



John Deere is dead and we are sailing 40 tonnes of steel more than 300nm back to our last port of call, with virtually no rudder and only small sails.



# SELF RESCUE

Don loves adventures and gets one when his motor dies a long way from anywhere in the Pacific Ocean

**F**unny how, when you least expect it, your world can turn completely upside down. That's when adventure comes to you, rather than you go looking for it. It happened to me again just last week, while on my merry way to Tuvalu in the Pacific (click on [www.bluetreasure.me](http://www.bluetreasure.me)).

The moon was simmering on the water, with little wind, as we motored past tropical islands. Our only issue, a 1kt head current, but life was serene... until 1.30am when the engine suddenly died. Bugger!

The injector pump had failed. No problem, I had a spare under the bunk. However, as we were fitting it (an eight-hour job) there was a

concern. That 1kt current pushed us ever so steadily towards a reef, with a 500m drop-off to the surf line making it impossible to anchor and there was zero wind. We made it, though, with just a few hours to spare!

Next day, life was good. As the sun set, I was at one with the world and my boat... until, you guessed it, the engine suddenly died again. Not good.

Unbelievably, the new injector pump also died with a catastrophic failure. We had just crossed the equator and were a long way from nowhere, and in an area with little wind.

As a 50/50 motorsailer, *ICE* has a small sailing rig to assist when

the winds are favourable and as an emergency get-home solution, but untried in that mode.

*ICE* has a small rudder by yacht standards. The engine is always meant to be making noise, pushing a prop wash across the rudder surface, giving it power. Worse was the fact that I now had a stationary 32in four-blade prop just a few inches from the leading edge stalling out half the rudder surface. This was going to be fun!

We were 320nm southeast of Tarawa in Kiribati (Gilbert Islands) and the options were making for Fiji, 900nm to the south-southwest, across the trade winds, or drifting back to Tarawa, which we had departed just a few days earlier.

To reach Fiji would mean recrossing the equator and hunting for wind. If we were lucky, we may get there in about two to three weeks, sailing at 2 or 3kts close reaching, but there was the risk we may not make the angles and would have to carry on to Australia! We decided on Tarawa.

## BUCKET SAILING

That started a huge learning curve trying to sail a 40-tonne bucket. *ICE* would want to round-up with each new wind gust, but we learnt rapidly. Soon, with the help of some unexpected consistent winds, we were getting 100nm days, running, reaching and going to windward.

It was unbelievable, bordering on pleasant, and was all about balancing sails to steer. We couldn't use the mizzen at all. Top speed was 5.9kts through the water, but averages of 3 to 4.5kts were the norm. *ICE* can sail!

Just three-and-a-half days after turning around, the sun was setting as we made the corner of the atoll, heading toward the pass and entering the channel into Tarawa. But now, the wind and tide were against us, not to mention all



manner of navigational hazards, like coral reefs everywhere, an unlit channel and a chartplotter that didn't match reality (so often the case out here in the Pacific).

On our way to catch crayfish and battle sharks (top). We have our EPIRB, VHF radio, HH GPS and strobe in our bag! Kapingamarangi atoll (above) is as far away from reality and civilisation as you can get.

THEY CAUGHT VIRTUALLY ALL THE CRAYS, WHILE WE BATTLED THE SHARKS, BUT THERE WERE MANY ADRENALIN LAUGHS...

With deep water, or no water right up to the pass, we were happy to find a small 5m ledge and dropped the pick at 2030 hours. What a great relief for all onboard. Yep we had a party. We made it.

Then the tide turned and the 2kts current went wind against tide! The 1.5m, short, curling waves and thunderstorms with 30kts winds and blanketing rain made it all very interesting. We had anchored downwind of 10nm of fetch for the waves from the other side of the shallow lagoon, so there wasn't much protection, or rest that night, but at least we were there.

Next morning, it was an epic 5nm Zodiac ride into Tarawa to find a towboat. There were none, so we spent another crazy night anchored at the entrance, sailing and crashing around our anchor.

The wind slowly dropped during the second afternoon and on the turn of the tide, we set sail again. With a few "racing tacks", we made the last 7nm to the port and dropped anchor a boat length from a secure mooring we had been offered.

It felt so good to be independent and made me wonder what we would have done if we were just a trawler, without a sailing rig.

## LOST AT SEA

While anchored at the entrance to the Tarawa lagoon late on the second afternoon, I noticed a small boat drifting out as its crew tried to start the engine. It was blowing about 15 to 20kts.

They anchored with a piece of string and a rusted bicycle rim as an anchor, then waved to us for help. I went out in the Zodiac and brought them back to ICE.

They were seven men, happy to now be onboard. Our engine was out, so I radioed for assistance. In about an hour, a fishing boat came to tow them back the 5nm to Tarawa as the sun was getting low



Seven guys in a small boat with a broken outboard, are picked up by ICE, or it would have been a two-month drift to New Guinea!

and the winds now gusting more than 20kts.

I have no doubt that if we were not there, they would have had to spend the night on their flimsy anchor. If/when that broke in the 35-knot squalls and 1.5m seas we later experienced, they would certainly have been on their way out to sea with nothing.

It happens all the time out here, though. Just weeks before we arrived, sadly, six children went missing in a canoe. Locals hope they will show up in New Guinea.

## CRAYFISH AND RISK

The 2500nm leg to windward from Palau in Micronesia to Kiribati was expected to take us about two weeks.

Halfway into that voyage, we had to stop at Kapingamarangi atoll (1.04.28N 154.48.03E). The 300 inhabitants see only two yachts a year and they sometimes go for up to four months between supply boats.

It is an amazing place, far away from anywhere and really off the track. Making friends here came easy and we were able to help them in a few ways; fixing radios and giving them some much-needed spare parts we had onboard. I bought a pig and we had a big party. We also went diving on Japanese WWII wrecks and American warplanes in the lagoon.

There was an invitation to do a night dive for crayfish outside the lagoon. Why not, the locals had their shorts and T-shirts and we had all the flash gear. They caught virtually

all the crays, while we battled the sharks, but there were many adrenalin laughs... in the surf, in the dark, with thunder storms, high winds and rain. Things could easily have gone wrong on a trip like that.

The winds were all offshore and just in case, I had two crew on ICE monitoring the VHF radio. While Mark and I dived, Jane stayed in the boat close by with a torch, VHF radio, handheld GPS, 406MHz PLB and more, just in case.

The locals on the other hand do it all the time, with nothing, not even paddles or an anchor, so, yes, they go missing, too. Only weeks before we arrived, another guy from the atoll went missing. Locals searched the lagoon to no avail, but say it just happens, anyway!

In the past 15 years, there have been some good-news stories of boats from Kiribati drifting the 1100nm to Kapingamarangi atoll.

There was the one about the three guys who drifted for more than two months — one died on the way, but the other two made it. Then the story of two blokes who both made it and the last, some five years ago, when three guys survived the two-month five-day drift to within striking distance of the surf. Only two of them were strong enough to swim for it. The third stayed with the boat. By the time the two were found on the beach the boat had gone.

I plan every excursion in a boat of any size seriously. Our Zodiac always has emergency gear. That simple trip from beach to boat could very easily, when you least expect it, turn your life upside down! 🚫