

SAILING THE RING OF FIRE, Part 2

Andy and Sue Warman

Roving Rear Commodores

(In Part 1 of Sailing the Ring of Fire, which appeared in Flying Fish 2019/1, Andy and Sue described their cruise from Malaysia via Borneo to Yap in the Caroline Islands. We left them as they departed the island for southern Japan, and rejoin them as they make landfall on Okinawa island.

Spruce – the second of that name which Andy and Sue have owned – is a Hallberg-Rassy 42 in which they have crossed both Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and visited New Zealand, Australia and Indonesia.

This is the second part of the cruise for which the 2018 Vasey Vase was awarded – see Flying Fish 2019/1 – and visit their blog at www.sailblogs.com/member/littlegreenboat.)

Japan

Our initial glimpse of Japan was of indistinct distant lights, twinkling before dawn – the island of Okinawa lay on the horizon after 12 days at sea. Light diffused into the eastern sky to reveal a grey, misty land devoid of colour, altogether more reminiscent of a northern European autumn rather than our sub-tropical latitude of 26°N. Cold, damp maritime air, originally from frozen China and Russia to the north, swung around the Asian winter anticyclone. It was hard to believe that the switch of the monsoon in May would invite humid moist air from the tropics and a procession of summer typhoons to these waters.

The first Japanese vessels we sighted were sleek and low in the water. Long, white hulled, with angular shaped superstructures ... fishing craft. We had not seen this type elsewhere. As we approached land the VHF crackled into life with a call from a Japanese Coast Guard radio station. They had seen our AIS transmission. An advance notification sent from Micronesia via an e-mail to Chi-Chi-Jima coastguard – Okinawa



*A fishing
vessel at Ie Jima*





Clearing in at Okinawa

only use fax – did arrive, so we were expected. Instructions said proceed to Naha immigration quay, with a particular warning not to hit the reef. Thirteen officials greeted our arrival at the dock. A minor theatrical farce ensued. We threw shore lines towards helpful Coast Guard personnel but the Port Health people immediately insisted they drop them. Our attempt to step ashore and tie on was momentarily thwarted, until we pushed their thermometers out of the way and secured ourselves. Engine still running, standing on the dock, questioning commenced. Temperatures were monitored with IR thermometers. “Where from?” “How long at sea?” “Anybody sick?” We coaxed them on board to sit down. A certificate was issued that stated we were provisionally cleared and if we did not get ill in the next nine days we were *de facto* fully cleared by the Port Health department.

Then came Coast Guard, Customs, Port Control, Immigration and maybe some others – so many faces, so many uniforms. The common factor was that each wanted to complete seemingly the same form by longhand. Surreptitious swabs were taken from various lockers, bulkheads and crew. Immediately bagged in polythene, these samples were rushed to a mobile forensics laboratory parked at the dockside. The officers seemed coy at being questioned on what was happening, though Sue’s cheeky “Oh look, they’re cleaning the boat for us!” was met with grins by the few who spoke English. After a couple of hours we were finished, save a repeat visit by Coast Guard officers later in the afternoon, now with the correct forms, to change our vessel status from International to Domestic. The upside of this change is not needing to clear with Customs at every port, at the expense of not qualifying for duty free fuel while in Japan. The strangest question fielded was “Have you visited North Korea?” quickly followed by “Do you have a North Korean flag aboard?” Perhaps the latter was a trick question, just in case we fibbed on the first one.

Finally free from officialdom it was time to replenish at the supermarket, always a pleasure when arriving in a culturally different land. However, until we obtained a local SIM card with internet connectivity, and the ability to translate Kanji into English online, shopping was a lucky-dip. Choosing *sashimi**, *sushi* and meat, immaculately presented beneath transparent plastic, was simple – things packaged in opaque wrappers proved more challenging. Unlike previous Asian countries, with familiar letters and bilingual dictionaries, or nations where the language is Latin-based, Japan renders one completely illiterate in the most basic of tasks. Often, guesses at contents based upon usual colour schemes proved wrong. Our tastes in food are broad, so astonishment at discovering unexpected contents was not too ghastly although one slimy, brown seaweed (we think) product left us gagging.

