

Saturday, July 23. 2011

### **Timeout until December**

Sunday in Santa Marta After returning to Santa Marta eight days ago we waited eagerly for the arrival of E Capoe, Andr f  's boat. I met Andr f   in December 2009 in Port-Saint-Saint-Louis, France. Port-Saint-Saint-Louis is one of the ports where the Rhone river flows into the Mediterranean sea, and it was the end of my three week river journey. For a month I was there, stepping the mast of Vespina and preparing her for sailing. Andr f   was moored next to me and working on his boat as well, and we worked and talked and celebrated Christmas together and grew close. Therefor I was very happy that I would meet him again, with his family, after so many months and miles. Valerie, Birgit, Andr f  , Merlin, Jutta, Zoe We didn't have to wait long - Saturday afternoon E Capoe was in Port. During the week we walked, talked, had dinner, went diving, and discussed our respective plans for the future. And it looks like we'll meet up again in the Galapagos next year in March. But today it's again time to say farewell, because Liz and I have a flight back to Europe in the afternoon (Santa Marta - Bogota - Frankfurt). The summer in the Caribbean is hot and humid, and the winds are unsteady, with a high hurricane risk. The hurricane season ends in November, and we will then return to Santa Marta and sail onwards towards the San Blas islands and Panama. The marina in Santa Marta is safe and cheap, and outside of the hurricane zone, so it's a very suitable location. In the meantime we can visit our friends in the northern hemisphere before we move to the southern hemisphere for a few years. Diving in Taganga. Not many fish around. I have to admit that I'm happy to leave the boat for a while. It's a wonderful life on the boat in many ways, but incredibly inconvenient and troublesome in others. I worry about weather, shelter, water, and electricity all the time and wait for the next thing to break (this week the keyboard of my netbook stopped working, it's the third keyboard in two years). The idea of putting these worries aside for a while and just focus on photography and video and get some projects done is very appealing.

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 07:59

Sunday, July 17. 2011

## **Reflections on Cuba**

Sitting in the plane to Cuba I wondered what to expect. I hadn't had much time to think about the trip beforehand, because I was occupied with the boat and two movie projects I had stumbled into in Santa Marta. One was a documentary about a young couple, the other was a film school for kids who were enthusiastic about movies. Having left all three behind with take-off, my mind became free to think about Cuba. View over Havana Thinking of Cuba, many images passed through my mind. The faces of Che and Fidel. Posters of shiny 50s cars. Catalog pages of exquisite beach resorts. Photographs of indifferent Soviet and Czech architecture. Romantic colonial-style buildings. Poor people working on tobacco fields and smoking cigars. Elegant men and gorgeous women singing and dancing salsa. I wondered if I would encounter all that, and how it could possibly fit together to form a uniform impression of Cuba. 9 am No work team Public transportation For three weeks we traveled through Cuba. Starting in Havana we visited the national park of Vinales in the west, then flew to the coastal town of Baracoa in the very east. From there we made our way by bus, taxi, and rental car back to Havana, visiting many small towns as well as tourist attractions. On the way we encountered all the images that I had associated with Cuba, although there are a lot more rusty cars than pristine ones, and they all smell horribly. But try as I might, I couldn't fit the pieces together. I talked to our hosts in casa particulares, locals and tourists we met in cafes, and tour guides we hired, with the intention to fill the gaps and clarify questions that had come up. Like why there are so many people on the street, when the unemployment rate is only 1,6%? Preparing a hot chocolate Meat vendor People were very friendly, and with the exception of some state-employed personnel very forthcoming with information. For example, the mystery of permanently busy streets is explained by the practice that workers register at their workplace in the morning, then go out on the street to talk and look for private work until checking back in to their official work before lunch-break. Reason being, that with the exception of cigar-rollers it doesn't affect your salary how much you work, and the salary is not enough to pay for the daily needs. This Cuban practicality, and a mentality of accommodating oneself with the circumstances, we found everywhere. Which doesn't surprise that much, when you consider that between the US-imposed trade embargo and a socialist government that allows little entrepreneurial freedom people have very limited ways to get by. Our landlady Marilyn Children playing with audio tape. Lesson: words hurt. Cuban porta potty Careful criticism towards the government in the fields of economic and personal liberties (property ownership, wags, travel-restrictions) was voiced often, but matter-of-factly: "This is the way it is, there is a historical reason why it is this way, and all we can do is hope that it changes in the future." And change is coming to Cuba. Since April the Communist Party Congress sanctioned reforms related the ownership and trade of houses and cars, as well as traveling and setting up small businesses. While Cubans await those changes eagerly, there are other areas that they don't want to change. Most prominently the free and very good health service and education system. Where many developed countries are developing a rift in the population between people than can afford it, and people that can't, Cubans trust that their government will continue to protect the interests of the whole population against a ruthless greed that often accompanies the privatization of public services. Still, the impression that I left Cuba with is that, at the moment, it all doesn't fit together very well, and the Government as well as the population has a lot on it's slate if it wants to improve the situation sustainably. On the morning of our departure Julio, our last host said to me: "I am not surprised that you are confused. I don't understand how this country works either." More pictures here

