

Nick and Sally Davies in *LIEMBA*



John Paterson introduced me to offshore sailing aboard his 53' *Gallivanter*, and when Commodore in 1973 he generously allowed me to skipper her for a 6-month return voyage to the Caribbean. What a fantastic opportunity! I learned then how attractive it would be to use the trade-winds to continue westwards, through Panama to the tropical South Pacific. Six years later, with my wife Sally, I planned to do just that.

Preliminary cruises on our Nicholson 35 *Liemba* to Brittany and Ireland helped define some necessary modifications for ocean voyaging. These included replacing an unreliable roller genoa with twin forestays and poles for downwind sailing, fitting a trysail track, mast steps, Aries self-steering gear, extra battery, VHF radio, basic SW receiver for time signals, better cockpit drains and extra ground tackle. I tried to get spare parts for everything. I even went on a Perkins diesel engine course. Together with extra water and diesel containers, it also proved wise to raise the waterline. Today, some of these changes sound primitive, but satellite navigation, computers, SSB radios and much labour-saving sail handling gear was then the preserve of larger yachts. All our navigation had to be by sextant.

We left Lymington in early September 1979 and took a conventional route to Barbados via Brittany, Spain, Portugal, Madeira and La Palma. *Liemba* handled well in a bad storm near Madeira which boosted our confidence. The eastern Caribbean was busier than I had found 6 years earlier. We encountered armed uprisings in Grenada and St Vincent. One special area was the little-visited east coast of Martinique. However, the San Blas Islands off northern Panama was our first experience of what was then a truly unspoilt archipelago. The canal transit took just one day and was a big adventure. Our lovely pilot encouraged us to motor-sail the 20 miles across Lake Gatun.

With the strong allure of the South Pacific, we originally planned to go straight there after Panama, and then work as doctors in Australia or New Zealand. However when offered a really good job in San Diego, California, my boss in London urged me to turn right after Panama and "pop up there". This proved more challenging than he realised. Wind and current are unfavourable for half the 3,000 miles between Panama and San Diego. Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador did not welcome yachts, and winds can reach hurricane force in the Gulf of Tehuantepec off southern Mexico. The final 750 miles along the Baja California peninsula is a desolate desert coastline with few good anchorages.

So it proved quite a contrast to arrive in San Diego and live aboard for 21 months while working in the university. We left there in February 1982 with just the two of us on board and spent nearly all that year in the South Marquesas Islands remote and French Polynesia, the and New Caledonia, Brisbane for the Pacific, sailing direct to the 3,000 miles away, exploring other extraordinarily beautiful islands in Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu before berthing in Mooloolaba near cyclone season.



The South Pacific did not disappoint: shark-filled passes into atolls, ruined temples hidden in the jungle (one complete with human bones), Tonga's smouldering volcano where the *Bounty* mutiny took place, and friendly locals often welcoming us with gifts of fish and fruit. We had to get used to the sheer scale of the Pacific and its gentle pace of life. Our chart showed one area 1,200 miles across without a single depth sounding. In our first anchorage in the Marquesas, a Belgian yacht liked it so much he had not moved for a whole year!

We had poor weather in the western Pacific. Our visit to Vanuatu was restricted to the southernmost outlying island of Aneityum which has an excellent natural harbour but little else. In New Caledonia, a haven of French civilisation, we could shelter behind extensive reefs. On arrival in Australia we endured the most appalling night-time rain storm while trying to thread our way through 20 miles of sandbanks in Moreton Bay before reaching the haven of the Brisbane River.

Although I considered selling *Liamba* in Australia to pick up my career in the UK, import duty and regulations made sailing back home much preferable. After spending the cyclone season doing GP locums and all sorts of necessary yacht maintenance, I loved following in Cook's wake up the Queensland coast inside the barrier reef to the Torres Strait. Off the north coast of Australia near Arnhem Land *Liamba* collided with a whale, for the second time as she had done this before in Mexico. No damage, but a worrying and uncertain experience, especially on a moonless night.

After Darwin, Bali made a useful stop, despite much tedious paperwork, before the two remote Australian territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Keeling. The latter is a stunning atoll and a perfect breather before tackling the rest of the Indian Ocean. The difficult decision is whether to go via South Africa or the Red Sea. I plumped for the latter.

Galle in Sri Lanka was a safe place to spend Christmas ashore with family friends. We stopped in Cochin in Kerala before the long voyage to Aden in what was then South Yemen. Sally had to return briefly to the UK, so I was single-handed entering the Red Sea, calling in at Mocha in North Yemen, before our long journey along the desert coasts of Sudan and Egypt and a two-day transit of Suez.

Now safely back in European waters, *Liamba* spent several months ashore in Cyprus. I enjoyed two summers cruising the Mediterranean and the inland waterways of France from Port St Louis in the Rhone delta to Le Havre. It was a truly emotional moment to step the mast in May 1986 and sail the final leg back home to Lymington.

