

Rob & Sarah Bell Travel Blog. Sailing Serafina our Najad 460 yacht from Turkey to the Caribbean via the middle east 2010

Sitting on the dock near the bay

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 12th - 15th April.

Had a great flight out on Monday with everything going to plan and there was no excitement at customs as we had feared. Speedy taxi driver whisked us from Dalaman Airport to Marmaris Yacht marina in record time arriving here around midnight.

Tuesday morning got straight down to the work which was to first wash the heavy deposits of sand and salt that had caked Serafina's decks and rigging. It seems they have had some big storms over the winter with the sea being driven over the sea wall, across the road, over the marina's walls and clean over the four rows of yachts before hitting us! No damage done though to our boat and it will just need a lot of repeat washing before we finally get her as clean as we would like.

Once we had washed the hull and topsides, Sarah set about wet sanding the hull in preparation for the anti-fouling paint. This is a very messy and tiring two day job which with hindsight we might just have considered paying someone else to do! Mind you we have seen some very poor work being done on other boats, so it pays to be sure about who you get to do the work.

On that subject we were astounded when on Tuesday, Star Upholstery turned up with our new bimini as promised. They have done a fantastic job on this as well as making canvas covers for the inflatable dinghy which were also superb. We have had a look at the gantry which is being made for the stern of Serafina, to house the two solar panels and the wind turbine. It looks very smart, but very large too! The plan is for this to be fitted on Friday and Saturday.

Met quite a few old friends already but are deliberately keeping our heads down at the moment until we have got all the work done ready for our launch date which is the 20th April.

Splash Down

Monday 19th April

Mad scramble to get finished in time with the additional complication of the boys from Demir Marine fitting out solar panel arch on the stern at the same time. This was fun to watch although not particularly easy on the nerves of someone like me with no head for heights! The concept of Health and Safety has not filtered through to the workforce in Turkey, so the spectacle is fairly exciting. The process of lifting the gantry onto the back of Serafina alone was worthy of a short film as they clambered dangerously all over the back of the boat with the use of just one ladder and a lot of bravery or luck. The one photo I really regret not getting was when three of the guys needed to make an adjustment to one of the fittings and this required angle grinding the weld and changing the angle before re-welding it. The grinding involved the three of them perched on top of the gantry which is on the back of the boat so they were some 20 ft up in the air. None of them had any protective gear at all as the cutter showered them all in red hot fillings. Mind you at the same time the boat behind us was

being sanded by fellows who also had just basic paper mouth and nose masks only, so their faces and eyes were thick with the dust of the toxic antifouling paint that they were removing!

Happily all went well and they finished the welding of all the stainless steel on Serafina around 8.00pm as it became too dark to continue anyway. We had had the props that are holding us up moved in the afternoon so we could paint with anti-fouling the patches that the props had covered before. This meant me trying to apply the paint after dark using just the street lighting. Sarah returned from the showers and felt that it looked like I had got more paint on the boat than myself, but it might have been a close contest!

Tuesday 20th

Up at 6.00am to get a second coat of anti-fouling paint onto the patches and make sure that these did not spoil all of Sarah's superb earlier work in painting the bottom. Sarah herself also rose and used the time waiting for the travel hoist to borrow some high trestles and a plank and polish pretty much the entire hull. Demir's men returned to polish the new welds and they also had to modify the guard rails and various other bits, but the end result is just perfect. We are so pleased that we choose to get them to incorporate the gantry with the existing steelwork so it really looks as if it was all designed for the boat from new, rather than something that has been just bolted on.

In the end we did not get launched until 5.00pm and after persuading the marineros that we did not want to go in the mooring they were offering us alongside the 300 ton travel lift, we were directed to a very tight spot between a 54ft French flagged Amel and a 50+ ft aluminium Omni. Sarah then set about washing the entire deck whilst I leathered it dry behind her so at last we have a moderately clean boat!

Early supper and retired exhausted to bed at 10.00pm.

Three steps forward and two steps back

21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th and 25th April

Blimey, not too sure where all the days have gone since we last posted a report.

The days have been a bit of a blur with endless visits from Demir staff as they have to make changes to the solar arch, mainly because they had not allowed sufficient space for the wires that we need to thread through the structure to connect up the panels and wind turbine.

Moshe and Claudia came to fit the sunscreens to the windscreen which look great, but during the installation two screws broke off and have

necessitated a further visit from the gel coat repair expert. Sarah studied his every move so that in future hopefully she can do the repairs.

Wednesday saw clouds followed by thunder and quite a bit of real rain which was not in the brochure .

Sarah went food shopping in Marmaris on Thursday which is market day and having taken the free ferry into town and the dolmus back out to the marina, she pretty much took the rest of the day off suffering from the dreaded lurgy, which might well be related to overdoing things for the past week or so.

On Saturday I went into town to get a load of electrical bits and pieces for our new panels etc. and had great success at the small electrical shop that I found at the end of last season.

Nothing was too much trouble and the owner went out of his way to solve all our issues, most of which he refused to charge for.

Saturday night was the Welcome to the Summer Party hosted by the marina and we had a wonderful night with great food, unlimited free drink and a brilliant disco which left everyone with sore limbs and sore heads, however we had to be up bright and early on Sunday as it was the marina Boat Jumble. We booked a free table and managed to sell quite a lot of stuff that has been cluttering up Serafina for a while, but judging from what others were selling we could have got rid of a lot more stuff if we had thought about it more. The real trick with these Treasures of the Bilge events is to try and come back to the boat with less stuff than you took. Trouble is there are always tempting items that someone is virtually giving away that are hard to

walk away from. We were very abstemious and only bought some wonderful strawberry jam and chutney made by another yachtie.

Sunday afternoon we got back to wiring issues and found another hiccup with the tubing and so on Monday morning I will be back knocking on Demir's door.

Photos at www.rhbell.com very soon.

Getting there gradually

Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday - 26th, 27th & 28th April

Monday 26th April

Pretty hectic day as we found ourselves trying to get on with our tasks with 3 different companies working on board simultaneously and to make this more interesting the 3 blokes putting the engine back together had to remove the steps leading into the saloon.

Finally managed with help, to chase all the cables into the solar gantry which was a great relief as we had wondered if it wasn't going to need some alterations made to it. The list of things to do is certainly getting shorter and we are looking forward to getting off sailing as soon as possible. John and Vanessa from Meander came round for a meal and they have very kindly offered to transport our genoa sail to Rhodes and send it via DHL back to England. It is surplus to requirements for the next few years and we do not have the room to carry it along with everything else. We could have sent it from here in Turkey, but the price increases by a staggering multiple of three.

Tuesday 27th April

I managed to complete all the wiring inside the boat for the two solar panels and the wind turbine as well as the charge controller device.

Sarah went up the mast to run two halyards whose mouse lines had frayed and broken during the winter storms. This involved dropping a length of fishing line all the way down with a small weight on the end, which we then attached the end of the first halyard to lead through. All went well with the first one but the second one jammed on the way down and as Sarah had now been at the top of the mast for nearly two hours we abandoned the project and she came down for a rest. After lunch we tried again from the beginning and this time all went well and Sarah returned to the deck only minutes before a huge electrical storm blitzed the area with spectacular thunder claps, lightening and a short burst of very heavy rain. For sure the top of a 20 metre (60ft) mast was not the place to be! Chris and Steve from Scott Free were craned in today and they came round for a few beers to celebrate being afloat again.

Wednesday 28th April

Quite a lot of jobs completed today and certainly one of the most rewarding has been the final connecting up and testing of the wind and solar power systems. One of the least pleasant was replacing the pump in the aft heads toilet! Sarah busy polishing up the cabin top and deck area getting the final winter grime off to be replaced with a proper shine....

I rejoined the early morning walking group on Monday and my knees are beginning to complain about the steep walk every morning up the very rough and rocky track leading up the hill behind the marina.

Some photos now posted at www.rhbell.com

Light at the end of the tunnel

Thursday, Friday and Saturday 29th, 30th April and 1st May

These last few days have seen us getting close to finishing all the bits and pieces like bending on the sails and working out all the storage issues. We have Trevor and Lesley joining us for the next 7 weeks whilst we take part in the East Med Rally and we needed to make some space for their luggage.

Certainly with the sails all back on we are looking more like a real boat again and there is a definite sense of achievement in the air.

Moby delivered our new cruising chute known as a Screamer and it was with a great sense of relief that we found that it fitted perfectly into the space we had made for it in the forepeak.

On Thursday morning we both went into Marmaris to the fruit and veg market which is quite an experience and I will be posting a few photos later. On Friday I had a little technical difficulty with Lloyds TSB with regards trying to pay a bill for work done using our credit card.

This peaked with an astonishing conversation that I had with their Customer Services, based in India which they ended by terminating the call having achieved nothing at all. It did not seem to trouble them that of all the security questions they can ask us, they chose on this occasion to ask things that we could not answer without the last statement in front of us. Really not too helpful when you are away abroad. In the evening we went to the marina restaurant for the first time this year joining David and Jill whose boat is anchored out in the bay at the moment.

On Saturday Sarah went off with Chris and Steve from Scott Free in the car that they have been sharing over the winter to do a big shop in town and we plan to go out with them on Sunday night for a meal in Marmaris. This was Labour Day here but it seemed to make no real difference as the Demir Marine stainless welders were still working hard to finish off the last little jobs for us. The work that they have done has been superb and we will be sending photos of some of these improvements to Najad Yachts just to let them know what they could do to make their boats better still.

We were given a guided tour over Skye which is a 78ft South African steel catamaran which was standing on the hard just in front of us during the winter. It is absolutely vast and the boat they like to call their tender that goes round with them is a 40ft powerboat with no less than four 350hp turbo charged Mercury Outboards to drive it along at a cool 65 plus knots.

Almost Ready Now

Sunday and Monday 2nd and 3rd May

Had a major sort out in the forepeak and managed to create some more locker space as a result. Found that we had rather more life jackets now than we realised or needed so Sarah put two up for sale on the Monday morning radio net and a buyer appeared at the back of the boat immediately which was very handy.

Sunday evening we were supposed to be going out into Marmaris for a meal with Chris and Steve from Scott Free, but their hire car share scheme ended prematurely so we ended up going to the marina restaurant and had an excellent meal again.

We have been talking for a year or so now about lining the anchor locker with something to protect the gel coat from the chain as it is brought in and having found the perfect material here, Sarah set about this task on Monday afternoon with excellent results, despite her horror of small enclosed spaces.

The days are getting very much hotter now and there is no doubt that summer has arrived. A lot of boats still being launched all through the day and half the night with both hoists still hard at it around 11.30pm every day. There are quite a number of the boats that going on the East Med Rally with us here getting ready and it is nice to be able to get to know some of the crews before we get to join the main body of the rally at Gocek on 12th May. Remarkably several of the boats due to join the rally on the 12th are still on the hard with no sign of the owners yet, which means they are going to have to go some to be ready.

Trevor and Lesley fly out tonight and are due to arrive here in Marmaris around 5.00am tomorrow, fortunately they have their own yacht here and so we will not be getting an early morning alarm call ? or at least we hope not.

Nearly Off – Saying Goodbye

Tuesday and Wednesday 4th and 5th May

Finally got round all the problems we were having with Lloyds TSB credit cards and were able to pay the two firms that had done most of the work on the projects we had arranged this winter.

All the jobs have been completed and we are just doing all the silly little bits and pieces prior to setting off tomorrow. Trevor and Lesley who are travelling with us on the rally arrived at 6.00am on Tuesday from the UK but as they have their own boat here we did not get to meet up with them again until around 10.00am.

The marina seems to be full of Kiwis and Aussies all of a sudden, must be their autumn back home, but they certainly now outnumber the Americans! The boatyard is now looking quite empty again as the marina staff still work long hours launching craft of all sizes. It is hard to

remember already just how incredibly packed the harbor was when there were over 1500 boats out.

The morning walk that I have been going out on with various people everyday just got rather more taxing when Dave who is a Kiwi and I were joined out front by Martin who is an Aussie from Sydney who is one very fast walker! For the past week or so Dave has kindly been holding back at my pace whilst we chat about things and he regales me with various stories of his travels and it is no coincidence that his yacht is called Raconteur, however when Martin joined us and upped the pace, New Zealand and Australian competitive spirits emerged and I was left trailing in their wake as neither wanted to appear to slow up. Martin was finally awarded the status of fastest dog in the pack and I just about managed to stay with them but certainly the level of conversation had dropped.

Trevor and Lesley have been round a few times as we sort out details like accommodation and some rules. I was not quite sure what rules they meant but suggested that we should at least agree how they would salute us every day. It looks like we are going to have a lot of fun along the way and there are any number of yachts and their crews here who have done this rally before and they all cannot praise it enough. It sounds like we will be very busy and very tired as well as suffering from a serious overdose of culture and history in amongst visiting some stunning locations and seeing their cultures. Beirut by night is one trip that already stands out as being something special!

Said goodbye to a number of friends in the bar this evening and will hope to see others tomorrow before we leave in the late afternoon. Most boats and crews are only off for the season and will return here in the winter, but our plans take us very much further afield of course and so it will be some time before many of us meet up again. Having said that there are 10 or 12 yachts that like us plan to cross the Atlantic this winter so doubtless we will all meet up in the Canaries in November or December.

36:49.5N 028:18.7E

Finally Off

Thursday 6th May

Pretty hectic day despite all the preparations there were still loads of little things to do as well loads of goodbyes. Some boats we will be meeting up with either in the Canaries or even the Caribbean but mostly they are staying in the Med for another year.

Sarah went up the mast to check all the rigging connections which went fine, but then when she offered to help some New Zealand friends (Bruce fell and broke his elbow at the airport on the way here last week) they asked her to check their rigging as well. This meant that I had to winch her up their mast using a manual winch!

Trevor and Lesley moved their stuff on in the morning and were given the full tour and detailed safety briefing by us.

No real idea where all the time went, but as our transit papers were not going to be ready until 5.30pm we fortunately had all day to get ready. Minor panic in the afternoon when Outlook crashed on my computer and a fraught hour passed before I redeemed the situation.

Manni and Bin our Aussie friends from last season arrived some 24 hours after they were due here which sadly meant that we did not get to meet up and spend any time with them before we left.

Finally got our transit papers around 5.45pm and our release papers from the marina at 6.00pm and then it was just a case of waiting for the mariners to turn up and finally at 7.00pm we slipped our lines and as we edged our way out of our berth and down the trots, horns sounded and people waved us farewell. Some of this was directed of course at Trevor and Lesley who having spent the winter here on their own boat are something of local celebrities!

We reached our destination just 5 minutes later which is the idyllic bay just across the way from the marina! The important part was that we dropped the anchor here, close to Souris Rose and we were now no longer attached to a pontoon. As soon as we had put everything away and secured the boat, Jill from Souris Rose came over in their tender and picked us all up and took us over to their boat for extended drinks and another big farewell as we will not be seeing them again for a very long time.

Lovely clear and still night and the very perfect start to our 7,000 miles, 12 month odyssey.

The Perfect Start

Friday 7th May

Marmaris Bay Cruiser net on the VHF Radio broadcast the current standings in the elections in the UK which did not sound very conclusive or positive, but doubtless all will become clearer soon.

Lovely still morning as we made a few changes to the rigging in preparation to sailing for the first time this season. The wind began to fill in quite early and so at 10am we weighed anchor and were soon nipping along under full sail in 12 knots of breeze. Tacked our way out of Marmaris bay and set a course for Ekincik Koyu (or Ee Bye Eck bay, spoken in a Yorkshire accent) which was a journey of just 20 miles to the east. Wonderful sail in a light breeze allowed us to give Serafina a good shake down and let Trevor and Lesley get to grips with all the systems and deck layout. The wind dropped around lunch time and so we had to reluctantly put on the engine at which point we caught our first fish, a Bullet Tuna, certainly big enough to feed all four of us tomorrow. Lesley is something of a keen fisherman as well so she excelled herself by having our catch gutted and into the fridge within minutes.

Arrived at our destination just before 3.00pm and dropped anchor in a delightful bay with good protection, clear blue water and a beautiful sandy beach. Lesley went for a slightly reluctant swim to check that our anchor was dug well in whilst Sarah and I put the very practical Trevor to work on our 'jobs to do' list.

Blissfully quiet evening with just the call of an owl breaking the silence.

Tomb Raiders

36:41.6N 28:51.8E

Saturday 8th May

No wind at first so we sorted out the bits and pieces for the new cruising chute for later on. Got away around 9.30am and motored for the first hour before the wind got up a bit. Sailed for a while with two fishing lines being trailed unsuccessfully, then as we cleared a big headland we flew the cruising chute for the first time only to find that we had confused the tack with the clew! Reversed the sheet and tack and bingo we were off like a frightened rabbit. Serafina was soon surging through the sea and a respectable 6.5 knots in just 8 knots of true wind which for fully laden cruising yacht is just the job. We also were able to get to within 60 degrees of the wind which makes the sail exactly what we had wanted.

Sadly the wind soon died away despite the forecast for a force 5 blow and we ended up motoring the final few miles of our trip today to Tomb Bay in the Gulf of Fethiye. Another nice spot, pretty well protected and we dropped anchor and took a stern line ashore to take up residence in our own cove.

Lunch was the excellent tuna we caught yesterday but you may have noticed that there was no mention of any success today! We all went for a swim and then settled down to do some of the 'jobs to do' list. It has to be said that Trevor and Lesley are fast becoming almost indispensable with all their skills and knowledge and we are fast getting to the end of the list, despite Sarah's best efforts to keep extending it.

Very quiet evening largely spent playing Mexican Train which is a great game vaguely based on dominoes and evidently very popular in the Caribbean where we are headed. Trevor would like you all to know that he won comfortably – Clever Trevor!

The Frog Chorus

36:37.3N 029:05.5E

Sunday 9th May

Woke to the sound of spots of rain that briefly turned into a proper shower, but the real downside of this was that the rain was heavy with sand and the boat looked for all the world as if we had been sprayed with coffee dregs!

After a leisurely breakfast we used the dinghy to go ashore and made our way through the undergrowth and scabbled over rocks, kicking up the smells of hillside herbs as we followed the intrepid Trevor on an expedition up the side of the towering hill to view the rock tombs that give the bay its name. Sarah insisted that we pause to view a couple of rock pools teeming with frogs. Fortunately it was cloudy still and so not too hot for the climb up and we were rewarded with some great views although the weather meant that it was not as clear as we might have hoped. Made our way back down to Serafina and decided to get under way as the bay was fast filling up with very noisy Gulleets and their loud music and equally loud passengers.

On our way out we picked a spot where we decided to 'swing' our gyro compass as we have been getting some odd readings lately. This required us to motor very slowly in two complete circles, each one taking a minimum of two minutes. No sooner had we started this exercise than boats seemed to materialise from everywhere and there was a lot of confusion as we slowly pirouetted in front of them all. Once this had been completed we visited a few other impressive bays before making our way under engine to Fethiye.

The water in Fethiye Bay is a horrible turgid green (s**t coloured by moonlight or Solent brown) which is not very inviting in any capacity. We anchored just off the shore a little way past the main town and its marina in around 12 metres of water and plenty of swinging room around us. At this point in the afternoon there was no wind at all and it was hot and very oppressive along with the sound of thunder rolling around the distant snow capped mountains. As we had tea the wind got up and we enjoyed a very welcome breeze which made it all very much more comfortable however this rising wind revealed that the support strut for our wind turbine had shed a retaining bolt and was wobbling a bit. We secured it with a temporary fix with a smaller bolt and have noted to buy the correct size bolt tomorrow. The peace and quiet of the evening was shattered by the late and very noisy arrival of a French boat which had several abortive attempts at anchoring, each time too close to other yachts for safety and then when they finally got settled, the crew sat out on deck and partied very loudly!

Fethiye is quite a large town and natural harbour, although it is fairly featureless as like Marmaris it was totally destroyed by an earthquake in 1958 and almost all the buildings are concrete structures. One redeeming feature is the restrictions on high rise buildings which mean that it has not grown upwards like so many other places. Parts of the ancient site of Telmessos remain and there are stone sarcophagi around the town dating from 350 BC and the ruins of a Crusader tower still to be seen. Behind and above the town is the tomb of Amyntas which is an Ionic temple facade carved into the sheer rock face dating from 450 BC.

Do you know where you are going to?

36:44.9N 028:56.6E

Monday 10th May

Hot sunny start to the day and so after a leisurely breakfast we launched the dinghy and motored over to the marina at Fethiye from where we strolled into the town.

Not much to see really as it is all so recent but we went in search of the museum, which we never found, but we came across a large school where some pupils had climbed up onto the railings on top of the wall surrounding the playground and were busy picking berries, possibly logan berries from the branches of a tree. Ever inquisitive Lesley and Sarah joined in and we were rewarded with some nice tasting fruit whilst the children practised their English.

Made our way to the wonderful fish market which was the main purpose of our visit. Here you can wander amongst countless vendors and select and buy fish, which they then gut and prepare for you. You then choose one of the restaurants in the little square who happily cook your purchase and supply salad, garlic bread and tea or coffee for just over £2 per head. Lesley bought us a barracuda and a sea bass which were both very tasty indeed. Only minor setback was that we totally forgot to photograph any of this.

After lunch we moved on the few yards to the extensive indoor fruit and veg market where we stocked up on essentials.

Made our way back to Serafina out in the bay and set off for Gocek.

The anchor came up covered in a thick cloying glop which took a lot cleaning off with the deck hose. Trevor had decided that we needed to have another stab at swinging the compass, so he did this whilst I cleaned off the anchor. Trevor's efforts were rewarded this time with a near perfect result mostly because we had now repositioned the fire extinguisher fitted by Najad in a cupboard just inches above the Gyro compass.

Wind got up for a while and we had some great sailing across towards Gocek, witnessing a near disaster when a 50 ft German yacht tacked ridiculously, immediately in front of a Danish Malo 38 and promptly stalled in the wind. The inevitable accident was avoided by some calm seamanship at the very last minute by the Dane.

We were then called up on the radio by some Dutch friends of Trevor and Lesley who had just sailed down from Marmaris today in order to meet up with us for a day or two. They had met 40 knots of wind along the way which had livened up their day. We both headed for Port Gocek Marina and were directed into stern-to berths on the same pontoon.

Fantastic showers here, but due to a minor clerical error this was not the marina we were supposed to be in. Still no problem for now as this one is close to the town whereas the one where we are joining the East Med Rally on Wednesday is miles from the town.

Had a light supper and then went and enjoyed some late drinks on board Chica which is the 42 ft Hallberg Rassy belonging to Trevor and Lesley's Dutch friends Rick and Cobi.

Right on time.

36:44.7N 028:55.58E

Tuesday 11th May and Wednesday 12th May

Tuesday was a day off all round although Rob spent a full 6 hours working on several websites for clients. Sarah, Trevor and Lesley went to explore Gocek and found a very upmarket small town that clearly caters for the charter market. There were some very smart shops and a rash of chandleries as well as a particularly fine coffee shop in an ideal setting where they sat with Rick and Cobi and discussed affairs of the world.

The afternoon seemed to rush past with a few jobs done, then in no time at all Rick and Cobi arrived for early evening drinks, a lesson in Dutch and the rest is history.

On Wednesday morning we were up early and got ourselves organised for the half mile trip across the bay to the marina where we were joining the East Med Rally (EMYR). There was a short debate as we motored along, as to the exact location of the marina as nothing was shown on our charts! However all was well and we were ushered in and given a mooring at the head of the pontoon, nearest the land which is very sociable as everyone has to walk past us to go ashore and so meeting and greeting is very simple indeed.

Soon met up with Jackie and Bob on Arwen as well as Steve and Chris on Scott Free as well as a host of others that have met recently and of course all the crews that Trevor and Lesley know. Loads of Aussies and Kiwis on the trip as well as all the usual suspects.

Trevor covered himself in glory yet again when after stripping down the emergency hand bilge pump, we finally got it to work for the first time since the boat was new! Lesley in the meantime has found a special place in her heart for Kenny which is the name of our washing machine which resides in their cabin, under the bed.

Lot of fun meeting loads of the crews as they arrived through the afternoon and then to break up the fun there was a meeting for everyone by the marina office so that we could be briefed about the next few days activities. Sounds like a lot of fun as well as some seriously long days and nights sailing. Reading through the itinerary which is quiet stunning with some outstanding visits and outings, we are wondering if the highlight might turn out to be the 'Beirut by Night' trip, mind you some of us may yet be mooring overnight in Beirut harbour itself!

Day Tripper

Thursday 13th May

Up bright and early today firstly to wrestle with the very flaky WiFi here and secondly so Sarah and I could be ready to join today's tour.

Trevor and Lesley have done a Dalyan river trip before, in fact only about a month ago, whereas we last did a similar trip 25 years ago! They opted to go into Gocek town by bus and meet up with couple of boats with their Dutch friends aboard. They had a long leisurely lunch and missed the bus back, but were spotted by Steve and Chris from Scott Free who were there in their rib (tender) and thinking that they were trying to perhaps escape insisted on running them back to Serafina. Trevor and Lesley accepted and got a good soaking on the trip home for their troubles.

Meanwhile we went off in a bus to Dalyan where the group transferred into 3 river boats for a fascinating trip down the Dalyan river, firstly to see the impressive rock cut tombs dating back to around 300 BC and then on to walk up to the ruins of the ancient city of Caunos dating back to 400 BC. This was once a grand city but it fell into decline as the river that led to its harbour began to silt up combined with the arrival of malaria carrying mosquitos which decimated the population. The final straw so to speak was an earthquake which pretty much levelled it. Sarah and I realised when we arrived that we had in fact been here before as well, but 25 years ago this was just an untended derelict site and there were none of the tourist trappings and attempts at restoration that are there now.

We then had an excellent lunch followed by a trip further down the river to Turtle Beach which is where some turtles always return to lay their eggs. We saw some turtles in the river on the way back and ended the outing with a visit to some sulphur springs and mud baths. Neither of us was tempted to try this, but plenty of people did and it was not a pretty sight!

In the evening there was a skipper's briefing attended by Sarah followed by cocktails and a large amount of substantial nibbles. There was a slide show running on a big screen made up of photos taken yesterday by a Turkish photographer and the star of the show, because of our location nearest the land, was Serafina. We have been promised a copy of the pictures when we get to Alanya so we may be able to show some on the website www.rhbell.com

Keep on running

36:11.73N 29:50.9E

Friday 14th May

Alarm went off at 5.00am so that we could get away at first light on the 68 mile trip to Kekova Roads. Over half of the fleet had already left around 4.00am so as we pulled away from Gocek at 5.30am in the half light of dawn, there were only a few boats still behind us. No wind at all so we streamed the fishing lines behind us and set off under engine on the long trip south and east.

Long quiet day with virtually no wind until early afternoon, by which time we had opted with just one other boat to take something of a short cut through a group of islands as it looked to be a more interesting route. As the wind filled in we started sailing through these islands and then had a go at flying Hyacinth (our new gennaker) which was a little ambitious as we were on a very broad reach, but Sarah and Trevor did a good job until we had to bear away onto a dead run for the final leg of the journey. We dropped Hyacinth and rigged our twin headsails (the girls!) and reefed the main and had a steady fast run down to the small gap in some more islands including Kekova that brought us into a landlocked bay and the small town of Ucagiz which provides a very secure anchorage and a brand new pontoon (financed by the Turkish Government in 2009). I should also mention the relay of Turkish coastguard patrol boats that accompany the rally throughout its entire trip along the Turkish coast from Istanbul until Syria. We opted after a hurried debate to go on the quay and with only a slight cross wind blowing I managed to make rather hard work of mooring in a gap between two

yachts. Might have been easier if I had thought about how much easier this can be with a crew to help rather than go about in our usual way where there is only the two of us! Dressed Serafina overall as is the rule on the rally and set about helping other yachts moor up to the quay. This gave me quite a few opportunities to practise my very limited French as it does seem that quite a few of the French boats do not have much English which is making things difficult for the organisers as they have always stipulated that all briefings, radio nets etc, would be in English and the French therefore have very little understanding of what they were being asked to do.

Invited on board Arwen to join Jackie and Robert for some drinks and then retired to Serafina for supper, and session of Mexican Train (I always come last or thereabouts) and an early night.

Dancing in the street

Sat 15th May

No sailing today so we had a chance to press on with more jobs around the boat as well as explore this wonderful village.

The immediate area is swamped with historical features varying from a castle and endless random tombs and sarcophagi to a complete sunken city which is a protected area and can only be visited in special boats.

There is just one road leading to the village from the outside world and they have a regular daily bus service - which runs just once a day! The end result has been that until the new pontoon was built late last year, the village was routed firmly in the middle of the last century and apart from the trip boats based here would have seen few visitors.

Sarah and Lesley spent part of the morning polishing the stainless whilst Trevor was sewing leather chafe patches onto the solar arch to house the stern anchor. After lunch we all went for a walk up to inspect the nearest tombs etc, but given a temperature today of 37 degrees we were not too energetic and were soon back enjoying ice creams.

In the early evening there was a drinks party and presentation event in the village square attended of course by all the rally which has grown now to 50 boats with 20 still to join us over the next few stops. They had laid on a live band who were great and after copious amounts of wine had been consumed the dancing began and before long the entire town seemed to be involved with the locals happily joining in. Things liven up still further as they introduced hand held fireworks which were little short of lethal. Finally things began to die down as most crews set off looking to have their supper either in one of the very few tavernas along the front or back on board their boats. We joined up with the Australians Trevor and Sasha and enjoyed a very different experience as we had found a family that were preparing and cooking Gozleme on their front porch next door to a carpet shop. The owner of the carpet shop insisted on providing all refreshments for free and we sat at the only table and enjoyed the spectacle of the smiley matriarch skilfully making and cooking these wonderful flatbread

wraps cooked on what appeared to be an upturned wok. These were then filled with feta, yoghurt and spinach and tasted great, feeding all six of us for just over £1 per person.

Finally wended our way back to Serafina and turned in as we have an early start tomorrow.

Lazy Sunday Afternoon

36:17.58N 30:09.09E

Sunday 16th May

Woke early to the sounds of the 4.00 am minaret, several cockerels, the pitter patter of rain and a man with a pickaxe working on the top of my head – or so it seemed.

We were all up and about at 7.00 am as we had to set off for Finike which was admittedly only 18 miles but our group had to rendezvous at the destination around 12.00am and there was little or no wind at this point.

We left at 8.05 am and soon had our fishing lures deployed as we motored between the islands under the watchful gaze of a guardian coastguard armed fast patrol launch.

The wind came and went several times encouraging us each time to set our sails only to have to put them away again just minutes later. To make the process of getting so many boats into a marina or port the rally has divided the fleet into 6 groups. Based on size. Each group is given a 30 minute arrival slot and as you come within half a mile of the destination you call in and are given a docking number within your group. This worked very well today and with the rather inevitable exception of two of the French yachts that had not quite grasped the concept, it all went well. We arrived rather ahead of schedule, but sailed slowly past the marina downwind and duly caught a fish only minutes before we were due to come in, but it did not matter as it wriggled off the hook before we could land it.

We came into the marina as directed and backed up to the quay and moored between a yacht from Canada and one from France. After washing down Serafina to remove all the sand which had been deposited by the rain earlier (or is it ash?) we enjoyed a lovely lunch on board, based largely on the delicious tomatoes that we were given last night by the carpet shop owner.

The afternoon drifted by with little happening, which is probably about right for a Sunday. Drinks in the cockpit led to a latish supper and an early night for all.

Two Tribes go to war

Monday 17th May

Our early night last night coincided with an outbreak of differences of opinion on the boat next door. Seems that not all the crew were prepared to accept the decision of the captain (and owner) over a particular issue.

Serafina had a good internal clean through and we developed a new system for the passerelle (gang plank) incorporating the new arch on the stern.

We then all wandered off into the town of Finike heading for the chandlery shop that Sarah had announced yesterday as being a veritable fishing emporium. Sadly the window she saw was not fully representative and we all came away very disappointed! We strolled through a very nice park where we found several tortoises wandering wild (photos will be posted soon) and finally came to another great fruit and veg market. Turkey certainly is awash with fresh veg and the rows of colourful stalls makes for a great sight as well as good shopping. We also bought some lamb in the butchers and were treated to a very skilful display of butchery. We ended up in a cafe that had just been recommended to us by one of the rally boats where we enjoyed some wonderful Pide which is a form of Turkish pizza, like a thicker version of pitta bread stuffed with various fillings.

Another casual afternoon developed into a research session where we discussed and looked up information on all the trips that are on offer as we pass through Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt. We simply cannot do all of them, so it is a question of picking what looks to be the very best and then perhaps organising our own things also as we go along.

Sarah went off to the skippers meeting at 5.30pm and returned with the news that our arrival time for tomorrow's trip had been set back an hour which means we do not have to set off until 5.30am for the 45 mile trip. At 7.00pm we attended another cocktail party on the quay and this time we were treated to performance by a young dance troop followed by music from a string quintet whilst we were served with a superb punch and optional beer etc. and wide range of nibbles and hot food. The food did not go far as certain visitors do not quite seem to understand the notion of sharing things out and queuing which is causing a little bad feeling here and there!

An announcement was made at the presentations that there were gale warning for tomorrow when we are due to sail from Finike to Kemer. We were due to leave at 5.30am but will now wait for a decision from the organisers which will be made at 6.00am.

Should I stay or should I go?

36:35.99N 30:34.2E

Tuesday 18th May

Radio net at 6.00am declared that although there was no wind, it was still due to blow up to 30 knots later and there was already a very large (2 metre) swell running outside, nevertheless it was up to all individual skippers to make their own decisions on whether to go or stay.

Along with all the other boats we chose to go and were under way by 6.30am and as promised found ourselves rolling pretty violently in the big broadside rollers. We pressed on and gradually the wind began to rise and by the time we reached the first big headland and a

gap between it and a large offshore island, the wind was gusting 35 knots and the seas were mighty impressive.

The yachts just in front of us were now seriously over canvassed which meant that the combination of big waves and strong beam on gusts made them all repeatedly broach violently in front of us which was not too clever. However once we were through the gap and clear of the headland the seas dampened down quite a bit and the wind eased for a while. The problem now was that we had been given an arrival time slot of 2.30pm and we were way ahead of schedule as we powered along heavily reefed at 9 knots. We furled the staysail and cruised under just a scrap of main but this only reduced us to 5 or 6 knots and it wasn't until the wind dropped away to just 8 knots that we finally slowed down to let the clock run down.

The wind then almost died completely so around midday we put back out all the sails and crept along at 4 knots, but true to form the blow returned and eventually we were back flying at 10 knots through the water with gusts just touching 40 knots. We reefed the main but as we did so the bottom batten pocket tore mostly away from the main sail and this appendage stopped us from being able to completely furl the sail away. So now under just storm jib we were still making 6.50 knots downwind and enjoying every minute. We later heard that a Swedish Grand Soleil 43 had been making 5 knots under bare poles for a while!

We arrived early at Kemer, but fortunately the organisers were ready and brought our docking time forward and we were waved straight into the marina and docked stern-to, pretty much outside the marina office.

No sooner had we moored up than the heavens opened and heavy rain poured down as the wind rose yet again. Docking was suspended while the wind was so strong and so we took coffee and waterproofs to poor Dave and Kath who were perched up at the marina entrance co-ordinating the arrivals and docking.

We then had two visitors whose boats are joining the rally here, both Najads, one a 570 belonging to Haaken and the other is a 490 belonging to Karl both of whom are Norwegian. In fact Haaken and his wife Ellen are doing very much the same as us this year and plan to cross the Atlantic a couple of weeks before us. Sadly we have just gone from being one of the most admired yachts in the rally to the smallest of three Najads!

In the early evening we had another rally cocktail party which was just drinks on the lawn by the marina office, but it was a good event and it is all becoming so much more relaxed and fun as we all get to know each other better.

Our group has an American called Rob as its group leader and he and his wife Kathy are sailing on their second EMYR in their 44ft catamaran Twixter. Rob is just great on the radio when we have our radio check-ins where we have to report in where we are and our ETA etc. I am having great difficulty in not calling him Houston when we call him as it all sounds so like the soundtrack from the film Apollo 13. Sadly today Rob lost a propeller today and possibly part of the shaft which may result in him having to drop out of the rally. He will know more tomorrow about the extent of the damage and whether he can get the spare parts shipped to our next port of call in time.

I hear you knocking

Wednesday 19th May

Woken by the unusual movement of the boat which turned out to be because the bottom of the rudder was caught between two rocks. The pressure had risen in the night and the sea level had dropped quite considerably since we had moored up creating this situation. Debated various options but could not drop back any further from the quay as our boarding plank was already only just able to reach the land. Only solution was to back out of the mooring and turn round so we came in bows to the quay. We had to summon a marinero in a joker boat to help as we were trapped in our mooring position by the angle the other boats were all moored at. This was soon all resolved and around 10 am the lad from the sail makers arrived to collect our mainsail for repair. He promised faithfully that he would be bringing it back at 5pm but not for one minute did we fully believe him.

The next person to come knocking was the local agent for Viking Life rafts whose van we had spotted yesterday by chance. Our life raft is due a three year service and we were going to have to get this done in Gibraltar, but this chap can get it transported up to Izmir and will deliver it back to us in a few days time in Alanya, hopefully.

We all got a few jobs done during the day, but an hour or so of the afternoon was taken up by a presentation that the entire rally had to attend in which the organisers gave us further details of rest of the rally. It all looks very interesting and exciting if not rather daunting.

A phone call initiated by us around 5.30pm spurred the sail maker into rushing back with our repaired sail around 6pm and we got it back up the mast and ready to go shortly before we were due out to the next social function which was another cocktail party followed by the first of the rally's formal dinners which was outstanding. A really wonderful meal beautifully presented in an outdoor beachside setting with music supplied by the group who had so entertained us all a few nights ago when we had all ended up dancing in the streets. I gather that they will appear a few more times before we reach Syria. The food was excellent and the wine flowed rather too well, particularly bearing in mind we all had one eye on the clock knowing that we had to leave around 5am for the 68 mile trip to Alanya in the morning.

Returned to Serafina around 11.00pm and took down all the flags etc. ready for our very early morning start.

36:33.5N 31:56.9E

Follow me –follow you

Thursday 20th May

Woken by the sound of boats leaving around 4.00am but we stuck to our plans and got under way at 5.15am heading out of Finike Marina for the 68 mile sail to Alanya.

Slightly surprised by the boat that followed us out without any lights showing and they stayed that way until dawn. Very little wind for most of the morning and no fish caught despite Rob and Lesley deploying three lines behind us. We tried sailing every time there was a breath of

wind and we even got Hyacinth up flying on two occasions, but mostly this meant that our average speed dropped and as we had to arrive at Alanya between 4.00pm and 5.00pm we were reduced to motoring for a good part of the day.

We did see a very large turtle swim past and we were even very briefly visited by some dolphins which was the first time this season. Finally we saw flying fish as we neared the end of the journey, but still no interest in our lures.

Arrived pretty much on time and were swiftly brought into the new marina here and tied up stern-to on one of the long pontoons and quickly got Serafina dressed overall. Sat back to enjoy a cold gin and tonic when Steve, who is the owner of a motor cruiser that Sarah and I met in Preveza (Greece) in April 2009, walked down the quay apparently looking for us. We invited him on board for a drink and quickly caught up with each other's news.

At 7.00 we had to attend another rally drinks party hosted this time by the marina and I have to say that they were very generous and so some of us rather swayed a bit as we made our way to the marina bar where we had a light and rather late supper. Probably not the best preparation for the trip that Sarah and I are going on tomorrow morning, which leaves at 4.00am

Long and winding road

Friday 21st May

We were up well before the lark to get on the coaches for the trip to Cappadocia. Three coaches, one for the English speakers, one for the French and the last was for German and Dutch speakers. Well that was the theory anyway.

The trip to Cappadocia is a very long one and in total over the two days we covered over 1300 kilometers through some stunning scenery.

The first part of the trip took us up over a mountain range where the road reaches 2000 metres above sea level. This precipitous winding road took us up to the snow line and down again several times and it was on one of the descents that our coach emitted a huge cloud of blue smoke and filled the bus with the smell of burning oil. It appears that our exhaust brake had just failed but the driver continued regardless and a mechanic met us at our first comfort stop and replaced the parts as we enjoyed a very comprehensive Turkish breakfast.

We made one or two stops along the way to visit various museums and the like but the main purpose of the outing was to visit the region of Cappadocia in the very centre of Turkey which has some outstanding natural features and stunning scenery, quite unique and a UNESCO World Heritage area. It is a land of fairy chimneys and underground cities as well as cascading cliffs mostly formed and created when the three great volcanoes that surround the area erupted several millennia before. Photos at www.rhbell.com

We toured one of the underground cities and visited any number of other magical and fantastical sites before ending up in one of the underground houses in Urgup to watch a performance by some whirling dervishes which is an extraordinary experience and quite special. It is a religious ritual dance that is unique and the 45 minute performance is mesmerising. The dervishes themselves are in a trancelike state and rather too many of us, after such a long day found ourselves nodding off momentarily.

The final leg of today's journey was to drive to the hotel which was a further hour and half away. This is because no development is allowed in the immediate Cappadocia region, but it meant that we arrived and sat down for dinner a full 18 hours after we set out. Spare a thought for our poor driver who did this all on his own which might not be fully acceptable anywhere else in the world. Our guide who had a wicked sense of humour was asked at one stage if the driver was OK still to carry on and he replied that 'he is still awake at the moment?.'

99 Red Balloons

Saturday 22nd May

Alarm call in our room at 4.00am so we could get packed and have breakfast and be ready to board the coach at 5.00am to go back to central Cappadocia to take an early morning hot air balloon ride.

Another hour and a half coach trip and we pulled into an area where dozens of balloons were landing and taking off again with new passengers. We had a short minibus ride to the point where our balloon had landed and all clambered aboard. We were very lucky to have a very skilled pilot with a good sense of humour who treated us to a very varied flying experience with some very exciting low level stuff as well as a high level panoramic period. At first he had us very nervous as he seemed unable to clear a set of power lines but with very little room for error we swept over them then back down as he tried to pick us an apricot as we passed through an apricot orchard. We then soared up a cliff face again almost close enough to touch before we descended down the back of the rock outcrop. To settle our nerves the pilot said that he was very pleased at how well his first flight seemed to be going! He then treated us to all sorts of views and excitements ranging from climbing to 650 metres before dropping down over a town and taking us down and flying below the roof top level along streets where we waved to a number of rather surprised locals, before just rising over chimneys or roof top solar panels etc. Finally he selected a landing spot and put the balloon down beside the transport trailer. Quite an experience.

We then joined up with the rest of the group and continued the tour of the region by coach visiting some quite stunning locations, none of which our photographs do any justice to, before setting out on the very long journey home. Finally arrived back at Alanya at 8.30pm very tired and mostly suffering from a degree of nervous exhaustion as we had all spent the last few hours sat silently praying that our very weary driver could stay awake long enough to get us home.

Howzat

Sunday 23rd May

Trevor and Lesley went off white water rafting on one of the organised tours whilst Sarah and I chose to take a day off and get a few jobs done, however we were thwarted by a number of events.

Firstly, the man who had taken our life raft away for a service in Kemer appeared at the back of Serafina with the raft on a trolley. We were mightily relieved to see him as I had feared that he might not have factored in that it was a weekend when he had promised to bring us the raft before we left on the 24th. He helped me manhandle it into position in its bracket and we are now fit for a further 3 years.

The next setback of the day was when I discovered that Trevor had stitched me up with a very unwanted assignment. The local live-aboard community here in Alanya are very English and amongst all the activities they get up to, is to play cricket. They had challenged the EMYR to put up an international team to play a 20 over match against them and I had been volunteered to be captain. At the very last minute we managed to secure our 11th player and went around to the pitch. This was a large clear area of concrete where the boats are usually craned out and it had a green astroturf carpet laid out with stumps and bails and a boundary marked with a rope. They also had pads gloves and even a helmet laid out for us and I was more than a little concerned about what we had let ourselves in for when they confessed that we would be using a tennis ball for the game. There were two rows of chairs for the expected crowd as well as tables and umbrellas.

I lost the toss and they chose to bat first and so I had to find who in my team thought they could bowl. I had 6 volunteers so I rotated them through the innings only to find that none of them actually were too hot at bowling with a tennis ball. The home team posted a respectable 120 with several of their batsmen choosing to retire when they had scored too many runs individually. Our opening pairing of an American who had never seen cricket before and a South African lady turned out better than expected and they gave us a good start. The opposition ran through our batting gradually but good knocks from our Aussie and a couple of Brits brought us to tea with 103 runs with 8 overs and two wickets in hand. One batsman we had been relying on had hurt his knee whilst fielding so he went in with a Kiwi runner who has his entire arm in a huge plaster cast. Sadly this pairing was out first ball when he lofted a catch to the nearest fielder.

Tea was just wonderful. A thoroughly English affair with the scene straight from a village cricket match with endless plates of cakes and sandwiches, including egg and cucumber with the crusts removed. The French and Swedish spectators who were bemused by the game were struck dumb by this spectacle. I gave strict instructions to the number 9 and 10 batsmen at the crease that they were to take their time and win the match and do whatever they liked but not to get out as I was batting at 11. Two balls later I was striding to the wicket and along with another South African we plundered the remaining runs to win a famous victory! In the speeches afterwards I thanked them for the game and on behalf of the rally invited them to a return match which would be a floodlit game in Beirut. We then comfortably saw the home team off in the bar afterwards establishing something for all future rallies to try and emulate.

Trevor and Lesley returned from the white water rafting which they both said had been quite amazing and unbelievably good value for money. Sarah meanwhile had gone shopping after the cricket and had taken a bus into Alanya with a very unhelpful driver who dropped her off in the wrong place and she texted us to say she was totally lost and hoped to see us in a day or so.

In the evening there was another formal dinner with the added twist now of flags from all 17 nations represented on the rally being paraded. The usual live band struck up and dancing followed, but we were all a little bushed and retired to bed long before the end.

Knock on Wood

Monday 24th May

Water Sports festival dominated the morning with a series of very unlikely team events that were organised by the live-aboard community for the rally. Since the rally is divided up into six groups anyway, forming the teams was easy and it was just a case of the group leaders press ganging the boats into joining in. Sarah and Lesley stepped up to take part in the ladies dinghy water polo and along with Kathy and Sarah (Limbara) in a second dinghy they won their entertaining and rather physical match to round off the mornings festivities.

