

Chagos Notes

Prepared by Beate and Harald Sammer
S/Y TANIWANI
For the ZLYC in Richards Bay
November 2007

We, Beate and Harald on the yacht Taniwani have spent March, April & May of 2007 in the Chagos Archipelago. Reflecting on this special time we are sure that amongst the many places around the world that we had visited so far, Chagos stands out as something very special and very rare.

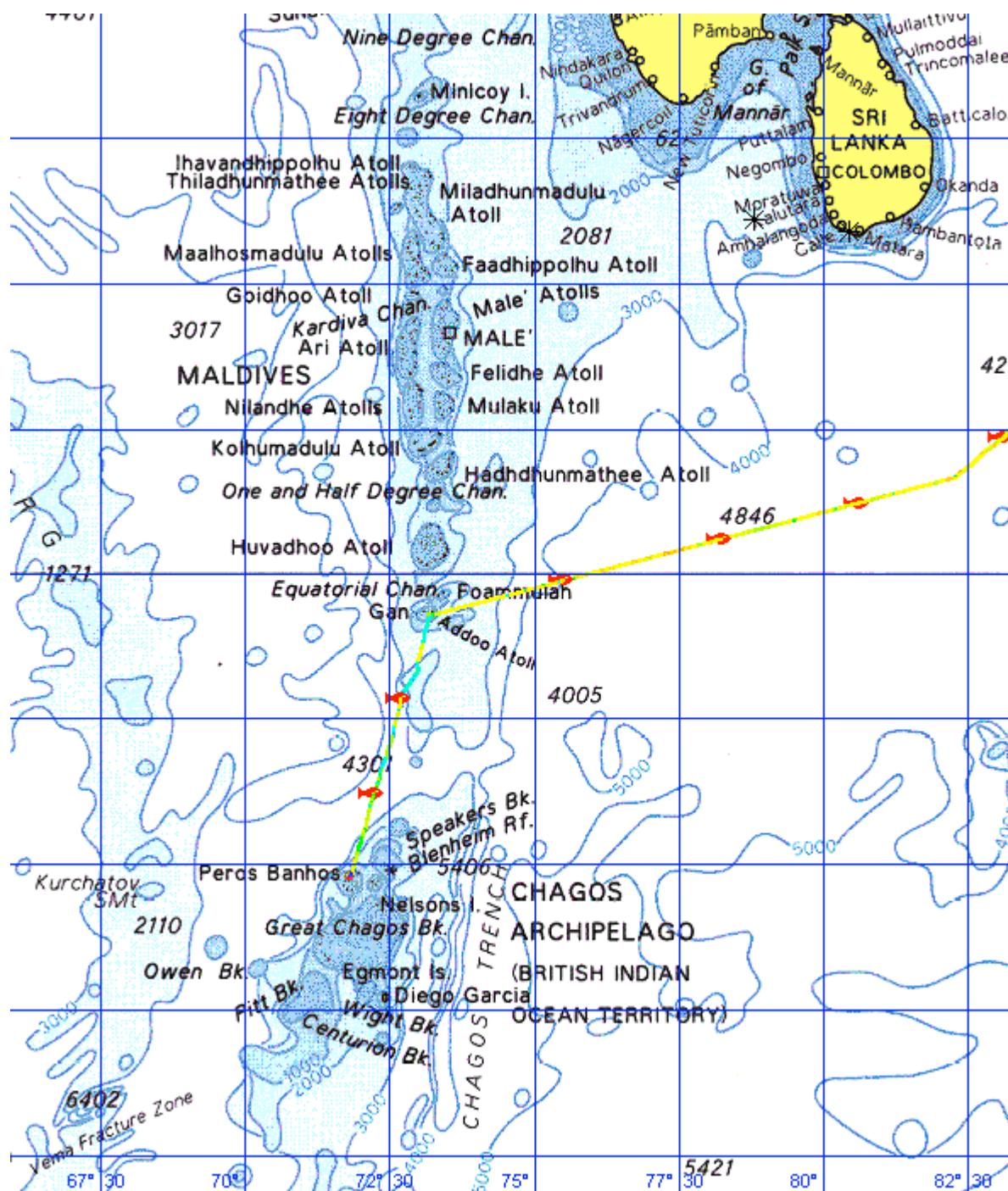
Like most of us world cruisers, we dreamed for many years of dropping the anchor in Chagos some day: A magical place for cruisers, pretty much in the middle of the Indian Ocean, its existence completely unknown to most ‘normal’ people, maybe except for Diego Garcia. “Ah, yes! Isn’t that an American army base?”

