

# SAILING THE RING OF FIRE, Part 1

## Andy & Sue Warman

### Roving Rear Commodores

*(Andy and Sue left the UK in 2009 aboard their Ohlson 38 Spruce, crossing to the Eastern Caribbean before continuing to Bermuda, New England and Canada. They upsized to a Hallberg Rassy 42 – also called Spruce – for the the summer of 2011, crossing the Atlantic for the second time and continuing into the Pacific to New Zealand, Australia and into Asia, where this account begins.*

*Having wintered in Blaine on the US/Canadian border, they plan a British Columbia cruise before heading south via Oregon and California to Mexico, then down to Central America in 2020.*

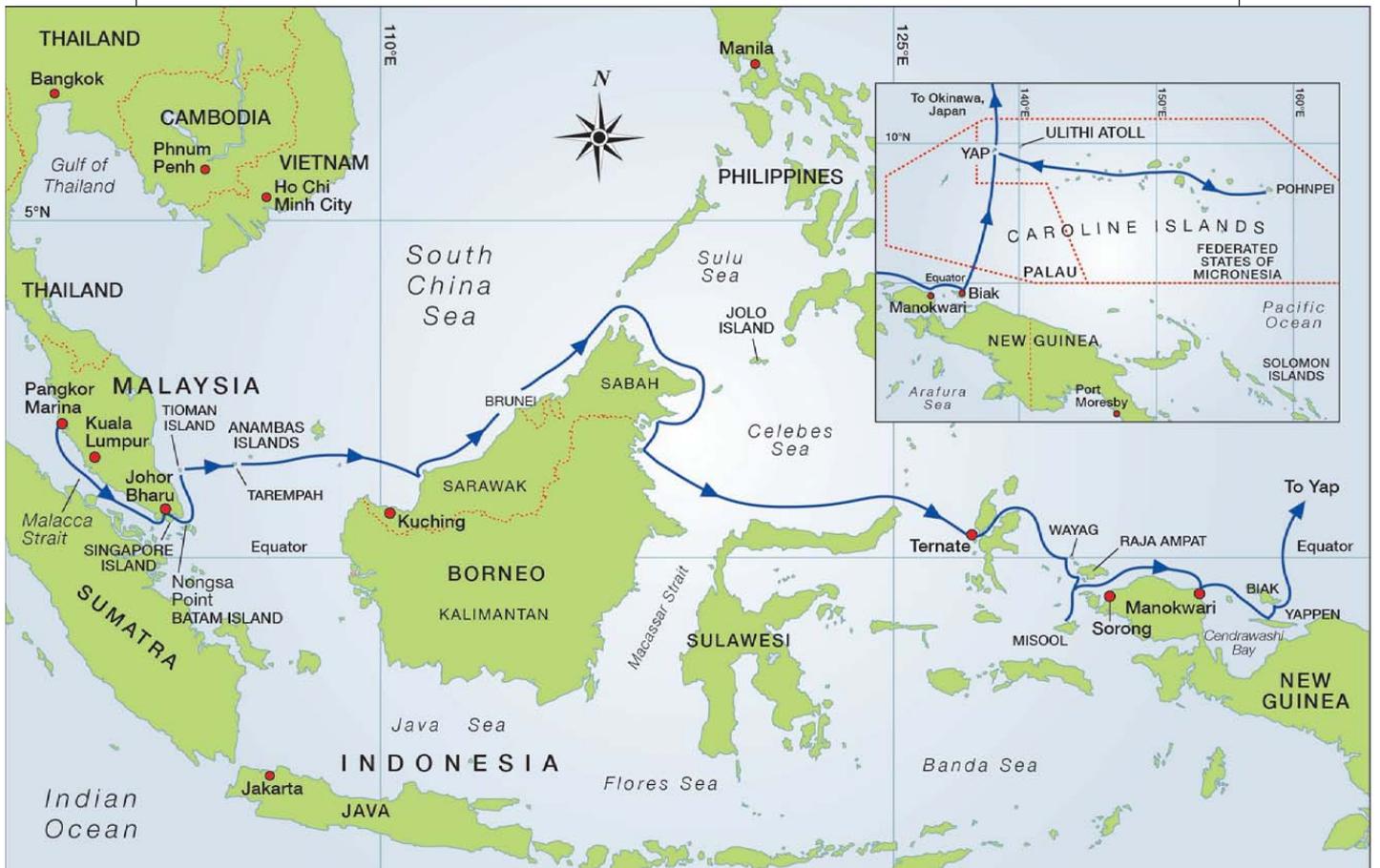
*This is the first part of the cruise for which the 2018 Vasey Vase was awarded – see page 11. The second part is scheduled for Flying Fish 2019/2. Meanwhile, follow their blog at [www.sailblogs.com/member/littlegreenboat](http://www.sailblogs.com/member/littlegreenboat).)*



