



AKAMA REPORT 19
11 March 2004

Because of our broken stabilizers, we tried to pick weather that would provide a smooth passage from the Hermits to Madang (PNG). Of course the weather guessers had it wrong. We had wind and waves on the beam and things got rather jumbled in the cupboards and fridge, as we rolled. All of our tools for weather prediction come via HF radio. We download GRIB files by email; these provide forecasts of wind and pressure. We receive weather faxes, which are maps showing a great number of meteorological parameters. Lately we have been receiving voice forecasts via HF radio. We've tried a newer system called NAVTEX, which is radio Teletype broadcasts, without much luck. Finally, we obtain information about actual conditions and some forecasts from other cruisers and net control stations on the several cruisers nets on the ham radio.

During the day, we saw some huge trees (top, trunk and root ball), and some big logs floating around. As this was a two-night passage and we were fearful that we would strike something. Luckily we avoided all hazards, including one big FAD.

We had a stowaway on board. Just before a storm hit, a young sea bird circled us and landed on the bow rail. It stayed there all night and did not leave until we entered the anchorage at Madang.

Entry to Madang (app. 5d 13m south 145d 48m East) was a bit rough, as we arrived in the dark, well ahead of schedule. Because it was raining cats and dogs, and blowing a bit, sitting out in the ocean near the entrance through the reef was quite uncomfortable. So, we decided to go in. The PNG government does not maintain their navigational aids well; several of the lights we expected to see were not on. We entered with what aids there were, helped along by our RADAR. We made one attempt, and then chickened out because the depths did not agree with the charts. After looking at the chart offsets (errors compared to the GPS position), on the second attempt we were in easily, if rather slowly. The quarantine anchorage, where we intended to wait for daylight was blacker than pitch. But, with our night scope and the RADAR we were able to determine that there were no unlit boats around; in fact there were no boats at all.

At daybreak, we were joined by our friends on HARMONY-88, who also made the same passage. Together we explored the coves and inlets, eventually settling on one for our stay here that had a few other yachts in it. Upon arrival, one of the resident yachties, Tony, came out in his dinghy and helped us anchor in Mediterranean mooring fashion (a stern rope ashore and the anchor holding the bow in place). A few days later more friends on SAMPAGUITA arrived; we put her between HARMONY and AKAMA, tied to the same thing on shore as AKAMA. This proved to be unwise, as in the night the winds shifted and SAMPAGUITA received a little love tap as the wind pushed AKAMA sideways. Eventually, SELKIE and MUSCAT, two other boats that we have cruised with also caught up to us.

Coming to this bay was a lucky pick; Tony is refurbishing a boat here and has about 30-persons on staff from mechanics to carpenters. He has made them available to us to help fix our generator set and our stabilizers. This was done with minimal drama. We also had them add a new 100-ampere alternator

with an external 3-stage regulator to the wing engine. This boosts our charging capability considerably. When the generator set died, we resigned ourselves to having to run the wing engine something in the order of 12-hours a night (during the day the solar panels kept things going) for battery charging. Now we need to run it only about 6-hours.

You may recall that we were somewhat trepidations about coming to Madang. It turns out that it is a cruising paradise. Apparently this was a prime cruising ground 25 years ago, and we can see why. The water is clear, the shoreline is absolutely stunning, and so far the people have been very friendly. It's a pity that the area has such a bad reputation; only a handful of yachts call here now. A bad report or two among yachties or in the news and a yachting destination is eschewed for ages.

The focal point of this area is Karkar Island, an active volcano that we passed by on our way here. We are told that some daring types charter an airplane and fly down into the centre; it is that huge. We'll pass on that, not because of the danger, but because of the cost.

We had a big party on Damon Island, which has a resort run by Adrian, a very interesting Irishman. The occasion was Louise-Ann's birthday, Graham's (HARMONY) birthday and Dianne & Philip's (SELKIE) wedding anniversary. On the way there we stopped at a beautiful little island for a swim and a snorkel. This truly is a lovely spot, with islands and coves everywhere. Adrian's resort specialises in pizza, and we consumed about a half dozen big ones between us, and countless bottles of the local lager, SP beer.

Like we noted in the Hermits and the Ninigos, we notice the cleanliness here. There is not a lot of litter around, unlike many Asian countries; and what litter is present is regularly cleaned up. Louise-Ann saw a young man jettison a cardboard box in the street, whereupon several of the locals berated him not to litter. They also take preventative measures; for example, they use billums, which are handcrafted knit bags, instead of plastic bags, which litter the land and the sea throughout most of the rest of Asia. Some of these billums are rather pedestrian in nature, but some are truly works of art, both in terms of the colours and the craftsmanship. There is one exception to the cleanliness; that is betel nut husks, which litter the roads and walkways. Although, there is not as much of the bright red betel nut spittle on the ground, as less lime seems to be used here.