While cruising in Japan, many significant harbour constructions are seen, and even small fishing ports boast substantial fortifications against waves – the awesome power of typhoons is clearly uppermost in the minds of civil engineers. The next day we moved seven miles north to a marina at Ginowan and our first encounter with a particularly tenacious type of floating weed. This introduced us to the art of rapid dives with a serrated knife – the rope-stripper made little impression on a large ball of this plant wrapped around a folding propeller.

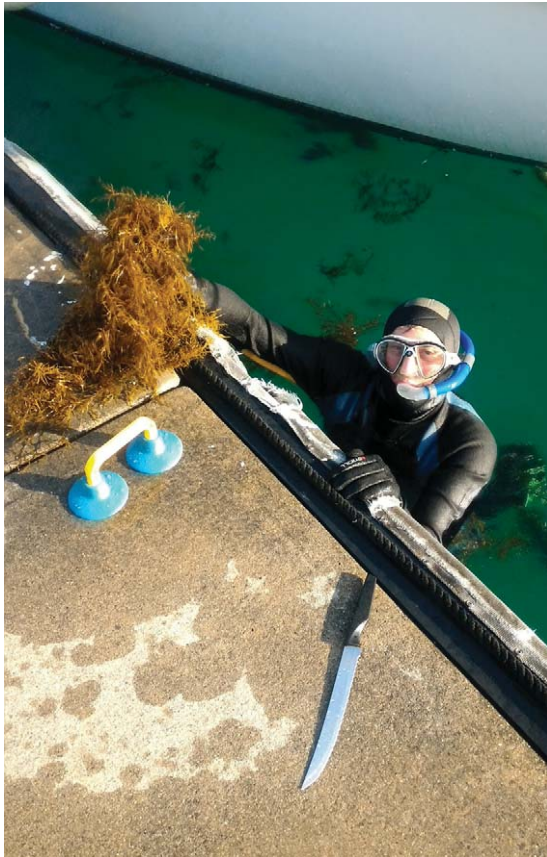
The language continued to present difficulties, but the people we met were most gracious in working to achieve comprehension. The generosity of folks was remarkable. An example from Ie Jima: a local fisherman saw us tying to an outer wall where depths were shallow and insisted on bringing us into an inner berth behind his craft. A friend who spoke some English was enlisted to translate. Later a package of freshly-made tempura-coated vegetables arrived. The following morning they insisted on driving us around their island, proudly showing us the sights, and then took us home to meet the family, play traditional musical string instruments and treat us to tea and cakes. This was typical of the people we met in the smaller fishing villages along the Sea of Japan coast.

* A Japanese delicacy consisting of raw fish or meat sliced into thin pieces and often eaten with soy sauce. Unlike *sushi*, rice does not normally feature.





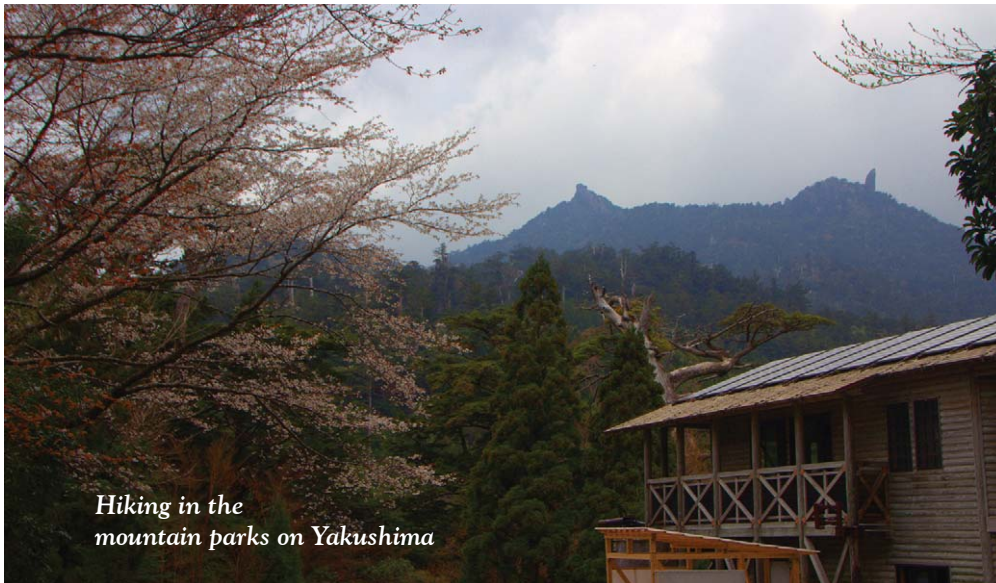
Traditional musical instruments, Ie Jima



