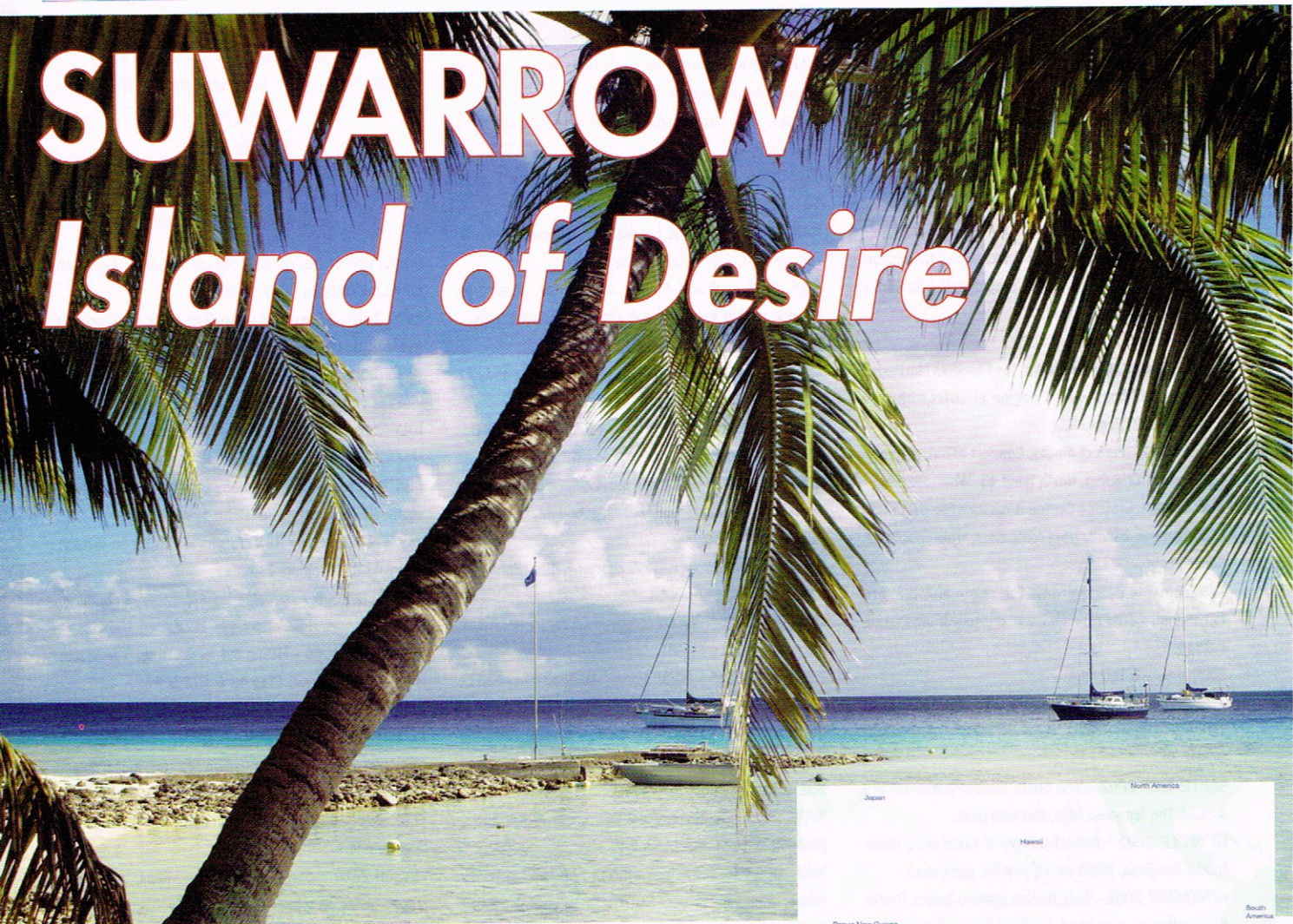


SUWARROW

Island of Desire



By Ruth Gerritse

"BYYYE!!! We'll keep in touch...."

