

Chapter Three

APRIL 2007

THE DAMARRI LOG

Dear All,

The last time we wrote, we were poised to transit the Panama Canal. I'm pleased to report that the transit went without a hitch and we arrived in Balboa on the Pacific side in great spirits and VERY relieved..... However, before saying more about what we have been up to, a brief postscript to the "Mad Frenchman of Portobello" episode....We heard on the grapevine that he went on the rampage again and this time he did succeed in setting fire to a boat and it was burned out..... This time the "forces" arrived with guns and he was arrested..... It's a pity they couldn't have showed up earlier.

We had expected that on arrival at the Panama Canal we would be given a wait of three weeks or more before our transit. So we were pleasantly surprised to be told that it would only be a week or so and in the event we had to wait ten days. The Canal was designed for big ships and was never intended to take small boats. The Locks are HUGE and millions of gallons of water flow in and out in just a few minutes. If small boats are not properly restrained they can get tossed around, a bit like throwing a match stick into a flushing toilet! Over the years many boats have been damaged and indeed, two days before our transit, a most beautiful boat was badly damaged while coming through the other way. We had supper with the owners and it had all been pretty traumatic for them..... The transit had been the focus of our every thought for a long time and after meeting those folks we were pretty nervous about it (particularly Ute!). However we prepared as best we could and I'm pleased to say that it all went well.

As a rule, sailing boats do not spend long periods motoring and do not have big engines. Going through the Canal involves motoring the whole way, sometimes at quite high power so quite a few have problems with their engines either overheating or developing mechanical faults. I'm pleased and relieved to say that Damarri acquitted herself well. The engine just "purred" all the way and even at our "economy revs" we were a tad faster than all the others and got to the Locks first. We had to have "extra crew" for going through the locks.... you have to have four "Line handlers" and a Pilot, so we had a total of seven people on board. When I told the Pilot that we had told friends and family to watch, he phoned the "Cam Controller" who turned the camera right on us and zoomed in.

I'm told we could be seen quite clearly though my Mum didn't pick out the "Look Mum, No hands!" sign we taped on! Having got through in one piece, most boats stop in one of two anchorages in Balboa to gather their wits and prepare for the long passages ahead. We were very disappointed with Balboa, firstly because it is dirty and noisy but also, considering the hundreds of boats that are constantly passing through, the facilities for cruisers are lamentable. So it took us quite some time to get everything ready.....filling all the water and fuel tanks right to the top, shifting things around to make room for more stores and making umpteen trips to the supermarkets. Also, since we expect light winds and lots of sunshine, I installed an extra Solar Panel to help with charging the batteries. So it was twelve days later that we finally set off for..... Cocos Island... "Where's that and why go there?" I hear you say...

In 1934 a guy named Bob Roberts and his chum "Bully" tried to sail around the world in a 26ft wooden boat named "Thelma". To cut a long story short, he got as far as Cocos Island and while he was on an expedition on shore, Thelma's anchor chain parted and she drifted onto the rocks and was destroyed. He got back to the UK and wrote a very nice book about his adventures ("Rough and Tumble" - ISBN 0-95381-809-8.) He later went to live in Pin Mill just four doors down from Albert Cottage, where Ute and I will be living when we return from our travels. He was a bit of a local character and became the last man to sail barges commercially on the East Coast.

He died in 1970 something. It was a fantastic achievement to sail such a small and basic boat all that way and without GPS or any of the other gizmos we have nowadays. We looked up Cocos Island on our charts and found that it was not THAT far off our route to the Galapagos and I thought it might be a nice idea to go there, see the place where Thelma came to grief and leave a plaque..... So we did!

