

s/v Soggy Paws: Papua New Guinea (PNG)

Boat Type: 2005 St Francis 44 MKII Catamaran

Draft: 3.5'

Homeport: Melbourne, FL USA

SSCA Members since January 1992

Rabaul, Smoking Volcanos and Lots of History

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

This trip is best done starting from eastern Indonesia/Philippines in January at the start of the NE Monsoon, when wind and current are with you, and returning in June when

the SE Trades start in the South Pacific. This article covers our time in Rabaul at the eastern tip of New Britain.

Later on our way back north we stopped at Rabaul again to see the things we had missed. We were still 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.

7-13 March 2019

Dear SSCA,

As we have mentioned before, commercial charting, including Navionics, is mostly useless for passage among SE Asian islands and anchoring as it lacks accuracy and shoreline and reef detail. We prepared satellite imagery of the area in advance and used that with [OpenCPN](#) to provide the accuracy and detail we needed.

Lifetime Commodore Terry Sargent of *s/v 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 Dave found several sources for information on diving and WW2 sites. Sherry's PNG 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. There is also additional information on *Ocelot's* website. 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.

Rabaul

This is one of those exotic locations you have heard of but never quite figured out where it is. I first heard about Rabaul when watching *Black Sheep Squadron*, reruns, starring Robert Conrad, on TV as a kid. I loved that show, the flying, and Robert Conrad. I really knew and understood nothing about World War II, nor could I have put a finger on the map where Rabaul was. But after our visit to Rabaul, where we saw all the sights, I knew exactly where it was. Another great resource on Rabaul is the black and white WWII documentary series *Victory at Sea*.

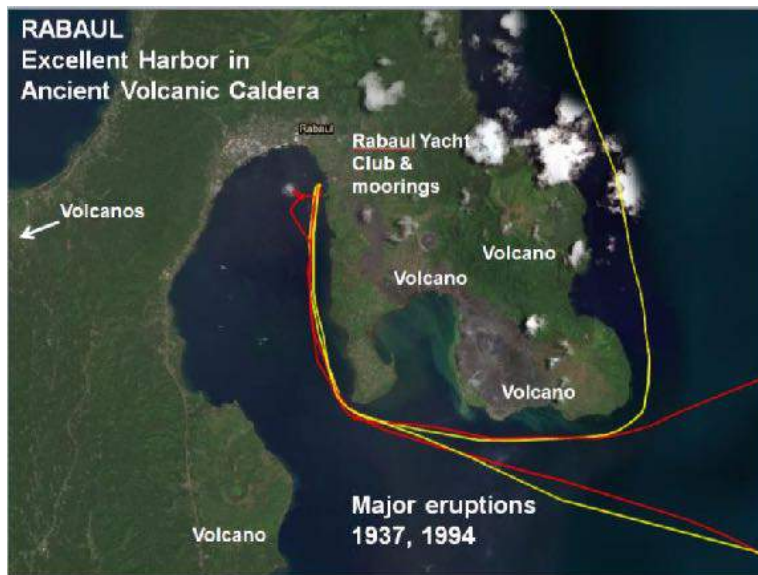
But Rabaul isn't just another World War II location; it is a spectacular natural harbor and treasure trove of Japanese World War II relics. The harbor is filled with



Japanese shipwrecks. The shoreline, hills and forests contain many plane wrecks, gun emplacements and tunnels. There are at least 4 air strips and a headquarters facility. These are all relics from a major Japanese air and sea base during the war. Looking at a map, you can see that the entire Simpson Harbor is actually the caldera of an old volcano, which isn't dead yet. It is a very volcanic location that has experienced at least two devastating eruptions. The last one was in 1994 which pretty much destroyed the town. That volcano is still rumbling and smoking. And the town is still there though somewhat smaller.



An undated but WW II era map of Japanese facilities around Rabaul



Google Earth satellite photo of Rabaul Harbor and our tracks in and out during two visits.

Rabaul also has a long colonial history--the town was first established in 1884 by the Germans, and became the German New Guinea territorial headquarters in 1905. Rabaul was taken over by the British in World War I and became the British Territorial Headquarters for New Guinea until the first major eruption in 1937. But it continued to be a significant port in the western Pacific trade routes until World War II.

