

On foot and on a tractor across "Europa"

by Heide Wilts – www.freydis.de

Who has ever heard of the little island called "Europa" in the southern part of the Mozambique Channel? If it appears on the globe, then it can be no more than a dot. However, it is exactly such remote spots which particularly



arouse our curiosity. We make an effort to gather information on the He Europa, but it turns out to be very scanty. Eventually we discover that it is an isolated coral island with a lagoon in the middle of the Indian Ocean, far away from both the coast of the South African mainland and Madagascar. Politically it is under French rule, and the French are said to maintain a base there. As a yachting enthusiast it is highly doubtful whether we will be permitted to visit the island. Quite rightly, such remote islands are increasingly being declared nature reserves where there is a ban on visitors. Despite the risk of being turned away, we cannot resist at least trying to visit Europa on our cruise from South Africa to Madagascar. The island is directly on our route. We are six when we set out, ourselves and two further couples. We are well aware that the 600 sea miles from Richard's Bay on the east coast of South Africa to Europa will not be easy. Yachtsmen who know this stretch report unanimously of vicious seas. Out at sea above the coastal shelf we are greeted by a high sea caused by the Agulhas current and a strong head wind which soon develops into a gale - enough to put one off sailing for good. After having fought for many hours, FREYDIS is still ploughing her way through a turbulent sea, making hardly any headway, so we heave to and bide our time. Karin, an experienced yachtswoman, tries to boost the crew's morale: 'We love it and are happy to be here. We must look at it positively, for goodness sake.' The

seasick crew, I must admit, is not very responsive. To add to it, Uli keeps us in suspense all night since he becomes confused and bewildered as a reaction to scopodermic plaster. The wind slowly turns from NE to W, SW and then to south. We are under sail again, but this time with a favourable wind. The crew recovers and the mood is optimistic. However, the wind deserts us on the third and fourth day. Not wanting to lose time, we motor along, although exhaust fumes and engine noise are the last things that yachtsmen delight in. On the other hand, we enjoy the calm sea, the blue sky and the warm sun. The humpback whales wave to us with their long flippers, tunnies shoot up out of the water, storm petrels and albatrosses circle above us, shooting stars and marine phosphorescence lend the night a magical touch. On the morning of the fifth day, there is a breath of wind from the SE. At last the counter current eases off. At times our speed made good is 7 knots. The sun becomes hotter, more penetrating and tiresome day by day. The closer we get to the island, the more we are seized with the desire to go ashore. Karl -Ludwig discovers a mistake as regards its location in the pilot: its longitude is 40°20' not 41 20'! The distance to the island is therefore 50 sea miles less. Uli, our most land-hungry, rejoices: 'An extra day's holiday on the island is like winning a competition.' At 4 o'clock we heave to and wait until morning. At six o'clock the outline of the flat island looms up on the horizon. We are situated about one and a half sea miles from the surrounding coral reef. The blood red sun rises between enormous dark clouds and the sky is full of birds. A wreck lies in solitary splendour on the reef, like a memorial. This is bizarre scenery with which to begin our visit to the island. We slowly investigate the reef from which further rusty shipwrecks stare up at us. In the background lies a glorious lagoon in shades of bright blue, green and turquoise which lures us - like a mirage. The lagoon, like every mirage, turns out to be a disappointment: being flat, covered in numerous heads of coral and without a single entrance for ships, not even for FREYDIS with her retractable keel.

However, to anchor on the outer reef is dangerous. The big question: Will we be allowed onto the island at all? We head for a boat which is about one and a half

sea miles away. Three anglers are sitting inside, one of them Chinese. I address them in my best schoolboy French. They certainly look us up and down, but they give no indication as to whether they understand me. I try English, finally even sign language - no reaction. 'Heave to, don't drop anchor,' Erich decides, 'Heide and I will go ashore in the dinghy.'

