

Islands and Rivers of Amazonia

Mina²'s South American Gremlin Cruise 2012/13

by Tim Barker



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"You are not fit to stand your watch. I am relieving you of your command with immediate effect. Return to your cabin. That's an order." Well, I've had any number of mutinous crew on board *Mina*² in my time, but this was the first time I'd actually been relieved of my command. I was delighted. This was the best thing that had happened on what had thus far been a disastrous cruise.

The trouble had started in the Baía da Ilha Grande 60 nm west of Rio de Janeiro in October 2012 when Maria the Downstairs Skipper, and I flew out to recommission *Mina*², my Oyster 485, after her over-wintering. We were to enjoy a couple of weeks holiday, cruising round the myriad beautiful islands in the Baía - arguably the best cruising ground on the east coast of South America - before I was to set sail on 3,700nm of passages round the northeast coast of Brazil, and along the Guianas to the Caribbean. We were half an hour into our maiden passage to a picturesque anchorage five miles away when the engine died. With just a zephyr of wind we sailed into the pretty bay and dropped the anchor. I then spent the rest of the day identifying the problem (a very heavy infestation of diesel bug notwithstanding a rigorous programme of adding biocide to the tank), sucking all the claggy bug from the fuel pipes - an unenviable job - and changing all the filters..

I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say that we spent most of Maria's two week holiday trying to overcome the problem (which, of course, affected our generator as well). We eventually managed to make our way to Rio de Janeiro where I left the boat for two weeks pending the arrival of Lawrence and Sally who were to join me for six weeks - destination French Guiana. The water in Rio harbour at 30°C is like a petri dish and on my return I discovered that the hull was absolutely covered in very tenacious goose barnacles. It was only after we had set sail that I found the little critters had jammed the bowthruster solid (not a problem); that the growth on the hull forward of the log impeller meant that the log didn't work at all (more of a problem) and that they had very effectively blocked the outlet from the head, on both sides of the seacock (a massive and highly unpleasant problem).

We had planned our cruise so that the passages were interspersed with visits to a variety of islands up the coast. We left Rio two days behind schedule because of strong northerlies forecast, but once we got going, the sailing was excellent with winds from the south quadrant. At 22°41'S we were amazed to see a Black-browed albatross wheeling overhead, a good 45nm north of the Tropic of Capricorn - who said they were birds of the Southern Ocean? To add to our joy we saw a couple of Humpback whales as they made their long journey south for the austral summer to the krill-rich waters of the Southern Ocean. It was for the whales that we were heading towards the Abrolhos Islands. This tiny archipelago 30nm off the coast of Brazil is the breeding and birth ground of Humpback whales. Overnight on 15 November we reduced sail to arrive at the islands at

first light, picking up one of the mooring buoys, laid to protect the rare coral reefs in the bay to the south of Ilha Santa Barbara. Our plan was to stay for just one day to see the whales before continuing our journey north, but on both counts we were disappointed. There was not a whale to be seen. The national park ranger told us that the last of the whales had prematurely left a week or two before, but we could expect to see some to the north of the islands. More strong northerly winds were forecast for the next 36 hours and rather than bashing into them we decided to stay in the protected anchorage for a further day. But the time was not wasted. A number of additional problems had materialised on passage that required fixing, not least three out of our four bilge pumps that had chosen to pack up simultaneously. And whilst checking the hull (and being unable to get the log working) I discovered that the propeller anode that I had checked and found satisfactory just a month before had eroded to the point where it had fallen off.

Once the strong northerlies had passed through, we set sail for the three-day passage to Morro do São Paulo, a popular holiday resort for the smart set of Bahia on the Ilha de Tinharé. Whilst on passage my high-tech Whispergen Stirling cycle generator packed up, worryingly filling the saloon with acrid black smoke, and I was further dismayed to find that my water maker was producing only a third of its capacity. Having disappointingly seen not one more whale, we entered the Rio Cairú and opposite Morro we anchored off the exquisitely beautiful beach strewn with enormous boulders, and backed by elegant swaying palm trees with the lush tropical jungle sweeping upwards into the hills behind. No sooner was the anchor down than I was diving into the steaming hot engine room for another session of fixing things, whilst Lawrence and Sally sat in the cockpit with caipirinhas - the famous Brazilian cocktail - in hand.



