

2011 Blog of Rob & Sarah Bell and their yacht Serafina of Maldon

This record commences on 6th January after our safe arrival in Barbados. The days 1st – 5th January are recorded in our 2010 Blog.

The Big Come Down

13:05.43N 59:37.02W

Thursday 6th & Friday 7th Jan

Having arrived safely and tied up at Port St Charles, I went off to check in with Immigration, Customs and Health. This is an official 'Port of Entry' and so these officials were housed in a splendid building just 50 metres from the boat. Mind you it has to be said that this is no port as such. It is a marina surrounded by a housing complex with a fuel pontoon at the entrance and 6 visitors berths which are actually built for Superyachts, so we looked a little diminutive moored in the huge slot tied to a fixed high concrete quay. Given the tide and the swell, this is not a brilliant spot to stay and when they explained the charges we were more than a little shocked! However both us and Scott-Free decided to stay for one night just to get some sleep and rest.

So off I went to see the officials who were having a busy day as there was us and Scott-Free to deal with as well as another Swiss yacht. Just three boats in the entire day and we gathered this was truly a busy day for them. They were all very friendly and helpful and we knew we had arrived in the Caribbean as the very first official I dealt with, on discovering I was English, felt the need to fill me in, not only on the state of final test match against the Aussies, but most of the Ashes series (which any of Australian friends reading this might want to be reminded – England won).

All the people we have met so far have been unfailingly enthusiastic in their welcome and it is all very refreshing and enjoyable.

We popped round to Scott-Free to celebrate our achievement with bacon baguettes and champagne but sadly all of our celebrations have been very much overshadowed by poor Sarah becoming quite ill within just an hour or two of our arrival. She has been laid low by sickness and diarrhoea and has spent 48 hours in bed feeling very miserable. Not at all what she had planned for her arrival in the Caribbean. (We now suspect the eggs we had on Wednesday)

On Friday after a rather restless night for us both (I seemed to be running a high temperature and by the end of the day I too had diarrhoea) we decided that it would be better to head south to Bridgetown and anchor in Carlisle Bay. Port St Charles has no town or shops at all as it really is just a housing or apartment complex, albeit very upmarket. There is a yacht club which is just a bar and pool with a restaurant for the house owners and I did take advantage of their facilities for at least a swim and a cold shower.

We had a couple of visitors during the morning one of whom was Martin Smyth who was introduced to us by email on the way over and as a local he has been very helpful and given

us a lot of useful information. His mother Trudi, who is away on a cruise at the moment, set up and ran 'Trudi's radio ham net' which provided invaluable weather routing information to yachts doing the Atlantic crossing. Sadly this is no longer operating so we were not able to use it.

The second visitor was a friend of Chris and Steve's who lives here for 6 months of the year and then during the summer he spends his time sailing his yacht which he keeps in Marmaris at the moment. He had kindly offered us help and advice and has even suggested that he could drive us to see some of the better attractions on the island (as well as possibly a supermarket!)

In the early afternoon after topping up our fuel tanks (we used the generator quite a bit on the trip) we set off for Carlisle Bay, with poor Sarah still firmly laid out on her bed. It only took a couple of hours to sail down and then after a good look round the anchorage (we know almost all of the boats here not surprisingly) I found a clear space and dropped and set the anchor. We have been warned about the clubs banging out music until 4.00am every night, but hopefully we are far enough out in the bay for this to be not too bad. It is quite rolly but safe and only a short dinghy run into Bridgetown itself.

Can't stand up for falling down

Sat 8th & Sunday 9th Jan

The only real matter of importance over these two days has been Sarah's continuing illness.

Saturday saw no improvement at all and given that she had now gone two and half days with no food, just liquids and still she had diarrhoea and stomach pains we agreed that she needed specialist help, however it was already late on Saturday afternoon which is not a great time to do such things in a strange country.

Help was on hand in the form of Martin Smyth who lives here and he immediately responded to my phone call by finding an emergency clinic that would be open till late and all day Sunday. The first catch was how to get Sarah ashore, given that she could barely stand and was not sure she could last long without a handy loo! Scott-Free have a decent rib and kindly offered to act as a ferry, but they were still in town at this point and darkness was fast approaching (6.00pm) so we decided that the safest and most practical solution was to schedule the exercise for the following morning.

In the event, everything went smoothly. Steve from S-F arrived before 8.00am with his rib and ferried Sarah (who was feeling a bit stronger after a bit better night's sleep) and myself into the Careenage, which is the entrance to the Constitution River that runs through Bridgetown. This snakes a little way into the town and ends at a convenient dinghy park where we were met Martin who had kindly driven in to take us to the clinic himself.

The clinic was pretty empty, well it was only 8.15am on a Sunday and Sarah was quickly seen and soon put onto a saline drip and blood tests done as well as being weighed which revealed that she had shed one and a half stone! She was then put onto a 3 hour long drip containing various ingredients (no I don't know what they were!) and we sat there until 12.30. This was not as boring for me as you might suppose because this is Barbados and the

TV in the waiting room was showing the whole of the live coverage of a 20/20 cricket international between South Africa and India. I was not the only one engrossed in this!

Eventually Sarah was released and we picked up the prescription she had been given and got a taxi back to the waterfront where very kindly Steve and Chris were waiting to ferry us back to Serafina.

However, we have to return tomorrow morning to a nearby facility so that they can do Ultra sound scan of Sarah's appendix as they are a little concerned that this might be related to a grumbling appendix. Hey Ho, good job this all took off after we had completed the crossing!!

Ended Sunday by doing a few loads of washing and inflating and launching our own dinghy so I can take Sarah ashore in the morning.

The anchorage is pretty rolly as I mentioned before and the very loud disco/club does run until 4.00am. In addition there appears to be totally unregulated Jet Ski hire from the beach and so we do have to put up with these noisy machines blasting around us during the day.....so not a lot to commend the place yet. However our brief run ashore today was very enlightening and we are both very much looking forward to seeing more of the island and its VERY smiley and welcoming inhabitants.

Long Distance Runaround

Mon 10th, Tues 11th, Wed 12th and Thurs 13th Jan

Sorry about the long delay but in many ways there has been little to report and again each day always ended with nothing resolved about Sarah's health.

On Monday morning we were due at the clinic for Sarah's ultrasound scan at 7.30am. We came ashore in the dinghy, making our way up the river to the waterfront and tied up at Independence Square. Of course this was rush hour here in Bridgetown so there were no taxis in the taxi rank and it was a while before we managed to flag one down and make our way to the clinic. Although we were now a bit late it transpired that the time of 7.30am was not actually an appointment as we had been told, but merely the time they opened! Like everywhere else, everyone was very helpful and friendly and within a couple of hours Sarah had had the scan and we were back at the emergency clinic with the results for the first doctor to review. This was another few hours during which their TV rather frustratingly showed coverage of the same cricket match I had watched the previous day!

Sarah was eventually seen by a different doctor who was very helpful but explained that the appendix was fine but there were a couple of things shown up that warranted a CT scan to clarify. We went off to consider this and the doctor kindly waived any further charge.

Once we were back on board and with Sarah feeling a little bit better, we decided to move Serafina from where we were to a new point much closer to the beach and further round the headland out of the swell. This was a great move and we now at least were rolling a good deal less which made life considerably more comfortable, although it was further to travel by dinghy to the town.

On Tuesday we contacted Sarah's GP at home who has been incredibly helpful and as a result we elected to go ahead with the CT scan here to see if we could lay all the fears to rest.

So on Wednesday we tried to make the arrangements to have this new scan, but of course nothing is quite that easy! We tried to telephone the doctor at his clinic and were told to call back after 1.00pm when he came into work. At 1.00pm our phone call merely resulted in us being told that we had to come in and see the doctor in person, so we went ashore in the dinghy and found ourselves once again sat in their waiting room. (The TV was now showing a live one day international cricket match between SA and India) and Sarah was eventually seen at 3.34pm. He helpfully gave us the paperwork we needed and told us we could now contact the CT scan company to arrange the appointment. It was 3.55pm and the scan company closed at 4.00pm. Fortunately it was very nearby and so we phoned ahead and walked round (slowly, Sarah still in a somewhat delicate state!) in time to be allowed in. They were very helpful as well (everyone in Barbados has been so kind and friendly and helpful) and cheerfully gave Sarah an appointment (a real one) for 10.00am the next morning. The only downside was the barium drink that she needed to take in three doses between 10.00pm and 10.00am the next day.

Thursday morning saw us arrive 30 minutes early at the scanner company which was no problem and they immediately processed Sarah and by 11.00am we were out, however although we had two copies of the CT scan on CD's, the report would not be available for a 'few days' although they subsequently suggested that we ring on Friday in case it is done by then. So the situation now remains that we have to wait for the report and then email it off to the UK for a second opinion before we decide anything further.

We then caught a bus back into town and made our way on foot towards the cruise ship terminal to see a craft workshop area that was actually very disappointing. Bridgetown plays host to an extraordinary number of cruise ships and the least we have seen on any day so far is two and frequently there are three or four including on Monday, the Queen Mary 2.

So to date we have seen very little at all of this island but we have had offers from the two sets of people we know here to help us get out and see a bit more soon. As one of them put it, it would be a shame to sail all this way and only see a handful of medical facilities! Furthermore we have been repeatedly told that Bridgetown is the very worst side of the island in pretty much every respect and so we cannot say that we have seen Barbados until we get out a bit more. To that end, Steve and Chris have agreed to hire a car with us on Monday so we can do a bit of exploring. Also their friends Bob and Lynn (with the yacht in Marmaris, Turkey) have offered to have us all over for a BBQ on Sunday. We plan to stay until at least Tuesday afternoon so we should get some ground covered between now and then.

Everyone we have come across so far have been wonderful and it is just so refreshing to meet such happy and polite people everywhere. Shopping in the small local 'supermarket' is entertaining with most people offering a cheery 'good morning' or whatever, which always demands a similar enthusiastic response. Everyone smiles and it is hard to have anything less than a very positive feeling about the people. Even in the clinic waiting rooms, new arrivals offer a big hello to all those already waiting and the positive response from them all is almost very vocal. We have been mighty impressed by the absolutely immaculate turned out children in school uniform – Sarah is quite happy to admit that she could never produce such a well starched and pressed sets of clothes, let alone coerce our two into them!

With both of us being under the weather since we arrived here, there is a growing list of jobs to do on board, but we do at least have no time constraints on us. We are catching up with all the laundry and on the plus side we have found that the solar panels and wind turbine are coping very adequately with us sitting out here at anchor all the time without access to mains power. We do

occasionally run the generator but this is only to power up the water-maker so we have plenty of fresh water for the washing machine and showers on board etc.

The weather has been quite unseasonal we are told. Certainly we did not expect so much cloud and so many torrential downpours which have continued all week. However it is very warm and beautiful when the sun is out and we cannot complain especially when we hear how things are back home. Although we have resorted to wearing our waterproof trousers to combat the choppy seas and occasional downpour on our trips ashore in the dinghy (unlike all other boat owners we have seen, but turning up in a clinic with a salty wet seat really isn't possible!) Sarah is also still convinced it's too cold to get wet on the way ashore!

Breathing easy

Friday 14th & Saturday 15th Jan

By Friday morning Sarah was well on the road to full fitness again, although she still has some weight to replace!

Steve and I set off in mid-morning on our mission to visit the Mount Gay Rum Distillery and fulfil a few jobs along the way.

We called in at the FedEx office to send off the CD with the CT scans of Sarah to the radiologist in the UK and asked them for directions to the distillery. (We had already been to the bus station where they had told us we needed to go to a different bus station!) The staff at FedEx were very helpful but all the while that the two guys were giving us slightly contradictory advice, the nice lady just kept shaking her head. This would go some way to explaining why we then found ourselves taking a very long way round, but we did at least walk past the Kingston Oval (cricket ground) and finally arrived at Mount Gay which very unhelpfully had no signs up at all, so we walked past it once!

However our luck improved once we had entered and despite the fact that we had just missed the start of a tour, another nice lady suggested we just slip in at the back rather than wait for 45 minutes for the next one. We joined the group of Americans off one of today's crop of cruise ships and the guide immediately spotted us and got us to introduce ourselves. The tour was interesting and mercifully brief before getting to the crux of the matter which was the tasting. We rather assumed we were supposed to have paid for this tour, but took our cue from the others and willingly joined in. This part of the tour lasted for quite some time as we had glass after glass of the different rums distilled here. We were then taken to the bar where we were invited to continue sampling the same rums some more. They did draw the line at the flagship product, which at 95 pounds a bottle was not too surprising, but then for a pittance they let us buy a couple of large shots anyway.

We took a taxi back into town where we had to swing by the CT scan clinic to pick up the written report for Sarah and wandered into Bridgetown to buy a couple of phones with Caribbean sim cards (15 pounds each including 5 pounds of credit!) and have some lunch. Lunch involved queuing up for a buffet arrangement, but there was no information about what to do etc. and so we joined up with the three Bajan ladies in front of us and quizzed them which turned out to be a shrewd move as they were very helpful and seemed to get us special attention from the staff. All very relaxed and we were very impressed by how much food the locals could pile on a single small plate at the buffet itself.

We then made our rather unsteady way back out to the anchorage to find that Sarah had been beavering away doing loads of jobs in my absence! Oops!

The collective plan to visit a district known as Oistins for a local fish supper etc was postponed until Saturday for some reason.....

We sent the CT scan off to our wonderful Worcester GP in the evening, and she has offered to show it to Sarah's original radiologist. Her initial response to the report (at 11.30pm UK time – definitely above and beyond the call of duty – but put Sarah's mind at rest in a very big way) was that all the excitement has been about old lesions relating to the endometriosis and Sarah's hysterectomy ten years ago. It was an entertaining report: having invited Sarah to bring any other information to the scan, she never saw a doctor or was interviewed, but the report states "there appears to have been a hysterectomy" as if the fairies have been at work and Sarah might not have noticed!

On Saturday, Scott-Free and ourselves hosted Bob and Lynn who live here, to coffee and then lunch on board while we answered their many questions about how we had set the boats up and other issues relating to long distance cruising as they plan to follow in our footsteps so to speak before too long as they have a yacht in Marmaris.

In the evening the four of us went off to Oistins to see the fish market, sample the rum punches, fish suppers and generally soak up the atmosphere of this predominantly Bajan area. Our taxi driver out there (Corrie) was very genial and like so many others, was keen to tell us all about everything we were seeing as we drove along. Once there we wandered through the market and amongst all the stalls, bars and 'restaurants'. Actually it was all great fun and the bigger enterprises had big BBQ's and were churning out various species of fish cooked to varying degrees of incineration. After some beers in one bar and some rum punches in another, we ended up sitting down at 'Pat's place' and all had great, but very spicy BBQ fish dishes, Sarah sampling the local delicacy of flying fish and declaring it well worth the fuss.

We decided to return to Bridgetown in one of the Government buses as recommended by the taxi driver earlier, but after a fair old wait we changed our minds and jumped into one of the frequent minibuses which operate just like the Dolmus in Turkey: you just jump aboard as it slows down and squeeze into any available space and hurtle off down the road. Steve appeared to be sat next to an interesting chap, but it later turned out that he was just blind drunk and so Steve never actually made out anything the chap slurred at him! Sarah, Chris and myself were in the very back seats and were able to enjoy watching the comings and goings as the minibus picked up and dropped off locals along the way. In the end, to our relief it dropped us off right by the dinghy and all for the princely equivalent 75 pence each. Transport and entertainment included.

Raining in Paradise

Sunday 16th & Monday 17th Jan

Sunday was firstly about getting some jobs done around the boat but the highlight of the day was our invitation to have an early evening BBQ at Bob and Lynn's house out on the west coast.

Bob collected all four of us from the waterfront at 3.00pm and drove us first to the beach close to their house with a short detour to show us 'Sandy Lane' which is where a good many of the rich and famous have their mansions. (The big stars though like Cliff, Cilla and the new addition, Wayne Rooney all live elsewhere in rather more exclusive surroundings far from prying eyes!)

There are no private beaches on Barbados as such, but some have easier access than others. This was a wonderful long sweep of soft sand with big but gentle waves and several long established trees set back giving much needed shade. We had a long lazy swim before we drove the short distance up the hill to their house with its fantastic panoramic view due west of the Caribbean Sea. Here we enjoyed a dip in their pool and sundowners before changing and sitting down to a wonderful BBQ dinner. Finally Bob kindly ran us back to Bridgetown and we made our way back out to the boats at anchor in the bay.

On Monday we had a car booked for another of our ambitious 'tours around the island with an inadequate map'. Bob had already warned us about the signposting here and the lack of much relationship between any maps and what actually happens on the ground!

The car was ready early for us, but unfortunately a very big squall of 30 + knots and torrential rain meant that we did not set off ashore any earlier than originally planned! I was today's designated driver and it did not take long to master the controls of quite the smallest automatic car in the world. However it was fairly new and everything worked and so off we set on a trip carefully planned in principle by Sarah and Chris.

Coffee and cakes were taken in Speightstown (Steve though, had a cheese and ham baguette which inexplicably also contained very strong chilli!) before we moved on to Port St Charles. We went here as part of a cunning plan to do all our checking out of the country paperwork in this quiet office rather than have to make our way on foot to the main customs and immigration offices at the cruise terminal in Bridgetown tomorrow. There were a few frustrating delays here all the same, but in the end it was all done properly although there is the small issue of us now being required to have left the country by 11.30 am on Tuesday. (You get 24 hours to leave after doing the papers.)

Next stop was St Nicholas Abbey whose name is rather misleading as it is not even slightly religious! St Nicholas Abbey is one of the island's oldest surviving plantations (founded in 1658) complete still with the Jacobean mansion house and outbuildings and of course – a distillery. It is well laid out and thought through for visitors, but the highlight is probably the 20 minute black and white home movie shot in the 1930's showing life on the plantation as captured by the owner on a visit out here.

Lunch beckoned and we headed off to the east coast but first we stood on Cherry Tree Hill, surrounded by mahogany trees and enjoyed the breathtaking views down the dramatic east coast of Barbados with the massive Atlantic rollers crashing across the coral reefs that guard that side of the island.

Our expert navigator (Sarah) found her way to the Atlantis Hotel which was down some very narrow and steep tracks, perched above the waves breaking along the rocky shore below. The setting was wonderful, but the service was a bit slow and we spent rather longer than planned waiting for some rather overpriced meals!

In addition to all our delays, we were also now rather low on fuel which was rather foolish of us. We had seen so many fuel stations along the way up the west side of the island, we just assumed this would also be the case down the east side! But this was not the case at all and so we took detailed instructions at the hotel to find the nearest petrol station which needless to say took us miles off into the hinterland, up and down countless steep hills and the route seemed designed to run us out of what little fuel we had left. The weather also now changed dramatically and so as we potted along and ground our way up the hills, the rain came hosing down and the winds blew with a force that had us more than a tad concerned about our boats back down in Carlisle Bay. We did however eventually emerge into a small town with a welcome petrol station and we were on our way again,

but by now all our plans for the rest of the day were in disarray, so we ditched the idea of the visit to Hunt's gardens and sadly we also had to shelve the offer of tea with Martin's parents who live out in that part of the island.

It took us quite some time and a few wrong turns (the signposts here are entirely optional and sometimes there are none and sometimes a forest of signs, most of which appear to be advertising.) before we finally emerged in Warrens (a town) and found the 'Save Centre' supermarket which was our chance to do some proper food shopping before departure the next day. Weirdly they stock quite a lot of Waitrose own products and this supermarket was considerably bigger and better stocked than anything else we have come across. This was a very worthwhile stop and it was with some difficulty that we crammed all our purchases and then ourselves back into the tiny car and headed back into Bridgetown, meeting the rush hour and its near stationary traffic heading out of town.

Finally returned to Serafina by dinghy in the dark and all four of us sat down for a quiet drink and reflected on one of our least successful island tours!

Off to St Lucia tomorrow (Tuesday).

Ain't no sunshine

14:04.40N 60:57.02W

Tuesday 18th, Wednesday 19th & Thursday 20th Jan

Spent the morning getting Serafina ready for the sail over to St Lucia and then at lunchtime we went ashore to join Steve, Chris, Bob and Lin for a buffet lunch at Cave Sheppards which is the department store in Bridgetown. I probably ate too much bearing in mind that we were about to set off on an overnight passage, but we all had a good time and we were sorry to have to say goodbye to Bob and Lin who have been so helpful and accommodating.

We were a little nervous about the fact that we were due to have left the island by 11.30am and our nerves were not allayed at all by the unusual appearance of a small customs launch that picked up a buoy only 100 metres from us and sat there all afternoon whilst we made ourselves finally ready for the off! Our departure was delayed a little by yet more big squalls that brought strong gusts and loads more rain and we had eventually to don our full waterproofs and raise the anchor and head off north east for St Lucia.

Scott-Free left at the same time, indeed we followed them for the first hour which was under engine as the wind had dropped away to just 5 knots. We cleared the main harbour passing Queen Mary 2 and two other cruise ships and gradually the wind began to pick up as we got further from the island. Before too long we were able to shut the engine down and were soon sailing briskly with 12 knots of wind and soon after that we had nearly 20 knots of wind and were sailing at 8 knots and quickly passed Scott-Free as the sun went down and was replaced by a full moon as the heavy clouds began to clear leaving a clear starlit sky.

We then had to reef down as we were going too fast, based on the fact that we had 100 miles to go and still had 11 hours of darkness ahead of us and as usual did not want to arrive in the dark. The wind increased to 25 knots which was fine, but as we broke clear of the lee of the island we found the Atlantic to be very inhospitable. The sea and waves were very confused and the next 12 hours were as uncomfortable and as unpleasant as anything we have had probably over the whole of the

past year. Fortunately we were blessed with a full moon and a clear sky all night, but we took waves over our decks from pretty much all angles and directions! The big rollers were pretty much as usual but there were seemingly two other wave patterns at work so we got slammed by unexpected walls of water which either broke into the cockpit or better for us were the ones that broke over the bows and ran down the decks hitting the deck screen. Sarah also spotted an unusual sound to one of the deck drains while it was clearing water off the deck, and to her horror, realised it was the rather vital handheld remote for the anchor. I had forgotten to bring it back into the cockpit after raising the anchor and it was gaily floating along the toe-rail of the boat, on its way to a nice sweep off the open stern! Off-watch sleep was not easy generally but the saving grace was that we were making such good speed, we knew that it was only the one night to put up with.

There was a bit of excitement with several large ships sharing the same route as us but everything worked out OK and as dawn broke we were just a few miles from the northern tip of St Lucia. We made our way into Rodney Bay and finally into the marina where we were made to feel very welcome indeed. Sarah had cleverly pre-registered for our customs, immigration and health online using 'eSea Clear' which made us very popular with the officials as it saved them a lot of work and it seems is not used by nearly enough people.

First impressions of the place were very favourable and we found everyone to be extremely helpful, although we were met by a number of entrepreneurial locals all offering their services mainly based on boat cleaning and polishing. We both agreed that 'Vision' was the most plausible and were not too surprised when Scott-Free took him on to clean and polish their hull. (We might well do the same tomorrow.) We met up with Shaun McMullen who lives on his boat here in the marina during the sailing season and who had been very helpful to us via email when we were looking for recommendations for a suitable place to leave Serafina in May for the hurricane season. He was keen for us to meet others here and was also eager to give us any help and advice we needed. As it happened though we never made the rendezvous in the bar in the evening as the rainstorm that arrived was pretty spectacular and having had such a bad night the previous night, we opted for a quiet night in and some sleep.

Thursday dawned bright and sunny and just as we were about to start on the long list of things we had planned, Shaun arrived and asked if we wanted to join him and some others for coffee in one of the bars. This led to us meeting a number of others including his partner Gabby and his brother Steve and his partner Jenny all living afloat here in the winter and we gleaned a lot of information about both the island and the Caribbean generally. Seems (like so many other places we have been over the past three years) that the weather right now is highly unusual and in this case, rather than the frequent very heavy rain showers we have experienced here, this time last year they were in the grip of the worst drought for 50 years! Mmmm.

