

## **ALDEBARAN**

### **The Kingdom of Tonga (31<sup>st</sup> Report)**

**At 0700hrs on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> September we set sail from Niue, in company with STELLA a Canadian boat, and Tenacious an American boat, for the Kingdom of Tonga 250 miles to the west. This would be our last major passage before embarking on the, sometimes hazardous, 1,100 miles to New Zealand.**

**Unfortunately,** for the wrong reason, we will always remember this departure. An hour before weighing anchor we heard the dreadful news of the attack on New York and for the rest of the passage we listened, in disbelief, to the BBC World Service on our single side band radio. A number of American boats and an English boat we were in contact with had family or friends working in the area. It was not until we reached Vava'u in Tonga two days later that we were able to see replays on television. I remember exactly where I was in 1963 when President Kennedy was shot and this atrocity will have the same lasting memory.

With very light winds we motor-sailed until 1130hrs, when we set the staysail in addition to the headsail and mainsail. The wind was 8/10 knots from the north-northwest that gave us a speed of just over 4 knots. After three hours with no increase in wind strength we re-started the engine and again motor sailed at about 1500 rpm, which gave us a speed of just over 5 knots. At daybreak on the second day we sighted Vava'u, the northern group of islands in Tonga. We had sailed for just over 14 hours during the passage. During the second day in the vicinity of the Capricorn Seamount in position 18degrees 44minutes south and 172degrees 25minutes west we sailed through discoloured brown water that was obviously emanating from the mount. This whole area of the Pacific Ocean is peppered with underwater volcanic activity and all our charts have notations listing reported areas of discoloured water.

**A Day Lost:** On approaching Tonga we crossed the International Date Line and as we were travelling from East to West we lost a day. So instead of arriving on Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> we arrived on Friday 15<sup>th</sup>. Unlike a lot of boats we were aware of the date line and planned our arrival prior to the weekend to avoid paying overtime on checking in. It is forbidden to go ashore until visited by the authorities. At 0730hrs, with our customary "Q" flag flying we rafted with Stella at the customs dock in Neiafu, the capitol of Vava'u. At 0830 we were visited by a quarantine official who charged us 20 pa'anga'e about US\$10. On being asked what vegetables we had on board Olivia showed him our entire stock consisting of 2 eggs, a few carrots, onions, tomatoes and lettuce. He asked how many meals our vegetables would do and was told one or two, this seemed to satisfy him. It is strictly forbidden to take coconuts into Tonga. Olivia gave him a cabbage like vegetable that we most likely would not be cooking. We were given strict instructions not to bring any vegetables ashore. He was followed by a customs officer, after which we went to immigration & completed the formalities. The whole process took less than 2 hours and all the officials were very courteous. Other boats reported having lots of vegetables, tins of non New Zealand cooked meats, and even an apple tart taken from them.

After the formalities we toured the anchorage looking for a suitable spot to anchor as all the mooring buoys were occupied. Everywhere was very deep, we eventually found a spot not far from the wharf and anchored in 20 metres. We managed to get a mooring buoy the next day from Sailing Safaries, which cost 10 pa'anga'e per day. The local currency is the "pa'anga'e" which has an exchange rate of about 2 to the US\$

Following a rest we explored ashore and ended up at the "Mermaid" bar/restaurant for the "double happy hour" from 1630 to 1830 hours. Local beer was down from 3 to 2.50 pa'anga'e per bottle or from US\$1.50 to US\$1.25. However being "poor Yachties" we got it at the cheaper price all day.

Vava'u with its many islands can boast to have a variety of terrain. The majority of islands have high sheer cliffs resulting in deep water to cliff faces while the remaining islands provide typical tropical vegetation with beautiful beaches and anchorages.

### **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup>:**

Being religious holidays, Sundays are strictly observed. Business stops, and Tongans are not allowed swim or fish by law. To pass the day we went for a sail to No. 7 anchorage, Port Maurelle, and met MUNA, ARGONAUTA and BEACON. They had just arrived from Niue and were waiting until Monday before checking in. The 42 anchorages in the Vava'u island group are referred to by number, thanks to the Mooring charter company having a base here. Their guide and charts of the area are excellent and we highly recommend them.

**Scuba diving** rates are very reasonable in Vava'u, two dives complete with equipment hire cost US\$32. Olivia completed the PADI open water diving course with Beluga Diving, one of two excellent operations in Neiafu. Back in St Lucia in the Caribbean she was unable to complete the course due to developing an ear infection. With her this time were three friends, Joy from Fair Hypolita and Brian and Sue from Nepenta. At the same time I completed an advanced PADI diving course, the highlights of which were night, search and recovery, wreck and deep dives. During the deep dive to 35 metres (115 feet) I had to complete an IQ test consisting of addition and multiplication sums. The purpose of which was to see if the extra depth was affecting my co-ordination and brain function. An early morning dive exploring the inside of the wreck of the Clan McWilliam, a freighter that sank in the harbour in 35metres after a fire in the 1960s, with the loss of a crewmember was a nervous and eerie experience. Diving in the area is superb with great visibility, abundant fish including sharks, coral, and caves. During our time in Vava'u I had 14 dives while Olivia had about ten.

