

The Retirement Project

Rallying - St Lucia to New Zealand

David Batten with Sally Batten

I was fortunate to be able to retire early. After much discussion with Sally, we decided to embark on a long-distance cruising project, spending approximately half the year at home and half exploring the world, though this can be very approximate, when an ocean crossing is involved. The project required a very substantial refit to *Avocet* or a new boat. The former would not have been cost-effective, so we decided to spend a lot more for something new, not only new, but built from scratch. Nearly 30,000 miles and four years later *Alcedo of Ryme* has proved an excellent, fast and comfortable cruising yacht and we are very happy with our decision.

She is a thoroughly modern design with a simple design brief that four to six people could be self-sufficient for four to six weeks cruising and that the boat should be capable of 200 miles a day on passage. She is 56ft overall, with twin engines, propellers and rudders and a keel that lifts from 3.5 metres draft to 1.5. She was launched in July 2012 and after sail trials



David and Sally Batten

any issues were resolved over the winter of 2012/13.

We cruised Morocco and the Canary Islands before the ARC to St Lucia and the Caribbean. We laid her up in Trinidad in May 2014. In 2015, we had a fantastic trip from Trinidad to the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Bahamas, North Carolina, New York and Cape Cod. We turned south at Plymouth, Massachusetts, and

returned to Deltaville where we left her in July. November saw us back on board for the ARC1500 to the BVI's and St Lucia in preparation for the start of the World ARC in January 2016. We like cruising in company with a timetable on which to base our adventures and in the company of other like-minded sailors. Thanks to the World Cruising Club's ARC

David Batten with Sally Batten

organisation, we have now safely negotiated thousands of miles in the company of some really wonderful people.



Jury rig and jury riggers

At Rodney Bay, St Lucia, the starting gun fired on 9 January and we were off on the 800nm sail to Santa Marta, Colombia, in company with 33 yachts bound for the Pacific. *Spirit*, a Baltic 56, and by far the fastest boat on the Rally, soon disappeared while the rest of us jostled for position in a dying wind. Those who had them, set spinnakers and waited for wind. This set the scene for subsequent racing legs. We have no

coloured sails as the boat is set up for only two. For this trip we had five as far as the Marquesas: Jane, Sally's sister; Venetia, who has sailed thousands of miles with us, including the transatlantic; her husband, Anthony. Though not an enthusiastic sailor, he loves travelling, exploring and

almost any amount of hull or deck scrubbing. We motored the first night, then set the genoa goose-winged the next day. This resulted in the only gear failure of the entire trip as the goose-neck attaching the pole to the mast broke with a bang. A jury rig, using dyneema and a cargo strap, allowed reinstatement of the pole. We now have a spare.

Some extracts from our blog will give a flavour of our experience and those things that left a lasting impression on us. *'Crew discussion of what they wanted from the World ARC did not include racing or prizes but did include getting there in reasonable time preferably first! Ship's Boy has just made the following observation: "Look at all the spinnakers behind us, they should try motoring."*' This was from a lady who did the AZAB race in Robertson's *Golly* with a spinnaker start and also spent 12 hours off the French coast drifting with the tide on a 'no engine' cruise with another RCC member.

We saw a lot of wind off Cabo de la Aguja as promised, but we survived without further breakages and tied up in the very modern marina in Santa Marta, Colombia, without disgracing or frightening ourselves. Our visit there was over-shadowed by all but one of us getting a nasty case of diarrhoea. We still managed two days of bird-watching and sight-seeing.

The Retirement Project

Our departure was delayed by strong winds and the Captain of the Port allowed no boats to leave.

The next race leg to the San Blas Islands included a night crossing of the finishing line, but gave good sailing. *'We would have been much closer and might have had a sporting chance of arriving in daylight today . . . if we had been braver about how close we went to the mouth of the river Magdalena. We went about 30 miles offshore, with only Barbara Jean coming as far north, while*



the rest of the fleet all went inside us so we have had to do some overtaking to regain a reasonable position in the fleet. Great winds last night and goose winged with the genoa poled out, we had some great sailing with a bright moon and a starlight sky, with Alcedo revelling in the huge swells to produce



speeds of up to 14 knots.' According to the WARC handicapping, we actually won that leg. The prize was a huge cheer from our friends and a bottle of rum.

