NOTES FOR PASSAGE TO NEW ZEALAND – from where and when!

David Sapiane Bsc September 2019

GULF HARBOUR RADIO

A number of yachts making this passage have asked for a bit of guidance and ideas for this spring passage. Options are leaving from Fiji or Vanuatu to NZ, or sailing to New Caledonia and then onward to NZ. And having decided this, when is the best time to go.

A bit of a refresh first. Unlike many parts of the world, seasons here in the SW Pacific may seem a bit strange. One thing to note is our spring pattern more closely resembles winter; conversely autumn more closely resembles summer. Another note is that in spring the High centers in the Tasman and the NZ region are a wee bit further north than in other seasons therefore disturbed westerlies are common. In other words SW winds in general are prevailing near NZ, plus spring is generally the windiest season. Winds over the passage routes are generally from the SE, thus the term ‘The Trades’ developed. Thinking about this it makes sense that departing from say Tonga is a better idea than from New Caledonia. As one closes with NZ a decision needs to be made as to keep the easting or to change course to put in some westing. Yachties spend hours studying pilot charts trying to make sense of the average winds and their directions.

The choice of leaving in Oct or Nov has been raised. Looking at the pilot data you may find that winds during these two months for Fiji are E to SE over 70% of the time. For New Caledonia it’s about the same, 60 to 70% are from the E or SE. Not much difference for either location is it. We on Chameleon have made these passages many times, but in end found averages really don’t help. The weather changes so much in the short term that careful analysis of Met Service charts and models is essential. We have found a waypoint of 28S/173E is a pretty good idea. Once near there we have had the opportunity to change course to take into account the latest changes in conditions. And what about your arrival time in NZ. Remember that in NZ the Oct weather is atrocious. It’s about the windiest month of them all with about the worst sailing weather. With that in mind November is a better choice. But of course there can be a good passage to NZ in any month – even October! Do you feel lucky!

Another consideration is our Anticyclone. Everyone tries to leave when the new High provides a favourable wind direction. Monitor this High closely especially when the High extends west to east over a long distance in the mid-latitudes. We’ll find disturbed easterlies on the northern side and we’ll also discover successive troughs in this easterly flow. Plus there will be areas of Cbs embedded in the common stratiform cloud. These of course bring heavy squalls and wind shifts. Another common occurrence is at night. Radiative cooling is the culprit. As the upper air cools the warmer surface air rises quite quickly increasing the size of the clouds and developing squalls are common. Just when the off watch is trying to sleep. And remember that November is Cyclone season; while rare to see one in Nov they do occur so be aware of this.

Now, looking at the Islands. New Caledonia’s unsettled weather occurs from Dec to Mar. Waiting until Nov to leave should be ok, but not always ok. There is probably less cloud in Oct than Nov statistically but this isn’t much of a factor. Fiji has relatively consistent trades thru Oct; In Nov clouds increase and the chance of showers and squalls increase. So differences in departure weather isn’t much of a factor in either of these Island Groups.

Reviewing quickly the typical weather pattern for this passage. Once a Cold Front passes the air flow is usually from a southerly quadrant. This air is colder than the surface so heating from below causes instability with scattered cumulus clouds complete with showers. As the ridge becomes more dominant the cloud tops get lower and showers tend to die out. At the axis of the ridge, or the Highs center, skies usually become clear. Often though we’ll have a shallow stratocumulus cloud sheet. As the High or ridge continues east be ready for the next Front or Trough. Typically this will be advertised by high level humidity producing cirrus cloud. Following this we’ll see the usual progression of cirrostratus, alto Cu, altostratus then cumulus, Cb’s and the Front. As you study the weather charts you have to decide the extent and strength of the winds behind the Front. This is when the choice of your waypoint comes in. If you planned well you may not see a Front; ideally arriving a day or so before the front hits NZ will give you very nice northerly quadrant winds.

So, with that out of the way. Do you leave from Fiji or go to New Cal? I think we know now that our chances of better winds favour Fiji; but leaving from New Cal is a shorter trip. We have done both many times. One thing we can tell you is determining which side of Norfolk Island to go is like flipping a coin. You can plan this in advance but it won’t matter. Neptune is in charge. Winds change, currents change, etc. We can say though, two thirds of the time we have gone west of Norfolk and one third the east side. We have also flown to Norfolk for a shooting competition and have driven around looking at the various anchorages. In rough conditions none of them are any good in our opinion. So thinking that you can hide out or wait out a front is wishful thinking. The point is, make a plan to avoid having to do this. This means making an ETA for NZ. Is the weather en route and arrival what you want? We cannot stress the ETA enough. If you choose New Cal try to depart from Ile de Pins. Leaving from Noumea is not easy. Wind accelerates in the lagoon and Mr. Murphy will ensure you have a miserable time.

Chameleon is not the fastest yacht around by any means but our average passage time from New Cal to NZ is around 6 days and some change. From Fiji, about 8 days. We’ve done both faster and a few slower. **We will use our engine to maintain our target speed**.

Now, one thing for those that have time and want to go back to Minerva Reef. A very good option from Fiji if the winds cooperate. It breaks up the trip and your final ‘window’ is easier to pick.

The trip from Fiji to New Cal is relatively easy. The usual trades will get you there without much worry. You can even stop at Aneityum in Vanuatu for a break. Shelter is found on the south and the north sides. Very easy. Also if you have time, stop at Lifou in the Loyalties. Then on to New Cal for absolutely fantastic food and low cal pasteries. ha ha. We actually love New Cal.

Nothing to do with weather but foreign visitors should keep in mind that if you arrive in October, you will need to leave in April as you get a 6 months stay. You can apply for an extension but this takes time and money. Far easier to come later so you do not have to deal with that or leave in April which could be as difficult as October.

So best of luck. GHR will be around to provide weather on your radio if you wish.

Regards David and Patricia GHR