

AKAMA Report 11

1 July 2003

Kismet, sometimes things just happen, both good and bad. We start this report with one of those tales.

As we entered our anchorage just west of Tanjung Po, Sarawak, Malaysia, on 3 June, after an easy half-day's coastal cruising East from the Santubong River, our steering failed. We poured a litre of hydraulic oil into the reservoir...to no avail. The oil we added went the way of all the oil in the system, straight into the bilge and overboard via the bilge pump.

Luckily, this happened as we were entering a rather large anchorage area, nicely lined up on the spot we had chosen to anchor. Equally luckily, the anchor bit on the first try.

As soon as we were settled Maurice went to the lazerette to have a look at the problem. There was hydraulic oil everywhere! AKAMA had burst a steering hose. Now, how does one fix a hydraulic hose when in the middle of nowhere when one has no spares? To make matters worse, this happened on a public holiday, Gawai Dayak (Harvest Festival).

Maurice went over to a local fishing boat to see if they knew where to get hydraulic repairs. The fishermen did not speak English. In broken Bahasa and brandishing the failed hose, he still managed to convey only the basic nature of the problem. The fishermen seemed not to know where to get a repair or a new hose other than "in Kuching". And then they left.

We discussed with the other boaters in the anchorage how we might get AKAMA going. It looked like the best bet was to jerry-rig the steering, so that we could go into Kuching for repairs. We put a hose clamp over the hole in the hose, hoping that it would slow the leak of hydraulic oil long enough to get there. Just when we were preparing to reinstall the hose, the fishermen re-appeared with not one but two hoses. Not only that, but both were terminated with the proper fittings! Where they got the hose and how they knew the size will remain a mystery due to our language barrier. We took one, and as we installed it on AKAMA the fishermen again simply went away.

The repairs effectuated, Maurice went in search of our benefactors to thank them. After locating them and thanking them profusely, he tried to pay them for the hose. They wanted nothing. When pressed they said 20 Malaysian Ringgit; he gave them 30 Ringgit (about ten bucks) and considered that a bargain.

7 June, we up anchored and headed further east, entering the Rajang River, which is the longest river in Malaysia. Now, this river is reportedly tough slogging, with many hazards to dodge, such as fast ferries, logs booms and deadheads. We saw little of that. The river is wide, very navigable, and reasonably clean, despite lots of development along the shore. We say reasonably clean, because it is light brown, like coffee with cream, and there is some logging debris. Our little flotilla (three sailing

cats, a steel sloop and AKAMA) saw dolphins, jellyfish and sea snakes. There were even well-painted buoys at critical spots.

We anchored for the night on the edge of a sand bar near a pile of logs. These logs are floated or barged down the river for loading onto big ships. There is a trade in errant logs, perhaps the reason there were none for us to run into. There is also log rustling! The log companies have stacks of logs all along the river banks, all well lit and all patrolled by security guards.

As Peter on SAMPAGUITA had caught a marlin on the way, we had a marlin BBQ aboard AKAMA that night, with pot luck on the other dishes. What a feast; what a good time!

The next day, we travelled further up the Rajang, this section much more rural. We felt like Bogart going down some Amazon River. HARMONY 88, in the lead, got to Sarikei first, and Graham reported high rise buildings and a bustling city. We thought he was kidding, as we saw no roads, or much development apart from logging, until we got around the last bend. Leaving our dinghies on the police pier (very safe), ashore we found wet markets galore, lots of little shops and a small city that is apparently rather prosperous. There was a bit more crud in the water, but few big hazards.

There are nearly no cruising boats passing here and few tourists (we saw none). So, the local newspaper, upon seeing our 5-boat flotilla, dispatched their reporter, who showed us around the city and quizzed us about cruising. Passers by often stared at us and many shouted hello or beeped their car horns and waved. We were featured in the local Chinese language newspaper, complete with three photos. That day, many more people recognized us and said hello!