Our original intention was to visit Chagos in June and July, coming from Australia’s east coast, through the Torres Strait as soon as the cyclone season was over. But then, while in Vanuatu and discussing planes with friends on three other boats, we all realized just how long we would have to wait out. The more attractive alternative was to go through the Torres Strait soon, and rather enjoy South East Asia, before moving on early in the next year.

Once in Thailand and Malaysia, we were to meet several Chagos knowledgeable boats, who all gave us invaluable input. So we learned that optimally we should be leaving Thailand in early January, when there was still good wind to go west to Sri Lanka, Maldives and Chagos. Unfortunately, we already had made plans at home for January, so mid February was the best we could do.

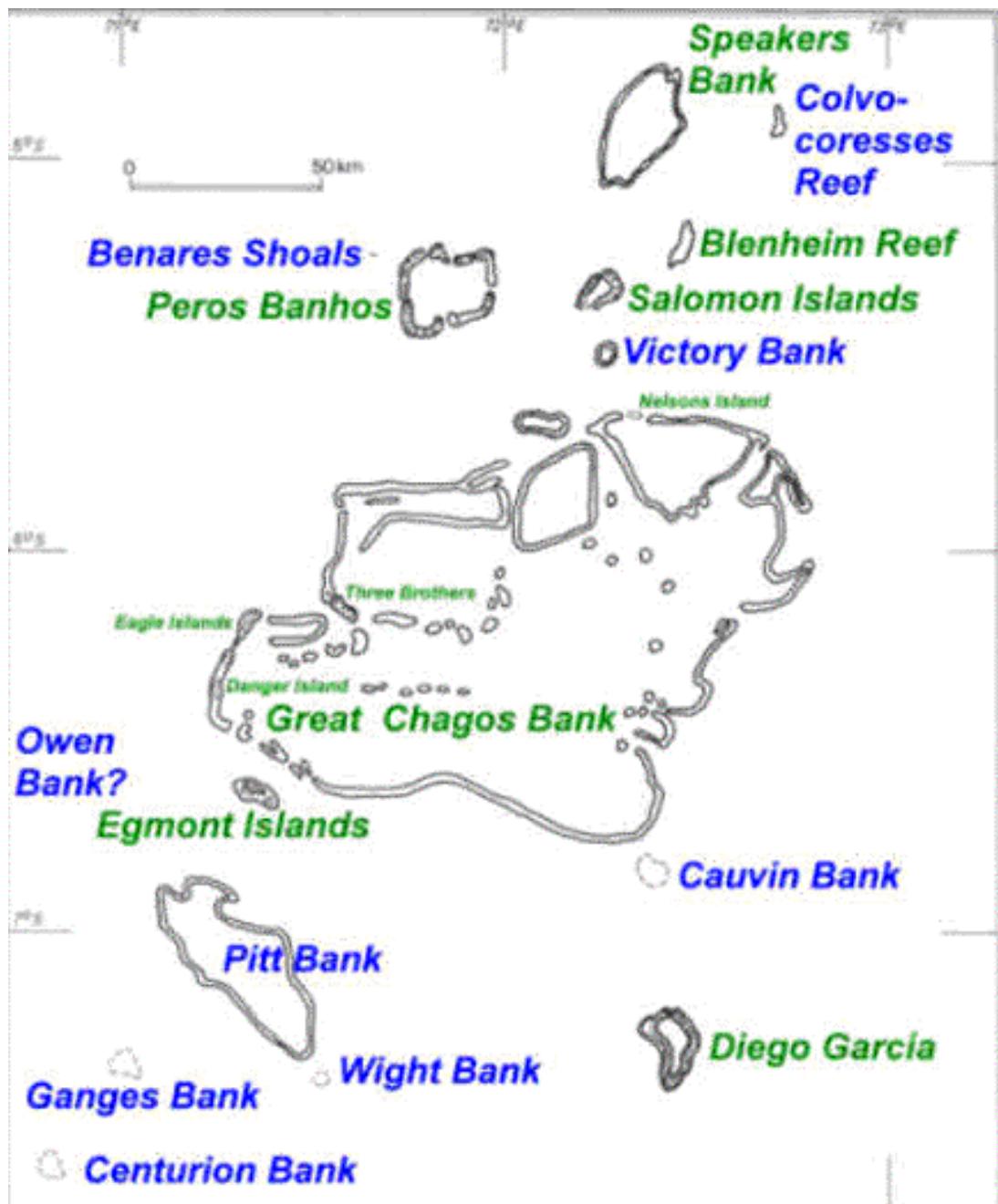
Here we learned that quite a number of boats use the special feature of the NW and SE Monsoon in the Indian Ocean to circle every year between half a year in Chagos and half a year in Thailand and/or Malaysia. And once in a while you put in a trip to Madagascar, Tanzania and back to Chagos via Seychelles. Not a bad lifestyle.