*Andy and Sue on  
a visit to India*

#### Malaysia to West Papua

From Southeast Asia, long-distance cruisers have several options for what comes next. Few follow the once-traditional route via the Indian Andaman Islands, Sri Lanka, India, Arabia and the Red Sea – instead greater numbers now head for South Africa via the Indian Ocean Islands. Some give up ocean passagemaking and remain in Southeast Asia. The route to Australia or the South Pacific goes via Borneo and Indonesia, while a small number take the North Pacific Rim route to North America with stops in Japan and Alaska. There are several ways to reach Japan from Southeast Asia. You can take in the Philippines and Taiwan, or first go east to New Guinea and through Micronesia or take a longer detour via the Solomons. These are all lesser travelled routes.



Our plan was to return across the Pacific Ocean via the Rim of Fire. The cold and potentially hostile weather of the Aleutian Islands indicated that a thorough overhaul while in warmer climes would be prudent, so this started by hauling out for a prolonged period. After sailing as far north as Thailand, we returned south to Pangkor Marina in western Peninsula Malaysia which we thought would be a fine location for 12 months ashore. Boat preparation activities became interspersed with exploring some fascinating parts of Asia. We moved into a studio apartment near the boatyard and rented a car for a few months while more disruptive boat jobs were tackled, all easily accomplished at Pangkor Marina. Kuala Lumpur has an international airport, sporting a variety of carriers into all parts of the Asian continent.

If one intends to use local professions for refit or pit-stop work on a boat we hear that Thailand is a better-serviced location, but we planned to do most work ourselves. Our berth, sheltered from harsh equatorial sun and tropical rainfall beneath the boatshed at Pangkor Marina, was a superb choice. A downside was that the mast needed to be removed, but inspecting the rig and servicing in-mast furling equipment was one of our priorities. Other tasks included cleaning fuel tanks, adding hull insulation, overhauling the engine, fitting a new cutless bearing and applying new Coppercoat antifouling. Our tasks list started with a count of 50 and finished at over 200 – such is the nature of boats. Local businesses are able to offer stainless steel fabrication, painting and GRP work, and supply hardware and a host of other items. Specialist yacht equipment must be imported, however, and the marina staff assisted with bringing goods in through customs.

Perhaps the most memorable phrase from our year in Malaysia was *boleh-boleh* – literally ‘can-can’, the local equivalent of ‘everything is possible’. Sometimes the reality was ‘not really’. Some professionals are indisputably skilled, but a few seemed to be learning their trade on the job. The most notable occurrence was when a friend commissioned a top-end overhaul. Following completion, heartfelt prayers offered by

#### ***Hauling out after two years afloat***





*A Chinese dragon celebrates the August moon in Malaysia*

the mechanic, prostrate before the rebuilt engine, were insufficient to compensate for his failure to install a timing belt correctly. There was no concord on the meaning of *force majeure* upon the destructive outcome. Other crews were wholly satisfied with GRP, canvas, painting and detailing work, while we had good work done on re-upholstery. Everything may well be possible, but choose wisely. The staff at Pangkor Marina were most co-operative, helping answer a multitude of problems and queries, and surprisingly remaining civil even in the face of disagreeable behaviour by a thankfully small minority of international visitors.

After we completed re-launch trials in early April 2017 and bade farewell to friends, *Spruce* headed down the Malacca Strait towards Singapore Island and Johor Bharu. Plans for a short stop with the boat in Singapore were abandoned as new compulsory agent fees are too expensive a surcharge for a short visit. Two nearby marinas in Malaysia

