

## CUBA AND THE WESTERN CARIBBEAN Commodore Simon Currin

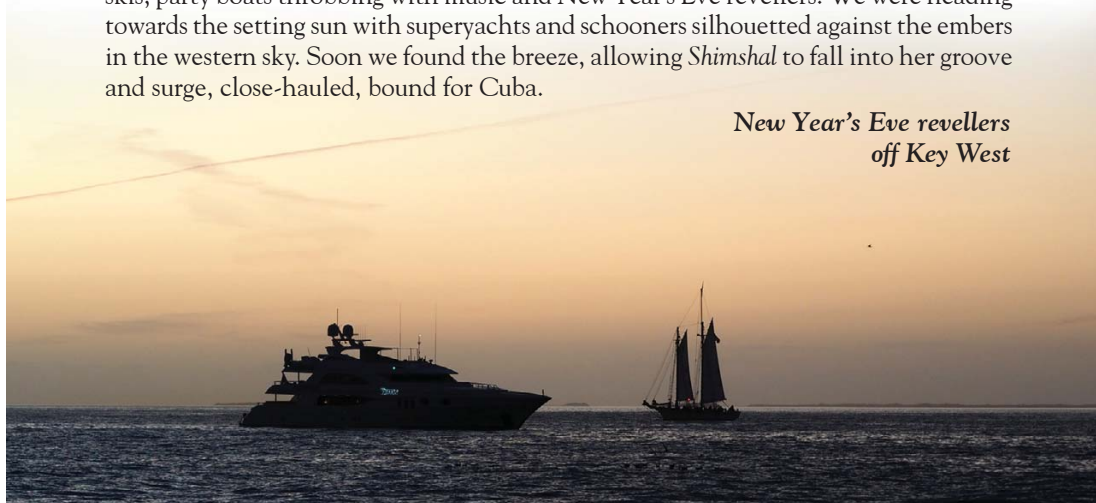
*(Simon and Sally left Scotland in 2015 aboard Shimshal II, their 48ft (14.6m) cutter, exploring Iceland and Greenland before crossing the Davis Strait to Labrador, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, where Shimshal was laid up during the pandemic. In September 2021 they were able to relaunch, and in 2022 headed south via Chesapeake Bay and the Florida Keys, where we join them now. Follow their travels at <https://voyagesofshimshal.blogspot.pt/p/blog-page.html>.)*

***Shimshal finally ready to sail south from Nova Scotia,  
having spent three winters in Mahone Bay during Covid***



The Straits of Florida are only 90 miles wide but their crossing is a journey back in time and a voyage between two radically different cultures. We raised our anchor in Key West on the last evening of 2022 and picked our way through squadrons of jet skis, party boats throbbing with music and New Year's Eve revellers. We were heading towards the setting sun with superyachts and schooners silhouetted against the embers in the western sky. Soon we found the breeze, allowing *Shimshal* to fall into her groove and surge, close-hauled, bound for Cuba.

***New Year's Eve revellers  
off Key West***





For much of 2022 our cruise had been in the shoal waters of the USA and our deep keel an encumbrance, banishing us from many quiet anchorages and the entire length of the Intracoastal Waterway. But now, as we left the partying tumult behind and the continental shelf gave way to deeper oceanic waters, our 7ft 6in (2.3m) keel came into its own. With apparent winds between 12 and 17 knots we sped into the night. The Gulf Stream did its best to keep us in America but the sailing conditions were perfect and the east-flowing current did little to dent our speed as we pushed southwest under clear skies and a bright half moon.

For more than 20 years we had been in waters too cold for flying fish but now, as the New Year dawned and with the strongest of the Gulf Stream in our wake, we were seeing them once more. By mid-morning the breeze had died and our trusty Yanmar engine brought us to the entrance to Marina Hemingway, about 10 miles west of Havana. As directed by the *Waterway Guide*\*, Sally began calling on VHF from 12 miles out but it wasn't until the fairway buoy that a polite voice answered her in good English, "Madam, you are very welcome to Cuba and a Happy New Year. Please take care in the channel as some of the buoys have been moved by Hurricane *Ian*". The buoys had indeed been slightly shuffled, but the channel was easy to find and we were soon on the customs dock with a throng of uniformed officials lining up to welcome the first cruising boat of the year.

