

## After 6 months in Bocas del Toro We Said Goodbye to Floating Doctors and to the Many New Friends We Made

It was January 6, and we were thrilled to be departing Bocas del Toro – not because we were joyful to be leaving behind our patients, colleagues and friends with Floating Doctors, or our fellow cruisers from Europe, Australia, and America scattered around the archipelago in yachts with names like Delta Swizzler, Stand Down, Aventura, DeCapo, Shearwater, Samba, Escapade, and many more. Rather, we were excited about getting underway simply because we were getting underway.



Passing by the town of Bocas del Toro on January 6, at the start of our passage to the Cayman Islands.

This passage was more “*interesting*” (aka unusual) than most, if for no other reason than we weren’t sure exactly where we were sailing to until moments before we cast off our lines at Bocas Marina. Our first stop was going to be Isla Providencia, a Colombian fishing village enclave off the Nicaraguan coast. Husbanding agents are required there, even for recreational vessels, and ours emailed a day or two before our scheduled departure to say the island was locking down due to an uptick in COVID cases.

We briefly thought to stop instead at Providencia’s larger and more touristy island neighbor to the south, San Andrés until the USDA informed us our mascot, Saylor, would have to quarantine for 6 months upon arrival in the U.S. if she stepped foot on Colombian soil because of the high prevalence of rabies in Colombia. So, we decided to sail directly to Grand Cayman instead – only to learn by email just moments before we cast off our lines that Saylor would be denied entry into the Caymans because she had been with us in Panamá. We could still come, but Saylor would not be allowed off the boat; and if discovered off the boat, she would be euthanized the email cautioned.

The voyage started out like many others after an extended period at anchor or in sheltered waters, which is to say we both felt a little queasy when we got out into the open ocean. To make things worse, we had to motor rather than sail because there was no wind, as predicted; and without wind to fill their sails, most sailboats bob around like a cork, and *AFS* is no exception.



It didn’t take long before we had ocean spray and white water over the bow.

Our strategy was to exit Bocas Canal motoring in a northeasterly direction until we got far enough north and east that we found the trade winds, at which point we would set our sails and fall off to the north on a close reach or beam reach, trying to remain east of the wreck-

strewn shoals, cays, and banks ~100nm offshore of Nicaragua, which are sometimes submerged, sometimes awash, and sometimes plainly visible as small islands. We did this for two reasons: The first is we didn't want to become a shipwreck casualty ourselves. The second is that reports still come in from time to time of pirates operating in this area.



Once the wind filled in, despite numerous weather sources predicting our winds should have been from the E-ENE, the winds we experienced were actually from the NE-NNE. And the 30° difference meant that we could not head directly for the Cayman Islands as we had hoped. Instead, we were on a course that would take us north of Isla Providencia, but directly toward the Quita Sueño Bank. We hoped the wind would clock back to the east for us, as the models suggested; but when it didn't, we tacked over and headed E-ESE for day give us a better rhumb line to the Caymans, and keep us well off the Nicaraguan coast.

The next day, January 9 at ~08:00h, we were ~65nm NE of San Andrés and ~40nm ESE of Isla Providencia, when we were unexpectedly and rapidly approached by a 20-25'

open, panga-type fishing boat with 3 men aboard. They came quite close aboard to our port side, while signaling for us to take down our sails and stop! They also gestured they wanted food. Frankly, we'd be hard pressed to call them "pirates." They showed no firearms and they did not attempt to board us, but they definitely intruded into our space, which on the high seas is enough to make anyone feel uncomfortable.



Although these hombres weren't pirates, they came out of nowhere, and invaded our space on the high sea. We're glad they left us alone.

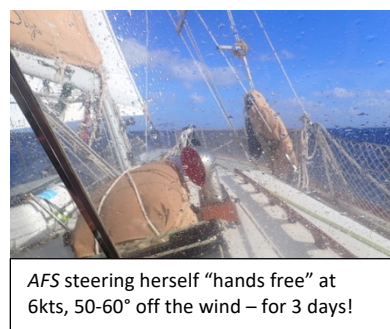
While Vicki went below to prepare a bag of food to throw to them (including canned goods to throw *at* them, if necessary!), I started our motor, revved it up to max throttle, and turned 45° away from their boat. For what good it might do, I also quickly flashed the only weapon we have aboard – a large Rife speargun, which has a stock that looks from a distance very much like a rifle. And, of course, Saylor was on deck barking continuously at the intruders, as she does for every motor boat that comes near us, even at anchor.

Several minutes later and before Vicki came back topside with the bag of foodstuffs, they broke contact with us, first ~1/2nm astern, and a short while later they disappeared over the horizon. We then resumed sailing our course after contacting by VHF radio two merchant vessels we saw on our AIS display. We rehashed the scenario over a few times during the day to see if there is anything else we could have or should have done differently, but didn't really come up with anything.

