

Mina² 2010 Brazil

Transcript of Blog

3 February - 16 April 2010

3 February 2010

Skipper returns to Mina2 – Worst Fears Confirmed

Today I returned to Mina2. The temperature as I left London was hovering around freezing point – warm compared with the average since I had arrived there just before Christmas. Everyone had been walking around wearing three sweaters and a scarf – and that was in my house.

In contrast, having arrived at the boat in Salvador, Brazil, I looked at the thermometer when I climbed down below. 39°C!

Getting on board was an adventure in itself. The Downstairs Skipper had asked Jean from Havanita to check the lines when she departed. He had considerably trebled them up and he told me that he had taken the boat back away from the pontoon a bit. “You may have to swim out to her when you get back!” he quipped. He wasn’t kidding. The bloody thing was five feet away from the pontoon, with bar taut lines holding it firmly in position. Having lost a bit of my honed fitness after six weeks of land-lubbering, and without the benefit of our B&Q step ladder to ease my passage onto the anchor the embarkation was, shall we say, challenging.

Having left the boat in the hopelessly inexperienced hands of my crew in December, I had given firm instructions that on no account were they to even think of moving the boat anywhere. But these instructions were, as are most of my instructions, completely ignored. I thought it was odd that every time I tried to call any of them, the line mysteriously went dead. It would appear that the moment I left my precious boat in their inept hands they were off – recklessly gallivanting not only around the Bahia of Salvador but venturing long distances offshore as well.

But reading the blogs which were being posted, it appeared that not only were they having an absolutely splendid time, they were also handling the boat with, if anything, greater care and skill than I would. Much to my amazement, this was endorsed by emails I received from our friends on the other Rallye boats. Surely no one other than me, least of all this bunch of incompetents, could possibly be entrusted with my beloved Mina2 and bring her back to her mooring unscathed? But apparently they can – and they did.

So, whilst feeling considerable relief, once again my worst fears have been confirmed. I was wrong and they were right. I owe my very considerable thanks to Neil, the Acting Temporary Skipper; the Mate, Peter “Golden Boy” Barker, and the Downstairs Skipper - the DS (now also known, variously, as Meercat Mary and, by me, as the AW (Absentee Wife) – we’ve seen each other for just four days since September). They did a fantastic job.

I would also like to thank the DS and all others who were responsible for decommissioning the boat a month ago. I arrived back today to find her spicker and spanner than I have ever left her.

And this ablution of compliments would not be complete without mentioning the blogs posted by my daughter, Selina, in my absence. I thought they were brilliant, and I hope you did too.

The DS rejoins me at the end of the week and after a few days of getting to know each other again in Salvador, we will be heading south to complete our journey to Rio and Angra Dos Reis.

11 February 2010

Blogging the Log – Crews Darkest Secretes Revealed

Every vessel has a log and into it is recorded important things like latitude and longitude, barometric pressure, boat speed and wind data. When I arrived back on Mina2, I found that the log had been conscientiously kept up by the crew in my absence, but it had turned into something of a girly diary. Let me share with you some of the gems that never made it into Selina's blogs [my comments in italics]:

Selina's been busy making Christmas decorations out of newspaper. Mugs [*yet another name for the Downstairs Skipper*] keeps trying to push the "Caju" sweets she bought in the market. They look like bats poo so no one's taking them. Might use them as glue for sticking up the decorations.....

"Drinks over @ MinnieB. Maria unable to relax as Pete ploughed through bowls of snacks as if he hadn't eaten in days. Meanwhile we let cat out of the bag that alcohol flows freely on Mina2 as of about 10am. Turns out other boats ration themselves to one small can of beer each before 6pm.....

Leave anchorage in a rain shower. Mugs dashes for a bowl to collect rainwater imagining, I suppose, that she might bathe in it later. She is disappointed to collect only a thimble-full. Now talking of making a slit in the bimini to collect rainwater like Havanita do. [*Bimini: sun shade over the cockpit. Havanita have NOT cut a slit in their bimini – they have a carefully constructed custom built tarp for the purpose*]......

Neil eats three Twix bars before even getting out of bed. Says he can – it's Xmas....

Selina gets stung on arse and siestas get interrupted by ensuing panic. Neil courageously offers to extract sting....

Raining.... Neil says "Does anybody fancy checking out the mangrove swamps?"... Sarah: "Well, they're just a bunch of reeds". Enthusiasm on board today is unbounded...

CRASH, BANG, WALLOP 14.00 Arrive back in marina [*bit worrying, that one*]...

Had caipirinhas, sucos and carpetas at a beautiful bar on the beach. DS downed her caipirinhas of maracuja in shockingly quick time which set the tone for the rest of the night....

Went into Morro de Sao Paulo. Tapioca stall caught on fire which happily cleared a long queue to the bank! [*bit heartless?*]...

DS takes her many phones everywhere, inconveniently wrapped in thick rubber. One or all seem to go off at spectacularly inopportune moments..."I'm in a mangrove swamp....I'm in a monastery...I'm on a quiet idyllic beach..."

I hope you enjoyed these little insights into what life is really like on board Mina2, as from now on the blog will be returning to the turgid prose of the skipper.

14 February 2010 Skippers Reunited

Position: 13:01.29S 038:45.12W – Ilha do Cal, Bahia de Todos Os Santos

I had returned to Salvador to find Mina2 had been left by the temporary crew in spanking good order so there was less maintenance work and making good to do than I had anticipated. And just as well as the heat here has been so overwhelming that one gets up at 0530 and carries out a few chores. By 0900 it's too hot to do anything more until the evening. No wonder so little gets achieved here.

The marina, locked and guarded day and night by armed security men, is by the docks— one of the less salubrious areas of town, and the area just a short distance outside of the marina is so dangerous that not even the police venture in. It is a very pleasant sort of prison – with the goodies on the inside. So, sadly, one feels constrained to wander around and get a feel for the place, the people and the culture.

Liliana and her boyfriend Rodrigo came to the rescue. Liliana is an old friend of Selina and had stayed with us for a few weeks when she came to London a few years ago. She had been looking forward to showing us around when we visited her home in Salvador. They were wonderful. They escorted me around town. They took me to wonderful restaurants and guided me through the particular cuisine of Brazil (very different – very yummy). We went to a brilliant jazz concert to hear great Brazilian music and introduced me to her friends and family. She arranged for me to get a data SIM card so that now we have internet connectivity on my laptop in whatever little bay we happen to be anchored. Liliana and Rodrigo were just wonderfully hospitable and my stay in Salvador would not have been a fraction of the cultural experience without them.

On Monday evening I was sitting on the bow of the boat when I saw an unusually fine example of South American chic sashaying down the pontoon.

"Hell-lo" I drawled as she approached. "Ding...dong. Fancy coming aboard for a drink?"

"You bet" she said in almost faultless English, "I could murder a gin and tonic".

This one was going to be a cinch, but, there was something disturbingly familiar about the easy way she chucked her luggage up to me, climbed up and swung her shapely leg over the pulpit. Having poured us both a stiff one, my unease persisted until it all came flooding back; this was no common-or-garden conquest of which there have been so many in the past few months – this was none other than the Downstairs Skipper herself. I had seen so little of her over the last few months that I had completely forgotten what she looked like. It was the nagging that started the moment she had got the drink in her hand that was the giveaway. What bliss – we were together again at last.

Tuesday was spent at supermarkets re-provisioning the boat, not least in preparation for taking Liliana and Rodrigo out for a sail on Wednesday. It was good to be out of the heat of the marina for the day.

Meanwhile the marina was beginning to fill up, as was the City of Salvador outside our gates, in preparation for Carnaval – the annual excess of wild celebration of exceedingly loud drums and music blaring from exceedingly big floats with exceedingly flimsily-dressed Brazilian lovelies gyrating on and all around them. It is recognised that the biggest Carnaval in the world is in Rio de Janeiro – very commercial, very brash – but arguably the best and most authentic Carnaval in the world takes place here in Salvador. It started with a bang Thursday night.

Thursday morning I awoke feeling a little below par. By lunchtime I was feeling dreadful. The DS took my temperature – it was sky high. I took to my bed and the DS showing an unusual degree of sympathy (must have had something to do with our months of separation) caressed my fevered body with a flannel dipped in ice water. The shock would have killed a lesser man. As I slipped in and out of consciousness (OK that may be slightly dramatic exaggeration, but I did spend most of the day sleeping) we speculated as to the cause of the fever. Dengue fever was the DS's first typically pessimistic theory. No. Too inconvenient – it takes weeks to recover from. Food poisoning? Possibly, but some of the symptoms were inconsistent. Heat exhaustion? Almost certainly, given all the right components and symptoms. But my favoured theory is that it was a simple case of love fever. Our passionate reunion after so long apart had taken its toll. Whatever the cause, the second liveliest Carnaval in the world passed us by unnoticed that night as I lay, near death, within the very sound of the drum beats.

Friday morning, and I staged a near miraculous recovery. Temperature was normal and, apart from feeling a little weak, everything else was normal too. So by Friday evening, we were ready to join the party. We took the “Elevador” up to the historic old town and as we emerged into the main square all our senses were bombarded. The music blasting from the vast floats hit you in the solar plexus. The streets were crammed full of Brazilians wearing extraordinary costumes, and everyone was gyrating to the sound of the Brazilian beat.

Brazilian women are renowned for their voluptuous bottoms and they show these off to great effect, bumping and grinding them ceaselessly to the never-ending rhythm as the parade of floats wind through the streets at a snail pace. It's crazy; it's noisy, it's happy, it's fun – it's CARNAVAL!

If we had any concerns about security in the crammed streets, our fears were allayed by an overpowering presence of the military and police. They were all over the place as they stood vigilantly in groups, or marched in great squads through the crowds fully decked out in riot gear, gripping their riot batons, guns at their hips. But there was no trouble. Everyone was happy.

On Saturday, re-provisioned and party'ed out we slipped our lines and left the marina for the start of our journey south. But before we were to head out into the Atlantic rollers we were to spend a couple of days exploring the bay of Salvador which I had missed out on when I flew back to the UK in December.

We sailed round the island of Itaparica and down a long wide channel to anchor for the night between two islands fringed with white beaches and palm trees – we are continually pinching ourselves to make sure we haven't died and gone to paradise.

16 February 2010

Brazil – The Journey South Begins

Position: 13:22.92S 38:55.61W

Before we left the Bahia (bay) of Salvador we spent a couple of days exploring its upper reaches. Having weighed anchor after our first night in the Itaparica Channel, we went to witness the great Tororó Waterfall, trumpeted by the pilot book almost as one of the seven wonders of the world. This we couldn't miss. So we motored the few miles down the channel to witness the glorious sight of a tiny trickle of water barely dampening the side of a very small rock wall.

