



*Invisible shelter!  
Anchored in 4m  
depth inside Minerva  
Reef, with no land for  
hundreds of miles*

# The most secluded anchorage on earth?

Neville Hockley describes an idyllic cruise south from Tonga to New Zealand, pausing to anchor in an amazing natural 'infinity pool' in the middle of the ocean, hundreds of miles from land

## Day 1: Goodbye tropics (18°39.3'S, 173°59.0'W)

**D**ream Time, our 38ft Cabo Rico cutter, is ready for her next passage, a journey of 1,200 nautical miles that will carry us out of the warm, tropical South Pacific waters that have become so familiar and comfortable, and down to New Zealand, on a latitude of 35° south, where winter gales are still blowing across the islands in regular six-day intervals.

To prepare our 1981 yacht for what we suspect will be a lumpy journey, my wife Catherine and I have replaced hatch gaskets, rebbed deck hardware,

secured storage lids, fitted our trysail and even dusted off our sea anchor. Yes, *Dream Time* is ready – her crew, however, not so much. You see, with the cruising guide books bleakly predicting that mariners should 'expect at least one gale on this passage' and our bodies acclimatised to steady Trade Winds and an average sunny temperature of 30°C, we're a little less than enthusiastic about leaving the 'Friendly Isles' behind.

Reinforcing this belief, a fleet of cruisers who left Tonga just a few weeks ago were caught midway to New Zealand in gale conditions and freezing rain! We don't



*The voyage demanded serious preparation. We dusted off our sea anchor!*

much care for rain when we're cruising, let alone the variety that gets so cold it freezes and hits you at 40 knots. But alas, our options are rather limited: stay in Tonga for cyclone season, lying directly in the cyclone belt, or suck it up, dig out our oilies and head down to the subtropics.

## Day 3: Fish on! (19°52.4'S, 176°15.0'W)

We're three days out of Vava'u, Tonga, heading south, and it feels good to be out on the open ocean again. The South Pacific Convergence Zone (SPCZ) – an area of unsettled weather that is known to spawn

cyclones at this time of year – is well behind us. We have the ocean completely to ourselves and we feel lucky to be out here.

Now that our bodies have adjusted to a world of constant noise and motion, Catherine and I have settled into our routine of 24-hour watches in relative comfort as *Dream Time* charges along at an enthusiastic 7 knots. She's making great sport of the 3m (10ft) swell, which rolls gently in from the south-east, a reminder, perhaps, of the last frontal system that passed through just a few days ago, and with all three sails – reefed main, cutter jib and yankee – flying against the clear cobalt sky, we're dancing

over the waves, sending brilliant white spray cascading off our bow as we fall off each crest.

*Dream Time's* motion is heavy, deliberate and comforting, almost as though we're sailing in slow motion. I imagine that she must look a pretty sight from afar: a burst of white surrounded by deep blue, in balance and harmony with the ocean. Perhaps we would have been captured on film if we had left Tonga with the cruising fleet of 20 yachts also bound for New Zealand, but we chose to leave on our own, opting rather to carve out our own wake on this passage, having the

*'We're dancing over the waves with all three sails flying against the clear cobalt sky, spray cascading off our bow'*

ocean to ourselves, a silent radio, and the thrill of feeling that we're exploring and discovering the world alone.

The passage has been good to us so far, delivering an average of 15-knot winds, gentle seas and a whopping 30kg (66 lb) yellowfin tuna, which we landed after an hour-long battle. It's the largest fish we've ever caught on *Dream Time*, and one that we feel honoured to catch. Catherine has dug out the wasabi, ginger and soy sauce, and for lunch we dined on the most succulent sashimi and seared tuna pieces we've ever had. What a life!

