

Whales and Mending Sails

Zebedee goes to Tonga

Alan Martienssen

‘Strange time to sail to Tonga?’

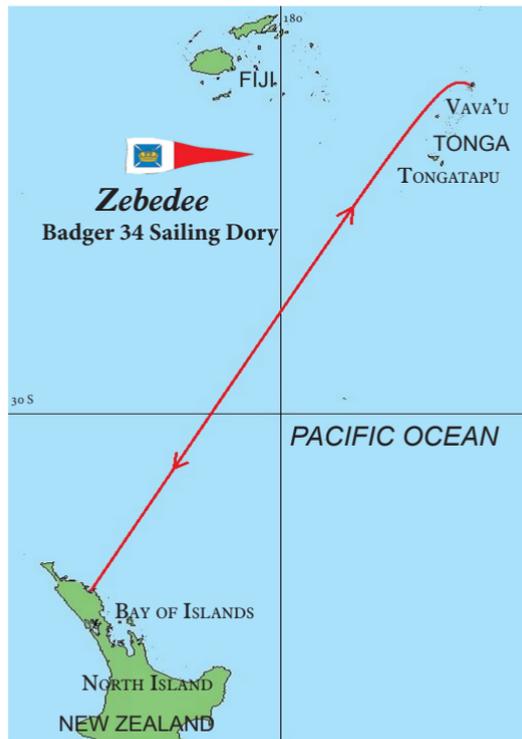
I was at Opuia customs checking out of New Zealand, and, yes, setting off on 3 September was rather late.

‘Had to go back to UK and earn some money.’

‘Have a good trip!’

Normally yachts arrive in New Zealand in November and leave in early May. Leaving New Zealand in the middle of winter was not really such a brilliant idea. But needs must if the devil drives, and the devil in this case was an ever present need for cash. ‘Money, the curse of the sailing classes,’ as my good friend Annie Hill (RCC) wrote. Still, the forecast could have been worse, SW 10-15 for the first few days, then a bit of a low, a gap, and then a real humdinger, but I ought to be far enough north to miss the worst.

I was late, so getting the anchor up with wind against tide in an engineless boat was the first problem. The wind was just forward of the beam, and with the junk sails that can be let out at right angles, I thought I’d be OK. Oh well. Had to crash the sails as *Zebedee* gybed unceremoniously around the anchor chain - right in front of the tall ship, *Tucker Thompson*. Finally, with much huffing and puffing, hauling up my 20kg Rocna and 60ft of chain as fast as possible, the anchor was aweigh



and *Zebedee* was drifting. I rushed aft to haul up some foresail and just missed the other anchored yachts. The anchor and sails seem to have got heavier. I must get fitter. Finally all sail was up, the *yuloh*, my Chinese-design sculling oar, was lashed on deck and *Zebedee* was tacking down the channel, past the ferry and into the Bay of Islands.

It's much better to set off on a voyage with light winds first, to sort everything out, and get the rougher weather later, and that's exactly what happened. By the second day, when the first low hit, I had things organised. The wind got up to about 30kts, the best direction, SW, and although the sea was a bit rough, *Zebedee* made excellent progress. The wind and sea calmed down over the next two days, but then the humdinger arrived. I



The wind got up a bit

was a good 350nm north by then, and a good job too. It wasn't too bad, maybe 35-40kts, a good F8, but again, from the ideal direction. I had *Zebedee* fully reefed and he was humming along at 6kts. It would have been awful further south. That's the key. Get as far north as possible early on, away from the depressions.

We were making excellent progress. On the ninth day out, I looked up at the sails at first light and noticed a hole. A big one, in fact, the foresail was ripped from luff to leach. I'd been having to do quite a few repairs recently, but I'd never had a rip that big before. However, with the junk rig it's not such a big deal. Just tie two battens together, and so take out the affected panel. Then just hope there isn't another rip.

