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Cruising the Exotic Southeast

Our Australasian Seas Adventure

by Maurice and Louise-Ann Nunas

Maurice Nunas was director of National Spectrum Management Operations in the Canadian Department of Communications (like the FCC in the USA). Louise-Ann Nunas worked in accounting and as an office manager. They migrated to Asia where Maurice worked as government relations director for private industries, and Louise-Ann was a counselor at the Canadian Education Centre and volunteer for the Canadian Association. In Singapore they bought Akama, a 1993 Kadey-Krogen 48' Whaleback, and cruised the waters from Thailand to Indonesia, eventually becoming full time liveaboards. Upon retirement, they slipped the lines and set out on the voyage of their dreams.

Thinking back over the past six years, we have so many memories. They run the gamut of emotion from pure terror to elation. Mostly they are pleasant memories of people we've met, wondrous sights and personal accomplishments. Our planned three-year trip in Australasia took over five years. We went to so many wonderful and exotic places in Singapore, Malaysia, Sabah, Borneo, Helen Reef (Palau), Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Australia and Indonesia.

We started out 15 September 2002, full of anticipation and some trepidation about what we were about to do: explore Australasia on our own by sea. Our friends and relatives thought we were nuts. "Aren't you afraid of pirates and storms?" was their collective mantra. Frankly we were a bit scared, but our fear was more than outweighed by the anticipation of the fun and adventure to come.

Cruising down the Santi River in Malaysia, heading to sea, we felt a bit like Columbus. We were heading into the unknown, armed only with our ship, our wits and our charts. We did

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Off Koh Pethra on the west coast of Thailand. The arms off the sides of Akama are stabilizing gear used at anchor.



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not even know exactly where we would go, other than it would be “wilderness cruising” around the South China Sea. In some cases the charts merely said, “UNSURVEYED,” with only a row of soundings between major islands and vague indication of depth and obstructions everywhere else. Cruising guides were few and scant.

Our first night was spent at anchor in Indonesia on the edge of the South China Sea, next stop being Kuching Borneo, a two-day passage. The next morning our spirits tumbled when we discovered that our inverter/charger had failed. Not wanting to go on without electrical redundancy, we reluctantly returned to the marina. In retrospect, we should have carried on. We endured numerous equipment failures during our voyage, many in some of the remotest parts of the world. We always found a way to cope

and generally made not only repairs but also improvements to *Akama's* systems.

We also were aided by locals. One day while going through some reefs into an anchorage, we discovered to our horror that we had no steering.

Using the wing engine as rudimentary steering, we managed to drop the hook in safe water. A hydraulic hose on the steering ram had failed, we had no spare, and there was not even a village anywhere nearby. We flagged down a small, open fishing boat. Unfortunately, the people spoke no English and we had no idea what language they were speaking, probably a local dialect. Since we were in Malaysia we waived the hose and blurted out “Ini tidak bagus,” fractured Malay meaning “This is no good.” They looked at us blankly and without a word went away. We sat there wondering how the heck we could carry on and tried unsuccessfully to mend the hose. To our amazement, the fishermen returned with two hoses, both with exactly the right fittings. They would not take any money, despite our attempts to pay.

Experiencing other cultures was fascinating. The remote Hermit and Ninigo islands off the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea were prime examples. What a fantastic experience. The people there intentionally live a primitive existence without any infrastructure. Simple gardens and fishing provide nourishment. Their only source of currency is from collecting



Maurice and Louise-Ann Nunas
aboard *Akama*



sea cucumbers that they dry in the sun. There is no running water, sewerage, electricity or shops. They move about the atoll between the small islands in dugout canoes with sails made from bits of bed sheets, flour bags and old poly tarps. Cruisers don't go here; they should. The people were truly

interested in us, as were we in them. Our experience with the locals here was to be repeated over and over. Perhaps our favorite memory was when we went inland in Borneo to the village of the Ikan people. There we were treated as honored guests, with numerous toasts of their local home brew. At one point a newborn baby was passed around and each of us

was asked to bless her. Only a few generations ago these people were the famous headhunters of Borneo.

One of the rewarding things about cruising in areas that are off the beaten

path is trading. We traded things such as fishing gear, soap, canned goods, clothing, and balloons and candies for the kids; in return we got fresh fruit, vegetables and seafood. Supply ships visit some of the remote areas only rarely, so our presence was truly appreciated. We were taken to see villages and schools. Sometimes we spoke before the assembled students and teachers about our culture and lives. Everywhere the children were truly delightful. We often blew up balloons and set them free in the wind. The kids would scramble in their dugout canoes to get them. We had a stock of cheap plastic recorders ("flutes"). Once we gave one out and that evening floating out to us in the bay came the tune "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Perhaps we've helped the next Kenny G to discover his talent. There is a great opportunity for cruisers to be truly helpful to local people without establishing a cargo cult.

Other cruisers were fun to meet also, and sometimes truly helpful. For example, in Papua New Guinea we lost our Naiad stabilizers and our generator set. With great trepidation we elected to go to the main-



Children at Vella Lavella await release of balloons

land, reputedly a very dangerous place. We found a small bay in which to anchor where, amazingly, we found an expatriate Aussie who was rebuilding a large wooden boat. He'd cruised there and liked it so much that he stayed. He was a great help, and over a five-week period we managed to obtain needed parts and manufacture others. So much for getting boarded or kidnapped by rebels!

