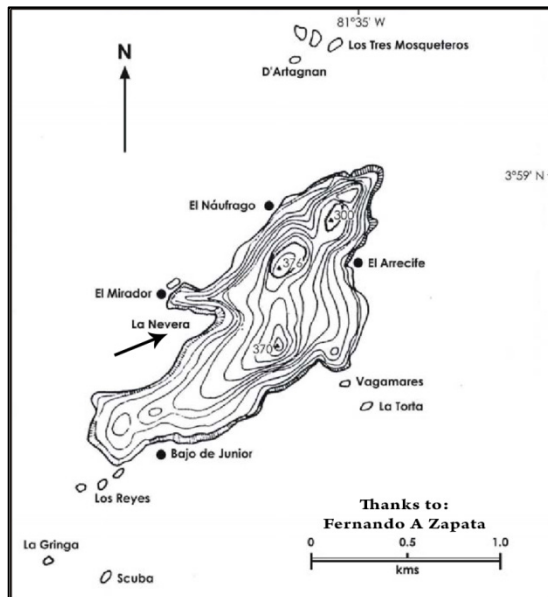
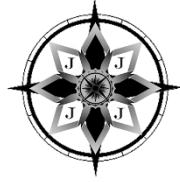


MALPELO – THREE HUNDRED MILES OFF COLOMBIA





Mid-Ocean Haven

ISLA de MALPELO

The bay created by the ridge that split into two became little more than a crease in our giant's side. On one side, a vertical wall of dappled grey ran away towards the west. The other side, the arm of the sentinel, fell northwest before crumbling into the sea.

Having furled sails and tidied ropes, when motoring back along the abrupt face Jason shouted, "Look! A cave!"

"And there's another one," I pointed ahead to a vertical split in the rock face with an opening at sea level.

"Over there! Look!" Jude called from the wheel, nodding to the left at another vertical fissure. This much bigger split extended from the sea to the apex of the ridges, towering up as if two phenomenal forces had tried to rip the rock apart.

This gash opened, growing deeper as grey-white walls visually sheared away from the other until what I perceived as the sentinel's arm appeared nearly severed from the central mass.



“Another cave!” cried Judith, getting excited and pointing ahead to the base of this aeons old fissure where another spooky Earth creature’s gaping black mouth lay. “Ah, Jack. We’ve got to stop here,” Judith pleaded.

Pointing an extended finger down, Jude knew I wanted to know the depth.

Her head dropped below the dodger’s hatch for an instant. When she popped back up, her eyes hardened, her eyebrows furrowed. “Thirty fathoms.” She sounded dismayed. “Far too deep to anchor.”

“Thirty fathoms, one hundred eighty feet. Damn,” I muttered, alarmed, but not giving up. “Let’s chug around and sound the bottom. Head over to that flat face near the fissure.”

Her eyes shot over to the rock face, and as she watched the swell ride up, her worried face took over. “You want to drive?” She appealed in a way I knew she felt apprehensive. Me too, what a place to screw up.

Though the bay appeared calm, a surge occasionally rounded the corner and drove in with some power. And although protected from the breeze, without warning, sharp gusts blasted down from all directions. This is when adventuring gets serious. We love isolated locations when everything goes well, but one mistake, one failure, then exciting fun can instantly turn into a life-threatening danger.

“Jerome, slacken the anchor and get the gypsy ready to run,” I ordered while heading towards the cockpit. “Jason, get the fenders out just in case. Let’s be prepared.”

Taking the helm, the depth recorder flashed next to the thirty-fathom mark. In no hurry, engaging the gears a few revolutions at a time by applying light pressure on the gear lever, I coaxed our baby closer to the rock. Three boat lengths from its sheer face, the sounder still warned of great depths.

In a hugely enjoyable, tense moment, Malpelo’s precipitous slopes formed a remarkable amphitheatre filled with the white tufts of booby birds staring at us. Above and to our left, near the crumbling wrist, a half dozen frigatebirds, black with sinister hooked beaks, peered down watching the show. And right in front of us, an amazing sight. That fissure, cleaved open as if by a mighty sword, ran wide enough for three boats side by side. At its far end, along a tongue of powder blue sea opened a black yawning mouth of another enormous cave. Mystery lay there, perhaps even treasure within its shadows.

Like a lazy water beetle, *Banyandah* drifted atop a transparent sea of great depth judged by the blue darkening ever so slowly as we followed the rock into oblivion. Along the water's edge ran a pink ribbon which on closer inspection became a massive band of limpets. Three fish, each the size of one of my sons, swam between the boat and shore with their gigantic mouths wide open, straining the sea for tiny morsels.