On the ninth day, I was keeping a good look out as I'd heard a rumour about a new island that had popped up out of the sea. I hadn't been able to find out the exact position and, as I expected to be much further west I hadn't bothered too much. All I'd heard was that it was about 60nm SW of Tongatapu, but which bit of Tongatapu? And there was a haze, and it would be getting dark soon, with no moon. It would be so embarrassing to crash into it. Then I saw my first whale of the trip, a humpback mother and calf, about 200yds off the starboard bow.

Then my trolled fishing line went taut. I virtually never catch fish, although I must have towed a fishing lure tens of thousands of miles. It

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was a tuna, though my Baja California, fishing guide book, didn't seem to list it. It was something between a skipjack and an albacore and tasted great. That would be fish for supper, breakfast, lunch, supper and the next breakfast. . .

I'd allowed myself three weeks to get to Vava'u, but on day eleven there I was, hove-to, waiting for first light to sail into Neiafu. It was a calm night, but as I began my approach, the wind increased, then the rain started and then it poured, and howled, well it felt a lot, probably only 25kts, but enough in the enclosed passes. I anchored off the wharf in 35ft, trying not to have too long a row. I ended up rather closer to the wharf than I had intended. The wind was blowing directly onto the concrete pile with a fetch of about a mile. It was not exactly ideal, and when the officials signaled me to come ashore, I took one look at the waves and chickened out. No way would *Dougal*, my homemade plywood 6ft, 6in pram, stay afloat with those waves, and the poor chap would be pulverised when coming alongside.

I waited.

Later that afternoon, the wind and the waves died down and I went ashore to check in. The official said he had to come on board to inspect my stock.

He asked me if I had any spirits.

None. He shook his head.

Any beer?

None. He shook his head harder.

Any Coca Cola? None. Now he was grunting.

I showed him *Dougal*. The sea was still quite rough. I wasn't too sure of having both of us in the dinghy. Better put my phone etc in a waterproof bag. I did so. He watched. He was wearing that type of formal long skirt and wasn't very agile. I climbed into *Dougal* and ended up hanging onto the concrete jetty, surging up and down with each swell - hanging on for dear life, actually.

He stood on the wharf looking down.

'I need to go back to the office. I'll be back soon.'

I hung on. A minute later he was back.

'There is no need to go on board. Come back to my office.'

A few minutes later all formalities were completed and I was free to go. The Tongans are wonderful people!

I spent the night anchored off the wharf. The next day I got a VHF message early. David Mitchell (RCC) had seen me come in, but most unfortunately had to leave for the Ha'apai group straight away. Oh well, but it would have been fun to catch up.

I had a bit of a row round in *Dougal* and got chatting to a few cruisers. I got the local info about markets, shops and communications. Once upon

a time all you had to do was write a few letters, and post them at the post office. The very occasional letter you received would be *poste restante* at the same post office - maybe two visits in the entire trip, at negligible cost. Now everyone and their dog expects you to be in instant, continuous communication with the entire world, which means internet and phone access. The cost of roaming with a UK or NZ phone is beyond my budget, so I needed to get a local SIM card and then let everyone know the new number. It was a real pain. Needless to say the phone office was closed, and I would have to wait for two days. When it had opened, I attempted to send a general email with the slowest and worst internet connection imaginable. That took another week, but after I'd let my brother know that I had arrived, I stopped trying. It was driving me insane. I had sail



Basically the cloth was shot

repairs to do, just like last year when I arrived in New Caledonia, and like the year before . . .

I sailed to Tapanā, which I knew from previous visits was a safe spot, and took off the foresail. I got it into the cabin to try to use my hand cranked Singer on it, but it would have meant taking the whole sail apart. I opted to hand sew a patch on, 11ft long, 6in wide. Just as I started the wind changed and I ended up really close to a cliff. Moving was extremely difficult, and I thought I was just far enough away. However, the

owner of the local moorings motored over and suggested I use the mooring *Zebedee* was nearest to, free of charge. I really do like Tonga!

