

Sunny Spray's travels, episode 14

Saint Laurent du Maroni, Crique Boeuf de Lamentin, French Guyana, August 21, 2016

Translated and edited August 24-25

Dear all,

On July 17 I wrote the previous episode, assuming that the next episode surely would be from Surinam. However, we still have not arrived there, because French Guyana proved to be rather attractive.

The last place where we spent quite some time was an extensive system of rivers and creeks, just north of Saint Laurent du Maroni. All of these are quite deep and hence navigable. Once anchored up, there is not much to do besides swimming and enjoying nature. A very pleasurable pastime!

We ended up there more or less by accident, when we were escaping the 5-day patron saint festival held annually in Saint Laurent, because of the never-ending noise (every night music, and from midnight to 06.00 h disco!!). But more on this later.



Crique Boeuf de Lamentin, a side river of the Maroni River, located in Western Guyana. The Maroni River is the border between French Guyana and Surinam. The water in the tributaries and creeks is very deep, and there is quite a current.



The OpenCPN map of the rivers and creeks is totally inadequate. It does not show depths, and is not complete. The red triangle represents Sunny Spray, when we first entered Crique de Boeuf Lamentin.

On the left hand side one sees a part of the Maroni River, nicely buoyed. The navigable channel is very narrow and close to the shore. The tributaries are indicated, but not completely: for instance, the loop to the right seems to end, but in reality the rivers meanders further on.

We found out the inadequacies once we laid hands on a staff chart covering the north part of the delta (left). Although not really meant for navigation (it gives no depths or obstacles), it does show narrows, side branches, type of vegetation etc. We added the depths we recorded ourselves by hand.

As done here, one may take a picture of the map and download it into the program OpenCPN, pretending it is a weather fax picture (using the weather fax plug in). By giving the correct coordinates, the two charts are fused (one laid on top of the other), and your ship's movements can be seen on the staff chart.

Before telling you more about this fascinating delta of creeks and rivers, I'll first fill you in on our last days in Kourou and its environs.

A very special event was a trip by car, with Francois, to a botanical garden, halfway between Kourou and Macoury. This garden is relatively small but very worthwhile to visit, because it houses more than 250 orchid species. In fact, they are gathering orchids in the rain forest to cultivate, study and classify them. It is one of the few centers in the world specialising in orchid research. In addition, they have many

other rainforest plants, noticeably bromeliaceae. Normally orchids are not my favorite type of flower, but seeing such a large variety in form and flowers changed my view.

Also very interesting was the discovery that French Guyana has been – and still is - for many years, THE country to supply vanilla, produced from an orchid. Scientists are still discovering new varieties, which are characterized and developed in the centre.



The garden has a separate section with dozens of vanilla varieties. The flowers are very small and hardly visible. The well known vanilla sticks are the dried fruits (like pulses).



In addition to all the orchids, the garden also houses special varieties of palm trees and carnivorous plants. We picked up many ideas for our own garden in Pedreguer (for when we are back).

This red palm tree is high is on our wish list. It seems that it can be ordered from specialized nurseries.

These carnivorous plants are very curious. I only knew them from my study books.



The visit to the botanical garden was our last special outing in French Guyana.

Fortunately the rainy season had come to an end, and having already had some dry days, we ventured to unpack the foot of the mast to finalize the repair of the mast and mast housing. One of the jobs was finishing the layering of the bottom part of the mast with epoxy. The most important job was the control of the repair we had done at sea, fastening the mast with a belt containing vertical wedges.

To our relief the belt with the vertical wedges was still in place, and looked surprisingly good. All that needed to be done was filling up some open spots with new pieces of belt with wedges.



The belt with vertical strips of polycarbonate that served as wedges between the metal mast ring (the white part at the bottom) and the mast itself (brown above). We made new pieces to fill up openings. In blue is part of the pulley fastener. To the middle on the right is the original construction, two lips connected by a bolt that can pull the two parts towards each other. On the other side it has broken off.

To tighten the white metal mast ring around the mast, Bob had planned to commission a new stainless steel ring that could be tightened with bolts. Price estimates to have that ring made varied between 550 and 1,250 €! So we looked around more, and came to a place where they said they could make one for

approximately 600 €. However, upon hearing the specifics, the technician shook his head and said no, this is never going to work; any construction with bolts will eventually break. He then suggested: why don't you use a ratchet fastener, as used by trucks which costs: 16.50 €. Of course we were very pleased by this honest (but for them commercially not very sound) advice!



