

## FULL CIRCLE

### Graham and Avril Johnson

*(Graham and Avril received the 2020 Vasey Vase for their 18-year circumnavigation aboard their 44ft cutter Dream Away, during which they've been among Flying Fish's most regular contributors. The account of the last leg of their voyage, entitled The 19th Hole and coincidentally their 19th submission, appeared in the last issue, and the offer of a final piece recalling some particular highlights was definitely not to be missed.*

*Dream Away anchored at Vanuatu in August 2015 features on this issue's cover.)*

The boys finished university, so we left home. We had been planning our great escape for years. The boat was ready, Graham obtained early retirement from academia and the world's oceans beckoned. Living aboard full time is different from a three-month extended cruise, so we set a two-year window before making a longer-term decision. Apart from a passion for sailing, it is fortunate that we share common interests in people, wildlife, exploring new places and learning new things. Neither of us had experienced South America, so Brazil looked an exciting destination.

Leaving from Southampton in June 2002 our navigation was on paper charts of varied antiquity with a stand-alone GPS receiver backed up by a sextant. We made it as far as Cowes, since it was blowing hard from the southwest and Av had been promised more downwind than windward passages. In August we departed Falmouth to meander down the Atlantic coast to Lagos, Portugal, revisiting favourite haunts and friends along the way. Leaving the European mainland, a spectacular spinnaker run sped us on to the Canaries. We shared Arrecife anchorage with a great bunch of cruisers, hosted Sunday lunch pizza extravaganzas aboard *Dream Away* and made many friends. After the ARC departed we cruised the islands, surviving a dreadful storm in Gran Tarajal on Fuerteventura. We shared the harbour with a pair of Aussie yachts and our combined efforts saved the boats. Senegal followed, anchoring off the Club Voile de Dakar at Hann. Along the beach large wooden fishing *pirogues* landed their catch, the same craft which had indicated their presence at night by lifting the lid from the brazier amidships, unleashing a great gout of flame.

We moved on to The Gambia, sailing 150 miles upriver to Janjanbureh, the old capital, spotting crocodiles, hippos, monkeys, chimpanzees, baboons and all manner of birds. Here we were immersed in traditional Africa, a far cry from the more commercialised, tourist-savvy coast. The people were warmly welcoming, and kids followed us everywhere, eager to run errands and show us around. Their currency was footballs, as hard cash was immediately confiscated by their parents. Negotiating in fractions of a ball was entertaining – they always knew when a whole one had been earned. Our maths class attracted the local teacher, who became a good friend. The school was shut as UK charity funding had been stopped, but the charity assured us they were restarting in the next school year so in the meantime we continued the funding. A great party ensued, with promises of our own hut in the compound when we return!

May 2003 arrived, along with the first rains, our trigger to set off for Brazil. Our Aussie friends were already bound for Surinam but kept in touch via HF for the ocean crossing. The radio had already proven its worth, keeping us connected with friends in



Graham and Avril have written many articles for *Flying Fish* over the past 18 years, listed by issue below. All appear on the OCC website – if you're unsure how to access them, refer to the Editorial on page 3.

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*One very happy  
Gambian schoolteacher*

the UK, weather information, nets and schedules with other cruisers. Our amateur licences provided legitimate contact with all number of different services and, once installed, virtually all were free. We added a Pactor modem\* in South America to give us access to GRIB files, from then on the mainstay for our weather forecasts. We have stayed with the GFS model, having learnt its limitations and foibles, and found it accurate enough for our requirements. We are not fans of multiple model debates, which is not to say that others are not equally good – it's simply a matter of information overload and any forecast beyond three days is dubious.

The 23-day ocean crossing was uneventful, our radar enabling us to avoid the worst of some impressive squalls in the doldrums. Arriving in vibrant, noisy, steaming Salvador was another culture shock. Brazil is a fascinating, vast country with some serious social problems, and watching one's back and never carrying valuables was *de rigueur* for any trip into town. After exploring the spectacular bay full of island gems we sailed south, investigating several rivers where the riverside villages introduced us to a very different Brazil. Enraptured by our new lifestyle we continued south, exploring more of Brazil, then Uruguay, and ending up in Buenos Aires, Argentina. We met Dutch friends repairing their 50ft steel yacht, badly damaged in the notoriously horrendous seas that arise along the shallow eastern coast when a *pampero* wind howls through. Av has two Argentinean distant cousins who provided a wonderful insight into the country, culture and society. We travelled extensively on the impressive coach system and loved our time in the High Andes.