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 14:00

Wednesday, July 6, 2011

## **Cruising: a retrospective after 20 months on a sailboat**

At anchor in Puerto Rico Cruising on a boat for a few years is just like any other vacation, only longer. A series of enchanting beaches, bustling bars, charming hotels, absorbing museums, all interspersed with dauntless voyages across limitless oceans on your fast and spacious yacht. Before I left Germany on my 33ft steel boat, acquired second hand only four weeks before, I was sure of that. The pent-up lust for adventure from 20 years of writing software needed a vent. I had tried hiking and motorbiking but it wasn't enough, so sailing was going to be it. I romanticized what was to come and planned every step of it ahead in detail. Just like it was a two-week vacation, only longer. Nighttime sailing, slowly. I had planned ten months for an Atlantic circle, Germany to Germany via the French canals, Mediterranean, South Atlantic, Caribbean, and North Atlantic seas. Two months into the trip it became evident that it would not be enough time. After two more months I admitted it to myself. Now, 20 months later, the journey is far from over. In the meantime I have not only changed the boat, but also scope and direction of the voyage. I am not longer alone, three months ago my partner Liz joined me. The destination is no longer Germany, but New Zealand, her home. At the moment the boat is in Colombia, where it will stay for a few months until the unbearably hot summer with frequent storms and hurricanes is over and we will sail from the Caribbean into the Pacific. This break is an opportunity to look back and give an account of what I've done, experienced and learned. Working on the mast, again. Sint Maarten The statistics for what I've done are easy, because it's written in the ship's log and my blog. Out of the 600 days and nights I sailed 80. On 38 days I went diving, on 35 sightseeing, and the beach saw me 14 times. About 100 days I spent on my hobbies: writing, photography and videography. Interests that I had since my childhood, but which I had only explored on the surface and not in depth. The remaining 300+ days, 50% of the total time, I either worked on the boat or was searching for supplies and spare parts. At first I thought that I did something wrong, because surely sailing must be less work. But talking to other cruisers corrected that belief. Cruising means fixing your boat in exotic places, is the common proverb. But fortunately the numbers don't tell the whole story, because there is a lot to be learned, and fun to be had, even when not at sea but sweating upside-down in tight compartments. Caught by a thunderstorm, 300nm north of Colombia The days at sea were without doubt the most exciting and exhilarating, but at times also the most frightening and frustrating, days of my life. Besting fierce storms or navigating difficult passages sounded great when I dreamed about it from the comfort of my home. It didn't feel so great when I was deprived of sleep, wet, cold, hungry, and my safety depended on numb fingers and a few tired brain cells between my salt-covered ears. In those moments I thought to myself: only a fool would set out on a journey like this. But those moments also gave me insight into who I am. Understanding nurtured acceptance, and sometimes change. Some perceived and long-loathed character flaws weren't that bad, I realized. Other traits had to change and I started working on them. But still I was happy every time I made it safely into the next port or anchorage. Then, inevitably, my life unwound in a blur: from the exiting to the mundane. Nothing cleared the adrenalin of arrival from my bloodstream faster than patiently sitting in the harbor master's office to complete paperwork. After the following customs and immigration procedures, complete with bills, I was already tired of land-life, and I wished to cast off immediately and be free again. I only needed to finish some maintenance work first, fill my water tanks, and buy groceries. And, always, acquire spare parts to repair broken equipment or add needed components. Admittedly, some days were more productive than others. Now and then an old, or newly acquired, friend would show up to lend a hand. Or I would walk or dinghy over to assist them. Sometimes this helped tremendously with the work, and I could finish tasks that I had despaired of earlier on my own. At other times we only diminished the supplies of beer and chatted into the night. Philosophizing with Peter, Las Palmas If these days were not as exiting and character-building as the one's at sea, they were valuable in other ways. I acquired a wide range of knowledge about how sailboats and their components are built and maintained, along with a host of mechanical and other skills necessary to execute the tasks. Working in a foreign country with local people also opened up their culture and language for me. And the beers and stories I exchanged with other cruisers built strong friendships, based on shared values and an understanding of what drives the other. But on hearing some stories and vitas I could only stare in amazement at the naiveté, or sometimes stupidity, and wonder how the person even survived through the years and voyages. This put my own feats into perspective, and showed me that with the materials and technologies available since the 90s anybody could do what I had set out to do. And the market is overflowing with affordable sailboats. All it takes is the guts to try it and the willingness to put up with some inconveniences. Spanish lobster, Sint Maarten If I had succeeded in my plans to restore an old sailboat and cross the Atlantic Ocean on my own, I had failed in another thing miserably. Part of the idea behind sailing was to get away from the computer screen, which had so far arrested my attention for up to 80 hours a week. But the computer is an integral part of the cruiser's life, if only to plan passages and stay in touch with home. In addition I choose writing, photography and videography as my hobbies for the trip, which glued me to mouse and keyboard for many more hours. But I enjoyed it tremendously, and for a hobbyist I've made it to a respectable enough level, at least in photography. Unfortunately, all the adventuring and learning doesn't make the world a better place, and it can be argued that I wasted my time instead of doing something useful. Be it social, political, economical or

