



BY PETER A. ROBSON



ADVENTURE CHARTER TO THE Galapagos

PASSAGEMAKING ABOARD
A FINE SAILING YACHT
WITH A PROFESSIONAL
CREW IS A UNIQUE
ALTERNATIVE TO DOING
IT ON YOUR OWN





For two wonderful weeks—including a transit of the Panama Canal, a 1,000-mile offshore passage and a week in the magical Galapagos—I didn't have to stand a watch, cook a meal, wash a dish, mix a drink or even make my bed. I could sleep whenever or as much as I wanted and could have long, hot showers every day. And no, I wasn't aboard a cruise ship.

For many, the dream of offshore passagemaking to exotic locales is ripe with adventure. The reality, however, is that the logistics and financial costs of buying and preparing an offshore-capable boat—and being able to survive for several years without a paycheck—mean it'll remain a fantasy. Another option is crewing offshore, which makes good sense for the free-spirited traveller (and should be mandatory for those considering heading offshore on their own). The downside is the potential of having to serve under a modern-day Captain Bligh or aboard a boat that isn't particularly seaworthy.

After making a dozen or so significant offshore passages in mine and other people's boats—most recently crewing on a 5,600-mile race from Qingdao, China to Victoria while being beaten by

storms, snow and freezing cold in a leaky boat without heat—I'd pretty well decided that at the age of 50, I was getting too old for that type of punishment. And going offshore aboard my own boat simply wasn't an option.

However, when I was invited to join two other guests on a voyage from Panama to the Galapagos on the 83' *Mustang*, one of the world's most luxurious sailing yachts and crewed by four professionals, I jumped at the promise of a comfortable and easy passage.

I flew into Panama in late June with fellow guest Vancouverite Baird Tewksbury, a veteran sailing junkie and well-travelled charterer. We met up with *Mustang* and her Vancouver-based captain Matthew Côté at Shelter Bay Marina on the Caribbean side of the canal across from Colon.

An ugly squall approaches as *Mustang* sails into the Pacific, with Panama in the background.

Opposite (from top): Mate Kate Cooke-Priest make friends with a friendly sea lion pup on Seymour Island while engineer Jared Howorth lays prone hoping for similar attention.

Isla Santa Fe is typical of the Galapagos, dry with steep cliffs. It is seldom visited and offers no shelter.

A male blue-footed boobie (right) whistles and lifts his leg as part of a mating ritual on Seymour Island.

Real china, crystal glasses, gourmet food and candles. Dining in luxury with (from left) Captain Matthew Côté, Shefali Choksi, Baird Tewksbury and the author.

OUR LUXURY RIDE *Mustang* is a custom Doug Peterson-designed Camper & Nicholson sloop operated by Matthew Côté and fellow Vancouverite Kim Dunfield. *Mustang* was purchased in the Mediterranean in 2006, and the two are sailing her around the world over the next five years, with Matthew, an experienced MCA-licensed Yachtmaster, captaining the boat full time. Meanwhile, Kim and his family meet up with the boat whenever they can get away. Fully Lloyds and MCA (Maritime & Coastguard Agency) certified for offshore chartering, *Mustang* offers adventure berths for up to six people during certain legs of her offshore travels as well as luxury crewed charters in select destinations such as the Caribbean and South Pacific. (Read about another *Mustang* adventure: “Dismasted: 1,600 Miles Under Jury Rig,” PY, July 2007.)

As we lugged our gear down the dock, we were immediately impressed with *Mustang*'s gleaming dark red hull, spotless white decks and abundance of varnished teak. After stowing our gear, Matthew toured us through the boat, explaining how things worked, and detailed the boat's emergency and safety equipment.

Mustang is sloop rigged with three hydraulic furling headsails, in-mast hydraulic mainsail furling and hydraulic self-tailing winches. No lugging heavy



sails from the forepeak, hanking them onto the forestay and sweating up the halyards—just press a few buttons and the sails are up.

Inside, *Mustang* is exquisitely finished in teak with plush Berber carpets underfoot. The saloon has two levels. The upper lounge area has large smoked-glass windows all around, lush big-leaved plants trailing over the railings and a very slick inside steering station that hides out of sight when not in use. A stairway with carved teak banisters leads down and forward to the dining table, wet bar

and a couple of comfortable settees. Forward of the saloon is a teak bulkhead with a single doorway that completely separates the galley and crew's quarters from the “guest” half of the yacht. Aft of the upper saloon, stairs lead below to the guest quarters. Baird and I shared a cabin with twin beds and large ensuite. Across the companionway is another large double cabin, which was being used on this trip by Matthew. The palatial master stateroom is full width with an island queen-sized bed. Each cabin has its own ensuite head, full-sized walk-in shower, Vacuflush toilet, real sheets, duvets and air conditioning. All in all, this was the most beautifully finished yacht I'd ever been aboard.