Last greetings and best wishes find their way from ship to shore and back. Through foggy eyes we watch the waving figures at the beach as they grow smaller and smaller. When we reach the pass navigation matters claim our full attention. Once we are back on the ocean both wind and current are favorable and *Thalassa II* does not need much encouragement. Usually a reason for undivided joy, but not this time. With the force of the elements behind us we lose sight of Suvarrow much faster than we would like to...

In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, some 500 miles north-northeast of Samoa, lies the atoll Suvarrow. It is part of the northern Cook Islands; an archipelago of five coral atolls, all rising only meters above sea level. The only way to

reach Suvarrow is by yacht. It is not on any of the commercial shipping routes, there is no ferry service, no runway. Suvarrow is the only atoll in the northern Cooks that has no permanent inhabitants. In spite of this—or because of this—it is by far the most famous of all Cook Islands.

The reason for Suvarrow's fame is New Zealander Tom Neale. Between 1952 and 1977 Neale spent many years living on the island in chosen solitude, like a true Robinson Crusoe. He had no help from the outside, no contact with human beings and nobody but himself and his two cats for company. On the main island, Anchorage, Neale built a small hut, had a vegetable garden and kept some chickens. Not only did he manage to survive quite well on the atoll; he actually

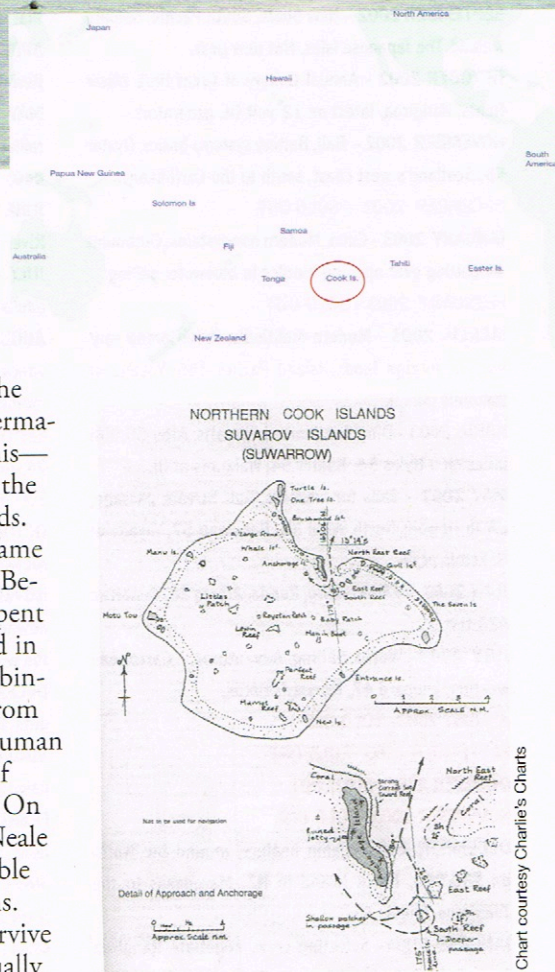


Chart courtesy Charlie's Charts



Tom Neale's old shack, left, still stands and is used as a storeroom. The newer house, right, is the current residence of the Samuela family and the location of the Suwarrow Yacht Club. *Thalassa II*, opposite, anchored near the old pier

loved his life there more than any other life he had ever known. Twice he was forced to leave Suwarrow for medical reasons. He sailed back to civilization on one of the very few ships that stopped at the atoll to collect lobsters and coconuts. But both times he returned to his beloved speck of coral in the middle of the ocean.

