

Chapter Two

MAR 2007

Damarri update Sun, 11 Mar 2007 20:14:51

Dear One and All,

Our last scribbling was from St. Kitts at Christmas and a lot of water has flowed under the keel since then. We enjoyed St. Kitts, it was very noisy..... but then it WAS Carnival time! We spent New Year in Nevis which was also lovely but only marginally quieter with a rather open and roly anchorage so from there we went to Montserrat..... and we fell in love with the place! Of course we knew that Montserrat had a still active Volcano but we never appreciated the hardship the people there had suffered. In fact, two years before the eruption of the Volcano, they had been hit by Hurricane Hugo which wiped out 75% of their housing. The Volcano had been "grumbling" for some time and then in '97 there was the major eruption which made about half the island uninhabitable. There was a major evacuation and the population is now about half what it was before. Many of the evacuees are still in the UK and I believe a fairly large contingent went to Canada.

We toured around as much of the Island as is now permitted..... All the "best" areas are in what is now the exclusion zone. The capital Plymouth is now under several feet of mud and ash, as is the old airport. We were enormously impressed with how the remaining inhabitants were trying to rebuild their lives on what is left of the island. They are trying to build a new capital out of a totally unsuitable village..... but it is all there is! There were numerous building projects to provide new housing and there is a new airport perched on top of a hill with a tiny runway just 550 metres long. The problem is that all the flat(ish) land which was suitable for building on, is in the Southern half of the island and now in the exclusion zone. The remaining Northern half of the island is all extremely hilly and really not easy to build on.... but they are having a damn good try with very limited resources. We found the people on Montserrat very different to those on all the other islands.... They have endured such disruption and hardship; you can't imagine anything more that could happen to them. They were amazingly calm, almost serene and had a kind of "Wartime Spirit" about them.

We visited the new Volcano Observatory on a nearby hill and from which we were able to view the volcano. From there they monitor not just seismic vibrations but also the SHAPE of the volcano which apparently is changing and GROWING all the time! It is still active and while we were there the "Alert Level" was raised to 4 (on a scale of 5). While we watched there were several "Pyroclastic Flows"..... They look a bit like an avalanche but are actually thousands of tons of rock and dust which become dislodged as more lava pushes up from underneath and then the stuff at the top comes cascading down the mountainside. It only lasts a minute or two and then the dust settles but it is truly spectacular! Later, while we were having our sundowner, the volcano "broke wind" and a huge cloud of smoke developed downwind of it and in fact it keeps doing that which was a bit of a problem for us because we had to sail through some smoke and ash on our route to Bonaire. Though we did our best to avoid most of it, we did sail through a patch where there was a strong smell of sulphur and a fair bit of grit/ash settled on the decks...

From Montserrat we started the run in to the Panama Canal by sailing down to the ABC islands, starting with Bonaire. About 470 miles with the wind behind us but we were rocking and rolling so badly that we had to tack downwind, keeping

the wind about 40 degrees off our stern. That of course increased the distance considerably and in the end we took nearly 4 days to get there.

There was a bit of drama on the way..... We were using a well known "phenomenon" named "Herb" to give us weather information..... Weather is Herb's hobby and he has been doing this voluntarily for over 20 yrs (We used him on the Atlantic crossing when we thought Tropical Storm Zeta might be coming our way.) Each day about a dozen boats check in with him from various points in the Atlantic and Caribbean and he gives them a forecast and maybe suggests a routing to take account of the weather. He started one day's session by saying that he had been contacted by the US Coastguard regarding an emergency beacon that was going off in the middle of the Atlantic. He was trying to contact the boat "Stella di Mare" to see if they were really in trouble or if the beacon had gone off accidentally, which does happen.