The rest of the day seemed to slide by as we discovered various shops, chandleries etc. added to which Sarah and Chris disappeared for a large part of the afternoon in the dinghy to explore the nearby shopping mall. They reported back that the shops were OK but the Haagen Daz ice creams were divine!

Yet more rain, but we braved the weather in the evening and we popped along to the marina bar for a sundowner with Steve and Chris and it was no surprise that we met up with Shaun and the others for a few beers. It was really quite noisy, what with the rain and very loud and shrill (Tree?) frog cries.

We have certainly been impressed by the all infrastructure here and plan to get quite a few things done one way or another before we leave Rodney Bay to explore some of the other parts of the

island both by land and sea. One thing is for sure and that is that we are not short of information and really helpful advice.

some new photos posted at www.rhbell.com as well.

Island in the rain

Friday 21st, Saturday 22nd & Sunday 23rd Jan

Spent the day seemingly just pottering about trying to get a few things done. We decided to employ Vision and his girlfriend Meshana to clean and polish Serafina's hull and they did a fantastic job at a very reasonable price.

We have also decided that we actually need a proper rib (inflatable dinghy with a rigid hull) as getting in from anchorages such as Carlisle Bay is very tedious and very wet in our little dinghy with its tiny outboard. In fact the built in fuel tank is not actually big enough to hold enough fuel to get all the way in and back out from some anchorages! These things are neither cheap nor particularly easy to come by and so the research is slightly tempered by what we can actually get hold of. After the usual long involved gestation period as I mulled over the options we have decided now on what we want and will now have to wait to see how long it might take for the thing to actually arrive on the island. We may go off sailing and come back to pick it up in a week or so.

Friday night we invited Shaun & Gaby, Steve and Jenny and, of course, Chris and Steve off Scott-Free who are actually moored next to us in the marina for drinks and we all had a wonderful evening, mostly with us quizzing them at length about where to go and what to see. What also remarkable was that the rain held off for once!

Saturday seemed to slip by rather quickly although Sarah was fairly productive on deck whilst I was rather chained to a hot computer down below. Cobra Libra with James and Lesley (we met them first in Porto Santo) arrived in the marina and are on a pontoon fairly nearby so we plan to catch up with them shortly. We had early evening drinks on board S-F and retired for a fairly early night.

On Sunday it was time for our now traditional mystery drive around the island tour. However in a complete break with tradition, we employed Vision as our guide and driver which worked very well as he had access to a large Honda 4 X 4 and knows his way around! He certainly open our eyes to the place and had no difficulty in driving us into areas where perhaps a car load of white folks might not usually venture too often. He also took us up into the tropical rain forest and as is fast becoming traditional on our trips, it rained like hell every time we wanted to get out and take photos. What soon became obvious though was the extent of the damage caused by Hurricane Tomas which blitzed this island right at the end of October. Great swathes of damage can be seen everywhere and still there are roads closed and those that are open are frequently reduced to single track as bridges and culverts and verges have been badly damaged and only partly cleared. Vision also very sadly showed us the site where a friend of his and his family used to live, which was swept away by a land slide during the hurricane. The family have never been found. A very sobering sight.

Vision took us up a track through some rain forest heading for some waterfalls, but as we pressed on up the track we came across international aid agencies water treatment plants and stand pipes that were providing basic drinking water from the brown and swollen river. Our progress was halted after a mile or so by a palm tree that had come down across the road and so we got out and walked for a while, but that ended when the rain recommenced. The rainforest was quite stunning: incredibly lush with so many huge green, but varied leaves. We recognised many species which we

struggle to coax as houseplants, growing like weeds here. And everywhere there is the most incredible range of trees growing wild bearing all sorts of fruit, grapefruit, cocoa, coffee beans, breadfruit etc. a true taste of paradise.

We had lunch in a nice little restaurant with a view across a bay to the Pitons which are two very distinctive island landmarks (and a World Heritage site) which we hope to revisit by sea later on during our stay. This part of the island has been well used over the years by various blockbuster movies as it has some dramatic settings. After lunch we drove up to the Diamond Waterfalls and tropical gardens and were treated to a rather idiosyncratic tour by Alexander, a local guide who was very energetic and interesting although his patter was not unlike automatic gunfire and was hard to keep up with. But despite professing many birds here we have barely seen any – one hummingbird, a large bird of prey and a few less interesting LBJs. (Little Black Jobs)

Finally we ended the day driving up the typically rugged east coast before returning across the island to Rodney Bay and sitting down in the Cafe Olé for welcome coffees and cake.

Time to burn

Mon 24th, Tuesday 25th & Wednesday 26th Jan

It is sort of worrying now how the days seem to slip by with very little happening or being done!

On Monday Sarah got the local sail maker to re-stitch part of the spray hood (the thread is turning to dust after three years of unrelenting sun and UV damage) and also to reinforce parts of the bimini which started to tear during the very early part of the Atlantic crossing. He was very prompt and the work was done by the end of the day, but whilst the spray hood was off, Sarah chose to give it a good wash which meant that for all of Monday we had no protection from the sun which of course was blisteringly hot and did remind us of the importance of these covers. As it happens when we came to put the spray hood back on, we found some more thread that needed replacing as well so that has gone back to the sail maker and left us with no cover over the companion way hatch. This has proved a real nuisance not because of the sun, but because of the rain. Every day we have had these sudden, fairly short but intense downpours, which have us scurrying around closing all the hatches that we have only just remembered to open. But with no cover over the companionway, we have to close the hatch which apart from making it all very stuffy, means I run the very real risk of banging my head on the bloody thing as I nip up the steps! Not a very fast learner it seems.

On Monday we also placed our order for a new dinghy and outboard and heaven knows how that took nearly 2 hours, but nothing is done very quickly out here. We now have to wait for goodness how long for the goods to turn up here. In theory they were due in St Martin (another island) on Tuesday and then might take up to a week to reach here. But all things are relative and given that the timescales out here make the Irish seem prompt, we have no expectation of seeing the new boat for quite some time yet. We plan to head off and return here later.

On Wednesday Sarah and Chris took a local bus into the capital, Castries to visit the market. The bus system is similar to the dolmus in Turkey: the minibus sets off once it is full, but they run pretty constantly and very fairly efficient although one of our drivers forgot to stop for one passenger but offered to drop her off on his way back – she wasn't very pleased! We had sped through town with Vision on Sunday and he had pointed out the market etc and also mentioned just how busy the streets would be. We crawled into town through a back street shortcut to try and avoid the traffic, and got out at the bus station, which is basically a long street, full of hundreds of minibuses. We headed for the market bearing umbrellas, lots of heavy downpours. The market was a bit of a

disappointment; it is very large and spread over three buildings but the majority of it is crammed full of tiny souvenir stalls all selling more or less the same stock of jazzy shirts, tie-dye dresses, basketwork, carved statues etc. We wondered how on earth they all manage to make a living, although there were three cruise liners in the harbour with their passengers aimless wandering around. I managed to buy some vegetables from the table stalls outside the market from a very friendly and informative seller, who explained a lot of the exotic vegetables we haven't come across before. We then found the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception which was the size of a large church, very brightly decorated inside with interesting depictions of both white and black Jesuses. After that we had a bit of a look round but fighting through the enthusiastic taxi drivers all trying to sell trips to the sea of humanity off the ships, the constant rain and not particularly inspiring shops, we admitted defeat and returned on the minibus.

Then late on Wednesday afternoon we received a knock on the hull and popped up to find two Swedish couples standing on the dock. They had just arrived in their Najad 460 and were moored one boat away from us. They were particularly excited as they had a whole host of questions to ask us as they had seen Serafina before, whilst she was moored up in Puerto Calero (Lanzarote) whilst we were back in the UK for a month. They had been hugely impressed with the gantry we had built in Turkey and apparently they have hundreds of photos of Serafina taken from every angle and now had the opportunity to quiz us about it all. Their Najad 460 is called Ellen and of course it did not take us long to find out that we both know a number of other Najad owners so the scene is set for Thursday when we plan to get to inspect each other's boats.....

Actually it was especially nice to have another smart Najad sitting near us on the dock as we have been suffering a bit of Oysteritis. It really does seem that there are more Oysters (a brand of yacht) here than in Fox's marina on the River Orwell which is where they mostly hail from. It would appear that a whole host of them come across with the ARC and then get moored up here and left empty.

Klingons on the starboard bow

14:05.41N 60:57.78W

Thurs 27th, Fri 28th, Sat 29th, Sun 30th and Monday 31st Jan

Thursday and Friday evenings involved a bit of competitive boat inspecting, with Goran and Helene from Ellen coming on board Serafina for drinks, armed with a camera! Goran is a self confessed lover of stainless steel and his boat has had huge amounts of additions and jobs done by Timo who is the star stainless man who usually does work for Najad, Hallberg Rassy and Malo yachts back where they are all built on the island of Orust in Sweden. Goran's main interest though was our bimini and the gantry at the back and he studied every detail with the very definite plan to have his own very weak bimini replaced as soon as practical. We had a great evening and they had news on all sorts of people we knew and since their home waters are the islands around Henan we were able to relate well to their stories.

On Friday it was the return match and suddenly I realised why they had seemed fairly unimpressed with one or two of the items I had been proudly showing to them on Serafina. Their boat is nominally the same as ours and just one year older, but it is different in so many ways. Certainly there were twinges of envy as we were shown round, but I guess this works all the time, both ways. Anyway they were of course wonderful hosts and we had a second very entertaining evening.

On Saturday we finally tore ourselves away from the marina berth and headed out into Rodney Bay to sit on the anchor while we wait for the new dinghy to arrive and to enjoy the peace and quiet that comes at anchor. The breeze is fresher and the turquoise blue water invites you to spend lots of time swimming, which is about the only real exercise we get and so far out here we have done almost none at all. It was while swimming on Saturday that I began to inspect our hull a bit closer after the trip over and as expected found barnacles etc round the stern and on the aft hull sections where the hull is contact with the water when sailing but does not have antifouling paint applied. But on the bow, just below the water, I found limpets growing which was a surprise to me as you wonder how they get to grab onto a vessel slicing through the water! Presumably they started life when we were in a marina in the Canaries perhaps?

We were just contemplating the next stage of our travels without Scott-Free around anymore, when they duly appeared and anchored about 40 metres away. At some stage soon we will be parting company!

Rodney Bay and St Lucia in general have had a chequered history of ownership. For centuries the French and English fought each other over these islands and St Lucia changed flag 14 times in 150 years. The British eventually prevailed here and Pigeon Island and Rodney Bay became the home of a British Fleet set on attacking the French occupied islands to the north. However despite the French ceding St Lucia to the English in 1814 we were a little slow it seems in replacing the existing French customs etc. and so most towns here have French names and the local Patois is French based!

Pigeon Island (which is actually joined to the main island by a newish causeway) still has the remains of the fort, barracks and some of the defences and is now a park maintained by the St Lucia National Trust. Situated here overlooking their own old wooden jetty is a restaurant/bar called Jambe de Bois which is a wonderful idiosyncratic wooden shack with rickety tables and chairs outside made from bits of old wooden ships. The view is across the bay and the breeze is refreshing as are the rum punch cocktails. In fact we left Steve and Chris there on Saturday night as they celebrated their wedding anniversary, with Steve last seen going downhill fast!

On Sunday morning we woke to find another Najad moored very close to us. This turned out to be 'Flying Penguin', a Najad 440 which is on its way north through the Caribbean. There we were thinking how intrepid we were having completed sailing 15,000 miles in Serafina since leaving Sweden ourselves in 2007 and just got here having left the Middle East in July 2010 and then they turn up on their way north having sailed from Sweden (in 2008) all the way down to the Falkland Islands and then back up to here! They were only planning to stay for the morning here in Rodney Bay and then sail on up to Martinique, but when we suggested that they could come for drinks in the evening if they changed their minds....they changed their minds!

Chris and Steve joined us as well and we sat fairly spellbound as Brittis and Hjalle told us some of their harrowing tales of adventure including being knocked down (boat laid over 90 degrees on its side) three times during a storm that blew at 60 knots for two full days and nights; and being run down and dismasted near Istanbul in their previous yacht by a Bulgarian cargo ship! They also had wonderful stories about their trip down to the Falklands and all the research they had done for rounding the Horn (he also had business connections in Chile) but in the end one of their daughters announced that she was getting married and all their plans went by the board. They brought with them their ship's teddy bear 'Charlie' who clearly goes everywhere with them and even has his own section on their website www.flying-penguin.se and so we introduced him to 'Hans' our ship's teddy! Anyway the evening flashed by far too quickly and they are heading off now, north to follow the east coast of America up to New York and perhaps beyond.

On Monday Steve, Chris, Sarah and I decided to trek to the top of Pigeon Island which involved making two pretty steep climbs. The first took us up to the old gun emplacements from the 1780's overlooking Rodney Bay where the English fleet had been based and then the second took us to the top of Signal Hill which was the look-out point from which you can clearly see Martinique, just 25 miles away. It was needless to say hot work, but we did at least make an early start and then celebrated with lunch in the Jambe du Bois restaurant back overlooking the anchorage. We have posted a few photos of the expedition as usual at http://www.rhbell.com/photos_2011.html

Swing Low Sweet Chariot

14:04.64N 60:57.48W

Tuesday 1st, Wed 2nd, Thursday 3rd and Friday 4th Feb

Tuesday was Chris's birthday so the plan was devised that involved us all heading into the marina in their dinghy in the late morning and then taking a leisurely walk following some loose instructions we had been given which should take about one and half hours over some hills and down to a beach and a bar on the north east coast.

Now we specialise in heading off around islands without maps, but we do at least usually have a car. All went well until we reached the very first decision point when I declared that we needed to carry on for 100 yards and then turn right, but was comprehensively overruled by the other three who all favoured the road they were on. We walked on stopping after 30 minutes to purchase water and some ice creams before continuing. (We did actually ask the checkout lady in the shop for directions and she told us we had to retrace our steps all the way back, so being pragmatic.....this advice was ignored and we pressed on.)

We finally asked a lad on the roadside for his view on things and he was very clear that we had no chance of getting to where we wanted unless we retraced our steps all the way back to the start. Fortunately at this point a mini-bus bumped its way along the track we were on and so we climbed on board along with the lad and headed back to our starting point.

Now we were faced with a new dilemma, did we take the correct pathway and spend another hour and a half walking across country to the beach (it was past midday now and very hot) or did we take option two which was a stroll up to the Golf Club where we had been told they did a very reasonable lunch. Well that was an easy choice and armed with detailed directions from the mini-bus driver, we headed off.

Now we know about local timescales that make the Irish look punctual, but "just up there and turn right at the roundabout" did not at any point suggest to me that we would be in for nearly an hour long walk, mostly uphill! Indeed, when we asked a chap after 30 minutes if it was much further he did at least estimate another 20 minutes.... However the walk was worthwhile and we finally emerged at the Golf Club which is a very grand place and we were suddenly concerned that our attire might not reach the standards required, but all was well and we sat in splendour on a balcony overlooking part of the course (par 71) and enjoyed a nice lunch and a good rest.

For the return journey we cheated and simply asked if the club's courtesy bus might run us make to the marina which they did without a murmur. Once back at Rodney Bay marina, we headed off in the dinghy across the lagoon to the shopping mall to get some supplies and then end Chris's birthday with ice cream and cakes at the Haagen Daz restaurant. All very decadent and enjoyable.

On Wednesday we pottered about again, still killing time and were pleasantly surprised when 'Ellen' the Swedish Najad 460 came alongside in the late afternoon and invited us over for drinks to celebrate Helene passing her PADI diving exam. We had another great evening with her and Goran and they left in the morning heading north to Martinique.

On Thursday I had a difficult conversation with the company supplying the dinghy, but it seems that it is waiting at St Martin's airport which is of little help to us, but I can think of worse places to wait! Scott-Free are about to leave us now and are heading off on the next phase of their travels which include a plan to sail up the east coast of USA this summer, so we invited them on board for a last game of Mexican Train which Steve won at a canter.

Friday was more of an action day as we opted to move across Rodney Bay and anchor on the Reduit Beach side as it meant that we were closer to the marina so we could use our old dinghy to make our way in to watch the rugby and various other events over the weekend.

So around 10am we raised our anchor and headed off across the bay and after our first attempt at anchoring ended in failure (rock bottom which would not hold the anchor) we were successful at the second attempt and were able to dig the anchor deep into a good firm sandy seabed. It is a bit more rolly over on this side but it saves us getting wet in the dinghy!

Made our way ashore in the early afternoon and had a nice buffet lunch in the Breadbasket and then after a wander around the shops there, we persuaded the staff in one of the bars to let us watch the rugby on the TV (not as easy as you might think) and settled down to watch our boys win a fine and deserved victory over the Welsh. Goodness me, the rugby double over the Aussies, Wales beaten in Cardiff and the Ashes.....life is good. As usual though, no sign of any Welsh supporters now and at least the Aussies had the good grace to email their congratulations...well sort of!

With the game being in the evening in the UK, it meant that we got to watch it in the afternoon here (4 hours behind) so with the sun shining and the breeze to cool us and the beers we had a good afternoon and evening.

Said goodbye to Scott-Free who plan to set sail in the morning (Saturday) and as they are on the other side of the bay, we will probably not see them actually leave.

Forgot to mention the other day whilst we were being driven around the island, Vision took us to a very poor coastal village where the Japanese have been allowed to invest heavily and have bought the old fish market and are busy building a quay so they can land whales. Everyone abhors whaling, but the island is so poor generally that they are happy to be bribed in this way. In fact the south of the island is the poorest part generally and as is so often the way of these things, it was also the bit most devastated by Hurricane Tomas when it swept across last autumn. Still large areas do not have running water and little prospect of it being restored any time soon and there are a number of charity events etc, being run by the yachting community to help as best they can.

Waiting

Sat 5th, Sunday 6th and Monday 7th Feb

Friday night and Saturday morning were not good for sleeping as the right hand side of Rodney Bay suffers from a heavy swell. Perhaps not epic like Carlisle Bay, Barbados, but enough to disturb us most of the night.

So on Saturday morning we decided to move back to Pigeon Island where things remain flat all the time and as we were about to leave, Scott-Free came on the radio to say a final cheerio as they were leaving St Lucia and heading north to Martinique. We watched them leave and then motored across the bay and anchored in a neat spot close to the shore and out of the way. Followed the exploits of 'the other teams' in the six nations rugby on the internet although the connection is a bit flaky this far from the signal.

Anchored further out in the bay was a cruise ship called 'Wind Surf' which is another of these things with masts stuck on the top to give the impression of sailing! The entertainment today though, was that the crew were ferried ashore to set up chairs and refreshments on one of the beaches and once this was ready, passengers were ferried in boats to the shore to sit in the sun, swim and enjoy a steel band. Sadly for them, we had a series of rain showers which did keep them on their toes a bit. Finally at the end of the afternoon, everything was cleared away and all returned to the ship and it headed off into the sunset.

On Sunday morning, after taking the aft heads apart and replacing two seals, we also moved back across to the other side of the bay as this allowed us to anchor close to the entrance to the lagoon. This meant that we could easily now motor into the lagoon in our dinghy and attend a surprise 60th birthday party and lunchtime BBQ for Steve (Shaun's brother) at the St Lucia Yacht Club. This was a great little event and as ever we met all sorts of folks, all full of useful info about the islands, but the problem is remembering it all! Loads of Canadians out here at this time of year (Snowbirds) and usually it is impossible to tell them apart from the Americans (until too late) but today it was a breeze, because all self-respecting Americans were sat in front of the Superbowl and so all the odd accents at the party pretty much had to be Canadian!

Have to retell the wonderful story Steve told us about his Irish born mother-in-law who lives in Cape Cod. On Saturday night he was talking to her on the phone and at the end of the call she signed off by hoping that, "You really enjoy your surprise birthday party tomorrow"!

Late in the afternoon we potted back out to Serafina in the bay, getting half drowned in a heavy downpour and then moved back across to Pigeon Island where on the second attempt we set the anchor in good holding. And a good job too as during the night the wind and rain came at us for hour after hour and by Monday morning we were still well anchored, but the GPS indicated that we had slipped around 12 feet.

Monday just slipped by with no news about the long awaited dinghy and we were buffeted by some quite strong winds which caused us to keep a keen eye on our position in case we dragged any more. We went ashore to the little restaurant on Pigeon Island, but were very disappointed to discover we had carefully selected the night they are shut!

On Tuesday we made our way back into the marina as we had been invited for drinks on board Tabasco Jazz in the evening and we just did not fancy either a night in the rolly part of the anchorage or a long wet dinghy ride home. Marina wanted to park us on the worst pontoon where we would be next to (and downwind of) a very dusty and busy road, so we said we would wait to see what else turned up around midday as boats left. By keeping a sharp ear tuned to channel 16 we eventually heard a boat call the marina staff to check his meter as he was off shortly and so we immediately called in again and were allocated a near perfect spot.

Drinks on Tabasco jazz were excellent and we also got to know Kay and Ken from Coyote. They run their boat as a charter operation for racing and corporate events both out here and back in the UK.

They manage this by shipping the boat back to the UK each spring for the UK summer season and then sail it out here on the ARC every November, selling places on the trip to sailors who are keen to sail cross the Atlantic, but with no suitable boat of their own. (<http://www.kayachtcharter.com>)

Wednesday was not my most favourite day this week. I spent almost the entire day stripping down all the pipe work in the forward heads and de-scaling the hoses and pump etc. They certainly know how to build these things into a yacht, but no-one seems to have given a lot of thought as to how you might easily service and replace stuff! Sarah in marked contrast went off to the 'Ladies Lunch' which is a weekly event that takes place in a nearby restaurant with a pool and which takes up a sizable part of the day. There is quite a large community of yachts which arrive in Rodney Bay and just spend the majority of the winter (yes this is the winter here) season here, so Sarah reported that the lunch is well attended with a main core of regulars supplemented by those passing through. There is a very wide range of experience from the novice, to one wonderful woman who is here for her twelfth year but has still managed to avoid learning to sail and another whose husband has died but she is carrying on singlehanded. (Yes, but who fixes the toilets?)

During the week we received an email from the new owners of our first Najad (which was also called Serafina until her sale) to say that they had crossed the Atlantic as well back in November and were shortly arriving in Rodney Bay, so with luck we will be meeting up with them and seeing our first boat again which will be fun.

The dinghy is alleged to be in St Lucia now, but stuck in customs.....

I can think of worse places to have to sit and wait!

8th & 9th Feb missing

It won't take Long

14:27.67N 60:52.14W

Thursday 10th, Friday 11th and Saturday 12th February

Mixed emotions on Thursday as we continued to wait for the dinghy and outboard to emerge from customs. I was summoned to the local customs office for 3.30 pm and around 4.00 pm was allowed to see the items, all boxed up still and on the back of a lorry. I signed the customs forms and then watched as our dinghy, along with two others stacked up with it, drove off to be assembled and prepared. Something of another false dawn really as we did not actually get the goods until Friday!

On the brighter side of life we met Bob and Sue who are the owners of Mawari which is the former Serafina, our old Najad 400 and they very kindly invited us round in the evening for drinks and a good look round. This was a great evening and a little nostalgic as we remembered long forgotten features of this lovely boat. Actually the day was something of a red letter day for Najad because in addition to Serafina and the former Serafina, there was a Najad 490 in the marina and, during the afternoon, a beautiful Najad 570 came in which belongs to the company's principle shareholder complete with large Najad flag flying.

On Friday morning at long last we got our new dinghy and what a beauty it is too. The supplier still managed a couple of little cock ups just to round off a miserable experience though: when he proudly unveiled the name he had put on the bow for us (helps to avoid random thefts) not only had

they used the wrong colour but had managed to spell Doris wrong (Dorris). Ah well she is at least unique now!

Spent a good part of the day making a mounting on the rear rail of Serafina to accommodate the outboard and then working out how to get this bigger, rigid bottomed dinghy onto the foredeck without damaging the deck for when we are sailing. We also spent some time saying our goodbyes to any number of the lovely people we have met here and hope to catch up with them either elsewhere or even back here again someday. We also cleared customs and did all the paperwork for leaving the island the next morning. In the evening we had Bob and Sue from Mawari for drinks and after they had had a good look round Sue did ask us to let her know if we ever wanted to sell her!!

