



SAFE HARBOR

in New Ireland

Words & Photos: Dani Smith

Top 10

Cruising Destinations

After 10 years of sailing our charter catamaran *Tiki Tu* out of Kavieng, New Ireland, and around the Tigak Islands, the Tsoi Islands and the islands surrounding Lavongai, I confidently proposed putting together this list of our top 10 favourite anchorages for the benefit of PNG boating enthusiasts. The task, however, proved harder than I ever imagined. The area has so many wonderful anchorages, and, best of all, in our experience they are safe. New Irelanders are a very welcoming and hospitable people and the further away from the main centres you sail, the more unique and genuinely friendly your hosts will be. These 10 anchorages really *are* our favourites but, rest assured, there are another 50 sitting hot on their heels!



A map showing some of the best cruising destinations of New Ireland

1. Nusalomon Is

Only a short sail from Kavieng, this is an excellent anchorage on most winds, except for strong SE due to the uncomfortable wind chop created in these conditions. The entrance is clear and the surrounding reef is easily distinguishable from the white sandy bottom, which has excellent holding. There is a bommie almost in the centre of the anchorage but it sits deep in about 7m of water. We normally drop anchor just inside of the bommie in about 3m and this gives good swinging space.

“...Sitting on the deck in the late afternoon or evening you will always spot turtles...”

Highlights: It's just so bloody beautiful! And, sitting on the deck in the late afternoon or evening you will always spot turtles. The squid fishing



here is phenomenal! We usually only squid fish during the day and here the squid like to shelter in the shade under the catamaran. Quite often we sail in here and there are massive schools of baitfish that sit in close to shore in only a metre or so of water. Super fun to snorkel with! The snorkelling on the reef in the north of the bay, and also all the way along the eastern edge of the island to the south of the anchorage, is excellent. Both are easy snorkelling locations and accessible straight off the yacht. There is loads of colour on the

reefs and plenty of fish, with the south side being deeper and a little more cavernous. Allow plenty of time to explore. On the island, there are relics from WWII. Nestled among the very small community is a bunker and on the west side of the island you can see the remains of trenches, big cannons, and a well-preserved 'spy house' – as the kids call it! The island is long and skinny and a walk to the southern point takes you through some surprisingly varying flora. The sandy point is picturesque as well as being a secluded swimming spot looking



west past Lemus Is to Lavongai, south through the Tigak Islands, and east to Kavieng.

The small family group that lives here is quiet and understated, and never intrusive. A couple of the young men will occasionally come to the yacht early in the evening to let you know they are going diving for kindam (crayfish) to see if you would like any – which we usually do. They have a set price per cray and sometimes you'll be lucky enough to score slipper lobsters as well.

2. Kabotteron Is

Just to the south of Nusalomon there are a few spots to drop the pick, depending on the wind conditions. The west side of Kabotteron has good protection during the SE winds in about 3m of water on a white sandy bottom. Then, just in from the SW corner of the island in front of the couple of houses is a great spot with excellent holding in nearly all but the rare strong SW winds. Here we anchor quite close in to shore in about 5m with

a sandy bottom.

Highlights: This island's topography is really interesting as it is almost like the shape of a donut, with the centre of the island being mangrove, and yes, you guessed it, mud crab central! If you ask, anyone will go fetch you some mud crabs and we usually pay K10-K15 a pop. The community on this island is fantastic, and super welcoming and friendly. The kids will come walking with you and give you a tour of the island, which includes some raised limestone caves up near the NW corner, where Japanese soldiers are said to have hidden during the war. Make sure you wear shoes or sandals! The rocks are sharp as hell but you won't want to miss climbing down into the caves. The kids run around on the rocks with bare feet and the fact they don't cut their feet to shreds simply defies logic! The walk with the kids continues along the north side of the island then heads in through the central mangrove area, back west through an old coconut plantation, and

Children on Ungalik Is



to the main village area on the west side. This is a really pretty village with huge flame trees, different species of frangipani, orchids, bananas, starfruit and papaw trees, and hibiscus in every conceivable colour, neatly set out with



Picture a small private island, with a white sandy beach, tall palm trees, beautiful flowers, magnificent sunsets, traditional and comfy bungalows and fine food. Surrounding this little hideaway are some of the most colourful reefs, best fish life and awesome surf breaks this planet has to offer....

