

Latitude 38

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WE GO WHERE THE WIND BLOWS



Roam — Catana 472 catamaran

Jim Yares

The Most Challenging Passage

San Francisco

Fiji to New Zealand was the most challenging ocean passage I've ever done. Not the longest. Not the worst weather. Not the most boat problems. It was timing the weather window and the variety of conditions that come with crossing three separate climate zones.

Except for an unexpected batch of embedded thunderstorms in the middle of the trip, the weather was exactly what we, our routing software, and our expert weather pros had predicted: Our routing software predicted the crossing would take five-and-a-half to six days for the 1,100-mile trip — it took five days and 16 hours; amazingly accurate given the complexity of the weather systems we crossed. It was a fast beam reach nearly the entire way.

Running With the Big-Dog Cats

We were sailing along nicely in 10 knots of breeze when I got a WhatsApp message from *Passage Guardian's* Peter Mott. "Hi, Jim, what wind do you have there?" He went on to alert us that boats ahead of us were running into squalls with strong winds.

Peter Mott runs *Passage Guardian*, a free service that tracks boats on passages and coordinates their rescue if needed. We use his service in lieu of a traditional "float plan" filed with friends or family ashore. He messaged us one night to give us a heads-up on the adverse weather ahead.

We'd left Fiji with a few large, fast cats. They would make New Zealand a day ahead of us, which meant that they would be running out in front. They served as our forward weather scouts, relaying their conditions back to us as we all sailed south.

Captain Glen aboard the KC62 *Kinetic* was feeding me weather conditions 60 miles ahead in the middle of the night. It was a big help. The Gunboat 66 *Slim* was also out here with us. This kind of communication used to

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take place over marine single-sideband radio. Today, it's WhatsApp messages over Starlink.



ROAM

The mighty crew of 'Roam' ready to go in Fiji. Left to right: Dave, Jim and Richard. "Even though it's hot in the tropics, long-sleeve hoodies are the way to go," says Jim. "It minimizes the need for sunscreen."

The squalls were short-lived — might have been six hours or so. When they passed, we were back to sailing fast on a beam reach.

Weather Routers

As we often do on these passages, we enlisted the help of two professional weather routers, MetBob, who has been routing us for the past two years, and John Martin of Ocean Tactics. He's a popular choice among the cruisers here and we subscribed to him for this trip, as well.

We rely on their input when evaluating the weather window and our target departure day. Once en route, we send them our position once a day and they reply with anything they see in the forecast that I might have missed. Sometimes, they'll advise a course change to take advantage of favorable current or winds. It's a worthy team effort.

This was our first passage using the new "AI-based" weather models. I was impressed with their accuracy. They are probabalistic in nature as opposed to the deterministic numerical models we've been using. Combined, they give you a good sense of what to expect and how to prepare.

A Great Crew

This was the first passage without my wife, Pam. She went home to look after her family and our vacant house. Sailing together these past three years has brought us close. We gravitate to our strengths: Pam looking after the welfare of the crew; me looking after



the welfare of the boat. On a passage we catnap during the day. At night we each stand rotating, three-hour watches. We make a good team.

Which is not to say I didn't have a great crew aboard for this trip. I did. Richard and Dave were ideal. They put their lives on hold to come to Fiji and make this happen.

Richard stepped into the role of shipkeeping and the care and feeding of the crew. He made sure we ate. Dave and I focused on navigating and running the boat. We all stood four-hour watches. Those are long watches, but they give each person a full eight hours off watch. Sleep is a secret weapon on the ocean.

Richard is an ocean-sailing veteran. He has a lot of miles in the Atlantic and Caribbean. We did a few passages

together back when I lived on the Gulf Coast. Dave is relatively new to ocean sailing, having done a "Baja Bash" from Cabo San Lucas to San Diego. He is a consummate outdoorsman and a true MacGyver, the guy you want on your side during the zombie apocalypse. He adapted immediately to ocean sailing.