We thought we got a fair deal on diesel at Santubong, where we took on 2000 litres for RM1.15 per litre, 15 cent cheaper than in Sebana Cove and the other major ports we'd been to lately in Malaysia. At Sareiki it was 83 cent a litre (about 27 US cents or \$1.02 a US gallon); we bunkered up.

Our personal health aboard has been excellent. Due to the motion of the boat, we are always flexing our muscles; so, we are both toning up. Also, our treks ashore often provide significant physical exercise. On the other hand, there are more hazards. The other day, when getting out of a dinghy, Maurice caught his toe on a line and fell. He went down like a giant in a cartoon, fist pitching over onto his knees and then forward onto his face. He sprained his wrist, scraped his jaw, cut his knee and cut his thumb open. None of the injuries were very serious, but cumulatively they made him look like he was in a battle...and lost.

On 10 June, we travelled from Sarikei to Sibu. Leaving at slack water, we were able to take advantage of a favourable current most of the way. The trip was without incident, except for a bit of drama when our aft bilge pump kept running. Maurice went below to find the leak but could see none; apparently, the water is back flowing from the bilge pump discharge line. A series of factors contributed to this. First, we have so much stuff on the boat, which depresses her waterline by nearly two inches (every ton drops her by an inch); this lowers the through hull fitting to just above

water level. Second, we took on a full load of fuel (total about 4 tons), lowering her some more. And, we are now operating up a river in nearly fresh water, which is less buoyant than seawater. Also, when a boat is moving at any significant speed, it squats somewhat at the stern. Finally, the one-way valve that is supposed to prevent backflow was allowing water to leak back into the bilge. We ‘solved’ the problem temporarily by using fuel from our starboard tank, heeling the boat a bit to get the bilge pump through hull up out of the water. Needless to say, cleaning the check valve is high on our priority list

Sibu is the second largest city in Sarawak, with a population of nearly 150,000 (In Report 10, we wrongly reported Kuching as having about the same; but it is closer to 500,000 we’re told). It is a busy industrial city with a long and bustling waterfront. At this point we noticed considerably more debris in the river from the logging further upstream. One morning a monster tree floated between our anchored boats, missing them all.

The Sarawak interior is a marine environment. Most people go everywhere by ferry, as the roads are either non-existent or in poor shape. We wanted to go up river to Kapit; so, with no road we had to go by boat. However, because of the currents and the debris, we decided to leave AKAMA at Sibu, and go by express ferry.

These ferries are built very much like an aircraft long and narrow with an aisle down the middle, and the larger ones have a similar seating capacity to a Boeing 707. Ours had three classes, first, business and economy, with massage seats in first class. They showed a movie during the two and a half hour trip. As the ferry progressed, it struck numerous objects in the water, despite the obvious attempts by the captain to dodge those he could see.

Kapit is a busy logging town with a population of about 50,000. There are few tourist venues or tourists; the main two are Fort Sylvia, built of wood in 1884, and now a museum and the town museum. Unfortunately, the latter was inexplicably closed while we were there. The wet market was also interesting. It had sights, sounds and smells that we had not yet experienced, as many ethnic people come in to sell their produce and wares. We saw things on offer that we’d not seen before, including (illegal) wild boar. As we’ve experienced elsewhere the people make the place, and Kapit is no exception. We found the people to be very friendly and curious about us. They are not at all shy and if one takes the time to just sit and relax, they will eventually approach and ask questions.

On the way to Kapit, we encountered Doctor Lee, a physician who is responsible for the clinics in the area. He agreed to take us to an Iban longhouse, a communal abode. The Ibans are a branch of the Dayaks, the aborigines of Borneo. Fierce hunter-gatherers, only in recent times did they give up cannibalism and headhunting.

