

Kia Ora All,

I am formally writing, informally, to keep you, the friends and whanau up to date with my adventures, and get some of my thoughts and experiences onto digital paper in the hope they will cease rattling round my head! I will be able to send one or a few of these throughout my time as we have a GPS phone that sends and receives data, and therefore emails, hooora! From the next instalment, these will come to your inbox under xxxx. You can fire back if you so desire to the same address, (please, text only) with the title, 'Attention Mitch' or such like. Please note that any emails with the subject heading or content that includes numerous words, such as 'where's the money you owe me', 'why is the cat limping' or 'where are those socks you borrowed', will instantly be firewalled.

And so...

Baltazar, Puerto Montt, Chile (March 19th 2012)

I have spent the last 2 weeks aboard a Damien II designed Sloop Cutter called Baltazar. She is 52 feet in length, constructed of rolled steel, has a retractable keel, and is a mighty 18.5 tonnes, (without fuel, equipment or supplies). This boat was made to not just endure, but inspire safe passage in some of the most formidable of environments on earth. She exudes a stoic air, and a sense of pre-emptive nostalgia ahead.

Today is our last day in Marina De Sul. This afternoon we begin our journey across the South Pacific, on route to New Zealand. I am filled with incredible excitement, and a healthy dose of anxiety. These have come in waves over the last 2 weeks, and as I learn more of this crossing they both grow equally in volume.

For these 2 weeks I have scrubbed mountains of grease from anchor lockers in aggressively yogaristic positions, constructed bilge pumps out of random ingredients, drilled, glued, cleaned, lashed, screwed, scoured, calibrated and coiled. As you know, for me at least half of these are reasonably new activities. While many tasks just require some good amount of sweat, turns out that one of my valuable skills is the calibrating and running of the many digital devices on board. It is comforting to know that there is a defined role for me on Baltazar, and equally those 30 odd years of playing video games where not entirely redundant.

Yesterday I finished compiling all the stores with my 6th epic shopping mission, and have now acquired quantities, qualities and variations of food and supplies so vast that one would think it would be enough to last 3 people 3 months... let's hope so! It has been joyous to spend some with Brian, Paula and Ona, loves yuuus... I have worked alongside some diamond Chilean workers, cooked, eaten, drunk, smoked and danced with them. In fact I have met many incredible people from around the globe all in various stages of sailing transit or secondment over the last couple of weeks here, some that have been here for years originally planning a minor stop over, and don't look like leaving in a hurry. I can understand this.

The crew includes me, Andy Whittaker the owner / captain and Angus Pridie. Andy is a 38 year old Englishman who calls many places home. This fact neatly illustrates the nature of this man's thirst for adventure. From professional mountaineer, to Antarctic Museum Curator, Andy's history certainly belies his years. He has a fine eye for detail, a strong thirst for challenges, and never lets the truth get in the way of a good story. And if even 50% of these are accurate, (and I believe the ratio to much higher), a life he has lead. Angus is a 67

year old Anaesthetist, with a long and very colourful history of sailing. He is blind in one eye, rather hard of hearing, has a dodgy ticker, a gammy back, and is one of the fittest, alert, hardy and competent men I have ever come across.

And so the 3 ready. Today we will depart with a wave and a wink to the many friends that I have come to meet in Puerto Montt. From Olaf the 72 year old French sailing pioneer, to Kaiu the metal loving handyman, and certainly the dolphins and seals that visit me at least every day... I will miss them all, and cherish some brilliant memories. We head out on our first main leg to the archipelago of Juan Fernandez, or that is that plan. Although there is a proposed route, with a range of destinations that we would like to make on the way to NZ, we may miss them all! I am at the hands of the winds, Poseidon and my captain... and I am not sure which I should fear and respect the most. Still, that is the plan today. The current route is as follows:

- Juan Fernandez
- Easter Island
- Pitcairn Island
- Gambia Islands
- Raivavae
- Cook Islands & Rarotonga

This may or may not take about 3 months.

So with a veracious sparkle in my eye, and already a tiny bit of sick in my mouth, I wish Chile, and the only significant coastline for 7,000 miles, ciao ciao. And to you all, aurevoir...

Bless,

Mark

Day 3 - Bay Hopping

The stinging clicks of plankton back swimming, (or perhaps breast stroking) did not keep me up the second night as it did the first. The former spent worrying that a gas leak was underway.

These 2 days have been somewhat challenging. More preparation. Don't get me wrong, doing more is a bloody good thing, think the anticipation is the tough part, and also the fact that Andy and Angus seem to have a sixth sense for the things that need to be done, while I am still a qualified land lubber and am asking quuuuuutie a few questions.

