

COFFEE AT FIJI AND BACK TO AUCKLAND

Fiji was hot. In the Vuda marina the boats were packed together in a tree surrounded circular pool that the wind did not penetrate. We were close to the office, café, small shops, and amenities block, that was always clean. Further seaward, past the customs dock, was a large restaurant and moderate sized bar and café. Whereas I had concentrated on filling water tanks and then using buckets for my washing others of the crew were concentrating on knowing when happy hour started and the best bargain for dinner.



We were all rather tired and a taxi drive to the recommended Nila Resort was too hard. Once it was dark we took the last four seats at the marina bar where Andy announced we were to have a Pina Colada. It was very good but it was followed by a Maitai, then some tea based rum concoction a final rum cocktail and Tequila shot. Pizzas had appeared and been consumed and after the first shot both Ernst and I headed for the boat. Fortunately I was already standing as I had done so to answer my phone after the third drink. I had stood, wobbled and clutched firmly onto a pole that had a slingshot effect on

me. I deemed it wise to remain leaning thereon. Ernst found standing very difficult.



While we followed the path back to the yacht I hummed to myself, "follow the ye3llow brick road," as it would have been much easier to see. Despite the celebratory night the crew was all awake and sober at 0800 Saturday. A car had been hired from 0900 but it was more like 0930 before we set off. We headed to Denarau to see what we had missed with the race being cancelled. The Queens Highway was a mass of potholes and the side roads little better.

We cruised by the expensively manicured resorts and parked near the Sheraton Hotel. The reception area was expansive and impressive. Ernst said the pool was cool and then swam out to a buoy off the manicured and imported sandy beach. There were a lot of people using all the beach chairs and the scene reminded me of the TV programme Bennydom. At the northern end of the resort was a charming chapel.



We tried to find the marina but were stymied by parking areas that required payment. Instead we returned to Nadi, wandered about the shops and had a really nice lunch at Singhs Fast Foods. We were

directed there by a friendly local who probably got a kick back. Adjacent was a clothing shop that also got our attention.

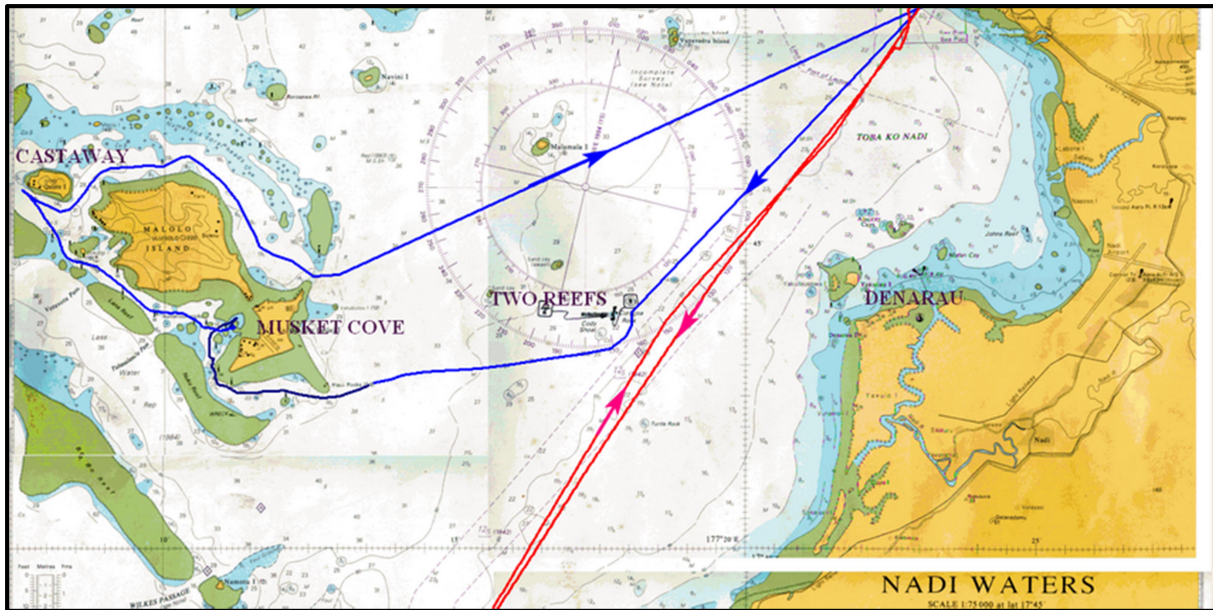


We then entered the market and bought some carrots, bananas and paw paw. Back into the traffic and bumpy roads we drove to Lautoka. The day was getting long by then and as all of the car parks had meters we returned to Vuda. That took a little longer than it should as we missed two turns. For dinner we took the advice of other sailors and used the car to go to the Nila Resort. A very nice dinner was provided and if we had got there earlier a swim in the pool would have been a good idea.

