devices once they have done their job and they simply fall back into the sea. "And if there's a ship underneath?" I asked, thinking that several hundred tons of metal falling on Mina2 as she sailed peacefully up the coast would have been the ultimate catastrophe in an already catastrophic cruise. "Well, I don't think any have landed on a ship yet" John replied, "but if they have, then the authorities have kept it very quiet." "I assume the boosters are recovered?" I asked. "Well, actually not" came the reply. This was ironic. Playing our part in saving the world, we had scrupulously been keeping since Salvador, at some inconvenience, all our non-biodegradable waste, including numerous food tins and beer cans, rather than throwing them overboard and polluting the sea, and that morning we had carted about five large bags ashore for ecological disposal. I had now found that our European governments were wilfully tossing hundreds of tons of scrap metal into the sea every month with no attempt to recover them. From now on I think I might just adapt my stringent policy on waste disposal at sea.

The other most striking fact to emerge was the duration of the entire operation. I had thought that the rocket would be powering away for a day or so to get to the right orbit level to deploy its cargo of satellites. Not a bit of it. Within 17 minutes of take-off the rocket has reached its orbit level, opened its cargo holds and deployed its satellites. Job done. After about 20 minutes from launch at the Space Centre, they turn the lights off and go home.

John and Beth have been unbelievable. Advised of our arrival only a couple of weeks before Christmas, they have thrown their hospitable doors wide open. Prior to our arrival, hair dressing and manicure appointments had been made for Sally, who would be leaving the brutish insanitary conditions on board Mina2 for Christmas in Florida, guests of properly posh Oyster owning friends. Not only have Beth and John provided showers and internet wifi (with which I hope soon to post some photos), but one of John's passions is cooking and we have enjoyed a couple of sensational meals at their home. They are acting as poste restante for a parcel of urgent spares being couriered out to French Guiana. And more than that, in a town that has neither buses nor taxis, they have over-generously loaned us one of their cars, without which trips to laundries, supermarkets, and numerous trips to petrol stations to refuel the boat with several hundred litres of diesel in jerries would have been well-nigh impossible.

Beth and John have also been kind enough to invite me to join them for their very traditional Christmas dinner. So I won't after all be all alone over Christmas with a can of corned beef and surrounded by tins of varnish. Oh, joy.

I hope John and Beth won't be insulted if I were to say that the town of Kourou hasn't exactly been selected by the United Nations as a World Heritage Site. It is a recently built dormitory town for the many people who work at the European Space Centre and it's not what you would call pretty. But it does have all the facilities of a small French town and that includes bakers and supermarkets the quality of which I haven't seen this side of the Atlantic. What joy to be able to buy ham that was actually sliced from an animal rather than being mechanically recovered and reconstituted into a flavourless brick. An enormous array of cheeses that actually taste of something, jars of foie gras, and slabs of mouth-watering pates. All plastered on a crispy French baguette and washed down with a bottle of good claret. Thank God I've recovered my appetite.

In between the numerous trips ashore we return to Mina2 on the dinghy which we tie up on the fishermen's jetty. The fishing boats are all small open boats that they take into the stretch of water between the river and the Iles du Salut. The catch is gutted on the pontoon before being carried to the fish market. So we negotiate our way down the rickety pontoon dodging the fishing nets and side stepping as best we can the gore of fish blood and guts which often just get left there, so we also have to kick out of the way the flocks of vultures that swarm over the pontoon picking at the carrion. Quite feral.

A couple of days ago we had an even bigger obstacle to negotiate. One of the fishing boats had clearly had a good day. The boat was laden with the most enormous fish I have seen. At least five or six feet long and probably five feet in girth with enormous ugly heads, we understood they were groupers. It took three men to lift each one out of the fishing boat to be hacked apart with a machete on the pontoon. Apparently they make good eating and fetch a good price. For the fisherman it must have been like a lottery win.

Yesterday, Sally and I went on a tour of the Space Centre that John had booked for us. It was fascinating but would have been more so had the entire 3 ½ hour commentary not been in rapid fire French alone, of which several of the visitors, including Sally and me, sadly didn't catch a word.

Lawrence couldn't join us for the tour as he had a plane to catch to wing him back home to his loving family for Christmas. Dear Larry. We just get on so well together. A veteran of so many Mina2 cruises, this year alone he has sailed with me from a few miles north of Cape Horn up the entire coast of South America and over the equator. 5,500 miles of the enjoyment of each other's company. Notwithstanding the considerable trials and tribulations of this cruise, his eternal optimism has lifted our spirits and his knowledge of things mechanical have proved invaluable. I couldn't ask for a better shipmate. I owe a debt to Carrie, his wife, for being so generous in allowing Larry the time off.

And today, I drove Sally, beautifully coiffed and manicured, to the airport for her flight to Florida for her Christmas in much more hygienic surroundings than she suffered aboard Mina2. I can't tell you what a pleasure it was having such an immensely experienced sailor on board. She kicked off, as Honorary Quartermaster, by taking charge of all the provisioning which was an enormous relief to all of us. But

far more than that was the comfort I got from having someone on board who not only knew all there was about sailing boats, but this boat in particular, she having professionally skippered a number of Oyster 485's in the past. It meant that the pressure was off, I could completely relax and get on with fixing the numerous problems that emerged. But the greatest debt I owe her was when she simply took control when I was ill, weak and getting weaker by the hour. I wouldn't have allowed many people to do that, and I can't tell you the relief I felt.

I was very sad to see both Sally and Lawrence go after our six weeks together, but sometimes on a long cruise, particularly one as challenging as this, it's good to take some time out alone. OK, I won't exactly be relaxing: I've got a maintenance list a month long to complete in the next week. But I will be regrouping and refreshing ready for the arrival of the Downstairs Skipper, and Linda my sister and John my brother-in-law for the next adventure up the coast of the Guyanas – to Suriname and Guyana before crossing over to Tobago, Trinidad and Grenada in the Caribbean.

Assuming you won't be interested in each layer of varnish that I lay down on my now well-worn sole boards, this is likely to be the last you hear from me until the New Year (although I hope to be posting some photos of the spectacular islands we have visited). So can I take this opportunity of wishing all you faithful Mina2 blog followers a Happy and Peaceful Christmas.

Date: Written on 11 January 2013 but covering 21-31 December 2012

A Bit Of A Catch Up

Oh dear, I've been a bit idle (again) and have been neglecting you all. Humble apologies. First up, may I wish everyone a very Happy New Year. Since I last blogged just before Christmas, a fair amount of water has passed under Mina2's keel and I've got a lot to catch up on: Christmas with the Melina's; the arrival of the Downstairs Skipper with my sister Linda, and brother-in-law John; New Year's Eve celebrations in the Iles du Salut; the passage to St Laurent du Maroni up a river on the border of French Guiana and Suriname; and the passage to Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname. To make our Guyanese Cruise more palatable, I will divide it into bite-sized chunks. Chunk 1:

After Sally and Lawrence left a couple of days before Christmas, I was all alone on Mina2 with no distractions. I had a long list of jobs to get on with and plenty of time to do them - theoretically. In practice, I also found myself in need of some downtime. Cruising around from one idyllic tropical island to another may sound like a thoroughly relaxing experience, but when you have the opportunity of stopping for a few days, you suddenly realise how the interrupted sleep patterns of night watches; non-stop repairs and maintenance and, in the time remaining, getting ashore to see something of the countries we had travelled so far to visit, is actually quite exhausting. Particularly as I was still regaining my strength after my debilitating illness, all the "should do's" on the list suddenly didn't seem so important – there were still plenty of "must do's" to keep me busy whilst also allowing me to relax a little.

