

Longgrass' Latest Adventures (Aka Kris Larsen)

Chapter one of The Book That Wasn't

From Darwin to Rabaul, PNG

Departure 10 Aug 2023

The first tide washed me out of Darwin harbour and in flat calm we anchored at midnight just north of No.6 buoy. In the morning breeze from NE, dead on the nose, I set sail and consulted the tide tables. The springs of a black moon. I overlaid the tidal streams with daily shifts of the breeze, and I did not like it at all. It was completely the wrong way round. Going through the Vernons would mean anchoring in deep water at the foul tide, and again. Cape Don looked like a three-day nightmare. I did not want to start a trip this length by a three-day nightmare. So, first change of plans. To hell with Cape Don. I turned around and pointed the boat towards Cape Fourcroy and open water. It was raining over Tiwis.

From the top of Tiwis to the Tanimbars it's only 170 miles, but it can be a lumpy 170 miles, under a deep reef, with hatches battened down, looking around the boat for your sea legs. The drop-off from the Continental shelf can be particularly harrowing. Persistent westerly set makes it a bash to windward and eventual landfall can be a surprise. I was obliged to round Babar on the wrong side more than once, in the past.

Crossing the imaginary line separating the seas of Australia from Indonesia was a boring non-event. No stupid fishos from Duckpond physically blocking our passage with their boat in flat calm, frantically calling the authorities to apprehend the suspicious vessel. No coast-watch plane circling overhead in a vain attempt to establish radio contact. No Navy officer yelling into a megaphone from his bridge: "WE ARE AUSTRALIAN WARSHIP! DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH ?!" Alas, no cheeky Nat yelling back from "Kehaar": "DO YOU?!"

This time we quietly slipped across, and the world is our oyster.

For all the modeling by Windy, BOM and all those Windgurus, no one ever tells the wind. Models forecasted E-SE, so in the afternoon we got NE shift, and nothing I could do would let us round Ceram from east, without a battle. I did not want a battle. I wanted nice sailing. Also, reflecting on the further course, I could not see how I imagined crossing Raja Empat. It's beautiful cruising ground, daysailing, gunkholing, but there are no lighthouses, no wide corridors for a fast passage at night. It looked simple on a chart, in a harbour, with a ruler, but closer look at 200 miles of rabbit warren of little islands with water too deep to anchor made me scratching my head. Another change of plans, another 150-mile detour.

Crossing Indo during the Dry can be seamless, painless exercise. Even heavily laden (food and stores added to a ton and quarter), "Kehaar" was well balanced and averaged over 100 miles a day. Just accomodate the conditions, don't fight it.

Approaching Ambon after dark, in heavy haze and occasional drizzle, hills were obscured by murk and I completely misread the topography. Large field of white lights ahead. I took them for another fishing fleet. We will sail through. So I boldly headed for them. On closing in I noticed that some of them were sitting a bit above the blackened horizon. There were no boats, they were street lights, and we were gonna pile it up on a lee shore. Quick gybe, harden the sheets, and where is that damned light house when you need it? Oh, way out there, no wonder.

Molucca Sea, between Halmahera and Sulawesi, is my favourite sailing patch. Strong, steady breeze, regular swell, fair current either side you take (there are two rocky islands right in the middle). Fair bit of

shipping. We crossed the Equator in a rainsquall and two weeks from Darwin, on a Full Moon, we exit Molucca Sea into the open Pacific.

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I've been at this place a number of times before, I know what to expect: after a solid 1000-miles' run since the calms behind the Tiwi Islands, wind dies to whisper, before it recovers after a while. You keep going straight, it's 300 miles to Davao, a nice 3-day run. You turn left, it slows down a lot, calms, currents and eddies towards Palawan and central Philippines. Turn right and you are facing a 1500-mile run along New Guinea, the coast I've never sailed before. All you need to do is round the island of Morotai, at the tip of Halmahera.

