

PASSAGEMAKERS: A VOYAGE IN ANDANTE

Tess and Geoff Gowing talk about their 1300 nm return passage from Cairns across the Coral Sea to the Louisiades Archipelago in Papua New Guinea.

The Louisiades Archipelago is a string of coral islands that trail off the eastern coast of Papua New Guinea out into the Solomon Sea. Most of these islands are populated by the local PNG natives who are English speaking, Christian, educated, and friendly. They lead a classic idyllic tropical island lifestyle living in coconut palm thatched single room houses on above the ground supports. They live at an almost subsistence level of existence. Money is not very important and on many of the islands the locals have little use for the Kina as there is no store nearby to spend it.

They maintain their level of subsistence by fishing and cultivating home grown produce (bananas, paw-paw, coconuts, sweet potato, taro etc) they keep chickens and sometimes pigs. Some of them dive for beche de mer (in season) and dry them together with shark fins for the Asian market. But, they are paid very little for all their hard work diving and fishing so it is not really a sustainable income, just a little bit of cash to purchase some essentials from mainland PNG whenever someone from the island can get there. At this stage they have not yet been exploited by western style tourism so it is refreshing to encounter friendly happy people who in spite of their simple living conditions do not yet aspire to, or need our western comfortable lifestyle. Bartering with visiting yachts and the occasional power boat provides a welcome boost to their level of existence.

Power boats are usually limited by their range but a passage making boat like Andante is an extended range vessel so we were able to make the whole passage without having to refuel, in fact we arrived back in Australia with over 1000 litres of fuel on board.

We took with us all sorts of goods; knives, machetes, hammers, fish hooks and line, clothing, rice, pens pencils and books and magazines, for bartering. These things we exchanged for fruit and vegetables from their hillside gardens and also some handmade artifacts. On most occasions we were also able to help supplement their food supplies with fish we had caught when moving from island to island. As we had caught the fish (usually Spanish Mackerel, Tuna or King Snapper) in their own local waters we would hand them over to the local people as a gesture of goodwill – it was always much appreciated - often they would return with gifts of coconuts or bananas.



What a catch to share with the locals

Compared with their dugout canoes and outrigger canoes with lateen sails (called 'lakatois'), the Fleming was a source of great interest and admiration to the locals and being men of the sea they were always very appreciative and understood the beautiful seaworthy lines of Andante. The engine room was a source of great fascination and they were certainly very impressed with us having crossed the Coral Sea from Australia to visit them.



Andante at anchor

The 500nm passage across the Coral Sea with the prevailing 25 – 35 knot trade winds from the SE on the stbd beam with 2.0-3.5m seas was one of the more challenging passages for Andante and crew. 3 1/2 days at this angle had the stabilisers working at their limits most of the time. Without them the passage would have been very uncomfortable and would have required waiting for the trade winds to moderate before starting out.

As with our Bass Strait passages in SE Australia, Andante met all the conditions with ease. Many times on this particular passage we remarked on how the robust design and the wonderful sea-keeping qualities maintained our already high confidence in our vessel. Both this leg and the return run back to Australia were in identical conditions. It certainly is reassuring knowing that you have a solidly built vessel designed exactly for the conditions.

Wherever we anchored in the Louisiades the swim platform soon had children on board just watching us go about our day. Except in very special circumstances we did not allow them beyond the transom because of the numbers. Always well behaved though the children would often bring shells or produce with them to barter for a pencil or a book, and very canny barterers they were too, on many occasions I am sure we often paid too much for a cowry shell or a hens egg – but it was always good fun and an enjoyable encounter.

Ice from the icemaker, drinks of pure water from the water maker made from their 'own' local seawater were very much a novelty and a stamp on their hand with the Ships Stamp was a 'tattoo' to be worn with pride around their island. The kids were all very well behaved, whenever we needed space we only had to tell them that it was time for them to leave and they would go back to shore in their pint sized canoes, to return later with more shells or coconuts to trade.

