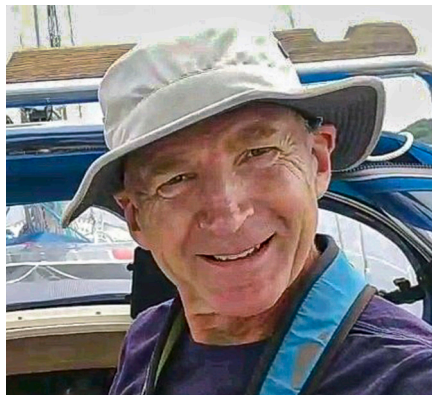


Two dozen islands in Japan

Cruising in the Seto Naikai and Sea of Japan

Francis Hawkings

Awarded the Goldsmith Exploration Award and the Cruising Club Bowl



Plainsong and I had been lucky to slip into Japan, despite Covid restrictions, in July 2021. I had left her there, fondly believing that I would be able to return to cruise in 2022. But my luck had run out: while most of the rest of the world opened up, Japan did not open its borders again until 11 October 2022. I flew in on 12 October. But, late in the season and now deeply engrossed in compiling a new edition of the *Pacific Crossing Guide* for the RCC Pilotage Foundation, it wasn't the right time to

sail. I hauled *Plainsong* out, renewed the anti-fouling, did some other jobs and travelled a little to visit friends. So at least *Plainsong* was in great shape for 2023.

Spring and autumn are the best times of year to sail in Japan. The winters are too cold and the summers are too hot. And even though the rainy season in southern Japan starts in late May, spring is arguably better than autumn because there is less risk of typhoons. So my 2023 season became April through to June.



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If 2021 had been voyaging from A to B, 2023 was really cruising: a slow and lazy meander in the islands of the southwest. And if 2021 had been somewhat solitary, 2023 was quite the opposite: I only sailed about two weeks by myself, for the rest of the time I was blessed with wonderful friends on board: first Simon, a UK childhood friend, then Shelly from the US, Keiko and Joy from Japan and Ivonne from Colombia – a United Nations of shipmates, each of whom brought something special to the cruise and some unique aromas to the galley.

Plainsong had been in Tannowa, about 30 miles southwest of Osaka at the eastern end of the Seto Naikai, the Inland Sea that is bounded by the Japanese mainland of Honshu to the north and east and the large islands of Shikoku and Kyushu to the south. After two years of hiatus I was ready to leave Tannowa but at the same time I knew it would be hard: I had got quite settled in there, the facilities and marina staff were terrific, it had proved safe from typhoons during my stay and, above all, by this stage I was leaving a lot of friends behind. But when Simon and I set off at 0800 on 12 April, a new sense of adventure and discovery set in, as well as the mindset of cruising in Japan: we had to leave at 0800, exactly, because that is when we had told our marina friends we were leaving, and we were duly serenaded on the dot of 0800 with foghorn blasts by Masayuki Takeda, the wonderful marina manager.

It was blustery outside the marina, grey, with rain showers. We tacked south through a narrow channel on a fair tide, dodging small fishing boats and coastal freighters, and feeling that delicious moment when, at long last, the boat puts her shoulder to the waves, the sails and rigging tension and you have to start paying attention to your tea mug because the world isn't always level anymore. I was concerned that a chilly rain wasn't a great introduction to cruising in Japan for Simon; but I needn't have worried – like everything else on the cruise, he embraced it with great enthusiasm.

For one crazy moment at my desk in California, I had conceived the plan that we should sail north to Hokkaido and back. It would be good for me to renounce the gentle seductions of the Seto Naikai, I thought, and by seeing more of Japan would make it easier to leave Japan when, eventually, the time came. But the weather soon blew that plan out of the water – or rather, didn't blow that plan into the water: it immediately became apparent that to get to Hokkaido and back in three months we would have had to keep up a numbing schedule of motoring in the light winds that often prevail in the Seto Naikai and Sea of Japan in the spring and summer.

