

INDEPTH

TRENDS, ANALYSIS, PERSPECTIVE

First, you get the boat out of 'jail'

A dubious delivery job starts with navigating the hostility and agendas of Dominican authorities

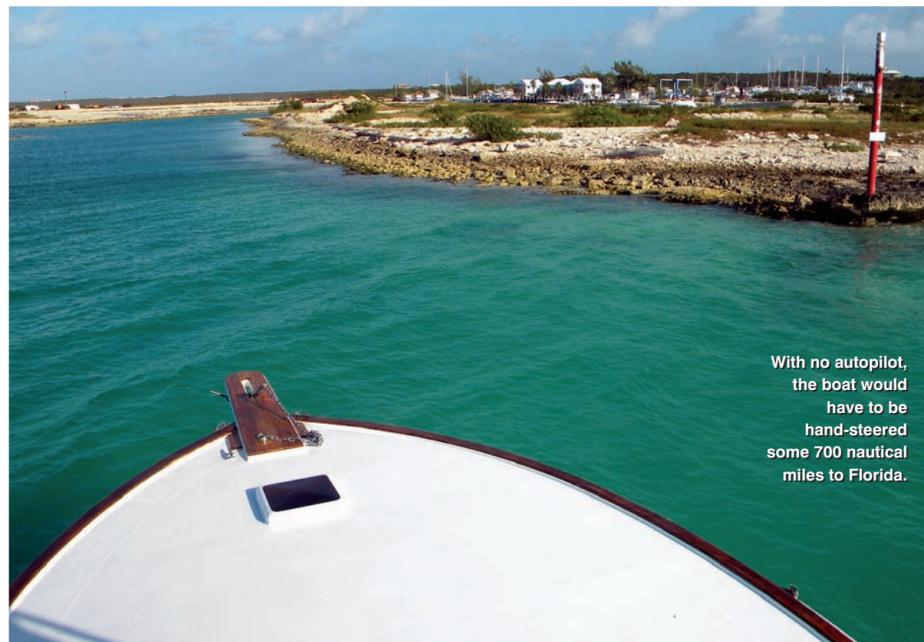
Editor's note: In the first of a two-part story, the writer and his pugnacious British friend must first get the boat they are delivering out of a Dominican port.

By Peter Swanson

Her twin Detroit's roared to life, and we took in the dock lines. Among the small crowd gathered on the rickety pier was artist Lou Jorgl, who lives and works aboard his boat in the Dominican Republic. Jorgl was performing his best imitation of a priest, going through the motions of blessing our voyage. Old Lou knew we needed all the help we could get.

Lou Jorgl is real, but from here on some names have been omitted or changed to protect the criminally negligent and all-around imbeciles who made this story possible. It is the story of the delivery of a boat from the D.R. to Florida. Editors at Soundings referred to it by the working title "Delivery gone wrong," which would have been a fine description except for the implication that this escapade had ever been "right" in the first place.

I was wandering around the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show with the rest of the boating scribes when I got a phone call from Barry Terry, my delivery partner in the Dominican Republic, about the possibility of a job. Terry runs a sportfishing excursion business at Puerto Plata and he likes to break up his routine with the occasional delivery. For me, the delivery sideline augments my "income mosaic" and provides valuable exposure to different craft and electronic equipment. We specialize in Florida-Caribbean jobs, though in 2008 we enjoyed a sweet gig taking a trawler



With no autopilot, the boat would have to be hand-steered some 700 nautical miles to Florida.

yacht from Ensenada, Mexico, to San Francisco.

In that initial call, the second sentence out of Terry's mouth set the stage for everything that followed. He said the boat was a 31-year-old sportfisherman without an autopilot, which meant 700 nautical miles of hand-steering. He wasn't reassuring about the rest of the vessel's electronics suite, either. She had been sitting idle in a harbor on the north coast of the D.R. and had just been sold to our client, a man back in the States.