First on board was the doctor to undertake a sanitary and health check which we passed with flying colours. It wasn't a stringent examination and was done with good humour and without the need to go below or make any kind of inspection. With those papers filled in it was the turn of the border guards, who were keen to record the number of GPSs and bicycles on board. Next the agricultural inspector, who counted our oranges and didn't see the irony in my dyslexic declaration that we had 5kg of flowers on board. Sally politely and patiently pointed out that I meant flour!

The queue to board dwindled and finally the dock master, a former history professor, came aboard. He spent much of his time apologising for the five identical forms he had to complete, always fearful of making a mistake which would make him lose pay. His forms required 18 of my signatures – the pile of signatures on apparently pointless forms reminded me of the hundreds of thousands of prescriptions I had signed in my professional career, each of which was just as pointless in a paperless age!

As the last official left, Commodore Escrich of the Hemingway International Yacht Club of Cuba arrived with his husky, accompanied by a cluster of dignitaries. We were now allowed ashore to be formally greeted by the Commodore in Spanish via a translator, with a photographer on hand to make sure that everything was proudly documented. We have met many OCC Port Officers and Port Officer Representatives on our voyages, but Commodore Escrich's sense of ceremony, formality and his sheer presence make him quite unique. We were invited to a formal welcoming reception at the Hemingway International Yacht Club on 4th January.

This involved more speeches, welcomes and presentations, but it was Sally who melted the hearts of the assembled crowd by making her first, and probably her last, public speech in DuoLingo Spanish. Over the previous thousand miles she had spent many of her watches talking to her phone, which hosts a rather brilliant app whose

\* *Waterway Guide*, 2nd edition, Addison Chan, Nigel Calder and others.



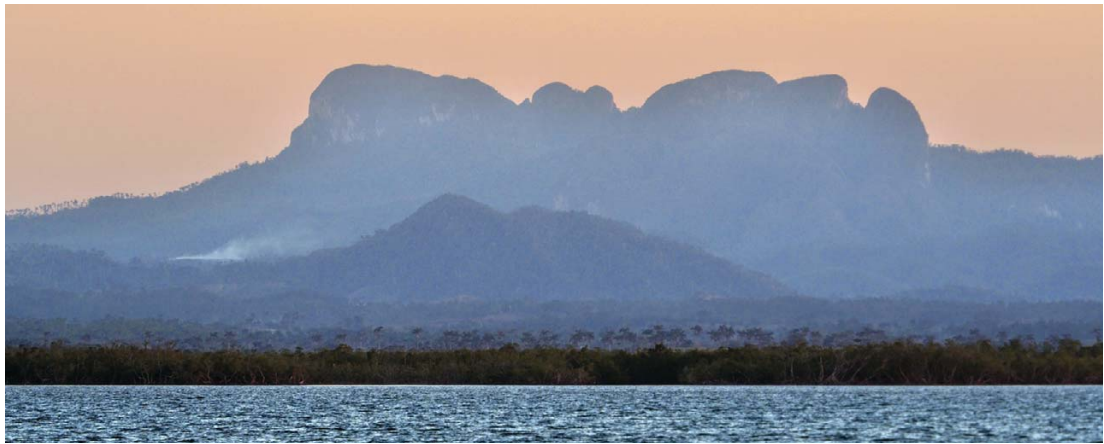
*Welcomed by Commodore Esrich of the Hemingway International Yacht Club of Cuba*

artificial intelligence seems to understand her faltering phrases. So too the great and the good of the HIYC, who applauded her brave attempt to mangle their mother tongue!

