

Right, the view from the bow as Heather Francis departs Kavieng, Papua New Guinea. Below, at sea on a sunny Christmas Day.

Super typhoons and Christmas at sea

To the editor: Our passage from Papua New Guinea to Palau was a long, drawn-out affair. We were crossing the equator, so this was somewhat expected. Everyone who has sailed that route before us as well as our weather router (a service that we employed for the first time this passage) assured us that once we got over the equator and through the doldrums, the winds would fill in. Being good sailors, we believed them and sailed due north out of Kavieng, PNG, hoping to find the shortest line as possible through the windless zone. For the first three days, although the wind was out of the northwest and on the nose, we sailed. The sea was calm, the winds

were light and the ride was comfortable.

Then we got tripped up on that imaginary line, and ghosted across zero degrees slow enough to watch the numbers on the hand-held GPS count down like the New Year's party we were hoping to have in Palau. The crossing happened, as it did the first time on the way to the Galapagos — in the dark — despite our best planning. It is, however, a momentous occasion even when it's not your first time. We celebrated by pouring ourselves a glass of rum, making sure to tip a bit to Neptune in hopes of winning his favor.

The rest of the passage, however, did not go as planned.

After eking our way north, we were forced to motor to free ourselves not from drifting, a state of sail we don't mind participating in, but from wallowing around in the swell as we got pushed eastward by the current. Over the next three



days, we put a whopping 40 hours on the engine, a personal best (or worst) for us, and although we clawed our way further north at an ear-splittingly slow pace, we did not find much wind. When the wind did finally fill in, it was not at all from the prescribed direction, but we happily glided along, close reaching and pointing exactly toward our destination.

Ten days into our passage, things started to look up: We were making progress, the conditions were comfortable and, if we could keep pace, we might even make port in time for Christmas. Then came a couple days of dirty weather. We battled sudden violent squalls, sat in the rain for hours on end and buoyed our spirit with the occasional glug of rum in our midnight thermos of tea. Conditions continued to build and soon we were rocketing along on only a small section of headsail in 30 to 35 knots.

The distant northern horizon grew dark. Dark like I have never seen before — purplish,



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impenetrable, metallic gray, cold, calculating and violent looking. For days Steve wanted to sail almost due west even though we still had to climb another two degrees north to reach Palau. For days I wondered about his reasoning.

Then we got the call from our weather router.

Located approximately 50 nm to the northeast of us was a low pressure system. A low that was deepening and moving fast, thankfully toward the northwest. We were advised to alter course for the next 24 to 36 hours, and on Dec. 20 we sailed away from our destination and all hope of arriving before Christmas.

That “fast-moving system” was a tropical depression with a high potential to deepen into a typhoon within 24 to 48 hours. The system had been on the radar of the forecasters for the last several days down around 4° N. This explained the crappy conditions that we had been experiencing for the last three days. This explained Steve’s sixth sense about keeping a

more westerly course.

The system did develop into a typhoon. We had sailed through the toddler stages of Super Typhoon Nock-ten. On Christmas Day, it hit the Philippines with a ferocious roar and was entered into the record books as the most intense storm to hit land on Christmas Day for the last 60 years.

Although the skies lightened when the depression moved off, so did the winds. On Dec. 24, with 193 nautical miles to sail, we were left adrift in a confused sea, sails down and everything clanging around.

Our 193 nm is, oddly, close to our best distance sailed in a 24-hour period. I was still hopeful that the wind would fill in and we would arrive in Palau on Christmas Day with enough time to spare to unpack the boat, chill a bottle of wine and the four cans of beer we’d saved, hang up some decorations and cook a nice Christmas dinner before it got dark.

As the hours drifted by, these lovely possibilities



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evaporated and my mood darkened deeper than that northern horizon. It wasn’t until 12 hours later that the winds filled back in, and during that time we rolled and clanged about, not even drifting 1 nm. In my fog of sleep-deprived frustration, I let the disappointment get the better of me.

After we raised sail and got underway, I grumpily ate dinner. Then I went to bed without a goodnight, sprawling on the cabin sole, hoping to catch up on some sleep. (You can’t fall off!) I sat my midnight watch with a scowl on my face, even though there was no one there to see it. All I wanted to do was close my eyes, fall asleep and pretend the whole thing wasn’t happening — that we weren’t going to spend Christmas at sea.

Heather Francis and Steve Hertik celebrate crossing the line aboard *Kate*, their Newport 41.

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But, as the Grinch so wisely noted, “You can’t keep Christmas from coming.” When I woke at 0600, I was greeted by a breakfast of hot polenta sprinkled with the last two pieces of bacon and a smile from my jolly elf, Steve. On the tree, which I had put up several days before in a spurt of holiday hopefulness, was a selection of “presents.” Hand-drawn cards noting all the things Steve wanted to give me when we got to port. Under the tree was my old woolly sock, brimming with bits and pieces Steve had collected around the boat, things he knew I liked or would make me smile: a packet of coffee, a tin of teriyaki-flavored tuna. And, like the Grinch, I suddenly felt my heart burst out of my chest, growing two sizes in gratitude for the fact that Steve not only put up with me but showed me what Christmas was really about.

As it turned out, Christmas Day was beautiful! We had perfect winds, calm seas and clear skies. For lunch I dug out the bottles of olives and sundried tomatoes that I had been saving, cut some cheese and salami and opened a box of not-stale Ritz crackers. We sat in the sun, enjoying a cold beer and a picnic lunch while listening to Christmas music. We had curry chicken cassoulet for dinner while watching a spectacular sunset. That night, the skies were clear and full of stars and, for the first time in many years, I saw the Big Dipper. Christmas, it turns out, doesn’t come from a store.

Two days later, on the 27th, after stalling outside the reef for eight hours, waiting for daybreak, we cleared customs in Palau. When we tied up to the mooring, I was a little disappointed the journey was over. After 20 long sometimes-trying days at sea, I felt like I could keep going. As if I could only remember the sweet spots.

The night before, in the dark, I wrote this in my journal:

“Now, with the prospect of land on the horizon, literally as Palau is right in front of us, that familiar feeling of disappointment is starting to creep in around the edges. Disappointed that the journey is over — that this incredible, vast and ever-changing blue existence is about to be interrupted by land — solid, immovable, unforgiving. That this beautiful, simple, raw state of mind will be temporarily lost. It takes several days out here to become empty enough to feel full, and only a few hours ashore to be full enough that you are empty. The trouble is never letting go of everything, it is holding on to the nothing that you find out here. Of not cluttering up the beautiful space inside you that only the ocean can help you discover.”

And that is why we are looking ahead at the next passage.

—Heather Francis is from Nova Scotia. For more than a decade, she’s traveled the world living and working on the boats. In 2008, she and her Aussie partner Steve bought *Kate*, a Newport 41-foot sloop. They are currently in the Philippines. Follow their adventures at www.yachtkate.com.