

TAHITI – THE HARD WAY

Alan Leslie

(Alan only joined the OCC in 2016, but has sailed all his life having been taught in dinghies by his father in New Zealand. Then family life intervened, until in 1989 he bought a 24ft GRP hull which took him two years to complete. Six years later he sold that to buy Diva – see below – in which he cruised NZ waters until retirement in 2008 permitted longer cruises, initially to Tonga in 2010.

Following the conclusion of this cruise in June 2014, Alan and Elyse returned to NZ, then in 2016 sailed to Fiji and New Caledonia. At the time of writing she was moored in Gulf Harbour Marina, Auckland, ready to hit the South Pacific again next year.

All photos are courtesy of Gunilla Peterson.)

Most people sail to Tahiti from Hawaii or the Galapagos, downwind, but from New Zealand it's a bit different. It's upwind to the northeast and it's certain that there will be bad weather somewhere, usually near the beginning or the middle. The trick is to head due east until a longitude of about 165°W and then turn north to take advantage of the trade winds from the southeast. Since meeting my friend Peter Russell-Green it had been my dream to sail to Tahiti. He had done it twice – in the '70s with his 34ft Alan Hooper-designed sloop *Milanion*, and then again in the '80s in his Whiting 40 *Southern Cross*.

With my previous boat, *Diva*, a 40ft John Spencer IOR Admiral's Cup design, I had sailed my first bluewater passage from New Zealand to Tonga and been hit by very bad weather. Peter assured me that I was blessed, as nothing would ever seem as bad again. Over the ensuing years I sailed *Diva* all around the South Pacific – Tonga, Fiji,



*Elyse in New
Zealand's Bay
of Islands*

Vanuatu, New Caledonia and back to New Zealand – but as the years wore on I found she was becoming increasingly hard for me to handle. She was built for racing. The large, non-self-tailing winches and big sails were a real handful in heavy weather, and whilst she was fast on the open ocean she was also very wet.

On numerous occasions, in different ports, I had seen Amel yachts and noted how well-protected the cockpit was. Amel owners are very proud of their boats, and it doesn't take much effort to be invited aboard and be shown why the owners think they are so wonderful. I was decided – I had to have one. So in 2012 *Diva* was put up for sale and I went on the hunt for a 53ft Amel Super Maramu. I found one in New Caledonia, after some negotiation arrived at an agreeable price, and took possession of *Elyse* in April 2013.

Because of the peculiar tax laws in New Caledonia I had two weeks in which to leave if I wanted to avoid paying local taxes, so with two young French crew aboard I set off for Vanuatu, where *Elyse* stayed for three months. I flew home to Australia, and later in the year flew back to Port Vila and sailed *Elyse* to New Caledonia solo – not a great problem in a boat that can be sailed entirely from the protected cockpit. Then in November 2013 I sailed her to New Zealand for the cyclone season, with the intention of preparing for the voyage to Tahiti the following year.

I had previously located crew via the Find a Crew website [www.findacrew.net] and one, Gunilla from Sweden, jumped at that chance to come. Two others, Lotti from Switzerland and Mark from the USA, were also found to be compatible and were interested in making the trip. We all met up at the Gulf Harbour Marina in Auckland in early May and spent a week provisioning and going through all the procedures on board, especially safety. Our voyage plan was to head due east, keeping at about 35°S until we were south of Raivavae in the Austral Islands, clear in to French Polynesia there, and then head north to Papeete.

Gunilla, Lotti and Mark aboard Elyse in Gulf Harbour





*Taking on fuel for the passage. Those red jugs
were stored in a locker, not on deck!*

On 14 May 2014 we left Gulf Harbour at 0800 for Auckland City to clear customs and set off. We reached the customs wharf at 1100, accompanied by Peter Russell-Green in his 40ft Birdcall, *Focal Point*, and Peter Greacen in his Bavaria 42, *Viveka*. There was no-one at the wharf, even though we'd informed them by e-mail of the time we would be there, so Gunilla and I went wandering off to see if we could find someone.



