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Crossroads

Voices & views of island life

CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

Passage to Paradise

With their boat fully loaded, shipmates fall into the rhythms of sailing on the open sea.

By *Poupette Smith*

Tea and cookies?" I shout, bleary-eyed, above the howling wind. Leo has just relieved me at my watch, and I am down below in *Firefly's* cozy cabin.



Leo nods, with his big Swedish smile spreading and his eyes sparkling in anticipation. He's up in the cockpit, bundled up like a polar bear. It is late autumn. Yesterday we finally sailed out of Chesapeake Bay and are now heading south to the Caribbean.

The kettle whistles. I stumble toward the stove, clutching the door with one hand and the chart table with the other. *Firefly*, our sturdy little sailboat home, is heeled over on her side. I look down at my feet and see that they are not at their usual 90-degree angle to my legs. If I were to stand this way ashore, I'd fall flat on my face. I lay a kitchen towel on the counter to prevent the spoons and cookies from sliding off, wedge two mugs between the stove fiddles, and pour out a shaky stream of steaming water. Mug in hand, I maneuver my way aft, toward the cockpit.

"I'm coming down," Leo gestures.

But first he looks around, scanning for ships. Satisfied that we are alone out here - 100 miles from land and getting farther away by the minute - that no one is bearing down on us, that we're not about to hit some huge piece of debris capable of sinking *Firefly*, he glances at the compass to make sure we're on course. The wind is up, perhaps because we're approaching the Gulf Stream, so Leo adjusts the auto pilot and makes a final horizon check, then comes below. As this is Leo's watch, it's his turn to repeat this entire procedure every ten minutes.

It feels good finally to be on our way. The past six weeks have kept us busy and tense, running through a long list of preparation chores: *Waterproof portholes. Service life raft. Update "man overboard" grab bag. Purchase spare parts. Update medical kit*, and so on. Now, after a day at sea, with 1,300 nautical miles ahead of us - which translates as roughly nine days until landfall in the Virgin Islands - we've begun to regain our sea legs and to unwind.

The first three days of a passage are always the most tiring. We must wean ourselves from the usual eight hours of sleep and adjust to a new schedule of three hours on watch and three hours off. If the weather deteriorates, the intervals have to be reduced; if it treats us kindly, we can do five-hour watches, and, better rested, even begin to spend some time together.

Firefly feels sluggish. She's loaded with water, diesel, food, and supplies. If Leo and I have planned well, we should have enough of everything we need - including food - to be self-sufficient for the next several months. *Firefly* has no freezer and only a tiny home-built fridge; with cold storage at

a premium, eating well takes planning. My strategy is to write up a varied 14-day menu, figure out amounts for everything I'll need for each dish, then multiply those figures by ten to come up with a grocery list for five months of meals. With the larder well stocked, Leo and I won't starve when the wind dies or be bound to the food shop when we feel like remaining at a deserted anchorage.

Over the years we've gained some important food insights. USDA guidelines notwithstanding, we have found, for instance, that mayonnaise keeps quite well without refrigeration, that unrefrigerated aged cheese will stay good for weeks, that whole powdered milk makes delicious yogurt, that butter can be preserved with salt and kept cool in the bilge, that bread and muffins aren't hard to make, and that such long-lasting produce as cabbage, onions, carrots, garlic, squash, and potatoes can be added to canned food to convince the palate that it's getting a fresh-cooked meal.

Sailors tend to either love or hate long passages. Some - bored and anxious to make landfall - simply endure them. Others, myself included, relish the solitude of lone watches, the luxury of having time to come to terms with a confusing world, the solidarity felt among a well-chosen crew. By day four of this crossing, I start to forget where we've come from and begin to dream about where we're going. Sitting in the cockpit, I close my eyes and let my mind wander through memories of my first Caribbean visit.

I remember myself as a child, intoxicated by Guadeloupe's dense tropical vegetation and rich, moist earth. I recall the explosion of tropical colors bursting from birds, sky, water, fish, insects, lizards, flowers, and fruit. I can almost touch the brightly painted wooden shacks, the lumbering oxen, and the green fields of swaying sugarcane. It's nice to be returning.

As we tick off the days, we also peel off the layers of winter clothing. Cockpit sponge baths and quick, daring rinses over the side help keep us fresh as newborns. *Firefly* moves along, driven by wind and current alone, advancing at a leisurely pace of 6 knots (nearly 7 MPH). I think of the questions our nonsailing friends often ask about long-distance sailing.

Superstition on the High Seas

Many mariners believe in luck, so superstitions result. Here are a few.

