

# THE CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF S/V KAMAL

A journey by Greg and Lauren Henry aboard their Pearson 365

*Excerpted from e-mail correspondence between Randy Powers and Lauren Henry in December, 2003. It is presented on this website with the permission of Greg and Lauren Henry.*

## **PART II**

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**Bonaire • Panama • Galapagos • Marquesas**

### **Bonaire 3/01**

Dear all,

We've reached the end of the Caribbean leg of our trip and are now in Bonaire, the diving capital of the world (or so they tell us). In a few days we will head west to Cartagena, the San Blas islands and eventually transit the Panama Canal.

After Guadeloupe we visited Les Saintes, a small group of islands just south of Guadeloupe. We managed to pick up two stowaways, one a French student on a short vacation and the other a Swedish graduate student named Robin, who made his way to the Caribbean by boat from Las Palmas. We had every intention of dropping them both off there but Robin ended up with us all the way to Bequia. Having him on board was great; he loved doing all the sailing stuff and even cooked! His Swedish meatballs made us the envy of the anchorage. (Robin, come back! Without you Greg makes me actually WORK!)

The Saintes are beautiful but small and we quickly moved on to Dominica. (Pronounced Dome-a-neeka) This was our first experience with the infamous boat boys. That term developed from the habit of local boys trying to make money by doing small things for cruisers, from disposing trash to delivering fruit to the boat. The practice has developed among older men, but the insulting term remains. As you approach the island small dories, whose drivers seem to be able to smell arriving boats from miles away, bombard you. Some are aggressive and persistent, and will only relent after you commit to one specific guy (and sometimes not even then). We arrived armed with a reference and Martin ended up being friendly and helpful. We took a rowed river tour with him up the Indian River, one of 365 on the island. (One for every day of the year, as the saying goes). The banks are lined with mangroves and numerous varieties of plants and trees, most of which Martin was able to identify and tell us how they are used in local medicines and dishes.

During our stay we took a bus to explore the island. Busses here, and across the island chain, are nothing like in the states. They

are called transports and are privately owned vans. The only way to identify them is an H in their license plates (for hire) and the colorful names stickered onto the windshield (Rasta Van, Easy Na, Who to Blame). Riding a transport in the Caribbean is a unique experience. There are no advertised routes or fares; everyone just seems to know who goes where. The vans are crammed full of people and packages and they stop whenever there's a request (made by knocking on the window). The result is like a Three Stooges skit, with constant re-shuffling of passengers and bags. (And stereo equipment, TVs, or whatever else needs transporting). I'm told the reggae music pumped through large speakers gets progressively louder the closer you get to Trinidad. The fares are ridiculously low and in an effort to pick up as many passengers as possible, the drivers execute some incredible (read: hair-raising) maneuvers. Only when I reached the Caribbean could I see buses passing cars on narrow, winding roads. In any event our bus ride took us up and over the mountain range through some spectacular scenery. The island is so fertile that according to Martin you can stick a cutting in the ground, ignore it, and it will quickly take root and flourish. Consequently Dominica is covered with dense, lush vegetation. Fruits are waiting to be picked at every turn; Robin brought coconuts, bananas and mangoes back from an evening's hike.

Elections were underway during our visit and the island looked like a massive game of color war; red, blue and green representing the different parties. Flags waved from every tree, banners hung across every street and people crammed into the beds of pickup trucks clad in their color of choice, yelling and honking the horn and generally making known their preference. In the end the current party, known chiefly for their flagrant corruption, was ousted by a coalition of the other two parties.

Our last day in Dominica was spent with Judy, a friend of my grandmothers who moved there with her husband 9 years ago. With Stephanie, a family friend along, we went to Trafalgar Falls, a series of two waterfalls reached after a short (but wet and slippery) hike. They have the distinction of being featured on an EC \$5 bill. It's hard to believe that such a spot is just a short ride from Roseau, the capital. Unfortunately a cruise ship was in port so the popular site was crowded. Our wonderful day ended on a sour note when upon returning to Portsmouth, where we were anchored, a local demanding a tip for watching our dinghy confronted us. We left without paying him, but later he successfully scammed Robin, our crew, of \$5 for a ride to Kamal in a boat he didn't have.

From Dominica we headed directly for Bequia, skipping Martinique, St. Lucia and St. Vincent unfortunately we can't see everything! The harbor in Bequia is the most crowded we've encountered, and the holding for the anchor is poor lots of boats

dragging. The island is hilly and green, although not as fertile as Dominica. The locals are friendly and are known for their intricate boat models. We saw some beautiful ones, but they start around \$500!

We were there for the SuperBowl, and tortured Robin by making him watch it with us. All the Americans seemed to come out of the woodwork for the event, converging at the one restaurant featuring the game. The evening was dominated by a group of obnoxious ex-pats. Sometimes I find it amazing that the entire world doesn't hate us.