So on Saturday around 8.00am we slipped our lines and made our way out of Rodney Bay and headed north to Martinique. The weather forecast was for 20 knots of easterly wind with 3 to 4 metre waves which is a little high even for round here, but the trip was only 25 miles and so we felt comfortable going. The trick appears to be to motor-sail round the northern tip of St Lucia, through some quite lumpy overfalls, which allows you then to lay a course under sail the rest of the way to the French West Indies. However we were very lucky today as the wind was truly from the east and we were able to sail the entire way at a good pace. Certainly initially we were only able to manage around 5 knots as the seas were very big off the northern tip of St Lucia and they kept taking our way off as we plunged through them and we were in all fairness quite heavily reefed as well. But as we cleared the island things became a bit easier and with a bit more headsail out we were off at 6 and even 7 knots still close hauled.

We then were treated to one of the most spectacular sights of our sailing careers as we watched two huge pods of dolphins, at least as many as 50 in each group, powering their way into the big seas heading directly towards us from the west. As it happens only a few of them chose to actually swim alongside us and we guess they were hunting the shoals of tiny flying fish fleeing everywhere, but the sight of this mass of aquatic wildlife was truly awesome. It was not until we studied our photographs later that we discovered that the bigger darker ones at the front were actually Melon Headed Whales and the bulk of the pack were Fraser's dolphins. We have got a few half decent photos which I will be putting on www.rhbell.com just as soon as we can get to an internet cafe.

There was added drama as a 'Pan Pan' alarm went out on the VHF radio when an American reported seeing a ketch lose its main mast just south of Martinique. We listened as the drama played out, not more than 12 miles from us, but it seems that the lone sailor on board was managing OK and in the event we were slightly surprised that no rescue service was activated.

As we approached Martinique our radio burst into life again with a call from good old Scott-Free who were just about to leave Le Marin, which was where we were headed. We had rather expected them to have moved on by now but they had had a few electrical problems to overcome first. We made our way tentatively up the 'Cul de Sac Marin' which is an apt name for the narrow, winding, shallow and rather loosely buoyed approach to the town of Le Marin and its extensive and rather random anchorages. Reminding ourselves that the reds and greens over on this side of the Atlantic are the 'wrong' way round we headed up with numerous yachts heading past us on their way out. We encountered some swimmers, snorkelling in the channel, near one of the red buoys and were a bit taken aback when they shouted at us to keep away. In the heat of the moment I could not summon up enough colourful French to explain that they were probably in the wrong place and the moment had passed as we swept on towards the town!

We passed two modern yachts wrecked, lying on their sides on the shallow reefs either side of the channel, which served to keep our minds on the job! Finally we made our way into the packed

anchorage where S-F was lying and dropped our anchor in about the only available space which was just behind them. Steve mindful of the time, knew that the customs and immigration office was still open for about another 15 mins and so he jumped into his dinghy, came over and whisked me into town and I was able to complete the formalities in time. I should say at this point that Martinique is part of France still. It is actually a department of France and so the currency is the euro etc. etc. So what was refreshing was the ease of checking into the country. Not because we are from the UK, but all boats simply have to type their details into a computer consol in the office and everything is done.

Steve and Chris then came on board Serafina for a coffee which led to a beer or two and their plans to sail to St Anne's Bay were shelved. In the evening we all went ashore and after walking past two very good looking restaurants we settled on a third establishment that seemed more relaxed. It was to be an inspired choice and we had an outstanding dinner which combined all the things the French do well without the surly waiter with attitude! In fact the reports that Steve and Chris gave us indicate that this really is a part of France with all the bits we don't seem to like about the French filtered out!

Sunshine after the rain

Sunday 13th, Monday 14th, Tuesday 15th and Wednesday 16th Feb.

The anchorage that we are in at Le Marin is surrounded by mangroves and is completely packed as is the marina and a second anchorage across the bay. Almost all of the boats out in the anchorage have no-one on board (and therefore no anchor lights lit at night) and in some case you wonder if the owners are aware how little is keeping their boats attached to the mooring buoy they are using! Added to the fun are the charted but largely unmarked shallows that are all around us and the route to the town quay for dinghies has a crucial gap in a sand bar marked by a traffic cone stuck on top of a short pole. There is an egret roosting area ahead of us in the mangroves which we will try to photograph before we leave.

Sunday was partially spent sorting out the new dinghy and a system for lifting it complete with the engine up to the deck level, alongside Serafina so we can make it safe from theft at night.

In the afternoon we used the dinghy to go ashore and explore the town of Le Marin in a bit more detail. Of course being Sunday everything was closed except for a couple of supermarkets allegedly open until 1230. We had moored the dinghy at a small dock behind one of the supermarkets not realising that this would become locked after closing hours and closing hour was half an hour earlier than published – luckily a kind hearted security guy let us back to our dinghy. And we got a good idea of where everything was in preparation for a full scale assault on Monday!

So on Monday, after a spectacular downpour with a double rainbow and weird light effects (see photos in due course), we headed for the boatyard end of the town and firstly found a grubby but workmanlike Inox Welder (Stainless Steel) who agreed a very reasonable price to modify the crane arm we use for lifting the outboard engine onboard when going sailing. The original was made last winter in Marmaris (Turkey) and seemed fine until we put the new 18hp Tohatsu outboard on it!! Next stop was a small sail-maker and canvas workshop that Sarah had found mentioned in a book about the island. They were only too happy to help with our complicated requests and were far more reasonable and flexible than any other sail-makers we have found. Actually our requirement is not too complicated, but once I had converted this into my excellent schoolboy French they were left pretty confused.

Found a working internet cafe in the afternoon and so I got on with emails and the like whilst Sarah booked herself a hair cut for the next day at the saloon nearby and went off to investigate a third supermarket near the marina. Finally we raided the two main chandlery shops here, armed with a growing list of requirements most of which were fulfilled. Quite a contrast however between the two shops as one is staffed by disinterested and downright rude assistants whilst the other has two wonderfully hard working, knowledgeable and helpful ladies.

On Tuesday we spent the morning working on board and then in the afternoon, we went ashore again, so Sarah could have her haircut and I could revisit the internet cafe. Sarah, pleased with her haircut, also came across an excellent proper French bakery which was an added bonus.

Wednesday morning I fetched the crane arm from the welder (Tony Crater – tel: 0596 7466 60) who had done an excellent job, then I went on a wine shopping expedition before heading over to the main town dinghy pontoon to fetch Sarah who had been back up to the bakery, done a little shopping and spent quite a lot of time trying on and then buying some new bikinis!

In the afternoon we picked up the canvas work from Didier and his hard working wife Maria at 'Voiles & Assistance' tel: 33 (0) 596 74 88 32. Actually one of the jobs they have done for us involves a rain hood for the forward hatch. We have suffered here from broken nights (and days) constantly having to get up and close the hatches as yet another heavy rain squall passes over, only to have to get up and open everything again barely minutes later as it is stiflingly hot and airless with them shut! Sarah has rigged up a very successful arrangement over the aft cabin which not only allows us to keep the hatch open in the rain, but actually causes a positive draft and keeps the cabin surprisingly cool all night.

Tomorrow we plan to sail north up to Anse Mitan on the west coast of Martinique.

Rock ferry

14:33.31N 61:03.42W

Thursday 17th and Fri 18th Feb

Headed off from the anchorage at Le Marin around 8.45am and carefully picked our way out of the shallow bay with various unmarked reefs.

Moderate 15 knots of wind behind us as we sailed clear of the inlet and past the massed lobster pots gathered around the entrance and off towards Diamond Rock. Diamond Rock has a place in history as the English, during their long running fight with the French in Napoleonic times, short of ships chose to mount guns and a small garrison on the top of this precipitous rock and called it HMS Diamond. A good many French ships got quite a surprise as they sailed past!

The wind remained steady now at 15 knots and we had a great sail round the south west tip of Martinique and headed up the west coast as far as the big bay with the capital, Fort de France on its northern shoreline. We made for Anse Mitan which is a small bay on the southern side with a little village and protected anchorage. However along the way we did encounter a German catamaran which managed to get Sarah very agitated! He was sailing along in the opposite direction to us, sunbathing on the trampoline in the bows and paying no attention at all to what was around him. We were on a starboard tack which in sailing terms gave us absolute right of way, but he made no attempt to avoid us and indeed did not even see us until very late. He then rushed around and altered course all a bit too late and as we passed close behind him, he gestured dramatically to say

that he was towing a long fishing line! We made it rather clear (I believe) that he was wholly in the wrong here and we made no attempt to alter our course any more as we were genuinely beating to windward and did not want to surrender any more precious ground. He seemed bemused that we were not being any more helpful here and I suspect that like others we have met along the way, he has no real idea of the rules of the road and how they might apply to him!

We felt our way slowly into this small anchorage which is wedged tightly between a beach, a reef and a marked fairway for small ferries leading to a jetty. Our anchor did not want to bite and we dragged a bit before it reset itself, took hold and buried itself into the sand and coral bottom. Sarah had chosen to come here because of the regular ferry service across the big bay to Fort de France where she planned some shopping for Friday, however the downside of this location is that these same ferries fly in and out with quite big wakes which rock us about quite a bit once an hour. Fortunately they only run until 11.00pm! We spent the rest of the day doing a few odd jobs including a lengthy spell in the water by Sarah as we cleaned the waterline on both sides of the hull. Sarah's side was in poor condition and mine was a breeze! In the evening we went ashore for a stroll and walked up to the resort, marina and village just round the headland from where we are moored. Wall to wall boutiques seemed to be the order of the day and I felt lucky to get back to the boat with my wallet intact.

On Friday morning Sarah was up bright and early to catch the ferry, but was still getting ready when I saw it approaching. However we jumped into the dinghy and sped in to the jetty arriving just ahead of the ferry which Sarah was then able to catch. Unfortunately the majority of shops mentioned in the pilot and Lonely Planet guide have either closed or are verging on doing so, so Sarah was unable to complete the purchases she needed (including replacing the sheet she lost off the line in Barbados, needed for our forthcoming guests!) – but did manage a little retail therapy of her own. She also visited the cathedral and the Bibliothèque Schoelcher which she declared as wonderful, designed by a French architect Henri Pick for the 1889 World Exposition in Paris; it was then reassembled in Fort de France and is still used as the local library, if a very ornate and colourful one!

We ended the day rigging the new rain covers over the bow and stern hatches – but of course it didn't rain for once.

Stay Now

14:44.44N 61:10.69W

Sat 19th Feb

Very little wind this morning, but we only had around 16 miles to sail, so we lifted the anchor and raised the sails and made steady progress away from Fort de France and headed north to St Pierre.

The wind got up for a brief spell but finally died away altogether which is an absolute first since we arrived here. So very uncharacteristically we had to put on the engine and motor the final 3 miles into the wide bay where you can moor with some difficulty, close to the beach. The catch here is that it is very deep right up until very close to the shoreline when it shelves suddenly to provide a small plateau about 5 metres deep for you to anchor on. But the holding is varied which is why our first attempt failed as the anchor never got dug in. Our second go was fine and we ended up just south of the little pier that makes it easy to take a dinghy ashore.

St Pierre is a very pretty little place and was the cultural and social centre of Martinique (known as the Paris of the Caribbean) until the volcano, Mt Pelee behind erupted in 1902 and burnt nearly 30,000 people to death. There were only two recorded survivors, one a cobbler who was working in his cellar and the other an infamous murderer languishing in prison!

However the real tale of the day concerns the out of date information we had gleaned from the pilot book. We understood the Customs point (We need to clear out of the island and France before heading to the next island which is Dominica.) was a computer terminal in the beach front cafe that remained open all day, which indeed it was until a year or so ago. Nowadays it is in the tourist Information office at the other end of the town so realising that there would be a timing issue, we rushed over there and arrived breathless at 2pm to find that as this was Saturday, it had closed at midday until Monday morning. What price good information?

So we have to stay in this delightful spot until Monday morning when we will hope to clear out first thing and head for the north of Dominica which is around 55 miles.

In the evening we went ashore and had a wonderful meal in a delightful little restaurant that had been recommended by various people along the way 'Le Tamaya' (+596 596 78 29 09, yes the number looks odd but it is correct!)

Lazy day

15:34.82N 61:27.95W

Sunday 20th and Monday 21st Feb

Nothing to do on Sunday really as we were just waiting until Monday morning which is when the Customs point next opened open so we could get our clearance papers to leave Martinique.

As ever there were several jobs that needed doing on board and late in the morning we went ashore and Sarah went on a short walk of exploration around St Pierre whilst I spent an hour in the internet cafe, or what passed as one.

Our nearest neighbours are a Swiss couple who appear to have unlimited energy as they are constantly on the move. Swimming (snorkelling and swimming round the anchorage just for the exercise), rowing (just round the anchorage for the exercise) and when on board they are frequently doing exercises! Quite wore me out just watching.

In the evening several boats arrived quite late including a Canadian couple who spent around one and a half hours trying to anchor. They seemed determined to speed around to different parts of the anchorage, drop the hook and then immediately change their minds and move. They finally settled on a spot, but probably only because it was now pitch dark.

Our attention was also caught by a beautiful little sailing boat that Sarah covets and which we have posted several photos on the site <http://www.rhbell.com> . In addition a lovely gaff rigged sail training ship came and moored behind us, followed by a larger and scruffier square rigger which had someone waterskiing on a very long line attached to the top of the aft most mast!

But the biggest surprise in a way was the almost total absence of wind all day. This never happens out here and was very eerie and I suppose we should have been grateful that we were delayed from leaving today as we would have ended up making the 55 mile trip to Dominica under engine!

Woke up on Monday morning to find a large yacht "Mirabella 111' anchored behind us. Up early so as to be first at the Customs point when it opened, so we could clear out of Martinique and get on our way to Dominica. Arrived at the Tourist Office which houses the Customs computer at 8.00am to find that I was third in the queue and the place did not even open until 9.00am. By 9.00 there was quite a crowd of us chatting away in a mixture of languages which all got very confusing for a while. However the good news is that I did get to use the computer third (I was braced for some continental style shoving as the French are not exactly renowned for their queuing skills) and we were off on our way before 10.00am.

We were blessed today with a return to the usual wind pattern and so a healthy 20 knot wind hurried us out of the bay and out into the open Atlantic again for the 26 mile passage between Martinique and Dominica. Here the wind continued to blow at between 15 to 25 knots but we were able to sail on a fine reach and in truth were slightly over canvassed as we managed a constant 7 knots driving through the rising seas, peaking at just under 9 knots with a lot of water over the decks. However as we were passing the northern tip of Martinique, we came across a humpback whale which was pleasant surprise, but sadly the photos were not much good though.

Once we reached the lee of the quite mountainous island of Dominica, the wind pattern changed dramatically we were treated to massive squalls (from almost every point of the compass), dead calms and endless rainbows as we continued our 56 mile sail to Prince Rupert Bay in the north west of the island and the anchorage off the town of Portsmouth. We were joined briefly by some dolphins along the way but no more whales today!

Finally as we reached Prince Rupert Bay, the wind began to rise sharply and was blowing a healthy 30 knots out of the bay as we made our preparations to anchor. We were met by one of the local 'boat boys' who are basically licensed guides and individually take a visiting boat and crew under their wings and provide various chargeable services. Alexis suggested we anchored further over to the left hand side of the bay and so we picked a spot and dropped the hook. It failed to set and was dragging along the sea bed, when it suddenly took a hold and stopped us dead in our tracks. This is both good and possibly bad news as we do seem secure for the night, which is important because it is blowing very hard still, but we do sort of wonder what caught hold of the anchor so suddenly. We may have hooked the reef or a rock in which case getting the anchor back up tomorrow might be very interesting!

Visions of paradise

15:52.02N 61:35.21W

Tuesday 22nd and Wednesday 23rd Feb

Woke up to a calm sunny morning with no wind and just the drying decks from heavy rain around 6.00am (locally they call this 'Blessed rain' as it cools everything down and clears the morning air).

First off, Alexis came by and gave me a lift to the Customs and Immigration office. This turned out to be a smart modern office positioned in the back of what could almost be a farmyard right on the far

outskirts of the town. They dealt quickly and efficiently with the formalities which mean that we can leave whenever we please without having to return to the office for clearance. Very refreshing!

On the way back to Serafina, Alexis was pointing out the new jetty and facilities built by the Japanese. This is a mirror of what we have seen done in St Lucia in a similar small rather run down town, but the Dominicans are a touch smarter and once it was built, they refused to allow the Japanese to do any whaling here and so it is just a very smart and rather underused fish market.

Another significant feature of the waterfront here is the array of wrecked ships lying along the beach. These were mostly washed up here by Hurricane Ivan in 2005 and left to rot. We gather that a Pakistani company offered to clear them all away and scrap them, but the Dominican government wanted payment for the scrap. In the end the Pakistani company gave up the idea and left after six months' fruitless negotiations and now the Dominican Government is left with an eyesore which it cannot afford to clear away itself!

Dominica is by all accounts the least spoilt of all the Caribbean islands and it enjoys a wealth of natural and highly unusual features which make it popular with hikers and the like. However as it lacks many sandy beaches, it is a bit off the main stream tourist trail. Here in Prince Rupert Bay next to the town of Portsmouth, lies the Indian River and a trip up this narrow winding river is an absolute must. Remarkably the entrance to this sole attraction is largely blocked by.... yes of course, a wrecked ship, but the small boats operated by the Boat Boys here can get past and take you up the small river. We signed up for this trip and Alexis picked us up at 3.00pm and took us himself. The river is tiny and as part of a their national park setup it is wholly protected. No engines are allowed so the Boat Boys (they are mostly middle aged men) get out the wooden oars and row you up explaining everything along the way. We were treated to all sorts of sights and sounds and our photos as usual do not do the place any justice, but it was a very interesting trip and Alexis was a wonderful guide and entertainer.

We would like to return before too long and spend more time on this fascinating island, but we have to be in Antigua by the end of Feb, so for now we need to keep moving.

We had another very windy night in the bay, with over 30 knots recorded around midnight, which was a bit of a worry as the holding for the anchor here is pretty iffy. We had gone swimming on Tuesday morning to inspect our anchor to find that it was perfectly OK, but simply caught against a rock or coral outcrop. Not ideal by any means, but secure against a straight pull, but the wind here darts about causing us to 'sail' around even more than usual at anchor all of which makes the chances of it breaking free of its tentative hold more possible! So cue a slightly nervous night. Furthermore it rained – a lot which required a lot of opening and closing of hatches again as we have not finished putting the new ties on Sarah's hatch covers.

Wind was still blowing around 20 knots when we headed out of the bay and set sail for Iles des Saints. We had a great 25 mile sail over, fairly well reefed this time but still managing a steady 7 knots which given the current state of our hull after 11 months and 8,000 miles is pretty good going.

We made our cautious way in between the islands on arrival and through to the town of Bourg des Saintes. There was a fair swell running through the gap in the islands making all the anchorages here a bit rolly and fairly busy. We had a good look around before finally anchoring fairly close to the southern end of the town and setting the anchor on the second attempt. The only real setback at the time of writing is the proximity of the ferries when they come in and the nearby junior drum band practice session that seems to be running well into the early evening. On the credit side there are

pelicans flying around the anchorage fishing which Sarah tells me is fine just as long as they do not choose to crap on your boat!

One very important bit of information I overlooked mentioning a few days ago was the consumption of the very last of the potatoes bought in the Canary Islands for the Atlantic crossing and very nice they were too! So that is all the onions and potatoes gone, just six litres of UHT milk left.

Look at the animals

16:18.48N 61:47.89W

Thursday 24th Feb

Very uncomfortable night with frequent strong gusts of wind and an increasingly heavy swell rolling in from the Atlantic.

We opted to make an early departure, partly because it was not very nice where we were and partly because we reasoned that it would be better to be one of the early arrivals at our destination (Deshaies, Guadeloupe) to get a decent anchoring spot!

Anchor came up pretty clean and we soon had a reefed main and a reefed staysail flying and were off at 7 knots between the northern islands and out into the Atlantic swell running between Guadeloupe and The Saints. The first bit of excitement came as we sailed through some fishing/lobster boxes (like pots but bigger!), marked as they are all over the world by an empty plastic container or bottle tied by a line floating on the surface, but barely visible at any time in the waves. This is not usually any sort of a problem unless of course you are motoring as then the line can get caught in your propeller and life becomes very tricky indeed! In our case however, we were sailing and not too bothered (well I wasn't too bothered, but Sarah was showing concern) so it was something of a surprise when one of these lines got caught around our rudder and stayed attached! We were now out in the bigger seas and making 7.5 knots which rather quickly reduced to 5 knots as we started dragging whatever we had caught along the sea bed. The line held fast and so we tacked through the wind and headed back into the shelter of the islands so we could either heave-to or anchor in some shallows and sort this out. Fortunately as we had hoped, the tacking manoeuvre allowed the line to slip loose and within a few more minutes we were free.

Back on course we found that the forecast 20 knot winds were nearly 30 knots and the sea was bigger than we had expected, but the trip across the gap between the islands was only 10 miles and we made very good time. Then we had to continue to sail up the west coast of Guadeloupe heading for the north west tip, some more 20 miles. This turned out to be pretty fraught as well with the wind alternating between 30+ knots and 5 knots and once again coming from all sorts of different angles. We did at times feel rather foolish as we met boats coming the other way as we sailed along very slowly heavily reefed in just 1 knots of wind. But then 100 yards later, we would be thankful for the shortened sail as we got hit by another fierce squall.

We made the final approach to Deshaies with 30 knots again on the nose and bashing our way through some messy waves until suddenly we were in the entrance to the bay and the wind eased a bit and the sea went flat. We motored past the big Club Med cruise ship anchored in the entrance to the bay and found ourselves a good, secure spot in which to anchor successfully. We had no sooner set the anchor, when a large turtle appeared in front of us and swam past. Sarah thought at first that it was a diver that we had disturbed by dropping our anchor near him!

We launched the dinghy and made our way ashore for lunch, some urgent shopping and to visit Customs and Immigration as usual when in a new country. The handy thing here is that there is a customs computer terminal in the internet cafe on the beach front so at least we did not have to go in search of a Customs officer which we have been told is pretty tricky here as they do not keep regular hours! But this is a part of France, so everything was closed from 1300 hrs to 1530 hrs at least. So we had a nice slow and very pleasant lunch overlooking the anchorage as we passed the time until the supermarket and the internet cafe opened.

Whilst we sat there we witnessed one of the most remarkable sights we have seen. A couple launched their canoe off the beach and paddled off into the anchorage heading for their yacht which was around 200 metres away. What was strange was that they had left a large dog on the beach and for a minute it stood and barked as they headed off and then it gamely followed them into the water and started swimming after them. They seemed quite oblivious to the dog and continued on their way as the dog frantically paddled some way behind them. We were still unsure if the dog was even theirs, but after 100 metres the dog seemed to be tiring and we wondered if we might have to rush back to our dinghy and go and rescue it, but the canoe paused for a moment or two and then continued and eventually the dog made its way right over to their yacht – which was a very long way out, far further than Sarah felt she would have swum as a reasonable swimmer. I suppose dogs on board do not usually get a lot of walking and swimming must be a very healthy, low impact exercise, but it was very unusual. The dog was then hauled into the canoe and appeared to be taken for a valedictory canoe trip around the anchorage while it stood on the prow to dry out before he was allowed on board the yacht.

Whilst we waited for the supermarket to open we rang Tom from the phone box surrounded by some very confident cockerels and hens making a helluva row which Tom commented on. They were particularly elegant fowl of very different colourings and they all appear to have the complete run of the small town – Cathy Hunter would be most impressed. The supermarket opened eventually and we were pleasantly surprised by a good deal of what it stocked (including Red, White and Rose Tarapaca wine – some of you will understand the significance of this find!) but there appeared to be just the one girl running the place so she was the checkout girl as well as running the deli counter which made for a lot of delays and queuing!

I managed to complete the customs forms whereby we cleared into the country and then in the same move cleared out again so we can leave first thing on Friday morning for Antigua which is some 46 miles north of here. The only doubt about this trip is that there is quite a bit more wind forecast tomorrow, but we are going to give it a go and if it is too bad, we can always turn tail and run back here.

