

Chapter Four

JULY 2007

Dear All,

I'm not sure who it was that named the Pacific, it may have been Magellan or Columbus, but whoever it was, Ute and I are here to testify that he got it wrong..... So far our journey across this ocean has been anything but "peaceful"!

We last wrote to you from the island of Santa Cruz in the Galapagos Islands. From there we went to the biggest Galapagos Island, Isabella which, though MUCH larger, has no proper port or dock and so is much less developed. Such roads as there are do not have a hard surface, they are just "dressed" with sand. The main town, Villamil, is very much a "one horse town" and though it does have an atmosphere and charm all it's own..... that is about all it does have! There was very little available there which was not a problem because we had been forewarned but it did make us realise what it is like living on a remote island and how dependant we have all become on good communications with the outside world. Isabella was charming and peaceful, Ute went on a Horseback tour up one of the volcanos. A friend once summed up my feelings about horses very succinctly as "dangerous at both ends and bloody uncomfortable in the middle" so I gave that particular trip a miss..... As with so many places, we would have liked to spend more time in Isabella but if we are to get across to Australia before the next Cyclone season we have to keep pressing on..... and the next stage was the 3,000 mile voyage to the Marquesas.

We left Isabella after lunch on April 28th and initially we had a reasonable breeze of about 10 kts. However by evening that had died away and that was the last we saw of the wind for about three days. This was not unexpected and we knew from other boats that there was wind further South so rather than just sitting there with all the sails flopping about and going nowhere, we thought it was a legitimate use of fuel to motor Southwards to find the wind. In the event we did find the Trade winds at about 4 degrees South. There were some areas of cumulus type cloud around but somehow we managed to avoid most of it and for a while we enjoyed some wonderful downwind sailing.

By May 4th the weather had become quite boisterous and we heard on the morning radio Net that one of the other cruising boats called "Sailabout", was in trouble..... At that time they said that it had lost it's mast and the cabin was waist deep in water and that they had activated their emergency beacon. The rescue was being co-ordinated by another Ham Radio Net so I tuned in to that frequency and listened for a while There was already a boat on it's way to the scene, they were about 100 miles away and making very slow progress. The US Coastguard were involved and there were two ships on their way but would not reach there till the following day.... (May 5th). Then when I heard the position of the stricken boat, it was only about 60 miles from US..... behind and a little to the North of us. So I made this known to the Net Controller and we turned round..... We had been on a very broad Reach in a good stiff southeasterly but when we turned round of course we were beating as close to the wind as we could..... we had

been escaping nicely from some rather nasty sqally weather but turning round sent us straight back into it. The wind was a fairly steady 20kts and in squalls was reaching 27 kts with heavy rain and seas of about 10ft.

We were motorsailing which gave us a little extra speed and got us a bit closer to the direction we wanted to go but we still had a current against us of about 1 1/2 kts..... Our initial ETA had been something like ten hours away but with the big seas and headwinds, it seemed to be going back rather than coming forward!

Eventually we got in contact with the Sailabout directly.... There were two people on board, a Norwegian man Gunnar and his wife Grethe. It turned out that they had NOT been dismasted but the forestay had failed and the mast was wobbling about rather alarmingly and though they were taking in water, it was nothing like as bad as our first report had suggested..... It is amazing how people exaggerate when they are not sure of the facts!!! In fact the boat had a bowsprit and the fitting on the bow that secures the bobstay had either pulled out or whacked something and the bobstay was no longer supporting the Bowsprit. This caused the bowsprit to fail and hence though the forestay was still there, it was slack and not supporting the mast. Also there were two anchors on the end of the bowsprit and since they were now dangling unrestrained, they were bashing a hole in the bow. The boat WAS taking in water but it was being kept under control by pumps and he was motoring slowly to keep the bow out of the waves as best he could.

