

Lydia in the Pacific



Cruise from: Rodney Bay, Saint Lucia W.I.

To: Raiatea, Society Islands, French Polynesia.

Dates of cruise: 9th January to 28th April 2016.

Skipper: Donald Begg.

Boat name: Lydia.

Boat type: Bowman 48.

Crew numbers: between 3 and 5.

Distance covered: 6508 miles.

Event: World ARC 2016/17 first part.

A. Sailing B. Geography C. The World ARC

A. Sailing.

Saint Lucia to Santa Marta, Colombia (830 miles)

Crew:

Donald Begg (RLYC)

Matthew Fyfe

Stephen Jones

Nigel Lang (RLYC)

Andrew Richards



We joined the boat where she had been laid up over Christmas at Marigot Bay on the 3rd January 2016, and on the following day sailed round to Rodney Bay. We joined the World ARC 2016 and participated in the usual lectures and festivities.

The ARC started on the 9th January with 32 boats. As Santa Marta is dead downwind from St Lucia I had hoped to get twin headsails rigged in the calm of Rodney Bay and cross the line with the hard work done. In explanation, we have a removable extra forestay, two whisker poles, and an old yankee fitted with hanks, so we can sail dead downwind with the mainsail furled and two yankees poled out for'd. It's a highly efficient rig, but with the need for well-guyed poles and chafe-preventing blocks on the sheets it's an awkward and time-consuming exercise to get it all up, and to get it all down. Well, no such luck. The ARC cleverly started the rally with an upwind leg of several miles to round a buoy off Castries, and only downwind once out of the shelter of the bay. It turned out to be no big deal in this case, because there was little wind and the sea was moderate. Indeed, all boats except us



used their engines for the first few hours, leaving us well behind and with a long catch-up (which we achieved, having overtaken about half the fleet by the time we reached Sta Marta).

The Southern Caribbean along the North coast of South America is reputed to be one of the toughest legs on a round-the-world voyage, with big winds and short steep seas. We were lucky, and had some lovely sailing in glorious sunshine with daily mileages of 110, 145, 151, 167, 145 . We didn't have strong winds until the last afternoon when the needle started heading up above 20 kts. At this stage, just as we were thinking about getting one of the yankees in, a German catamaran close by blew out its spinnaker, so indeed we got the

yankee in pronto. We rounded Cabo La Aguja in towards Sta Marta at midnight with 38 kts of wind, a lot of sea, and one well-reefed yankee, crossing the line at 02.35.

Santa Marta to the San Blas Islands (290 miles)

Departure from Sta Marta was delayed by 24 hours because the harbourmaster closed the port owing to high winds outside. Much moaning about autocratic decisions and about bureaucrats who think in terms of day-tripping motorboats. Well, he had a decision to make and he made it. When we did sail, at 08.00 next day, we crossed the starting line with barely enough wind for steerageway, but once clear of land the wind was 20kts and more with a lumpy sea. Our destination was Cayo Holandes 290 miles away and we needed to control our speed so as not to arrive in the dark. Our charts, both paper and Navionics, offered minimal detail of the islands, and we were dependent on the Panama pilot and on our eyesight for reefy navigation. So, we sailed under yankee alone, Steve caught fresh tuna for lunch, 150 miles on the middle day, and arrived at 08.51 on the third day.

We had a day at Cayo Holandes, then a pleasant 11 mile sail to the fleet gathering and BBQ at Chichime Island. On the next day, 4 miles across to an uncomfortable anchorage at the capital Porvernir, just for clearance into Panamanian waters, and another 8 miles to a lovely anchorage, inside the reef, at Lemon Cay.

Between Cayo Holandes and Chichime we towed our dinghy, painter secured to the dinghy with a bowline. The bowline shook its way loose. In the morning there was no dinghy (luckily we had shipped the outboard back onto the boat) and a stiff breeze was blowing across the harbour and out to sea. We carry an old Avon as a spare, and out it came. Later that day at Lemon Cay I swam the short distance to shore to book a dinner table at the restaurant. And there, neatly hauled up on the beach, was our dinghy! Two fishermen had picked it up and brought it in to the restaurant owner. After a friendly discussion, several beers at my expense, and USD 150 lubrication, the dinghy was ours again. The painter is again secured with a bowline, but the loose end is now moused to the standing part with a cable-tie.

Lemon Cay to Shelter Bay, Panama (70 miles)

We motored overnight, there was little wind and I wanted to give the engine a run. We came in to Puerto Cristobal through the breakwater entrance at 09.00, ships anchored and underway everywhere, all traffic including yachts under the thumb (or voice) of port control. On to the newish marina at Shelter Bay for fuel and a snug berth.