Made our way back out to Serafina, calling in on another Najad in the bay (a Swedish N400) and had an early night in preparation for tomorrow.

Moonshadow

17:00.81N 61:46.55W

Friday 25th Feb

Up at dawn after another windy night. The anchorage was fine and stayed silky smooth but the endless bursts of 25 + knot winds whistling through all the boats was a little disconcerting bearing in mind we were about to go out there in the morning.

Very reassured to find four other boats making ready and leaving the bay as well as us, so we were at least not the only ones to take this trip on. However as we left the protection of the deep bay, it became obvious that three of these other boats had no intention of sailing to Antigua and two headed south and one set a course for Montserrat leaving just us and another poor fool (flying just a bright orange storm jib) heading north into the teeth of the wind and the fairly large waves the Atlantic so likes to build up during these sustained blows. As it turned out the true wind never rose above 30 knots which gave us a peak of 35 knots across the deck as we sailed close hauled, over and through the rough seas.

We did make very good time however and we emerged 44 miles later into the relative calm of Falmouth harbour at 1.00pm. The bad news was that several of the small forward hatches had not managed to withstand all the water crashing over the foredeck and we had quite a lot of sodden bedding and furnishings below. This has been caused by us using hatch covers to prevent glazing (eventually) to the 'window' part of the deck hatches. They are attached by a thin elastic which has the habit of working its way into the rubber surround. As this has occurred to a lesser degree before we have now resolved to abandon this good practice and if in x numbers of years' time we end up replacing hatches, well so be it! It is also fair to say that we had got fairly wet ourselves as the waves had occasionally broken pretty much right down the length of the boat and so rather too water much had found us sitting peacefully in the cockpit!

Entering the big anchorage that is Falmouth Harbour here in Antigua is a little bit of a shock. Not the bit where you wind your way in past the reef guarding the shallow entrance, but the moment when as you round the corner you first see Antigua Yacht Club and Marina which is home to some of the world's biggest yachts. But believe me, big is not always beautiful (and yes, Maltese Falcon is berthed here at the moment!) but it does make a very impressive sight.

We dropped anchor in the bay, just off the Yacht Club Marina entrance in shallow water with fairly indifferent holding so we were not confident of our security for a while as the anchor struggled to get a deep firm hold. It was still blowing old boots and there was a fair chop because of the long fetch (it was bumpy because of the small waves).

We launched the dinghy and I went ashore and walked over to English Harbour (Nelson's Dockyard) and did the Customs and Immigration bit while poor Sarah started the process of drying things out on board. I also took the precaution of finding out where we could watch the England v France rugby match and bumped into Ken and Kay on 'Coyote' which had just finished a 4 day, 600 mile race.

Anchored close to us was a Farr 56 called 'Moonshadow Star' and as they had their Cruising Association pennant flying we made a point of chatting to them as we had just missed a CA Blue Water Section party in Les Isles des Saints, which had been just two days before we could get there – it transpired that they were in fact the organisers of the event. Brian and Sandy kindly invited us over for a drink at 6.30 pm and we had a great evening before retiring to Serafina and a much needed sleep.

Small World

Saturday 26th, Sunday 27th and Monday 28th February

Late breakfast and headed ashore to check out the handful of shops and the chandlery in Falmouth before settling down in the Antigua Yacht Club to watch England play France in the rugby. Few French supporters present but they went a lot quieter after halftime! Shame we could not say the

same for the elderly, possibly drunk, Englishman directly behind me who insisted on protesting all decisions very loudly and almost always incorrectly. There were times when I wondered if he was watching the same match as us, or thought that he was just 10 minutes behind the game we were watching! It was painful stuff and even my patience broke at one point when I had to explain what was happening. This did not help at all and he looked at me as if I was talking in a foreign language! Makes you proud....

After the game we wandered over to English Harbour and Nelson's Dockyard. It is just one of those strange facts of nature that in an area where natural harbours were at a premium, Antigua has two superb examples that back onto each other. Sarah started chatting to a young lad (6) and his mum and it turned out that they knew some friends of ours and even knew about this blog and the musical titles! They are Catherine and Mark with their children Mia and Lachlan (Locky) who are on their way to NZ in a catamaran 'Pegasus of Jersey'.

Made our way back to Serafina and spent the last hours of daylight doing a few of the jobs on the list that seems to have grown a bit lately!

Delighted in the evening to find an email from David and Lyn Wilkie on Moonbeam to say that they were anchored in English Harbour and had read our blog and seen that we had just arrived as well, so they suggested we meet on Sunday for lunch somewhere.

Sunday morning we headed ashore around 10.00am to meet Catherine and Mark for coffee in the yacht club. Scotland were due to kick off in their match with Ireland and Mark, being Scottish was already at the sports bar where the game was to be shown, so we went to join him. Sadly the game was not being shown after all and for a while it was all a bit surreal as I sat with an Irish couple who had got live commentary of the rugby on their Iphone whilst watching an Italian league football match on the TV! Sarah and Catherine managed to put the world to rights until they had to head off and collect their children from the yacht club where they had been out with the juniors sailing and we headed over to English Harbour again to be picked up by David and Lyn in their dinghy and whisked out to a restaurant across the bay.

Some three hours later we were back in English Harbour and made our way back to Serafina feeling a little guilty about not having done any of the day's planned jobs. Still it was a Sunday!

Monday morning was a bit unpleasant with clouds and rain and still the strong winds. We got stuck into the jobs we had avoided yesterday and delayed going ashore to collect some goods from the chandlery etc. until after lunch. Even then we hung on a while until the wind eased and we felt more confident about leaving Serafina out in the bay unattended.

Some beautiful sailing yachts on the move today as well an outstanding and very large motor yacht that had to reverse all the way up the buoyed channel and into the super yacht bays as it was too large to turn round any closer!

Not very nice weather at all today but we did feel a bit better by the end of the day having achieved rather more than the last few days!

Getting Better

17:03.96N 61:53.01W

Tuesday 1st March

Woke up to a lovely morning, blue skies, fresh breeze and a hot hot sun!

We got ourselves sorted out quite quickly and headed off out of Falmouth Harbour and made our way very tentatively through a shallow and quite tortuous route along the inside of the coral reef that runs along the southern and south eastern coastline of Antigua. Really we should have sailed but we are still a bit cautious about sailing through reefs etc. and were content to motor today in depths that frequently went below 3 metres under the keel. Sailors from the east coast of England will scoff at this and declare this as deep, but in our defence I should say that we are not talking about a muddy or sandy bottom, but rock and coral! And we have seen far too many derelict wrecked hulls of yachts as we have passed up the island chain to take any of this too lightly.

As we approached today's destination Jolly Harbour, we were suddenly reminded why we had gone to so much trouble to sail out here. The wide open bay was the most wonderful turquoise blue with crystal clear blue water over an unblemished white sandy sea bed. With the sun overhead the blue of the water was straight out of the tourist guide and we did well to find our way into the entrance of this purpose built complex along a rather poorly marked and extremely shallow channel as our attention was constantly distracted.

William came out to meet us in a dinghy and showed us into our berth in the marina with rather less explanation than needed. It was quite late in our approach that we realised that we were going to be mooring between poles (after a fashion) and Sarah coped brilliantly with the late adjustments to deal with this situation and we were soon moored up safely stern-to a high quay. First issue was that we needed our passerelle to get ashore which was fine except that we last used it in Gibraltar and I had only recently cleaned and polished all the stainless fittings in preparation for storing them away for a few years.

It did not take us long to find that there is an excellent chandlery here and Sarah soon located a laundry service to help us get all the bedding sorted for our guests who arrive on Thursday. We plugged into the mains, but although it is 220 volts it is only 60 cycles, but we did not think that was an issue for us. However when later we ran Kenny (our washing machine) he suddenly protested in mid cycle and started making some very unpleasant noises. We panicked a little as we could not contemplate life without Kenny and after several attempts to resolve the problem, I suddenly twigged that it might be to do with the 60 cycles issue. As an experiment we ran up the generator and disconnected from shore power and we were greatly relieved when Kenny performed faultlessly.

Moonbeam (David and Lyn) arrived about an hour after us and tied up on the opposite side of the same pontoon as us. We have invited them for supper on Wednesday.

Do I know you?

17:00.81N 61:46.56W

Wednesday 2nd, Thursday 3rd and Friday 4th March

Busy old day sorting Serafina out for our friends (Mick and Dione Roberts) which means once again trying to find new homes for some of the stuff stored in the forepeak (front cabin) so that they can store some of their belongings. Inevitably as soon as Robert and Joyce left us back in the Cape Verde islands, the meagre space we had left for them to use quickly filled up with our odds and ends again.

There is a good chandlery store here (Budget Marine – part of a chain spread through a number of the other islands) and so we were able to get some clips to allow Sarah to put the finishing touches to her rain covers for the hatches... and not before time because it did quite a bit of raining during the day! Very big supermarket here which was well stocked and had the most remarkable selection of meats which is a little unusual.

The marina is pretty small and strangely pretty empty. There are a few boats coming and going each day, but I had rather imagined that Jolly Harbour would be a bustling busy resort. Certainly it has all the shops and facilities as well as all the housing built around the waters edge like so many other developments these days, but there are few people and the shops as a result are poorly stocked and a long way short of the retail therapy experience that Sarah had hoped for!

We had a real bonus when we were approached by Celia off 'Alice' as she and Andrew were flying home today for 3 weeks and so they kindly handed over all their perishable foods. In fact in another of those strange coincidences that abound here, Celia used to work for the BMF as Secretary of the Wessex region. This prompted David from Moonbeam to send an fun email to the BMF in Egham to announce the planned formation of a new BMF Region 'The Western Atlantic' with him and myself as former BMF directors, as the initial members and Celia as secretary. Are there any other former BMF members out here?

David and Lyn from Moonbeam came round for supper in the evening and we had a great time and almost persuaded them to stay for one more day as we were sort of expecting Scott-Free to arrive on Thursday from Guadeloupe where they had engine problems and had to be towed into Deshaies by of all the strangest co-incidences, Mark on a boat called Blue Beyond that had just arrived in the anchorage, who were on the rally from the UK to Southern Portugal with S-F and ourselves back in 2008 and who neither of us have seen since!

During the night it rained as hard as we have seen for years, which at least spared me from deck washing duties in the morning and seriously filling up dinghy. However the rain kept making appearances all morning which made for a hot and sticky day.

Moonbeam left around 0700 hrs heading for Barbuda (an island about 30 miles north of here) but during the morning a boat called Resting Goose arrived and moored next to us. It took about 10 minutes before the owner David, worked out why the name Serafina sounded familiar. He used to co-own a boat based in Antibes with Noel and Heather Ingram who also had a Najad yacht based in Hamble Point Marina and we had got to know them there during 2005/6. Noel and Heather had told David to keep an eye out for us, but to find himself moored alongside us was a remarkable surprise. He also comes from West Mersea, where by another coincidence it transpired that a great friend of Sarah's from her Bradwell sailing days Judy Tridini, was the person who redesigned David's garden!

Then around 1400 hrs our VHF crackled into life and it was Steve on Scott-Free calling us up as he could see our AIS on his chart plotter (we had turned it on so we could spot them first!). He confirmed they were on their way and then at 1445 hrs we watched a BA flight pass overhead which was the one carrying Mick and Dione.

Around 1600 hrs we were helping to tie S-F up when Mick and Dione arrived in a shared taxi. This was all very apt as M & D had brought out various bits and pieces including several things for Steve and Chris.

All headed off to the nearby beach for a swim and a few beers as we watched the sun go down and in the evening we all had dinner cooked by Sarah on board Serafina.

Friday morning dawned a lot finer and by 1100 hrs were on our way to Falmouth Harbour. We anchored first in Carlisle Bay for a swim and lunch and then after a nice relaxed beat upwind in just 10 – 15 knots of wind, we made our way into Falmouth and dropped the hook pretty close to the spot we were in only last weekend. The outcome of the very much hotter, sunnier day today was that there were a few hints of sunburn around as we settled down for our 'sundowners'.

From Russia with Love

17:00.48N 61:45.85W

Saturday 5th and Sunday 6th March

Lovely clear blue sky first thing this morning, but it clouded over before too long and became a quite mixed day with the weather.

We made our way out of Falmouth Harbour at 1100 hrs and headed east round the island to a big area on the south east corner of Antigua called Nonsuch Bay.

This involved sailing upwind and so we had a long tack out to sea before turning through the wind and beating back up towards our destination. We agreed that as we were back offshore for a while we should try our hand at getting fresh fish for supper and so the trusty lure was pressed into action for the first time since we were crossing the Atlantic on our way to Barbados. Sure enough after about 30 minutes, the rod bowed and the reel screamed and an magnificent Mahi Mahi leapt clear of the water to signal what we had caught. We furled the staysail and let the main fly to bring the boat to a standstill while we brought the fish in. In hindsight this was probably a mistake as we ended up with a big Mahi Mahi at the back of the boat and this fish was anything but exhausted! Mick took a photo at this point which was handy because before we were able to land it, the fish finally broke free of the hooks and swam to freedom and we lost an excellent supper. Undeterred we set the lure to work again and just before we arrived at Nonsuch Bay we reeled in a perfect sized tuna.

We had a squall and some quite heavy rain to endure during this sail as well as surprisingly choppy seas which did upset a stomach or two but after two hours of sailing we weaved our way through the rocks and shoals into the astonishingly blue and tranquil bay. There were a few boats there already including a magnificent 194ft yacht, Salperton, which lost its mast a week or so ago and is being made ready to be shipped back to Europe for a replacement. (Photo on <http://www.rhbell.com>) and we found ourselves a suitable spot and dropped the hook. This bay is unlike anything we have been in before as it is has no visible protection at all from the Atlantic ocean all the way across to Africa! But there is a submerged coral reef stretching all the way across the mouth of the bay and this gives the waters inside total protection so there is no discernable swell at all. It is therefore quite strange to be sat at anchor looking straight out to sea and into the teeth of the wind and yet be as comfortable as being tucked away in a cove or even a marina!

After watching the sun go down (actually it had just hosed down with heavy rain for 5 minutes) we were treated by Sarah to a fabulous supper of fresh tuna which she had filleted instead of cutting into steaks, with potatoes and a homemade salsa salad and we sat in the cockpit until very late, enjoying the cool fresh breeze off the ocean. Salperton may not be looking her best, but she lit her blue underwater hull lights alongside us which did look quite fantastic under the starlit sky.

On Sunday morning we had a slow start and eventually made our way out of the lagoon as such and sailed slowly back westwards along the coast to English Harbour where we moored up, stern to the quay inside Nelson's dockyard. Complicated process involving dropping the bow anchor first and reversing in as in Greece, then the dock master takes a long line out to a fixed buoy as extra security. Mike and Anne from Nimue were standing on the quay and so we had a chat with them and shortly afterwards, Flying Penguin (Najad 440) came onto the quay one boat down from us.

We had originally planned to go up to the BBQ and steel drum party event at Shirley Heights, but in the end settled for drinks on board after which Mick and Dione very kindly bought us all dinner at Jonny Coconut's restaurant which was a short dinghy ride across the water. It rained like mad several times in the evening and night and we were generally glad that we had not ventured up to Shirley Heights after all. The only downside was the boat load of Russians next door to us who sat in their cockpit chatting loudly until 0230 hrs when the heaviest of the night's rain showers sent them scuttling below.

A Familiar face

17:07.58N 61:53.30W

Monday 7th March

Slow start again saw us just about to leave the quayside at English Harbour when up walked Frances and Chris Martin, friends of ours from our home in England! They had decided on a break from the grind in the UK and having tossed up whether to go skiing or seek some sun, had booked at very short notice a few days in Antigua. This was their third day and they were on an island tour and taking in Nelson's Dockyard when they spotted Serafina tied to the quay. Extraordinary luck really as this was almost the only time we have been on such a public position. Normally being anchored off would have made it impossible for them to have seen us.

They came on board for a coffee and we planned how we might pick them up from their hotel and take them sailing tomorrow. (As luck has it our planned anchorage for Monday night is only a few miles from their hotel.)

After they headed back off on their tour, we called the dockmaster to come and release our lines so we could leave. Sadly the very amiable and helpful O'Neil from yesterday was not around and so we had the services of two rather less competent and rather brusque chaps who made quite a meal and a hash of things. They finally turned up and eventually released our rope from the big mooring buoy, but then seemed incapable of organising the people on the Russian boat next to us to release their line which was obstructing us still. None of this is at all unusual at this harbour and is solely the result of how they do things here. At some stage our American neighbour on the other side of us popped up to inform us cheerily that he had been there several weeks and 3 out of every 4 boats that made to leave found that their anchors were fouled on chains or other underwater obstructions which probably was a nice earner for the dockyard diver!

The line was finally undone but very little effort was made to retrieve it as we left the quay and used the anchor to pull ourselves out from the moored boats. With a cross wind blowing, Sarah needed to use the engine but knowing that the loose line was under our hull, did not dare to engage the prop but concentrated on 'advising' the Russian crew in as few words and syllables as possible about what they needed to do – and how soon! All was well and we recovered the anchor without any problem

(we had deliberately laid it a long way out in the hope this would be safer) and gently motored out of the harbour, passing Nimue who were anchored in the bay.

Gorgeous day but barely any wind which was very uncharacteristic and so we motored, picking our way through the inner reefs along the coast to save time and then as we turned northwards we picked up some good wind. We then enjoyed a cracking sail up the west coast of the island and made our way into Deep Bay which is just short of St John's which is the capital. Deep Bay is well protected, but has the distinctive feature of a wreck from around 1900 in the middle whose tallest mast still sticks out of the blue water. The Andes sank when, having been refused entry by the capital's harbour as she was smoking through a hollow mast, she anchored around the corner to check on her cargo of pitch. Unfortunately the act of opening the hold allowed the fire to really catch and she sank once her wooden decks had burnt off the metal structure. The Andes apparently still occasionally burps pitch.

Mick and Dione swam ashore to find out if this was a suitable spot for Frances and Chris to come and join us the next day, whilst Sarah swam over the wreck and then to another beach to look for stones. (Don't ask)

I managed to cock things up and sent the end of the spinnaker halyard up to the lower crosstrees which meant that Sarah had to don the climbing harness and I winched her part of the way up the mast to retrieve the halyard for me.

Nice quiet evening spent at anchor although the bay did gradually become a bit rolly with a rising wind which at least ensured no mozzies and kept things cool.

Goodbye

17:03.96N 61:53.01W

Tuesday 8th, Wednesday 9th & Thursday 10th March

After breakfast we prepared Serafina for sailing and launched the dinghy in preparation for the arrival of Chris and Frances. They appeared on the beach bang on time and having picked them up we headed out to sea for a sail.

We were lucky at first and blessed with a fair 12 knots breeze which allowed us to set the full cutter rig and whilst Mick helmed we headed off from Antigua roughly on a north westerly heading. After about half an hour we were joined by a mother and baby dolphin and then a third one added to the fun as they swam under and across our bows for a short while. We then tacked and headed for Boon Channel on the northern coast of Antigua. Chris enjoyed a bit of good sailing until gradually the wind eased and backed leaving us headed and running out of time. We ended up motor sailing as far as Prickly Pear Island where we dropped anchor and had a late lunch and a few beers as well as a swim.

Time slipped away and rather too soon we had to head off and return Chris and Frances to civilisation which we did by sailing into the little bay where their hotel was and again running them ashore in the dinghy.

We were now running out of light and made our way fairly quickly to Long Island and across the shallows to Jumby Bay which had been recommended to us as an idyllic anchorage, but having

dropped and set the anchor it was clear that this was not going to be the smoothest of nights! There were a couple of other yachts there as well as a big gin palace called 'One More Toy' and so we had the place pretty much to ourselves. Sadly as the night drew on the wind rose and fell a few times and the swell became very uncomfortable and we all had a fairly restless night.

In the morning we did not wait long before we set sail for Five Islands Harbour, but as is the way with things, the nice fresh breeze had dropped away to virtually nothing and after sailing the first few miles at barely 3 knots we finally had to give in and motor the rest of the way, past St John's and into the big turquoise blue haven that is known as Five Islands Harbour, but is in fact just a big bay (1 mile across and 2 miles deep) with several lovely looking sandy beaches as well as mangroves and a small island in the middle. The entire bay is very shallow and remarkably empty. When we drooped the hook, we were only the fourth boat there and by nightfall that number had only risen to six. Like most of the bays though, the wonderful blue water is not at all clear as it is thick with sand and coral sediment, but still very refreshing to swim in and stunning to look at.

This was Mick and Dione's last night out here and we enjoyed a peaceful night with only a slight swell and woke to another brilliantly clear blue sky. We stayed in Five Islands Harbour until midday before setting off on the short return trip to Jolly Harbour and the end of Mick and Dione's stay with us.

We motored round in a very light wind and a blisteringly hot sun and were ushered into virtually the same berth as we had before, by William. We all went for a great lunch at Peter's which does an excellent BBQ and then M & D finished their packing and around 1700 hrs climbed reluctantly into a taxi heading for the airport. We gather that there is a tale to be told about their trip in the taxi, but that will have to wait until they get back to the UK.

Having waved goodbye, we set off down to the beach to join Chris and Steve from Scott-Free who are still here and Mike and Anne from Nimue (pronounced Nimway) for a few drinks as the sun set dramatically over the deep blue and turquoise sea.

Accidents will happen

17:04.54N 61:53.69W

Friday 11th, Saturday 12th and Sunday 13th March

On our return to the marina we heard that there had been a very nasty accident involving the malfunction of an electric winch. The incident developed incredibly fast and due to Steve's (on Scott-Free) very quick thinking and subsequent care of the injured person, it is generally felt that he almost certainly saved her life. This incident has left the sailing community rather shell shocked and we on Serafina have reassessed our own safety procedures.

Friday was spent sorting Serafina out and catching up with all the washing and some maintenance.

One problem we have locally is that the mains electricity supply is 60 Mhz which causes some of our electrical equipment to not work and this includes Kenny, the washing machine! So to get round this problem we have to run the generator a fair bit which is frustrating when we are also plugged into the mains. In the evening we were invited to S-F for supper and an evening of Mexican Train along with Michael and Anne from Nimue. It was a great evening and of course Sarah ran out the winner – again.

Our original plan had been to move on to Falmouth on Saturday, but in the end Sarah and Chris from S-F caught a bus into St John's (the capital of Antigua) to visit the market and do a little general shopping. Steve helped me with a few jobs which was very helpful and in the evening they came over to us for a few quiet rum punches! Sarah came back very enthusiastic about St John's: a particularly good and extensive market, and the usual split personality town with the duty free shopping area for the cruise ships (but this time, for once, tastefully done) and rather scruffy streets for general shopping. The general shops were much more varied, including a fascinating shop full of carnival wear and interspersed by wooden shacks of shops and houses, gaily painted and decorated with intricate woodwork. They also walked up to the cathedral which was being "re-sheeted", ie a new layer of corrugated iron added to the roof and sadly wasn't open to the public, as it was quite the nicest church we've seen.

On Sunday morning we made an early start and headed out of the marina as soon as they opened, via the fuel pontoon to anchor outside Jolly Harbour in the very shallow anchorage out in the bay. The reason for the rush was so that we could dash back in the dinghy in time to watch England v. Scotland in the 6 nations rugby. The afternoon was pretty relaxed although Sarah did undertake another of her epic long distance swims to a far beach to search for interesting stones and shells.

We were entertained at sunset by about 10 pelicans who were diving on a shoal of fish which passed quite close to us. They are extraordinary creatures and almost prehistoric in appearance. But their dive is dramatic and quite spectacular. (pictures at <http://www.rhbell.com>)

All along the watchtower

16:18.48N 61:47.88W

Monday 14th, Tuesday 15th & Wednesday 16th March

We made a fairly early start and had raised the anchor and were on our way by 0800 hrs heading for Carlisle Bay. We managed to sail most of the way inside the coral reef, but eventually had to motor the last bit as the wind had rather uncharacteristically died away. We dropped the anchor in the bay's crystal clear water but sadly the clouds stayed over head and so instead of a swim in hot sunshine, it was more of a dip in the rain which only I took advantage of.

Scott-Free joined us here about a hour or so later (on our recommendation) and still it rained and stayed cloudy!