Because of all this we were anxiously anticipating our visit to Rabaul. It was only a 20 mile sail from the Duke of York Islands. As we approached Rabaul, we could see the Tavurvur Volcano's distinctive shape. Motoring into the harbor, we passed the still smoking volcano that blew its top in 1994. Later we hiked out to see the volcano up close.



Our first view of the Tavurvur Volcano with another behind it

On arriving in the harbor, we picked up one of Rabaul Yacht Club's (RYC) moorings at the direction of Rod Pearce, the official RYC greeter for visiting yachts. Rod is quite famous among wreck divers and World War II buffs, as he has made a 40+ year hobby and business out of finding World War II wrecks, both in the water and ashore. He also has a liveaboard dive boat named *Barbarian*. We were pretty excited to meet him.

You can read a little bit about Rod and his exploits here:

[World War 2 Wreck Hunter Rod Pearce](#)

and a more personal perspective here:

[Wreck Hunter Rod Pearce](#)

Our buddy boats arrived the next day, and it happened to be "steak night" at the yacht club. So we all went in for drinks and dinner.

Rabaul Yacht Club (RYC)

Rabaul had a thriving ex-pat community (mostly Australians) until the 1994 eruption, and RYC was one of the cornerstones of the social scene. The eruption covered the whole section of town where the yacht club was in several meters of volcanic ash. RYC was one of the few facilities that escaped being crushed by the ash, mainly due to its members help cleaning up. But it has never recovered its former glory. And many of the old ex-pats have died or gone home.



Rabaul Yacht Club facilities with volcanic ash roadway



The Rabaul Yacht Club dock with Rod's boats on the right and another liveaboard dive boat on the left

We spent a week there on the mooring at Rabaul Yacht Club. There is no fee for the mooring if you are staying a short while, but they expect you to come in and buy a few drinks at the bar and come to their Friday night dinner (the only time they serve food at the yacht club). The dinner has good food for a reasonable price. You can leave your dinghy safely at the YC dock, there is Wi-Fi in the bar, and you can dispose of trash there.



The gang enjoying a round of bevies at the RYC

If you plan to spend some time in this area of PNG, RYC encourages you to buy a “temporary membership fee” for K200/\$55 US, which entitles you to membership at the Rabaul Yacht Club for a year. Since we were grateful for the mooring and the hospitality, and planned to come back later in the year, we opted to become a member at Rabaul Yacht Club for a year.

We were surprised to find the "dance floor" part of the yacht club 2 inches deep in water. The ash had piled up enough around the yacht club that if it rained hard, the water didn't drain through like it used to. It had been an extremely rainy preceding week so there was standing water on the floor. But no one seemed to care.

Logistics

We spent the first couple of days in Rabaul finishing our check-in to Papua New Guinea, and reprovioning. We had done a provisional inward clearance at Customs in Kavieng, our first port. When we left Kavieng we got outward clearance for Rabaul (one piece of paper, no cost), which we gave to the Customs officer in Rabaul.

It was easy to catch a shared taxi (in 15-seat vans) into town, for K1 per person (about 30 cents in USD), from the Yacht Club. Sometimes we had to walk out to the road to catch one, but several times, the van would come right down the yacht club driveway to check for passengers. These (route 7A vans) go right into town and drop you off at the market, and right across from one of the biggest grocery stores (SOHO), where there is also a Bank of the South Pacific (BSP) ATM.

Provisioning

It is best to get to the ATM's in Rabaul in the morning, as they often run out of cash by mid-day. SOHO supermarket would permit you to get cash back if you bought something from them, if the ATM is not working. Besides the BSP ATM at SOHO, there's a BSP with 3 ATMs up the street a little way.