When we realised that he was able to motor, I asked him if he could motor in a WNW'ly direction which it turned out that he could do. So I asked him to maintain that, which meant that we would intercept each other rather sooner. By now it was late afternoon and would soon be getting dark. We discussed with Sailabout and the Coastguard the various options for when we got to them..... Any transfer of people at sea is hazardous and in those conditions IN THE DARK it would be downright dangerous. Of course we would take them on board if their lives were in danger but we really didn't want to take them all the way to the Marquesas, if only because we wouldn't have had enough food and water for 4 people. We didn't want to go all the way back to the Galapagos either! So we decided it would be best to keep the number of transfers down to a minimum and wait for the first ship to arrive in daylight the next day. We would continue to make best speed towards the scene and then "stand by" in case things took a turn for the worse.... Gunnar and Grethe agreed that this was the best course of action..... even more so when they heard that the nearest ship was a Norwegian registered bulk carrier.... the "Belnor".

SO we carried on motorsailing, making between 6-7 kts and with his 5kts almost towards us, the ETA came forward rapidly. It was very dark and raining and we could see absolutely nothing! Ute is much better at spotting things than I am so she went on full-time lookout duty while I drove the boat and handled the radio. Eventually at about 8 miles apart she thought she might have spotted a light but wasn't sure..... then maybe half a minute later she thought she saw it again but it had disappeared..... Then again and eventually there was no doubt..... There she was.... bang on the nose!

Until then it had all been quite exciting and an interesting exercise

but at that point I have to admit to becoming just a tiny bit emotional..... That tiny glimmer of light in those horrible conditions seemed to symbolize life and hope.....

Eventually we came within about half a mile of Sailabout at about 20.15, a bit under eight hours after we had turned round. We agreed that we would heave to for the night and "maintain station".... We were there if needed but in the event we were not needed other than to maintain communications with the Coastguard/radio net and keep them informed as to what was going on.... Oh, and to "talk in" the American P3 Orion rescue plane which had flown six hours to get there in order to drop a liferaft and survival equipment..... I think they were a bit disappointed when Sailabout told them he didn't need it! They flew directly over us at about 200 ft and then turned round and flew home..... A long night for them.

So we spent the night dozing and keeping half an eye on Sailabout. Daylight came and we were able to see the Sailabout properly and to take some pictures. Eventually the Belnore arrived on the scene at about 08.45.

The Belnore was a very big Bulk Carrier and the Captain did a fantastic job in difficult conditions of maneuvering it upwind of Sailabout to create a lee.... They then secured the boat with lines fore and aft, and Gunnar and Gretha climbed a ladder (about 20ft) and were taken safely aboard..... and we had a ringside seat! All this was done whilst motoring forward at maybe 4 kts, presumably to maintain some degree of control. Sailabout was also motoring at the same speed and they left her with the motor running and in gear. So when they cast her adrift she just motored off into the wide blue yonder, all on her own. I spoke to Gunnar on the radio to wish them luck once he was on board the Belnor and he said that he did not leave any seacocks open, thinking that the leak would eventually sink her. However he did say it was quite a slow leak and that she would take "some time" to sink. I felt that she was a hazard to other boats so I reported her course and speed to the Coastguard..... I heard later that they were sending someone out to sink her..... a bit sad but it had to be done."

The sequel to the story was that the Coastguard did not make any attempt to sink the Sailabout and in the following ten days at least two other cruising boats sighted her, one of them nearly running into her in the night. The other (slightly amusing) sequel was that though the Belnore was Norwegian registered, her Captain was Chinese (not sure about the rest of the crew) and we had been told that her destination was Brazil so we had ASSUMED that she would be going through the Panama Canal and that Gunnar and Gretha would be dropped off there..... WRONG!

Either the Belnore was too big to go through the Panama Canal or since their destination was Paranagua in the South of Brazil, they routed round CAPE HORN and did not get to Paranagua until May 24th, nearly 3 weeks later!

So once all the excitement was over, though the wind was still about 20kts with seas to match, it all seemed strangely quiet and we suddenly remembered that we still had over 2,000 miles to go to the Marquesas.....