Following extensive boat preparations in Mar del Plata, in January 2005 we began our great adventure to the Beagle Channel in loose company with our Dutch chums. Our friendship with a retired Argentine Air Force officer paid dividends – being the meteorologist for the Total oil field at the entrance to the Magellan Straits, he provided detailed weather data during the passage. There were several fascinating breaks, notably the surreal red sand cliffs of Caleta Hornos, then Puerto Deseado, an archetypal frontier town some 700 miles south of Mar del Plata, deep into the Roaring Forties, which we enjoyed until violent weather confronted us on our harbour

\* A Pactor is a terminal node controller fitted between an HF radio and a computer to facilitate digital radio communication.





*Awesome glaciers inch down from the Darwin range*

mooring. A friendly fisherman counselled us regarding tactics and bolt holes further south, one of which provided refuge a few days later in an approaching storm. We anchored close in under the high cliffs just north of Cabo Virgenes lighthouse at the entrance to the Magellan Straits. Further out the weather and sea state were vile, and while our greatest danger came from debris blown over the clifftop we remained unscathed. It certainly substantiated the old adage to listen to local advice, especially from professional seafarers.

Finally rounding Tierra del Fuego, we entered the Beagle Channel heading towards Ushuaia. We had not planned to tarry but, finding the region totally enthralling, we elected to overwinter. Renewing visas was simple as the Chilean naval outpost of Puerto Williams lies just a few miles away along the Beagle Channel on Isla Navarino. There was so much to see and explore and the wildlife was extraordinary – albatross and condors, steamer ducks and penguins, otters and beavers, seals and orcas ... the list was endless. Sailing highlights were rounding Cape Horn, including a brief landing, and weeks circumnavigating Isla Gordon in the Beagle Channel, exploring all the extensive inlets along ‘glacier alley’. Here, in the presence of one of nature’s most hypnotic, powerful forces, we were shocked to see the effects of global warming. Bleak moraines stood isolated, behind them a great swathe of barren land before the retreating glacial face.

In Ushuaia we enjoyed both excellent skiing and a busy social life amongst the small contingent of cruisers and welcoming locals. Finally, eight months later, we waved goodbye, to spend the next six months exploring the plethora of Chilean channels and *caletas* on passage to Puerto Montt. It is an extraordinarily wild, remote wilderness where safety and self-sufficiency are paramount. An epic diversion was the sail through the Andes to Puerto Natales, where we left *Dream Away* at anchor

in a shallow river whilst we travelled to renew our visas. We were carrying five anchors to provide security in all seabed types and wind conditions, and employed our favoured tandem-anchoring system, a traditional fisherman anchor shackled on 6m of chain ahead of our main 60lb (27kg) CQR. We later changed the CQR for a Manson Supreme, which provided significant improvements in setting time and overall performance. Its Achilles heel is the quantity of thick mud it picks up, which can inhibit resetting if not cleared.

Further north, in Puerto Edén, we made friends with the Port Captain and his family, enjoying a memorable New Year celebration together. We were also involved in the search for a missing French yacht, eventually located in a remote bay. A gas explosion had wrecked the yacht and the couple were in a desperate state after 20 days' living ashore in their liferaft. We found the Chilean Navy personnel scrupulously honest, fair and helpful, so it was embarrassing when the falsification of the stricken vessel's insurance documents was discovered. This is not a unique deception, just another stupidity that engenders distrust of yachties and encourages ever more restrictive regulations.

Finally we reached Puerto Montt, a small city supporting a large fishing fleet and the base for the significant salmon-farming industry. Easter Island was next on the agenda, but an email from a fellow cruiser, injured whilst touring in a 4x4, persuaded us to fly to La Paz, Bolivia to drive him back. We spent a leisurely six weeks touring Bolivia, crossing the Atacama Desert, the salt pans in Uyuni and land-cruising through Chile back to Puerto Montt.

*Next day we scaled the peak opposite,  
rewarded by more spectacular views of Machu Picchu*



Reviewing the sailing plan we decided on Mexico, since our Spanish was currently good and Baja California was on Av's wish list. Spurred on by the Humbolt Current and a following wind we reached Ecuador via the Juan Fernández (Robinson Crusoe) islands and Iquique, northern Chile. A secure mooring in Bahía de Caráquez, Ecuador freed us to explore. Machu Picchu, another on Av's wish list, was an awesome highlight of the adventure. Elsewhere, Lake Titicaca, Quito and Mount Chimborazo were memorable destinations.