I had heard Stella di Mare trying to call Herb but he couldn't hear them and they couldn't hear him..... I could hear both and ended up relaying between them..... They were indeed in trouble. They had hit a submerged container and it had wiped off their skeg and rudder. They had no steering. Herb has handled such things several times before and tried to make suggestions as to how they might steer the boat but the poor devils were absolutely exhausted and elected to go to bed and try it next morning... I felt like Tony Hancock in his sketch "The Radio Ham", trying to relay messages regarding their position, their condition, were they taking on water, and a message from the Coastguard that they should turn off their Emergency Beacon and only re-activate it if they wanted rescuing and were prepared to abandon their boat. The guy said that they had sailed 60,000 miles in that boat and he was rather fond of it..... he didn't want to abandon ship..... Eventually the radio propagation conditions improved and they became able to hear each other so then I bowed out but it was all exciting stuff at the time!

The next day we arrived in Bonaire and I missed the later instalments but I kept in contact with Herb by e-mail. He kept talking to them for the next couple of days, trying to encourage them and to suggest other things they might try. However they were not successful in gaining enough control over the boat and eventually they did re-activate their Emergency Beacon and were picked up by a 600ft Tanker..... A sad ending to the story but at least they are alive.

To be honest the ABC islands, or what we saw of them, were a bit disappointing. They have a Dutch colonial background and are totally different to all the other islands we had been to up to that point in that most of them have hills or mountains which in turn means that they get significant rainfall and are very lush and green... many have real rainforest. In sharp contrast, the ABCs do not have any hills to speak of and are very dry and almost barren..... there are huge Cacti growing everywhere. Bonaire has "branded" itself as a nature reserve so although the water was very clear and diving and snorkelling are reputed to be amongst the best in the Caribbean, the island itself was a bit of a disappointment. They have created a "Nature Reserve" in the North which was very interesting as long as you like cacti. Actually we did see a few quite interesting birds, including some Flamingo's and some MONUMENTAL Iguanas! One of these things came after me when I was trying to take a picture of it. Remembering how Ute had told me she had read that they have a nasty bite I made a hasty retreat! We later discovered from a Ranger that some people feed them and they come to you expecting food.

Honestly, this thing must have been about 4ft long and looked like a not so mini dinosaur..... I thought I had stumbled into Jurassic Park! The only other thing of

real note on Bonaire is that in the past it was a major producer of salt..... in fact it still is.

The Southern part of the island is VERY low; in fact they have built it up in places and have made HUGE salt pans..... we drove right round there and it was very interesting to see.... including the tiny sheds that used to be the living quarters of the "workers" back in the days of slavery. One slight mystery was that the water in the salt pans was bright PINK..... I have no idea why.....

From Bonaire we had quite a boisterous day sail to Curacao, the "C" in the ABCs. Curacao is bigger than Bonaire and is more geared up for the Tourist. We went there because we had quite a bit of work to do on Damarri and there was supposed to be an excellent chandlery there.....In the event the chandlery was no better than anywhere else, we did buy a new dinghy but not from the chandlery. We were anchored in a big lagoon and though we did go into the capital Willemstadt a few times, we didn't get out and about much because it looked pretty much like Bonaire and anyway we had plenty to do. There was a big "cruising community" in Curacao..... The island is well out of "Hurricane Alley". Some had been there for the Hurricane season and inertia seemed to have set in. Others, like us were starting their run in towards the Panama Canal. It seems that the Southwest Caribbean has a reputation rather like the Bay of Biscay and there are a lot of strong winds and rather nasty seas between the ABCs and the Canal. Many was the long discussion on the relative merits of staying WELL offshore, as recommended in one Pilot book, against hugging the coast as recommended in another brief that was doing the rounds. There was much tooth sucking and listening to Weather forecasts and I think quite a few used the weather as an excuse to stay there for rather longer than was strictly necessary!

