

So often we think of you, tell ourselves we need to finish our letter and get it sent, and wonder how you are doing with your plans and dreams. There should have been a newsletter in May but it got stolen on our first night anchored at Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, Canary Islands - complete with our laptop computer and other things. I had just put the finishing touches to that newsletter and added photos to it so that I could send it as soon as I had found an Internet cafe!! So frustrating, so depressing, but also a whole new learning curve. I never realised how much work was involved in setting up a new computer until I bought a new one to replace the stolen one, and I had to remember and re-install all the programmes we had been using over the years, register with them or find the old registrations, and download them from internet cafes. Let alone the frustration of not having backed up those last bits like the newsletter and correspondences. Thankfully all of our photos had been backed up so we did not lose any of those to the thief!! And the other consequence is that now you get a mega letter!!

When was it when I last wrote? I think our last progress report ended in Isla Formentera, the most southern of the Balearic Islands, in the Mediterranean!! So much water has passed under our hulls; so many plans have been changed; so I guess you will be quite surprised to hear that we are in Gambia and *not* on our way across the Pacific!

Here is in short (!!!) our news since then -

February 21, 2008 - We departed Formentera under spinnaker, 48 hours later we were surfing at 20 knots and very soon after had set the drogue to slow us down so that the auto pilot could do the steering for us. I guess that is winter sailing. We had a few very interesting nights dodging ships, but thankfully they too were attentive and watching out in the storm so we had no troubles making contact with any of them. Most of the ships seemed to be stationary and just waiting out the storm; I guess the straights of Gibraltar were too rough for even them to go through in this weather.

As we did not want to stay in a marina in Gibraltar we anchored in a very protected part of this natural harbour, off the Spanish town of La Linea, which is on the border of Spain and Gibraltar.

Here we met a few cruising people who had also chosen this port as a place to sit out the winter weather before heading on to other sailing grounds. Our time there flew by, with sundowners at each others boats trying new wines and chatting, a lot of laughing, which did our souls a lot of good. And then there were the not so favourable chores, like, 5 visits to the dentist to fix my broken tooth, days spent tracking down the right customs people to sign and stamp our receipts for goods purchased in the EU, and visiting each of the numerous insurance companies in Gibraltar trying to get some sort of third party insurance to cover us for especially the Panama Canal later. And the exciting moments like re-anchoring in the strong winds that had a big rusty listing steel hulk of a boat (mini ship) dragging across the bay, intent on stopping only when exactly in the spot where Queimarla was, and did. Thankfully we got out of the way in time and anchored way upwind of it. And the adventurous moments where we explored 'The Rock', hiking around the back of it, climbing to the peak and taking in the awesome views of the Mediterranean to the East and the Atlantic Ocean to the West, and admired the audacity of the Gibraltar Apes as they bamboozled or scared tourists out of their snacks or lunch.



The rock of Gibraltar, and it's hat of clouds



Paul has untrustworthy company

March 29, 2008 - departed La Linea at 9am. The weather forecast is for East winds, turning North East later in the day. We motored around and said our farewells to our neighbours and friends and, on the favourable tide, shot out of the straights of Gibraltar.

First 24 hours, 155 nautical miles and our first flying fish.

By our third day out we had big seas, strong winds and the drogue out so that the auto pilot could steer the boat and we did not have to hand steer. Thankfully only for 24 hours, and then the situation eased and we were able to sail freely again.

We had an interesting hitchhiker join us for a few hours two days from landfall, a cheeky little fellow that made Molly's life interesting for a while.



April 2, 2008 at 16:00 we dropped anchor in Arrisife harbour on Lanzerote.
642 nautical miles in 104 hours. Ave. speed 6.2 knots, max. speed 20.7 knots.

Hurrah!! Our first landfall out of the Mediterranean!!

