

INDEPTH

TRENDS, ANALYSIS, PERSPECTIVE

Delivery where trouble is a companion

Misfortunes plague the delivery of a 42-foot sportfisherman from the Dominican to Florida

By Peter Swanson

As we nosed Double Trouble toward the opening in the seawall, a Dominican navy man came running down the quay, hollering that we must not leave.

Barry Terry, my British delivery partner, was at the helm, and I was on the foredeck coiling lines. I hollered back at the navy man in Spanish: "We went to your office — no one was there. Now, with bad weather coming soon, you want us to come back. We need to go now. What you are doing is not correct. We are leaving."

before setting course for the Turks and Caicos Islands.

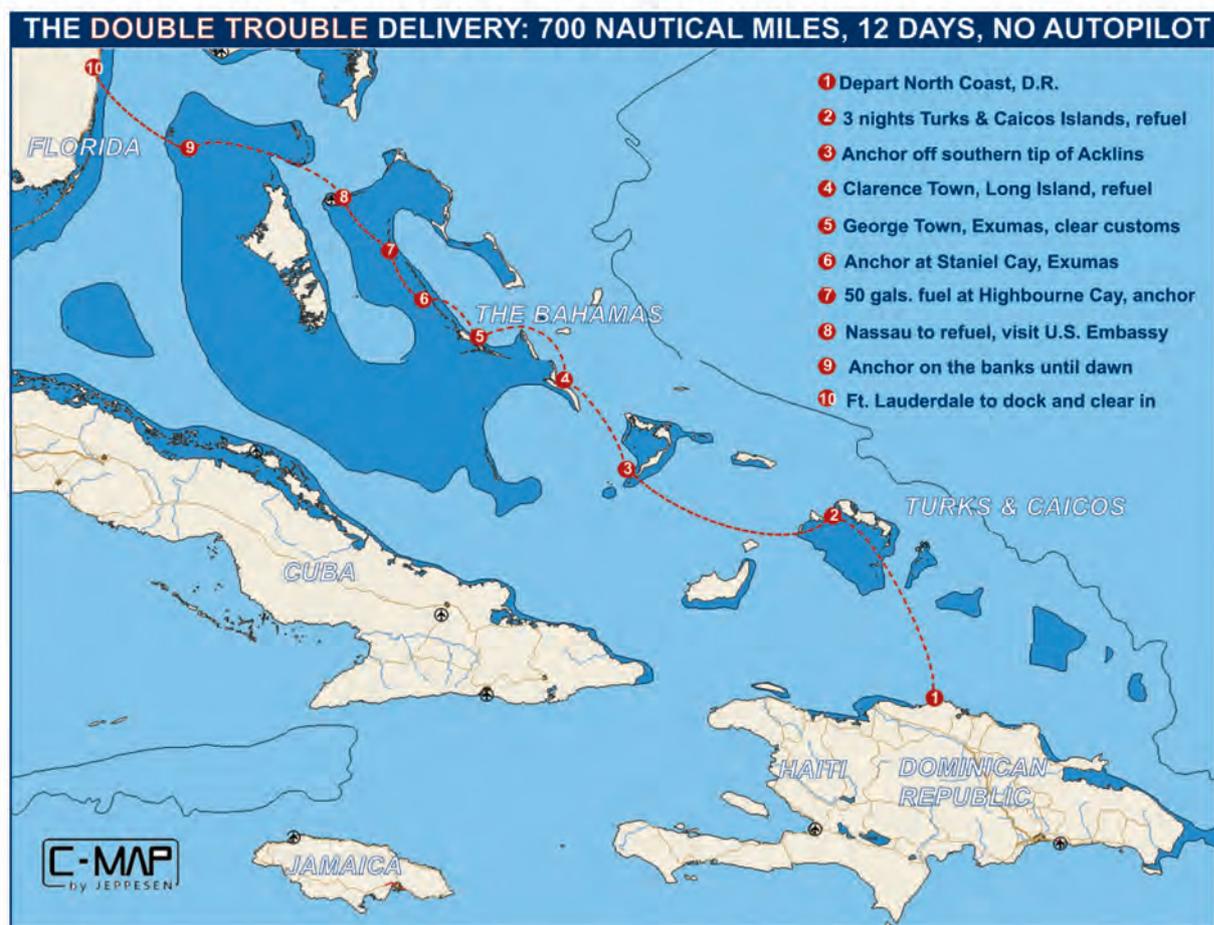
Dominican port authorities, though unfailingly polite, constitute a menace to safe navigation because of their inability to appreciate the importance of weather windows to the movement of small vessels, a poorly developed sense of urgency and institutional corruption. To ensure a timely departure, we had even made an advance appointment with the Dominican navy for a Friday night clearance. Yet when the time came, no one was there.

