

.....There and Back Again  
A WESTERN CARRIBEAN SAILING ADVENTURE



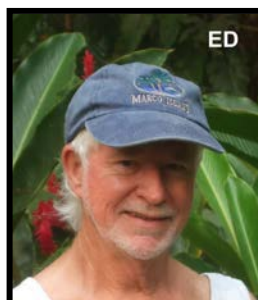
The Sailing Vessel CARACOLA  
(Sea Shell)  
...a 43 foot Catamaran



“A CAPTAIN  
AND TWO ENGINEERS”

Capt Mario Van Blerk  
and Engineers Ed Crane & Lee Henderson

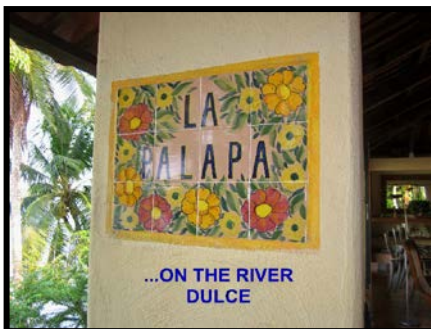
*Recorded by Ed Crane*



**DAY ONE -Monday April 15, 2013  
MARCO ISLAND DEPARTURE**

Lee and I are packed and ready to go. Steve Riley drove us to Ft Lauderdale to catch a non-stop 2.5 hour Spirit flight to Guatemala City.

After an uneventful flight we arrived in Guatemala and were met by Mario. He already had his Toyota SUV packed with all the provisions, inside and on the roof rack. From the airport we set out on the 4.5 hour drive down the mountain from 4,897 feet in elevation to Mario's Marina and estate at sea level. The highlands were dreary...dead and brown, not unlike the New England landscape in the winter. By the time we reached the Rio Dulce (Sweet River) that evening the landscape was lush and green as you would expect in the tropics.



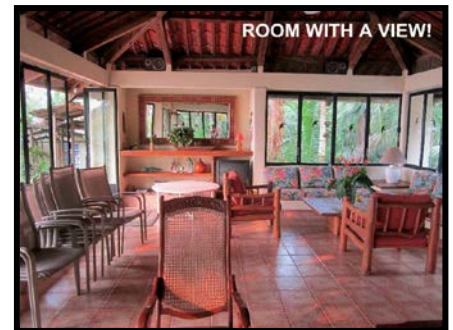
Mario's Marina and grounds are not accessible by land. We called for a couple of his guys, Mingo and Sergio, to pick us up in a small boat. Off to the estate we went, loaded down with 4 week's supplies for 3 guys. We got the Caracola galley stocked

that evening, and then had cocktails and dinner at the main house, La Palapa.

The property grounds and buildings are beautiful. The pictures tell the story.



In Guatemala City Mario's cook Anamaria, under the direction of his wife Elisa, had prepared a delicious meal for us...steak, veggies and potatoes. I heated it up, and we feasted.



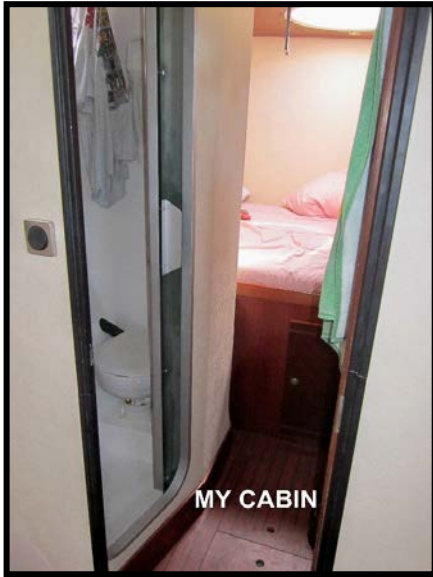
## DAY TWO -Tuesday April 16

### Down the Rio Dulce

We got under way motoring down the river at 7:45am. The Caracola is beautifully set up for long term cruising. Four staterooms, each with a private head (bathroom to you landlubbers!), hot showers, full galley, ice maker, freezer, two refrigerators, a coffee maker, microwave, a large common area around a big table in the main cabin inside, and a magnificent rear shaded cockpit area, that I like to call the poop deck (probably not a legitimate Guatemalan term?). The Caracola is powered by twin 26 HP Yanmar Japanese diesels. They are so quiet you can hardly hear them. That's a good thing on a sail boat. Only "Stink Potters" relish those roaring engines...and the smell of diesel in the morning!



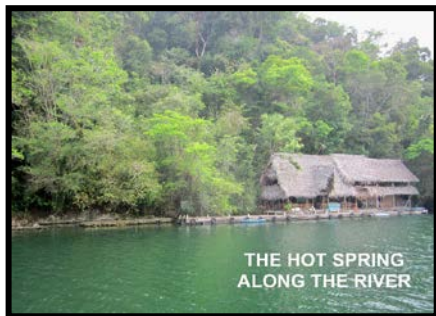




The scenery along the way was stunning. I fried up some onions and added some Frijoles Negros (black beans) for a light breakfast. We are so heavily provisioned with frijoles that it must be the national dish, or at least a favorite of Mario's!



Along the way we saw a hot spring on the river bank (agua caliente). Some entrepreneur had made a tourist attraction out of it.



The Caracola reached the town of Livingston at the mouth of the Rio Dolce at 11:45am. Lee and I went for a walk about town while we got processed through customs/immigrations. Livingston is said to have been established by runaway slaves from Jamaica, but now has a large Indonesian population. There is no road to Livingston. It is only

accessible from the water.



The Caracola departed Livingston around 12:30pm with a 15 knot wind out of the north east. We celebrated with Guatemalan cervaza's (beers) and lots of snacks like smoked oysters and such. Those frosty cervaza's sure went down smoothly. Mario tells us the Dutch say drinking a cold



beer is like having an angel pee-pee-ing on your tongue. As the day went on the winds increased to a peak of 28 knots, and the Caracola flew through the seas. It was a glorious day of sailing. The only concern was that we kept getting a low battery alarm on the Auto Pilot. The alarm would occur and then after a short while it would clear. We made landfall at a tiny uninhabited island, West Snake Cay (pronounced Key), and anchored up in the lee of the island. Had a little trouble getting a hook, but the real trouble began when we shut the engines down. All the DC power went off leaving us in the dark. It being cocktail hour we

decided to have a few Cuba Libras (rum and coke with lime) and ponder the situation. Aboard a boat it is always important to have one's priorities in order, and to not let your alcohol level get too low. In addition, we have plenty of limes on board, so there will be no scurvy on this trip. Limes are best served with rum!

Without a schematic of the electrical system Lee and I set out to understand the wiring scheme. We made some progress, but were hampered by the darkness. We decided to drink a toast to the Gremlin god, who sometimes fixes things during the night, and then hit the sack.

Most boats I'm familiar with are arranged with dual battery systems. Typically A & B battery banks. Under normal use you operate from one bank, A or B, and keep the other side in reserve. You keep rotating this so that you always have a fresh, hot battery bank in reserve. The Caracola has nine 12V batteries, but they are apparently all in use all of the time. Five batteries feed one side of the boat, and the rest the other side. There is a switch that combines both sides so that you have one big battery, but if that goes dead you are out of luck. We do have a large solar array, so if you are not in a hurry, and the sun is shining, you can wait awhile for the batteries to charge



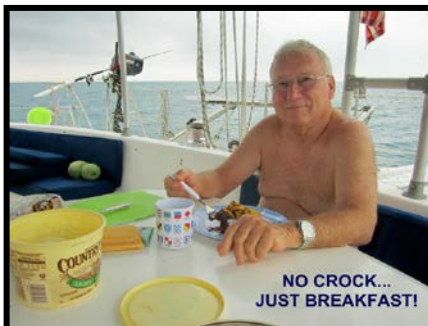
back up.

### DAY THREE -Wednesday April 17

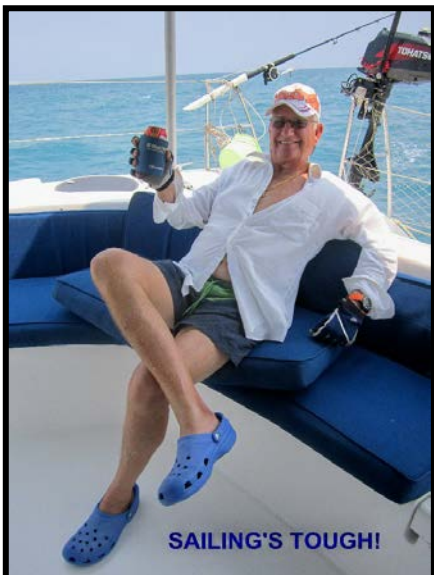
#### Destination: Placencia Cay, Belize, about 20 nautical miles

With the rising sun we were better able to address the electrical problem. Much to our delight the Gremlin god had fixed things during the night. The engines started. We let one engine run for a while to insure that all batteries had a good charge. Then, just for back up, I disconnected one of the batteries so that we would have a spare to start the engine should those bad Gremlins come back.

We finally got under way after a breakfast of fresh cantaloupe, fried plantains and (you guessed it) Frijoles Negros, prepared by Mario.



Winds were out of the NE at about 15 knots. Unfortunately, Placencia where we are going is also in the NE so it was tack-tack-tack, tack-tack-tack all day. I didn't mind. It gave me an opportunity to sharpen my sailing skills. Much needed!



Lunch was snacks and beers. It's a good thing beer is one of the major food groups! Beer's better than liquid bread!



We arrived in Placencia, Belize, late afternoon and dropped anchor in a sheltered bay, just in time for Happy Hour.

After some relaxing Cuba Libras and Mario's rum and lemonade

I heated up some Goulash and rice from the freezer. Anamaria, Mario's cook in Guatemala City, had prepared it, under the direction of Elisa. We had a pleasant evening, and hit the sack early for a very peaceful night.



## **DAY FOUR -Thursday April 18**

### **Destination: Blue Ground Range & Southwater Cay, about 18 NM**

Woke up to a beautiful sunny day, light wind, and dead boat batteries! Neither engine would start. Batteries were reading around 11 volts.

Lee and I went to work, further understanding the electrical system. We worked out a plan to isolate one engine and get it started using our spare battery that we had set aside the day before. Mario had some jumper cables that were critical to the plan. Sadly, the jumper cables were in bad shape and would not carry the current required by the starter. They got hot and smoked. Lee later fixed them.

The whole time we worked on this, the solar panels continue to charge the batteries. We shut everything else down and diverted all power to the starboard engine. Mario got an engine started and we were back in business.

We set up a test by moving the Auto Pilot to the other side of the electrical panel to see if the phantom "low battery" indication would follow. It worked fine on the other battery bank.

It was a relaxing day sailing. Moderate wind still from the NE, requiring some tacking.



We had a little trouble finding the passage. Charts were a bit unclear, but we made it through without mishap and arrived at Southwater Cay on the edge of the barrier reef by late afternoon. We anchored in a sandy spot, and left one engine running to charge the batteries. After we shut the engine off we isolated three batteries from the system for backup, which later turns out to have been a good decision.

Happy hour was beers and rum, with snacks.

I heated up some chicken wings from Mario's cook Anamaria, and we ate them with a nice salad, and fruit cup for desert. The wings were delicious. I will try to remember the next time I have



wings not to throw the bones over my shoulder. Cindy would not like that! One can develop bad habits on a boat!

