

CHANGES

tasty waffle cones. And although it's not in the guide books, the mini-mart next to the Chook Shack outside Tipperary Waters Marina in Darwin has a wide selection of liter tubs of delicious ice cream. We baked Christmas cookies onboard, but you guessed it, we went ashore at Labuan Bajo on Flores Island in Indonesia for ice cream on Christmas.

From December to February '08, we traveled through Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, where we had excellent adventures involving culture and arts, flora and fauna, and people. We saw traditional dancing in Bali and Komodo dragons on Rinja, and met wonderful people on Lombok. But, sad to say, what almost brought tears to our eyes was the large neon Swenson's Ice Cream sign that we spotted on a busy street corner in Singapore. The four of us huddled around the menu and quivered. The kids had to stop me from taking photos of our large, neon-colored sundaes.

Over the spring months of '08, we crossed the Indian Ocean, traversed the Gulf of Aden, and traveled up the Red Sea into the Med. We broke up the passage across the Indian Ocean with a stop at Male in the Maldives, which is where we met up with those ice cream-loving cruisers on the San Diego-based *Kosmos*. It was at Male that our older daughter discovered that ice cream is a recognized currency. For in return for climbing

Having heard a rumor about there being ice cream on their boat's masthead, the whole Arnold family started climbing.



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the mast of *Kosmos* and tightening a few things, she got a Strawberry Fudge Ripple! We made our Middle Eastern landfall in Al Mukallah, Yemen. We found a sincerely warm welcome from the port officials and townspeople we met. We also found and enjoyed ice cream with chocolate sauce that was served in parfait glasses at the Moderne restaurant near the harbor. The Red Sea has some of the best snorkeling we've experienced. We spent quality time on water sports and managed to squeeze in some time to see the Pyramids in Egypt. But perhaps most satisfying of all, we also managed to find excellent ice cream in a small shop in Port Ghalib.

We spent the summer of '08 touring the Mediterranean from east to west. We saw Greece from Rhodes to the Peloponnese, during which time we also discovered that Greek yogurt served with honey is almost — but not quite — an acceptable substitute for ice cream. Lucky for us, the Greeks also like ice cream. When we reached Sicily, we were reminded how much we also enjoy gelato. We spent many happy hours sitting at an outdoor café, people-watching and eating excellent fruit-flavored gelato in Siracusa. We had no trouble finding both ice cream and sites of historical importance throughout Europe. In fact, we'll all fondly remember the time after each tour spent discussing history, art and culture over delicious ice creams.

In September of '08, we left Gibraltar and the Med and made our way to South America. We stopped at the Canary Islands. By then it had been almost a week since we'd had any ice cream. After a summer of easy access, it was hard to go back to viewing ice cream as a rare treat. In the Cape Verdes we had to make do with ice cream bars from a mini-mart freezer. We crossed the Atlantic to Brazil and our ice cream opportunities improved, for the Brazilians make a wonderful dessert that has a crepe wrapped around *dulce de leche* as its base. Then it is topped with ice cream. It was hard for us to leave Brazil. We are now in Argentina — at latitude 38, no less, although latitude 38 south — on our way back to the Bay Area via the Straits of Magellan. We'll let you know what kind of ice cream the penguins prefer.

— the arnold family 12/05/08



**DreamKeeper — Pac. Seacraft 40
Gar and Nicole Duke
The Solomon Islands
(Sausalito)**

It's eight in the morning in the beginning of November here in the Solomon Islands, and we're already dripping with sweat. A cup of dark roast Vanuatu Tanna coffee, freshly-baked sourdough bread, and some delicious organic home-grown Solomon Island pineapple start the day. We tune the SSB to Radio New Zealand and hear about the continuing economic problems back home and around the world. But we relish the fact that we have finally elected what we believe will be a competent President.

We try to stay in touch with the 'other' world, but let me tell you, the United States sure feels a long ways away from this country just to the northeast of Australia. We're mostly alone here in the Solomons, as the majority of yachts we know are on their way to Australia or New Zealand for the South Pacific cy-

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BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY DREAMKEEPER

Spread; Even young kids in the Solomons are comfortable on the water. Inset; Another beautiful sunset in this remote part of the world.

clone season. It's been almost two years since we 'Puddle Jumped' from Puerto Vallarta to the Marquesas, and we're excited to be still heading west. Our ultimate goal is to sail back beneath the Golden Gate in a few years.