With the ice broken, conversation flowed and we heard first-hand the life stories that form the backdrop to the north-bound Cuban exodus that had been so evident during our journey through the southern US states – we had seen abandoned Cuban fishing boats all along the Florida Keys. Munching canapés and sipping rum and Coke at the HIYC, a mother told us of her 20-year-old son’s journey to Miami in search of a better life. Food rationing, poverty of opportunity and the State’s firm grip drive the young and the talented to seek their fortunes on the other side of the Florida Strait.

*Pink Chevrolets in the Plaza de la Revolución*





*Vigñales from our anchorage near Cayo Levisa*

Our month in Cuba was fascinating. A guide took us to Havana, where Castro's statue in the Plaza de la Revolución gazed incongruously down on lines of pink Cadillacs. Near the Old Port we found the Soviet missiles that sparked the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago. They are disarmed, but still point defiantly at America and are emblematic of the broken relationship between poor Cuba and its giant, prosperous neighbour.

After Havana we abandoned guides and took a trip to Vigñales in search of cooler mountain air and some cycling amongst the limestone cliffs and caves, where we enjoyed darting hummingbirds and circling vultures. It was a perfect antidote to the ocean. The *taxi colectivo* ride back to Marina Hemingway was in a gem of a car. With three bench seats our gleaming, green, 1952 Chevy could have seated nine but, for our journey, there were just six on board. Our 'pilot' for the trip was as flamboyant as his car with a huge gold watch and pendant. Singing, gesticulating and chain-smoking he kept us well entertained whilst occasionally looking at the road ahead. His ancient wheels flew over the potholes with barely a jolt and the big Mercedes diesel engine took us to speeds that the Chevrolet designers would never have intended. A memorable journey!

Our voyage southbound from Nova Scotia had been wonderfully sociable. We often cruised with buddy boats, met great folk along the way and spent our nights in crowded anchorages. As we pressed south most of our posse crossed the Gulf Stream to spend the winter in the Bahamas where, apparently, anchorages can often be crowded. Not

*Mangrove forest fringes much of the coast in western Cuba*



*Free-diving  
lobster  
fishermen  
trade their  
catch at Isla  
de Juventud*

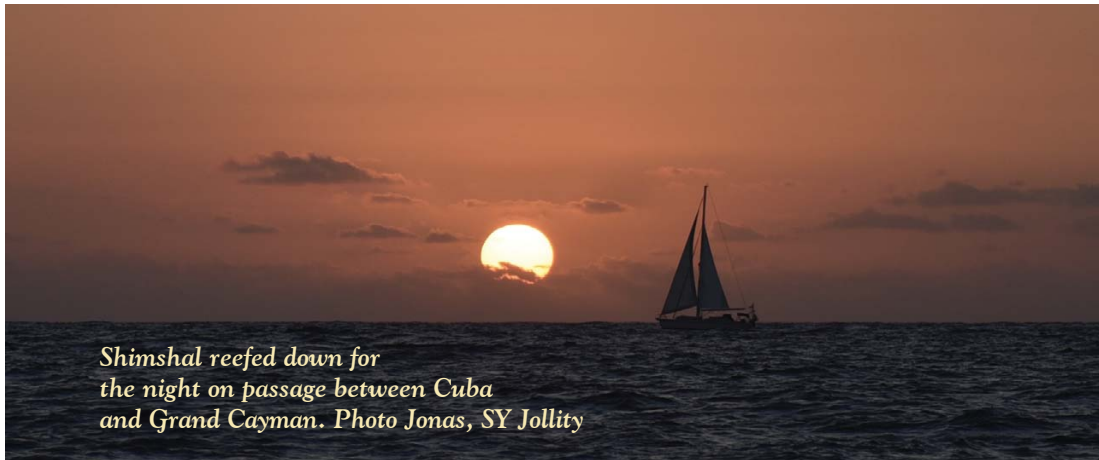


so in Cuba, where there were very few cruisers following the restrictions placed on US crews in 2017. While we were in Marina Hemingway in January 2023 there was less than a handful of boats. During our anti-clockwise cruise from Havana to Cayo Largo on the south coast we saw no other cruisers. This rugged, remote coast some 360 miles long is fringed with mangroves and coral sand beaches, its crystal-clear water guarded by intricate reefs and islands. It is a perfect and beautiful cruising ground. The few folk we saw were fishermen who spent their days free-diving for lobsters and who happily traded their catch for cash or commodities.

