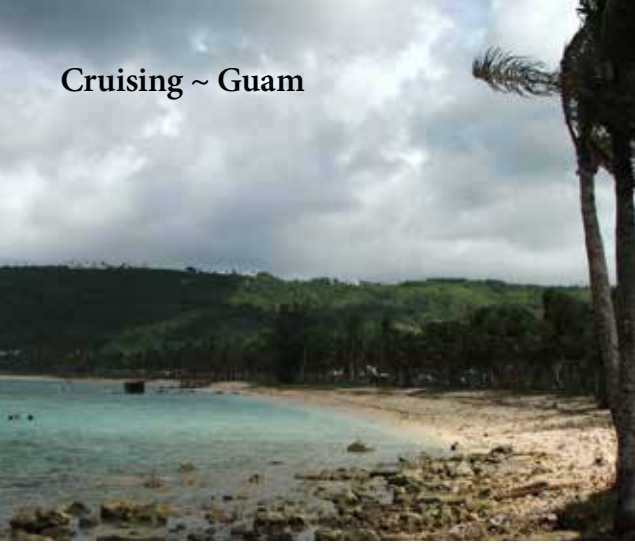


Cruising ~ Guam



A Guam welcome

Nick and Jenny Coghlan head to Guam; narrowly missing out on a dip in the Marianas Trench but discovering the delights of Micronesian shopping malls

It had been six days since we had left Ponape, in the Federated States of Micronesia. After a slow start we were now rolling along downwind at five knots, with 800 miles on the log. It had been an ideal passage, enlivened by many dolphin sightings and successive night visits from the same large brown booby. In another day or so, we should be off the US Territory of Guam. But there was something I wanted to check now, and reading from the GPS, Jenny called out our position to me:

“12 degrees 46.9 North, 145 degrees 38 East...I'd say we're about there.”

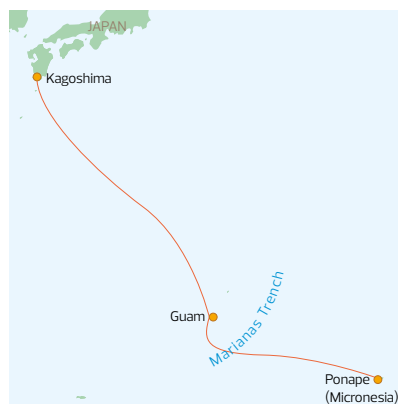
“What depth is the chart plotter showing?”

“It's just dark blue... but the paper chart has us in about 9,600 meters.”

We were over the Marianas Trench, the deepest water in the world. I'd always wanted to go for a swim right here. But the seas were breaking; getting back on board could be tricky and it seemed a pity to waste the wind by stopping. Instead, we rustled up what loose change we could find, and I recorded Jenny ceremonially dropping two Canadian quarters overboard. Later (you can find anything by asking Google these days) I skimmed through pages of arcane discussion and mathematical formulae on the web: the conclusion was that it would take three to four hours for a coin to reach the bottom of the Trench

Magellan of course knew nothing of the unusual depth of the ocean when he passed this way with the *Concepción*, *Trinidad* and *Victoria* on March 5 1521, on the first voyage around the world.

They were three months out from Patagonia and had crossed the entire width of the Pacific. In this time the men had seen only one small atoll (from a distance),



and so low were their rations that by now they were soaking their boot leather in water and eating it. When they landed on Guam the next day, the first contact between Europeans and Pacific islanders did not go well. The Chamorros had no concept of private property and, after initially friendly encounters, made off with whatever they could find aboard the three ships. In retaliation Magellan's men shot a number of them dead with their crossbows. The Spaniards sailed on almost immediately, having been unable to re-provision. In disgust the Admiral named Guam and its neighbouring islands the *Islas de los Ladrones* (Islands of Thieves), a name that stuck until Spain formally claimed the archipelago in 1667, renaming the group the Marianas.

As we motor-sailed into a stiff NNE breeze up the supposedly lee side of the main island, we were nervous about two things (but not the modern Chamorros, known to be friendly and peaceable).

First, although there was cooling water entering our venerable Bukh diesel engine, there mysteriously seemed to be none exiting overboard. Second, we knew that Guam hosted a massive American military presence and our reception might be brusque.

OPPOSITE PAGE: (L-R top to bottom) Asan beach, principal site of American landings in July 1944; Dolphin, en route to Guam; Jenny dropping a Canadian quarter into the Marianas Trench; Bosun Bird en route; Marianas Yacht Club; Apra Harbour; yacht anchorage center-left; Remains of a Japanese 'Betty' bomber (Mitsubishi G4M); Bosun Bird receives a nocturnal visitor: a brown booby; Magellan's Landing bar; Monument to Magellan's landing; Site of US landings, Asan Beach Umatac Bay; War memorial, Asan Beach

All hands to the pumps

The matter of the disappearing cooling water was clarified when Jenny reported steam rising from the bilge inside the cabin: there must be a leak of some sort in our exhaust's water trap, allowing the near-boiling exhaust water to run below rather than overboard. This was not reassuring. But the problem could be resolved temporarily by frequent (manual) pumping of the bilge. The crew, accordingly, did not see much of the coastline over the next several hours.

