

ALONA'S REPORT FROM VANUATU

It is now 18 months since ALONA left the Squadron pool to cruise the Pacific. Since that time we have visited New Zealand, Vanuatu, Tonga, Fiji and the Solomons. The following is an account of our experiences in the Vanuatu group of islands.

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It was interesting to return to Vila, Vanuatu, 7 years after my first visit when the country was still a Condominium administered jointly by the British and French, and look around to see what changes have taken place in that time. The French influence is quite noticable, and I was told by an expatriate that France is pouring money into the country, particularly into the schools, no doubt with the idea of influencing the younger generation to be pro-French. The Prime Minister, Father Walter Lini, has a tight reign on the country and one sees few white faces in places of business and none in Government offices. The ni-Vanuatu are intelligent people and appear to be managing well, but despite this, the country seems to be a standstill with empty shops, restaurants closing and almost empty resorts and hotels.

After a couple of weeks in Vila where we had sailed direct from New Zealand, we decided to backtrack to Tanna Island, having sailed past it on the way but unable to stop until we had cleared Customs and Immigration in Vila. It is about 130 miles south, which meant an overnight sail, so we set out with a favourable forecast of 8-14 knot easterlies, but before long it went SE at 25-30K, so we were hard pressed all the way in rough seas. It took 30 hours instead of the expected 24, arriving at Pt Resolution at last light, to my relief as I had visions of spending another rough night at sea.

This very pretty bay was named by Captain Cook when

ALONA'S REPORT FROM VANUATU

he anchored there in 1774, but an earthquake in the late 1800's raised the seabed making it too shallow to anchor where the best shelter would otherwise be found. However we set a stern anchor which kept us from rolling in the swell which always enters.

The main reason for our visit was to climb the active volcano, Mt Yasur, which rises conically from the surrounding jungle and was belching clouds of smoke as we sailed past the previous day. A hill separating the anchorage from Mt Yasur had smoke continually rising from vents in its side and at the water's edge hot water runs from holes in the rocks and small geysers spout water and steam regularly. Next morning we followed a path uphill from a small beach to the village where the people live in their traditional palm woven huts with thatched roofs, set amid huge banyan trees around a large 'village green' where cows grazed and a soccer match was in progress.

The Tannese still consider themselves Christians belonging to a particular denomination such as 7th Day Adventist, Catholic, Presbyterian etc and are regular church-goers despite the fact that in the last 25 years or so they have invented their own religion worshipping a God called Jon Frum. There are several theories to explain the origin of this cult, but all agree that the sight of huge quantities of war materials brought in by the Americans in 1942 was crucial, together with the confusion created by the rival sects of Christianity. They believe Jon Frum lives beneath the fires of Yasur from whence he will one day emerge, bringing the villagers goods and wealth in abundance. A red cross is the symbol of their newfound religion and each village has one or more of these crosses, surrounded by a low fence, prominently displayed.

By chance the local taxi, a battered utility, passed us on the road to the village and we arranged for

ALONA'S REPORT FROM VANUATU

him to take us to the volcano next day. We then called on Chief Narrawa to ask permission to visit his village and to my surprise he gave me 2 eggs and a grass skirt made from palm fibre. In return we gave him cigarettes and sweets for his grandchildren. Next day we enjoyed the drive over earth roads through dense jungle then up the slopes of Mt Yasur where the track ends not far from the summit, and from there we followed a steep path to the rim of the huge crater. The sheer sides led down to 3 or 4 active areas which emitted constant clouds of smoke, cinders, red hot rocks and intermittent very loud explosions. Even our guide jumped at a couple of extra loud burts, and it appears this was one of its quieter days!

The barren mountain and surrounding plain consist of black dust scattered with large and small boulders and old lava flows, with a lake in the middle of the plain. On descending the mountain we crossed this desolate plain, skirting the very edge of the lake, and drove on to Sulphur Bay. The village here owns Mt Yasur, and is the centre of the Jon Frum Cult. We were sorry that we were not able to stay for their weekly feast and ceremonies.

