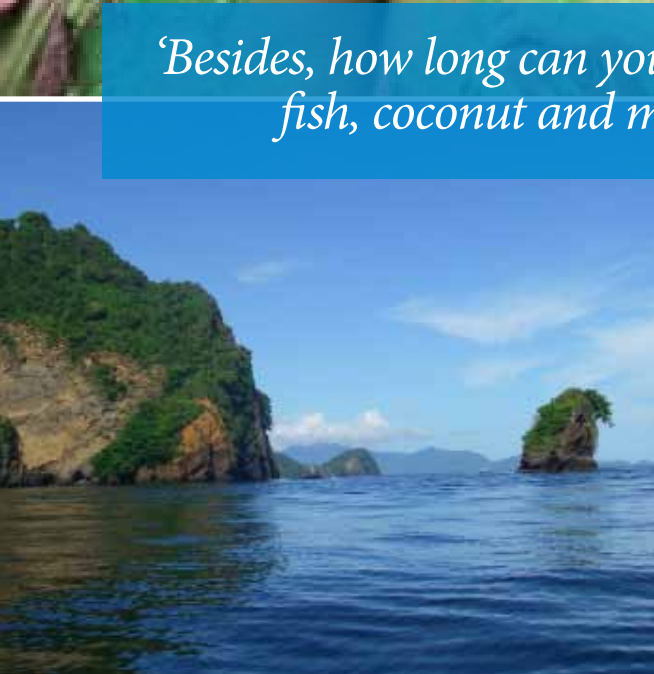




'Besides, how long can you live off fresh fish, coconut and mango?'



CARNIVAL BREEZE

David Matelicani discovers the frontier towns of Guyana and Suriname make beautiful hurricane season alternatives

Inspired by six months cruising the northeast coast of Brazil, I was more than willing to extend my stay another six, but all too soon I was obliged to weigh anchor and set my sights on new destinations. Regrettably, my visa was due to expire.

Despite feeling at the time, that my departure was somewhat premature, I harbour no regrets. Sailing in Brazil was, and will always be, a wonderfully exotic adventure. Besides, aren't good times, by definition ephemeral?

I do, however, get to take with me a few lasting impressions: there is a plethora of white sandy beaches and remote island getaways to discover here – specifically south of Salvador, near Morro de Sao Paulo. Gamboa was my favourite island anchorage, and the closest I've come (in Brazil) to finding my 'cruiser's paradise'.

Approximately one thousand sea miles, (or 10 days sailing) separate Fortaleza (my Brazilian point of departure), from the Iles du Salut in French Guiana. Reportedly it's a comfortable sail with both favourable current and winds. Provided you stay in deeper water, say 100 nautical miles out from the coast. At this distance, no yacht is likely to hit stray tree trunks or other jungle debris and solo sailors need only worry about the occasional squall or cargo vessel.

I had weathered a couple of

uncomfortable days (with gusts to Force 7), but was generally pleased with my progress. Especially after logging 120nM daily runs (a new record for *Eileen*). This was sufficient motivation to tolerate any discomfort and, while the distances travelled were admirable (for a small boat under stay-sail alone), in future I'll think twice before running before the wind without a mainsail. The incessant rolling can turn the stomach of the hardest sailor, and I'm hardly hardy!

What followed were three days of gentle breeze so I opted to hoist the 'iron topsail' and maintain my 100nM average to day five. The boat can easily manage 100nM in a 24hr period when motor sailing, and since *Eileen* consumes just over half a litre of diesel an hour, I rarely feel compelled to wallow about for days-on-end in the tropical heat, waiting for a favourable wind. Switching from my Aries wind vane to my electric autopilot, I passed the time profitably trolling for supper.

On day seven an all-too-favourable wind made its appearance in the form of a short-lived gale. Well, I assume it was a gale, though I did little to verify this empirically. I'm not too fond of braving a drenching to measure wind speed with my handheld anemometer.

