

THE PACIFIC DRIFT

Vetle, Ma Theresa and Dag Hoiland

EXPLORE – LEARN – SHARE summarise the purpose of our journey.

We call the journey *Escape West* because west is the direction of our travels. Our boat, SY *Escape*, is a Beneteau First 47.7 and her home port is Stavanger, Norway. We have sailed her thousands of miles since 2009 and she has served us well. Literally and figuratively we are, Vetle (one month shy of eight years at time of writing), Ma Theresa and me, Dag.

Our *Escape West* journey started when we left Stavanger in July 2019. We sailed to Gran Canaria, continued across the Atlantic in January 2020 and cruised the Caribbean until Covid caught up with us in March/April 2020 (see *Flying Fish 2020/2*). In May 2020 we left *Escape* on the hard in Curaçao, returning at the end of July 2021 to continue our westbound explorations. This is the story of our Pacific Drift in April 2022.

Nuku Hiva, French Polynesia, September 2022

“How do we know the way?”, Vetle asked. He had been up for a while silently looking at the stars – he was always quiet when he knew he should be in bed. I guess the question had been maturing in the two weeks that had passed since we left Las Perlas in Panama. “How do we know, Papa?”

“You see that one there? The bright one just above the horizon?”, I sat comfortably in the cockpit with my back to the companionway looking at *Escape* finding her route through the following seas guided by Monique, our Hydrovane self-steering gear. “Yes Papa, I see the one, but it is behind us. We go the other way,” Vetle said as he lifted the phone pointing at the bright star. “It is Venus,” he proclaimed triumphantly.

We had played with the StarWalk app on many nights exploring the night sky. It was my gateway into talking about the universe and, more importantly, the Earth and its environment. “Yes, it is and you know that without the app,” I replied. “Venus is the brightest star we have after the Sun and the Moon and it rotates backwards,” I heard him say as he looked up from the app. “What does that mean Papa?”. I was clueless. “I guess it means it rotates the other way,” I said without offering a better explanation. “Oh, we would all be dizzy there”.

“But how, Papa? How do we know the way to Bounty Island?”. “When I see Venus covered by our aft stay, I know we are on course to Pitcairn or the Gambier Islands,” I said. “If not, we are too much to the west or the south. It is called celestial navigation”. Unsatisfied with my response, he continued, “But Pitcairn is so small. What if we pass it and never see it?”. The *Bounty* adventures had rubbed off somehow. “Pitcairn became famous because it is hard to find,” I told him. “I know,” agreed our adventurous seven-year-old. It was time for bed and he knew it. My night watch continued while *Escape* comfortably headed deeper into the southern hemisphere pushed by the southeast trades.

Curaçao to Panama

After returning at the end of July 2021 we survived a six-month yard stay at Curaçao Marine. We don't mind doing work on our boat, but discovering a small crack in the keel-matrix only days before launching was a serious setback. Something had happened during the 15-month storage but no one could offer any explanation. Our plans were

bombed, timeline gone and monthly budget blown while to-do lists multiplied. It was not until January 2022 that *Escape* was ready for the high seas, stronger and better than before. By then we had celebrated birthdays, Christmas and New Year in Curaçao.

After a week on a Bonaire mooring the itching grew and in early afternoon we cast off again for San Blas, Panama. The 700-mile passage took us along the Colombian coast, guided through the night on our way southwest by the radiance of Santa Marta, Barranquilla and Cartagena on the horizon. We had them marked down as optional stopovers, but the Colombian Covid-motivated red tape was too rigorous for us. It was a quick ride with fresh winds and seas which allowed us to rediscover our boat after the long separation and repair. Before long we rounded the East Holandes and sailed up the Mayflower Channel to El Porvenir in San Blas. It felt good to get behind the reefs and out of the ocean swell and to drop the anchor in 10m of clear, warm water. The passage had passed without any problems with either boat or crew.

