

MALAYSIA TO MADAGASCAR

Graham and Avril Johnson

(Graham and Avril left the UK in 2002 aboard their 44ft cutter Dream Away to circumnavigate, largely off the beaten passage. They are prolific Flying Fish contributors, writing a near-record 17 times over as many years, most recently in 2017/2 with Sweet Carolines, an account of their visit to the Caroline Islands north of New Guinea. We rejoin them on the Malaysian island of Langkawi.)

The Indian Ocean crossing has a poor reputation amongst the cruising fraternity. Strong winds and confused, high seas feature in many tales – Av was not looking forward to it. This season, several boats made direct for Madagascar from northern Indonesia, but we preferred to take a more leisurely northern route. Sri Lanka was high on our agenda and we wished to visit as many places as viable.

Having checked out from Langkawi we decided to visit Sabang, the northernmost outpost of Indonesia. Arriving in the large, sheltered, scenic bay at the northern end of the island we were directed to the quarantine mooring. A bevy of officials were ferried the 30m from the jetty to our mooring in a large coastguard cutter. Consternation. Were we ill, was there a boat problem? The issue was having put Sri Lanka as the destination on our clearance paper. However, after explaining other cruisers had recommended Sabang and we needed some fresh supplies, everyone was happy.

A hornbill at Av's favourite anchorage in Langkawi



Sabang is a small island, easily travelled around in a day on a motorbike. It is unspoilt, with lush tropical forest, lovely sand beaches, a few low-key tourist resorts and friendly, welcoming people. After a most enjoyable week we left on a favourable morning breeze bound for Trincomalee on the east coast of Sri Lanka, 870 miles distant. The forecast was for light patches in the fading northeast monsoon and we anticipated a slow journey. In the event the wind remained stubbornly ahead of the beam, providing us with a greater apparent wind and a faster passage than expected. The highlight was crossing the 90°E meridian, which marked three-quarters of our circumnavigation. The only significant issue was fleets of fishing vessels trailing nets more than a mile long. Helpfully, the end of the net was usually marked by an AIS beacon whose identification was referenced to the parent vessel.



Sabang jetty. Fishing boats, the coastguard launch and a catamaran on the quarantine mooring

'Trinco' is a military port with a significant naval base, only recently opened to cruising yachts. It is one of the world's largest natural harbours, providing excellent shelter in all conditions. Yachts are required to use an agent to check in, give 48 hours notice, then



24 – with an accurate ETA. After obtaining clearance via our agent, we anchored in company with five other yachts and ventured ashore to buy fresh food. It's a moderate-sized town, comprising three long shopping streets packed with small business enterprises and a couple of reasonable food supermarkets. Alongside the busy, chaotic bus station lies a large fresh produce market, plus a big fish market where the catch is delivered from the boats arriving at the adjacent beach. It's a bustling place, with crowded streets and the inevitable masses of small motorbikes and *tuk-tuk* taxis. Again the locals were friendly and welcoming, making it a fascinating place to visit.



Scenic train ride in Sri Lanka

Confident that *Dream Away* was totally safe and secure in the anchorage, we took advantage of the good bus and rail links to explore the rest of the country. We enjoyed the cool highlands with their extensive tea plantations, scenic railway journeys, a myriad of ancient wonders, and much lovely walking. Sri Lanka boasts numerous national parks, the highlights being the large herds of elephant and a wondrous array of bird life. It is also renowned for its extensive pristine beaches, which are often virtually deserted.

We soon got into the local cuisine, enjoying traditional lunchtime curries and a great range of tasty, spicy foods. We discovered Kotthu – finely-chopped *roti**, vegetables and meat all stir-fried to make a scrumptious, filling meal that is a national dish. The chopping is performed with some ritual – two large blades that beat out a rhythm peculiar to each chef.

* *Roti* are flatbreads made from stoneground wholemeal flour, eaten all over the Indian sub-continent as well as throughout Malaysia and Indonesia. They're also encountered in the Caribbean, often with a curried meat filling.



*The great and
the small in
Minneriya
National Park*

Our one-month visas expired all too quickly and it was time to head for Gan, the southernmost Maldiv. The passage started slowly as we worked the local sea breezes down

the east coast and along the south of Sri Lanka, but the voyage was often enlivened by the local fishermen who would pursue us for miles in order to trade fish for cigarettes and a chat. The ideal passage makes good westing towards the Maldives so one can then potter south, either through or alongside the atolls. We were late in the season, however – the northeast monsoon had faded away and the southwest monsoon was picking up with the usual squally and overcast conditions. It became a long slog to windward, but eventually we closed the southern atoll, only to be hit by the strong east-going Equatorial Counter Current. We spent the best part of three days struggling



*Trading on the
high seas*

to get into Gan, with one day of almost incessant strong, squally conditions. On the last night we had a real blow, but a favourable wind shift allowed us to make the course. When it all passed by we were only about 15 miles from port, wallowing about in no wind and lumpy seas. On came the engine for the first time on the passage and we headed in, after 13 days and 1053 miles.

