At the end of 2004 we were with our first Green Nomad in Vanuatu, where we had sailed to after spending the previous South Pacific cyclone season in Kiribati and the Marshall Islands.

This was our second season in Vanuatu, the first one being in mid 2003, coming from New Caledonia. Apart from Vanuatu being almost as good as it gets for cruising, we had made plans to meet old cruising friends, from the Atlantic and Caribbean times and also some we had been talking to via HF radio but did not know personally.

After five months of great cruising and much fun, which will be the subject of another text, the new cyclone season was coming, and to avoid its dangers we decided to take refuge in the Solomon Islands, which even though they lie in the Southern Hemisphere, are situated mostly under 8 degrees south. This close to the equator the tropical depressions start to form, but before they can become real cyclones they tend to travel South and East, making the island group, specially the Western Province, a safe place to spend the southern summer months.

So, by the end of October we were in Sola, Banks Islands, where we cleared out of Vanuatu. The customs officer, who had already cleared us out the previous year, decided to come on board to make sure we had the duty free wine cartoons bought in Port Vila. Luckily we had them untouched, not as the year before. But it is quite easy to refill the plastic bags with water and vinegar anyway…

The year before he had commented that although most boats cleared out of Sola to go to the Solomons or Kiribati, they all seemed to go away southwards around the island, which was
the wrong way. Wasn´t this funny? We got the message: if you clear out, go north, even if you want to spend time in the western coast before going away. The way around the northern tip of Sola towards Waterfall bay on the west coast is a lot longer. So he was doing his job well and ours a little tougher.

Leaving Sola we made a stop in the Reef Islands, where we stayed fishing and meeting other boats for a few days, and then sailed to Tegua, in the Torres Islands, which has one of the most scenic anchorages we know, even though it is deep and full of coral heads, if a boat cannot access the small lagoon in front of the village. Now we could get in there with the new Green Nomad, which has a swing keel and only 80 cm draft.
We spent two days there, snorkelling and fishing with Edi and Claudia, from Joceba, and getting to know the locals from the small village.

We had made quite a close group of friends in Vanuatu, and some of these were coming to the Solomons, like Edi and Claudia on Joceba, Majham and Suffyo on Zazen, Gabriel and Kathy on Tartaruga, Mat and Brad on Nyathi, Maho, Salomé and Fanny on Mektoub and Nick and Anna on Thank Girl. This group became like an extended family, and the six months spent in the Solomons almost could be used as a script for a movie depicting the South Seas vagabonds.
We left in the end of one morning to sail the 330 nautical miles that separated us from the Solomon Islands main group, and after a little less than three days arrived in Uki Ni Masi, a small island off the North coast of San Cristobal.

There we met Tartaruga, with Gabriel, a spaniard that had his boat named with the portuguese word for Turtle, as he had lived in Rio de Janeiro working for a telecom multinational corporation. The only thing multinational about Gabriel now were his friends.

We had to go to Honiara to check in the country, so this first stop was not entirely within the rules, even though we never intended to go ashore. The island was fringed by a most beautifull coral reef, and the waters were extremely clear, so we had the dingies in the water and spent some time snorkeling and fishing.

As I was having my shower on the stern platform at the end of one day, a small dot in the horizon that started to grow into a more discernible shape made us a little concerned, as it had that gey colour and shape of navy patrol ships.

Navy patrol ship it was, and they were coming to give a lecture on the little village about he dangers of home brew, which had killed a number of people in the Solomon Islands due to
improper ingredients being used and abusive intake. They nevertheless sent a search party to our boats, inspected our papers and said we must go to Honiara to check in. They were at all times polite and very professional, and even ended up meeting with Edi in Honiara to get a copy of his DVD with the last soccer world cup final.

On the next day we made our way to Honiara, a 130 nautical mile trip, and even though nothing was to be expected in the forecast, a small low center deepened to the North of Malaita and gave us a rough ride, with 30 knot gusts and lightning.