We are received by two young friendly soldiers on the beach. When we explain what we want, they point to the boat with the anglers which is landing now, too. Only the boss, the Chinese man, can make this decision, they reply. Lam-Yam, the Chinese man, and Robert, the island's gendarme, accompany us to a small station situated barely 50 paces from the shore. There we learn the reason for their reticence. Europa has been a nature reserve since 1975 and there is a strict ban on yachts. As they notice our enthusiasm for their lonely island and leaf through the pictures of our other voyages, they slowly lose their reserve. Lam-Yam finally agrees to the stay we have been longing for. Robert even wants to accompany us around the island himself. They both explain how the island came to be called "Europa". It was named after an English ship which discovered the island in 1774. It was ceded to France in 1896. It has had a weather station since 1948. The team, which changes every six months, consists of Lam-Yam, Robert and two assistants. As the island is of strategic importance to France, seven soldiers maintain their own small base nearby to demonstrate military presence. We anchor on the flat reef in front of the weather station and hope the wind does not increase and the anchor does not slip in the poor sea bottom. It is a risk to leave the boat on its own, but who wants to miss the opportunity of going ashore? Robert is waiting for us on the beach. Being an athlete who is used to running in this climate, he does not tire during the three days of showing us round the barren island, an old and partly sandy atoll, in the scorching sun. We stalk over sand, walls and rubble of prickly, dead coral, dead trees and thomy undergrowth to reach the nesting places of the quarrelsome terns which are teeming with life. Every year, thousands come here to breed from the Kerguelen Islands in the Antarctic. We pay a visit to the largest frigate-bird colony in the

Indian ocean with its quiet tenants, the gannets, the lagoon with its silver fish, the dangerous tiger and hammer-headed sharks, the colossal loggerhead and green turtles and flamingos. Its narrow belt of vegetation consists of mangroves, euphorbias, flamboyants, tamarinds, bougainvilleas, sisal and a few coconut palms.

Despite this strip of green, it has nothing in common with a tropical idyll. There is hardly anything colourful, blossoming or lush here. A lot of the plants have withered and died. Water is the major problem. There is precipitation only once a year in the rainy season. Even though there is an absence of ponds, myriads of blood-thirsty mosquitoes attack us at sunset. We stand muffled up like beekeepers on the sand dunes where the young turtles hatch out. About 160,000 are born on the beaches of Europa every year, but only one in every thousand manages to escape the predators that are lurking everywhere. We discover a few crosses made of wood and stone in the middle of a neglected sisal plantation. Robert tells us the sad story of a couple who settled in the area and created a livelihood for themselves by growing sisal. While the husband was away in Madagascar, purchasing provisions and tools, three of the servants murdered his young wife and little daughter. On his return the husband killed the murderers and left the island for ever. Murderers and victims both lie buried in the small cemetery. Although the island is only 4 sea miles in diameter, it seems never-ending. The tractor rides, it is true, save us a lot of walking, but the jolting and jerking leave us feeling shattered. There is no mercy for walkers here. Karin and Karl-Ludwig come to the end of their tether in the holey terrain of the land crabs and give up. I crawl into a damp, gloomy wreck just before I collapse with the heat. Erich is exhausted and falls over some coral rubble, not noticing that his 1000 dollars worth lens is falling out of its case, and Bernd loses his expensive James Bond sunglasses. This spot in the Tropic of Capricorn is harsh and off-putting - and yet fascinating at the same time because it has its own special character. It is a sanctuary for animals. However, this island with its heat, mosquitoes, prickly coral and sharp thorns "gets us down" in the end. As we set

sail, I lie in my berth with a high temperature, a headache and bites all over my arms and legs.

Only when I feel better, am I able to appreciate the enjoyable moments on the He Europa, as when we rescued the baby turtle from the greedy frigate-birds and when we dragged a turtle, weighing several hundred pounds and exhausted from laying eggs, back to the water....

And again when a young tern settled on my shoulder and I felt like Alice in Wonderland.

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