## **DAY FIVE -Friday April 19**

### **Destination: Cuba, about 400nm, 3+ days sailing**

Up early about 5:30am. Mario seemed glad to see us. Seems he had dreamed Lee and I took the dingy and abandoned ship in the night.

Before I woke up, Mario and Lee were already at work on the electrical system. Battery voltage had dropped below 10 volts overnight. Not possible to start the engines. Mario again suggested we look for the oldest of the 9 batteries and remove it from the system. We had discussed doing this before and were holding it in reserve. Trouble is, the oldest battery has the highest probability of being the culprit, but it could be any battery or multiple batteries. This could have been a long drawn out process of elimination. As it turns out, the oldest battery was easy to get to, so we electrically removed it from the system. Right away the system voltage went up to 11.25V. Still not enough to start the engines, but good enough to use our 3 backup batteries. Lee hooked them up and I started the port engine. Maybe that old battery was really bad?

With that we figured we were good to go, but this a boat after all. Lee and I worked the anchor with Mario at the helm. In the process we managed to snarl a mooring line from an abandoned sunken mooring ball. It fouled the port prop. I went diving and managed to cut away nearly all of the line, leaving a small amount of fiber around the base of the prop. The prop spins freely, so we are good to go again, and we headed for the channel, open water, and Cuba some 400nm away, line of sight.

This will be my first extended Blue Water sailing! We'll sail day and night for about 4 days to reach Cuba, our next land fall. Exciting!! Blue water sailing, one for the Bucket list!

Breakfast while underway. Cereal with raisins, apples and grapefruit. Sadly, no Breakfast Beers.



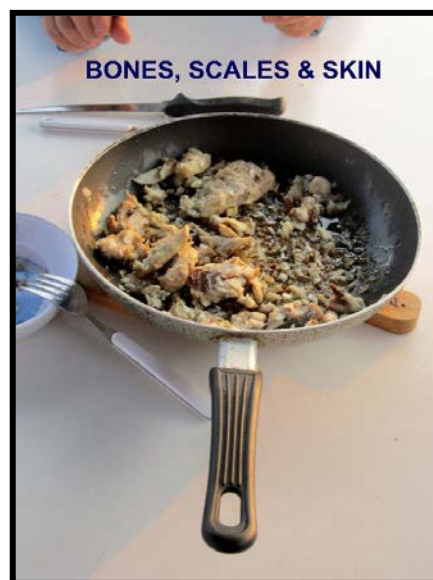
We have a busy day ahead.

The day was beautiful, sunny with a slight haze. Moderate seas with swells. Wind favorable out of the SE at 15-20 knots. The Caracola's making 6-8 knots. Mario says these are about the best conditions he's seen for making Cuba. Typically, winds are out of the east, and try to drive you toward Mexico.

At one point a pod of dolphins played in our pressure wave off the bow.



During the day we did some trolling. In the afternoon we caught a medium sized barracuda. Mario cleaned it and chopped it up, bones scales, skin and all, and fried it. I wasn't too interested, but Lee and I ate a small bit to be polite. I did not like it, not being a fish guy. Mario cleaned the pan, which was a smelly mess.



Later we caught a small blue fin tuna. We let it go. The barracuda had been a bloody mess and a lot of work to clean, especially with the dull knives we have aboard. No one was interested in doing that again. The image and smell of that barracuda in the frying pan made me a bit (actually, a lot) queasy.

As the day went on the winds picked up. Lee spent some idle time sharpening a couple knives. We don't have a wet stone, but Lee improvised. It's what real sailors do on a boat.

As night was falling we attempted to take in the Genoa, but the roller furling jammed. By this time it was way too rough to attempt a repair up on the bow of the boat. So we secured things, put on our foul weather gear, and safety harnesses, and hunkered down for a rough ride. We have a rule that when you are on deck, especially standing watch alone, that you wear your safety harness

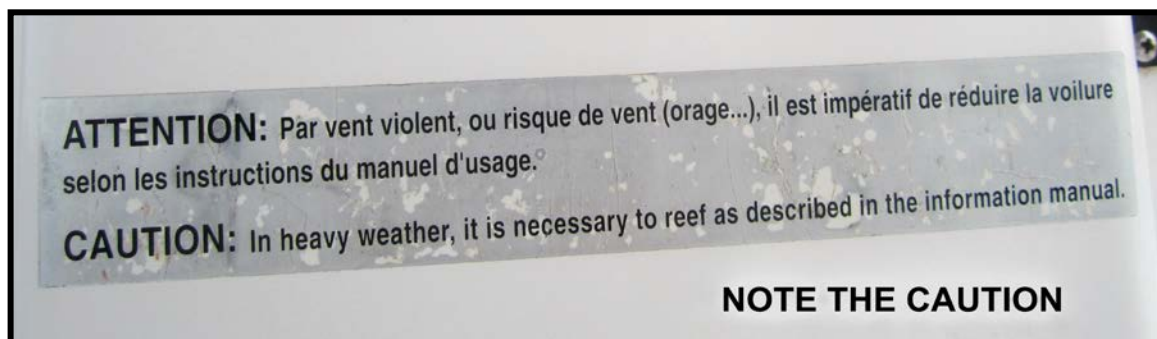


and are connected to the boat at all times. It's not going to be a nice night for a swim!

The nasty barracuda and rough seas continued to haunt me. I took one of the pills that my friend Ira the Doctor had prescribed for nausea. It really helped. Nothing like good drugs!

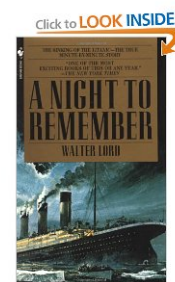
Winds peaked at 30 knots, and probably averaged 25 knots through out most of the night. We were getting tossed around pretty violently. It was hard to stand up. Every so often the ocean would throw a bucket of cold salt water in your face (my favorite part!).

I had the watch from 7pm to 11pm, and again from 2am to 6am. Mario was up almost all night, cat napping in the main cabin. With the jammed roller furling we had way too much sail up. Sailboats are rated for how much sail is up vs the wind speed. The boat structure can only take so much before bad unthinkable stuff happens. We should have had a reefed Genoa and 2 reefs in the main. Note the caution warning in the picture below. On the first day Mario had showed me a table in the boat manual that had wind speeds vs sail configuration. He noted that this was the most important thing in the manual, and that I should study it. Little good that did!



We monitored the battery voltage carefully, and ran one engine for an hour as needed. Not a good night to have two dead engines. (Caracola needs a wind generator to supplement the daytime solar panels. Then we would not have to run the engines). During my second watch the port engine started to alarm so I shut it down for the night. I went to sleep after my second watch, just as the sun was coming up.

It was a “*Night to Remember*”! Hummm, catchy title...maybe I should write a book?



## **DAY SIX -Saturday April 20**

### **At sea, off the Mexican coast, headed for Cuba**

Beautiful day. Sunny, light wind out of the east-southeast. Not a bad direction. The storm has passed. A lazy sailing day. About 70nm's, line of site, to the western tip of Cuba. Probably a full day with the light wind.

When I got up I found Lee down in the engine compartment trouble shooting the port engine problem, the alarm that I had experienced the night before. He replaced the two water pump belts and one pump impeller, but it did not solve the problem. (Doesn't every boater have a spare impeller? ...the answer is NO, only the ones who want to make it home again!) The alarm indication read “*water flow*”, but this was not documented in the engine manual, so we had no idea what it was trying to tell us. Lee checked the heat exchanger and verified that both the fresh

cooling water and the saltwater cooling were working, so with some reluctance we disconnected the buzzer in the ignition panel so the alarm would not drive us crazy. Next time we run this engine we'll monitor it closely.

When Lee opened the port engine compartment this morning there was considerable water sloshing around. There appears to be a small hull breach above the water line (good news!) around the swim ladder. We speculate that the salt water in the engine compartment could be causing our electrical problem by screwing up the sensors, giving us false indications. Electrical things hate salt water!

We tried running the port engine for a while, but then the alternator alarm came on, so we shut it down and soaked the wiring in WD-40. Legend has it that chemists working for the Rocket Chemical Company of San Diego, CA, in the 1950's were searching for a formula that would prevent rust by displacing water. They tried 39 times without success, but on the 40<sup>th</sup> try were successful. Hence Water Displacement formula #40 became WD-40. (Really true! I can't make this stuff up! Google it!)

Light lunch and beers.

For dinner I heated up some Bavegoreng, an Indonesian rice dish prepared by Mario's cook under the direction of his wife Elisa. We added some additional optional spices. Dinner was delicious.

Lee and I put a second reef in the main and reefed the Genoa in preparation for the night sail. We failed to do this in time last night and were caught with our pants down, a 30 knot wind, and heavy seas. Last night it was not safe to go on deck to reef the main, and when we tried to roll in the Genoa the wind was too strong to get it reefed...so, last night we sailed all night with too much sail up. This is not good for the boat, which has structural limits. See picture of Caution label on previous page.

I took the 7-11pm watch and the other guys went to sleep. Infinitely better than last night, where I was bundled up in full foul weather gear, safety harness on, and strapped to the Captains chair. Every 10-15 minutes the ocean would throw a bucket of chilly ocean water in my face. It crossed my mind last night that maybe Blue Water sailing was not for me! But tonight was beautiful. The 10 to 15 knot wind out of the E-SE held for most of my watch, and were making 5-6 knots in the right direction.

## **DAY SEVEN -Sunday April 21**

### **Bound for Cuba's western tip, about 60 nm**

Up around 6am. Lee and Mario are up already and clambering for breakfast. Mario was supposed to wake me at 4am for another shift, but says he wasn't tired. I think he was just being a good host. I'll have to set the alarm on my phone next time.



Lee and I made coffee in the Caracola's baby French Press. It only makes one cup at a time. The French Press is old and tired. You learn to strain the coffee through your teeth to get the grounds out.



I prepared some fried eggs, bacon and frijoles negros. These processed beans are something else. Note how the spoon stands up in them. Good stuff, anyhow, and we gobbled it up.



Mario has a standard coffee maker on board, but it's brutal on our delicate electrical system. It's a regular domestic unit that runs off the inverter. Inverters take 12VDC power and turn it in to 110VAC power. For every amp that you need at 110V, it takes almost 9 amps DC to generate the same power. Thus Mario's 900 watt coffee pot requires 75 amps DC from the batteries while brewing. Sort of like running a car starter for the whole time it takes you to make coffee. Think what that would do to a car battery!

Lee and I discussed the port engine problem. We are concerned about the alternator alarm. It's safe (and possible) to run a diesel engine without the alternator working, but we need the current to keep the batteries charged. Lacking the proper tools to analyze the alternator we decided to replace it with Mario's spare. (Of course we have a spare!)



It was my turn in the engine compartment. We were under way, but fortunately the seas were not too rough. I got the old alternator out, and the new one installed and

wired back up. Awkward work, two levels below the deck, slippery, greasy and smelling of diesel, with no room to move around. Had to do some of it by feel, and managed to smack the top of my head twice on the steering mechanism. The spare alternator was not an exact replacement so we had to "Mickey Mouse" a few things. Then we fired up the port engine for a test. At first the alternator light was on, and we were disappointed. But after a while the warning lights went out, except for the mysterious "water flow" indicator. The new alternator was putting out plenty of charging current. We still theorize that salt water intrusion corrupted the sensor wiring. A

combination of WD40 and engine heat drying out the wiring may have allowed the alternator indicator alarm to finally clear. The alternator I removed may just need to be dried out and cleaned up. Mario will take it in for an overhaul.