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hedges between the predominantly traditionally-built homes. It's kind of a long walk so take a bottle of water or ask the kids to climb a coconut tree to get some kulau (coconut water).

In the water there is huge diversity in colour, and I liken the reef on the SW tip of the island to a botanical garden, with many distinctly different sections. One area of the reef is a huge anemone colony, with what must be thousands of anemonefish in every colour and size. Be prepared to see sharks here too, both black and white-tipped reef sharks. The water clarity is generally excellent as good currents run past this SE tip of the island.

3. Ungan Is

Literally the next island to the west of Kabotteron, little Ungan Is is another of our favourites within the Tigak Island Group. Like most of the islands in the area, the reef extends around the northern side. Here the best anchorage is on the west side but it is strictly for catamarans only, as we anchor in only 1.5m of water, with white sandy bottom. Often in lighter winds the current through here will be stronger and will take control of the yacht but holding is good. If you are in a vessel with deeper draft you can just anchor further out in deeper water but you will be more exposed to the winds.

Highlights: The reef that juts out from the west side of the island just north of the anchorage is one of the best drift snorkelling spots in New Ireland. You need to time it with the current and have someone in a dinghy ready to pick you up at the other end but the sheer number of fish on this reef and the diversity in sizes and colours is unbelievable. The village and community on Ungan is only small but always seems to have something going on, whether it be weaving of pandanus mats, harvesting copra, making saksak (sago palm) roofing or smoking fish. The village chairwoman is Julie and she lives near the SW corner of the island where the majority of the village lives.



New Ireland-coconut plantation

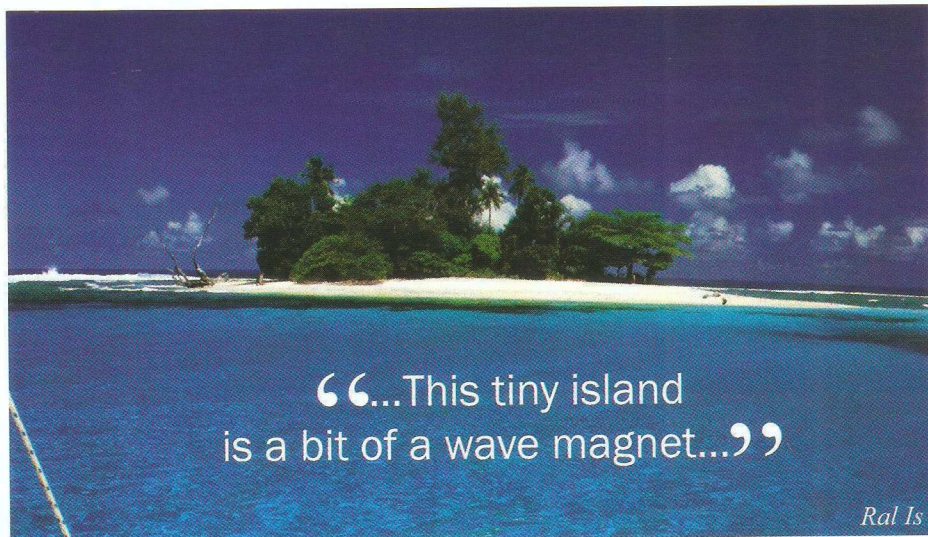
4. Ral Is

Only 5nm from Kavieng Harbour, this tiny island is a perfect spot to "hang" during the day but is not recommended for an overnight anchorage due to lack of protection from the wind and a minimal swinging area. The reef almost encompasses the entire island, leaving only a small wedge to anchor on the south side. It is fine in all winds provided it is relatively calm. Anchoring is done on sand in anything from 2-6m depending on how close to the reef you are comfortable with. The white sand patch on the south side rises up out of deep water, looks moonscape in its appearance and has good holding.

Highlights: Famous as a surfing destination within New Ireland, this tiny island is a bit of a wave magnet and boasts both a right and left-hander, with the right being more consistent

“...If you are looking for that dreamy deserted tropical island then this is the one...”

and wrapping all the way around the reef. It's a great spot to sit on the yacht, waiting for the conditions to be perfect, then just paddle on over to the break.