I did at least make the effort of noting my remarkable speed (8 knots over ground), but only from the

Main: Hesketh Bank is a riot of rickety landing stages on the river

Left from top: Dag Pike is best known for his power boat exploits, but he has always sailed for fun

EILEEN OF AVOCA'S ROUTE

comfort of my bunk. Not surprisingly I exceeded my daily average of 100nM for the remainder of the journey, making short-shrift of the passage to French Guiana.

Salvation Islands

The anchorage at Ile Royale looks the part, but isn't as protected as one might expect. Two days of bouncing about and several episodes of "Sorry, my anchor dragged" (by others), were enough for me to forgo my new life as a hunter-gatherer. Besides, how long can you live off fresh fish, coconut and mango? The novelty wears off.

Many find solace in these islands through quiet meditation and inner contemplation. It's undeniably pretty, but that didn't stop me racing the five miles to reach a different kind of solace in Kourou.

For yachtsmen en route to the Caribbean from Brazil, Kourou provides a welcome oasis of European living in a convenient, if unexpected, location. As I'm a man of simple tastes, (I'm told it compliments my simple mind), European living means access to the culinary delicacies I've craved since setting sail from the Canary Islands.

Not that I've disliked the staple Brazilian diet of black beans with lumps of various meat served on a

bed of white rice. It's just that I do so enjoy a varied diet, and wandering about a rocket launch complex all day (Kourou's claim to fame), does little to appease the appetite!

The ultimate stopover for hardy sailors seeking refuge from the torturous seas and tempests of South America was to be found further north. A fact only revealed to me in a chance encounter with a French yachtsman who, more than 20 years earlier, had been posted to this idyllic site as part of his military service.

It's the penal colony of St Laurent that sits on the Maroni river. No prisoners these days, but how curious such a pleasant anchorage didn't

Passage tips

Heading south from the Caribbean

Heading south from Trinidad and Tobago isn't as hard as it's been made out to be. Yes, you may have days where the wind is on the nose and yes, there are places where you will battle up to half knot of current.

The best departure point is Store Bay in Tobago. Head past Toco, Trinidad, and take a direct bearing from there. The only obstacles you will encounter are Trinidad's oil platforms to the southeast of the island. A more coastal route follows the 20m contour along Guyana and Suriname, but only advisable with crew.

Right: Crabbing at low water among the sandbanks at

warrant mention in my guides. Especially when St Laurent can boast the safest, most sheltered anchorage in French Guiana; easy access even at low tide along a buoyed, lit channel; great provisioning (and free Wi-Fi); and plenty to do within walking distance.

I had expected a town packed with sailors, but for some reason St Laurent hosts only a trickle of French and Dutch visitors. Why the secrecy? I didn't stay long enough to find out. Much as I would have liked to linger, Caribbean waters beckoned.

Eileen in the Caribbean

A gentle breeze whisked me toward the Caribbean. I would have set more sail, if only I didn't have to worry about unexpected squalls. One minute I'd be motoring at a steady 4 knots and the next I'd find myself running before a squall at 7 knots, desperately trying to tie a third reef in the mainsail. How undignified!

The good news was, after six days I arrived unscathed in Store Bay, Tobago. Yet another splendid



'Little did I know that my one-year stint aboard Eileen was about to stretch to three'



anchorage. It had taken some 7,000nM of sailing and almost one year (since leaving Yarmouth) of living aboard a 23ft (7m) boat, but I was finally in the Caribbean.

A celebratory drink was the order of the day. Little did I know then that my one year stint living aboard *Eileen* was about to stretch to three.

Stalled journey

September arrived hot, too hot. I've never been anywhere the heat bothered me as it did in

Chaguaramas, Trinidad, and that includes deserts of Egypt and Oz. The sultry air sapped my strength and just walking between the yard and the ship chandler was exhausting work. With the many facilities at hand I was still expecting a speedy conclusion to my annual maintenance on *Eileen*, but nobody in their right mind hustles here!

