



Mike Harker

Panama's Las Perlas Islands and the Galapagos

Mike and his three companions head for the Galapagos – but it's not all plain sailing ...



I have often been asked, if I could return to visit any one of the exotic places I was able to explore on my first three-year voyage where would that be?

The Galapagos Islands, lying just south of the equator in the Pacific Ocean off Ecuador, would always be my quick answer.

The Pacific island group of Las Perlas, less than 100 miles from Panama City, would be my second choice. And here I was now with three friends, two beautiful young Danish women whom I had recently met, and a good friend from home.

Tom had taken some extra time off from flying a 747 Jumbo from Chicago to Hong Kong to visit these islands with me. He was more than pleased to find Louise and Mia from Copenhagen aboard when he arrived. Together we were to experience new adventures and I had the advantage: I had already spent three weeks here on my first time through and I was playing the expert guide this time around.

The mishap of grounding on the other side of Don Bernardo Bay did not diminish our enjoyment of the most beautiful beach in Panama. I got out the two kayaks and put the "Air Breath HUKA" into the dingy for exploring, and the underwater camera to document it all.

We had a great time for three more days, moving from one little bay or beach to another and the perfect weather added to our good mood.

The final island from my last voyage, San Jose, was also to be the stepping off point for my buddy, Tom. The man who owns the island also owns the company that paves most of the streets in Panama City and the International Airport runways. He is an avid flyer, and even paved his own landing strip just up from his house, situated on a cliff overlooking a fantastic bay famous for its fishing. I was able to visit him two years ago and was hoping to find him still there when we dropped anchor.

But things had changed. Instead of the modest house on the cliff, there were now a few huts and a sprawling mansion-like building just up from the private beach. We took the dinghy ashore anyway and landed on a well-manicured beach with park-like surroundings. There was nobody to greet us so we all walked the pathway up to the main house and were amazed at the beauty of the landscaped walkways; an abundance of exotic ferns and colorful birds everywhere. The main two-floor structure had a huge covered veranda overlooking a swimming pool further down the cliff.



This was now an exclusive hotel. We talked with a receptionist who told us this was a new resort with sixteen private bungalows and, yes, the same man still owned the whole thing! He was not present at the time but we were asked if we wanted lunch from their restaurant. But of course!

We thoroughly enjoyed the fresh caught fish and trimmings and the girls even took a swim in the pool. Tom had hoped to get a ride on the owner's private plane but he was in the city for another week.

There was nothing left for Tom to do but call his operations manager at the airline and explain the situation. They were able to offer Tom three more weeks of leave time, just enough time to sail with us to the Galapagos and spend a few days there exploring the fantastic natural beauty he had heard so much about. He was elated!

The bay below the restaurant was facing SW and the rollers were too large for comfortable sleeping, so I went five miles north to a bay I knew that would be sheltered from the elements and spent a very comfortable last night before embarking on the next leg of our next trip. We enjoyed a fresh baked breakfast aboard before sailing the 900 miles to the Galapagos.

It was an uneventful five-day voyage for me but it was the first time sailing on the open ocean for my friend Tom. He became impatient, asking every morning "Are we there yet, I roll into my jet up to the gate faster than this". The girls, who had sailed down to Panama from Jamaica for their first ocean sail, were much calmer and even excited. They were able to steer and plot a course change, something they had wanted to do before leaving Denmark. ▶





On the third morning out Louise caught a big-eye tuna. She hauled it in herself, bonked it over the head with the little bat I carry, and proceeded to bleed then skin the entire fish herself. I got out the special fish filet knife I carry but never use and Louise was able to make a great meal of raw fish and wasabi.

The winds were light for two days so I ran the Yanmar engine at 1800 rpm to move us along at 7 knots and charge the batteries. Somehow the Fischer-Panda generator wouldn't start. I read the manual and tried everything in the "Trouble-Shooting" section but still could not get the generator to run. I didn't tell anyone about the problem, in order to keep the atmosphere light, but I was worried. I still had a long way to go, across the entire Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic before reaching the Caribbean again.

The Galapagos Islands are high and we could see them a long way off, too long for Tom, he wanted to get there sooner and be able to enjoy some time back on land. The girls kept him occupied until we finally dropped anchor during the middle of the sixth night at sea. This first night was terrible and for the first time in over four years of sailing, I couldn't sleep a minute. I got up grumpy and "angry-at-the-world".