“...This tiny island is a bit of a wave magnet...”

Ral Is



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Tiki Tu anchored off Ungalik Is

The island itself is only a bit bigger than a tennis court so if you are looking for that dreamy deserted tropical island then this is the one. It is popular on Sundays or public holidays as a picnic spot for the local crew but the rest of the time you'll have it all to yourself. Below the water, and outside of the surf season, Ral is also an excellent snorkelling spot with good visibility and variety. We often see sharks here as well as turtles and stingrays and there are always plenty of parrotfish and cuttlefish. Fishing is usually good on the approach to Ral Is

but the island is also a designated dive site so we never fish from the yacht while anchored here.

5. Tsoi Launung Is

We leave the Tigak Islands now and head west through Senta Pass and into Ysabel Pass to the bottom of the Tsoi Island Chain. This is another "catamaran only" anchorage as the approach is very

shallow and has a scattering of bommies. We anchor down near the southern end of Tsoi Launung where there is a long sandy spit that extends from the island. The anchorage is nicely protected from any kind of chop due to the sand spit and surrounding reef. We head in towards the sandy spit and line ourselves up with the crack between Tsoi Launung and Nusankelo Islands, anchoring in about 3m.

Highlights: This place is just stunningly beautiful and peaceful – the perfect spot to watch the sun set over Lavongai. We find we stop here quite a lot purely for the tranquillity of it all, to swim off the sand spit with its powder-fine white sand and turquoise water, and explore the narrow channel between Tsoi Launung and Nusankelo islands. There is a pretty little village not far from the anchorage and you will see plenty of outriggers dotted out in the waters of Ysabel Pass. Being that little bit further away from Kavieng now, you will find people from the villages will come out to the yacht asking if you have any rice or flour or sugar, and will usually want to trade it with papaws, bananas, pumpkins, beans, and if you're lucky, some freshly smoked fish. We also have a lot of requests for spears (cigarettes) and fishing hooks, sinkers and line.

6. Mosuang Is, Lavongai

At the other end of Ysabel Pass, close to the larger island of Lavongai (New Hanover) is Mosuang. Anchoring is done on the western side of the island in 10m, quite close to the island, in good mud holding. There aren't any stray bommies or obstructions and the channel between Mosuang and Lavongai is also clear. Mosuang has excellent shelter during both the NW monsoon period, if you sit in close to the island, as well as during the SE trades. The island is uninhabited.

Highlights: This is rather simple. Every time I have ever snorkelled here, there are always turtles. Friendly turtles. Lots of them. The reef is also excellent in its own right, with good clear water



despite being in close to Lavongai with its many rivers.

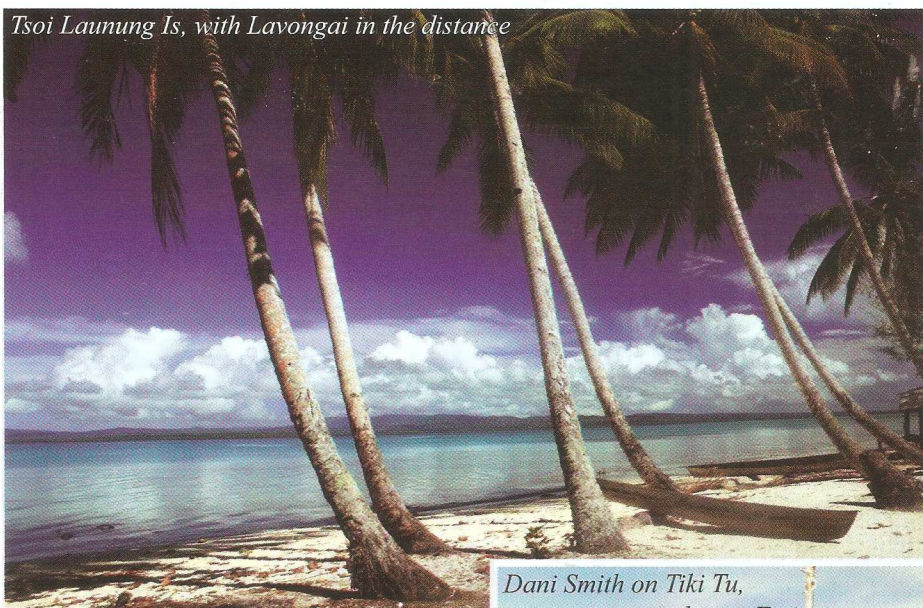
Another nice feature about this island is, despite it being uninhabited, you will get a visit from the kids from the village of Tsulikava, over on Lavongai. They will see your yacht from the village, jump in the canoes and pop over to say hi, as it is such a rare treat for them. They rarely bring anything to trade and they have never asked us for anything. They just want to practice their English and have a paddle around the yacht. Tsulikava is very different from the villages on the islands through the Tigaks or the Tsois so a trip over in the dinghy to have a look around is well worth it. If you arrive at the right time you will be showered with pineapples, which they have growing alongside the pathways through the village.

