

THE CHALLENGE OF A CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF JAMAICA IN A SMALL BOAT

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Fishermen on bamboo rafts

The Jamaican waters can sometimes be very rough with Morant Point and the southwest coast having notorious weather. Yet there are also many days when the waters are relatively calm and the fishermen in their simple craft venture out of site of land to make a precarious living. Boatmen who were used to rough waters had built my little 16 feet long orange speedboat on a beach at Carriacou (Rif 7). After I bought the boat, I made quite a few modifications, including a conversion to make it into a floating caravan type of boat with a sleeping area of 2000mm x 1600mm under a tent, a bimini for shade and built in buoyancy. The hull had proven to have a good shape in rough water and I had done a few good (but sometimes rough) trips in the boat from Grenada to St. Vincent, Bequia and Tobago Cays. For a small boat, fair weather and visibility are critical, as it is essential to be able to read the waves and ride over them in a proper manner – hence my choice of going counter-clockwise around Jamaica.

Adequate experience in boat handling and preparation are also essential. In addition to the main outboards engine I also had a small stand by engine, which proved useful. For fuel, I had about 110 litres on board plus spare oil and a simple tool kit. As a luxury, I had a well-insulated icebox, which kept drinks and food cold for many days. Other essentials were a few separate containers of water, plus adequate food, cooking gear, safety gear in the form of life jackets (including spares),

Lovely coastline before San San



flares, a few torches and a spotlight, a good anchor and line, a boarding ladder, night-lights, an electric bilge pump and a manual bilge pump. **For navigation**, I had photocopied nautical charts as well as relevant extracts from John Lethbridge's cruising guide and sealed them in Zip Lock Bags. A hand held compass, a hand held GPS and a hand held VHF radio completed the major equipment.

The original plan was to leave in Rif 7 at about midday on 16 April 2003 (just before Easter), but a few problems occurred, including my trailer breaking before launching, which delayed the final departure time to after 16.30. The waters were reasonably calm but clouds were scudding down from the

hilltops as I approached the East Middle Grounds. Luckily, there were no white caps and following a heavy shower of rain, stars appeared in the sky as I headed towards Bowden and a safe anchorage. The only problem was fishing nets and floating bottles being used as markers, which kept being caught round the engine. As evening advanced, I caught sight of what I thought was a fishing boat with a tall superstructure going slowly into **Port Morant**. There was only an entry light and no moon yet, so I followed them carefully and soon realized that it was **Paul Scott's yacht Spranzie from RJYC**. Both boats berthed alongside at **Bowden**, so we shared a nice supper cooked by Lisa.

Although I didn't get to sleep until 23.00 hours or so the previous evening, my little alarm clock made sure I was awake at 05.00 on Thursday morning, to cook fresh coffee and prepare a light breakfast before leaving in the first light of day. I headed east on relatively calm sea as the sun was slowly rising - it was wonderful, as the infamous **Morant Light** was passed under perfect conditions, although there was a gentle swell indicating what it could be like. Odd fishermen



Morant Point in calm

popped out of hidden coves. As we passed, we saluted each other. There were a variety of boats ranging from fibreglass hulls with outboard engines to simple bamboo rafts and paddled dugout canoes.

Heading north and then west the coastal scenery became more interesting, with a background of the Blue Mountains and a foreground of changing shapes and colours. With a small boat, it was possible to pop into small coves, take some pictures and admire the scenery, before getting out in the open sea again where a good speed could be attained. **The coastal area from Priestmans River to Port Antonio proved to be the most scenic and included the lovely Blue Lagoon and San San coves.** Port Antonio was reached in just over three hours from Bowden. The new marina was still not operational properly, so

I motored over to the old marina where there was a warm welcome, but no fuel. One of the attendants guided me round to the next cove where we could draw the boat onto the beach

and get the fuel tanks filled by crossing over the road to the gas station. **From RJYC to Port Antonio I had only**



Port Antonio Marina with Rif



Outside Blue Lagoon

used 60 litres for the approximate 72 miles! Back at the marina clubhouse, I was able to get a wonderful breakfast of bacon & eggs with toast, coffee and orange juice for J\$200, which I consider good value, especially when it was served in a nice friendly manner.

The two hour break had been nice, but other coastal areas beckoned, some extremely beautiful, with other areas being not so interesting. The **Port Maria** area was choppy even though the skies were clear. Viewed from the sea, the **James Bond Beach Resort** was lovely with a well-protected anchorage for sailing and powerboats. The busy port of **Oracabessa** was passed at about 12.30. In the early afternoon the skies darkened, so navigating visually through reefs became more difficult as the watercolour differentiation became more difficult. Most reefs were easy to sea, but due to a wrong signal by some of the locals, I got out of the main channel near **Reggae Beach**, a few miles before **Ocho Rios**, and the deep motor hit a coral head, putting me out of action for a while.

With the help of some people at the beach, I managed to contact some engine mechanics. Eventually a recommended mechanic with initials AA took the 30hp engine and 36 hours later returned it saying that the shaft was not damaged and that he had repaired it, so that it would work like normal again. (Trusting me was badly deceived!)

