

ALDEBARAN'S

Sailing Circumnavigation

Report 43

New Caledonia and a return to Vanuatu

June 2004 to August 2004

It was a very tired and somewhat exhausted Pat & Olivia that eventually, on Friday 18th June, secured Aldebaran to the Port Moselle Marina in Noumea, New Caledonia after their eight day rough passage from Australia.

If I was to fall in love with any place we have visited it would certainly not be Noumea. Being a French Colony and me not having any French did not help. However Immigration, Customs and Quarantine were all very courteous. Prior to arriving we had heard that Quarantine were very strict about what food you could take in, no meat, dairy products or vegetables. Our Quarantine Officer just sat in the cockpit taking particulars and on leaving he took our rubbish. I relayed this over the radio to Matt & Robyn on Pale Fire and Martin & Catherine on Suleika, who were 24 hours behind us, and they were much relieved. Unfortunately, on arrival they got a different Quarantine Officer and she went through their boats in detail and removed a lot of their supplies.

The eight days we stayed in Noumea were spent resting, having our headsail repaired, doing the odd repair job and catching up with cruising friends in the area. When checking out of New Caledonia in Noumea you are entitled to duty free diesel. We purchased 200L at €0.44/L instead of at the full price of €0.79/L. You are not entitled to duty free if you are planning on visiting the Loyalty Islands off the west coast.

From Noumea we spent 6 days cruising the south coast including the well sheltered and popular Baie de Prony before making the 120 miles passage, in company with Suleika and Pale Fire, to the Loyalty Islands where we anchored in Baie de Gaatcha (position 20-55.5 south and 167-05 east) on the west coast of Lifou Island. This was a very pleasant anchorage and one of the highlights was the magnificent bakery in the village that produced lovely very large loaves of bread. From Baie de Gaatcha we sailed 21 miles to Baie de Doking on Lifou's north coast and anchored overnight among large coral heads (20-41.95 south and 167-10 east).

From Lifou we set a course for Erromango Island in Vanuatu, a distance of 154 miles but after four hours of motorsailing into headwinds we altered our course for Port Vila and arrived there 32 hours after leaving Lifou. It was not one of our nicest passages. Having been in Port Vila last year it was the first port we revisited since leaving the Caribbean in 2000. Our friends Keith & Gay from New Zealand joined us for three weeks while we cruised north to Luganville. On the 200 mile route to Luganville we re-visited many of the islands and friends Olivia and I encountered last year. Two new places we visited were Banam Bay on Malakula and Atchin Island.

Would you wear a namba when dancing?

At Banam Bay we were entertained with traditional dancing, the males, dancing in an area segregated from their womenfolk, wore "nambas". A namba is a woven leaf wrapped round the penis, leaving the remainder of the male genitalia exposed. Never had any of us seen such a display of male testicles "swinging" so openly. At the conclusion of the dancing we were shown, from the outside, the hut where the young boys, around the age of eight, are circumcised and remain until healed. During their confinement they are looked after by the male members of the village and on healing are collected by their parents who then pay for the "operation". Before we departed we were each given a coconut to drink and local food. The cool coconut milk was very welcome but the food was awful, it even looked disgusting. When we retreated from the food the dancers immediately began devouring it. It was a very unusual sight to see about 12 naked men, except for their nambas, surrounding the food laid out on large leaves on the ground with their "bums" exposed.

From Banam Bay we sailed to Uri Island where, like last year, we were made very welcome. Moving north we endeavoured to anchor, without success, at Wala Island and so continued north to Atchin Island. Although only measuring about 1000 x 700 metres the island is home to five different tribes each with their own religion, the largest being the “Ruwar” followed by the “Centar”, “Melparav”, “Melmarvar” and the “Emelep”. On the island we met Gary whose wife died a few months earlier shortly after giving birth to their fourth son. Gary, with three of his sons and a number of other island children, guided us on a tour of the island. We were introduced to Gary’s ageing parents and given refreshments. That evening we entertained Gary and the three boys on Aldebaran. It was a memorable sight to see the boys watching a video for the first time and exploring the boat.

