

DESTINATION

Alaska to Nova Scotia



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY TONY FLEMING

PART 1 - FROM ALASKA THROUGH THE PANAMA CANAL TO THE ATLANTIC. WHEN WE DEPARTED JUNEAU, ALASKA, IN THE SUMMER OF 2006 I HAD NO IDEA THAT WE WERE EMBARKING ON THE FIRST LEG OF A JOURNEY THAT WOULD ULTIMATELY TAKE US TO NOVA SCOTIA BY WAY OF THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS AND THE PANAMA CANAL. IN FACT THE PLAN WAS SIMPLY TO RETURN VENTURE TO HER HOME BASE ON VANCOUVER ISLAND BEFORE LEAVING HER FOR THE WINTER.

The first decision that led to this mother of all sea trials was to swap out the existing engines for the new MAN common rail engines. It was not that there had been anything wrong with the originals but the MANs appeared to be a better choice for the 65 and we wanted to check them out before recommending them to our customers.

The work went ahead without problems but it was July 2007 before we were ready for a trial cruise to the Broughton Islands on the Canadian mainland just north of Vancouver Island. In the meantime I had been invited by Bruce Kessler to bring Venture south to California to act as one of the escort vessels to accompany the fleet of boats taking part in the first Fubar rally

he was organizing from San Diego to La Paz in Mexico. So the second fateful decision was to accept his offer and take Venture 1200 miles down the rugged Pacific Coast from Vancouver to Southern California. This is not a coast for the faint of heart or for someone without a reliable vessel. The seas are rough and the coastline littered with jagged

IT BECAME ROUTINE FOR BOTTLE-NOSED DOLPHINS TO STOP WHAT THEY WERE DOING AND SPEED TOWARDS THE BOAT TO BODY SURF IN THE WAKE.

rocks and sea stacks. Ports of refuge are few and closed by the Coast Guard in rough weather due to dangerous conditions at the entrance to the harbours. Apart from spending five days holed up in Crescent City waiting for the weather, the trip was accomplished without any problems and one month later we joined the Fubar fleet in San

Diego. The two week, 900 mile, cruise down the coast of Baja California was a great success and many boaters who had never previously crossed an international border or even been at sea overnight had their first experience of both. After the cloudy skies of the Pacific Northwest, the nightly heavens were ablaze with stars. We stopped in remote villages as well as in up-

market developments in the vicinity of Cabo San Lucas. Journey's end was the modern CostaBaja marina in La Paz and a party, accompanied by a mariachi band, was held on the beach to celebrate the safe arrival of all the boats. The next major decision was where to go from here. One option was to take the boat 2,000 miles back north for another season in Alaska



VENTURER IN ISLA DEL COCO WHICH LIES ALMOST 300 MILES OFFSHORE AND IS ADMINISTERED BY COSTA RICA.

but Burr Yacht Sales, our East Coast dealer, was keen for us to cruise on the East Coast. I considered shipping Venture to Florida but the cost was high and there were no ships scheduled at the right time. Venture's skipper, Chris Conklin, had returned a few months earlier from taking a Fleming 55 from California to Maine in only 39 days so he already had experience of the route. It seemed ridiculous to be considering shipping when we had a boat designed and capable of making the trip on her own bottom.

Making A Plan

And so it was that the basic plan was hatched to make the journey to the Atlantic coast. With the main course now set we just needed a few side dishes to round out the menu. The possibility of an excursion to the famed Galapagos Islands was investigated, found to be feasible and included in the itinerary, with an intermediate stop at remote Cocos Island. Further research revealed that we could just squeeze beneath the bridges on the Erie Canal in New York State

which opened an inland route through to the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway. We left Venture for the winter in the well run and secure CostaBaja marina in La Paz and returned to Southern California to finalize our plans. We returned in March 2008 and started our trip with a cruise in the Sea of Cortez, also known as the Gulf of California, which separates the sparsely populated peninsula of Baja California from mainland Mexico. On the very first day we encountered a pod of

ad



IT WAS A 440 MILE TRIP FROM ISLA DDEL COCO TO GALAPAGOS AND IT WAS WORTH THE JOURNEY.

killer whales as we headed for a rocky islet teeming with seals while fork-tailed frigate birds wheeled about our heads and pelicans plummeted into the water to feed on schools of fish.