Two hours after that aborted first attempt, the final signatory to our departure papers arrived, after having been tracked down at a local bar. He was a narcotics officer, and after a cursory inspection of

ference. Instead of advancing the revs by pushing forward on the lever, we now had to pull the port throttle back to go faster.

Rather than reversing the cable at the throttle — and risk breaking a piece of linkage that would be difficult to replace in the D.R. — we decided to press on asymmetrically, as it were. As mentioned in Part 1, Double Trouble boasted a healthy pair of Detroit Diesels and a sound hull, but her systems were about to fall apart for want of maintenance. The synchronizer was just the first of numerous mechanical challenges, because systems that worked dockside were only biding their time.

* * *



"Please come back," the navy man pleaded. "It will only take five minutes."

If you read last month's installment, you know we were hired to deliver a 42-foot sportfisherman from the Dominican Republic to Florida. You also know the curious circumstances that convinced us to move Double Trouble (not her real name) from one Dominican port to another to make preparations and repairs

the boat, we were cleared to go to sea. Finally, we could go — but then we couldn't.

Terry was getting no response in the port throttle. Tracing the control cable, we found that it connected to a massive old synchronizer that had decided to die in the D.R. Terry disconnected the cable from the synchronizer and attached it directly to the port engine. Now we had throttle, but with a humorous dif-

Under way at last. Terry and I set a course for the Turks and Caicos, about 80 miles north. We used our borrowed Lowrance HDS-8 chart plotter to steer, and with no autopilot to help, we stood two-hour watches throughout the night, making a steady 8 to 9 knots. Off watch, we slept on the padded bench seat in front of the helm.

No human steers as efficiently as a modern autopilot in a seaway, and our track looked like a wiggly wave, with especially big deviations during moments of lost concentration. Our constant corrections were also forcing hydraulic fluid out of the leak behind the console, which would need topping off as soon as possible.

By dawn, we were off Salt Cay in the Turks and the clouds to our northwest were colored pale green, reflecting the water of the shallow Caicos Bank. Using "eyeball navigation" to avoid the coral heads, we crossed the bank and anchored at Sapodilla Bay just after sunset Saturday — exhausted. As the ocean grew rougher outside, we spent Sunday making repairs and decided we would continue the work for two more days at the Caicos Shipyard Marina, where we had access to parts.

We had repaired the genset in the D.R. to run the fridge, electric stove and battery chargers. We had used shore power to freeze bottled water in the freezer section. Even without power to the fridge, we could then use the freezer as an icebox for cold soda, juice and perishables. At Sapodilla, it was time to refreeze our ice, so we cranked up the genny. While I was unclogging debris from one of the bilge pumps for the umpteenth time since the rudder post had developed a significant leak during our passage, I noticed the layer of diesel fuel riding atop the bilge water.

Terry investigated. He found that among the maze

regulation, nor professional courtesy to a retired civil servant, nor the fact that Britain had just sent another 500-man combat regiment to Afghanistan — nothing would color LaRana's world view. Meticulously groomed and wearing a pressed uniform, he was a creature of a well-lit, air-conditioned environment. We were two sweaty, salt-encrusted middle-aged men, badly in need of showers and haircuts, who had just hand-steered a boat for 700 miles for not enough money.

"I don't have the cash either," I said, mimicking the Brit-speak, "and wouldn't be inclined to pay even if I did. Barry, you'd better give me the ship's papers in case they haul you away."

Unlike the U-boat men in "Das Boot," however, we were saved by the bell. The minute hand on the wall clock was pointing to the five. LaRana advised Terry that he was free to go until tomorrow, when we were to return with the owner of the boat. Our client, LaRana said, would be asked to pay Terry's fine and might — just might — face administrative action himself, since his boat had been used to transport Terry into the country illegally.