In November 2007 we left South America to explore Central America. On a dark, windy, wet night close to some reputedly dangerous Colombian islands, *Dream Away* was suddenly lit by a high-powered spotlight. A large *panga* roared up alongside full of balaclava-shrouded men. There was much shouting and gesticulating, but we got the message to follow them. We were greatly relieved when they guided us through the gap in their long fishing net, advising us of the best course to avoid others ahead. We don't carry guns, feeling they are more likely to escalate than solve trouble, are useless in the face of a bunch of seriously armed pirates and cause endless trouble with the authorities. We sometimes ponder how many 'missing fishermen' are the result of panicking, gun-toting sailors.

The wind on the passage north is either feast or famine. We used the diurnal coastal breezes to make slow progress, with an occasional blast from a *papagayo*. The notorious Gulf of Tehuantepec produced a quiet day and we crossed into Mexico under spinnaker. Finally we reached Guaymas in the Sea of Cortez, enjoying pelicans, boobies, turtles, manta rays, dolphins and whales on passage. We hauled *Dream Away* out, went for a tour around the country, then returned to the UK to resolve family issues. Mexico was good to us – we made many friends amongst both cruisers and locals, loved the food and the scenery, and the wildlife exceeded all our expectations.

In March 2011, after a year cruising the Sea of Cortez, we headed for the Marquesas, soon settling into our normal three-hour night watch routine. It was a good, varied run – we lay becalmed for 24 hours with all sails stowed, the big yankee split in a blow and a chainplate sheared, but our ancient Monitor wind vane never slept



*Beautiful bays abound along the Baja Peninsula in the Sea of Cortez*

***We regularly provided overnight accommodation***

and we arrived safely in Hiva Oa after 27 days. French Polynesia is a world-renowned destination with many spectacularly attractive islands and atolls. We found an underlying tension between locals and colonialists, however, and it was not a happy place. Tahiti gave us the opportunity to restock, replace all the chainplates and meet some of the multitude of cruisers jammed into the anchorages. We encountered several skippers on their first sail, eager to expound knowledge which, disconcertingly, rarely extended to the collision regulations. Equally worrying were those whose maintenance Everest is changing a light bulb – both sorely try the patience of their competent and generous fellow cruisers. Today's technology which enables a yacht to be sailed by simply pressing buttons encourages such feckless behaviour, but there are many avenues to sensible, responsible preparation such as the OCC's Associate Membership, mentoring and youth sponsorship initiatives.



We took the northern route across the South Pacific via Suvarrow, Samoa and Tonga. With the cyclone season approaching, we set out for New Zealand in early November 2011, arriving in Opuia eleven days later after an uneventful passage. We had barely arrived when disaster struck. Av was diagnosed with breast cancer, needing an urgent operation, so we stayed in Auckland for immediate treatment. All went well, with outstanding medical care, and a passing conversation in Ponsonby Cruising Club resulted in our moving into the basement flat of Dave and Barbie Fredric. Av

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***A small OCC gathering in the Bay of Islands, New Zealand.  
Left to right: Avril, Malcolm and Helen Shaft, Nina Kiff, Graham***







*Fulaga, Fiji, one of our all-time favourite atolls*

convalesced there until March, after which we returned to Opuia to spend more time with Tony and Nina Kiff, PO for the Bay of Islands, who had been unbelievably supportive from the outset. These four folk transformed a nightmare into a bearable reality, being true ambassadors for NZ's legendary hospitality.

Av recovered well, so in mid May 2012 we sailed off for a circuit around Niue, Tonga and Fiji. Arriving in Fiji soon after the authorities had opened the Lau group of islands to cruisers, we found an unbelievably beautiful atoll and spent a solitary month there. Fijians are naturally open, friendly people, illustrated by allocating a

*Old and young striving to rebuild after Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu*



number of their islands to the populations of small Pacific communities facing the catastrophe of rising sea levels inundating their land. So a pattern was established – southern summer in NZ and winter in ‘the islands’. Then in 2015 Av was cleared for longer-distance voyaging so it was time to move on. During our downtime we edged into the 21st century with digital charts, computer-based navigation, notably Open CPN and the ability to create overlay chartlets from Google satellite images. We even bought a smartphone and an AIS.

