



## AKAMA REPORT 15

13 January 2004

We made our way south and east between Sabah, The Philippines and Indonesia. This area is reputedly very bad, full of pirates and other undesirable sorts. The exact location of the border between Malaysia and the Philippines (and in some cases Indonesia) is in some doubt, which leads to the occasional skirmish. This is where a few years ago some Philippine Abu Sayef guerrillas (they say they are separatists, but they act more like terrorists and bandits) kidnapped a bunch of tourists from a Malaysian resort island, and held them for ransom. We ran through as quietly as possible, keeping well offshore, with running lights extinguished, exchanging our observations and positions with other yachts by coded waypoints. Nothing happened.

We filed our last report from The Sibutu Strait in the Sulu Archipelago in the south-western Philippines, which is between the Sulu and Celebes seas. The Sulu Sea lies between the Philippine Islands (on the west, northwest, north, east, and southeast) and Borneo on the southwest. The Celebes Sea is south and east of the Sulu Sea, bounded on the west by Borneo; on the east by the Sangihe Islands; and on the south by the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (Celebes).

Our run south through the Sulu Sea was a veritable sleigh ride, with a following tide and favourable winds pushing us along. In the Sibutu Strait, two currents meet, sometimes flowing smoothly and sometimes bumping into each other in an incredible display of the force of nature. We had planned for the former, but encountered the latter. Being in the strait was like being in a washing machine; we were tossed back and forth by eddies and confused currents. At one point AKAMA was pointed nearly due east, but moving nearly due south. We had hoped to round the corner entering the Celebes Sea to find favourable conditions, only to be met with currents against us of up to two knots. According to our research this was not supposed to happen.

The Celebes Sea is deep, dropping to 6,200 m (20,300 ft) at its lowest point. Our depth sounder cannot cope with such depths and had to be turned off to avoid false alarms. There are very few islands. One would think that being so many miles from land, with the bottom miles below, there would be no navigational hazards! Not so; the local fishermen have installed FADs (Fish Aggregating Devices) here and there. These are steel cylinders about the size of three or four 45-gallon drums welded together (and some may indeed be so constructed), often pointed on one end. They have no lights on them, and some float low in the water, presenting a poor RADAR target. These are anchored to the bottom (yes, two or three miles below) and serve to attract colonies of fishes, which are harvested by hand lines. We are ever vigilant, as running into the pointed end of one of these could hole the boat and sink her, or at least do serious damage. Avoiding FADs, floating logs and the like during the day is a simple matter of watch keeping. At night it is more difficult. We set up an alarm zone on our RADAR, ahead and about 20-degrees to either side. If anything comes into this zone an alarm sounds. This might happen often if there are lots of waves. False alarms usually sound for a moment or two and then go away on their own. Floating logs, FADs and such present a constant alarm. We search for the offending hazard using our night scope or stabilized binoculars and steer around. We know of a few yachties that just plunge ahead into the gloom, without RADAR, trusting fate; they have more nerve than we have.

Other than the FADs, a passage through the Celebes Sea, for the most part should be much like traversing a desert; there is nothing here. AKAMA is on autopilot, the next land in our path is over 300-miles away and we just look around, read, eat, and take turns sleeping. Our trip started out that way, but the joy-ride across the Celebes Sea was short-lived. On the night of 8 January we got rather beat up by the weather. The forecast was for 10-knot winds from the ENE; perfect power boat weather. By morning it was supposed to change to 15-knots, still pretty good. What we got was 24-knots winds (with gusts over 30), 10-foot swells and steep wind waves, right on the nose. Some of the waves were breaking and when we hit one of these we sometimes took spray right over the pilothouse; that's over 17 feet above the water! This instantly changed an easy passage to a very rough ride. It also revealed a weakness in our navigation computer set-up. We had installed the flat screen monitor on the chart table, choosing one with a good heavy base, so it would not slide around. It didn't slide, it flipped. As we came down off the top of a particularly bad wave, it did a sort of somersault and smashed itself against the keyboard. LCD screens cannot take this sort of punishment and it died instantly. Fortunately, Maurice was able to hook up our old laptop in its place. Due to this bad weather we have pulled into a town called Tahuna on P. Sangihe, Indonesia (3d 36.6'N by 125d 28.4'E).

