

This report has been a long time in the melting pot, but at long last I am making a determined effort to stop being a tourist for a while and let you know what we've been up to. ALONA has covered approx 7500 nautical miles over the last 7 months, with most of the time spent at sea, not as pleasant as one would hope, but once in port those passages soon fade from conscious thought in the excitement of exploring new islands and countries.

As you know, we made a very late decision to sail to the Mediterranean, so we were exceptionally busy during August preparing and provisioning ALONA for the months ahead. So far I am very pleased with the results as we seem to be the only boat that hasn't had to try to obtain stores along the way - that is apart from fruit and vegetables which are nearly always readily available and wonderfully fresh.

It was a sad farewell dinner we had in Darwin with Susan, Doug, and little Lucia before we set sail early on Tuesday, 6th September, 88, a hot, calm day; weather which continued for several days. These were relaxing days which gave us a chance to recover from the hustle and bustle of departure.

As we neared Ashmore Reef, 480 miles west of Darwin, we passed close to some Australian oilrigs, brightly lit at night. We also saw some Indonesian praus going the opposite way and 2 were anchored near us at Ashmore where we stopped overnight to enjoy a good sleep. This extensive area of reef is an Australian Wild Life & Fisheries Reserve and the several very low sand cays are breeding grounds for great numbers of sea birds. The Government keeps a ship there to ensure the Indonesian fishermen don't take fish, shells, birds or birds' eggs.

From there to Christmas Island (another 1000 miles) we had mostly good winds but dead astern so it was a rolly

sail. It took just on 13 days to reach there where we anchored in Flying Fish Cove at 3.30 am. Friends Megan & Bill from BELLE were there and had already established a friendship with Bernie, the Police Superintendent, who was very kind to us also, making us welcome in his home as well as showing us around the island. He knew where to find the wild fruits including passionfruit, guava, paw paw and cherries. The many cherry trees were introduced by the Japanese during their WW2 occupation of the island.

We noticed a big difference in Christmas Island since our stay there last year when cruising on ST COMBS; the phosphate mines shut down just after our departure so the Australian Government, with monetary and retraining incentives, encouraged the population of mostly Malays and Chinese, to re-settle in West Aust. Only about 600 people remain and the place is like a ghost town with so many empty houses and flats. There was still talk of building a hotel/casino, but unless one happens to be a gambler or an ornithologist, there wouldn't be much to do. The bird life is fantastic, with Christmas Is frigates, tropical golden bosun birds and boobies, including the Abbotts booby found only on C I. The red crabs are another phenomenon. They mostly live inland and every November migrate to the sea in their millions; a moving red carpet covering hillsides, gardens, roads and shore.

We enjoyed our time there, but felt we must keep moving, so a week later we left on the 550 mile passage to the Cocos Keeling Islands. The beam winds averaged about 20k and we made good time; 1 day clocking 193 miles, but that did include a favourable current. We arrived in a nasty rain squall, but having been there before we had no trouble crossing the reef to anchor off beautiful Direction Island, a low sand cay thick with palm trees and on which, in the past, the Cable Station was located. There were 11 other yachts in the lagoon,

most of them German. After the calm sunny weather of last year, it was disappointing to have windy, showery conditions most of the time, with just the odd nice day when we enjoyed some snorkelling. We had two trips across the large lagoon to West Is to the store and PO, but generally it was odd job time in between socialising.

Cocos Is where the fleet of cruising yachts diverge, many going to South Africa, others NW to Sri Lanka or India, and some like us, headed west for the Seychelles via the Chagos Archipelago. After 2 weeks we said farewell to those we didn't expect to see for a long time, if ever, and left for Chagos.

The weather continued to be unsettled during this passage with frequent squalls (one of which split our recently repaired genoa) interspersed with very light conditions. There were many sail changes and we had to keep an eye on the horizon at all times as the squalls appeared out of no where. We still got caught with the MPS poled out as a spinnaker in almost no wind when an unexpected 35k gust caused a spectacular broach; quite a knockdown. We eventually got the sail off but it was a nasty experience. It was interesting to sight a pod of what we think were Pilot whales and many very large dolphins.

When about 600 miles from Chagos, Gill was shocked to discover that the forestay was loose. When tightening the backstays didn't make any difference, he had to accept the frightening fact that the forestay had broken and the mast was in danger of toppling! He hand furled the jib as the self furler wouldn't work, then attached our 2 spinnaker halyards to the bow fitting as temporary stays; these, with the inner forestay, held the mast reasonably firm. We faced a long sail without a jib, but later found that in light conditions we could fly our mizzen staysail, attached to the inner forestay, as a small MPS, and this helped a lot.

