

**ALDEBARAN**  
 World Sailing Circumnavigation  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Report**  
**San Blas Islands, to Balboa via the Panama Canal**

**Our last report concluded after we entered the treacherous  
 San Blas Islands off the Panamanian mainland in the dark.**

**400 islands and a swath of tropical forest** on the mainland extending to the isthmian divide, between the Caribbean and Pacific Oceans comprises the San Blas Territory. There are approx 50 villages represented by tribal councils with a total population of nearly 40,000 Kuna Indians. They are a very proud and independent people and in 1924 fought the Panamanian authorities seeking independence. In 1938 they were granted “almost” autonomous rule in their territory. We had to pay \$5 each time we cruised in another chief’s area. Their main source of income is coconuts, fishing and traditional crafts. They are very famous for their Mola making. Molas are embroidered intricate designs applied to multi layers of coloured cloths. Being continually visited by the Indians selling the molas is sometimes annoying. After each purchase you vow not to buy anymore, but their friendly smiling approach just melts your heart and you are caught again. We spent three wonderful weeks among the Indians and could easily spend a year in the area. During our stay we visited, local villages, isolated families on remote islands, took our dinghies up mainland rivers, where we swam and showered, sailed in their traditional sprit rigged dugout canoes called ”ulus”, and visited their farms high in the forest. The islands are mainly covered with coconut trees surrounded by white sand beaches. Regretfully we noticed a shortage of fish on the reefs, it appears they are being fished out and we were sad to learn they were using bleach injected into the reefs to dislodge lobsters and octopus etc.

**Crocodiles as swimming companions:**

At Bahia de Tiburn, (9-33N and 078-60W), a bay on the mainland near the capital Porvenir, together with MUNA and CAP DOR we went swimming after anchoring. Shortly after emerging from the water Muna’s crew noticed what appeared to be a log drifting across the narrow entrance of the bay, that we had come in through, towards some mangroves. About ten minutes later we all observed “the log” moving in the opposite direction but this time it had a large Pelican in its mouth. Our crocodile was about 12 feet long and was swimming only about 30 yards from us back to his lair. Our further swims were reduced to quick immersions.

**35 miles from the Pacific Ocean:**

As the crow flies we were only 35 miles from the next stage of our circumnavigation, but first we had to transit the Panama Canal. Sadly on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> January we said farewell to the San Blas Islands and began the sail to Colon, the entrance to the canal.

**Portobelo** 52 miles from the San Blas Islands was where we stopped for four nights before continuing the 20 miles to Colon. Columbus called this bay Puerto Bello when he stumbled in with his weary ships in November 1502. Francis Drake used the port in 1570 as a base to rob Spanish merchantmen. He returned in the 1590s and destroyed the beginnings of the Spanish fortifications. Drake died during the same voyage and is reported buried at sea near a nearby island recently called Isla Drake. It is reported that the warehouses of Portobelo would get so full of gold that silver ingots

lay in the streets, unguarded. No wonder the place attracted constant raids by buccaneers, including Henry Morgan in 1668. In 1739, two years before his failed siege of Cartagena, Admiral Vernon destroyed the Portobello forts and dealt a deathblow to the ports thriving commercial trade from which it never recovered. Today, it is only a small town with a few grocery stores, all owned by Chinese, it is famous for its annual October festival for the Black Christ attracting upwards of 40,000. We watched, and enjoyed, our first live base ball game here, it was an inter area three day competition. Visiting the museum and the many ruined forts surrounding the town was pleasant and a good physical exercise.

### **Colon, entrance to the Panama Canal:**

On Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> February the 20 mile sail from Portobelo to Colon, for me, was very emotional. On stowing our sails at the entrance to the port we knew that the when next used we would be in the Pacific. Malcolm on MUNA, who surprise surprise was sailing in company with us, and I spoke on the VHF and we both expressed our emotions at completing a major phase of our adventure and reaching the beginning of what would most likely be the longest phase ending in New Zealand towards the end of the year. At 1540 hours we anchored in the area known as “The Flats” (9-21N and 079-55W) adjacent to the Panama Canal Yacht Club.

