

New Zealand

Tomtom et Clairette, le 3 novembre 2011 à 10:56

As we said in our last article, we picked the first weather "porthole" to sail from Lautoka, Fiji to Opuia, New Zealand. Leaving on the 12th of September, we were supposed to have 2 days of moderate South-East trades, followed by the crossing of a small high - which we expected to travel Eastwards and generate nice North-East or North winds - and the traditional front between 25°S and 30°S. We knew it was a little early, but the Rugby World Cup had already begun and we really wanted to be in NZ for the France-All Blacks game on the 24th of September and to meet one of Claire's friend on the 25th.

Everything went as predicted for the 3 first days, but - as it could be expected - the porthole became smaller and smaller ... One unexpected low forming on the South side of the first high, another big high to cross, followed by a second front (the big one, 48h of force 6-7 from the SW) and a third high ... to be welcomed just before arriving at the latitude of the North Cape by a last front with black thunderstorm clouds. Thankfully we had all the weather information possible, with the weatherfaxes and the GRIB files, and we could anticipate and head SW or SE depending on what was expected.

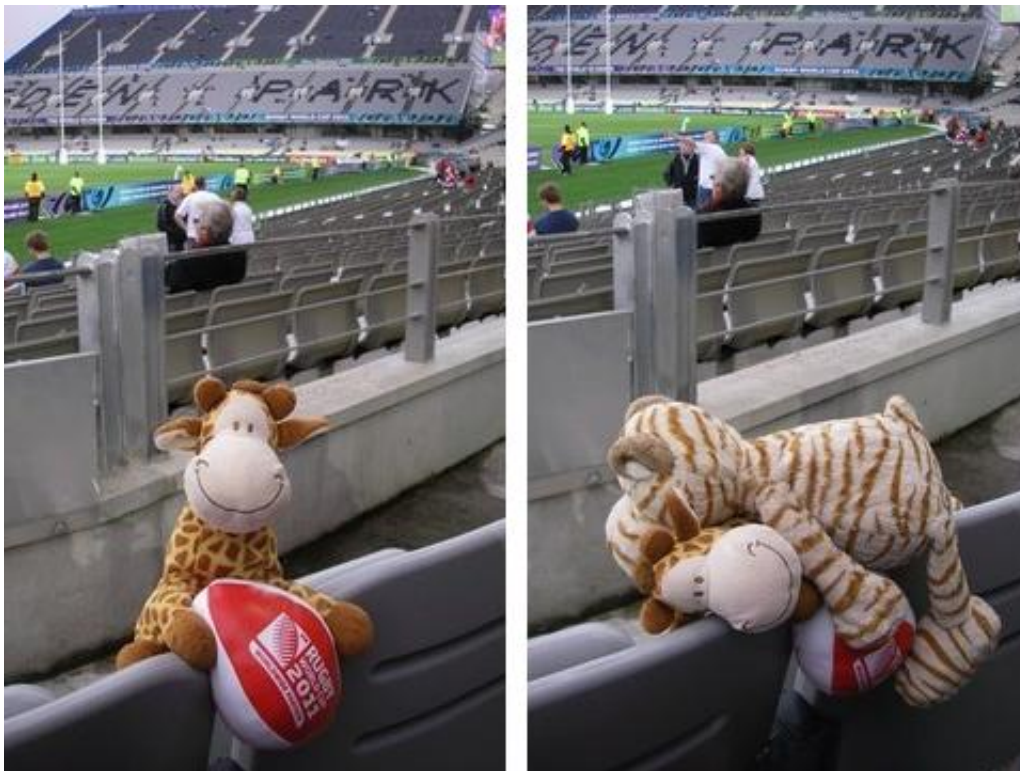


The last front at the sunset, a pleasant night in prospect ...

We knew that the temperatures would drop rapidly on our way South : 1°C per day in the air and in the water ! But the arrival in Opuā, at 5 in the morning on the 24th of September, was worse than all that we could have imagined. The water was at 13°C, and the air at ... 10°C (the absolute 0 on Schnaps being 20°C, it was therefore -10°C !!). After a year in the tropics we were literally freezing, even if the Austral Spring had started 3 days before.

But we were there in time for the game : it was the objective and we did it, after 11 and half days at sea (4.3 knots on average with ... 86 h motoring). Of course the result was not very good for the XV de France (NZ won 37-17), but we noticed the incredible tension in the assembly of the Opuā Sailing Club and the relief when, after 10 minutes of clear domination, the French took 3 tries in a row on defensive mistakes ... But our first contacts with Kiwis were great : very friendly, helpful, always trying to find solutions for our problems. Everything seems easy and straightforward, it is not a problem to find a car for rent on a Saturday afternoon, and it is quick and simple.

The day after the arrival, we were already in Auckland to meet one of Claire's friends who was in New Zealand for the World Cup. It was great to drive through green hills, nice forests, to see sheep and cows along the road ! We had forgotten all that, after so many months with coconut trees and tropical forests, and we realised how much we liked that ... We feared Auckland, as we do not usually like big cities, but we were not as ill-at-ease as in big American cities (my reference is the only American city I know : Montréal). Maybe it was because of all these people (even if there were way too many Frenchies) in the streets for the World Cup, but maybe not: the city is well-spaced, a few skyscrapers here and there but not too many, and mostly 2-floor buildings ... We went back there for the England v. Scotland game ("*O Flower of Scotland ...*") a week later, as we could get cheap tickets thanks to Sean, one of the Opuā marina guys. Great to watch a nice game (even if England won ;)) in one of the Meccas of Rugby, the Eden Park Stadium.



