

(Since Bora Bora, my muse has been taking a bit of a break, so Fran has written quite a lot of this chapter - her deathless prose in normal text, mine in italics).

It was on the 22nd of July that we finally quit French Polynesia; after three months of getting by in schoolboy French, 50 years past its best-before date, it was a relief to be heading for some English speaking ex-British colonies.

We left on a moderate north-easter, just as the weather was about to follow its usual pattern of falling light, swinging around through north and west, before coming back fresh from the south-east. This time, it came back very fresh, with heavy rain, and made worse by the swells, coming at us from all directions. We heard later that some folks had hove to, and others had run off before it, but for us, it was just on the limit for safe sailing with a beam wind and sea, as long as we took it more slowly than usual, fully reefed. What eedjit named this ocean the Pacific? And of course, as we approached Rarotonga, having slowed right down for a dawn approach, the next fronts came through, and we had to beat against a light southwester up to Avatui harbour. The usual place for yachts, stern to the harbour wall, was full, but we found a better place, with bow anchor and stern lines to rocks near the small boat basin; more comfortable, with less "bounce back" of waves. (Avatui can be most uncomfortable in a northerly). The only drawback was having to move aside temporarily, to allow a gas tanker to turn neatly in its own length, using a bow anchor.

Rarotonga has some good hiking. There's the cross island trail, done by many tourists, but still quite steep and interesting in parts. In the middle of this trail is The Needle, a fairly vertical volcanic plug. Graham and Sue, two very fit and skilled young American climbers (they've climbed El Capitan, a 6-day "big wall" route in Yosemite) offered to lead me up it. Just within my capabilities, given a good man at the top end of the rope, belaying me. There's life in the old dog yet.

And there are routes up the other peaks; not so technical, but still steep, with fixed ropes in places where there are slippery mossy sections of rock and loose earth. It was good to get up into some high, airy places.

After French Polynesian prices, it was good to be able to store up again in the big Avarua supermarket, at New Zealand prices. Whisky became affordable again, although the main demand is still for cold beer.

Rarotonga is noticeably cooler than the other islands, being further south, but it's all relative. It's going to be a bit of a shock when we finally get to the temperate climate of New Zealand.

A pleasant overnight sail brought us to Aitutaki. And here we nearly came to grief. The channel through the reef is narrow and shallow and very poorly marked. Only shoal draft boats like Tystie and the catamarans can get through. We stood off the entrance in a very low swell, looking for the rear leading mark, but couldn't find it, although the front one is plain enough. There's an old broken beacon in a very misleading position about 100 metres north of the entrance, and we were nosing in towards it slowly, looking for a clue, when we suddenly found ourselves in amongst the coral heads, and perched on top of one before I could gather any stern way (memo to self: in New Zealand, replace 2-bladed folding prop with pitiful performance in reverse, with a feathering 3-bladed prop). Dry mouths, raised pulses and a scramble for essential abandon-ship items ensued; a lot of yachts that go on the reefs don't get off, or are badly damaged. A pan-pan call for a tow didn't produce any results. We got the dinghy hoisted off the deck and swung it outboard, intending to run an anchor out - and that and our weight forward did the trick, lifting the stern clear of the coral. The outflow from the lagoon then took us clear, twenty minutes after grounding. We were lucky, and got away with only chipped glassfibre along the bottom of the keel, after a shameful lapse in seamanship. Of course, as soon as we had stuck fast, the entrance was clearly visible, and after diving under to check for damage, it was easy to motor in.

Aitutaki relies mostly on tourism these days, but in a rather lower key than on Bora Bora, with only two small resort hotels, and a few guest houses. There's no public transport, and we rented a scooter to wobble round the island roads at 20 kph (here and in Rarotonga, economical two-wheeled transport was the norm, unlike Papeete, which was overrun with big expensive new cars). Highlights were attending an "island night", with a buffet and Polynesian dancing; and a day trip around the lagoon, with snorkelling and a BBQ, on a tourist boat (the lagoon is too shallow for yachts, and anyway, yachts are prohibited, and our nerves were still too shaky). We learned that the Australian TV reality show "Survivor" had taken over the entire island not so long ago, and no bookings for holidaymakers had been accepted. The more remote motus were used to "strand" the participants on. However, the TV company appears to have

managed the whole thing well, with \$ 3 million, much needed, going into the local economy. Our boatman got a lot of work and two big new outboards out of the deal, so he was happy.

