

TRAWLER TRASH IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

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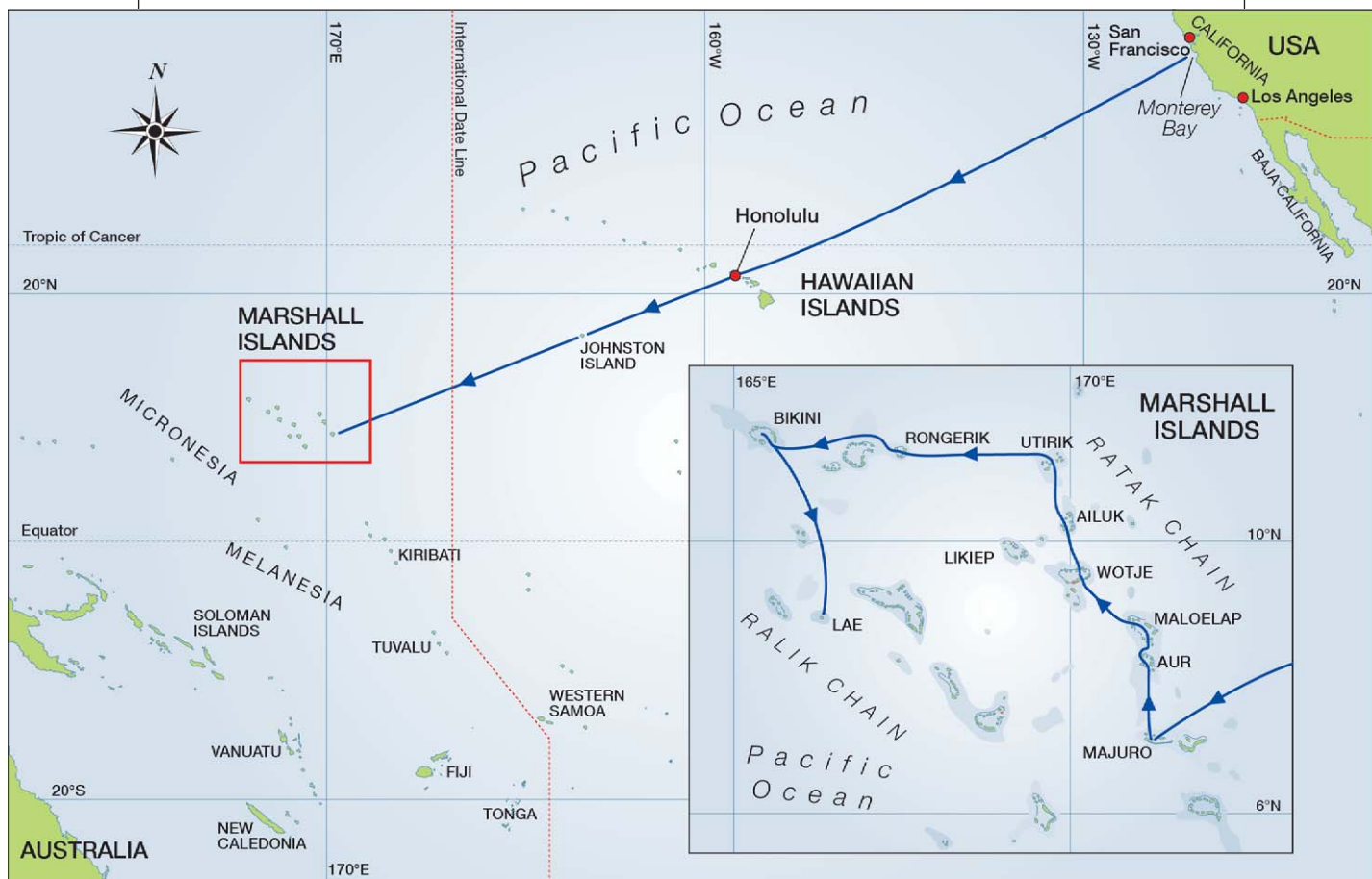
(Janice and Andrew received the 2017 Vasey Vase for their extensive Arctic voyaging over the previous four years, which followed eight years spent building their aluminium Van de Stadt Samoa 48, *Destiny*. Visit www.sailblogs.com/member/destinyatsea for the full story.)