Over the next few days we made our way slowly north encountering numerous whales including the huge endangered blues as well as fin whales and the more athletic hump backs which repeatedly breached clear of the water. It became routine for bottle-nosed dolphins to stop what they were doing and speed towards the boat to body surf in the wake and cavort around the stem; some turning on their sides as if to gauge the height of the bow, before using powerful thrusts from their tail to launch themselves clear of the water higher than the foredeck rail.

For two weeks we enjoyed perfect weather with warm days, and cool nights anchored in a series of secluded bays surrounded by the stark beauty of the Baja coast. The sky remained a pastel blue streaked with ever-changing patterns of wispy clouds while the sea took on the shade of a kingfisher's wings. Every evening, mountains as high as 1200m were etched in sharp relief against the backdrop of a lingering sunset.

Heading South

We returned to La Paz where we topped up our fuel and provisions and took on two crew members and headed south for Puerto Vallarta on the Mexican mainland. Here we had a rendezvous with another Fleming 65 for a helicopter photo shoot and we stayed for five days before continuing on to Tenacatita, where we anchored in a small bay.

The main attraction here was a trip in the tender through a mangrove forest to a secluded beach. There is a bar at the entrance to the estuary which can only be crossed when the tide is high. Thereafter the river narrows down until you find yourself in a green tunnel ducking your head beneath overhanging branches to avoid decapitation. The rays of the sun piercing the canopy of the tangled branches created a stippled effect as we sped along the narrow, twisting channel hoping not to meet anyone coming the other way.

Our next stop was Huatulco where we tied up at the modern marina. We visited the charming, nearby town and its restaurants. Everyone we met was exceptionally friendly. In fact this was true for all of the places we stopped at along the coast. The landmass of Central America is very narrow at this point and north-easterly winds from the Gulf of Mexico are funnelled across this narrow neck of land through a gap in the mountains and can turn the infamous Gulf of Tuantapec into a maelstrom for as far as 200 miles out to sea. The area is notorious and some cruising boats stay as close as 400m off the beach to escape its fury. We were lucky and a careful check of the weather showed that it was safe for us to make a direct crossing of the gulf. Unfortunately we were running late on our schedule so we bypassed the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua and headed directly for Los Suenos in Costa Rica which meant travelling non stop for 96 hours. Along the way, when 70 miles offshore, we encountered fierce Papagayo winds which churned up the seas and gave us a rough ride. Los Suenos has a Marriott resort overlooking a modern marina packed with sportfishing boats kept in immaculate condition with daily grooming by an army of industrious boat hands. We remained here for several days awaiting a change of crew and preparing ourselves and Venture for the long excursion out into the Pacific Ocean.

Out into the Pacific

It was May 1st when we pointed Venture's bow out into the immensity of the Pacific Ocean with just a hint of nervous anticipation. Our first stop was the miniscule speck of Isla del Coco which lies almost 300 miles offshore and

ad



AFTER A SHORT WAIT IN THE BALBOA BASIN WE RAFTED ALONGSIDE A 55' SPORTFISHING BOAT AND, WITH VENTURE PROVIDING THE MOTIVE POWER, WE SLOWLY MOVED TOGETHER INTO THE LOWER BASIN OF THE MIRAFLORES LOCKS.

is administered by Costa Rica. Thirty-one hours later, the tropical island loomed out of the rain showers; its steep, forested flanks shrouded in mist giving it a lost world appearance. Once in Chatham Bay we were called on the radio from a barely visible hut on shore and instructed to pick up one of the moorings with yellow floats. We awoke the following morning to a magnificent tropical sunrise and were visited by two rangers in their RIB. They completed the formalities and together we watched a DVD describing

the rules of the national park. We arranged with them to take a guided walk through the rain forest to a waterfall. We took the tender around to another bay and over a shallow bar to the mouth of a small river. Here we started our trek over an unusual suspension bridge fashioned from retired fishing floats. With the place having an annual rainfall of 7,000mm, we were fortunate to enjoy a rare sunny day. The track through the jungle was rough and the combination of heat and high humidity made

for an exhausting climb through the rain forest. Attempts to keep feet reasonably dry along the soggy track proved to be laughably futile when the last section turned out to involve wading thigh deep across a river. But the waterfall was beautiful and plunged into a jungle pool. Refreshed after a dip, the downhill return journey was much less arduous.

