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## HURRICANE AT ANCHOR

“Starboard 10 degrees,” comes the call from Linda, standing on *Intermezzo*’s lower spreaders. “Hold her steady right there. It looks like we’ll have room to swing just around the point off to port.” We were threading our way through one of the fjord-like channels of Papua New Guinea’s Cape Nelson region.

*Tucked deep into the Cape Nelson area of Papua New Guinea, Intermezzo is anchored in with a spectacular backdrop. The cliffs raise straight up on three sides, with only the head of the anchorage, where a valley floor slopes to the water, being accessible.*

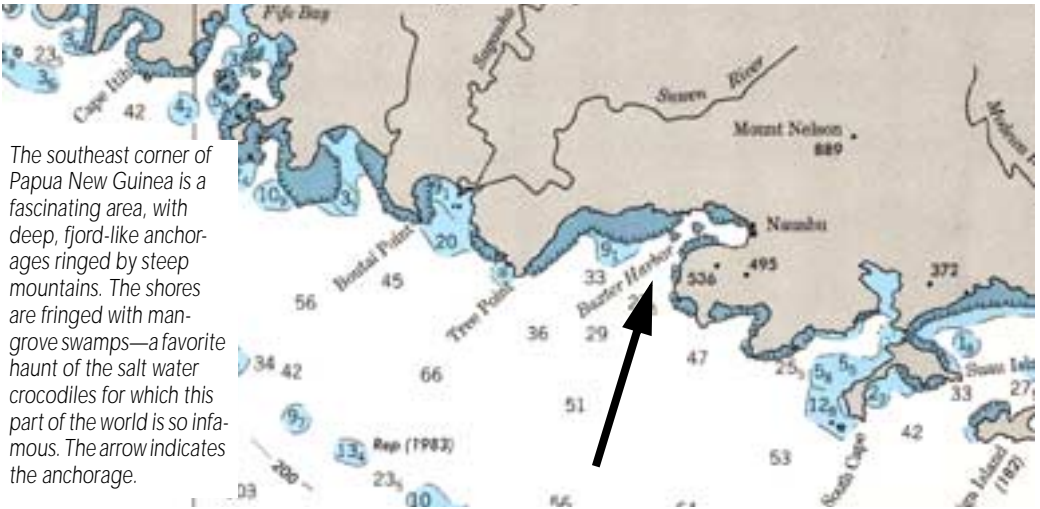
For the past six weeks in company with the Schmidts aboard *Win’Son* we have been exploring this rarely visited part of the world. We have been rewarded with both beautiful deserted anchorages and visits from primitive but friendly villagers. But now both crews are restless and looking forward to the big city, Port Moresby, a few hundred miles away, just around the corner. It is the end of April, the “official” hurricane season is about to close, and we are ready to move out of the “safe” area towards one frequented by typhoons in the Southern Hemisphere summer.

Although our cruising ground is exotic, the seasonal migration we are effecting is typical of that of cruising yachts all over the world. Most choose to travel to new areas outside of the hurricane belts during the summer. In the West Indies, people head for the Mediterranean or the eastern seaboard of the United States. South Pacific cruisers usually head for New Zealand. A few hardy souls stay in the tropics but spend much of their time anxiously listening to forecasts and keeping a weather eye on the local hurricane hole as they enjoy deserted anchorages.

As we make our turn to port a large cul-de-sac opens ahead; several deep-water streams emptying into the anchorage give promise of tasty mangrove oysters. We might even see one of the saltwater crocodiles for which this part of Papua New Guinea is famous.

The steep-sided channel is flanked by craggy cliffs and steep hills. Once inside we are confronted by a vast flat bowl with the cliffs receding into the background. As we look around, an eerie feeling overtakes us all.





The southeast corner of Papua New Guinea is a fascinating area, with deep, fjord-like anchorages ringed by steep mountains. The shores are fringed with mangrove swamps—a favorite haunt of the salt water crocodiles for which this part of the world is so infamous. The arrow indicates the anchorage.

## Something isn't right.

The lush jungle foliage of the entrance channel has given way to a semi-barren, contorted landscape. Instead of huge, brilliantly green trees draped with vines, we see broken and twisted stumps, uprooted giants thrown about at crazy angles. It looks like the set for a Grade B jungle horror movie.