The best laid plans can sometimes go astray, and ours to over-winter aboard *Destiny* in Sisimiut, West Greenland, hit the pan in November 2017 when Greenland's former masters the Danes declined to extend our visas. Greenland is independent, is not part of the EU or Schengen and the Greenlanders were happy for us to stay, but their immigration policy is still handled by Denmark. Despite lots of research and planning we had to leave, so *Destiny* was hauled out at Anguungaquaq shipyard in Sisimiut. We spent a busy three days draining down all the systems in preparation for -30°C winter temperatures, and removed all susceptible bottles and tins as well as cleaning products. We left *Destiny* on 2nd November.



*Destiny ashore in ice-locked Sisimiut,
21st March 2018*

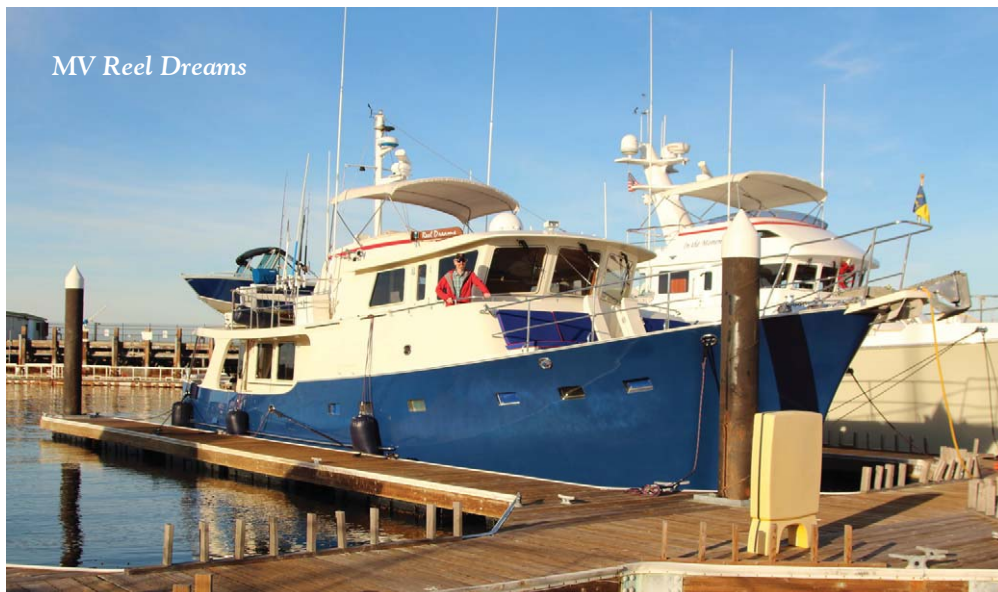
Once we knew that we could not fulfil our winter ambition we posted that we were available to crew, preferably in warmer waters, on the OCC website's 'crew wanted' forum. Within a week we had two offers. First to contact us was Bud on MV *Reel Dreams*, who needed crew to get his Kadey Kroger 58, a trawler-style motor vessel, from Monterey Bay, California to the Marshall Islands. Bud, his wife Marilyn, sister-in-law Janice and Yorkshire Terrier Bubba are on a three-year adventure. Marilyn had surgery in November, however, and needed recovery time, so Bud wanted crew to get the boat to Majuro where Marilyn and Janice would rejoin him. The trip covered the three months that Andy and I needed to be away, so a few e-mails and phone calls later we agreed to undertake the challenge.