7. Unusa Is, Lavongai

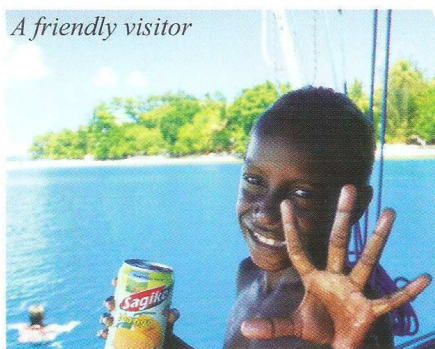
Only a few nautical miles along the Lavongai coast to the west is tiny Unusa Is, which sits so closely to the coast it is connected by a land bridge. This creates two little bays on both the west and east sides of the island that make great little anchorages. Our preference, mainly due to the general weather conditions, is the one on the west side. Entry is very simple and easily defined. The water right up to the land bridge is about 8m deep, the bottom is mud with superior sticky holding and there are no underwater obstructions.

Highlights: A short dinghy ride away you can head up the Mosse River

Tsoi Launung Is, with Lavongai in the distance

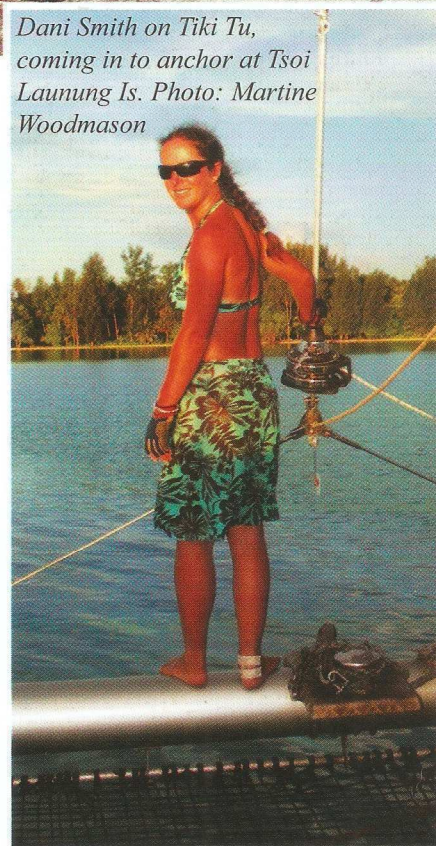


A friendly visitor

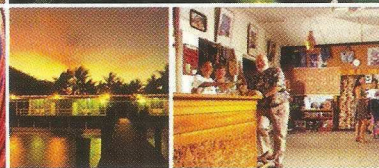
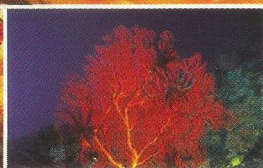


where there are a couple of small villages that are incredibly interesting to visit. You feel as though you have stepped back in time in some respects as the people here are truly living as they have for generations. The river itself is very pretty, with overhanging sago palms, big raintrees and loads of birdlife, interspersed with the traditional housing of the villages and singing children. If you can snag it, try to go up in a traditional canoe instead of your

Dani Smith on Tiki Tu, coming in to anchor at Tsoi Launung Is. Photo: Martine Woodmason