A blue nylon ratchet fastener tightens the metal mast ring around the mast. On top of the entire construction comes a waterproof cover (called mast-pants), which is closed using velcro. The top part of this cover slides under the metal ring to which all mast blocks are attached. This makes doubly sure that everything is watertight, we seal the top part with duct tape, by now our favorite repair item!

As of now, the constructions appear to be effective. On our way to the Maroni River, the mast stood like a rock, and not a drop of water entered. Hope it keeps that way!

On July 28 we left Kourou and waved goodbye to our pontoon friends. We had spent nearly two months in Kourou and had had a splendid time, despite the rain and sky-high prices.

As agreed beforehand, we first wanted to re-visit the Isles du Salut, where we had anchored when crossing the Atlantic, but had not (yet) visited. It is a beautiful group of three islands, but with a very sad history.

The sadness had already started with the first attempts to colonize the mainland of Guyana near the river Kourou. After losing its North American overseas lands in 1763, French king Louis XV decided to establish a large colony there. The entire expedition was badly prepared, and many would-be colonists died because of disease and the harsh living conditions.

In 1764 the survivors were transported to the three small islands in front of the river Kourou, then called the Triangle islands, whilst awaiting transport back to France. The exhausted and sick colonists had a chance to recover a bit, and hence forward the islands were called the Salvation Islands (Isles du Salut).

In 1854 it was decided to close down all existing penal colonies in France, and to establish new ones in French overseas dominions. 75,000 deportees arrived in Saint Laurent in French Guyana; 55,000 of them were sent to the Isles du Salut, some to be located on Isle du Diable (Devil's Island), others on Isle Saint Joseph (cells for solitary confinement) and the majority on Isle Royale (regular prison cells, the

guillotine and administrative buildings). On drawings of that time, not a tree can be seen; it was very bleak and desolate.

The French overseas penal colonies were closed in 1937, but it was 1954 before the last prisoners had left the Isles du Salut. More than 50,000 people died on the islands, because of the difficult climate, tough working conditions, and the harsh and cruel regime. If someone, condemned for a minor crime, had served his time, the sentence was automatically changed into lifelong; heavier crimes were eventually punished by the guillotine. Political prisoners, such as Dreyfuss and Lagrange, were denied access to their lawyers for years on end, and letters and presents of their supporters were withheld and never given to the prisoners. Often people did not even know for what crime they had been sent overseas.



Sunny Spray in Coconut Bay of Isle Royale on the mooring of the Space Center ferry (which, thanks to our friends from the pontoon in Kourou, we were allowed to use). The name is apt, because the coconuts are floating literally around you.

Well known is Henry Charriere, who wrote the book *Papillon* (later filmed with Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman), about the penal colonies and his escape from Devil's Island using a raft of coconuts. In the island's museum they are not very complimentary about him; "...*Papillon* was a troublemaker and not very liked by his fellow prisoners (let alone by his guards and the directors). Many of the events

described in the book were not his, but the experiences of others ...” Even if true, this does not change the fact that the type of events described were truthful, and the picture he paints of the circumstances and practices on the Isles du Salut is horrifying.

Nowadays the island governors view the atrocities differently. On the back of the map, provided to tourists, the officials now write: “The penal colony was a failure in both human and economic terms. Most of the convicts died in Guyana and their sacrifice did nothing to help the colony develop”.

Since 1965, the Guyana Space Center purchased the islands (which are just in the path of the Ariane launches), which has made a real effort in restoring buildings and in nature preservation.



Coconut palms quickly re-take the island. Once a building is abandoned, it only takes a few years before trees are growing inside, as well as outside, the structures. To the right, the restored director’s house, now serving as a museum.

We have seen a lot of examples of this restoration and nature preservation work. We visited Isle Royale nearly daily, and the re-taking of buildings by trees is amazing. Between the trees and the abandoned, as well as the restored, buildings one can take fine walks using old paths. Whilst walking, many different animals may be seen. The island is a popular holiday destination with the people of French Guyana. They arrive by ferry, lugging large cold boxes and personal gear over the old paths, mostly to the steeply sloping Western shore, which has some bays in which one can swim and a refreshing sea breeze. In addition there are sites where the vegetation has been thinned and people may hang their hammocks and mosquito nettings between the trees. There is also a hotel and one restaurant with a fantastic view of the ocean and Devil’s Island.



View of Devil's Island, as seen from the terrace of the restaurant. From there you can follow easy paths down and all around the island. Holiday makers hang their hammocks between the trees and stay a couple of days.



Big green lizard and colorful caterpillar. We did not see the resident cayman.



This monkey had just stolen bread from the restaurant, and anxiously peers around who might steal it from him. The peacock is very innocent.



