

## SWEET CAROLINES

### Graham and Avril Johnson

(Graham and Avril have been prolific contributors to Flying Fish since departing the UK in 2002 aboard their 44ft cutter Dream Away to circumnavigate. Fifteen years later they were around 146°E – another ten years, maybe?

All the excellent photos were taken by either Avril or Graham, except where indicated.)

The Caroline Islands in the North Pacific encompass the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau. They are rarely cruised, being a significant diversion from the classic European coconut-milk run and ignored by most North Americans in favour of the South Pacific islands. We arrived in Pohnpei, the seat of government for the four states comprising the FSM, and after clearing in with the pleasant port officials, anchored at the head of a bay off a new small marina. The town is a sprawling, busy, bustling home to a large number of sizeable shops, and the range of predominately US goods to replenish our depleted stocks was the best since leaving NZ. Pohnpei is home to the ancient site of man-made islands at Nan Madol, with massive buildings constructed from gigantic horizontally-laid basalt columns, one of the Pacific's wonders. Inside the fringing reef the large,



An ancient dry stone construction at Nan Madol

The entrance to Pohnpei lagoon and port facilities





### *Japanese tanks, relics of World War Two*

lush, vertiginous island is noted for its prodigious rainfall, but even so Japanese war relics still litter the hills, including tanks and complete gun emplacements, which provided interesting distractions on a good hike.



We considered spending Christmas at nearby, privately-owned Ant Atoll, so purchased our permit and sailed the short passage. After a couple of days in a breezy anchorage with an endless procession of tourist boats coming and going we felt restless, so sailed on to Lukunor in the Nomoi (Mortlock) Islands, a few days away. Anchored in a beautiful crescent-shaped bay off the main village, we were greeted ashore by the inevitable gaggle of giggling kids. After presenting a small gift to the village chief we were welcomed into the community. It was a lovely peaceful place to enjoy Christmas.

Lukunor is part of Chuuk State, whose similarly-named capital island has a fearsome reputation for unfriendly, sometimes violent, locals and difficult, obstructive officials.

Its attraction is the numerous World War Two wrecks, making it a diver's paradise. Yap, the westernmost state, has a reputation for vigorously reintroducing and maintaining the traditional lifestyle, particularly on the remote, rarely-visited outer islands. We are not divers so it was no contest – we sailed a four-day, 500 mile



*Christmas Sports  
Day at Lukunor*



*Inter-island transport at Lamotrek*

passage to Lamotrek in Yap State, entered the lagoon through a winding entrance, then anchored in crystal-clear water in perfect shelter at the southern end of the village. Behind the white-sand beach were all manner of huts and shelters, with villagers immersed in daily life looking up to wave. Lovely outrigger canoes lay quietly at the waters edge, with a couple of large, ocean-going versions hauled ashore. From the noise it was apparent a school was close by, hidden by trees, and soon the shore was lined with waving, excited children.

Joe paddled out to greet us, a fascinating character – chief of one of the three villages, master mariner, master boatbuilder and the local medic! Dress code for men was a loin cloth, for women a wraparound skirt woven on a back-strap loom. The population was about 500, each family group living in huts around their own compound.

The Yap government had decreed that a visitor fee of US \$20 could be charged, but the islanders waived this for those prepared to offer help. Top of Joe's list was the disintegrating transom on his *panga*. Fortunately Graham had a stock of GRP mat and resin, so made a good job of it. Given the island's adherence to tradition we wondered on the rationalisation for fibreglass *pangas*\* and Yamaha outboards. Apparently, following a devastating cyclone in the late 1990s, aid had poured in to build 'solid homes', but the locals preferred their traditional natural materials, and spent the money on

\* Pangas are small, outboard-powered, fishing boats, usually of between 20ft and 30ft overall, with a high bow, narrow waterline beam, and a flotation bulge along the gunwale. The original design is said to have been developed by Yamaha in the early 1970s, and to have taken its name from the panga fish.

*A young man collects tuba from the treetops*

boats instead. With declining fish stocks they facilitated more efficient and reliable fishing to sustain the population, enabling them to remain in their little bit of paradise.