### **Colon:**

Years before we left home we were warned about the security problems in Colon. It has perhaps the worst reputation of any city likely to be encountered on a circumnavigation. We were told that you could not walk the streets and that it was necessary to get taxis to get around. Well, we are glad to report that no such strict security action was required. Walking the busier streets in company and not walking out at night proved ok for everybody. Of course you do not wear expensive watches or jewellery.

Provisioning in Colon we found to be very good and easy. A 20p bus ride takes you to a choice of major supermarkets and they give you a free lift back. Internet outlets are within a 15 minute walk.

**The Panama Canal Yacht Club** we found to be very convenient. They allow free access to their dinghy dock and the marina costs \$0.45 per ft. You cannot pre-book the marina and space is allocated on a “first come basis”. It has a lovely air-conditioned bar and restaurant. The restaurant has a superb choice of menu, all at very reasonable prices. It also proved to be a good social gathering centre. The large jugs of draught beer are to be recommended.

**Canal preparations** begin by requesting a measurer who comes and checks the dimensions of your boat and notes items such as, maximum speed, fuel capacity, fuel consumption in 24 hours, water capacity, and availability of toilet facilities, cool drinks and food for the advisor. Boats over 60ft get a pilot. You sign many forms absolving the Canal Authorities from any blame in the event of an accident. After the measuring you pay your US\$500 transit fee and US\$800 deposit into a local bank, this can be done with visa. Later the same day, if you wish, you can ring for a transit date, boats are allowed two weeks after measuring to book the transit. ALDEBARAN was measured on a Monday and we booked our transit for the following Friday together with MUNA. While I prepared the boat, Olivia was busy planning and obtaining the provisions. As additional fendering we purchased 10 old tyres covered in plastic at \$2 each and managed to get the loan of the four 125ft long x 7/8” dia. lines required. Lines can be hired at \$15 per line per transit. The story of how and when we managed to get our lines is for another time. Engine reliability is of the utmost importance, a breakdown can be very expensive. Read the story below. To familiarise ourselves with the various transiting procedures, Olivia and I transited the canal twice as line handlers for friends before our transit, this we highly recommend.

### **The canal transit:**

On the appointed day both MUNA's and our advisors arrived at 0850 hours, 40 minutes late. We had already weighed anchor and immediately proceeded to the Gatun Lock with its three chambers, which raises you 26 metres to the Gatun Lake. After having to wait about an hour, during which time MUNA and ALDEBARAN rafted together, a raft we would maintain through the three locks, we entered the first chamber astern a very large container ship and tied alongside a tug. This is reported to be the easiest way to transit the locks rather than centre locking or alongside the walls. Our main concern was the turbulence and backwash, which the container ship would generate when he started his propeller moving to the next chamber. Luckily our advisors requested him to take it easy, he did, and at 1245 hrs we exited the Gatun Locks unscathed. MUNA and ALDEBARAN separated for the 30 mile transit of the lake to the Pedro Miguel Lock. On boarding, our advisor indicated that we were scheduled for a two day passage which means anchoring overnight at Gamboa, about 7 miles from the Pedro Miguel Lock. In the hope of preventing this we motor sailed quite fast across the lake. It was a lovely scenic passage, especially through the Banana Cut a small boat shortcut. As on our previous transits we again saw monkeys on the same island, but this time a whole troop.

In Colon we bought a medium sized polystyrene cooler box, that we filled with ice and lots of soft drinks for our advisor and line handlers Tony and Martin from DIVA and Gabby with her two sons aged 9 and 11 from STEADFAST. Adrian, Gabby's husband and father of the two boys was line handling on MUNA together with Raoul and Cindy from MANANA. Olivia was kept busy playing host and feeding everybody. Unfortunately, or fortunately as it turned out, we did not make sufficient time and had to anchor at Gamboa where our advisors were collected. They said that they, or other advisors, would join us between 0930 and 1000 the next morning to continue the transit. Being a very sheltered anchorage, ALDEBARAN dropped her anchor while MUNA rafted alongside. . Semi-celebrations were held followed by a swim in the fresh water. If we had seen then what we later saw there would have been no swimming, for shortly after emerging from the water a large crocodile swam past our stern about 20 metres away.