Morro do São Paulo

We had planned to spend three days in Morro, but as we were already well behind schedule we cut this to two, managing to get away from the problems on the boat for just half a day to visit this beautiful island that has no cars, the tourists' luggage being taken to and from the small port by wheelbarrow.

The number of problems on the boat was now worryingly high and I had decided to do a pit-stop in Salvador just 35nm north of Morro. Salvador was the only place within 750 miles that had facilities that would enable me to get a diver down to sort out the problems under the boat; get some help in quickly fixing the problems within the boat, and at the same time we could refuel and fill up with water. In light winds we left the Rio Cairú and headed north under motor. 10nm out and the gear box packed up. I carried spares of most components of the boat, but for some reason an entire gearbox had not been on the list. We would have to sail into Salvador. Using email and satellite phone I managed to get hold of the Mr Fixit of Salvador. As we arrived three hours later, he was waiting for us in a workboat to take us in.

Once tied up, Mr Fixit came on board and we went through the long and growing list of problems starting with the gear box. He told me that by 0800 the following morning the boat would be swarming with the highest qualified technicians in the country, all dedicated to solving our problems in the shortest possible time. We would be ready to leave within three days. Guaranteed.

It turned out that Mr Fixit was as unreliable as his prices were extortionate. What had been planned as a pit-stop turned into a seven-day nightmare, most of the time waiting for the promised technicians to not turn up.

The gearbox would need new parts that would take over a month to arrive but, by sheer good fortune, Mr Fixit happened to have an identical gearbox - almost brand new he promised - that he could install immediately. All it would require would be a quick call to the Absentee Downstairs Skipper in London to arrange a second mortgage on our home and it would be ours. Most of the negotiations took place with me lying down in my cabin, as shortly after our arrival in Salvador my back had gone out catastrophically. I was incapable of any movement without excruciating pain and I was on a killer cocktail of drugs that turned my body and my brain to jelly.

Now well behind schedule (I had to get Sally and Lawrence to French Guiana by the end of December to catch their planes home for Christmas) we decided to miss Jacaré and head straight to Fernando do Noronha.

With the majority but by no means all of our problems fixed (but at least the head had been successfully unblocked), we cast off and motored out of the marina. For the previous two years we had lived with a mysterious graunching noise from the propeller shaft which had been expertly diagnosed as cavitation of the propeller. With our new gearbox in place I was delighted and amazed to find that the problem had gone completely, before coming to the chilling realisation the problem had not been cavitation

at all - we had sailed to and from Antarctica with a gearbox that was slowly self-destructing and which could have packed up at any time.

