

## NORTHWEST PACIFIC PASSAGE

### Annika Koch and Björn Christensson

*(Annika and Björn have been sailing together since 1973, first in a home-completed 31-footer, later buying a Forgas 37 named Lindisfarne, in which they explored the Mediterranean and the Baltic before returning to their home near Gothenburg. Three years later, on 1st May 2005, they started their circumnavigation, reaching Australia before heading back north to Canada. In 2012 they upsized to Moon, a Koopmans 47, built in Holland in 2001 but then lying in Langkawi, Malaysia.*

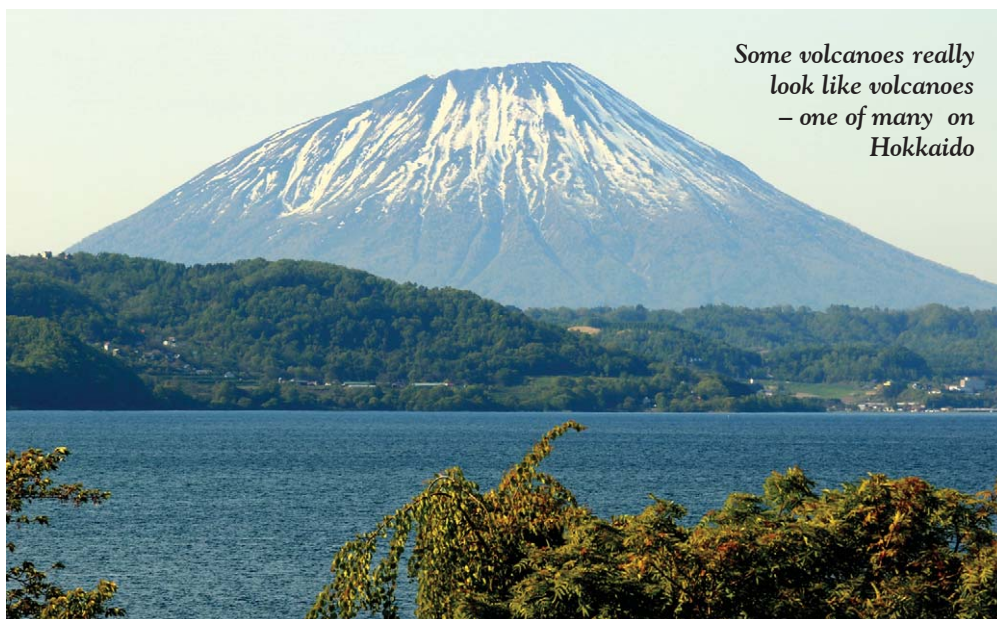
*Annika and Björn have visited Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, Japan and Alaska, sailed south down the west coasts of Canada, North America and Mexico, transited the Panama Canal into the Caribbean and then doubled back north as far as Boston. Visit their highly professional blog – in both Swedish and English – at [www.sailaround.info](http://www.sailaround.info) to read more. All photos by Annika and Björn except where credited.)*

#### **Kushiro, Hokkaido, Japan – Sunday 5th June**

With paperwork done on Friday all four yachts are ready to go. We leave at 1500 into a flat sea and grey skies, with *Shuang Yu* (American), *Kéa* (French) and *Liv* (Swedish) some hours ahead of us. No wind means our speeds are very similar and we remain in VHF range all night.

#### **Monday 6th June: Day 1**

A cold morning after a clear night with no moon. The water temperature is only 4°C and the air temperature during the night down to 6°C. We were told by the Coast Guard to stay at least 4 miles offshore because of fishing nets, but there were still a lot. It's lucky our radar picks up the markers, because during the night we had to alter course to avoid at least three.



*Some volcanoes really  
look like volcanoes  
– one of many on  
Hokkaido*



*Religion is an important  
part of Japanese life*

*Cherry blossom  
in May plays an even bigger role*



Early in the morning we heard *Shuang Yu* calling a fishing boat and understood that they had been caught in a fishing net. They had chosen to go even further out, obviously not always good. Later via our SSB radio net we learned that they were free but could not use their engine. Pam, who usually jumps into the sea to clear anything around the prop, tried, but it could have ended in tragedy in the bitterly cold water. She almost

*The Japanese take customs clearance seriously – up to ten officials can arrive*







*Harbours in Japan are mostly free, but plenty of fenders and fender boards are needed*

couldn't get back up into the boat and was shivering for half an hour before she could breathe normally. They started to sail towards the closest Japanese port but *Kéa*, the French catamaran, was closest and volunteered to turn back and assist. Diving gear and drysuits solved the problem and the two were able to continue northeast, though *Shuang Yu* later chose to head due east.