We joined Bud, Marilyn and Bubba on 27th November at Monterey Bay. After a few days' familiarisation with the motor boat and some final provisioning, Bud, Bubba, Andy and I departed for Honolulu on 1st December. Andy and I do get seasick (particularly me), but on *Destiny* I prepare bottled meals and tubs of ginger cookies for at least a week, by which time I can stop my tablets and function normally. Bud does not get seasick, and we left Monterey Bay into a forecast heavy swell which continued for many days. As we departed we had dolphins playing around the bow, keenly watched by Bubba. After that we saw a few flying fish and a few boobies, but for 2000 miles the Pacific Ocean was barren. Bud had told us he averaged 6 knots, but the reality was more like 4 to 4.5 knots on this particular leg, even seeing 3.5 knots. With that wind speed and direction we would have been doing 7+ knots in our 'blow boat' (Bud's term for sailing yachts). Trawler Trash is a term used by one of Bud's friends for his motor boat and which now proudly appears on his nav seat cover.

Bud uses weather forecaster Chris Parker, who kept us apprised of the weather fronts and advised a 200 mile diversion to the south to avoid some particularly rough weather. This meant fuel forecasting reduced our rpm on the two engines to ensure we had a contingency reserve to get to Honolulu. *Reel Dreams* has a very different motion to *Destiny* and I did not get rid of my seasickness – despite trying without tablets for a few days I had to resume taking them until we reached Honolulu on 22nd December. Bud was good, doing most of the cooking on passage, so I took over the galley once we were in harbour and, it being Christmas, we made pastry and mincemeat and produced a few trays of mince pies! Hawaii Yacht Club welcomed us into their midst late evening with a celebratory beer in the bar.

Honolulu gave Bud an opportunity to catch up with his cousin Wayne, whom he had not met for thirty years. Wayne kindly showed us round the island and invited us to his house to meet his lovely family on Christmas Eve. We joined the Hawaii Yacht Club festive celebrations, and delighted in watching their parade of illuminated boats – Father Christmas, Rudolfs and palm trees! Andy and I also took time to buy some warm weather clothes (having come from the Arctic) and lightweight wetsuits for snorkelling.





Honolulu, Hawaii

With a better forecast we set out for the Marshall Islands on 30th December. I tried going ‘cold turkey’ by not taking any seasickness tablets, but after four days I started vomiting blood, so it was a relief that the tablets (Postafen – Meclizine hydrochloride) instantly settled everything down and the next 2000 miles were better than the previous. We had to stop at Johnston Island, where the Americans destroyed most of their chemical and biological weapons, to do an alternator change, the second on the Hawaii leg. You are not allowed to go ashore and are supposed to get permission from the American Coast Guard even to anchor, but the mechanical emergency meant we had not done this. There is a skeleton crew ashore and someone radioed us, taking all our details.

Since leaving Monterey the temperature had gradually been rising – layers of clothing were removed, trousers swapped for shorts, and shoes for bare feet. We had several time changes and a dateline change, which completely confused our phones and tablets, particularly the calendar app. With more gales forecast we eventually stopped at Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands. Marilyn’s return to *Reel Dreams* had been delayed due to further surgery, so Bud decided to take the time to visit the atolls that make up the archipelago. On 23rd January we left Majuro for Aur Atoll, heading for the south entrance. Our first warning of the entrance was white breaking waves ahead. It is 30m (100ft) wide and 15m (50ft) deep, and all submerged. It was too late in the day to go ashore and visit the Mayor – it was dark by 1930 so there were 12 hours to dream away, or sweat!

Next morning we went ashore. Bud dropped us off at the steep-to sandy beach, then took the tender out to deeper water, threw an anchor over the side and swam ashore (we continued this process throughout the voyage, necessitated by the 1000kg, 70hp rigid tender). Our first welcome came from kids at the local school right on the beach and we then walked through the village to find the Mayor. After talking with him, his wife gave us some bananas which we exchanged for a bag of coffee. Invited to view

the village, we chatted with locals, seeing their homes and animals – chickens, dogs and pigs. The Pastor invited us in for fresh coconut milk, which was very refreshing, and Bud gave each of his children a lollipop. Taking our leave, we became engaged by another group of school children. Andy and I sat down with them and looked at their spelling books, which contained some quite difficult words. Bubba was a point of interest, but the pet concept was impossible to explain.