As for the Navy, as we drew near Apra Harbour we were approached by a grey, high-speed military launch. The captain, after shouting instructions via a bullhorn, shepherded us past the great booms that block the entrance to the Navy dockyard and pointed towards a set of mooring buoys off the Marianas Yacht Club. The dummy Polaris missile mounted in one corner of the bay was presumably a clue as to what lay behind those booms. On shore, officials kindly came to meet us at the club bar, wished us welcome to the USA, and mentioned in passing "the terrible news from Japan".

We now learned that a week earlier, on 11 March 2011 when we were 300 miles out from Ponape, a devastating tsunami had struck the East coast of Japan's largest island, Honshu. It had flooded the Fukushima nuclear plant and caused incalculable loss of life. In Guam those nuclear subs had strained at their moorings for a few minutes, but that was all; at sea a one-meter wave must have passed under Bosun Bird's keel, but we would not have noticed it in the trade-wind conditions. By phone we reassured distant shore-bound friends that we were fine. This development gave us pause for thought, certainly. But 95% of the coast of Japan – our →

next destination – was unaffected and alternative destinations were not obvious. Callous though it might sound (and it did, to some friends) we could see no reason to change our sailing plans.

In the footsteps of Magellan

Exactly where Magellan landed is actually open to doubt. But the conventionally accepted site, where there is a small white memorial, is at Umatac Bay in the Southwest of this hilly, 35-mile long island. After an entire day squeezed inside our Vancouver 27's cockpit lockers, fixing the boat's water trap, we rented a rusty old Toyota to visit it. There is an unimpressive whitewashed obelisk in the quiet village and a bar named Magellan's Landing; its Budweiser-sponsored sign states enigmatically that 'Responsibility Matters'. On the hillside above the bar are some more imposing ruins from a Spanish fort of a later date, but as you look down on the small bay you have to agree that it's unlikely Magellan would have been able to fit his three caravels into this cramped space.

Much-better documented, as you would expect, is Guam's pivotal role in WW2. The fighting over this island, along with neighbouring Saipan and Tinian, was desperate. Defending Japanese troops staged successive suicidal banzai charges as the US Marine 3rd Division struggled its way inland from landing beaches where they had taken terrible losses. And not every Japanese soldier was killed or captured. Just around the corner from Umatac is a tacky hamburger joint called Jeff's Pirate's Cove. Near here, Jeff will tell you, Sergeant Yokoi of the Imperial Japanese Army stepped onto the road one day in 1972, after 28 years hiding in the hills of the interior, following instructions to fight to the last man. After he was apprehended, he was shown newspapers from 1945. But only when he received authority from Tokyo would he formally surrender. Yokoi received USD \$300 in back pay and was flown home to a media

frenzy, to which he responded by saying only: "It is with much embarrassment that I return."

On the sandy landing beaches at Asan and Agat, the Japanese flag now flies alongside the Stars and Stripes and families hold picnics on the weekend. Unlike in Normandy, there are no American graves here, but artillery pieces have been preserved and black-and-white photographs give an impression of the organised chaos of the landings of July 21st, 1944.

Not the usual ship's stores

If you've been cruising for some time among the smaller island groups of the Pacific, where the shops are invariably dark and poky, their stock out-of-date and overpriced, then Guam is the consumer paradise you've been dreaming of. Here in Agana, the capital, is what is reputed to be the largest Walmart in the world (which is saying something), a similarly massive Home Hardware and, if you need that American junk-food fix, McDonalds and Taco Bells galore; all with US mainland prices. There's also a street of glitzy outlet stores: Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Louis Vuitton. Japanese visitors flock here in large numbers to shop; later we learned that for Japanese this is known as 'the poor man's Hawaii'. But even for born and bred westerners such as us, it was intoxicating (for a short while) to marvel at the variety of goods on the shelves; this when in Honiara or Port Vila you'd have spent whole days tracking down a pair of stainless steel bolts or a can of tinned ham



ABOVE
Spanish colonial-era fort overlooking Umatac Bay

BELOW
Sergeant Yokoi meets with the press in 1972, after 28 years hiding in the interior of Guam

whose expiry date was still valid.

Back at the anchorage and a few dollars poorer, we soon got to know the permanent denizens of the airy yacht club: the usual selection of colourful, shorts-wearing and heavily suntanned Jimmy Buffet wannabes who have become stranded for various reasons in tropical outposts such as this; 'characters' every one, and all of them men. They had dramatic stories to tell of mishaps that had befallen other yachts to have passed this way and of the great cyclones that hurtle in every year along Typhoon Alley. They'd remember in detail the long-distance cruisers who over the years had left their home-carved plaques on the wall, as if they had left last week. The boats on which they lived, out in the bay, would be stained with green mould, the sail covers white with seagull guano.

It's tempting in places like this to think: "Well what if we stayed too? Looks like a pretty laid-back lifestyle..." But if you lingered over more than a single drink, you'd see a wistful, lost look in their eyes. Some had just lost the will to go on, and were beached here; others had run out of money or drank too much; all, you intuited, had been abandoned by their girlfriends or wives. They'd be there day after day, just hanging out.

We carved our own wooden plaque, screwed it to the wall and rowed out for the last time to Bosun Bird. As we motored out of the harbour, I answered Jenny's anxious look of inquiry by bending over the stern: "Yes, there is water coming out of the exhaust."

We set the wind-vane to steer NNW. Next stop Kyushu, Japan.



ALL PICS NICK AND JENNY COGHLIN