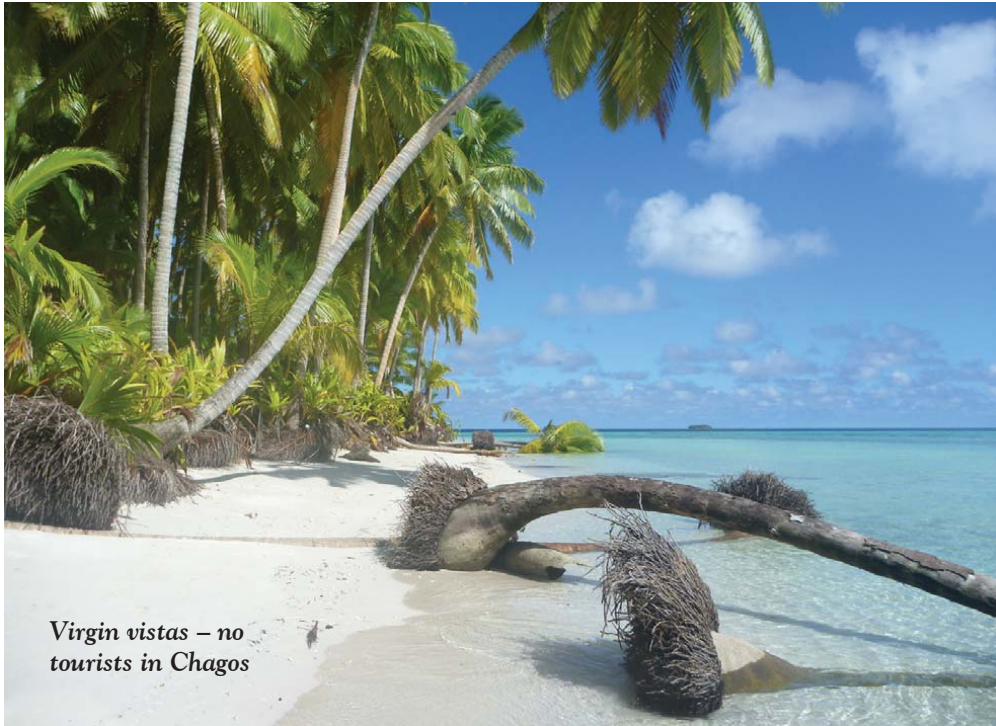


Birthday celebration in the Maldives. Av's badge got her free entry to the Hithadhoo Nature Reserve

architecture of square concrete-block buildings. The people are very friendly, but life appears pretty tedious as they live under the restrictions of extreme Muslim rule and most of the young folk leave as soon as they can, usually to work abroad. The current president is paranoid about a coup, and fearful of infiltration by subversives aboard yachts. His solution is for all yachts to carry an electronic tracker to enable monitoring to ensure they do not approach any villages, something banned on the cruising permit but previously generally ignored by the cruisers. We needed an agent to check out, so employed a company whose head of operations is our OCC Port Officer in the country. We never met, but he was friendly and helpful on the phone and in e-mails.

Gan, one of the several islands of Addu Atoll, was once an RAF base and is the last place to stock up with fresh food before reaching Chagos in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) where there is nothing except fish and coconuts. We moored in a small lagoon alongside the causeway linking Gan to the adjacent island of Feydhoo. It was a tight anchorage but shallow, which was just as well as our windlass had failed (this was a priority fix). Yachts are required to use an agent to check in and out, but it is possible to check in oneself by saying you are only staying for a couple of days. You can then change your mind and use an agent to check out later. Even so, the charges are outrageous since nothing is provided for the money and there are endless restrictions.

The towns and villages comprise one or two dusty, sandy streets with little shade and a uniformly boring



Whilst in Gan we had been dogged by rafts of grass clogging up the intake filters, the loo being a particular annoyance. Following a careful check of the engine raw water filter we motored out in virtually windless conditions. After a few hours the engine temperature gauge suddenly went into the red, alarms sounding. The filter was clear but a great wedge of grass had embedded itself in the intake skin fitting. G checked the raw water impeller, which had clearly not enjoyed the experience and had shed a couple of blades. Then followed two hours of clearing the pump, replacing the impeller and getting everything back together, during which G managed to burn the skin off the back of his right hand. This was bad, as his left hand was still recovering from a close encounter with a snatch block which nearly lost him the use of his thumb on the run into Gan.

