

**5th Report: Curaçao Marine
Part A 12°6'N 68°55'W
Belém
01°26'S 48°29'W
Fortaleza
03°42'S 38°28'W
Natal
05°46'S 35°12'W
October 21 to 29, 2013**

Route Overview



After Nino and his family returned home on **Friday, October 11**, we start with the preparations to take *Silmaril* out of the water.

On **Wednesday, October 16** we take down the sails (there is little wind thank goodness) and on **Thursday, October 17** we are ready for the operation: Rocky does his job with great calm and precision and *Silmaril* is put on the hard without mishap.



It is terribly hot and we are glad to step into the shower to cool off and to get rid of the sweat. We say good-bye, especially to Elsa and Jaap, our Dutch friends from the *Sark* and to Ursi and Max, the Swiss couple from the *Pussy Cat*.

Hans, the owner of the little apartment we rented, brings us to the airport. The flight to Paramaribo is short, only about one and a half hours, but the bus ride to town and to the hotel is very bumpy and too long, we arrive around 1:30 a.m. We decide to order a taxi for the return trip, since we need to be at the airport again by 8 a.m. The trip turns out to be nerve-wracking; the traffic is enormous and the hotel desk had miscalculated the time we would need to get to the airport. Moreover, as we arrive on the airport premisses, the driver asks much more money than we were told to pay and he drives at snail's pace through the labyrinthian streets to the departure area and has us on tenterhooks. Well, we give him a little more than the amount suggested at the hotel desk, he is not happy at all, but we leave him grumbling and run off to the gate. We arrive just in time for boarding the plane to Belém.

The Hotel Beira Rio in Belém lies directly on the shore of the Rio Guamá and we are in our room toward midday.

The climate in Brazil is more agreeable than in Curaçao, a bit cooler and less sweat-inducing. We are happy to be here and to start the big adventure of our long trip to Switzerland.

From our window we have a great view over the river and the nearby jetties. Many boats are moored or circulating on the wide muddy water.

In the afternoon we take a taxi downtown to get first impressions of the city.

The hotel is located in a rather run-down area and the pictures taken out of the taxi on our way to town show quite varying scenes.



There are the shops in the streets near the hotel, lively shopping and selling, lots of traffic in the streets full of potholes, puddles and refuse. Between the shops and small businesses, the people live in derelict hovels, many of them built on stilts over the ditches along the streets.

The garbage in those ditches is unbelievable. I'm sure they stink like sewage. We just did not smell them in the taxi! The difference between the rich and the poor is depressing.

As we drive on we encounter well-tended housing, lots of fashionable shops, all kinds of hotels and an unaccountable number of high-rises.



Saturday, October 19. We plan to explore Belém on foot today. A taxi takes us to the old town. The same impressions pass before our eyes; closer to the old market the houses become richer, more colorful, hardly any wooden constructions, let alone miserable shacks. The electrical installations would bring about a heart attack to Swiss electricians! Even downtown among the ultramodern high-rises they look like that.



The small port is full of bustling business. Goods are transferred from the boats to the trucks and vice versa. Basket by basket of acai berries is handed along a line of young boys.

The berries are the fruit of a palm tree. Their juice and pulp are an important staple food in this region. The two bags probably contain manioc meal, very important in the Brazilian cuisine. We ate "farofa", in butter roasted manioc meal, as a side dish in a variety of first courses, and some other dishes prepared with the meal.



The harbor shows everyday life in amazing openness, public showers, bedrooms and the insides of house



boats are common pictures. Water taxis are available, but the very old would have difficulties to climb on board.



These guys are also around.



In the market hall of Ver-o-Peso the choice of goods is overwhelming. There are vegetables, souvenirs, fish, meat, ready-made menus, drinks of all kinds and a huge collection of indigenous spices and remedies.

There are bottles and phials of every form and color.



Whatever dragon blood might cure, . . .

. . . this stuff's effect is known even to us!

On our stroll through the city we come across traces of Portuguese architecture. A number of house fronts are covered in glazed tiles called "azulejos" even if they are not blue, as the Portuguese word suggests, just as in Portugal.





