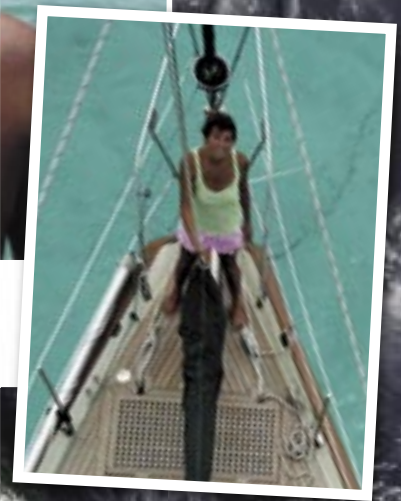
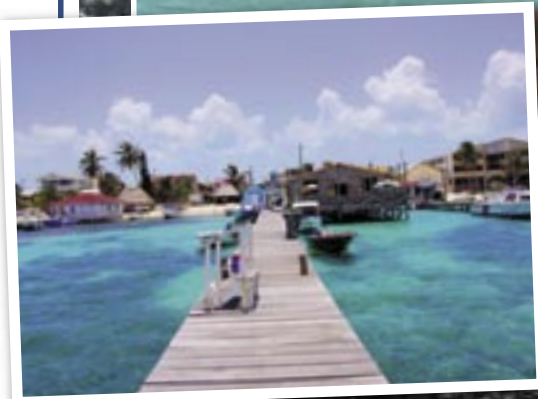


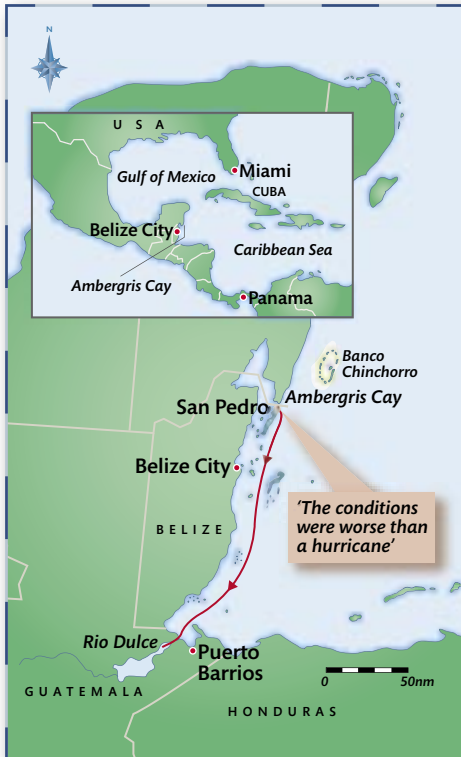
Satellite view of Tropical Storm Arthur.

TRAPPED **IN A** TROPICAL STORM

Neville Hockley and his wife, Catherine, ride out the full fury of a tropical storm, 'hanging on by their fingernails' in an anchorage with poor holding



ABOVE: Neville Hockley in the foreground, with *Dream Time*, a Cabo Rico 38, lying to her double anchors before the storm. **LEFT:** San Pedro. **TOP RIGHT:** They monitored the yacht's anchor swing on the chartplotter. **RIGHT:** Catherine Hockley



There's a first time for everything. On 1 June, 2008 – the first day of the hurricane season – my wife Catherine and I were being slammed by Arthur, the first tropical storm of the season. The day just happened to be the first anniversary of our year of liveaboard cruising. As we watched thick lightning bolts strike the water around us, I wondered what other experiences the night had in store for us.

No one had predicted such ferocious winds, or torrential rain to hit Belize, where we were anchored. The local forecast was fatally inaccurate. Weather reports predicted 20-25 knot winds from east-south-east with the remains of a tropical wave sweeping across from the east. Arthur claimed seven Belizean lives and caused about £9 million of destruction.