*Leaving Auckland
with the two
Peters in
the lead*

In fact they found us. We were in a Customs bond area and not allowed to 'just wander around', we were sternly informed, and then taken back to *Elyse* and told to wait. We didn't have to wait too long and a team of friendly New Zealand customs officials arrived to do all the paper work. We were cleared out and on our way by 1200, with the two Peters leading the way past North Head and Rangitoto Island, heading for the Colville Channel where we would turn right and head east. By evening we were off the northern tip of the Coromandel peninsula with 18–19 knots of wind dead behind us, sailing due east with main only, and going well.

With four of us aboard, our watch system during the night was three hours on and nine off, which is pretty civilised. The boat sails under autopilot all the time, so there's not much to do when on watch except to keep an eye on things, especially the radar and AIS, both of which are set up with alarms to warn if other vessels are near us. We sailed through the night on a broad reach with just the mainsail. The breeze had gone a bit south and was up to 30+ knots, and next day we found that we'd covered 170 miles from noon to noon. In the afternoon the breeze dropped quite a bit and we were doing only 5–6 knots under genoa, main and mizzen, although on a beam reach. But all was well, the crew were happy, and we had risotto and salad for dinner – we were living well.

By the 17th the wind had slowly backed from south-southwest through south to south-southeast. That pushed us slightly north as we tried to stay on a beam reach below 35°S. So we rearranged the sail plan to fairly close-hauled, with the staysail and two reefs in the main and mizzen. The breeze went up and down, as did our speed, but we generally managed about 6 knots, which was okay, and our course was much better. We couldn't afford to go north until we reached 165°W – only then could we lay a course to Raivavae, otherwise we wouldn't be able to lay it and we'd end up in the Cook Islands.

We found a slight leak from the gland at the top of the rudder shaft, but after adjustment it wasn't too serious and we could deal with it. A few days previously a big wave had come into the cockpit and over the stern. It had knocked out the plug in the aft cabin top where the emergency steering fitted, and before I could replace it water got in and soaked my bunk – I'd have to sleep in the main cabin. *La vie sur la mer!*

Two days later we were reefed down and ploughing along. We'd been caught out a little, as the wind was now southeast and we were almost laying Raivavae, but really a bit too much north. We decided to keep going and see what would happen the next day. At 0612 UTC (1812 LT) on 19th May our position was 33°28'31S 167°37'54W, our course 044°T and our speed 6.4 knots.

During the night we received an e-mail from Bob McDavitt, our weather router in Auckland, advising us to alter course to 020°T due to a deep low pressure cell that was moving south from Tonga. After two days, he said, the wind should go northerly and we should then be able to reach off to the east. So we kept that course all day, except when we hove-to for an hour or so to put some anti-chafe gear on the staysail sheets and alter their routing slightly. At about 1730 we ran off to have dinner in the cockpit on a more stable platform, but after dinner we came back onto a northerly heading again. The sea had worsened during the day and was getting a bit rough, with two swells, one about 1.5m from the southeast, the other from southwest and about 2.5m. When they got together things got a bit interesting ... and wet! At 0612



At sea in pleasant weather

That night we hove-to in 40–50 knot winds just to get some respite from the constant banging and crashing. By the early hours the wind had gone down a bit so we set off again, heading east with a strong north to north-northwest breeze. At 0608 UTC on 22nd May our position was 30°24'·18S 162°54'·25W, our course 087°T and our speed 8·6 knots.

We'd been having chats on the radio with John Neal, who was about two days ahead of us and heading for Rururtu in the Austral Islands. He'd left 48 hours before us in his Hallberg Rassy 46 *Mahina Tiare* (with paying crew!), and went north to try to get round the low descending from Fiji/Tonga. His northerly plan worked, but like us he got a little hammered by the seas and by winds close to gale force, though we were on the other side of it.

By the next day it was all over. The wind had dropped and backed to the northwest, and we were broad reaching in 15–20 knots and sunshine. All would have been fine except that the skipper lost his balance in the cockpit while holding two plates of *chilli con carne* (lunch), which ended up all over the starboard sheet winch, the cockpit floor, and the skipper! It was soon cleaned up, however, and fortunately there was still some in the pot – Gunilla always made extra. It was very good.