Our dinghy was launched and Adrian and family together with Tony and Martin motored to a nearby exclusive resort. Poor Malcolm was feeling under the weather with a bad cold and so I made him some medicine in the form of hot whiskeys, Jameson of course. On their return in the dinghy about two hours later, in good spirits, we had our evening meal. It was a most pleasant affair with crews moving from boat to boat. Feeling very tired I went to bed about 2130 hours and remember hearing Helen, Malcolm's wife, returning my almost full bottle of Jameson. The mention of Jameson was all it took for our line handlers to give it a quick death.

### **An expensive engine failure:**

Also in the anchorage was a catamaran whose timing belt broke on its engine during a transit the day before us. He was eventually towed through the Pedro Miguel Lock on the following Tuesday alongside a tug. We were not allowed to tow him. The following are some of the costs he incurred; \$300 per night in the anchorage, \$100 per hour for the tug and \$400 for the pilot. Not very nice.

### **An expensive transit:**

In January 2000 a new record transit fee was set of US\$184,114.80 by a roll-on-roll-off cargo vessel. The average fee is approx. US\$45,000.

Next morning we all relaxed and savoured our surroundings until after the appointed time when our advisors failed to turn up. Shortly after midday PEACE AND ALOHA, who left Colon that morning, passed us. They also told us of three more boats behind who also left that morning including ZEPHYRUS. Our advisors, different ones, did not appear until 1235 hrs at which time we could see the three boats approaching. Departing the anchorage rather quickly, to keep ahead of the three boats,

we motor sailed through the Gaillard Cut. This is the section of the canal that claimed the greatest number of fatalities during its construction. On reaching the Pedro Miguel Lock, a single chamber, we had to raft with PEACE AND ALOHA, a new 60ft American yacht. We were not too happy with this arrangement, as we did not have confidence with some of their line handlers, which later proved correct. For the down locks you go on front of the ships and again we were rafted to a tug. On exiting the Pedro Miguel Lock it is about a mile to the final two stage Miraflores Lock, the one with the camera on it. The line handlers on PEACE AND ALOHA on three occasions during these last locks missed the tugs on casting their stern lines and on one such occasion the miss allowed our sterns swing out and we were in danger of hitting the opposite wall. However, as they say, "alls well that ends well" and so we emerged from the last lock and entered the PACIFIC OCEAN unscathed.

**WHAT A RELIEF** it was to have completed the transit and motor under the famous "Bridge of the Americas" to the Balboa Yacht Club where we picked up a mooring at 1750 hours. The celebrations began with a small "dram" from the bottle of Midleton "VERY RARE" Irish Whiskey given to us by Richard Burrows on our departure from Howth way back in July 1999. This special bottle was first opened in mid Atlantic the second time was on arrival in St Lucia and will not again be opened until we reach New Zealand.

**Balboa Yacht Club** is expensive with no public phone or shops for miles. Every journey is a taxi ride, the cost of which just keeps mounting up. Diesel, which we believed was US\$0.47 per litre has gone up to US\$0.52, the price on the street is only US\$0.39. Moorings cost US\$0.50 per foot or US\$20.00 per night for ALDEBARAN and in addition you have to join the club at US\$25. Even to spend one night on the moorings or berth for diesel you have to pay the membership fee. In addition, like any industrial port, the water is dirty with a regular smell of diesel in the air. Ships entering and leaving the canal passed within 150 metres of us. We were sorry we did not provision better in Colon and bypass here.

**Panama City** is very difficult to get round and in most cases requires a taxi. The shopping is very good with a good variety. Whether we see more interesting areas depends on how long we stay here. Hopefully it will only be a day or two more.

### **Looking ahead:**

From here we sail to the Galapagos a distance of almost 1,000 miles. We hope to arrive there early March and stay at least three weeks. Towards the end of March or early April we will begin the 3,000 mile, about 25 days, crossing to French Polynesia and onwards across the South Pacific ending up in New Zealand in November. Since leaving Ireland we have sailed 8,500 nautical miles and the distance from here to New Zealand, as the crow flies, is approx. 6,600 miles. We will then only be half ways on our circumnavigation.

Until our next report, from where we do not know.

**Keep sending your e-mails, we love to 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  
Balboa Yacht Club,  
Panama  
February 2001**