

2010 Travelogue 2 - New Zealand, yet again

(NOTE: Some photos, along with this report, can be found at www.syanna-kellywright.com.)

My last travelogue concluded with us having just checked out of Tauranga, New Zealand and sailing towards Tonga. Subsequently that passage to Tonga was interrupted by bad weather, we were knocked around, and we have returned to New Zealand to make repairs to the boat.

The first couple of days out of Tauranga we had little wind and had to motorsail. Ultimately the wind filled and we were able turn off the motor (although we have two motors - one in each hull - we only use one at a time when motorsailing) and we were quite content finally to be leaving NZ for the tropics under full sail. Soon the wind shifted from the West to the

Northeast, however, which was the direction we were headed, and built up to a bit over 30 knots, and we began crashing into every larger headseas. In the cockpit as darkness was setting in, Glen and I were wearing our wet-weather gear, enjoying the ride, patting one another on the back, telling one another what a good job we were doing and how well Anna was cutting through the mounting headseas, and how lucky we were.

Soon thereafter a big wave smashed into the starboard bow and knocked the trampoline net loose. On inspection we found the force and weight of the wave had torn the track to which the tramp attaches completely off the compression spar (which runs fore and aft from the middle of the crossbeam back to the bridgedeck), but the tramp was still held on three sides. We changed course to keep the seas from ripping the tramp away entirely, and based on the forecast of a reduction in the wind, decided to wait for light

the next morning before attempting repair. We did not want to lose ground in our passage to Tonga so we hove-to, which is a method for setting a sail to work against the rudder so that the boat sits fairly still, drifting slowly backwards, the seas hitting the bow at an angle. The next morning arrived with still mounting seas and winds - the forecast was wrong --and the waves irregular due to the shifting direction of the wind, but we were able to lace the tramp around the compression spar without difficulty. However, because we were comfortable hove-to, we decided just to wait out the weather and continue as we were until more favorable conditions prevailed.

In case conditions worsened, we got out our sea anchor and determined how best to deploy it, which we had never done before. A sea anchor is to use when all else fails and you are at sea, far from shallows where you can drop steel anchors to stick in the sea floor. Instead of metal, a sea anchor is a parachute of reinforced fabric that when opened in the water serves to hold the nose of the boat into the oncoming waves and allows the boat to hold its position with a bit of stern way (that is, movement backwards).

Our sea anchor is 21.3 feet (6.5 metres) in diameter, and the entire

setup comes in three heavy bags, including 558 feet (170 metres) of 3/4 inch (20mm) line and a 131 feet (40 metres) long bridle that attaches to each bow.

The next day passed comfortably enough for us, lying around in the pilothouse, napping, reading, but the winds shifted back to the Northwest and built to over 40 knots - the high was 48 knots - and the seas kept getting larger and larger. It was quite interesting watching them and observing how well Anna responded, riding gently over the breaking crests and down into the valleys, with the wind blowing the tops off the waves, spume shooting almost horizontally. We congratulated ourselves on how well our boat was handling the conditions, and how comfortable we were. Every now and then, however, a big wave would break right on top of us and crash into Anna beam on, knocking us around, spilling all the books from the bookshelves, knocking the dinghy off its chocks on the aft deck, and making a huge roar. It is always difficult to estimate the height of waves from inside a bobbing boat, but our mast rises about 75 feet (23 meters) from the waterline, and it appeared from my vantage point in the pilothouse that the highest waves were approaching half the height of the mast. They were the biggest seas I have ever been in, I think, and quite irregular, coming from several directions.

I suppose it must have been one of those big crashing waves that jerked the rudders in such a way that the steering cables came off, and we were left without steering. It was getting dark, around 1700 (5 p.m.) and I had just gotten off watch and was down in my berth when John informed me that we had no steering, and the rudders were thrashing around madly in the rudder compartments. The starboard rudder had broken its safety line and was totally out of control, even dangerous to try to tame. We stuck the emergency tiller into the head of the rudder post, but the force of the seas slapped it against the bulkhead and broke the tiller in two. Moreover, working in the confined space of the rudder compartments in the thrashing seas was making everyone seasick.

With night approaching we determined to deploy the sea anchor and lie safely to it overnight, and hope for better conditions the following day. We followed instructions and led all lines outboard but deployment was made much more difficult because we had no steering and the deck light did not work (we had just changed the bulb a couple of months earlier). Somehow in the course of the boat fetching up on the sea anchor rode, the starboard bridle line went strongly to port and then in straightening snapped three stanchions. I don't know how it happened - perhaps we fell into the trough of a big wave - but our unfamiliarity with the deployment of the sea anchor certainly did not make matters any easier. For our lack of practice with the sea anchor I, as skipper, have only myself to blame.

