

International Aries: Adventures to South America's Machu Picchu

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AIRES: The Aries is the first sign of the Zodiac, starting at the spring equinox of March 21st through April 20th, and is symbolized by the ram on the Zodiac wheel. An Aries is typically courageous, adventurous, enthusiastic, energetic, confident, dynamic, quick-witted, craves excitement, and likes to have fun. He can also be somewhat bossy, selfish, impatient, foolhardy, a daredevil, and inclined to insist on getting his own way, but he's eternally a sentimental romanticist. Just a little background on why the crazy things I do within this book seem so naturally ordinary to me. This tale is told from what my eyes witnessed over twenty-two months from Kansas to Peru and back.

Sailing Chapter

Wednesday, Feb 5th 1997

On Wednesday afternoon we left the Margot harbor at the western coast of St. Martin by pushing the boat with the dingy against the tide out to the big blue. I sailed the first shift counterclockwise around the island, past Lucy's B&B, past David's shipwrecked yacht, past Philipsburg bay of French snobs; goodbye and good riddance. Now out on the open ocean, the winds and waves and getting rough and never-ending. Passed between Saba and St. Bart's and then relived for the night watch by Oliver. He pointed the compass due south and I braced myself for a solid week of sailing non-stop around the clock towards Trinidad. We were all excited to get moving, but once you start sailing, there is nothing to do but sit there and let the wind take you; tacking back and forth against the wind in the general direction your headed.

Unlike driving a car, when sailing you cannot just pull over and take a nap when you're tired; one of us had to be at the helm at all times which was divided into three 8-hour shift around the clock. Even with sixteen hours of leisure time, I soon learned that it was extremely hard to get any deep sleep as the boat rocked so violently below deck that I had to strap myself into my bunk to keep from being flung out. After two days of sleep-deprivation being rocked back and forth in my bunk, I finally collapsed into a deep sleep by sheer exhaustion.

The third and largest misconception that I harbored was that any kind of fancy food could be prepared while at sea. The gas stove was set-up on a pivoting swivel, which seemed odd to me at first, but I soon realized that it was quite necessary to rock with the movement of the yacht. A tall pot was first bolted to the stovetop and could only be filled one-third of the way full as not to slop over the sides. Any concept of measuring a quantity of liquids is completely out of question as nothing stands still. While holding onto the ceiling handrail with one hand, I found that I could only do minimal food cooking without making a huge mess. Of the seven days at sea, making macaroni & cheese was about as fancy as I could muster and I soon realized why we had brought so many granola bars and wedges of cheese.

Sailor's Shower Chapter

As the captain and first mate were both European, they seemed to be quite content with drinking warm beer, but it found it repulsive, not to mention that Carib brand beer is rather ilk even when ice-cold. Being out on the ocean, the salt spray that dries on your hair makes it get natty and start to stand up after awhile; after a few days we all looked like kooky the clown, and with limited potable water the only way to get somewhat clean was to take a 'sailor's shower'. This new adventure in getting clean involved letting out a rope with a knot tied at every two-foot and an orange buoy tied to the end of a twenty-foot length. We would each in turn, strip down and lather up with soap and then carefully lower ourselves off the rope to be dragged along by the yacht.

The apparent danger in my mind was straight out of Herman Melville's *Sea Wolf*, where a stinky cook is dragged by a rope and a shark takes off his leg. The unapparent danger was just how hard it is to hold onto a rope when your being dragged at 6 knots and the fact that if you let go it would be extremely hard to circle back to find a bobbing head in the expanse of ocean, much less retrieve you to a moving vessel. After both the captain and mate had taken their turn being dragged along and both exclaimed about how refreshing it was it looked quite manageable and safe. So with my usual bravado, I got all soaped up and started to descend the rope till the friction of the water grabbed my feet and pulled be backwards, making my hands ache as I clutched the rope. Soon, I found myself out to the end of the rope with my feet on the slick rubber of the buoy having a great time being buffeted up and down.

I must have stayed out there for a bit too long because the captain started to gesture me to come back with a frantic look on his face and I soon understood why. It was taking a great strain on my arms to just hold on and when I started to pull myself against the force of the water a fear started to well up inside of me that I hadn't felt since grade school gym class when we had to climb the rope up to the top of the gymnasium and ring the bell. Each pull felt like pulling three times my body weight and each time I let go of one hand to reach forward my other arm would scream with the force of just holding on.

Once I quieted my fear and started to use my feet to hold my weight, the yacht slowly got closer but my willpower was fading and it took an internal banter of profanity to get me close enough for them to hoist me aboard. Although my pride didn't allow me to confide my fear to my shipmates, I had definitely underestimated the power of the ocean; once again biting off more than I could chew and almost paid a very heavy price with my mortality. For the next few nights, I was tortured by continued nightmares of the rope slipping through my aching fingers, only to find myself bobbing in the open ocean watching the yacht sail off into the distance with a sinking sensation of impending death till I awoke drenched in sweat.

Dominique Chapter

Once the uniqueness of sailing a yacht had worn off, it was just kind of monotonously boring, just sitting and making slight adjustments to the helm wheel to keep on a prescribed navigational bearing. Starting with the Captain's warning of a red sunset, a squall brewed up and little or no sleep was possible throughout the night due to rough seas. I came up at 5am with some hot tea to relieve Oliver, who looked white as a ghost. Watched an amazing sunrise over Nevis through scattered drizzle, and we caught sight of another Swedish yacht ahead of us. I soaked beans last night and cooked them up into a huge batch of rice and beans to keep for a few days. For dinner, I sautéed three onions, four sausages, added two cans of tomatoes and two cans of chili for a yummy Gumbo; Andos loved it but Oliver was too sick to eat. Came up to the helm early at 2am to relieve Oliver, who needed some extra sleep after puking up the dinner he didn't want.

Later that night in the wee hours of the morning, as I was drenched to the bone gripping the helm wheel, we began to pass the leeward side of Dominique Island, as the waves became larger and larger with the swell of the island. Even though I had been slapping my face to keep focused in these dangerous waters, I let my sleep deprivation get the best of me and must have dozed off for a minute or so. When my foggy mind focused an eye on the compass, I first thought I was dreaming as it pointed due east and when I looked up; the moonlight illuminated island directly in front of me had gotten startlingly large.

In a panic, I swung the wheel clockwise in an effort to correct my position and we were hit broadside with a huge wave that soaked me with an ice-cold chill that immediately snapped me into a panic that my dreaming might crash us against the rocky coastline of this volcanic island. In the next wave's trough, I brought the wheel another turn clockwise to turn the bow into the wave and tack against the wind to escape the impending coastline. Deeply thankful that the captain had explained the basics of sailing, because in another hour we were well away from the island and my anxiety had subsided into confidence. When Andos came up at sunrise with a cup of tea, I felt it better not to mention that I had almost killed us all and instead asked if he got any sleep; he mentioned how rough the seas had gotten the previous night and that I must be exhausted keeping us on track - I just smiled with a nod of agreement and hummed my favorite Jimmy Buffet tune.

**Mother, Mother Ocean, I have heard your call. I've wanted to sail upon your waters since I was three feet tall – 'cause you've seen it all – you've seen it all.*

Watched the men who rode you, switch from sails to steam. Within your belly you hold the treasures that few have ever seen - most of them are dreams - most of them dreams.