



COULD YOU SURVIVE A SOUTH PACIFIC CROSSING?

Words and Images by Ocean Belcher

A sense of doom looms over the boat. The storm cell tailing us puts a black cloud on the horizon of our minds. We've had six days at sea, been beaten and broken, and it feels like groundhog day. Warren's out the back getting his head bandaged together, Rowan's losing his stomach, and we're all still seething from the 2L of pumpkin soup that had managed to hurtle itself dramatically throughout the cabin downstairs.

Meanwhile we've received the news from our sister ship Tamara that a second front is on its way – so heavy they've had to turn and run. It's felt like receiving a death sentence.

We can't sail anymore. We're sleep deprived, we're soaking wet and there's nothing left to give. We'd have to sit tight and let the next system pass. We curse and fumble with the parachute anchor at sunset and get the thing deployed before settling in for the worst night's sleep of our lives.

So how did we end up in this situation? Ignorance. It's bliss until you're in the sh#t.

*"As the age old saying goes
"there are two types of sailors.
Those that leave unprepared,
and those that never leave".
We chose to leave."*

2 WEEKS EARLIER

Like any good expedition, it began with obsessing over MetService for weeks. Pouring over charts and maps to plan our journey, matching this with our understanding of the weather and systems which could blow us all the way to Fiji...

We'd trained my mother to deliver forecasts via the satellite phone, completed our Advanced Sea Survival Course with Coastguard Boating Education and had even had a play in the life raft. We were ready and all that was left to do was cross our hearts and pray for a safe passage.

This is something we'd been dreaming about for a year. Casting off and setting sail for the sandy beaches of the Pacific Islands. Dancing over white crested waves and cutting a path through lightly wind-whipped water. Sailing represented the ultimate freedom – a way to leave the duties of land and life behind.

We'd been lent the family boat – a Farr 1020 named Ambrosia, and had 20 friends joining us on & off over a three month period to bite off a piece of the Coconut Milk Run. Fending a thousand reasons why we shouldn't abandon life at home, we broke free from restraints of "the man" and embarked on what would be the mission of a lifetime.

ENTER FLAW #1

We had a schedule.

Friends were flying to meet us in Fiji – and as a result we needed to reach the Coral Coast on time. But mother nature bows to no one!

As the Queen's birthday and our departure date rolled around, the weather was still in a state of flux. The weather charts were screaming red and we were bobbing in the marina like sitting ducks. The infamous Auckland – Noumea Yacht Race put on by Royal Akarana Yacht Club had been postponed and we were forced to follow suit.

But there was only so long we could wait with said deadlines, so planned to cast off regardless on Sunday 3 June. It was a somber mood walking down the dock – I felt like I was heading to war. Feelings not reflected by an

extremely enthusiastic crew. The sky was black and the air heavy with moisture; wind whistling through loose sheets and halyards creating a departure orchestra against confused skies.

Colville Coastal Forecast valid till midnight: SW 35 knots gusting 40. Easterly swell up to 3 metres. Strong change of thunderstorms.

We were in for a wild start, but felt optimistic that things would blow through quickly...

ENTER FLAW #2

We were coastal cruisers. And forecast aside – we weren't totally in tune with our boat. Nic has been sailing her for years, but she was a floating caravan that got loved throughout the Hauraki Gulf. A mission-mobile for Islington Bay and Motuihe, for doing bombs and drinking beers. I'd only seen the spinnaker once and she was laden with antifoul stains from the last guy who tried to send-it downwind. We hadn't had a test run in heavy weather and certainly didn't intend to.

But as the age old saying goes "there are two types of sailors. Those that leave unprepared, and those that never leave". We chose to leave.

Everything started calm enough. Rain on the horizon presented sunset rainbows and a salty haze. We had sundowners – Lion Brown – and set into our first night-shift with the upmost enthusiasm. But night-time brought with it the demons of seasickness and complacency. The on-watch crew were so ill that they couldn't man the boat, and "Tony" our autopilot was left to his own devices while they assumed fetal position in the cockpit and threw up on themselves.

Over the soothing sounds of dry-retching I could hear the front of thunderstorms and gales approaching. The noise wild wind on the water makes is something else. Like Evil whistling through his smashed-up front teeth while grinning at you like a maniac. One fowl swoop of his drunken hand and we crash gybe the boat, blowing the mainsail in two. I fear the trip is over before it's even begun. We wrestle the pieces down and lash them to the deck, while Nic nurses a suspected broken wrist.

With true male bravado he continues to helm as

we limp under bare poles into the nearest bay, drop anchor and radio for help on the sat phone.

Public holidays in the middle of nowhere are always a convenient time to get sails repaired. We make a mad dash into Opuia searching for sailmakers whilst the rest stay on the boat to take care of our copious rum supplies and Monopoly Deal.

Fast-forward 24 hours and we're on the move again, massive thanks to Ross Harold Sails who hooked us up on Queen's Birthday Monday. But we're still plagued with five days of what was coined "Cyclone Maude". She's a hearty wench with one eye who just won't take no for an answer.

Eight metre swells demand we cancel plans of both the Kermadec Islands and Minerva Reef. They knock us down and destroy our wind instruments, crashing over the boat, flooding the cockpit and projectile vomiting through the washboards into the cabin below. We're regularly woken by the ocean reaching our bunks – which end up so wet that we give up getting undressed and choose to sleep in our wet weather gear.

Meanwhile a cracked engine coolant pipe floods 25l of water a day into the bilges – but we hadn't worked that out. We spend hours each day on our hands and knees in the cabin getting thrown about (breaking the fridge in the process) while trying to keep the boat afloat. We all end up so bruised, bloody and beaten that we swear we'll never sail again. But decisions should never be made in times of trauma.

Eventually the temperatures rise, the seas subside, and the butter starts to melt. Our first bluewater swim arrives like a baptism, washing us free of our filth and sins – namely breaking Nic's family boat. The brain quickly erases any residual memories and to the innocent bystander, you'd think we were having this much fun all along.

We stock up on pawpaw and local beer, sling hammocks from the halyards and settle into a tranquil three months of cruising and island hopping – exploring the outmost reached of Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. I guess this is why they say "the joy of bluewater sailing is a well-kept secret".

