



KERMADEC ISLANDS TRIP – 4TH SEPT – 15TH SEPTEMBER 2020

From Margaret Howard

We are finally underway on the *MV Braveheart*, bound for the Kermadec Islands. The trip originally was scheduled for May, postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are lucky as September is a far better time to travel, longer days, warmer water and the humpback migration to the Kermadec Islands.


I travelled down with Laurie Wright on the Friday afternoon to start our journey on the 4th, the others joined us on Saturday the 5th. There were six from Auckland joining the Mt Maunganui Club to make up a party of 14 divers, plus the six crew. From the Dolphin Club, Allan Dixon, John Herring, Margaret Howard, Chris Nipper and Laurie Wright and Robert Ailing also from Auckland. The Mt Maunganui Club, Steven and Glen Grant, Brian Dally, Mike Torr, Tony Burt and Janet Houston with two independent, John Aiken and Lance Lilley. The amazing crew, Skipper Neal, 1st and 2nd Officers BJ and Matt, two Engineers Conrad and Ryan, and the excellent cook Charlie. Such a wonderful bunch of guys, very experienced and professional, and very interesting to spend time chatting to. They take shifts of four hours on and six off.

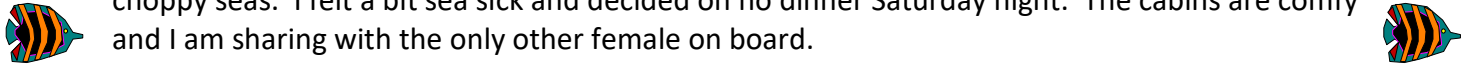
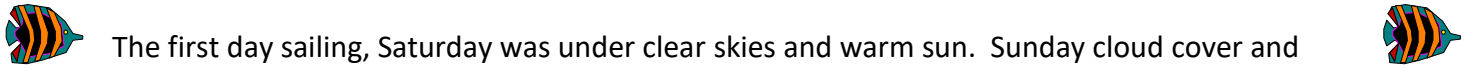
The *Braveheart* has just changed hands, this is the first trip with the new owner Sean Kelly from 'Pacific 7'. The vessels history is mostly with research, at 39 metres long, constructed of steel, with a helicopter deck, two dive tenders and capable of steaming around 10 knots for 33 days non-stop. Previous owner Nigel Jolly says 'They have been doing the impossible since 1995'. The vessel has visited the Kermadecs many times and has spent time in parts of the Pacific and Southern Oceans including the remote Pitcairn Islands and Kerguelen Island.

The vessel is well equipped for research expeditions, can handle 16 metre swells and has even carved its way through ice in the Antarctica. International agencies who have used the *MV Braveheart* include National Geographic, the UK Government and New Zealand Department of Conservation.

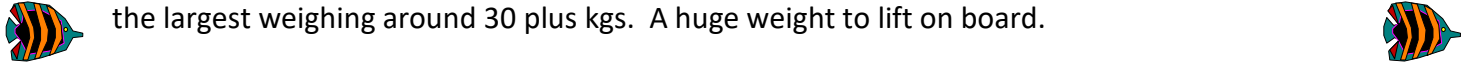
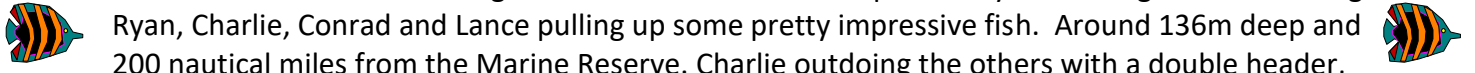
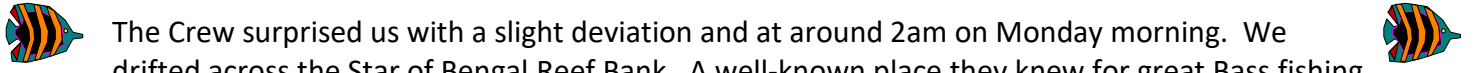
We left the heads of Mt Manganui around 11am on the 5th with 2½ days travel ahead of us to cover the 1100 kms (540 nautical miles) north-north east of the North Island of New Zealand, to reach Raoul Island (also formally known as Sunday Island), the largest and northern most of the main Kermadec Islands. The New Zealand owned Islands, around 16 of them, now a marine reserve, are the visible surface arc of a chain of about 80 volcanoes, stretching for 2,600 km between Tonga and New Zealand. Raoul Island is 900 km south south-west of Ata Island of Tonga.