Later we even met a boat that had spent an entire year solely in Chagos. But the good time to really enjoy and explore Chagos is the first half of the year. Later the stronger SE confines one to just the eastern anchorages in Salomon. Even later we learned that yachts following our original plan, who arrived in Chagos in June or July, didn’t enjoy it near as much. Most likely, since the best place in Chagos in our opinion is Peros Banhos and it becomes untenable in strong Southeasterlies.



While in the middle of the ocean, Chagos isn't very far from the Maldives and from Addoo in the south of the Maldives it is exactly as far away or as close as Male, the Maldives capital in the middle of the lengthy chain. But there are many atolls between Addoo and Mahe and just empty ocean between Addoo and Chagos.

Chagos is a collection of more or less (often less) round coral atolls. These atolls vary greatly in size and many of them are sunken. The biggest atoll is the such a sunken one, and is called the Great Chagos Bank, with its 100 miles diameter it would be the biggest atoll in the world, but only a handful of small islets make it above the surface.



Only four of these atolls have an island and reef chain that provides shelter from the rough open ocean, with a quiet lagoon inside. Of those the largest is Peros Banhos, about 18 miles across. Unfortunately it features a more open section in the south east, that allows the trade wind swell to enter, an render it uncomfortable during the SE trades season.

Continuing down in size, the next is the infamous Diego Garcia with about 12 miles length, well protected but off limits to ‘normal’ people. Then, just five miles long is Salomon, (not to be confused with the Solomon Islands in the Pacific). It is very well protected and is sort of the capital of the Indian Ocean cruising fraternity. Finally, also about five miles long, but slim and full of coral heads is the Egmont atoll.

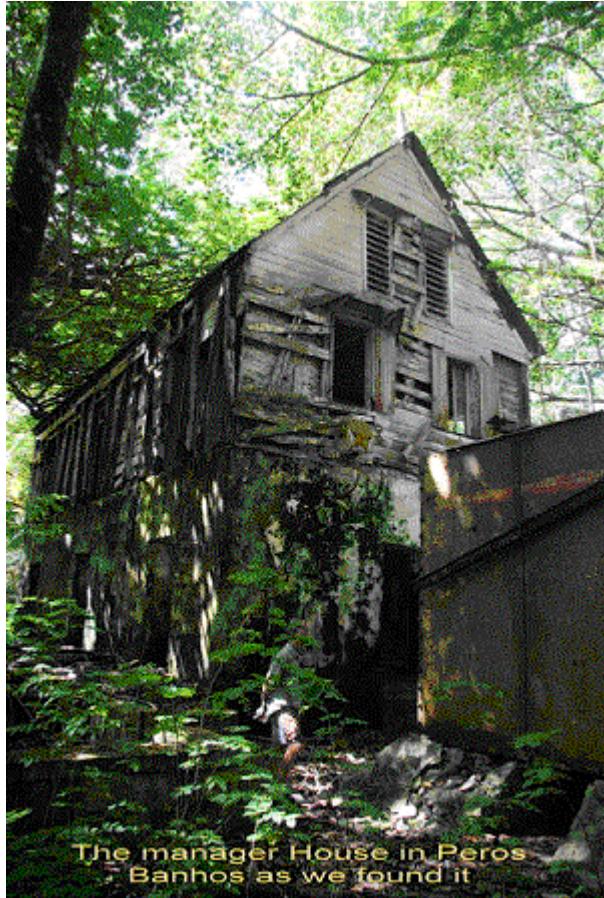
The whole archipelago is about 200 miles long and over 100 miles wide.
This entire area is British and officially referred to as BIOT (British Indian Ocean Territories).