Two days later I was on watch at 2 am when I saw what looked like a solid black wall approaching. I called Gill and we lowered the mizzen but didn't have time to reef the mainsail before the squall hit us at 40k and with a change of wind direction. The boom vang shackle broke and we did an almighty gybe, but thank God the mast held. This storm lasted about 36 hours then the wind did another sudden shift and dropped to 8k. I certainly couldn't say this passage was a pleasant, or relaxing one.

It was essential to replace our forestay in the Chagos Islands as we still had over 1000 miles to sail to the Seychelles from there. Diego Garcia, one of the Chagos group and the US Indian Ocean naval and air base, seemed the only answer to our problem, although we knew entry was forbidden. Gill tried several times to raise them on the radio emergency channels to no avail, until, assuming that they were listening but not replying, he explained our serious problem and said we were proceeding there for repairs. This brought almost immediate results via a US freighter anchored at Diego Garcia, and he acted as an intermediary between us and the authorities. Finally we were given permission to enter for repairs, with instructions to wait 3 miles offshore until an escort arrived.

We knew that Diego Garcia is part of the British Indian Ocean Territories, but as it is leased to the US, it was a surprise, after being circled by 3 large tenders first, to be boarded by 2 British Officers. It appears Britain still maintains overall authority for law enforcement and Customs and has about 40 personnel stationed there.

We were directed to a small man-made inner harbour where we tied up to a long floating dock, ideal to lower our furling gear on to. Upon inspection, Gill found the stay had broken at the top which meant a replacement wire was necessary. Simon, the young British Officer

who was "in charge" of us, couldn't have been more helpful, breaking the rules (we weren't allowed ashore) to drive Gill to various Yank workshops until a wire was unearthed. Not stainless unfortunately, but galvanised was better than none and should last until we can replace it in Cyprus. Gill had to cut away the damaged top section of the self furler and then we threaded the wire and the Yank fitters clamped it with their special gear. By this time it was getting late and Gill was exhausted. I lost count of the number of times he climbed the mast, so I asked Simon if we could stay there overnight. A long embarrassed silence followed, then he said that would only be possible if he posted an armed guard on board, but we could go out and anchor in the harbour overnight, then come back in next morning, which we were happy to do. During the day Simon had given us bread, fruit and vegetables from his own fridge and bought cartons of Coke and 7UP for us at an incredibly low price, as well as filling our spare water containers.

It was a very interesting experience and I can't help wondering how many billions of dollars have been poured into the building of this base. No doubt the Russians monitor it by satellite and not much would be secret from them, but I guess that they have to maintain strict security regulations.

A 24 hour sail north brought us to the Salamon Lagoon, smaller than Garcia and surrounded by small islands and islets joined by reef with a narrow entrance passage. We spent a day anchored near the entrance exploring Ille de Passe and the coral, before motoring in heavy rain to the recognised anchorage off Ille de Boddam next day. The lagoon is full of coral bommies just below the surface, and it was surprising how much easier they were to spot in the rain than expected. We probably looked strange wearing polaroid sunglasses in the rain but it is the only way to pick out the variations in colour which indicate the depth and the coral.

There were 4 other yachts there when we arrived and BELLE came in the next day. One has to anchor over coral which is never comfortable, as the chain inevitably winds around the coral heads as the boat changes direction with wind and tide, shortening the scope and causing the boat to pull up with a shudder in the wind gusts.

In the past, a copra plantation had existed on the island and the overgrown ruins of the quite large settlement were fascinating to explore. Stone walls are an indication of where the roads once were and a couple of houses are still habitable, one being the "Yacht Club". There are several wells where washing water can be obtained, although always swarming with voracious mosquitoes. We found the old cemetery where most of the dead were interred in above ground cement sarcophagus which are cracking and crumbling in the humid sea air.

We enjoyed snorkelling over the coral bommies in the lagoon and caught fish every day. Sadly, it seems the comparatively few visiting yachties have denuded the area of crayfish and coconut crabs which were once plentiful, but limes, breadfruit and taro can still be found.

The British from Diego Garcia do the rounds of the Archipelago once a month to ensure that no one has tried to settle on the islands, so we were delighted when their visit coincided with our stay, especially when they handed out boxes of fruit, vegetables, drinks, nuts, etc. They also will bring free diesel to the yachts, but the tender broke down after the first run and we missed out.

