

CRUISING VANUATU



By Roxy and Carl Podlogar

In 2016, my husband Carl and I embarked on a new chapter in our lives as an offshore cruising couple. The new life was ten years in the planning. A small part of it – the story of our purchase decision and our experience of taking delivery of our new Seawind 1160 – appeared in the previous edition of the Seawind Magazine. Since then, we've had some truly wonderful adventures. But, prior to all of that, we were methodical about our planning: we appointed a land-based manager, worked with our financial team, established a trust, and met with our dentists, doctors and more. Right from the outset, we intended to sail around the world – and that plan never changed. But, despite our best efforts, no amount of preparation could prevent unforeseen emergencies in far-flung places. In such places, where a lack of basic communication can leave you utterly helpless, you must draw upon the strength of the sailing community, knowing that the friendships and people you meet will forever be an integral part of your sailing life.

Our journey began with the provisioning and commissioning of our Seawind 1160, Sky Pond, in Vung Tau, Vietnam. We arrived in Vietnam on the eve of Tet (New Year) celebrations, reaching Seawind's loading dock just before midnight to drop off supplies and spare parts. We toured Vietnam and finished the final provisioning of food and domestic items over the next few weeks. We set sail on our official delivery leg from Vietnam to Darwin, Australia, within a day of taking ownership of Sky Pond.

Six weeks later we arrived in Darwin, only to discover that Australia was celebrating a week-long Easter holiday. I'm sure all cruisers have experienced arriving in a port in need of marine services, only to find the town involved in a celebration, leaving you to wait patiently and fend for yourselves. After re-provisioning and refuelling in Darwin, we continued through the Timor

Straits, stopping at Thursday Island. We had planned to sail around the eastern side of Australia with the aid of the north-westerly winds, but unfortunately missed the seasonal weather window and motored against the wind and waves for most of our journey from Darwin to north-eastern Australia.

We eventually reached Cairns, Australia – which we viewed as the midpoint on the way to Brisbane – and a promise of some respite from our journey from Darwin. We moored at a delightful marina nestled into neighbourly Yorkey's Knob. At last, the 'delivery' leg of our journey felt complete. For the next month, we toured the area, meeting other sailors and making friends with those docked nearby, little knowing that the friendships we forged at the marina would prove to be invaluable in the future.

While moored in the Yorkey's Knob Marina, Carl and I made a habit of leaving the boat every day at sunrise to take advantage of the cooler temperatures. We ran on the beach or swam in the shark-netted surf – which was more anxiety-inducing than reassuring, as you might imagine. One morning on my way to the beach, I passed another boat and heard an alarm from inside it. I immediately reported it to the marina office, though predictably they did nothing. Over the next few days, I kept a watchful eye on the boat, waiting for its owners to return. Upon their arrival, I introduced myself. Sylvie was a French national who had begun scuba diving and photography at a young age, and found new passion later in life by crewing on sailing vessels. Robyn was also an accomplished sailor, diver and photographer. On learning that our itinerary would eventually take us to New Caledonia, Sylvie insisted on introducing us to her dear French friend Nicole, a resident of New Caledonia who, she said, would be happy to host us during our stay.

Introductions were made by email prior to our departure, and throughout our journey we kept in touch with our new friend, apprising her of our tentative arrival date in New Caledonia. We bid farewell to our new friends in Yorkey's Knob and set sail through the Whitsunday Islands, eventually reaching our next destination – Brisbane.

