

LETTERS FROM OUR MEMBERS

***Soggy Paws* — 44' St. Francis — 3.1' draft** Subject/Area: **Cruising in SE Asia/Western Pacific -** **Doing the SE Asia Divers' Triangle**

Dear SSCA,

Everyone tends to focus their cruising around their interests, whether it be cultural, historical or following some other famous (or not-so-famous) person's path.

Well, we are “mad keen” divers, and last year we did the SE Asia Diver's Triangle—cruising from the Philippines to Indonesia to Palau, and then back to the Philippines.



After cruising the trade wind routes in the north and south Pacific, the monsoon seasonal winds in SE Asia take a little getting used to. But once you figure them out, they can be darned useful for smart cruisers who want to explore the area under sail. Figuring out the weather in this area is complicated by the fact that some of the cruising in SE Asia (Indonesia, specifically) occurs both north and south of the equator. So, cruisers are always talking about “Northern Winter” and “Southern Winter.” And sometimes the effects from “winter” spill across the equator to the supposed summer season.

The OpenCPN (free charting program) Climatology Plugin helped us sort through these issues. It has more up-to-date data than the traditional pilot charts. We used the Climatology Plugin to help us develop a cruising plan that let us take advantage of the seasonal wind changes, the seasonal calms, and avoiding typhoons and cyclones.

We started our journey from Oceanview Marina, at Samal Island in the Philippines, where we had just sold our cruising boat of 20+ years, the CSY 44 *Soggy Paws*. And we had spent a little time doing a few critical upgrades to our new-to-us St. Francis 44 catamaran. Our critical upgrades: A hardtop for the cockpit, a new bigger solar array and MPPT controller, and a 40-gph watermaker. We were ready to cruise. The primary destination: Raja Ampat in SE Indonesia.

In previous years, boats leaving from Samal for Raja Ampat usually left in late September, participating in a rally that met up with the Sail Malaysia Rally to the east. Because the SW Monsoon is blowing in September/October, it is a great time for the boats trying to head east from Malaysia. But it is a terrible time to head south from the Philippines to Raja Ampat. At that time of year, the southerlies are blowing, and it is always a beat to get south from the Philippines. After we participated in the rally from Samal in September 2014, we suggested a change to a spring departure. But because

of the Malaysia Rally, and the status quo, the 2015 Rally again left in September from Samal and the participants again had to bash south into the southerlies.

The organizers of the previous years' rallies from Samal to Indonesia, SSCA Commodores Luc Callebaut and Jacki Lee from *s/v Sloepmouche*, opted not to organize a rally in 2016. They said to us, "feel free to pick up the reins, and we will help you out." So, we became the cruise leaders and took the opportunity to change the departure date to mid-April, 2016. Negotiations with the rally sponsors in Indonesia forced us to move the rally departure date back to May 6. This was to coincide with a big celebration in the 2016 Indonesia Tourism focus spot somewhere else in Indonesia—we had to make sure anyone in OUR rally would have time left in their six-month visa to make that event in October (even if no one in our rally was intending to go there!).

The reason for a wished-for April departure was that the northeasterly monsoon winds would still be favorable, giving a nice sailing experience on the 500-mile trip down from the Gulf of Davao (SE Philippines) to Raja Ampat. This would have worked out well if we had been able to leave in mid-April. By early May, it is the transition season, so we had a couple of good days of sailing, and then the wind petered out. We spent quite a few hours motoring SE in near calm conditions, but at least the wind wasn't on our nose.

Because we were on a rally (albeit with only six boats), we had specific stops and a specific time schedule. Fortunately, Luc Callebaut had coached us and our Indonesian sponsors to stretch the schedule out so we had time to cruise down to Raja Ampat, not rush. The rally stops were spaced about 100 miles apart, and we had a week or so between events to get from one location to another.

This year we had a little extra challenge in organizing the rally. The kidnapping of several cruisers from Oceanview Marina in September 2015 by the infamous Abu Sayyaf terrorists had everyone rightly worried about security in exiting south from the Philippines. Especially since the rally departure date had already been publicized on the Internet. Though the Jolo area, where the Abu Sayyaf are based, is nearly 500 miles from Samal, if they made a raid once, they could conceivably do it again. So, Dave, retired Navy man that he is, used a few contacts from his Navy days in the Philippines to request a Navy or Coast Guard escort from Samal south to the Indonesian border. Once we had secured the Philippine Navy's agreement, he then pressured our Indonesian sponsor to get the Indonesian Navy to meet us at the border. Coordinating this, and educating the planned escort boat captains about the peculiarities of escorting sailing yachts, took quite a bit of extra effort on our part. And of course, trying to organize cruisers is like herding cats!