The predicted wind became a no-show, which of course was a blessing for the diving operation. We tried to sail in the few gusts, but the engine was on for pretty much the whole day and by evening we'd motored 130 miles of the 1300 to Attu in bright sunshine.

*Moon and her crew in Kushiro, the day before leaving for Alaska*



### Tuesday 7th June: Day 2

Another cold, clear night, with fog a few hours after sunset and no moon but lots of stars. The nights get shorter every day! We are travelling northeast, which also means that the morning comes earlier with every mile. We have already adjusted the time by two hours to have daylight during 'daytime'. Our routines for 24-hour sailing are starting to get in place and we sleep okay, although the sea is a bit rolly and the engine makes lots of (normal) noise. This is the second time we have had to run the engine at the beginning of a passage knowing that the weather will be calm for the first few days. Last time it was between Tasmania and South Island, New Zealand. That time we were overcompensated with wind in the final days of the passage, only beating the arrival of a storm by a couple of hours. This time we hope the approaching low will not be that nasty.

Fredrik, the son of friends back home, is helping us with an overall view of the weather patterns. Hopefully we will be able to come north of the strongest winds and be able to continue towards Attu despite the low. We can only communicate with the



outside world via SSB and Pactor modem, a slow connection that only allows short messages. We probably won't have internet for another three weeks. In the meantime we enjoy the sunshine and an unusual situation in this area – no fog! The high pressure has obviously brought very dry air, and in spite of the cold current from the Bering Sea, the little humidity doesn't condense as fog. We have studied a blog from this area written last year and they didn't see much of the sun for the whole summer!

To port we have snow-covered Russian islands south of Kamchatka, 30 miles west of our route, very beautiful in the morning sunrise. The south-going current from the Bering Sea, now only 3°C, slows us down by about 1 knot, but thanks to our big (900 litre / 200 UK gallon) diesel tank we have no restrictions on motoring. Despite



the sun and no wind it's bitterly cold, so we wear lots of extra clothes and of course a wind-breaker on top. In the sun and in the lee of the pilot-house it's okay with only one layer, but not 'outside' and at night.

*Moon's* interior is normally a comfortable 18°–20° thanks to our hot water heating system and its eight radiators, powered either by the engine or, if we are sailing, the WhisperGen. In daytime, with the sun through our big windows, it's almost too much! Our friends have more normal boats with little extra heating, except for *Liv*, a Hallberg Rassy, which in the Swedish way is equipped with an air heater. But as all their diesel may be needed for the engine its use will be restricted. Distance made good 125 miles.

### Wednesday 8th June: Day 3

Just after sunset we saw the new moon for a short while before it disappeared below the horizon. After that another cold night with no moon but a lot of stars. However the night was lit up by the gleaming stream from the propeller – really amazing, like some backwards-pointing flashlight under the boat. For a few hours during the night we had some swell, but it disappeared in the morning and we were surrounded by flat, oily water all the way to the Russian island away to port. Taking advantage of the flat conditions we had a shower before lunch – the humidity inside *Moon* is very low and the teak grid in the shower had dried within an hour.

Distance made good 123 miles, 98 percent of it under power. Today we saw our first tufted puffin – really cute!

### Thursday 9th June: Day 4

Fog all night – 'normal' weather, in fact – but by early morning it was more like light drizzle, and we could see large passing ships about three miles away. We had two close calls with ships during the night, the first before midnight and with a CPA (closest point of approach) of less than 100m. We'd called them when they were 10 miles north of

*One reason for sailing to Alaska was the wildlife.  
This horned puffin is very similar to its Atlantic cousin*



*A curious Russian  
fishing boat that  
approached to  
within 50m of us*

us and asked if they were aware of a sailing yacht on their route. They clearly were not, but no problem – they altered course 5° to starboard and only resumed their previous course once we were astern. The next one was more alert and had already seen *Moon* on the AIS monitor and, because

we called them when they got closer, changed course 10° to starboard.

The wind is still very weak, but now from the southeast which allows us to motor-sail almost close-hauled on our northeast course, making *Moon* much more stable. The current has also changed since early morning, and we are now making 6.5 knots through water and often adding 0.5–1 knot of current. Previously, with weak tail winds and an adverse current, we were doing 5.5 knots but losing up to 1 knot.