The next day, I picked up Double Trouble's new owner at the airport. He was with his wife. It was instantly apparent that this was no drug kingpin and that our fears of having been duped into becoming smugglers were unfounded. Our client was very concerned about the trouble at the immigration office, however. He said he would be willing to pay Terry's fine, but Terry wanted none of it. "You can't argue with the man in uniform," our client advised.



The end is near, the job nearly completed.

At the immigration office, we were pleasantly surprised when the ranking officer, a woman, allowed Terry to repeat his story. She checked his online confirmation and declared that even though he may have broken the rules for entering the United States, she would take into account the bad advice from U.S. officials at Nassau and waive the fine. She ordered Officer LaRana to make it happen. Even the grumpy customs guy next door was in a good mood when we returned.

* * *

Our client was as courteous and straightforward in the flesh as he had been over the telephone. We

went over the boat with him and all of its problems, including an infestation of giant cockroaches. He clearly had expected Double Trouble to provide him with a turnkey sportfishing operation. Instead, we pointed out that it needed completely new wiring, a new fuel system, new hydraulics, etc. On the other hand, the engines were strong and the genset, too, so he probably had value for the purchase price, though he paid a third more just to get her to the States.

At least our client would be knowledgeable about marine repairs. As it happens, he is a professional mariner, the captain of tugboats and crew support vessels in the Gulf of Mexico. So I asked him the question Terry and I both had on our minds, especially now that we knew his professional background: \$40,000 is real money — how could he have bought the boat without looking at it?

He said he had several telephone conversations with the previous owner. Apparently Capt. Mickey had sold himself convincingly in order to sell the boat. "After talking with him, I just felt I was dealing with a 'brother of the sea' and that I could trust him. I guess I should have gone down there and looked at it."

His wife agreed — and forcefully. "I think you bought the wrong boat," she said.

Good captain, if you're reading this, let us know how things are going with Double Trouble, or whatever she is now called. Terry and I would love to hear from you. We just don't have the heart to call. ■

SAVE THE DATE

MAINE BOATBUILDERS SHOW

March 19, 20, 21 2010
10-6 Friday and Saturday, 10-4 Sunday



VISIT WWW.PORTLANDCOMPANY.COM AND VIEW BILL SISSON'S VIRTUAL TOUR OF THE SHOW, AND HOW TO GET HERE AND THE NEW LIST OF 2010 EXHIBITORS



Proudly presented by:

PORTLAND
YACHT
SERVICES

58 Fore Street, Portland, Maine 04101 • 207-774-1067

INDEPTH

the D.R. and transfer their cargoes to elements of the Dominican military, which then see that these bundles of white powder find their way onto other aircraft, shipping containers and ... small boats like Double Trouble. Besides the life raft, which lacked an inflation lanyard, there were a dozen places where contraband could be secreted — I thought of the insulation void between the interior and exterior of the fridge, for example.

Terry was particularly troubled. He had retired from the division at British Customs that investigates drug smuggling and had even worked undercover on vessels believed to be carrying contraband. "With my background they'll never believe that I was ignorant of the fact," he said. "How could I convince them that I have spent the past 21 years trying not to think like an investigator?"



I told him that as soon as we reached George Town I would telephone Gary Carmichael, an experienced agent at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, which performs the functions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Drug Enforcement Administration at the state level. He could advise us what to do and maybe even arrange an inspection. I hoped the call would inoculate us, in a worst-case scenario.

I phoned Carmichael at George Town and Nassau and left messages. He never returned the calls because, as I later learned, he had been hospitalized to undergo major surgery at the time of our trip. Terry fussed, saying that maybe we should present ourselves to the DEA at the U.S. embassy in Nassau. I argued against that because we had absolutely no evidence, just suspicions. Even if there were nothing on board, Double Trouble's new owner — our client — would probably have his name added to a watch list for possible drug involvement.

"I would not have advised you to go to the DEA on a hunch," Carmichael told me a few weeks later. "First, they would have required all sorts of ID to know who they were dealing with, and this

would involve putting your names through a computer, so *your names* would end up on their lists."