Cyclone *Pam* devastated Vanuatu before our NZ departure so we advertised for aid goods and in true Kiwi tradition the response was overwhelming. Traditionally, the first departures north were in early May, coinciding with the end of the cyclone season, but the cyclone season is now extending into late May, and cyclones are becoming more intense. Rising sea temperatures are contributing to this and the problem is accelerating at a frightening pace. We finally left in early June, making landfall in Aneityum. Contacting the local medical centre they reported a shortage of baby clothes, “well, it just so happens...!”, and so it continued as we made our way north, visiting isolated villages on many islands. We met and made friends with a great number of people who shared their thoughts, beliefs and lives with us in a way possibly not achievable in more normal circumstances. For us it was an unforgettable experience filled with images and stories that we treasure.

In mid November, with the cyclone season approaching, we sailed from the Torres islands, the northerly extremity of Vanuatu, bound for Pohnpei across the Equator in Micronesia. It was a good passage – the inclination to stop in the Solomons was overridden by the prospect of a fair wind all the way across the Equator, so the spinnaker

### *Glorious downwind sailing in the Pacific*





*Like nothing they'd seen before – the 'Gay Gordons'  
in response to Lamotrek's traditional dance*

stayed set. In Pohnpei all manner of shops and supermarkets, bars and restaurants abounded and we had internet access. The latter is a mixed blessing. Today's apparently insular cruiser leaves less behind, as technology enables family and friends to travel with them virtually. Abundant cruising information is available instantly on the internet. There is no time to row over to other yachties to chat or to glean local knowledge.

Heading west we found increasingly more traditional island communities. Lamotrek, Elato and Woleai were favourites where we both got immersed in local projects. Their gratitude, warmth and inclusiveness always made leaving hard, but

*Long-time  
ambition  
achieved.  
We even  
met the  
farmer  
who  
discovered  
the site*



the leaving parties were unforgettable. However, all is not perfect in paradise. Fish stocks are decreasing, shorelines are littered with plastic detritus, seawater levels are rising and the seasons are becoming unpredictable. Finally we reached laid-back Yap, where people knew we had visited their 'home' island because of Av's island-woven, uniquely patterned, wraparound skirts.

Moving on to Palau gave an altogether different experience, with a booming tourist industry based around diving in the stupendous karst island studded lagoon. Soon tiring of all the hubbub we made for the Philippines, clearing in at Tacloban. We were apparently something of a novelty, but everyone was friendly and helpful and we



*Traditional waterside fishing village in the Philippines*

moved on to enjoy a wonderful cruise through the islands ending up in Subic Bay on Luzon. *Dream Away* was looking well used, so we arranged for a spray job at highly-recommended Waterside Ventures, and whilst awaiting suitable painting weather we went travelling. Firstly a brief visit to NZ for Av's check-ups, then three months touring Australia – Cairns to Adelaide on hop-on-hop-off Greyhound buses, then campervan across country to Darwin. A memorable trip, catching up with sailing friends along the way. A month enraptured by a luxury tour of China – a special birthday present from Av's wish list – completed the grand tour.

The excellent paint job completed, we left in late January 2017 on a fascinating cruise through myriad islands heading towards Borneo. We explored the quieter western coast of Palawan, hoping to avoid the significant terrorist problems in the south, but after a couple of unnerving encounters were glad to reach Kudat safely after a night crossing the Balabac Strait. Kudat proved a pleasant town, with a defunct ferry terminal still housing the customs and immigration officials. The ink pads had dried out so we only had the faintest impressions in our passports. It was an easy introduction to Malaysia and the special forces team kept a good watch on us to Kota Kinabalu, from where we

*Multi-tasking mother in Borneo*



travelled to see the amazing wildlife. Orangutans are the top draw, but the biodiversity is phenomenal. It was depressing, however, to fly over once-pristine jungle now replaced by an endless vista of palm oil plantation.

Northerly winds in the South China Sea can blow fiercely, creating dangerous conditions as the swells pile up along the western Borneo coast. Coupled with extensive



*Temples and cultural sites abound in Sri Lanka*

inshore oil fields it's an area requiring some respect. Nevertheless, we had a wonderful time exploring rivers, offshore islands and Kuching, the capital of Sarawak with its fascinating history and architecture. It was a short leg across to mainland Malaysia and, following a brief visit to Singapore, we carried on up the Malacca Strait to Pangkor Marina, recommended by several cruisers. We found it well managed and safe, with exceptionally friendly and helpful staff. We flew to visit more of Asia as planned, Cambodia, Vietnam and Japan giving us a varied insight into the culture and beliefs of societies very different from ours.

