

Best Explorer

Logbook 2017 – From Australia to Sorong, Indonesia



Figure 1: The track of our 2017 navigation

**Thursday 6 to Monday 10 April 2017 –
Pacific Ocean
Bundaberg, Queensland – Australia**

We considered ending our voyages here in Australia, but the Far East is too tempting an area to be overlooked without visiting it.

The only real decision we made in advance is not to return to Europe in future via the 'normal' Indian Ocean route, but to sail through the Arctic Ocean again.

It would be a shame not to make the most of and refresh our experience of that ocean, which makes us almost unique in Italy.

Australia, meanwhile, offers us many possibilities, from exploring the Great Barrier Reef to that of its northern coasts and then of all the nearby areas to the north, which are rarely visited by boats.

We have, however, had to reluctantly exclude Tasmania and New Zealand – which would take years – from our exploration plans. We do not think we are able to extend our stay in the Antipodes by that much.

Without extending our sailing horizons too far, this year we plan to visit New Guinea by sailing along its eastern coast, visit the Solomon Islands and finally land somewhere between Port Moresby and Borneo. We intend to finalise the details whilst we carry out maintenance on the boat.

We certainly have two very important jobs to complete:

replacing the rigging, which is now about fifteen years old, even though it still looks excellent, and repairing the centreboard's hydraulic piston, which is leaking oil. The latter job involves lifting the boat to remove the piston from below and lifting it again to refit it.

When I arrive at the Brisbane airport, I'm slightly worried about immigration, because of course I don't have a return ticket, given that I'll be leaving Australia by sea.

Once again, the courtesy and pragmatism of the Australian officials impress me very favourably: a few questions, the presentation of the boat's logbook (written in Italian) and everything is sorted.

Once on board, I find everything in order. Ray, the mechanic who looked after the boat for me, has done an excellent job of looking after it and has even cleaned the deck thoroughly. He has also arranged the travel lift for hauling the boat out.

I take the time to get the systems up and running again, check those systems that, as usual, have broken down in the meantime, stock up on supplies and confirm all the appointments for working on the rigging and centreboard.

I'm still suffering from jet lag for a few more days. I also take the time to go into town, which is about twenty kilometres from the harbour, do some shopping (it's cooler than I expected), and I resolve to find the cause of the propane leak, which has been going on and getting noticeably worse since last year.



The weather generally remains fine, albeit with a fair amount of cloud cover; the sun on the horizon filters its rays, fanning them out and gilding the edges of the clouds in a way I have never seen before or since being on this coast.

When, early on Monday 10 April (a matter of the tide), we begin lifting the boat, I am full of energy.

Thank goodness! The lifting strap, under pressure, has bent and fractured one of the hull's edges near the starboard toilet, and now the crack is wide enough to fit a finger through!

The boat, however, is safely ashore on its temporary cradle, and I congratulate the Best Explorer, which has once again proved generous to us even when in trouble: it wasn't dam-

aged whilst we were in the water, so we didn't sink...

There's no point in regretting it now. Steel can be welded, and we'll investigate the causes later. Today I have to start dismantling the shrouds and disconnecting the mast's electrical connections because we're taking it down tomorrow, and this will take me the whole day. The boat is connected to shore power and I'm rushing to replace the gas regulator first of all – you never know, that might be the problem.

**Tuesday 11 to Monday 24 April 2017 –
Pacific Ocean
Bundaberg, Queensland – Australia**

A period of intensive maintenance work begins: to repair the hull, the entire internal structure around the damaged area needs to be dismantled to allow for cutting and replacement. I ask Ray's helpers to do it for me: it takes them a full three days!

The mast needs to be dismantled and placed on the ground so the shrouds can be replaced, and arrangements need to be made to replace the centreboard piston: it can't be mended.

While we're at it, we'll also need to dismantle the very rusty hatch frame and replace it with a stainless steel one.

I'll also take the opportunity to replace the radar, which has been broken for some time, and the external plotter, which is now too old and for which electronic chart cartridges are no longer available.

Then there's the whole job of repainting the hull. In short, there's a lot to do, but this is only the second opportunity we have since leaving Italy (the first was in Tahiti) to properly tackle the maintenance.

Over the years we've learnt a great deal about treating steel: it's simple enough, really, but it requires the right materials, a temperature that's at least lukewarm, and time to apply all the coats of epoxy paint in a careful sequence, which is essential.

I'll try to get as much done as possible before Nicoletta arrives in about a fortnight.



Figure 2: Best Explorer on land in the shipyard

As I dismantle the various parts, I discover that the rust on the outside deck has made significant progress along all the edges of the metal sheets where there are openings. Unfortunately, this means there will be far more repairs to do than expected.

It is now clear that the damp and cold of the north have found every possible way to cause hidden damage without us being able to stop it.

This is the worst and most unexpected consequence of my stay in Tromsø. They aren't properly equipped there for seri-

ous maintenance work on pleasure boats. Let alone on steel.

