

Lydia to New Zealand



Cruise from Raiatea to Opuia.

Dates of Cruise 13 October to 25 November 2016.

Skipper: Donald Begg.

Boat type: Bowman 48.

Crew numbers: single-handed.

Distance covered: 2562 miles.

Lydia at CNI



Lydia is in the water at the Chantier Naval des Iles in Raiatea and is approaching readiness for Neptune.

The engine alarm has been rectified. It wasn't the oil-pressure sender or the gauge. It was a loose-fitting bulb in the control-panel which was causing a short. The bowthruster has re-joined the ocean of the living. It wasn't the mcb on the motor or my suspected water damage (pace Sam of Wishanger), it was a small nick some way along one of the cables to the control unit. Full marks to Cyprien of CNI for his logical and patient diagnosis. The replacement parts that I've brought out from Lymington stay unopened in the spares locker. Matthew, how could we sail two oceans without spare fuses for the engine fuse-box? (We have some now, which should ensure that we don't need one). Thierry of CNI has serviced the mechanics. Regine has stiched the torn luff-tape on the yankee. Karin is preparing my final bill, I'll leave that for the cool light of tomorrow morning.

The boat is full of pate de campagne, rillettes de porc and all those healthy delicacies that you get only on a French island. I thought about a bottle of Pernod in honour of Job de G, but then common sense reasserted itself. The cabin basket is loaded with fruit.

There isn't much wind at the moment and it's from the SW. Bob McDavitt, my new weather-router in New Zealand, tells me that this is being caused by a passing depression and that the SE Trades should be back on stream by Sunday. So the plan is to escape from the yard tomorrow Thursday, run up to Bora Bora (27 miles) for a trial trip, and be ready to hit the blue by Saturday.

On our way

No complaints about the CNI yard, but what a relief to be away. It reminds me of naval days, when certain Captains were known to have their ships towed out of refit yards if necessary, knowing that one delay will follow another unless you break the chain. On a lovely azure day with a light SW wind I motored up inside the lagoon along the island of Tahaa, out through the Passe de Paipai, sailed up to Bora Bora 20+ miles away, into the lagoon through the Passe Te Ava Nui , and picked up a mooring at the "Yacht Club" (in fact a restaurant) just N of Vaitape. Both passes were easy, none of the currents and overfalls of the Tuamotu equivalents.



Bora Bora is spectacular and beautiful, it was used as "Bali Hai" in the musical South Pacific, but it's touristy, the locals have seen us all come and go before, the "Yacht Club" is expensive and a bit snooty to a solitary moderate-spending punter. I really wanted to be on my way, and Trade Winds were forecast for Saturday. So I got a few jobs done, and popped across to The Gendarmerie to clear out of French Polynesia. O dear, forget about Paradise! Six forms to fill in, two of which I am asked to scan and email to Immigration in Papeete. "But I'm a sailing yacht, not a Cunarder, I don't have wifi, let alone a scanner." Reluctantly the gendarme ("I'm a Gendarme, not an immigration officer") agreed to scan and email the documents for me. But "it's Friday afternoon, you will get your departure document by email but I don't know when, don't sail until you have it". On Saturday morning no email. Tough, I'm off, hopefully an email will catch up with me, otherwise I will have some explaining to do in the Cook Islands.

I sailed at 9.30 on Saturday morning. As I write it's approaching Sunday midday, we had a pleasant sail overnight doing 5-6 knots in a 10 knot SE'ly, but now the wind is backing and fading, and we're down to 3 kts. The forecast is for a light and variable wind. So my plan is to sail as far as I can, lovely sunshine and very blue sea, and at some stage accept the inevitable and start up.

First leg and Rarotonga

It was a slowish passage overall, light winds to begin with and for'd of the beam, some motor-sailing, and then the wind backing and strengthening as the South East Trade Winds re-established themselves. The third night out was uncomfortable with 25 kts of wind from the S and a confused sea, but with morning the wind backed and moderated, and by the fourth night we were romping in the right direction at 7+ knots with the wind just abaft the beam. Daily mileages 117, 112, 128, and 151. The sky was blue. No other ships seen in this very remote part of the Pacific. Being recently out of a French supermarket it was sausage, pate and cold beer as a run-up to meals, doesn't matter too much about the garlic with no other human being within a hundred miles. Rarotonga was visible at 32 miles.

