



SURF, WRECKS AND REEFS

When the surf is up in Tonga interest in wrecks is down and the cobwebs come off the longboards. No one had ever surfed this spot before.

In the hunt for shipwrecks, *ICE* narrowly escapes becoming a statistic herself after striking a coral reef, but *Nirvana* quickly returns on a classic surf day

In the first two months of the Fiji cruising season this year, at least six yachts experienced serious collisions with reefs. One sank in deep water less than four minutes after impact, with no loss of life. The various hull materials, nature of the impacts and weather at the time all had a bearing on the final outcome. Having cruised the area I know my C-map electronic charts are often up to 150m out of position and never consistently in the one direction. To sail those seas it is all eyes on the water, sun high, slow as she goes... and keep your fingers crossed!

Happily the C-Maps for Tonga are spot on, with accuracy over the whole island chain down to just a few metres. But that did not stop me from planting *ICE* on top

of her first reef! Oops!

A few weeks ago, in my ongoing efforts to pass on 40 years of sailing experience to my crew, I told them about the cause of most common forms of groundings. A lack of concentration, and usually a combination of events, build up to ultimately create a downfall.

IMPACTS HAPPEN

During my years afloat, I have only ever had three impacts that amounted to anything more than a soft touch. The first in 1980 occurred as I set off solo for New Caledonia. I was onboard my little 29ft yacht *Skye* cruising down the Brisbane River, motoring at just 4kts. I went the wrong side of a starboard beacon (to let a ship pass) and whacked into the only rock in the river, at 7kts. I

forgot about the following current.

The aftermath was messy. I had slammed into the bulkhead smashing my nose, and *Skye* now painted in blood, pressed hard aground. No real damage though. Why did it happen? Probably because I set off on a Friday and I never have since.

My second impact was in Antarctica in 1995 onboard my 60ft expedition yacht *Spirit of Sydney*. We had just dropped anchor at Cape Denison, in a small boat harbour with a 30-knot wind building. It immediately dragged and we crashed onto rocks on a potentially dangerous (no, lethal), icy lee shore. We survived. Why did it happen? I put that one down to the "Antarctic Factor".

Now my third mishap was just last week! We were in wide,



We heard of this yacht going down on a reef in Tonga last season and found it in 8m of water at the approaches of a tricky anchorage on the island of Kelefisea. We had started our *Talisker Bounty Boat* expedition from this island just two years before. It happens, hey. Fortunately, no lives were lost, but it was a sad sight and strange experience diving it.

open water among only randomly scattered reefs, the sun sparkling high above, the sea flat calm and a beautiful blue and the day crystal clear. The chartplotter was precisely accurate and everything was all happy and dandy onboard.

Cruising heaven, hey!

We had just left Pangai in Tonga's Ha'apai group of islands, bound for a little bay just a few miles down the road to look for another wreck. Minutes later, we were on top of the reef. Why did

it happen, because I was enjoying the moment?

I was monitoring our course through the reefs from the pilothouse. The chartplotter was on 1.5nm range, forward looking sonar set 50m ahead and echosounder on. We were making 6kts through the water. I was chatting with my crew about the fun days ahead, reminiscing on the past, all laughing a lot. My crew then reached across to switch the plotter range up to 12nm, then returned it to just 3nm. I did not realise it was now not on 1.5nm, but all looked fine. We continued chatting and laughing. Life was good, till it all went to mud... or should I say reef.

I first noticed a slight shadow on the sonar 40m out. Was it just interference or fish? I slowed the throttle to idle, glanced at the echosounder, all okay, then the chartplotter... a black dotted circle, with us about to enter it. Hmm... interesting? No, not good.