There seemed to be the occasional weather window and Ute and I wanted to see Cartagena in Colombia so when a slight moderation in the weather appeared, we elected to take the inshore route and do it in as short hops as possible. So it was that the first day we only went from Curacao to Aruba (the A in the ABCs) and then the very next day decided to push on towards Cartagena, a journey of about 360 miles which took us a rather uncomfortable three days. The winds were mainly 20-25kts, occasionally 28kts but the seas were very fast and awkward with at one point 3mtr waves with just FOUR seconds between them..... Damarri handled it all extremely well and inspires great confidence.... we set up the wind vane steering and left her to it..... she steers herself far better than I ever could! However you can never just "switch off". There always has to be someone on watch, firstly to keep a lookout for ships and other boats of which we saw several and of course just to monitor the course and that everything is OK. We try to operate a 3hrs on, 3hrs off system through the night and generally it works pretty well but when the boat is really "rocking and rolling" you never really sleep properly so one way and another, we both get pretty tired. On the Atlantic we seemed to get into a "rhythm" and didn't get so tired but on these shorter trips we never seem to get into that rhythm..... Anyway, it was all worth it!

Cartagena dates from the early 1500s and became the major port in the "Spanish Main". It was raided by all the famous pirates, including Francis Drake. It is situated/built around a very large inland waterway (about 8 miles long by about 5 miles at it's widest) and as with many large cities, it has many well defined "Districts". We anchored just outside the "Old City"..... just across the water the skyline was more like New York with lots of high rise office blocks and hotels but a short walk away is the MOST beautiful (and beautifully preserved) old walled city we have ever seen.... All in "Old Spanish" style, it is

thriving and bustling with little shops, Museums, Theatres, Plazas.... you have to see it to believe it! There is also a HUGE Sea Wall which took 100 yrs to build in order to keep the raiders out. And then about 1/2 mile away in the other direction was a big Container Terminal almost as big as Felixstowe!

As we all know, there is a huge amount of drug crime in Colombia but for some reason Cartagena is "off limits" to the criminals. As with many cities there are areas it would be unwise to go at night but walking around during the day we found the people friendly and we generally felt pretty safe. There was an excellent "Club Nautico" where all the cruisers hang out and which most use as their base while in Cartagena and most things, including good food were available. Cartagena was certainly one of the high points of our travels and we were rather sorry to leave..... but if you are going to get there, you have to keep moving!

The little corner of the Southwest Caribbean between Colombia and Panama is known as the Gulf of Darien and it too can have some very nasty weather. There is a permanent Low pressure system that sits over Northern Colombia which is in more or less constant conflict with the weather systems coming down from the United States. However "windows" do sometimes appear and we took advantage of one of them to sail the 200 miles across to the next "must see" place, the San Blas Islands.....

The sail to the San Blas was another fairly boisterous trip.... We had expected about 20 Kts of wind to start with, reducing to 10-15 Kts from about half way but the wind never did reduce and in fact it increased slightly which gave us another problem..... We had calculated our departure time expecting the light winds and a fairly slow time. As it turned out, Damarri went like a train all the way which meant that about 40 miles out we "hove to" for a couple of hours and then proceeded with much reduced sail in an effort to lose some time and arrive after Sunrise. But it was not enough and it was still dark when we arrived so we had to motor up and down to lose about another hour.

As the Sun came up we were able to see the islands and the kind of places in which we had planned to anchor..... These islands are mostly TINY with nothing but a few coconut palms for shelter and the waters in between are treacherous, being strewn with coral reefs. We knew this of course having looked at the charts but for navigating amongst coral you need good light and calm waters, neither of which did we have (the wind was still 22 Kts/Force 6)and I felt distinctly uncomfortable about it..... Another look at the charts revealed an inlet on the mainland that looked as though it ought to be more sheltered and only about five miles or so from where we were. So we motored over there.....The "inlet" turned out to be a mangrove. Around the entrance were a few fishermen in dugout canoes. We motored in and dropped the anchor and within a few minutes a couple of guys came over in a dugout and offered us a couple of nice fresh fish.... we bought them! After a good sleep we put the dinghy in the water and went about 2 1/2 miles to "Porvenir", the island where we are supposed to check in and that in itself was an interesting trip going between coral reefs and past a couple of islands which were DENSELY populated with what look like primitive huts (not "mud huts" but that kind of thing). Porvenir has the "airport" on it..... actually airport is rather a grand description.

