

s/v Soggy Paws: Feb 13 - Mar 4, 2019 (Part I of II)

St Francis 44 MK2 Catamaran,

Draft 3.5'

Home Port: Melbourne, FL, USA

SSCA Members Since: January 1992

The Hermit and New Hanover Islands; Rudder Repair in Kavieng, Papua New Guinea

The below cruising information is extracted from the blog of s/v Soggy Paws with some modifications. It covers an early portion of our 11 month, 7000 nm trip in 2019 from the Philippines southeast through eastern Indonesia, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands and return.

This article covers our trip east from the Hermit Islands, 100 nm off the northern New Guinea coast, to Kavieng at the northern tip of New Ireland Island. At this time we were a group of four boats, including the 48' catamaran *Ocelot*, the 41' catamaran *Indigo*, the monohull *Berzerker* and us, all travelling together for most of the trip down.

[TOC](#)

Again commercial charting is mostly useless for passage among islands and anchoring as it lacks accuracy and shoreline and reef detail. So we prepared satellite imagery of the area in advance and used that with OpenCPN to provide the accuracy and detail we needed. Terry Sargant of *Valhalla*, the SE Asia custodian of cruiser waypoints, provided way points for anchorages used by the few cruisers that had been in the area before us.

Sherry had also done her usual vacuuming of cruising information from internet sources and we had spent time with a couple of cruisers that had been in the area earlier. From our cruising library and the internet I found several sources for information on diving and World War II sites.

Sherry's Solomons Compendium, available under the Destinations menu on the SSCA website or on our own website, now has waypoints and information for most of the possible stops along the northern New Guinea coast and outlying islands. On this trip we mostly cruised among the eastern islands of New Guinea, offshore of the New Guinea coast which has a reputation for piracy and theft.



Red track is route down SE, yellow is return to NW

The next islands to the east of the Hermit Islands, still in the Admiralties, are Manus and its surrounding islands, a short overnight away (approximately 92 miles). Another boat had anchored in a couple of spots along the north coast of Manus in 2017 and again in 2018. But the people of Longan Island in the Ninigos, which we had visited earlier, now told us to avoid it. Apparently a boat of theirs had gone missing on the trip back from Manus, and they felt it was due to piracy, not weather.

[TOC](#)

I had first visited Manus in 1972 as a young ensign and Navigator on a US Navy destroyer. Wow that is 47 years ago! We needed more accurate paper charts of the passage south through the outer Papua New Guinea (PNG) islands and especially the narrow Jomard Passage to the Coral Sea and Australia.

So the captain sent me ashore to the Australian naval base where I picked up the charts. At that time we were navigating by radar, depth contours and celestial. It is a good thing we didn't have to anchor anywhere along the way. The base is still there, though now manned by the PNG navy. The Australian quarantine station for refugees is now closed. We did stop in Manus on the way back from the Solomons to check out of PNG and take on fuel, but that we will cover in a future article.

In PNG, the "pirates" are called "rascals". Typically they are not pirates, but often inebriated young men looking for easy money or free beer. But in a few places there have been cruiser reports of trouble and armed gangs pillaging small towns. With a very ineffective and fairly poor and corrupt central government, not much is done when there is a report of such activity out in the outer islands of PNG. So cruisers are well advised to keep asking questions as they move through the islands like "Where is it safe for us to stop?" On this leg of the trip we had all decided to give Manus a pass, and go straight from the Hermits to New Hanover and Kavieng, about 300 miles to the ESE.

On our CSY, we'd normally figure 120-130 miles per 24 hour day on passage. I think our record was around 150 miles, as we tended to reef early and jog along comfortably rather than pound along with full sails up. On the catamaran, with a favorable wind, we can easily do 7-8 knots, making 170 nm or more per day if the wind stays steady.

The goal normally is to arrive in daylight. It's tricky, with unpredictable weather among the islands. And it's more difficult to guess arrival time, the longer the passage is. You have to do the math: "If we make 5 knots, we'd arrive at X time, and if we make 7 knots, we'd arrive earlier at Y time." As we found on approaching the Ninigos, it's not easy to slow a catamaran down with strong wind and current behind you.

The Hermit Islands

After anchoring at Longan in the Ninigos, a day sail west of the Hermits for 8 days with crappy weather and poor protection from the wind and waves, it was really nice to be in a calm, protected place (Manta Harbor) in the Hermits. And we had sunshine!

On the first morning we were there, a couple of our group took dinghies across to Bob's place to see the Manta rays. They said it was a great experience, with Bob actually in the water with them, guiding them to the cleaning station. Definitely worth a small fee to Bob to see the Mantas. Unfortunately, I was among the "walking wounded". My small scratch from a branch, and a minor nip from a dog who's tail I stepped on in the Ninigos, had turned into a raging tropical infection.

TOC

I was on antibiotics and definitely staying out of the water. Craig on *Berzerker* was in the same state, and Chris on *Indigo* had a cold. So we were all just happy to spend a couple of days resting up.



The Hermit Islands and out tracks down and back.