As it was not possible for me to leave Mina2 anywhere in the region and fly back to London to join my family, I had been resigned to the fact that the Christmas celebrations would pass me by this year. Enter John and Beth who had adopted Mina2 and her crew like family. I was invited to join them for their big celebration dinner on Christmas Eve (as is the custom). If I were to expect a dinner of roast turkey with all the trimmings, I would have been disappointed. What we got was MUCH more fun. John, Beth and their daughter Juliette had invited a dozen friends round. International in mix, the meal would nevertheless be French in style. All the guests brought something along for the meal. We started off with amuse bouche of smoked salmon and caviar. Then the meal proper kicked off with succulent oysters specially flown in from Paris, followed by foie gras (the Real McCoy – none of your watered down paté rubbish) with home-made onion tart. Next was succulent roast lamb, followed by an array of delicious French cheeses. A salad and then, the pièce de resistance and a nod to John's English origins, a genuine British Christmas pudding. Every course was served with a different and excellent French wine, and champagne with the Christmas pud. And the company was as varied and excellent as the food and wine. I arrived at 1900 and left at 0200 on Christmas Day. What an evening, and my heartfelt thanks go to Beth and John for their generous hospitality.

A couple of days later and the package that had been couriered out to me with essential spare parts eventually arrived. At last I had a working bilge pump, diesel tank covers that didn't leak and – most importantly - hot and cold running fresh water at last. When you are working hard in the confines of a boat and the temperature is a very humid 38 C, you can imagine how good a shower is from time to time.

The boat now looked like a building site, tools and spare parts on every surface and all the floor boards up. It took me about two days to get the boat ship shape, which I managed with minutes to spare before the Arrival of the Downstairs Skipper. On 29 December, Maria descended like an angel from the very heavens (courtesy of Air France) with my sister Linda and brother-in-law John. I'm surprised Linda and John had agreed to come – it was they who had a year earlier been with me on the Falklands cruise where we endured a hurricane force storm for 36 hours. If they thought they were here for a holiday, they were quickly disillusioned. John, brilliant at fixing things, was immediately given a long task list, whilst the DS and Linda were tasked with masterminding the Big Shop at the superbly stocked French supermarkets for provisions for the next five weeks. John and I were meanwhile ferrying jerry cans back and forth from the boat to drive to the fuel station to replenish our nearly exhausted diesel tank.

By the following evening we were in sufficiently good shape to invite the Melina's aboard for drinks and nibbles before ferrying everyone ashore for our farewell dinner with them at a restaurant specialising in local Creole food.

The following day, we weighed the anchor (in the 10 days I had been here the fouling is so bad in the Petri dish-like water that barnacles were actually growing on the anchor chain) and we made our way out of the river and across the 10-mile stretch of water to anchor in the Iles du Salut for our New Year's Eve celebrations.

Date: Written on 11 January 2013 but covering 21 December 2012-31 December 2012

Position: 05:30.367N 054:01.975 St Laurent du Maroni

New Year's Eve on the Iles du Salut then on to St Laurent du Maroni

I had been told that for the small hotel on Ile Royale in the Iles du Salut, New Year's Eve was a busy night. We went ashore after dinner and made our way up to the hotel and found the large dining area crammed with revellers. As this was a night for celebration we went to the bar and ordered Devil's Island rum punches which we found to be almost undrinkable. As midnight approached the DJ cranked up his powerful sound system and we twisted and cavorted the New Year in before stumbling down the jungle path in the darkness back to the dinghy to crack a celebratory bottle of champagne.

As I sipped the champagne in this tropical paradise, it seemed hard to believe that a year ago to the day, we were untying from the *Micalvi* in Puerto Williams, donned in our polar gear, to head south past Cape Horn to Antarctica. What an unbelievable year. We have sailed more than 8,500 miles crossing 80 degrees of latitude. We have sailed in water temperatures ranging from -2C to more than 30C. We have endured hurricane force storms, had ugly encounters with ice and beautiful encounters with whales in some of the most isolated and extraordinary cruising grounds in the world. It has been a humbling and exciting adventure.

On New Year's day we went ashore for the Downstairs Skipper, Linda and John to marvel at the monkeys, parrots and agoutis in the equatorial jungle and, visiting the many prison buildings, to reflect on the misery that the islands must have witnessed when it was a feared penal colony. During the day, we were surprised to see a large Turkish gullet, the *Albatros feliz* come into the bay and anchor.

We stayed over the following day and visited the other accessible island, Ile St Joseph. The small island has no remains of the prison buildings but did have an interesting cemetery (for the warders and their families – the bodies of the prisoners were simply tossed into the sea to be devoured by the circling sharks). There is a track round the edge of the island with good views over Devil's Island and the small house in which Dreyfus was held prisoner, and we passed the pool that had been dug by the prisoners out of solid rock and which they used as a tidal swimming pool.

After lunch on Mina2, we weighed anchor for the overnight 130 mile passage northwest to St Laurent du Maroni, a town up the Maroni River which marks the border between French Guiana and Suriname. We arrived at the entrance to the river at 0700 the following day, and made our way gingerly towards the shallow bar at the entrance to the river. The river has navigation buoys to guide boats in. There should have been pairs of green and red buoys like gates you go through you, marking the deep water passage but, unhelpfully, the first two were more than half a mile apart. One of them was out of position but there was no way of telling which one. We edged towards the red starboard buoy. The water got more and more shallow. All around us the metre high rollers were breaking over the shallow sandy bottom. I bottled out and retreated to safe water before heading towards the green port-hand buoy. Again, the water got uncomfortably shallow and, again, tossed around by the breaking waves, I bottled out. Meanwhile, we noticed that *Albatros feliz* was coming up behind us. Max, their owner and captain, was full of confidence. "It's that way" he shouted as he

passed us, pointing to the green buoy, “Follow me in!” Confident that his depth was greater than mine (which I subsequently discovered was not the case) I followed him through the crashing waves, but it was heart-in-the-mouth stuff. Once over the bar, the waves subsided and the water got deeper, and we made our way peacefully 20 miles up the river past the mangrove lined banks to the town of St Laurent. Just off the town, lying across the river, was the rusting hulk of the *Edith Cavell*. History doesn’t relate the circumstances in which she met her end but now, with a forest of trees growing through her decks, she makes a splendid breakwater behind which we anchored, protected from both tide and wind.

The border river is at this point about a mile wide, and there was a constant stream of pirogues – long, pencil-thin canoes with large outboard engines - shooting backwards and forwards between French Guiana and Suriname with passengers and their cargoes of boxes and crates. There appeared to be no policing of this traffic until there was a commotion and we saw a “Gendarmerie National” skiff with three well-armed policemen ushering in a pirogue to the town beach alongside our anchorage. A Gendarmerie van pulled up to the hard, a load of crates were heaved off the pirogue and put in the back of the van and, with much gesticulation, the pirogues crew were given a grilling before being taken away.

Given that French Guiana only has three towns of any size, the difference between St Laurent du Maroni and Kourou is considerable. Kourou is a modern town built principally for those who work at the European Space Centre. Spectacular rocket launches and the Melina family aside, it doesn’t have a lot to recommend it. It lacks architectural merit (totally) and has all but no personality. St Laurent, however, has personality in abundance. It was established as a penal colony in the late 19th century and was built by the prisoners, for the prisoners. The Transportation Camp dominates the town. With its high walls and austere prison blocks one is reminded of a concentration camp. In the 65 years that the French sent its prisoners to Guiana, more than 70,000 people passed through the camp. The hard cases, political prisoners and loonies were sent to the Iles du Salud, but most of them stayed here to be ravaged by epidemics of yellow fever. Their rations were just sufficient for survival under a regime of hard labour, but once the guards had corruptly stolen part of the rations to sell for their own benefit, many of the prisoners died of starvation. But the town having been established, it also attracted traders who settled here and the town is full of old French colonial buildings in varying states of decay.

