

**ALDEBARAN**  
**32<sup>nd</sup> Report**

**TONGA to NEW ZEALAND**

From Nomuka Iki, in the Ha'apai group of islands in Tonga, we had a lovely night sail under an almost full moon to the northern narrow approach to Nuka Alofa (21-08'south / 175-11'west) on Tongatapu. The approach is over 20 miles long where a detailed chart and radar are necessary in poor visibility. Arriving early in the morning, after slowing down, we tied "stern to" to the rough breakwater in the harbour. The manoeuvre involved, after taking wind direction into account, dropping our bow anchor in mid harbour and, with port and starboard stern lines at the ready, reversing close enough to the rough boulder breakwater and casting the lines ashore to helping hands. We completed the manoeuvre textbook style, unlike many other boats.

Cruising Tonga necessitates checking in and out of each of the three island groups. Checking in at Nuka Alofa requires reporting to the Customs and Port Authority both of which are adjacent to the harbour. When checking out of the Kingdom an additional visit to emigration is required. The Emigration Office is situated in town, a twenty-minute walk or a 3 pa'angas (US\$1.50) taxi ride. Up to seven people can hire the taxi for the 3 pa'angas. Directly opposite the immigration office is the best cake shop we had come across in many months and I treated myself to a large cream doughnut, it was delicious. Another place worth visiting was the Bill Fish bar and restaurant opposite the harbour entrance where draught beer is available at 2 pa'angas a glass.

The four days in Nuka Alofa were spent victualing with provisions and completing many small jobs on the boat in preparation for the 1,100-mile passage to New Zealand. An example of the jobs involved were; fitting a new vhf radio antenna, making new brushes for the wind generator, servicing winches, replacing two mainsail luff slides, sewing foot of headsail, tightening engine belt, fixing 240 volt inverter, changing oil and fuel filters and of course the oil, shortening the anchor chain by two links where they had shown signs of wear where connected to the anchor, cleaning the hull and propeller and finally sorting the charts required for the New Zealand coastline we might encounter.

Daytime energy, during these crucial days, was not helped by a mosquito that caused us two sleepless nights until on the third night Olivia was able to send it to wherever mosquito go after departing this life.

**New Zealand here we come:**

At 0820 hours on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2001 we departed Nuka Alofa, sailing past the majestic red and white King's palace, and began the passage to New Zealand. As mentioned in our last report this is the second of two passages we feared most between Ireland and New Zealand, the first being the Bay of Biscay that we negotiated without a serious problem. Exiting through the Egaria channel and sailing between the notorious Duff Reef and the mainland we set a course for North Minerva Reef 280 miles to the southwest. The 55 hour sail to Minerva was in ideal conditions during which at various times we sailed "wing on wing", that is with the mainsail set on one side and the headsail poled out on the opposite side, or with the spinnaker set.

### **Semi-circumnavigators:**

At 1900 hrs on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> November on crossing longitude 177 degrees 22.8 minutes west we completed 180 degrees of longitude since sailing Aldebaran from Majorca, where we had bought her in July 1998, and thus we became semi-circumnavigators.

### **A big mistake:**

One of our golden rules we have is not to leave the spinnaker up overnight for fear the wind might increase necessitating having to go on deck in the dark to take it down. We try to avoid working on deck for fear of one of us falling overboard during the hours of darkness. Friday evening, with a beautiful red unobstructed sunset and a warm 10/15 knot breeze, produced the sailing conditions you dream about and so;

#### **“WE LEFT THE SPINNAKER UP”.**

As the sun rose the following morning the wind quickly increased to 20/25 knots and somehow we managed to get the spinnaker very badly wrapped round the forestay. Being unable to free it from the deck I was left with no alternative but to climb to the top of our 50ft. mast and try freeing it. With the mainsail full out, we set Aldebaran on a downwind course sailing slightly to leeward to give protection to the wrapped spinnaker. Using a bosuns chair and taking a safety harness with me I climbed the mast while Olivia took up the slack on the safety halyard. The seas at this stage were building and every foot I ascended the swaying of the mast seemed to quadruple. On reaching the top, the swaying had me out over the ocean on both sides of the boat. Securing myself with the safety harness and using both hands I eventually, after fifteen minutes, succeeded in freeing the spinnaker. If you would like to experience the feeling of “rubbery legs” try the above exercise and on your return to the deck your legs will definitely feel like rubber.

### **Minerva Reef:**

For many years prior to embarking on this adventure I tried to visualise exactly what this renowned refuge and hazard located in the middle of the ocean would be like. Most of the books and guides covering this part of the Pacific include historical records of how the many, known, ships and yachts ended their nautical career on this reef.

Six hours after the problem with the spinnaker we anchored in North Minerva Reef, (23-37’ south and 178-55’ west), a saucer shaped circle of coral in one of the remotest parts of the Pacific Ocean and almost 300 miles from the nearest terra firma. The narrow entrance pass is only negotiable in fair weather, and accurate co-ordinates are essential, the reef, which is about 3 miles in diameter, only shows at low water. Inside the reef the water depth ranges from about four to twenty metres while outside to the east lies the Tonga Trench, an enormous marine canyon over 1,000 metres deep. On our arrival there were three yachts anchored in the reef and six days later when we departed the fleet had grown to twenty four, all waiting for a reasonable weather window before embarking on the onward unpredictable passage to New Zealand.