Galapagos Awaits

When we left the following morning for the 440 miles to Galapagos the rain had returned and the island retreated once more behind a misty curtain. For the next 48 hours we ploughed a lonely furrow across the ocean. On the last night before reaching Galapagos, white birds (later identified as swallow-tailed gulls) fluttered like giant moths in and out of the pools of red and green light cast by the navigation lights. Except for faint clicking and mewing sounds, their flight was silent.

We crossed the Equator at 0300 and arrived in Academy Bay at Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz island at 0900. We anchored among the many boats in the bay and set a stern anchor to keep us from turning broadside to the roly waves. Our visit to Galapagos had been arranged through Naugala – a company I had found on-line. We went ashore and met Johnny Romero of Naugala and were introduced to Patricia Stucki who was to be our naturalist guide.

We started our tour of the islands the following morning and over the next eight days cruised 327 miles through the archipelago. There is no space here to cover the visit in detail but we



PELICANS FLOCK WHERE EVER THEY CAN FIND A PLACE TO LAND.



MARINE IGUANAS IN THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS TAKE YOU BACK TO THE AGE OF THE DINASOURS.



COULD IT BE MORE IDYLIC THAN THIS.

were lucky enough to see most of the indigenous flora and fauna unique to these special islands. Only about 3% of the land in the Galapagos is inhabited or cultivated by humans and less than 1% of the remainder is open to tourists. A strict itinerary is arranged for visits and must be adhered to. For example, you cannot linger in a spot because you like it. If you are scheduled to visit it in the morning then you must be gone by the afternoon. No one is allowed to visit any place without a guide and there can be no more than 16 persons per guide. When you are ashore, the trails are clearly marked with black and white posts and you cannot deviate from the marked trail. Getting ashore can be a challenge. Most landings are accurately described as 'wet' which means you should be prepared to be immersed up to your waist. Even with landings described as dry you can expect to get your feet wet. Tenders cannot be dragged up onto the beach or tethered in any way to the shore so usually someone has to stay behind on the tender and take their turn later but still be accompanied by the guide. Anchoring the yacht can be a challenge as many of the anchorages are exposed and/or have a rocky bottom. We bent two anchors in two days so you need to carry extra ground tackle.

We learned that, like so many other places, the Galapagos marine park is plagued by illegal fishing most especially the killing of sharks for their fins by local and foreign fishermen. These animals have their fins sliced off and are then thrown back in the water to die. It is estimated that at least 300,000 sharks are destroyed annually in the Galapagos alone and 80% of the fins from that source go to San Francisco for distribution. So the next time you fancy a bowl of shark fin soup just consider you may be unwittingly contributing to the cruel slaughter of an increasingly endangered species – and just for a bowl of soup.

6000 Litre top up

Having travelled all the way from Costa Rica to Coco and then having cruised for eight days among the islands, Venture's tanks were getting

ad



VENTURER AWAITS FOR THE LOCK TO FILL BEFORE ENTERING GATUN LAKE.

low and we took on 6,000 litres of pre-arranged diesel at Baltra Island close to the main international airport.

We had 900 miles of open ocean ahead of us before arriving at Panama City at the southern entrance to the famous canal. This was the longest passage that any of us had undertaken in a powerboat and we kept a careful log of fuel remaining and distance to go. For the most part the weather was fair, although we did have one day on which we had swells and windblown waves on the beam which caused us to alter course to make the ride more comfortable.

