



Mike Harker

Speeding across the South Pacific



Alone, Mike takes his courage in both hands and heads out from the Galapagos towards Australia.

The choice to sail the 9,000 nautical miles across the South Pacific Ocean from the Ecuadorian Islands of the Galapagos to Sydney Australia, alone, is a difficult decision to make especially for an inexperienced sailor like myself and in a brand new boat, the Hunter 49.

I had crossed the 3,000 miles from Isla Isabella Galapagos to Nuka Hiva in the Marquesas three years previously in my Hunter 46 with two inexperienced crew. We enjoyed over three months of the warm hospitality of the Polynesians on five different Marquesas islands in over thirty different anchorages before heading north to Hawaii. This time I would just be passing through on my way west to Australia.

The plan was to stay in the SE trade winds and ride the Humboldt Current setting towards the west. These are the strongest and most consistent between 10 and 20 degrees south latitude and there are practically no islands or other hindrance most of the way across.

The "alone" would present an unknown challenge in itself.

My preparations before heading out from Santa Cruz Galapagos were extensive. I filled all my fuel tanks and the ten five-gallon jerry jugs with diesel, at 96 US cents a gallon I couldn't pass up the opportunity. I would be paying 3 USD a litre in French Polynesia.

I also installed my new Balmar alternator for the Yanmar, a new fuel pump for the Panda generator and bought provisions for three months. My HRO water-maker was working fine as well as everything else aboard. I felt confident to take in the anchor and set full sail headed due west along 3-5 south latitude.

After eighteen days of terrific sailing at between 18 and 24 knots of consistent SE winds I arrived in Nuka Hiva rested and in good spirits. Having spent weeks here just three years previously, I wanted to visit some of the wonderful Polynesians I had

accompanied to their "Olympics of Polynesian Dance" on the neighbor island of Hiva Oa. There were still many of the dancers but most of the young girls had departed for higher education on Tahiti. I printed out some of the photos from the contest and everyone had a great time reminiscing and chatting. My French is still pretty good and the Polynesians are helpful with interpretations.



The "Olympics of Polynesian Dance"





I was supplied with some local food favorites, fruit and good wishes after only three days' visiting with old friends and headed due west again along latitude 10 S. About halfway to Samoa, I had placed a waypoint off of the Karoaina Atoll to be sure to miss it on my way by, however I had a "Triple Wrap" of sail, sheets and winch that I wrote about in previously. This could easily have been the end of my voyage and my boat right there in the middle of nowhere but I made it through another adventure only slightly wounded. (Read about the "Triple Wrap" in the May issue Yachtworld Magazine.)

US Samoa was the next island on route. I did not know what to expect but I had heard that it was not really a very nice destination for cruising sailors. They were right. It was absolutely terrible: dirty, unfriendly and expensive. The only reason for stopping there for a US flagged vessel would be for shipping anything from the States. It is officially part of the United States and therefore flights and goods are duty- and tax-free. There is even a West Marine shop and US crew would have no immigration problems. However, since I had no crew waiting to get off or on and I needed nothing to buy, not even fuel, I left after only two peaceful nights at anchor.

By this time I was halfway across and way ahead of my own schedule. I planned to average 6.5 knots sailing – about 1,000 miles a week – but, in fact, I was averaging 8.5 knots with the right SE winds and 1.5 – 2 knots of positive current. That was actually a pleasant and fast sail all the way across to here. I left Samoa in good spirits and expected more of the same towards my next waypoint, Vanuatu.

ABOVE
Anchored at
Samoa.

BELOW
Mike's "old"
gennaker just
before she "Blew-
Out".

I wanted to stay in the trade winds and current to have as few rocks, atolls and small islands in the way as possible. Therefore I planned to stay north of Cooks and Fiji with all their dangerous offshore islands, sail along the south latitudes between 15 and 20 degrees, which would put me well north of most, and head right into Vanuatu.

A few days before my planned arrival, the weather GRIB files reported 70 to 80 knots of gale force winds in the southern ocean. That was well south of me, but the effects could be felt dramatically. I had south swell of over 20 feet and then three days of 45–50 knots of SSE winds. I had been flying my small gennaker from my old Hunter 46 wing-on-wing with the Genoa polled out to windward before the strong winds hit. I was too late in taking down the gennaker as I had to go forward to roll and then retrieve it. The threads were old and weak and the sail just "Blew-Out" and was in tatters when I finally did get it down. I saved the pieces but really they are useless for anything but short ties.

I was glad that I had ordered a new type of spinnaker from Germany, one with a built-in Paraglider to make it easier to launch and retrieve as a single-handed downwind sailor. It would be in Sydney waiting for me when I arrived there in a month or so. I e-mailed to confirm this and was relieved to have a positive answer.

As I was sailing slowly into Vanuatu Harbor looking for a place to anchor, a nice young man came alongside with his small powerboat and said he was a Hunter sailboat owner too and wondered where I had just come from. When I said





Florida, he almost jumped out of the boat. Kit was his name and he invited me to anchor in front of his restaurant and also to come in to have lunch with him. What a lovely place and such very nice people. I had planned for just a day or two in Vanuatu but I enjoyed myself so much I stayed almost a week taking a jeep tour and exploring the lush island. I was over two weeks ahead of schedule anyway.

The route west towards northern Australia is strewn with shallow waters, dangerous reefs and only a few safe passages. I planned my route to go north of New Caledonia and traverse through two very narrow passes between reefs. My Nobeltec charts in the laptop and the Navionics charts in the Raymarine chart plotter were both exact and I got through both dangerous reef areas still on auto-pilot. Once through the dangers I plotted a course down the eastern coast of Australia.

But I had to change my plans. There were 35-40 knots of wind from the south predicted, exactly on my nose. I do not like to sail to wind, so headed into Brisbane, Manly Harbour. I had been warned that checking into Australia was problematic unless you had all your things in order. I had e-mailed my arrival date and port of entry and also got a visa, all over my onboard SailMail using my HF radio,

Customs and immigration were waiting for me. The guys were pleasant, helpful and interested in my voyage. The customs guy "googled" me and knew all about my adventures from my web site. The check-in was easy and pleasant, until quarantine!

The guy came aboard with two large yellow bags and his sniffer dog. After almost thirty minutes he had confiscated all my provisions and anything edible. It all went into the yellow

ABOVE LEFT
Mike at Vanatu with Kit, owner of a Hunter 38.

ABOVE
Australian quarantine!
RIGHT
Mike's boat *Wanderlust* has a front row slip at the Sydney Boat Show.

BELOW
Mike enjoys a magnificent entrance into Sydney.





Mike gave twice daily seminars at the show.

bags to be burned. I guess they want you to buy Australian because I had nothing but a few canned goods left to eat!

Manly had a Jazz Festival over the weekend so it was a pleasure to wait out the three days of strong south winds. On Monday bright and early I sailed down to Sydney with perfect NE-NW winds about 20 knots the whole three days down the coast. It was a perfect sail right into Sydney Harbour. Magnificent! What an entrance, Sydney is spectacular with the two headlands, the beautiful homes along the cliffs, the historic bridge and then the sail-like Opera House.

Darling Harbour was the site of the Sydney International Boat Show and I was just in time. Matt Hayes, an Australian champion and Olympic sailor, is the Hunter dealer and he had arranged a front row slip for me along the walkway of the boat show. *Wanderlust* stuck out like a beautiful "sore-thumb" for all to see. ■