

Two Contrasting Cruises

West to Colombia - Scotland and Home to Lymington

Jervis Devonshire

A Caribbean Cruise

Some contrasting sailing this year, for our first voyage we joined old friends and Royal Thames members, Stephen and Grace Foot, in Grenada, on their 45ft Wauquiez, *Water Music*, at the end of February. They had crossed from the Canaries in January, en route to New Zealand. Our aim was to sail the leg to Panama, calling at the ABC islands and Colombia, before cruising the San Blas Islands.

A few days acclimatising included some sightseeing using the local 'dollar-buses', packed with islanders and driven like chariots. We met up with William and Sarah Maltby (RCC) on *Freebird*, and all joined the 'barmy army' to watch England play the West Indies in Georgetown, only to be rained off.

With a civilised mid-morning departure to ensure daylight arrival in Bonaire, we set course in a northern arc to avoid any proximity to Venezuela. Our first 24-hour run, aided by the heavy spinnaker until dusk, clocked up 215nm, over 200 even allowing for half a knot of current. After 48 hours we gybed onto port for the broad reach into Bonaire arriving with good timing at 1700.

On passage we saw a couple of suspicious fishing boats, but were not approached; soon after our trip a yacht was shot at whilst on passage from Trinidad to Grenada, so our decision to keep 100nm north of the Venezuelan islands may have been wise. This 420nm passage gave a taste of winds to come, as you sail west the trades increase. We regularly had 20-25kts and 3m swells.

Bonaire is an excellent stop-over. Anchoring in the lee of the island, off the main town of Kralendijk is very convenient, provided the strong trades are blowing. Clearing in and out is straightforward, and cars and bikes can be hired nearby for a tour. Snorkelling is excellent from the anchorage, although a permit is needed to dive or snorkel at any of the designated reef sites elsewhere on the island. We



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Strong winds in the trades

hired electric bikes for one excursion, a wise choice as making headway into the strong trades required plenty of power. On our second trip we hired a car to explore the Washington Slagbaai National Park and visit the renowned snorkelling reefs which were spectacular.

We needed a sailmaker to repair a major tear to the main, which had split right across just above the second reef during a controlled gybe; we had completed the leg with third reef. With no sailmaker in Bonaire a call at Curaçao was required. A short day passage of 35nm to Spanish Water, an extensive sheltered inlet with several anchorages and marinas, was the comfortable choice. The alternative, the main town of Willemstad, has a rather urban marina, and a vast oil refinery close by, and to windward. We anchored in the more exposed western arm, having taken advice from the local live-aboards.

The more sheltered southern arm is subject to pilferage, although we relocated there before we departed, there one could swim from the boat. We located the sailmaker, and transferred the sail to him, but felt that the repair timing was *mañana*, not helped by our arrival coinciding with Carnival. We also had to clear in, this was as difficult as Bonaire had been easy. A visit by the whole crew to two offices in Willemstad, Customs and Immigration, was required; the two offices are somewhat illogically on opposite sides of the harbour, hidden amongst the docks, a taxi ride apart. The whole operation had to be repeated on departure, costing plenty of dollars and two mornings. Both islands are former Dutch colonies, but differ in their approach.

With time on our hands, we toured the island, hiring a sturdy car, roads in the scenic national park at the western end being little more than dirt tracks. On our return we met heavy traffic; the carnival processions, incredible costumes and loud decibels from enormous truck-mounted speakers. Due to the intensive oil refining and plentiful employment, this island must boast the highest ratio of cars per capita of the Caribbean. We indulged in a little history, visiting the Kura Hulanda museum, which specialised in the anthropological aspects of Caribbean African-American history and dealt sensitively with slavery, in which the island played a central role. Departing the islands, we felt that they were interesting to visit if one was passing, but the penalty of beating back against the trades may exclude them from most Caribbean itineraries. They are, however, outside the hurricane belt, and Spanish Water could provide a safe summer lay-up location.

Our next leg to Cartagena, took us close to Venezuela. Just south of Aruba,

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we could detour to the north, but felt that the volume of traffic and presence of patrol boats would keep the passage safe. Our first night was still off Venezuela, so we decided to run without lights, however, on my watch the traffic was so busy that it was safer to switch on. As we headed west we were skirting south of the notorious 'hole', an area of the western Caribbean where, due to the fetch of the stronger trades, and sea depth, large seas build up. We also noticed that to leeward of the islands, the sea was more confused, but settled down after ten miles or so.

Once we were off the Colombian coast after the first night, we felt relieved, however, there was no lessening to the wind and sea, and we sailed under reefed main and poled-out genoa making good speed. On our second day out, our fishing reels screamed; we had two lines rigged, and both had weighty fish, so we started the engine and engaged astern, and landed two splendid yellowfin tuna. The smaller, about 20lb, was returned and the larger one made sushi that evening, with plenty of tuna steak left for our arrival supper the next day.