Another rough sail brought us to Suwarrow, hundreds of miles from anywhere, now designated a Cook Islands National Park and made famous by the book, "An Island To Oneself", by Tom Neale, who lived there as a hermit for many years. Wardens John and Veronica now live there with their family during the sailing season, when it has become very popular with we yachties. John, a Maori from Rarotonga, says he "gets paid for enjoying himself", leading a fleet of yacht tenders across the lagoon when there's something to see (a stranded sperm whale in our case, and all the seabirds nesting on Gull Island, including a pair of Masked Boobies). When his boys catch some tuna, he lays on a BBQ, with the yachts all bringing a dish. He's happy to receive the yachts of many nations there, coming together as "one world", but he gets very sad when we all leave.

We arrived at Suwarrow just in time for the Wedding of the Year. Chris and Sandy, on "Carinthia", from San Diego, had decided to look for the most romantic place in the south pacific to exchange their marriage vows, and had decided that Suwarrow, at sunset, under a palm arch, with a ship's captain officiating, fitted the bill. The news got around on the grapevine, and a record fleet of 24 yachts were there. They got their wish, the rough weather abated enough for the sun to show, and they even got some musical interludes courtesy of another American boat, "Hipnautical", that carries an Irish harp aboard! And then we had a splendid party.

Yet another rough sail, followed by yet another heaving to for a dawn approach, brought us to Samoa. We were thrilled (OK, I was thrilled) to discover a launderette close by the new marina. After several sweaty months in the Tropics, we were at last able to wash our upholstery covers, lee cloths etc. There were several bar/restaurants and an ice cream shop across the road from the marina, everything else was about half a mile away. Taxis comprise 50% of the traffic, and solicit your custom all along the road. They are pretty cheap, but we walked into town and only taxied back, when laden with stores. There are several stores, each of them containing part of what you need by way of tins and packets, so we tried most of them. Fruit and veg. plus all the tourist tat, is available from the market proper and the Flea Market. There is very good value to be had, if you buy in bulk. Each stall-holder had piles of produce in front of him/

her, with a figure scrawled on cardboard perched atop. Thinking this was the price per item, we picked up one or two fruits, only to be told that the price referred to the whole stack! The selection was not as wide as in French Polynesia or the Cooks; they do not grow either onions, potatoes or carrots locally. Root veg. here means big starchy tubers of taro, cassava and kumara. Someone told us that one of the reasons that Samoans and Tongans so often come in the giant economy size is that taro, their basic starch food, contains a natural steroid. Sounds reasonable. We have had several chances to acquire a taste for this monster tuber, but it still compares unfavourably with wallpaper paste.

At the edge of town we stopped to look at a building site, as you do. Immediately, we were accosted by a tout, who was soliciting customers for the Polynesian Evening at his restaurant, called The Laid-back Turtle in Samoan. It seemed a very good deal, so we agreed to come, that same evening. A van picked us up at the marina and drove us back - to the building site. The restaurant is bang in the middle of a controversial office development, funded by the Chinese. Nothing is happening while the matter is in the Court, with the proprietor suing the government for compensation and resettlement. We were glad to contribute our mite to this struggle against the Big Cheeses, and it was a very enjoyable buffet and show, quite the best value in town. The contestants for the Miss Samoa title, to be awarded at the end of the Festival, were also part of the audience. At the end of the show, which included the exciting Fire Dance, they were persuaded to appear on stage, so we got a preview.