We did get boarded though, twice, in the middle of the night. It's a frightening experience. We carry a can of mace, an extensible bludgeon and a machete. Both times Maurice rushed out, naked, armed with only the knife and a one million-candle power spotlight. He must be a fearsome sight! Lucky for us, in both cases, our infrared alarm scared off the intruders. In fact, such boardings are quite rare. We've met hundreds of other cruisers and only one had ever been boarded and threatened.

Our last leg took us from Australia via Indonesia's Lesser Sunda Islands to Bali, then north back to Malaysia. First we had to get from Brisbane to Darwin. Put into perspective, this is like going from Miami to Maine and then down the St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario. Apart from the world-famous Whitsunday's and the Great Barrier Reef, this was a bit of a bore really. Anchor—sleep—move on—anchor—sleep. This took us about seven weeks. Despite the days of

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The chief at Waterfall Bay welcomes Louise-Ann with a lei.

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boredom, once at Darwin we looked back at the accomplishment with some pride.

We encountered nearly no other power cruisers on our trip. Most were sail boaters. Invariably they regarded us with curiosity and sometimes a bit of disdain. While fueling in Darwin we allowed a lovely Amel Super Maramu to raft alongside. “Where are you going?” they asked. “To Singapore,” we replied. The next utterance was predictable: “You’re going to sea in that!” We told them where we’d been over the past five years, and they were at a loss for words.

Heading across Australia’s Bay of Carpentaria, en route to Darwin, for the first time in five years we were in the company of many boats, most sailing yachts heading for the Darwin to Indonesia rally. In good weather the crossing takes about two days. The bay is known for violent storms that whip up big square waves in the shallow water. We got caught in one of the worst storms we’d endured. The waves were higher than the boat and the winds gale force and more. More than once we had to bear off our course, then claw back the lost miles whenever the sea eased. We were never afraid for our lives. We’d already had too much sea time in bad weather for that. We knew *Akama* could take it. But we sure were severely punished, and things that had never moved

about slid back and forth noisily. When we got to a safe anchorage we surveyed the damage. To our astonishment, there was nearly none. Despite the shifting of nearly everything that was not screwed down, and despite having fallen off several big waves, only a few dishes broke and one battery fell over spilling acid into the bilge. We were relaxed and sipping coffee less than an hour after anchoring, and for the first time were truly in awe of *Akama*’s ability to transport us safely. Then the sailboats began to arrive. They had blown-out sails, broken rigging and salt water everywhere. All their crews were clad head to foot in foul weather gear and many were pouring water out of their boots. For days afterwards the VHF was buzzing with harrowing tales of the storm and ever-inflating estimates of the winds and the waves. Until then, we had assumed that when the going truly got rough we’d be better off in a good sailboat.

“The Authorities” were something that we worried about before setting off. We expected to be ripped off, delayed and even harassed in most places. While that did happen once in Indonesia, generally the officials everywhere were wonderful. In fact, most of our problems were in the developed countries (New Caledonia and Australia among the most annoying). For the most part, we’d arrive unannounced and after a few formalities were granted nearly unlimited cruising privileges. One of the most hospitable countries is Malaysia, yet some people shy away from it simply because of their Islamic religion. In New Caledonia they went over the boat with a fine tooth comb and confiscated about fifty pounds of food that other authorities found to be acceptable. In Australia they put two dogs on board and spent a half-day tearing the boat down looking for drugs and firearms for simply no reasonable grounds. The trip had been concluded safely and without arrest.

So, here we sit back in our slip at Sebana Cove Marina, Malaysia, reflecting on all that we have been through, seen and done. The voyage is complete and sadly *Akama* is now on the market. Why, you ask? In New Zealand, about half way through our trip, Maurice was diagnosed with a rather rare and aggressive

mouth cancer. We were devastated and our first instinct was to put the boat up for sale and fly back to Canada. After a little investigation we concluded that having the work done in New Zealand and then completing our cruise made more sense.

Over a three-month period, Maurice underwent several operations to remove half of the roof of his mouth, and some gum and sinus tissue. We lived on *Akama* the whole time, driving into Auckland countless times for visits to labs, clinics and hospitals. After the operations Maurice was so weak he could hardly make it down the pier to the boat. He had lost about 20 kilos (over 40 pounds) and it took months to get his strength back. Overall, we stayed an extra year in New Zealand.

After Maurice recovered, we crossed the Tasman Sea to Australia. This was the only time we took on crew. We were concerned that Maurice may not be strong enough for a one-week passage. But he was

fine and could not be kept below, standing his watches and coming up most nights to see that all was okay.

Unfortunately, one of the side effects of Maurice's operation precludes him from swimming, snorkeling and diving, some of our favorite things about cruising. And without her dive partner, it's less fun for Louise-Ann. So, *Akama* is reluctantly up for sale.

If she does not sell here, then what? We'll just keep on living aboard and cruising. *Akama* is our home and we still love life aboard. There are lots of places in Asia and Europe that we have not explored. And, going back to North America via Japan, the Russian Maritimes and the Aleutian Islands is not out of the question. Only time will tell.

Editor's Note: Inquiries regarding the purchase of Akama, now in Malaysia, can be directed to crew@kadeykrogen.com.

Liapari Island lagoon. Paradise does not get much more ideal!