Our trip up the river in the hospital speedboat was an experience. This boat is perhaps 24 feet long and has a low enclosed cabin to accommodate about 8 persons. It’s open at the back and three more can sit athwart ships just ahead of the outboards. With two 85-horsepower outboards it flies! There is about a 2-foot square hatch above the driver, who can sit either on the seat and look out the windscreen, or atop the back of the seat and, with his head half out the hatch, look out over the coach roof. The latter

mode is de rigueur; so for safety, he wears a motorcycle helmet, complete with visor. Once underway and on plane, the driver dodges and weaves among the numerous bits of flotsam and jetsam, with only partial success. We hit several logs and once had to stop to disengage a sizeable branch from the props. We came back at night, truly a harrowing experience. But it was also thrilling. As we shot off the wakes of ships we were passing, sometimes into and over a log, Louise-Ann would scream and laugh...simultaneously.

The Iban traditionally live in communes that resemble motels, built of natural materials, such as wood, rattan bamboo and thatch. Each family has their own “suite”, running off of a long common area in front. We were amazed at the longhouse we visited, as we had expected a primitive abode. We found instead a modern, well-built structure built of brick, concrete and colour-bond roofing. The people were exceptionally welcoming. We sat cross-legged in a circle in the common area and chatted about their culture and ours. Some spoke excellent English, while others just barely got along. The Iban have a tradition of heavy alcohol consumption; we were treated to Tuak, their home-made brew, which is a type of rice wine. Tradition has it that many glasses are consumed bottoms-up, which we did. As we left, they followed along pouring numerous one-more-for-the-road drinks. Though he is an Iban, thankfully, our driver did not drink!

We left Sibu on 15 June, taking advantage of the favourable current provided by the spring tide (See Report 6 for an explanation of spring vs. neap tides). The higher water brought down a lot more debris and we struck several sizeable bits and pieces, but no logs and without damage. When the current turned against us we stopped and anchored for the night, setting out again at first light.

We went into the commercial port at Bintulu, an unusual thing to pleasure vessels to do. However, this is a commercial port with a difference; they welcome yachts. Once in their harbour, the police helped us to raft up in the limited space. They even gave us a lift to the bus stop, which we had started to walk toward. The downside was that the port is quite a way from the town of Bintulu. Luckily, we happened upon a man with a 14-passenger van. He served as our “limousine” to and from town, and the next day to the national park at Niah.

We had a little drama just after arriving at Bintulu; AKAMA was taking on seawater! One of the other boaters noticed that the bilge pumps were running full tilt and asked what was going on. Maurice jumped down into the engine room to find water pouring in from the shaft gland for the emergency engine. A little explanation is in order for our nautically challenged readers. The propeller shaft exits the boat on a slightly downward angle via a fibreglass tube. As this tube is entirely below the water, seawater can come in. To prevent this, most boats have a packing gland, kind of like the packing gland on old-fashioned faucets; you tighten the nut until the drip stops. On a boat, these are adjusted so that the water just barely weeps out, as the water is needed to lubricate the gland. AKAMA however has a drip-less seal. It is composed of a cylindrical rubber bellows that is clamped to the forward end of the stern tube. The forward end of the bellows is fitted with a thick ceramic washer “face seal”. The propeller shaft has a matching stainless steel collar that runs up against the ceramic seal with a slight pressure. The collar is held to the propeller shaft with two grub screws atop of which are two more, to lock everything in place. Apparently, nobody

bothered to tighten the locking screws on AKAMA and all of the grub screws vibrated loose; one was missing. This let the stainless collar ride forward on the shaft away from the ceramic seal, allowing the seawater to pour in at an alarming rate. Had we not noticed this and had the bilge pump failed, AKAMA might have sunk in a few hours. Fixing the problem was child's play. Maurice just had to push the collar back in place and tighten the screws. Luckily, we even had a spare grub screw to replace the missing one.