We were warned that the authorities in the Galapagos would put divers down to inspect our bottom, so at Shelter Bay we had the boat lifted out and pressure- washed. It worked, on arrival in the Galapagos three weeks later the comment from the divers was "muy limpio".

Panama Canal - 31.1 and 1.2 - (50 miles)

30th January, Terry Wogan died.

31st January Matthew Fyfe left the ship, Alvaro Aramburu joined.

We sailed from Shelter Bay at 14.35 on the 31st and anchored in Anchorage F, the small-craft holding position. At 16.40 our "advisor" came aboard, we proceeded into the Canal, were rafted up with two other yachts, and were through the Gatun Lock by 21.30. Our advisor was hungry, Steve prepared him a seafood paella, at which stage he told us that he was allergic to shellfish. Steve rustled up something more bland.



All 32 yachts rafted together in Gatun Lake, cold beer was drunk, and we all slept peacefully.

On the morrow, 1st February, the advisors came aboard at 07.25, we all un-rafted and motored into the lake. The transit of the Canal was scenic and fun, under engine of course, and the three down locks held no surprises now that we knew the form. We came under the Bridge of the Americas at 16.00 and shortly thereafter anchored off the marina at La Playita. Surprisingly, there was no marina at the Panama City end of the Canal big enough

to take a group of yachts. This is changing, because La Playita are building a big new jetty, and it's a good thing because the anchorage is crowded, bumpy, and swept by strong tidal streams. We did get 24 hours in the marina for refuelling and provisioning. This was our last day in a marina until Tahiti two and a half months later.

Andrew Richards left the ship.

Panama City to and around the Pearl Islands – 74 miles

We sailed for Contadora on the 5th of February and enjoyed several days of free sailing in Las Perlas, with a fleet gathering at anchor on the 10th.

Pearl Islands to Galapagos – 888 miles

We came away from Contadora on the 12th with 15 knots of wind up our chuff, twins set and sailing well. The wind increased to 25 knots for two days and, with over a knot of favourable current, we made terrific daily mileages of 190 and 205, by which stage we had furled most of one of the yankees. Then the wind dropped off the edge of a distant cliff, we were into the Doldrums and motoring on a glassy sea.

I had followed the advice of the Pacific Crossing Guide and headed well South to cross the Equator at 84 deg W before altering almost due W towards the islands. We crossed the Equator at 10.15 on the 16th and spliced the mainbrace with champagne, a Nelsonian eye turned to the immaturity of the hour. We then motored to San Cristobal, arriving at Wreck Bay at 13.00 on the 17th. Other yachts employed weather routers, were advised to head straight for the islands, and got there before us. But motoring on a glassy sea gave us wonderful sunsets and lots of marine life (rays, sharks, dolphins, distant whales) as we approached land. The skipper went over the side just before entering harbour for a final scrub of the waterline. We anchored with the bower, then paid USD 2.00 for a water taxi to take out our stern anchor and keep us snug.

Around the Galapagos – 128 miles

We sailed from Wreck Bay at 15.00 on the 22nd, and then motor-sailed in a light breeze overnight, anchoring at Puerto Villamil on Isabela Island at 07.15 on the 23rd. On the 25th we weighed at 06.45 and motored across a glassy sea to Academy Bay on Santa Cruz, anchoring again fore and aft in the early afternoon.

Across the Pacific – Galapagos to Marquesas – 3103 miles



This was the big one, and the longest sea transit on the World ARC itinerary.

My fear was that, in this El Nino year, the winds would blow hard in the Western Pacific, and the Trades would fail in the East, so we had full fuel tanks in Academy Bay plus a couple of jerry cans on deck. We left Santa Cruz on the 2nd of March with a good Easterly, making 7 knots with all white sails set, then up cruising chute as the wind weakened, and finally engine on as the wind failed completely in the evening. We then motored or motor-sailed for two days, again following conventional wisdom by heading well South to 5 degs S and more before turning West. And yes, after two days the Trades blew, and we never looked back. Other boats again used professional weather routers who recommended a more direct route, and they sailed well and covered less distance than us. One advantage for us is that once we reached the latitude of the Marquesas (9 deg S) we had brought the wind from our port quarter to our stern, so up went the twins and up they stayed for 11 days. As we got closer to the Marquesas several boats with less efficient downwind rigs had to resort

to tacking downhill, whereas we went straight for target. The boats that beat us across, and there were several of them, were the serious competitors with steely nerves who kept spinnakers up all night. We sailed more conservatively, and still beat an Oyster 56, an Amel 54, and several of the cats.