At each atoll village we visited, the houses had solar panels with a battery. They also had one or two 1500 gallon (5700 litre) tanks for collecting fresh water from the roofs. It transpired that these were donated by a Taiwanese company and have been gradually distributed throughout the islands, making a big difference to the islanders. The same company gifted a power station on Wotje Atoll. We were lucky to have an island tour of Wotje with Ray of MEC power. Like the other atoll islands, any houses on Wotje without electricity are given solar panels.

Every village had its own subtle personality. They were all laid out with wide paths and most houses were made from plywood with tin roofs and open sided to allow air flow. On some islands, however, people had used old Japanese World War Two buildings for housing. Even the pigs had moved into old bunkers to raise their piglets. The Japanese did not reach Ailuk (pronounced Ilook), which is a beautiful village. It was hit by a typhoon in the 1990s, and all its houses were destroyed and the trees uprooted, though fortunately no one was killed. Since then the locals have been rebuilding with concrete blocks. Shade is very important, and all the villages had huge breadfruit or pandanus trees throughout.

Within the atolls most of the population generally live on one or two islands, with the remainder given over to growing coconut. The islanders also raise some of their pigs on these islands, ready for celebratory slaughter at birthdays, deaths or weddings. On

Janice, Bud and Bubba visiting local women working on handicrafts





Janice having a difficult counting lesson in Marshallese

several islands we walked into the jungle to cross to the windward side. The coconut trees were dense, with lots of dead debris and coconut husks in piles. The locals collect them to process the copra for income, while the women use other parts of the leaves to make beautiful baskets, and wall coverings with cowrie shells woven into the design. The windward beaches all had lots of plastic rubbish. We found some lovely shells, Andy using a stick to roll the shells over to check if they were occupied. You have to be careful, as some of the owners have very powerful stings which can be fatal.

Andy and I spent time snorkelling. The health and formations of coral varied at each stop, with the best where there were no people. With no human predators the fish were more varied, a lot bigger and friendly. We had bought a great reference book with over a thousand excellent photos, and much fun was had trying to identify the individuals we had seen on our return to *Reel Dreams*. There are a lot of interesting wrecks to dive, relics of World War Two, and Bud, Andy and I explored a number of these.

English is taught in the schools and most people speak at least some – definitely better than our Marshallese. Wotje has both an elementary school and a high school, and students from Aur and Maloelap Atolls (about 60 and 87 miles away respectively) come to Wotje High School in August and remain until May when they return to their island homes. There are some 400 students who live-in from ages 12 to 16. Part of Bud's conversation with the Mayor was about the importance of education. It is nicely summed up by the High School's motto: 'Today we Follow, Tomorrow we Lead'.

With each village visit a regular pattern developed. First we visited the Mayor. Next we walked around the village and surrounding area. On most walks we were met by children. We said 'Yokwe', they said 'Hello'. They always asked where we were from, so Andy would produce a stick to draw a world map in the sand and so a geography lesson happened. They loved it. They thought it very funny that we were from England but our boat was in Greenland where it is very cold! (Another impossible concept for the



*Janice,
the
church
bells
and
local
kids*

children – our boat is in a frozen sea, with continual darkness. It must sound like hell to them.) As each child joined the happy band they would want to shake hands and say ‘Hello’. This led on to ‘what is your name?’ from both sides. They struggled with Janice until Andy drew it in the sand. Each child was then encouraged to draw their own name, from the oldest of 12 years or so down to the youngest of about 4 years. It was very impressive. On one occasion, asking their ages resulted in a difficult (for me) counting session. Meanwhile Bud would wander round looking at the remains of Japanese wartime buildings, followed ‘pied piper’ style by another band of children interested in Bubba. When we left, Bud would produce some individual boxes of raisins, rather than sweets. These were given to the kids, who shared the contents amongst themselves. At the tender we said ‘Yahweh’ and they said ‘Bye’, with giggles all round. What a great time we had with them all!