Usually 6 or 7 living on Raoul in the three buildings, one being the old Bell Homestead. Now pest free and weed control taking place, monitoring the volcanic activity, Dept of Conservation Rangers and a MetService weather station. Back in 2017 the houses in poor run-down condition have now had a complete overhaul and paint. No one on the Islands at the moment because of Covid-19.

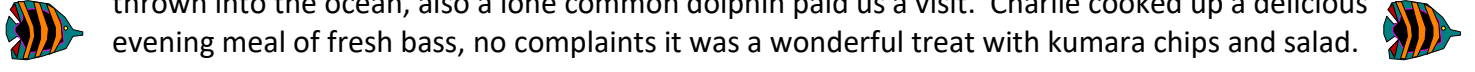
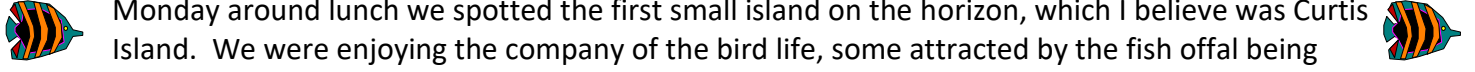




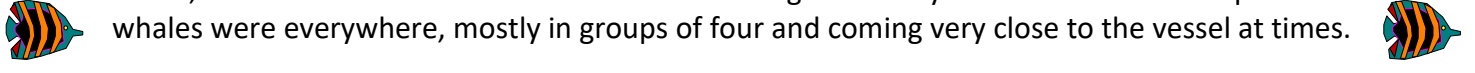
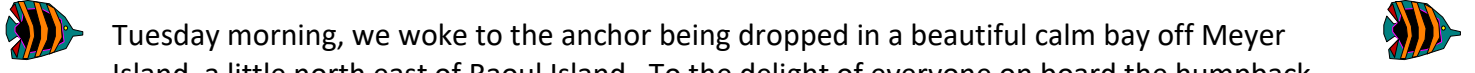
The first day sailing, Saturday was under clear skies and warm sun. Sunday cloud cover and choppy seas. I felt a bit sea sick and decided on no dinner Saturday night. The cabins are comfy and I am sharing with the only other female on board.



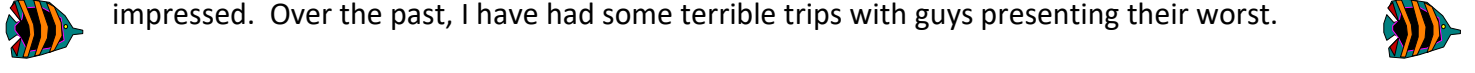
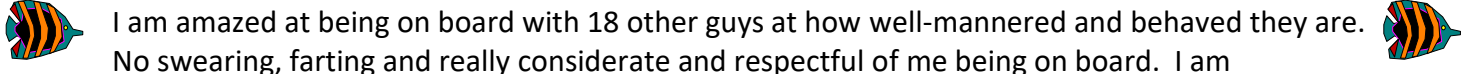
The Crew surprised us with a slight deviation and at around 2am on Monday morning. We drifted across the Star of Bengal Reef Bank. A well-known place they knew for great Bass fishing. Ryan, Charlie, Conrad and Lance pulling up some pretty impressive fish. Around 136m deep and 200 nautical miles from the Marine Reserve. Charlie outdoing the others with a double header, the largest weighing around 30 plus kgs. A huge weight to lift on board.