While I was getting de-greased and cleaned up the guys caught another fish. We think it's an amber jack. Lee filayed it and Mario processed it for cooking.



For lunch I prepared a large salad. The lettuce is going south, so we needed to eat it. I added two avocados and chopped up some onions. I found a large salami in the back of the refrigerator, and chopped up a few slices for some protein.

Maria LaGorda, Cuba, is about 40 nm away as of noon. Legend has it that Fat Maria once ran a whore house for the pirates there, hence the name. She's probably not still in business?

We arrived late evening, but in time for happy hour. Since we had to motor the last 15 miles we ran the ice maker and replenished our supply, in preparation for happy hour. Just how happy would happy hour be without ICE? Dinner was the fish we caught this morning. I'm not a fish person but I found it tasty. Fresh cantaloupe for desert.



There's not much to Maria Gorda. It's just a diving destination with one bar and a small restaurant, according to our 15 year old cruising guide. As we approached from the south we could see the "town" lights, but the entire coast in both directions to either side was dark, uninhabited. In days to come we will learn that the entire west coast line of Cuba, until you get close to Havana, is, with a few exceptions, uninhabited. There are a few protected bays with

small towns according to the chart.

Time to sleep. Hot and humid. A sticky night. We have the same air-conditioning that Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón) had (none)!

## **DAY EIGHT -Monday April 22**

### **Arrival in Cuba**

We were up by dawn, excited to be going ashore. We haven't set foot on land since Livingston, a week ago. But then came disappointment. Mario called the officials on the radio for check-in instructions, only to find that Fat Maria's is no longer an international port of entry. We weren't allowed to go ashore. Bummer! We were very disappointed.

The next port where we can check in is at least a full day sail away, around the western tip of Cuba and along the north coast toward Havana. It's called Punta Morros. Our 15 year old



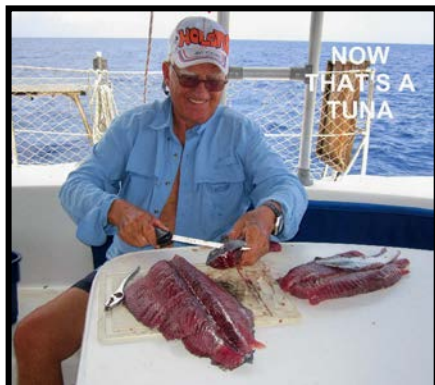
Cruising Guide says that Cuba has plans to develop a marina there and to make it the new port of entry. Apparently that has happened.

I made breakfast: fried eggs, bacon, frijoles negros and cranberry juice.

With the anchor up, we headed for Punta Morros. Today there is almost no wind. The seas are flat, so we will motor, using only one engine (the Port one) to save diesel. Flat seas are beautiful to Stink-Potters, but not to Sailors. We need wind.

The screwy and mysterious port “water flow” indicator is still on. I checked the engine cooling system. Primary and secondary water is flowing through the heat exchanger and the temperature is normal. Guess we are good to go for now with the Port engine. Very strange.

Just before noon we got a strike on one of the trolling rigs. The reel was singing, the line rushing out. I grabbed the pole and tightening up the drag as much as I dared. The run stopped just before the line ran out. Then I began reeling him in. It took so long that my battery went dead in my lap top, which I had been using to update this log when the strike occurred. We landed a 25+ pound Albacore (tuna). Lee filayed it and Mario processed it for cooking. I tried to teach them how to skin a filet without losing so much meat, but it's hard to teach old Captains new tricks! There's so much meat on this fish it didn't really matter if they lost some.



I fried up some of the tuna for lunch, and used up the last of the salad. The tuna was quite tasty. We pigged out. The rest went into the freezer. I have a feeling we will be eating a lot of tuna the rest of the trip.

At 2:30pm ships time (i.e. Guatemala time) we rounded the western tip of Cuba at Cabo San Antonio, past the light house, and on our way to Havana. We were concerned about getting skunked again at Punta Morros, with perhaps no immigration check in. We could waste a day or more. So it's screw Punta Morros, and off to Havana, a long way away, and likely with the wind on our nose most of the way...Lots of tacking ahead...bummer.



Capt Lee made a new friend! A little bird, exhausted from flying so far from land, spotted the Caracola. After circling the boat looking for a spot to land he landed on Lee's head and proceeded to make a nest. (I was rejected, not having much nesting material on my head!). He stayed there for the longest time, and then hung around the boat all night. By morning several more identical birds had joined us.



We agreed that after our big lunch none of us was very hungry. I cooked up some “cheezy made easy” (Kraft macaroni and cheese) adding some chunks of salami for protein. Mario found a couple more avocados, so we had them with some cherry tomatoes.

Just a footnote. I tried to use the microwave for the mac & cheese, but the inverter screamed and tripped. Microwaves and coffee pots are just not the first choice for boats, for the reasons noted previously in this log.

I took the 7:30pm to midnight watch. Lee's on midnight to 3am, and Mario 3am to dawn. I took the longer shift since it's not difficult for me to be up that time. The other guys went right to bed, both being morning people. Seems like I always end up on boats with morning people. Reminds me of my friends Tom and Leslie who used to go camping with us in our tiny pop-up camper. They were morning people, and liked to celebrate the dawn with wild sex.

It was a beautiful night. The moon was bright (and getting brighter every night). We were well out of the shipping lanes and didn't have to dodge the container ships like on that infamous Gulf Stream crossing to the Bahamas a couple years ago aboard the Brigadoon. (Did I mention that the Caracola, like the Brigadoon, does not have radar?) I saw some lights in the far distance, but no ships up close. I set up an empty crate for a foot rest, and a better pillow for the Capt's seat. Mr. Bird, who was, we later learned, named Juana la Cubana, and I settled in with my Kindle and had a pleasantly uneventful watch. I'm now well into my 3<sup>rd</sup> book for the trip. Love my Kindle Paper White.

We motored all night. Thankfully, our little diesels are very quiet, as previously noted.

## **DAY NINE -Tuesday April 23**

### **Bound for Habana (as it says on the chart)**

As of 8am we are 115nm line of sight from Habana (Havana), and 170nm from Key West. Progress through the night was slow. The wind was either nonexistent, or on the nose.

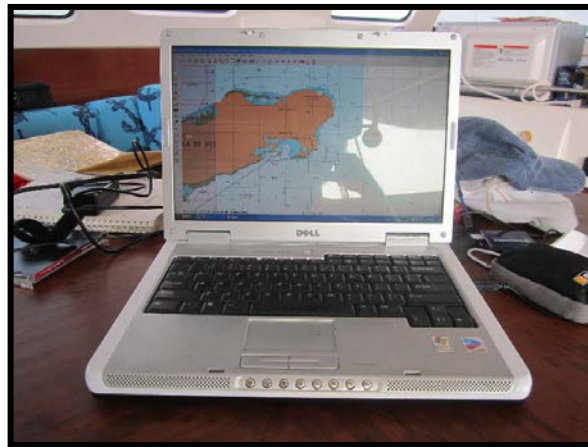
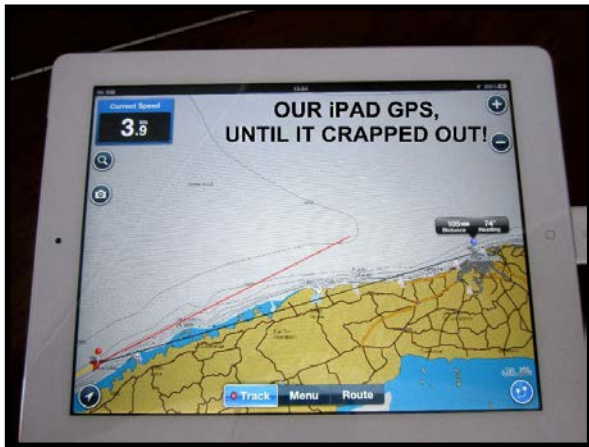
Cereal with raisins and coffee (a whole pot, since we are motoring! Yea!)

While Capt Mario rested Lee and I made the command decision to take in the Genoa, turn on both motors, and head directly for Habana. Cuban cigars and good rum are calling!



We continued motor-sailing up the coast. As the day progressed the wind picked up. Mario decided to shut down the motors and sail. This will be more stressful and mean a lot of tacking. But after all, we are a sailboat.

Late afternoon I noticed a “low battery” warning on the iPad. The Caracola has 3 GPS systems: an iPad running an Avionics App, a laptop running a program Fugawi, and a hand-held Garmin. The iPad can be powered from 12VDC or the inverter (110VAC). The laptop can only be powered by the inverter and the Garmin only by 12VDC. After thorough investigation and testing we concluded the iPad battery had crapped out. Not repairable. One GPS down, two to go. We are very far from home! But, then, Chris C. didn't have a GPS, and he did OK...well, he did lose a couple of ships...



As the day wore on the wind continued to pick up. We wisely have 2 reefs in the main.

By evening winds were 20 knots and the seas rolling, with a heavy ocean swell. Working in the Galley was problematic, so we opted for a couple rounds of rum drinks and snacks. Mario brought out an excellent Spanish sausage. The three of us devoured it.

We had neglected to reef the Genoa before the wind came up, so it's going to stay out all night. We really need to get a procedure on this!

The wind seems to be coming directly from Habana, so our course is a giant saw tooth of tacking back and forth. We tack out for two hours, and then back to the coast for an hour and a half, and have only progressed 5-6 nm closer to our destination in 3.5 hours of sailing. Such is sailing.

I'm not a big fan of sailing all night. This night was no exception. Instead of going to bed at 7:30 the other guys stayed up. It took three of us to tack, and we had to do that frequently. During one tack the Genoa sheet (line) got caught on one of the mast wenches, and got away from us. The sheet snapped in the wind like a bullwhip. Before we could winch it in the line slapped the 1/2" thick Plexiglas windshield and broke it. This situation can be very dangerous. It's not safe to be around a loose sheet.

A little after midnight Mario turned in. Lee took the helm. I camped out in the cabin to assist in the frequent tacks. Shortly after 2am I laid down in my bunk. Lee would wake me as needed to

tack. One time after we completed a tack and I had just retired to my bunk, Lee shouted “we gotta tack again”. There was a large ship ahead and we were about to cross his bow. Night sailing: never a dull moment! You gotta love it.

Winds peaked out at 30 knots. Lee was at the helm until 4:30am, when he woke Mario who sailed us into the sunrise.



Our poor windshield. Yet another repair item for Mingo's list.

## **DAY TEN - Wednesday April 24**

### **Still bound for Habana**

At dawn this morning we were 45 nm line of sight from Habana. Progress has been very slow, working our way up the NW coast of Cuba, tack by tack.

Lee used the coffee maker to brew a pot. The inverter tripped again and would not reset. The freezer, ice maker and Laptop GPS are now off line. I went down into the compartment and checked all the connections. We decided to have breakfast and give the inverter a chance to cool down. Perhaps it will reset. Meanwhile, Mario broke out the spare inverter and I prepared to change it out. You gotta love spare parts on a boat! Seas are still pretty rough, so I'm not looking forward to this.