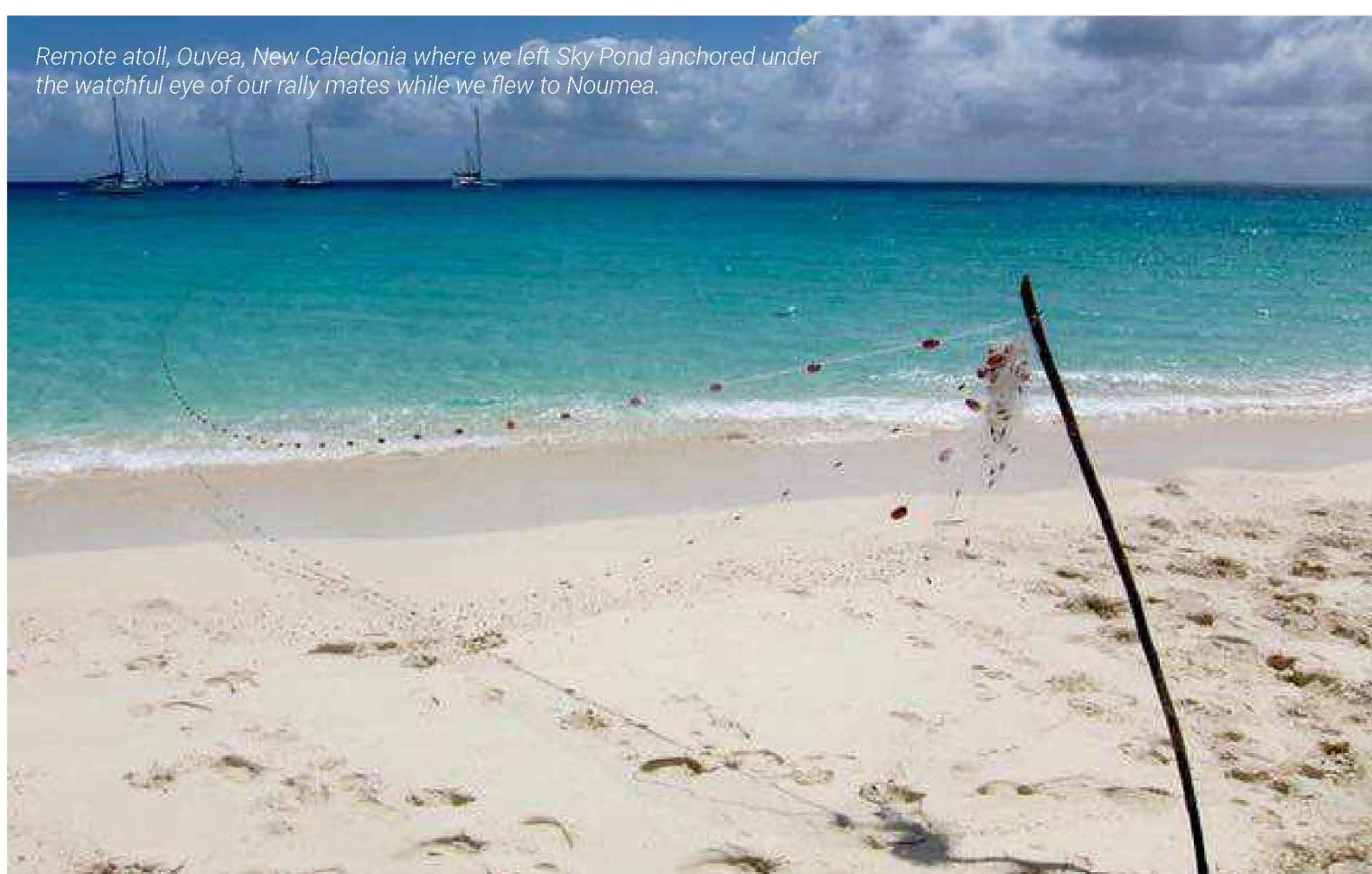
Our plan was to leave Brisbane in late June 2016, and rendezvous with the Island Cruising Association (ICA) rally which had already left New Zealand and been in Fiji for a month. Joining the rally afforded us the opportunity to garner knowledge from the rally leader, take advantage of the camaraderie of a small select group of experienced sailors, and expedite the process of immigration and customs that a rally organisation offers.

The life of a blue-water sailor is not as glamorous as many might imagine. Being on a boat does not afford constant access to fruit or vegetables, nor does it permit regular exercise. For these reasons, I was only slightly concerned when I noticed a slight ache in my lower right abdomen, which I attributed to the irregularity of

my diet. Carl and I were preparing to depart Brisbane, in accordance with the weather window, and I brushed aside any lingering concern about the pain. The passage was to be our first solo (or couple) ocean crossing, and we were busy preparing for the two-week journey to Fiji, commencing 30 June 2016. The passage was easily handled, with perfect winds and mostly sunny conditions. We conferred daily with a weather router and received Predict Wind downloads via Iridium satellite twice a day to monitor changes in the weather. We arrived in Vuda Point Marina, Fiji, to rejoicing local singers at the customs dock and a raucous 'Bula Bula.' For the next month, we sailed around Fiji making friends with many locals. Though we spent a month travelling around Fiji, it was still only a fraction of the amount of time needed to enjoy such a beautiful place and its people. As we were preparing for departure to Vanuatu, I told my husband for the first time, 'I've had this small ache in my side, and I thought you should know before we make this two-day passage to Vanuatu.' He made a mental note and we were on our way.

