

A Sentimental Journey Aboard M/V Mandalay (ex- R/V VEMA)

**By: Ellen and Tom Herron
February 2005**

We never took a honeymoon, just raced back to Lamont to sign up for the spring semester after a January wedding in Toronto. We sold our beloved Corsair F-27 trimaran (a go-fast sailboat) last December, when we noted that it tended to go a lot faster than we sometimes could. A wedding anniversary was coming – number 40. It was time to do something special.

When we saw that Windjammer Barefoot Cruises was offering a 50% off sale on all cabins on board the S/V *Mandalay* (ex R/V *Vema*) during the week of our anniversary we couldn't resist booking in spite of the long trek from coastal NC to Grenada.

So on a cold rainy Saturday at the end of January 2005, we were ready to head for the airport to start our special holiday when the airline called to tell us that they had cancelled all flights out for the rest of the day because of an ice storm west of I-95. We are Lamont alumni, imbued with Doc's philosophy to overcome all obstacles so, instead of 'staying the course', we quickly devised and implemented plan 'B'.

We persuaded the local airline to give us tickets on one of their rivals and let us fly out of Jacksonville FL to catch our flights to Grenada in Miami. Then we rented a car and drove 544 miles in the cold rain to Jacksonville. The next evening we arrived in St. George's Grenada, (see map at end) which is still a mess from September's visit by

Hurricane Ivan as evidenced by the Tunguska-like forests of foliage-stripped trees on the hillsides and roofless churches in the town.



After rousing the guard at the container port to open the gate, our taxi drove past the containers to the dock and dumped us out near a tall ship where a party was underway and from which loud music was blaring. At the foot of the gangway was a youthful barefoot fellow in a white uniform with epaulets who introduced himself as 'Captain Matt'. We had made it to the '*Mandalay*' our home for the next six days. She was a far cry from '*Vema*'.



As *'Mandalay'*, the youthful, elegant 83 year-old hull again sports the three masts she lost in the late 1960s. The forward mast now belches smoke though. She's fitted with fisherman-rig sails, not the gaffe-rig of *'Vema'* or *'Hussar'*, and has an upper party deck for 70 or so passengers that extends from the fantail to the anchor locker covering the old mid-ship core winch area. Lots and lots of varnished wood inside and out make her incompatible with US safety regulations so she now flies the flag of Grenada. Instead of a crew of Lunenbergers and Fijians, she is now manned by a crew of 24, most of whom come from Guyana or the islands. Low headroom, a little over 75" and bunks of similar size make her still a tight squeeze for folks the size of Jeff Fox who rated a custom berth.

Early Monday morning, most of the passengers mustered on the upper deck where the repeat passengers knew how to respond properly to the Captain's 'formal' greeting at the start of his daily 'story time' ritual and how to train the newbies. All were settling into a holiday routine and only a few still wore shoes. Tom was introduced as a celebrity passenger since he served as chief scientist on one leg of *'Vema'* in 1976. Several passengers as well as the captain started interrogating us on life aboard *'Vema'* and Lamont oceanographic research. There is a little *'Vema'* memorabilia on board and the captain expressed great interest in acquiring more. He would really like to carve a new eagle for the figurehead since our kids helped wear out the original when it sat in front of the Oceanography building.

In true *'Vema'* spirit, the passengers started to collect data, mainly photos and souvenir spices before leaving Grenada. After lunch on board, the 89 year-old chief harbor pilot arrived to help us depart for Carriacou. Once the old gentleman transferred back to the pilot boat, Captain Matt took the helm



and ordered the crew to their sail raising and battle stations. A call went out for volunteers to assist. A Jolly Roger was flying in our rigging and in Barefoot Windjammer style we 'engaged' a tall ship that happened to be anchored out in the harbor with our trusty cannon as we crossed her bow.