UTC on 20th May our position was 33°38'·37S 166°32'·57W, our course 010°T and our speed 7·2 knots.

By the 22nd we were into our third day of pretty much gale force winds. Then the low passed and the wind went north and settled at around 35–45 knots, gusting over 50 at times. We were heading more or less east. The confused seas made the motion highly unpredictable and it was very wet, even in our well-protected cockpit. Moving around below was very difficult. We were well but tired, and the boat was handling it well which gave us all a lot of confidence. At 0612 UTC on 21st May our position was 29°48'·71S 164°50'·45W, our course 109°T and our speed 6·3 knots.

*The author on watch
and clipped on*

The sea had really abated and the breeze was still backing. It would go south sooner or later, and then southeast. The prediction was that when it went south it would die almost completely, and then we would have to motor east until we picked up the southeasterly and could lay a course directly for Raivavae. In a straight line we had just over 500 miles to go. At 0611 UTC on 23rd May our position was 29°12'·69S 159°41'·52W, our course 059°T and our speed 5·9 knots.

The wind died at 0100 on the 24th and the motor went on. The weather was beautifully sunny and the seas calm as we headed east, waiting for the southeast breeze to come. We brought a lot of damp stuff up into the cockpit to dry off in the sunshine. It was unlikely that we would get wind anytime soon, but *Elyse* was going well, the batteries were fully charged, the water tanks full and the Yanmar purring away below decks. All was good. We were also eating well – slow cooked salmon with saffron, cream, carrots and potatoes for lunch – and looking forward to getting to Raivavae. At 0423 UTC on 24th May our position was 28°51'·36S 157°10'·72W, our course 087°T and our speed 6·2 knots.



Raivavae from seaward

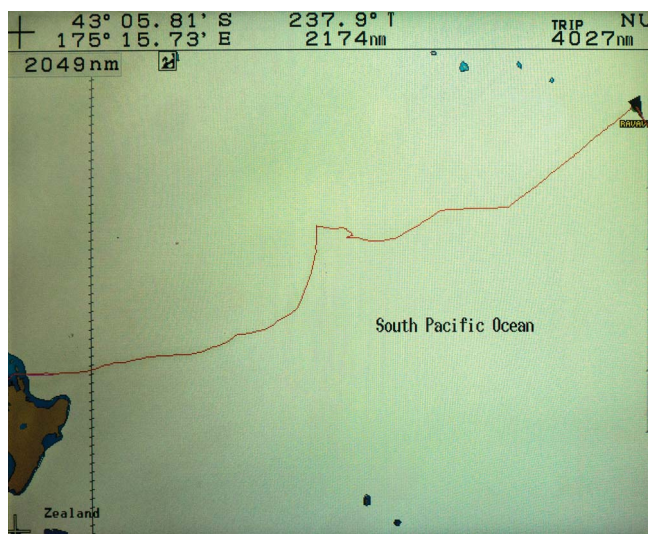


The southeast breeze finally arrived at about 1500, just when Bob had said it would, and with 15 knots from just aft of the beam we were on course to Raivavae under full genoa, main and mizzen. We feasted on prawn stir-fry and rice for lunch, put chicken sandwiches in the fridge for later, and were generally very comfortable. We hadn't been able to get onto Far North Radio to report our position, but we knew where we were and everyone on the Sailmail list knew too, which at 0404 UTC on 25th May was 28°16'·86S 154°22'·77W, our course 057°T and our speed 8 knots.

Next day the wind increased a little and backed into the east, blowing at around 20 knots. We spent a quiet day, eating up the miles towards Raivavae – 260 miles to go, hopefully a day and a half. With the lift in the breeze we put the mizzen away, and with one reef in main and genoa were making good speed in the right direction. I was thinking that if the speed continued the next day we might have to reef down further to slow the boat so we arrived after daybreak. At 0405 UTC on 26th May our position was 26°26'·64S 151°35'·1W, our course 055°T and our speed still 8 knots.