Finally, we departed Samal on May 6, 2016, headed south. We made two overnight stops in Philippine waters and then did one 36-hour overnight leg to reach the first inhabited island—Sangihe—in northeastern Indonesia. We kept our Philippine Navy escort for two days, and then met the Indonesian patrol boat at the border.

After clearing in (with rally credentials) in Tahuna Harbor in Sangihe (not a normal clearance port), we spent five days in Sangihe being entertained by the Sangihe Tourism Department. Rallies have pros and cons, but the two biggest pros were the hand-holding for clearances, and all the freebie activities in each stop.

Over the next 10 days, our little group made its way from Tahuna Harbor, to Morotai



(big U.S. air base during WWII) for a short stop, and then down to the first stop in Raja Ampat, at Wayag. Wayag is an uninhabited archipelago with some great diving, snorkeling and hiking possibilities. It is far enough from the tourist center at Waisai that few day-trip boats visit. We were virtually alone in this gorgeous setting for two weeks.

For divers with their own compressors (three of the five boats had their own compressors), this is a paradise. There is a reasonable anchorage off a nice beach with good protection, and six or seven world-class dive spots within dinghy reach. And most of the dive locations are documented with descriptions and precise locations in the excellent book, *Diving the Bird's Head Seascape*.

The two biggest challenges in diving in Raja Ampat are the anchoring depths and the currents. In Wayag, anchoring depths weren't a problem because the anchorage, inside the atoll, is reasonable depth and is relatively close to the dive locations. But the currents were something else. Though we had tidal information, it took a few days of trying before we could reliably time the direction and strength of the current. If we got our timing right and arrived at the dive site at slack water, we could anchor/tie our dinghy up, and jump over the side. If we got the time of slack current wrong, we had to either tow our dinghy behind us on a long line while diving, or designate one diver to stay on the surface with the dinghy(ies), so that no matter where the current took the divers, there would always be a boat waiting on the surface when they surfaced. We used all three methods in Wayag, diving the coral pinnacles outside the anchorage.



Soggy Paws at *Wayag anchorage*

Diving season in Raja Ampat, according to the dive resorts and live-aboard dive boats, ends in May. Many of the dive resorts and liveaboards give discounts for May and June and then close for maintenance for July and August. This is when the SW monsoon starts up, which results in squally weather from generally a southerly direction. At least in 2016, we found May and June to be great diving months. We had very little wind, not much rain and almost no tourist dive boats! In July and August, we did have some periods of nasty weather, but also some periods of fairly-nice weather. But one must remember that the anchorages marked "excellent" by some cruiser in January when the winds are blowing out of the NE, may be awful in August when the winds are blowing out of the south. If you are picking waypoints out of cruiser's blogs, it's always good to note the month they were there. With careful planning, we had few nasty surprises

along these lines.

Though we are sometimes budget cruisers, it's always easier and usually much more rewarding to go on guided dives, rather than diving by ourselves—at least until you get an idea of the local diving environment. We are always looking for an affordable way to dive with a good dive center. As is our normal habit when exploring a new area, especially in the off season, we would go to a dive resort and introduce ourselves, ask them about their facilities and equipment, and ask if they permitted outside divers that are not staying at their resort to join their groups. Sometimes this is a big “no,” no matter whether or not we were willing to pay their premium prices. (While a two-tank dive in the U.S. normally runs \$60-75, dive resorts in the top places often charge \$100 per dive or \$120-140 for a two-tank dive).

As an enticement to get discounted dives, we offer to (a) bring all our own equipment, (b) dive only on a space-available basis i.e., if they have a trip already going, and if there's space in the boat, (c) offer up our dive credentials. Dave is a (retired) U.S. Navy diver and YMCA and PADI instructor with well over 1,000 dives, and I have Rescue Diver qualifications, and several hundred dives. We sell ourselves as “no trouble” divers just adding cash to their already-planned dive trip. Often this works, but sometimes, for various reasons, they are not interested in discounting their dives.