Unlike in the Pacific where the many islands and atolls were populated by the Polynesian and Melanesian settlers, Chagos was uninhabited when Vasco da Gama first sighted it. Much later some of these islands were populated to produce copra, first with slave workers from Africa and later with cheap labor from Asia. The mix of all these and some Europeans created the so called Ilois, French for islanders. When Mauritius and the Seychelles became independent, the British who had ruled all these places for a long time, kept Chagos in their possession.

Soon after, between 1967 and 1971, the entire population of then just under 2000 people, was expelled from the islands and sent to Mauritius by the British Government, to make way for a joint US-UK military base on Diego Garcia. The future of Chagos remains uncertain and in the mean time the British Supreme Court had ruled the eviction of the population illegal and in theory the islanders could return to all their former islands except for Diego Garcia.

Most people think it unlikely that much will change until the military base isn't needed any more and expect that Britain will then pass Chagos on to Mauritius.



In the mean time, with the islands only accessible by private boats and no commercial business, they have become a formidable nature preserve and a great place for the long-distance sailors. Some 15 years ago, parts of the area were declared strict nature preserves and one is not allowed to approach any of these islands closer than 200m.

And off course it is illegal, and one can get into serious trouble, getting closer than 12 miles to

The rules and instructions can be found at:

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KArticle&aid=1174558806718>

Diego Garcia without prior permission, which may be granted in case of an emergency.

Until this year yachts like us would simply sail to one of the atolls other than Diego Garcia, enjoy and wait for the patrol boat to come some day and register you, collecting \$100 for a 3 months permit. This has now changed and no ship can go to the islands, before requesting and receiving a permit from the BIOT office in London. This is not difficult and can easily be done via e-mail and pay-pal. The price however has been increased to £100 per month. This new regulation is in force since January 2007, but yachts arriving before the end of March were granted the old price of \$100 to stay for up to three months after arrival.

Also introduced with the price hike was a list of rules including a “price list” for the penalties, in case you get caught violating these.

Apparently most of these regulations have been in force for a long time, but new is the restriction to use only a few prescribed anchoring sites. The text regarding those reads:

1. *These anchoring areas must be routinely used. However, in cases of emergency or when action is needed to prevent accidents, yachts may anchor wherever necessary to ensure safety.*
2. *At their landward side in all zones, the seabed rises very rapidly to shallows from depths of as deep as 15 or even 20+ metres.*
- 3 *Within all anchoring zones there are shallow patches, and the designation of a zone does not imply that the zone is always safe or is safe in all conditions.*

Except of an infinite supply of fruit de mer, reasonable water in some of the old wells, and another infinite supply of cockonuts, you need to stock up well before going there. Enough fuel is one major consideration. For Taniwani this was 740 liters of diesel in the three tanks and another 260 liters of diesel in jerry cans on deck making the total 1000 liters. Then another set of jerry cans was just for the dinghy.

Since we planned to stay more than two months and still have a solid diesel supply when leaving for the Seychelles, the calculation was easy: We need 6 liters per day for the generator to charge batteries and allow us to use all the luxury on board, including washing machine, water maker, dive compressor and so on. That part would amount to maybe 400 liters and than another 100 liters for the main engine, so that we could leave Chagos with still 500 liters in the tanks. In Chagos your boat is your home and your dinghy your car. For all the fun activities like fishing, snorkeling and exploring the islands, the dinghy is essential.

The fuel we took along would allow us to drive the dinghy at full throttle for half an hour each day – (about 150 litres) and on average this seemed ok. Yet our friends with a lot of fishing, diving and children activities found 200 litres to be on the short side! Remeber that in Salomon you need to drive outside the atoll to catch fish, while in Peros fish is everywhere.



Would we really like to stay in such a place for over two months, was one of the questions we asked ourselves long before we made it to Chagos.



In the past we had found that one of the great things of touring the world the way we do, is to meet all these different people, see their lifestyle and be repeatedly impressed by the friendliness we received all around this planet.

So, with no people in Chagos, and just the same little tropical islands every day - would we get bored?