Sunday morning Andy departed for home via Air NZ. We had received our Cruising Permit and after the rest of the crew completed washing, Crest headed for Musket Cove.



About half way across Nadi Bay were two circular reefs that Grant and Ernst wanted to snorkel over. It was near high tide and the reefs were completely covered. Ernst was directing me using Navionics software and said we should anchor in the cavern that ran into the reef. I refused and pulled up in 16 metres of water clear of the reef. It did give Grant and Ernst a greater distance to swim but meant Crest was safe from the coral and that the anchor was on sand. I had yet to prove the accuracy of Navionics and so far had been happy with the digital version I had of the British Admiralty chart. I swam around Crest while the others went to the reef and looked at the fishes. By the time they returned there was not a lot of the afternoon left. Full sail and motor got Crest around the reefs of Mololo Lailai and then to the confusion of boats, moorings and reefs in the anchorage between Mololo and Mololo Lailai.



Grant and Ernst took the dinghy ashore and I stayed with the ship and had a light dinner. Trusting software for navigation rather than eyeball had been tiring as many of the charted beacons were missing. I had by then proved that Navionics placed the yacht further to the north than reality. There was a cooling breeze blowing through the cove that soothed me.

In the morning Ernst wanted to set off at first light for breakfast at Castaway resort.

“Not a good idea,” was my response. “We need the sun on high so as to see the reefs that are all covered.” It was 0930 when we made the tortuous passage around beacons, reefs and islands. The words, “Unsurveyed” on the chart says it all.



By the time we anchored it was after 1000 and I sat on the resort deck and was served a nice coffee while I watched the children being taken care of by the staff. Grant and Ernst swam in the pool, fell asleep in the loungers and had a walk. We had lunch at the resort and later a sunset drink and pizza. Ernst hired a Hobie cat and with Grant sailed out to the reef at the west. They then took turns to snorkel and watch the fish and quickly used up their allocated half hours use. The staff came out to tell them to return and they set about to do that but the wind had died. I took Crest's dinghy and towed them back to shore.



Castaway was a lovely spot with attentive polite staff.



We spent the night anchored at Castaway and because Ernst wanted the yacht back at Vuda by 1000 were ashore just after 0600. We were too early for the breakfast that had been the attraction for Ernst. A coffee and croissant was the substitute and then we took the broad passage around the west side of Mololo followed by setting full sail to cross to Vuda. Part of my navigation problem was that the British Admiralty charts colour the land yellow, the reefs green and the sea either white or blue. Repeatedly I would wonder why I could see along the coast when I thought the chart said we still had to round a headland. It was the water covered reef that had to be rounded.



At Vuda we filled with water, 246 litres of diesel, obtained some food and cleared customs. The latter was a pantomime act with Grant and Ernst vanishing alternately when the customs staff appeared. To the relief of the fuel dock attendant we departed around 1220 and set off for Navula Pass. The easterly wind had turned to the north and that blew us comfortably across the bay.



I reviewed the weather options whilst I still had Internet access. There were fronts extending north/south from both the east and west side of New Zealand. In between was a broad band of light wind almost all the way from Fiji to New Zealand. It would need a lot of engine hours but based on the fuel consumption coming north we had the capacity. The various tanks held about 430 litres and that would allow for at least 200 hours running time and should easily produce 1000 nautical miles. The winter so far had been unusual as the trade winds had not set in properly. Thus a direct route to New Zealand might work best.