Twenty days went by in a flash. The wind was pretty consistent at 15 to 25 knots and the sun shone. The seas were occasionally confused, less rhythmic than those which we had had in the Atlantic, and we had two or three nights when the motion made sleep difficult. We encountered a couple of fishing boats, inevitably in the middle of the night, otherwise no shipping. We saw dolphins occasionally, otherwise no wildlife. We arrived in Hiva Oa, Marquesa Islands, at 15.06 on the 21st March after 20 days at sea, 3103 miles, an average of 155 miles per day or 6.5 knots. As we came ashore we were presented with flower garlands and glorious slices of fresh grapefruit!

Around the Marquesas – 114 miles

After four days at Hiva Oa we sailed on the 25th 10 miles to Baie Hanamoneona on Tahuata Island and stayed for three days, with one short sail to neighbouring Vaitahu in order for the pious among the ship's company to attend Easter Sunday mass. On the 28th we weighed at 03.00 and motor-sailed in a light wind the 66 miles to Baie de Hakahau on Ua Pou. Visibility was exceptionally clear and we could see our destination at 32 miles. On the 30th we had a lively sail with 25 knots of wind on the beam, 26 miles to Taiohae Bay on Nuku Hiva. There we stayed until the 3rd of April, with day sails up and down the South coast of the island to the Baie du Controleur and the spectacular (and rainy!) Baie de Taioa. Taiohae is a big anchorage, perfect for an ARC fleet get-together.

Nuku Hiva to Rangiroa – 574 miles

This was a lovely, if undemanding, sail, starting with 15 knots of wind on the beam and glorious sunshine. We had the chute up during the day and made 164, 147, 135 daily

mileages, The wind was failing as we approached Rangiroa and we motor-sailed at the end in order to make our rendezvous with slack water for the pass into the lagoon.

These are the Tuamotu Islands, or the "Dangerous Archipelago", infamous for their low-lying profile and surrounding coral reefs. The passes into the lagoons are complicated by lively tidal streams and, surprisingly, a total unavailability of tidal predictions. The Pacific Crossing Guide does offer a rule of thumb for estimating the time of slack water based on the times of moonrise and moonset, and we found this to be reasonably accurate, although we did have an exciting tidal rip for a short distance as we gunned the engine and shot the Passe de Tiputa into Rangiroa lagoon. To have done so under sail alone would have been a challenge. To the skipper's relief, the Navionics chart was spot-on despite warnings to the contrary. That said, we looked for the anchorage off the Kia Ora Hotel recommended in the sketchy pilot "Charlie's Charts" and eventually found it, with the help of other yachtsmen, a good couple of miles from its charted position in both Charlie and in Navionics. Has the hotel moved in recent years? Not according to the local taxi driver.

Nigel Lang left the ship.

Rangiroa to Tahiti – 206 miles

We weighed at daybreak on the 10th April and shot the Avatoru Pass, this time with perfect timing, enjoying the view of the village and its church, with only the occasional fisherman out and about on this lovely Sunday morning. Rock and coral were quite clearly visible a few feet under the keel.

The wind was on the quarter but weak, so we flew the chute and kept a few revs on the engine just to maintain 6 knots. The next morning, Tahiti was visible at 32 miles. Good visibility or not, there were clouds in the sky, and from now for the rest of the cruise rain became an unwelcome and unremitting companion.

We berthed at the newish marina in Papeete at 14.00 on the 11th. Shore power, hot showers, and a walk ashore for the first time since Panama.

Tahiti to Moorea, Huahine and Raiatea – 162 miles

This was a cruise through beautiful islands, sadly veiled by the frequent rain. We spent three nights in spectacular, mountainous, dark green Cook's and Opunohu Bays in Moorea. The shelter was good, but anchorage depths of 20m required all of our anchor chain.

We sailed from Moorea at teatime in a stiff breeze, aiming to cover the 92 miles to Huahine overnight. I reckoned that the breeze was really wind acceleration around the island crags, and when it dropped, some 10 miles out, I thought that I had the measure of it. Then, 10 minutes later, up it came to 30 knots, with a nasty steep sea, just as it was getting dark. We got the main in sharpish, and sailed the rest of the way under yankee alone, reasonably comfortable but always with that steep sea on the quarter and the threat of a broach.

At Fare, in Huahine, we had the reassurance of a visitors' mooring buoy just off the village, comforting in what was now constant wind and rain. There was also frequent lightning, and a neighbouring yacht suffered serious damage to her electronics (my compliments to Berthon, who had put a proper diffuser at the tip of our mast with good bonding to the keel). We tried to enjoy Huahine, but the rain was unrelenting, so we gave up and set off on our last 26 miles to lay-up in Raiatea against an uncomfortable headwind.