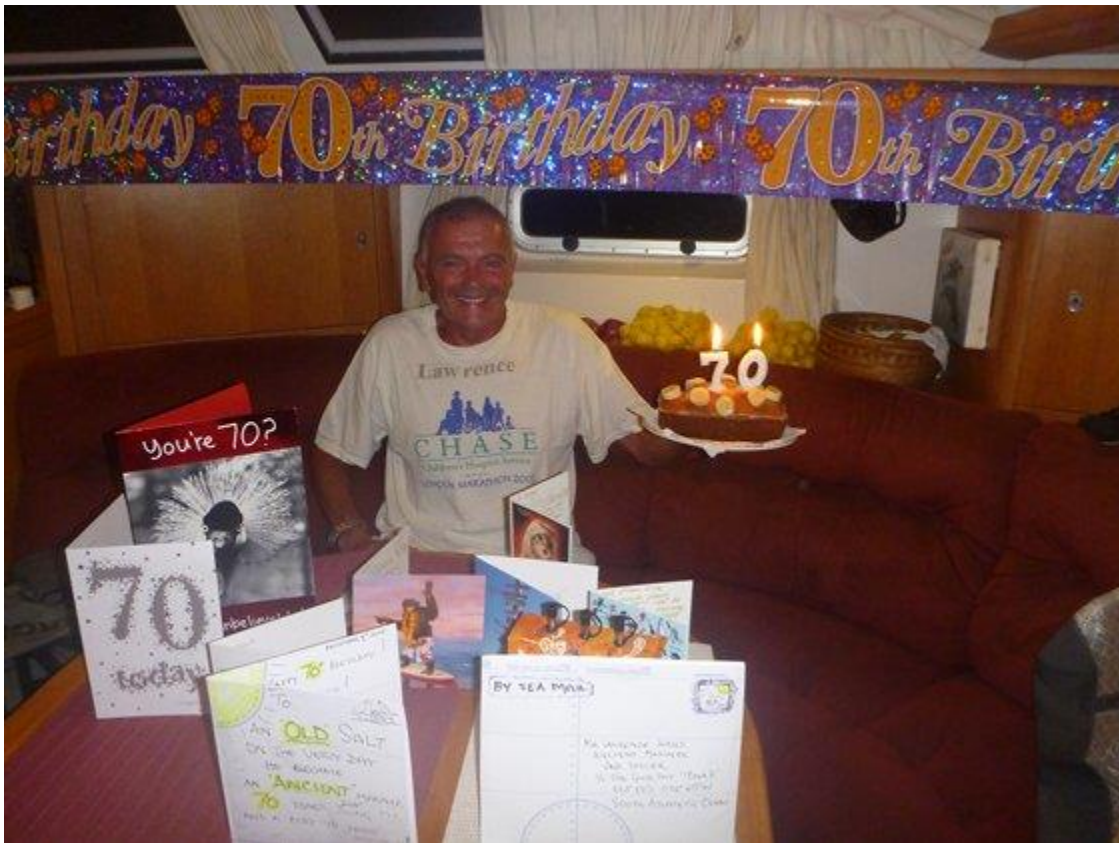
We had a fabulous 700nm five-day passage NNE up the coast of Brazil to the island of Fernando do Noronha which lies 200nm out into the Atlantic off the bump of Brazil. Much to my enormous relief, nothing else packed up except we did find a food storage locker awash with diesel caused by a crack in an inspection hatch. It was a long and unpleasant job clearing up the mess, but with a new inspection hatch in place the problem was solved.



Fernando do Noronha

Even having missed out on our stop in Jacaré we were still well-behind schedule so our visit to the paradise island of Fernando do Noronha was cut from four days to 36 action-packed hours. Fernando is a small island five miles long and less than two miles wide, with a spectacular sugarloaf mountain and surrounded by the most perfect beaches imaginable. Sometimes described as "the Galapagos of Brazil" the coral waters are teeming with tropical fish, turtles, sharks and sting-rays and it is considered to be a divers' paradise. The island is difficult and expensive to get to and the small number of tourists is strictly controlled. The number of visiting yachts is also controlled, but by an eye-wateringly expensive permit fee.

Before we could sample the delights of the island, we had an even higher priority. It was Lawrence's 70th birthday. You might be wondering what I was doing sailing up the coast of South America with a doddering old codger, but Lawrence doesn't dodder, and nor does he codge. In fact he was far and away the fittest person on the boat, kept fitter by his twice-daily routine of 100 press-ups and 200 crunches on the poop deck. The saloon was decked out in tinsel banners, presents were opened and candles were blown out on the lemon drizzle cake (Lawrence's favourite) that had been secretly baked during the previous night by Sally. Songs were sung and toasts made to Lawrence's continuing health and happiness.



Lawrence - 70 years young

Having got that nonsense out the way, we went ashore, cleared in and hired a bright yellow beach buggy, the *only* way to travel round the island, particularly if you have Lawrence behind the wheel, re-living his rallying days. We met up with Kevin, a local naturalist, who took us on a snorkel safari which was absolutely brilliant. After an excellent lunch at his mother's restaurant, we then spent the rest of the afternoon driving round the island visiting the old fortifications with large canon just lying around on the ground next to the rusting remains of First World War artillery pieces. We also took the opportunity of emptying and cleaning the outboard motor petrol tank, as we were still having problems which we suspected were caused by dirty fuel.



The Yellow Peril

We left at 1800 as night was falling, our departure delayed by 40 minutes as our massive 40kg Rocna anchor had got well and truly jammed under a rock. We tried to extricate it by tugging at it from every point of the compass and, now in total darkness, we were just about to throw the towel in and resume our efforts at first light, when it slipped free and we were on our way.