ONLY 20 MINUTES FROM PORT MORESBY'S JACKSONS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

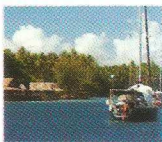


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Korongai, or the Gas Chambers to the surfing crowd, Vala Vala Bay



dinghy as the whole experience will be enhanced without the noise of the outboard. Back at the anchorage the very small family community on Unusa is unfailingly welcoming and friendly. As soon as you drop the anchor they will be out to visit you. Given the distance from the closest shops (Kavieng, about 35nm away), they will want to trade with you. Rice, flour, sugar, biscuits, two-minute noodles, fishing hooks and spears (cigarettes) are the main things. If you are fully stocked up on all the pumpkins and papaws you can possibly handle, you could ask someone if they could get you some squid. The men on Unusa will fish at night from the land bridge and deliver the squid to you in the morning. But be prepared. Make sure you specify how many squid you want – the first time they offered to get squid for us we ended up with about 5kg!

8. Vala Vala Bay, Lavongai

Another 6nm to the west of Unusa is Vala Vala Bay on mainland Lavongai. In the middle of the entry to the bay is a section of reef and you can enter on either side, although the eastern side is wider and deeper at about 14m. You can continue into the bay as far as you feel comfortable as it levels off at about 3m. The western end has some scattered bommies close to the fringing reef but the water here is not clear due to the rivers that flow into it, so drop the pick in the middle somewhere and you will

“...If you surf, then you’ll be within paddling distance of two of the most consistent breaks in the region...”

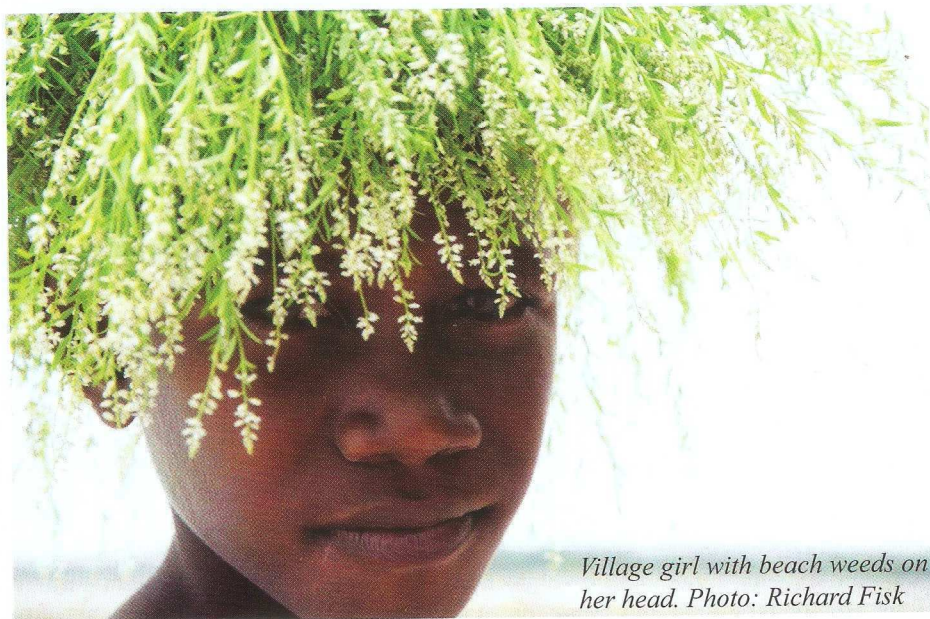
be as good as gold. This anchorage is protected in all conditions except for a strong directly northerly wind. Holding is excellent in mud.

