

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Linda Crew-Gee

(Linda continues the tale of her Buzzards Bay 14, Francis H, begun in Flying Fish 2018/1...)

The main reason for making a circular tour of French Polynesia with Pete was to get back and sail *Francis*. Otherwise we could have sailed *Oryx* off somewhere else rather than returning to New Zealand after 6600 miles – but *Francis* was there waiting for me. I had bought her because she was irresistibly sweet and beautiful. I was in search of a new life and so was she. Once rigged and ready I had wanted to sail her, but instead I left her in a mud berth in Stillwater for six months and sailed to Polynesia with Pete. To her, it did not look like the new lease of life I had promised her. I had intended when I eventually got back to sail her around Hauraki Gulf slowly and leisurely and get to know her. Instead I was in a hurry to get her to the Bay of Islands for the Tall Ships Regatta in January 2018 to show her off!

On our return to NZ I found *Francis* safe in her mud berth, bone dry and looking as pretty as ever. Soon we had kitted her out in all her finery and set off for the long sail to the Bay of Islands, 130 miles to the north. Suitable anchorages are far apart, weather forecasts are only forecasts, strong changeable winds are the norm, and with no VHF, GPS or mobile phone signal I felt I was about to embark on one adventure too many that year. I was not wrong.

I could never have imagined how magical it would feel to be able to almost touch the dolphins swimming alongside, or how enthralling it would be to glide through

Awaiting my return in Stillwater





Linda at the helm

flocks of hundreds of undisturbed birds. When a whale's head surfaced only 100m from us, facing us and breaching with a big splash, my imagination went wild. Its head was much bigger than *Francis's* bow and I imagined its open jaws swallowing us. The tail, when it eventually surfaced, was even more scary – the whale was at least three times the size of the boat.

On her second day on the open sea *Francis* showed how much she was loving it. We were making slow progress in the early morning breeze, absorbing the beauty of the coastline. I was on the tiller, half a mile off Elisabeth Reef, when the rudder came

off, breaking the tiller as well. What a shock to see it suddenly floating astern! Luckily I managed to grab onto it, and Pete jumped out of the cabin to rescue it. Needless to say I was worried, watching us drift towards the reef while Pete hung over the stern struggling to put the rudder back on, but he kept his cool while I was thinking of waving for rescue!

Turning in early and exhausted we slept well in her cramped cabin that night.* The weather forecast was not ideal, but our most committing leg was probably doable so we decided to go for it and at crack of dawn sailed out of a well-sheltered Whangamumu Bay. The wind was blowing hard – southwest force 5–6 – and the sea rough. We already had two reefs in before we had properly set off, and I was wondering if we should turn back. I sensed trouble ahead and was apprehensive. When the wind increased in the afternoon it required the engine to make any progress at all, and we sailed, motored and motor-sailed. We tried it all but progress was slow. With the wind on the nose and short waves *Francis* was like a toddler trying to climb a staircase. She was stopped in her tracks with every wave, but she did not give up. She was sturdy, buoyant and surprisingly dry.

* Buzzards Bay 14s have a 14ft waterline but are more than 17ft overall.



Bream Island, off Bream Head, Whangarei

By the end of the day we had made it to Oke Bay anchorage. To quote Pete: “This was some sail – a memorable sail, and not an enjoyable one” – so even by that old salt’s standards it was quite something. As for me, I was ready to hail any tour boat that passed by, asking for a tow for my tiny boat which had struggled for hours to make little progress in a very rough seas. Or at least to take me away – I wanted to be out of this! Then a shocking thought crossed my mind: how nice it would be to be sitting in an office looking at a computer screen. I was stunned. It was obvious that I was not enjoying the experience, and that I did not appreciate the magic of wild seas, white wave crests, silvery seaspray, the shining sea surface, the sudden gusts, the birds... When Pete noticed that I was not my usual happy self and asked me how I felt, I only put a finger across my lips. I needed to understand what was going on inside me, and eventually did. It was a very interesting discovery.

We had put *Francis* and ourselves through our paces. I’m not sure who fared best in the 11 hours of hell rounding Cape Brett in a tiny boat, horrible seas and force 5–6 headwinds. It was good to see what *Francis* could take and make – it seemed she could take a lot but could make but a little. When Pete declared that we wouldn’t be taking her across the Tasman Sea I was disappointed but I’m sure *Francis* sighed with relief, as I did. It wasn’t exactly the maiden voyage we had envisaged and not surprisingly I have few pictures.

Fraser Rocks, north of Russell in the Bay of Islands





Sailing with other junks

The following day we entered the Bay of Islands. It was sheer joy to be on her helm, sailing in smooth waters and moderate winds along one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world. This was a perfect environment for a beautiful little boat. On

her name plate it is written: *Francis H – Bay of Islands*. We had brought her back to where she belonged. I was elated.

As we left her at anchor in Opuia, surrounded by big yachts, she looked what she is – a perfectly-formed, cute, tiny boat. Chris, the very first person to come aboard in the Bay, became her suitor. I watched him falling under her spell while he was admiring her in deep silence, and sensed his heart flying towards her in the same way mine had when I first saw her – *Francis* had seduced her next owner.

I was not surprised when he said, “She’s so cute. If you ever want to sell her I’ll buy her. Ask me first”. So I did. I took a month to part with *Francis*, sailing her in the Bay and just enjoying being aboard her. We sailed with Chris to Kerikeri and Murray Reid, her builder 40 years earlier, came to see her at the Stone Wharf where she had first been launched. His toddler boat was, by this time, a well-weathered lady of the sea.





Francis in Kerikeri

I hope Chris has as much fun with her as I did during our brief encounter. It was a great relief to know she would be continuing her life on the waves in the ownership of a most accomplished sailor. I was proud of her, and am grateful to everyone who helped me accomplish my mission of giving her a new lease of life. Fair winds and smooth seas, little mermaid!



A ship is floating in the harbour now,
A wind is hovering o'er the mountain's brow;
There is a path on the sea's azure floor,
No keel has ever ploughed that path before;
The halcyons brood around the formless isles;
The treacherous ocean has forsworn its wiles;
The merry mariners are bold and free:
Say, my heart's sister, wilt thou sail with me?

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Epipsychidion*