View of our Anchorage from the Road to the High School

The next day, a few of the healthier crew walked to the new high school that had just been built. In Longan they had told us it was not opening until April, but there were already teachers and kids attending the school. Rumor has it that eventually they will have cell service.

[TOC](#)

This school will serve the surrounding small out island villages, but only for selected students and with very strict rules. No beetle nut, smoking or alcohol! Both boys and girls were attending, so not too strict.



Some of the Cheerful School Kids Escorting Us Around



The New Girls' Dorm with Solar Electricity and Water.

[TOC](#)



Construction Equipment and the Galley and Dining Area.

Once we'd swum with the Mantas and checked out the school, we were ready to head for Alacrity Harbor, a shallow small sandy bay in the NE corner of the atoll with open access to the sea. On the satellite image it looked like paradise. Bob offered to come on board and guide us there, but then how would we get him back? Bob insisted that the only route to Alacrity was to go outside the eastern entrance, up the east side of the atoll, and into Alacrity Harbor from the entrance there. But Jon on *Ocelot* and I both had very good satellite imagery and we could see that there was a fair chance we could go to Alacrity using an inside route through the coral reefs.

So we did. The entire way was scattered with shallow reefs, but on a sunny day, with the satellite images to assist, it was not difficult to pick our way through. The narrow passage on the south side of Alacrity, inside the reef, was the point that we were not sure we could get through. One catamaran that had done a lot of diving around the Hermits, had stopped short and anchored south of that passage. But with good light, we passed right through with 18 ft minimum depth. Easy peasy.

The next question was, could we find shallow enough anchoring in this basin, for 4 boats, without damaging the coral. It was hard to tell from the satellite imagery. We did! *Indigo*, who arrived first, anchored on a sandy ridge that was about 30 ft deep, with plenty of room on either side of them. But Dave was keen to explore the really shallow large sandy areas on the inside edge of the reef. We checked out two spots, one with a 6' depth and one with an 8' depth.

[TOC](#)

The 8' depth one probably had enough room for 2 boats. And, unlike Indonesia and the Philippines, the tidal range in the Ninigos and Hermits was only about 12". So the outer reef provides good protection even at high tide.

We spent one night anchored next to *Indigo* and *Ocelot*, and then moved up to the shallow 6' reef anchorage for a couple of nights. With the wind blowing NW-N at 15-20, there was some small chop but no real waves. Dave scrubbed the bottom of the boat in the shallow clear sand and explored the reef edge with snorkel. I was still boat-bound due to my infected leg. By now, I was on heavy antibiotics, and it was starting to look better, but I needed to stay out of the water.



Shallow Sand Anchorage at Alacrity Harbor looking north.

There is a little island on the west side of Alacrity with a nice beach. It looked like an ideal beach BBQ spot, but those that went ashore said it was buggy. I never got to step foot ashore.

Dave and Sue and Jon from *Ocelot* went for a snorkel out in the pass. Dave said it was mediocre with a lot of dead coral, probably from heavy wave action from storms.

We stayed a few days at Alacrity Harbor, doing chores and planning the next hop. Jon on *Ocelot* wanted to wait a few more days to get more moonlight for the 3 day passage, but we looked at the weather and decided it was time to go. With the wind that was forecast, *Indigo* even thought they could make it to Three Island Harbor, New Hanover, in 2 days. Ha!

[TOC](#)



Shallow Reef Anchorage at Alacrity Harbor looking East

Hermit Islands waypoints:

West Pass, large opening:	01-30.53 S / 144-57.44 E	
Our anchorage, Mantas:	01-32.51 S / 145-01.99 E	Shallow ~6'
Alacrity 18' Pass (inside):	01-29.76 S / 145-08.15 E	
Alacrity 23' Anchorage:	01-28.72 S / 145-08.04 E	
Alacrity 6' Anchorage:	01-28.55 S / 145- 07.81E	Shallow!
Alacrity 8' Anchorage:	01-28.46 S / 145-07.99 E	Shallow!
Alacrity 25' Pass (outside):	01-29.02 S / 145-08.29 E	

Passage East to New Hanover Islands

Looking at the weather, which forecast 15-20 knots behind us, *Indigo*, who has a full complement of sails and tends to leave them up longer, thought they could make the 300 nm in 2 long days and one overnight, averaging around 8.5 knots. So their plan was to leave at "sparrow fart" (aka Oh-Dark-30) and press on as fast as possible. We reluctantly agreed to try, knowing that if we couldn't keep that speed up, we might have to arrive in the dark. But we had good satellite imagery for the arrival area, and it looked pretty wide open to come in. *Indigo* would presumably be there to help guide us in to a safe spot to anchor in the dark.

TOC

But at departure time the next morning, we had heavy rain, 100% overcast and squally weather. Minding the adage "You can't pick your weather on passage, but you CAN pick the weather you leave in," *Soggy Paws* and *Ocelot* decided to stay put for a day. We were comfortably anchored in 6' on a big sand bank with all around protection, so it was an easy decision. *Indigo* chose to leave, as the wind was forecast to lighten up the next day. *Berzerker*, our token monohull, who has a slower top speed, decided to leave mid-day, after the worst of the rain cleared out, knowing that it would take them at least 2 nights, maybe 3, to make the 300 mile passage.

