

## My Beautiful Laundrette

*A dear friend of mine was complaining to me via e-mail about her laundry situation. Piles of it, she said, a Denali of grubby clothes she could never quite summit in her laundry room. She has two kids and a husband, as do I, and so she knows something about laundry piles. She's also a clever, resourceful cruising sailor with thousands of miles beneath her keel. She just happens to be on land these days, and the sad but inevitable*

truth is that once tethered to terra firma, even the most devoted of cruisers tend to lose perspective about how good they have it regarding certain realities. For instance, note that the clothing mountain was "in her laundry room."

"You," I replied, tapping the keyboard more briskly than necessary, "have only to walk up your stairs, shovel some clothes in a machine, and push a few buttons. Presto, and it's done. Hot water and a dryer, for god's sake!" Or words to that effect. She didn't take it personally. At the time, we were sailing *Osprey* in Panama's Kuna Yala, which, while possessing endless wonders, lacks anything, for 80 miles in any direction, remotely resembling a Lady Kenmore. She knew how I felt about laundry at that time. I was Lady Kenmore.

The locals in the Kuna Yala, even in communities that had adopted a more contemporary way of life, didn't stray far from their traditional roots when it came to washing stuff. In Nargana, we took the dinghy up the Río Diablo one day and passed several families whose *ulus* were laden with dishes and clothes. They beached the boats on a pebbly spit and hauled everything, including themselves, out into the freshwater river for scrubbing. We knew cruisers without watermakers who did the same. Every few weeks, they'd anchor in the mangrove-lined harbor, labor up the river, collect freshwater for their tanks, do their wash, then devote a few minutes to some soap-bubbly personal hygiene. We also knew that the river's muddy banks, slicing through the tropical jungle, were just big Slip 'n' Slides for the local crocodiles. Call me crazy,

but I think laundry is a big enough hassle without being chased by an 18-foot prehistoric reptile with a major attitude—although over the years, I've witnessed men in certain laundering establishments who have resembled this species.

So while we were in Panama, I opted instead for two drywall buckets, a hard-working Spectra watermaker, a couple of water jugs, and a nice awning across *Osprey's* aft deck. It's true that in the tropical islands, you can get away with wearing very little. Still, over time, you simply can't escape the laundry monster, especially with a family of four. There are sheets. Towels. Undies. Shirts. I had cruising friends with more storage capacity who had laundering assistants, nifty little hand-cranked tumble washers and spin dryers—the modern equivalent of my grandmother's plug-in wringer that sat atop the washer. It actually had a gear shift—how cool is that? Her wringer's inexorable maw always reminded me, when I was a child, of something out of a Stephen King novel, but in Panama, I would've paid large to have one just like it on board *Osprey*.

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*Dirty little secrets:* Go to [cruisingworld.com/1302laundry](http://cruisingworld.com/1302laundry) to share your onboard washday miracles and stainfighter solutions.



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KARLO CLARKE (TOP), WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

Instead, it was all done by hand. Johnny, my husband, and I would take turns under the awning. We'd agitate the wash with our arms, hands, and the occasional foot, then rinse, wring, rinse, wring, and finally hang it up. Depending on how long we'd procrastinated, doing the laundry could take anywhere from an hour to half the day, not including drying time, which was rarely a problem except for

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the occasional stray rain shower. Usually along about the second rinse cycle, when my hands and back were aching in equal measure, I'd get rather surly. "So," a friend would say over the VHF, "what are you guys up to today?"

"Living the dream, baby. Just living the dream."

But it isn't always this way. Over time, I've found laundering in less remote areas to be a pleasure. One morning on

Isla de Roatán, off Honduras, we woke after a night of heavy rain to find our dinghy spotlessly clean and full of fresh water. In retrospect, I should've used it as a Jacuzzi, but instead my daughter and I dumped in the laundry and had at it, as if we were in a vineyard at harvest time and crushing grapes.

The longer I've cruised, the more sanguine about laundry I've become. I used

to be so hopelessly picky. Somebody else washing our clothes? Eewww. Now I'm overjoyed to find someone else to do it, even if it gets dried on a tree.

If I'm lucky enough to find an actual laundrette, I positively love laundry day. True, there's rarely hot water, and sometimes they use an open gas flame to heat the dryers, which can be startling to the uninitiated. The power may or may not stay on for the duration.

But you meet the nicest people, like Miss Ida at the Rockside Laundrymat, in Black Point, a town on Great Guana Cay in the Exumas. Besides having the prettiest view of any laundering facility I've ever seen, this place has Miss Ida, whose gospel-infused singing is a gift of angels. Another time, while sitting on a concrete step in a Guatemalan boatyard's laundry room, I met Alejandra, matriarch of the Ramirez clan, who explained to me (as best as I could understand) the fine art of cooking beans all day in a cast-iron stew pot over an open wood fire.

Laundry, it seems, is a universal truth, a great equalizer that can bridge cultural and linguistic barriers. Seen this way, no wonder my friend was bored with her mountain of wash. Where's the adventure in having your own laundry room and tediously dependable major appliances? When you're out there, you just never know where your dirty clothes will lead you.

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*The Clarke family is currently aboard Osprey in Annapolis, Maryland.*