In St Laurent du Maroni there is a buzz that was lacking in Kourou. The varied racial mix of French Guiana: the maroons – the escaped and freed slaves; the native Amerindians, the Chinese and Vietnamese and a few Europeans are all here. It has the feel of the border town that it is, not least along the river bank where the dozens of pirogues are tied up alongside sticks, reminiscent of Venetian gondolas, the owners rushing around touting for your business. We went for a long walk around the town and up the river before hiring a pirogue to take us back to the town beach where we had left our dinghy. We loved it all.

24 January 2013.

No blogs for a week. Are we still alive?

I have desperately been trying to find the time to send a blog to continue bringing you up to date with our Amazonian cruise. But life has been such a hectic whirl of night passages and exploring the fascinating and rarely visited countries we've been passing through that I'm afraid there has been no time.

I last left you in St Laurent du Maroni on the border of French Guiana and Suriname. Since then we have sailed to the capital of Suriname, Paramaribo, thence onwards to the Essequibo River in Guyana (once British Guiana). There we left the boat at anchor for four days and went on a fascinating tour of the country. As I type we are now approaching Tobago. So I've got lots to tell you, but I'm afraid you're going to have to wait a little longer.

After a luxurious respite, the gremlins are back again, and may have delivered their coup de grace. Yesterday, the engine packed up as we were leaving the Essequibo River. By now, I like to think I know my way around a diesel engine. I've tried everything without success to get the engine running again, but it looks like it could be the injection pump. This box of tricks is perhaps the most complicated part of the engine. Apart from being very expensive, they almost never give any problems so almost no one carries a spare – me included. They also require specialist skills to install them. So tomorrow we're going to have to sail into the anchorage in Scarborough in Tobago and start the process of getting it sorted. And until we do get it sorted, in Scarborough we will have to remain.

What I will try and do in the interim is to post some position reports with lat/longs so at least you will be able to see on the map where we've been.

Sorry folks, I'll get back to you as soon as time and gremlins allow

2 February 2013

Mina2 Imprisoned in Commercial Harbour - Blog Resorts To Plagiarism

Time availability for blogging remains in short supply I'm afraid. Nearly a week ago, on our 320 mile 2 ½ day passage from the Essequibo River in Guyana to Tobago our engine packed up. We eventually suspected the problem to be a faulty injection pump which could only be repaired by specialists. We were approaching Port Scarborough on the southeast coast of Tobago with the prospect of having to enter the commercial harbour under sail alone. The area in the harbour where we were able to anchor in deep enough water, but outside of the route of the many ferries that come and go to Trinidad, was small and it would require all our concentration and seamanship skills. We wouldn't wish to try it in too much wind and we couldn't do it in too little wind. It was going to be tricky and there was a tangible tension in the air. As we approached the harbour entrance a large black cloud appeared from behind us bringing with it not just blinding quantities of rain, but a dramatic increase in wind speed to 40 knots and a shift in the wind direction to the north, which would have made our entrance impossible under sail. We turned the boat around and headed back out to sea to allow the squall to blow through, but we also had to stem the 2 knot current that was in danger of sweeping us downwind of the harbour and onto the rocky reefs that guard the entrance. After 20 minutes the squall passed and we resumed our approach to the harbour. There was another yacht in the small anchorage which considerably restricted our options, not to mention numerous moorings which we also had to avoid. But in the event we were able to manoeuvre Mina2 under sail into the only remaining small gap and the anchor chain rattled out. We'd made it.

Once ashore, having cleared into the country with immigration and customs, we were helped by Mr Williams, the friendly customs officer, to find a mechanic to sort out our problem, and that evening Mr Cato arrived on the boat and started stripping the engine down. He confirmed that the injection pump wasn't working and took it away to send to Trinidad for hopeful repair. A few days later we got the good news that it was repairable, which was just as well as I had simultaneously found out from Ally at Oyster that the delivery time for a replacement pump was 3 ½ months. That would have meant an abrupt end to our Caribbean cruise before it had even started. So, for the last week, rather than swinging at anchor off a palm-fringed beach, we have been holed up in the commercial harbour awaiting the return of the pump. But never mind. We hired a car and have spent the week exploring the lovely small island of Tobago. As I write, I am waiting for Mr Cato to arrive, pump in hand, to release us from our imprisoned anchorage.

But back to the blog. No I haven't found time to write about our adventures in the Guyanas yet – but my sister Linda has, so with her kind permission, I am plagiarising her excellent work and will be posting edited extracts. My few inputs are in italics. The first appears below – Linda's account of our time in Paramaribo in Suriname:

“What a great place. *We anchored off the town, 30-miles up river, opposite the Torarica Hotel, just behind Albatross who had set off a day earlier.* The hotel is one of the best in town, very upmarket, with tennis courts, swimming pool, casino and air conditioning and has a convenient pier and pontoon for us to dinghy to. We expected to be approached by the hotel with demands for money to use the pier, and even took to skulking out of the hotel complex via the car park to avoid detection, but in the four nights we were there, no demands were made.

The centre of Paramaribo is delightful. It is packed with old white painted timber buildings, built after fire destroyed the old town in 1826, and is now a UNESCO heritage town. All the buildings are different and very individual, apparently the result of the fact that none of the architects had received any formal training. The Roman Catholic cathedral is particularly beautiful, *allegedly the tallest* wooden building in the Americas. The outside is beautiful, but the inside is even more impressive, completely clad in delicately carved cedar with a columned cedar balcony providing a gallery around the whole church. There are churches of every denomination here, plus endless mosques, temples and synagogues. On one of their main streets it boasts a large ornate mosque *right next door* to the main synagogue which the Surinamese point to as a symbol of their ethnic diversity and tolerance. There are also people of every denomination here – African, East Indian, Indonesian, Javanese, Jewish and Dutch. As in French Guiana, everyone is extremely friendly and welcoming.

We took our time to get to know the city, partly because we had to go through the whole rigmarole of checking boat and crew in. This included two trips to the immigration office which was a half hour taxi ride out of town and a further visit to the Consular section of the foreign affairs ministry which was in town.

We did eventually manage to visit the various museums. Fort Zeelandia is the best of the museums with a long history. It is beautifully laid out with all sorts of interesting artefacts, but somewhat spoiled by all the information being written in Dutch, a singularly impenetrable language. The visitors' book was littered with plaintive pleas from non-Dutch speakers to have the information translated, ranging from the curt 'please translate this information' to the rather more whimsical plea from a Canadian woman who said how charming she found it that none of the information was not translated as it left non Dutch speakers free to use their imaginations to invent the 'facts' and their own versions of the history of Suriname. Obviously these had had no effect to date – possibly, as Tim pointed out, that the museum staff didn't speak English!

We organised a day tour from Paramaribo with the delightful Mr Twist, recommended by a Dutch cruiser. He claimed to be half American (his father had 'left a little egg behind') a little Jewish, a little Indonesian, a little african, in short typically Surinamese. We drove about an hour and a half south of Paramaribo on an excellent tarmac road before reaching the ferry across the Suriname River. We had been in a hurry to get there before the scheduled bus as the ferry apparently left promptly on the bus's arrival, but on getting there, found a long queue of trucks, buses and taxis, and a delapidated broken down ferry. A new engine was on its way from Paramaribo and all we could do was sit and join the crowds to wait for the next 3 hours. This gave us a fascinating opportunity to observe the Surinamese in all their variety – amongst others there were maroons or descendants of escaped slaves speaking Samaracaans, others speaking Talkie Talkie, Amerindians, and a couple of Malays who were working for a logging company. Their truck was leaking a constant trickle of fuel onto the sand they were parked on, but the driver was completely unconcerned – it's just diesel he said as he flicked his cigarette ash into the ground nearby. To while away the time the various drivers tried their hand at fishing from the broken down ferry using a length of bamboo and a bare hook baited with a bit of bread. They had considerable success, pulling out something that looked like a pirana and then some very exotic striped yellow and black fish.

