



A FISH STORY

Native hawaiians teach a haole something about fish

At dawn on the twelfth day we raised the twin crests of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea shimmering under a clear sky on the Southeast horizon. It had been a brisk run since leaving Sausalito, the trades well abaft the beam, allowing us to sail for days on end with only the slightest of trim adjustments to the spinnaker. The sailing had been as pleasant as one could have hoped, and the three of us had finally stowed our foul weather gear, glad to finally be in the limpid tropics after so many cold days and nights. But the constant pressures under sail had caused an ominous fracture to develop in the gooseneck, the swivel fitting that joins the boom to the mast and, since a complete break could disable the vessel, it was imperative to get it repaired. We headed for Hilo, aiming to find a welder.

Tying up at the quay, we followed the harbour master's recommendations and hitched a ride into town to negotiate the repairs with a local shop, spending the next couple of days reprovisioning and recovering our land legs. With the gooseneck repaired we cast off at dusk to explore the lee side of the island, sailing close to the land while watching along our starboard rail as the slow volcanic lava oozed from Mauna Loa into the ocean, lighting up the darkness in a hissing cloud of steam, glowing red through the crystalline water as it piled on the bottom.

By early morning we had rounded the corner and were sailing in a fresh breeze along the Big Island's eastern shore. Two hundred yards to starboard, hundreds of spinner dolphins cavorted in the raking light. True to their name, they shot out of the sea as individuals or in groups, spinning rapidly before plunging back into the deep. Their sheer numbers made the ocean's surface boil, and we watched for hours, transfixed in awe by the spectacle.

That afternoon we fetched the southern tip of the island and lost our breeze, proceeding north under power. The Kona Coast is steep-to and offers little in the way of anchorages, so with the last rays of a dying sun we entered Kealakekua Bay, a wide bight backed by the steep slopes of Mauna Loa, considered the sacred harbour of Lono, the Hawaiian fertility god. A small fishing village could be seen between the trees on the southern tip and at the other end was Captain Cook's monument, on the spot where, two centuries earlier, he had been killed by angry natives. No other vessels were in the bay and we dropped the hook in 30 feet over sandy bottom, settling in for the night.

As I brushed my teeth on the deck the next morning, a group of dolphins swam close to our stern. Grabbing goggles and fins, I dove in, hoping to interact with them and fulfil a dream I'd had since childhood. But they were elusive and kept their distance, edging away each time I approached, allowing me to get no closer than 20 or 30 feet. Observing them from a distance, I discovered that they were feeding, and it was a fascinating sight. The pod had circled a school of small fish that they kept in tight formation with the bubbles exhaled from their blow-holes. In what appeared to be some kind of hierarchical order, one dolphin at a time would enter the maelstrom of circling fish and eat his fill before retreating to the periphery, allowing another to enter and gorge. The more important animals seemed to feed first while the younger, less important dolphins waited their turn. I could only marvel at the obvious intelligence of these animals, whose military precision in feeding enabled them to so famously spend much of their time in play.

Eventually, the pod broke ranks and headed out to deeper water. I swam back to the boat to inflate the dinghy and rig the outboard, spending the rest of the morning snorkelling in the crystal-clear waters near Cook's monument. My two shipmates had invited Australian friends visiting the islands to join us for a few days' cruise and they had planned to meet them at the Kona airport. We agreed that I would ferry them ashore in the dinghy and return for them later that evening after their friends had arrived.

In the centre of Kealahou Bay is a primitive landing platform, a concrete quay where boats can load and offload, and I steered the dinghy toward it with my crew on board, togged up in their best shore-going clothes. Standing on the dock, watching our approach with grave curiosity, were a girl of seven or eight and her four or five-year old brother, both dressed in sun-bleached T shirts and patched shorts. Arriving at the quayside, my shipmates quickly hopped off and went to look for a phone booth from which to call a taxi while I prepared to return to the boat. As I was putting the outboard into reverse, the girl called out,

“Mister! Give us a ride on your boat! Please?”

They were irresistibly cute and I, not having much to do for the rest of the day, thought, “Sure, why not?” The two kids clambered aboard, settling into the dinghy while we headed out for a ride around the bay. They were quiet and respectful and didn't say much.

Off in the distance, near the edge where the bay opens into deep water, I noticed a strange sight. Several fins were protruding through the surface, moving slowly and

erratically in a way I'd never seen before. It looked as if several fish were feeding from some floating object which in itself might be worthy of closer scrutiny, but it was hard to make out from where we were.

“What do you suppose that is?” I asked the children. “Should we go over and investigate?”

Silence.

Arriving at the spot we discovered that it was a big fish swimming upside down. The fins we'd seen from a distance were its tail fin and pectorals, the dorsal fin being concealed beneath the water. It seemed obvious that at some point in the night it had been caught on some fisherman's line and in the subsequent struggle had broken free, a suspicion only confirmed by the length of line hanging from its mouth. But its frantic descents to the deep had inflated its air bladder and it now swam inverted, unable to release the air. It was only a matter of time before it would be attacked by predators.