Our time in Minerva was spent swimming, snorkelling and of course socialising. It was during one of our snorkelling expeditions while exploring under a coral shelf that I came face to face with a very large **shark**. Not recognising him as one of the more common type reef shark I made a quick departure from the area back to the dinghy. Thus ended that day’s snorkelling.

**A tragedy averted:** During our stay at the reef, a fellow cruising yacht escorted a 30ft motor launch into the reef after the crew lost their way. The Tongan skipper, Ken Sundin, had just bought the launch for US\$2,500 in Fiji and was bringing it back to Tonga, a distance of 500 miles with two Fijian crew, Mosses and Mervin. They had no radio or charts and only a hand held GPS whose batteries had run out. Being low on fuel and food and with contaminated drinking water, had they not crossed paths with the yacht it is believed all would have perished. All the yachts in the anchorage donated food, water, navigation equipment, charts, batteries, and a VHF radio in addition to tuning their engine and giving basic navigation lessons. They had no idea how to navigate. Not being able to spare them the 200 gallons of diesel required to get back to Tonga we arranged for the Tongan Navy to bring them the necessary fuel. They charged the Skipper over US\$5000, twice the purchase cost of the boat, for the rescue. I hope he was charged with an appropriate maritime crime for endangering the lives of his crew.

**New Zealand here we come:**

On getting a reasonable forecast we began the last 800 nautical miles (920 land miles) to New Zealand. After 2 days we were advised, by Des of Russel Radio, to slow down to allow a bad weather front to cross ahead of us. The next 24 hours were spent drifting on a mirror like sea with all sails stowed. It was so tranquil you could not imagine the contrast that lay ahead.

**Hove to:** When a light easterly breeze set in we re-hoisted our sails and continued south towards our destination. However 24 hours later the weather deteriorated with increasing wind and seas. After some ten hours when the wind rose to 35/40 plus knots and the seas rose to 12/18 ft we “hove to” for 8 hours. This was the first time we had to “hove to” in ALDEBARAN and we were very pleased with the way she behaved.

Although this was the worst weather we had encountered since leaving home, other than being uncomfortable, we were not at any time concerned about our safety as we had great confidence in our boat. Food during this time consisted of biscuits, chocolate and soup.

**Rest,** if you could call it rest, had us lying on the floor wedged between the saloon table and seat, complete with our heavy weather attire, lifejacket and our “grab bag” at the ready in the event of having to abandon the boat. Our “grab bag” is a waterproof canister containing; passports, boat papers, flares, handheld VHF radio, fresh water, an emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB), GPS, first aid kit, basic fishing equipment, a torch and batteries etc.

With staysail set and 3 reefs in the mainsail we endured a further 18 hours before conditions improved. Going on deck during this time was kept to a minimum for fear of being washed overboard even though we always used safety lines. We know how ALDEBARAN reacts when “hove to” but do not know how she would recover from a 180degree knockdown. I am glad to say we still do not know and indeed hope we will never find out.

We cannot praise our WINDPILOT wind steering system sufficiently; it performed flawlessly throughout the heavy weather.

The remainder of the passage to New Zealand was uneventful with us having to motor the last 25 miles in a flat calm.

**We were a happy couple** that tied up at the Tauranga Bridge Marina (37-40’south / 176-11’west) in New Zealand, 16 days after leaving Tonga, and two and a half years and 16,876 miles since leaving home. On the dock to meet us were the Authorities. Having obtained all the necessary documentation in Tonga and having them duly completed, except for the section on alcohol, the check in procedure was completed in 15 minutes. It was the easiest and most convenient entry we had experienced in our travels to date.

**Alcoholic fears unfounded:**

The alcohol allowance on entering New Zealand is 1125ml of spirits and 4.5 litres of wine. What we had on board **greatly** exceed this, the result of duty free bulk buying in Panama. I did not want to complete the custom form giving incorrect information for fear of being searched and thus landing in deep trouble. On the other hand I was afraid to enter the correct amount for fear of confiscation. On examining the form, the custom man noticed the blank spaces, after explaining our dilemma he said, “just put down what you have”, which I did. He then signed the form and we were in New Zealand. Finally, there is no way we are going to tell you the alcohol figures we put down for fear of you getting the “wrong” impression!!!!!!!

In addition to being welcomed by the authorities and marina staff we were welcomed by Fred & Renne from the other ALDEBARAN with their crew John, they arrived a few hours ahead of us, also Matt & Debbie from Aeventyr and Seamus & Terri the Irish couple we met in Tonga. They brought a bottle of champagne, beers, food and tit bits after which we went to town and had a huge meal.

***WE DID IT; WE HAVE SAILED FROM iRELAND TO NEW ZEALAND.  
SHOULD WE BE PROUD OF OUR ACHIEVEMENT?  
OF COURSE WE SHOULD BE, AND WE ARE.***

Finally, our plans are to remain here in Tauranga, located in the Bay of Plenty, a 2.5-hour drive south of Auckland, until after the “Around Alone Race” completes it's stopover here in February 2003. We will then sail north to the Bay of Islands, exploring the many renowned beautiful anchorages on route, including Auckland where we might see some of the Americas Cup.

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

**Pat and Olivia  
Yacht ALDEBARAN  
New Zealand**

**p.s. If you have difficulty in contacting us you could ring our home;  
at Dublin 01-8322312, Int 353-1-8322312 or e-mail [dinghy@indigo.ie](mailto:dinghy@indigo.ie)**