Steep jungle slopes reaching down to the sea, clusters of tin roofs huddling in the coves, wisps of blue smoke up in the green valleys. Since 1929 when my chart was printed, someone built a lighthouse near the point, flashing 5 sec. As you'd expect of a major headland, great downwind run is over. Rain squalls, calms, eddies, rudder-breaking overfalls, puffs of wind from every point of compass, more calms, more vertical waves. Four hours to clear 2 miles.

With a final burst of a local breeze you get a nudge out of the couldron and into the main body of the current, SE picks up and you are in the clear. You open a can of lychees to celebrate, and you are looking into all the vastness of the Pacific ahead. Only the vastness is not empty. Directly east, merely 130 miles ahead, lies Helen Reef, with smaller Tobi Reef even nearer. I once met a dude who sailed to Helen Reef, and he showed me the chart. A classical atoll about 15 miles across, with an opening in the NW and a string of motus circling the lagoon. It belongs to Republic of Palaw, and the only inhabitants are a fishery inspector and his family. Apparently a friendly lot, marooned in their paradise for months at a time. I had no chart, and no intention of looking for that entrance blind. I had 1500 miles of an unknown coast to traverse, to windward.

During the crossing of Banda Sea I set down and wrote what little I actually know about the north coast of New Guinea: it's mostly mountains, steep slopes, water deep all the way in. There is a coastal current generated by the Trades, running against us east to west. By all accounts, conditions are a lot quiter than the south coast which is exposed directly to the Trades. Much less wind, to start with, a 20-knot squall is rare. In Darwin I downloaded a compedium of cruising reports for the area, the coast and passages to Palaw and Carolines. Three things became clear: first, any forecasts and fancy weather models are wrong about 50% of the time. Accuracy of flipping a coin. Second, winds, if any, are light, coming from any direction, regardless of the season. Pilot charts agree, variables evenly distributed around the rose. And the third, 80% of sailing is done under engine.

Tacking into light fickle headwinds along the shore too deep to anchor, contrary to a known coastal current... you can do that for a while, but not for 1500 miles. So, we plan to stay offshore, at least 100-200 miles out. Ought to be a lot more steady wind, and maybe a bit of a fair current. Between 4 degrees north and 8 degrees, runs the mighty ribbon of Equatorial Countercurrent, right across the entire Pacific. I know, I got shafted by the said current at both ends, Panama and Philippines. 4 degrees north sounds a long way up from New Guinea, but we rounded Morotai at 2 degrees 50 north, so it wasn't far from there.

Belt 5 degrees either side of Equator is free from cyclonic activity, Corriolis force so close to the Line is not strong enough to start them spinning. Most typhoons are spawned in the ITCZ (Intertropical

Convergency Zone, the good old Doldrums), where the NE and SE Trades meet. ITCZ stays always north of the Line, between 1 and 14 degrees north. It migrates north-south with the Sun, lagging about two months behind. Right now, August-September, ITCZ is furthest north, around 14 degrees. So it will not affect us and for all the practical purposes we'll be sailing in the wind system of southern hemisphere, even though we are 3-4 degrees north.

Another little thing I noticed crossing Equator in the past: when it's blowing SE below the line, it often angles SW above Equator, with a period of good southerly in between.

That was about all that I really knew.

Just to show me that I do not know everything, the very first day current whacked me 30 miles north of my dead reckoning position (medieval Spanish navigators called position derived from dead reckoning a "fantasy position"). I was incredulous. Sextant shot was difficult, through thick moving cloud, but with hardly any swell and clear horizon my error could not have been any more than plus-minus 5 miles, not 30. Afterwards I drew on paper all the currents around here that I am aware of, and it made perfect sense: all that water has to go somewhere. We brought a current with us up the Malacca Sea, the strait between Mindanao and Sulawesi sets strongly to east, and coastal current along New Guinea hits the wall of Halmahera and Morotai head-on. The only way water can go is to curl on itself, to NE, then join the Equatorial Countercurrent. Looking at Pilot Charts, month of September, it was all there. They even gave it a number: 1.1 knots.

