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## The Life Nomadik

Chronicle of a Lunatic Voyage



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# The Day We Found Primadonna

Posted by [lifenomadik](#) on April 9, 2014

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March 15, 2014

The flamingos marching pompously lead us to a strange sight: a boat, 44-48 feet ketch named Primadonna, with red metal hull leaning on her port side stuck in the shallows between Booby Cay and Mayaguana. From outside it looks like there could be someone still living there, even though the boat is not in her prime. We have seen much more derelict-looking vessels still inhabited. "Hello, anybody there?" we call a few times. No answer.

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SV Primadonna grounded near Booby Cay, Bahamas

Almost everything we see from outside is intact: the sails are all there, the ropes, winches, swivels, a surf board, a life raft, a shiny windlass same as ours but much newer and in better shape. Usually, when we see a wreck it is already stripped from anything that could be useful. The international maritime salvage law states that any vessel and/or its cargo lost or abandoned at sea belong to the first who finds it. Meaning, if you find a wreck it is all yours. Yet, we are not sure this is a wreck, it looks too good even though it is washed aground and apparently abandoned.

The next day there local fishermen in a skiff pass by Fata Morgana on their way to the reefs. They have a compound on the beach (a small shack built with junk materials) and spend a few days per week diving in the reefs around the remote anchorage. In the weekends they go back to their settlement on Mayaguana, some 18 miles west. I wonder what they are looking for in the reefs.

They stop by to say hi and to ask us if we could charge their phone. We ask them what the deal with the red metal boat is. "It is abandoned not too long ago, very recently in fact. If you like something it's all yours." Sounds like a permission to go aboard and get stuff.

  
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We spend the entire day going through all the things on the boat. It is a mess inside and it's obvious we are not the first ones to check the stuff out, but maybe we are the second ones. Most probably the fishermen have already been here taking only what they need (not much): the dinghy and the outboard motor are missing. We get what we need too plus some junk that we surely don't need but it is too good to leave behind and we might sell it or keep it as spares. Like the winches (two oversize ones and two smaller ones), swivels (we love swivels), and ropes (five good long ropes, one is heavy duty, can use it for hurricanes), in excellent condition. We leave the sails except one that looks like a blue spinnaker in a bag, this one we take (we didn't have a spinnaker and we so much wanted to have one).



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- [September 2013](#)
- [August 2013](#)
- [July 2013](#)
- [June 2013](#)
- [May 2013](#)
- [April 2013](#)
- [March 2013](#)
- [February 2013](#)
- [January 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [November 2012](#)
- [October 2012](#)

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- [Cuba](#)
- [Dominican Republic](#)
- [Florida](#)
- [Guatemala](#)
- [Mexico](#)
- [People](#)
- [Photo Essays](#)
- [The Very Best From The Blog](#)
- [Uncategorized](#)



We also leave the chain and the anchor behind as we already have a couple of each, and they are too heavy to just stack them aboard Fata Morgana. She is already overweight, poor Fata... But we do need the life raft (it's an old one, but a life raft is an essential expensive thing for the long distance cruiser), the surfboard, and the shiny new windlass (heavy but precious, we take it for a spare), three sets of snorkeling gear (strange yellow ones, very good quality, made in Italy, very dirty, as if people have been snorkeling in mud, but we clean them with Clorox), a marine radio, some flags and clothes (a strange dress made of window curtains and mosquito nets, became my official wrecking dress), a nice domino set, a portable compass, and many more treasure. Wrecking is so much fun!



Mira wearing her official wrecking dress she just found; holding yellow flippers she just found.

*Wrecking is the practice of taking valuables from a shipwreck which has foundered near or close to shore. Often an unregulated activity of opportunity in coastal communities, wrecking has been subjected to increasing regulation and evolved into what is now known as marine salvage. Wrecking is no longer economically significant; however, as recently as the 19th century in some parts of the world, it was the mainstay of otherwise economically marginal coastal*

*communities. (Wikipedia- 'Wrecking')*

Wrecking is a sort of a centuries-long tradition rooted in the Bahamian culture and history. The first European settlers, the Eleutheran Adventurers who immigrated to the island today called Eleuthera in the late 1640s to seek religious freedom and begin a new life, found themselves stranded on a rocky land with not much soil, with very limited freshwater and hot weather where agriculture proved to be impossible. Luckily for them, they were located on the main route of the galleons going back and forth between the New World and the Old World busy colonizing the Americas, loaded with goodies. In stormy weather, many of these ships ended up washed on the shallow reefs around the islands providing the settlers with abundant booty. Wrecking became the local industry.

But our excitement is mixed with an uneasy feeling.



Evo inside Primadonna

A wreck is always a terrifying sight, a warning and a reminder of what could happen to any of us at sea. Someone's dream ended on the rocks. Someone, a traveller and adventurer like us, suddenly lost everything. I wonder what happened here not too long ago. How such a heavy boat got blown away to the shore? Where is the crew of this unfortunate vessel? From the stuff inside we conclude they were a couple with a dog. Among men and women clothes many for cold weather, and five huge bags of dog

food, we find a phone (still working) and a wallet with an ID card and some receipts. Pascal Ott and Monique Christmann from France were on board *Primadonna* probably not more than a few weeks ago. But what is their faith, are they OK? We decide to find out and to contact them as soon as we get to a place with internet.



I just Google *S/V Primadonna* and *Pascal Ott* and found a bunch of interesting articles and forum discussions piecing together a curious and not so romantic story of travel and deception.

The story begins in the small quaint community in Oriental, North Carolina with the arrival of *S/V Primadonna*.