Neale's mentor and great example, author Robert Dean Frisbie chose the same atoll as a home for several months in the 1940s. For love of solitude he called it his "Island of Desire," also the title of the book he wrote about his time on Suwarrow. For Neale, one of his biggest fans, the name could not have been more aptly chosen. He too wrote a book about his life on the lonely atoll. "An Island to Oneself" became a classic for island lovers, romantics, South Sea addicts and adventurers alike.

A POPULAR PORT OF CALL

"This will never work...." We are 24 hours away from Suwarrow

and have a strong northeast wind that has been with us for days now. The sailing is wonderful and we are exactly on course. But the seastate is rough, there is a high swell and the only entrance to the lagoon of Suwarrow is a leeshore in these conditions. "Entry should be made only in good weather with a calm sea" according to the cruising guide. Even if we stretch those words to their limits it is quite clear that the circumstances are all wrong. Slowly and reluctantly we start to realize that we may have to abandon our plans of visiting Suwarrow. The atoll that attracts us so because of its remoteness and inaccessibility seems to be presenting us the backside of exactly those characteristics.

But the weather gods are on our side. During the night the wind dies down to a gentle breeze and the sea flattens. At first daylight we spot palm trees on the horizon. We replace the small-scale chart for a detailed plan of Suwarrow and prepare for our approach. With South Reef and Entrance Island in line we

sail through the pass and enter the lagoon.

During our passage we have both enjoyed re-reading Neale's book. It is because of this book that we now feel as if we are entering a world we already know. We drop our anchor in front of the pier that Neale restored with blood, sweat and tears in an obsessive action that nearly cost him his life. Through binoculars we take a first look at Anchorage Island. We plan to stay a day or two, maybe three. More than enough to take in some of the atmosphere and see what is left of things Tom Neale described. Then we suddenly spot four curly heads on the beach, quickly followed by their parents. They must be the caretakers. Suwarrow has been declared a national park by the Cook Island government, and now two rangers are stationed here during the cruising season.

For John, 42, and Veronica, 29, this is their second season on Suwarrow. Last year they came alone and left their four children with a



loving grandmother. But six months of separation was even harder than they had expected. This year the government of Rarotonga made an exception to the rules and allowed them to bring their four boys to the island. A freighter dropped them off in April. Another one will come to collect them again in November. In

the meantime an unreliable radio is their only contact with the mainland (being Rarotonga) and their loved ones. Other than that they are on their own. Even in emergencies. It takes a lot of courage, as well as confidence and wisdom to be able to deal with that.

Neale's old shack is still standing, but is now being used as a storage room. A more solid house was built for the caretakers. The living room and kitchen are downstairs, open to all sides but one and doubling as a classroom, dining room and meeting place. A wooden stairway leads upstairs where the Samuela family of six sleeps. They have arrived with a limited supply of gasoline (for the outboard and a small generator), and a stock of flour, instant coffee, sugar and some other basics. What's there is there: once it is gone there will be no more. The first supply

Our lives are worlds apart, but friendship bridges cultures.

ship that will stop at Suvarrow will be the one that will take them home in November. For meals the family is depending on fish and coconuts.

Visiting yachts are the main reason for their presence. Suvarrow has become a popular port of call for cruisers on their way from French Polynesia to Samoa and Tonga. Because of the increasing number of cruisers contact with other people is one of the things that John and Veronica are not lacking, although the remoteness of the atoll would suggest otherwise. Upon our arrival we find two other yachts in the anchorage, when we leave the number has grown to 10. In August—the busiest month of the season—20 is not unusual. The paperwork involved in our check-in is being taken care of at the kitchen table, but is just as official as in the



main port of Rarotonga. Another job of the rangers is to protect the reserve and avoid abuse such as illegal lobstering and spear fishing. But the thing they love doing most is to share the beauty of Suwarrow with others. Whenever time and weather allow it John and Veronica take people in their small boat to tour the lagoon and visit the outer islands.