Highlights: Quiet, peaceful, safe and stunningly beautiful with the rainforest-covered mountains of Lavongai spread out right in front of you. Oh, and if you surf, then you will be within paddling distance of two of the most consistent breaks in the region. The reef in the middle of the entry to the bay is Korongai (‘Step on Blood’ in local tok ples), and also known as Gas Chambers by the surfing crowd, or more recently referred to as The Slab. There is hardly a ‘crowd’ to speak of out here though, as the Niu Ailan Surfriders Alliance (NASA) oversees a Surf Management Plan in this region that keeps the number of visiting surfers to a sustainable level during peak season. Korongai is fast, heavy, machine-like, and a guaranteed coverup for those willing to partake. The other break is Uvanai on the eastern entry to the bay. This is a little more sedate but loads of fun, suitable for both short and longboards, and very, very consistent. There are also other breaks

within a short dinghy ride of Vala Vala Bay. For more details on surfing in this region visit the Niu Ailan Surfriders Alliance website at: www.surfingpng-newireland.org.pg

9. Ungalik Is, Lavongai

Literally a stone’s throw from Vala Vala Bay is Ungalik Is, lying just offshore northern Lavongai opposite the Manatalava River. There are two spots to anchor here. The one on the south side of the island is protected to all winds other than a strong westerly. Depth between mainland Lavongai and Ungalik Island is pretty level at about 10m and we normally sit in quite close to shore in 6-7m. Approaching from the east there is a small isolated reef just south of the SE tip of Ungalik so you need to give a wide berth then turn into the anchorage once you have the steeple of the church on your starboard beam. The other anchorage is on the eastern side and we normally drop the pick here if there is anything with a bit of west in it, or if the surf is pumping and you want to keep an eye on it. There is a fringing reef on the east side, easily distinguished, as well as an isolated reef less than 100m to the east. We drop the anchor in the pocket between the outside reef and the fringing reef in about 5m but you can drop anywhere south of this, it just gets a little deeper. Holding in both spots is excellent in mud.



Village girl with beach weeds on her head. Photo: Richard Fisk

“...The children make this island such a joy to visit and I can honestly say most of our guests would name this their favourite anchorage too, for the same reason...”

Highlights: This is the island community that pretty much made me decide to come and do yacht charters in Papua New Guinea. We were welcomed with open arms on that first visit – and every one since.

Eleven years on, the children are still as excited to see us as that first day. They make this island such a joy to visit and I can honestly say most of the guests on our boat *Tiki Tu* would name this their favourite anchorage too, for the same reason. And the mums and dads on the island are also very cool! This island is switched on to tourism now and a visiting yacht can expect to be given loads of options for things to do nearby. An excellent choice is a trip up the Manatalava River by outrigger canoe to visit the gardens where families grow their fruit and vegetables, watch the

locals harvesting sago and sprinting up betelnut palms, as well as bird-watching and perhaps even crocodile spotting. You can extend this with a walk to the old Puas Mission, where there is a primary school, a small aid post with a maternity ward and a Catholic Church. Best to go on a school day so you can see classes in action. You will most likely be asked to give a little talk on where you are from and what it's like to live there. For the more energetic, a trek up into the mountains of Lavongai can be arranged. We walked up to Ngongolavui a few times, which is quite an easy 2-3 hour walk with a great swimming hole and waterfall. We always arranged to have dinner on the island so guests could experience a little piece of village life and excellent local dishes such as tapioca, sago, kaukau