I sailed back to Neiafu, to have another crack at a general email, and I bumped into *Listowel Lady*, very great friends from years ago, while cruising Chagos to St Helena, and maybe Trinidad as well. They had a few problems on their passage, and had complete steering failure when all the hydraulic fluid disappeared. They'd replaced the fluid with cooking oil!

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Our mutual friend, Paco, on his huge cat, had also had steering problems, and his engine had packed up. Both boats were waiting for parts. We had



Peace and security at Tapanā

dinner on each other's boats, talking about old times, and got chatting about whales. Tonga is one of the very few places where you can go snorkeling with gigantic, 56ft long, 50 ton humpback whales. It was one of the reasons I'd sailed to Tonga. We all arranged to go together.

It was amazing. The whole thing is strictly regulated. No more than one boat is allowed per whale group, usually a mother

and calf, and no more than six swimmers plus the guide in the water at one time. The boat approaches a whale, and from a distance the guide enters the water alone and swims up to the whale. If he judges that the whale is happy he signals and we then swim to the guide.

We got to within a few feet of a massive mother and calf, the calf often sitting on its mother's head. Paco didn't feel so well, so he lent me his GoPro, an underwater camera, and I took some videos. Unfortunately I hadn't identified which end to point and the first videos only showed my face, hidden behind mask and snorkel. I got the hang of it eventually and



got some amazing shots. He later set them to music, a wonderful record.

I set sail the next day, and just as *Zebedee* was tacking out I spotted *Leto*, very, very great friends from New Zealand. I'd last seen them in 2009 in Australia. I turned round, and as I approached a new hole appeared in the



foresail, right next to my patch, there was also a small rip in the main. Bother! *Leto* would be around for a few days waiting for a new mainsail and engine parts, so



we arranged to meet up at a later date. I sailed back to Tapana to start new repairs. This time I didn't just fix the sails, but I put on reinforcing patches too. I'd noticed that the rips generally

started at the leach and ripped forwards. There were also small rips at the corners. Basically the cloth was shot. On both sails, I put reinforcing patches at every corner on each panel, and three vertical strips of cloth at six inch intervals from the leach. It took a while.

I sailed back to Neiafu to catch up with *Leto*, and we arranged to go snorkeling with the humpbacks. It had been so brilliant last time. It's not every day that you can get so very close to such a humungus wild animal. We had the most amazing time. Again, we got very close, the whales didn't seem to mind us at all. The guide told us that the number of humpbacks was increasing and many were quite used to swimmers in the water. The whales migrate each winter from Antarctica up to the tropics to give birth and breed. In the spring, they swim back towards the pole. The other amazing thing is that they don't feed for the whole migration. They only feed in the Antarctic.

I even went a third time. We had a bit of a fright with the second whale group we saw. There was a mother and a very young calf. It was almost

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white and only about 10ft long. They swam under us, and we even saw the calf suckle. As they were swimming away, the calf seemed to notice us. It turned rapidly, and swam towards us. The mother suddenly turned, very, very fast. I'd never have believed an animal that big could turn at



that speed, and she shot straight at us, putting herself between us and the calf, which meant missing us by inches. Her speed was phenomenal. Then she swept away into the depths. We all came up gibbering, all talking ten to the dozen. I was shaking like a leaf. The guide, who had taken out David Attenborough's team filming humpbacks for the BBC, did mention that serious injuries were extremely rare, except when the whales were jumping. They occasionally land on a boat, but that would be by accident. Later that same day we came across a mother and a much bigger, 20ft long calf. The guide said he recognised this one, and that the calf liked to play. And play it did. The calf would swim right up to us, often turning upside down and doing barrel rolls, crossing its massive 'arms'. It got so excited it started to squeal. It was swimming away, when it did a tight turn and headed straight at me, upside down. Swimming backwards with fins is really difficult, and I failed to get out of the way. The calf's right 'arm' hit me on my left hand, then my forearm, then my left leg. It wasn't particularly hard, but their flippers are covered in barnacles. There was a lot of blood, but it was basically scratches. I've been hit by a whale, not sure if I should be proud or what.