We arrived in Vanuatu on 9 August without incident, but the ache in my side had become more pronounced

Remote atoll, Ouvéa, New Caledonia where we left Sky Pond anchored under the watchful eye of our rally mates while we flew to Noumea.

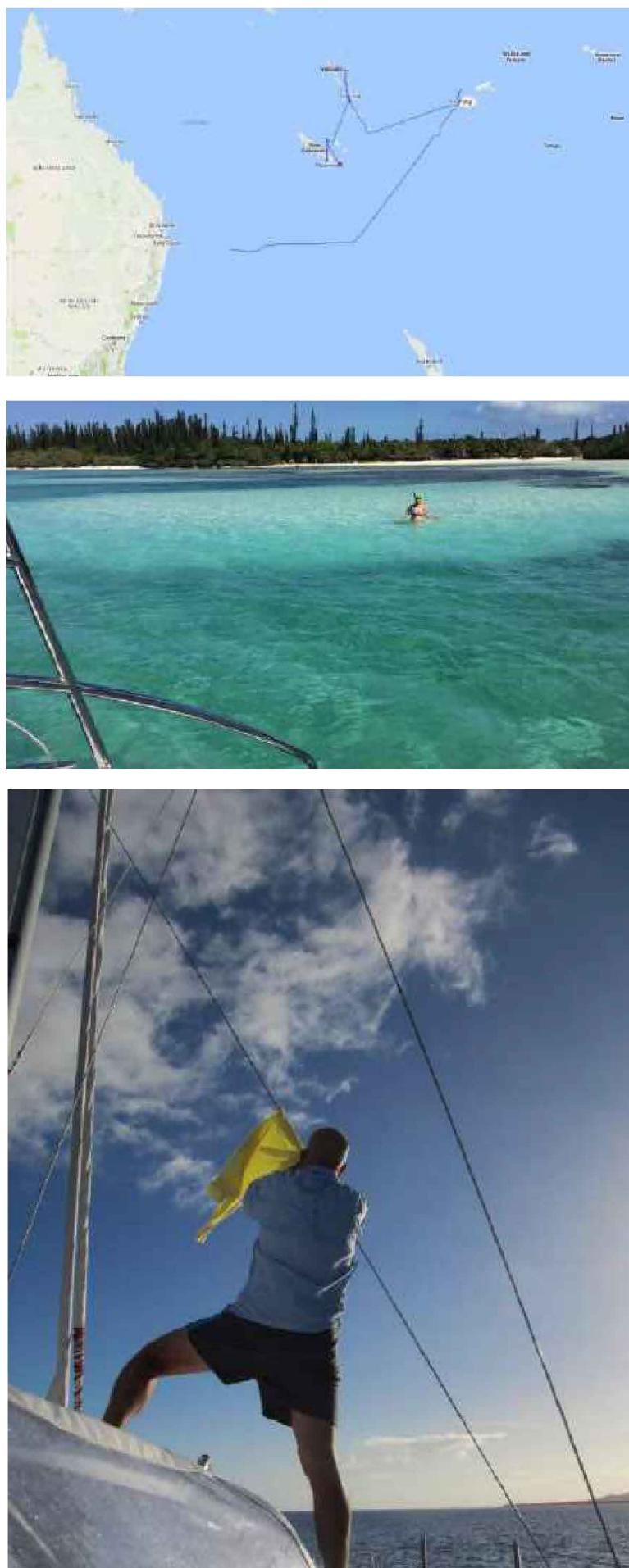


and was accompanied by nausea. At the main city, Port Vila, I visited an Australian clinic that was reminiscent of an American doctor's office. I felt comforted by the white walls and familiar procedures. The doctor couldn't elicit severe pain when palpating my abdomen, nor was I running a fever. The island, being more rural and rugged than those we had previously visited, didn't have the facilities necessary to perform the blood test that would diagnose appendicitis. I was sent to the French radiologist across the road for an ultrasound.

As I was on the examination bench, I watched small lizards crawl up the sides of the exam room, as the doctor informed me that his 'really good' ultrasound machine was not available but assured me that I did not have appendicitis based on the results obtained from his older machine. I walked back to the Australian doctor for the results from my urine sample. She thought there might be an elevated white blood cell count which would indicate a kidney infection. I was prescribed antibiotics and sent on my way. The pain in my side subsided with the antibiotics, and I supplemented my dwindling supply with more we had onboard, prescribed by our personal doctor. The next month was spent in peaceful bliss, the pain in my side forgotten as we explored the island.