THE SUWARROW YACHT CLUB

"Look at this little guy!" Less than a meter from where we stand is a big nest with a tiny little frigate chick in it. He isn't exactly beautiful, but he certainly is cute. It is a glorious day and we are at Gull Island. The name is a bit of a misnomer, as there is not one single gull to be found on this motu—the Polynesian word for small islet within the lagoon. Instead Gull Island hosts a huge colony of frigate birds, as well as an even larger colony of terns. We arrive at the peak of the breeding season and the number of chicks is mind blowing. Every single bush and shrub literally bends under the weight of the nests of the big black frigates that have a wingspan of approximately eight feet. The terns use whatever surface is left for them. "Don't walk on the sand," John tells us, "because you will be crashing eggs there." We completely missed them at first but on inspection find the beach littered with tens of thousands of tern eggs hidden from the eyes of predators by nearly perfect camouflage. The scale of it all is overwhelming. Never before have we seen so many birds, nests, eggs and chicks. The sky is nearly black with wings and the sound is deafening. For a second we fear that we have caused the commotion, but John reassures us that we have nothing to do with it. Birds on Suwarrow do not recognize humans as a potential danger and are not frightened by them. It is just rush hour here: thousands of parents are flying in and out in a constant effort to feed thousands of chicks.

On our way back to Anchorage a fishing line is trailed to catch dinner. Within fifteen minutes Veronica reels in an impressive grouper; five minutes later followed by the next and not long after that by a third one. It is too big a catch for a family of six, but it is the perfect amount for a spontaneous party in potluck style. Every boat brings a side dish and some drinks and the one and only house on the island temporarily becomes the "Suwarrow Yacht Club."

Three days is by far too short for Suwarrow, it doesn't take much to realize that. We want to experience the beauty of Gull Island a second time, we would like to visit more motus and we want to spend more time with John and Veronica. The moment we met a friendship was born and we both feel that we aren't ready to let go



The sky above Gull Island is filled with thousands of terns and frigates and every branch bends under the weight of the nests. Jeremiah, above, proudly shows off a resident coconut crab. The Samuela family, opposite top, and an impromptu potluck, opposite bottom



The four sons eagerly show cruisers their island and cross the reef on their bare feet without even noticing

of it yet. In the days that follow we slip into their island rhythm. We are grateful for the many wonderful moments we share and the insights Veronica and John give us of their unusual life on the atoll. Hours are spent sitting on a coral rock or at the kitchen table. We talk about the island, jobs, dreams, longings, the world.

Their four sons (twins of five, the middle son eight, the eldest 11), show us around on Anchor-age Island. On their bare feet they run across the coral reef as if it isn't there. We can feel the razor sharp edges through the soles of our shoes. Whenever they can they catch small fish using their hands, a hook without bait or a homemade spear. Any catch that doesn't make it to the kitchen is for Zebo, their domesticated young tern. John and Mark work on fixing the generator, the radio and the water pump. Veronica teaches me how to make fresh coconut milk and how to harvest hearts of palms. I have little to teach her in return; my kind of

knowledge is useless here. Instead I relieve her urgent shortage of cooking oil and flour. Our lives are worlds apart, but it doesn't matter in the least. Friendship bridges cultures. Here on tiny Suvarrow there is no room for reticence; the people are as pure as their surroundings. The heartiness and uncomplicated honesty shown by both of them affects us. Time flies by and creates a chain of precious memories.

SERIOUS WILDLIFE

"Ever seen a coconut crab?" Jeremiah is the eldest son and being 11 means you have to be cool. Even here. Our answer to his question is negative, and that is exactly what he was hoping for. Together with his brothers he disappears into the jungle on motu number seven of the so called Seven Islands. Soon we hear their cheers of victory: they have found one. When they eventually work their way out of the shrubs we feel like we have been translocated to Jurassic Park. The animal shown to us is a mix between a gremlin

and an oversized prehistorical lobster. It is blue, has giant claws, more legs than I feel comfortable with and a puffy looking body with warty freckles. "Do you want to hold it?" Jeremiah's face tells me it is a rhetorical question—I am a sissy. Mark is the courageous one and saves our honor. Being completely ignorant when it comes to coconut crabs we are quite impressed by the size of this creature, which measures no less than 16 inches. We quickly learn that we shouldn't be: this is actually a junior. A serious coconut crab can be up to three feet long; from claw to hind-leg that is. So how do you find these animals? "Oh, that's very simple. If you walk through the forest and lose your footing, you have found his nest." Right.

