



LOW SEASON IN PARADISE

Not everyone who crosses the Atlantic carries on directly to the Pacific after the winter season. Kate Ashe-Leonard describes the joys of summer in the Caribbean. Photos Jim Hooper



Pelicans soar over white sand beaches that fringe perfectly sheltered anchorages. Rum punch flows freely and the aroma of barbequed chicken drifts on the breeze. The bright colours of Carnival and steel drums playing into the night. Markets selling breadfruit, papaya and avocados, weighed out on scales. Days spent snorkelling reefs and hiking volcanic mountains. Evenings with other sailors watching for the green flash, sharing ideas and making plans. Fond memories of our time in the Caribbean.

As the final lock gates of the Panama canal swung open to reveal the Pacific ocean to us for the first time, I couldn't help but feel nostalgic about the places we were leaving behind. To me those gates represented the end of one very important chapter in our circumnavigation and the beginning of something new and completely different. It had been a tough decision to enter the Pacific. The Caribbean's diverse cultures, stunning islands, cruising community, sporty sailing and excellent marine services provided us with an ideal cruising ground which felt hard to leave behind.

Antigua to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Two days before Christmas we tied up at Nelson's dockyard, Antigua, after an uneventful first ocean passage across the Atlantic on our Catana 47. The marina was decked out festively and carols were playing in nearby bars and restaurants. We soaked in the atmosphere and celebrated Christmas. Soon though, we were around at Falmouth harbour before setting sail again, this time to Green Island, one of only a few anchorages we would visit in Antigua.

With a limited budget and plan to circumnavigate in just three years, we didn't have much time to hang around and made our way quickly south. Conditions between the islands were feisty: the winds were usually quite strong, making for fast sailing on a beam reach. Tricky acceleration zones and large swells kept us on our toes too. We reached Guadeloupe, our first French Caribbean Island, and indulged in French cheese and baguettes. We sailed to Deshaies on the north-west coast, then around to the capital, Pointe a Pitre. The stunning island of Marie Galante did not disappoint followed by Îles des Saintes, a tiny, charming archipelago lying off the southwest tip of Guadeloupe.

In Dominica, we anchored at Prince Rupert Bay, Portsmouth where we wandered around town and partook in cruiser sundowners and barbeques ashore. After touring the majestic Indian River, we did an eight-hour unguided hike up and down the highest mountain, Morne Diablotin, followed by a drive through the island's extraordinarily lush interior. We sailed south then and took a mooring near the town of Roseau. We took a dinghy to the Champagne reef to behold the magic of volcanic gases creating bubbles underwater, surrounded by tropical reef fish.

Next we raced to Martinique in time for Carnival where we danced on the streets of Fort de France among the crowds, reuniting with a group of cruisers we met in Sicily a year earlier. We continued on to Sainte Anne for some good provisioning. Further south in Saint Lucia we



found a peaceful spot in the gorgeous Marigot Bay which is used by some as a hurricane hole because it is so well protected. Our last anchorage just off the town of Soufriere with a clear view of the ‘Pitons’ mountains, was magnificent.

Learning to slow down in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, consisting of 32 islands, was where we wanted to spend most of our time before heading west. Three months after arriving in the Caribbean we checked in at Saint Vincent and made our way to Bequia. Anchored off Princess Margaret beach for the first time, an oceanic manta ray swam gracefully by and, a few weeks later, an enormous Leatherback turtle buried her eggs on the beach in broad daylight. We were in a very special place.

Bequia’s capital, Port Elizabeth is a quintessential Caribbean town. With modest buildings painted colourfully, it is full of workshops, markets, cafes, bars and restaurants. The amenities, moorings and options to anchor; near town, beside Princess Margaret

beach or around Lower Bay, make Bequia a sailor’s favourite hangout and social hub.

Once settled in we sailed up and down the island chain but, our favourite place by far was Union Island. En route, we often stopped off at Canouan with its interesting upmarket new developments including the Sandy Lane marina and Mayreau’s famously beautiful Salt whistle bay and its very authentic Caribbean bars.

Union Island and its wild, white sand beaches on the north and west coast and sheltered flat water at the southern end, ideal for kiteboarding, had everything we needed. Its rugged mountains, great for hiking overlook its three main anchorages which are well protected. We rotated between them depending on what we felt like: Chatham Bay for its unspoilt raw beauty, Frigate Bay for water sports and Clifton anchorage for proximity to the largest village. Despite a reputation to the contrary, the villages were full of courteous, friendly people. Fruit and vegetables could be bought at a fair price from

ABOVE LEFT
Polaris in a remote anchorage in the Grenadines

ABOVE RIGHT
Salt Whistle Bay, Mayreau, St Vincent and the Grenadines

BELOW LEFT
Local fishermen in the Grenadines

BELOW RIGHT
A Green Sea Turtle

PREVIOUS PAGE
Union Island in the Grenadines became a long term base for *Polaris*

individual sellers and with a few small stores, we could top up our basic supplies whenever we needed to. On settled days, we’d sail around to the Tobago Cays, drop anchor in clear shallow water and hang out watching the 100s of turtles coming up for air and diving down to feed on sea grass.

