

A L D E B A R A N

World Sailing Circumnavigation

Dutch Antilles to the San Blas Islands (21st Report)

Our last report terminated as we were leaving the Islas de Aves, the most westerly of the Venezuelan offshore islands, and set a course for the Dutch Antilles or better known as the “ABC” islands of Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire.

Bonaire, the most easterly, was our first stop. After a lovely downwind sail in fairly big seas we rounded the island’s southern tip and then had an even nicer eight-mile broad reach in flat water to the anchorage off the capital Kralendijk. With no anchoring allowed we had to pick up one of the many mooring buoys costing US\$5 per night. Checking in and out here was perhaps the easiest we have experienced and only cost US\$0.30. Bonaire is renown for its excellent diving, unfortunately we did not get an opportunity to sample it. The town is the cleanest we have ever experienced, there was not a piece of rubbish or plastic to be seen on the streets, I think even the trees were afraid to shed their leaves. Unfortunately it was very expensive and we only purchased essential foods.

Curacao, (pronounced Curasol) 37 miles further west, together with SANGARIS and Harold and Diana on ZEPHYRUS, was our destination on Sunday 17th December. The main anchorage here is SpaanseWater (Spanish Water)(12-04.9N and 068-51.8W) a large totally protected irregular inlet with many bays and anchorages. Sarifundys, a kind of small marina and club, is the most popular anchorage although in a somewhat remote location. We took the famous local bus into Willemstad, the capital. Willemstad is very nice and reminds one of Amsterdam. On arrival, we were unsure as to whether we would stay here for Christmas or continue to Cartagena, Colombia. For Christmas dinner at Sarifundys they would have a roast pig with all the trimmings. It sounded good and we were very tempted to stay, however as we had a forecast for reasonable weather over the next few days we decided to make for Cartagena and subsequently checked in and out at the same time at no cost.

Colombia, with its atrocious reputation concerning pirates and drug runners was the only country on our planned route that we were determined to keep clear of. Before we left in 1999 we planned a 200 miles avoidance of it’s coast and yet on Tuesday 19th December we set sail on the 470 mile coastal passage to Cartagena. Together with SANGARIS and ZEPHYRUS we departed Curacao at 1410 hrs and with the 15/20 knot tail wind made 165 miles in the first 24 hours. On the second 24 hours we only covered 137 miles, which is still a good day’s run. Our planned route took us close to the Colombian mainland, we had a number of anchorages planned in the event of bad weather if required. However with fair weather we continued, and the only foul weather we experienced was the 10 to 15 miles crossing the mouth of the mighty Magnalena River approx 40 miles north east of Cartagena. Here, where the fresh water meets the salt water, we had winds of 30 plus knots and seas in the region of 12 feet from the starboard quarter. Not to overload the autopilot I hand steered through it for about 3 hours. This was the first time we have had waves breaking into the cockpit. The rest of the passage was uneventful with the wind easing the nearer we got to Cartagena where we arrived at 1630 on Friday 22nd December.

Cartagena Colombia, where the 17th century Spanish had their marina and the city and country we said we would bypass by 200 miles was where we spent Christmas and the New Year. The atmosphere over the whole holiday period was truly amazing. There were street parties, street dancing, and magnificent firework displays on New Years Eve, which we watched from the crowded castle ramparts in the old part of the city. People were friendly, helpful and we did not at any time feel threatened. The marina where we stayed at Club Nautico is badly in need of a major

cash injection, it is owned and run by the infamous “Big Norman” Bennett and his wife “Candelaria”. The reason we went into the marina was because our generator was out of action and thus we only had refrigeration when connected to shore mains. Club Nautico is very convenient to all amenities with a big supermarket, internet, restaurants and telephones and only a US\$1 taxi fare to the old city, that you can walk to in about 20 minutes. Excluding remote island anchorages Cartagena was without doubt the most enjoyable of all the populated places we have visited. Even negotiating/haggling with the many street traders for the various wares they had was a pleasant experience. We got to know a number of them and they were always extremely helpful with advice etc.. There was one particular young boy of about 10 years of age from whom we bought from on Christmas Eve. He was most pleasant and we kept meeting him on a regular basis. We have some very nice photographs of him, which we will put on the web.

History: If there is one man who stands out in Cartagena’s colourful 465-year history, it is Don Blas de Lezo who was born in Spain in 1689. He entered the service of the King at the age of 16 and was unfortunate to lose his left leg in the battle of Gibraltar. Later in the battle of Tolon he lost his right eye and, “believe it or not”, when in the battle of Barcelona lost his right arm. He continued as a commander, as his reputation for tenacity and courage was already making him a legend. In 1740 Spain learned of an impending attack on Cartagena by the English under the command of Edward Vernon. Don Blas de Lezo was requested to bring his fleet and help defend the city. With perhaps less than 2,500 men counting slaves and Indians and about 500 Spanish soldiers he had less than four months to prepare his defences. On 15th March the first three English ships arrived and they kept coming over the next few days until there were 186 ships mounting 2,070 canons and with 23,600 men anchored off the city. The details of the battle are fascinating and described in detail by the historians and, while I have more details, space and time does not permit me go into them. In summary however, Vernon captured many of the outlying forts and it was in one of these sea battles that Don Blas was again wounded. On April 5th Vernon won the battle for the convent of La Popa on a high hill overlooking the city. This battle is recorded as having been one of the bloodiest in English history. Vernon now felt that victory was within his grasp, for there was nothing between him and Don Blas’s last place of defence, the great fortress of San Felipe, which Vernon overlooked from La Popa.

