

January 31, 2009

Sunday afternoon, January 4, we departed the Canary Islands for our passage across the Atlantic to Antigua in the Caribbean, 2700 miles away. We left from San Sebastian in La Gomera, the exact same place from which Christopher Columbus departed on his first voyage across the Atlantic in 1492.

Our first 7 days out were mostly idyllic, just right for two “old mariners” enjoying perhaps their last major ocean passage. After passing the lee of La Gomera, we enjoyed a brief 15 hour sail with winds NE 20 knots before encountering lighter winds. Except for interludes of variable winds or squally periods, we enjoyed a sail for 6 days on a starboard broad reach with winds N to NNE 8-15 knots and seas less than 6 feet. During much of this period we encountered beautiful days and moonlit nights, sailing mostly on a wing-on-wing configuration with poled out jib. When the winds were 8 knots or above the sail was most comfortable; with less consistent wind the boat had more motion. During the week we enjoyed all of our meals out in the cockpit.



Since departing La Gomera, we had been sailing a course of 240 degrees true. Our plan was to head toward [20 N, 30 W] until we were able to pick up the easterly trades. Early Sunday morning, January 11, we picked up the trades slightly earlier than expected, and so changed our course and headed west toward Antigua, 1798 miles away.

For the next two weeks we sailed with easterly winds (ENE to ESE) until our arrival in Antigua. With the wind directly aft, the sail technically became a downwind sail, one of the most difficult points of sail to be on due to the possibility of jibing, especially in our cruising wing-on-wing configuration. Hence, it became important to bear off from our intended course in order to take into consideration the yaw of the boat due to the sea conditions. Basically the greater the seas, the more we needed to bear off. Only for brief periods when the wind veered more NE or SE did we actually sail our intended course. Mostly, we just zigzagged our way across the Atlantic, sailing on a broad reach. With the wind behind us, we began to surf the seas.

Sunday morning we put our self-steering vane into “commission” as we expected the winds and seas to start increasing Monday according to our “weatherman”, Phil’s brother. We had been using our auto pilot to steer the boat, but now felt that the wind vane would do a better job as it followed the wind in contrast to the auto pilot which steered a compass course. As the wind vane allowed for wind shifts, it permitted us to sail closer to our intended course while reducing the possibility of jibing. Also, we felt that our wind vane would be better in handling the predicted higher seas because the auto pilot used more battery power in those conditions.

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On Monday the seas increased to 8 feet with winds 15-25 knots. In the morning we jibed over to a port broad reach as we were north of our intended track. Although officially south of the Tropic of Cancer on Sunday, it wasn't until Monday that we finally took off our sweats, 8 days after our departure from La Gomera. At night, though, we still wore a light jacket during night watches.

By Tuesday, the winds were 20-25 knots and seas 12-15 feet. Generally seas come from one direction, but these seas were coming from two to three different angles due to opposing wind and currents. Also, these seas were short and steep rather than the longer swells we normally encountered. Sailing downwind has often been referred to like being in a washing machine due to the twisting motion, but with the seas coming from different directions this motion was accentuated. Now we were definitely "holding on", and *Kuhela* was taking lots of water over her deck and in the cockpit plus quite a pounding, especially when the seas came from the sides.

With the winds increasing, we reefed our main to its third and final reef point early Wednesday afternoon. Now we were sailing with just a small amount of sail up in both our main and poled out jib. After reefing, we brought *Kuhela* back to a starboard broad reach as we were now south of our track. But unlike on Monday when we jibed, this time due to the high seas we used the engine and very slowly "came about" with the wind passing over our bow instead of our stern, waiting for just the right moment to turn into the wind. By mid-afternoon, the wind was 30 knots and the seas were 20 feet and steep, breaking at times. By evening, the winds were 35 knots and up to 45 knots during gusts. One wave came into the cockpit so fast that we didn't close the hatch in time and so took water inside the cabin. We definitely didn't sleep much that night.

The same unsettled weather continued on Thursday, with steep 20 foot seas and winds 25-35 knots, with up to 45 knots in gusts. Throughout the day, *Kuhela* continued to take quite a beating. On a number of our passages there had been at times tense moments; today was one of those days. In the afternoon when Phil went to tighten the lines of our self-steering vane, he found that the welds had broken on the shaft, thus making the self-steering vane inoperable. Thankfully, we still had our auto pilot. In the evening, we both started to smell diesel. The idea that our brand new Turkish fuel tank was leaking was absolutely depressing. We both felt worn down, and our weather report showed no end in sight during the immediate future. The only positive thought was that "hanging on" gave us great isometric exercise. Thursday certainly was not a great day, and the sea conditions again made for a long night.

