

courtesy of John and Sandy Heinrichs

THE MINERVA OPTION

The Road From Fiji To New Zealand

Includes A Stopover At An Unusual Sunken Atoll.

By
**JOHN
BEATTY**

John and Sandy take the whole village for a short cruise on Tiger to a beach picnic on Fulanga Island in the Lau Group.

WHEN JOHN AND SANDY HENRICHS STARTED MAKING SUMMER BOAT TRIPS FROM SEATTLE TO SOUTHEAST ALASKA IN THE 1990S,

the idea of finding safe harbor enclosed in a reef in the middle of the South Pacific never crossed their minds. Neither did taking a village of some 50 Fijians for a boat ride. Waiting to clear customs behind a U. S. Navy vessel was also far from their minds.

The Henrichs started coastal cruising in a Grand Banks, then moved on to a 60-foot Hatteras convertible named *Tiger*. In 2007 they decided to trade fast trips with many fuel stops for the economy and seakeeping ability of a true ocean-capable passagemaker. It took three years to get the new *Tiger* commissioned and ready to go. John and Sandy voyaged in this vessel from Mexico up the coast and, ultimately, across the Gulf of Alaska to Prince William Sound. Not many people do that trip in their own boat. What more could anyone ask for?

THE DASHEW FPB 64

The newest *Tiger*, the Dashew FPB 64 was the answer for Sandy and John Henrichs. The combination of fuel capacity, seakeeping ability, other factors related to construction, systems simplicity, reliability and redundancy allow for comfortable two-person operation of this unique vessel.

Consider the widely held belief that it takes a minimum of three people to safely cruise nonstop for more than a couple of days and nights. Having to arrange for a third crewmember to meet the boat in a jumping-off port like San Diego, Plymouth or Auckland adds another challenge to planning an otherwise flexible schedule. Who needs unnecessary complexity in cruising plans? But how can you comfortably make a multi-day open-ocean passage with just two people? Finding a seaworthy and safe boat, such as the FPB 64, does away with much of the worry about nasty weather and heavy seas.

Consistent displacement speed is a plus. Some long-range, trawler-style yachts need to start a long passage several knots below normal cruising speed in order to achieve their maximum range. Pushing the weight of a full fuel load across the water at speed increases fuel burn. The FPB 64's greater fuel capacity allows even longer passages at normal cruise speed. Remember, slowing from 10 knots to 7 is a decrease of 30 percent. This fuel economy also allows a skipper to put off buying fuel where it is expensive and perhaps go to the next stop, where diesel prices might be lower.

The ability to run downwind and down the front of sizable seas while staying on course is much more efficient than having to head into the weather to be safe and comfortable. In the unfortunate and unlikely eventuality that the seas get too big to surf and the ship gets sideways, the self-righting hull of the FPB 64 instills confidence in any world-cruising crew.

"I wish I could put into words the feeling of running the boat, gliding along the face of the larger swells so effortlessly without any feeling of the acceleration in speed," Henrichs says.

"Once, the max speed on the GPS ended up at 13 knots, but you would never know it sitting in the boat. I just couldn't get enough as we kept looking for the larger swells off in the distance, hoping they would catch us and let us experience more surfing. Our boat feels so slippery, and once the large swells move towards the boat, off it goes straight as an arrow

sliding along the face of the swell, just like a surfer finding the perfect wave. Now, Sandy and I both look at a 500-mile nautical passage like crossing the street. The boat doesn't tire you out."

Like almost all ocean-going powerboats, the FPB 64 is stabilized with active fins. Roll is well controlled. Pitch is another concern. In many popular trawler-style designs, the hull is wide to increase interior living space. For the same space reason, the vessels are sometimes tall. Riding upwind and over swells on a wide-body trawler means pitching. While the FPB is not a wave-piercing vessel, the hull is narrow to effectively minimize pitch. What good is lots of space in a beamy boat if you are stuck in port because you would not be comfortable at sea?