Realising that I need to stay proactive with my worth as crew. Spent most of the day working front to back through the watermaker. Worked through the process in all its tubes and filters, pumps and pins. Talked to the tech guy in the Canary Islands, "of course not standard practice" but he gave me the password to the computer interface to monitor everything myself as part of the troubleshooting. Turns out that travelling the South Pacific is an endeavour worthy of pulling out all the stops, and perhaps one that no company that has equipped a boat would want as a bad reference if it all goes pear shaped.

Made a pretty tasty dinner if I say so myself. These beautiful chilli capsicum fused spikes, stuffed with pancetta, cheeses, shallots and fresh sweet corn, fresh peas with coriander, and merikan baked potatoes. Washed down with a rather cheeky 12 year old whiskey. Oh the depravation! I have a distinct inkling, that such meals are unlikely very soon, as logistically things such as cooking will become somewhat challenging.

Turns out our keel is in one piece, and the rods only slightly bent, (we hit a wee rock whilst leaving port). Still, was a good opportunity for Andy to get in the water, and unblock the heads from the outside, (not sure how I didn't end up with that one – small mercies early on perhaps).

So, another day and night here with a complete organise, stash, lash, fruit and vegie bleach, egg vasolinadge, (getting kinky now), and then the next day getting the sails are up, and all nav equip calibrated, (the pressure building for me on this one – raaaather important and all that), then west from the mainland. Very eager to get amongst now, sure the reality can't be more work than the anticipation of my first blue water passage... especially that we have a new sea anchor to aid us if we can't reef any further, with the waves higher than our mast and so enabling us to slow down the rise and decent of waves numerous times our mast height. Shit.

Day 6 - Abtao Bay

We sit upon the precipice of the South Pacific tonight... It beckons, and I certainly am ready, well as I ever will be anyway. Finally got the watermaker cranking out 65 odd litres an hour.

After 4 nights at the first stop, we motored 10 miles further up the coast, with the main purpose of finishing the autopilot calibration, another of my jobs... so, didn't work, yikes. Basically we are going nowhere until this is sorted, no pressure. So, head back in the manuals and multiple units, (I count 8 individual pieces of hardware that all need configuring). Getting serious cabin fever, (yeah really). Not really appreciating the magical spot we were in, until I reflect here, now. Rocky bay, with steep verged bush covered hills meeting the ocean. A few rustic houses, an old lady making her way down to the ocean edge at low tide, walking stick in hand, sack for collecting shellfish in the other... it is interesting how you perceive things from a boat. While right before you, things are somewhat distant, surreal. This does not mean that you feel disjointed from the environment, more that one feels reflective in the moment.

Did get the sails up for the first time yesterday, quite spectacular. Few tweaks, Angus again proving his worth, especially as a sail man. We are due to set away from the Chilean mainland to Juan Fernandez tomorrow, and in order to do that, today was my last day to get it all running. Feeling some real heat here, and deep into these units, even the Furuno technicians I skyped in NZ didn't know how to get this shit done. Don't know how it got so messed up... and at 3pm today, I cracked it. We can set a course and run! No need to strap anyone to the tiller, hooora, or as Angus puts it, Hazaaaar!

Cooked up another mean feed, (more saying so myself) and as I asked whether anyone's birthday was falling on a day on our journey, Angus paused, looked at his watch, "Oh, I'm 67 today". So casual, understated, energetic... legend. Celebrated with a couple of fine whiskeys, and listened to some very pleasing and warming reminiscing from him.

Magic day, finally feel ready, and that I have earned a right to be here...

Day 8 - The Pacific Ocean

Am now out here. Is a gnarly place, and a gnarlier scenario. Is coming to the end of day 2, heading norwest from Chile heading up to Juan Fernandez. Running broad reach with a 25 knot south easterly behind heading along 2M – 3M swells.

At dusk last night we lost sight of land, a both liberating and eerie feeling. I took the watch from 6 till 9pm, then 3 to 6am, (3 on 6 off). So, am keeping the boat on course, away from anything that may pop up in the horizon, and in an efficient and safe relationship to the wind. A pretty immense responsibility, knowing that lives rest on this being done and done well.

On the 3am watch, was greeted by the incredible sight of dolphins swimming beside the boat luminated in phosphorescence. Breathtaking. Did feel a little like we were being stalked though by waterborne wolves. It is evident in volumes that we are in their environment now.