The agouti is a handsome rodent type of animal, about as big as a rabbit. It is also as prevalent as rabbits! They do not hop but walk on 4 legs, with a bit of a bent back. They can be seen everywhere, between the trees, next to and among monkeys, on the paths, and on the lawn in front of the restaurant.

On August 1 we cleaned the boat around the waterline, because we had gathered quite a number of barnacles. We hoped the fresh water of the Maroni River would do the rest (it did indeed).



Dry season does not mean it has stopped raining. It means it is mostly dry, but occasionally a heavy squall may pass through, bringing with it very strong winds and nearly horizontal rain. This one hit us at Isle Royale.

On August 2 we left the mooring and motored out for 10 miles, in order to reach deeper water (that is, approx 20 m); the coastal waters are very shallow, with many wrecks and shifting sandbanks. Once we had arrived at the 20 m contour, we hoisted the mainsail only, and left the mizzen sail in its bag. We had a fantastic sail, and without the mizzen sail we did not have to worry about the mizzen sheet trying to wrap itself around Olivia.

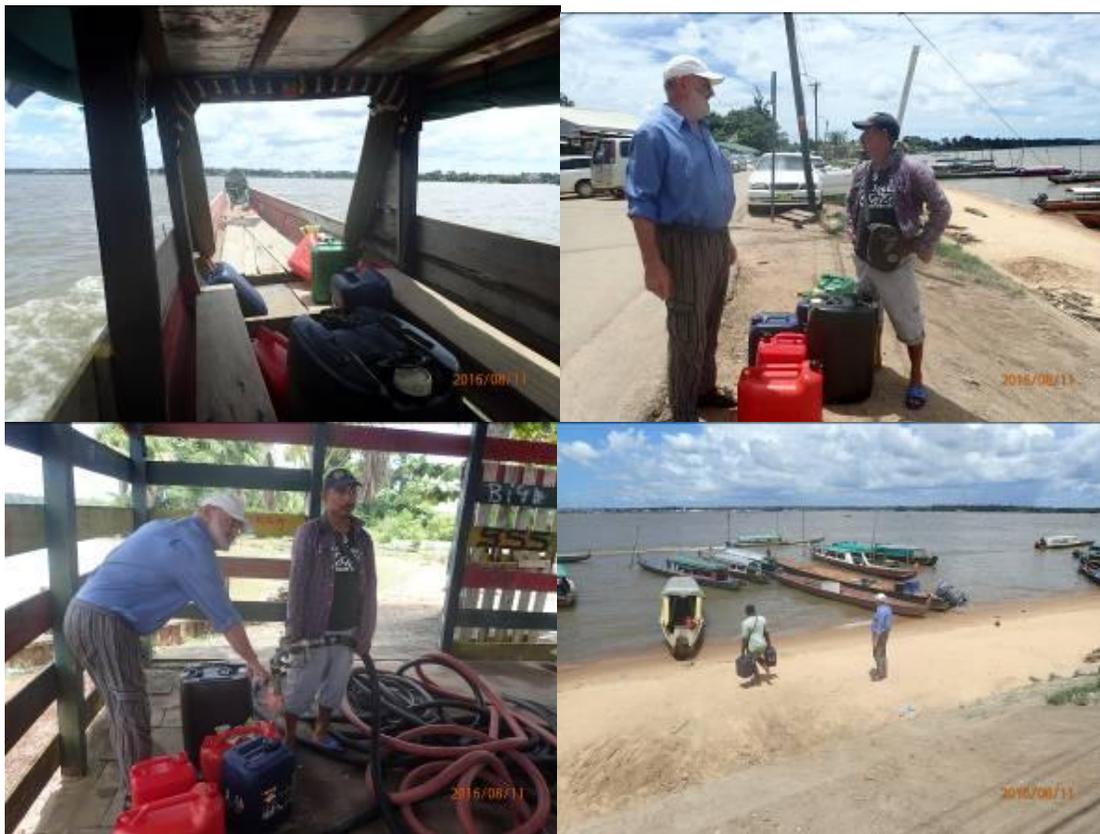
The repaired mast stood like a rock. Olivia functioned fine – we thought. After sailing nearly 5 hours, the boat started deviating a little bit from its course, so we took a good look at Olivia. Her wind vane was standing upright, as it should be, but we could not detect much movement. How strange! Closer inspection revealed she was still blocked. In other words: Sunny Spray had kept course for five hours, all

by herself, without a human hand on the wheel or Olivia to guide her! Of course we praised Sunny Spray lavishly, and de-blocked Olivia, who took over and kept course perfectly.