Avatiu is a small but quite busy harbour. Must get clearance from port control before entering, says the pilot. So I called them on Ch16, once, twice, third time and lucky. They said that a fishing boat was leaving later in the afternoon, so could I please anchor temporarily in a corner of the harbour? This I did, and it looked comfortable, so I'll be happy if I can stay here quietly rather than doing a Med-moor on a busy and bumpy quay in this small harbour. But there's a snag (possibly literally, I hope that my anchor hasn't picked up a witches' knitting of old mooring ropes). Three separate immigration/customs/bio-diversity control officials would like to pay me a visit, says port control, can I please come in and fetch them with my dinghy? Sure, but it's just me on board, I have to inflate the thing, launch it, get the outboard on it, and it will take me a good half hour. No problem, says port control. Well, it took half an hour, by which time immigration and customs had knocked off for the day, so the Q flag remained at the yardarm, no run ashore and nice restaurant for me that evening. The bio-diversity controller did come aboard, we had a pleasant chat about life in the remote Pacific, and he confiscated all my fruit, leaving just one apple for after supper. He even asked me to supply him with a bin-liner to take my fruit away in. A bit like being asked to provide a basket for your own head to roll in before the guillotine. Well, all's not lost, there's supposed to be a good fruit market here.

Thursday morning, and the officials are on the quay at 08.00, including one lady who doesn't like water and small boats, but puts a brave face on it in the line of duty. All done within half an hour, my old French Polynesia clearance paper from Papeete in April perfectly acceptable, 100 NZD or so to pay to the State of Rarotonga, down comes flag

Q, and the lady gives me a lift in her van to the laundry with my dirty-clothes bag running along behind. Well, almost.
Let's have a look at Rarotonga.

Rarotonga



Having arrived on a Wednesday, my intention had been to stay here a couple of days, have a good dinner, get some fresh food onboard, and get on with it towards Tonga on about Saturday. However, there is a low-pressure system approaching the Cooks, the winds will be contrary for a couple of days, and Metbob advises staying put until Tuesday or Wednesday. So I embrace that pastime which is well known to yachtsmen, hanging about in a small harbour awaiting a change in the weather.

Rarotonga is the main island of the widely-dispersed Cooks, "main" being a relative term for an island with a 19 mile circumference. It has a bit of agriculture, but the main business is tourism, all of it Aus and NZ. The locals look Polynesian but speak with a NZ accent. The currency is NZD. Sitting in a busy restaurant with, at this stage, one's unaccustomed ear beset by Antipodean voices, is a hoot, it's like living in a live comic strip. The girls semi-glam, the chaps in wife-beater vests (here's cool: a wife-beater with

a hood!), backward baseball caps and flipflops.

Well, give me a month or two.

I've had a few jobs to do on the boat, but other than that my only notable activity has been the vaunted cross-island walk over the lush hills from N to S. It starts and finishes on a good track through verdant small-holdings and orchards. In the middle there is a steep climb, hard work but with a terrific view from the top. Then the killer: the way down. This is a long, steep scramble down slippery rocks, helped occasionally by well-positioned ropes. Luckily it was dry, in wet conditions it must be lethal. I fell once, not badly, but enough to sprain a wrist mildly and fear for the working of the boat. The whole took four hours, and the track ended at the main road on the Southern coast with a strategically placed bar, a cold beer, and a bus back to Avatiu harbour.

A trip on the bus to Muri Beach, the centre of beach activities, and that's about it on this island. There's only one other yacht in, a 30ish foot double-ender with a charming young Australian couple who are heading for Palmerston Island.