To think that in far less technologically advanced places, such as Sand Point, a remote little island on the edge of the Bering Strait, they regularly use simple, lightweight, portable plastic covers with internal heating that are perfect for the job, but which they don't have in Tromsø.

Meanwhile, I discover that there is indeed a leak between the gas cylinder secured on the aft platform and the stove. The long stainless steel pipe runs through a wooden support in the kitchen floor. There, a one-centimetre section in contact with the wood has turned into a steel sponge through which gas was leaking dangerously without being detected by the alarm fitted nearby. Quite a risk!

Nicoletta joins me to help with the work, which is now looking set to take much longer than anticipated. It's a low point, partly because our sailing plan isn't well accepted back home and will have to be revised.

At 4 pm on the day of her arrival, I warn Nicoletta not to stay on land, but to climb the ladder and come aboard. I don't explain myself clearly and she delays: she'll pay dearly for the consequences. Here, the accursed sand fleas are everywhere, called 'nono' in Polynesia and 'sand bugs' here. They are so tiny that we've never actually managed to see them; they come out at dusk and the only protection is to cover every inch of skin possible, unless you leave the infested area immediately. You don't feel the bites until the next day, but then they become very painful and linger for a couple of weeks!

**From Tuesday 25 April to Monday 12 June
2017 – Pacific Ocean
Bundaberg, Queensland – Australia**

Nicoletta, I don't know how she managed it whilst travelling through various countries where she had to work, arrived with the new, heavy wind generator, which we installed straight away.

Over the following days, we continued to replace parts and order and fit instruments. The bow bridge triangle, which was also unexpectedly corroded, was replaced with a new stainless steel one. We then cover it with appropriate anti-skid material.

We also ordered the new radar from a very well-known manufacturer, striking a balance between cost and performance, with the result that we ended up with more of a toy than a proper instrument. Disappointing.

We set to work on the various paint jobs and realise that the goodwill of our mechanic's workers is inversely proportional to their competence.

An example: one of them kindly offers to mix the paints for us in a 2:1 ratio. The initial quantity isn't enough, so to double it he adds more in a 1:1 ratio, and we have to insist a lot for him to do it properly.

We take a day off to celebrate Nicoletta's birthday and go to visit the wild Fraser Island: it's well worth the trip!

The Australian craftsmanship leaves us speechless: the

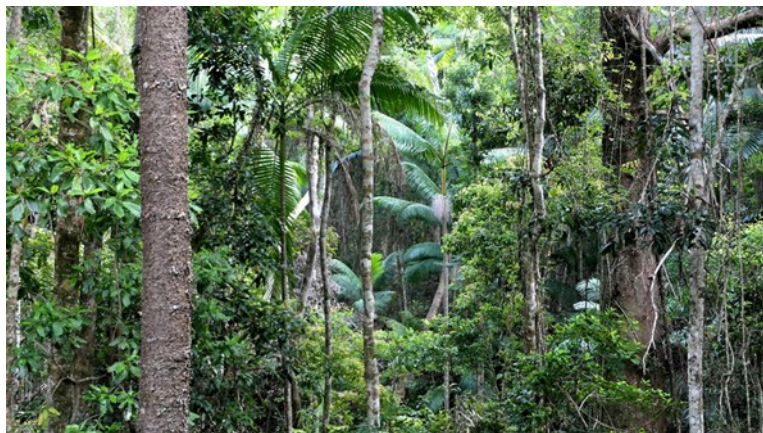


Figure 3: The thick Fraser Island forest

new deck hatch, which was supposed to be made like the old one the blacksmith had as a sample – curved like the deck – comes out as straight as a billiard table even the second time round! On the third attempt, they get it right, finally.

The centreboard piston promised in a week arrives after two months. When fitting it, they try to tighten the retaining bolt anti-clockwise until, growing impatient, I step in.

Our mechanic has to go to great lengths to get me to have the gas pipe replaced by a specialist, because the kitchen isn't up to Australian standards as he would have it. In short: if our experience teaches us anything and you need work done (apart from the courtesy and superb work of the rigger), rule out Australia.

Logbook 2017 – From Australia to Indonesia

On 7 May, Nicoletta returns to work in Italy and will only be able to come back here on 21 June. We continue working with the construction site, the instrumentalist and the mechanic until Monday 12 June.

Given the time that has passed, you can imagine the sheer number of problems and jobs that have been dealt with, which I'll spare you the details of. Suffice to say that the most important ones – namely the mast and shrouds, hull repairs, the hatch and the piston – have finally been completed.

Every now and then I allow myself a few moments' respite, which I use to walk along the coast to Burnett Heads, a small village nearby with a supermarket and a few shops.

I recently underwent a long-overdue operation that has finally resolved my walking difficulties, and I'm enjoying the walks.

The path runs alongside a wooded area on one side and the river mouth on the other. I don't recall seeing any animals apart from the ever-present pink and grey parrots, which always fly in flocks. No kangaroos, but no snakes or spiders either!

We're in the southern hemisphere: winter is approaching here and it's quite chilly, so I need to buy some warm clothes. This also justifies a few trips into town, which, incidentally, doesn't particularly appeal to me.