Just before arriving in Honiara we caught a Mahi Mahi, and the first dinner and party in the Solomons had a menu, with the crews of Zazen, Joceba, Tartaruga and Green Nomad discussing their various experiences to that point.

When visiting the officials for our check in paperwork we met an american sailor that had left his boat in Tulaghi, 20 miles across the Iron Bottom Sound from Honaira, and he was all words about how bad it was to anchor in Honiara and how we should not have done it, as it was dangerous for weather reasons and stealing. We later commented how fortunate it was that we had reached this far without his advice…

Years later in Thailand I met the same guy, and he was spreading false rumours about or friends on Zazen, as once in the Solomons he arrived at an anchorage to find them listening to music in high volume with not a whole lot of clothes on.

We spent a week in Honiara, buying some extra supplies to last us the cyclone season, as we had initially intended to sail to Australia, and learning about the local life, which was
returning to calm after some years of political turmoil. In past years very few boats had been visiting the islands due to this, and now with an Australian and New Zealand peace force things were improving.

This elderly man had never set foot on a yacht before

With new stocks we made our way to the Florida Islands sailing with Tartaruga, and after overnighting on a bay East of Tulaghi we made a very interesting trip, motoring the narrow channel between Nggela Sule and Nggela Pile, going for some 8 miles just between the lushest vegetation and small villages, finding a breathtaking coral pass on the other end, with such clear water and small depths that even then our idea that a capable cruising boat for us should have variable draft was forming, feature that we have now on the second Green Nomad.

Our destination for this trip was the Island of Anuha, on the North of the Florida Group, where awaiting for us were Majjham and Suffyo, from Zazen.

Sailing along the North Coast of Nggela Sule we were followed by two bride whales right into the anchorage, which was on a fantastic half atoll surrounding two islands. Kathy from Tartaruga speedily jumped in the water after they reached the bay, trying to swim with the whales, but they did not stay long enough.
We spend a couple of weeks in Anuha, with Joceba, Mektoub and Thank Girl arriving and joining us. Edi and Claudia were sick, with Malaria, and this was my first contact with this common disease in the Solomons (I had it as a child in Africa). Possibly even then I already had the parasite in me, but no symptoms. As it turned out I would have to live with this disease on and off for the next six months.

One morning Marli awoke with a small fever and vomiting, and in this area you first think of Malaria, so we decided to cross the channel between Anuha and Nggela Sule by dinghy and ask the locals in the nearby village if there was a clinic somewhere in walking distance, so she could be tested for Malaria. One of the villagers offered himself to come along, and guided us through to the clinic, which was a good hour and a half away by foot, and Marli had a hard time following us.

Reaching the clinic the tests for Malaria proved negative, but she lay down for a couple of hours taking in hydration in order to recover enough for the walking trip back, which in the end did not occur, as we saw Maho’s catamaran arriving in the anchorage in front of the clinic, and even thought he was coming to get us worrying about our long time gone from the boat.
It turned out that the real patient of the day was him, having been stung by a stingray on the beach while playing with his daughter. He was treated with injectable antibiotics and soon we were all on our way back aboard Mektoub.

Being connected to the faraway world with an HF based email system, we received an email from Marli’s brothers in Brazil saying that her father was ill, and if she had any means to do it, she should try and reach Brazil in the near future.

There was no clear description of the illness or its gravity, but we knew by the way it was said that it was serious, so we decided to start making our way to Ghizo, on the Western Province of the Solomons, which had an airport and was close to Vona Vona Lagoon, the place where we intended to spend most of the coming months.

On the way we stopped one night at Korighole Harbour, in the south coast of Santa Isabel, which was an unbelievably beautiful place, and made the 100 miles passage across the New Georgia Sound towards New Georgia Island. We could spend months just in between these two islands, but another email from a friend had shown us that Marli’s father situation was worst than initially communicated.

