

Passage from Luperon, D.R. to Boqueron, P.R.

By: Jim on SY Twelfth Night

I yelled "Aw Crap!!" and threw my hat onto the cockpit sole. I rubbed my face with my hand in frustration. Chris turned her head from the bow and from the chore of raising the anchor to see what had happened. "The max prop won't flip into reverse, I think its fouled!" I said and with that our planned departure for Puerto Rico came to an abrupt stop. I tried moving the boat forward but couldn't get any headway as I gave the engine more throttle. The engine



strained, billowing out gray smoke, but the boat would not move in the water.

All morning boats had been moving past our anchorage, shouting encouragement, or simply "see ya in Boqueron". A group of ten or so sailboats had begun the two-day run from Luperon on the north coast of the Dominican Republic to the West Coast of Puerto Rico. It soon became apparent we could not leave until the bottom of the boat and the running gear were cleaned. Luperon harbor will do that to you. My anti-fouling paint is only a couple of months old.

We spotted a boat with a diver under it and arranged for him to clean our boat as soon as he finished the boat he was working on. The diver finished, motored over to our boat, and tied to our port side. He went into the water with a pookah, a breathing apparatus that was supplied by an air compressor in the belly of his small skiff. After 5 minutes he surfaced, said "its gonna be a while, Capt" and headed back below. We could hear the scraping and the grinding as the barnacles were cleaned off the hull and the running gear. We busied ourselves with small tasks rather than sit and sulk. Finally, the diver surfaced, accepted a cup of Chris' best coffee and a wad of cash, and we were off.

We were the last boat to leave for Puerto Rico. The catamaran Camunguita left too, but they were headed back home, perhaps to sell their boat. A bad experience several days prior had convinced them that they would be happier with land under their feet. We watched them quietly disappear over the horizon. The trip up the Dominican Coast is tricky. A strong and surly equatorial current runs along the north shore. The mountains above the coast shape the weather and therefore the sea conditions there. About 2 hours out we saw lots of debris in the water that had come from the town of Puerto Plata. Torrential rains had flushed huge amounts of flotsam and jetsam into the water. We stayed offshore to minimize the danger. Less than an hour later we meet SV Gringo, which had to return to Luperon with a fouled propeller. They had an inner tube from a truck tire wrapped around the propeller shaft that they could not get off. Their attempts to loosen it by diving over the side with a knife were unsuccessful.

We arrived at Punta Patilla too late to avoid the thunderstorms that had built in the thick afternoon air. While the storms could not reach us, the convection that built with the storms increased the winds, turning them and putting them on our nose. We chugged ahead at 3 knots, frequently taking water over the bow. Often a big wave would bring us to near standstill and you could feel the current grip the boat and hold her still for a moment. Saltwater rushed over the combing and into the cockpit. It was not pleasant on board Twelfth Night, and small tasks, such as using the head, become an adventure.

We've had it easy. Our friends aboard Catamarans, which don't like to go to weather, were getting pummeled. The catamarans had to tack to make headway and their progress was plodding to say the best. We left the catamarans behind and by midnight we had caught the lead boats. The winds decreased and we were able to hold 5 knots as we motor-sailed along the coast. We stayed about 3 miles off the shore to avoid fishnets, floats and unlit wooden fishing boats that would not appear on radar. All of the boats talked to one another, sharing information, or just seeking the comfort of another voice in the blackness. Most of the mates were asleep in the bunks when they are off watch. It was a moonless night filled with stars. I was wrapped in shorts, t-shirt, an offshore Jacket, life harness and ball cap. I looked up into the Caribbean sky. No matter how many times I do this, I am always amazed. The hills along the coast were covered with yellow, white and amber lights. I wondered what the people who lived beneath the lights on shore were doing and what their lives were like.

The near morning the coast dropped off to the southeast. We met swells that were coming from a gale system hundreds of miles away. They are 7 to 9 feet in height, and each wave was about 40 yards thick. They were smooth and almost flat on the top. The swells arrived about once in every twenty seconds and weren't too uncomfortable if you didn't dwell on their power, or how they lifted the boat. Twelfth Night received the swells on her port bow and gracefully slid down them as they disappeared under her quarter. We changed course to a point north of Hourglass Shoal, at the eastern tip of the Dominican Republic. We could expect cranky seas there. I ate a couple of cold mango current pancakes while Chris had pretzels and sipped coffee. We listened to NPR on our high seas radio when the program was interrupted by a bulletin that the space shuttle Columbia had just gone missing. We hailed the other boats and alerted them to that fact. In minutes the boat to boat chatter ceased. We all held our breath and prayed.

The end of the second day brought freshening winds, and churning seas as we arrived at the Mona Passage. The Mona Passage is the largest, meanest, piece of water in the Caribbean. It sports depths of a mile plus where underwater mountain ranges shape and shift the strong currents that wander there. At the start of the passage I whacked my head against the companionway when a swell caught me going down the companionway stairs with dishes in both hands. I felt nauseous. Chris checked me quickly to see if I had dilated pupils or other signs of a concussion. I was miserable for a while. Chris handled the night watch effortlessly. SV Dragonfly hailed big freighters they saw on VF radio and alerted them to our presence. By the middle of the Mona Passage the waters were smoother. The Island of Puerto Rico shielded us from much of the large swells we had experienced earlier. It was another clear, spectacularly star lit night. The lights of Puerto Rico rose off our bow and grew as we reached for them.

Around 3:00 am the Catamaran Searapido fouled her prop in a fish trap line. Aboard were Jan and Jim, a couple of Brit's who are some of our favorites in this group. They stopped the engine and set their anchor in about 100 feet of water. Then they waited.

At dawn, Jan dove over the side of Searapido as Jim steadied the boat. Jan is a real corker. She is feisty and funny at the same time. You suspect she had a lot of detention during her formative years. Jan went over the side, cleared the prop and announced to all that the water was 'quite clear and quite warm'. Searapido was underway again.

We arrived at Boqueron at 8:30 am AST. We waved to each other and offered congratulations over the VHF radio. It seemed like every other phrase I heard on the radio contained the word beer in it. There was much talk of getting together, but that did not happen. Not that day. After the 48-hour run and a few stiff drinks, we began to fall asleep, some of us still seated in our chairs with glasses in hand. It had been a 'long' 48 hours. One by one we fell. Memories of the Mona Passage danced in the darkness and we became lost unto ourselves.

EPILOGUE

We met the couple aboard Camunguista in Luperon. We liked them. It seems unkind, yet particularly accurate to say they were having a lot of problems. One afternoon they left Luperon in weather conditions that no one thought were even tolerable and got pounded. They returned and anchored in the harbor ahead of us. The catamaran drug anchor to a point where it was 40 feet or so from our port beam. They wanted to stay there, but we said no, they could not and said that we would help them re-anchor if they wished. (Catamarans and monohulls aren't compatible next to each other as they swing differently in the winds).

They declined our offer of help. Later they called and apologized for the problems. We said 'things like this happens to everyone' and not to worry. "Get some rest and a few stiff drinks" we said. "Yeah!" they replied. It was clear that they hadn't mastered a lot of their technique required for cruising, or perhaps they were just having a bad day. Four days after we last saw them, Lori Lynch fell off Camunguista during a night passage in the Bahamas and was lost at sea. We know that the cruising community will be diminished by her absence. Our heartfelt sympathy goes out to her husband and the rest of her family. Lori is seated second from the left in this photo taken a week before her death.