



The Pacific here we come!

Annie Hill returns as Blue Water Letter correspondent as she leaves the Atlantic behind and enters the Pacific via the Panama Canal with an eclectic fleet of cruisers

Iron Bark, our 35ft steel Wylo II is anchored on the Flats in Panama, waiting to transit the canal. It's a wonderful place to be. On the one hand, you can see a procession of ships, wearing flags from all over the world, while on the other are mangroves and palm trees, with ospreys fishing and heron stalking their prey. Bats the size of butterflies, fly past in the early mornings and at sundown. And all around are yachts of every style, material and size, from 7m to 70m (23ft-230ft).

We haven't seen such a variety of boats in a long time. Perhaps it reflects the individuality of the people who cruise the Pacific. Among the 40-odd yachts at anchor, there isn't a

single Hallberg-Rassy – the archetypal cruising boat in the West Indies. There are more Wylos than Jeanneaus; indeed few of the boats are readily recognisable 'brands' and at least a third of the yachts are under 12m (42ft). For once, we're not the smallest boat at anchor.

The atmosphere is like it used to be in the Canaries, in the days before GPS and SSB, when sailing across the Atlantic was still a big adventure, a step into the unknown where you had to rely on your own resources. Everyone is exhilarated, if a little apprehensive about the transit and what lies on the other side. They are happy to line handle for each other, because it's good to have the experience on someone else's vessel first. Charts and cruising guides are perused, discussed and compared. Overloaded dinghies pass constantly to and fro, piled with bags of groceries. Information is eagerly sought and generously given. The excitement is palpable.

TENDER THOUGHTS

In such a heady atmosphere, parties happen at the drop of a hat. A week ago we celebrated

LEFT: An eclectic collection of dinghies stream out astern of Sarei, a Contest 29



MAIN PICTURE: The Panama Canal – gateway to the Pacific Ocean. ABOVE: Annie Hill's Wylo II Iron Bark in calm waters

the original Wylo II's 26th birthday party, this afternoon we celebrated Amrei's birthday on board *Sarei*, a Contest 29. Looking at the dinghies gathered astern was very interesting. In the Caribbean, the norm is large RIBs – usually tied up on a short piece of wire, which makes it very difficult for everyone else to get to and from the dinghy dock. Astern of *Sarei*, however, lay an eclectic selection of dinghies, most of them solid, many of them home-built and principally propelled by oars. Some of them can take a 2hp outboard, if they have to; some have a sailing rig, which is almost as effective and a lot more fun. And they all have rope painters of a sensible length: one of the many advantages of a solid rowing dinghy is that no one wants to nick them.

Argo's dinghy is an exception. It's an ancient inflatable powered by an even more ancient outboard. Pepe Sindelek spends a lot of time working on them, but this never affects



Clockwise from left: There are more Wylos at Panama than Jeanneaus; Pepe Sindelek and Blanka Sirova's enthusiasm is infectious; the couple's boat, Argo anchored in the Flats

his irrepressible grin. For years he worked towards realising his ambition of sailing round the world and now he and his beautiful wife, Blanka Sirova, are doing it. Pepe and Blanka come from the Czech Republic, but bought the 9m (30ft) steel *Argo* in Italy. She needed a huge amount of work and Pepe virtually rebuilt her. *Argo*, like most of the small, low-budget boats, is immaculate both outside and down below. Everything is organised carefully, everything has a proper home, there is no loose gear. Sailing along the notoriously rough Colombian coast, they were almost knocked down by a large wave, a great deal of which ended up over Pepe in his bunk. Blanka's eyes are round with remembered alarm as she tells the story, but there was no damage – their stowage worked as it should. Pepe and Blanka are infectiously enthusiastic, their *sang froid* is salutary. They were robbed of US \$1,500 at a cashpoint in Margarita, but Pepe just shrugs

and puts it down to experience. He and Blanka speak several languages, including Spanish, and blithely cycle around Colón, while the rest of us take taxis. 'By the time they realise you are someone to rob, you have gone past them!' Already they have found someone to give them tyres for the transit while the rest of us are paying \$3 each, but wherever they go they make friends. We are looking forward to crossing tacks all through the Pacific.

PACIFIC BOUND

I have managed to sail 150,000 miles in my own boats without ever entering the Pacific. For more years than I care to recall, I have desperately wanted to sail to New Zealand, where my mother was born. And now, my dream is about to come true. I can't wait to encounter the Galapagos wildlife, to see the towering peaks of the Marquesas, to swim in the limpid, turquoise waters of a Tuamotu lagoon, and anchor in Robinson's Cove.

Before coming here, we spent nearly three months in Trinidad. There had been no time to work on *Iron Bark* since leaving Greenland. She hadn't been out of the water since early



2002 and her topsides were looking a bit sad. There was the usual list of jobs to get through and we decided to build a second dinghy while materials were available at reasonable prices.

We arrived in Panama a bit late, but it's worked out all right. The Canal Authorities had just cleared a huge backlog and the waiting time was reduced from one month to two weeks. It will take us that time to stock up, do our stint as line handlers for others and check the final details before heading out.

Iron Bark is now in good shape and ready to go back to her own ocean. Trevor built her in Queensland and launched her in 1997. By 1999, she was in the Antarctic and has been in the Atlantic Ocean since leaving there. It's fascinating to speculate on the possibilities ahead. After New Zealand, we will undoubtedly head back to Australia for a while, but what comes next? Another voyage back to the South Sea Islands, or perhaps a passage east to Chile to explore the Patagonian channels? The opportunities are endless. ▲

ANNIE HILL

Annie Hill, 50, author of *Voyaging on a Small Income* and *Brazil and Beyond*, sails with Trevor Robertson, aboard *Iron Bark II*. Between them, they have sailed over a quarter of a million miles.

Iron Bark is a 35ft steel Wylo II design, built in Australia by Trevor. She is possibly the only yacht to have wintered both in the Antarctic and above the Arctic Circle.



BIRDS OF PASSAGE



Sascha Augenstein and Amrei Flum left Holland in 2001 and are heading towards the Galapagos Islands on board their 1968 Contest 29 Sarei. Their favourite place to date is Bahia de Salvador, Brazil.



Ian and Kathy Harper on board Ariel, a 32ft Wylo II. The couple left Falmouth in the UK in 2005 and are heading towards the Marquesas. Their favourite place to date is Portobelo, Panama.



Nick Skeates, designer of the Wylo II cruiser, on board the first of the class to be built, his own boat Wylo II. Nick is heading towards Las Perlas, Panama. His favourite place to date is Portobelo, Panama.