

Dear

November 18,1996

Hello again from the South Pacific. We were about to leave for Vanuatu when we received a fax from Bobbi's father. Her mother has gone critical and is expected to die very soon. Her father needs her with him during this time period. Her whole family is assembling for the last time. I am on my own until the end of the month (estimated).

Most of the cruising boats have left for New Zealand , Australia or Singapore. I am the last American or for that matter, I am the last of the boats of the English speaking nations in New Caledonia. All of the American, Aussie, Kiwi, Canadian and English boats are gone. It feels good to be a stranger in a strange land. My French vocabulary has doubled since Bora Bora - I now know four words. The boat is hauled out of the water onto the hard in a beautiful new boatyard. I'm trying to do some cosmetic work on the boat while Bobbi is gone. Work is proceeding very slowly as I am very easily distracted. The bright work is very tedious and I can only give it about a half day. It takes a combination of heat gun, mechanical stripping, chemical stripping and sanding before the varnish can be applied ( 6 coats minimum). I should probably find someone to do this for me.

I am doing a great deal of walking trying to get into reasonable shape. Floating around in a boat is great fun but not good exercise. I am now walking about 20 kilometers very quickly. I'm doing really good and feel quite healthy. A few days ago I walked to a place called *Pointe Kongou*. First you come to some old French barracks from 1886 (date on bldg) that have been squatted in by Kanaks - very interesting place. Next you walk along a very high ridge from which you can see all the way out to the outer reef system to the west of Noumea. Then you come to a road that leads to an old fort, but I did not take it because I saw the beach and could not resist. The water is wonderfully clear and the beach is shoal with calm water. There are shady places for me under palm tree clusters. Next to the beach is a small outdoor bar serving cold beer and food for those that want it - all so nice. I spent the middle of the day under some trees next to the shoreline and then walked back to *Oso Bueno*. The northern coastline of the peninsula looks almost perfect for kayaks and I think I may give it a shot this week. Friends invited me to a fresh Walu barbecue Saturday night. They have their boat hauled out right in front of ours so I didn't have far to go. Three French couples and me - such nice people - they all spoke English just so I might be comfortable. After a few glasses of wine I begin to share how athletic I've become lately telling them of the great distances that I had been walking this last month. Two of the ladies decided to take me on a special hike the next day into the mountains above Noumea. We started out at 7:30am. One of the ladies was the national snow skiing champion of France when she was young and probably had about two grams of fat on her body. The hike very similar to the one Bobbi & I did in Apia, Western Samoa, to Robert Luis Stevenson's grave - straight up a mountain - and it almost killed us. The rapid climb of about 800 meters was what did me in. Both of the ladies I was with could have done it running and had to wait for me several times. At first I tried feigning that I had a rock in my shoe to get them to slow down a bit. Then I tried to pretend some interest in a plant

or rock near the trail, but nothing would slow them down. No ruse would work. I finally had to tell them I could go no farther as I'm sure my pulse was well over 200. When we got back to the start of the trail we sat and drank Diet Coke and observed the most stunning view. I know that I have been improving my physical condition since arriving in Noumea but today I learned that have a long, long, long way to go. One of the six cruising boats we stayed with in Tonga showed up the other day. Stanick & Cora off the vessel *Ambler*. He is Czech and she is German. They are blues musicians and Bobbi and I just love them. In Tonga we danced to their music every Friday night at the *Bounty Bar*. They are hard core and have been floating around out here for 10 years. They both speak a dozen languages and are fun to with. They will be playing in Noumea for the next six months on Wednesday nights at a place called *The Hotel San Francisco*. We will be there.

(Nov. 29) I'm just now getting back to this letter. I had to take a break for tropical cyclone "Cyril". It came within 180 miles of Noumea and got my attention. I have *Oso Bueno* chained to the ground. In addition, I used a great deal of heavy nylon line. Some of the less anxious people now call me spider man.

Our travel plans are likely to change again. I'm feeling like sailing up into the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) and on into the Solomons next season.

(Dec. 7) Bobbi has been back for four days and we learned this morning that her mother has died. She will not return for the ceremony as it is impossible to arrive in time. We are grateful that she had the recent opportunity to see her Mother and say good-bye. It amazes me that her father knew that his wife would let herself die after the family had assembled for the final time. Bobbi is OK and feeling settled about things.