The English were well motivated knowing that it had been nine months since the last shipment of treasure left Cartagena and thus believed the fortress contained a fortune. On April 9th Vernon attacked from three sides. The battle raged fiercely all day and achieving nothing and with substantial losses Vernon retreated. While trying to regroup he kept receiving reports of widespread illness among his troops. On April 15th Vernon held a council of war where it was decided the only way to capture San Felipe would be to bombard it from the ships in the bay. This, it was decided would be to dangerous to the fleet as they would have to approach to close to reach the high ramparts and would be directly under the guns of the fortress. According to English historians, the widespread dysentery, malaria and yellow fever had rendered their forces unfit for another frontal assault so the men and equipment reloaded on the ships and preparations were made to return to England. By May 12 the last of the English had left and the siege of Cartagena was ended.

“Never count your chickens until they hatch”:

The English had been so sure of victory that they struck victory medals as soon as the siege began. The inscription reflected their confidence: “The forts of Cartagena destroyed by Ad. Vernon” and “They took Cartagena, 1741”. Probably the most arrogant of all was the one showing Vernon standing in front of Don Blas as he kneels in surrender. The inscription says, in English of course, “ The pride of Spain humbled by Ad. Vernon”. The English apparently felt it was ungallant to conquer half a man so they put his arm and leg back on for the capitulation that never took place.

As a result of the leg wound he had received Don Blas de Lezo was to die shortly after the withdrawal of Vernon's fleet.

The above is just one episode in the intriguing history of Cartagena.

Engine problem: To get fuel before leaving Cartagena we motored to an adjacent marina and on the return short journey the oil pressure alarm sounded and I switched off the engine. On opening the engine compartment I was confronted with the aft end of the compartment covered in oil. We drifted downwind back to the anchorage, performing a copybook anchoring manoeuvre without sails, our headsail was off while we were making a small repair on it and the mainsail would have taken a while to set. I put more oil into the engine, started it up and to my horror saw oil squirting out from where I did not know. It was difficult to establish from where it was coming. All kinds of horror thoughts went through my mind including that of having a major engine problem. Luckily, I discovered that the oil was coming from the oil filter and so after tightening it the problem appeared to be solved.

A sad departure: On Saturday 6th January, the day we planned to leave Cartagena, we awoke to learn that Malcolm, Helen and Laura on MUNA had their dinghy and outboard stolen from behind the boat during the night. Even with Laura sleeping in the cockpit the culprits cut the rubber which held the bow ring, to which was attached a locked wire, and quietly disappeared with the lot. They were left with the bow ring and locked wire. The dinghy and outboard were only eight months old. We raise our dinghy on a halyard and lock it ever night. What with reporting the incident to the various authorities we did not depart until the following morning. It was a sad ending to what had been a most enjoyable stopover.

ONWARDS:

At 0930 hrs on Sunday 7th January we weighed anchor and after two hours motor sailing we exited Cartagena Bay through the southern Bocachica entrance, guarded by the three forts first captured by Ad. Vernon in 1740. Once clear of the entrance we set a course for the Rosario Islands, anchoring there at 1405 hrs. (10-10.98N and 075-44.67W) a distance from Cartagena of 18 miles. I took the opportunity here of cleaning the hull and propeller and was pleasantly delighted at the performance of the anti-fouling applied in Trinidad. On the propeller the only barnacle growth was where the MPX had worn off, in hindsight I should have etched it for adhesion before applying the MPX. I also fitted a new oil filter. Next morning at 0620 we left on the 180 mile passage to the San Blas Islands. In contrast to the previous day, the morning was like a millpond. After about 90 minutes motoring the oil pressure alarm sounded again and we stopped the engine. It was again leaking at the oil filter we considered sailing back to Cartagena. I tightened the filter far beyond that recommended and it continued to leak especially when I increased the revs. MUNA passed us a can of oil, which we topped up with. We also hung a jamb jar under the filter and when full poured it back into the engine, it's called "re-cycling" We were only able to motor at about 3.5 knots. Muna stood by us. The wind gradually picked up and we were able to eventually cut the engine about 1400 hours and had a lovely sail from then on, leaving Muna slowly behind. With an almost full moon the sail through the night was very pleasant.

The San Blas is not an area to enter at night and the many wrecks in the area confirm this. Had we not had the problem with the oil filter we would have had no problem arriving before nightfall on the second day. However our GPS was now showing an arrival time at our waypoint at the Caoba entrance at about 2000 hours or 1.5 hours after dark from where we would have to negotiate our way to the anchorage. There was no question about it, we would have to stay at sea until first light the next morning. SANGARIS who had already arrived at the anchorage very kindly agreed to come out in their dinghy and guide us in. We rendezvoused with them at 1945 hrs and with their hand held depth sounder, this piece of equipment impressed me very much, led us to the

anchorage where we anchored at 2030 hrs in position 9-34.9N and 078-40.4W. Muna who were at this stage some four hours behind waited and entered the next morning.

Our next report will cover the San Blas Islands and Panama

Please keep sending your e-mails, we love get even the smallest bit of news or better still "gossip". But, please no jokes or attachments, if you have an attachment please paste it to the message.

**Pat and Olivia
Yacht ALDEBARAN
San Blas, Panama
January 2001**