

ARIADNE'S LAST VOYAGE

Iain and Meg Buchanan

(After cruising the Atlantic islands for several years, in late 2012 Iain and Meg decided it was time to sail their 45ft Bruce Roberts cutter Ariadne across the Atlantic, a tale they told in Capricorn and Back – see Flying Fish 2016/1.)

As with the death of a relative or friend, so with the loss of a boat – the event should not be allowed to cast a deep, dark shadow, at least not for too long. Rather, the positive memories, the good times and the shared experiences should come back to the fore. In that spirit we recount some highlights from our final years with *Ariadne*, starting where we left off in our last article – July 2013 in French Guiana.

South America

French Guiana is not a colony but an Overseas Department of France, using the euro and with the full services of the mother country. The port at the capital, Cayenne, has silted up but there is a dredged channel into a commercial port in the next river to the southeast, Dégrad des Cannes. Yachts do stop there, some using pontoons shared with fishing boats and liveaboards, and there are no marina fees, but the general rundown look led us to anchor in the river. Public transport outside the capital is pretty well non-existent, with locals and visitors reliant on hitchhiking. We did this twice, to get to car hire, and found the locals welcoming and helpful. The highlights of our stay were a visit to a remarkable zoo set in the rainforest, the bird life on the river, and the proximity of two Carrefour supermarkets stocked with French food and wine. Flocks of hundreds of red ibis and white egret roosted in the trees on the east bank of the river, and caught in the evening light gave a good impression of a decorated Christmas tree. We went to the Space Centre at Kourou, but there

were no launchings.



Swinging at the turn of the tide in the river at Dégrad des Cannes



*Caymans – in a cage –
French Guiana*

Our last stop on the South American mainland was Suriname, previously Dutch Guiana, a relatively short sail further west. Again the ports are in rivers, and in mid-August we anchored off the capital, Paramaribo. This is a remarkable city, a World Heritage Site, with many large wooden houses and other buildings left over from the colonial period. The authorities were discouraging yachts from using this traditional anchorage, so we

caught the flood and set off for Domburgh, about 20 miles upriver. There is a small village with some shops and, on Sundays, a range of Javanese food stalls. Living in Suriname was generally very inexpensive. A bus into town cost about 50p for an hour-long ride, local car hire was 12€per day, five good local grapefruit cost £1, and Iain had a haircut for £2.

Ariadne had not been berthed alongside for some time, and wishing to have shore power and running water we settled into a small marina at Waterland about 10 miles further upriver. This is a new 'resort', the pet project of a Dutch businessman, and has been done very tastefully with landscaped grounds and friendly staff. The area is rich in birds, monkeys and frogs, and several of the latter adopted the boat as their temporary home. The only downside to this

