



AKAMA REPORT 20
24 March 2004

We arose at sparrow's fart on 11 February; actually we woke the sparrows just after 5 am and were underway from Madang before six. It was a gorgeous morning, with no strong winds and calm seas. The catamarans SELKIE and MUSCAT left with us, HARMONY-88 and SAMPAGUITA having left earlier, bound for other ports. The mountains of Papua New Guinea sliding by the starboard side reminded us of the Rocky Mountain foothills. The boat ran fine. Here and there plumes of smoke rose lazily through the jungle from cooking fires in the villages along the shore. This is what trawler cruising is all about.

We have been in the Bismarck Sea since we arrived in the Admiralty Islands, and we crossed into the Solomon Sea at the Vitiaz Strait (6d S by 147d 45m E). This strait is an interesting bit of terrain, as the shore is lined with limestone cliffs, which appear to be terraced and de-forested. In fact, no forest ever grew here and the terraces are natural, being made up of limestone layers containing marine fossils. The land a kilometre or so, back to the mountains, was once submerged. The limestone is generally covered with low-growing vegetation and the odd tree. There are many deep valleys that extend down to the sea from the mountains behind, no doubt caused by erosion. These valleys contain lots of trees and some have rivers and waterfalls. It is truly spectacular scenery and there is no doubt why it is reportedly one of the World Heritage Sites.

At first glance, this coast of New Guinea appears to be nearly devoid of anchorages; the water is deep right up to the shore, and then the limestone cliffs rise rapidly from there to the mountains, or the area is blocked by reef. However, here and there one can find a way to get behind the reefs to depths good for anchoring. Usually local knowledge is needed to get in and out safely. On our first night out of Madang we anchored at Mur (5d 40m S by 146d 33m E) in volcanic (black) sand; we had a peaceful night as the reef kept most of the swell at bay. This was a secluded area in front of a plantation. There were, however, locals visiting us from a nearby village, and one canoe was striking in that it had about eight young persons in it, one of whom had a home-made ukulele. He strummed the uke and the others sang. We encountered another outrigger canoe, whose fisherman owner was singing at the top of his voice as he paddled out to sea. One expects this in the Polynesian islands, if for no other reason than Hollywood movies depict such behaviour. Finding such a culture in PNG was a pleasant surprise.

The next day we tried to stop for the night at two bays that were reputedly good, but could not find a suitable anchorage for three boats. The third time was the charm, Kelanoa Harbour (6d 01m S by 147d 30m E). This is a large bay in front of which, according to the chart, is an impenetrable reef and a little island. It turns out that there is a passage...if you know where to go (the locals guided us). We had another peaceful night and in the morning went to the Saturday market. Since this is a village of only five or six hundred souls, the local market is very small. We were a bit embarrassed when the Darrel (the Ward Councillor or head man) and Andy (our guide) kept the locals out of the market while we shopped. Later, we were taken on a tour of the village. This one, like the others in PNG, compared to

SE Asia, are quite clean and well kept, albeit extremely rustic. In the afternoon we were in for a rare treat.

While touring the village, we were offered a demonstration of traditional dance. We (eight of us from three boats) paid 100 kina (about 40 dollars) for a one hour show, thinking that this would be a few local children or some impromptu amateurs, and we considered the fee a donation to the village. When we returned to the village in the afternoon, we were amazed when several dozen men came out in striking traditional costumes, followed by a band of drummers and singers, also in elaborate costumes. It turns out that this village is famous for its traditional dance. Not only are they the current champions in PNG, they won first place in international competition. The team takes it so seriously that they practice every day for one to five hours. In August, they are off to another international competition in Palau, to defend their title. The dancing, drumming and singing was fantastic.

The third night's anchorage was spent tucked in behind Sialum Island (6d 05m S by 147d 36m E). Unusual for these parts, the locals there have set up a marked channel. We were welcomed by the Ward Councillor, Hans, and like the previous anchorage, we were assured that there are no crocodiles, sharks or rascals. In the village we were shown their abattoir, now closed due to a shortage of electricity; they now export their cattle live. Darryl and Hans told us that raising cattle is a big business, a good source of income for the villages. They sell the cattle to the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore. We were given another demonstration of traditional dance, this time by the women of the village. This was probably more authentic than the men's group the day before, as they do not practice; they simply perform any time there is a special occasion. At this village and several others, we've been having fun with the children. Sometimes their parents send them out with coconuts, fruit and vegetables; in return we give them balloons, soap, pencils, whistles and such. Sometimes we just throw some inflated balloons into the water and the kids all go nuts diving in to be the first to capture a prize. Phil of SELKIE has this down to an art form; he bought hundreds of balloons and always has a pocket full. When he goes ashore he is constantly surrounded by kids.