The rest of the crew and the third guest returned in the early evening with last minute provisions. Kate Cooke-Priest is a U.K. lawyer who is taking time off to travel and working as ship's mate and stewardess. Jared Howorth is the engineer, a very talented young Englishman who could maintain absolutely everything on the boat. Sam McCormick was our gourmet cook and had recently crewed aboard the 140' sailboat *Mari Cha III*. Our fellow guest was Shefali Choksi, a lawyer friend of Kate's from England. She claimed the big aft master stateroom.

First class accommodation with duvets and fitted sheets. The twin cabin was shared by the author and Baird Tewksbury.



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Our first evening on board was to be typical: cocktails and snacks in the cockpit before being called below for a late dinner. Meals were typically an appetizer, salad, main course (filet mignon the first night) and a delicious dessert creation. At each meal, the table was decorated with flowers, fancy folded napkins and crystal glassware—even Martha Stewart would be envious. And of course, there were hundreds of CDs in a variety to please even the most discriminating ears (give me Jimmy Buffet any time). The three of us shared meals with Matthew, who quickly proved a wonderful raconteur, keeping us in stitches the entire trip with tales of his adventures delivering yachts and operating charter yachts.

THE PANAMA CANAL We spent most of the following day relaxing and exploring the former Panamanian military base surrounding the marina, trying to photograph the monkeys we could hear but not see scrambling in the jungle overhead.

We were scheduled to transit the Gatun Locks late that afternoon, and just before leaving, our agent delivered us the four 100' lines we'd be using to keep us centered in the locks. Baird and I both wanted to handle lines, so Matthew (who was making his fourth transit) explained how the locking process worked and how to set up the lines, tie on the monkey's fist that the shore handlers would be tossing us, and feed the lines in and out so they didn't get tangled or jammed.

At 17:00 hours, we were on station, where we picked up our pilot and entered the Gatun Locks. This was my first transit and despite being completely soaked by torrential rain, thunder and lightning, I was thrilled to be helping work a yacht through this historic canal. With Matthew's expert supervision, we passed through the first set of locks without incident, managing to stay mid-canal, and the pilot—who I spied nodding off a couple of times—gave us the ultimate compliment when he said we were pros and didn't really need any help from him.

We anchored in huge Lake Gatun for the night, dropped off one pilot and picked up a new one the following day. We then cruised the Banana Cut through the swamp and jungle to Mira Flora locks and the massive Galliard



Baird Tewksbury relaxes in the upper saloon. Ah, this is the life.



Another 5-star dinner, this time with seared tuna caught by the author.

Cut. All along, the engineering that created the canal across the isthmus amazed us. We also thought of the thousands of workers who died from malaria during its construction.

By 14:30, we were passing under the Bridge of the Americas, which joins the continents of South and North America. After dropping off our lines at the Balboa Yacht Club, we unfurled the sails (ahh, such a simple process!) and hoisted in a 15-knot breeze. We were off to the Galapagos at 9.5 knots.

SMOOTH SAILING For the next five days—aside from a few squalls to 40-plus knots—we sailed along in comfort, with the breeze ranging 10 to 20 knots. The prevailing winds at this time of the year are west and southwest, so when the wind was too close on the nose to sail, we motor sailed with the mainsail. Our

speeds averaged from seven to 10 knots. This was the start of the rainy season, so the sky was typically overcast. When rain was frequent, we helmed from the enclosed pilothouse, though on several nights, we were able to steer by the Southern Cross from the "all business" cockpit helm station. The seas never got above two metres, and while we couldn't always eat at the dining table, the gourmet meals kept coming.

Although not necessary, Baird and I asked to be put on the watch rotation, and we worked three hours on, six off. But I'd never stood such easy watches. The autopilot did all the work, and it was just a matter of keeping an eye on the instruments, plotting other ships on the radar and toying with the chart plotter. When we had to shorten sail, it was a simple matter to push a few buttons to furl a portion of the main and roll up one headsail and unroll another. The coffee was always on, and the cockpit table, which has a clever refrigeration unit built into it, was always stocked with a variety of ice-cold beverages. Covered by a full bimini top, the cockpit provided welcome protection from the elements and became the favoured hangout when not on watch. Here we swapped tales, read our books and snoozed to our heart's content. All the ship's systems worked flawlessly, with Jared busily pottering about, tool bag in hand.

The crew was a delight, and we got to know each of them as friends, especially Matthew. At the same time, though, the crew went about their business, respecting



The Panama Canal, still one of the great wonders of the world.

the boundaries between passenger and crew—real professionals.

