

As a child, I had dreamed of one day sailing into the sunset, but I grew up without boating skills and a tendency to seasickness. When I moved from Portland, Ore., to Orange County, Calif., I looked forward to starting a new life, but never expected to say, "Why don't we go cruising."

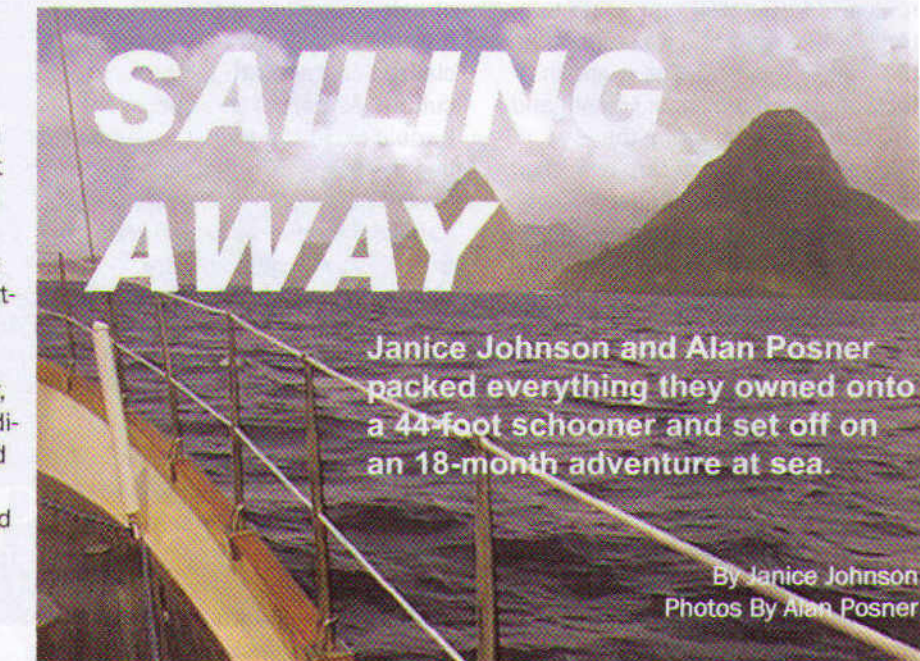
Within months, my significant other, Alan Posner, had retired from his medical practice, and we purchased an old 44-foot Nauticat staysail schooner, which was built in Finland, and named her *Prologue*. A year later, we sold everything and moved aboard. A month later, we sailed south.

As *Prologue* left the dock in Long Beach, I felt numb with fear. At least Alan was a good sailor. That night, I stood watch for the first time; when Alan found me sound asleep, he became angry, and I hated my incompetence. Alan immediately set up an alarm on the radar to warn of approaching boats.

On our second overnight passage, the seas were rough and the sky moonless. I sat in the pilothouse, barely able to sit up as the sailboat barreled through the darkness like a wild bronco, but I was determined not to fall asleep. We anchored on windswept San Quinton Bay and were alone until the Mexican navy sent a boarding party. Three men climbed aboard. One rushed to our bow, where he stood for the next hour with his machine gun at the ready. An officer conducted an inspection while a sailor followed him around, both hands on his rifle and eyes always on



Architecture in Curacao reflects the city's European heritage.



Janice Johnson and Alan Posner packed everything they owned onto a 44-foot schooner and set off on an 18-month adventure at sea.

By Janice Johnson
Photos By Alan Posner

Prologue approaching the Pitons at St. Lucia.

us. After the young men left, we heaved a sigh of relief.

The next night we anchored at Cedros Island, where dolphins, sea lions, pelicans, sea gulls, ducks and schools of fish surrounded the sailboat and filled the air with friendly noise. The sea lions jumped out of the water in formation, imitating dolphins, but plump and uncoordinated. All night long, sea lions bumped against the

hull of the boat. In the morning, a rumba line of sea lions and dolphins followed us out of the harbor.