Pretty red and white "azulejos"
Heavy traffic does not keep this crazy man from playing with his diabolo in front of the many cars waiting for the green light. He is really good and performs the wildest caprioles.

Just before the light turns, he dances to the sidewalk and waits for his next chance.

A week after the famous procession of the Cirio de Nazare, that takes place every year, remnants of the impressive festivities are still everywhere.



In front of the tribunal dozens of little wooden boats float in the pools, garlands and small shrines still decorate many houses. We have lunch in a self-service where we meet Toni, a young student who offers to show us his city. He speaks some English, is eager to practice and to tell us a thousand things about Belém.

We visit the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, a park with a small zoo and divers exhibits. Goeldi was a Swiss naturalist who restructured and enlarged the museum in the late 1880ies. He looks at us under his bowler hat, a life-size photograph, a lean figure, maybe marked by illness.

Toni knows next to nothing about animals and plants. A small tortoise is covering the small pit with laid eggs in the typical movement of her hind legs. He thinks it's just a baby! Well, I reared dozens of Greek tortoises hatched from the egg and know very well, how they dig a hole with their hind legs, drop the eggs into the little pit and cover them carefully.

The enclosures for the animals are small, very old-fashioned facilities. The tortoises and crocodiles do not seem to mind much, but the black panther and the birds are nervous and obviously unhappy.

Only the pond with the giant lotus inspired me to take a few pictures. The bosoms open at night.



These are still closed or already withered.



After the visit to the zoo we take a taxi and bring Toni to his neighborhood. He says goodbye very affectionately: "I love you!" The taxi drives off and he is gone.

Unfortunately we only know his first name. I would have loved to thank him again for his spontaneous but almost shy friendship.

The dinner is served on the terrace and we enjoy a marvelous view over the river in soft pink light under gathering dark clouds. We eat far too much; the servings conform with the general corpulence of many Brazilians, the old and the young.

Sunday, October 20. In the night I already had an odd feeling in the stomach and sure enough my body purges itself with abandon in the morning.

Since we have booked a river tour for the afternoon, we take a taxi to the nearest pharmacy to buy medication. My affliction is not unknown to the pharmacist and what she prescribes helps after a short while.

With rest and no food for lunch I feel much better by 3 p.m. and we board the water taxi at the jetty in front of the hotel.

We join a small group of German tourists. Their guide speaks excellent German and kindly invites us to participate in their program.

Looking back from the water, we see our hotel, the blue building with its enormous terrace on stilts and the water taxis on the jetty in its full extent.



Along both banks of the river houses are built very close to the water or on stilts each with a jetty.

With a tidal range of about 3 meters the boats have to be able to reach the dwellings at low or high tide.



The water taxi takes us into a branch of the Rio Guamá to this little village on stilts, where we land among a variety of boats.

The water is low; we get off the boat under the platform and ascend the wooden stairs up to the small restaurant and souvenir shop on top. We are expected, many curious faces look us over as we appear one by one.



This is the starting point of the stroll through the jungle.

Our guide leads us to a small farm behind the village, where our "jungle guide", a seventy year old scrawny manikin receives us with a broad grin.

He and our tour guide show and explain what there is to see in the rainforest: plants and their healing power, fruit and small creatures.

The richness is simply staggering.



There are many varieties of cocoa growing out of the tree trunk,



. . . the so-called tortoise ladder liana creeps in weird contortions among the greenery, . . .



. . . termite mounds rise from the ground . . .

. . . or hang high up in the tall trees, black clumps that are connected to the ground by complicated ramified trails and tunnels built by the tiny insects along the trunks of the giant trees.



The view into the jungle canopy is dizzying and full of surprises. Masses of parasitic plants grow rampant on the trunks and the branches; some are in bloom, others sprout leaves of divers green, many dangle their aerial roots. A young tarantula sits hidden in a dark nook. At this tender



age they are obviously totally harmless. A number of hands hold it and then our guide releases it carefully into its familiar hideout.