Girouette and Hobbes training in the Eden Park before England v. Scotland.

We spent some time in the Marina : after 6 months without having seen a pontoon, Schnaps was happy not to worry about the anchor's holding any more, especially with the almost continuous bad weather we had since our arrival, either windy or rainy. And we could enjoy the benefits of civilisation : hot fresh water showers, internet, shore power, etc... The only "benefit" of civilisation we did not enjoy was the necessity of an Electrical Warrant of Fitness for the boat : an inspector comes with his voltmeter just to control that the polarity of the power lead is good. 60 NZ\$ just for that. It would almost be worth writing a second **open letter** to the bureaucrat who invented this regulation ! The purpose is officially to avoid fires in the marinas ... but if it were really about that, the DC circuit should be inspected as well as the "electric" fires are much more prone to come from a badly designed DC circuit. Anyway, Schnaps passed successfully its EWOFF and can proudly display its green sticker valid until 2015.

Having rented a car for the game in Auckland, we wanted to take advantage of it for the week after and go camping up to Cape Reinga (the Northern end of the North Island)... but the weather discouraged us, and we went back to Opua after 2 days on the "Kauri Coast" to haul the boat out of the water and repaint the bottom. It was really necessary after 2 years; there was almost no paint left at some places ! We did that in Doug's Boatyard, a very nice place that we would definitely recommend, both for the environment (just above the bay) and for the pleasure to meet the owner !



Schnaps is being lifted out of the water on the rails

After 2 weeks in Opuia, we were eager to go and discover the Bay of Islands, and spent a pleasant evening in Paihia watching Wales defeating Ireland and - quite unexpectedly until the moment of the anthems, where I saw how determined the French faces were - France defeating England. As I had said before the game that if France won, we would hoist the huge tricolor flag that we never dared to hoist before at Schnaps' stern, so did we... But as far as our discovery of the Bay of Islands was concerned, we were once more stopped by the weather after having reached Russell (where we met Emile and Judith who invited us to watch the second quarter-finals and share a meal with them!). Anyway, we decided to go back to the marina and invite all the friendly people we met on Schnaps... We were busy almost every night but we had very pleasant evenings ... Our schedule was full, with the dinners on shore or on Schnaps, and we did not have enough evenings to invite all the people we wanted ! But as we plan to settle in New Zealand (to be followed in our next adventures!), we will have other opportunities to do so !

Our next weeks' schedules were decided by the last games of the world cup : we were invited to watch Wales v. France and then a wonderful New Zealand v. Australia. We would - unexpectedly - meet the All Blacks again in final ! With our big French flag still flying proudly on Schnaps, we were greeted by "Go All Blacks!" cries - at which we were proud to answer "Allez les Bleus!!" - each time we arrived in an anchorage. This was really good-natured, there was hardly any animosity! Nothing to see with what could be read in the NZ tabloids on the French

Team at this time.

We spent the week in the Bay, visiting Motuarohia and Moturua's anchorages in quite windy conditions, which made us end up in the more sheltered Orokawa Bay... where we could find some good mussels! As the weather was not expected to improve, we decided that if we had to stay in the boat, we might as well anchor in the range of a wifi network to start looking for a job, a car, a place to stay in the following months, write some blog articles, etc. So we moved back to the "civilisation" : Paihia with a quick stop in Opuia to say goodbye to our friends, who we will be happy to visit again when we will come back in the North! It was also the moment to pick up my sister who joined us after her trip in the South Island... it was a little funny to meet again, after a year and half, at the other end of the world!!



The anchorage at Motuarohia Island in the morning lights.

We spent two days with this crew reinforcement exploring a few islands in the bay, and went walking on the very nice Moturoa and Moturua islands. The weather was almost perfect for this, at last ! We could understand why a lot of cruisers coming from the tropics do not go further South with their boat: this is a wonderful playing ground with innumerable sheltered anchorages... And thanks to Doug, we knew where the best ones were !

Then came the final. We watched it in a bar on Urupukapuka Island, with a few tourists and many people who had gone out fishing for the week-end (we could notice that leisure fishing

was really developed along NZ coasts). Useless to say that we were the 3 only French people in the room, proudly wearing our white and blue jerseys! Even if we had very little chance to win the final, we knew - and so did almost all the Kiwis but a few pretentious journalists - that everything could happen with "Les Bleus" and that it would not be a piece of cake for the All Blacks. And, as everyone could see, it wasn't! The atmosphere was incredibly tense, especially at the end of the game... Honestly, we would have been a little embarrassed if the French Team had won, and were happy with this result : France played very well, could have won but didn't, and this made all the critics and mockery vanish. We were also happy for the Kiwis who had been waiting for "their" World Cup for such a long time, and who came to see us at the end of the game to shake hands and chat a little. We will particularly remember Gary, who offered us to come with him the day after to pick up some scallops (unfortunately we had to leave and couldn't go with him), invited us at his home when we will be back in Northland and gave us his big "All Blacks" flag which now flies proudly under Schnaps' starboard spreader as our new courtesy flag!

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