

FIJI CALLING

Preparation for an overseas yacht trip takes a lot of time and money. Ideally the yacht should be fully prepared a year beforehand to allow the owner and crew to use the vessel, know its quirks and sort out problems. Thus I was a little surprised when Ernst Klein asked in August 2022 if I would be the captain of the yacht in a race to Fiji. Ernst had purchased Crest in December 2021 and it was his first yacht. Crest was a well presented vessel with a lot of creature comforts which I had enjoyed on the delivery trip from Wellington to Auckland.

By March a lot of paper work had been read and ticked off, surveys booked, safety items checked or ordered and a crew arranged. I suggested that I could travel to Auckland and with all the crew go out for a weekend setting off Friday night to go around Great Barrier and the Moko Hinau Islands before returning to Auckland midday Sunday. Ernst thought that a good idea but in discussion with the rest of the crew he was distracted by a yacht race so the training session became an afternoon sail.

I arrived at Bayswater marina on Friday 31 March and checked the yacht to remind myself how everything worked. Shortly afterwards Ernst and then David Black came aboard. We had two jobs to do the first being to go to Westhaven marina to try out a berth that had become available. It was barely wide enough for the yacht but that can be an advantage in bad weather as the yacht cannot get blown away from the pier while trying to catch and attach mooring ropes. We then walked across to the Viaduct Basin to register for the race, receive the course details and starting information. After a bite to eat we returned the yacht to Bayswater. Ernst and I stayed aboard for the night.

Saturday the sky was grey it was raining and the wind about twenty knots from the north. Andy Krinkel, Grant Bailey and David were aboard before midday and we were out at the start line by North Head in time to assess the wind direction. There were about thirty other yachts and I managed to find a useful position in the middle of the long start line as the gun went. With staysail and full mainsail the yacht was comfortable. I had vetoed the genoa because of the need for

manoeuvrability and wind strength. The course was to round two buoys by Tor Bay and return to the start. Four tacks later the wind started to ease and the genoa was set and staysail was rolled away. It was good sailing practice and in the fully covered cockpit the crew stayed dry. There were two problems, first an over ride on the port aft sheet winch that was soon cleared and second a need to secure the starboard halyard winch drum. Both were promptly dealt with by the crew.

After the race we had another berth to test at Westhaven before returning to Bayswater. As the yacht was motored across the Waitemata Harbour I noticed a vibration from the propeller. The propeller was attached to a sail drive bolted to the engine and all rubber mounted. Such installations are usually vibration free.

Ernst and I had another night aboard and were able to spend the evening checking items and proving that the heating and genset systems worked. Sunday Ernst delivered me to the town terminal where I boarded the ferry to Half Moon Bay. My sister and grandnephew were waiting for me and after a tour around Music Point we were back at her home.

During April and May Ernst had the Category 1 survey completed, obtained a life raft, storm jib, trysail and drogue and then had the yacht lifted to inspect the sail drive. There was water mixed with the oil in the sail drive so that was flushed out and the seals replaced. The mechanics did not at that time have replacement bearings. Crest went back into the water and although the sail drive now contained only oil, the vibration was still present. The mechanics diagnosed a worn coupling between the engine and gear box. On 4th May Crest was lifted out at Gulf Harbour and placed in a cradle. The engine was separated from the gear box and slid forward into the cabin. The coupling was replaced and the sail drive given new bearings at both top and bottom. The work was completed late Friday 6th May and Crest was booked to return to the water the following Tuesday at 0815.

Ernst and his wife Shannon were at Gulf Harbour Tuesday when Crest was lowered into the water. The young mechanic was also present and when the motor was started water showered out of the strainer for the sea water intake. There was much fiddling to get the lid to seal that was only partly successful. The manager of the Travelift was fractious as Crest

was still hanging in the strops and preventing the next boat from being lifted. Eventually with the leak partly fixed Crest was moved out of the Travelift into a work berth. That also did not please the manager as there were boats due there. A short while later the water leak seemed to have been fixed, the engine was purring and Ernst and his wife set off for the 16 miles to Bayswater.