Zazen had an Iridium satellite phone, and so it was that during an HF schedule he put Marli’s brother Lauri on the microphone and while sailing at night she received the dreaded news that her father had passed away. It was a hard night, but we were at sea and things had to be done.

We reached New Georgia next morning, turned to an anchorage in the North coast but a little later decided to try to reach Kolombangara that day, so we could be in Ghizo in the next morning. By the end of the afternoon we were entering Mbambari bay, in the East coast of Kolombangara, a very protected and beautiful harbour. The locals surrounded with canoes and had vegetables and carvings for sale, but I let them know of the sad night we had, and they let us be.
We finally reached Ghizo, from where Marli would leave on her way to Brazil and her siblings, being ten in total. She had to have that reunion, as we had been away from family for four years by then.

Ghizo island and its lagoon are a most varied scenery, with anchorages that go from blue water atoll style to deeply closed mangrove, and even in this heavy moment its beauty was uplifting.

Having just a debit card from Australia that could work only on the banks of Honiara, the only way to buy her ticket from Ghizo to Honiara was in cash, and that took away almost all money we had on board, which saw me left with two hundred dollars that would have to last me until I reached Australia at the end of cyclone season.

The day of Marli’s flight to Honiara arrived and we took a small motor boat that makes the run from Ghizo’s main pier and the airstrip, located on a small island inside the lagoon. We said goodbye and so it started my singlehandling sailing experience, which lasted almost six months, when I May 2005 I crossed alone from Munda to Cairns, in Australia, where we met again.
On that same day I had a fever, and went to a local malaria test clinic to see if I had it. The result was negative, but something inside told me it was wrong. I wrote to a Doctor from Australia that we met on a clinic specialized in traveller’s health, asking what could happen if I took a malaria medicine course not being sure it I had it. She said it was safe to take it, and so I did. What I did not know is that medicine I took was effective mostly against falciparum or cerebral malaria, as it is also known, which is the commonest strand in the Solomons, but it should be followed on by a course of another medicine if what you have is vivax malaria, which I had.

This concurred to make me have another three recurrences of malaria, slowly reducing my body weight from the usual 52 kg to a mere 46 kg.

But between malaria crisis, the next months were amongst the most active and fun from all my years sailing on our first boat.

This period showed me how much one can take if survival is at stake, as during the malaria crisis I still had to take care of myself and of the boat and navigation, anchoring, clothes washing and other shores. Even when all I wanted was to lay down and rest, I still had to get out there and trade for fresh vegetables and fruits, go fishing, get water and all the elements of a good diet, because I knew this would make the difference between getting through the disease or not.
My idea was to spend most time in or around Vona Vona Lagoon, an area with excellent protection from all wind directions, superb anchorages, with tens if not hundreds of islands and coves. In one of these islands named Lola was a rustic lodge for surfers and fishermen, Zipolo Habu Resort. It was owned by an American named Joe and his wife Lisa, a natural of the Solomons. They were very hospitable to the cruisers, letting us take water ashore, hang out in the island and their daughters were happy to have the company of a bunch of sailors.

Vona Vona Lagoon and Lola anchorage, places to return to

Not that this support was the only reason to draw us there. Lola is located just a few hundred meters from the open ocean, which is reached across a fantastic coral reef, with waters of incredible visibility.
Having not much money left was not a real problem, as we had as usual the boat stocked for six to eight months, and for that nice drink on sundown I was brewing rice wine aboard from a recipe learned from another cuisers in Vanuatu, so that was nearly for free.

So, from the 200 dollars remaining I spent at once 100 on diesel fuel, so I could have enough to last me to Australia. And because we had stocked the boat for two, now I had some surplus, which I sold to some less well stocked friends, mainly the luxuries like instant coffee, olive oil, cigarettes that we have as gifts to locals and some other niceties. Green Nomad Store was open for business!