* * *

Nervously, on a calm and sunny day, we crossed the Gulf Stream to Fort Lauderdale, Fla. We had been on the water for 11 days since leaving the Dominican Republic. We had overcome many difficulties, if not our doubts. If you've seen the World War II film "Das Boot," you can understand our sense of foreboding. After watching the submarine crew in a series of gut-wrenching escapes from destruction, their U-boat surfaces to enter the hardened submarine pens in France. Just when you are actually rooting for the enemy, the American planes swoop in, drop their bombs and kill the sub and its crew. The end.

That's what almost happened to us ... well, sort of. Let's just say the bureaucracy dropped a bomb on us, but unlike the hapless submarine sailors we survived to fight another day.

States and come back with his 90-day visa.

How anyone can think this restriction, with its \$200 "work-around," serves the cause of national security I don't know. We reasoned that maybe the rule had been changed. Terry visited the U.S. embassy in Nassau to inquire and was advised that he need not book that flight, thanks to a new online visa waiver program. We visited the Web site and Terry was instantly approved.

A minute after showing our passports and papers to the man at the U.S. Immigration counter in Fort Lauderdale, Officer LaRana marched out and confronted Terry. "Why, Mr. Terry, have you chosen to enter this country illegally?"

We tried to explain about Nassau and the visa waiver. He wasn't interested in that or Terry's online confirmation number. The immigration people at Nassau had been wrong; the waiver was for arrivals on commercial carriers only. Their mistake, but LaRana seemed determined that we suffer for it.

LaRana called a superior and, without mentioning



(Clockwise from left) A jury-rigged chart plotter came in handy with no autopilot to help steer the boat; despite the troubles, there were moments of tranquility; the author takes his turn at the helm.

We entered Port Everglades unchallenged and rented a slip for Double Trouble at a marina along the Dania Cutoff Canal. Had we been smugglers, we could have taken our life raft canister, put it in the trunk of the rental car and vanished. Instead, we reported to U.S. Customs. At the office, we rang the special button for people arriving on private yachts. A man came out and barked, "You're too late. Go away."

"What do you mean we're too late? The sign says last appointment at 4:30. The clock says 4:15."

"I don't care," he growled. "Everyone knows it's rude to arrive this late. Come back tomorrow." So we went next door to the immigration office, where we encountered a gentleman I shall call "Officer LaRana."

As background, you should know that British subjects may fly to the United States by commercial airliner and, as long as they are in good standing, will automatically be allowed into the country for up to 90 days. Not so when arriving by private yacht. In that case, they must present a visa obtained in advance from the U.S. embassy in their "country of origin," meaning the United Kingdom. Terry's plan, since he resides in the Dominican Republic and not his country of origin, was to wait until Double Trouble was docked in Nassau in the Bahamas. From there, he would take a quick flight to the United

our Nassau experience, asked what he was supposed to do with the renegade Brit. The supervisor apparently had run his finger down the list of fines for immigration offenses and said, "\$545." Pay that, LaRana said, and Mr. Terry can have his 90-day visa.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Granted, he broke the rule. But he did so unintentionally and on the advice of your colleagues in the Bahamas. Wouldn't the right thing be to waive the fine?"

"He broke the rule, and my supervisor has spoken," LaRana said.

As was certain to happen, Terry was losing patience. "Rules are for the guidance of wise men and the blind obedience of fools. Maybe you've heard that one," Terry said.

LaRana asked Terry for cash, since credit cards were not accepted. "I do not have the money," Terry said, face glowing redder than usual. "And even if I did I would not be inclined to pay it. You are treating me like a criminal, and I have done nothing wrong. My country is a signatory to the treaty. I have a valid passport and means of return. I have presented myself to you after arriving here with a visa waiver that I was advised to obtain by others in your organization. I was a customs officer for many years, and never did I treat anyone like this, nor would I if these circumstances had presented themselves."

LaRana was unmoved. Not the absurdity of the

of hoses in the engine room, there was an open-ended hose that T-ed off the generator's fuel supply line, so when the genset sucked fuel it also sent a steady stream of it into the bilge. That explained why the boat stunk of diesel when we first boarded. Terry plugged the line with a screw and secured it with a hose clamp.

In addition to the genset leak, repairs made at the Caicos yard (and afterward) included installing new bilge pumps, replacing bilge pump hoses, replacing the genset impeller and fuel filter (not available in the D.R.), repairing the rudder post leak, reinforcing the port outrigger after a shroud failure, jury-rigging an anchor light and unclogging the head, which eventually failed altogether.

