

Our February 2018 trip took us to the islands of the South Pacific. We flew via Hong Kong, where we had a whistle stop tour that took us to 'The Peak' via the Peak Tramway, Stanley Market and Aberdeen Harbour, where we were given a short cruise around the junks and giant thousand seat 'Jumbo Seafood Restaurant'.

From Hong Kong we flew to a very wet Auckland in New Zealand, where we had a city tour in the rain, eventually ending up at the Auckland Museum, before boarding the Caledonian Sky. An overnight sail took us to Paihia on the northern tip of North Island and the Waitangi Treaty Grounds. This is New Zealand's most important historic site, and is where the Treaty of Waitangi was signed between the British Crown and the indigenous Maori in February 1840. Here the sun shone, and we were shown two massive 'Ceremonial War Canoes'.

The larger one, named Ngātokimatawhaorua at 35 metres, it is the largest in the world. It must look spectacular when it is in the water each year with its 76 paddlers. You can appreciate why Princess Diana wanted a shot in it (apparently the only woman ever allowed in a war canoe). We watched a dance show before being greeted by a traditional Maori Haka.

Another overnight sail took us north to Norfolk Island. This was a penal colony for the 'Worst of the Worst' criminals of the day. However, a recent study of 6,458 Norfolk Island convicts, has demonstrated that the reality was somewhat different: more than half were detained at Norfolk Island without ever receiving a colonial conviction. Furthermore, the majority of convicts sent to Norfolk Island had committed non-violent property offences, and the average length of detention there was three years.

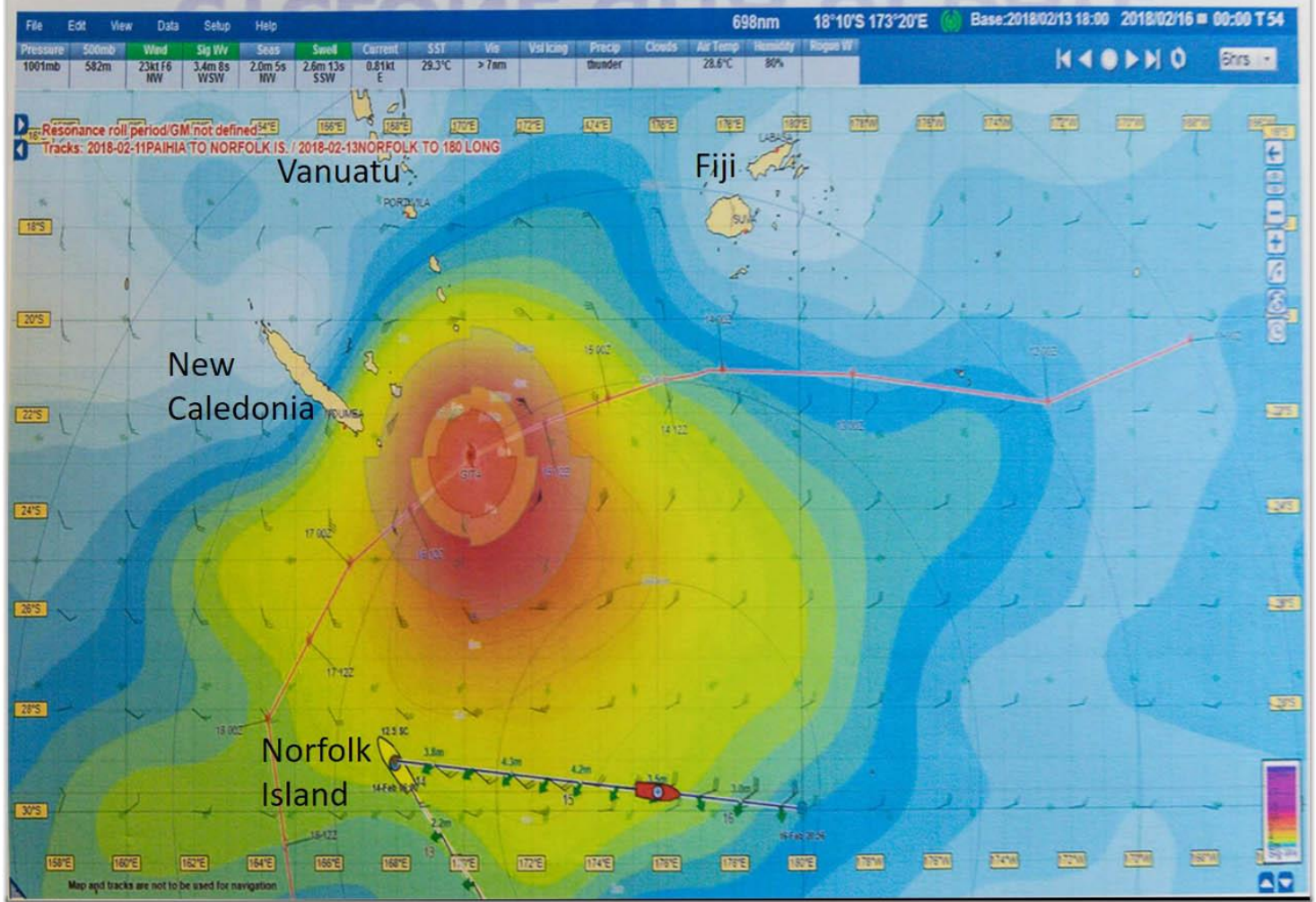
Norfolk is a very green and hilly island, surrounded by steep cliffs, where we went ashore in our Zodiacs in a very rough sea, to dock at a stone jetty. Our intended landing spot had been changed to the other side of the island to get a calmer landing. After the penal colony was closed in 1813, the descendants of Tahitians and the HMS Bounty mutineers, including those of Fletcher Christian were resettled from the Pitcairn Islands, which had become too small for their growing population.