You can't fight strong currents. You have to accommodate them. Take a simple one-knot stream. If it's running against you, you lose 25 miles a day. If it's running with you, you are getting 25 miles free ride a day. Difference between the two situations is 50 miles, a respectable daily tally in the tropics by itself, without doing any sailing. For short runs it's not worth bothering, but on long ocean passages difference of 350 miles a week makes you or breaks you. Every effort should be made to get out of a foul current and into a fair one, even if it does not run exactly in your direction. After a 1300-miles run down current, if you have to make a 400 mile dog-leg, you are way ahead. Draw it on a paper, you will see.

Current was pushing us north, fast. Fair enough, I will come along. Another 50 miles further north, and it will merge with our buddy, Equatorial Countercurrent running between 4 and 8 degrees north, our way, east.

I was charted up for a coastal passage, all the way, but the charts did not reach further than 60-100 miles out. We were staying 200-300 miles out. The only chart for that far offshore was a rather intimidating photocopy of "Philippines to Bismark Archipelago" sheet. It has all the reefs and islands to avoid running into, but covering the entire 1800 miles till New Britain, daily progress needs to be observed with magnifying glass. Quality of photocopy paper does not approve of repeated plotting and erasing of position lines, so I repurposed one of my old sturdy BA charts of the Philippines, with correct latitude span. Just mark the meridians the way you need them and use the chart as a plotting grid, never mind all them islands.

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I spent the month of September meandering in a narrow strip a touch north of Equator, between 3 and 4 degrees. Attention to navigation is essential. Drift a bit south, and you fall off the Travelator, the fair

current. Too far north, and you are lost amongst the reefs and atolls of the Carolines. At one point we were barely 100 miles from the nearest island. That was a surprise, Caroline islands with all their Pacific lagoons, are only a month's easy sail from Darwin. Will bear it in mind, for another time.

1500 miles can be a long passage. Light winds from every point of compass rose, calms, vile eddies of the main current throwing us off, south. Winds so light, a yachting would declare it a calm. Make sure you maintain heading, though, because even in lightest winds you are actually moving. You want to crawl in the right direction.

An awful lot of shipping. Bulk carriers from eastern seaboard of Australia, fanning out on direct routes for China and Japan, all along the New Guinea coast. One or two every day and a couple at night. How many that I slept through, God knows. Frequent local rainsqualls with no extra wind in them and little actual rain on our head. Floatsam comes in batches, every few hours a patch. Huge tree trunks floating by, some bigger than "Kehaar", entire palms, coconuts, bits of timber boats, myriad of plastic garbage, all the time. Of the sea life there are periodically crews of friendly Philippino fishermen, otherwise precious little.

More calms and barely perceptible breezes, steel fishing buoys anchored to the sea bottom telling us we were caught in yet another stray eddy. Fishing buoys are moored in the overfalls and areas where eddies meet. Messy swell, even in calm. I clocked one buoy in a flat calm rushing past us at three knots. At another buoy, again in a flat calm, I dropped the sail to see what the current is doing, and buoy said we were drifting at half a knot NW, a wrong way. Which did not endear me to that particular buoy. As if it was her fault. Some guys find it hard to accept that there are things you can do absolutely nothing about, like current. Well, what can you do about it?

Currents is a monster. Calms several times a day, between them fluky breezes for a few hours at a time. Thrashing canvas, snarled sheets, broken strings, gybe after useless gybe. Sailor in me reefs and despairs. Navigator checks and rechecks the astro. Even dumb kitchen clock navigation confirms: sun rises 5-6 minutes earlier every day. That's 80 miles easting in a day. There is no way we are sailing 80 miles a day. 40, if we are lucky. The rest is current. On other days our tally is less than 30 miles. How come such a difference? Large currents are not like rivers in the sea. I worked with real-time maps of Kuro-Shio current in Japan, and Gulf Stream in the Atlantic. More like a long paddock full of mad snakes. Seething, twisting, curling, throwing complete loops 200 miles across... Overall the whole caboodle moves at the average speed you read in the Pilot Charts, but at any given point, when you are in the actual ribbon, it will be something else. Sailing across you will average out, but caught in a flat calm, you go where the current takes you, even if it's backwards.