So *Ocelot* and *Soggy Paws* departed Alacrity Harbor together at 0630 am the next day. We managed to get ourselves out of the 6 ft deep anchorage and into deeper water with no problems. But somehow, as we were navigating around to an open space where we could put the sails up, a coral head jumped off the bottom and bumped us. It was one that didn't show up in our satellite imagery (or at least one I hadn't noticed). We would have seen it in daylight, but being dawn, we didn't see it. Fortunately, it was just a momentary light bump on the keel, and there was no damage to the rudders or sail drives. Just one of those hazards of going where no man has gone before!

With the lighter winds, we had full sail up and averaged about 6 knots. Early on we reefed in a little bit to keep from running away from *Ocelot*, who is quite a bit heavier than we are. Later they put up their asymmetrical headsail to keep up with us.

Besides a few squalls, the biggest challenge, as usual, were lights in the night. On an open sea, in the dark, a small light could be a small light in a fishing boat half mile away, or a big light on a tanker 10 miles away. It's sometimes hard to tell. AIS helps a lot, but not every boat, especially out here, has active AIS. Radar can help too, but mainly with the bigger ships, and those usually have active AIS. On my watch, I could see a very bright glow on the horizon, no AIS, and no radar signal. Hmmm, what the heck was that? It turned out to be a stationary (fishing?) platform beyond my radar horizon. It took several hours to pass, and I worried about the possibility of smaller boats out with nets. But never saw another light. We saw several of these anchored in many thousands of feet of water.

Sometime during the 2nd day, we saw a signal on the AIS about 6 miles in front of us, going very slowly across our path. Initially it did not look to be a problem. But then it turned around, and then it was going the other way at 8 knots. Then it stopped almost right in our path. As we got closer, we could see it was a large local fishing boat. To make sure we stayed out of its way, we called it on VHF and asked what his intentions were.

"I am chasing the fish," he said.

"Are you going to continue on your current course?"

"I am chasing the tuna. Where the tuna goes, I go."

[TOC](#)

He never would say that he was continuing on his current course, or what he was doing, except chasing a large school of tuna. He told us to maintain our course and we would be OK. Thankfully, the tuna must have headed NW away from us, because he soon ran off that way at 8 knots.

New Hanover Islands

After a gentle second night, mostly going wing on wing, we arrived off Three Island Harbor, New Hanover, and proceeded to anchor around 8:30 am in a well-protected spot. This spot is also known as "Clem's Place" after the name of the most prominent island inhabitant. Clem and his wife run a backpacker surf resort on the NW side of the island. This area was also a Japanese anchorage during WW2, providing sheltered deep water for ships helping to protect the large (70,000 men) Japanese base at Kavieng. There are several interesting shipwrecks, a mini-sub, and planes in the area. Clem was able to take us to those near his home. The area is described briefly in the PNG Lonely Planet and diving guide, and several cruisers had been there for a short stay before us, but we had little detailed information. So another adventure awaited us!



Chart showing locations of shipwrecks and planes we visited

Dunung Anchorage:	02 22.21 S / 150 07.30 E	Plenty of room for 4+ boats, in 25', at least during NW season.
Kate Anchorage:	02 35.00 S / 150 29.36 E	48 ft sand.
Kate Airplane:	02 35.22 S / 150 29.101 E	About 25' of water.

Once we had made the big jump from the Hermit Islands, we were anxious to move on to Kavieng in order to get checked into PNG. We had been nearly 3 weeks out in the boonies with few supplies and no internet.

TOC

But we had arrived in New Hanover on a Friday, and it would take a full day, navigating among reefs and small islands, to sail to Kavieng. And then there was a WW2 Japanese plane to see along the way. We didn't want to arrive in Kavieng on a weekend and try to check into PNG. So we decided to enjoy Clem's Place at Three Islands for the weekend. Besides, there was some diving and exploring to do!

Friday we spent mostly settling in from the 3 day 2 night passage; stowing sea stuff and launching the dinghy. We were visited throughout the day by a series of kids in canoes wanting to trade fruit and veggies for lollies and biscuits (Australian/PNG speak for candy and cookies).



Sue on *Ocelot* Trading with the Kids

In the afternoon, we went ashore on Dunung Island, the middle of the Three Islands. We walked around the island to find "Clem's Place". Clem is the head of one of the families on the island, and he and his wife Sophie have established a small backpacker type surf and fishing resort.

Clem asked us if we were interested in doing a "River Trip" the next day. The trip entailed motoring up the river in one of Clem's boats, visiting a remote village and then rafting back down part of the river. After ironing out the details for the trip, we went back to our boats for happy hour and an early night.

Commodores Dave and Sherry McCampbell
s/v *Soggy Paws*
Currently in Samal, Philippines

[TOC](#)