Instead, I surrendered entirely to the weather: we would sail west in a leisurely way through the Seto Naikai and then – if the wind was blowing from the north – south in the Sea of Japan to explore the west coast of Kyushu and its off lying islands. If it was blowing from the south, we might go north instead. When there was no or little wind, we would keep our distances short to avoid boring motoring; when there was a favourable breeze, we would make the most of it; and if the wind was strong but adverse, we would declare it a hiking or museum day ashore. I only had a few fixed points and places for changes of shipmates; and this non-plan

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proved, in fact, to be the perfect MO: stopping every night, or for a few nights, in harbours along the way, enjoying what the islands had to offer on land as well as by sea, and trying to avoid doing anything heroic.

The resulting cruise was shaped more by themes than by an itinerary: art, architecture and museums in the Seto Naikai; *onsens* – public hot spring baths; the beautiful but slightly sad villages and islands throughout the southwest; the somewhat fraught history of European encounter and Christianity in Kyushu; and the kindness, welcome and fun that we experienced with the people we met along the way, including a bevy of children that we had on board over the months.



The scruffier the harbour, the warmer the welcome – *Plainsong* in Nushima

had difficulty finding a place to moor alongside: some older fishermen were shooing us away but by a stroke of luck two younger guys arrived on mopeds just at that moment and beckoned us to the spot against the wall that we had had our eye on all along. Initially they declined our invitation to come on board later for a drink because, they explained, they had to get up at midnight to go fishing. But they returned at 1730 after all ('We discovered that we didn't have to get up till 0100' – some things in Japan remain a total mystery), and how:

The people theme started with a bang on day one. Our goal was modest – Nushima, a small island I had visited before in 2021 and which is well positioned for timing the tide through Naruto narrows and into the Seto Naikai proper the following day. The norm in Japanese cruising is stopping at harbours at night – partly because almost every bay has been developed into a harbour with a breakwater and partly because many of the other bays have aquaculture below the surface. (In fact, in just over nine weeks of cruising we only anchored half a dozen times.) But in the Nushima fishing harbour we

At two, dancing on the engine box



laden with food, drink, ice and a small fridge to keep it all cold. So it was party time on *Plainsong*, which culminated with the two-year-old daughter of one of our saviours, who had arrived with her mother later in the evening, dancing on the engine box and taking selfies on my phone.

If Simon didn't know what had hit him, there was more to come two days later, when we emptied a small *izakaya* (informal restaurant) after a convivial dinner, including the proprietress and the chef along with all the customers, all of whom piled into the back of a pickup truck to drive us through the woods back to our harbour ('With the wild boar, it isn't safe for you to walk,' they explained implausibly) and for the inevitable boat inspection.

And this became a theme: if we were eating ashore, we would seek out small *izakayas* and sit at the bar where, inevitably, one would fall into conversation before long. Sometimes it was basic, only as good as Google Translate could facilitate. But often it was much more. And we didn't only have to go the pub or host a party to enjoy meeting and learning from the Japanese. The sailors we met along the way – and often re-met as we sailed along similar paths – were unfailingly helpful and fun, especially the single handers (of whom one encounters many). On Shikoku, Simon and I spent a day sightseeing in Matsuyama with a sailing couple we had been introduced to, visiting its wonderful castle and going to one of the oldest *onsens* in Japan. They in turn introduced us to another local sailing couple; he had been a professional boat builder and showed us round the self built, lightweight gaff ketch in which he had circumnavigated solo. They knew we were leaving early the next morning – which by our standards usually meant by 0700 or so – and at 0450 there was a polite knock on the hull: it was Tomio and Kazue, delivering two beautiful bento boxes of food that Kazue had prepared to speed us on our way, along with snacks to start and melon for dessert.

