

KAVA, CAKES AND SEWING MACHINES

Katie Thomsen

(Having returned to her ex-pat home in Antwerp, Belgium from a liveaboard kayaking trip in British Columbia, Katie announced, 'I could live on a boat'. Seven years and 35,000 miles later she and husband Jim have sailed halfway round the world enjoying a simple but exciting life visiting exotic places, parking their home in beautiful bays, and delving deeply into new lands, waters and cultures aboard Tenaya, their 2006 Hallberg-Rassy sloop.

Jim and Katie received the Rambler Medal for 2012 in recognition both of their cruising among the islands of Vanuatu and their positive actions once ashore, some of which are described below. Katie chronicles their adventures at www.tenayatravels.com.)

It all came together in Vanuatu. Eighty-three steep, forested islands are scattered in the warm South Pacific like a big Y running north to south. Aneityum, the southernmost island, is about eight sailing days north of New Zealand. That's about 1000 miles. *Tenaya* was anchored in Anelacuahat Bay at Aneityum and I was sitting on the beach with a jar of bubbles. As the glistening orbs floated on the wind, the kids playing nearby cautiously approached with wide eyes. Soon they were taking turns blowing bubbles and squealing with delight. Captivated, my husband Jim pulled out his camera. Our hearts began to open.

The following year we returned with an Epson 4x6 photo printer. The lady at the bank suggested I give the album of bubble-blowing kids to Seralyne, because the girl on the cover was her granddaughter. Seralyne was thrilled! People on this remote island seldom have pictures of themselves or loved ones. Along with hugs and happiness, I received two delicious grapefruit and made a new friend. A few days later her son Jonah brought Seralyne and a boatload of kids out to *Tenaya*. It was their first time on a sailboat, ever.

Seralyne's family visits Tenaya



Across the lagoon, Mystery Island receives thousands of cruise ship passengers each year. People make a decent living selling trinkets and tours to the mostly Australian tourists. We thought postcards might be a hit, so made some



Mystery Island, Vanuatu



'Primrose welcomes you to Vanuatu' – one of the postcards we made for Seralyne to sell at her stall on Mystery Island

Marie and the kids from Port Resolution visit Tenaya

All kids love bubbles!

for Seralyne to sell from her stall. We also printed photos for Keith and Natu to advertise their cultural tours. We ask permission before photographing people and find most enjoy seeing themselves on the camera's display. Because they rarely have them, local people are delighted to be given photos of themselves and their families.

Stanley paddled up in his hand-hewn outrigger canoe shortly after we anchored in Port Resolution, and welcomed us to Tanna with a broad smile. A few days later he politely asked if we would charge his mobile phone as his village has no electricity, and of course we were happy to





Jim takes a portrait of Patrick's family

help. Ashore, broken things found their way into Jim's backpack. He was able to fix Esther's speaker, Marie's solar powered light, Sam's underwater flashlight, Stanley's DVD player and several mobile phones. Carolyn asked if he would have a look at the village water pump which had stopped working and Charlie wondered if Leah's sewing machine could be repaired. They had asked the right man – 40 years ago Jim and his brother decided they could make backpacks, so



Kally looks at a photo of himself

Tenaya at anchor in Port Resolution



Stanley visits Tenaya. He is the yachtie liaison for Tanna Island

they purchased an industrial sewing machine. It wasn't long before something broke and, unable to afford a professional mechanic, they began taking it apart. After many attempts they learned how a sewing machine worked and figured out how to fix it.

Leah is a mother and widow who earns money making skirts. Her Singer hand-crank sewing machine had not worked for months and no one had been able to fix it until Jim came along – it took him three hours and drew quite a crowd. As he got up to leave, two women cradling broken machines emerged from the onlookers. Back to work he went. The next day Elsie, Jenna and two others asked him to look at their inoperable Singers. He was able to repair all but Jenna's. The beaming smiles and heartfelt thanks were payment enough, but the ladies gave him baskets of food as well.



Jim repairs the village water pump at Port Resolution on Tanna Island





Jim fixes Elsie's sewing machine

As she and I walked out of the village along the rutted dirt road into the dense bush, Marie described the different types of fruit and vegetables grown in the gardens. Eventually she stepped off the road onto a barely perceptible path of slightly trampled vegetation. She glided effortlessly over and under green, sometimes prickly,

often substantial, obstacles while I followed clumsily behind. I tried not to step on anything with a leaf until she pointed out that I was waltzing around weeds.

All her corn had been eaten by a cow, and Marie was so upset on hearing the news from her mother that she did not want to see the devastation with her own eyes. She had not been back until now. After a few moments of quiet contemplation she took me through

Leah, thrilled that her sewing machine works again



Marie makes a chocolate cake ...

her garden and then to those of her family. She dug tubers out of the soft, dark soil with her bare hands, put them in an empty rice bag and topped it off with a papaya from her mother's tree.

On the way back to her village I asked if there was anything Marie would like from me. "I want you to

make me a cake," she said with a smile. "Okay, banana, white or chocolate?" I asked. "Chocolate" she declared. I'd gone my entire life without making a chocolate cake from scratch, but now I was inspired to avoid boxes. The following week David asked Jim if he could spare some rope to tie his cow to a tree. I urged him to give up some old climbing rope. Perhaps this was the errant creature that ate Marie's corn.

When we returned the following year I brought along sturdy, reusable containers and plenty of cocoa. Carolyn asked me to bake a cake for her nephew's circumcision ceremony in Yakupen, and Meriam requested a cake for her son Ron's ceremony in Manuapen. These are important traditional ceremonies held each year in villages across Tanna. When Marie wanted a cake for her son's second birthday, I invited her out to *Tenaya* to help. She was amazed by the electric mixer and cheerfully agreed to lick the bowl to help conserve water.

... and Ron chooses it at his circumcision ceremony





A man prepares for a passport photo

Soccer players must have ID cards with a passport-sized photo if they wish to compete on other islands. Four of these photos cost 1500 *vatu*, about US \$15, a month's earnings for a guide. When word spread that Jim would both take and print passport photos we were swamped! The two teams from the John Frum village at Sulfur Bay brought baskets, feathers, *kava* and a lovely woven mat. Others gave us fruit, vegetables and herbs.

Then Werry, the manager of the Port Resolution Yacht Club, asked us to make signs requesting yachts keep their rubbish on board, not to leave it on the island, burn it on shore, or toss bottles or cans overboard in the bay. We did and hope it helps.

Local people are keen to visit the boats anchored in their bay, and one day we had 26 kids out in two dinghy loads, girls first, then boys. We usually send them home with a National Geographic or two. Twice we have given local people rides. Anthony sailed with us from Aneityum to Tanna; then Chief Molsas, a paramount chief, and his daughter, her husband and their infant son joined us for the trip up the



Printing photos aboard Tenaya



*Our kayak
is full of gifts*

coast of Pentecost so the young man could receive medical treatment. For thanks we were given a special *kava* ceremony. We like *kava*.

Jim and I have finally figured it out. For us, this journey is not simply about seeing new places and spending time with cruising friends – it is about weaving ourselves into the local tapestry, learning from those living in the places we visit, and sharing our knowledge and resources with them. Our floating home is a veritable workshop. We have skills, tools, bits and parts and can offer things and services not usually available on remote islands. In return, we receive unconditional friendships, handmade treasures, enlightened perspectives and a bounty of sustenance. By opening our hearts and minds, offering our expertise and inviting locals onto our boat, we open the door for each to peek inside the other's world.

*Chief Molsas and his
family aboard Tenaya*

