

Sailing the world

Epic voyage of many challenges and beautiful encounters for Pattaya-based Belgian

By Colin Hastings



Wing-wing in trade winds

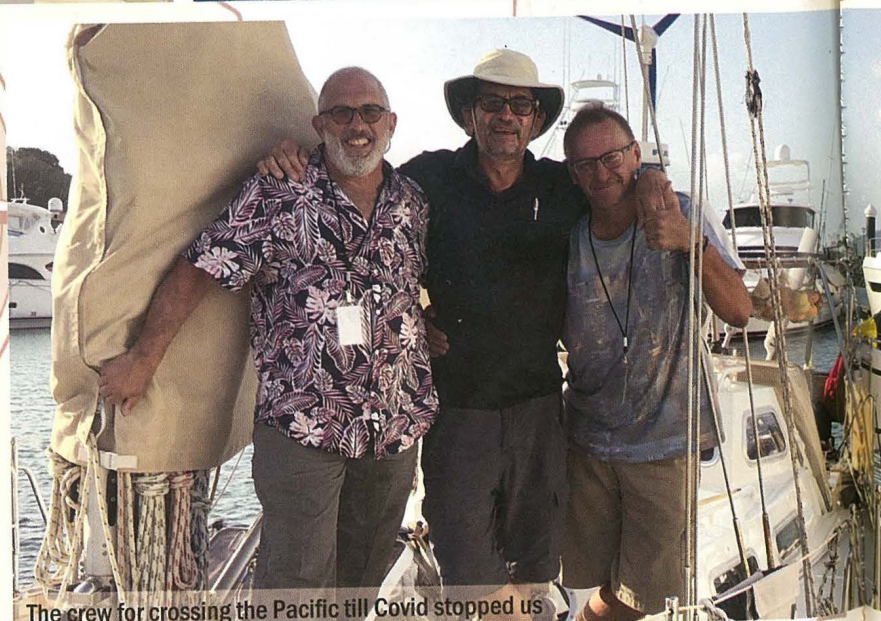


Anchoring in Paradise, Misool

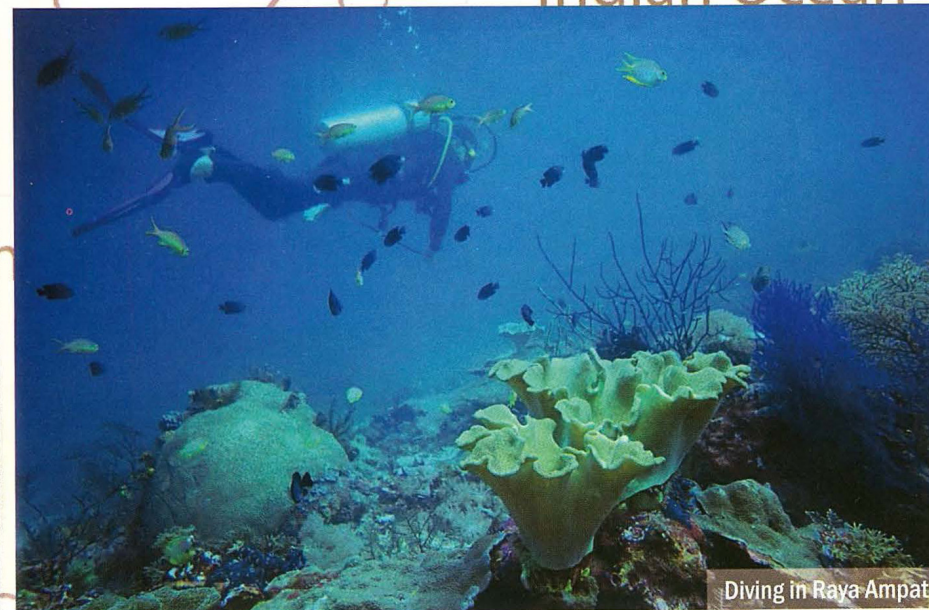
After a full life taken up with family, work and maybe a few hobbies, retirement looms. What do you do to fill the hopefully many years ahead? For one Belgian expat, the answer was clear, unequivocal and challenging in the extreme; circumnavigate the globe by boat. Despite limited experience, Stefaan De Vos was determined to give it a try. He'd had sailed in Thailand, but nothing on the scale he now envisaged.

It turned out to be an epic voyage of discovery, lifetime friendships and memories, as well as one rather unwelcome surprise – the catastrophic loss of his boat in the Caribbean. The project also took years longer than he had expected and only finally concluded earlier this year.