Niah is fantastic! For some reason you cannot find it in your Funk & Wagnall's (Encarta), so we'll explain a bit. Niah National Park, near the town of Niah in Sarawak (this is in Encarta), is the home of the Great Niah Cave, which in 1957 was the site where an important archaeological discovery was made. Artefacts dating back to the earliest part of the Stone Age were found, making Niah the cradle of human occupation for the area. Cave paintings and death ships (coffins shaped like boats) were also found; we saw the former and saw some remains of the latter. The cave, which is enormous, is riddled with chambers and tunnels. We reckon that we put a total of about 12-kilometers on our shoes getting there (an easy trek through a jungle path) and in the caves (all on wooden walkways). To this day, there are people working in the caves, sweeping bat guano on the cave floor (to sell as fertilizer) and collecting birds' nests for birds nest soup. The latter group climb to impossibly high precipices to collect the nests, often spending a week or more high above the cave floor, even sleeping on little ledges.

By the way, attentive readers of these chronicles will recall that we have a water maker (desalinator) to obtain potable water (see Report 7 for details). However, running in the muddy rivers makes using the water maker untenable, as the filters clog up rapidly. So, running low on water, we bought hose and rigged up the water catchment system (described in Report 7). It works great! We let the first few minutes of rain go overboard, to clean the deck and the air, and then put the hoses into the water tank fills. This is much faster than the water maker, and the rain is free.

On 21 June, we left Bintulu for Miri, which is farther to the northeast. Due to the distance, we made the trip over two days, anchoring for the night along an unprotected shore. This is a horribly rolly way to try to get some rest, but we did not want to keep running through the night and arrive in the dark.

Miri is a town of about 220,000 population, and not very yacht friendly. There are no marinas or anchorages. When we arrived, we went up and down the Miri River looking for a place to anchor six boats (the sixth boat, Slippery When Wet, joined us in Bintulu). Miri is an industrial town catering to the offshore oil patch; all we saw along the river was stilt houses and industry. So, we tied the three deeper-draft boats, including AKAMA, to a barge that was tied up to the shore, and the three catamarans anchored nearby.

Along the way to Miri we had caught four fish, all Spanish mackerel! They ranged from 20 to 24 inches long and 1.7 to 3.4 pounds. We let the little one go. Dressed out, we got five pounds of fillets. Report 8 gives details of our fishing rig and our lack of success to date. With this good catch, our cost per pound has dropped. From about \$115 per pound to about half that, still not a bargain! Some of the other boats caught fish too and we had a BBQ party on the barge.

We expected to find good shopping and lots of things to do in Miri, but were disappointed on both scores. There are some decent supermarkets, but we did not find the western goods that we were seeking. In fairness, we did not search very hard. There are few tourist attractions. Anyway, we decided to leave early, striking out on our own for Brunei, leaving behind the other five yachts.

We had a difficult time with local officials in Miri, unusual for us so far. A common thread in reports from yachties is the great deal of time needed to clear in and out, and the terrible bureaucracy. Every place is different, with seemingly no co-ordination between the various agencies (immigration, customs, medical quarantine and port authority). Miri gets very few yachts, and we were the first to go to clear out. The immigration man was nice, but we did not spot that he gave us one wrong form (this would haunt us later). Then we had to take a taxi some thirty km to the shipping port to clear customs, even though they have an office in town right next to immigration. There, we were met by total confusion. The receptionist sent us up to the port authority, even though we asked for directions to customs. The port authority man sent us down to customs, where they had no idea how to deal with yachts. They wanted cargo manifests and the like, something we did not have. They also spotted the error that the immigration official had made and were making noises like they would not accept the form. Then, a lady customs officer breezed by and said, "Oh they are a private yacht and are exempt from the marine department regulations", producing a manual to prove her point. The guy dealing with us thus lost face big time and got even more bureaucratic. The discussions and chasing around went on and on. Finally, after spending most of the day, we got our clearance. Later we found out that the other yachts had an easy time of it, no doubt due to our 'pioneering' effort.

We have lots more to report but his report is already too long. So, until next time, stay well and remember to drop us a note about what is going on in your world.

Maurice & Louise-Ann