Fortunately the rest of the voyage was less eventful with some good winds and a frustrating amount of very light winds. The fishing was good, we caught a total of five "Mahi Mahi" and one Wahoo plus a few "monsters of the deep" that broke our 80lb fishing lines..... plus one that managed to take my entire rod and reel before I could get to it!

As we got towards our destination Hiva Oa, the wind got lighter and lighter and we were making frustratingly slow progress. On the night of day 24/25 with only about 200 miles to go, frustration got the better of us and we decided to use the motor. We were motoring slowly through the night when we got an Overheat warning on the engine. Of course we stopped it immediately and on investigation found that one of the cylinder head bolts had failed. This had allowed the head to distort just enough to allow the cooling water to escape.

One of the greatest things about this cruising lifestyle is the "community spirit" that exists amongst the boats. We all know the risks we are running and the problems we face, when anything goes wrong you are almost spoiled for choice when it comes to offers of help! In the event a South African guy Rien, who we have seen almost everywhere we have been for the last few months, and another guy were there waiting for us when we eventually arrived in Hiva Oa. We used our own dinghy and outboard motor tied alongside to drive us forward at about 2 kts and they showed us to a perfect spot and helped us anchor safely. We had been at sea for 27 days and it was SOOOO nice to see some friendly faces and to have so much help getting into a fairly tight anchorage. Over the next couple of days Rien virtually took over and stripped the cylinder head off the engine..... and I'm glad to say that there appeared to be very little damage. I will spare you the details of the fiasco that followed over getting the spare parts but suffice it to say that a very frustrating two weeks later, the replacement parts arrived. Our friends had all moved on but I put the engine back together again and it ran as sweetly as ever so we wasted no time in getting back "on the road".

This has turned out to be a another rather long newsletter so I will spare you the details of all the islands we visited except to say that in the Marquesas we went from

Hiva Oa to Tahuata, Ua pou, and Nuku Hiva..... In my humble opinion the Marquesas are simply the most beautiful islands in the whole wide world. They are all volcanic in origin, they all have big mountains (up to 4,000ft) and deep valleys with waterfalls, deep bays many of which are uninhabited.... These islands are all you could ever hope for just BEAUTIFUL and as close to paradise as we will ever find. Fantastic snorkelling almost everywhere with so many wonderful fish.... In Nuku Hiva we even saw a couple of giant Manta rays swimming around the anchorage..... These things were feeding on huge "clouds" of baby jellyfish and were performing "aerobatics" in the crystal clear water in their efforts to scoop up as many of these little blobs as possible..... they were 3 - 4mtrs in wingspan and swam just a few INCHES under our dinghy! The people on all the islands were serene and friendly..... thankfully they stopped eating visitors some time back! They keep their islands very neat and tidy and we got the feeling that France must be pouring a lot of money into these islands because there was very little evidence of any kind of "industry" other than the production of copra from coconuts. A large number of households seem to have their own little copra drying area..... Copra is produced by

breaking the coconut open and prising out big chunks of the "flesh" inside. This is then laid out in the sun to dry. When it is ready, they put it all into sacks and it is collected by the supply boat which comes every week. There were a few tourists on some of the islands but really very few..... The Marquesas are so far from anywhere, it takes a very determined tourist to get there!

We were very sad to leave the Marquesas..... and even more sad to think that we will probably never go back there.....

>From The Marquesas it was a six day sail to the Tuamotus..... The Tuamotus are a long chain of 78 coral atolls spread over about 1,000 miles in a NW-SE direction. Mururoa Atoll, where the French did all their nuclear testing is near the bottom end of the chain. In the days of the sailing ships (with no engines or GPS!) they became known as "The Dangerous Archipelago" because they are very low lying and difficult to see and there are some strong currents passing between the atolls..... and many ships have been wrecked there. Most of the atolls have a "Pass" or break in the reef which gives entry to the lagoon in the middle but many of the passes and most of the lagoons are strewn with coral heads which mean that even though we have GPS to find the place, when we get there we have to navigate by Mark 1 eyeball because the individual coral heads are too numerous and cannot be charted.

