

ALDEBARAN'S

Sailing Circumnavigation

Report 44

Final weeks in Vanuatu and our return to Australia

September to November 2004

On the 30th August with the arrival for three weeks of our friends Jimmy and Rita Stanley from Malahide in Dublin we set sail the following day from Luganville on Espiritu Santo for Vanua Lava in the remote Banks Islands of Vanuatu. At 0745 the following morning, after 114 n/miles, we anchored in Vureas Bay amidst 29 other yachts. The reason for going to Vureas Bay was to attend the local five-day festival due to start on 1st September. Situated on the southwest corner of Vanua Lava, Vureas Bay is a 4 hour walk through the jungle to Sola, the islands capital. With a population of 1,200, Sola is the only place in the islands with electricity, it also has a small grass airstrip that is very often unusable due to flooding. Supply ships arrive infrequently.

In 2003 we attended the 3 day festival at Waterfall Bay (see report 40) about 10 miles, or a four hour walk, north of Vureas Bay. The majority of the performers at that festival were from Vureas Bay. They were very unhappy with the way they were treated by the organiser, Chief Kerely. I became very friendly with Chief Godfrey of Vureas Bay and I suggested they should run their own festival in 2004.

Two weeks earlier during our visit to the area we had taken orders from various villagers for supplies they required from Luganville. On delivery we were paid either in cash or with goods, e.g. fruit, vegetables or handcraft. The popular request was for rice, some of the other items included sugar, salt, flour, kerosene, hand tools and cooking utensils. Aldebaran became an inter island trading ship.

The Festival:

At 0830 hours on Wednesday 1st September the festivities began with the raising of the national flag and the singing of their national anthem. This was followed by a very emotional welcome sang directed at the visiting yachties, there were no tourists there. The main event of day one was the "pig killing ceremony" performed by Chief Godfrey to enhance his standing in the community. Following the ceremonial chanting and dancing the chief knocked the pig out with blows to the head. While stunned, with his heart still pumping, a vein is cut and its blood is collected in containers. The chief's immediate family lined up and were blooded by having the pig blood smeared on their foreheads and cheeks. I was honoured by being the only person among the 60 visiting yachties invited to be blooded, thus becoming a member of Chief Godfrey's family. Over the following four days the crews of the 29 yachts were treated to displays of traditional dancing, cultures, cooking, singing, hand crafts and methods of catching birds. The magnificent headdresses used during the various dances were made from local materials and were made for this festival only.

On the Friday night, the yachties prepared and brought ashore their traditional food while the natives reciprocate with theirs. It was a great success and a very enjoyable evening was had by locals and yachties alike, the occasion concluded with the various nationalities giving renditions of their country's music and song.

The last day of the festival began with an open air religious ceremony followed by a magnificent display of the Island's unique "Snake Dance". The performers are painted with black & white stripes simulating sea snakes. The legend behind the origin of the dance is of a family who had an Albino boy and they wished to attend a local festival. In order to disguise the boy they painted the whole family as sea snakes.

Prior to the closing ceremony the visiting sailors sang a song, composed by a crew member of one of the boats, thanking all the villagers for a great five days of festivities. The event concluded with all the villagers moving along the line of sailors shaking hands and embracing each other. Many tears being shed on both sides. It was a very emotional scene and one we will never forget.

An even more emotional event, a few days later, was when Olivia & I with Jimmy & Rita were finally leaving the area. Chief Godfrey & his family gave the four of us a going away traditional lunch in the village during which we noticed that Godfrey was very subdued. Back on the boat as dusk was falling Godfrey came paddling out in his dug out canoe. As soon as he came aboard he and I began crying uncontrollably as the realisation of the fact that we most likely would never see each other again dawned on us. Olivia did her utmost in trying to console us. *I will never forget the occasion.*

Sailing south we anchored in Lakona Bay off the village of DALOP on the island of Gaua. We brought our computer ashore and gave the villagers a slide show of our visit there the previous year. These people do not have electricity and so to see the computer working amazed them.

Continuing south via a number of pristine anchorages we arrived and anchored off Luganville where Jimmy and Rita left us after three weeks to continue their adventure to New Zealand.

Seven Day Adventists:

Of all the various religious organisations we have encountered during our travels we found the Seven Day Adventists to be the most practical (I am not one). They sail among the remote islands providing doctors, nurses, dentists and other people with useful attributes. Unlike other sects we have encountered we never heard them preaching their religious beliefs. On Aore Island we visited a boarding school they established and which was being run by Alester and Jill from Scotland. One of the very practical projects they were engaged in was teaching local boy's carpentry. Pupils pay €460 per year for a three year course and on leaving a grant of €460 is returned to them to help them establish a business. They can also buy new and second hand tool for €0.77 each. This was indeed one of the most useful projects we witnessed to date. Another was Jill teaching the local women dressmaking. While we were there Jill was endeavouring to complete a contract of 100 dresses. While they have a generator, it is only switched on for a few hours early morning and late evening. Olivia and two other sailor women came to her assistance by bringing ashore their own sewing machines which they were able to run with a small Honda portable generator loaned by another boat.