I also often visit the little fish shop at the marina, which supplies me with cooked prawns of exceptional quality: perhaps the best I've ever tasted!

We have heard that Port Moresby in New Guinea is very dangerous for crime, especially towards whites. So is the rest of the country, with a few exceptions such as perhaps Rabaul, far to

the east. We have therefore changed our plans and will take ourselves, still to New Guinea, but to its much quieter western Indonesian coast.

It's now clear that I won't find anyone to accompany me for the nearly five hundred miles separating me from Cairns, where Nicoletta will be arriving. I'll have to manage to sail on my own.

I spend several days studying the route, which will wind its way along the inner channel of the Great Barrier Reef. I carefully plan the possible stopping points with the help of the mechanic, who knows part of the route well. They must not be more than ninety miles apart to allow me to rest.

I will only be able to sail during the day because of the numerous islands and atolls and the coastal traffic, and I must be able to reach the anchorages while it is still light. There aren't actually that many anchorages that meet these conditions.

On Friday 9 June, the boat is finally launched, and I set about stocking up on the necessary supplies.

I can't hide the fact that I'm a bit nervous: I've just enough time to reach Cairns before Nicoletta arrives, and there are many miles to cover. It's only the second time I've sailed solo.

**Tuesday 13 to Tuesday 20 June 2017 –
Pacific Ocean
Bundaberg – Cairns, Queensland –
Australia**

We're off to a good start!

I set sail, head into the river estuary and the engine cuts out! I've no doubt inadvertently closed the fuel valve again (remember Canoe Cove?), but now the current is carrying me towards the shore. I'm as quick as lightning! I open the valve, climb back up and restart the engine, which starts after a couple of coughs. Just in time.

This is where the coastal channel begins, but the outer reef is far off and out of sight.

A lovely sail to Cape Capricorn, a wooded headland that owes its name to being situated almost exactly on the Tropic. I drop anchor in the shelter behind the headland, only to encounter the second problem of the trip: that damned windlass jamming again.

This is just the start of an endless series of problems. Months of maintenance on the boat haven't been enough. Now both pumps that fill the diesel working tank have seized up. Good-bye rest, but I manage to sort it all out! I'm very tired.

The night is splendid: I can see Sirius and Orion almost at their zenith, with the moon rising a few hours after sunset and the sky's vault crossed by a brilliant Milky Way. The southern stars—Canopus, Hadar and Rigel Kent, still unfamiliar to me even after

several years now—shine all night long further south.

I've planned to cover a hundred miles the next day, so I set off at five in the morning. It's still dark.

The south-easterly wind that helped me at first dies down by midday, forcing me to slow down.

I have to stop earlier at one of the alternative anchorages I'd planned, but I've still covered eighty-five miles today.

The next day the same pattern repeats itself, though I set off even earlier. Today there is no wind.

On the mainland, I can see many merchant ships moored, and the water is far from clear. I suspect the mines supplying the ships are doing it no good at all.

On the third and fourth days, too, I set off early and sail with no wind. My stops are nothing more than resting places: no time is left for anything else.

On the fifth day, a potentially serious problem looms. During an inspection, I notice that the hull beneath the sink in the forward port bathroom is wet. I nearly have a heart attack: could it be that the hull beneath this section is rotten, just like the one on the starboard side?

I could kick myself for not thinking to inspect it whilst we were working on the starboard bathroom.

The first thing to do is looking for a shipyard to carry out an emergency repair, but I don't succeed in finding one before Cairns.

In the meantime, to save time, whilst sailing I set about dismantling all the bathroom fittings, just as the shore-based

workers had done on the starboard side. It had taken them three days. I feel sick at the very thought of doing the same thing on my own whilst underway.

I have to break the work down into ten-minute intervals so I can go out on deck to check there's no risk of collision.

Fortunately, there is practically no traffic on this route.

The night is very short, but I have to rest anyway. I get back to it as soon as I set sail again, still in the dark. To my surprise, I finish dismantling everything in a few hours (so much for Australian professionalism).

To my immense relief, I discover there's a microscopic hole letting fresh water out under pressure, forming an almost invisible mist that wets the hull. The hull itself, however, is intact! No repairs are needed, apart from plugging the hole.

I set off again, but I can't relax: the autopilot is playing up and forces me to hold the helm all day.

On the last day, the wind picks up and the sailing becomes pleasant. It's a shame that fatigue and tension prevent me from enjoying it as much as I might.

In the end, utterly exhausted, I manage to reach Cairns where I moor with great trepidation (it's an estuary and the cross-current is strong), but by drawing on all my expertise, I succeed.

Thank goodness Nicoletta is arriving tomorrow; I've had far too little rest this week. I'm exhausted.

Wednesday 21 to Thursday 29 June 2017 – Pacific Ocean Cairns, Australia to the Arafura Sea

The days spent in Cairns are hectic. We receive confirmation from a shipyard that there are no problems under the port bathroom.