Come Tuesday, the weather forecast is good for Wednesday, Metbob has given me a green light, and it's time to clear customs and immigration. This time I go to them, a half-mile walk into Avarua town. I also need to pay harbour dues here at the Harbourmaster's office, but I'll do the long bits first, six or seven forms to fill in, and catch the Harbourmaster when I come back to the boat. Immigration, two forms but no problem, passport stamped. Customs: they need to see proof that I've paid the harbour dues before I can get my clearance document. So walk back to the harbour, pay the dues, and walk back to Customs. Several forms, and the document will be handed to me on the quay tomorrow morning when I've said I'm departing. Total cost: NZD 256 harbour dues for 6 days' anchorage, NZD 69 departure tax for one person, and NZD 57 "officers' time". Add that to the NZD 151 that I paid on arrival, and visiting the people of Rarotonga is not a cheap occupation. At least it's all done with a smile, unlike the equivalent in the West Indies.

A visit to the supermarket, a loaded dinghy, lots of fruit looking no different to the stuff that was confiscated, and I'm ready for the next leg.

Second leg, Rarotonga to Tonga

Not the fastest of passages, 891 miles took 7 days, biggest daily mileage was 136, shortest 119. The SE Trade Winds were more hesitant than they have been, I'm not sure whether this was because of the time of year or because the wind is more variable as one gets further West. So the wind was on the bow for a while, nowhere much at all for a while, sometimes dead astern which is uncomfortable, and yes, sometimes on the beam or quarter and useable. For my last 36 hours it was on the quarter and I was making 5-6 kts, which was a tonic for morale. The engine was on for 34 hours, occasionally for main propulsion but generally for motor-sailing.

At the weekend Metbob commented "the South Pacific Convergence Zone will go through a venting process and will send a bundle of wet tropical air across Tonga on Monday". On Monday evening, still 200 miles out, the wind dropped and black clouds gathered. Switching on the radar I saw that they were heavy, and got most of the sail off the boat. By midnight the wind was 30 kts on the nose with stronger gusts, sheet rain and an unfriendly sea. The

cockpit was no place to be. Being in the middle of nowhere, I had the boat on autopilot motoring gently into wind, battened the boat down including the main-hatch washboard, and went to my bunk. By dawn the wind was dropping, by mid-morning we were bowling along with a good breeze on the quarter and lovely sunshine.

100 miles out we crossed the Tonga Trench, maximum depth 10,587 metres. No reading on my B&G echosounder!

Tonga is low-lying coral, unlike the previous few islands. The loom of Nuku'alofa's lights could be seen at midnight on Tuesday, and at 04.00 we rounded the Hyana Shoal and into the long passage between the reefs. I couldn't have done it at night without electronic charts. Dawn was at 06.00, and at 07.00, too early for Customs, I anchored off Pangimotu Island. Breakfast, then into Nuku'alofa, alongside the customs wharf at 09.00, and radioed Port Control to tell Customs that I was at their service. Customs and Immigration were there within the hour, gentlemen in skirts, good for us Scotsmen, a pleasant chat, a lift to a nearby ATM so that I could get the necessary Tongan dollars. "Do you play rugby, sir?" "Not with you" could have been my answer, "you're 3 times my size". "You're almost done", they said, "you just need health clearance, and he'll be here within 20 minutes". Well, Health turned up four hours later, with his young daughter, having picked her up from school first. He wrote out a form, charged a bundle of T\$, and I was indeed done.

Nuku'alofa looked hot, busy, and industrial. So I motored the 1.5 miles back to the tranquil Pangimotu anchorage and joined the dozen or so other yachts just off "Big Mama's Yacht Club". This, as I was to learn, is the holding point for yachts awaiting the weather window for NZ.

Tonga

I have been in Nuku'alofa, capital of Tongatapu and of the Tongan islands, for 8 days, and I haven't much to write about. Again, my intention had been to stay here for three or four days, and again I find myself waiting for a weather window, in this case the all-important one for the passage South away from the Trade Winds and into the Variables. We have been up to a dozen boats in the anchorage off Pangiamotu Island, 1.5 miles from Nuku'alofa. This is the site of "Big Mama's Yacht Club", a small resort that makes its living out of the NZ-bound yachts.

Most boats have taken a view on the weather and have sailed, I have been advised by Metbob to wait another couple of days. By sheer coincidence one of the other boats is also a Bowman 48, and I have been lucky to have the charming company of the English-NZ couple aboard. I believe that 17 Bowman 48's were built, so to find another in this remote location is a surprise.

