

# 2001

## CARIBBEAN, NORTH AMERICA

### Captain's log, January 6

*1002 pos clear Cayo Largo entrance buoy, A/C to 180°, up rpm to 1600. Clear sky, warm temps*

We were underway for the Cayman Islands for resupply and brief maintenance. Michel had done his homework and with Pire's help, knew exactly where we would go on our next trip. We would return to Cuba and visit Jardines de la Reina, the Gardens of the Queen. Like a long string of pearls in the blue-purple waters of the Caribbean, the reefs, cayos, and islands offshore the southeast coast were the most untouched and pristine in all of Cuba. Uninhabited and difficult to reach, with poorly charted, shallow, and dangerous reefs and with no water or any supplies available, the gardens were not on the cruising itinerary of deep-draft power yachts. They were also patrolled by Cuban military, enforcing strict conservation laws. Beachcombing, snorkeling, and non-commercial photography were permitted, but scuba diving, fishing, and touching or taking any form of marine life was out. Just our kind of place!

Actually, there was fishing in the gardens. Avalon, an Italian company, had somehow curried favor with Fidel and was granted the only license to operate a sportfishing business there. They had an impressive operation that included a barge/hotel, supply boats, and a fleet of small, very fast fishing boats. The fishing for their European customers was fantastic and commanded top prices in the world of charter fishing. After a photo or two, all the fish were released. Naturally, the owners of this gold mine were very protective of their lucrative operation and worked with the authorities to discourage any visitors from so much as dropping an anchor in the gardens.

Pepe, the manager of the fishing operation, understood immediately that *Moana* was not the average yacht. With our shallow draft and running gear that could not be damaged, we had the ability to go where few boats would dare. When we began showing up in cayos where no power boats had ever been seen, his captains were impressed, but he began to watch us like a hawk. We were not commercial fishermen, but we did enjoy catching or spearing fish for dinner, so the game was on, and it was not hard to get a nice grouper or snapper whenever we wanted.

In a wild place like the gardens, finding a calm anchorage at night is often a serious challenge. Many places on the nautical charts that looked great were inaccessible due to coral reefs or shallow sand bars blocking entrance to calm lees and beautiful lagoons. The charts were not accurate, especially with depths, so we had to be very careful when approaching any anchorages. In some cases we found tall sticks driven into the bottom by fishermen, marking very small channels into the lagoons. The sticks had no flags or anything attached, and many times they were difficult to see. But with a person on the bow, looking down into the clear water, we were sometimes able to find our way into some of the most secluded, idyllic lagoons imaginable. This included Cinco Balas, or Five Bullets, where we met Elvis. His real name was Rey, but when our cook admired his good looks, warm personality, and resemblance to the famous singer, we simply called him Elvis. With a personality that matched, and speaking perfect English, he enjoyed his new nickname. He worked for Pepe, running one of their supply boats that was also set up for fishing. When he came into the lagoon and was very surprised to see us anchored there, he came over to give us a typical Cuban welcome. We gave him a tour of the boat and a cold beer, and we asked a hundred questions about the gardens, which he answered quite candidly. This included his instructions from Pepe to report our whereabouts and activities whenever he saw us. We really enjoyed his company—even more so, when he located the best anchorages and the access channels on my charts.

The next morning was memorable. There were two channels into Cinco Balas, and the one I used to enter was so difficult, I decided to use the other for leaving. It was marked with sticks pretty well at first, but then it became very hard to see the channel, and I slid into the bottom on one hull or the other, over and over, stopping the boat. With her protected running gear, this was not dangerous for *Moana*, but it was embarrassing for me. I felt like a Sunday drunk who could not find his way home. Elvis suddenly appeared in a small boat, hopped aboard, and came to my pilothouse, which was now full of people wondering what was going on. With a smile worthy of his namesake, he took the controls, lined up his run, dropped the engines in and out of gear, and, while the boat slowly slid through the narrow spot in the channel, raised his hands in the air and sang out, “Don’t worry, be happy!” Laughter and applause was instant, while I could not help but notice a wading bird less than one foot from the starboard side, and was sure it was the same to port! It was an amazing display of local knowledge and boat handling skill.

Thanks to Elvis, we found and enjoyed the Gardens of the Queen as if in the company of the queen herself. Fishing, diving, and exploring pristine reefs and beaches by day, and night after night anchored alone in one or another beautiful, calm lagoon or island lee, it was an epic trip. But epic trips to wild places are never without some unexpected drama.

We discovered a really beautiful anchorage one afternoon, inside the lagoon of Boca de Juan Grin. We anchored in very shallow water, as we often did, especially with the notes of Elvis on our charts. It was a spectacular spot, with sand and turtle-grass bottom, surrounded by white

sand beaches and a few mangroves, and with just enough room for the boat to swing with the change of tide and current. The water was perfectly clear, and after anchoring we could see our big “Bruce” anchor resting on the bottom, just off the bow of the boat. There was little current, so the anchor was on its side, with one “arm” sticking straight up.