So a poor start, but we tried the engine which went fine. Later it started overheating again – it transpired that the new issue was a leak behind the fresh water pump, which we assumed to be a gasket problem. By now the wind had picked up so we sailed the rest of the passage to Chagos, thinking we could motor if necessary by simply topping up the fresh water. All went well and we arrived at the entrance to Salomon Atoll at high water after three enjoyable days' sailing. Unfortunately, the wind lightened, veered and blew straight out of the lagoon entrance. Coupled with a now ebbing tide we needed the engine to get in. We fired it up but, disconcertingly, there was no raw water cooling flow through the exhaust – obviously one of the broken impeller blades had worked through to block the flow.

Without a working engine we were in a difficult position, with darkness approaching, a contrary dying wind, strong but uncertain ebbing currents, and surrounded by reefs. We launched the RIB, which was lashed on the foredeck, got the big (15hp) outboard



A nesting red-footed boobie

on and secured it alongside. We were then able to make progress into the pass at about 0.4 knots. The scheme was to find somewhere shallow and anchor, but in a failing light with coral heads around, Av suggested we call on the VHF to see if anyone had a powerful outboard to add to ours to help us in. Amazingly, we got an instant reply from *Ostrika*, a Swiss yacht, offering help. Patrick, Paola and Gaby soon arrived alongside in their RIB with 18hp outboard. With one RIB each side, *Dream Away* was powered into the atoll and duly anchored safely in the lagoon.

Owner/skipper Patrick and his crew had been horrified at the state of Graham's hands, to such an extent that the following morning Patrick and Mauro arrived to clear the debris of the destroyed impeller from the cooling system so we could move the boat if needed. We were indeed fortunate to encounter such a competent, helpful and charming group. A couple of days later Graham removed the water pump, to find the fresh water leak was through a hole in a core plug, not a gasket as originally thought. He fixed it with some epoxy.

Following all that excitement we settled down to enjoy the unspoilt paradise of an uninhabited Indian Ocean atoll. A ring of islands and islets around the rim all beckoned for exploration. Unsullied white sand beaches, nesting birds in abundance, particularly red-footed boobies and graceful terns, huge coconut crabs and an abundance of other creatures provided a fascinating environment. We snorkelled across the multicoloured coral reefs seeing giant clams, a colourful collection of reef fish, sharks cruising by and huge manta rays gliding towards us with gaping mouths. The latter slipped effortlessly past, totally unperturbed by our presence as were all the fauna we encountered.



