



*Following a very successful 1996 Kenwood Cup campaign, winning Division C ahead of Flash Gordon (USA), G'Net (Japan) and Quest (Australia), the overall cruiser-racer prize and the Molokai Race, Jim Farmer decided to cruise his Farr 43 Georgia from Hawaii back to Auckland, stopping at Palmyra and Western Samoa. He gives an account of the cruise.*



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The crew consisted of Jeremy Lomas (Jero), Jared Henderson (Beach), Dave Munday (Mundiz) and myself. Jero and Beach had been part of the *Georgia* crew in the Kenwood Cup and Mundiz had sailed on *Georgia Express*.

The voyage included a plan to visit Palmyra, a small island 950 miles south of Hawaii that had been occupied by the US armed forces as a munitions and fuel depot in the Second World War. During that time the island swarmed with more than

here, 47 boats have been wrecked on the reef.

Roger was waiting for us once we got into the lagoon, standing on the back of his dinghy to guide us. Roger had told us to tie up to two trees about 10m from the rusted iron pier in the lagoon. Beach was very cautious about the way he walked through the low undergrowth to get to the trees as we had visions of snakes, crabs etc.

As it turned out, snakes are not an issue, but crabs certainly are, especially the co-

pace. Everything was "beautiful" or "infested" (with sharks and crabs). At first we thought he was inclined to exaggerate, but as he took us around the island we came to appreciate that he was not overstating the case, at least about the beauty of the place.

Roger left France 28 years ago and has travelled extensively since. He says he was originally a restaurateur in Paris. He came to the island four years ago in his 47ft cruising sloop and anchored in the lagoon. He sleeps aboard every night. He is a strange

# Palmyra paradise

6,000 occupants; now it is owned by a Hawaiian family and the sole resident is Frenchman Roger, who is employed as the caretaker.

The island has a large but overgrown runway, capable of handling a jumbo jet and built by the Americans, a number of large lagoons, the main one of which can only be entered with some difficulty through a dredged channel.

I kept a detailed diary ...

## Saturday, 24 August

We arrived at our waypoint north of the island about 4am, then bore away to another waypoint three miles on before dropping the mainsail. From there, we motored in very choppy seas for six miles adjacent to the reef south of the island accompanied by very large dolphins. Beautiful sunrise – brilliant red sky.

We woke Roger just after 6am on the VHF and he gave us a new waypoint to the entrance of the very narrow channel into the lagoon – an extremely daunting task. The channel is flanked by two visible shipwrecks, including a 110ft Korean vessel that sank five years ago.

In the four years that Roger has been

conut eating variety, which are anywhere up to 50cm across and terrifying; the land crabs reach the size of a bread and butter plate.

While Beach was tying up, a large dog bounded out of the undergrowth at him, causing Beach all sorts of apoplexy. The dog leapt at him – and began licking him to death. It was a beautiful Alsatian cross named Tutu and was extremely intelligent. Another dog, a sort of Doberman-Rottweiler cross called Blackie, an aggressively friendly ginger cat, which kept the dogs in their place, and a collection of hens, chickens and a rooster completed Roger's menagerie. Apart, of course, from the crabs: Roger told us that if his cooking pot is burned, he leaves it out on the ground overnight and the crabs clean it so that it shines.

Roger is originally from Paris and is aged in his mid-50s. He is of stocky build, very tanned, with long, straggly blonde hair. To me he looked like a shorter, scruffier version of the French actor Gerard Depardieu. His English was excellent, but the French accent was very noticeable.

His enthusiasm for the island knew no bounds and he talked at a rapid, non-stop

mixture of a man: simultaneously sociable, yet with a strong drive to live alone. I suspect his sociability outweighs his isolationist and private side, as he could not have been a better, or warmer host.

He was proud of his 19-year-old girlfriend from another Pacific island, who was not there while we were visiting. He showed us photos. The boys weren't as impressed with her beauty as was Roger, which only goes to prove that beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder.

After we had tied up the boat, Roger first took us for a walk around the immediate environs. His land camp consists of a very primitive, but orderly shack, which he had built. It had a library of paperback books, in the middle of which was a roosting chicken. At one end was a cage-like wire-netted very dark room, where he kept a number of large island crabs, which he studies.

Outside the house was a concreted area with a large slipway. He had a barbecue there and an assortment of rickety chairs and wooden benches set around a table with a thatched umbrella giving merciful shade. That night we sat there after roasting a large piece of lamb we had brought



with us, watching two sharks cruising within a couple of metres of the slipway and a 2m manta ray that glided gracefully in the same area. Roger, who normally lives on fish, attacked the lamb with great gusto.

