

March, 1994

Dear Family & Friends,

The Earth is round and Windborne has not fallen off, contrary to the lack of Newsletters!

When we last wrote to you, Windborne was in Grenada (August 1992) and ready to sail over to Venezuela for three (3) months. We did, loved it, and that's what this Newsletter will describe.

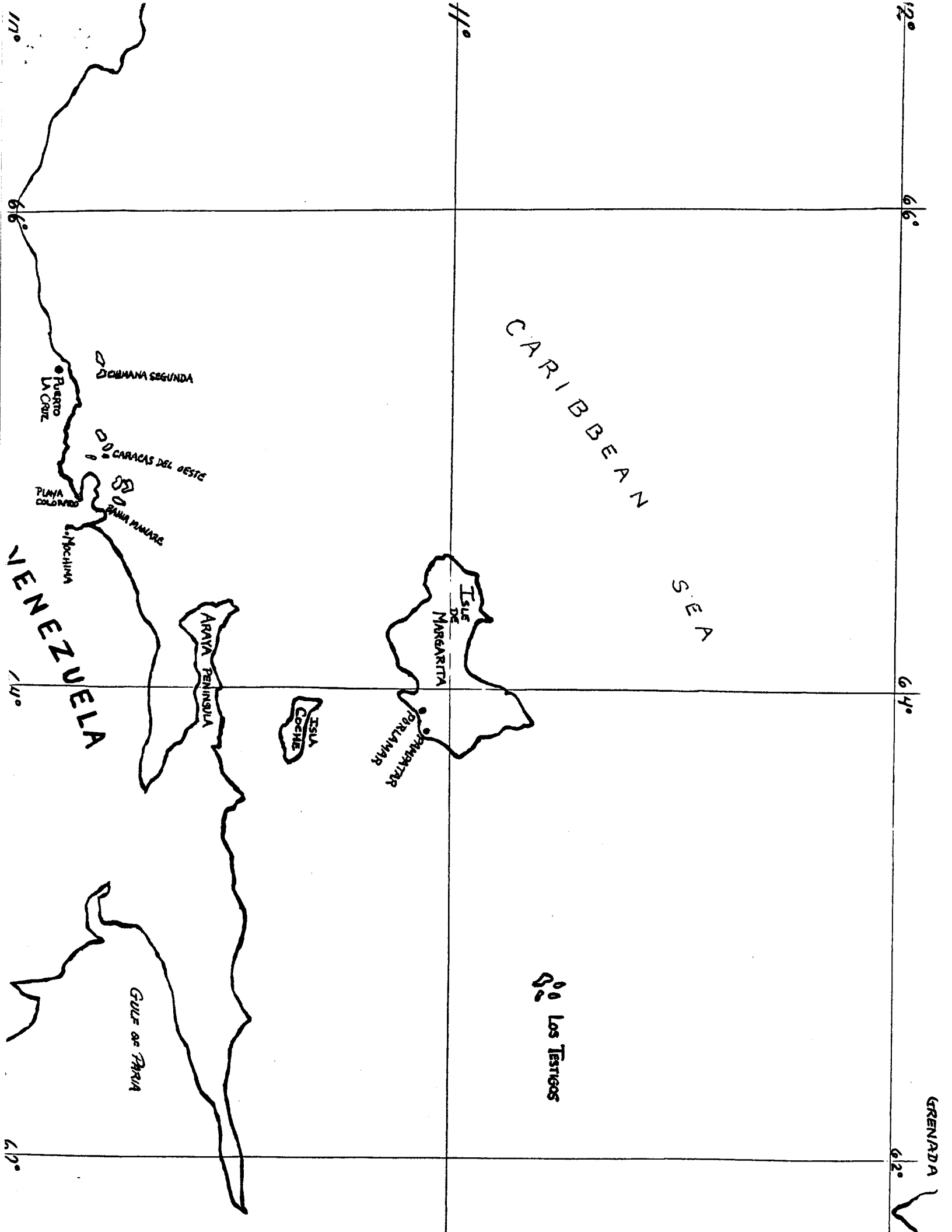
However, you're probably wondering:

- a) why haven't they written about this sooner and,
- b) where had they been in their silence for all of 1993?!?!?