We slipped into the nearly empty marina at Cayo Largo and, once again, were greeted by officials and dignitaries on the pontoon who live-streamed our docking on Facebook. Thank goodness our arrival was not as catastrophic as it had been a few months earlier in Norfolk, VA when a lapse of concentration put us aground in front



*Cayo Largo Marina*



*Shimshal reefed down for the night on passage between Cuba and Grand Cayman. Photo Jonas, SY Jollity*

of the dock belonging to the newly appointed Regional Rear Commodores for South East USA! Pire, the urbane Cayo Largo dock master, gave us a very warm welcome. He had been Fidel Castro's translator in an earlier life and has been helping cruisers on Cuba's south coast for decades. He readily accepted my invitation to become an OCC Port Officer Representative and his new OCC PO flag hangs above his desk next to a picture of Pire and his former employer – Fidel Castro. Welcome to the OCC, Professor Pire El Cid!

The humour and spirit of Cubans was a most notable feature of our stay on this huge and fascinating island. Every day they cope with food shortages, rationing, a nepotistic and controlling State, ostracism from much of the developed world and a monolithic bureaucracy. They rejoice in their great education system and their health system and yet smile at the irony of having many excellent, homegrown doctors and nurses but empty pharmacies thanks to sanctions. They crave the return of tourism to their shores, having glimpsed the prosperity it brought when tourism briefly flourished a decade ago. Hopefully the sanctions and restrictions on travel will one day be lifted and the wonderful, proud Cubans that we met will prosper. The OCC has great connections in Cuba, with three superb Port Officers in Varadero, Marina Hemingway and Cayo Largo. OCC friends also connected us to Yoni and Addonis Perez, who work out of

*Shimshal moored off the cemetery at Georgetown, Grand Cayman*



Marina Hemingway and can't do enough for visiting cruisers. Their details are on our Cruising Information Map so don't hesitate to contact them before you head for Cuba. Please take your boats to Cuba and spend your dollars there!

The brisk 140-mile trade-wind reach from Cayo Largo to the Cayman Islands went quickly. A harbour launch escorted us to the customs quay and, after checking in, took us to a free mooring where we spent a happy week or two snorkelling in the gin-clear waters, exploring Grand Cayman and being royally entertained by friends of friends ashore. Within minutes of rigging our mooring bridle the OCC crew of *Blue Mist* wandered over to say hello and welcome. We had low expectations of Grand Cayman, having previously only associated it with offshore banking and tax avoidance, but the warmth of our welcome, the astonishing underwater life and the supermarkets brimming with fresh produce endeared these islands to us. Another high point of our Cayman visit was the moment when I re-engineered our watermaker and wonderful, fresh water started flowing into our tanks, thus ending the 10 litres a day limit we had imposed on ourselves since leaving Marina Hemingway.

360 miles due south of Grand Cayman is the tiny, mountainous Isla de Providencia. The summit of a volcanic seamount, this gorgeous, jungle-clad tropical paradise fringed by coral is a distant outpost of Colombia. It should have been a relaxing reach, but the seas were high and we had a few mechanical and electronic problems to contend with. The tiller arm connecting our autopilot's linear drive to the rudder quadrant failed and, soon after, the backlight on our ancient Raymarine plotter gave up the ghost, turning the screen black and unreadable. It did us good to sail the boat as she was meant to be