Av was taken to meet Joe's wife Katherine, who didn't speak English, then on to see Micaela, who did. Here she was presented with a beautifully woven wraparound skirt. She wore this religiously, finding it cool and comfortable, and spent many a happy hour meeting various village women. There is a clear demarcation between women's and men's work – women weave, tend the gardens, gather crops, catch small land-crabs, cook, and look after the home and children; men fish, look after the animals, build homes and boats, carve, produce coconut-fibre rope and sit around drinking. Late every afternoon the men's circles form and *tuba* (palm wine), which has been collected over the day and comes ready-fermented at about 13% proof, is drunk in prodigious quantities. G, of course,



*Weaving a skirt on a back-strap loom takes about a week*





### *The birthday boys*

was invited to join in! The day's activities and accomplishments were discussed and a plan formed for the next day. Women are barred from the men's circle, although exceptions are made for visiting foreigners. Av was invited, but it was obvious that everyone felt more comfortable when she decided to join the ladies elsewhere.

Coincidentally, Manuel the dentist and past chief shared a birthday with G, so a double celebration was planned with a special meal. It was huge fun, and the 'birthday boys' were covered with talcum powder and yellow turmeric and bedecked with flowers. There was singing and dancing, and Av produced a super birthday cake (the ubiquitous banana cake) complete with candles.

At 66 G was considered quite old – most men don't make 70, invariably dying of liver or kidney failure due to alcohol abuse. Lack of access to medical care is possibly the greatest downside to remote island existence. There is no airport and Yap, 500 miles away, has the nearest hospital – linked only by an unpredictable and irregular ferry service (once a month if you're lucky). An ill islander would approach Joe, who has basic medication for simple ailments. For anything more complicated he talks to Yap on the SSB, where his diagnostic skills are highly regarded by the hospital medical staff. They may send out drugs on the next ferry, which if ineffectual would result in the patient eventually being ferried to Yap. Upon reaching Yap they are often so ill they need to be transferred to the Philippines; the outcome is usually sad.

Master boatbuilders were overseeing the construction of a couple of large ocean-going craft and several fishing canoes in a shady shoreside work area. Nearly all work is done by adze, with teams of up to half a dozen men working on a single hull plank on the large craft. There are no plans, everything is done by eye, the hull shapes are asymmetric to compensate for the outrigger, and the high prow has a sighting-notch to enable the navigator to line up with the stars.

Alongside, schoolboys were being taught to build their own small canoes. In school they were learning star charts and traditional navigation from master mariners like Joe, who had made many extensive passages using only those traditional skills. For both boys and girls up to 14 years all the traditional skills were taught alongside a more recognisable curriculum of numeracy, literacy, etc. It was fascinating to learn how much you need to know to survive successfully in paradise. Classes were taught in English and/or 'vernacular', and there were a few computers – all used by the staff. Equipment had been delivered to set up a satellite-link for internet access and wifi, but it had been sitting in the boxes for quite a while awaiting the expert to arrive to commission it. A recent EU initiative had offered every household an individual solar-powered electricity supply, which most had accepted. Times are changing, technology is encroaching, and its impact on the next generation will be interesting.

Whilst G was off in 'boy world', Av visited the school and was invited into various classrooms to observe. With the older children, she was asked to talk about our trip. It's difficult to fit 15 years into 15 minutes. During break time, she got out her tablet to show how we navigate on the computer. With Google Earth KAPS she could show what the island looks like from space. Inevitably she subsequently spent time installing the programs and charts on several staff-members' computers, explaining how everything worked.

At 0·8 miles north to south by up to 0·5 miles west to east, Lamotrek is a large island by local standards, with plenty of opportunities for good hikes to isolated bays and sandy coves. On the ocean side the Pacific swells crash in across the reef and there is good



*Amazing precision is achieved using  
a simple adze*

lobster hunting. On the lagoon side all is tranquil clear water, abundant with seafood and fish. In between, the thick tangled jungle is home to delicious coconut crabs.

Inevitably the mending list had grown, but with it our sense of community with the islanders. It was going to be hard to leave. Our departure coincided with a village festival with men's and women's dances in full island costume. The grass skirts take several days to prepare, and it's a work of art getting the body painting, arm bands, head bands and associated foliage all in good order. What fun it was, a feast to finish and a mountain of food to take on our travels. Av was presented with another skirt in some of her favourite colours (orange and purple) and G received a great skein of hand-made coconut fibre rope and a lovely model fish trap made by the school kids.