Briefly, Tom and I took an 11-month employment in the British Virgin Islands between December, 1992 and November, 1993 with The Moorings, the world's largest charter boat company. We moved aboard and operated a 50 foot sailboat for their Crewed Yacht Division. A job that we both thoroughly enjoyed, but kept us incredibly busy with 24-hour turnaround charters. More about our lives as Charter Boat Captains later.

Presently we are back aboard Windborne in Saint Martin and will be slowly drifting southward through the Caribbean island chain during 1994.

And now, The Exotic Land of Venezuela . . .



On August 23, 1992 at 6:00 p.m., the bottom of Prickly Bay released our anchor which it had held happily for four weeks. Lovely Grenada; we would miss her as we watched her twinkling lights fade astern in the early evening hours.

We sailed uneventfully through the night, following a lightening storm which lay ahead of us 50 miles or so and never gave us anything but a brilliant sky to watch.

Dawn revealed the four tiny islands of Los Testigos where we would stop for a few days before continuing on to the Isle of Margarita and the mainland of Venezuela. Los Testigos are located 90 miles southwest of Grenada and their only inhabitants are frigate birds and a few fishermen.

We share the anchorage on Testigo Grande with two other boats. One Brazilian and the other, an American named "Almitra" whom we had met previously in Grenada. It's a beautiful anchorage right off a lovely sandy spit with waves crashing on shore just the other side. A 300 foot sand dune spans southeast of us and the terrain is generally desert-like, home to thousands of cactus and succulents.

Our four days on this South American oasis were spent snorkeling, fishing, baking bread, hiking and exploring. Much of this was done with our friends from Almitra. One afternoon, we four Americans stumbled upon a fishing camp with three 'pescadors'. These three fishermen knew no English and we, no Spanish (yet). Regardless, we all had a good time for about an hour drawing pictures in the sand in order to communicate.

On our second afternoon at anchor, an intense storm front closed in. We could see an ominous black wall filled with rain pushing white, frothing water in front of it. We estimated that we had about 20 minutes to "batten the hatches". We secured all portholes, hatches, tied all jugs down on deck, and took below anything without a proper home. Even hauled up the dinghy on deck in case we had to make a quick retreat to sea. When the tempest hit, day literally turned to night. The 40-knot wind lasted for one hour and heeled Windborne 15° at anchor. Horizontal sheets of rain pelted us for long

after that. We three boats all had our running lights on and watched out the portholes. We thought Almitra's screaming wind generator would lift the entire boat out of the water, but instead came in contact with their GPS antenna and instantly demolished it into splinters. Other than that, we all fared well through the blow. Thank God for heavy chain and anchors!

Several days later the high pressure system weakened, reducing wind speeds to a more manageable level. Sailing forty-four miles west-southwest, Isla Margarita looms 3,240 feet and most of its shoreline is rimmed with tall, modern buildings. This is the Gold Coast for Venezuelan mainlanders who frequently vacation on this coastal island.

Before getting into the hustle-bustle however, we arrive at their sleepy little seaside village of Pampatar for Clearance.

Unlike the Eastern Caribbean islands where your Clearance is done first with Customs and then Immigration, the Venezuelans require Clearance with all of the following: Customs, National Guard, Immigration, Port Captain and a Doctor! It can take up to 2½ hours and the whole procedure must be repeated when you leave. In addition, each of the above offices can sometimes be a hot mile from each other. Therefore, we chose our option and hired an Agent to clear us in at a cost of \$30 U.S.

A visa is required for Venezuela and its territories. We had applied for ours while in Grenada; \$35 each. At the same time, we received a cholera vaccination for Venezuela at a cost of \$25 each. Upon arrival in Venezuela or territories, a Doctor comes aboard your boat, inspects your toilet and refrigerator and gives you a 10-minute speech on cholera. If you have any fresh fish on board, it's confiscated. This, of course, is done for a fee of \$10.