We then set about figuring out how to obtain entry permits for Indonesia – a truly complicated process – and stocking up on supplies.

Finally, on Sunday, we are able to set sail in fine weather after the obligatory exit formalities from Australia. A Europe without borders and without nautical bureaucracy (excluding, of course, the ineffable Italy) seems light years away.

The barrier from here northwards is much closer to the mainland and the navigable channel, dotted with shoals, is much narrower, but the water is finally clear.

Confirming my earlier assumption, there are no longer any mines along the coast.

Before evening, we pass by Endeavour Reef, where Captain Cook nearly lost his ship, the Endeavour, and also sail past Cooktown, at the mouth of the river where it took him seven weeks to repair it.

Our watches are inevitably solitary.

The following morning, around six o'clock, I give in to fatigue and doze off for a few moments at the helm with the autopilot.

lot engaged (we're motoring, there's no wind and the autopilot seems to be working).

The radar alarm isn't on because, so close to the coast, it would be going off constantly, but the active AIS is always on.

I am woken by an unusual noise. I look up and, just a few metres from the bow, I see a fishing boat coming straight at me from the starboard side.

I just manage to disengage the autopilot and give the wheel a sharp turn. I miss the fishing boat's side by less than a hand's breadth, but I can't veer any further or I'll end up like the Costa Concordia, ramming into its side.

Thick steel cables to the nets are trailing from the stern, and our bow pulpit gets caught underneath them.

The fishermen hurl abuse at us but make no move to help the boat, which is being dragged along.

Nicoletta has jumped onto the deck and is running towards the bow to free the pulpit, but she risks getting seriously hurt whilst I try in vain to steer the boat to starboard.

Seeing that the manoeuvre had failed, after a few moments of indecision I veered completely to port to follow the fishing boat and, by accelerating, managed to free myself.

I remember perfectly well that there was absolutely no one in the fishing boat's wheelhouse: damned reckless fools!

There is damage to the forestay, the jib furler which no longer works, and the pulpit, but at least no one was hurt.

We breathe a sigh of relief, but we're still very shaken and absolutely furious. I was coming from the left of the fishing boat,

right, my fault, but I was tired and a moment's distraction can happen. And them, sailing with no one on watch!

If there had been someone on deck, they could at least have sounded the horn! What's more, the wretches keep their AIS on passive mode so no one knows where they're fishing, thus our collision alarm didn't go off, but theirs certainly did!

There's no question in their mind of stopping to check the aftermath of the near-collision, is there? Not even with a radio call! I wish them things I can't repeat here.

The coast is covered in primeval forest, and the route is dotted with coral reefs; the scenery is beautiful.

We stop for half a day to rest and recover from the scare, then set sail at midnight to continue on past Cape York, the northernmost point of the continent.

We'd hoped to spot a few saltwater crocodiles, but we see no sign of life either in the water or on land.

We will not tackle the extremely difficult Torres Strait between Australia and New Guinea directly, as its maximum depth is around ten metres. During the Ice Age, Australia and New Guinea formed a single continent.

It is crossed by extremely strong tidal currents, but we will stay close to the coast where the seabed is clearer, if not deeper, and the currents are weaker. The weather is overcast and it rains from time to time.

We have timed our crossing to exit the Strait heading north-west with favourable currents. Halfway across the Strait, now in the Arafura Sea, a twenty-five-knot tailwind picks up. It's an interesting crossing mainly as we do not have any idea how

this sea will look like.

The sea looks muddy and grey, matching the overcast, rainy sky, for now it's depressing, but we're not sailing badly.

**Thursday 29 June to Wednesday 6 July
2017 – Pacific Ocean
from the Arafura Sea to Sorong, Indonesia**

The sea is choppy and we carry on with a mixture of curiosity and boredom due to the monotony.

At dusk we spot a long, low fishing boat of unusual appearance on the horizon and, moments later, a hundred metres to starboard, our eyes are drawn to a small flag. We reach it in no time and, when we are just a few metres away, I make out a row of floaters across the bow.

“Nicoletta, a drifting net!”

There’s no time to do anything and I fear the worst. Incredibly, we pass over it without the line of floaters getting caught in the keel, propeller or rudder. It’s almost a miracle!

Unfortunately, by now it’s almost nightfall, and we spot another one a little further away; this time we can’t see if there are any floaters: it’s too dark. We leave it astern without knowing whether we’ve passed over anything or not.

As the stormy night sets in, with showers and frequent lightning, the entire horizon around us lights up with the blinding spotlights of fishing boats: they’re absolutely everywhere! We weave our way from one spot to another, heading each time for the areas with the least light, hoping to stay as far away as possible from the likely nets we wouldn’t be able to see.

The sea is black and rough and we don’t want to think about what would happen if we got tangled up and the nets left us

helpless in these conditions.

We don't sleep a wink all night, tense as violin strings, until, just before dawn, it seems we've left all the fishing boats behind us.

As day breaks, the sky clears, the sea calms, and we can finally take turns resting.

