

Nine of Cups – 45' Liberty Cutter – 7' draft – December 2006
Subject area: **South Atlantic Crossing and Tristan da Cunha**

After waiting out the windy, raw, rainy southern hemisphere winter months in Uruguay, we headed out in mid- November for Cape Town, South Africa. You really need to look at a chart to see that Cape Town lies almost due east of Uruguay and the remote South Atlantic islands of the Tristan da Cunha group are right along the way. Only one of four islands in the group is inhabited with about 300 hardy souls clinging to the side of a volcanic peak. Few boats are able to stop at Tristan due to unpredictable weather and an open roadstead anchorage, but we were determined to give it a try. Despite more than 30,000 miles under the keel, we had never made an entire transoceanic passage either, so this too, was something we were hoping to add to our “done” list. With a tot of rum over the side and sincere words of supplication to Neptune, we were off to Africa.

As always, we were seasick for the first few days despite our pre-embarkation regimen of Stugeron®. We muddled through and managed with the usual “feeding of the fish” and felt pretty normal by Day 4. We settled into a daily routine of 3 hour watches and enjoyed the ride. Generally, the weather and winds were decent, but we had our share of less than pleasant days with winds to 40+ knots and seas larger than we have ever seen them.

Tristan da Cunha was some 2,075 nautical miles from Piriapolis as the crow flies. Since the island is so remote, we had sent a general email before leaving (yes, the “remotest” island in the world has internet) explaining that we hoped to stop and inquiring if there was anything we could bring with us that might be wanted or needed. To our surprise and delight, we had several emails within a day and though nothing was needed as the supply ship was due any time, the resident radio communications person and HAM would happily provide information and weather en route and wanted to set up a sked as soon as we left Piriapolis. SSB voice contact was difficult at first, but daily emails via Sailmail kept us in touch.

One day merged into the next and miles slipped away under the keel and 21 days later, “Land Ho!” Touted as “the remotest inhabited island in the world”, arrival at Tristan during calm weather seemed fortuitous. We had scanned the horizon from 50 miles out looking for the 7,000' summit of Queen Mary's Peak thrusting itself out of the blue South Atlantic waters. Finally, shrouded in the mist ahead, a vague form appeared...Tristan da Cunha. Contact with Andy, our HAM friend, earlier in the day confirmed that it was a “fishing day”. Weather on Tristan is distinguished as either good, i.e. “a fishing day” or not good, i.e. “no fishing”. Andy had also paved the way for our arrival, notifying the appropriate people that we were on our way. We anchored in 75' of kelp-thick water on a rocky bottom.

As soon as the anchor was down, the Health Officer radioed to confirm that there were no communicable diseases aboard...an obvious issue for these secluded Tristanians. It was late in the day and we were asked to remain aboard until the following morning, but queried if we needed any provisions in particular. I mentioned eggs and that didn't seem a problem. Tired, but exhilarated that we were at Tristan, we tidied up the boat, made dinner, celebrated with a glass of wine and hit the sack early...glad to be sleeping together for a change.

We were hailed at 0730 and informed that it was “a fishing day” and we could come ashore at our leisure. The Customs/Police department official met us at the tiny dock and helped us tie up the dinghy. He had a dozen eggs packed loosely in a plastic bag...“Compliments of the Missus”, he said. He drove us to the Administrative Building where we paid our immigration fees and landing duties and were introduced to the British-appointed Island Administrator, Mike Hentley. We were given three days ashore with the option to renew if we wished to remain longer.

Tristan's primary source of income on the island is the harvesting of lobster (crayfish). It is an island cooperative effort with a South African-run processing and freezing plant on site. There is no all weather anchorage, so fishing boats are launched each morning and then hauled each night by crane and secured on the wharf. Because Colspot Harbor is so tiny, we were given strict

instructions that we needed to be off the island each day before the fishing boats returned in the afternoons.

Andy was waiting for us as we exited the Admin building. Though we were really just meeting for the first time, we felt as if we were best of old friends and the greeting was warm and heartfelt. He took us on a tour of the island. There's only one main road on Tristan which is about 7 miles long and leads to the Patches and the east side of the island.