environmental: belonging to something larger than a single personal life and contributing actively is important. I accept that, but I have no twinges of remorse. I knew from the beginning that I took some time off not only from work, but in a way from society. This trip was for myself and I would be the only one to lose or gain. One thing I gained unarguably was a lot of envy from my friends for the pictures I posted online. That people enjoyed my photography and videos made me very happy, and will continue to do so for a long time. It has become a true passion. But there are more noteworthy lessons and changes. Reasoning and acting myself out of difficult situations honed my out-of-the-box thinking and increased my confidence. Having to make the best out of unchangeable circumstances - e.g. the weather and bureaucracy - helped me to become more patient. And arranging myself with limited water, electricity, space, and amenities on the boat taught me to make do with less. The physical labor, sportive lifestyle and a balanced diet improved my health: I lost 16kg and have no more back- and wrist pains. All combined, the effect on my life is significant: healthier, happier, more patient, more confident, more agile, less needful. Liz and me, Havana. Many, maybe all, of these things I could have learned by staying home and continuing a regular life. Not in such a short time, and not working 80 hours a week, but maybe 40 or 50. Although it is highly unlikely that I would have. I am ambitious and competitive, and I lived in an environment that I had a lot of control over. With so much time, thought, and enthusiasm tied up with success in business I would have easily fallen behind in the self-improvement department. As it is, I feel that I have improved a lot and gained in many ways. For myself, and for my relationship. Last week I asked Liz, my partner in crime on the boat, if she wants to become my partner for life. She said yes. But on land. Which is fine with me. When we get to New Zealand I'll be happy to trade this adventurous but inconvenient life for more comfort and new challenges: a family of our own and a new business. After we get there. Between here and there, however, are the spectacular Panama Canal and the wide blue expanses of the Pacific Ocean - what an adventure!

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 18:48

Saturday, July 2. 2011

## **In Cuba**

View from our hotel roof, Havana. Car. Sofa. I am a shifty, devious, scoundrel. At least in the eyes of the customs officers of the world. Liz thinks it's the way I walk and look around, or it might simply be the bad jokes I tell when waiting in line. Doesn't matter whether it's USA, Australia, Colombia or Cuba, I seem to fit everybody's checklist of people to randomly pick for a thorough search and interview. The interview upon entering Cuba lasted for 90 minutes, followed by an inspection of every single item in my luggage. Liz noted, while waiting, that some other people had to open their luggage as well, but that only took a few minutes. Liz, however, must be looking pretty shifty herself, because she was selected for a methodical search and a walk through the body scanner on leaving Colombia as well. I attribute it to her looking impossibly cute and trusting. Heedful people must think it's an act. In the end we both made it into Cuba. And after the scariest taxi ride ever we made it even alive into the hotel. It had started out as your usual after-dark Caribbean taxi ride. No seat-belts and unlit streets full of people, bicycles and handcarts. The old Lada smelled of gasoline, the dampers were gone, and I could tell from the way the driver worked the wheel that the left brakes were gone as well. All that didn't stop the driver from going as fast as possible. Then he received a call on his mobile phone (I didn't know they had such things here). After that he was in a hurry, and the fact that the brakes didn't work so well was irrelevant, since he didn't use them anymore. Drifting around corners slowed us down enough to avoid what was waiting behind them - usually people. Am I not easily scared in a car, but I truly wished I was somewhere else. Dining in a "paladar", somebody's livingroom Since our epic arrival a week ago we stayed a few days in a hotel and then moved into a guest house, called a "casa particular". During the day we walked through the different parts of Havana, explored the Cuban cuisine (bad news for vegetarians), or worked on our respective projects in the hotel lobby (being the only place with internet access). Liz is writing, and I am making a movie about our favorite cafe in Santa Marta. Vinales valley Bottling station in the rum factory Yesterday we visited the obligatory Rum and Cigar factories, and tomorrow we'll fly to Baracoa at the very east of Cuba. From there we plan to travel back to Cuba by bus via Santiago, Santa Clara, and other notable sites of the revolution. I hope to go diving somewhere on the way as well. The first impression is that this is a country with some serious housing and transportation issues. Crumbling buildings and overflowing buses everywhere. The rest seems to work quite well, though a lot of people are very poor. But in this Cuba is no different from most other countries in the Caribbean and South America. But there are many areas in which Cuba is different, about which I'll write another time.

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 09:02