Outside Navula Pass the wind faltered then came from ahead and after an hour or so decided it could come lightly from the east. We motor sailed through the night with the mainsail close reefed and flattened to steady the yacht. When I woke for my 0600 watch I found that Grant had set the full mainsail to the wind that had freshened from the east. After adjusting the mainsail we rolled out the staysail and set off on a fast romp over the sea. The sea was lazy with no height to the waves despite the wind strength varying from 15 to 25 knots. It became a splashy day with total cloud cover. Our speed mostly hovered around eight knots. By the end of the morning 10% of the mainsail had been



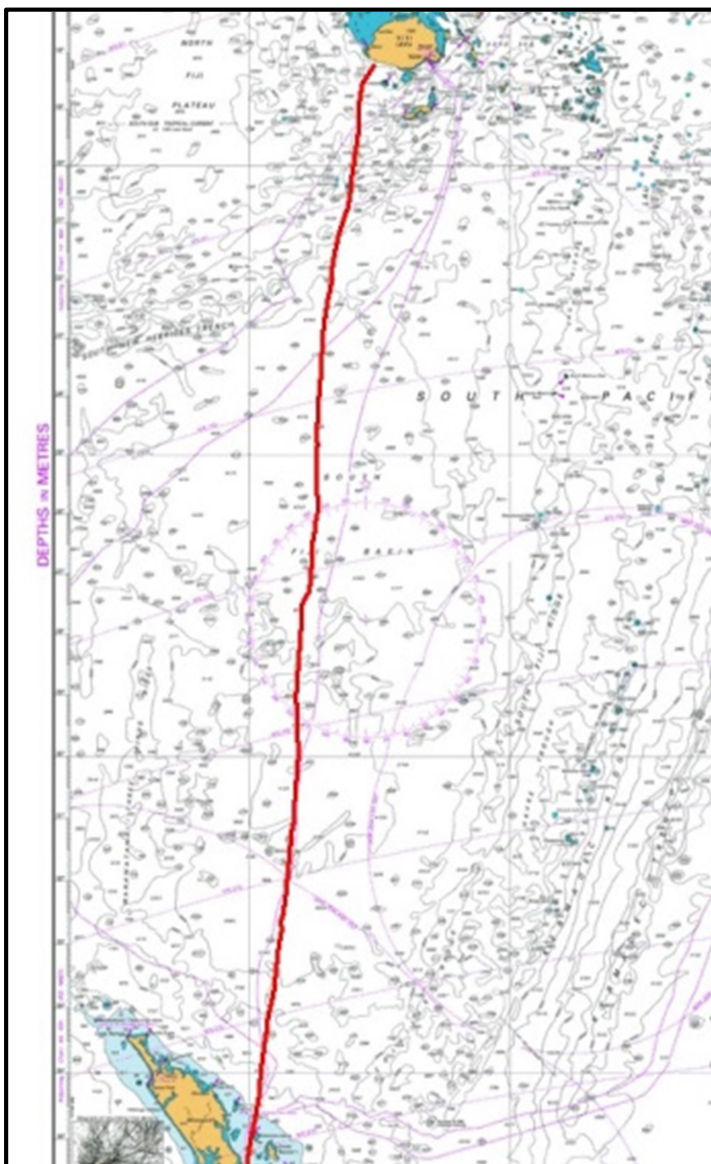
rolled in and soon after another 20%. That rig stayed like that until early next morning. It was a very dark night with light rain, a jiggly sea and wind that varied in strength from eight to twenty knots. Around 0300 the motor was started and the staysail rolled away as the wind had stopped. Ten minutes later sails were moving Crest at seven knots and the motor was off. The sea settled but at times there were thumps as the bow first rose and then came down onto the waves. At the start of my 0900 watch I swapped the staysail for the reefed genoa. It became the best day's sailing. It was warm, the sea was gentle and under full sail we averaged over seven knots. At the end of the afternoon as the sun set the air was cool. We had passed 23 degrees south.

There was a problem to deal with. We had found that the cover on the port side staysail sheet had chaffed through about four metres from the clew of the sail. I was reluctant to cut out the length and adopted Ernst's suggestion that we tape the joint. We did have spare rope if the sheet needed to be replaced.

Fishing lines were being towed astern. I have always regarded them as an unnecessary complication. With the yacht speeding under full sail what happens when a fish is caught on the line? At speed nothing is likely to be caught and nothing had been caught on the journey north. On the way south five miles outside Navula Pass by some difficult story the two lines had tangled and one of the lines was wrapped around the rudder. We pulled the free line clear and continued. Two days later, just after 1600, there were three serious strikes on the rod. A two and a half kilo Bonito was pulled aboard.



After a quiet night, Friday was a day of clear skies and sunshine. There was only a small lumpiness in the sea and from 0300 the motor provided propulsion. We stopped the motor before lunch for a brief



swim in water that was definitely colder than in Fiji. Almost immediately after stopping there was a message through our Garmin tracker. “Why have you stopped?” Our shore base was keeping a careful watch.