By the time we had reached the Sea of Cortez, we were tired. I had mastered night watches and we had seen beautiful sights, but we wanted a break from the daily grind of ocean travel. *Prologue* spent the month of December docked in La Paz. During the holiday season, merchants decorated stores with trees, angels, manger scenes and a few Santas. Huge Christmas ornaments, reminiscent of piñatas, hung at every intersection. Shoppers crowded into the city's center, and transient vendors stood in stalls or knelt on blankets.

While docked in La Paz, we took an eight-hour ferry trip and then a nine-hour train ride to visit the Copper Canyon. Our first look took our breath away: an expanse of exquisite mountains and steep valleys, shrouded in pink mist. We left the train at Creel where Taramuhara Indians raced by on wooden-bridled horses, chaps flapping. From there we visited a church in a remote village high in the mountains above Creel. Inside the plain cement building, parishioners sat against the walls, on benches, waiting. Finally, 10 men donned gold head-dresses, with red, white, green and gold crepe paper streamers, and danced — until large buckets of fermented corn mash were brought forth to share — and then everyone danced to honor the Virgin of Guadeloupe.

Back at sea, we anchored off Isla Isabella, a bird sanctuary where hundreds of frigate and booby birds sat on nests, perched precariously on scrubby little trees. The tiny white fluffy babies could be seen peeking out from under their mothers. Amorous males puffed up the red skin under their chins to the size of basketballs to tempt any female not involved with child-rearing.

In Puerto Vallarta, we found a full marina and bustling boardwalk. Diners in an Italian restaurant watched while I tried to mend a hole in our heavy sails and Alan put away

dock lines. A few diners snapped our picture. We took a bus downtown and found distinctive architecture lining a white beach, while above it all stood high jungle-covered hills. Smooth-talking waiters beckoned us into their restaurants. Three American men wearing only bathing suits under huge beer bellies rode down the main street on horses, giving new meaning to "Ugly American."

At the islands of Tres Mariettas, we visited a bird sanctuary recently destroyed by a tourist's fire and watched a naturalist sadly tagging and bagging the casualties. Nearby, we chased giant manta rays in our dinghy and, after the sun went down, watched small white rays jump out of the water.

We left Mexico and sailed down Central America where strong winds drove us to seek a safe harbor in Nicaragua. At midnight, we limped into San Juan del Sur with an

fancy marine rain gear. As we neared the Atlantic, we could see it far below us. As we pulled into the marina, we noticed that our Panamanian pilot and young woman friend had sparked a romance.

Our last stop in Panama, the San Blas Islands, was home to the short, attractive and good-natured Kuna Indians who live on hundreds of white-sand islands covered with palm trees and surrounded by stunning coral reefs. We bartered fish hooks, finger nail polish, spaghetti (with "red sauce") and toothpaste for their needlework. When offered a rain poncho with Mickey Mouse on the back, the Indians looked at it with confusion and politely declined.

In Colombia, we fell in love with Cartagena, the only city in that country we dared to visit. We met a young Brazilian who had ridden a motorcycle around South America and written a book. Now, he was paid a monthly stipend to sail around the world. In Cartagena, he met a lovely young woman, and five days later, they were married. This way, her family would allow her to travel with him. We also met a young Frenchman with yellow teeth, cotton-candy hair and a filthy boat; he had a charming personality and desperately wanted a girlfriend, too.

We enjoyed the tidy, colorful and efficient Dutch influence in Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire. We snorkeled along Bonaire's world-class coral reef and learned how to cook lizard from a local. In Aruba, we strolled along carefully tended beaches and gambled in fancy casinos, whenever Alan could find a \$5 blackjack table. We drank beer in bars built over the water, and ate fresh fish for every meal.

It was a short trip to Venezuela's islands, where vivid blue and turquoise water contrasted with rose- and peach- hued sand. Along the northern coast, we found jelly fish-infested bays and heard stories of desperate robbers. When we arrived at Puerto La Cruz, a small black bat clung to our bow. We learned he was a blood-sucking bat from a nearby island. We lost him under the dock of a five-star resort and forgot him for the next two weeks while we enjoyed the free cocktail parties, cable television and inexpensive massages.

From Venezuela, we headed north and entered the Eastern Caribbean, where our traveling companions changed to ocean liners, luxury yachts, European sailboats filled with young adventurers, and international charters. The Eastern Caribbean seemed to be the center of the boating universe.