### **First IRISH boat:**

A race on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> Sept organised by the Mooring Charter Company saw us "press gang" additional crew for ALDEBARAN to man the ropes etc. Among the entries were American, British, French, German Australian and of course local boats. Some of the "press ganged" crew had never raced before and almost had a coronary when I went for pole position on the starting line. However despite an excellent start, we crossed the line second at the correct end, we were no match for the faster stripped out local charter and more "race" designed boats and so gradually we slipped down the fleet. Carrying 180 litres of diesel in spare cans on the decks did not help our speed. We eventually finished 10<sup>th</sup> and were elated to receive two prizes, one for the 10<sup>th</sup> position and one for being the first IRISH boat. Another very important point of the race, which I suppose I should tell you, is detailed at the end of this report.

### **A Tongan Feast:**

Together with 20 people we went to a Tongan feast at No 11 anchorage, Ano Beach. Locals including children wore traditional costumes adorned with garlands of frangipani flowers. They gave us a very pleasant display of traditional dancing & music. To show your approval of the dancing the tradition is to stuff one or two pa,anga'e notes, to the dancers costumes. The feast consisted of assorted local foods including, octopus, fish, chicken, bacon, a variety of local vegetables and other items, which we could not identify. All the food was served on seashells and eaten with fingers. We were not given any drink other than lots of watermelon. The musicians played throughout the meal. Afterwards we were invited to try "KAVA" the local drink made from grinding the kava plant to powder, putting it into a sack and placing it in a large water container. The sack is then squeezed just like a large tea bag. The result of which is a "DISGUSTING LOOKING" and "DISGUSTING TASTING" very "RELAXING" drink, providing of course you drink enough of it. With the exception of Malcolm, & I the others only took small sips of the potion. To say that Malcolm and I ended the evening in a very relaxed mood would not be an understatement. We were the last to leave, **enough said.**

### **A new island & navigational hazard:**

Shortly after our arrival in Tonga a major navigational hazard appeared 25 miles offshore. The radio announcement described it as being an island that had just surfaced in position 18degrees 19.5minutes South and 174 degrees and 22minutes West, measuring 2 miles long by 1 mile wide. Needless to say we all marked its position on our charts. Such is the nature of the seabed in the area that similar hazards appear and disappear periodically. I wanted to sail out and plant an Irish flag on it and claim it for our country. However, two weeks later as we were preparing to sail and claim it, the island sank back under the ocean. Next time we will act quicker.

**Whale watching** is big business in Vava'u. The surrounding waters are breeding grounds for the Hump Back whale. A number of operators offer boat trips to watch and indeed swim with the whales. Olivia went on one such trip and was enthralled by the experience. On spotting a whale and her calf and knowing the calf had to breath air about every ten minutes the skipper was able to estimate the approx. place where they were likely to surface next. Positioning the boat and having two "watchers" ready to enter the water, complete with snorkelling gear, the skipper would gave the signal and the two swimmers would gently slip into the water. With luck you could be swimming with mother and calf. Olivia was lucky and was able to swim beside the calf while the massive dark hulk of the mother majestically swam only metres below. A memorable experience was how Olivia described it.

**Hospitality and generosity** was what we experienced on anchoring with our friends Malcolm, Helen and their daughter Laura, in their 33ft Ebbtide steel boat Muna, off the very small Vava'u island of Lape. On going ashore we met the local schoolteacher and her husband who invited us for a meal that evening. With a population of 26, including 5 children, it was perhaps the poorest place we had experienced. As arranged, at 1800 hours we went ashore and were met by our hosts who led us to the village and their home.

### **An invasion fear;**

The island has no means of communication with other islands except by boat. A few days before our arrival the islanders were in fear of their lives when a large ship anchored off and disembarked people dressed in white overalls and orange jackets into smaller boats "landing craft" and circled the island. Having just heard of the terrorist attack on the United States the islanders were convinced terrorists were invading them. Not having any way of communicating their concern to neighbouring islands they endured a few hours of total fear, before the "terrorists" retreated. However we were able to dispel their fears by explaining that it was only a cruise ship that had offloaded their passengers for some sightseeing, and that their white overalls and orange jackets were if fact safety overalls with lifejackets.

**A home cooked meal:** The home we entered, measuring about 6 x 12 metres and divided between sleeping and living areas, was constructed with sheets of timber with a tin roof. An island generator gave power to one electric bulb per family for a few hours each evening. With no furniture we sat on a woven mat with the food spread out in the middle. The food consisted of local vegetables, fish and chicken, all cooked under a small lean-to in an earthen oven. With no alcohol on the island we were given ample quantities of coconut milk. Earlier in the day we saw them catch the wild chicken, it was the leanest chicken we had ever seen. Exchanging stories of each other's living and country traditions made for a very enjoyable evening.