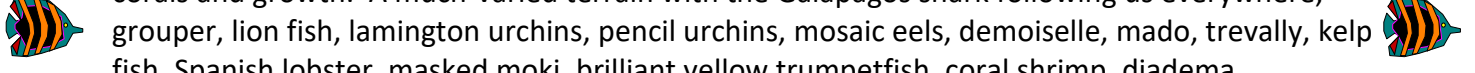
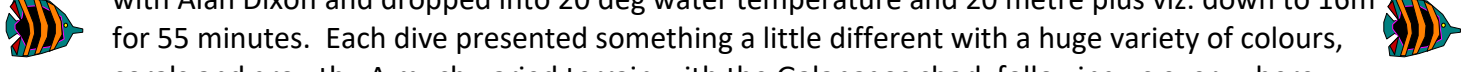
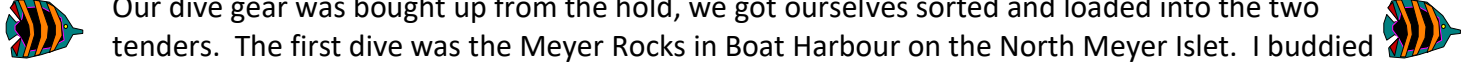
Monday around lunch we spotted the first small island on the horizon, which I believe was Curtis Island. We were enjoying the company of the bird life, some attracted by the fish offal being thrown into the ocean, also a lone common dolphin paid us a visit. Charlie cooked up a delicious evening meal of fresh bass, no complaints it was a wonderful treat with kumara chips and salad.



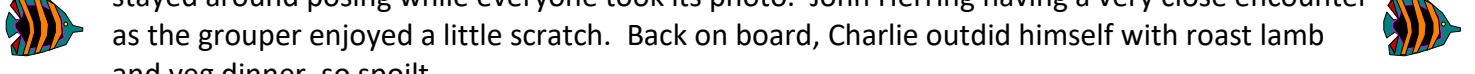
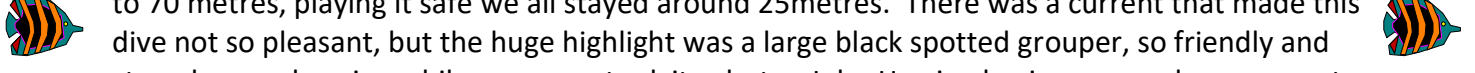
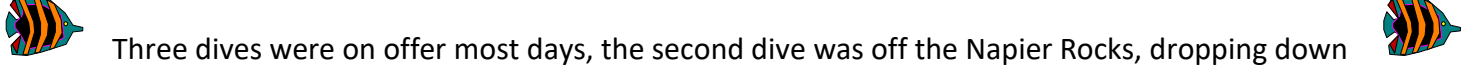
Tuesday morning, we woke to the anchor being dropped in a beautiful calm bay off Meyer Island, a little north east of Raoul Island. To the delight of everyone on board the humpback whales were everywhere, mostly in groups of four and coming very close to the vessel at times.



I am amazed at being on board with 18 other guys at how well-mannered and behaved they are. No swearing, farting and really considerate and respectful of me being on board. I am impressed. Over the past, I have had some terrible trips with guys presenting their worst.





Our dive gear was bought up from the hold, we got ourselves sorted and loaded into the two tenders. The first dive was the Meyer Rocks in Boat Harbour on the North Meyer Islet. I buddied with Alan Dixon and dropped into 20 deg water temperature and 20 metre plus viz. down to 16m for 55 minutes. Each dive presented something a little different with a huge variety of colours, corals and growth. A much-varied terrain with the Galapagos shark following us everywhere, grouper, lion fish, lamington urchins, pencil urchins, mosaic eels, demoiselle, mado, trevally, kelp fish, Spanish lobster, masked moki, brilliant yellow trumpetfish, coral shrimp, diadema, nudibranchs, Moorish idol, Lord Howe coral fish, blue maomao, crown of thorns, long finned striped boar fish, yellow beaked drummer, black angel fish, king fish whizzing around with the sharks, far too many to mention them all. Certainly, a variety of sub-tropical, tropical and temperate fish on each dive while listening to the whale song, very pleasant.





Three dives were on offer most days, the second dive was off the Napier Rocks, dropping down to 70 metres, playing it safe we all stayed around 25metres. There was a current that made this dive not so pleasant, but the huge highlight was a large black spotted grouper, so friendly and stayed around posing while everyone took its photo. John Herring having a very close encounter as the grouper enjoyed a little scratch. Back on board, Charlie outdid himself with roast lamb and veg dinner, so spoilt.











 *MV Braveheart* has undertaken a lot of survey work in the past and is well equipped with excellent gear. We spent a lot of time surveying the ocean floor looking for the wreck of the Cargo ship *SS Wairuna* scuttled in June 1917. 



