

# Just Jane in the Fijis

## Jo Capel

On the run from Tonga to Suva we set out into real trade wind sailing under an overcast and drizzling sky. With a steady 15 to 20 knot SE, *Just Jane* had a fast passage for the 420 nm, which was easy sailing compared to that from New Zealand to Tonga. Our biggest concern was Oneata Passage, which is an unlit five-mile gap between reefs about 180 nm before Suva. We arrived in the area about 0130 on a black night with drizzle and no visibility. I stayed below, watching the radar and plotting our position every few minutes, hoping like hell this would not be the night that we had poor satellite coverage and couldn't receive a correct position. Arnold was on deck, straining his eyes to be sure that the GPS gave us accurate positions and that we were clearing the reefs. It was a great relief to pass through into relatively flat seas.

Next morning at about 0330 we hove to off Suva Harbour entrance, as there was another reef to negotiate and we knew that our charts were one or two nm out in some areas. Clearing Customs in Suva was an all day affair. We tied up at the main wharf with our Q and courtesy Fijian flags flying, and the quarantine official boarded within half an hour. The next step was to go to Port Control on the wharf, wait in a queue, fill out form after form and then on to the Immigration office in town. I was told to return to *Just Jane* and wait for an official, as they wouldn't complete the formalities in the office.

By 1600 the Immigration official still hadn't arrived, so it was back to Port Control. The Customs official claimed that the Immigration Officer had indeed been to the boat, but found nobody there. This, of course, was not true, because Arnold and Tim had been there all the time. I took a taxi (mercifully very cheap in Suva) back to Immigration, only to find that they had closed for the day. The Customs guy could see I was getting a little annoyed, so he rang Immigration and handed the phone to me. I was told that as it was Friday and the following Monday was a public holiday I wouldn't be able to complete the formalities before Wednesday of the following week. After

a lot of negotiating, he agreed to reopen his office and to pay for my taxi to get there.

As I was filling out the forms, I heard a Scottish voice behind me that for a moment I thought was that of Billy Connolly the comedian. It belonged to Johnno, skipper of the yacht *Scanhalla*, which he took from country to country to be joined intermittently by the owner. When we were at last legally in Fiji, Tim, Arnold and I went aboard her. Beer or rum-'n'-coke weren't enough for Johnno, who took straight whisky and plenty of it. At about 2200, the cigarette slipped out of his mouth and with a cryptic 'Aw, fock it!' he curled up on the floor and went to sleep. Tim suggested that he would survive the night, and thus ended our first day in Fiji.

We anchored off Royal Suva Yacht Club, 15 minutes walk from the town. It was a bustling place, and every time we went there we would be approached by a Fijian trying to sell us drugs. The conversation usually started with, 'Bula, you wanna smoke, mon?' We declined all offers and instructed Tim to do the same and to keep walking. Tim was ecstatic when he saw a McDonald's store and a cinema complex, but I was ecstatic when we sailed out of Suva for Blue Lagoon.

Before doing so, we had to buy some *yaqona* (*kava*) for the *sevusevu*. When visiting Fijian anchorages and villages it is expected to give half a kilo of *yaqona* root to the '*turaga ni koro* (the village head) or another local dignitary to get permission to anchor, swim, walk on the beach or explore the island. We also had to obtain permits from the Ministry of Fijian Affairs in order to cruise around and visit the outer islands. This was all to do with courtesy and respecting the old Fijian ways.

Tim decided to get his long hair cut before we left Suva. He chose a filthy shop run by a particularly sleazy-looking Indian. The same comb was used for everybody's greasy hair, and there was no water for washing. I immediately thought of head lice, condemning me to what I

saw the Tongan women doing: going through their children's hair, picking out the nits, squeezing them, looking at the result and then flicking them away. As soon as Tim had finished, I rushed everybody back to the boat for showers and to douse our heads with special shampoo for head lice which I bought in New Zealand. Talking to other yachties, we discovered that head lice can be quite a problem when travelling through the Pacific, especially if you have children. Several yachties found it extremely difficult to rid themselves of them — the head lice, that is. After hearing that, we maintained a check every few days for the rest of the trip, fortunately with negative results.

