



the Promise *of* *the* Cork

The turbulence of a 727 shook my berth as it took to the sky, carrying sunburned tourists back to Miami, and shocking me into a new day. Last night we cast off from the Sonesta Marina dock and anchored in this cove, unaware it was the watery end of Aruba's International Airport. We came to relax, and clear out the city clatter. We scrubbed *Bittersweet's* full keel and staged the cabin for offshore passage-making. Now, as I lay in my berth imagining the islands and wilderness ahead, tranquility swept over me, then trepidation.

story and photos by Nonnie Thompson

Our greatest ocean challenge lay ahead, yet my young daughter slept nearby, calm and unburdened. Before leaving home, I recalled my husband David soothed Annie with the promise: "Corks float no matter what, and our Shannon is the best cork on the ocean." Only 600 miles of blue water stood between us and the San Blas Islands of Panama, but this was a path fraught with peril. This path would test his promise.

As Jimmy Cornell writes in *World Cruising Routes*, the southwest Caribbean Sea can present "dangerous seas for a small yacht." Yet to continue our itinerary, we had to cross it. We read on . . . "At the height of the trade wind season, the constant easterly winds pile up the water . . . Many boats have been knocked down or pooped by the steep following seas." I studied his words over and over, willing a different interpretation of his warnings. On our trusty single sideband, David

Jones, transmitting Caribbean weather from *Mistine* in Tortola, confirmed the seasonal trend. Via daily reports, we monitored trade wind intensity as we waited in Aruba. I hoped for a forecast of light breezes, but the reports through February continued moderate to strong.

We had enjoyed an easterly sleigh-ride since Grenada. However, the counter-current in the basin of Central America concerned us. Trade winds, often 35-plus knots in winter, opposed the current and stood the 25-foot swells on end. Dangerous steep seas gave us pause. With angst, we remembered the current vs. wind battles off Nantucket, in the Chesapeake, and near Nevis. We knew the current, in opposition, always got the upper hand, literally. Over cockpit cocktails with *Dragon Lady*, our buddy-boat for this passage, we planned headings and SSB chat schedules and twenty-year-old Bryan joined us as crew.

With the whine of another jet on approach, I rolled over and caught my husband David grimacing under his radio headset as he digested updates from *Mistine*. Our eyes met.

David soothed Annie with the promise: “Corks float no matter what, and our Shannon is the best cork on the ocean.”

“Time to go! The window is closing,” The window had held light winds, now they were strengthening. Popping open the forward hatch, I scanned the mesquite trees on the beach, growing horizontally with the east wind. I began my final mental preparation for our crossing, an exercise of the imagination.

Imagination was our great motivator. David and I had visualized this journey in our fire-warmed Marblehead, Massachusetts cottage for four years. The dream was to move to Seattle aboard a sailboat, home school 12-year-old Annie and spend a year exploring the coast of North America. We restored our Shannon 38-foot ketch, quit our jobs, and sold our house. Then on a nasty black September dawn, we sailed out of homeport and into our stolen year. Now, after New England gunkholing and Caribbean island-hopping, we were in-

tensely focused on the next leg.

Journal Entry: 23 February: 12° 32'N / 70° 04'W

We leave Aruba at 1430 and head W-NW to clear Venezuela. Fifteen-knot winds, quartering seas and a westward current, push us along 7 knots. So far, so good. Annie works her Monkey Fist knot, perfecting it...or avoiding her midterms. As night falls, we set 3-hour watches and relax. Under a one-quarter waxing moon, I take my 2100 watch. The moon sets, and the stars take on a fresh brilliance between patchy clouds. Accompanied by the Southern Cross, we are surfing toward paradise.

24 February: 13° 03'N / 71° 43'W

Saturday is glorious, with wind at twenty-knots and seas unchanged. The sun is bright, after cloud cover early. We chat with *Dragon Lady* 60-miles ahead and settle into our watch



David at the helm in the worst of the long day



Dawn brightens the breaking seas

on the water

>> CRUISING

routine. Then, a somber update from *Missine*: The trade winds are up and predicted to blow over 40 knots, stronger at night, for the next 48-hours. He tried to reach us before we left Aruba with his best advice: "Don't leave!" Too late now. Our knowledge and faith in *Bittersweet* will be our survival. Then I look to Annie, her headphones delivering the mixed tape from friends and a sleepy grin.

25 February: 12° 49'N / 74° 16'W

Day breaks slowly on Sunday, cloudy and ominous. The wind strengthens; the seas build. By lunchtime, the winds are gusting to 30-knots, and the sea surges with a new force. Anxious, we prepare for "increasing night

winds": cabin stowed, deck cleared, harnesses donned, and duties clarified. We watch night fall, and a half moon rises to illuminate worsening seas. Having cleared Venezuela, we adjust our course to sail the rhumbline, parallel to the Colombian Coast, and within reach of the counter-currents. We are in for a rough night and decide on two-hour watches to share the strain. When I take the helm at 2100, Annie is reading in her berth, and I recall the promise of the cork.

26 February: By midnight, we are plummeting off 20-foot waves at over 11-knots, the wind is gusting over 48-knots and we are on constant watch. We determine the sea is too confused to attempt heaving-to.

"Mommy, I just saw 50-degrees and it was cool!" Her voice chimes above the wind, her face lit with glee.

To control the boat speed, we turn to the Sea Drogue. The drogue drags us taut against the sea, a certain comfort. Bryan and I take turns managing the wheel, keeping the hull perpendicular to the breakers.