“There is a funny smell.” said Shannon as Crest motored out of the marina.

“It will just be some oil that has got onto the engine while the work was done,” Ernst confidently said. A short while later he noticed that the engine temperature was 120C and shut the engine off. Down below he found clouds of steam around the engine. There was no wind so a sharp turn was made to glide back towards the marina. When the engine had cooled another quick burst of power was applied to give headway and again stopped the engine. In that manner they returned to the service berth and had arranged the mechanic to be waiting. This time it was a more senior person.

“The trouble is that the rubber seal in the filter has been stretched and is not seating properly. Thus the pump is sucking air and no seawater is being pumped through the systems. I am not sure when I can get a new seal.”

“Well can't we go to Burnsco and buy a new filter?” was Ernst's response and that is what happened. With the new filter in place there were no leaks over the engine, water was rushing out of the exhaust and the cooling system was working. Again they set off for Bayswater.

The engine was happy but the lower part of the companion way was not in place. It had been removed to disconnect the engine from the gearbox and left out of place in case more work had to be done. That made it hard to get down to the cabin as the two lower steps were not available. No trouble to Ernst with his long legs but an impossible feat for his wife.

All went well for quite some time until Ernst noticed that the fenders were still hanging over the side.

“I will bring them in,” declared Shannon.

“No leave them,” was Ernst’s reply and after a bit he went to retrieve them. One was missing and when he looked aft he spotted it floating.

“We will go back and get it.” Ernst declared.

“No,” said his wife, “leave it and let’s get to Bayswater.”

Crest was put about, the fender was retrieved and put on the floor of the cockpit where it was in the way.

“I will put this down below,” said Shannon.

“No leave it.” was Ernst reply. Shannon picked up the fender and fired it down the companion way. Its rope followed and in the way of boats and ropes was promptly gathered up by the V belts at the front of the motor. All three belts snapped and the rope wedged around the pulleys and stopped the engine.

Ernst had spare V belts and tools. One belt went onto the auxiliary alternator but the other two defied Ernst efforts. He was unable to get the engine alternator to move to give the required slack.

“The water still came out the stern,” was his comment to me later that evening.

“Yes that pump is gear driven. The fresh water cooling pump is driven by the belts that also drive the engine’s alternator,” was my reply.

“Well we headed back to Bayswater at about one knot without overheating, got there after dark, tied up and came home. On Thursday I will go back with a mechanic friend, he will fix the belts and then we will get Crest to Bayswater.” That duly happened without any problems.

A week later, Louise and I drove to Auckland. We stayed with my sister in Howick and on Saturday morning I braved the drive through the centre of Auckland to Bayswater. Ernst met me at the marina and we started checking equipment and systems and a little later were joined by Andy and Grant. While Andy and Ernst dealt with checking the main engine and an oil change and service of the Genset, Grant and I dealt with a stocktake of stores and secured a radar reflector aloft. After a Spartan lunch we took the yacht for a brief motor to ensure the engine

was working properly. Once the yacht was back in her berth Andy and Grant left us and Ernst and I set about to measure ropes and resolve final equipment purchases.

Sunday was a rest day with northeast wind and cloud that became rain by evening. All that was due to clear and the forecast for our departure on Thursday afternoon was for wind on the beam at about 14 knots. What could be better? The only problem was that my sister's car decided to have a hiccup. Louise and Kay were due to drive to Hawera on Wednesday and then Wellington on Friday. The backstop was for my Mondeo to be their transport rather than waiting for my return in Auckland.

By the end of Monday Kay's car had been fixed, I had some time on Crest sorting ropes and changing the lead for sheets and had received a visit from a ski friend. Tuesday Grant delivered bulk food and Ernst arrived aboard in the afternoon to test hoisting the storm jib and trysail.



I stayed aboard for the night to make sure all comfort systems were working. Wednesday Grant delivered the fresh food and by then we had found that the small day fridge was not working. There was plenty of room in the main fridge and the freezer was almost full. The dry food

store under the island seat was 75% full and two of the cupboards along the starboard side were full. Departure was set for Thursday morning and we probably had enough food.