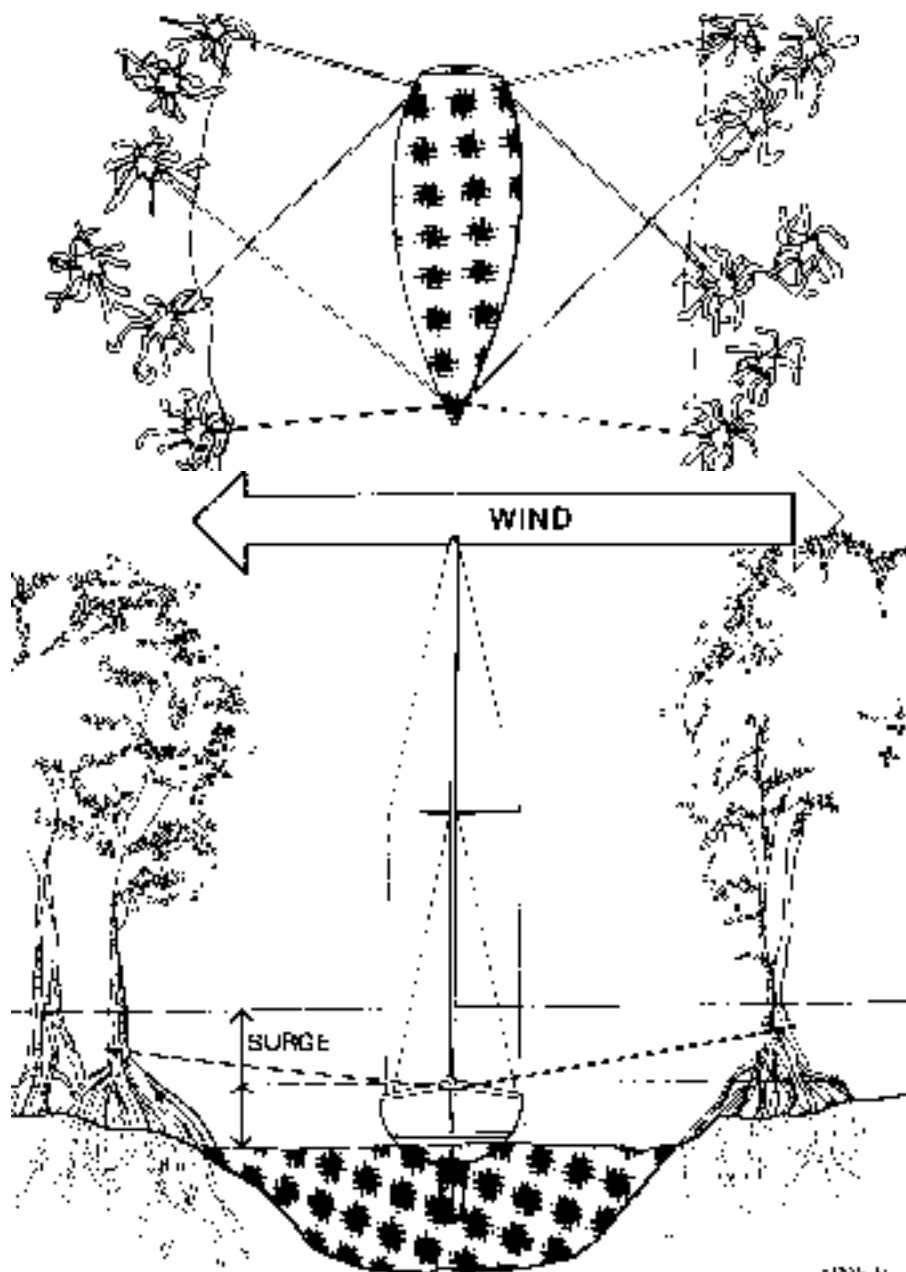
We drop the hook, get a good bite under power, and launch the dinghy. A short ride brings us to a landing, where we can scramble ashore and head for the local trading post. Linda is after some fresh bread, and I am hoping for a few tall tales. We are frankly curious. What we learn generates more unease than any horror story.

Two years previously there had been a 180-knot cyclone blow through the anchorage. Not only is this area considered outside the typical hurricane belt but that storm had occurred in June, well outside the Southern Hemisphere summer season. The storm had devastated the local crops, forests, and villages. The tale brings home most forcefully the fact that *hurricanes can happen almost anywhere, at any time of the year.*

The message is clear: never take for granted that you are fully safe from a major tropical storm. Of course, properly prepared, with a well-found yacht, in a secure anchorage, you can ride out a revolving storm with a minimum of trauma. The key is preparation and having the right gear aboard.

The best tropical protection from hurricanes will be found in the mangrove swamps, usually up a river or estuary. The trees deflect the wind above the surface, and their roots provide strong points from which the boat can be briddled. It is best to strip the boat of roller-furling sails, covers, and halyards, to reduce windage as much as possible.





The ideal situation in the mangroves is to bridle yourself between the edges of the river. Lines should be doubled up and heavily chafe protected. If you have short lengths of chain, use these to connect to the mangrove roots or around tree trunks to avoid chafe on the lines.

Allowance has to be made for storm surge. Try to get as many lines as possible led to winches before cleats. If you have to adjust during the height of the storm, it will be much easier to ease or tighten, if you are working with a winch rather than just a cleat.

And then once you are secure, sit back, relax, and try to stay cool. The odds are the storm will pass you by, if you are prepared.

### Where Do You Shelter?

If a tropical storm is imminent, your first decision is where to shelter. Consider the expected direction of the wind and any shifts, the height of water from flooding or storm surge, damage from flying debris, the number of other vessels in your anchorage, and the protection from wind and sea afforded by the surroundings.

When summer cruising where the possibility of a storm is present, it is always best to stay close to a “hurricane hole” and to have alternative harbors in mind in case traffic or weather makes getting to your first choice impractical.

