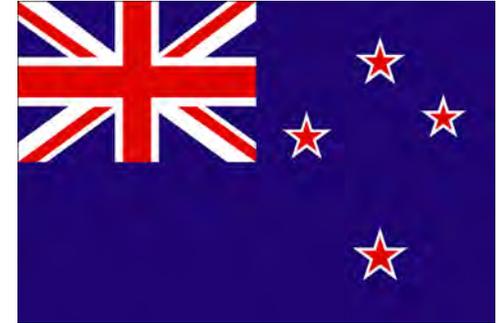


THANK YOU NEW ZEALAND

By Cindy Smith, Island Cruising NZ Member

New Zealand is renowned to overseas cruisers as a welcoming country with stellar marine services, a safe and comfortable haven to get boat works completed, a place to reunite with sailing friends, and do land touring to some of the most picturesque places in the world. Indeed, to quote James Michener's New Zealand, "it is simply the most beautiful country in the world." And as in years past, October 2019 saw overseas yachts begin their annual pilgrimage from the South Pacific islands to New Zealand for cyclone season.

In a normal world, yachts would stay the New Zealand summer, enjoying magnificent cruising grounds before a May or June departure to warmer climates. However, 2020 will forever be etched in cruisers' collective memory as the Year of the Bubble. For the first time in years, boats had to be heated, dehumidifiers sourced and winter clothes found! We watched in horror as the world exploded with the COVID crisis. On March 21st Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced New Zealand's new alert level system and by March 26th, the country was in lockdown.



Some cruisers made it back to their boat home just in time, such as Martin and Ellen Prins on SV Acapella. The couple had flown home to the Netherlands in early March, planning to stay one month to catch up with family and friends. But they quickly realized that visiting with loved ones was not going to be possible due to COVID restrictions, so the decision was made to fly back to New Zealand, arriving just 12 hours before the border closed. A 14-day quarantine was required, and the Prins are grateful that they were allowed to isolate on Acapella. Although made more difficult because the boat was on the hard, Martin and Ellen received amazing support from the management of Riverside Drive Marina who even placed a portable loo right below Acapella with a sign "For the use of Acapella only." Fellow cruisers shopped for groceries and friends hailed from over the RDM fence to say hello.

For other overseas cruisers, the closure of borders has been more difficult. Raffaella Marozzini and Giovanni Viviani have spent several years sailing SV Obiwan from Italy, in October 2019 arriving Bundaberg from New Caledonia. Hearing from friends about the beauty of New Zealand, in early March 2020 they decided to fly to NZ for a campervan holiday. They were on week two of a planned three-week trip to the South Island when the lockdown announcement was made. The couple had to quickly figure out what to do as borders and options were

closing seemingly by the hour. To their great dismay, as they were literally boarding a plane to Australia, they were told by a gate agent that they could not board, despite prior airline approval and Pilot saying it was OK. In the end, Rafaella and Giovanni were left behind in New Zealand and are very grateful to cruising friends for inviting them to stay on SV Y2K.

Debra and Phil Perfit on SV Coastal Drifter also found themselves in New Zealand without their boat. They had flown from Tonga at the end of January, planning to spend 3 months campervan touring around the country. On March 24th while camping in Opunaki (near Wellington), having heard little rumblings about COVID, they met a local couple on the beach. Later that evening, the couple came to the campervan and said that the government was asking people to immediately go to their homes and self-isolate. By the end of the conversation, Deb and Phil found themselves effectively adopted and ensconced in a “sweet dollhouse studio” where they stayed for the next 60 days. The Kiwi couple would not take any money, so Deb and Phil helped care for the sheep, chickens, and other animals as well as gardening and doing weekly shopping runs. This incredible show of kindness by New Zealanders still brings tears to Deb’s eyes.

Our boats became our bubble in the “new normal” of lockdown. Suddenly, a trip to PaknSave or Countdown became a scary, maybe even risky, event which took 3 times as long depending on the queue. Our weekly ladies lunch out to a restaurant was cancelled; in fact ALL social events were suspended for an unknown period of time. We felt guilty if we got too close to someone when using the cruiser amenities lounge or walking the Loop. For sailors used to socializing daily, this produced some level of anxiety and feelings of isolation.

One by one, South Pacific Island nations began to firmly closing their borders. Overseas cruisers found themselves “trapped” in New Zealand, nowhere to go, with many of our visitor visas expiring. Thankfully, Immigration New Zealand issued an automatic visa extension for which overseas cruisers were very grateful. We said the word “trapped” with a huge smile on our face because this country was the best place in the world to be!