On Thursday Grant and Andy arrived at 0830 and once we had the water tanks full Crest was motored over to the fuel wharves at Westhaven. 135 litres were needed to bring both tanks to almost overflowing. We then returned to Bayswater as the Customs man was due there at 1100. He arrived a little earlier and very quickly completed paperwork. By then the sky had cleared and 20 knots of wind was blowing from the southwest. Crest was eased out of her berth at 1115 and once clear of the channel I turned the bow to the wind for the mainsail to be unrolled. The bow was then turned to starboard, the genoa set and motor stopped. Rain clouds were to windward but with luck we would outrun them. Abeam of Devonport the sails were gybed and we commenced a magnificent ride. The displayed speed varied from six to nine knots; the yacht was comfortable with a heel angle of rarely more than ten degrees. Some dolphins came to inspect us between Rangitoto and TiriTiri Island and the sea was flat with only small white caps. It was perfect sailing that we hoped would continue.

At 1915, eight hours after departure, we had covered 55 nautical miles and were midway between the Moko Hinu Islands and Great Barrier. There was a bit of a lull in the shadow of Little Barrier but we were soon through that and back to an eight knot charge across the ocean. The night conditions were consistent with the wind from the southwest at about twenty knots, the sea little more than a metre high but with the occasional steep waves of about two and a half metres. It was near full moon so the seascape was clearly lit. It was fast perfect sailing, a little cool but down below the cabin heater made life easy. At 1115 Friday after a day's sailing we had covered 170 miles and that meant an average of near seven knots. The day continued with no change in conditions but a variation of the cloud cover. At times it was sunny but mostly it was cloudy.

A little after 0900 on Saturday the wind had moved from 240 to 175 degrees true so we gybed onto the starboard tack. That meant the course moved from 19 to 35 degrees true. Our distance run was only 157 miles

and the wind eased with the day and by 2100 the wind had backed to 165 degrees. It seemed impossible that we could have got to the trade winds at thirty degrees south. I eased our course to 10 degrees true so as to still arrive at my planned waypoint in the latitude of Minerva Reef.

Saturday night the wind held but varied from 14 to 24 knots. The strongest wind was from midnight to 0100 Sunday. The sea remained slight and our speed varied from six to eight knots. Thus by 1115 Sunday the days run was 180 miles. There were a few very light showers of rain and the only complaint by the crew was the creaking of the joinery underneath the cockpit. If I stood near the bed or put my pillow and head against the centre partition the creaking stopped. Keeping my head in the just right spot while Crest danced over the waves was a challenge.

Sunday was a day of playing with the sails. The genoa was poled out to starboard every time the wind veered to 170 - 180 degrees. While getting the pole in position a flying fish was found dead in the port scuppers. After about an hour the wind direction returned to 160 degrees and it was better to have both sails to port. Twice the wind was less than ten knots and the motor was run for an hour each time to help the speed and charge batteries.



The wind was better to us on Sunday. It was still from the southeast. It would have been nice to think that it was the southeast trade winds but we were still too far south for that. By mid-afternoon I had changed our

course from nearly 19 to 9 degrees. The forecast was for us to expect a light SW wind in 12 hours, then 12 hours later 10 knot NE winds followed by 15 knot westerly. Reality was the wind died and we motored from 1800 hours. Sometimes the genoa was set with the mainsail, sometimes the mast was bare.

Monday the sky was clear, the sea a lovely blue that is only seen away from land and the waves vanished. It was warm and by 0930 it was time to pause. The sails were rolled away, the motor stopped and it was swim time. The water was warm but we all had a reluctance to stray from the vessel. An hour after we were back aboard a fin was spotted in the water!