As we prepared to commence the one-day sail from Vanuatu to a remote atoll in New Caledonia, my mind drifted once more to the pain in my side, which had slowly returned with the completion of my antibiotic prescription. I consulted with two of our close and experienced rally friends, Debora and Warren, also Seawind owners, asking that they weigh in on the available options to get to Noumea, the main city of New Caledonia. I felt that I needed to see a doctor for another diagnosis.

Within hours of our conversation, I was flat on my back in our master cabin telling Carl that I needed to fly to Noumea and get to an emergency room. I reminded him that another rally member, Pip Sawyer, was fluent in French and that she could be of assistance. Carl took the dinghy to her boat and asked for her help in communicating with the French-speaking staff at the local resort. Within a short time, Pip had arranged for an ambulance to transport me to the local ER to wait for our plane to the main island, which was at the crack of dawn.



The next morning, we flew to Noumea and were lucky to find a lone taxi to take us to the city's hospital. After working with the French admittance team in the ER, we were rushed through blood tests and an ultrasound, which both confirmed that I had been suffering chronic appendicitis for almost two months. The antibiotics had staved off an acute rupture of my appendix.

Time now to recall Nicole, the friend of a friend who we had only met through an email introduction while in Cairns, Australia. We had intended to meet her when we arrived in New Caledonia, but emailed her to inform her of my medical emergency as we were in transit to the ER. As I lay on my hospital bed waiting for my surgery late in the evening, a woman burst into the room speaking English and French and said to my husband, 'I am Nicole! I am here to make sure you are completely taken care of!'

She translated impeccably what I was experiencing to the French/English doctor and nursing team, then offered to take my husband to a nearby hotel to get him settled while my surgery was underway. Once the surgery was complete, we learned that I couldn't fly back to where Sky Pond was anchored on the remote atoll, as the surgical procedure included a carbon dioxide injection into my abdominal cavity. Our rally friends were kind enough to watch over Sky Pond, proving that the importance of a rally should never be underestimated.

Nicole generously invited me into her beautiful home for three days, while Carl flew back to Sky Pond. After my initial three-day recovery, Nicole and I went to the market and stocked up on French provisions, while Carl single-handedly delivered Sky Pond to the Ile des Pins, where the three of us rendezvoused, as Nicole and I took the high-speed ferry from Noumea to the island, passing Sky Pond as we crossed the channel. We spent the next four days enjoying and cementing our new friendship with Nicole on Sky Pond.

Our reliance on our French friends doesn't end there. Three weeks later, believing that our medical emergencies were behind us, Carl and I were picking up a mooring ball just west of the same town, Noumea. The seas were a bit rough and I was steering at the helm (with a still-tender abdomen) to



