Our winter cruise in the Caribbean is drawing to a close. Our passage from the Chesapeake to the British Virgin Islands with cruising friends in the Salty Dawg Rally seems so long ago. Cruising the Virgin Islands, both British and U.S. with friends and family visiting, followed by a passage down to Bonaire, and two months diving in Bonaire, has given us a pretty full six month stay in the Caribbean. But, we are approaching mid-April and it is time to head North. We are ready to be back home in the Chesapeake to enjoy the beautiful springtime there and, of course, to reconnect with family and friends.

DEPARTING BONAIRE

We are sitting on a mooring, the same one we’ve been on for two months, off the colorful and very European town of Kralendijk, the major town on the delightful island of Bonaire. Bonaire sits at 12 degrees north, along the southern edge of the Caribbean Sea and just 50 miles off the coast of Venezuela. Crystal clear waters, extremely healthy reefs, over 150 dive sites accessible by dinghy, and a vertical drop-off to 100 feet that passes under the line of moored boats off Kralendijk and all along the western side of Bonaire. These features give divers, and particularly cruisers who are divers, some of the best diving in the world. Add to that a broad selection of first class dining options at reasonable prices, a friendly cruising community of blue water sailors, almost no crime, and security by the Dutch Police and the Royal Navy of the Netherlands—it is a special place. Last night at a potluck cocktail and hors d’oeuvres gathering aboard Flash, we had been warmed by the hugs and best wishes of many of our cruising friends in the fleet, some new this season and some we had known from our eight previous seasons in the Caribbean. All have been added to our sailing distribution list.
list now numbering close to 300 to receive our monthly journals, and we of course have been added to their mailing lists, blogs or however they log their adventures.

Our plan for getting back to the Chesapeake is for my wife Seale and myself to sail as directly as possible, and non-stop if we can, the 1,800 miles to the Chesapeake. It would be about a nine to 10 day passage. Our longest previous passage with just the two of us has been nine days. We have done many passages over the years with just the two of us, including seven return trips from the Caribbean to the Chesapeake. We’re hoping for favorable enough easterly trade winds to allow us to reach up to the Mona Passage, pass between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico without stopping, and then take what the Atlantic gives us as we head the long stretch from the Caribbean northwest toward Cape Hatteras and on to the Chesapeake Bay.

We know the most challenging part of this trip will be the last 200 miles approaching the U.S. East Coast, with the changing weather conditions of spring, most notably the late season cold fronts that can dip down, followed by nasty northerly winds and even developing low pressure systems off the Carolinas. We rely on Chris Parker’s weather forecasting, as well as GRIB files downloaded from the OCENS weather data service, presentation of weather model data by PassageWeather, and regular updates and forecasts by the meteorologists at the U.S. National Weather Service. We do our own synthesis of the data, and make our own routing decisions.

But, starting from Bonaire provides another weather challenge. A semi-permanent low sits over the northern part of South America in late winter and early spring, trapped against the northern end Flash lying in Kralendijk’s harbor; below, enjoying another excellent meal in Bonaire
of the Andes and the prevailing weather fronts coming in off the Pacific. This low’s counterclockwise rotating wind causes an acceleration of the winter trade winds in this southern belt of the Caribbean, so we often see winds in the upper 20’s to low 30’s this time of year. After blowing near 30 knots for a week, the forecast calls for the winds to ease into the upper 20’s on April 15th. So, we get ourselves prepared to depart then.

CROSSING THE CARIBBEAN

Although winds are easing, they are still fairly brisk. We set up Flash for some easy reaching with a double reef in the main. Departing our mooring at 8:30 a.m., we are hailed on the radio first by British friends from Suzie Too, and shortly thereafter by friends on Celilo and Teusen Takk, exchanging well wishes and expectations we will cross paths again, maybe next season. We run down the southwest side of the island and round up on a beam reach to clear the western end of the island. Once clear of Bonaire, we settle into a nice rhythm, taking a north northeast heading for the Mona Passage, 420 nautical miles away. Winds are as forecast in the upper 20’s, with an apparent wind angle of about 50 degrees. We are reaching comfortably at nine to 10 knots, the catamaran platform stable even in these six foot seas.