While 'favourable' conditions this first night into the second day, the environment is so new, exhilarating and terrifying. Certainly best to be up top. Doing anything extremely challenging down below. Woke up this morning, falling out of bed, ripping a few layers of skin off my back on a pin in the heads, (toilets you landlubbers), quiet scream in pain as I look up to see Angus' grizzly face gnarled in what looked like terror only to take in the whole scene and see his naked sinewy body squatted over a bucket in the cockpit. What the fuck is this, some sort of twisted social experiment!?

Every day brings new challenges, experiences, stories and wounds. I realise that pain will be a daily experience. I also realise that there is no point reacting to this pain, everyone is experiencing it, and no one cares. There is no room for fragility. I soon learn to ignore it myself. Reflecting on all of these as I wait out for my night watch. Things are starting to get hairier outside. Wind and swell picking up. I feel like a pea in a rather large soup on the verge of being swallowed by an insatiably hungry fat man...

Day 10

After 4 days without sight of land the reality of this endeavour are now becoming realised. Sounds all rather dramatic I know, but this not akin to anything that I have ever experienced, and cannot reference to anything I know. Riding acrost 3 metre swells, 30 plus knots of wind, standing in the cockpit looking out over lines of endless waves. Gracefully obsessive peaks and troughs have me at the top of the world one moment, and in the belly of her voracious appetite the next.

Each 3 hour watch bringing healthy degrees of anxiety and restless 'naps' in advance, then once on deck the thrill and awe takes over. Again, these are still rather 'moderate' conditions, yet we have had numerous waves break over the deck, including an immense body of water push its way over our stern and through the cockpit surging through the saloon into the fore of the boat. Hands quickly moving, and as Andy poetically phrased "nothing moves faster than a desperate man with a bucket". This all happening within moments of our Navpilot bowing out, and the need to man the helm manually. This was to prove the end of that technology. But as I am learning from these incredible men on board, it is all about problem solving. We were able to rig a beautiful piece of engineering and craftsmanship that was on-board Baltazar, but yet to be utilised, the Ares. This is essentially a wind vane that utilises some very elegant gearing a pullies to set a constant course relative to the wind. Very, very cool – yet still we are now essentially hand-steering across the South Pacific.

My days and nights are consumed with vast and vivid stories from both - especially Andy, whose untold yarns are coming thick and fast. From 'pitch polling' (where a boat rolls a full 360, but front ways), to mad Russian cruisers wrestling sharks and crocodiles to make handbags as gifts for his wife, and infamous sailing icons racing against the clock to be the first person to circumnavigate the globe single handed, (have a search on Jooble for Bernard Moitessier or Robin Knox Johnson if the mood strikes). Angus certainly adds some unique colour to these yarns, not least is his penchant for buckets. Yes buckets. And not least the best possible size, shape, weight and material for the perfect shit bucket. Class. And all the while new crafts and skills are discussed and practiced – from whipping, flaking, alpine butterflies, navigation and so on and so forth.

We are edging closer to our first port of call, and I am very much looking forward to a swim, stable galley and cold beer.

Land Ahoy!

Cheesy I know, but the more time I spend with these salty seadogs, the more I realise that sailing is rich with tradition and ceremony. And so, today I was positioned on deck, eyes sharpened more than usual to look out for land - Juan Fernandez in particular. Careful to be sure of the call, otherwise a flogging would certainly ensue as a result. And across the great sea scape, covered in a shroud of mist and cloud the gentle yet exacting lines of Juan Fernandez beckon... Land Ahoooooy!

The Juan Fernandez Archipelago

Myself and Angus stay silent in awe for quite some time as we approach our anchorage from around the western side of Robinson Crusoe Island. Angus eventually lets out a very faint, "super". Super indeed bro, super indeed. Having passed 3,000 foot cliffs dropping vertically into the ocean, we make our way into Cumberland Bay. The main 'centre' of the island, shows us less severe relief, with rolling green hills flowing down to this rustic fishing village. One of 3 islands that make up the archipelago, Robinson Crusoe is indeed mainly known for having been the home to the marooned Alexander Selkirk for four years, which is very likely to have inspired the novel Robinson Crusoe.

Swim, beer, customs. That's the way to enter a country. Brilliant to be on solid again. Really quite taken aback by the raw nature of this place. One is also taken aback by the level of rebuilding and evident devastation of the coastline. On the night of the 27th Feb 2010 a Tsunami struck this island on the back of the 8.8 magnitude Earthquake that hit Chile. 16 people perished that night. They are rebuilding in many ways.