Along the way, we were treated to a constant parade of sea life, including several different types of whales, sharks, dolphins, turtles and the ever-present flying fish. In the afternoons, Matthew held informal study sessions in the cockpit with the crew, teaching them seamanship and navigation using practical examples as we sailed, as some hoped to one day write their own Yachtmaster tickets.

PASSAGE TO GALAPAGOS We crossed the equator without fanfare at 06:15 on a damp, cool morning on the fifth day out from Panama. We'd considered some kind of celebration, but with the crossing time being so early and the fact that we'd be arriving in the Galapagos later in the day, we decided to hold off celebrating.

We spotted Isla San Cristobal, the most easterly of the Galapagos, just after noon.

The island, like most of the Galapagos, is volcanic, rising gently from the sea to a series of cones, much like the Hawaiian Islands. As we closed land though, the hillsides were much different than Hawaii—arid, barren, rocky and covered with sparse scrub and cactus. I'm sure they look little different from when they were first discovered by accident in 1535 by Fray Tomás de Berlanga, the Bishop of Panama, and later when visited by Charles Darwin in 1835.

The sky was clear blue, and the 15-knot wind perfect for a close reach. As we paralleled the shoreline, we took turns on the helm, laughing, smiling and ribbing each other while seeing who could log the fastest speed. Ten knots, 10.2, 10.7, 11, 11.4 and bragging rights went to Baird at 11.7 knots! The amazing thing is that we were sailing along in absolute comfort, and it seemed like we were doing half that speed. *Mustang* had proved a very fast and capable sailor—rolling ever so gently and steering with only the

lightest touch. What a thrilling way to arrive at a landfall.

For the next week, we anchored in the Galapagos, which is worth a whole story in itself. We spent two days in the bustling port of San Cristobal, then sailed north and anchored off Puerto Ayora on Isla de Santa Cruz for the rest of our stay. Both of these cities were surprisingly busy with lots of traffic, taxis, tourists and mini-cruise ships. The surrounding countryside was well developed with small farms producing fruits, vegetables, cattle and even coffee. Seeing the real “wilderness” the Galapagos is known for involved taking one-day or longer organized tours to outlying islands.

Cruising yachts are only allowed into four anchorages, and exploring by dinghy outside those anchorages is forbidden. Cruisers can hire a naturalist, which permits them to visit 60-something anchorages, but this is an expensive proposition and would have cost us about US\$2,000 per day.

“WE SAW BLUE-FOOTED BOOBIES AND RED-THROATED FRIGATE BIRDS WITH THEIR EGGS AND CHICKS, SEAWEED-EATING MARINE IGUANAS, EAGLE RAYS, SHARKS, GIANT TORTOISES, AND WE EVEN SNORKELED WITH SEA LIONS.”



privacy and food are, to put it mildly, pretty basic.

While our voyage cost \$6,000 each for two weeks—which was pretty reasonable considering all our food and liquor was included—it was a small price to pay for making a passage to one of the most intriguing places on the planet.

Add to that the chance to sail on one of the world's premier yachts with an accomplished and very professional crew and a superb captain who doubled the value of the passage simply through his good humour and wit, and I can't recall a more memorable or relaxing voyage.

At the time of writing, Mustang was in Tahiti about to head on to the Caribbean via North and Central America. For more information on the Mustang's schedule and her upcoming charter availability, contact Matthew Côté at matthewcote600@hotmail.com or mustang@skymate.com.

Left: Fishboats moored near the fish market in Puerto Ayora on Isla Santa Cruz. At the market, pelicans and sea lion pups wandered among the customers and vie for scraps.



Right: One of the author's greatest experiences was swimming with sea lion pups.

Below: Whalers and early settlers almost wiped out the once-abundant Galapagos giant tortoises. They are now slowly rebuilding, thanks in part to hatchery programs.

However, despite the limitations, to be in the part of the world that spawned Darwin's theory of evolution and the home of species not found anywhere else in the world was a once in a lifetime experience. We had some wonderful explorations and saw incredible sights: blue-footed boobies and red-throated frigate birds with their eggs and chicks, seaweed-eating marine iguanas, eagle rays, sharks, giant tortoises, and we even snorkeled with sea lions. None showed the slightest fear of humans. And between each excursion, we returned to our luxurious yacht to be treated like kings and queens.

There is nothing in the world comparable to making an ocean passage in a self-contained sailboat nor the experience of being all-alone on the vast and unpredictable sea. Yet there

comes a time in many a sailor's life when he or she simply doesn't want to take the challenge of crewing or owning a yacht. For myself, the opportunity to make an offshore passage in comfort—to have the adventure but not the responsibility of the boat—proved a perfect way to enjoy the best of both worlds.

Mustang is one of only a few first-class yachts currently sailing the world that offer this type of adventure chartering opportunity. Some are larger with passengers crammed in like cattle, while others offer what I call the "granola" experience, where the adventure is the same, but the level of comfort,