Our two girls, 13-year old cocker spaniels, have been sailing offshore all of their lives, so they know the routine—finding their favorite spots to nap, and waking to eat or do business on the top step of the starboard sugar-scoop, clipped in with harnesses and lifejackets of course. It is a sort of hibernation routine with lots of sleep and limited eating. They are good crew.

About 30 miles north of Bonaire, we get a low pass from a Dutch Coast Guard prop plane. Probably logging our name and matching it to other data. We receive no radio call, so all must be okay. As we sail north across the Caribbean, our AIS (Automated Information System providing name, course, heading closest point of approach, and other data) picks up a few freighters and tankers passing east or west all along this route north, probably traffic to or from the Panama Canal, or transporting crude from Colombia or Venezuela. The AIS shows how close they will come to us, but in all of these cases they will clear us by several miles, so no concerns on evading ships. It is great to have AIS, a system that has made offshore watch-standing much easier.

By afternoon and through the evening the winds slowly decrease in intensity, as we get further from...
the low pressure system camped over the northern part of South America. By morning, 24 hours north of Bonaire we are in comfortable 15 knot winds as we continue on a rhumb line for the middle of the Mona Passage. We often fish when we get the boat speed down to seven knots or less, but decide to take a pass on fishing because we still have a good supply of dolphin (mahi mahi) in the freezer. The almost dozen flying fish on the trampoline from the night before don’t count—they get tossed back.

As we enter the Mona Passage, 48 hours out of Bonaire, the winds lighten up since we are in the lee of Puerto Rico. We need a little engine boost, so start one engine and run it at low rpm. With the boost in speed, we increase apparent wind to fill the sails, efficiently getting us up to a reasonable seven knots.

**ATLANTIC OPEN OCEAN SAILING**

By evening we have cleared the Mona Passage and officially entered the Atlantic. We can now fall off to a northwest heading, and take apparent winds a little aft of abeam. The 15 to 20 knot trade winds are warm, the motion is comfortable, and we are making good speed in the 10 knot range. We hope for the trades to carry us to about 20 degrees north.

But, our hopes are not met. As the winds continue to drop through the night, we set the Code 0 in place of the genoa to try to keep some speed up. By morning of day four, we find ourselves in fairly flat seas, drifting along at three to four knots, with only slight swells lingering on from the prior day’s heavier winds. Soon all wind disappears due to a large high pressure system settling over us. We start one engine running at about 1,800 rpm, trying to conserve fuel in case it is needed later. Chris Parker informs us the high might linger for a couple days. The ocean gradually becomes perfectly flat, more like a mill-pond.

Morning and evening checks of weather over the next three days show no change in the forecast. We keep ourselves occupied, napping when not on our rotating three hour watch, reading, polishing stainless, repairing a freshwater system pump that decided to quit, and giving the girls a bath and grooming.

Finally, we get some decent wind for sailing and it holds for the next two days. It starts out light and builds to 10 knots from the south-west, so we sail close-hauled. As the wind clocks west and north-west, we fall off to keep sailing. We then tack over once it goes north and starts to build.

**APPROACHING THE GULF STREAM**

Chris Parker advises us that a front has stalled along the U.S. east coast, guiding developing low pressure systems off Georgia and the Carolinas along the front and up over Cape Hatteras, often building to near gale or gale conditions. New lows are forming every other day and sliding up along the stalled front. And, this sequence is predicted to continue for the next few days. Chris doesn’t think the front will move off before we would get to Hatteras. He thinks we should alter course for Beaufort, North Carolina but be careful not to enter the Gulf Stream when winds are north to northeast in the 40 to 50 knot range behind each low. We will have to time our arrival and crossing of the Gulf Stream carefully.