About 600 live on the island, and are largely reliant on fishing. And what a hardy bunch of fisherman they are. Heading out each day on their 'Lanchas', we get to meet some excellent characters here, with some very sound and tempered advice on how to fish the right way and tie knots, again, just so. Many men on the island riding horses around in some very inhospitable terrain, down through the main street, unkept manes flowing in the sea breeze, with their beasts following suit.

We spend a couple of days replenishing stores, mending and fabricating enhancements to Baltazar that revealed themselves on the leg here. After finishing these duties, we finally get a chance to spend some time on the island, and in the water. Yes.

Turns out Andy has a history here, and a rather harrowing one at that. He was moored in this bay on his previous yacht, Zephyrus during the night of the Tsunami. He talks openly for the first time of this over some whiskey on the 3rd night. Too brutal and 'real' for me to put into words here, but Andy and his wife Rhian were able to save some people. Spending time with the locals with Andy, some begin to open up to this event, and some more stories and connections unfold, with Andy able to track down some of the people that's lives became intertwined with his that evening. Humbling to be a part of.

Our few days here were always going to be too short. But so happy to be able to see and experience a place like this. The last night was however a perfect last for us. I prepared a lovely fish, (caught on your rod brother Budgeon!); in a 'traditional' manner for a range of the lovely local people we met in our short stay. Washed down with a few ales, the 3 of us spent the last wee hour's sautéing ourselves in a large wooden cauldron, fashioned into a hot tub, overlooking her that we shall again sail into at day break...

Day 24 – 10TH April

We are now approximately 800NM from the haven that was Juan Fernandez, and the same to our next destination, Easter Island, which makes us officially in Blue Water, or as a good friend coined it, “A bloody big blob!” And a glorious *blue* it is. Without attempting to regale you with over use of adjectives, it is a deep, rich blue that I am not sure if I have ever seen before.

A week has passed since departing Juan Fernandez. I spent the first few of which wondering A), *What the hell am I doing here*, and B), *What the bloody hell am I doing here*. Due in part no doubt to the over consumption successfully achieved on Juan Fernandez, but largely due to a clearer understanding of the length and breadth of this endeavour, and just how much I miss my loved ones, (youuus). I have since moved through this, during my numerous reflections enabling me with great amount of time to think; pondering on Dr. Zeuss fabricated clouds by day, and the waxing moon cycle at night. Am beginning to do less thinking and more being, in the realisation that I am not my mind. Whoa, OK, less reflection required here...

The 3 on 6 off shifts now have become routine, along with the various chores required on-board. We are still eating very well, although our fresh food stocks are now waning, as are our appetites' for soups and broths, due to the warming climate no doubt. We are agreeably moving along the fringes of a high currently, with a gentle 15KN SE breeze and following swell again for the most part. Perfect conditions for practicing reefing, knots, reading, (about sailing of course), and fresh water 'showers' on deck. This has also enabled us to put the poles out, meaning we can run the headsail and mains on either side of the boat. A fine sight indeed, as we redundantly and happily chase down the sun and moon every day and night with our acres of sail fore.

The Yeti has been making regular appearances on board. He lives somewhere in the bilge I think, and when no one is about to pay attention, he runs frantically though the boat, furiously rubbing clumps of hair from his body. This can be the only explanation for the accumulation of so many short and curlies gathering on-board.

I am still working on the fresh fish front at sea, having finished the heavy duty line, which includes 150 pound line and metal trace. Yip, 'Argh!'. Have enjoyed the playful company of bird life. Am quite amazed that these creatures are so far out from land. Visits from Wilsons Storm Petrels, and Birds of Paradise a welcoming reminder of terra firma, although not of diving for my lures.

The Easter Island Bunny visited us on Sunday. Nice to surprise the lads with a little bit of traditional commercialised holiday fervour captured within little chocolate moments of 'ooh'. However, it did take Angus sometime to grasp the practice, as he merely observed these scattered little treats for some time, “Mmmm, why are there eggs and chickens hiding everywhere?”. Of course he pretty much missed out on most of them. No doubt Easter Island has some suitably delectable treats waiting for us all...

28°47.770' S

95°36.1666' W

Hove to, (put the brakes on) to fix the prop shaft from running free while under sail. Sun beginning to rise, beautiful clear morning. Time for a swim it would seem... Assess the drift and current speed accurately, (spit in the water), check. Turns out not a precise method of measurement. Whipped round the back of the boat rather quickly, but a few frantic strokes has me hanging off the stern. Surreal. Middle of the 'big blob', over 4,000m down, (enter those co-ords into Joogle Earth if interested), getting dragged along, peering down into the depths- completely engulfed by Blue. Figure can see about 30M down until the electric blue is devoured by its darker and more sinister neighbour fathoms below... Rather exhilarating, I half expect an ancient sea creature to rise up from the depths and swallow me hole.