The afternoon was really spent just hanging around waiting to set off on the overnight sail to Girne in Northern Cyprus. We had special instructions from the tour committee to please arrive ahead of the rally to help them with the docking arrangements as this was likely to be the hardest place of all to squeeze all the boats in. We were heading for the commercial port, where the government was going to clear out all fishing boats and other moored craft and halt some of the ferry services to the island for the duration of our stay. However with no wind forecast we were clearly going to be motoring most of the way and so knowing that we were due to arrive at 10.30am tomorrow morning, there was no point leaving Alanya until 6.00pm today.

We slipped our lines and were heading out into the bay bang on 6.00pm when our prop caught a large mass of wood and we thought for a moment that our trip was over. Fortunately the prop just splintered the timber and no damage was done and we continued on our way in a light breeze which allowed us to briefly sail, but mostly just meant we could motor sail on greatly reduced revs, thus conserving fuel.

As darkness fell, we were overtaken by one of the rally yachts (A Plus 2) who was motoring as well, but they were on a course that took them across our bows and far too close. Then as they swept across our front, we spotted the fishing line they were towing and drew their attention to it. Unbelievably they then shouted at us to alter course to avoid their line. International rules of the sea (rule 13) are very clear that the overtaking boat ALWAYS keeps clear, but despite being the 'stand on' boat we took action to avoid getting their line around our prop. However as soon as we tried to resume our course they again waved at us as their line was still very close to us. We have no idea why they failed to alter their course as

required by the rules and this is a subject I will be taking up with them shortly. But 'D minus' is our new name for their boat!

The wind pretty much had died away now, but there was a long rolling sea left over from an earlier storm running broadside to our route, so all the boats had a long night rolling from side to side all the way.

We also discovered just after dark that our starboard navigation light had stopped working as well as our radar. We used our tricolour light at the top of the mast to replace the light and it was such a clear moonlit night that the radar was not essential.

35:20.5N 33:19.8E

Right here Right now

Tuesday 25th May

Very little breeze at any stage last night and the morning dawned clear and sunny. As we approached Girne in Northern Cyprus we came up behind Mashona which is the committee boat and at that moment they developed a problem and steam billowed out of their exhaust. They stopped and we circled them until they had resolved the situation.

Meanwhile another yacht's engine had stopped and they were unable to restart it so one of the crew of a nearby yacht transferred across and very cleverly jury rigged a pump to bypass the lift pump and got them going again.

The committee boat and ourselves proceeded into the harbour, but they went into the little marina (this is their home port) whilst we continued into the commercial port to moor in our designated spot so we could help bring the other yachts in. What we had not expected was the huge level of excitement on the island about the rally's arrival but fortunately we performed a perfect stern-to mooring in front of TV and film cameras and the massed ranks of customs, immigration, passport and police officials. Sarah, Trevor and Lesley tidied up Serafina and dressed her overall in flags whilst I went and presented myself and our papers to the specially arranged long line of tables of officials who welcomed us to Northern Cyprus.

The rally organiser Dave, then appeared and gave me my full brief which was not just helping the boats moor as I had previously understood, but I was to be the dockmaster for all the boats arriving on the main quay, whilst he managed the other quays. He had a very carefully laid out plan of how it might work in theory, but since all the boat widths vary so much it would not be until later that we would see if it worked! There was very little space at all and it involved mooring the boats in their groups with one rank of yachts anchored stern-to the quay and then a second rank of yachts anchored behind them but these had to use stern anchors and tie their bows in between the bows of the first rank of boats that facing the other way. An added excitement was that not many boats fancied being in the second tier and a good many claimed not to have stern anchors at all. Add in all the language difficulties and we were set for a long afternoon. Armed with a whistle that Sarah discovered at her Dad's last winter, a portable VHF radio to communicate with all the fleet, Sarah, Trevor, Lesley and

some local marineros (who were pretty bemused by the sheer scale of the endeavour) to catch ropes and the memories of doing all this 30 years ago when running a flotilla, I found the next 5 hours more fun than I might have imagined. I probably did not win too many friends as I made boats that dropped their anchors in the wrong spots (having ignored our signals about where and when to anchor) go back out and do it again until they got it right! Hopefully next time they will pay a little more attention. We were all a little surprised by how many of the boat owners were not very adept at anchoring properly and one yacht in particular could yet turn out to be a disaster in waiting as they had absolutely no idea about what to do. But for the most part everything was done with good humour and between us we squeezed 74 yachts including several catamarans and one huge Nordhaven motor yacht into the allotted space. I would dearly love to see an aerial shot of all this. Dave thanked us and reassured us that this was probably the worst place for trying to shoehorn the fleet in throughout the rally, but we know that we are headed for places where they may only see 20 boats in an entire year apart from us all coming in one hit, so there is more fun to had yet.

In the evening we were taken by coach up to the very well preserved castle overlooking the old harbour where we had a huge buffet meal, endless drinks and were due to meet His Excellency the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, but in the event he was unable to attend and sent his deputy to address us and welcome us to their country. There was a small but significant incident as most people queued for the food when rather predictably, certain nationalities used their usual swarming technique and one particular lady received a detailed explanation of what exactly she was doing that was unacceptable to everyone including the hosts, from the normally shy and retiring Sarah! The four of us took a taxi back afterwards to the boats, where we had to walk through the empty customs and passport control sections of the ferry port to get to the quay.

633 Squadron

Thursday 26th May

Rather a slow start to the day with Trevor and I seeking to solve the problems with the non working radar and starboard nav light. We checked all the connections and generally fiddled around to no avail and then suddenly for absolutely no reason at all the radar was working perfectly. We turned our attention to the light and found that it was working too. This was a poor outcome in many ways as although we are pleased they work OK, we have no idea why they let us down and have to assume that they may well fail again.

Sarah went off to find a hairdresser and Trevor and Lesley went to explore the town and returned in the early afternoon with a hire car. We all jumped in and went for a drive in the mountains behind Girne, heading east to see some of Northern Cyprus. Went paddling in the sea and had ice creams before returning via a Lemur superstore to stock up on groceries.

Elected to have a quiet night in, playing Mexican Train again whilst having an informal wine tasting of several bottles bought from the supermarket with a view to deciding which ones to get a stock of in at the very good prices here. The only catch was that the boat was raided by loads of mosquitos and regardless of how many we killed, and we killed a lot, they just kept

appearing from somewhere. We checked and rechecked every possible way in but it was just hopeless and by the time we went to bed we had despatched perhaps as many as 50 and had all developed something of a nervous tick which involves slapping yourself seemingly at random. This could prove embarrassing if we are still like this in the morning!

Road to Nowhere

Friday 27th May

Bright and breezy start after lengthy discussions with other boats about the numbers of mosquitoes last night – and this morning.

We decided to explore some more of Northern Cyprus in the hire car today and so by 9.00am we were on our way heading west along the coast to the very western tip. We probably should have taken some advice about this before setting out as there is little of interest out there at all. The area is pretty desolate with a handful of impoverished villages and any number incomplete property development enclaves. We then pressed on southwards towards the border with the Republic of Cyprus and drove in a long loop to the outskirts of Nicosia before turning north again and returning to Girne (aka Kyrenia). The island has two mountain ranges running west east along the northern coast and a third including Mount Olympus in the west. Behind the first two ranges to the south lies a huge plain and this stretches down to the Green Line which is where the border with the Greek speaking Republic of Cyprus lies. The island has no natural anchorages and so all harbours are manmade and in short supply.

On returning to Girne we called in at a fishing shop and purchased a second rod and reel to see if we can do better at fishing by increasing the lures we can trail! Then after a stop at the supermarket to stock up on wine and beer we returned to the harbour to find a scene of near chaos as the moderate breeze that had been blowing all day had swung round to the east and was sending a big swell into the commercial port. This meant that the huge raft of boats was pitching and bobbing dangerously and frantic efforts had to be made to save serious damage being done. Serafina was relatively safe as we were on the very eastern end of all this as the first boat in the other day, but some of the smaller boats in the corner of the harbour had a fairly torrid time.

This evening's rally event was the much publicised Pirate Party which requires us all to be fancy dress and to parade on foot as a complete rally through the busy streets and harbour area of Girne to the main hotel. The start was delayed due to the situation with the boats but by 9.00pm the wind had dropped and everything settled down so off we went. It certainly caused quite a stir as 150 people dressed as pirates walked through the streets carrying large national flags of all the 18 countries represented.

Returned finally to the boats very tired and very full of food again, to do battle with the mosquitoes, but either we were too tired to care or they were too full from last night to bother, but it seemed a quieter night all round.

Tired of Waiting

Friday 28th May

Fairly chaotic morning mostly taken up with the minutiae of paperwork and getting ready to sail to Mersin in Turkey overnight.

Trevor and Lesley used the car to run various people to the supermarket for supplies and covert bacon runs!

We had to exchange our shore passes and get our passports back in return and various briefings took place so everyone was clear on how we were going to be docking the next morning when we arrived.

But the main focus of attention was the plan, or rather the absence of a plan for all the boats to refuel. The price of fuel here is very low indeed and so everyone had left their fuelling until we arrived here, unfortunately when we arrived the fuel barge was not operational and it seems that road tankers were not allowed to fill boats in the commercial harbour where we were. Deputy Dog (real boat name is Salty Dog) which is a large Nordhaven motor yacht had negotiated an exclusion to this rule as he needed 4500 litres, but the rest of us needed to queue up as we left the harbour and fill at the fuel station. This whole idea was fraught with problems as it takes an age to fuel 70 odd boats and the small ones that needed to leave first to make the 108 mile sail to Mersin, were hemmed in by larger boats that did not need to leave yet. This process was further complicated by several boats getting their anchors snagged on a major underwater obstruction. This blocked a group of boats and in the efforts to free the snagged anchors, one boat lost its anchor altogether when its swivel link snapped under the load. One of the remaining boats had diving gear on board and was able to release the trapped boats, but the missing anchor was never found.

As it all turned out, our group was the second last to fuel and so we sat around all afternoon and finally got under way around 5.00pm, heading out into a very flat sea with only a light breeze blowing directly on the nose.

As darkness fell we switched on our lights and we delighted to see that the starboard nav light was fine still, but the radar only lasted an hour or so before going on strike again. This was a bit of a concern as light fog had descended reducing visibility to only a mile and with so many yachts ahead of us we needed all the help we could get. Usual array of unlikely and quite illegal lights were on display ahead as various nationalities flouted the rules, mostly due to complete ignorance I am sorry to report. One French boat stopped dead to recover a large tuna they had caught, but since they had not bothered to put their lights on in the first place, they soon became a serious hazard! However all was well and mostly we were just jealous that we had not caught a fish ourselves!

36:47.4N 34:37.5E

Leader of the Pack

Saturday 29th May

(Sorry, but earlier in the week I got the days of the week wrong!)

Long slow night almost totally done under engine as we had nearly a knot of foul tide holding us back meaning that we were going to be late for our arrival slot in Mersin, however it quickly became clear that everyone was well behind schedule, but most significantly the committee boat (Mashona) had engine trouble and was limping further behind still and would not be able to get to our destination in time to bring the fleet in. It came as no real surprise to us then when our name was then called on the radio and as a result of our performance on the quayside in Girne, we were asked to act as the dockmaster for the day and also to act as group leader to control the actual docking of the group 5 boats.

We increased our speed and along with Twixter (an American catamaran) who were going to be overseeing the docking the cats and the boats of Group 6, the two of us swept through the big commercial harbour entrance and made our way into the fishing harbour that is to be our home for the next few days. We were met by boats carrying photographers and were amazed to find that the little harbour had had 150 fishing boats of all sizes moved out and the pontoons were all set ready for our arrival along with a lots of sightseers and several coastguard boats and lots of police, positioned on the shore. The first and most immediate issue was that the pontoon that we were going to be using for our group and only had one side cleared, so we had to rethink the plan immediately. However all went swimmingly well with Sarah, Trevor and Lesley marshalling our group's boats and bringing them one by one into the harbour and onto the pontoon and then rafting a second tier alongside the first. I brought all the other group leaders into the harbour and having docked each one, they then individually brought in their own group boats onto their designated quays. The departure of two huge container ships held things up slightly but overall this actually went very well with all the group leaders taking the situation on board and with surprisingly little fuss the entire fleet was docked by mid afternoon. There were of course incidents along the way, but apologies were usually issued afterwards and once everyone was in, attention was turned to the various mechanical problems that some boats are beginning to suffer and my mind was very focussed on the plight of the leader's boat as we need them back in full health for the rest of the rally. Especially as I understand that we have some exciting times ahead docking in Syria, Lebanon and Israel, quite apart from the start of the Suez canal and Port Said in Egypt.

Such is the pace of events that just a few hours later at 6.30pm everyone was trouping aboard buses for the short trip to a wonderful civic reception hosted by the mayor of Mersin in the grounds of a very smart official building. We were treated to another excellent buffet meal and the wine, Rakki and soft drinks flowed freely all evening. There was a great performance by an official and smartly uniformed brass band, followed by a really good display of traditional Turkish folk dancing. Another more modern band played for while during which the folk dancers attempted to teach people some steps, before finally a disco got going, but by now most of us had taken the early coaches back to the harbour as we were all pretty tired by the exertions of the day and the lack of proper sleep through the night.

Light My Fire

Sunday 30th May

Lazy and very hot day spent doing a few jobs around Serafina and catching up with emails etc. This is a fishing harbour and so the facilities are minimal and as there is just one water tap for the whole pontoon and we are on the very end, we had to wait nearly 7 hours for our turn! Not too sure about the water quality for drinking and so we have avoided filling our tanks here and will aim to make water on the next leg of the trip on Tuesday.

In the evening Scott Free organised a pontoon party for their group (Green) and as we are moored on their pontoon, we were cordially invited to join in. Sarah made a delicious bean salad which along with wine was our contribution to things and we all had a great evening and a wonderful impromptu buffet with all sorts of very tasty dishes brought by the various crews. Steve who had organised the event was very upset when after three quarters of an hour his instant BBQ failed to even get warm so the kebabs had to be done on the boat's cooker!. Eventually we split into smaller groups and retired to a few of the boats and things continued until quite late.

Stay Another Day

Monday 31st May

Not the happiest of days so far. We had not elected to go on today's tour and so we were still around the marina when the first reports came in of the two major incidents that are likely to seriously affect us and the future of the rally.

The incident involving the Israeli navy may well impact on us yet, but the biggest upset was the killing of 10 Turkish sailors at Iskenderun allegedly by the PPK. We were due to sail to Iskenderun tomorrow afternoon but the authorities have asked us not to go. This is nothing to do with security as such, but the town will be in mourning and burying their dead and will be in no mood to welcome and entertain a big international rally of yachts. This of course throws the whole itinerary in to some disarray and currently the plan is to stay here in Mersin an extra day and then to sail directly to Lattakia in Syria a day or so early. This is not an easy set of decisions as there are a load of fishermen here who need their moorings back and there may not be room for us to arrive early in Lattakia.

Hopefully the situation involving Israel will have time to settle, but again there will be issues of our visit to Lebanon beforehand.

The big formal dinner in the evening was rapidly scaled down as Turkey has called a day of national mourning, so we were still entertained to dinner but the dancing and partying was cancelled and following a minutes silence the speeches were not surprisingly very subdued and a touch political.

Trevor and Lesley went off and explored the city by foot and bus, getting a little lost along the way, whilst Sarah and I just went to the big bazaar in the afternoon and strolled around the shopping areas to the east. Mersin is well beyond the tourist trail and although a holiday resort, it is only geared up for Turkish visitors. This is why everywhere we go we are

approached by friendly locals testing their English and all asking where we come from. When we say England their eyes often open very wide and they seem utterly amazed that we could have ever got here! The little harbour where the fleet is shoehorned in has become a real focus of local interest and hordes of visitors come down particularly in the evening, either to promenade or just look at all the boats. The bazaar was wonderful and it is such an experience walking down the tight alleyways just soaking up the atmosphere, sounds, sights and smells. This is a far cry from the tourist Turkey we have seen so much of to date. Certainly most of the rally will be very happy to spend another day exploring this very welcoming of places and its people.

Another brick in the wall

Tuesday 1st June

Rather than just kick our heels today we generally set about different tasks.

Lesley took Steve from Scott Free shopping for fishing gear which was not a total success, whilst Trevor and I both spent time in the office. The 'office' as it has become known throughout the rally is the local branch of Burger King who have a strong WiFi signal and are happy for everyone to sit there and send emails, skype and browse the net etc.

I also was tasked with attending the skipper's meeting at 10 am for our group this morning as Sarah knew full well that as it was going to be all about completing the transit logs for departure from Turkey and that certain skippers might be rather slower at picking up how this was done than others.... I can hardly talk really as I was going pretty slowly but fortunately Sarah from Limbara was sat next to me with all the answers prepared!

All four of us then went off for lunch in town with Jackie and Robert from Arwen, nominally heading for a kebab house that had been recommended, but we never found this one and settled for an excellent alternative and enjoyed a selection of kebabs, some made with wraps (doner kebabs) and some with bread rolls along with a plate of salad and chillies.

After lunch Sarah, Trevor and Lesley headed off by dolmus to the 'Forum' which is a posh rather European shopping centre in another part of the city (complete with M & S) and Lesley came back with a sophisticated black cocktail dress. Lesley actually had a very flamboyant haircut done yesterday and her freshly flowing tresses were the talk of the rally at the dinner. She has had to endure references to 'Sindy' and 'Barbie' although the older ones amongst us saw her more as one of the original Charlie's angels, but Trevor found all this less funny when someone called him Ken!

Sadly Lesley was also the subject of the days less auspicious event when she and Trevor were sharing one of the portacabin shower units that have been installed in a car park nearby. These are very basic and have no locks which makes it all quite exciting, but their day deteriorated when Trevor discovered that the dividing wall was missing sections affording their neighbours a very public view! It was around this point that the single hook that they had hung all their clothes on broke off the wall and all of Lesley's clothes and wash bag fell into the pool of water below.

On their slightly grumpy return we all set off to our group's pontoon party (group 5, Light Blue) armed with several loaves and a huge Greek salad that Sarah had made and had a great evening with some very tasty dishes and a particularly fatal Blue cocktail courtesy of the crew of Limbara.

Finally we returned to Serafina for a session of Mexican train which is growing on me fast although Sarah has proved herself very adept at this and won yet again!

Today was very hot and sticky making it the second very hot day in a row and definitely a clue to what we can expect for the next few months in the middle east. Air conditioning would have been very welcome, but we are just going to have to get used to this and hope to acclimatise quickly.

Food Glorious Food

Wednesday 2nd June

Slow start again today as we are not setting sail for Syria until tonight. Sarah and Lesley went off to the supermarket by dolmus to stock up for the next few weeks or so as things become a little more difficult from here on.

The 'office' at Burger King was busy as folks made use of the last certain WiFi connection and then at lunch time the four of us set off for lunch out and rather on a whim headed for a kebab house recommended by Sarah on Limbara. We found the restaurant easily and found that there was no menu as such, but their speciality is a very special long kebab the size of which is dictated by how many people are eating. We were four people so they went off and in due course brought us five or more plates of delicious mezes (starters) which were a range of salads along with a basket of the wonderful local pitta bread. In due course they placed a one and half metre long elongated toasted pitta bread down the middle of the table and the chef, with two others helping him, arrived carrying a single very long adana kebab all on a single long thin bladed sword. With great ceremony and a big flourish they placed this along the long bread and then dramatically withdrew the bladed leaving our meal laid out on the bread. This consisted of grilled lamb wraps, chicken and lamb kebab which along with all the salads left us all very bloated by the end. Sarah had to rather bolt her lunch at this stage as she had to return for the skipper's briefing which would explain her indigestion later on during the night's sailing. We took our time and waddled back to Serafina later.

The afternoon passed very slowly as none of the boats could leave until the authorities had returned our papers and passports which did not happen until 5.30 pm. This performance was due to the fact that we were all leaving Turkey to head for Syria and the paper-chase involved in leaving Turkey, with regards to visas and ship's papers, is almost as bad for leaving the country as it is when you arrive! There was virtually no wind and the sun was blazing down all afternoon which left everyone very hot, tired and frustrated.

Eventually the papers all arrived and suddenly there was a madcap panic with most of the boats making a frantic dash for the open sea. Not too sure what the extreme hurry was, although some boats claimed they were just hoping to get offshore and then stop for a swim.

We got away quite promptly and were very pleased to find that the wind was rising quite quickly outside the commercial harbour and in no time all the fleet were sailing in around 12 knots of breeze which was just off the starboard bow and allowed us to make a refreshing 6.5 knots close hauled pretty much bang on course for the 96 mile trip to Lattakia in Syria.

As the light started to fade, the Najad 570 came past us sailing at a comfortable 8+ knots and we were able to take some reasonable photos of her sailing whilst they did the same for us.

I had spent some time yesterday taking the radar cables apart and checking the system right through as well as cleaning and spraying all the connections and we were rewarded with a fully operational system all night which was very handy as firstly we had boats from our own fleet to avoid (along with some interesting navigation light configurations!) and then there was a report of a large fishing fleet 12 miles ahead of us laying nets across our path. The good sailing wind inevitably died away after only a few hours of sailing and eventually we had to concede that 3 knots was not good enough and began to motor on towards Syria.

Round Round

35:32.5N 35:45.8E

Thursday 3rd June

Long hot night motor sailing spent avoiding several other yachts that did not seem fully aware of our presence, but then a lot of boats only have two on board and they must be getting tired with all the shore activities as well as the longish overnight passages.

We crossed the Syrian border just before 5.00am and as required we called up the Syrian navy and reported our presence, course and destination. The rules here are very strict and we are not allowed to sail within 6 miles of the coast until exactly 90 degrees off the port we are heading for, at which point you turn and head straight in without deviating from the 90 degree line.

As dawn broke, we set up the two fishing lines and were rewarded in under 20 minutes with a bite. We slowed down and played the fish and were duly rewarded when we landed a 6.5 kg tuna. Lesley had not dealt with tuna before but with Sarah reading from the book and their combined culinary skills, she quickly gutted and sliced the fish into 14 thick steaks which were in the fridge within an hour. The only real casualty was one of Sarah's favourite small sharp knives that went overboard when we were emptying one of the buckets of blood and bits and the small amount of cleaning water that hit Sarah's side of the bed!

The next excitement was when we picked up a load of plastic sheeting round the prop, but unlike one of the Danish boats earlier in the night who ended up diving to clear their prop of 20 metres of plastic, we were able to free the debris by using plenty of bursts of reverse.

As we drew close to Lattakia the news we dreaded came in that the small harbour that should have been cleared of boats was still full. Somehow the news of our earlier arrival had not been fully understood by everyone! We all slowed down whilst the committee boat frantically tried to clear spaces for us all. This of course set back all the arrival times and despite this information being clearly broadcast over the radio to all groups and all boats, many seemed not to understand the situation properly and steamed on merrily. The end result was loads of boats arrived at the entrance too early and joined us and the others who were due in first in a giant wheeling pack of yachts, either holding station or motoring gently round and round much to the consternation and confusion of the Syrian navy gun boat and an unarmed coastguard boat.

We were called in quite quickly and edged our way in using a stern anchor (for the first time ever on Serafina) to end up with our bows between the bows of the Najad 570 (Ko Ko) and a new Amel 54 who were moored stern to the quay. We actually took the spot originally allocated to a large Canadian yacht (Nauticat 48) but they had got a rope round their prop and were aground having got their approach slightly wrong! We ended up with a 54ft Aussie boat on one side of us and a 45ft Beneteau with a Kiwi crew on the other.

We were then boarded by Customs and Immigration officials complete with black boots which we were not quite brave enough to ask them to remove unlike the fearless Chris on Scott Free. The customs man wandered through Serafina looking at things at random and bore a striking resemblance to the new head of state of Syria! With the paperwork completed we were welcomed to Syria and allowed ashore with special passes whilst our passports were taken away to have visas added and stamped. While the others tidied Serafina away, I set off to the 'Yacht Club' office to sign up and pay for the two trips we had chosen to do whilst here. This turned out to be a good deal more complicated than we assumed as quite a few things had changed and there was a distinct lack of information, though no shortage of rumours.

The rest of the fleet was still coming in and there was no shortage of excitement as various boats called in with problems, the most extreme of which was a gearbox seizure which had resulted in water pouring in through the stern gland. Not sure how genuine some of these breakdowns are sometimes, as they always seem to right themselves after the boat has been given a nice early berthing slot. In this case the yacht could not be brought in to the quay, so they had to anchor in the middle of the little harbour and on reflection it was a pretty good place to be. Our position tacked on the outside of another row of yachts is just about tenable provided it stays calm and there is someone here to keep an eye on things, but the catch for us is that we, along with the boat crews around us are all heading off on a two day trip by road to Damascus.

Nothing happened in the afternoon as we caught up with sleep and rest, but arrangements were made to take 9 of our best tuna steaks over to Scott Free who would provide the BBQ and salads and most of the drink etc. We had a great evening and retired finally to bed feeling that this fishing lark wasn't so bad and we now know that if we catch lots more, we will eventually cover the cost of the rods reels etc!!

Money for Nothing

Friday 4th June

I cover the information about Lattakia in tomorrow's log, but today we took a coach to visit the 'forgotten cities' and this trip set off for what was to be a very long and sadly slightly dull day.

Our guide for the day started well and brought us up to speed with a potted history of Syria and the region as well as information about the life and customs here. The coach drove through part of Lattakia City before it soon was heading out into the very sparse and barren countryside. The roads are very basic and pretty empty of any sort of traffic and the odd railway lines that we saw were mostly rusted over and disused. Dramatically, we saw a car upside-down in the narrow central reservation blazing away – laconically the guide said “oh dear, it's a car”! The centre reservation is actually a deep and quite wide open ditch, so traffic seemed unaffected by this serious incident and about ten minutes later we met the fire engine going the other way, rather too late perhaps.

There is a very tangible air of neglect as signs of former prosperity abound, but everything is very run down and incomplete. Our guide tried to explain that the endless shells of incomplete houses are the result of Syrians desperately trying to invest their money in something tangible during the embargo that the West put on the country following the Lockerbie bombing. Their inflation had rocketed and this was the only option open to them. In addition, Syria like Greece has (or had) a tax on completed buildings and so the game is to leave the house without a proper roof, ready for the next floor to be added and avoid the payment. The result gives the country this air of abandonment and less than half of the houses we saw showed any signs of occupation. The Syrians themselves though have shown themselves to be very cheerful and welcoming and most want to stop you and talk to you in their best English and again their excitement on discovering that we actually come from England is remarkable. Lesley spent part of the night sail learning about their customs and what to do when in someone's home which I foolishly suggested was probably not something that was going to happen, but by the end of our first 24 hours she had been invited into at least three homes, although in fairness she has not actually been able to take up these offers yet! Absolutely everywhere we went, children would run out and wave to the coach excitedly and we saw more smiley faces here than anywhere else so far.,

After 4 hours travelling we arrived at Sergilla which is one of the forgotten cities and we got out of the coach and were taken round the key parts of this quite remarkable site by our guide under the full glare of the Syrian midday sun. There are 5 of these cities which are also sometimes referred to as villages, which grew up when the route of the silk road to the orient changed course to avoid the fighting and problems in the desert to the east of Syria. Sadly when the fighting finally came to an end (!) the route reverted to its original course and these cities were simply abandoned intact as there was no trade left at all. Numerous earthquakes since have brought most of the buildings down but it is quite surprising just how much has survived. Melting in the heat, we climbed back onto the bus and drove to the restaurant that

was giving us our lunch. This was a faintly entertaining affair and once we had worked our way through all the courses we found that it was already 4.00 pm and so the coaches then headed for home. The guide then felt the need to run us through some of the politics of the region, taking the opportunity to deliver a lengthy monologue on the unfairness of the Syrian supported Hamas and Hesbollah being called terrorists whilst the Israelis were not. This continued rather too long and there was relief all round when he finally ran out of steam. He then did a pretty good job of winding us all up about the poor value for the day and the forthcoming trip to Damascus so that when we arrived back at Lattakia we were all keen to discuss matters with the tour operator! However we have now seen the full itinerary for this trip and are feeling much better again about what is in store.

We had supper on board, which of course was tuna and couscous and rounded off the day with a hot and sleepy session of Mexican Train.

Jailhouse Rock

Sat 5th June

A day off in theory, but the morning was spent sorting out our various lines as the boats were all bobbing in the big swell today and no sooner than we had got everything OK than one of the mooring bollards on the quay came away from the quay altogether and we had to rush back into action to solve this new problem. The afternoon was more relaxed as the wind had come round and by the end of the day, Sarah and Lesley had managed 7 loads of washing and had prepared some fancy nibbles and a wonderful apple crumble for us to take with us to dinner on Arwen in the evening. Jackie and Robert entertained us to roast lamb, with roast potatoes and veg and we all had a great evening and were joined briefly by Dave and Kath from Mashona.

There have been a number of incidents recently that need reporting. Firstly Heinrich on 'Stranger in the Night' discovered that his wife Frauke had a five year old Israeli visa stamp in her passport, so they were refused entry on their arrival here in Syria and had to set sail immediately back to Southern Cyprus. There we understand that the German authorities issued her with a new clean passport, but the Syrians had now declared her unwelcome in their country until their war with Israel was over. So they are sailing directly to Lebanon now and we hope to meet up with them there.

All the Aussies got together and declared that they were not impressed with the planned trip to Damascus and went ahead with arranging their own longer visit. There was great amusement all around when news came that they had tried to book into a hotel in Damascus using their shore passes as they had not got their passports back from the Syrian authorities here in Lattakia. The police had been called and they all spent several hours in police custody until the issue was resolved by the rally organisers. They will not be looking forward to getting back here as the jokes about former convicts are very thick on the ground. To rub salt into the wound, there were a few Kiwis with them on their trip and the police ignored them!

Rock around the clock

Monday 7th June

Alarm call at 5.00am summoned us down for breakfast ready for a 6.00am departure from the Ebla Cham Palace Hotel. Barely able to face more food so soon, I settled for boiled eggs sensibly avoiding the massive spread of enticing dishes and hot food.

We soon cleared the outskirts of Damascus and the slum areas that still house all the Iraqi refugees and were soon heading east along the road from Damascus to Bagdad and out into the Syrian desert. Our destination was Palmyra which was four hours driving and several hundred kilometres out into the desert along a narrow, fairly straight single track road flanked by a desolate lunar landscape with a low barren mountain range bordering our left flank for a good part of the way. There was almost no signs of life for the entire trip with just the very occasional Bedouin tent with a few animals grazing nearby. In fact if it was not for the odd military post or camp we would have seen almost no people at all. We stopped at the halfway point at the 'Bagdad Cafe' which was little more than a small house with a handful of tents nearby, a very old Lister twin cylinder standing engine powering a small generator providing the electricity and a windmill driven water pump providing the water from a well. The scene was straight from a movie and the bus seemed very out of place parked outside as the increasing wind was blowing up a pretty good dust cloud. This was our WC stop and that was about all they had to offer and even then you needed to really want to use the facilities to brave them! Mind you there was seating out of the wind and under a cover which was a welcome change from the coach seats.

But soon enough we were back on the road and following a second (and very luxurious) WC stop we entered the ancient city of Palmyra, 'Queen of the Desert', which is Syria's star tourist attraction and one of the world's most splendid historical sites. Its setting and the profusion of remains is quite stunning sitting as it does in this remote desert oasis setting. Since the beginning of time Palmyra has been central to the safety of the caravans travelling the great trade route (Silk Road) running from the Orient, through Northern India/Pakistan, across Iraq, across the Arabian deserts to the Med. It was the capital of the kingdom created when Queen Xenobia challenged the Romans and conquered most of the Levant and Egypt in the second century. Its demise started in 273 when the Romans in a brutal reprisal for an attack by the Palmyrians, torched the city and although the temple was later fortified and used as a village with a new fortress being built on a nearby hill top, the final straw was a huge earthquake which devastated the place.

We got off the coach at the start of the 1.6 km main street leading to the massive quadruple Great Colonnade but before the guide could get into his stride we were being pestered by the lads desperately trying to sell scarves and trinkets. They were for the most part very determined but somehow it just is not as invasive as it is in Turkey and as elsewhere, they used very small children to appeal to our generosity and moved around the site to get ahead of us at different points by cramming up to four at a time onto motorbikes and driving through the ancient ruins. Cannot see them managing this sort of thing at Stonehenge! Our guide took us through the site of the central part of the city to the theatre which was only unearthed in more recent times and is almost totally undamaged. The whole site is quite

magnificent and every bit a match for Ephesus. We then visited the huge temple at the end of the main street, enough of which remains to leave you in total awe as the sheer scale of its buildings and the entire city.

Next was lunch and yet another large feast where as usual we all overdid things on the wonderful buffet only to find that there was a main course to follow which was a Bedouin dish of roasted sheep which came to the table complete with the head!

Lunch was followed by a short drive along the valley of tombs where we stopped briefly for the chance for a few photos before setting out back west across the desert heading now for the coast and the magnificent mountain top Crusader fortress of Krak des Chevaliers. It was a three hour trip with yet again nothing to see but mini whirlwinds and more military posts, including an airfield until the final few miles as we emerged from the desert into the coastal hinterland of Syria and the more usual rundown villages and part built housing – but always smiling and waving children.

The coach wound its way up an impossibly narrow and hairpin strewn road to the very top of the mountain (2300 metres) and the entrance to the superb castle. It was inhabited until the late 1930's when the government emptied everyone (7,000 people) out and the French, under their League of Nations mandate over Syria, began in 1934 an ambitious rebuilding programme that has resulted in visitors being able to walk around and see exactly what the castle was like back in 1170 AD when it housed a huge garrison complete with horses and supplies. It is rightly considered the best preserved of all the Crusader fortresses in the Middle East. Our photos cannot do the place justice as the very best view in a sense is from the valley below in the pass that was the only access through to the interior between Antioch in the north and Beirut in the south, which is dominated by the formidable castle.

Finally we made our way back to Lattakia and the boats where we found that there had been very strong winds in our absence and this time, a very large bollard had pulled out of the quay! Fortunately Harken on the Najad 570 'Ko Ko' was here and he dealt with the crisis when it happened at 6.00am! Nevertheless there was a very big swell running still and a rising wind which made everything very difficult especially trying to clamber over the bows of Ko Ko onto Serafina as the two boats pitched and rolled.

Photos and full log at www.rhbell.com

Rock the Casbar

Sunday 6th June

We set off at 7.00 am for our two day trip to Damascus and Palmyra, well we should have done, but there were organisational issues with the coaches, two of which had English speaking guides, one French and a fourth had a German speaking guide. The first catch was that there were too many English speaking passengers for the number of places so a 'prisoner exchange' was agreed with the German bus. Then it transpired that our guide had recently been involved in a coach crash and was refusing to sit in the 'suicide' chair in the very front of the coach. Finally all was sorted and we set off 40 minutes late, but this time issue was

resolved by re-arranging our itinerary somewhat. I was a little concerned about leaving Serafina for two days in such a difficult mooring position, but was hugely reassured to discover that Harken who is a director of Najad and the owner of the Najad 570 in front of us had decided to stay and look after our boat (and possibly his). Can it be that all Najad owners receive such excellent after sales service?

Damascus almost certainly needs no introduction from me. It claims to be the world's oldest continually inhabited city being over 4000 years old and its place in history is well documented!

We headed straight to Damascus and arrived in the old town with time to visit the house where St Paul was baptised before a huge and very fine lunch in a restaurant also in the old town. We then walked all the way down the road called 'straight' until we reached the Hamidiyeh Souk or Bazaar (Casbar is an African term, but it was the best we could do!) The first part we saw was the spice market which was very impressive, but we then were outside the Umayyad Mosque, (The Great Mosque) considered the most famous of Islamic mosques and it became the inspiration for architects for many centuries trying to build its equal. This was originally the site of a Byzantine church and claims still to house the head of John the Baptist and also in the grounds is Saladin's mausoleum. To enter the mosque we all had to remove shoes of course and the men wearing shorts had to put on skirts and the women had to put on full length robes. The inside of the mosque is cavernous and certainly very impressive. From here we returned to the bazaar and had time to wander the extensive under cover market that it houses. This was every bit as impressive and probably more extensive than Istanbul and although the streets were narrower, the nature of the Syrians makes this a much more enjoyable and relaxing experience as the traders are not constantly 'in your face' hassling you to buy. Sarah was a little miffed as we had passed the most interesting looking shops at pace, earlier on the walk from the restaurant.

We ended this part of the day waiting at the agreed to spot to meet the coach which was where the old town meets the new Damascus and we all had a fascinating 20 minutes watching and photographing the incredible scenes at the road junction. It is quite impossible to convey here the extraordinary scenes of multiple lanes of traffic at a huge junction, sort of controlled by lights, but largely regulated by use of the car horn and dogged perseverance. Add to this the cyclists who having absolutely no regard for their own safety, set off at random in any direction choosing any lane or any direction that suited them best, frequently heading blithely down the wrong way of a dual carriageway. Then to top this all off were the foolhardy occasional pedestrians who just walked, ran or stood still in fearless attempts to cross the junction at all the wrong times. The photos we took do no justice to this chaotic scene, but it was quite an experience to watch.

We were whisked off to our 5 star hotel to shower and change before heading back to the Old Town for dinner in another restaurant. The stars are not issued quite as pedantically as they are in Europe, but nevertheless this was a nice clean hotel on the road to the airport with its own golf course! So once again we found ourselves eating too much food but this was broken up with some entertainment which was headed up by a belly dancer who livened things up.

She was followed by a chap who performed a whirling dervish dance, which was nothing like the full performance we had seen in Cappadocia, however he spun at a much faster rate and it is impossible not to be both fascinated and very impressed by their ability to keep spinning for so long with their eyes shut and not end up crashing into everything! But he returned minutes later to perform something quite unique and although it was based on the same spinning technique, his special rainbow coloured costume lit with tiny lights allowed him to deliver a stunning and dramatic performance which had us all on our feet in admiration. (yes of course I had forgotten to take the camera!)

We returned to the hotel fairly weary and very full of food and all set our alarms for 5.00am as we have a long day ahead tomorrow.

Feel the music

Tuesday 8th June

Recovery day after all the travelling and eating of the two previous days.

Lot of dodgy tummys around and sadly Trevor is one of them, so he spent the best part of the day in bed resting and fasting.

Kenny the washing machine was back in action today and once more we turned to the rather more mundane business of jobs around the boat, which for me included starting the process of exchanging the halogen lights inside the boat for ultra low energy LED lights, while Sarah continued the difficult job of splicing our redesigned anchor chain snubber system.

Very windy last night and around 2.00am the wind was fairly howling through the rigging, flags and bunting sounding for all the world like rain. Fortunately the direction was better than before and so although the big swell continued through the night, it at least did not get any worse and during the day, both the wind and the swell reduced slowly. However it remained difficult, if not quite dangerous to get off the boat and go ashore as Ko Ko, which was our route to dry land, was still pitching and rolling a good deal more violently than the rest of us. We lost one of our rubber mooring compensators which are rubber devices that adsorb some of the snatch, when it snapped in half yesterday evening. The problem where we are moored is that we are a number of big and heavy boats all rafted together in various ways and so as the boats pitch and roll out of synch, the combined weights that come to bear on a given point can be immense.

Lattakia started life in around 1000BC as a small fishing village but first came to the fore when Pompey at the head of the Roman army came here. Its strategic location meant that it subsequently has seen endless invading armies pass through including the Assyrians, Persians, Alexander the Great, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Arabs and of course the Ottomans. Nowadays Lattakia is the major port for the Syrian Arab Republic, which for those that are not aware is bordered by Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east and south east, Jordan to the south, Israel to the south west and Lebanon to the west. A sort of who's who of the middle eastern hot spots!

The political situation around the Gaza blockade is still causing difficulties for the rally, but for now we are continuing as planned but there may yet be changes ahead we understand.

In the evening there was another 'formal' dinner to which we were required to wear our posh frocks, however the outdoor event which took place outside the marina office descended into average chaos as all the plans were thrown into disarray by the rather unplanned arrival of 100 of the marina manager's closest friends and family. Some of the tables reserved for the rally were taken over and the arrangements for going up to get food were abandoned as the chefs simply delivered most of the food to the Syrian tables! Fortunately we have all eaten too much over the past few days and so the sum total of a single kebab wrap each barely justified us all to get so dressed up. There was a fun Syrian band of entertainers who were very loud and at times rather resembled a group of football supporters however they kept things moving along until they were replaced by a very loud disco which at least had the merit of recognising what sort of music we all enjoyed and a good time was had by all. Well, when I say all, I mean all those who were fit enough to attend as there are now quite a lot of people suffering in the same way as poor Trevor who like most of them stayed on board the boat all evening.

Sailing

Wednesday 9th June

Trevor was back up and about today which was good to see and a tribute to doing the right thing. Too many others rush to take the immodium style pills at the first sign of a dodgy tummy and it all takes forever to sort out, mind you we had a 110 mile sail to do tonight and you did not want to be poorly for that!

Another of the long days sort of waiting for the off and although we got a few jobs done it was almost with an air of relief that we were able to get under way around 3.00 pm. Poor Three Rivers, who have made a dogs dinner of every arrival and departure since joining the rally in a boat they only bought second hand a matter of weeks before the start, had another disaster as they motored across the marina dragging their stern anchor all the way until it finally and inevitably snagged on the anchor of a motor boat on the far quay. This was our opportunity to set off in comparative safety and once we had recovered our stern anchor, which was a lot more involved than we had first imagined, we headed out to sea in a reasonable rising breeze heading for Beirut and Jounieh Marina, in Lebanon.

We were soon sailing and within around 6.00 pm we heard the fishing reel screaming again and sure enough we had caught ourselves another 6 kg tuna. Using some of the lessons learnt the other day this one was brought aboard, bled, gutted, cut into steaks, bagged and into the fridge in near record time. We decided against trying again as it would be dark before too long and the wind was still rising.

As the night fell, so the wind kept up, but infuriatingly pretty much directly from the direction we were headed, so we found ourselves back motor sailing in order to stay on track for a 11.00 am arrival the next morning.

Bright lights Big city

33:59.2N 35:37.2E

Thursday 10th June

By 1.00 am we were sailing again in a rising 15 knots of breeze and the direction allowed us to hold our course for Jounieh. We romped along at a steady 5 to 6 knots but gradually the seas were building and the wind began to head us. We had to slow down for a while to allow a big cargo ship to cross our path and although we soon were back up to speed the wind began to drop for a while and once we were down to 3 knots we put the engine back on to help us along. At this point the wind backed to head us completely and just for good measure began to pick up strength again along with the waves. We were soon motor sailing hard into quite a chop and to keep the mail sail from flogging we chose to 'tack' our way up wind. Sadly we had a schedule to keep and as we were due in Jounieh by 11.00am we could not really afford to kill the motor and enjoy a good sail as this would make us too late.

In the event we arrived on time and had a good but short sail from the final waypoint down to the marina entrance and after a short wait milling with the various navy patrol boats watching us, we were ushered into the marina to moor up in a large raft again.

Sarah and the others sorted out the ropes and springs etc. whilst I went off to do all the various formalities which are very complicated and involved in this part of the world. However as part of the rally, this is made a good deal easier as by and large, all the officials come down to the marina and set up their stalls and we just have to deliver all the various copies of all our papers and passports etc. to the right people in the right order.

Once all this was done we could relax a bit, but Sarah kept going and cooked some of the tuna and couscous to make a much needed lunch. This was accompanied by the sound of automatic gunfire in the hills behind us which somehow was not unexpected seeing as where we are now!

At 6.30 pm we set off on the coach tour billed as 'Beirut by night' and this was a very pleasant trip into the city to view various key points, old and new followed by a couple of hours to allow us to wander through the city centre and do what we want. I am not too sure quite what I expected this city to be like but certainly we were probably all surprised to find such a vibrant, modern and quite westernised environment. Certainly security is a big issue and the streets are thick with heavily armed soldiers and in particular the centre of the city is well protected which is either very reassuring or a little worrying depending on your outlook. In addition to the abundance of military vehicles bristling with soldiers there are also sleek black sporty saloon cars filled with armed troops cruising the streets all the time and as an interesting complication these are the same colour as the taxis! The entrance to the marina is defended by a tank that frequently takes up a new position every few hours but this has more to do with the small naval base and military R & R centre next door. Beirut, has been largely rebuilt and is a tribute to the Lebanese governments determination to make things happen here and there are surprisingly few scars showing from the civil war that tore the city apart

back in the 1980's. However having said all this, the whole place is very relaxed and cosmopolitan and there is an overwhelming sense of affluence everywhere in a very marked contrast to Syria.

The four of us plus Kathy from Twixter selected a restaurant almost at random in one of the streets of bars and cafes and enjoyed a very nice but simple meal which was supplemented by an enormous platter of fruit given for free at the end.

Finally headed home on the coach and fell gratefully into bed, very tired from the long night before.

Dance Dance Dance

Friday 11th June

Up bright and early to go on today's organised excursion which started with a trip to the Jetta Grotto. This was actually one of the more interesting visits we have done as the 'grotto' is a very poor way of describing what they are actually campaigning to have recognised as one of the 7 natural wonders of the world! We arrived at the same time as several hundred school children, but were fortunate in being able to get our tour over before the younger ones got started. The caverns are simply breathtaking and reduce almost all other such sites to being mere side shows. The process of viewing them is a little rushed and the boat trip along the lower level is almost manic, but there is doubting that they are a sight well worth visiting. The tour today involved various other stops including an inevitable Crusader fort, this time at Byblos which was a biblical Phoenician city where we also had another enormous lunch provided. We do seem finally to be getting the hang of these endless feasts and manage to hold back from eating all the wonderful mezzes that start the meal, now knowing that there are several course yet to follow.

The tour ended up in heights of Harrissa, a small mountain top location where the views across Jounieh bay were fairly impressive, but might have been better in the morning before the heat haze obscured it all somewhat.

Back to the marina for swimming and showers before getting ready to go out for the formal dinner hosted by Jounieh. This turned out to be by far and away the best night so far with an excellent meal, rather too much drink and a first rate disco. Rather inevitably, with the setting being alongside an Olympic sized swimming pool with a dramatic night backdrop of the twinkling lights of the city spread across the hills behind us and random firework displays lighting up the sky, it was no surprise at the end that several people took to the pool, not all willingly!

Pinball Wizard

Saturday 12th June

So today was about doing our own thing and getting to grips with what might be the real Lebanon and Beirut.

Firstly I would like to reproduce a paragraph from the Lonely Planet guide.

“ For some it is a city of fear; for others, freedom. Throw in maniacal drivers, air pollution from old, smoking Mercedes taxis, world class universities, bars to rival Soho and coffee thicker than mud, political demonstrations, and swimming pools awash with more silicone than Miami. Add people so friendly you’ll swear it can’t be true, a political situation existing on a knife-edge, internationally renowned museums and gallery openings that continue in the face of explosions, assassinations and power cuts, and you’ll find you’ve never experienced a capital city quite so alive and kicking – despite its frequent volatility.”