By its very nature, cruising means being adaptable to change whether it be different cultures, food, weather, seas, and now the restrictions of lockdown. In the interest of supporting the local economy, cruisers reached out to several members of the Whangarei growers market who agreed to accept online orders and deliver to the Town Basin. This was a huge bonus to those of us who had grown accustomed to amazing NZ produce grown locally. We had lots of time on our hands, so projects got checked off the list, supplies got organized, and deep cleaning those bilges was contemplated, perhaps even completed! Because the vast majority of New Zealanders are friendly, patient, and followed the rules, cases of COVID gradually began to stabilize and then steadily decline.



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Meanwhile, during lockdown Martin Prins decided to gather three fellow Riverside Drive Marina cruisers to begin playing music, while social distancing of course. Martin, Lisa Benckhuysen, and Pelle Berg began making music under the tent at RDM three times per week. Barry Perrins joined later, and the group became the RDM Band. While this was certainly an emotional boost for the players, the music also made things seem a little bit more normal for residents of RDM and listeners walking the Loop.

On June 8th New Zealand went to Alert Level 1 and groups were again allowed to gather. After 10 weeks and 4 days, our bubble had burst and this surely meant a party! There was such a joyous feeling of gratitude towards New Zealand and Whangarei for keeping us safe and well. To convey those feelings to the community in visual terms, overseas yachts decided to participate in Winter Sailstice.

Winter/Summer Sailstice was founded in 2001 as a global annual celebration of sailing held on the weekend nearest to Summer Solstice in the northern hemisphere. Sailing has historically expanded the horizons of the human race by connecting continents, cultures, and commerce. This is certainly true of New Zealand's rich sailing history, with the arrival of Polynesian people via sailing wakas in roughly 1320 - 1350.



Riverside Drive Marina Band on the Canopy Bridge



Dressed Boats

To celebrate "lockdown freedom", boats proudly hoisted their dress flags and golf enthusiast cruisers installed a putting green on the Town Basin Marina barge.

On June 20th a celebration of thanks and appreciation was held on the Whangarei Canopy Bridge with the RDM Band and Friends playing to great applause and dancing by the crowd. Whangarei Mayor Cheryl Mai gave a welcome in her signature official robe and was surprised with a "Whangarei Love it Here" banner that had been signed by overseas yachts. The river was blessed by Elder Fred Tito in traditional Maori style, followed by the firing of three cannons from the canopy bridge toward downriver, bringing ooo's and aaah's from the crowd. The public were invited to walk the docks and chat with cruisers about what life is like on the water. And finally, there was a golf putting competition on the newly minted green aboard the Barge Inn.



Thank you Banners

The day concluded with a cruiser dinner/dance fundraiser benefiting the Black Ball Yacht Club. Established in 2017 by David Irvin, with membership representing 23 countries, the mission of the BBYC is to provide a mechanism for cruisers to thank Whangarei for its hospitality through donations and memberships. This gratitude is expressed through awarding scholarships to disadvantaged Whangarei youth, encouraging them to get involved in the Marine trade. The first scholarship was awarded in 2018 to a Kamo High School senior, sending her on a 10-day youth development program aboard the Spirit of New Zealand Tallship. Coming soon, a cruiser cookbook will be for sale, with 100% of the proceeds going to the BBYC Scholarship Fund.



Canopy Bridge with Thank You Whangarei spelled out in flags

Animal lovers Lauri Jensen and Chuck Miller on SV Free Spirit have fostered kittens on three separate occasions for the SPCA, the last one turning into an adoption. Susan Vint Koning on SV Shenemere volunteers for the Red Cross, an organization which provides many services including drivers for physician appointments, support to immigrant farm workers, and much more. Logan Hudson, age 14, from SV Blanchette also volunteers at the Red Cross in the Op shop.

Giving to the people in places cruisers visit along our travels, whether it be time, supplies, or money, is as natural as breathing. So when we land in a place for a longer period of time, we extend hands and hearts as we have done in the islands.

In early April, Cyclone Harold devastated vast swatches of beloved cruising grounds in Vanuatu. A call for help went out from Sea Mercy and many cruisers responded with donations. Sea Mercy's mission is to provide critical health, disaster, economic development and education for remote Pacific Islanders. The devastation by Cyclone Harold was particularly complicated because of closed borders due to COVID. However, since Sea Mercy has enjoyed such a long history of support going directly to locals on the ground, they were permitted to load a ship with portable desalination units, water filters, tents, and tools which reached Vanuatuan villages shortly thereafter.

In the local Whangarei area, cruisers are volunteering in a variety of settings. Vandy Shrader on SV Scoots, a longtime lover of birds, volunteers at the Bird Sanctuary.



