

ALDEBARAN'S

Sailing Circumnavigation

Report 41

VANUATU 2003 (part 4)

(Including the 1,050 miles passage to Australia)

(Exchange rate; one Euro = 124 vatu)

On Monday 29th September we departed Gaua and thus the Banks Islands and began the 49 mile passage to Port Orly on the main island of Espiritu Santo. On passage a good size mackerel succumbed to our lure and was successfully landed providing us with two lovely meals.

Anchoring off the small uninhabited Thion Island, (position 15°-02 south and 167°-05 east), we visited the nearby uninteresting French speaking village of Port Orly. Thion Island has two freshwater lakes; we would only recommend the larger one towards the centre for swimming. Here we also washed our bed cloths, hanging them on lines we tied between the trees.

A few miles south of Thion Island is Vanuatu's most famous beach, Champagne Beach. Unfortunately it has become commercialised with the locals charging for landing. Large cruise ships anchor off and disgorge it's hundreds of passengers onto the beach every few weeks. Another disadvantage with the beach is that the anchorage is often very roly. For these reasons we remained at Thion Island and had four very relaxing days there.

Million Dollar Point and The President Coolidge:

At 0650 hours on Friday 3rd October we weighed anchor and at 1425 hours, after motor sailing for most of the 40 miles, anchored in 10 metres off the Beach Front Resort at Luganville. The approach to Luganville is through the Segond Channel. This area of Vanuatu was a hive of activity with allied forces during the Second World War. Among the now historic sites are Million Dollar Point and the wreck of the troop carrying ship President Coolidge.

During the war the entrance to the channel, where the Americans had a massive fleet, was mined to prevent Japanese submarines and war ships from entering. Fully loaded with 5,000 troops, ammunition, trucks, jeeps and guns etc. the President Coolidge hit a "friendly" mine and began shipping water. The Captain altered course to starboard and ran the ship ashore in an attempt to save her. Photographs of the incident show the ship's bow high and dry on the reef and the troops abandoning her by way of scrambling nets, ladders and ropes. It is reported that they were told not to collect their personal gear as they could return later for it. Most of the troops were able to wade ashore through the shallow water of the reef as can be seen in the photographs. An engineer was killed when they hit the mine and an army captain who returned inside the ship to help some of his men was trapped when the ship slid backwards off the reef into deep water. It was a miracle that only two lives were lost. The ship now lies on her port side with the bow under 25 metres and the stern at 70 metres. It is now the world's largest most accessible wreck and attracts thousands of divers from all over the world each year. As the saying goes "It is an ill wind that does not bring some good". I plan to dive on her before leaving Vanuatu in a few weeks.

About a kilometre east of the wreck is the infamous Million Dollar Point. At the end of the war and not wanting to transport all their hardware back to the States the Americans offered to sell the items, valued then at about one million dollars, to the then rulers of Vanuatu, the French and the British. It is reported that the price the French and the British offered was only a few cents in the dollar. The offer was based on the belief that they would not ship the goods back to the States and would therefore just leave it behind. The reasoning was indeed correct, they did not ship it back but what

they did was unforeseen. "UP YOURS" the yanks must have said, because they built a large ramp from the shore extending into deep water and drove and shoved everything over. While the ramp is no longer visible, the site is easily recognisable, especially at low water when some of the items can be seen. On our way back out the channel on route to Ambae Island on Sunday 5th October in company with Thomas, Jill and Brian on the American yacht 'Charlotte' it being a beautiful morning with no wind and the normally rough sea looking like a mill pond we anchored off the point. Not wanting to get our anchor entangled in the wreckage Olivia put on her snorkelling gear and guided me to a clear area over sand. Jill and Brian did the same for Charlotte.

It was low water and we had a magnificent snorkel over a variety of hardware and vehicles. Clearly visible were jeeps, forklifts, trucks, engines, and caterpillars etc. I tell the story of how two of the jeeps still had their headlights on which proved they worked through the night, pretty good batteries after sixty years. I have the brand name if anybody wants it.