At long last our jungle guide granted us an impressive performance: he demonstrated how he and his people harvest the acai berries. He twisted a ring from a palm leaf to fit



his feet and the size of the trunk. With it he climbs up similarly to Alex's method of getting up on the mast with his climbing gear, raise the feet n the ring along the trunk, reach up with the hands and push up

with the feet and so on. To come down, Alex proceeds in reverse, our jungle guide just loosens his grip and drops to the ground like a fireman along the pole, hands and feet gently hugging the trunk. The friction leaves noticeable traces on the ring! What about his hands, knees and feet? I suppose the affected areas grew thick layers of horny skin. I did not check!

With every step I find inconspicuous but glorious pictures: tinder fungus on a decaying trunk . . .



. . . an old hoe, . . .



. . . pretty blossoms, . . .



. . . or a discarded water container.



On the return trip we pass many homes, where people play, swim or simply enjoy the "dolce far niente" of a Sunday afternoon.

Once in while a boat passes by or overtakes us.



Long stretches of the bank are overgrown with tall Araceae. Every so often a flower appears, but at our speed I cannot not take a really good picture of this magnificent blossom, so large and so white.



We return just before sundown.



On our last evening in Belém we have dinner on the terrace in the mellow light of a cloudy sunset. We eat the local specialty, a "Feijada", a bean dish with lots of other ingredients. The *Platon* will arrive tomorrow and we will go on board.

Monday, October 21, the day of our new adventure: we start on our voyage on the freighter *CMA CGM Platon*.

Alex has observed her position for the past few days and we see her now on our iPad slowly moving up the river. The pilot must already be on board. The agent sends a message that he expects us at Gate 11 in the harbor at

2 p.m. According to our conscientious Swissness we arrive at 2 P.M. sharp and wait, first for the agent and then for the papers we had sent by e-mail already on Friday, but have not yet reached this office.

Well, that's the way it goes in Brazil.

After an hour and a half we are allowed to enter the harbor area and we walk with our trolley bags over the bumpy cobblestones toward the monster. She is moored at the end of the pier, quite a distance from Gate 11 and we move along huge stacks of containers dodging the flatbed trucks that run to and from the ship, carrying the unloaded containers or those to be loaded.

We are the only guests on board and take possession of the owner's cabin on the starboard side below the bridge.



The *Platon* was built in 2007 in Korea. She is pretty much the age of *Silmaril*. We are allowed to move on the ship at all times wherever we want to go, on the upper deck along the narrow passageways on both sides of the ship, . . .



. . . in the canyons between the container towers, . . .

. . . even to the bow and the stern we may go. They just want to know our whereabouts, so we are expected to inform the bridge about our rambles.. Our cabin is on the F Deck where the captain and the officers live. We eat seven stories below and descend and climb 7 stairs with 13 steps for the meals three times a day. There is no elevator.



We spend our first evening on board watching the men load and unload containers. Three gigantic ship's cranes work non stop.



The work is dangerous and accidents happen. An ambulance is permanently stationed near the ship. Loading and unloading went on until early morning. We are supposed to leave tomorrow. Time in port costs a lot of money.

The view from the height of our cabin is impressive and we watch with



fascination.

Belém City has many skyscrapers and more are being built. Most of them are residential high-rises with very expensive apartments, as we are told.

The city demonstrates the discrepancy between the rich and the poor conspicuously. The sun is setting around dinner



time; we go to eat in the officers' mess, read for a while and close our eyes to the distant noise of the moving cranes.



Tuesday, October 22.



The Pilot comes on board toward 4 P.M. The maneuver of casting off can begin. The captain in uniform commands from the flying bridge, the pilot gives his advice.

Slowly the ship moves away from the pier in parallel motion. The captain operates the bow- and stern thrusters himself.

The helmsman and the 2nd officer concentrate on the captain's commands: "Dead slow ahead!", "Dead slow ahead, Sir!", "Port 10!", "Port 10, . . . Port 10, Sir"!

In normal English this means: move ahead at the lowest engine speed, turn the rudder 10 degrees to port, the helmsman repeats the commands and confirms the new position.

The instruments mirror the commands, that's the way we understand what is going on.

The ship moves slowly ahead.

The skyline of Belém with its many high-rises sets off the wretched housing conditions on the bank of the river in



horrible detail. Many huts and shacks are built on stilts, their floors only just above the water. We cannot imagine how people can live here.