In fact, there was a part of us that felt bad for not providing them with any food before “scaring” them away. But later that night, while still off the Nicaraguan coast, Vicki woke me up during her watch because she became concerned when she realized we were surrounded by fishing boats with unusual navigation lights. I also thought they looked strange. In the end, they turned out to be, well, fishermen, but it exemplifies the impact the earlier incursion had on our psyche.

Continuing on our passage, like any vessel at sea, we had the usual amount of maintenance issues. For example, our autopilot was working overtime in some rough seas and its 30-year-old hydraulic pump motor overheated. After cooling down, it only had enough oomph to hold our course in light air and gentle seas, and even then, only for a few minutes – just long enough for the helmsman to get a drink or go to the bathroom. We also did an unplanned cooling system refresh on our Northern Lights genset after a hose clamp failed on the back end of the heat exchanger. And we discovered several topside leaks after a day of white water washing over the deck during a period of Force 5-6 sea conditions. The unwelcome saltwater below deck got our chart locker wet and some spare parts in one of the port-side storage bins.

Manually steering for an extended period is quite fatiguing, but the fatigue can be minimized with proper sail trim. So, the upside to our autopilot problem is we paid more attention than usual to sail trim. In fact, we got our genoa, main, and mizzen sails trimmed just right, and we were able to sail our desired course “hands free” for two days with AFS making 4.5-6.5kts on a starboard tack consistently holding 50-60° off the wind.



If all that wasn't *interesting* enough, we added a public health issue to the list of events. Vicki tested (+) for COVID with one of the home test kits we have aboard, even though we both tested (-) 24 hours prior to our departure from Bocas. We used our Iridium GO! satellite phone and dutifully contacted the Travel Management Team in Cayman Islands to inform them of Vicki's change in status. They checked with Cayman Island health authorities and confirmed we could still make landfall at George Town, Grand Cayman, and either quarantine aboard AFS if we chose to stop there, or “gas and go” to our next destination. (We briefly thought about continuing on to Isla Mujeres, but the weather forecast was marginal, even with a working autopilot, for a northwesterly transit of the Yucatán Channel west of Cuba.)



Land ho! George Town, Grand Cayman Island. Kind of flat...

We first sighted the rather unimpressive skyline of Grand Cayman on January 12, at 09:20h. The island itself is totally low-lying (highest point = 50') without the majestic grandeur of other places we've seen come into view after an ocean passage. But seeing land after several days at sea is nevertheless



Hoisting the Cayman Island courtesy flag and yellow Quebec (Q - for quarantine flag) prior to arrival. The Q flag has more significance these days.

a sight to behold. When we reached ~2nm offshore, we doused our sails and prepared for our arrival at George Town, including hailing Port Security on VHF channel 16.



Port Security cleared us for entry into West Bay, and they initially instructed us to take any available orange ball in the mooring field that lined the inshore waters just off the town. However, as we approached the mooring field, they directed us to proceed to the North Terminal quay (normally reserved for launches from cruise ships) where Customs and Border Patrol officers would review our passports and boat documents for clearance into Cayman Islands.

Everything but the arrival COVID test was completed in 20-30 minutes, and we remained at North Terminal for 2 hours waiting to be tested. With a building swell at the terminal quay due to a rapidly approaching nor'wester storm, we contacted Port Security for instructions. They directed us to transit to Spotts Bay on the south coast of Grand Cayman, to take a mooring there, and await further instructions. And shortly before sunset, we were asked to dinghy ashore to Spotts Dock where we would rendezvous with Cayman Public Health for testing.



If you have to have a swab shoved up your nose, this is the lovely RN you want to do it, and this is the place you want it done – Spotts Bay, Grand Cayman. That's AFS in the background.

Not surprisingly, Vicki tested (+) for COVID as it had been just 2 days since she tested (+) with our home kit. Inexplicably, however, I still tested (-). So, here we sit in the beautiful Grand Cayman aboard *At First Sight* – in quarantine. But there's nothing to complain about, really. We partially circumnavigated the island, mooring or anchoring



in Spotts Bay, West Bay, North Sound, and Governor's Harbour. The water is pristine. The views are spectacular. We've also able to received several "no contact" deliveries of food and other essentials.

Besides no tourist activities, the main downside to the enforced isolation is that we can't have a technician come aboard to help us fix the autopilot – and without that, we're reluctant to set sail for Isla Mujeres or any other away destinations.

However, there's an upside to almost every situation, and in this case it's we will have had time to repair those leaks we talked about above (if we can stop taking in the views)!