Trevor and Lesley teamed up with Rupert and Kirsten from ‘Rumpus’ (NZ) who had hired a car, but their day started late as the car was not made available to them until midday after which they roamed far and wide (the entire country only measures 100 miles by 50 miles max) encountering all sorts of sights and sounds including probably a mistaken visit to a Hezbollah stronghold in the south! They also watched the first half of the England world cup football match in a bar somewhere up in the hills before returning quite late to Serafina.

Sarah and I headed for the big city and after failing to find the bus we wanted, entered negotiations with a couple of taxi drivers about a ride into Beirut. These discussions always involve the driver climbing out his battered car and taking me into a shop or bar to find someone who spoke Arabic and French (more common than English here) then I would employ my finest schoolboy French to secure finally a good deal which had us climbing into this very dilapidated small saloon car and with dramatic u turn across the streaming traffic, we were launched into the astonishing melee that is the Beirut traffic system. The only time I think that I have been more frightened by a car journey was on the return trip, more of which later!!

The ‘highway’ to the city has in places four lanes carefully marked out with white lines, but never ever have they been of less value. Our carriageway of the dual track road rarely had less than 5 lanes of vehicles and the concept of overtaking and undertaking is meaningless as the road is simply there for everyone to use as they see fit. This frighteningly seems to include scooters, motor bikes and even the odd car coming the wrong way. Taxis have special powers here, in as much as they are defined as all being ordinary and frequently elderly saloons of little value, whilst ALL other cars are huge SUV’s, 90% of which are black with black tinted windows. As all these vehicles merge and weave at speed the taxis are the ones that hold their nerve the longest and amidst a cacophony of blaring horns we hurtled into the city. It began to become quite apparent as we entered Beirut that the taxi drivers believe that a good toot on their horn bestows 10 to 15 seconds of a shield of invincibility on their car, hence as they approach blind corners and junctions, a good blast allows them to continue at speed with the manoeuvre. Our driver was rather confused by our tourist map and had to stop several times to ask various people if they could help but eventually we arrived at our destination where he was unable to change our 50 dollar note. Unfazed though he simply approached some nearby security guards and after an excited conversation they all rooted around in their wallets and he returned to give us the correct change! Currency is a little flexible here and generally they use Lebanese pounds, dollars and euros. Payments and

change are usually given in a complicated mixture of all three which needs careful watching and a calculator would be handy.

We set off on foot and duly arrived at the Hard Rock cafe where we purchased some of their unique Beirut branch T-shirts, before taking another short taxi ride to the downtown area. We had by now made several more discoveries about Beirut. This is a city of cars and we were the only pedestrians. People might wander out of buildings, but only to get into their cars and drive off and secondly you do not hail taxis here – they hail you! As the only pedestrians, we were considered fair game by every taxi driver regardless of which direction they were travelling. It does become tedious as they hoot at you, slowing down to speak, constantly seeking your custom. However this did prove to be useful when trying to cross busy roads with 4 or more lanes of speeding cars, since as you stepped up to the kerb looking for a gap, hordes of taxis would stand on their brakes causing instant chaos around them, at which point you can scamper across the road. Actually all the drivers generally seem to be very mindful of the odd pedestrian and in return for a complete absence of traffic controls such as lights etc, they seem prepared to slow up as you walk across in front of them and do not blast their horns or get stroppy. (mind you, many are talking on the phone and may not have seen you...)

We finally found the shopping mall that Sarah had been seeking and we spent a happy hour or two visiting some very exotic shops before we met up with Harken and Ellen from 'Ko Ko' for a leisurely late lunch. After the lunch, Ellen and Sarah continued to shop whilst Harken and I remained to discuss life over a few cold beers. The World Cup Football is big over here and you cannot move for wide screens and everywhere they fly the flags of the participating countries, but since they have no direct interest it is all very relaxed and enjoyable.

Around 7.00 pm Sarah and Ellen returned carrying mercifully few bags (Ellen did try to explain to me that 'few' did not necessarily mean I had got off cheaply.) and we entered negotiations again with a taxi rank and ended up back in the giant pinball machine that is the local traffic system. Our new driver obviously had something more pressing to do than deliver us to the marina, so we flew along as he kept one hand out of the window firmly holding onto the roof of the car and using the other hand to steer, change gear, hoot and deliver insults. At one stage we were ordered to stop by a soldier brandishing an automatic weapon, but this was because we were in the wrong slip lane and he merely wished to see us and the car behind, returned into the fast flowing traffic without getting killed in front of his guard post. It is quite surprising how quickly you become used to the constant presence absolutely everywhere of these heavily armed soldiers and by and large I find them reassuring rather than threatening, which is the whole point I suppose.

Once back in the marina all four of us went to Serafina for a nerve-soothing glass of G & T and Harken and Ellen cooed over Serafina as they had had an identical Najad 46 before upgrading last year to their new Najad 57. As soon as they left we were invaded by the Aussies on 'Cozer' moored alongside, as we had been promising them a viewing of Serafina all through the rally and now was deemed the right moment as two of them were flying home in the morning. Several bottles of wine and a few rum and oranges (and rum and ginger

beers) later it was 1.30 am and T & L had also returned from their adventures so we all called it a night, but not before T & L told us about their driving experiences, topped by the Aussies who had been hit by a car travelling on the wrong side of the road – and which had failed to stop to discuss the incident with them.

Second Hand News

Sunday 13th June

So after all the problems around the fleet with ‘Syrian Tummy’, poor Lesley has developed ‘Beirut Bum’ which has all the same symptoms! However, this did not keep her back from setting off with Trevor and the crew of Rumpus for a second day of touring by car.

Sarah decided to do the big food shopping trip that was needed and set off on foot to the nearest supermarket, however in contrast to what she had been told, everywhere was closed so in order to get to the other supermarket she made her way up to the main road to hail a taxi and found instead a bus waiting. She tried to check that this was going to the right place, but the answers were fairly vague, nevertheless she hopped on board and was dropped off fairly close to her destination, but still needed to walk back to an exit point before she could make her way finally to the store after one and three quarters hours of travelling, most of which had been on foot. She managed to do most of the shopping here as planned and in her first bit of luck of the day was able to hitch a ride back to the marina on the rally’s tour bus that was passing by.

The town that we are based in here is called Jounieh and was a sleepy fishing village until the 1970’s and the height of the civil war in Beirut, when tens of thousands of Christians moved out here to avoid the bloodshed.

T & L headed into Beirut and visited the National Museum before driving to Tripoli (the one in Lebanon!) where they discovered rather more poverty than had been in evidence elsewhere. But like us the main topic of conversation was the driving experience where they witnessed a three lane carriageway with 6 lanes of traffic squeezed in!

Had to endure a bit of friendly banter from the Aussies who beat England at rugby last night and the less said about the football team the better. This left me with a dilemma as to who to support in the Germany v. Australia football tonight!

Quite a few boats are leaving the rally here for various reasons as well as some of the crews so a few sad farewells have been said prior to tomorrow’s trip south.

But the big shock news has been hearing through a third party that Demokan, who was the owner/manager of Yacht Marine, the marina in Marmaris, was shot dead last night in Fethiye, Turkey. We have no further information although the rumour mill has swung into full action! This was the marina where we kept Serafina last year and most of us who spent any time there would have had a friendly chat with him at some time.

In yesterday's log I failed to mention about the range of buildings in Beirut city. Certainly there are the extensive new building projects that are transforming the city, but you do not have to look far to see buildings and statues even, bearing the scars of war riddled with bullet holes and of course there was the recent car bombing here in 2005 which was the assassination of the former Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri. This has left two huge shells of former hotels astride the main road with a memorial to mark the site of the bomb. The Syrians were blamed for this and they were forced to reluctantly withdraw all their troops from the country as a direct result. Israel last invaded Lebanon in 2006 in retaliation for an attack and kidnappings by Hezbollah and pounded the Lebanon for 33 days from the air. Right now though the country is still sitting on something of a knife edge with Hezbollah in open war with Israel and the Lebanese government somewhere in the middle.

Undercover of the Night

Monday 14th June

Another of those long days sort of waiting to get off on the night passage, but the tension was considerably higher than usual due to the nature of tonight's trip.

T & L set off with Rupert from Rumpus in their hire car to get some final bits and pieces from the supermarket which ended up taking them hours, whilst Sarah made soup and sandwiches for the overnight sail. Swimming and showers were the order of the late afternoon before we were finally able to get out of the raft we were moored in to get to the fuel dock (VERY cheap fuel here in Lebanon), where we were also able to pick up our passports and set off for Haifa in Israel.

The obvious catch is that the Lebanese do not allow boats to travel from Lebanon to Israel and the rally was therefore very publically heading for Southern Cyprus but once we were 25 miles offshore we all turned left instead of right and headed through the night leaving the lights of Beirut blazing in reflective sunlight on our port sides as we motored into the rolling swell and light southerly breeze heading for what promised to be a very exciting and eventful night.

We tried fishing for an hour but with no luck and with the onset of darkness, our radar once again gave up on us on the one night when we perhaps would need it most.

The wind died away totally by the late evening and as we motored south we read and re-read the very detailed instructions as to what was likely to happen as we approached Israeli territorial waters. We were prepared for gunboats and warships that would appear alongside without appearing on our radar and who would almost certainly board most boats as a matter of course. We were prepared for our GPS signals to fail as their navy would be likely to jam the satellite signals to blind us while they investigated our presence and purpose and we were ready for a host of other possible scenarios and an inevitable barrage of questions that would be delivered over the radio to each and every boat. Let alone the heightened security regarding world events in this area!

The key point though as we proceeded along the Lebanese coast was that we had been given a very specific narrow gateway at an exact GPS location 16 miles offshore and some 90 miles south of us through which all boats had to pass in order to enter Israeli waters and a very specific time determined by the Israeli navy.

Who are you?

32:48.2N 35:01.8E

Tuesday 15th June

As the night wore on we heard the committee boat being given the third degree over the radio, firstly by the Lebanese navy, then the Israeli navy and then by a UN warship. Finally they were quizzed by an American nuclear submarine that was leaving Haifa as we were all due!

However the current political tension in the area may just have worked in our favour as initially the first boats approached the 'gate' motoring across a flat calm sea around 8.30 am on a clear sunny morning, just two gunboats came out beyond the gateway and worked their way through the entire fleet of 64 boats (some chose to leave the rally in Junieh), circling each of us in turn, training its weapons on us and then calling the boat in question and asking a set of very brief questions before allowing each boat to continue on its way. Over the next few hours several fast patrol craft came out, each circling and investigating us and all of them brandishing either automatic weapons or deck mounted guns, but none appeared particularly threatening as such, but their state of alert and intentions were very clear!

Gradually the wind began to build a bit and it freed a little to allow us onto a fine reach and so as an experiment we unfurled the twin headsails onto just the downwind side and rigged Serafina as a cutter to see what might happen. We were delighted to see the speed leap up, and far from back-winding the staysail, the new combination proved very powerful in this situation and we soon were zipping along doing up to 7 knots in just 9 knots of wind. We trailed the fishing lures all the while but sadly to no avail, but then this is probably because Sarah had announced that we needed to catch something for tomorrow's supper! However we did pass through an extraordinary mass of huge jelly fish that looked for all the world like a mass of identical white plastic bags floating just below the surface. Indeed one boat reported them as such. Then as yet another gunboat arrived to take a tour of inspection round Serafina, we saw a pod of dolphins, but they did not stay with us as the navy boat powered its way over.

As we approached Haifa, we watched another big submarine coming in to port ahead of us and then suddenly there was a very fast police launch calling us up on the radio and just seconds later, having instructed us to maintain our heading and speed, they were alongside holding out a fishing net into which we had to put our passports for a provisional inspection and I had to answer another set of quite straightforward questions. They then disappeared off towards the harbour entrance for a while before returning and giving the passports back. We rounded up into the wind and dropped all the sails as yet two more gunboats passed us by in

different directions, but we were clearly of no further interest to them and mostly they just waved hands or weapons.

Our group then gathered together in the mouth of the harbour before being called in to moor up in the tiny yacht basin which proved very tight indeed and our eventual position was not too great as we were alongside a huge motor yacht (Salty Dawg) with a dozen boats rafted loosely outside us – all with quite a scramble over our decks and mountaineering up the side of the hefty ‘Salty Dawg’ to negotiate! Sarah and Lesley spotted a mangrove heron on the bank of the docks as we made our way in through the harbour, which was pretty impressive given all the other things happening around us at the time.

Customs were the first people to board us and once they had declared themselves satisfied (and I have to say that they were extremely pleasant and polite) we then had to all go to the Harbour security office to deal with immigration. They too were very quick and helpful and as requested they gave us our visas as loose inserts into our passports rather than stamping them, which would have meant that we could neither carry on to Egypt nor return to Syria or Lebanon at any time.

Next up we visited the stand set up by the local yacht club who were handing out t-shirts, hats and other goodies as a welcome to Israel promotion. Sarah and I signed up for two tours over the next couple of days, while T & L have opted to perhaps hire a car again and see what they can find. Everyone has been hugely welcoming and the organisers have indicated that of the navy’s questioning of them earlier in the day may have really been to reassure our hosts that we were not here staging any sort of protest rally.

At 7.30 pm we attended a reception followed by a big buffet dinner, but the big difference this time was that the Israeli government had found out just three days ago that we were coming and pulled out all the stops to make this a big event. The keynote speaker was the Minister of Public Diplomacy and Dispora Affairs and he broke the ice perfectly with a witty opening about only just hearing that there was a flotilla of yachts coming from Lebanon and that they (the government) tended to be very nervous about such things at the moment! There were quite a few more speeches and a dancing display from a young dance group followed by the meal and a disco, but having had such a long night and the anticipation of it all, left most of us desperate for our beds and it was not too long before we all headed back to our boats.

Take me to the river

Wednesday 16th June

Emerged still fairly tired, to climb onto a coach for today’s tour which included a visit to Nazareth. This turned out to be a very interesting day indeed and we were very glad that we had chosen to do, despite beginning to feel a little jaded about all this side trips.

Our tour guide was excellent and he took us to the location of the sermon on the mount, and the approximate place on the River Jordan where Jesus was baptised (a very commercial spot

which is in daily use for full immersion baptisms) and down to the Sea of Galilee where Sarah had a paddle. We travelled along the part of the border with Jordan, saw the Golan Heights and heard all about the life and struggles of Israel and its people. He also explained in great detail the importance in all this of fresh water and that this is really the crux of their arguments with several of their neighbours!

We enjoyed a really wonderful meal in an Israeli restaurant and it seems that one of the other coaches had exactly the same fare, but they sat and had theirs in a nearby Kibbutz.

We got back about 6.00 pm and almost immediately joined a farewell party hosted by the crew of Limbara who are leaving the rally here and heading back to England. They were going to carry on to the next stop at Ashkelon, but were a little put off by the fact that it is very close to Gaza and the town and the marina were frequently the target of rocket attacks during the recent uprising there. Most crews had agreed this evening to join the local yacht club members for evening meals back in their homes but our had declined at first but were persuaded by Hassan, who is one of the organisers, to join him at the home of a former Israeli admiral who has sailed on this rally some 10 times over the years. The Admiral drove the three of us up to the top of Mount Carmel which towers over Haifa and we viewed the panorama of the city which was spectacular. We then went to his new apartment on the 10th floor of a very swish tower block and met all his other guests which included a few other people from the rally. We had a very interesting evening and were eventually driven back to Serafina around 12.30 pm by one of his wife's friends who has taken at least 6 narrowboat holidays in the UK over the years!

Trevor and Lesley opted again to hire a car and amongst other things visited the Sea of Galilee for a swim. They too joined a family for the evening and by all accounts had a good time as well.

Communication Breakdown

Thursday 17th June

Off first thing on a half day tour that soon proved to be a total shambles. The guide was dreadful and paid no attention to what he was being asked and was far too busy delivering his views and political leanings. The last straw was a three quarters of an hour visit to a shopping mall so 6 people could do some supply shopping despite the vast majority of the passengers being anxious to get back to their boats at the time given in the details when we booked. We endured this until the bus finally returned to the marina around 2.00 pm just in time for Sarah to attend the skipper's briefing for tonight's sail south towards Gaza and our destination of Ashkelon Marina.

The journey is around 100 miles but with light winds forecast there was some considerable debate about when it would be best to set off. In the event this was all rather academic as the way all the boats were rafted together and squeezed into Haifa meant that we could only leave when all the boats blocking you had left and in our case this was nearly last!

The first boats away reported 30 knots of wind from a southerly direction which served to slow the reluctant leavers down even more. We finally got away around 5.20 pm and found that the wind had dropped to 14 knots and so we hoisted the sails and beat our way out of Haifa heading for the start of the very tight corridor down which we had to sail to avoid the wrath of the Israeli navy. Various fast patrol boats checked our early progress and we on Serafina also were singled out for a visit and visual inspection by a fully fledged warship, but by and large we proceeded uninterrupted into the night.

The fleet was quite bunched up during the night as we were required to remain in the narrow Israeli shipping corridor running a minimum of 12 miles offshore. However it is not easy for 60 yachts to sail and motor sail in such a confined space, at night, knowing that we are sharing this channel with all the sea going container ships etc. Furthermore, there are still countless foreign flagged yachts in our fleet who have no working knowledge of understanding of either the international requirements and directions for lights at sea, nor the rules of the road. Goodness knows what some of the big ships heading through this flotilla made of it all, but it must have caused a quite some consternation on their bridges.

First cut is the deepest

31:40.9N 34:33.2E

Friday 18th June

A few excitements during the night sail when we had to shine a spotlight onto our sail to warn a yacht that seemed intent on running us down that we were there. Also Trevor called up the Swedish yacht 'Kanavo' because they had failed to hear the Israeli navy who were repeatedly calling them by position on channel 16. They were being called because in their enthusiasm to sail they had ventured well out of the corridor and were in the middle of a military zone!

The wind had died away during the night and what little there was, was directly on the nose, making sailing near impossible if we were to make our group's arrival slot time. We arrived off Ashkelon just a little early (the group times were all set back at 8.00 am which was a little frustrating) and had to wait while several other groups were docked. It sounded like total chaos in the marina and it transpired that whilst the various group leaders who were running the dockside operation were doing their very capable best, their efforts were seriously hampered by the marina staff who seemed to have little concept of what was happening and were intent of frustrating all their efforts.

We 'hove to' and waited and watched the entertainment which was being provided by several acrobatic microlight planes and a tug boat pumping huge jets of water into the air from its fire pumps. We were duly called in but in a very late change were not directed to the pontoon where it had been planned to berth all three Najads. The marina had been organised to arrange this so that the Israeli Najad agent could have a mini boat show type display, but like everything else, they cocked up and there were boats already moored in the way. We were directed round to an unusual mooring for the Med and had to reverse down a line of moorings

and then turn very sharp left into a slot that was 'guarded' by two large, rusty steel posts. With a very healthy crosswind blowing I made a mistake in turning too hard too soon and whilst recovering from that, lost all way and inevitably we were blown down onto one of these posts which left a short but significant scratch on Serafina's immaculate hull. Almost certainly not the last one we get, but indisputably the first we have been responsible for!

T & L went off at a gallop to hire a car (they had just 30 minutes to get to the hire car office) as it is our plan to drive to the Dead Sea tomorrow rather than go on another organised tour which looks a little hectic and largely based on viewing more old stones again.

There was free beer on the quay and we were all treated to a stunning acrobatic display by a stunt plane, before we sat back to enjoy a quiet G & T.

At 7.00 pm were invited over to 'Ko Ko' to celebrate Haaken's birthday and so the four of us joined his other 8 guests on board the Najad 570 for champagne and nibbles before he took us all out for a very enjoyable meal in the nearby restaurant. A good time was had by all and we drifted back to our boats around midnight braced for an early start in the morning for the trip to the Dead Sea.

Float On

Saturday 19th June

Sadly Rob was struck with the Ashkelon Affliction, so he sensibly decided to stay on board and keep awash with water. The rest of the crew set off in a hired car for the Dead Sea, bouncing along in the small vehicle down the almost deserted, but reasonable roads (it's the Jewish Sabbath). Interestingly the rather basic hire company road map was actually showing every road on our route – there are just hardly any roads. We passed pretty desolate steppe desert populated with camels and the usual sheep flocks with attendant herders out in the blistering heat. We were stopped by the police but a glance at Trevor's English driving licence (ie not in Hebrew) was too confusing so we were waved on. Eventually we crested the final mountain to see the Dead Sea below us and descended 411 metres below sea level – it is the lowest place on surface of the planet. We approached from the south passing the southern basin which is one HUGE salt pan of only 6m depth and a quite amazing turquoise colour. What look like waves breaking on the shore is just salt drying out.

We carried on to Ein Gedi Nature Reserve to walk up to David's Waterfall. It was already pretty late at 11am to be doing the walk due to the temperatures but the suggested hike was a fairly easy stroll passing several plunge pools of freshwater, finally reaching the waterfall falling about 100ft. All around the waterfall it is incredibly lush with water oozing through the rock despite the fact that the way up is through boiling rock. It was great to hear birdsong again and we spotted a fairly grotty looking Hyrax and some Ibex. We decided to forego the plunge experience as all the pools were heavily occupied and after a paddle to try and cool off, we set off for a more salty swim.

We opted to swim from the public beach rather than the full spa alternative expecting it to be very crowded. In fact there were only 30 or so people, when we tiptoed over the very hot

pebbles into the sea. It is an experience like no other: the water has such a high saline content that it is difficult to see through, stones drop directly (rather than the usual wobble wobble), to taste a drop of seawater feels caustic on the tongue, any cuts are agonising and swimming is simply impossible. One floats so high, your legs come right out of the water, righting yourself is a definite technique – in fact progress against the current was most easily made in an almost walking mode, upright, sculling on your back or doggy-paddle with just arms. Take a look at the photos at www.rhbell.com When we came out, we were so salty it was not possible to dry off.

We carried on to Ein Gedi Kibbutz for a late lunch dictated by Sabbath doctrine which forbids use of any machinery (the very Orthodox actually switch on their lights the Thursday evening before and keep them on until the Sabbath is over or employ other people to do these chores for them), so we ate a pre-prepared Cholet dish, which was a huge plate of stew and rice and one serving was sufficient for the three of us. We did notice that the air-conditioning and many other mechanical operations continue so perhaps it is just a nod in the right direction of religious doctrine?

We then went for a wander through the Kibbutz's Botanical Gardens where they grow over 900 species of trees and shrubs ranging from tropical to desert climates. This was a fairly surreal experience as the setting of the kibbutz is within a barren rocky canyon with a temperature of 42°. Considering the kibbutz was only set up in 1960 and the exceptional problems with water throughout the country, the trees were very mature and the gardens were beautifully set out amongst the buildings of the kibbutz and its guesthouse/hotel. But we had to admit defeat as we had now reached melting point and headed back to the marina.

Our journey each way took us to within 8 miles or so of the Gaza Strip (yup, we are aware just how stupid we may be) which was really hard to believe. The marina we are in is just north of the security zone but we are reliably informed that the Palestinians won't bomb here as it is too close to the power station that also powers their air-conditioning.

At 9.00 pm there was a concert and fireworks display on the beach beside the marina which went on till midnight. By all accounts it was not a fantastic event, but the music was fine and the bar stayed open late!

Bridge over troubled waters

Sunday 20th June

Day started badly when the hire car broke down as Trevor and Lesley were taking Bruce to hospital for the latest in the saga of him having the pins removed from his broken elbow. Once they had been given a fresh (and larger) car they also took the opportunity to do some food shopping as we have been warned that supplies will be harder to come by in Port Said.

Very hot and still day which made doing jobs around the boat very unpleasant, but who are we to complain when we are enjoying unbroken sunshine day after day. Sarah set to with a view to repairing the scratch in the side of Serafina but was delighted to find that the scratch

looked a good deal worse than it really was and although a fuller repair will be needed, the marks polished out fairly easily.

It is one of those strange truths that whenever England beat Australia at any sport, you can never find an Aussie. Well this lot had nowhere to hide, but they tried hard enough to avoid us never the less. For the most part they suddenly feigned any interest in rugby and a total denial of the score last night when England thoroughly thrashed Australia 21 points to a miserable 20. But these are the same folk who all knew the score last week within minutes of the final whistle. Roger took things to an extreme I felt when he arrived at the dinner dressed as an arab. He certainly avoided being recognised as an Aussie, but the security guards were very unimpressed.

Security is of course a big topic here and it is very unnerving to see all the young men carrying automatic weapons all the time. The ones who have the magazines strapped to their weapons are off duty, and the loaded guns belong the people on duty, uniform or no uniform. We have become used to all the military traffic, airborne or otherwise, but very few of us missed the sound of very heavy guns being fired in the afternoon.

In the evening we had another presentation evening with drinks and a big buffet dinner along with a very impressive display by two costumed Brazilian dancers who were accompanied by three drummers. The speeches were as usual a little predictable with the mayor particularly keen to thank us for making the considerable effort to continue with our rally when there was so much tension in the area. The recurring theme was that the arrival of so many yachts representing 18 countries means a lot to them here and as part of this we were invited to listen to 'Bridge over troubled waters ' and perhaps adopt it as a theme ourselves.

Sadly this spirit of goodwill and understanding did not extend as far as their police and immigration service as they refused to allow us to have our passports back until after midnight which was slightly less than helpful as we are mostly setting off tomorrow morning for Egypt (130 miles) around 5.00 am. Not the perfect start to a long night and day, particularly as we have also been warned that the temperature is going to be higher by 8 degrees tomorrow and very little wind is forecast.

Only 36 boats are making the last two legs of the rally, with many just staying here in Ashkelon and using this as a base to explore Jordan and Jerusalem etc. which is what we plan to do in a week or two. These boat crews plan to take a coach up to Herzliya which is a way north of here and where the rally finishes on the 28th June, to join us for the final dinner and presentations. It is obviously a shame they do not wish to complete the rally they signed up for, but understandable that many crews see the 24 hour trip to Egypt and the 24 hours back, only a few days later as a bit too much.

Beautiful Day

Monday 21st June

Immigration kindly let two hard working female officers work through the early hours of the morning to hand back our passports, which in our case was not until 2.00am. We all went to

bed and at 5.30 am we back up and slipping our lines and heading out into the Med towards Port Said, Egypt.

The weather gods smiled on us today and we were soon bounding along with a gentle northerly breeze to take us on our way. 15 miles out we were greeted by the Israeli navy who checked our details and wished us a safe journey.

As we turned southwards on our new course from the 15 mile mark, the wind was behind us and so we set the twins (the twin downwind headsails) and for a while they set quite well, but the wind infuriatingly was not quite fully behind us and it became harder and harder to keep them filled. Gradually the wind died away and by 11.00 am we were motor sailing, but things got better as the wind increased again and came round to fine off the starboard bow and so we set the cutter rig which was a tremendous success again and we were soon cutting through the smooth sea under a VERY hot sun at 7 knots in barely 9 knots of true breeze.

Around 2.00 pm the wind veered round to the beam and the cutter rig no longer did the job and so we furled the staysail and just ran on the 'twins' lying together as a single headsail. This was fine but once the wind dropped to 10 knots we had no option than to complete our use of the entire sail wardrobe and raised Hyacinth (the Gennaker). A loud bang which turned out to be an expensive snatch block pulling open, was the only setback and we were soon back barrelling along at 7 knots which was very satisfying.

The wind direction gradually made it impossible to continue flying Hyacinth and it was around 5.00 pm that we had to restart the engine to help us along under a conventional rig. The temperature remained high all day and into the evening and by 9.00 pm it was still 29 degrees with 75% humidity.

It was at this point that we approached a huge gas platform and wisely took a route well to the south although this was made a bit tricky by a big fleet of fishing boats. Suddenly out of the pitch black we spotted a big unlit mooring buoy for the support vessels which we missed by less than 20 feet and were very lucky that it had not been on our exact track. Sarah immediately radioed all the boats behind us to warn them and give its exact position to the south of the rig, which was gratefully received by them all, but sadly 'Walkabout Too' (you guess the nationality from the name) choose to give this obstruction a very wide berth and went right to the north of the rig and steamed straight into a duplicate buoy out there! This has done very serious damage to their bows and at this time we are still unsure what their next step will be, but at least the hole was above the waterline.

The next excitement was another enormous fleet of very large and badly lit fishing boats and for the next three hours Serafina weaved her way through this mass of fast moving, unpredictable and impossibly badly lit vessels. By some extraordinary quirk of fate or whatever, our radar which has been out of action for several weeks now, quite spontaneously came to life and allowed us to plot our way through this mass, but not without a lot of worry and angst. I should come clean at this stage and admit that the watch system on Serafina meant that Sarah, Trevor and Lesley between them carried the day as I was off watch and sound asleep throughout the full three hours of all this excitement.

Certainly the day rated as one of the best day's sailing we have had in a long time and it was very satisfying using all the sails in their various configurations so successfully.

Doing the Hokey Cokey

31:15.5N 32:18.2E

Tuesday 22nd June

Around 1.00 am as we cleared the last of the huge fishing fleet the wind came back up to 15 knots plus and so we killed the engine and sailed along very peacefully all the way to Port Said, however the entry to the Suez canal and the mooring location that we have been given is not at all straightforward and the rally was only allowed to make its way down the canal to the naval base that is to be our home for the next few days once we were all together in one big convoy.

The solution to this was for all the boats to anchor in an area of shallows close to the entrance and wait until everyone had arrived. As we approached, we had to sail first through an anchorage of huge ships and yet another fleet of curiously lit fishing boats and trawlers who were showing us no favours. It was still pitch dark and so we dropped the sails at this point and felt our way forward through all this erratic traffic until we arrived finally at the shallows and rounded up and gratefully dropped the anchor. Sarah slept on deck mainly because it was cooler there, but as things turned out she soon had other duties. The wind at this point was still only force 3 and the heat and humidity was really oppressive and coupled with a nasty swell coming from right angles to the wind, this was not a very restful spot. Then from nowhere the wind swung round almost 180 degrees and blasted us at 30 knots (but it was accompanied by a drop of 7 bars in barometric pressure over the previous 13 hours)! Fortunately we had put down loads of chain despite the depth being so little and we remained firmly in position, but it needed Sarah on deck to keep an eye on things.

Gradually the last boats trickled in and in anticipation of the port authorities allowing us entry, we all raised our anchors and formed up into circles in our groups and then finally this became one giant circle of yachts (36) until the permission was given to our leader for the day Hassan, to enter the canal and so battling the gusts of 30 knots and hordes of returning fishing boats the big convoy headed in a less than organised fashion down the Suez canal bound for Port Said. Of course the fishermen had not yet finished with us and trawlers continually dropped their nets in front of yachts forcing us to veer out into the centre of the canal where the large tugs overtaking us blared their horns to clear their path. Add several 'pilot' boats and police launches and there was pretty average chaos. Fast moving ferries plying across the canal added to the fun and even when we made it to the naval base, we still had to wheel around avoiding each other until it was our turn to moor up. Some drivers have not yet grasped the need for patience at this stage and feel the need to career around at speed causing mayhem around them. We had to put on full reverse at one stage to avoid being cut in half by one particularly headless French chicken! Bless you Marie...

Finally it was our turn and we reversed up to the quay dropping our bow anchor in the bay to hold us off the dock wall. We had been warned that there is a lot of swell in here as the big ships heading up and down the canal sweep past the open dock entrance, but what we were not expecting was the cacophony of sound that is Port Said. There is an extraordinary and constant blare of car horns of all tones and despite all our experience so far with noisy traffic, nothing can compare with this spot.

Very helpful and efficient customs, immigration and health procedures saw us all settling back to a welcome lunch on board followed by a long and very hot afternoon nap.

In the evening we were invited for drinks aboard Savarna by Keith Pam and Chris where we were joined by Goran and Birgitta from Kanavo and Jim and Corola from Koza. We had a great evening followed by a quick guided tour of the spacious Hanse 54 and left long after we should have around 9.30 pm.

Returned to Serafina for an excellent chicken casserole dish and were soon off to bed for a much needed cooler sleep, but mindful that we have to be up and running by 5.30 am again to get on the coach for the two day trip to Cairo followed by a boat trip sailing on the Nile and then a visit to the pyramids.

Red Sails in the Sunset

Wednesday 23rd June

Up at 5.00 am to have breakfast and be ready for the 6.00 am departure of the coaches for the two day trip to Cairo. Before we can board the three coaches which are parked next to the boats, we have first to queue up and pass through one of the buildings, putting all our luggage through a scanner and pass through a scanner ourselves, only then are we allowed to walk back and find a seat! The gates to the naval dockyard were then swung open and the three coaches swept out with a full armed escort which was augmented by the police who proceeded to hold up the traffic junctions all the way through the city so that our journey was not impeded in any way. In fact the security arrangements that followed us for the two days were quite extraordinary and they take the threat of terrorists attacking tourists very seriously – or at least they put on a very fine display of doing so. Each coach had a ‘security’ officer on board and these gentlemen wore ill-fitting black suits with machine pistols clumsily stored under their jackets (see photos at www.rhbell.com).

The drive to Cairo firstly took us along the banks of the Suez Canal and gradually the urban sprawl of Port said gave way to scrub and eventually steppe desert with the only things to see being frequent military barracks of various descriptions set back in the dusty landscape. The road which was a dual carriageway all the way, was busy up to a point with just commercial traffic and very few cars. The two lanes were completely optional and as we were to discover later, are not in any way designated as fast or slow or overtaking. After a couple of hours the outskirts of Cairo loomed and soon we were passing scenes of squalor and poverty and into the inevitable traffic jam where now there were large numbers of cars all of varying vintages.

Egypt is a country with some 79 million people, 22 million of whom live in Cairo which they claim is the second largest city in the world after New Mexico, although I have no idea what criteria they use for this last statistic. More of concern is the 30% rate of unemployment which equates to a frightening number of people struggling to survive here.

Our first stop today was the Cairo Museum in the centre of the city which houses all their antiquities and in particular the treasures found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun. The guide on our coach was a very knowledgeable lady who did a wonderful job in taking us round and explaining what everything was and mindful of our thresholds of boredom, kept it all moving along very well. Next we went to the Mohamed Ali Mosque, but the coach driver needed to make a turn across the streaming traffic to reach the citadel and this involved the assistance of the junction's traffic policeman who required some cash and a bottle of cold water before he prepared to help. This is the way here with baksheesh which is no more than unregulated corruption when involving the police and tourist police. The mosque was very impressive and its position high above the city afforded us fine views over the sprawl below with just the sound of thousands of car horns blaring away.

From here we went on to Khan Khalili and the souqs where we had an hour to wander through the narrow streets crowded with stalls armed with detailed instructions on how to bargain with the vendors in the event that anything caught our eye. Inevitably we were also besieged by individual street sellers as usual in the part of the world and our armed security guard did disperse a few of the more persistent ones from time to time. This was an interesting experience and perhaps our time in the Istanbul markets last year made this all easier to deal with and certainly we felt under less pressure here generally.

Our busy day continued with a one hour sailing trip in feluccas which are the traditional Egyptian sailing boats. I had rather fondly assumed that this was going to take us on a gentle sail down the River Nile with the desert either side of us. The reality was a fun sail up and down a section of the Nile, between two road bridges in the centre of Cairo, flanked by large hotels (including the Four Seasons) which we all enjoyed, particularly as the breeze was cool and the sun was going down fast. There was a lot of theoretical competition between the boats although I am quite sure that the Egyptian helmsmen were mostly unaware of what was being urged. Terry from the yacht 'Manca' (Canadian as it happens) called out 'Starboard' at one point and seemed quite pleased with himself, until it was pointed out that his boat was on a 'Port' tack. It has been our slight misfortune to arrive in this part of the world in the middle of a heat-wave which we have been assured is due to end at the weekend. Temperatures of nearly 50 degrees have been recorded in the centre of Egypt and certainly we have all found it stifling everywhere we have been, especially last night in the dockyard.

From the feluccas we headed off to the hotel which is very close to the pyramids but sadly they were just out of immediate sight from the hotel itself mainly because of a new concrete flyover, but we did at least get our first sightings of them as we arrived. The hotel was excellent and once the chaos of the room allocations was sorted we went to our room then Sarah had a swim in the huge pool before we wandered down to join all the others in the dining room for a very nice and well presented buffet dinner. Some hardy souls stayed up in

the bar afterwards, but Sarah and I retired for a great night's sleep in an air conditioned, spacious and very quiet room. Sadly Sarah briefly chose to switch on the TV and promptly upset herself by hearing about the floods in Brazil where as far as we are aware, Ewan is currently on a boat trip down the Amazon. She texted Tom to see if he knew anything and his reply said that he had no news, but knowing his brother, he was probably surfing his way to safety or involved in some such improbable escape.

Walk like an Egyptian

Thursday 24th June

Yes, well there is a reason for this as you will hear....

Our dear leader Hassan, who along with Dave and Kath are the redoubtable EMYR organising committee about whom I plan to elaborate tomorrow, managed to get today's itinerary changed slightly to allow us all a very lazy slow morning with the chance to swim and enjoy a late and VERY nice breakfast. (I apologise to all the readers of this blog who feel that I mention food too often, but it seems to play a big part in the running of this event and the side effects of eating the 'wrong' local foods is a hot topic of daily conversation!)

Around 10.30 am we re-boarded our coaches and headed for the nearby Giza Plateau and its pyramids which were every bit as inspiring as I had grown up to imagine. There is a good deal more to the pyramids than piles of rocks and we spent a good hour wandering around this site with a total of 9 pyramids (there well over 100 across the country) before moving up to a panoramic position where we could get better photos. This also gave most of us the opportunity to have a camel ride a short way out into the desert and back. All four of us went for this option, but some others chose to ride horses and a few took the seemingly less adventurous decision to ride in pony and traps. The camel rides were a great experience and very little prepares you for what happens, but with young lads to lead the animals for the most part, there was nothing too dangerous about this. Trevor however was shown how to steer his camel and set loose to make his own way with the young lad throwing the odd rock at the camel to get it to go faster! The two person horse drawn carriages certainly looked sedate when seen trotting along the roads, but our here in the desert, the drivers seemed to have a rather better developed sense of fun and these hurtled along with pretty wild sense of abandon. Various photo opportunities followed before we all made our way in an unruly train back to where we had started. Photos will be posted at www.rhbell.com shortly. We had only been in the saddle for half an hour, but quite a few people seemed to be walking a little stiffly after this excitement. What detracts from these experiences all the time slightly, is the endless requests for baksheesh which is just fine when it is deserved, but frequently it forms part of a minor scam that leaves a bad taste in the mouth. On this occasion most of us were keen to offer money to the young (8 – 14 year old) boys who led our camels and took photos of us with our cameras etc. but as we dismounted, adults would materialise and start to haggle the amount. We had of course already paid for the ride so this was merely a tip and yet they wanted to argue and demanded foreign currency. I insisted on paying the lad and thanking

him personally and largely ignored the man demanding further payments, but I have no doubt that in the end the boy will have had to hand his money over anyway.

We then moved on a few hundred yards (by coach) to where we could get a good view of the Sphinx which is very much smaller than you might imagine. Lots of mystery surround its origin and purpose but by common consent it is deteriorating quite quickly and recent attempts to halt this process appear only to have accelerated this. The whole site is very impressive and one can only marvel at what it must have been like all those thousands of years ago when it was all new and the pyramids themselves were covered in polished marble that has of course long since vanished. That the site has survived so long given the almost total lack of protection by the authorities over the years is very fortunate.

At this point our group got back on board the coach but despite promises that this would not happen, a very small group went off in the tour operator's support vehicle to buy some Egyptian cotton sheets or whatever. The upshot of this was that as the three coaches had to travel in a tight convoy at all times, we were all required to wait for their return. We assume that our guide tired of this and we set off slowly driving through Cairo and out onto the highway back to Port Said. However, because the last coach still did not catch us up, we drove slower and slower until finally the armed police support team made us stop and wait. The rather curious (and quite worrying) aspect of this was that we remained in what we would call 'the fast lane' of the dual carriageway for all of this time, including the bit when we were parked! Finally the third coach caught up and once again our convoy moved off only to stop again within the hour under slightly more dramatic circumstances. Our coach was second in the convoy, but Trevor happened to witness part of what happened next, which was that a young lad stepped out into the road and launched a large water melon into the path of the leading coach. This struck the vehicle on the side mirror and windscreen, breaking the mirror assembly and obscuring the drivers vision. He stood on his brakes which of course caused us all to have to brake as well. The poor lad could not possibly have picked a worse target for his prank as the armed security guards jumped off the vehicles and gave chase along with the armed military police. Suddenly we all felt just a little vulnerable as the guards seemed to have overlooked the possibility that the melon was only a ruse to bring the convoy to a halt and draw away the security screen and so we all sat still hoping that there was not a more involved plot in progress.... of course all was well and the police failed to catch the lad, which was just as well for him as his future for a short while had looked very bleak – and brief.

The convoy moved off again and we made our way to Ismailia and the marina/yacht club there. Ismailia is around halfway down the Suez canal and makes a good overnight mooring for yachts. Originally the lake (Lake Timsah) here was fresh water and it is named after its crocodiles, but once it was joined to the salt water canal they died out. The lake is a popular spot for bathing and has a number of private clubs as well as public beaches around it. We were the guests of the yacht club, which has no yachts as such but is a very welcoming place nonetheless and on our arrival we saw a huge trimaran belonging to the Sultan of Oman that was on its way to France where it will be taken over by a Frenchman for the next single handed round the world race. Then as we drank our free cans of cold soft drinks, we watched

another trimaran that turned out to be Ellen Macarthur's former world record record breaking 'B & Q' arrive and moor up. Ismailia was built at the same time as the Suez canal and became the home of Ferdinand de Lesseps who was the director of the canal during its construction. It was hard to ascertain the grandness of the town as again we were whisked through with policemen standing on EVERY street corner. The fresh water for irrigation and drinking water here and as in most of this part of Egypt is carried on small canals fed directly from the River Nile. What is very surprising is the terrible condition these waterways are kept, which is full of rubbish of every conceivable sort. Some have been dredged out, but the rubbish strewn spoil is simply left along the banks to leech back into the water.

In due course we set off back to Port Said and this time our convoy was extended to include a police car with sirens and lights running ahead of the truck with the soldiers. Still all the crossings were police holding up all the traffic and so we had an swift trip through the city and back into the dockyard. We climbed off the coaches and had to walk past the yachts to line up at a door where they intended to get us all to pass back through the scanners again and show our passports. Someone in authority had the sense to recognise the futility of this and the idea was abandoned and we were allowed to return to our boats.

We dusted ourselves down and poured some very welcome G & T's and before long were joined by Chris and Penny from 'Karma Daze' although after a couple of drinks each they headed for the noisy dockside party being held by Group 4. We enjoyed spaghetti with a very tasty tuna dish that Sarah cooked before we all headed to bed. Somehow I never heard another thing, but I understand that the dockside party ran very loudly until quite late.

Dirty Old Town

Friday 25th June

A day off for us all to sort out the boats in preparation for the 136 mile sail to Herzliya, which is close to Tel Aviv, Israel.

I got a little bogged down with the previous two days blogs whilst Sarah set about washing decks and things. Trevor was under the weather again, this time with stomach cramps which are giving him a lot of pain, so much so that he did not come with us to the Rally Dinner in the evening.

We all took a stroll up into the nearest parts of Port Said and visited the market, but in truth this is neither a very safe nor pleasant place to be and several crews reported being heckled by groups of youths. Like Cairo, everywhere and everything is very dirty and dusty (the desert may have a part to play in this of course) but the standard of living is clearly very low indeed.

In the evening we all boarded the coaches for a short, high speed, armed and escorted trip to a very smart nearby hotel where we were treated to another superb buffet meal. Frequently these events have a pay bar which is no problem of course, but on this occasion they pitched the prices so high as to be ridiculous and so lots of people chose to just have bottled water! After various presentations there was a disco, but somehow they missed the market slightly

and whilst there was plenty of enthusiastic dancing going on, most people chose to sit this one out and there was a quite definite rush to get on the first bus home. During the speeches there was a slight distraction in the hotel reception area when an Egyptian wedding party arrived complete with band and once they started dancing they had everyone's rapt attention.

Sarah and I left Lesley at the dinner as she was very involved in learning Egyptian dancing, but in fact the second and final coach was not that much later in the end, so we all had a fairly early night.

I thought that I ought at some stage to say a few words about the organising committee for the rally. The entire event is run by four seemingly unlikely but very hard working individuals, Hassan, Dave, Kath and Faruk (who is not actually on this tour but beavering away in his office in Gocek, Turkey).

It is hard not to equate Dave and Hassan with Laurel and Hardy, partly for their endless good humour throughout, but perhaps partly due the air of organised chaos that surrounds their announcements and presentations and general organisation. In truth Hassan does an extraordinary job balancing the needs, demands and sensibilities of a selection of very volatile middle eastern countries, several of whom are actually at war with each other, along with the curious and eclectic band of sailors drawn from 18 countries around the world with all their idiosyncrasies. This he does with a cheerful and indefatigable good humour, brushing off setbacks and always trying to find humour in a situation. Not everyone fully appreciates this approach and certainly there are a few who despair of the apparent lack of organisation, but no-one can deny that he gets the job done one way or another, and I am certain that the logistics would have long since defeated a more conventional approach. Dave and Kath are perhaps best described as our long suffering 'flotilla leaders' as it is on their broad shoulders that the practical problems of taking nearly 70 boats from port to port and country to country falls, knowing full well the complete absence of space, facilities and assistance that awaits them along the way. They struggle to get ahead of the fleet on passages, often starting off in the very early hours in order to be ready and waiting the arrival of the yachts at the destination. They are the ones trying to bring order to the chaos of trying to dock all the boats, by carefully orchestrating the entire event, only for one or more skippers to totally ignore all the instructions and wreak havoc by doing all the wrong things, frequently quite wilfully. Indeed being a flotilla skipper is actually a good deal easier than this job here as most holidaymakers do generally do as they are instructed. Dave and Kath's problems stem from the fact that here they have 70 determined, single-minded self professed experts, who frequently resent being told what to do and are largely nothing like as good as they like to think! Add in language difficulties, real or deliberate and it is a wonder that they keep going with such an indomitable spirit and wonderful sense of humour. I have posted a couple of photos of Dave and Hassan at www.rhbell.com .

Convoy

Saturday 26th June

Usual air of slight confusion right from the start as Hassan needed the bigger boats to leave first as their anchors and chains straddled a lot of the smaller boats anchors, however as is the way of these things, the small boat skippers were summoned to collect their exit visas and boat papers first....