The engine eventually arrived and was installed. We were able to continue our journey on the red dirt road on the other side of the river. We were now into very arid bush country growing in impoverished white sand soil. Our first stop was at the remains of an old 17th century Jewish settlement. The Jewish community had initially come from Brazil when they were expelled by the Portuguese, but as they did well on the sugar estates, were joined by Jews from other parts of the world. There was a substantial cemetery in a jungle clearing and the remains of what had been a large brick build synagogue on an elevated site overlooking the river. We stopped at a couple of rather ramshackle 'black water' resorts and cooled our feet in the extremely dark red water, dyed this intense colour by the jungle vegetation. Because of the delay, we had to return early, but on the way back, stopped at a maroon village which appeared to be deserted, but that Mr Twist assured us was inhabited, the people only having gone to Paramaribo to sell their goods. They seem to live in an extremely primitive way, living off cassava which they have to prepare carefully, boiling the cassava root and then squeezing the cyanide laden juice out using a long woven tube called a 'matapi'. The day ended with a stop at a javanese restaurant where we were served a delicious chicken noodle soup called saoto.

Back in town we met up again with the crew of Albatros and had a highly entertaining meal together, this time in a Latin American restaurant which had excellent food, but where the service was somewhat reminiscent of Fawlty Towers. We were invited aboard their gullet to 'see what a luxury yacht really looks like'. It really was luxurious – three double cabins, captains quarters and crew quarters, all with their own private bathrooms, a fabulous enclosed stateroom and a marvellous aft deck complete with low couches for lounging and a large dining table that could seat at least 10 people.

Albatros set off the next day for Trinidad, while we stayed a further two days, enjoying the city. We went to the market to provision for the next leg of our journey. Part of the market was called the 'maroon market' which sold all kinds of dried leaves, roots, unguents and potions. It felt as if we were in Africa. The lady at the tourist office that we could buy a 'matapi' there, and indeed there were several stalls selling these long woven tubes. They were almost 2 metres long, and it was only when the lady selling them demonstrated how we could bend them in half, thereby enabling us to get them into our luggage that we each bought one. We were then the cause of considerable amusement as we walked back to the boat with our purchases. 'Matapi, matapi' people called to us from across the street, with broad smiles on their faces (or were they sniggering?).

We all loved Paramaribo and found the people extremely friendly, but we had all been reading a book called *Wild Coast* by John Gimlette, which described the totally horrific history of the country, including the savagery of very recent history in the 1980's when a sergeant called Desi Bouterse carried out a military coup and proceeded to run the country brutally as a dictator. 15 high profile citizens, academics, lawyers, journalists etc were murdered in Fort Zeelandia, where there is a memorial to them and many other atrocities took place. We thought that all this was well over, but were absolutely shocked to find in an article on the internet which said that Desi had recently been elected as president. It detailed other details of his drug running, international arrest warrants etc. So perhaps it's not such a happy country after all if you scratch the surface.

Back on the boat water continued to be a bit of a problem. (*Not only the rivers, but the sea for miles offshore is too muddy to use the water maker and, in the absence of any accessible taps from which we could fill our water tanks, we were reliant on collecting rain water from an adapted sun awning. When we did at last get far enough offshore into clean water, I turned the water maker on only to find that the gremlins had got to that as well – the seal on the pump had disintegrated and a replacement will not be available for six weeks – too late for this cruise*). The tank was now half empty and there had been no rain for almost a week. In French Guiana we were told that the rainy season was late but had now started. In Suriname, Mr Twist assured us the rainy season would start with the new moon, which was three days away. The truth was that the clear blue skies did not seem to portend rain any time soon. We were experimenting with how little we could make do with to have an overall wash. Maria turned 'native' claiming her upbringing on the River Plate had prepared her for these conditions, washing herself and her clothes in the extremely brown and muddy river water. On one day there was a very light shower and Maria immediately appeared on deck in swimming costume and with bar of soap, lathering herself all over but then finding herself with a slight problem as the rain came to a premature end.

We decided that from Paramaribo, we would go straight to the Essequibo River in Guyana, bypassing the Courantyne River about which we could get very little information. Timing of our exit from the river was again problematic, trying to balance getting out of the river on an ebb tide with getting over the shallow sands at the mouth on a rising tide and timing our entry to the Essequibo the following day before nightfall. We left just after breakfast, and glided down river on the tide with little to no wind to push us along, passing large White Hawks perched on the navigation poles. The wind remained light and we regretfully had to resort to motoring to reach our destination *in Guyana* safely before dark.”

Mina2 Teleported Onto a Different Planet

Position: 12:00.039N 061:45.627W Prickly Bay, Grenada

Mr Cato came up trumps. On the day he had said he would, he turned up with the repaired fuel injection pump for the main engine. The fact that the engineering company in Trinidad had charged more for the repair than the cost of a new pump in the UK was only a minor irritation – I was just glad to have the ability to run the engine again. Whilst he was on the boat, Mr Cato also repaired the outboard engine which had been giving us problems.

As Mina2 was imprisoned in Scarborough Harbour by her lack of engine the DS, John, Linda and I hired a car for the week and got to know the delightful Caribbean island of Tobago. At just 22 miles long and 6 miles wide, a week was more than enough. Our first mistake was to drive over to Store Bay on the other side of the island, the main anchorage in Tobago, to see a few yachts swinging to their anchor in clear water off a beautiful sandy, palm-fringed beach. This was what we were missing, but there was nothing we could do but drown our sorrows with a couple of rum punches in the beach bar. Driving around the island's coast road we saw

several other great anchorages and I hope that we might revisit Tobago next year when I return and explore some of these delightful spots.

But our island exploration also took us deep into the rainforests to a large waterfall with a cool pool at the bottom in which we had a refreshing swim (and much needed, given the dire shortage of fresh water in Mina2's tanks). The DS, Linda and John went on a guided jungle excursion (I was with Cato as he reinstalled the injection pump, so missed out), and we had several memorable meals of the local creole food washed down with exotic Caribbean cocktails and punches. Not least at the King's Bay Café on the east coast with fabulous views and exquisite local food cooked by a New Yorker who came to visit and stayed. We also experimented with the local street food called rostis which seem to consist of handful of curried flavoured chicken necks wrapped up in a very doughy chapatti type bread. An acquired taste.

The other use we put the hire car to was to refill the diesel tanks with 500 litres of diesel which required four trips to the filling station with six large jerry cans and then ferrying them to the boat by dinghy to decant into the tank. This chore was made very much less painful by the fact that this must have been the cheapest fill up ever. Trinidad and Tobago are lucky enough to have their own oil fields and they sell diesel at the staggeringly low price of 15p per litre. Yes, that's one-five-pence a litre. No pound sign on the front. My last fill up cost £625. This one cost just £75!

Because this abundance of oil, Trinidad and Tobago is one of the richest countries in the Caribbean. So there is very little poverty (certainly compared to the desperately poor Guyanese countries that we had passed through) as everyone who can't get a job seems to be employed by the government. So the roads are excellent, the streets are clean, and the people are well fed and happy. We thoroughly enjoyed our time in Tobago, notwithstanding the mechanical frustrations. The people were all very friendly and we look forward to a return visit there next year before we start our cruise of the rest of the Caribbean islands.