In the Seto Naikai, Simon and I based many of our stops on architecture and museums. First, Naoshima, a well-known art island that been my original motivation for coming to Japan. I had visited the island in 2021 and had seen the museum buildings by Tadeo Ando from the outside, but had not been able to visit the collections inside because of Covid. Beyond Naoshima, Omishima, which I liked even more: not on the international art circuit, like Naoshima, bucolic and charming, but full of both art and historical museums, as well as a spectacular museum of architecture by Toyo Ito, overlooking the islands and channels. A day later, we stopped for lunch at Mitarai, now a sleepy village but once an important port midway along the Seto Naikai that was fabled for the iniquities that come with visiting sailors. Its streets still have the elegant 'tea houses' and workshops of the 17th and 18th century Edo Period. In all, we visited 11 museums in our first 10 days, without really trying, and there were many more to come throughout the cruise.

In Omishima we were reminded of the often-mysterious nature of Japanese bureaucracy. Mooring in most fishing harbours is free, but if you go alongside a pontoon, there is sometimes a charge (typically based on length or tonnage),



Museum of Architecture, Omishima

particularly if the pontoon is run by the municipality. Such was the case with Omishima's long and rather excellent pontoon. So an official drove from his office to visit us and with much filling of forms and handing of receipts, we paid our fee for the night: 22 yen (about 12 British pence or 15 US cents). We thought this was quite a bargain until we decided to stay a second night and the official made a second round trip; this time, our fee was only 11 yen. But even this proved to be expensive compared to the many free pontoons we moored at subsequently. In general, provided we shopped or dined sensibly, we did not find Japan expensive.

When I first arrived in Japan, I had been rather afraid of the Japanese onsen culture. So many chances for frightful faux pas of hot spring etiquette; the unfamiliarity of public nakedness; and all that boiling water. But a friend in Tannowa had shown me the ropes and as we sailed among islands out of which pure hot water was spontaneously springing we discovered what a delightful luxury in cruising life they can be. In Naoshima, of course, the onsen was arty; on Iojima, near Nagasaki, it was a posh spa; at Obama, on Kyushu – a hot spring town where the harbour literally steamed, sulphur and all – the public onsen tended more towards concrete brutalism; but everywhere there were onsens, often looking out across the sea, and many of my new sailing friends were basing their cruises specifically on enjoying the baths.

The Seto Naikai, the west coast of Kyushu and the islands that lie off it are beautiful places to cruise. The waters are mostly protected; there are a myriad of islands, some large, some small, often steep and hilly and always covered in trees. However small the islands, there are almost always villages; most islands have a ferry and all have fishing harbours protected by great concrete breakwaters and seawalls. The villages are often picturesque; the way of life is quiet, revolving around fishing and farming – rice, onions, oranges, loquats, vegetables and other things. Larger villages may have a fish processing facility or perhaps a factory for cultivated prawns. There is a little tourism.

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Seto Naikai view, Yashiroshima

These small islands and villages are beautiful and charming places to visit. But we began to notice the visible impact of depopulation as the country's demographic ages and the young people leave the islands for the cities. On the streets, in the stores and around the harbours, only old people; abandoned schools; once-upon-a-time restaurants for which the pandemic was the final straw; empty houses, with nature encroaching; sometimes a promising new building that looked like a hotel but was actually a nursing home; fishing boats that never left the harbour; shuttered fish plants; and idle infrastructure, despite incentive schemes, a lot of local initiative and a ferry network whose subsidy must be astronomical. So

Simon at the Buddhist Observatorio, Suo-Oshima



despite the beauty of the islands and the charm of the villages, we started to feel a slight sadness for communities that had once thrived but for which there was no way back to prosperity. It was like looking into the future for all our ageing societies.

Three weeks and fifteen harbours out from Tannowa, Simon and I popped out of the Seto Naikai and into the Sea of Japan, navigating the Kanmon Kaikyo, the narrow strait between the southwest tip of Honshu and the northern tip of Kyushu, in the early evening of 2 May. I felt quite ambivalent about all this. The Seto Naikai is so delightful and there were so many islands we didn't visit. I didn't know how I felt about the Sea of Japan – wouldn't it be boring to have