After breakfast of fried eggs and frijoles by Mario I climbed into the compartment and was able to reset the inverter. Yea! The spare inverter went back into storage for another day. And a good thing for that, you'll see later.

We made slow progress, zigzagging up the coast. Tack-Tack-Tack. Well after dark we finally approached the entrance to the Hemingway Marina where we plan to spend a few days. The cruising guide cautions that the channel to the marina is tricky under the best of conditions. A couple boats a year are destroyed on the reefs flanking the entrance. The Caracola was not interested in joining that group. The weather was snotty. Wind blowing like stink at 20-25 knots out of the NE, seas rough. However, it was almost a full moon so visibility was good. Our only choice was to sail back and forth until dawn.

I took the 8:00-midnight watch and headed out to sea. With the Genoa reefed and 2 reefs in the

main the Caracola handled nicely. I kept on the same tack for 4 hours, just killing time. My watch was uneventful, and I avoided running into Key West! Woke up Lee at midnight for his watch, and he headed back toward Havana.

A footnote: Private vessels are not allowed in Havana harbor.

## **DAY ELEVEN -Thursday April 25**

### **The Hemingway Marina**

I woke up to a beautiful day. Mario was at the helm, the wind and seas had calmed down. We located the entrance to the marina and carefully navigated through the reef without a problem. Not trying to enter last night had been a very wise decision.



First stop was immigration. This turned out to be quite an adventure. Everything is done in steps with endless paperwork, all done in multiple copies using carbon paper. Some of you older folks may remember that stuff? Carbon paper was the Xerox machine of the 40-50's. Are we a bit stuck in time, or what?



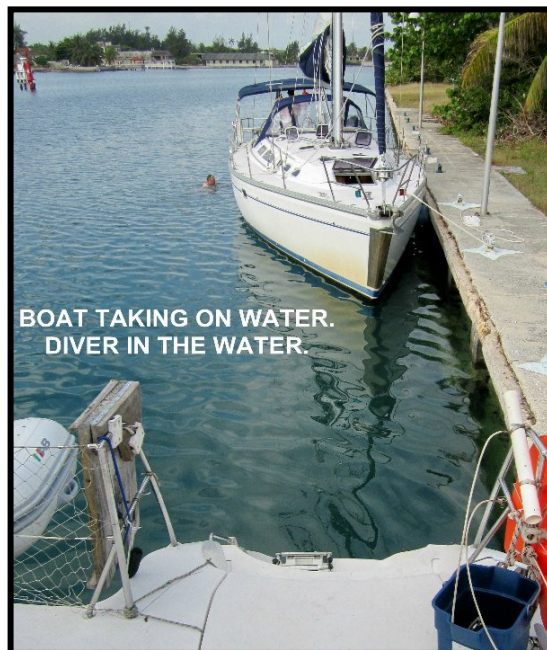
First aboard was the doctor. A very friendly older gentleman who spoke excellent English. Mario recognized him from a previous visit. Next came the agriculture lady who checked out the galley and the refrigerators and the storage lockers. She took out most of the stuff from the freezer. No idea what she expected to find. Maybe she was just curious? Then came the veterinarian to check our pets. Even though we didn't have any pets, there were still forms to fill out. Next the customs guy looked all around the boat. They confiscated our flares and flare gun, but gave us

a receipt to retrieve them when we leave. The Cubans have some odd rules. They also made us put our little hand-held GPS into a plastic bag, and then sealed it with a piece of tape. Guess they thought we might give away the coordinates of something? Lee and I filled out our immigration forms and Mario followed the immigration guy to his office for the final round of paperwork. The only person missing was the fellow with the drug sniffing dog. He would catch up with us a couple days later.



Overall it was a positive experience. Everyone was extremely pleasant and friendly. Some even removed their shoes when they boarded the Caracola. They laughed and chatted with us. Most spoke some English. Each person, in turn, told us their personal problems and how difficult life was. Being the generous guys that we are we shared our good fortune with them... :>)

While we were at the dock being inspected this guy pulls in behind us in a 40+ft mono-hull going way too fast. He wasn't even at the helm. I yelled at him and waved my arms. He jumped to the cockpit and slammed the engine from forward into reverse. Never a good idea! There was a horrible screeching noise, and the boat crunched into the dock, stopping less than two feet from our stern. Investigation showed that he had spun out his propeller shaft, and dislocated the engine from its mounts. This created quite a stir. Everybody rushed to help, or just look. The sailboat was shipping water thru the damaged propeller shaft bearing and in danger of sinking. They pulled it back from us, and a diver went in to inspect the damage. The Cubans finally brought up a work boat, tied the sailboat along side and hauled it away to the shipyard before it could sink. We later learned the shipyard could not repair the damage. The leak was plugged and the boat was towed out of the marina channel. It set sail for Key West 90 miles away, with no engine. Sure hope he had good batteries? Some people should not have boats. Best to stick with cars, they don't sink.



This is an example of how Americans get into trouble in Cuba. Our government can not tell American citizens where we can go in the world. Something about the Constitution and Freedom. However, the United States has a 50 year old embargo against Cuba. That's a law, and if you break the law there is always hell to pay. So, the deal is, you can go to Cuba, but you can't spend American dollars while you are there. At least not traceable ones. It's a bad idea to leave a paper trail. The guy with the trashed sailboat could not easily pull out his VISA and charge the repairs. The nasty Feds would have followed the paper trail back to him, and it would have been ugly. I know someone in a similar situation in Cuba. The resulting fine was \$30,000, although I believe they did bargain it down to a more reasonable amount.

With the Caracola secure in her slip and hooked up to shore power we set out explore the Marina

and have some lunch. Everyone we encountered was friendly, from the guard patrolling the grounds, the garbage collection man, Gorilla the diesel man, the clerk in the cigar store where Lee and I bought a couple Havana's, to the folks who waited on us at the Fiesta restaurant in the Marina.

Mario connected with Nelson Calzadilla who he had used as a guide on a previous visit. We hired him to drive us around Havana all day Friday. Nelson proved to be an outstanding guide...excellente!

Lunch was at the Fiesta restaurant in the marina, and was delicious. I had a chicken, pork & beef combination and washed it down with three "strong" beers, called Bucanero's. The bill, with tip, came to about \$11 US per person. Cash, naturally.



Like many places I've been, Cuban beers are rated more by their alcohol content than color or flavor. For example a Bucanero Fuerte has 5.4% alcohol, making it a strong beer.

Another popular beer, Cristal, is a light beer because it has 4.9%.



Lack of sleep over recent days, endless tacking, a big lunch with 3 Bucanero's each knocked us out. It was back to the boat for a long nap.

I woke up first. While the guys continued their nap I went for a long walk around the marina. There are a few stores, what looks like a disco, a couple restaurants and bars. At one end is the Old Man and the Sea hotel, now mostly abandoned. The story we heard was amusing. Apparently the hotel was used to house Venezuelans who came to Cuba for medical treatment. Cuba apparently has excellent healthcare. A dated survey in our guide book says Cuba ranks 39<sup>th</sup> in the world for healthcare. The US was ranked 38<sup>th</sup>, not much different. When we went through immigration we were obliged to join the Cuban healthcare system and pay \$25 each per day for Castro Care. We should implement that at our borders. Maybe if people had to buy Obama Care as they crossed the border they wouldn't be so hot to come.

Evening was a relaxing time having cocktails and cigars on deck with the full moon overhead. Mario called his daughter in Guatemala who said to him "You should see the beautiful moon we have here". Mario said "I know. I am looking at the same moon right here!"

## **DAY TWELVE -Friday April 26**

### **Hemingway house and touring Havana**

Nelson picked us up around 9am. He had changed \$200US for each of us into Cuban CUC's. The exchange rate is \$1.1US to 1 CUC. CUC's are known locally as "Kooks".



Nelson speaks excellent English with a Spanish accent and was very knowledgeable. He explained everything as we drove along toward the Hemingway Estate, *Finca Vigia* (Lookout Farm), where Ernest lived for 21 years (1939 to 1960). That's more than twice as long as he lived in Key West. Mario and I could understand Nelson perfectly, but Lee had some trouble with his accent, resulting in a funny story.

Nelson explained how everything in Cuba is owned by the government. When he pronounced "government" it sounded somewhat like "gorman". From the content of the sentence it was easy for Mario and me in the back seat to understand what he meant. But Lee, who was riding in the front seat says to him "Who is Gorman? What happened to Castro?" Nelson was confused. He says "Castro is the government". But Lee kept after it "How can Castro be Gorman? In the US we only know about Castro and his brother. Where did this guy Gorman come from? Explain to me who Gorman is." Lee was getting louder and about to go Postal. Mario and I had to step in from the back seat and rescue poor Nelson. :>)

The Hemingway estate was beautiful. After he died in 1961 the government took it over and preserved it as a tourist attraction. You can't go inside, but you can walk all around it and look in the windows. I've been to the Hemingway house in Key West. It pales by comparison to the beautiful Cuban estate. It's not hard to see why he loved it, and spent over 20 years here.





Hemingway bought the original house and grounds in 1939 and added to it to create the estate. In addition to the pool he also added an observation tower with an incredible view of the Havana harbor below, as seen in one of the pictures on the previous page.

His boat, the motor vessel Pilar has been enshrined at the estate. There were two of these boats built. The second one is in the Bass Pro Shop on Islamorada in the Florida Keys. Hemingway commissioned the building of the Pilar, and had a heavy hand in the design, so the story goes.



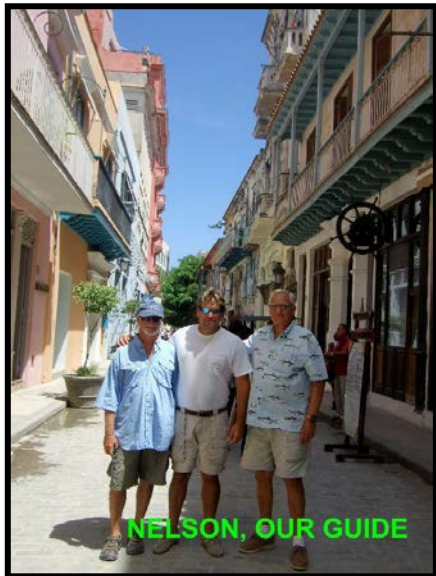
The Pilar was acquired in April 1934 from Wheeler Shipbuilding in Brooklyn, New York, for \$7,495. "Pilar" was a nickname for Hemingway's wife Pauline and also the name of the woman leader of the partisan band in his 1940 novel of the Spanish Civil War, For Whom the Bell Tolls.

The estate also has a huge pool. Lee and I got our picture taken in it, without the water, of course. I'll bet Hemingway had some parties to remember here? He was, by all accounts, a party animal just like me!



And then there's the famous old cars of Cuba, like this one parked at the estate. Some of these probably do not have any original parts in them, thanks to our childish 50 year old embargo. It has only hurt the Cuban people, and accomplished nothing but to drive Cuba away from us and toward our enemies.

From the Hemingway estate it was back to Havana. The central part of the city is undergoing restoration funded in part by the United Nations. It's a great thing to see these incredible, historic buildings, many from the 1700's, being restored to their former glory. Since the 1958 revolution very little maintenance or new construction has been done. The old buildings are falling apart, and would soon be lost to history without this restoration.