After a little water-in-the-diesel delay we moved on to the tiny, privately run island of Mustique. In general it reminds me of a golf club everything looks pristine, perfectly groomed and people even get around in vehicles suspiciously resembling golf carts. Of course, among the islands homeowners are Mick Jagger, Elton John and Tommy Hilfiger. While on the beach at The Cotton House, a chic hotel built around an 18th Century plantation and sugar mill, I found the pillow menu with a full page of pillow options for hotel guests. Exclusive and reclusive, and so upscale that it eschews the more ostentatious displays of St. Barts.

Our next stop was the Tobago Cays. These are actually a few scattered, uninhabited islands surrounded by spectacular reefs. The anchorage is located between the islands just behind the shelter of the reef and when you look out there appears to be nothing between you and the coast of Africa. It's definitely eerie. When we arrived we were sharing the anchorage with approx. 50 other boats, but that number dwindled in the following days. The best snorkeling is found in the outer reefs; moorings are installed for dinghies to tie up to, and we swam out, letting the strong current bring us back. The visibility was perfect, and although I tried, I failed to identify even half of the marine life we saw.

After the Cays we went to Union Island where we found a small but inviting town. We stocked up a bit during the day and listened to a great steel band at night.

On our way to Grenada we stopped in Curacao for just one night. After sunset a rowboat approached with a man and woman aboard, locals out for an evening ride. The woman was obviously upset about something, yelling at Greg, telling him that it wasn't right of him to take her picture and she'd come for her money. When visitors first descended upon the islands with their cameras the locals were terrified that with each image a piece of their soul would be stolen. They got over that once they realized they could charge money for the privilege. Greg insisted he hadn't taken her picture; he'd been taking a shot of the sun with the sextant. We got it out to show her and she remained unconvinced, except that her companion recognized it for what it was. Beaten, she decided

to try and convince me that my hair would be just perfect for braiding. I respectfully declined.

We remained in Grenada for quite a while awaiting the arrival of packages, but we didn't get to see too much. Every time we planned an excursion it seemed the gods or at least customs/the weather/broken equipment, etc. got in the way. But we did manage to meet up with a few friends, which was fun.

We are now in Bonaire, arriving after a picture-perfect three-day passage, and are planning a dive, a visit to the salt flats and pink flamingo breeding ground. (Greg wants me to mention the pod of dolphins that joined us for a short swim our second night out of Grenada. They were playing; we were obviously moving much slower than they prefer to travel, but they skirted around, in front, behind and underneath the boat, leaving trails of phosphorescence in their wakes. We were mesmerized, running from one side of the boat to the other as they weaved around us.)

Thanks for all the messages on the guest book what an unexpected surprise when we first logged on! We continue to look forward to your notes.

### **Panama 3/01**

After leaving Bonaire with its incredible diving and snorkeling we sailed for Aruba. It's not somewhere I'd choose to spend any length of time (imagine Disneyland in Vegas), so of course we were stuck there for almost one week waiting for a good window to head for Cartagena. We never got one (boats we know who did go reported 30-40 knot winds) and we sailed instead straight to the San Blas. Our landfall was in the Holandes Cays on the western end of the San Blas archipelago.

The San Blas are situated just east of Colon along the Panamanian coastline. The area is inhabited by the Kunas, believed to be the last full-blooded descendants of the Carib Indians who lived in the area before the Spanish arrived in the early 1500's. We sailed in the company of two other boats, White Rose III from Australia, and Gandalf from Gloucester. Don and Jeannette are at the tail end of their four year circumnavigation aboard White Rose. They have four children and eleven grandchildren awaiting them back home in Australia. Don regales us with stories of his immigration from England, years chopping down trees in the outback (including the one that fell on him) and more recently the trials and tribulations of their world-wide sail. And then Jeannette tells us the way it really happened! Jay and Carol on Gandalf (think back, those of you who have read the Hobbit!) represent the baby boomers, with dry senses of humor

and a bilge stocked full of wine. They were joined in Aruba by Bill, a multi-talented (he bakes! he spears fish! he cleans!) Canadian whom we're trying to strong-arm into coming as far as the Galapagos. Greg, Bill, Carol and I go snorkeling in every anchorage chauffeured by Jay, who hates going in the water ("it's so wet!") but, good sport that he is, sits in the dinghy with a book and a beer getting nothing read as he tolerates our frequent reports of the happenings below.