By late afternoon the sunny weather with rain showers was changing and we were recalled to the ship. This proved exceptionally difficult and the sea now had a three-metre swell at the jetty. Somehow we all got back on board and this was when we first heard of Cyclone Gita. Our voyage was roughly sailing from South to North, but a tropical Cyclone named Gita was crossing our path, travelling East to West.

Across the Tropic of Capricorn



CYCLONE GITA UPDATE



It was a Category 4 Cyclone with winds of 233 km/h recorded in Tonga, where it caused substantial damage. At its heart the waves were reported to be 20 plus metres high, far too violent for our small ship. The captain had no choice but to take us on a 1000-mile detour, in a long curve around the back of the cyclone, and hope that it did not turn on us. The charts showed a route which had a more reasonable five metre swell but meant that we missed out our stops in New Caledonia at Iles des Pines and at the Island of Tanna, where we intended to visit the rim of the 'live' volcano.

After almost four days of extremely rough water, we were back on track with our stop in Vanuatu. The weather was now warm and sunny with temperatures approaching thirty degrees C.

We arrived on schedule at Havanna Harbour, which is a natural harbour created between the islands of Lelpa, Moso and Efate. After a wet landing, we were met by a local band and then explored the local village and UNESCO World Heritage Site of 'Fels Cave' with its primitive cave paintings.

Next day, still in Vanuatu, we berthed at Luganville and were transported to Nekar Custom Village. We were greeted by warriors and allowed into the village where we were shown the types of food eaten locally. The men, women and children put on a selection of very different dances. The women engaged with us and the men continued their aggressive stance in their dance.

The island of Vanikoro was verdant in the morning sun and the sea was calm for the long run in the Zodiacs to Vanikoro Island. The local policeman, who offered to lead us in safely through the reef, peeled off as he realised that he was running out of fuel.

As he returned to the ship for fuel, we checked out his planned route and headed back to the wider channel between the reefs to reach the beach safely. Leaf and grass garlands had been beautifully prepared by the village people to welcome us. We took our place on wooden planks around an area that had been set up for dance.

The dances were split over three separate areas. The main area, circled by a ring of palm fronds, had wooden boards over holes, which performed superbly as drums. The oldest to the youngest joined in the dances, which had an impromptu feel, making them all the more authentic. This island only get a cruise ship visit every couple of years so the locals were delighted by our visit.

