

September 6, 2003

We spent 24 memorable days cruising the remote Pacific side of Panama, truly a cruiser's paradise, before arriving at the Balboa Yacht Club on Wednesday, September 3. With so many islands and navigable rivers, one could cruise a long time in Panama. When we turned the corner around the northern point of Isla Parida on Sunday, August 10 - our first day in Panama - and saw off in the distance Isla Gamez with its jungle setting and crystal clear turquoise waters, palm trees, and white sand beach, we knew we had "finally arrived." Isla Gamez was a gem of an island - the first island on this cruise to remind us of the South Pacific.

We spent 3 lovely days anchored off Isla Gamez. Except for Sunday when a few small powerboats came out from David (40 miles away) to enjoy the afternoon, we had the small island all to ourselves. It was here that we did our first trading for fruit with a man who paddled out in his dugout canoe from Isla Parida. As supplies were very difficult to acquire by most locals who lived along the remote Pacific side of Panama, trading with cruising boats was quite common. Many were subsistence farmers with little money. This man needed milk for his children and also some school supplies, and so that is what we traded for some bananas. Plus, we felt good being able to help his children as he never asked for anything for himself, only for his children. Also, it was at this anchorage that the down switch of our anchor windlass suddenly stopped working. Luckily, upon isolating the problem, it ended up being a quick fix. After 14 years, the salt water had corroded the contacts.

At the suggestion of a fellow cruiser, we moved 2 miles down to the southern anchorage off Isla Parida on Wednesday afternoon. This ended up being a mistake as the southerly swells caused this anchorage to be somewhat rolly. On top of that, a drenching rainstorm pounded the area that evening, complete with lightning and thunder.

In the morning, we motored to the Islas Secas, 20 miles away, and anchored off Isla Cavada in beautiful clear turquoise water. It was a lovely anchorage. Unfortunately, an oncoming storm caused the wind to shift to the north for part of our first night. As this anchorage was exposed to the north, the 20 to 25 knot northerly winds and the resulting seas made for a few uncomfortable hours. The next evening the wind once again shifted back to the north for part of the night. After two days we decided to move on, as we were ready for a more protected anchorage.

Originally we had planned to head next to the Islas Contreras, as all these small island groups lay "like stepping stones" along our path. The only good anchorage was a northerly exposed anchorage at Isla Brincanco. So, we continued on to Bahia Honda, 30 miles away, first motoring and then motorsailing. We anchored late Saturday afternoon, August 23, in the rain.



**Isla Gamez**



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Bahia Honda was a world class anchorage, completely protected, in a beautiful tranquil setting. Mountains surrounded the anchorage and the thick jungle came straight down to the water. In the center of the bay was an island where a small fishing village with very limited supplies was located. The people in this bay were quite isolated as there was no road out to the Pan American Highway, only a horseback trail. Our anchorage was in a secluded cove on the far western part of the bay about 1½ miles from the island in the center. Only the sounds of birds, the splash of fish, and the roars of howler monkeys broke the silence.

Besides the beautiful surroundings, the people in this bay made this anchorage special. There was Joe Domingo, the bay's "Welcome Wagon" host, and his son Kennedy. There was Juan, a 68-year-old cruiser who had fallen in love with Domingo's daughter and so had assimilated into the culture. He was full of so many funny and humorous stories, especially concerning the difficulty of hunting animals in the dense jungle as it was impossible to see anything more than 10 feet ahead. And then, there were the people on the island. Every day one or two dugout canoes came by our boat to visit, some paddled the entire distance and some used small outboards attached to the back of their dugouts. It was amazing that despite my very limited basic Spanish, I was able to carry on a conversation using my Spanish/English dictionary only a few times. Some wanted to trade or sell fruit. One wanted laundry detergent, a school child needed a pen, another needed milk, and a few needed a fishhook. Mostly, though, they all wanted to linger and visit. The last family that came out to our boat gave us a gift of four fresh eggs. These many memories from our days at Bahia Honda will linger with us always.

Around noon, Thursday, August 21, we departed our beautiful anchorage in Bahia Honda and headed to Las Perlas Archipelago in the Gulf of Panama, about 220 miles away. As there weren't any good anchorages between Bahia Honda and Las Perlas, we decided to do a two-night overnigher instead. Both nights out we had quite a bit of rain. Compared to many cruisers who had traveled this route, though, we felt quite lucky. Often this could be a frustrating sail as weather over Colombia affected at times the Gulf of Panama adversely. For us, most of the time the current and swell were with us, and when there was some wind we were able to sail a reach to a close reach. During our two days transiting we mostly motorsailed, occasionally sailing. Since we often had the current with us, we actually had to slow the boat down our second night out so as not to arrive at Las Perlas Archipelago before sunrise. During these two days we encountered ship traffic at times due to the proximity of the canal, but not as much as we thought we would see. We arrived at Las Perlas Archipelago Saturday, August 23, just as the sun was rising. Countless islets fringed the main islands of the archipelago. With the rising sun, it was a beautiful sight.



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Our first anchorage was next to the Don Bernardo Islet on the southeastern coast of Isla Pedro Gonzalez. It was a picturesque anchorage with a palm-lined white sand beach and crystal clear waters. Unfortunately, it was here that our dinghy outboard motor decided to quit again - once more losing all compression. For cruising boats, an outboard for one's dinghy is quite important, especially for exploring. Without an outboard, one is very limited. Thus, there will definitely be a new outboard motor purchased upon our arrival in Panama City.

