

Extended Cruising in the Caribbean

Installment 7 Returning from the Caribbean to the Chesapeake Bay

This is the seventh and last installment of a series of articles that chronicles our seven month adventure of sailing Windward Passage, our Beneteau 445, from the Chesapeake Bay to the Caribbean and down the island chain as far south as St. Vincent. After spending two months in St. Vincent we sailed back up island to Tortola to prepare for a mid May return to the Chesapeake. Previous articles covered Planning the Voyage, Preparing the Boat, The Outbound Ocean Crossing and Cruising in the British Virgin Islands (BVI), Cruising in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) – The First Month, and Cruising in SVG and Sailing to The BVI. This final installment covers the ocean passage from the BVI back to the Chesapeake Bay.



Figure 1 - Susan Williamson sails into Road Town (photo by YachtShotsBVI)

My wife, Susan, and I spent two weeks preparing the boat for the trip north and began the process of provisioning. We sailed to some anchorages that we had not yet visited and to some of our favorite locations where we could say goodbye to the friends we had made over the last few

months. She then flew back to Wilmington on May 1 and I continued the task of making ready while awaiting the arrival of the friends who would do the ocean passage with me.

I elected to not haul the boat to have the bottom painted before returning to the Chesapeake so I needed to clean the grass and fuzz on the bottom before our departure. I sailed to Great Harbor on Peter Island and set up my Sea Breath unit that provides fresh air through a compressor and regulator to allow me to work under water up to a depth of 30 feet. I donned my mask, fins and weight belt and went overboard with brush and scrub pad in hand. Under the boat I encountered a 4 ft. long barracuda enjoying the shade. We have seen him on several occasions when we have visited this anchorage and he has been no problem. He seemed to prefer the middle of the hull and I most needed to clean the rudder and propeller so we struck an agreement that I would stay in the rear third of the boat and he could have the middle third. This seemed to work well and I began working on the

barnacles on the propeller with a bronze wire brush. The grass and barnacles came off in a great cloud and the propeller was really looking good when the barracuda decided he would move into my third of the hull – just curious, I'm sure.

I continued cleaning and just as I completed the propeller became even more curious. I then moved a little aft and began cleaning the rudder. The barracuda became even more curious as I made more clouds of grass and stuff from the rudder. I reminded him of our agreement and pointed out that he was no longer in his third of the hull. He smiled that toothy smile and then gave a great big yawn just to be sure I saw all of those razor sharp teeth. I decided it must be lunch time and retreated to the swim ladder. However, it is difficult to climb the swim ladder with fins on. It is amazing how fast fins come off when you have an incentive. I climbed the ladder and decided to complete the cleaning job another day – in another location. As I was stowing the gear I saw him take up residence under the dinghy where he stayed until he was sure that I was not going to come back in to play. Then he resumed his position under the boat.

On May 10 Chuck and Judy Stadler arrived and we tested the local pulled pork and spare ribs as possible meals for the trip north. They pronounced them as ideal provisions – the consensus was that the hot sauce used on the pork would surely kill any bacteria for at least a week. We sailed to some of the better snorkeling spots and generally relaxed for a week. This gave them the opportunity to become acquainted with the equipment that I had added since they had sailed with me over a year ago.

The two remaining members of the northbound crew – Gerry Hunter and Sut Anderson – arrived on May 16th. That evening we got a very favorable report from Commander's Weather Corp. that indicated that we would be able to leave the next day and anticipate an excellent weather window for the trip home. This was a relief since the weather to the north had been bad for the last 10 days with a series of fronts coming off the east coast of the US and generating gales and full storms between the coast and Bermuda. The northbound boats that left Tortola over the last two weeks were really getting pounded and I was glad that we had not tried to leave earlier.



**Figure 2 - Chuck Stadler
tops off the water tank**

We cleared customs and immigration early Saturday morning and left the dock at 0930 in light winds. The lows that were to the north were diminishing the trade winds and generating some swells of six to eight feet but a high pressure was predicted to allow the trades to rebuild over the next few days. We enjoyed two days of sailing at 5 to 7 knots in beautiful sunshine. The tow behind generator and the wind generator were providing almost all the electricity that we needed to keep the batteries charged so we did not have to run the engine.



