

5000 MILES IN ‘THE VARIABLES’

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Roving Rear Commodores

(Suzanne and Chris are long-term cruisers aboard their 42ft cutter Whanake, having left the UK in 2009 to head for Suzanne’s native New Zealand – but by a somewhat roundabout route. Previous articles have described cruising Scandinavia, Brazil, the Falkland Islands and the Chilean Channels, for which they were awarded the 2015 Rose Medal – see page 31.)

It is actually on record in Flying Fish 2014/2: ‘...we have earned a downhill ride across the South Pacific in the South East Trades’. Well that turned out to be pure fantasy, because on leaving Valdivia on the Chilean coast it took 5000 miles of sailing in the Variables across the eastern South Pacific before we found those elusive south east trades at Tahiti. We didn’t help our cause by taking a higher latitude route at around 25°S; but sailing west along this latitude we were able to visit the eastern South Pacific islands of Robinson Crusoe, Easter Island and Pitcairn Island. The temptation on leaving Valdivia was to head due north, both to escape the bad weather of Patagonia and to reach the trades as quickly as possible, but this would have meant missing out on these island gems.

From the Chilean coast until we reached Pitcairn Island we experienced wind shifts on a repeating 5 to 7 day cycle of a constantly backing wind with a background 2–6m southwesterly ground-swell generated from far away southern ocean lows. The wind would start in the northeast with an approaching front, back to the northwest and blow for about 24 hours, then slowly back west, west-southwest, southwest and south until it was southeast off a high; then it would creep east as the high moved off until it was back at northeast with the next approaching front. We hove-to six times in the northwest or west winds of approaching fronts – usually for 24 hours, once for two days – as there seemed little point bashing into it when free winds were behind it. This wind cycle is undoubtedly related to the time of year we did the passage (late June to mid August) – if we had left Chile when most other cruisers do, at around February/March time, we would probably have experienced more stable high pressure weather with light easterly winds.

All these variable winds meant a confused sea, and northeast wind against southwest swell turned the sea from confused to utterly demented. There were bad days – times of far too much cursing that we’d give it all up and trade it in for a land life with a vegetable garden. Our newly shipped kitten would go pure wild crazy several times a day, and we played frenzied childish games with her to release her pent-up madness – hers and ours. Promises of frolicking one day in green grass were made to the cat, and it’s what we dreamt of as well.

The great circle route from Valdivia, Chile to Pitcairn is just under 3000 miles, but we ended up doing 800 miles more on a reverse great circle, with our track curving up to the Equator rather than down to the pole. The reason for this was firstly to gain a bit of northing to get some distance from the fronts, secondly to ride the top of the highs and avoid wallowing in the centre of them, and thirdly to keep both the southwest

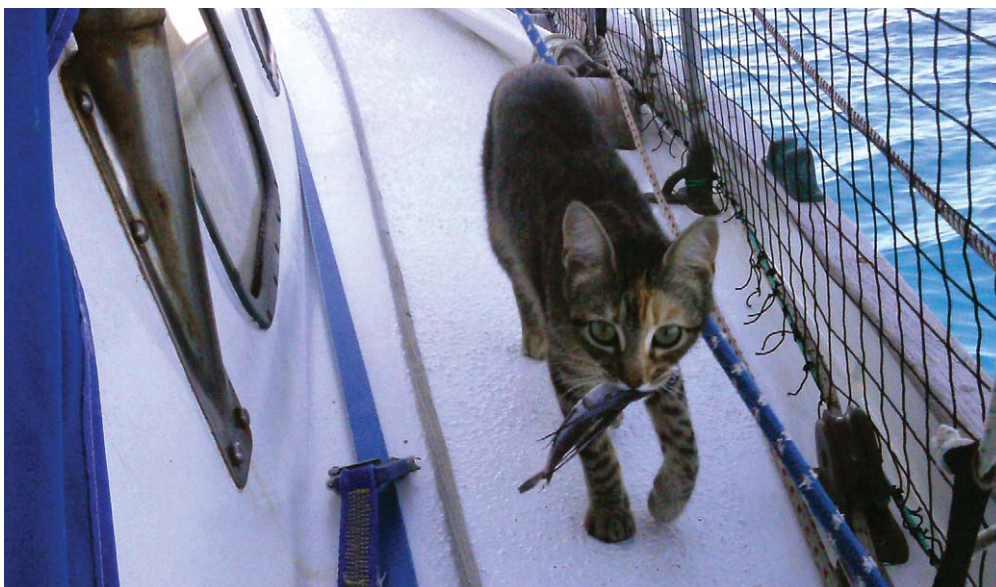
swell and west-southwest wind on the beam as both were too violent forward of the beam. It was better to be well off the swell and wind for more comfortable sailing, even if it did wreak havoc with our rhumb line.