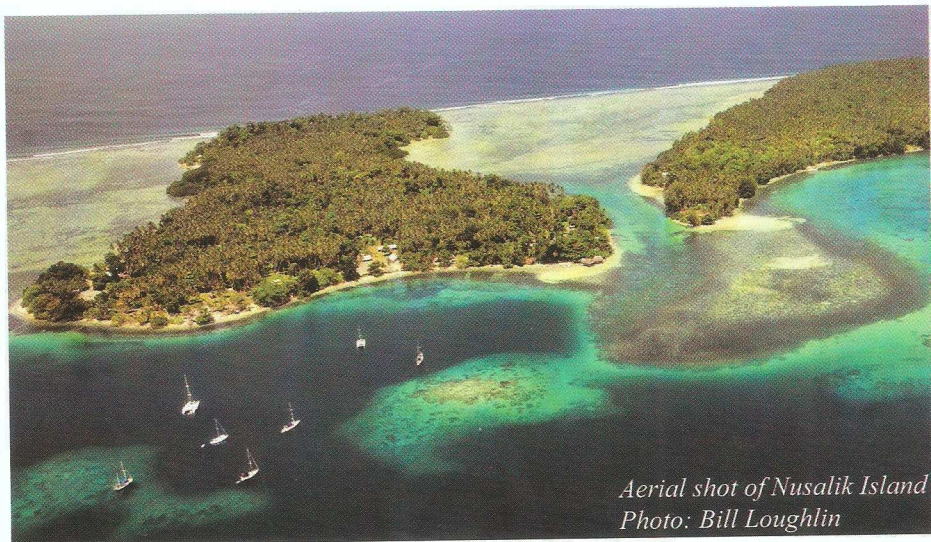


Singing on Ungalik Is

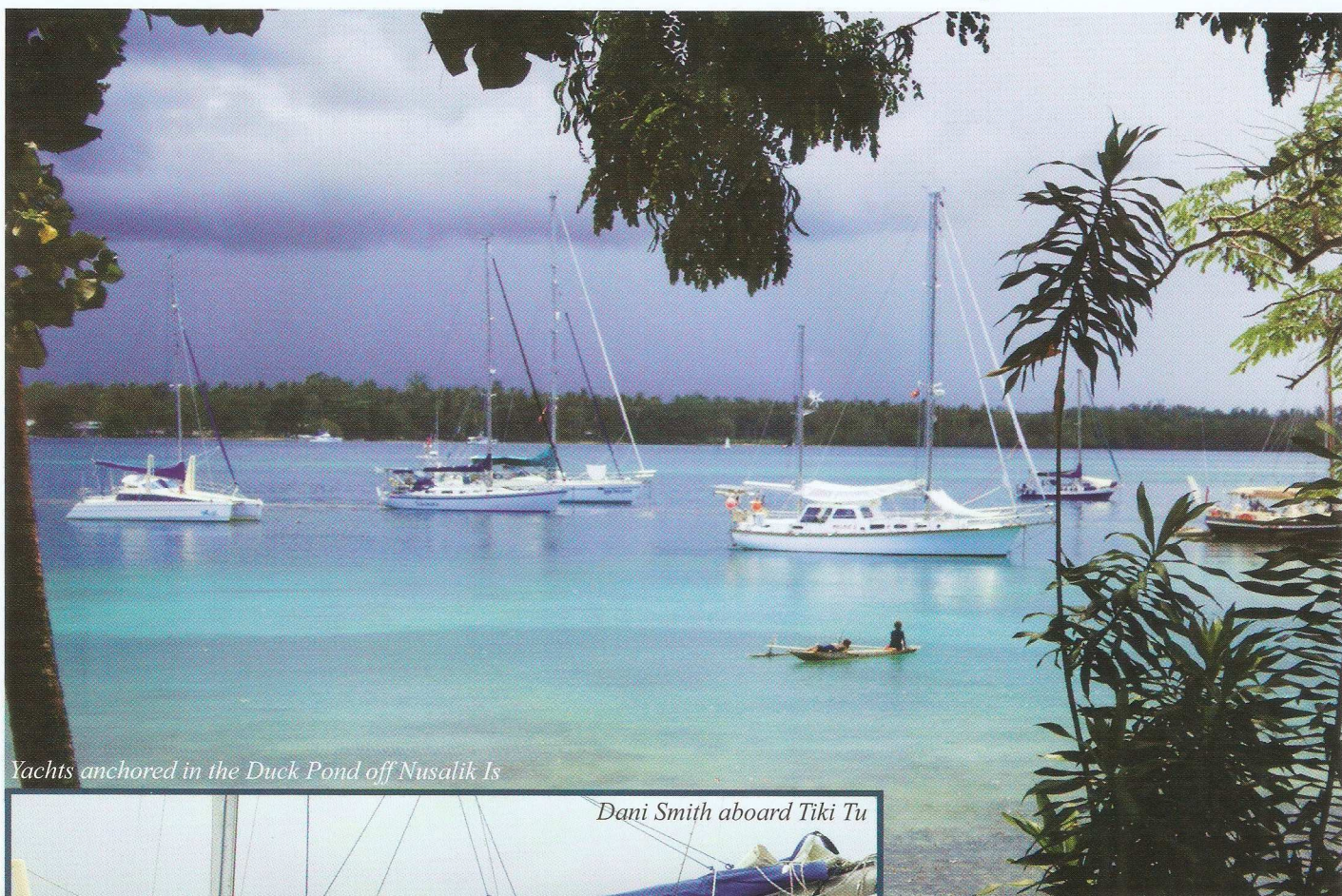
(sweet potato), rice, lots of vegetables and usually some fish or mudcrabs. And if you really want to see this island rock, ask them to put on a singsing for you!