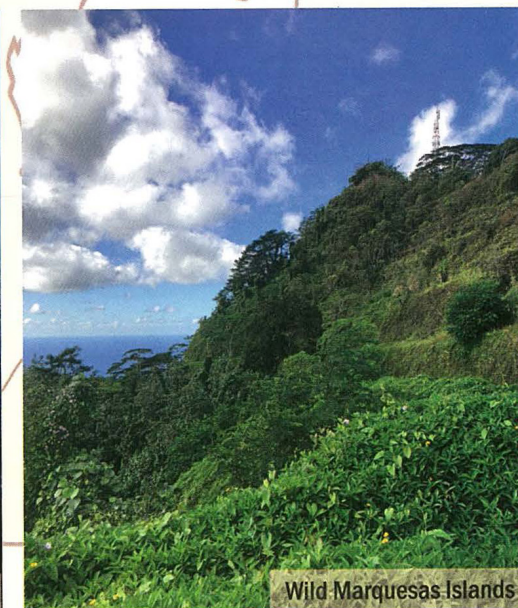
Stefaan first arrived in Thailand in 1998 to work as an engineer in a German-owned



The crew for crossing the Pacific till Covid stopped us



Diving in Raya Ampat



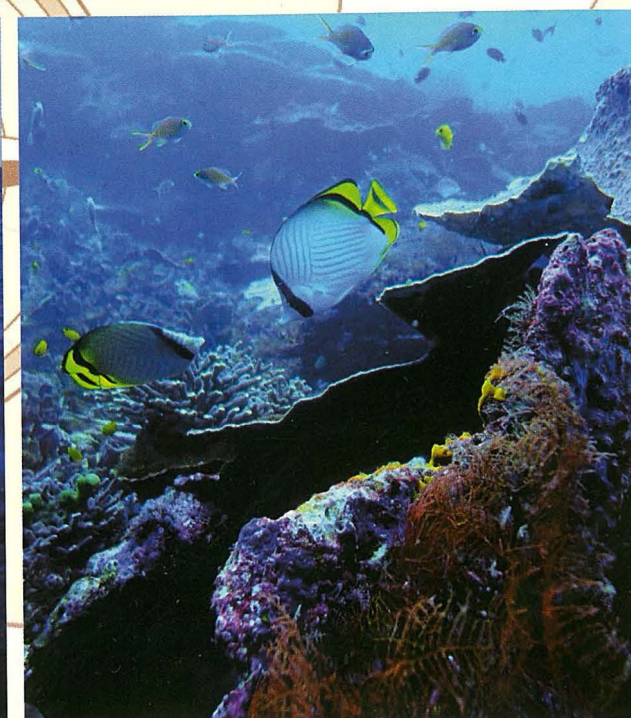
Wild Marquesas Islands



Tuamotus, diving with a wall of sharks



Swimming in 4000 m of water



Raya Ampat

chemical factory in Map Tha Phut on the Eastern Seaboard. A couple of years later, he joined the Royal Varuna Yacht Club in Pattaya, where he learned to sail in a Hobie Cat, a small catamaran. Upgrading to a bigger boat, a Hobie Tiger, he headed out to sea on extended voyages, stopping off at islands like Ko Samui and Ko Chang.

By the time retirement came around, Stefaan had already decided on his plan to sail the globe, but to make it a viable proposition, he would need a far bigger boat than the humble Hobie. In this case, a 40ft single hull Vanderstadt yacht, one of the most trusted boats of its kind. For the next four years, he learned to master the yacht from its home base at Ocean Marina, Pattaya, before setting sail on his once-in-a-lifetime adventure. Heading south from Pattaya, he dropped anchor in the Malaysian resort of Langkawi, before crossing the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka and Mauritius, then around the notoriously unpredictable Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. After visiting Namibia on the western side