Isn't the Solomon Islands a dangerous country? Aren't there dangerous rascals about, to say nothing of crocs and malaria-carrying mosquitoes? Wasn't there a major ethnic conflict recently, and isn't it a place where some of the most feared headhunters in the South Pacific lived? We smile. After all, that's the point, right? There are some legitimate dangers, and you do need to be on your game, but that's what makes it a true adventure. The truth is, we at Team *DreamKeeper* are very happy to finally be off the beaten track and cruising some less-traveled locations. In fact, the Solomon Islands are beginning to rank up there with our

favorite South Pacific countries.

David Stanley, he of the *Moon Handbook of the South Pacific*, calls the Solomons "best kept secret in the South Pacific." We've only been here two months and have seen only a fraction of the country, but we were quickly seduced. What's so great about the Solomons? Let's start with the people.

Everywhere we've gone in the Solomons, including the capital of Honiara, we've met about the most friendly people you can imagine. We've been invited to many villages, been treated as family, have had the most wonderful conversations, and have been given incredible wood carvings as gifts. By the way, the master carvers of the Solomons

are considered to be the best in the South Pacific. In addition, Nicole has even been given hugs by a couple of our local male friends. If you know Melanesian culture, this is very uncommon. Guys just don't touch women, especially not in public. When our friend Robert hugged Nicole during our good-byes, Nicole and I both shed a tear, as it was a rare act of deep affection that reached across traditional cultural norms. Anyway, these are the kind of people we've been meeting.

To be honest, there are a few bad people here in the Solomons. Most people are very poor, and some are desperate to make a few bucks to either send their kids to school or, in the worst case, buy a cold Sol brew and fresh betel nut at the local island shop. It's no different here than in any developing country, so you have to remember not to flaunt material wealth and to keep your boat locked when you leave her. The boats that usually have trouble here are the ones where hatches have been left open, dinghies left unlocked, and decks cluttered with stuff that can be easily swiped by someone in a dugout canoe. Fortunately for us, we've had none of these problems, and have been warmly welcomed to every village by most kind and giving people.

The Solomon Islands are intriguingly beautiful. They are covered with green trees and bushes that grow from the base of the limestone and volcanic substrate. And many anchorages feel like we have traveled back in time, for most places have no electric lights. The people travel primarily by dugout or outrigger canoe. Parrots and hornbills fly through the forest, and frigates and sea eagles are everywhere. Orchids grow like weeds, and gardens are abundant with fruit

Nicole and Gar are more than willing to accept the risks of seeking out adventure and less visited destinations during their cruise.



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and vegetables. Every time we come to a village, we trade rice, sugar, pens, pencils and notebooks for tasty pineapples, coconuts, watermelons, eggplant,

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Kids in canoes hung around the boat all day.

scallions, bush limes and lemons, green beans and papaya. In one village the kids learned that Nicole loves flowers. Soon every dugout canoe full of kids was bringing out beautiful bouquets of orchids, bird of paradise, hibiscus and frangipani. She was in heaven!

There is abundant life in the ocean, too. We caught four yellow fin tuna just sailing into our anchorage a few days ago. Last night the local lobstermen brought us four lobster in exchange for some D-batteries for their flashlights. In Marovo Lagoon, where we spent a couple of weeks, the passes to the outer reefs were full of big pelagic fish such as giant trevally and dogtooth tuna. It was also home to the most gray reef sharks we've seen anywhere. There were hundreds of them! We thought diving the passes in the Tuamotus was cool, and it definitely is, but if you want to see healthy shark populations, the passes in Marovo Lagoon are unreal!

We also spent a few days out at the Arnavon Islands, which is a marine sanctuary. The Nature Conservancy helped set up this protected area, along

Nicole freediving with a big gray shark. What you can't see in this photo is that there were dozens more big sharks nearby.

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with the three local communities who share the ownership of the land and sea. Arnavon is one of the most important sites in the South Pacific for hawksbill turtles to lay their eggs. It's amazing, for not only are there turtles everywhere, but also fish and bird life. Within minutes of dropping our hook in the lagoon, manta rays began swooping around our boat, thriving in the nutrient rich water. Pairs of parrots squawked as they flew by, and the seabirds laid their eggs on the nearby sandy beach. When we immersed ourselves in the 85-degree water, we saw an abundance of giant clams, plenty of rare napoleon wrasse and bumphead parrotfish, and possibly the largest sweetlips and giant grouper. The local rangers were happy to show us around, and even take us to see the turtle nesting sites, where they record and help protect the hawksbill nests. There is a \$20 anchoring and visiting fee to help pay for the management of the area, and we were happy to pay it.