Surely the reality that no one hand-steers during passages would strike the non-boater as odd, but most long-distance mariners would rather drink spit than actually steer a boat for more than 10 minutes, and I am no different. "If we have to hand-steer, at least we shouldn't have to hand-navigate," I said, begging for help from one of my contacts at Lowrance, an electronics manufacturer with a booth at the show.

Lowrance smiled on us with the loan of one of its new HDS8 GPS/chart plotters, generosity that

would make an enormous difference later. Similar groveling got me the necessary cartography from the people at Navionics, whom I reminded are headquartered in my old hometown of Wareham, Mass.

With Lowrance and Navionics in my luggage, I flew to the Dominican Republic the next day. That's when I learned we would be the second team to attempt the delivery — that is, if we decided to go ahead with it. Terry was waiting for me before going through the boat, which I will call Double Trouble.

* * *

The first attempters were a pair of cruisers who had landed in the harbor and never left. They didn't get far with Double Trouble either, and they caused a panic in the harbor when they tried to return in the middle of the night, having forgotten how to find the harbor entrance. The cruisers in the harbor mobilized, sending dinghies to the mouth with spotlights to guide these "experienced mariners" back into retirement.

Some say one engine had quit and the electronics had failed. The skippers themselves didn't say much. Certainly the fact that they called asking for waypoints over their cell phone instead of the VHF was a clue. We would later be astonished at the full



The writer's delivery partner Barry Terry.

PETER SWANSON

extent of how negligent they had been trying to take that old boat to sea.

The boat had been sold by a waterfront character, which the Caribbean seems to have more than its share of. For this story, I'll simply refer to him as Mickey Rongeur (not his real name) and leave it at that.

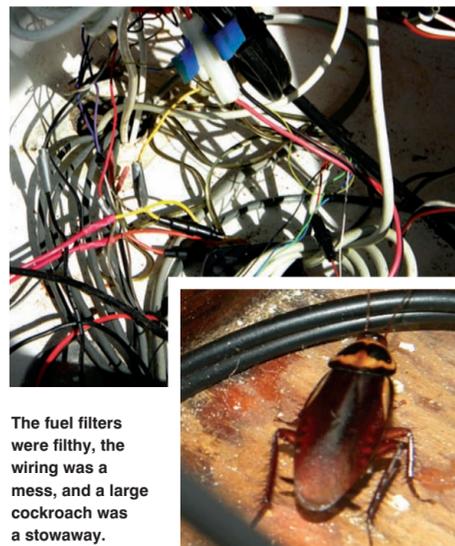
Our strategy was to get the boat to another marina and away from any intrigues by the seller or Dominican officials — in other words, to break Double Trouble out of "jail." We felt we needed to get her to an upscale facility, where one is protected from the most overt corruption common in Dominican ports, which have an awful reputation for onerous clearance procedures and "entrepreneurial" officials. We realized that once we had made that short trip to the new marina we were pretty much committed to the delivery.

* * *

My first impression of Double Trouble was from 100 feet away, and she looked pretty good. But when we climbed aboard I caught a whiff of the liquid in which I would marinate for nearly two



The fuel filters were filthy, the wiring was a mess, and a large cockroach was a stowaway.



weeks — diesel fuel. Plus, the interior was filthy, and the wiring was beyond bad. Not only was the original, crumbling cabling of non-tinned copper, but as repairs were made and new equipment installed, none of the old stuff had been removed. Medusa had neater hair.

"Captain" Mickey, as he called himself, and his Dominican maintenance man and associate assured us that except for a couple of dead batteries (two of four) and a non-functioning generator, Double Trouble's equipment worked fine, including the radar and fishfinder, even though these instruments had no covers and appeared to have been baked in the tropical sun for years.

Believing none of it, we were nonetheless reassured when those big engines rumbled to life at the first turn of the key, and we reckoned we could put Terry's crew from his sportfishing excursion to work sorting out the boat's problems while at the marina.

First we had to get Double Trouble out of the harbor, and that involved a trip to see the comandante.