The tiny, overgrown airstrip runs the FULL length of the island and we didn't actually see anything that could pass for a terminal but I think the passengers

must have to pass through the "police station". We tied up the dinghy alongside two dugout canoes and went ashore. A guy dragged himself out of a hammock and came over to check us in..... He didn't speak English but we gathered that the usual chap was away until Saturday so we couldn't check in to Panama but he could give us a permit to cruise Kuna Yala.... and that was all we needed!

So then it was back to Damarri to watch the sun go down. Though it was still windy "outside", there was not a breath of wind in OUR mangrove.... we were the only boat there. There was total peace.... no wind, no loud music..... just "jungly noises" like whistling frogs, crickets, the odd "plop" of a fish jumping and the squawk of an occasional parrot as he flew home for his tea..... BLISS.... THIS was what we signed up for!

There are several hundred tiny islands that make up the San Blas. They, and a small part of adjacent mainland Panama are inhabited by the Kuna Indians and go to make up what they call "Kuna Yala". Technically Kuna Yala is a part of Panama but

within that area the Kuna govern themselves. They are physically quite small.... only the Pygmies are smaller, a tall Kuna is not much over 5ft and they are trying hard to preserve the culture and lifestyle they have lived for hundreds of years. They live in crude houses made from what materials they have.... which means mainly sticks and palm leaves.

Unfortunately space prevents me from saying too much about their way of life. Suffice it to say that the women run the show (so what else is new!). They marry young and a new husband will move into his new wife's family home and live with them until he can become self supporting. Over the few days we were in the mangrove we got to know a couple of the fishermen (One was the other's Son-in-law) quite well and they invited us into their home on the island of Mamitupu to meet their family..... There were at least fifteen of them living in the one household.... in fact they lived in TWO huts, one was for sleeping and the other had a living area at one end and the "kitchen" at the other with an open fire in the middle of the floor..... The Lady of the house sat regally in her hammock and didn't move from there throughout our visit. I found it slightly embarrassing to keep taking photos of everything but the kids had never seen a camera and were fascinated with this new toy so I showed them how to use it and they happily went round taking lots of pictures for me!

While Kuna menspend most of their time fishing, the women spend most of their time making "molas". These are brightly coloured/patterned sewn squares (maybe a foot square) which they sew onto quite ordinary clothes to make the distinctive brightly coloured traditional dress that they wear.... and they DO wear it all the time, not just for the tourists. Needless to say, we bought rather more molas than was strictly necessary and they will look wonderful when framed and hung on the wall!

We visited several more islands after that, some uninhabited, some with just one family living there. There was even one tiny island with just one palm tree on it..... nothing else, just like the cartoons! I could write so much about about the San Blas and the Kuna but this letter is already too long..... suffice it to say they that with their white sand, palm trees and lovely people our visit to the San Blas was by far the most enjoyable part of our travels so far. Long may the Kuna preserve their way of life. It was with great reluctance that we left there.

It was now just 70 miles to the Panama Canal, a bit long for a day sail so we thought we would make a stop at Portobello on the way. Portobello was a sort of

"clearing house" set up by the Spanish for all the Gold and Treasure they plundered from the region. Consequently it was raided by all and sundry on a fairly regular basis and in fact it is here that Francis Drake met his end. He was buried at sea near what is now known as "Drake Island". We had a fabulous fast sail along the coast and when we got there, we found the bay was sheltered and very beautiful..... So we were somewhat disappointed to find that the town itself is a complete DUMP.... There was obvious evidence of its grand Spanish past but it was run down and filthy, however it was not without interest.... and drama! The inhabitants are mainly black and in the church there is a big statue of "The Black Christ" and Every year in October there is a "Festival of the Black Christ". However we were visiting in early March and our visit happened to coincide with the "Festival of the Devil". This is not quite as sinister as it may sound..... it is really just another excuse for a party! On the Saturday the streets were filled with thousands of people, there was much loud music and dancing..... and lots of people going round in the most fantastic devil costumes!