We did not enjoy the San Blas Islands as much as we hoped. There was a lot of wind, many other boats and not enough time to get to the less-visited islands. Anchoring at Porvenir to check in was unpleasant as it is very exposed, surrounded by reefs and the only land is a runway. We next called at beautiful and very sheltered Portobelo. Shelter Bay Marina, at the head of the Panama Canal, was one of our favourite places. It is completely sheltered, sited in a nature reserve with fabulous birds,

David Batten with Sally Batten

monkeys, sloths and other wildlife, near a great local market and within convenient distance of the Panama Canal visitors' centre.

We enjoyed the Panama Canal itself hugely. The WARC sorted all the paperwork. Yachts went through in rafts of three, each boat with an 'Advisor' and a minimum of two rope-handlers on each of the outer boats



Sloth at Shelter Island

as well as someone on the helm. *'The whole canal experience is definitely unique and not to be missed.'* We motored into Gatun Lake from the locks at about 2300 and rafted up on two buoys, nine yachts to each buoy, to wait for daylight and a new Advisor. Early next morning we motored to the locks on the Pacific side, a beautiful trip through unspoilt, Panamanian forests and wilderness, before emerging from

another series of locks into the Pacific - so exciting!

La Playita was not great. *'..we anchored off La Playita in what the Ship's Boy described as the middle of the Pacific, well away from the marina entrance and other yachts to allow for swinging space in the unpredictable currents off this shore. There were comments about taking sea sickness pills and needing safety lines on deck.'* The marina is to be avoided if there is any swell. A sleepless night is guaranteed. We did enjoy Panama itself and can highly recommend the market for stocking up on fresh fruit and vegetables, but it is huge. A local taxi driver can show you where to find everything.

The shopping mall is also a great place for anything non-perishable that might be needed for the Pacific crossing as the Galápagos Islands are very expensive.



Lock in the Panama Canal

We were delayed leaving La Playita by the first of our outboard problems. The Suzuki refused to work as we were preparing to depart. A local mechanic diagnosed a problem with the electronic ignition. Carnival had started the day before and everything was shut for days. Peter Forbes from *Carango* rescued us, lending his spare outboard, so we were only a

day late for cruising in the Las Perlas Islands.

These are clearly lovely if the weather is good, the water clear and you don't try and take any short-cuts through poorly charted areas in strong currents. None of these conditions applied. We had the nastiest moment of our whole trip when we hit a reef taking a short-cut through a narrow channel with a supposed 6m depth. Luckily we were going slowly, have a lifting keel and managed to

motor out of what suddenly became a field of invisible rocks/reefs into which we were being pushed by a nasty current. We had already had the hull cleaned for the Galapagos by divers, but Ben and Sam from *Into The Blue* kindly dived



Galapagos Tortoises

again when we were all anchored off Contadora to check for damage. All appeared well except for some scratches in the lead bulb.

The sail to the Galapagos was uneventful, with the exception of the wonderful company of the ghostly, swallow-tailed gulls that fished around us at night. Arriving in the dark at Puerto Banquerizo Moreno on San Christobal was a little challenging. The buoys are not as marked on the Garmin chart, which put us firmly on the land when we anchored just ahead of *Spirit*. We were welcomed next morning by a host of officials and two divers. After a full inspection of fridge, deep-freeze, hull and medical supplies and several trees-worth of paperwork, we were cleared and allowed ashore. The Galapagos is a truly wonderful place, but be prepared for bumpy anchorages, not always crystal-clear water and plenty of rules for tourists. The islands are best explored on one of the many local cruise boats with a good English-speaking guide. They were also not the ideal starting point for our longest passage, but we did find enough fresh fruit and vegetables in the market at Puerto Ayora on Isla Santa Cruz and, thanks to *Carango's* crew, a van to take it all back to the port. The market produced the toughest chicken we have ever tried to eat. We recommend sticking to supermarkets for meat.

Our 3,000nm Pacific passage was faster than our Atlantic crossing, but with some of the same frustrations. We didn't pick up the trade-winds for several days and they were too light at times for our sail wardrobe. We

David Batten with Sally Batten

motored to top-up our speed, but did have some fabulous sailing when we found a more normal trade-wind.

'It's a very big ocean with nothing but sea and sky and the odd Booby, yes it was definitely a Red Footed Booby and Tropic Bird for company.'

'Overheard, Ship's Boy on handing over to Jane. "Just keep the thingamie." Jane seemed to understand exactly what was required.'