Wanting to revisit some of the places which the temporary crew had enjoyed over Christmas and the New Year, but which I had missed whilst being back in the UK, we turned tail, hoisted the sails and headed out of the channel and up into the Rio Paraguaçu, past the Ilha Francés and fell off the chart into the area excitingly marked "Uncharted". I have to admit that we had the help of a succession of GPS waypoints provided by a sailor who had explored the upper reaches the previous year – and just as well because although the river was wide, most of it consisted of very shallow water apart from a narrow channel which had enough depth for us. Some two miles upriver we swept round a bend and were greeted by the sight of a glorious baroque church on the shore of the river, surrounded by palm trees, and standing behind a strip of white sandy beach. It is extraordinarily beautiful. Now disused and destined, I fear, to fall into dangerous disrepair, Santiago de Iguapé was built by the Portuguese Jesuits at the turn of the 17th century (Iguapé is the Indian word meaning "by the water"). Almost at the steps of the church, local Brazilian families were lounging around and swimming in the warm river water. Behind the church is a small village whose inhabitants fish the river in dug-out canoes and (I subsequently discovered) harvest oysters.

When enjoying hot summer-like weather, one rather expects the evenings to be long. But we are in the tropics. At this time of the year, the sun is passing almost directly overhead and the sun rises at 0600 and falls promptly at 1800. And when I say falls, it falls like a stone. Bright sunshine one moment and 20 minutes later it is pitch black. So we went ashore at about 1700 and wandered round the ramshackle little village

before it got dark. What we hadn't expected was that Carnaval is not just restricted to the big cities, but that even villages as small and simple as this have their own Carnaval, and here it was in full swing. Dozens of kids, some covered in ash and all in fancy dress ranging from groups of tuttu'ed ballet dancers to ghouls with hideous masks and horns, were wandering around. When the van blasting music appeared, everyone went into a frenzy and paraded around the village square crushed around the van, all dancing. It was a fabulous manifestation of the joy of a small community celebrating Carnaval at its most simple. Brilliant and completely unexpected fun.

Monday morning we started making our way to the exit of the Bahia, anchoring off the village of Itaparica ready for the open sea and the start of our journey south.

The following day we had a very pleasant beam reach 40 miles down the coast to Morro de São Paulo which is an up-market albeit very chilled out beach resort, not just for the better-off Brazilian but for a number of foreigners as well (we heard a number of Argentine accents in the streets). The anchorage is slap bang in the middle of the route where dozens of tourist boats hurtle past between Morro de São Paulo and the next village up the coast, Gamboa. It is like being anchored in the middle of an aquatic motorway. The dangers of this became apparent a few weeks ago when a yacht, snugly anchored, was T-boned by one of these ferries travelling at full tilt, resulting in serious structural damage. So when we went ashore in the evening, I lit the boat up like a Christmas tree with anchor lights at deck and masthead level (strictly against regulations, but anything to be seen) and we also kept a bright light in the cockpit, illuminating the bimini.

We found a delightful bar, set on a hill overlooking the lush vegetation of banana and palm trees and sipped caipirinhas as the sun went down. As I was taking a sip of the nectar through my straw, I couldn't help but notice another straw slip into my drink and drain the entire glass in one expert suck. It was the DS. "You were drinking too slowly" she explained.

After we (the DS, that is) finished our drinks we wandered down the one street lined with expensive boutiques and had a simple pizza about four feet round at a restaurant on the beach in front of which four muscular young Brazilians were playing a version of volley ball with their chests, heads, legs, feet – anything except their hands or arms. This is the famous fute-volei and you need incredible skill to get the ball over the net just once. These guys were having incredible rallies that went on for minutes. We were riveted.

20 February 2010

Sadness as The Real World Tracks Us Down

Position: 13:54.85S 38:59.39W

A couple of days ago I received an email from good friend Barbara Traill with some incredibly sad news. "Thought you might like to know that Phil Archer died peacefully in his chair listening to his favourite music on Friday". This struck me like an arrow through my very soul. Dear old Phil. Here we are living our fantasy dream and meanwhile, back in Ambridge, real life continues with real tragedies. I was gutted, not least because

I've not been able to get a strong enough mobile signal in these outposts of civilisation to download a podcast of The Archers Omnibus so I could share in the nation's grief.

But one can't mope forever so, moving on, back to paradise.

Having allocated a couple of days amongst the extensive islands inland from Morro de São Paulo and Gamboa, we made an early start to make our way to Cairú, the last navigable settlement upriver. Although only 12 miles away over the ground, as we were punching a 2-knot ebbing tide it was 20 miles through the water, and more than a 3-hour slog. We stopped off very briefly at what I considered a delightful village on the way, where they were making and repairing on the beach "saveiros", the traditional river boats, using nothing more modern than adze, saw and chisel. Not turned on by traditional boatbuilding skills, the DS considered the stop to be rather a waste of time.

We arrived at the ancient town of Cairú at midday. The pilot book waxed lyrical about this "jewel of baroque architecture". It was one of those "must-visit" places (but, granted, so was the great Tororó Waterfall). The anchor had hardly bedded in before the DS declared Cairú "a dump" and insisted we had 1 ½ hours (with no lunch) to get ashore and see the place in the scorching heat of the midday sun before heading back down-river for another 3-hour slog against the now flooding tide to arrive back at Gamboa shortly before dark. This was the situation from my perspective.

The DS and I had one of those mature, rational marital discussions. I was branded (quite reasonably) a selfish pig and we spent what only I thought was a delightful afternoon in front of what only I considered to be a delightfully picturesque village. In the late afternoon we went ashore and discovered with the help of an official guide that, yes, some of the houses in the backstreets were wonderful examples of 17th century baroque architecture, but only three of them. It wasn't exactly Venice. However, the 17th century Franciscan monastery which is still operating (albeit with only two Franciscan monks compared with the 50 or more that lived there in its heyday) and which is being painstakingly renovated was, indeed, a jewel. On this the DS and I agreed. Fantastic naïve ceiling paintings. Incredible wood and stone carvings, and pillars decorated with beautiful gold leaf designs. But, yes, it could have been seen at midday.

Another early start the following morning and with the help of a favourable tide we zinged down river in 1½ hours back to Gamboa, and we were walking down what Selina earlier described as "Paradise Beach" by 0900. We returned to the boat and relocated to an anchorage a couple of miles away behind a spit of land, took the barbecue onto the white sandy beach and cooked a late lunch of incredibly tough chicken (you see – not everything is perfect here).

Friday morning and another early start, this time to head back out into the Atlantic to sail a further 35 miles south to another big inlet riddled with islands – the Bahia do Camamú. Once in, it promised to be a wonderful cruising ground. Reading the pilot book, the entrance looked terribly tricky involving a tortuous route through rocks and shallows. Without the intricate buoyage system one would be doomed to be dashed on said rocks. Imagine our dismay to arrive to find all the buoys had gone – not one to be

seen anywhere. Added to which I had discovered that the electronic charts I have covering the whole of South America were hopelessly lacking in detail. Luckily I had been able to download some good charts from the Brazilian Hydrographic Office website and with these we worked our way in with no problem.

I had been keen to try some of the Brazilian coastal cuisine. There was a choice of two restaurants opposite our anchorage. We arrived in the dinghy at the pontoon of the first and were getting out when two women asked us how they could help us. "We've come to eat a good Brazilian meal" we replied. "Not here, you aren't" was the polite reply. It turned out to be a private house. The other restaurant said that sadly they had just shut (it was 6pm). More tough chicken on the boat.

An even earlier start today (Saturday) to catch the 0600 ferry to Camamú itself (it's too shallow to get there in one's own boat). The saveiro, an open wooden boat with benches down each side and which serves as a ferry here, was full of local Brazilians going to the Saturday market – mainly women and children. As we wove our way through the mangroves, one of the babes in arms got a little fractious so a comforting breast was produced to succour the infant. Being an English gentleman I averted my eyes. Soon, on the other side of the boat, another small child was demanding similar comfort from its mother and another breast was produced. In no time, breakfast was in full swing, so to speak, and there were so many breasts on display that there was hardly anywhere I could look for fear of potentially giving offence.

At 0730 we arrived at Camamú. It is a small provincial town, serving the island communities. After the obligatory hike up to the top of the hill to see the few so-called historic buildings all of which were closed or boarded up, we went to the market which was a seething pit of feral commerce. One market building was devoted entirely to numerous types of flour – corn, manioc etc – in vast sacks. Thousands of them. Then there was the open market with all the fruit and veg, most of which were unidentifiable to us, and more bananas than I've ever seen in my life. Finally was the market building which was dedicated to dead animals and all they contained. I'm a healthy carnivore and I like my steaks rare but this was enough to turn even my stomach. Every constituent part of every conceivable type of animal was on display in all its gory glory. The final straw was actually outside the meat market where we saw a jaunty little lad straining every muscle to push a wheelbarrow in which were the seeping decapitated heads of two enormous cows.

The DS was almost throwing up. "I know that seeing this sort of thing is an important part of cruising in distant lands, but I'm beginning to crave just a modicum of sophistication".

23 February 2010

Tricky pilotage and idyllic anchorages

After our interesting excursion to the market town of Camamú we determined to explore in Mina2 the upper reaches of the inlet at the end of which was another small town, Maraú. The town lies more than 17 miles from the sea and most of that distance was again marked on the chart as "Uncharted" but the advice we had been given was that if we stuck to the middle of the river on the straights and favoured the outside

edges on the bends we should be OK. Although it got uncomfortably shallow in places, the advice held good.

We recce'd a few anchorages on the way up river. One in particular held appeal for the DS. It was a small inlet and the pilot book said that we could take the dinghy into the inlet where we would find a foot track through the mangroves which would lead us to a wonderful Atlantic beach the other side of the peninsula. The DS is into Atlantic beaches. We found the inlet, took the dinghy up as far as depth would allow and started trudging through the swampy mangroves like two exiles from "The African Queen". Eventually we came to the only track which led, rather unpromisingly, straight into a private small holding. Trying to ignore the incredulous gaze of the occupants as we strode through their property, we scaled a barbed wire fence and found ourselves on the main dirt road. With no apparent way through to the beach, after 20 minutes of walking along the road with lorries and coaches hurtling past and covering us with dust, we threw the towel in and retraced our steps. The only way to get back to the dinghy was through the small holding again and we were glad that the Brazilian farmers had not unleashed the Dobermans as we scuttled back through to the track.

Looking forward to a long and lazy Brazilian Sunday lunch, we continued up the river and as we approached the river frontage of Maraú under motor, with the DS in position ready to drop the anchor, the lever which controls the gears and throttle for the engine suddenly came away in my hand. These things happen on boats. We were in forward gear doing about four knots at the time and, unless I turned the engine off, that was what we were going to continue doing until we ran out of fuel in about four days time.

The DS was recalled from the bow and drove around in circles for a while whilst I dived below for the tool kit and tried to sort out the problem. After about five or ten minutes I managed to get the control lever back in place, albeit a temporary fix, and we glided to a halt in front of the town quay and dropped the anchor.

This manoeuvring would doubtless have caused a great deal of interest amongst the inhabitants of Maraú had there been any. But we went ashore to find about three people in the entire place. I know it was Sunday but it was like the plague had hit the town and wiped out the entire population. Not even having any baroque architecture to hold our interest, we were back on the boat in about ten minutes and motoring back ten miles down the river to a perfect anchorage we had spotted on our way up.

The anchorage was all it had promised to be, located between two idyllic palm fringed islands. We stayed here all the following day and the only people we saw were a handful of fisherman drifting past casting nets from their dugout canoes.

On boats there is continual wear and tear and maintenance that needs to be done and over time a list builds up. We took advantage of our lay day in this superb spot to have a very productive day, ticking off a long list of outstanding tasks. As dusk fell we motored to the mouth of the river for a very early start for the next leg on our journey south.