We were now well into the northeast trades and were rollicking along with the wind just abaft the starboard beam, with an extra shove from the 1.5 knot current that flows southeast to northwest along the coast. Great sailing, but I wasn't in a position to enjoy it. Six hours after leaving Fernando, I started feeling a bit off. By 0300 I was running a high temperature and had all the symptoms of full-blown man-flu. But no problem, I knew what it was. Heat stroke feels just like a bad dose of flu. I'd had it before a couple of times and knew it only lasted 24 hours. The 24 hours came and went but the symptoms persisted, but by this time I was feeling constantly nauseous as well, unable to even think about food, let alone eat it. I alternated between feeling so cold that, even in the 30°C heat, I was shivering and chattering so much that I was concerned my fillings would drop out, and burning up so much that I could have wrung the sweat out of my sheets.

I was lying on my bunk one day, feeling as wretchedly nauseous as ever when I heard a loud graunching noise under my aft bunk. The autopilot linear drive - the massive ram

that allows the boat to steer itself - had packed up. The gremlins hadn't given up their mischief. I still had 1,800nm to cover to my final destination and the prospect of hand-steering the whole way, day and night, was not an appealing prospect. Whilst I may have let the team down badly by not carrying a spare gearbox for the main engine, I did happen to carry a spare linear drive. Within 40 minutes, we were back in action again.

The gremlins must have been furious because they then broke the generator again (a hangover from the fuel bug problem). Frankly I was too ill and weak to bother trying to fix it so decided simply to run the main engine to recharge the batteries. The gremlins thought this too easy a solution so they broke the alternator as well. This was getting serious. We now no longer had any means of generating electricity and, however much the purists might sneer, on modern boats you can't do without the stuff, not just for light and refrigeration but for quite important things like navigation lights and instruments. So I had no option but to crawl from my sick bed and spend a few hours mending the generator.

But whilst I had my back turned in the engine room, the gremlins were under the sole boards sabotaging the drive belt on the fresh water pump. No problem. I carry a spare pump and we took the belt off the spare and fitted it. But within half an hour, the gremlins had broken that one as well. I crawled back to my sick bed defeated.

On *Mina*² I run a three-man single watch rotation of three hours on and six hours off. I have a strict rule that, however ill you're feeling, the only allowable excuse for not standing your watch is that you've fallen overboard. So, hoist by my own petard, every nine hours I crawled out of my bunk, dressed in three layers and a woolly cap and shivering more than I ever had done in the deep south, heaved my way up to the cockpit to stand my miserable watch.

After four days, with absolutely no sign of improvement of my mystery illness, I had become seriously weak and had shed more than a stone in weight. We were days away from the nearest human settlement and even further away from a hospital. It was at this point that, crawling to the companionway for my next watch, my way was barred by Sally and Lawrence, and Sally mutinously relieved me of my command. Never was a mutiny more justified nor more welcome. I nearly wept with gratitude. After five days, the fever finally went and, whilst still as weak as a kitten, the crisis was over.

This coincided with our arrival at Ilha Dos Lençóis¹ and, after the worst passage in my life, I found myself in Paradise. You won't find Dos Lençóis in any of the pilot books. Earlier in the year I had met a Brazilian cruising couple who had plied this route several times. They told me that if I visited just one place along this coast it had to be Ilha Dos Lençóis. It is a small island at the edge of a delta, two miles long and half a mile wide, 300nm southeast of the Amazon delta. I had been told that it was populated by a community of subsistence fishermen almost cut off from modern civilisation with no communication and no electricity (hence their birthrate was amongst the highest in

¹ Anchorage at 01°18.925'S 044°52.886'W. Pilotage information for entry can be found on Tim Barker's website: www.mina2.com

Brazil). They live in mud-floored huts intricately woven from palm fronds, and fish in the estuary for the largest, juiciest prawns you have ever seen. Rarely exposed to tourism, they are reserved but not hostile. There is no agriculture on the island because it consists only of enormous sand dunes. It is "Lawrence of Arabia" meeting "The African Queen".



The sand dunes of Ilha Dos Lençois



Hut made from palm fronds

We had by now caught up with our schedule and with only one more passage of 600nm to get Sally and Lawrence to their departure point of Kourou in French Guiana we were to have the luxury of staying here for four days. None of us wanted to leave. The epicentre of the small village is the small bar/store on the beach, just opposite where we had anchored, and where we slowly got to know the inhabitants. In between visits to the village, we walked over the wind-shaped dunes which were every bit as varied and beautiful as the icebergs that I had seen just a year before. It is quite the most enchanting place I have ever been to.