## Day 7: A little sanctuary (23°39.6'S, 178°54.4'E)

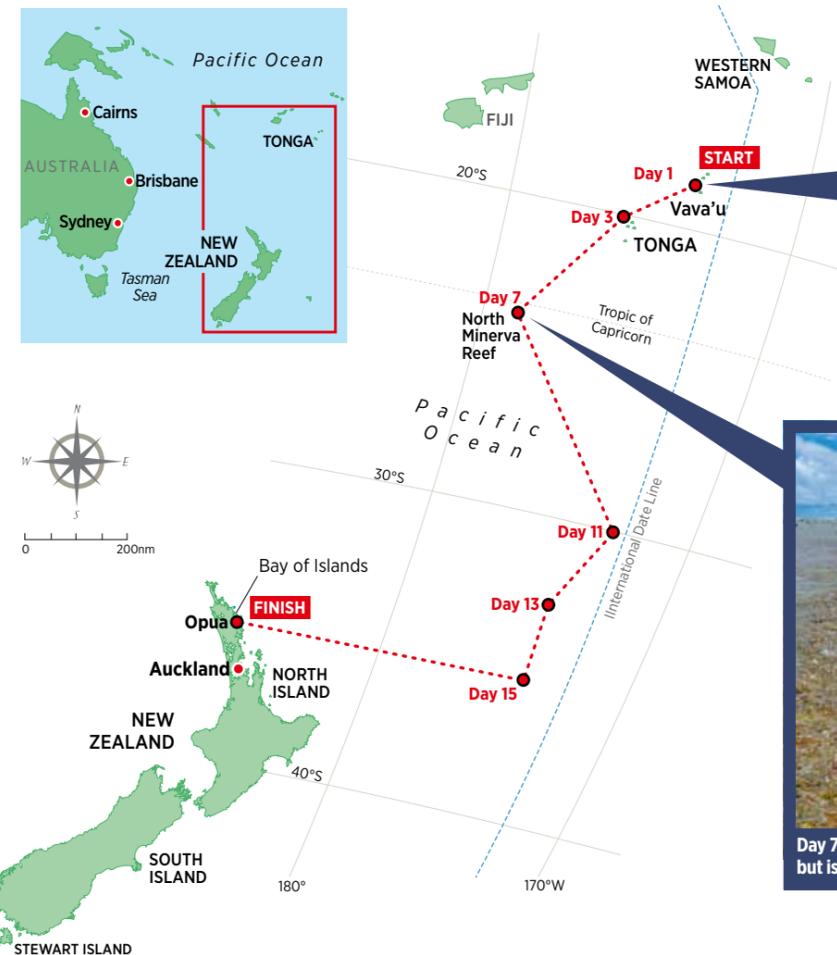
We're anchored in 4m (13ft), suspended in a turquoise lagoon of translucent water, yet the panoramic view from the cockpit shows nothing but unremitting sea and sky.

We've made a pit stop in North Minerva Reef, a mere speck on the charts and an anchorage in the middle of the ocean that doesn't even register on radar. We won't make landfall here, because there



PHOTOS: NEVILLE HOCKLEY

*Great sailing on Day 3, but as we voyaged south, the passage turned into a chilly helter-skelter ride*



*Day 1: Goodbye tropics! With cyclone season imminent, we left the 'Friendly Isles' and sailed south*



*Day 7: Minerva Reef uncovers briefly every day at Low Water, but is awash for most of the time*

CHART: MAGGIE NELSON



ABOVE: A stroll on the ankle-deep top of Minerva Reef, which shields the lagoon from swell



South Pacific swell smashes into Minerva Reef

isn't any. North Minerva is a submerged ring of limestone coral just four nautical miles in diameter, a tiny pinnacle of reef, awash and surrounded by ocean – a little sanctuary that seems to be gasping for air, able to breathe only at low tide.

A narrow pass through the reef on the northwestern corner, the only access into North Minerva, is flanked by vertical walls of coral and with the South Pacific spilling over the reef along the southeastern edge, the lagoon continuously drains back into open waters. In heavy weather, the current can sometimes reach up to 10 knots, but in settled conditions North Minerva provides wary sailors with a welcome break from passage-making – a unique anchorage in which to wait for the next weather window.

At low tide we walked across the limestone shelf, then as wide as a football pitch, which falls away suddenly to meet open ocean, where South Pacific swell breaks violently and relentlessly against the vertical wall of submerged limestone. It felt as if we were standing on the edge of a cliff.

Over the centuries, many ships and yachts have faltered at Minerva, driven up onto the ledge, their keels grinding alarmingly and permanently against solid rock. Others, anchored inside, have been caught in a violent and sudden storm, surrounded by white water, trapped inside with nowhere to hide. We feel vulnerable here, enough to make us check our weather forecasts and read the barometer regularly.

Fiji and Tonga are disputing ownership of these reefs, but looking out across a vast ocean that consumes the reef at high tide, it's clear Minerva is ruled and owned by the sea.

#### Day 11: Feeling a little weather(ed)

(30°11.3'S 173°03.7'E)

We're now sailing away from New Zealand and our distance to Auckland is steadily, depressingly increasing. We haven't changed our destination and opted for Australia, although we are on a perfect heading to make landfall in Brisbane. It's just that for the moment, another day at least, the wind is blowing steadily from south-south-west, precisely the direction we wish to sail.

