

A Decent Obsession

Roger Holden

Of Background and Boats

Marion and Roger Holden have been members of the RSAYS since the mid-1970s. They have owned five boats since taking up sailing in 1970 — four of them on the Squadron register as *Marionettes*. Their first 'gone foreign' was in *Didgeridoo*, a ridiculously small 21-footer which took them from England to France and Belgium in 1971 with two babies aboard. These days, their cruising has become more genteel and concentrated on the Pacific and South East Asia, with good friends and good wine replacing those much earlier sailing companions, dirty nappies and milk supplements. They fly home each Christmas to share the season with their son and daughter and three grandchildren, and to catch up with Squadron friends. They intend spending this year in Thailand, and depending on security and war considerations, will



Marionette



Marion and Roger Holden

probably head up through the Red Sea and into the Med in 2004. *Marionette IV* is a 49-foot Taswell, designed by the UK naval architect Bill Dixon for fast push-button offshore cruising, where the desire for reasonably secure red wine slurping fits comfortably with pace and space requirements under sail and motor.

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Author's Note

What we have to say makes no chronological or sequential sense. Very deliberately. There will be no wave-by-wave descriptions of hazardous passage-making out into the Pacific or into south east Asia, no fact-laden logs displaying navigational triumphs (with modest mea culpas thrown in for earnest balance), no solemn advice for the desk-bound Walter Mittys who yearn to follow in our wake.

Those who race round the cans would probably not be interested anyway, and those whose notion of cruising involves turning on motors when the wind falls light would probably be offended by our pedantry. The real reason, though, is that for us sailing is a very private obsession, so what we have tried to do is to find some common groundswell, to introduce you to those wonderful people who have ensured that our cruising life goes on with undiminished zeal after years of fun afloat and

- | | | |
|-------|-----------------------|---|
| 1994 | <i>Marionette III</i> | Adelaide-Sydney-Brisbane-Lizard Island-Townsville |
| 1995 | | Townsville-Gove-Darwin-Ambon-Banda Island-Darwin-Port Douglas |
| 1996 | | Port Douglas-Brisbane-Townsville (Roger to Solomons as crew on another vessel) |
| 1997- | | Townsville-Brisbane-Gizo (Solomons, three months)-Louisades-Cairns-Southport |
| 1998- | <i>Marionette IV</i> | Southport-Lizard Island-Brisbane-Lord Howe Island-Opuia (NZ) |
| 1999- | | Opuia-Minerva Reef-Tonga-Fiji-Vanuatu-Chesterfield Reef-Brisbane |
| 2000- | | Brisbane-New Caledonia-Vanuatu-New Caledonia-Brisbane |
| 2001- | | Southport-Cairns-Gove-Darwin-Bali-Kalimantan-Singapore-Langkawi (Malaysia) |
| 2002- | | Passage-making gives way to genteel cruising Langkawi, Phuket and surrounding islands |

perhaps through them, help you to get to know us better too.

January, 2003

If there is any sense at all to be made of this, it is that mixture of curiosity and adventure, that juxtaposition of joy and sadness in travel, that feeds the passion of life at sea. If sailing is our private obsession, then it is the people we meet who fuel our more public addiction.

The message is, as ever, unmistakable, quite unambiguous; it really is time to return to the boat.

We have been home now for a month, and the prolonged beckoning heat shimmering across the sea and into our lounge at North Haven has combined with the pre-Christmas excesses to



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overpower the senses and the waistline. It is all so unsettling. And then she announces that the lawn needs serious attention, the paths are a disgrace, and a tree must be cut back, because (wait for it) it is blocking her view to the sea from sitting positions in the spa and on the loo!

Yes indeed, the message is quite unambiguous. We really must get back to the boat. Fast!

This will be our tenth year on the run from earth-bound mundanity, almost a decade of very close living and loving aboard. If you add that to 35 years of marriage, it is little wonder unspoken messages can be so clear.

