

Report 26 –Florida Islands

The morning of 30 May was beautiful and calm. So we decided to make the 25-mile crossing of Iron Bottom Sound to the Florida Island group, reportedly an excellent cruising ground. Naturally, about half way across, the wind picked up and by the time we arrived it was gusting to over 30-knots. We poked around to find a suitably sheltered anchorage, eventually settling on a natural hurricane anchorage (9-05S x 160-10E) near Tulagi Harbour in a small bay surrounded by mangroves. Until WW-II, this area was the seat of the British Government in the Solomon Islands. Iron Bottom sound is named for the dozens of war ships that were sunk there, mostly US and Japanese. There was a massive naval battle here that cost the lives of many men; there was also plenty of fighting on the land, and the killing of many local people. The locals say that the continuous supply of bodies attracted large numbers of sharks to the sound and that they did not leave for nearly fifty years.

In the morning we moved a couple of miles southeast to Ghavutu Harbour, to visit a new eco-resort that is under construction. Every resort needs an attraction and they have dolphins. The resort has a large dolphin pen, a resident animal behaviour scientist and many keepers/trainers. The idea seems to be to fund the research part via the tourist part. We wish them luck and have to admit that in the area it certainly is unique. We think that a better drawing card is the snorkelling and diving, which is reputed to be among the best in the world. At Ghavutu we again met up with SELKIE and MUSCAT, who had left Honiara before we did. ARCTURUS came along that afternoon; so for sundowners on AKAMA we had another crowd. The next day the weather was just as bad, or worse; nevertheless, we had a nice snorkel on the reef. We saw a large white and reddish starfish, a sort that we had never seen before.

Wednesday, 02 June 2004 was a disaster. We set out for Tokyo Bay, only a couple of miles to the east, to see some wrecks. There are two wrecks there, a US LST and a Japanese destroyer, both visible from above the water. We were to meet ARCTURUS there and spend the night. As we entered the mouth of the bay a red dugout canoe paddled out and asked us to stop, not something that we wanted to do as there were reefs and shoals all around. Then he got huffy and asked us who gave us permission to be there. We said we did not need any, whereupon he pressed the issue a bit harder. We got huffy right back, told him where to shove his bay and headed west to Sandfly Passage, named for HMS SANDFLY. Later we learned Tokyo Bay is not a friendly place; there are reported cases of canoes coming out at night and cutting anchor ropes, leaving the yachts go adrift.

We had an easy ride to Sandfly Passage, but then had to slog our way up to the spot where we wanted to anchor against several knots of current. Upon arrival, we could not find a suitable anchorage. We investigated a bunch of places, but they were either lee shores, the bottom would not hold, or the reefs were too close and too shallow. Several ideal spots shown on the chart were not really there. Then, disaster; for the first time ever, we put AKAMA hard aground on a reef that we could not see. We managed to get her off and went for an alternative anchorage where we could dive to assess the damage, only to be told that the anchorage was untenable and there is a 20-foot crocodile in the area. This information is accurate, as it came from John, a very helpful local who greets arriving yachts. So, we headed for another alternative anchorage shown on C-MAP and described in a cruising guide, only to be told on the

radio by SELKIE that they had gone there already and found the anchorage to be marginal for day use, let alone overnight. So, we decided to leave, even though it was late in the day.

We ran all the way back to Ghavutu Harbour (about three hour's run), where there are several slipways nearby in case we needed to lift AKAMA for repairs; also, there are no crocks, and there are safe anchorages. Arriving in the dark and rain, we had to make our way back to the anchorage. Of course, none of the navigational aids were lit. We made it safely, collapsed in a heap and had several stiff drinks after a harrowing day. But it was not over. In the middle of the night, one of our intrusion alarms went off. Maurice went outside with a 1-million candlepower spotlight and a machete. On the quarterdeck there were wet footprints where the intruder had boarded, took a few steps, heard the alarm trip, turned around and then fled. We shone the light all around looking for the canoe, but could not find it. In the morning we dove on the hull and found extensive scraping of the paint and fibreglass from the grounding. Fortunately, the damage was only cosmetic. There was also a little nick out of one of the propeller blades; we had come very close to having a big problem!