On Wednesday 4th August, with Keith promising to assist in the boys education we sadly bade farewell to Gary and the boys and sailed the remaining 30 miles to the Aore Resort on Aore Island just off Luganville on Vanuata’s largest island Espiritu Santo.

Aore Island together with the area surrounding Luganville during WW11 was awash with ally bases. Many of these remains can be viewed on a short walk round the island.

Two days later we crossed the 1.4 mile channel and anchored off the Beach Front Resort next to Luganville from where we had to take Keith to hospital with a badly infected toe. It was diagnosed as cellulitis. Later that day Keith and Gay flew home as planned.

Weighing anchor on 10th August we began our passage to the remote Banks Islands by way of Palikoulo Bay, where we almost grounded on a large coral head, and Port Orly where we spent a beautiful quiet night with the anchorage to ourselves. By 1610 hours the following day, having started at 0630 hours and after 49 miles, we anchored off Gaua, the first of the Banks Islands. Within a short time we were visited by Chief Henry and three of his villagers who invited us to their village the following morning. Unfortunately by 0845 hours the next morning the wind was blowing at 30 plus knots and Lakona Bay, where we were, was very exposed. Chief Henry braved the surf and rough sea in his dug out canoe and advised us to leave. We immediately raised the anchor, put two reefs in the mainsail and headsail, and set a course for Sola on Vanua Lava the next and main island in the group. It was an extremely rough 33 mile passage, and we were a relieved couple that successfully anchored (13-52.45 south / 167-13.18 east), on the second attempt, in the sheltered bay at Sola, the capital of the Banks Group on **Friday 13th August**.

What happens in these remote islands if you are born with a deformity e.g. a clubbed foot? Well the answer is “very little, if anything”. That was the outlook for Mia born three months earlier to Ben & Cathy, from Vureas Bay on the opposite side of the island, who we made friends with in 2003. Two weeks prior to our arrival Cameron, a retired orthopaedic surgeon, and his wife Marilyn, from America, on their yacht Makali were visiting Vureas Bay and heard about Mia. With Ben, Cathy & Mia aboard they brought them to Sola where Cameron, Cathy and baby Mia awaited a flight to Port Vila. There are no roads between Sola and Vureas Bay and so the journey involves either a four hour difficult trek through the jungle, so long as the rivers are not in flood, or a hazardous 18 mile sea journey in an open dug out canoe or on the one small open boat on the island with an outboard. Cameron had arranged for a fellow Australian orthopaedic surgeon who was on a working visit to the Port Vila Hospital to perform the operation free of charge. Cameron and Cathy with baby Mia were in Port Vila for two weeks during which Mia was assessed, operated on and given post operative treatment. On return to Sola, where Makali with Marilyn on board were anchored, they brought Ben, Cathy and Mia back to Vureas Bay. Cameron and Marilyn remained in the area until such time as the cast was due to be removed from Mia’s foot when Cameron removed it. With the exception of a small financial grant from the local authorities Cameron and Marilyn paid all expenses.

Vureas Bay;

Despite the lack of modern methods of communication the villagers of Vureas Bay knew weeks ago that we were coming, they had heard from other yachts who knew through our daily long range radio net of our plans and to say we received a warm welcome would be a gross understatement. Chief Godfrey his family and villagers welcomed us with open arm and a few tears.

The whole village were engrossed in preparations for their forthcoming five day festival due to start on 30th September. They had never held a festival before although last year, 2003, they were the main participants at the Waterfall Bay Festival a five hour jungle and shorelines walk to the north, where we met them first. During that festival they were very dissatisfied with the treatment they received from the local organising chief and as a result they took the decision to organise their own.

Our reason for sailing to Vureas Bay two weeks prior to the event was to deliver supplies we brought with us from Australia and to see if they required any further supplies from Luganville before the 30th. We would be returning to Luganville to meet our friends Jimmy and Rita Stanley from Ireland and bring them up to the festival.