We manage to use the autopilot's servo motor, which has broken down again, correcting our course only with the control button: at least this way we reduce the physical strain.

The sea is now dotted with the pale blue blisters of Portuguese man-of-war; these jellyfish are very dangerous for swimmers, but look very beautiful.

In these conditions, we can take turns resting for long stretches and even enjoy the sailing again. We pass several jungle-covered islands with not a soul in sight. We approach the coast of the large island of New Guinea, which is also covered in forest. It feels like being in a Conrad story.

As we continue, we gradually approach the mouth of the natural channel leading to Sorong, which we enter at dusk.

We decide not to stop to rest and arrive in Sorong in the middle of the night amidst violent downpours. We find a number of tall, massive fishing boats anchored ahead of us, lit up as if a party were taking place on board.

Keeping an eye on the depth sounder, we navigate between them with great caution, not trusting the chart's accuracy very much and afraid of encountering ropes stretched between them.

We end up anchoring, exhausted, in twenty metres of wa-

ter off the small island of Doom, unsure of the seabed's holding but too tired to look for an alternative.

We were greatly helped by the advice of Alice, who had been our sailing companion between the Galápagos and the Marquesas, now a crew on an Italian boat moored right next to us.

The next day, with the help of a local handyman, we went to complete all the complicated entry formalities. At his suggestion, we left a few tips here and there, for ridiculous sums, to show the officials our gratitude for their courtesy and helpfulness.

We later realised that they were really just tips, because on other occasions we forgot to give them and suffered no pressure or negative consequences.

We round off this leg of the voyage with a brief get-together in the evening with Alice and the skipper of the other boat.

They tell us about a nasty ordeal they went through not long before, when they were boarded by thugs and robbed at gunpoint. We're in rather rough waters. Fingers crossed!

**Thursday 6 to Tuesday 11 July 2017 –
Pacific Ocean
near Sorong, Indonesia**

We welcome two of Nicoletta's friends and their Indonesian friend on board: they've come aboard to explore the possibility of opening a diving centre in this area, like others that are springing up all over the place around here.

This is a new experience for me: this time, I won't be the one deciding where to go and how, but I'll have to accommodate their requests, always with safety in mind, of course.

We head towards Batanta, a long, wild island just west of Sorong. We proceed somewhat by trial and error: this is our first time anchoring in the face of the dense Indonesian jungle, and we arrive after skirting a field of buoys.

It is a pearl oyster farm, a bit like those found in the Tuamotu Atolls. We stop a little further on in a quiet cove fringed with coral. I'm a bit unsure about my choice, but everything goes well.

The next day we move a short distance up the north coast, into a much larger bay. The water is crystal clear and the jungle around us is noisy. The seabed is quite varied, and the coral reefs are irregular. They are different from those on other Pacific islands: I'll have to get used to them.

In the evening several large hornbills fly high over the boat: what a view! I didn't expect to spot one: they are really majestic.

The day after that, we go and anchor inside an atoll in the middle of the channel between Batanta and the island of Mansuar: Pulau Jerief.

There is a diving centre there run by an Italian woman whom Nicoletta knows, and she gives us a warm welcome. Entering the lagoon was really interesting: the channel isn't marked in any way, and we had to search for it using vague directions we'd received beforehand.

We moved slowly through the coral heads with the keel raised, scanning the seabed carefully. The corals were clearly visible beneath us and the light was just right for spotting them.

I took the opportunity to try and memorise a few landmarks to guide me next time, but there were very few reference points.

As evening fell, thousands of flying foxes flew overhead, heading to feed on fruit on Batanta: an almost eerie spectacle.

We then moved to a cove on the island of Pulau Pef after a difficult stop at the jetty on Pulau Arborei, which was being battered by the current. Even in the cove, we were deep in the jungle, surrounded by mangroves.

This area north-west of Sorong consists of an archipelago of islands, atolls and very distinctive karst formations

The entrance to the creek is spectacular: limestone rocks, the remains of ancient coral reefs, some ten metres high and topped with thick vegetation, stand guard over the dark, utterly still water.

We move forward slowly in the silence, disturbed only by the faint hum of the engine. Further on, the channel opens out

and the jungle slopes down to the sea. We head starboard into a ravine where the water becomes crystal-clear. We anchor by throwing a line from the stern to the trees. We are in a paradise!



Figure 4: The crystal clear water of the Pulau Pef cove

Our next stop saw us mooring further at the jetty in the village of Pulau Manyafun, after duly seeking permission with the help of our Indonesian friend.

The waters along the north coast of that island are too deep for us.

We immediately attracted a crowd of children who sat on the jetty watching us and the boat in silence. There were too many of them to invite them all aboard, something they would have loved very much.

Meanwhile, our Indonesian friend and Nicoletta's friends had gone to enquire about their business affairs with the village

chief.



Figure 5: Night dances at Pulau Manyafun

Here, every patch of land is owned by an extended family, including collateral relatives and descendants, and everyone must give their consent for any transaction.

At night, pitch-black due to the lack of lights, we could hear music and singing, so we followed the sounds and a little further on we witnessed an unexpected and harmonious little show of local dancing.