IN REVERSE

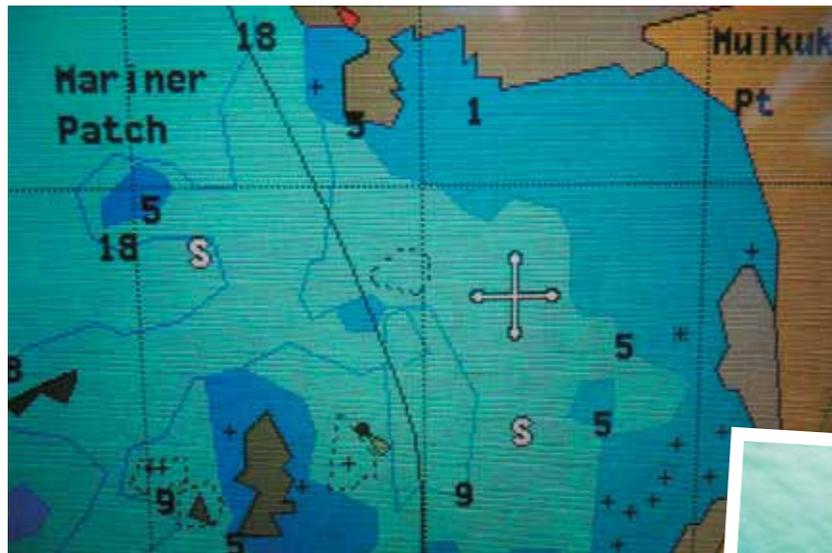
Pulling the throttle to reverse I simultaneously looked out the window, close over the side, switched the plotter back to 1.5nm mile range and WOW! A bright, yellow reef was now on the screen, with us in the middle, and now also visible out the window. *ICE* is still doing about 3kts and I cringe — full reverse but no hit.

We are 35 tonnes and slowing fast, but at about one knot *ICE* crunched a bit of reef — aggh! — as she slid slowly to a stop on top of the coral. It all took about 30 seconds after the first indication from the sonar.

The reef was about the size of a very large house. We were on the roof, about 60 per cent of the keel touching. With the chartplotter at 1nm, I could see we were now on the back edge, the crew reporting that the bow was on over the drop-off to deep water. I decided to immediately power off straight ahead with as much speed as possible, worried about the exposed rudder taking a hit if *ICE* slid off slow.

It all worked, with no rudder contact. *ICE* has no more barnacles on 60 per cent of her 35mm keel plate. I felt bad about the reef top scar, estimated at 25m long and 60cm wide.

I shouldn't have been so relaxed,



Top: Our chartplotter at 1.5nm range clearly showing Hakau reef which we sat on! Above: The chartplotter at 3nm range showing a black-dotted circle that I know is a reef with less than 2m of water over it.

not let any one touch the plotter and importantly, I should have known that some smaller reefs *do not* show up as a “reef” (yellow), at 3nm range on the plotter, just a dotted black line on blue. I had never seen that before. At 1.5nm it was bright yellow with a name. Like all of us, I am still learning and this time I got away with it! Many others have not.

TREASURE AT LAST

The *Port-au-Prince* is a famous ship in Tongan history. It was an American privateer which attacked and plundered other ships for their treasure and also

We had spent a few days looking for the historic wreck of the *Port-au-Prince* when it was announced that a local diver had found it a few islands farther north. If it really is that ship it may answer a few interesting questions about Tonga’s past and recent history.



“ WE ARE 35 TONNES AND SLOWING FAST, BUT AT ABOUT ONE KNOT ICE CRUNCHED A BIT OF REEF — AGGH! — AS SHE SLID SLOWLY TO A STOP ON TOP OF THE CORAL

A secret reef cove on a secret island, with reports of a large wreck not far away outside the surf line... fact or fiction?

went whaling. She was overrun by Tongan warriors in 1806, with twenty-two crew killed and the ship ransacked for the metal and other interesting items. *Port-au-Prince* was then burnt to the waterline and sunk, probably still with treasure onboard.

Rumours suggest the ship may have been found in the early '70s by a Japanese dive team, who secretly removed the treasure worth hundreds of millions. The survivors from the ship, together with the cannons recovered from it, went on to upset the balance of power within the warring factions, changing the political course of the Kingdom forever.

Meanwhile, it was announced

to the world last week that the wreck has officially been found by a local diver and some treasure too. I just hope now all appropriate archeological surveys and conservation efforts are put into place during the recovery phase, as this is truly a wreck of some significance, if the discovery is correct. We spent a few days looking for the same wreck in its historically reported position, but it was not our day.

ONE MAGIC DAY

Cruising in Tonga is good on a bad day, but every so often it goes off. We were at a special island, visited twice by Captain Cook, following up a lead on some wrecks. *ICE*

was anchored in a tiny reef cove with surrounding steep walls of coral and just enough room to swing. A two to three metre swell was pumping in the sun only 50m off our stern.

All interest in wrecks disappeared as longboards were launched for the first time in nearly a year. It was awesome. Pure Nirvana!

The locals say we were the first people “ever” to surf that break. Late in the day, the offshore wind dropped out as the sun set golden over those magic waves. Wax was stuck in my chest hairs, I was suffering nipple chafe and my man boobs were red. We were all simply tuckered out and I’ll never forget it. 🍷