We weighed anchor at 0445 just as the sky was beginning to lighten and headed out of the river into the Atlantic. As dawn approached, the entire sky turned every hue of orange in a spectacular sunrise. Magical. The reason for the early start was that we had to get to our next destination, Itacaré, a distance of 34 miles, before high water at 1030. (Having spent the last two years in the tideless waters of the Mediterranean, it's strange having to factor in tides once again).

The entrance to Itacaré is tricky. The river entrance is almost blocked off by a large spit of sand and there is a narrow and not very deep gap between the rocky headland and the spit. A few feet out of position and you would ground one or the other. And if the tide was falling, there you would stay for up to twelve hours being dashed to bits by the Atlantic surf. So when on our arrival we happened to find a local fishing boat going in who beckoned us to follow him in, we willingly accepted the offer.

The difficulties don't end when you are over the bar. Most of the harbour is extremely shallow and there are just a couple of pools where a yacht of significant draft can swing to anchor without going aground at low water. The fishermen who led us in showed us exactly where to drop the hook. At low water we float in our pool with drying sand both in front of us and behind us.

But the difficulties of getting in are more than rewarded by the charm of this place. Some of the best beaches in the world are along this coast and Itacaré has developed into a lovely laid-back resort, popular particularly amongst young surfers. So after the total lack of sophistication of towns and villages so poor and so untouched by tourism it is difficult to find any establishment that can serve you food, we have spent a very relaxed day and a half here enjoying good Brazilian food, and caipirinhas at beach bars shaded by the palm trees. And the DS has been in her element walking along the deserted sandy beaches and indulging in her favourite activity of body surfing in the waves.

Tomorrow we head out again and further south to Ilhéus where we are being joined from Buenos Aires by Christine (the DS's best friend), Fernando and Michael who will be staying with us all the way down to Rio.

1 March 2010

Crew sickened by first passage on Mina2

Position: Abrolhos Islands 17:57.89S 038:41.19W

If we thought the entrance to Itacaré was interesting, it wasn't half as interesting as our exit. We wanted to get to Ilhéus in good time but couldn't leave Itacaré until there was sufficient water over the sandy shallows barring the exit. I thought we could probably get away with it shortly before half tide. We couldn't. As we headed towards the narrow gap, the water got more and more shallow until we felt the old familiar sensation of the boat rocking forward as the keel made contact with terra firma. Having tried to back out off the sand unsuccessfully, I then tried every point of the compass to find a gap through the shallows. There appeared to be none.

I was scratching my head and waiting for the tide to rise further to a background murmur from the DS of "Well that's a lesson learned. Now we're stuck for good."

We're doomed" when, yet again, a local fisherman who was entering the harbour came to our aid. He showed us where the deeper water was and with this certain knowledge I gunned the engine and ploughed our way through the sand and at last we were afloat – but not for long. Following the local knowledge put us aground a couple of more times before we were able to scrape across the bar and out into open and deeper water. Free at last.

We had to motor a good part of the 32 miles to Ilhéus where we anchored in front of the charming thatched buildings of the local yacht club. For a small fee all the facilities of the club including restaurant, bar and swimming pool were available to us. Very civilised. We went ashore and started the lengthy process of clearing in and out at the harbour captain's office, a short walk away. Our papers were scrutinised at length, then turned the right way up and scrutinised some more. Some 40 minutes later, one of the documents was stamped and we were told to report to the Federal Police for their approval of our documents. We went to the police office as directed to find a bemused member of the Military Police who said he couldn't help and said the only Federal Police office he was aware of was about an hour's bus ride away. Exhausted we returned to the yacht club and a welcome caipirinha.

The following morning we were told by the yacht club that they thought the Federal Police might have a presence in the commercial harbour right next door where, in turn, we were told by the gateman that that was not the case but why didn't we forget the whole thing? Authority enough, we thought, and did just that.

Later that day we were joined by Christine, Fernando and Michael who had flown up from Buenos Aires to join us for ten days on our passages down to Rio, some 600 miles south. Christine knew she was prone to a bit of sea-sickness but had been persuaded by her family to arm herself with every seasickness remedy known to man and go for it, to join us for what would be the experience of a lifetime.

We set sail the following morning for the first passage 185 miles down to the Abrolhos Islands. When I say "set sail" due to light winds, now from the south, we managed to sail for only 9 hours out of the 32 hours it took us. Despite the light airs, the sea was lumpy. During the course of the voyage, Christine had been getting quieter and quieter and, notwithstanding taking all precautions, becoming greener and greener. Come to that Fernando wasn't doing so well either. And whilst Michael was bearing up relatively well, he wasn't exactly offering to go down below and cook the meals.

Christine's relief at reaching the anchorage in Abrolhos was shattered when she discovered that the swell curling into the bay made the boat roll and pitch almost as much as it had been on passage. Everyone knows that the instant cure for seasickness is to sit under a tree, but no luck there either. The Ilhas Abrolhos is a Brazilian naval base as well as a national park and landing on the islands is forbidden and enforced. The look on Christine's face was one of tragic misery.

The Ilhas Abrolhos, lying 35 miles off the coast and which we could only look at, were a bit of a disappointment as well. The archipelago consists of four small islands, in all about 1 ½ miles across. Having been used to lush almost jungle-like vegetation down the entire coast of Brazil, the completely barren landscape was, well, dull.

The DS went down below to cook a delicious dinner. Fernando, notwithstanding having slept for the whole passage, appearing on deck only to stand his watches, announced at 1930, just before the meal was served, that he was going to bed. Christine had one mouthful and announced at 2015 that she was following Fernando. Michael, stalwart that he is, managed four mouthfuls and retired at 2030. None of them reappeared for the next 12 hours. Must have been the food.

By morning the swell had diminished and everyone was feeling a little more human. But only a little. Getting on to dry land was still a priority. We contacted on the radio the national park ranger who could give us an escorted tour round one of the islands. He said he would be delighted but was a little busy. He gave us permission to anchor our dinghy off one of the islands and sit on a rock on the foreshore until he had time to appear. Off we went and after swimming ashore, Christine's world at last stopped moving. Colour returned to her cheeks and a smile to her lips. The rest of us, meanwhile, swam off to explore what the Abrolhos were famous for – the underwater delights of unique coral and exotic fish. Snorkelling through the shallows we entered another world. Surrounded by turtles, and extraordinary fish of every brilliant colour, shape and size, it was like swimming in a tropical aquarium.

Above the surface of the water, the air is also full of exotica. Magnificent frigate birds, tropic birds and brown boobys (also birds) glide majestically overhead whilst their young squat on the barren slopes of the island waiting for their doting parents to bring back a morsel of regurgitated fish. But it is in the southern winter in June to September when the most spectacular display takes place in the islands. It is then that literally thousands of humpback whales migrate north from the Antarctic to mate and bring up their young. Apparently the water is thick with them. There is a regulation that says that yachts should not get within 50 metres of the whales but, in practice, it is almost impossible getting MORE than 50 metres from them. It must be some spectacle. Another time perhaps.

I had been concerned that the boat seemed increasingly sluggish over the previous week or so. Now in the clear waters of the Abrolhos I went down to have a look at the bottom. Even though I had had a diver go down and clean the bottom only three weeks earlier I was appalled to find it covered in an inch-long coat of fine seaweed. I had had a very expensive application of copper epoxy applied in September which was supposed to provide excellent antifouling properties for ten years or more. This was not encouraging.

So now we had to plan for passage speeds 10% below our normal average because of the excessive weed and, given the light winds we had experienced recently, rather than leaving for the next 200-mile leg to Guarapari at first light the following morning I decided we should leave at midnight.

4 March 2010

Storm-bound in Caravelas

Position: Caravelas 17:44.68S 039:15.40W

The perspicacious amongst you will have noticed that three days after we set off for a 200-mile passage south, our current position is actually north of the Abrolhos Islands. This, sadly, is not a mistake.

The forecast we had received before our departure indicated wind of no more than 8 knots for the entire 36-hour passage (so light as to be hardly sailable in Mina2) and, indeed, that turned out to be absolutely accurate for the first six hours. Not thereafter. The wind picked up from the nor'northwest. 20 knots. Perfect. Sails out. Engine off. Clipping along.

Then, three hours later and completely unexpectedly, the wind swung round from the south. Pretty much bang on the nose, and increasing in strength. Over the next few hours we found ourselves battling against stronger and stronger winds until we were in half a gale (34 – 38 knots apparent wind speed) and launching ourselves over four metre waves – bigger than I had seen since we had been in a 36-hour gale on our way up to the Lofoten Islands at the top of Norway in 2004. Mina2 and I were having great fun but it was becoming increasingly miserable for everyone else on board. Tacking down the coast in these conditions had increased the passage time considerably. Along this coast the safe havens are hundreds of miles apart. Fernando, who has been sailing in these waters for years, said that a cold front like this would last for two days or more. We had two options: battle on like this for another 36 hours or turn tale and have a much more comfortable sleigh ride with the wind behind us and seek shelter in Caravella 85 miles to the north. We would be there in about 12 hours. The choice was simple. (To put this into context for sailors back at home, it is like setting sail from the Hamble for the Scillies and, having got as far as Dartmouth, deciding to turn round in a gale and return to Hamble again).

On paper the approach to Caravelas, which is a small old town some four miles up a river with a very narrow entrance, looks quite tricky but in practice (and using the excellent Brazilian charts I had downloaded off the internet), it wasn't a problem even though we were entering it in the dark at 0400. We were all relieved when we dropped the anchor just before dawn.

After a well-earned sleep we took Mina2 to the town quay to replenish her fully depleted fuel tanks, re-anchored, then took the dinghy ashore to explore the small town. Completely off the beaten track, it has real charm. Once relatively wealthy (from God knows what crop which has since failed or fallen out of global favour), the streets are full of charming little houses, many brightly painted. The main industry now seems to be fishing and there is a fleet of small fishing boats which chunter out of the river every evening and return in the early morning.

After the trauma of her first two offshore passages, Christine was now agreeing with her family that this was indeed the experience of a lifetime and a particularly ghastly experience at that. Desperate to get off the boat, she was investigating bus timetables to ferry her to our next destination. Meanwhile, the others had found a place with internet access and were scrutinising the weather forecasts. All agreed that the wind was to stay from the south, and quite strong, for at least three days. We would stay anchored in the safety of the river until the weather changed.

The following day the DS and our three friends caught a bus to a wonderful sandy and deserted beach and spent the day chilling out whilst I stayed on the boat to do various odd jobs and to catch up on the blog.

Friday, and we are planning to hire a taxi for the day (no hire cars here) to explore the surrounding area.

Date: 5, 6 & 7 March 2010

Still Storm-bound in Caravelas

Position (still): Caravelas 17:44.68S 039:15.40W

Friday morning, and no suitable taxi was available so we all piled onto the local bus to visit the small town of Alcobaça 20 miles to the north. Half way there the skies became as black as soot and the deluge began in biblical quantities. Soon the road was completely flooded but this didn't put off our bus driver who had a timetable he was determined to keep to. We flew along in a foot of water, a wall of spray flying up either side of the bus. It was like being on one of the Disneyworld rides; very exciting but at the same time a little scary.