We stayed three nights in this little fishing harbour. Although a perfectly safe anchorage for the boat, and we were able to buy everything we needed like bread and vegetables, the rubbish everywhere and the stench of rotting fish had us pulling up our anchor and looking for a nicer place to be. We sailed from Lanzerote to Las Palmas, Gran Canaria. The landscapes of these two islands are so different, so at odds with the idea of islands in the middle of an ocean, till one remembers that these are volcanic, not coral. Lanzerote is dry and volcanic rocky, and fairly flat, and surprisingly, agricultural, growing mainly grapes. The vines are planted in dug out hollows in the ground, which act to protect the vines from the winds and also as a natural moisture trap, catching the night time dews which automatically run down feed the vines. Gran Canaria is mountainous and partly forested, and has a big modern city with all the trappings of boutiques and street cafes.

On arrival in Las Palmas I phoned mum, who told me I had been here before - "remember?" she asked. No, not really.

Surprised, I asked what where we doing here?

She replied, "we ate bananas and drank milk, a luxury. The ships crew went on strike so we had an unscheduled holiday there."

I think I was eight at the time; we were on our way from Australia to Germany.

I woke early that first morning. It felt good to be in warmer latitudes, the morning sun was already warming the deck under my bare feet, and I could just wander out in shorts and t-shirt. The morning soon greyed over though, when I noticed a knife lying on the back deck. As I made my way into the port hull I noticed how wet everything was. In short, during the night while we were all sleeping soundly in the starboard hull someone had swum out to the boat and stolen my laptop computer, our SSB world receiver radio (which I use in tandem with my computer to get weather for-casts), Paul's backpack, and his wet suit jacket. Stupidly I had not packed the electronics away into lockers, as was the usual practice. Stupidly I had weakened and allowed Molly one more comfortable nights sleep in her blankets inside the hull, not outside in her locker in the cockpit to raise an alarm.

Now I know that most everybody has had something along these lines happen to them sometime in their lives, sometimes worse, but, by golly, doesn't it make one feel so violated, so aggressive, so suspicious of everyone that looks like it could have been them? Clear to see how wars start. And we came out of it lightly. It could have turned out much worse considering the knife left behind by the thief.

The police were informed, took a statement, but like anywhere in the world, with not a lot of interest.

Molly now sleeps in her cockpit locker, with her blankets.

Paul sleeps with a big stick next to his side of the bed.

I sleep with the aerosol insect spray at the ready at my side (for the eyes).

We have bought little electronic alarms and fitted them to all lockers and hatches, and movement alarms inside the hulls.

And we have replaced my computer with new one, bought a new SSB world receiver, a new wet suit top and a new backpack. We walked our feet flat for days trying to find all of this at reasonable prices, and pretty well failed, the 'duty free Canaries' are more expensive than mainland Europe and their tax.

As the days passed and we lightened up we noticed life around us again.

Found amusement to see local boats people use the yellow buoys that mark off the swimming zone as mooring buoys - one quite permanently.

Saddened to see, especially in this seemingly affluent place, an old guy and two young men sleeping under turned over fishing skiffs on the beach, scrounging through rubbish bins.

Shocked to see most everybody just tossing their rubbish and wrappings to the floor, regardless of rubbish bins nearby, and then a thick almost unbroken line of cigarette butts fringing the high water mark at the local beach.

Astounded to watch small hobby skiffs racing between the few anchored boats in the bay, and then one ploughing straight into the aft section of our port hull, punching a hole about 20cm above the waterline!! Drama number 2 unfolds as Paul jumps into the dingy and makes chase and actually catches up with the boy, who was yelling 'sorry sorry sorry' all the way. Paul stayed calm, and met up with the father, and the insurance was notified, and assessors assessed, and agreed to pay. Wonder of wonders. Two weeks later we had two nights in the marina and Paul had the hole patched, strong, functional, but not pretty, a real scar on our newly fared and painted boat.

But that was not all, on our second weekend in the anchorage, while still waiting for the assessor to visit, another boat owner, this time in a brand new power boat, lost control of his anchor up manoeuvre, and floated back to t-bone himself on our port bow. Paul was on land stretching his legs; I was below when I felt the hard bump. Leaping on deck, snatching a fender that just happened to be there, I managed to jam it between his boat and our side as he pushed his boat off the bow and was quite prepared to slide along our hull till he came free astern of us. The fender and vigorous pushing off on my part saved us from more damage. He just kept muttering 'tranquil tranquil' at me as I was telling him to help me push him off. He was not so forthcoming with personal or insurance details, and we have found out from his insurance company that unless he comes forward to make a claim then they can do nothing. He hasn't, so we have written that off. Not as major damage as the other, but still a scar and repairs.