After three days at sea, we closed the Colombian coast, having understood from our on-line cruising guide, *Colombia to Rio Dulce*, by Frank Virgintino, that if a yacht cleared out of the last port for Cartagena, it was permitted to call for an overnight stop at a Colombian anchorage before clearing in. We had decided to call at one of the 'Five Bays', just east of Santa Marta, part of the scenic Tayruna National Park and settled on Gairaca as the most favourable bay. We ran into trouble here, with a violent downdraft causing a severe head injury to Gillian. It is worth examining this in detail as despite an experienced skipper and crew, there are lessons to be learned.

The geographical background is unusual; the already strong trade wind, blowing at 25-30kts, meets a spur of the Andes, the Sierra Nevada, which rises to over 15,000ft and is snow-capped. The arms of the five bays are also hilly, from south to north, and lie across the NE wind. These obstructions create whirling downdrafts from the south/south-east, as shown in the chartlet. When we arrived off the bay, the seas, already running at 2-3 m, became steeper and more confused, not surprisingly as the sea shelves from 600ft a mile and a half off the coast. The wind was gusting to the upper 30s, possibly more.

Our task was to drop the reefed main. As the halyard winch is at the mast, it



Bahia Gairaca

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was preferable to be in the smoother confines of the bay. The mainsheet traveller is forward of the cockpit and aft of the bridge deck, an arrangement also found on some of the traditional Swans. The mainsheet winch is sited just forward of the track, so you have to lean across the track to operate it; this was Gillian's task, I was on the helm. Inside the bay we came onto a port beam reach, before rounding up to drop the main, at this point we were hit by a sudden and very strong gust from the starboard side, whipping the boom across in a gybe. Stephen at the mast ducked, but the parts of the mainsheet struck Gillian across the forehead, knocking her unconscious into the corner of the cockpit. She was bleeding profusely from the forehead, a large area of flesh was torn from the skull. I administered first aid and repaired the wound with a bandage to stem the bleeding, while Grace went into Mayday mode very proficiently. To our great relief Gillian recovered to a semiconscious state within 2-3 minutes, with undiluted pupils, although she was very groggy. The damage caused by the flaying rope alone was very surprising.

Our next dilemma, with the sails down and under engine, was whether to seek the responder to the Mayday, as the VHF signal faded as we went into the bay, or to seek help from the shore. We chose the latter as we could see a shore facility, and we knew that about 20 miles away by road was the substantial port of Santa Marta, where there should be a hospital. As we approached the shore we attracted attention by waving, and fortunately there was a dive school on the beach, with a very competent instructor who came out in a motorised canoe and carried Gillian and me to the shore. Two local residents bundled us into their very beaten-up car and drove us at full pelt to Santa Marta, where we found a clinic and Gillian was repaired with 24 stitches. At this point she regained full consciousness, at not much more than an hour after the blow.

We had planned to meet a very old friend, James Cock, who was a resident of Colombia, living in the south. He was due to join us for the cruise to the San Blas, and luckily was on his way to Cartagena that evening. He insisted we join him there where he had an apartment within the walls of the old city. We arrived by taxi at midnight, and the next morning Gillian had a full medical examination with a scan which revealed a hairline skull fracture, but otherwise no significant damage, to much relief all round. There is very little English spoken there and we were lucky to have a fluent Spanish-speaking friend to interpret. We recuperated for a fortnight before returning home. Headaches diminished over the first week, the scar has faded and she has made a full recovery.

Returning to our friends aboard *Water Music*, they had been swiftly visited by a Coastal Patrol vessel checking out the Mayday. They spent a wild night at anchor, with lots of chain out and careering around in the downdraught gusts. After a windy two-day passage with an overnight stop at Puerto Velero, they joined us at Cartagena, berthing at the expensive but secure Club de Pesca. The boat was hauled out at Manzanillo Marina, some distance away in the south-east of the harbour, for a coat of antifouling, a wise precaution prior to visiting the Galapagos. It was all quite an achievement for Grace as they had not previously sailed this powerfully rigged boat without additional crew.

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Certainly exciting cruising waters, Colombia is a fascinating country, with great tourism opportunities. Everywhere we were met with helpful and friendly people, the kindness of our rescuers at Gairaca was exceptional. Our enforced delay allowed us to explore Cartagena in depth, with our knowledgeable host as guide. One of the oldest cities in the Americas, founded in the mid 1500s, it is rich in museums and culture. Sacked by Drake, it's amazing walls withstood a later attempt by the English to capture it in the 1700s. Our history books omit such failures. We were sad to miss exploring the San Blas, but fortunate to miss a long, hot hold-up at Colon before the Panama Transit. Stephen and Grace arrived safely



Approaching Bahia Gairaca

in New Zealand at the end of October, a great achievement.