We wanted to see some real live coral atolls but obviously we couldn't visit all 78 of them so we carefully selected three which were not far off our route through to Tahiti and which looked as though they were fairly easy to get into. In the event we went to "Kauehi", "Fakarava" and "Toau"..... To say that these atolls are all very similar sounds glib, but they are.... They consist of a big "ring" of coral reef anything from just a few miles wide to, in the case of Fakarava, about 32 miles long by 15 miles wide. The reef itself can be anything from say 20 meters to 2-300 meters wide (from the ocean, across the reef to the lagoon) and the people live on this thin strip of reef. The reefs are not usually a continuous strip of "land" but are made up of a number of individual islands or "Motus" with narrow and very dangerous passes between them. Many of the motus are uninhabited and there are small communities, sometimes just one family, on some of the larger Motus. Again there is not much sign of any industry beyond copra though they seem to be trying to build up "Diving Tourism" in a limited way as the diving and snorkalling is just unbelievable with such clear water and so much coral..... There are so many different kinds of fish that it is not possible to list them but we did see sharks and even some moray eels..... just like the pictures in the books with their heads poking out of a hole in the coral!

It was Charles Darwin who worked out how these atolls came to be..... They are in fact volcanic in origin and millions of years ago, what are now the Tuamotus was a string of volcanos sticking up out of the ocean. Coral only lives and grows in waters where there is light and lots of oxygen so each volcano had just a "Fringing Reef" around it's edges. Over the course of millions of years, because of the drift of the tectonic plates, the volcanos slowly sunk into the sea and as they did so the coral kept growing in order to keep itself near the surface. So at some intermediate stage there would have been a small volcano in the middle of a ring of coral and eventually we have been left with just the ring of coral with no sign of the volcano that once was there..... He was a clever chap, that Charles Darwin!

>From the Tuamotus it was just a two day sail to Tahiti, from where we are sending this letter. Tahiti is the "capitol" and administrative centre for the whole of French Polynesia and as such it's capitol Papeete, is very developed and not quite the dreamy paradise that we all think of when we think of "Tahiti". Having had very little in the way of "facilities" or even shops, for so long we have gone into a marina here to do a few maintenance jobs on the boat and to stock up the lockers which were getting a bit low. We haven't seen a lot of the island so far but Papeete and the surrounding area is much like any Mediterranean town /port. The French influence is very evident though they have managed to keep a Polynesian character to the place. Everything is available here though at a price! Of course almost everything has to be imported and distributed amongst the islands so we have found all of French Polynesia is extremely expensive..... £3.50 for a small beer is not unusual!

The maintenance is all done now and we plan to see a bit more of Tahiti before moving on to Moorea in a couple of days time..... For those old enough to remember the old musical "South Pacific", Moorea is the fictional "Bali Hai" that featured in the film and the song..... "Bali Hai may call you.....". We will spend a few days there and then move on through the rest of the "Society Islands", Huahine, Raiatea, Bora Bora and maybe Maupiti but we will have to see how the time goes. Actually we are feeling that since we will only be doing this once, we are doing it a bit too fast..... The Pacific is SO big with SO much to see, we can never see it all but we would like to see more than we have been and spend longer in some of these places so we have decided to stay another season in the Pacific. We have to be in Australia by early November in order to avoid the Cyclone season so we will continue wandering Westwards till round about Fiji and then make a dash for Australia where we will take Damarri out of the water for a few months. Then the plan is to relaunch her next March/April and "do" the Western Pacific with a bit more time to spare.

Well I think that's about it for this "edition". Once again, apologies for the fact that this has been so long but the Pacific is a big place and quite a lot has been happening! We have been hearing some pretty dramatic reports about the Cyclone season back in England so I do hope you are all Ok. Do please keep in touch and give us your news.....

Love,

Paul, Ute and Damarri.