Venezuelans love officialdom and anything they can use a rubber stamp on. In addition, they seem to possess every shade of Bravado. From the National Guard whos daily patrol of city streets en mass are with full weapon dress, to a city bank security guards standing at their station one on each side of the front doors, Uzi drawn, finger on trigger. Nor are they exactly ashamed of using their political positions to get ahead, as attested to by the presidents \$17 million embezzlement trial, and subsequent coup. Although we witnessed these things in urban areas, we felt it was overkill.

Porlamar is the cosmopolitan city of Margarita and wears it well. A shopping mecca with everything imaginable at duty-free prices. It was here that Tom was nearly arrested.

While I was waiting at a food mart, Tom went to a nearby bank to cash some travelers checks. He approached the Foreign Exchange Desk, slid over his passport and proceeded to sign the checks while she witnessed. She then took the checks and passport from Tom, claiming he was an imposter! He patiently asked her to review the passport again. Long minutes passed as she huddled with her supervisor and they suspiciously glared at Tom. The clerk walked back to Tom with checks and passport in hand, shaking her head, brows furrowed, rattling fast Spanish. Thinking he was to become an example of political exercises, he grabbed the checks and passport out of her hand and escaped out the door!

Needless to say, we now had a small stack of worthless checks. Fortunately we took the checks to the Concorde Hotel and explained our plight to an American Front Desk Manager who readily cashed our checks after looking at Tom's passport. He told us that we were not the first ones and that others had long weeks of problems trying to retrieve their money. He said Tom had done the right thing. (---Only in Venezuela . . .)

From Margarita, it was on to Isla Coche. A strange island of red and yellow hills covered by scrub and cactus. Large, new abandoned buildings were all that remained of an agricultural research center gone broke. Walking through the town was like a deserted Twilight Zone set. Town Hall, newly cemented planters and lamp posts, playground, church--all probably down the drain along with the research center. Here's proof that a desert island is indeed a strange place for an agricultural research center.

While in Coche we were reunited with four Canadian cruisers from months ago, and we shared a few cerveza (beers) trading adventures.

Next, we spent one afternoon in front of ruins of a Fort on Venezuela's Araya Peninsula. Almost immediately after dropping our anchor, we had intermittent visits from 12 friendly young men and boys who were very curious about this only boat in the anchorage. Some hung on the boat 10-15 minutes trying

to do chin-ups in order to see onto the deck. They obediently heeded our reprimands to stay off. A few asked for "Agua, por favor!", (water, please). They swam around until dusk, staring at us with big, brown eyes and broad, white smiles.

The following morning we motored along a windless coastline to Mochima National Park on the mainland of Venezuela. Mochima is a pretty inlet that extends four miles into surrounding hills. Deep inside, it's densely wooded and opens up to a mirror-calm lake with the Village of Mochima. It is the first time that Tom and I have seen land surround us since leaving the United States!

While fishermen are allowed to live and fish in the area, other development is restricted and wildlife protected. Dolphins, seabirds, small green parrots and hawks are abundant. The mountains get a lot of rain but it rarely reaches the outer islands, so you can actually see the transition from jungle to desert.

The Village of Mochima is a very pleasant, small town that thrives on a combination of fishing and tourism. Visitors arrive mostly by bus and car and all along the waterfront long, open boats are waiting, their owners anxious to give harbor tours.

The twenty miles from Mochima westward to Puerto La Cruz includes a dozen islands and hundreds of anchorages. The following are a few of our favorites.

Bahia Manare - A stunning cove surrounded by massive rock walls 100 feet high. Atop the facing cliffs are lookout posts where fishermen can see the entering schools of fish which they net. Three shacks on the beach are home to fishing families who cook whole fish and arepas (a corn-flour heavy pancake) on an open hearth and invite you to join them. There is also a neatly painted prayer house whose candle burns each night.

Isla Caracas Del Oeste - An uninhabited island with excellent snorkeling. Elkhorn and brain corals almost covered with yellow, red and blue polychaetes. In addition, beautiful schools of fish. We often wear a Lycra wet suit in Venezuelan waters because of the colder equatorial current, as well as the seasonal population of micro jelly fish.