Next we stopped at Finsch Harbour (6d 33m S by 147d 50 m E), mostly to see the wrecked ships from WW-II. We were anchored right in front of one of them, but did not snorkel on it, as the water was too murky. Unfortunately, we could not find the other one that is supposed to be at snorkelling depth. Still, this was a very nice anchorage, well protected and scenic. The visit was marred when some of the locals presented us a bill for 900 Kina (about 400 dollars) anchorage fee for three boats. Gary of MUSCAT politely refused to pay, stating that we had paid the yacht fee in Madang and no more was due. We all left without paying and without interference.

It was a short run from Finsch Harbour to Schneider Harbour, just an hour or so. The marine pilot books say you cannot get in the northern entrance; we tried and chickened out at about 3.5 metres depth. SELKIE had a go and also turned around, but we both thought that at a higher sun angle and with less wind one could slip through by hugging the coast of the northern side. We entered the gap between Schneider Harbour and Dreiger harbour, and entered Dreiger Harbour (6d 39m S by 147d 52m E) with barely more water, about 4 metres; there is no actual passage here. This is a very scenic place, but loaded with people, and we were "villaged out" at this point. However, the anchorage in the inner harbour is perfect for three or four boats and it is between an uninhabited island and a large residential high school...much better! We were invited ashore to address the students, explaining our lifestyle and to talk about our home countries. It was interesting and completely different from talking to the people in the villages, as there are only adults and young children there. Snorkelling here was about the best we've had in the past few months; there is some live reef and numerous reef fishes.

St. Patrick's Day saw us anchored at a lagoon at the Tami Islands (6d 46m S by 147d 54m E). If you look at the chart you'd swear that it is impossible to get in here. Some folks in Madang drew us mud maps that were of little help. As we were picking our way through the reefs, some locals came out in canoes and guided us in. The inner lagoon on the north side of the islands is yet another lovely tropical destination...this leg of our trip just keeps getting better! We bought some handicrafts at Tami and traded a bit with the locals. Unfortunately, they are used to tourists and are quite aggressive about selling their wares; otherwise we might have stayed for a few days. Leaving Tami was much easier than getting in, as we learned that there is deep water from the outer lagoon marker to the west, despite what the chart indicates, which is reef all around.

We arrived towards the end of the day at the Lae Yacht Club (6d 44.3m S by 147d 0.3m E), an excellent new facility in Lae, PNG's second largest city. The club has a good breakwater, finger docks (some with power and water), a nice clubhouse with a reasonable cafe, and a filling station for diesel and zoom (premixed outboard engine fuel). We were given a hearty welcome by the club members, most of whom are Australian expatriates. Our neighbour there was BARBARIAN, a charter dive boat. Rod, the owner, drove us and our friends on SELKIE and MUSCAT all over town, as there are no taxis in Lae. As thanks, we put on a BBQ, but Rod pitched in and did as much work on it as we did; a good time was had by all. Lae's reputation as a lawless city is a bit overblown in our opinion; it is probably not much more dangerous during the day than most large cities. At night, however, the reputation is probably true; nearly all the expatriates carry pistols and shootings are frequent. We went out only in the day and had no trouble.

In Lae we replaced the leaky rams on our Naiad stabilizers with the ones we had shipped in from the USA. We needed to find three cap screws, two to jack up the top plates and one to pull the pins. These are not common screws and we had to have the one for the pin made in a shop. Fellow yachties who have this equipment might want to have a look in the manual, and buy these screws (and a few others noted in the manual), so that you can repair your Naiads in an emergency.

We think we've solved our email problems. You will recall that we were resigned to simply posting our reports to our web site (www.nunas.com), as the bounces and other administrative messages were choking up our account. But, quite a few of you wrote wanting the email reports. So, we are now sending the reports to another email account, from which they will be sent out for us by our son. We don't often check that account for mail, so if you have a message for us, then please send it to our winlink address.