It is a miracle that criminality, social unrest and public protest are not more noticeable on a stroll

through the inner city. We suspect that terror reigns in those places a soon as it gets dark.

Many boats are on the river, from the nutshell to the tourist water taxi.

Every so often a private



motorboat with a large outboard engine roars by, the newly rich of Belém boastfully



parading their wealth with lots of waves and noise.

A number of boats have sails, they all seem hand-crafted, but the make is very similar. It makes sense to hoist sails; there is always some wind and it is probably more reliable than the engines in some of the boats judging from their looks.

We soon reach the open sea and head southeast toward Fortaleza.

Wednesday, October 23. One of the 3rd officers gives us the mandatory tour about the safety on board. We don our helmets and follow him to the life boats, the life rafts, the lockers with the life jackets and the immersion suits; we even go into the life boat, look at the seats with the safety belts, follow his explanation of the order of boarding and releasing the craft and marvel at the noise the engine makes. Our guide explains the duties in case of the different alarms. Whatever signal is sounded, we have one obligation: proceed to the bridge and wait for the master's orders.

In conclusion to the safety instructions, we have to fill in a form with the correct answers to dozens of questions.

A few words concerning the crew. The captain and seven other crew members are Rumanian. The remaining 18 crew, the 2nd and two 3rd officers among them, are Filipinos. With all of them who keep watch on the bridge we socialize with a warm response; we are always welcome, day and night. They make coffee for us and answer all our questions. We return their favors with gifts of chocolate.

In the evening the sun is reflected in the windows of our cabin.

In front of us only containers, cranes, water and sky. . .



. . . the sun descending and the fiery haze gradually diminishing to total darkness.



Thursday, October 24. In the afternoon we reach the bay of Fortaleza and marvel at the innumerable skyscrapers.

The pilot is already approaching and in a short while, he climbs up the breakneck Jacob's ladder.



All the way at the pier below the blue crane the *Platon* is supposed to make fast. The tugger is ready to help with the maneuver.



It takes time to move the ship into the assigned space. Another cargo is expected and *Platon* slides meter by meter closer to the fishing boats at its stern.

In over an hour we are close enough. Four men handle the cables and heave them over the massive bollards. We need Brazilian money, reales, and take a taxi to the Mercado Central. We pass through quite well-kept streets, no sign of poverty here. They must have relocated it.



No luck with the money machine in the market. We wander around, try our luck at the post office, but to no avail. So, we explore the huge market hall. On four stories above the parking dozens of stands are crammed full with textiles, clothes, shoes and other leather goods, household items, nuts, liquor of all sorts and souvenirs.

Everywhere cell phones are busy, customers deliberately ignored, although I'm interested in those textiles.



Meanwhile it is dark, but work has not stopped in the harbor. Gigantic wings of wind generators are moved on flatbeds. Mobile cranes load containers on *Platon* incessantly, but far too slowly.

The first officer is very frustrated, loading proceeds at a slow and stop pace. He seriously doubts that we will be able to leave on the appointed time on Friday toward evening.



Friday, October 25.

In the morning there is indeed a cargo tied up right behind us. We never heard anything. And they are still loading. We are allowed to leave the ship until 4 p.m. and take again a taxi down town. We buy more chocolate for the crew and large bottles of drinks for us, Coke and Guaraná, a beverage made

with the powder of the seeds of *pauline cupana*, which has been used for centuries by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon River region as nutritional supplement and antipyretic remedy.

We like it because of its refreshing and not terribly sweet taste.



We take the same route and this time I succeed in taking a picture of the monstrous madonna through the car window. She seems to compete with the high-rises looking benevolently on the busy street and the child obviously enjoys the bustle enthusiastically.



Many buildings are tiled, not only churches, but entire towers glisten in variously colored glazes.



In the supermarket we marvel at the oversized chunks of various sweets.

Small portions in plastic containers tempt the customers, most of it sugar, no doubt. We go without a taste for our teeth's sake.

The order of our undertakings is quite often not very logical. Despite our heavy shopping bags we walk a few blocks to the beach.