Although still 100 miles southeast of the Gulf Stream we are finding winds and seas building in the north winds, so we continue to reef. Chris advises us to stay southeast of the Gulf Stream, as 40 plus knot winds against the stream are creating treacherous conditions. We are seeing 30 plus knot winds and building seas about 50 miles southeast of the stream. Chris suggests we sail east, and then back west over the next 24 hours, in effect stalling but staying out of the stream. The tactic is intended to buy time until the low pressure system moves off to the northeast, and for winds to settle down—at least long enough for us to get across the Gulf Stream and into Beaufort, NC. We won’t have sufficient time before the next low to get around Cape Hatteras. All the weather data I can pull in, from GRIBs agree with Chris’s prognosis.

I didn’t like the idea of slogging up into the waves with any kind of boat speed just to stay in place. So I decide to heave-to. We have set up Flash before to heave-to, and find that she sets up well in 30 knot or more winds with a triple-reefed main only—no headsail required. Being a narrow-hulled catamaran she is easily driven. The boom is sheeted slightly to windward, and the helm also set slightly to windward. Since our steering is hydraulic, we don’t need to lock the wheel. There is no feedback from the helm. This also allows us to make small tweaks in the helm position to get the balance and motion we want. She holds a heading of between 15 to 30 degrees up into the waves, while we are actually...
being set a bit to leeward. Speed through the water as we are being set is only about half to one knot. Current in the area is to the north-east, spilling off the Gulf Stream, at about half to one point five knots. So when on port tack we are set to the east at about one point five to two knots, and when on starboard tack we are set to the west at only about a half knot or less.

We are not hove-to because of conditions in our vicinity. Locally we are experiencing 30 knots of wind and seas of about six feet and are very comfortable hove-to. We could sail in these conditions, but that would put us in the Gulf Stream head-on to winds in the 40's and seas in the 12 to 15 foot range. So the purpose of being hove-to in this case is to stay in a safe location until serious conditions north of us ease.

Finally, next morning after being hove-to for 16 hours the winds begin to abate in our area. Chris advises that we should wait another three hours for seas to begin to settle in the Gulf Stream. Even then they will be lumpy. So after 19 hours of being hove-to, we shake a couple reefs out of the main, ease out the genoa, and make for Beaufort, NC. We keep speed up and get in on April 25th before the next forecasted low, after 10 days and 1,612 nautical miles from Bonaire. We know we still have another almost 300 nautical mile leg to get from Beaufort, NC around Cape Hatteras and up to the Chesapeake Bay to our home on Carter’s Creek, off the Rappahannock River. We don’t have the option of going up the Intracoastal Waterway, since our mast-height with other gear is 75 feet—not even close to the 65 foot controlling clearance. We are fine with that; Flash is a blue water boat, and does just fine offshore.

BEAUFORT AND THE CHESAPEAKE

We always enjoy a visit to Beaufort, NC. It is a comfortable southern town, relaxed, nice streets for walking, uncrowded, friendly residents, and good dining. After a couple of enjoyable days in Beaufort, we find an opening in the weather allowing us to get around Hatteras and up to the Chesapeake with favorable winds and good sailing. So, off we go for the roughly 30 hour passage to the Chesapeake and home.

Sailing up the panoramic Chesapeake Bay, and then the idyllic Rappahannock River is anticlimactic. We are not going north to Maine this summer for the first time in several years. Our next adventure will be heading south with the Salty Dawg Rally in the fall. But, over the past six months we have experienced another challenging adventure, wonderful times with sailing friends and visitors, and excellent sailing with our trusted blue water vessel. Flash is now tucked comfortably into her slip at home, and we are happy sailors.

Hank and his wife Seale are lifelong sailors. They made the switch to a Catana 471 performance cruising catamaran seven years ago after owning and sailing monohulls from 22 to 52 feet for 45 years. They have each logged 130,000 blue water miles.