

Voyaging on MaaMalni - 2008-2009



July 1, 2008

Hello to all. below is a series of emails that I received from Mike & Suzan. I put them in order first to last for ease of reading.

Maamalni Suwarow - #1 Land ho! Or Suwarow Tomorrow? Monday 6/30/08 9:55 AM

When the fleet left Bora Bora, some of the boats went to Roratonga in the southern Cook Islands while others went to Suwarow. In making our decision of where to go, we contacted MaaMa's previous guardians, Roger and Alice Williamson asking their advice. Their immediate response was "whatever it takes, beg, borrow, steal or even if you have to book passage on a freighter, go to Suwarow". While the trip to Suwarow was a bit of a detour, being about 300 miles 'above' the normal rumb line, we had an uneventful passage there. With about 2 days of good winds after 2 days of motoring we came upon this atoll archipelago designated as a National Park and managed by the county of New Zealand.

At sea, when coming upon an atoll, one see a ragged line upon the horizon that from a distance looks like a line of vertical lines - very odd. As one approaches, those vertical poles meld into coconut palms and coral sandy beaches surrounded by a continuous line of breakers on it protective reef. The color of the water is literally beyond description. The 'blue' is cobalt and aquamarine.... Some of the most dazzling colors we have ever seen. The colors are so vivid the only comparison would be to squeeze out Grumbacher oils on a fresh canvas and those won't have the brilliance and variation of nature's real color! As we approached the only natural passage into the 60-mile long lagoon, a voice was heard over the VHF radio asking if we saw the masts of the already arrived boats of the fleet. "Not yet" was our response but we soon saw them beyond the palm trees. The passage into the lagoon is quite narrow and is approachable during daylight hours only. Basically the approach is a Par 4 with a dogleg to the right with coral heads on either side of the boat replacing the ubiquitous sand hazard. The approach is further complicated by a 2-3 knot current, which is trying to take the boat from port to starboard. The good news is that the color of the water changes around the coral heads and makes them more identifiable.

Once we made the dogleg to the right, it was a natural entrance to one of the most magnificent blue water lagoon imaginable. Ahead lay the ARC fleet. We made contact with Southern Princess of Sydney Australia who suggested that we anchor off their starboard quarter in about 80 feet of water and thought to be generally clear of coral "bommies". Suzan and Larry went forward and laid out about 250 feet of chain while I backed MaaMa down setting the 60-pound Bruce anchor. Thunk and we were parked!

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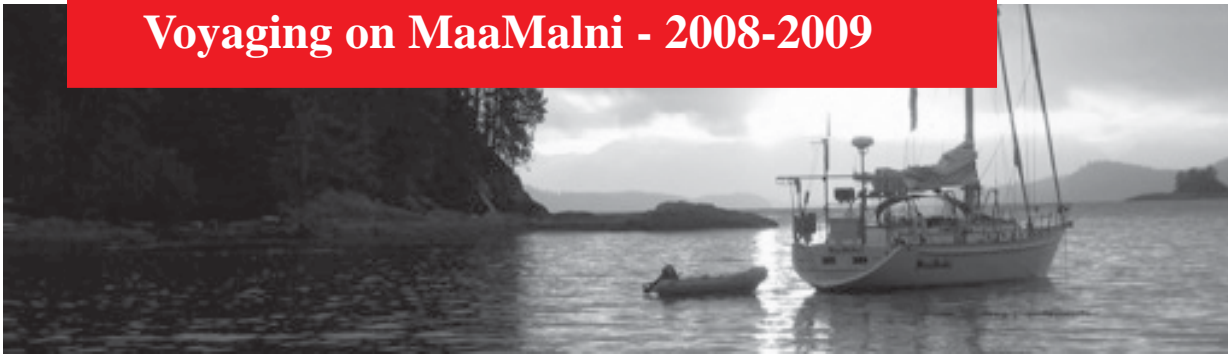
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Maamalni - Suwarrow # 3: Do you want to apply for this job? Monday 6/30/08 10:12 AM

Taking the dinghy into shore the next day was a little problematical as there is a very narrow path between the coral heads to get to the crude wharf of sorts that extends out about 100 feet from shore. Getting out of the dinghy, once tied to the dock, we made our way to the caretaker's quarters. This atoll has very limited elevation change... all of about 10 feet rise above mean high tide which means that the island can be completely swept clean during a cyclone (the Pacific name for the Atlantic "hurricanes"). The New Zealand administration had installed a caretaker some 8 years prior and before the death of the famous hermit Tom Neale who had lived on the island for many years, who with his book made this a sought out stop on the milk run across the Pacific, but the caretaker is only in residence for 6 months as there is a fear for his safety in the event of a cyclone. As it happens, there was a cyclone that hit the island this past December and wiped all of the plant life off of one of the nearby island. John, the caretaker told us that the birds of that island were still in shock and that it would take some time to recover.

