

Afloat Again.

By Wyn on Union Jock

After several years enjoying the Caribbean as well as the cruising Life on their monohull they and are now on a Catamaran built by Lagoon that they purchased in France, which is their home Port. It's nice to have the new Union Jock back amongst us and here's the news from so far.

We're in a beautiful bay off the coast of Martinique and back where we belong, on a boat in the Caribbean sunshine and loving it. We've re-met seven cruiser-boats here in Saint Anne's that we've cruised with before and spoken to other old friends on the radio. Its just like coming home after a two year absence.

The trip across on the freighter, Super Servant 4 (SS4), was just an incredible experience. It is one hundred and thirty meters long and weighs twelve thousand six hundred tons unladen. Not something you want to bump into during the night! We loaded our new Union Jock, a 41foot Lagoon catamaran, at La Rochelle on the north west coast of France on a dark and freezing 7th January morning. SS4 has the ability to submerge the main deck under three meters of water, to load we just motored through the open stern and were positioned on supports by divers beneath us. Once all of the thirty-odd boats were in place the ballast tanks were pumped dry and the freighter rose five meters. Fortunately we were able to travel with our boat on SS4 and did not need to get flights and accommodation to await her arrival in Martinique. We lived and slept on our own boat but all meals and refreshments were provided free on the mother-ship. There were only four 'riders' including us, an engineer on a one hundred foot luxury motor yacht and a young Ghanaian boat boy traveling and working on a sailing catamaran. We formed a great relationship with the Russian officers and Filipino deck and galley crew and were extremely well accommodated by all of them. Even the captain himself took the trouble to take us on a conducted tour of the giant vessel.

We steamed south west from La Rochelle across the bay of Biscay which lived up to it's bad reputation with high winds and lumpy seas, turned south down the west coast of Spain and Portugal and into the straits of Gibraltar. We were heading for Toulon on the French Mediterranean coast where more boats were to load. During the night we steamed north east parallel to the Spanish coast and the wind began to rise. We'd had some rough weather in Biscay but this was something different. The wind screamed in the rigging of the sailboats on deck and the ship buffeted into huge seas shuddering when we ploughed through the big waves. Our position on the deck was about half way along at the fulcrum of the pitching motion so we didn't experience too much movement. We were also protected by the superstructure which rose more than twenty meters ahead of us but still we had salt spray from the 'big ones' all over us. We were very glad we were not out there in

our little boat. At breakfast the next morning the captain told us that his wind instrument recorded winds in excess of eighty knots before the indicator needle fell off!

Fortunately the arrival at Toulon was less eventful and we anchored in the huge bay in bright if cool weather. Toulon is not only a huge commercial port but also a French naval base and we counted over thirty warships including a nuclear submarine and two aircraft carriers. We were able to go ashore while the SS4 submerged and loaded more boats for the Atlantic crossing. We were reminded of how much we prefer country life or island cruising by wandering around the busy and noisy seaport city. We were glad to get back aboard and watch the preparations for departure. Soon the huge anchor was aweigh and we steamed majestically out to sea under the guidance of the pilot. It was Saturday 18th January and we set course directly for the Straights of Gibraltar some 600 miles south west. The weather gradually rose and by the evening of 20th we were punching a force eight gale with torrential rain and wind gusting to fifty knots as we approached the narrow pass between Europe and North Africa. We went to the bridge-deck and were struck by how difficult it is for the officer of the watch to see a small sailboat in a confused sea at night. However the lights of the land on each side of us were enchanting and we felt privileged to be able to view them from our vantage point.

Once out into the Atlantic we headed due west to take the north west swell on the forward of the ship which prevented her rolling too much. When we were well clear of Africa SS4 headed due south to the Canary Islands and by 23rd January we were in the lee of Lanzarote. We stopped for a couple of hours to allow for some routine maintenance to the main engines then waved goodbye to the last land we would see before the Caribbean as we motored south of the islands and headed west at thirteen knots. Ship board life settled back into the routine of boat jobs on Union Jock, which consisted of a daily wash down with fresh water as the exhaust soot from the SS4's engines was blown over all the boats aboard by the following winds. Our day was also punctuated by three regular mealtimes when we chatted with the officers and crew. Occasionally we'd have drinks with the engineer of the luxury yacht or he would join us for an evening aboard Union Jock.

As we steamed further west the weather became warmer and much more 'Caribbean' with blue skies and puffy white clouds. On the evening of 30th January the Captain ordered a BBQ and we enjoyed flame grilled steak, chicken and huge prawns on the main deck together with as much wine and beer as we wished. It was a unique experience to have a BBQ on the working deck of a huge freighter under the starry Atlantic sky steaming at thirteen knots hundreds of miles from land.

On the morning of 1st February we awoke to find ourselves rounding the south end of Martinique on route to collect a pilot to guide us into the port of Marin. As we entered we were called on our VHF radio by a bunch of our cruising buddies who were at anchor in the bay and had seen SS4 come

in. Four of them came out in their dinghies to welcome us. As we anchored we were on the wings of the bridge deck and could see and hear them yelling and waving at us and letting off party poppers. Seeing and hearing the commotion the Captain stuck his head out of the bridge window and asked, with a knowing grin "friends of yours?" The next day, after SS4 had submerged again, we bade the officers and crew a fond farewell and reversed Union Jock out of the main deck and headed for the marina.

The next few days were a blur of visits from old friends and well-wishers. We stayed at the marina dock to provision UJ for the following few weeks and re-acclimated ourselves to the wonderful Caribbean climate. After a couple of days in the noisy and very public gaze of the marina were soon out on the hook in the breeze and clear water where we prefer to be.

We plan to head north stopping at Guadeloupe to see our yacht broker, at Saint Martin to buy more boat stuff duty free, and then on to the Virgin Islands where we hope to have a frame custom made for a bimini sunshade. By June, in accordance with the terms of our insurance, we must be south of twelve degrees north to avoid any hurricanes that may come across the Atlantic. So we'll head for Grenada and probably Trinidad around that time. At least that's the 'plan de jour'.