"What do think our chances are of getting the boat to the [new marina] today?" Terry asked, as we drove to the naval HQ.

"I'd say about 75-25, and that depends on whether we can even find the comandante. It's Sunday, and he could be away from the comandancia and hung over." I also suggested to Terry that we might try to minimize the drama if the meeting didn't go our way. Fat chance!

At this point, I should say a few words about my partner, Barry Terry, an Englishman of 65 years and a man of many careers. Terry was an officer and a boxer in the British army. He was a briefly a professional soccer player whose prospects dimmed because of an inability to distinguish that sport from rugby. He went on to a career as a British customs officer during an era in which the agency combined aspects of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and Internal Revenue Service. He took early retirement, crossed the Atlantic in his 32-foot sailboat and proceeded to cruise the Caribbean for 10 years, ending up in the Dominican Republic.

Terry has become slightly more bilingual recently, but for years his Spanish was primitive. He could order food and drink. He could be rude and obscene in Dominican Spanish but could also

make his apologies for the bad behavior. Despite his belligerence and British brand of sarcasm, he can also be a jolly old Saxon, breaking out in song and singing tunes from the 1960s and old standards in their entirety.

We agreed that for the purposes of the meeting, neither of us would speak Spanish, though I get on fairly well in the language. With us was a translator, one of Terry's crew in the sportfish biz.

* * *

Sitting in the rustic front office of the comandancia, we faced the naval officer in charge of the port and the federal narcotics agent, who kept quiet at first. "You cannot leave in the vessel today. You must get an additional document signed at navy headquarters in Puerto Plata, but since today is Sunday, you must get the document tomorrow and then return," the comandante said.

We argued and argued and argued, and told them through our translator that their piece of paper was

nonsense. I had the feeling the narc was able to understand English by his attentiveness to our conversations among ourselves.

Frustrated at last, Terry's face grew even redder than usual, and he hollered, "Look, there are 400 boats in the harbor — 400 boats! — and you know that you would let any one of them leave today with no problem. We are not ignorant foreigners. I am a resident and a businessman here. We are professional captains, and we know the rules."

Though taken aback — and probably wondering if there really were 330 boats more than he knew about in the harbor — the comandante nevertheless refused to budge. It was time to put our get-out-jail card into play. Prior to the meeting, I had phoned a friend who was a top executive in a crucial Dominican industry — a man with access to the leadership in Santo Domingo, including the president of the country. Speaking to Terry and our translator, I said, "Maybe it's time we called Tito. Tito will call the admiral in Santo Domingo, and the admiral will sort these guys out."

"I speak English," the narc then announced, "and I understand what you are saying. You are going to call someone in the capital, and then an admiral is going to call us." His tone was derisive.

"We will call Santo Domingo, and you will get a phone call, but I understand your position," I said to the man. "You and the comandante prefer to learn things the hard way."

"You should also know that we have nothing to do with this Captain Mickey," Terry said. "He is not our friend. We are just professionals moving the boat."

After still more discussion, we reached a compromise. The comandante called navy headquarters and arranged to have the bogus document prepared for us, even though the office was officially closed. Our translator would make the 45-minute drive each way to pick it up and then return.

When we met later, we brought with us a local boatbuilder and good friend who had "cooperated with" comandantes past and present. The navy men greeted him with hugs and handshakes. The boatbuilder vouched for us enthusiastically. We paid a \$12 fee, and the comandante gave us written permission to take Double Trouble to the new marina. We left as friends, without having to call in the air strike.

For whatever reason, the problem, in hindsight, apparently had been the boat's former owner.

From the comandancia we drove directly to the marina, said goodbye to our friends, received our priestly blessing from Lou Jorgl, the artist, and washed our hands of Captain Mickey and his incompetent helper, who had misled us about the electronics. We didn't mind that the radar didn't function, but neither did the fishfinder, which meant no depth sounder in addition to no autopilot. Only the VHF and a simple GPS read-out were working, and there would be many more surprises.

