

By Jeanne and Colin Harrison

Jeanne and Colin have written numerous interesting articles over many years describing their cruising adventures. In the last year their articles have featured the Isle of Skye, the Canary Islands, the Pandemic in Panama, sailing across the Pacific and COVID-19 chasing *Dakota* back to Australia. Jeanne and Colin sold *Dakota* after returning to Australia. The following article was written prior to their experiences in Panama, and we are pleased to publish it now as part of a series on unusual cruising destinations. Editor.



WE had to get out the atlas to see exactly where French Guiana (South America) was located. Cruising friends had been working there at a place called Marina St Laurent on the Maroni River which bordered Suriname to the north. We noted that Brazil bordered French Guiana to the south.

Our mates had high praise for the location and the friendliness of the Australian-born marina owner, David Mateliciani. Since they had helped with maintenance on the marina's European standard moorings we had confidence in the quality of the facilities which lie about 12 miles up the fast flowing Maroni River, known locally as the 'French Amazon'.

After reading more about French Guiana we decided to make it our landfall following our Atlantic crossing from Cape Verde, even though our friends were not going to be there at that time.

Our first landfall in French Guiana was on the offshore islands of Les Iles du Salut (Salvation Islands), a group of three former prison camp islands (Royale, St Joseph and Devil's) about 10 miles from the mainland. The anchorage was at Ile Royale but the best known island of the three was Devil's Island, the location of the infamous fortified prison camp for French political dissidents brought to notoriety by the Dreyfus Case.



Dakota at Ile Royale



Commandant's residence

As Ile Royale had a landing pontoon and served as the main administrative centre for the offshore prison camp, it was now busy during the daytime with shuttles of catamarans from the nearby mainland town of Kourou arriving with tourists eager to either study the history, see the ruins or enjoy swimming in the crystal clear water. Only one other cruising yacht (*Dutch*) was at anchor with *Dakota*.

It was fascinating to see the ruins and restorations to the settlement, from the posh Commandant's residence to the bleak prison cells. At 5°17'N, the island abounded in lush tropical vegetation. Wildlife included various species of monkeys and the shy agoutis. It was a hot, sultry uphill walk to see the main administrative buildings and to find the café with fresh baguettes and a terrific view of Devil's Island.

After several days of delightful R&R here, following 16 days at sea from Cape Verde, we decided to do the overnight sail to the Maroni River. We reviewed tide times and phase of the moon; currents; the weather and wind forecast; the charts which included unsurveyed areas and extensive shallow banks and wrecks; the Maroni River entrance markers; and possible anchorages once inside the river. Our last five days of passage-making from Cape Verde to Devil's Island had been consistent, with gentle 12-16 kts of NE tradewinds. The wind forecast, which we could access via internet with our UK WiFi sim card, was for a continuation of these conditions.

The full moon would be an advantage as far as visibility, but would add to the tidal race on the river. The South Equatorial Current would set us generally in a favourable



St Laurent Transportation Camp Monument

direction but the rate and exact direction was questionable. The wind and weather looked good for both departure and arrival points, with only a 9 kt wind forecast for the morning near the Maroni River entrance. We were very low on diesel so we needed enough wind to sail most of the 90 nm to the river entrance channel, so as to conserve fuel for the river journey.

To avoid the non-hydrographic (unsurveyed) areas and shallow banks along the way we would have a beat initially, then it would be a downwind run. The river channel showed a minimum depth of 0 m so at least mid-tide was needed to travel into the Maroni channel. The channel markers were reported to be good, but after spending two seasons in Europe we had to remind ourselves that this was the American buoyage system, so red markers would be to starboard and green to port. The first possible anchorage would be just inside the river mouth, a further 10 nm from the channel entrance. We conservatively estimated the travel time, as we could heave-to if our trip was quicker than planned. A daytime entry to the channel on a rising tide would have been ideal.

