



FPB 64' - BUFFALO NICKEL



## EXPERIENCES

'It's all the *reasons* we cruise'

BY VALERIE AND STAN CREIGHTON

The *cruising lifestyle* is not all about cocktails enjoyed at sunset in idyllic anchorages.



**W**ell... okay. The cruising lifestyle is MOSTLY about cocktails enjoyed at sunset in idyllic anchorages. But occasionally, circumstances warrant far more engagement with the people who inhabit the coastal communities we visit. And perhaps not surprisingly, it's times like these that result in our most stirring and colorful memories.

We were readying to depart Fiji in 2015 for the lovely tropical island nation of Vanuatu in the South Pacific, researching scuba diving destinations, fascinating traditional villages, and volcanoes to visit, when Cyclone Pam hit. The Category 5 storm slammed into Vanuatu with 155 mph winds and gusts to 200 mph, wiping out power and communication in this poor country of 83 islands. 90% of buildings were damaged, displacing thousands of people from their homes.

"So, now what?" we wondered. Maybe we should just skip Vanuatu altogether and just make for New Caledonia, with its postcard-worthy beaches, spas and French food and wine? Underwater reefs in Vanuatu would be damaged along with their infrastructure. And we could never have slept well at night anyway, after frolicking all day as tourists in the face of their devastation.

Instead, we figured this would be a good time to give something back. During our previous two years cruising Fiji, the local people had been so generous and welcoming to us yachties. Just walk past a home in a Fijian village at mid-day, and the family will invite you in for lunch. They'll mean it, too. Whenever a cruiser faces a challenge – runaway dinghy, boat gone aground – the villagers are right there, dropping everything to lend a helping hand. We'd heard the people were similarly genuine and welcoming in Vanuatu. So we decided to spend six weeks contributing in whatever way we could to their recovery efforts.

After a bit of online research, we found a good fit with a U.S.-based charitable organization called **Sea Mercy**. Their mission involves using sailing volunteers and their vessels to deliver disaster relief and medical care to island nations in the South Pacific. They coordinate a 'mosquito fleet' of private yachts that, unencumbered by some of

the red-tape plaguing the larger NGO's, are able to make assessments and meet needs in less accessible target areas in a more nimble and efficient way. Our **FPB-64** was the perfect vessel for the job: *we had the capacity to go for extended periods in remote locations without access to fuel, fresh water or provisions; and we had no problem making 'uphill' runs comfortably and quickly among the islands.*

Our job was to make assessments, deliver and install equipment for the World Health Organization, deliver needed supplies within the province on behalf of Vanuatu's Disaster Management Office, and meet whatever other needs we could as they arose. Our focus was the Shepherd Islands, a cluster of relatively small and rarely visited islands that were hardest hit by the cyclone.

Other than using our yacht for interisland transport, the 'fixing of stuff' turned out to be our most valuable contribution. The Ni-Vanuatu (people of Vanuatu) living on the more remote islands are skilled and resourceful in many areas, but not when it comes to machinery and hardware. Though they enjoy the recently available convenience of having a truck or an outboard motor or a generator (often shared,) they don't know how to service or maintain these and have nobody to teach them. Cruisers, on the other hand, are virtually to a man (and in many cases, woman) very handy at diagnosing and repairing mechanical and electrical equipment, often able to MacGyver things back to functionality with dental tools and duct tape.

Of particular importance were systems related to fresh water catchment, and damage to small boats. The villagers depend on their small craft, not only for subsistence fishing, but also for access to health care in larger villages, which can be many miles away.

In truth, we received at least as much as we gave during the experience. It allowed us to cultivate friendships and to gain insight into a lovely and vibrant culture. It inspired us in exposing us to people who respond to upheaval and tragic loss with a positive outlook and even generosity. It anchored us in gorgeous locations off the beaten path, where we discovered the wonder of Vanuatu's wildlife and natural environment.