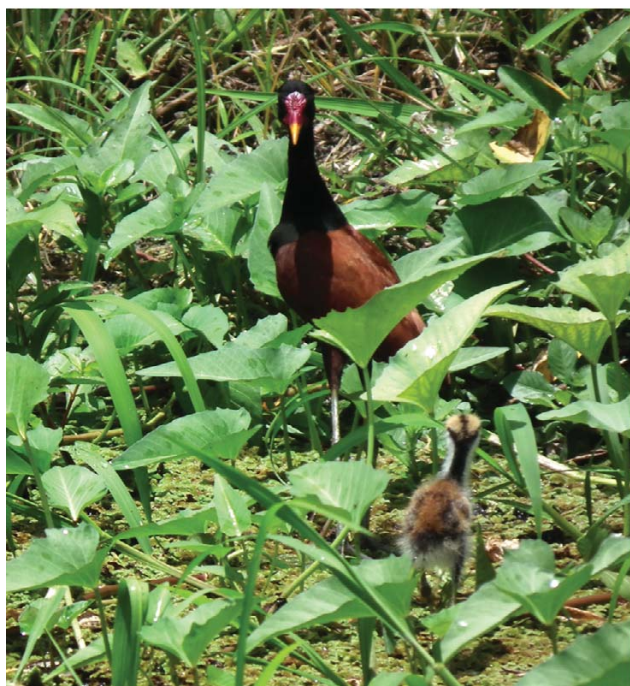


*Part of
the Old
Fort, at
Paramaribo
capital of
Suriname*

The Wooden Cathedral at Paramaribo

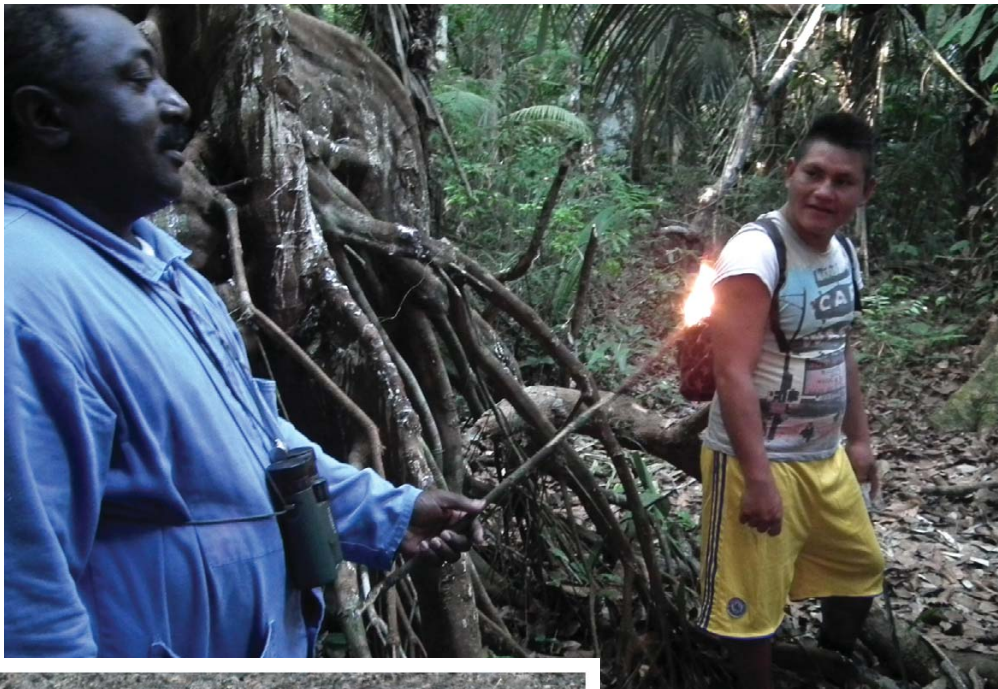
was the surprise of a small, wet amphibian appearing suddenly at dusk, hopping skilfully around the boat and anyone who happened to be sitting there. With a car we explored some of the colonial relics, such as the riverside forts guarding passage from seaward to the capital.

Our time in Brazil had been restricted to the littoral, and Suriname offered the opportunity to venture deep into the rainforest. We booked a trip to Palumeu, about 270 kilometres inland. Access was by small plane to a grass airstrip, with accommodation in wooden lodges alongside an Amerindian village. The guides were excellent, taking us on the local rivers to walk



in the forest, climb a large rock outcrop with views to other 'inselbergs' all the way to the border with Brazil, and visit the nearby village and its crop fields. We stayed in Suriname for our maximum visa time of three months, which dovetailed nicely with our timing for entry to the hurricane box, and in mid-November set off for Trinidad, about 550 miles away.