Earlier, during our walk Roger showed us an outdoor bath in the middle of the bush that was linked to a 120,000 gallon fresh water reservoir. We all had baths there. The fresh water was very cold and refreshing. It was great to get rid of the saltwater feel on your body.

Our walk continued to the airplane runway, which was overgrown, but large enough to land a 747. To the side was a crashed aircraft, still reasonably intact. From the runway, we came to a most beautiful little cove with trees overhanging the water.

At Roger's instigation, the boys climbed one of the trees and leaped into the water far below. I swam around demurely. The thought of sharing a lagoon "infested" with sharks, even though relatively small ones (the largest we saw was about 1m, but apparently they do grow to more than 3m before moving further away) was not calming. Later in the day Roger took us across the lagoon in his dinghy and we swam quite happily in waters where we saw small sharks (or Nirmirs as we called them, after

the movie *Jaws*). We also swam in an area "infested" with fish, literally thousands of them. After that we went further out in the lagoon, nearer the reef to what Roger described as Disneyland. This was a coral reef of unbelievable beauty. We put on snorkelling gear and swam over coral that surpassed anything I had ever seen before in Fiji, Tahiti or at Hayman Island.

After dinner, we retired early to bed on board *Georgia*. It had been a truly memorable day in surroundings that are unique. I felt privileged to be one of the relatively few people who have been able to visit this inaccessible, remote and beautiful island.

Roger's hospitality was overwhelming and, although we had reciprocated with the lamb meal and had given him beer and wine and a Kenwood Cup cap that he really loved ("superb"), I felt we owed him a huge debt. The mosquitos by the shore quickly interrupted our sleep, so we motored further out into the lagoon, anchored and retired into a deep sleep.

#### Sunday 25 August

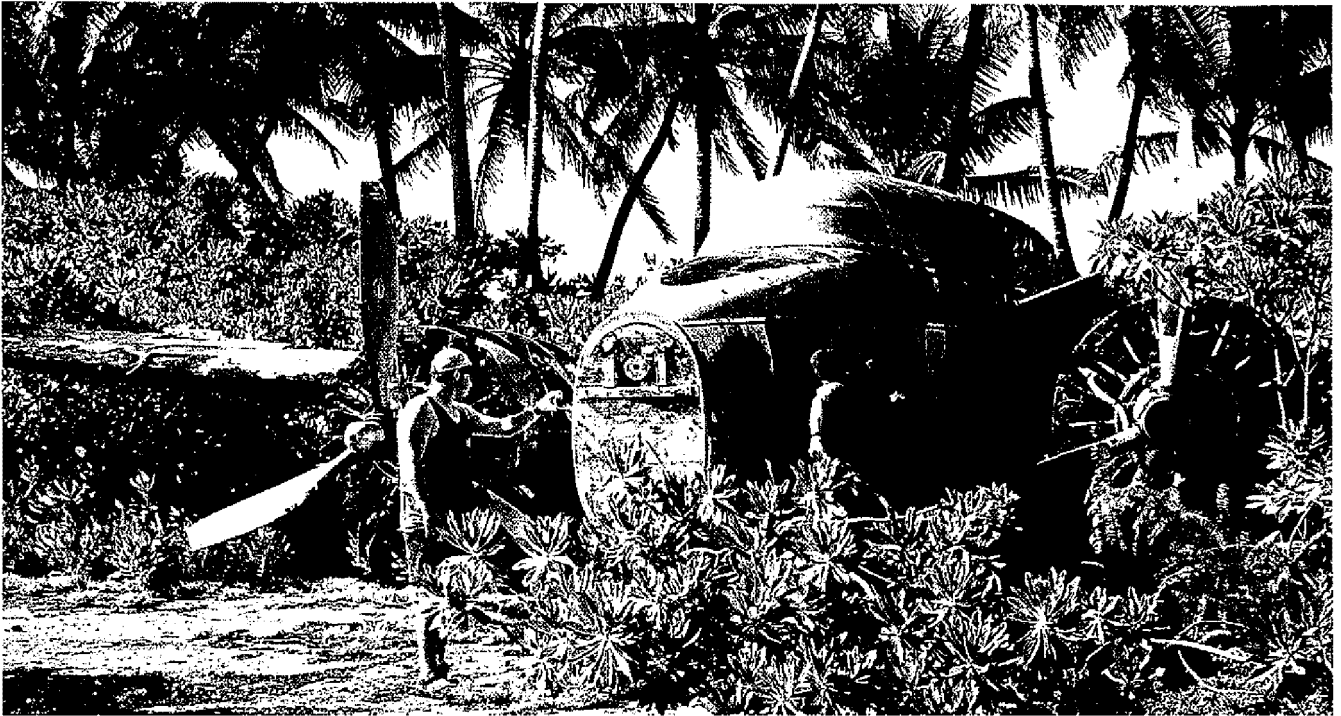
Roger came over to the boat while we had breakfast and cleaned up the boat. We have just been watching a barracuda over