From there, after a delightful snorkelling stop on a coral ridge and white sand near a small islet, we made our way to Pulau Penemu, anchoring at the narrow mouth of the central bight, as we weren't very familiar with the area. You have to ask for permission to visit.

it right at the entrance: tomorrow!

**Wednesday 12 to Saturday 15 July 2017 –
Pacific Ocean
near Sorong, Indonesia**

Having requested and paid for the permit, we entered by passing under a power cable of unknown height to anchor in the centre of the lagoon.



Figure 6: Pulau Penemu panorama

We take the dinghy to climb up to a vantage point: the view from above of these grey karst rocks, weathered by the elements and scattered across a crystal-clear sea, is fantastic and well worth the effort of climbing up and down with my recently operated leg.

The cliffs are also fascinating when viewed up close from

the dinghy: they are home to pandanus palms and other plants that serve as perches for colourful birds.



Figure 7: Trees cling to the rocks

We head to the far end of the inner lagoon where, on a mini-isthmus facing the opposite side of the island, a pleasant resort has been built. We treat ourselves to a drink before returning on board.

There we find a surprise: after dinner, whilst relaxing in the cockpit, we hear a rustling sound. Good heavens! It's a rat! Not as big as a brown rat, but still terribly harmful.

We set off in pursuit. The creature, of course, flees, quickly climbs the radar mast and slips into the hole at the top through which the antenna cables emerge.



Figure 8: Two brightly colored parrots

I can already picture the disaster it could cause: from there it could get into the lockers and then inside the boat.

Luckily, it's stopped inside the mast, but how do we flush it out? After much deliberation, whilst I stand on the alert with a short batten from the mainsail, Nicoletta—who, though an animal lover, is no friend of rats—sprays insecticide up the mast from below, hoping the rat, repulsed, will come out the top.

The manoeuvre works; the rat pops up at the top and with a well-aimed blow I stun it, throwing it into the sea, where it dies. I confirm my status as a great white hunter amidst general jubilation! But I fear that the Great Spirit of Rats has a terrible revenge in store for me.

We move north of Mansuar Island. The water is deep and, with the owners' permission, we moor in the morning to a

buoy in thirty metres of water.

After lunch, we feel the boat moving. It's not the first time: in the stunning Gulf of Morbihan, in Bretagne, many years earlier, and at Cape Vancouver in the Bering Sea, I'd already had a similar experience with the boat being tossed about by violent currents. There's a current here too, I think, and I go out onto the deck with the others to check.

The first thing I see, to my great surprise, is that the mooring line is not taut at all. It meanders lazily on the surface: the boat seems perfectly still.

And yet, the current moving her is definitely there.

I lean over the bow and see that it is indeed cutting through the water with some vigour: but there is nothing holding us back! Yet the boat is perfectly balanced, shifting slightly from side to side.

I almost feel like laughing: the only explanation is that two currents, one superficial and the other deeper and in opposite direction, balance each other out perfectly. An almost unbelievable combination!

I struggle to explain the situation and urge my friends not to try swimming anyway; there's no guarantee the effect would be the same on a human body, and we might be swept far away.

Back in Sorong, Nicoletta's friends disembark with their Indonesian guide, who leaves us his supply of very strong chili peppers. I wonder if he even put them in his coffee?

Meanwhile, we've managed to contact Wick, the owner of Helena Marina, which is situated on a river, and he'll be coming to guide us there.

From Sunday 16 to Wednesday 19 July 2017 – Pacific Ocean surroundings of Sorong, Indonesia

We begin to get to know this Indonesian city, full of colourful and courteous people, with the supermarket shop assistants laughing as they look at us, but they are kind and are probably just amused by our rather unusual appearance.



Figure 9: Up the river

We're meeting at 10 am on Sunday the 16th so we're ready to navigate the river estuary at high tide. We understand why this is necessary – to avoid running aground if we make a mistake – but we've never actually done it before.

After a few miles, we find ourselves in very shallow,

murky waters; we take care to follow properly Wick's instructions, but it is not easy without any landmarks apart from a few mangrove trees in the distance that are slightly taller than the others. We proceed slowly, and when we run aground a couple of times, it is fairly straightforward to get ourselves out of trouble by reversing gear a little.



Figure 10: Evening at Helena Mariina

The journey up the unnamed river is fascinating: it's a five-mile sail that feels like being in the jungle of Sandokan. Once we're in the river, depth is no longer an issue all the way to the marina, where the tide's influence is almost gone.

We moor at a narrow wooden jetty next to a couple of buildings with a grassy courtyard in between: it's the most rudimentary marina we've seen so far, but we make arrangements to meet up here in about ten days' time and leave the boat in safe keeping until next spring.

Meanwhile, Mauro has arrived and, together with him, we board a sort of bathtub without moving the boat to go to Sorong to complete one of the endless formalities that Indonesia requires every time we want to move on.