In Grenada, we enjoyed the yacht club with its expanse of soft green grass, outdoor laundry and starched waitresses. We happened across a group of American and British cruisers at a happy hour and were invited to dinner. We filled a large taxi and bumped along the rutted roads, past the stink of the rum factory and to a building



Prologue docked in the Bahamas.

overheated engine. Over the next six days, we could not leave our sailboat due to high winds in the harbor. Our batteries, water and food ran low, while the Sandinista port officials found creative ways to take our money.

In Guatemala, port officials charged a reasonable fee; and the charming young officer who visited the boat smiled a lot, shook our hands energetically, and said, "I am pleased to welcome you to Guatemala. I am pleased to welcome you to Guatemala." We took the bus to Antigua, the old capital city that had become a mecca for Spanish-language schools. On the trip home, we discovered we had taken the wrong bus, and our driver dumped us on a dusty street in the middle of a shantytown outside Guatemala City, while the bus riders roared with laughter and we wondered if we would ever get home.

The coast of Panama was lush and deserted all the way to the Canal, and stayed away from the prison island. In Panama City, we prepared to transit the Canal by hiring a pilot and rope handlers. A young American woman from another sailboat volunteered to come along. We crossed in one day, always surrounded by huge merchant ships. It rained and the local line handlers loved wearing our



(Above) Falmouth Harbor, Antigua. (Right) *Prologue* approaching Fort Lauderdale, Fla., at trip's end.

without walls, on top of a hill. There we ate local food cooked by the taxi driver's wife and served by his daughters.

Next, we cruised north through the small islands of the Grenadines. On Union Island, we watched a Rastafarian, with a beard and dreadlocks to his waist, lay down on broken glass and later balance a chair on three empty beer bottles.

On Mustique, still in the Grenadines, we took a tour to see the vacation homes of Princess Margaret, David Bowie and Mick Jagger. We sat in a local bar, searching faces for someone famous and ran into friends from the taxi driver's dinner. They invited us to Christmas dinner aboard an Italian yacht in the Tobago Cayes, a protected wilderness that looked more like a superhighway for sailboats. We paid \$5 to have a head of cabbage delivered to the boat so we could bring coleslaw to the dinner.

We stopped in Dominica when water leaked into our engine cylinders. We anchored in front of a shabby hotel, and two staff members rushed out to assist Alan with disassembling the engine. During the procedure, one was squirted with oily water from head to foot. Once the engine was reassembled, Alan found one extra screw. In the middle of the night, he figured out where it went, and the next day we left Dominica.

On the main island of Guadeloupe, customs officials wanted to fine us 1,000 francs for not having a current Coast Guard stamp on our boat's documentation. Alan refused to budge and directed me to call the U.S. Embassy. His tenacity convinced the officials to back down, and we left that island immediately.

In Puerto Rico, we attended a regatta fashion show where bikini-clad girls in high heels paraded across the stage. The King of the Regatta came out and enjoyed their attention. He announced that his successor would be selected, and the girls rushed over and tried to pull Alan onto the stage. Blushing profusely, Alan refused to move. It was a case of mistaken identity, and he was abandoned while another man was pulled onto the stage to be crowned king.



In the Bahamas we found clear, shallow water in shades of turquoise, but we quickly learned to watch for dark yellowish spots that indicated coral heads. Flying fish landed on our decks, and tiny birds traveled with us between islands. On my birthday, we visited Allen Cay, where 50 iguanas rushed out to greet us and then stood motionless until we left. It was the most exciting birthday party I have ever had.

As we neared the United States, I realized that I had become an adequate first mate to an excellent skipper who had faced bad weather and equipment failures with courage and good judgment. Yet, I felt fortunate to still be alive.

Prologue arrived in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. After 7,000 miles of undulating oceans, 18 months of endless togetherness, and 25 countries; we were ready to be back in the United States. *Prologue* limped into the Lauderdale Marina with a major leak in her hydraulic steering system, serious dings in the keel and hull from coral heads, a warped propeller shaft, and two very happy sailors.

Note: Today, Janice and Alan live in a house in Palm City, Fla., and have a motorboat. They are members of Palm Beach Mensa.