AKAMA REPORT 8
19 April 2003

When we last wrote, we were at Langkawi varnishing the teak rails. We only got this half done when the weather abruptly changed, with rain replacing our fair days. We probably could have stayed and finished the job, but we wanted to leave while there was still at least a bit of life in the NE monsoon. So, leave we did. We won't bore you with the details of the trip, as they are more or less the same but in reverse order to our trip from Sebana Cove to Langkawi (see Report 5).

In this report, we mostly want to talk about fish, firstly because we've finally caught some! You will recall (Report 6) that we were spending oodles of money on fishing gear and getting absolutely nowhere. On our trip south, just south of Langkawi, we hooked a mackerel. It was not a very big one, not worth keeping, but we landed and released it. A few days later, we landed another much better one, 6.5 pounds and 32 inches long. We ate some and froze the rest. Filleted, we got just over 4-pounds of meat. That works out to a little over $115 a pound, since we spent almost $500 on fishing equipment. It gets worse!

Over half of our investment in fishing equipment is special trolling rods and reels that we bought a few years ago on advice from anglers in Singapore. These are now stored away, unused. We should have realized that fishing for us has nothing to do with sport; the idea is to catch meat!

We now fish using a simple homemade trolling rig, based on suggestions from several fellow cruisers. The rig is simply about 120-feet of 200-pound monofilament line (the heaviest we could find), terminated in about 5-feet of 150-pound leader. A lure goes on there. The bitter end of the line is fastened to a stanchion on the side of the Portuguese bridge, just forward of the pilothouse. On the next stanchion aft of the bitter end we tie a 2-foot bungee cord and lead it aft alongside the line. After letting the line all out, we pull about a 3-foot bight into the line and tie it onto the free end of the bungee cord. We put a little bell on the forward end of that bight, which hangs loose just outside the pilothouse door. The whole thing rolls up on a plastic hand-line spool for storage.

When a fish strikes, his resistance pulls the line back on the bungee cord, moving the bight of line and the bell rings. When the bungee cord is pulled out far enough for the bight in the line to become taut, the hook is set into his mouth; it's kind of like a dog running into the end of his leash. Total investment for the set-up is less than 50 bucks, over half of which is the lure. Had we the inclination, we could make our own lures from old spoons, bits of pipe and plastic for pennies; we probably will. We have two such lines, one for port and one for starboard. Now for another fish story...

On the night of 31 March, in a bay about 100-miles north of Singapore, we had an experience that we do not care to repeat. We had anchored at sundown, and about a half-hour later we were looking at a little flashing light in the distance, wondering what it was. Through the binoculars, we could see that it was a fishing float marker, comprised of a flag on a float with a little strobe atop the flagstaff. It was drifting in the 2-knot tidal current and we wondered what kind of net, trap or line was hooked to it.

Not long after that, our GPS anchor alarm started ringing. For those not familiar with GPS, the GPS knows exactly where the boat is at all times. When we anchor, we store the location of the anchor into the GPS, and if we move beyond a preset radius an alarm goes off. This is truly useful technology that we use without fail when we anchor. Anyway, we reset it, assuming it was a false alarm, and went back to serious relaxing. It rang again only a few minutes later and we knew that we had trouble.

We discovered that there was a fishing-net across our anchor chain. Not only that, but it was pushing hard on the chain, adding a huge additional load to our anchor. Then we realized that the little strobe light in the distance was marking one end of a drift net, and the net had drifted across our boat. The other end was not visible, as it stretched off into the distance, mostly under water.

Drift nets can be over a hundred miles long, but (fortunately) not here. This one was perhaps a mile long. For those who have not seen one, here is how they work. The top edge of the net is suspended from a cord that has little floats every foot or so. The bottom end of the net is weighted down lightly, just enough to sink the net and the floats on the top line. Every 100-feet or so there is a 4-metre line to the surface, connected to a buoy about 18-inches long and 6-inches in diameter. The overall effect is a net that is suspended about 4-metres below the surface of the water; all you see is the buoys. These things drift with the current, catching everything in their path, including our boat!

So there we were, with this huge net pushing our boat and dragging our anchor. The combined effect of the current on all those little floats and the net results in a very big force, enough to move us and our anchor toward shore at almost a knot, as the bottom was mud and not the best holding! So, what to do?

First, we looked around hoping to see the net's owner, but the only fishing boats visible were miles away. Then, we tried to pull the net and its lines up to the foredeck with a boathook, hoping that we could somehow dislodge them from our anchor rode, then pull the anchor up and drift free; but they were pulling way too hard for that. Next, we tried raising the anchor with the winch, but the net and its lines, being fouled came up with the chain. With the additional load from the net, the winch was not strong enough to pull us to the anchor; we did not dare start the main engine and motor up to the anchor for fear of getting the prop fouled in the net. In short order, the net wrapped itself around AKAMA preventing us from drifting free anyway. So we cut the net and lines. The side that led off to starboard cracked away like a bullwhip. But the other side remained fouled on the anchor chain; it also had become fouled on the port stabilizer. The situation was becoming dangerous, as we continued to be pushed toward shore, but at least getting rid of half the net cut the rate by about half.

So, we launched the dinghy and went around the boat cutting away the remaining net and lines. What a job! We had been in this situation for nearly two hours when the fisherman finally arrived on the scene, mad as hell. After we explained that we had not run down his net, but that it had in fact run us down, he calmed down a bit, but still demanded compensation and telephoned the marine police.