A galimule mother and chick. Their wide feet and light weight allow them to step across lily pads

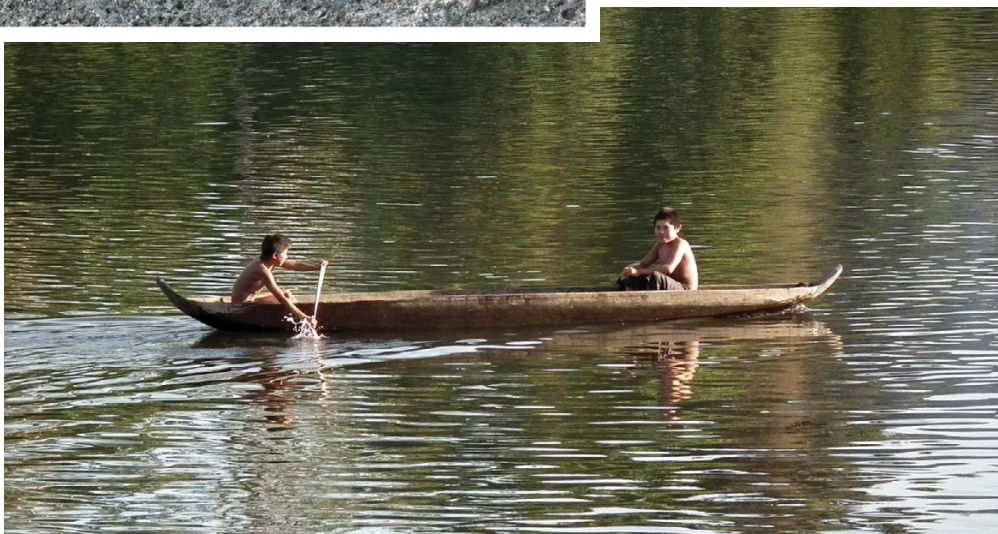


*Our guide demonstrating
the creation of fire using a
camphor branch*



*In the rain forest, an 8cm
(3 inch) insect is not too
worried about camouflage*

*Children in a traditional
canoe at Palumeu*





Ginger the cattle egret becomes more relaxed

The Eastern Caribbean

On some passages *Ariadne* had been home to sea birds for a few days, and occasionally small land birds and insects. On this trip we were visited by a cattle egret, not the most oceanic of birds. It arrived soon after we left Suriname and stayed until we sighted land at Trinidad and Tobago. At first it stayed forward of the sprayhood, but it gradually got nearer the cockpit and eventually favoured the lazarette, pacing to and fro like an admiral on the poop deck. It had a distinguished quiff and became known as Ginger.

We hauled out in Chaguaramas Bay, making good use of the trades and chandleries of which we had seen little for more than a year. Our

first objective for 2014 was to make the OCC Anniversary Meet in Dominica – our first event since qualifying. It was a great introduction to what became our favourite island in the Eastern Caribbean. Jolly Harbour, Antigua was to be the boat's home for the hurricane season, and by the time we caught our flight home our trip, which had started in the Canaries, had lasted for 22 months during which we had spent only three nights off the boat.

Given the length of our pre-season job list an early return to Antigua was called for, and this was when we experienced Hurricane Gonzalo. The day before it hit in October 2014 we had no internet connection, though we saw a forecast on BBC World which showed a lively weather system heading for the islands, but the forecaster spoke of a 'wet and windy' spell in the Eastern Caribbean and there were no keywords used, such as storm or hurricane. Around 0900 the wind rose quickly with heavy rain. At our rented villa the windows and doors started vibrating, and



Walking the poop deck



The site of the OCC 60th Anniversary Meet, Prince Rupert Bay, Dominica

eventually two large glass patio doors were blown out, followed by a complete bedroom window. Rain and wind came howling through the house, though by this time we were sheltering in an internal bathroom which had no windows. Apparently the Met Office did forecast a tropical storm, but the system stalled offshore, picked up more energy, and hit Antigua with gusts up to 100 mph. The damage we suffered was quite local and probably due to a small twister within the storm itself. Boats in the yard and marina were relatively unscathed, but some at private berths were damaged or even sunk. Some crops on the island were destroyed, but there was no loss of life. Islands further north were badly hit, especially St Martin.