Jude and the boys became enthralled sightseeing shouting from the foredeck whenever they spotted something extra special. Time had little meaning while *Banyandah* just drifted with the sounder searching for a pinnacle of bottom, finding none. The bottom dropped away to great depths. Maybe long ago, Malpelo had been a volcano. Millenniums of erosion may have washed the outside away, leaving only this rock, the volcano's plug. The three jagged spires lying offshore could be other vents.

The boys were keen to climb to the peak and I knew Jude particularly enjoys exploring caves, so I needed to find a way to anchor *Banyandah*, if only for the day. A plan came to mind, risky, but worth a go.

"Okay gang, gather round," I said, joining them at the railing. "We're going to drop the anchor then run a stern line ashore."

Jude whipped around. "What! That's crazy. It's much too deep."

"Maybe, but along where that cleft runs into the bay, I got readings of one hundred fifty feet. We anchored deeper than that at Kingman Reef."

Saying that didn't stop Jude. "Yeah and getting our anchor back at Kingman took more than two hours. Or don't you remember?"

My eyebrows shot up remembering that particular morning's anger and frustration. Indeed, Kingman had been tough. Two hundred feet to a sand bottom behind the tiniest, most primitive reef with the nearest help more than a thousand miles away. If we hadn't been on charter, we'd have passed that one by. So I crossed my fingers and hoped this place would be easier.

"Come on, Jude. You want to stop or not? The boys are stronger now, and we'll get our anchor back, I promise."

Jude made no further comment. She wanted to stay but voiced her concern as part of her job keeping me tracking straight.

"Okay, here's the plan. The bottom might be jagged, so we'll buoy the anchor with a stout return line to un-jam it if the anchor gets stuck. You do that, Jude. Tie our mooring lines together until you get a hundred and eighty feet. Jason, Jerome, you launch *Little Scamp* and go scout the shore

to the left of that cleft. Search for a hole or lump to tie our stern line onto. Okay? Clear?"

Nods all around.

"Well, let's go."

I moved *Banyandah* out to a safer distance then let her drift while we made preparations. In ten minutes, we were ready. Up and down our foredeck, Jude laid the lines tied together, one end attached to the backside of our anchor, the other to our buoy. *Little Scamp* with the boys rowing two abreast along a mid-ocean shore, searched for a knob that would hold *Banyandah* stern to the rock to prevent her dragging the bow anchor off the undersea cliff face. If that happened, the 'B' might drift out to sea, or onto other rocks. In either case, we'd lose our baby and be stranded.

With the line ready, I nudged *Banyandah* closer to the boys still searching from about an oar's length of the shore. They looked comical. Side by side, each with a hand on an oar, their other swatting the air around their heads. Malpelo must be plagued with bugs.

After the boys found a stout knob to tie our line onto, I manoeuvred *Banyandah* into position over the undersea slope and backed up towards the face. Judith dropped the bow anchor and paid out chain until the boys could fasten our stern line to the shore. In minutes we were settled, stern to, barely a boat length off the rock face.

Such a beautiful spot, on one side a cave opened while another captured our imagination on the other. As if behind an invisible barrier, wind gusts ceased ruffling the water just in front of us and the swell seemed less as we were tucked nicely into a corner. All well, except for the thousands of bugs. Small midges with transparent wings and slender bodies, taking great pleasure in crawling over our arms and legs, getting caught in our hair. Strange, they didn't bite, just a darn nuisance.

"Shall we eat lunch early?" Jude asked, "It's ready."

"Sure, I'm starved." Cupping hands towards the mountain, I sang out "Jason! Jerome! Lunch!" Hearing the echo, I thought what a strange call to bounce off these walls.

With Malpelo towering straight up, we gathered around the cockpit table now spread with freshly baked bread and the crispy fried Rainbow Runner we'd caught earlier, along with other delights to celebrate a first meal at anchor. When the initial chomping and hunger eased Jason commented that he'd seen the strangest lizard. That reminded me of

Around The World In Ever Increasing Circles

seeing him, after he'd tied our rope to shore, sitting quietly on a rock platform overlooking the bay. He'd been so still, I'd thought him lost in thought or entranced by a school of fish feeding along the shore. Malpelo possessed that unique quality of something special always in sight.

Jason described the reptile using his finger to outline its shape. "He was all black with a wavy frill, like a rooster's comb sprouting from his head." Then he grinned, shaking his head in wonder. "There are lots of them. And boy, are they curious. I sat very still, and several walked right up to me. One even licked my foot. And guess what? He had the brightest red tongue!" Eyes wide, excitement racing through his voice.

"A bright red tongue?" Jude repeated as she forked another mouthful of the juicy white fish.

"Yeah, and another one, sort of greenish-grey had lots of little yellow spots all over its body. Gosh! And really active, jumping rock to rock."



