Well that’s a complete reversal of thoughts!” I said to John as he came up with the idea of sailing the world on a catamaran. The dream of exploring far flung corners of the earth was one we both held, but it had been a monohull that was going to be our home.

AN UNUSUAL ROUTE?
We started our adventures in April last year, having shown our new home, the first Discovery 50 catamaran, at the Multihull Boat Show in Lorient. And oh what adventures we have had! Crossing the Atlantic we saw just a handful of boats, and when we called them up a typical response was “Aren’t you going the wrong way?” Not at all - we wanted to explore the east coast of America, routing via the Azores and Bermuda, making our landfall in Newport, Rhode Island.

Last summer, Maine had the best weather for 30 years and the long sunny days were spent exploring the pink granite islands and pretty towns, dodging lobster pots and enjoying the company of family and new friends made along the way.

As we headed south we saw whales, and became fascinated by the history of old fishing towns of New England. We spent two days in New York and had a memorable sail past Manhattan. We sailed the Chesapeake and the Carolinas to Florida - greatly enjoying the pelicans, cranes, herons and manatees that were there in plenty. We then crossed to the Bahamas for six weeks sailing and snorkelling in azure, crystal-clear waters - hardly long enough for such a wonderful expanse of islands - each group with their own personality and reason to explore.

Cuba was next and strikingly different: in its history, culture, language, political conscience and social reasoning. Different too in the distances one needs to sail between anchorages and the absence of fellow cruisers. Havana is like stepping in to
an old European city, full of baroque facades, neo-classical buildings, shaded squares and intriguing courtyards. American 1950s cars are a quintessential image of Havana. Look at any street and you will see their curvy trunks and bonnets ostentatiously protruding beyond the rest. Live music is everywhere in Havana, and dancing too. We had a glimpse of the practice session at the famous ballet school and witnessed some of the passion of flamenco. We also saw many signs of the hardship the population endure. For transport, Cubans use mule and cart, cars that are held together by diligence and love; buses (which are in fact trucks and absolutely packed), and hope – that if they stand by the side of the road for long enough someone will give them a lift. Basic rations are not really enough; housing is crowded and run down. For many, their jobs must give them little sense of purpose. Yet despite all that, we found the people to be gracious, positive and proud of their country.

Now, just one remarkable year on from the start of our journey, we are in the San Blas islands. This bejewelled archipelago that sits on the north-east coastline of Panama offers a remarkable step back to a different time. The vibrant reds, oranges, greens and yellows of the traditional costumes of the Kuna Indians seem a perfect balance to the brilliant hues of blue of the water. You have a choice of over 300 palm-loaded, tiny islands, which are fringed with fine white sand. Many are protected by coral reefs – and what a joy it is to spend an afternoon snorkelling in the balmy water, discovering the wealth of life and beauty just beneath the surface!

A few islands are packed to the edges with a Kuna settlement, the cane and palm huts connected by hanging washing and lively children. A lot of islands are uninhabited, whilst some may be home to a family or two. They fish, gather coconuts and paddle their canoes long distances to collect fresh water. As you drop anchor you may well have some Kunas arrive in a dugout canoe, keen for you to buy the local embroidery or just-caught fish.

SO HOW HAS LIFE BEEN LIVING ON BOARD FOR A YEAR? - ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC!

Our adjustment from land-locked living started two years before we set off when we sold our house and moved to small rented accommodation. We were forced to get rid of possessions, which was hugely liberating. It highlighted just how few things you actually need or want.

In any event, by choosing a brand-new, 50' foot, luxury catamaran, we’ve had more than enough space and comfort. The Discovery 50 has all that you would expect in terms of large fridge and freezer, washing machine, water-maker, etc, but it is the design that provides both the luxury and pleasure. Internally, the most sumptuous aspect has to be the full beam master cabin: super-king size bed and his and hers bathrooms. The sun-beds and hot-tub add a touch of decadence on deck. The very large saloon and en-suite guest cabins make it delightfully easy to have family and friends to visit and without any compromise.

I have thought about this, and not only do I have everything that I would have in a house, I have an ever-changing view from the kitchen window, there is very little housework and driving to the shops in a fast dinghy is a joy. And unlike a house, a boat gives you choice and opportunity: you can move it or stay just where you are.

You can, of course, treat a boat just like a house and leave it – take a long weekend
somewhere or go on holiday. We have taken some fabulous diversions - such as hiring a car to revel in the vibrant autumn colours of Vermont. We also drove the Blue Ridge Highway and hiked in the Smoky Mountains.