A private pontoon in Jolly Harbour, Antigua after Hurricane Gonzalo



Moving On

Wishing to leave the eastern chain, we reached agreement with our insurers that Curaçao was an acceptable place to leave the boat for the next hurricane season. While heading south we re-visited some favourite places – including the Îles des Saintes for superior food – then headed southwest to Bonaire, the nearest of the ABCs. It was about 400 nautical miles, with a brisk following wind and little use of the engine. The ABCs are renowned for their marine reserves, with opportunities for diving and snorkelling. The islands take great care of their marine environment and Bonaire does not permit anchoring anywhere. The harbour authorities have laid buoys off the town and there are a couple of dinghy docks for landing, but usually with some surf running. We hired a car and took a trip round the island. With reasonable roads it would have taken about two hours, but many of the roads are effectively unpaved and the hire ‘car’ was more of a small truck. The south of the island is one large salt pan with a jetty where large ships can load, and by the pans are tiny shelters built for the slaves who once worked there. They are only large enough to accommodate two adults lying down. The north of the island is a national park – a craggy desert with cacti and spindly bushes. Walking into the interior there is a natural spring which attracts mammals and birds, as well as large iguana-like lizards easily 2m long. In Curaçao we visited Spanish Waters, before moving the short distance to Wilhelmstad and the yard at Curaçao Marine.



Family business and recovery from an injury kept us from sailing for almost two years, but in February 2017 we ‘splashed’ and made preparations for sea. Our plan was to head for the Dominican Republic and then sail east to Antigua, where we had booked to lift out, with a view to returning to Europe in 2018. We lost some time fixing an intermittent fault with the instruments but failed with the autopilot. Our main concern was to have a working echo-sounder – we could manage without the rest.

On leaving Wilhelmstad conditions were blustery in the lee of Curaçao, but as we cleared the coast the wind settled to 20–25 knots on the beam, with a boisterous but steady wave pattern. We connected the windvane which took us effortlessly 400 miles

to Marina Zar Par in the Dominican Republic, a few miles to the east of the capital, Santo Domingo. The marina is well-run and welcoming. Power boats outnumber yachts, but there were a number passing through, generally heading west to Cuba. The Dominican Republic – the eastern section of Hispaniola – is larger and more populous than the countries of the eastern Caribbean. We did not take much time off to explore, but did enjoy a visit to the capital where there are many buildings from the earliest colonial days. Supermarkets are some distance from the marina but there is a free bus service there and back.

Our EPIRB failed on test – for the second time. A couple of years earlier, in Antigua, it had failed with two years still to run to the replacement date. A local agent had provided a new battery, and now this also failed two years short of the replacement date. We later managed to get all the equipment back to the manufacturer for test, and were told that the first battery, with a replacement date of March 2017, was ‘low’ when tested in July 2017. The second had a label of a design which had not been used since 2012 – the conjecture is that ‘the expiry label must have been added by a third party’. Chandlery and support in the Dominican Republic is fairly thin on the ground and we were unable to source yet another replacement.

Last Voyage

Early on the morning of Sunday 30 April we left Marina Zar Par, waved on our way by the assorted authorities. Our plan was to sail east, possibly taking in some islands we had not previously visited such as St Kitts. The weather forecast was easterly 15–20 knots, though it was gusting well above that, dropping to 10–15 knots by Tuesday. There was a veer forecast, and we set a course to the southeast to take advantage of it. We set the main with a single reef and the full yankee, trimmed the windvane self-steering to take over the helm, and settled down to watch-keeping. It was going to be a long beat, but the boat was very comfortable with it.

At the 0600 handover on Monday we checked around the boat and found a lot of water in a bilge forward of the mast. We inspected all the through-hull fittings and found them sound. We checked the anchor and sail locker hatches on the foredeck, and the security of major items such as the anchors and windlass, finding nothing amiss. Down below there was no sign of damage to the hull, and water appeared to be coming from ahead of a bulkhead between our accommodation and the sail locker where there are no skin fittings.

