



## **Log of S/V *High Drama*** **No.5- Panama Canal**

The Caribbean trade winds regularly spill across the Continental Divide through the Gaillard Cut in the Panama Canal and down over the Bridge of the Americas onto ***High Drama***. The winds bring warm dry air and blow at 12-16 knots all day and all night. The nighttime low temperature drops a few degrees lower at night, so a sheet or T shirt is needed when sleeping on deck. It is the summer dry season Panama, and even the tourists can tell.

This episode of the adventures of ***S/V High Drama*** covers High Drama's haul out at the Vacamonte shrimp boat repair yard, visits by family, and a transit of the Panama Canal aboard ***S/V Grace***. This log finds the ***High Drama*** crew making final preparation to set off to the land of Darwin, the Galapagos, and then further west. We now have several email addresses and we very much enjoy hearing from you, ***as long as you don't send our message back to us***. The addresses are at the end of this epistle. If this Log is garbled beyond the usual lousy syntax of the author, or if you fail to see the pictures, you may look for it at <http://members.aol.com/Brookehighdrama>, where our son Jason graciously promised to put it.

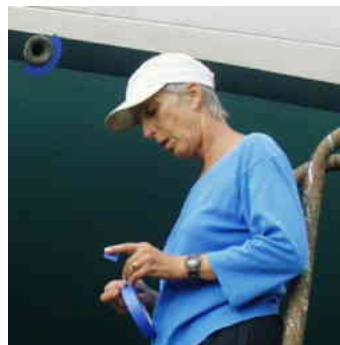
### **Refit of High Drama**

We have been engaged in preparing ***High Drama*** for offshore sailing since we since we decided last August to sail to the Galapagos. The term "we" must be used quite loosely because in a stroke of extreme good fortune we met Scott and Sharon aboard S/V ***Geisha***. Scott started tearing down engines at age 9 and first met Sharon when her engine blew up. His technical college instructor assigned Scott to rebuild Sharon's engine. She became more interested in machines as well as mechanics and became a prototype machinist. Scott put in 8 years in a Chevy dealership and 9 in at Chrysler. He has been to most of the schools those two manufacturers offer. He has the keenest eye for potential problems that I have ever seen. What started out as some discrete assignments grew into a major refit. Many of the repairs and upgrades we paid so dearly for in San Diego were done again. Scott explained things as he went along and showed me how our new exhaust muffler was just loose on the bilge floor, banging into a seacock when we hit a big wave. When our new teak deck was installed, there were no backing plates put on the cleats on the foredeck. The windlass motor should have been rotated so that when the anchor chain came aboard it

did not make contact with the electric motor, nor splash sea water on it. The list of “do overs” is long. Plus, there were some upgrades that we wanted. We replaced our plumbing and installed new wind instruments and a depth sounder. We even put in an electronic fishfinder with the hopes that it will give us a better picture of the bottom as we approach reefs in the South Pacific.



**High Drama on the hard at Vaccamonte.**



**Ann taping.**



**A neighbor.**

Some work necessitated that we haul out. We hauled High Drama out of the water at a repair yard that caters to shrimp boats, not yachts. The owner and chief engineer went to Georgia Tech for an undergraduate and masters degree. **High Drama** was lifted out of the water by a Synchronlift that handles large shrimpers. The yard workers were very professional, but the facilities presented quite humble amenities. We continued to live on the boat in the yard and learned that the millions of “moscas” or flies also called the repair yard home. Living conditions fell somewhat short of sanitary and Ann picked up a serious and nasty case of the touristas that hung on for 10 days.

The boat yard was next to a fish processing plant and small commercial area. Although Ann and I had been exposed to some strong smells from a meat packing plant in our home town, Albert Lea, Minnesota, we were ill prepared for the smell of fish guts when the wind shifted. The small commercial area included a bank, a restaurant, and a bar. I recalled the days of my youth when I worked construction and my colleagues would consume 4 or 5 Grain Belt “steaks” for lunch. The restaurant and bar were company stores and as far as I could tell, they presented no bargains. Although there were a few women who worked in the fish processing plant or in the offices, the boat yard was a male dominated environment. Boat yard workers verbally expressed their delight at seeing female yachties walking through their turf. After the first day the workers all returned our “Buenas dias! Como esta?” with a smile and a “Bien, gracious.” Several workers adopted us and told us we need not be concerned about the workers in the yard, but that we should watch out for the men who hung around the wharf. The workers uniformly advised that we should

never leave our boat unattended at night, and never leave tools out in plain sight. These men had little exposure to English . Our modest success communicating in Spanish prompted me to recall the thousands of depositions I sat through watching lawyers play on the subtleties of language and feign lack of understanding in an effort to get a more favorable response from a witness. When *both* sides to the conversation are trying to communicate, the process can produce some fascinating results!