The sandy shore stretches along the bay in impressive distance to the horizon, golden, clean, seamed by numerous hotel towers.

Few people sit under the parasols. Once in a while a person in a bathing suit walks by.

We have a drink and return by taxi to the harbor.

Loading is still in progress, the departure time continually postponed hour by hour. We watch and wait for the maneuver of casting off until midnight, when we go to bed and fall asleep from pure exhaustion.

The ship leaves at 3 a.m. and we never notice!

Saturday, October 26. The ocean is infinitely blue and quite calm. The small swimming pool below our cabin is filled with sea water in clement weather and Alex takes a dip with relish.



A group of gannets accompany the ship. Do they not live only in the northern countries?

The birds certainly belong to the sulidae family. They fly and hunt exactly as we have observed gannets in Scotland time and again. We don our helmets and go to the bow to get closer to them.

Beautiful birds. Unfortunately it is very difficult to capture their hunting stunts with the camera.

They float on the upwind around the ship, bat their wings a few times . . .



. . . search the surface performing the funniest contortions . . .



. . . get into diving position and dart as swift as an arrow into the water. The picture is not perfect, but it does show the bizarre movement quite accurately.

We never caught the exact moment of the plunge with the bird, only the splash of the water!

We watched those artistes for a long time and laughed a lot when they wiggled their tails in flight, scratched their head with one leg or shook themselves like dogs, again in great height after the dive.



Sunsets on the water are different every time, each has its own fascinating aspect.

In the afternoon the captain reduced the speed from an average 17kts to about 11kts, since the harbor in Natal can only be approached in the daytime and to avoid anchoring in front of the harbor. So, he saves diesel and a needless maneuver.



Sunday, October 27. The bridge gives us a wake-up call before the pilot comes on board. Shortly before 6 a.m. we are up and look around, a cloudy sky and the shoreline blurry. Natal lies on the Potengi River, the approach is complicated. The Pilot gives advice for a zigzag course through the shallow water of the bay to the narrow mouth of the river.



The rocks are indeed alarmingly close to the ship!

The buoys of the waterway leave little maneuvering space, the tugboat keeps close in case of emergency.

In front of us the huge bridge spans the wide river; after the bridge a dozen sail boats are moored on buoys, there are no foreign flags, all of them seem locally owned as far as I can make out.



The *Platon* is heading for the pier at its very end.

The pilot and the captain are ready for the maneuver.



The ship's stern must be aligned with the edge of the pier, it is moved meter by meter.

No wonder fishing is prohibited so close to the turbulences of the gigantic propellers.

The ship will receive its full load here. We will certainly stay until Monday.



Alex has been afflicted for days with a swollen elbow, we assume mucositis and Renzo agrees by mail judging from the pictures we sent. So, we want to go downtown to get the medication. The steward tells us to go to Midway Mall, where we should find everything. Most shops open only at 1 p.m. on Sunday. But there are dozens of small eating places.



We finally find one with internet access and we pass the time downloading books for our e-book readers.

The mall is vast, so vast that the cleaning squad works on skates. The pharmacies, we asked in three of them and wasted much time in finding them in the various extensive levels, refused to sell us the medication without prescription. This is a new experience. In Belém they handed us the same stuff without blinking an eye. So, we take a taxi to the nearest hospital where we are referred to another one and at long last get information from a doctor in Portuguese, both orally and in writing:

bur site do olecrano (olecraneana) inflamatória. Well, we already know that! He refuses to prescribe antibiotics in reserve for the long trip to Gibraltar (Alex draws a picture of the wide expanse of water!). He proposes to ingest Nimesulida capsules twice a day, apply ice and wear a sort of tight sleeve on the elbow, as we guess from his notes and long-winded explanations in rapid Portuguese. He also informs us of the possible causes for the inflammation: excessive acido urico due to immoderate consumption of alcoholic beverages and/or crustaceans!! Alex's beer intake was certainly substantial in the heat of Curaçao! But since when is Alex allergic to shellfish? Moreover, Renzo is convinced that the cause is mechanical overuse. We tend to believe him.

The consultation has taken a long time. It is already late afternoon. We return to the ship to eat dinner and enjoy a relaxing evening with a movie on the MacBook.