1m long swimming slowly near the surface off the end of the boat. We put a line over with a large piece of ham on the hook, but it was studiously ignored. Roger says he has been trying to catch this fish for a long time. Fearsome! Much more sinister than the reef sharks.

In the afternoon we saw Tutu catch two sharks. Roger took us for a long walk down to one end of the island. We were walking along a beautiful stretch of golden sand. Tutu was bounding ahead in the shallows of the lagoon. Suddenly, he came sprinting back through the water, with a black and white fin in front of him. He chased the shark about 80m before baling him up very close to the shore and then grabbing him just behind the back of the head. We were amazed and spontaneously applauded.

The shark was close to 1m long. Roger took it off him and threw it back, much to Tutu's disgust. Later he caught a smaller shark, which was also thrown back to swim away apparently unharmed.

We then went crab hunting. The meat of the crab legs was delicious. Roger also extracted from the base of a palm tree a beautifully tender solid extract to which he later added a peanut-based mayonnaise,



*Picture clockwise from above: A crashed aircraft off to the side of the runway, which is large enough to land a Jumbo Jet. One of Roger's "pet" crabs. Jared Henderson with Tutu, the shark-catching dog. Roger (right) at ease in his Palmyra land camp.*



which we had with the crab meat. Roger told us fascinating stories about the island, ranging from tales of hidden treasure, buried hundreds of years ago and revived in news stories in the past year or two, to an infamous murder a number of years ago when a wanted American criminal who had fled to the island killed a wealthy couple to get their yacht. He claimed they had fallen off their dinghy and been eaten by sharks, but a year or two later the chopped up skeleton of the woman was found

washed up on the island in an aluminium box that was proved to have come off the boat.

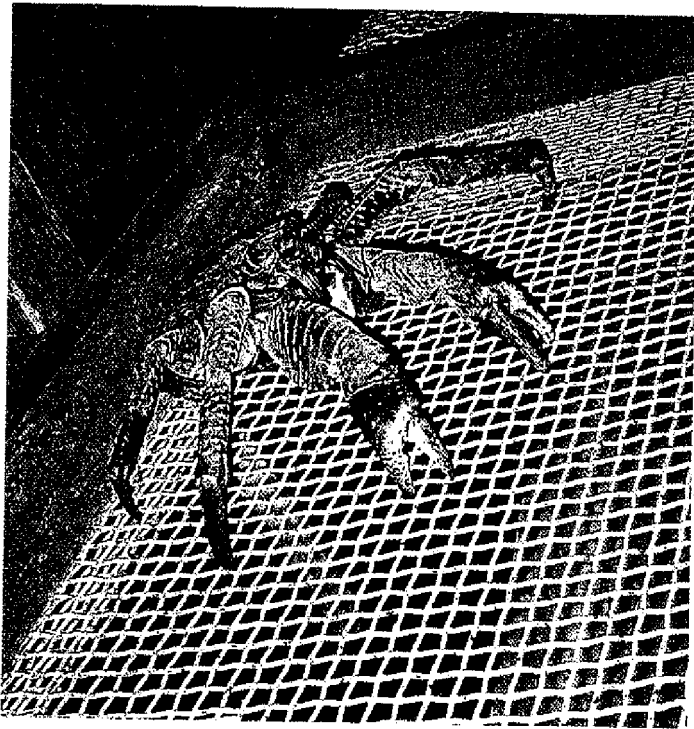
#### **Monday 26 August**

One minor tragedy last evening. Jero did the dishes on deck in a bucket and, having washed and dried the plates and pans, threw the dishwater overboard. Unfortunately, the cutlery was still in the bucket. We are therefore down to one knife, fork and spoon that survived. Uncharac-

teristic of Jero. He resisted an initial temptation to dive in after the cutlery because of the ever-lurking barracuda. This was fortunate, as events turned out.

