



Tales from the crypt

Surely old superstitions do not still apply? **Heather Francis** gives this due consideration finding this cruise no easy beat.

We woke up to a double rainbow arching across a clear sky and disappearing behind Isla Coco's. It had been a little out of our way and a bit on the expensive side, but this tiny island off the coast of Costa Rica was well worth the visit.

We had spent five days exploring the island and snorkelling in the crystal clear waters but it was time to starting heading west. That morning the sea was calm but for a steady ripple of breeze that skipped across the surface. The horizon was a smooth, flat line of blue. It looked like a perfect day to start our 500 nautical mile passage to the Galapagos Islands.

After breakfast we started to prepare for the day ahead; stowing the cabin and doing the predeparture checks on our problematic engine. I dug out the ships log, turned to a clean white page and started to make notations. I reached across the nav. table for the calendar and counted four days since our arrival. My finger landed on the word: Friday.

Should I tell Steve? I thought to myself. We own a green boat, are we really that superstitious?

My head was heavy with possibilities. I knew that most sailors who believed in nothing else, probably still believed it is bad luck to leave port on a Friday.

Friday on my mind

But this cannot technically be considered port I assured myself, when we did not really check back into Costa Rica. No, we just sailed 700nm from Panama in the wrong direction to get to Isla Cocos, which is governed by Costa Rica and got a pretty stamp in our passports when we arrived.

Technicalities, I decided. If I could pretend I did not notice we are about to leave port on a Friday, then maybe the sailing gods could too. I swallowed my decision down like a spoonful of bitter medicine and crossed my fingers for a smooth passage.

After our ritual good luck kiss on the bow Steve went back to the cockpit. Our finicky engine was co-operating that morning so he gave me the thumbs up. I dropped the mooring and we motored out of the protected anchorage.



Once clear of the tall island we found a nice breeze to fill the sails. Steve ducked below for a nap while I picked out my lucky lure and rigged up the fishing rod, happy to spend the afternoon in the sun. Not even an hour passed before the ratchet on the reel announced we had hooked up.

“Fish on” I yelled and started furling away the headsail to slow the boat. Steve, who had just drifted off to sleep, grumpily came up on deck, grabbed the rod and strained to get a couple turns on the reel. It looked like a big one.

He and the fish battled it out, neither willing to concede. Steve would reel in a few metres of line only to have the unseen fish take twice as much back in a sudden circular dive. After two hours Steve was fatigued, his hands knurled like an old crone’s and starting to blister.

As if sensing that he could no longer grip the rod tightly the fish dove, jerking it over the lifelines. A lanyard attached to the rod let us quickly recover our best piece of fishing gear, but when it happened again we agreed it was time to cut the line. Fish and lucky lure be damned.

A light drizzle had started and a row of dark clouds now filled the horizon. By late afternoon we had steady rain and increasing winds. After dinner we reefed the mainsail and then

I headed below, leaving Steve in the wet and uncomfortable cockpit. Before I even peeled off my gear I heard him pull in some headsail as the wind and sea continued to increase.

My favourite berth underway, the settee in the main cabin was impossible to even lie in; I slid off onto the floor with every wave. I ventured forward to crawl into the vee berth only to discover that the forward hatch above our bunk had sprung a leak. The bed was wet and the sheets were clammy.

Disappointed I clawed my way back into the main cabin. The only dry place left to lie down was the 18” wide bench wedged in behind the saloon table, a place that, up until then, had not been considered a berth at all. I only had two positions to choose from: lying on my side with the corner of the table within inches of my face and the boat heaving in a confused sea, or lying prone on my back with my arms folded across my chest like a vampire. Neither were relaxing. After what seemed like hours of shifting around uncomfortably, and only a few minutes actually sleeping, the alarm went off.

My watch was a torturous, cold four hours in the dark watching the horizon for ships and keeping the boat on course.

MAIN: A double rainbow at Isla Cocos was not a sign of good things to come.

TOP LEFT: Slightly stunned but happy to be crossing the Equator together.

I was soaking wet within the first half an hour and spent the remainder of my four hour watch hopping from bare foot to bare foot trying to create some body heat. Steve came back up on deck he looked haggard, "Get any sleep?" I asked.

"What, in the coffin?" He smiled weakly. Now was not the time to mention we left on a Friday.

Sorry

We had two straight days of rain and 25 knot winds. The sails stayed reefed, the boat stayed closed and we remained damp, tired and cranky.

Life was reduced to a cycle of four hours on watch and four hours on our backs in the coffin. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Although we managed two hot meals a day, neither of us logged more than two consecutive

hours of sleep at a time. On the morning of day three we both felt like zombies and conversation had degenerated into grunting at each other.

During my watch the wind picked up to a steady 35kts and started to clock around. The seas became more confused as the wind waves tripped over the large ocean swells. I furled away more headsail, leaving up just a scrap of jib but the boat was still a little sloppy, we really needed to tuck the second reef into the main.

I know the golden rule about reefing; do when you first consider it, otherwise it will be too late. But Steve had a long night and when I poked my head down below he looked like he was sleeping so I waited. I waited until I heard him rustling downstairs before I mentioned anything. It had only been 45 minutes but by the time Steve took the wheel I already knew that I had made a mistake trying to be nice.

We do not lead our halyards into the cockpit so I clipped my harness onto the jack-line and, hand over hand, moved forward to the mast. The boat was pitching in the messy sea and I could not crank the winch on the swaying boom and hold on at the same time. So I sat on the cabin top and cranked the winch above my head half a turn at a time, taking up the slack in the reef line with my other hand.

