

11 July 2010

At anchor, Spanish Waters, Curacao

Dear Family and Friends,

Here it is, mid-2010; I will emerge from radio silence and say hi. First, a short summary of our sailing season so far, keeping in mind that almost none of you are sailors. We had planned to stay in Trinidad for Carnival and we did. It was wonderful and I have finally invested many hours in writing it up and attaching photos. All of it – 4 long essays—can be found on my blogsite: www.sailblogs.com/member/tashtego. I will try to post a blog about Curacao and Bonaire soon, with more photos.

A brief digression: I am writing this while holding down a good seat in preparation for watching the World Cup Final game --soccer, guys, aka football/ futbol in this part of the world. No, I haven't lost my mind; good futbol is fun to watch and it has one excellent feature—a game ends 90 minutes after it begins, with maybe a very few extra minutes to compensate for the clock continuing to run while injured players are revived. It is also a good way to connect with the entire non-American world, especially when you are surrounded by people who really care who wins. Approximately 600 million people will watch this game, many in circumstances as peculiar as mine—I am under a canopy flapping in the wind, in front of 2 temporary 4' TV screens set up at the local fishermen's bar and the place is filled with Dutch cruisers wearing orange (as in House of Orange), many of the



local fishermen, and lots of beer. In the interests of fairness and a few misguided supporters, the flag of Spain has just been hung on the fence next to the Dutch flag, to a chorus of boos. At first Fred wouldn't watch soccer, calling it "a pussy's game" but after he watched the quarter and semi-finals, I don't hear him saying that anymore. For a non-contact sport, the players take amazing bruises. There is usually good sportsmanship – opposing players who have just collided often help each other up. Of course, at other moments they also deliberately try to inflict mayhem on the other guy's legs.

← Futbol is serious business.

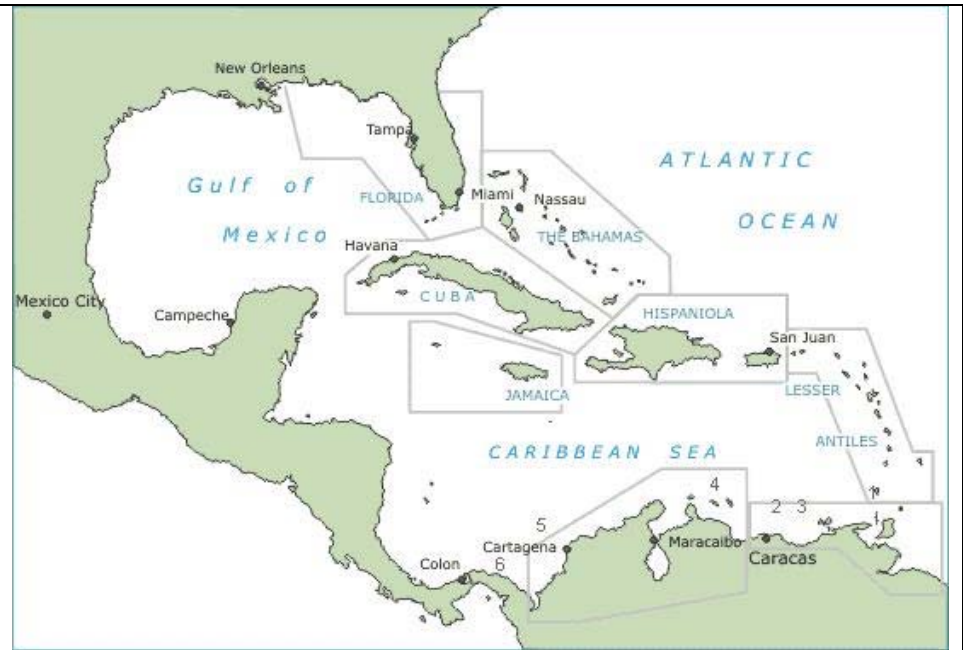
Post-script: Alas, Spain won. Actually, they deserved it. The few Spanish supporters were very loud at the end.

Back to Trinidad: we didn't count on spending an extra 6 weeks there after Carnival but then, we hadn't planned on self-inflicted stupidities like stabbing the new chartplotter with a knife or running the engine for 30 minutes without ANY cooling water (unbelievably it seems to have survived). Don't ask. And after losing the transmission on a pleasant Sunday afternoon outing with two Trinidadian boat workers and their families, it became urgent to fix that properly as well. Since our cruising agenda for the next year (or maybe two years) will not provide much in the way of boat services we were patient and did our best to get all the important boat systems in good order.

Finally on Easter Sunday we left Trinidad (#1 on map below) and were sailors again. We sailed 80 mi north of the Venezuelan coast before turning west—piracy on small cruising boats has become a big problem in those waters in the last few years. Cocaine for Europe and the US now flows out of Venezuela instead of Colombia and near the coast there are sinister pirogues with multiple huge outboard engines that don't mind stripping a sailboat clean on their way back from an offshore delivery. With the increasing violence in Venezuela they know there will be NO consequences.