After slowly motoring out through the channel, we left Palmyra accompanied by a spectacular display of about eight large turtles with dolphins leaping high out of the water. We were all sad to leave after a truly memorable two days.

We sailed in pleasant, sunny conditions of 10 knots of wind slightly forward of



the beam at a comfortable 9 knots boatspeed.

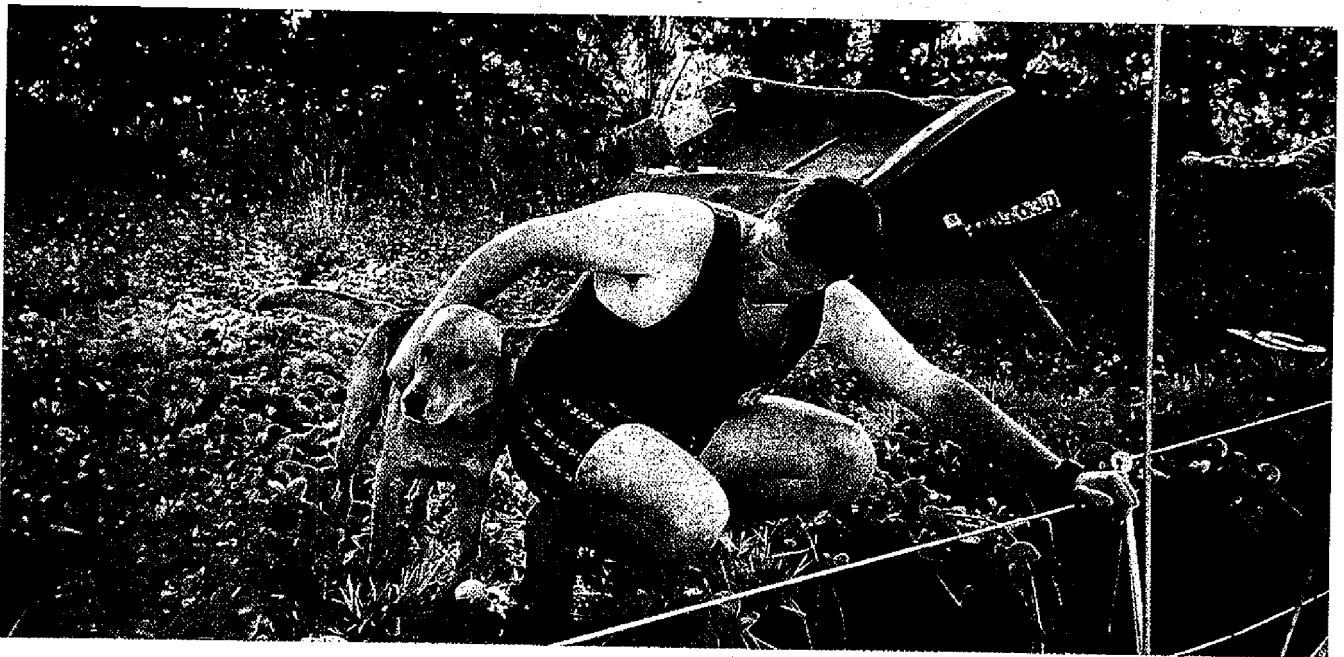
A few days out of Palmyra, we heard some amazing news on the regular evening SSB radio scan.

#### Friday 30 August

6.30pm - Jero has been on the radio to Ron du Bois (Waikiki), Russell Radio and Roger. The news we heard was incredible. *Total Recall*, another New Zealand boat on its way back from the Kenwood Cup called at Palmyra a couple of days after us. One of the crew, Mark Sheffield, went swimming off the boat and was attacked by the barracuda.

**Postscript:** After my return to Auckland, I spoke to one of the crew members off *Total Recall* who told me that Mark had dived off the boat to retrieve something. The barracuda severed two arteries in his leg.

They left the island that night and, with considerable difficulty, transferred him to a US ship, which carried him back to Honolulu. The incident was reported on television in Hawaii and in New Zealand newspapers.

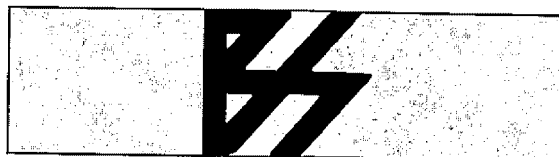


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