At 0600, 11° 34'N / 76° 06'W, we pull in the drogue and pay out the Yankee. David takes the helm and I force myself to go below. Annie is snuggled deep in the folds of her lee cloth. Sleeping, or hiding, she is peaceful.

At 1100, David's calls for relief. I hurry to the companionway, pull back the hatch, and am daunted by the sight. David appears glued to the wheel, bright yellow in his foulies against a wall of turquoise streaked with white foam. My gaze follows the wall upward and upward until it settles on the crest,

breaking against a pale blue sky. I turn my attention to Annie, snug in her harness watching the clinometer.

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I turn back to the cabin and I survey the disarray. The cabin looks like the drum of a dryer with pants, tops, and gloves flung through the air on the clothesline. I pull on my still-wet gear. With my harness secure, I hustle into the cockpit, careful to keep the salt spray out of our dry cabin. The instant I get hooked in and crawl to the wheel, David collapses into the cockpit and makes his way to the cabin. I hope he can sleep.

With no break all day, I see white-capped turquoise in all directions. My heart sinks as our heart-shaped stern lifts, then our bow surfs. In foul weather gear up to my neck, I am salted and hot in the tropical sun, my arms cramp, and my eyes burn with the strain. Between breakers, Annie and I chat about home, TV shows and new cruising buddies. With Annie's company, I feel the success of survival and again the vision of restful beaches makes me smile. I see in Annie's face the confidence I sometimes forget to see in myself. Her hope refreshes me, her trust reminds me of the promise of the cork, of our care that keeps her safe.

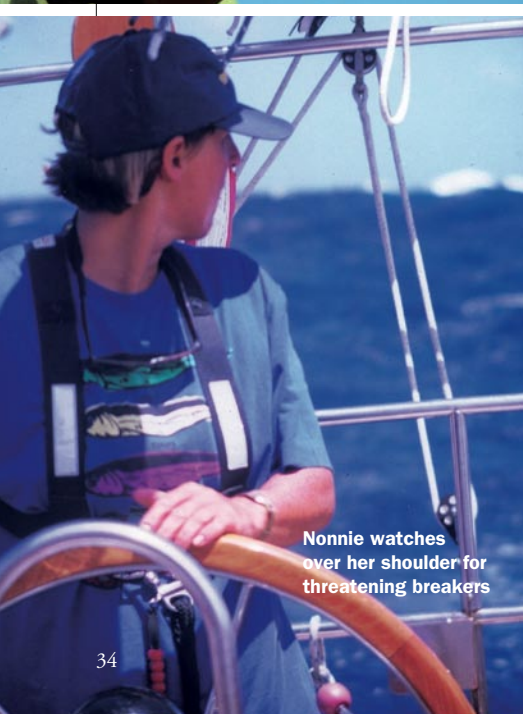
Night comes with clouds and we are totally in the dark. *Dragon Lady* calls to report moderating conditions ahead. We are encouraged as we face another rough night. The wind drops to 25-knots, we are riding the sloppy swell like a rodeo bronco. The next twelve hours are a blur of sail changes, GPS fixes, radar readings, snacks, and attempted slumbers.

27 February: 10° 17'N / 77° 32'W

The morning sky is somber gray and damp, our once bright blue sea reflects the pallor. As conditions weaken, the



Annie finds Flying fish on deck at sunrise



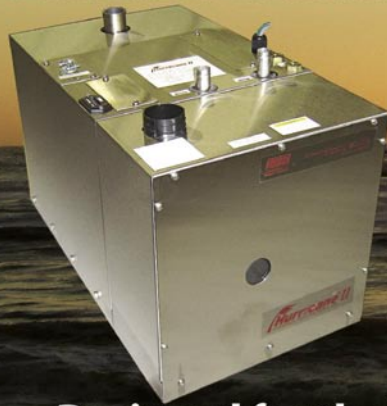
Nonnie watches over her shoulder for threatening breakers



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mood on board builds with anticipation of the 360 islands ahead. The crew chatter is lively, despite our exhaustion. Barreling towards Panama, we are accompanied by dolphins playing in our bow wake. Annie sings their song and her innocence relieves us all. By afternoon, we are fishing, reading and cruising again. With a sudden pop in the hand line, we find a large fish fighting the lure. All hands on deck to pull in a 46-inch wahoo.

At 1800, we sight the hills of Panama and rejoice. The prize of passagemaking... the thrill of landfall. The light is waning as we ghost into the San Blas. Rolling in on a huge swell, we see the turquoise waters, islets and reef of the Holandes Cays, but our antique charts show imprecise coral heads. Darkness descends. Glued to the depth sounder and radar, we pass behind the first atoll and swing in out of the swell.

Piercing our concentration, a voice on the VHF radio calls... "To the boat just entering the San Blas, welcome, and follow my directions. I'll get you through the dangers."

For nine days, we settle into the gentle rhythm of the San Blas. The wind that battered us, now refreshes us, and sends Kuna fishermen skittering across calm waters in shallow pangas.

And we review the passage. *Bit-tersweet* was ready for the toss of the sea but we humans were pretty beaten up. In spite of diligent watch schedules and meals, the constant jarring wore us down. We agree that, while we will remember the Southwest Caribbean with the wariness of a dog-bitten child, we have sharpened our craft.

I will always remember the solace I found in the trust of my daughter's smile. And the cork that did its job. 



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