Rapa Nui

We arrive within 15NM of Rapa Nui, (Easter Island) sometime in the AM. Sails away, we drift at a reasonable 3KN's around to the North Side of the Island until sunrise. Headsail and main out, we crash along the last 10NM to our anchorage at sunrise. Large waves crashing into sheer cliff faces to starboard, carnivorous rock outcrops beckon while seemingly prehistoric seabirds herald our arrival, (or are telling us to piss off, one can never be sure).

Anchoring at the main port of Hanga Roa, coral reefs, perfectly clear tepid water, palm trees, lava tubes and rolling hills in the distance. Blissfully cruise in to see the Amada, (after a swim of course), to meet with what I can only describe as Hawaii 5-0 styled Navy personal. Large and broad Rapa Nui men in perfectly groomed attire and trucker caps casually question Andy on our credentials and activity. Wide beamed smiles, turning often to me continuing this blissfully long exercise. Lost after 'Ola Amigo' I happily smile and nod to the dulcet tones of these men, warmed by the welcoming nature and casual dialogue as I slowly drift off to sleep - as one does at school when a given teacher exercises such pacifying qualities.

Turns out the Navy were custodian over Rapa Nui, (Big Rapa) in the late 60's, having undergone a 'Treaty of Annexation of the Island' by Chile in 1888. The history of this island is richer and thwart with more up heavel then any I know of, (in my vast and comprehensive knowledge of world history). Its inhabitants have endured famines, epidemics, civil war, slave raids, colonialism and near deforestation; its population declined by 95% in a 10 year period during the mid 19 century. I won't recite my rote learnt history lesson here; Wiki can do that far more holistically than I.

Certainly a tourist fueled environment now, we take advantage of the breathtaking sites of the island. From crater lakes, lava tunes, caves, and of course the Moai or statues. Erected somewhere between 300 and 1100 AD, (BIG variation there), under the 'Ancestor Cult', deifying ancestors of particular wisdom and power. These Moai faced inland on the coastlines, the spirit world at sea to their backs, a 'symbiotic' relationship formed between the two, heralding fertility and health to those still living, while securing the ancestors rightful place in the spirit world. I find this a glorious sentiment. Most of these had been toppled during the subsequent reign of the 'Birdman Cult', but as part of a worldwide heritage program have been restored and re-erected. Mint.

A few days here have been so restoring and enlightening. Some beautiful locals, a refreshing pace, epic surf, Pisco sours and pollo all provide very welcome sustenance. Aaaaahhh... But paradise would surely become the mundane after too long, (I figure about 50 years or so), and so we replenish the stores, water and prep Baltazar for the next leg. Chur as Rapa Nui.

April 26th

We seemed to be blessed with conditions. 20 Knot following breezes and sea-state, blue skies and calm nights, (rubs furiously on the 'lucky' piece of wood in the cockpit). One blip, the gearbox is leaking, so some repairs will indeed be required at the next port.

We settle into our watches, and enjoy some of the beautiful fruits and veg procured from Rapa Nui. I get to strap a climbing harness on and swim behind the boat. And by swim, I mean drag. Turns out I can't swim at 4 Knots, who'd of thunk it! I feel like live bait.

Raised the spinnaker yesterday. Had yet to be unveiled, (even on shore), so a good degree of trial and error resulted. But up she went, and as I darted around the foredeck arranging lines and sheets managed to run smack into the boom. Smooth. Jumping back up, I flop around like an inebriated squid, only to have Andy instruct me to take a seat. Good idea considering I was asking the air hostess if I could have some peanuts.

Beautiful watch last night. Inspired by Andy on the ability to use many natural elements; not least the stars, I start to use the skies to get bearings and even navigate. Has been consuming me since. Turns out, that this is how ancient Polynesian and Micronesian civilizations so effectively navigated the Pacific. Even our own Cookie Monster did this in the 1970's as he made his way to our airwaves and traded with the Maori. No, wait... "Excuse me, could I have some more peanuts?"

Our Fickle Friend

We are 600 odd NM from The Gambies. We have talked often to this point, of how blessed we have been with the weather. I have now learnt to curb my enthusiasm - at least in ear shot of Baltazar – and temper my reminiscing with a healthy dose of realisation that this journey is far from over.