Clearing the fouled prop at Okinawa

Yakushima, our last island stop before reaching one of the four main islands, offered great hiking, a few glimpses of the almost finished (early this year) cherry blossom and a story of ancestors who logged giant *sugi* (cedar trees). Huge stumps, now camouflaged by undergrowth, hinted at the magnitude of trees once felled. Many of the behemoths still growing were more than a thousand years old.

Further north, beyond Nagasaki, lies Hirado, a town rich in history from the age of European expansion. *Shogun* by James Clavell is set in this era and its central character, the English pilot Anjin San, was a real person – his grave is here. Traders from the UK and Netherlands opened fortified trading warehouses in Hirado and along with them came the usual following of missionaries. The typical story of European takeover and domination might well have unfolded,



*Hiking in the
mountain parks on Yakushima*

but frightening tales of European domination in the Philippines may have reached these shores and the incumbent Shogun chose to limit the scope of foreigners to influence Japanese culture and politics. The foreign traders were evicted from Hirado in 1625 and relocated to Dejima island near Nagasaki, which enabled the Japanese to retain control of trade and cultural intervention within their country. Not until Commodore Perry from the USA steamed into Edo Bay in 1853 with a sample of gunboat diplomacy, and the following year visited Kanagawa and Hakodate, was the status quo disrupted.

Fukuoka was our first large city, a blending of the old and the modern found on Kyushu island. Temples and shrines are situated within compounds encircled by high-rise office buildings. The aesthetic harmony of traditional architecture, manicured gardens, raked pebbles and balanced shapes provided a relaxing sanctuary within modernity. A love of flowers, blossom and nature emanated from the Japanese people we encountered in these locations.

Taking photographs of loved ones dressed in traditional costume alongside cherry blossom, wisteria and a host of other colourful blooms is a widespread leisure pastime.