The atolls are not places to enter at night without good local knowledge, especially as the charts for Ailuk and Utirik were up to a mile out. As well as using the radar and our eyes, Andy had downloaded Google satellite pictures of the atolls and entrances, importing them into Open CPN on Bud’s laptop so he could get familiar with another useful tool while Andy was around to help him. Google Earth satellite images are converted to a geo-referenced file so your vessel is shown in true position over the image. Google Earth is 100% correct, unlike many nautical charts for remote areas of the world – we could even make out shallow coral heads this way! (Check out the Venturefarther website and OpenCPN VF plug-in for details of very easy Google Earth KAP file manufacture. We used the same process for East Greenland.)

Visiting Utirik on Sunday morning we heard singing from the church, voices lifted across to our ears on the gathering breeze. As custom dictates we visited Walder, the Mayor, and his family first – his children had drawn ‘Welcome’ in the sand for us where we came ashore. We were met on the beach by Dallas, who asked if we had any flour, rice or coffee they could buy. Their last supply ship had been in December with the next one not due until March, and they had run out. There had been no fee set for Utirik, so we planned to pay with food. We left a tub of coffee with Dallas at the end of our first trip ashore, as the church were having a gathering to pray for his sick mother. This was the first time we had been directly asked for anything, so the following morning, before we went ashore again to visit Mayor Walder and his wife Laureen, we raided the boat provisions and put together supplies of rice, flour, sugar and coffee, which we offered as our fee to be shared amongst the residents by Mayor Walder. We had a great interaction with Laureen and Walder, going through phrases such as ‘how are you?’ and the reply. Realising that we would be transferring from the Ratak (eastern/sunrise) atoll chain to the Ralik (western/sunset) chain they gave us the answers for both dialects.

Rongerik was the only uninhabited atoll that we visited, following an eventful, breezy passage with a lumpy sea. Shortly after I relieved Andy at 0600 the starboard alternator bearing started making an awful noise, so we shut off that engine and ran the rest of the passage on the port engine. At about the same time the control panel for the stabilisers failed, so for the rest of our trip we had no stabilisers! Andy and I did a few snorkel trips on Rongerik, being greeted rather too closely on one of them by an inquisitive grey tip reef shark at least 5ft long. While snorkelling we saw nice reefs, signs of recovering coral, glorious fish of all sizes and awesome giant blue clams. Why? No humans, hence the abundant marine life. All four of us explored the fabulous beaches, with the first birds in quantity flying overhead and nesting. We also went jungle bashing to the windward side which resulted in some scratched limbs.

Jungle bashing



Some scale: we are normally based in the Arctic, and *Destiny* waited for us in Greenland. Greenland and the Marshall Islands have very similar populations of approximately 56,000 people, and both cultures have evolved to live off the sea. The land area to house them is very different, however – Greenland has 840,000 square miles, versus 70 square miles for the Marshall Islands (made up of 1225 islands and islets, with only five being single islands and the rest grouped into 29 coral atolls). Although only 70 square miles in land area, the Marshall Islands are scattered across 750,000 square miles of ocean. True atolls, the islands are low and narrow, encircling large central lagoons. Wotje is the widest at less than a mile across, while the highest elevation, at 34 feet (10.2m), is on Likiep. The southern islands have more vegetation than those in the north, which enjoy a drier climate. There are no rocks or hills, just coral and sand. Pandanus is an important food in the northern islands, with breadfruit equally so in the south. Coconut production and fishing are important everywhere.

