

ALDEBARAN
27th report
TUAMOTUS, French Polynesia

On Monday 11th June we weighed anchor in Ua Poo in the Marqueses and set sail, together with our friends in Muna, for the Tuamotus, a passage of 500 miles. Such long passages are common in the South Pacific and we now embark on them without the trepidation that prior to starting this adventure much shorter passages in the seas round Ireland and the UK would generate.

The Tuamotus are a group of 78 islands, all but two being coral atolls, extending over 900 miles and lying in a North West to South East direction and on a direct route from the Marqueses to the Society Islands. The only greenery on the atolls, are palm trees and short grass. The archipelago is also called the “Dangerous Archipelago” due to their low-lying character. From a yacht they are, in good visibility, only visible from about 8 miles. Prior to the GPS system of navigation very few yachts ventured into the area, but now a number of the motus are regularly visited. The number of lost and stranded yachts dotting the area attests to the dangers.

Nuclear Testing:

Up to January 1996 the French Government used the southeastern part of the Tuamotus for their nuclear testing and as a result that area is off limits for cruisers.

Makemo one of the bigger atolls, about 40 miles long and 10 miles at its widest point, was our landfall. Twenty miles from Makemo we passed the atoll of Taenga on our port. The atolls normally have only one or two entrance passes with currents running up to 9 knots and so it is almost essential to time your entrance and exit near slack water. We arrived at Passe Arikitamiro (posn. 16-37'S / 143-34W) at 1500 hrs on Thursday 14th June and on entering the pass had an adverse current of about 3 knots. Just inside the pass, to starboard, is an anchorage off the village of Pouheva. However we heard on the radio of a nice anchorage about eight miles across the atoll bearing 116 degrees magnetic. Crossing the atoll in good light is not a problem, the coral heads are easily seen, however when we crossed the light was poor and a rain squall on route did not help and so we proceeded slowly arriving at the anchorage and anchoring at 1700 hrs. in posn 16-43.3S and 143-27.7W. The 498-mile passage from the Marqueses took 81 hours at an average speed of just over 6 knots with only 12 hours of motoring, which included charging batteries. Muna arrived next morning having had a bad night with deteriorating weather. We stayed five days during which time there was a lot of socialising with beach bar-b-cues among the 8 boats there. The snorkelling here was not good. On Tuesday 19th we motored back across the atoll to Pouheva village, bought a few basic provisions and searched for a source of black pearls. After an almost fruitless search we managed to buy a nice pearl for about US\$7.50 or IR£6.70. Some of the boats, that visited other atolls, were more successful in acquiring pearls.

On leaving the village we sailed 17 miles in convoy with Muna and Cap D'or, taking turns to lead through the coral heads, to a lovely anchorage in the north east corner of the atoll in position 16-30.9'S / 143-49.3W.

Sharks:

While snorkelling, which was very good, on the reef to the south we came face to face with our first sharks. They were white tipped reef sharks and reputed to be harmless unless provoked. We certainly did not make any movements that might provoke them.

Our next anchorage was inside the northern Passe Tapuhiria, (16-27.12'S / 143-58.04'W) not one we relaxed in due to the many reefs and coral heads surrounding us. The anchorage recommended in the Charlie's Chart Guide was even worse, we sailed in and immediately came out. We enjoyed walking the beach and exploring the abandoned seasonal fishing village. The highlight here was when we took the dinghy to the outside of the pass as the flood tide began and, with Malcolm and Helen from Muna, snorkelled, holding on to lines attached to the dinghy, back in through the pass. The coral, fish and especially the many sharks we swam over were truly amazing. We never though we would ever swim with sharks.

At 1200 hrs on Sat. 23rd June, after spending 15 minutes freeing our anchor, we motored out the pass, together with Muna, and set a course for the atoll of Fakarava 90 miles away. After 3 hours we were engulfed by a big squall with winds of almost 40 knots. It was easy to see the squall coming up behind us and we had put three reefs in the mainsail and rolled up the headsail. It only lasted about 30 minutes after which we reset full sail and continued wing on wing. It turned out to be a beautiful night passage with a clear star studded sky and light winds. Early next morning, 75 minutes after high water, we entered Passe Tumakohua at the southern end of Fakarava against a 4-knot current. The pass, despite the description in Charlie's Charts, is well marked and did not cause a problem. At 0845 hrs we anchored off the village of Tetamanu in posn. 16-30.36'S / 145-27.32W.

