

AKAMA Report 10

2 June 2003

We departed Sebana Cove Marina, as planned, the morning after sending our previous missive. Well, the plan was to leave first thing in the morning, but the marina office did not have our bill ready until past nine. This lost bit of time is not a critical thing when embarking on a 3-day trip. Nevertheless, the old Maurice surfaced briefly, "We told them yesterday that we were leaving first thing; tell them that if they want their damned money they'd better move it!"

The trip down Sungai (river) Santi was routine, even a bit boring. This is a sure sign that we are past due to leave, as we still recall cooing and awing over the beauty during the first few trips up and down. Mundane is not what we signed up for!

We will miss our friends at Sebana. As we described before (Report 6), boaters tend to be a sociable lot and good friends are easily made. They also tend to help out their own. While in Sebana, friends going shopping would often pass by and ask if we needed anything from "The City" (Singapore). But it does not end here, when he could not find a loudspeaker that we needed to repair our HF radio, our friend John took it upon himself to patch up our defective one. It works perfectly.

As we proceeded seaward, we received a call from HARMONY 88, an Australian sailboat, which was making the same trip. We agreed to chat with each other once in a while during the trip. This is also a common occurrence; we don't generally travel "in convoy" like the military, but we do generally keep in touch by radio, especially on long passages.

There are boaters' radio nets, both ham and marine band. The one we check into is on 14.323 MHz at 0000 GMT. Boats in the served area check in each day, giving their position and report the local weather. The nets also provide a weather forecast. They are also useful for getting in touch with other boaters, and they provide good general safety and public services. A short while ago a boater in the Philippines died, and the SE Asia net was instrumental in helping his widow cope with suddenly being a single hander on the boat. Recently a boat left Sebana, bound for Borneo and the owner said he would check in daily. When we did not hear from them the word was spread on the net to look out for them; they turned up safe and sound albeit a little off of their planned course due to a storm.

This was our longest passage so far, a crossing of two nights and nearly three days. There was no high drama this time, nothing broke down and we barely saw any other vessels, save a few fishing boats. Well, there was one unlit boat that 'seemed' mysterious, but once we got past it we realized that it was only an anchored fishing boat. Highpoints of the passage:

-We had five dolphins cavorting in our bow wave for the longest time. No matter how often this happens, we never tire of watching them speeding along, seemingly effortlessly swerving and veering, but never getting run down by each other or by AKAMA. At another time one lonely dolphin swam to our boat and LA started to get excited but it took a quick look-see and then he was off. It was almost as if he was checking to see that we were okay. Sometimes as they swim they turn on their side; we are sure that this is to have a look at us, so who's watching who?

-Something broke Louise-Ann's favourite fishing lure. It left teeth marks and tore off the rear hook. This is no puny lure so the fish must have been huge. We recall the strike, as the bungee cord snapped tight with a bang, but became loose immediately as it got away. We did not know the lure was broken and trailed it for the rest of the day, catching nothing.

-We saw several yellow and black banded (poisonous) sea snakes, one big one reared up as the boat passed and another dove.

As we neared Borneo, we went rather farther north than we needed to, to avoid being close to land. There have been reports lately of piracy and other troubles in the stretch between the Anambus Islands (we've been there-see Report 4) and Borneo. Of course, yachts are rarely the primary target of these rogues, so there was little real danger.

Immediately after arrival we anchored in the first bay we came to in Malaysia, Sleepy Bay, intending to stay only overnight and then move on to Kuching. However, we were joined by HARMONY 88 and then by three Australian catamarans (SELKIE, MUSKAT and SAMPAGUITA) that had come from Tioman. So instead of leaving, we stayed for several days and partied. The first evening, we had a BBQ aboard AKAMA. The next day, we went ashore had a picnic on a nice little creek running out across a sand beach, followed by a birthday party for one of the other cruisers. According to one of the park rangers there are rhinoceros there; but we did not see any. We assumed that they were imported, but were later amazed to learn that they were once indigenous here, but are now rarely seen and possibly extinct.

We and Harmony 88 left the anchorage a day before the cats, and anchored in the Santubong River, north and a bit west of Kuching. For those of you who follow in our wake, this is an excellent place. We left the boat nearly every day in complete safety, as we were anchored near the fisheries police. There is a private marina nearby where we often left our dinghies when going ashore and where we were allowed to deposit our garbage. A fisheries officer located a fuel truck for us. Everyone was most accommodating. The port of Pending (just east of Kuching), on the other hand, is busy with people and according to the police is not a safe place to leave the yacht unattended.

Kuching is the capital of Sarawak, a delightful city of about 150,000 people. It is the chief port for the western coast of Borneo. Timber, alas some from illegal logging, is exported from here; we saw a big barge load going right past us to a saw mill on the Santubong River. They also export the most wonderful aromatic and spicy pepper; we had received a gift of some a few years ago and were lucky enough to find more on our recent shopping excursion. We went for an all-day walk of the old part of town and saw (among other things) Fort Margherite, the Astana, residence of the 'white rajahs' of the Sir James Brooke family from 1841 to 1946 and now the governor's residence. The white rajahs are worth looking up in your encyclopaedia, as space does not permit telling the tale here. Subsequent walks have taken us down most of the streets in the old part of town.

It is excellent for provisioning. We went to a very well stocked wet market spanning over a city block, replete with fish, chicken, fruits and vegetables. There are lots of shops of every sort and even a few supermarkets.

As we walked along, we were conscious that we were nearly the only Caucasians around; tourism is suffering mightily due to many reasons: SARS, economic downturn, fear of Muslims... The fact is westerners have nothing to fear here. We walked through the streets of a kampong (village) and were greeted by endless smiles and hellos.

Kuching also has good repair facilities. When the cats left, one developed mechanical problems and had to be towed a good portion of the way, as there was not enough wind for her to sail well. They had broken a drive shaft spline and were worried that a new one would be hard to find and would probably have to be flown in. In less than a day, arrangements were made with a local machine shop to have a new one built at a reasonable price.

There are also excellent museums and cultural venues. We went into the Sarawak Museum and Library and the Chinese Museum. We also visited the Cultural Village, where they have recreated the homes and living style of the rural ethnic groups. Luckily, the day we visited there was a special annual celebration, with a beauty pageant, theme play (the mystical origin of rice) and so on.

We went on a jungle trek in the Santubong foothills, which is nearby our anchorage. The trail is approximately 2 km. long but seemed longer with all the ups and downs. Halfway through the trek we came upon a small waterfall with pools and had a much needed dip. The water was very cold and fresh.

We're off in a day or two headed northeast to explore the coast towards Brunei. We'll be in touch when we can.

Best wishes to all,
Maurice & Louise-Ann