Ambae Island:

Fifty miles to the east of Luganville is Ambae Island with the anchorage at Lolowai being one of the most interesting anchorages we have ever entered. You must come over a volcano crater, which encloses the anchorage. You have to line up two markers on the hillside to get the necessary course over the crater. The pass is very shallow and narrow, we had less than a metre under our keel crossing the crater. It is imperative you do not deviate from the course until the eight metre depth is reached when you must then turn to port to reach the anchorage (position 15°-16.9 south and 167°-58.8 east). The guides emphasize that there is very little room for error. Once inside the holding is excellent in eight to ten metres.

In addition to wanting to experience this unusual anchorage we came to attend another festival. The difference between this festival and the one we attended at Waterfall Bay was that this one was not organised with visitors in mind but rather it was to show and explain local customs especially to their youth in the hope of maintaining traditions.

Together with other yachties we attended the opening and closing days of the three day festival. With electricity, roads albeit it bad ones, and transport on most of the island living is somewhat better than in the remote Banks Islands. The dancing and traditions performed were totally different than what we had seen at Waterfall Bay. We were able to buy refreshments like coconuts, sweet grapefruit, bananas, and fresh water prawns. For a lunch of rich with some kind of meat in it and all wrapped in a large leaf we paid 35 vatu, about €0.20

During our stay in the anchorage the local clinic was broken into and a computer stolen. We heard that some of the locals were pointing their finger at the yachties. This caused us great concern and so a deputation, including your truly, met the clinic director and we succeeded in proving it could not have been a yachtie. We never heard if the theft was ever resolved.

Asanvari on Maewo:

Weighing anchor on Friday 10th October we very carefully steered a reciprocal course to the one we entered the crater on and emerged unscathed to set a course for Asanvari on the nearby Island of Maewo. Motoring the 12 miles into headwinds we took the opportunity to make over a hundred litres of fresh water. Our water maker has been a great buy, it can produce over 40 litres of fresh water per hour and so we do not have to skimp on washing or showering.

Anchoring of the beautiful and colourful village of Asanvari in crystal clear water with it's two tier waterfall off your bow ranks without doubt among the top most attractive in Vanuatu.

Chief Nelson and his family run the "Asanvari Yacht Club" and extend a warm welcome to all visiting yachts. He and his son Nixon speak perfect English. Nixon worked as a chef on a small cruise ship for a time and on returning began providing meals at the "Club" for yachties. His speciality is coconut crab served with rice local vegetables and dressed with a lovely papaya sauce.

Pre-dinner drinks of kava are all included for the 1,000 vatu (about €7.50) charge as is the string band. Their string band is the best in the area and win many of the local and national competitions.

The 1,000 vatu charge is very reasonable so long as you do not put a value on the rice, salt, petrol for

their generator and other such ingredients that he always seems to be short off and requesting donations prior to cooking the dinner.

The kava making here was accomplished using a coral stone to grind the kava roots, at the festival in Waterfall Bay they used a meat mincer, neither method looked hygienic, but take it from me the end result of looking and tasting like dishwater were the same. Very few westerners like the kava; it is a drug, but the minority of us that do find it very relaxing especially after the lips go numb. I have had a good number of extended sessions drinking up to eight shells, half a coconut shell is the unit of measurement, and everybody drinks from the same shell. Olivia claims it relaxes me like no other known substance, vegetable, mineral or human. You do not wake up with a hangover the next morning, however, after a good session the 'state of relaxation' can last the whole next day. Try it some time but not just a sip, that's a waste of good kava, I know it tastes like dishwater as I have already said, but persevere to about three shells and see, I mean feel, the effect, it's other people that will see how it effects you.

Excruciating Pain:

A visit to the waterfall resulted in me experiencing the most excruciating pain I have ever experienced. Foolishly I entered the water in my bare feet, (like I always do) and stood on something. I remember feeling a prick on the sole of my foot but passed no remarks of it. About thirty minutes later when we returned to the boat I began feeling pain in my foot, it felt like a bad sting. Within minutes it became unbearable. While crying with pain, Olivia examined my foot and observed a small sting like puncture. Part of our medical kit includes a very effective pump device for removing stings. We tried this numerous times without success. By this time I was in very bad pain and it seemed to be travelling up my leg. Over the VHF radio we sought advice from another yacht who suggested it could be a sting from a stone fish and that they sometimes prove fatal. This news, of course, was not what we, more so I wanted to hear. We had already been told such dangerous fish were in the bay but assumed they did not enter fresh water. Whether it was this news or the natural development of the sting I am not sure but I really felt my Round the World adventure was going to end in this remote place. Delving into our medical books we applied every lotion and concoction suggested including putting the foot in very hot water. Admittedly it was a hot evening but this in no way accounted for the sweat that was pouring from my body. After about an hour, whether it was the result of one of the lotions applied, the hot water or the stings natural course we will never know but the pain began to ease. Thirty minutes later it was almost gone and my earlier premonition of death was fading in unison. I would never wish such a painful experience on anybody. To this day we are not sure what I stood on other than knowing it was not a stone fish.