In January 2018 we sailed the remainder of the Malacca Strait to Langkawi, a duty free island and one of Malaysia's top holiday destinations. It encompasses many small islands with stunning anchorages and a large area of navigable mangrove forest, home to prolific birdlife. The Thai border lies less than a mile north and, after checking in, we island-hopped towards Phuket. Phang Nga Bay, where *The Beach* and *Bond* films were shot, is tightly packed with jungle-clad limestone islands featuring beautiful beaches and, of course, endless sunshine. It was horrendously crowded, both ashore and afloat, the water was filthy, and a heavy swell made many anchorages untenable. It's probably more attractive out of season, but we were glad to leave.

A recurrent gearbox problem changed our plan inasmuch as we returned to Pangkor to resolve the issue. Eventually, the start of February 2019 found us underway bound for South Africa across the Indian Ocean. This region is renowned for poor HF propagation so we bought a sat phone, which provided eye-wateringly expensive weather reports. We chose a northern route to include Sri Lanka, where we found a fabulous, safe, secure anchorage in Trincomalee that enabled us to travel to Lion Rock, also on Av's 'must see' list. As home to some of the world's oldest cultures it was fascinating, as the scene of recent atrocities it was disturbing, our Tamil driver providing an alternative scenario to the government dogma. Then followed Gan in the southern Maldives, Salomon Atoll in the Chagos archipelago, and a fairly bumpy ride to the Seychelles, typical of the Indian Ocean, putting considerable wear on the sails and crew. After being told by the locals there was no chance of a safe passage to Madagascar until mid September we sailed late July, arriving safely having negotiated the fearsome compression zone unscathed. There followed over two months exploration of the relatively undiscovered paradise along the northwest coast with unique wildlife and remote, friendly villages.

In early September, Topsail informed us of our insurer's refusal to renew our cover. It's happened before and it's tiresome. We had an unblemished record with considerable experience in a proven boat, but every time, the same excuse – the insurer had had heavy losses the previous year and was not prepared to countenance any undue risk. With more countries now demanding a minimum of third party cover, many cruisers simply buy this and get full cover locally. Fortunately, Topsail came up trumps with an alternative insurer.



*A hermit crab recycles mankind's mess in Chagos*



*A crowned sifika, one of many unique and endangered creatures found in Madagascar*

The end of October found us in Richards Bay, South Africa, berthed at the Zululand Yacht Club. We enjoyed the nearby safari parks, met with old and new friends, celebrated Christmas together and, following a raucous New Year's Eve party, left at 0300 on New Year's Day 2020. Setting a *Dream Away* record of 240 miles in 24 hours in the Agulhas Current we reached Cape

Town via Port Elizabeth and Mossel Bay. The Victoria & Alfred Waterfront under the shadow of Table Mountain was our new, totally-sheltered home, while a new set of sails and standing rigging completed a significant SA refit programme.

We enjoyed the usual tourist activities and sights in the region and flew to Namibia for an incredible wildlife expedition, driving around in Etosha Safari Park. Next we sailed there, reaching Walvis Bay in the normal thick fog after a good, fast, downwind

***Rich and poor juxtaposed in Nosy Be, Madagascar***





*Christmas on the journey home. Still together after all these years*

passage. We only have a cold store with a small freezer box, enough for long passages where the food competes with the beer and sealant tubes. When stationary we tend to eat ashore, sampling an incredible variety of local foods and flavours. Whenever we go travelling we find someone ashore who allows us a corner in some large freezer. So after taking advantage of the sailing club restaurant freezer we embarked upon an awesome drive around this beautiful, vast, sparsely-populated country in a 4x4 with a roof tent. The warning that you needed to be self-reliant took on a new dimension when we buried the vehicle up to door-level in mud.

Back aboard, COVID-19 was dominating the news. Initially we stayed put but in late April, during the second lockdown, decided to return to the UK in sensible weather conditions, rescinding a long-standing plan to visit the Caribbean 'when we are old'. St Helena was closed to us, but Ascension provided a month's welcome respite in a COVID-free environment. Leaving in June we made an uneventful 3000 mile voyage to the Azores, revisiting Horta for the fifth time after a 26-year absence. On 22nd August Portugal was added to the UK's safe travel corridor list, so we sailed back to home waters, finally arriving on 11th September at Hythe Sailing Club, Southampton where it had all started 18 years and 60,000 miles earlier.

We have sailed to some unimaginably beautiful places and met people of all colours and creeds, rich and poor. Consistently we have found them naturally engaging, kind and generous. Even in our darkest times folk have stepped forward to help, and we have made many lifelong friends. The cruising community remains a unique body of souls, some undertaking the most incredible voyages, others content to potter about in the sun. We have loved the lifestyle and treasure many memories. We thank all our friends for helping to make it such an unforgettable experience.