★ ★ ★

Niutoputapu is right at the top of the Tonga chain, an overnigher from western Samoa, and an island as idyllic as any in the Pacific can be. Stunning clear waters inside a lazy breaking coral reef, a volcano backdrop to the north, Three or so villages tuck along the northern coast, omnipresent churches of differing persuasions vying for the loyalties and glorious singing

voices of the villagers. As elsewhere in these so-called backwaters of the world, young American Peace Corps workers offer their civilising services with an evangelical zealotry that would make the missionaries of old so very proud. Such is the paradox — if you're lucky enough to be born in paradise, there's no shortage of people willing to come along and save you from it.

Anyway, a wonderful place, as I have said... but all was not right, and a consultation with tea leaves and chicken entrails confirmed it was time for emergency action. 'How about,' I said tentatively, 'we give Samoa a miss, and head for the bright lights of Fiji instead?'

'How far?' said she (listlessly).

'About 550 miles into Savu Savu... with these reinforced trades, we'll be there in a hurry.'

'Oh, is that all?' said she (much brighter now). 'A good idea let's go.... no more than three days, and we'll be in, won't we...'

So we did, and we were.



With John and his family, Hunga, Tonga, 1999.

It really is amazing what a calming effect a civilising haircut, some judicious hair colouring, and great dollops of pampering in a beauty parlour can have on a woman after weeks away from it all.

Get it right when the messages come, and they'll sail with you forever!

★ ★ ★

Among the many islands of the Vava'u group of Tonga is Hunga, where through a small gap in the cliffs, one can find protected anchorage in a small bay. It's not one of those coral fringed destinations that one normally associates with the Pacific, but richly deep green hills fringed with palms and small fishing villages attest to a contented tropical lifestyle. There are no resorts here, thanks be to those who still manage to say no to such out of place abominations, but the churches have managed to maintain a firm grip. And when the hymns of the singing Wesleyans take on the hymns of the singing Catholics and the singing Mormons in fierce Sunday worshipful competition, the stunning music

reverberates like no other place on earth. Individually the voices sound almost discordant and harsh: together in choir, they blend with a neck-tingling harmony and volume that is truly inspiring. You look for amplifiers, and they aren't there. You look for mass choirs, and there aren't any — just 20 women, men and children at the most, bellowing their hearts and faith to Heaven. Astonishing. An hour of this, and you can almost forgive the missionaries for everything.

John came to our boat in a small fishing canoe, and invited us to church. When the service was over, he invited us to lunch, and in the custom of Tonga, stood aside from us with his family while we dined alone. That which was left was their Sunday dinner. Then we spent hours talking on worldly matters, we played with the children, we joked and laughed. We became at one with this warm and welcoming family. Then, bearing small gifts, we were escorted down the hill to our dinghy. Please, would we come again for one last meal before leaving Tonga?

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And so it was decided that we would return the ten miles from Neiafu on the following Monday if the weather permitted. Monday came — a wet, blustery south-easterly day of misery. The conditions were not so bad as to preclude some effort on our part, but it was unpleasant, so we stayed put. We knew, of course, they would understand.

Three days later, we returned to Hunga, with small gifts of our own for the family. There was no one to meet us at the water's edge. There were no welcoming calls as we trudged up the hill to the family home. We were met at the door by John and his family, civilly, sadly, awkwardly. It transpired that on that previous Monday, they had prepared a feast for us, John had waited on the hill top for signs of our arrival through the narrow passage, joyful and proud anticipation giving way to increasing despondency and loss of face in front of his family, in front of his village.

We had not come, we had betrayed a friendship. It could never be the same again. Explanations were lame and unconvincing. We shook hands, we said awkward goodbyes with tears all round.

Don't blame the fresh trade winds, the squally rain. Blame those who never made the effort because they never understood the true sweet simple obligations of a freely-given friendship, Pacific-style.

★ ★ ★

We met her, climbing the hill into town at Nieafu, a forlorn weathered figure, hair stained grey by the years and by the constant harsh daily facials from sun and sea. At the age of 70-plus, she had just lost her Oyster 40, had our Trish. Sunk somewhere between the Cooks and Tonga after hitting who knows what in the early evening.

Forlorn, yes, but spirited still, and relishing a little in the tale of a stormy night in a liferaft while heavily reefed yachts bore down for rescue.