With the engine back up and running we were now able to leave Tobago and head for our final destination – Prickly Bay in Grenada – 85nm to the northwest. We set off very early in the morning and arrived mid afternoon. Mina2 has spent the last 2 ½ years visiting some of the most unspoilt and rarely visited cruising grounds in the world. To find that there is another yacht in the entire country, let alone in a single anchorage, and the place seems rather overcrowded. So imagine my amazement as we entered Prickly Bay. There were more than a hundred yachts anchored in the large bay. I hadn't seen this number of masts in total in the last 2 ½ years, let alone in one place at one time. There is a pontoon where you can come alongside and fill up with fuel and water, and buy a large bag of ice whilst you're there. A fabulous luxury. The moment you step ashore, you are surrounded by sophisticated bars and restaurants and the best equipped chandlery I've ever been to (I had to be dragged out kicking and screaming as it was felt, apparently, that more than an hour drooling over shackles, pumps and split pins was probably long enough). It had the feel of Salcombe-in-the-Sun with families holidaying with small children, zipping back and forth in their dinghies. It was like Mina2 had been teleported onto a different planet.

It has taken some getting used to. On the one hand this buzzing environment is exciting and luxurious. We are once again back in the Land of the Lotus Eaters. On the other hand I was filled with a great sadness. It suddenly dawned on me that the greatest adventure of my lifetime was now finally over. Whilst I'm sure great challenges lie ahead, battling in hurricane force winds and mountainous seas in the extreme environment of the Southern Ocean; the fantastic challenge and reward of cruising in Antarctica and Tierra Del Fuego, and visiting the incredibly remote and unspoilt islands of the northeast coast of Brazil, and the rivers of the Guyanas was now in the past. A memory. But a wonderful memory that I and all the people

who have joined me on this great adventure will never forget. But for now, we have to re-acclimatise ourselves to the pampered world of the Lotus Eaters.

Linda and John left for home a few days ago after our fantastic five-week cruise of the Guyanas and, with a couple of weeks before my son Peter arrives with his girlfriend Maggie, the DS and I have been licking Mina2 into shape. Poor old Mina2; she'd been put through a lot over the last couple of years and she was a little battered and tatty. Fine for the superb expedition yacht that she has been, but this was a different world with different standards, and the DS and I have been working hard converting her back from expedition vessel to luxury cruising yacht. She is now cleaned and polished stem to stern, inside and out and she can now float proudly in the company of any luxury fleet.

I'm mindful that I am still well behind with accounts of our visits to Guyana and further extracts from Linda's log will follow shortly. I will also start working on sending you some photos.

14 February 2013

I've now found time to write about our wonderful trip to Guyana which I am posting in several digestible parts. This is Part 1:

When Linda was 19 she spent nine months in Guyana on her gap year. Our cruise into Guyana was not just a great adventure for all of us, but a particularly emotional trip down memory lane for her.

The capital, Georgetown, is at the head of the Demerara (of sugar fame) River, but 10 miles to the west is the delta of the mighty Essequibo River and it was here that we were bound. En route from Suriname, the strong westerly current that I had bargained on deserted us and we were running out of time. The last 12 hours we were motoring flat out, and to ensure we made the entrance and a safe anchorage before nightfall, I decided to cut the corner into the river to save a critical half hour. As we approached the entrance from the side, we found our way cut off by hundreds of poles sticking out of the water with fishing nets strung between them. They ran for miles, seemingly blocking our path. Seeing what might have been a gap, we nosed our way through at a snail's pace and were mighty relieved to find ourselves on the far side of the obstacle without having got a net wrapped round our propeller. We eventually put the anchor down in the river as the last rays of light were falling, and to await the following dawn when we would resume our passage upstream. The Essequibo is the third longest river in South America after the Amazon and the Orinoco, and our destination was the small town of Bartica, some 50 miles upriver. The river is wide, but the navigable channel is narrow as you wend your way between the mud banks that lurk just below the surface. There is very little pilotage information available and what there is is as unreliable as the charts, so we were lucky enough to find a small freighter making its way up river and following it made our passage a lot less stressful.

We eventually arrived at Bartica and anchored off the dilapidated quay, opposite the town power station that was noisily belching out thick acrid smoke from its chimney. It turned out that it wasn't just the quay that was dilapidated but the entire town. In the hinterland of Guyana, a lot of gold mining takes place, some of it legal and some not so legal and Bartica is the mining town where the prospectors come to resupply with fuel and food. We had accumulated some rubbish that we took ashore with us to ecologically dispose of, only to find the entire town was a rubbish dump. We could

have put our garbage anywhere (in fact we had to do just that as there wasn't a garbage bin to be found). The streets were absolutely littered with cans, broken rum bottles, plastic water bottles and rotting vegetables. Packs of stray dogs roamed the streets, entertaining themselves by chasing the many cows that were also, inexplicably, ambling along the roads. When the British left Guyana, one of the things they left behind was their entire fleet of British Army Bedford 4-ton trucks which are now pressed into service ferrying enormous barrels of kerosene and supplies to the mining camps. The town was full of them, half in working order, thundering up and down the main street, the other half in bits, with men under them with large spanners and surrounded by the component parts of differentials and drive shafts. We noticed that the streets were full of men and almost no women. It was like the Wild West.

We got our passports stamped at the heavily barricaded police station (only a few years earlier, a bunch of gangsters stormed the police station, killing several officers before stealing their weapons and then rampaging through the streets indiscriminately killing anyone who got in their way). We lingered at the police station for as short a time as possible, not for fear of another gangland assault, but because of the overpowering stench of raw sewage from the filthy gutter just outside.

Amazingly, for a country that has far less tourism than it deserves, there is a Bradt's Guide in which we noted that a good meal could be had at the Platinum Hotel. Over the entrance door was a sign that said "NO alcohol. NO weapons. NO men under the age of 18". We all strode into the reception which we found to be dimly lit with blue lights, with the smell of sweat unsuccessfully disguised by the smell of cheap perfume. I think (although I am no expert in these matters) that the Platinum Hotel is now a brothel and, judging by the startled look on the face of the blousy receptionist, food is the one commodity they don't provide.

Having failed to find dinner we returned to the boat and the following morning we made our way a mile downriver and anchored off Hurakabra, the delightful riverside home of Kit and Gem Nascimento. Their property doubles as a resort for visiting tourists and the garden, surrounded by jungle, was a haven for monkeys and parrots. Kit and Gem were in Georgetown, so we were greeted by their supervisor, Mike, who showed us around, accompanied by his dogs (which have to be locked up at night or they would be eaten by the Jaguars that roam in the surrounding jungle). At one time a cabinet minister, the urbane Kit has been doing all he can to develop Guyana and the Essequibo as a destination for cruising yachts, and prior to the cruise, I had been in touch with him for information. We had told Kit that we wanted to leave the boat for a few days and take an excursion to see the interior of Guyana. Gem had put together a tailor-made four-day itinerary for us and Mike, who in a previous life had been a ship's captain, was to keep an eye on Mina2 at anchor in front of the house. That evening, Kit and Gem returned from Georgetown and invited us over for drinks.

We were picked up from the boat at first light the following morning by Mike who took us to Bartica in the small Hurakabra launch where a taxi was waiting to take us to the airstrip about five miles out of town. The journey, along a hopelessly pot-holed mud track, took 40 minutes. At times we thought we were going to have to get out and push. On the grass airstrip stood a very old and very small Cessna single prop aircraft. Standing by it was a scruffy man wearing torn checked trousers and a T-shirt. We assumed he was the mechanic. And he was the mechanic – but he was also the

pilot. He opened the door to reveal an interior that was completely falling apart. What was left of the seats had tufts of horse hair sticking out, and all the plastic trim that remained was falling off. Maria, a nervous flyer at the best of times, picked up a seat belt which came away in her hand. John is 6'8" in his stockinged feet. Getting him comfortably into a Range Rover is a challenge. Getting him into the Cessna was a near impossibility, but eventually we were all shoe-horned in and the pilot managed after a struggle to close the passenger door by leaning out of his window, lifting it on its hinges and slamming it hard. We were off.

