



Postcards from the Caribbean #3
S/V Polyphonic
Jeff Grossman / Jean Levine
and the cats Sarge & Shadow

Dateline: British Virgin Islands (at last!)

It has been a long hard slog to windward, but we are finally in the Virgin Islands! The Trade winds have been unusually strong and consistent for the last month, rarely blowing under 15knots, and often over 20kn, and from the East or Southeast. Guess which direction we've been going. But we've been taking short hops making a whopping average of 15nm a day. But "a journey of 1000 miles starts with a single reef ..."

Our last "postcard" left us wandering the deserted beaches of Conception Island. From there we set out to make our best time to the Turks & Caicos. A group of Islands that Jean and I have wanted to visit for a long time. From Conception we went to: Rum Cay, then an overnight sail to West Plana Cay, then to West Mayaguana, Abraham's Bay Mayaguana, then a long day to West Caicos.

On the crossing to the Caicos we got to see a pod of Pilot whales up close. They are about 18' long, dark, with big blunt heads. We also discovered that some fish have noses and thumbs. After dragging our fishing line behind the boat with no luck for days, with a lure that has worked for Dorado (aka Dolphin, Mahi-Mahi), Jean gives up when the wind dies and reels in the lure. No sooner than she has taken the rod below than a pair (male & female) of the largest Dorado I have ever seen pull up right next to the boat, at the surface, and swim along side. Hence, our proof that fish have noses and thumbs 'cause they were certainly thumbing their noses at us!! They were beautiful fish though. For those of you who haven't seen a Dorado in the water, they have a broad spray of shiny Green, Yellow and Blue across their backs.

Along the way we meet up with two other boats that were also working their way down South, Kamal and Architeuthis (Latin name for the Giant Squid). Kamal is a 36' Ketch whose owners (Mike & Jenny) just bought the boat in Miami and are cruising for the first time (though they have lake sailed/raced for nine years). Architeuthis is a 55' Trimaran (three hulls) with a family of four aboard that have been cruising the Tri for years now. We end up sailing in consort with them on and off for a considerable time. Fun having company!

West Caicos is like most of the other islands named above in that it's East side (windward) has shallows, but it's West side (leeward) has a narrow run of sand & reef, maybe 100' to 500' out, then drops off in a steep wall to hundreds or even thousands of feet. We pick up a mooring ball that is set about 300' off the cliffs of West Caicos, but is already in 45' of water, and only a couple boat lengths astern it is 70', and another boat length after that, the abyss. The water here is as transparent as all of the lower/outer Bahamas. We can easily see detail and make out fish species at the 70' depth, like the small reef shark Jeff saw down there while snorkeling.



While hanging around the South side of Providenciales, just called Provo by sailors, to wait for a break in weather, we hear a boat Endangered Species on the radio. Endangered is a 44' Catamaran with our good friends from Tampa, Rick n' Robin, who are on their way back from having cruised the Virgin Islands. They were going into Turtle Cove Marina on the North side of Provo for a couple days. We head around and join them for several days of great fun, story sharing, provisioning runs, meeting new people, and site seeing. Provo's North shore has a crescent shaped beach stretching seven miles, and set behind a reef about a mile offshore. Several resorts have been built here, including a Club Med. But there are still large runs of unspoiled beach. We highly recommend Provo if you are looking for an off the beaten path beach vacation, especially if diving is one of your hobbies.

One of the highlights of our visit to Provo was a tour of the Conch Farm. Conch has been about "fished" out from Florida, the Bahamas and the Caribbean. So a Marine Biologist, that had a hard landing on the Caicos Islands with his sailboat, decided to figure out the life cycle of the conch and see if he could farm them commercially. It took awhile, but he finally learned the right formula and herding process. Fascinating to see how it's done, with conch being cared for at all stages of growth. They are hatching and growing conchs by the millions!

Originally, we had thought we could sail directly from the Turks & Caicos to the Virgin Islands. But the Trade Winds set in early and strong and it would have been eight days of rough sailing with just the two of us (the cats still won't stand a watch). So we decided to follow the guidance of others and use the Bruce Van Sant book "The Thornless Passage". Bruce has done this trip against the Trades many times and has developed specific "stepping stones" and timing that takes some of the "thorns" out (thorns being rough seas, strong winds, etc). A prime example is to run along the North coast of the Dominican Republic (D.R.) and the South coast of Puerto Rico, using the night lees to advantage. The night lee is when the land has cooled enough over night to generate a land breeze that counters the Trade winds. Often reducing them to near zero. Conversely, if one tries to travel these coasts in the afternoon when the already strong trades are reinforced by the sea breeze, then one will find the Trades increased by 10kn or more. This is not good when the Trades are all ready at 15-20kn. The only thing with working the night lees is one must set sail between midnight and 4:00am, depending on the stage. This does interesting things to ones biorhythms.