Olivia's Medical Emergency;

Two days after arriving in Vureas Bay, with a list of orders, we sailed to Waterfall Bay to visit Chief Kerely, Chief Patrick, Chief Jimmy and Chief Nixon all of whom we met last year. As usual, we had only anchored when Chief Kerely came out in his dug out canoe and invited us for lunch the following day. He was no sooner gone when Chief Nixon arrived and he too invited us ashore. Going to bed that evening we remarked how busy we would be the following day visiting everybody. We had heard that Chief Kerely was not in favour with the other three chiefs and so we would have to try and steer clear of local politics in our conversation with each.

However little did we know what lay in store for us the next morning, especially Olivia.

On Thursday 19th August in almost 30 degrees centigrade Olivia woke up shivering and I had to but sleeping bags on her to try and warm her. This condition, with the addition of aches and pains, continued for some hours when, even with barely a light sheet on her, she began sweating profusely. We were the only boat in the anchorage but managed to make contact through the radio with Greg and Leonie and their two small boys on their yacht Bifrost who, lucky for us, were on their way to our anchorage, (read in our report 30 how we co-ordinated a medical emergency when Greg took seriously ill while on passage to Tonga in 2001). Before they arrived I went ashore and explained the situation to our lunch hosts Chief Kerely and his wife Elizabeth. They were very disappointed as they had prepared all the food. When Greg and Leonie arrived and agreed to come over and assess Olivia I went ashore again and rather than totally disappoint our hosts sat down to lunch with them. We had barely started our meal when Greg called me on the handheld vhf and said that Olivia's symptoms were similar to malaria and that she should have a blood test as soon as possible. I immediately excused myself, returned to Aldebaran where Greg helped me weigh anchor at 1400 hours. I knew there was a clinic at Vureas Bay but was not sure if they could do a blood test. Two hours later we arrived at Vureas Bay and I anchored close to the beach just off the village and called for somebody to come out. Ben came out in his canoe and when I explained the situation he told me that yes the clinic could take a blood sample but it would have to be taken to Sola, a four hour trek through the jungle, and then, if possible, catch a flight to Luganville for analysis. Olivia's condition necessitated a much quicker response and so ten minutes later I weighted anchor again and despite a bad forecast set a course for Luganville 112 miles south. Conditions were very bad with rough seas, 25 plus knots of wind, rain squalls, and with 100% cloud the night hours were some of the darkest we had ever experienced. Olivia, despite being very weak, managed to keep watch while I had a few hours rest in the cockpit beside her.

On the 0800 hours radio net next morning I relayed our situation and immediately had offers of help on arrival at the Beachfront Resort in Luganville. On approaching the anchorage Michael of the yacht Constant Bay and Matt from the yacht Pale Fire met us in their dinghy and on coming aboard helped me anchor at 1115 hours or 21 hours after leaving Waterfall Bay. With Michael remaining aboard to tidy up things Matt whisked us ashore where they had a taxi waiting to take us to the hospital. At this stage Olivia was anything but well, and a rash began appearing on her right leg.

The hospital was very efficient in taking and analysing the blood sample. Within an hour we were leaving the hospital with good and bad news and a supply of medication. The good news was that it was not malaria but the bad news was that it was cellulitis and that she would have to rest the leg in a raised position for a week to prevent the infection was spreading. By the following morning the front of her leg from the ankle to

the knee was a bright scarlet coloured swelling. A doctor on another yacht visited Olivia each day and suggested using a marker to outline the scarlet swelling in order to ascertain its progress. By the end of the week, having finished the medication, the swelling and redness subsided and Olivia got fully back on her feet. It had been a very anxious time.

On 28th August our friends Jimmy and Rita Stanley from Dublin joined us for three weeks. After allowing them rest overnight we shopped for supplies in Luganville and at 1500 hours weighted anchor and thus began an overnight return passage to Vureas Bay for the festival.

PREVIEW:

In our next report, our 44th we will describe how they acclimatised. Also covered in the report will be the five day festival, diving on the world's largest most accessible World War 11 wreck and how we assisted in bringing fellow yachties 800 miles to safety in Australia after their rudder broke.

Pat and Olivia Murphy, s/y ALDEBARAN

Please keep your emails coming to the boat at ei5359@sailmail.com, or to patandolivia1999@yahoo.com, we really appreciate receiving them and your comments, but please no jokes or attachments.