The agreeable easterly-southeasterly winds that we had for the first few days out of Minerva have been replaced by a colder southwesterly flow. We're close-hauled, thumping, pounding and crashing into seas in an effort to hold our rhumb line. The conditions are so unfavourable that last night I had to vacate the forward cabin, where I usually sleep, and migrate aft to a berth with a lee cloth

in the main cabin. The excessive noise in the forecabin, and the occasional moments of levitation as we fell off the backs of steep, 3m-high waves, made sleeping in the vee-berth impossible – similar, I imagine, to sleeping on the floor of a van careening around corners and over the occasional speed bump during a high-speed pursuit. Oh yes, and while a wrestler beats the side of the cab right next to your head with an enormous sack of potatoes.

But while our ride south is getting a little

sporty, making the most mundane and casual chores, like brushing your teeth or making a cup of tea, a battle of endurance, where you discover stabiliser muscles you never knew existed, *Dream Time* is taking good care of us. Even with water rushing along her leeward deck, the bow plunging into troughs, crests crashing over her coachroof and dodger, the years of replacing gaskets, installing hooks, toggles, bungies and locks, have paid off – her cabin remains perfectly dry and in order (which is more than can be said for her crew).

#### Day 13: More cake?

(32°25.8'S, 174°26.3'E)

Now the weather has settled down and we're able to function without requiring a full body harness, we're faced with a new set of challenges. Catherine has taken it upon herself to bake all of our remaining bread, muffin and cake mixes before we arrive, as her precious long-term storage supply will most likely be confiscated by the Customs officials when they board *Dream Time* in a couple of days, so we're on a stringent diet of baked goods for the remainder of our passage.

I have another three muffins, two scones and a rather large solid-looking lump of cake to consume before my watch is over. I'm finding it hard to swallow. I could, of course, simply commit my rations to the sea, but if Catherine found out it would be tantamount to mutiny.

The temperatures are now into the thirties and we've been adding, on average, one additional layer of clothing with each latitude. Bermuda shorts and sarongs have long been replaced with thermals, wet weather gear, woolly hats, shoes and even socks. Our night watches, once a time of lounging comfortably in shorts and t-shirts under a warm blanket of stars, are now spent huddled and shivering under the spray dodger. Less than 200 miles to go,

just two more days, but still a pile of potentially illegal bio-hazard baked goods to eat before we can tie-up to the quarantine dock. I'm not sure we're going to make it!

#### Day 15: Kia ora!

(35°18.8'S 174°07.3'E)

After consuming mountains of muffins, bread, cakes, peanuts and other potentially high-risk food products before arriving in New Zealand, you can imagine my disappointment when the Customs officer, after rummaging through our boat for an hour and a half, casually mentioned that all the items Catherine had insisted, and at times forced me to eat during our last few days at sea, were indeed 'no worries', and allowed us to keep the remaining muffin mixes – which, traumatised by having to eat so many, I will never be able to look at again without gagging.

The westerly winds that we were promised regrettably never arrived, so the last two days of our passage were spent tacking, charging, crashing, beating and motoring into chilly headwinds. There is nothing quite so demoralising or frustrating than pounding into cold seas all day only to watch your distance to waypoint steadily increase. But on Friday at 1820, after 15 days at sea, exhausted but exuberant, we arrived in the Bay of Islands, New Zealand!

