

A Cruise in the Indian Ocean

by Heide Wilts – www.freydis.de

Still 645 miles to go to the Prince Edward Islands. The barometer continues to fall - high time to prepare 'Freydis' for stormy seas ahead. We fold the trisail, get the jib ready, close the valves and portholes, check if everything is well secured and stowed away, in case of capsize. Finally we lay out life-jackets and lifebelts.



Early in the morning we start to dance about; a storm with blue skies and sunshine is blowing up from the north-west. Huge seas with green and white foaming crests are towering behind us, rolling noisily, thundering and lapping against the ship and breaking more and more often over the cockpit and the deck. At eight o'clock strong winds drive us across 40° south. A thundering New Year's Eve is about to start and the barometer is still falling. 'These are the "roaring forties"; now things are getting going,' shouts Erich, the skipper, and the old hands nod. Our newcomers on board have become very quiet; Steffen disappears time and again with the cockpit beneath the masses of tumbling seas. He clings desperately to the rudder and stares at the compass as though trying to hypnotise it. Burghard, looking pale after his watch, has retired to his berth. Both of the men have no idea what we are going to be facing in the next few weeks. Only much later on do they admit that they had been frightened out of their lives during this part of the voyage. A few days ago we set out from Durban on a cruise of 6500 sea miles; starting from South Africa we want to sail via the small wind-swept islands in the south of the Indian Ocean to Perth in Australia. Erich and I have been sailing the seas of the world for decades. No later than 1991 when we were stranded on Deception Island did we prove our ability to survive even in the Antarctic. Karl, Erhard, Manfred and Peter have all sailed with 'Freydis' before. Only two of the crew are new to our good old 25-tonner of steel. Right from the outset all eight of us are well aware of two things: there is no turning back on this route. One can but allow oneself to be swept towards Australia by the prevailing westerly gales. To sail in the opposite direction against the elements is impossible. Secondly, there is no opportunity to sign off en route. The few existing islands are either prohibited nature reserves or are inhabited by a few hardy scientists, living like recluses at these small out of the way bases,

who only grant asylum to those genuinely shipwrecked. At eleven o'clock at night on our eleventh day at sea, we see the volcanic island of Prince Edward on our radar screen - our first stop. At four o'clock in the morning it slowly emerges from a bank of dark clouds. In the light of dawn we can recognize high black cliffs and gentle rolling hills, covered in a shining silky coat of olive green vegetation. The beach and the volcanic slopes are studded with hundreds and thousands of white dots. Each dot represents a bird: penguins, giant and diving storm petrels and wandering albatrosses. Seals accompany us diving up and down in the water around the boat. We steer to the neighbouring island of Marion. The twelve young South Africans stationed there are already eagerly awaiting our arrival: 'Welcome to Marion,' calls out a voice over the radio. 'I'm Brian. We're looking forward to meeting you. You are the first human beings to visit us here for nine months. We'll let the crane down so that you can come ashore safely.' Cold champagne and hot showers await us on the island - a few days of what seems like a holiday to us. Every day at five o'clock in the afternoon it is 'Orca Time' on Marion. Six killer whales turn into the bay, cutting through the crystal clear sea like a naval convoy. The scientists recognize each whale by its dorsal fin and have long since given them all names. When we call out over the water from the rocks, the animals seem to hear us. They swim to the shore and blow. Steffen and Burghard get nearest to them; warmly dressed in wet suits, they climb down the cliffs on long ropes into the icy cold water in order to observe the orcas more closely. It is cloudy and drizzly as we set off on our expedition across the island. We climb over volcanic rocks covered in lichen, and cross over stony deserts and an open tundra-like landscape with carpets of grass and moss, marshes, and moors and fields of tussock grass and edible Kerguelen cabbage. It often feels as though we are walking on soggy sponges. Wandering albatrosses, with a wing span of three metres, are sitting stoically on their nests. 'Marion is just twenty-four by sixteen kilometres, but a third of all the king penguins in the world live here,' explains Jaca, a young biologist who is taking us to Kildalkey Bay.' 250,000 pairs of macoroni penguins and 500,000 pairs of king penguins brood here. A slippery carpet of excrement extends from this penguin settlement. When we leave Marion for the Crozet archipelago, we put our watches forward two hours. During the trip there is plenty of time to study old reports, written by victims of shipwrecks, and sealers and whalers, who sailed in this area at a time, when nobody could have imagined that one day people would sail here just for pleasure. In November 1886 the French schooner, 'Tamaris', struck hidden cliffs south of the 'Isle de Pingouins' and sank. After two days thirteen of the crew reached the neighbouring island, 'Ile de Cochons', in a small sloop with some water and a few kilos of ship's biscuits as provisions. British sealers had once released pigs on the 'Ile de Cochons', but subsequently killed them off, as they

