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# ROMANCE

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## IMPRESSIONS OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC - LOST EDENS, FIREWALKERS, BUSHMEN, WAR CANOES, SHELL MONEY AND SHARK WORSHIP

*Polynesia--soft lands of luminous lagoons, blue mountains rising from the sea, sun dappled palms against a brilliant trade wind sky. The pure magic of Moorea's deep, misty fjords, little wisps of cloud spilling down her spectacular peaks. Long walks along the shore road under the palms, or up in the cool mountains among pines and coffee and waxy cashew trees. Sudden squalls in the night to send us racing on deck to put out a second anchor. Huahini--the Marae of Lac Maeva, ancient open air temples of human sacrifice, somber and brooding.*

*The Firewalkers of Raiatea: A pit 20' x 50' filled with sizzling volcanic rocks is first swept with palm fronds to remove live coals. Prayers are chanted to ancient gods; then a very old woman, the widow of a chief, steps into the pit carrying a torch. She crosses with measured steps, unscathed by fires still burning beneath the rocks. Then the whole troop marches across--rather quickly--several times. The ceremony is completed by traditional singing and dancing. After it was over, in about an hour, we braved the pit. I walked across barefoot--rather quickly. The rocks were HOT all right, but no longer scorching. Hot decks are good training for amateur firewalkers. In Raiatea, Tahitian friends gave the Romance a traditional "Tama Ara A", a sumptuous earth oven feast of tuna baked with hot rocks, poi, paupaw and pamplemus, that huge perfumed Polynesian grapefruit; elegant raw fish in lime juice and coconut cream, yams, taro, baked bananas, sugary pineapple and hearts of palm, that millionaire's salad which sacrifices the tree--all eaten with the fingers like Adam and Eve. Tahitians and hospitality are synonymous.*

*Bora Bora was a milestone for Romance. Here in 1972, we reluctantly turned homeward to a busy season in the Virgins, with a promise to ourselves to return--a promise now kept. The Cook Islands, Rarotonga and Palmerston flew by, then the Samoas, Pago Pago and Apia, and on March 14th, we celebrated 10 years of owning and sailing our beautiful and much loved Romance across the wide oceans of the world--stuns'l weather and turkey and all the trimmings.*

*We remembered the Tokelaus as a lost Eden. No yachts are allowed to call, but Romance carried medical supplies for a new clinic--and the chiefs were out of tobacco! We were welcome. Atafu is a small atoll, the matus (islets) thickly covered with palms and very green, with fine white sand beaches. The reefs are awash at low tide, strewn with huge black blocks of coral torn from the sea bed and hurled onto the reef during hurricanes. The deep blue of the open sea breaks with deceptive gentleness, smothering the bright orange of the coral wall in whitest foam. Beyond, the lagoon shimmers vibrant turquoise in the sun. The whole is a scene of dazzling beauty, this alone worth sailing half a world to see. Triangles of white appeared, sailing outriggers skimming like butterflies outside the reef. They quickly overtook Romance under full sail. The Tokelau dugout is an interesting type, 35-40' long; low, midship and stern sections cut from separate logs and sewn together with sennit, and caulked with resin. Planks are added in the same manner to give extra freeboard, and both ends covered like a kayak. When a man dies, he is buried in a section of his canoe--and a new log added on.*

There are no western style homes in Atafu. The fale's are attractive open walled thatch huts with palm mats to lower when it rains--very cool. The floor is usually elevated, covered with finely woven mats. There is no furniture, and one sits cross legged or reclines on the floor. Cooking is done over open fires and is excellent, in the finest Polynesian tradition. Our boys were adopted by several families, and the girls given a fale of their own just steps from the moon-washed lagoon, with the chief's daughters in attendance. There were dances every night, the Polynesians laughing uproariously at our efforts--and a grand festival of color and music and traditional dancing the final afternoon. On Nukunono, the old tribal songs and legends have only recently been revived, and it is said the children sing for 8 hours at feasts and never repeat a number! On both these happy Edens, we feasted royally, and did our best to reciprocate with parties aboard. Romance was swamped with revelers enjoying the novelty of American food, the laughter only turning to tears and laments on parting. And as Romance sheeted home her sunset-burnished sails, dark canoes trailed her into the golden ocean.

Monday, April 5, 1976, the day that never was, Romance crossed the International Date Line among the Fijis, passing also from the carefree isles of Polynesia, into the exciting unknown of the far Western Pacific--dark and primitive Melanesia, which was to thrill us beyond expectation.

New Hebrides: There are only about 150 bushmen, Small Nambus, still living in the unsurveyed interior of Malekula. Just 3 weeks before, the Small Nambus had split a Frenchman's skull open for entering the Nakamal, the sacred house. Now all the scattered mountain villages feared Government reprisals. No one had been up there since. We negotiated for guides among the coastal people. The expedition was impossible, on, then off again. In the end, they searched us and let us go, unarmed and without cameras. Our 8 youngest and strongest constituted the largest party to attempt this 3 day forced march. Completely at the mercy of the bushmen, afraid to break some unknown tabu, these kids from American cities lived and ate with wildmen, sleeping in the "woman's house," with pigs for company, and banana leaves for cover against the mountain cold.

The rest of us attempted a nearer village, but being nearer the coast, they were even more fearful, and would not consent to our visit. We did however, surprise a young man and 3 boys along the path. We impaled them with our cameras, as shy as jungle animals, wearing only a green

banana leaf 'nambus' and curved pig's tusks. They warily accepted our cigarettes; and on passing a spear triumphantly into the jungle. We got the message.