We loaded up with fresh food and *yaqona* from the fabulous Suva market, filled our tanks with water, and changed the oil in our 55 hp Yanmar diesel. The Whale gusher pump in our bathroom finally gave up after being used repeatedly by many cruising kids to fill water balloons, and we replaced it at a reasonable marine shop for Fiji\$88.

We stopped at several anchorages on the way to Musket Cove, including Vaga Bay on Beqa Island. The villagers immediately came out to greet us and asked for numerous items, one being outboard fuel. It was late afternoon, and as we planned to leave early next morning we didn't want to go ashore. They pestered us for quite some time before eventually leaving us alone.

According to Michael Calder's *A Yachtsman's Fiji*, Musket Cove should be entered only 'in full daylight when reefs can be clearly seen.' It is on Malolo Lailai Island, which is part of the Mamanuca Group on the west side of Fiji, where reefs seem to be everywhere and the SE trades are usually quite strong. We cautiously wove *Just Jane* round beacons and reefs, and after speaking to Musket Cove Yacht Club on VHF, picked up a \$5 a night mooring. Here was a meeting place for yachts from all over the world. There were several we had met in New Zealand, and Tim caught up with Sparky, an American boy off *Starlight*.

At the other end of the island the Plantation Island Resort was full of tourists and holiday

makers. This appeared to be lavish, with many interesting features. We left our dinghy at the yacht club, walked along the beach and mingled with the guests. This was quite an educational experience for Tim — not necessarily the right sort of educational experience — but nevertheless he learnt a different set of social rules, namely how with an air of confidence one can fit into a situation where legally one shouldn't be and avoid being asked to leave. We had a delightful time lolling on deck chairs on the beach while Tim played happily in the games room with the other children there.

The highlight was trying our skill at sail boarding. [Jo wrote 'wind surfing', but we have been informed that this is a trade name protected by copyright. — Ed.] Tim even managed to have a personal instructor for a short time, then came back and relayed the rudiments to Arnold and me. I noticed that Arnold was standing very still in the water and looking worse than he does when he's sea sick. As I went towards him, he hissed through his teeth that he had a sea snake wrapped round his ankle. Tim and I were out of the water like a shot (women and children first!). We left Arnold to his fate, with no heroics from us. Arnold cautiously waited until the creature had removed itself, then he too couldn't get away fast enough. It was time to move on.

On the way to Blue Lagoon we stopped at Navadra anchorage. *Just Jane* anchored in 40–50 ft between three uninhabited islands. It was a perfect place, with beaches, coconut trees, and only one other yacht nearby. The snorkelling was fantastic. With a SE breeze of 20 knots we had a comfortable day sail to the Yasawa Group, and with the usual weaving round reefs we anchored in Blue Lagoon, where Brooke Shields made her famous movie and we had arranged to meet our friends from *Little Swan*, whom we last saw in Tonga.

In the mornings and while Arnold baked bread I sometimes tackled school work with Tim. As there were usually many more interesting things to do, I decided that if he did nothing else, he would at least complete all the Year Seven maths curriculum. Much of what we were sent seemed to be a repetition of what he had done in Year



