



## CHAPTER SIXO PUERTO MANIACO

Puerto Vallarta is a place totally out of control. Imagine Disneyland, the Daytona 500, Beverly Hills, Bangladesh, Monaco, Coney Island and Key West at spring break, all rolled into one. The Beverly Hillbillies meet Donald Trump. This is the most eclectic collection of tourists and zillionaires I have ever imagined. Beaches and streets clogged with waddling, sunburned, shopping-bag-toting tourists from Minneapolis and Fargo alongside \$7 million yachts and \$10 million houses. Mind you they eat in very different restaurants and shop in very different stores, but they're all here, soaking in the sun and taking a break from whatever it is they normally do (driving a tractor or shopping on Rodeo Drive).

We take the local bus into 'Centro', the old part of Puerto Vallarta, and begin our march along the beach. There is, literally, no room for a hot dog on this beach. Every square centimeter (a large centipede) is taken. The only reason I know there's sand under all this is because I saw a picture of it in a brochure. I am stunned by this seething, seemingly infinite mass of flesh, dotted with locals selling straw hats, blankets and jewelry, guys selling smoking skewers of shrimp or chicken, other guys selling little silver buckets containing six little bottles of beer, and women wanting to braid my hair (until I take off my hat). If I wasn't so happy that they won't be following me around trying to convince me that the Stevie Wonder look is back, I'd probably be insulted at their laughter.

We eat Marlin-on-a-stick (it tastes like snake), drink beers and walk around town trying to take it all in. In the middle of all this madness stands a spectacular cathedral. As if to complete this Felini-esque scenario, there's a wedding going on inside. On a Thursday afternoon. When the ceremony ends the entire wedding party marches out of the church and into the street, then proceeds directly to the beach. To join in with the drunken college kids from Austin and the families from Montpelier. Having seen 'The Wedding Crashers', I join right in. "Buena vista!"

Enough is enough. We hop a bus back to the marina. Of course you might think that with everything else moving at the speed of mud in Mexico (the average house takes...oh.... a few years—give or take a few years—to build), that the busses would simply meander their way along. You'd be wrong. It seems that the drivers are hell bent on turning a reasonably well-running vehicle into a total wreck. They slam on the brakes (three or four times per block), then stomp on the gas as they crank the steering wheel all the way to one side, and then a little more. Then slam on the brakes again, then another firm STOMP on the gas as the bus careens just inches away from...another bus that is doing the same thing. I find it quite comical; Chris grips the seat in front of her with white knuckles.

Back at the boat we grab towels and head across the inlet to the beach in front of the Paradise Village Resort. Now this place is a lot closer to 5-Star than anything I've seen so far. The beach is packed with sun worshipers but this crowd is decidedly more upscale than the one in Puerto Vallarta. The surf is pretty big but I bash my way out, getting a full face smack-down every few seconds. The water is warm, the sun hot, and the afternoon perfect. We retire to the pool and sip little umbrella drinks which don't have umbrellas and aren't really little little but they are cold and strong so I order another round immediately.

That night we have dinner at the Paradise Marina Yacht Club. I order a beer and the waiter brings out a can of beer, plops it down in front of me and walks away. So much for the 'Yacht Club' atmosphere. Feels more like I'm at José's Beer Garden. After dinner we meet up with an all female boatload of cruisers, then hit all the resort hot spots and dance till late like the drunken sailors we are. I think I promised several dozen women I'd take them for a sail the next day but it might have been more. Luckily I don't remember those kinds of things.

I never really considered it before but some Mexicans have other possessions besides cars. Many of them here in Puerto Vallarta also have boats. Now I don't want to seem mexist but the stereotype of the 1984 Honda Accord with the big, loud, chrome exhaust pipe, purple tinted windows, 200# base reflex earth-rumbling speaker and 12-15 occupants seems to have carried over into their yachting mentality as well. Just replace the 84 Accord with a 15' peeling, warped, leaking plywood skiff and everything else stays the same. And this package comes complete with the 'oblivious' gene, of course.

As we dinghy (the verb form of dinghy: I dinghy, you dinghy, he-she-it dingies) across the channel there is never a shortage of barely floating boat/jalopies that are absolutely *packed* with people—parents, kids, aunts, uncles, grandparents—entire generations of families, out for a fun outing. On the ocean. Where the swells are 4-6 feet and the nearest life jacket is made of cork and floating in a swamp in Cancun. That these people ever make it back to land is indeed an impressive argument for the possibility that there is a God. In fact, the fact that they even make it out of the channel without mowing each other down (and believe me, they try!) is quite impressive. *See Juan! I tole you there is a God!*

They are still roaring around late at night, long after the channel has turned to an inky black. Lights? We don't need no stinking lights! We're drunk! Who cares??!!

Art and Chris leave for home the next morning and I am alone for a while before the next crew arrives. I untie from the pilings and head out through the channel just as a big set of waves starts building on the outside. With just inches to spare I sneak out over the first cresting 4' wave as they build bigger and bigger. Another three minutes and I would have taken a nasty hit. I head north ten miles up the bay to La Cruz for New Years eve. Rumor has it the place rocks.

There are perhaps thirty-five boats anchored in the bay. It is somewhat sheltered from the big swell that is pumping 10' waves up at Punta Mita, but there are still big swells rolling through the anchorage. The monohulls are rolling around wildly, but not Jangada. Lucky for me because I have chosen today to rebuild my watermaker which has developed a small leak in the piston shaft. I gather up a pile of tools and almost get the thing apart before removing the wrong bolt and having a puddle of green oil pour out. Oops.