The bathtub seems more suitable than our dinghy, which has decided to deflate rapidly, but as it has no engine, we fit it with our fifteen-horsepower outboard engine, which is very heavy.

An Indonesian man from Helena Marina is also coming with us to keep watch over the boat and the engine whilst we're off running around the offices.

We've barely travelled a few hundred metres down the river before we're already full of water. We're sitting very low in the water because four people and a heavy engine are a bit too much of a load for this little boat.

What's more, there's a small hole below the floating line in the stern. We're taking on water and Nicoletta steps in to plug the hole with her finger, like the famous little Dutchman who saved the dam.

The descent down the river, viewed from the water's surface, is even wilder and more unsettling than when done by boat. We wind our way through the shallows of the estuary and learn to recognise them by spotting the almost invisible sticks planted on the riverbed as markers by fishermen: good to know.

Mauro at the bow leans towards our destination like a figurehead, but jerks back when a fish brushes past his nose, leaping high out of the water closely pursued by a large barracuda.

The barracuda, more surprised than Mauro, gives a desperate flick of its tail and misses him by a hair's breadth. The epis-

ode has gone down in our annals as perhaps the strangest and most hilarious of my entire life at sea!

On Tuesday, after a river descent by boat – always exciting – and the now routine slalom through the shallows, we set off on an uneventful voyage and return to anchor at our favourite spot in the middle of the jungle at Batanta.

The dinghy has been patched up and we enjoy a trip around the bay, which we hadn't done yet. We scare a giant flying fox perched at the top of a tree and explore another very picturesque stretch of seabed.

In the evening, we take a proper shower under a tropical downpour.

In the dark, silent night (the moon is in its last quarter and the clouds have disappeared), after a few minutes our eyes adjust and the forest-covered headland to the west appears as a black wall against the slightly lighter sky. But there is a certain glow that piques our curiosity: some trees are pulsing with tiny lights. They are tropical fireflies! The spectacle is magical, and only fatigue and our eyes closing make us give up.

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Pacific Ocean
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We want to return to the Gam area, which seems to offer better mooring opportunities.



Figure 11: Anchored at Gam

We're heading back to Friwin to anchor again, trying a new position to the south-west. Our instruments are playing up and we've long since lost the use of both the depth sounder and the forward-looking sonar, so, taking advantage of the calm, clear sea, we approach the coral reefs – which are very jagged – with great caution. Unfortunately, the charts for this whole area are seriously lacking.

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In the past, they used to send out the dinghies with a hand-held depth sounder, which we also have, but we trust the boat's solid construction.

There is also a current in that area and we cannot find a suitable spot, so we have to fall back on the old anchorage.

We usually move on in the afternoon, so in the morning we take the opportunity to enjoy some lovely swims with snorkelling.

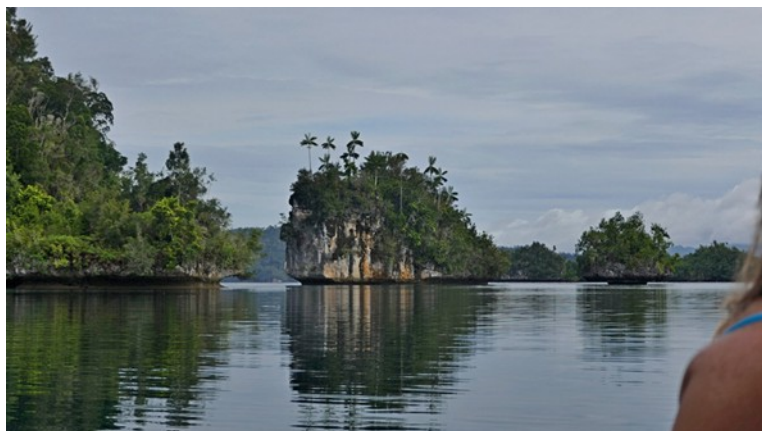


Figure 12: The stunning karst islets at Teluk Sumlamanyoko

In the afternoon we head into the large open bay between Gam and Waigeo, Teluk Sumlamanyoko, slipping into an area of spectacular karst formations, this time anchoring in a sort of pool surrounded by forest and completely deserted.

A trip in the dinghy is a must, and we discover ravines,

caves, passages and underwater freshwater springs with strange effects on the surface. We return to the boat for dinner, almost overwhelmed by the beauty of the place.

The next day will be full of excitement. There is a very narrow, winding channel between two rock faces several metres high that allows us to avoid circumnavigating Gam. The chart states that it is deep enough. I decide, either bravely or recklessly, to trust it for once, but first I approach cautiously to observe the current, which is strong and against us. Better that than with us. OK. I go in.

Well, it was one of the most thrilling experiences of my sailing career: it felt like rafting in a twenty-eight-tonne boat. She always responded obediently to the helm, but what a thrill to turn the wheel just in time to prevent her from skidding onto the rocks jutting out just a few metres away... We came out of it unscathed!

About five miles ahead of us lies Pulau Pef, our destination. We suddenly find ourselves in the middle of a field of buoys that seems to block the way. It's one of the many pearl oyster farms. We get close to look for a way through, stopping next to the first buoys and looking around.