*Traditional
costume
amongst
the cherry
blossom*



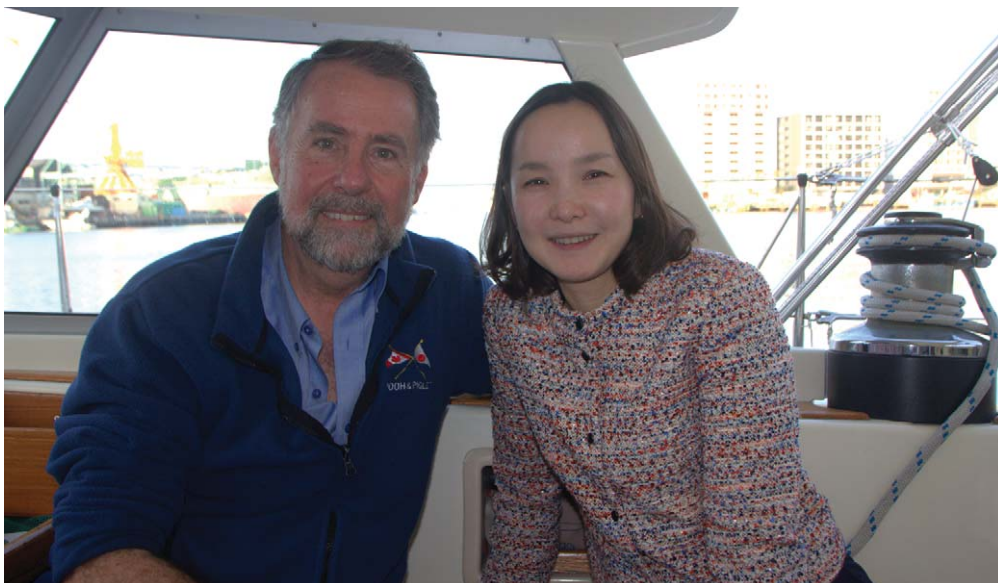


Spruce moored at Hirado

In Fukuoka we met Kirk Patterson and his wife Tsuyuko. Kirk, who originally hails from Canada, is a member of the OCC and a correspondent with the Sailing in Japan Facebook group. He is a superb source of help and information to those cruising these waters.

Hagi, better known today as a ceramics centre, played an important role in Japan opening up to modernisation during the late 19th century. Following centuries of isolationism, contemporary shipbuilding technology from the Netherlands and Russia was adopted – archaeological excavations have recently uncovered the sites of this important shipbuilding history. The Meiji period opened suddenly and the feudalism of the Shogunate era was rapidly abandoned.

Fukuoka Kirk and Tsuyuko





Festival day at the Oki islands

We almost met another OCC vessel in Hagi when we spotted *Brother Wind* arriving in the marina (*Spruce* was alongside in the nearby fishing harbour). We started to head towards them to say hello, but saw a large welcoming committee of officials ready to pounce – evidently Giles and Jo would be busy for some considerable time. Although we travelled much the same route northwards our timing did not coincide again.

The Oki islands, Saigo and Dogo, offshore in the Sea of Japan, gave longer passages with decent sailing breezes. Away from the Honshu mainland in Saigo, a festival at a Shinto temple gave glimpses of Japanese culture as experienced by villagers. It seemed residents are





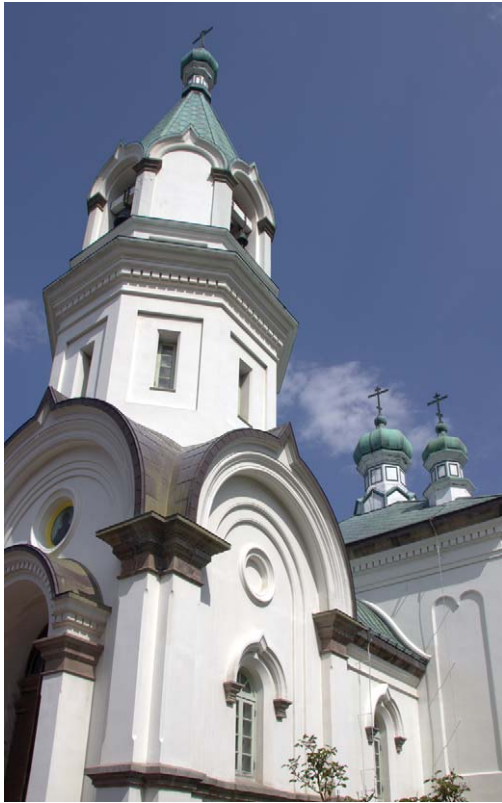
Historical re-enactment at Hakodate

‘required to attend’, and a local family invited us to join their picnic in the temple grounds. Limited conversation revealed that this was an event to bless the gods, the ancestors and the temple. Samurai skills and traditions were clearly revered. Big-nosed scary characters, similar to those seen in Bali, made a costumed appearance. Maybe this was another representation of Europeans from first contact centuries ago? Many other varied costumes were sported by dignitaries, clerics and participants. An amazing display of horsemanship was a centrepiece – a galloping stallion ridden by a Samurai who steered with his knees while shooting arrows into targets. He was separated from the thronging crowd by only a thin rope barrier.