The village on the beach



and the biggest juiciest prawns imaginable

We left on 13 December, bound for the Iles du Salut off the coast of French Guiana. The 580nm passage was the best of trade wind sailing with the steady east to northeast winds wafting us to our destination.

On the morning of the second day into the passage, there was an enormous commotion. The screaming “Man Overboard” alarm went off as did the ear-splitting fog horn. Sally and Lawrence scrambled on deck to find at the wheel that monstrous old ham, King Neptune, with his mane of white flowing hair and long beard, and wearing a fetching grass skirt. He was roaring away about being “Lorde of the Domaignes Of All The Seas” and all pollywogs must pay homage to his Courte etc etc. It was like having Brian Blessed on board. Sally and Lawrence were duly initiated as His Majesty's subjects and we entered once again the northern hemisphere.



King Neptune drops by

After four days we saw land - three small islands ten miles off the entrance to Kourou. These are the Iles du Salut, including Devil's Island, the notorious penal colony made famous by the book and film “Papillon”. At 1300 we let the anchor go in 5 metres of water in the well-protected bay, surrounded by palm trees and the cries of monkeys and parrots coming from the wooded slopes of the island. We had arrived in Europe.

French Guiana is not a country, it is a Département of France and every bit a part of Europe as Cherbourg. A French Coastguard cutter lay at anchor in the bay and onshore stood two French policemen with their familiar pill box hats and smart dark blue shorts

with red piping. Having become accustomed to allocating the best part of a day clearing in and out of countries in South America, I was somewhat fazed that no one seemed in the slightest bit interested even in seeing our passports, let alone stamping them.

The Iles du Salut were last used as a penal colony in the 1950's but most of the buildings remain as a reminder of the brutal conditions in which France's most hardened criminals were kept. It is quite chilling wandering amongst the buildings and thinking of the cruelty and enormous human suffering that took place here.



Devil's Island

The only other interesting thing about French Guiana is that it is home to the European Space Centre from which the Ariane rockets are launched. There are about ten launches a year and we had struck lucky - one of those launches was to be following evening. We had been given an introduction to John and Beth, one time cruising sailors who had sailed here and stayed, John working at the space centre and Beth teaching English to the French. Beth greeted us as we sailed up the river and anchored off the fishing quay in Kourou and drove us, windows wide open, to her home where we all had our first showers in weeks. That evening we went to the beach, fortified with bottles of fine French wine bought at the fabulous French supermarket, and waited for the launch. Just after sunset there was a blindingly bright flash and a cigar belching flame rose into the sky, tilted towards us and roared overhead towards space as the massive booster rockets spat out their flames with a deep rumble that you could feel as well as hear. The ground

beneath us literally shook. It was awesome. We followed the rocket spacewards through binoculars and after about 45 seconds we could see the booster rockets peeling away from the main rocket, to fall red hot into the sea at the exact spot we had been sailing through just two days before. 20 tons of red hot metal falling onto the deck - now, that really would have been the gremlins *coup de grâce*.