On a couple of occasions we had some of the elders and their family from various villages on board for afternoon tea and in some cases an evening meal. Not surprisingly, as they have all had a mission education their manners and respectable behavior made it a pleasure and delight to have them on board as our guests. On one occasion, the island representative and his family prepared a meal for us in appreciation of our visit, subsequent friendship and support to his island. This meal we also had on board Andante.

The meal was a Chicken Coconut Curry prepared from the slowest rooster on the island that still must have taken 3 days to catch, a Fish Curry with local spinach and taro root and local chilli and spices.

We provided the rice because it is not grown in the Louisiades and so not readily available locally. The curry had a unique smoky flavour as a result of it being cooked in open pots over a coconut husk fueled open fire. The smoky flavour enhancing the curry and coconut flavours and making a unique gourmet meal – how good is that? You won't get that at the Grange!

Cruising the Louisiades is a must for any sailor who aspires to take a vessel overseas. The archipelago is only 500nm from Cairns. Sailing is relatively easy with a beam reach from the SE Trades each way, with the breeze sometimes on the aft quarter to give you a shy spinnaker run. The region is well charted and the charts are accurate although some of the 'bommies' appear to have moved since they were charted so, as always, care needs to be taken when near the fringing reefs. In addition, there are a number of books written by other cruisers with 'mud maps' of various anchorages.

The region is constantly bathed in 5 – 15 knot tropical breezes warm tropical sunshine and often with a refreshing afternoon shower of rain. The temperature is mostly in the mid to higher 20's. The local people are friendly and extremely hospitable, they are intelligent and they are honest. They will come out in their canoes to help guide you in through their surrounding reef if you wait outside. Local protocol and politeness requires that you ask permission to go ashore on each island, and all things on any island are owned by somebody, so it is not there for the taking (shells, coconuts etc.).

Customs and quarantine formalities are easily managed both in and out of each country. Be aware though that your vessel must be an Australian Registered Ship. This voyage being our first venture out of Australian waters in *Andante* made it one of our epic voyages. As with all passages, preparation is essential and we are preparing now for our next adventure



The ship's stamp "tattoos"

Ed - If any members are interested in making an epic journey in their yacht (or power boat) across the Coral Sea to the Louisiades then give Geoff a call on 0418806911

ANDANTE is a Fleming 55 Pilot House Motor Yacht 18 m long with 2 x 500 hp Cummins engines. The hull is semi displacement with a max speed of 18 knots. The comfortable passage making speed is 8 – 10 knots. Fuel capacity is 3800 litres that can be extended to 5400 litres with 2 x 800 litre fuel bladders

Evolution? Revolution

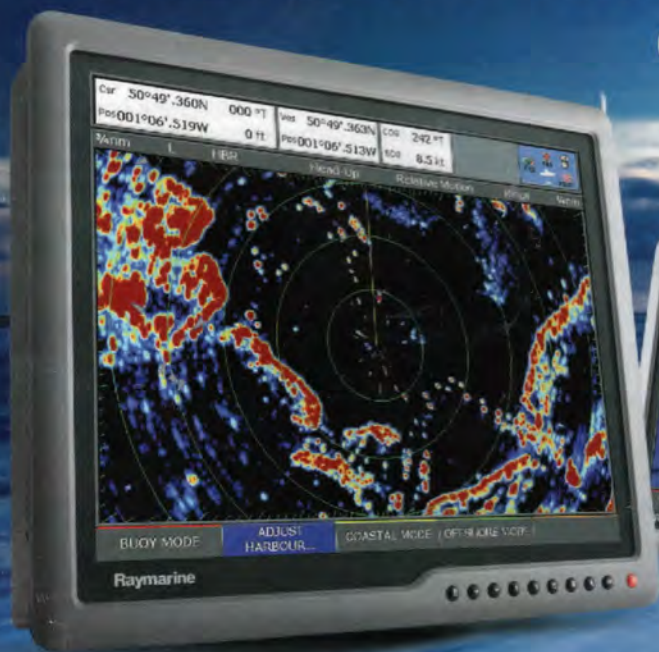
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