For the next twelve hours we bailed the boat. We carried a collision mat of our own making, but in the prevailing conditions it would have taken both of us on the foredeck to try and place it over a damaged area which we could not identify. A change of tack did not affect the water ingress. When we took a break for some food it appeared as if the situation was stable, but returning from our break it was clear that the water level was still rising. It was time to make a distress call. Two rocket flares and a VHF call brought no response – nothing was close by. We had seen only one yacht and one merchant vessel since leaving Zar Par. We started working through the distress frequencies on the MF/HF radio, got an acknowledgement on 6MHz and established voice contact. As a precaution, we prepared the liferaft in its cradle for possible use.

A US Coast Guard plane flew overhead about two hours later, established VHF contact, and indicated that a Coast Guard cutter was due shortly. We dropped the



The Coast Guard find time for a selfie aboard Ariadne

sails, checked that no lines were over the side, and fired up the engine ready to motor and manoeuvre with any support vessels. A RIB came over from the cutter and three men came on board. They rechecked all the areas that we had looked at and like us could find nothing amiss. At first the Coast Guard captain wanted us to leave the boat and try to tow her, since they would not allow anyone to stay aboard while towing. We preferred to stay aboard and continue trying to save *Ariadne*, and eventually it was agreed that three men should stay and help us take the boat to the nearest port, meanwhile monitoring the water intake.

During much of this Meg had been on deck and was cold, wet and tired. With a man on the helm, Meg went below for some rest, found some dry clothes, and promptly fell asleep as we made 5 knots towards Puerto Rico. Eight hours later, at first light, it was clear that we were losing the battle. *Ariadne* was going down by the bow and the water had nearly reached the engine and batteries, so we abandoned ship to the Coast Guard cutter taking with us three grab bags which we always have packed. *Ariadne* was still afloat but with her stern well out of the water. The Coast Guard Captain checked with his base for orders and we departed for Puerto Rico, having broadcast a 'hazard to navigation' message. We doubt she floated for much longer.

What had happened? Water was coming into the boat forward of what we could see from inside. Towards the end we inspected the sail locker again and found a high water level. There is no opening from that locker to the sea and there is a solid bulkhead separating it from the rest of the boat. There was a manual bilge pump in the locker but it could not keep up with the rate of water ingress. We think we must have hit a submerged object which penetrated the sail locker and the forward section of the boat, probably spanning the bulkhead and damaging it. The conditions were boisterous and noisy enough that any sounds of impact would have been muffled by the wind and waves.