Our first destination was a 40 minute flight to the Kaieteur Falls. 95% of Guyana is impenetrable rainforest and looking down from 5000 feet as we flew over endless tree tops it looked for all the world like we were flying over an enormous broccoli. The pilot pointed down and said "If you crash into that, all you can hope for is that the plane bursts into flames – that's the only way they'll find you. And if they don't, the Jaguars will" The DS's knuckles went white. But amazingly we arrived at the airstrip at Kaieteur Falls.

Now not many people know this but the Kaieteur Falls in Guyana is, at 700 feet, the highest single drop waterfall in the world. And not that many people get to see it. We nearly didn't see the falls either. Low cloud swirled around the airstrip. The caretaker of the reception lodge rushed out. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Nothing's the matter" we replied, "We've come to see the falls." "Oh" he said, sounding disappointed, "the only time a plane comes in this early is when it's in trouble". We told him that we were supposed to be met by a guide, but the caretaker said that the guide hadn't turned up. "Anyway" he said "there's no point in going to the falls. They'll be covered in mist in these conditions. You won't see a thing".

The pilots face brightened for the first time. "OK" he said "we might as well leave now and go on to Iwokrama". "Hold on a sec" said Linda, who had organised the entire tour through Gem, at some considerable cost "We've sailed half way round the world to visit the Kaieteur Falls and we're not going to give up that easily". Out into the clearing walked Leroy, a National Park Ranger. He somewhat reluctantly agreed to stand in for the absent guide and take us to the falls himself, so off we trekked through the jungle. Our "driver" was not best pleased and was left by his plane sulking.

Leroy soon thawed and started pointing out interesting plants, animals and birds. He showed us an enormous Giant Tank bromeliad, in the base of the bowl of which was a small pool of water. Inside was a minute bright yellow green frog, the very rare and endangered Golden frog, that spends its entire 8-year lifespan amongst the leaves of the same plant. We also saw a flash of orange and could see perched in a tree, a Cock-of-the-rock bird (*Rupicola rupicola*) with its extraordinary crested head. As we ducked and dived through the jungle we started to hear a deep roar which got louder and louder until we reached a rocky plateau by a wide river (the Essequibo) and there, completely obliterated from view by a wall of mist, we assumed to be the Kaieteur Falls. Leroy said that this fog was very unusual. There was no realistic chance of it clearing and we might as well now return to the reception lodge. Linda was not to be dissuaded. So we hung around in the swirling mist until, magically, it parted to reveal the most fantastic sight. The whole width of the river fell over a cliff and plummeted 700 feet into a pool below where it collected itself and resumed its journey, past

Mina2 lying to her anchor at Hurakabra, and into the sea. It was awesome, not least because this isn't a tourist trap with hundreds of people and souvenir shops. It is one of the Wonders of the World in a completely unspoilt jungle setting. We were the only people there.

We returned to the airstrip where our disgruntled driver shoe-horned us back into the dilapidated Cessna for the next flight 80 miles further south to the eco-resort of Iwokrama. We bumped to a halt on the grass airstrip. Out we got. The driver dumped our luggage onto the grass beside the plane and, without even giving us time to hand him a generous tip, said "Someone will come and collect you", climbed back into the plane, gunned the engine and roared off into the sky. We looked around. We were completely alone. We didn't even know if this was indeed the Iwokrama airstrip. But before too long a truck arrived and we were greeted warmly by two of the Iwokrama staff who said they heard the plane flying over and assumed it was us.

Iwokrama is an eco-resort built in the middle of the jungle to accommodate scientists and tourists alike. We arrived at the complex and were shown to our very smart and immaculately clean, albeit quite basic, bungalows surrounded by manicured lawns leading down to the banks of the Essequibo. Before lunch I walked round the grounds and down to the river bank where there was a sign "SWIMMING PROHIBITED". We went to lunch in the main complex and were greeted by a Canadian PhD student who had just started an internship sponsored by his university. There were lots of people sitting eating at one end of the complex. "Are they the scientists?" John asked. "No" said the intern, "they're the staff. I'm the only scientist here at the moment. They ran out of funding". They weren't getting much income from tourists either. In the two days we were there, we were the only guests they had.

I asked one of the staff why swimming in the river was prohibited. "There are caimans (alligators) in the river and there is one that patrols along the beach here. It's a big one, about 15 feet long, and has three legs". "What happened to its fourth leg?" I asked. "The piranhas got it." "Oh" I said sarcastically "so you've only got caimans and piranhas to worry about" No" he replied, "If they don't get you, then the anacondas, electric eels and sting rays will". Swimming was definitely off the agenda. After lunch we were taken on a guided walk to spot birds, not through the surrounding jungle itself but along a road where they were much more visible flying across the gap in the foliage.

In the evening, after dark, we were taken out on the river in a small open boat with a couple of guides. As we glided down the river, one of the guides played a powerful torch around. In the beam you could see pairs of brilliant crimson red lights. "They're the caimans' eyes" we were told. We approached a few of them as they lay in the water with just their nostrils and eyes protruding above the surface. We then nosed in to the shore and the guide started playing his torch into the mangrove trees hanging close overhead. "What are you looking for now?" Maria asked. "Snakes" said the guide. "Ah" he said "there's one!". Immediately above us was a green snake hanging from a bow. This is, indeed, a wild place.

The following morning, and we were up early to be taken to Iwokrama's canopy walkway where a series of swaying suspension bridges have been strung 100 feet up in the canopy of tree tops. From here you get a different perspective of the jungle

being able to observe different plants growing from the trunks of the large trees, and different birds. But it was the walk to and from the canopy walkway which was the most instructive. We had with us Gerry, a young Amerindian who knew everything about all the birds and trees and was enthusiastic in sharing his knowledge with us, describing the various plants and what they were traditionally used for, whether for medicines, making weapons, or for construction of houses, boats and furniture. Wherever you go in the jungle you hear the piercing call of the Screaming Piah but you rarely see the bird. Jerry pointed one out. It looked a completely nondescript brown bird until it threw its head back, opened its beak wide to expose an orange coloured throat and belted out its ear-shattering call. Gerry also noticed a hole pecked high up into the trunk of a tall tree. "That's where a Scarlet Macaw lives". He hit the trunk of the tree with a large stick and, sure enough, out of the hole came a large and magnificently plumed scarlet, green and blue parrot.

Further down the trail, Jerry said that we should advise the camp that we were heading back for lunch. He picked up a stick lying by a large tree and gave the trunk a mighty wallop. An incredibly loud "boing" resonated from the tree across the jungle. It was a Messenger tree which the Amerindians used to communicate with each other over long distances. Sure enough, as we walked into the camp clearing, lunch was ready and laid out for us.

Our first destination was a 40 minute flight to the Kaieteur Falls. 95% of Guyana is impenetrable rainforest and looking down from 5000 feet as we flew over endless tree tops it looked for all the world like we were flying over an enormous broccoli. The pilot pointed down and said "If you crash into that, all you can hope for is that the plane bursts into flames – that's the only way they'll find you. And if they don't, the Jaguars will" The DS's knuckles went white. But amazingly we arrived at the airstrip at Kaieteur Falls.