- ✍ **Renaming a boat is thought to portend bad luck.** But if *Stinkeroo* must go, an unaming ceremony and a separate renaming ceremony are in order.
- ✍ **Setting sail on a Friday is thought to be unwise,** because Friday is a day of potential bad luck.
- ✍ **Some sailors refuse** to utter the word "rabbit" (in any language) on a boat. The animals had a tendency to eat hemp lines.



"Where do you anchor at night?" someone will inquire, perhaps imagining that we sail at breakneck speed by day and stop each night at one of hundreds of palm-lined islands - all neatly spaced like

highway motels across the vast ocean, all within a day's journey of each other. Or perhaps they think we simply drop anchor wherever we are when night falls. In truth, sailing day and night in good conditions, *Firefly* averages 160 statute miles - a mere few millimeters on a world map - with each 24-hour period and is far too small to carry enough "rode" to anchor in a three-mile-deep ocean.

"Have you ever been in a storm?" is another favorite query. I try to envision my inquisitor's idea of a storm compared to mine, knowing that a wave he might describe as ten feet high is actually only two.

"Aren't you scared?" some people ask, and I answer, "Occasionally. Though when I am, I know it will pass. And once it has, I forget, remembering the good things instead."

Mind you, I have the luxury of saying this because, knock on wood, after 23 years of sailing to many parts of the world, *total* disaster has never struck. We have been near a hurricane, but never near enough to lose the boat. Leo was once on a boat that lost someone overboard, but that person was retrieved. And I simply refuse to dwell on my biggest fears: sinking or flipping, hitting a reef or having a collision at sea, piracy, losing someone overboard, or dealing with a medical emergency. I prefer to keep those stored at the back of my mind.

"What do you do all day?" is a query I'll often hear next.

The question implies that at sea, life stops, that the boat sails herself to a paradise while the crew members sit idly by, twiddling their thumbs. In reality even the simplest tasks - such as washing, cooking, and getting dressed - take more time on a wet, heaving stage. Lack of sleep, especially during heavy weather, complicates things further. Regular chores like navigation, trimming sail, auto pilot adjustments, weather tracking, and repairs occupy a good deal of our waking hours. We spend any leftover time indulging in hobbies: programming the computer, making electronic and mechanical improvements, reading, writing, playing the guitar, and using *Firefly's* radio to talk to people all over the world.

For me, the experience is not lonely, tedious, or claustrophobic. We have plenty of company. Today an agile seabird bounces off the water, using the ocean as its trampoline. Flying-fish glide through the air, plopping down with a *thud*. An elegant, long-tailed tropicbird entertains us for hours, circling overhead. I scoop up a clump of sargasso weed to inspect its many camouflaged inhabitants. Portuguese men-of-war, their inflated crests making them resemble pompous gentlemen, sail past, propelled by invisible zephyrs. Tonight the moon rises as the sun sets, and the two giant mango-colored balls briefly dance a fiery celestial tango. When darkness falls, it's just us, the moon, the stars, and the phosphorescence.

Nine days out, and we are so in tune with the ocean's rhythm that we sense the change: Land is near. Long before the islands become visible, signs of their proximity tease our senses.

Boobies and other coastal birds, turtles, and insects appear. Dolphins come to play near *Firefly's* bow. Fragrant smells of earth and plants, of seashore and human habitation infuse our world, bidding us welcome.

I can't wait to make landfall, but I am aware of wanting to ease back into civilization. St. John, smallest of the U.S. Virgin Islands, is the perfect place to do so. We'll drop anchor off Maho Bay, just as we did the last time we sailed in, on a December night in 1993. I think of waking the next morning and slipping over *Firefly's* side into clear, calm, cooling turquoise water. Of lounging in our now-level cockpit, binoculars focused on the island's tree-lined shores. Of falling asleep with Leo, accompanied by sounds of crickets and tree frogs. Of replacing the incessant sound of water rushing past our boat with the quiet of a hidden cove. I can't wait to wrap myself in a sarong and wander barefoot through the bush in the hope of surprising a mongoose on the prowl.

There is an unwritten law aboard *Firefly*; it states that whoever sights land first is owed an ice cream by the other. My mouth waters as I scan the southern horizon for the tip of Crown Mountain on St. Thomas, or Mount Sage on Tortola. It is almost dusk, and we are about 50 miles north of the Virgins, the distance at which such peaks might become visible on a clear day.

But Leo beats me to it.

"Land ho!" he shouts, pointing to a distant smudge, "I'll take my banana split when we check into Cruz Bay."

By dawn tomorrow, *Firefly* will have arrived in paradise.

A licensed captain, Poupette Smith has contributed to Sail and Sailing, and has lived aboard Firefly for 13 years.

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