Without a lot of current or wind, this was normal, and I went to bed that night confident everything was okay. In the middle of the night, Gerard, one of our guests, gently shook my arm and told me he could hear something strange. And it was very strange, indeed, to see the anchor chain rubbing against the line cutter on the port bow, due to an extreme angle on the chain. The tide had fallen, as I knew it would, leaving only one foot of water under the boat, but the breeze had come up in the opposite direction of the current, pushing us to the side of the lagoon. This crazy combination made the anchor chain run off from the starboard bow at the extreme angle I could see in the light of my flashlight.

We needed to spin the boat around so the anchor chain would run out straight ahead, instead of under the hull or against the cutter on the port bow. In daylight, with deeper water and more room, this would have been a simple maneuver; but as I tried to power the bow around, I realized the elements would not allow it. In the dark, everything was difficult to see, and the radar did not show a well-defined lagoon. As I tried to envision the forces working against us, I noticed the chain angle was slowly changing with a change in the current, and the boat was slowly starting to drift sideways, toward the anchor. In a normal situation, the boat would have coasted past the anchor, the chain would come up tight, and the boat would have aligned itself normally, into the current. But this night, nothing was normal and our boat was a double hulled catamaran. In a matter of minutes, the boat was going to drift over the big Bruce anchor, and its steel “arm” was going to slice us open like a knife through soft butter!

The last thing I wanted to do was raise the anchor, drift down current, and wind up aground, but I had no choice. I used both engines and serious power to get the bow around, and as we quickly approached the spot where I was sure the anchor lay, Joubert hauled the chain. The moment the anchor came out of the water, I spun the boat in her own length, we dumped the anchor again, and in the darkness, held our breath. Moments later, tragedy was only a word. With the current and breeze now from the same direction, *Moana* once again rested quietly in the center of the small lagoon, and no one would ever know the anxiety and fear felt that night in “paradise.”

Two days later, while leaving Pasa Cachiboca, we encountered a small commercial fishing boat, with its two-man crew. It was rare to see such a boat in the gardens, where everything was protected, so I brought *Moana* alongside to learn what they were doing there. Debbie had some scrambled eggs leftover from breakfast, so we passed over a plastic bag and used it as an excuse to say “hello.” At that moment, and without a word, the crewman began scooping lobsters from a hidden compartment in the deck, throwing them into our cockpit. At the same time, we saw an adult turtle with her flippers tied up, lying on her back on the deck.



Cuban commercial fishing boat

The silence of the captain and deckhand confirmed they were fishing illegally, and they were worried about what we might do. I understood their fear, and tried to gain their trust by telling them about my younger years in the commercial fishing business, and that I would never report them to the authorities, but they refused to say a word. Then, I told them the women aboard our boat were very sad to see the turtle, and lectured them a bit about taking turtles and their eggs (I assumed they had caught her when she was laying her eggs), which was a little ridiculous, given the plight of Cuban fishermen. It was an odd “standoff.” The fishermen clearly understood my words, but they simply stared at me in silence, as if waiting permission to leave.

Michel ended the strange standoff by suggesting we simply buy the turtle, which is what we did. The fishermen seemed relieved, passed over the poor animal, and immediately got underway. We ran outside the pass and released the turtle offshore the reef. She was apparently unharmed by her brief captivity and swam off fast, while I wondered if our short encounter with the fishermen was good or bad for them. We received a dozen lobsters and rescued a turtle, but I wondered how they would be able to spend the money (\$ US) we gave them. Quite possibly, they could not spend the money for years to come, or ever.



Luis and Donald with pet jutía

One day, a very old and worn commercial fishing boat anchored nearby, launched its small boat, and came alongside. The captain, one of the largest and most muscular men I have ever seen, was very friendly and eager to learn about us. I was especially interested in how and what they fished for, and in general, what their lives were like in Cuba, so we had an interesting exchange. We learned they fished primarily for lobsters, which were in abundance in certain areas of the gardens and were the property of the government. The fishermen could not sell them to anyone else, and they told us how many they caught in an average year. We were astounded! Their usual catch was worth nearly US \$250,000, but the total the entire crew received was less than US \$8,000. Viva Fidel!

Before leaving, the captain asked if we could give them some beer, a precious cargo they could never afford. It was near the end of our trip, and we did not have much aboard, but I gave them a case we could spare. They smiled broadly and rowed back to their boat. And the next day, we saw the warm hearts and generosity of the Cuban people. They returned with two five-gallon buckets containing an amazing assortment of beautiful tropical reef fish. On their previous visit, they noticed our bait tank held not just bait fish, but “pets,” so they brought us a nice, thoughtful gift. But that was not all. They also brought us a baby jutía, on a little leash

for the three-year-old son of one of our guests. They also brought two adult animals, skinned, dressed out, and ready for the barbecue. When the fishermen left port they only had aboard some rice, so to augment the crew stores, they immediately went to the mangroves and caught jutías for fresh meat. They were giant tree rats! When the captain divulged this and saw the reaction of the women aboard, he told us to roast them and give a small piece to the little boy. He promised the boy's reaction would prove how delicious they tasted, and that evening, we saw the proof. Little Luis ate the jutía with gusto, as did all the men and crew. To this day, I have to say the meat of those tree rats was absolutely delicious.

