

ESCAPADE

TRIP TO VAVA'U, KINGDOM OF TONGA. 18 MAY 2009 to 09 OCTOBER 2009

The Motor Vessel "Escapade", a 15 metre Riviera launch with Ross (Skipper) and crew members Robert, Darron and Joe, set off from Whitianga Marina to the port of Tauranga where the vessel was loaded up with 1600 litres of additional fuel in drums plus the 3700 litres in the tanks. After completing the New Zealand departure formalities we left the port of Tauranga in good weather conditions on Monday 18th May with great excitement and anticipation of the sea voyage ahead.

Upon leaving the harbour entrance a rumb line to South Minerva Reef was placed on the GPS chart plotter, 2 degrees magnetic north and approximately 800 nautical miles away. The message went out- "too late to change your minds now!!".

Travelling in convoy was Brian Gordon and his crew on board the Motor Vessel "Waverley", also a 15 metre launch, that had travelled to the Pacific Islands on 6 previous trips. It was a great comfort to be travelling together as this was Escapade's maiden voyage outside New Zealand waters.

It was also comforting to have an experienced crew on board "Escapade" as Joe had done the trip to Fiji twice (once on a launch and once on a yacht), Darron had skippered his own vessel back from Australia and Robert knows the vessel so well as he is Escapade's deckie and second skipper.

With our trusty Furuno radar, sounder and auto pilot running sweetly, 16 degrees water temperature and a speed of 7.5 knots, a 2 hour watch schedule was put in place. At 7.00am on Tuesday morning the crew had the lures in the water and to my surprise they were marlin lures (not tuna lures)- serious stuff!! On Wednesday morning the water temperature was up to 19.8 degrees and Joe landed our first Mahimahi (approximately 5 kgs)- fresh fish for dinner tonight. Waverley hadn't even wet their lines as yet and some good humoured chatter took place over the VHF as a result.

On Saturday at 8.00am we arrived at South Minerva and cedar plugs and rapalas were wired up and deported overboard with multi hook ups in depths of between 100 to 250 metres. The results were mostly Wahoo between 15kgs up to 35kgs with some smallish yellow fin amongst them. There was plenty of action and this kept the crew busy as they continually hooked up and released the fish. We only needed one good fish for dinner - have you ever gaffed a wahoo in the tail? Ask Joe what happened !! A lot of laughs as a result and captured on video!! Fortunately the gaff held and we got it back after it had a good swim. Two hours of super hot fishing and the crew had had enough!! That's how full on the fishing was. Unfortunately we never found any sign of marlin.

As we entered the lagoon of this figure 8 shaped coral atoll we were amazed by the clarity of the water at 23.5 degrees. The depth inside the lagoon ranged between 15 to 20 metres and with some bombies (coral heads) which were easily spotted and avoided. The anchorage was great. The lagoon is approximately 3 miles wide and 6 miles long and offers excellent shelter from all weather except cyclones. It was a real buzz to be there. At low tide you can walk on the top of the reef and explore it. There are several holes which have formed- just get in a hole and you may find a crayfish or 4. How easy is that!!

With gusts of wind up from the north-west between 30 to 35 knots we stayed an extra night and then headed to North Minerva which is some 20 miles north-east. Inside this reef we came across several Tongan vessels with free divers collecting giant clams and sea cucumbers for a lucrative Chinese market. The divers wanted to trade some of these for cigarettes!!

The next morning we said goodbye to Waverley as they headed to Fiji. Escapade pointed it's bow for Tongatapu, some 260 nautical miles away, with a detour to the east for some interesting sea mounts with thoughts of marlin in our minds. That afternoon Robert angled our first marlin which was released, estimated to be between 280 to 300 kgs. Yippee and a great fish. However, this would be our only marlin but we did catch mahimahi and small yellow fin as we made our way to Tongatapu and arriving at midday on the 29th May. It was great to see Denise and Rebecca who were there to welcome us on arrival. In a jovial mood we had a relaxed and very social night discussing our voyage and our memories of the trip with the highlights we experienced- no cruise ship will ever take it's sightseers to the remote marvels of the Minerva Reef. Summary results- 7.4 days motoring, 2.46litres of diesel per nautical mile, 1259 nautical miles.