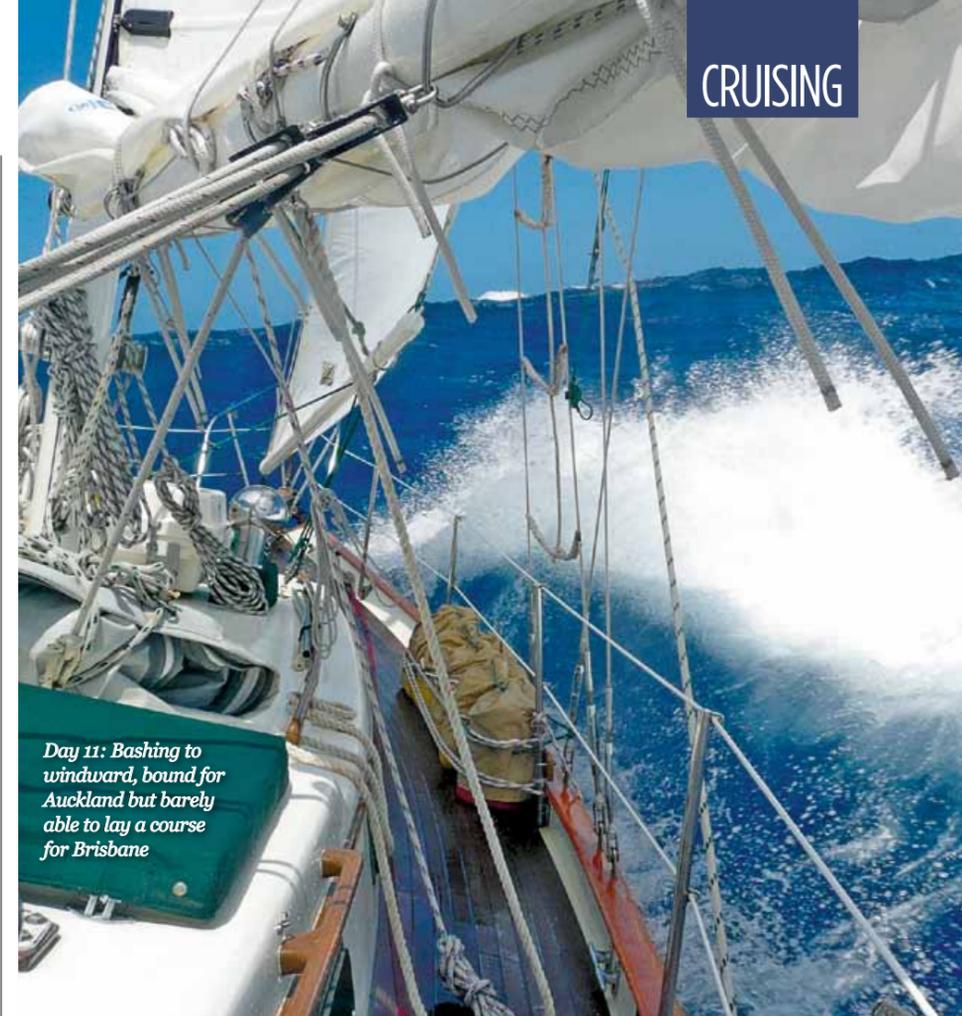
We've been berthed in Opuia Marina for two days and are still in shock. After spending the last four years in third world countries, remote tropical atolls or uninhabited islands, New Zealand is just a little overwhelming. It feels as if we've been trekking through remote woods for the past four years and have suddenly stepped out onto a busy main street.

It's sensory overload. Supplies, food items, marine hardware and services that have been unavailable for so long now surround us. A chandlery just opposite our slip has every single item of hardware on my project list. Every boat service a skipper could dream of is just a hail away. Ferries whizz across the harbour regularly.

The WiFi Internet at the marina is a hundred times faster than we're used to. The showers are clean, with plenty of hot water. The laundrette is a large room filled with row upon row of shiny, clean machines. There is a casual buzz of order and efficiency here, something that we once took for granted, but now, at least for a little while I suspect, we are in awe of and feel privileged to experience.

We're still in disbelief that we actually sailed this far. New Zealand is literally on the other side of the world. We started in the northwestern hemisphere, we're now in the southeastern. We're 13 hours ahead of England. It's summer here when it's winter back home. The sun sweeps across the sky to the north, not the south, and we're on the same latitude as Cape Town on the very southern tip of Africa. We've come a long way.

Thankfully, spring has finally sprung



Day 11: Bashing to windward, bound for Auckland but barely able to lay a course for Brisbane

*'Our Bermuda shorts and sarongs have long been replaced with thermals, wet weather gear, woolly hats, shoes and even socks'*

down here, so by the time we head down deep into the Roaring Forties, perhaps all the way to Stuart Island (a remote and wild outpost at 47° south), summer will be in full subtropical bloom.

We're looking forward to exploring the South Island – a rugged and spectacular land filled with glaciers, jagged peaks, plunging fjords, bubbling volcanic mud pools, rainforests and sheep, lots and lots of sheep. But we've decided to give our oilies a chance to dry off, and *Dream Time* a well deserved rest, as our passage further south will be from the climate-controlled, dry and smooth suspension-riding comfort of a second-hand camper van. ▲



Day 15: Land at last! Alongside the quarantine dock at Opuia, in New Zealand's Bay of Islands

#### Neville Hockley



Neville and Catherine: sailing around the world

Neville, 39, grew up in Southampton. He learned to sail with his father, racing dinghies from Mudeford Quay, and later crewed on larger yachts in Australia. In 1994, he sailed from Sydney to Italy on a 44ft cutter, chronicling his adventures in a book, *Dream Time* (Vanguard Press). Neville and his wife, Catherine, bought their first boat, a 28ft Newport design, in 1988, but upgraded two years later to their current 38-footer. They run a graphic design and advertising business while sailing around the world.