Welcome to New Zealand

We made landfall at Opuia on the north end of New Zealand's North Island. My general strategy is to get off the ocean as fast as possible on long trips. Being the closest port of entry to Fiji, Opuia fit that bill perfectly.

Opuia and the Bay of Islands Marina are well equipped for the surge of transient yachts visiting New Zealand this time of year. We arrived in the middle of the night and slowly motored through

IN LATITUDES



ALL PHOTOS ROAM

Above: 'Roam' in Viaduct Harbour. Top right: Making landfall at night is serious business — Jim was well prepared. Center: Even though it came from New Zealand (and was bought in Fiji), 'Roam's frozen meat did not pass inspection and was confiscated. Bottom: Make sure you get a good bottom job — and document it — before you try to enter New Zealand! Inset: Strong winds take their toll on the ship's ensign. "We seem to go through two a year," says Jim.

as "inconclusive." They couldn't see the hulls well enough. When the biosecurity lady came aboard in New Zealand, she and I sat at my laptop and reviewed the video. She was satisfied that we were clean, and, after inspecting the anchor chain and seizing most of our food, signed us off. We were officially cleared into the country.

Down the Coast

We spent a day in Opuia catching up with friends, cleaning the boat, doing laundry, and fixing a few things that had broken. The weather looked good enough that we decided to head down the coast to Auckland.

I'd always wanted to tie up my own boat in downtown Auckland's famous Viaduct Harbour. Now I finally had the chance. We enjoyed a beautiful day in the City of Sails after another foggy arrival. At this point, Richard and Dave booked their flights home. After an amazing dinner at Chef Al Brown's Depot Eatery, they were off, and I was again solo.

I still needed to get *Roam* another 100 miles farther south to Tauranga, where we planned to haul out and leave the boat for a while. Fortunately, I was able to recruit our friend Mikayla, whom we'd met in the Cook Islands. She was able to take a day off from teaching and help me make the overnight sail.

My quick trip down the coast was a sampler of what cruising is like here. And now I know why Kiwi sailors love it so much. There are countless anchorages and towns to enjoy. I'm looking forward to our return, when we can slow down, head north, and enjoy all of the anchorages we blew past.

End of the Line

We've reached the end of the "coconut milk run," the route following the trade winds from North America through the South Pacific islands of French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga, Fiji, and on to New Zealand: a long-held goal, two years and more than 10,000 miles in the making.

The boat is currently out of the water and in the capable hands of Tauranga Marina Boatyard, where talented boatbuilders and craftsmen are refitting and remodeling her.

We're back in the US for a few months to spend time with families

the dense fog up the river to Opuia. Yes, it's prudent to stand off and wait for daylight when arriving at an unfamiliar harbor. But I'd been here before, and the harbor is well charted, well marked, and well lit.

That said, the unexpected fog made us extra cautious. We slowly picked our way in using the radar image overlaid on the electronic chart. By 4 a.m., we were tied up to the Q dock.

As we were tying up, I went to step off onto the dock and promptly fell into the water. The combination of fatigue, adrenaline withdrawal, and "land sickness" (where standing on land after a

long ocean passage causes disorientation) struck again. It was a cold shock.

Soon enough, we all had hot showers and naps, and then began the day-long process of getting cleared into the country. Customs, immigration, and biosecurity were all very friendly.

An interesting aspect of New Zealand's biosecurity requirements is that visiting yachts must have a clean bottom free of invasive species. We always scrub our hulls before leaving a country. But the Kiwis want photographic and video evidence of your clean bottom in advance of your departure from, in our case, Fiji. Our video was rejected

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over the holidays. And we'll tend to our slowly deteriorating house, which needs some love.

As always, our plans are loose. We expect to be back in New Zealand in February to inspect all the work being done and put the boat back into the water. Then we'll enjoy some time sailing around this beautiful country — maybe even join friends on the South Island Rally.

The cyclone season in the South Pacific ends May 1. After that, we may head back up to Fiji for another season there. Beyond that, who knows? Maybe Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Australia? Maybe back to New Zealand?

Plans written in the sand at low tide.

— *Jim 12/10/25*

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