Then, after so many miles, and when only 15 miles from lay-up, Murphy's Law. The engine alarm pealed into life. With the wind on the nose, we turned and fled back to the mooring in Huahine. The alarm could only mean coolant temperature or oil pressure. The oil looked ok, and has never been a problem. I topped it up anyway. The engine had been running a little warm, but nothing special. Well, we changed the water pump impeller, which is a pig of a job, and took two hours, because it's difficult to get at. The old impeller was ok, but at this stage we changed it anyway. We started the engine, the alarm was still with us. The oil pressure gauge was showing maximum, which can't be right, and according to Nigel Calder's bible is its failure position.

So surely, it must be a faulty gauge. ?? At this late stage, I was going to risk it. The next morning we motored across to Raiatea, horizontal rain and 30 kts of wind on the bow, engine alarm driving us up the bulkhead. Eventually the rain eased and we entered the pass in to Raiatea lagoon, with a short final motor to Apooiti marina.

Raiatea

We filled all fuel and water tanks, and had the boat hauled out at the Chantier Naval des Iles. Here she will undergo well-deserved maintenance and a few repairs. Thierry, the French engineer, will be looking at the engine alarm. "Zut", he says, "it can't have been the pompe d' huile or you would jamais have got here."

B. Geography

Santa Marta. This is the second year that the ARC has called here. It's a modern, comfortable marina. The town is cheerful and welcoming, with lots of affordable restaurants and no obvious sign of street crime. There were expeditions to a coffee plantation, to Simon Bolivar's house, to a forest, to Cartagena, and there was a good ARC beach BBQ. For my money, and for crew morale, a break in a sea voyage is the business.

San Blas. These islands are well known to yachtsmen and are perhaps losing a bit of their magic now that GPS makes them easily accessible. There was an ARC rdv at Chichime,

which was fun and sociable, but the anchorage was just too crowded for ARC boats plus the many others. It was a useful first experience of coral-reef eyeball navigation.

Panama. Shelter Bay is a modern and comfortable marina in an old US Navy base. The trouble is that it's a long way to get anywhere, so, for example, the one restaurant in the marina gets swamped when 32 ARC boats are in. The town of Colon is a long cab ride away, and is neither attractive nor safe. There was an excellent ARC day tour to an Indian reserve up the Embraya River.

La Playita Marina at the Pacific end of the Canal will be a godsend when the new jetty is complete. Panama City is excellent for provisioning, fuelling, minor repairs and parts. Make use of it, chaps, it's the last chance you're going to get for a long time. The ARC organise a good tour of old Panama and parts of the Canal, and an event called "the party bus", a discotheque in an old bus which tours the city with deafening music and copious rum, is an absolute hoot!

The Pearl Islands (las Perlas). This is an archipelago 40 miles off Panama which provides an early experience of Pacific island cruising. Contadora, where the ARC rdv is held, is a bay with a couple of small shops and a hotel and restaurant. The other islands have sparse habitation and offer little other than quiet anchorages and terrific bird-watching. Navigation is a challenge: neither Navionics nor Admiralty paper charts show sufficient detail, so it's the pilot book, the eyeball, and slow speed. There are reefs everywhere and it's very tidal so, to strike a chord with Channel Islands and Brittany sailors, you come into an anchorage at high water and then fall off your chair with shock when the ebb lets you see what you've just sailed over. I was told by a local cruiser that he had a specific Navionics disc for the area, and if I were to do this again I would try to get one at the chandlers in Panama (I did try to get a paper chart, but the one that I was offered was no better than the Admiralty chart which I already had).

The Galapagos.



These are great fun and the highlight of the voyage. Visiting yachts are strictly controlled and we were subjected to two one-hour examinations on boat management covering hull cleanliness, pollution avoidance, food on board, the adequacy of the ship's medicine chest, et cetera. One boat was discovered to have barnacles on her bottom, and had to take hired divers 70 miles out to sea to have them removed.

Once compliant, we were allowed ashore and enjoyed a friendly welcome, lively restaurants, bars, and numerous ARC and non-ARC tours. We visited three islands (that's one's lot): San Cristobal, Isabela and Santa Cruz. We saw animals, rays, sharks, whales, we hired bikes (flirting with heatstroke!), we walked, we swam, and we dived. After our two weeks there we were really fond of the people and the islands.