Looks like in 48 to 72 hours we are faced with some hefty conditions just shy of the Gambia Islands. With 60KN + winds forecasted, we make a decision to push through this leg as swiftly as able in the hope that we won't dwell too long within. While Baltazar is a vessel designed largely to weather conditions as oppose from run from them, we still decide to make good while we are able. Preparations are considered, such as cooking, as such activities become nigh on impossible in such conditions. Everything that could possibly be dislodged both on deck and below are lashed and stored, and our sea anchor is prepared. I have never felt so connected and tightly bound by a team as I currently do with these gents.

“Be great to be in at least one big storm eh!?” I can't remember who the bastard is that posed this with me prior to my departure, but bless ya. It is a curious feeling knowing that you have very limited control of a situation so far removed from any assistance. A situation that may prove very uncomfortable, possibly dangerous. One ponders mortality. I have felt this many times thus far on this journey in a range of conditions, but now it is fragrant and in full bloom. Fear.

The next morning heralds some deeply dark squalls on the horizon. During the last hour before sunrise, these squalls are suddenly punctuated with white strikes. I had seen them a few hours earlier, distant and sporadic. Now they grow quickly in intensity. By the time Andy is on deck for his watch, we are witness to the most incredible lightning storm I have seen. Dozens of forked white shards race ceaselessly across a large part of the horizon portside, and perhaps only a few miles away. “I don't want to pass under that bloody thing!” Andy offers. I go below and put on any and all pieces of rubber based items I can find.

The next day presents us with our biggest conditions. 30-40 knot winds, with a 3M swell and the odd 4M roller coming through. I have to say that I am loving this. And hating it. A peculiar mixture of adrenalin and panic. Sleeping or spending time below certainly not recommended here, but once on watch, and with a clear view of the environment I can't help but be in awe.

And then the dead calm. Yip, the centre of the low moved on and above, and every breath of wind has left us. We are sitting 150NM out from The Gambies, and not moving. Thought would of relished this, but no. Completely helpless, impotent. Careful what you wish for eh.

Lots of time to trip over each other at the moment. We are all restless, sleep deprived, (average about 5 hours of broken sleep a day), hungry for meat and a cold beer, (perhaps even with someone else). Living in such close quarters for this length of time is, again, a real social experiment. Is this what living with your girlfriend is like? Yikes. (I must remember to not send this email to Rachel). Writing of Rachel... My craving for arrival at our next port has another rather significant sweetener for me. My girl is flying into The Gambies' to meet me for 2 weeks! If we don't get some wind soon, I'm swimming.

Mangereva

The trials of the previous few weeks are washed away into insignificance as we sail through the reef into the Gambies. The sun warms more than just our skin as we navigate with precision though the coral heads to our anchorage at Rikitea on the main island of Mangereva.

We stumble ashore into one the most relaxed and friendly environments I have ever bathed in. How I have missed the smell of land, and the smile of people. And smiles are plentiful here. Every single person greets each other as they stroll down the main road. Everyone. Not just out of courtesy one feels, but a general regard for each other. What a novel idea. OK, this will sound cheesy, but here it is... there is the most beautiful flowers lining the ocean side road here; frangipanis, bougainvillea's, delectable flora strains of many kinds; the air is thick with the smell of fragrant smouldering leaves and b qued pig, (fed on coconuts of course), oh, and there are coconuts, limes, banana, papayas and other sumptuous fruits growing everywhere. One only has to reach out and refresh ones eagerly quenched thirst in this village sized tropical garden. And as you make your way lazily along, catching glistening rays of liquid sunshine, a beaming smile and welcoming wave is on every doorstep or bountiful garden you care to grace. Told you.

And so I leave the lads very happy and relaxed in the calmest and most serene anchorage we have yet had on this trip, (first anchorage that doesn't involve getting up every hour to assure we are not drifting into peril). To meet my girl. She arrives via Tahiti looking so at place in this 'paradise' a veritable jewel in its' crown. This salty sea dog could not be happier. Ahhhh... And she brought me a smoked chicken!

The next 2 weeks are filled with some fabulous adventures, and some very welcomed rest on solid. We stroll, paddle, swim, eat mountains of freshly baked banquettes and cheese, paw over gorgeous and exotic dinners, purvey locally nurtured black pearls and even go on an excursion on Baltazar together to Tarivai; a small island not far from Mangereva. Anchoring in a lagoon between 2 stereotypically pristine islands, we can see the most blissful looking abode nested in between two adjacent white sand beaches. Living here is Eduard and Denise. Andy befriended this couple upon his last trip through here. Cordially invited to lunch the next day, we feast on yet more chicken, mmm, and... vegetables! Such a hardy and generous couple. So good to see people truly living off the land, and what they don't grow or generate themselves they receive in kind from yachties such as ourselves for trade in what is bountiful on their doorstep. We visit them a couple of times, enjoying their hospitality immensely - and although Eduard does not speak English, nor myself or Rachel reasonable French, with the aid of Andy and Angus, and through much sign language and drawings in the sand, we get an intriguing insight into how they have lived, the wrongs of the French passed and on-going, and what life in French Polynesia means to them now.