And the drama?..... We noticed that there was a large ketch anchored in the bay with no other boats nearby. It turned out that there was a single-handed Frenchman on board who had gone mad. This may sound incredible, even funny but I assure you it is true..... On the night of the full moon he put his sails up and went sailing round the bay. There was a HUGE Mega Yacht (with a helicopter on the rear deck) anchored a little way out and this Frenchman ATTACKED it! He was shouting and raving and even fired flares at it! Eventually it raised its anchor and left.... Then all was quiet for a few hours until at about three in the morning he went on the rampage again, this time attempting (thankfully unsuccessfully) to set light to two other boats..... one was occupied and they put the fire out quickly.... only the cockpit cushions were scorched. The other was unoccupied and he poured fuel on the water around it and tried to light that. There were a few small flames but fortunately that was not successful either. The cruisers were all talking to each other on the radio, the Americans were talking of shooting him but thankfully that didn't happen. The Police were called but they said there was nothing they could do because this guy was on his boat which was French sovereign territory..... and he wasn't about to get off it! The Coastguard were called and we were told they would arrive at 09.00 but they never did arrive..... We stayed one more night but thankfully all was quiet.... maybe because it was then past the full moon? Of course we have all heard of "lunatics" but now I seriously wonder if there might be something in it.....?

So now we are in an anchorage known as "The Flats" which is the waiting area for the Panama Canal. Our way ashore is through the Panama Canal Yacht Club but we are advised not to set foot outside the Club without using a taxi because the town, Colon is just too dangerous for outsiders, particularly "whites" who have enough money to buy a boat..... However amongst the yotties there is a great camaraderie and feeling of expectation, rather like that we experienced in Tenerife before the Atlantic crossing. There is a great deal of preparation needed before transiting the Canal. Every boat has to have a pilot on board and in addition to the skipper you have to have FOUR "line handlers". I have been on a "look-see" trip as a line handler on somebody else's boat and really it is not the big drama that it is made out to be as long as everybody knows what to do and concentrates on the job in hand. The transit involves going up 85ft through the three Gatun Locks then you moor up overnight and continue through the canal and the three down locks the following day. We have been given a date of Wed 14th March so we will arrive on the Pacific side on the 15th.....

The Panama Canal has a website..... www.pancanal.com and somewhere on the homepage there is a link to their Web cams. There are three web cams.... at Gatun Locks, Miraflores Locks and there is also one on the new Centenary Bridge. We leave in the late afternoon and will almost certainly go through the Gatun Locks in the dark.....That is also the middle of the night in the UK so I don't think many people will want to watch that..... (except my MUM&DAD!) However, give or take an hour or so, we will probably be going down through the Miraflores Locks at about 5.00pm GMT (6.00pm in Europe) , on the 15th. So if anybody would like to look in we will try to give you a wave! Remember Damarri is a CREAMY YELLOW colour with a DARK GREEN stripe round her and she has DARK GREEN canvass work. We should be one of three boats tied together. I should also say that although there IS a schedule, it is very flexible as so many things can happen to disrupt it..... On my look-see trip one of the pilots didn't turn up on the second day and that boat was stuck in Gatun Lake for 24 hrs. Another boat's engine overheated and stopped in the middle of the canal which delayed the ship that was due to go through with us, that delayed us for nearly an hour.... so I'm sorry if it doesn't go quite as planned.

So..... here we are on the threshold of the next chapter in our adventure..... The next time you hear from us we will be somewhere in the Pacific..... and I promise the letter will be a bit shorter!
Love, Paul, Ute and Damarri.