As we came into Chatham Bay, it seemed strangely familiar. It was exactly as Bob Roberts had described in the book: -

"Away to Port little offshore rocks dotted the steep to coast and to Starboard there loomed the great hump of Nuez Island, which is separated from the main Island by a narrow deep water channel....." Yup, it's all there and Nuez Island is still covered in bird droppings and still looks just as forlorn as he described! He cribed how he spotted a sandy patch on the bottom, rounded up and dropped the anchor right on it..... In fact we saw two sandy patches, one a bit bigger than the other so we chose that. I suspect Roberts would have done the same..... I confess though that he did it all under sail, we had the luxury of an engine.... and we used it! Chatham Bay is quite small so we were possibly anchored in the same spot as the man himself! As soon as the anchor was dug in, we saw all the "strange fish" he wrote of, plus three sharks swimming under the boat! From the pictures in the book I was able to guesstimate Thelma's last resting place so we went ashore and I screwed the plaque to the rock at the bottom of a nearby cliff, hopefully above any possible high water mark! It read, "In tribute to Bob Roberts, "Bully" and THELMA" and in small letters in the bottom right-hand corner it was signed "Damarri '07".

Cocos is owned by Costa Rica and is now a protected nature reserve. Though it was uninhabited in Bob Roberts' day, now there are a couple of Rangers living there and I think they were quite glad to have us or anybody there! They were fascinated when I explained why we had come and showed them the book. In fact it is not quite as it was when Roberts was there because now there is a "Visitor Centre". Although we saw no-one else, I believe quite a few keen divers go there specially to see Hammerhead sharks. They have partially cleared one hillside and made a path up it so it is a bit easier to get around than it was in 1934. Unfortunately we had to make a hasty retreat because there was a big thunderstorm rumbling nearby and I was concerned about Damarri alone out there in the bay; it was probably just such a storm that accounted for Thelma. From the little we saw, Cocos is an absolutely BEAUTIFUL island... Quite mountainous, very densely covered in trees and other vegetation and the wildlife has to be seen to be believed; THOUSANDS of different birds, many of which we had never seen before. The waters were just teeming with fish, notably a large bright blue job that looked like particularly good eating, sharks....

Oh, and then there was the wild pig... we were told that there are also wild goats there. We didn't see any goats but we did see and take a picture of a pig on the

beach.... It looked like an "Old Spot" to us and I guess his ancestors must have been carried as live stores on a ship in years gone by. There were several fresh water streams running into the bay and we drank from them and I had a long overdue wash in the biggest of them! If you are going to get shipwrecked, there are lots worse places to do it than Cocos!

When we got back out to Damarri, her anchor chain was wrapped round a coral head and every time she rose to a wave there was a sickening graunch. Thelma was left at anchor for several days while Roberts went exploring inland so it is perfectly clear how her anchor chain broke...I was just contemplating going in with my snorkel to see how we could unwrap it when a 5ft shark swam underneath us..... So oddly enough I gave up that idea! Eventually we did manage to free the chain by going backwards and forwards and weaving about..... we were lucky, unfortunately Thelma was less so!

We left Cocos with a feeling of enormous respect for the two young men who had sailed all that way in such a small boat. Damarri is 39ft, built of steel, has all the gizmos and an engine. Thelma was just 26ft10ins, built of wood and I don't think she even had an engine, let alone any of the other stuff! It took us six days to get from Balboa to Cocos because there was hardly any wind and we motored for much of the way..... Roberts and his chum took 27 days to do the same journey! Well done Bob, I take my hat off to you! It then took us another week to reach the Galapagos Islands..... I understand the BBC have just done a series of programmes on the Galapagos so I don't need to tell you anything about it..... But I will anyway! Our landfall was in "Wreck Bay" on the island of San Cristobal. The anchorage was very crowded and there were some big rollers coming into the Bay so we didn't even check in. We did stay one night and the following morning left for Academy Bay on Santa Cruz. Actually the anchorage here is almost as crowded as Wreck Bay and the rollers here are just as bad.... but there is nowhere else we are allowed to check in so here we have stayed..... The Galapagos are right on the Equator and though it is usually quite hot at the height of the day, it can actually be quite cool at

night and during the early mornings and evenings. The reason is that , there are several cold ocean currents (notably the Humboldt Current that comes all the way up the West Coast of S.America from the Antarctic) that all come together around here. So whereas the Gulf steam keeps England rather warmer than it should be for its latitude, the Humboldt and other currents keep the Galapagos somewhat cooler that you would expect..... we even had FOG the other night!