The day continued calm with the wind less than 10 knots from the northwest until 2200. The wind then switched to the northeast and quickly built to 22 knots. The motor was stopped and under a full moon, mainsail and staysail we were close hauled on the starboard tack steering 341 degrees. The night went downhill from then. At change of watch at midnight Andy and I swapped the staysail for the genoa as Crest lacked drive into the bouncy sea. Crest had put herself about but the port tack did not give good results. We changed back to starboard tack and Andy

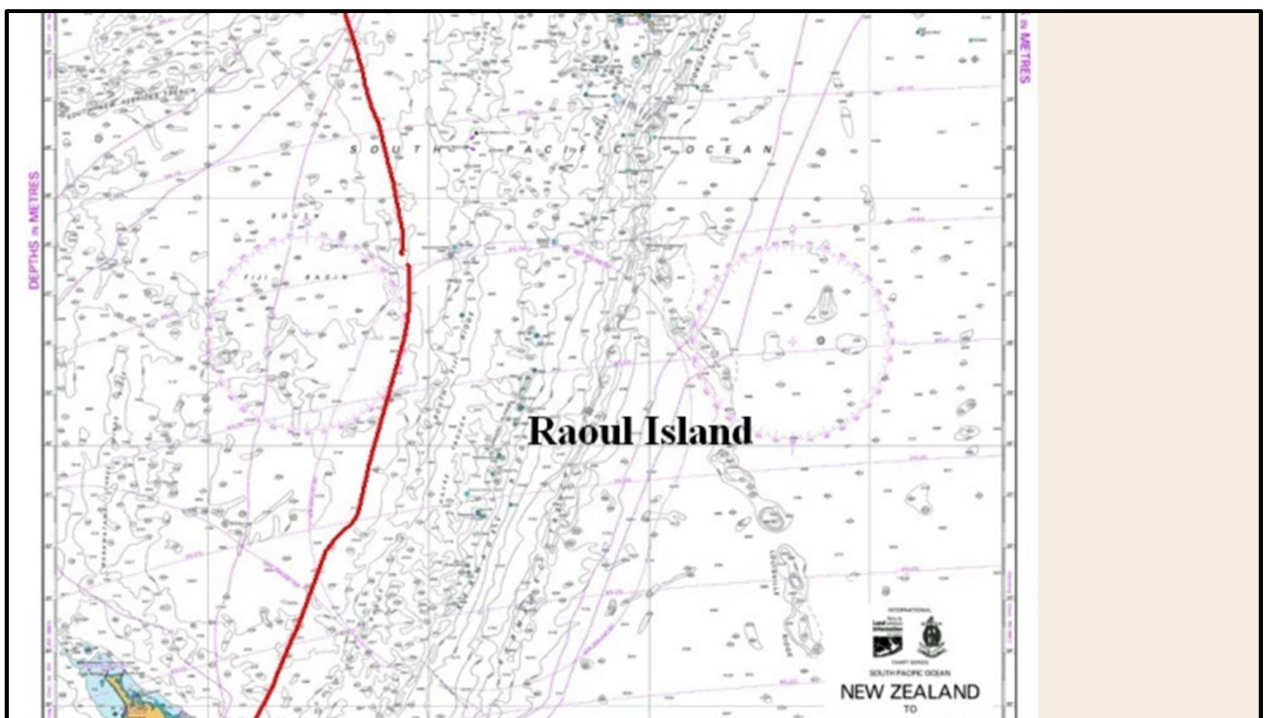
was happy to hand steer for his watch. Half an hour later there was a call for help. The wind had zipped up to 38 knots and we battled to reef the sails. With half the mainsail rolled into the mast and two thirds of the genoa rolled away Crest was happy to stand upright. Our course varied as the wind did not want to stay in a constant direction. By 0200 we were close hauled butting into eleven knots of wind and were back to full sail. Finally around 0400 the wind settled first to west and then southwest. We were at 25 degrees south and not quite into the tropics. After a torrid night Tuesday became pleasant sailing with some light drizzle. The wind speed eased and I set our course directly for the Navula Pass. After lunch the motor was needed to help the sails and I found the cause of a clunking sound. One of the spacers around the bolt holding the Vang to the mast must have worn away. That allowed the fitting to move up and down and a temporary fix was a length of small cord tied in place. The cord lasted two days so might not have been temporary.