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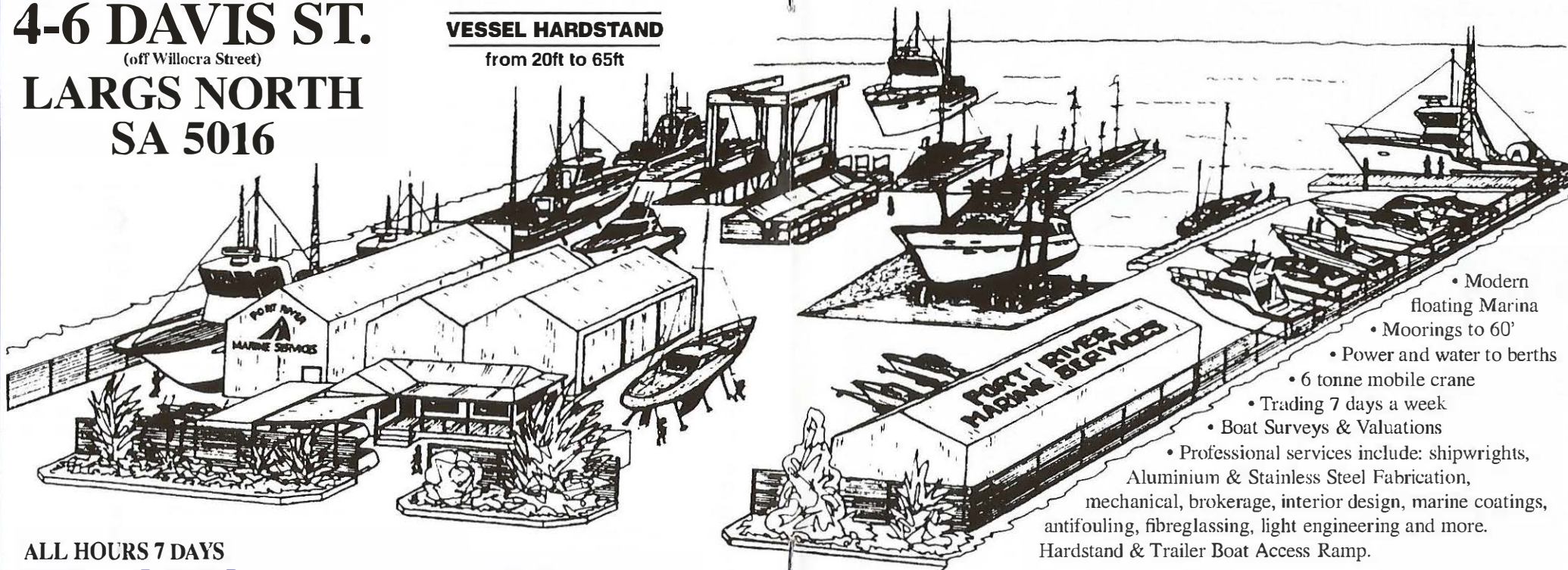
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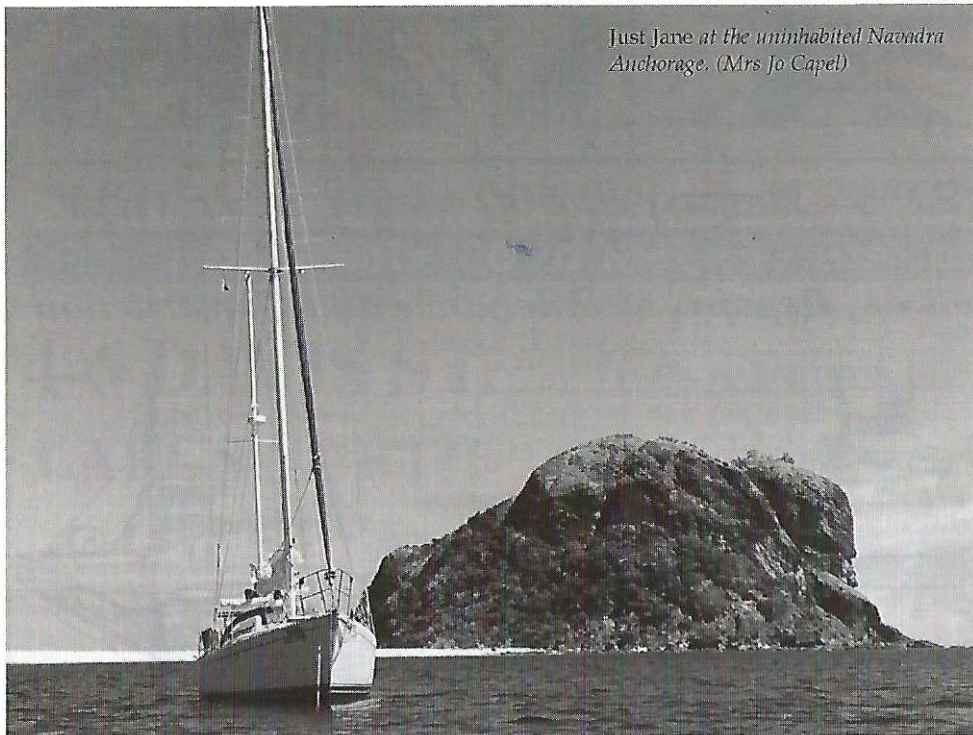
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Just Jane at the uninhabited Navadra Anchorage. (Mrs Jo Capel)

Six, and as his skills in reading, writing and research didn't present a problem, we concentrated on and very quickly completed the mathematics.

