

Sunday 11 April

After Rick finishing insulating the loft, building his shed and installing a new kitchen we are definitely ready for a break.

It was an early start but booking on-line enabled us to park in the short stay car park for only £66.40 for 10 days. Breakfast at Cafe Rouge, not great. Premium Economy made for a quick check-in and we were fast tracked though security. Bought a new camera. The flight went very quickly, Mike and Thyra set their watches by the aircraft journey data screen which was not at all accurate. Much to Thyra's relief when Mike thought we had 3.5 hours left it was only an hour. It went so quick, I watched "It's Complicated, I love you Phillip Morris and Precious",

My first impression of Barbados was that it was flat and unwelcoming. We were expecting some Caribbean music and everyone to be upbeat and friendly.

The hotel is a great disappointment, the best bit being that it is right on the beach. Although our room is basic we are pleased that we are on ground level by the swimming pool and bar. The embarrassing thing is that we have to wear a wrist band to show that we are all inclusive. It is a crap hotel, very run down serving only local drinks and even worse wine is served by the glass at dinner only. Mike and Rick are determined to make the best of it especially as the Masters is on with Tiger Woods playing for the first time after all the sex revelations. I am typing this on our new notepad laptop.



After a few Rum Punches we had a swim in the sea. The beach is fantastic with golden sand and turquoise sea. It was great, great and great, perhaps we can make do with this awful hotel. The afternoon tea consisted of marmite and peanut butter sandwiches, one of which Rick's had a bit of mould on. Thyra got chatted up by a local artist. I think it's the end of the season as there are aren't many people here, but there are lots of under 16 netball teams. All very tall and energetic.

Supper was a great improvement on afternoon tea but the rum punches had taken effect and I couldn't

even drink the awful local wine.



We were tired and went to bed early.

Monday 12 April

I woke up on average every two hours and the night was long. Big, big panic as Rick couldn't find the key to the safe and it will cost 350 dollars to get a replacement. I emptied the cases and pulled the room apart, after all the cost of a replacement key is more than the valuables we have locked away. Eureka, there it was on the floor by the bed. Breakfast was good and jumping over the waves in the sea even better. After meeting with the Virgin Rep we hired a car and made our way to the Harrison Caves which were a little disappointing. They have revamped the site and it is all very modern but they need music and lights. Hero Rick took us the scenic drive back assisted by Thyra's considerable navigation skills. Tomorrow we are thinking of driving to Sandy Lane but how we possibly be seen wearing these all inclusive wrist bands. I've tried to cover mine with my watch.

Barbados is a non volcanic island being composed of coral, most of the coastline is encircled by coral reefs. The first indigenous people are thought to be Amerindians from Venezuela 350 – 400 BC. In about 800 the Arawak's arrived from South America and these were displaced by the Caribs in the thirteenth century. . The Portuguese briefly claimed the island from mid 1500's to 1600s but left little impact on the island. British sailors landed in 1625 and remained in possession until independence in 1966. The rich plantation owners continued to import African slaves to cultivate the sugar cane. By the end of the 18th century Barbados's inhabitants turned from mainly English and Scots and Irish to overwhelmingly black. Slavery was finally abolished by the British in 1834. The population of Barbados now is about 282,00 with about 80% being of African decent.

The temperatures are relatively mild due to the constant trade winds off the Atlantic coast. It's about 30 degrees today but humid and cloudy, we passed through some villages that must have just had a downpour. The wet season is from June to November and the dry season being from December to May.

Barbados was one of the world's biggest producer of sugar cane in 1640 replacing the tobacco plantations. Although Barbados' history is heavily influenced by sugar production the economy is now dominated by services and tourism.

Dinner was okay but I was tired and slept like a log. Must cut down on the rum punches, they knock me out.

Tuesday 13 April

Today we are going to explore the rest of the island in our fully loaded rented Toyota. It's not a big island, only 166 square miles. Mike offered to navigate as he thought it would stop him falling asleep. He didn't get off to a good start as we suddenly found ourselves driving through the capital city of Bridgetown which we hoping to avoid. He used all sorts of excuses, blaming Thyra and the map. It's a large scale map and before you knew where you were we had passed it. We were looking forward to seeing the Sandy Lane Hotel but it was gated as you have to book in advance. We were expecting miles of beautiful golden beaches but they were hidden by hotels or secured complexes. It was sweltering hot when we stopped at the old fashioned town of Speightstown for a drink. Our hotel is looking better by the minute as it has a constant cooling breeze or should I say wind and a decent beach you can get onto. The rest of it is not much to speak of though as it badly needs refurbishing.