The scenery was dramatic as we crawled along a paved road which had only recently been re-opened after spring flooding. He showed us the "Patches", the individual vegetable garden areas each member of the community maintains. Potatoes, the island's main crop, were in blossom. From the hills, we could see Inaccessible and Nightingale Islands, miles away and off limits to visiting boats. Andy pointed out all the local landmarks and talked about island life, answering our innumerable questions with considerable patience and stopping every 20 feet for more photos.

We returned to town late morning. There is only one "town" on the island locally referred to as "the Settlement", but officially named Edinburgh of the Seven Seas. We checked out the post office and bought the requisite postcards and collectible Tristan stamps (another profit center for the island). Andy pointed out the small supermarket/general store and we browsed a bit, settling on a book about Tristan and a souvenir mug. We returned to Andy's house for a lunch of "plo", a St. Helena curry specialty and a South African Castle beer. Andy's wife, Lorraine, called and offered to open the tiny island museum for us...an interesting collection of island memorabilia and history. We bought a few more souvenirs.

Left on our own for the rest of the afternoon, we walked along small grassy paths lined with New Zealand flax laden with red flowers, chatted with some of the friendly Tristanians we met and generally got a feel for the island. We wandered to the lobster processing plant and got a short tour of the facility. By 1500, we headed for the harbor. Assuming the weather was good the following day, we had made plans to have lunch with Andy and Lorraine and go for a hike up to the volcano. Andy had given us some Tristan lobster as a gift and we had a wonderful dinner aboard sampling Tristan's finest delicacy.

0730 and Andy hailed us...it was a fishing day! We prepared to go ashore, but realizing that the wind had shifted to light northeast during the night, we made a decision to skip the hike and stick closer to the harbor in case there was a more drastic change. Lunch with Andy and Lorraine was grand. They had put up their Christmas tree and the mood was holiday festive with an array of salads, cold cuts and an island rarity, a fresh salad. In an effort to offer some gifts as a means of saying thanks, we brought some DVDs, software games and a batch of brownies, all of which were heartily welcomed, but didn't come close to giving back what they had given us.

As lunch progressed, we could see white caps forming and "Cups" began bucking at her tether. Within minutes, the wind began howling and the gentle 5 knots became a 25 knot northeasterly, putting us on a lee shore. We made a quick departure, Andy stuffing our backpacks with more lobster, Tristan "taters" and cider (for celebratory purposes only).

Scampering down to the harbor and loading the dinghy was a challenge, but nothing compared to the maneuvering required through the big breakers that were entering the tiny harbor. A wet ride, we rode up the waves and hit down hard in the troughs. Once back to "Cups", we had the new challenge of hoisting the outboard and the dinghy which had become an unwieldy kite in the 25 knot winds. David secured the dink while I made ready below for a hasty departure. Well, not that hasty...the windlass wasn't working. After several minutes of tinkering, David opted to haul the anchor manually...110 pound Bruce with the corresponding 300 feet of chain. Midst rain, wind, skinned knees and building seas, he managed to get the chore done in just under two hours and we were off. We radioed Andy our thanks and adieu's and within a short time, Tristan was lost behind us in the mists and clouds.

As if to pay restitution for a couple of nice days at Tristan, the next four days were rainy and sloppy. The winds were erratic and the seas were choppy, seemingly unable to decide from which direction to pommel us. We had another 1,500 miles to go to Cape Town and had been foretold that it would be the worst part of the trip. We had also been warned to stay well south in our approach to Cape Town to avoid being swept too far to the north by the prevailing southeasterlies and the Benguela Current. The rest of the trip, save the last 18 hours was actually quite pleasant. The last 18 hours... well we figured the South Atlantic didn't want to give us up without a struggle. We managed to keep on track and on the December 21, we saw our first African sunrise. As we sailed into Table Bay and finally caught sight of Table Mountain, we heaved a sigh of relief and joy. Just in time for Christmas!

Commodores Marcie (AA1ZM) and David (AA21ZL) Lynn