Add to this that there aren't so many anchorages or places to go to, especially now that anchoring would be restricted to just five anchorages in all of Chagos.

We weren't sure about all these questions when we came to Chagos and we kept wondering about it for at most a week, then the Chagos virus got us and we could have stayed forever.

In fact we were so busy, that we didn't have time to care about things like this write-up. Hiking around islands, snorkeling on the reefs, diving on coral heads or on the drop-offs outside, moving to a new anchorage, having sundowners on the beach, meeting other yachties and sharing pot-luck dinners on various beaches. - And yes, there is always some maintenance work to be done on our boats.

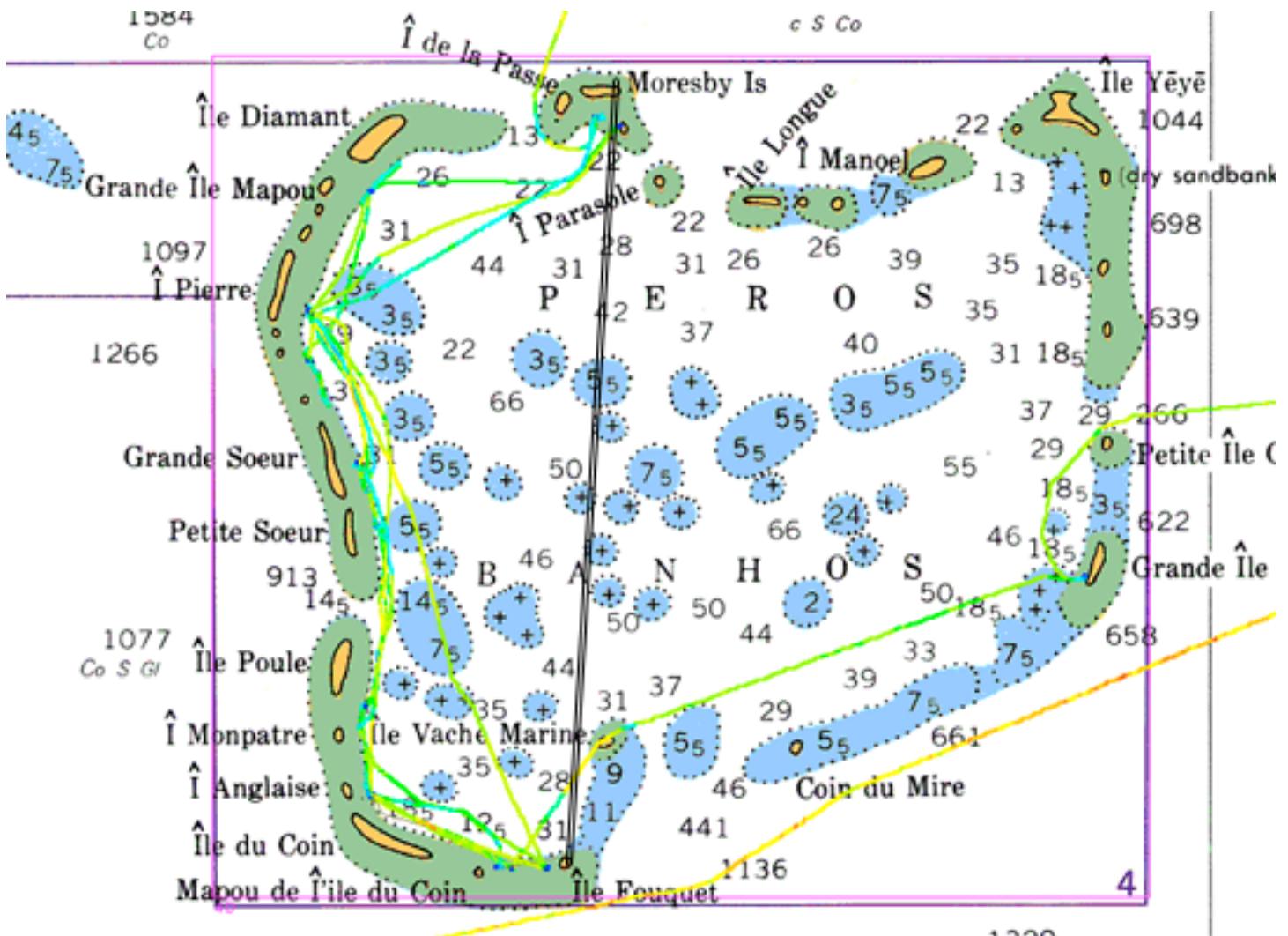
When we arrived in Chagos, we came in through the northern pass of Peros Banhos and just turned left to anchor near Moresby Island. Mahi Mahi and Taniwani were alone, but in the far we saw two or three more yachts along the island chain.