After lunch, the boys took Judith off to explore the caves while I cleared up the dishes. One of us needed to stay on the boat. We wouldn't feel comfortable leaving our baby unattended. A broken line, a dragged anchor, we didn't want to spend the rest of what would be a rather short life sleeping with the birds and crabs on this rock.

I kept them in sight most of the hour away, except when they stole around a corner to enter one of the sea level caves. When they returned, they climbed on board soaking wet.

First over the railing came Jason, shaking his head and gibbering, "Jeepers, that was creepy."

"Oh, it was not," Judith retorted. "A few small birds darted in and out the cave, some big swell and lots of noise, but not much else."

Jerome, who had been securing *Little Scamp* to the stern, climbed on board. "Tell Dad about the fresh water."

"Fresh water?" I asked, "What fresh water?"

"That cave over there," she said, pointing towards the hidden one, "has water dripping across its entrance. Maybe rainwater percolating down."

I looked at the grey rock that separated the hole from us, "Fresh? You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I tasted it. That's why we're wet."

"Perhaps an artesian spring from deep in the Earth. From how high did it drip?"

"What do you think Jerome, ten metres?" she asked, pointing to a spot on the mast approximating that height.

An expert opinion requested, Jerome put on his pensive demeanour, and somewhere in his grey matter, an exact measurement was being calculated. No one rushed him. More enjoyable watching the mind of this young adventurer tumble than needing the answer.

"Ah..." he uttered, thought lines straightening out, "About ten metres, maybe a bit more." Then he gave a final authoritative nod.

A chuckle escaped me before I could stop it.

"What?" my growing space engineer asked. "What's wrong?"

I smiled again and gave his arm a playful squeeze.

"Oh, nothing. You're just cute, that's all."

With no explanation for the curtain of fresh water, we set in motion our next event; an assault of the summit. Canvas walking shoes got dug out of storage, a container filled with fruit drink, the camera checked for film, and last, I wrote our names and address plus a few details about our visit on a piece of paper and sealed the message in a bottle for placing at the tippy-top. One last necessary measure, coating ourselves with bug repellent.

In a critical manoeuvre, timed to the swell fluctuating half a man's height, Judith rode the swell in, back rowing till *Little Scamp* crunched the

wall where for a moment it hovered at the top. In a wink, whoever's turn sprang across onto jagged spikes and sharp limpets. One slip and those crustaceans would slice open flesh. The next instant, the yellow dinghy dropped while Jude pulled a few deft strokes to get away with the run of swell. Not an exercise for beginners.

Once assembled on the rock with shoes and daypacks in place, we took off—straight up! On toes, and using hands, we inched up, climbing the rock face until reaching the first plateau. *Banyandah's* masthead now lay far below. Down even further, a miniature Judith, a hand shading her face, gave a wave sending us on our way.

We climbed to the extreme end of that plateau where, feeling puffed, I stopped to enjoy the lovely sight of a blue upon blue world in every direction. Radiating towards us marched an army of sparkling silver wind ripples created by the afternoon sun reflecting off their crests. Above them, white fluffy clouds hung motionless as if dabbled on a canvas of cornflower blue.

Looking closer, boobies nested everywhere on the pebble-strewn ground. Some guarded a single white egg with brownish-purple speckles. Others, frail featherless chicks under them. None seemed frightened by us. In fact, when approached slowly, those without eggs or chicks would allow us within an arm's reach. But we didn't touch them. Some wild animals might allow humans close, but they don't like to be touched.

The boobies squatting upon an egg or chicks didn't react so placidly. Instead, they grew visibly nervous upon our approach. When still several metres away they would turn their heads to one side and dip their beak as if pecking the ground. Then they'd quarter turn the other way and dip it again. If we moved closer, they rummaged through the few twigs in their nest. Grasping one crosswise in their bill they'd repeat their warning, striking the ground with the end of the twig as if marking their territory. I can't explain why, but boobies have the most expressive eyes. They don't change shape, and nearly impossible to see them blink, but somehow those perfectly round discs transmitted their pleas, and we always left them unmolested.

Those black lizards with a top frill that Jason described were about. So too the greenish-grey ones with yellow spots. While the frilly lizards looked something out a Japanese sci-fi film, some skinny grey ones jumped rock to rock and pitched up at our feet where they'd freeze. Then zap! They'd snap their head up like a spring-loaded pop-up to look us

straight in the eye. Again all movement would cease like a statue except for a pulsating beat in their necks. Next instant, they'd bob their head up and down twice or thrice before a pink tongue came out to lick our skin before rock hopping at breakneck speed, leaving us wondering what the heck?