The weather was bad for most of the time we were there; very wet and very windy, which forced us to reconsider our plans to spend 4 weeks there. A cyclone on 7th November, SE of Diego Garcia, and which was responsible

for our stormy weather, heralded an early change of seasons south of the Equator. When, a few days later, another cyclone was reported to be developing south of the Seychelles, we all decided to leave as soon as we got a favourable forecast from Mauritius. This is a worrying time of year for yachtspeople, especially when heading for the Northern Hemisphere, as we must avoid an early cyclone south of the Equator and a late one in the north. Therefore it is imperative to get to a safe harbour close to the Equator where cyclones don't occur, and wait until the weather is right to continue. When what appeared to be a reasonable forecast was received at the end of our second week, we quickly prepared to leave. I was making lime marmalade at the time so we were the last to leave.

None of the 5 yachts reached the Seychelles. The first 2 changed their minds as they were leaving the lagoon when the wind strengthened from the west (our course), and went to Phuket in Thailand. After 8 hours of bashing into the head winds, hoping conditions would improve, which they didn't, we opted to go to Sri Lanka, an easy course to lay. BELLE battled on for another 2 days until they found that they had made good only 120 miles west in all that time; they went to the Maldives instead. We felt particularly sorry for EAGLES NEST when, after persevering for over a week, had to give up; they also went to the Maldives.

Upon our arrival in Galle, Sri Lanka, we were dismayed to find that the country had been at a standstill for 8 days and nothing open or working including banks, post offices, Govt offices, hotels, shops, markets etc, and no transport running. Three days earlier the Union chief had been shot dead on the wharf where we went ashore. Every day the paper was full of reports of bomb blasts, burnings, massacres and intimidation in all walks of life by the JVP, a terrorist party. One hundred and forty transformers had been destroyed so

consequently electricity was either restricted or non-existent, and water was scarce. Buses were prime targets with many drivers and passengers being shot and the buses burnt. I could go on and on.

A heavy influx of military personnel into the south soon after our arrival saw an end to the worst of the visible trouble and things gradually returned to as near normal as possible in the circumstances. Despite the troubles, we didn't experience any feeling of being in danger or see many signs of it apart from the odd burnt bus and soldiers on the buses and streets.

The markets, when operating, had a bountiful supply of very fresh produce. We had 10 large bananas, 1 pawpaw, 1 pineapple, 4 large mangoes, 8 eggs and 1 loaf of bread delivered to the boat for less than \$2. The pineapples were superb and avocados cheap and plentiful. Can you believe it cost \$1 each to have our hair cut! The fishermen would offer us fish and prawns most days, and we didn't worry about the fish while the huge prawns were available.

The former yacht agent, Don "The Godfather" Windsor (a Singalese), still has open house for all the yachties. If there is anything at all one needs to buy, repair, do, go; Don, his sons or daughter will organise it. He sits on his "throne" on his verandah, phone at hand, giving orders. He knows everything that happens in Galle and who did it, in fact several times while we were talking with him the police rang him for information on the curfew or the state of the roads. He admits to charging 10% for his services but it is cheaper than paying double which usually happens when we deal with the locals. He was indispensable, especially as he could change travellers' cheques at bank rates; no doubt he deals on the black market there. It took at least half a day to change cheques at the Galle bank, that is when it was open.

ALONA - REPORT FROM GOA, INDIA

Together with 4 others, we hired a minibus for the day to go to Colombo to obtain visas for India in case we had to leave Sri Lanka in a hurry. It's only 116 km but takes at least 3 hours each way due to the very narrow road and heavy traffic; enjoyable going in the early morning but tiring going back. Leaving Colombo in peak hour traffic has to be experienced to be believed.

We felt glad that we had spent 2 weeks touring in the country last time, although some yachties did so with the main problem being the difficulty in obtaining petrol. There were up to 22 yachts in Galle Harbour at one time; French and German in the majority, with Swedish, British, Swiss, NZ, American and Australian.

We spent 4 surprisingly enjoyable weeks in Galle; the old Dutch fort area is quaint and interesting to wander through with its narrow streets, old Dutch homes and churches. One can enjoy walking right around the Fort on top of the huge battlements.

Yachts kept arriving from Cocos, much to our surprise, as it was so late in the season. Some were at sea during the third cyclone which developed at the time we left Chagos, and they had a very unpleasant and miserable passage, in fact the cyclone was named Emmy after the Australian yacht which was nearest to it. At this time a Mayday call came over the radio from an American yacht east of Sri Lanka. The owner had died of food poisoning and his German crew member was seriously ill. The US base in Guam parachuted a medic team to the yacht which was later abandoned at sea when they were picked up by a ship and taken to Singapore.

Don was becoming very edgy about yachts remaining in the harbour as the 19th December election approached, so all but 3 decided to leave for India. We set out with Goa as our destination.

To be continued in the next edition of Squadron Quarterly.

BERYL MORCOM

If anyone would like to contact Beryl and Gill, they may be contacted during April and May 89 at the following address:- Yacht ALONA, Larnaca Marina, Larnaca, Cyprus.