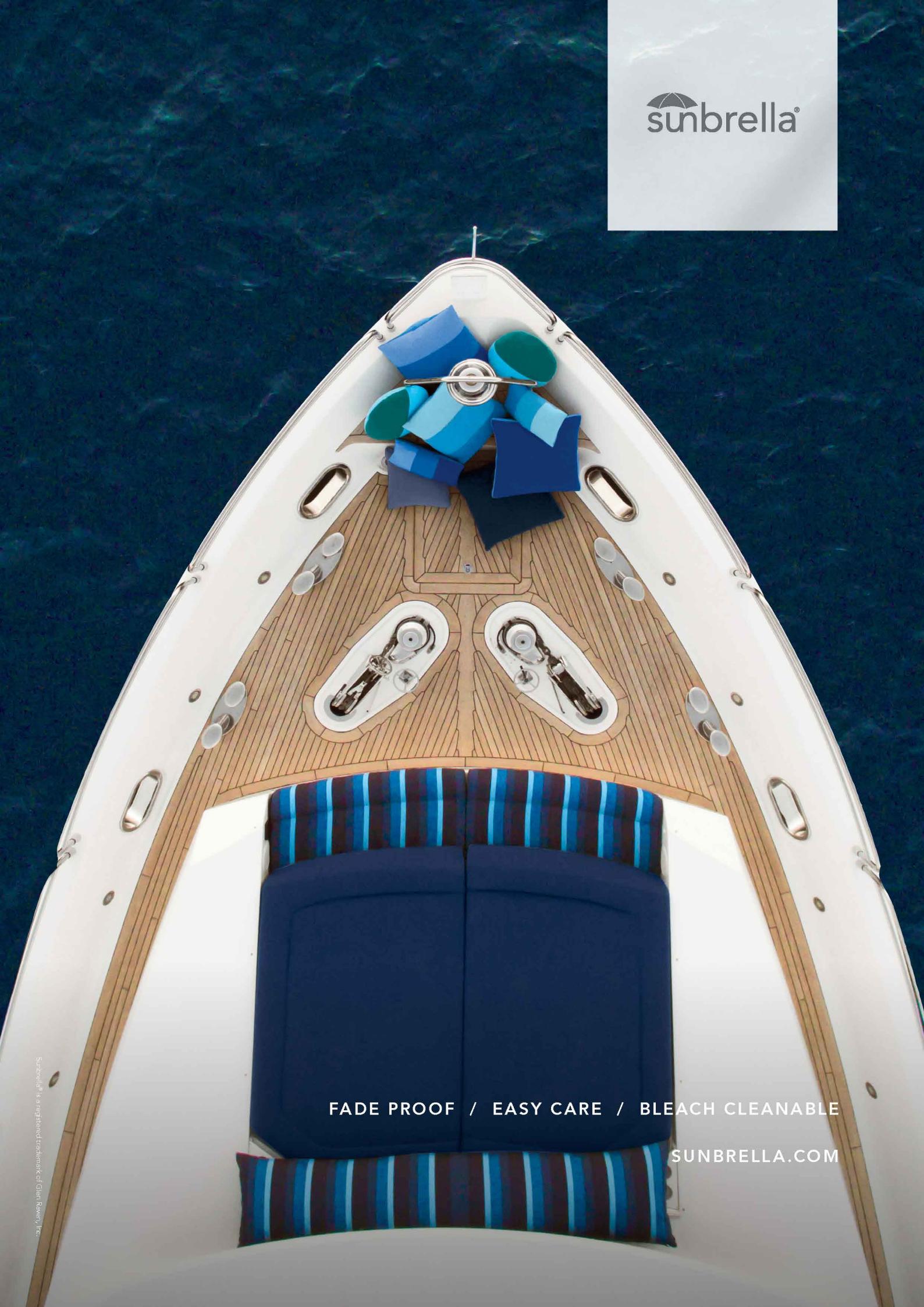


keep the boat pointing into the wind and towards the mooring ball. Our mooring ball procedure was to pick up the loop of the ball off of the bow, and I could see Carl leaning over the bow as he was trying to reach the mooring ball's loop. I then saw his body jerk dramatically downward before he popped back up holding his hand in the air, calmly stating, but with an ashen face, 'We need to get to the ER.' He had just 'gloved' the tip of what the locals refer to as his 'social' finger on his right hand. He had crushed his middle finger and, with little prevention from his sailing glove, detached the tip of his finger above the first knuckle. Suffice to say, we now only pick up the mooring ball off the port stern steps, and then walk it up to the bow.

Luckily, our location was approximately fifteen miles from Noumea, the same city and the same hospital where I had my surgery three weeks before, but Carl was in no shape to bring Sky Pond into an unknown marina. We realized that we were motoring past a popular mooring ball field at another resort island

where our French-speaking Kiwi friend, Pip, was also moored. We quickly changed course and sped toward Pip's boat while hailing her on the VHF. She and other friends helped us onto a mooring ball in their bay and provided some temporary medical care. They hailed a water taxi and provided instructions in French to get us to the hospital. Again, our rally friends watched over Sky Pond while we waited for the orthopaedic surgeon to reconnect Carl's finger. Carl's injury was triaged as a lower priority, and he lay waiting for several days before he could get his procedure.