We stopped for an outstanding lunch at a private restaurant. Capitalism is slowly coming to Cuba. It is now possible to have a “private restaurant” in your home with enough seats to make it profitable. I had a Pork dish. The meal presentation was beautiful. Unfortunately, I was so excited about eating it that I forgot to take a picture. You'll have to use your imagination.

One of the embassies (Swiss, perhaps?) erected a large TV screen on the side of their building and began broadcasting CNN around the clock. Castro couldn't do much about it, embassies being sovereign property. So he erected an array of flagpoles with flags to block the view, thus protecting the people of Cuba from all those tempting worldly sights.



After lunch we drove around Havana some more and then back to the marina. The guys were tired and took a nap while I went down to the water front bar at the beginning of our canal. It's amazing how many new friends you can make buying rounds of \$1.25 beers. It was a great afternoon with the locals. Came back and cleaned up the boat. It was another lazy evening on board.



## **DAY THIRTEEN -Saturday April 27**

### **A Lazy Day at the Marina**

We slept late today, cereal for breakfast, then did a few chores in preparation for an early morning departure tomorrow. We stocked up on Bucanero beer and a case of “Santiago de Cuba” rum.

I fried up some of the Tuna for lunch, and Mario cut up the last of the avocados. The fish was quite good.

We relaxed at the waterfront bar with beers. Nelson helped us acquire a box of Cuban cigars, much to the delight of Lee and me. Cost to us, about \$3/cigar. We later saw these same cigars in the Guatemala City airport duty free shop for \$19 each!



Mario settled up with the harbor master. This marina is pretty expensive, considering what you get, and the condition it is in. About \$100/day plus “tips”. Very little has been done to maintain this since it was built in the early (pre Castro)1950's. The sea walls are falling apart; sidewalks are crumbling and have holes and missing sections. Only a few things worked in the public restroom/shower.



## **DAY FOURTEEN -Sunday April 28**

### **Goodbye Cuba**

Up early at 6:30am local time and arrived at the immigration dock at 7 as planned. We were the only boat there. It took about 45 minutes to process all the paperwork so that we could leave (probably a new record for Cuba!). Our flares and flare gun, that were confiscated when we checked in, were returned. Our little GPS was “unsealed” from its plastic bag.

It's a beautiful day. Light wind, calm seas. No problem navigating the narrow channel out of the marina. Sailing with the wind is so much more pleasant than beating into it as we did most of the way here. We're making 4-5 knots and the boat is rocking gently back and forth. Minimal, if any tacking.

I made breakfast: eggs scrambled with chili peppers, bacon, cheese, bread with some kind of Guatemalan berry marmalade and coffee.

Very laid back sailing today, with little need to the adjust sails. We just sat back and enjoyed the warm, sunny, dry weather. Napping, reading, etc. I read about a quarter of the latest Castle Nikki Heat book. Mario brought out some imported goodies for lunch: smoked herring and sardines in oil, on crackers, with plenty of beer. Yum! I'm sorta getting the hang of this fish stuff.

We continue to have concerns over the electrical situation. Battery voltage dropped off fast today as we sailed down the coast. It got down to about 12.1V, forcing us to run an engine for a while. Anything below 11.9V is likely not to start the engine. That should not have happened since all the batteries just spent three days charging on shore power. Besides, we are not using much power, and the sun is shining on the solar panels. Something serious is wrong...good thing we have sails or we might have to row home! Wonder what the Stink Potters do under these conditions?



I was standing at the power panel looking at the voltage and current readings. With one engine running we had about 12.8 volts (should be about 13.7+V) and a charging current of about 35 amps (reasonable), but the batteries are not charging. Thinking out loud I mumbled to myself “Where is all that power going?. Lee, who was standing nearby, overheard me and said “Something must be getting hot. Let's look for a hot battery!” Incredible idea! I immediately climbed down into the Port battery compartment and began checking. The first battery was room temperature, as were the next 4. With sinking spirit I put my hand on the 6<sup>th</sup> battery. It was almost too hot to leave my hand on it! Voila! This is the best news yet. Good batteries wired in parallel and under charge should all be the same temperature. We have a bad battery with an internal short, the most common failure mode in wet cell batteries. That's where our juice is going!! I climbed out and then down into the Starboard battery compartment and found yet another hot battery. Mario handed me some tools and I isolated both batteries from the system without actually removing them, which is unnecessary and even dangerous while underway with

the boat rocking and rolling.

Now we will have to verify the fix. We will keep the Starboard engine running to charge up the remaining 6 (of the 9 original) batteries. My watch started at 8pm. Things are looking good. Voltage is up to 13.2V and charging current at 45 amps. Normal, given the present state of the batteries.

I woke Lee at midnight and turned over the helm. My watch was uneventfully pleasant. Electrical system still looking good. Voltage is up and current is down to mid teens...all normal with the engine running.

Turned in and the Caracola rocked me to sleep. Wonder if I could rig up my bed at home to rock like this? Hmmm...Cindy might not share my enthusiasm?

## **DAY FIFTEEN -Monday April 29**

### **Down the coast of Cuba**

Up about 7:30 after a great night's sleep. Another beautiful sunny morning, with light winds off the stern pushing us along about 4 knots. Seas moderate, with gentle roll. Grapefruit, slab of cheese & coffee for breakfast.

Now for the good news. Our immediate battery problem seems to be solved. Lee shut down the engines midway into his watch. The Caracola has now been running on batteries for about 8 hours, obviously without solar power during the night. The voltage is still at 12.6V and looking good. I guess we won't have to row home after all!

A job well done! And it only took two engineers two weeks, a gallon of rum, some Cuban cigars, and a case of beer to figure this out! Hat's off to Lee on the break-through idea.

Beautiful day sailing. Read books, napped, screwed around with the laptop, editing pictures and updating this log.

Winds picked up in the afternoon. We rounded the western tip of Cuba about sunset and reefed the Genoa for the night. We all made calls home on Mario's cell phone. Thank you, Castro!



Winds are not favorable for the Caymans or Jamaica, so we'll try for the bay islands of Honduras, about 4 days sailing from here.



Nobody was too hungry after the big, late lunch, so I fried up some cheese tortillas and Mario made drinks. Lee and Mario turned in.

Uneventful watch from 9pm to midnight.

## **DAY SIXTEEN -Tuesday April 30**

### **Blue water sailing**

Slept in until 7:30 . Winds about 20 knots out of the SE. Seas rough, with BIG ocean rollers. About a 3 knot current against us, really slowing down our progress. I attempted to make a movie of it. No land in sight. Everything is very far away. Closest land is Cozumel, about 80nm to the west of us.

No breakfast, no coffee. Beers mid-day. Mario cooked up some fish and white rice for a late lunch.

Weather snotty all day. We're getting beat up and slammed around. Very tiring! Your muscles are constantly working against the motion of the boat. It's quite the workout.

Some cheese and snacks with rum drinks for dinner. Too rough to do much else.

I dodged one big ship on my watch. As usual, it's hard to read lights to know what you are looking at. It was overcast last night with limited visibility. Moon didn't rise until around 11pm. Turned over helm to Lee at midnight.

## **DAY SEVENTEEN -Wednesday May 1**

### **Blue water sailing, on to Honduras**

Slept in until 7:30 . Winds about 20 knots out of the SE. Seas rough, with BIG ocean rollers, same as yesterday. I hear there was some excitement last night on Lee's watch. Winds peaked at 30 knots, and seas got much rougher. Waves broke over the bow and the guys got drenched. At one point stuff in the cabin was thrown around (very unusual for a catamaran) . The coffee maker ended up on the floor, along with the laptops and all the stuff on the table. I slept through the whole thing. So much for catamarans being so stable you don't need to secure anything.

No breakfast, no coffee. Hard to stand up anywhere much less cook in the galley. Mario ate some leftover cold fish. I passed!

Mario cooked up some smoked sausages for lunch. The trick was to catch them as they rolled around the table, and wrap them in a piece of bread slathered with Grey Poupon mustard for glue.

The engineering department faced another challenge about an hour before sunset. I was down in my cabin, which shares the bulkhead with the port engine compartment. I smelled that nasty "electrical smell" of burning insulation, and went up to confer with the crew. They were already on top of it, since the primary GPS/laptop and the freezer were off-line. Our inverter had crapped out yet again! ... It was getting dark, with very rough seas and 20+ knot winds. I climbed down into the engine/battery compartment, and sure enough one end of the inverter and a plug was a

charred, burned mess.



While I started taking things apart, the crew scrambled for the spare inverter and the tools. I got the new inverter installed and wired up. It didn't work! As it turns out there were two issues. I had reused the existing big cables that go to the battery side of the inverter...no reason not to, and we were in a hurry, working against sunset and the rough sea. The holes on the lugs were too big, making a poor connection with the new inverter's smaller terminals. Then when I went to disconnect it and replace the cable, the negative inverter terminal turned freely. Out of the compartment came the inverter, and Lee took it into the cabin to trouble shoot away from the salt spray. We dismantled it on the desk inside the cabin. The problem was a manufacturing defect. The negative terminal was not connected inside of the unit. We repaired it, reinstalled it, and were back on line just as the last light faded. Lee was disappointed...he was hoping to get a chance to show off his skill navigating by the stars!

A footnote: Lee is a retired Navy pilot who once flew planes all over the world with little more than a radio and compass and the stars. We had no doubt he could get us home, but still weren't anxious to try it.

Dinner was spaghetti, another of the delicious prepared meals from the freezer. I heated a pot of water on the stove for the pasta. Sloshing boiling water was a bit scary, with the boat pitching and rolling, so I tried to keep one hand on the lid at all times, while also heating the sauce. Bon appetite! ...as the frogs say.

Due to a late dinner, my watch started at 9pm. A black night, overcast, so no stars or moon. Difficult to tell where the horizon was. When I saw a light I couldn't be sure if it was a boat, a plane or a star poking through the clouds. Winds died down from 20+ knots to about 15 knots by end of my watch at midnight. Lee took the second watch.

## **DAY EIGHTEEN -Thursday May 2**

### **Destination: Roatan, Honduras**

Up at 7:30 again. I take some ribbing from the "morning people" crew, but at least I'm getting enough sleep on this trip. The sea has calmed down, and winds are at 6 knots (the lowest we've seen in days), but they are now in the wrong direction, blowing us off course. We'll have to motor some. We are about 20 nm from our destination, Roatan, a bay island of Honduras. Spending the night at anchor in some protected cove is at the top of our list. Cocktails and Cuban cigars on the



poop deck, watching the sunset...ahh! Can it get any better?

The crew wasn't happy with the sleeping habits of the cook this morning. They were ready for breakfast a couple hours ago, and had already had a bite to eat. So I promised and delivered Brunch: Huevos Rancheros, bacon, Spam and frijoles negros with grilled onions served on tortillas. A three pot meal.



In the interim, I made a couple cups of coffee in the baby French press. They were terrible! Our cups were full of grounds. Lee came up with a clever solution. He jury rigged the coffee maker so we could boil water on the stove, suspend the filter mechanism over the pot and “drip” hot water through the filter. It worked great, and we had our best cup of coffee so far. Mario, who seldom drinks coffee, tried it and declared it “excellente”.

My Canadian friend Ted of the S/V Ragtime would call the weather we've had the last three days SNOTTY! And he'd be right. Even though we are now motoring slowly toward our destination, instead of sailing, it's a relief not to be constantly slammed around inside of the boat. That gets old after a while!