It turns out that a guy in a boat near me is a tech rep for the company that makes my watermaker so I bring all the parts over to him and we spend an hour fitting it with a new piston and all new seals. Amazingly, he has a complete supply of spare parts on his tight 34' sailboat. Probably the only parts in all of Mexico. We talk boats and destinations, and drink beer as he deftly reassembles the myriad parts. Back on Jangada I reattach it to the hoses and motor and amazing, it works. No leak, no parts left over (I wonder where this screw is supposed to go....?), good water. I'm on a roll.

Just as I'm finishing up I hear yelling nearby. I crawl out from under the berth (there's a rule on boats that anything large and complicated to work on will always be located in an inaccessible, cramped location) and peek my head outside. A 46' Beneteau named 'Southern Cross' had pulled in between me and 'Victoria', a 50' custom steel sloop that was anchored just north of me, and was dropping anchor. The owner of Victoria was not happy about this situation and was eager to let the owner of Southern Cross, and indeed every other boat within shouting distance, know about it. There ensued a full-on shouting match that had me in stitches. Victoria's owner, a rather plump fellow in his mid 60s, was screaming obscenities as the owner of Southern Cross, a rather fit fellow in his mid 40s, was telling him to fuck off. "You want me to come over there? Is that what you want?" Southern Cross threatened. "Okay, I'm coming over, shit head!"

As Southern Cross jumped into his dinghy his wife appeared in the cockpit. This was great! I grabbed a beer and settled down for a great show here in the idyllic anchorage as the sun eased it's way to the west.

Southern Cross quickly arrived at the stern of Victoria (it was, after all, only 75 feet away; he probably could have *jumped* over to the other boat) stood up and the two continued there shouting match. Suddenly Victoria disappeared for a moment and reappeared with something silver and shiny in his hand. Holy mackerel! I thought. This guy has a gun! Must be a stainless 45 automatic. This is gonna be wild! I grabbed my binoculars and got ready to duck.

Nose to nose, Southern Cross standing in his dinghy and Victoria towering over him in the cockpit with the silver thing in his hand, the two kept the scenario up as Southern Crosses wife was screaming at them across the water: obviously she had seen the silver thing too. I focused my binoculars on the silver thing, which turned out to be a winch handle and not a gun. Still a rather ominous weapon at close range.

Southern Cross then decided he'd made his point and returned to his frantic wife. I looked over at them, smiled and waved. They waved back. I let things settle down a bit

(Southern Cross was certainly not moving) then rowed my dinghy over to introduce myself and tell them I really enjoyed the show. I'm a friendly kind of guy, you know.

They told me they had toured the town of Tequila a couple days ago and offered me a margarita with some of their booty. A good start to New Year's eve. We talked sailing and sailboat parts and fixing things and cool places we'd been and all the usual sailors stuff. And had another margarita as the big red sun took it's last breath and dropped below the horizon. Turns out Southern Cross was named after the Crosby Stills & Nash song, and he played it a few times, quite loud so as to reinforce his presence to Victoria, I think. And we had another margarita.

Now it's dark, it's 7pm on New Year's eve, I don't even know where my boat is, and I am totally shitfaced. Good start. Back on Jangada I can barely keep my balance so I decide to join the throngs who are gathering on shore. I grab a beer (the antidote to Tequila, or so I'm told) and head for shore. The beach is already littered with dinghies and staggering sailors. Perfect! I join one group as they weave their way into town and within minutes we are the best of friends.

The main destination is Philos, a pretty basic 'cruiser' bar owned by—get this—a guy named Philo. Whoda thunk! But first we detour along the beach to where the locals have set up a big stage (built from rotten boards sitting atop some crumbling concrete posts). On the stage there is a DJ and at least a dozen enormous speakers. It is surrounded by blinking, flashing, strobbing lights so that there is no chance of your eyes ever getting to focus. As if mine could anyway. The music of choice is techno. Loud, overwhelming, thumping, driving techno. Between the lights and the noise there is no room for any other senses (not even the thick smoke from burning palm leaves and marijuana). The beach is absolutely packed with people, mostly under 25 and they've already been partying all afternoon. Total Mexican New Year overload.

Around 11pm we meander (a.k.a. stumble) up to Philos where the crowd is pouring out into the street as the band picks it up a notch. Some woman drags me into the maw and we dance like lunatics until.... I don't remember much after that. I think the new year started sometime later and I remember a few big flashes and booms of fireworks way off in the distance, across the bay in Puerto Vallarta. Or maybe it was just my imagination—tequila will do that to you. I don't think I made it back to the boat that night.

New Years day was a day of recovery, for me and a LOT of other people. Unfortunately the locals felt that the best way to recover was to keep right on partying. Yes, the techno beach party was still in *full swing* at noon the next day, with absolutely no indication that it would slow down any time soon. I'm not sure which was louder: the pounding Mexican techno noise or the pounding in my head.

Finally around 6pm the party winds down—much to the relief of everyone anchored out—and the calm, peaceful La Cruz bay returns to normal. There didn't seem to be much movement on any boat I saw, including mine.

So much for New Years. Now it's time to gather up my crew and head south. The wind is forecast to start pumping tomorrow: 20-25 knots from the north. Should be some great sailing.

Happy New Year!  
Docfun  
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