*Spotting reefs in Indonesia*





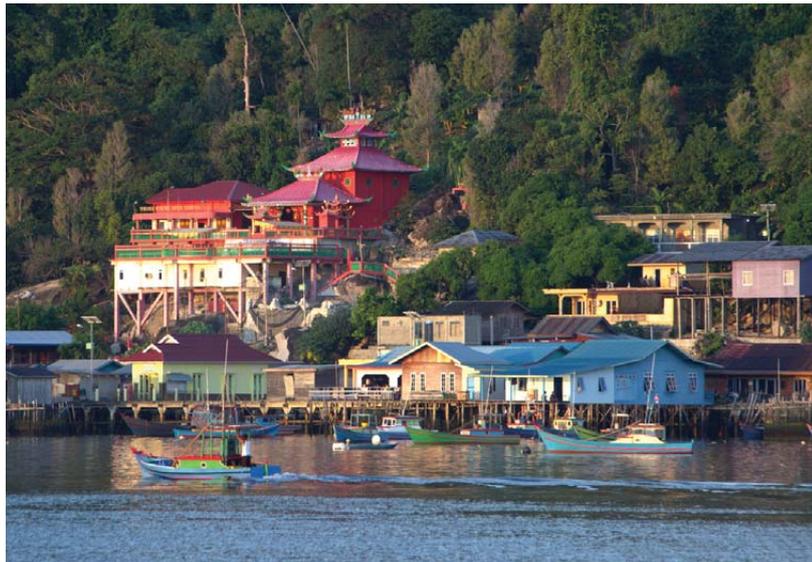
*An idyllic anchorage in the Anambas Islands*

enable easy access to Singapore – Puteri Harbour west of the causeway, and Senibong to the east. We selected the eastern option as novel and better positioned for the onward journey eastwards. The 300 mile passage from Pangkor offered an excellent shakedown cruise for *Spruce* and her landlubberly crew. A later detour into a winding river to Sebana Cove Marina gave a mild hint of experiences to come in Borneo, where dodging shallow zones in poorly charted muddy waters becomes second nature.

We sailed east coast Malaysia as far north as Tioman Island, then out to the Indonesian Anambas Islands and on to Malaysian Borneo, Sarawak. Our selected route gave variety, without a long haul northwards only to return much the same way. If deviations were all joyous sailing they would be more appealing – short periods of breeze each day and hours spent motoring make wide detours somewhat tedious.

2017 was the first year that the Anambas Islands offered local clearance facilities at Tarempah, the main town. The previous year friends had to complete inbound and

*A Buddhist temple at Tarempah*





outbound formalities at Nongsa Point, and depending on whether the SW or NE monsoon was in force this necessitated a 200 mile beat in one direction or the other. A major focus of the latest president is to reduce corruption in government offices and keen young faces fronted each department visited. No charges were levied save a harbour fee from the Port Captain and, upon seeing our receipt for this transaction, the senior customs official went into earnest anti-corruption investigative mode. The fee in question was 84p sterling. Our visas were duly stamped for 30 days.

Navigation in Indonesian and Malaysian waters can be tricky. Surveys of the former chiefly date from the era of the Dutch Empire, though traditional bearings and plotting of major features can be used to fix positions. Often, GPS is completely misleading – we found positions of both land and dangers to be up to five miles in error, but errors were not consistent even in the same region. Even so, some skippers swore by modern electronic aids. We know of one vessel that narrowly missed a reef during daylight hours, avoidance involving a crash gybe and a serious injury – they were following another boat's electronic 'safe' track sent via e-mail ... a track created while following an 'infallible' modern chart system during darkness! A combination of e-charts, some paper charts, satellite imagery and GPS, all liberally supported by manually laying hand bearings onto an electronic plotter – and of course the human eye – worked satisfactorily. When we could not travel in daylight we opted to sail greater distances if that enabled us to remain in routes used by international shipping. Those regions are better surveyed and are travelled by deeper keels.



*Squid fishermen in the Anambas Islands*

The Anambas are a marvellous cruising ground. We enjoyed a month of cruising alone amongst scenic but little-visited islands and islets. The underwater scenery varied greatly as different administrative zones apply various rules for regulation of fishing – in some places we dived with shoals of huge bumphead parrotfish and myriad colourful creatures, in others the reefs were ruined and evidently over-fished. Even so, it was a delight to enjoy a region where modern tourism has not yet arrived in earnest.

Sarawak is a semi-independent province of Malaysian Borneo, whose people jealously guard their autonomy from Peninsula Malaysia where different ethnic and religious traditions dominate. The ethnic distribution is heavily influenced by indigenous river or inland mountain peoples, such as Iban and Dayak, and away from the provincial capital, Kuching, many families still live in communal

*River communities in Borneo*





*Performers at a festival in Kudat*

long houses. As recently as the Second World War ancestors engaged in 'head-hunting', and some houses still respect the dried, shrunken heads of enemies as part of their spiritual assets, though the folk we met

during our travels inland were friendly and welcoming.

