



“Oh I don’t know where I’m a gonna go when the volcano blows”

Dateline: Montserrat

Postcards from the Caribbean #5

S/V Polyphonic

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and the cats Sarge & Shadow

From the Killer Bees at Nevis we go visit the live volcano at Montserrat. In between we have a wonderful close reach sail at 8 – 9 knots, past the Kingdom of Rodonda.*

For those that don’t know, the southern two thirds of Montserrat has been destroyed over the last decade by the Soufriere volcano. This includes the capital Plymouth, and the airport, being buried by pyroclastic flows and ash. England has invested almost \$400 million to help the country of Montserrat rebuild, and the northern third is a beehive of construction. New schools, government buildings, a new seaport and a new airport are all under development. Meanwhile, the volcano continues to do its thing, periodically erupting to the constant consternation of the residents of Montserrat.

The last eruption had just been this past March. We arrive just after a quiet period and anchor in Little Bay, the only allowed anchorage in the NW corner of the island, next to the new seaport. Five boats sailed over together, all crewed by couples, and the ten of us pile into two taxis to take a tour of the island. Of course, the highlight was a visit to the Volcano Monitoring Observatory with its magnificent view of the volcano. While we watched, Soufriere rumbled several times, each time sending up clouds of glowing ash 1000’ feet above its peak. We got the impression that it was winding up for another big one. We just couldn’t get that Jimmy Buffet song out of our minds the whole time we were there.

All of the cruising guides warn not to sail to leeward of Montserrat at the risk of getting volcanic ash all over your boat. I knew from my scientific readings that this ash is very bad stuff, abrasive, corrosive, with the ability to clog engines and short electronics, and so fine it gets everywhere. So, though we sailed to leeward of all the other islands in the Caribbean, when we left Montserrat we sailed the windward side. We elected to set sail at 02:00 so that we could see any lava flows glowing in the night. We did see one small burst of red/orange. But, read on ...

About a week after we leave Montserrat, BOOM, the volcano blasts a big one. Ash is shot 40,000’ in the air and covers boats with ash as far away as St. Johns, 100nm downwind. We are only 30nm away in Guadeloupe, but being upwind we are spared. But the collapse of the South side of the volcano generated a mini Tsunami. When the wave reached the U-shaped harbor of Deshaies (on Guadeloupe’s NW corner) it piled up just enough to flip the dinghies in the anchorage, push the fishing fleet up on the beach, and give the cruisers a nice rock n’ roll. We



had left Deshaies a few days before and the wave had dissipated by the time it reached us at the SW corner of Guadeloupe.

The most powerful volcano story came from our friends Stan and Connie on Folie a Deux, their 45' Catamaran. They had been anchored in Nevis, the next island Northwest of Montserrat, the day before the big one. They had been getting coated with ash from a series of small eruptions and having a devil of a time trying to clean it up. The ash was inches thick outside and inside the boat. They left Nevis at sunset to sail straight to Guadeloupe, figuring as we had, that they would pass the volcano at night and see what they could see. As they approached the North end of Montserrat they saw what looked like Transformers bursting and all the lights on the island went out. Connie says to Stan "this thing is going to blow" Stan says "Yeah, right Honey" (a verbal pat on head). They elect to go around the leeward side, and (very luckily) make it to the south corner at 01:30 when ... BOOM. Lava geysers, flares and other fireworks combined with intense lightning in sheets, balls, and bolts, like massive fireworks exploding into the night sky. The fireworks illuminate a red and orange glowing ash cloud billowing up over their heads in the night. They were only 4 miles from the volcano and had front row seats ... actually more like in the pits seats. So close that Stan, with all seriousness looked at Connie and said "Honey I'll love you forever ...". Connie thought that this is what the end of the world must look like. They redlined both engines and managed to make it to windward without any ash or flaming debris landing on their boat. As they related this story to us two weeks later, you could tell that it was still too fresh to be an exciting story yet. This experience scared the s#\$% out of them and they were still feeling the effects.

On a lighter note, we met a young man, John, single-handing a 28' sloop that had been anchored along the middle of Montserrat just before the eruption. He had been anchored in the exclusion zone, but hadn't heard any announcements on the VHF, so figured he'd be OK for the night. A Helicopter goes by, and shortly after a patrol boat comes up and says "Leave now". John notes he could leave in about an hour. The patrol boat says "you don't understand ... you need to leave NOW!" and explained that the Helicopter had been sent by the Volcano Monitors to make sure the area was clear, since they knew the eruption was imminent. John left. Even though it was blowing 30 knots and the seas were rough he figured the voyage to Guadeloupe was the lesser of the two evils. He made it to Deshaies just in time to have his new outboard tossed in the water when the Mini-tsunami flipped his dingy. (see Postcard #4 about rebuilding drowned outboards).

Yep, all sorts of adventures to be had sailing out here in the Caribbean! Next up in the batting cage is Tropical Depression #6, but that story will be in the next postcard.

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* Rodonda is a big rock about 1000' high with sheer cliffs, only about a half mile in diameter, and 15 miles from anywhere. A writer claimed it many years ago, and this writer had himself crowned King by a Bishop from Montserrat. How they even got onto the rock to do the coronation is beyond us. Since then the Kingdom has been passed by inheritance to a variety of characters, but only to writers or journalists (Cathy are you interested?). Antigua claims the island, but so far none of the writer Kings have been interested in going to battle over it.