'In the trade-winds at last, so a great 24 hours with no motoring and approx 194 nm covered. We were the closest to Hiva Oa by a smidgeon on the last position report from Yellow Brick and could only just hear Aliena, Blue Summit and



Fatu Hiva

Paradise Found on the SSB, so being Net Controller in 5 days time may be a little fanciful.'

'Life on board goes on as you would expect. The Skipper walks the decks twice a day, checking the rigging etc. and throwing the day's quota of flying fish back into the sea. He has done the extra hour on the helm to cover the 25 hour day resulting from changing the clocks. Those who wear them are on their third Scopoderm patch, all are feeling well, vegetables have had their daily check for health and menus have been planned for the day by the cooks.'

With only a little motoring, some cracking good sailing with full main, the genoa goose-winged and some surfing, we were first across the line at Hiva Ova. The Marquesas are very impressive, tall and steep, with big swells sweeping round the headlands and, on the day we arrived, dark grey cloud obscuring the tops of the highlands. Most of the anchorages are subject to swell and landing on some of the beaches requires preparation



and an athleticism challenging to most of our age group. Twice we couldn't get ashore, but where we did land, we found hospitable people, really stunning landscapes, abundant grapefruit, bananas, papaya, breadfruit and other fruit, but very few vegetables, other than carrots and green papaya. There are very few roads and lots of waterfalls. Fatu Hiva was by far our favourite island. We had two lovely days there over Easter.

We had a crew change in Nuku Hiva, Jane leaving us and David's sisters, Tessa and Bridget, joining us for the sail to Fakarava in the Tuomotu Islands. *'At sea again, Yesterday was a bit frustrating, with a light wind from the ENE and sometimes NE and a big sea emptying the sails as the boat rolled. Some rain squalls gave Nina a good soaking, but thankfully passed behind us and, we caught a fish! Not being good fishermen, we were not entirely sure what it was, but the flesh looked like tuna and it was entirely edible. Today, everyone has had some great sailing in the sunshine with the wind on the beam, encouraging a "Toad" attitude towards speed and a competition to see who could be closest to the Garmin track at the end of their watch. Best not to enquire what was happening in between.'*

Our timing for arrival at Fakarava was important. The passes between the reefs in the Tuomotus Islands are best negotiated at slack tide, with good visibility; they usually have no navigation aids and sounded very scary to Pacific novices like ourselves. Fakarava has a very wide, easy northern pass, which presented no problems on arrival, though we did experience quite exciting standing waves when leaving several days later. It is an excellent Pacific atoll to cut your teeth on, with good anchorages in both the south and north ends of the lagoon. The people are delightful, the snorkelling excellent and there are lovely black pearls, as well as basic stores to be had when the supply ship has been in. We also visited Anse Amyot, on Toau, another beautiful and unspoilt island with crystal-clear water, great snorkelling and even leading lines.

We spent a week in Papeete, Tahiti, for much needed boat maintenance including repairing both outboards. We stocked up at the excellent Carrefour, sorted out the laundry, hired a car and caught up with other members of the WARC at the rendezvous. We dined at some very

David Batten with Sally Batten

sophisticated restaurants. Tessa and Bridget left us in Papeete, so we set off with our core crew to explore: Moorea, one of our favourite places; Huahine, very good for cycling; Tahaa, very unspoilt with more good anchorages and pearls and finally Raiatea. We did not get to Bora Bora. We had had enough of civilisation and tourism in Papeete.

From Raiatea, we set off in a mutinous mood. We refused to wait for the WARC racing start off the dock at Utoroa in what we felt were unsuitable, squally conditions in very restricted waters. Our next destination was Suvarrow, an isolated, deserted atoll with a very exciting-looking entrance and anchorage. We arrived at dawn with *Spirit* and *Two Fish* and followed them in through the reefs with help from Jason who led the way. 'Two Fish



Big Mahi Mahi

were brilliant in giving us information about depths and guiding us into the deeper water via our AIS on her track, so although it was all quite scary, we went through safely.'

Suvarrow is hardly en route to Niue and Tonga, but after the weather settled, we did appreciate the pristine snorkelling, plentiful reef sharks and beautiful beaches - once we had had a group clearance of rubbish. 'A lovely afternoon on a perfect uninhabited Pacific Island, in great company. It doesn't get much better than this.'

Time in Suvarrow was limited to three days by the WARC, so that early



Beach gathering

arrivals would go on to Niue and leave room for the second half of the WARC fleet. We required the help of Sam and Ben from *Wishanger* to unwrap our anchor chain. The 500nm sail to Niue was another mixture of frustration and

motoring and then great sailing. In Niue, '... we had three wonderful days in an as yet unspoilt paradise, where we have not had to lock up the boat, chain up the dinghy and where everyone appears to be happy and content.'

