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# *Latitude 38*

CRUISING THROUGH THE CROSSROADS

— PANAMA PUDDLE JUMPERS

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# CRUISING THROUGH THE CROSSROADS

**M**ore than any other place on earth, the Panama Canal is the ultimate maritime crossroads, where ships and boats of all types, from all over the world, converge.

Among the 14,000 vessels that transit



*Like several of their Aussie countrymen, the Dransfields are cruising their European-bought boat, 'Nika', back to the land down under.*

'the ditch' each year, roughly 700 are sailboats, and the majority of those are headed west toward the storied isles of French Polynesia.

Just like the sailors that you've read about previously in these pages who are making the 3,000-mile trek from Mexico to the Marquesas, the salty adventurers who head west from Panama also qualify as Pacific Puddle Jumpers. That's why it was a no-brainer for us to accept an invitation from friends at Panama City's Balboa YC to come down and meet the



fleet — or at least part of the fleet.

With westbound sailboats trickling through the Canal daily from November through April, the toughest challenge in planning a Puddle Jump Kickoff Party was picking a date. For lack of a more

scientific method, we threw a dart at our calendar, and it landed on March 6. That turned out to be a splendid date, because more than a hundred cruising boats were idling in Balboa anchorages then (on the Pacific side). Many of them were preparing to jump west directly to Polynesia, while others would first visit Ecuador and the Galapagos before crossing to the islands.

Despite giving only about 10 days of advance notice, our little fiesta drew roughly 130 sailors from at least 17 nations — and we hadn't even advertised that we'd be giving away free snacks and beer, or raffling off Tahitian sarongs and black pearls.

**B**efore we tell you about the fascinating contingent of sailors we met at the shindig, allow us to share some impressions about the Republic of Panama today. As important as this vital international transport link is to world commerce, we hear surprisingly little about it in the mainstream press.

By all indications, though, Panama is a country on the move. Not only is a third lane being added to the ditch in order to accommodate more ship traffic, but an enormous container port is being built on the Pacific side. There, cargo unloaded from ships that are too big to transit the Canal will be transhipped north, south and east. The few existing marinas are essentially full, but several more large facilities are supposedly in the planning stages. With the election last year of President Ricardo Martinelli

*Roughly 400 westbound sailboats pass through the Canal each year. Just past the Bridge of the Americas lies the Balboa YC mooring field.*

— a no-nonsense businessman who has vowed to root out corruption and deal harshly with drug runners — the place now seems to be a magnet for foreign investment.

Although the outlying areas of the

country are still sparsely developed, Panama City, where at least a third of all Panamanians and thousands of expats live, is booming. Glimmering skyscrapers seem to be sprouting up faster than banana plants in the surrounding jungles.

The Canal, after all, is one of the most dependable cash cows in all of the Americas. And while the minimum wage is

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still less than \$1.50 per hour, when you check out any of the city's four enormous shopping malls, it's obvious that there is a burgeoning middle class here.

For sailors traveling across from the Caribbean, up from South America, or down from Central America, the city is the best place for provisioning, facilitat-



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ing repairs, or dealing with medical issues for at least 1,000 miles in any direction. And did we mention that the official currency is the U.S. dollar? As you can probably tell, we were impressed.

**W**ith the help of our generous hosts, Frank Nitte and Shirley Duffield of the formerly San Diego-based Islander Freeport 36 *Windsong*, plus Club Manager David Cooper and his staff, our first-ever Panama Puddle Jump Kickoff Party was a huge success. After enduring two long days of jet travel, our long-time French Polynesian event partner, Stephanie Betz, arrived from Tahiti with a truckload of informational brochures and free Polynesian cruising guides, courtesy of Tahiti Tourism, the Papeete Port Authority and other partners.

Once the crowd had viewed our multimedia presentations and picked our brains about everything from im-

**"Anybody up for a trip to Tahiti?" This diverse group of sailors is definitely rarin' to go. We'll recap their passages in the coming months.**



**Otto, who is Hungarian, and Lilian, who is Swiss, began their cruise in South Africa four years ago, aboard their Vickers 45 'Vagabond'.**

migration issues to the price of wine in Papeete, the entire fleet seemed fired up to make the 4,000-mile crossing, and eager to experience French Polynesia's treasures.

**T**he Puddle Jumpers we meet annually in Mexico tend to have a lot in common, as most hail from somewhere along the West Coast of Canada or the U.S. But

this gathering of passage-makers was as multinational a group as we've seen anywhere. As we got to know them, they revealed a wide range of backgrounds, and shared cruising tales from all over the planet.

Many are already far along on circumnavigations, having set out from homeports in Europe, the East Coast of the U.S., the Caribbean, or South Africa. And few of them seem to be constrained by strict time limits or fixated on following unwavering itineraries.

For example, would-be circumnavigators Neil and Katherine Farley of the Florida-based Paine 48 *Attitude* had already been meandering for 6.5 years when they arrived at Panama. Keith and Shirley Bowen of the Lavranos 40 *The Road* have been out 10 years already, but expect to get home to South Africa eventually.

"Each year presents a new canvas on which to paint enduring life experiences," says John Ellsworth of the British Virgin Islands-based Oyster 56 *Sea Mist*. He, his wife Cheryl, and son Ian are 4.5 years into a 10-year circumnavigation.

Canadians David and Marian Paul



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are circumnavigating too, but on a decidedly non-linear route. They left Vancouver four years ago and have since been across to Europe and back, having spent two years exploring the Med.

Michael and Jodie Hickam's proposed itinerary is one of the most unique in the group. After island-hopping through the South Sea islands, they intend to sail their San Francisco-based Gulfstar 47 *Savannah* across the Pacific to Southeast Asia, then up to the Philippines and China.

Speaking of exploring far-flung destinations, New Zealander Kerri Walker tells us she has been cruising aboard the Westsail 43 *Mariposa* part-time since she was 15 (initially with her parents, we assume). Since 2004, she's traveled across the Indian Ocean, around Africa, up the South Atlantic, then spent two years in the Caribbean and Central America with her boyfriend Andrew Tozer along as crew.

Although he doesn't seem the type to boast about it, Australian John Drans-



LATITUDE/ANDY

***Our Tahitian partner Stephanie, right, shows Leah Prentice of 'Reflections' how to wear a pareo — and do the traditional war dance.***

field has one of the most impressive sailing resumes in the fleet, having campaigned 470s in the Olympics and been three-time world champion in Fireball dinghies. But all that probably seems like a lifetime ago now that he and his wife Helen are deep into the cruising life. Like several other Aussie crews, they bought their nearly new Bavaria 46 in

Europe — Croatia, in this case — and are taking their time sailing her home with their kids, Jesse, 9, Zoe, 7, and Tyler, 4, along as crew.

There are plenty of other 'kid boats' in the fleet also, including *Pickles*, Guy and Joanie Moppel's Ohio-based Trintella 49. Their crew also comes in all sizes: Christopher, 10, Julie, 8, Henry, 5, and William, 4.

And there are singlehanders too, such as San Diego firefighter Vince Wawrzyneski of the Morgan 45 *Fidelis*, who is circumnavigating with a planned stop in Poland to visit his family roots.

As in the past, this year's fleet is chock full of extremely colorful characters. Now that we've made their acquaintance, we hope many of them will share their stories with us (and you) in future editions of the magazine.

We wish them all safe passages, punctuated by grand adventures along the way.

— **latitude/andy**