We arrived at the corrugated iron covered bus station, the pounding of the rain on the roof so loud we couldn't here each other shout. After half an hour the rain abated to no more than a tropical downpour and we made our way into town. It was unprepossessing. After an exceedingly average lunch in a self-service restaurant – the only restaurant we could find that was open - we wandered round and found ourselves in the bustling fishing port at the entrance to the river. Very picturesque, very bustling, this was the highlight of the day.

Whilst whiling away the stormbound time on the boat I had been re-reading the bible on sailing in heavy weather, aptly entitled "Heavy Weather Sailing". One of the accounts was of an horrific storm in exactly the same area in which we are sailing: it came out of the blue – completely un-forecast - and hit with the force of a locomotive. The account was terrifying: 80 knot winds, stupendous seas. It went on for more than two days. Ashore, it destroyed the yacht club and all the yachts sank on their moorings. The poor yacht caught offshore was pitchpoled, rolled and nearly destroyed. It's all very well if you are coastal sailing: get hit by bad weather and you head for the nearest safe haven just a few hours away at worst. The problem with this coast is that safe havens are hundreds of miles apart and in those conditions you can't get to them if you wanted to – you just have to get as far offshore as you can and ride it out. If you were of a nervous disposition and you read this account, you would never leave port again. I hid the book lest the Downstairs Skipper, renowned for her nervous disposition, should find it.

We went to the internet shop thing (which I think was still working off a 64 kB modem given the cripplingly slow speed) and scoured the web for weather forecasts. Not good. Whilst the prevailing winds in this neck of the woods were from the north to east which would waft us down to the southwest to our ultimate destination in comfort, all the forecasts were for sou'westerly gales which would be a tad on the uncomfortable side. We had decided that we were gentlemen, and gentlemen only sail

downwind, so we would wait until the prevailing favourable winds returned. It would be long wait. As we returned in our dinghy to Mina2 anchored in the river it started to rain. The rain lasted most of the night.

Saturday and another bus trip, this time to a simply delightful little place just 10 miles north of Caravelas called Praia de la Graúca. Nothing more than one hotel (with apparently no guests at all), a few small houses, a beautiful palm-fringed beach which went on for miles – and a divine little restaurant which served fresh Brazilian food at its best. At last, the long lazy lunch we had been hankering for.

On our return to Caravelas it started to rain again. And again, it lasted most of the night.

9 March 2010

Escape from Caravelas

Position: Vitoria 20:17.88S 040:17.20W

Sunday the 7th and Christine and Fernando had run out of time. Fernando had an important meeting to get back to in Buenos Aires so we bid a sad farewell to them at the bus station with Christine's ambition of sailing into Rio harbour unfulfilled.

Meanwhile, Maria, Michael and I were all set to leave at first light the following morning. The wind had swung back to the north and whilst very strong winds (Force 7 to 8, gusting 9 or 10) were forecast, these winds were well to the south and east of us. No problem. Before retiring for an early night I picked up another forecast and – horror upon horror – the strong wind warnings were now for the whole of the area we were in. Although this didn't tie in with the other weather data I had, it would have been irresponsible to take the boat out given this uncertainty. Another delay.

Late the following morning we spoke to the owner of the only other yacht in Caravelas. It transpired he knew the coast and its weather intimately. He lived on board his yacht and had been cruising up and down the coast for years. He gave us all sorts of valuable information. He said that he was also wanting to head south but had delayed because today there was too LITTLE wind. We asked him about the official forecast and he said that whilst it didn't say so, the weather was well south. No chance of even moderate winds between here and Vitoria 185 miles south. Guaranteed! Hallelujah. Let's get outta here!

Within five minutes we had the anchor up and, a week after our first attempt to head south, we were off. We swung out of the river into the ocean and found that our new best friend was absolutely right about the waves – they were high. And he was absolutely wrong about the wind. It was, as forecast blowing Force 7 from the north. But to hell with it – the wind was from behind us, we were travelling fast and safely and the wind was forecast to diminish after about 12 hours. It was just as well Christine had jumped ship – she would have been in hell in the rolly boisterous conditions. Added to which it poured with rain for 4 or 5 hours during the night.

At 1530 the following day we arrived in Vitoria and anchored off the Iate Clube do Espírito Santo. We were astonished by Vitoria. We had been expecting a town somewhat larger than the very small places we had visited before, and we had envisaged it to be rather rundown and industrial. As we approached the city, enormous skyscrapers became visible, and hundreds of them. It was like approaching Manhattan. Set amongst attractive green hills reminiscent of Rio de Janeiro, Vitoria is a magnificent, wealthy, thriving city. All the buildings are modern, attractive and well maintained and the streets, lined with upmarket sophisticated shops and restaurants are clean. What a contrast to the subsistence existence of the Brazil we had seen so far.

The Iate Clube (yacht club) was very welcoming and for a nominal R\$ 5 (about £2) per head per day we had full access to the upmarket club facilities including excellent bar and restaurant overlooking the harbour, swimming pool, sauna etc etc.

But being behind schedule we couldn't linger long. The Downstairs Skipper was very keen that we had an additional hand on board for these long overnight passages and Michael had already been incredibly accommodating and had delayed his flight back to Argentina from Rio by a couple of days. So after a day of sightseeing we were due to set off for the 195 mile passage to the fashionable resort of Búzios early on Thursday morning.

But before I left I had to go to the top of the mast to rescue a flag, the halyard of which had been mysteriously severed. Up at the top I was horrified to see that the (technical bit here) forestay foil for the yankee had substantial damage. A thick aluminium section had been ripped like paper down a foot of its length and jagged bits were jutting out. So that solved the problem of how the burgee halyard had been severed, but it's a complete mystery what caused this damage. It must have required enormous force. It's just as well our cruise is drawing to a close as this will require specialist riggers to sort out and possibly the need to have a new section of foil shipped out from the UK (if Ally from Oyster after-sales is reading this – I'll be in touch shortly!).

13 March 2010

Búzios – the St Tropez of Brazil

Position: Búzios 22:44.86S 041:53.02W

We weighed anchor and left Vitoria at first light – 0530 – bound for Búzios 190 miles to the south. It should take about 30 to 36 hours. The wind was very light, not sailable, so we motored –and motored, and motored. In fact apart from just half an hour of bliss in the middle of the night, we had to motor the whole way. Nightmare. We arrived at 1000 the following morning and a small dinghy came out to offer us a mooring belonging to the yacht club, Iate Clube Armação de Búzios which we gladly accepted.

The yacht club has a novel policy about visiting yachts using their moorings and facilities. Unusually, no charge is made, on condition that you spend at least R\$25 (£10) per day per head in the restaurant and bar. As the food (breakfast, lunch and

dinner) was excellent, and the caipirinhas large and potent, this didn't represent any great problem.

Búzios is about two hours drive away from Rio de Janeiro and is a popular weekend and holiday beach resort for the smart set of Rio. Once a small but extremely picturesque fishing village, it came to prominence in the 1960's when it was adopted by Brigitte Bardot and her wealthy Brazilian lover as their holiday location of choice. The village was transformed and so grateful are the locals at her having caused the instant swelling of their coffers, that the whole place is Bardot obsessed. Restaurant Brigitte, Bar BB, Rua Bardot, the shops are full of Bardot T-shirts and shopping baskets. There is even a life-size bronze statue of their divine heroine sitting on a bench where tourists queue up to be photographed snuggling up to her.

After the poverty-stricken subsistence communities which had been our sole visiting places since leaving Salvador a month ago, Vitoria and Búzios certainly were the little bit of sophistication that the Downstairs Skipper had been yearning for. Pretty as a picture, surrounded by numerous little coves with perfect beaches, it was a delightful change.

Michael had been wonderful company, when we saw him. He's like a dormouse and was seemingly capable of sleeping about 18 hours a day, waking briefly to entertain us with a succession of incredibly weak, old and corny jokes. Living off a diet of water and dried biscuits he was also very cheap to maintain – a perfect guest really. The DS and I greatly appreciated his company, particularly on the long night passages, and we were very sorry to see him leave after two weeks to return home.

The DS and I stayed on for a further day. Our next great mission was to sail to Rio de Janeiro but in order to avoid a night passage (which the DS is not keen on) we decided to break the journey at a small anchorage 25 miles south at Cabo Frio.

14 March 2010

The Anchorage From Hell

Position: Praia Do Farol, Cabo Frio - 22:59.92S 042:00.48W

Cabo Frio (Cape Cold) is a large peninsular which juts 5 miles out into the South Atlantic Ocean. A deep, cold current from Antarctica wells up at this obstruction and brings to the surface lots of nutrients so the area is teeming with fish and, consequently, fishing boats. The Cape consists of high steep-sided mountains and the anchorage was reached by passing through a narrow gash in the rock. The pilot book referred to a safe and secluded anchorage off a sandy white beach. Sounds idyllic doesn't it? With the wind having been very moderate on our short 25-mile trip from Búzios, we were surprised to squeeze through the gap to find a gale of wind blasting out. We could hardly stand on the deck to let the anchor go as the boat bucketed around in a steep chop. We let out a great deal of chain to ensure we didn't drag if the already appalling conditions got worse. The idea of swimming to the perfect sandy beach was laughable.

As darkness fell, a number of fishing boats entered the bay and dropped anchor waiting for the tide to rise sufficiently to take their boats over the shallows to their

harbour. Soon our secluded anchorage was like Newtown Creek on a bank holiday weekend. One boat anchored, I thought, unnecessarily close to us. Lightning was flickering all around us. Anticipating a very early start we turned in at about 2100.

But after a couple of hours the DS called me to report a boat was rapidly approaching us. It was the fishing boat anchored close to us. The wind had gone round through 180 degrees and the wind had died to almost nothing – most of the time. About every 5 minutes, a catabatic wind – a williwaw – came screaming down the steep mountain in front of us and hit with the force of a runaway train – from 3 to 50 knots in half a second, lasted about a quarter of a minute, then calm again. In these conditions the boats were slewing around all over the place and this was causing the fishing boat to career towards us before being brought up short by his anchor rope. It was clear that a vicious cold front was passing over us and with cold fronts come rain. And rain it did – torrentially.

If williwaw sledgehammers, tropical rainstorms and out of control fishing boats weren't enough to cope with, a deep swell started to make its way into the anchorage. The boat started trying to roll its mast out. Probably swinging 35 degrees each way, down below it was like being in a washing machine. Trying to get some much-needed sleep ahead of our long passage the following day, the DS and I were doing impersonations of star fish – spread-eagled on the bed to stop ourselves from being tossed around like rag dolls. It didn't make for a comfortable, relaxed night.

By 0500 there was just enough light to make our way out, and without looking back, we left the loathsome anchorage to set off to fulfil the ambition of a lifetime – to sail my own yacht into the most spectacular harbour in the world – Rio de Janeiro!

15 March 2010

A Dream Come True – Mina2 Sails Into Rio de Janeiro

Position: Marina Da Gloria, Rio De Janeiro - 22:55.16S 045:10.19W

Just after the Downstairs Skipper and I got married – only 31 years ago, but what seems like a lifetime – I was taken by her to meet the outlaws in Buenos Aires. On the way, we stopped over at Rio de Janeiro. I was captivated. Overlooked by the massive figure of Cristo Redentor, arms outstretched atop the Corcovado, planted amongst verdant mountains and surrounded by spectacular beaches with the evocative names of Copacabana and Ipanema, the entrance to one of the most beautiful island-dotted harbours of the world is dominated by the Pão de Açúcar, Sugarloaf Mountain. It is indescribably beautiful. I dreamed that one day I would sail my own yacht into Rio de Janeiro, the Cidade Maravilhosa – the Marvelous City. But it was a pipe-dream. One of those unachievable ambitions, it was the unreachable star.