Intruders:

When we anchored off a small village at Dart Anchorage, Espiritu Santo, we invited Chief Jimmy Simeon and a number of his villagers aboard. We were the only boat in the anchorage. At 2am that night Olivia heard somebody aboard and fearing, if she woke me I would rush out and could be met with a machete wielding or firearm carrying individual she did not waken me. I should explain that I am a very sound sleeper and so heard nothing. When Olivia heard the intruders retreating towards the back of the boat she shouted at them and in the process woke me. In sticking her head out the hatch she saw two men scrambling off the boat into a dug out canoe. When I got on deck the culprits were paddling like bad back towards the shore. On searching the boat we came to the conclusion that they had got nothing. It was a very frightening experience and the worse we had experienced in over 15 years of cruising.

Next morning we beckoned the Chief to come out and told him of the incident, he was very upset and apologised profusely. We explained that unless the culprits were caught and punished we would have to communicate to other yachts advising them not to visit his village. About an hour later we saw two canoes leave the shore, the chief was in the first and there were two people in the second. On boarding us the Chief informed us that these were the two intruders and he returned a pair of diving flippers they had taken. They were an old torn pair that we had laying on the deck

that they had seen earlier in the day. The Chief made them apologise. We thanked the Chief for his efficiency and assured him that we would encourage other yachts to visit him.

The President Coolidge:

On the 26th October 1942 the “President Coolidge” a merchant ship of 654 ft. and 21,936 ton, while approaching the Vanuatu Island of Espiritu Santo through the Second Channel hit two friendly mines guarding the channel entrance. The navy had failed to communicate the new mine layout with Captain Nelson. The ship was laden with 5,092 officers and troops and a full complement of war machinery.

Realising his ship was in danger of sinking Captain Nelson ran her aground and using life boats, nets, Jacob’s ladders and ropes all but two of the 5,092 aboard were successfully off loaded. Fifty minutes after she was beached the vessel slid backwards into deep water.

She rolled onto her Port side as she sank, taking with her two men including an army Captain who re-entered the ship to look for one of his men. Their bodies were never found although a few years ago the Captain’s service revolver was found in the galley.

The location is only a few kilometres from Vanuatu’s second largest town Luganville and only a kilometre from Million Dollar Point where, at the conclusion of WW11, the Americans, rather than leave their hardware like bulldozers, trucks and jeeps etc to the locals drove the lot into the Second Channel. With the two sites so close the area has become a Mecca for divers. I had three dives on the wreck the first was along the promenade deck; the second was the exploration of the No1 and No2 holds where tanks, jeeps, artillery and guns were clearly visible. My third and deepest dive to 45 metres, for experienced divers only, was through the ship to the main saloon to see “The Lady”, an alabaster plaque of a lady on a Unicorn. The tradition is then to remove your mouthpiece and KISS the lady which I did. Returning to the surface from such a depth necessitated 3 decompression stops to avoid the bends.

Vanuatu to Australia:

On 13th October our friends Andrew, Nicola, Christopher and Stephen Knights from Brisbane joined us for a few days. Nicola and the two boys flew back on 18th Oct while Andrew remained to sail the 1,040 nautical miles (1,200 miles) passage to Bundaberg in Australia across the Coral Sea. Like last year we again joined the, free and well organised, Port-to-Port Rally which this year attracted a record entry of over forty eight boats. The 2003 rally had 28 entrants.

At midday on Monday 18th we departed Luganville and during the first 24hours sailing in rough seas on a course of 238 degrees we logged 152 n/miles with the help of the 15/20 knot south east wind.

An Emergency:

Towards dusk on the second day we heard over the radio that the yacht “Dawn’s Light” had lost their rudder. It had broken off cleanly just below the waterline. Returning to Vanuatu against a head wind or sailing south through the reefs into New Caledonia were both out of the question.

They endeavoured to rig a jury rudder using the spinnaker pole with a floorboard strapped to it. This proved unsatisfactory. Luckily they had a wind steering system and with the use of a boat hook tied to the unit they were able to steer manually, albeit with great difficulty. If the weather got bad there was no way they could have continued and would have had to abandon the boat.

Maritime Express another yacht in the rally suggested that fitting an electric tiller pilot to the wind steering system might eliminate the need to hand steer. At 2200 hours a call went out for anybody with a spare tiller pilot and we, in Aldebaran, were the only yacht with one.

We were about 20 miles ahead and at 2230 hours we turned back to meet the casualty. After about two hours we rendezvoused with Dawn’s Light and the small fleet of accompanying yachts and slotted in behind them to await daylight before attempting to transfer the tiller pilot. It was a calm night and the casualty and accompanying boats were motor sailing at about 5 knots towards Australia 800 miles to the west.