Four *pangas*, two outboards, an HF radio and a host of smaller items later we sailed the few miles to the adjacent atoll of Elato, population 100, where we knew an outboard awaited our attention. We were immediately drawn into village life, starting, as usual, with a welcoming ceremony. Kevin, the outboard owner, whom G had met on Lamotrek, was designated our host, taking us off to meet his family and many other villagers. Island pride decreed it necessary for Av to be wearing a skirt woven in their community, not the Lamotrek one. A quick change ensued.

Kevin and G wandered off to inspect the outboard (blown head gasket), and devise a solution. The major stumbling block was the absence of any tools beyond an ancient, rusting box spanner whose end needed beating into shape to remove spark plugs. Yamaha engines can be largely dismantled with one size of spanner, however, so it was easy for G to gather enough tools. Kevin worked well with G, learnt quickly, and with the engine running was overjoyed when presented with the toolkit.

#### *A traditional departure dance*





Lunch is prepared for the kindergarten children at Elato...

In the men's circle the story was told about G mending Joe's *panga* and, amazingly, they had one also requiring attention. It was a real mess. Not just the transom, but serious gunwale damage and broken bottom

ribs and stringers. "What have you been doing?" G asked. Downcast eyes, shuffling feet and somebody mentioned turtle. Ah, so that was it, a big one has the capacity to inflict serious damage when hauled over the side and left to thrash about in the bilge. Just like on Lamotrek you never worked alone – men and boys would watch, and G always took time to talk, explaining what he was doing and encouraging people to get involved. The locals made new wooden frames (which fitted perfectly) for G to glass in; the job went well but finished the resin. It's amazing what you can fix with a tube of sealant and epoxy glue, however. Av, in the meantime, had got the sewing machine out and was busy building a sail for a *proa*.

*...who gather to wait for it*





*Kevin views his island as seen from space*

Inevitably kids were always around, eager to ‘help’, clambering over everything, and just being kids. Their highlight was our arrival or departure in the dinghy – a swarm would carry it up or down the beach, and a ride was a fiercely-contested treat. Even the youngest could secure the dinghy safely and we never worried about anything disappearing.

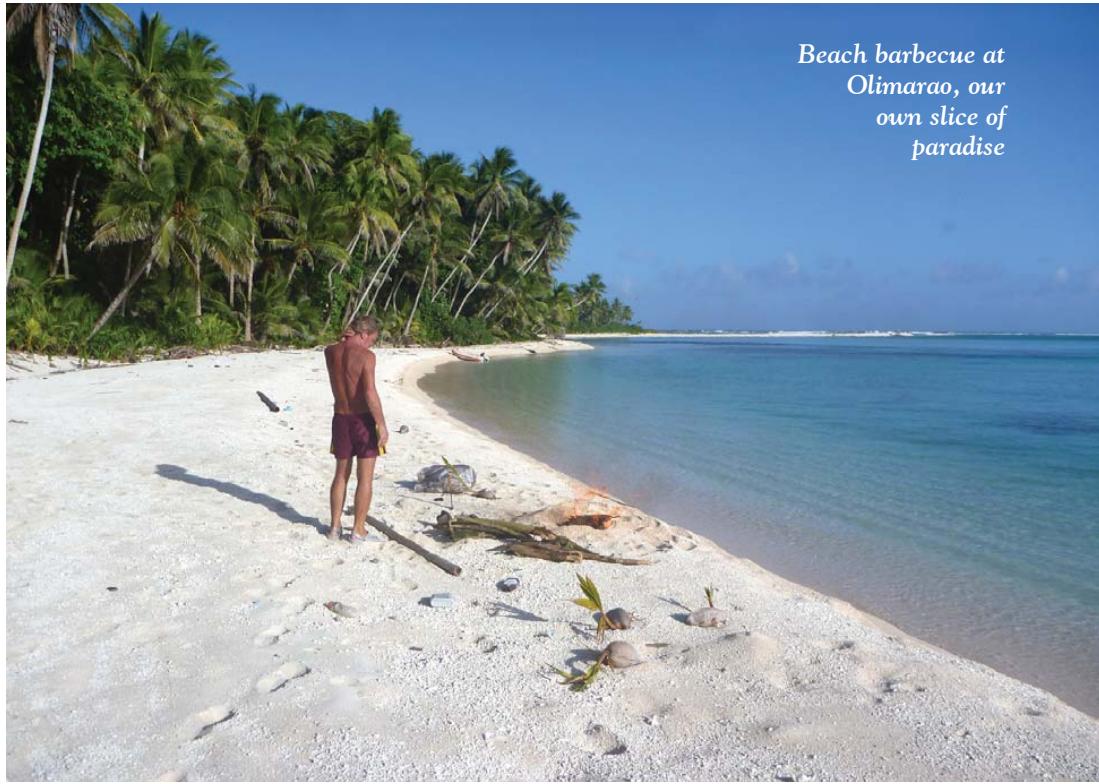
We lived well. There was always a coconut to slake one’s thirst with cool fresh milk, we received our share of the daily catch distributed on the beach, and fresh vegetables were supplied from ‘the garden’, a large area of soil raised up on a bed of volcanic rock. The old garden had become untenable due to rising sea levels, however, and the villagers were anxious and asked what they could do. We had little advice to offer – they are victims and, unless the world changes, their outlook is bleak.



