

Interview of Kristin Lambert, Peace Corps volunteer in Târgu Jiu, Romania
by Micah Carbonneau for the Romania PC publication Spuneți, December 2007

1. You were on a ship for one year at sea. What was your most dangerous night at sea?

I guess the most dangerous nights are the ones where your anchor pulls loose while you are asleep and the boat goes drifting into very nasty places. The most common arguments among cruising sailors have to do with anchoring. Of course it does happen to everyone, and usually there aren't terrible consequences, but it's a tremendous adrenaline rush when you wake up to odd noises or hear scraping, to find that you are heading into a reef or sharp rocks, or sometimes into someone else's boat.

But I don't think the question about danger is the same as asking when you are, or were, the most afraid. When sailing, the greatest fear is being de-masted or turned over in a big storm, and I was in plenty of terrible storms, way too many. The second great fear is hitting a sleeping whale or being hit by a freighter. No matter how much metallic "stuff" a sailboat puts on the mast, most freighters can't see them on radar, and they travel extremely fast from the horizon to your boat. While I was cruising, a brand-new 52-foot sailboat was hit by a Korean freighter about halfway to the Marquesas, and it sunk in 90 seconds. The crewman on watch had gone below for just a minute to pour a cup of tea. The horizon was clear when he went down, and from the deck of a sailboat, it's eleven miles to the horizon. Fortunately, and it was extremely unusual, the freighter spotted them and went back to pick them up, then let them off in Panama. My boat was never broached (tipped sideways into the sea), but others were and it's plenty scary.

There were many very dangerous times, mostly due to stupidity or freak weather:

- traveling in solid fog and having a speeding fishing boat come out of it dead ahead, with no one on the deck, just missing the sailboat by a few feet.
- traveling in the dark into a completely black and invisible cove, following what's hopefully the anchor light on a boat (fortunately it was).
- sailing head-on into a storm around a famously treacherous point, sick as a dog and trying to get to a hospital, tacking more than 20 times and seeing the same damn tree on the shore each time.

2. Could you describe the experience some? Who were some of the crew's characters? What was your typical day like? What kind of food were you cooking up?

During crossings, someone has to be on watch all the time, usually four hours a shift. Night watch is wonderful, especially with phosphorescence in the water, dolphins traveling with you for company, thousands of stars above, the sails wing-on-wing in the wind (set to both sides and traveling fast). There are so many magical times: going into a new harbor where you've never been, seeing old friends' boats anchored and coming to meet you in their dinghies (the cruising community is quite small and you see the same boats over and over again); seeing all sizes of manta rays leaping high out of the water doing somersaults, and many other unbelievable things at sea (50 miles offshore a pair of Monarch butterflies landing on the shrouds, thousands of squid spawning and dying on the same night and littering the shore); diving for crabs, steamer clams, other shellfish and cooking them immediately on the deck; beach campfires with music and hermit crab races; innumerable onboard dinners with friends. God, sometimes I really miss it.

Other things were not so good: hauling water and groceries with no car, finding showers and doing laundry (those buddies with water makers and showers on board their fancy sailboats were treasures), mechanical breakdowns with no parts, a mainsail line falling from a halyard in a storm (you have to go all the way to the top to fix it). Things better forgotten.

I'll pass on describing "characters", it takes too long. Suffice it to say that single-handers, people who sail alone, are pretty strange. If they weren't already, they grow more so.

There's no typical day, every day is different. At sea, there is time to read and write, and in those days there were no satellite phones or internet, GPS was brand new and the instruments were huge. Generally cruisers travel for a day or two and then stay in a nice harbor for a week or more, before moving on, so it's a pretty slow way to travel. Ashore there's always something new to see and do.

You cook whatever you want and have supplies for, and I learned how to cook in a storm, tying myself into the galley and trying to keep food on plates to serve it. You learn a lot about making things work and what really needs refrigeration (never commercial mayonnaise, it'll last for years; sink cheese in oil and it won't mold; Joy makes suds in salt water and it washes dishes just fine; crossing cookies always contain ginger to stop seasickness). Home baked cakes and blended cocktails are the ultimate onboard luxuries.

3. What inspired you to be such an adventurer - in your personal life - from life on the ocean to life in northern Alaska - to your professional life. Was it the influence of family, books, or some role model? Who or what books?

I guess I never thought of it as adventure, but I think I inherited a rather high tolerance for risk. To paraphrase my friend the explorer Mike Horn, the experience of fear is the same for everyone, it's just the boundary where you experience it that gets stretched further out. Before working in Barrow, on the Arctic Ocean at the extreme northern point of North America, I had already lived in Alaska for 50 years and traveled all over Alaska as a photographer and later as part of a television documentary crew. The pay is very good in the Arctic and I needed three more years in the Alaska retirement system for my pension, so it seemed like a natural thing to do. Besides, I wanted the experience of living in a foreign culture, and the Eskimo culture is more foreign than Romania. Like here, it helps to know people and have a good professional network, with a solid reputation for getting things done.