A Canadian yacht called *Three Daughters* was anchored next to us. They had broken their bobstay, which had ripped up their bowsprit and wrecked part of the teak toe rail. As we had a large block of teak wood with us, we gave it to them, and in return they gave us a sheet of aluminium which we needed to replace the frame for the diaphragm of our bilge pump. They had aboard two girls (Camille and Serene) and a boy called Orion, and were living on a budget even tighter than ours. The third girl of the yacht's name had returned to Canada. An American yacht took pity on them and gave the children a knee board. That called for them to be towed by a dinghy with a more powerful engine than our 4 hp model. It didn't take Tim and Camille long to find a volunteer, and they were soon taking turns to be whizzed around the anchorage. In return for this kindness, the

children baked a chocolate cake for the generous volunteer. With the children occupied, we spent our time on maintenance and relaxing in this idyllic place.

We spent a delightful evening with Don Morton from *Toolka T*. [See *Squadron Quarterly* June 1993: 29-33.] We all had a *lovo* on the beach with the villagers and other yachties. This is a feast of pig and fish, cooked in an underground oven and followed by a lot of *kava* drinking. Tim had his first taste of it, served in half a coconut shell. *Kava* is a muddy looking liquid, which has an unpleasant taste until your lips go numb and then you can't taste anything.

[Kava is a non-alcoholic, euphoria-producing beverage made from the root of the pepper plant, principally *Piper methysticum*. The active ingredient has narcotic and sedative effects somewhat akin to those of marijuana. In the Pacific islands *kava* is taken as part of a fairly rigidly prescribed ritual, and other than causing placid indolence when taken to excess, it seems to do no harm. It was introduced to the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory as an alternative to destructive alcoholism, but has not been successful. In that population significant side effects and toxicity have been reported. — Ed.]

*Little Swan* arrived, and so did the rum. We all decided to head to Sawa-i-Lau Island about 15 nm away to see the caves. To get the keys and permission to enter them, it was necessary to go to the village that owned them and carry out the *sevusevu* ceremony, which is the formal presentation of *yaqona* to the village chief. This was not the village in the bay where the caves were, but on an island quite a distance away on the other side of the lagoon. By this time there were five yachts in the anchorage, all keen to see the caves, so in order to speed up the process a big dinghy was required with a large outboard motor.

*Golden Opus* is a magnificent yacht, 83 ft long, designed and owned by Ron Holland and with a very large tender powered by a 25 hp outboard motor. On board were its interior designer and his family on holiday from England, with paid crew. We all trooped across to the correct village, and did the *sevusevu*. This involved crouching down in a grass hut with the chief, offering the *yaqona* and going through a small ceremony of hand clapping and welcoming Fijian words. After that we could return to the anchorage and explore the caves.

The partly fresh water caves were a little way up the side of a rocky outcrop above the beach. Inside the main cave was a narrow ledge above a large pool of water with a shaft of light shining on to the water at one end. We had come to see the under-water caves, but no-one knew where they were, and, unlike Mariner's Cave in Tonga we didn't have any instructions.

[For Mariner's Cave, see *Squadron Quarterly* March 1998: 23 and the annotated copy of Lord Byron's poem *The Island* in the Hardy Library. — Ed.]

Everyone kept swimming around and diving down in search of the under water caves. Two abalone divers who were crew on *Three Daughters* had the courage to dive about three metres down under the rocks, swim under water through a cavern and find the other caves. Following their torch lights, we, including the children, followed them. When we surfaced we found this cave to be very dark, and although we could barely see anything it was quite fascinating, if not a little scary. The abalone divers told us they were capable of diving almost a hundred feet, and they squeezed through more under water caves, but the rest of us thought that was a little dangerous. As we



Jo Capel ceremonially taking kava.

didn't want to be permanently trapped there, we found our way back to the main cave.

