The Hokulea Happening in Yap, 2004

Wells Shoemaker

In 2004, my friend, Don, and I left for our fourth kayaking adventure in the South Pacific.

Several of our friends wondered, before the second trip, which one would return alive, since, apparently, we both have fairly assertive personalities. Turns out, both of us did...over and over again. Don is a tough athlete, a legitimate explorer, expert sailor, experienced diver, underwater photographer, talented navigator, and impeccable planner. He's good at everything he does, but in particular, he's one of the rare and precious dentists who's not only magnificently good at his craft, but sincerely committed to the social equity. The importance of keeping your teeth has no ethnic or financial boundary, nor does pain...and he fixes it while others shirk. I admire this man, who also owns a two-man, 22 foot, inflatable Aire Kayak that has taken us up and down the Marovo Lagoon, out into the Slot with big swells, into the mangroves, through channels choked with dolphins and sharks, and over countless reefs. We found a few beers in outposts along the way.

Don, our boat, and the maybe dormant Nggotokae above the southern end of the Marovo Lagoon

In 2004, instead of returning to the Solomon Islands, we flew to Yap, and later to the Ulithi Lagoon.

Yap, a member of the Federated States of Micronesia, is an island nation known for many virtuous things, including stone money that weighs more than a Volkswagen...but navigation using only environmental signals is the big one. Sailors from Yap reached Hawaii long ago (it's a very long way), according to traditional knowledge.

Skepticism being the currency of modern times, along with worship of the technology of the late 20th century, an apocryphal challenge was cast that it couldn't be done again, and accordingly, it was merely a legend. Back to that later.

Don and I spent a few days on Yap before flying out to the Ulithi Lagoon, where the US Navy sheltered 800 warships in anticipation of the amphibious invasion of Japan, which, of course, did not occur. That's another tale, also. While on Yap, we rented bicycles and pedaled to the far side of the island where the guidebook said there was a spectacular tropical beach. However, the book also said that visitors needed permission, which could be granted at a general store nearby.

We pedaled towards the beach, but we didn't spot the store. We're Yankees, but not stupid enough to barge in without permission, so we retraced our steps. We found a single room building next to the path which we passed earlier. Through an open door, we could see a few cans on shelves. Sitting on the stoop was a friendly looking gentleman about our age with long hair, tattered shorts, sandals, and a friendly smile.

We asked where the store was, and he said, "You're here." We asked if they had any beer, and he said, "Sure." We bought three. Later, three more. We asked if he lived here, and he said, "No, just visiting for a while. I work away."

We asked, "Where?" He replied "Johns Hopkins."

He's a research biologist with a PhD in an arcane molecular discipline. That led to quite a conversation, during which he asked what we knew about Yap. I recited the knowledge regarding the legendary navigators, especially from the small islands East of Yap. I then blurted out my admiration that a boat from Yap made it to Hawaii recently without any electronic gear...relying upon the legendary skills...stars, current, wind direction...water temperature perceived by plunging into it. The legend stands!

He asked, "Well, right. Do you know the name of the boat?"

I replied, "Yes, I think it was the Hokulea."

He grinned and then asked, "Do you want to see it?" Well, yeah.

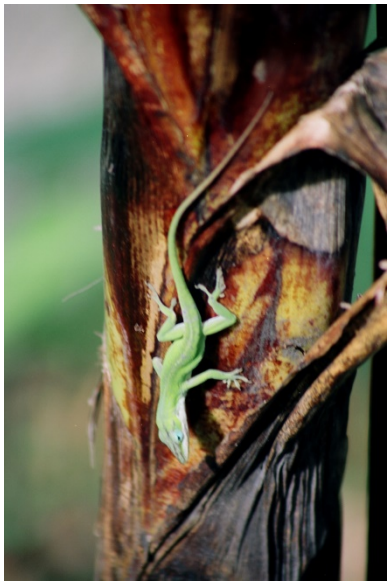
We walked around the back of the store, and he pulled back an orange tarp, and revealed this:

The story isn't quite finished. At that time a young man arrived who had some unusual mannerisms and speech which was hard to understand. As the resident pediatrician in our Yankee duo, the communication became my happy task.

Our new friend, the biologist, asked if we wanted to see some things that weren't in the guidebook, and the answer was obvious. The four of us marched into the jungle, saw a spectacular, intact temple building with no tourist trappings, and the conversation stretched toward dusk.

We returned to the store, but took this last picture before we left.

Please note my clean Salamandre Winery T Shirt. Everywhere I wore that shirt, people giggled. I later found out why. In Yap, lizards are considered to be the most foolish of all creatures, since they will climb a palm tree for no good reason at all, and fail to bring anything back down. To be called a lizard is not exactly a compliment in Yap. To celebrate the creature, well, it leads to questions about judgment.



OK. Now I get it.