

### My Christmas Trip to Rotuma on MV Niuvaga

Following on from my response in the Bulletin where I said I will write with regards to our trip to Rotuma on MV Niuvaga hence this posting.

MV Niuvaga was to leave on 16/12/12 but was delayed in Suva for 4 days until 20/12/12 because of Cyclone Evans. The boat was full of Tuvaluans returning home, in addition to 28 of us passengers travelling to Rotuma including my family, our 4 friends from The Land of the Long White Cloud, the Bennetts from Hawai'i and the Chairman of the Rotuma Council.

On 19/12/12, we were told that the boat would leave at 7.30am the next morning. Thus on 20/12/12, we had a mini bus to pick us up with our luggage at 6.00am and drop us at the wharf because there were 9 of us with 15 suitcases of clothes and presents for our extended family in the island. Plus we also had 10 cartons of groceries and a bag of potatoes as part of our 3 weeks' ration in Rotuma. Luckily I did not have to worry about buying meat because my husband had already butchered a cow besides spending \$1,200 on meats such as chicken, lamb chops, lamb shanks, lamb neck, mince, luncheon, bacon, sausage, steaks and 10kg of corned beef. It really surprised me to find all these many prime quality meat varieties from Leylands readily available in Rotuma. In addition were the lagoon and deep sea fish that we had. Hence we did not miss the Coles, Woollies and Aldi supermarkets in Sydney.

But the wait that morning dragged on from 7.30am to 8.30am then 10.30am before we were told that there were 20 Tuvaluan overstayers in Fiji who were travelling on the boat so we'd have to wait for the Immigration officials. It took the rest of the day for the slow moving bureaucrats to process 20 passports without anyone being able to answer our enquiries as to when the boat would be leaving for Rotuma. So people left the dock to buy meals and water without fear of missing the boat, which was a blessing given the sweltering conditions from the aftermath of the cyclone, especially since there was no shed at the wharf for shade. The delay and the uncertainty was mind-boggling and totally unacceptable in such hot conditions, especially since we had only been in Fiji for a week and yet to acclimatise to the blistering humid conditions.

When our tickets were purchased, we were told by the agent that "*meals are provided on board,*" but weren't told that one needs to take *their own utensils*. It was only after the boat had left port that we found this out. We opted to upgrade to the captain's meal for AuD\$8.00 and were served watered down tinned corned beef stew. We were fortunate that we carried both Australian and Fijian dollars, for the bursar would only accept payments in Australian dollars because of its buying power; thus we had to cater for our Kiwi friends, too.

I could be wrong but I thought that the Fiji Marine Board inspectors do a safety check of all vessels leaving Fiji ports. Hence I believe that MV Niuvaga's agent in Rotuma, who did the liaising with the boat owners, has got a lot of explaining to do, for:

1. Why did he allow the boat to travel only on one engine at 6 knots an hour that took 53.5 hours to get to Rotuma? The journey was about a half a day longer than normal, risking the lives of so many people in the open seas between Suva and Rotuma.

I also believe that the engine problem affected the pumps, causing the toilets to overflow with raw sewage which was very unhealthy, especially when the toilets were located close to where a lot of the passengers, including children, were sleeping. I used my smart phone to take shots of these filthy conditions as proof in case the agent and the owners of MV Niuvaga want to dispute what I have said.

Also, I only saw one punt on board, which made me wonder where were the life rafts and jackets, and if there were enough for everyone on board in case of an emergency. This really worried me, for I kept reminiscing about the horror scenes of the movie *Titanic*, which reverberated over and over in my mind until we got to Rotuma. Especially when the boat trip was just after cyclone Evans.

Certainly I'm not a whinger but am very adamant when it comes to safety, especially that of my family and where peoples' lives are at stake. Such a boat trip should be no different from that of an aeroplane where passengers are told where to find safety equipment and shown how to use them in case of an emergency.

2. At that rate of 6 knots an hour, the agent in Rotuma would have known that the boat's ETA at Oinafa wharf would be at night on Sunday 23/12/12. So why didn't the agent in Rotuma inform the captain of the boat that there are no lights at the wharf, which contravenes Fiji's OHS Laws for work done at night.

The Captain should have been given the option to either leave on 19/12/12 or try to pick up speed to arrive earlier rather than @ 12.00am on 23/12/12, since no work is allowed at the wharf on Sundays by Chief Kausiraf of Oinafa District.

When the boat arrived in Rotuma there were no lights at the wharf, so the boat was unable moor at the wharf but, but had to remain about 300 meters away from it. The passengers and our luggage had to be ferried in an open punt in the dark to the wharf, which was scary.

3. Why didn't the agent in Rotuma come back when he was asked by a Mr Sulio Batavotavo to go and organise the lights for the wharf when "you knew that the boat will arrive at night." It took 3 hours to ferry the 28 passengers and our luggage in a small punt in the darkness only to scramble up the wharf's embankment, thanks to John Bennett's kind assistance with his rechargeable light. Hence we didn't get home until 4.00am that Sunday morning, where our kainaga were waiting to perform the *mamasa*.

Moving forward, I hope that something can be done by all the stake holders involved to prevent such occurrences, for the travelling Rotumans and safety's sake. Not only by this boat, which occasionally graces our beautiful shores to pick up the taro and cassava for the trade with Tuvalu, but also the other boats that commercially service Rotuma, such as the *Lady Sandy*. Also, the agent should be aware of the potential litigious consequences when he knowingly endangers the lives of passengers for a small commission.

**Margaret Enasio**