In the early afternoon we gave in and motored round to Falmouth Harbour where we anchored in a good spot not too far from the marina and it's dinghy dock. We then went ashore to try to sort a few things out as well as finalise the details for the car hire for the next morning. Scott-Free arrived a little while later and kindly invited us to join them on board in the evening for a chicken curry.

On Tuesday we collected Chris and Steve from S-F at 0830 hrs and headed ashore to pick up our hire car.

In a complete break with tradition we armed ourselves with 3 maps of the island although we soon discovered that only one was vaguely useful!

First stop was Shirley Heights which was an 18th century fort and lookout point with a stunning view over English Harbour, Nelson's Dockyard and Falmouth harbour. (photos at <http://www.rhbell.com>) From here approaching enemy ships could be easily seen and a beacon lit. There were 40 odd beacons across the island which meant that literally within minutes of a sighting the entire island would be aware of an approaching enemy. As it turned out during the day we came across some 10 to 15 of these beacons.

Our next stop was Harmony Hall which is a lovely restaurant and art gallery located overlooking Nonsuch Bay and we enjoyed superb (but very expensive) coffees and afterwards looked round the gallery and climbed the watchtower/beacon there to take some photos. As seems standard on all these islands there is no signposting which makes it all very interesting and added to that, Antigua's roads frequently alter between tarmac and rough, loose stone! From here we meandered our way to Long Bay and its popular sandy beach. Sarah, Chris and Steve opted to have a swim here whilst I guarded the valuables and took some pictures of them and the pelicans diving in amongst all the bathers.

We had a basic lunch which was very slow and it was mid-afternoon before we headed off to Devil's Bridge. This was a stunning location with dramatic surf breaking over the rocks and blow holes jetting water high into the air. Finding this was nothing short of a miracle as access was down a narrow unmade road with the only road sign directing deliveries to an adjacent eco hotel!

Next was Parnham harbour which we never really found, but we did pass the Viv Richards Cricket stadium along the way to St John's. We drove through the town taking in various features including the very idiosyncratic statue of V.C. Bird (the island's first prime minister after independence).

We ended up driving down the west coast and all the way back up to Shirley Heights to catch the sun setting. We arrived just in time and as we were enjoying a beer and the view we discovered that Flying Penguin were there too. They had just had a very exciting helicopter ride to Montserrat which had involved an emergency landing after the chopper developed a mechanical problem whilst flying over the still active volcanic crater!

The day ended with dinner at Jonny Coconat's in English Harbour and a quick nightcap on board S-F followed by sad farewells as we said goodbye to Chris and Steve who are now heading North towards New York and a summer cruising up the coast of America, whilst we head south to Grenada then fly home to the UK in early May.

Wednesday dawned cloudy with a light wind and so we delayed our start until after 0900 hrs. We then raised the anchor and set sail southwards to Guadeloupe and were very lucky to have a brisk 15 to 20 knot wind driving us along on a reach at 7 to 8 knots all the way on the 46 mile trip to Deshaies. We popped the fishing line out for a while and as a clump of old rope and fishing net floated past I suggested that we might get a strike soon as fish frequently hide under these things. Almost immediately the line started flying out and in due course we reeled in a fair sized barracuda, but sadly even the locals here will not eat the barracuda as they feed on the reef fish who in turn mainly have a disease (ciguatera) which is very bad news for humans! So after recovering our magic lure we consigned it to the deep.

Around 1530 hrs we rounded the entrance to Deshaies bay and were escorted in by a single, very large dolphin and as we made our way past the first of the anchored boats we were surprised and delighted to see Shaun and Gaby on Tabasco Jazz there. They kindly invited us on board for sundowners and explained their major change of plan which has them now laying the boat up in Antigua rather than Grenada.

Hitchhiker

15:52.37N 61:35.81W

Thursday 17th, Friday 18th & Saturday 19th March.

Before I start the log, I need to confess that we made a mistake (again) in identifying a fish. The barracuda we caught the other day was in fact almost certainly a Wahoo and would have been a great catch to cook and eat. We were very unsure as we brought it in and as it is considered very unwise to eat barracuda out here because of the disease they can pick up from their prey, we erred on the side of safety. However we did photograph it so we could do the identification later and hence our confession now! (For those who know more about these things we have added one of the photos to the website (<http://www.rhbell.com>) and we have a few more taken from other angles which I can email to anyone prepared to give an opinion.)

Anyway, on Thursday we headed into the small town of Deshaies in the morning to check in with Customs and to arrange a hire car for the next day. Customs on these French Islands is a breeze as you simply put all the info into a computer and bingo it is all done for you. Better still the Customs clearance computer terminal is housed in a small internet cafe on the front so access is very easy and the hours a lot longer!

Car hire proved more of a challenge and we had to visit the Tourist Information centre to find out where we could do this. They sent us along to the only car hire outfit in town who were a lot less than helpful. The possibility of a car in the morning only ranked as 'perhaps' and the best they could suggest was that we should return at 0830 hrs. We asked if we could at least reserve a car should there be one, but he said this was not possible and that the arrangement was 'first come first served' in the morning. We then visited the Spar supermarket and bought 8 bottles of Tarapaca wine which is our absolute favourite and unavailable anywhere else that we have been over the past 4 years travelling.

In the afternoon we got a few things done as well as nipping ashore again and telephoning our eldest son Tom as it was his 26th birthday – where does the time go?

Friday dawned hot and still, which has to be a first here. Normally the wind can be relied upon to howl through this bay but today it was almost eerie. We were up a bit early but decided that we did not want to miss the chance of hiring a car, so we set off in the dinghy at around 0745 hrs. As we headed across the bay another dinghy headed off from a French boat and guessing that they might just be planning the same as us, I suggested to Sarah that when we reached the dinghy dock she should leave me to sort out the locking the dinghy etc. whilst she nipped ahead and went to the car hire shop. This was a smart move as it transpired that the French couple were indeed acting on the same instructions as us and had intended to be a bit early. However it simply had not occurred to them that we might be doing the same and so they were more than a little shocked to find us stood outside the door when they arrived. They did not speak to us at while we waited and when the office opened, both Sarah and I had anticipated their next move and neatly stepped ahead of them into the room and conversed with the manager as they tried to rush the door! All very childish really but as it turned out, after the company had sorted us out with our car, the manager then turned the French couple away explaining that there was only the one vehicle. They were not best pleased and the Entente Cordial took another hit.

So off we went in our battered and very basic Ford Fiesta which rather critically did not have any Air Con. But it was at least a set of wheels. We spent a lovely day driving around Basse Terre which is the westward and highest of the two islands that make up Guadeloupe. The roads were a very refreshing contrast to Antigua and it was like being back in France itself with good fast roads and first class signposting (well, by Caribbean standards...).

We drove up to La Soufriere which is the volcano towering over the rain forests, but decided not to bother with the 2 hour hike to the summit. We then headed over to the town of Basse Terre which is the administrative capital of the country and wandered through the market (where we bought two straw hats – one for Sarah's head and one as a light shade for our cockpit light!) and the streets for a while before pressing on to the wonderfully named Vieux Habitants. (Photo of me by the sign at <http://www.rhbell.com>) where we found a fantastic little restaurant only serving a small selection Plat de jour and we had a really good lunch for next to nothing.

In the afternoon we headed up into the depths of the rainforest and visited a waterfall and walked a short trail through some of the forest taking quite a few photos of course. Finally we made our way back to Deshaies where we returned the car and returned by dinghy back to Serafina who now had some new neighbours in the bay. Still not a breath of wind which is a bit of a pain as it makes the evenings and nights very hot and humid as well as encouraging the mozzies.

The wind stayed away all night and when Saturday dawned bright and sunny it was still completely still with all the boats in the anchorage facing in different directions.

We raised the anchor and headed off south under engine and for the first time since we arrived in the Caribbean we had to motor almost the whole 35 miles to the Iles des Saintes. We were joined briefly by two large Common Bottlenose dolphins, about 7' long. One of the dolphins had two Remora fish attached to its stomach. These are large fish (about 14") which use a modified dorsal fin as a sucker to attach themselves to their host, often leaving a nasty lesion. They basically hitchhike a ride with the host, initially when small feeding off the parasites on the host's skin and then as their mouths get too large to pick off the parasites, "hide behind the cover provided by their hosts and suddenly dart forth to make a kill in a school of fishes". It was really sad to see these ugly fish attached to a beautiful dolphin – particularly so, as the dolphin rolled on its back to show them to us as if asking for help.

We did manage to sail across the 7 mile gap between Guadeloupe and 'The Saintes' but the wind died again as we arrived at our destination.

We chose not to go and anchor off the town of Bourg des Saintes as we had found it pretty uncomfortable last time we were here, and so we headed straight to a beautiful looking bay on the protected south western side of Ilet Cabrit. There were already a few yachts there and because of the light and variable wind they were all lying at different angles which made deciding where to drop our hook a bit problematical, however Sarah of course rose to the challenge and we ended up in a very good spot.

Very good snorkelling here along a coral reef that starts barely 40 metres from where we are moored which makes it all very easy. Lazy afternoon snoozing and reading after which I went snorkelling along the reef which was quite amazing and as good as anything we have seen in a very long while, well that is up until I met a moray eel out on its travels and I elected to return to Serafina for some tea!

We were astonished to discover that even though we are a long way from civilisation out here, we could still pick up wifi – and for free! Sadly this and a text from Mick and Dione rather took the shine off the day with the news that England had been outclassed by Ireland in the 6 nations rugby (bit like the cricket!!). However the day ended on a high note when we heard that Wales had lost to France and so England were this year's tournament winners. Now there is just the small matter of a world cup coming up in NZ later in the year.....

All Night Long

Sunday 20th, Monday 21st and Tuesday 22nd March

Lots of colour and excitement today as firstly Royal Clipper, a sailing cruise ship arrived and anchored in the town bay and then almost immediately afterwards an immensely colourful regatta got under way with dozens of beautifully painted boats from all around Guadeloupe competing in the annual sailing race here. The boats which are all of identical design and based on the traditional local fishing skiffs were a great spectacle as they raced around the bays accompanied by dozens of spectator boats

In the afternoon we went ashore into Bourg Des Saintes and toured the town and the waterfront where all the racing crews were winding down with a BBQ, disco and a drink or three. Sarah feels that it important to note that the winning boat by some margin was an all girl crew and from what we have read since, this is not their first win either! The town is delightful and although being Sunday and most places were shut, it was easy to see the attraction of this area. However there is just something slightly odd about the place and it seems to be more like a French 'Greek' island than a Caribbean island.

The bay became pretty busy during the day and as the sun set, we were a little concerned about one or two boats getting too close. However Sarah reserved her concern for the late arrival of two French catamarans one of whom was displaying a large inflatable penis and who rafted up together on the far side of the bay. Her concerns were entirely justified as it was not long before the music started and their very noisy party ran late into the night despite comments from all the other French boats moored here.

Monday dawned bright and sunny and we headed ashore around 0830 hrs mainly to do our customs clearance paperwork but also for a bit more exploration. The customs bit was pretty tedious here and when I arrived at the Mairie's office, I found myself fourth in the queue. This afforded me plenty of time to chat to the others who were American and Canadian and I learnt quite a bit about where we are headed and a lot more about Maine and the east coast of America which is sounding more and more interesting by the minute. When it was finally my turn to do the clearance it was blissfully simple and hard to work out why we had all had to wait so long. You just have to type all the required information into the official computer (all the French West Indies are the same), but the customs officer simply watches you doing this and probably is not entertained by all the crews struggling with the French keyboard which is not the same as our 'qwerty' ones.

Once this was complete, Sarah and I walked up to Fort Napoleon and apart from enjoying the splendid views from this vantage point, we found the restored fort to be very interesting. There were a lot of references to the Battle of the Saintes which was an epic sea battle between the French and English (of course) and we could hear the tour guides waxing lyrical about the event so we rather assumed that this was one that we did not do too well in, but on reading up on the subject since, we see that the English won a major victory here and it seems all the more remarkable that

the French give it so much credence. (This contrasts with Cartagena in Spain where we visited their naval museum which was in complete denial about the events surrounding the Armada!)

We returned to spend the afternoon back on board Serafina and were entertained for a while by the crews of the two catamarans who had now assembled on the small beach and were conducting a whole series of sporting events between themselves. There was also concern when two French ladies off a nearby boat set off in an inflatable canoe and were soon swept across the bay in the strong wind and were heading for distant trouble before one of their crew set off in a small dinghy to eventually rescue them. Finally we saw two people paddling a dinghy with a broken down engine and so I went out and towed them back to the shore.

Just before sunset the two party boats left the bay much to everyone's relief, but in fact it was not long before it began to pour with rain which it proceeded to keep doing for hours, If only it could have done that the previous night! In fact by morning we seemed to have had about 3" of rain and the dinghy was incredibly heavy to manoeuvre back on deck.

We headed off from The Saints around 0830 hrs and threaded our way around the reefs and through a maze of fishing buoys and back out into the 25 mile stretch of Atlantic down to Dominica. The wind blew a pretty steady 15 knots and we made fast progress ending up dropping our anchor in Prince Rupert Bay at 1145 hrs. We had a bit of difficulty last time we were here in getting the anchor to bite, but this time all went well and we got a good hold at the first attempt.

Good WiFi signal here so we were able to catch up with emails etc and Sarah continued working through the afternoon on making a new anchor snubber, which is something of a work of art this time and a big labour of love (4 splices in a 20mm 8 plait rope which has taken hours and hours).

The bay here is one of those strange places where the wind blows regardless of weather conditions. It continued to blow at 20 knots all afternoon and barely died much in the evening. We had planned a trip or two on our return here, but time is beginning to run out before we fly home to the UK for the summer in early May, so we are going to press on southwards heading for Bequia (pronounced Beckway) and the Grenadines and finally Grenada.

Shine a Light

Wednesday 23rd March

The wind died away completely in the night and we awoke to a hot, sunny and very still morning.

I must mention the boat boys in Prince Rupert Bay, Dominica, they work very hard and deserve to do well providing all sorts of services. As it happened I was awake around 0200 hrs and witnessed one of their late night searchlight boat patrols which they do for free every night to deter and/or detect the bad guys. This is amongst all the other things they offer: rubbish collection (for which we believe they have to pay to dispose of it), trips up the Indian river, journeys to and fro the well hidden customs office, maintenance of the buoys etc etc. Yes you have to pay, but they have already paid for training in the summer through their tourist authority and then paid again to belong to the official group of boat boys there.

With no wind at all, we motored pretty much the whole way down the 20 odd miles of Dominica's western coastline passing a Humpback whale near the southern end which was being rather hounded by two tourist whale spotting boats which caused it to dive.

As soon as we cleared the southern end of the island we were hit by 20 knots of easterly wind and were immediately back sailing properly at 7 to 8 knots for the whole of the 25 mile stretch of open Atlantic ocean down to Martinique. The sea was remarkably flat which helped us fly along rather too quickly for the fishing lures which kept skipping out of the sea behind us and posed more of a threat to flying fish than anything conventional!

Swept into the bay with St Pierre at the head and found the anchorage very empty. We dropped the hook and quickly launched the dinghy in order to do our customs clearance before the office closed. I arrived hot foot at the door to find that it had just closed at 1500 hrs and met an irate Norwegian who was trying to explain to the lady who had just locked up that having opening hours of 0900 to 1500 was pretty daft as most yachts normally don't arrive until 1600 hrs.

The anchorage quickly filled up around 1700 hrs and we were actually very surprised to see so many boats here.

Anniversary

Thursday 24th and Friday 25th March,

Having sort of admired the two elderly square riggers that arrived at dusk last night, we were rather less impressed to be woken by one of them ringing the watch with its ships bell at 0600 hrs. Since we were now awake we decided that we might as well leave and so we headed off south from St Pierre with 12 knots or so of breeze.

As we passed Fort de France the wind picked up dramatically and we had the most wonderful sail all the way down to the south western corner of Martinique, where we paused to put in a couple of reefs before we rounded the headland and began a long beat to windward to reach Le Marin.

We was pretty much as we had expected and we stuck to the task of sailing close hauled into the wind and mounting seas for a couple of hours and then finally decided that we had had enough of this and motor sailed the final 5 or so miles directly into the teeth of the wind to reach the buoys marking the very interesting long approach to the town of Le Marin.

We edged our way again into the shallow and unmarked area of the main anchorage and found a spot to anchor, close to where we had been some 5 weeks ago when we came here heading north. It is an unusual place in that there is a huge expanse of protected water, but it is mostly too shallow for boats of our depth and there are no markings or buoys to help you. So although it looks like you can moor anywhere you like, you need to remember that a lot of the boats here are either much smaller or are catamarans which draw very little water. The other strange feature is that less than 10 percent of the boats here have anyone on board. Most are tied to mooring buoys and are clearly kept here long term and many are just anchored and also left looking rather forlorn – and there are hundreds of them.

We launched the dinghy in record time and sped into the town to catch the customs and immigration people since we had not been able to do this in St Pierre, but as I rushed up to the doors of the office at 1500 hrs I met two other French crews who like me were very surprised to find the doors locked shut and a sign telling us that their hours were 0700 to 1200 hrs.

We visited the internet cafe, picked up a few essentials and Sarah booked a haircut for the next morning before we made our way back to Serafina for a quiet night in.

On Friday morning Sarah was up with the lark and took herself ashore for her haircut at 0800 hrs, where outside she meet a massive caterpillar shambling along. It was black and white striped with bright red ends, about 6" long and fat – whatever it grows into will be big! We then went ashore together later in the morning to do a bigger shop and spent a while in the afternoon in the internet cafe. In the evening we came back yet again to enjoy a superb meal in L'escale Marine which is wonderful little restaurant on the road round to the marina. This was to celebrate our 29th wedding anniversary and so we pushed the boat out a bit, so to speak and Sarah is still marvelling over her outstanding lobster, which she has been promising herself since we crossed – but Barbados was not the occasion! It is a very typical French restaurant with the larger than life, jolly patron who commended my continued attempts to butcher their language. It would have been much easier to converse in English, but we like to make an effort...

Strangers in the Night

Sat 26th and Sunday 27th March

Due to the forecast for deteriorating weather, we brought forward our departure from Martinique to Saturday late afternoon. The trip down to Bequia is around 90 miles and rather than push ourselves by trying to rush this in daylight, we opted to make an overnight passage leaving Martinique at 1700 hrs and hopefully arriving in Bequia around 1000 hrs the following morning. We are heading straight past St Lucia as we have already spent quite enough time there this year and we want to squeeze in some time in the Grenadines before we fly home from Grenada in early May.

As a result Saturday morning was spent sorting out customs and immigration (we checked in and out all in one fell swoop) and in between monstrous downpours of tropical rain we visited various shops and the internet cafe. In the afternoon we prepared Serafina for the night passage and got some rest in preparation.

We left bang on 1700 hrs amidst more torrential downpours and as we emerged from the protective lee of the island out into the Atlantic for the 25 mile crossing down to St Lucia, we had virtually no wind and a surprisingly flat sea.

We again opted to have 4 hour watches which means that one of us sails the boat single handed whilst the other sleeps, changing roles every 4 hours. Sarah rather lost out this time as her watches included the open water stretches between Martinique and St Lucia and between St Lucia and St Vincent, whilst I had the easier runs down the west coasts of both of these islands. Consequently Sarah saw virtually nothing at all in her watches, whereas I had dolphins and fishing boats as well as yachts and cargo ships heading in the opposite direction to us to contend with. In fact we had a very close encounter with a large yacht that had been heading safely past us heading in the opposite direction, when inexplicably I noticed very late that its light configuration had changed and it was now heading directly for us. Fortunately as we were motor sailing at the time, I was able to apply full power and drive Serafina flat out so that the other boat passed just behind us. I am quite certain that they remain unaware of the incident and that either they had not seen our lights against the backdrop of the lights on St Lucia behind us, or more likely the person on watch was paying no attention at all and they had altered course without realising we were there.

The weather was not great and we enduring repeated heavy showers usually preceded by squalls of 20 plus knots of wind and in between the wind dropped to 3 or 4 knots and we had to use the motor. Finally for the last stretch from St Vincent south to Bequia itself around 0900 hrs, we had a healthy 25 knots of wind and although the waves in this bit of open sea were quite a bit bigger, we had a great final sail to end a long night.

The small island of Bequia has a reputation for being a wonderful place to visit, but the anchorage (Admiralty Bay) and the town of Port Elizabeth at its head, is known to be a bit difficult in that the holding is very patchy. After pottering around big bay looking at the various options, we selected a spot close to Princess Margaret Beach and were lucky enough to get a really good patch of sand first time. We then noticed that barely 30 metres away was 'Saltscar 3' with John and Sue who had been moored near us back in Puerto Calero, Lanzarote in November.

We had a quiet day watching boats leave and arrive and took the opportunity to relax after the night's exertions.

Visions of Paradise

Monday 28th, Tuesday 29th, Wednesday 30th and Thursday 31st March

I cannot be certain just yet, but I think we have come across paradise.

Certainly Bequia is a wonderful island and our first trip ashore confirmed that this was very much more of what we had expected when we first headed out to the Caribbean.

This island is not easy to access and so the run of the mill tourists simply do not get here and so it is quiet and very friendly. Admittedly there is a slightly faded air to the place as a lot of places are closed up or for sale, but following the credit crunch etc, almost everywhere is feeling the pinch.

Our first contact with the locals was the process of Customs and Immigration clearance as usual, but here it was just that little bit different. We again were able to use a new online clearance system called eSeaClear which has been running for just a couple of years out here and was intended to make the whole process of sailing from island to island (country to country) much more straightforward, but sadly as yet very few of the islands actually have embraced it yet. In addition it is so badly publicised that it seems that only a handful of sailors such as us know about it or use it anyway – it doesn't feature in the standard pilot books used out here. However Bequia is one place that does accept this system and so I marched into the very smart and imposing government building and stepped up to the Customs desk brandishing our reference number. It was a breeze and so whilst at least 5 skippers were stood around frantically completing forms in writing and having to produce multiple crew lists, we were processed in minutes with all the work as such being done by the officer.

Sadly this enlightened approach did not extend to the next desk which was Immigration. Here a long queue snaked around the lobby as the one lone Immigration officer dealt with each case. This involved him completing a large form in pen and ink for each boat and carefully noting the details on the form of every member of the crew with all their passport details. He then had to stamp each passport and again add various details and counter signatures to each one, in long hand. He was however very cheerful and smiley and seemed totally unfazed by the length of the queue, pausing at one stage to take a lengthy mobile phone call.

Once this was all complete we took a stroll around Port Elizabeth and visited the handful of shops before pausing for a coffee at Gingerbread Cafe and restaurant. We also booked our tickets for a day trip on a schooner to Mustique for the next day.

The rest of Monday seemed to pass in a bit of a blur as we enjoyed swims in the beautiful clear blue water of the bay until 1730 hrs when we took the dinghy over to Saltscar 3 to join John and Sue for

drinks. We had a entertaining evening and even managed to witness the green flash again as the sun set over the ocean.

On Tuesday we were up and running bright and early and took the dinghy over to the dock where we were joining the schooner, Friendship Rose for our all-inclusive day trip to millionaire's paradise – Mustique. The usual complement of guests on board is 35 but today there were just 12 of us and we had a wonderful day out. The other guests were on land based holidays and filled us in on what else there is to see and do on Bequia and at the same time take in how small and empty the island is! One couple are staying at a brand new hotel where they are 2 of only 4 guests!

Bequia is also rather special in that by agreement with the IWC the islanders are allowed to take four whales each year. These are hunted and killed in the traditional way with hand thrown harpoons and sailing boats. Not surprisingly they do not always get their annual quota and it seems that only a week ago they harpooned but lost a humpback. So it was a little exciting that as we headed across to Mustique in the schooner, that we came across two of these sailing boats trying to hunt down a whale. I am not sure that either of us fully support this idea of hunting whales and so we rather hope that they were unsuccessful! We understand that the successful whale hunter's spoil will make their own parish very wealthy for a short while as the proceeds are shared amongst their local community and will support the local school etc, it is therefore incredibly important to the locals and at least one of the sailors on the schooner was very wound up by the spectacle.