Once under way the genoa was set and later the mainsail to a wind that was blowing from the northwest. Some rain came down during the 1800 to 2100 watch but then cleared for the rest of the night. The wind faded and it was the motor doing

the work for half the night and all Sunday and Monday. Each evening the sun would set and we would watch for the green flash as it vanished. Each day cloud gathered around the sun at the critical setting time, and no flash was seen.

There was excitement on Monday. The first was to see another yacht. It was to the west of us and heading for anchorage near Savu Savu. They did not reveal the name of their vessel. The second excitement was that we gave the engine a rest for 30 minutes and again had messages from shore asking whether we had problems. The need was to let the engine cool before checking oil levels in the engine and the sail drive. Both were good. We then realized that we had an audience of three mammals that looked to me like small humpback whales but could have been a type of dolphin. They did not follow us once the engine had us moving.



There was no excitement on Tuesday. The sea remained in its same placid wobbly state, the wind was mostly from 240 to 300 degrees true and rarely more than five knots. At 2100 the wind direction was 15 degrees true and it seemed that the predicted northeast wind had arrived. More wind was promised for Wednesday.

I was on watch until 0300 Wednesday morning. Ernst took over and at that time the wind was far from strong. I looked forward to at least

five hours sleep but that did not happen. I had left the genoa set and the sheet on the starboard winch above my cabin. 45 minutes later the sheet and winch made clanging noises each time the sail filled. At 0400 I popped my head up into the cockpit,

“The sail will set better if you roll up at least a metre,” was my tired suggestion.

“I have rolled up the genoa completely and poled out the staysail. I am about to roll out the mainsail,” was the proud response from Ernst.

“Do NOT let out all of the mainsail,” was my response as I knew the predicted wind speed. Once the mainsail was set Crest was positively purring. I would have preferred two people on watch when the staysail was poled to windward and hoped that Ernst had used his safety harness. The yacht looked comfortable.



After day break I found the answer to the puzzle of what had caused the port staysail sheet to chafe. With the sail in its normal position the

sheet ran inside the stays clear of all obstructions. Once the jib was poled out the block on the track leaned outward and the sheet was rubbing hard on the lower part of the inner side stay. We realised that the sheet should be threaded outside the stays aft to the next turning block when the staysail was poled to windward and did that.



At day break Wednesday the sea was a jumble of nearly three metre wave peaks that looked more serious than they were. We were travelling at an average of seven knots with bursts in excess. The northern tip of New Zealand had been passed but was over a hundred miles to the west. The day continued with total cloud cover, a cool wind from 23 degrees at 18 knots. I blessed the covers that had been zipped in place all around the cockpit making a nice conservatory.

As the day advanced so did the wind. From 1500 to 1800 the boat speed hovered between eight and ten knots, the sea state remained a bit lumpy but with no serious height. When the mainsail was set at 0400 the equivalent of one reef had been left rolled into the mast. Then bit by bit more of the mainsail had been rolled away and then some of the staysail.

Abeam of Cape Brett the boat speeds were between nine and eleven knots. Forecasts were predicting about 30 to 40 knots in the open sea

and the Hauraki Gulf for the evening and that would not ease until Thursday afternoon.

Ernst and Grant spotted the Poor Knights islands through the murk at 1423 when Crest was twenty miles to the east. It took longer and a little less distance for my eyes to make that connection. The wind by then was 28 knots from 40 degrees and our course was 190 degrees. Crest then decided that ten and eleven knots were better speeds with a maximum of fourteen and I decided we could reef the sails further.