Playa Colorado - A public beach where we were swarmed by jet skis and people being towed on an oversized, inflatable torpedo. On the beach vendors are busy selling cerveza, arepas, coconut tarts and fried plantain. We enjoyed sampling all of it!

Chimana Secunda - Weekend spot for the mainlanders. White, powdery sand beach rimmed with thatched cabana huts and palm trees. High rock cliffs on either side echo the surf pounding on the beach. At night the fruit bats and vampire bats swirl in the air, their squeaks sound so close, you'd think they were hanging in the rigging! Some had 18" wing spans. Naturally, we made sure all our screens were in place before dark. We knew of several cruisers who didn't and awoke to a vampire bat flying around in their boat and a chaotic time trying to get him out. Still others we heard were biten--it was reported they liked toes.

However, it was not a bat that stalked us here one rainy, crowded Saturday afternoon. At first you could only hear thundering engines and just make out a white bow wake shoveling through the water. With its speed and size, it came in quick and by the time its bow wake rolled every boat in the anchorage, it had everyone's full attention. Everyone stopped whatever they were doing and wondered who would be under its' scrutiny.

The sixty-foot, battleship grey military cruiser neared pulling back throttles, slowing to an ominous approach. The smoked black windows gave nothing away but the large, bold letters on her sides wreaked authority, "GUARDIA NATIONAL" (National Guard). It motored deliberately right to Windborne!! The grey ships bow towered over Windbornes deck and hovered just a foot away. We stood meekly in its shadow. A uniformed soldier emerged from the blackened pilothouse and sternly ordered, "Passporte!". Apprehensively, we handed them over. He disappears with them into the pilot-house. Long moments pass before he reappears and we surrender our ship's documents, as ordered. Without any dialog he again vanishes within the pilothouse. Panic sears through our veins as the hovering ship now motors away from Windborne, out of the anchorage. They now possess all our vital documents! Tom makes a quick mental note of the vessels hull number; in case of what, we did not know.

Finally the ship holds position 500 yards away. After an eternal 15 minutes, the ship manuevers back along side Windborne. (Are they coming back to handcuff us?!) The door opens, soldier marches out and hands over all our documents. He then bid us an unsmiling "Gracias". WHEW! They sure like to see you sweat! They spent the next hour checking a few other boats in the anchorage. We later learned that these random checks are typical.

Puerto La Cruz is a bustling city of 100,000 people. Located on the coast 450 miles east of Caracas, it is truly a place of "have's" and "have nots". Being an OPEC nation rich in petroleum, many reap the by-product benefits while others suffer from its' excess.

Venezuela's currency is the Bolivar and it seems to be on a runaway train. Within the three months of our stay, it rose from 66.30 to 78.55 = \$1.00 US. Banks were offering a 42% rate of return on a one-year CD! The ever-improving currency exchange rates made our lifestyle very pleasant. To have your laundry washed, dried and folded was \$1.50 per load. Diesel fuel was .27¢ a gallon. We also had new upholstery done for a fraction of States prices. -- And food! For example, it was almost cheaper to eat in a restaurant than it was to buy the food, bring it home and prepare it. In a wonderful restaurant, a meal of filet minon including drinks and a bottle of wine cost about \$15.00 -for the two of us. Their tenderloin, called Lomito costs \$2.00/pound and beers were .35¢ each.

There were many street vendors with presses who would squeeze you a 10 oz. glass of fresh orange juice for 25 Bolivars (.36¢). Another popular item is a "Jugo Batido". They take your choice of fresh fruit, chop it, throw it in a blender with ice and a hint of sugar and whir . . . delicious! Banana, pineapple, strawberry, melon, peach, apple - you name it. Their produce here is beautiful.

Their common fast-food was an empanada, a meat filled pastry. But they also loved the American hot dog and Lebanese fallafal.



In the shopping district, the streets were filled with people, aromas and music. Every radio competed for the festive beat of the Latin salsa music. And what do they love to shop for? Shoes! Unbelievably, whole streets and blocks are dedicated to footwear and accessorizing leather products.