*Breakfast arrives*

We loved it there – a tiny island that you could walk around in an hour, home to wonderful people in a setting of unimaginable beauty. We knew everyone and lived an easy, relaxed lifestyle completely cut off from the outside world. Kevin had taught G how to milk the palms for *tuba*, the free booze, counselling him that it would be wise to let the younger guys climb for it. The night before we left they threw a party, presenting us with a mountain of food to take away including lobsters, octopus, turtle and tuna, plus taro and breadfruit cooked in different ways. We were given gifts of a hank of rope and another *lavalava* (skirt) for Av. As these items are the islanders' only means of obtaining hard currency, we were deeply touched.

With permission from the island chief our next stop was Olimarao, an uninhabited atoll just a 30 mile day-sail away, another picture-perfect little white-sand island offering complete protection from the steady trade winds. We spent several days lazing



about, feasting on the goodies from Elato, walking around 'our' island, gathering some astounding shells, and basking in the warm waters of a Pacific island dream. We found several turtle nesting sites and saw a couple in the lagoon, lobsters were washed up along the shoreline and fish were abundant, but with our Elato food mountain there was no need to trouble the wildlife. Often moonlit evenings were spent ashore around a fire and barbecue, never being troubled by mosquitoes or other bitey things, watching busy crabs scurrying about and fruit bats flying overhead beneath the stars.



*Some of the enthusiastic students after our presentation. Photo Stan Rett*

Our next destination was Woleai Atoll, 130 miles downwind in a steady breeze. It's a large atoll, more than six miles wide, with several sizeable islands and a lot of reefs that require close attention. The main centre is on Falealop, the northeastern island, which provides a large, sheltered bay in tranquil, clear water. It's altogether a more organised and busy place, still living the traditional lifestyle but with a much larger population (over 1000). The main secondary school for the region is based there, and the men's circle nearest our landing place included several of the staff. We were invited to visit, which led on to 'can you give a presentation?'. It was well received, to the extent that we were asked to come back and present to the whole of the senior year. That evening we frantically put together another Powerpoint talk as we had a shrewd idea some of the audience might have seen the first one.

Promptly at 0900 next morning we faced a room packed with students and staff. The girls had been busy, and we were bedecked with garlands of vividly colourful flowers. It was a unique experience to be so delightfully welcomed before giving a talk, and we certainly smelled divine. Afterwards G went to watch the boys' culture class under the 'men's' hut they had built. Some were rolling fibre rope, which twists in opposite directions depending on whether it's intended for boat use or housebuilding – nobody knew why. Av in the meantime was ensconced in the staffroom, demonstrating and downloading a variety of software.

Av was presented with another *lavalava* – this time woven with fibre from banana and hibiscus leaves – the traditional materials (dyed orange and purple). It is very difficult and time-consuming to produce, and highly valued. It transpired the boys were most put out that the girls had made us something and they had not thought to do so. We had to return for the presentation of a lovely carved wooden canoe paddle. The tip is specially shaped to make a distinctive sound if the stroke is correct, a unique gift.