At times like these when problems occurred, we really felt infinitesimal in such a big ocean, so far away from any sight of land. As we were only halfway across the Atlantic, we started to think about the worse case scenarios. "What if" the auto pilot failed and we had to steer by hand 24 hours a day. "What if" our batteries failed, making our auto pilot inoperable. "What if" we ran out of fuel due to our fuel tank leak, making us unable to charge the batteries or start the engine. "What if" our rudder broke. Before leaving Turkey, Phil had had an emergency rudder made that attached to our self-steering vane as our existing rudder was only one of a few items that had never been replaced or fixed on our almost 30 year old boat. Now with our wind vane inoperable, our emergency rudder was useless. Luckily, none of our worst case scenarios ever happened, but on that day and the following days those "what ifs" kept entering our minds.

Friday we had more of the same unsettled weather with winds 25-30 knots and gusts to 35 knots. The seas were down to 15 feet but still coming at times from different angles. In the morning we brought the boat back to a port broad reach as we were now north of our track. Due to the high seas, we used the engine like we had on Wednesday and very slowly "came about."

On Saturday, the seas were once more 20 feet and winds 25-35 knots. As our GPS allowed us to calculate the speed of the boat, our speed while surfing the big seas was normally for a few seconds 7-9 knots. During the early morning hours of Saturday it peaked at 13 knots, the most ever. In the rough sea conditions, our auto pilot worked much harder, using more amps than normal. Since our self-steering vane broke, we had been having to charge our batteries three times a day in order to keep our auto pilot working as our aging batteries were unable to keep their charge very long. At 5 a.m. while still dark, we had another scare. Our batteries were so low that when Phil started the engine to charge the batteries, our auto pilot shut off for the first time causing the boat to jibe hard, breaking the preventer before Phil could correct the course in total darkness. Fortunately, nothing more happened; it could have been far worse. Luckily, we had another preventer.

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Sunday and Monday saw the same unsettled weather. However, unlike the previous seven days when the skies were overcast, the skies now were clear to partly cloudy. The wind was still 25-30 knots and higher during squalls, but the seas were down to 10 to 15 feet with some 20 foot seas intermixed. On Sunday we experienced many squalls, except that now the wind seemed to oscillate between 35 knots down to 10-15 knots briefly following each squall causing quite a bit of rock'n'rolling during the lull due to lack of sail up. As the days were getting warmer, we no longer needed jackets during night watches.

Tuesday we continued to have the same weather with winds 25-30 knots, oscillating between 40 to 15 knots briefly during and after squalls. The only change was that the seas were now down to 10 feet. As we were currently south of our track, we changed back in the morning to a starboard broad reach, still using the engine to very slowly "come about" due to the sea conditions. Around noon, our boat jibed due to a freak wave. Luckily no damage was done, but a half hour later we noticed that the main sheet had come out of the blocks, an unusual occurrence. Working the problem, Phil slowly maneuvered the boat into the wind, took the main sail down, and reattached the sheet.

After 8 days of "hanging-on", the weather finally began to moderate Wednesday morning with winds 20-25 knots and seas 8-10 feet except during squalls. As a result, we were finally able to just jibe the boat when changing back to a port broad reach due to being north of track. In the afternoon we passed 053 degrees west, and it felt like we had passed over a "magic" line. Now, the winds were 15-20 knots and seas 5-6 feet. In fact, everything felt different. Even the air smelled tropical, reminding us of the South Pacific. This was the type of weather that we had originally expected during much of this passage, and now it was finally happening. With the settled weather, we started to take out some of the reefs in our sails.

Thursday through Saturday the settled weather continued with winds 15-20 knots and seas 6-10 feet. As we approached Antigua, it was important to sail closer to our course. We jibed over to a starboard broad reach on Friday, and then back to a port broad reach on Saturday. In the previous four days we had had such poor propagation that we were unable to report our position using email. Luckily during two of those days we were able to transmit our position to the Ham Maritime Mobile Service Net which in turn posted our position report. Finally Thursday evening, we once more had adequate propagation to send and receive emails. With the settled weather we once again were enjoying our meals out in the cockpit.