Trish is delightfully eccentric, a Pom whose blue water sailing and ocean racing credentials hold up with the best. We saw her several times over the next week or two as she sorted out life and a new berth to New Zealand, and we marvelled at her growing resolution and optimism.

Later we learned that she had bought a new boat in Auckland, and the following year had

headed back to Tonga, and then on to the Lau group in eastern Fiji, where she piled the vessel on a reef while accompanying another vessel through a poorly charted pass, and lost the lot once more.

Last year, we met again, this time in Phuket when she sailed in with her new boat *Entheos*, bought in New Zealand and voyaged to South East Asia via Australia and Bali. While Marion flew to London to see her parents, I helped Trish take *Entheos* down to Langkawi in Malaysia for a much needed refit before tackling the Red Sea in 2003. Alas, her lovely new sails from Phuket were untried and the main jammed constantly while trying to reef; coral build-up on the bottom kept maximum speed down to four knots; in violent thunderstorms huge volumes of seawater poured below because frozen latches stopped ports from closing; the ancient heat exchanger sprayed water all over the engine electrics like mid-summer sprinklers on the parched banks of the Torrens.

Weary, washed out and a little downhearted, Trish drifted us engineless into the fairway to Rebak marina at four in the morning. There to tow us in were our friends from *Akwaaba*, the very people who rescued Trish in the Pacific three years before.

The following day, after clearing customs and immigration, we sat at an internet cafe.

'Roger,' she said, 'Is *Roger* spelt with *d* in it? Tell me, how many years have you been sailing? How many sea miles do you think you've covered in the past few years? Would it be fair to describe your sailing experience as well above average?'

'Trish,' I asked, 'Why do you need to know these things?'

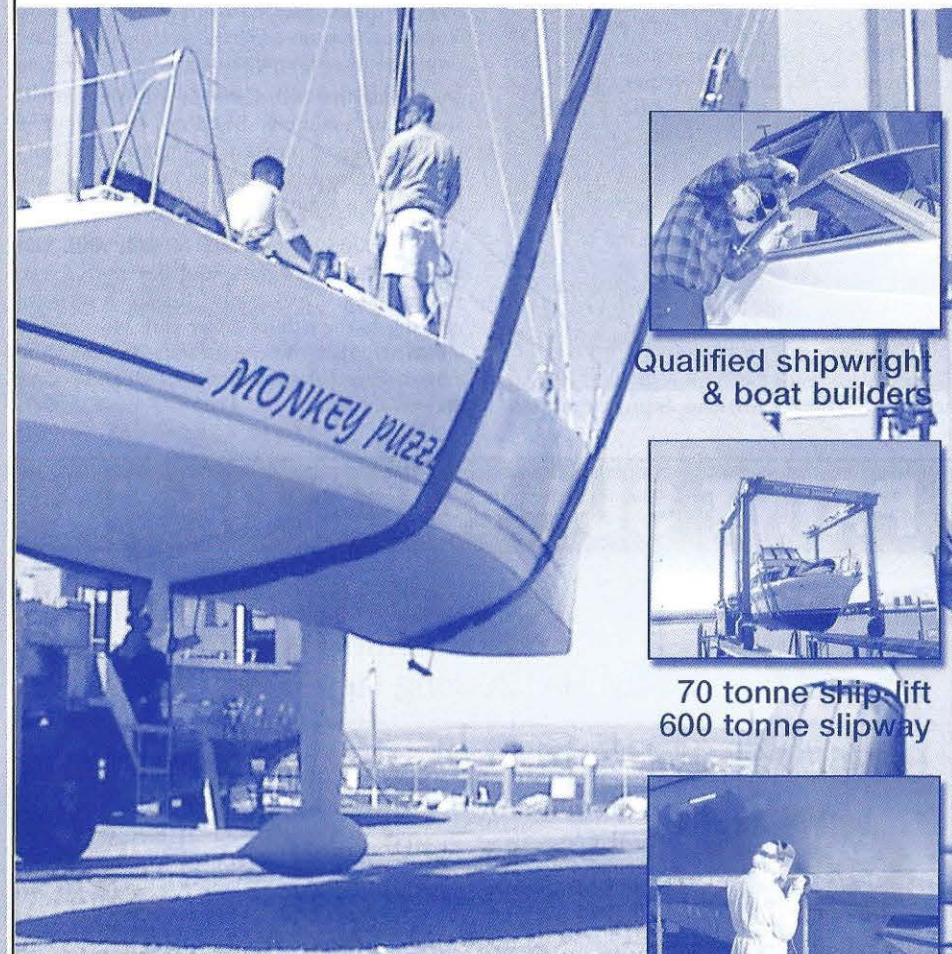
'Oh, because of my age and all the troubles, my insurance company won't let me leave port now unless I have an experienced crew, and until they have given approval. I'm sending them an e-mail to let them know we're off to Langkawi.'

