Mike Harker

Heading out: From Panama to Las Perlas

"In life you rarely get a second chance. When that opportunity is offered, you should take it and make the best out that second chance." says Mike Harker, who nearly lost his life in a hang-gliding accident. We join him on the first leg of his circumnavigation in a Hunter 49.

Learning in the Bahamas

After completing 32,000 ocean miles on my Hunter 46 in 2004, I was planning the continuation of my voyage around the world via California, the South Pacific and Australia, then rounding the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa and back to Miami via the Caribbean.

I took delivery of the Hunter 49 *WanderLust 3* during the Miami Boat Show a year ago last February. My first voyage, a shake-down just to learn all the new features on this new boat, was to Nassau Bahamas. I met a beautiful young woman from Toronto Canada at the boat show and she wanted to crew with me for a week or two in order to get her Captain's Licence with sail endorsement. As I had gone to Sea School in my "off months" and received my Master Captain's Licence with offshore and sail endorsements, I was now allowed to sign off on her papers for her upgrade.

Kimberley flew into Nassau and we sailed together down to Georgetown stopping at three beautiful bays and beaches overnight. Kim was an excellent sailor and very nice company for the ten days we were together.

She flew back to Canada and I continued alone towards the "Windward Passage" between Cuba and Hispanola. I stopped

overnight in the most southern island of the Bahaman group, Inagua and the small village of Matthew Town. I planned to sail around the world and then return to this little hole-in-the-wall harbor where I would cross my own route and become a "circumnavigator" with my new Hunter 49.

Captain's Log

I have had six rain squalls dump their load on me already today.

I am the second day out from Jamaica headed to Panama. My course is 200 degrees, which is 20 degrees East of due South. Panama lies about 400 miles away. At my speed, 7.5 knots, that's another 3 overnights.

The pillow-like tops of these clouds only hint at what their dark bases carry. A few miles to the East, they are lined up as if in a race, a race across the Atlantic, from Africa, where these "Trades" originate.

You can't outrun them, not at 7.5 knots. You have to prepare and wait until they hit then dump their load on you. This is preceeded by a strong increase in wind. From the constant 12-15 knots coming out of the East, the winds before these squalls increase to 22-25 knots, and a change in direction depending on how far they are north or south of the line to the Easterly Trades.

If you are caught unprepared, they can knock the sails down and you heel (the boat leans away from the wind pressure) excessively.

I have developed my own way of preparing for the "hit".

I am sailing with the second reef in the main. That brings the main sail down to about where the smaller head sail, the 'stay sail', tops out. I also have the "Jib", rolled all the way out. That gives the boat a good "pull" from the constant trade winds.

When a squall is about to hit, I will quickly roll up the jib and turn the boat a little into the wind until the rains come, then turn back. Eventually everything returns to normal and I head back towards Panama and roll out the jib again.

Another squall is approaching, so I better tend to business.

Meeting New Friends

The Windward Passage was, as the weather report stated "Boisterous Seas" with large swell and wind chop in the 35-knot wind. It was the first heavy sea test of my new boat and she handled it very well, a tremendous improvement over my "old" H-46. After three nights, I pulled into Port Antonio on the north-east corner of Jamaica. The marina there is named after the famous screen star Errol Flynn, who owned the entire island just off the bay where he built a luxury "hut" and kept his ketch, flying friends into the bay on his sea plane. The island is still gorgeous and very inviting and I had a wonderful four days docked next to a 68-foot charter ketch.

Captain "Bob" was having engine problems and was stuck there with his three paying guests for over a week. I invited the three young women and his crew over to my boat for dinner. I can seat eight very comfortably and his boat was torn apart down below. We all had a terrific dinner; the girls cooked and then we all watched the new "Pirates of the Caribbean II" movie on the 40" big screen with surround sound.

Afterwards, the three girls asked if they could sail with me to Panama because they thought they would never leave Jamaica. I told them it was a new boat I was not confident enough to take non-sailors on the open ocean for over a week. But, if they could make it to Panama, I would take them over to the Pacific side and the Las Perlas Islands.

The next morning I left for Panama with a beautiful five-day sail into the San Blas Islands. I enjoyed three days of exploring five different small islands, talked with a group of Kuna Indians at my final anchorage and came into the Panama Canal Yacht Club with the anticipation of a quick crossing just as my last transit three years previous. Things have changed now that they are widening the canal for larger ships. The freighter traffic is now one-way for twelve hours and then the other way for twelve hours. Yacht traffic can only travel in the opposing direction, also only one-way. That means only about half the normal traffic is transiting as compared to my last voyage.

I hired TITO from the Yacht Club to take me in his car to do all the required paperwork. This took four hours but only cost me $50 because there were three other captains with us and we split the cost of our guide. The actual price of the transit was the same, about $850, but I had a ten-day wait for my "slot".