We were surprised by the number of times we sailed with three reefs in the main – these incidences were not gales, just strong winds but in confused seas with ground-swell. When hove-to in winds of more than 30 knots we found it was better to have our trysail set, as there was much less leeway compared with our triple-reefed main. We also used our trysail in light beam winds with heavy swell – the main would be slamming and slatting uncontrollably in the wave troughs, but our loose-footed trysail worked well and had enough sail area to keep us trundling along. For the periods of downwind sailing in light easterly quarter-winds there was far too much swell to use our cruising chute, and even our poled-out lightweight genoa would often slam in the swell and give the rig a horrible shake. A flying jib, we think, is the answer for these conditions.

We saved our diesel for motoring in the dead calms following a blow, when the big swell made wallowing around very roly and being hove-to no longer worked. If we had 24 hours of calm the sea would decay quite quickly just leaving the southwesterly ground-swell, and when the wind filled in again there was a period of nice sailing for a few hours before the sea became lumpy and then confused again. But it was well worth persevering with those endless variables to reach the southeast South Pacific islands, and sailing away from Valdivia on the Chilean coast everything did flip fast – the rain suddenly stopped and water became like gold; we quickly shed our clothes and looked at our thermal clothing in utter disbelief that it could have ever been needed; bad weather only came one out of five days rather than four out of five; sun-seeking stopped and we started sun-avoidance measures ... there really wasn't any in between.

Before leaving Chile we took on an (irresistible) stray kitten that we had found (or rather she found us) in Patagonia, and she became ship's cat. Yanmara – named after her appreciative purr which rumbles like our Yanmar engine – made it officially as ship's cat on catching her first flying fish. But even with the flying fish, with Yanmara on board we

Ship's cat Yanmara claims yet another flying fish





had to do some serious fishing. The South Pacific did not disappoint, with some huge mahimahi, bonitos and, on one lucky, day a yellowfin tuna. So sailing across the Pacific made perfect sense to Yanmara – it was simply all about catching and eating fresh fish across the hunting ground of the ocean. She found her sea legs without ever losing her lunch, and in the quiet waters of the Chilean canals we had taught her to use the heads. Out in the big Pacific swells this heads use became a real challenge for her – precariously balancing on the edge of a toilet seat over a sloshing bowl of sea water is a nervous undertaking for a cat, so we would always go in with her to hold her paw for moral support, or sometimes physical support to stop her slipping mid-act. Apart from

Mahimahi of the South Pacific



Alexander Selkirk's plaque on Robinson Crusoe Island

the toilet arrangements she really took to life at sea and was great for morale on the long ocean passages of the Pacific.