Sherry and Pam enjoying the well-stocked Anderson's supermarket in Kokopo

If you want better provisioning, Kokopo, about 10 miles along the shore south, has a couple of stores that cater to western tastes, including a great selection of cheese. The Kokopo fresh market was very large and had a wide selection of local fruits and vegetables. The vans going back to Rabaul leave from the van loading area next to the Kokopo market, just ask someone where the queue for the 7A PMV is. It is possible to take a van from Rabaul into Kokopo, I think it is 1A (but ask at the van area in Rabaul). Not sure the price. But the trip takes about 45 minutes.



The veggie section of the Kokopo market



Handmade dresses for sale at the Kokopo market

Everyone seemed friendly (locals and expats alike). But we did keep asking where it was safe for us to go on our own, and where it wasn't. We followed their advice and had no problems, with either theft or ugly behavior.

Fuel

You can arrange for diesel to be delivered in 200 liter drums to the RYC dock, and they will bring a small pump to pump it into your boat (rafted alongside the dock) or into your jugs. If you want smaller amounts, or want to see your fuel pumped directly from the pump, we hired a van for a half day to take 4 boats' worth of jugs into MC Seeto for diesel and gasoline. It's a little cheaper to buy diesel by the barrel, but some of us were gun-shy after bad experiences with delivered fuel in barrels in Indonesia.

You can get propane bottles refilled at the depot in town (ask Rod what fittings they can accommodate).

We found epoxy and bottom paint (at fairly shocking prices) at MC Seeto, Barlow's, and another store in Rabaul town.

Once we got the necessities out of the way, we managed to fit in a couple of days of tourist activities seeing the volcano and some of the World War II sites.

Volcano Hike

We went on an early morning guided hike to see the Tarvuvur volcano, arranged by Liliane at the Rabaul Hotel. That cost K250/\$70 US for the van and the guides (security) to take us up the mountain. It's a 15-pax van, so it was perfect for 8 of us. We hiked right up to the rim of the smoking volcano.



The early morning hike to the Tarvuvur Volcano



We made it to the top!



Sherry, in the belly of the volcano



This was once a thriving part of town, now a lava wasteland.
Note the cross.

It was recommended to do the hike first thing in the morning, so we left at 5:30am. It is about a 15 minute walk across level ground and a half hour scramble up the hardened lava to get to the rim. Bring good shoes, a walking stick, and good knees.

Historical Day Tour

We were referred to Suzie at the Rabaul Hotel to arrange a day tour, but her prices were “tourist prices” and we were looking for more reasonable yachtie prices. We eventually arranged for a van for K200/\$55 US for the day, and used one of the Rabaul Historical Society members as a tour guide, for another K200. Split 8 ways, this was reasonable for an all day tour, which took us all the way down to Kokopo with a number of stops, both historical and shopping, and up to the Volcano Monitoring Station, which has a great view of the harbor. Contact Francis, the van owner at 7040 9265 and Rob Rawlinson the tour guide at 7254 3486 to make arrangements.

Our first stop was the Bitapaka War Memorial south of Kokopo. It was raining so we didn't wander around much because of the soggy ground. It was a beautiful, well-kept site honoring the Australians who died during World War II, either defending Rabaul when the Japanese first attacked, or during imprisonment during the war.



Beautiful Bitapaka War Memorial grounds

The next stop was the Kokopo Museum. It pained us to see the significant war relics not preserved and sitting outside in the rain. At least they were not still in the bush being plundered. Funding was the problem. A few pieces had descriptive plaques, most did not.



Kokopo World War II Museum sign surrounded by various WW II guns



Large Japanese searchlight used for anti-aircraft defense



A Japanese World War II Anti-aircraft Cannon, 25 mm



Japanese Model 97 Prewar military motorcycle with side car,
licensed by Harley Davidson



Lots more relics including a Japanese Long Lance torpedo and various guns



Kokopo museum grounds with Japanese tanks, plane engines and torpedoes. Closest tank is very rare amphibious model



Japanese triple 20mm AA machine gun in excellent condition



Japanese A6M Zero, less its engine,
in the back yard of the Kokopo Museum



An assortment of Japanese machine guns and helmets



An assortment of aircraft engines and other
WW II relics in the back yard of the museum



Pet crocodile for security

The next stop was at Tunnel Hill. Here was just a small portion of the miles of tunnels excavated by the Japanese in Rabaul during the war. These particular tunnels housed prisoners of war (Australians and New Guineans). They provided the slave labor to construct buildings and excavate tunnels for the Japanese. We did not have time on this tour to also visit the Barge Tunnels, but we did see them on our return to Rabaul in October.