'Hang on,' I said. 'We're *already* in Langkawi.'

'Oh yes, so we are,' was all she said. And laughed and laughed as only Trish can laugh when the spirits are on the rise once more.

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Time has dimmed most of our memories of Mr Dat. We can no longer conjure up images of the physical (other than that he was stocky and unusually tall for an Indonesian) but the nature of the man still shines through.

A prominent businessman and community leader, he was our guide in Ambon in '95, a wonderful ambassador for his island, who dedicated his day to our curiosity. He drove us everywhere; he took us to his village to meet his family; and he felt for us as we trembled in the uncanny, chilling atmosphere of the Australian war cemetery overlooking the harbour.

And he told us proudly how he — an Indonesian Christian — joined with his fellow worshippers to help the Muslims build their mosques, and how the Muslims in turn helped Christians renovate their churches. It was, he said, an island where religious differences actually inspired an exotic social mix of tranquility and hope.

Within three years, Ambonese were dying in their hundreds as Christians burned mosques

and Muslims torched churches. The violence and slaughter continue to this day through the provinces of Moluku.

Has Mr Dat survived all this? We hope so, but we doubt it. Reasoning optimists in clean white shirts and ties who appeal for peace and hope are usually the first to go.

Anyway, if the men of hatred haven't killed him by now, the despair most surely has.

★ ★ ★

Sanook is the word for it in Thailand, a somewhat nebulous Buddhist endeavour to give and receive pleasure in whatever you do. If you have fun, even the most mundane of tasks becomes rewarding and worthwhile.

At the south-western end of Koh Muk (*Koh* means island) is a delightful bay with a very rudimentary, makeshift 'local restaurant' clinging to the side of a low cliff. No sides, no electricity. Just three courses: chicken, squid and/or vegetables, laced with chilli and bedded on rice.

A five-kilo gas bottle with mantle provides the light, suspended from a rusty crossbeam nail. It really is idyllic, with *Marionette IV* snug at anchor across the darkened bay.

There are just three of us: Marion, Roger and the wiry cook, who is dressed in only shorts and a smile that makes up for our total lack of Thai and his total lack of English.

Sanook! Fresh and fiery chillis hit the wok, spreading pungent cooking aromas to attack the nose and throat with pain and pleasure, Sanook! Laugh till it hurts, words will only get in the way.

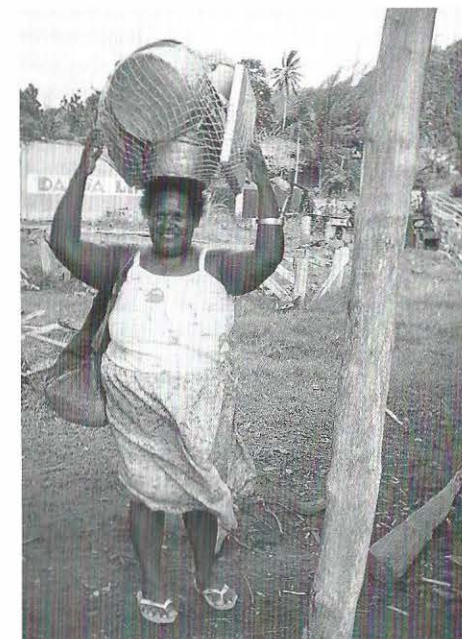
Until... until the gas bottle drops from the nail and crashes to the concrete floor, missing Marion by the merest whisker and plunging the place into shocking blackness.