With the cave expedition out of the way, it was time for rum-'n'-coke and party time with *Little Swan* and the other yachts on the beach. Next day Tim and Camille from *Three Daughters* quickly became friendly with the English children aboard *Golden Optus*. They soon had the *Golden Optus* crew towing them around on their knee board behind the tender, as well as teaching them how to water ski, using Ron Holland's 'water toys', with which the yacht was well equipped.

The *Golden Optus* crew were out of milk, as they hadn't allowed for how much the children would drink. It was five weeks since we last went shopping, and although we were out of fresh food we still had plenty of canned food and heaps of long life milk. But what we were very nearly out of was something essential to our daily health and life, which was coffee. We had reduced our intake from twelve to two cups a day, because coffee in the Pacific was very expensive, up to \$30 for 200 grams, and on reflection we should have stocked up with much more in New Zealand. Fortunately *Golden Optus* swapped a bulk amount of very expensive coffee for long life milk, and we were all happy with the deal.

*Little Swan* left for Vanuatu and we headed for the marina at Vuda Point to fill up with diesel and water. We carried 900 litres of water, which was enough for showers most days and to wash dishes and clothes. We never came close to running out, and usually carried about 400 litres of diesel fuel. We filled our gas bottle for Fiji\$19.20. No matter which country we were in, it always seemed to cost about AUS\$20 to get it filled.

Vuda Point Marina was a delightful and convenient place to get ready for the next passage to Vanuatu. *Just Jane* was tied up next to an American yacht *Serenade*. Like most yachties, they were cleaning out their boat, and they gave us two fuel containers and piles of books and yachting magazines. We in turn passed our literature on to another yacht. Well stocked with diesel, water, gas and books we were ready to leave for Vanuatu.

After a pleasant morning sail to Lautoka we visited the market for fresh fruit and vegetables before going to Customs. Clearing out of Fiji was certainly easier than clearing in. At Lautoka it took about an hour, compared with the whole day affair in Suva. As we set out for the passage through the reef we noticed that we had an alternator problem, as the house batteries weren't charging. That, together with a strong wind warning for the area, convinced us to anchor for the night at Momi Bay. Arnold fixed the alternator by resoldering the wires from the brushes on to the terminal. Next morning, with the batteries fully charged and the strong wind warning cancelled, we sailed out through the passage to clear the reef for Vanuatu, 520 nm away.

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To be continued ...

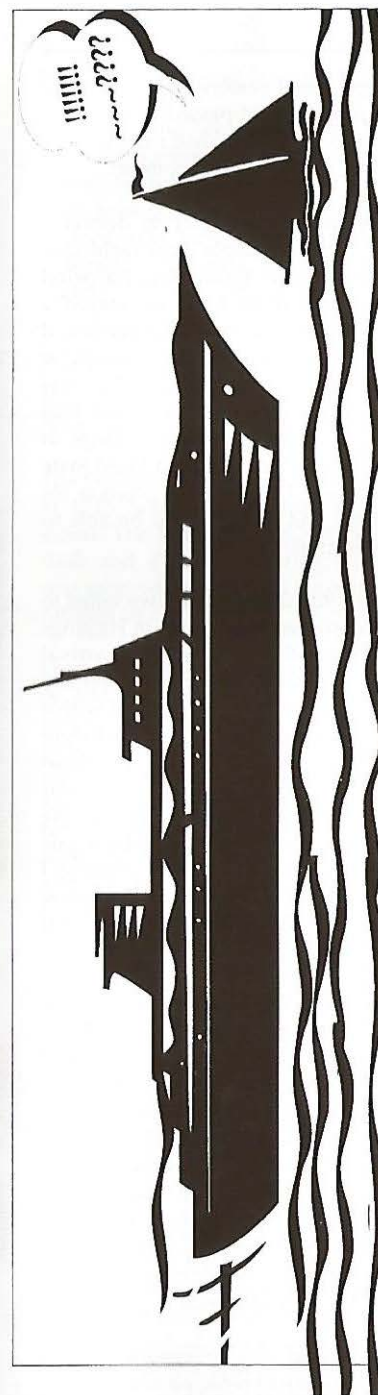
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