**High Drama** lost some of her dignity hauled out. She looked like a proper lady with her skirt hiked up uncomfortably high. She got a new coat of bottom paint, through hulls for seacocks that had weathered and frozen, and through hull fittings for the new depth sounder and fish finder. The work all proceeded swiftly because we brought the parts, paint and other supplies with us. Thanks go to Scott on that score.

## Holiday Visits

We were pleased to have family visitors in the last month. My brother Tom and his lady friend Sam visited us in late November. Despite pronouncements from internationally renowned weather sources, the long awaited “dry “ season had not yet arrived. The weather was hot muggy and rainy for a week. We sailed from Panama City to Isla Contadora. (You may recall that the Shah of Iran lived out his years on Contadora after the Ayatollah deposed him.) Now Tom had already told me that he had never caught a big fish, which he defined as one larger than a bullhead from Fountain Lake in Albert Lea. Indeed, he claimed he jinxed boats by his mere presence. While I thought this was overstatement, he proved that it was true. He hooked several big fish, however, crevalle jacks weighing about 40 pounds. They were fun to catch on our new rod and reel, but he was very disappointed to learn that the meat is a dark red and very bitter, and not fit to eat. We released five fish. He did set a personal record for size, however. Returning to Balboa from Contadora he hooked the only other fish in this area that tastes lousy, Mexican jacks. So much for Tom’s fishing. On the only sunny day we had we snorkled all afternoon at a small island surrounded by bright sand and a modest coral reef.

We did enjoy several meals ashore with Tom and Sam. Sam speaks excellent Spanish and convinced the waiters to deviate from the menu. I am not sure what we ate, but it was delicious! On a trip around Contadora in golf carts Tom and Sam noticed that mine had some difficulty going uphill. While they thought it fun to attribute the poor performance to the large load, the machine performed no better when we switched. We visited all of the beaches on the island and were disappointed that Panama’s only lawful nude beach, highly touted in our guide book, was a garbage dump.

Now when my mother Lois and son Jason visited, we caught good eating fish. Lois and Jason arrived at midnight and at about 5:00 AM the next morning we sailed again for the Perlas Islands. Lois slept in and when she got up we already had a nice sierra which was in the process of becoming ceviche and we had filets for several meals. We traveled further than the inhabited island of Contadora to an uninhabited island named San Jose. The dry season had begun and we experienced sunny days and trade winds out of the north. Lois had expressed some apprehension about traveling to Panama in the first place. Fortunately, Jason had a few days off and could travel with her between Christmas and New Year’s Eve.

The surf in San Jose was not huge, but we still had exciting dinghy landings. Lois popped out of the dinghy with the agility of a 40 year old when we hit the beach. All those years of swimming, walking, golf, and bran have paid dividends for her as she approaches her 87<sup>th</sup> year. While we were not able to show Tom and Sam much of the cruising life, we introduced Lois and Jason to it by staying four days bumming around beaches where we and the boats we with whom we cruised were the only boats around.

## **Aid to S/V Grace**

Our friends Scott and Sharon aboard S/V **Geisha** started turning on the single side band radio at 7:30 each night when their friends sailed to Ecuador some months back. As more cruisers made the trip, Scott and Sharon were there to take their latitude and longitude and chat on the radio as the long night watch began. Over the course of several months, more cruisers checked in. Occasionally, sailors reported problems to Scott and Sharon and they were able to provide some assistance. S/V **Grace** was such a boat.

Forgive my digression at this point, for while many people would start the tale with the identification of equipment failures, the beginning of the story dates back several more weeks, to when **Grace** first crossed the equator. Indeed, only skillful cross-examination uncovered the whole story. Sailors, particularly former airline pilots, are prone to start a story of mishap at the point of equipment failure, rather than to explore the root cause, which is a link in the chain of causation far more remote in both time and space than the actual equipment failure.

## **Paying Homage to Neptune**

After several changes of heart, Jerry and Ellen aboard **Grace** decided to sail to Ecuador, their longest offshore passage up to that time. They sailed wide of Colombia because of the stories of civil strife and the war on drugs. After several days at sea, they approached the equator. Jerry had been saving a bottle of fine French wine for 25 years for just such an occasion. At precisely the moment they crossed the equator, they uncorked one of the best wines they had ever tasted. So fine was this wine, they later allowed, that the dose they poured to Neptune might have been thought to be niggardly. Jerry squirms a little answering questions on this subject, so there is a fair inference that *he didn't give Neptune his due at all!* As things later developed, we now know that a larger dollop of less noble wine would have been far better.

**Grace** had engine problems then sail problems about 300 miles offshore. The wind and seas grew and they were in the snot for three days. Scott assisted in remedying the engine problems and we both sailed out 50 miles to provide fuel when **Grace** arrived in the Perlas Islands outside of Balboa. We will surely profit from **Grace's** misfortune. We have decided that when we cross, we will toast with cheap wine and give Neptune a hell of a slug.