The following day was similar. Having sent out e-mails telling everyone how well we were getting on, some commented that it sounded like we were eating in restaurants every day and not really sailing! Well, we were sailing, but it was very comfortable and we were well-prepared with a variety of meals for the trip. We all believed that there was no excuse for bad food! We still had about 120 miles to go, and expected to sight land early the next morning. At 0308 UTC on 27th May our position was 24°55'·08S 149°23'·73W, our course 058°T and our speed 6·8 knots.

Early next morning we saw Raivavae rising out of the dark sea to the east. We found the pass easily and negotiated our way through the calm lagoon to the anchorage. The entrance and the passage through the lagoon are clear and free from dangers, and the reef shields the bay from the ocean swell. At 1030 LT (0030 UTC) on 28th May we dropped anchor in Baie Rairua at 23°51'·94S 147°41'·33W. We had



*Our track from New Zealand to Raivavae –
not quite what we'd planned!*

lunch before launching the dinghy and motoring in to the beach and the *gendarmerie* to register our arrival. It was all very pleasant, and we were proud of the 'Raivavae' stamps in our passports ... not many people have those!

In French Polynesia they have a peculiar clearance system for yachts. You fill in all the



Clearing in at the gendarmerie at Raivavae

paperwork at the *gendarmerie* and then you have to go to the post office to buy a stamp to mail your arrival papers to Papeete – seriously! We might get there before they do, I thought, particularly as the Raivavae post office only opened in the mornings so it would have to wait till the next day. Duly cleared in, we dinghied back to *Elyse* to celebrate our arrival in French Polynesia with cheese and crackers and champagne. Peter Russell-Green had given us the bottle before we left Auckland with a note instructing us not to open it until we reached French Polynesia. Thanks Peter, it was rather special – 2367 miles from Auckland in 14 days almost to the hour. A good trip!

The following day we went to the post office to mail our arrival form to Papeete. It was a peaceful day in Raivavae – not much happens there – and we went for a long walk around the west side of the island along a paved road. There were a few houses



Raivavae, with the church on the right



En route to Papeete

and a few cars. The air was clear, the water cool, and the local people friendly with a *bonjour* from everyone. A woman told us about *le magasin* which was next to *l'église*, but we walked past the church twice and didn't see anything resembling a shop. We thought we must have missed it and decided to have another look in the morning. Our plan was to leave the next afternoon, in order to arrive in Papeete on Sunday, wait overnight and clear in on Monday morning. We weighed anchor at 1530 and were on our way in a light northeast breeze of 10–12 knots. At 0341 UTC on 30th May our position was 23°37'·75S 147°44'·1W, our course 345°T and our speed 6·6 knots.

The next day was spent quietly sailing slowly towards Papeete. There was a slight swell, 15 knots of wind from the east, and the sailing was easy, warm and sunny. Sunset was at 1730 LT with 212 miles to go. At that rate we would be off Papeete about midnight the following night, so decided to slow down to extend the arrival time to the early hours of Sunday morning. At 0400 UTC on 31st May our position was 20°56'·41S 148°32'·78W, our course 346°T and our speed 6·9 knots.

We covered 194 miles in the next 24 hours, a great day's sailing but too fast! We had two options – keep sailing and heave-to, or head for the west side of Tahiti Iti and anchor. We chose the second option, and anchored for the night in the Passe Tapuaeraha, off Fareena, at 17°47'·68S 149°17'·99W. We planned to head for Papeete the next morning, reckoning it would take five or six hours. Late morning saw us heading into the pass near Marina Taina, and being the weekend it seemed that most of the local populace were out on the water in some sort of craft or other. We motored through the crowds, past the marina and the airport, not realising that we should have called up the airport on the radio to request permission to pass.



Sunset in French Polynesia, land of dreams

By early afternoon on 2nd June we were tied up to the wall at Boulevard Pomare at 17°32'42S 149°34'33W. It was Sunday, so Papeete – in common with most French places – was closed! Next day we visited the Port Captain, who informed us that there was no more paperwork to do as everything had been done in Raivavae – we should just come and see him when we were ready to leave. So there we were, finally, in Tahiti, the dream fulfilled, almost. There was plenty more – Moorea, Huahine, Raiatea, Bora Bora – still to explore, of course, but that's another story.



Papeete at last