From Provo we sail to French Cay on the Southern point of the Caicos bank. We anchor behind the lee of French Cay to wait for a weather window to sail the 100nm South to the D.R. French Cay is only about 10 acres and is a protected reserve. The nearest other land is 20 miles away, and the nearest inhabited land is over 30 miles. Standing on the this small islet one can look 360 degrees and see nothing and nobody in all directions as far as the eye can see. Ah, privacy!! A really cool visual effect can be seen from here. The Caicos banks are vast and shallow, with transparent water. Thus they are a vivid, almost florescent green color, in sharp contrast to the deep ocean blue that runs right up to the edge of the banks. As the relatively low, puffy Cumulus clouds drift over the banks the cloud bottoms turn green reflecting the bank color! Even the sea gulls flying over have green wings underneath!



Since French Cay is so small, and right on the edge of the bank, the swells leak around the island and create a strong roll. Though we are safely anchored, the roll gets so strong that we end up sleeping on the floor of the main salon. I kept humming the theme song from Rawhide.

Finally, after three days there is a slight down tick in the Trades, and forecast for even less as we approach the D.R. We certainly were ready to leave French Cay! Turns out the forecasts were completely wrong. The winds built all day and night until we were sailing with just a scrap of sail and still going full speed. The winds at peak went to Gale force (34kn+) and seas to match. We had a very rough night, which scared the piss out of one cat (while the other calmly continued to eat from his food bowl). Nights like this are one of the reasons why we selected a boat like Polyphonic, a Skye 51. She is very strong, had no problem handling the weather, and was calm and dry below.

We finally reached the D.R. at Manzanillo, just East of the Haitian border, at dawn the next day. After a couple days rest, we worked the night lee to Luperon. This meant leaving just after midnight and powering eight hours, arriving just before the Trades started their daily kick. Luperon is a natural harbor and excellent hurricane hole, just big enough to fit 100+ boats. The scenery is mountainous and very lush, and relatively unpopulated. Provisions and fuel are very cheap, with a low cost of living. Many boats stop here for the whole hurricane season, and some even longer, and some never leave. We enjoyed our stay, but would never consider living there.

In Luperon we finally meet many other cruisers that are heading South. Most of them have been waiting for three weeks or more for a break in the Trades to make the 240 miles to the West coast of Puerto Rico. The last 100 miles of the 240 are crossing the Mona Passage between the D.R. and Puerto Rico. The Mona has a reputation for being particularly rough. To paraphrase the “Thornless” guide: “pick the best weather you can and take your lumps in the Mona, if you wait for a calm you’ll wait a month of Sunday’s”. We were only in Luperon three days when our forecasts and weather faxes showed a two day window coming up when the winds should die to 5knots or less. A fleet of eight boats prepares to set off as soon as the window opens (when the wind and seas have backed off enough).

I find there is great irony in a bunch of sailors sitting in port waiting and praying for no wind!

Our window opens just before midnight on May 23rd and is perfect, we have that “month of Sunday’s” of calm over the Mona. We power 37 hours, the longest we have ever gone under power on a sailboat in one stretch. We make Boqueron on the Southwest corner of Puerto Rico by noon the next day with the fleet following us in from 16:00 to the next morning. Except for the two boats that decided to stop for a rest on the final point of the D.R. While they rested the window closed, the Trades came back, and they had a vicious crossing of the Mona. Whew, we got a big break for once!!

While crossing the Mona, Jean caught her first fish of the trip! A nice Black fin Tuna which went straight to the grill. I don’t care for Tuna, but Jean and the cats woofed it down and purred.



Boqueron is called the “Myrtle Beach” of Puerto Rico due to it being a major spring break and party destination. However, it is also a quaint village and has a spectacular 5 mile stretch of Coconut Palm lined beach. We spent a week in Boqueron enjoying the location, and companionship of the fleet. A bunch of Cruisers having rotating cocktail parties on the different boats, meeting ashore for joint chores, “girls walks” that Jean organized, excursions and site seeing.

We will leave you now with this image of Palm Trees and white beach. Our next Postcard will cover our adventures with rainforests, waterfalls, biking, hiking and snorkeling as we cruise along the South coast of Puerto Rico and the Spanish, US, and British, Virgin Islands.

Pics:

- 2) 007 Turtle Cove Marina, Provo, Caicos Islands
- 2) 070 Polyphonic in Luperon
- 2) 071 “Staging” anchorage in Luperon
- 2) 080 Isla deo, Mona Passage