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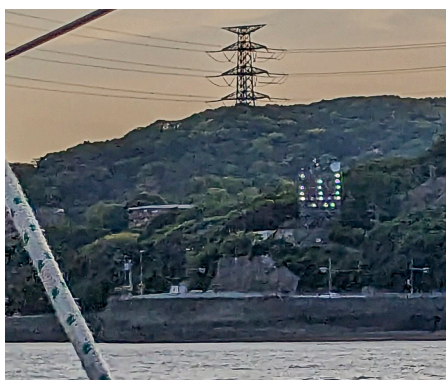
land on only one side of us and – heaven forbid – perhaps there would even be swell? And I was a bit anxious about the Kanmon Kaiyō, where the shipping traffic is intense and the tides run very strongly. There are illuminated signs, visible from the sea, to tell you the direction of the tidal current, its strength and whether the rate is increasing or decreasing. But we entered the

channel at slack water before the westerly set began; the strait is quite short and rather interesting; and once one gets used to huge ships looming seemingly right into the cockpit, it really is a piece of cake.

Two days later we were in a real marina in Fukuoka, Kyushu's largest city, with water on the dock, showers, the works. It poured with rain. Simon hit the museums and I hit the launderette, an oil change and all those other things one does when you reach a real marina. Simon was leaving, after a month on board, to join his wife for a land holiday; I was sailing on by myself for a while.

Looking ahead to the end of the cruise, I had arranged to leave *Plainsong* for the rest of 2023 at Fisharina Amakusa. In the nuanced hierarchy of Japanese harbours, a fisharina is a marina run by a local fishing cooperative, in this instance in a maze of islands half way down the west coast of Kyushu. A friend from Tannowa kept his boat there and had recommended it as safe and economical, if a little inaccessible. But before the Fisharina was willing to take me on, they wanted to meet me in person. A bit strange but, well, OK. I probably should have just rented a car, as my wife suggested, and driven there and back in a day from Fukuoka; but instead I decided to build my itinerary around it for the next week or so. After all, surely it was *Plainsong* that the fishermen wanted to meet, not me?

Sign for westbound tidal stream in Kanmon Kaiyō



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Hirado castle by night

So I hightailed it out of Fukuoka as soon as the rain stopped and put in some long days to get to Amakusa on time, keeping a wary eye on a typhoon that was swirling about to the south of us to make sure that I always had a bolt hole if I needed it. It was great sailing, actually, and despite my deadline I stopped for the day at

Hirado, a delightful small town off the northwest corner of Kyushu with a long history of contact with the Europeans and a picturesque castle that dominates the bay. The day before my interview, I sailed through a tidal choke point with dolphins gamboling on all sides, rounded a breakwater and moored alongside a rickety pontoon in the little-visited fishing harbour of Futae on Shimoshima, off Kyushu's west coast.

Confirming my arrival and timing at Amakusa for the next day (precision being important in Japan), a problem emerged: belatedly, the Fisharina had discovered that they couldn't or wouldn't sign a long-term contract for a foreign vessel. Instead, *Plainsong* would have to stay on the daily mooring rate times however many days in the months there were. This would have made the marina more expensive than my home port in California and three, four or five times more expensive than the going rate in that part of Japan. A deal-breaker, so my itinerary had been in vain. But all was not lost. The typhoon risk had subsided and Obama, an onsen town, was within reach. I couldn't resist going to a town called Obama; so off I went on a fine morning, and let ice cream and the onsen work their relaxing magic, and soothe away *Plainsong's* hard feelings.

By this time it was the middle of May. I needed to retrace my steps a little to the north, to Nagasaki which, since it had an airport, would be my hub for a series of crew changes over the next few weeks. I rather liked Nagasaki. It is a medium-size city spread over a series of hills on either side of a deep estuary, completely rebuilt after its 1945 tragedy. Its shipyards come up both shores right into the heart of the city and a huge electric crane, designed and built by Scottish companies in 1909, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Incongruously, a row of Rapa Nui *moai* statues, for which I never did find an explanation, greets you as you sail up the river. More importantly, Nagasaki was crucial in trade between Europe and Japan and for Christianity in Japan from the 17th to the 19th centuries. After the Portuguese had been expelled from Japan because of their over-zealous promotion of Christianity

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and the Dutch had been relocated from Hirado to Nagasaki, the tiny artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki Harbour became the sole point for trade between Europe and Japan from the 1640s to the mid-1800s.