Fakarava is the second largest atoll in the group being 32-miles long and 15-miles wide. The village of Tetemanu is deserted except for a few natives who fish and work at the two small resorts there. Manahee and his partner Tilla run one resort. Their guest accommodation consists of very attractive straw huts surrounding a lovely lagoon. Malcolm and I helped Manahee roof a new hut he was building and Tilla gave us a lesson in weaving palm leaves. As usual in the anchorage we met a number of boats, that we knew, including Jim and Joe Wallace, an Australian couple, who hosted a party on their 65-foot Nordhaven motor cruiser Atlas.

Human remains on a deserted island:

We spent four very enjoyable days in this South Pacific Paradise, drift snorkelling the pass and exploring the many adjacent deserted motus (small islands). On one such deserted island we discovered three sets of bleached human remains. One wonders how they met their deaths. The drift snorkelling was the best so far, the beautiful, coral which adorned the sheer sides of the pass, the sharks and the huge Napoleon fish that we saw and the speed at which the current brought us in and pass the many fish traps made for an exciting adventure. We repeated this on a number of occasions.

A Near Disaster:

From Fakarava we sailed to another atoll, Faaite, 13 miles to the south, where our whole adventure nearly came to a disastrous end. We entered Passe Teperioha against a very strong current of about 6 knots. When we eventually broke through we tried to find a passage to the recommended anchorage. Having to turn sharply to starboard we now had the sun in our faces. Even with Olivia at the bow we failed to see the forest of large pinnacle coral heads until it was too late. We grounded on one. Never have I donned my snorkel and fins as fast. On diving under I saw that we were stuck on a coral between our rudder and skeg and I assessed that there was no serious damage, only cosmetic. There was no way we could drive Aldebaran off. Luckily we had been towing our dinghy, and we quickly put our 5hp Yamaha outboard on. A second feature in our favour was the weather conditions, a light wind and calm sea. Attaching a line to Aldebaran I managed to tow the transom clear of the coral pinnacle, then quickly re-boarded Aldebaran and with Olivia guiding from the bow and me watching our stern we eventually motored back to clearer water. During our mis-adventure Muna stood by. We explored the area some more and not being happy with our findings quickly exited the pass followed by Muna.

Once outside we both decided, i.e. Muna & ourselves, even though there was very little wind, to leave the Tuamotus and set a course for Tahiti 260 miles to the west. And so it was, that on Thursday 28th June 2001 we sailed or more correctly motored towards the Society Islands of **Tahiti, Moorea, Huahine, Raiatea, Tahaa and Bora Bora**, made famous by Captain Cook and the mutiny on the Bounty, and the film “The Sound of Music” etc.

At this moment Sat 30th June:

“After two nights at sea this morning’s dawn was a memorable sight. The sun was rising directly astern and Tahiti visible 40 miles off our port bow with Moorea directly ahead and 10 miles further. After two weeks in the low-lying atolls of the Tuamotus the massive peaks of Tahiti are a complete contrast. Our waypoint off Tahiti’s northern tip is Point Venus where in 1769 Captain Cook built a fort to observe the transit of Venus thus giving the point its name. Papeete, the capital, will be our first landfall where they are currently staging various celebrations in the build up to Bastille Day on 14th July. From what we hear things, including eating out, are very expensive in Tahiti and so we will be eating aboard a lot.”

At 1345 hrs we passed Point Venus and at 1500 hrs entered the harbour of Papeete, the capital of Tahiti. As there is a charge to anchor near the town, we headed for Maeva Beach, about four miles to the west and past the airport, where we anchored in posn. 17-34.6’S and 149-37.3W at 1630 hrs. on Saturday 30th June after 52.6 hours at sea.

Thus began, after 13,706 miles, another phase of our adventure, that we will detail in our next report.

Keep up your e-mails to, we love to get even the smallest bit of news or better still “gossip”.

**Pat and Olivia Murphy
Yacht ALDEBARAN
South Pacific**