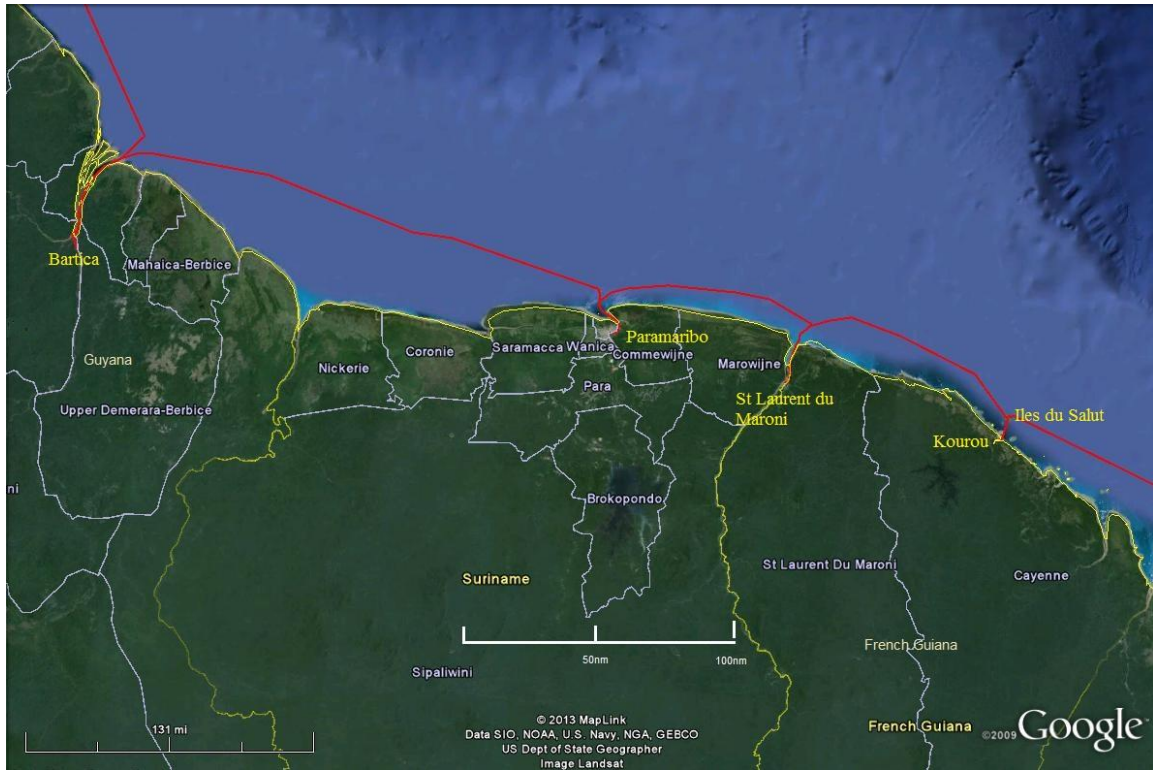
After what had turned out to be a mechanically and electrically challenging six-week cruise, albeit with some sensational sailing and islands in between the crises, Lawrence and Sally were probably delighted to get off the boat and fly their separate ways for Christmas. I, however, could not leave the boat anchored in a remote river and was to remain there all alone over Christmas and until the New Year, wallowing in self-pity. It was not to be. John and Beth opened their house to me, lent me a car to get there, and invited me round for their sumptuous French-style Christmas dinner. They were generous beyond belief. Meanwhile, I also had an exceedingly long list of maintenance jobs to keep me busy.

On 30 December I was joined by the Downstairs Skipper, together with my sister Linda and brother-in-law John, for the next part of our cruise along the Guianas and thence to the Caribbean.

The Guianas - now French Guiana, Suriname (previously Dutch Guiana) and Guyana (previously British Guiana) - were collectively known as the Wild Coast. From the beginning of the seventeenth century the coast was colonised by the European powers of the day for the cultivation of sugar and tobacco, all the hard work being carried out by slaves from West Africa. When slavery was abolished, indented labour was brought in from India, Indonesia, Java, and Vietnam. Combine them with the several tribes of native Amerindians, the colonialists from Europe and the Jewish communities chased out of Brazil and you have an immensely rich ethnic diversity that still exists in these countries today. For Linda, it was to be a trip down memory lane as she had spent nine months in British Guiana during her gap year and had many fond memories. We couldn't wait to get going.

After a day of provisioning we motored out of the Kourou and over to the Iles du Salut, not only to show the new crew the islands but also to celebrate New Year's Eve there. Sipping a glass of champagne in the cockpit before going ashore for the festivities, it seemed hard to believe that just a year ago to the day, we were untying from the *Micalvi* in Puerto Williams, donned in our polar gear, to head south past Cape Horn to Antarctica. What an unbelievable year. We had sailed more than 8,500 miles crossing 80 degrees of latitude. We had sailed in water temperatures ranging from -2°C to more than 30°C. We had endured hurricane force storms, had ugly encounters with ice and beautiful encounters with whales in some of the most isolated and extraordinary cruising grounds in the world. It had been a humbling and exciting adventure.

At the top of Ile Royale in the building once used as the mess for the prison officers is a hotel. New Year's Eve is the biggest night in their calendar and we joined them for their celebrations, drinking wicked "Ile du Diable" rum punches and dancing the night away.



