

Nov 24, 2008

Dear All,

Sorry about the radio silence. Trinidad has turned out to be a place to work hard, with many opportunities to play as well. I guess I wrote previously that what was supposed to be a 7 day haulout to paint the hull and take care of a few things turned into 14 weeks on land. I will send a longer write-up about all the boat issues for the boaties among you, but a short summary for all my non-aquatic family and friends is that once hauled out we discovered we had a problem common in the tropics where the fiberglass hull starts to soak up water. Fortunately we were able to keep the repair cost "low" by paying one of the yard staff to grind all the gel coat off the hull and then finish the work ourselves, applying 6 coats of a 2-part epoxy to seal it, followed by 2 more coats of a different 2-part epoxy, followed by 2 coats of anti-fouling paint which has so much copper in it that it isn't legal in the US. All this took place after the hull sat in the sun and rain for 14 weeks while the fiberglass dried out. This problem turned out to be a blessing in disguise because once the hull had been completely sanded we could see a 1 ft x 2 ft area on the bottom of the keel where an earlier repair had been done badly. When we tapped the area with a hammer, the entire piece fell off, exposing a 2" hole in the keel. If we had hit a coral head with that part of the keel, we would have had water pouring into the boat in an area we didn't even have interior access to; very bad news indeed. Fortunately, the yard we hauled out in had all the necessary expertise to make a really watertight repair very quickly. Since that little surprise sucked up all our remaining boat money for the season, we wound up refurbishing all the brightwork by ourselves; we are using a sealer instead of varnish and we hope that it will look cared-for with less heroics than varnish requires.. Doing all the woodwork and topsides ourselves also proved to be a good experience: we already had the know-how and I discovered I could work straight through the Trinidad midday heat, thereby earning the respect of a lot of the yardworkers. Tashtego looked really beautiful by the time we were ready to go back into the water.



Note the gorgeous Trinidad skies.

So now we are back in the water, attending to a number of smaller boat issues before heading out for Year 2 of the cruising life. We are staying here to enjoy Thanksgiving with various boaters who have also been in Trinidad all hurricane season, most of whom were also doing repairs large and small on their boats. Then when the weather permits sometime the first week in December we will sail straight across the Caribbean Sea to US Virgin Islands (about a 4 day sail) because Fred wants to spend New Years' at a bar called Foxy's in the BVI. It is supposed to be quite a scene but I suspect we are 30 years too old for it. Fred's niece will join us for the week at New Year's. Then by mid-Jan I hope we are on our way back down toward the Windwards with stops only at one or two Leeward Islands (Saba? Nevis, Dominica). Winds get quite high in the northern Caribbean during Jan-March, as we found out last year, so we will see what it is like further south. If any of you is somehow impervious to this season of economic collapse, you might consider flying to any of the following islands where we would be happy to host you after Feb 1: Martinique, St. Lucia, Grenada. We have learned the following from long-term cruisers: visitors can pick the place they will visit or they can pick the time they will visit, but they can't pick both. Our one fixed point for the season (other than Foxy's) is to be in Antigua for Classic Regatta. If you love boats I really really recommend that. Can even give you names of 2 small hotels that have reasonable prices. That is about the 3rd week in April. Looking very far ahead, we would like to sail to Barbados in May or June (very far off the usual cruiser route), then to Guyana or maybe Surinam for a month or so, Tobago in July, keeping a good eye out for weather, and then Trinidad Aug-October. You would be welcome to join us for any of these adventures but would have to be >>>very time flexible and ready for misadventures as well as adventures. Trinidad, however, is a known commodity and our dates here are pretty firm. Right now tix from NY or Boston to Trinidad are surprisingly cheap, so give some thought to Trinidad next summer. I really love it here. Here are pictures of (clockwise from upper left—Adobe zoom will let you blow up the pictures)





Saturday fresh market, 6 am; cranes building fancy hotels in 1st World part of Port of Spain ; Tassa drummers in Hindu temple at Divali with fellow boaters in foreground – note average age; a samaan tree and home in the diplomatic district. I included the picture of the samaan tree because this tree is absolutely the Platonic ideal of Tree. It grows 80' tall or more, spreads at least 200 feet across, and is all canopy; the absence of lower limbs means that you can see the architecture of the tree yet enjoy a cool dense shade. Truly an Ur-tree. Trees this size are proof that there have been no hurricanes in Trinidad ever. On the other hand, given the cut-away hillsides that collapse and clogged drains that flood this island with lethal effect for mere heavy rains, a hurricane would bring the island to its knees.

Together with all Trinidadans we followed the US election season with intense interest -- mostly by listening to BBC and reading the local papers. There was great joy on this island at the outcome. It has been really interesting living here, 1st world, 2nd world and 3rd world in one complex dynamic chaotic and violent package. I am writing several essays about Trinidad and would somehow like to post them, together with all the blogs I have written this year, at some place on the Internet, so you could pick and choose what you would like to read. But when I look at a few bloggers' sites (sailblogs, blogger, ...) it seems that they all require you to post a blog by typing it using the site's template. I want to create my blogs as PDF files so I can control where the images go and then post the PDF files on my blog site. Also my internet access is sporadic and difficult, so I want to just upload completed blogs, not sit and create one online. Anybody got any information about a blog site that will allow/support that?

Even though the last 3 months have been pretty boat focused, we have had time to go to plays and musical events, hike and do Monday evening potlucks with fellow cruisers. But it will feel good to hoist our sails for the first time in 5 (!) months. It already feels great hanging at anchor in Chaguaramas harbor, bouncing around in boat wakes. Unfortunately the water carries at various times a fair amount of debris, natural and man-made, and oil. Makes swimming at anchor pretty much a no-no, completely unlike the entire rest of the Caribbean.

I >> hope to write a general letter for New Year's but if it gets delayed, then I will seize this occasion to wish you all a good holiday season. And express the hope that you are weathering the economic turbulence okay. It will be interesting to see just how much the tourism decreases in the Caribbean. Probably very little for the ultra-wealthy, with their villas and megayachts, but a whole lot for the people who splurged house equity on a one-week cruise. An awful lot of islands have bet the bank on tourism as a growth industry. Not good. If Tashtego can manage to get through a whole sailing season without any more major repairs, we should be okay. Just have to eat more meals on the boat instead of eating out. By the way, Trinidad has had 14% inflation since we arrived and we find food prices at the markets really quite high. It is a testimonial to the patience of Trinidadans that there hasn't been civil unrest.

Hugs to all.
Connie and Fred

PS Several years ago I closed my New Year's letter with the fervent hope that the year would see Guantanamo closed. I will renew that as my New Year's wish for the year, together with the re-instatement of habeus corpus. Perhaps not the most urgent items, in light of everything else, but an internal rot that diminished all Americans in the eyes of the peoples of these islands and of most of the rest of the world. And hey, if our new government will just make friends with Cuba, we can sail to Cuba !!! You can meet us there.