In Lola I decided to change the galley layout, fabricating a dishes dryer on a high level so that I could free the second sink. This using only whatever material were on board, and so
for several days I hardly put my face out of the companionway, which prompted Joe and Lisa to send their daughters to check on me and see if I was well.

Rendova island in the background, Lola in the right, inside Vona Vona Lagoon

A lot of the time my only contact with other people was during the HF radio contacts with the other cruisers. That was our way to keep in touch when we were dispersed through the Western Province of the Solomons. Our group was augmented when Bill and Ulli, from a catamaran named Mau, from England and the australians Kadari, Sonia and their children Ary and Ivy, from another cat named Storm Bird, arrived.

Bill was a retired sailor from the Royal Navy, Ulli a german Nurse. He made me remember the Captain Haddock from Timtim's adventures, with his looks and peculiar spirited speech!
At times we were all apart, each boat on a separated island or lagoon, and at some other periods we would come together for more social days, having parties, going fishing, hiking in group.

I was the one staying more in Lola, and used to spend most days in the reefs around it, going snorkeling or fishing. The marine life was so fantastic that I could hardly think of something else to do than observing it. My fishing was done just for nutrition, and most of the time I swam and looked.
Life with friends on the islands of Vona Vona Lagoon

There was a particular shark that followed a curious pattern. He would let me swim and fish or try to fish for 40 minutes to one hour without coming around, but almost always after this he would show up and tell me who was boss. I usually would give up fishing then, as the thought of a bleeding fish in the water would loose all appeal. One ne of those days an amazing thing happened: after I was in the water for the usual hour, boss shark came and I went back up to the dinghy. Sensing that the moment was good for going about two huge groupers came out of their hidding holes. As the sun was high and the water very still and clear, I could see them standing from dinghy, and they could see me, and so I stayed watching them and the surrounding marine life, taking in all the beauty for as long as I could take the sun’s heat, in one of these magic moments that you will forever remember.

One afternoon after some diving and fishing I felt a light fever returning, and I knew for sure the malaria was coming back. I decided to make way to Ghizo the next morning, where I could see doctors at the local hospital. Munda was closer but it did not occur to me to go there. I motored to Kolombangara’s Ringgi Cove, passing through the Diamond Narrows, between New Georgia and and Arundel islands.

I spent the night in Ringgi Cove, without suffering any bad symptoms from the malaria, and at day break I left for Ghizo, entering the lagoon by the pass next to Kennedy Island and already inside I saw a heavy rain squall coming, which would lower the visibility and prevent me from advancing, and just at this cloud arrived the malaria crisis hit with full strength, the fever reaching 41.5 degrees Celsius, and myself startin to shake volently, barely able to seat next to the wheel and hold the boat’s position while the rain squall passed. At this moment things were looking alarming, but soon the squall was gone and knowing that a safe
achorage and help was only five miles away gave the necessary strength to hold on and reach the destination, where I signalled Nick from Thank Girl to get on the VHF radio, asking him to come by and get me with his dinghy. He did so and accompanied me to the hospital.

Malaria test done and vivax malaria detected, medicines prescribed and purchased, I went back to Green Nomad. That night Gabriel, who had sailed in to see if he could help, brought me dinner, this being the only night that I know I would have been unable to feed myself, and help was there.

I spent a week anchored in front of a bar named PT109, after the boat captained by the then future president of the USA John Kennedy, which was sunk in the straight between Kolombangara and Ghizo during the Second World War. There I would listen to the music and people having fun ashore, while the slow recovery from the malaria took place. As soon as I felt strong enough, I decided to go to a more tranquil anchorage, which was where I first met Storm Bird. Zazen was there too, and knowing I was a bit tired from the malaria they invited me over a few nights for dinner.

Kolombangara seen from an anchorage in Ghizo and Storm Bird next to a dinghy pass to the outer reef.