Superb sailing on the tail of a departing gale took us on to Wajima, another town desperately trying to invent itself after a former heyday of fishing. The competitive Japanese tourism market is not targeted on international visitors, most of whom remain along the opposite coastline. An ageing and rapidly-reducing population exacerbates the situation as young people leave these rural and coastal communities for the cities. We saw many elderly people working bent double in the rice paddies and fields, but encountered few young fisher-folk. Many small boats lay hauled ashore, grass growing tall around them. We learned that, as the population ages, vessels are abandoned, while a lack of clarity over ownership leaves a legacy of GRP disposal headaches as the older generation pass on.

As we progressed north the temperature continued to reduce, despite summer looming closer – until the monsoon winds switched from northeast to southwest a cold chill continued to be delivered from China and Siberia. At Awashima island resting fishermen huddled around a brazier eating barbecued pork and drinking *sake*. One of the group was part-Filipino and spoke both English and Japanese. He said they would have liked us to stay longer “Next time come slow”, but the season was fast moving on and we needed to continue north.

Hakodate is a modern city at the southern tip of Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan. Another milestone in the engagement of European powers to subjugate



The Russian Orthodox Church at Hakodate

Japan occurred when Commodore Perry pushed for opening of trade with northern ports, a particularly important location for US whalers in their drive for oil. Our visit coincided with an annual costumed re-enactment of local history. The spectacle involved people in uniform shouting, waving samurai swords and firing cannon, accompanied by an excited voice describing the action over a public address system. All was in Japanese but we got the gist.

The Sailing in Japan group put us in contact with Mizuno San. He is involved with racing at the local yacht club and gave assistance with the authorities in Hokkaido, as the rules in this northern island appear to be applied differently. As thanks we gave him one of Sue's wood-block prints of Fatu Hiva, a place to which he fondly remembered travelling in the 1970s aboard a wooden sailing schooner.

Onwards to Kushiro, passing through a cold ocean boundary as we sailed past Cape Erimo Misaki. The first cold tentacle of an Arctic current displaced the warmer Kuroshio current, deflected out towards the Americas by the big island of Honshu. En route, our rudder snagged an illegal, unmarked, gill net – a line of slim white floating in the wavelets slipped under the bow, seen too late to avoid. It was cut free with a knife lashed to a rod while immersed to hip-level from the stern ladder. The water felt freezing but was around 8°C.



*Spruce
alongside
in Kushiro*

In Kushiro we met Seki San, a friend of Mizuno San and another stalwart helper of passing cruisers. He helped us with Customs, Immigration and the formalities necessary to revert our craft to International status, obtain duty free fuel and clear out from Japan. Nobody at the local offices spoke English, and he understood the rules although there was a debate about recent changes. Seki San also took us around to look for a store selling insulated snow-boots, which proved a boon in Alaska.

This was our last port in Japan – *Spruce* now lay poised to make the 1300 mile leap northeastwards to the Aleutian island chain. We expected to reach Dutch Harbor some four to five weeks after departing Kushiro, which required a suitable weather forecast. Not yet June, we might need to wait for some time.

Japan to the Aleutians

To our surprise, a slot of reasonable weather coincided with completion of provisioning and refuelling. A high pressure area built to promise a zone with 10–15 knots of following winds once we had motored 100 miles on our way. On the morning of 27th May we left Kushiro harbour and motored out into a cold adverse current that lazily flowed southwards. Coast Guard warnings of gill net fishing vessels close to shore recommended moving at least six miles offshore, and this we did. Nonetheless, we found the said fishing vessels on our track. A shrill voice screamed over the VHF for us to move nearer to shore, broken English interspersed with excited Japanese. Nightfall was due soon, however, and we refused to close a rocky coastline – and the disputed Russian border lay not so far ahead. Eventually a hesitant voice spoke enough English to respond with a precise position for the inshore end of the nets. Flagged buoys were located and safely rounded, and we motored into the gloaming, still almost five miles offshore. That encounter ended our tag session with menacing nets in water of 5°C. The language of fishing boats babbling on VHF frequencies slowly changed, now Russian, eventually nothing. Only the cold remained, perniciously seeping through the hull and loitering on the cabin sole. Time to deploy the snow boots!