Basing their new boat in Whangerai, New Zealand, where she was built, this lucky couple has found adventure after adventure in the South Pacific. Here are just three of them:

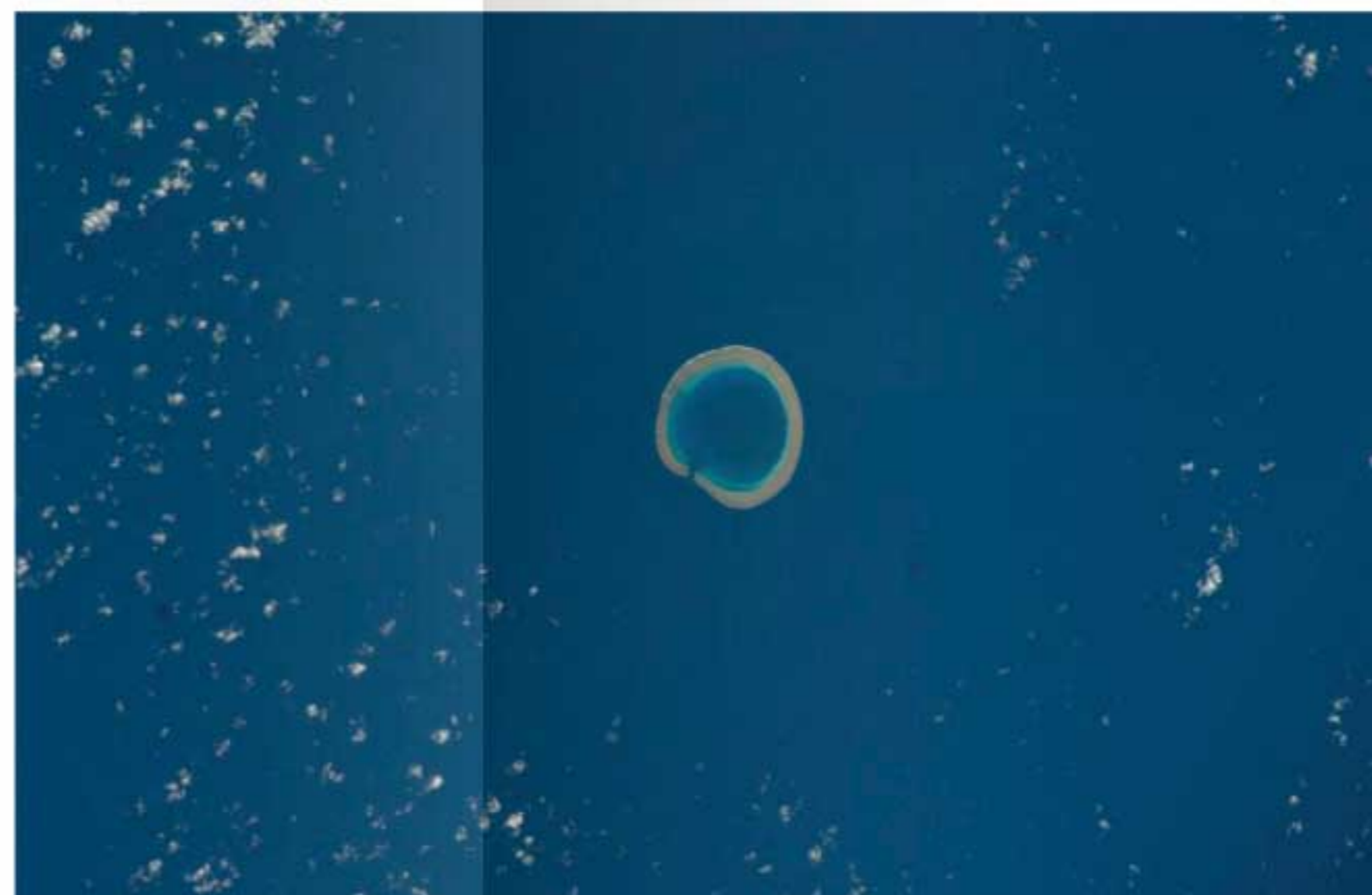
A REMOTE PLACE

On their first trip to Fiji, the Henrichs visited Musket Cove Yacht Club and became lifetime members. Joining the club is both easy and difficult. The easy part is coming up with the membership fee: one Fijian dollar for the captain and five for each crewmember. The hard part is meeting the only requirement to join: You must arrive in Fiji on your boat from another country.