Because of the malaria I had been a long while without scraping the bottom of Green Nomad to clean off the marine growth, and it was badly needed now, so I moved to an anchorage that was closer to the lagoon’s outer reef, because it is risky to dive in murky water in the Solomons, due to the presence of salt water crocodiles, which tend to be closer to river estuaries and mangrove lined shores. But even there, with the depth dropping from 10 to 30 meters, very clear water, I had an eye for the scraper and another looking down and around watchful for the crocs.
With a clean boat I sailed to Liapari, a small island next to Vela Lavella, with a narrow channel between both islands. There I met Mau, Zazen and Tartaruga. By then I was stronger and already back to my daily snorkeling and fishing trips to the reefs. There I swam with a school of huge Napoleon fish, almost bigger than me.
Vella Lavella in the left and Liapari, separated by a narrow channel that we explored by dinghy

Something I will always remember was the trip we made with three dingies tied together along the channel between the islands, with us laying down and watching the scenery above and underwater, with such blue and clear water that is hard to imagine.
Drifting down the channel between Liapari and Vella Lavella

In Liapari there was a boatyard for service boats and tugs, and it was managed by Noel, from New Zealand, and Rose, his wife, natural of the Solomons. We spent some nice afternoons ashore, enjoying their hospitality. The land in Liapari was beautiful, with lush vegetation and a profusion of colours to please the eye.

I decided to return to Vona Vona lagoon, and this time I went via the Western pass, just across the reef from Ghizo. I crossed the whole lagoon stopping in a few islands along the way, in a maze of reefs and small islands that can be tricky to navigate but of such beauty to take your breath away. Doing that singlehanded meant sometimes running from the wheel to the mast and climbing it to the first spreader, to spot the way ahead using polarized sun glasses, and running back down to correct the course.
Aloft to spot reefs and find my way with polarized sun glasses

In one of the anchorages I received the visit from Tony, a carver that had met me in Lola before. The carvers in the Solomons are great artists, using contrasting colour woods and shells like the nautilus to produce magnificent works. And mostly they do all that with the simplest tools, like knifes and pieces of metal taken from WWII wreckage.

I agreed to buy a nazo nazo (phonetical spelling, as it sounded to us), a kind of figurehead used in ancient war canoes from the region. If the figurehead is holding a bird it meant a peace mission, but if it was a skull, better was not to stay and ask questions...

The price agreed was a cutlery set given to us as wedding gift. Forks and knifes are easy to come by anywhere, aren't they?

In Lola I was back to my old hard life, snorkeling, fishing, doing some social life with other boat crews when they came by. I was normally by myself, seldom going ashore, to the point that some of the lodge guests sent a boat inviting me for dinner, so that they could know something about that misterious figure that never came ashore even though the boat was a couple of hundred meters away.

I also had some very social periods, like around the end of the year, when we made several partys ashore and on the boats. One of these partys was decided at the very last moment on the 24th of December, when we saw the weather was going ot be calm, and rafted four boats, all hanging on Green Nomad's anchor, for a memorable evening. There was
decorations and food, and even Lisa and some locals from Lola came to share this evening with the boat crews

Zazen, Green Nomad, Nyathi and Joceba in Vona Vona lagoon

After another spell of good life, I was awarded with another malaria crisis, and this time I went to Munda to visit the hospital. As I was quick to move and make the tests and get the treatment, this crisis was easier and quicker to overcome. The bad part was that in Munda they wrongly diagnosed me with falciparum malaria, and this caused an improper treatment to be administered, which in turn was the cause of a fourth and spectacular return of the disease later on.

I took the opportunity to know the area around Munda, which has superb anchorages, and the town itself was quite interesting, offering good vegetable markets and general stores.

It was in Munda that our family of South Seas vagabonds had the first contact with a little machine new to us, as most of us had been away from big consumer centers for three or four years. It came to be because Kathy had asked me to go the Munda customs and get a parcel sent to her from Australia. She was gone and would not be coming back, and so I went to customs and asked for the parcel explaining the situation, which they kindly understood.