We set sail for the outer buoy of the Maroni River, where we arrived at 08.00 am. The tide being unfavorable, we anchored in 6 meter water on a sandbank. That was a new experience for us, anchoring out at sea! It was a bit choppy, but not enough to keep us from catching up on sleep and having a leisurely breakfast.

Helped by an incoming tide we did well heading up the 25 miles to Saint Laurent du Maroni, where we arrived at 4 pm. A green grassy riverfront, a small pontoon, a couple of houses, a small terrace in front of the marina office. Behind that a small town with some colonial houses, the Transportation Center where, over the years, 70.000 convicts had passed through, one main street with shops, mainly Chinese ones, and some quarters which we were advised NOT to visit.

Saint Laurent is a real frontier town. On the opposite side, in Surinam, is Albina, which is quite similar to Saint Laurent. Between the two is a never ending stream of small and big canoes, transporting people and goods. Sitting on the aft deck of *Sunny Spray*, you easily count 20, going at the same time, whatever the hour of day or night.



We also crossed the river to take advantage of cheaper fuel prices in Surinam. Using our own and borrowed jerry cans, we crossed in a pirogue to Albina, took a taxi to drive us to a nearby filling station, filled the cans, drove back to the pirogue by taxi, and employed a docker to haul the heavy cans on board. We plus the cans were delivered on board Sunny Spray. Every step (pirogue, taxi, pump station,

carrier) cost money, but even then we paid much less than in French Guyana. It was an African-style endeavor!

The marina chef told us that most traffic is illegal: goods are much cheaper in Albina, whilst living conditions, and in particular government support (French social welfare), is much better on the French side. Consequently, many new arrivals cross illegally, settle down in French Guyana, receive ample welfare money, and earn black money on the side. The houses they live in are called “maison lapins”.

He also told us that the French social welfare system is socially very detrimental: the French financial allotment per child is very generous, having as a consequence that most women are nearly constantly pregnant. Average income is 4,000 € per month per household, excluding additional black money. Sadly, most of the children are not receiving much attention. Once mum gets too old to bear more babies, that task is relegated to a young daughter, who consequently leaves school and a possible education. Result: there are many, many, young people, often with a lot of pocket money, without a job, hanging around. You do not see poverty, but you do see a lot of unhappy, discontented faces. The atmosphere in town was absolutely not to our liking.

Even worse was the noise. We will have to get used to that, because the Caribbean is, and has been, a very noisy place, but Saint Laurent beats every other place! Apart from the normal street noise, EVERY night at midnight some discotheques start their blaring disco beat, and they go on until 06.00 am. Every night!! It is impossible in the heat to sleep with all windows and hatches closed, and even then, and with ear plugs, the noise penetrated. When we were there for a week the seasonal patron saints festivities started. These were to last 5 days, and for the convenience of the inhabitants the festive terrain was rigged next to the marina. Bad luck for us!

The daytime noise was not so bad, mostly local music, and the Caribbean beat is quite nice. But again, after midnight, a full programme with rock bands and disco’s started, again until 06.00 am sharp. After enduring the festival for two nights, we fled. A pity, because some of the daytime and evening programming looked quite nice, and in particular I would have liked to have seen some of the scheduled dancing groups.



Rusalka (left) and Black Billy (right) went with us to Crique Boeuf de Lamentin.

Fortunately local sailors had told us that the best place to move to would be the side rivers and creeks north of Saint Laurent, an area large enough to cruise for several days. In the end, three of the four moored sailing boats left: the Australian *Black Billy*, the Mexican *Rusalka*, and *Sunny Spray*.

We had met *Rusalka* before in Kourou, and we had already made some pleasant trips together, such as the river visit to the carbet, and a joint trip to the zoo in French Guyana (see travel episode 13). Meeting up again with Marc, Daniela and their three children (Uma, Pali and baby Tiara) was lovely, and we spent many happy days together.



Uma (7) discovered how to make little statues using the clay sticking to our anchor. Pali (4,5) was very independent on his peddleless wooden bicycle.

During our first week in Saint Laurent, Daniela and Tiara were visiting Mexico, with Marc caring for the children. I was happy to have them over for dinner and other events, such as watching the opening of the Olympic Games together (our computer screen also serves as a TV). Reception on the digital antenna, bought in Kourou, was reasonable, and since we were in a French department we have seen mostly events in which the French participated. Fortunately they also showed top events such as the 100 and 200 m sprint finals! The upside of being technically in France was that they did show the complete Tour de France, which we watched daily.