Cruising in Fiji offered places to see and things to do that are found nowhere else in the world. One place high on John's and Sandy's list was the Lau Group. They made the 200-mile overnight trip from Savusavu to the Island of Fulanga at the southern end of the Lau Group. Sailors around the world have reported this island to be one of the most beautiful places they have ever seen. The island has only four villages, none with electricity, running water, roads or communications with the outside world. There is no regular supply boat and, of course, no airport.

Until a few years ago, this island group saw only two or three cruising boats each year, due to the \$1,000 permit fee and difficulty obtaining the proper permits. In 2012, the Fijian government relaxed cruising permits, and record numbers of boats are now visiting the Lau Group. *Tiger* was boat number 38 for the year, with a few more expected before the end of the cruising season.

This group of islands is surrounded by a very large reef system, which has one small opening of just over 100 feet wide and 14 feet deep, where boats enter the lagoon. Passage



This is what Minerva Reef looks like from space. Note the opening into the lagoon and anchorage. Many passagemakers find shelter here en route to and from New Zealand. John and Sandy Henrichs wearing the same tee shirts that were given to the customs officials in Tonga.

through the reef needs to be on an incoming tide, close to slack water. During the outgoing tide, the waves break at the entrance, making the passage risky. Always the conservative pilot, John brought *Tiger* in at the right time, slowly and carefully. During *Tiger's* time anchored at the Island of Fulanga, a 120-foot sailboat entered the lagoon a couple degrees off course. She hit the reef, turned around and didn't make another attempt to enter.

Once in the protected bay, John and Sandy secured *Tiger* and made the short trek to the village for the sevusevu (presentation of a gift to the chief). This ceremony is very serious and a big part of Fijian culture. The Henrichs presented the chief with a pound of kava root. Upon the chief's acceptance of this gift, the Henrichs were officially granted permission to be a part of the village and allowed to fish, dive and explore anywhere on the island.

After a few days of exploring both above and below the pristine waters, the Henrichs were invited to join the whole village for a picnic at a remote beach. One of the elders asked if they could take a few of the children to the beach on *Tiger*, because the village boat couldn't carry everybody who wanted to attend. No problem. The Henrichs agreed to have the village boat drop off a few children at nine the next morning for a fun-filled day.

Right on time, the first small boatload of kids and adults arrived at the boat. The leader of the group asked if the Henrichs could wait for a few more people. In the end, they had close to 50 people aboard *Tiger*. Fortunately, it was a short trip in calm water. They enjoyed a lunch of delicious fruit and very fresh fish cooked on the beach.

At four in the afternoon, most of the villagers went back



on *Tiger*, leaving the village's boat driver with very few passengers. The accompanying photograph doesn't show everyone who was aboard *Tiger*, because a lot of the ladies wanted to visit Sandy in the galley. John let the children steer the boat as time allowed, drawing priceless smiles on their faces. He taught the men to steer the boat using the autopilot controls. They couldn't believe they were actually controlling the heading using the knobs and not the steering wheel.

THE CHIEF'S KAVA

There were more visits to the village in the next few days, but finally the Henrichs' time in this lovely spot was ending.

"We wanted to visit the village one more time to say goodbye to some of our friends," Henrichs says. "As we approached the village, one of the young girls came running, shouting, 'Sandy and John, the chief wants you now!' We proceeded to the chief's house. He was sitting inside on the floor in front of a kava bowl. He asked us to sit next to him and drink kava." This is a great honor because the chief normally keeps to himself and doesn't visit with outsiders very often.

"We ended up staying several hours and learned the chief is one of the last Fijians who had built the large ocean-going canoes that traveled around the islands over 50 years ago." He is now 87, looks healthy and is definitely the man in charge.

"Around six that evening, it was time to say goodbye. Everyone came out of their homes to give us a big hug with lots of tears. Back at the boat, we thought it was all over, but when we woke up the next morning, we saw all the children on the beach singing to us. We pulled the anchor up, took the boat as close to shore as possible, gave a very long blast on the horn and walked to the bow to wave our final goodbye

to everyone. It was a very emotional moment for both of us.”