Now not many people know this but the Kaieteur Falls in Guyana is, at 700 feet, the highest single drop waterfall in the world. And not that many people get to see it. We nearly didn't see the falls either. Low cloud swirled around the airstrip. The caretaker of the reception lodge rushed out. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Nothing's the matter" we replied, "We've come to see the falls." "Oh" he said, sounding disappointed, "the only time a plane comes in this early is when it's in trouble". We told him that we were supposed to be met by a guide, but the caretaker said that the guide hadn't turned up. "Anyway" he said "there's no point in going to the falls. They'll be covered in mist in these conditions. You won't see a thing".

The pilots face brightened for the first time. "OK" he said "we might as well leave now and go on to Iwokrama". "Hold on a sec" said Linda, who had organised the entire tour through Gem, at some considerable cost "We've sailed half way round the world to visit the Kaieteur Falls and we're not going to give up that easily". Out into the clearing walked Leroy, a National Park Ranger. He somewhat reluctantly agreed to stand in for the absent guide and take us to the falls himself, so off we trekked through the jungle. Our "driver" was not best pleased and was left by his plane sulking.

Leroy soon thawed and started pointing out interesting plants, animals and birds. He showed us an enormous Giant Tank bromeliad, in the base of the bowl of which was a

small pool of water. Inside was a minute bright yellow green frog, the very rare and endangered Golden frog, that spends its entire 8-year lifespan amongst the leaves of the same plant. We also saw a flash of orange and could see perched in a tree, a Cock-of-the-rock bird (*Rupicola rupicola*) with its extraordinary crested head. As we ducked and dived through the jungle we started to hear a deep roar which got louder and louder until we reached a rocky plateau by a wide river (the Essequibo) and there, completely obliterated from view by a wall of mist, we assumed to be the Kaieteur Falls. Leroy said that this fog was very unusual. There was no realistic chance of it clearing and we might as well now return to the reception lodge. Linda was not to be dissuaded. So we hung around in the swirling mist until, magically, it parted to reveal the most fantastic sight. The whole width of the river fell over a cliff and plummeted 700 feet into a pool below where it collected itself and resumed its journey, past Mina² lying to her anchor at Hurakabra, and into the sea. It was awesome, not least because this isn't a tourist trap with hundreds of people and souvenir shops. It is one of the Wonders of the World in a completely unspoilt jungle setting. We were the only people there.

We returned to the airstrip where our disgruntled driver shoe-horned us back into the dilapidated Cessna for the next flight 80 miles further south to the eco-resort of Iwokrama. We bumped to a halt on the grass airstrip. Out we got. The driver dumped our luggage onto the grass beside the plane and, without even giving us time to hand him a generous tip, said "Someone will come and collect you", climbed back into the plane, gunned the engine and roared off into the sky. We looked around. We were completely alone. We didn't even know if this was indeed the Iwokrama airstrip. But before too long a truck arrived and we were greeted warmly by two of the Iwokrama staff who said they heard the plane flying over and assumed it was us.

Iwokrama is an eco-resort built in the middle of the jungle to accommodate scientists and tourists alike. We arrived at the complex and were shown to our very smart and immaculately clean, albeit quite basic, bungalows surrounded by manicured lawns leading down to the banks of the Essequibo. Before lunch I walked round the grounds and down to the river bank where there was a sign "SWIMMING PROHIBITED". We went to lunch in the main complex and were greeted by a Canadian PhD student who had just started an internship sponsored by his university. There were lots of people sitting eating at one end of the complex. "Are they the scientists?" John asked. "No" said the intern, "they're the staff. I'm the only scientist here at the moment. They ran out of funding". They weren't getting much income from tourists either. In the two days we were there, we were the only guests they had.

I asked one of the staff why swimming in the river was prohibited. "There are caimans (alligators) in the river and there is one that patrols along the beach here. It's a big one, about 15 feet long, and has three legs". "What happened to its fourth leg?" I asked. "The piranhas got it." "Oh" I said sarcastically "so you've only got caimans and piranhas to worry about" No" he replied, "If they don't get you, then the anacondas, electric eels and sting rays will". Swimming was definitely off the agenda. After lunch we were taken on a guided walk to spot birds, not through the surrounding jungle itself but along a road where they were much more visible flying across the gap in the foliage.

In the evening, after dark, we were taken out on the river in a small open boat with a couple of guides. As we glided down the river, one of the guides played a powerful torch around. In the beam you could see pairs of brilliant crimson red lights. "They're the caimans' eyes" we were told. We approached a few of them as they lay in the water with just their nostrils and eyes protruding above the surface. We then nosed in to the shore and the guide started playing his torch into the mangrove trees hanging close overhead. "What are you looking for now?" Maria asked. "Snakes" said the guide. "Ah" he said "there's one!". Immediately above us was a green snake hanging from a bow. This is, indeed, a wild place.

The following morning, and we were up early to be taken to Iwokrama's canopy walkway where a series of swaying suspension bridges have been strung 100 feet up in the canopy of tree tops. From here you get a different perspective of the jungle being able to observe different plants growing from the trunks of the large trees, and different birds. But it was the walk to and from the canopy walkway which was the most instructive. We had with us Gerry, a young Amerindian who knew everything about all the birds and trees and was enthusiastic in sharing his knowledge with us, describing the various plants and what they were traditionally used for, whether for medicines, making weapons, or for construction of houses, boats and furniture. Wherever you go in the jungle you hear the piercing call of the Screaming Piah but you rarely see the bird. Jerry pointed one out. It looked a completely nondescript brown bird until it threw its head back, opened its beak wide to expose an orange coloured throat and belted out its ear-shattering call. Gerry also noticed a hole pecked high up into the trunk of a tall tree. "That's where a Scarlet Macaw lives". He hit the trunk of the tree with a large stick and, sure enough, out of the hole came a large and magnificently plumed scarlet, green and blue parrot.

Further down the trail, Jerry said that we should advise the camp that we were heading back for lunch. He picked up a stick lying by a large tree and gave the trunk a mighty wallop. An incredibly loud "boing" resonated from the tree across the jungle. It was a Messenger tree which the Amerindians used to communicate with each other over long distances. Sure enough, as we walked into the camp clearing, lunch was ready and laid out for us.

One thing that had struck us was that most of the people in Guyana outside of the towns were Amerindians, the original indigenous population of all the Guyanas. In French Guiana and Suriname most of the population seemed to be descendants of the black African slaves brought in by the European colonialists, or the Indian and Far Eastern descendants of the indented labour that was brought in after the emancipation of the slaves to work in the sugar plantations. In Guyana eight distinct tribes of Amerindians still exist, and whilst they may no longer be bludgeoning each other to death at the drop of a hat and (by some accounts) then eating them, they are still fiercely proud of their individual tribes.

After the canopy walkway we were driven for lunch to Rock View Lodge, from where we were to get a boat to take us upriver to Karanambu Lodge. In the south of Guyana, the jungle abruptly peters out and is transformed into the open scrub of the savannah. Rock View was bought by an Englishman, Colin Edwards, who came to Guyana to construct roads and decided to stay. The estate is now not only a working

ranch but a tourist lodge as well. Unfortunately Colin was not there when we visited, but we met two of his sons who work there.

Karanambu is an estate that has been in the McTurk family for generations, and was accessible only by a long boat trip up the Essequibo. It was the boat trip that turned out to be the best surprise of the whole trip. In fact Karanambu sent two boats to take us up there. The water level in the river was so low and the water therefore so shallow that if all of us and our luggage went in one of the open aluminium boats we would never have made it. So our luggage went in one and we in the other. The trip took three hours as we wended our way between the exposed sand banks and the river was absolutely teeming with wildlife. Black caimans lined the banks, sliding menacingly into the water as we passed, and we even saw a rare spectacled caiman. And in the sky and in the branches of the trees that lined the river was an astonishing variety of birdlife. We were lucky enough to have with us a Karanambu guide, another Gerry, who had a strong Guyanese accent. “Were you born in Guyana?” we asked him. “No” he replied “I was born and brought up in Balham, South London”. He came to Guyana with his parents when he was 17 and has remained there ever since, not once returning to the UK. Gerry knew every bird we saw from small kingfishers and plovers up to the enormous and colourful Jabiru storks, whilst Ospreys circled overhead. We saw several dozen different species during the trip. Magic.