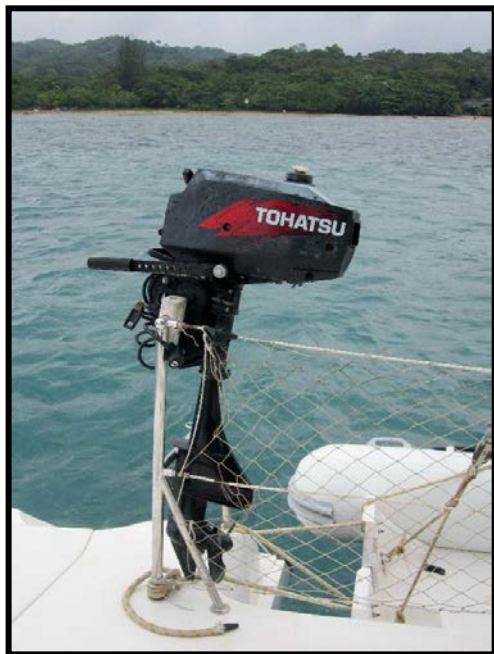
I seem to be the default computer guy on board. When the other guys screw up the GPS chart plotter I get called upon (Eddie, Eddie! Come now...) to restore it. This morning, while I was updating this log, Lee was struggling to get the detailed chart of waters around Roatan so we could avoid the reefs. He tried everything without success. I suggested he might have the wrong map loaded into the plotter program. I told him to try the NE

Caribbean map. “That makes no sense he said, defensively. I have the right map. We are in the Western Caribbean, not the NE Caribbean (you dope you, left unsaid)”. “Stop being so damned stubborn and just humor me. You have nothing to lose” I said. So he loaded the NE Caribbean map and everything worked just fine...

We rounded the western tip of Roatan and located the markers for the passage through the reef to the anchorage. Once inside the reef we all relaxed...as it turns out perhaps just a bit too much, too soon! Lee and I went forward to prepare for anchoring, and we promptly ran aground on a sandy bottom. We screwed around for a while, but were unable to get off the bottom. Two boats full of locals cruised by. They hooked up some lines and pulled us off. Price: 7 Guatemalan beers! What a deal.



Once anchored up we got ready to take the dingy into town, but the motor wouldn't start. Gas just poured out of the exhaust port when you pulled the starter cord, indicating a probable stuck open needle in the float chamber. Odd, because they usually stick closed, not open. Not hard to fix, but we were all cleaned up and lacked the proper tools and a place to work. So we flagged down the water taxi and paid Jason \$10 for the three of us to go ashore.



It's very hot and sticky with almost no breeze. They say a cold front is coming in. A cold front's hard to believe this far south in May.

I like the West End. A nice clean, interesting tourist place. Friendly people. Very focused on diving, but lots of bars and restaurants. We walked the whole street and had drinks at a couple places. Mario made a deal for \$100 with a taxi driver to give us the grand tour of the whole island tomorrow at 10am. Roatan is about 40 miles long and about 2-3 miles wide, and very hilly (some would say mountainous).

Jason took us back to the boat about sunset, with an arrangement to pick us back up at 9:30 the next morning. Mario served up a few more drinks and we relaxed on the poop deck after our strenuous day. I grilled up some cheese tortillas for a snack.

Off to sleep, for the first night in a while without a watch schedule.

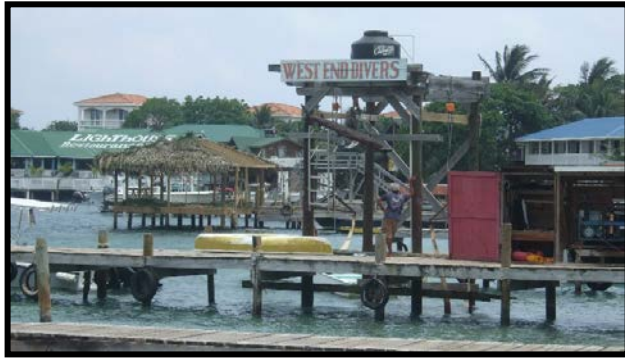
## **DAY NINETEEN -Friday May 3**

### **Roatan, Honduras, The West End**

We all slept in, although morning people don't really understand that concept! Jason was scheduled to pick us up at 9:30 in the water taxi for our 10:00 tour appointment, but apparently he is on island time, and arrived around 10:30. So we missed our appointment. After some negotiation Jason set us up with another driver Dennis, for the same price. While we were waiting for him, our other driver showed up, and was sad to have missed his lucrative fare. It was an



awkward moment. We are a bit suspicious that Jason may have orchestrated this. Dennis is probably a relative?



At the landing where the water taxi docks there is this floating (well, not so much anymore) bar that has seen better days. Apparently it broke loose during a storm and got stuck here, never to be moved again. It has some interesting signage.



Dennis gave us a great 5 hour tour, from the west end to the east end and back, stopping at interesting places and many beautiful resorts along the way. Pristine Bay, a new water front golf complex being built in part by an investment group from Guatemala, was especially impressive. Mario was able to drop a name of his "friend" getting us royal treatment. Cute little sales girl figured she had three live ones with fat wallets. Turns out you can pick up a nice 1500 sq ft condo with a view for about a half million \$ US. We couldn't decide whether to split one three ways or just get one each.





We had lunch at The Parrot Tree, another beautiful resort, owned by a Canadian. Lee and I had the Texas mega burger, which I again forgot to take a picture of. Excellent. The bill for the three of us and Dennis was \$60. I got a WiFi connection, processed some of my email and sent Cindy some pictures.



Mario had Dennis stop at a beach so he could fill two gallon jugs with sand for his daughter's aquarium.

The next resort. Paya Bay, was kind of out of the way down a long dirt road. We stopped for drinks, and I was able to get a WiFi connection and send Cindy some email and more pictures. They even have a nude beach. That appealed to me, coming from a nudist family. Maybe my parents had been here?





Dennis stopped at a super market and we restocked the coke light (ie diet coke) and beer. Mario had his picture taken in front of a store. He had worked for the parent company of that store for 40 years.



In addition, Mario was the Honorary Dutch Consul General to Guatemala for 18 years.

We paid Dennis \$120 for the day, including a \$20 tip. A pretty good deal all around. Only complaint is that Dennis could use a little work on his English. But then my Spanish is not so hot either. We are thankful to have multilingual Mario with us.

Burdened with all the supplies and the sand, we opted to have Jason take us back to the boat in the water taxi. It would have been nice to spend some more time in town, and get another WiFi connection. That's one of the problems with cruising. Even if your dingy is working it's nice to be back on board by dark and reasonably sober. But without a dingy you really don't want to miss the last water taxi and have to sleep on the dock with the homeless people. Partying late, like I want to do, is not an option.

We sat on the poop deck having cocktails and listening to the music from the bars along the water front. Always amazing how sound carry's over water. We are pretty far away, but can follow the words of the songs.

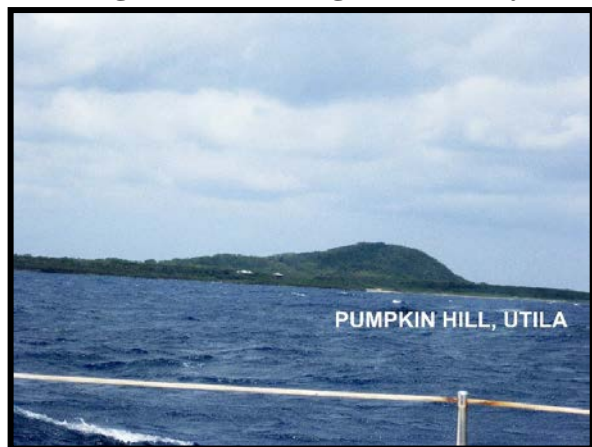
Wind looks favorable for a departure tomorrow to our next destination, Utila, less than a half day sail from here (21 miles). Not too far...thank you, thank you!

I hit the sack early, around 9pm.

## **DAY TWENTY -Saturday May 4**

### **Bound for Utila**

Up around 6:30am. Great sleeping last night. Cool breeze, gentle rocking. Lee checked the oil in both engines before we got under way. Port engine OK. Starboard took about a quart. Normal.

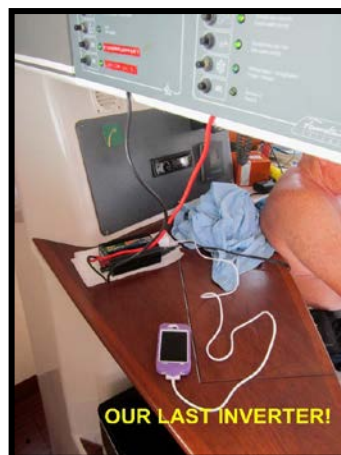


Got the anchor up, and through the pass in the reef without mishap by 7:30am, bound for Utila. Mario has a friend there, Capt Al. We hope to tie up to his

dock and avoid the dingy/taxi issue.

More trouble with the laptop/GPS this morning. Map looks good, but it's not showing the location of the boat. The computer is not recognizing the port the GPS receiver is plugged into. It took me about a half hour to get it going again. You sure never run out of stuff to do on a boat! Never a dull moment.

As it turns out, the GPS was probably screwing up because of the new inverter. Once we got tied up to the dock we noticed that the inverter was dead. Lee and I got out the old burned inverter, and the new dead one, and set up an inverter triage area on the table to see if we could make one good one out of two bad ones. The result was marginally successful, in that we got one running, but it had a screwy AC output voltage and we were afraid to use it, and perhaps blow up our electronics and freezer. So we made some wiring changes to let us run the freezer directly off the 12 volt batteries using the freezers internal inverter, and hooked up our last inverter directly to the power panel. It's a baby 400 watt guy that will keep the GPS & the PC's going and will charge phones and such, but that's about it. If this last inverter dies it's back to shooting the stars and plotting points on a paper chart...just like Columbus!



Finally got off the boat and met Mario's friend, Capt. Al, who was kind enough to let us tie up to his dock.





The town consists mainly of one paved street that runs along the water front, with stores, bars and restaurants on both sides. The street is just wide enough for two golf carts to pass, but is also mobbed with pedestrians. We made our way to Lance Boddin's, the golf cart rental guy and arranged to rent a cart the next morning at 8:30am. The plan is to tour the entire island by golf cart!



There's lots of stuff available on Main Street. You can get your teeth fixed and pick up a casket on the way home. Not sure what the straps are for?





We went for a walk around town. Mario wanted to show us this “artist” place. Someone had invested an enormous amount of energy in developing this. It’s worth a look if you are ever on Utila. The pictures don’t do it justice.



It was time for a beer. We located an interesting waterfront bar and stopped in for a couple of frosties. This party boat loaded with drunken tourists kept cruising by.







Lee and I thought we were getting bit by “no-see ‘ems”. That is until we saw one and smacked it. Back to the boat for a snack and bed, and some Cortaid for the bug bites.

## **DAY TWENTY ONE -Sunday May 5 East Bay Harbor, Utila Island, Honduras**

Off to pick up our golf cart around 8:15am. We spent most of the day driving all over the island, much of it on dirt roads. Lance had given us a map, but the map and the roads seemed to have little in common! I drove. It was a lot of fun, but sad to see how poorly these folks take care of their island. There's trash dumped everywhere, even though there's barrels all along main street, and apparently some type of trash pick up service.