After a mostly sleepless night the off watch crew caught up on sleep during the day. A flying fish was found in the scuppers and more seen skittering across the water. There was considerable cloud cover and the warm sea remained slight. The wind speed was close to 20 knots in the morning but to the confusion of Admiral Beaufort there were no whitecaps. The wind eased during the afternoon and by dusk and during the night the Volvo was at 1600 revolutions and a quiet mover.

I slept solidly through Andy and Grant's watches from 2200 until 0200 but was awake instantly at the start of Ernst's watch. He had brought the throttle back to idle as the five knot breeze had freshened to ten. We sailed from that point and at the start of Grant's next watch at 0600 there was discussion of setting the Gennaker. Once it was daylight the sail was hoisted and helped boost our speed until 1100 when a shower of rain disposed of the wind and the engine was back at work.



That also brought about a desire for cleanliness. Thus with less than 300 miles to go and only half of one water tank used, we each had a shower.



During the passage I had been regularly checking the fuel gauge before running the engine. By Tuesday there was about 50 litres left in the main tank. While eating lunch the engine was pushing the yacht into a small head sea making Crest gently nodded her head. The engine revolutions suddenly died away and then resumed at 1800. I immediately assumed the fuel was sloshing back in forth in the tank and the engine was

starving for fuel. Ernst quickly changed the supply to the reserve tank and the engine again purred happily. Lengthwise narrow tanks have drawbacks. By 1600 the wind returned and the engine was thanked.

The last two days of sailing were very similar. The wind was from 160 degrees and then slowly moved to 190 degrees. That meant that the headsails would not set properly unless poled out. Initially that seemed too hard but we soon worked out an easy method. However I was upset to be woken at the 0400 change of watch on the second to last night with the words, “the steering is broken; we cannot turn the wheel.”

I crawled out of my large bunk and came into the cockpit. Grant was steering and could only turn the wheel about five degrees to port and 15 to starboard or a quarter of its normal travel. We first thought the rudder may have jammed on drift wood. The engine had been running so it was brought to neutral and then moved to reverse. That only achieved snapping the fishing line being towed astern and as nothing had been caught in the previous days did not matter. When it was daylight Grant offered to get in the water and check if there was an obstruction on the rudder. The rudder was clear so more thought was applied and Ernst suggested disconnecting the autohelm. That also did not allow the helm to move normally. Another pause and thought was applied. Andy then disconnected the drive chain from the starboard wheel. Normal service was instantly restored and the steering was easier than it had been for the trip. Later in the day Andy removed the wheel from the axle and undid the bolts holding the axle and bearing. It was seemed obvious that one of the three bearings had seized. Two weeks later it was established that a grub screw between the seals had loosened and was grinding on the casing.



We no sooner had the steering under control when the wind increased to 20 knots from the west and under staysail and doubled reefed mainsail Crest maintained a comfortable six knots. Using the port wheel and autohelm, sailing continued for the last day and night of the trip. The navigation worked out well and we arrived nicely at my adjusted way point that was five miles out from Navula Pass. There was no chart disc in the main plotter but a paper chart, my computer with a digital chart and Navionics on Ernst's I Pad provided assurance that we were entering the correct gap in the reef as also did a catamaran up ahead. From seaward the Pass was hard to distinguish. The break on the reef was obvious but the leading marks were too distant in Momi Bay to be helpful.



We followed the catamaran through the pass at 0830 and then enjoyed a fine sail across Momi and Nadi Bay to Vuda Point. Vuda marina asked us to wait outside as the customs berth was busy so we anchored at 1130 and had a swim. An hour later the customs berth was free. The marina staff gave us a singing welcome and hung a lei on our guard rails.



Then we were handed forms to complete and the Customs, Immigration and Health people arrived after lunch. That took about an hour before we could move to the inner part of the marina. The wind seemed to miss the inner pool and it was very hot for my old body.

The passage was planned to cover 1250 miles but because we reduced the distance to eastwards we covered 1231 miles from Bayswater to Vuda Point. The journey had taken eight days giving an average speed of 6.4 knots. The engine had been running for about 100 hours.