Japanese and foreign Christians, and the practice of Christianity, were all brutally

suppressed and went underground. The open practice of Christianity only re-emerged in the second half of 19th century. Today, there are large and interesting churches in Nagasaki and smaller ones in many villages in western Kyushu. The trading post of Dejima is now a fascinating restored historical site, right next to a



The surprising taste of Easter Island in Nagasaki



A moment of reflection, Twenty-Six Martyrs Monument, Nagasaki

and excellent museum of Christian martyrs before we left Nagasaki. In mid-June, Ivonne and I bicycled to a UNESCO World Heritage Site commemorating hiding Christians amid rice terraces at Kasuga. Christian or not, it was impossible not to be moved by this history of bravery and perseverance. Hirado's trading past was also reflected in museums and monuments.

For my final month, I was truly at the whim of the winds. I simply had to put into Dejima from time to time and eventually end up in Fukuoka again, where I had arranged an alternative lay-up. The winds were blowing from the northwest when Shelly arrived, so we headed south to circumnavigate Shimoshima, which has a maze of interesting channels and islands on its eastern side. With our eye

new marina.

This, then, became a recurring theme of the next month's cruise. We would be in a small harbour somewhere and suddenly church bells would ring out over across the water. It was a strange feeling to hear such a symbol of European culture in Japan. Shelly and I visited a monument

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on another possible typhoon, we were keeping close to bolt holes once again and spent a night in what proved to be one of my favorite anchorages, Noboritate on Oyanojima, where a narrow channel opens up to a series of pools surrounded by protective hills. Back in rickety Futae the next day, we had perhaps our wackiest dinner yet: pretty awful food in a window-less converted garage decorated with an overpowering cat motif, run by the friendliest people you can imagine.

After Shelly left I headed back to Nagasaki to collect Keiko and her ten-year-old son Kazuki, nicknamed Joy, for a long weekend. Since we were into micro-circumnavigations, Sunday's programme was a sail around Hashima, an abandoned island of derelict buildings where a scary scene from James Bond's *SkyFall* was shot. Monday morning was school for Joy: live by video to his classroom from *Plainsong*'s cockpit as we sailed to Iojima and, of course, the *onsen*.

Now it was early June and the rainy season had started in earnest. But for my final few weeks, once Ivonne had joined, we were pretty lucky. Our route back north to Fukuoka allowed us to visit offshore islands which I had had to pass by on the rush to Amakusa, particularly the Goto Retto cluster of islands northwest of Nagasaki



Ivonne powers Bike-chan uphill on Ikishima

and Ikishima north of Hirado. Here there were more *onsens*, churches, temples and shrines, more new friends and their children and some great bicycling – or rather, I should say, some futile attempts on my part to keep up with Ivonne, a formidable and relentless *ciclista*.

The cruise had a sound track as well. In

every harbour, there was the thin call of the ospreys and the raucous talk of crows; in the woods behind, a song of a bird that I never managed to see which had a sweet, liquid warble, despite a tendency to get stuck on one particular riff.

But for all the themes and sub-themes, a cruise is a cruise nevertheless. The boat, the weather, the tides, the navigation, the wellbeing of the crew were paramount. I was very pleased with *Plainsong*, whose only crime was a non-functioning fridge until almost the end of the cruise – a very minor inconvenience, since we were rarely out of range of at least small village stores for more than a day or two. (This too provided a lesson in Japanese kindness: before I left Tannowa, I asked some experts for help in troubleshooting the problem. They visited three times, including over a weekend. In the end, they would accept no payment and, because they had not been able to solve it, they gave me a gift instead.)

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Give or take some intense rain and not quite enough wind, especially in the Seto Naikai, the weather was generally pretty good. But we ended up motoring more than I really like. If I were doing it again I would probably shift everything a month earlier and put up with chilly weather in March in order to avoid more of the rainy season and the uncomfortably sticky end of June, as well as fewer threats of typhoons and perhaps more wind.