I am supplying a map so you can see where we are and will be the rest of this year. Having received inquiries about whether we were affected by oil slicks and hurricanes, it seemed like a map would help. For scale, this region is approximately 1500 miles N-S by 1800 miles E-W -- almost the size of the continental US.

Tiny numbers along coast of South America mark our 2010 locations.



When we turned west, we were sailing seriously downwind for the first time since leaving Boston. Tashtego is a great boat (we get lots of compliments on her) but she wallows downwind. And it didn't help that I had left the spinnaker pole in Boston – an oversight since corrected with the help of Fred's brother-in-law Chris. We spent a week on Venezuelan off-offshore island archipelagos called the Roques and Aves (2 & 3 on the map --no dots shown). We ignored the official authorities and they ignored us. The Roques are a destination for Venezuelan day-trippers and luxury yachts and offer wonderful ly empty anchorages and pristine waters:



Anchored behind a reef – note surf in distance.



All to ourselves.

Proceeding westward, we spent 6 weeks in Bonaire, where we did a lot of scuba diving, and now we are spending almost 3 months in Curacao. It is hurricane safe and offers cruiser amenities. (Aruba, Curacao, and Bonaire are #4 on the map).

The ABC's were settled in the early 1500's by Sephardic Jews fleeing Spanish/Portuguese /Catholic persecution and by Reformation Dutch capitalists and were important centers of trade and commerce in the 16th-19th C. Not because of what they could grow, which was almost nothing – these islands are hot, stark and dry. They produce salt and cactus and sustain only wild goats.



The north half of Bonaire is a lot like So. Arizona, but with much less diversity in plants and animals.



The entire south half of Bonaire consists entirely of salt flats, with great dive sites along the coast,.

Initially the main enterprise was piracy and then privateering against Spanish ships (the Netherlands fought Spain for 80 years); after that it was the slave trade. There was slavery in the New World by 1530's, less than 40 years after Columbus. Almost every slave brought to French and Spanish colonies came in Dutch ships via Curacao. A local architect has restored a district in Willemstad into a hotel/restaurant/shopping district called Kura Hulanda and filled its museum with slavery artifacts and African sculptures. The former makes for difficult viewing; the sculptures are stunning.



Slave manacles – there were trunkfuls of these in the Kura Hulanda museum.



Restored “slave huts” near the Bonaire salt works. Not much bigger than dog houses.

Today there is widespread prosperity in these islands and the benefits reach large proportion of the residents. There are almost no shacks in the town or country, no litter, no crazy driving, and no loud music. Quite a contrast to Trinidad. Alas for us cruisers, since most folks have cars public transportation is not as convenient or frequent as in the rest of the West Indies, although still good by US standards. The big economic engines are oil refineries for processing Venezuelan crude oil and tourism. And like everywhere else in the Caribbean, both islands are busy paving their waterfronts and hillsides with huge homes built for both affluent locals and seasonal visitors. The main town in Curacao, Willemstad, is a World Heritage site and it has entire districts with lovely well-preserved or restored buildings.



Shopping street in Willemstad



Waterfront in Willemstad.



Tourists in Curacao are mostly Dutch, Bonaire tourists include lots of divers from the US. On both islands the resorts and their amenities seem really nice – lower key than Aruba and very gracious. The waters in this part of the Caribbean are unbelievably clear. In Bonaire when it was full moon the cat would walk along the deck yowling because she couldn't get at the fish she saw swimming 20 feet under the boat.

In addition to the tourists, local people really use and enjoy their beautiful waters and beaches-- more than in any other islands we have seen so far. This may be another consequence of general prosperity.

← Late Sunday, Mambo Beach, Curacao

↓ Below: Later, same beach



These islands are totally multi-lingual. The local language is Papiamentu, a creole that is ½ Spanish, ¼ Dutch, and ¼ Portuguese . Because Papiamentu is the official language, is taught in the schools, and is used in all the broadcast and printed media, linguists predict it will be one of the few micro-languages that will survive in our era of global communications. In addition to speaking Papiamentu, everyone speaks either Spanish or English and if they have completed secondary school, they also speak Dutch. It really is quite impressive to be somewhere where everyone speaks 2-4

languages without giving it much thought. Not only do we native-English-speaking cruisers expect everyone to know English, we get away with it because English is the common language of all the international cruisers in these anchorages. Except for the French cruisers, who absolutely refuse to speak anything but French and thus remain linguistically isolated.



← Willemstadt: garden in Kura Hulanda, tranquil refuge from very hot sun.



← Curacao's north east coast and newest national park: Sete Boka.

When we finally pull anchor here, we will head to Cartagena (#5 on the map) and the San Blas islands off the coast of Panama (#6). We may also explore the rivers of the Darien Gap. Now that our cruising pace has slowed way down, we may still be in or may return to Cartagena in December, because Christmas and New Year's in Cartagena

are supposed to be really special. But that will be the subject of my next letter.

Hugs to all! And Fred says hello.
Connie