We thoroughly enjoyed our trip round the island in a minibus. It was just us, our bubbly Samoan guide Fitou and our stolid driver, Kevin. The most notable feature of the villages are the huge churches, always better built and maintained than the houses. (Traditional Samoan fales mainly consist of a floor platform and a roof, with curtains "you can roll right down, in case there's a change in the weather".) There are many denominations represented, with the Mormons topping out in the competition for newest and grandest. We couldn't travel all round the island, because one corner was reserved for, you've guessed it, the Australian TV show "Survivor". The coast is fairly inhospitable for yachts, as there is not much lagoon, the reef fringes the land proper, as befits a younger volcanic island. For the same reason, swimming is only possible in some locations. We stopped for lunch at one of the best beach areas, where there are dozens of small roofed platforms on stilts - beach huts

Samoa-style. These are rented by visitors and by locals on holiday; there is usually a kitchen hut or a cafe adjacent. Heading inland and upwards, the cross-island roads wind through dense vegetation and rainforest trees. The valleys are used for plantations and for cattle grazing and everything looks green and lush, however, you soon realise that creeper vines are strangling great areas of growth. Apparently, this is camouflage, a "mile-a-minute" vine that the Americans brought in to disguise their installations in WW2, and left behind to devastate the countryside afterwards. The Pacific is full of unintended consequences.

The Festival featured a display area on the harbour front by the government building. (This is a hideous concrete block foisted on the newly independent islands in the 70's, funded by the Chinese. To mollify local opposition, they put a fale on the centre of the roof; it looks like a toupee.) Here you could see displays of carving, painting, weaving and other handicrafts. There was also a greasy pole to climb, and another beam where 2 guys flailed at each other with cushions. Just like a village fete. The local radio station was there to gladden one's ears with loud pop music of uncertain vintage. I was quite touched to recognise Connie Francis. The real meat of the Festival was the competitive displays of traditional singing and dancing, particularly the Fire Dance. This took place in a church hall, and was well-attended every night; packed out on the evening that the heavens opened. The following day it rained solidly for nearly 24 hours and we decided to give it a miss. Fortunately, the sun shone for the last morning, when there was a procession of floats (haha); one for each of the Misses Samoa. These were wonderfully ingenious and detailed, depicting various activities of island life and featuring groups of attendants in identical puletasi (more on this later). The float parade was preceded by the Police Band as it moved from the marina to the Gov. Bldg. As you know, this is the land of men in skirts, or lavalavas; the uniform doesn't detract from their stalwart mien! Another highlight was the finish of the 50-man-per-boat rowing race, in the longest long boats anywhere.

The puletasi is what all Samoan women used to wear; it comprises a wrap-around skirt and a tunic top, both in patterned fabric or with solid coloured lavalava and patterned top. The dancers still use it, and most middle aged and older women. The stores abound in colourful fabric and most have a seamstress in house, ready to run up whatever you want. I had one made out of a length of material with a wide floral border; it is

really nice. It took three days and cost about £30 altogether. (*I'm wearing my lava-lava as I write - it's by far the most practical garment in the tropics. The business suit in Samoa consists of a dark grey or blue lava-lava, a white shirt - and flip-flops*).

Everyone who comes to Apia makes the pilgrimage to Vailima, where Robert Louis Stevenson spent the last four years of his life. I even climbed Mt. Vaea to visit his tomb, which looks out over the harbour. (*his epitaph - including the line "Home is the sailor, home from the sea" - will do for my remains, too*) The villa was added to by the German delegation pre-WW1, then used by the NZ High Commissioner, then by the Samoan Head of State. It was badly damaged in successive cyclones in '91 & '92. An American millionaire, who had been a Mormon missionary on the island, took on the formidable job of restoring it, and opening it as a museum dedicated to RLS. This coincided with the centenary of his death. There is almost nothing left of the contents which is original, but they have certainly captured the spirit of the place, as described in his many letters and in the photographs.

Festival Week was also notable for the presence of the Pacific Forum Line's new container ship, which was blown onto the reef, and stayed there until tugged off on the Spring tides. It was joined by a fishing boat, which wasn't so lucky; this shows that I wasn't just whinging about the weather!

On Monday the 7th September, just as we were leaving, they changed the traffic over from the right hand side of the road to the left; chaos was predicted, but was averted by means of calling two public holidays, and putting most of the police on the streets. Why, you may ask? Apparently, the government has organised a deal with left-handed New Zealand, whereby second-hand cars will be shipped to Samoa at very advantageous prices. This takes little account of the many cars already here, and particularly of the colourful old rattletrap buses, all with entrances on the right. Although it will not take long to fix that - hand me a chain saw, someone.