We succumbed to his sob story that he and his mate worked every day from 7 am to 8 pm with this one boat and net. This was his only source of income. Taking pity on him we gave him 200 Malaysian dollars as compensation for missed fishing and to repair his net. Also, he and his mate were very hungry, so we gave them some sandwiches and Cokes; in return, they gave us two buah (we don't know the English name for this popular local game fish). He helped a little to get the rest of the net off AKAMA and went away, saying that he'd return later that night with the marine police to fill in an incident report. We never saw him again, nor did the police show up. Anyway, enough about fish!

We are now at Sebana Cove marina getting ready for our next great adventure, a trip to Borneo. We hope to leave in a week or so. Preparing for the trip entails only doing a little routine and preventive maintenance on us and the boat. We both have finally had a long-overdue dental check-up. Our teeth were fine, but Maurice had to have two teeth repaired, one just a chip and one a crown, as he persists in using his teeth as tools. AKAMA, on the other hand ran very well on the last trip, and needs little, just tightening of belts, replacing of filters and a few small repairs.

The most important repair is our refrigerator/freezer, which packed in the day we arrived at Sebana Cove. We noticed that it was making a strange noise, the fridge portion was not working at all and that the freezer portion would just barely make ice. With some difficulty, we found a technician that was willing to come out to the marina. This is a tale that bears telling.

A small Chinese man wearing cargo pants and a baggy shirt meandered around the docks looking lost. He was dishevelled and carried nothing, looking rather like a lost fishing charter guest. Eventually, he wandered over to AKAMA seeking directions. He did not speak much English. Maurice tried his limited Bahasa and some Mandarin; the responses were mostly simple English and grunts. Here was our refrigeration technician. He did not exude confidence; our hearts sank.

Maurice began to describe the problem. However, before he could even begin, the technician waved him off, not wanting to be concerned with facts. Maurice kept talking. The technician kept ignoring him.

We pulled the refrigerator out of its closet and the technician squatted at the back, feeling the components. He then announced that he needed to look in the refrigerator. He seemed to know what he was doing; we were beginning to feel better. Eventually, he vanished in search of his tools, returning with a small canvas bag, walking in a slow halting gait. We observed that if he walked any slower he'd be going backwards.

Head in the now-empty refrigerator and screwdriver in hand, he began taking apart the interior of the refrigerator. Screws and bits dropped around him for a short time and then he stopped when a panel would not come out. "Why like that?" Seizing the plastic panel in his hands, he applied considerable force but it did not budge. "How to disassemble?" he muttered, giving a mighty yank and breaking wind in the process. It did not budge despite either effort.

He then tried to prise the panel from its spot; little hidden plastic bits strained and broke under the onslaught. Louise-Ann and I turned to each other and grimaced. Satisfied that he'd broken away whatever hidden pieces of plastic were the impediment, he gave another mighty heave and farted. One corner of the panel came up but otherwise it would not budge "Hmm, how to disassemble?" he repeated.

With a larger screwdriver, he attacked the underside of the open corner. Bits of insulation flew and more plastic pieces broke under the strain. Another heave, another fart yielded no success.

When he paused, Maurice suggested that maybe he should look below the stubborn panel, in the freezer compartment. "Maybe screws there", Maurice opined, using his best local English. The technician looked and removed some screws. More pulling and farting, however, would not release the panel. "Something in middle holding", the technician mumbled. "Maybe another screw underneath", Maurice countered. He removed the screw and the panel, much the worse for wear, came free.

"Fan turn only slowly, slowly", stated the technician. He reached for his screwdriver and proceeded to attack its connector with a vengeance, to no avail. When he paused for another fart, Maurice, now in his realm of electronics, reached over and disconnected the fan.

To his credit, the technician now proceeded to measure the power source, jumper the thermostat and perform a few other tests. However, he arrived at the errant conclusion that the thermostat was defective. As he picked up one of his weapons of destruction, but before he could hack it from the panel assembly, Maurice jumpered the power to the fan motor and observed, "Look, fan still move slowly, slowly; thermostat no bad". His mastery of their mutual language was improving. The technician farted his agreement and turned his attention to the fan.

Apparently, the fan blades had moved on the shaft, binding on the motor bearing or fan housing, as a pull on the fan resulted in it turning freely. Our hero beamed in victory, "problem now gone", farted, and proceeded to replace the removed panels and parts. Amazingly, he managed to get the fridge back together with only two screws left over, little sign of the considerable damage that he had inflicted on its parts, and everything working. Eventually, he found homes for the two screws, charged us fifty ringgit (about 20 bucks) for his efforts, farted and departed. To our complete amazement, the refrigerator is still working as we write this well over a week later.

We finished varnishing our teak rail, despite the often-inclement weather. A few words about varnishing are in order. Every boater has his "secret" recipe for varnishing. Here is ours. First, we sand back to smooth, using progressively #80 to #150 sandpaper, not usually going back to bare wood unless the varnish is cracked and peeling. Then we wipe on a coat of Marine Penetrol, wait a few minutes, and rub the piece down vigorously with a lint-free cloth. Then we lay down a couple of coats of 25%/75% Penetrol/varnish mixture, let dry then wet sand with #200 until the surface is totally smooth. Subsequent coats are built up with progressively less Penetrol, after rubbing each previous coat down with a tack rag wet with Penetrol. Eventually, we notice bubbles and/or ridges; at this point we wet sand just enough to get back to smooth using #400 sandpaper. The result is a perfectly smooth piece of teak with no blemishes (well, that's what we shoot for). Then, we lay down two final "presentation" coats of varnish thinned with only about 5 to 10% Penetrol and 5 to 10% thinner, the amounts of each depending on the temperature and humidity (it's a sort of Zen thing (you know when you get it right). Anyway, when we have it freshly done people do stop and say, "Wow". Unfortunately, right after we put on our final coat, we had an unusually heavy dew, which resulted in a matte finish. It still looks good, compared to the teak on most boats, but we were shooting for "wow".