Eventually things got underway and by 9.30 am most of the boats were off the quay with their anchors safely stowed, milling around inside the small naval dock waiting to be led back up the Suez Canal by the pilots and out in to the Med. We finally moved out nominally in a single file, but there are some boats (not all French) that take a perverse delight in doing anything other than what they have been asked and so the impressive line of boats was punctuated by random yachts speeding up the outside in a second ad hoc line! Progress was then disrupted when 'Escapade' got a rope around their prop in the middle of the Suez Canal, but they soon took a dip and freed themselves.

We cleared the canal and right on cue the wind picked up and in no time at all the entire fleet was flying along displaying a wonderful array of coloured downwind sails and various other configurations. The fishing boats seemed almost bemused by this sight, but soon got back into the rhythm of trawling across our paths which added to the fun. Poor Lesley had now joined Trevor in the sick bay and so we elected to take things a bit gently and we set our twin headsails as a single genoa and set a course for Israel. As the wind picked up to 12 knots we found ourselves buzzing along at 6 knots which attracted the attentions of two large dolphins who proceeded to play under and alongside our bows for the next three quarters of an hour, until in fact 'Savana', (Hanse 54 ft) flew past us with her cruising chute billowing, at around 9 knots. This sadly proved to be a more attractive option to the dolphins and they left us for their new friends!

As the wind began to head us, we set the cutter rig and were soon making 7 knots in just 11 knots of true wind which had us eating up the miles and leaving some boats flying chutes in our wake. Unfortunately by mid afternoon, Sarah had also succumbed to the devil that is diarrhoea and I suppose the term guppy tummy probably originated from Egypt. In due course the wind began to drop after dark and at 11.00 pm we put on the engine to help us maintain a reasonable speed. Sarah was now in a very poor state and Lesley was little better, but Trevor at least felt capable of standing his watch. The net result was that I did mine and Sarah's individual three hour watches back to back and then got a three hour break while Trevor stood in, before I was back on again. Not ideal but the best option probably under the circumstances.

All Over Now

32:09.7N 34:47.6E

Sunday 27th June

Well the rally hasn't quite finished, but England lost to Germany in their World Cup game today and worse still we have a few German crews on the rally. The only recent consolation

has been discussing with the Aussies the merits of their first ever woman Prime Minister. The fact that she is also married to a hairdresser has only deepened their pain.

We motored through the night, but it was a long and uncomfortable one for most of the crew and their plight was not helped by a very large swell that was running and with no wind to steady the yacht, we rolled badly for several hours.

At 5.00 am we had our first visit from the Israeli navy which was a little exciting for me alone in the cockpit. I saw the gunboat approaching at speed by the light of the full moon, but as they neared Serafina, they turned on a hugely powerful searchlight which bathed us in bright light but equally blinded me and ruined my night sight, which presumably is part of the idea. After circling twice they called on channel 16 to know the name of the boat and the EMYR rally number. I gave them this info and they thanked me and welcomed us to Israel and hoped we had an enjoyable stay! They then roared off at full speed leaving us rolling in their wake. But they had not gone far when the radio came to life again and a different voice called Serafina by name and demanded we alter course immediately for a more northerly heading to avoid getting within 9 miles of a sensitive gas installation. This was a case of mistaken identity by the shore radar station as we were nowhere near where they thought, but I acknowledged the instruction and they were satisfied. At this point the gunboat returned and again circled us twice but this time said nothing. Eventually they asked me to tell me who we were and when I repeated the information they did not reply, but headed off again. One hour later, in full daylight a second armed patrol vessel approached and circled us, but this time seemed satisfied to just read the information off the back of the boat!

As we approached Herliya black clouds formed and as we came in and docked around 9.00 am, we did so in pouring rain which was as much a surprise to the locals as us. We were as usual here, met on the pontoon by customs and immigration etc. They wanted to see all the crew on deck but I explained that Sarah was not well enough to do this. I explained that she had seasickness and a poorly stomach as we did not want to have issues with the health department! They came aboard and conducted a brief search, apologising to Sarah as she lay there. Next we were required to all take our passports to the Immigration office to have visas stamped and inserted and again I explained about the problem with Sarah. The officer went off and told the three of us to come to the office as instructed and he would see if they would send someone to identify Sarah to save her coming too. In the event, we were halfway to the office when we met a senior officer coming the other way. He turned out to be the head of immigration here and was personally coming to check Sarah out of sympathy for her plight. He was very cheerful and apologised to Sarah for having to come aboard to see her and overall the entire team here including customs were extremely helpful and pleasant. Some of the other boats had sniffer dogs put on board, but this was more about training the dogs than a genuine search for contraband.

First impressions of this marina are very favourable and we are already reconsidering our original decision to head south back to Ashkelon Marina in a few days time and base our travelling to Jordon from here instead.

Lesley, despite still feeling pretty rough, washed Serafina's decks and between us we sorted out all the deck gear and put up the flags etc. Meagan from 'Kiwi Volant' is a nurse and she popped round to see Sarah and administer some pills to help her situation which had all the signs of being full blown dysentery. It transpired that a good many crews have been suffering the same or similar symptoms and the general feeling is that I will succumb at some stage, but hopefully not when we start our overland travel to Jordan and Jerusalem. Trevor and Lesley have also been given various medications and hopefully they will avoid the temptation to start eating and drinking again too soon, but it is not easy as there is a real end of term spirit developing here.

The Final Curtain

Monday 28th June

Last day of the rally and most of the crews are busy making arrangements for whatever they are doing next, which ranges from folks like us heading west for the Atlantic and others flying home tomorrow morning to get back to work!

Poor Sarah was no better at all and so the next step was to move her onto a stronger medication which she took around 1.00 pm. In the meantime she had simply been unable to leave her bed other than to take the two steps into the heads. (that's the toilet to non sailors!!) After two days of just water she is certainly looking very weary. In the afternoon, Ellen from 'Ko Ko' came round to explain that she is a fully trained and practising acupuncturist and offered her services to Sarah, which she gratefully accepted and so in the late afternoon Sarah was laid out looking for all the world like a pin cushion. I had succumbed to the problem briefly in the night and so spent the day on a diet of water and the odd breadstick, but actually did not feel too bad at all.

Trevor and Lesley started their packing as they are transferring onto Kiwi Volant in the morning and I think they surprised themselves by how much stuff they had brought with them. Good job they are not having to fly home at this stage.

It seemed that T & L had also got ahead of the tummy bugs that they had, but both were nominally taking things easy today as they have the start of their overland trip to Jordan starting tomorrow as well. There was much discussion had on board Serafina as to how to deal with the health issues as there appear to be a number of remedies on offer but a shortage of informed advice.

In the evening we had the last of the rally events which was a final presentation evening, plus dinner and dance hosted by the city of Herzliya and held in the boatyard adjoining the marina complex. Sarah of course was unable to attend at all which was very sad and I spent most of the day and evening fielding endless kind enquiries as to her progress, or lack of it.

The event turned out to be the biggest bash yet and apart from the 200 invited Israeli guests there was the mayor of Herzliya and a host of representatives from a dozen different embassies based in Tel Aviv. The bar which was serving absolutely every conceivable drink or cocktail was totally free and most people took full advantage of this facility and more than

a few needed quite a bit of help on the walk home around midnight. There were the usual slightly political speeches but in reply Dave put his point across very clearly and as usual Hassan 'shot from the hip' in his speech making his views on matters very plain indeed and both received great applause for their efforts.

The dancing was sparked off by a performance by a dazzling Israeli band 'Sensation' who were very good indeed and the disco that followed up was good, but the food was a little curious in that we were only served with plates of barbequed meat, which was excellent, but the absence of anything else was a little curious, especially as any number of us were desperately trying to eat sensibly and red meat alone did not fit the bill! It was a little disappointing in a way that the rally ended in such a way as we had rather hoped that we would all be together for this last night and able to chat and say our goodbyes. (Quite a few boats had left the fleet over a week ago and stayed in Ashkelon in southern Israel, not making the final legs to Egypt and back up to Herzliya. The crews had all been brought up however in a coach for the evening by the committee, but it was all a bit chaotic saying our hurried farewells.)

We returned to Serafina around midnight to find Sarah looking a good deal more cheerful and sure that she had turned the corner, all of which she reckoned was down to the acupuncture which she hopes to repeat tomorrow.

So long, Farewell, Goodbye

Tuesday 29th June & Wednesday 30th June

Well the important news is that Sarah is on the mend at last and of course she immediately tried to overdo things, but after two days without food, she did not last long!

These two days have been spend doing the washing and clearing up the boat from 'rally mode' and getting everything sorted and back into its usual places now that we have a bit more room again.

Trevor and Lesley got off first thing on Tuesday, moving their luggage onto Kiwi Volant before setting off in a taxi to Tel Aviv for a few days travelling in Jordan. We immediately discovered that they had left their life jackets behind and I rushed round to their new mooring, but in vain as they had already left. So we have left them with another boat crew who plan to be here when they return.

Sarah had another session of the acupuncture on Tuesday and over the two days gradually returned to health, but had to go very slowly with food but has decided that she is feeling strong enough for us to join Scott Free on a trip to Jordan which will take us away for around 6 to 7 days.

Lots of farewells over the past few days, but thanks to the wonder that is email I am sure that we will be able to stay in touch with a lot of new friends wherever they are around the world.

We had to move all the boats from the pontoon we were on to new moorings during Wednesday and so we and Scott Free helped each other. I was on board Scott Free and we called in at the fuel dock to top up their tanks and found ourselves moored along with one of the navy gunboats, whose crew were sitting under parasols on the fuel dock having their lunch. The crew all looked impossibly young and their attitude was very relaxed. There was loud rock music blaring from their PA system and they had a big banner fixed on the side of the superstructure which showed a picture of a similar vessel at high speed with its searchlight probing ahead and the prominent strap line 'Smoke on the water – Fire in the sky'. Dave tells me that last year there was one with 'Bad Boys' written on it!

I suppose at some stage we will need to sit back and reflect on the rally and the highs and lows, but if I was asked today by someone interested in taking part next year I would thoroughly recommend it along with most of the caveats that we received when we asked. It is hard work as the pace is fairly unrelenting, in terms of sailing and travelling as well as the social side. We were incredibly lucky to have had such a good 'crew' in Trevor and Lesley and recognise that this makes a huge difference. We have heard so many tales of crews that have fallen out during the trip, often quite spectacularly that I would urge anyone else to think very carefully before inviting anyone along. The downside of not having extra hands along is that the sailing side of things become more onerous so as in everything else with sailing, it is all a compromise.

As I have indicated above we are now away for 7 days and so there will be no blog posted until we return. I sure most of you could do with the break too!

Don't forget the photos at www.rhbell.com

Ticket to Ride

Thursday 1st July

Set off at 8.00 am on our 6 day trip into Jordan along with Chris and Steve from 'Scott Free'. Firstly we took a taxi from the marina in Herzliya to the central bus station in Tel Aviv. Security in Israel is of course very tight and so we had to have our bags searched before we could enter the bus station, but then having purchased our tickets for the long coach trip down to Eilat (the Israeli port at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea), we had an hour to kill, so we bought coffees and pastries from a wonderfully eccentric vendor who had near perfect English and a very good sense of humour, and watched the world go by. The vast majority of the people walking past were in military uniform and almost all of them were wearing machine guns strapped to their shoulders. Some carried rather more substantial weapons and as I have commented before, it is hard to get used to seeing 20 year old girls so at ease with such weapons carried as others might carry a handbag!

Our coach duly arrived and we boarded the packed vehicle taking our numbered seats next to two girls, one of whom was carrying a very large machine gun. I was not sure whether to be reassured or concerned.

The 5 hour journey passed easily enough with good roads and air conditioning. We passed interesting road signs one of which that read ‘beware of camels near the road’ and as we descended down to the level of the Dead Sea we passed a sign reading ‘Sea level’ which was only about half way down the hill. Once we arrived in Eilat (the bus was not allowed into the depot until a heavily armed policeman had walked through the vehicle eyeballing each one of us), we took a taxi to the Jordanian border crossing. This was rather more involved than I had expected and having first passed through endless passport and visa checkpoints, the four of us emerged into the bright sunshine and had to walk across the 100 metres of ‘No man’s land’ to Jordan carrying our luggage, with signs on both sides of us warning that the area beyond was mined.

As we made our way round the road blocks and headed into the first of the Jordanian controls, we had just a handful of travellers ahead of us. They turned out to be three crews from the rally as well (‘Bright Side’, ‘Walkabout Too’, and ‘Joss’) and we all had a brief chat while we waited for the visa and passport formalities to be completed. Having finally accomplished this successfully, we emerged in Jordan and had now to negotiate with the taxis. This got a little heated as there were a number of misunderstandings, but finally we realised that the deal here was that the taxis were not allowed to take us directly to our hotels in Aqaba, but could only drop us at the central bus garage where we would have to start again. So the four of us piled into one and set off, but no sooner where we clear of the military zone, the driver turned and asked which hotel we wanted and took us directly there for a few quid extra – of course!

Our hotel, the ‘Al Cazar’ was billed as ‘tired but good value’ but I think it was tired quite a few years ago – and now it is ‘time expired’. However we checked in and decided to give the murky swimming pool a miss and went off to find the travel company ‘Above and Below’ who we hoped would help us arrange and book all the next stage of our journey.

Their office turned out to be just round the corner and Jill, who runs the place was extremely knowledgeable and helped us mould our ideas into a workable plan.

After showers we set off to find the Royal Jordanian Yacht Club who were assured had an excellent restaurant open to visitors. This proved very easy to find and Steve and I ate very well, but Sarah had to continue to take things easy as she was still only gradually starting to eat properly again and Chris was also taking things slowly as she too was recovering from a few days of tummy upset. The restaurant was not too busy but sure enough there was another crew from the EMYR rally eating there (Terry and Dorothy from ‘Manca’), how small is this world?

It’s unbelievable

Friday 2nd July

Again we set off at 8.00 am, this time though we were picked up in a smart people carrier for the 3 hour trip down to Petra. Sadly the air conditioning was broken, but it was early in the

day and we were heading for higher ground where the temperature was a little more reasonable so it was no real hardship. Our driver was very entertaining and managed to explain that Jordan is home to some 7 million people, only 3 million of whom are Jordanian, the rest being Palestinians who had settled here with the help and blessing of King Hussain. He himself was a Palestinian and came from a large family, 'a rabbit family' and proudly told us that Jordan was 70% desert and rocks and absolutely nothing else – but added that he found it hard to believe that the only two countries in the entire middle east that did not have oil were Jordan and Israel. We arrived at our hotel just outside the entrance to the historic site of Petra around 11.30 am and were told we would have to wait for our rooms to be ready, so we went for a stroll before returning and used the very pleasant hotel swimming pool. Finally our rooms were declared ready but the one assigned to Sarah and me was still in occupied when we let ourselves in! We went back to reception who promptly allocated us a second room but on inspection this turned out to be tiny compared to the first one, so they eventually gave us a third room which was acceptable – but only just considering the broken fridge and TV.

We had a lazy early afternoon and then around 4.00 pm we made our way to the entrance to Petra with a view to walking through the site and back prior to a longer more detailed visit in the morning. Nothing can really prepare you for the extraordinary experience that is the hidden city of Petra and our timing was perfect as the coach tours had left and most people were making their way out as we began our journey. Firstly we rode on horseback down the 800 metres to the start of the Siq which is a dramatic rift in the rocks that leads you down a narrow deep pathway for one and half kilometres before dramatically opening up to reveal the first of the incredible rock tombs, the 'Treasury'. It was at this point that we met the crew of Kiwi Volant along with Trevor and Lesley walking the other way. We had no idea that they were here today and it was great to meet up with them again. They had been very intrepid and during a very full day had walked almost the entire site including the two mountain top locations. The entire site is both awesome and spectacular and whilst most of the city buildings were levelled in two huge earthquakes in 363 AD and 551 AD all the massive rock tombs carved into the massive sandstone cliffs remain untouched. This place makes Dalyan rock tombs in Turkey look decidedly ordinary! The city in its heyday was home to some 30,000 people and was one of the most important trading centres along the silk road and it was able to pay off the Romans in order to continue their trade unmolested. Sadly the rise of Palmyra (see earlier log entries) and the development of sea trading led to the gradual demise of the city and of course the earthquakes did the rest. The extraordinary thing is that Petra became a secret place only known to the Bedouin from the 12th century when Saladin captured the two forts that the crusaders built here, until 1812 when it was 'discovered' by a Swiss explorer! Visiting the site is no easy matter and stout walking shoes are the order of the day as the city stretches several kilometres beyond the 'Treasury'.

We made our way back up through the site as the sun went down and after a buffet dinner in the hotel got a reasonably early night in preparation for our planned return to Petra in the morning and the ascent to the monastery.

Stairway to heaven

Saturday 3rd July

Breakfast at 6.30 am and started to walk through Petra by 7.00 am to try to avoid the heat and the crowd. (This is actually a very quiet time of the year here as it is too bloody hot!) We made our way to the far end of the city (4 Km) and now faced the daunting climb up to the site of the 'monastery' which is the most impressive of all the rock tombs, but is perched on a mountain top and reached only by a long and precipitous pathway containing over 800 steps and a lot of rubble strewn track. Being old, we opted to ride up on mules which seemed a good idea at the time and after some sharp negotiations we set out with Steve, Chris and myself perched on robust mules and poor Sarah riding on a rather smaller donkey. In retrospect this was not as cute as it seemed as the route is fraught with hazards. Firstly Steve's mule was given its head by the lad with us and it led the way rather slowly. I was also allowed to ride my mule without assistance but she (Monica) was a lot fitter and more enthusiastic than Steve's and constantly tried to squeeze past and overtake at the narrowest and most frightening spots. Chris probably had her eyes closed for most of the rather harrowing journey up, but poor Sarah had a donkey that was simply not strong enough any longer to cope with the climb and having a passenger and so it slipped and stumbled, even ending up on its knees at one point. Not helped at all by the 10 year old driver frequently cajoled it with a stick when the donkey then skittered sideways. The driver would not agree to Sarah getting off and walking despite the constant admonishments to sit forward or in the middle of the travelling saddle secured by a piece of string.... The only thing that we all agreed could be more frightening than going up the trail and the 800 steps hewn out of solid rock with precipitous drops on both sides, was the thought of the descent. So we thanked the two lads who had brought us up and opted to return down on foot. The prize for making the climb however was well worthwhile and Sarah even climbed a little higher to an observation point for a few more photos. The descent was a good deal easier than we had imagined, but as the mules came down past us, without riders, we were reminded of how pleased we were not to be on them. Smooth rock and hooves are a poor combination if you need traction and it is hard to believe that there are not a few casualties each year.

On the way down we were passed by the delivery trucks on the ascent – 3 donkeys, two with water unaccompanied and the third far behind with the donkey driver carrying diesel. (see photos at www.rhbell.com)

We made our way finally back out of the city and the Siq and returned to the hotel for a swim and lunch after which we were picked up by another 'people carrier' (one with air con this time) and were driven to Wadi Rum.

Wadi Rum is the desert made famous by Lawrence of Arabia and this magnificent desert and mountain landscape is both fascinating and dangerous. We climbed aboard a modern Land Rover at the visitor centre and our Bedouin driver drove us at speed down the road leading into the desert before leaving the tarmac and heading out into the wilderness. This was the first signs of life where a group of six camels being ridden by – would you believe it, but the same three crews we had met at the border two days ago! We stopped and chatted for a while before we lurched off again on a fascinating and informative tour. This is the true home of the

Bedouin and is a most unforgiving place and it is now largely a protected area as they try to look after its fragile eco system. We were shown a number of sites including very ancient rock carvings with three different languages and features before stopping by a large rock so that we could watch the sun go down over the desert (photos will be posted shortly at www.rhbell.com) and as we waited, our driver collected a few bits of stick and grass and soon had a very small fire burning, onto which he placed a small kettle containing water and sage and in no time at all we were enjoying sage tea as the sun set dramatically. We then set off again in the Land Rover in the gathering gloom and he took us to a Bedouin camp by way of a VERY dramatic drive down the almost vertical slope of a very high sand dune. Finally we ended up racing across the desert in near total darkness before rejoining the tarmac road and returning to our people carrier. We were then taken back to Aqaba where we checked into a different hotel from before (much better) and after a quick late pizza we went to bed exhausted.

Octopus' Garden

Sunday 4th July

An altogether easier day all round and we did not leave the hotel until 9.00 am for the very short coach trip to the dive centre on the shore of the Gulf of Aqaba run by 'Above & Below'.

Steve had opted to go scuba diving here as he is qualified and so he enjoyed several dives accompanied by an instructor whilst we were satisfied with hiring snorkels and flippers and swimming along the edge of the reef which was very impressive. Despite the proximity of the Aqaba container port, the coral is very much alive and growing and there were countless species of exotic small fish on display. Steve encountered all sorts of sea life during his dives including an octopus, whilst the single most impressive thing that I saw was a large parrot fish.

There were 4 other divers in the centre today, all of whom work at the Canadian embassy in Amman. They claimed to be typists, but their size and shape indicated something rather more in the security line! Apart from them, we had the entire centre to ourselves which included a large salt water swimming pool and a bar as well as countless sun-beds and crucially, lots of shade. And an awful lot of insistent flies – I think we are looking forward to those islands that apparently spray the blighters!

We returned to our hotel around 5.30 pm and went off to book our bus tickets for the trip tomorrow up the desert highway to Amman, the capital of Jordan. This involved walking past the impressive Movenpick hotel and so we were all unable to resist having some of their beautiful speciality ice cream – at some considerable expense.

We ended the day by returning to the Royal Jordanian Yacht Club again for dinner where we found the crews of 'Ko Ko' (Haaken and Ellen) and 'A Plus 2' (Jean and Christiane) enjoying the suchi.

The wheels on the bus....

Monday 5th July

Leisurely start today as our bus to Amman did not leave until 11.00 am.

We arrived early for the bus knowing all the security issues that had to be gone through as usual out here. Lots of stamping of forms and things before we loaded our bags into the boot and took up our seats which were at the very front, on the top level of a double-decker coach. We assume that these are reserved for tourists as all the rest of the coach was shrouded in darkness as the curtains were all drawn to keep out the sun. We therefore had a perfect, uninterrupted view of all the scenery and we persuaded ourselves that as we were heading north up the desert highway (aka The King's Highway), we would not be in the sun ourselves. The flaws in this logic were (1) that the vehicle did not have functioning air conditioning, but was packed with every seat full so the temperature was close to unbearable and (2) the view for the 4 hour trip along the King's Highway was unrelenting featureless desert! As our driver had said the other day – Jordan is just sand and rocks.

The bus company did try to help things along and started by screening a few episodes of Tom & Jerry on the TV, but this was soon replaced by a 3 hour Arab epic (in Arabic of course) which seemed mostly to consist of people shooting and killing each other. Not ideal for the several families with small children watching. On the road we witnessed the usual exciting driving although it must be said that there is a lot more control over things in Jordan. However we did spot a lone wheelbarrow parked in the fast lane, goats wandering in the road (this is the nearest to a motorway here) and were briefly held up when we reached the site of an accident where they were dragging the burnt out shell of a fuel tanker and a car off the road. Traffic seems indifferent to these issues and at the crash site, despite the presence of the police, some cars, vans and the odd truck were cheerfully crossing the central reservation which was a deep V shaped ditch, before heading the wrong way down the fast lane of the other carriageway and then crossing back 100 metres down the road.

We arrived hot, tired and hungry (the bus only made one stop along the way and that was just on the side of the road in the middle of the desert) and accepted a taxi ride through the city to our 'hotel'. The taxi driver was not prepared to name a price and insisted that we gave him whatever we wanted, which presumably normally works in his favour....

The hotel was billed as a backpackers hostel and that was a pretty apt description, but it was very clean, or so Sarah claimed and VERY basic. We wandered out into the city to find something to eat and settled for a very basic snack to last us until dinner. We went for dinner to a restaurant recommended by the Lonely Planet guide (heaven knows what we would have done without this invaluable book) and pretty much accepted what we were given as they had less English than we had Jordanian. Headed off to bed and slept very well despite having a pillow that seemed to have been made out of lumpy rocks.

Jerusalem

Tuesday 6th July

But first a ride out to Jerash. As part of our arrangements with 'Above and Below' in Aqaba, we had booked another 'people carrier' to transport us in Jordan today and so another smart vehicle complete with driver and working air conditioning, picked us up at 8.30 am from outside our hostel. We drove to Jerash which is one of Jordan's main attractions and billed as one of the Middle East's best examples of a Roman provincial city and more importantly perhaps for me, this was planned to be the last bit of rubble gazing for quite a while! In truth it is a quite remarkable site and it is impossible not to be very impressed with it all. We have over the past few months been spoilt by visiting any number of quite outstanding places and they do begin to pale and blur a bit, but this is another of the sites out here that was hidden under metres of sand and lay largely undiscovered and ignored for centuries, despite being surrounded by the modern town. It is very extensive and the two theatres plus the chariot racing arena alone make this a worthwhile visit. Sadly as in so many of the places we have been, our photography has not done the places any real justice. We only publish the very basic pictures on the website (www.rhbell.com) but have an extensive library of photos that Sarah has edited down from the original thousands taken, for folks back home to view if they ever get the urge.

After an adsorbing 3 hours in Jerash it was time to head for the border crossing back to Israel and continue our journey to Jerusalem. Now 'border crossings' and 'Israel' are not words you put together in a sentence lightly. As we have already found out this can be a very long and messy process and it very much matters where you cross into Israel depending on where you want to go next and how long you have got to spare. We had opted for the Allenby bridge Crossing, which is a bridge across the River Jordan, however for obvious reasons, in Jordan this is known as the King Hussain Bridge. There is another bridge known as the 'Jordan Valley Crossing', but this is a long way to the north of where we wanted to be. Rather confusingly this is also known in Jordan as the 'Sheik Hussain Bridge'. So you can guess I expect where this story is going...rather like us, to the wrong border crossing! We kept asking the driver as we went along if he was heading for the King Hussain Bridge and he repeatedly confirmed this, but when we finally arrived and spelt it out one more time he realised his – or his boss' mistake. So cue another 2 hours driving south to the correct bridge. Here we had to go through the rigmarole of checking out of Jordan before handing over our passports and boarding a shuttle bus for the trip across no man's land and the bridge to the Israeli border. We were handed our passports back when we got onto the bus, but this was just part of an endless set of procedures designed to wear the average terrorist into submission. The shuttle took us slowly to the Israeli border crossing the mighty River Jordan. Ah well, for those that do not know the geography of this part of the world you need to know that at this point the Jordan is slightly smaller than Barbourne Brook at the bottom of our garden in Worcester. Israel keeps all the water in the Sea of Galilee for its own use thank you and only a trickle makes its way to the Dead Sea, which is getting smaller by the minute.

So as the bus reaches Israel we have to get off and show passports whilst they search the vehicle. We then get on again and travel another few yards before getting off again. Now we go through endless passport and luggage inspections and body scans (passport inspected a further 5 times) and queue to get our new visas. We were sent to a booth with a new girl on

duty along with her supervisor, who was determined not to help her at all so she learnt the hard way! This was not very helpful for us as we were a very unusual party in that we have to beg them not to stamp our passports as once they have an Israeli stamp in them, we can never visit any of the other Arab states again, which when you are sailing in bad weather could be a serious issue. So as before, we asked for our visas to be stamped on an insert which confused the new trainee totally. It took an age and dozens of questions before this all became clear to her and even then they needed to know why we kept coming in and out of Israel and more to the point why were we returning now. A small boat does not feature in the training manual. As it turned out we were very fortunate as the crossing was quiet and we were clear in under 2 hours. We then bought 'shared taxi' tickets for a minibus ride to Jerusalem, but this involved sitting in a stifling minibus for 30 minutes before he even started the engine, as he could not leave until he had a full vehicle.

At last we were off and it only took around an hour before we were clambering out close the Damascus Gate of the Old city. Our hotel tonight was interestingly called the Lutheran Hostel and we wandered through the narrow streets of old Jerusalem which are little more than one huge almost underground bazaar (Jerusalem operates on all sorts of different levels) for a little while before we finally found the right place. The Lutheran Hospice was wonderful and an absolute delight. It was pretty basic (read chic boutique – but Rob doesn't know these things!)but everything was new and clean and the few staff were so helpful. They recommended a restaurant not far away (nowhere in the old city is far away but the streets are modelled on a maze) and we had a nice meal and a very good nights sleep.

On the road again

Wednesday 7th July

A great breakfast (which turned out to be more important than we had planned) set us up for the day and around 9.00 am we set off on foot for the Jaffa gate and once outside the Old City, we were able to catch a bus to Yad Vashem, which is the new Holocaust History Museum. The bus rattled us across the city which is undergoing major road works as they are adding a new light railway. The driver helpfully told us when to get off the bus, but it was very unclear where we went next, but in due course we found our way to the very smart and impressive complex scattered over 45 acres of the of Mount of Remembrance. The guide book suggested allowing a full 3 hours to take this all in but frankly they cannot have ever been here on a serious visit. There are many features around the site, the main one of course being the central museum building itself, which is quite outstanding. It took us nearly 5 hours to make our way through the History Museum alone and this was simply because it is so comprehensive, informative and harrowing. We emerged older, wiser, appalled and not a little hungry. We walked back to the main road and caught a bus back to the Jaffa Gate from where we planned to walk the ramparts of the Old City.

Sadly they had closed to the public just 5 minutes earlier (it was now 5.40 pm) and so we walked through the lanes, packed with shops all selling identical tourist tat until we reached the Wailing Wall, which a bit of a let down although it is apparent even from our viewpoint

that the wall is stuffed full of paper prayers in all the cracks. And like so many religious sites we have visited here, the women have to worship separately corralled into a small area. Our next stop was the Via Dolorosa, which is the route supposedly taken by Jesus when carrying the cross.

After walking the first part of this, we headed for our hostel again to collect our bags and head for the bus station and home. It was of course now the rush hour and so we were lucky to get seats at first but Steve gave his up for a blind lady and as the world and his mate crammed aboard at each stop, we did sort of wonder at what point they called it full. We arrived in due course at the central bus depot, but for security reasons no bus with people can enter and our bus was only passing anyway, so we had quite a fight to get off the bus in the first place.

We then had to queue – yes another bag and body check, but having queued for 5 minutes, Steve and I were suddenly directed to another entrance as our bags were too large for this one. So now we were separated from Chris and Sarah and they had not seen us being pulled out, so it was a little while before we were all reunited inside the multi-story complex that includes the bus station. The buses from here to Tel Aviv run every 15 minutes and so we were soon on our way again heading out of Jerusalem and once again we found ourselves surrounded by young soldiers and civilians mostly carrying seriously large weapons.

At Tel Aviv we bravely opted to try for another bus to save us the 80 NIS taxi fare to the marina in Herzliya and having found one heading for the right town, the driver informed us that for the marina we needed a different one. This one eventually arrived and then had an electronic fault and we stood around for 20 minutes in frustration before they sent a replacement. This was now running late and at each stop more and more people boarded until at last a ‘full’ light was illuminated. However it still stopped everywhere anyway so people could get off of course and it seemed for ever before suddenly the driver and several passengers sitting around Sarah announced that we needed to get off as this was as close to the marina as it went. We fought our way off this bus and found ourselves standing in the dark at a VERY busy road underpass with no clear idea of where to go. An hour later we trudged wearily along empty roads into the mall behind the marina and found ourselves in a parallel universe where there were thousands of people and packed restaurants and bars – all focussed on the second semi-final of the world cup. All we wanted was some food (remember breakfast all those hours ago??) but everywhere was full (note the biblical reference) except just one Italian restaurant who were paying the price for not installing a TV. Hooray!! Strangest sight of the day was as we sat having dinner when two joggers ran past in shorts etc, clutching a beer each and with large machine guns strapped to their backs. Ready for just about anything I guess.

We ate well and returned gratefully to our respective boats for a reasonable night’s sleep despite the stifling heat.

We’ve got to get out of this place

Thursday 8th July

No rest for the wicked as we now needed to get ready to set off sailing for Malta tomorrow. The process for leaving Israel is as complicated as arriving with the additional annoyance that you have to pay (around £20 per person) to leave. This is not the end of the world, but Border Control are not based here and only come on certain days (which seem to change on a whim). You can only leave by checking out through Border Control, who cancel your visa and then they need to see you depart. This is of course policed by the navy who handily have a gunboat stationed at the entrance to the marina in case, like the Aussies on 'Ednball', you forget to do some of the paperwork.....

Our plans were disrupted when it transpired that the Border Control lady was not coming tomorrow and although we could leave on Saturday, the cost doubles for that day only! We swallowed this bitter pill and along with Scott Free made plans to stay here on Friday and leave on Saturday regardless of the extra charge (less than staying another night). So instead of a busy day getting provisioned and ready, we took things a little slower although Sarah remained busy regardless and then at 4.30 pm the Border Control announced that they could pop in at 8.00 am tomorrow if we wanted as a special favour. We then had to backtrack as there was no way we could be ready now and we did not want to rush off to sea knowing that we have a 7 or 8 days and nights before we reach Malta without proper preparations.

Early supper and then we had Steve and Chris round for a few drinks and very long game of Mexican Train. They had an interesting rule that we have not seen before that allowed players to create branch lines from doubles placed in their own personal lines. Does anyone out there know about this rule?

Stormy Weather

32:26.81N 28:20.41E

Friday 9th July

Spent the day getting sorted for the long sail to Malta.

Weather forecast showed head winds all the way but little we can do about that but just get on with things!

Sarah and I had dinner out in the evening with Ellen and Haakon from Ko Ko and we hope that we might meet up with them later in the year when we arrive in the Caribbean as they are crossing the Atlantic just a few weeks before us in November.

Saturday – Tuesday 10th – 13th July

Got our visas stamped by Border Control and set off from the pontoon at 08.00 am heading for Valetta in Malta, although we had to stop at the fuel dock first!

Very little wind and so we opted to motor out to the 12 mile point (Israeli rules) before setting sail properly and of course the weather forecast was correct and the wind was bang on the nose. We then endured a long slow sail with various amounts of wind, but always a big swell which kept taking all our way off and was quite unpleasant. Scott Free had opted to sail

right from the start and they did very well throughout and it was sort of reassuring to see them in the distance and on our AIS. The wind got up after dark and we flew along albeit still in the 'wrong' direction and gradually the shipping traffic around us increased. Radio traffic was dominated by the Israeli navy and it did occur to us that there was something going on today and this suspicion was heightened when we came across the ship 'Rainbow Warrior' acting rather curiously at midnight.

Sunday was a very frustrating day with very light wind, still remorselessly from the west and progress was slow. We did try our hand at fishing at 08.00 am and by 9.00 am had landed a perfect 8kg tuna. One and half hours later the steaks were in the fridge and everything tidied away. We are beginning to get the hang of this now!

We had our daily 7.00 pm radio net with Scott Free, who we could no longer see even on the AIS for some reason and they turned out to be just behind us, but over the immediate horizon. The regular radio net is actually them helping Sarah use our SSB radio but there is a fault somewhere and this is not working properly, but since we are still close enough to use VHF it does not matter just yet.

Monday was little better in terms of wind direction and we chose to put in our first tack to head away from the Egyptian coast and head more for Turkey! Not sure if this was not all a bit academic but it seemed a good idea. In the evening Scott Free gave us their position which showed that they had simply stayed on the same tack all day and were now some miles to the south of us but not too far away. So in the evening we tacked back again and headed south west again which then coincided with a steady increase in the wind strength. This got up all night and although we fairly few through the darkness (no moon at all so far, but loads of shooting stars) the sea built up as well making it a very nasty ride indeed. Added to the fun was the fact that in the middle of the night the furlex on the forestay jammed with a riding turn and so we were stuck with the twins set as a yankee and no way of furling them up, or even tacking (the inner forestay precludes that option) and so at dawn I had to dismantle the unit and start again. This meant sitting on the bows with my legs astride the forestay and my feet dangling over the sides to take the furlex apart, but in the big seas this meant a real roller coaster ride for me as the bows reared high in the sky over one big wave and then plunged down and through the next wave – and I do not do roller coasters!! As luck would have it, I did not get submerged during this operation and all was well.

Tuesday dawned and we were in 25 knots of wind and big seas which made sleep hard to come by. One huge wave hit us beam on and swamped the entire deck and sadly found the slightly open hatch above Sarah who was desperate for both sleep and fresh air, delivering a huge amount of water on to the bed, Sarah and the sofa-thing, plus walls etc! We made good speed all day and eventually the seas began to die down but the new complication was tons of shipping heading both to and from the Suez Canal. We spent hours dodging them before finding that the wind direction had now got even worse and was driving us further south still. We plan to tack this evening and head back out northwards and will be interested to hear where Scott Free are.

The plan of doing this in 8 days has gone out of the window for sure and we could be out here for 10 or more days easily at this rate.

Life on the ocean wave

Firstly a quick apology for the long delay in posting this log, but sadly my computer died during the first days of this last trip and so I was unable to post daily updates via the satellite phone. The good news is that this means that you have been spared a daily blow by blow account of our travails!

The slightly edited version therefore of what happened is as follows:

We set off from Herzliya Marina in Israel around 8.00 am on Saturday 10th July heading for Malta which was a mere 1031 miles away which we had hoped to do in around 8 days, unfortunately the weather had other ideas and we ended up taking nearly 11 days to cover 1173 miles.

We set off in company with Scott Free (Contest 43) and they showed us up by sailing right from the start, whereas we decided to motor out to the 12 mile mark as directed by the Israeli navy before starting to sail in the light breeze. The principle problem for the next 6 days was that the wind blew remorselessly from the North West which is exactly where we were trying to sail. This means that we had to tack upwind all the time and this was made a great deal harder by an adverse current and surprisingly heavy seas with big waves that kept battering the boat to a standstill which meant that it was almost impossible to make decent ground on either tack. It is depressing enough at the end of a day's sailing to have to tack back up a river or whatever, but to spend 6 days heading either for Libya or Cyprus/Crete instead of the very distant island of Malta became very wearing. Constant wind shifts meant that we needed to be vigilant otherwise we could easily spend several hours sailing nice and fast, but actually losing ground by the minute! For the most part we had good 20 knot winds but at times we were facing just a few knots and progress was very slow and frustrating. We were also very surprised how the wind got up every night which is the exact opposite of what usually happens out here. Many nights found us with a full cutter rig hurtling along at 7 knots into a completely black night (there was no moon at all for the first 6 days) which can be a little disconcerting.

On the port tack with full fuel tanks, we unfortunately get a bit of a diesel smell in the galley and aft cabin. One night, Sarah in need of sleep, in desperation to relieve the smell and to try to lower the positively steamy conditions below, stupidly opened the aft hatch about 1?. The inevitable happened: just the one rogue wave shot across the stern (having given no inkling of this before) delivering approximately at least a gallon of salty water across the bed, Sarah and the sofa thing in the cabin. Luckily swift action saved the mattresses and cushions ? the lovely mouldy bedding is being seen to by the local laundry as I write this!

Scott Free is not quite as fast as Serafina and so we lost sight of them at the end of the first day, but we were still able to talk on the VHF and as a back-up had agreed to talk at 7.00 pm every night on the SSB (short wave) radio. By the fifth day we were some 70 miles ahead and no longer could talk on the VHF, but sadly our SSB still failed to transmit so although we could hear Steve and Chris, they could not hear us. However they continued their SSB transmissions every night and we were able to plot their progress and hear how their day had gone, although this was frequently not good news for one reason or another. We too suffered gear failure and the old adage of 'show me something mechanical and I will show you something that will break down' is so very true of small yachts. First casualty was of course my computer then during the third night with the wind blowing 23 knots, the furlex with the 'twins' on got a 'riding turn' and this meant that we were unable to put these sails away and had to continue flying along at 6 to 7 knots through the darkness until dawn when I was able to go forward and sitting astride the bow with my legs dangling over the side, I dismantled the unit and released the jam. No big deal but the waves were very large at this stage and so Serafina's bow would climb and climb into the sky before plummeting down the back of the wave and burying her nose into the following one. Fortunately I did not actually get submerged during this excitement but the huge rise and fall resembled one of those fairground rides that I NEVER go on.

Radio traffic during the first few days was dominated by the Israeli navy challenging every ship regardless of where they were and when we came across Rainbow Warrior (Greenpeace) acting very strangely around midnight on the second night we did wonder if there was something going on.

By the third night our AIS system started to play up. This is a brilliant bit of kit which places the nearest 100 ships onto our chart plotter and is invaluable for helping us to avoid being run down by the huge amount of traffic streaming through the Med. It was particularly important on this trip as we were having to tack back and forth across the busy shipping lanes and so it was with some concern that we watched as the ships began to disappear off the screen to the extent that we were sometimes only seeing one or two, when we knew of course that there were 50 or more within range of us. This fault came and went for the rest of the journey but we had of course the back up of the radar..... ah yes, the radar that has been playing up all this year! Sure enough when we most needed its services, it decided that this would be the best time to down tools and simply fail altogether for up to 24 hours at a time. Not to be outdone the E80 chart plotter at the chart table started to 'slow down' during day 4 and ended up freezing its screen altogether by day 5. We disconnected it and left it turned off for the rest of the trip. During the 5th night we put the engine on for a while to help charge the batteries and give us a bit of a push upwind, but we were greeted by a new and alarming whine that was something new above the usual sound of the motor running. I suspected one of the alternators but some exhaustive investigations finally revealed the Black jack shaft bearing to be the culprit, or rather I was guilty of not bleeding this unit more regularly during this journey. (This is something I do before we set sail each day usually, but it never occurred to be during all the excitement of non-stop sailing that I still needed to do this whilst we were sailing along as well.) Finally we never quite got to the bottom of some very loud sounds of

creaking from two locations in the hull which indicate movement in the hull which is causing distress in a joint somewhere. We will be investigating this quite urgently before we leave Malta.

On the plus side on day 5, I managed to cobble up a system that enabled me to connect Sarah's laptop to the internet via our Satellite phone and so we were able to download a weather forecast at least which was a great help in planning the rest of the route. The basic problem that we were experiencing with the weather and sea state was due to a Meltemi storm blasting through the Aegean Sea at gale force 8, which explained the huge waves that were making our lives so miserable and partially explains the curious wind patterns by night. It also showed however that we needed to head north from the African coast to avoid the worst of the weather to come and that on day 7 we should find the wind dying away altogether and that the final 300 miles of the journey would have to be done with little to no wind at all which is almost exactly what happened!

On the wildlife front we had our moments. Fishing has become a bit too easy.... well the thing is that we became a bit cocky during the rally having caught a couple of fish, but then I discovered that one of the French boats (Pasha) was distributing fresh tuna to people at EVERY stop, so I had a little chat with them at the end to discover their secrets. They were extremely helpful and without giving too much away, a lot came down to the lure and style of hook. They said that their luck had changed dramatically once they had discovered this and I suggested that this was something of a magic lure. Josie replied. "Oh no, it does not work every time, some days we only catch one fish!?" So I bought one of these lures in Israel and told Sarah that I had it cracked now! So when on day 2 she announced that fresh tuna was required, the pressure was on. I launched the gear and in less than one hour we had landed a magnificent 8kg tuna. We are also getting considerably better at the landing, bleeding and filleting etc. and this was all done with the minimum of fuss and mess. We learnt quite a bit from Lesley which has helped this along. It was not until day 8 that we agreed that we needed another fresh fish and bingo... we caught one again within the hour. The only excitement this time though, was that we had been listening to a British warship challenging ships as part of some NATO operation and we assumed that drugs are one of the issues here. The classic exchange of these goods is done by the packages being thrown overboard from a ship and picked up by a small boat (or yacht) which then takes it ashore. We noticed on the AIS (which was working rather well at the time) that the warship had altered course and was heading directly to our position although they were still 40 miles away. It was at this point that we caught the fish and stopped dead in the water to bring it to the boat and land it. This would have course looked VERY suspicious to the navy from where they were and so we spent the next few hours as they closed in on us, preparing for a visit from a boarding party. (This actually involved Sarah rushing round tidying up to make it look less chaotic) but in the end they just steamed straight past us and took up station around 20 miles south of us and proceeded to announce on VHF channel 16 that they were about to undertake some gunnery practice and that all ships should keep a reasonable distance. One ship called them and quite sensibly asked what was a "reasonable distance?" to which the reply was a reassuring "10 miles?!"

On day 5 we were joined by a fabulous school of 12 Risso's dolphins. We have never come across this type before and they entertained us by playing along with us, diving under the bow and riding our bow wave for over an hour. On day 7 we were joined briefly by 4 Common Bottlenose dolphins and these athletic creatures put on a terrific show of acrobatics, diving out and turning over on their backs before re-entry, synchronised swimming, but quickly swam off. Finally on day 9 we started to come across increasing numbers of turtles in the sea around us and whilst the sea was mirror flat we would be alongside them before they realised and could see them up close. Sadly a significant swell started as we got closer to Malta and the noise of our bow plunging into the waves alerted them and they would dive from view just as we got close. And Sarah would like you to know that she found a small flying fish on the deck after one windy night.

So that was the brief version of events. We certainly had a good trip and learnt a lot about ourselves and life aboard a boat on an extended journey and hopefully useful lessons have been learnt and will continue to be learnt as we get ever closer to our first ocean crossing in December. 1173 miles is nearly halfway across the Atlantic but technically we should not have head winds then, we very much hope! Interestingly, after night 3, we found that the watch system of 3 hours on and 3 hours off really worked rather well; our bodies seemed to have adapted and with a quiet doze of an hour or so each in the afternoon there was no struggling with awful sleepiness while you are 'in charge'. And that over-rated activity of washing? Nasty big seas are not conducive to covering oneself in soap and remaining upright, or even on the boat! So we resorted to the heaven sent baby-wipes and eventually to heaving to (stopping the boat under sail) and showering off the back ? Sarah even had a couple of swims at this stage, despite Rob's disapproval at the potential for lost ground and worry about being stopped in the middle of the shipping lanes but it is the breeding ground for the Great White Shark, so there was always a chance of something more dramatic.....

We can work it out

Tuesday 20th July ? Friday 23rd July

Having arrived in Malta and taken stock of things we had of course to go through Immigration and Customs etc. Oh what a relief it is to be back in the West again! The formalities were barely that and although I did need to present myself to the customs office, the marina sent me down in one of their cars with Richard who is one of the mariners. He had prepared all the paperwork for me and had actually signed it all as well, but the customs officer said that he would prefer it if I signed as well! It was all good humoured and relaxed and on my return to the marina I set about finding the Raymarine agent and all the other specialists we now needed to see.