Saturday evening we said farewell to Darron and Robert as they flew home to New Zealand. That left just 4 of us, myself and Denise, Joe and his partner Rebecca and we spent a further 2 days at Tongatapu before leaving to the Ha'apai group of islands on our way to Vava'u. The Ha'apai group of islands are very picturesque, lots of small islands with white sandy beaches and most of these are surrounded by coral reefs that need to be carefully negotiated in good daylight. The water was very clear and with a crew member on the bow it was easy to spot any bombies. Rebecca caught her very first marlin and a blue marlin at that, estimated at 70kgs. Joe also hooked up on a blue marlin which was estimated at 250 kgs and both these fish were released. We spent 3 days in and around the Ha'apai group on our way to Vava'u.

We arrived at Vava'u on the 7th June- what a great place this is. Lovely blue water at 26.5 degrees, air temperature of 26 degrees, deep water, no reefs on the west side to negotiate, very safe anchorages- A boaties dream.

We had the pleasure of meeting up with Henk and Sandra Gros again as Denise and I had fished with them when we were in Vavau 3 yrs previously on their boat Target One. Henk joined us on board for a few days game fishing which helped us so much with local fishing knowledge and on one of these days we hooked up on a blue marlin that did it's best to pass "Escapade". I think we got up to 20 knots for a few minutes. 1hr and 15 mins later we boated Joe's biggest ever Marlin at 238kgs- Great angling Joe.

We were hooking up on Marlin pretty much every time we ventured out. On another day Denise hooked up on a nice fish (I called it as a smaller blue as Denise didn't believe she had the strength to angle a larger fish). 1 hr 30 minutes later she boated the blue marlin which weighed in at 214.5 kgs- a great effort. (She didn't stop smiling for at least a week).

We also had a very social afternoon with Caroline and Steve Campbell (Ika Lahi Resort at Hunga Island). Steve has the vessel "Reel Addiction" and holds more than 100 of Vavau's game fishing records and he also has a huge amount of information that he is willing to share. The island itself has a narrow entrance that requires careful navigation and that leads into a very sheltered lagoon which offers great protection from bad weather and with good anchorage. The resort is at the end of the lagoon.

Vava'u has a great network on Channel 26 every day. It starts off with a call for any emergency or priority traffic, then the weather forecast, a buy and sell section, services needed or required, people wishing to contact others and general information. It is a wonderful network operated by local volunteers and great for boaties. It was amazing how many times someone needed help with something and between those listening there was usually an offer to assist or a solution given.

Every Friday afternoon there is a friendly yacht race in the Harbour for any yachts that wish to enter. It was always fun to watch and good to see that New Zealand was well represented and won now and then. Every yacht that entered won a prize. Friday night was always a great social night as well.

Joe and Rebecca flew back to New Zealand and reality on 18 June. It was great to have them on board with us for those 3 weeks.

Two days later saw strong winds up to 60 knots in Neiafu Harbour which struck just before dawn and lasted for approximately 2 hours. The forecast had been for winds up to 35knots. Some yachts broke their moorings and a 60 ton motor launch, that had been left unattended, dragged it's anchor causing mayhem for a time. "Escapade" was safely sheltered at the south end of the harbour under the cliffs and had winds measuring 35 knots but it was still a little scary. It tested our anchor which held fast. (Rocna anchors are brilliant)

We had a week of unsettled weather with rain and winds between 20 to 25 knots so we decided it was time to service the engines and do some other general maintenance jobs that needed attention.

27th July saw friends Debbie and David Donald from Kawhai join us for a few nights and 2 days fishing. David is putting his own vessel "Crazy Horse" into charter. On day 2 David hooked up on a big blue- 1 hr later we landed the fish which weighed in at 302kgs. It was David's first blue marlin and his biggest fish. Well done Dave. It was also Escapade's heaviest blue marlin. Debbie also caught her first blue marlin which we released and also a sail fish and mahimahi.

3 August was a special day- Denise's big day out!! She released 4 blue marlin in one day- 2 of which were estimated at 120kgs, 1 at approximately 70kgs and then the big one at around 220kgs. Well done- she deserved a medal!! But settled for a drink instead!! Her best fishing day ever. She was a little weary the next day but no sore muscles. Her angling technique, for a small person with no great strength, is very good. She had it down to a fine art and lets the chair and the boat do the work.