Sanook! Out come the candles, out come the meals, on goes the laughter again.

It is time to say goodnight. We pay for the meal, and head for the dinghy. The night has cost us \$3 between us for the meal, a beer and a belly full of laughs. That's sanook for you!

★ ★ ★

There is a wonderful moment in the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* when Greek mother tells Greek daughter in words to the effect: 'Look, men may be the head of the house, but never forget women are the neck. Whenever they need to, they can turn the head in any direction they want.'



Melva, Solomons, 1997.

It's so true, of course. For Greek read 'Italian,' 'Jewish,' 'Australian,' 'Solomon Islands.' Yes, even up there in such a remote location as the Solomons, as so clearly exemplified by Melva the Matriarch of Marovo Lagoon.

And so it came to pass that Chief Luten Hila Watts of Mbili Village, Mbili Pass, was despatched regularly by Melva aboard *Marionette III's* dinghy

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to seek out regular plentiful supplies of bananas so that she could make huge quantities of freshly baked banana cake to ensure that said chief's sweet tooth (nay, sickly tooth would be more accurate) could be satisfied. Marion's recipe and lessons for the cooking thereof had been presented to a gathering of the village ladies, and voted overwhelmingly as the ultimate weapon in maintaining control over their menfolk. From those lessons onwards, any signs of dissent from the men could easily be quelled (a) by the addition or subtraction of sugar to the recipe, or (b), in extreme cases, the threat of withdrawal of supply entirely.

Melva, incidentally was big. Luten wasn't actually a small man — it's just that alongside her, he looked it. She was huge, a lovely, enormous bulk of goodwill and laughter with eyes that dominated from the blackness of her face. Luten was chief, the head of the household, but in matters of control there could be no doubt that neck could turn that head whenever it wanted! Marion's banana cake just made the job so much easier, that's all.

★ ★ ★

Finding bananas for Melva often meant long dinghy journeys across the gigantic lagoon complex of islands and reefs, with Chief Luten as navigator in the bow. As long as you understood that when Luten pointed, it meant

danger in that direction and not 'Go that way,' progress became reasonably straightforward and certainly a lot safer.

Once this gentle quiet man stopped us in the middle of nowhere on a reef several hundred metres from the nearest small island, where two Solomon Islanders in shorts alone were working in waist-deep water alongside a wooden dugout canoc. On their heads were masks and snorkels, their tools for tending small clams they were growing for the U.S. aquarium market.

'You are from Australia?' one asked, with a truly welcoming smile from a face fringed from the crown to the unshaven chin in crinkle-cut salt and pepper stubble. 'I have been to Australia. I once spent twelve months fruit-picking near a place called Mildura. Do you know it?'

We told this man of quiet dignity of the wonderful manner in which we had been welcomed to his country, and, half in trepidation, asked if Australia had been as kind to him?

'Oh yes!' he said beaming. 'Wherever I went, people opened their hearts to me. I could not believe how wonderful people could be.'

Hunting for bananas cannot come more uplifting than that!



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★ ★ ★

'Hallelujah!' cries the preacher man. 'Hallelujah!' cry the 20-odd swaying women as they go deeper and deeper into a trance. Wailing, crying, hands waving to Heaven. Eyes loll, feet shuffle, the intensity is too much for some as they crumble into the white sand beneath the palm shelter.

Two men control the show. No wailing or loss of control from them. Drums and voices feed the frenzy, then slowing drums and soothing men's voices bring the women back to reality again. The crying dies, the wailing eases to tears.

Yes, brethren, this is religion Fiji-style, beside the Blue Lagoon in the central Yasawa Island group. *Love Boat* and *Brooke Shields* territory this, a dozen cinematic, palm-fringed clichés for every frame no matter what direction you look.

'We hope you enjoyed our service,' say our two pretty Fijian hosts, proselytising far from their home on the much larger Fiji island of Vanua Levu. Barely 19, they are the modern face of Pacific missionary activity, dedicated and earnest youngsters with saving souls in mind, ours included.



Marion and the missionary girls, Fiji, 1999.

'Fascinating,' says Marion diplomatically, 'An amazing service.'

I have nothing to say. I walked out on to the beach in disgust long before the wailing reached its crescendo.