We motored along tea-coloured rivers that have provided highways into this impenetrable land for centuries, but modernity is fast reaching into Borneo – the old ways will soon be but footnotes in museums or books. Broad rivers convey huge volumes of water from mountainous parts of the interior, and taking a vessel upstream is best done by working the tides and playing the river-rules game to find deeper water, typically on the outer sides of bends, though finding the deep route on straight sections is not always intuitive. Sometimes, huge barges are towed behind

*A drummer at a concert in Kudat*





*Pig-tailed macaques, Kinabatangan*

river-tugs, slewing dangerously at the bends during the strong ebb tides – one skipper skilfully avoided striking us with his errant barge while we were anchored to await the end of an ebb flow out of the channel at Sarikei, one of the larger river towns in Sarawak. The northwest coast of Borneo, close to the route between China and India, has been of significant strategic importance for centuries. In recent times the discovery of oil off Miri, in Sarawak, and next-door Brunei has raised the economic profile of the region. For now, many disused rigs float off Labuan Island awaiting an upturn in world oil prices.

Of the three main river systems we entered in Malaysian Borneo, the Batang Rajang was the most expansive but the Kinabatangan in East Sabah was by far the most impressive for wildlife. Proboscis monkeys, orangutan, silvery lutung, pig-tailed macaques and several species of the avian hornbill are but a few of the amazing fauna of Borneo. An opportunity to travel along smaller waterways in a dinghy, quietly watching wildlife in their natural habitat at dawn and dusk, without a tour schedule, is a remarkable benefit of cruising aboard one's own boat. However, a brief glimpse of a satellite-mapping program quickly shows that the remaining habitat for these wondrous creatures is severely

*A crocodile basks beside the Kinabatangan river*





*A silvery leaf langur, Kinabatangan*

impacted by farming. Immediately away from the river margins valuable logging has taken the once lush forest, now replaced by bland, homogeneous, palm oil plantations. The wildlife is squeezed closer to the rivers and, though good for viewing, the

limited habitat must make the continued survival of these animals precarious.

East Sabah has suffered in recent years due to kidnappings by extremists based at nearby Jolo Island in the Philippines. The notorious Abu Sayyaf is occasionally reported for kidnapping and murdering tourists, but less reported has been the abduction of local people from river communities, ongoing for decades. The Malaysian authorities take the threat to international tourism seriously and we joined a sailing rally for the passage down the east coast of Borneo. A small fleet of fourteen yachts was escorted by Malaysian commandos and police under the control of ESSCOM (East Sabah Security Command). The situation seems to be improving, with a plethora of military posts

*ESSCOM escort on the east coast of Borneo*





*Spruce anchored at Raja Ampat*

established on islands along the coast which, together with regular maritime patrols, are aimed at denying the extremists and their supporters freedom to operate. We were most happy to benefit from the escort, and a small rally with only fourteen craft was good fun for social interaction. The previous year more than forty vessels had participated and some of the small harbours and anchorages must have been challenged to cope with such a sudden influx of visitors.

Maratua is an offshore reef island in Indonesia. It was a lovely place to relax after the pressured timescale to traverse the 'risky' region of East Sabah and we stayed for ten days, along with a few other boats from the rally. A shallow, turquoise lagoon with reef drop-offs close by, the diving was excellent. From there craft took two different routes southwards. Those going back to West Malaysia headed down the Macassar Strait, west of Sulawesi and south around Borneo, whereas the four of us going east towards New Guinea traversed the north coast of Sulawesi. Along the ring of fire, rocky coastlines of volcanic islands plunge quickly into the ocean abyss and viable anchorages are widely scattered and deep – dropping anchor in 25m or more is common. The scenery is spectacular and distances large, with the north coast of Sulawesi stretching east for 300 miles.

Ternate, once a major spice port of Portuguese and Dutch colonists, gently smoulders on the horizon as we approach. Dark lava fields extend into the sea as we sail south along the coast to anchor off the main town. Here we need to do our first visa extension. The social visas issued in our last Malaysian port, Tawau, gave two months from arrival in Tarakan, our first Indonesian port. Here in Ternate the authorities allowed us to renew our visas two weeks early, giving us six weeks before the next extension was due – an important concession, because the next clearance port at Sorong was beyond other places where we wanted time enough to linger and dive.

*Exploring the  
limestone caves  
at Raja Ampat*

Raja Ampat offers not only great diving but also spectacular limestone scenery and birdlife. For underwater excursions we were on our own as our hopes to join with other rally folk to team-dive had not been realised. The currents can be strong, and careful selection of dive sites and timing of tides was required for safety. On some dives we towed our inflatable dinghy on a long tether, thus ensuring a ride home when we surfaced. The diving is amazing – fish, turtles and large fan corals abound – and our favourite locations



many, from craggy Misool in the south to Wayag in the north. It is often necessary to anchor in deep water with a stern-line to the shore. Cruising in company with one other yacht would work well – more than three and most anchorages would be too restricted.