Monday, October 28. Another Midway Mall day; we need to purchase the medication for Alex.

On our way to the mall we see many high-rises and a great number of houses of all kinds of shapes and colors, but never squalid buildings as we saw in Belém. They are certainly in another area. Alex takes pictures through the car window.



Two pharmacies provide what the doctor has prescribed.

We return to the eating place where the friendly owner gave us the password for the internet already yesterday. We answer mails, Alex patiently tries to download e-books with a very slow link. I'm tired and fed up with "mall life" and decide to have a haircut. It only takes forty minutes.

Before we go back to the harbor, we walk along the innumerable shops with clothes and shoes and clothes and shoes again! Who on earth can afford or even needs all that? Prices are as high as in Switzerland!

We buy more chocolate for the crew on the bridge and in the galley, an investment highly appreciated and rewarding.

Back in the harbor the loading is still going on, it is already dark and many lights are on in the city.

The evening sky is cloudy, the sun has gone down a long time ago and only sends dim colors over the horizon.



Tuesday, October 29. No one knows when we will depart. The captain grants us shore leave until 1 P.M. We walk through the streets in the vicinity of the port and look again for a hot spot accessible without a password.

The area is pretty run down, although there are old houses in rather good repair between collapsing ruins.

Very few people are around, but we feel quite safe despite the trashy look of the place and the urgent warnings from our table-mate, a Croatian captain on instructor's duty for increased safety on board.

He constantly held forth about the dangers of traveling!

The small market in the harbor where the local fishermen do their business is not busy right now. The boats arrive in the morning, unload and sell their catch to the waiting customers. The fishmonger under the blue awning probably takes and cools what is not sold for the late customers or resells it to the shops in the neighborhood. The stores in the filthy streets are spick and span!



The movable diners also look well kept with their white table cloths and tightly covered food containers.



A shoemaker works on the sidewalk. His lockable shop has rollers. He probably pushes it to a safe place at closing time.

What ever is not nailed down in the streets and courtyards, from bikes to eating places on wheels, is secured with heavy chains and huge padlocks. Theft is obviously wide-spread. No wonder, the poor have very little and take what keeps them from starving.

Unfortunately, the miserable economic situation is a perfect breeding ground for thieves who steal for different reasons than hunger.



We return to the ship along the main thoroughfare without having found a hot spot. The downloaded books n the iPad are still not transferred to the e-books.



Since our arrival we have observed the refurbishing of this house front. The masons obviously mistrust the stability of the rickety scaffold, all of them are secured by elaborate safety belts.



The flower of this tree in the harbor is edible, as we notice. The eater calls it juba, if I understand him correctly.

Loading is still going on. The departure time is postponed hour by hour. The first officer walks around with his mobil radio. He is afraid that the last container will not be on board before 5 p.m. and that we will not be able to leave this evening.

The harbor is closed from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. for any maneuver whatsoever. We follow the work with tension.

Deep below us the frame for the large containers is unhooked.

Two men receive the next container and direct it to the proper position by means of long lines.



A cage transports the two to the small containers at the stern of the ship, where we can watch them at close range.

At waiting times they sit down and relax.

Their work is incredibly dangerous. Just watching them takes our breath away. They climb onto the dangling containers in order to help the crane operator aiming at the required position to set the container down. Once in place one of them must release the frame.



They take hazardous short trips above the containers. What a job!

Time and again the crane stalls owing to insufficient power. There are 400 refrigerated containers on board with bananas, mangoes and water melons; the generators are overcharged and unable to cope with both tasks. Work Progresses sluggishly and the deadline approaches inexorably.



Two pilots have arrived but remain on the pier. Shortly before 5 p.m. the captain shouts into the radio "Stop!", the two crates with the retaining clips are loaded and the two remaining containers are left behind for the next cargo.

At 5 p.m. sharp the crane operators leave the ship (they work for the GMA CGM shipping company, but are hired local workers), The pilots come on board and we are allowed to leave at the last minute.

The entire ship seems to breath a deep sigh of.



We cast a last glance on the skyline of Natal!



We are on our way across the wide water heading for Gibraltar.