We continued on to North Point at the top of the island and then, after a few detours, courtesy of Mike, took one of the roads back through the middle of the island to the hotel. There is still a lot of sugar cane around, we were told that because of the dry weather they are having to harvest it early this year. There are lots of garages on the island and the buses, some of which are privately owned, whizzed past you at a rate of knots. Mike was very agitated as he thought Thyra and I were laughing at his appalling directions, which of course we denied. He was back to his cheerful old self once he had a sail in Hoby.

The Manager's Cocktail Party would have been a bit thin on the ground if we hadn't turned up. He said that business was the worst it has ever been. Luckily an unexpected 150 guests had turned up today as their flight couldn't land in Antigua because of a storm. The netball teams from Barbados, Cayman Island, Trinidad and Tobago, St Vincent and Bermuda are making up the numbers. Some of the girls, who are all under 16 are at least 6ft 6" tall, they pile their plates up with hot dogs, burgers and chips. We were determined to try and stay awake after 9.30 pm and sat by the pool to watched the evening entertainment. There was a fire eater and some girls doing the limbo who got Mike to join in. An old man somehow managed to stagger from table to table to sing some old songs. When we thought Mike was suitably inebriated we broached the subject of his lack of navigation skills. He took it well and somehow we have made it to 11.30pm before retiring to bed.

Wednesday 14 April

It's goodbye forever to the Barbados Beach Hotel. There was a lot of hanging around today whilst waiting for transfer to the port and then waiting for our room to be ready. The Carnival Victory seems huge and very glitzy just like being in a Las Vegas Hotel. We don't like it much and they don't seem overly concerned with hygiene. There isn't anyone insisting that you use the hand wash and the public toilets weren't that clean. However, our room is great all that's missing is a mini bar. We arranged to meet Mike and Thyra at the gangway but they got lost and it took them 15 minutes to find their way out. This didn't leave much time for us to have a look at the cricket stadium, we just about had time to take a couple of photo's of the statute outside it.



Thyra got blisters from the fast walk and Mike was a bit concerned that his ankle might swell up. It was hot, Rick bought a small bottle of rum and topped up a coke bottle. He managed to get it through security but I refused to have anything to do with it.

We found it hard to find a non smoking bar. I enjoyed my dinner, the service was fast but they are well aware of my gluten free diet. Heard from Jen, she is having a stressful week preparing post election briefings. I was ready to disco but Rick was exhausted so we had another early night.

Thursday 15 April – St Lucia – docked in capital town of Castries

Woke up at 5am to read *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*, it's really good. Julie has got into a routine with the chickens, cleaning them out each day, moving them every other day and of course collecting the eggs. She says they love sweetcorn but not really sure she is enjoying them.

At breakfast we sat with a couple from Minnesota and another couple from Barbados. The Barbados couple run some hotels, one of them was just up the road from us and they also have other business interests, real estate and car hire ask.barbados.com, They thought that the Sandy Lane area was very

overpriced, it costs something like \$5000 a night in the Sandy Lane Hotel. He once again confirmed that Barbados was suffering badly from the recession and now that the main tourist season was ending many businesses will go under.

We shared a minibus with 8 others for a short island tour and a trip to the beach resort of Rodney Bay. We had a lazy afternoon sunbathing and reading or books. Mike was a bit shocked when he took a swig from his water bottle and found it was neat gin that he had smuggled onto the ship in his luggage. It was quite amusing to us that he then had to smuggle it back on board again in his beach bag. I like this island as it more friendly than Barbados, the hills make it more interesting and it is lush and green. Our guide pointed out lots of fruits growing wild i.e. cocoa, cashew, avocados, bananas, cinnamon, mangos to name a few. There was a loud American woman with her sheriff husband who were a little drunk on the way back.



St Lucia is 239 square miles, a bit bigger than Barbados. Once again the population of 174,000 is mostly of African decent, they speak English but Antillean Creole is also spoken by 80% of the population. The island was first settled by the French who signed a treaty with the Caribs in 1660. They began to cultivate sugar cane and started to import African slaves as many of the Caribs died because of diseases such as measles and smallpox as a result of lack of immunity and being overworked and mistreated by the whites. Power kept passing between the French and British until the British secured it in 1814, as a result of the French influence 70% of the population are Roman Catholic. They gained independence in 1979 and recognise Queen Elizabeth II as head of State. Their economy depends primarily on tourism, banana production and light manufacturing. They like their cricket and jazz.