Light conditions mean there is hardly any swell, except in overfalls, and consequently daily life inside the boat is a lot more pleasant than when you are rolling in full-on Trades. Cat certainly appreciated the steady boat, trying to work out a way to sneak past me onto the deck. Sure, I let her hop on deck and I'll never see the fucker again.

Light conditions and calms are murder on rigging, though. Thrashing canvas and constant rubbing takes toll on the sail and all the innumerable ropes that make up a junk rig. In the Sea of Bismarck I had to lower the sail on deck and stitch up the leach of the top panel that shredded in light winds. Yeah, I have never heard of Bismarck Sea, either.

About a month into the passage I noticed I lost condition. Every slightest effort sent my heart racing, I was winded up just climbing on deck from the cabin. Junk is a lazy man's rig. You drag that dirty big rag up, tighten the sheets, click on the windvane, and you wait till you get there. In hard going your body is busy just compensating for the movement of the boat. Crossing the Indian Ocean to Madagascar I had no problems with fitness, we were rolling like on a fair ground, but in light settled weather of Pacific you sit on your arse, doing nothing, day after day. I can see how the old folks locked up in the geriatric homes lose it quickly. It happened to me on a Pacific crossing before and it was frightening. On the way from Hawaii to Darwin my halyard started chafing through at the very top, I had to climb the mast in a bosun's chair and cut a length of it off. I did it in the seaway, on adrenalin alone, but after that I spent two days lying on my back, recovering. Nearing the coast, just bringing my anchoring gear on deck from the bilges nearly killed me. Now it was happening to me again, going feeble and flacid. Before leaving Darwin I looked into simple exercises an old man can do on a rocking boat. Push ups, sit ups, squats, stretching, bare minimum to keep functioning. It is not about building up muscle, it's about keeping blood circulating. I started a regimen of exercising as a part of daily routine. I kept it to 15 minutes a day. After the exercise, great feeling every time. I know, it's only the chemicals released in my blood, but the feeling is real.

September near Equator, Equinox, Sun creeping directly overhead. Sextant reading 86-87-88-89 degrees. Do not listen to the experts who claim that you can't get a sight with the sun higher than 80 degrees. With a bit of practice and settled conditions you can run it right up to 89. For the actual zenith passage, 90, I tried cooking position lines very near the local noon. Not particularly accurate. At first, on the day itself I just gave up. Position lines were vertical, which gives you longitude, and that will do for a day. Trouble was, after the dog-leg we were angling south, chasing the sun at the speed it was moving south itself, so it was directly overhead for three weeks. Sun moves 23 miles a day, a degree every three days. We needed latitude. I got plenty of practice, and I figured out some dirty tricks, you would not believe it. Stregoneria, pure witchcraft. When we passed the first island, a little flat pancake in the mid of nowhere, it was exactly where it was meant to be and there was some punching of the fist in the air and yelling over the ocean. I was rather proud of myself.

Zenith passage means rain. Near Equator when the sun crossed overhead, it brings a rainy season, give or take a few days either way. I do not know why. Way offshore you do not get those apocalyptic 40-knot fire and brimstone affairs that you get near the coast, but it rains a lot. Larger rain cells bring their own wind, at first a 10-15 knot blast, from any point, then settling down, for several hours. Only the largest ones carry lightning, but I watched waterspouts sneaking their snouts down from the clouds, trying to connect to the water surface, only to be obliterated by rain and a rainbow.

There are rainsqualls, and then there is Rain. Rainsqualls last 10 minutes, while the Rain is for real. Solid grey 360, unrelenting, wave after wave of fine rain. It can last 3 hours, more often 6 or 7. Having a crap and a shower on deck is one cold combo. It does carry wind, from somewhere we did not expect, so we are moving, bur it's too wet in the hatch and too gloomy and dark to do anything in the cabin. Time for the cat. I sit on the floor in the kitchen, my back propped against the furniture, cat on my lap, twitching its tail. I am in peace, waiting for it to rain itself out.

Sailing is not about harnessing wind, it's about harnessing time.

Rabaul, New Britain, PNG, October-November 2023

I found a place less friendly to visiting yachts than Australia.