Look but don't touch ... I'm protected



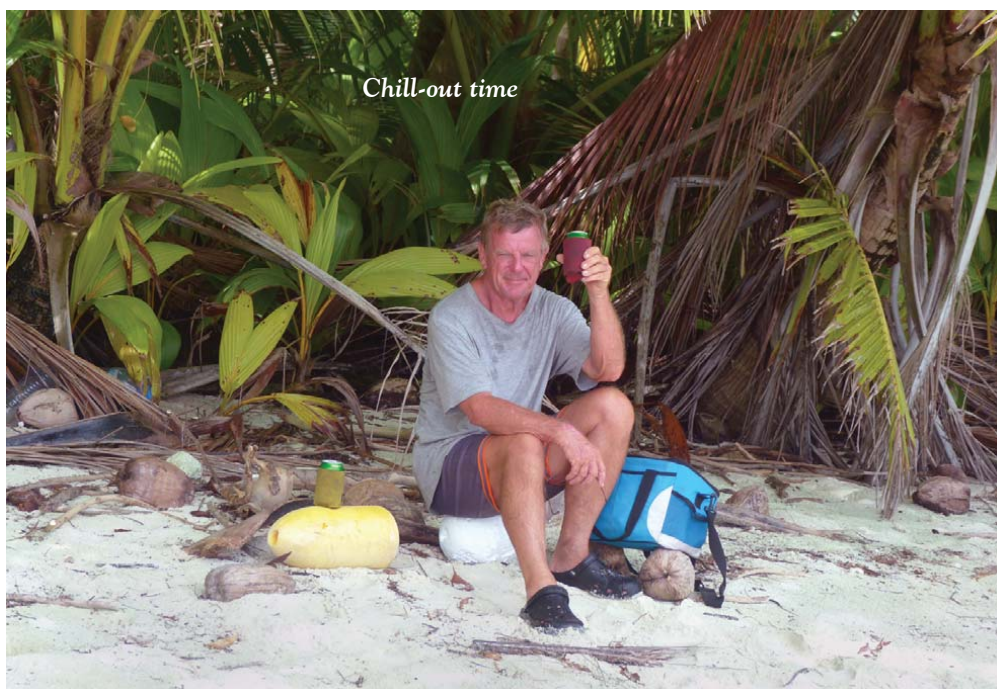
The wildlife getting over-friendly

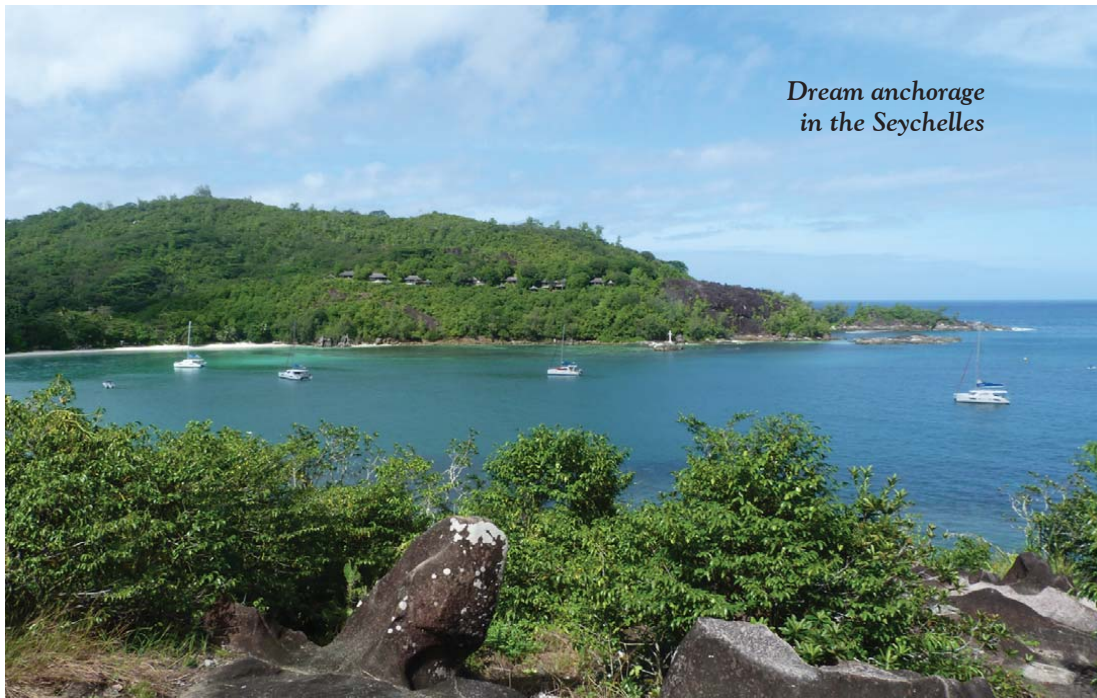
Chagos is currently administered by the BIOT department of the UK Foreign Office. Cruising yachts can apply for a permit to stay for up to a month at either of two atolls on the grounds of safety and recovery time on the long Indian Ocean crossing. Tourism is not allowed, the permits are expensive, the restrictions onerous, and insurance cover is required for medical evacuation and wreck clearance in the event of an accident. There are no internet, no shops, and no facilities except for a freshwater well dating back to the days when the place was populated. Self-sufficiency is the byword and a well-stocked beer locker and generous wine rack are recommended prerequisites.

Time passed by and we, along with *Ostrika* and a Chinese couple in a large catamaran, were looking for a weather window to head south to Rodrigues and Mauritius, but the weather to the south of us was vile and getting worse. Our one-month permit was expiring, so we applied to the BIOT authorities in London for an extension which, after communicating with the local patrol vessel, they readily granted. Another week passed and conditions deteriorated further; we all applied for further extensions, which were again granted.

Essential supplies were running low so we looked for a sensible weather pattern for the Seychelles. It's a direct route across the northern part of the Southern Indian Ocean, though far enough south to avoid the strong Equatorial Counter Current, and a slightly more southerly course should find fair winds. We completed the 1084 mile passage in ten days, sailing down to nearly 7°S to keep the wind. We had only two nights under engine, mostly downwind with a few squalls. The main issue is the sea state, which is generally short, steep and confused, and in light winds the constant rolling causes significant wear on both sails and crew.