Some lessons:

Extra caution in strong wind close to high land, especially if the wind is coming across land with high land opposite, instead of the more usual directly offshore as found in the lee of an island, where the downdrafts dissipate in open water. We were well reefed, despite this the force was very violent. On larger boats where the gear is heavy, consider siting mainsheets where they can do the least harm, not across the cockpit or close to the wheel and binnacle, where they have the potential to swipe the helmsman. Forward of the cockpit area may decrease leverage, and require more winching, but is safer. Fitting a rope-friction boom-brake, (eg Wichard or Walder) can also help to control the boom when the downwind preventer is removed. The trend to mounting the track on arches as found on Malo is spreading. Taking the final lead forward to the mast and back to a safely sited winch, a Swedish system, will also keep the crew handling it out of harm's way.

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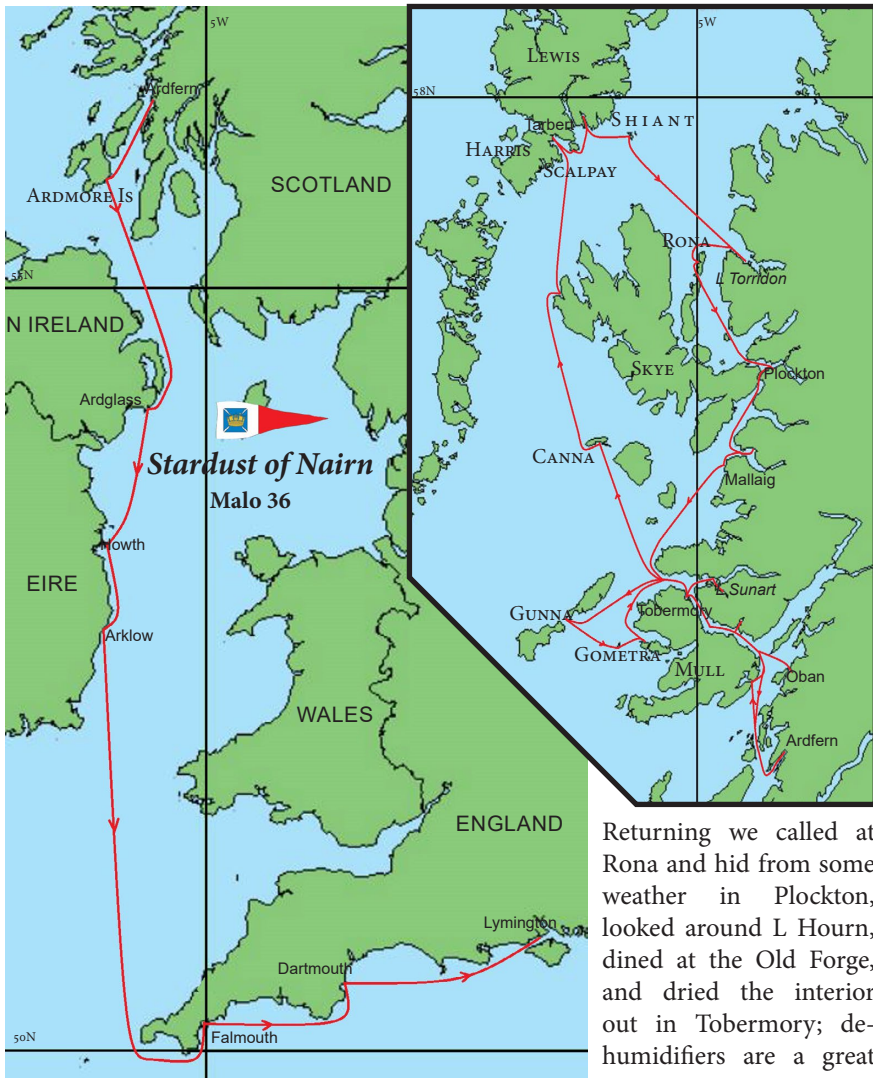
The old saying is that if you fall off a horse get on again as soon as you can. Gillian was determined to put the accident behind her, and we returned to *Stardust*, which we had wintered in Ardfern, reassured by the safe cockpit of our Malo with the mainsheet out of harm's way on the arch.

