

By Jeanne Harrison

From French Polynesia to Australia



Colin at Rangiroa Pass

As soon as we were able to repair our anchor winch control unit, we were ready to hoist anchor and depart the beautiful but roly anchorage in Nuku Hiva, Marquesas. That was on 1 July 2020. After a brief stop at nearby Ua Pou we sailed westward to Rangiroa in the northern Tuamotus. On arrival we found friends on the yacht *Clío* who had already scouted out shops and restaurants near the anchorage.

Six quiet days on the hook in clear turquoise waters, coupled with Happy Hours, dinners ashore and just a bit of pearl shopping, made for a delightful interlude at Rangiroa on our way to Tahiti. However, the local tourist-oriented economy was suffering as all the over-the-water holiday bungalows sat vacant.

By 15 July we were squeezing *Dakota* into the last available marina space at the downtown Papeete Marina. COVID-19 had put a halt to charter activity as international flights to Tahiti had been suspended, resulting in large, unattended catamarans

filling every available spot on the pontoons and wharf, except one tiny berth just big enough for our 40 ft monohull.

The nearby Carrefour supermarket provided sensory overload for shopaholics who had not seen a proper grocery store since March in Bonaire. But the main draw card in Papeete was the haul out facility at Technimarine, where *Dakota* received much-needed attention including fresh antifouling and a few new toilet outlet valves. Our previous haul out had been in Denmark in May 2019, with a lot of sea miles under the keel since then. This yard visit was in

preparation for the next 3,500 nm non-stop passage to Bundaberg, Queensland.

While we were doing boat maintenance, French Polynesia opened its airport to flights from North America and Europe. We could see that their 64 person coronavirus case figure was about to change. Polynesian-designed masks became fashion accessories. Masks plus hand sanitizing were soon made compulsory before entering most shops in Tahiti as overseas tourists began arriving.

Meanwhile COVID-19 in Panama had exploded to 23,000 cases. We were justifiably anxious to stay ahead of the virus tsunami. By the time we reached Australia, Panama reported almost 100,000 cases and French Polynesia saw cases closing in on 1,000.

[Jeanne later reported that Panama had more than 130,000 cases at the end of October, and French Polynesia's cases had risen from 1,000 in early September to more than 7,000 at the end of October - probably as a result of allowing flights from USA and France.]

Before leaving Tahiti we filed a Quarantine Exemption Request online with Queensland Health. Yet 40 days later no action had been taken on the application. Consequently, upon arrival on 10 September after 34 days of isolation at sea, we were escorted by the police firstly to COVID-19 testing then to hotel quarantine at the Sugar Country Motor Inn, Bundaberg. We were guarded 24/7 by armed police who were ever so polite but could neither explain nor challenge our quarantine. Other overseas yacht arrivals were released from quarantine after a negative COVID-19 result usually after two days. Some were quarantined on their yachts for those two days. We were required to prepay all marina fees for the full 14 day quarantine period.

Daily we added supporting information to our Queensland Health online Exemption Request,



Fashion mask

including negative COVID-19 results, a photo of *Dakota* from Marine Traffic with our Tahiti departure date and Bundaberg arrival data, a photo of Papeete clearance papers and photos of passport stamps. Nothing elicited a response until ten days of quarantine elapsed and we had unnecessarily been taxied to a second COVID-19 test (not surprisingly negative again).

Finally, with apologies for the ten day delay, we were told that our request for exemption from 14 days quarantine was granted. Fortunately, upon receiving this notification, friends promptly plucked us from unjustified detention at a user-paid expense of \$3,700 for 14 days for two people. We have not yet been billed, but there is a Queensland Health online Exemption Request Form for that as well.

It had taken five days to get a corkscrew while in quarantine, but once released we could raise a glass with the yachting community and our numerous local friends using our own proper corkscrew and glasses.

A few weeks of yacht maintenance kept us busy in between Friday night cruisers barbecues, Tuesday afternoon Petanque games, AFL game parties and the full-on Australian cruisers social life.

Breakages on the high seas had included one toilet seat plus a severed gimbal bracket on the stove. Whilst underway Colin temporarily resolved the stove dislodgement by blocking it up with a thick board, then locking it back into place. I carefully cooked on the non-gimballed stove top, using the fiddles, for seven days. We also lost our masthead TV antenna and chaffed through our No 2 reefing line.

Normal cleaning, varnishing and engine maintenance were required once we were



Food shopping in Tahiti

settled back aboard *Dakota* in Bundaberg. We were able to get sail repairs done and the V-berth mattresses re-covered locally, while our faulty chart plotter was replaced by Raymarine in Sydney.

On the way to Australia we had only three glimpses of terra firma: Moorea (which was visible from Tahiti on most days); Raiatea on day two; and remote Niuafou’ou, Tonga. Ironically Niuafou’ou Island was a location which I had long been curious about. Lacking ports or landing places, this inaccessible volcanic island has been known historically by philatelists for Tin Can Mail or Canoe Mail, which were letters taken by canoes to passing ships usually destined for the USA or England for missionaries. Within my sailing themed stamp collection, I have several of these collectable covers.

Fiji had opened two marinas near Nadi for inbound clearance, but the fees, Covid testing and paperwork discouraged us from stopping there. No other countries had any open ports for private yachts, and anchoring anywhere, including reef areas, was forbidden.

We passed north of Fiji, then south of Efate Island, Vanuatu. Nearing Grand Pass, northwest of the main island of New Caledonia, the following southeast swells reached Southern Ocean proportions. We were relieved to get into the lee of the reef once we entered the Pass, but had heart-stopping moments as the 5-6 metre seas were rolling under *Dakota*.

The sea state had been rough at least once every week during our 34-day passage. We hove-to several times to let conditions settle. Of our six Western Pacific crossings, this was definitely the worst. It was a psychological help to have weather

information texts sent to us on the satellite phone by our son. At least we could prepare ourselves for the next onslaught of strong winds.

The Breaksea Spit flashing light was a most pleasing welcome to Australian waters. Once in the lee of unseen Fraser Island, our only worry was hitting a whale in Hervey Bay during the night. Fortunately all went well and we entered the channel to Bundaberg in the early morning light.

Now we will have to see what border controls allow our movements to be. We had planned to go to New Zealand or Tasmania or home to South Australia. But perhaps this just wasn’t meant to be the year for those sailing destinations. The year 2020 will definitely be remembered by most of the world, including yours truly, as extremely challenging.



Tight parking at Tahiti



Haul out at Technimarine



Arrival at Bundaberg