were inedible due to their feeding mainly on dead penguins. As a result, the stranded had to survive on birds' eggs and seal meat. In August of the following year they were so desperate that they scratched an SOS message on the lids of old preserving tins which they hung round the necks of albatrosses. Forty-eight days later fishermen found a dying bird on the beach near Perth and took its airmail to the local authorities. Again two months passed until a rescue party reached the 'Ile de Cochons'. However, their 12-day search was without success and the missing men were never heard of again. We also have mixed feelings as we steer towards Crozet. There does not appear to be a sheltered place to anchor in the whole of the archipelago. Navigation is difficult, as the island's position has not been measured accurately. To add to this, dense fog envelopes us and our echo-sounder also fails at the last moment. As the down winds hiss at us from the invisible steep slopes, we can sense the proximity of the island. Again and again a labyrinth of dark rock faces, on which the sea breaks with dazzling white spray, looms out of the fog for a second or two. The howling and the barking of the seals and the trumpeting of the king penguins echo hauntingly from the cliffs. Ahead of us a deep inlet. A refuge, perhaps? No, a foreboding jet of air. So again, a hasty exit. Soon after that we see a bay, but it is far too small for us. Not a single patch of sand, only insurmountable steep rock faces and caves full of seals(??) They feel at home in this martial environment; as do the penguins who let themselves slip down the long strands of seaweed, hanging from the rocks, as on a slide. As the sea breaks onto the rocks, they are lifted back to their abodes, like in an elevator. On the shore there are dark gurgling caves which look like entrances to the underworld. We do an about-turn - but come back later, as we do not find a better place to anchor. Steffen, Burghard and Manfred succeed in getting onto the island from the dinghy via a ledge and in fastening mooring ropes on land, to lend additional support to the anchor. During the first night a storm suddenly blows up and puts the safety measure to the test. By noon the following day the nightmare is over. 'Off to the island; there's no time to waste,' Erich urges. Five of the party cross over to explore the uninhabited island. Three of us hold the fort on board. Within hours a hurricane hits us with winds of up to Force Fourteen. To my horror, I notice the seas have changed direction; the breakers are now running straight into our little bay which is white with spray and steeped in mist. Not waves, but foaming walls of water up to eight metres high are tearing towards us and washing over the whole boat. More and more often gaping troughs open up in front of us. The sea retreats. It is as if all the water is sucked out of the bay. Even the seals have crept onto the rocks higher up and are fighting loudly over the safest spots. Penguins and baby seals are being washed off the ledges and slashed by the waves. Only the greedy giant storm petrels benefit from the massacre. We force ourselves to keep calm.

What we would like to do best is to slip anchor, untie the mooring ropes and, using the engine, leave at full speed. However, the slightest complication with the engine would lead to our being smashed onto the rocks by the waves. If we were actually able to get out with our 60 h.p. engine we would have to leave the others behind without food or adequate clothing. Who knows when we would be able to return, if we were driven away with the storm? In addition, we would no longer have an anchor to enable us find shelter in another bay. There is really no alternative but to wait and survive this pitch black night. Every now and again we illuminate the bay with the halogen lamp in order to monitor our position. Sometimes we see our party up on the cliffs, trying to keep warm by keeping on the move. They have returned hot and sticky from their expedition, and are now suffering from exposure. 'We had hardly settled down to sleep on the penguins' excrement, huddled up next to one another like a row of spoons, than some disgusting, scavenging birds started pecking at us,' recalls Erich later. Next morning Erhard sets off with the dinghy to rescue those on land. After two or three extremely high breakers the bay always becomes calm for a moment. We have to make use of this time. The boat is being tossed up and down under the rocks. The only way to get on board is to take a daring leap when the boat is washed upwards by a wave. Burghard and Manfred want to jump first - and are promptly swept from the rocks by a wave. Manfred is still able to haul himself back up. Burghard is hanging from the rope in front of the rock face. A second attempt at this hair-raising manoeuvre: Erhard steers the dinghy to where Burghard is hanging who then simply lets himself drop. Then the others follow suit. After we are safely reunited on board, tears begin to flow. We make a hasty escape from the bay. In February 1772 while searching for a promising 'southern land', the Frenchman, Yves Joseph de Kerguelen with his two frigates, came across an unknown group of islands, lying like a blob of ink surrounded by lots of little dots in the Antarctic sea. The sailor described it to his king as a real paradise, a fertile and lovely 'France of the South'. Captain Cook, passing by four years later, re-christened the alleged Garden of Eden, 'Desolation Island'. It was not until the whaler era that whole fleets landed on the Kerguelen islands to plunder its marine wealth. We find plenty of relics of these times along the coast: corroded equipment from whaling factories, boilers, tanks, pipes, winches, wagons and rails leading to a decaying pier. In Port aux Francais we discover modern 'civilisation' - eighty French people keep the flag of the 'Grande Nation' flying. They live in a real village, consisting of concrete houses, portable homes, corrugated iron huts and a forest of aërials. There are even cars driving around. The people stationed at the base are tremendously hospitable and spoil us with superb French cooking. Lettuce and other vegetables come fresh from the base's own greenhouse. After a night in the 'suite', in principle, reserved for the