The Port-2-Port Rally to Australia:

At 0500 hours on Monday 13th October we departed Asanvari on the return sixty mile passage to the Beach Front Resort at Luganville. With us were three of the locals, Nixon the chef, Columbus the baker and Chief Richard together with a consignment of taro and a large empty gas bottle. In a few weeks time Asanvari was due to host a sports festival and with supplies low they were delight to get the opportunity of visiting Luganville to replenish stocks. Columbus, the baker, had completely run out of flour. With their supplies they would return on one of the inter island trading coasters that would take two days to reach their village. The sail across was a pleasant one and catching another nice mackerel on route added to the enjoyment. Before leaving us they posed for a photograph while displaying the new Cruising Association of Ireland's burgee.

For the past few years a rally called "The Port-2-Port Rally" has been organised between Port Vila in Vanuatu and the Port of Bundaberg in Australia a distance of almost 1,100 miles. We had no intentions of partaking in it until a few of our friends said they had entered. I asked them how much it cost to enter, and when they said it was FREE we said "*we are in*". Entrants had the option of starting from Port Vila or Luganville in Vanuatu or New Noumea in New Caledonia.

On Monday 20th October at 1100 hours the briefing for the Luganville starters took place at the Beach Front Resort with the organisers providing a delicious selection of finger food free of charge. Of the 26 starters in the rally 16 including ALDEBARAN started from Luganville. Having cleared

out of Vanuatu with customs and immigration a few days earlier, the intervening days were spent provisioning for the estimated eight day passage. With our customs clearance papers we were able to purchase duty free fuel, the oil company transported the fuel to a nearby beach in 40 gallon drums and hand pumped it into our containers that we brought ashore in our dinghies. We only required one hundred litres to fill our tanks. Our two tanks hold 350 litres and we normally carry 120 litres in containers on deck.

Two hours after the briefing we weighed anchor and set a course for Australia 1,050 miles towards the setting sun. After 10 miles we cleared the western exit of the Second Channel with our next waypoint North of Chesterfield Reef 533 miles away on a course of 249 degrees true. With light south easterly winds we only recorded 112 miles for the first 24 hours, this was followed by even less for the next 24 hours, 102 miles. On day three we recorded 134 miles, day four 151, day five 141, day six 135, day seven 140 and the final 134 miles on day eight. Due to very light winds throughout the passage we motor sailed for almost 50% of the 7 days and 21.5 hours it took us but only used 162 litres of fuel or about 1.7 litres per hour while motor sailing. Fishing statistics were, one fish landed and three lures lost.

AUSTRALIA was sighted twelve miles off at 0745 hours local time on Tuesday 28th October 2003 and at 1030 hours we berthed at the Quarantine Dock at the Bundaberg Port Marina. Two days earlier we were buzzed by an Australian Customs plane who requested our details. In completing the rally entry form we had to supply, in addition to the usual information, our passport details. An essential requirement for a yacht approaching Australia is that they must notify, no later than 48 hours, the authorities informing them of which port of entry they will land at and their estimated time of arrival. For rally entrants this formality was performed by the rally organisers. The reception the rally entrants received from all the authorities, Quarantine, Immigration and Customs was exceptional; they even gave us presents as did the organisers. The next seven days had us enjoy free meals, tours and fun events. In summary; a very enjoyable rally, and for free, including two free nights in the marina.

WELCOME TO AUSTRALIA.

PREVIEW:

In our next report, our 42nd, read how we spent six months in Australia where we bought a campervan, toured a small portion of this massive country and of the magnificent private dock where we had Aldebaran moored and much more.

Pat and Olivia Murphy, s/y ALDEBARAN in Australia

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