10. Nusalik Is, Kavieng

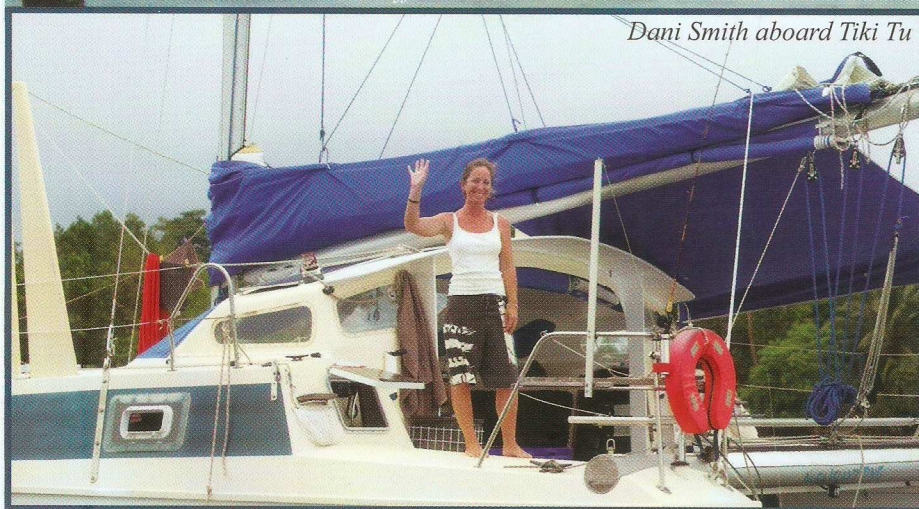
We can't forget the fabulous anchorage in Kavieng Harbour so frequently visited by all manner of international cruising yachties. Despite what many 'cruising guides' say, the best anchorage within Kavieng Harbour is over in the Duck Pond on the east side of Nusalik Is. You can make the approach to the anchorage from the north entrance as well as from the south. Check your charts for the best way to get in but it



*Aerial shot of Nusalik Island
 Photo: Bill Loughlin*



Yachts anchored in the Duck Pond off Nusalik Is



Dani Smith aboard Tiki Tu

is very simple and you will anchor in good holding in 7-10m. The anchorage has great protection in all winds except for strong SSE or S, however, due to the surrounding reefs, the water always stays flat calm and the holding is very, very good.

Highlights: Quick and easy access to Kavieng town for provisioning and refuelling. Unlike many other small towns in PNG, Kavieng has a couple of shops with quite a large selection of imported products, and most cruising yachties are astounded at being able to buy items they haven't seen in all their

travels through Melanesia. The Kavieng Market is right on the foreshore and has a surprisingly varied selection of fruit and vegetables compared with other coastal PNG towns.

Nusa Island Retreat is on the island and offers awesome buffet dinners every night, as well as one of the best stocked bars in Papua New Guinea in a relaxed atmosphere with an excellent vibe and good service. Also on the island is Panaconda village, where many of the locals make jewellery from shells and coral as well as carvings, which they sell from a small market set up within the village. If you are into diving (and

Kavieng has some of the best and most varied diving in the world!), then Scuba Ventures is just the other side of the harbour and will collect you from your yacht to take you diving. There are 13 dive sites within a few minutes of the anchorage and many, many more a little further away. If you surf, then there are five breaks all within 10 minutes' dinghy ride. These breaks are again managed by the Niu Ailan Surfriders Alliance to keep visiting surfer numbers at a sustainable level.

Next door on Nusalavu Is, you can take a wander through pandanas and coconuts to a couple of huge WWII relics, then continue on around the beach to some raised limestone blowholes. You can even swim straight off the yacht to the reef just south of the anchorage for some great snorkelling on a *Jake* Japanese seaplane.

But wait! There's more! Except I can't possibly list every reason to visit Kavieng. You will just have to come and see for yourself. ■

Dani Smith