As for the caretaker's facilities... well the cyclone had taken out 2 of the buildings, the cooking shed and the shop, but the 2 story "house", actually a covered pad with an enclosed space up the ladder had survived. John is a native Cook Islander and has his wife and their 4 children with him for his tour of duty. Every year a freighter delivers the caretaker and whatever supplies are needed for the next 6 months and then returns 6 months later to pick him up. He has a radio in which to talk to his boss in Roratonga and if there would be an emergency, it would take 2 days to get a boat there, as the nation does not have a helicopter. John felt that this was an ideal job for him and a way to educate his 4 boys in the traditional ways. He had arrived a mere 4 days before the fleet did and had barely gotten setup but he was ready!

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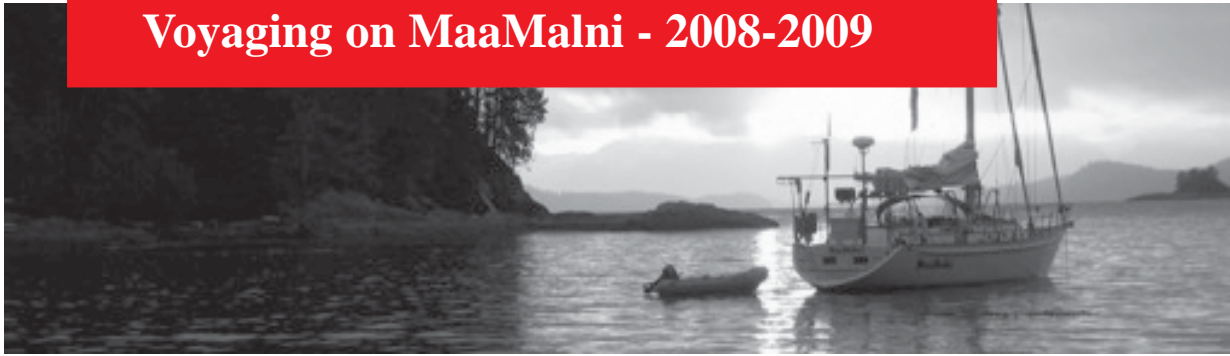
Maamalni - Suwarrow # 4: Did Hitchcock Visit? Could de Laurenti capture the es
Monday 6/30/08 10:42 AM

As this is a National Park, it is required that the caretaker accompany any visitor to the outer islands. This had been made a requirement when after some unaccompanied visits, hundreds of dead birds were found without a natural explanation. Fortunately this was not a hardship as John has an intimate knowledge and palpable love of the archipelago and its marine and land eco-system. He took groups out to some of the outer islands for bird watching and of course to various snorkeling spots.

When it became our turn, John took us to Turtle Island, which was about 2 ½ miles west inside the lagoon by dinghy. We anchored off the coral beach and waded ashore and were allowed to wander along the beach where hundreds of thousands of birds were nesting and flying about. They would alight like swarms of grasshoppers literally filling the sky with flapping wings and shrieks of bird noises. Left protected under the branches of the scrub brush were the newly hatched chicklets all flouncing about in their dresses of down and mouths wide open screaming for a something to eat. We were agog with the number of these little flightless downy critters all shouting for their moms. We waded along shallow tide pools and could even walk along the reef line on the outside shore as the waves broke into the lagoon. There is no way that a camera can possibly capture the colors of the reef, the lagoon, surf and tide pools. What an experience!

After this, John took us to one of his favorite snorkeling spots that turned out to be one of the most beautiful underwater gardens we have ever seen. There had to be 50 varieties of coral... brain coral, tree coral, branch coral, feather coral, fire coral, black coral, cabbage coral all combining into magnificent monumental coral heads... No prize winning multi layer garden of the land can hold a candle to this stunner! Add to this the tremendous variety of color, white, orange, red, yellow, purple, green, scarlet, blue and emerald. This must be the place that Mr. Pantone developed his color chart. And the coral was simply bursting with life forms with lively reef fish darting in and out of their protective locations. Suzan exclaimed that this was the best diving she has ever done... and she has been a lot of places!

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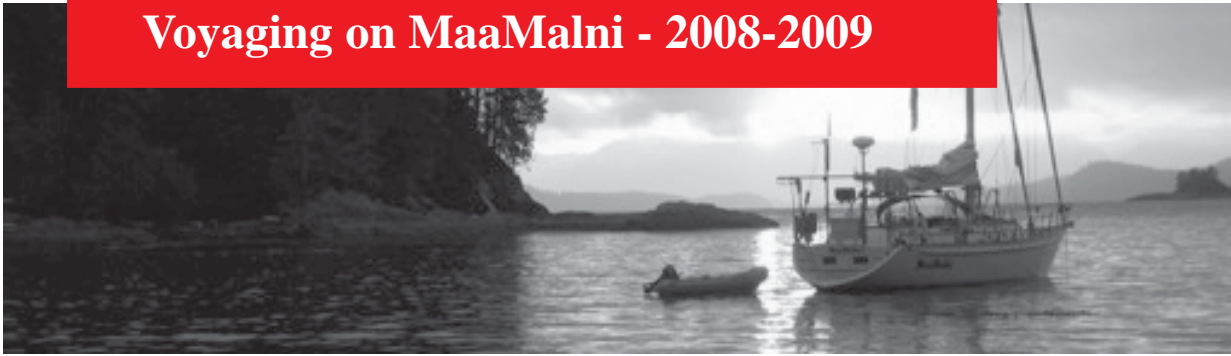
Maamalni - Suwarrow #5:Oh Maitre'd, our reservation for 4 please and could I c
Monday 6/30/08 10:42 AM