CAULDRON OF FOAM

At 0200 on Sunday morning, rather than being tucked up in our forepeak berth with a cool breeze blowing through the hatch, Catherine and I were huddled together in the cockpit wearing oilskins and lifejackets and staring in disbelief as the once-serene anchorage was transformed into a tumultuous scene of breaking seas, stinging rain and 60 mph winds. Our cutter, *Dream Time*, a Cabo Rico 38, shuddered violently against the stronger gusts, straining against her two anchor cables.

The barrier reef, less than a mile off our bow, had become a thunderous wall of white water as huge seas smashed against the coral. The narrow, unmarked channels into the harbour, through which we had sailed just a few days previously, had disappeared in a cauldron of foam and surf. To our stern lay the menacing shoreline of San Pedro. It seemed only a matter of time before

our anchor would drag, pitching us into the web of piers, docks and pylons.

'WORSE THAN A HURRICANE'

Five of the eight boats anchored around us dragged. A small charter catamaran, unable to re-anchor, spent much of the night circling the harbour. A chunky Irwin sloop danced around on her single anchor chain, swinging like a pendulum, beam-on to wind and sea, back and forth all night. Her owners later claimed that the conditions were worse than a hurricane they had once weathered, and, disheartened by the experience, they headed back to Florida rather than continue their planned voyage south.

At the height of the storm, a 48ft ketch was washed ashore. We watched in horror as she was swept silently across the anchorage towards the beach, careening broadside into a pylon before heeling violently and foundering in only 3ft of water. Her owner later told us the 60lb CQR anchor had snapped at the base of its shaft.

HANGING ON BY OUR FINGERNAILS

A giant slab of limestone rock covers the seabed in San Pedro's anchorage. Coated with just a few inches of powdery white sand and patches of seagrass, it's a struggle to get anchors to purchase here. Because of the poor holding, we had taken the precaution of dropping two CQRs, 60lb and 45lb, each with about 38m (125ft) of chain, and a 6m (20ft)

nylon snubber, set about 40° apart and with scopes of 10:1. We dived down and set each anchor by hand, chipping away at the seabed until the tips were set. We were holding, but hanging on by our fingernails.

We had the engine running, ready to be engaged at the first sign of trouble. All our navigation equipment was turned on, recording our anchor swing, displaying water depths, windspeeds and approaching squalls. When the lightning started, we decided to switch off and unplug our electronics.

'A PRIMEVAL MONSTER'

We had experienced lightning storms before, but nothing like this. The thunder was ominous and rumbled with steady regularity, like the steps of a primeval monster approaching, crashing across the Belizean Cays towards our secluded anchorage.

The driving rain obscured our view of the lightning bolts that we knew were almost upon us.

It was then that the full force of the storm struck. The wind suddenly increased to a new level of ferocity. The San Pedro Yacht Club recorded speeds of 99mph. The rain no longer came down in sheets, the air seemed to be saturated with water. Waves began crashing over our bow, sending gallons of spray onto our dodger. Then the lightning came.

CITY PLUNGED INTO DARKNESS

The first strike landed midway between us and the Irwin sloop, about 150ft away, suddenly illuminating the scene. Unlike previous lightning storms that we had watched excitedly while sipping drinks in the cockpit, here we sat in



Checking the anchor gear during a brief lull

silence, shocked by the sheer strength, size and duration of each strike. We watched three bolts hit the island, throwing showers of white, red and green sparks into the night, plunging the entire city of San Pedro into darkness.

Suddenly everything else – wind, rain, dragging anchors – paled into insignificance compared with the relentless lightning.

IT WAS A CRAZY IDEA

No amount of preparation, experience or equipment could protect us. We were vulnerable, helpless – but our luck held. The closest strike came to within 20ft of *Dream Time*.

Daybreak brought a brief lapse in conditions as the wind dropped to a steady 35 knots. The rain continued to fall, flattening the seas a little, but as the wind began to shift around to the south and the distant rumble of thunder

grew louder, it was clear it wasn't over.