Bud was very keen to visit Bikini. Within the Marshall Islands all land is owned by someone, land being the most valuable asset the Marshallese have. This was a problem when the USA did nuclear testing on Bikini in the 1950s. (They dropped a total of 66 bombs – ‘Bravo’ on 1st March 1954 was equivalent to 17 megatons of TNT, or 1300 times the destructive force of the Hiroshima bomb. It was specifically designed to create a vast amount of lethal fallout.) Bikini was evacuated, but Rongelap and Utirik were not and lay directly in the path of the fallout. Subsequently, the locals on several islands had to be relocated due to radiation contamination, but all the best land was already taken. What was left was uninhabitable due to lack of fresh water, or the soil would not support the local food or copra production for earning money.

Without stabilisers the passage to Bikini was uncomfortable. Bud’s scratches from jungle bashing had become infected so he started antibiotics, and after a few days was able to go ashore and meet the skeleton Marshallese crew who maintain Bikini, planting

vegetables. Every six months American scientists visit to take soil, plant and water samples. The top layer of soil brought in after the bombings is ‘clean’, but if you dig down a little it is not ‘clean’, hence the monitoring and observing how Mother Nature tries to heal our human abuses.





Local men on their outrigger, off to collect coconuts from the next island

We were not prepared to go ashore on Bikini, snorkelling instead as the sea water is changed daily! We saw some great fish up close and personal, shoals of various fish happy to follow and swim around us. We had the opportunity to do closer inspections of new coral, some soft corals, tunicates and sponges, but best were the giant clams. We found two next to each other, both a metre wide and with fabulous iridescent lips in hues of blues, browns and greens. Looking into the insides of these ancient clams was absolutely amazing, but they were incredibly sensitive to movement and snapped shut quickly. They must have been very old to have reached this size, but we saw very few smaller clams. We found a green sea turtle tucked under a coral ledge resting, but after hovering over it watching for a while we moved off without having disturbed its 'down time'.

Having called at Aur, Maloelap, Wotje, Ailuk, Utirik, Rongerik and Bikini, our last visit was to Lae Atoll. We tried to anchor off the village, but had to move to the next island, the beach area being more sand than coral outcrops. In the late afternoon we were visited by the Acting Mayor, the first time local people had come out to us. It was good to invite them onboard and offer them soft drinks (the islands are alcohol-free) while Bud and the Acting Mayor chatted. Later that evening a boat came out in the dark to deliver a bag of drinking coconuts for us – delicious cooled in the 'fridge. They remove the husk in a way that leaves a soft plug. When you want to drink from it, you knock the plug off and if a hole is not evident you push a knife through the soft area left by the plug – easy! Before we left the island Tingey, a Mormon Elder, collected a few sprouting coconuts to let us taste *iiu* (pronounced yew). You open the coconut and the whole of the centre has become an edible, soft, tasty white pith. The coconut is a truly versatile fruit!

The locals at Lae Atoll still use traditional sailing outriggers to visit the other islands and collect the coconuts, and it was the first place where we were able to watch the men working on at least four traditional outrigger boats. These are great boats, which sail really well and fast even when laden with six men and sacks of coconuts.

We arrived back in Majuro on 22nd February after an uncomfortable two days' motoring. In 82 days Andy and I had covered 5377 miles on *Reel Dreams* – 973 engine hours, which included replacing five alternators and carrying out three oil and filter changes on each engine, with another on each engine due. The stabilisers had stopped working, with no possibility of an on-passage repair. We looked on our trip as a research opportunity into motor boats, crewing other people's boats and travelling in the Pacific. We had interesting experiences and gained answers to our questions. We will be sticking to sails. And another visit to the Pacific? ... maybe. As predicted, it would have been an almost perfect reach the whole way by blow boat!

We left on 1st March, Nuclear Remembrance Day in the Marshall Islands – a national holiday when the Marshallese remember the American nuclear tests of the 1950s. Our hearts go out to these lovely islanders who were friendly, welcoming, and quick to smile and laugh. The Marshall Islands are not on the usual cruisers' track, but they are well worth visiting.