All you ever wanted to know about Samoa and were afraid to ask. For additional info, please see Lonely Planet.

On Wednesday 9th September, after a Tuesday-free week (*we crossed the Date Line at midnight, and in the blink of an eye, it was the day after tomorrow!*), we anchored in the lagoon of Niuatoputapu, in the Kingdom of Tonga, with a dozen other yachts; some new, some old

acquaintances that we hadn't seen for a while. The weather was fine and a bit quieter than it had been for a fortnight or so; we all had rough passages to get here, with rain squalls and some thunderclouds.

Samoa seemed a world away, with Apia, its bustling hub, full of traffic and people. This island has a population of little over a thousand, in 3 villages spread along a mile and a half of sand track, above the beach on the north coast. There is a quay at the E end, where the yachts anchor; the administrative offices are, of course, at the other end. Four people from 3 departments plus Laura visit each boat as it arrives. Who she? Laura is a thirty-something Englishwoman with a Past, apparently the sole proprietor of The Palm Tree Resort, and the facilitator for all encounters between the locals and yachties. We were lucky that another yacht was kind enough to transport the group in their big dinghy (plus outboard), or David would have been ferrying for hours. They brought forms to be filled out on the spot. Part two of the procedure required us to pay the fees, at the appropriate offices. Firstly, we had to visit the Treasury to change some currency; there is no ATM here. There are three ladies in charge, each at a desk with a calculator. We were told that the maximum amount we could change was \$NZ150, the equivalent of 210 Pa'anga, 10 of which is the fee. At 3P to the pound, and other fees totalling 130P, this didn't leave much in hand! The actual currency reserve was held in one rather battered tin cash box, which was solemnly unlocked for each customer. They went on to tell us that further exchanges could be made at a nearby shop - nothing like being directed towards the black market by the Chancellor of the Exchequer! All this because the principal inter-island ferry sank recently, and no supplies are coming in, not even money. And the airstrip's beacon needs a spare part, so the plane that could bring it isn't allowed to land.

The women of the island are the breadwinners, weaving the finest quality pandanus mats that are worn around the waist at various formal occasions in Tonga, and which become family heirlooms. One evening, they laid on a fundraising event, at which the process was demonstrated (and a feast was laid on - The Tongans will use any excuse for a feast). It's rather like linen, in the way that the basic leaf has to be rendered down to reveal the useable fibre. The funds were being sought for a solar lighting project, so that the women could continue to weave in the evenings. The men? The older men work the plantations, bringing in all the basic foodstuffs needed. The younger men are all in Australia and

New Zealand, earning hard cash to send back home (but finding the time somehow, it would seem, to father large quantities of children).

The passage down to Vava'u was one of those where you have to decide whether to sail as fast as possible, and get in before dark, or as slow as possible and get in at dawn. We chose the latter, for comfort. Must be getting old.

This is the last island group that we plan to visit before heading south towards New Zealand. I spent quite a bit of time here in Vava'u in '96 & '97, so it is interesting to see how things have changed. This has become a centre for tourism and yacht chartering in a minor way, (there was a Cruise ship in port when we arrived), and the financial crisis has affected the numbers coming here (with the exception of those arriving by yacht - the harbour moorings are full). It hasn't helped that Royal Tongan Airlines went bust last year. So, lots of restaurants, cafes and bars, not too many customers.

However, the market is still lively and most people smile. Fortunately, there are more palatable vegetables than taro to be had, including superb carrots, although, at present, not a single (imported) onion! This is a major problem for people trying to jazz up a bean diet.

Yacht chartering has come to these islands because there is easy sheltered sailing between them, many sheltered anchorages with sandy beaches, lots of coral reefs to snorkel around, and a balmy climate in the winter. Just what you want for a sailing holiday. But I think we're getting just the teensiest bit bored with South Sea Islands, each looking pretty much like the last. We're hanging around until our joint birthdays, on October 5th, hoping to get a good feast, and then it will be time to head south, looking for a suitable weather window to make the crossing to New Zealand, after the spring gales end down south, and before the cyclone season begins up here.