This was too good an opportunity to pass up. An exhausted but healthy fish could not be left here to the mercy of the sharks. Surprisingly, it was still intact, and if it could only release its air, it would be swimming happily in the depths. We had but little time before this chance slipped us by and all I had to do was seize the fish by the tail and haul it aboard. The problem was its size. As I neared the dinghy I realised the damn thing was nearly as big as the boat! No problem— I grabbed hold of its tail and proceeded to haul it in. The children, by now, had lost all their original shyness and were screaming like banshees, scrambling in a panic to get away from the monster fish.

“Shut up and help me pull!” I commanded.

Obediently, they took hold of whatever part they could and the three of us succeeded in bringing the fish on board. Out of its element, the fish began to struggle, flopping around the bottom and endangering the stability of the dinghy. Fearing we would capsize, I instructed the kids to sit on the fish to keep it from moving and to try to be quiet while I set course for the quay. They dutifully took their positions but were unable to contain their excitement, screaming all the way in.

As we neared the shore I observed an enormous Hawaiian standing on the quay. His face not only betrayed concern for the children, but outright hostility towards me, and I began to wonder how I could explain the apparent mayhem that must have alarmed anyone viewing us from the shore. Hawaiian natives, especially those on the Big

Island are not known for their affection towards white people, whom they derisively call haoles. Once a proud and independent kingdom, two hundred years of European colonisation have brought them nothing but misfortune and death from missionaries, whalers, and competing colonial interests. Furthermore, diseases to which they had no immunities have decimated their way of life as well as their population. Although the percentage of the native population on the Big Island is relatively high compared to the rest of the archipelago, it remains infinitesimally small, with Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiians) representing less than 0.5% of the population, most of whom live with extended families engaged in fishing and ranching. So it was with some trepidation that I throttled down and nosed the dinghy alongside the loading platform.

“Aloha, bra! Look what we have brought you!” I exclaimed with a broad smile as the kids clambered off. “This is our contribution to the community!”

The man’s face softened as he replied “You’ve got yourself an ulua!”

Although by now it had ceased its struggling, the fish was so large I could barely move it. The Hawaiian calmly stepped into the dinghy and lifted it with one hand, holding it under his chin. “Too bad you’re so late; we could have added it to the cooking pit of our lu’au! Come on back and have a brew,” he said, holding the beast as it hung from his chin to his toes.

I tied up and followed him into a grove of trees where a group of men and women were gathered drinking beer around the imu, an open pit fire covered in stones and coconut fronds and banana leaves under which a pig slowly roasted. It was clear they had been there for several hours; the scent of cannabis filled the air and the party was in full swing. More beer was passed around and I was offered delicious pupus out of Tupperware containers that contained all sorts of delicacies. The Hawaiian giant placed the fish on a large picnic table, and in a few minutes had gutted it and cut enormous slabs of meat into cubes and filets.

“We can’t open the imu or we’ll spoil the pig, but we can make a great sashimi and have plenty left over for the whole village” he said. Filling a large pot with the cubes of ulua, he added soy sauce and wasabi, letting the whole mix marinate. “It’ll be ready in a few minutes — you’ll see how good it is,” he said with a wink. He carefully wrapped the steaks and filets in banana leaves and placed them in plastic bags. “Take a few back to the boat with you. There’s plenty to go round!”

By the time I had finished my first beer and taken a few tokes of the joint going round, I had the warm, cozy feeling of being amongst friends. This gathering, and the feast that these simple fishermen were sharing with me confirmed all the stories I had

heard about Polynesian hospitality and I felt it was a well-earned reward for the hardships endured in sailing a small boat across the Pacific Ocean. Amongst themselves they spoke Hawaiian, which I could not understand, but their Pidgin English was nearly as incomprehensible. No matter: with the warm buzz of brotherhood, beer and weed I understood everything I needed to know.

After a few minutes, the Hawaiian pulled out a few cubes of fish and presented them to me on a banana leaf, saying, “Try this. See if you like it.”

Biting into that first piece of sashimi was Heaven on Earth. I had rarely tasted anything better. This is the life — freshly caught fish with Native Hawaiians on a tropical island, surrounded by friendship and good cheer. This is as good as it gets.

Suddenly I remembered.

Ciguatera is a toxin found in fish inhabiting tropical and subtropical waters, magnifying along the food chain as larger fish feed off smaller ones. It is odourless and tasteless and cannot be removed by cooking, and its symptoms include gastrointestinal poisoning, neurological disorders, paralysis and, occasionally, even death. The larger the fish the greater the concentration of the toxin, and I was very interested to discover how the Native Hawaiian fishermen had learnt to distinguish healthy fish from diseased ones. Centuries of living from the oceans had surely given the Polynesians inside knowledge of the perils of the sea and I was eager to learn from them.

“Tell me, how can you tell if the fish has ciguatera?” I mumbled as I bit into another piece of sashimi. “Is there any particular test you conduct to determine if the fish is safe to eat? Any way at all of knowing?”

“Oh, that’s very simple, bra. Look around you. Do you see anybody else eating it? We simply wait 20 minutes and if nothing happens to you, we figure it’s safe to eat and we all dig in!”

Those ancient Polynesians knew certainly their stuff.

Text and photograph by Michael Dunev

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