Alas, paradise is not perpetual. And so with much sadness, yet fonder memories, I bid Rachel au revoir. A few days more of preparation - and most importantly waiting for wind, and we say farewell to Mangereva and the Gambies'. You've given more than I expected, and expected less than I feel I owe.

Raivavae

Our last destination awaits. 700NM, 265°W. This will be our last stop before the long leg back to NZ. Time to give push to Baltazar, and see what we can get from her, and make sure she is locked down for this significant secondary leg. And she certainly delivers. We have just carved out a 17NM + day, often averaging 8KN's... and she is loving it.

A few days of great following wind and kind seas again turn to nought. Time to motor. While 15 hours of hand-steering and diesel fumes does get somewhat tiring, at least we are cracking on, and prove the gearbox is not in too bad a shape. Certainly good to know.

The blood poisoning I received in Mangereva from open wounds on my feet has finally stopped seeping everywhere, and I can now almost walk properly as my feet and legs are no longer infected balloons. No need to strap my feet up in duct tape each day either. Bonus.

We get wind finally, and Baltazar quickly gets into her groove. We will not quite make it into port before sunset, and aren't too keen to navigate through the coral in the dark so we hove to for the evening. As we beat to at sunrise, it certainly bodes well for good fishing, with a few frantic boil ups beckoning in the distance. Strike! Finally, target species; mahi mahi. A glorious 15 or so pound example. Such a beautiful fish. 3 hours later, we arrive at the majestic Ravavae, anchor lovingly between the reef and the palm tree dotted coastline, invite the neighbours over for lunch, and have seared thick, tender and delicious mahi mahi steaks over a smokey and aromatic coal bar b. Thanks be to Moana for safe passage and her fine fruits. I exhale deeply...

The Australs

One week in Raivavae was a treat not anticipated. Thinking that we had experienced the nuances of true island culture, I was aghast, (in an incredibly relaxed manner), to discover that the culture here is even more tranquil, and the pace beyond pedestrian. All the second hands are absent from clocks, car and bike horns removed, and a single circa 1970 roller skate issued on arrival to place under ones head as you glide blissfully around the island.

Friendly. Welcoming. Humble. On the first saunter on the island myself and Andy were casually rallied by a group of local men to play some petanque. The national sport it would seem, (of all 300 or people), we were quickly embroiled in a great match, and did not entirely embarrass ourselves. Bonus. I partnered up with the local Pastors son, whom spoke English. I spent some lovely time with Herman and his best friend Gaston over the next week. As luck would have it, there was a grand occasion being held at a church on the other side of the island that night...

Once a year a church related event takes place on one of the 5 islands that make up the Australs group. That year, and that very night it was held here. A fabulous occasion. Ceremonies began formally, with the most ornately presented men and woman attending, dressed patriotically in their respective island colours. The most glorious fabrics, gracefully adorned flower arrangements and beaming smiles upon smiles were on display. I receive more snug handshakes and warm welcomes than I can shake a stick at, (although I was conspicuously missing my shaking stick that day). A good hour and a half of said formalities and everyone is seated, filling up the 150 seat church on the islands edge. As I look down on the vibrant congregation below, I can't help but feel like I am witnessing the world's largest flower arrangement. Then the music began...

I was in turn witness to the most incredible aural spectacle. Each island group would play and sing the most joyous of traditional pieces. Much more lively and buoyant than most, nay, all hymns I have previously heard. As they sang, they moved, swaying in unison as much as they projected their strong and vibrant tones symbiotically. At times, often when a crescendo of a song was reached, the conductor of the respective tribe would throw a challenge - or perhaps more of a peaceful homage - open to another tribe. They would in turn take up the mantel, and weave their own sonic rendition into the original. Such heartfelt and passionate praise. Real community.

We spent an adjectival day exploring some of the regions motu's, (motu's are uninhabited island outcrops within the reef, you know, the stereotypical one palm tree illustration). Venturing out with some Swiss medical interns that I befriended on the island, (I know random hey! When quizzed to why they chose such an incredibly remote location, they of course answered, "Why not!" Indeed, why the helium not!). A most pristine mission.

