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EPI-THRILL

At the risk of being called a wimp, I have a confession to make. Sailing in the tropics with the 15 knot tradewind on the quarter is not the best thing in the world. Not quite, anyway. Motoring in calms is better. Not any calm, but that silky smooth sparkling calm when the ocean heaves with promise.

We were motoring south from Santo in Vanuatu towards the island of Epi, more miles away than we could do in daylight. And the trade didn't develop after dawn as we had expected. The sun battered us into the deck, only my cotton bank-robber's hood preventing deep-fryment. This attracts even more derision than my stylish plastic sandals. But it works.

We were several miles to the east of Malekula, famous for its tribes of penis-sheath wearers when the glassy surface was broken into shards of light and white, and black curved fins. Bottlenose dolphins and short-fin pilot whales, perhaps fifty animals. Fortunately I wasn't alone. Karen could provide the necessary psychological impetus required for jumping into what I imagined would be shark-infested waters. Oceanic white tips often follow groups of pilot whales and I haven't spent enough time with them to be absolutely comfortable in their presence.

Bottlenose dolphins came to the bow, big powerful animals, the largest 4m long, infinitely graceful. We slowed to a crawl and I slipped into the water and finned to the bow where I could hold onto the bobstay with one hand and be dragged along. The dolphins lazed away, one returning for a closer look but they wanted little to do with me.

We drifted slowly into the pilot whales, several spy-hopping. We could see them just under the surface pretending to be Polaris missiles in slow motion.

I finned over to the closest group. The visibility was poor, the water full of gobs of plankton. About 20m away they cohesed and lazily meandered away, but not so lazily that I had a hope of catching them. There was a silky shark with them, looking like a stretch grey reef shark without the black tail margin. It made one approach to see what I would do (I didn't flinch - outwardly) and then kept its distance, returning occasionally to see if I still existed.

On the next approach Karen joined me in the water. Again the whales would not let us close enough for decent pictures, and the silky seemed intimidated, in spite of being longer than either of us. As I pulled myself out of the water, a group of mahimahi came past, lighting up electric neon blue.

As we sat on deck stupefied, the oceanic white tip which was following the group swung past *Eila* to see what was going on. I felt disinclined to throw myself into the water.

Towards dusk, as the sun lit the haze over Malekula, we spotted a blow, a distinctive blow even half a mile away. From where we were it looked about 45° forward from the animal. A sperm whale blow is about the same again to the side, but we couldn't see that. It lay on the surface for a while then dived. If you thought watching humpbacks dive was tedious, they are nothing on sperm whales. They might as well dive forever. By the time it came up, either it or we were so far away we didn't get another decent look at it before darkness fell.

Shortly after dawn we anchored in Lamén Bay on the island of Epi. It's a bay half a mile across, only 6m deep quite a long way out, with blackish sand on which grows a threadbare carpet of seagrass. Inshore there are a few chunks of coral rock with some live coral and attendant reef fish, but nothing you would get out of bed to go and see.

Lamén Bay is famous for its friendly dugong. There are two such dugongs in Vanuatu, the other is at Tanna, famous also for its active volcano. Both are males but the Tanna one gets too little bromide in its seagrass diet which makes it quite a handful. It is not fussy; it will try to mate with anything. So far it hasn't drowned anyone, but there have been some near misses. The other problem with the Tanna dugong is the poor visibility.

Dugongs have a remarkable ability to evade detection, even when you know they are there, and they have to surface every few minutes. They stick their nostrils out, take the breath then roll their backs as they submerge. The rolled back looks almost identical to a turtle shell, and Lamén Bay is full of green turtles. So looking for dugongs is never boring, just unproductive.

This dugong, which the French community call *dudul*, is a creature of habit, and in late afternoon often enters the bay and will interact with people in the shallows.

We spotted the animal later in the day; I swam over, snorkelled down and about 8m away he behaved like a wild dugong and disappeared for hours. So much for the friendly dugong.

The next day we found him again. This time he would just keep hoovering seagrass as I crept across the bottom. Though the seagrass didn't seem to amount to much, the root system was extensive and the feeding left meandering troughs through the grass. Maintaining almost 3m and 350kg of dugong requires about 35kg of seagrass daily.

In the evening we encountered the dugong at play in the shallows. Here we could touch its skin with its sparse bristles and hold on to his back as he swam around. The dugong

appears to seek human company simply for entertainment. Two Peace Corps workers were the first people to habituate this animal to humans.

Like dugongs, green turtles are protected in Vanuatu. So there are lots of them, as in other places where they are protected like Hawaii, and you wonder why they are on the IUCN Red List of endangered species. Turtles tend not to tolerate scuba in places I have dived, but you can often get quite close snorkelling. But not for long. In Lamén Bay they behaved normally, being moderately tolerant and leaving without hurry.

One turtle seemed different. I snorkelled down and pretended to go about my own business, feeding on seagrass. Ok, pretending to; I don't need the bromide. Pretty soon I could forage in the sand very close to the turtle while it was feeding. Once it had accepted me, I could forget about seagrass and concentrate on underwater photography. To my surprise it would tolerate scuba gear too, so Karen joined me with the turtle. To watch a wild turtle feeding while we were both closer than a metre to it was a revelation. Often it would sweep away the surface covering of sand with its flippers to expose the seagrass. Shutter speed is critical here, to freeze the head but leave the sweep of the flippers a blur.

Thinking about the better pictures I have taken, its almost always with these strange individual animals that are curious or more tolerant of people, which allow you to think of the picture first, then go and create it. To be able to do this in one location with two endangered species is a rare treat, one of many that Vanuatu has to offer.

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