Tonga tourism is, I understand, concentrated in the Vava'u islands 200 miles North of here. I came direct to Nuku'alofa because I'm keen to get on to NZ, and this is the spot for jump-off. The island and small town are busy, but un-touristy. Sunday was an experience. Tongans are religious, and on Sunday not a shop nor a cafe were open, there was hardly a car or a person on the street, but there are churches here like there are pubs in Glasgow, so there was the sound of singing at every street corner. Society is totally hierarchical, from HM the King down through the village chiefs to the

general population. Women are authoritative figures in society and family. I had a taxi-tour of the island on Monday, lots of verdant agriculture and a couple of old Tikki ruins.

The people have been invariably charming, as one might expect in the "Friendly Islands". A bit of gold in the front teeth is much favoured as an accompaniment to the ubiquitous smile. Obesity is reputed to be a major problem, but who are we from the UK to talk?

I've now cleared Customs, the boat is loaded with fruit and veg (not much else is available in the shops), and I'm hoping that Metbob will give me sailing orders tomorrow.

North Minerva

Not feeling great on Saturday morning, a bit of a skirmish with Moctezuma. But no hurry, the plan is to sail as far as North Minerva Reef and take fresh stock of the weather there. N Minerva is 250 miles from Tonga, so two easy days, sail after lunch on Saturday and be there on Monday afternoon. Moctezuma seemed to be weakening by 2 pm, so at 3pm I weighed and sailed out through the reefs in a light breeze, encouraged by "Shandon", the other Bowman, who had sailed at 1 pm (now also single-handed) with the odd chortle of "what's keeping you?". The breeze was enough for 4 knots under yankee alone down the lovely Egeria Channel. It's supposed to be buoyed, but not a buoy did I see, it would have been a little hairy without an electronic chart.

Once at sea the wind dropped, and that was the story for 36 hours, a little bit of sailing, some motor-sailing, modest progress. By Tuesday morning there were still 100 miles to go, so clearly we're not going to make it today, and then the wind picked up and we were doing 7 knots in a lumpy sea. But that's too late to be any good, because we can't get into Minerva in the dark, so now I'm reefing and trying to slow the boat down. The result was that we were 10 miles off Minerva at midnight, at which stage I have to in order to await daylight. I haven't tried heaving to in this boat before. How do you heave to in a cutter with a self-tacking staysail? See me in the bar afterwards! It was satisfyingly comfortable, so much so that when I got up at the planned hour of 5 am I made a quick decision, no need for such hurry, and went back to my bunk for another half hour.

The approach to Minerva is spooky. You can't see the reef until very close, but there, in the middle of the South Pacific, you see the masts of yachts clearly at anchor. It doesn't take imagination to see why Minerva was avoided like the plague in the days before GPS. With Navionics the entrance was easy to find and, for the record, our position was spot on and we could have done it at night if necessary.



Minerva is a coral atoll, 5 miles in diameter, with a navigable lagoon and good holding in the middle. It gives shelter from the waves, if not the wind. At high tide all you can see is breakers over the reef. At low tide the coral appears. I took the dinghy and had sort of a walk on a pinkish moonscape surrounded by turquoise sea. Lobster catching is reputed to be a rewarding pastime, I didn't try it. It's said to be quite sharky, so swimming loses its appeal. I didn't see any sizeable fish, except for one ray the size of a coffee table which flopped slowly past the boat.

There are some 25 yachts here, including the ones who sailed from Tonga before us, all waiting for a low to pass by between us and NZ. Saturday seems to be the likely day for departure, it will be like crowds leaving a football match. On Thursday afternoon we were visited an RNZAF Orion which made several low passes and broke our monotony, it's been a few years since I last saw one of them.

Date Line

Lydia has crossed the 180th degree of longitude. She is now half way round the world. For readers in Europe, she is now tomorrow rather than yesterday, she is now in the Far East and not the Far West.