Banner gifted to Mayor Mai

When visiting Kia Island in Fiji last year, Jill Hasty and Dan Morrison on SV Dazzler were shown to a brand new library, which the village children were very excited about. However, the beautiful new bookshelves were empty, so the couple started a GoFundMe page to fill them up. In Whangarei, the couple reached out to the community and thousands of books were donated by the Kokopu Elementary School and the NZ Lions Club. GoFundMe funds were used to purchase new books and large world maps. But with international borders closed, delivering the books to Fiji was a dilemma. So Jilly reached out to the cruising community and several volunteered to take boxes of books to Fiji when their border reopened recently.



Debra Perfitt, SV Coastal Drifter, is currently training with the Coast Guard to work on their rescue boats. Several overseas yachts are members of the New Zealand Coast Guard. For an annual fee of \$115, members receive free on-water assistance New Zealand-wide on any vessel, which is an outstanding deal. This money is used to keep equipment updated and repaired so that the Kiwi attitude of “let’s go get them” enthusiasm and kindness can be maintained. See www.membership.boatiesbestmate.nz for more information.

A portion of the overseas cruising community are families with kids, or “kid boats”. The cruising lifestyle demands these young mariners spend more time with their parents, being home schooled, and much less time with other children, both at school and at play. A large majority of their socializing is

with other adult cruisers, or adults of the communities visited in travels. For these cruising kids, who are used to being on the move, lockdown seemed more like a long ocean passage; home school, boat activities and the already familiar method of digital connections with friends.

Getting to stay in New Zealand for this extended time has been a true gift for 14 year old Cooper, on SV Wiz. Pre COVID, he joined the local Scouts group. From Scouts, Cooper has made several friends who he plays Jugger, Magic and Warhammer with on a weekly basis. Of course he missed this during lockdown, but used makeshift playdates on the internet.

Overseas cruisers are very, very grateful to NZ for extending our visitor visas. Universally, the feeling is that we are extremely blessed to be in a country who recognized the COVID threat early and dealt with it promptly and effectively. Local marine businesses are thrilled that we are spending money at a time when yachts have usually departed for warmer climates. And the friendly hospitality, not to mention the splendour of nature in New Zealand, is unmatched in the world.

Cooper’s mom Susan sums it up by saying “The Whangarei community has been so incredibly welcoming and kind to us during our entire stay. I believe that in some parts of the world we would not have been welcomed, however I truly felt that we were accepted into the community, and treated as part of the team. For this I am eternally grateful.”

So what does the future of cruising look like? Because overseas cruisers are usually on the move, there is a growing degree of uncertainty. Will our New Zealand visitor visas and boat TIE be extended again in



Cooper from Wiz learning how to change a tyre at Scouts

September? If not, where would we go? For the majority of overseas boats currently in NZ, our boat is our home and we do not have another place to go. Fiji just opened their border with many new rules and restrictions. If we leave New Zealand, will we be able to come back for cyclone season? Will other South Pacific countries open their borders and under what restrictions? And even if they do open, many boat insurers will not cover losses if the boat is in the cyclone belt during specific months. Surely it is not safe to venture out just as cyclone season is starting? These and more thoughts are swirling in our minds, as we try to stay calm hoping that New Zealand will let us and our boats stay until June 2021.

Although Raffaella and Giovanni are very grateful to cruising friends for inviting them to stay aboard, they are very much missing their boat home. Now that lockdown is over options continue to be limited. If Australia does not open flights from NZ by September, the couple will be forced to fly home to Italy. Australia has announced that no flights from Europe will be accepted until July 2021, so Raffaella and Giovanni will have left their boat home unexpectedly for 16 months.



Raeffaella and Giovanni

The long-time cruising tradition of continuing on from New Zealand to Australia, Indonesia and beyond is being reconsidered. Long range plans covering large distances are being changed to shorter miles and timelines,



necessitated because the future of border controls are so uncertain. A “Go West” philosophy is being altered to “where is it safe to go and can we get in and back out to safety?” Due to the pandemic, cruisers are also questioning their impact on the places we might visit. How is our presence affecting already fragile food and other supply chains? Can a small island nation continue to handle our burden of rubbish disposal or the potential for us to bring in disease? On balance, is our impact on the economy more negative or positive for the local people? Once experienced as a wonderful adventure crossing oceans, these cruising questions are emerging to thoughtful consideration as never before. Two things are certain: the pandemic has changed cruising for several months if not years to come, and we are very thankful to have spent the Year of the Bubble in New Zealand.

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