Things settled down after that and we rode to the sea anchor all night. The next day the winds dropped to around 30 knots and we attempted again to get the rudders under control. The port one proved no great problem and we were able to lash it to some eye bolts. The starboard one, though, had turned almost a full circle and the rudder had become stuck, wedged against the bottom of the hull. Try as we might, we could not get it to budge. We determined that our only chance of forcing the rudder into its proper

fore-and-aft position was to employ both motors full speed ahead and hope the power of the seas would knock it back into alignment. We first had to retrieve the sea anchor, a process that took about an hour and, because we could not motor with any accuracy, ultimately required us throwing a grapnel over its retrieval line and float before we could haul it all aboard. We found that some of the parachute's stitching had come undone and that a shroud had come loose.

With the sea anchor and lines secured on deck, we then put both engine throttles down and motored away. Soon the drag of the seawater caused the errant starboard rudder to realign itself, and we were able to reattach the cables to the quadrants (more precisely, radial drives), then reattach the autopilot, which we had earlier removed for fear of damage, and the rudder sensor, which had been ripped from the shelf where it bolts on.

The starboard rudder shivered and made noises but responded to our steering commands, both manual and through the autopilot, and the port rudder seemed not affected at all. The starboard radial drive was damaged, both warped about an inch and a fitting on it broken off where we attached a line in a vain effort to get it under control. Several bolts, attachment rods, and sheave brackets were bent or cracked. The steering cable was kinked and a couple of sharp strands now protruded. The autopilot made new noises and leaked fluid. The port radial drive was warped even more seriously than the starboard one. The cog on the outside helm in the cockpit was not operating properly. The trampoline track was still broken away on one side and only lashed on, the navigational light where the big waves were hitting no longer worked with rust from it staining the hull, and we had three broken stanchions and loose lifelines. With all that damage we determined that we best return to New Zealand, some 275 nm away, and make repairs there rather than carry on to Tonga where repair would be many times more difficult, if not impossible.

So over the course of several days we sailed and motored back to Auckland, where Anna had never been before, checked in again with NZ Customs and Immigration, and began the slow process of organizing repairs. We determined early that it would be best to haul Anna to ensure that the rudder was in good order, and thought hauling in Auckland would be an easy matter, but it turned out that was our greatest hurdle, with our 28.5 ft. (8.53 metre) beam being the limiting factor. There was no travelift wide enough and the one slipway with a trailer that could take us was closed for repairs for three months. No one else could handle us, other than commercial yards that service ships and large fishing boats and they wouldn't consider us except in an emergency. Finally we located a slipway where, about 10 days after our arrival, we came in at high tide, tied off to pylons, and waited for low tide when a tractor/trailer rig from a boat hauling company moved into place - carefully keeping its hydraulic-operated trailer out of the water -- and loaded us, then moved us 100 feet or so up onto a slab where we were set down and braced.

I was in contact with my family during the long interim before haulout, and my gutsy daughter, Emily, eager to see New Zealand but with only a week before the summer term at her university, impulsively flew over with just 20 hours notice, and she and I toured around as much as the short time

frame allowed. On the Coromandel Peninsula a few hours to the East of Auckland, we were stuck an extra day due to the road being closed by flooding as a result of torrential rains. But we had a truly wonderful time together, she got to meet some great Kiwis and see the beautiful scenery, and after a week, she flew back to the States. I've had several great trips alone with my sons before, but this was the first alone with my daughter.

After hauling onto land, we began the tedious job of deconstructing Anna, removing the starboard rudder for inspection, taking out the autopilot ram for servicing, untying the trampoline net and removing both the compression spar and even the main crossbeam so that new, improved tracks could be attached properly in a shop, rather than in the almost constantly rainy weather at the boat. We also disassembled the radial drives, the sheave brackets and steering cable in the rudder compartments, and the helm in the cockpit binnacle.

We have not had any major issues with the way the boat itself was built, as Alwoplast in Chile, the boatbuilder, has done a fantastic job overall. On the other hand we have had several issues with the spars (masts and booms, etc.) provided by the sparmaker, King Composites, a British firm with a factory in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The tramp/net track is a good example: the tracks that the boatbuilder built into the hulls are outstanding, but the tracks the sparmaker built into the compression spar and the crossbeam are poorly designed and built with the wrong materials and some poor workmanship. On disassembling the crossbeam and compression spar, we noticed that there was a good bit of rust around the several stainless steel fittings (anchor roller, etc.), which is surprising for a boat just a year old. We removed the fittings and discovered that, for the most part, the fittings had not been bedded with a sealant so that water could migrate behind them and begin the rust process. We have also suffered the main batt-car track pulling loose from the mast, and severe chafe problems: two main halyards, about 8 main reef lines, and both headsail reef lines have all had to be replaced. And the wiring for the lights in the mast (deck lamp and steaming light) must be bad as they have failed now twice in the first year.

We are now awaiting technicians to correct the poorly made trampoline tracks on the two spars, and finish the metal work on the steering system before we can reassemble. I think that we will be back in the water in about ten days.

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