While “carting” around, Mario took us to visit his Dutch friend (the little guy on the right) who runs a horse ranch not far from the airport. This guy makes a living in part as the only Yanmar engine parts dealer on Utila.



We took a break and stopped at the airport for a fruit drink. Later Mario picked up another gallon of sand for his daughter's aquarium.



Had lunch at a comfortable open air water front restaurant on Main Street, then back to the boat for a short nap. It's great to be at a dock! No dingy issues.



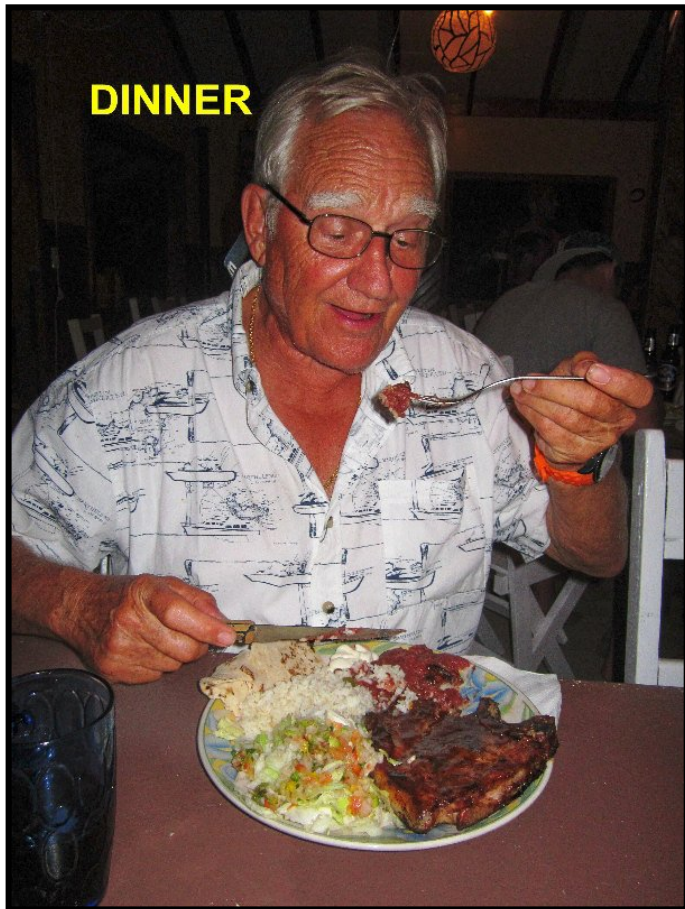
Turned in our golf cart at 5:30pm. The entire day from 8:30am to 5:30pm cost us \$60 total. A bargain!

Lee and I have trouble keeping up with Mario. He's got the energy and stamina of a teenager. Mario is 79 years old (young?)

Dinner at JR's Bar and Grill. As we arrived we ran into Mario's Dutch friend and his wife, who were just leaving. Mario and I had the pork dinner, with all the fixings. Awesome. A thick slice of grilled pork with BBQ sauce. This time I remembered to take a picture! Lee had shrimp. When we asked for the bill, la quinta porfavor, it came to \$33 US, including the drinks. That's total, not per person. Lee and I treated Mario, and left a generous



**\$40.** The place was packed with young divers, and some locals. Lots of beautiful young healthy people, especially the women. Hardly a fat one there. Obviously not from the US, where obesity is now the norm... My Daddy always said that *“you don’t take a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to a banquet”*. Of course, now days some of these women had probably brought their boy-toys along, so I guess it goes both ways.



**Capt Al, our host, had locked the gate. But we finally got his attention, and got back to the boat. Still much better than the dingy route.**

**Livingston, at the mouth of the Rio Dulce, is about 115 nm west of Utila. That’s a full 24 hour day of sailing with a favorable wind. We’ll get processed through immigration there. Hopefully, this will be my last night watch for the trip...not my favorite job! From Livingston, back up the Rio Dulce to Mario’s marina, and then later to Guatemala City and our flight home.**

## **DAY TWENTY TWO -Monday May 6**

### **Bound for Guatemala**

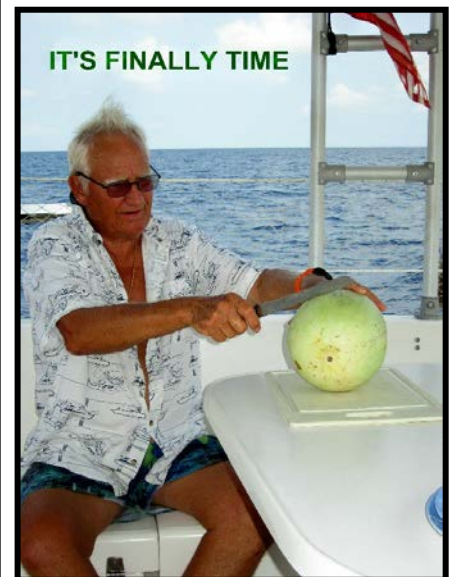
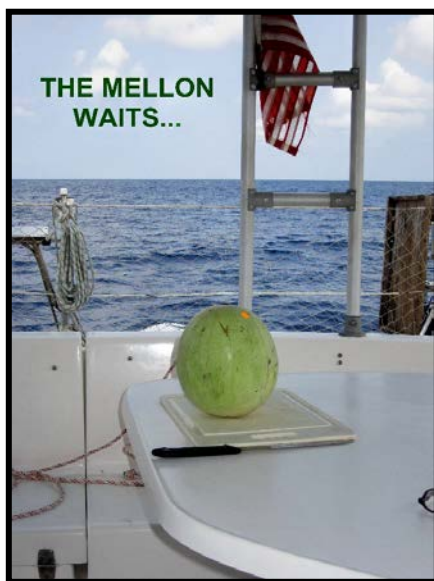
**Off Capt Al’s dock and underway by 7:30am. Almost no wind, but marginally from the right direction, SE. I prepared a breakfast of huevos rancheros (with grilled onions & peppers and cheese), spam, bacon, cherry tomatoes and toast. We devoured it.**



We've been under way now for 2 hours, and I think that with binoculars and a little imagination I could probably still see Capt Al's dock! I casually noted that we were hardly moving, and of course Lee, who would argue with a brick if it had lips, had to say "No, we're moving right along".

After three hours we gave up and started a motor. Eventually a small breeze came up and we were able to resume sailing.

Mario got our last water melon out of the locker and prepared to cut it up for lunch. We got distracted doing something with the boat and the sails, and sort of forgot about it. The water melon just sat on the table, waiting patiently for Mario to return.



**WARNING: Do not try this aboard a mono-hull!**

As soon as you take your hand off the melon it's likely to land on your foot!

Here are some guidelines for mono-hull sailors:

- Coffee should never be too hot, because it eventually will end up in your lap.
- Never leave the dock without lots of bungee cords to strap everything down.
- During happy hour do not let go of your drink to reach for the snacks. Your drink will end up on the deck, and that's alcohol abuse!
- There is no such thing as a quiet anchorage. The slightest swell will dump all those clean dishes in the drying rack onto the deck. Dry them and put them away!
- Anytime you open a cabinet be prepared to catch everything that will come flying out.
- Unless you are sitting down always hang on to something, preferably with both hands.
- Store all sharp objects in drawers close to the deck so they are less likely to fly across the cabin.

Gentlemen only sail catamarans. They can ignore these guidelines!

Wind continued to pick up. It tuned out to be a beautiful, quiet day of sailing...reading, napping, sipping cervaza fria. (Sometimes I don't get that right, and I order a fried beer, instead of a cold one)

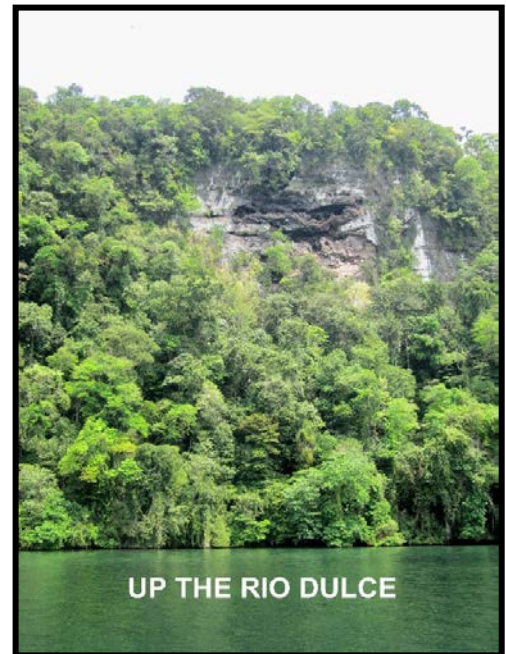


Happy hour (Tangeray & tonic with lime for me and Lee) & Cuban cigars. Dinner was Spaghetti, another one of our frozen prepared meals. Excelente! I stood my usual watch. Mario was up with me most of the time. We were sailing wing on wing, called “butterfly” in Guatemala. The Genoa is on one side of the boat, the Main on the other side, with the wind coming from behind the boat. This is an inherently unstable sail configuration, and sometimes leads to a violent jibe. That is to say, the boom will slam from one side to the other violently and unexpectedly as the wind shifts (or the helmsman loses concentration!). We did have a restrainer in place, but it's still tricky, and makes me nervous. Toward the end of my watch we took in the Genoa, and continued on with just the main sail. Mario went to bed and Lee relieved me at midnight. It will be daylight before we reach Livingston. Right on schedule, in spite of our slow start this morning.

## **DAY TWENTY THREE -Tuesday May 7**

### **Livingston, and back again**

When I got up this morning we were about 1.5 hours from Livingston. Arrived without issues and got checked in through immigration efficiently. Only \$100 US to grease the process. One guy, no inspection, little paperwork. But the process was faster because they knew Mario.





**We leisurely motor-sail back up the Rio Dulce toward Mario's Marina, some 4 hours away.**



**There's a light wind on the stern.  
It's time to deploy the Spinnaker. Now for a quiet sail home.**



It's been a fantastic adventure! I can now check off two more items from my Bucket List: Blue Water sailing, and revisiting Cuba, where I lived in 1957-1958.

Thanks to Mario for making this possible!

## EPILOGUE

We unloaded all of our personal stuff. Under Mario's direction his marina staff cleaned and secured the Caracola, making her ready for the next adventure.

We were all pretty beat and just relaxed the rest of the day. Later in the afternoon Mingo ran us over by boat to Bruno's bar and grill where we could get WiFi, and catch up on our emails. Mario refuses to set foot in Bruno's. Seems there's some bad blood there. We didn't get the full story. Come on, it can't be all that bad? Bruno's has a good happy hour, with dollar Victoria's. Or, if you are a big spender, you can go for the Gallo's for under \$2.



Wednesday Mingo had some errands to run, so he dropped us off at Mario's marina. Lee and I



explored the grounds and took some pictures, and had few beers (Gallo's, pronounced guy-aa-ohs) at the bar. This is such a magnificent place that Mario has here. It will be hard to leave. Maybe he'd hire me as a handyman? Watch out, Mingo!