Leaving Devil's Island with a single reefed main and just a bit of furled jib we had a good quick windward beat up and around the shallows. First the jib was totally furled, then the mainsail reefed again as the wind exceeded forecasts. As we rounded the shallows and cracked the main sheet to



Maroni River

run downwind, the wind accelerated and the favourable current increased. As the apparent wind jumped to more than 30 kts, we were covering 8.5 nm per hour over the bottom (significantly more than our planned average trip speed), so we triple-reefed the main and eventually hove to for 2 hours, realising that instead of a 24 hour passage, the trip could prove to be a 17 hour passage and we could possibly make the last of the earlier inbound tide, albeit under full moon at about 0300 hrs. When the wind dropped back to 17 kts we continued onwards, hoping for the sea state to ease. Meanwhile we were looking at alternative destinations if the 2-4 m breaking waves made a river entry untenable. Our next planned stop, Tobago, was another 500 nm downwind.

Fortunately the seas abated. After locating the approach markers we had a quick run into the river mouth. We have found the French to be very good with their channel markers, and this was no exception until we reached the last green marker before the anchorage area. The light on this marker was extinguished. Fortunately both the chart plotter (Navionics) and radar showed the green port marker 400 ft away, just as it became visible in the moonlight.

Finally we were inside of the river mouth. We managed to anchor in the moonlight at the first possible stopping point, swallow a cup of coffee and hit the pillows by 0500 hrs. Oblivion descended immediately thereafter.

After a sound six hours of sleep and more coffee, we upped anchor and flowed with the incoming tide for 12 miles to St Laurent du Maroni. Thankfully we were refreshed and keen to closely follow the meandering Maroni River markers to St Laurent, previously the central processing Transportation Camp (penal colony) in French Guiana and now a town of 50,000. There we could clear customs and immigration, re-provision, tour this Amazon-like destination, and do yacht chores. We were the only cruising yacht on a mooring, as most yachts arrive here later on a northerly migration from South Africa. *Dakota* comfortably sat on her river mooring with one side facing French Guiana and the other Suriname, depending on ebb or flood tide of the Maroni River. *Dakota's* Atlantic Ocean barnacles gradually surrendered to the fresh river water

environment and relinquished their grasp on her hull. Occasional rain helped to clean the Cape Verde's Sahara sand from her rigging, but meant that closed hatches exacerbated the heat and humidity prevalent at this latitude. We tried to stay cool by relaxing and enjoying local tropical juices, burgers, baguettes and French wine ashore for the next nine days.

As the St Laurent Transportation Camp had been the processing centre for about 70,000 French prisoners arriving in French Guiana from 1852-1953 there was much to explore in the town and at the Historic Camp Monument. Throughout the town there were impressive administrative and residential buildings in French Colonial architectural style, including the Town Hall and Justice Centre.

Few of the Camp prisoners ever returned to France. Most were banished, and even after completing their sentence were not permitted to leave French Guiana. Among the transported prisoners, in Cell 47, was Henri Charrière alias Papillon (played by Steve McQueen in the 1973 movie) who was a convicted pimp. About 100 political prisoners were processed here at St Laurent, then shipped to Les Iles du Salut. This included Dreyfus, the famous wrongfully convicted French politician.

Death sentences at the St Laurent Camp were administered by guillotine. At a table facing the guillotine the condemned prisoner ate his last meal, drank rum and wine, smoked a cigarette then signed his own release from prison prior to execution. Besides interesting history, St Laurent offered us a good provisioning opportunity. David, the marina owner, drove us to the supermarket and then to the petrol station for diesel. He also drove us around to see some of the local sights including the nearby Amerindian indigenous residences. We walked to the Sunday market and tried the 'must-have' local soup. The marina had a café where we could indulge in Aussie Works Burgers, specially created for us. A nearby tap was available for filling our water jerry cans. What more could we ask.

Although a bit off of the beaten track, we enjoyed our visit to unique French Guiana. Next stop for us was the Caribbean as we sailed onwards towards Charlotteville, Tobago.



Colin enjoying the local soup