Figure 3 – Judy Stadler, Chuck Stadler and Gerry Hunter swim in mid-ocean

On the third day the wind died and we had to motor. In the afternoon we decided to turn off the engine and go for a swim. The water here is shown on the chart as being 5868 meters deep! We always leave one person on board in case the wind picks up and the boat begins to drift away. Though the wind was light the boat was drifting at about half knot and we made use of a safety line that I had thrown overboard with a fender attached. After about an hour of swimming we resumed our motoring refreshed and considerably cooler.

Since leaving Tortola we had only seen one other ship and had seen no marine life to speak of. The moon was approaching full and the night sails were incredible! The brighter stars and constellations were easily seen but the bright moon made it difficult to see the dimmer stars. We practiced our celestial navigation and Sut Anderson – who had recently completed the US Power Squadron Junior Navigation course in celestial navigation was able to determine our location to within 2 miles of our GPS coordinates.

On May 22 the wind began to fill in again and we enjoyed several days of great sailing. We saw whales breaching about a mile away from us. They would shoot out of the water about half of their body length then rotate as they splashed back into the



Figure 4 - Sut Anderson and Gerry Hunter enjoy a meal

water. It was just like the commercial for Pacific Life that we see on television. Truly a spectacular sight but too far from us to get any pictures.

I requested an update from Commander's Weather and we were told that there was a severe front coming off of Charleston and we should try to make as much distance to the north as possible to avoid the predicted strong winds (possibly as high as 50 knots in the squalls) as the low passed south of us. We altered course to head dead north and motor sailed to get above 32 degrees north latitude as quickly as possible. By May 24 we were north of 32 degrees and the front gave us some excellent winds of 15 – 25 knots out of the north-northeast and we altered our course to head straight for Norfolk.

As predicted the wind died just as we entered the Gulf Stream and we motor sailed across with almost no swell or waves. We were visited by several pods of porpoise. These incredible creatures spent nearly an hour playing in our bow wave. Their speed is impressive as they accelerate across our bow. At one time they completely surrounded the boat. Then they got bored and took off with a great burst of speed.



Figure 5 - A pod of dolphin swim with us

We arrived at the entrance to the Chesapeake on May 27 and by 0340 we had made our way into a marina at Little Creek so that we could clear customs. I have purchased a Customs and Border Patrol decal that facilitates clearing in under the new procedures that have been established since 9/11. We called the after hours number to report our arrival and, as instructed, called the normal business hours number at 0800. A border patrol officer and a customs officer came promptly to the boat to inspect us and clear us in. This is a considerably more formal procedure than in the past and it pays to know the regulations. We had disposed of all of our fresh fruits, vegetables and meats and had segregated our trash so that there was no food in the trash that we brought in. Also, our water tanks were empty and we had ensured that there was no water in the bilge. We were told that if we had not done this we would have had to pay someone to take the foodstuff and incinerate it. I'm not sure what would have been the means of disposing of water from

the tanks and the bilge but I believe it, too, would have had to be disposed of by a service. This would have taken at least half day.

We left Little Creek and began the sail up the bay to our home port of Rock Hall. Within an hour we were greeted by a swarm of biting black flies. There were hundreds of them and we were killing 3 and 4 at a swat with our fly swatters. The crew threatened to mutiny and head back to the Caribbean. The captain was saved by the arrival of a predicted cold front. The front brought a temperature drop of 30 degrees and winds of 34+ knots – right on the nose. We spent the entire night beating into this wind and seas of 8 – 10 ft. This was the weather we expected to encounter in the Gulf Stream. By 0645 we were exhausted and we altered course to the Solomons where could anchor in protected water and get some sleep. By 1100 the winds were abating and we had lunch at one of the restaurants. Gerry's wife joined us



Figure 6 - Judy Stadler enjoys a quiet watch

for lunch and then took Gerry with her as they were planning on sailing down the bay to a Beneteau rendezvous the next day.

We left Solomons at 1300 on May 27 and enjoyed a sail in the remnants of the gale until the late afternoon when the wind completely died. We spent the last 6 hours motoring to Rock Hall arriving in the slip at 0015 on Thursday morning.

In summarizing this trip my wife and I agree that it was one of the great adventures of our lives. We have sailed the Caribbean islands many times and they are beautiful and exciting places to visit. However, we both agree that it was the opportunity to share them with 45 of our friends that made the trip so wonderful for us.