My greatest role model was my father. He was an amazing man: a terrific bush pilot and flying instructor, an passionate outdoorsman who loved hunting and fishing, an exceptional photographer (we always had a darkroom at home), a meticulous craftsman, a gunsmith, a great bronc rider in the rodeo circuit at only 16 -- he was skilled at literally anything he touched. He had a photographic memory and could recite Robert Service poetry all day, while we took many long road trips (no, I didn't inherit it). He was always curious and loved to read, he used to read aloud to my mother at night. I feel lucky to have known him, and am still devastated that he died in a plane crash at only 49 years of age. None of my children ever got to know him. I'm sure that's one of the reasons my daughter Dara is such a dedicated hunter, to make him proud. Her bio is pretty funny: <http://womenhunters.com/bio-dara-smith.html>

4. (optional) Favorite book and why (or) book that had the strongest impact on your life.

I've had different favorite books at different stages of life: Johann Wyss' Swiss Family Robinson, Richard Bach's The Bridge Across Forever, John Fowles' Daniel Martin, Joshua Halberstam's Everyday Ethics, inspiring biographies, travel books to feed my wanderlust.

5. What was a typical day like in the frozen tundra of Northern Alaska? What are the Northern Lights like?

For me there is no "typical day" in the Arctic. It depends on what is happening and what I'm busy doing. I have never been bored, and don't really know what that means. I always have projects to do and daily make lists of things to do that can never be finished. The wind is almost always blowing near the Arctic Ocean, and when it's already 50 or more degrees below zero, it can be pretty miserable. But no one ever stays home because of weather, you just dress appropriately in parka, mitts and mukluks and go out anyway, usually on foot. Beating the elements is sort of a challenge that everyone wants to meet. It can snow any day of the year, and I've seen July softball games that continue on through snowstorms. I learned skin sewing and crafts from Eskimo elders, did beadwork on leather and made garments hand-stitched with fur, studied ivory carving and traditional music and dances. Everyone watches for polar bears and there is a crew of men whose job is to try to keep them out of town. It is light all the time in the summer and mostly dark in the winter. But the sun isn't far below the horizon, so it's not pitch black, even when it's dark.

The northern lights are truly the most magical wonder of the world. They are best in the Interior near Fairbanks, where I lived for eight years, not up in the Arctic (a disappointment when I went up there to work!). They move all over the sky and change colors, just like in the videos. Sometimes there is a vortex in the middle and when you lie on your back to watch, it's like you get sucked right up into it. Breathtaking and fabulous. Of course, you probably know that big tourism in Alaska now is from Japanese who come in the winter, believing that children will be gifted who are conceived under the Northern Lights.

This is a quote from a discussion on Salon's Wanderlust long ago:

<http://www.salon.com/april97/wanderlust/ttreaders970408.html>

Kristin Lambert | [God's Country: Where Is It?](#)

10:19am Apr 2, 1997 PST (#28 of 35)

I obviously take a lot for granted, reading this conversation. I have been feeling sorry for myself because snow is falling today, and the wind is gusting it around. But I am watching a moose browse in my yard as I write this, I can see no neighbors from my property, and at night the sky is blanketed with stars. I step out on the balcony overlooking the lake where there are no houses except mine, from my bedroom where a fire is burning in the fireplace, and see Hale-Bopp blazing in the sky. It is the brightest of all the bright stars. The tail is six times longer than the comet itself. It is like magic! Not only am I really living in God's country, but I'm grouching at it. It was warm and sunny on Easter, so this cold, snowy wind is a shock. Although it's dark here in the wintertime, when I go away traveling, it is the silvery moonlight shining through the long nights that I miss. We get enough sun (and energy) in the summer to make up for it.

I have lived nearly all my life in Alaska, but left it for a couple of years to see the "real" world. I went on a long sailing trip south along the Pacific Coast, from San Francisco to Manzanillo and back up the Sea of Cortez. Certainly life at sea is God's country. I lived in the beautiful, quaint Victorian city of Port Townsend in Washington, and learned to love the spectacular scenery of Puget Sound, which must be God's country. I've traveled in Canada through British Columbia and Alberta, and surely Jasper must be in God's country. But I find myself drawn back to Alaska with gratitude, knowing that I belong here. Still, those of us touched by wanderlust feel the need to go see the other side of the world, and I am curious to visit your "rat race," if only so I can sigh with relief when I return to my wilderness home and regain my perspective on life.