I met a couple of sailors at port here, (that doesn't quite sound right). Jonas, a very cool American solo adventurer whom does not choose a destination, rather sees where the winds choose to deliver him - Bruce and Marcel the Zimbabwean and South African couple that have been at sea for 3 years and still don't seem sure if they like cruising - and towards the end of our stay Jamie from Canada and 3 young lads. They had just sailed direct from NZ, (our next and of course final port). Wished I hadn't spoken to Jamie before we departed. Turns out they had a rather horrendous leg. 5 days out of NZ, 12M waves, gale-force winds, and then it all got a bit worse. The boat was knocked down twice, flooded, integral structures ruptured, electronics decimated, and bones broken. All this resulted in some absolutely shattered individuals and a previously \$150K boat now lucky to sell for \$20K - which is exactly what Jamie was planning to do next.

And so, our turn... We prep for our longest leg yet. A solid 2,400 odd NM to NZ. Replenish stores, (including fresh tomatoes and cabbage!), pick plenty of wild lime and bananas, and

bid farewell to new friends. We know this process well now, with our roles well defined and our mettle tested and proven. Still, I don't sleep a wink the night before we depart.

Homeward Bound

I know the way. I am to bring Baltazar and myself to her shores. Home.

Straight off the bat the Grib files, (satellite generated weather forecasts) show a very deep low in our path. 60KN's and not a desirable prospect. We decide to stay high, and retard our progress. Works well. Low passes underneath, and although we are battered with some 40KN – 50KN odd conditions, we don't get a thumping. And so, we aim to stay pretty much on this latitude until we hit The Kermadecs, and then bear southwest to NZ. This should keep us above any significant systems, and allow us to head in on trade winds that a very likely to be Westerly's coming out of NZ. Many things crossed.

Whales! WHAAALES! First time I have seen them. Right Whales. Good Omen.

Catch our second mahi mahi. Eat like kings for 3 days. The tastiest fish I have ever...

Feel like I am mastering my whipping. A lovely manly sewing practice used to reseal, bind and dress rope. Delectably manly and delicate.

Great news! Discovered I know longer need a pillow as the bushiness of my wilding beard and Einstein inspired do now suffice. Plus.

Had the most beautiful watch last eve. Perfectly clear night, no moon so the stars just pulsed. I had Baltazar singing. Full sail, perfectly in her groove beating to in a 15KN southerly, using the stars to navigate, shooting star upon star heralding the way...

Now over 2 weeks in. Just passing over the Tonga and Kermadec Trench – over 8,000M deep in parts, and breaking dry in others. Maybe another week or so to go. Getting tired, but still energised as I crave all things home...

Home

The last week or so certainly had its challenges, and in return some spectacular final moments. Beating to for days in unforgiving conditions, and then head on winds - whether heading on a port or starboard tack, we get no closer to our destination. Mood is somewhat dire for a time. We then receive some lovely easterly winds, swinging round from southeast to northeast. This allowing us some very comfortable and pleasing beam and broad reaching, and in turn following swells urging us ever on; the wind at our backs we power through the last few days.

2 days out. A pod of whales breach a few meters from our stern, albatross effortlessly sail along the drafts generated by marching swells, and pancakes and rum soaked coffee over a breathtaking Venus and in course spectacular Sun rise. The last 24 hours seems like an eternity, but a welcome one.

I eagerly take on back to back watches, hand steering us from midnight, eating through the miles, surfing down 4 metre swells in 35KN plus winds, to bring us in. Land ahoy as I clock the light house beacon on Cape Brett signalling our 30NM point from her coast, and soon after, navigate away from 2 very large cargo ships that were bearing down on us.

We round Cape Brett about 5am, with the last awe and fear inspiring wave breaking on our portside due to the severe change in depth. Sailing all the way into the Bay of Islands, we arrive in Opuia 7am Monday morning. A suitably cold and crisp NZ wintery morning, the Bay receives us with grace. My heart swells, nerves ease, body fatigues.

My girl waves us in. Lumpy throat, salty eyes. Am so very happy to step onto land. Home. 100 odd days at sea, and over 6,000NM travelled. An experience that I will never forget, as memories are still crisp, I relish all the moments passed, sharp and rough edges all. Not least the time spent with the incredible men beside me.

I hope not to take too much for granted again, and certainly relish so many simple pleasures right now, the most of which without any doubt; a smile, and word or 2 with my you, my friends and whanau.

M