The next morning I moved the boat up into the small-protected cove where I knew from last time that this would be the calmest place to stay, just a dinghy ride into the main village of Santa Cruz. I pulled the boat up near the cliffs, and tucked in behind the breaking reef dropping anchor in 22 feet of clear water. I didn't want to risk another "grounding" as in the Las Perlas but the difference in tide height here was only about 8 feet, not the 20 feet in Panama. This spot is right below the most famous "Angermeyer Point" restaurant, inn and exclusive rental house in all the Galapagos. Two brothers who made their life's work here founded it 75 years ago.

My three former crew members, and now tourists, went ashore daily for the next three days to rent horses, scooters, diving gear, jeep adventure rides and eat in restaurants. I was left to clean up the boat and work on my generator problem. Because I had to use the main engine's alternator to keep the batteries up, that special Balmar alternator was also giving me problems; the only problems so far on my voyage around the world. Not only could I not get the 12 kw generator started, but now the alternator was smelling like burnt wires and its output was only about half of what it was designed to do.

Tom was able to get a complicated flight back to Chicago by way of Quito, Panama, Miami, and final destination, his home base in Chicago. I met the owner of the hotel in front of where we were anchored, Teppy Angemeyer. With his brothers and uncles he owns the entire waterfront along Angemeyer Point;



their grandfather was the first European to settle in and write about the Galapagos since Darwin. The Angemeyers are from Denmark where they still own large property. Teppy even owns a 68' Halberg-Rassey yacht that he sails during the summer months in Denmark.

I introduced Louise and Mia to Teppy who promptly invited them to stay in one of his efficiency apartments in exchange for some serving duties at his restaurant. I was now free to make my departure plans and work on the alternator/generator problems I was having. I needed at least one of the two to keep my 900 amps of house batteries charged. I carry a 1 kw Honda portable generator as a backup, but that would not be enough to get me around the world.

I ordered a replacement Balmar alternator from Hunter via e-mail and was told it would arrive by Fed-Ex in two to three working days. I left for the neighboring island of Isla Isabella and my favorite anchorage - I just needed to get away from the "Big City" feeling of Santa Cruz and all the eco-tourists.

It was an easy six-hour sail over. I ran the engine at low rpms to charge the batteries but about halfway there the alternator gave up completely. I was now without ANY way of charging my batteries. I decided to call Fischer-Panda on the SAT phone and explain the problem. I bought and carry with me the F-P Offshore Spare Parts Kit and I trusted that the engineers and technicians could help me repair the generator at anchor.

No Luck!

I could not get the generator to start. I charged the starting battery with my little Honda generator but after three days of trial and error on the SAT phone and via e-mail, the generator



still would not start. And the Fed-Ex agent in Santa Cruz said that my replacement Balmar alternator had indeed arrived in Quito Customs after only three days but that customs would not yet release it. It seems that Hunter sent me two alternators, one a reserve and the other a replacement. I had only ordered one. Customs was somehow confused and would not release the package.

Every day for the next two weeks the Fed-Ex agent said, "Tomorrow it will surely come!" Frustration!

The technicians at Fischer-Panda had also run out of ideas. I turned out the entire contents of my spare parts and found a small box with a new fuel pump inside. I decided to take out the old one near the fuel tank and replace it with the one out of the kit. Within seconds the generator started and I was able to charge my house batteries again.

But I still needed the new Balmar alternator working on my Yanmar main engine before I attempting the 3,000-mile crossing to the Marquesas. This leg of the voyage was at least three weeks if the weather held and I would not leave until my new alternator was released from customs at Quito airport.

Finally, after almost three weeks waiting, the agent e-mailed that the package had arrived. I was to take the morning ferry (\$60) back over to Santa Cruz, pay him \$180 for his shipping costs even though it was all sent prepaid and take the afternoon ferry (\$60) back to Isla Isabella. I did NOT want to argue; I just wanted to get out of there.

The Galapagos had been my first choice when asked to which exotic destination I would most like to return. After this protracted and frustrating experience it was now the island I most wanted to leave!

Next month: *Onto the Marqueses ...*

