

Sailing with the Singlehandlers

by Cheryl Rice - SY Ginseng

We've done that passage about a half dozen times. You know the one - "that passage" - the passage between Grenada and Trinidad. Eighty miles of water open to the Atlantic with the easterlies at their strongest and a current to slow you down. It doesn't matter which direction you are traveling. Northwards or south. It's usually the same. Bumpy, windy, slow when you hit the current. Yes, we've done that passage at least 6 times and only once was it pleasant and that was by chance. That was last year in June. We were sailing from Carriacou down the east coast of Grenada planning a yellow flag stop at one of those lovely little bays on the south coast. The winds were light and on the beam. The seas were friendly and the skies were clear and we just kept on going. We arrived in Trinidad rested and in good spirits.

Not a trip like the other ones. Not like the first one - when the engine ground to a halt and the forestay broke. My husband and I spent hours, unwillingly bound for Venezuela, while we wrestled with the furling foils so that we could take advantage of our foresail and reach our goal - Chaguaramas, not Porlamar,

Nor like the third one when the steering system wasn't working. The seas were so heavy that I was left with calloused hands from turning the boat into the seas and then letting the salt-sticky wheel slide back as we were carried sideways over each huge wave.

Not like the fourth one when I threw up three times and lay on the low side huddled under a blanket for the entire trip.

With these unpleasant memories we do not look forward to our annual pilgrimage to Trinidad. This June past we sat at anchor in Mount Hartman Bay planning our crossing to that yachtie friendly hurricane hole south of latitude 11. Once again we were psyching ourselves for a tough passage.

But this time would prove to be different. This time we had weeks before our plane flew out of POS. This time we would not leave on impulse because the moon was full or because we were bored or because we were getting a craving for a double. This time we were under the guardianship of the singlehandlers.

We had been hanging out with them since the Cays. Charming, sociable, interesting men, they organized restaurant outings, knew where to find the best snorkeling, initiated dominoes at a local bar and they were always enthusiastic to join us for bocce on the beach or a taxi tour on land. We found bridge players among them. We could count on seeing them at happy

hour.

I have never really understood singlehanding. Cooking for one. Having no one to fetch you a drink when you really don't feel like moving. Having no one to run down below when you have forgotten to turn on the instruments. Having no one else to blame for bad decisions. Entering new harbours without an extra pair of eyes. Dropping anchor without someone on the wheel. Daunting. Awesome.

And for all those reasons singlehanders think things through before setting out.

Did I leave the winch handle up at the mast?
Do I need to reef the main before I leave?
Do I still have that waypoint in for the oil rig?
Will I need the fenders when I get into port?
How many sandwiches should I prepare?
Can I put my hands on the Doyle?

And the weather. They want to be sure about the weather. One of them had a weather fax and we got daily reports. They had consulted all the weather gurus. June was experiencing tropical waves, non-stop. The singlehanders knew when and where the last wave went through and when the next one would bring heavy rain and winds. Early next week was the best guess for a window. Of course, they argued, this was problematic because it would be full moon on Monday and the currents are strongest at the full moon. And the tides. There was panic in the anchorage until we could put our hands on tide charts.

All concerned agreed that an overnight sail was wisest. That would assure us that we would enter the new port in daylight. Some were leaving earlier than others. Departure times were planned so we would not sail into the Bocca when the tidal flow was at its highest. Inadvertently David and I did just that and we watched in admiration as a British schooner followed us in under power of sail. I met the skipper at the customs dock and told him how impressed I was. He shrugged a "no big deal" shrug. And indeed on a crewed boat it seemed like no big deal. But the singlehanders leave nothing to chance.

A watch system for one person means no sleep, of course or at most little cat naps. At the bar on Sunday I listened to an interminable discussion of the range of one's radar and its reliability. Bill doesn't have radar. "You can call me on the VHF", he joked, "to be sure I'm awake." I promised myself to do just that-on the hour. But then I, having a mate at the helm, was the one who was able to sleep for 2 hours straight and Bill was the one doing the wakeup call.

The trip was worth all their preparation. It was overcast and we went through squalls but they were light and brief and we did not have to reduce sail. The predicted 15-20 knots with 5 foot waves proved accurate. We heeled comfortably. We never took water over the rails. The wind backed from southeast to east. We kept to our rhum line. We passed through the Bocca in daylight. When we arrived at the customs dock, regular working hours were well underway and the singlehanders came in with relieved greetings.

Then next day I talked to two skippers who had left Grenada the previous week, They had long and awful crossings. They left on two of the days when the singlehanders were sitting in the bar critiquing the latest weather information. They had known about the tropical waves. They had known that we would be mighty uncomfortable if we left before Monday. "You should have been with us and our guardian angels," I said smugly. From now on I'm sticking with the singlehanders.