PNG.

After a fortnight in Rabaul I for the first time stepped ashore. I still did not have any stamps in my passport, and I was still waiting for Port Moresby to issue me e-visa that I paid for 12 days ago, but I've been given a verbal "shore leave". By a customs dude of all people. The fact that I paid him, twice, a tank of fuel in his old truck, so he could drive home in the mountains for the weekend, may have something to do with it.

I walked 2km to Rabaul town to see what I can get in the market and in Chinese shops. Pretty much everything I need, including little inverter I got to power my laptop on the boat. There is no public Internet in Rabaul. I will try Yacht Club, I thought, which I had to join as a member, so I can tie my dinghy to their wharf.

Afternoon of my first day at liberty I rowed ashore to the Yacht Club to look for wi-fi. Club was closed. After I left the market this morning, violence flared up again, gunshooting, machete slashing, house in the suburbs burnt down. Everything shut down again. Cruise ship due today in Rabaul pulled up in Kokopo instead, 15 miles away. Compared to other places in PNG, Rabaul violence is minuscule, but not used to it, people overreact. Also, underlying cause is different. No "rascals" here (street gangs). A word came down right away that my shore leave was restricted: I can go out only in an emergency, and then chaperoned by a member of Rod's extended local family. Rabaul is reputed to be the most friendly harbour in PNG. You could have fooled me. Officials do not want visitors, probably worried about their safety. Yet local poor are friendly enough.

Rabaul harbour is in a volcanic caldera a mile and half wide and three miles long, opened to south. Spectacular anchorage. It's deep and geologically fresh, maybe 3000 years old. Its shores are lined by six smokestacks of various height, three of them active. The one that buried Rabaul under ten feet of ash in 1991 is just a gash in the ground at the foot of a big mountain, at the edge of suburbs. Smoking, some nights throwing red glare, stinking of sulphur. Over the trees you see no cone. After the eruption in 1991 the whole area was a flat black plane. 4 degrees from Equator sun turned it into Hell. Government abandoned Old Rabaul and moved everything to Kokopo across the bay, an hour by bus. Port and its facilities remained, as did the poor who could not leave their coconut groves. Till today they are digging out the roads buried under the ash, few guys with shovels pushing the ash around. Shore gained about 50 metres and today the whole lot is covered in jungle and squatters. Two of the craters erupted again in 2005 and 2014. New Rabaul, behind the wharfs, much smaller, was slowly built by a different mob, new immigrants from other provinces. One of the causes of current conflict.

I came to PNG for the first time in 1979 and I was refused entry. I walked along the coast from Jayapura (Indo) to Vanimo (PNG). There was no road and no border crossing. You only guessed in which country you were. In Vanimo cops gave me a feed, bed for the night, and in the morning they sent me back the way I came, on foot.

44 years later the story repeats. After battling the last 65 miles for 7 days I dropped the pick in front of Rabaul Yacht Club in total calm and

I was refused entry again. I did not have an e-visa issued before arrival. I am glad I did not attempt to get one in Darwin, it would have been impossible. In Rabaul it took combined efforts of 4 people 5 days to lodge the application. Two weeks later I am still waiting for it. One of seven supporting documents I had to lodge was a clearance from the home port. How can you have that before departure? Also a stat dec that I have not visited Wuhan, China, in the last 21 days. And Covid vaccination papers. Christ, it's October 2023! But when I told them I have a cat on board, I got no reaction at all. You can't extract a bribe from a cat, so they do not care.

There is an old white dude living on his boat in the harbour, very nice guy, an official liaison between officials and yachties. Rod, 72, born in Rabaul, lived his entire life in PNG. Retired diving charter man, him and his local family did most of the work to get my application online. Dorothy, his lady, gets my shopping.