My favorite defect, however, was one we didn't fix. Have you ever dipped a spoon into a pot of boiling water to retrieve a boiled egg and suffered an electric shock? Yep, plastic spoons only after that. And with the mass of mystery wires strewn about the bilge, I thereafter refrained from dipping my arms into the ooze to unclog the pumps while the genset was running.

On the morning of our departure, we filled our tanks at the Caicos Shipyard fuel dock and got another surprise. One of the 250-gallon tanks took 70 gallons of fuel, the other 170. Unbeknownst to us, both engines had been returning fuel to one tank.

The seller of the boat, Capt. Micky Rongeur, and his Dominican mechanic had assured us that Double Trouble's Detroiters drew and returned from their own tanks, and there was no system in place to transfer fuel between the two. Now we realized they probably had not understood our question in the first place.

Never mind. We had gone 20 hours without running one side dry, and based on that experience, we could cruise at 9 knots for more than 24 hours without emptying the tank without a return. That was good, because 24 hours of running time would take us to the next fuel stop at Clarence Town on Long Island in the Bahamas.

* * *

Our passage strategy was a bit unconventional. Normally, vessels heading west from the Caicos Islands transit to the north of Crooked and Acklins islands in the Bahamas. We had two compelling reasons not to do so. Although it added a few miles to the passage, going south of Crooked and Acklins had three advantages.

First, we would have the remaining swells on our quarter rather than the beam. Second, around the southern tip of Acklins was a sheltered bank, free of obstacles, that we could creep onto in the dark — even without a depth sounder — to get five or six hours sleep before dawn. Third, once we resumed our course we would do so in the lee of Crooked and Acklins in calm water. By the time we were once again exposed to the ocean, as we moved up

the east coast of Long Island, the seas would have calmed considerably, according to the forecast.

Happily, the passage worked as planned, and we arrived at the Flying Fish Marina in Clarence Town in late afternoon. By now, sections of the rubrail that had been attached with only one screw for every five mounting holes had been dislodged by the force of the waves. And one was bent outward at nearly a 45-degree angle from the hull. We looked a mess. As always, marina owner Mario Cartwright was welcoming and helpful, but we managed to annoy the crew of the \$5 million sportfishing boat that Terry tried to dock next to.



Barry Terry at the helm in blue Caribbean waters.

“Rules are for the guidance of wise men and the blind obedience of fools.”

— Solon the Lawmaker of Athens, 6th century B.C., and Barry the delivery skipper, 21st century A.D.

By the time he realized the adjacent slip had been cordoned off to prevent just such an intrusion, it was too late to make a graceful recovery, and he barely avoided whacking the immaculate 75-footer. The boat's captain and crew made show of snubbing us at the marina's tiny pub, even though we had missed their boat by a good eight inches.

We endured similar derision at our next fuel stop at Highbourne Cay, when we nuzzled up to the fuel dock in the space between the transoms of two megayachts docked in opposite directions. Both captains came aft to glare at us as we made our approach. One even put on what I call “bitch wings.” That's when someone stares at you intently with both fists balled into his or her hips, elbows sticking out, as if ready to take flight and peck you in the head.

But these indignities were a small thing compared to self-inflicted mental anguish that followed our stop at Clarence Town. As we drove north toward

the tip of Long Island, Terry put voice to a thought that had been bothering me for days. “Listen, have you considered that we have been set up, that this boat is carrying drugs to the States,” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” I replied. “In my mind, I've been calling that life raft on the foredeck the cocaine canister.”

The sticking point was our earlier discovery that the man who had purchased Double Trouble for \$40,000 had done so over the telephone without ever looking at her. Such an act was so foreign to me that I had been trying to imagine a context for it, and now we had one.

“Why would anyone buy a boat sight-unseen? Maybe because the particulars of the boat didn't matter,” I said. “Maybe it only had to be good enough to make one trip to the U.S. And maybe that way the buyer had deniability if the boat were stopped and



The dining area in the main saloon was Spartan to say the least; washing diesel from clothes the old fashioned way.

drugs found. He'd point the finger at us.”

This scenario is not at all far-fetched. In the last few years, the Dominican Republic has become the transfer point for much of the illegal drugs en route through the Caribbean from South America to the United States. Small planes fly in from Colombia and Venezuela, land in remote areas of