*A rough and squally passage to Isla de Providencia without autohelm*



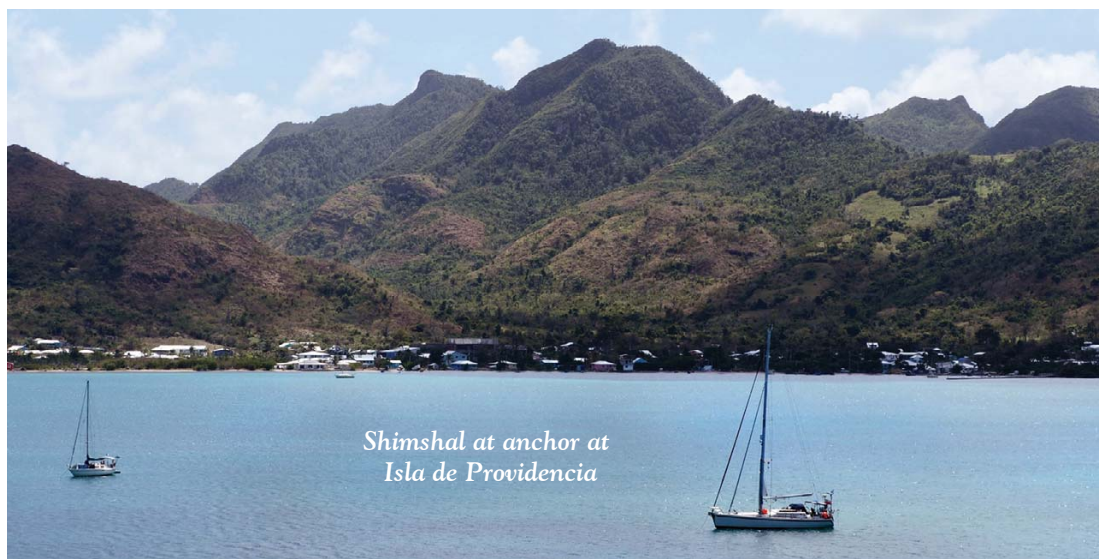


sailed instead of relying on pushing buttons and gazing at screens. We fixed our gaze on the Southern Cross and kept the compass pointing south, hand-steering on two-hour watches. We enjoyed it so much that we kept sailing the same way on the final leg to Panama, despite having made some temporary fixes in Providencia.

We had sailed to Providencia because it has a mountain which offered the opportunity to stretch Sally's legs and slake her thirst for summits. She was not disappointed and the highlight of our visit was the day we spent hiking with Bernardo, our incredibly knowledgeable guide. It took us ages to reach the top as every tree, orchid and shrub had a story or a medicinal use and those stories had to be told. It was late morning before we reached the summit and gazed out at the surf breaking on the barrier reef, the patchwork of emerald, blue and brown seas, the steep, jungle-clad slopes and a few yachts in the anchorage near *Shimshal* being buffeted by the strong trade winds.

To check into Providencia it is mandatory to use an agent. We chose Mr Bush, whose office has a balcony with a fine view and a cooling breeze. He sat us down to enjoy the shade while he marshalled the various officials required to check us in and out. All came to us and the process was conducted efficiently and enjoyably with a little help from WhatsApp. Mr Bush had been on the island in 2020 when Hurricane *Ioto* had torn into it, destroying 95% of the houses and damaging the tiny airport. Three years later the island was still full of Colombian contractors busily rebuilding houses, the airport and the infrastructure, a process paid for by faraway Bogotá. Every local we met told us the story of when the Category 5 came their way, bringing terror and leaving ruin in its wake.

The trade winds had been blowing hard throughout January and February and every morning Chris Parker's weather report spoke of high seas in the Western Caribbean. We were tempted to stay on in Providencia and await quieter conditions, but we spotted a brief window long enough to get us to Bocas del Toro in slightly milder conditions. As it turned out, our passage was benign and the sea state far more comfortable than forecast. We hand-steered all the way once again and enjoyed the starry, moonless nights, the warm wind and the deep pass between breaking surf to enter the sheltered waters of Bocas del Toro, Panama.