At the end of the last cruising season, the Henrichs were waiting for weather in Fiji. Finally, they got a forecast for a fairly easy trip from both of their weather routers. But a few hours after leaving port, John got a call from the routers. The forecast for arrival at the New Zealand town of Whangarei had changed. It would be a rough passage for the last part of the trip. To avoid a bumpy ride, they could either slow down 3 knots from normal cruising speed and proceed to New Zealand, or turn back to Fiji and wait a few days for better conditions.

Extremely slow cruising seemed like torture after being able to cruise at 10 knots or more. It would add almost two more days to a four-day voyage. Going back to Fiji was not palatable, either. They had seen enough of this part of the South Pacific for this voyage and wanted to get back to New Zealand.

MINERVA DETOUR

There was third option to consider. They could change course slightly and head toward a spot 400 miles south southeast of Fiji and 200 southwest of Tonga, called Minerva Reef. There they could hole up for a few days while the destination weather calmed down.



Obviously it is easier to raise an island that is mountainous. If a place is so low that at times it is under water... well, you better have a very good idea where the island is in order to raise, or locate, it. Minerva Reef presented exactly that kind of a problem. With the aid of GPS, John and Sandy raised Minerva Reef.

They arrived at the lagoon's single entry point at 1000. It was high tide, so no land showed. Their charted location agreed with the sonar presentation. They entered dead slow and had to increase the range on the sonar to see the bottom. It was 100 feet deep. The depth came up to 40 feet, and they were in. They were the only ones there.

Within the next two days, 13 more boats arrived, all from Tonga en route to New Zealand, and all waiting for weather. *Tiger* spent three days at Minerva Reef. At high tide, when the natural reef breakwater disappeared, it was a little bumpy from the swells, but not bad. The poor weather conditions at the reef did not lend themselves to beach walks and barbecues. All John and Sandy did was check the local wind forecast and move *Tiger* to the part of the lagoon that would be in the lee and have smoother water.

When the New Zealand weather forecast improved, the Henrichs left Minerva Reef, expecting light head winds all the way back. The wind turned out to be much stronger and took some of the smoothness out of this last leg. They traveled the 800 miles in just over three days. The onboard comments: "Our boat rode great. Even crashing into the head seas and taking lots of green water over the bow, the ride was fine and the off-watch crew slept comfortably."

When they were about 60 miles from New Zealand, John got a call from a sailboat crew who saw *Tiger's* Automatic Identification System (AIS) and couldn't believe they were doing 9.8 knots. John said, "We normally do 10, but due to the head winds and head seas, we had slowed down a little." John talked to some sailors after they reached Whangarei. They had been at sea for between nine and 13 days, making the same trip from Minerva Reef. They had to tack and couldn't make much progress. Some sailors said they made only 2 knots average over a 48-hour period.

WHAT NEXT?

The Henrichs' original plan was to cruise the New Zealand, Tonga and Fiji area for one season and then bring the boat back to Seattle. As this story is being written, they are flying back to New Zealand, where they were to remain until May. Then it is back to their "adventures in paradise" for another season.

"If we ever come back (and we will)," Henrichs says, "we plan on heading back along the Western Pacific via Japan, Russia and the Aleutian Chain. We could leave *Tiger* in Cordova, Alaska, for one winter while we fly home and then come back up for a summer in our old cruising grounds off the coast of Alaska and British Columbia." ■



If one was to have a potluck on the "beach" at Minerva Reef, the dinghies would have to serve as tables and no one would have dry shoes. Hence it's almost an island but not quite.

Note here that Minerva is called a reef. In some cases an atoll is defined as a small island that forms on a reef. But an island is always above water. Minerva is not an island because it is only dry and visible at low tide.

In early seafaring times, the term raise a destination meant to find it. Raise referred to the perspective of a watch stander looking at the horizon. If an island came into view, the tallest point showed first, and as the vessel got closer, the rest of the land mass appeared to rise out of the water.