At Neiafu on Vava'u, Tonga, we were suddenly in the company of tens of other yachts and relative civilisation. In spite of this, we enjoyed Neiafu with its numerous pigs, botanic garden, daily market, restaurants and transvestite population. As a welcome contrast to the more eastern Pacific islands, Tonga has some wonderful sheltered anchorages, great snorkelling and walking, more bird life and many more yachts. We were not there long enough to do Tonga justice, as the WARC had organised special customs and immigration clearance for us in Lomaloma, Vanua Balavu in the Lau Islands. This is not normally a port of entry for Fiji and we were very keen to go there. They had been devastated by cyclone Winston in February and we were hoping to be able to provide some support to the locals. The day we were scheduled to clear out of Neiafu, 40 knots of wind was forecast locally with very rough seas. Only four WARC boats left as planned. We elected to wait 24 hours as conditions were forecast to improve. We only encountered 28-34 knots from a favourable direction during the first night, so had some fast sailing.

Our arrival after two nights at sea was in blustery conditions and not very good visibility for another pass in the reef with



A happy crew

no navigational aids. Conditions did improve and we made it safely to the anchorage off Lomaloma using the waypoints given to us by WARC. *Take Off* and *Meaerra Nieida* were both there and Jergun from *Take Off* helped us into the anchorage past two reefs not properly identified on any chart. Re-building had started at Lomaloma thanks to help from the New Zealand navy, but the trees that had not been up-rooted were stripped of all greenery, some houses were still roofless and most of the men of the village were in Suva buying building materials and stores. All the WARC boats that made it to Lomaloma contributed to the collection being made by the Sea Mercy yachts of non-perishable food, clothing, cooking utensils, medical supplies etc. and some helped with distribution and crop planting.

Vanua Balavu has some wonderful anchorages, the locals were all incredibly friendly and their resilience in the face of destruction of home and livelihood was impressive, as was the community spirit that was

David Batten with Sally Batten

enabling the rapid re-building of their villages. *'We enjoyed the amazing relaxed and community lifestyle of unspoilt Fiji. There can be few places left in the world so untouched by the rat-race and so-called civilisation and we feel privileged to have been able to come here. We found navigation quite challenging as many of the reef markers had been destroyed or modified by the cyclone and there are some uncharted rocks in the Bay of Islands that catch out the unwary.'*

From the Bay of Islands, we made an overnight sail to Viani Bay on the south-east coast of Vanua Levu in the Somosomo Straights. Here we met Jack and had a lucky rendezvous with *Paradise Found* and *Wishanger* as they were going out for a snorkelling expedition off Rainbow Reef in



The exchange of gifts ceremony at Port Resolution

the early morning. This was a fantastic experience. *Wishanger* anchored off the edge of the reef with *Paradise Found* and *Alcedo* tied up either side while we snorkelled in pristine water. We loved the very nice anchorage at Viani Bay, and Jack took us walking through great birding country. We realised how sheltered the Bay was when we found much stronger winds once out of the lee of Taveuni Island. We were glad to round Point Reef into the calmer waters of Savusavu, even though it was full of yachts and most moorings were too close for *Alcedo's* length.

Savusavu has everything, market, supermarkets, fresh meat supply, restaurants and hardware stores as well as a vibrant, multi-national population. We had been asked to buy supplies for Tanna which had been hit by a cyclone last year. This list included large axes, hammers and some machetes. The girls were to be seen walking around the town brandishing several axes each. We socialised with all the other WARC

and New Zealand yachts there, did more boat maintenance and found that the water-maker required a replacement component to be shipped to Denerau. We had thrifter showering for a time. From Savusavu we made our way to the Yasawa Islands via Bua Bay and Yadua, using waypoints from the infamous Curly and eye-ball navigation. There are many lovely anchorages in the islands, but our visit was blighted by strong winds and some rain and not all the anchorages provide good shelter. There are also plenty of navigational hazards for the unwary.

