



Postcards from the Caribbean #11
S/V Polyphonic
Jeff Grossman / Jean Levine
and the cats Sarge & Shadow

Dateline: At Sea off the Cuban Coast

As I write this we are on our delivery home, going direct 1,006 miles from Fajardo, Puerto Rico, to Key West, Florida. We have just exited the Old Bahama Channel and have only 170nm to go to Key West. An 'after Cold Front' NW wind is blowing so we are close hauled hoping for the predicted wind shift that will let us point Key West. The air is noticeably colder and it is obvious that we have put our Caribbean sailing behind us. It has been 8 days since we left Puerto Rico so we will be really looking forward to getting into Key West.

We met the Cold Front yesterday, before we could make it out of the Old Bahama Channel, and have spent last night tacking back and forth to work our way out. This was particularly entertaining since the [Channel is a busy sea-lane](#) and there were as many as 5 ships in sight at one time. The ships stay in their traffic lanes, and answer our calls on the radio to confirm how we will pass each other, so as long we kept vigilant it wasn't dangerous. I even got to chat with the Captain of the cruise ship Noordam and we wished each other a good watch.

Now, to pick up our cruising tale where we left off, in the British Virgin Islands (BVI's). Our friend, Annie, had flown into St. Thomas and taken the Ferry over to the BVI's, aiming for Roadtown where we awaited her. Unfortunately, the Ferry took her to Sopers Hole at West End, 20 miles away. Not sure where she was, Annie sought out the nearest Marina, walked into the office and asked for Polyphonic. Where upon the man next to her pipes up and says "Polyphonic! I know that boat, and they're not here!". Seems our "fame" has spread far and wide. We had met Mark on 'Cat'n Around' in Luperon and sailed with him around Puerto Rico, and now he was stuck in Sopers Hole doing extensive repairs to his boat. What were the chances that the first person Annie met in the BVI's knew Polyphonic! Annie caught a ride to join us in Roadtown for the Shore Parties.

With the girls sobering up from the excitement in Roadtown, we headed for Coral Bay in St. John's. In Coral Bay is the infamous [Skinny Legs Bar](#) where we celebrated New Years Eve (or Old Years Night as they call it) with many of our cruising friends. We caught up with Sea Note, Wally's World, Moonshadow II, Navigator and Rhum Runner and had a wonderful time toasting, and getting toasted, for the New Year's celebration.

From Coral Bay it's a delightful sail back around to Sopers Hole, from where Petra must leave us. On the way "Georgia", [the largest sloop in the world](#), sails past. With a [mast almost 200'](#) off the water it is a most impressive sight to see her under sail. While in Soper's Hole, we take a taxi ride to Cane Garden Bay. This is one of the most scenic Bays in the BVI's. The sea conditions precluded us from bringing Polyphonic into the bay, so we visited with a land trip. Here [the girls](#) had fun [frolicking on the beach](#) while Jeff caught a nice snooze in a comfortable beach chair. The next morning Petra left us early for her trip home and then we sail to Norman Island. While Polyphonic is safely on a mooring, Jean and Annie take a hike up to the top of the island for the view, and Maryanne and Jeff hang out at the Pirate's Bar.



One always knows when it is time for Happy Hour at the Pirate's since they set off a cannon to announce it, which scares the bajeezes out of you if you aren't ready for it!

The next morning we stop for snorkeling at the Indian's, a group of 100' high sharp rocks sticking up out of the water about a mile from Normans. Annie and Jeff snorkel over for some of the best coral and wall scenery that we have seen in our entire year. The Indians are absolutely spectacular, and a must for anyone planning to visit the BVIs.

Next, back to Sopers Hole to see Maryanne off and to pick up Pat. We met Pat in St. Martin and though young (18) he is an excellent sailor, having been trained to Watch Stander level on Tall Ships. Pat proves to be a great crewmember and a tremendous help on our long sail home. He even enjoys cooking at sea, which gave Jean a nice break.