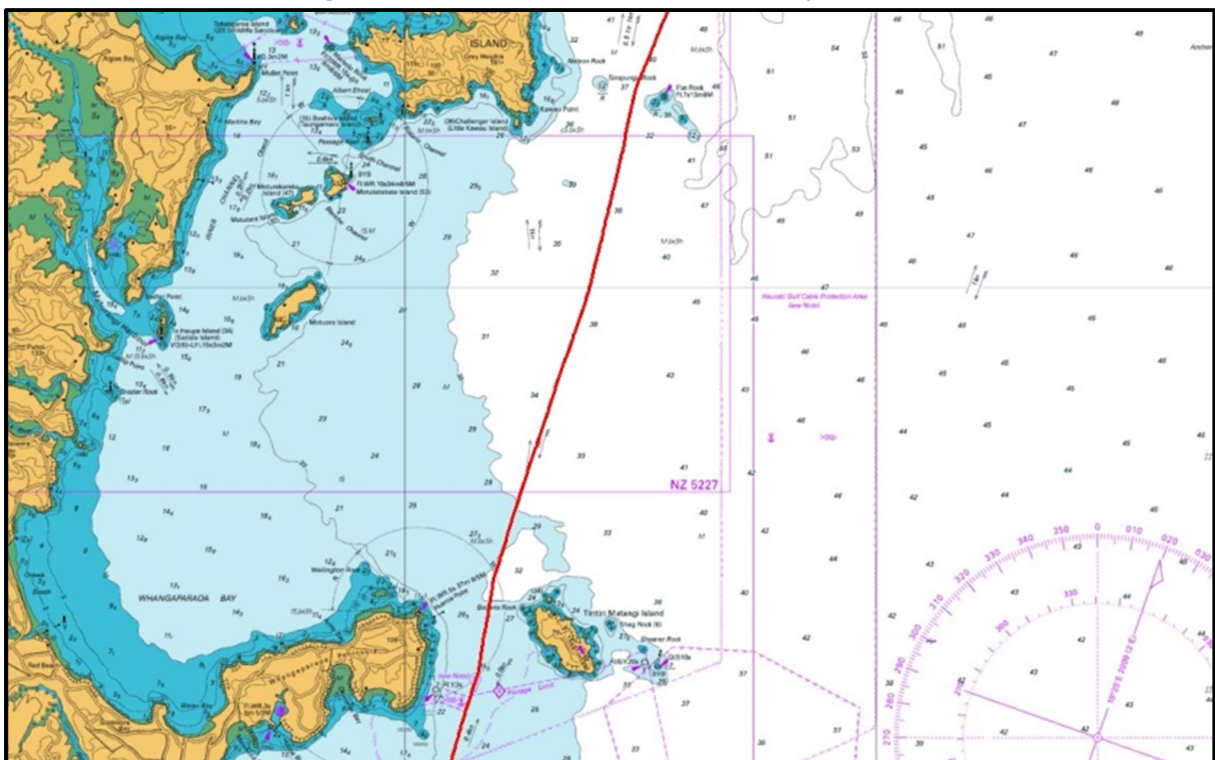
The rain started at 1800 as we came abeam of the Moko Hinau Islands. The lighthouse there shone out brightly on the dark stormy night and seemed a lot closer than our five mile clearance. The further south we went the heavier was the rain and south of The Hen and Chicken islands there was lightning and later we could hear its accompanying thunder. One flash and crash was pretty close to overhead and soon after our AIS warning system was screaming.

“It says we are on a collision course with a boat,” was Ernst’s concerned statement.

“What direction is the boat going and how fast,” was my reply. After a pause the reply by Ernst was,

“It seems to be going our course at the same speed.” We could see no navigation lights ahead, the object looked to be about five miles away so I left Crest on her course flying over the waves with minimal sail and most of the horse power coming from windage on the mast and rigging. After 15 minutes the danger on the screen vanished. Perhaps it was an echo caused by the lightning. The rain became a deluge.

Little Barrier was left to port at 2200 and Kawau was abeam to starboard at midnight. We were in waters very familiar to Grant so I



followed his suggestion that we pass inside Flat Rock and Tiritiri.

“It will be shorter and avoid traffic,” Grant suggested.

“There has been no traffic and in these conditions unlikely to be any,” was my response looking at the one and half metres of mainsail set out from the mast and about a metre of jib.

At 0200 Thursday we shot through the Tiri channel. The sea was no calmer but the rain was easing and the wind was down to 23 knots. The engine had been started as none of us felt like setting more sail. Auckland was in view ahead. By 0430 the sails had been furled and we had rounded North Head. The last challenge was to find the Customs berth at Westhaven. I knew its general area and presumed we would find a sign. It was 0510 when I turned Crest into Westhaven and by 0530 she was tied alongside at the Customs berth. The crew were abed soon after as we had established that no one would be around to see us until 0900.

The journey had been successfully completed in 8 days and 19 hours. Crest had covered 1170 nautical miles, the crew were well enough and the yacht in excellent condition. The engine had been running for 137 hours and had consumed about 300 litres of diesel. We had emptied one water tank. The food supplies were adequate with enough to eat well for another six days.

Equipment damage was minimal. A winch switch fused in the on position; a staysail sheet that was a little short (we had cut out the length from the chafe) and the self tailer for the rear starboard winch did not work; And that was all.