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ALONA'S VANUATU REPORT CONTINUED

In the December edition of the Newsletter I began my description of our experiences in the Vanuatu group of islands. The following completes this chapter of our cruise through the Pacific.

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A pleasant interlude was when 2 friends joined us for 2 weeks in June/July; they were lucky to have the longest stretch of good weather we had had, 10 sunny, calm days and moonlit nights, with it turning cool towards the end of their stay. We explored Mele Bay, Havannah Harbour and the northern part of Efate Island, finding some beautiful coral and tame fish which ate pawpaw from our hands.

By now we had been in and around Vila for 8 weeks and it was time to start heading north. A final week in which we refuelled, reprovisioned, filled our water tanks and prepared to leave civilization as we knew it for the next 3 months. We had decided to go on to the Solomon Islands, as in theory at least, it's downwind sailing all the way with the SW Trades. It was sad leaving Vila as it is a delightful town and we had enjoyed our time there. Although Vanuatu consists of many islands, there were reported to be few good anchorages, but we wanted to stop at as many places as we could and were prepared to put up with a bit of discomfort.

Our first stop was at Selua Bay on Emau Island after a brisk sail in 25k winds, and as we arrived the sky clouded over and it started to rain, making it difficult to see where to anchor to avoid the coral. The reefs here were superb, some of the best and most extensive we had seen, although the water was cold. We walked across the island, following a good earth road, disrupting school as we went by as the children all rushed out to say hello. A teacher walked back with us and told us there

were 2 schools adjacent to each other, one English with 113 students and the other French with about the same number. There are 3 villages on this small island and each speak a different dialect, using Bislama to communicate.

After a rolly night we sailed 25 miles to Revolieu Bay on Epi Is, with the wind still blowing hard. This bay has a black sand beach and we tucked in behind a large reef. Then a short sail to Lamén Bay on the NW corner of Epi where we put out a stern anchor to combat the swell. This bay is very picturesque, with a large settlement, a store and modern high school. The previous headmaster, from New Zealand, was keen on landscaping and the lovely gardens were a credit to him. The students all speak 4 languages, English, French, Bislama and their village dialect which puts us to shame. Next morning we found a Fijian warship anchored nearby, quite a small wooden ship with a tiny helicopter landing on top of the stern accommodation. A rugby match with the locals was arranged for the following day, but we decided to move on.

At last the wind moderated and we sailed on to the Maskelyne Islands on the SE tip of Malekula Island, and here we at last found an area comparable with Vava'u (Tonga). We anchored in a tiny bay between small Ui Is and the mainland, with an extensive drying reef at the head giving excellent shelter. It was a beautiful spot, surrounded by hills thick with vegetation, palm clad shores and sandy beaches, with the natives quietly paddling their outriggers to their gardens for the day or to the reef to fish, stopping to stare or for a chat, hoping to be asked on board which we usually did. We found a fantastic underwater hill of thick coral, gently sloping down and down in crystal clear water. It was mostly staghorn of an amazing colour range with many fish darting in and out. After 4 days here we managed

to tear ourselves away, and sailing through this picturesque group of small islands, went on to Pt Sandwich, a few miles north on Malekula Is, a huge harbor edged by mountains with jungle down to the shore, broken occasionally with beaches where the copra plantations are, and offering an excellent calm anchorage.

We walked about 2 miles along the road to the small town of Lamat and were surprised to note the higher standard of living here compared to those on the smaller islands we had been to. We were looking for bread and a young girl showed us the way. The bakery consisted of a large brick oven under an iron roof, out in the open, where the baker, dressed in ragged shorts, was just removing the most scrumptious looking bread from the oven with an old oar. We bought 3 loaves and one for our guide, much to her delight. One thing I'll say for the French, they have taught the people of Vanuatu to make delicious bread. The smell of hot bread tantalised us on the long walk back, so we made our dinner of fresh bread, cheese, pickled onions and wine, followed by fresh fruit salad and cream. Not what I had planned, but delicious. The people were very friendly, smiling and waving as we went by, and as usual we managed to collect hoards of children along the way. One young lad climbed a coconut tree and gave us half a dozen green coconuts, not easy to lug a mile or so but much appreciated.

We sailed across to Ambryn Is where the anchorage wasn't particularly sheltered or picturesque, so we only stayed one night. It was interesting to see the natives bathing and washing clothes in the hot rock pools on the beaches (it is a very volcanic island). Back to Malekula where we anchored in Pt Stanley, a bit bouncy but reasonable. We took our bikes ashore and had a long ride, miles

further than we had intended as we took the wrong road (no signposts) to the town of Norsop, but eventually found our way back there to find a very dirty, run down settlement. The town of Lakatore, where we were anchored and which was formerly a British run town, was much nicer, with a co-op store which even had icecream. We still had a couple of days before we had planned to get to Santo, but for want of a better place to go, sailed there from Pt Stanley.