It was time to head back to New Zealand, but would the sails hold up? I did consider leaving *Zebedee* in Tonga on a hurricane mooring, and flying back next year with new sails. However, the reinforcements seemed to be working. There were some new holes, but they didn't progress past the strips. I did have some spare sail cloth. People were joking that I might

have to stitch my laundry into the sails as patches if I ran out. In the end I decided to give it a go. *Zebedee* can actually sail quite well under bare poles. So as long as the wind was generally favourable, and I avoided a lee shore, it ought to be OK.

I anchored off the wharf, but this time the wind was fine. In fact there wasn't any, so I left Tonga under *yuloh*, and it was mighty hot. Eventually a small breeze got up and *Zebedee* was bowling along nicely. As I cleared the last island I heard a sort of rhythmic slapping sound. I looked across at the shore and sure enough there was a humpback's tail slapping the sea surface. It looked like a calf, and it went through my mind that it was waving goodbye. Just then a fully grown humpback surfaced and blew 100ft away on *Zebedee's* port side. It was swimming at high speed straight towards the noise. I wondered if it was some sort of alarm call.

The wind clocked round and soon I was making excellent progress. The sails were holding up fine. In fact after six days I was a whole day ahead of my last passage from Vava'u, and I started to calculate when I would arrive in Opuā. Luckily I don't have any long-distance communications, because, as I might have guessed, it didn't last. It blew, dead against, then it was calm, completely calm, not a breath, then it blew again, from dead ahead, and so on. On one dark and stormy night I noticed the fore yard hauling parrel had chafed right through. This isn't usually a big deal, just lower the foresail, and replace the line. In fact I've taken to simply tying in a short replacement piece. However, it was a bit rough and the furled sail bundle was crashing all over the place. To slow it down, I lassoed it as it passed by, but unfortunately I didn't get the rope around the whole bundle, just one batten, and that wasn't strong enough. There was an ominous crack. What a pain! Replacing the line is no hassle, but a batten is a much greater task. I lashed the broken battten to the one above, fore and aft. That would do. I was not going to try to replace a batten in the pitch dark while everything was crashing around.

A couple of days later it had calmed down and I replaced the broken batten. I now carry four spares. The passage seemed to be taking forever, and I started to wonder if I would ever get there. The sails seemed to be holding up, with some holes and rips, but none extending past the reinforcement strips. There was quite a big hole in the top main panel, which was a little more worrying. That's my storm sail. Finally, 100nm north of the Bay of Islands, I got a fair wind, and *Zebedee* started humming along. I decided to try sailing with just the foresail. Previous attempts had been less than successful. The rolling was horrendous, so for downwind ocean sailing I normally have the main right out at right angles and the fore sheeted right in; the result is no rolling. However, George, the Aries windvane, struggles a bit and we zig zag. David Tyler (OCC), on *Tystie*, had mentioned that dinghies also get the "death roll", but there was a solution.

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Sheet the sail in a bit. So I tried it. Sailing on just the foresail would be useful. If nothing else, it would reduce the wear on the main, which if the fore falls apart might be quite handy. It worked. George was ecstatic. He steered



a perfectly straight course, dead downwind at 6.5kts. Brilliant!

Again I started to calculate when I would arrive. So of course the wind died at dusk, and I bobbed about all night. At one point I could hear breakers, and checking the

chart I wasn't that far off Bird Island. I had a good look, but it was black as your grandfather's. It was time to *yuloh*. Now *yulohing* is all very well in flat water, but offshore there's always a swell, which makes it a whole different ball game. I struggled and cursed. Each time I got going, *Zebedee* would turn back towards the sound. It was most disconcerting when you can't see anything. Finally a bit of wind turned up and I sailed away from the rock, and also away from Opuia. What a pain! At dawn the wind filled and we got going. I called Martime Radio on my handheld VHF and told them I should be in Opuia at 0800, and the wind died. I then thought I'd miss the tide as well, so it could take even longer. My luck finally changed and *Zebedee* made it all the way up the channel. I anchored at 1200. 16 days, it could have been worse. . . and the whales!