But we'll be the first to admit that the Solomon Islands are not for everyone. If you're a cruiser who is looking for white sand beaches and doesn't like to spend much time with locals, you'd be better off somewhere else. For in the Solomons, you'll get 'canoeed' at every village — and possibly all day long, too. It's the culture for locals to come and check you out, welcome you and talk story. In addition, not that many yachts roll through these islands, so at many anchorages and villages you visit, you may be the only yacht that stopped there in years — if ever. Usually we are the center of curious attention, and sometimes have been visited by canoes from sunup until sundown. Many times people stare, enjoying watching our daily routine. The people take pride in your visiting their home, and love it when you visit, walk around, say 'hallo', and laugh and play with the *pikinini* (kids). And when you need a break from the villages, there are still many beautiful isolated anchorages where you can chill out in privacy. The Solomon Islands cover a lot of territory, and in most places the population density is very low.

Two dangers are crocs and malaria-carrying mosquitoes. You need to be careful where you swim,



because there are safe places and unsafe places. It's sometimes a bit annoying that you can't simply swim anywhere you want, because it does get seriously hot here. But you can seek out safe anchorages and safely get in the water there. We haven't been bothered much by mosquitoes. But we do take some prophylactic medication, and we do cover our hatches and portholes with nets at night. Malaria is a very real threat out here, so you do have to be smart. Thankfully we haven't had any issues with the 'muzzies', and have seen little of them these past couple of months.

There was considerable ethnic conflict on two of the main islands, Malaita and Guadalcanal, in the eastern province between '99-'00. And Honiara, the main city on Guadalcanal, was not a good place to hang out. But these days it's a dusty, bustling South Pacific city, full of aid organizations from Australia and New Zealand trying to get the country moving forward again. The streets are stained red, but it's from all the betel-nut chewing locals who, once they get over their

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Had this young one been born 150 years ago, it's likely he would have been 'blackbirded' into the sandalwood trade.

initial shyness, greet you with big red-toothed grins. The local market is huge, much larger than the one at Port Vila in Vanuatu, and is filled with incredible veggies and fruit. You can even head to the Lime Lounge for the best thick milkshake in the South Pacific, or the yacht club for a cheap cold local Sol beer to drink while you watch the sun go down. There are some good supermarkets, an interesting museum, and many WWII sites and wrecks worth checking out.

When we arrived in Honiara, ours was the only cruising boat in the harbor. A week later, there were seven cruising boats, including ones from Japan, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Norway and Germany. It was a real international mix of yachties who had decided that the Solomons couldn't be as bad a place as the rumors had it. As I write this, we are at our last Solomon Island landfall, a place called Mono Island on the northern border next to Papua New Guinea. There

are five yachts here — from Norway, New Zealand, Holland, England and us — and it's the most boats the village has ever seen at one time. The people are ecstatic, and the *pikinini* are laughing nonstop as they swim and paddle around us. There is a celebratory feel in the air, and everyone seems elated that we have chosen to call upon this little island.

We hope this letter inspires readers to not only light out on your own dreams, but to take risks and find adventure in your lives. During the years we spent preparing for this journey in Sausalito, countless people told us that we were too young and too inexperienced, or they felt the need to try to scare us with stories of storms and pirates. And once we entered the world of 'cruisers' traveling oceans, the scary stories got even worse. People would tell us to avoid this place or that, either because of the people, weather or navigation hazards. Some

of this information was valuable, but most often we had delightful experiences where we were warned not to go.

For example, we actually loved the Marquesas and Tahiti, wouldn't have missed the Tuamotus for the world, and relished in the coral reefs in the Ha'apai Group of Tonga. We must have had the easiest check-in to Suva, Fiji. All of these are places that people told us they disliked or advised us to avoid. We've learned to go and see for ourselves instead of relying on the reports of others.

We also suggest people not be afraid to leave the 'American-only' yachtie groups, which we think are too common. These folks rarely branch out to spend time spend time meeting yachties from other countries or getting to know the locals. Don't be afraid to go take some risks, explore and get off the beaten cruiser track. There are still thousands of islands out here in the South Pacific that are rarely if ever visited, and they are waiting for you.

Now that we have had a glimpse of the Solomon Islands for ourselves, we would come back again in a heartbeat. And we recommend it to all. Tomorrow we leave for Papua New Guinea, soon followed by Palau, Micronesia, and West Papua, Indonesia. Our dream is still alive and the adventures continue.

— gar 12/05/08

Flashgirl — Wylie 38+ Commodore and Nancy Tompkins Cruising The Happiest Place? (Mill Valley)

Greetings from Vanuatu! We finally got away from New Zealand on October 20, and had an interesting sail — meaning many headsail changes to match the conditions — to get here. I'd been wanting to visit Vanuatu — which has a popu-

At 76 years of age, the still-virile Commodore handsteers 'Flashgirl' at high speed to yet another South Pacific destination.



FLASHGIRL