Our stay on the river system Awala-Yalimapo and its creeks was fantastic. Visiting these types of places is why one travels by boat: having your own house with you, with sufficient food and drinks to last several days or weeks, visiting places that would otherwise be impossible or difficult to reach, and choosing yourself what to visit in your own timeframe. You can also undertake joint activities with like-minded people.

Sailing the tributaries and creeks was not that difficult. Of course one has to navigate with care, since the available maps did not show any water depths or obstacles. But you soon find out some generalities: such as when a river narrows, it becomes deeper, when it widens, it becomes shallower. Also, when water flows more quickly, it becomes deeper, and that is one of the reasons why you keep to the outside curves. Sometimes you could practically touch the trees, while the water depth would still be 10-12 meters!



Our joint outings into the side creeks with the dinghies were very special. Marc has quite a large dinghy that can take several people, and has a strong engine, sufficient to pull all the other boats against the current. We have a small dinghy with a silent electric motor, great for silently cruising the creek, whilst towing Marc's dinghy. Daniela preferred to take her inflatable canoe; if she had to feed Tiara, she would come alongside, so that Tiara could be handed to her. Marc would then pull the canoe along.

One of the side creeks was like a green cathedral (unfortunately the camera ran out of juice when we were entering it, so no pictures!). The trees grew 40-50 meter tall, there was a heavy undergrowth, many lianas and air roots, and very narrow. We heard absolutely nothing whilst we silently glided along using our electric engine. Marc whispered: "I am sure we are being watched by at least a hundred eyes", and we had the same feeling. Even the children were quiet. It was very imposing.



Preparations to venture into one of the side creeks. It needs some time before everyone is seated in a dinghy or canoe. Baby Tiara is literally "downloaded". Uma is ready to peddle.

Everyone is wearing a bush hat, because the sun is burning down and you never know what might fall out of a tree onto your head.



The composition of the boats changes continually, people swap places because there are frequent stops for food, drinks, wanting to be with mum or dad etc. Here Daniela is with Uma and Pali.



A man's job! Next page, Bob with Pali.



Mangrove trees have extensive sets of air roots, which can form fantastic shapes.



Daniela on a slalom between lianas. On the way back we hit one, causing a load of tree and leaf debris to fall on our heads. Fortunately no snake amongst it!



Most beautiful were those stretches where mangroves and palm trees are interspersed with flowering trees. We even spotted a Tipuanua tree (we have one in our garden in Pedreguer).

And now we are here alone. Saturday evening (tonight) there is a beach party opposite the moorings, and surely we would hear nothing! Yeah yeah. We left as a precaution, a pity, because I had just bought internet credit for a full week.

Black Billy stayed in Saint Laurent; it is waiting for a spare part for its outboard engine. *Rusalka* left for Surinam, because they are running low on drinking water, which can be sourced easiest from Domburg Waterland Marina. We were back in Saint Laurent for three days to arrange our clearing out papers and to get the necessary stamps.

As usual, plans change daily. First we wanted to skip Guyana (former British Guyana), but yesterday we spoke to a sailor who had had good experiences there, and we also managed to download a cruising guide with sailing directions. The cruising guide has whet our appetite.

For sure we will soon be leaving for Surinam and want to stay some time at the Waterland Resort. If you are reading this, we have arrived there, and also have an internet connection again.

And the problem with Marine Traffic has been solved! We can again be followed, with the correct name! That took quite some emails, but now everything functions as it should be. The reason why they kept locating us in Harlingen in the Netherlands was very interesting: Our position in Kourou was 5 degrees and something north and 52 degrees and something west. Whilst looking up the position of Harlingen in the atlas, I saw its location as 52 degrees and something north, and 5 degrees and something East. I wrote this curious coincidence to marine traffic, who sheepishly wrote back that yes, sometimes human errors occur. But anyway, they corrected it soon after that exchange.

Lots of love, and hasta la próxima!

Helma.

We can (again) be followed on www.marinetraffic.com. Ships name: *Sunny Spray*; MMSI: 244780434.

Animal of the month: the monkey

Contrary to the previous episodes, we did not manage to shoot that many good animal pictures. Here along the creeks we hear a lot of monkeys, but we have not seen them. We did manage to extensively photograph monkeys on Isle Royale.

We saw them cracking open coconuts along the paths in the woods, jumping across the roofs of restored buildings, and playing on a lawn in front of the guest apartments of the hotel.



At the latter location three young monkeys were playing rough and tumble, with much pulling of tails. Some older monkeys let them be, whilst sitting around them in a protective circle, nibbling some greenery and pretending to be much occupied and not mindful of the youngsters. I sat quietly on the lawn for half an hour and managed to take these pictures.