* * *

At the marina, Terry and his crew and I spent the next three days changing filters and belts, trying to find appropriate spares, and repairing (or jury rigging) the electrical system enough to have confidence in basics such as navigation lights. Altogether we did too much to list here, but, speaking of lights, I used duct tape to attach a piece of plastic Sprite bottle over the starboard nav light, which was missing its green lens. Terry's men got the generator to run

by reattaching a wire that had broken off, so now we would have a way of charging the starting batteries for the Detroit's if necessary, not to mention power for the boat's electric stove.

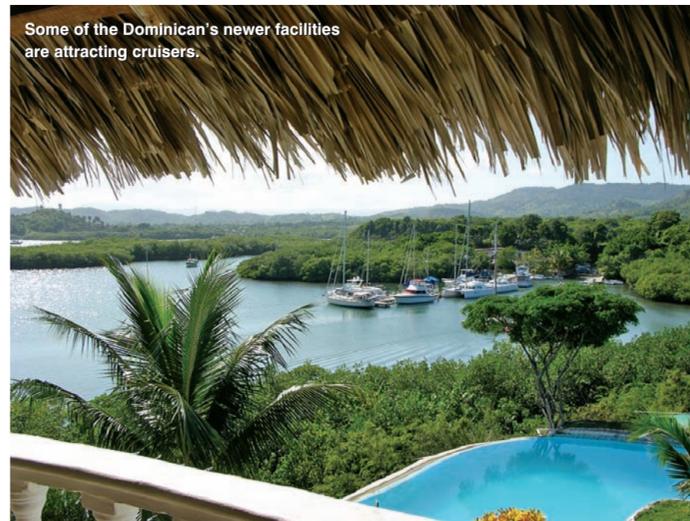
The boat came with a tiny fluke anchor connected to the rode by 12 feet of 1/4-inch chain. The setup was grossly inadequate, not just for overnight anchoring but as a last-ditch measure to prevent the vessel from foundering on a reef should her engines quit.

And, by the way, the fuel filters were absolutely filthy, the primaries filled with water. Both engine belts were well worn, and one was about to break.

And this brings me to the imbeciles who had made the first delivery attempt. What could they have been thinking? Even a casual inspection would show that Double Trouble's former owner was clueless when it came to boat husbandry. Yet those two had set out for the States about their safety but mathematically challenged as well. Even at displacement speeds of up to 9 knots, Double Trouble burns 11 gallons of fuel an hour; its two fuel tanks hold 500 gallons total. The distance to Florida Keys on that route is about 670 nautical miles. Even if they topped off the tanks at Great Inagua in the Bahamas, the remaining distance made it likely they would run

to go via the Old Bahama Channel, as they had told others. If so, not only were they lackadaisical about their safety but mathematically challenged as well.

There's a lot of lonely water between the Dominican Republic and the United States, particularly if it was true that the first crew had planned



Some of the Dominican's newer facilities are attracting cruisers.

out of fuel in open water unless they stumbled into some port on the north coast of Cuba.

We telephoned our client back in the States with our honest appraisal of the situation. We told him the boat was essentially sound, with strong motors, but that it needed work before it would be safe enough for the voyage and could pass a U.S. Coast Guard inspection. We explained that the things we needed to buy in the Dominican Republic cost more — sometimes a lot more — than they do in the United States. We didn't want him to be surprised when he got the bill.

It was during this conversation that we learned an amazing fact: Our client had purchased Double Trouble over the telephone without ever coming to look at her. This revelation would haunt us later. For now we were just stunned.

Double Trouble must have been a hell of a good deal.

By the time the boat was ready to rock, we had just enough of a weather window to reach the Turks and Caicos, our first fuel stop. We would be leaving after dark and arriving on the Caicos bank in early afternoon. After that, things would get even more interesting. But before we could go, we would have to endure yet another meeting with the Dominican navy.

Meet me back here next month for the rest of the story. ■

PETER SWANSON

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