We clear out of the BVIs, sail past the US Virgins, and in two easy days of sailing reach Culebra, in the Spanish Virgin's. It is so much easier going downwind! We love the Spanish Virgins, they are so unspoiled, especially when compared to the US and British Virgins. We spent most of our time in Culebra snorkeling. We tried a couple [new spots](#) where we chased a large sting ray from its resting place, swam with a 6' eagle ray, and followed a small hawk bill turtle around. But the coral was weak so we decided to go back to the spot we had visited earlier in the year. This time, instead of biking to the beach we caught the local bus, then backpacked over the hill to the [secluded snorkel beach and Rosario reef](#). This reef has excellent coral structures and is teeming with fish, especially the very colorful Parrotfish. Culebra is part of Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico is part of the United States, so when we cleared into Customs and Immigration here, we cleared in for Key West (as long as we didn't stop at a foreign port on the way back). This makes things much easier for our arrival back in the 48 States.

Though we wish we could spend weeks in the Spanish Virgins, we are on a schedule to get home. Another sunny and easy day sail brings us to Fajardo on Puerto Rico's Northeast coast. The Marina Puerta Del Ray had been recommended to us and we used it as our base to prepare for the long sail back to Florida. The marina is outstanding but is so large that to get from our dock to the mainland they run a golf cart service! We rent a car and spend two days getting prepared for sea, working down the checklist of: shopping at Walmart, Supermarket, WestMarine (twice each), boat inspections, fueling, oiling, watering, assigning watch schedules, rigging and securing. We do find time to have some fun and, for the first time in a year, go to a movie theater, seeing "Lord of the Rings, Return of the King" (with Spanish subtitles). After our chores are done we take a day and drive up to the [El Yunque rainforest](#). This forest is a large National preserve and has many hiking trails and waterfalls. We [visit the museum](#), then drive up to about 3000' elevation to hike in the woods to a waterfall. The hike takes us through the [lush tropical growth](#) and the cool air is a nice break from the summer like conditions at sea level. When we reach the waterfall, Jean and I take pictures as [Pat and Annie swim](#) in the cold water. Pat is Canadian so he thought the water was warm ...

We spent four days in Fajardo, then a short two hour run takes us to the small island of Isla Palominos with the tiny of islet of Palominitos next to it. These are picture postcard perfect [Palm tree lined islands](#). The only thing on Palominos (except one private home) is a beach bar that has its patrons brought out by small ferry boats from the Puerto Rico mainland. [Palominitos has nothing but a few Palm Trees](#), white beach and coral reefs. We were able to get a picture of the two islands with a rainbow bridging them, [its colorful ends each landing on a beach](#).



It is finally time to start our voyage home. Though we hope to do it in six days, we know it could take much longer. Light air on the first day out gets us off to a slow start. We only carry enough fuel to motor about 1/3 of the way, and there aren't any good places to fuel up on the way. Besides, we don't want to stop in a foreign port and lose our US clearance. For the first 300nms of the trip we are in open Atlantic. So, though the first two days bring comfortable light winds, we have a large swell (8 – 12') rolling on our beam coming from an Atlantic storm way to the North.

One afternoon I pop up on deck and Annie is looking out to sea watching the large ocean swells with a camera on her lap. I joke about her waiting to catch a whale picture when, about ¼ mile from the boat, a Humpback whale breaches, leaping almost completely out of the water! It was a full-grown whale and a spectacular sight, just like in the movies. Then gone in a second, no time for a picture and no other signs of whales before or after. If we hadn't been looking at that spot, at that second, we would have missed it. Amazing.