However first and most important to me was to find a computer repair shop or whatever to see what could be done about my dead computer. (This is the one I use for work as well so it was critical to get this resolved ASAP.) I was directed by the marina staff to two possible

shops, but they actually marked my map incorrectly and so after failing to find them, I asked in a small shop if they could help. They directed me to another place which was a healthy walk away but this turned out to be a very lucky break. They did not make any promises but took the machine and told me to call back the next day. In the event they replaced the keyboard and RAM and managed to get it all up and running again which was just fantastic. They also had plenty of other advice to offer and as a result I am doing things a little differently now.

Finding the marine experts turned out to be a breeze as well, as they all have their offices, along with all the chandlery shops etc, within 400 metres of the marina. I had soon spoken to them all and arrangements were in place for people to come out see to our problems.

Sarah had meanwhile set about washing all the encrusted salt off our topsides and after two hours of spraying, scrubbing and leathering she declared herself moderately satisfied. We listened to the SSB radio at 6.00 pm local time hoping to hear Scott free broadcast their position but we heard nothing.

On Wednesday morning, Stefan came from 'Medcom' to look at the SSB Radio. It took him less than 15 mins to find the fault in the wiring done by Najad when building the boat and he soldered the joint correctly. It then took a further hour and a half to get confirmation that it was all working OK as the stations that you can use to test the system (Madrid, Palermo etc.) are not always fully operational. Anyway he declared it all working and left us highly delighted and very hopeful that we might get to speak to Scott Free in the evening. Sadly this did not happen, as again we could not hear them broadcast and it is probably because of our mooring being surrounded by other masts , high harbour walls etc.

On Thursday an engineer turned up from the boatyard that is attached to the marina to deal with the broken dipstick in the Yanmar gearbox and although he had to return later on, he solved the problem removing the broken piece from the gearbox casing without dropping anything into the gearbox itself. He returned the next day with a new replacement dipstick (actually he brought two suggesting that a second one might prove handy given how fragile they appear to be). Sarah meanwhile had found an excellent laundry nearby who managed to remove the now yellow, green and black mildew that had developed in our soaked bedding from that errant wave. She also found a brilliant supermarket (a 'drive'in' supermarket on the first floor of a building!) which has all sorts of wonderful things that we have not seen for ages. We were still unable to raise Scott Free on any sort of radio which was very frustrating. We also had a visit from Kurt who is the Raymarine engineer. He had expected the radar problem to be an easy fix involving software, so he was upset to find this not to be the case and after spending quite a bit of time testing the radar connections he went off promising to return the next day with the proper radar test equipment. The AIS problem he thinks is to do with the built in aerial splitter, but since we are discussing with his company the option of replacing our AIS 'receive only' set up with a full 'transmit' and receive unit, this may no longer be an issue for us.

[AIS as I tried to explain the other day allows us to see all the ships around us as they are required by law to transmit this data so it appears on our chart plotter. The unit we hope to

buy means that we will be transmitting as well and so all the ships and anyone else with an AIS receive unit will be able to see us and our data, which is a huge safety issue when offshore.]

Friday became a Red Letter day when I raised Scott Free on the VHF radio. We immediately transferred to using the SSB (because we can!!) and chatted for a while. They were only 35 miles out of Valletta and hoped to be arriving around tea time. Other aspects of the day were less good and the principle disappointment was the non arrival of the Raymarine engineer, so we have to hope he appears on Monday otherwise we are going to be staying here in Malta a while longer.

Around 3.00 pm Scott Free pulled in and docked just along the pontoon from us. We joined them for a celebratory bottle of bubbly and in the evening they came round and had dinner on Serafina. They had taken a full 14 days to do the trip, but had resolutely stuck to not using the engine even when the wind had dropped away and actually spent one night just drifting in a flat calm. They were very well and like us had learnt a lot about themselves and the boat from the trip. They also had a long list of problems to get solved, the most pressing being the broken autopilot which had meant that the two of them had had to hand-steer the boat for 10 days.

Magical Mystery Tour

Saturday 24th July

Very sorry about the curious ? marks that have replaced all the inverted commas etc. We have found that certain wifi systems do not enable us to send emails from Outlook, so I have to use my webmail which has this glitch. I am sure you are all quite capable of understanding it all anyway – assuming you are still awake!

Firstly a quick welcome to all the readers of the Scott Free blog as I understand that Chris has not posted any information for a while and she has suggested that you can find out what they are up to at the moment viaus!

Saturday dawned a bit breezy and this soon picked up to a full blown gale which was of no threat to us securely moored downwind to a pontoon, BUT it did produce a big dust storm from the neighbouring empty boat park which has covered Serafina in a thick layer of dust on the outside and sadly on the inside as well as we had to keep hatches etc. open through the day regardless.

In the morning we met Jackson and Rico off ‘Apparition’ who are an American couple who Steve and Chris got to know last winter when they were all based in Marmaris. They are also heading for the Caribbean (but they hail from there, so we are hoping to do some serious brain-picking re routes etc) but we did not know that they were in the area, but they heard us call Scott Free on the VHF radio and butted in to ask where we all were moored.

Casual day spent mostly trying to catch up with paperwork and the like, but at 4.00 pm we took delivery of the hire car that the four of us have booked for two days in order to get to see more of Malta. Our first outing was at 5.30 pm when we set off for Zurrieq which is a town in the south

west corner. I should explain that Malta is a fairly fanatical Catholic country and so every weekend right through the summer there are several feasts or festivals each weekend held in one town or another celebrating one saint or another. So tonight was the culmination of a week's

festivities in Zurrieq which we had been told featured a big fireworks display. If Malta is keen on anything beyond religion then it has to be fireworks and thunder-flashes which can be heard throughout the day, every day.

We had an interesting and very scenic tour in search of this town partly because our tourist road map was rather low on information and partly because road signs appear to be optional. Having missed any number of turnings, Steve who was navigating (with an inadequate map and no

glasses to read it with) declared that we were going to go "Off Piste" which was fine until the road became almost a track and we found ourselves in an African refugee camp! Nevertheless we continued past this and duly arrived in the correct town. We parked the car and wandered off to find

the town centre and check about the festivities. The time was 7.00 pm and it was still broad daylight and the leaflet we had suggested that the fireworks would not begin until 11.00 pm.

We found the centre of the town and were amazed to find that the main square was full of huge (50 ft high) Catherine wheels of various shapes and sizes and that there were dozens of catering vans and all the usual traders that follow public events. We wandered through the centre and out to a main road beyond looking for a bar or cafe where we could sit down, have a drink and a bite to eat, but everywhere seemed closed except for the vans, until we happened upon a tiny bar that was cashing in on the expected crowds and had set up extra tables in the street and was offering take away food. We sat down at a spare table and ordered up beers and some food which quickly arrived.

The only slight catch at this stage was that there were huge mortars firing fireworks and thunder-flashes into the sky just upwind of us and the sound was truly deafening, almost painful and the effect was a little lost as it was still sunny! What we did not know was that we had a ringside seat

for the main aerial display and by the time we had our third or fourth round of drinks (Steve and me) the town was packed solid with people and darkness had fallen.

Around 9.45 pm the display started and although there were some notable highlights, the overall effect was not too wonderful as there seemed no pattern or urgency and so the event seemed to drag on a bit. By 11.30 pm it was still happening but we were quite cold from the strong wind that was still blowing hard, so we vacated our seats and headed back to the town centre and the host of massive Catherine wheels which were due to follow at some stage. We met two large brass bands that were parading slowly through the streets and when they finally finished playing competitive tunes we discovered that the main fireworks display was only just about to begin!

We had a great view from where we were now standing and the whole show, set to deafening music blasting from huge sets of speakers all around the town (never mind the fireworks themselves), was quite outstanding and the finale which went off seemingly almost overhead was the finest I have ever witnessed. There then was a delay whilst the crowds watching from various vantage points around the town made their way to the centre where we were. They then had to clear the crowd out of the main square where all these huge bits of machinery were placed, as a sop to H & S (to a mere 30 foot away and downwind, in the gale-like conditions!). Finally the last part of the display got under way around midnight and the Catherine wheels were unbelievable. Never mind ones that go round and round, these things did the most wondrous displays and were utterly incredible. Of course our photos were useless and do no justice to it all, but it is a memory we will hold for a long time.

Sunday morning started a bit early when an Italian motorboat moored up in the slot beside us and they were struggling to get lines ashore until we emerged to help. At 10.30 am Steve, Chris, Sarah and I set off again in the hire car to explore more of the island on what was to become something of a mystery tour and headed north first finally settling on Mellieha as a suitable spot for a late lunch. We visited any number of coves, bays and villages along the way and after lunch headed off southwards (this is a tiny island so it does not take long to cross) and chanced upon the old capital Mdina (yes this is the correct spelling!). What a wonderful place it is perched on a hill top and completely unspoilt in any way at all. It was certainly the highlight of a very good day out. We eventually found our way back to the marina and Sarah's day was finally crowned when she had a long skype call from Ewan who had just got home safely after 9 months away travelling.

The wind had died down a bit by the early evening but still the air reverberated to the sound of yet more fireworks in the area around us, but as it was still light there was nothing to see!

I can see clearly now

Monday 26th July, Tuesday 27th July and Wednesday 28th July.

Kurt, the Raymarine engineer came along in the morning and following extensive testing he was finally able to identify the problem with our radar which was a component in the main chart plotter. The question now was did they have a spare circuit board on the island and who exactly was going to pay for all this? I continued to exchange emails with Raymarine's head office whilst the local agent did likewise. The good news was that the unit that was needed was in stock and so the job was scheduled to be done on Tuesday.

In the evening Steve, Chris, Sarah and I went round to 'Apparition' for an evening of Mexican Train, but Sarah also took the opportunity to quiz Jackson and Rico all about the Caribbean and the East Coast of the USA about which they have extensive knowledge. She also managed to win the game hands down!

On Tuesday morning Raymarine came back to us with the very welcome news that they were prepared to cover the cost of repairing the radar under the warranty (£585 plus labour) and in due course Kurt appeared and dismantled the E 120 and replaced the main circuit board inside. The good news is that it all works fine now. The electrical charging issues have been solved for now by performing a factory reset (bit of a cop out by the engineer there) and so it all looks fine at the moment, but time again will tell and exactly the same is true of the problem with the E 80 display. It would be easy to suspect that after the flurry of initial works which were excellent, the rest of the solutions seem to be aimed at getting us to leave the island and get things sorted properly somewhere else!

No success either with tracking down the creaking sounds in the hull. One needs us to remove some ceiling panels so we can investigate when sailing next, however, for reasons best known to themselves, the builders at Najad chose to fix these three panels with a VERY strong adhesive instead of the usual clips that make it all so much easier. Hey Ho.

Still having to wait with fingers crossed to see if the new AIS transponder unit arrives from Sweden in time to be fitted before we leave. We still have the receive only unit of course, but that was playing up badly during the last trip and so it would be great to get all this sorted now.

Sarah and Chris set off in the afternoon for some retail therapy but came back with very little to show for their outing except natty new haircuts.

Wednesday started with the prompt arrival of the fuel truck for us and Scott Free. Very helpfully the truck had a hose long enough to reach all the way down the full length of the pontoon to reach Scott Free at the very end.

Sarah did pretty much a final food shop before we set off again and together we finally made it on a tour of all the chandlery shops to work our way through the list of bits and pieces we need. It has to be said that Malta really is a breath of fresh air after all the places we have been and it is wonderful to be able to find just about everything you need and all at quite competitive prices.

The really good news towards the end of the day was the sudden arrival of the AIS units at the dealer's office and so we now can be sure that we will have a new one installed either on Thursday or Friday morning before we leave on the next leg of our journey. And yes, Sarah does regard it as a very extravagant birthday present for Rob, although reports from Scott Free of ships calling them up on the VHF and offering to alter course to avoid them makes the price seem rather more reasonable!

Happy Birthday

Thursday 29th, Friday 30th and Saturday 31st July

OK so I like Malta. Actually I like Malta a lot and the longer we stay the more we are getting to enjoy the place, the people (well mostly) and the whole experience.

We are off now on Sunday, our delay being because of some adverse weather coming in across the Med from France, but we are hoping now for a window in the weather that will allow us to head for Sardinia and if the next wave of dodgy stuff comes though early we have the option of heading north in the seas between Sardinia and Italy which looks to be a bit calmer.

Thursday became a bit of a non day for us as our original plan had been to spend some time in Valletta but for various reasons this was put off until Friday, so the day seemed to just slide by with little of note happening until the evening when we were invited for dinner on good old Scott Free.

They had invited Rico and Jackson as well, but somehow their invitation never got read in time. We had a great evening although it all had to come to an end as I was finally unable to stay awake any longer! However during the day, Sarah did manage to solve the mystery of the lone elderly gent

who every evening could be seen wading in the shallows close to the marina wearing a snorkel mask. He spends hours bent double obviously rooting on the sea bed for something, which now turns out to be sea snails which are surprisingly large and for which he gets 30 euros each, presumably from a restaurant. The downside of his business is that he has got the most obviously extreme skin cancer all over his back as he wears no protection at all.

Friday was my birthday (58 would you believe) and the day started promptly with the arrival of Kurt who was installing the AIS. Sarah had also managed some real presents and so it was a very cheerful morning for us.

Scott Free had a less successful morning as Kurt went to deal with their autohelm problems once he had finished on Serafina and although he solved the problem with one of their three (yes three!) autopilots, he determined that the main unit had a fault that was a little harder to fix and needed

him to call Raymarine in the UK or else they were looking at some €1100 for a new circuit board. This of course was all information they would rather have had a few days ago rather than now with another weekend when no work gets done looming.

In the late afternoon we went for a trip into Valletta to explore the city and to enjoy along the way a ride on one of the island wonderful buses.

The national bus company here runs buses which are exclusively dated from 1950 to 1980 and it is nothing short of a living museum. All painted a garish yellow and orange with fantastic sign-writing (with weird and wonderful tag lines), they rip around the town, packed with passengers who seem to almost relish the lack of air conditioning, suspension or doors. How on earth they keep all these vehicles roadworthy, God only knows but they are such fun

and I know that when we have finished all our travels I would gladly return here to live out my time as one of their drivers (and yes they are all of Rob's era as a coach driver!!) The fares are presumably subsidised and for our trip we paid less than 49 cents (50p) each. Photos at www.rhbell.com

We wandered around Valletta which is a remarkable place and very attractive although not in a way that is easy to capture on film. Sarah and Chris both found plenty of interesting shops along the way and after an early evening drink we headed back towards the marina, but aimed to call in at the Royal Malta Yacht Club for my birthday dinner. The bus driver seemed to understand our request and promised to let us know when to get off, but in the event took no notice of us and it was not until we were most of the way back to the marina did it become obvious that he had either forgotten or misunderstood. Given that everyone here speaks good English we can assume charitably that he just forgot..... Anyway we walked back to the Yacht Club and discovered that its dining room also doubles up with the restaurant next door, which was fine and we enjoyed a hearty meal. I say hearty because we were all very full at the end, but especially Steve and me as we had to cope manfully with the most enormous full racks of ribs each!

I mentioned in an earlier posting from Malta that the national pastime at this time of the year is letting off fireworks, but we have also discovered more about this as well. Certainly every town or district has a feast or festival to celebrate at some stage and by all accounts each place also has its own resident pyromaniac who will make all the fireworks himself and there is stiff competition between the villages. This then involves plenty of testing and practice which sort of explains that almost constant crump of explosives throughout every day. As we approach the weekend, this intensifies and it becomes quite natural to hear these things booming out all day, but of course to very little effect in broad daylight, just endless balls of white smoke in the sky rather like anti aircraft fire.

Saturday was our last day here and so we spent the time preparing for the next leg of the trip. As I mentioned earlier the weather is not being too helpful and so we have had to make a few late alterations and plan for contingencies. Scott Free had another visit from Kurt who this time removed the electronics for the main autopilot to work on over the weekend. It is nice to know something is happening, however, like us they had rather planned to leave on Sunday morning, but in their case heading for Tunisia, so they may be here for a few more days yet. We invited them round for a farewell drink in the evening and said our temporary goodbyes, but we sort of expect to meet them again before too long, probably in Spain or Gibraltar as we are both headed for the Canaries in a similar time frame. We will however be trying to stay in touch using the SSB radio and there are two other sets of friends who have asked to join this informal net. They are Andy and Sara on Limbara (ex-Rally) who are currently heading up the Portuguese coast and Rico and Jackson on Apparition who are heading to the Caribbean at the same time as us.

Big fireworks night tonight as they seem to have been practising hard all day – but you will have to wait until we make Sardinia for a full report as we are signing off now just as they are getting going (It is now 10.30 pm), until next Wednesday, all being well. Should be a busy morning around

6.00 am as we are only one of a number of local boats all setting out at first light. They are all heading for Sicily, which is not far off our track too although we have some serious reefs to avoid in the channel between Sicily and Africa.

37:14.2N 12:55.7E

Sunday 1st August

On passage from Malta to Sardinia.

We left Valletta at 5.45 am just as it was getting light and made our way out of the extensive harbour into a fair swell left from yesterday's stronger winds. However to our surprise we met a fresh North easterly breeze which was just perfect for us and we made fast progress all the way up the coast of Malta before we were finally headed and then the wind dropped away pretty much altogether. But the good news continued when a few hours later the wind freshened up again, this time from the South West, so again we were able to make good speed for a while.

Dolphins appeared, but ignored us and we saw flying fish, but little else except lots and lots of big ships, but hopefully they could see us too now with the AIS transponder working away. Long hot day with little else to amuse us, so very grateful that Sarah had purchased our first newspaper in ages to bring along.

We had our first SSB radio net at 6.30 pm and this was a huge success with us able to chat with Apparition who are on their way to Tunisia and Scott free who are still in Malta. Really nice to be able to talk to folks whilst we are away at sea.

Hope to bounce this email off a phone mast on Sicily as we sail past!

38:18.10N 10:57.70E

Very cold and damp night last night with heavy cloud cover. Had to dig out waterproof jackets and warm clothes!

Today was hot and still. Very little wind although what we had was at least favourable and helped us on our way. The only downside was the strong tide running against us, sometimes up to a knot.

Good SSB radio not with Apparition and Scott Free. Great news is that Scott Free have had their main autopilot fixed by the resourceful Kurt and they will be on their way to Tunisia as soon as their weather improves, which they hope will be Thursday morning.

We should reach Sardinia around lunchtime on Tuesday (tomorrow!)

Oh Happy Days

39:12.09N 09:07.69E

Tuesday 3rd August

Arrived here in Cagliari in Southern Sardinia just after midday and made our way to the marina Di St Elmo where we had pre-booked a berth. This is August and the whole of Italy goes on holiday and so this is very much the peak season – and boy do the marina berthing charges reflect the concept of supply and demand. We were directed into the tightest of trots I have ever tried to get Serafina into and then had to reverse into a tiny slot with no room to swing. All jolly exciting but with nil wind blowing it all went well.

The trip here from Malta was pretty uneventful and served only to endorse the old adage that the ideal yacht for the Med should have a short mast and big engine as the wind either blows like hell or not at all. For the bulk of the 338 miles from Malta to Sardinia we had little or no wind at all. What wind we did have was very helpfully on the beam and it allowed us to motor sail at a steady 5.5 to 6 knots with the engine on very low revs. So why did we motor sail? Well, we had a weather window which gave us three days to make the trip before a big storm was due to blast out of the Gulf of Lyon across to Sardinia and then on down past Sicily and through to Malta (which is what has now kept poor Scott Free in harbour for a few more days). The timing was just about bang on and only a few hours after we had arrived the rigging all around began to whistle as the wind picked up and by the time we strolled into Cagliari itself it was causing all sorts of mayhem in the town as restaurants began to lose their destroyed parasols. Wildlife in short supply along the way although we were joined by some enthusiastic dolphins for a while on Monday which was fun. Two more appeared around midnight during my watch about they did not stay too long. I expect that we get these visitors more often than we realise at night, but because the sea was an incredible glassy calm that night it was not hard in the bright moonlight to spot them leaping from the sea and flashing at speed just beneath the surface as they cross under our bows before leaping again on the far side and then repeating the exercise. Quite magical.

First impressions of Cagliari are very favourable indeed and our first contact with the locals beyond the marina was as usual dealing with the traffic. Gosh what a difference it makes heading back into the western world and not only was the heavy traffic calm and well controlled, but also very considerate. There are zebra crossings every 50 yards it seems and all vehicles unfailingly pull up if you so much as look like you might like to cross the road. And this is Italy! No aggressive taxi drivers hooting to see if you want a lift and well ordered neat parking. (well there are exceptions everywhere!) The pedestrian crossing lights on dual carriageways do not require you to wait on a centre reservation, but simply halt all traffic in both directions and stay on red to give the slowest invalid plenty of time to cross. All very civilised.

Then there are the shops..... Sarah left me briefly in the internet cafe and swiftly found all manner of wondrous places and she is clearly not too bothered how long the stronger winds keep us here. The Lonely Planet Guide (what we do without this brilliant series?) directed us

to Isola del Gelato which is the most fabulous ice cream shop claiming a boggling 280 varieties. Well they did not have all 280 on display but the array was fantastic and so diverse that it took 20 minutes simply to whittle the choices down to possible. I do think that Sarah was about to ask if they did accommodation as well! We then made our way to a large supermarket that the marina had recommended and it was quite remarkable to watch Sarah as she wandered almost spellbound around the huge and comprehensive shop floor. She announced later that she had never seen anywhere quite like this before and it was clearly a reflection of the affluence of the inhabitants of the island. Despite being on foot and a long way from the boat, she was unable to resist buying some items there and then and so we did not get back to Serafina until nearly 8 pm and after three days at sea as well we were both ready for an early night despite the live music blaring out from the nearby football stadium.

Sarah was also finally able to relax properly after she spoke to Ewan on the phone as he confirmed that having come home last week after 9 months travelling he had been to see the employment agency that had found him jobs last year only for them to offer him a full time job working for them in his chosen field of recruitment. Happy days.

Pretty Woman

Wednesday 4th , Thursday 5th and Friday 6th August.

Well you have to hand it to the Italians, they do have style. Over the past weeks we have sailed from the dusty, rather hostile middle east, via Malta which was a blessed relief, but caught in something of a time warp based around the 1960s, to Sardinia which although it likes to consider itself fairly independent of Italy, fairly oozes everything Italian.

The second biggest island in the Med after Sicily, Sardinia has long been something of an enigma and only comparatively recently has begun to reinvent itself as a tourist destination. Cagliari where we are currently moored was heavily bombed by the Allies during WWII, but despite everything thrown at it over the years by successive invaders from the Phoenicians onwards, including the Carthaginians, Romans and the Spanish, it has retained its charm and the wide open Spanish boulevards along the front give it some style whilst the medieval town in the centre has been largely protected.

Despite the clear blue skies, the strong wind has been quite definitely cold and even on the passage here from Malta we found ourselves putting on warm clothes each night. The marina is on the edge of the town and is a long walk or a reasonable bike ride away, but following our trip in on the first evening, it did not take Sarah long to plan a return visit, however it was not until Thursday that she was able to take a break from restoring Serafina's topsides to their former glory and spend some time exploring the shops.

So Wednesday was spent washing down the decks and generally breathing new life into the boat, whilst also catching up on emails and the like. In the evening we sat down to watch the film 'Lawrence of Arabia' which was all the better now that we know so much more about the geography of the area and had visited the desert at Wadi Rum. The only downside was

that it turned out that the file we had been given only had the first half of the film and so we now have to wait until we meet up with a yacht that has the second half!

On Thursday, as I said, Sarah interrupted her polishing to spend some time visiting the shops and although she had a good time, she only made a very modest purchase in the sales. The wind kept up a fairly constant howling through all the masts in the marina, but there was always the Italian women to admire. Not quite sure how they manage to always look so cool, but even the children seem to practise putting a swing into their walking! Sarah very miffed that the men seem universally to be fat and middle aged. I cycled into town in the late afternoon to get to the internet cafe and came across police blocking the main thoroughfare. As I progressed further I came across a very noisy and colourful parade which involved loads of young and pretty protesters (yes mostly girls) sitting in the road blocking it, blowing whistles and sounding gas powered horns and generally making a commotion. They were being observed by bored looking police and riot police who appeared to be simply waiting for the moment when they would be told to sweep this lot out of the way and restore order. I discovered that they were protesting against the fact that they were all due to lose their jobs and they were outside the local government offices responsible. It was serious in its purpose, but Arthur Scargill and the miners it wasn't.

Another cool evening – hope that this is just the effect of the cold front (described in one weather forecast as a severe cold front!) sweeping over this part of the Med. We are more than a little fascinated by the aquatic life in the marina. We met two dolphins in the filthy harbour, just outside the marina pontoons on our way in which seemed strange, however around and under the boats here we have loads of very lively and quite large fish that spend all day and all night thrashing around on or near the surface. The first night here I honestly thought that someone had fallen in and was silently struggling to get out.

On Friday we had to get ready again to depart, heading hopefully for one of the bays fairly nearby to spend a few nights at anchor for a change. Only possible problem is that it will be a weekend and that is what just about every local boat owner seeks to do as well. Sarah went off in the morning to explore the old town further and take some photos. She reported that it was very picturesque, but not necessarily very photogenic with a very large piazza at the top of the town (sadly covered in graffiti) surrounded by incredibly narrow streets with many floored houses covered in vegetation and washing. From the top she could see a huge swirling cloud across the salt pans but couldn't make out if it was dust, salt or water – and sadly not a sign of a pink flamingo. In the afternoon it was time for a big shop to prepare for possibly up to a week away from shops.

The wind was still blowing hard as we went to bed, but we are confident in the forecast for lighter winds in the morning.

It' s only Rock and Roll

38:55.71N 08:43.25E

Saturday 7th August

Up at 7am this morning to make an early start on the trip round to Porto Teulada as we understand this is likely to be a popular spot over the weekend with local boats. Firstly though we had to make our way over to the fuel station on the far side of the large harbour but just as we arrived and made our cautious approach to the quay, a small speedboat came flashing past and swept in to dock ahead of us. To our delight and surprise the nice man running the fuel berth simply waved the boat away and pointed to us. The driver of the speedboat looked at us and signalled to ask if we were going in for fuel.... we have no idea what else he thought we could possibly be doing there... and ungraciously pulled out of our way and had to wait. The fuel dock here was very clean and tidy which is by no means the case everywhere we have been and the guy was very helpful and polite.

We were soon on our way again but there was no wind at all and so we motored gently out of the harbour and set a course round the headlands heading south and west. Around midday we reached the Capo Spartivento which where we met the seas that were still pretty heavy from the last 4 days of gales. Nothing very dramatic but it slowed us up. An hour later the wind swung round 180 degrees and went from almost nothing to 25 knots and of course was bang on the nose again! We ploughed our way through the seas slowly before being able to bear away into the large bay which has Porto Teulada at the head.

There is a harbour here which is something of a local enigma as there is some confusion as to why it was ever constructed. It is miles from any town and originally built by the government possibly to house military vessels using the adjacent prohibited area for military exercises, but local fishermen claim it was built for them! Either way it has now been developed to become a Porto Turistico and has some pontoons and is being developed now as more of a marina but despite the wind still blowing at 20+ knots we opted to drop anchor in the bay outside which has clear blue water over a sandy bottom. The anchor set first time and we so we sat back enjoying being back at anchor for the first time in just over 3 months. I dived in to take a good look at the prop which has grown a good covering of barnacles, prop-shaft, anodes and the hull which we have not seen properly for the 3 months and found that the water up at this end of the Med is bloody cold! I also checked the anchor and after spending a short time brushing the waterline clean, I got out for a hot shower to warm back up.

We watched dozens of boats arriving during the afternoon and the marina quickly began to fill up and we noticed quite a bit of activity on the quayside and realised that they were setting up some sort of event for the evening, so after the 6.40 pm radio net with Scott Free on the SSB radio (which was not a success as we struggled to hear them, although they seemed to be able to hear us OK) we launched Doris the dinghy and made our way into the harbour. It seems that this was the final event in a day-long religious festival giving thanks for the fishing and fishermen and we found loads of stalls had been set up selling all manner of things. There was a religious service being conducted outside the marina office and so we took the opportunity to potter round the empty stalls to see what was on offer. We then made our way down to the visitors pontoon and sought out the Spanish flagged Najad 490 that had sailed in late in the afternoon. Sadly none of them had a word of English and we were reduced to using French again. This was not really going too well, when the crew and owner of a Contest 50 that we had seen two days earlier in Cagliari stepped off their boat behind us and we gratefully fell into a conversation with them in English. We then set off back to Serafina, but not before we had spotted a stage, set up with a large drum kit and lots of speakers so we knew we might be in for a late night.

As we got back on board, the entire fishing fleet came out of the harbour with all the boats crowded with people, presumably off to conduct a service at sea to bless the fishing grounds. They were all blowing their horns and several were dangerously overcrowded, but it all appeared to go off OK and they came back about half an hour later, just as darkness fell.

It was at 10.30 pm that the band struck up and to my delight it was British Rock and roll band (no idea of their name as we could hear them perfectly well without going back ashore!) who played some wonderful tracks that I have not heard in years.

Baby its cold outside

39:12.05N 08:22.85E

Sunday 9th and Monday 10th August

It has sort of been creeping up on us ever since we left Malta, but for sure the evenings and nights are colder. In fact by the second night during the passage to Sardinia, Sarah was doing her watch wearing jeans, several t-shirts and a fleece along with a fleece hat. At night at anchor we have had to break out the blankets again all of which is a little disconcerting in August. I mentioned this on Sunday night during the SSB radio net with Scott Free and Apparition (hooray, we could just hear them both at last, although they could both hear us loud and clear.) and Chris said that they were having the same experience so it must just be a blip in the weather pattern surely!

On Sunday the day started with a mass exodus from the nearby marina as almost all the boats streamed out frantic to get a good spot in one of the nearby bays we assume. Soon our anchorage emptied as well and by lunchtime we had the whole bay to ourselves. Should really have been a very casual day, but Sarah has difficulty sitting still when there is so much boat to keep looking beautiful and so she spent far too much time polishing. This included the wind turbine mounting and I did take a photo of her up there which will appear at www.rhbell.com just as soon as we can find some wifi.

We both had a swim, but rather more because it was a rare opportunity than because the water was inviting. It certainly was crystal clear and a beautiful blue, but it was also pretty bloody cold – well we thought it was. It also gave us an opportunity of scrubbing off a very unpleasant line of dirt and algae that had developed only during our stay in Cagliari!

The forecast for Tuesday was a bit of a blow from the south which was not too clever in this bay so we made an early start and went round to Portoscuso which was a straightforward trip but did involve coming through the San Pietro channel which is a large expanse of water between Sardinia and the small Island of San Pietro that looks very inviting but rather like the east coast of the UK, it is VERY shallow. Of course the comparison finishes there, because here you can admire the bottom as you skim over it at 6 knots!

We made a cautious approach to the marina at Portoscuso as the charted depths were a bit borderline for us, but we got through the entrance OK but there was no sign of a mariner nor could we raise anyone on the phone or radio. We had made a reservation so we were fairly

confident.... Anyway two helpful lads waved us over to an empty pontoon and we tied up alongside whilst they shouted for the marinero (who is also the one man office here) and he finally appeared wearing a yellow towel wrapped loosely around his ample waist and he cheerfully said that we were fine where we were. We were given to understand that this marina was a cheaper option as there are few facilities here and there is very little room for yachts our size. Mostly it is taken up with motor boats, ribs and just a few quite small yachts. However this is Sardinia in August and once again we were more than a little rocked by the cost of a night here. We wandered into the town to take a look round, find an internet cafe and supermarket and generally check the place out to see if it would be a suitable jumping off point next Saturday when we head for Cartagena in Spain, a mere 500 miles away.

Sadly we found almost nothing here at all. The only internet spot had long since packed in and everywhere else we enquired were quite clear that they did not have internet access. This of course is a moot point, because of course they do have internet access (I have a hand held gauge that tells me exactly what they have) but this is Italy and the rules are quite strict and it seems easier for them to just say no than make any effort to help you. We did finally locate the supermarket which Sarah is planning to check out on Tuesday morning and we were pleased to see that the travelling fairground that rather overlooked our mooring, was packing up and moving on.

Just after we tied up here though, a 50ft Sweden yacht pulled into the berth next to us and this was one of the yachts that had been anchored in the bay with us the other day. The Italian owner came across for a chat and to say what a beautiful yacht Serafina was (they know how to make Sarah happy!) and explained that he used to have a Najad 331 and had traded up now to his current 50 foot Sweden Yacht. He spoke excellent English, but sadly was rushing off with his girlfriend as they had hired a car to join a party and were leaving the boat here for a day or two.

In the evening Sarah and I went out for a meal and found a very nice restaurant which did us very proud indeed, with Sarah proclaiming that her mussels were the very best she had had for a very long time although the amount of garlic involved was a little extreme! The town was a little busier when we had finished our meal and we paused to watch a volleyball league match being played out on the promenade before making our way back to Serafina.

These Boots were made for walking

39:05.83N 08:17.93E

Tuesday 10th, Wednesday 11th and Thursday 12th August.

English translations have always been a source of amusement along the way and today Sarah found a sign on the marina's toilet (notice the use of the single tense) which said "Please use delicately".

On Tuesday Sarah went off to visit the market and then the supermarket both of which turned out to be pretty good. We gave the hull a good scrub before setting off under sail for a bay on the southern end of San Pietro Island which looked to be well protected.

Not surprisingly this like all the other bays was pretty over-subscribed with yachts, motor boats and ribs but we got ourselves tucked in and waited to see who left at the end of the day. Eventually boats began to leave and there were just three left in our small bay, but we had our eye on a spot in the adjacent bay which looked a good deal more protected, but there were lots of boats still there until quite late. In the end we stayed where we were but resolved to get up early in the morning and move to the other bay if there was still a suitable spot.

There is very little here really, but there is a sandy beach in the main bay which is very popular by day with land based visitors but no shops or other facilities. A big Customs rib made several visits to the bay and each time seemed to pull up people who had taken their dinghies close to the shore. We are aware of a rule in Italy about mooring too close to the shore, but can find nothing that explains what is happening here.

On Wednesday morning we got up at 7.15 am and raised the anchor and motored round to the perfect spot in the next door bay as planned. We dropped the anchor pretty much exactly where we wanted and sat back to enjoy all the fun as the hordes arrived during the day. However at 10.30 am just as the boats all started arriving, the Customs boat returned and approached us and explained that we were not allowed to moor within 200 metres of the beach. Now this was an interesting and debatable point as our anchor was most certainly 200 metres off shore, but the wind had dropped and we were lying on the beach side of it (in fact in such clear water we could see we were hanging directly above our anchor!), so clearly we were in the wrong. If only the usual breeze had picked up a bit earlier or the Customs boat had come later, all would have been well but as it was we had to move and re-anchor just behind the boats that had arrived. During the next few hours over 70 more boats came and dropped their anchors which made for a very busy and packed space. But there was little wind and so the fact that most of these boats had anchors that barely reached the sea bed did not seem to matter and everyone seemed happy enough. The Customs boat returned a few times and it became clear that the rule is about mooring 200 metres off the beach, not the shore. There is a big difference! So we resolved now to move again once the visiting boats had all gone home to a peaceful looking spot next to an American boat and close to the rocky west shoreline, tucked back into the bay in case the wind came up over the next two days.

In due course all the boats left and at 6.00 pm we moved back closer to the shore and hope that this time we are OK! Certainly there has been plenty to watch all day with the coming and goings as well as some very nice yachts to admire. Sarah went ashore for an investigative stroll as she is hoping to do a brief shopping trip on Thursday to Carloforte which is the main town on the island, prior to our setting off to Spain on Saturday.

Thursday morning I rowed Sarah ashore at 9.00 am, she had finally decided that although the bike ride in would be a doddle, trying to get back across the large expanse of rocks with the bike and shopping tucked under her arm on her return was a bit beyond her. As all available information (ie the rather gormless car park attendant) indicated that the bus didn't depart until 11.30am she decided to walk into town about 2 ½ miles away according to the chart plotter and as the crow flies. This proved to be an brisk walk of one and a quarter hours along a pretty busy road with no shade, and to add insult to injury, the 9.30 bus passed Sarah

about 20 minutes into her walk – well, it seemed a good idea at the time! This exercise was all in aid of saving yet another very expensive stay in the poorly equipped marina at Portoscuso, without even the justification of wifi; to get a few groceries for the next passage and try and sort out the phone card we had bought. We had bought the card to ring the boys at home but had failed to get it to work, so Sarah found the main post office (inevitably out of town) to find out what we were doing wrong and to ring and book a berth in Cartegena (Spain) for next week. She was advised to put more credit on the card and try again – but again to no avail. We feel that communications of any kind from Sardinia are fairly impossible.

Carloforte proved to be a delight: a very pretty rambling town with multi-coloured houses, even the lime green ones, for once, seemed to merge into the colour scheme. It also had a bustling harbour with six different pontoons possibly offering berths but all looked very busy and this was despite the fact the majority of the boats must have already left for the extensive bay hopping that goes on here. The ferries were constantly arriving and departing – no wonder Rod H warns against the ferry surge here – with whistle blowing policemen managing the traffic after a fashion. Just south of the town and set slightly farther back from the sea were further salt pans which profess to accommodate flamingos – again none were in evidence today (so, no pretty flamingo titles yet!) Sarah got the grocery shopping done and went to catch the bus. It seems that no one in Carloforte speaks any English (nor were there any English papers but as throughout the Med, they stock English Vogue and magazines like Hello) but it was indicated to her where the bus left and that she would need a ticket from the next-door Tabac, who it turned out didn't sell any but said you could pay on the bus! When the bus did arrive the driver told Sarah and two others they would need a ticket from the another Tabac which he helpfully pointed out, but this one also professed not to sell them. Finally running down the main street they found a third Tabac where a good row ensued (the other two passengers were Italian so language was not the issue here) before the owner agreed to sell them tickets and they all three made the bus before it left, in fact it was remarkable that it waited for them throughout this fiasco. Then to end a fairly fruitless trip, as Sarah got off the bus the heavens opened and she got soaked, as did her trusty boatman!

The day stayed distinctly overcast and cool. Much to my dismay, as there were certainly a few candidates moored rather too near the beach like us the previous day, the Coastguard's didn't put in appearance either – perhaps the rain is too much for their very smart uniforms as their rib is open to the elements? We spent much of the day with Serafina drifting back and forth over her own anchor and watching the fish in the very still sea, eventually we went for a swim in the evening which became a lovely warm, sunny few hours. After dark I tried my hand briefly at attempting to catch squid, but sadly with no success.

My old man's a dustman

Friday 13th August

So today we woke to find just 4 neighbours and within an hour that was reduced to three when the nearest boat to us, an American yacht called Horizons raised his anchor and set off

for a bay over on Sardinia itself, looking for a decent internet connection. As it turns out he returned around 7.00 pm and anchored fairly close to us, but not near enough for a conversation and since I had now put the dinghy away ready for our trip we could not pop over for a chat to find out what had changed!

Strange day from the weather point of view and although warm enough, it remained overcast for quite a lot of the day and the wind gradually increased throughout the day. This created a moment of drama when a big motor boat which kept coming back each day and mooring next to us, began to drag his anchor. We shouted to try to get their attention and eventually a maid appeared who clearly had no English but recognised the urgency in my voice! She summoned the owners and it was one of the girls on board who reacted the quickest with a big fender whilst the man made his way up to the flying bridge and finally drove them clear without any damage done. They then spent the next hour anchoring and re-anchoring in much the same spot trying to get their small and rather inadequate Danforth anchor to hold them in the weed.

Today rather dragged as we prepare to set off tomorrow morning for Spain. Lots of little jobs done plus a dinghy run ashore so I could take all our rubbish up to the bins set back about 100 metres behind the beach, all of which helped to pass the time, but all in all we are about ready to move on again.

Raindrops keep falling on my head

37:35.78N 00:59.10W

Sat 14th August to Tuesday 17th August, passage from Sardinia to Cartagena, Spain.

We woke up on Saturday to the very unfamiliar sound of raindrops falling on the deck. Actually it was hosing down for a short while and the wind was blowing in from the seaward side so the bay was a very lumpy, bumpy, cold, wet and rather inhospitable place to be. There were only a handful of boats there with us and the first to leave was a very pretty 35 ft English yacht which had a pretty torrid time trying to recover their anchor whilst their bows kept plunging into each oncoming wave.

Our plan was to leave around 2.00 pm but as usual I had potted about and got everything ready too early and was keen to be off, so we left around midday assuming that this wind was very favourable for our trip. Of course things never quite work out like that when you are sailing and no sooner were we off the southern point of the island than we found ourselves headed by the fickle wind and were now close hauled and tacking well south of our chosen route. Several tacks and two hours later the wind began to veer nicely and by 2.30 pm we were on a fast reach with the cutter rig set, making 7 knots in just 9 knots of true wind and all was well. (It also gave Sarah her opportunity to point out more than once that if we had waited.....etc.)

This was also the precise moment that we clocked our 10,000th mile since leaving Sweden in June 2007 which was probably more deserving of a drink of fizzy rather than the cup of coffee that we actually had to celebrate.

At dusk the wind began to drop away and the direction backed making it harder and harder to hold the course we wanted. There was only 1 hour of a quarter moon and then it was very dark indeed, until around 11.00 pm when the night sky over Africa to the south of us was lit almost continuously by a huge and unremitting electrical storm. No sound of thunder where we were, but constant lightning flashes spread along almost half the horizon. Neither of us much enjoy these events and we were grateful to be speeding our way parallel and away from the presumed track of the storm. By 3.00 am Sunday morning the lightening was reducing, to be replaced by a thrilling display of shooting stars and stunning phosphorescence lighting up our wake as we continued to surge through the calm seas.

Around 8.00 am I started fishing and during the course of the day tried various different options and was beginning to get a little nervous that we might be going to fail today when around 3.00 pm the reel started to scream and sure enough we soon had another 3 kilo tuna in the fridge. We rigged the twins ready for the forecast downwind run, but it never happened and we were left on a broad reach with a growing uncomfortable swell and little real wind to drive us on so we motored for a while and were grateful when in the early evening the wind began to fill in and we could kill the engine for a peaceful sail again.

During the night though the seas began to build from a blow elsewhere and began to make our ride very uncomfortable, added to which the boom would swing to windward as the boat rolled in the waves and then crash back out as the wind filled the sail again. By the early hours we had to put a stop to all this and were back motor sailing with the mainsail pulled in tight. This became very tedious and by morning the seas were really quite big and very steep, so as they swept up behind us and loomed over our stern rail you really sometimes wondered if they might not just sweep straight over the top of Serafina, but of course each and every time they passed under us and allowed us to semi surf down their fronts.

Eventually the wind veered enough for us to set the twins in the full downwind mode and Serafina fairly flew along in a perfect rehearsal for the Atlantic, we hope! The wind rose above 20 knots but with a few rolls of the furlex everything remained fully under control. Sadly by the evening normal service was resumed and to keep our course we had to drop the downwind rig and set for a broad reach, but again we had the nightmare of the mainsail not having enough wind to hold it against the roll of the boat in the waves, so again it had to be sheeted in to protect the sail, the fittings and our nerves! We had only 12 knots of wind through the night but the seas did not seem to ease much and so we had another uncomfortable night and awoke to a very cloudy morning sky and a forecast that seemed to hint at the possibility of more rain, but little wind. At 11.00 am we re-crossed the meridian (the north south line of zero Longitude that passes through Greenwich)

Tried a bit more fishing and got very excited by a big strike in the early afternoon, but by the time we had slowed the boat etc. whatever it was had escaped without being hooked which was a shame and the only consolation was a bullet tuna that we caught as we prepared to make our approach to Cartagena.

Made our way into the large naval base and commercial port that is Cartagena and approached the Club Regatta Marina with the faint pitter patter of rain again briefly. Very rarely since we left the UK have we been back to any individual port as our journey has been remorselessly outward bound and then this summer we have headed back through the Med on a different route from the Middle East, so Cartagena is a first in that respect. We called in here in 2008 for a few days and were very taken with the place and of course this was where we encountered the marinera dressed and looking remarkably like Laura Croft, not that influenced our decision to come here in any way.....

It was 7.00 pm and the night duty marinero (actually they call them the 'sailor' now) was on call but his lack of any English, our lack of Spanish (I am now so befuddled by all the languages we have encountered over the past three months that I can barely utter anything intelligible) and his confusion in his own mind as to how he wanted to moor us up, led to a difficult 30 minutes before we were tied up safely and ready for a cold drink.

The SSB radio net that we conducted just as we made our approach to the harbour revealed that Apparition are on their way here from Mahon and hope to be here in two days, but neither of us has been able to raise Scott Free who could be here later today if they have stuck to their plans.

Circus

Wed 18th , Thurs 19th and Friday 20th Aug

Well Cartagena certainly has changed since we were here just two years ago. Then it was very much work in progress with some very smart areas and some very grotty parts, but an apparent determination to shake of its industrial and grimy past and try to take a share in the lucrative tourism and yachting markets. There is still a big naval base here, but the shipyards are clearly taking in other work now.

The town is just wonderful and all the rebuilding work is tasteful and on a very grand scale. It is very hard to visualise that this place was very heavily bombed during their civil war and has suffered neglect and decay almost ever since. The first and most obvious sign of the intent here is the frantic construction work down on the waterfront where they are effectively doubling the length of the Cruise ship terminal quay. But the whole of the towns extensive waterfront has been done very well with huge open spaces and imaginative planting and sculptures etc (Sarah is particularly taken by a huge male nude and the whale tail emerging from the harbour – photos may follow if I can get her out there!).

The Club Regatas Yacht Club Marina is a little basic with a lot of swell from tugs and other vessels to contend with, but as compensation they have a first class club house with a superb swimming pool, bar and restaurant for visitors to use. The town has pretty much everything somewhere (which is a bit of a problem as directions can be hard to get) including an 'Él Corte Ingles' which is the nearest thing to John Lewis out here. Sarah spent the majority of a day there whilst it rained doing some serious shopping (not the retail therapy she might like as it involved a new Hoover, boxes for storage in the bilge etc) and then had to persuade a

very surprised taxi driver parked outside that she would like him to drive back into the store to collect her purchases from customer services, not as straightforward as you might think in pigeon English!