*August 24, 2013*

*Nearly a year ago, a red hulled steel ketch tied up at the free Town Dock. It flew the colors of France and overstayed the forty-eight hour limit for the free dock until someone called our policemen...*

*S/V Primadonna withdrew to the harbor anchorage and lingered through the winter into spring and then summer, all the while showing the wear of time and weather and apparent neglect. But she was not abandoned. Her two crew stuck with her through storms and what cold winter brought. Rumors regarding the two crew and the condition of the boat sputtered about...*

*When Primadonna dropped her hook in the anchorage, she became the third in a triumvirate of long term boats in a short term anchorage. Despite two of the boats being occupied, all appeared in varying states of neglect...*

*Community conversation and criticism exploded. It has been a slow year for visiting boats. How much of that can be blamed on the vagrancy of these three boats? Local discussion in many cases turned to anger.*

*One of the crew was arrested for shoplifting (coffee and Nutella). Some in the community have offered food or cash as assistance. In total, it was not sufficient for Primadonna to disembark for the Atlantic crossing back to France...*

*Community patience has largely expired. There is still no known plan for the crew to be able to depart, so some want to drag her out to sea or seize the boat and jail the crew. Is the crew hoping that the heavens will open with cash, food and fuel falling free from the sky? What to do? Two people are stranded in a foreign country on a boat that cannot leave under its own power, penniless and hungry. What are the limits of charity? Should we continue to feed those who will not/cannot feed themselves?*

- From Cabin Notes: Life on the Water. Read full article [here](#).

The community of Oriental, North Carolina wants the derelict Primadonna and her French crew out of their anchorage. Out they go, but in a rather ugly manner.

*March 5, 2014*

*The boat and its French crew had homesteaded in Oriental's harbor for over a year. In late September, Primadonna's owner, Pascal Ott asked Pat Stockwell to co-sign a check for him. That generous impulse by the Provision Company's manager to help a fellow sailor cost him three thousand dollars (the check was counterfeit; Ott refused to pay back).*

*... Because local police wouldn't take action, Pat Stockwell's only recourse was to work his way through the small claims court system, which he did, incurring still more costs.*

*A judge ruled in Pat's favor in early December. But by then, Primadonna had been towed from Oriental's harbor to Morehead City. In Morehead, it would have still been within the reach of North Carolina's small claims court system. Primadonna lingered only about a week there before its crew took their boat out of the country and out of the court's jurisdiction.*

*... Then in January came reports from Booby Cay in the Bahamas that the boat ended up on a reef there. In February there was yet another report — that Primadonna's crew was deported to France for violating the Bahamian law about checking in when you enter their waters.*

From TownDock, News and View from Oriental, NC. Read full article '[Passing the hat for Pat](#)'

What do I think about all this? I cannot really judge the crew or take a side based on a couple of

articles. I would love to hear the other side of the story, Ott and Christmann's version, but I still have to get a hold of them. How did a French couple with a dog, penniless, end up in the United States on a boat, and most importantly, why did they leave France? The story is much longer, its beginning and end are still unknown, and maybe one day we will find out. In any case, what S/V Primadonna and her crew have been through is very unfortunate and I feel much compassion for them.

As for us, the day we found Primadonna was a good day.



Returning with a full dinghy



Evo with surfboard.



Our new domino set



Maya has fun with her new surf board which is missing a sail...Flamingos in the background.





s/v Primadonna

Like 42

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## 6 Responses to The Day We Found Primadonna



**Tony Tharp**

April 14 2014

I was pleased to see you express compassion for the crew of Primadonna, but I wonder if your plundering of the Primadonna was actually an act of piracy? As I understand it, maritime salvage is a legal process and I saw no evidence in the article that you went through any legal steps to establish your right to remove articles from the vessel. You may neither know nor care that there is a legal claim to the vessel originating with an Oriental, N.C. (USA) resident who allegedly was bilked by one of the Primadonna crew. In short, your behavior and compassion seem somewhat hollow.

[Reply](#)



1.

**life nomadik**

Frankly, we didn't think we are doing anything wrong. We thought salvaging things from a wreck is a normal activity and even a good one, like recycling and

April 15 2014

saving stuff from the dumpster. The boat did look like a wreck, it was beyond salvaging itself, a derelict rusty vessel, abandoned in a desolate place and the stuff we got is not such a big deal, as I already explained. Now, after the event has been blown out of proportions, we are willing to do whatever is right, please advise.

My compassion (i didn't know anything about the people and still don't know what exactly happened to them to end up on the reefs) goes to all who wreck their boat and are forced to abandon it. They are obviously some poor people, not saying they are good or bad, as I don't believe in such a separation, who went to lots of troubles and lost everything. WE didn't think they would need any of the stuff we took if they have abandoned the boat. I repeat, the boat IS abandoned since a few months now, damaged and aground beyond salvation. So what we did we considered "a natural course of events" at the time, but now we regret taking anything from Primadonna, not worth the critiques and troubles.

[Reply](#)



**Chris Witzgall**

Glad somebody got something out of those two. As a suggestion, you could sell the winches, and send some of the \$\$\$ to Pat. He is a stand up guy, and I sure he would more than appreciate the \$\$\$, and how you came by it.

Chris

April 15 2014

[Reply](#)



1.

**life nomadik**

Chris, we can do that, thanks for the suggestions. I hope Pat contacts us. I tried to find him and wrote to oriental's newspaper.

April 15 2014

[Reply](#)



**sb kidd**

<http://www.inlandwaterwayonline.com>

Pat works here and is a very good person that tried to help the wrong people.

April 15 2014

[Reply](#)



1.

**life nomadik**

we admire him for this, and we are willing to help if we can.

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