I hired the four required line-handlers and rented the fenders and lines for the transit on the following morning. At sunrise the day of my transit I was awaken by a boat tying alongside. It was Captain Bob and his three girls. They immediately threw their bags over the rail onto my boat and jumped ship. I forgot I had invited them to sail with me if they ever got to Panama.

I had the idea to use the three girls, plus a fourth girl I met from Austria who was sailing around the world with her father, to be my "Line-Handlers" for the transit. I kept one of the original handlers as a mentor for the girls and off we went to cross the continent from the Atlantic/Caribbean into the Pacific Ocean with four girls as line handlers. Nobody would believe it!

The transit was a joy. We went up the three locks that afternoon in the middle of two other sailboats and tied to a mooring overnight on Lake Gatun to wait for our twelve-hour window. The girls were terrific and the pilot was thoroughly enjoying himself helping the girls with their chores.

We easily crossed the Lake Gatun and the following three locks down into the Pacific Ocean. The Austrian and Israeli girls took a bus back to the Caribbean side to join the father of the Austrian girl for the transit the next day, and the two Danish girls from Copenhagen asked if they could ride along with me to the Las Perlas Islands. Mia Pedersen, 32, is a school teacher in Copenhagen; Louise Bech, 33, is a graduate architect; both are taking some travel time off before settling down to the rigors of daily life. They are fun loving and free spirited and have been a joy to have aboard the last few weeks.

Las Perlas

My good buddy Tom Mein, an airline pilot, took time off to visit for a week to experience the beauties and wonders of the Las Perlas. He didn't realize we would have our own beauties on board. Tom was able to have another pilot friend fill in for him while he extended his leave time to one month to join us to the Galapagos.

Our first night in the "Pearls" was moonless and pitch black. As we rounded the southern point of Contadora to anchor in the protected western bays, I was surprised to see three other sailboats right in front of us with no anchor lights. Only by the light of my strong spot were we able to find a safe and secure position between the others.

The new line-handlers (above).

Meeting the locals from Pedro Gonzales (below).

The next morning was beautiful. After coffee and fresh baked rolls, my three crew members headed out in the dingy to "discover". I dropped the kayak and wanted some exercise by rounding the island. After another calm and moonless night we headed to the Canal Gibraleon, a narrow, and at its southern end, shallow passage between Gibraleon and Casaya. Our goal was to anchor in a beautiful bay off of Isla Bayoneta.

I had been here before, in June 2004, and spent a total of three weeks throughout these islands. I was cherry picking my favorite spots for my friends. The next highlight was the village of Pedro Gonzales on the island of the same name. We rounded the pelican nesting island of Senora and dropped anchor in front of the fishing village. After a few hours talking with some villagers, I wanted to round the northern tip of Punta Zancadillo to anchor for the night in my most favorite Bay de Don Bernardo.

The winds were getting stronger and their easterly direction would mean the wind would blow right into the beautiful bay. I decided to stay under the protection of Punta Zancadillo for a few hours or until nightfall to wait out the easterly winds.

We dropped anchor in 14 feet of water at what I thought was a lower tide. On the hand-drawn sketch of this anchorage in Zydler's *Panama Guide* it shows ten feet at Spring Low Tide. Enough of a margin for a short stay ... or so I thought.

All this time I was unaware of the predicted tide fluctuation. I had had no problems three years before and was comfortable in this anchorage. I decided to spend the night after the girls cooked up a terrific dinner with the fresh caught fish we traded for in the village. After one beer (I don't drink and one beer or glass of red wine knocks me out) I was in bed by 10 pm. The others talked and laughed until they, too, were fast asleep.

When you spend 24/7 on a sailboat, you get to know every movement and sound. At about midnight, I was awakened by something strange. Not a sound, not a light, just a feeling something wasn't right. In the cockpit I looked around. It was a new moon so there was a myriad of stars but no light and nothing visible. But I did feel the boat heel slightly to starboard.

I went down to turn on the instruments, but as I descended the stairs to the instrument panel, I noticed they were at an angle familiar to me sailing hard on port tack. We were heeling!

The depth gauge showed 0.1 feet of depth under the keel. We were aground!

"Watch the Las Perlas islands. Last time we anchored there we had 18 foot tides!"

Bob Bitchin, publisher "Latitudes & Attitudes" sailing magazine

"Deep water and extreme tides in The Perlas, careful where you set the anchor, don't want to end up sitting on a rock at low water!!!"

Pam Wall, West Marine Outfitting Manager

"Warning for all coastal residences and buildings, extreme high and low tides, the most variance in 2 years, at the New Moon and 3-4 days after, up to 20 feet difference in tide height."

Panama Public Radio

Within seconds, all three of my crew were coming up to ask the captain what was happening. As the captain, I was embarrassed to report we were aground. "What do we do?!" was asked. "Nothing, we have to wait it out."

I opened the Navionics charts and clicked on the tide charts for Panama City. It showed an extreme low tide in about two hours. My report to my crew was "get out some wine and cheese and prepare for the boat to heel over by as much as 45 degrees." We closed all the starboard hatches, I sealed all the breather outlets for fuel with duct tape and closed and taped all the drawers on the high side.