The next two days were spent cruising up and down the Mboli Passage. This is a long, narrow passage between two large islands. It winds its way roughly north and south through rugged hills at one end, mangroves in the middle and low hills at the north end. Along the way, the scenery is gorgeous and it is replete with wildlife, including a 10 to 20 foot long crocodile. The people at the northern end, where we anchored for the night, were curious about us. As usual, they had shells, fruit and vegetables for trade. Mostly, though, we just talked about where they are from, what they do, what their children do, what happened to them during the tension, and answer their questions about us.

The exit from Mboli Passage is near Tokyo Bay and we thought that we would give it another go; perhaps the lousy reception we got was a fluke. Wrong! Shortly after entering the bay someone from shore started yelling, "stop!", then "restricted area", and "go back". We ignored them and continued on, followed by SELKIE, who we re-met in the passage. We were able to get relatively close to the US LST (transport vessel) and to the Japanese destroyer. It is absolutely amazing how far into the bay the destroyer is located. We were worried about AKAMA getting through some of the narrow areas; they got a destroyer in there (well, it was aground...but still)! We were harangued a bit on the way out, as was SELKIE. One of the locals even flipped SELKIE a finger when they said that they were not interested in going ashore to buy WW-II artefacts. We are glad we went in, but we do not recommend this place for overnight anchoring...the people are just not friendly.

So, having exhausted the parts of the Florida Islands that we were interested in, and in some cases they having exhausted us, we returned to Honiara Harbour. In Honiara we provisioned with duty-free booze and diesel; neither process was easily completed due to bureaucracy at its finest. We attempted to visit the national museum, but it was closed. We were told that artefacts were stolen from the museum during the tension, what a shame. We also tried to no avail to find a mail packet, of about 8-months worth of accumulated mail that had been sent to us from Singapore a month earlier. Who knows what was in that package; hopefully just statements and junk-mail! Our last day ended with a buffet and floor show of cultural dancing at the local 4-star hotel;

the cost for two, including wine was only about 50 dollars. What a deal! At our table, guest of ARCTURUS was Rudolph, a local Malaitan that they had met. He is trying to set up a fishing operation in the area, but is otherwise a very well-spoken and informed university student. Talking to him gave us new insights into the life and times of local people and their society, as most that we meet are villagers with rather parochial views, whereas he is a former villager attending university, quite rare. We discovered that in his culture arranged marriages are still common. So, with a dozen young dancing girls among the troop, we, the “village elders” proceeded to rate them in terms of grace and beauty as potential bride for Rudy. One girl in particular was lovely, with a thousand-watt smile that lit up the room. Rudy was a bit embarrassed by all the attention but enjoyed himself; the ‘elders’ had a whale of a time, joking, laughing and carrying on. We also had at our table the captain of the local police pursuit boat, an expatriate Australian tugboat captain. He is part of a major multi-country stabilization force led by Australia. They are definitely making a difference here, although the jury is out on whether things will back-slide when they eventually pull out.

It’s time for a few words of advice about boat equipment and vendors, this first one especially for you down-under types. There are two major Australian autopilot manufacturers, Coursemaster (which supplied ours) and TMQ, which supplied the one on HARMONY-88. Attentive readers will recall Maurice fixed the one on HARMONY a few months ago. Well, our autopilot has never liked our new GPS; the GPS talks to all the equipment on board in NMEA sentences and everything but the autopilot responds properly. We wrote Coursemaster about this some time back and they sent us a new PROM chip that was to do the trick (they tried to stick us with a high charge and shipping but we eventually agreed on only the shipping). It didn’t do the trick, despite months of trying. Recently we emailed them, twice, giving specifics about the problem and they do not even answer us. TMQ, on the other hand, when we were fixing HARMONY’s autopilot responded promptly and completely to our questions. The second one is our on-again-off-again love-hate relationship with West Marine. We emailed them several times to get a big order together and they ignored us. Only after our son, Kyle, phoned them did they respond, but only in small part. When they finally responded to our technical questions the answers were very poor, they did not answer all of the questions, and in one case they simply told us to call the manufacturer (right, try that from the middle of the Pacific Ocean). We are not impressed and will be looking for an alternate preferred supplier.

We will leave Honiara soon and make the crossing to Vanuatu. Stay tuned!

Maurice & Louise-Ann