It was Elegance Night and dressed in our finery we met up in the bar for pre dinner drinks. Thyra was wearing her new diamond necklace that Mike bought her yesterday. The food is average, they gave me some gluten free bread tonight that was almost inedible. We watched a bit of the late night show and even though Rick was up for a bit of boogie I opted out as I was falling asleep.

Friday St Kitts 16 April 2010

We docked at the capital Basseterre which is on part of 27 acres of reclaimed land. As you come out of the port there is a large square full of duty free shops. The rest of the town is a bit run down, they have a mini Big Ben and a prison in the centre of the town.



Mike and Thyra had set off on their catamaran sail and snorkel trip. For \$25 each we booked a trip from the dock. There were only 8 of us who ran through the rain to the coach only to find that our guide had forgotten the keys. He climbed through the window to open the doors and then it was laughter all the way in-between him taking calls from his boss man. He just loves the girls and has all sorts of squeezes, a side squeeze, hard squeeze and a main squeeze. He yelled out of the window at one of his sides squeezes but asked us not to mention this to his wife. Following a laugh at his own jokes he would say "Oh yes, huh huh huh chop chop chop. Unfortunately, bossman took him off the job and replaced him with knowledgeable Byron who was a teacher. We then discovered that most of what funman had said was a load of rubbish, he had been told to drive us around until they could rustle up a few more tourists. Bossman kept phoning Byron who had to stop a few times to collect more tourists, he was not amused and eventually turned off his mobile.

St Kitts and Nevis are sister islands, separated by only 2 miles of water and were governed as different states until they were unified by the British in the late 19th Century. Today Nevis accuses St Kitts of neglecting its needs. St Kitts became the first British colony in the West Indies in 1624 and then in 1625 became the first French colony in the Caribbean. St Kitts is shaped liked a chicken drumstick, 23 miles long and 5 miles wide. It has a population of only 45000, and they became independent from the United Kingdom in 1983.

The islands are of volcanic origin with large central peaks covered in tropical rainforest with most of the steeper slopes being unpopulated. There are numerous rivers which provide fresh water and one small lake, however today's rain was very welcome as it's been very dry with water restrictions in operation. Sugar was the main export from the 1640's but this was abandoned five years ago when it became unprofitable. The economy now is dominated by tourism, off shore banking, agriculture and light manufacturing. There are a number of medical schools and a veterinary college. The government have provided a successful housing scheme for people who cannot get a loan from a bank. They have built many individual basic houses and once they have paid off 50% off their low interest loan they are able to extend the properties. Some of the properties are in excellent positions. The island suffered from devastating hurricanes in 1998 and 1999.





We watched a batik demonstration and stopped at Frigate Bay, a beach resort. A photo opportunity presented itself where we could see the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Caribbean Ocean in the other direction. This is the side of the island with white sand and expensive real estate and where they are going to build a new marina. You could see Nevis in the distance as the rain had stopped by then. There are about 75,000 monkeys on the island, some as tall as a man. Some of the baby ones are dressed in a nappy and their monkey-men charge \$2 for you to have your photo taken with them.



Despite the rain showers Mike and Thyra caught the sun. Mike was overwhelmed with the amount and colours of the fish he saw whilst snorkelling. The Icelandic volcanic ash is causing chaos with people's travel plans. Flights as far as Italy have been cancelled, we may have to make other plans to get home.

Rick has a swollen gland in his neck, a headache and we had to cut the evening short so he could rush to the toilet.

Saturday 17 April 2010 – Saint Maarten

One Island but two countries, one part French and other Dutch. 39,000 live on the Dutch side and 36,000 on the French side in an area of only 34 square miles. It's a volcanic island and nothing much can be grown for export so the main industry is tourism and almost everything else has to be imported. In 1634 the French did manage to cultivate tobacco and in 1620's the Dutch collected salt from the ponds. For 200 years the island passed between the Spanish, British, Dutch and French and in 1816 the French and Dutch zones were restored. The Dutch side is known for its nightlife, beaches, jewellery, rum based guavaberry liquors and casinos. The French side is known for its nude beaches, clothes, shopping and French and Indian Caribbean cuisine.



The weather was pleasantly warm and a little windy just right for Mike's chance to compete in a shortened America's Cup course while Thyra stayed on board for a facial. Rick and I picked up a \$25 a piece trip round the island. It wasn't as much fun as yesterday, we shared the minibus with a very large couple who got married yesterday and her daughter and boyfriend. She broke the car seat while she was trying to haul herself out. The roads on the Dutch side were a bit pot-holed whereas the French side were well maintained. The French side was very chic with expensive shops and restaurants.