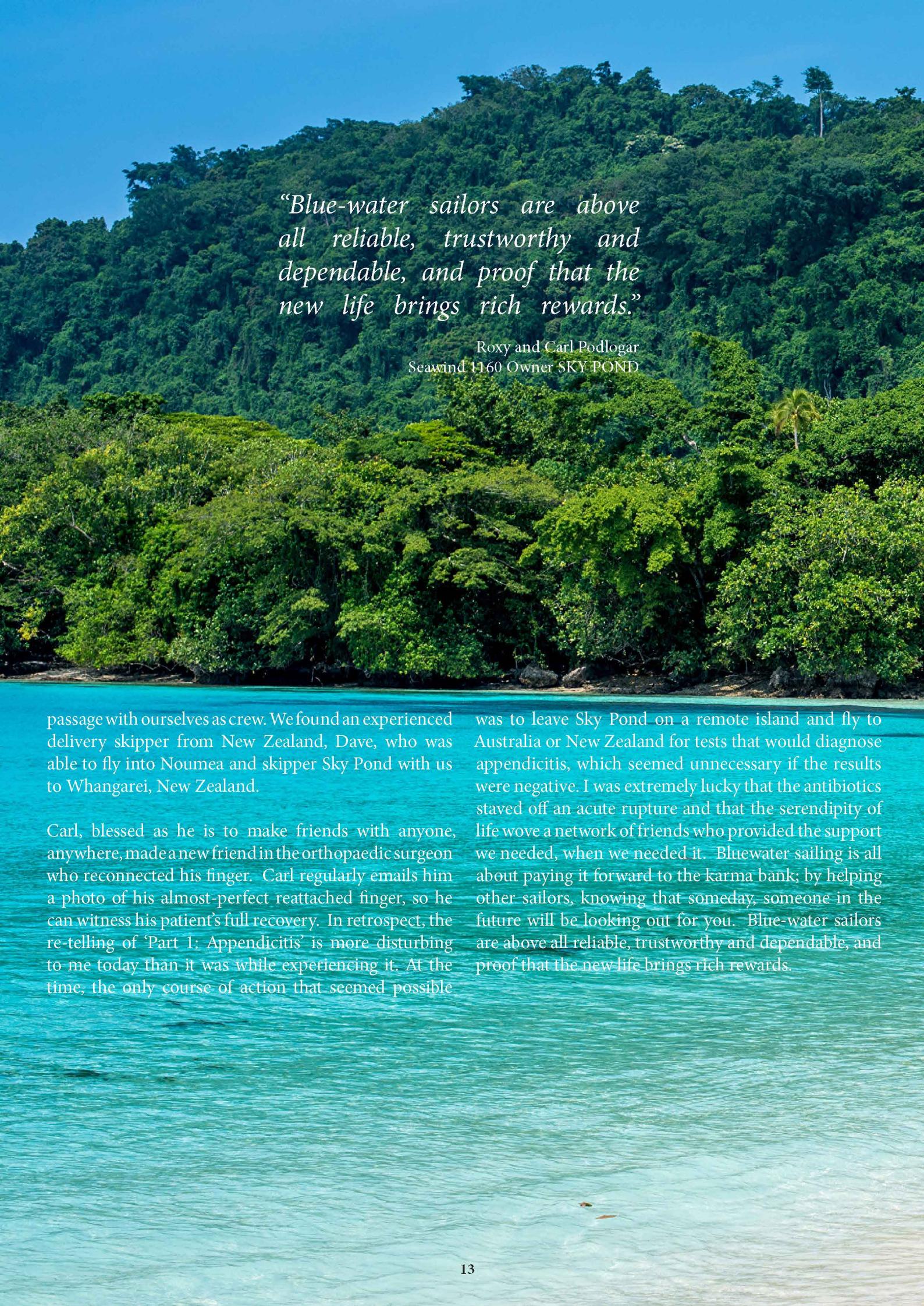
I bunked with and enjoyed the company of the other rally members moored in the Noumea Marina while we waited for Carl's procedure to take place. We then used our circle of friends to generate a list of possible delivery skippers who could help sail Sky Pond back to New Zealand, a six-day passage, as the cyclone season was approaching and neither Carl nor I were functioning well enough to make the journey alone. We needed a reliable and trustworthy skipper to sail the



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Roxy and Carl Podlogar
Seawind 1160 Owner SKY POND

passage with ourselves as crew. We found an experienced delivery skipper from New Zealand, Dave, who was able to fly into Noumea and skipper Sky Pond with us to Whangarei, New Zealand.

Carl, blessed as he is to make friends with anyone, anywhere, made a new friend in the orthopaedic surgeon who reconnected his finger. Carl regularly emails him a photo of his almost-perfect reattached finger, so he can witness his patient's full recovery. In retrospect, the re-telling of 'Part 1: Appendicitis' is more disturbing to me today than it was while experiencing it. At the time, the only course of action that seemed possible

was to leave Sky Pond on a remote island and fly to Australia or New Zealand for tests that would diagnose appendicitis, which seemed unnecessary if the results were negative. I was extremely lucky that the antibiotics staved off an acute rupture and that the serendipity of life wove a network of friends who provided the support we needed, when we needed it. Bluewater sailing is all about paying it forward to the karma bank; by helping other sailors, knowing that someday, someone in the future will be looking out for you. Blue-water sailors are above all reliable, trustworthy and dependable, and proof that the new life brings rich rewards.