The following morning we returned and visited the school. It had four pupils in three classes. Although poor the school was well equipped with modern schoolbooks, thanks to the generosity of a previous American yachtswoman. Being retired teachers Malcolm and Helen were intrigued with the experience. Before departing we gave presents to the pupils and our hosts.

**Mariners Cave** on the western side of Nuapapu is an underwater cave requiring good snorkelling skills, although frightening to enter it is however not too difficult for a competent swimmer. The cave entrance is located under water below coral cliffs. A few days earlier we tried without success to find its entrance, this time we had what we hoped were accurate GPS co-ordinates of 18 degrees 41.46 minutes south and 174 degrees 04.51 minutes west. To swim some distance under an underwater ledge and not locate the cave entrance could result in running out of air with perhaps serious consequences. On ALDEBARAN for this adventure were the crews of Muna, Honeybee and Nanmosol. Laura was first to locate and swim into the cave. With the exception of Olivia and Helen the rest of us followed. It is said that if you can swim under your keel and come up the far side you should be able to swim into the cave. On surfacing inside you are immediately aware of the changing pressure caused by wave surge and the fact that the cave is totally sealed to the outside. Blowing your nose helps to equalise the air pressure. A week earlier an experienced diver had to be rescued and brought to hospital after suffering problems with his ears. The swim out was much easier as you could see daylight. The return sail to our anchorage, after achieving our objective, was one of celebration.

After 5 weeks we departed Vava'u on 19<sup>th</sup> Oct., in company with Argonauta, and had a night sail to the middle island group of Ha'apai. Muna had left a few hours earlier.

**The Ha'apai group** in contrast to the Vava'u group is characterised by low palm covered sandy beaches, beautiful coral reefs, clear water and small rural groups representing varied religions. The islands are the least charted in Tonga and together with their lack of safe anchorages in adverse weather are not very popular with cruisers.

**Haano** was the first island we visited followed by **Foa** before checking in at **Pangai**, on **Lifuka**. The official checking us in was very courteous and helpful; he did his best to encourage us to extend our visit. He was very disappointed when we returned the next day to check out. While ashore Malcolm and I had, for 50p, 2.5 cups of coffee each at Mariners Café.

Being 23<sup>rd</sup> October and **Olivia's birthday** we arranged to sail 6 miles to the neighbouring small island of Uoleva where Argonauta and Cap D'or were anchored. After anchoring in position 19-51'south and 174-25'west the Muna crew came over by dinghy flying green, white, and orange balloons to begin the birthday celebrations. This was the third year in a row we celebrated her birthday together, in 1999 it was in the Canaries, and Trinidad in 2000. When the crews of Argonauta and Cap D'or arrived the party was complete. The evening concluded with Malcolm, Helen, Olivia and I having a meal ashore at a small resort, that could only catered for a maximum of ten and they already had six guests. After the meal we sat on the beach, by a roaring fire, absorbing the peace and tranquillity of this piece of paradise totally isolated from the pressures and troubles of the outside materialistic world.

**Oua Island** was our next destination. Seeing two yachts anchored behind the reef we cautiously approached the narrow "dog legged" pass, as our charts were not sufficiently detailed. This proved to be a very sheltered and scenic anchorage. On exploring the roadless island we met local children who asked us for pens and pencils. Next day we returned and presented the school with boxes of pens and pencils much to the delight of the teachers. As with the other islands the biggest and newest building was a Mormon Church complete with tennis and basketball court.

From the anchorage we were in sight and only 4 miles from the island of "TONGUA" that featured in the famed mutiny on the Bounty.

Our last island to visit in the Ha'apai group was Nomuka Iki 22 miles South. However we decided to continue with a night passage to Nukualofa, the Kingdom's capital, on the island of Tongatapu, and so at 1805 hrs., after only four hours we set sail on the 60-mile passage.

Nukualofa would be our departure port from the Kingdom of Tonga on route to New Zealand, the half way mark of our circumnavigation. We are more anxious about this passage to New Zealand than we have been for any previous passages.

**Keep this quiet:**

The race described above is a weekly fun event and had only ten entries, with Aldebaran being the only Irish boat. So in truth, we finished last Irish boat in addition to being last in the race., but we enjoyed ourselves, which was the purpose of the outing.

**Our next report, our 32<sup>nd</sup>, will take us from the Kingdom of Tonga to New Zealand via the infamous North Minerva Reef from where we have an unusual story of being involved with a lost fishing boat. We will also describe how we had to heave-to in heavy weather and how our wind steering system came into it's own.**

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

**Pat and Olivia  
Yacht ALDEBARAN  
South Pacific**