A motorboat approaches us in a hurry; there are three stern-looking people on board and one of them, a young man who is clearly nervous, raises a Kalashnikov and points it at us. He can barely make himself understood: "Come with us." "No, not at all." "Come on," he says, waving the rifle. "No."

Two tense minutes...

Then their outboard engine cuts out.

They get distracted and I open the throttle wide and

speed away; our engine doesn't cut out. They look stunned, but they don't shoot... Nor do they follow us.

This time we go to the end of the channel and drop anchor in the centre of the inner lagoon. Once the dinghy is in the water, we head ashore, mooring at a small jetty amongst some boats.

From there, a wooden walkway winds its way through gigantic mangroves that I had never seen growing on what is now dry land. It looks like a work of art. Every cross-beam seems to have been shaped specifically to follow the meandering path.

The walkway leads us to the other side of the island. A top-class resort with excellent taste, Pulau4diving, owned by a Swiss woman, welcomes us free of charge and offers us an aperitif. We'll be back here tomorrow.

Come nightfall, we discover that the thief of the bananas left outside, which were regularly disappearing, is a flying fox coming to stock up...

**From Sunday 23 July to Tuesday 1 August
2017 – Pacific Ocean
near Sorong, Indonesia**

Snorkelling today. A dip from the resort's platform into the open ocean treats us to one of the most fascinating underwater views.

The expanse of water, barely a metre deep, stretches for about a hundred metres from the shore; it drops to a few metres just below the platform, before plunging a little further on at an angle of about thirty degrees towards the blue depths.

The coral is not branched as it is elsewhere, but amongst the nearby growths we discover a group of no fewer than five giant clams in perfect health, all close together: we linger for a long time watching them breathe through their orifices, as large as saucers. Large napoleon fish linger indifferently amongst swarms of smaller fish of every shape and colour, whilst further away and deeper down, slender blacktip sharks pass by.

We surface, reluctantly tearing ourselves away from this wonder.

Once we've set off, we stop to examine ancient hand-prints high up on what are most likely the remains of the floor of a cave that collapsed long ago. We are deeply moved, and our thoughts inevitably turn to the parallels with the modern hand-prints of children on the wall of a Paamiut school in Greenland, seen in 2012.

Years later, similar images found on nearby Sulawesi

were dated to 67,800 years ago!

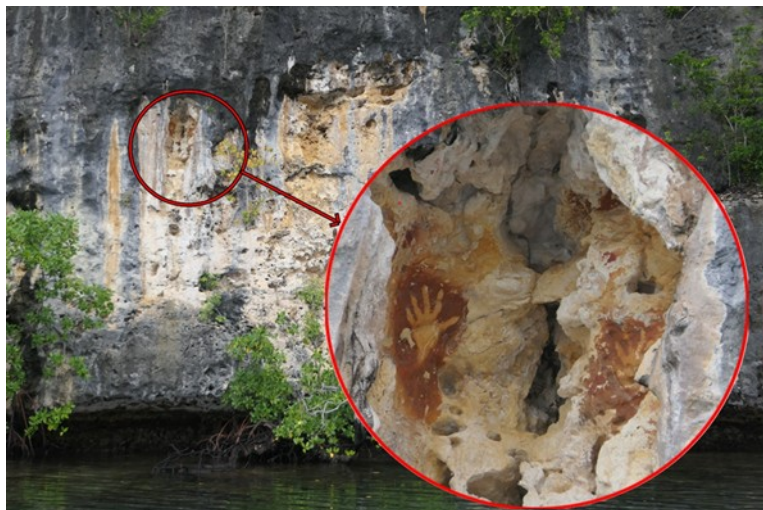


Figure 13: The hand prehistoric impressions

We return to Sorong with a stopover at Friwin and another at Pulau Jerief for a final dive on the reef and a farewell to the Italian woman who runs that resort.

A nasty experience at sea: all around the boat in the lagoon there is nothing but floating plastic, possibly from Sorong – even here!

We sail up 'our' river and moor for the winter at Helena Marina. We set about organising our winter lay-up, a daunting task.

We move the dinghies, inflatables and sails to a nearby

warehouse and try to work out how to send supplies from Italy and through the Customs.

We'll need a lot of it, starting with the forestay and a Yankee sail, which were irreparably damaged in the collision with the fishing boat in Australia.

The fridge has finally stopped working, but they're willing to repair it here if I bring some parts from Italy. No chance to get this service in Australia. And so on.

There are no ship chandlers or hardware shops here worthy of the name.

Wick hopes to have a slipway ready by spring, which he is building and which should allow us to haul the boat out of the water for a refit.

This is one of the biggest problems we've faced every year in these remote places: it's by no means easy to find shipyards or ports that can both provide winter storage and lift our twenty-eight tonnes.

A word of advice: if you're planning a voyage similar to ours, think about it many months in advance and perhaps plan your stops accordingly!

Once again this year, the four months away from Italy have flown by!