But today, that dream came true. With tears in my eyes (really) with my best friend, wife and DS (all the same person) at my side, accompanied once again by Andy Williams belting out The Impossible Dream, Mina2 sailed my dream into reality as we coasted into Rio harbour.

19 March 2010

A Wet Dream Come True

Position: Marina Da Gloria, Rio De Janeiro - 22:55.16S 045:10.19W

It's just as well that our dream arrival into Rio harbour happened when it did. The night before we arrived there was the most fantastic storm. It dominated the headlines of the Rio papers. Our friends in Rio were concerned for our survival thinking we might be in the thick of it out to sea. But, happily, we weren't, and the Impossible Dream became reality as Mina2 sailed into Rio harbour in full sunshine.

It didn't last. The storm clouds re-gathered and for our first two days in the "Cidade Maravilhosa" it has bucketed down with heavy rain almost continuously. Had we arrived in these conditions we wouldn't have even seen the Sugarloaf Mountain on our way in.

Our humour has not been enhanced by our location. In Rio itself, there are two marinas. The Iate Clube de Rio de Janeiro, which is the Brazilian equivalent of a combination of the Royal Yacht Squadron and the Hurlingham Club. Very luxurious with every possible amenity and in a prime position in the shadow of the Sugarloaf Mountain, it is also very exclusive, and they do not welcome visiting yachts unless you are a member of a foreign yacht club with a reciprocal relationship, and not one British yacht club is on their list, or unless you are introduced by a member, and we don't know any.

Which leaves Marina Da Gloria. And glorious it ain't. We were ushered into one of their visitors' berths which is attached to a rickety pontoon. The water is disgustingly dirty and stinks. The place is infested with rats, both dead and alive; the live ones running around on the rocky ledge just in front of the pontoon and the dead ones bloated, rotting and floating around the boat. Apart from loos and showers there are almost no facilities – not even a bar to sit in front of with a caipirinha whilst fashioning the next blog. To add to the frustration we found out that had we known just one member of the exclusive Iate Clube, the first three days in the lap of luxury would have been free, and thereafter the charge would have been just 1/6th of the extortionate price we are being charged in the cess pit. And it's bloody raining.

What has more than made up for the disappointing weather and the even more disappointing marina facilities is the first social interaction we have had for a long time apart from the friends we've sailed with.

Almost on our arrival we met up with Scott (Aussie) and Fabi (Brazilian) Murphy on their catamaran, "Miss Bossy" (one of only three other foreign yachts we have seen in Rio). Having had almost nil sailing experience apart from a short Day Skipper course, they bought Miss Bossy in the same marina in Greece where I over-wintered Mina2 a year ago and, just the two of them, decided to go for it. We have been sailing in the same waters as them for months, out of the Med, Cape Verde then the Atlantic crossing over to Brazil. This is the first time we have met although we have been communicating by email having been introduced through this blog. They are both thriving on their extraordinary adventure. Respect.

Then there have been our land-bound friends in Rio. Maria's first cousin, Vivien, who lives here and came on board for a drink with her son André a couple of nights ago after which we went out for dinner. And likewise Lilian, sister of the unfortunate Christine who joined us from Ilhéus to Caravela but failed to make it to the Rio entrance, who we met this evening with her daughter, son-in-law and delightful grand daughter, Lucille, Zulu, and Sofia. They took us to a wonderful restaurant overlooking the Sugarloaf mountain. So it's been busy, busy, busy on the social front.

In between social engagements, and not having had the weather for sightseeing, we have done not much more so far than spend almost an entire day trying to top up the Brazilian SIM card which drives our internet connection (but now we have it I've been able to get another fix of The Now Show and The Archers). We also went to an excellent Historical Museum housed in the old city armoury. We were intending to visit all the sights in the old part of town yesterday but found a large political demonstration taking place and the whole "Centro" closed off by riot police. So lots to do yet.

Rio Reveals Her Beauty in the Sunshine

Date: 19 March 2010

Position: Rio De Janeiro

There is a tropical flower that closes in the rain to protect its petals. In this state it is dull and uninteresting. But when the sun comes out, it re-blossoms giving a vibrant display of natural beauty and colour. And so with Rio. Rio is not a city that can be appreciated in the rain. Even its residents, the Cariocas, hide their beauty in the rain. Most of them simply stay at home until the sun re-emerges and they venture out once more into the leafy sun-speckled roads leading down to the white beaches and the sparkling Atlantic surf. In the sunshine Rio re-blossoms into a colourful, warm, friendly, vibrant city.

Rio was carved out of the tropical jungle and despite all the concrete, tarmac and brick the jungle encroaches back into the city. The magnificent trees found in the thick forests in the hills surrounding Rio also thrive in the pretty city streets and provide a shady canopy in the charming residential areas of Urca, Ipanema and Leblon. Parasitic orchids cling to the trunks whilst monkeys tempted into the city by the easy pickings of food leap from tree to tree. Below, the Cariocas that aren't enjoying the many magnificent beaches that front Rio wander through the shady streets or enjoy a drink or a meal in one of the many bars and restaurants that spill on to the pavements.

This is the civilised and beautiful Rio, but there is a darker side to the city as well. Surrounding the leafy middle class districts are the favelas, the slums that have grown indiscriminately up the hills around the city. In ramshackle houses built from any material that can be salvaged or stolen, millions live in appalling conditions with little or no sanitation or fresh running water. Controlled by drugs barons, they are lawless, dangerous areas where even the police dare not venture. To say that Rio is a dangerous city where you can't walk around without being mugged or worse would be completely wrong, but one needs to know which are the safe areas and which are

not – and this is where local guidance is invaluable. Enter cousin Vivien and her husband Marcelo who have been our guides, mentors and tireless hosts.

On Friday, Vivien and her daughter Ana took us off for our first sightseeing tour of Rio. First stop, Parque Lage, a magnificent Italian villa built in the middle of the city in the 1920's in a vast area of landscaped parkland which is a stunning combination of formal Italian gardens and Brazilian forest. Vivien's mother is of the Lage family and although the family fortune was confiscated by the government in the Second World War (long story) and Parque Lage has been home to the Visual Arts School for many years, Vivien and Ana still felt a little proprietorial as they showed us round the house and gardens.

Second stop on our cultural tour was also once a private home, built in 1950 by Walter Moreira Salles, banker and diplomat. Artistic philanthropist, he spared no expense in commissioning the finest modern architects and landscape artists of the day in creating what is now a venue for film, visual art and photographic exhibitions. There was an excellent exhibition of Charles Landseer paintings and sketches of Brazil.

Exhausted by our cultural morning we lunched on traditional Brazilian morsels in an excellent bar / restaurant in Leblon. A quick pit-stop back to the boat for a much-needed siesta (culture is SO exhausting for a simple sailor), and then back into town for dinner with Vivien and Marcelo. Although we have stayed with them in the past at their home in the country, we had not been to their apartment in Rio before. It's right up there with the Moreira Salles house we visited earlier in the day. If it's not been featured in House & Garden or Architectural Digest, it should have been. And the position is incredible. The entire frontage of the apartment is glass which opens onto one of the prettiest of all the beaches down the entire coast.

I like a good glass of wine but one of the problems with the boat is that the ambient temperature down below tends, at about 35 degrees C, to be a tad above that recommended for wine storage. So most of the wine is cooked by the time we get to drink it.

Marcelo's cellar, however, is temperature controlled and stuffed with the finest wines. Combined with Vivien's superb cuisine, it was a great evening.

21 March 2010

The Ilhas Cagarras and a Tour of Inland Rio

Position: Rio De Janeiro

Saturday was the day we acted as host for our Rio friends. Lilian and Nigel, Vivien and Marcelo and Ana their daughter with friend Daniel came on board for an outing on Mina2. Sadly Lilian and Nigel's daughter Lucille dipped out – having the energetic and exhaustively inquisitive three-year old Sofia on board would have been too much. Probably the right decision but we missed them. We sailed (just) to the Ilhas Cagarras, a small archipelago of islands about seven miles out of Rio harbour. It was a wonderful but brief escape from the confines of Marina Da Gloria.

We hadn't expected any culture today but we got it. Ana peeled off her T-shirt for a bit of serious sunbathing on the way to the islands to reveal a stunning tattoo which occupied most of her back. Whereas most tattooees are satisfied with a bald eagle, a dolphin, or a bleeding heart with "Kevin" beautifully inscribed underneath, Ana had an original work of art by the leading Brazilian contemporary artist Beatriz Milhazes who is a friend of hers. Spiralling flowers cascaded down Ana's back. Living art at its best, Milhazes lesser works are to be found at the Tate Modern and the Pompidou Centre.

The Ilhas Cagarras are quite barren and are a nature reserve for breeding frigate birds, vultures and brown boobies. With brilliant views over Ipanema and Copacabana, it was a perfect anchorage where we swam, ate and drank before sailing back at dusk.

Having said goodbye to Marcelo, Vivien, Ana and Daniel we were then taken by Lilian and Nigel back to their home in Barra, a new district created over the last 25 years that spreads about 30 miles west of old Rio. Ultra-modern, it is a strip of alternating sophisticated shopping malls and large condominiums of houses and apartments in spacious landscaped estates which provide a very secure environment. Barra runs down an almost endless beach so no one is more than about 5 minutes away from the sea. We had a splendid evening with Anglo-Portuguese fellow guests Rodney and Gill which stretched well into the night.

The following morning we were up early again for The Grand Tour of Rio, Act II with Vivien and Marcelo. This time it was to see some of Rio's glorious surroundings. Up and up we climbed into their car until we reached the Tijuca National Park.

Back in the 18th century the springs in the hills provided water, flowing down an aqueduct, for the developing city of Rio. The hillsides were later deforested to make way for coffee plantations. But the deforestation resulted in the water drying up. So the Emperor of Brazil, a member of the Portuguese royal family, made the brave decision to order the sequestration of the plantations and the replanting of forest trees – not restricting them to the local species, but to species from all over the world. The result, enjoyed to this day, is a tropical arboretum on a massive scale, unequalled anywhere.

We then climbed aboard the funicular railway to climb the steep mountain to the top of Corcovado, the enormous pinnacle of rock on which stands the famous landmark of Rio, Cristo Redentor, the vast figure of Christ, arms outstretched. Sadly the Cristo is covered in scaffolding as part of the smartening up process for the Olympics in 2016, but the views from the top are breathtaking.

Time for lunch, we went to a fabulous restaurant called Aprazível in the pretty district of Santa Teresa where all the artists live and where we lunched on Brazilian specialities. Followed up by a tasting of different types of cachaça, we arrived back at the boat ready for a very early night.