Thankfully good things happened too. We met another Australian couple, who, with a sense of humour familiar to us, helped us shake off the doldrums and see life as new starter sailors. We had to admire these people. Mat and Karen made a choice between cruising in a campervan and cruising in a catamaran when deciding on a lifestyle change. The catamaran idea won, and after selling everything they owned, house, car and kit, they purchased a Lagoon 42 hibrid (electric) cat in France, took possession and started learning. Hearing someone talk about 'going primitive' when looking for bays to anchor in (no wifi !?!), or worrying about sail trim, or how the anchor is set properly, or the spikes of household power generation and consumption, and freshwater management, provisioning for passages and not eating it straight away, and how to deal with that freshly caught fish that is still flapping it's slime and scales everywhere, and how to steer the dingy in a straight line - I remember our start. Very refreshing and a lot of fun. We cruised in company with them from Gran Canaria to Tenerife, hired a car and cruised by road, drank wine and compared boats. 'Where II' is just plain luxurious and civilised compared to 'Queimarla', who leans towards camping cruising. 'Cruising' has come a long way since we built our boat. But we still would not trade and would only change a couple of things.



On Tenerife we became Dock Rats for 4 days. At 40 Euros a night we took full advantage of the security and, with friends, hired a car for a couple of days to explore the islands inland, used water flamboyantly enjoying 'real' showers, washed the Port St Louis and Sahara dust off, and walked the groceries on deck without getting our feet wet and sandy.



The islands are volcanic and the anchorages are quite open and deep with 10 meters or more, usually with a rocky bottom making it interesting and even difficult to anchor, as well as being open to any swell that builds up in the ocean. We had to be more attentive to the weather here than in most places we have anchored.



We painted our own guest land flags for our possible (we still hadn't made up our minds!!) land falls in the next couple of months. Here are Gambia, Senegal, Cap Verde's and Anabon. I managed to buy only one flag for Venezuela at a chandlery in Los Americas.

In Tenerife we collected one of our parcels that we had been waiting for, the main reason why we had stopped at the Canaries at all. The second parcel was still on its way. We thought having the last bits of boat things we wanted sent to us along the way was a good idea. But when the second parcel got stolen from me at the bus terminal at Santa Cruz it was the last straw. No more 'stuff'. We can do without. And we have to get going. Get to somewhere else where I can sleep and stop having nightmares about thieves and tricksters. Surprisingly we have been here 2 months. We have completed a lot of the little jobs on the boat, saw a lot of the islands we visited, even took in a cultural event or two, and certainly enjoyed finding out of the way places and small restaurants to lunch at. But this delay has put a big question mark over our next destination. June is the start of the hurricane season in this part of the Atlantic and across the Caribbean, and although the chances are slim of anything building up this side so early, it is still a risk. Do we dash across the Atlantic and hide out from the hurricane season south of the Caribbean? Or do we tackle the wet season (off the beaten track, humidity, mosquitoes, malaria) in West Africa, and visit Gambia and maybe even Senegal? It will be the last time we will be near Africa, and we did enjoy our visits to various parts of this continent in the past.