After two hours, the boat was on her side in the soft mud. Tom jumped out over the starboard railing expecting to get wet over his head but he stuck in the muddy sand at about waist level. The boat was still floating slightly but you could tell that the starboard side was also in the muddy sand.

I gave Tom the little underwater camera and he simply walked around the boat taking pictures, on the port side he was actually only ankle deep. The little flash on the camera wasn't powerful enough to light the boat from a distance, but it was enough to give an impression.

Within the next two hours, the boat simply eased herself upright and began floating. There was not even a sound of creaking or cracking. That acknowledges the quality construction of these new Hunters, although it's not a method of testing that Hunter recommends. She withstood the "grounding" test without a flaw.

The next morning we rounded the point and anchored in Don Bernardo. There is a small island there that is just right to get photos of the boat sailing with all sails up in front of this white sand beach lined with gorgeous coconut trees and green foliage. **We are now on our way to the Galapagos Island, one negative experience richer.** ▶

Louise's story – Cruising Las Perlas

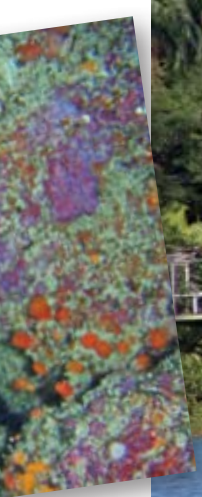
We go from one beautiful little island to the next. Drop anchor in the dark and wake up all excited to see if this place is as beautiful as the last little bay. Jump straight in the clear water from the boat and relax surrounded by the most beautiful scenery as you drink coffee and dry off in the sun. Paddle the kayak right onto the beach and enter a new island to be explored for the first time ... almost.

This is the first time I experience cruising islands by boat and it is wonderful. I realize that arriving in a new place with a 48-ft sailboat instead of a ten-litre back pack makes travelling quite a different experience! The three main questions on a backpacker's mind are: where to sleep, what to eat and how to get to the next place? This is all taken care of by the boat, and in this case to an extent that makes living extremely easy and comfortable – a smooth-running boat, comfortable beds, hot showers, hammocks on the deck, movie nights with surround sound, cold drinks in the freezer and great people to hang out with. Food is not a problem either as this boat is loaded with more canned tuna and chocolate than fuel! On top of that we are provided with all kinds of toys to explore the water that now surrounds us. And we have great days in Las Perlas going on trips in the dinghy and kayaks, swimming, snorkelling and diving.

What really adds excitement to this way of travelling though, is that it does not take much before "you playing in the ocean" turns to "the ocean playing with you"! We realized this as an unusually great difference between high and low tide resulted in the beautiful *Wanderlust* becoming stranded late at night in a dark little bay at the Island Pedro Gonzales, were we had dropped anchor for the night. Within a short time our "home" and everything in it stood on the bottom of the bay at a forty degree angle! As we had no power to change the situation we took the only reasonable course of action – to open another bottle of red wine and wait for everything to fall back into place – actually not a bad night!

Trying to paddle against the current in a dinghy from Isla Bartolome back to Contadore was another challenge at sea, and a test of social skills for three people in a very small dinghy under a very hot sun (one of whom was desperate to catch a lobster, but had to go for canned tuna again ...). Luckily we were rescued by local fishermen.

We left Las Perlas after a week full of adventures, to experience the real Pacific Ocean and six days at sea!!! It is very strange and very beautiful out here – there is so much space all around and yet nowhere to go. In a way here is nothing, but then again

there are so many kinds of blue in the sky and the sea – from black to silver, from clear to dusty. There are constant changes in the surface of the water and the formation of the clouds. All the stars that surround you at night, the sunsets and the moon that gets bigger and bigger and sets as a red glowing ball in the middle of the night. There are different sounds and textures of the water – smooth and soft as it feels on your bodies when we go swimming in the middle of the Pacific, and hard and rough as it appears when it lifts the bow of the boat from the surface and slams it back down again – making you sleep like a spider all spread out on the bed. Still, after a very long clouded day four with no wind and where the gauge seemed to be stuck at "sixty hours to arrival", I start to get restless and I am not the only one ... quite often our fellow traveller, the pilot, crashes into the cockpit yelling "are we f—— there yet?" The panic growing in his eyes, he argues he could have gone three times around the world by now, and that he parks his plane at the gate at the same speed we are going! Time takes on another dimension out here – it takes some getting used to, I guess.

It is a great adventure experiencing this big open space, the wind in the sails, the salt, wind and sun on your skin and the excitement when dolphins, a whale or flying fish break the surface. Little things brings you great pleasure: a bird follows the boat at night, the wind suddenly picks up, someone brings you a hot cup of tea on your watch, or a cold glass of wine while you gaze at the sunset – it's not bad ... it's not bad at all ... ■