

Confessions of a Floating Expat

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I'm an American, married to a Norwegian, living on a boat in Mexico. We left Florida in 2007 to cruise our way home to Seattle, and have made it as far as the Pacific coast of southern Mexico, having spent nearly 9 months in Guatemala's Rio Dulce, 2 years in Panama's Bocas del Toro, and nearly a year here in Huatulco. We're not rich...but our life is.

The life we lead is stunning. The scenery changes the minute we throw off the lines and decide to move on. We're always at the mercy of the sea, the wind, the engines, the electronics, the radio, the mystifying paperwork dances to get into and out of the country, and the language. We are buzzed by small fishing boats up to a hundred miles off the coast; escorted by huge schools of dolphins who leave green contrails in the nighttime sea; delighted by turtles dozing and sunning themselves, oblivious to the seabirds standing on their backs to rest; and sometimes moved to tears by the inexpressible beauty of the world and our small place in it.

In our travels, we meet people from everywhere: Australia, England, France, Germany, Holland, South Africa, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, the United States, and Norway. They're sport fishermen on huge gas-guzzling fiberglass rockets with gleaming stainless tuna towers twice as high as the boat is long; single-handers in tiny sailboats who've crossed oceans alone; disenchanting misfits who've cobbled together something that's seaworthy enough to allow them to live on their wits and off the grid; rich yachties with more money and boat and toys than brains; retired neurosurgeons, cops, nurses, teachers, entrepreneurs, real estate investors, marine biologists, engineers, and musicians; young families raising their children to be self-sufficient, confident and fearless; "trawler trash" like us, still working part-time to fund the cruising kitty and participate in the world in ways most people only daydream about. We meet them in secluded anchorages or small marinas or tiny grocery stores or local bars or over the radio.

The community we're part of is extraordinary. Whenever any one of us needs help, it is given willingly and generously, without thought of cost or convenience. We feed each other, doctor each other, lend each other tools or engine parts, look after each other's boats and pets and children. We trade books, magazines, DVDs, recipes, and maintenance tips. We participate in the local communities -- volunteering to help build a library, sew school uniforms, teach English, visit nursing homes and hospitals, even spay and neuter stray animals. We play music together, learn Spanish together, celebrate holidays together, share information and resources together, even grieve together. We're a strong, compassionate, and vibrant community.

Our relationships are intense, but often fleeting -- we'll meet someone, spend a few days getting to know them over a beer or a potluck, and feel like we've known them all our lives. Yet we'll help them cast off when it's time for them to move on, waving goodbye until they round the point and disappear from our lives. The bonds we forge are so deep that each encounter leaves me grateful for the contribution to my life.

When I go back "home" to the States, I'm increasingly unsettled, disturbed by the frenzy of life there. The discord. The disjointedness of communities. The politics. The expense. The fear. The vitriol. The whining. The psychic struggle to try to control a world that appears, according to the media, to be spinning way beyond anybody's control.

And, spending time with cruisers from other countries, it appears that I'm not the only one baffled by the current state of affairs in the U.S. They express shock, outrage, and disappointment, many of them saying outright that they think we are a dying nation, a failed experiment -- our "shining beacon" growing dimmer by the day. This evening after a matchless dinner of homemade shrimp empanadas and good tequila, the Canadian and English cruisers shared their frustration at being treated like criminals every time a flight home requires a touchdown on U.S. soil. They are appalled at the decline in civility, the apparent lack of education of our citizens, and the fact that we have to pay a fortune to visit a doctor or a dentist. They lament the fact that our most valuable export is weaponry. They are stunned by the intrusion of ignorance and religious wingnuttery into our politics. And I can't disagree. It makes me sad. It hurts my sense of identity.

But it motivates me to reflect on how to live my life with integrity alongside the chaos, and dedicate myself to making a contribution in the world in spite of its opinion of "us." I can be kind. I can share. I can help others. I can participate in my community, wherever I am. I can be my ideal of a good American. I can live my life fully and put one foot in front of the other toward making each day meaningful and each relationship a blessing. It seems to me that it's all any of us can do.