BUT, having arrived here and settled in, we noticed that there was a lot of feverish work going on all around the waterfront area with dozens of containers, big fenced off areas and even a two storey temporary building being erected. Then a sound stage and other developments and we were soon to discover that on Saturday the circus comes to town. Not the sort of circus you all might expect but the America's Cup sort of circus. Actually it is called the Med Cup but it is contested by most of the America's Cup teams in special yachts and used by them to train teams and develop new ideas. Sponsored by Audi, this event is a huge travelling circus with lots of the big name skippers taking part. The last stage was up in Barcelona last week and Cartagena is host this week with the racing kicking off on 24th August. By Thursday things were beginning to take shape and then one by one the yachts started arriving, brought down by delivery crews and took their places along the main town quay, lined up stern to the prom so everyone can stroll along and view them. By Friday the place was humming and the sponsor became rather more obvious with the strategic placing of over 30 brand new Audis of all shapes and sizes around and about the big waterfront area. (It did strike me that if you owned an Audi, it would be very easy to find a free parking space this weekend!) Of course this jamboree has a downside and whilst we were sort of congratulating ourselves on having literally a ringside seat for all this, (the yachts are moored only metres away from us) we discovered on Thursday night that they like to party. Long and hard! So the bar overlooking the marina blasted out music until 6.30 am when the drinking games took over. This though turned out just to be a practice run for Friday night which was louder and I suspect that we, like most other visiting yachts will be gone by Sunday! And there is still the very big stage being constructed.....

Anyway, we spent the past few days getting things done as ever and wondering quite where all the time goes. Scott Free suddenly appeared on Thursday morning which was a nice surprise. They also has a surprise as they approached the big harbour when a submarine surface immediately behind them! They had had a pretty good trip from Tunisia, apart from several huge electrical storms and a lot of rain, but had been very upset not to hear us, or Apparition at all during the SSB radio net that we have. We too had been disappointed not to be able to speak to them and they had to confess that they had completely forgotten that Tunisia is on UT plus one hour and of course we are running on European time which is UT plus 2, so they had been sat there calling us at the wrong time of day!

Me and my shadow

36:41.78N 02:47.41W

Saturday 21st August & Sunday 22nd August

Well after a long and sleepless night on Friday night, we then discovered that the weather on Monday and Tuesday was turning against us and seriously affected our plan to move onto Almerimar early in the week. The end result was that we went off in the morning with Steve

and Chris from Scott Free to visit the excellent naval museum in town after which Sarah and Chris went for a shopping expedition to El Corte Ingles whilst Steve and I returned to the marina. Around 3.00 pm both boats set off on the 120 mile trip heading south and west along the Spanish coast enjoying a very favourable 18 knot wind from the east. We soon had our cutter rig set and were slipping along at 7 knots in a fairly flat sea and enjoyed a very fast ride for several hours. Gradually the wind began to drop away and backed towards the north which slowed us up and introduced an uncomfortable swell.

At 7.00 pm we were visited for the first time in our travels by a pod of Long Finned Pilot Whales. They came up to us at speed and spent a short time almost inspecting Serafina before moving off eastwards towards Scott Free who were around 3 miles behind us. In fact they followed us closely the whole way and since we both have AIS transponders it is possible to watch and know each other's every move. The trouble is that you soon become a bit competitive about the sailing speed as we know each other's speed over the ground and so tweaking the sails to keep the speed up becomes rather compulsive. They were just 2.2 miles behind us at one stage but this ended up at 4 miles before the wind finally died.

We managed to keep sailing at a reasonable pace until around midnight when finally the wind dropped to barely 4 knots and had backed to the point where it was directly behind us, which caused the boat to roll heavily and was not enough to keep the sails pulling despite lashing the boom out to the gunwhale. So we were reduced to using the engine again through the rest of the night, which remained very warm and beautifully moonlit throughout.

The shipping lanes alongside our track were very busy and inevitably we came across a fair selection of interestingly lit fishing boats and some other strange boat movements, which remained fairly suspicious... Dawn brought clear blue skies and sweltering heat, but no wind and we ended up motoring all the rest of the way to Almerimar which we reached around 3.00 pm. However at 9.00 am we were visited by a large group of dolphins of mixed types, but mostly the Common Bottlenose. What was remarkable about this pod was that they behaved quite unusually with the smaller dolphins holding their heads under water and beating the surface of the sea rapidly and violently with their tail fins. This we understand is usually a tactic used to drive prey along into a waiting trap, but in this case it seemed almost aggressive and directed at us. They did not stay long and the photos at www.rhbell.com do not do them justice.

We were very disappointed to have left Cartagena so early and to have missed the opportunities to explore it further and enjoy more of what it had to offer, but frankly the Med Cup party had taken over and it was clear from talking to the locals that things were about to get a lot worse over the next few days as the event built up to the actual racing. I think that we would have felt compelled to move on even if the weather hadn't made the decision much easier.

Night Love

36:21.31N 05:13.76W

Monday 23rd, Tuesday 24th, Wednesday 25th and Thursday 26th August.

On Monday morning Steve and I went to the local boatyard in the marina complex at Almerimar to see about getting a few of our outstanding jobs done here.

We have a leaking rudder post and this requires the lip seal to be changed which is not a big job, but I had rather assumed that the boat needed to be craned out for the work to be done. The catch here was that they would not know if they had a replacement seal in stock until they took out the old one and then we might be stuck here (out of the water) for a week whilst they tried to order one. So we called the job off and have since discovered that we can get the seal ourselves and that the job does not require the boat to be taken out of the water after all!

We did however discover the local marine electrical engineer 'Marco' who has done some very good work for both us and Scott Free, so our visit here was not totally wasted.

Almerimar must have been a very exciting marina project when it was first built, with many mooring basins all surrounded by blocks of accommodation, retail units and restaurants. Sadly it never took off and large sections are empty and others rather run down. The basins are not full of boats either and a good many of the ones here have seen better days. Very helpful people though and I must say a particular thanks to Mary McKnight who is the Cruising association's HLR and who went out of her way to help us with information and advice.

On Wednesday we bid farewell and around midday set off on the 120 mile trip heading for La Duquesa which is very close to Gibraltar, where we are meeting up with some old friends Leigh and Gillian who just happen to be out here on holiday this week. We left with a good wind blowing the right way and a very promising forecast and were soon slipping along at 5 to 6 knots. Sadly this was not to continue and within two hours the wind had died and we were reduced to motoring again – the whole way which was just short of 24 hours!

The sea at least remained flat and we enjoyed a very bright well lit night with a full moon high in the sky all night long. There was a strong counter current running for most of the time, but we were in no hurry having timed the trip so that we would arrive late morning at La Duquesa.

Sarah had a very eventful evening watch leading up to 11.00 pm as we were visited by up to 12 dolphins who played alongside Serafina for nearly 40 minutes. She did however miss the great photo opportunity as she had just finished photographing the setting sun and put the lens cap back on the camera, when a dolphin leapt majestically into the air with the sunset as the near perfect backdrop. (Sounds a bit like the fish that got away...)

The night air was very cold and damp and we both had to wrap a bit for our watches and even made ourselves mugs of hot chocolate! But following a patch of fog, the morning dawned clear and hot and the day went on to be very hot and still.

La Duquesa is a nice little marina, but it has a VERY shallow entrance. We had called ahead to confirm that we would be OK drawing 2.2 metres and were assured that the sand bar

across the entrance was 3 metres at least. Well that might well be the case, however this close to Gibraltar we are back in a tidal situation, along with very high pressure and a full moon all of which combined to lower the water level by around a metre meaning that we scraped over the bottom with 0 showing on our depth gauge. Once inside the mole, all was well and we found that the place was far from full and that we were probably the largest yacht here – no surprise there now!

The marina is also surrounded by developments here, but at least the place is buzzing but rather more along the lines of Bognor Regis and Margate than we had hoped. Plethora of 'English' pubs and bars and more Chinese restaurants than Spanish ones. Good facilities and excellent WiFi are definite bonuses, so our two night stay here should be OK.

Water Water

36:08.15N 05:21.37W

Friday 27th, Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th August

On Friday morning Leigh and Gill came over from their borrowed villa for a sail and to stay the night. The theme for the day was undoubtedly water and the general lack of it!

The water had been turned off to their villa several days earlier and despite various promises they still had none when they left to visit us and they were hoping that all would be well when they returned as they had the place to clean up etc. before they flew home on Monday. We also had a water issue, but ours concerned the height of water (or rather the lack of it) over the entrance bar to the marina. We had made a note of the level when we arrived in our berth yesterday and given that we had only just made it over the bar, clearly there was no point in us trying to leave the marina until we got a higher reading at our berth this morning.

Eventually the level crept up to the right number and we cast off and motored out into a silky smooth sea and absolutely nil wind. We motored up the coast to Sotogrande where we inspected a 280ft long super yacht which was at anchor off the town. We decided not to bother with going inshore to anchor for a swim and simply swam off the back of Serafina as she drifted on the slight tide. I took this opportunity to investigate the knocking noise that we were getting now when the prop was turning and found that the bolt holding part of the Spurs Rope Cutter had come undown and was about to fall off! It took three or four dives before I got it firmly screwed up tight again using an Allen key. After lunch we made our way slowly back to La Duquesa managing to sail for nearly 20 minutes in total. We also managed to lay on a sighting of dolphins for our guests and although the dolphins were pretty subdued and unimpressed with our 3 knots, they did at least come over briefly! What we also discovered was that along this stretch of the coastline the local fishermen lay long surface nets that extend down around 3 metres and are marked at each end by small buoys and guarded by one boat. They are laid at right angles to the shore, in line with the currents and present endless problems for people like us, trying to spot them and work a passage around them all.

In the evening we went out for a meal in one of the few Spanish restaurants there and had a very good, but far from cheap meal.

On Saturday morning our guests left and reported later that their water was back on in the villa, whilst we headed off out of Duquesa and down the coast to Gibraltar. Endless nets to avoid again, pretty much all the way and this was not helped by a very fickle wind that varied between 5 knots and 20 knots and between north and south! As we approached the rock itself, the wind settled into a 25 knot blast bang on the nose and in direct opposition to the current/tide and so as we rounded Europa Point it was all a bit bouncy and lively.

Once we were round the point it was a reach into the bay and Serafina raced into the big ship anchorage at 8 knots before we rounded up, dropped the sails and motored into Queensway Quay Marina. Last time we were in Gib we came to this marina for the final days of our stay as it is very much nicer than the alternative which is Marina Bay. What we had forgotten was that it has a constant and unusual swell running causing the boats all to surge and roll slightly on their moorings. No WiFi that reaches to the boats, but a nice cafe on the quay that has a free connection. Sarah came back on board in the evening in a bit of a grumpy mood as she had also now remembered as she went for her shower that this was the place with the highly unpredictable and fluctuating shower water temperatures!

Sunday was spent at work in various ways around the boat and Sarah's chosen subject today (and for the next three days) was polishing the gantry. We have an American boat alongside us and they are planning to return to the Caribbean Islands which are their home waters, at the same time as us and from the same starting point in Tenerife so we have been getting lots of useful information from them about where to go and what to see etc.

Scott Free set out today from Almerimar and they expect to be joining us here tomorrow afternoon. We have both just bought Fleet Broadband Satellite systems to replace our existing clunky options so we will have fast email and secure internet connections for our Atlantic crossings and onwards from there. We have bought the kit from Mailasail in the UK who have been brilliant with their help and advice so far and the packages have been sent from the UK to us here in Gib, hopefully arriving on Tuesday if the Bank Holiday doesn't mess that up. So Steve and I will have plenty to do getting this all installed.

Our neighbours on the other side have just sailed down from the UK in a Bavaria 38 and by all accounts had a dreadful trip with big headwinds all the way across Biscay and thick fog for the four days it took to come down the coast of Portugal.

Sarah had hoped that we could get some cockpit cushions made while we were here but sadly we had not factored in the concept of a Bank Holiday so as the whole place is closed until Tuesday, not much is likely to happen very soon, so we will probably have to wait until Lanzarote – any suggestions anyone?

Waiting in vain

Monday 30th, Tuesday 31st August, Wednesday 1st & Thursday 2nd September.

Firstly I have to say that we have changed our views about Gibraltar since we were last here in 2008. I suspect that when we first came here, we were new to this way of life and we had found Gib to be a bit tired, faded and faintly grubby. Nothing has really changed here, but in

the light of our travels we would say that Gibraltar has grown on us considerably and we have very much enjoyed our extended stay here.

Now about the extended stay.... As reported in the last posting, we have bought a fleet Broadband Sat phone and internet system which has been despatched using the tried and tested overland services of TNT. This was expected to arrive on Tuesday according to TNT in the UK, but locally they rather scoffed at that idea giving a more realistic suggestion of Friday at the earliest. Well it is Thursday and their tracking system on the web revealed this morning that the box was being held in Seville, so Friday is looking doubtful but fingers are crossed. However then we have to fit the dome and all the bits and pieces which will require wiring, drilling and even some stainless steel welding possibly so we are going to be here a few days more for sure. Finally the weather turns against us next Tuesday according to the latest forecasts which will hold us up for even longer.

The time has not been wasted though and Sarah has been spending a lot of time exploring the duty free shopping and taking advantage of the opportunity to buy some replacement electrical goods while we can still get 240 volt stuff at good prices. She has also spend a huge amount of time cleaning and polishing the gantry on the stern and she has done a wonderful job, but now no one is allowed to touch it!

Our American neighbours 'EdE' Bunny and Tim left on Thursday morning bound for Mallorca and Barcelona, however they are based in the Virgin Islands and are planning to cross the Atlantic at the same time as us, so we may yet meet up with them again.

Students of meteorology and cloud formations would have enjoyed the view over the last few days of the top of the rock of Gibraltar towering above us. The conditions are such that clouds are forming as the air rushes over the top and it is quite spectacular as they build rapidly and stream off westwards.

The swell in the marina reached epic proportions on Tuesday and Wednesday with the very worst reserved for the night time. There have been quite strong winds blowing in the bay and it seems that the easterlies cause this surge. It is very disconcerting to hear the ropes straining under the weight of 16 tons of yacht as it tries alternately to pull the bollards off the quay and then the fixed mooring lines off the sea bed. It also means that we have to moor a little way off the pontoon to allow for this movement and so getting on and off has its moments! Scott Free unearthed some heavy duty steel spring mooring compensators that they used last winter in Turkey and were astonished to see the springs compressed fully under the loads here, whereas they had hardly moved at all in the fiercest winter gales in Marmaris.

Satellite of Love

Friday 4th, Saturday 5th, Sunday 6th & Monday 7th September

Friday was altogether a rather more exciting day, firstly with the anticipation of the arrival of the Fleet Broadband kit. The TNT tracking had the parcel somewhere on route between here and Seville and a phone call to the local office ascertained that they were in a van parked in a

compound on the Spanish side of the Gibraltar border. But they might as well have been on the moon!

TNT promised to let us know as soon as they arrived, but under pressure promised to call the driver for more information and let us know. Which they didn't follow through.

We rang again at 12.00 and were told that nothing had changed but they expected the van to come through around 2.00 pm or a bit later. We pointed out that the Customs (like so many institutions here) closed at 2.30pm and given that it was Friday and they did not work weekends, we were going to be stuffed for another three days. We rang again at 12.45 and this time they announced that the van was on the move at which point Steve, who had gone through all this the day before with UPS, asked if it would help if we got down to customs ourselves and did all the paperwork ahead of the arrival of the goods. Yes, this was a good plan and so we jumped on our bikes and peddled for all we were worth across or rather around, Gibraltar. Never did quite work out one of two of the road junctions as we ignored most signs and made our way directly to the border. For those of you who have never been here, the 'Rock' is separated from Spain by a narrow strip of land on which lies the airport; its runway stretches right across from sea to sea. As we approached the runway the lights turned to red and it looked like we were going to have to wait for a plane to land, however it turned out that they just have a traffic management system that stops waiting traffic building up across the runway and within a few minutes we were back on our way. It turns out that Steve did not have precise details of where we were headed, but in due course we made our way round a police barrier ("sorry, in a hurry!") to the distant customs building. This is a two storey shed and downstairs are the handling agents, one of whom was going to help us. We found them eventually and were told that the packages had arrived and that all would be well once the paperwork was complete. They told us to go upstairs to the customs office and to complete a form there. Steve, who as, I said, was now a veteran of these things, suggested that we would just be sent back down by the customs to get the form completed by the agent and it would cost us £10. They agreed that this might be the case and so we just handed over the tenner and they filled in the form for us there and then. This took the nice lady less than 30 seconds and we were off again, this time to see the customs man. We queued for a while before we were dealt with and all went well. Back on the bikes again and now we had to cycle back across Gib, past the marina we are moored in to the far end where TNT have their office and depot. Finally arrived there, hot, sweaty and a little fraught. They were very pleasant and helpful and promised to drop the packages round in an hour or two. We must have looked a little desperate at this point as the manager had a rethink and asked if we wanted to take them with us now. I pointed out that we were on bikes and he made the best decision of the day when he got the packages put into an empty van, along with us and our bikes and so we made our triumphant return to the marina in the back of a battered transit van.

So all we had to do now was unwrap the stuff and install it..... This required all sorts of other bits and pieces, some of which could not be bought until Monday and even then, Gibraltar has turned out not to be the place to buy much in the way of electrical kit! We did at least get the local stainless steel fabricator (Metal Mikey) to turn up on late Friday afternoon so he

could see what needed to be done to mount the domes. He went off and suggested that he might have the work done on Saturday, but it sort of depended on whether or not he went to work on Saturday... He then went off and we found him a little later sitting in the Waterfront Cafe drinking coffee so clearly he felt no urgency in our case. However he did return the next day with the jobs done, mostly slightly wrong admittedly, but it was a start. He went away again suggesting that it should be possible to get it put right immediately, but we found him in the cafe again and the work was not corrected until Monday.

We had better luck with the firm that Steve contacted about crimping up the aerial cable end and their man arrived pretty much on time on Monday afternoon. (Steve bumped into him at lunchtime in the marina office around the time he was due, but he said he had to go to the waterfront cafe for a coffee first.)

A large part of Monday was spent cycling to and fro trying to buy small items like crimps and wire etc. but the availability of stuff and the vague opening hours makes it all very hard work. Part of the town follows the government offices example and work 'Summer Hours' which are 8.00am to 2.30pm. Others work normal hours and then there is the moving feast that is lunch. Either way I managed to arrive at the wrong places at the wrong times all afternoon. (It is a bit like Malta where Business to Business companies sort of keep normal office hours, whereas retail take a siesta. This means that some shops will stay open until 5pm where other only reopen at 4pm so if in doubt you get to rush around madly between 4 and 5 just in case.)

Finally got the sat phone installed and working on Monday night, but it was not until Tuesday morning that we were able to add the computer and email etc. to the list of jobs done.

In the meantime the weather has now set against us leaving for a few more days so we are likely to be here at least until Wednesday afternoon or Thursday morning.

Meanwhile Chris and Sarah have been haunting Morrisons (the so-called superstore, which in the UK would be an average type supermarket!) as they ponder purchases for the Atlantic crossing. Sarah has braved the hairdressers here – weirdly, hairdressers as a breed only speak Gibraltese. And the result was an all time record so far: £6 and 15 minutes including wash, and actually a very good cut whilst the stylist carried on a belted conversation with the whole salon!

We were joined here in the marina by Nimue with Mike and Anne on board. Nimue is a Contest 44 and is almost identical to Scott Free so there was lots of comparing going on with secret winners and losers on both sides I suspect. Nimue are also crossing the Atlantic at much the same time as us – sounds like it could even be described as busy – and are booked into the same marina as us in Lanzarote whilst we fly home in October. They left on Sunday just ahead of the weather change lucky things.

On with the show

36:09.49N 05:21.87W

Tuesday 8th and Wednesday 9th September

We decided that we could head for Madeira despite the blow that seems to be coming. Since this is some 600 miles Sarah went off with Chris from Scott Free to do a big pre-trip shop at Morrisons.

Various small technical hitches blighted the final stages of getting the Fleet Broadband sending emails, but eventually all was resolved with much help from the very resourceful Ed Wildgoose at Mailasail in London.

In the evening we went out with Chris and Steve for dinner at the Waterfront Cafe which was very good indeed, but the evening was rather spoilt at the end when poor Chris bit hard on a cherry stone and broke a tooth. Not the ideal way to prepare for 6 days at sea.

Wednesday was a bit of a rush as we had to vacate our berth before midday or incur another full day's charges. We crept out with a few minutes to spare and headed round to the duty free fuel berth next to the airport runway. From there we motored to the anchorage at La Linea which is the Spanish side of the border. There is a brand new marina just opened here, but as we are leaving around 6.00 am tomorrow to catch the tide through the straits of Gibraltar, we have opted to anchor in the bay.

Nice spot with a good view of the Rock although rather close to the end of the runway too. Scott Free arrived a few hours later after Chris had seen a dentist (temporary repair done which should be fine until she can see a dentist with a bit more time to spare!) and we found out that Apparition and Wind Machine are both in the marina behind us, but they are not leaving until Sunday.

Glorious evening in a pretty sheltered spot and we just have to hope that the forecast headwinds tomorrow morning are as light as they say!

Blowing in the wind

34:22.1N 11:51.7W

Thursday 9th, Friday 10th & a bit of Saturday 11th September.

Left the anchorage in Gibraltar at 6.00 am on Thursday and made our way carefully in the dark through the big ship anchorage with Scott Free about half a mile behind us. By 7.00 am we were just clear of Gibraltar bay and entered the straits hoping for a favourable tide to whisk us out into the Atlantic. Sadly the timing was awry and we had an adverse current all the way to Terifa where we were braced to expect the usual gale force winds. So instead of flying along with the tide under us, we struggled at times to make 2 knots across the ground, but the sea was flat and the wind non-existent. Even at Terifa there was no wind and so we continued to motor due west until we reached the end of the big ships traffic separation scheme when we turned southwards to cut across the streams of massive ships heading in and out of the Med. We had a good break and as soon as we cleared the area, we set a course for Porto Santo just as the wind began to rise and by 2.00 pm we were rattling along with the cutter rig set, managing 6 knots in just 10 knots of true wind. The wind kept building and soon we were flying along at 8 knots and by nightfall Scott Free were some 5 miles behind us.

The wind came and went during the night and we managed to set the wrong sails pretty much every time, but we were still making very good speed until the wind veered to blow over our starboard quarter. This slowed us down as we were also now experiencing the first big Atlantic rollers that were coming ahead of a storm further out. These were hitting us broadside and rolling us alarmingly and causing the sails to flap and flog as there was not quite enough strength in the 15 or so knots of wind to keep them filled. Scott Free fared better with their big genoa filling and so by the morning we were pretty much alongside each other.

Friday was a very dull day really as we rolled our way on a broad reach in bigish seas making around 6 knots which was fine but less than exciting. The sea became increasingly confused with two big swells running at right angles to each other! So some would roll us over at quite a crazy angle whilst another set would march up behind us, towering over us, before passing under us and carrying us forward as we powered down the backs of them. Sounds fun, but it wasn't! Did see some flying fish, but no whales or dolphins.

Scott Free gradually edged ahead of us although they also were heading rather west of the required course in order to keep their larger headsail filled. By nightfall we had considered shaking out the reefs in our main sail to help us keep up the pace, but prudence prevailed and we left the reefs in and the stay sail set. During the night the wind increased to force 6 and came round onto the beam again and so we were perfectly prepared as it happened and we flew along under this conservative rig and overhauled SF passing them just at dawn.

Grey skies greeted us at dawn on Saturday, but these began to clear by mid morning and as we were still making 7 knots with the reefed main and stay sail we decided that today was the day to put Henry (the Hyrovane wind steering system) into real action. This was fairly entertaining as there was a big learning curve involved and SF were very confused by our very erratic course, however things settled down and before long Henry had things pretty much under control. Clearly we have a bit to learn about the fine tuning, but it was a real thrill to see the wind vane steering in full action. This kit steers the boat using the wind to provide the power to move its rudder and the wind direction to set its course. Completely silent and nil power usage.

Very hard to type this log as we still have quite big waves tossing us around, but things are a lot more settled now we are so far out into the Atlantic that we are getting the steadier winds. Making brilliant time and are ahead of our schedule, the downside being that as things stand we will arrive in Porto Santo (island close to Madeira) in the dead of night.

Island in the Sun

33:03.71N 16:18.94W

Saturday 11th, Sunday 12th and Monday 13th September.

We made very good progress on Saturday with Henry (the hydrovane – named after Henry the Navigator...) in complete control of our steering, but as night approached we switched back to the Raymarine Autopilot as we are still not confident or expert enough to make adjustments to Henry in the dead of night in a big sea.

The wind stayed pretty constant through the night and we now had two 150 (and even a 158 mile day!!) mile days under our belts on this passage. That was about the end of the excitement though as gradually the wind began to drop away over the next 24 hours and we found ourselves just buzzing along between 5 and 6 knots in a flatter sea. It was really an almost idyllic day as we made good progress but were never under any pressure and so we relaxed and enjoyed the ride. What was missing was any real wildlife though. We were visited at one stage by 20 to 30 dolphins, but at that point we were only making around 4.5 knots and they didn't see any fun in riding along so slowly, so they just swam on by and after a few very dramatic leaps and plunges they were gone.

Our problem now was that we had made such good progress overall on the passage that we were going to arrive in Porto Santo around midnight so we had to rethink our arrival plan. We decided that making our way into a small anchorage off a beach, in a strange place with nil moon to light our way and a reputation for erratically lit buoyage was not a great move; so we opted to reduce sail and slow right down and stall our arrival time until daylight. We furled away the headsails and carried on under just the main, but of course the wind started to get up and we were back making 6 knots! So we reefed the main heavily and brought the speed down to 4 knots which was fine until the wind died completely and we found ourselves almost drifting at just 2 knots. However this was just fine as it let the clock run down, the only problem now was that the autohelm made such a noise as it tried to steer a boat with almost no steerage way on. The resolution was to hand steer which Sarah did for two hours followed by me for three hours by which time we were outside the harbour a couple of miles behind SF who had been motoring and it was 9.00am.

We made our way into the little harbour beneath the dramatic backdrop of the soaring cliffs and hills that make up the tiny Atlantic Island of Porto Santo and were greeted on the pontoon by Nelson the duty Marinero. This really is the most wonderful place and everyone is so friendly and relaxed. I did the usual formalities with the Customs man who was very chatty and keen to display his knowledge of England and English. The marina office were very helpful too and we soon felt very comfortable indeed here.

No sooner had Nelson finished welcoming us to the island, than another person approached us and introduced himself as James. This turned out to be one of those many instances where you find out how small this world is. James and his wife Lesley were getting married on the island of Paxos in Greece in 2008 when we arrived there. Furthermore their reception was at Mongonissi which is the bay and restaurant run by our friends Theo and Pan and we were moored there with Serafina at the time. They had reason to remember seeing Serafina there as they had also been moored on the same pontoon as us in 2007 in Hamble Point marina, (UK) although we had never actually met them before. We invited them and their crew for drinks in the evening and along with Steve and Chris we had a good evening, during which we also discovered that James had been sailing with another friend of ours Anthony L-D (boat called Big Doris).

James and Lesley were getting married in Paxos because they had both worked for Sailing Holidays which is owned and run by our very good friend Barry Neilson, who had worked with us in Greece back in the 19th century!

We plan to stay here for 5 days and as things stand we cannot think of anywhere better. There is a big three day festival starting on Thursday in honour of Christopher Columbus (the island is Portuguese) and the only setback so far has been the arrival of some Spanish boats complete with a band who set up on one of the pontoons last night and are truly awful. Not

that they play bad music, but more that the singer would be excluded from any karaoke bar for being so utterly tone deaf!

Paint it red

Tuesday 14th, Wednesday 15th & Thursday 16th September

Porto Santo is a largely volcanic rock sitting around 30 miles north of Madeira and is the only other inhabited island in this archipelago. However it does have some sandstone and boasts a fabulous beach reputed to be the rival of anything in the Caribbean apart from water temperature of course! Its main visitors seem to be a few of the richer Madeirans who take the ferry here at weekends to enjoy the better weather and of course the beach as well as the relaxed beauty of the island. In fact the owner's of the yacht moored next to us are from Madeira and are here on their holiday. They sail their boat here and then pop home on the ferry to collect their car and motorbike so they have all they need for a week or two! They left on Wednesday to go back to work but they have been really helpful with advice about what to do and where to go and have given us all this info for Madeira as well. In fact when we asked for restaurant recommendations in Madeira they immediately asked us to phone them when we wanted to go out and offered to come along with us. They have a house and a boat that they rent out and you can find links to their websites on our links pages (www.rhbell.com/yachting_resources.htm) - the house looks wonderful as Vasco is an interior designer.

We took the open top coach tour round the island – there is one tour per day as there are very few people here – and thoroughly enjoyed the two hour ride. There were four stops for photos which helped spin the trip out a bit as it is hard to take so long touring an island just 9 miles by 5, with four roads. We discovered during this trip that there is an airport here. In fact it is very large and with a very modern terminal building and although totally deserted, it is the main reason there is any development here at all still. The history of this is that it was built as a major NATO Air base in 1960 and as tourism developed generally in Madeira, flights came here so passengers could transfer to ferries for the trip to the bigger island which had no airport at all. In time Madeira gained its own airport, but it suffers from regular violent crosswinds and so all flights are re-routed here then and the ferries are pressed into service again. It remains a NATO reserve base though and exercises are held here from time to time. But apart from that there is little excitement here although it was the home of Christopher Columbus's in-laws and it is reputed that the great man had a house here too, so every year there is a festival to celebrate his triumphant return to the island complete with a full re-enactment of the event and it just happened to be on this Thursday, with the lovely lady in the marina reception playing the role of Columbus's wife for the third year running. The re-enactment was part of a great evening and the island clearly pulls out all the stops for this event. The beach directly in front of the town square was all decked out and everyone was dressed in 16th century costumes and a play of some sort was acted out on the beach leading up to the arrival of a full sized replica of Columbus' ship which sailed up close to the beach and he was rowed ashore to be met by various people including his wife. This all took place after dark which rendered all photography obsolete but it was very well done and carefully lit

and clearly most of the island turns out and gets involved. There were hog roasts and various other interesting foods for sale along with the usual collection of jewellery stores and whatever although Sarah was impressed enough to buy at least one nice present there. We went off afterwards in search of the famed local ice cream shop which we eventually found just as a costumed procession complete with a band and Columbus's wife and her entourage came past. It has to be said that anything similar done back in the UK would have been comparatively tasteless and half cocked compared to the effort put in here by everyone involved.

The marina is tiny, housing only a handful of visiting yachts although there is some space within the harbour for a few more boats to swing on fixed buoys. The harbour is another legacy of NATO who built it some time ago but it was not until 1980 that visiting yachts were allowed to use it. It is really quite big and mostly empty save for a ferry landing quay in one corner and a breakwater that forms the wall of the little 'marina'. See photos at www.rhbell.com/photos_2010.htm

The sea wall of the harbour beside the marina is one those places around the world where visiting yachtsmen are invited to leave a record of their visit by way of a small mural. Over the last 10 years or so this has built up into quite a display with offerings ranging from very skilled down to enthusiastic amateur. You will not be surprised to hear that Sarah spent more than a day preparing and executing our contribution. (See photos at www.rhbell.com/photos_2010.htm) So anyone from her art classes will be pleased to hear she has got round to doing at least one artistic exercise this season.

The plan is to sail south tomorrow to Madeira, presuming that the wind that is whistling around this evening dies down a bit first! Amusingly Rob did endure some embarrassment while arranging our exit papers; he was asked where we were going next and had to admit he had no idea. In his defence, Sarah and Chris on SF tend to discuss the route between them although much of this is done in his presence, but not having done the research he obviously doesn't engage at these times! 'Mrs Columbus' then went on to suggest possible destinations – no, Rob didn't think any of them rang a bell. Eventually, in exasperation she asked "well, do you think it is Quinto do Lobo where you already have a reservation?" and Rob had to agree that it sounded likely! But in his defence he does have his finger on every other pulse to do with our expedition....

32:44.49N 16:42.76W

Early Morning Rain

Friday 17th September

Up and about at 7.30 am to get various jobs done before departure for Madeira. One of these was to check our emails as we have some replies outstanding from Sweden concerning issues with the boat. The internet arrangements in Porto Santo are very simple and civilised. Outside the little office they have constructed a covered way and put two long refectory tables there with bench seats and smart new power points. This area alone receives coverage of their free

WiFi connection and so you just have to wander over to here to get connected. Once I had finished here I had to return the shower and toilet keys to the office and then go to the customs office and check out of the island. The only snag today was that the office was locked up and the office next door (Port Authority) had no idea if the officer was coming in today! I went back to the marina office to ask about this and after scratching their heads for a few moments they pointed to the man in a blue uniform sat at one of the internet benches and with relief told me that he was the customs officer today! Totally unfazed, the officer took down our details on a scrap of paper and wished us a safe journey before returning to his browsing.

At this point it poured with rain which was a bit of a shock to the system really.

Once the rain had stopped we finished getting Serafina ready for sea and after saying goodbye to all the boats around us, we set off.

There was a nice 15 knot breeze blowing and so we made a brisk start in the lee of the island, but once we got clear of this, we were back in the open Atlantic with its long tall rollers coming over our stern quarter. We made good time although the wind became a bit flaky towards the end of the 30 mile trip. Up in the sky Sarah took delight in identifying thunderclouds, wind and more impressively three potential waterspouts forming as their twisters reached down from the heavy cloud base.

About 3 miles from the protection of the lee of the eastern extreme of Madeira Island we hooked a very large fish. I say fish because after 10 minutes of excitement with whatever it was exerting more pull than the reel brake could handle, the twin hooks broke free and we were at least left with my favourite lure, but no monster fish to identify or show for our effort. (Photo of me looking bemused as the rod strains and the brake fails on the website.)

Made our way to Marina Quinta do Lorde, Madeira where we were enthusiastically welcomed by the mariners who introduced themselves by name and insisted on shaking hands and explaining everything. The office were no less effusive and Joanna in reception took great delight in spending some 40 minutes explaining everything that they could and would do for us. It is a wonderful spot and little expense has been spared in the development which is surrounded by an almost complete apartment resort. There is a festival that starts tonight – lucky us – and we are welcome to join in.

The water here is crystal clear and the rules are very strict about what can and cannot be put in it. I took this opportunity to take a dive under Serafina again to re-inspect the rope cutter and found that the noise we have been hearing is not a serious issue, but just some missing sound deadening polyurethane plugs.

We had Chris and Steve over for a wonderful dinner (despite lack of fresh fish and very limited ingredients....) cooked by Sarah and a session of Mexican train which I am pleased to report was won for the very first and possibly last time by ME!

Climb every Mountain

Saturday 18th, Sunday 19th and Monday 20th September

Saturday was spent tackling the extended list of jobs that had grown during the last few days, ranging from repairs to paperwork and storage. Remarkably after studying some photos of Serafina during her building, I have found an extra locker – well perhaps more a storage area, under a false floor inside one of the saloon units which is a real bonus as it will hold loads of bottled water for emergency use during the Atlantic crossing.

On Sunday we combined with SF to hire a car for the day to explore the island and what an absolutely wonderful place it is. Chris and Steve have been here before on a land based holiday but for us it was a huge surprise to find it such an incredibly diverse and beautiful island. The roads range from fast expressways that spend almost more time underground in huge tunnels than out in the open to allow the road to run all along the southern coast without spoiling or disturbing the views and character of the place, to small rural lanes reminiscent of Devon. Tacked on the south side of the island is a quite amazing airport with the runway built on stilts over the sea alongside a cliff; underneath is a sports club with astroturf pitches and yachts and motor boats stored in a vast area. The island is made up from several volcanic peaks that rise sharply out of the Atlantic to heights over 1500m which is what dictates the climate here which is mild but quite wet! This leads to an extraordinary amount of lush vegetation and the fertile soil means that a remarkable variety of plants thrive here. Where else do you see brussel sprouts growing in a veg patch alongside bananas and grapes?

In the centre of the island are two plateaus close to the very peaks and from there you can take any one of dozens of carefully marked trails and walks that suit everyone from casual walker to energetic hiker along levadas, which are very well-maintained manmade irrigation channels running very gently down from the spine of the island. There are no golden sandy beaches, but all along the rugged coastline the roads drop down very steep wooded and rocky valleys to the sea where small resorts have sprung up at the shoreline. Everywhere there was evidence of the fearful rain storms that caused devastation only a year ago as the torrents of water cascading down the ravines swept away roads and houses. The photos we took do the place no justice at all and it is a destination we can heartily recommend.

For the sailors things have only recently improved. There are no natural harbours here and yachts were not welcome at all and so most yachtsmen until around 2003, left their boats in Porto Santo and came across on the ferry. Now there are three marinas, but one we noticed as we drove by is empty and abandoned. (We have since found out that it was built by the government and was badly thought through and every year when the winter storms arrive the place is pretty near destroyed! Last winter the sea wall broke into two sections which seems to have signalled the death of the place!) The marina we are in is only partly full and the third is in the busy little main harbour at the capital Funchal.

As usual we attempted to navigate our way around the complicated and badly signed roads with the sole aid of a tourist map and so not surprisingly we spent a lot of time quite lost, which was part of the fun as we saw any amount of things and places we would never have thought to visit! The catch is that you are either driving uphill or downhill much of which is

orientated around hairpin bends. It is quite unnerving to enter a tunnel which then starts to climb and climb before peaking and sending you down a steep incline so you burst out into the sunlight heading straight down a steep hill. There are also dozens of cable cars for getting down the big headlands to the beaches and one feature we missed altogether by mistake were the cliffs reputed to be the second highest sheer rise sea cliffs in the world! (575 metres)

It was a long old day, but by sheer chance we found a lovely restaurant for dinner and eventually made our way home around 10.30 pm.

On Monday, Sarah decided to take the bus into Funchal as she was keen to go to an art museum dedicated to two brothers from Madeira, Henrique and Francisco Franco. The bus driving was far more exciting than other experiences given the terrain and took an hour and a half. On arrival the rain started and didn't let up till she arrived back at the marina; amazingly very few of the locals seem prepared for the downpours and gather at all the shop entrances until it lets up. This far out at the eastern end of the island where the marina is, seems to escape the endless cloud bursts. The museum turned out to be very small (the taxi drivers hadn't heard of it – oh for those talented black cab know-alls) and Sarah was the only visitor, but claims she was delighted with it. She then visited the much hyped Municipal Market which proved to be visually stunning but staffed by pushy vendors insisting one tastes their wares and very much priced for the tourists. I stayed on board and got some more bits and pieces sorted out as well as some work done and we ended the day getting Serafina ready for an 8.00 am start tomorrow and the 300 mile trip to Lanzarote. Sadly the weather forecast shows little or no wind for the next few days so we will have to see what develops.

Driving Too fast

28:54.03N 13:42.04W

Tuesday 21st, Wednesday 22nd & Thursday 23rd September

So the summer sailing season draws to an end with this trip which brought us up to 4380 miles since we left Turkey in May. We have visited 13 countries along the way and can now guarantee to say please and thank you in any country using the wrong language every time!

We now understand that the recent hurricane that crossed the Atlantic has upset all the wind patterns which goes some way to explain what happened over the last few days!

We set off from Madeira at 8.00 am on Tuesday with a forecast for no wind at all for the 300 mile, two and bit day trip. Not ideal really as we have really enjoyed getting free from the Med and the sound of an engine, but we needed to get to Lanzarote to lay Serafina up for the month while we fly home for a break before tackling the Atlantic crossing.

First things first though, so we trailed the fishing lure straight away and within a few minutes had caught what we think was a mackerel, not too sure, but it tasted great! Anyway this was not enough for a meal for two so we tried again and within an hour had a 4 kilo Atlantic Bonito on board. Very practical but not great entertainment value as now I had to stop fishing and we were only two hours into the trip.

It was a long dull day as we motored gently and then into the night where the wind gradually picked up a little, but only enough to bring us cold rain and not enough to sail by. Long night watching an electrical storm some 200 miles ahead of us and sitting alone on watch wearing full waterproofs for the first time in a very long time.

By dawn the wind had picked up and we were able to sail briskly which prompted us to download a new weather chart and to our surprise there was a complete change and we were facing winds that were expected to pick up to 25 knots and a whole lot more rain. As it turned out the whole thing became a complete lottery as the wind came and went all day. Sometimes driving us along with gusts of 20 knots and sometimes barely 6 knots. The problem that was growing was the timing of our arrival (again) as Lanzarote has a number of unlit offshore islands and unlit fish farms as well as numerous other unwelcome hazards such as overfalls etc. none of which we fancied dealing with in the dark. So the plan was to moderate our speed such that we would arrive at the north of the island at dawn on Thursday. But with 20 knots of wind blowing from forward of the beam, we kept going too fast, so we reefed right down so that we could sail at around 5.5 knots which was fine until the wind dropped again and we wallowed in the increasing Atlantic swell. All very frustrating but the forecast was for even more wind so we were at least confident that we would finish the trip in daylight on Thursday, it was all about where we would be at dawn.

In the early evening on Wednesday the wind started to climb and with the heavy reefs in place we finally settled on a good speed that seemed to be about right, but then as midnight approached, the beautiful clear sky (and bright full moon) disappeared to be replaced by heavy clouds and another massive electrical storm directly ahead of us. I chose to slow down more and reefed the headsail down to virtually nothing which helped a bit and meant that for the next hour I just watched the storm as it slowly moved east out of our track as we got closer and closer and the rain settled in around us. By 2.00 am it was a good 30 miles from our track and we had a clear run to Lanzarote but despite all our efforts we were still early and to add to the excitement the seas were now throwing up growing Atlantic rollers with a peak of 28 knots of wind. We hurtled past Graciosa Island bearing away through a gap in the islands and were fortunate that the wind veered a little which saved us having to gybe at this point.

As we came down the eastern coast of Lanzarote dawn broke and the wind and seas settled down and we had a gentle run down the coast before dropping the sails and motoring into Puerto Calera which is a marina and resort near the south east tip of the island. Again on Wednesday night we had spent our night watches wearing full oilskins and even sea boots at one stage, but by the time we arrived at Puerto Calera the wind had turned into a hot blast and sitting here in the marina is almost uncomfortable in this hot and humid wind which is still blowing at 30 knots as the evening draws in.

Wind Machine (Jim & Michelle) were moored up here when we arrived and came over to say hello. They are part of a group of us who were all in Marmaris last season and who are all heading across the Atlantic this winter. (the MARC – Marmaris Atlantic Rally for Cruisers!)

Scott Free came in about 5 hours after us and had a far worse deal than us as the winds had headed them for a while yesterday to add to their woes.

We had a few visits from Dolphins during the trip, but rarely did they stay long. The best was about 12 'Atlantic Spotted' Dolphins who played around the bows for 10 minutes or so on Wednesday. We had no idea that we would see so many different species of dolphin during the course of our travels and we are indebted to Sarah's Dad who gave us a wonderful book (Whales, Dolphins and Seals – a field guide to the marine mammals of the world) which is brilliant for identifying them all as they swim around us; we have even been known to stand on the bow with book in hand sorting them out.

The AIS transponder proved its value as well on this trip. It is extraordinary how you can be several hundred miles out into the Atlantic and the only other ship within 100 miles is on a collision course with you. In this case we did find ourselves crossing something of a shipping route as we had quite a few ships crossing our bow or stern but one 1000ft long chemical tanker actually altered course by 5 degrees to pass 500 yards under our stern before resuming its previous course and heading which is a definite first for us and we did not even have to call them up and ask.

Yellow Submarine

Friday 24th, Saturday 25th, Sunday 26th & Monday 27th

Probably best to call time on this blog for a while now as we are just spending our days preparing to fly home soon and so there are endless laying up type jobs to do so Serafina is ready to go again at the beginning of November when we return to the fray and set off across the Atlantic all being well. Everything needs to be inspected and cleaned from halyards to shackles. All moving bits have to be inspected, cleaned and lubricated (particularly since much of the Middle East sand and dirt appears to be attached) and there are a whole host of minor things all of which assume a greater importance once you leave the comfort zone of land and head out on a 2,800 mile 20 day passage to the other side of an ocean!

Puerto Calero is a pleasant enough marina although it is a little quiet at the moment. The big attraction here is the Yellow Submarine which is a tourist sub complete with underwater viewing panels. This is certainly the busiest feature around here and every day there are countless coach loads of people who are brought here and taken out for what seems to us to be a rather short ride. But then I haven't heard anyone complain either.

The pontoon fingers are VERY short and Serafina is clearly a bit too long for them but it is the same for others here. It makes getting on and off quite difficult and when it blows (and it blew at 50 knots during the first night which was interesting...) it is almost impossible to tie the boat tight to the finger. By Monday night we had decided that it might be better if we turned Serafina round and backed her into the berth. This we did at dusk with the help of David and Lyn Wilkie from Moonbean who are moored next to us. This is better, but I will be asking the marina if we can actually leave Serafina in a different berth, downwind of the pontoon whilst we are away. Better peace of mind!

David Wilkie on Moonbeam arrived the same day as us and it was a huge and pleasant surprise to see him again. We were both directors of the British Marine Federation countless years ago (David was actually BMF's Scottish President for a good many years.)

Steve and I watched the Grand Prix in one of the many bars here which at least got me out of working for two and half hours. Plenty of shops, bars and restaurants on site here, but at this time of year it is all rather deserted. Not too sure what the holiday season is out here.

Anyway I am going to call it a day for now and plan to resume the blog in early November as we head down to Tenerife and then off to the Cape Verde Islands which are around 850 miles south of here and then from there we plan to head across to Barbados.

Highlights of the year so far include the visit to Cappadocia and the balloon ride there. We also enjoyed our visit to Finike in Turkey and the overland trip to Petra in Jordan although Sarah is keen to forget her donkey ride there! We both loved Madeira and Porto Santo for a variety of reasons but then we liked Malta (and its buses) almost as much. We are indebted to the EMYR organisers, principally Dave, Kath and Hassan who worked so hard to make their rally such a wonderful and quite unique experience. Equally thanks go to Trevor and Lesley who were such great friends and 'crew' during the rally. Dislikes were few really, but neither of us much enjoyed the atmosphere and attitude in Israel. Egypt was pretty dire but the camel ride near the pyramids was a favourite of Sarah's. Syria had little to commend it, but that might be partially because the tour guides were so opinionated and very poor at their jobs. But overall we have had a fantastic year so far and not withstanding a few problems along the way, Serafina has looked after us very well indeed and we are full of confidence for the second half of this year's travels.

Finally a big thank you to Chris and Steve on Scot Free who have been sailing along with us most of the time since we left Israel in July. They have been wonderful company for us both, full of really useful information and help whenever we have needed it; their presence out at sea and our exchanges on the SSB & VHF radios during the passages has been a great bonus! They too are taking a break now and will definitely be appearing again in the blog as we start the final preparations.

Make a note in your diaries or wherever to return here around 10th November.