We remained alone, during the next week when we slowly worked our way south to Isle de Coin, stopping at several places before.

Only there did we meet six other boats and over time we big grew friends with most of them.



By mid April we were around 35 boats in Chagos, some 10 in Peros Banhos and around 25 in Salomon. That distribution was surprising, since that time until about mid May is ideal for exploring Peros Banhos. We spent the much longer part of our stay in Peros and are convinced it is the much nicer place. More fish, more wildlife and the diving is the best on the planet. But it does spoil you – we found all diving or snorkelling after leaving Chagos rather disappointing.



The black line in the chart above shows the separation between normal and strict nature preserve. It is quickly obvious that stronger SE winds will enter over the submerged part of the atoll and make all anchorages along the western chain quite uncomfortable if not dangerous. The possible anchorages at Grand Coquillage and Petit Coquillage are off limits. It is however ok to sail through the lagoon and use one of the eastern passes. You can see from our tracks that we did so on our way to the Salomon Islands.

New this year is, that even in the regular zone, anchoring is restricted to the three areas. The reason for this additional restriction is the concern that yachts would damage too much coral if they continued to anchor where they like.



We found that with a good graphical sounder or fish-finder, it is quite possible to distinguish sand from coral. While the water is extremely clear, there are many surfaces that look like sand and are flat, but hard as rock and boats often drag for that reason. The listed anchor zones are by no means free of coral, or this 'fake sand' and are not automatically safe – one really has to look and check.

Inversely, there are some excellent anchorages with very good holding at places outside those prescribed anchoring areas.

Even in the calm season, squalls come through, often unexpected and in the night and many boats that do not anchor allowing for a 360 degree swing have come got into trouble, and on average one boat a year ends up on the reef.

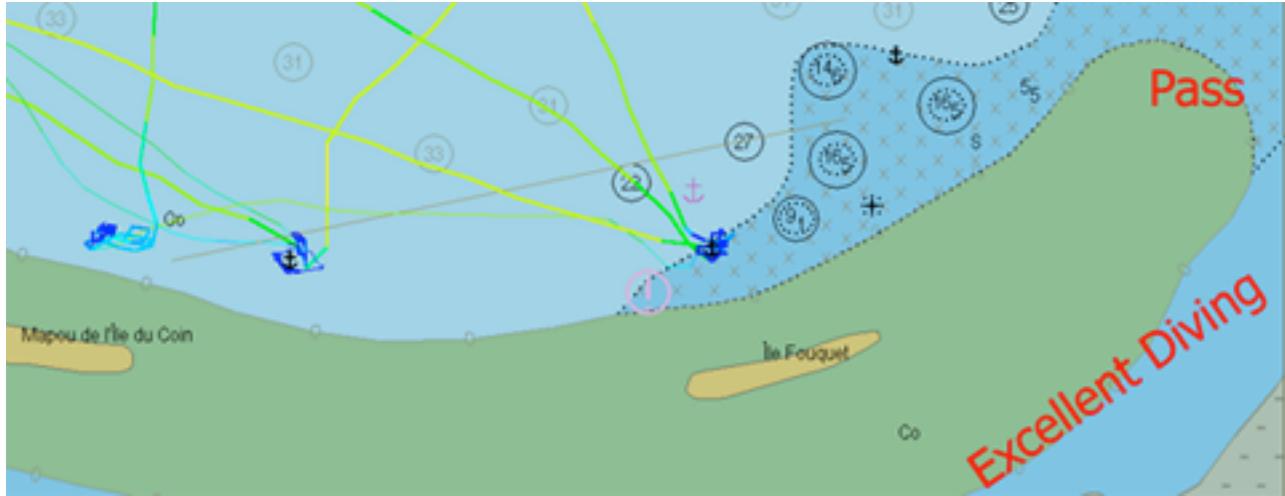
For all these reasons, more sand, better holding and plenty swinging room, we have typically anchored in depth of 20 – 30 meters.