At dawn the promised wind gradually built from the southwest. Sailing wing-a-wing achieved 4 knots, not impressive but easy, gentle sailing compared with our expectation for these latitudes. Venturing on deck chilled one to the bone, and inhaling the cold, dry air into one's nostrils gave a sensation like entering a walk-in freezer store. The sea around us was a dull green-grey colour. Sure, we had cruised coastal waters in winter, but this was a wholly unfamiliar environment – an ocean passage with long summer hours of daylight but water that would soon be only 3°C. The forecast promised dense fog, which arrived after we had already become enveloped in an opaque shroud that accompanied us for four days. Sometimes visibility might extend to a couple of hundred metres, though often only 50m with wraiths of wet air wafting around the pulpit. But still the steady breeze carried us on our route towards the Aleutians.

Ship propellers and engines became audible through the hull, but popping a head outside was met with silence and our eyes were unable to focus properly on the thick blanket of mist. Strangely, signals on AIS presented large numbers of vessels bound either for China or the Panama Canal, some doing 20 knots. Once a contact was at a five mile range we called them on VHF: "Can you see us on AIS and radar?" The immediate response was usually "Stand By!", followed by confirmation that we were 'visible' on both AIS and radar. Sometimes we heard a foghorn. Ships willingly altered

course for us. One UK registered ship asked, “What are you doing up here?” “We’re on holiday,” we replied cheerily.

Our planning had assumed twelve days to reach Attu, the nearest island in the Aleutian chain, if that proved the most suitable destination, including four periods of gale force winds. The islands further eastwards would take longer to reach and expose us to greater risk of heavy weather. The first gale arrived with several hours of 35–40 knot winds, but from astern. The seas did not build to any appreciable level. The second depression was deeper, moving rapidly southeast from Siberia – we named it ‘From Russia With Love’. A sticky anemometer showed 48 knots gusting into the 50s, fortunately also from astern. A small showing of headsail proved too little to pull us downwind so we sailed across the wind for a while. At 0200 the strongest squalls reduced and we took turns to hand-steer downwind. By 0900 the wind had eased to around 40 knots, more sail was presented, and *Spruce* sailed herself beautifully. She gallivanted down the faces of cold, tumbling waves, her stern rearing skywards before each rush forwards. Albatross played in the wind, dipping into troughs to accelerate out of sight before wheeling skywards, an exhilarating exhibition of showy acrobatic prowess. Another gale was forecast for three days later, with easterly winds, but we resolved to reach Attu before that one arrived.

The wind dropped steadily over the next 36 hours and periodically we shook out reefs. As our speed fell we motor-sailed. Finally, just a breath of wind from astern remained and we resigned ourselves to motoring in the reducing seas. A shrieking alarm screamed urgently – but why was the engine overheating? The last thing we checked was the seacock. Normally quite stiff, it was loose – floppy and closed – the cold sea temperature had caused contraction of dissimilar metals. With a restraining strap added and a new impeller installed we were on our way again, still on target to outpace the impending easterly gale.

Fog on passage to the Aleutians





Nearing Attu

The final morning on passage was windless and very cold. Distant snowy mountains peeped above the swell, glowing red in the dawn light. Excruciatingly slowly they grew out of the ocean. As the sun rose, white peaks shone brightly. It was 6th June and we were at the same latitude as southern England, but so much snow. This is what Northern Europe would be like without the balmy Gulf Stream. As we neared Attu a pod of orca appeared on cue and seabirds flew towards land. It was a stunning vista, a completely new cruising experience for *Spruce* and her crew. Cackling geese, shellducks, surf scoters, loons and many others watched as we anchored in Massacre Bay, close to the site of the dismantled Loran station, relieved to have completed the passage north.



maggie and milly and molly and may
 went down to the beach (to play one day)
 and maggie discovered a shell that sang
 so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and
 milly befriended a stranded star
 whose rays five languid fingers were;
 and molly was chased by a horrible thing
 which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and
 may came home with a smooth round stone
 as small as a world and as large as alone.
 for whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
 it's always ourselves we find in the sea

e.e. cummings