However, the trip to Mustique was great and we arrived in the crystal clear anchorage in Britannia Bay and were taken ashore where 6 of us combined to take a taxi on a grand tour of the island. The taxi was actually an open backed truck, but Michael, our driver, took things nice and steady and was very experienced in dealing with the likes of us! The tour therefore included the major features such as the houses belonging to Tommy Hilfiger, Sir Mick Jagger, Bryan Adams and the late Princess Margaret etc etc. In fact the island is so small and exclusive that it only lasted an hour because Michael drove incredibly slowly. He did from time to time interrupt our chattering to tell us the weekly rental rates for each and every house we came to, which ranged from 30,000 US dollars a week down to merely 12,000 US dollars.

We returned to the schooner for an excellent inclusive lunch and then were taken off in the tender to spend some time snorkelling on a nearby reef. Finally we headed back under sail and motor to Bequia, enduring a very impressive rainstorm along the way and plied with yet more drink and tea. The schooner was built here in Bequia by hand some 43 years ago and it first worked as a mail boat carrying the mail and essentials from Bequia to Union Island. It then was pressed into service as the only ferry between St Vincent and Bequia carrying literally everything between the two islands, before being replaced by modern ferries and taking up its eventual role as a trip boat visiting Mustique and Tobago Cays on wonderful day trips. The one ever constant in the life of the boat is the skipper, Lewis. He and his brothers built the boat in Providence Bay and he has skippered the boat from then until now. Lewis is 85 years young.

New photos at <http://www.rhbell.com>

Wednesday was spent working and Sarah put in a good few hours cleaning the hull in preparation for the least popular part of our travels which is the lay-up.

In the evening we had John and Sue from Saltscar 3 round for drinks and again enjoyed a thoroughly enjoyable and interesting evening with them both.

On Thursday we had invited David and Debbie who we had met on the day trip to Mustique, on board Serafina for coffee. I picked them up in the dinghy from Jack's Bar and after coffee and a bottle of wine(!) they kindly offered to give us a tour of the island in their hire care. They hail from Sutton Coldfield and are staying in a villa here for a week and by coincidence also celebrated their wedding anniversary on the 27th March. (The difference being that they have achieved the more impressive milestone of 40 years.)

This is not their first visit to Bequia so they know their way around what is actually a very small island with only a few roads and of course no road signs at all. The highlight of the trip was undoubtedly the Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary which is a very unassuming place but the work they do is remarkable and here they rescue and raise Greenback and Hawksbill Turtles which they nurture and release back into the wild when they are about 5 years old. They run a school education programme which is their main mission, to educate the kids on the island all about the turtles etc. This is because the turtle's biggest predators by a long way are humans. The eggs are considered a valuable delicacy and so the locals have always raided any nests they find and steal the eggs; and they are still legally allowed to hunt the turtles for food. There are laws against selling turtleshell products, so it is pretty sad to see the stalls set up in the street outside Customs doing just that. The school programme aims to change the habits and put pressure on the adults to stop killing the species. Currently a turtle's life expectancy is such that only 1 in 3000 makes it to adulthood and they do not start breeding until they are about 20 years old. Clearly things are beginning to work and even the fishermen who used to hunt the turtles now donate fish free to the sanctuary to feed the healthy population.

The other aspect of such a small island is that there are very few people here and so you meet all the same people everywhere! It is impossible to go anywhere without bumping into all the people we met on the boat trip – repeatedly.

In the evening we came ashore and met up with David and Debbie again for a meal and then went along to the Frangipani bar to listen to the steel band and watch the 'jump up' dancing. Of course we met everyone else again and had a great end to a wonderful day before finally retiring to Serafina just after midnight.

A little bit of magic

Friday 1st, and Saturday 2nd April.

Went ashore at 0900 hrs and met up as planned with David who kindly drove us out to their villa where Debbie cooked us a wonderful full English breakfast. Time slipped away and it was midday before we returned to Serafina where we got her ready for our departure the next morning. It was a windy night and we did briefly consider staying another day or so, but finally resolved to head south to Tobago Cays.

Bequia has been a wonderful stop and it has to be said that the island, the town and the inhabitants all make it a very special place and one where it is easier to stay than leave! The anchorage was a bit rolly, but somehow you can forgive it this inconvenience when the place is just such a delight. We are of course indebted to David and Debbie for taking the time to show us round the island and we look forward to returning next season.

We headed off at 0845 hrs pretty well reefed which was a wise precaution because as we cleared the headland and sailed out into the open ocean again, we were met by 25 knots of true wind. Fortunately this was from the east and as we were heading almost due south, we had another

wonderful sail for some 25 miles down to the island of Mayreau. We trailed the fishing line and were wondering if we had lost our touch when with perfect timing we hooked a perfect sized tuna and once he was aboard and I had gutted him, we sailed into the lee of the island of Canouan which helped flatten out the waves so Sarah was able to do the filleting on the back deck as usual.

We continued down to Mayreau where we dropped the sails and using the pilot book and the chart plotter, we piloted our way through the shallows and huge submerged reefs out into the Tobago Cays Marine Park. This is a quite magical location and probably one of the most dramatic and picturesque anchorages in the Caribbean. We picked our way through the crystal clear waters, only metres from the reefs and between three small islands to reach the very special anchorage sat behind the coral reef that is all that keeps out the full force of the Atlantic ocean. We dropped the hook into firm sand and after lunch jumped into the sea and swam ashore to the nearby white sandy beach and the protected area renowned for its turtles. This was an outstanding experience and we both spent ages swimming with Greenback turtles out in the wild. They seemed almost oblivious to our presence as they swam and munched on the weed on the sea bed, pausing only to occasionally surface to take a gulp or two of air before gliding downwards and returning to feeding. We saw all sizes from very mature adults to relatively young specimens. Sarah also came across a ray which pretty much rounded off a near perfect day.

In the evening we watched several of the yachts heading off, but we chose to stay despite the swell and planned to swim ashore in the early morning. Sarah then cooked some of the fresh tuna which was as ever simply delicious.

Heaven is a place on earth

Tuesday 5th, Wednesday 6th and Thursday 7th April.

Chatham Bay is one the ultimate chill out bays. It is quite large enough that the few yachts that do stop here can moor well away from each other and there are no beach resorts to disturb the peace. In fact the few beach huts/restaurants here are very low profile and very basic indeed and so they make a very refreshing change to anything we have come across before.

There is a road down to the bay, well track is a better description and so for the most part the boat boys/ restaurant owners come here from Clifton in open boats each day. These establishments (there are three) are simply wooden huts of the garden shed variety with steel drums converted into BBQ's. One or two have electricity so they can at least run a fridge. At the right hand end of the bay there is an altogether smarter complex being put together and this has a proper restaurant and bar with prices to match.

So on Tuesday we elected to have lunch ashore and having dragged the dinghy a little way up the beach we walked along the shore and visited each 'restaurant'. In the end we choose Seakie's mainly because he had Vanessa cooking and she inspired more confidence in us than any of the very chilled out guys at the other places! Vanessa had just finished making a special local soup (Callalou) and talked us into having that. Well the option was that or nothing... and it was really good as it happens. We then finished our stroll along the beach at Aqua (the new restaurant under construction still) and had a wonderful Tiramisu and coffees before returning to Serafina.

Following advice from Vanessa, we snorkelled out to the headland and were rewarded with some brilliant coral and any number of exotic species of fish as well as more turtles and even a moray eel.

The wind kept up all day and again all through the night, but the water stays flat which makes it perfectly comfortable here if a little noisy.

On Wednesday we were persuaded by Tim who runs Jerry's bar (yes, very complicated) to have fresh lobster for dinner and so at 1800 hours we went ashore and settled ourselves down at one of his two tables. There was a French family at the other table and we were soon joined by Dennis and Sarah, a Welsh couple (well sort of, who Tim had 'sold' to us as English) and were delighted to have them join us on our table. The lobsters were all cooked on the BBQ and this took forever, but the time passed quickly and we had a great meal even though the hurricane lamps barely allowed us to see each other let alone what we were eating (just as well perhaps?).

Before we had gone ashore though, we were treated to one of those special events and this time in addition to all the turtles heading off on their regular 1630 hrs tour of the bay, we had three Boobies feeding off the small fry that were swimming around the few boats here. Hard to photograph as they actually swoop so close to the boat and dive under the water, almost under the boat as well. The best pictures we could manage are at <http://www.rhbell.com> . But as well as all this, there were also some tuna feeding in the bay and so larger fish were all leaping and thrashing around trying to escape.

On Thursday morning we bade a reluctant farewell to Chatham bay but we will most certainly be back early next season. The 5 miles round to Clifton took no time at all and we were soon edging our way into this small town's anchorage which is again formed courtesy of extensive coral reefs that keep the fury of the Atlantic at bay. Very little room really here and plenty of hazards for the unwary, but we are about to head off to Grenada which is another country again and so we have to clear out of St Vincent and the Grenadines first, and Clifton is the last place we can do this as we head south.

We went ashore in the dinghy and tied up on the yacht club dinghy dock and walked into the delightful little town. This is how I imagined so much of the Caribbean to be like and so I have been a bit disappointed until arriving in the Grenadines. Customs and Immigration are based out at the airport and so I set off there on foot. Not such a big deal as it is only about 400 yards to the short strip of tarmac that fills this role. The officials were all very pleasant and helpful and the absence of any computers here meant I had to complete all the forms by hand but this hardly seemed to matter as it was all so relaxed.

Good to have access to the internet again and we took advantage of this to catch up with emails and the like, whilst sitting out in the anchorage gazing out into the Atlantic across the foaming reef.

Sadly the first part of the night was rather spoilt by the arrival of a large gullet style boat which having anchored right next to us, set about having a late night party with dancing (admittedly Sarah did find this quite entertaining to watch: a couple of short, stout Americans(?) dancing very ineptly on the roof of the deck saloon – she was all fingers crossed for further types of diversion, but they stayed safely on the deck!) very loud music, but fortunately the rum punches took their toll eventually, but not until after some horrendous community singing....

The Big Come Down

Friday 8th April

Music finished on the nearby boat around midnight and then for good measure they sounded their horn when leaving at 0700 hrs in the morning.

Since we were now awake we opted to make a start on today's journey and so by 0840 hrs we had lifted the anchor and were making our way (reluctantly) out of Clifton and heading south west to Carriacou, which is an island just to the north of Grenada but also part of Grenada, so we could clear through Customs and Immigration and spend a few days there.

It is only 5 miles between Union Island and Carriacou, but we tried a bit of fishing along the way and were rewarded with a Yellow Tailed Snapper (and very pretty it was too, as Sarah pointed out).

Hillsborough is the main town on the island and it is rather small even by standards out here, but the anchorage was large and straightforward, although there is a big swell and consequently the only boats here were, like us either clearing in or out of the country. The paperwork was easy for us as Sarah had noted from the pilot book that you could download the one page 'check in' form in advance and complete it and make the required 5 copies before going ashore, so I had done this the previous evening. Life then was very easy as the officials dealt with our case quickly and pleasantly. Other boaters were less fortunate and were sent off to find a photocopy machine once they had laboriously completed the forms standing outside in the sun!

As soon as this was all completed, we set off for Tyrell Bay which is round on the western side of Carriacou and we motored round, making our way between several islands, past a stunning quintessential Caribbean beach/desert island – basically just a sand bar - and across some shallows before making our way cautiously into what appears to be a large bay, but is in fact a mass of shoals, reefs and the odd unmarked wreck. The pilot book certainly talks this place up and we were looking forward to a few days here, rather along the lines of our time in Chatham bay, but with the added benefit of internet access. Sadly Tyrell Bay appears to have lost its charm and is little more than a rather tired and run down place, with a handful of basic restaurants, several large rusting barges and tugs (quarrying sand?) and a very dilapidated boatyard. The internet WiFi is close to useless and the boat boys are listless and almost disinterested. One of them, whose speciality appears to be selling Chilean wine, spends most of the day drifting round the bay, trying to get the outboard engine started on his boat.

I suspect that we will not be staying here anything like as long as we planned and may well head south to Grenada in the next day or so.

There are a couple of things that I forgot to mention at the time, one of which was that the large scruffy fishing boat anchored not far from us for several days in Chatham Bay, Union Island, turned out not to be a fishing boat at all but a Venezuelan vessel that brings fuel to Union Island. I think the correct term is smuggle, but given that Venezuela is very much off limits now to yachts due to the rapid expansion of piracy there, this was not something we felt the need to find out more about, but it did explain why it would disappear for part of each night.

The other issue was the April Fool's trick that we fell for hook, line and sinker. Shaun Mc Mullen is a friend out here who has been exceptionally helpful in advising us about all manner of things, but primarily about laying the boat up in Grenada where he has personally recommended Spice Island Marine. I made the mistake the other day of probably asking one question too many about the way things are done when laying up in the summer as opposed to the winter and got a very helpful email warning us in great detail about the one big drawback at Spice Island Marine which are the Fruit bats and in particular their poo. The email detailed the problems and various solutions (including making a scarer from wire, silver paper, and an old anode – Sarah was then planning the most elaborate, and artistic bird scarer) and we were completely taken in, even to the point of asking other boaters who have laid up there about the problem. Well done Shaun – just watch your back!

On the subject of piracy, we have been very sorry to read how Mark and Chris on Blue Magic on the current Blue Water Round the World Rally have had to abandon their attempt to sail up into the Red Sea so close to the end of their odyssey and Blue Magic along with all the other remaining boats are to be loaded onto a ship and transported into the Med at no little cost. The problem off Somalia and across the Indian ocean has now escalated well beyond any semblance of control and all the naval warships from around the world patrolling there are not even able to protect the merchant ships over such a widespread and lawless area.

And Happy Birthday today to our son youngest son Ewan, who never ever reads this log!!

Hillsborough, Carriacou

Friday 8th April

Just dropped the hook here long enough to go ashore and clear Customs and Immigration as this is part of Grenada.

Right Here – Right Now

Saturday 9th and Sunday 10th April

We spent Saturday at anchor in Tyrell Bay getting one or two jobs done in preparation for the lay up and dodging numerous cloud bursts. Not much else going on here although quite a few yachts left and we were very entertained by one or two of the new arrivals. It seems that this must be the first stop for some of the bareboat charter yachts coming out of Grenada and so boat handling is still something they are coming to terms with. One catamaran managed to miss the buoy it was trying to pick up, then fall back and straddle the boat behind, bouncing off two further boats behind that – obviously handling twin engines had not been mastered yet.

Saturday night was pretty breezy but the anchor held firm and it was around 0730 hrs that we pulled up our anchor and headed south to Grenada.

The wind quickly picked up to 25 knots and so we set a course and with a slightly reefed main and one of the twins flying we were soon making 8 knots towards the north west tip of Grenada. There was just the one real hazard as such on this part of the trip and that was the active underwater volcano directly in our path. There is a one and half mile exclusion zone which we skirted, although the 57ft Oyster that we had just over taken calmly sailed straight over the top. Oh how we prayed for a small eruption....

Made very good time to Grenada and were able to sail most of the way down the west coast to St Georges which is the capital, passing another Oyster along the way. We then made our way into the main harbour which seems to be one of the prettiest we have seen anywhere out in the Caribbean. Hurricane Ivan wreaked havoc across the island only a few years ago and still there are many signs of the damage caused, however the waterfront in St Georges looked beautiful. We headed into Port Louis marina where we plan to do some more of our preparations for laying Serafina up. The marina staff were very helpful and accommodating, but as is the way with so many marinas around the world, they seem to all want to re-invent the wheel and so the system for mooring up here was as convoluted and tricky as any we have seen before. Fortunately there was no real wind blowing at this stage and we managed eventually to get Serafina nicely sorted out with the only casualty being

the base of my back when I tweaked something trying to haul on a bow line, so I am having to take things even easier for the next 24 hours or so!

The first thing we noticed as we arrived though was the extraordinary number of Oysters (make of yacht) here and we soon discovered that the Oyster Caribbean Regatta 2011 is based here starting on Monday.

There are 46 Oysters assembled here from all over the world, of all sizes (well actually they are almost all 56ft or bigger) and they have 5 days of racing and/or socialising. The good news was that James and Lesley (who we have met in various places along the line - starting with their wedding in Mongonissi, Greece!) had recently got a job working together aboard the 56ft Oyster 'Sulana' are here. They are with the owners Alan and Sue on board and so we immediately were able to get to meet various people involved in the week-long event.

Competition for the sailing community – what is a suitable collective noun for so many Oysters. A 'richness' or perhaps an 'opulence' please submit ideas by email using the 'contact us' form at <http://www.rhbell.com>.

The berth we have been given here at Port Louis is very apt as we are on the one piece of quay that all the Oyster owners have to walk down to come ashore, so we have proudly raised our big Najad flag and are getting to know them all as they repeatedly stroll back and forth, sneaking admiring glances at Serafina, or perhaps not!

Don't Rain on My Parade

Monday 11th, Tuesday 12th, Wednesday 13th and Thursday 14th April

Monday was the first day of the Oyster Regatta and this was mostly spent preparing their boats for the Concours d'elegance judging in the afternoon.

This is largely a competition to see whose professional crew can make their boat look the smartest with most of the owners, but not all, taking things easy! Sadly for all concerned the weather here is very unseasonal and it kept pouring with rain which meant feverish activity afterwards as they desperately chamois-ed the boats dry and shiny again – and again – and again.

We in the meantime set about starting our preparation for the lay up but this was broken up increasingly as we paused to answer questions and chat with the many people passing by. Seems a good many of the Oyster owners hail from the east coast and the fact that Serafina is registered in Maldon catches their eye and sparks a conversation. It also seems that a fair number of the sailing community in West Mersea have their gardens designed and landscaped by Sarah's old sailing friend Judy Tridini!

Actually it has all become very friendly and we have found ourselves whiling away a lot of the time chatting to crews of all nationalities about all manner of things. Sadly Eddie Jordan's yacht is on a different quay, so we don't get to hob knob with all the rich and famous.

Tuesday was their first race day and as part of all the pomp and ceremony you would expect of this grand fleet, they had to line up in close order, line astern in the harbour and parade past the town and fort in a grand display of opulence, with the band playing and cannons firing from the land and photographers and cheering crowds..... But did I mention the weather earlier? Well it rained like I have never seen rain before and for a full hour or so, these boats filed in perfect order (oh how the

organisers of the East Med Rally would dearly wish they could make this happen – but then none of these skippers are French!!) past the fort. No band, no crowd, damp cannon only fired twice and about the only point of note is that it was probably the wealthiest collection of drowned rats in the world. Oh yes and there was not a breath of wind.

Seems the wind did get a bit later on, but even so they had to shorten the course and they all came back in later in the afternoon making a good show of having enjoyed themselves. James and Lesley joined us for dinner on board Serafina as they were not invited to the big bash for the owners in the evening and they did at least have the consolation from the racing of having won their class in this first race.

On Wednesday there was at least some wind and they all set off in better spirits and the better news was that they were going to be away for two nights now as their regatta was taking them to the marina where we are headed to on Saturday. (Le Phare Bleu)

However we had a new distraction today as the Roche family from Worcestershire arrived to start a two week sailing holiday on a yacht based here in Port Louis so we ended up joining them in the bar for a few drinks in the evening.

Thursday was a day free of interruptions and so we both got lots done and in the evening we went out for a meal with the Roches who have had a frustrating day as the boat they have chartered was simply not properly prepared and had any number of important technical faults.

Dead Calm

Friday 15th, Saturday 16th and Sunday 17th April

Coffee with the Roches in the morning gave us the chance to brief them about the islands they are heading up to visit, then they were off but the winds were pretty light and the forecast very unusually is for the wind to pretty much die away over the next three or four days. All really strange: the two things you can depend on in the Caribbean are good winds and sunshine, and the heavy cloud and frequent showers have put paid to the second of these all week.

We headed off into St Georges (the capital) using the local private bus system. These are modern minibuses run along the same lines as most of the islands and the dolmus' in Turkey. You don't need to flag them down as they all slow or even stop as you walk along offering you the ride. Price is fixed so there is little to discuss, but the slick development out here over the dolmus system is that the driver has an assistant who rides by the sliding side door and leans out of the window and hails anyone either he or the driver feel might be in need of a bus ride. He also takes the money and crams everyone in, leaving the driver to concentrate on driving as fast as possible. There are so many of these at work that you could never wait more than a minute for one to pass headed your way.

St Georges was fun and we spent some time first in the fruit and veg market as Sarah selected her goods, as ever trying not to upset all those you do not buy from whilst avoiding getting ripped off by those that you do. Very colourful place with some wonderful old buildings that mostly survived hurricane Ivan a few years back. Sarah had done her homework on St Georges and so I found myself being taken on a very carefully planned trip around various art shops, galleries and the like before we jumped in a passing bus back to Port Louis.

A quick word or two about the marina which is comparatively new and has been pretty well designed (apart from the mooring system) and the showers get a gold star from us and must rank up amongst the best we have encountered in some 16,000 miles of sailing in Serafina. The marina staff wizz around the jetties and quays on Segways which is pretty slick and very efficient. It is hot down in the basin which is protected from the prevailing wind and overlooked by two high peaks, both topped off with forts which provided the protection from invaders in days gone by. (The last invaders were the Americans in 1986... but they don't count.) Remarkably one of these forts is now the police headquarters and the other, which must rank as prime real estate with stunning views, is the prison!

In the afternoon the Oyster regatta came sailing back into St Georges and clearly Eddie Jordan had been feeling a bit left out where he was moored before, so he came and tied up alongside the quay next to ours. Racing rarely brings out the best in people and we were soon hearing stories of crews 'having words' and one paid skipper and his wife who we had met at the beginning of the week had walked off the boat and packed the job in! Some others were showing the strains.....

Saturday was the last day of their racing and they all set off first thing in the morning less than enthusiastic about the complete absence of any wind. We were moving on ourselves today and after putting the finishing touches to Sarah's stainless polishing, we headed off to Hog Island. Mind you the leaving from the marina was not all that easy. We waited whilst Bobby Moncur (Former Newcastle United captain) parked his catamaran next to us then the marina staff came along and untied us, but their system is pretty convoluted and they managed to untie our bows before letting us release the stern so we drifted back gently onto the quay before we were able to rescue the situation. Then as we headed out of the marina and into St Georges' main harbour area, which is tiny, we met all the Oysters returning as their race had been abandoned after barely 30 minutes of actual racing.

We motored round the south west tip of Grenada and then threaded our way past a series of nasty looking shoals and reefs into a beautiful looking tranquil bay tucked behind Hog Island. The route in has a few buoys marking it, but the pilot book warns that these are not official, are very possibly now in the wrong positions and largely missing anyway! The anchorage is quite spacious and not at all crowded, but over time we did come to realise that a lot of these boats have no-one living on board. There is a shed/bar on the beach on Hog Island but again no electricity or road access and it is all very basic; the rest of the shoreline around the bay is fringed with the ubiquitous mangroves.

The night was the stillest we have experienced out here and was almost quite eerie and without any wind, pretty hot.

Sunday dawned with even the open sea absolutely dead flat and still. We took the opportunity to take down our mainsail ready for the lay-up and found that the bimini we had made last year in Turkey makes an ideal platform for folding the sail up on and so this was easily our least fraught sail folding session ever! We were just completing this when an English couple, Bridget and Paul from Brightlingsea (Essex) came past in a neat inflatable kayak and paused to ask (like so many others) about the fact that Serafina is registered in Maldon (Essex) and this led us to invite them on board for coffee and we enjoyed a fascinating hour or so learning more about the area from them as this is their 3rd season in the Caribbean.

In the late afternoon things began to liven up on the beach and bar as Sunday is the day they have their beach BBQ and a live band which we had been told by various souls, was very good fun. Mostly this involves Grenadians who arrived in a fleet of battered fast boats, but once we saw a number of dinghies arrive from various of the yachts in the bay, we launched our dinghy and rowed ashore. We

soon met a number of very interesting and varied folk from all over, but sadly the band had some sort of technical problem and in due course they packed up their equipment and went home. This meant no dancing tonight, but did have the advantage that we could at least hear what people were saying. There is quite a community of live-aboards here with two boats sending their children to school locally. Several like us are about to fly home to various parts of the world, but unlike us they are leaving their boats afloat here in the bay throughout the hurricane season! They put their faith in 'sand screws' driven into the sea bed by a diver and the natural protection offered by the geography of the bay. Given that a number of the boats are occupied throughout the year by friends, there is always someone here to keep an eye on things if there is a problem. Well that is the theory anyway.