 *Copied over for a better read.* (While anchored off Sunday Island, for boiler maintenance, on the 2nd of June, 1917, the German raider SMS WOLF sighted smoke on the horizon. The seaplane Wolfchen went to investigate. The smoke was from the 3,947 ton New Zealand steamship *Wairuna*, loaded with cheese, milk, and meat, but even more important to SMS Wolf, she carried 1,200 tons of coal. *Wairuna* was sailed to Sunday Island where both ships anchored, and the coal and stores were soon transferred from *Wairuna* to *Wolf*. On the 16th of June both ships weighed anchors. The next day, no longer of any value to the Raider, *Wairuna* was scuttled. Read more at wrecksite: <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?172408>) 

 We are limited to the places we can dive as the wind is hitting us from the north east. The first dive on Wednesday was on Red Gull Reef, a lava flow around 14 metres in pretty sloppy conditions. The reef was hard to locate and *Braveheart* up anchored and came and located it for us. If you missed the small reef it was sandy all around. Lots of sharks and plenty of fish varieties, with some very curious large kingfish. On surfacing Conrad was operating the tender and we headed around to Denham Bay where *Braveheart* was now anchored. We were entertained by huge humpback whales all around with a large school of dolphins at the same time. We saw a turtle on the second dive in Denham Bay and some very pretty rock outcrops on top of the boulders with the sun behind. Loads of small tropical fish and small cabbage corals, some amazing colours. Also, the ever-present grouper. 

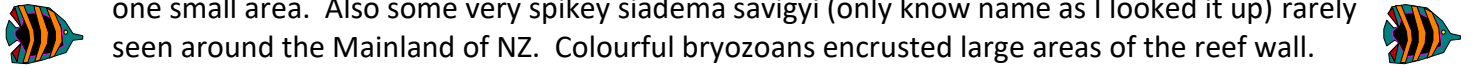
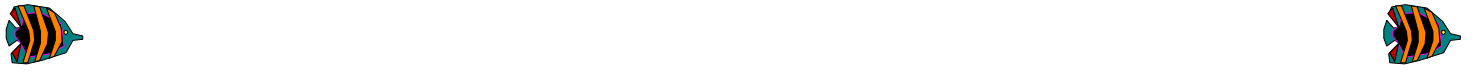
 On Thursday our third day of diving, the seas were up, and *Braveheart* stayed in the lee of Raoul and we headed out in the tenders to find Parsons Reef. A dive site that Pete Mesley recommended. Once again hard to locate, while searching we had the entertainment of whales all around us with breaching, showing their magnificent fluke with tail and pec slapping. On this dive several saw whales while on the dive, some lucky enough to get photos and footage. Whales were also sighted and filmed on the next two dives, and on each dive the ever-present whale song. 

 We had a calm night in Boat Cove but seas chopped up early Friday morning. Neal the Skipper decided to move *Braveheart* to anchor off Meyer Island again. We are lucky as we were still able to dive every day, I believe some trips have turned out so rough that it has not been possible to dive at all. Others have been out there with flat calm seas and able to dive at outer islands and some of the more exotic dives sites on offer. 

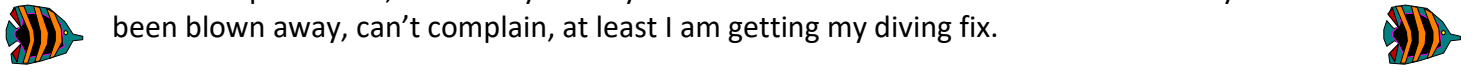
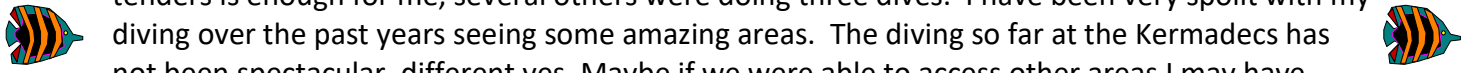
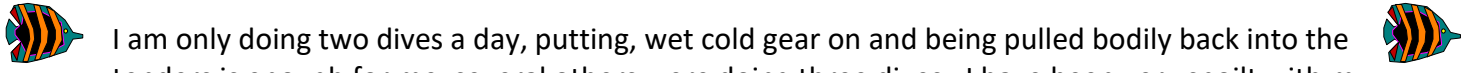
 We dived Egeria Rock, saw a turtle and a much larger shark than normal. I saw some very entertaining behavior by a group of larger blue maomao. I think maybe mating and egg laying, not sure but they were all taking it in turn to rub and roll around on the stoney bottom. 