We stopped at the nude beach and saw loads of willies mostly on middle-aged and older men. The afternoon was spent on the beach near the port where we managed to get 2 sunbeds, an umbrella, 4 beers and 2 sprites for \$15. Lots of people are leaving the ship tomorrow.



We are getting a bit concerned about the flight home and are thinking of doing our washing tomorrow should we be delayed in Barbados.



Sunday 18 April – San Juan Puerto Rico



We are getting seriously concerned about our flight home as flights have now been stopped as far as Italy. We could get a flight to New York and take a transatlantic crossing or maybe get a cruise from Barbados to Barcelona. Another thought was that if we were having to pay for hotel and food ourselves it maybe

cheaper to do this cruise again but then we wouldn't be on hand if our flight came up. I had another terrible night's sleep as I had a pain in my little finger, it sounds silly but it was a painful pain. Someone who was lost knocked on our door just after 2am this morning. It was changeover day for the cruise and the main embarkation point. We had to go through emigration and then join the tour we had pre-booked for a trip around the old town and a tour of the Barcardi factory, The factory tour was a waste of time, just a showpiece.



The island is part of the US and the city has a population of 422,665. San Juan is one of Puerto Rico's most important seaports and the centre for manufacturing, financial, cultural and tourism. It seemed huge and also very affluent after all the other islands we had visited. Why would they want their independence when they had it made with the States helping to fund it. The city is well kept and not at all third world. It was difficult to hear what the guide said so it was just as well I had read up on some of the history of the island. The Virgin rep gave us the impression that they would put us up in Barbados until we could get a flight home. If so, we may have to upgrade as I remember saying as we left the Barbados Beach Hotel "Goodbye and I won't be seeing you again". Famous last words.





Back at the ship, gone had most of the big black mamas who had been replaced by a very much younger set of mostly Americans. We had a lazy afternoon resting and reading. Once it got dark we ending up at Senior Frogs where we could have a drink and free internet. It had live music and was really buzzing. Unfortunately, Rick and I fell out as he got stroppey with me (I think he has a personality change once he is on the computer) and I got in a mood and wouldn't go to dinner with him. We ended up staying in the cabin but that was fine, perhaps we needed some time just to chill out and we definitely didn't need the extra calories.

Monday 19 April – Saint Thomas – US Virgin Islands pop 51,000 area 31.24 sq miles

Another mountainous island, much like some of the others we have seen but with a lovely bay. In 1917 St Thomas was bought together Saint John and Saint Croix by the US for \$25 million in gold as part of a defensive strategy to maintain control over the Caribbean and the Panama Canal during the First World War. US citizenship was granted to the residents in 1927. The post war era saw a rise in tourism as a result of relatively cheap air travel and the American embargo on Cuba. Despite natural disasters such as Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and Hurricanes Luis and Marilyn in 1995 the island's infrastructure continues to improve from the increased flow of visitors. Every port we go to is full of supposedly duty free jewellery shops. The Americans are mad on shopping but I can't believe these shops are economically viable, although I suppose each cruise holds between 1000 – 3000 passengers and staff. It's not every day you buy a diamond necklace or ring and after seeing so many they all start to look much the same.



Took an open-air safari cab to Magen's Bay Beach which according to National Geographic is one of the ten most beautiful beaches in the world. I don't know if I would go that far but it was a pleasant long, sandy bay bordered by trees. Most people were lying on their towels, we put ours next to a couple from California who were on a Princess Cruise. We chatted the morning away swapping stories of previous cruises and holidays. A must read is "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett.



Next was the St Thomas Skyride to Paradise Point, which I thought was going to give us a chance to see across the other side of the island but you could only really see the harbour where we were docked. The

camera battery decided to run out at the top of the mountain but a newly wed American couple took our picture and offered to email it to us. We just made it to the Butterfly Farm as it was only a two minute walk from the ship. It was tiny but the plants and description of the life span of the butterfly made it worthwhile.

Back on the ship we once again enjoyed the Reggae Band and even better Rick got to see the latest "Star Trek" film on the big screen. I enjoyed our meal, we tried to have a look at the show but it was full to bursting. Another early night.

20 April – Dominica population 72660 - 290 sq miles

Woke up to blazing sun, it was really hot. We bought 2 hours internet time for \$7 and did a few emails. Latest news is that BA have sent up a few test flights and are hoping to find a slot to enable them to land. Jen says they have sent the navy to Spain to pick up some soldiers who have been serving in Iraq and thinks we should look at getting a transatlantic cruise back home. The best news we could have is that we would be put up in an all-inclusive for another week.