(Dec. 8) We are getting ready for a one month auto tour of this island. Tent and related equipment have been cleaned up and inspected. The island is very primitive once one is out of Noumea. Most of the villages provide a place where people can camp.

(Jan 1,1997)

We rented a small car planning to explore inland New Caledonia camping most of the time yet staying in hotels when it seemed prudent. We started up the west coast on roads built by American servicemen during WWII. The entire road system outside of Noumea was built that way and in fact, the stop signs are still the old octagonal signs that say "STOP". The old bridges in the north and all along the eastern coast are still those put in during the war years. Our first three campsites were on the west coast shoreline. We enjoyed great privacy and I was reminded of the kind of camping I did 30 years ago in Washington State. Lots of neat spots with very few people. Our fourth night was spent in the Malibu Beach Resort - they love those California sounds. This was the first time I slept in a bed in almost three years. This camping trip was first time off *Oso Bueno* in three years. The land on the western coast of New Caledonia is dry and very similar to the eastern slope of the *Sierra Nevada* in California. We've had some great adventures: dogs peeing on tent, great sunsets, French rap tunes played loud by people in tent next to us, ran aground with vehicle while passing over pothole, awaking at 3 AM and scaring off local Kanak boy on a campground looting mission, many beautiful rivers emptying into the sea.

The east coast is very tropical with waterfalls and lush foliage including ferns, palms, banana, pineapple, taro, coconut, etc. The beaches get a C-, not of the quality we're used to but then, we really have seen the best. (We're pretty jaded at this point.) The east coast is less traveled than the west coast and the roads are not well developed. We took an ancient two-car cable ferry across one large river. It was powered by a one cylinder gasoline engine very similar to my lawnmower engine at home. In the village of Poindimie we found a beautiful campground on the beach. The area was swarming with day users until about 19:30. We then put up our tent thinking this was the best yet with nobody there but us. Two hours later we awoke to the sound of pickup trucks loaded with Kanaks complete with major fireworks, French rap music and lots of booze. Bobbi advised me to be patient and find the peaceful center inside of myself. This was very difficult but after several hours of screaming drunken natives with skyrockets, it was over. The trucks started and then they were gone. We moved on down the coast with occasional side trips up the many valleys. Our last campground on the east side was truly beautiful. A Kanak family had built traditional palapa style shelters at each campsite along the ocean. Each one was different with thatched roofs and split bamboo or plaited palm frond sides, some round, some rectangular, all very nice. We drove back over the mountainous spine of New Caledonia returning to our first camp area near Poe Beach. We discovered that dugongs are also here in New Caledonia. A local couple told us that dugongs had been sighted that very morning in the waters south of Poe Beach - we looked but saw nothing. We arrived back at *Oso Bueno* a little earlier than we planned. New Caledonia was now proximate to tropical cyclone *Fergis*. This was a much larger cyclone than the first one of the season but it eventually passed to the east not coming any closer than about 300 miles.

The cyclone left very clear skies so we headed down to the southeastern tip of the island and pitched our tent at a beautiful *Gite* with a small white sand beach. The owners were gone for the day so we had it all to ourselves and we were able to behave accordingly. A great end to a month of camping in New Caledonia.

New Year's Eve is here and the French know how to do fireworks. *Oso Bueno* is on the hard just 20 meters from the harbor of Noumea providing us with ringside seats to the year end fireworks display. They did it all in about 15 very intense minutes.

Bobbi & I saw fireworks we've never seen before.

(Jan 23, 1997)

We had another cyclone! Cyclone *Drena* passed within 30 miles of Noumea . Bobbi & I have now seen hurricane force winds. We were very well protected but still saw over 80 knots in gusts. The other side of the hill experienced much higher winds. We walked to the exposed area being physically unable to walk into it at times. We saw clouds of spray over 30 meters and seas in the North Harbor that were just like in the movies. Noumea was really well protected and there was very little damage. The cyclone reached 120 knots in the center as it passed by us.

We continue to enjoy New Caledonia very much. They call Noumea the "Paris of the Pacific". We both really find the French culture to be very special. Style & taste.