 My second dive on Friday was the west side of Meyer Rocks with the ever-present photographic grouper posing for us. Also, the friendly sandagers wrasse followed me everywhere blocking my view as he was admiring himself in my mask. There was a variety of the small mosaic eels on this dive and a large gut covered in purple hydroids lining the valley. An eel and Spanish lobster in 

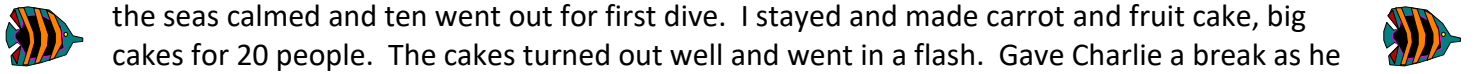
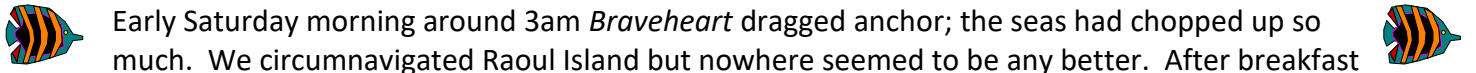




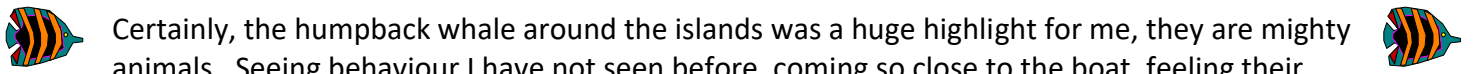
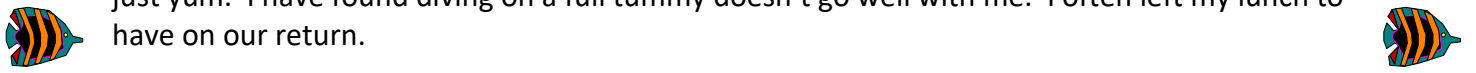
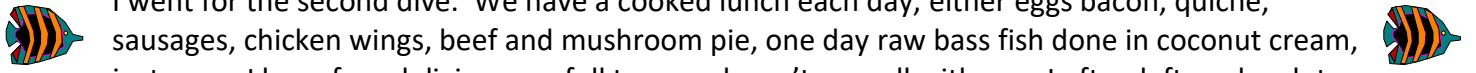
one small area. Also some very spikey *siadema savigyi* (only know name as I looked it up) rarely seen around the Mainland of NZ. Colourful bryozoans encrusted large areas of the reef wall.



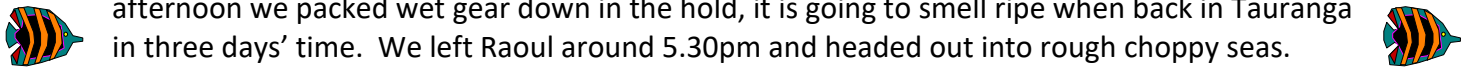
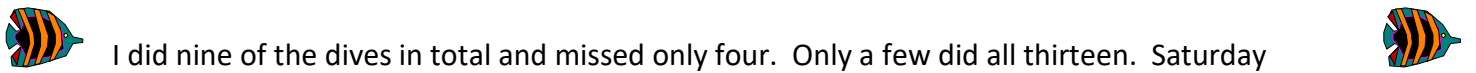
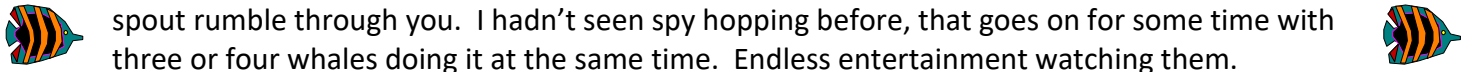
I am only doing two dives a day, putting, wet cold gear on and being pulled bodily back into the tenders is enough for me, several others were doing three dives. I have been very spoilt with my diving over the past years seeing some amazing areas. The diving so far at the Kermadecs has not been spectacular, different yes. Maybe if we were able to access other areas I may have been blown away, can't complain, at least I am getting my diving fix.