We enjoyed another breathtaking morning as we made our way to Santa Ana. The captain selected a position to drift while we went ashore. A group of warriors, brandishing clubs and spears, challenged every Zodiac approaching the shore. The challenge evaporated to broad grins amongst the warriors, helped in no small measure by the local children laughing at the warriors. The music played on bamboo, with discarded flip-flops providing the percussion, was unusually melodic and rhythmic. A series of dances were put on for us, including the conch shell dance. The dancing culminated with the dance of the virgins. Women wearing white hats / masks began the dance. The 'Mud Men' then flirted around the women until the blackened warriors displaced the mud men.

Honiara on Guadalcanal is the capital of the Solomon Islands and this was today's stop. We were moored up in the port, and mini buses took us firstly to the local museum, the Central Market and then the Parliament Building where we were given a full tour. We returned to the ship for lunch.

After lunch was a rather more sobering experience as the events of WWII were unfolded before us. Both the American and Japanese memorials plus Henderson Field Airfield were a fitting tribute to the men on both sides who fell in the decisive battles of Guadalcanal.

Today was the highlight of the entire trip, Marova Lagoon in the Solomon Islands. We anchored inside the double barrier reef system of the lagoon and visited the village of Mbili, on one of the many islands. The captain picked his route into the lagoon and anchored in a deep channel off Mbili. He sent out scout boats to survey the channel and surrounding area to check depths against charts. We were the first cruise boat ever to visit this remote area and our visit had been organised by the country's government officials that we had picked up earlier in the trip, and who had travelled with us on the ship for the last few days. The onboard officials eased the passport and immigration formalities and allowed us easy access to the islands without hinderance.

We headed off early and were met with a wonderful welcome at the village. The children and village folk had obviously been busy making garlands and palm leaf hats to present to us. There were boats tied up all along the waterfront; word had clearly been sent to neighboring islands and excellent local crafts were on display.

We encountered a spirited challenge, with a little twist - the warriors' dance was designed to be comical and reflected the fun that bubbled through the village. A small group sang a beautiful song of welcome from the platform in the open meeting hut. One of the men added to the welcome with a speech that he had obviously given a lot of thought to. He described our visit as "a dream come true". There were displays of everyday activities, like husking coconuts and basket weaving.

Everyone who waited in line for fresh coconut but held their breath as the young kids deftly cut the coconuts, their machetes landing millimeters away from their fingers. No Health and Safety Rules here.

On our return to the ship we encountered a pod of Spinner Dolphins that came to play with our boats. After lunch on the boat, we headed out to a sandy beach for a swim in the 33 degree crystal clear water.

Next day it was the island of Tetepare, again in the Solomon Islands. The goal of the Tetepare Descendant's Association is to protect and conserve the island for future generations and descendants. Nobody lives on the island apart from part time rangers. Their efforts are paying off. The island is in pristine condition.

We were met with another menacing display from four young warriors and welcomed while being told us about the goals of the Association. Huge local crabs were dropped on the lawn for us to see and examine. Hearing that they have pincers strong enough to break into coconut shells made sure we kept our toes well out of the way.

We went with the wardens, following their boat in our Zodiacs, to see the turtle tagging. After being tagged and weighed the turtles made their way back into the water. Their struggle across the sand was in complete contrast to their graceful swim once in the water. After lunch, the people who did not want to snorkel went off for a cruise in the Zodiacs along the coast of the islands.

We sailed overnight to the port of Raboul in Papua New Guinea, where we were taken to see the local volcano with its hot springs. The water was emerging from the ground boiling, a bit hot for bathing. The charter flight was two hours late in arriving for our flight to yet another country. Australia this time and the city of Cairns. It rained that night with a massive thunderstorm.

Next morning was brilliant sunshine as we headed out for a visit to the 'Great Barrier Reef'. A high speed catamaran took us on a ninety minute trip to a permanently moored pontoon. Here were anchored a glass bottomed boat, a semi-submersible and a helicopter platform. Here people could snorkel, dive or just view the huge selection of fish swimming everywhere.

Our final day, was spent taking things easy in Cairns with a visit to a small Zoo containing some of the animals of Australia. Here Paula got a chance to 'Cuddle a Koala'.

Our flight home was via Hong Kong, but when we arrived at Heathrow, we discovered that both Glasgow and Edinburgh Airports were closed due to snow, so our flight north was cancelled. We had to book a further two nights in the local Premier Inn and then get our re-scheduled flight home.