On our way back from the coral gardens we dinghied over to Williwaw for a quick chat. You may recall Eric and Graznye are from France and both are doctors who had previously reviewed and attended to my finger. We went by to say hello, which evolved into an invitation for dinner aboard MaaMa to help improve Franco-American relationship. They happily accepted and cocktails were scheduled for 6. A little later in the day, the 3 amigos of Onelife, a lovely Amel Supermaramu from Italy came by to invite us for Pastis that evening. Well, never wanting to turn down an invitation for cocktails we suggested that they bring the Pastis to MaaMa and join us, and the French for dinner... this was to be a really international evening. All of a sudden the party for dinner grew to 9 and it was no longer possible to do a sit down at the table so we would just have to make do with an informal gathering around the cockpit. The planned dinner was butter-flied leg of lamb ala Maamalni, curried rice and salad.

MaaMa's Little Lamb is quite easy to replicate... and we are well known for great lamb. First procure a leg of lamb, which is more easily done at the supermarket versus the farm where they are hard to catch. Next butterfly the leg. Now "butterfly" is a term that scares off most people. It's a Julie Child term that simply refers to removing the flesh from the bone... using a small paring knife, just cut it away from the bone... it may not be pretty but it's not difficult. Having said that, lay the meat on a cutting board. The meat when laid down will have high and low spots so you want to 'equalize' the surface by putting some vertical albeit shallow cuts in the high sections which you 'push to the side' to get the meat laid down and a more consistent thickness. Then you take slivered garlic and push into the meat in all sorts of locations... the more garlic the better. Next, sprinkle liberally salt and cracked black pepper followed by a dusting of garlic salt, cumin, curry and finish with a toss or two of cinnamon. Rub the spices into the flesh. Flip and repeat the spices and rubbing on the underside. Cover and let stand at room temperature for 2 to 4 hours. Grilling. The lamb is best done on a barbeque but it can be quickly seared on the stove and finished in the oven. Remember that lamb cooks very fast. Why I don't know, it just does. Heat the barbeque to a medium high heat, place the beast on the grill. Timing is based on your grill, usually ours (when in the propane versus butane mode) will take about 10 minutes per side whereupon we remove the beast to a platter, cover with foil and let stand for another 20 to 30 minutes where the cooking process continues par excellence. For lamb, par excellence means grilled on the outside and pink on the inside, never grey. Do not overcook! Remember, remember, and remember the lamb will continue to cook with its residual heat. Again, don't overcook!

As our luck would have it, the boys from Rome came aboard with their aperitif and their dead fish caught that day which they insisted had to be cook for dinner too. Once the lamb was removed from the grill and finishing under the tent, the fish was cleaned and placed upon the grill and was served 45 minutes later. Dinner conversation was conducted in four languages (American, English, French and Italian) but the language of eating and drinking is universal and a good time was had by all.

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MaaMalni - Suwarrow #7: Sumo wrestling in the dark. Monday 6/30/08 10:42 AM

Its kind of like going into the Sumo ring blindfolded when you lay anchor as you have no idea where you are placing your muscle. The Sumo ring is where two very large opponents meet both swathed in loin cloths, perfectly coiffed hair pull back into a French braid and then stomp and stare at each other. Sumo matches are usually one round and ends when one opponent throws the other one out of the ring. This is kind of the way it was with MaaMa versus the Coral Head. A contest of stealth and bulk.

To get good holding you want your anchor to dig in, but on the other hand you also want to get it back. When the tide changes, the boat will move around. Add some wind, likely changing direction over the course of a couple of days and you have this heavy chain under the boat seeking out any rock, coral head or other underwater obstruction to wrapped itself around. When we stepped into the ring and weighed anchor the coral had done its stealth thing and had sucked the chain in, but as Suzan had previously studies our own wraps and so directed me as to which way to move the boat. Besides the coral was no real match for MaaMa's heft, all 54,000 lbs. So MaaMa 1, Coral 0. I hate to think what others may have done to this fabulous atoll without mooring buoys and this is one place that we want to return. Knowing that there is only one location permissible for anchoring we can be assured that the remaining 60 miles of the lagoon and its coral will remain untouched.

So it was off into the sunrise as we left the next morning following the track line on the electronic chart plotter... what a marvelous thing these electronic gadgets when they work. If you made it in without hitting anything and just follow that track out, you should make a clean escape. Storyteller left the same time but were headed for Tonga to meet family. We stayed in radio contact for several days just to be sure that all was well and that we had both dodged the weather bullet that was headed for the rest of the fleet.