We were shocked to see a local man in a canoe, with only a pipe for a paddle, trying to recover cushions from his sunken charter boat. As the wind began to increase from the south-west, it was obvious he would not get back to shore safely. I found a spare paddle in our lazarette and threw it to him. 'Thanks man, I see you later!' he shouted. But even with a paddle he was not making headway, with the two sodden cushions hanging heavily over his canoe.

He seemed determined not to abandon them as he drifting seawards towards the reef. It was clear he needed help. I jumped into our 8ft inflatable dinghy, half-full of water, and started the 5hp outboard engine and motored over to him. Catherine wasn't happy to see me go. I made slow progress towing him ashore, the engine straining.

As the lightning began to close in around us, he spotted a third cushion adrift and asked me to motor back out into the maelstrom to recover it! I gave him a look that said it was a crazy idea and dropped him off at the



Dream Time back underway, heading south to Guatemala

so fortunate. The Belizean newspaper, *The Reporter*, reported that 65 boats had sunk at Ambergris Cay. When we left, four days after the storm, the ketch was still aground, her American owner waiting desperately for a local tugboat to pull him to deeper water. Catherine and I continued our voyage south.

We don't take what happened lightly – it was certainly, without question, the worst night at anchor we have ever had, but we set off to sail around the world seeking new experiences and challenges, to leave the familiar behind.

EPILOGUE

As I write, we are in Guatemala's Rio Dulce, sitting out the rest of the hurricane season, berthed deep in the jungle and surrounded by dense walls of vegetation, howler monkeys and Mayan natives. We can't always pick our experiences and we don't always know what the next ones will be, but we are living each moment as it arrives, and that's just the way we like it. ▲

NEVILLE HOCKLEY

Neville, 38, grew up in Southampton. He learned to sail with his father, racing dinghies around Mudeford Quay, Christchurch. In 1994 he sailed from Sydney to Italy via the Indian Ocean and Red Sea on a 44ft cutter-rigged sloop, and chronicled his adventures in a book, *Dream Time*, published in 2000. Neville and his wife Catherine bought their first boat, a 28ft Newport, in 1998. Two years



later, they traded up to their current yacht, a 38ft Cabo Rico cutter named after his book. They meticulously rebuilt her and then set off on a 10-year circumnavigation. Neville has taken his job with him – he owns a graphic design studio, which he manages from his yacht.



A ketch aground in the aftermath of the storm

nearest dock. I made it back to *Dream Time* just seconds before the tail-end of the tropical storm struck.

When the morning light came, our anxiety lifted and a cup of tea helped as Catherine and I weathered the last gusts in subdued exhaustion.

OTHERS WEREN'T SO LUCKY

Dream Time survived Tropical Storm Arthur without incident, but many others were not

» LESSONS LEARNED



Storm clouds gather outside the barrier reef at Ambergris Cay

If we had known the conditions were going to be so severe, we would have certainly relocated *Dream Time* to Cay Caulker, an island just 15 miles south of San Pedro with better holding and a protected western shore. Regrettably we didn't, but here's what I think helped us weather the experience:

1 Dropping two anchors at approximately 40° with 10:1 scope was a good start.

2 Without question, it was diving down and setting each anchor by hand that prevented us from dragging like the other boats.

3 Our nylon snubbers absorbed the pitching and helped steady our bow against the choppy seas.

4 If you're concerned about your neighbours dragging, ask them to move or move yourself. We made the local catamaran charter company move an unattended 42ft

boat that they had anchored right off our bow. They assured me she wouldn't drag but begrudgingly re-anchored. She did drag, but slipped harmlessly past our port side.

5 Get yourself organised before the storm hits. We removed all the sun awnings, ran our engine in case we dragged, monitored our swing on the chartplotter, wore full wet-weather gear and lifejackets, and carried waterproof VHF radios and torches.