Through out our year we have been fishing, primarily hoping to catch some Mahi (aka: dolphin, dorado). Instead, all we have caught are some rather large Barracuda and Tuna. One day, about halfway to Key West, the seas are calm and we are having some fine sailing. Flying fish have been doing their usual aerial shows when all of a sudden a Mahi leaps out of the water after one, making several jumps before the Mahi catches it. We have our lure out and sure enough, a couple minutes later, [whizzz he takes our hook](#). This turns out to be one of two that we caught that afternoon. Unfortunately for us, but luckily for the Mahi, we didn't have a net and both fish managed to leap off the hooks just as we were lifting them out of the water into the boat. Damn, and they looked really tasty. We are getting a net before the next cruise! Ironically, neither of the big Barracuda leaped off their hooks. Jeff had to reach down and very carefully pliers the hooks out of their tooth filled mouths to release them.

Dateline: Useppa Island, West Coast of Florida

Not long after penning the first two paragraphs of this postcard, as we are separating from the Cuban coast, we have a guest fly aboard. A healthy looking Pigeon lands on our deck, prances about for a while, and then takes up roost under our Dodger (canvas shelter). This was neat, and Shadow, our black cat, thought so too as he dashed out of his home, which also happened to be under the dodger, and leapt upon the bird. The bird flared its wings, flailed with its beak and managed to get away unharmed. Shadow goes back in his home under the dodger ... pigeon lands on top of the dodger, out of sight of Shadow, and goes back to preening. Soon the [Pigeon, now named Fidel, takes up residence under our dinghy](#), which is upside down on the foredeck. Here it stayed all the way across the Gulf Stream. We figured the Pigeon would fly off when it saw land. Nope, it stayed aboard all the way to the fuel dock, walking the decks while we fueled, maneuvered to our slip, got tied up, and went partying for the night (see below). The next day we finally saw the bird had moved to another boat, maybe the fact that we took away its water bowl and stopped feeding it had something to do with it. Anyway, the dinghy that was once named "Monotone" is now called "Pigeon Coop".

In the earlier morning hours before we arrive in Key West, we track a ship on radar that is coming at us, but still 7 miles away. Since we cannot see any lights, but the radar return was very strong, we can guess who it is. When the ship was 4 miles out and still coming at us, I hailed them on the VHF. On the second hail we get, as expected "U.S. Coast Guard" asking us 20 questions. This is the fourth cutter we've seen



since the Bahamas, along with 1 turboprop, a jet and a helicopter. We watch on radar as the cutter shadows us (with no lights on) for the rest of the night, so we are not surprised when they board us in the morning. I had not been boarded since the Zero Tolerance days of over a decade ago. Back then, a boarding was a VERY unpleasant experience. This time it was easy. The Guardsmen were very polite, friendly and professional. We had been very careful to make sure we had everything required so they were able to go right down their checklist and give us the clean Gold boarding record.

After nine days, three hours, and some odd minutes at sea we finally reach Key West. We have arrived in Key West during Terra Nova Yacht Race Week, with the [200 boat fleet sailing out](#) for the 4th day of racing (out of 5) as we motor in the channel. This is one of the most competitive race weeks in the world and attracts [top sailors from over 17 countries](#). Many of our friends from home are in Key West, racing on a variety of boats during the day, and partying on Duval Street at night. We just have a chance to secure the boat and ourselves (showers, etc) when the fleet returns and our friends drag us out for the Key West night scene. Great fun. Our friends Rick and Robin from Endangered Species were in town on their way back to the Caribbean for “retirement” cruising. We met them in the Caicos Islands on our way down, when they were headed back to Florida for cruising kitty top up and boat additions. Fun meeting up with them going the other way!

We are now almost home. I close this postcard sitting at anchor in one of our favorite Florida spots, off [Useppa Island in Pine Island Sound](#). We are only a couple days from home. This will be our last post card. It has been a most magical and rewarding year. It is with the excitement of being home, and with great melancholy about the end of the voyage, that we approach Tampa Bay. There is no doubt that, though it may take years, as soon as we have the resources to go cruising again, we will go. Now, we are looking forward to seeing all of our friends again and catching up with each of you on the years events.

In radio etiquette:

“Off and Clear for now ... Polyphonic out”