The Wild Coast

After spending New Year's day exploring the islands, we set sail at dusk for an overnight passage to the River Maroni which marks the border between French Guiana and Suriname. The 115nm passage took less time than planned, helped along by the fierce 2 knot current. We arrived at 0700, and made our way gingerly towards the shallow bar at the entrance to the river. The river has a buoyed channel. There should have been gates of green and red buoys marking the deep water passage dredged through the bar but, unhelpfully, the first two were more than half a mile apart. One of them was out of position but there was no way of telling which one. We edged towards the red starboard buoy (this is IALA B country). The water got more and more shallow. All around us the metre high rollers were breaking over the shallow sandy bottom. I bottled out and retreated to safe water before heading towards the green port-hand buoy. Again, the water got uncomfortably shallow and, again, tossed around by the breaking waves, I bottled out. It was only on our third attempt that, with our hearts in our mouths, we scraped over the bar (I don't think we ever did find the dredged channel) and made our way peacefully 20 miles up the river past the mangrove lined banks, and anchored off the town of St Laurent du Maroni.

The border river at this point is about a mile wide, and there was a constant stream of pirogues – long, pencil-thin canoes with large outboard engines - shooting backwards and forwards between French Guiana and Suriname with passengers and their cargoes of boxes and crates.



Pirogues crossing the Maroni between French Guiana and Suriname

Unlike Kourou, the town of St Laurent has personality in abundance. It was established as a penal colony in the late nineteenth century and was built by the prisoners, for the prisoners. The Transportation Camp dominates the town. With its high walls and austere prison blocks one is reminded of a concentration camp. But the town also attracted traders who settled here and it is full of old French colonial buildings in varying states of decay.

In St Laurent du Maroni there is a buzz that was lacking in Kourou. The varied racial mix of French Guiana: the maroons – the escaped and freed slaves; the native Amerindians, the Indians, Chinese and Vietnamese and a few Europeans are all here. It has the feel of the border town that it is, not least along the river bank where the dozens of pirogues are tied up alongside sticks, reminiscent of Venetian gondolas. We loved it all.

We stayed in St Laurent for two days before making our way out of the river for the 130nm overnight passage to Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname. The bar to the Paramaribo river is nothing like as perilous as the Maroni and our entrance was uneventful and, after making our way 20nm upriver, we anchored off the town. I say "town" as, whilst Paramaribo is the capital of Suriname and therefore a city, you can walk across it in about 15 minutes. But what an architectural treat. Most of the old part of the town consists of wonderful wooden buildings in the Dutch colonial style and it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Parimaribo - a UNESCO World Heritage Site

One of the dangers of cruising on a sailing boat is that you get to see the one mile coastal strip of many countries whilst rarely finding the time to explore anything in the middle. Not with Linda on board. Having spent a day clearing in to the country (not a particularly easy process) and exploring Paramaribo, the following day we were collected by the magical Mr. Twist who took us on an adventure in his minibus. We visited the now deserted site of an ancient Sephardic Jewish settlement, had a picnic in the jungle surrounded by monkeys, snakes and an awful lot of bugs, went to a Maroon village (the Maroons were escaped slaves) which was indescribably basic, and were introduced to a community of native Amerindians. Very touristy but a fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable day out.



Hut in a Maroon village

Our final destination along the Wild Coast was the Essequibo River in Guyana 225nm away. Running short of time to get into the river before darkness fell, I decided to cut a corner and take 10nm out of the passage. It looked alright on the charts. What the charts didn't show were a string of fishing nets that were rigged to poles that stretched across our path as far as the eye could see. But I could see a small gap and we had another heart-stopping moment as we drifted through (no, I didn't have the propeller turning). Happily it worked and, back again under full power, we arrived at the anchorage in the river in the nick of time. 15 minutes later you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. The following morning we made our way the final 30nm up the river and anchored off the town of Bartica which is a port of entry. The formalities were close by and straightforward.

Bartica is a mining town servicing the gold mines - both legal and illegal - in the jungles of Guyana. It was like something out of the Wild West. The ratio of men to women was 5:1. The men were rough and the women weren't pretty but no one seemed to mind. Packs of wild dogs roamed the streets, harassing the cows that wandered unfettered through the town. Old British army 3-ton Bedford trucks are the transport of choice for getting supplies to the mines. There were dozens of them, about half of them in bits on the roadside with someone underneath trying to coax them back to life.