The meat of the coconut crab is considered a delicacy by many, and in the old Suvarrow days they were harvested in large numbers by visiting yachties. Thankfully that came to an end with the arrival of John and Veronica. Catching crabs

is no longer allowed. We release the awe-inspiring animal. It swiftly returns to the safety of the dense vegetation. Instead of coconut crab we will have coconuts for lunch. In less than half a minute John scoots up a tree and provides both drinks and food. On our way back to the dinghy I am more cautious than ever about where to put my feet. Every bit of soft earth is suspicious and the distance seems to be much longer than I remembered.

NEVER SAY NEVER

Two weather windows come and go and both times we are in doubt about what to do. On one hand there is the golden rule to never let a good wind go unused. On the other hand we have grown to love Suvarrow and don't feel like leaving yet. On both occasions we stay, and we never regret it. In the end the reality of practical matters persuades us to be ready for the next window. The water tank is nearly empty, we have shared our last fruit and vegetables weeks ago. On top of that there is the countdown to the coming cyclone season. The ticking

of the clock cannot be ignored and we still have a long way to go to the safety of New Zealand. Fourteen days after our arrival we say our goodbyes and exchange as many bear hugs as we can. "When will you be back?" asks one of the boys. We don't know what to answer. Never say never. It isn't very likely, but oh... how we would love to return one day.

When we pick up our anchor the whole family is waving at us from the beach. As soon as the chain is in and the anchor is locked we set our mainsail. At the same time we are waving back at them and shouting our last greetings. Then we pass South Reef and enter the pass; only minutes after that we are in open water once again. The boat sails smoothly and doesn't need much attention. Thankfully.

Only once before—in Patagonia—were we so moved by a destination that leaving it caused physical pain. It probably isn't much of a coincidence that both Suvarrow and Patagonia can only be reached on one's own keel. To us places like this are the gems of cruising life.



Thalassa II, a Suncoast 48 steel cutter built in Holland in 1977

The magical feeling of reaching the nearly unreachable is hard to beat. These are the destinations where we find our most cherished memories. Looking back at the island that is so quickly turning into a dot on the horizon we talk about what has become one of the highlights in over four years of cruising. Suvarrow. Island of Desire to Frisbie, to Neale and now to us.

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ABOUT SUWARROW

Entry waypoint: 13°14' S / 163°06' W • Anchorage: 13°14' 982" S / 163°06' 476" W

SUWARROW is located approximately 500 miles east-northeast of Samoa, 750 miles west-northwest of Bora Bora and 500 miles north-northwest of Rarotonga—the administrative center of the Cook Islands it belongs to. For an atoll Suvarrow is relatively big, with a lagoon that is approximately 11 miles wide. On the coral ring that surrounds the atoll are about 25 small islands or motu. There is only one pass into the lagoon. Anchorage—the island where the Samuelas are staying and where both Frisbie and Neale once lived—is located next to the pass.

Although it is one of the biggest islands in the atoll even Anchorage is small. At its widest point it is no more than 600 feet, and its length a little over one mile. The only source of freshwater on Suvarrow is rain.

Charts, cruising-guide

- British Admiralty 4606, Tonga to Archipelago des Tuamotu
- British Admiralty 1174, Suvarrow islands
- Cruising guide: Charlie's Charts of Polynesia (The South Pacific, east of 165°W Longitude), 3rd edition