This morning we even had an hour without the engine, sailing at 6.5 knots under the windvane in absolute silence, but it did not last for long. Before re-starting the engine we rinsed the krill out of the water strainer – no wonder there is so much wildlife in this part of the world. Late in the afternoon we had a visit from a big, big sperm whale which came within 20m of *Moon* – a little too close...

Distance made good 143 miles, 98 percent of it under power.

#### **Friday 10th June: Day 5**

Fog the whole day, cold and part drizzly. Swell and waves moderate because the true wind is only 10–15 knots though we have 14–20 knots apparent when sailing close-hauled – perfect! We shut down the engine only a couple of minutes into this fifth day and have been sailing ever since ... very nice and quiet. As long as the wind exceeds 6–8 knots the Windpilot Pacific Plus windvane does a great job of keeping *Moon* on course. Another advantage is that we don't have to hand-steer when using the HF radio. HF interferes with the rudder sensor to the autopilot computer so we can't use it when transmitting. HF radio communication is mysterious. Sometimes it is non-existent, but other times, like this morning, the conditions are great with very fast download of GRIB files – extra important as a low is forecast to pass tomorrow. The WhisperGen is working well, meaning full heat and electricity aboard and no restrictions on cooking, making bread, radar, nav PC and all the other nav instruments, which is a relief in this dense fog. The morning radio net had some bad news – *Liv* could not get their heater to start, giving them a very cold boat. *Kéa*, the French cat, had hit something during the night (they think probably a log) and got a 20cm scratch through the outer skin of their



composite fibreglass hull. No leakage however, and there is some sort of stiffener/support inside the hull where the scratch is. They were complaining about the cold inside the boat, but had no second thoughts about continuing towards Attu despite the damage.

Distance made good 136 miles (all under sail!), totalling 657 miles so far – close to half the great circle distance from Kushiro to Attu.

#### **Saturday 11th June: Day 6**

A foggy night, but not much rain and 15–20 knots of wind from east-southeast. The swell and the wind didn't always co-operate, making *Moon* a bit uncomfortable, but compared to what we had expected from the predicted low this was nothing – almost an anticlimax, in fact. Pointing about 45–50° to the apparent wind, or between 35–45° over ground, almost on the great circle for Attu.

The conditions stabilised in the morning and remained unchanged throughout the day, making the sailing both comfortable and relatively fast despite our reefed mainsail. Sailing close-hauled, *Moon* is almost as fast with full headsails and a reefed main as with a full main, providing there's more than 10 knots. Under 10 knots from astern and we have to motor-sail, as the swell and waves roll *Moon* and the mainsail flops from one side to the other, giving no contribution to the speed. Before noon the wind became more easterly, giving us a course of nearer 25–30° over ground. Much of the time we still have an opposing current, but seldom more than half a knot.

The WhisperGen had been running for 36 hours and started to get too warm, so was stopped by the microprocessor. It was probably caused by lack of nitrogen, which we couldn't top up enough before leaving Japan. Now we were in almost the same state as the others, although we still had a warm boat while motoring. When it was too cold we turned the engine on for a few hours, especially during the night – the temperature kept above 16° during daytime, despite no heating.

The evening net showed that *Liv* and *Moon*, 30 miles apart, had made almost the same distance during the day, though *Kéa* the catamaran had used her gennaker and made great progress. The backing wind brought us into the shipping lane again, and now and then we called ships that had a CPA of less than a mile to make sure they were aware of us. No problems so far – they were all very polite and altered course to give us enough room to feel comfortable. Distance made good 148 miles, all under sail.

#### **Sunday 12th June: Day 7**

Fog but no rain during the night and decreasing wind until 2000 when we had to start the engine. It stayed on all day, though not a bad thing as the WhisperGen isn't working and it's getting cold. During the day it's around 16° inside *Moon* without using heating more than occasionally, but at night it falls rapidly. There is a new low with stronger wind due within a day or two, but until then we will probably have to use the engine.

During the night we had one ship ahead with a CPA of less than 100m. We called as usual when we were 10 miles apart, and after some trouble understanding us they confirmed that they could see our AIS and were going to alter course to starboard. We had no preference which side they wanted to pass us, but thought it a bit odd because they were on our starboard side. Sure enough, when the change of course came on AIS it was to port! When we were talking on VHF they probably hadn't seen us on AIS and the reflex was to alter course to starboard to pass port to port.