Stainless Steel: Sarah saw an advert in a local magazine for some new American product that looked to be the perfect answer to everyone's problems and so we bought some Island Water World in St George's to try. You simply paint this stuff on, leave it for 30 minutes or so and then wash off with a hose. It requires a high ambient temperature but nothing much else! Too good to be true really but she used it on all of our stainless whilst we were in Port Louis and have been astounded by the early results. Time will tell of course as the additional feature of this product is that you must not then add polish etc, as it claims to retain its protection for 6 months or so. So we will know more about this when we return to Grenada in November – hopefully not arriving to find a rusty hulk!!

Sails

Monday 18th, Tuesday 19th, Wednesday 20th, Thursday 21st and Friday 22nd April.

Crumbs doesn't time fly!

Monday was another flat calm and windless day, but to add to the eeriness of this was the spring low tide which was exceptional and which left many of the coral reefs even a long way offshore fully exposed.

We decided that spending another day in the bay was fairly pointless when we had so much to do, most of which meant being based in a marina, so we headed out and made our way round to Le Phare Bleu marina. We had been recommended to try this particular marina because it had beautiful clear water and was a very inexpensive but smart operation.

The dock master, Kevin, is English and he came out to meet us in their rib as we picked our way gingerly between the shoals, which are at least marked by buoys, even if it is still rather risky to take them all at face value! Docking alongside the pontoon was easy as we had no wind and Kevin and his assistant Julian were on the quay to take lines and manage things very ably. They welcomed us to the marina and explained the set up and the strict rules concerning waste which ensured that the water in the marina and bay remained perfect for swimming and snorkelling.

In due course we took some time to explore the venue and we felt at times that we needed to pinch ourselves as it all seemed so unlikely and perfect. The marina office, toilets and shower block are all situated in an old Swedish lightship which is also home to a fine dining restaurant. Ashore there is a less formal restaurant and bar as well as a swimming pool, mini market and a number of marine enterprises. The marina has a book swap and free film/DVD/video library (although predominantly in German) and everywhere is immaculately clean and tidy. They even have a couple of sailing dinghies available to guests.

There are some spectacular fish swimming around the bay and marina area, which probably explains the presence of a very large grey heron and two ospreys.

On Tuesday we got back into working mode and spent the next few days gradually working way our way through the huge list of jobs to do in preparing Serafina for a long hot summer ashore. Basically the plan is to do as much work as we can here by way of preparation before we motor round to Spice Island Boatyard which is in Prickly Bay. There we will be craned out onto the hard standing and the boat will be placed in a steel cradle and parked somewhere in the yard. It then gets lashed down to the ground to secure it against any passing hurricanes! I tell you this by way of explaining what we are trying to do, but the reality is something we will have to wait and see. So what we are busy doing right now is servicing every single piece of equipment so that hopefully when we return in November everything will still be functioning properly and be ready for another full season's sailing. Also all the hull and superstructure as well as all the fittings need to be cleaned, polished and waxed to protect them from the unrelenting sun of a Caribbean summer.

There are not very many boats here, most of which are based here permanently and by all accounts do very little sailing. It is a delightful spot and very friendly and extremely secure which means that it is also very relaxing. You do not have to lock the boat every time you want to go off and do anything else and that alone is worth the mooring fees.

One slight drawback to this island is that none of the sail makers has a sail laundering service, so where we normally just remove the sails and send them off to be washed, dried, aired and stored for 6 months, we found ourselves having to perform this function ourselves! Not quite so easy and having successfully dropped and folded the main the other day, we now had to unfold it and wash it and dry it. The local solution seems to be to lay it out on the big lawn here and rinse it with a hose and then leave it to dry. We tried this and also did the same with the downwind sail, but it was not a huge success! Washing was fine but drying proved tricky as the top side was fine, but the underside would always sweat and as you dragged it over it picked up mud from the ground.... so we ended up with two sails that were at least free from salt, but not dry. On the upside the resort had a nicely watered lawn at our expense! The solution was to hoist the sails up the mast in the early morning the next day and to let them flap in the breeze and fast warming sun. The hard wind jib we just washed as we hoisted it and then let it also air dry hanging from the mast. We just wish we had known that we would have to do this a week ago when sitting in Tyrell Bay in torrential rain! Could have done it all then and not spent an entire day messing around here.

On Wednesday evening we signed up for the Friendship Dinner which is a great idea where they prepare one long table for dinner and everyone just sits where they like and away you go. The meal was brilliant with a wide variety of dishes for us all to try and the company was excellent. We were sat with Bobby and Lesley Ward from Florida who have an Island Packet Yacht called Gráinne and were due to be craned out for the hurricane season the next morning. They were mines of useful information both for the east coast of America as well as any number of other issues. On the other side we had David & Julia who have a 50ft Lagoon catamaran "Torvin" and their friends who had just joined them (Liz and Patrick) turned out to know well a very good friend of ours back in Oxted, Surrey – Malcolm Lowe. It really is a very small world sometimes. It was a great evening but shortly after first light on Thursday we were back at our jobs!

Good Friday saw several yachts head off heading north for a week or two and the place began to look quite empty with only a few familiar faces were left.

We have not really had a chance yet to get beyond the immediate environs of the site yet so we have not seen much of the island. Hopefully we will get an opportunity during the coming week before we are craned out. But our appreciation of this little resort grows daily. There are a few apartments for rent and a few small marine businesses here as well as a car hire office and

remarkably a Customs and Immigration office. But the real bonus' are the pool and the crystal clear waters of the bay. The showers are housed in the Swedish Lightship and are very clean, neat and extremely practical however they are located in former cabins down the port side of the ship and as it lies facing due north, they are exposed to the full glare of the very hot sun for the entire afternoon and early evening which means that they resemble saunas rather more than shower rooms!

Driving in my car

Saturday 23rd, Sunday 24th, Monday 25th, Tuesday 26th and Wednesday 27th April.

Saturday and Sunday were spent working flat out (in between the odd rain showers) on Serafina, but on Saturday night there was a diversion by way of a live band in the marina bar. The Doc Adams Blues Band were quite a revelation and I sat and enjoyed a number of old favourites being performed by this very accomplished band. Doc Adams is something of the local hero as he is also the resident Chiropractor and he lives on his motor boat in the marina! (Although I may never forgive them for their sanitised version of Route 66!)

Monday we definitely began to run out of steam, but mainly because we were just about ready now for the craning out on Thursday, so Sarah was persuaded that on Tuesday we would go round and have a BBQ with our friends, the Roche family, who had now returned their charter yacht and were spending their last few days in a villa. However before we turned up at the villa, we took the opportunity to visit the boatyard at Spice Island where we are craning out, to chat to the staff and clear up a few questions.

We then walked round to the Roche's villa and were left almost speechless by the incredible size and opulence of the place. Not only was it huge and spacious, but it also came with staff! Wonderful views across the anchorage at Prickly Bay and an infinity pool for good measure. (couple of pictures at <http://www.rhbell.com>)

On Wednesday we hired a car for a day out exploring the island as we have tried to do in most of the places we have been. In true tradition it poured with rain for a good part of the day. This is still the dry season out here and by comparison, this time last year they had a serious drought and water shortages. We did however have a better map than usual, not that there are any road signs to help and Sarah did an outstanding job of navigating us around the island.

However we did have one bit of luck. We always hire the smallest car of course, but this firm probably only have a couple of cars, so we were upgraded for free to an excellent four wheel drive, four door SUV. This was pretty handy as the island features lots of difficult and steep roads, mostly riddled with large potholes. We did also take the opportunity to briefly take it off road at Levera Bay.

Sarah had planned a full day trip taking in some of the major attractions, but first we had to go to the main post office in St George to collect some goods ordered from America. This did not go quite as well as expected as we were given some very duff directions and so we lost the best part of an hour dealing with this in pouring rain.

Once we were on our way we headed into the centre of the island passing through the impressive rain forest during some even more impressive rain storms! We made a quick detour (and ducked the ticket purchase as the hut was unattended) to see the slightly uninspiring Great Etang Lake (altitude 1800 ft) – although the fact that it is somehow connected to the 'Kick Em Jenny' submarine volcano that is still active offshore (when the volcano is active the water heats up in the lake!) made it more intriguing. We made our way up to the north east of the island passing through Grenville

which is sort of regarded as the 'other' capital of the island. It represents very much the other side of life in Grenada away from the tourist areas in the south. Like so much of the island there is abject poverty here and we felt very conspicuous in our shiny hire car as we passed through clearly defined Rasta areas, where people are living in tiny shacks on stilts – the size of which we would honestly consider garden sheds at home and housing goodness knows how many people. The island itself is beautiful and we probably enjoyed our trip round Grenada more than almost any of the other islands we have visited out here and again it is impossible not to remark on the incredibly smartly turned out school children everywhere we went. Despite all the problems and difficulties, all of the children are immaculately dressed in smart clean uniforms and remain like this even after school has ended and they are making their long and difficult journeys home largely on foot.

We visited the Belmont Estate which is the largest cocoa plantation on the island and which runs tours and a small museum. All very interesting and surprising that it is still working almost as it did nearly three hundred years ago with just the important distinction of no longer using slaves of course! Grenada is very proud of its chocolate and rightly so and we were probably not too surprised to learn that it can be bought in the UK at Waitrose!

After a quick paddle on an Atlantic beach with great rollers, and a further detour to another lake, Antoine (altitude 20ft we were proudly informed) which is supposed to have great birdwatching, but like all our visited sites today, very muddy; we reached Bathway beach along the north east coast in time for a late light lunch at Aggies tiny restaurant which had been recommended to us by several people during the day. We then viewed Levara bay and took some more photos before wending our way round the northern tip and all the way down the west coast back to le Phare Bleu Marina. As we drove through Gouyave a funeral procession was underway with an immense queue of mourners all very formally dressed in black following a coffin being processed along the high street.

In some of the roadside shacks we have seen fairly basic square kites have been constructed out of plastic sheeting and sticks for sale. This appears to be the latest fad here and there are dozens of wrecked kites attached to the power lines around the island. Indeed we were treated to several on the hill above the marina over the weekend – the more exotic ones sport very irritating whirring, whining mechanisms!

And finally we have enjoyed the friendly attitudes of the locals on this island, but Rob was a little disconcerted by a hand-painted sign we saw on our travels today: Trespassers will be Executed!

Walking in the Rain

Thurs 28th April – Monday 2nd May

Up with the lark on Thursday to motor round to the boatyard at Spice Island Marine. Bit more wind blowing and larger seas than we have been used to for a while, which was a pain as we had removed our sails in preparation for being craned out. This meant that we did roll quite a bit until we were clear of all the offshore shoals and were able to turn downwind and run with the waves for about half an hour to Prickly Bay. Once we entered the bay and got behind the protective shelter of the headland, the sea went much smoother and we made our way carefully through all the moorings up to the head of the bay to the boatyard.

Although we were about 40 minutes early, they were ready for us and so we turned round and reversed into the travel lift and Serafina was soon out of the water and poised over dry land as the lads scraped loads of barnacles off the hull before pressure washing it. They then took her round to where she will be parked for the next six months and we really do seem to have got one of the best

seats in the house. We are parked right by the entrance and almost on top of the security guards office. Only yards from the washing machines, toilets, showers and loos. Also the excellent bar and restaurant 'De Big Fish' is barely 50 yards away! Steve from Scott-Free would be in seventh heaven as the large and very well stocked Budget marine chandlery is no more than 30 yards from us.

The only slight drawback is that because the sled is not working at the moment, they were not able to put Serafina into her steel hurricane cradle just yet. I think we might have been a bit happier to see that last bit being done before we left, but such is life.

Sarah set about polishing the hull and then covering it all with a protective layer of special wax which you leave on until you return in 6 months and then polish it off. It helps protect the boat from UV damage. We also decided that we did not want to have the boatyard sanding our antifouling for us as we would not be here to supervise the work, so Sarah set about doing this herself with scouring pads and lots of water! The downside of being where we are is that everyone walks past us on their way to pretty much anywhere so we get lots of visitors and passing comments. One particular American chap was in awe of her hard work and found various spurious reasons to call by, mostly to ask what she was doing and why!! He named her 'the Beast' and if you look at the photos on the website <http://www.rhbell.com> you may see why.

To make life a bit easier and in keeping with most folks here we have booked into an apartment so we can go home at night, shower in peace and enjoy some air conditioning. Sadly the recommendation did not work out too well this time and we are housed in something which on reflection makes staying on board Serafina ashore almost seem attractive. Getting to and from the apartment in the morning and evening is theoretically a breeze as the local mini buses fly past every 20 seconds or so and at 50p each it is barely worth walking the three quarters of a mile. However we might have overlooked that the last three days have been a weekend followed by a bank holiday. So we have walked it and on Sunday night it was very unpleasant as it was pouring with rain. We did however come across a huge toad who was pretending to be invisible. The very worst aspect of the flat is the large dead cockroach in the middle of the kitchen (he had obviously partaken of the generous dollops of killer powder all round the edges of the kitchen – yes this got Sarah into her more neurotic behaviour mode regarding vermin!).

'De Big Fish' is quite a social hot spot for cruisers as it serves the anchorage as well as all those of us now ashore in the yard. It has a great happy hour (a bucket with 3 beers in for 2 pounds sterling) and there are always lots of interesting folks to meet and plenty of old friends who are either passing through or laying up like us. Amongst these were John and Sue off 'Saltscar 3' and Catherine, Mark and their children of 'Pegasus of Jersey'. The later were anchored in the bay undertaking some major repairs as they had belatedly discovered that the reason the steering on their catamaran had become 'different' half way across the Atlantic, was because one of their rudders had dropped off! Mark had dived to investigate the issue in Bequia, some 2 months after the crossing and was astonished to find the complete blade missing. So he and a friend are busy making a new one and have removed and strengthened the existing one. This is making them quite late for their sail down to Panama and transiting the Panama Canal.

On Saturday night we ended up eating with Ken and Wendy who we had first met in Puerto Calero, Lanzarote. They are from Tasmania and are on their way back to Australia in their Bavaria, bought in Slovenia. Ken until recently held the Australian record for sailing single handed, non-stop around the world in a boat that he built himself and so he seems to consider that sailing a Bavaria back from the Med, via Panama and the Pacific to be something of a 'milk run' (a mere 8,500 miles to go still)!

Sadly De Big Fish also recognises Sundays and bank holidays and has been closed which has caused Sarah some headaches as her catering plans rather revolved around them being open and serving food.

Going Home

Tuesday 3rd and Wednesday 4th May

Tuesday was our last day in the yard and so in a final fevered push we completed all the jobs and were able to wander over to De Big Fish to join various friends for a farewell drink or two. We ended up having a meal there with Catherine, Mark and Whit and bade them well on the next leg of their trip to Panama – once Mark has finished repairing the rudders!

Hopefully we have left Serafina in good shape to endure a long hot and rainy summer, but as a bit of insurance we have Lesley popping in every week to keep a good eye on things but especially mildew and any over-friendly vermin. The boatyard will be moving Serafina to another spot once they are ready to put her into a hurricane cradle which is a bit of a shame as the security team were very friendly and able to keep a watchful eye on her as she towers over their hut.

On Wednesday we made our way to the airport just a bit too early but this was because Sarah had organised Alvin to pick us up in his dilapidated car and as a measure of safety she had chosen to give him an earlier time to pick us up to allow for the 'Caribbean Factor' but he had turned up 30 minutes early and we had to just go! We are taking some electronics back to the UK for repair which is quite a performance as you have to get special customs clearance forms sorted and then present the items to customs at the airport so they can see them and sign off your paperwork. The point of all this is so when we return they will not charge us the usual 26% import tax. However getting security clearance and then passing through all the controls to get to customs at the airport was very tedious and it was a good thing we had factored in plenty of time.

The Monarch Airlines plane (Airbus 330) was pretty much on time and we got away almost on schedule but did not realise that this went first to Tobago where we all had to get out for an hour while they turned the aircraft round ready for the rest of the flight home. So it was two hours after leaving Grenada that we finally rose into the sky and headed for Gatwick. The rest of the trip went well and we arrived home tired but in good spirits on Thursday morning.

So in the 12 months since we left Turkey in April 2010, we have sailed 8,324 miles which includes 1,993 miles crossing the Atlantic from the Cape Verde islands to Barbados and 2,358 miles from Israel across the Med to Gibraltar. We have visited 21 countries, some several times! Every one of the blogs has had a song title as the subject line, which has been almost as challenging (thank you Lesley and Trevor for that idea – and your inspirations) but this is not a particular feature that I plan to continue with next year!

We are back in the UK now until mid November when we will fly back out to Grenada and the current plan includes sailing north up the east coast of America to New York and beyond taking 12 months to enjoy the challenge. This blog will of course recommence as soon as we arrive back on board but in the meantime Sarah and I both wish all those of you reading this diary a very enjoyable 6 months of whatever season you are experiencing. We of course are trying to get our heads round the confusion of being in the UK for the whole summer and not having a boat to sail in!

Our best photos and cruising notes (yachting resources) are all posted at <http://www.rhbell.com>

November 2011

Back in the swing of things

Arrived back in Grenada on Wednesday 30th November and despite fears of delay due to the strike in the UK our flight was bang on time.

We went straight to Spice Island Marine Boatyard and found Serafina safe and sound and looking very well. Sadly she was parked with her stern overhanging a working area and a large pool of oil which made getting on board nothing short of very hazardous. All was very well on board and we were very pleased that we had chosen to get Lesley to keep an eye on things and to open up the boat each week to air it and avoid mildew etc.

We then took a taxi to the hotel room we had booked for just the first night. Ricky was the first taxi waiting at the boatyard entrance and when I asked him if he knew the Siesta Hotel in Grand Anse, he smiled and repeated the name back to us signifying that he knew exactly what we meant. It turned out that he was merely proving that he was capable of repeating what we said, because it was soon apparent that he had very little idea at all. Fortunately as he drove rather aimlessly into the right area, he chose to stop and get some directions, which led to a quick U turn and all was well.

In the morning Sarah headed off to the nearby very smart supermarket and then took a taxi back to the boatyard with all her shopping, whilst I caught a bus straight there and got the boatyard to agree to move Serafina away from the oily area. I had sort of forgotten the excitement of these buses and as usual one pulled up within a minute of me reaching the main road. It took a few moments before we all could agree where it was I was trying to get to and off we shot. Very good value for around £1.50 as they managed to drop me off pretty much by the gate.

There was a bit of a delay to work in the morning as the lads from the yard spent several hours moving Serafina. Then in the afternoon as we got stuck into our jobs re-commissioning Serafina, two lads turned up to add a second coat to the antifouling paint. They were very good and did a wonderful job which was very reassuring. It seems that the waxing that we did before we left last May has been a big success. We took some advice back then to apply the wax, but not clean it off afterwards so it provided a barrier against the hot summer sun and heavy rains of the summer rainy season out here. Sarah has found that it now cleans off really easily and has done a wonderful job.

The other huge bonus was the Stainless Steel. We had found and trialled a fairly new product called Spotless Stainless (<http://www.rochemarine.co.uk>) which makes the whole business of cleaning Stainless really easy, but the proof of the pudding lay in what it might all be looking like when we arrived back out here after 7 long months of sitting in in a boatyard. We were simply stunned by the fantastic condition we found it all in. Most of the stainless was near perfect and it was only some small parts of the lower grade stainless steel made in Turkey that had any rust showing – and that all simply wiped away. It is a quite outstanding product and just so simple to use.

The restaurant and bar next to the boatyard, De Big Fish, was still going strong and it is undoubtedly going to be something of a lifeline for the next 8 days. The owner Rickky came and sat with us on Thursday evening and we chatted about developments since we were last here. We had an early night in the end as our body clocks are still on UK time (4 hours ahead) and it is hot and very humid. The best time of day for getting real work done is still at first light in the morning, so the alarm is set for 5.00am.

Hot and Sticky

Well certainly first thing in the morning is the best time to work, but it does not actually get light much before 6.00am. the weather here is 'unusual' (well there is a surprise...) and it rains every night without fail and is not too shy about pouring down in the mornings as well. Then you add the sunshine and it is not surprising that the humidity is currently running at 89%. (readers in the UK can just assume this means bloody uncomfortable.)

One of the bigger jobs that needed doing was the changing of the batteries as the older ones were beginning to show their age and were failing to hold their charge well enough given the amount we rely on them. We had ordered a new set through Budget Marine Chandlers during the summer and this in itself had been a long drawn out process as the Swedish manufacturers of Serafina chose to use a type of battery unavailable anywhere else in the universe it seems! But we did find some superior AGM batteries that would fit into the existing battery boxes and so they were ordered from Holland. They were shipped to Miami and then thanks to the perseverance of the Budget Marine manager here in Grenada, they arrived here just before we did. This just left the small matter of how I was going to remove the 6 very heavy existing batteries and replace them with the new ones. This is hard enough at the best of times, but given that Serafina is perched up high above the ground in the boatyard it all became a good deal harder. Fortunately Rickky from the De Big Fish came to our rescue by telling us about a lad who he sometimes used who was very strong and only charged the equivalent of £18 per day. So Jess was contacted and he came along on Saturday morning and was absolutely brilliant. A really likable and friendly lad aged around 20, he knew nothing about boats but was very careful at all times to ensure nothing got damaged. He was also so excited to learn the knot that we were using to tie the batteries to a rope to lower them to the ground and spent ages practicing it and begged that he be allowed to tie the knot every time from then on. (We have seen him since and he admitted to practicing the knot at home on his baby brother!)

This at least dealt with the heavy work side of changing the batteries, but as is the nature of such things all the terminal posts were slightly larger and new link cable had also to be made and so I had a busy day in the bowels of Serafina in some pretty uncomfortable heat. Poor Sarah in the meantime was busy as ever polishing the hull for which she is again receiving plaudits from other cruisers working on their boats, so it a shame that there isn't a prize for this.



One big downside to the long hot wet summer here seems to be the huge increase in the mosquito population and this is a good deal worse than when we were here in May. Sarah still appears to be immune whereas I am clearly the dish of the day. Despite applying every repellent known to man, I am being eaten alive it seems.

Quite a few other folks like us getting ready to launch and our nearest neighbour is Jim who comes from Chicago and trades in 'hogs'. He has left his wife back home so he can get on with all the work and like so many others is astounded by Sarah's dedication to the cause.

Darkness falls very swiftly at 6.00pm so there is at least a finite end to the day's travails, so then it is time for a shower which is invigorating by virtue of the fact that the shower block here only has very cold water on offer. And for the first two nights there was no lighting either.

On Sunday we had a warm and very humid and overcast morning followed by a still and blisteringly hot afternoon which was pretty draining, by at least by nightfall we did feel that we had broken the back of the worst jobs.

Launch date is the 8th (Thursday).

Splash and Dash

Yes, well that was the general idea but sadly it was rather more splash and clunk....

All went well preparing Serafina and thank you to all of you who have noticed that we are back in harness and sent us emails.

We managed to complete our main tasks in what has been becoming an increasingly oppressive heat with Sarah going up to the top of the mast, not once but twice! (we did this around 6.30am over two days to minimise the heat issues.)

Finally Thursday dawned and we said our goodbyes to various new and old friends and the crane crew arrived with various machines to move us and then hoist us back into the water. This all went very well and the staff at Spice Island Marine are to be complemented on their very cheerful and thorough work. They even crawled under the keel to apply the very final bit of antifoul paint prior to the splash.

We were lowered carefully into the sea and then when it came to starting the engine.....nothing but the sad empty click of a bugged starter battery! It was cheerfully showing a full 12 volts but sadly it had no oomph (technical term for power). I dived below and using jump leads coupled one of the domestic batteries up to help, but still nothing at all. The yard lads summoned one of their engineers and he jumped aboard with some proper beefy looking jump leads and after also failing to succeed, he linked one of our new domestic batteries directly to the starter motor. This certainly helped a bit but it was the short squirt of fly spray into the air intake that did the job (don't ask) and finally the engine roared into life and we were off.