We were heading into the 15-knot wind so the sails only helped to somewhat stabilize *'Mandalay'* as she rolled through the swells. Her sixty year-old GM diesel provided the propulsion to her four-bladed prop. (How many blades did Sam Gerard want? – five?)

Doc Ewing should be pleased. Evening found us on our first station, riding at anchor off Carriacou and ready for dinner in the salon. We began by collecting personal data on our fellow passengers. The meals were all excellent and plentiful and the house wine was quite drinkable. Later that evening, we went to an astronomy lecture on the stars and constellations given by one of the crew.

Like the 24-plus hour long stations held on 'Eltanin' we stayed anchored off Carriacou through Tuesday undertaking geological, biological and chemical studies, that is we walked the beaches, snorkeled with cameras, explored the little bit of town and searched for the 140-proof 'Iron Jack' rum for which the island is known. Under the counter in a grocery shop, Ellen found the stuff - dispensed from a gallon plastic jug into an old 'Listerine' bottle (the local measuring unit) and finally into an empty, used wine bottle. Lacking a core winch, *Mandalay* used her two launches to capture and retrieve these data for posterity.



The Captain declared that Tuesday night was party night and ordered passengers to jury-rig gear into costumes, for any kind of character as long as the name of the character began with 'P'. The Captain also offered his apologies for his absence as he had a previous engagement.



He sure missed a great sight when the diva appeared on deck in a spectacular red and pink color-scheme, including platform shoes and fishnet hose. Louie, the beloved cook on 'Conrad' would have been stunned. The diva seemed to know Henry Kohler (her throaty bass voice sounded a lot like Capt. Matt's) as she asked Ellen what he would think of her presence on board. Maybe Captain Kohler is the ghost that some of the crew believe haunts 'Mandalay'.



Towards the end of the evening, Captain Matt did appear, as the guest drummer with the steel band. Then near midnight, he took the helm and set sail for Bequia. He again had to enlist the help of the diesel because of the head wind as we headed for Bequia in the Grenadines where we again anchored off and passengers set off on site surveys of Mustique or Bequia, expand Ellen's geologic collection (beach sands and rocks from around the world) or remain on board to test the water quality and transparency (swim), monitor the wires over the side (fish, but not for the giant squid one scientist went after on 'Vema' over the Chile Trench), study for orals (read popular fiction) or just grab some rack time. Meanwhile the crew hosted a diplomatic visit just as *Conrad* did when Ellen was chief scientist on her in 1975 off Chile. This time, a Bequian crewman on 'Mandalay' and his wife arranged for a local pre-school class to come aboard for a field trip.



Thursday at dawn Capt. Matt took the helm again and we went through the emotional, orchestrated ritual of weighing anchor and enlisting both crew and passengers to help raise sail.

Now we found ourselves motor-sailing south with the swell, in a now dying breeze for Tobago Cays, a lovely national park, unspoiled by power lines. There we found great snorkeling as well as piles of conch shells on the shore and cacti sprouting from the volcanic rock on the hillsides.



Then it was on to our last stop, Mayreau, a privately owned island that just recently installed an eyesore of a power station and utility poles. A late evening 'cultural' study trip to several pubs was undertaken by many of the passengers who returned to the ship in great voice, if not great shape.



A final cannon duel with another tall ship included quite a few 'moon' volleys fired by the hearty guests on *Mandalay* as we headed back to St. George's Grenada to catch an early flight back to the States on Saturday morning.

We had a great time but would have loved to do some real sailing, not just motor sailing so if we decide to dig deep into the piggy bank and book another cruise, we'll make sure to select a two-week south-bound cruise going with the northeast trade winds.

The captain and crew would love to know more about '*Mandalay's*' life as '*Vema*' and they were really delighted that some Lamont alumni had chosen to vacation on '*Mandalay*'. They love this ship, as do most of the passengers, many of whom repeat and repeat. For us, it was the also the first time at sea where we didn't have work to do or were not responsible for her. It was wonderful to be able to just sit back, talk about old and new times, relax and enjoy.