Lost Contact:

Although we had a system of watch keeping I stayed awake most of the night during the emergency. Well, maybe that's not completely true because while I was the only one on watch during the last few hours of darkness I lost contact with the fleet and to this day can only explain losing them by the fact that I must have fallen asleep. Anyway, as dawn broke there was no sign of the fleet and I had to call Dawn's Light up on the radio for their position. On plotting their position we were over 7 miles behind and had to increase our motoring speed to catch up. Please keep this little confession to yourselves.

The Equipment Transfer:

During the hours prior to the transfer Olivia, Andrew and I discussed the method we would use to transfer the equipment. We finally decided to wrap the items for transfer using a number of plastic bags fully taped to reduce the possibility of water entering the package. The package would then be attached to a float in case it fell into the sea. The plan was for Andrew to bring Aldebaran as close as possible to the casualty without endangering the safety of either boat. I would throw a light line, with a heavier line attached to Dawn's Light. On catching it they would haul it in until they had the heavier line aboard. The package would be attached to the heavier line by a pulley and by Olivia hauling the heavier line as high as was necessary using a halyard it was hoped the package would slide across to Dawn's Light. In theory it sounded feasible but would it work with both boats heaving and rolling badly in the large confused swell.

Our first attempt at passing the line failed as Andrew, who was not used to Aldebaran, did not have the confidence to bring Aldebaran close enough. We should have foreseen this weakness in our well thought out plan. However for the second attempt Andrew and I changed places and as I closed with Dawn's Light Andrew managed to throw the line across. Two crew members on Dawn's Light, the third member was trying to steer the boat, hauled the heavy line aboard and made it fast. Olivia hauled on the halyard raising the heavy line and immediately the package began to slide down the line. Half ways across it stopped and almost landed in the water as the line between the boats slackened. Quick thinking on Olivia's part in hauling the halyard higher rescued the situation. As soon as the package landed on Dawn's Light they disconnected it, released the line and Andrew and Olivia hauled it back aboard Aldebaran endeavouring to ensure the line did not sink to deep and foul our propeller. I immediately steered away and the operation was successfully accomplished. To assist the crew of Dawn's Light in connecting the equipment we sent over, I included photographs and details of how we connected it, I also wired an extension lead to connect to their battery. After about an hour they reported everything was working and they no longer had to hand steer. The Norwegian boat Augustus agreed to stay with the casualty and released the rest of us to continue on our way. Providing the weather did not deteriorate the chances of Dawn's Light reaching Bundeberg 760 miles away were good.

Onwards:

Five days later, having successfully navigated the many reefs on route, we arrived in Bundeberg after burning a lot of diesel due to the lack of wind. The last 50 miles is across Harvey Bay and the day before we crossed the weather was atrocious with many yachts reporting damage. If such weather hit while Dawn's Light was crossing there was no way they could have handled it.

Unfortunately on Saturday 23rd we heard a MAYDAY for a man washed overboard from the trimaran "Traveller" off Cape Moreton east of Brisbane. We believe the man drowned.

After logging 1,052 nautical miles in 7 days and 20 hours, an average of 5.6 knots, we berthed at the Arrival Dock and, within an hour, having been visited by Immigration, Quarantine and Customs, we were, for the second time, stamped into Australia. With favourable conditions the casualty arrived safely in Bundeberg about 8 hours after us.

The next few days were filled with festivities of all descriptions and on the last day the prize giving ceremony took place and to our surprise we were awarded the “Spirit of the Rally” award.

Out of three rallies we have participated in, since departing Ireland in 1999, we have won the “Spirit of the Rally” in two of them; the third one did not have such an award.

On Saturday 6th November we departed Bundeberg Marina for Brisbane but after an hour we had to return as we could not unfurl the headsail. After fixing it we again departed the following day.

On our way south down the Sandy Straits between Fraser Island and the mainland we diverted up the Mary River to Maryborough. On the 100 minutes motor up the river we ran aground twice, luckily it was only mud. At Maryborough we met Frank Eakin from Ballymena in Ireland. Frank is a retired doctor and had qualified with Gareth May of Malahide in Dublin. We spent a night at his house during which he entertained us with his bagpipes. During our stay at the Marina in Maryborough a workboat got into difficulties in the strong current and crashed into our transom causing minor damage.

Eventually on Tuesday 16th November after sailing 3,430 nautical miles during the 2004 season we tied up at our friends Andrew & Nickie Knight’s private pontoon at Raby Bay, Cleveland near Brisbane to await the passing of the forthcoming cyclone season.

P.s. Sorry but I forgot to mention that on 23rd October during the crossing we celebrated Olivia’s 60th birthday. Please keep this quiet!!!!!!

PREVIEW:

Our next report the 45th will describe the most frightening moments to date when we crossed the infamous Wide Bay Bar enroute up Australia’s east coast on our way to Darwin prior to departing for Indonesia.