Whilst on the subject of female and male anglers- When there is only the two of us on board Denise usually angles the fish and I handle the boat. When a fish strikes it is all go for the first few minutes, clearing the other lines and getting the fish under control. Denise's only complaint is that the skipper yells instructions at her as he seems to think she is stone deaf!! My version of this is that I just speak loudly to ensure she hears when so many other things are going on at the same time!! She has got very good at taking no notice which makes me yell even more. She is also very good at using her selected hearing abilities!! Easy to think you know better when you are not the angler, she says!! A little praise would go a long way she also says and suggests that instead of yelling "get stuck in and get some line back" it would be nice to hear "going well love just keep up the good work". Denise let me angle a marlin one day (a rare experience for me) and she did not yell any instructions at me (she could have she said, as I was doing it all wrong, but she didn't). The problem was that she was handling the boat and I was too busy trying to get the line back and angling as hard as my old tired body would let me but without the skill of my good lady as I am just not as good at angling as she is!! I was so busy angling that I forgot to yell instructions regarding the handling of the boat and as a result of this she managed to run over my line and my prize fish swam away. Just goes to show that my yelling skills are useful!!!!

On Thursday 6th August we woke to the news that the passenger ferry that travels from Tongatapu to Vava'u, "Princess Ashika", had sunk overnight. We offered "Escapade" to NZ Search and Rescue and at 2pm they gave us the green light to assist. We had 8 crew on board and we motored down to the location to arrive at midnight where we took a sounding over the sinking sight and then searched under moonlight until 7.00am when the New Zealand Orion aircraft was overhead and made contact with us. The Orion crew gave us coordinates of debris and a search pattern to follow but unfortunately it was only debris and 2 life jackets that we found. We called off our search as dusk approached as the Orion was returning to land for the night and there was too much debris in the water for us to continue in the dark safely without the Orion's eyes from the air to warn in advance of objects they could see that were semi submerged. We arrived back to Vavau at 7.00am on the Saturday morning. The sinking of the ferry was a very tragic event and there were many families on the island that had lost family members. It was a time of great sadness. One person did some research and said that if you compared the total population of Tonga and the lives lost on the Princess Ashika with the population of the USA, this would equate to 1.5 million people lost in one tragedy.

The travelling distance from Neiafu Harbour down the channel out to the open sea is about 45 minutes at 7 knots with the depth within the channel averaging between 40 to 90 metres. Once you exit the channel area the depth soon drops away to 500 metres and more. On Tuesday 18th August we set out down the channel with the lures out and had not gone very far when we had a strike. We were just off Fata Point in the entrance to the bay and in 65 metres of water. Denise was in the game chair and it was not long before we realised it was a good fish, but what was it?? It went deep and forced us to keep moving and we travelled a fair distance down the channel as a result. We thought it may be a shark and then may be a black marlin. All was revealed as Denise landed her best yellow fin tuna at 57kgs.

We had our Aussie friend, Sam, fly from Melbourne to spend a few days on board with us. On Monday 24th August Sam caught 4 Marlin, 3 good Mahimahi and 1 Wahoo (one triple hook up where we got 2 of the fish). We had 7 more bites and hook ups. We were finding that the fish were hard to stay hooked up as they were mostly small fish and this continued to happen for the rest of our time at Vavau. Sam was really happy- 4 days fishing with 5 marlin, 1 sailfish, 2 mahimahi, 6 wahoo, 2 baracuda, 2 yellow fin tuna, 2 good skippies. In those 4 days Denise also caught 2 marlin, mahimahi and wahoo. That's great fishing. The following day Target One landed a 325kg blue marlin- congratulations Henk.

30th August my brother Brian and my nephew Warwick and his son Kane arrived for 4 days- 2 days fishing but in very rough seas unfortunately and with winds up to 25 knots. We managed to catch 3 Marlin, 6 Wahoo and 4 Mahimahi. They all had a great time.

On 02nd September "Escapade" was asked to respond to a May Day call with the location approximately 23 nautical miles away. The sea conditions were not nice and after 7 hrs we towed a Spanish yacht, that had it's rudder fall off, back to the safety of Neiafu harbour.

The weekend of 5th September was the Vava'u Yachting Regatta and the Governor's Cup Race. "Escapade" was asked to be the committee boat. It was a great weekend with a full moon party on a small island on the Saturday night after the yacht race. Sunday morning we were called up by another vessel to ask for our assistance as someone had accidentally partially severed their finger when a hatch slammed shut on his hand. As we had the speed to get the person back quickly and because there was a doctor/surgeon on another vessel in Neiafu harbour that could stitch the finger back into place if too much time did not elapse, we took off at speed with the victim and his hand wrapped in ice. His finger was repaired successfully as we caught up with him a week after his accident.