Obsessed with the idea of escaping Trinidad's muggy heat, the concept for a marina and yacht maintenance complex back in St Laurent du Maroni was born. With a little help from some friends, the idea became a proposal, duly submitted to council. The response was swift and positive, so as soon as *Eileen* was back in the water I pointed south and sailed back to French Guiana. Time to turn the proposal into a project.

Would this spell the end of my sailing adventures? Not likely. If anything, it added a new impetus and served to ensure my exploits

continued. My little blue Yarmouth 23 had simply found a new home in the jungles of French Guiana, and if all went well, St Laurent would soon offer the maintenance alternative I had so eagerly sought. In theory.

Back and forth!

In practice, the task I had set myself was herculean, but a man of constant leisure has time for chipping away at logistical and administrative hurdles. Having gained strong support from the local authorities all I really needed to do was convince sailors to brave the passage south.

This sent me scurrying back and forth between French Guiana and Martinique on what might be called fact-finding missions. Of course, it was never all work and no play.

Discovery of Guyana

It was on just one such fact-finding tour I discovered the vital missing link (in the form of an intermediate

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port), that would trivialise the journey south from the Caribbean.

It was supposed to be a quick sail back to French Guiana from Martinique, but two weeks later I found myself battling thunderstorms, drifting to southeastern Venezuela.



EILEEN OF AVOCA Yarmouth 23

LOA: 23ft 2in (7.1m)

Beam: 7ft 6in (2.3m)

Draught: 2ft 11in (90cm)

Builder: Neil Marine, Sri Lanka

Designer: Wyatt and Freeman



Top: Kingholm Quay's tiny harbour has drying-room only

Above: Dry out alongside the quay in Port William, which resembles a Cornish village

Progress at 1 knot was frustratingly slow, but despite this I might have arrived with time to spare if I hadn't been swamped by a rogue wave! I was dozing on my bunk when, without warning, *Eileen* was knocked sideways in a rush of noisy white-water which instantly drenched everything in the cabin.

It appears that a Yarmouth 23 isn't troubled by the extra weight of a temporary aft jacuzzi. I wish the same could be said for the captain who was slowly coming to realise that everything that hadn't been tied down was now adrift, including *Eileen's* precious fuel reserves. Without enough diesel to reach Saint Laurent, I went in search of fuel at



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Matelicani got into sailing in Mauritius at the age of six, where he hired a dinghy with his brother for the day with the proceeds of their exploits on the one arm bandits.

nearby Guyana with a small degree of trepidation.

What about pirates?

Well what do you know, it's evidently no more than a wild rumour. No pirates waiting to pounce on unsuspecting single-handed yachtsmen in Guyanese waters after all. What I found instead was a unique cruising destination full of rather pleasant surprises.

Bartica services the burgeoning gold mining industry in Guyana, so it's not your average tourist destination, but if you want to see what a frontier town looks like you need go no further. I revelled in the raw abrasiveness of the place. It permeated authenticity. No prettily painted Disneyland fruit stalls to appease the tourist psyche, just functionally brute reality.

A rally is born!

Not even a handful of yachts could be found south of Trinidad. Where was everyone? Apart from hiding from hurricanes up north, I suspect they were all sweltering through boat maintenance in Chaguaramas.

As I had discovered such splendid alternatives, it was time to share the experience with other sailors, tempting them further south with a rally. One that escapes the Caribbean hurricane zone, leaving Trinidad and Tobago, stopping halfway at Bartica in Guyana and continuing on to St Laurent du Maroni.

Teaming up with others, a new annual event, the Nereid's Rally was born. Now, rather than hunker down for six months waiting for the next sailing season, you can indulge in visiting some of the least known anchorages in the Atlantic. Leaving Trinidad around the start of September, the rally last three weeks with stops in Guyana, French Guiana and in Suriname. ✦