Two days later, at sunset, a different but equally old and beat-up fishing boat came alongside. They immediately gave us a large bucket of live lobsters. We had no more beer, so we put together a huge care package of food and clothes. We offered money also, but they did not want any kind of money. They explained that being caught with any kind of money other than Cuban pesos would land them in jail, so they were very happy trading for food and clothes. They said they were headed back to port, and quickly departed. The trap was set.

Minutes later, as darkness fell, we turned on our bright deck lights, which blinded us from seeing the Cuban military patrol boat that was suddenly alongside. Six armed soldiers burst into our cockpit and immediately found the bucket of illegal lobsters. The commanding officer slowly came aboard, his eyes fixed on mine. He knew I was the captain and, with his short, direct Spanish, made sure I knew he was in charge.

“Now, you will raise your anchor and follow us to port. Your boat is now the property of the Republic, and you and your crew are going to jail.”

“I don't think so.”

“Start your engines, and do as I say.”

I met his stare, and with a slight smile bordering on arrogance, silently turned and went to the pilothouse. I was more than a little nervous as I retrieved a letter from Pire. The letter was simply an invitation to come back to Cuba and visit the Gardens of the Queen, describing the beauty of the area, listing all the services his company offered, and thanking us for coming to Cuba and using his agency. But it had lots of “scrambled eggs,” and official looking stamps and insignia of a government document. At the bottom was Pire's signature, bold and impressive, and his title of ship's agent. And most importantly, it was in English.

When I returned to the aft cockpit, the officer's posture and attitude was unchanged. His men stood around us in a semicircle, waiting, I was sure, for their commander to show his power over the stupid American. I held up Pire's letter, pointed to his signature, and in my best Spanish, demanded, “Do you know who this is? This letter is permission to visit the Jardines de la Reina and enjoy the wonders of this paradise. And it is from the personal representative and official interpreter of El Commandante” (Fidel Castro). As I said this, I stroked my chin, letting him know I knew the meaning of this act. (Castro had a beard, and whenever a Cuban wanted to convey that the subject being talked about was Fidel, he simply stroked his chin.)

In this case, I wanted to suggest I was no mere tourist and, in fact, could have connections all the way up the chain. Connections that could make things uncomfortable for the officer who continued to coldly stare at me.

He reached for the letter, but I held it back, saying, "You can read it, but you cannot have it."

"We will see about your letter," he said.

And with that, he barked orders to his men, returned to his boat, (with the lobsters, of course), and leaving one of his men to wait for his return, disappeared into the night. He was out of radio range and would have to return all the way to port to confer with his superiors. I knew this, and knew it would be a very long night for him if he returned. What I did not know for sure was if he could read English.

When I held up the letter in front of him, he scrutinized it as if he wanted to know every detail. I had seen this act before, in several developing-world countries, and immediately surmised he could not read it. Now the game had changed. Now, the most important thing to my Cuban "general" was to show his men that he was smart and educated and was the man in charge. And to go home to his warm bed and forget about bothersome boat captains. Several hours later, a small boat arrived to pick up the last soldier.

This, our second trip to Cuba was spectacular. The weather was good almost every day, and the fishing, diving, and exploring were unbelievable. With a boat like *Moana*, we sometimes joked about living in a five-star hotel, but when the weather was good, in a place like the Gardens of the Queen, even the best hotels in the world could not match the combination of luxury, locale, and ambiance we enjoyed. Sunrises to sunsets were filled with lifetime memories. We lacked for nothing. With our big generators supplying electricity to commercial grade equipment and sophisticated systems, the family and their guests enjoyed the luxury and elegance that defined our operation. Our feet never saw shoes. We enjoyed gourmet seafood cuisine in laughter and tee shirts. It was paradise.

With our second Cuba trip behind us, Michel and the family flew home, unbelievably beginning with a flight to Havana in an old Russian biplane. Viva Fidel! With the freezer full of fish and lobster, we ran south to Grand Cayman, and on to Panama. It was a mix of fair to sloppy weather, with only the bad fuel we purchased in Georgetown being a surprise. With a system designed to clean and remove water from a bad load of fuel, we did not miss a beat, and we arrived in Cristobal on February 20. Two days later, we picked up our pilot in the morning and idled to Gatun Locks.

For me, the Panama Canal is a historical and unbelievable marvel of engineering, and for years I loved taking boats through. The procedure of putting a boat inside a chamber, filling it with millions of gallons of water to raise the boat to another level, crossing a lake, and reversing the procedure to take a boat to the sea level on the other side of the canal, all the while surrounded by dense, tropical forest, is simply a fantastic experience. The pilots were very knowledgeable, and it seemed I always learned some new and interesting facts about the