Although our crossing was relatively uneventful, our landfall was quite exciting. Around midnight on the evening before our arrival in Panama we approached Punta Mala on the coast and suddenly found ourselves in a frenzy of shipping with large freighters travelling in opposing directions at 26 knots or more. Even at our speed of around nine knots this produced a closing speed of 35 knots so a ship 8 miles away would be on you in 13 minutes. We also kept a sharp look out for ships coming up from astern which, running at almost three times our speed, would overhaul us at an alarming rate. To add to the fun, thunderstorms blossomed on the radar from just a small blip to obscuring half the screen in next to no time. Under these conditions, AIS is an absolute godsend because the AIS targets still show through the clutter as well as giving speed, course and CPA of the myriad targets – of which we had as many as nine at one time. In those days we were not transmitting our own AIS information – an omission we have since rectified. An average of 40 ships per day pass through the canal and the great majority of them pass Punta Mala which translates as "Bad Point".

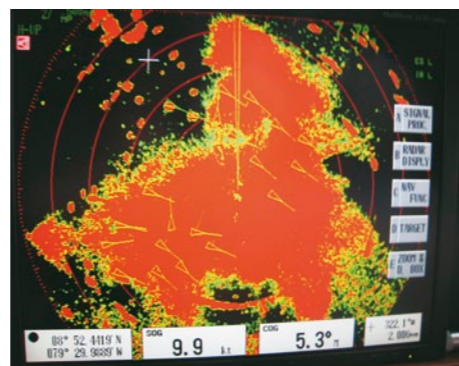
We reached the big ship anchorage at the head

of Panama Bay at 10 am where we were met by the sight of dozens of ships at anchor awaiting their turn to negotiate the canal. The radar was a blizzard of targets. Dark clouds hovered overhead and rain squalls obscured the horizon while squadrons of pelicans patrolled the skies. We called on the radio and were directed to Flamenco Marina where we tied up 102 hours after leaving Baltra, giving us an average speed of 8.8 knots for the 895 nautical miles. We had used 3,600 litres of fuel with a consumption of four litres per nautical mile or 35 litres per hour which included the genset.

Transiting the Canal

Our actual transit of the famous canal was a couple of days later and began with our taking on the pilot in bumpy sea conditions from a launch just outside the entrance channel. We were directed under the Bridge of the Americas which, until 2006, carried the only road linking North and South America. After a short wait in the Balboa Basin we rafted alongside a 55' sportfishing boat and, with Venture providing the motive power, we slowly moved together into the lower basin of the Miraflores locks. We were barely inside when the massive lock gates swung closed behind us. Ahead of us in the same chamber was a bulk carrier from Bangkok. Messenger lines, with a small but dense monkey-fist on the end, were thrown aboard by line handlers on the side of the locks. You need to be paying attention because if struck on the head you could be knocked cold.

The messenger lines were attached to 3' loops in the ends of the 125' lines by the crew aboard the boats and then hauled back through the closed chocks by the line handlers on the lock walls. As the boats moved deeper into the lock chamber the line handlers walked alongside them and dropped the loops over bollards.



GOING IN TO THE PANAMA CANAL THE AIS IS AN ABSOLUTE GODSEND BECAUSE THE AIS TARGETS STILL SHOW THROUGH THE CLUTTER.

A bell sounded and water began to boil up into the lock through 20ft diameter culverts in the floor of the chamber. As the boats rose, the dock lines were progressively shortened by crewmembers aboard the boats using the cleats as snubbers. The mixing of fresh and salt water causes additional turbulence in the first and last locks where canal water meets the sea.

This procedure was followed for two more locks on the Pacific side before our two boats disengaged and continued independently across Gatun Lake. We linked up again for our descent through Gatun locks which dropped us back to sea level through a series of three chambers. The Panama Canal is an amazing feat of engineering built at tremendous cost in toil and human life one hundred years ago. In the space of a few hours it had allowed us to cross from the Pacific to the Atlantic side of the continent from where we turned Venture's bows north and started the long trek to the distant shores of Nova Scotia.

In Part 2 (May-June PPB 2012) Tony Fleming recounts the final stage from Panama to journeys end in Nova Scotia. **PPB**