Your best bet is to go up a river or creek or into a mangrove swamp. The close foliage will act as a windbreak and in many cases cause the worst of the storm to pass overhead. Second, there will be plenty of ways to tie the boat. Mangrove swamps are usually narrow enough for you to center the boat between the banks, tying off to the mangrove roots.

### Securing the Boat

Where each line you put out passes around a tree, lamppost, or even cleat (be sure the cleat is well secured), chafing gear must be employed. On board chafe must be watched as well. Chafe is more severe in one of these blows because the wind is unsteady, causing the nylon to stretch and contract. Any corners or rough surfaces will abrade it rapidly.

*When things don't go right: these boats all dragged ashore during one of the many West Indian hurricanes. However, for the most part they can be salvaged because no other boats landed on top of them. It is typically a case of pulling the boat off into deep water, and maybe do some rudder and keel repair.*

*If you are going to be in hurricane-prone areas, it pays to have substantial ground tackle.*





*These boats are all salvageable, once again as they've landed by themselves (although the rocky beach (above) and concrete sea wall (below) are less hospitable than a nicely sloped sand/or mud beach.*

*Note how the rudder of the bottom boat has lost the tip—which is good—rather than damage the entire rudder shaft.*



### Anchoring Considerations

If your only options are anchorages, look first at the amount of protection from the expected direction of the storm winds. Secondly, consider what you will do once the eye passes and the wind goes through its major shift. Normally you move to the next windward shore during the lull before the storm resumes. Is there sufficient protection there? (It is also important to know the lay of the anchorage so you can make the change in less than ideal light if necessary.)

Think about the bottom characteristics. Only the best holding will suffice in a true storm: hard mud or deep sand. We always checked holding by reversing at full throttle against a medium-sized anchor. If it holds, we are sure our big hooks will do well in the blow.

If it's likely that you'll have to share the anchorage with other boats, commercial or pleasure, it is important that you be in the best spot early. That may mean moving before an actual alert is given that danger is imminent. In many parts of the world the biggest risk in a blow is from other boats dragging or breaking free in crowded anchorages.

Many times a storm will be in your general region but too far away to cause damage. It may even be heading away from you. This can create a false sense of security. If it changes direction suddenly, within hours the clouds and rain that are usually on the fringes of a storm may make it impossible for you to move to your protected spot.

In storm conditions you should lay out two or three hooks. The main hook on chain should be left slack so that it only takes load when the rope rodes have stretched to their limit. Chafe at the stemhead must be watched carefully.

If the option exists, try to orient your boat's bow towards the expected worst direction of the wind. Remember that in gusts she may be heeling, perhaps almost on her beam ends. Is there room for your mast to clear other vessels or trees?

It takes lots of line to do a good job. Most experienced cruisers carry enormous quantities in the unlikely event they will need it. Aboard *Intermezzo II*



*This is so depressing we didn't want to use it in the book. But then we thought, "Hey, there's a good lesson here."*

*If you compare the landing place of this unfortunate vessel to the others you will see she had the misfortune of fetching up against a small rock cliff. With the waves slamming the boat against an immovable object like that, there isn't a hope, even with a metal boat.*

*Which brings us to the lesson: A major consideration for positioning the boat in a hurricane anchorage is what is the land like onto which the boat is likely to drag. Obviously it is better to look for a soft landing spot.*

we had a total of 1,200 feet of 3/4-inch nylon and 800 feet of 5/8-inch nylon for use as either rodes or securing lines. If we had been caught in a hurricane, you can bet every foot would have been used.

### On-Deck Preparation

Sails on booms, roller-furled canvas, even halyards, should be brought belowdecks to reduce windage and the chance of something getting free and causing damage. All hatches should be dogged and storm covers fitted. Dorades should be removed, and cockpit lockers sealed shut. Deck and cockpit drains must be clear and free running. More than one yacht has been sunk by *rain* in a tropical storm. If you expect flying debris, your storm shutters should be rigged.

After the storm hits, take bearings to ensure that you aren't dragging, and maintain a careful eye on the storm surge and flooding. If you are tied close to a dock or trees, the water's rise and fall will make line adjustment necessary.

Yachts in cyclone-prone areas such as Fiji and Guam have ridden out 200-plus-knot storms. The key is being prepared in advance and taking action to find shelter while our choice of adequate hurricane holes is best.

Being aboard a multihull at anchor during a hurricane raises a different set of issues. The basic problem that these designs inherently have a huge amount of windage in their structure, allow the wind to get underneath the bridge deck area, and are light in weight. The potential is there to get upside down (as shown in the photo below).

While conditions will vary between boats and with storm and wave development, there are several things to consider:

- Make sure the boat can maintain an into-the-wind attitude.
- Being tied to a dock, on only one side is riskier than it is with a monohull.
- Consider flooding the hulls to provide more stability.
- Can breast anchors or tie downs be set if the boat cannot weather-cock? These may help prevent capsize.
- It may be safer ashore than aboard.