MARIOS MARINA PRECIOS 2012			
ALL PRICES ARE US DOLLARS \$			
DOCKAGE		MONTH	
SIDE TIE	300		
MED MOOR	250		
MOORING	200		
OVERNIGHT	20		
ELECTRICITY	45¢ KW		
RENTALS			
* LAUNCHA 12 PAX	125 DAY	LAUNDRY	
* DOES NOT INCL FUEL		SELF SERVICE	3/ WASH 3 DRY
		FULL SERVICE	7.00 LOAD
DAY LABOR		LAUNCHA SERVICES	
BOTTOM CLEANING	20.00	FRONTERAS RIO DULCE	1 WAY 5
		LIVINGSTON	25
VARNISHING	4.00	VAN SERVICE	
DECK & HULL WASH	4.00	PUERTO BARRIOS	MORALES 15
STAINLESS POLISHIN	4.00	MORALE	4
		GUATEMALA C Y	WAY 160
		FAX	SEND REC
		LOCAL	2
		INTERNATIONAL	
		US	3
		EU	3

VARNISHING FOR \$4/HOUR??



You gotta be kidding? Varnishing for four bucks an hour? Maybe I don't want this job after all.

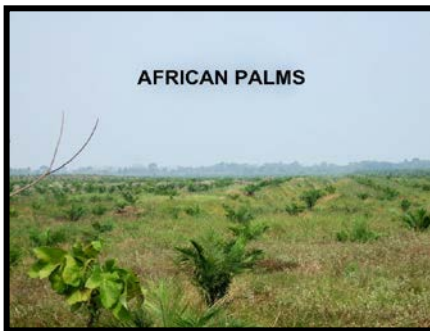


Later Mario took us on a tour by boat. First we stopped “in town” to convert some money. I changed \$200 US into 1,536 Quetzales. Lee was less successful. We went to 2 banks, but his debit card would not work at either. Guess I'll have to be the banker until he can use his VISA. The river has a narrow opening west of here, on the other side of the bridge, which then opens into an enormous lake. Long ago the Spanish built a fort there, called Castillo de San Felipe. It is said they had a chain across the opening that prevented ships from sneaking into the lake. The influence that the Spanish had on the “New World” is pretty incredible!



On Thursday Mingo took us over to pick up Mario’s car and we went on a tour of the countryside, ending up at a hot spring. The once heavily wooded countryside has been almost completely

stripped of trees. In their place are cattle ranches and farms growing bananas, African palms (for palm oil), rubber trees (a big business here), sugar cane, etc.



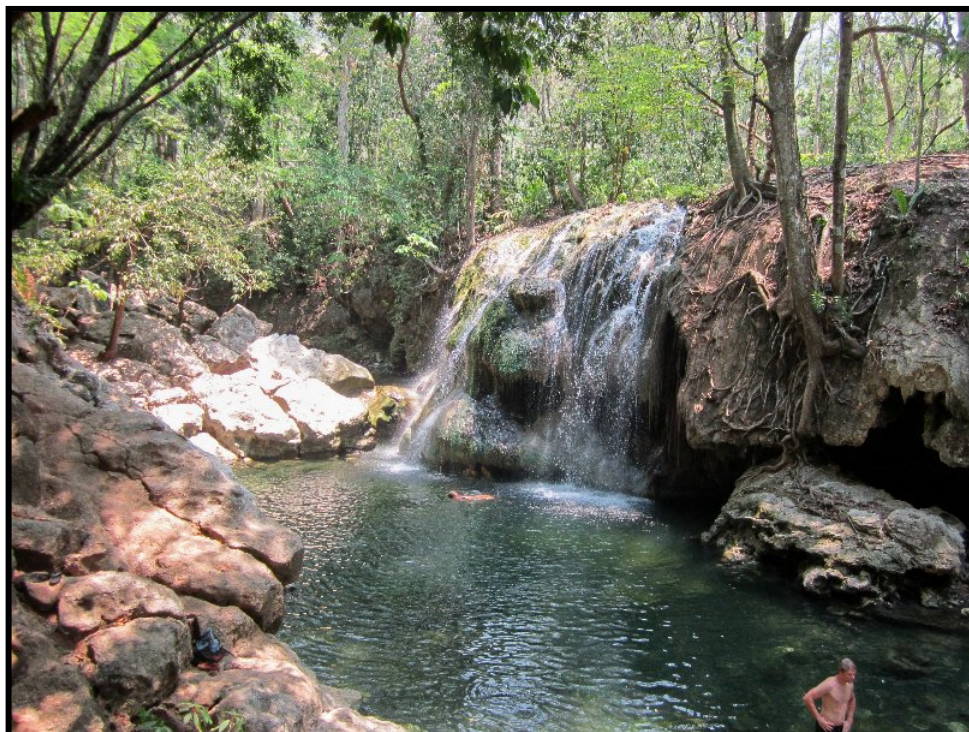


The picture above is a living fence. Sticks from fast growing trees are just stuck into the ground where they take root. Wire stretched between them makes the fence. We had such a fence in our backyard in Cuba.



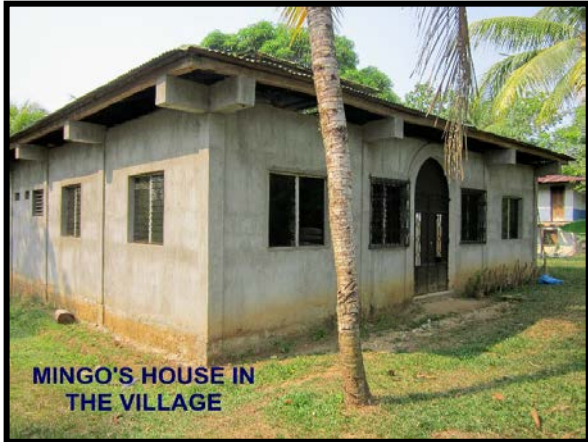
The hot spring and water fall were a lot of fun. We spent some quality time there, relaxing. Afterward we went to a nearby restaurant on the lake for Hamburgers. I passed on the special...lake fish, head, bones and all.

On the way there we picked up a couple of English girls who were hitching. We had seen them at the hot spring earlier. They had been in Guatemala for a while doing volunteer work. Pretty young girls hitch hiking in Guatemala (or anywhere, for that matter) seemed like a bad idea to us. Good way to end up a “bride” to some drug lord.





Friday we went for a walk around Mario's extensive property. He's having some issues with encroachment on his land and needed to check it out. There a small village behind Mario's land. Mingo and his family live on Mario's property, but he also has a house in the village.



Later we went for a boat ride around the other part of the river we had not yet seen. There are a lot of magnificent houses and estates along the river. My favorite was the estate of Christian's parents. Christen is married to Ingrid, one of Mario's daughters. The pictures tell the story.



Lunch at Mario's marina. Later that evening a frog stopped by for Happy Hour. He was very fond of our excellent Cuban Rum. The next day he was still there, but the rum wasn't.

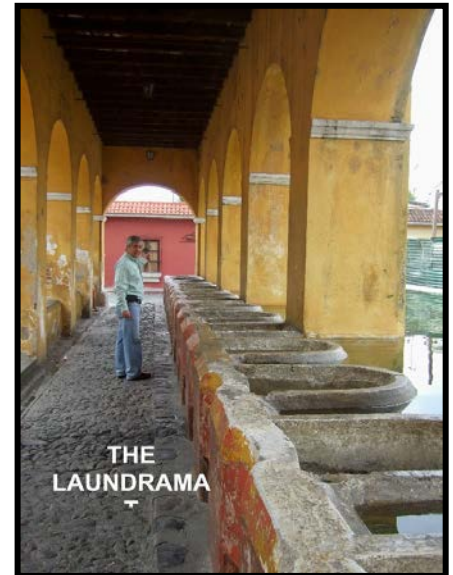




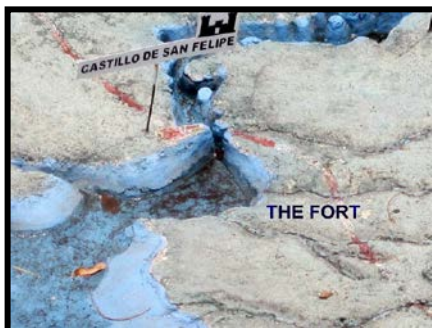
Never trust a Frog!

On Saturday we packed up the small boat and headed for the landing, and the car. It was a 4.5 hour drive back to Guatemala City, arriving at Mario's Penthouse without incident.

Sunday Karen and Jaime, Mario's daughter and son-in-law, took us on a sightseeing trip to Antigua, a city that was once the capital of Central America. The city sits at the foot of a volcano (the same one you can see from Mario's living room), and has been damaged by earthquakes on several occasions. In two pictures above you can see the old Laundromat. Probably a pretty modern convenience in its day? The volcanoes, as seen from Mario and Elisa's living room.



Monday Mario took Lee and me to see a relief map created by engineers in 1905. Pretty amazing! It's said to be very accurate. You've got to wonder how they did that without the GPS system and modern tools.



He was born in Xelajú, Quetzaltenango on July 23rd, 1859, son of Cruz Vela and Antonieta Arango. He entered the Technical School on April 5th, 1857, where he obtained a Degree in Sub Lieutenant and Engineer in Telegraphs, and then he graduated as a Topographer Engineer. All his academic achievements and his outstanding domain in Mathematics allowed him from 1898 to 1900 to be the Faculty of Engineering's Dean. His big topographic engineering knowledge helped him initiate the construction of the Map in Relief on April 19th, 1904 and finishing it in October 28th, 1905. This project was his bigger work. He died at the age of 50 years old in February 28th, 1909, in Esquipulas, Chiquimula. In this monument built by the Guatemalan sculptor Rafael Rodríguez Padilla in 1959, we can observe in the wall, symbols in Key Morse and letters. Every letter and its respective key represent a Country State. The sculptor placed these elements to represent the form in which people from villages outside the city communicated with the people inside the city, all this information was stored and detailed in maps. It is necessary to make notice that the Map in Relief possesses an accuracy of 99.99%.

Later that evening we went over to Karen and Jaime's house for happy hour and dinner. Mario and Elisa had sold them the house after living there 25 years. It's a very beautiful house and grounds, in a gated community. Karen and Jaime have three daughters. Elena, who is in Holland, will be starting college in Boston this fall. Irene will start college in Charleston, also this fall. The younger daughter, Laura, is 14 and in high school.



Laura is a gifted linguist. She speaks flawless, unaccented English, with a bottomless vocabulary. You would never guess that her native language is anything other than English. She told us an amusing story. On a recent trip to the US the local Spanish teacher asked Laura to come to school and speak to the class so they could practice their Spanish. She did, and after a while the class started making some snide comments about her, as young kids are prone to do. Eventually she tired of it and announced to the class, in English, that she spoke their language as well as they did and understood everything they were saying. The room went silent.





Later we picked up Elisa and went out to lunch with Roberto and Virginia. Roberto is Mario's partner in Mario's Marina at the Rio Dulce.



After lunch Mario took us to see his land on the outskirts of Guatemala City. Mario bought the land for his children. He's having some trouble with the "guard" or caretaker, who is making a few bucks on the side allowing truckers to dump stuff on the land. This guy lives there with his wife and 13 children. Mario offered to get him fixed a while ago, but he declined.



Tuesday it was off to the airport in Guatemala City and our 2.5 hour flight to Ft Lauderdale, where Cindy and Dottie picked us up.

**WHAT A GREAT ADVENTURE THIS HAS BEEN...Thanks to Mario and Elisa.**