On **Saturday 19 April**, I set off again at 11.30, passing some of the hotels and resorts near **Ocho Rios** before passing **Falmouth**, where it was rough waters for a while. The engine did not seem to pull too well and was vibrating, but it took me into **Montego Bay YC** at about 16.00 hours, just as the racing was finishing. A wonderfully hospitable crowd made me feel very welcome as we supped **Appleton** and watched the sky getting darker. With full tanks again and another piece of ice I made up the bed and slept fairly well in the marina.

Sunday 20 April was a new day with another early start.

After the nice protected waters of **Montego Bay**, the ocean waters were choppy, so it was not possible to get up and plane with the boat. Going round **Pedro Point** and heading towards **Negril** brought bigger seas, with continuous white caps. The engine had been noisy since leaving **MoBay** and just opposite **Greenfields**, there was a crack and it stopped operating. It turned out that the original damage had been mainly to the lower gearbox, which had never been fixed! The little 2hp engine was taken out of the forepeak so that I could slowly motor to the shore, choosing a small fishing village where I could beach **Rif 7**. Thanks to the mobile telephone, my driver was able to get to **Greenfields** by just gone 14.00 hours. In the



Harrogate Beach with all the goods for transport after breakdown

interim period, the fishermen (*mainly Eckford Pahle*) had helped me unload everything from the boat and pull it ashore above high water.

Back in **Kingston**, there were no spare

parts for the engine so I decided to buy a good second-hand engine that was for sale at a reasonable price and would be compatible with **Rif 7**. Eventually I was able to collect the engine and then waited for break in the weather.

The third part of the circumnavigation began in the afternoon of **22 May**, after a meeting in **Mandeville** and then a drive to **Greenfields** with a laden vehicle. By just gone three thirty in the afternoon, the boat was fully laden again. The engine started first time, so we went for a short run before saying farewell to my friendly saviours (who had been fairly rewarded). The seas were calm and the sky above was blue as I skimmed past **Negril**, with its tourist areas and lovely cliffs. Even **Negril Point** was calm, so good progress was made. Going past **Bluefields** and **Whitehouse** in a boat was not as spectacular view as when done by the road, I found, so I did not spend too much time in the area.

Black River beckoned and it was reached at 18.30 in the evening, having gone further than anticipated. A boat watcher was appointed whilst I went to get some more fuel for the run back to **Kingston**. It was a good hike to the gas station, easy going there, but tiring coming back laden down with 20 kg on each arm. Many fishermen went out to sea at seven or 8 in the evening, creating a wake as they went downriver, so I moved my mooring (*with permission of the watcher*) to a side waterway. However, it was not possible to escape the inevitable bar music until gone ten at night. Some sleep was possible as I curled up in my sleeping bag on the inflatable mattress below the tent of the boat.

As the cocks started crowing, but before the sun had appeared in the sky, I slipped away from the mooring and cleared the reefs near **Black River** before heading east again. Friendly fishermen waved – some had been out all night, but others were starting a days fishing. The seas were a bit choppy and near **Port Kaiser**, they became rough with white caps for a while. Feeling like a rest and needing to refill the main fuel tanks I pulled into **Port Kaiser**, where the efficient security guards asked what I was doing. This was followed by another gentleman on a bicycle. When they realised that I was just re-fuelling and relaxing for a while they became more friendly and wished bon voyage.

There were a few clouds in the sky and still some white caps around, but the coastal scenery was nice but not spectacular, so I motored on to familiar territory – **Portland Bight**. On the outside of the reefs there were white caps and a fair swell, so I decided to go inside the reefs and have a rest and something to eat at **Pelican Cays**, as I was getting weary. Nearby was lovely **Pigeon Island**, with possibly some friends, but clouds in the sky and tiredness convinced me to finish the trip that same day.

Near **Wreck Reef**, I encountered **Stephanie J** rolling in the swell under engine and a flapping mainsail, without much wind. Not far behind was **Dolphy 8** who had not even raised her sails and was rolling in the swell. For **Rif 7**, the lack of wind was a blessing, but the swell and waves across **Sand Hills** needed attention to the helm.

They say the last mile home is the longest mile home, and it certainly felt it after nine hours of almost solid motoring as I rode over the chop in **Kingston Bay** at the entrance to the yacht club. After a total of about 30 hours of motoring, (*spaced over different periods*) I had managed to circumnavigate Jamaica in my small boat.

During the trip, only one dolphin and two turtles were seen, plus numerous fish jumping out of the water, including the inevitable flying fish. Even birds were very scare, with hardly any visible offshore, but quite a few were seen in the harbours. I was lucky with weather (or judged it correctly).

Was the trip worthwhile? The answer is a definite yes! The coastal scenery alone was worth the trip. Additionally there was the satisfaction of setting out to do something and achieving it. Would I make the trip again? Yes, but in a more leisurely manner so I could explore more of the lovely little coves inaccessible to bigger boats.