We were not the only ones in this state. Two Australian boats, SAMPAGUITA and HARMONY-88 both pulled in here, one just before us and one after. Two more Aussie boats, SELKIE and MUSCAT battled it out and got here about 10-hours after we did. We're glad to have the company, as we know all these people and have been in contact with them by radio throughout the trip (and we know them from stays at marinas). More importantly, we are not supposed to enter Indonesia without a permit (called a C.A.I.T), so having company is really good. So far, the authorities are favourably disposed to us taking refuge here, although they want, endless paperwork, and some want "gifts" and "administration fees".

When life dishes out lemons you make lemonade. We have filled with diesel, as we used a bunch pushing into the weather for a day and a half. Next fuel is about 2000 miles away (we've got over a 3000 mile range in smooth seas). We've also visited this delightful village, where cruising boats don't call; indeed we have not seen any other white people. The locals are very friendly, especially the children who are completely uninhibited. Half the town come out every day in the late afternoon, hoping to have a chat with the three or four words of English that they know. The children can be rather bold and want to come onto the boat, as do a few of the adults. Everyone here seems very happy, and not destitute, as we've seen in many other island communities. If there is a down-side, it is in too much familiarity breeding contempt; we had a fender stolen. To get it, someone had to climb the anchor chain to the foredeck, several metres above the water, creep along the foredeck, untie the fender and make off with it. We've re-stowed the remaining fenders inside the Portuguese bridge.

We went ashore the other night to a restaurant called the Marina Coffee House where we celebrated Philip's (a fellow yachting) 50th Birthday. We had a fabulous Indonesian feast. Some of the restaurant owners' family provided live music for us so we had a great time singing and dancing.

The water here is very clean and clear. There are reefs nearby for diving and snorkelling, but no dive shops. There are virtually no tourist facilities, albeit there are a few hotels. One has to wonder why the Government of Indonesia has not put more emphasis on tourism. This whole area, like the rest of SE Asia is a great, untapped tourist paradise.

In other news, Maurice has become a godfather...of an autopilot that is. One of the boats travelling with us, HARMONY, blew her autopilot. The owners, Graham and Sylvia, were considering turning back, as an autopilot is indispensable on any long trip. They brought it over to AKAMA and after a bit of

study and a few tests, Maurice was able to jury-rig it to work acceptably well. One of the field effect transistors was shorted and Maurice was able to pull one out of a non-essential circuit and substitute it for the blown one. Yachties frequently name their autopilots, as they can be likened to having another crew member aboard. HARMONY's autopilot has been renamed "Maurice".

Boat Leaks: It seems that boats, including AKAMA are forever springing leaks. These are usually rain leaks, above the waterline. It's a continual battle. We fixed most of them a year ago, by removing most of the deck rails and re-bedding them with 3M-5200, perhaps the world's best bedding compound/sealant/adhesive. Recently, we developed more leaks, which were fixed by simply tightening some screws. We blush to report the worst of the bunch was self inflicted. We recently installed air horns atop the pilothouse. The thing is, if air comes out of air horns, it follows that water can come in. And it does. Of course this revelation is based on 20-20 hindsight, after having cups of water mysteriously show up on the helm station after each rain. How the rain travels first sideways to enter the horn and then uphill to pass through the orifice will remain a mystery. The quick fix was some Saran Wrap and elastic bands; a more permanent fix will follow...eventually.

Our web site (nunas.com) now has some selected photos of our voyage on it. They are only 300 pixels wide, so they will not tax your internet bandwidth. Have a look and tell us what you think. Later on, Kyle has promised to add links to more detailed versions of the photos, for those unlimited bandwidth types who like their photos in great detail.

As we send this, we are on our way eastward from Tahuna, towards Helen Reef (Pulau) 2d 53'N by 131d 46'E. That is about 400-miles from here and the trip will take three to four days.