During our stay it seemed that as long as you chose your anchorage careful and with consideration, anchoring outside the designated zones was tolerated. At least in Peros this seems quite sensible as there are many good sand patches along the island chain. Solomon is yet another story with no sand at all in the main anchorage at Boddam, more of this later.



We will now describe our favorite anchorages starting in the south:

Ile Fouquet:

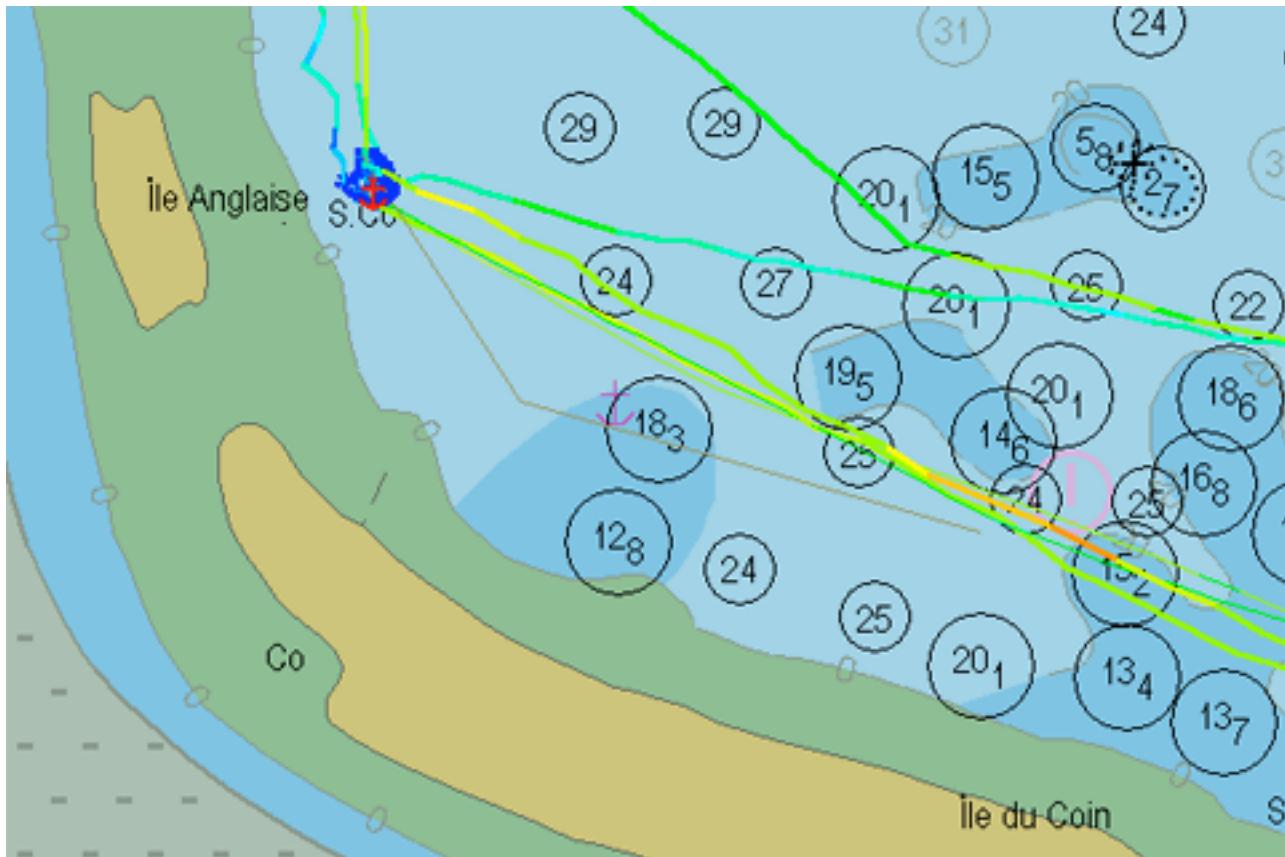


The light grey line is the official anchorage limit. Between this line and the reef or the islands is the designated anchorage.