And there was Kirk. Kirk Patterson runs a consulting business for visiting yachts and had enabled me to get into Japan in 2021 despite the Covid restrictions. His advice and help are invaluable – and addictive, so I was determined not to use too much of them in 2023. But I did turn to him for lists of possible harbours (like an email version of a yet-to-be-written cruising guide), for help in making occasional pontoon reservations when I did not have a Japanese speaker on board and, critically, for negotiating *Plainsong's* next long-term stay until 2024.

I was keen to defy the norm and do more anchoring, less mooring in harbours. But it really isn't possible. The coastlines of even the small islands are so developed; the bottom in many bays is rock rather than mud or sand; and there is the ever-present risk of aquaculture below the surface. So, mostly, we were mooring alongside; walls are the norm, pontoons are better; sea stations, where there are some facilities for yachts, are a luxury – Yuge, in the Seto Naikai, being my favourite of many favourites, with showers, a laundry, a coffee lounge and convenient shops, *izakayas* and fuel nearby. Often, filling stations would deliver diesel to a pontoon on little trucks.

All this harbour work did wonders for my manoeuvring skills, which have always been pathetic. I still had my fair share of embarrassments and heart attacks, but no damage was done and I became much better at making the occasional brilliant manoeuvre look intentional rather than lucky. Walls were sometimes gnarly and our mooring lines, fenders and fender boards took a beating (in fact I bought some new lines, sold by the kilo, at a ship chandler in Hirado). Occasionally we were given less than perfect advice and couldn't always moor where we wanted to moor. But other times we were saved from disaster by fishermen who helped us out. Harbours were generally pretty empty. Often we were on our own; four of us together was a max. We only met one other foreign yacht. But our blue ensign caused a lot of discussion; we were generally taken for Australians who had lost their stars.

Bridges and power lines were another new way of life to learn. At first it was exciting and a little nerve wracking going under even the high ones. It is not uncommon, especially in the Seto Naikai, to round a corner in some idyllically picturesque channel and find a handsome new bridge not marked on the old paper charts I had on board or a power line providing electricity to a tiny island community. In Kyushu, a couple of harbours were only accessible, or much more conveniently accessible, by going under a bridge. So my standard had to be lowered. I estimated the tip of *Plainsong's* burgee to be 16m above the sea, without being

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100% certain. But the height information in the new pec smart navigation app seemed to be comprehensive and accurate, and by the time I was sailing in Kyushu, we were taking on 18m bridges fairly routinely, although I did try to time it as close to low tide as I could.

As for the wellbeing of the crew, both in the galley and out of it I think my shipmates looked after me better than I looked after them. Simon took on the entire responsibility of provisioning and cooking and we lived like kings as a result. With Shelly we explored the parallel universe of wacky Japanese snacks, their garish packing and mysterious inscriptions promising – and consistently delivering – unnatural colours and dependably chemical flavours inside. After one particularly satisfactory supermarket raid in Nagasaki it was reassuring to think that the numerous packets we had on board would have kept *Plainsong* afloat in case of a flooding. With Ivonne, not only was the galley mercifully out of my hands again, but the most divine guacamole was a regular feature on the new menu.

So with good food aboard and ashore, good friends at sea and new friends on land, no mishaps or breakdowns (though I did have one momentary, unscheduled encounter with soft mud just short of a pontoon) and a whole new culture to explore, this relaxed approach to cruising proved its weight in wellbeing. We had visited 27 islands and 36 harbours, and could have visited a thousand more, but by the end we felt like old Japan hands nonetheless.

As for *Plainsong*, she is under Kirk Patterson's watchful eye in Odo Marina in Fukuoka, where she is waiting for more ambitious cruising plans in 2024. As I was closing the boat up on the last weekend in June before flying home, I was taken out for a delicious sushi lunch by one of the single handlers I first met in Obama, whose home port is also Odo. A week later, I was eating sushi in a restaurant run by the chef's cousin in Los Angeles, conveying family greetings and swapping business cards and photographs. Such is the nature of cruising in Japan.

Temple garden near Fukuoka