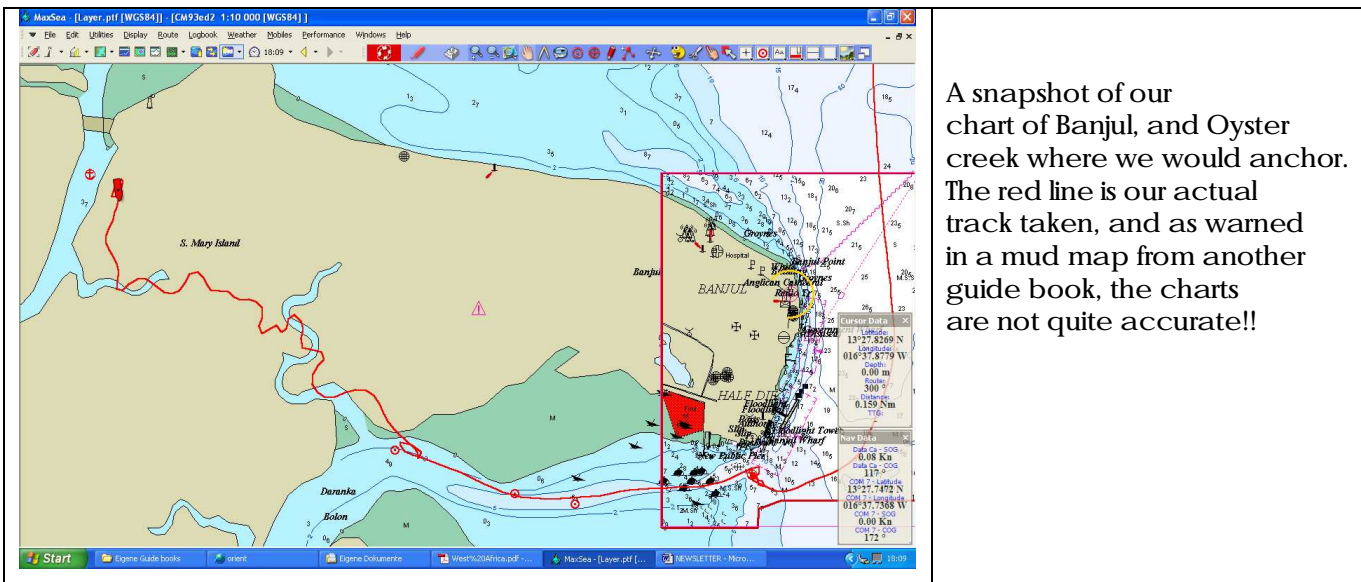
9th June, 2008 - we departed the Canary islands. Destination? We're still not 100% sure of where we wanted to go, so we just headed southish, and waited to see what the weather would do. Baked bread and made yoghurt on this trip. Haven't done that since 2001! For only the second time in our sailing career we actually passed another yacht, also a catamaran. It is quite unusual to even see another sail let alone come that close to them in these big oceans. And we had visitors. 2 pigeons, tagged to Canary Islands, Spain, must have lost their track and been swept out to sea, and quite exhausted they settled on Queimarla for the journey to where-ever.

We had a good journey until on the 16th of June we had our first taste of bad(ish) weather. Line squalls from the South. Fast cloud and short sharp periods of wind, which you can actually see thundering across the ocean surface. But we knew these, and were ready. While waiting for one of these to pass over us, no sails up, just floating, we were visited by a hammerhead shark. Three hours later we were able to set sail again, and knew that Gambia was going to be our landfall. In the evening of the 17th we dropped anchor just outside of Half Die, Banjul, Gambia's harbour. We had covered 1094 nautical miles in 200 hours of mostly comfortable sailing. Our guests took to wing and headed North, I assume to follow the coast to a Latitude they might recognise. I wonder if they made it back to the Canaries?

'Half Die' derives its name from a cholera epidemic in 1869, when literally half of the population did die. Thankfully the mortality rate has improved. It was our first taste of Africa for many years, and was still a

culture shock. Although once an English colony, and Banjul being the capital and main residence of the President, it is still – Africa. Dusty, colourful, smelly and dirty, bubbling and alive, white smiles in black faces, hands out for loose Dalasi, the local currency, and if you answer their question to ‘what is your name’ you are expected to pay them for being your friend. We Toubabs (white people) are rich. Many of them are rich too, but you and I wouldn’t notice it. Paul braved the officialdom the next morning, clearing us in with the port captain, immigration and customs, losing on top of the official fees a good 25 percent for ‘presents’ and ‘fines’ – no receipts of course. No way to get around it, other than fight, and it is not our system so the chances of winning are pretty well zero. Four hours and 55 Euros later Paul came back with dusty feet, five mangos and a one month visa each. We think he came out of it cheaply. The demands were higher.

First things first, make our way to the much quieter and safer anchorage at Oyster creek, and then see to fixing our engines propeller which had a broken blade.