We lucked into a dive operation in Raja Ampat that took us up on our offer. Raja Ampat is considered the epicenter of marine biodiversity with more fish and coral species than any other place in the world! And the small critters are amazing. Their requirements (a) they would let us know by text message the night before if there was space (b) we bring all our own dive equipment (c) we supply and fill our own tanks (d) we commit to a package of 20 dives per person.

Twenty dives are a lot of dives, and more than we really needed to see the best of the Dampier Strait/Cape Kris area of Raja Ampat. However, the greatly reduced price per person per dive was too good to pass up. So, we bought the package. We ended up diving with Biodiversity Eco Lodge for 20 dives spread out over three weeks. We got to dive the best dive spots in Raja Ampat several times each. They had excellent dive guides, and a good dive operation. And their clientele were from all over the world, mostly middle-class, nice adventurous people. It was a wonderful experience in a truly world-class dive area.

We think we added to everyone's enjoyment—no one can believe we are diving our way around the world. At the end of a great dive week, we had all the dive guests (four of them) and the dive instructors and guides out to *Soggy Paws* for a round of drinks and some daydreaming about doing what we were doing, “someday.”



Diving at Cape Kris, Raja Ampat

Other than at Wayag, we only did a few dives at Raja Ampat on our own—one dive, some cruising friends loaded everyone up on their big catamaran and took us all out to Cape Kris—this is the premier dive spot in Raja Ampat—and

dropped us all off along the wall. There was a pretty good current going, so it was a fast dive, but wow was there a lot of fish and sharks there! We dove Friwin Bonda in several locations from the dinghy with our big boat anchored nearby. We dove at Kabui Pass with a buddy boat, with two dinghies towed behind, after snorkeling the pass several times, so we knew where the best spots were.

By early August, our Indonesian visa was running out—we could still renew it for two more months, but... We had done all the best dives and activities in Raja Ampat, we had thoroughly explored the north coast of Batanta, and much of Kabui Bay (places to go when the south winds were acting up). So, we made the decision to head north on the southerly winds to another dive mecca, Palau.

We cleared out of Sorong, Indonesia on August 4, beached *Soggy Paws* on a beach along the north coast of Batanta to change the zincs in the sail drives on August 5, and then headed north toward Palau.

After a couple of days of day-hopping along the NE coast of Waigeo Island, the first major jump was a long day-sail to remote Ayu Atoll, 50 miles north of Waigeo. We arrived with enough daylight to work our way into Pulau Abdon, in the center of the atoll. This was a pretty weird place—the island, though there were nearly a hundred houses, was almost deserted. We saw only a few people in a three-hour walk ashore, and unfortunately, none of them spoke English. It looked like there had been quite a development attempt there a few years back, which just petered out. Whether this was an Indonesian Government initiative or some NGO operation, it was hard to tell. But there was even a (no longer functioning) cell phone tower there, with installation notes dated 2013.

Since our next stop, Helen Reef, was 156 miles away, we didn't stay long at Ayu Atoll. We spent one day poking around and left the next day to catch a good weather window for Helen Reef. The challenge at Helen Reef was to be there during a light period in the southerlies. The anchorage there is open to the south, and can be quite exciting if the south winds blow hard. We were trying to reach Helen Reef when the southerlies were going to ease off for a couple of days.

Oops, we almost made it. The wind turned off a day earlier than forecast and we ended up motor sailing the whole way between Ayu and Helen, dead downwind in very light conditions. But we made Helen Reef early enough on the second day to get in safely in good light. We were contacted on VHF Channel 16 as we entered the break in the reef, by the rangers based on the island. They don't have AIS, but they do have a



Ranger Station at Helen Reef

32-mile radar—used to keep rogue fishing boats out of the Helen Reef protected area. They offered to come down and guide us in, but since we had excellent Google Earth charts and someone else's track, we navigated our own way in. It was easy in good light.

They only get about 5-10 cruising boats a year in Helen Reef, so the rangers who do six-months stints on the tiny sand island are very welcoming to newcomers.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to us, the official rule is that you can't even snorkel in Helen Reef without a \$1,500 permit. But the Rangers said that as long as we went in the boat with them, we could do a little snorkeling while they spearfished for food. We would have loved to do some diving—that was one of the reasons we planned a stop there. But it was not possible without violating rules and overstepping the friendliness of the rangers.