Just 12 miles round to St Georges, the capital and a berth in Port Louis marina where we hope to finish the stainless polishing etc. and provision up. Given a good berth at the end of their main quay, which gives us privacy and a clean pontoon to wash some of the canvas parts on. This was the first time we had laid up for a hot summer rather than a cold winter and there have been a number of casualties of the heat and humid air. We motored all the way, partly due to the lack of wind and partly due to a not altogether irrational fear that the engine might not start again! Having docked the first thing I did was try the starter and of course nothing happened.

The plain fact is that the starter battery was knackered and failing to hold any sort of charge and so we bought a new battery today and all is now very well in that department. I did fail to mention in the last posting that the arrangements with changing the domestic batteries ended up rather neatly. We got Jess to do all the hard work but he cost us for his time. So on the morning that we were doing the change over, I went onto the local radio net and under the item "treasures of the bilge" I offered our old batteries to anyone who wanted them for just ECD 100. I got several instant replies

on the VHF and a very grateful English chap wheeled them away in a barrow only an hour after we had lifted them down onto the ground. This paid for Jess and enough left over for a round or three of cold beers. (Yes the old batteries were pretty useless, but evidently better than the ones their new owner had, or rather didn't have – and that was a long story in itself, but not for today.)

Sarah is suffering from a very sore throat and seems a bit over tired, obviously from all her exertions and a lack of proper sleep, so Friday was declared a rest day for her. Well, a sort of rest day at least but sadly life goes on and there are always some things to do, but she did at least get a good sleep last night!

Met some very nice Swedes whose Farr 56 (Victory Too) was next to us on the hard and who are also now here in Port Louis. They kindly offered us the use of their hire car for some fetching and carrying, but we can get just about everywhere in the dinghy here in St Georges harbour. The Foodhall has its own dinghy dock (very smart it is too with Christmas lights at moment, as well. Plus today all the staff there were wearing Santa outfits which must have been pretty damn hot), the chandlery has a dock, the customs office has a dock and we can shoot off into the main harbour and moor right in the town for a bit of social shopping and the produce market on Saturday.

New pictures at http://www.rhbell.com/photos_2011.html

Heading North

This might be our last WiFi for a few days so we are posting this entry even though we have little to report yet!

The hope is to leave Grenada in the morning and head north to Union Island and then on to Bequia. This was a great anchorage on the way down and we had a great week there, but we have heard disturbing things about a dramatic rise in petty crime there and suddenly parts of the anchorage are deemed unwise to use and vigilance is required day and night. Rather a shame, but we gather that the authorities are very much on the case as tourism is the small island's lifeblood.

From Bequia we will sail overnight to St Lucia where we plan to spend Christmas. But doubtless these plans will be changed as we go along.

Port Louis has been a good spot from which to make our final preparations for the coming cruising season as it is close to a few specialist services and another good chandlery (Island Waterworld). Today we had Basil (St John) along to see to the problem with the main fridge which was frosting along the top (more serious from the user's point of view, when the fridge baskets are firmly welded to the side of the fridge by a glacier!) but not really at all cold inside. He swiftly diagnosed a lack of gas in the system and set about refilling it for us and by early afternoon all was well.

I was fully occupied yesterday polishing all the stainless steel, well all of the gantry at the rear of the boat to start with. Once again we used Spotless Stainless cleaner and this is a remarkable product for sure. The first time we used it there was the issue of existing wax on the steel which made the job a bit slower, but as I said the other day, we were thrilled how it protected everything over the period ashore. Now that we are simply redoing the existing stuff, it is an absolute breeze and the results are staggering and it is all so easy. Wish we had the franchise!!

Kenny, our on board washing machine failed to start the season and with a full load of washing inside it refused to spin or empty itself. So I set about taking things apart to sort this out and after a

number of excitements got it all fixed and took the opportunity to service some of the items associated with Kenny as well.

Naturally if things are playing up, you can be certain that the toilets will not want to be left out of things! So both were back-flushing and the forward heads was just not working properly at all. So with humidity running at 89% still, I had the joy of taking both sets of pumps apart and fitting new seals where needed. Not a lot of fun, but just something that has to be done. Both loos are fine and running well now which is pretty important given that we are not going to be seeing another marina for quite a while.

We used the dinghy to get about and for simplicity we just put the 2.5 hp Yamaha outboard on. Sarah did question on our first outing the fact that we did not have the oars with us. I said that they hardly mattered as we were within the harbour and all was fine with the outboard.....so of course it stopped dead with us stranded in the middle of the lagoon. Finally got it restarted and we went straight back and unearthed the oars – which doubtless we will never need again.

Poor WiFi here which means having to go to the bar with the laptop to send and receive emails etc. Sounds like fun, but at their prices it is best to avoid the drinking part.

So with luck we will off sailing shortly and the next entry should be somewhere north of here. But the way things go in sailing in the early season we are not holding our breath just yet.

Gentle start

Cleared customs at 8.00am and were finally clear of the marina with some goodies from the new bakery shop just by the entrance to the marina, around 9.00am.

Light winds all the way up the west coast of Grenada as usual but we were blessed with a smooth sea and around a knot of current under us.

When we cleared the northern tip and out into the Atlantic swell again, we were very pleasantly surprised to find the seas remained pretty flat by Caribbean standards and the gently easterly breeze allowed us to make our course direct to Union Island. Better still we were able to make a very comfortable 6 to 7 knots all the way and so it was around 4.00pm that we dropped the anchor in Chatham Bay on Union Island having decided not to bother going into Clifton this late to try to clear customs and immigration.

Sadly we saw no dolphins, whales nor did we even get any bites on the lure we were towing for the final few miles, but it was a wonderfully relaxing first sail of the season.

The beautiful bay had only a handful of boats anchored and we were able to give ourselves a nice spot with a good sandy holding for the anchor. We were still lowering the anchor when the first of many turtles came by to inspect us! We were also treated again to the spectacle of boobies diving and feeding on the plethora of small fish shoaling around the bay.

We settled down to our first swim which was just wonderful and sat and enjoyed watching the sun go down finally without a mountain of jobs still to get done!

Bequia

Slipped out of Chatham Bay around 9.30am and made our way north with very light, very un-Caribbean winds cutting through another surprisingly smooth sea.

We had debated visiting Tobago Keys to see the turtles again, but we glad we had decided against this when we saw the huge lumbering form of a cruise ship anchored off the nearby island. We can only imagine that it would have been chaotic and very unpleasant there today.

Progress was mixed as although we could just about make our heading to Bequia, the wind was so light that we were reduced to quite a bit of motor-sailing to make up the time on the 30 mile trip. Again no sea-life apart from one very large turtle miles out at sea, although we did come across patches of weed and sadly, a lot of plastic flotsam at times.

We dropped anchor in Bequia around 2.00pm and had lunch then had a bit of a panic as we realised that we needed to clear customs and immigration before they closed at 4.00pm (or so we assumed). This meant launching the dinghy and putting the big outboard onto it, which was the first time we had even touched the bigger engine since we returned.

We managed to get this all done and shot into the town and arrived with barely 5 minutes to spare. But everything takes an age here and although we had already done a lot of the tedious stuff using 'e Sea Clear' online, it still requires someone with a rubber stamp to produce 5 copies of a document that I had to sign and date. Then across to immigration who were very helpful but a little confused as we were clearing in and out and the same time! (Our plan is to sail north tomorrow night to St Lucia, as the winds are forecast to turn into brisk northerlies on Friday).

Another refreshing swim and supper on board followed by an early night.

Rodney Bay, St Lucia

Wednesday 15th Dec 2011.

We spent a bit of time wandering around Bequia town visiting a few of the shops and galleries and generally having a good nose around. This was followed by a sandwich at Gingerbread after which it was time to return to Serafina and get her ready for a 4.00pm departure.

We got away promptly, but the wind was pretty much as forecast and the light east, north easterly at least allowed us to set a very slow course for the south western tip of St Vincent.

As darkness fell we were reduced to motoring slowly and this remained the situation right through the night. One of Sarah's watches in the middle of the night was at least enlivened for 20 minutes by a group of a dozen very enthusiastic dolphins, who were delighting in causing the phosphorescence to sparkle as they leapt in and out of the sea. Sarah said that it seemed like they were all wearing fairy lights on their backs!

Our timing was upset by the very unusual phenomenon of a very positive current under us the whole way and so despite all our efforts to slow down so as not to arrive in Rodney Bay before first light, we were still there rather too soon. Once dawn broke we made our way over to the north west side of the bay, close to Pigeon Island where we found a good spot and dropped anchor. We had a few hours rest before launching the dinghy and making our way into the marina within the lagoon where we had to clear in through Customs and Immigration. This proved to be just as slow and frustrating as ever and so it was early afternoon before we were able to nip over to the

shopping mall in the dinghy to get some urgent supplies, prior to returning to Serafina who was now being buffeted by some heavy swell and a growing north easterly wind.

We seemed to have found a good spot again as the sea and wind were combining to make huge sections of the bay completely untenable. We witnessed some yachts suffering dreadful rolling as they caught by the huge cross swell. In fact we watched in some kind of awe really as one big blue Oyster sat there dipping its toe rails into the sea repeatedly as the crew seemed to be simply hanging on in the cockpit for dear life! After several hours of this, we watched them finally work out that they needed to move and were frankly horrified as they set off and started trying to anchor in a spot that was if possible, even worse than where they had been before.

More and more yachts started to work out the benefits of being where we were and we were soon joined by any number of others. There was just one extraordinary coincidence during all this. We have come here principally to meet up with Shaun and Gabby on their yacht Tabasco Jazz, but we were told in the marina that they had not yet arrived because of problems at home, but that Shaun should be here soon, heading down from Antigua. So we were delighted when at around 5.00pm we saw Tabasco Jazz nosing its way through the mass of yachts and neatly dropped their anchor almost alongside us – before they realised it was us. We did invite Shaun and his crew on board, but they were exhausted from a hard three days travelling south and we were quite pleased ourselves as we had a night's sleep to catch up on as well.

Might be a noisy one as the wind is still rising as we are heading off to bed.

Rodney Bay Marina, St Lucia

17th, 18th, 19th, 20th 21st and 22nd Dec 2011.

Blimey I had no idea it was so long since we had written a log!

On the 17th we stayed out in the bay and the swell eased gradually although the wind kept increasing. It is all about the wind direction in terms of the nature of the swell out there.

On the 18th we negotiated a place in the marina as we knew that the weather was about to deteriorate further and we expected a bit of a rush for the safety of the lagoon. It was also the day after the ARC prize giving and so a lot of those yachts were now leaving the marina heading off to other islands for Christmas, so places were beginning to appear. We got lucky in a sense and were offered a berth which only had American power hook up facilities, but we had no need for shore power so we took the berth figuring that we could better negotiate a decent berth from inside the marina, rather than bobbing out in the bay. This turned out to be a master stroke and in the morning of the 19th Dec we spoke very nicely to Gary who was the very flustered duty dock master. We assured him we were in no hurry and did not want to hassle him, but it would be nice to be on the prestigious D pontoon if anything came up. We were rewarded by being given pretty much the best seat in the house and we moved at midday to a superb outside hammerhead berth which gives us a lovely fresh breeze and no passing footfalls or security issues. We even have the wind just pushing us off the quay all of the time so our fenders are spared from endless chaffing. Then for good measure they ushered our Swedish friends on 'Victory Too' (Farr 56) into the berth immediately in front of us. Perfect.

Our berth also meant that we were just three slots away from our Norwegian friends on Ko Ko (Najad 570) so we got full access to their lovely coffee machine!! In fact we went out that evening with Ellen and her son (Jasper) and his girlfriend, Lotta (she is Finnish so I have no idea of the correct

spelling) as well as another Norwegian couple. We used our dinghy as transport as they had just sold theirs (long story) but this required two trips in and two runs back. All went well on the first run, but on the second, the engine died and became very unhelpful. In the end I got it to complete its duties, but it now only runs if the choke is half out.

Still busy working on Serafina by day. We had a serious problem with our chart plotter on the sail up from Bequia as it kept switching itself off and restarting at random. Not very helpful when you have a cruise liner crossing your track..... We have had this looked at and the first solution was to reboot the system with a full reset. This resulted in the minor inconvenience of deleting all of our tracks and waypoints, which is a shame but not fatal. Time will tell if this has solved anything.

We also set about converting the rather useless locker in the dinghy into something more substantial, useful and secure. This like everything has taken time and some welding and fabrication in the nearby boatyard, but the outcome is just what we wanted so we are pleased about that at least.

I have been 'wasting' a lot of time trying to run some cables down from the top of the gantry to a power source in the boat, partially to run a courtesy light over the swimming ladder and partly in order to power a new wifi system that will be up there soon. I say wasting because despite all our efforts we have been unable to 'mouse' a line all the way back down into the boat. There is some sort of restriction halfway down the upright and although there are two cables in there already, we just cannot get a new line down there. Very frustrating indeed.

The weather continues to be an enigma, with lovely sunshine for most of the time, but also frequent very heavy showers – especially in the evenings, which combine to give a very high humidity. We do not expect much sympathy from residents of the UK, but we are just reporting things as we find them!

Sarah has been putting out our internal Christmas decorations and some of the other boats here have taken time and trouble to decorate themselves with fairy lights, but it seems to be the Americans who take this aspect most seriously and there are a few very impressive displays at night time.

Rather disappointed with the chandlery here (Island Water World) as it seems to be a pale imitation of their branch in Grenada. There is a very useful large hardware store across the road though (Johnsons) and they have all sorts of useful things at sensible (non-marine) prices.

On Wednesday evening Haakon (Ko Ko) arrived from Norway where he had been home on business. He rushed round and had a celebratory drink with us and then he and Ellen again invited us to join them and some other Norwegians (there are a lot of them about at the moment!!) for a meal at a French restaurant in town. We accepted of course and had another great evening feeling pretty inadequate as everyone else switched from Norwegian to English without any effort. In fact Jasper and his girlfriend can only communicate in English as she has no Norwegian and he has no Finnish. We have now made a special effort to get more involved in all this and have now at least learnt how to say "hello how are you?" Linguists reading this may like to know that this is a guttural exclamation of "hey". Well it is a start at least.....

On Thursday 22nd Ko Ko set off round to Marigot Bay to join up with 4 or 5 other Norwegian boats for Christmas eve. (They do not bother with Christmas day it seems and are very unsure as to what Boxing Day could mean. We will be meeting up with them again before too long we hope as we plan to both meet up with Iain and Jan Simpson on their new Najad 570 'Song of the Ocean'. We heard

today that they had just arrived in Antigua at the end of their latest transatlantic crossing. (I am not insinuating anything here, but I was pretty sure that they were heading for Barbados originally.....)

We also heard by email today that there is a friend of a friend currently about halfway across (so still 1000 miles to go) who have lost part of their rudder and have no proper means of steering. By all accounts other yachts in the vicinity are helping as best they can with water, food, support and advice.

And the other big local story is that the owner of a 55ft 'X yacht' came back from supper the other night on the island of St Maarten and found his yacht had been stolen – lock stock and barrel. Makes you think a bit more about security.

Christmas in the sun

23rd, 24th and 25th Dec

Not really sure where all these days are going as time spent in a marina flies by with little of apparent consequence occurring it seems.

We invited 'Elvis' who is a local fix-it man to have a go at sorting out our declining outboard and he returned after an hour or so with it restored to full original power. I had quite forgotten how surprisingly effective such a small (2.5hp) outboard engine can be for pottering around.

We continued our battle to mouse some cables into the gantry with ever more desperate approaches and it seems that we were closer than we realise on Christmas Eve, but the end of the day overtook us and we certainly were not planning on trying on Christmas Day.

Those of you reading this blog last April may recall that we were the victims of a very effective April Fool played by Shaun and Gaby involving the bats at Spice Island marine in Grenada. Well Sarah is not one to take things lying down so to speak, and she purchased some Halloween rubber bats in the UK and her original plan had been for us to sail into Rodney Bay and go ashore and festoon Shaun's boat 'Tabasco Jazz' in them on evening before they knew we were back. Sadly Shaun was delayed arriving this year and as I reported a few days ago, he arrived after us and anchored next to us so the element of surprise was removed. But ever patient, Sarah waited until they went out on Christmas Eve and then went round and decorated the boat with the bats! And by all accounts this was well received!!

A surprise arrival on Christmas eve was Frank Hatfull who runs the Najad owners website in the UK. He had joined a boat crossing the Atlantic in the ARC but had jumped ship in the Cape Verde islands for various reasons. He then had eventually managed to hitch a ride on an Italian yacht for the crossing and his arrival on the 23rd Dec made him the last ARC arrival.

Christmas Day was very different for us this year as we joined Shaun and Gaby for a day at The Body Hotel – Le Sport <http://www.thebodyholiday.com/the-resort>

This was something close to paradise and we had a fully inclusive Christmas day package which meant a wonderful day on their beach enjoying endless exotic drinks and far too much fantastic food. Father Christmas joined us, arriving on his motorbike (last year he came down a zip wire from one of the rooms high above the beach). Gaby and Sarah were photographed sitting on Santa's knee getting their presents. Pictures at <http://www.rhbell.com>

Actually we were very lucky with the weather as we have been getting quite a lot of unseasonable rain. It rains every night as standard, but there have been a lot of heavy daytime showers as well. But Christmas Day stayed clear blue all day which was a bonus.

Take off delayed

26th, 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th Dec

Once again it is a little difficult to work out where all the days went.

We have finally completed all the repairs and maintenance jobs – we hope, but such is the way of these things there is always something lurking around the corner.

On the positive side we have finished installing our rather special courtesy light at the stern. This project started life as a simple need for a light to make it easier to get up the rear steps of the boat in the dark when returning from a trip ashore in the dinghy. The concept was easy enough and we just needed Sarah to agree to a light unit that she found aesthetically pleasing. This was achieved in the summer at a boat show finally and we brought the unit out with us – although the supplier kept us on tender hooks by not delivering it until 24 hours before we were due to fly! The next debate surrounded a switch, or to be more exact, where to position the switch. Clearly it needed to be somewhere we could reach on our return in the dinghy, but placing it near the sea level on the transom seemed pretty unwise as it would be submerged in a following sea. And so the debate continued until several people came up with the surprising simple solution of installing a remote switch along the lines of most electric garage doors. A suitable device was sourced as ever by Robert Forsdike and that too we brought with us. Then all we had to do was get a 12 or 24 volt supply to the light and the switch up on the gantry somewhere and all would be well.

Now as this plan unfolded we got to hear about a very neat new WiFi aerial system called Wirie AP and this we decided would also go up on the gantry and utilise the same power source. But when it came to the simple task of mousing the wires through the tubes it all went badly wrong as there were already too many wires blocking the tubes. It took us days literally, to succeed and although the solution is very neat, the route was very tortuous and at times depressing! (And just where are you Steve, S-F, when we need you?!)

However the outcome is just brilliant and has already brought admiring comments – well, we have had to show everyone! We combined the light unit and the radio receiver into one unit thus minimising cables and water ingress issues and the completed project is even better than we had hoped.

We also completed the alterations to our dinghy whereby we modified the rather pointless open locker in the bow into a lockable store. This involved a new aluminium lid and stainless fittings, but the result has also brought complimentary remarks. It is a good job we have plenty of time on our hands right now as we do seem to have spent a lot of time doing all these things!

On the negative side though, we were informed the other day that the manufacturers of the mast (Selden) have issued a product warning and recall on a crucial fitting near the top of the mast where the forestay is attached. It seems that this fitting is prone to cracking and can fail altogether which is VERY bad news. The suspect fitting recall applies to a number of yacht manufacturers and only for masts supplied during a 3 year window, starting in 2007, the year Serafina was built of course. So I winched Sarah back up the mast (it was very windy which did not make this any easier for her) to check the serial numbers on our fitting and sure enough ours is one of the dodgy ones! Selden will

of course send a replacement and pay for the work to be done, but first you have to find yourself a good rigger and secondly it helps if you have an address they can send the unit to, which in our case is none to straightforward. We are waiting to hear from them, but as they have agents worldwide I am sure they will have a good solution for us.

Another reason for our decision to stay here a few more days is centred around the weather which has turned a bit breezy and with 30 to 35 knots of wind forecast, we did not feel the need to head off just yet. Plus there is the issue of New Year's Eve to deal with.

We have met up with Robin and Sue who have a Najad 405 (Halsway Grace) which they sailed over here on the ARC this year. Their plans for the next couple of months seem to mirror ours and so we hope to see more of them as we head north. However before then we are all going out on New Year's Eve together.

We had surprise visitors this morning when Brigitta and Bert presented themselves on the quay. Brigitta was one of the principle sales team in Sweden for Najad yachts and they were just killing some time between flights as they were making their way to Antigua where they are joining Iain and Jan Simpson on their Najad 570, Song of the Ocean. In fact we hope to meet up with Ko Ko and SotO in the next 7 days or so which will be fun – wherever this is!

The weather continues to confound everybody and it is hard not to feel for people who have come out for a week of sunshine only to discover that it can rain pretty impressively here too.

So our plan is to head down to Marigot Bay on Sunday and then as soon as the Customs people return to work after the holiday (Wednesday?) we will head north to Martinique.

Marigot Bay, St Lucia

13:58.05N 61:01.76W

Sat and Sunday, 31st Dec and 1st Jan

Following discussions with one or two other boats with Hydrovane Self Steering systems fitted, we decided to make some checks on our set up and fine tune its settings. We did find that it was not quite set up correctly and we are now very much looking forward to trying it out again to see if we have made this excellent system perform a bit better still. All in all though, we kept ourselves amused through to dinner time on New Year's Eve, then following a few phone calls to friends and family we headed round to Halsway Grace for pre-dinner drinks and then on to the Ocean Club, which is one of the restaurants in the marina complex.

We had a great evening and enjoyed some good food and wonderful company. At midnight we walked out onto the poolside area and watched a very spectacular fireworks display down on the beach, with other big displays following it rather further away.

Earlier in the day we had introduced ourselves to the owner of Weir Kraken which is another Najad 570. He keeps his boat out here and in the USA with a professional crew on board all the time. Sadly he only gets a very short amount of time himself on board and so he was being very stoic about the fact that something serious had failed with the hydraulic outhaul inside the boom and his boat was partly in bits as they struggled to fix it in time for his week's holiday. The good news was that they got it all done by late morning and he and his family set off for their planned trip down to Bequia for the evening celebrations. 70 miles and around 6 hours of daylight.

On Sunday as planned, we settled up with the marina office and said all our goodbyes and by 10.30 were sailing out of Rodney Bay with a brisk 15-20 knots of wind more or less behind us.

At 6, 7 and even briefly 8 knots, we were soon approaching the narrow entrance to Marigot Bay and had just got our sails down when a very violent rain storm swept through with 25 plus knots of wind driving it hard at us.

We elected to drop anchor to one side of the entrance channel having agreed not to take one of the available (but expensive) mooring buoys. This went well and we settled down for the afternoon with more bouts of rain followed by blistering sunshine. At 3.00pm one of the boats ahead of us left and we chose to move into their space as it was a bit further out of the channel and closer to the inner bay and so a bit less roly. This seemed to go well and we sat back in our new position feeling fairly smug. This was the point at which the strongest winds and rain storm of the day swept through Marigot and at its height (around 30 plus knots) our anchor broke out and we dragged a short distance. So once the rain had moved on, we raised the anchor and re-positioned ourselves, but this time we got it wrong and ended up too close to a French catamaran that was on a fixed buoy. So undaunted we tried again. This time we failed to get the anchor to set, so we went through the whole process again – and again before we were finally confident that we had a reasonable holding. But our confidence on the quality of the holding here has been seriously dented and so we will re-consider our options tomorrow morning! What made all this slightly worse was that the boat that arrived just before the big storm which dropped its anchor almost exactly where we had been before, had no trouble at all.....

Anyway as we go to press (8.30pm) a large catamaran has just eased its way between us and the nearest boat (showing the wrong lights and with their night-sight compromised by a bright cockpit light) and dropped its anchor and very little chain just upwind of us, so it time to start hoping the wind does not get up tonight.

Trip continued in 2012 log