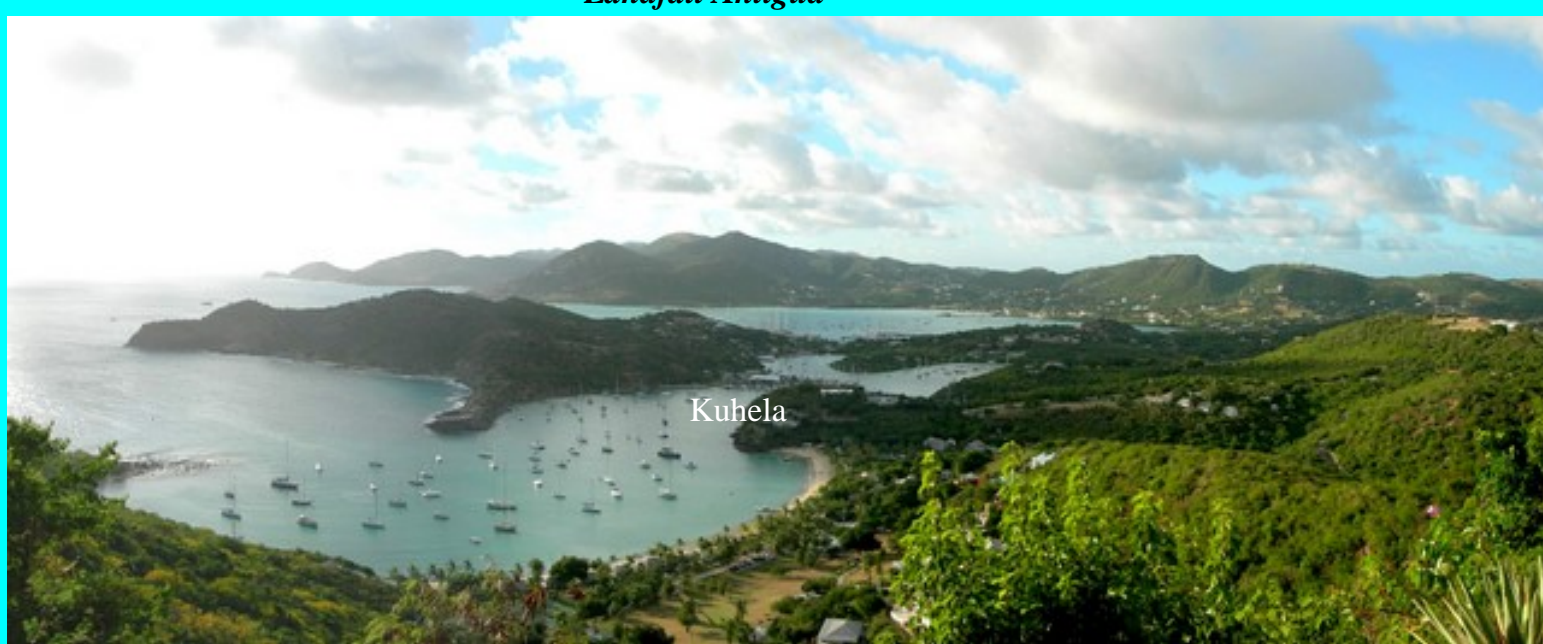
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Early Sunday morning we were able to see the loom from the lights in Antigua, and when the sun rose a few hours later we could see the island. It was a wonderful feeling. We jibed two more times before finally dropping our anchor in English Harbor on January 25, 21 days and 2 hours after our departure from La Gomera in the Canaries. In all, we had traveled 2823 nautical miles, sailing an extra 123 miles as a result of not being able to sail along our intended route. During the passage we had had very few ship contacts and generally enjoyed a ½ to 1 knot favorable current, either from the equatorial current or the Canaries Current. During the crossing our boat took a lot of punishment but fared well, although some items on the boat will have to be repaired or replaced. With our arrival, we set our clocks back 4 hours to Atlantic Standard Time and looked forward to our first full night of uninterrupted sleep in 21 days.



*Landfall Antigua*



*English Harbor, Antigua*

After spending time in Antigua, our plan is to sail south enjoying some of the southern Caribbean islands before arriving in Trinidad on April 15. We will be flying home on May 1 for our younger son's graduation from the University of South Florida at St. Petersburg. Our plan is to return to Trinidad on November 1 and start sailing the boat northward through the eastern Caribbean islands, arriving back in Florida in May 2010.

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Epilog: We spent 3 weeks in English Harbor, Antigua. We were able to repair our 20 year old self-steering vane. We replaced our batteries as they were finally showing their age. Through testing we have diagnosed that it appears that the leak in our fuel tank is due to a broken welded seam on the port side. When anchored and the tank is filled to only 25 gallons it doesn't leak, but when filled to 30 gallons the diesel seeps through. Naturally we'll have to have less fuel in the tank when heeled over while sailing. As there is plenty of wind in the eastern Caribbean and the distance between islands is not much, our present plan is to carry extra jerry jugs and wait until we bring the boat back to Florida in May 2010 to replace the fuel tank.

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