Laura catches our dinner

South Atlantic Ocean



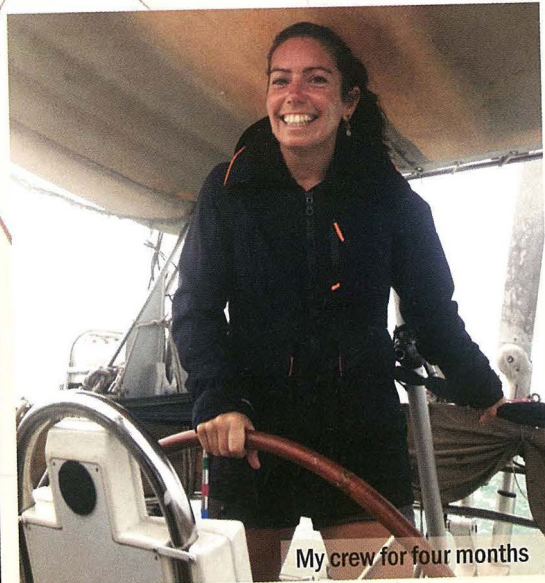
Cape Town



Beautiful Marquesas



Dancing Bora-bora queen



My crew for four months

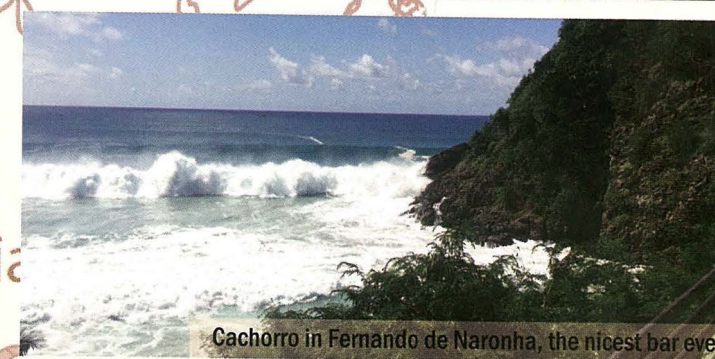
of the South African continent, he began the long voyage across the Atlantic, with a brief stop en route at the island of St Helena.

Next stop was Fernando de Noronha Islands, some 350 kms off Brazil's northeast coast, then to Brazil, on to Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean where Stefaan spent several weeks' well-deserved rest. Later back at sea, on the

approach to the Panama Canal, which would take him to the Pacific Ocean, Stefaan's boat ran aground on a reef. It was an entirely unexpected setback, despite having sophisticated navigational equipment.

"It happened at night in the middle of nowhere," he recalls. "The map I was using was wrong – it indicated a depth of 1,000 metres." Stuck on the reef, Stefaan radioed the local fishermen for help, who in turn contacted the Coast Guards on the coast of Colombia some 20 kms away, who came to the rescue. Any hope of saving his yacht was lost after the fishermen robbed the stricken vessel, including its engine. Stefaan had already spent 18 months, mostly at sea, since leaving his home base in Pattaya, and would spend the next few months as crew on four other boats that took him to Cuba, Panama, the Marquesa Islands, Tahiti, and Bora Bora before returning to Europe.

"After crewing for others, I needed again my own boat, which I eventually acquired in Majorca," he says. One year of preparation later, he was ready to resume his round-the-world expedition, which included a second crossing of



Cachorro in Fernando de Naronha, the nicest bar ever

the Atlantic to the Panama Canal and the Pacific. Then Covid struck and Stefaan found himself quarantined on his yacht in the remote Marquesas Islands and then for a much longer stint on land, which enabled him to discover one of the most fascinating areas of the world and its inhabitants.

Eventually he got underway again and Stefaan sailed to such glorious destinations as the Tuamotos Islands, the Cook Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Vietnam and finally back to Thailand, arriving in Pattaya in February this year.

"Every day brought something new – it could be a catastrophe or a wonderful experience. I never knew what to expect," he recalls. Of all the many memories of this epic voyage, the experience that had the most impact on Stefaan was the vastness of the seas. "The oceans are very empty, completely empty," he says. "There's nothing, not a ship, not a bird, no sign of life. Nothing."

ADVENTURE



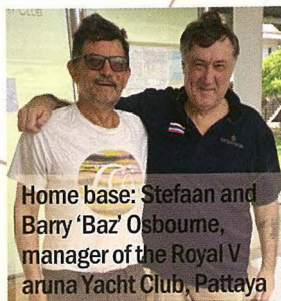
Beach life in Tobago



Resting in the Carribean

Stefaan rarely sailed alone. "I'm not a social person but function much better when I can interact with other people." Volunteers from France, India, Canada, Poland, US, Mexico and his home country of Belgium joined Stefaan at various stages of the voyage.

"The Mexican volunteer was especially welcome as he managed to cook the most wonderful food. But everybody who joined me are now friends for life and I'm in contact with all them on a regular basis."



Home base: Stefaan and Barry 'Baz' Osbourne, manager of the Royal Varuna Yacht Club, Pattaya



Fox, ready for a new owner

For most of his voyage, Stefaan relied on wind power, switching to an engine for 600 kms at most. While a fresh water-maker using sea water ensured ample supplies, the yacht, but also carry 400 liters' storage.

He encountered many dolphins and few whales. Stories about the many fish he caught, including huge tunas, which provided some great meals, come with a cautionary tale. "Don't go fishing when you're hungry," says Stefaan. "You can go weeks without catching anything, then suddenly there are loads of fish."

The 50 or so islands of the Marquesas in French Polynesia also left a huge impression on Stefaan. "They are so remote, so different and very beautiful, often with very steep cliffs making the islands difficult to access. The people are wild in the sense they hunt with knives and catch their own fish."

"The French, who still administer the islands with gendarmerie and a military presence, are well integrated."

But the most beautiful area he visited were the Indonesian islands south of Papua New Guinea. "They are remote and spectacular with crystal clear waters and wonderful beaches. Maps for this part of the world are not good."

Stefaan, who has three children – one in Belgium, another in Spain and another living in Bangkok – is now considering his future. "Right now, I'm trying to settle here in Thailand. I still want to travel – but not on a boat."



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