The San Blas were beautiful but touristy. We enjoyed sailing the ins and outs of the islands, all offering beaches, palm trees, clear waters and good anchorages. We enjoyed the snorkelling and meeting fellow sailors on the beach in the evening. We enjoyed finally being on the boat again, blending exploration, school, chores and boat maintenance. All too soon our cash and provisions ran low, forcing us to seek out the nearest ATM and grocery shop, which were in Shelter Bay Marina, Colón, Panama.

Arriving at Shelter Bay was a shift in mindset and pace. It was now all about transiting the Canal and entering the Pacific. Business cards recommending Canal transiting agents, Uber drivers and others were put into our hands by Shelter Bay

Marina. Panamanian business culture snuck up on us too fast and before long preparations for the transit were in progress – measurement of the boat, organising lines and line handlers and preparing to submit documents ... but first and foremost fees and payment. Nothing happens in Panama until money changes hands. We chose a recommended Canal agent, services were agreed and dollars paid over. Then silence and waiting, until finally a date for the transit came through. We would transit on 8th March. And we did. We had time to visit the last refuge of Captain Morgan and the fortresses at Portobelo, enjoying its history while having Pirate Pizza in Casa Vela.

The Panama Canal

We entered the Panama Canal with great anticipation on the afternoon of

Sunset in Portobelo



*Nomadica, our buddy
boat for several weeks*

8th March. It was a milestone in our journey westwards and Miraflores, the final gate, was the door to our Narnia. The transit is actually an easy 40 miles. The Canal guide arrived as agreed on 'the flats' outside the entrance to Shelter Bay Marina and we progressed quickly to the Gatun locks that lifted us up to our overnight stay in the Gatun Lake. Before entering the lock we rafted up with *Nomadica*, a 58ft steel yacht sailed by Morgan and Cheryl Morice (OCC) and their children Gäel and Naiya, whom we'd met in the San Blas. There was a third yacht on the other side.

On exiting the gate the other yacht suddenly lost power so we towed them to their mooring for the night. Later we learnt that they'd had to stay there for two weeks while the Canal Authorities sent a mechanic to remove their entire engine for repair. They were not allowed to do anything other than wait – everything was decided by the Canal



*Nomadica waiting for
the lock to open*

authorities while the cost soared. Be sure everything is in good working order before entering the Canal! The following morning a new Canal guide arrived. We motored across the Gatun Lake, squeezed through the Culebra Passage, snuck under the Centenario Bridge, took the Pedro Miguel locks down one floor and headed for the Miraflores Lock – the gateway to the Pacific.

When the Miraflores Gate on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal opened in front of us we were at the start of the biggest ocean on the planet. We left behind Captain Morgan, Long John Silver and all the



*The
gateway to
Narnia –
the Pacific
Ocean*

pirates of the Caribbean whilst welcoming Robinson Crusoe, HMS *Bounty*, the works of Herman Melville, the South Pacific tales of Jack London and many other stories about this great ocean. We were excited. We exited the Canal, rounded Isla Flamenco and dropped anchor in 12m of dirty water with the skyline of Panama City in front of us. We were to stay there for a month, exploring, provisioning and enjoying big-city life.

The Pacific Ocean*

Our first 24 hours in the Pacific was a joy ride, together with our buddy boat *Nomadica*. The forecast showed great following winds and the current pushed us in the right direction. I went below to prepare a coffee for my night watch. Vetle and Theresa were sound asleep and all was quiet apart from the sounds of *Escape* eagerly heading southwest through the waves. Venus danced from port to starboard of our backstay and I had only to look up to confirm that Monique was keeping us on course towards the elusive Pitcairn at 23°S. The celestial navigation was going well and we still had 3500 miles in which to fine tune it.

Preparing dinner



We passed the Galapagos north of the main islands and just south of Wolf Island, and crossed the Equator at 96°W, 30 minutes into my birthday on 19th April. We had opted out of visiting the Galapagos before leaving Panama – it seemed too expensive and cumbersome, requiring fumigation and certification, compared with what cruisers actually get to see.