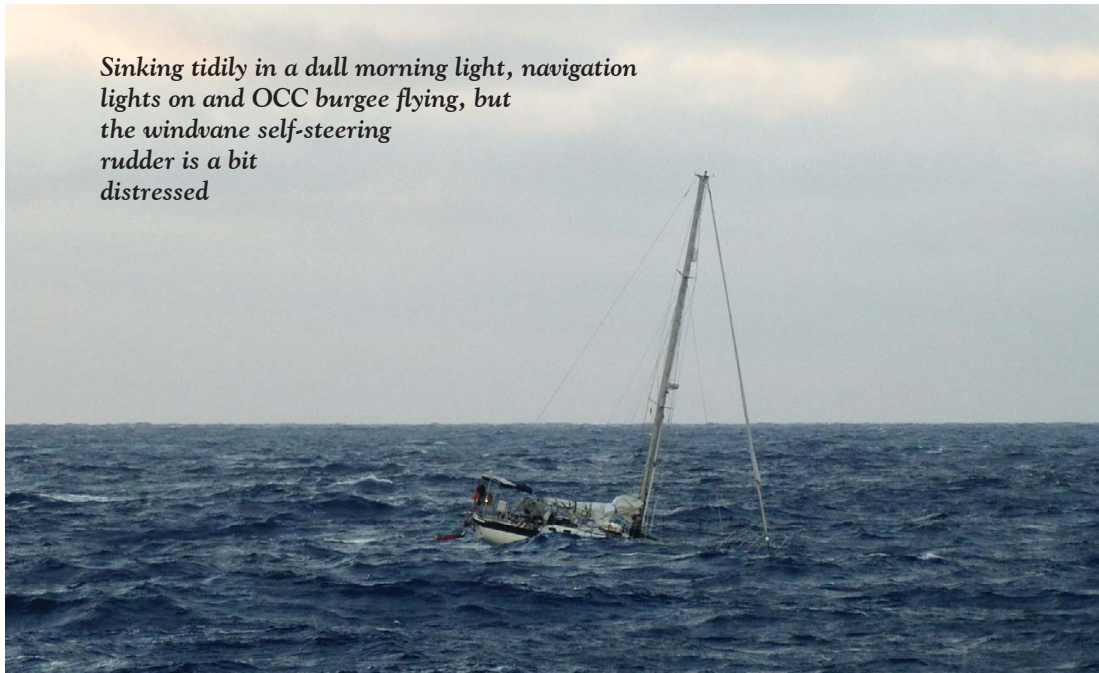
The commitment and seamanship of the cutter crew were exemplary, especially their boat handling of the RIB when transferring people and kit to and from *Ariadne*. Once on board the cutter they were very helpful, finding hotels, flights and offering lifts. We had checks from a paramedic once on shore, and the Coast Guard arranged for us to meet an immigration officer (we had not been planning to enter the US and needed visa waivers). Our landfall was on the southwest coast, near the Mona Passage, so the Coast Guard are practised in assisting vessels in distress.

After the formalities, the Coast Guard paid for a taxi to take us to a nearby hotel. That evening we arranged flights home and by Thursday lunchtime we were back in Glasgow.

Lessons Learned and the Aftermath

- Without some form of long distance communication we would probably have ended up in the liferaft in a sea area with little transiting traffic. In future we would not be without some suitable system in addition to the EPIRB (see overleaf). We have long had packed grab bags on our pre-departure check list and one of these contains hand-held items such as GPS, VHF and other electronic items. In electrical storms this bag is put into the oven, in the hope that it will act as a Faraday cage. Had we not had passports, credit cards and other personal items, the immediate aftermath would have been much more complicated and drawn out.
- Staying with the boat was absolutely vital – you have shelter, food and communications.
- Unless you are willing to take a sizeable financial loss, good insurance is essential. Before leaving the cutter we acquired an e-mail address where our insurers, Pantaenius, could ask for a report on the incident. Eight working days after posting

*Sinking tidily in a dull morning light, navigation
lights on and OCC burgee flying, but
the windvane self-steering
rudder is a bit
distressed*





Rescuers and rescued on arrival in Puerto Rico

our claim we had an e-mail from them indicating that they were meeting the agreed hull value and personal effects cover in full.

At the time, we thought we would not have another boat after *Ariadne* – a friend remarked that ‘we had put a lot of our lives and love into that boat’. We had not been put off sailing itself, but it seemed to have lost its central position in our lives. But after a couple of weeks we began to sense that something really was missing. By late June we were looking at boats, first on the west coast of Scotland and shortly thereafter on the south coast, starting in Falmouth and finishing in Chichester, where we found our new boat, a Rustler 36. We are getting reconciled to the loss of space – *Ariadne* was 45ft – and while the new boat is in very good condition we are enjoying the task of making her our own, even taking in a trip to the Southampton Boat Show to catch up with developments. Our cruising plans are not yet formed, and we have the pleasure of speculating on the nature of future voyages. As for communications, while we have been great fans of SSB, it looks like we will move over to satellite for the new boat.



Should you find yourself in a chronically leaking boat, energy devoted to changing vessels is likely to be more productive than energy devoted to patching leaks.

Warren Buffett