Serendipitously, just as we were starting to worry about time and finances, we were offered some remote work which we decided to accept. We began to rethink our three-year sabbatical; we realised it might be possible to cruise slowly, working along the way instead of just rushing through. We’d landed on our feet and began to really relax into the pace of Caribbean Island life. It was time to slow down.

Hurricane season at Union Island

Come summer, Union Island became our base for hurricane season. It’s just south of the hurricane zone line and our insurance company agreed to cover us for named storms providing we were around or south of Union Island. We reviewed the





**ABOVE LEFT
AND RIGHT**
Idyllic anchorages
in Tobago Cays



BELOW
Chatham Bay,
Union Island

weather forecast on a daily basis and even used a weather router who issued regular email analysis of hurricane threats in the region.

In June though, a tropical storm was upgraded to a potential category 3 hurricane. Its forecast path moved between veering north, south or even a possible direct hit to Union Island. Uncertain what to do, cruisers were sailing both north and south to get out of its path. Our weather router was highly uncertain about what to advise and we made the difficult decision to hang tight and wait for some agreement between the weather models.

Contrary to our insurance requirements, when it eventually became clear it was heading south, we sought shelter further north in Bequia. There we saw a maximum of 28kts while Union clocked 40. It ended up hitting Trinidad and Tobago before dissipating.

In winter, which is windy season, we spent many days on the water kiteboarding. When the wind subsided though, we became restless. We started to put some thought into

Crew of Polaris' top five Bluewater cruising bits of kit

Communications suite

Starlink, Iridium Go, EPIRB and Personal AIS beacons

Starlink gives us internet access pretty much anywhere. We can download weather forecasts at lightning speed, maintain contact with family while underway, and it eradicates the need to source local sim cards to get internet access on arrival in the places we sail to. We also decided to hold on to our Iridium Go which provides us with the ability to make phone calls, send emails, text messages and peace of mind should Starlink stop working. Starlink is not portable so if we had to get into our life raft, we could bring the Iridium Go with us as a means to communicate. We have personal AIS beacons in our lifejackets should one of us ever fall overboard. Our EPIRB could save our lives one day though we hope we never need to use it.

Power generation

Solar and Lithium: A combination of having enough solar panels used in conjunction with lithium batteries enables us to maximise the solar gain. Our solar array is on a lightweight tilting rack which we can adjust to ensure they point at the sun as we got through the day. As a contingency, we can charge our batteries using our generator but we are hoping to completely remove it when we have completed our project to put in a high output alternator. This will be a lighter weight solution that provides more than twice as much power to our house bank of batteries.

Navigation

Open CPN and Satellite Images

In addition to our chart plotter, we wouldn't be without Open CPN, an open-source navigation software which operates from our laptop but will integrate with NMEA 2000 networks onboard. We often use it in conjunction with satellite images which we have pre-loaded into Open CPN for more remote areas that are poorly charted.

Contingency refrigeration

Dometic 12 Volt fridge and freezer: In addition to our two Frigoboat fridges, we have a Dometic portable fridge and freezer which has been the most reliable household appliance onboard, always working during the many times our primary fridges have broken.

Visual navigation

Steiner Commander Binoculars with built in compass: A recent present to ourselves, we anticipate these amazing binoculars coming in handy when we reach southeast Asia, a cruising area which is famous for been highly populated by local boats that do not use AIS, fish attraction devices and fishing nets.





Our boat floated over a steep underwater drop off and the visibility off our stern was 20m plus.

Being so far south, hurricanes are rarely a concern but soon after arriving we were unfortunate enough to experience a local weather phenomenon known as a reversal. With the onset of specific conditions, the wind switches 180 degrees, putting the moored boats on a lee shore. Huge surges are generated, creating waves that bash off the town wall and back at the boats. The worst affected sometimes break their moorings. It was a hair-raising experience – similar to being at sea in a bad storm that lasted 24 hours.

Many parts of the island are best accessed with a four-wheel drive due to the island's bumpy red dirt roads so, we shared a rented one for three months with another couple. The northern half of Bonaire is arid and desert-like with a national park full of cactus and well-marked hiking, walking and cycle trails. The south is home to the country's pink salt flats, a great kiteboarding beach and a famous windsurfing lagoon. Apart from its salt production and the island's iconic pink flamingos and donkeys, Bonaire is most famous for its dive sites. With over 85 sites, I decided to get my Open Water diving certificate there.

Bonaire is also well connected to Europe, with cheap flights via Amsterdam, we decided to leave *Polaris* in the marina while visiting family. When we returned after five weeks in mid-November, our extended five-month visa was about to expire and so we prepared to set sail for Colombia. →

ABOVE
Port Elizabeth, Bonaire

BELOW
Pink salt flats, Bonaire

the upgrades we needed to make. It was hard to believe that by then, we'd actually been in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines for almost a year. In that time, we narrowed down which improvements would make the biggest difference to our cruising life. We decided our next stop: Dutch Sint Maarten, 320nm northwest of us. Favoured for its superior marine services, it is also an easy place to get parts with no import duty. In March we finally weighed anchor and headed north.