I took the parcel back to Green Nomad, and there we all sat around it and I opened it to reveal this little thing with the name Ipod on it, and we touched every button to find out what it did…
Also in Munda I purchased another nuzo nuzo, nicer than the first, and this time the price was a drill bit set.

The end of April was coming and Marli was still in Brazil. My visa for staying in the Solomons would expire soon, and so we decided that she would not fly to the Solomons to meet me, but rather stay in Brazil and only fly to Australia when I had sailed the boat there singlehanded. This 900 nautical mile passage was going to be my first one all by myself.

This would also save the cost of the ticket from Australia to the Solomons, which was more than half the money we had left after the recent years cruising the islands.

Another reason I wanted to waste no time in sailing to Australia then was that I had felt some slight fever symptoms the days before, and I knew the malaria was still there somewhere, and another crisis could impair my ability to sail the boat for a long while.

So it was that I checked out of the country in Munda and sailed to Vona Vona lagoon, in order to relax a bit and enjoy this wonderfull place a little more, and to wait for a weather condition that would give me the best possible start.
Last anchorage before departing to Australia. Ary and Ivy having fun with the local kids

Storm Bird came to join me, and a little later Gabriel, now also singlehandling, as Kathy had left, and who was also going to sail to Australia. The place we were, just south of the Eastern pass into Vona Vona was extremely beautiful, and I still could dingy ride to Lola and say goodbye to Joe, Lisa and their daughters.

Finally the day to leave came, and me and Gabriel sailed through Munda bar and into the Coral Sea. For that whole day we are able to appreciate the majestic Rendova Island while slowly moving away from that magic place.
Tartaruga and Green Nomad in the morning that both sailed singlehanded to Australia

We knew the first part of the journey would be tricky, and we had to clear the southeastern tip of the Louisiades group before being able to swing around to a direct course to Cairns, and this would put the wind far ahead of the beam. The first night we had southerly winds right on the nose and lightning, and Gabriel, with an engine problem thought about returning, but I told him that I would go on, even if it would take me a month to reach Cairns.

After we cleared the Louisiades we had a nice Southeasterly for the whole way down to Cairns, and as tartaruga was a faster boat we became truly solitary with our own thoughts. We had a couple of HF radio contacts every day, but no visual contact.

I was visited by a pod of pilot whales, who I believe were attracted by some music I had been playing that had whale sounds on it, and they sailed along for nearly an hour.
Pilot Whales swim with Green Nomad in its last passage with me

After eight days we were reaching the pass on the great barrier reef that leads into Cairns, and being nearly dark we decided to wait for the next morning, which allowed me to catch up with Gabriel.

At dawn I started sailing in, as there were still around 30 miles to be transversed inside the reef to reach Cairns. About two hours before arriving I called Australian Customs on the VHF radio, and told them my ETA at Marlin Marina, which is where boats coming from overseas had to go, and it was then that my body must have sensed that the task was done, because at a surprising speed a fourth and to date last malaria recurrence came fast. By the time I tied the boat in front of the Quarantine and Customs officers I had a 38.5 degrees Celsius fever and rising.

It was interesting to watch as the face of the quarantine officer changed when, in response to his mere formality question if there was any sick people on board I answered: YES, one case of malaria!

This was the last passage on our first boat, and a little later than a year after that we were leaving Australia having sold our beloved home for the last ten years to attend family concerns in Brazil.
Green Nomad and its new face, now a Kiribati 36 aluminum swing keel design, in Paraty, Southeastern Brazil

Now, we are already back on track, having built a second boat, also named Green Nomad, and this time having co-designed it in partnership with B & G Yacht Design, naming the design Kiribati 36 after another of our favorite places in the world, which was subject of a previous article and that you can read by clicking here.