Two turns on the winch and I got an override. Impatiently I gave the winch a few more cranks hoping to work the tangle through. I quickly realised I had made my second mistake of the morning; my impatience and inexperience had locked the reef line on the winch. I looked up hoping that Steve had not noticed my mistake and knew instantly by the disappointment in his eyes that he had.

My heart sank. I scurried to the mast and let the main halyard off just slightly. The boom swung from side to side, clanking and crunching with each small movement of the boat. Without tension on the mainsheet or main halyard it was dead weight held off the deck by only the rigid boom vang. I was about to untangle the override when the boat suddenly rolled steeply to port.

I hugged the mast as I heard the boom violently swing sideways; the rig shuddered as it settled momentarily, the end of the boom vang cocked at an unnatural angle. Then the boat was picked up by another wave and the boom rolled to starboard. The force of the swinging boom snapped the end of the vang and the boom crashed onto the deck, the end lying over the lifelines and dragging in the water.

There was too much drag for me to pull the 13 foot boom and sail back on board, although I tried desperately. We quickly switched places and Steve calmly heaved the boom from the water, let down the rest of the sail and tied everything down safely.

Sealions guard the entry in San Cristobal.



If the boat had rolled a few seconds later, if I had been standing in front of the boom, if I had been sitting on the coach house.... "Go below and get some sleep." Steve's command interrupted my list of morbid scenarios.

I knew there is nothing to say, sorry could not erase the stupidity of my mistake. I went below and lay in the coffin. "Goddamn Fridays!" I muttered as the tears trickled down my cheeks.

Heaven and hell

When I woke up a few hours later I laid with my eyes shut hoping it was all just a sleep deprived bad dream, but I could still hear the angry ocean through the hull.

After my midday watch I had a sink bath. I reached all the stinky and important bits but still felt clammy. A mouth full of water confirmed my suspicion, our tanks had been compromised and our fresh water supply contaminated with seawater. The only possibility was that the tank vent on deck had failed and salt water was backing into the valve and into the tank.

I was too defeated to bother to mention anything to Steve and figured that I would be getting wet and salty on watch anyway. We had two jerry jugs for drinking water so we were not in any danger

of dehydration but this new development threatened the already fragile morale on board.

Five long days after departing Isla Cocos we approached the equator. Living up to its reputation as the doldrums the wind dropped off so that we were lucky to be averaging three knots. That afternoon the wind all but died and our progress all but stopped.

We had both sailed over the equator before, but never on our own boat. It felt like a milestone that needed to be celebrated. So when it finally rolled around at 0100 I woke Steve for the

"If I could pretend I didn't notice we are leaving on a Friday, then the sailing gods could too."

festivities. We snapped a picture of the GPS and ourselves and had a shot of rum in the cockpit as we inched over the invisible line in the sea.

Steve crawled back into the bunk, leaving me with my thoughts and a glass of rum in the darkness. I wondered if perhaps Neptune and I got off on the wrong foot. I reached out over the railing and tipped the rest of my glass into the sea as a peace offering. I figured it couldn't hurt.

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RIGHT: Storm clouds brewing literally and figuratively.

BELOW: Finally on anchor at the Galapagos Islands.



Land of make believe

By daylight the winds had filled in again, only this time they were blowing directly from San Cristobal, our destination.

We made slow progress to windward, tacking back and forth across the rhumbline and a contrary current. The possibilities of a calm anchorage and a good sleep that night slipped further away with each change of course. Over a hot meal Steve pulled me out of my grumpy haze; after all what is one more night at sea?

It turned out to be another night sent to test us. Our fresh headwind died shortly after dark and we were left adrift, the lights of San Cristobal teasing us in the distance. When the current started to push us backwards we decided that if we wanted to check in before the weekend we had no choice but to spark up our temperamental engine.

Just before dawn I woke to a strange noise and vibration emanating from the engine bay. We had cracked an engine mount. How, I wondered, could anything else go wrong?

But it seemed I had spoken too soon; one look at the electrical panel and also I noticed the alternator was no longer charging the batteries.

When I told Steve he let out a maniacal, exhausted cackle and told me to try and get

a little more sleep. We had another two hours to the harbour entrance, no wind and current pushing us backwards, what else could we do.

Just after daybreak we arrived at San Cristobal and found a spot in the surprisingly busy anchorage. When the boat was packed away we sat on the bow and enjoyed a hot cup of tea together, sharing the excitement of finally arriving in the fabled Galapagos Islands.

We knew it would be a busy day checking in with the agent and getting the boat cleaned and reorganised, so we enjoyed a few minutes of calm while we could.

“One hell of a trip, eh?” I asked.

“Don’t even talk about it. Besides right now, we are in the Galapagos!” Steve beamed as a seal darted under the boat.

“Well, we can do anything we want today, anything that doesn’t involve moving the boat.” I declared.

“Oh yeah, why’s that?”

“Today’s Friday, you know it’s bad luck to leave port on a Friday.” I elbowed Steve gently.

“Silly superstitions, who believes in that stuff?”

I smiled and decided that one day over a beer somewhere I would tell him the whole story and we’d laugh. But that morning I wanted to enjoy the stillness of being at anchor and savoured thought that on Friday I would be standing on solid ground on an island in the Galapagos. 

cruisinghelmsman Heather Francis



Heather Francis is originally from Nova Scotia, Canada where they say saltwater runs in your veins. For over a decade she has travelled, lived and worked on boats around the world. In 2008 she and Steve, her Aussie partner, bought *Kate*, their Newport 41’, in California. They plan to do a lap around the planet, albeit slowly. To follow their adventures log on to www.yachtkate.com.