We had carried out a couple of important modifications over the spring refit, the Kiwi prop had given trouble last year, a pin securing a blade had worked loose during our trip around the exposed west coast of Ireland, and I felt the prop was over complicated and not the most efficient. We replaced it with a folding three-bladed, Danish Flex O Fold. We noticed a much-improved performance. We also modified the sail plan, fitting a working jib of 105% to a Selden furler on a second forestay close behind the genoa furler. This sail, of heavy duty dacron from Sanders, has reefing padding, can be effective down to storm-jib size, and is easy to tack with little overlap. We use the genoa for off wind and light airs, and have the

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luxury of twin, running-jibs on furlers, they function without a pole in flat water, and minimise the need to work on the foredeck. The deck fitting for the second forestay was already in place, although it has been further reinforced, and the set up has been well tested in this season's strong winds, giving many of the advantages of the cutter rig for which we are a tad too small.

With indifferent weather we cruised our well-worn routes around Mull, Canna, Skye, and on to Harris. The winds did not favour our plan to explore the west coast of Harris, instead we visited Lochs Claidh and Bhalamuis on the east coast, before heading to Shieldag via the Shiant islands, where rare fine weather and clear water revealed the guillemots and razorbills swimming below us in the anchorage.



Returning we called at Rona and hid from some weather in Plockton, looked around L Hourn, dined at the Old Forge, and dried the interior out in Tobermory; de-humidifiers are a great

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invention.

Collecting our daughter Charlotte, and six-week-old granddaughter, Alice, from Oban, now easy with the new short-stay marina, we made a gentle cruise out to Gunna, Cragaig Bay on Ulva and viewed the seabirds on Lunga; the puffins were as prolific as ever. Strong southerly winds changed our plan to circumnavigate Mull, and we returned instead via North Harbour Gometra and Tobermory again, not before inspecting the seal nursery at L.Teacuis, anchoring in the narrow cut of Doirlinn.

We were home to Ardfern on 11 July, having left on 11 June, and sailed 591 miles. We experienced much more rain than in the past, colder temperatures, and plenty of wind, for which our new rig proved excellent. Walks from the amazing



Luskentyre , West Coast Harris

on-line guide by Chris Elliott (RCC) were a good distraction; this is now almost as essential to cruising Scotland as charts from Antares.

The season was rounded off in September with a passage back to Lymington. Growing family commitments decided us to base at home and cruise the nearby waters next season. Departing from Ardfern on 31 August, we headed down the Sound of Jura in rain and unstable winds, gusting over 30kts and hitting 40+, which flipped our dinghy, unwisely still in tow for use that evening at Islay. The painter parted and the Avon inflatable sailed downwind. We recovered her on the second pass, learning that it is far easier to approach without main from the windward side, using the lee of the hull to calm the water. A breezy anchorage amongst the Ardmores Islands soon calmed down. We were hoping the forecast would prove



Rock Arch on Inch Kenneth, Mull

correct for our run across the North Channel. It did and we departed with dinghy stowed on deck, F3/4 gave pleasant sailing with a massive tidal boost until off

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Belfast, then a long, motor slog, passing Strangford Lough, squeezing into the tiny and shallow entrance to Ardglass, with the last of the light, and only inches under our keel at LW springs. After an early departure for a whole day's motor-sailing, the wind dead ahead and blowing 15-25kts, we hugged the shore for flat water. We only sailed the last few miles into Howth.

The Howth Yacht Club marina is tight on turning room in a breeze at low water, but makes up for it with a lively clubhouse and good facilities. Here we waited for the arrival of Ali Macleod, who had nobly agreed to join us for the passage to Lymington. A day was spent exploring Dublin. Ali arrived the following afternoon, as did a gale, and we sat out a further day before departing for Arklow on 5 September. Passage facilities here are fine, with a pontoon on the river side, we were joined by Miranda Delmar-Morgan and Edward Sprott (RCC) on their recently acquired Najad, also on passage south.

Departing next morning we were again hoping the moderating forecast would prove correct; with two reefs we saw 35kt gusts but it was moderating as we passed Tusker Rock. We made good speed in a WNW F5 with left-over sea, until the wind veered further into the north and decreased, leaving an impossibly bouncy sea state in which we were better off motor-sailing to preserve the sails. Longships came abeam at midday, and we were relieved to be in better seas. We had a good sail to Falmouth, arriving at 1700, after a 35 hour passage. The next day to Dartmouth was one of our best sails of the season. Ali departed; it is always great to have a really competent co-skipper aboard. We sailed on to Lymington with a stiff westerly giving good fast sailing across Lyme Bay although the rain set in yet again.

We were really pleased to have improved our motoring performance with the new prop; we had a lot of headwinds and head seas, and the ability to punch our way aided by the increased thrust and soft hull shape was invaluable at times.

Here's looking forward to *fruits de mer* and fresh croissants next season.