It's obviously important to use simple but exact expressions to get around the language barrier. 'Maintain course' is preferable to 'continue this course', and that solved the problem this time. We will use 'maintain' to avoid misunderstandings in the future. There is another reason for 'maintain' – we are a sailing boat, and 'maintain' makes it clear that we are aware of the rules and that the other vessel can count on us keeping our course. Ships have A-transponders and we normally see them 30 miles away. B-transponders on yachts and some fishing boats are less powerful and we see most of them only 10–15 miles away. Surprisingly, *Liv* can sometimes see *Moon's* B-transponder 30–35 miles away – True Heading obviously makes good AIS equipment.

The radio net this morning showed similar distances to *Kéa* and *Liv* as yesterday, mainly because we have all used our engines more or less continuously. We had a close encounter with a fin or sei whale during the net – not as close as the sperm whale the other day but a more relaxing 50m... In late morning we started the EchoTec watermaker for the first time since November. We had postponed this until we had clean sea water around *Moon*, and of course we had to have at least one tank empty. We 'test ran' it for 45 minutes to get rid of any residue and then got water of absolutely top quality – and at the usual 50 litres per hour with pressure still well below 800 psi in spite of the very cold sea water. The high capacity is because the three filters and 5–6m of hose between the intake and the high pressure pump are in warm areas. It's very convenient to be able to use the engine water strainer with its glass lid to check the amount of krill and other small sea creatures – the watermaker's pre-filter will certainly clog if we have lots of krill.

It looks as though we may make landfall on Attu on Thursday 16th Japanese time. We will soon cross the international date line, however, and gain a day, making us arrive on the 15th at the westernmost (and easternmost) spot in the United States. Distance made good 135 miles, total since Kushiro 833 miles. Engine in use 18 hours out of 24.

#### **Monday 13th June: Day 8**

We actually saw the moon for a short time last night, before the clouds and fog returned. By early morning the fog had eased and at dawn we had red skies to east, then after lunch we got partly clear skies and sunshine for several hours. We motor-sailed until early morning, when the wind backed and we had to lower the staysail and motor into 4–5 knots of headwind with just the reefed mainsail until evening.

We learned on the morning radio net that *Kéa* had got a net around one of their propellers. They have diving equipment (they helped *Shuang Yu* with a net the first day) but even with drysuits it's still very cold! All through the night the AIS had shown Russian fishing boats in the area where *Kéa* caught the net.

Distance made good 128 miles, but engine in use 24 hours out of 24...

#### **Tuesday 14th June: Day 9**

Light wind from northeast, but very rough seas with swell from the east and waves from the northeast. This, together with our heading northeast into the waves, makes life onboard uncomfortable and progress slow. Warmer water at 6–7°, however.

During the evening radio net we learned more about *Kéa's* adventure with the fishing net. They had managed to get most of it off the prop, but there was still





*Preparing to drop anchor in Casco Cove, Attu. Photo by Dominique, aboard Kéa*

some nylon around the shaft between the sail drive and the prop that was impossible to remove in the cold water – not good. *Kéa* is still 30 miles northwest of us, motor-sailing southeast, and *Liv* 60 miles south-southwest, sailing east-southeast with more wind and a building sea.

At the morning net we had contact with all three other boats. *Shuang Yu* has made very slow progress and is now 500 miles south of us, *Kéa* had motor-sailed southeast during the night and is now 30 miles southwest of us, and *Liv* is 70 miles south. We were surprised to find that our slow motor-sailing east-northeast during the night had brought us so much closer to Attu compared to *Kéa* and *Liv*. The wind backed during the morning, so we changed course to due east and set the staysail, which resulted in more speed and a better angle to the waves. Hopefully we will have more wind in the evening and from a more northerly direction. It would be nice to be able to turn the engine off, although for the moment we don't have any heat inside *Moon* without it.

Distance made good 99 miles, nearly all of it motor-sailing in confused seas. Total 1060 miles since leaving Japan, and less than 200 miles left before Attu landfall.

### **Wednesday 14th June: Day 10**

Not a pleasant night with the swell running from dead ahead, no moon, and drizzle now and then. On top of that a short, steep wind-driven sea made us stop every so often, so we motor-sailed for a long time to make progress.