The first island we reached was the lovely misty isle of Robinson Crusoe, part of the Juan Fernández archipelago, 475 miles off the Chilean coast. It amused us to read that the Scot, Alexander Selkirk, survived off goat meat during his four-year exile on the island because he didn't like fish – not an uncommon Scottish trait to this day. We only managed three days there before an approaching front with strong northwest winds meant we had to head back to sea. The main

anchorage, Cumberland Bay, is open to the northwest, and it's a catch-22 with the alternative anchorage on the southwest side being exposed to the southwest swell. On the last day the local fishermen were paying their annual tribute to San Pedro, the patron saint of fisherman, and we joined a local fishing boat to tour part of the island



Honouring San Pedro at Robinson Crusoe Island



A moody Houtitu Bay, Easter Island

and sing tributes. The priest on board blessed all the fishing boats and fishermen, and the yachts and sailors, so we departed on the long passage to Easter Island with abundant karma, having been blessed.

Six days out from Robinson Crusoe we actually had to change course to avoid hitting Emily Rock (ED 1869) – one of only three rocks, all ‘Existence Doubtful’, in a vast area of the empty southeast South Pacific. Existence doubtful or not we didn’t want to take any chances, and passed within 5 miles along a safe line of latitude south of it. It is good to know that some mysteries of our planet remain, and even all-seeing Google Earth doesn’t know if Emily Rock exists or not. But somebody must have seen something back in 1869 for it to be named and charted.

Twenty-three days and 1995 miles later we arrived at Easter Island with settled weather for a few days, giving us time for plenty of Moai (statue) sightseeing. Then a very slow moving front arrived with very strong northwest winds so we had three days rolling around in the anchorage, but far better than being hove-to out at sea for three days. We anchored on the southeast side of the island, in a bay with good holding on a sand bottom and well sheltered from northwest winds, but predictably rolly as it is an open roadstead off a small island in a very big ocean.

A very scenic spot for doing the laundry





Approaching tiny Pitcairn Island

We left after the front had passed and the wind backed to west-southwest – the oceanic forecast was for 15–20 knots of south-southwest winds backing to south-southeast, with 6–10m SW swell. Leaving on this forecast might seem a bit foolish given the size of the seas, but we couldn't believe they were this large in the immediate area as observed by the size of the swell coming into the anchorage. Fortunately we were proved right and encountered about 4–5m of southwesterly swell, which, as we were heading north-northwest for Pitcairn Island, was perfectly manageable.

From Easter Island we made landfall at Pitcairn Island after 1298 miles and 13 days. Pitcairn is a tiny – 1 km x 3.5 km – cliff-lined island at 27°S, just outside the tropics and in the track of passing winter lows, which presents a challenge for both safe anchorage and actually being able to land. But we were in luck, as our arrival timed with a few

The patch of sand for anchoring in Bounty Bay, Pitcairn Island





The weird mid-ocean North Minerva Reef

days of post-front settled weather. The anchorage of Bounty Bay is surprisingly good, with a large patch of sand which is free of coral heads and in a not-too-deep depth of 11m. And the island is just big enough to give some protection from the southwest swell. It was still rolly, but in Pitcairn Island's Bounty Bay we enjoyed our best night's sleep since leaving mainland Chile seven weeks earlier.

West of Pitcairn we reached the realm of mainly easterly-sector winds, mostly south-southeast through to north, but it wasn't until we reached Tahiti that the plain sailing really started with fairly consistent southeast or east trade winds across the South Pacific to Minerva Reef. From Pitcairn we sailed via the Gambiers, the Austral islands of Raivavae and Tubuai, the Society Islands, Niue and North Minerva Reef. From Minerva Reef to New Zealand we had a few more days of southeast or easterly trades before being back in the Variables. Then after a couple of days of obligatory headwinds to gain the New Zealand coast, we made landfall at Opuia.



New Zealand landfall – a joyous sight for a long lost Kiwi

All these variable winds in the South Pacific certainly show that an east-going passage across to Chile is quite feasible at around 25-30°S, especially in the winter months. With so many fronts coming up to these latitudes it would seem a matter of picking one's latitude for a ride across that could take in the Austral Islands and the Gambiers of French Polynesia, and then Pitcairn, Easter Island and Juan Fernández, followed by a downwind sail of the Chilean Channels and into the Atlantic. 🐟