24 March 2010

Escape from The Marina From Hell

Position: Itaipu – 22:58.33S 43:02.85W

Monday morning, and the daunting task of getting all the ships paperwork brought up to date; revising the crew list with the Policia Federal and then clearing in and out of Rio with the Port Captain. Typically their offices were miles apart. Thankfully I had the help of Scott & Fabi from “Miss Bossy” who also had to get some papers sorted. They knew the ropes – and the language. I honestly don’t know how, or whether, I would have coped without their help. The whole process went quite smoothly for me, taking less than two hours in total. It went less well for Scott & Fabi who were sent off to Immigration at the international airport where they were kept waiting for four hours before Scott’s visa was stamped with an extension.

Scott & Fabi had also put me in touch with a diver who was meanwhile scraping the weed off the bottom of Mina2. He did an excellent job as our cruising speed under motor went from a sluggish six knots up to our customary seven knots after the operation.

We had intended going into town in the afternoon to look around whilst changing Maria’s flight ticket to Buenos Aires. But we had been told by the marina that we had to hang around as they were relocating our pontoon and we had to be there to reposition Mina2. It would all be done by 1330. It wasn’t. There would be a delay until 1430. 1430 came and went. Eventually at 1600 we were told they couldn’t do it that day – it would be done the following day. So one day had been wasted and we were expected to waste half the following day as well, apparently.

That evening, the water in the marina which is rank at the best of times started smelling strongly of sewage. The smell was so overpowering that it kept me awake most of the night. The rats must have loved it but we’d had enough. The following morning, I told the manager exactly what I thought of his appalling marina. He agreed with everything I said before refusing to discount his extortionate charges, and we left. We motored out of Rio harbour to a delightful anchorage off a small fishing village, Itaipu, about seven miles away.

As we arrived, a man in a canoe circled us like a shark. Once the anchor was down he introduced himself as Bruno from the beachside restaurant “Pli Onboard”. We’d heard of Bruno. A cheerful and highly entrepreneurial young man he not only ran his excellent restaurant but also provided visiting yachts with anything from supermarket shopping, to fuel, ice, takeaway meals, drinks - whatever you wanted. He gave us a menu to peruse and we later called him to order an excellent lunch of fried lula (squid) and beautifully light deep-fried cheese pasties, delivered once again by canoe.

Later in the afternoon, “Miss Bossy” arrived in the anchorage. They too were planning to leave at first light for the 60-mile passage to Ilha Grande.

We awoke Wednesday morning to a calm and windless day. It would be Perkins Power that would get us there. But we needed to make water and the route hugged the coast so there was plenty to look at along the way.

28 March 2010

Paradise Re-Found – Phone Signal Lost

Position: Saco de Ceu, Ilha Grande – 23:06.36S 44:12.15W

And indeed the 60 mile 9-hour passage from Rio to Ilha Grande was under motor the entire way – the most wind we saw was 7 knots, hardly enough to move us through the water let alone get us to our destination with enough sunlight to see it. But the sea was smooth, the sun was hot, and we were close enough to the shore the whole way to find a pleasant distraction. We arrived in Saco de Ceu mid-afternoon and found ourselves in a paradise bay. The landscape here is hilly verging on the mountainous, and all lush jungle with a few picturesque houses on the shore of the deep bay surrounded by palm trees. Turning a blind eye to the palm trees it was reminiscent of the prettiest islands in the Northern Aegean in Greece.

The only downside, from the Downstairs Skipper's point of view was that the ring of high hills around us blocked all mobile phone signals. The DS has an obsessive need for mobile communication at all times so much of her time was spent jabbing at the buttons on the many phones we have accumulated on board, but all with the same negative effect.

We decided that this place was so perfect that, notwithstanding lack of comms, we would take a day's holiday and we spent the whole of the next day here just chilling. It's ages since we've done that and it was bliss. In fact I managed to get the paints out for the first time in about six months. Here is the result:

The DS also did a painting of the same lovely scene which is much better than mine. But if she wants it posted she can get her own blog.

28 March 2010

Over-wintering Plans Scuppered by Silt and Bureaucracy

The Bahia da Ilha Grande is an enormous, partially enclosed bay in between Rio De Janeiro and Sao Paulo, about 45 miles across and 20 miles deep. Surrounded by steeply forested hills the bay consists of numerous islands – there are said to be one island for every day of the year – and literally hundreds of anchorages. The water is clear and warm and the rocky islands are perfect for diving or snorkelling. It is without doubt the best cruising ground in the whole of the east coast of South America and you could spend six months here and still leave with plenty of anchorages undiscovered. The only downside from a sailor's point of view is that there is rarely any wind. Well, not the only downside – there are the biting insects as well. Not dengue fever carrying mosquitoes, thank goodness (the DS is always on the lookout for them), but midge-like creatures that you neither see nor hear but they bite drawing blood. The itch is five times worse than a mosquito bite and they last five times as long. And they appear to be unaffected by Deet, spirals or the DS's disapproval.

Friday morning and we motored the short 12 miles to the town of Angra Dos Reis and anchored outside of the marina. The bureaucracy in Brazil regarding foreign cruising boats is something of a nightmare. It involves several different agencies (police,

immigration, customs, port captains to name a few, each of which are usually situated at diametrically opposite ends of town). Their job is to ensure absolute compliance with complex but loosely defined regulations, so every officer in every department in every port has a slightly different interpretation of the rules.

We are to leave Mina2 in Brazil for six months. The marina fees are extortionate here so we had made arrangements to leave the boat on a secure pontoon up a river in a well-protected condominium property owned by a friend of a friend. All looked good. We mentioned this in passing to another French/German boat we met in Vitoria. BE CAREFUL they said. Another foreign boat had done this and found that this practice was not authorised and they were not allowed to take the boat out of the country until a very large fine had been paid. You had to leave the boat in an authorised marina. That was the first we had heard of this sting in the bureaucratic tail.

So off we went to the relevant customs office in Angra to check this out in plenty of time. Our cruising friends appeared to be right. We contacted the condominium pontoon owner who said he had never heard of this regulation but he was sure that a solution could be found. We agreed that we would take Mina2 to the condominium pontoon to check it out, and the following morning we would go together with the owner into town to solve the problem with the various departments. The latter part of the exercise turned out to be unnecessary. We had been assured that there was plenty of depth on the pontoon but, in the event, discovered that the river had silted up and at low springs we would be nearly a metre aground. So we had to abandon the whole of the condominium plan. With less than week to go we are now back to square one, researching alternative marinas.

Having escaped from the river before we got silted in forever, we anchored off and went ashore by dinghy to have a look at the rest of the condominium. It is a highly exclusive area about the size of Kent, enclosed with razor wire and electric fences with security guards outnumbering the residents. It includes a marina (not suitable for over-wintering) with enormous motor yachts, a country club, bars and restaurants, golf course and shops stuffed with designer gear. All surrounded by stunning vast houses in large immaculately maintained gardens all with swimming pools. It is really impressive. The only thing that is missing are the people. Apparently the immensely wealthy owners of these magnificent properties all arrive on 20 December and leave, en bloc, on 10 January. The rest of the year the properties are empty apart from the army of workers who keep the lawns manicured, the hedges trimmed and the pools cleaned in preparation for the next 20th of December. These privileged few can't be bothered with traffic jams; part of the condominium is a heliport with room for lots and lots of helicopters.

So with only a week before we decommission the boat and the DS heads back to Argentina and I return to London, rather than exploring this paradise we will be trying to find a safe and bureaucratically compliant haven for Mina2 for the southern winter.

3 April 2010

Mina2 Finds Southern Winter Home

It's been a while since the last blog which is only because what news there has been is completely dull. But I'll tell you about it anyway.

There are some out there who seemingly think that the Downstairs Skipper and I are on a perpetual holiday, drifting (or, in our case latterly, motoring) from one idyllic anchorage to another. But few of you have had to deal with Brazilian Bureaucracy; or had to find a secure berth at short notice for your yacht for six months where it isn't going to go aground and fall over every twelve hours.

Well, to cut a tedious story short, we've found the secure berth at Bracuhy Marina at the top of the Bahia de Ilha Grande. And rather nice it is too. The marina is nicely located, well run, secure and has nice restaurants and bars for us to relax in after a hard day's decommissioning work. Even better, we pulled a few strings and negotiated a price which is even lower than the condominium price.

But in Brazil you can't just leave a boat – everything has to be authorised, documented and stamped by the assemblage of bureaucratic agencies. A week ago we went to the customs office in Angra Dos Reis – the big town in the area - to ask whether or not we could leave Mina2 in a private condominium. But before we had even been able to ask the question (after a two hour wait), we found we had another problem we weren't even aware of. Amongst Mina2's Bible-sized dossier of official forms, all in Portuguese which I don't understand, there was apparently one form which authorised me to be responsible for the boat for 3 months from the date of my first arrival in December. My responsibility had expired 10 days before. Thank goodness this High Official was the only one we had come across who spoke English.

"But I am the Skipper, the Owner, and I have been on board for the last 10 days. I have been responsible for the boat"

"You may have been responsible, but you have not been authorised by us as being responsible and therefore you have been irresponsible, violating Brazilian Presidential Edict Number 47924Z, which is a criminal offence"

"But why was I only authorised as being responsible for 3 months?"

"Because you only have a three month tourists' visa. If your visa expires then clearly you can not be responsible".

"But I left the country on 23 December and returned again in February, so I have a valid visa until May" I said, showing him my passport.

The High Official scrutinised my passport and said, "I can see your entry stamps for 17 December and 4 February, but where is your exit stamp in December when you allegedly left Brazil".

"I don't know" I said, "No one stamped my passport when I left"

"Then how can I tell you left Brazil?"

"If I didn't leave Brazil, then how come I re-entered Brazil on 4 February".

Round One to The Skipper. Seconds out. Round Two.

This man was good. He was damned if he was going to be defeated by overpowering logic. "But your Boat Customs Documentation says you were responsible only until 17 March, and that is all that matters as far as Brazilian Presidential Edict Number 47924Z is concerned, and since then you have been irresponsible and you have committed a criminal offence". Knockout to the High Official.

We did a bureaucratic samba for a few more minutes and then we found that the he was only flexing his Bureaucratic Muscles and that he was, in fact, a decent chap and he crossed out the offending date of irresponsibility, wrote in a more sensible date and officially stamped it twice (the first stamp was upside down, which wouldn't do).

The following day we returned to Bracuhy Marina to pick up another critical form saying that the Marina would be responsible for Mina2 during my six months absence and we returned once again to Angra for Round Three with the High Official (each of these round trips takes more than 3 hours). No problem this time, except the High Official told us we had to report to the Port Captain's office. Although I had been told by the Port Captain's office in Rio that it was not necessary to check in with the Port Captain in Angra, we went anyway. Hell, it was only another day.

Having checked we were in the right place we waited patiently in the queue for over an hour to be told that it was not the right place after all. And so on and so forth.

It might sound pretty quick to you, but I've abbreviated things a little and the whole process took four days. Granted, in between waits we have been able to find time to visit a number of idyllic little spots. Or they would have been idyllic had it not poured torrential rain for a lot of the time. The one benefit of this is that the temperature has dropped at last. In fact for the last couple of nights, with temperatures plunging into the high 20's (Centigrade), we've had to pull a sheet over us at nights to keep out the almost arctic cold.