Micronesia became a Japanese colony following the defeat of Germany in 1918, and until the start of World War Two hostilities the islanders claim a harmonious accord, the Japanese instigating many improvements in island life. During the war the Japanese denuded Woleai of vegetation and constructed a long, heavily-defended runway; now derelict artefacts of war including several aircraft lie haphazardly in the jungle. It was another fine place for walking and exploring. Plans were afoot to repair the runway following an earlier, disastrous, attempt when the company broke up a section of reef for landfill, resulting in flooding of gardens and other unpleasant side-effects. This time an immense ocean-going barge that had mysteriously washed up on Yap reef was to collect landfill from Pohnpei, 1200 miles away. It's going to be a long job – don't make any immediate plans to fly there.

Yap is 380 miles northeast of Woleai, with uninhabited Sorol Atoll lying just south of the rhumb line. We broke our passage there after an exhilarating reach across some boisterous trade winds. The entrance to the lagoon was more a depression in the reef than a clearly defined pass, and an extensive reef shelf kept us some distance offshore. Nevertheless it was easy to land in the dinghy to explore. The island is overrun with large monitor lizards, introduced by the Japanese to hunt rats, but we were hunting for coconut crabs. The perfect peace did not last long, however, as a couple of days later another yacht arrived – nice folk who anchored away from us and had been making some interesting passages. Even so, when another yacht anchored nearby it was time to move on.

Yap is a large, mountainous, volcanic, verdant island with extensive cultivation battling the ever-encroaching jungle. It is not as high as Pohnpei, so not as wet. It's a place where nothing really happens, there are no great attractions, yet it holds you with its calm, peaceful welcome, easy laid-back lifestyle and convenient harbour anchorage. We shopped for the first time since Pohnpei. Only a few days remained on our three month

*Our old mainsail was just the right size for an ocean-going proa*



**Stone  
money  
used to  
be legal  
tender  
in Yap**



visa, but we found an extension was possible if we wrote a letter

explaining why. We wrote we liked the place and wanted to stay longer, which worked! The islanders were delighted to see Av wearing her *lavalavas* and always knew which island each one came from. In the hills, various enclaves of outer islanders exist, some settled permanently, others working for a season or simply visiting family. In one village we were welcomed and shown around. Guess what! They had this HF radio ... sounding familiar?

Sharing the anchorage were three other cruisers and the aforementioned giant barge. Having foundered on the reef, it had been towed in to become the centre of a dispute

*Sheltered moorings at the Royal Belau Yacht Club*





*Narrow channels and hidden  
anchorages abound in  
Palau's rock islands*

over ownership. Everyone wanted a slice of the action, including the boat that had towed it in, the chief who owned the reef, various government departments – and, of course, the original owners rather wanted it back. It is going to be a long time before Woleai runway is operational!

At the end of February we made for Palau, an independent state whose main source of income is tourism based upon its excellent diving and famous rock islands inside the huge lagoon. We had a fast 260 mile day-and-a-half sail, downwind with a fair current, arriving early off the long entrance channel which winds through the reefs to the main harbour. Following a pricey check-in we proceeded to the Royal Belau Yacht Club. Picking up a mooring in the lovely sheltered lagoon, our base for the next month, we met up with friends aboard *Carina*, last seen ten years previously in Panama.

Peleliu is a small island at the southern extremity of the lagoon, the scene of fierce fighting between the US and Japanese forces in World War Two. Much of the old battlefield remains as it was left, providing an interesting visit despite its depressing history. We found where a small company of Japanese stayed hidden for 2½ years following the end of hostilities before surrendering. There is still a terrifying amount of 'live' ordnance lying about, and it doesn't pay to stray from the cleared paths.

The towering, verdant karst islands appear like emeralds strewn across the bright blue lagoon. We enjoyed wonderful days pottering through a maze of channels with many spectacular anchorages. The reef snorkelling in crystal clear waters was superb, viewing incredibly beautiful coloured corals and a myriad of stunning reef fish. The busiest locations, where an endless procession of tourist laden boats rush about, were easily avoided or simply visited early in the morning.

We departed the Caroline Islands having enjoyed months of fabulous sailing, wonderful, welcoming islanders and unrivalled, unspoilt, tropical beauty. Given the opportunity, don't miss them!