Madang has bats by the millions; more precisely, most are flying foxes (fruit bats). We are told that they feed on fruit, mostly wild dates. Huge camps of them hang from the trees during the day all over this area. Unlike most bats that hide in the dark and emerge at night, these bats roost in trees and are constantly whistling, chirping and squawking. They seem particularly active in the late afternoon and early evening, and we enjoy watching them soaring about and landing, then instantly turning upside down to roost. It is quite a sight to see, although we could do without the bombing of the boat, as they relieve themselves. In most of the world, these bats are much decreased in number and it is unusual to be able to see camps of millions of bats, like once existed in many areas. Nevertheless, we are informed that the locals do hunt them, with slingshots. Apparently, they taste like a cross between chicken and pork...we'll pass.

While the bats dominate both visually and aurally, it was some birds that really had us going. At dusk and dawn we were perplexed by what sounded like a cross between a crow and a duck saying, "aw, aw, oink, oink, oh, ohhhh". Sometimes the sound was like an old man laughing. Eventually, we found out that the crows here have a unique accent and series of calls. Every time we hear them we laugh.

This area is paradise for fishing and diving, again little visited. We had lunch at the local fishing club and overheard some of the members talking about their catches. The numbers and sizes were astounding, even accounting for the effects of the beer. We went out on a day trip on one of the local live-aboard dive boats, Miss Rankin, and had a lovely time swimming and partying, while a few of the folks aboard dove on one of the numerous wrecked ships in the area, reporting good visibility and easy access. We would heartily recommend a visit here to our diving and game fishing friends. The dog tuna sashimi was delicious.

Louise-Ann and another yachtie, Flavia from SAMPAGUITA, went for a drive to Jant Timber Camp at Wawan, P.N.G., about an hour drive from Madang. They were taken there by Anastasia, the coordinator for Kindergartens among the villages. Apparently, the villages don't have kindergarten teachers and the parents are either too busy working in their gardens or are not enthusiastic about teaching their children. So Anastasia's job is to recruit and teach adult volunteers to teach kindergarten. Anastasia visits the villages periodically. She takes a nurse with her, who checks the children over; if they have serious health problems she refers them to a doctor. The kindergarten that we visited had a good volunteer teacher, Sophia, and two aids, Ruth and Rose. They took part in the children's program, which was a lot of fun.

They also took time to walk through the camp and came upon some ladies making billum bags. The ladies showed them the leaves of the plant that they use, how to peel the leaves, and how to roll the strands of the leaves together to make the yarn. They also came upon a lady who was cooking sago (it looks like very thick starch when cooked) and a green vegetable called slimy spinach probably because of its thick sauce. They got to taste the food and got instructions on the procedure for cooking sago. It was a very interesting day at the camp, learning the cultural ways of the people and enjoying the beautiful scenery of P.N.G. On the return trip to the city they stopped at another village called Bilbil where the ladies make pottery from clay, sand and water; and were given a demonstration by the potter. This was fascinating, as she did not use a wheel. Instead, she somehow spins the clay in one hand with her thumb, and shaped it with the other hand. It is also interesting to note that they do not use kilns, just an open fire.

Here are some notes about suppliers, for our fellow yachties. We've discovered an excellent Westerbeke parts source, Hansen Marine (Tracey@hansenmarine.com). They shipped our parts from stock the same day they received our order. Our experience with Naiad, the manufacturer of our stabilizer system, was good. They were instantly responsive in answering our many questions and providing advice. Because the dealer that caused our problems (he put in the wrong hydraulic fluid) was no longer doing business with them, they even gave us a discount on the parts. Better still, they shipped from stock the same day we emailed them our order. As long as we are handing out free advice (it's worth what you pay for it), we'd like to comment about Boat-US and West Marine. We hate to love West Marine, the giant of the retail boat parts industry and we try to love Boat-US, which holds itself out as a sort of member's club. Well, we sent both of them the same email looking for a new alternator and regulator, which appear in both of their catalogues. Only West Marine replied and they were able to ship from stock within 24-hours of our confirmation. Now if they could just do something about those awful prices...everything for boats costs double or triple the cost of equivalent parts at industrial supply houses.

Several our correspondents have commented that what we are doing is dangerous or that we are courageous (a euphemism for crazy we suppose). The fact is, most of the time we don't believe that we are in any danger; and we've never felt we were in serious danger. We don't doubt that the risk associated with our lifestyle there is slightly greater than it would be if we were ensconced before the television set. This increased risk is the price we pay for the reward, being able to experience all these

new places and cultures. But, we emphasize, the difference in risk is only slight. Perhaps the human reaction to danger is unduly magnified, some sort of leftover from the days when our ancestors lived in caves and had to instantly make the fight-or-flight decision, and a wrong decision brought death. But, while the risks for most of humanity these days are exceptionally low, the reaction remains primitive. The media reports mad cow and people stop eating beef, West Nile and people stop going out of doors, a terrorist attack on an airliner and people stop flying. In this spirit, we close this report with a quote from Sterling Hayden's autobiography, *Wanderer*. "[We are] enmeshed in the cancerous discipline of security. And in the worship of security we fling our lives beneath the wheels of routine, and before we know it our lives are gone."

We are underway again. Our current position (as we write this) is 5d 18m south 145d 58m east. We're making about 6 knots and heading for the Solomon Islands, with stops along the PNG mainland on the way.