Big Yellow Taxi

Monday 8th and Tuesday 9th November

Monday started badly when we got up at 5.00 am to find torrential rain lashing the UK. Things did not improve when the taxi booked for 5.30 am failed to show up and a call to their office at 5.45 am revealed that it wasn't going to show either!

A frantic call to the first name we saw in Yellow Pages produced a car in under 5 minutes. This was just the job and our anxiety was distracted by the performance of the driver during the next 20 minutes or so as we hurtled up the M5 heading for Birmingham Airport. It turned out that our driver was actually the duty controller who had jumped into his car whilst

running the business from his home. He proceeded to drive the car and juggle the radio handset and a telephone as he re-organised all the jobs that were in place for him to cover, to other drivers. He despatched cars all over Worcester and handled incoming calls from new customers, who like us needed a taxi straight away. How he held all this information in his head and talked to us was a mystery and we were most impressed. Finally his boss arrived in the office and took over the phones leaving our man to concentrate on not getting caught speeding. All went well and we arrived in good time. Sarah had a small mishap when the boxed sandwich she had bought for the flight opened up inside her hand luggage and she found herself picking out the food from amongst her things. I was not to be left out of the fun and managed to drop a full cup of coffee from a tray in the cafe.

Good flight with tail winds which got us to Lanzarote 40 minutes early and we seemed to be on the only Ryan Air flight with decent leg room for a change.

Serafina was looking dusty but well and an hour with a sponge and hose soon had her restored to her glory.

Spent the afternoon sorting out the gear we had brought out and catching up with the news from other yachts around us.

In the evening we went for a quick pizza with Chris and Steve of Scott Free and were in bed fairly early.

On Tuesday we set about the various jobs we had now to complete before leaving here and in the afternoon James Robinson arrived from the UK to spend two weeks sailing in the islands with us.

We have been waiting for 3 weeks for a package that was sent to us from the USA but had disappeared into Spanish customs. Nothing seemed to be known about it or even where in Spain it was. Heard today that unbelievably the package had arrived in Lanzarote but instead of being delivered, it was sent back to the USA! This might have been OK if it had gone back to the supplier as they would have held the package and refunded our money, but the US Postal service simple re-sent the parcel to Spain again and to date no one has a clue where it is.

If I were a carpenter

Wednesday, Thursday and Friday 10th, 11th & 12th November

Wednesday was spent getting some planned jobs done using spares and items purchased whilst we were back in the UK last month. Sarah also went aloft in the bosun's chair firstly to attach the new SSB radio aerial stand-off blocks that I had made, on the back stay and then up the main mast to do a thorough rigging inspection. The backstay operation also involved her removing a nylon block with a small hacksaw and all went well until the very last part when she did an excellent job of sawing into one of her fingers. We lowered her to the deck

and after treating the wound with several steristrips and cups of coffee all round, she went back up and finished the job.

Somehow the day slipped away and it did not help that the weather is very odd with blazing sunshine interspersed with rain which was definitely not in the brochure.

On Thursday the plan was to go for a day sail and return to the marina in the evening, but when we got up to find huge black clouds swirling around the island we had a little change of heart and decided to get the last of the bigger jobs finished instead!

One of these involved modifying the bracket on which we store the outboard engine on the pushpit rail. We devised a cunning plan to make this work better and to make it stronger but like all such projects where neither James nor I are any good at carpentry we did encounter the odd technical error along the way.

Friday saw us finally underway and we left Puerto Calero on Lanzarote around 11.00 am after various goodbyes to all the crews who were staying a little longer.

Very little wind to start with so progress was slow on the 30 mile trip south to Fuerteventura, but gradually it filled in and as we gained speed so the apparent wind came forward of the beam and we were able to fly the full cutter rig and our speed leapt up to around 7 knots and we ate up the miles before having to gybe round and start the very interesting (challenging) approach to Puerto Del Castillo.

The wind was only around 15 knots and the sea was bouncy but nothing untoward, but the pilot book and the electronic chart plotter had rather different ideas as to what we would find by way of navigation marks leading us past a very large shoal and reef guarding the entrance to the marina.

In the event both were wrong and we needed to use some common sense and caution as we dropped the sails and swept in out of the swell. The two marineros came down to show us our mooring which was alongside on the very end of the only pontoon, which itself looked fairly rickety. All went well and we appear to have arrived in a tiny marina with just 5 visitors moorings close to a small tourist village. There is some bad weather on its way and so we plan to stay here until it blows through but we may review this when we have a chance to explore the rather limited local facilities.

Heard in the evening by email from America the latest on our parcel which has to date travelled from USA to Spain, to Tenerife, to Lanzarote, back via Spain to the USA but not quite to the original supplier who had heard that it was on its way back to Lanzarote again. Well you could not make this up really but they have discovered from the tracking that it is now in the Czech Republic – heaven knows why, but the supplier (Boxer Marine, who have been outstanding in their support throughout this sorry story of mail service incompetence) have now refunded our original payment and hope that we will re-order when we arrive in the Caribbean where they may be able to deliver the goods faster!

We taught James Mexican Train last night and he picked it up very quickly, almost too quickly as he nearly pipped Sarah for second place!

Diving in the Deep end

Saturday 13th & Sunday 14th November

Saturday was another day spent getting some jobs done and exploring this wonderful little resort.

The 'marina' is tiny and barely worthy of the title, but it is home to quite a few sports fishing boats and the one rather lightweight pontoon houses the locals and has just a handful of visitors moorings which are wholly taken up by a small charter yacht, and large German catamaran and us. In simple terms the pontoon nestles in the corner of a large bay with a protective wall, but we rather stick out of the end which is nice as instead of the usual view of a marina or harbour wall, we can see out to sea and watch everything happening on the beach and around us. The water is crystal clear (handy for the submarines) and shallow and blue. This then was the perfect place for me to finally resolve the problems we have been having with the noisy spurs rope cutter fitted to our prop shaft. This involved diving and removing the unit in bits and bringing it up on deck where we could replace the polyurethane 'buffers' and reassemble it all underwater. After 4 or 5 dives with the snorkel it became obvious that this was a more serious job than we had thought and so we dug out the diving bottles (mini B kit) and set about doing the job properly! This made life much easier and we soon had the replacements ready, but now we had only a few minutes of air left in the tank. (The tank is small and only for emergency use under the boat and we have used it several times already!) There turned out to be just enough air to get it all done and afterwards, Sarah took the tank to the dive shop on the quay and it is now all full and ready for use again (3 euros).

However there are a host of visitor attractions based around us including pens with sea lions, and large wooden pirate ship, jet skis, optimist dinghies, a Wayfarer dinghy and no less than two yellow submarines. The lad who is in charge of the 'marina' is also the sailing instructor and the captain of one of the submarines.

Sarah picked up the local area magazine which is all about attracting the attention of all the English visitors to the plethora of bizarre attractions including 'Titti Trollop's Music Hall Tavern' and its not to be missed 'Famous Comedy Drag Dinner Show'. There was also an article about the re-enactment of the Battle of Tamasite where 270 years ago the British failed to invade the island. The article was accompanied by a picture of a boat full of Red Coated British soldiers and officers landing with the telling caption 'lock up your goats!'

On Sunday we went out sailing and spent the first hour or so practising all sorts of different emergency procedures such as 'man overboard' drills with different sail configurations in use. This inevitably threw up a number of issues that we had not fully thought through before and together with James (who is also a Yachtmaster Instructor) we worked out some practical solutions to most situations. Nothing is very straightforward though and more thought and practice is going to be needed in due course. The wind died away after lunch and so we took

the opportunity to hoist Hyacinth, our cruising chute and had a very enjoyable hour or two experimenting with trimming her set for best speed on various points of sailing.

In the evening we walked round the big bay to a small fish restaurant recommended in the local magazine and had a very nice meal although based heavily on garlic!

Riding along on the crest of a wave...

27:44.82N 15:37.42W

Monday 15th, Tuesday 16th and Wednesday 17th November.

Monday saw the arrival of the bad weather we had been expecting and so we spent the day moored safely to the quay watching the seas building outside the protective wall and took the opportunity to see what everyone got up to here on Fuerteventura when the beaches were too bleak and cold (23 degrees).

We took the mini motorised children's train service out through the resort area to the main road where we caught a bus into Rosario, the capital. This turned out to be a pretty depressing place (or perhaps we never found the good bits) but we did find the main shopping mall and after some crepes by way of a late lunch, we had a swift shopping session in Hyper Dinos which allowed us to stock up for the next few days or so.

Tuesday saw the weather improve and we were able to stick to our plan of leaving in the early evening to sail the 128 miles overnight to Gran Canaria. The day then was spent sort of getting ready for the off and doing a few more jobs etc.

Just behind where we were moored, out in the bay were two red buoys and these marked the rather unimaginative course for the jet skis. People would hire the machine for 15 or 30 minutes and either one up or two up, they would wizz round the two marks. Actually the machines were very quiet and made little noticeable wash so we sort of enjoyed watching them tentatively going faster and faster, willing them to overdo the turns and fall off. It is hard to imagine anything duller than 30 minutes spent going round the two buoys and we never got round to finding out how much they were fleeced for the privilege. The yellow sub made countless trips out and round a very limited circuit in the mouth of the bay and frankly we were all surprised that we did not see customers coming out on deck to be sick as the vessel rolled hugely in the surf. The marina staff kindly agreed to let us stay on our berth until 6.00 pm and when a boat arrived to take our place around 5.30 pm they had to hang around and eventually were allowed to moor alongside us as we made our final unhurried preparations.

We set off as planned at 6.00 pm and were soon making our way past the foaming reef which had the quite large waves that had built up over 24 hours breaking heavily over it. Once we had a reefed mainsail set along with just the staysail, we settled down for a 30 mile downwind leg with us taking it in turns to hand steer all the way. (not sure we could trust the autohelm to manage Serafina in these waves without gybing accidentally.)

We made good speed and it was just after midnight that we reached the point well south of Fuerteventura where we had planned to change course and head for Gran Canaria on a beam reach. The big issue around these islands are the wind acceleration zones that they all have, which can double the wind strength in particular areas and sailors are very much obliged to ignore these at their peril! We now had a cracking sail for a few hours and we covered a good 12 miles before the wind began to die away and in due course when it had dropped to just 8 knots we had to reluctantly motor sail for a while to keep up our speed in order to make a daylight arrival at our destination. (Timings and distances are rather erratic as for some reason our log keeping was rather less than diligent.)

With dawn came a rising breeze and once we had reached the next acceleration zone we were really flying. However James and I had to hold off setting the full cutter rig until Sarah had served up a wonderful breakfast of bacon, tomatoes and scrambled egg. Once the full rig was set, despite still having a well reefed main, James set a record for this trip managing a speed of 9.2 knots through the water, only to see his record taken a little later by Sarah when she hit 9.5 knots.

By midday we were passing along the southern coast of Gran Canaria still making 8 knots , but the wind began to ease again and so it was not until 2.30 pm that we finally backed into our berth in Pasito Blanco, which is a nice quiet private Yacht Club Marina, which seems to be a very pleasant and peaceful spot. We celebrated with 'Safe Arrivals' by way of a glass or two of white wine with our lunch which had Sarah knocked up and after a brief visit to the local tiny (but brilliantly well stocked – Lanzarote and Fuerteventura have been distinctly disappointing) Spar store we had a quiet afternoon at rest.....

Climb Every Mountain

Thurs 18th & Friday 19th Nov.

We spent the two days exploring the island by car.

On Thursday we headed north to Las Palmas which was very straightforward until we hit the streets of the city and things began to go awry. We had decided to break with tradition and purchased a proper map of the island instead of relying on the usual tourist maps and we finally located the marina where the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) was assembled, but it was a devil of a job to find our way in by road, only to find that there was no parking at all and so we had to come back out, park the car and find our way back again on foot!

Immediately met several people we knew including the rally organisers both of whom managed to spare us a few of their precious minutes. The ARC is a rally of 250 yachts all heading across the Atlantic, leaving this Sunday and heading for St Lucia, which may or may not be ready to receive them following the recent hurricane damage.

We wandered around looking at some of the yachts and visited various chandleries and picked up a few items that we were after. Sarah headed off to El Corte Ingles while James and I settled down to some lunch overlooking the marina.

We headed home in mid afternoon, but made a lengthy stop at a huge Carrefour hyper store along the way to stock up for the next few days and the crossing to Tenerife on Sunday. (Yes the same day as the ARC sets out for the Caribbean...)

The evening ended with a full game of Mexican Train where Sarah pretty much humiliated both me and James.

On Friday we headed west to Port Mogan via Porto Rico. The latter was dire and we did not bother to stop and explore the place as it made all previous tacky resorts look good.

Port Mogan was very different, but as we made our way into the town we found the place gridlocked and packed with pedestrians. It was at this point that Sarah enquired of us if it was Friday today! She had just remembered reading that Friday was the day to avoid at all costs and anyone staying here would be advised to leave for the morning at least! The whole town is given over to a travelling market with endless stalls all selling the same very overpriced leather goods and jewellery etc. We located the marina but the only way to get there was to copy a local driver and to ignore the road closed signs and shoot down a closed access road which was fine until it lead us to a police road block. Sarah was despatched to enquire about access to the marina and they helpfully let us enter the nearby car park.

There is no doubt that this is a very pretty town and has much to commend it, but as it was heaving with people from all over the island, it was not much fun. The marina (who had refused our booking as they were full) resembled an old and crazed goldfish bowl and clearly is only a shadow of its former glory. Never have we have been so pleased to have been turned away as there is no security at all and the bars etc all surround the boats who cannot get any peace at all, day or night.

Had a coffee and headed north into the hinterland, with a view to driving up into the mountains vaguely towards a village called Tejeda. This turned out to be the absolute highlight of the entire visit to these islands. The road twists and climbs inexorably up a narrow road, frequently only just wide enough for one small vehicle, with breathtaking sheer drops falling away all around. We made frequent stops to photograph the incredible views and the winding road below us, but then only a mile or so further up, the view improved still further. Sadly low clouds began soon to diminish the photos, but upwards we still climbed. It was several hours of this before we found the village we were seeking, but we still had to find a way down into the village from the road we were on! We negotiated our way down a very narrow street much to the concern of a builder up a ladder and ended up in a wonderful little restaurant with a great view back across one of the valleys.

After our late lunch, James still felt that we had not had enough of an adventure and selected an equally exciting and unlikely return route which took us up and over another range of the mountains in the centre of the island. Here the contrast between different sides of the range was stunning, as we had risen up from bare brown rocks, to greener areas with fir trees and some cultivation and then suddenly it was all deciduous trees in their full autumn colours and swirling white clouds below us soaring upwards on thermals along with several large birds of prey!

We were very impressed with it all and the undoubted beauty of the island as well as the ability of our Nissan Pixo, but we could not help having a sneaking admiration of the odd hikers and cyclists who were doing all this under their own power.

By 6.00 pm we were safely back on board Serafina and sifting through the photos (which are never as good as the view that you hoped you had captured) to put on the website.

www.rhbell.com

You can't always get what you want.

28:28.03N 16:14.66W

Saturday 20th and Sunday 21st November

Saturday surprisingly busy as we firstly tested our Hypo Hoist recovery sling which is designed to help recover someone from the sea. We have had this device for years and installed fixing points on both sides of deck to deploy it when the boat was new, but somehow never actually tested it in anger. This was very helpful as it threw up a few problems and issues that needed resolving and modifications were required. Now I can honestly say that along with our session at sea the other day, there is a reasonable chance that we could cope fully with a man overboard situation when it is just the two of us on board! All we have to do now is remember it all.....

We fitted new shroud protectors (the old ones were badly UV degraded) and James and I worked out a way of using the jackstays and safety harnesses on Serafina to best effect, avoiding potential disasters when going forward on deck in seriously bad weather. Generally pretty obvious stuff in principal but as James keeps reminding us, a lot of the structures that we take for granted will get swept away or crushed when a body crashes against them along with a mountain of blue water!

Sounds a bit morbid really, but we both felt a good deal better for having gone through all this in a practical way and tested the theories for real.

We were all a bit weary in the evening and with the prospect of an early morning ahead, we retired to bed fairly early.

We can thoroughly recommend the marina at Pasito Blanco to other boaters as it is very quiet and pleasant as well as secure which is in marked contrast to the other marinas we saw during our travels on Thursday. However there is a strange and very strong surge that runs through the marina all the time and as it reaches high tide, this swell becomes very significant. All the boats then surge around and there is quite a bit of noise mostly from warps and knots straining as heavy boats snatch violently against their restraints. What was all the more surprising was that this happened despite there being virtually no wind or sea running outside.

Sunday started with us rising at 5.00am to slip our lines and make our way quietly out into the Atlantic for the 58 mile sail to Santa Cruz, Tenerife. The forecast was for very little wind

and so we wanted to get away early as we figured that we might be motoring most of the way.

Certainly there was little or no wind for the first few hours and this was sort of handy when at 8.10am we snagged a large clump of rope and fishing net around our propeller. We hove to and good old Sarah unearthed her wetsuit and went over the side to investigate. She saw the problem at once and so armed with a diving knife, she very quickly cut it free and in no time at all we were back on our way.

By 9.30am the wind was rising fast and we assumed that this might be an acceleration zone effect. We reefed the main and ploughed on into the wind and waves which were pretty much on the nose. Our luck changed then as the wind freed off a little and we were able to set the cutter rig and still make our heading for Santa Cruz. In no time we were flying along and we then enjoyed a wonderful sail the whole of the rest of the way, mostly at between 7 and 8 knots, taking a lot of water over the decks as it happens. The old issue of slightly leaking hatches raised its head again and we did have to rescue a few wet items as some small amounts of the sea crashing over the foredeck worked its way past the seals and into the forepeak. But despite this we had a fabulous sail over and the only shortcoming was my failure to catch a tuna, but in my defence it has to be said that the lures were barely in the water as we were sailing too fast for these rather light weight ones!

We met two very grand and impressive schooners sailing the opposite way to us and our collective coming together was rather overshadowed by a 950ft chemical tanker travelling at 19 knots that passed very close behind us all!

Just after 2.00pm we reluctantly dropped the sails to make our way into the marina which is huge and only part full and by 3.00pm we were putting the boat away with an eye on the forthcoming 'safe arrivals'. Santa Cruz Marina is one end of a very large commercial harbour and has lots of pontoons and stern-to moorings all behind a large mole which means it is very well protected indeed. Most of the boats here are poised to make an Atlantic crossing, but the added interest comes from the fact that its very size means that it is one of the very few places in the Canary islands that can host the very biggest yachts, so moored in front of us are several 100 ft plus sleek speedsters and their crews. Rather pleasing as well, is seeing an Oyster 65 looking very ordinary amongst such beauties. James is quite sure that he saw the Oyster skipper in tears on the phone to Super-yachts Anonymous.

Almost epic game of Mexican Train ended with James finally victorious just before we all fell fast asleep.

Knock on wood

Mon 22nd, Tues 23rd & Wed 24th Nov

On Monday morning we were joined by PG who is the specialist that Najad Yachts have sent out from Sweden to sort out the outstanding problems that we have had this season. We have met PG many times before both in Sweden and UK and so we very pleased to hear that it was him whom they were sending.

PG arrived along with several cases packed with tools and spares and all manner of bits that he might need.

The primary objective was the load creaking noises in two distinct areas and PG set about his tasks with good humour and plenty of enthusiasm and was not too fazed when we added quite a few other little jobs to his list!

The added excitement today was the arrival during the previous night of another 120 foot yacht. The poor Oyster (which we now discovered was actually 72 ft) was dwarfed by these huge boats who all had big crews on board and who appeared to be making preparations for a race as well as provisioning for an Atlantic crossing. It turned out that these monsters were taking part in a Trans-Atlantic race due to start here at 1.00pm (not much publicity for sure!) so James and Sarah set off on foot to get a good place along the sea wall to watch the big event. This turned out to be something of an anti climax as it was just the three super yachts taking part and the start line was quite a way offshore and total crowd watching the event numberedthree.

Disappointed with this, James and Sarah set off into town to try to locate some decent WiFi as there appears to be nothing here in the marina. This left me to watch PG giving a masterclass in how to dismantle a Najad 460 which meant that poor Sarah returned to find the boat pretty much upside down. In fact Serafina's saloon resembled a pit shaft with 4 pit props holding up a newly glued section of the ceiling. The effect was exaggerated by the fact that the props were bits of random broken planks and other bits of wood foraged from the skip area and screwed together. (photo to follow at www.rhbell.com)

This was also James's last day with us and so in the evening the three of us and Chris and Steve from Scott Free all went off in search of a decent restaurant. Clearly we started our search in the wrong place as we walked some distance up and down the hill that Santa Cruz is built on, before finding just about the only actual restaurant, right back in the square we had started! It turned out to be really good and we all enjoyed good meals and a wine that we are determined to track down in the supermarkets.

We hired a car on Tuesday so Sarah could take James to the airport (much cheaper than a taxi) leaving PG and me to continue our trail of destruction. In fact it had been hoped that there would be some decent wind so we could go out sailing and with the ceiling now removed, PG would hopefully be able to see if his remedial works had succeeded. Sadly there was no wind at all and so he set about some of his other tasks.

Sarah returned from the airport several hours later having run into exactly the same problems with the traffic system as PG. The marina is very well signposted once you get onto the service road along the front, but access to this is nearly impossible to find and is completely unmarked. Having got back, she then picked up Chris and they went off to explore El Corte Ingles and various supermarkets. By the end of the day PG had done all he could and with the forecast for no wind at all again tomorrow he decided to take the day off and spend some time with his wife who had come out with him for the week but who we have not met yet.

On Wednesday Sarah took advantage of PG's absence to tidy and clean Serafina and more exploration of the city revealed a number of chandlery shops as well as some of the usual suspects including an M & S Food hall. In the evening Steve and Chris came round for drinks and we discussed plans for the crossing as well as what might happen beyond.

(I can't get no) Satisfaction

Thurs 25th, Fri 26th and Sat 27th Nov.

As forecast there was at last a breeze this morning that meant we could go out sailing and see if PG's work had solved all the issues.

Steve from SF came along to help and around 10.00am we eased our way out of the marina and in no time were flying along at a respectable 6 knots close hauled. The news was mostly good, however there was still some creaking still coming from the aft cabin doorway which was a problem area for access.

We tacked and now on a port tack the noise increased. Nothing like it used to be, but not quite what we had hoped for! Poor PG spent some time below as the boat pitched through growing seas and a rising wind trying to locate the source of the noise, which was not easy for him as he gets very seasick down below due to an inner ear problem.

We returned to the marina where he set about improving the situation and then about an hour later, Steve, PG and I took Serafina out again for a second trial. The wind had got up now and we had a great but rather too brief sail as it was obvious that there was nothing PG was able to do to solve the problem. We returned a little disappointed all round and PG spent the rest of the day putting the ceiling panels back (with the correct adhesive this time). Sarah had meanwhile been visiting the chandleries and seen a sail maker about making a couple of items for us.

In the evening we were invited on board SF for dinner and Mexican Train – a 'to-be-completed game' where we are not winning....!

On Friday PG turned up for the last time to finish off the ceiling trims and a few other minor jobs around the boat. He left us at lunchtime looking very miserable as he was so upset about failing to solve all our issues. (Short of sailing back to Sweden there seems to be little that can be done at present – The problem is not at all serious, but just a little frustrating and would require major surgery to resolve possibly.) Nevertheless, we have been very impressed with Najad's new management's enthusiasm for righting previous errors.

We secured Serafina with additional lines and springs in preparation for the storm we have heading our way over the weekend and the start of next week.

Saturday was very much an administration day as Sarah spent the entire day in front of her computer planning menus and shopping for four persons for four weeks. I too found plenty to do but did have time to follow via the internet, England losing to South Africa at rugby.

Worse still sounds like I will be getting some emails from Australia shortly unless our cricketers pull off a small miracle!

Another warm day (26 degrees) and it seems so odd seeing the city putting up their Merry Christmas bunting in the sunshine (particularly when we are hearing the woeful stories of the UK weather). The wind picked up on Friday night to give us a little foretaste of what might be coming. This marina is not too good a place to be (but there are few options on this island) when the storms blow up from the south so we are all bracing ourselves (and our boats) against the sea surges and strong gusts expected.

Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head

Sunday 28th, Mon 29th & Tuesday 30th Nov

Well pretty much as promised the forces of hell were unleashed, but it was a curious build up. We had seen the synoptic charts showing big winds from the south and were braced for the wind and some possible surge from the southerly seas, but on the Sunday there was no wind at all, but the marina became close to untenable as an extraordinary surge and swell developed causing all the boats to roll and pitch violently. The pontoons became roller coasters and I just wish I had had a video camera to record them as they snaked up and down their full lengths. As you walked alongside the quay you were sometimes above the ground at waist height and then plunged to a foot below the ground!

We had put out extra ropes to secure Serafina and to try to hold her away from the short pontoon finger that was on our downwind side and in the main this worked well but since she was now not firmly attached to the finger, it allowed her to roll dramatically. Somehow this seemed preferable to fixing her tightly to the finger which like all the rest of the structures was rising and falling several metres with every surge.

The noise became very unpleasant as the pontoons all grated against their securing piles and all the boats strained violently against their ropes. As night drew in and the tide rose it all became even more unpleasant and everyone was prepared for very little sleep and still the wind had not started!

We were not wrong as we endured a long sleepless night although the wind when it came never got above 45 knots. Monday was a long day where working on deck was pretty much out of the question but the good news was that the forecast wind and rain was nothing like as bad as forecast. (All the schools were closed for the day and most shops chose to only open for a few hours as a precaution.) Sarah has drawn up menus, a detailed shopping list and a careful plan for how we hope to pack all this food into the available space. All of which is fine but we also have two crew joining us on Thursday (Robert and Joyce Forsdike) for the crossing and they may want to have somewhere to sleep!

The surging and rolling continued all day and by the early evening as it came to the top of the tide it seemed as bad as Sunday night again. Several boats had had to move during the day because their pontoon had begun to break up but the good news was that during the night

as the wind came round to the north the conditions began to ease and we did at least get a reasonable amount of sleep.

On Tuesday morning the surge had reduced significantly but the wind kept up and we now had torrential rain to cheer us up. We had to collect the car that we have hired with Chris and Steve from the ferry port and this involved a walk in the driving rain which was quite a novelty. Once we had the car we all went up to the huge Carrefour Hypermarket so that Sarah and Chris could start their provisioning (non perishables). This should have been simple enough but the traffic system here is nothing short of a complete mystery to us all. Not helped by the fact, that yet again in our travels we have arrived at a port where they are rebuilding the front – and there are no signs to the one and only entry road that eventually leads to the marina, which Sarah eventually discovered after circumnavigating the city for an hour last Thursday. Wonderful roads but the entire city is one way and there is little to guide or help the visitor. Steve and I set off back to the marina with the first load of water, milk and some drink but firstly tried to locate a gas depot that would refill Steve's Calor bottle. We had directions but they turned out to be a work of fiction and after endless stops for further advice and endless laps of the 'Buenos Aires' district of Santa Cruz we finally located the unit, only for them to turn us away saying that they could not (or would not) fill the bottle. We eventually got back to the marina just in time for me to turn round and return to Carrefour to fetch Sarah and Chris and all their shopping.

The sun came out in the afternoon and there were some very impressive rainbows and by the evening everything had pretty much settled down at last.

Just for the record, the plan as it stands is for us to head south to the Cape Verde islands leaving here on Wednesday 8th December. That is a trip of around 860 miles and should take 6 days or so. We intend to stop there for a couple of days before heading west to Barbados arriving there around New Years day or perhaps a little later. Of course this is not like catching a bus and we will have to keep a careful eye on the weather systems before we commit to leaving!

The Road to Hell

Wed 1st, Thurs 2nd & Fri 3rd Dec.

On Wednesday along with Chris and Steve we set off to explore the island in our hire car and in keeping with tradition purchased a wholly inadequate road map. We headed north into the Anaga mountains and once again found ourselves driving up narrow twisting roads, climbing ever higher before plunging down to a tiny village beside the sea, where cars were not frequently seen judging by the way the locals strolled in the road. After a coffee, we headed back up into the hills and made our way westwards and as usual got lost once or twice due mainly to the absence of road numbers on our map. In one town we found ourselves returning to a roundabout on the outskirts four times, each time from a different direction!

Eventually we ended up down in the south at Garachico where we had lunch in the town which was pretty busy with likeminded tourists.

Next stop was a visit to Masca which is a little village which is almost inaccessible and remote. This sounded just the job and so Sarah took over the driving from me and off we set. When they say that was hard to get to, they meant a very narrow road twisting and turning as tightly as any of the tortuous roads we have been on over the past month. Added to this was the other traffic, mostly heading back up out of the valley which made this a very difficult drive. But the clincher were the coaches also coming the other way which forced us to edge right up hard against the cliff face as they inched past us! Sarah endured an hour of this before gratefully handing the driving duties back to me.

Masca itself was in a very impressive setting although the village is given over, inevitably, to tourist shops; but we had coffee and ice creams in a very nice cafe before we set off back out of the valley. There were endless photo opportunities all through the day and we will be posting a selection of ours at www.rhbell.com none of which really do justice to the beauty of the place, but the most impressive sight has to be the massive snow capped volcano in the very centre of the island. El Teide is remarkably the highest peak in Spain and (apparently) one of the highest volcanoes in the world.

Last stop on the road trip was a visit to the awesome Acantilados de Los Gigantes which are huge cliffs climbing an impressive 600 metres vertically from the sea.

We then headed for home which was a very long way off, but fortunately we soon found the new motorway and had a fast run through the early evening back to Santa Cruz. However, along the way we did get something of a cultural shock when we came across the Playa de las Americas and Los Cristianos which are huge modern resorts with the entire landscape covered in sprawling white apartments and housing. It is the most astonishing contrast with the northern part of the island.

On Thursday I drove to the airport to collect Robert and Joyce Forsdike who are sailing with us on Serafina to Barbados. They had started their journey around 2.00am as they were driven to Stanstead which thankfully remained open (Gatwick and Manchester were both shut due to heavy snow) and arrived tired and blinking into the bright sunshine here. Very sportingly they emerged from customs both wearing very new baseball caps with the word 'Crew' emblazoned across the front.

We had a flawless journey back to the boat and this must be recorded as the first trip on Tenerife where we did not take at least one wrong turning! The day sort of drifted away as they were both tired and after we had caught up on news they had a much needed snooze. Steve and Chris joined us in the evening for drinks and after supper cooked by Sarah we all had a fairly early night.

Friday was a return to business as usual and Robert F got involved straight away firstly soldering and repairing a lead for the computers before undertaking an oil and filter change for the generator and various other jobs in the engine room all of which allowed him to satisfy himself that the mechanical side of Serafina was in good shape. Sarah and Joyce made various sorties into the city visiting various stores and markets as well as Carrefour and El Corte Ingles, armed with the menu plans. The day just slipped away and it was 7.30pm when

we had showers and wandered into town to visit first the Cafe Atlantico who have excellent WiFi (we drank wine whilst Sarah downloaded another 'Audible' book and I updated various websites) after which we went to Restaurant Olympto for a very nice meal.

The latest weather forecasts look a lot more promising with every indication that once this weekend's storm passes through, we could see the trade winds setting in from Cape Verde islands across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. The only downside still is that we are being promised headwinds for the first few days out of Tenerife which will make us rethink things a bit. However the biggest setback to our departure date at the moment is the discovery on Friday that next Monday and Wednesday (or possibly Thursday!) are bank holidays here which messes up all the planned visits to the fruit and veg market and purchase of perishable foods. So the actual departure day is still open for discussion, but may now be Thursday 9th Dec.

Here we go again

Sat 4th, Sun 5th & Mon 6th Dec

Well, as predicted the next band of low pressure arrived over the weekend and with it came winds from the south and the inevitable big swell ravaged the marina again. This time the winds were very ordinary, but the swell in here was every bit as bad as last weekend and on Saturday night neither Sarah nor I got much sleep as we surged and rolled in the extraordinary conditions. Remarkably Robert and Joyce had a pretty good night in the forepeak which seems to be insulated against the worst of the noise and effects of the swell.

On Saturday we all were involved in preparations with Robert and I servicing and maintaining deck gear and equipment at the mast whilst Sarah and Joyce went off to investigate meat and other purchasing options. The swell made the evening pretty unpleasant and we had a fairly early night.

On Sunday Robert F Set about fitting a very smart LED lighting strip under the fronts of the galley cupboards which has been a fantastic improvement to the galley, both for normal use and during passages. In the afternoon the four of us plus Steve headed off in our hire car to the big retail park on the road to La Laguna with the express purpose of buying Steve and me wetsuits. (Seems Sarah would like me to be the one to do propeller clearance etc. when in the mid Atlantic surrounded by sharks!) This turned out to be quite a comedy show as both Steve and I rather liked to believe that we are both very much more svelte than we really are! Poor Sarah was despatched back to the rails again and again to collect ever larger wet suits as Steve and I tried to wrestle ourselves into them! Eventually we both settled on suitable suits that both fitted and were fairly easy to get on and off in a hurry, although in both cases we still seem to need an assistant. Later in the afternoon Robert F did mention that he thought I looked pretty good for my age in a wetsuit, which as comments go, might have been nicer for me if it had come from either Sarah or Joyce.

In the evening Steve and Chris joined us on Serafina for drinks, dinner and a session of Mexican Train.

We had a better night in terms of sleeping as the swell did seem to have eased a bit, but by the morning it reappeared with a vengeance.

On Monday Robert F was put to work again using all his electrical engineering skills and he made various modifications including completing the installation of the Broadband satellite phone and internet system. The big surge continued all day and if anything had got worse again by the evening although there still was no wind at all.

We have been putting our new Lava vacuum packer to work over the past few days and hopefully this will all prove invaluable during the trip across the Atlantic. It allows us to pack all manner of foods down into much smaller units and also protects stuff from damp and damage. There have been a few debates as to what items we can vacuum pack and unlike Scott-Free we have drawn the line at tea bags!

There has been feverish activity in the main square of the city, just across the main road from us here in the marina. They have been constantly draining and cleaning the central fountains and pond area all the time we have been here and it now transpires that for the first time ever they are hoping to freeze the whole thing and create a public ice rink (yes I know that it is nearly 28 degrees here) in time for Christmas.

One other feature of Santa Cruz is the remarkable amount of cruise ships that call in here. We have had four different ones lined along the quay almost every day this week which makes for an awful lot of tourists thronging the streets. What does seem a little cruel is that the last ship to arrive each day is moored at the end of the line of ships and the passengers, who it has to be said are not always the fittest of individuals, end up walking miles before they get anywhere near the shops and city centre.

Latest weather forecasts show that we may have to delay our departure until Saturday or perhaps even Sunday. There is not a lot of wind around, but until then it is all coming from the south which is exactly the way we have to head to get to the cape verde islands and one thing is for sure neither us nor Scott-free have any intention of setting off tacking upwind with so far to go!

You Got Me Rocking

Tues 7th. Wed 8th & Thurs 9th Dec

Endless southerly wind have made this marina a very unpleasant experience and when the strong winds returned on Thursday we really copped a big swell and several of our dock lines parted in the big surges.

Kept ourselves busy though in our various ways with Sarah co-ordinating her highly organised provisioning schedule. It has been 'interesting' trying not only to source all the provisions but getting some stuff frozen and other stuff vacuum packed. Friday sees the final bits of the jigsaw coming together with the buying of the fresh veg from the market, where Sarah has been busy with her phrase book grooming one of the traders to give us the best stuff! Adding to the fun has been the complication of two bank holidays this week alone

(Monday & Wednesday). You have to hand it to the Spanish, as they really know how to break up a working week/month.

Robert F has been an absolute hero getting any number of jobs done to his very high standards and it has been quite an education working as his assistant! I have sort of been dreading this part of the preparations as I feared what Robert F would have to say when he inspected some of my electrical installations, but so far he has not been too critical and he seems reassured that Serafina is in pretty good shape.

I think we all have had enough of this place now (and I include all the other yachts of various nationalities here) and are just dying to get off and be on our way. The wind is due to calm down a bit tomorrow and hopefully swing round a bit to the west, so with luck the big seas will subside. We have enjoyed Santa Cruz, particularly from the provisioning point of view as well as it being a busy, attractive town (with many sculptures like other Spanish towns we have visited) that doesn't just cater for tourists. But sadly we have not enjoyed the marina at all. There is practically no protection from southerly winds or seas and it gets very uncomfortable, if not downright dangerous. There certainly is very little of the security that is supposed to be in place – we rarely see any dockside crew at all; and the girls in the office are of a pretty surly disposition (but a view of the back of a row of containers from their office can't help!).

Many thanks to all those of you who have kindly sent us emails wishing us well and a Merry Christmas! We have not been able to reply to everyone but we are very grateful.

Minor hiccup was the discovery that we do not have the Cape Verde Islands on any of our electronic charts which has set us a small challenge. We have a pilot book, our chart plotter has the islands in rough outline and Joyce has downloaded a tourist office App for her iPhone which along with its built-in GPS gives us a surprising amount of detail! This will certainly be a destination we enter during daylight hours. All my fault as I had not really considered that we might need the electronic chart for Africa to get from the Canaries to Barbados!

We have struggled also with a very poor and intermittent WiFi service. It seems to work near perfectly when you need to pay for another 5 days of service, but as soon as you sign up, it dies. This has meant trips to the Cafe Atlantico to use their 'free' service, but there is a limit to how many cups of Cafe Con Leche one can drink. The solution has been an internet cafe that Sarah found and we are fast becoming their top patrons.

Steve from Scott-Free has meanwhile been developing quite a relationship with the city's three chandleries with almost twice daily visits to them all. We have not been much better ourselves but I am certain that they will all be dockside on Saturday morning to wave goodbye to their best customer and new best friend! In fact they have all been very helpful and friendly and although we are constantly cycling across the city to visit them, we are mostly only buying quite small low cost items.

One Potato, two potato

26:40.4N 17:40.3W

Fri 10th & Sat 11th Dec

Friday was the day Sarah's plans all came together with the final big shop at the veg market. Joyce and Robert F went with her to help and reappeared several hours later in a taxi laden with fruit and veg. A lot of comment was passed about the huge volume of potatoes that had been purchased and certainly when it was all laid out on the pontoon, it did seem that she might have slightly over catered on the spuds. In the end we gave some away to S-F and a French family who are planning to leave in a day or so as well.

All the veg was washed, dried and carefully packed away on board hopefully in a way that will make it last better and be accessible as we go along. Sarah finally began to look a whole lot more relaxed as we came to the end of the day and everything was deemed to be ready for our departure in the morning and to round things off nicely, the wind swung round to the north as predicted. We had a light supper (baked potatoes) and an early night.

Saturday dawned bright and sunny and at 8.00am we helped S-F untie their lines and set off, then we slipped our own lines and headed out of the marina. Sadly we had to head north first, just a few miles to another small harbour to take on fuel, so it was around 9.30am that we finally set off on a south westerly heading for the Cape Verde Islands.

Glorious sunshine but almost no wind and it was coming from the south west! We ended up motoring and motor sailing for most of the day and night with just a few hours of sailing properly whenever the wind picked up a little.

Sarah spotted and photographed two short finned pilot whales who were cruising along across our track. To her surprise they stopped and let us sail through before resuming their trip! In the early evening we saw quite a bit of lightning over the Canary Islands and the distant African coast and had our own little rain clouds for a while. The night sky was beautiful and largely clear (Sarah would beg to differ: her midnight watch had hardly any moon or starlight and endless thunder clouds but she did see a couple of dolphins) and shooting stars were very much the main features of interest. There were a few ships around and a couple of large yachts (148ft and 112ft) that crossed our track but otherwise a pretty empty sea. Scott-Free are just a few miles behind us at present and we keep in touch by radio at least once a day.

The Fish

23:18.66N 20:20.69W

Sun 12th & Mon 13th Dec

Firstly i should explain that the use of the engine on Saturday was mainly because the weather forecasts all showed that we needed to be a good 300 miles south of the Canaries as soon as possible and with virtually no wind (and that was on the nose) we like others resorted to the 'iron topsail'. As it has turned out the forecast has changed now and instead of meeting big headwind later in the week, it now suggests a complete absence of wind altogether due to a strong blow sweeping across the Atlantic just to the north of us. Hey ho, we will just have to see what turns up!

The second important point I must make is to highlight the wonderful service we had from Nautica Nordeste which is one of three very helpful chandleries in Santa Cruz, Tenerife. When I came to realise that our electronic charts did not include Cape Verde I went off in search of the correct electronic chart card (Africa) but to no avail. I then asked about paper charts as a back up to what we did have and again drew a blank everywhere.

Then on Friday night just as we were about to settle down to supper and an early night, we heard a voice calling for the captain. When I emerged I found the main man from the Nordeste chandlery standing there. He asked if we still needed a chart and when I said yes, he very excitedly told me that he had just had a parcel delivered as he was closing the shop in the evening, which had come from Imray maps and with luck there might be a Cape Verde chart enclosed. Together we went up to his van parked by the marina office and sure enough when he cut through the tape, there amongst this old back order was the very chart we needed. That really is going the extra mile for a sale!

As it happens, Nordeste are also the agents for Air Breeze and Air X wind turbines and they were involved in a very complicated arrangement involving the American manufacturers, the German distributors, an incompetent Turkish agent and ourselves. Very simply the Turkish agent took it upon himself to supply the wrong turbine which we had installed in Marmaris last April. We were not aware of the change to our order until we were sailing from Israel to Malta and complained about how noisy the unit was, only to be told by the Americans that we had the Air X which is noisy! We protested that we had ordered the Air Breeze (identical casting), our paperwork indicating exactly that but the reality was different! So we asked what could be done. They replied that they would put the problem in the hands of the German distributor for Europe and that they would undertake to replace the unit with a brand new correct one. Much easier said than done with us sailing remorselessly across the Med and then out into the Atlantic on our way to the Caribbean. However the arrangements were made and despite my reservations about all this really happening, two engineers working for Nordeste turned up in Santa Cruz Marina, Tenerife armed with the new correct unit..... except that it wasn't quite the right unit as the Turkish agent had supplied incorrect information as well and so these guys were standing there with a 12 volt unit, but Serafina is 24 volts. One phone call later and the engineers were driving south across the island to meet their boss who was now heading north from the far end and they exchange units in a car park half-way and a couple of hours later we had our new wind turbine in place. As I said above – wonderful service.

So back to the trip. We motored slowly through Saturday night until around 6 am on Sunday morning when there was just enough breeze to spare us any more of the engine and with the full cutter rig set we began sailing again. Our speed varied from 2 knots to 5 knots at first but gradually through the day the wind increased and we reached a respectable 8 knots before it began to die again. It was around 3 pm that we caught our first Mahi Mahi which is a superb, very colourful fish renowned for its very tasty firm white flesh. R & J were treated to our well rehearsed landing, gutting and chopping up routine although it was slightly different from dealing with a tuna – Sarah had her first fairly successful attempt at filleting. (Where were you Lesley when we needed you?)

As we settled into the night watches the wind eased and came further round to our stern making progress very slow and noisy as the sails and spars banged and shuddered as Serafina continued to roll in the Atlantic swell without the breeze to steady her. At 2 am we decided to

revert to the engine for a few hours, but as dawn broke there was barely 5 knots of breeze, but it was at least a beautiful sunny day.

Around 10 am were visited by possibly as many as 20 Atlantic Spotted dolphins who spent quite a while playing under and around our bow before carrying on their journey.

We listened into the Rum Runners Radio Net on the SSB and although we could hear everyone clearly, we were unable to transmit our position and details to them all as our SSB radio does not seem to like the 6000 MHz frequency; we had been warned that this was likely to occur by the Maltese engineer. What they were all saying was that they too had despaired of the lack of wind and were mostly motoring gently at the moment.

The day stayed gloriously sunny but the wind remained fairly elusive until the early evening when despite the prediction for a light and variable breeze, we were treated to a good 15 knots from the east which allowed us to record an impressive 70 miles in 12 hours.

Talk to the Animals

19:27.1N 23:05.9W

Tuesday 14th & Wednesday 15th Dec

We had good sailing conditions through the night and by morning we were racing along at 7 knots but through the day this died away yet again and we ended the afternoon motor sailing gently to try to keep up the mileage.

At 6.30pm we were visited by several quite rare Rough Toothed Dolphins who have a rather more prehistoric appearance and unusually are quite audible with their chatter. Joyce chatted and squeaked back as she believes this can bring them to the surface but eventually they dived straight down instead of peeling off through the waves – another idiosyncratic movement particular to these dolphins. We motor sailed on through the night and R & J were woken around 2.30 am by the sound of the dolphins chattering outside the hull! There was a concern during the night watches when we were approached and shadowed for a while by an unlit vessel which we hoped was just a fishing boat and certainly later in the early hours of Wednesday we were tracking three fishing boats on the radar and sometimes visually. As a precaution R & J darkened the yacht for an hour and eventually it disappeared off our radar.

The wind began to rise around 5.30am and by 6.00am we were back sailing again. Gradually during the morning the wind continued to rise, but very unhelpfully it was coming from completely the wrong direction (again) and we were forced to sail close hauled and could not get within 50 degrees of our chosen course. The forecast had the wind veering all morning and so we stayed on a starboard tack until it had come round sufficiently for us to tack onto a new course which was at least due south. The sea was very unpleasant by now with a short chop running against the long Atlantic swell which resulted in waves that stopped us stone dead as Serafina buried her bows into them sending a wall of water rushing over the decks.

The sky then darkened and fearing a line squall Sarah insisted we reefed the main. This we completed just as the wind hit us and we then had an hour or two of 30 plus knots which had us flying along still at 6 to 7 knots when we were not semi-submerged in the next set of waves. The strong wind and cloud passed over and we were left with a good sail but the

confused heavy sea remained and so progress was fairly slow as we still kept coming to an almost dead stop every so often as we were still sticking our bows into the waves.

By late afternoon the wind had dropped right away to barely 5 knots leaving us wallowing now in the seas which were at least a lot flatter. We once again resorted to the engine so we could at least ease the ride. We had a quiet night gently motor sailing through to 5.00am when the wind had risen again to allow us to resume sailing. In no time we briskly cutting through the flat seas at speeds up to 8.5 knots and to our relief, this was to continue into Thursday.

We have chatted each day with Scott-Free on the SSB radio and the main topic of conversation has been the unseasonal and unpredictable winds and wind direction. It is supposed to be blowing a steady force 5 or 6 from the NE but we have had absolutely everything except that! Equally there is supposed to be a current running south parallel to the African coast, but that has been running east, west and north, but rarely south. Finally the rolling Atlantic waves are meant to be marching relentlessly from the north west but again we have almost everything else but what we wanted. The weather forecasts change every day and so planning ahead of 24 hours has proved to be a mistake as we have several times made decisions that we have regretted later.