Friday 18th September was the first day of the Vava'u International Billfish Tournament and is a 4 day event with fishing on the Friday and Saturday, rest day Sunday, fishing again Monday and Tuesday. We decided to enter the tournament and on board was our three anglers, Joe Brogan, Sam Cadman and Denise and myself as Skipper. We gave it our best shot and came 3rd place overall.

We won several daily prizes for mahimahi and wahoo but these did not count as points for the billfish tournament itself as points were only awarded for billfish. Denise won the lady angler prize in the tournament with 2 blue marlin, one caught on 37 kg and one on 24 kg. It was a line weight tournament and the tournament figures were 115 confirmed bill fish strikes- 82 hook ups- 33 tagged billfish (1 striped marlin, 1 black marlin, 29 blue marlin, 2 sailfish)- 5 boats fishing from 8.00am each day to lines out at 4pm. No bill fish were weighed as all were tagged and released. Absolutely hot fishing action and a great tournament.

On Saturday 25th September we left Vava'u and with David Donald on board with us and as part of our crew to NZ. It was sad to say goodbye to friends we had made during our time at Vava'u as we met so many great people and had such a great time with so many wonderful experiences.

We headed south towards Tongatapu via the islands of Latte- Kao and Tofua which was letting off steam as it is an active volcano. Water temperatures were 25 and 26 degrees and we caught and released 3 marlin in these two days. We arrived into Tongatapu on Sunday evening. On Monday we were joined by the friendly faces of Darron (Soprano Charters) and Chris Dunn (Coro Cowboy Charters) as they arrived to accompany myself and David as crew to bring "Escapade" back to NZ. It was great to have Darron on board again and to catch up with local news etc. Tuesday and Wednesday were full on days getting provisions, fuelling up and generally packing down the boat to get it prepared for the journey home. We did manage to get in some socialising and had dinner on shore with local friends joining us. On Wednesday morning we were greeted with the news via a phone call on Denise's mobile from home that Samoa had been hit by a tsunami and at the time we were tied up to the wharf at Tongatapu waiting for the fuel truck to arrive so as a precaution we headed out into deeper water as Tonga also had a tsunami warning in place and this was lifted at midday. Denise flew home Wednesday afternoon and we began our journey to North Minerva where we met up with "Waverley" again.

The return trip south was very similar to our trip north. Fishing on our way and with Chris angling 2 spear fish and a striped marlin on stand up gear. We also caught a few yellow fin tuna and a mahimahi- alas no marlin at the Minerva Reefs again though. "Escapade" arrived into Marsden Cove on Friday 9th October to clear Customs and then on to Whitianga to arrive at 4.30pm with showery weather, a lumpy sea and water temperature of 15 degrees.

Many thanks to my crew and in particular Darron who did both crossing with me. You all made the trips special in your own individual ways. It was great to have a crew each way that got on so well together with a sense of humour and the commitment to take their turns on watch and assist in general. Well done guys as I could not have done this without you.

Summary- Ocean crossing- heading north we had 10 to 20 knots south westerly most of the way. Heading south we had mostly southerly and 2 days of 20 to 25 knots on the nose which was a bit uncomfortable but at no time frightening. We used more fuel on the way home- 2.7 litres per nautical mile compared to 2.46 litres per nautical mile on the way up. Worst weather was between Marsden Cove and Whitianga.

Summary- Fishing – Billfish only-

43 Blue Marlin of which 4 were weighed- David Donald 302kgs
Joe Brogan- 238 kgs
Denise Knutson- 214 kgs
Robert (Sam) Hilton- 148 kgs

1 Striped Marlin, 6 Sailfish, 4 Shortbilled Spearfish

Serious Marlin fishing days was 31 days. Days with no Marlin= 11 days

Best fishing was two days with 4 Marlin on both days

Lost count of how many Mahimahi, Wahoo and Yellow Fin Tuna we caught

WOULD WE LIKE TO GO BACK AGAIN- YES- YOU BET!!!

Lots of great memories, great climate, good company, wonderful experiences

Photos are on our website- www.islandcruise.co.nz

Ross Knutson (Skipper/Owner)- MV Escapade.