We had originally planned for the whole trip from Sorong to Palau to last about a month. But between the “no permit” problem at Helen Reef, and upcoming weather, we decided to make a dash for Palau. So, after our 72 hours allowed at Helen Reef (for emergency repairs, you see), we headed out for Palau. There was squally weather on the way and we were trying to beat it in to Palau, 330nm away.

We didn't quite beat it in. In the middle of the night on the second night, we were overtaken by a squall with winds to 40kn. Fortunately, we had seen it coming and had a second reef in the main, and rolled the jib to a postage stamp. We were already in a wing-on-wing dead downwind configuration, so we screamed along, surfing down the waves at up to 15kn, hand steering, for about two hours until the winds settled down to a more reasonable speed. We had a nice sail after that and arrived in Palau around noon on the third day.

We spent the next three months in Palau, diving and exploring. Again, it was the off-season, and we managed to negotiate another great dive package with one of the smaller dive operators that was struggling through the low season without having to lay off their dive staff. We had done diving on our own in Palau in 2014, and knew the techniques, knew the dive sites, so we could have done the diving ourselves. But diving on your own in Palau takes a buddy boat with similar dive experience, and it takes a lot of effort. So again, we were able to negotiate a great package rate per person per day for a three-tank dive with Nitrox. It helped that one of our crew on the trip up from Indonesia was a dive instructor and knew the owner of the dive operation, and he helped us get his “friends” rate. We did two full weeks of diving (30 dives) with Palau Dive Adventures, again on a space available, cash payment basis.

After seeing all the best dive sites, several times, the easy way, we only bothered to do a few dives on our own—to a couple of the wrecks and a cave dive near the cruiser mooring field.

Dave also made two week-long trips to Peleliu with a couple of like-minded WWII buffs. With all its jungle, caves and overgrown rusty relics, Peleliu is his favorite WWII site of all time. Not enough room here to explain why, but if you're a WWII buff, contact Dave directly and he'll tell you why.

Southern monsoon season can be a little tricky in Palau, because the main area where cruisers are permitted to moor without having a cruising permit (which costs



Sherry in the blue, blue waters of Blue Corner, Palau.

money) is open to the southwest. You do have to keep a weather eye, and either be tucked up in the protected end of the mooring field or be ready to trot across the lagoon a couple of miles to a protected spot while the weather goes through.

Early November is when the Western Pacific typhoons quit curving north to hit Japan. In November and December, the tracks flatten out and they come closer to Palau and go into the central Philippines. We figured that around November 1 it was time to think about heading someplace safer. Though we'd planned to go to Subic Bay in the Philippines, when we studied the typhoon tracks for November and December, it looked like Oceanview Marina at Samal Island (near Davao) in Mindanao would be a lot safer. Plus, we'd been there before, and knew our way around.

We'd been waiting for northeasterly winds to make the trip to the Philippines. November is a transition season and if you watch the weather, it's possible to get a several day weather window where the wind doesn't blow out of the south. We left with a fairly narrow window with less than perfect weather, and had to spend the first day tacking in light air (which we try never to do). Overnight the wind finally started switching as forecast and we were able to sail the rest of the 450 miles to the southern tip of Mindanao without another tack. We used www.FastSeas.com to plot our route and help us figure out the weather, taking in to consideration both the changing wind and the big current that runs between Palau and Mindanao.

We thought this cruising triangle made for a perfect 6-8 month cruising season, with pretty good sailing weather considering the area. By hitting the world-class dive spots in the off-season, we were able to do some fantastic diving at a very reasonable price. As a bonus, we saw very few other cruisers and were able to spend time in some real out of the way places.

COMMODORES SHERRY AND DAVE MCCAMPBELL

Check out Dave McCampbell's article in the new Cruisers' Workshop on page 28

The Cruisers' Workshop is a new SSCA initiative to promote and facilitate what SSCA is known for: cruisers helping other cruisers.

You are invited and encouraged to submit articles that describe helpful hints, things that work, or out of the ordinary products that have improved your cruising life.

To begin to outfit the Cruisers' Workshop, and to trigger your thoughts about tools of your own to add, Dave McCampbell, s/v *Soggy Paws*, has submitted the workshop's first three fantastic articles. They were published in the March and April *Bulletins* and on page 28 of this *Bulletin*.

These articles are also being organized by category and date published on the SSCA website under Cruisers' Workshop.

Now it's your turn! To learn how to submit your own articles, see page 31.

We know you have some great ideas of your own. We all look forward to reading about them!