Unlike the atolls we had recently enjoyed, the Seychelles are a collection of mostly granite islands with mountainous peaks, verdant jungle-clad slopes, and extensive, fine white sand beaches littered with large boulders – all very picture-postcard, with





*Dream anchorage
in the Seychelles*

extensive areas of marine/national parks dedicated to preserving the unique flora and fauna. The latter range from giant tortoises to the world's smallest frog and the sole remaining flightless birds in the Indian Ocean. The islands have only been inhabited for the past 200 years and remain relatively unspoilt.

The arrival procedure at Victoria, one of the world's smallest capital cities, on the island of Mahé, is to call Port Control and be allocated an anchorage location in their quarantine zone. Following this all the officials are ferried out to clear you in. The 'ferry' trip costs around £200 – an outrageous but unavoidable tariff. Once cleared, you are free to enter the small boat anchorage by the Seychelles Yacht Club. To complete clearance one must visit the Port Captain's lair where a friendly, helpful woman gives you the extensive list of the various charges you will be faced with before you leave.

The Seychelles is not the safest place on the planet, having a bad reputation for piracy and theft. Not quoted in the tourist brochures is the fact that it is a major distribution hub for the drugs trade and has an alarmingly high percentage of heroin addicts. We were assured that at this time of year the seas were too rough for pirates and the water too cold for uninvited guests to swim out to the boat.

We had bounced on the keel going into Gan and wanted an inspection, so *Dream Away* was lifted out on the immense travel-lift at Taylor Smith Boatyard. We had only shaved off some gel coat, but it was good to get her all sealed up. It is not a cheap establishment, but very professional and the workmanship was of a high standard. The boatyard lies in a commercial area to the south of Victoria with an abundance of workshops, chandlers, hardware and all manner of specialist as well as general stores. It is a great place to get things fixed and buy parts – a business opportunity exists for a sailmaker/repairer, as there are none on the island. The local upholsterer is the best bet available for basic sail repairs.



Dream Away dwarfed by the giant travel-lift at Taylor Smith Boatyard

Next it was off to potter around the 'inner islands' group. First you need a permit stating your itinerary, which initially seems an annoyance, but then you

remember the troubles they have and understand the need to keep an eye on your safety. The two principal inner islands are La Digue and Praslin, which lie adjacent about 24 miles northeast of Victoria. La Digue is the smaller of the two and offers a step back in time with ox carts, bicycle transport and giant tortoises meandering along the main street. Much of Praslin's coast is designated a marine park and expensive to anchor off, but Anse Lazio at the northwest end offers good shelter from the strong southeast trades in a picturesque location. Around about is a plethora of smaller islands, most with sparkling white sand beaches and often uninhabited. There are also a disturbing number of reefs so one needs to pay attention to the navigation. Returning to Mahé and the yacht club we enjoyed good walking on the many trails developed around the island, which afford splendid views from lofty peaks over the landscape and surrounding waters.

July and August are the time for the strongest southeast trade winds and we were there in late July, looking for a weather window for Madagascar. There is a compression zone on the northern tip of Madagascar that produces fearsome seas, and many yachts making this passage report substantial damage – it is this leg that deters many cruisers from using the northern route. We had rejected a couple of marginal weather windows, but finally found a pattern caused by an aberrant low

An elderly resident of La Digue





Women from an isolated coastal community in Madagascar

pressure system that would give us a favourable run. We went, along with *Ostrika*, and had a great passage, actually needing to motor near Cape d'Ambre to get in before dark and the stormy forecast for the following day.

The passage ended in Baie Lotsoina, the first deep bay on the northwest side



of Madagascar, without incident or breakages, and we heaved a sigh of relief. There followed three wonderful weeks cruising down this beautiful, remote coastline. We anchored off uninhabited islands, and in bays and coves where the locals from the small, isolated villages immediately launched their dugout canoes and came to trade. We spent some intrepid days hiking and were captivated by the magnificent splendour of the region.

*Dream Away and
Ostrika in Nosy Hara*

*Classic dhows are handled
with superb skill*



We write this whilst reclining in Nosy Be with calm seas, light breezes and all manner of civilisation. We have checked in with no issues, extracted money from the ATM, have good quality internet connection, and shops stocked with well-priced food and drink. We still have to cross the Mozambique Channel and round South Africa, so there are challenges ahead, but we have crossed the Indian Ocean and Av is happy.

The town anchorage in Hell-Ville, Nosy Be