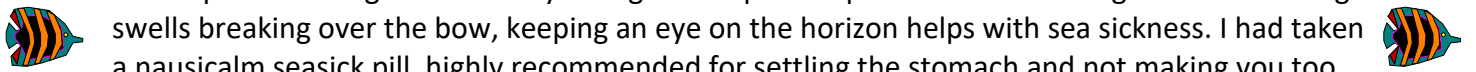
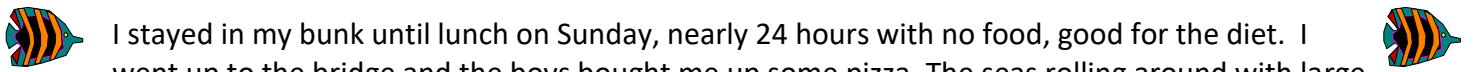
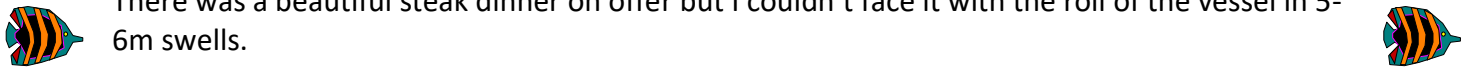
Early Saturday morning around 3am *Braveheart* dragged anchor; the seas had chopped up so much. We circumnavigated Raoul Island but nowhere seemed to be any better. After breakfast the seas calmed and ten went out for first dive. I stayed and made carrot and fruit cake, big cakes for 20 people. The cakes turned out well and went in a flash. Gave Charlie a break as he had gone out for a dive.



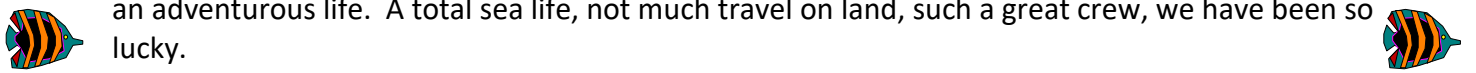
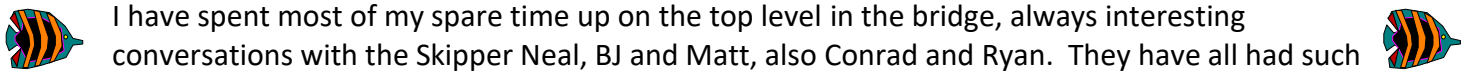
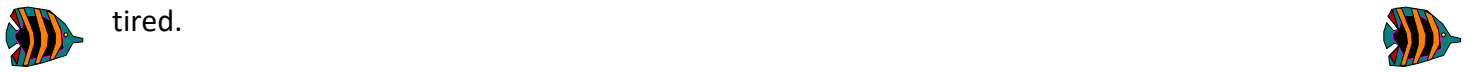
I went for the second dive. We have a cooked lunch each day, either eggs bacon, quiche, sausages, chicken wings, beef and mushroom pie, one day raw bass fish done in coconut cream, just yum. I have found diving on a full tummy doesn't go well with me. I often left my lunch to have on our return.



Certainly, the humpback whale around the islands was a huge highlight for me, they are mighty animals. Seeing behaviour I have not seen before, coming so close to the boat, feeling their spout rumble through you. I hadn't seen spy hopping before, that goes on for some time with three or four whales doing it at the same time. Endless entertainment watching them.

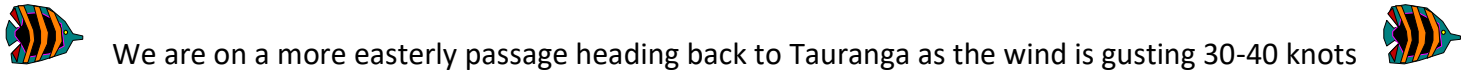


I did nine of the dives in total and missed only four. Only a few did all thirteen. Saturday afternoon we packed wet gear down in the hold, it is going to smell ripe when back in Tauranga in three days' time. We left Raoul around 5.30pm and headed out into rough choppy seas. There was a beautiful steak dinner on offer but I couldn't face it with the roll of the vessel in 5-6m swells.