The dry grainy rocks also housed big slow-moving scaly lizards that in my youth we called Gila monsters. Probably not a very accurate name for these creatures as I don't think they're the same venomous ones of America. Their blunt heads, rounded bodies to stumpy tails were covered with dark scales large enough to identify as individual hard pads stuck onto leathery skin, and fat like the Gila monsters I'd known years ago. Unlike their skinny cousins, these lethargic fatsoes weren't curious. They preferred to remain inert in the shade under the larger boulders. But as Jason found, their bloated shape is deceiving for they can move with surprising speed if approached.

We slogged higher and higher under a warm, lowering sun, tripping over sharp stones sometimes losing foothold on crumbling boulders. When halfway up, Malpelo looked one chunk of rock with bits and pieces broken free. Perhaps breccia or a loose conglomerate with a pattern. I'm far from an expert. All I know is that Malpelo's external appearance morphed through several changes during our two-hour ascent. From a solid homogeneous mass near the water's edge to a plateau of crumbly stuff a third of the way up. Next, we came to the ridge forming the sentinel's arm, which ran up to a saddle linked to Malpelo's dome-shaped top. That formation appeared composed of basalt as if this bit of the mountain had been forged crystal by crystal.

One side of the ridge dropped to rocks awash hundreds of feet below. On the other, on *Banyandah's* side, a slide of small stones seemed ready to tumble ended in a drop right above the mouth of the big cave. Lose our footing one way, we'd fall to the sea. Slip the other, we'd tumble in an avalanche and fall smack onto the tongue of the cave. Either way would be deadly. Cautioning the boys, we continued climbing the ridge till we came to the fissure that nearly split the ridge from the main body. There, a dubious rock bridge spanned the crack full of jagged spikes. Having gotten that far, the route ahead looked clear to the shoulder. So, Jerome being the lgihtest, I held onto his hand in an acrobatic lock grip then sent him to test the strength of the bridge.

Loose stones crumbled off and cascaded down in puffs of dust that flew away on the breeze. But the stone bridge held. Unlocking our grip, in

two steps Jerome went over. Mincing my actions as if a danseur noble barely touching the stage, I started fine, but wind buffeted me midway. Stopping to regain balance, looking down, I can confirm that the fault all but split the ridge with nasty spears directly below.

Once on the other side, we arrived at the base of the crown, feeling pretty chuffed. Looking up, the top appeared as if an upturned saucepan of solid rock that rose vertically out of loose stones on all but one side. That side rose straight out the ocean like sliced cheese.

From this height, cloud shadows drifted over a vast expanse of steel-grey sea still dappled with shimmering silver brushed by the artist. At the base of the saucepan lay a loose rock incline and our high spirits feeling mischievous, a young man's challenge didn't wait for a reply. Sweating freely, we scrambled, racing each other up that slope, creating an avalanche of sliding stone as we struggled. Through ragged breath we taunted one another, and for a while, it looked bitter defeat for me. But the vitality of youth still lacked the older man's cunning and laughing, and still jeering we breasted the saddle, almost, but not quite in line.

Jason and I were bent over, when Jerome gasped, "What a good race."

A few further words of banter passed between us until we felt the cooling breeze and noticed the abrupt new vista of open sea. The bold weather side of Malpelo now before us, we faced the south wind and straw-coloured cliffs dulled by soft shadows meeting crashing white breakers from faraway. Leaning back trying to slow my breath, sweeping an eye up this sheer face I discovered brown boobies made this rugged weather side their home. Their larger size requires a cliff face or flow of wind to get airborne. Many of these larger birds roosted precariously on narrow ledges, their nesting sites not as secure as the white boobies on the rubble-strewn slopes just passed. How they minded their egg or coped with their young started our heads shaking in wonder. As compensation for their awkward nesting sites, they need only to spread their two-metre wings to gain flight even in this gentle wind.

After a rest, one false start trying to scale the summit's vertical wall using pockmarks for handholds soon became so precarious we gave it away. Luckily, we found a more accessible route up a boulder-strewn fault line wide enough for us to scramble. Up this pathway, we scampered over small rocks right to the tippy top to find Malpelo's bald head almost flat. Walking to the edge of the drop-off, my toes began tingling as if atop the Eiffel Tower just as a sudden wind blast tested my balance.



Malpelo Landing



Daredevil Ridge

About Us ~ the long and short of it



The short version says we met and travelled, and then built a boat while having two super kids, then travelled forevermore.

Jack began life in an American mega-city during the topsy-turvy time following WWII. He grew up amongst skyscrapers and super highways, smog and streetlights, so he rarely saw the stars and had few escapes from city life except for sandy beaches and beautiful surf. One memorable escape came when his parents took him on a donkey ride down into the amazing Grand Canyon in a scary ride that awakened his love for the great outdoors.

Judith, aka Jude, had a completely different upbringing in a quiet north England town. Her family often explored the green hills overlooking the North Sea, fished for tiddlers in streams, and experienced thick North Sea fog and wild gales.

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