By driving the route up to Norfolk, Virginia, we were able to accept a personal invitation to tour the latest US aircraft carrier. I will always cherish the memory of visiting the Kennedy Space Centre and seeing a rocket launch. Before we set off on our travels I confided to a cruising friend “What’s worrying me is what I will do all day on a boat.” She didn’t respond immediately and I watched her face wrestle with the shock, confusion and then realisation that I was just a novice. “You never get bored with the shock, confusion and then realisation that I was just a novice.”

For a start, in order to make passage you are studying charts and pilot guides, planning your route, perhaps preparing some meals. On passage, you are watch-keeping, adjusting your route, perhaps preparing some meals. Looking out from the galley I could see the Brest peninsula: I was on watch, preparing a meal. The new owners of our Discovery Magic had been exemplary and gave me great confidence for the voyages ahead.

Apart from doing the single-handed transatlantic race in a monohull, John had competed in several long-distance races in high performance multihulls. That excitement and understanding of what they are capable of is part of him. Even when we first thought about bluewater cruising, we deliberated whether it should be a monohull or a multihull. The Discovery 55 monohull won out, but there was always the thought of sailing on a cat. So when the first Discovery 50 was still on the drawing board, it seemed a natural step that we should take delivery of it.

Although we had chartered catamarans, I had never sailed one far off-shore and was a little apprehensive about it. Our delivery trip to the London Boat Show in January last year was a good introduction to adverse conditions. We were sailing this brand new boat to a schedule (never a good thing) and set off in the evening light with a snow blizzard following us up the English Channel. By the time we got to Dover we had 35 knots of wind, and by the time we tied up at Excel exhibition site in the East End of London we had 10cm of snow on the decks. Discovery Magic had been exemplary and gave me great confidence for the voyages ahead.

**SO WHAT HAVE I DISCOVERED IN THIS PAST YEAR?**

I had been really worried about missing our family and friends. I have discovered that not only do they manage perfectly well without me, but that we can stay in good contact. Almost without exception, one way or the other, we have been able to get internet connection on the boat, although it hasn’t always been strong enough for Skype. Yet on other occasions it has amazed me that there is any connection at all. When we were more than 3 miles offshore we saw a whale; Skype was up and running and I could excitedly share the experience with my son back in England. Here in the San Blas, at an isolated island anchorage, we are happily sending and receiving e-mails. My 80-year old mother, when she realised we were going to be away for some time, surprised us all by embracing computer technology and we are now corresponding by e-mails almost daily.

**CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE...**
I have discovered the joy of living in the present. Sailing has opened my eyes more to what is before me and the pace of sailing has allowed me to enjoy it. Take the other afternoon: as I was strolling along the beach of a very small island, two small girls ran up to me. Their boldness left them almost straight away and they quickly disappeared into the safe darkness of their hut, their courage returning only when their father appeared. To my delight, they were very happy for me to take photographs. More than that, there were several minutes of madness when the men of the family posed for the camera by doing handstands, climbing up coconut trees and hugging each other. When I got back to the boat I printed off some of the shots and took them back to the family. The women then wanted me to take some photos of them. They rushed back in to their huts to put on all their finery. More prints followed and more glee. None of that had been planned, but we all had a fun afternoon and I have some great memories to treasure. I have discovered just how different places can be and that they all have much to offer. I don’t really enjoy long passages (although we have covered more than 11,000 in the last year). Yet even long passages have bonuses: the pleasure of watching the sunrise; the buzz for being responsible for the boat and crew on a dark night watch.

I have discovered that wherever we have gone we have been shown kindness and friendship. The Harbour Master in Maine offered us her car to provision the boat; a New York bus inspector went to great lengths to successfully retrieve my wallet that I had left on a bus on 5th Avenue; Bill and Carole in Fort Lauderdale were ardent caretakers of our boat when we left it for three weeks. Another example was the Harbour Master at New Bedford, who, when it was predicted that a hurricane was imminent, not only helped us secure our boat, but took us to a hotel and was there waiting in the lobby the next morning to return us to the boat. Then there is the whole cruising fraternity that somehow seem compelled to swap advice, books and bits of equipment in order to help each other. In particular, it is the Ocean Cruising Club that stands out. We didn’t discover the OCC until we got to America. The only qualification for membership is to have done a 1,000 nautical mile passage non-stop. The wealth of experience, camaraderie and support given by those members is second to none, and the help their Port Officers gave us went well beyond the call of duty.

It’s been a most amazing year, full of adventure and new experiences. Above all, I have rediscovered the reason why John and I first got together thirty years ago. I would recommend to anyone thinking about cruising to go and discover what it’s all about.