Here we settled in and got to know a few people, and soon we had ‘friends’ for life. We try to employ friends, rather than just give money away, and it has been received with respect. For 3 euros one chap gets water for us, for 4 euros a lady does our washing. And for about 3 euros we can eat local and even have a coke. ‘Local’ means rice and a stew of unknown ingredients, but it is tasty and we’ve not suffered yet. We go shopping at the locals market, and we are recognising people, and they us (not hard considering our skin colour!!!), exchanging banter and a laugh. Only when the bumsters hassle us, bumsters being young men trying every trick in the book to get us to pay for them, do we get annoyed. But a quiet ‘you are being very rude, go away!’ soon has them looking for other prey. Generally it is a very open and polite society. Once we got a little lost in the maze of alleys in Serakunda, and wandered into a compound, or living area, of some locals. They were eating lunch, in the local style, squatting outside in the yard around a fire oven sharing from the same platter. When we backed away, apologising for the disturbance, they all smiled and gestured us to join them. We laughed and thanked them, but sadly were too embarrassed to join them. We found out later that as Toubabs this would be understood, but the right thing to do is to join them and accept their hospitality. Catch 22 is that this system is very reciprocal, and that many whites have lost possessions to that now ‘extended’ family. Nicely of course. Not stolen.

We motor sailed with Queimarla 156 nautical miles or 288 km up the river Gambia. The trip took us 18 days, and would have taken longer if not for the fact that our visas were due for renewal, and we could only do that in Banjul. We had tried to purchase a three month visa on arrival, but immigration wouldn’t allow it, saying that we could get a three month one when we came back for renewal. Have since heard that this is a load of rubbish, and the reason for them to do this is so that they get a little extra ‘present money’ out of us each time we renew. This information came from an official, and when we objected, he just grinned and said ‘That is the African way!’ The trip itself was fantastic. Well worth the effort I think. We had our moments, but on a whole it was relaxing and peaceful, and we had no problems sleeping at night in very secure and calm anchorages. On two occasions we were all covering together in the saloon as thunder cracked overhead and lightening lit up the sky. Hearing the warning wind whistling through the bush and mangrove before it actually hit us was an eerie experience. Despite our mangrove surrounds we still had the tallest target in the area, our mast. Most of the time we tucked into a Bolon, or creek, and anchored in 3 to 5 meters of water. Getting into these creeks had the heart palpitating! The water depth dropped to as little as 90cm at the entrances, meaning we had about 20cm to spare. We tried to tackle these at low water, so that we would have the incoming tide to swim us off the bank if we did run aground. Once inside and anchored, we could hear our surroundings. Birds!!! Sometimes monkeys, and on a couple of

occasions the grunt and snort of Hippopotamus. The wild life was not as prolific as we had been led to believe, but then again it is the start of the wet season and many birds migrate, and the animals find water holes.



Only the hippos and snakes stayed. But we were happy with what we saw, and managed not to anchor in a hippo hole, which apparently happens, as we had been warned to watch out for these holes underwater. Come too close to their territory and they can get angry. Recon an anchor on the noggin would do the trick too.

Saw wild pig, baboons, eagles, osprey, egrets, colourful kingfishers, and more, while motoring close to the banks of the river, sometimes so close we could touch the foliage as we drifted by. Oh, and mosquitoes, bugs, beetles, flies, flying ants, earwigs, butterflies and other indescribable, sometimes reaching Stephan King proportions, but that's typical of the tropics. The trip was a great experience on our own boat, especially being able to do it at our own pace, have our own place to sleep, and hide-out from the bugs. Travelling like this also means finding groceries, and what better way than to visit the villages and buying local and meeting people away from the tourist track. I could write another 2 pages just on this! If you get the chance, do it. And don't shy from the early part of the wet season. It's not as bad as Darwin in the wet, it's clean, and the Sahara dust is tamed. Ok, this newsletter is about to become a book, so I will bring it to a close. Sorry if I got carried away with words. I feel I have only skimmed the surface of our experiences! We are going to stay in Gambia for a while longer, maybe sail north the 90 odd miles to Dakar, Senegal, before heading to the Cape Verdes in September.

We look forward to hearing your news!! Write soon!
Barb, Paul and Molly-D