Of course we should see more of these islands while we are here but the truth is that we still have a long way to go and have already seen most of the "wondrous creatures" that we came here to see.... they are everywhere! We often see sea lions swimming around the anchorage and it is not unusual to see them sunning themselves on this or that boat! goodness knows how they haul themselves so far out of the water.... At night we have to lift the dinghy out of the water otherwise we would find it full of sea lions in the morning! They are real characters and you often see them swimming on their backs, half asleep just lazing around. The most amazing (and comical) sight is when the fishing boats come in and the fishermen are filleting the fish..... There must be at least twenty assorted pelicans and sea lions all hanging around their feet scrounging for scraps! We have taken some lovely pictures.

The Blue-Footed Boobies are quite the most spectacular birds we have seen so far. We have all seen the comical nature films of them doing their courtship dance and the souvenir shops are full of cute Boobie toys and postcards but.... you

should see these birds diving! Up to now we have always been impressed when watching Pelicans and BROWN Boobies diving for fish.... they usually dive from about 10-15ft up and make quite a spectacular dive.... but the fish they catch are almost on the surface and the bird never goes completely under water. The Blue-Footed Boobie often dives from a height greater than the masts of any of the boats around here, so let's say about 60ft..... a free falling human falls at about 120mph. These birds sometimes flap on the way down to speed themselves up so I reckon they must hit the water at least that speed, maybe even faster. They fold their wings right back and enter the water like an arrow with barely a ripple..... and then you see nothing for fully 4 seconds. God knows how deep they go or how they catch the fish while they are down there but they truly are THE most spectacular fishers we have seen.

Then there are the Marine Iguanas..... we have seen quite a few iguanas on our travels, I seem to remember mentioning Jurassic Park in a previous letter. The Iguanas here are different (now there's a surprise!) and indeed were cited as part of Darwin's theory. There are land iguanas which are a bit different to the Iguanas we have seen elsewhere and Darwin showed how that species had "adapted to their environment and evolved into the Marine Iguana which is not found anywhere else in the world, though here they are ten a penny! They are not always easy to spot because they are black and they spend most of their time sunbathing on the black volcanic rocks by the sea. But once you spot one, look carefully and there will almost certainly be a whole colony of them. Most of the time they don't do much and they don't run away when

you approach them but it is amazing to see them swim.....they don't look like natural swimmers, I think they have a small web between their long claws but they don't have "webbed feet" as such and yet they swim out through the roughest surf using their tail for propulsion. You see a little black head bobbing in waves that I certainly wouldn't feel comfortable in. Apparently they graze on some kind of sea grass..... but cute, they are NOT!

The finches that formed another major part of Darwin's theory are also very plentiful. He thought that in such a remote place, it was unlikely that all these different finches came here as they were. He figured that they were all originally just one species of finch but they gradually developed into different species depending on the environment/habitat in which they found themselves. In fact Darwin defined nine different finches, mostly by differences in their beaks and he said that their beaks developed over many generations because of the food that was available to them. To be honest some of the differences are obvious but some are quite subtle and I am not sure I could say we have seen all nine types but we have certainly seen a lot of different finches.

We haven't yet seen any Giant Tortoises in the wild but we did visit the Darwin Research Centre where they are breeding them in order to replenish the stocks on some of the other islands..... Tragically in years gone by, people, notably whalers, have killed a huge number of the tortoises for meat and in some islands they are almost extinct. There are different "strains" of the breed on different islands and of one strain there is only one left.... he is at the Darwin Research Centre and is known as "Lonesome George".... and unfortunately once he dies that will be another species that will become extinct.

The people here have all been friendly and perfectly charming..... and they are a good looking lot too. There is no loud music, the place is clean and well cared for and it is just a really nice place to "chill out" literally! Having refuelled and restocked, the broad plan is to move on soon to the biggest island Isabella. We

hope to spend just a few days there and hopefully see a few more strange creatures, then depart for the Marquesas..... That trip is about 3,000 miles and with the likely light winds, should take about a month.

Well, I think that's about it for this instalment. The next is likely to come from Tahiti or somewhere around there.....

It's a tough old life but someone has to do it.....

Love from Paul, Ute and Damarri.