We arrived at Karanambu at dusk and were greeted by the manager Salvador and his wife Andrea, and plied with welcoming rum punches. The McTurks are said to have been in Guyana for two hundred years, but they remain as English as English can be. Our visit to Karanambu had particular significance for Linda who, 45 years earlier, had visited Karanambu unexpectedly and had been given English tea and cake by Constance McTurk served on fine china plates. Linda has written her account of our trip and her memories of her earlier visit on their blog site

www.blog.mailasail.com/suilven/125

I think it was Linda’s description to me of her earlier visit that made me think that we were to be staying at a typical brick built English country home. How surprised I was to find that not only all the out buildings but the main residence itself was made in the traditional Guyanese style with a large living area completely open to the elements on the sides, and the whole building covered with an enormous steep roof covered with intricately woven palm fronds. This working estate now derives much of its income from visiting guests such as ourselves. Previous guests have included members of the Royal Family and David Attenborough. Very sadly, Diane McTurk, the daughter of Constance who entertained Linda so many years ago, was away for a couple of days, so we didn’t get the chance to meet her but the professional manager of the estate Salvador (Guyanese) and his wife Andrea (very New York American) entertained us handsomely. We each stayed in one of the guest lodges, again built traditionally with an open roof space covered with palm fronds. The large double bed was covered with a mosquito net above which was an extra covering. This was to protect us from the constant rain of bat droppings in the night as they swooped in and out and around the bed. “Sometimes” said Salvador, “in the night you’ll find a bat sitting on the floor. If it’s in your way, just shoo it out with your foot!”. Also sharing our room with us were termites, frogs, and the most decorative wasps nest you’ve ever seen.

The following morning, before we left to catch our plane back to Georgetown, we had the time to go out in a 4x4 to look for giant anteaters. We managed to see one, albeit at a distance, a surprisingly large animal lolling away in front of us with his enormously long ant-eating head close to the ground.

We were due to get back to Georgetown on a regular Guyana Air flight which was scheduled to pick us up on its way from Lethem, a small town on the border with Brazil. Andrea said “Would you like to see Lethem? It’s an interesting town.” We said we would, so she called the air company and got them to pick us up on the way to Lethem rather than on the way back. Personal service indeed. “We’ll need to get to the airstrip early” said Salvador “to make sure there aren’t any cows on the runway”. When the plane arrived, the DS was relieved to see that it was substantially bigger than the Cessna, taking about 20 passengers, and that the charming and courteous pilot was immaculately turned out in a smart, clean uniform. He took one look at John’s height and put him in the co-pilots seat. John spent the entire two flights quizzing the pilot about all the systems and controls. I’m not quite sure whether John wasn’t actually flying the plane by the time we got to Georgetown.

At Georgetown we were greeted at the airport by Gem who gave us a conducted tour of the capital in her car, including a drive down memory lane for Linda, visiting all her old haunts; the school where she worked and the convent where she stayed with the Anglican nuns.

Kit then joined us for dinner where, at our request (and Kit’s disgust), we ate traditional Guyanese food. Kit not only was, but remains, a well-known influential figure in Guyana and he was constantly greeting and being greeted by people. Kit and Gem took us back to our hotel and joined us for a nightcap of fine Guyanese liqueur rum. Kit introduced us to the owner of the hotel who took a personal interest in the fact that the air conditioning in the DS’s and my room wasn’t working and he went off with a screwdriver to fix it. The hotel was modest by European standards and Kit surprised us by saying that the President of Guyana, Donald Ramotar, who was a personal friend of the hotel owner, had been known to pop in from time to time, particularly on the hotel’s karaoke evenings where the President would wow his electorate with renditions of New York, New York. Very hands on.

Kit and Gem left us to go home, and Linda and Maria went to their respective rooms leaving John and me to enjoy one last Guyanese rum before retiring. Whilst savouring the nectar, the owner of the hotel came up to us, with another chap who I assumed was an air conditioning expert. “May I introduce you to the President of Guyana, Mr Ramotar”. John and I leapt to our feet and shook the president’s outstretched hand. “I understand you’re the people who have arrived by boat” said the charming President. I know that Guyana doesn’t yet get many tourists and they are now doing what they can to encourage more tourism, but a personal audience with the pre-briefed President of the country was rather more than I had expected. We chatted about this and that and where we had sailed from. The President congratulated me on my adventurism before excusing himself, presumably to warm up for his karaoke session.

I went up to our room where the DS was already in bed. “Sorry I was a little longer than expected, but I’ve been chatting to the President of Guyana” I explained nonchalantly. “You’re drunk” the DS said “get to bed and stop being so stupid”.

The following day we were once again driven around Georgetown by Gem. The city is a place that has a reputation for a very high crime rate and isn't a place you would walk around on your own. Which is a shame because it is a town with enormous character. Built by the Dutch below sea level, with a high retaining sea wall, the town is criss-crossed with drainage canals either side of which are wide tree lined avenues and beautiful old wooden colonial buildings, many of which are now sadly very run down. We were driven across the floating bridge over the Demerara River (the longest floating bridge in the world) to Parika on the Essequibo where we took a small fast boat that roared 30 miles up the river at breakneck speed to Bartica where Mike, the supervisor at Hurakabra, was waiting to take us by launch back to Mina2. The wind was blowing powerfully from the east and the strong ebb tide of the river was coming from the west which made for pretty choppy water. "You'd better put these over you" said Mike, passing a couple of plastic sheets to us, "there might be a bit of spray". That was a bit of an understatement. For 20 minutes as we shot through the choppy water, it was like having a fire hose pointed at you from close range. The launch was shooting off the waves and crashing into the troughs with a loud cracking noise which I assumed was the wooden hull disintegrating under the hammering. I was just weighing up my chances of being able to swim to the shore when I saw that the wooden bench that Linda and John were sitting on in front of me was beginning to split under their weight. Every crash into the waves and it buckled and splintered more until the whole thing gave away and, with a thud, Linda and John continued the rest of the journey sitting on the stringers in the bilge. We all thought it hysterical but did wonder what the reaction would be, not of rough and tough sailors like us, but of more genteel guests that they may have staying at Hurakabra. The tourism learning curve is long and steep.

Our adventure right the way down the Guyanas had been fascinating, visiting a rarely visited cruising ground (Guyana gets no more than about 12 yachts visiting every year – about half the number that visit Antarctica) and experiencing the extraordinarily diversified cultures of these remote countries.

Our trip to Guyana was undoubtedly the highlight, not least because of the four-day excursion into the interior which is a trip that I doubt any of us will ever forget. The organisation of the trip (with the exception of the absent guide at Kaieteur) was flawless. It involved several organisations, taxis, and planes and throughout the four days we were passed seamlessly from the care of one group of people to the next. We never felt like tourists but like guests. The personal attention and friendliness we received everywhere we went was exceptional. The knowledge of all the guides was boundless, as was their enthusiasm in telling us about everything. The success of the trip was due entirely to the organisational skills of Gem, to whom we owe a great debt. Guyana is a wonderfully unspoilt country with an enormous amount of history, culture and nature to lure the adventurous tourist and I would highly recommend it whether you are coming by yacht or plane.