Denerau was full of more sophisticated tourism. At Musket Cove we joined other members of the WARC for the Fiji rendezvous, squeezing into the stern-to marina at low water with the keel up. Musket Cove makes a very pleasant jumping-off spot for Vanuatu. *'... a lovely spot, with sandy beaches, pretty villas, great paths and some wilder spots. We have spent the two days there walking, bird-watching, snorkelling and socialising. The Skipper has managed to fix the water maker and the Garmin cockpit chart-plotter, thanks to Ian's sister, Alison, who joined Zoom... Alison carried a replacement plotter in her luggage from Australia and took the broken one back, how kind was that!'*

The next leg was to Tanna, Vanuatu, and we started preparing for the 1,000nm hop to New Zealand. There would be no stocking up in Tanna and we had decided not to go to Vila with the rest of the WARC. We opted out of another racing start through reefs in light airs. After 36 hours of frustrating motor-sailing in a big sea, the wind filled and we were sailing well reefed on a broad reach. Resolution Bay in Tanna is a pleasant anchorage, but subject to swell. Taking the dinghy to the beach at low tide requires eye-ball navigation to avoid the bommies. We enjoyed a visit to the volcano. WARC have established an exchange of gifts ceremony, giving away axes, machetes, cooking pots and utensils, clothes, writing supplies etc. and receiving vegetables, fruit and baskets in return from the locals, who were still recovering from last year's cyclone. After a four-day stay, the WARC fleet left for Vila. We remained to wait for a suitable weather window for sailing to New Zealand. We were very emotional watching each boat weigh anchor and leave. We felt very lonely knowing we would not see them again and that we would be on our own from now on.

We left Tanna three days later to beat to Aneityum, because the swell in Resolution Bay was getting unpleasant. Anelghowhat Bay provided much better shelter for the next 24 hours and then we were off, *'... hard on the wind all day with variable wind strength and direction and a stopping sea. At times we were making better than the course suggested by New Zealand Bob, our advisor for this quite tricky passage, but at times worse.'* A better wind direction developed before we fell into a hole, with a gale forecast to the south of us. *'Our plan is to try and stay far enough north to miss the worst of the gale and then make the most of the westerlies in its wake to get us as close to New Zealand as possible before the wind dies or goes more southerly again. All very tricky and*

David Batten with Sally Batten

very much depending on how far north the low comes. As can be imagined, we are becoming just a little obsessed with weather at the moment!'

We were lucky. After six nights at sea sailing or motor-sailing, with nothing more than 25 knots just forward of the beam, we arrived in Opuia in early afternoon. With disbelief we realised that we were really in New Zealand and it had not all been a dream. In fact, the worst weather we had all across the Pacific was the last sail, Opuia to Whangarei. *'By the time we got to Bream Head, it was gusting 40 knots, so we had a very unpleasant beat in a gale force wind into Bream Bay, past Marsden Point and into the estuary. A long motor against the wind got us up to Port Whangarei where it took three attempts to get the anchor to set. Anthony was really quite ill with an infection and had to be dinghied ashore to hospital, but was allowed back after an IV dose of antibiotics. He went to bed, the rest of us had a very strong anchor nip!'*

This phase of the retirement project had taken us about seven months and *Alcedo* added another 10,000 miles to the log. She is now in Whangarei, New Zealand, waiting for warmer weather and more relaxed cruising in 2017. The winter weather was cold and wet, so we packed up the boat and flew home to a sunny UK summer.

Some miscellaneous notes:

Fishing: The less said the better. From the blog: *'Ship's Boy (Venetia) has suspended all fishing activity. The fishing seminar in Santa Marta indicated a) you need a rod, b) you need to stop the boat, c) a purpose-made box is required for killing the fish to prevent blood and scales on the deck. Ship's Boy won't play with a rod, we won't we stop the boat and we don't have a box, so we may never catch a fish!'* We did catch three fish in seven months. One tuna and two Mahi Mahi, but had to listen to the fishing exploits of other yachts on the daily SSB roll call as they boasted of huge fish.

Spares: You will never have a spare for everything you will need and you will need things you never thought of or just didn't take enough of. Cargo straps are especially useful.

Cooking gas: Propane and butane are terms used interchangeably in the Pacific Islands. Plan for butane refills, which are more likely.

The Company: We sailed with just the most wonderful group of people of all ages and nationalities for a great time socially and everyone supported everyone else. Help was on hand and unstintingly given.

Watch System: While Jane was on board, four of us did three-hour, solo watches, with David on call for sail changes and navigational or boat issues. After Jane left, three of us did two watches of three hours and one of two so as to keep the same hours each day. It worked well. We were lucky to have Venetia and Anthony aboard, giving much needed help for the long passages and good companions for sharing the wonderful places we have visited and explored.