P.S. In my last blog I told you about these ghastly midge-type things which descend at twilight and whose bites are much worse than mosquito's and last much longer. They are called Borachudos, and they are a new pest to the area. But we may have found the solution. Someone suggested an almond and vanilla oil rub as being an effective, natural, green deterrent. We found a bottle in a chemist and have for the last few days been rubbing oil into each other all evening. The effect is dramatic. It probably doesn't keep the midges away, but I've enjoyed it enormously.

Easter Weekend and the Anchorages Get Clogged

Date: 2 April 2010

It is the Easter weekend, and rich Brazil has come out to play in the Bahia da Ilha Grande, filling the fabulous shore-side houses and re-commissioning the enormous number of motor yachts which fill the marinas here.

Having negotiated Mina2's home for the winter and got all the documentation in place, we were free to spend our last 36 hours before the end of our epic cruise. Good Friday morning and we knew that the more picturesque anchorages would start filling up by lunch time – so an early start.

First stop were the Ilhas Botinas which are a couple of postcard pretty tiny side-by-side islands each with a few perfectly positioned palm trees and surrounded by clear warm water, corals and an abundance of tropical fish. As it was only 0730 when we arrived, we were the only boat. Perfect. Down with the dinghy for a Kodak moment,

on with the snorkels to swim in the tropical aquarium, then back onto the boat and weigh anchor for a Beach.

The DS has a passion for beaches and she had been complaining that in the country with some of the best of them in the world, she had enjoyed remarkably few of them. The hot one in the area is Praia do Dentista (Beach of the Dentist??) on the south side of Ilha Gipóia. It was 0900 when we slung the anchor down and there were only three other boats there. We swam ashore, and the DS was happy walking down the deserted palm-fringed beach, for a while. A couple of motor boats approached the bay, anchored, and got their ghastly noisy Scoobidoo's down and started shooting round the anchorage. The DS was now unhappy.

"How are we going to swim back to the boat without being run down? Haven't they anchored too close to us? Can't they see the anchorage is almost full? "

Remarkably we managed to swim back to the boat with all our limbs intact. Within minutes the horizon was filled with the bow waves of motor yachts all converging on the anchorage. One by one they winkled their way in, set their anchors, broke out the beers and cranked up their stereos. Having persuaded the DS that with no wind and no tide, no one was going to drag their anchor and cause irreparable damage, we settled down to a morning of people-watching. By lunchtime, there were conservatively more than a hundred boats in the anchorage – you could almost walk across the bay on the decks of plastic. What amazed us was that any boat over 10ft long had at least one professional crew on board. By the time you got up to 50 ft, there were half a dozen of them rushing around doing God knows what. On Mina2, with two Skippers on board, no one does anything.

Before we got hemmed in for the night we decided to move on. But as we went from one anchorage to another, we found them all full to bursting. Moving round to the north side of Ilha Gipóia, remarkably we found a delightful anchorage with no one else there at all. My log says "Anchored in 11m at 22 deg 02.35S 044 deg 21.88W. Only boat. How lucky is that?" We were to find out.

4 April 2010

Rock and Roll on The Last Night of The Cruise

The following afternoon we were to go to Bracuhy, tie up in the marina and start the hard work of decommissioning Mina2 who was to stay there for 6 months. This was the last night of our cruise and we were all alone, at anchor in a romantic setting. The stage was set.

A few hundred yards down the coast was a restaurant with a pontoon for their water-borne clients (Ilha Gipóia, 3-miles long, and completely covered in lush tropical jungle, has no roads and all the waterside properties can only be accessed from the sea). As darkness fell, the lights of the restaurant were switched on – bright, garish greens and reds, and a searchlight which described patterns across the sky. "How ghastly" we said "thank God we aren't eating there".

After a romantic on-board dinner of beautiful fresh prawns, marinated in olive oil, lemon and garlic, cooked to perfection by the Skipper, and served on a bed of pasta with a wine and tomato sauce and washed down with an excellent bottle of Chilean Sauvignon Blanc, we retired at 2245 for our last night at anchor.

The searchlight was an indicator which we missed entirely. At 2300 the “music” hit us like a sledgehammer. The “Íla” was open for business. The owners of the open-air club (or disco for those of a certain age) had invested enormous amounts of money on the best and loudest sound system in Brazil. It was fantastic. The noise could be heard in Angra, four miles away. From two hundred yards away it had a physical impact.

Had the DS and I been sound engineers, we would have been waxing lyrical about the high fidelity of the monster, saying “Maria, listen how the higher frequencies resonate perfectly with our rigging, causing them to twang in sympathy with the Brazilian rhythm”. “Indeed”, the DS would have said, “but what I find even more remarkable is how the strength of the lower frequencies cause the entire hull to act as a sound box, so that with the regular bass notes, it is like sitting inside a constantly beaten drum”.

But we weren’t sound engineers, we were a couple of tired old sailors needing a bit of kip. And we weren’t going to get it.

Just as the DS and I were debating whether this was Garage Music or HipHop, the first of the rocket-fuelled revellers arrived in their rocket-fuelled stink boats. Stink boats only have two speeds – flat out and stop. As the constant procession passed us to anchor off the club and get ferried ashore, their enormous wash caused Mina2, already under the physical onslaught of the music, to start rocking and rolling with our stern, right beneath our bed in the aft cabin, crashing up and down in the waves. As the last of the revellers arrived at 0300, so the first of the revellers started to leave, so the bucketing was continuous. Incapable of sleep I went on deck to survey the scene and my guess was that more than 100 stink boats (not one sailing yacht) were anchored off the club.

But we knew that this purgatory would end. And it did - at 0800 the following morning. I don’t suppose any of the professional crews got any sleep either.

5 April 2010

The Night(mare) of the Borrachudos

We were snugly berthed in Mina2’s new home in Bracuhy Marina where I would be living for 10 days before returning to the UK, leaving the boat here until my return in October.

We were lucky to find the place. It is a very tranquil small marina tucked in the entrance to a river. Well protected from wind and waves, Mina2 would be very secure. With pretty trees at the waters edge, hiding a selection of nice bars and restaurants, it would be difficult to find the time to work on the boat. We quickly befriended a couple of people who live on their boats here, speak English, and who

said they would keep an eye on Mina in my absence. The place was perfect – until nightfall.

During the night both of us woke up in the stifling heat, itching like mad. It's quite normal to wake with the occasional bite and we sleep with a tube of antihistamine cream by the bed. A quick smear and back to sleep again. This time it was different. We would have used the entire tube and covered our entire bodies. I turned on the light and looked in the mirror. My body was absolutely covered with bites. Given that neither of us had neither seen nor heard any insect at all, for a moment I wondered whether or not we had both contracted measles – it was that bad. Because the aft cabin was so hot and clearly infested with the unknown insects, we decamped into the saloon which was a bit better, but we didn't get much sleep after that. The itching was insufferable.

Actually, I don't think they were the dreaded Borrachudos. I've been doing a bit of research on them. It is the females that are the bloodsuckers, depositing a bit of venom whilst they're at it. Typical. The bites don't normally start itching for a while and the itching lasts for days. In this case, however, the itching was intense from the outset but, thankfully, by the morning there was no sign of the bites at all. Odd.

The Downstairs Skipper Deserts Mina2 – Snoopy Dognapped

Date: 6 April 2010

Position: Marina Bracuhy

Ever since we've been here in Marina Bracuhy, the DS and I have been bitten to death by unknown insects, and it's poured with rain (the only conclusion I can draw is that we have an infestation of bed bugs as a result of the appallingly unhygienic conditions in which the Downstairs area has been kept). The rain is forecast to continue for days; and it's non-stop and torrential.

The DS said "I've had enough of this bloody boat, I'm outta here. I'm going home to Mummy in Buenos Aires – and Snoopy is coming with me."

Snoopy, constant friend and companion for 35 years, came on board with Pete in Cape Verde, initially as Ship's Mascot. But he threw himself into the day-to-day activities of a transatlantic passage; trimming sails, helming, keeping watch, helping in the galley and mixing the most delicious Mango bombs with a triple gin float for Venetia. The exertion nearly killed him (see blog and photo of 8 December), but he turned out to be such a valuable member of the crew that he was soon promoted from Ship's Mascot to Ordinary Seadog.

Only last week he volunteered to stay on the boat whilst we were away and guard it in our absence. I was touched by his devotion to duty. This is a position of some responsibility and he is, after all, nearly 250 in dog years. I immediately accepted his offer and promoted him from Ordinary Seadog to Able Seadog. The little fella was almost bursting with pride.

So when the DS started trying to stuff Snoopy into her suitcase, there was a bit of a scuffle. "No", said Snoopy "My place is here, guarding Mina2 for My Great Leader.

For the first time in my life I feel valued; I have a Position Of Responsibility. I will not let The Skipper down. I will NOT go with you”. The DS defiantly stuffed Snoopy further into her suitcase, zipped it up and left the boat.

I will miss them both.

Floods Cause Tragic Mudslides – Many Dead

Date: 7 April 2010

I have reported the torrential rain we’ve been experiencing. I thought it might be normal. It isn’t. This morning a bucket I’d left on deck yesterday was full to the brim. Not a glass – a bucket. Transpose this amount of rain to an entire mountainside and the consequences have been horrendous. In the slums around Rio, less than 60 miles away, there have been landslides which have taken hundreds of houses with them. More than a hundred known dead so far. Thousands homeless. And the rain, whilst less torrential than the last 48 hours, is forecast to continue for another three days at least. Tens of thousand further houses are in imminent risk. These are the worst conditions in more than 50 years. A state of emergency has been declared in the city of Rio and a three-day period of mourning has started. See the BBC link:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8607518.stm>

It’s sobering to think that the fun-loving city which we were enjoying so much just 10 days ago, and which is just down the road, is now in a state of chaos and suffering such tragedy. The reason those people affected by this tragedy lived in the slums in the first place was because they had very little. Now they have nothing. My thoughts are with them.

Final Preparations for Over-Wintering

Date: 15 April 2010

I’ve been ticked off by the Downstairs Skipper. Not for the first time it has to be said. In my last despatch I reported on the tragic mudslides in and around Rio de Janeiro without mentioning that the DS and the poor dognapped Snoopy were, as the hills started to crumble, making their way in the torrential rain by bus from Angra Dos Reis, through Rio, to the airport. Had they set off an hour or two later, the roads would have been blocked with mudslides. And an hour after their plane left, the airport was closed for the day due to flooded runways. Indeed the roads were still half blocked six days later when I left, with enormous earth moving equipment clearing the mudslides. On one stretch, sitting in the middle of the road was an enormous rock, literally the size of a house, which had crashed down the mountainside. The death toll of those whose slums were swept away by the deluge has risen to more than 250.

The rain continued to fall after the DS’s departure, frustrating my efforts to bed the boat down for the “winter”. I had been warned that the steamy tropical climate meant that everything had to be as dry as possible down below or when I returned I would not only find mildew over everything, but mushrooms growing on it as well. Likewise, the water here is so warm throughout the year that it is like a Petri dish and a static hull would attract every form of animal and vegetable growth. It was essential that I got a diver down to put plastic bags round the propeller and the bow thrusters or I ran the risk of returning in October to find them completely seized up. In addition,

our mooring in the marina was only temporary; we had to relocate before I left, and again this required a diver to go down, find the concrete block to which the back end of the boat would be attached and secure a rope to it. But there was so much mud in the water swept down the river by the rain, and the light was so bad under the gloomy sky that neither job was possible.

