



AKAMA REPORT 14

5 January 2004

AKAMA Report 14 We left KK on schedule for our trip around the top of north-eastern Borneo. This was to have been a slow cruise from island to island. We ended up making miles, as we had winds and nearly continuous rain for over a week. All the way around from Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan, we had one rolly anchorage after another, with few exceptions. The exceptions were spots we picked more for their shelter from the weather than for their scenery or attractions.

Most nights we anchored with one or more of the yachtie friends with whom we have been keeping company here in Borneo. We've written before about the nearly instant camaraderie among yachties. We are not really travelling in convoy, but most nights we catch up with one or more of them or they catch up with us. We often anchor near each other and sometimes have sundowners or pot luck dinners together. We share information over the radio about anchorages, sea conditions and local attractions. Invariably, at major locations such as big towns and yacht clubs, we help each other out with shopping and repairs.

As usual, equipment quit on this trip. Our friends Steve & Elaine, who write cruising books for yachties, have a tongue-in-cheek rule that something breaks down every 600-miles. Maybe they are right, as we have certainly had our share of failures. First our autopilot went on strike (broken wire). Then the stabilizers began to make an awful noise (loose v-belt). Finally, the generator overheated and quit (broken v-belt). Fortunately, these things were easily fixed.

More seriously, and potentially a show stopper, is the generator set, which has again failed. In KK we repaired the heat exchanger when we could not get a new one without delay. Eventually, the new one arrived and went into ship's stores for the fateful day that it was needed. That day arrived and we discovered that it is the wrong part. So, we are using the generator, but have to keep adding fresh water to it, or the salt will eat away the internals. We emailed the manufacturer, Westerbeke over a week ago, marked it urgent, and they still have not yet replied. We are not impressed with this company or their agent in SE Asia, KUT Diesels.

There were a couple of interesting moments. The first was at Pulau Malawi, where we stopped to tighten the v-belt on the generator and anchored for the night. Some locals, two young men and a little girl, came by in a little boat, got onto AKAMA's swim platform and watched as Maurice worked. We tried to talk to them, but could find no common language. They had shells and fish to sell, but had nothing we wanted. This was unfortunate, as we would have liked to have traded with them. Their boat was a mess, their clothes were full of holes; they were clearly destitute and could have used a few dollars.

Another interesting spot was P. Langkayan (another lousy night due to swells and wind). Here the rain stopped briefly and we had a chance for a snorkel amid colourful fishes. Alas, the locals have nearly destroyed most of the nearby reefs. Fortunately, they have recently discovered tourism and have built a dive resort on the island. This is good news for the reef, which is making a come-back.

Upon arrival at Sandakan, a city of perhaps 500,000 persons, we anchored near the local yacht club, which has nice shore facilities but nothing in the water. The wind blew up from the east and created a very dangerous situation, as the boats were anchored too close to one another. Our boat and a small sailboat "kissed" in the night, resulting in damage to our newly-varnished cap rail and a few hull scratches. So, we moved farther into the bay to a large, safe anchorage where there were only two other boats, including one of our friends. Our other friends soon joined us, as did another yacht. We were all feeling rather smug and safe when all hell broke loose. Fishing trawlers by the score arrived to shelter from the seas, which had built up to such an extent that they could no longer work. These rough wooden boats with huge diesel engines anchored around us, dangerously close, and powered by fast enough to rock us, sometimes quite violently. At one point, there had to be at least fifty of them anchored in the area, often with insufficient anchors, so that they drifted in the wind and waves. Sometimes one boat would anchor, with its too-small ground tackle, and then two or three others would raft off it, exacerbating a bad situation. Of course, situations vary according to your perspective; while we were wringing our hands with worry, hoping that our shiny yachts would not be damaged, the fishermen were having a good time on their "days off", gunning their engines, manoeuvring among their fleet, visiting between the boats and so on. The next night, they organized themselves into groups of up to a dozen boats, and anchored much more safely. At one point we stopped watching a movie, to go outside and watch the fishing boats jockeying for position, coming and going. None of the yachties got much sleep those two nights.

Despite the vigilance we yachties took, one night all of the sailboats were visited by thieves. Most of them lost their outboard motors and their accessories. We were fortunate and did not lose anything. AKAMA is rather large and more difficult to board than the average sailboat. While this does not preclude theft, it does make her a somewhat less of a target. Although police reports were made, none of the missing gear was recovered. After that, we had several police patrol boats anchored in the area. It gives peace of mind, but is a bit like hiring a shepherd, after all of the sheep have run off.

One night we had to re-anchor, as AKAMA was too close to another boat for our liking. Our anchor, a 55-pound plough-style, got caught on something. When we finally got it free, the stock had been bent like a pretzel. We deployed one of our emergency anchors and looked for an engineering shop that could straighten the anchor. This is not as easy as it seems when you don't speak the local language. Ultimately, we had to schlep the anchor around from shop to shop until we found one that could do the job. Two men and a huge hydraulic ram were put to work to straighten the stock. They bent and measured for quite some time, ultimately getting it nearly perfectly straight. Now for the good part, they refused to take any money in payment, not even a "tip"! We went to the store and bought them some oranges and drinks, which they reluctantly accepted. There are still some white knights out there.

Christmas found us aboard AKAMA with a bunch of our fellow yachties, having a communal turkey dinner. It is hard to get into the Christmas spirit when it is 30-degrees outside and none of our friends and family are present. But, having our new yachting friends aboard was a close second; a good time was had by all.

We did not expect much during New Year's Eve at Sandakan; after all, they are mostly Chinese and their New Year is a month away. How wrong we were! They decorated the town waterfront with lights, decorated all the local police and navy boats, and at midnight they shot off a pile of flares, followed by a nearly world-class fireworks display. We watched it all from the monkey island (atop the pilot house).

For our wedding anniversary, 2 January, we went to Hawaii...that is the Hawaii restaurant in Sandakan. We started out at the Sandakan Hotel dining room, a supposedly 5-star spot. But, when we discovered that they did not serve alcohol, we shifted to a lesser hotel, where we knew we could get a drink. The food was surprisingly good, and because we were there ahead of the peak time for dinner the service was very attentive. Moreover, we had a 4-course meal, with a couple of drinks, for only RM20 each (less than ten bucks).

We fuelled up at Sandakan, taking as much as AKAMA would hold (we filled her three tanks right to the tops of the fill pipes) and On Saturday 3 January, we left. We went only about 70-miles the first day, along the Borneo coast to a little village called Tambassan. There we anchored between an island and the island of Borneo, in a delightfully peaceful spot. It was so nice and we had work to do, so we stayed an extra day, touring the little village. We visited the police chief who showed us a mango tree that had been there for well over 100-years. During WWII, the Japanese used it as a gallows to hang anyone who resisted their authority during the occupation. Speaking of soldiers, at one point, a bunch of armed soldiers came over in a big black Zodiac, but all they wanted was to have their photos taken aboard AKAMA and the other two boats we were travelling with. Later, others arrived wanting the same thing.

On 5 January, we left Borneo, setting off on our next journey, a long passage to New Zealand. We'll write about that in our next report.