This is beginning to present a problem for R & J as we were prevented from leaving Tenerife for three days because of the weather and we are now behind our planned schedule and they are fast running out of time for their proposed return to the UK from Barbados. As things stand they may now have to fly home from the Cape Verde Islands which will be a huge disappointment for them, but they realise that it would be unfair of them to put pressure on us to complete the Atlantic crossing by a very fixed date in January.

16:53.21N 24:58.48W

Gone Fishing

Thursday 16th, Friday 17th and Sat 18th (morning)

Arrived at Sao Vincente Island in the Cape Verde island Archipelago at 0800 hrs UT

Thursday dawned with the sea a lot calmer and a good fresh breeze blowing from the north west. We were making a good 6 + knots through the water under our full cutter rig and around 1000 hrs Sarah announced that we could try a bit of fishing again! We put out just the one line and 3 minutes later the rod was bent double and the line was screaming out against the drum brake.

We had to furl the stay sail and let the main fly to try to slow Serafina down to allow us to play and recover the fish, which proved pretty exciting. We managed to reduce our speed down to 3 knots and Robert F and I watched in awe as a big Mahi Mahi leapt from the sea about 60 metres behind us. As I wound the line in further, the fish on the end (a beautifully bright coloured Mahi Mahi) also leapt out clear of the water along with its mate again. Finally we brought the captured fish aboard and were delighted to have a 5 kg Mahi Mahi.

We will be posting a photo shortly at www.rhbell.com but sadly their colour subdued dramatically after death.

The wind continued to blow steadily all day and we were rewarded with some superb sailing and managed to put a load of miles under our belts.

Sadly Friday saw all the wind die away again and careful calculations showed that we had no chance of arriving at Mindelo, Sao Vicente Island before the late evening, so we shortened sail and settled down to a slow day sailing and occasionally motor sailing so that we would arrive in the Cape Verde Islands at dawn on Saturday. This made for a long tedious day and since R & J now knew they had to return to UK (and work) they got Joyce's son, Thomas, to book them flights home which were arranged for Monday 20th Dec. Since Robert F really wanted to catch a fish himself, we put our both lines all day but sadly we caught nothing at all (probably going too slowly now) but to make things worse, when he recovered one of the lines, he found the lure missing altogether so he genuinely now had a story of the one that got away!

The sea was relatively flat in that there was absolutely no wind at all through the afternoon, however the huge Atlantic rollers continued to tower over us as they bore down and then passed smoothly under us, raising us up and then dropping us down into their deep troughs. They are very impressive and rather intimidating (even without a breaking crest) as you try not to imagine what their immense power would be like in bad weather.

Sarah had another visit by dolphins during her night watch— at least 18 Atlantic Spotted dolphins bow rode for over an hour. She crept forward (this time well attached to the boat by her harness) and sat and watched them. The sea was so glassy that the dolphins seemed to be flying rather than swimming and disturbing what appeared to be squid that fluorescently lit up.

A long still night meant that we all managed to sleep well on our periods off-watch and just before we dawn we approached the gap between the islands of Sao Vincente and Santo Antao. Here we saw the lights of several other yachts heading the same way and soon they all seemed to fall in behind us, trusting us to lead them in. This was a case of the blind leading the blind as we had no electronic chart to guide us, but we pressed on using the old fashioned methods of a paper chart and the Mark 1 eyeball.

As dawn broke we were rewarded with a fantastic view of these two dramatic and beautiful islands, one very high and across the small channel, the other much lower, as we made our way into the busy anchorage at Mindelo and on past the main port to the new 'marina'.

Our calls on the VHF went unanswered but we saw Stardust (USA) anchored nearby and they confirmed that the fuel dock would open soon, so we headed in and found a member of the marina staff standing on the quay watching us approach. We tied up on the fuel pontoon and he told us that it would open in one hour and that after filling we could take any place we liked in the marina. This turned out to be a good decision by us as by the time it opened there were 5 more yachts that had followed us in all waiting for fuel and they had a further wait as

we were not allowed to leave the fuel dock until Sarah, 3rd in the queue, had done the full check-in and paid for the fuel in the marina office!

Having topped up the tanks we moored up in the marina using their lazy lines and I headed off on foot with Joyce to find Customs and Immigration to check us and Serafina into the country and to arrange visas for R & J as they are of course now leaving the boat and flying home. As we left the secure compound of the marina we were immediately accosted by some 'boat boys' who want to help and show you around etc. etc. but we put them off for now. We found the Police and Immigration office about half a mile away and were very lucky to find a helpful officer sitting in the office who was prepared to help us as strictly speaking the office was shut over the weekend. We completed all the formalities in good time and returned to Serafina where we all sat down to a light lunch and 'safe arrivals' which was a bottle of fizzy for Sarah, Joyce and myself and an ice cold tonic for Robert F.

So this is Christmas

Sat 18th (pm), Sun 19th and Mon 20th Dec

Saturday afternoon was fairly relaxed and we all took naps as we had decided that since R & J would not now be with us on Christmas Day, we should have the planned Xmas meal etc. tonight. Sarah put up the Christmas decorations and cooked us the steaks she had bought in Santa Cruz. Sadly these were not quite as nice pieces of meat as had been hoped but we all had a wonderful time and crackers were pulled and presents exchanged, and our imported Xmas Pudding eaten. The night was less pleasant as there was a party being held in the nearest bar (very modern and European) which played VERY loud music until nearly 6.00 am in the morning.

Sunday dawned hot and still with a clear blue sky and our first task was to go out and take Scott-Free's lines as she glided into the marina around 9.00 am. They had had another still night, but we were able to assure them that they had more sleep than us! After several glasses of Buck's Fizz on board S-F (Safe Arrivals) we all repaired to Serafina where Sarah and Joyce cooked all 6 of us a wonderful breakfast of bacon, tomatoes and scrambled egg. Eventually we went about getting various jobs done around Serafina, then after a very light lunch the four of us had a stroll into Mindelo to take a good look around. Being Sunday it was almost totally deserted and as this is no holiday destination, there was nothing much open. We did however end up back at the little harbour and went to the bar and swimming pool area which had hosted last night's party and enjoyed a few cold poolside soft drinks. The restaurant looked good and we resolved to return here for dinner.

Chris and Steve off S-F came round for drinks in the evening before we all headed off to the restaurant and enjoyed a great evening considerably enhanced by the attentions of our waiter Joseph who hails from Senegal.

Monday was cloudy and warm, but not unpleasantly hot which made the chore of packing etc. less onerous for R & J. I headed back to Immigration and the maritime police offices to now check Sarah, myself and Serafina out of the country. I was the first person there which was handy as we knew that a lot of the yachts here plan to leave at the same time as us on

Tuesday. (The authorities are closing down for Christmas on Wednesday so no boats would be able to leave until 5th Jan) As before the officers were all very pleasant and helpful although I did wonder if they knew how busy they were going to be today.

The town was a very different place now with a huge mass of humanity crowding every street and square. It is quite evident that the indigenous population is very poor and most seem to scratch very meagre livings. There are large numbers of police officers everywhere but at no time did we feel at all threatened or concerned. The police presence is mostly to deter petty crime for which these islands used to be known and generally everyone is civil if not overtly friendly.

The islands still use the old Portuguese Escudo as currency, but conveniently accept Euros at a fixed rate of 110 Escudos to one Euro. Language is more of a challenge to us as the official language is Portuguese, but most also use Creole to converse and French if you are lucky. I was very naive and somehow expected Cape Verde to be another small piece of Europe and was not at all prepared to find myself in a very African country.

During the morning a ferry arrived and the waterfront came to a virtual standstill as lorries and pick-ups packed with produce stacked impossibly high and with people perched precariously on top made their way through the colourful throng of foot passengers that choked the streets.

We went into town for a simple lunch and the day sort of drifted away with the main focus being on R & J's departure and flight home – assuming the UK freed itself from the grip of snow and ice. Their trip involves flying at 11 pm from this island down to Santiago where the main airport is. From there they fly to Lisbon and then on to Heathrow..... which was closed still. Their taxi arrived 5 minutes early and whisked them away leaving us to contemplate the full significance of crossing the Atlantic with just the two of us on board.

16:51.03N 27:09.10W

We are going to Barbados

Tuesday 21st Dec

Spent the morning getting Serafina ready for the crossing and after a light lunch ashore with Chris and Steve from Scott-Free, we both slipped our lines around 4.00pm and headed out of the harbour and into the Atlantic Ocean.

The wind was blowing between 20 and nearly 30 knots and the sea was quite uncomfortable at first, but heavily reefed to start with, we still made very good progress south from Sao Vicente Island and then turned west for the Caribbean. Two other yachts followed a little way behind and we know that there are several others ahead of us that left in the morning.

After dark the wind dropped briefly whilst we were in the lee of the last of the Cape Verde Islands and then returned with all the power of earlier. This precipitated our first crisis but fortunately Sarah spotted it just in time. One of the zips holding the bimini onto its frame had broken open and we were about to lose the canvas in the strong wind. She grabbed the cover and called to wake me and get me up on deck to help. Together we tacked the yacht onto an

easier ride in the waves and effectively hove to so we could get the bimini removed from its frame. I wish I could say that this was a straightforward and easy exercise but even with all the deck lights blazing and the boat fairly still in the confused sea, it still all got a little exciting!

However we eventually got the bimini off the frame and tied the frame itself up safely before tacking back onto our original course and resumed sailing.

The wind continued to gust up to 30 knots all night, but as we were on a broad reach and heavily reefed still, we were making between 6 and 8 knots hour after hour. The seas are anything but pleasant and very confused which makes for a very uncomfortable ride and just for good measure, every so often a rogue wave hits the hull side-on and fills the cockpit with spray and we discovered in the morning that one had also delivered an unsuspecting flying fish on to the deck – a 6” specimen had arrived, and it was very interesting to check out the wings.

Stitch in Time

16:45.5N 31:20.4W

Wed 22nd & Thurs 23rd Dec

Wednesday continued just as the night that preceded it, with the wind blowing a steady 20 – 25 knots generally from the ENE which meant that we were on a very broad reach, just off a run.

We made excellent time racking up 154 miles in 24 hours and constantly able to keep to our rumb line.

In the mid afternoon we were joined by a dozen or more Atlantic Spotted dolphins who at first seemed rather shy, but gradually became more and more friendly and ended up with them riding our bow as if Serafina was actually on their backs. They stayed playing and showing off for about 40 minutes before disappearing as suddenly as they had arrived.

As the day wore on, the wind began to veer making it impossible to maintain our chosen course so we gradually edged our way north of the line. Scott-Free were just a couple of miles away throughout the day and gradually a third yacht overhauled us both and by dark had vanished over the short horizon.

The wind and seas eased quite a bit in the night and to reduce the problem of the headsail slapping, we reefed it heavily and sheeted it hard . This still allowed us to make reasonable speed although we continued to slip further and further north of the rumb line.

In the morning we took a VHF call from S-F who now had a problem. They had gone forward on deck to put out their downwind poles and found that a large part of the yankee headsail's UV sacrificial strip had come unstitched and needed urgent repair. They were just telling us that they planned to heave-to (stop) and take the sail down and sew it up. This is OK with no wind in a marina, but bobbing around several hundred miles out into the Atlantic

Ocean is less appealing. During the night we had sailed quite a bit faster than them and so we were nearly 12 miles ahead of them and with knowledge that they were now going to stop altogether we immediately decided to turn round and sail back towards them. We had always planned to make this crossing together and we were hardly in a position to help each other being so far apart so heading back was an easy choice. Serafina is quite a bit faster on most points of sailing being longer than S-F so it is rather up to us to make the effort to check our speed and stay in touch. This support works both ways as it is very reassuring to see a mast light by night and their sails by day with so little else around.

It was nearly 3 hours before we caught sight of their mast and it was at this point that they announced that the repair had been made, but now they had to get the sail back onto its furler which is a deal harder than getting it down! Sarah decided that she could usefully spend this time repairing the tear and the zip on our bimini cover and so she spent the next hour or so stitching some cloth in and when she had finished we put it back up on its frame which was a great relief as it was very hot without its shade all day.

We rigged our downwind sails and potted along slowly to let S-F catch us up but again the wind thwarted us and we ended up sailing all night with just a reefed main on a broad reach whilst they slowly overhauled us.

Around 5.00 am we were all back in action as a large cargo ship 'Cape Spencer', seemed to have decided that the Atlantic was not quite big enough for them to make their way round us and seemed intent on running both us and Scott-Free down (their CPA Closest Point of Approach was 0-24 feet!). Sarah radioed the bridge and asked if they had seen us on their radar and AIS, and after a short pause they were able to confirm this and agreed that they would alter course to pass behind us. In the event they did no such thing but opted to pass in front of us, but without telling us of this change of heart. This certainly put them on a new course to avoid us by a small margin but they seemed to be ignoring S-F now! Steve called them and asked their intentions and they acknowledged his position and said that they would avoid him, but he was back on the radio after a few minutes to complain that they were still coming far too close for safety. In the end the ship did alter course again and as they passed by, they called Steve up and seemed to be hoping for a grateful 'thank you' but they got a rather frosty response from S-F which was, not surprisingly, a little short on Christmas cheer!

We had three flying fish on the decks during the night – not sure why we bothered to bring the rods..... They were fairly small but as they skitter down the deck, they obligingly shed loads of surprisingly large scales.

Merry Christmas

16:27.6N 35:42.3W

Fri 24th & Sat 25th Dec

Thursday was a fairly straightforward day as we made reasonable speed and managed a pretty good course as the wind swung from east to north east and back several times. This forced us to keep changing the headsail configuration but at least kept us from getting too bored.

Highlight of the day was spotting a breaching humpback whale in the distance behind us, sadly not close enough for a photo, but pleasingly far enough away not to present any threat either!

The night was pretty quiet again and we struggled to keep the headsail working and eventually opted to simply put it away and sail with just a slightly reefed main. This worked surprisingly quite well and we were able to hold a good course and keep pace with S-F who were about 5 or 6 miles ahead of us under full sail.

Christmas day started with special gift for Steve on S-F from Neptune (working on Santa's behalf?) as he got the shock of his life in the early hours when he was struck by a flying fish. Chris was furious, not because of the scales in the cockpit as it thrashed about, but because Steve had shouted out loud in his shock and surprise, waking her up.....

Christmas day dawned bright and sunny and a bit windier and rougher than forecast which made setting a table for Xmas lunch a non starter on Serafina. We exchanged presents which was embarrassing for me as Sarah had gather a whole bag of goodies together for me, though admittedly mostly joke presents. (She got a lot of pleasure blowing bubbles that are probably still floating somewhere just above the waves in the Atlantic.)

Lunch was a real treat with some beautiful steaks (rather more practical than turkey) and baked apple with mincemeat for pud. We spoke to Tom, Ewan and my brother David on the Sat phone and received quite a few nice emails and also a very welcome incoming phone call from Robert and Joyce who had got home safely on Tuesday despite all the weather.

Using just our reefed main sail set on a very broad reach, we stayed around 6 miles behind S-F all day and so we decided to keep this set up through the night as it was very simple and quiet and ensured that we stayed in touch with them. What has changed slightly is the size and height of the underlying Atlantic swell. The ordinary waves are coming from the ENE roughly with the wind as you would expect, but the huge swell is running down from the north and slightly north west direction. These rollers are immense and when Serafina bobs to the crest of each one you can see enormous distances laid out like vast scooped fields, across the ocean, but in the troughs there is nothing but the long sweep and a wall of water approaching you from the north and the back of the last wave dominating and obscuring the view to the south. So we can only see S-F when we both rise on the crests of different waves at the same time.

The wind became very patchy on Saturday night and ranged from 3 knots to bursts of 18 knots, but it was the very low winds that create the most problems as in the big swell, the sail and spars crash and shake as we wallow and slop around, barely making any way at all – and irritating the hell out of Sarah who was mainly on watch at these times.

On Sunday morning dawn revealed a huge mass of black clouds and the radar confirmed that we were going to get wet. The rain duly arrived along with 25 knots of wind which picked us up and got us flying along again.

Emails with news from anyone would be welcome to break up the day! Please only send to rob@ the usual address or you can always use the 'contact us' form on the website www.rhbell.com

Good Times Bad Times

16:04.9N 40:17.7W

Sunday 26th and Monday 27th Dec

Generally Sunday proved to be a good day's sailing and the steady wind allowed us to follow the rumb line (which is the shortest distance between two distant points *around* the earth. A line plotted across the Atlantic over a distance of 2000 miles shows as a curve on the chart to allow for the curvature of the earth) at speeds between 4 and 6 knots whilst the sea smoothed out a bit to make the ride a lot easier. To minimise our rolling (we are sailing just under the main at the moment on a very broad reach) we have set the staysail but sheeted it hard in with the sheet lead inside the shrouds so it offers resistance.

In the evening however the sky began to become rather more threatening and Sarah summoned me from my off watch sleep to help reef the main as we were speeding along at 8.5 knots in 20 knots of wind and the cloud behind us clearly was about to deliver considerably more in the way of gusts. This proved very timely and we were well placed when the squalls arrived, indeed we left this sail configuration in place all night as we endured a whole succession of these big black clouds that mostly brought very strong blasts of wind under them. Sleep was rather patchy as these stronger winds had the effect of whipping up a large waves which as ever ran at an angle to the main swell, creating a very big and confused sea. In many ways the absence of moonlight was a bit of a blessing as we could not always see the big waves as they marched up behind us, seeming all to tower completely over our stern and must surely cascade their tons of water into the cockpit. But each and every time the wave would pass harmlessly under our stern, lifting us bodily into the air and then as it passed under us it would lift our bows, point the transom down into the trough behind us and the whole process was repeated. The time to worry is when the wind is a good deal stronger and the crest of these waves begin to break.

At 8.00am I came on watch and within just one minute I was joined on the seat by a flying fish! It was still dark and the little chap was frantically flitting around causing chaos and a lot of mess. The thing is that he and I both had the same intention, which was to return him/her to the sea ASAP, but this needed him to keep still whilst I tried to pick him up and relocate him. Naturally this was not something the fish understood too well and so every time I tried to pick him up, his frantic wriggling, his incredibly slimy body and what appear now to be sacrificial scales meant that he simply shot out of my grasp time and time again. I resorted to a sailing glove and finally picked him up and lobbed him gently over the side. Now I am sure that lots of fishermen will protest that this treatment and method of repatriating it with the sea was too violent and will have done for the poor fellow, but they might not think this if they had ever seen one of these critters fly. They launch themselves out of the sea and with their wafer thin wings, they glide at speed for up to 60 metres across the wave tops. But it is the

manner of their landing which is important here. There is no finesse to this. No graceful swooping or soaring or gliding. They do not touch down gently, surfing to a standstill. They are less like Tom Daley and more like a brick. They hit the water at speed and at almost any angle and I am guessing that if they can constantly withstand these impacts, they should be OK with being dropped in off the side of Serafina!

Dawn was greeted with the arrival of a particularly thunderous cloud which had winds gusting to just short of gale force 8 and it is beginning to look like Neptune has decided that our honeymoon period is over and it is time to show us a little of the malevolence that an ocean can produce. We spent the entire day being tossed around like a small toy, rolling, pitching and plunging our way through big rolling seas and sets of waves running across each other. The wind strength was only alternating between 15 and 20 knots, but the direction shifted dramatically and constantly all day requiring us to endlessly adjust our course to avoid an accidental gybe or to return to our favoured course. Fortunately in the main we were able to maintain a reasonable heading and as we bucked our way through the seas, we had the satisfaction of knowing that we were at least heading roughly in the right direction! Though Sarah's take on it is probably a little different as she bounces around below trying to prepare meals....

Things generally quietened down in the evening and Sarah's first watch saw us making 6 knots straight down the line as I slept soundly. Then as we changed watch a series of clouds full of rain and 35 knot squalls swept up behind us hour after hour giving me plenty to do and denying Sarah a decent sleep again. By morning we had 20 knots steadily from around the east and when we checked in with S-F we had to switch to the SSB radio and a scheduled net as we were unable to reach each other using VHF. It transpired that they had rigged their downwind sails and poles last night and to their surprise had enjoyed a big and favourable wind shift which meant that they had had a sleigh ride through the night and were now a remarkable 19 miles ahead of us. Once the last of the current crop of squalls had passed through we too set our downwind rig and found ourselves heading well south of the line but enjoying possibly a smoother ride. The forecast is for the wind to veer a little, later in the day and this should be perfect... watch this space.

Halfway to paradise

15:28.8N 45:08.5W

Tuesday 28th & Wednesday 29th Dec

Well Tuesday turned out to be a pretty good day for us particularly once we had set our downwind sails and poles. (Simbo Rig)

Serafina became very much more stable (well, by comparison to earlier) and the autohelm had less to do, but when the squalls hit us, the fireworks really began.

In one burst of 35 knots of wind we found ourselves surfing at 11.5 knots through the water – our speed over the ground was 13.2 knots!

The wind maintained a steady 20 knots all day and once the succession of rain and wind squalls had finished around midday, we had a great few hours flying along at speeds of between 8 and 9 knots.

S-F on the other hand had suffered a crisis by way of a serious bit of gear failure. They also use two poles to hold out their foresails, but they have very long Aluminium ones, one of which is actually a telescopic whisker pole, or rather it was! In a 40 knot squall, something went wrong and suddenly this thinner pole was bent at 90 degrees. The seas were far too rough to risk going on the foredeck to recover the situation, but they were able to head up onto a broad reach and leave the broken pole in place until mid-afternoon when they got it down. This held them back and so by the end of the day we were back in touch with them both on the AIS and VHF radio.

AS dusk fell we found ourselves being driven too far south and the lighter winds were causing the downwind sails to slap and crack as they emptied and refilled as the boat rolled in the still quite heavy swell, which puts a huge strain on the rig and our nerves, so we put the twins away and came up onto a broad reach and sailed through the night with just the main held out with a preventer. (Sorry to those who find these bits a bit technical!) It was at about 10.00pm that we passed the half-way mark with just over 1000 miles covered and I thought about the fact that the nearest land was so far away, but then a bit of investigation showed that Brazil was just 850 miles away.

We both had much better nights off watch and were feeling a good deal more relaxed when dawn broke to reveal a beautiful clear blue sky and very hot sun. The wind stayed around 15 knots all day and as a direct result the seas dampened down and the swell became rather less intimidating. In fact Sarah declared that today would be OK for a spot of fishing as we could do with some nice fresh fish. I should explain that whilst one can fish in most conditions and also possibly land and gut the catch in big seas, the factor that determines if I am allowed to fish or not is whether the back deck is stable enough for Sarah to be able to sit/squat and fillet and skin anything we might catch.

So around 11.00am I put out the lure and (I am really sorry Robert F about this...) just 15 minutes later we heard the reel scream and the rod bowed under the weight of another strike. We had just re-rigged and set the twins and were sailing at around 6 knots downwind again which was a pain as we now had to slow down to bring in and play the fish. So we rolled the headsails away and landed a very nice Mahi Mahi that was just shy of 3 kg. After I had gutted it, Sarah performed her magic, filleting the flesh from the backbone and then removing the skin from each side in one go. A career in the fish market beckons...!

Lunch then was some of this fabulous tasting fish and there is plenty in the fridge now to last for number of days, so once again my sporting interest has lasted just a quarter of an hour and we have been at sea for more than a week.

The rest of the day sort of drifted past as we made 5 knots all afternoon under the twin headsails, but again the lack of wind caused the sails to flop around quite a bit. We have had a bit of a thought about this and plan to try some changes on Thursday when we next set that

rig up. We took the opportunity to have showers off the back of the boat and it is rather unnerving standing there as the big waves tower over you. I have tried repeatedly to capture this effect on camera, but somehow it never looks quite as dramatic or daunting.

Wednesday night passed without mishap but the wind remained vaguely from the east and the strength constantly varied between 8 and 18 knots, so with these changes in the wind direction we found ourselves constantly having to silence the wind shift alarm! The good news was that the sea has moderated and we are now left with the long even rollers and less of the nasty short stuff in between.

I thought I should mention the moral dilemma I face when watching for whales. Sarah has issued standing instructions for me to keep a constant vigil for these wonderful creatures, but by their very nature this presents a problem for me. Mostly you only get to see one breach as it dives for the depths and so in the lucky event one gets to see this, calling Sarah to see is fraught with issues. The event is usually swift and dramatic and almost certainly by the time she has rushed up to see, she will have missed it. Now she will be doubly upset because I will have witnessed it and she still has not, so would it not be best to say nothing and just enjoy the spectacle and not upset her? In the event my first sighting on this trip of a breaching hump back whale was so dramatic that I instantly and quite involuntarily shouted a very loud 'Wow, that is incredible' and the secret was out. Fortunately Sarah was on deck at this moment and the whale obligingly breached two more times before diving so she saw it as well.

A Life on the Ocean Wave

15:21.6N 47:06.4W

This is written by Sarah, a complete novelty/novice!

I thought I would jot down a few of the pros and cons as I see it, of life at sea, especially for those readers who have not experienced the salty situation.

Firstly you have to be aware that everything takes at least twice as long to do, partly as you consider how to approach it on a bouncing swinging platform, then having to anchor each utensil/tool/food item/fish (especially challenging!)etc etc. And on deck you have to go slowly to ensure you don't get left behind in the briny and yes, we are using our lifejackets and harnesses – and no I am not getting any more adept at using the clips. But the advantage is that it does fill in time – in fact I am looking forward to the total boredom we have been promised, but perhaps this is on boats where there are more crew doing the jobs? I have secreted away a Vogue magazine as a treat for then (though I am not sure I have a lot of interest in the winter fashions...) but it may not be read until our arrival at this rate.

As everyone is no doubt aware, I have been preoccupied for a very long time about the provisioning and catering. Sadly this could not be solved until the day we left Tenerife when we went and finally bought the planned for fruit and veg from the market, washed it and stowed it – a whole day's activity. I think Rob has a photo to put up of this. I am hoping that this learning curve has been completed and will help in future, as I was pretty unpleasant

to live with beforehand – I know, so difficult to believe hey?! So now no food shopping for the 3 weeks or so of passage (Tenerife onwards – Cape Verde was utterly hopeless for food buying), yippee, but all the produce has to be checked, turned, dampened down, kept dry, depending on its nature. Disastrously (although admittedly somewhere along the line I had multiplied by some incorrect number, so we had enough potatoes to see us to Australia and to hand out on the pontoon) a sack of potatoes went off, along the lines of poteen, under the forepeak berth – luckily discovered in Cape Verde rather than a tossing sea. And the 5 dozen eggs stowed in a crate in our heads have often been in danger of being sat upon on occasions. So one of the jobs is sitting on the floor going through 5 crates of veg checking each item for squidginess (they are mainly individually wrapped in foil) – a good recipe for seasickness in certain conditions.

We were lead to believe that we would be completely out of most veg by now, but we have quite a choice still – no doubt we would have got through a whole lot more if Robert and Joyce had continued on passage with us so it might have become more difficult to be imaginative regarding the menu. I had laboriously developed a menu for the whole 30 days or so (after that it was tins and I really didn't care if we lived or died!) but with only two on board I haven't really bothered to stick to it religiously, but I would have had even more unnecessary food on board without it! And of course there is always fish which, once Rob has gutted it and I have chopped it up (my next job is as a fishmonger – my filleting is coming on a treat), is a very easy meal or three. Poor Rob is extremely fed up: he enjoys all the fiddling around with the line and lures; but catching a fish within 20 mins or less of launching his toy is no fun at all.

The night watches: we have migrated to four hour watches at night and technically, through the day, but cooking etc does disrupt this and Rob ends up gazing out far more than his fair share of the time. I do 1900 to 2300, and then 0300 to 0700; Rob loathes dark night watches and as he points out, this is my dream, so I do feel it is the least I can do. We will end the trip with pretty well no moon at all, which is a) boring with little to look at and b) a bit frightening when you are careening through the night at speed with no idea what is in front of you or where the wave is going to hit you next! But the stars are like you would never believe without the light pollution, just more and more depth of vision of the twinkly bits. Chris on Scott-Free introduced us to Audible books which we have downloaded on to our iPods and this has transformed the boredom stakes/drop-off rate. At night Rob is doing his watches in chest high waterproofs, a hat, socks, sometimes a jacket as well – I am in a fleece and jogging bottoms or shorts – one of us is weird!

One of the hardest bits is sleeping comfortably. Often the boat is bouncing and crashing through the waves, with banging, groaning rigging, it is not at all conducive to one's ability to gain beauty sleep. Rob sleeps on a berth in the saloon made up on one of the side sofas with a lee cloth held up to rings in the ceiling to stop him rolling out of bed. This feels like the hottest coffin in the world to me with my somewhat claustrophobic tendencies. So I have tried the aft cabin, sliding sideways across the bed; the other sofa without a lee cloth clinging on with elbows and knees to the sofa back to prevent me rolling on the veg crates; previously sleeping on the floor has been OK but we bounce too much in the ocean; so now I sleep in the

forepeak. It has amazing acoustics of the sea rushing and bubbling past – Robert & Joyce heard the dolphins one night through the hull. I wedge myself against our asymmetrical sail (I knew it would come in handy one day) and lie in the emergency recovery position which more or less reduces the levitation effect or the feeling that if you lie on your back all your flesh is being rolled around your skeleton! But generally I complain too much – it is still more comfortable than a Bradwell 18, the table on a Sadler 32 and quite probably the narrow beds on our canal boats!

And it's hot below – we can't open any hatches, well not since our trip from Israel to Malta where I stupidly caught a rogue wave through the 1" of open hatch which delivered gallons of water on top of me. And we heard a horror story of another yacht disturbing a sleeping whale by accident and with the slap of its tail, he soaked the interior of their boat. Despite the heat it is really too salty to do any clothes washing/drying – a great excuse and something to look forward to when we arrive! Anyway we don't need many clothes (any?) during the day. But we (well, I do) get through gallons of suntan cream.

Washing ourselves is much more entertaining. Down below is just an invitation to add to our collection of bruises (especially elbows and ankles) so we shower on the back deck/step. Like everything it has to be planned: you don't soap feet and bum at the same time as the chances are you will slide to the toerail and out into the wide blue yonder; and you need at least one hand to grip on for grim death, another for the shower head and one for the body brush and what about one for the shampoo? Meanwhile huge walls of water rise up above you from behind the boat.... It's all very exciting and Rob has been snapping away for the perfect illustration of this, well with the right black blocks it might get published.... And I bet our bathroom has the best views ever.

Our upper body strength is great for such elderly personages – constant sail changes and winching is all good. But we are developing really weedy legs – will we be able to walk anywhere once we arrive? Endless sitting down means that you get aching backs and spotty bums (sorry!).

And the worst bits? The loo obviously – gazing down into the bowl while madly hand pumping (and not landing in the eggs) is good for queasiness. Added to this when you sit on the loo, the loo lid smacks you smartly about a third of the way down your spine, as the boat skates up and down waves – this will be our first job to solve when we arrive!

It was great not to have to cook Christmas lunch, but awful to miss the boys even though we spoke to them on the satellite phone where Ewan was showing me up with some very exotic Xmas recipes and Tom was contemplating galvanising himself for snowman building! And I had been pretty remiss on the present front, which I will no doubt be paying for on our return. And every so often something goes wrong, but as in all sailing it is never just the one problem, one always leads to another catastrophe. But as they say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

The best bits of course are the sea life – although I think we have had enough of the daily delivery of flying fish to our door, they are very slippery, smelly and shed a huge amount of

scales everywhere. But the dolphins are fantastic, and seem almost as interested in us as we are in them. And one day we will see a whale close by – watch this space. Although Rob is less enthusiastic! Serafina is proving herself in every way – the sailing is usually great, all the various power, water and communication systems have performed brilliantly. And hopefully on our arrival, we will have a great feeling of achievement – or is that exhaustion?!

Happy New Year

15:04.6N 49:18.9W

Thursday 30th and Friday 31st Dec

Firstly many thanks to all those of you who have emailed us. It is great to get all your news and I am sorry we have not always answered you all, but typing can be quite tricky with the boat rolling and pitching. My typing is laborious at best, but when you spot the key you want and go to press it, it sort of helps if the same key is there when your finger arrives! The software supplied by that nice Mr Bill Gates struggles to comprehend me sometimes. (Must investigate speech recognition software sometime.)

Anyway, thanks to all those who kindly informed me of our exciting destruction of the Australian cricket team. Even had emails from Australians in suicidal despair....

So having sailed through the night on a broad reach, we finally reached the rumb line around midday and as it happened S-F was just 2 miles away from us at this point having sailed down the line all night. So, just as we came the closest we have been for several days, we were overtaken by a huge black cloud which brought a heavy downpour and 30 knots of wind. Suddenly with nil visibility the two boats were swept along on a new course and we both reflected on the irony if we had now hit each other with so much sea room around us!

Once the storm clouds cleared, we set our downwind rig with the twins both poled out. We have taken advice from various experts via email as well as a suggestion from Steve on S-F and the results have been sensational with Serafina now barrelling along downwind without any of the slapping, banging and general commotion suffered earlier.

As the sun set we reefed the main and took several turns in the downwind sails so we would slow down and remain behind S-F through the night. The wind continued to blow a steady 15 to 20 knots all night and so we made excellent progress and by dawn were just 100 metres behind S-F. However there had been more than a little excitement during the early hours!

Around 5.00am we were sailing about 2.5 miles directly behind S-F with Sarah on watch when she suddenly realised that the light she had assumed was another star disappearing over the horizon might be another boat appearing from the horizon. The radar did show a target, but it was so close to S-F that she assumed briefly that it was just a radar shadow. It turned out to be a yacht sailing upwind in the opposite direction to us, which is just unbelievable as no-one would normally undertake to sail upwind against the trade winds surely? It was hard to work out what it was doing as its tricolour was definitely the wrong way round and much dimmer than S-F which was beyond the other boat by this time. The yacht proceeded on port

tack to sail straight between us and S-F which caused fluttering hearts on S-F who wondered how they might explain to their insurers how three yachts could collide with the nearest land over 800 miles distant.

On Friday morning we closed in on S-F and agreed over the radio that we could photo each other as we passed by. I put out our full downwind sails and quickly accelerated to 8 knots but just as we were about to come level, our Satellite phone began to ring. Sarah was still asleep off watch so I dived down to take the call from Robert F who was very kindly calling with some tech info about our batteries (see below). By the time I came back on deck we were level with S-F and barely 50 metres apart and Steve looked very relieved to see me back at the helm! In fact, Scott-Free must be feeling a little persecuted as later in the morning we met a tanker rushing in the opposite direction at 14 knots which came within one mile of them!

We took loads of shots as we slid past and then we reefed again and let them pass us back to continue on their way. Then as we passed behind them, Sarah popped up with a bottle of 'Blow Bubbles' and proceeded to blow loads of soapy bubbles from our rear deck which drifted across the turbulent surface of the sea towards S-F. Not sure any actually reached them, but as a West Ham supporter Steve was suitably impressed by the idea at least. We then put Henry (our Hydrovane windvane self steering system – named after Henry the Navigator) into service which allowed us to turn off the autopilot and save on power. We also launched our tow generator which is a device we tow behind us that gives us several amps of power for free day and night. All in all we have become pretty green.....

So to the power problem. We found over the last few days that the battery bank was dying overnight despite the charges we were putting in. Clearly something needed to be done as we were ending the night with systems beginning to fail with warning buzzers etc declaring insufficient voltage.

The solution supplied by Robert F has been to investigate the battery banks and see if there is an individual battery which is unwell and disconnect it and its pair from the system as they might be pulling everything down. I managed this despite us being tossed around quite a bit again by a very odd and confused sea and so for now we seem to be OK. Part of the problem is still that we are too power hungry at night and despite the solar panels by day, wind and tow gens, we clearly need to use our generator rather more in the morning and evening to give the batteries a sporting chance!

New Year's Eve was an uneventful night by and large although Sarah did get rained on during one of her watches. We chatted to S-F who were about 6 miles away, at a time we had agreed in advance would be our midnight (we set our own time zones as we cross the Atlantic. In general terms we move the clocks back one hour for every 15 degrees west that we travel. With a bit of luck this will have us arriving in Barbados in the same time zone as them which is UT minus 4.) and exchanged best wishes. They invited us over for a drink, but we declined as we were a bit tired.....

Sitting on top of the world

14:28.6N 53:12.3W

Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd Jan 2011

New Year's Day dawned bright and sunny but there was a distinct lack of wind which did at least have the benefit of allowing the seas to settle down a bit.

What we were left with was just the long Atlantic swell which we are pretty sure is now higher (and deeper) than at any previous point in this trip. The long deep troughs leave you gazing up at these walls of water and then as you crest the top of the next water hill (Chris on S-F coined this term during the day) the view across the ocean seems to go for ever and leaves you quite literally as the highest point for hundreds of thousands of square miles. S-F had a big cargo ship pass them heading in the opposite direction and they were enthralled how this huge ship could disappear one minute and then loom over them the next.

The sailing was very dull though and pretty frustrating as although we could still make 4 to 5 knots, this was accompanied by the sails slapping and folding and refilling as we rolled gently in the waves. It seems that the promised trade winds that are usually blowing nicely at this time of year have simply failed to materialise yet (at least six weeks late), although we have heard that things might be a bit better further ahead of us, so fingers crossed for the final few days.

We have seen no dolphins since 200 miles out (ie 1500 miles ago!) and the only wild life remains the little black birds that keep showing up and the endless flashing flying fish who continue to delight us with their long almost graceful glides and crash landings, with some still ending up on our decks. (Sarah did read today that a speciality of Barbados is deep fried flying fish.) The little birds have visited us every day and we are not actually too sure what they are. However on Saturday we were joined for an hour by a much larger sea bird that looked a lot like a gannet. It was very acrobatic and would interrupt its soaring sweeps across the sky to dive, near vertically into the sea to make a catch.

Still the days and nights are punctuated by the odd large dark clouds, which creep up and deposit torrential rain and frequently strong gusts of wind. Inexplicably this only seems to occur when I am on watch... or it becomes my turn to be on deck.

Along with S-F we have been trying to arrange for a mooring for a few days on our arrival in Barbados, but this has so far not been possible. There are few visitor moorings in Port St Charles and these are kept usually for the lucrative visits of superyachts and small yachts such as us are of little interest. We may end up checking into the country and then heading to the anchorage in Carlisle Bay, Bridgetown.

At dusk on Saturday, we chatted on the VHF with S-F and debated the merits and otherwise of perhaps motoring for a while as the wind had dropped to barely 8 knots, but as we spoke, it improved a bit and we decided that 12 knots was quite enough for sailing and so we continued into the night under sail. However around 3.00am on Sunday morning, the wind had dropped to just 3 knots and our speed was a miserable 0.1 knots! 20 miles to the south of us we picked up the AIS signal of a tall ship (200ft sailing vessel), the Alexander V Humbolt

which was managing just 2.5 knots but in pretty much any direction. Reluctantly we rolled away the sails and for the next few hours we made our way under engine. This did at least have the merit of helping us charge our batteries which remain quite low and in need of a bit of a boost.

Sunday was a long dull old day as the wind never filled in and we were left sailing and occasionally motor-sailing all day long. The wind would edge up to 10 knots and we would unfurl the downwind sails and set everything up and after a short while it would drop back down to 6 knots leaving us pretty much wallowing along at 3.5 knots. S-F were not able to hold a course along the rumb line with one pole now broken, so they kept as good a heading as they could manage and continued to sail and motor sail as well.

By the evening we had covered only 112 miles which was our worst days run yet and the prospect is for not much more wind anytime soon! We managed however to sail through the night OK averaging a slightly better than 4 knots and with the calmer seas we both had reasonable sleeps when off watch.

On Monday morning we briefly caught sight of the masts and yardarms of the tall ship sailing parallel to us. They appeared to have turned off their AIS 24 hours ago and so we had no idea where they were until their mastheads poked above the horizon. Could be a scene from Pirates of the Caribbean or Master and Commander!

Head like a Hole

13:46.7N 57:30.8W

Monday 3rd & Tuesday 4th Jan

Another rather uneventful day apart from the long succession of thick black clouds and their intense downpours and strong gusts.

There is nothing you can do as they ponderously bear down on you from upwind and we were reduced to tracking them on the radar and guessing how lucky we might or might not be!

[Sarah:] Poor Rob was exceptionally unlucky at one stage. We had spotted a huge squall heading our way with a very clearly defined edge, beyond which was a torrential downpour flattening the sea and changing the colour from the usual deep blue to murky khaki. Rob was hiding inside – it was a first: very nasty weather on Sarah's watch! – he was despatched post haste to grab the camera. He then nimbly zipped up the companionway steps completely forgetting he had shut the hatch across because of the rain. His head is already pretty battered but this was the mother of all collisions, not only opening up a horrible graze/cut but giving his neck whiplash and shortening him by several inches – he even got nearly five minutes sympathy! We can only hope that the photo, which he heroically still took, is worthwhile and captures the fact that I was still sat in sunshine on one side of the cockpit while the heavens opened on the other side.

Progress was pretty slow as the wind barely exceeded 15 knots other than in the squalls and again we only covered around 110 miles in the full 24 hours.

As the sun set we chatted to S-F about their plans for the night as we had just got to within 2 miles of them at this point. They planned to continue as before, simply sailing as fast as they can on as good a course as they can manage and then hope to make their way back to the rumb line during the following day if the wind shifts allow. So we opted to reef our sails down again so that we would not surge ahead and disappear into the distance.

Clearly Neptune had decided in the night that we have been having far too easy a time so far as gradually the wind picked up through the hours of darkness. Nothing dramatic in terms of wind strength and the direction remained good, but what changed for the worse were the sea conditions. By the middle of the night, sleep was very hard to come by and being on watch was no more restful! The issue once again is the short chaotic swell that runs counter, or at least at an angle to the main massive rollers. This sets up a mass of confusion and Serafina was being bucked and tossed around like a small toy, reminding us just how vulnerable we are out here in the open ocean. Almost no position is comfortable or particularly secure in all this and we are both looking forward to some respite and a half decent snooze!

By dawn we were making good speed through the water (6+ knots) but now found that we also had a counter current and so our speed over the ground was merely 5.5 knots. All rather frustrating and slightly depressing with the end now just 280 miles away.

Gradually during Tuesday the wind and the seas died down and by and large we had quite a restful 12 hours although S-F did get lashed by one particularly enormous rainstorm.

We decided around 4.00pm to have showers off the back of the boat as per usual and I went first and Sarah decided following her ablutions to sit on the bottom step and trail a foot in the warm sea, wishing she could be trailed from the back but we were going too fast with no intention of taking sails down for this. She then eventually came back up on deck and as she turned to replace the gate across the open push-pit, she saw the first sign of sea life (apart from the flying fish) for over a week. She called me over and together we stood and studied the unmistakable grey malevolent mass that was a sizeable shark, barely 2 metres behind us, cruising effortlessly down the face of the following waves, keeping an easy pace with us. It remained there for a minute or two and we were too enthralled to grab a camera or do anything but stand and stare. It remained barely beneath the surface of the water with its distinctive tail breaking the surface from time to time. We rather assume it was attracted by our tow generator. This is a stainless steel rod with plastic propeller fins which we tow behind us. It rotates as we sail along and in turn it turns the rope that connects it to a small turbine which generates a modest amount of 'free' electricity. There are plenty of tales of these devices being attacked by sharks who are drawn to its flashing shiny movement. Steve on S-F has now told me that it for this reason that he has painted his one black! Certainly an aggressive shark would make short work of the plastic blades. Sarah is rethinking swimming opportunities.

The wind now died away to less than 10 knots and both boats faced a dilemma. We were about 230 miles from Barbados and as we are only prepared to arrive in daylight we had now to consider the timing of the rest of the trip. We were barely managing 3.5 knots which was no good at all as all our calculations showed that we needed to average just over 5 knots to get this spot on. (We collectively agreed that we did NOT want to spend Thursday night at sea.) So we all concurred that if the wind remained light, we would have to motor sail for as long as was necessary to maintain the 5 knot average and make landfall on Thursday afternoon.

We furled away our headsails and started up the engine and headed into the night as did S-F. Of course that was all it took for the forces of nature to wake up again and over the next few hours I got drenched in a huge and dramatic downpour, but Chris on S-F seemed to suffer even worse poor thing and was soaked to the skin in a sustained cloudburst that rendered her waterproofs useless.

The wind picked up and we were soon back sailing again and sped through the night at speeds of 6 and 7 knots which was very enjoyable and surprisingly restful we felt. It has put us ahead of the average, but by Wednesday morning we still had 140 miles to go.

Reasons to be Cheerful

13:15.78N 59.38.67W

Wednesday 5th & morning of Thursday 6th Jan 2011

On Wednesday morning we were joined at 7.00am by a dozen or so Atlantic Spotted dolphins who seemed very pleased to find us racing along at 7 knots in a good breeze. They stayed and played around the bow, dropping back occasionally and then racing in and daring each other ever closer to our bow as it sliced through the deep blue water.

The day had a bit of 'end of term' about it as we closed in on the island of Barbados, still 140 miles distant, but today we were blessed with 15 to 20 knots of steady breeze all day and so we were able to eat up the miles getting well ahead of our required average. The wind did ease briefly around dusk, but before we had time to consider our options, it picked back up and we fairly raced through the first half of the night, so much so that we had to put in a whole series of reefs to shorten sail and slow up as we had no wish to arrive at the reefs off the northern coast of the island in darkness.

All went very well and dawn found us gazing at the lush green island as we sped towards its northern tip. Sarah had to invite a 1000ft tanker to alter course to avoid running us down (we also had to do this earlier in the afternoon with a smaller tanker) which he did very graciously. We immediately then got a call on the VHF from Barbados Port Control who wondered where we were and what our destination was. Sarah explained it all to them and they were charming, wishing us a good end to our journey, a happy New Year and hoping that they would see us at some stage in Bridgetown.

As we approached the northern tip of the island, the depth reduced dramatically which forced the big sea to become larger still and we sailed around into the lee of the island with just a reefed main and reefed staysail in around 25 knots of wind. Hopefully this is proper Caribbean sailing as we now raced across the bay at 8 knots enjoying the strong wind and the flat sea and in no time at all fetched up at the entrance to Port St Charles. We dropped the sails and rigged fenders and mooring ropes and tentatively made our way into the little port remembering that over on this side of the Atlantic the buoyage system is the total reverse of Europe!

We backed into a huge superyacht berth and once tied up, I nipped off as required to do all the paperwork and complete all the formalities of entering the country, then returned just as Scott-Free docked in the berth next to us. Off now for "Safe Arrival" drinks on Scott-Free.

So here we are in the Caribbean, safe and sound as well as older and wiser.

End of 2010 sailing log of Serafina.