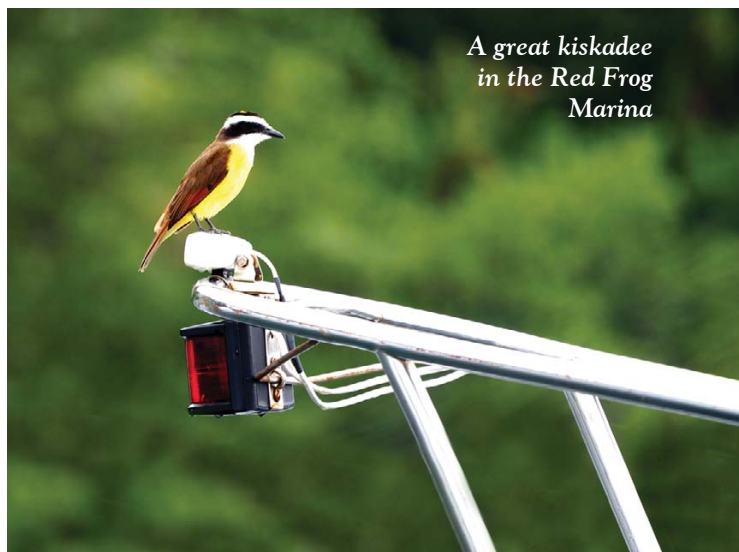
*Shimshal at anchor at  
Isla de Providencia*



*Bocas del Toro's  
southern anchorage*

A different set of procedures surrounded our Panamanian entrance, but we were soon ashore and enjoying the vibrant town with its colourful waterfront and exquisite cafés. Bocas has a multitude of *ferreterías* (hardware stores) and many of our early days there were spent combing them for those bits that only cruisers need ... new sanitation hose to make the heads work better, after spending a day sweating in Providencia trying to rod a calcium-caked, foul-smelling pipe ... bigger wrenches to remove the errant tiller arm ... a dehumidifier to keep the mould at bay while we head back to Europe for the summer ... cockroach killer just in case one crawls onboard.

After a week anchored off the town we moved into our final berth for this season at the lovely Red Frog Marina on Isla Bastimentos. Our plan was to lay *Shimshal* up there for the hurricane season and return to Europe to avoid the worst of the rain, heat and humidity. Pierre, an ex-cruiser who now lives ashore, will be caring for her in our absence and divers will scrub the hull every three months. Pierre tells us that the most common unwanted boat visitors in the marina are boa constrictor



*A great kiskadee  
in the Red Frog  
Marina*



*A three-toed sloth makes its slow way upwards*

snakes, and we know of one couple who had to deal with a massive serpent emerging from their boom when offshore. With so much sun, rain, heat and humidity it's a hostile place to leave a boat, but the marina is safe from hurricanes and crime so we are comfortable leaving her until the northern winter.