Lydia Down Under

Out of Minerva Reef, into the Southern Ocean. Green light from weather router Metbob, the low to the South is almost past, head Southwest to begin with and curve round the top of the new high until heading due South on the rhumbline for NZ. I weighed at 09.30 and several of us went out through the gap in the reef at close intervals, David Mitchell in the other Bowman close behind me. He crept slowly past me, then I caught up as the wind freshened, then he pulled away further East heading for Tauranga. We kept in SSB contact three times a day for the whole voyage, which was amusing and reassuring. Why did he creep past me? He has one less fuel tank and one less water tank than me, and no generator. If I wish to be kind to myself, I say that his is the lighter boat.

The weather followed Metbob's forecast. To begin with there were 3m swells, rolling up from the gale to the South, but they weren't uncomfortable and reduced as the wind backed and moderated, then to be replaced by a shorter confused sea which was unfriendly for a day or two. Daily mileages were a satisfactory 149, 142, 153, 155. Then the high became established, the wind faded, and we were motor-sailing for the rest of the voyage. I'm not complaining, the run between Minerva and Opuia is Bomb Alley, and we got away with it lightly.

The only technical disappointment was the generator, which closed itself down on the second day with the engine heat alarm glowing. I changed the impeller, it didn't need it. I suspect an electrical problem, either the sender or the control board, that seems to be the way with Fischer Panda. It will need to be looked at in Opuia, but in the meantime I was using the main engine anyway so the batteries were being charged. Something I will investigate in Opuia is the installation of solar panels, all the other boats in these parts swear by them, and we can't be at the mercy of a temperamental generator when ocean sailing.

There wasn't a lot to see. David, who knows about these things, reckons that he saw a juvenile albatross, a long way North for the time of year. I saw numerous terns, and just one pod of dolphins. We're out of season for whales. When a couple of hundred miles out we crossed the underwater Devonport Seamount Chain which feeds into the volcanic ranges in NZ, and in which the depth changes from 3833m to 884m within a couple of miles. It's weird to think that you're cruising over an underwater Matterhorn.

Timing was unfortunate in that we approached the coast as darkness fell, the first sight of land being the lighthouse on Cavali Island at 22.5 miles. The Pacific Crossing Guide puts its finger on it, suddenly in NZ you are back in civilisation, there are lighthouses that work and buoys that are actually lit. I even had a fishing boat close by, the first time that I've had to consider collision avoidance since leaving Raiatea. Then we were into the Bay of Islands. I stopped the boat in Pomane Bay on a very dark and now blustery night to drop the sails and get the lines and fenders out. Then into the Veronica Channel under engine and up river to Opuia in the rain and in cooler conditions than we've known for a while, a stiff Northerly wind beginning to build. We berthed at the Customs Wharf in Opuia at 05.00. Half an hour later it started to get light, that would have helped! One of the Minerva boats got in just ahead of me, two just after me, and there were a dozen Q flags

awaiting the start of the Customs day at 09.00.

Customs were a good introduction to NZ and such a contrast to some of their counterparts elsewhere: friendly, welcoming, but no nonsense and efficient.

My remaining fruit and veg was confiscated of course by Biodiversity, plus a jar of honey and some other bits. I tried to get them to confiscate

Matthew's jars of mayonnaise and tins of pasta sauce, but no luck. They weren't interested in Nigel's strawberry jam either. By 12.00 all boats were done and we moved into cosy berths in the marina.

The distance covered was 271 miles from Tonga to Minerva, and 830 miles Minerva to Opuia. That's like sailing from Lymington to Gibraltar with a stop at Brest. But the currency in the Pacific is different, 1000 miles is considered to be a hop and a skip.

The total distance from Raiatea was 2562 miles. Thierry, the engineer at Raiatea who is an experienced single-hander, said to me that single-handing is an interesting challenge, "mais on est quand-meme content d'arriver".

Hear hear. I'm glad to have done it, I'm glad to know that I can do it, and

I will undoubtedly do it again. But I shan't miss the monotony...and the lack of exercise. Going for a morning run in Opuia has been like drinking

champagne. And now the boat, which has performed exceptionally well, needs

some maintenance and tidying up. For the record, I still have half my fuel capacity since topping up in Raiatea, and we're on the same cooking-gas cylinder since the Galapagos.

I look forward to going home for Christmas, then coming back out, with Nicola, for what promises to be a terrific cruising ground.