We had 4 nights in this delightful bay, enjoying visits from locals in their outrigger canoes who gave us pawpaws, coconuts and lemons, but on the fourth night the wind went to the north sending 4 foot waves into the bay, making it untenable. At first light we quickly checked our chart to see where the nearest shelter was to be found and discovered the only place was Anelgoahat Bay on Aneitym Island, 50 miles to the south. With a following wind we made good time, arriving about 5 pm. The bay is protected by the mountainous island, a sandy islet, and reefs, with the entrance open to the west.

It was there that we received the disturbing weather report indicating that Cyclone Namu, which had just

ALONA'S REPORT FROM VANUATU

swept through the Solomons, was heading directly for our anchorage! It was expected to weaken into a severe tropical depression with winds of up to 45k; already a large swell was entering from the west. We picked up our plough anchor and attached more chain and our 44lb Admiralty anchor to it, relaid them in line and felt quite confident that nothing would move us. We removed what we could from on deck and secured what we couldn't, chewed our fingernails and waited. That night a severe thunder squall went through and had my stomach tied in knots for a couple of hours until it moderated. The lightning was continuous, accompanied by thunder, strong winds and torrential rain. The next couple of days it blew about 30k and the breakers were crashing over the reef, but that was it - the cyclone had petered out by the time it reached us, so after 4 days, the weather cleared and we were able to go ashore.

We met the school teacher who in good English, told us something of the island, and also a forestry officer who was supervising the planting of Kauri forests on the island; Kauri is native to these southern islands. There are no roads, the only means of transport being dinghies with outboards or outrigger canoes. The plane from Vila lands each Thursday and a Burns Philp coastal freighter calls every month with supplies. This small bay supports 3 churches, Presbyterian, Catholic and 7th Day Adventists - quite amazing for so few people.

The islet protecting the bay and on which the airstrip is built is uninhabited, but has been developed in the most delightful way for the FAIRSTAR passengers to enjoy a morning on a tropical island. In fact the FAIRSTAR called in on the morning after our arrival, much to our astonishment, as we didn't know then of her regular visits there. They had no sooner lowered their launches to take passengers

ashore when the approaching cyclone caused a sudden weather change with strong winds and rain so they all returned to the ship without landing. Bad luck for both passengers and locals who no doubt make a lot of money selling artifacts to the tourists.

We had a comfortable sail back to Vila, taking 34 hours for the 190 miles, and enjoyed once again a calm anchorage and the amenities of a large town. By this time the yachts in the Sydney/Brisbane to Vila race were arriving and the place started to liven up.

The Vila Cruising Club organised a fun race to Havannah Harbour one weekend. There were 9 starters on a sunny Saturday afternoon and we sailed the 18 miles to Lelepa Landing in light winds and smooth seas, finishing 3rd across the line. The focal point for the weekend was a disused open-air restaurant where a BBQ was arranged for that night, with delicious food and a bottle of French champagne for each yacht. When it came time to present the prizes we were astonished to find that ALONA had been declared winner on handicap (we didn't know there was one), and Gill was presented with a large silver cup. It is a perpetual trophy so we had to hand it back later, but were given a small wooden trophy which is now attached to the mast in the saloon. It was a beautiful night, balmy and moonlit, and we all had a great time dancing under the stars or sitting around the large campfire. Next morning we went ashore for breakfast before starting the race back to Vila. After a quiet start, a change came through with strong winds and drizzle but we pressed on under full sail, keen to do well, but once again were 3rd across the line, beaten for 2nd place by 2 minutes.

BERYL MORCOM

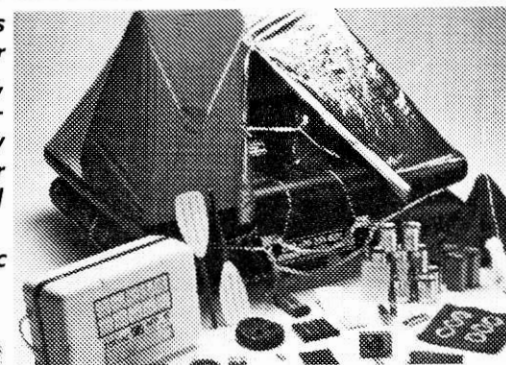
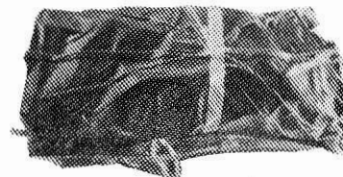
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