The night off Ambrym we'll long remember, a wild night of racing clouds, surfing-curling seas, close dark cliffs, and the great volcano, Benbow, streaming a cherry red plume above us. Ambrym--of the heroic black-fern gods and brooding slit-gongs, hollow tree trunks with big eyed, long nosed, whimsical faces. We traded for drums, masks and dance sticks, half-figures with waving arms, resembling papier maché, but fashioned of cob-webs and clay.

Ticopia is a 'forbidden' island, once considered hostile and excitable. Nobody goes there. It sounded interesting. Romance anchored in 15 fathoms off the fringing reef--the chain literally roared down--and was soon surrounded by canoes. The Ticopians are fierce looking fellows, tattooed all over, with a huge mop of kinky red hair, black teeth, and mouths stained hideously red from betel nut chewing. They wear a loin cloth of plain white tapa (bark cloth.) The women wear nothing but tattoos above their tapa skirts, smoke pipes, chew betel and shave their heads. They wouldn't win any beauty prizes. The children, however, are adorable, with big brown eyes, sweet smiles, and fresh flowers in their pierced ears and noses.

It is required that token gifts be presented to each of 4 chiefs who rule Ticopia, the wildest, fiercest old men on the island. The 12 year old son of the youngest chief went along as aide to protocol. Skipper and I had to crawl on our hands and knees before the chiefs, then sit cross legged before those fierce countenanced buddhas, while an attendant translated pleasantries. Can you imagine our straight-laced New England Skipper in such a setting? Yet the people could not be more friendly.

The youngest chief invited us to a feast. We crawled into his low, dark hut, I in a tapa presented by his wife, as flexible and comfortable as a plaster cast. The villagers crowded in behind us and sat in the shadows, cuddly babies pressing sleepily against us. The light from a single precious lantern flickered on leaf wrapped packages hung neatly from the rafters. Yams or skulls? Outside, the cook fire blazed beyond the low door. We sat and ate and thought about where we were, in a chief's hut in Ticopia. "A brigantine's a time machine," Randy Jones sang. Perhaps none of us would ever be more keenly aware of turning back the years, the centuries?

First came the traditional lap-lap, a sort of yam pudding with chunks of papaya and egg, baked in a coconut shell, and best eaten in the dark. Then came 3 scrawny whole chickens from their meager supply, to be torn apart and shared, then casava roots, taro and more yams, all washed down with drinking nuts. Then in traditional Melanesian hospitality, we were offered and tried, betel nuts, chewed with a pepper leaf and dry lime, 3 'awfuls' making a 'good' to them. This magical night ended with the chief himself leading his sons in an ancient chant, a slow dirge accompanied by measured swaying and sharp claps, well calculated to thrill the least adventurous.

Solomons: Langa Langa. Jack London once called Malaitia "the most savage Island." Even today, there are elusive bushmen in the interior, naked and wild. Their age old enemies, the 'salt water people' still build their sago palm huts on coral-walled artificial islands out on the reefs of Langa Langa Lagoon. There they cling to their old customs, and worship the shark, BIAKWA. The women are busy full time making money--literally--out of shell. For "shell money"--strings of tiny shell disks--is still legal tender in banks and stores throughout the Solomons. Believe it or not.

Shell fragments are first rough chipped into 3/8" disks, drilled and strung, then polished by endless rubbing between grooved planks. There are 3 denominations, white, the lowest, orange, and red, the highest, from a shell 10 fathoms deep. The current bank rate is \$20 Australian for a fathom (6 feet) of red shell money. The custom survives because a bride (or a pig) can only be purchased with shell money.

Gawa in the Marshall Bennets is another never visited island. Here we made one of the most thrilling discoveries of the world cruise, 60 man war canoes with pandanus sails (no white man's canvas here!) still being used for long voyages. We saw four magnificent models, and some of us sailed in one--40 feet long, with very high, ornately carved prow and sterns, streamers of white cowry shells flying. The outrigger was nearly as big around as our masts, and the space between decked over with bamboo. The sail is rectangular, the yard laborously hoisted without blocks, and set diagonally to the mast. As soon as this primitive thatch sail filled, the canoe seemed to leap out of the water, flying like the wind. To tack, the yard is simply swung around the mast, bow becoming the stern, and off she goes. The people of Gawa are supreme artists, everything they own, bowls, paddles, betel nut mortars, adzes, walking sticks, are exquisitely carved. We traded trifles for treasures.

On Kitava in the Trobriands, we had the incredibly good luck to arrive on the eve of Mila Mala, the yam festival celebrating the harvest and beginning of the new planting season, literally their New Year. Mila Mala is always held on the full moon. At new moon, ancestral spirits fly over from Tuma Island, and are welcomed back to the village by the oldsters. At Mila Mala, the youngsters parade to honor the spirits and bid them goodbye for another year, a parallel to our Father Time, and Baby New Year. We left Romance at 4:30 AM, and marched silently up the dark jungle path to the village, tiny mushrooms glowing in the damp grass. We wondered if they were a form of 'flying witches'; together with fire flies and shooting stars--in Trobriand belief. In the village, parents were painting their children's faces in charcoal and white lime, and Halloween excitement prevailed. The children's brown bodies gleamed with coconut oil, their hair dusted with lime and decorated with bright parrot feathers and flowers; and with garlands of green betel nuts around their necks. The boys wore only a banana leaf, the girls perky new grass skirts, so short and full they stick out like ballerina skirts. The most exciting lizard skin drums, and the wild notes of a conch horn accompanied the parade; and when it was over, we were graciously included in the yam feast. Here, Mary Robertson, the most dedicated doctor in Romance history, broke all records by seeing 186 patients in one day. Her reward? Number 187 threw up all over her cabin. Such are the joys and trials of deepsea sailing.