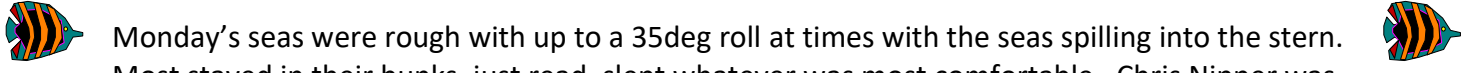


I stayed in my bunk until lunch on Sunday, nearly 24 hours with no food, good for the diet. I went up to the bridge and the boys bought me up some pizza. The seas rolling around with large swells breaking over the bow, keeping an eye on the horizon helps with sea sickness. I had taken a nausealm seasick pill, highly recommended for settling the stomach and not making you too tired.

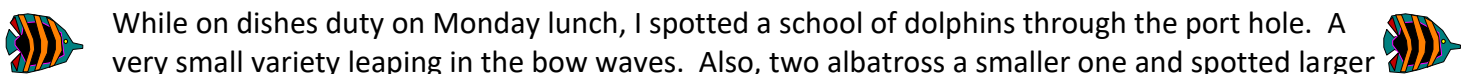




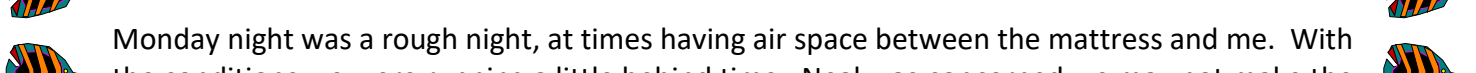
We are on a more easterly passage heading back to Tauranga as the wind is gusting 30-40 knots from the south. No chance of another fish on the Bengal Bank in these conditions, shame as we were all hoping to bring home some fresh fish.



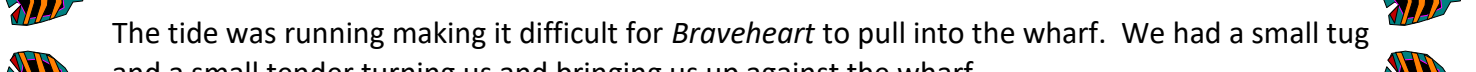
Monday's seas were rough with up to a 35deg roll at times with the seas spilling into the stern. Most stayed in their bunks, just read, slept whatever was most comfortable. Chris Nipper was sea sick and headed out for some fresh air around 3am in the morning. He lost his footing and crashed into the cutlery drawer and mount, taking it totally off from under the table. Neal found him on the floor feeling very sorry for himself. Chris or anyone else can't fathom out how he managed to do that..?? The only accident except for some bruises and scraped skulls on low bulk heads.



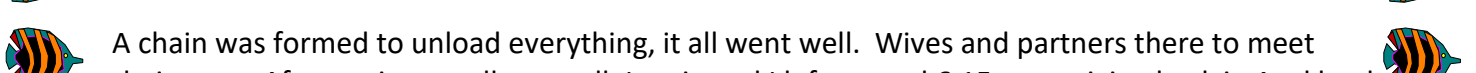
While on dishes duty on Monday lunch, I spotted a school of dolphins through the port hole. A very small variety leaping in the bow waves. Also, two albatross a smaller one and spotted larger one. They are mighty birds. We had a variety of birds accompanying us each day.



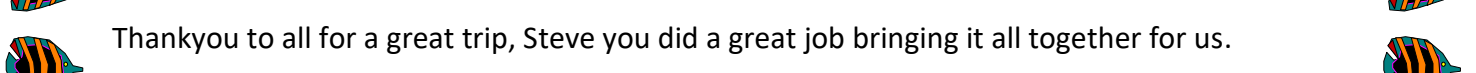
Monday night was a rough night, at times having air space between the mattress and me. With the conditions we were running a little behind time. Neal was concerned we may not make the 5pm tide into the heads.



The tide was running making it difficult for *Braveheart* to pull into the wharf. We had a small tug and a small tender turning us and bringing us up against the wharf.



A chain was formed to unload everything, it all went well. Wives and partners there to meet their men. After saying goodbye to all, Laurie and I left around 6.15pm, arriving back in Auckland at 9pm. My husband Peter there to meet me in Mission Bay.



Thankyou to all for a great trip, Steve you did a great job bringing it all together for us.