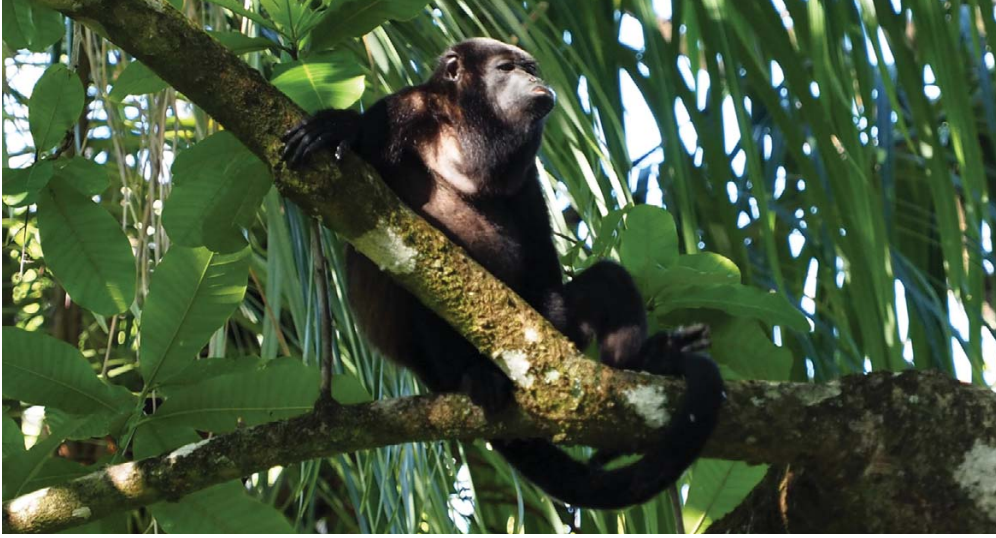
Isla Bastimentos is another tropical gem, with native jungle and a rich population of exotic fauna. On our way to the café every morning we glimpsed the three-toed sloths ever-so-slowly munching their way through the leafy canopy, the diminutive and highly poisonous red frogs whose toxins were used by the native Indians to poison their darts and the capuchin monkeys scavenging for handouts. A short walk across the island to the Caribbean coast took us to a fine surfing beach but hungry looking caimans (a close relative of the alligator) lurk in the muddy waters of the lagoon.

With *Shimshal's* lay-up work nearly complete we took a complicated journey to the cloud forest on the Panama/Costa Rica border. The journey involved a couple of high-speed (35 knot) water taxis, a four-hour road trip to the town of David near Panama's Pacific coast, a bus up to Volcán and then a tortuous 4x4 track that wound up through the rainforest into ever-denser cloud. I had wanted to hire a 4x4 and make the journey under our own steam but Sally, who is always more sensible, opted for a Hilux driven by someone who knew both the way and what he was doing. A wise decision as it turned out, as the dry season came to an end the minute we left Volcán.



*The diminutive red frogs give the marina its name*





*A howler monkey near Boca Chica*

The way grew greasier and steeper as we bounced up a narrow, rough track with river crossings and precipitous drop-offs. At first it was like a wet weekend in Wales with thin mist, dripping moss-covered trees and gentle drizzle. Later, as we neared Mount Totumas at an altitude of 1900m, it was more like Mordor with rain pelting down and the early afternoon light more like dusk. Karin met us with umbrellas and escorted us to our treehouse in the cool cloud-forest canopy, where a hummingbird darted across our balcony and, despite the rain hammering on our tin roof, we were surrounded by the exotic noises of jungle birds. We spent the next few days wandering the mountain tracks, before heading back to Bocas and fitting *Shimshal's* protective cover for the rest of the rainy season.

*Isla Bastimentos's Caribbean coast*



*A male resplendent quetzal – only  
25,000 pairs are left in the world*

Cruising is all about contrasts. The frustration of breakages, the toil of maintenance in hot and sweaty exotic places, the thrill of a landfall, exploring new lands, meeting new friends and the pure pleasure of a well-balanced sailing boat surging through the waves on a starry tropical night. Our journey from the Canadian Maritimes to Panama in 2022/23 was full of contrasts in abundance – great company, spectacular cities and scenery, fun sailing, technical challenges and memorable gatherings. It's those varied and intense experiences that transform a journey into an adventure and make memories that last a lifetime.

**Simon's footnote to the photo below**

As part of my personal war against American-style single-use, shrink-wrap plastic covers I'm pleased to point out that this cover has protected our boat for eight years now and is still going strong. It's made from Weathermax, a lightweight, strong, breathable, waterproof, uv-stable fabric.

In Greenland it accumulated 70cm of snow and ice and in Iceland it survived winds that blew away a house! I hope it does the trick during the equatorial rainy season.

*Shimshal snug under her 'winter' cover for the remainder of the rainy season*