I did spend 14 days sitting on a boat like a bottle of stale beer, but it does not mean I was an isolated bottle of stale beer. Poorest of poor can't afford public transport, and they paddle their little outriggers around, stopping at my boat, offering usefull things for sale. And when the market is closed through the violence, they have nowhere to sell their meagre produce. Three or four times a week they bring good fresh fish. Coconuts, green bananas, both eating and cooking varieties, papayas, eggplant, huge avocados... Yesterday a dude brought me a young cockerel. Surprisingly tender, for a bush chicken. I brought with me enough local currency in small change to last me a couple of months, so I have been eating well. Dorothy would bring me once a week basket of vegies from the market in Kokopo. When my physical condition hasn't improved in all the time here, she arranged a consultation at a clinic for my heart arrhythmia. A "doctor" (an untrained nurses aid, really) checked my blood pressure, which stubbornly remains text-book normal, and took a drop of blood for malaria test. That was the full extend of her knowledge about arrhythmia. She wrote me a referral to a real doctor in the main hospital, 4 days later. I guess for her consultation fee of \$3 I can't expect more.

Today Yacht Club is expecting a visit from the governor of the island, who is coming to fix the violence problems. A rich young playboy nobody respects. I did get wi-fi working, but PNG Internet is heavily censored. I could not access a number of sites, "Error 404, page cannot be found". Both my e-mails are banned, as we found when we tried to lodge my visa application a fortnight ago. Blog site will not allow me to log in either. So all those long e-mails I've written will go on a spare USB chip and I will send it by post. 21st century communications.

There is absolutely no wind, one thing that computer models I saw agree on. In-between monsoons.

I feel a lot like in Africa 30 years ago, living off the land in the cracks of the system. Cat is a great comfort, excited to be allowed on deck.

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More "fighting", two more houses torched, everything closed indefinitely again, market, shops, even hospital and public transport. My hospital appointment was cancelled, permanently. Staff is afraid to travel to work, so everything stays shut. Guys walking the black beach are swinging unsheathed machetes in their right hands, looking over their shoulders. Fishermen afraid to go out fishing in their dugouts. Living from hand to mouth, after two days everyone gets too hungry and place

opens up, for a day or two. Then the violence flares up again. Totally unpredictable. As fighting intensified and folks dug up home made guns, fewer and fewer outriggers went into the bay, until there were none. My food supply line dried up. That's when I decided I have to go, visa or no visa, wind or no wind, heart problem or not.

The very next day the Army moved in, flown from Pt.Moresby at governor's request, and they imposed a curfew from 7pm till 6am. And all those hungry villagers were out in the bay in force and I scored bunches of bananas, sack of sweet potatoes, 20 drinking coconuts, strings of mackrel, fresh kankung leaves, all of a sudden.

I am glad I spent nearly 4 weeks in Rabaul, even though it was anything but pleasant. I travel to learn how different places cope with contemporary world. Rabaul does not. Dysfunctional society of deep poverty, ruled by blind short-term self-interest. Nobody gives a fuck. About anything. They take money for the services to be provided and then provide nothing. Everyone. Government, hospitals, tradesmen, farmers. From top to bottom. Like with my visa. They charged me AU\$ 230 and then gave me no answer, for a month.

Even though I was officially not allowed ashore, I got to know the place reasonably well. I spoke to a number of people from both sides of the conflict, many of them are seamen who served on big ships, ferries and foreign fishing boats, so they speak good english. More I learned, more complicated the situation appeared. I overheard opinions of resident white expats. I spoke to the Chroatian catholic priest several times, he has a church full of violence refugees, women and children, sleeping between the pews. A mess. And it only flared up a few days before I arrived. Perfect timing, Kris.

Road to Kokopo closed by vigilante gang robbing passengers on public transport, I hired a "banana boat". 40HP launch, to go shopping in Kokopo, with customs' permission, as Rabaul remains shut down. "Tropicana", the big modern 3-storey shopping centre on the beach, has pretty much everything, as long as you are not too fussy. No dairy, dried fruit, health food or gluten free stuff, but good selection of Ozzie and Chinese cans, reasonable priced. Also good farmacy. I needed couple of days to recover from the shopping trip. Then I hired a muscle (Dorothy's brother) to help me get the water on board. On the final day he's coming to lift my dinghy on deck and the anchors. So I have 5 months food and water, boat in top condition, and a broken down old man at the helm.

In-shallah.