In our second week out, at 5°S, the southeast trades finally firmed up and gave us a steady push of 20–25 knots of warm winds. We were happy, *Escape* was happy and all was good. Time at sea had allowed us to enter into the rhythm of our daily offshore routines – breakfast at sunrise and checking the rig, steering and running rigging for chafe. After the morning log book entry, some hours of sleep for me while Theresa kept the boat running safely. A hot lunch at midday, then getting together in the cockpit in the early afternoon

* *Escape's* route in the Pacific can be followed on the chartlet on page 38.

to talk, do some school if the weather permitted and prepare for dinner at sunset. Theresa struggled with seasickness, but with the following seas and steady wind she managed.

We met dolphins and pilot whales. We lost some lures to tuna, *mahi mahi* and *wahoos* but the only fish we landed was after sundown. It was an ugly, slimy creature with a barracuda head and body like an eel. Needless to say, we dropped it back into the ocean. Later we heard that there is a deepwater fish commonly called 'night barracuda' that comes to the surface after dark to feed.

Panama was long forgotten and the South Pacific islands not yet on our horizon. Night followed day and dawn brought the promise of yet another day at sea. *Escape* sailed herself. If the wind was too brisk we reduced sail, and when the breeze allowed we flew the spinnaker through the day. We did runs of between 120 and 160 miles between noon positions depending on the wind. We always sail conservatively on long passages to avoid breakages or, worse, any injuries.

By the third week of our crossing we started to look for a weather window to visit Pitcairn. This was all prepared before leaving Panama and Brenda, the jack of all trades in Pitcairn, was ready to welcome us to their island, their history and their community. Through the whole crossing we kept in contact with *Nomadica*, plotting both boats' progress. They had gained about 150 miles by keeping further south than we had.

We started to calculate, first by ourselves in our heads in quiet moments, then in whispered conversations after Vetle was in bed. "We may be in by Wednesday". "There's a low forming southwest of Pitcairn, but we may make it if we can manage 150 mile daily runs for the next 48 hours". "Looks like *Nomadica* will make the weather window before the low closes in". Once the cat was out of the bag it became the daily topic of discussion and navigation. Every morning the downloaded weather was scrutinised and flooded with courses, isobars and distance calculations.

As the remaining distance to Pitcairn decreased and the forecast accuracy improved it became obvious that we would not make the weather window, so one morning we made the decision to head straight for the islands in French Polynesia. Pitcairn and the Gambier archipelago are only 300 miles apart, but we had to make the decision before the apparent wind angle became too tight to make the Gambiers.



*Servicing
Vetle's
car on the
crossing*



“It looks like Venus is not dancing, Papa. Venus is always on the same side of our aft stay. Can we find the Bounty Island, Papa?”. We had to break the news to Vetle somehow. “We are so close now that we had to look at the weather and decide. We cannot go ashore on Bounty Island because the weather is too windy,” I said. “Will Gäel and Naiya go there?” he asked. “I think so,” I replied, “they are just enough ahead of us to make it while the weather is still good”. Theresa entered the conversation, “Remember that the Bounty Island is hard to find and it is hard to get on land”. “Are we still doing celestial navigation, Papa,” I heard him ask. “Yes, we are,” I replied. “That is why the Bounty Island is so hard to find”. “We can use the phone to show the way, Papa,” he said showing us the Navionics app on his phone. He was right and it showed our course firmly set for the Gambier archipelago. Who did we think we’d fooled?

We entered the southwest pass into the Gambier archipelago 30 days after departing Panama. The crossing had been long but pleasant. We had enjoyed days and nights at sea and our adventure in the South Pacific had just started. We will have to keep Easter Island and Pitcairn on our list for the next time we pass, but that may not be for a while.

School goes on and on