There are no marinas, we anchored in bays and used ubiquitous and useful water-taxis. Technical assistance is available but unsophisticated. We made our own water, but could have taken on fresh supplies from a barge. Fuel was brought out to the yacht by a boat with plastic jerry cans and a pump. Some boats filtered the fuel, some did not and suffered, we did not filter and, touch wood, have not had a problem.

Marquesas.



These islands are a welcome point of arrival after a long sea voyage, they are rugged and

very beautiful. The slight surprise, at least for me, is that there's nothing much there in terms of towns, restaurants, street life: a distant cry from the vibrant human mass of the West Indies. The people are friendly and fun, but they don't have much to offer other than the beauty of their islands. It's not a great place for re-provisioning, and it would be a bad

place to suffer a serious breakdown. So we hiked, we swam, we visited various tikis (old religious sites), and we enjoyed good sailing between the islands. Native dancing is taken seriously and enthusiastically, and the singing, especially in the churches, is lovely.

The Tuamotus.

I was feeling the pressure of time to get closer to Raiatea before the appointed day for lay-up, so we visited Rangiroa only. These islands are low-lying coral atolls, so geologically chalk to the Marquesas' cheese. The lagoon in Rangiroa is clear turquoise, one of those places where you can stand on your foredeck and examine your anchor. The snorkelling over the reefs is pure "Finding Nemo". There are a couple of "supermarkets", but they don't have much. The big deal for tourists is black pearl cultivation and sale. We anchored off the Kia Ora hotel, which is a picture-book honeymoon location, but expensive and a bit snooty. Not to worry, the tiny village of Tiputa was a short dinghy ride away, and it boasted no less than two good and affordable restaurants. A couple of visiting NZ yachts added a touch of bonhomie. Given more time, we would have enjoyed visiting some of the other atolls.

Society Islands.

Tahiti has a new but fairly basic marina in Papeete, right in the centre, and a more mature, busy and sophisticated equivalent outside the town at Taina. There are proper supermarkets, chandlers, engineers and sailmakers. But Tahiti is a bustling, working island which, surprisingly, has little to offer the tourist or yachtsman other than facilities and a well-connected airport.

Moorea is very beautiful, rugged, mountainous with a hound-tooth skyline, dark green. We enjoyed excellent walking on well-waymarked trails. But the people have seen a few tourists in their time, and a few yachtsmen. Everything is expensive and the welcome is perfunctory.

Huahine is supposed to be beautiful, but we saw little of it because of the unremitting rain. The "yacht club" at Fare is a good bar and restaurant which became our base. There appears to be a problem with petty crime. One British yacht, while we were there, had an outboard stolen from her dinghy at night while it was actually up on the davits! A Belgian yacht, two nights later, had her dinghy (on a painter) stolen: it was left on the beach, but without the outboard. The owner of the Yacht Club depends on visiting yachts for his livelihood and he swore that he would get the culprits... unlike the local gendarme, who resignedly wrote the details down in his book and returned to his café au lait.

Raiatea is pleasant, nothing special, but a major yachting centre and a base for Dreamcharters and The Moorings. The Chantier Naval des Iles, the yard where Lydia has been laid up, was recommended to me by the Society Islands rep of the Ocean Cruising Club. It is European-run, with a German manageress and French chief engineer and chief electrician. The proof of the pudding will be the state of the boat when I pick her up again, and will be reported on in due course. A disappointing, if predictable, feature is that they can obtain very little in the way of spare parts, and at time of writing I am receiving a stream of requests for light bulbs, switches and the like to be couriered out. One of the British yachts in the ARC is there needing a new Volvo engine, and is having a tawdry time.

C. The World ARC.

This is expensive. The cost for a 48 ft boat to join the first half of the rally was £9000 plus £900 per crew member. But in return for that you get your Panama Canal fee, cruising permits in the Galapagos and other islands, and the huge benefit of a friendly face to meet you at each stop with paperwork in hand and local officials lined up.

The ARC community is tight-knit. We first got together at a meeting in Rodney Bay, and each skipper gave a two minute run down on his boat and crew. It was just a sea of faces. Four months later, when we left the ARC, we knew everybody, and unfamiliar faces had become a community of friends. Added to that there is safety in numbers. While at sea we had two roundups a day on SSB radio, we looked out for each other and we pooled expertise. I had a bowthruster and an outboard repaired by a co-rallier.

The downside is that you don't get to meet many crews outside the rally, and the sudden arrival of 32 boats at a quiet anchorage like Hiva Oa is viewed with something approaching hostility by other cruisers whose peace is being shattered.

For my part, I am comfortable with my present plan to mix my cruising by sailing singly from Raiatea to Australia by way of NZ, and then to rejoin the World ARC for the Indian Ocean. Deo Volente.