The San Blas are beautiful palm-lined islands with white sand beaches, numerous coral reefs and calm, protected waters. If ever one wanted to escape, this is the perfect place to do it; no computers, no phones, no stores, nothing. The Kunas live in small huts made of white cane with thatched roofs. The floors are packed dirt and the furnishings are sparse - often a crude table with chairs, a shelf for dishes and utensils, and hammocks for sleeping. Primitive by our standards, but everything is meticulously maintained, down to the swept floors. Locals speak mainly Kuna and Spanish. It's understandable that none of us know any Kuna, but incredibly, of the seven of us none speak Spanish, either. All I have with me is a "Spanish for Travelers", not altogether useful when trying to converse with Kuna Indians. ("necesitamos un botones para las maletas".) But in the few days we were there we managed to become friendly with a local chief, his family and some of the other people living on their island. We snorkeled, traded for molas (hand-sewn designs laboriously stitched onto square pieces of cloth) with local women, were treated by the chief to a tour of a nearby island overflowing with fruit (avocados, limes, bananas) and dove for crabs and langouste (lobster) with a young man from the island with more lung capacity than anyone in our party.

We are now anchored in "the flats" at the mouth of the Panama Canal. It is more desirable to be on a dock at the yacht club because HUGE ships and tankers traverse the canal day and night throwing enormous wakes that roll us like a top. The Panamanians just recently took possession of the canal and already changes can be felt; one of their first acts was, of course, to raise the transit fee and institute a "security deposit" of \$800 that we've heard they try very hard to find justifications to keep. Applying to transit requires a somewhat tedious process filled with paperwork and bureaucracy accompanied everywhere by a cab driver because it is unsafe to go anywhere without one. There is currently a transit backlog due to a shortage of pilots (one must be on every yacht/ship as it goes through) and we are expecting a wait of at least one week, perhaps more. Of course we have things to keep us busy, from repairs to the boat to food shopping and a trip to the duty-free zone. One consolation is how cheap everything is here: at the yacht club cokes are .50 and a pitcher of beer \$3.

We hope to be through in the first days of April and find some wind on the Pacific side (which would be unusual) to take us to the Galapagos.

### **Galapagos 4/01**

We've made it as far as the Galapagos, bringing our total miles sailed above 5,000. Our stay in Panama was interesting, educational, and a unique experience, but we agree with most the other boats that the best part was seeing it fall behind as we sailed away. The canal itself is a phenomenal testament to America's boundless optimism at the turn of the century. Its construction was an enormous undertaking with a cost high in dollars and lives. To their credit, the locks are still running smoothly as originally designed despite nonstop operation.

I think Carter's heart was in the right place when he decided to hand the canal over to Panama - after all, it was not run for a profit and the original lease was obtained under somewhat questionable circumstances - but in no time they've managed to make quite a mess of things. We were hard pressed to find logical explanations for many of the canal's rules and regulations, and I think it's a place only Joseph Heller would feel at home. Most boats were given their transit date and time days in advance, but could count on changes up until and even during their transit.

We crewed as line handlers on another boat (each boat must have four people aside from the captain to work the lines leading to the top of each lock as the boat is raised or lowered, depending on which direction you're going) and our call time was 5:30am. This actually had us excited because it meant we had a good chance of getting through in one day instead of two. I was motivated when I got up at 4:30 that morning, but by the time our pilot (assigned by the canal commission to accompany you through) arrived at 10:00 none of us were particularly chipper.

We discovered later that this is a common occurrence; why they don't want boats through in one day is another mystery to us. Stories are numerous and, in hindsight, amusing (though it took some a while to see the humor); the overweight pilot who caused the stern to go down and water to come in (and that same one drinking TEN beers that day); the captains on three boats rafted together getting contradictory instructions from each of their pilots; Tony, the pilot who runs his business over a cellular phone while "supervising" your transit; the pilot who refused to transit with our friends who didn't have a person on board to specifically look after their baby, and who then asked for the ice pack that he'd brought on board, and the list goes on. Luckily for us we had only minor problems and after two days found ourselves unscathed and in the Pacific.

The trip to the Galapagos was slow but comfortable. The seas were almost nonexistent, but so was the wind so we ended up motoring for much of the seven-day trip. We were accused by Don of suffering from the impatience of youth, but who was sipping cold beers and getting a good night's sleep while White Rose was ghosting along at 2.5kts? What we've seen so far of the Galapagos has been incredible. We are on the island of San Cristobal and will soon move on to two additional ports of call.

The people (of whom there are many more than you would expect) are friendly, generous and helpful, and of course the animals plentiful. We were visited by a red-footed boobie two days away from landfall, who decided to take a free ride and left us with a messy souvenir. The sea lions come to greet you upon arrival and slither around the boat once you've anchored. There are so many of them on the beach at night that you have to be careful not to walk over them. They also have a tendency to crawl up into any boat or dinghy they can get access to. The local economy has taken quite a hit in the last year, so that \$1 is worth 25,000 sucras, up from 2,000 last year. Not good for the locals, but of course wonderful for visitors. We'll be here another week, then begin the long, long journey to the Marquesas, likely between three and four weeks. Pray for wind!