Since their daytime shopping hours are pinched due to the siesta hours (11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.) they've invented a fantastic nightly galleria along the waterfront strip. Vendors set up their wares: leather, jewelry, paintings, carvings, pottery, sunglasses, T-shirts, pastries, flans, etc. It draws a big family-oriented crowd; lots of kids, even strollers. It's a safe and (finally) cooler time for a walk. Daytime temps are high 90's.

"Safe" is a relative term in any urban area and Puerto La Cruz is not much different. Theft is the biggest threat to the tourist, but common sense can foil pick-pockets and purse snatchers. However, the cruising sailor has a couple of other potential pitfalls: The Dinghy and its' Outboard. There are several stolen in the Puerto La Cruz area each week. Many had been locked. To reduce these thefts, there was a designated dinghy parking lot set up on the beach in front of the city. The lot was manned by attendants known as Dinghy Boys who would protect your dinghy while you were ashore. They were on duty from 7:00 a.m to midnight, sometimes later. While you were gone, they would clean your dinghy, fill your water jugs, bring you ice or whatever errand you needed. All for the equivalent of .50¢ US.

The Dinghy Boys were a great help ashore, but the poor dinghy was still a target in the anchorage as well. At night it was mandatory to lock the dinghy to the mother ship AND it had to be lifted out of the water. The motto was "Lift It or Lose It".

Sadly, theft was a problem on the water. We shared the same anchorage as a boat which had been broken into and robbed by a swimmer from shore. The thief rafted his stolen goods on one of the boats foam cushions, swam back to shore and was never caught.

In another case, a cruising catamaran with two French sailors aboard had the following true experience:

The two French sailors had been ashore for their evening meal. When they returned to their catamaran they surprised a naked, wet thief who was in the process of sawing through the boats locked doorway. He had apparently swam the 100 yards from shore. The Frenchmen apprehended the young Venezuelan thief and took him, still naked, to the Police Department. However, the Police advised that it was not their jurisdiction since it happened on the water; it was a case for the Guardia National. So the two Frenchmen and naked thief taxied to the Guardia National office. During the 20 minute taxi ride the young thief had manufactured his story. Unfortunately, the Guardia National Officer didn't quite understand the Frenchmen's poor Spanish, so the Officer asked the Venezuelan what had happened.

He stated that he met the Frenchmen in a bar, who later invited him to their catamaran for a drink. After they were all aboard, the French stripped him and wanted sexual favors of him. When he refused, they threatened to have him arrested as a thief!

This story ends with the two Frenchmen being thrown in jail overnight and the naked thief catching a cab home!

Luckily, Tom and I neither had a problem with theft, nor were we forced to use our poor 'pecito' Spanish to explain anything. We knew no Spanish when we arrived in Venezuela, but quickly learned enough to get by. Out of necessity, the first place we learned was at the grocery store. After a few times of ordering a half kilo of anything from the deli counter, you're on your way. We also got very good at charades and Pictionary.

I've saved the best part for last -- visitors! To explore new lands and cultures is truly an adventure. But to share them with someone makes it all the more memorable. We were fortunate to have Bobbi & Jeff Roshitsh and Shelly & Jean Sinclair as our guests while in Venezuela. They agreed that they would've never otherwise gone someplace like Venezuela, but were all glad they did. It was an absolute pleasure to have them along.

We certainly enjoyed our visit to Venezuela and I feel that I have only briefly described all of what we discovered. It is a fascinating country with passionate people.

Our cabin door is always open and the invitation stands. If you wish to come for a visit and taste our Caribbean lifestyle, please contact Jean Sinclair at (216)494-2472 with your estimated time frame. We'll be ready to welcome you aboard Windborne!

Thanks to all of you who have written to us, sent cassette or VCR tapes (the TV shows and movies have been great!) -- keep them coming! Send anything, anytime to:

Jean Sinclair  
c/o Windborne  
306 Gaslight Circle S.E.  
N. Canton, Ohio 44720

Since we are roaming the Caribbean again and no longer working as charter captains, I promise the next Newsletter won't take so long.

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Monika".