## **S/V Grace transits the Panama Canal**

Although Ann and I did not take **High Drama** through the Canal, we served as line handlers on S/V **Grace**. The Canal runs southeast to northwest for a distance of approximately 50 miles from deep water in the Pacific to deep water in the Atlantic. Ships are raised 85 feet in a series of three locks, they next cross a man made lake, they then go down three locks to sea level in the other ocean. The average ship transits in about 10 hours. Most sailboats take two days and spend a night at anchor in Lake Gatun. Sailboats pay between \$500 and \$750 to transit whereas the largest cruise ships pay \$150,000. About 14,000 ships transit each year, traveling 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Captains on large ships must yield navigational control of their vessel to a canal pilot. This gives massive cognitive dissonance to US Navy commanders. However, an "advisor" is assigned to sailboats, and the sailboat captain maintains navigational control.

For a superb readable account of the history of the Panama Canal, see David McCullough's **A Path Between the Seas**. Indeed, the book reads like an intrigue novel, which the history of the Canal was! Below are a few pictures of the transit that we took as crew on S/V **Grace**.



**A fellow traveler**



**In first lock.**



**Jerry & Ellen**



**Lock doors open**



**Tied to tug in lock**



**Cookies for tug crew**



**Car ship in lock behind us**



**Pushing off wall**



**Pilot "advisor" leaving**



**Carship in rear view mirror**



**Captain Jerry toasts the crew**

**High Drama** is loaded to the gills with supplies. We meet Mike and Stacy soon. We will propose a few days of sight seeing, a few days of shake down cruising in the Perlas Islands, and then a 700 mile sail to Ecuador. It seems two cruisers lost their outboard motors which were involuntarily "donated" to the local economy. After some research, these vessels found that Panama is the best place to replace outboards. We will be heading for Salinas or Manta Ecuador to deliver the new outboards. We will take them as deck cargo. We may or may not spend time in Ecuador, but the next stop after that will be the Galapagos.

Ironically, last night we got a call from a large motor yacht(M/Y) **Katharine**, moored 100 yards off our stern here in Balboa. Mike's older brother, John Morrison and his wife Sue are guests aboard the vessel and they had just transited the canal in **Katharine**. John stopped by to see how his brother would be living and then invited us for a tour of M/Y **Katharine**. Well, we stayed for cocktails and dinner and were modestly embarrassed because we did not "dress" for dinner. Actually, I don't have any clothes that would have been appropriate.

Owned by Lee and Penny Anderson, **Katharine** is 145 feet in length with a fulltime crew of 8. She has a spa on the top deck (of 3) with a swimming pool sized hot tub and expansive couches, one set facing forward and one set aft. The second deck houses the operating station, with more electronics than a 747. The engine room is white and spotless, with 2 generators each one of which is larger than our main engine. She makes 2000 gallons of fresh water a day, but the stewardess only serves bottled water to drink. Last night the chef whipped up a little something and we were served Italian wine from the most exclusive winery in Italy, the name of which I did not recognize, nor do I remember. The wine was great, however. We decided that we might possibly become accustomed to cruising with a crew of 8, but that we might need to revise our definition of a boat unit.

After transiting with the Canal with S/V Grace we contemplated turning professional. We completed another partial transit with our good friends Joe and Lisa on **Net Result**. These affairs are tense for the boat owner, but almost a party for the help, especially given the assignment I drew on this transit. I was stationed aft on the port side. As luck would have it, we side tied to a tug on the port side and all I could do was to offer supervision and criticism to my colleagues on the starboard side. They graciously and repeatedly declined my offers on both scores. One of the great joys of this cruising lifestyle is the friends that you meet and the intense fun that you share. One of the saddest parts of cruising is that we became very close to Joe & Lisa on **Net Result**, and Jerry and Ellen on **Grace** in a very short time. In the next few days we will sail in opposite directions. While we profess that we will meet again another time in another anchorage, we know that carries a heavy dose of optimism.

We always welcome hearing from you. Please email us often and let us hear what is new. **But please don't send our email back to us.** We receive email at sea by high frequency radio and it cannot tolerate much text and no pictures. We receive at 1200 baud, which is quite slow, but adequate for a one page email. Please email news to us at [WCX7992@sailmail.com](mailto:WCX7992@sailmail.com), or [KD7GWH@winlink.org](mailto:KD7GWH@winlink.org) at sea. As always, please send lawyer jokes, photos, and religious material to us at [Brookehighdrama@aol.com](mailto:Brookehighdrama@aol.com) which we check when we are on land.

We remain poised in Panama.

**Jeff & Ann Brooke**  
**S/V High Drama**  
**Balboa Panama**