Bartica - reminiscent of the Wild West

Linda had put together a four-day programme for us to see as much of the country as possible. But given most of the country is impenetrable rainforest all the transfers were by an ancient Cessna held together with string and chewing gum.

Guyana is desperately trying to promote itself as a tourist destination and, indeed, it has much to offer. Not many people know, for instance, that Guyana has the highest single drop waterfall in the world. The Kaieteur Falls at 741 feet high, four times the height of the Niagara falls and twice the height of Victoria Falls, is in a dramatic jungle setting. It is spectacular, and we had it all to ourselves.



The Kaitour Falls - we had it to ourselves

Our first night was spent at Iwokrama, an eco-resort built in the middle of the jungle to accommodate scientists and tourists alike. But there were only a couple of scientists there (lack of funding) and no tourists apart from ourselves. Set on a bank overlooking the Essequibo river there was a large sign "SWIMMING PROHIBITED". "Why?" I asked. "Because the river is full of caimans [alligators] and piranhas, and if they don't get you, then the giant stingrays, anacondas and electric eels will". OK then, definitely no swimming. We were taken out by boat to look at the caimans in the water, the poisonous snakes draped from the overhanging trees, and the petroglyphs carved into stones more than 5,000 years ago. After aerial jungle canopy walks and a search for jaguars which stalk the jungle we then went by open boat up the river for four hours to Karanambu Lodge which is in the savannah at the south of the country. It is home to the McTurk family, an institution in Guyana for the last 200 years, but whom remain as English as English can be. The wildlife here is unbelievable. On our trip upriver we identified literally dozens of species of bird and whilst staying at the lodge we saw giant anteaters lumbering across the savannah.



Caimans patrol the shores of the Essequibo River

We then flew to Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, for our last night. After a tour of the city and dinner of typical Guyanan creole food, we returned to our hotel for the night. Linda and Maria retired to bed early, leaving John and me sitting in the bar enjoying a nightcap. To give an indication of how few boats cruise the Guianas, the hotel manager came to our table with another man in tow. "May I present to you Mr Ramotar, the President of Guyana" said the manager. "Ah" said the President "so you're the people who've arrived by boat. I've heard all about you". We had a pleasant chat before John and I went to join our respective wives for the night. Entering the hotel room where the Downstairs Skipper was in bed reading a book, I said "I'm sorry I'm a bit later than I expected, but I've been chatting to the President of Guyana". The DS gave me one of her withering looks. "You're drunk" she said. "Just get to bed and shut up".

Our adventure right the way down the Guianas had been fascinating, sailing in a rarely visited cruising ground (Guyana gets no more than about 12 yachts visiting every year – about half the number that visit Antarctica) and experiencing the extraordinarily diversified cultures and enormously rich wildlife of these remote countries.

Our time in Guyana spent, we rejoined *Mina*² and made our long 50nm way out of the mighty Essequibo River, motoring against the northeasterly breeze. We had just borne away outside the mouth of the river and started heading for Tobago 400nm away when the engine died. The gremlins had sabotaged the fuel injection pump, a complex,

normally totally reliable and very expensive component of the engine for which I, like most boats, did not have a spare. Meanwhile the generator had gone wrong yet again, so for the second time on this cruise we found ourselves hand-steering with no means of generating any electricity. I worked seven hours through the night and eventually got the generator up and running again. With no engine, when we arrived at the Port of Scarborough we had to sail through the port, into the inner harbour, and sail onto the anchor. It took a week to get the fuel injection pump fixed, during which time we hired a car and thoroughly toured the island.

Our final leg was 75nm to Grenada where *Mina²* was to be laid up for the summer. En route, the radar packed up and is, I discovered, irreparable. The gremlins final victory. We sailed into Prickly Bay to see more masts at anchor than I had seen in total in the preceding three years. Most people would give their eye teeth to be in the Caribbean on a yacht, but I found myself overwhelmed with a feeling of depression. Finding myself in this land of lotus-eating holiday-makers, it suddenly dawned on me that the Great Adventure was finally over. But what an adventure it has been. I will carry the memories with me for ever.