

North Minerva

23°39'S 178°54'W



By Neville J. Hockley

One of the luxuries of cruising is the freedom to visit and explore the remote and hidden corners of our world. Places that—due to location or topography—are inaccessible and unknown to all but a lucky few. North Minerva, a mere speck on the charts that doesn't even register on radar, is such a place. There is no land beneath your feet or on the horizon. No trees to provide shade. No houses in which to seek shelter. Just an endless and unbroken expanse of sea and sky. And yet each year a handful of migratory cruisers are fortunate enough to visit this little sanctuary and experience what is perhaps one of the most isolated and remote tropical anchorages in the world.

My wife Catherine and I were sailing from Tonga to New Zealand when we stopped at North Minerva Reef, but we didn't make landfall there, because there wasn't any. North Minerva is just a submerged ring of limestone coral, a tiny pinnacle of reef awash and surrounded by deep ocean. Under a clear sky we anchored *Dream Time*, our Cabo Rico, behind the reef's eastern

edge. It was a strange sensation to be three days into a 10-day passage, 800 miles from our destination, yet anchored at sea.

At low tide, we motored our dinghy to the coral ledge and walked across the shelf, treading carefully around rock pools and fractures, testing the ground as though walking on ice. We almost expected the petrified surface to break without warning. At the windward edge, the shelf fell away dramatically to open ocean, where the powerful South Pacific swell, uninterrupted for 5,000 miles, rose up and broke resentfully against a wall of submerged limestone. We felt exposed, standing on the very edge of a precipice, looking out across a vast wilderness.

That night, we awoke to *Dream Time* tugging anxiously on her anchor chain and found ourselves on deck surrounded entirely by black ocean. It was high tide and the Pacific had spilled over the ledge and consumed the reef, turning our once moderately protected lagoon into open sea. It was unnerving and disorienting—like waking suddenly from a deep sleep and not knowing where you are.

The Minerva Reef, named after the whaleship *Minerva*, which in 1829 earned the unfortunate distinction of becoming the reef's first recorded victim, has claimed many vessels over the centuries, some driven terrifyingly onto the unforgiving ledge, others caught in unexpected storms, trapped inside and surrounded by whitewater. I imagined decaying hulls and the rotting ribs of ships long forgotten, scattered around the reef's deep base like discarded bones littered about a lair.

Fiji and Tonga are in dispute, both claiming to be the reef's rightful owner. The debate, however, seems futile, for as we sailed away, watching all traces of our anchorage disappear behind the first crests, it was clear that this little sanctuary is ruled—and will one day be completely consumed—by the sea. ≈

Read more about the sailing adventures of Neville and Catherine Hockley on their website www.zeroXTE.com

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