At yesterday evening's radio net we were furthest north, with *Kéa* 30 miles south-southwest and *Liv* almost 90 miles in the same direction. *Shuang Yu* had made some progress but very slowly. Then shortly before the morning net we saw *Kéa*'s AIS signal only 5 miles south of us, and by the afternoon they were still there. *Liv* had been able to sail during the night and was now 50 miles south-southwest, but *Kéa* and *Moon* had both slowed to avoid making landfall in the dark. It looks like all three of us will arrive before noon tomorrow.

During the night and morning we crossed two borders – first the territorial border between Russia and the USA, and some hours later the international date line. Then after leaving Attu we will cross from 180°E to 180°W. The first time we crossed the date line was heading west across the South Pacific in 2008, then again en route to Alaska from New Zealand in 2011. Crossing the date line confuses us as to just what time and day it is, but as long the sun rises east of us we are safe...

Distance made good 127 miles, about half of it under sail.

#### **Thursday 15th June: Day 11**

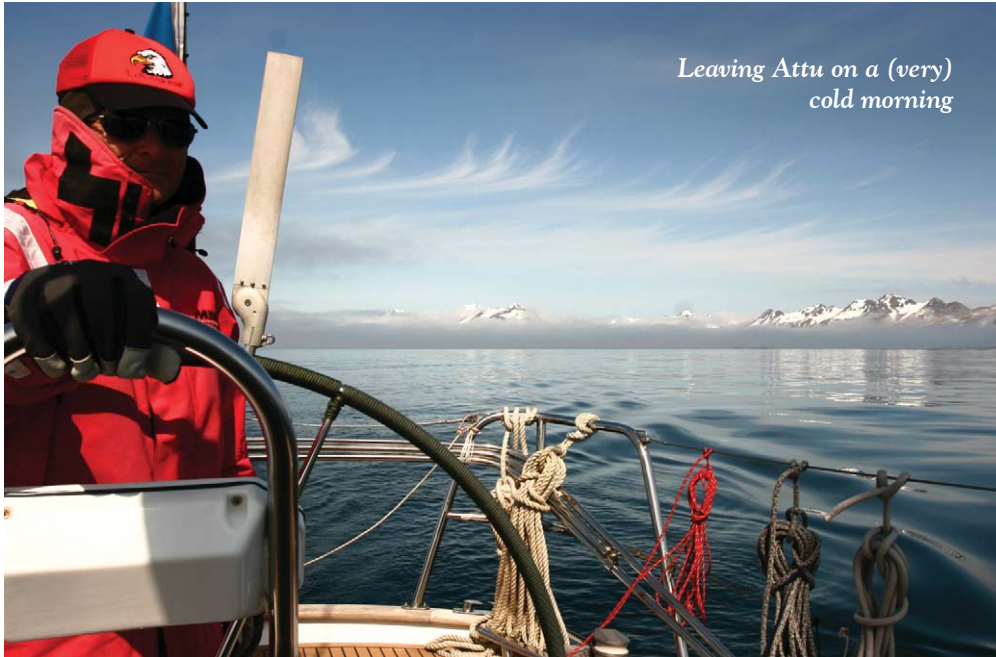
At the evening radio net it was clear that the three of us in the north would make landfall at much the same time, and as there are not that many safe anchorages we have all chosen the same bay. During the last 20 miles we could occasionally see the partially snow-covered slopes as the sun made heroic attempts to chase away the low clouds, but in contrast the boats astern sometimes disappeared in light fog.

At 1000 we finally shut down the engine after dropping anchor, and shortly afterwards both *Kéa* and *Liv* were resting nearby. We invited both crews for a sundowner aboard *Moon* in time for the evening net, when we will try to make contact with *Shuang Yu*. As they approached the bay *Kéa* saw two small vehicles moving, so obviously there are people at the US station although it closed in 2010. We plan to visit them tomorrow.

*With Kéa and Liv in landlocked Finger Bay, Adak*







*Leaving Attu on a (very)  
cold morning*

In spite of some drizzle – the low that should have moved on by now seems to have stopped right over Attu – the scenery is beautiful with snow patches at the foot of the nearby slopes. Overall it is very green but with absolutely no trees – we will have to wait until Kodiak to see some forest. We plan to continue east after a day or two's rest, weather permitting. It is a little too far between the islands to go day-hopping so it will mean overnight sails, and the route is all upwind...

The passage had taken us 10 days and 16 hours, and though the great circle distance is 1300 miles we covered 1367 miles over the ground (probably nearer 1500 miles through the water allowing for adverse current), an average speed over the ground of 5.33 knots.



*Brown (grizzly)  
bears are  
another major  
attraction...*