Two beautifully spoken and intelligent girls. Why can't they see things for what they really are? Why can't they see the hand of man where some feel their God's hand ought to be?

★ ★ ★

In the world of suits and ties, Chief Emile would command respect. Tall, dignified, eloquent, multilingual, he is a true visionary and leader of his people.

Chief Emile does not wear suit and tie. He wears a penis sheath, and very little else.

In his village on Malekula island, near an exquisite, tiny sand-surrounded satellite called Waya where *Marionette IV* is at anchor, Chief Emile is explaining why he is turning to pre-missionary traditions and values to strengthen the structures of community life. And what a village it is: clean grass huts, tended palms, paths of glorious croton and bougainvillea. It is the Pacific village of true romantic notions rather than the corrugated iron reality of most other places.

The chief is the French by-product of duopoly, of the days when London and Paris took control of their lands in a joint colonisation of the New Hebrides called a 'condominium'. He professes little understanding of English but standing in the *nakamal*, or male ceremonial hut where the men meet to drink kava and determine the ways, he has little difficulty persuading us of his plans. He is not opposed to western influence. He understands that he cannot turn back the floodtide of western change, but he does feel he can underpin community foundations so that qualities and traditions do not get washed away when it comes.

The conversation gets around to male circumcision. Yes, he explains, boys of twelve are taken away from the influence of their direct family, and under the tutelage of an uncle and in the seclusion of the long-house, are taught the facts of life and are prepared for the responsibilities of manhood. This culminates in

circumcision, a practice that had been suppressed under the influence of missionaries.

Alas, he explains, with so few boys in the village sometimes they have to combine intakes over a few years.

'Oh,' says our ever inquisitive Marion as her scientific training moves curiosity into top gear, 'Surely that means some boys will be quite old before they become initiated, producing potential conflicts of seniority?'

'Yes,' says Chief Emile. 'It is inevitable. Sometimes boys are fifteen before they are circumcised.'

'Oh,' says Marion again, 'Is fifteen the cut-off point then?'

And then she and we realise what she has said.

Three US Peace Corps workers who are with us stand po-faced in shock and self-righteous horror at this 'gaffe' in the sacred *nakamal*.

Not so Chief Emile. He bursts out laughing, with absolute and genuine delight, which really

indicates a pretty good feeling for nuances by one who professes little understanding of the English language, now doesn't it?

★ ★ ★

Lovely Butu, her husband Wayan and their two young children are Hindus, who live in the predominantly Muslim city of Singaradja on the northern beaches of Bali.

We met Wayan in 2001 while swimming off the tourist strip of Lovinia. He was doing just what we Australians love to do when the heat takes over: head to the beach with the children. He brought Butu to the boat next day to meet us, and then took us to their house for lunch. The house is filled with flowers, books and love. It is not unlike our memories of middle-class mid-60s Australian living — comfortable, spacious but not yet so clinically overwhelmed by computers and electronic gadgetry that one tends to forget its nurturing purpose.

Butu is elegantly beautiful, inhibited a bit by the shyness that comes from lack of English in our



Roger with Wayan and Butu, Bali, 2001.

company, but not so much that she cannot find the time to slip out and buy us a little gift to remember them by.

When we returned home in late November, 2002, there was a deeply moving letter from Wayan, asking on behalf of the people of Bali for forgiveness from us and Australia for the atrocities and insanity of the Kuta bombing.

Actually, there were two letters. The first tear-spattered effort was abandoned, and the second started and finished the next day; then both were posted together anyway.

We wrote back, of course, assuring him that the people of Australia did not blame the people of

Bali, that they knew how much suffering and devastation his island had gone through as the result of those who are motivated by unreasoning hatred, that we all know how much the Balinese elevate the sanctity of life by deed and example.

Words, just words! Trite and unconvincing.

You see, Wayan is an anaesthetist at Singaradja Hospital. What words of comfort can you send to a man who has just spent countless, hopeless unpaid hours sifting through the human wreckage of hate, and who then comes home exhausted to write a letter of forgiveness where the tears may wash away the ink, but can never wash away the anguish and the horror of it all?

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