



AKAMA REPORT 32 Noumea to NZ

Our overall impression of New Caledonia is mixed. On the one hand, we were ready for some civilisation after having travelled through some of the more remote regions of the area. However, on the other, we were disappointed to see that civilisation brought with it open pit mining, nearly total deforestation and resultant erosion. While New Caledonia is unusual as an outpost of French culture, we cannot help but think that the nearly total domination of the western society over the indigenous one is a shame. The Kanaks drive western cars, speak French, wear western clothes and work in western shops and industries. We saw few Kanaks in charge and virtually no remaining vestige of village life.

One of the interesting things we did at Noumea is watching the elusive green flash. With sundowners in hand, we make our way up to the boat deck or the pilothouse for an unobstructed view to watch the sun go down into the sea. When the air is reasonably clear and there are no clouds on the horizon, just as the last bit of the sun disappears below the horizon a green flash appears, just for an instant. We've looked for it for years, but in New Caledonia saw it many times. Each time the phenomenon looks a little different. Way cool! You won't find this in your Funk & Wagnall's, but a search on the Internet will net you a bunch of sites, some of which have technical explanations and some neat photos.

We did more maintenance in New Caledonia than we had anticipated doing. Here are a few maintenance items that might be of interest to our fellow yachties and the technically inclined. We have been having trouble with our bilge pumps coming on too often. Our first fix was to remove the simple float switches, which have given us a lot of trouble in the past, and to substitute therefore electronic switches. These are great! They switch on when they sense water, but continue to pump for about ten seconds after the water ceases to touch the sensor. This totally empties the bilge. However, while this improved the situation, the pumps still came on and off more than they used to. The culprits were the one-way flapper valves in the bilge pump discharge lines. These stop seawater in the lines and that which may enter the discharge through-hull from going down into the bilge. We replaced them and when we took the old ones apart we discovered that the seawater had eaten away the little axles that hold the flappers; we suspect that they were made of brass instead of bronze.

VHF radios are now quite different due to the new Global Marine Distress and Safety Service that governments are finally rolling out. Our new Uniden Polaris has those features, but, we actually bought it because of its two wireless handsets (in addition to the usual one on the radio). The wireless handsets link to the radio using 900 MHz radio signals, much like cordless telephones, which is undoubtedly the donor technology. With a handset each, both LA and I can operate the radio from anywhere on the boat. The downsides are that the audio quality from the handsets is not quite as good as that from the main microphone, they are subject to interference, and there is a little delay between listening and talking. Overall, they are worth having, except that for some reason our Heart inverter/charger interferes with them. Maurice, Uniden and West Marine are all trying to find a solution. Stay tuned.

Last, but not least, we have been trying for ages to get our HF radio antenna tuner working reliably. Maurice found some blown diodes in it some time ago and that at least made it work, but it was erratic.

We checked everything and, finding nothing wrong, concluded that something else was dead in the tuner. So we ordered a new one. To our surprise, it worked only slightly better than the old one. So, back up on the pilothouse roof we went, this time to cut off the feed line connectors and crimp on new ones, about the only thing we did not check. Imagine our surprise when the wire parted in the middle! Apparently, the insulation had cracked right where the wire enters the deck, underneath the waterproofing "bog" that was supposed to keep the salt water out. Well, not only did salt water get inside, it ate away nearly all the strands of the wire. Every time we transmitted there must have been hidden sparks flowing out of the crack and along the copper oxide. So, the problem was not a \$500 tuner, but a 50-cent piece of wire; being a professional technologist, Maurice was so embarrassed. Anyway, much poorer, we now have a very good signal from our HF radio, essential for our email and weather fax.

On Wednesday 20 October, we left New Caledonia for New Zealand, about 900 miles south. This was the easiest passage we've had to date. The weather at the beginning was a bit windy, but once we got by that the seas were calm and the winds, what we had of them were favourable. The trip took us about a week, including two days were we left Noumea and only day-hopped between anchorages. The actual ocean passage only took us five days. We were both trepidations about this passage, probably because we got beat up so badly going between Vanuatu and Noumea, the feelings fuelled by other yachties who said that everyone gets beat up on that passage. We account for our easy time by good research and a bit of good luck. The biggest part of the research was to re-learn our CPS weather course and use it to study the weather faxes and GRIB files, to pick the right weather window. Having travelled through some of the most remote places on the planet, we were also a bit worried that there might be a lot of maritime traffic; well, we did not see even one ship until we arrived in New Zealand.

Arrival in Opuia was uneventful, although we had to slow down for most of the last day, so as to arrive in daylight. The officials were great; we had no problems at all. We saw several choppers in the air, no doubt patrolling for "aliens". Thanks to having checked in with one of their marine radio stations, when we were about two days out, we had no problems.

We did not stick around Opuia, although we will spend time there when we leave. Instead, we pushed on south to a lovely little bay where there is room for dozens of boats, but we can only see a few. We had our own little cove all to ourselves. We will spend two more nights in such secluded anchorages, as we make our way to Auckland, where we will pull into a marina and get the boat ready for our very first non-family visitors.