After spending 2 days at Isla Pedro Gonzalez, we moved 5 miles north to the anchorage off Isla Bayoneta. Since the wind had shifted to the northeast, the anchorage at Isla Pedro Gonzalez had become a little sloppy. In contrast, the Isla Bayoneta anchorage was quite protected. Careful navigation was needed as we approached the anchorage as the water was quite shallow and rocks and reefs abounded. Besides using charts and depth sounder, Mary was out on the bow pulpit as lookout while Phil steered, and walkie-talkies were used when needed. Snugly tucked in-between three small islands, this small anchorage was totally secluded. It was a great place for kayaking, especially when the tide was in and we could maneuver amongst all the mangroves, rocks, and islets and quietly observe the many different birds that lived there.

Two days later we moved on to the Isla Ampon anchorage, about 5 miles away and located on the eastern side of Las Perlas Islands. This same careful navigation was needed during this passage, both through the narrow channel over to the eastern side and on the approach to the anchorage. While traversing the narrow Gibrleon Channel, we saw our first spotted eagle ray. How beautiful and graceful it was as it moved through the water. The highlight of our stay at the Isla Ampon anchorage was the meeting up with five other cruising boats, none whom we had met before but all whom we had heard at times on the Panama Pacific Cruisers Net. While there, we all became fascinated at observing a group of sharks, 6 to 8 feet long, in the shallow waters off the anchorage. What was most unique about these sharks was that they were non-aggressive and completely oblivious to our watching them from our dinghies. It was like they were doing some form of ritual dance. In fact they were about to give birth. Also, while at this anchorage we had spring tides. The difference between low and high tide was 15 feet. When Mother Nature "drained the bath tub," it was an amazing sight to see all the rocks and reefs exposed and to realize that we had passed safely through all. After 3 days at the Isla Ampon anchorage, we moved 12 miles south to Espiritu Santo, a small island located along the northeastern side of the largest island in the archipelago, Isla Del Rey. It was here that we spent our 4 last days in Las Perlas. This was a lovely, peaceful anchorage with lots of coves, islets, and beaches to explore - all depending on whether the tide was coming in or going out. When the tide was coming in, it was fun to kayak around all the coves and islets created by the incoming water and observe the many different birds that lived in the area. When it was low tide, it was fun to walk on the beach. Had the outboard to our dinghy still worked, this would have been a great place to use it as there was so much to explore, and many of the beaches were not nearby.



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After 11 days in Las Perlas Archipelago, we pulled up our anchor at 6 a.m., Wednesday, September 3, and headed toward the Balboa Yacht Club, 60 miles away. While traversing northwest along the eastern side of Las Perlas, we spotted a number of large whales, and a few delighted us by breaching. As there was no wind we motored the entire way, and we had a knot or two of current helping us along. We had hoped to arrive in Balboa and Panama City on a blue-sky day, but sadly it was a hazy, overcast day with only 10 miles visibility. When we finally did see the Panama City skyline, we were surprised at all the skyscrapers dotting the horizon. As we approached the outside Panama Canal channel marker, a short-lived squall with gusts to 25 knots came directly down the channel toward us. Luckily, it passed by quickly. In the area surrounding the Panama Canal channel entrance, 24 ships were at anchor - almost all waiting their turn to go through the Panama Canal. What an exhilarating feeling it was to realize that we had finally arrived at the entrance to the Panama Canal, one of the major engineering feats of our time, and that in just over a week we would actually be transiting the canal. We passed all the anchored ships and headed up the Panama Canal channel to the Balboa Yacht Club. We picked up a mooring at the club around 3 p.m.

We have thoroughly enjoyed our first couple of days here at the Balboa Yacht Club. It has been fun socializing with other cruisers. The club, being located in the old U.S. Canal Zone, is situated in a lovely park-like setting. And, we couldn't have asked for a better view. As our mooring at the Balboa Yacht Club is about 100 feet outside the Panama Canal channel markers, ships from all over the world transiting the canal pass just 500 feet away from our boat. From our cockpit, we can also see the Bridge of the Americas ½ mile away. Watching all the ship traffic pass by has been exciting. Sometimes, the wakes caused by passing boats and ships are annoying, but at least they are short-lived. The pilot boats cause the most wakes with many large ships hardly causing any wakes at all. Before arriving, we had thought that the ship traffic would be continual, but much to our surprise it has been intermittent.

Since arriving in Balboa we have been busy. We "officially" checked into the country and obtained a health clearance, a visa, and a cruising permit. We purchased a new outboard motor. Plus, we completed the entire process necessary to officially schedule our canal transit. This entailed having an admeasurer come to our boat to take "official" measurements and make sure that all the necessary equipment needed was onboard for the canal transit, and then paying for the transit at the bank. Thus, it is now "official." Barring any unforeseen circumstances, we will be transiting the canal on Sunday, September 14 - exactly one year to the date after we pushed off from Bellingham. For those interested in watching us go through the Miraflores Locks, the canal's live web cam can be accessed at [www.pancanal.com](http://www.pancanal.com) or via a link on our web site.

After transiting the canal, our present plan is to cruise the San Blas Islands before arriving in Cartagena, Colombia, the first part of October. Instead of leaving the boat in Cartagena as originally planned, we have decided to sail the boat back to Florida the first part of November, arriving in St. Petersburg, Florida, no later than the first week in December. As the distance is only about 300 miles more to go through the Yucatan Channel to Florida, we have decided to enjoy our condo during this period before pushing off for the Mediterranean in the spring.



*Balboa Yacht Club Moorage*



*Panama Canal Traffic*



*Bridge of the Americas  
Entrance to Panama Canal*

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