New Year's Eve anchored off the West Papuan town of Manokwari was memorable. As dusk fell fireworks began to launch, and an incessant flurry of sparks, bangs and whooshes continued for the next nine hours with a particular crescendo erupting at midnight, though by then the air was so full of smoke that the spectacle was diminished. As 2018 got underway we headed east for our last three weeks of cruising in Indonesia, at the northern end of Cendrawashi Bay. The island of Yappen gave our most worrying experience. Finding a rare anchorage of suitable depth, we stopped to sleep after a slow overnight sail from Manokwari. Unexpected visitors in a motor boat seemed to have some official capacity, and a short while after they departed three more arrived. One introduced himself as the Commandant of the local brigade of the West Papuan Liberation Army, proudly showing his carved baton of office and combat knife. One of his companions armed with an assault rifle clambered aboard for a photograph. We departed under cover of a tropical downpour that conveniently arrived an hour later.

After almost five months cruising across the vast Indonesian archipelago, we were ready for something different. When we left Pangkor Marina it was quite sobering to

think how far New Guinea lay to the east – we had logged 4500 miles to reach Biak and still had many more miles to cover.

### **Micronesia**

Departure on a 700 mile passage north to Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia went smoothly. Strong winds and close-hauled sailing at the beginning and end of this leg took us back across the Equator for the last time, but most of the passage was undertaken with very light winds or none at all. This seemed an abnormal year – La Niña had diminished trade winds to the east and raised surface sea temperatures by 2°C on the western side of the North Pacific Ocean. During our passage we passed nine FADs (Fish Aggregation Devices) – long steel barrels moored to the ocean seabed by Philippine fishermen, to which they sometimes tether their boats. These objects are unlit and show poorly on radar in ocean swell – how many more we missed in the dark we shall never know.

In spite of a timely request and follow up queries for a cruising permit, the Micronesian capital island of Pohnpei had issued nothing. Officials in Yap advised us to depart Indonesia – our request was securely in the system, there would be no problem. On arrival, after six days at sea, still no permit. Several days later HQ commanded the local officials to fine us \$1000 for arrival with no permit. We refused to pay, and instead submitted a memo including an attached ‘paper-trail’ that showed we had done our best to comply. Pohnpei responded with a permit that was due to expire one week later ... we must apply for an extension. Whether it was bureaucratic inefficiency or something more sinister we never discovered.

For five weeks we enjoyed school visits, hiking, canoeing and the lead-up to Yap Day celebrations, held in early March. Yap was among the German Pacific possessions handed over to Japanese colonial administration after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. A school was built, tuition was done in Japanese, and some older inhabitants still understand their school-day language. Come the Second World War many other





*Traditional dancing in Yap*

islands were invaded by the Japanese military. Yap was bypassed during the campaign to liberate the Philippines, although her isolated, Japanese-controlled airfield was repeatedly attacked to prevent aircraft from interfering with allied shipping operating from a nearby Yapese outer island, Ulithi Atoll. The old wartime airfield still has several wrecked planes that lie where they were devastated. Gun emplacements and rusty bullet-pocked armaments can be seen in several locations.



*Second World War  
aircraft still on the  
runway at Yap*

Contemporary culture, established since the end of the Pacific War, is heavily influenced by the USA, but for 50 years the local people have maintained a hold on their ancient island traditions by means of Yap Day. Each village enters dance teams that compete for accolades. Dances originate from centuries ago and each has spiritual significance. Unlike the French Polynesian Heiva, this event attracts few tourists – it is by the locals, for the locals. The costumes needed for the dances involve families and villagers in a host of supporting traditions and crafts. It is wonderful to see the mobilisation of inhabitants from the very young to the elderly maintaining their traditions.

During our time in Yap a typhoon formed to the east during the lowest risk month, February. Although early predictions had it coming right over Yap, and finding a secure and sheltered anchorage required local assistance, it eventually passed 150 miles to the south, where winds reached hurricane force in Pulau and the Philippines.

We left for the passage north to Okinawa in southern Japan in early March. Based on historical occurrences there was a risk that a typhoon might impinge our route during the first 650 miles and, possibly due to the warmer than average sea temperature, winds were stronger and from a more northerly angle than anticipated. Very close reaching in 25–35 knots of wind was our lot for much of the 12 day, 1260 mile passage. Thankfully, no more typhoons appeared until we were long gone.