'Administrateur Superieur', we leave the archipelago heavily laden with 360 eggs from the chicken farm and 50 freshly baked loaves of bread from the bakery. On course for Heard Island. We cross over the invisible border to the 'Furious Fifties' in style. Freydis races at 10 knots and more over the waves which resemble a raging mountain range. The danger of these manoeuvres lies in the possibility that the bow can plunge into the trough of the wave and the following sea can cause the stem to capsize over the bow. Again and again we run off course. At this point a single breaker from the side could also capsize us. For two days the hurricane has been chasing us, becoming more and more ghastly; the waves towering in an increasingly threatening fashion. The reason for this is the enormous submarine mountain range that lies between Kerguelen and Heard, which causes the waves to break and is in some parts only 150 metres below the surface of the water. Between two storm fronts the wind dies down to Force Eight, and sometimes a few rays of sunshine manage to force themselves through the clouds. On the port side a colossal iceberg drifts past us and behind it we see land at last - Heard, the most southerly point of our voyage. We live on a 'flat' island for two days, as the mountains remain hidden in the clouds. Suddenly 'Big Ben', appears right in front of us, the volcano on Heard with its 2745 meters and glistening glacial tongues, extending down over the black lava beaches to the sea. Once more we cross over with the dinghy and find a waterproof packed logbook in an abandoned Australian shelter. The last yacht registered is Gerry Clark's 'Totorore'. This New Zealander sailed all alone to Heard eight years ago. After a mast broke on Marion, his crew decided they had had enough. Clark concludes his entry with, 'In case I don't survive, please inform my wife that I did at least get as far as Heard.' It was a miracle that this single-handed yachtsman managed to reach Australia, his destination - although he capsized five times during this last stage alone. We have another 2000 sea miles ahead of us to St Paul, our last stop. We have long since left the wildest of the seas behind us. Instead we find ourselves far too often in a lull or with the wind coming from the wrong direction. We tack and bob up and down. In the end the crew have to radio Perth and cancel the bookings for their return flights. While the crew is reading all the books in the library on board, Erich is horrified to discover that the navigation charts for Australia are missing. Out of pure necessity we have to make do with the drawings in a sailing book and an old school atlas in order to sail round the islands and reefs. A hundred miles from our destination the first freighters pass us, so we know we are close to the coast. The crew is basking in the sun. After 73 days and 6663 sea miles the haze lifts, and we see Australia ahead of us. We go ashore at the pier in Freemantle. The customs officers search the boat from top to bottom. The health authority officials confiscate butter, onions and spices. Then they also send a German

shepherd dog on board to search for drugs. It is only when we tell them about our itinerary that they begin to thaw a little. Shaking his head, one of them takes me aside, all he is able to say is: 'You must be a very crazy woman.' Heide's summary of the voyage We are given a mooring at the pier of the Freemantle Sailing Club, where for the first time after 73 days and 6663 sea miles we give Freydis a thorough spring clean and also wash off the salt. In the evening at the 'Fisherman's Kitchen' we have a skipper's meal of seafood and lots of greens to replenish our vitamin deficit. Our mood is both euphoric and wistful. Our experiences of the last months are still very vivid in our minds; the fear and excitement have not yet faded. It will be a while before we have digested it all. A process which each one of us has to do on his own. However, at the end of the voyage we are all proud that we are still friends, despite living at such close quarters, and look back without any reservations on the time we spent together. The time has come for us all to go our different ways, but we are sure that we will meet again; some may even sail with us once more. The hard times are soon forgotten; what remains are the beautiful memories of lonely bays, deep-blue seas, gigantic volcanoes, bizarre icebergs, glaciers and animals which had never seen a human being before. Lastly we cherish the experiences and adventures we have been through together. For our young members, it is all summed up in Steffen's final comment: 'It has not put us off, on the contrary, we have tasted blood.' As regards sailing in the Indian Ocean Erich and myself have, all the same, come to the conclusion: 'Once is enough!'

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