Dominica is unspoilt with lush mountainous rainforests, home to many rare plants, animal and bird species. The French introduced wild boar and the Sisserou Parrot is the island's national bird. Dominica's economy is heavily dependent on both tourism and agriculture. The sea around Dominica is home to many cetaceans and notably sperm whales and dolphins.

Christopher Columbus named the island in 1493 and in the next 100 years the island remained isolated. Many Caribs settled there after being driven from surrounding islands and this continued into the 1600's. In 1660 the French and British agreed that both Dominica and St Vincent should be abandoned. Dominica was officially neutral for the next century but the British and French were harvesting timber by the start of the 18th century. France gave the United Kingdom possession in 1753. The emancipation of African slaves in 1834 led to Dominica becoming the first British Caribbean colony to be controlled by an African majority in 1838 and it become an independent nation in 1978. Independence did little to solve problems stemming from centuries of economic underdevelopment. Chronic economic problems were compounded by the severe impact of hurricanes in 1979 and 1980 and in 1981 Dominica was threatened with a takeover by mercenaries. By the end of the 1980's the economy recovered but weakened again in the 1990's because of a decrease in banana prices.

There are conflicting opinions as to whether the island should have an international airport as many citizens are seeking to preserve its spectacular natural beauty by discouraging high impact tourism. Of all the islands we visited this was the most unspoilt, in the port there were no high rise hotels or duty free jewellery shops. We took another \$25 each trip from the dock and boarded a clapped out coach to make our way though the mountainous winding roads to Trafalgar Waterfall. Mike and Thyra were seated next to the driver and thought that any minute they were about to go through the windscreen. We sat on a temporary middle seat and thought the bottom of the coach was going to fall out every time we went over a pothole. Every now and again we would stop for the locals to pass drinks through the windows. Avocados, cashew nuts, mangoes, pineapples, bananas, cocoa, coffee, bread fruit and many other plants and trees were growing wild. Flowers that we would have as indoor plants were as big as trees and some were made into hedges. The rocky path through the rainforest down to the waterfall was quite challenging. If I had realised how difficult it was I wouldn't have taken my bag and would have worn sensible shoes, not flip flops. Mike managed to have a paddle and Rick actually had a swim under the waterfall. I had a little paddle but was scared of slipping on the rocks. It was baking hot, some of the water I paddled in was hot but Rick said it was cool under the waterfall. There were two waterfalls which were quite spectacular. We had a drink of coconut milk out of the coconut once we got back to the coach area. This must have been the hottest day so far. We then stopped at a sulphur spring that was actually boiling, nearby there were holes in the rock with steam coming out. On our way back to the port we

passed through the botanical gardens.

After lunch on the ship we did a quick recky round the town. There is a shop that sells everything from sugar to a car. We stood in an electrical shop called Courts to watch the latest news on the volcanic ash. The news confirmed that BA have sent flights from various countries out to England hoping they can land. I wouldn't want to be one of the first to fly back. We bought a bottle of gin for \$12 and sat in a cafe while Rick decanted it into a water bottle. Last night on board and I enjoyed my lobster meal. We watched a bit of the show but kept dropping off. The Honeymoon couple who have a reception planned at home for Saturday say that they have been told that if our plane leaves tomorrow we will be given priority as our seats are booked for that day. That is a bit disappointing as we have started to look forward to a few more days in Barbados. I am not sure if they are right as there must be some priority cases. All will be revealed tomorrow.



Wednesday 21 April

We spent most of the morning surmising what was going to happen, will we be able to stay another week, or two or maybe even a month. We wouldn't have minded staying on and neither would Mike and Thyra provided they had a firm date for their return flight. Mike really needs to get back for meetings next week. Checking out of the ship was straightforward. I suppose it wasn't too bad on board, we were just about getting used to it. This holiday has been a bit tiring as it would have been nice to have had the chance to have to odd day off but we couldn't stay on-board as we may never visit these islands again. Also, it gets dark about 6.30 pm which makes the day rather short.



Unfortunately, even though there were supposedly 2000 people who turned up to try and get on our flight, nobody offered us any cash or incentives to stay. In fact, some people were actually downgraded from first class and premium economy. We travelled back on a much older plane that had plenty of leg and aisle room but a not so good entertainment system. I had a reasonable sleep and the journey went quite fast. Even though it was a good holiday we are now looking forward to a couple of weeks rest in Tenerife.