Upgrades in Dutch Sint Maarten

Our passage took two nights, reaching all the way. As we motored through Simpson Bay on the Dutch side and navigated under the opening bridge into the lagoon, I was struck by the wrecks scattered everywhere. We were in the hurricane belt, but thankfully still had four months until the next hurricane season.

Our first project was to add 1,450 watts of Solar via panels which were attached to a lightweight aluminium tilting solar arch. The second was to double our usable house battery capacity by changing from gel to lithium with 720-amp hrs. These upgrades would make a big difference to our autonomy in terms of power. We fitted all new instruments, a new chart plotter, radar and autopilot keeping our old one as a backup. With more available power, we also added a washing machine and rewired the water maker so it could run off

the batteries as opposed to being dependent on the generator alone. Finally, we replaced our anchor chain with a much longer one of 100m, suitable for the deeper Pacific anchorages in our future. With our work complete, and hurricane season just around the corner, we decided to sail down to Bonaire in the Dutch Antilles.

Five months in Bonaire

The 465nm passage was fast and furious; we barrelled along on a broad reach averaging 10kts all the way there. We kept a safe distance from Venezuela due to political unrest and possible piracy threats. Relieved to arrive after the boisterous conditions at sea, we waited for a mooring to become available. Bonaire is a marine park where anchoring is prohibited, instead there are two rows of moorings that line the town wall for sailboats. We were lucky to get an outer mooring.





Colombia

The passage to Santa Marta of 415nm was an intense one. As we rounded the Gulf of Venezuela, we saw upwards of 40kts and enormous seas which built up quickly. Running under bare poles to slow down and avoid a night arrival proved ineffectual – our speed remained above 6kts. Granted permission by the coast guard, we entered Santa Marta Marina where we would base ourselves for the next two months.

Set against the dramatic backdrop of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the marina is picturesque but gusty due to the mountains with winds regularly above 30kts. It is also a port of entry where the reception staff will function as a clearance agent. After exploring the town and surrounding beaches, we made plans to complete a five-day trek through the rainforest in the Sierra Nevada where we would visit the Lost City, a place where ancient mountain tribes still reside. Although gruelling with eight-hour days of hiking up and down steep, muddy slopes, the trek under rainforest canopy remains a highlight of our circumnavigation to date.

Cartagena was on our must-see list too and we headed by bus to spend a long weekend in the old town. The drive through impoverished slums was sobering but the town itself was enchanting. We walked the walls, perused galleries and

museums, ending the few days we had there in some great rooftop bars before returning to *Polaris*. It was time to prepare for the next leg, this time to the San Blas islands off Panama's east coast.

San Blas islands

The San Blas islands are an independent Indigenous territory off the Caribbean coast of Panama. The islands are an idyllic powdery white sand, palm-tree kind of archipelago you never want to leave. Days there were sometimes lazy or could involve sailing between islands keeping a careful eye on depths to avoid shallow reefs, followed by barbeques and bonfires on the beach after dropping anchor.

After four weeks though, we were starting to feel the pressure to get started on our jobs list. It was late December and we needed to haul out and replace our rudder bearings, some through hulls and sail drive seals. Now certain we wanted to transit the canal and head into the Pacific, we also needed to arrange our Panama Canal transit and secure a long stay visa for French Polynesia, not to mention deciding our route across the Pacific.

Shelter Bay, Panama

We selected Shelter Bay marina as the place for us to prepare. Conveniently located next to the Caribbean entrance to the Panama

ABOVE LEFT
Hollandes Islands,
San Blas

ABOVE RIGHT
Cocos Banderos, San Blas

BELOW LEFT
Colourful graffiti
and characters in
Cartagena, Colombia

BELOW CENTRE
Capuchin monkey,
Shelter Bay

BELOW RIGHT
A tiny islet in the San
Blas archipelago

Canal, it has a boat yard, swimming pool, bar and restaurant and a complementary daily bus to and from supermarkets. There's also a jungle complete with howler monkeys, capuchin monkeys and sloths just fringing the marina. Occasionally a saltwater crocodile is found in the murky marina waters but thankfully we didn't encounter any. After six weeks of tough, frustrating jobs and countless provisioning bus rides to the supermarkets, we were finally ready to transit the canal and enter the Pacific. I couldn't believe we were really going to do this.

After two years in the Caribbean, the huge distances between islands in the Pacific made me nervous, pushing me to the edges of my comfort zone. What would it feel like to be at sea for between three and four weeks, I wondered? What if something went terribly wrong? But, in spite of these natural concerns I was certain that our time in the Caribbean had equipped us and our boat for more remote, longer distance sailing. With the slower, more mindful approach to cruising we had adopted in the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, I had a feeling we would be in the Pacific for at least a few years too. We were hungry for big passages to the most faraway of places and I could hardly wait. ✈



ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kate Ashe-Leonard and Jim Hooper have now sailed 25,000nm five and a half years after purchasing *Polaris*. Well over halfway through their circumnavigation, they are currently cruising Australia. In the coming months they will continue their voyage west and into the Indian ocean.

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