P.S. Greg wants to know does anyone (other than Walter) really care about the performance of a Pearson 365? As our broker told us when we bought it; it sails how it looks. And he was right.

### **Marquesas 6/01**

Dear all,

If someone were to ask me for one word which best describes offshore sailing it would have to be BORING. It took us 20 and one half days to reach the Marqueses from the Galapagos, and most of the time nothing of consequence happened. Sleep, eat, read, eat, sleep, read. I suppose boring isn't so bad, however, when faced with the possible alternatives. We had a string of late evening squalls with increasing wind intensity the further west we got, and the motion of the boat was not particularly comfortable due to a large swell that refused to dissipate. But even though it wasn't the text-book passage I'd been anticipating it could have been a lot worse. One of the boats we were in daily contact with, Tarka IV, had some rigging break and they were forced to spend the better part of one particularly rough day up the mast making repairs. Many limericks were composed immortalizing their Aussie stamina and guts.

And ah, landfall. You cannot possibly imagine what it feels like after 20 days of nothing but sea and sky to finally approach land. To make it even better, we could not have chosen a more beautiful anchorage than Hanevave, on the island of Fatu Hiva. The island is incredibly lush, with bright green plants and trees covering the steep cliffs lining its perimeter. Hanevave is marked by enormous spires which tower over the bay. We've visited several other islands in the Marquesas since then, but still think Hanevave is the most beautiful.

We didn't get much time to rest because the very next day we joined several other cruisers on a trip to a remote waterfall. After a fairly strenuous hike we were amply rewarded; the waterfall cascaded down a 350ft sheer wall filling a deep pool with water and emptying over and under boulders into a stream running all the way back down to the village. We picnicked, and swam in the cold water pool at the base of the fall. We spent one week in Fatu Hiva talking with locals, buying the freshly-baked baguettes, trading for fruit and local wood carvings. One family hosted a traditional banquet in which about 24 cruisers participated. We ate poisson cru (raw fish soaked in lime and coconut milk) baked taro (like potato) and a delicious fruit concoction which looked awful but tasted wonderful. Despite the increasing number of sailboats which arrive every year the Marquesans remain friendly and generous. We were invited into houses, offered beaded necklaces, and found it impossible to walk down the street without being greeted by everyone.

Although Fatu Hiva was the most beautiful island, our favorite visit was to Ua Pou, the western-most island of the group. There we enjoyed another local "feast" as well as our own cruisers pot luck bbq on the beach. The French Polynesian islands are preparing for the Bastille Day festivities in Papeete, Tahiti, and we watched the island's teenagers practicing their traditional dances. We also talked with the local boat builders who were almost done constructing a Marquisan sailing catamaran (like 2 canoes connected by a platform) which 6 men are planning to sail to Tahiti for competitive racing. They will be escorted by a 50ft cruising ketch, but I don't know how it will keep up with a cat that's expected to make up to 14 kts an hour! There will also be rowing competitions in Tahiti and every afternoon the Ua Pou rowing team was out practicing in the bay with powerful, coordinated strokes. They let Greg and a few of the other cruisers take out a canoe; they had fun, but I have to admit, they didn't look nearly as impressive.

I think the Marqueses both were and weren't what one would expect. Certainly the scenery is stunning, the weather beautiful. Although I thought it was a stereotype, the women do wear bright, floral pareos and place flowers - and even woven garlands - in



their hair. Goods are brought to the islands by transport boats, and until they arrive store shelves can be very sparse. Most islands have fresh baguettes available, although you have to place your order on some of the smaller islands then collect them in the afternoon, waiting with the crowd until your name is called. Although you often feel far from "civilization", the islands are heavily subsidized by the French so it's not unusual to see people driving brand new land rovers and steering their wooden skiffs with shiny new outboards. And also thanks to the French, everything shuts down for lunchtime.

After leaving the Marqueses we stopped in the Tuomotos, a group of atolls which are rings of land accessible only by one or two passes. Entering can be treacherous, but once inside you are treated to calm clear water and extensive coral beds which are great for snorkeling, as long as you aren't afraid of the bands of curious sharks. (I am, but we went anyway!) We also saw copra crops being harvested. Copra is made from coconuts which are dried either in the sun or smoked, and it's used in the production of soap, among other things. This is also one of the places where they harvest black pearls, which are sold around the world. The oysters are artificially grafted then mature while strung on lines hanging off of shacks scattered around the lagoon. The pearls have made many of the atolls prosperous, but they still have to wait for the arrival of the supply ships nonetheless... We'll soon be in Papeete to enjoy the festivities and await the arrival of Greg's family. Hope all's well back in the states,