Santo has seen better days - about 40 years ago when the American Forces were there. It is rather run down and dilapidated with many old Quonset huts still being used. I counted over 30 small Chinese mixed stores in the long main street, all selling a bit of everything and all selling identical merchandise - I don't know how they make a living. The anchorage here, although the second largest port in Vanuatu, is open to wind and swell despite being surrounded by islands, so we only stayed long enough to see Customs and Immigration, shop and visit the market. With so many Chinese living there I expected to get a good supply of European type of vegetables, but all I could get was a cabbage, one cucumber and some cherry tomatoes. I decided that I would have to get used to cooking native style food in future.

We then had a short sail north around 'Million Dollar Point' to the calm, sheltered waters of Palekulo Bay, about 8 miles by road from Santo and where we had a relaxing week before clearing Customs and Immigration to exit Vanuatu. Fortunately, after clearing, yachts going north are allowed stopovers on Santo Is, the Banks and Torres Groups before finally departing Vanuatu and entering the Solomon Islands.

Until now we had been a little disappointed in Vanuatu overall compared to Tonga and Fiji where we cruised

last year, but were delighted to find the northern islands exceeded our expectations. At Peterson Bay, just north of Palekulo Bay, we crossed the reef at high tide and anchored in a beautiful lagoon dotted with several small islands and where the skin diving was very good. A walk inland brought us to a small, very blue, very clear fresh water lake, surrounded by lush tropical vegetation and huge banyan trees, where we enjoyed a swim and shampoo in this 'Dorothy Lamour' setting.

From there a short sail brought us to Hog Harbour, not a nice name for a lovely bay with fine white sandy beaches and clear aqua water. A section of this bay is called Champagne Beach where we found the locals cleaning up the undergrowth and building shelters for when the FAIRSTAR calls in. The people who organise the FAIRSTAR cruises have done their homework well and have chosen some delightful isolated beaches and islands in Vanuatu, Tonga and Fiji for their passengers' enjoyment. There were fresh water springs bubbling from the sand there and we scooped a pool and had a hip bath after our snorkelling.

Pt Olry, on the NW corner of Santo Is was another superb anchorage with small islets, clear water and good coral. I saw the largest sea snake so far there, but they are timid and swim away (so do I!). There is a large village nearby and we were able to buy bread from their store.

From there we had a windy rough 55 mile passage to Santa Maria Is in the Banks Group, making 7-8K all the way, and anchored in pretty Lakona Bay. This bay has the nicest black sand beach we've seen with fresh water springs gushing out from the base of the low cliffs and also bubbling through the sand, forming rivulets at low tide. The ni-Vanuatu in these islands are very isolated, their only contact with the outside world, apart from coastal freighters, being cruising yachtsmen, so

we always had a welcoming committee of one or more outrigger canoes. They have so little by way of material possessions, their clothing is usually very ragged, so they really appreciate being given any clothes we can spare. We will be lucky to have a T shirt to our backs by the time we arrive in Australia. They love to be asked on board, especially the children who are interested in everything, and found our photograph album fascinating. They amaze us by speaking such good English. The girls were interested in my painted toenails, so to their delight I painted theirs and sprayed them with perfume. We gave them drinks, sweets and biscuits; the men all ask for cigarettes or tobacco, sometimes for hard liquor which we refuse as diplomatically as possible. They always reciprocate with fresh fruit and vegetables such as pawpaw, bananas, breadfruit, native spinach, lemons, grapefruit etc.

Not long after we anchored in Lakona Bay we had a visit from Warris Paterson, the chief, who later took us to visit his village on the headland. Another visitor was Henry, who has a log book in which he requests all visiting yachts to write and paste a photograph and we found very interesting to browse through.

Next day a 30 mile sail to Vanua Lava, on the way passing close to a whale resting on the surface. There we anchored in beautiful Waterfall Bay, which has twin falls on the point with a large pool at the base. What bliss to bathe and wash our clothes in such abundant fresh water. There is no village here, only a hut, as there is very little flat ground, but there is one nearby so we had our usual greeting, this time from Custom Chief Thomas, his wife and 7 children. I managed to find clothes for them all and they were delighted with a rubber pillow for the baby. Next day Thomas brought us a basket of fresh water prawns and later a crayfish and fresh vegetables. The reef there was very interesting with deep crevasses filled with coral and fish of all colours and sizes, and for the first time we regretted not having scuba gear.

A 22 mile sail in the usual 20-30k winds brought us to a unique anchorage in the volcanic crater of Ureparapara Island. Some time in the past this volcano must have exploded, blowing out a section which allowed the sea to enter. The villagers here have a hard life with irregular visits by supply ships and no radio communications. Because of the steep high mountain sides which surround this anchorage the people here have very little flat ground for their gardens and usually have to walk many miles up and down steep tracks to tend their gardens each day. The only school is in a village on the opposite side of the island and the children also have a long steep walk each day over the top of what was once the rim of the volcano. The anchorage is very susceptible to severe 'bullets' of wind and we recorded several gusts of up to 40 knots.

This was our last stop in Vanuatu and from there we continued our way northwards to Vanakolu, the most southerly island of the Santa Cruz Group in the eastern Solomons.

BERYL MORCOM