But in the last three days, the clouds dispersed, the hot sun came out, the waters cleared and everything started coming together. The decks were festooned with ropes, clothing, pillows and mattresses to dry them out thoroughly, and Paulo the diver appeared. And just as well. He discovered that the anode on the propeller (which stops the propeller from being eroded by electrolysis) had all but fallen off and needed to be replaced. He also found the concrete block further along the quay, pronounced it in perfect condition and position, and attached a stout rope to it. Paulo had done a good job and we have agreed that he'll go down every six weeks and clean the bottom of the boat to keep the weed in check.

The following morning we were to relocate Mina2 to her new permanent mooring. As I now had a plastic bag round my propeller Mina2 needed a tow, so Asis (one of the incredibly helpful friends we had made since our arrival) arrived in his dinghy. With his 8-horsepower outboard straining away to move Mina2's 20 tons, we very slowly backed out into the middle of the marina at which point his outboard packed up. I was adrift with no means of propulsion. Interesting moment. But Asis managed to coax the outboard back into life before we started making contact with other boats and dragged us round to our allotted space where Asis' wife Marie-Therese was waiting to take my lines. Asis and Marie-Therese will be keeping an eye on the boat for me and will be arranging for someone to open the boat up every couple of weeks, give it a good airing and brush all the cushions and mattresses to prevent mildew. Mina2 will be in good hands and her skipper will sleep easily at night for the next six-months. Another new friend, Luis – an Argentine doctor who lives on his boat in the marina - gave both Maria and, later, me a lift into Angra to catch the bus to Rio.

Now Is The Time To Say Goodbye **Date: 16 April 2010**

And so ends the most remarkable and enjoyable year of my life. It was in April last year that I flew out to Preveza in the Ionian, and after a couple of weeks preparation, launched Mina2. Joined by the Downstairs Skipper at the beginning of May we made our way through the Corinth Canal and into the Aegean for a summer cruise through the Greek Islands and round the southern coast of Turkey. In August, with a relay of friends to help me, we travelled the length of the Mediterranean to arrive on my birthday at the end of the month in Lagos on the Algarve coast of Portugal. At 2,250 miles the exit from the Mediterranean was further than our transatlantic crossing and on the way we enjoyed stopovers at Crete, Malta (blown away by the historical heritage of this fascinating island), Tunis (and a day's tour round the site of old Carthage), and Ibiza which was, well, lively.

Mina2 was hauled out of the water in Lagos in September for a major refit (which allowed me a couple of weeks to rush home and catch up with my family and a pile of paperwork) and at the beginning of October we headed out into the Atlantic to Madeira where we joined up with the Rallye des Iles du Soleil. After stopping at

Tenerife with the massive 2-mile high El Tiede volcano, our route took us to Dakhla in Western Sahara and our land-based day of adventure in the Sahara desert; then on to Dakar, capital of Senegal. Dakar was an enormous culture shock and not a particularly pleasant one, unlike the Sine-Saloum delta where the people were delightful; their way-of life fascinating, and the variety of birds incredible. A wonderful few days. On to the Cape Verde islands (during which we achieved our memorable 200-mile day) where our three-day visit to São Antão was one of the highlights of the year. Then “The Crossing” which was extraordinary in every sense of the word.

Arriving in Salvador having sailed 2,200 miles over 13 ½ days I returned to the UK to be with my parents and sisters for a precious few days before my father’s peaceful death.

Returning in early February, the DS and I spent a couple of days exploring the upper reaches of the Bahia before heading back out into the Atlantic and down the lush tropical palm-fringed coast of Brazil. Our stop-overs alternated between wide inlets, nearly deserted and barely supporting an impoverished population who fished for their daily meal from ancient dugout canoes, and swanky resorts with the rich being ferried in to their luxury holiday homes by helicopter. The contrast is stark.

After being holed up in Caravelas for nearly a week we continued our journey, culminating in our emotional arrival in Rio De Janeiro – the realisation of a dream. After a week of being entertained by our friends in Rio, we arrived at our destination of the Bahia Da Ilha Grande.

So what will be the enduring memories? The adventure has been a wonderfully enriching cultural experience. The land-based contact has been enormously varied in terms of the people, their way of life, their food and, particularly, their music.

I won’t forget the music. Portuguese fado in Madeira, the Arabic influenced Spanish music of Tenerife, the Cuban/West Indian/African influenced music of Senegal and the unique music of Brazil. But for me the most wonderful music came out of the Cape Verde islands. One never went anywhere without the sound of their live music being played and sung. Influenced by Portuguese fado and African rhythms, it is hauntingly beautiful.

There has been enormous diversity in the landscape as well. The volcanic mountainous Atlantic islands – some barren as dust, others lush Gardens of Eden. In stark contrast too were the bone-dry sandy dunes of Saharan Africa interspersed with Colorado-type rock formations, and the meandering low-lying mangrove-lined swamps of the Sine-Saloum delta, the water thick with fish and the mangroves filled with birds of every species. And then there is the lush tropical mountainous jungle down the entire coast of Brazil.

Out at sea we have not seen as much wildlife as I had hoped or expected. But over the period we have met up with many dolphins – from the biggest ones I have ever seen at about four metres long, to a pygmy variety which were barely a metre long. However often one meets up with dolphins there is always a thrill as they interact with the boat, playing around the bow wave, doing acrobatic tricks for the sheer fun

of it and then swimming sideways looking at you through their beady eye, almost as if they are looking for our reaction to their company.

And we have seen humpback whales – only a couple, but having contact with any of these magnificent creatures is a memorable privilege.

We have fished, mainly without success but we did catch a few which were large enough to cause panic and pandemonium, but then provided us with some memorably delicious meals. But at some cost. We certainly lost more expensive lures than we caught fish. The fish we saw most of were the flying variety (one very large specimen of which nearly knocked me out in the cockpit (see blog 2 November)).

Which leads me to contact with animals of the human variety. I am not naturally a rally person, preferring the greater sense of adventure that one gets from independent travel. However, the Rallye des Iles du Soleil is the only practical safe way in which one can navigate hundreds of miles up the Amazon, and you can only participate in that adventure if you have done the whole rally (I will be deferring the Amazon leg until after I get back from the Deep South). But in the event it was a rewarding experience. The organisers dealt with all the bureaucratic formalities of clearing in and out of each country which saved endless time and hassle. And with their contacts in each of the ports of call we were able to get things fixed on the boat (happily few) which would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, otherwise.

Whilst communication with many of the other rally participants was hampered by language barriers, we nevertheless made many friends and had the pleasure of sharing some wonderful experiences with them.

One unexpected aspect of the rally was the competitive element. “It is a rally – not a race!” was the constant cry of the organisers – but put one boat alongside another sailing in the same direction at the same time and human nature takes over. In my case, the racing blood came coursing back through my veins. The turbo-boosting cruising chute went up a little earlier and stayed up a little longer than might otherwise have been the case; sails were trimmed a little more frequently, and the emailed positions of each boat were analysed at length to see how we were faring against the “competition”. It added an extra dimension to the pleasure of the passages which I thoroughly enjoyed.

So how did Mina2 do? Well, I may be a little biased, but I thought she did rather well. We motored far less than most of the other boats. Apart from 28 hours to get through the loathsome Doldrums (compared to 35 to 55 hours that the other boats reported) and excluding the time up the Sine Saloum delta, we motored hardly at all for nearly 4500 miles between Portugal and Brazil. Notwithstanding, we seemed to make our way through the fleet on most of the passages. So the old girl done good.

Mechanically she also stood up very well. The ocean is a harsh environment for mechanical and electrical components, and one can expect a succession of problems that need to be sorted. But apart from an initially temperamental generator and the problem of replacing the watermaker motor, the very thorough overhaul of the boat in Portugal in September paid dividends and meant that very little went wrong.

But it takes more than a good boat to get results. You also need a good crew, and Mina2 had good crew in abundance. Some of my friends who came along are old hands: they know the boat and they know me. Some of them even know how to cook which is an added blessing. Some of them don't. But the ones I admired most of all were those who volunteered for the sheer adventure of it – and found themselves in a completely alien environment controlled by a manic, alcoholic, fag-smoking lunatic. Added to which, a good proportion of them took a while to find their sea-legs so were feeling like death. But there were no complaints and no missed watches, however dreadful they felt. Heroes every one. I love you all, and I couldn't have done without you.

So how did I fare personally? It was actually a lot more tiring than I had expected for much of the time. Most of the boats on the rally had permanent crews who were there for the duration. Mina2 was unusual in having a succession of different crew coming and going. Some were old hands but others were new to offshore sailing. Typically I sail with a crew of three including myself and we take it in turns to keep watch. But as skipper, one is also responsible for a heap more other things beside. Before the crew arrives there is the planning; the provisioning and the fixing of things. During the passage there is the navigation, monitoring the systems and controls and the routine maintenance (I know the boat intimately and it takes far less time to fix a pump myself than to try and explain it to someone else who will be off the boat in a couple of weeks). Particularly with inexperienced crew on board, I am on call 24/7 for every question or uncertainty, and they occur all the time. So the amount of sleep one gets becomes limited. Silly though it may seem, the socialising that is part and parcel of a rally community, whilst enormous fun, compounded the problem (I'm afraid I can't say no to an invitation). By Cape Verde, I was becoming quite seriously exhausted.

Ironically, the two-week Atlantic crossing was the most relaxing time of all for me. Peter, my son, found late in the day that he was able to join us – making a crew of four rather than three. But I decided that we would stick to the three-man watch system and that I would not stand any watches myself. This system worked extremely well. I was able to get a sensible amount of sleep, whilst supporting everyone else and doing all the other skipperly things. Brilliant!

Skipperly things have included writing this blog. I've always written a journal of my various cruises but often this has been done after the event from notes I have jotted down as I went along. The blog, however, disciplined me to write at the time. It is of the moment rather than recollections, and therefore has a different style. At times, on those lonely night watches, the imagination has strayed a little. Someone described the blog as "rather self-indulgent and only loosely based on the truth" which I think sums it up exactly. I've enjoyed writing the blog enormously and it will provide an enduring record of the whole wonderful adventure and the increasingly frail hold that the writer had on sanity. My only regret is that I didn't have access to the blog technology earlier.

I'm told by those who had to stay at home - our spouses, children, parents and friends – that the blog enabled them to get a feel for what it was like on board; that they were able to share the experience to an extent, but without the nausea. That's brilliant. But what really surprised me was to find out how many people, completely unconnected with Mina2 and her crew, were also following the blog. Not just those who had in the

past, were at the time, or were hoping in the future to sail the same course, but also many who simply came across the blog by chance. If you emailed me in December when I asked to know who you were and I didn't reply, please accept my apologies. It coincided with the time when I had to rush back to the UK. I would have written the blog anyway, but to know that there are people out there who are actually reading it makes it all the more worthwhile. Thank you all for indulging me.

I plan to return to Brazil to recommission Mina2 in October with a relaxed program taking the boat down to Buenos Aires for Christmas, home town of the DS and home to very many friends. It will be the following year (2011/12) that we are planning the big push into The Deep South. If you want me to let you know when I'm back on line, please email me at tim(at)barker(dot)org(dot)uk (address disguised to avoid phishers or whatever they're called).

Until then, this is CapTim, failing to cope with Real Life in London. Out.