Liz peers into the first tunnel



Sue and Craig look at the inscriptions on the wall

Next was a stop at the Rabaul Volcano Observatory. This provides a great view of the harbor and some of the volcanos. Plus we had a nice chat with one of the fellows there monitoring the volcanic activity in PNG.



The great view of Rabaul town, the harbor and RYC on the left and our boats

Next was the Japanese War Memorial, erected with Japanese funds. It was on the hill above the Yacht Club and is typical of many erected all over PNG and the Solomons.



The Japanese War Memorial



Memorial inscription dedicated to world peace

On another day, we arranged a visit to Admiral Yamamoto's Bunker, and the New Guinea Club and Museum. These are within walking distance of the yacht club, but you need to arrange for someone to let you in.

Admiral Yamamoto was the Commander and Chief of the Imperial Japanese Navy at the start of WW II. Under pressure from his superiors and against his good judgement, he conceived and executed the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec 7, 1941. He directed the Japanese Navy in the Pacific until his death in 1943. He was shot down by US P-38s in April 1943 while on an inspection tour in New Guinea and the Solomons. His headquarters for a time early in the war were in Rabaul.



Admiral Yamamoto's bunker is close by the yacht club



Massive concrete slabs protect the bunker



The map room of Yamamoto's bunker indicating distance rings and bearings of different locations from Rabaul

Next door was the New Guinea Club and Museum. The New Guinea Club is a social club, but also houses a few interesting historical items from World War II and the Colonial Past. Most WW II relics are at the Kokopo Museum.



Small Japanese tank on the front lawn



Tail section of a Japanese plane hanging on the wall inside

Diving

Rod Pearce gave us waypoints for the diveable wrecks in the harbor. He can fill tanks, but you need to supply your own gear. Sadly, between reprovisioning, touring, and the rain, we never got to dive any of the wrecks. Most are fairly deep, picked over and would require a dinghy trip to find them.

Eating Out

Besides Friday Night Dinner at Rabaul Yacht Club, we had lunch one day at the Rabaul Hotel, a 10-15 minute walk from RYC. It was good but a little pricey. They also offer dinner. There are many “Kaibar’s” in town. This is apparently the PNG version of a fast food place. We ate lunch a couple of times at the Kaibar at the Soho Grocery store. The lamb stew was OK and relatively cheap. You can also pick up cooked food at the market.

Clearance Out

On leaving Rabaul for the Solomons, we again visited the Customs officer in Rabaul, obtained a Customs clearance, and got our passports stamped out. The officials in both Rabaul and Kavieng were friendly, relaxed and accommodating. Not much paperwork, no boat visits, and a small cost only for Plant Quarantine on arrival in Kavieng. The Customs official in Rabaul told us that Rabaul was the clearance port, not Kokopo. More to follow on our return to Rabaul a couple months later when we were not in a rush and there was better weather.

Commodores Dave & Sherry McCampbell

The image shows a promotional banner for Waterway Guide. At the top, a yellow bar contains six icons: a marina, a gear, an anchor, a bridge and lock, a warning sign, and a fuel pump. Below these icons are the labels: Marinas, Services, Anchorages, Bridges & Locks, Nav Alerts, and Fuel. To the right, a red arrow points to a box labeled '6 modes' which lists: Marinas, Services, Anchorages & Free Docks, Bridges & Locks, Nav Alerts, Fuel - Diesel, and Fuel - Gas. Below the icons is the large text 'WATERWAY GUIDE' with 'THE CRUISING AUTHORITY' in a red box to its right. Further right, it says 'PLUS Ratings & Reviews on Marinas and Anchorages'. At the bottom, it reads 'Proud Sponsor of SSCA Plan your time on the water with' followed by the website 'www.waterwayguide.com/Explorer' in a dark blue box with 'Explorer' in yellow.