

By Jeanne and Colin Harrison

ON 23 April 2020 Dakota successfully transited the Panama Canal in only one day (0500-1730). In addition to this one-day transit, special concessions were granted by the Canal Commission due to COVID-19. The major change was that we were permitted to transit with only four line handlers for our raft of three yachts rather than the normally required four per yacht. Our raft included *Happy Hour 2*, a 58’ catamaran in the centre and *Risky Business*, a 45’ Australian Adam’s sloop on the far side. Colin and one of the catamaran’s crew handled our lines with Jeanne at the helm. In addition, we had a Panamanian Advisor on board. Social distancing was easily maintained with only the four of us on *Dakota*.

Not wanting to have human contact on the Panama City side of the Canal, as virus cases were accelerating there, we were permitted to clear out of Panama from Colon (Atlantic side) and did not stop for fuel or water in Balboa (Pacific side). After a day of rest at anchor just off the Pacific channel we raised anchor by hand, as the anchor winch had failed when we dropped anchor initially. Due to lack of wind, we motored about 28 nm to Isla Viveros, Las Perlas to await favourable wind as Colin tried to sort out the winch issues, plus the toilet blockage caused when our Canal Advisor tried to pump paper through the system. We also wanted a few days of isolation to assure that we had no virus symptoms.

The wind forecast was good for Tuesday, 28 April so we started our 4,000 nm journey to Nuku Hiva, Marquesas, French Polynesia. We didn’t get far on Day 1 before hearing a distress call from a US registered yacht inbound from Nicaragua which was out of fuel and water. We burned four hours’ worth of diesel to reach them after dark to take them 5 litres of our precious water plus some milk and juice. We had a bit of trepidation as their dinghy approached us in the pitch dark to receive the liquids, but all went well and they seemed appreciative.



Jeanne at the helm in the Panama Canal

Panama to Polynesia



Line handling in the Panama Canal

A few days later one of the bungs used on our toilet repair popped out. Before we realized that the bilge was flooding, we had salt water in all of the starboard lower food lockers. Fortunately most of the food tins were in large plastic bins, but those that were not had to be washed with fresh water, plus the lockers needed a clean up. Luckily good Karma brought a windless tropical downpour a few days later, meaning that we could top up our water tanks, jerry cans and buckets. But rain meant closing hatches which was not pleasant in the unvarying 30° temperatures.

Then we sailed onward into a void. For many days our forward progress was only derived from the south-setting current. For six days we sailed less than 50 nm towards our destination each day. Much of the time we hand-steered as the wind was too light for the autopilot. During this time Jeanne injured her right hand when a bucket lanyard wrapped around her fingers when the bucket overfilled as she was hauling in sea water for washing.

Unable to easily lay a course east of Galapagos we were sailing south-west towards the islands, about 80 nm from land and just preparing dinner, when we were radioed by a ‘warship’ announcing its presence and calling for our passport details. It was actually the Offshore Patrol Vessel *Isla San Cristobal* of the Ecuador Coast Guard, and the word ‘warship’ was very intimidating. A high speed dinghy approached with seven armed marines and five of these men boarded *Dakota*. Over the next two hours they proceeded to lift every floorboard, rummage through every cupboard, scrutinise and photograph our track on the chart plotter, photograph the inside of our satellite phone and even open random food and drink cans to verify contents. They virtually touched every surface, leaving a mess behind, and causing us great concern over possible coronavirus contamination.

We were then ordered to sail either 180° (dead into the wind) or 270° (straight into another wind void north of the Galapagos). We chose the latter. Subsequently we learned from the Australian Honorary Consul to Panama that we had inadvertently sailed into a ‘major international drug operation’, which probably explained the celebrations on the warship which we mistook for inappropriate partying as they sat abeam of us. Our five marines looked terribly distressed to have been assigned to Nana and Popsy’s yacht while others were apparently having a successful bust elsewhere.



For six days we sailed less than 50 nm towards our destination



Ecuador Coastguard board *Dakota*

From there onwards it was a challenge of light winds versus diesel/petrol consumption to keep batteries charged for the refrigerator and autopilot. As Colin meticulously monitored daily fuel usage, we saw whales frolicking, dolphins jumping, flying fish scurrying, and birds trying to hitchhike. A booby damaged our masthead wind instruments when trying to perch there. One night as we struggled to lay our course, a tanker sat stationary, dead on our course, forcing us to gybe in the middle of the night. Another night our AIS picked up a large fishing boat and its accompanying helicopter. We maintained a 24 hour watch of 3 hours on, then 3 hours off, but west of the Galapagos we saw only three vessels for nearly 3,000 nm.

Our son Craig was a huge help with wind forecasts, providing occasional optimism but mainly emotional support. Our daughter Caron Anne tried to get information from Nuku Hiva Yacht Services but, as we expected, the biosecurity regulations were changing constantly. When we left Panama, the only port open in French Polynesia was Papeete, Tahiti. Fortunately, *Risky Business*, one of our partners through the Canal, arrived in Nuku Hiva, Marquesas, French Polynesia before us and sent helpful information and encouragement via the satellite phone.

A full moon as we neared Nuku Hiva was most welcome. Our pleasant, but long and frustrating 44-day passage from Las Perlas significantly exceeded our similar 30-day passage on *Manali* in 2016. But we never ran out of Diet Coke or chocolate! Hearty dinners included French Duck Cassoulets, Dutch Ragouts, Danish Seafood Gumbo, Spanish Octopus Stew, Pasta Carbonara, American Chilli Con Carne and British Sweet & Sour Chicken – the best of tinned food available in countries previously visited.

Our book inventory held up to ravenous reading of historical fiction and non-fiction, murder mysteries, detective novels,



Nothing found on board

social history, cruising guides and even a Rumpole Omnibus. The book exchanges in Grenada and Panama provided many titles and subjects we might otherwise not have chosen, but added to the interesting variety of reading options.

Diesel remaining aboard on the last day into Nuku Hiva was about 5 litres as we threaded our way gently through the anchorage to find a shallow spot to drop the anchor by hand. Thank goodness for the battery charging from the portable generator and the petrol we bought in Bonaire, as no petrol had been available at Shelter Bay, Panama. A big roll during a squall the night before arrival in Nuku Hiva caused the genset to choke off with its fuel finally depleted. Petrol remaining in the jerry cans was just enough to get us ashore in the dinghy.

We had much to look forward to in Nuku Hiva, especially an uninterrupted whole night of sleep. Our quarantine period turned out to be only one day as our sea time was taken into consideration. Not knowing how long we would be in quarantine, friends on *Risky Business* brought us two huge bags of gorgeous fresh

fruits and vegetables upon arrival. Then the Sea Rose crew brought us diesel and petrol. We had last seen them at a yachties dinner party in Bamaga near Cape York in 2004, so this was a very pleasant reunion.

It is amazing to think that one year ago we were in Denmark. Now we are half of the way from Panama to Australia. Just to be back in the South Pacific is a joy. French Polynesia has contained their COVID-19 count to a mere 60 cases. Meanwhile cases in Panama exceeded 25,000 by 23 June and 43,000 by 11 July. To the west there are presently no countries open to incoming Australian yachts due to COVID-19 restrictions, except for Australia. However, we are free to cruise in French Polynesia.

Our ‘To Do’ list is still quite long, but several items have already been moved to the ‘To Do In Tahiti’ list where we have arranged a haul out for *Dakota* in Papeete next month. Perhaps this will give other South Pacific nations time to open their ports to cruising yachts. Meanwhile Papeete, Tahiti will put us within 3,300 nm of Australia. Hooray!



Arrival at Nuku Hiva