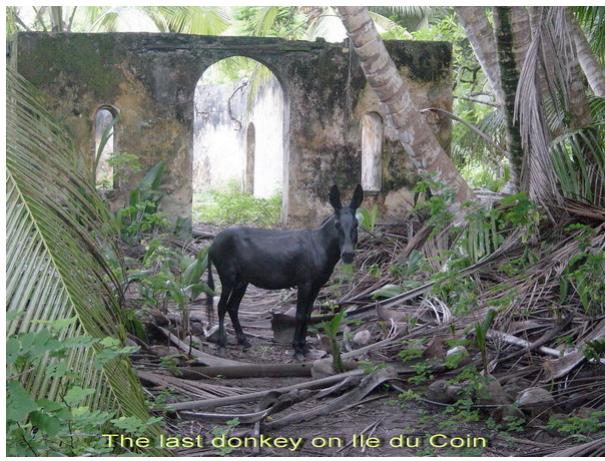
- (1) The leftmost of the three anchors: Depth 27m, holding very good in sand. There are more coral patches to the west and that is why we do not recommend the place shown by our track just off the north end of Mapou de Ile de Coin. The reef between Mapou de Ile de Coin and Ile Fouquet dries totally on low tide and it is a nice walk, between and around the two islands. You may anchor closer to the reef, but it may get tight when the wind shifts to northerly directions. This is also the best anchorage in SE conditions. Boats that anchored here in SE 20-25 knots reported it as quite reasonable – you will have to live with a roll.
- (2) The middle anchor, just off Ile Fouquet. An equally nice place with an easier access to Ile Fouquet. Depth between 12 and 18m, not as clean as the other place, needs some looking. Other boats had anchored safely along a line between these two places.
- (3) The rightmost anchor. Just before it opens out into the wide southern pass, there is a large sand patch with very good holding. It is already outside the designated anchoring area and almost exactly on the line that demarks the strict nature reserve. Depth is 7m to 10m and there is some tidal current. It is the closest to the pass and diving and snorkeling in the pass and just around the corner along the drop off is very good.



Ile de Coin:



Again the light grey lines are the official anchorage limit. Between these two lines and the reef or the islands is the designated anchorage.

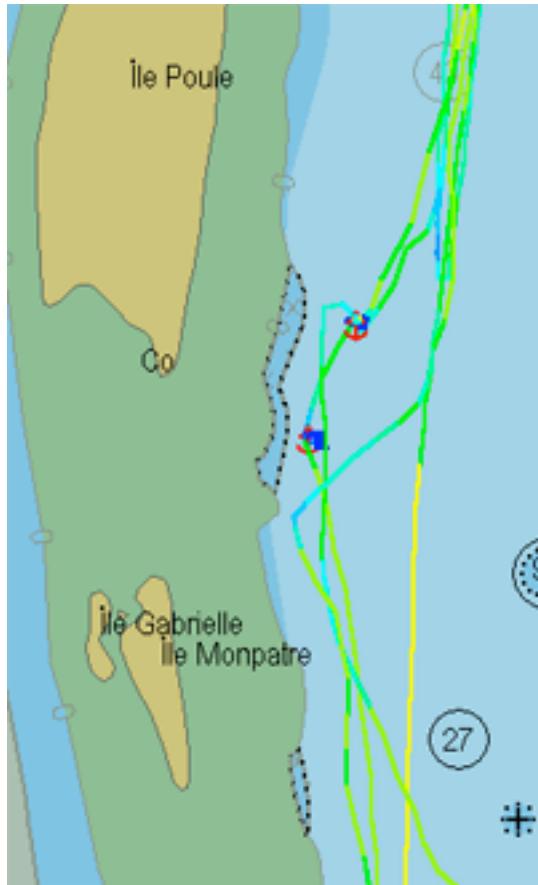


We found the anchorage off Ile Anglaise better, with sand and good holding and when anchoring in 15m or more you are safe swinging around. Most boats anchor further south and close to the derelict stone mole indicated vaguely on the chart. But when a serious squall hit, one third of the boats dragged.

This is the main anchorage in Peros as it is where the original settlement was and while the buildings have partially collapsed or have been overgrown by the jungle, there is a very good well there. Also, exploring the village and the island is real fun and with some luck you may meet the last donkey of Chagos.

Apparently, when the people were evicted, most animals were killed, but the donkeys were left to themselves. For many years there was a real community of them, but now there is one lonely donkey left. He is very shy and this is probably why he is still alive.

Ile Poule – Ile Monpatre:

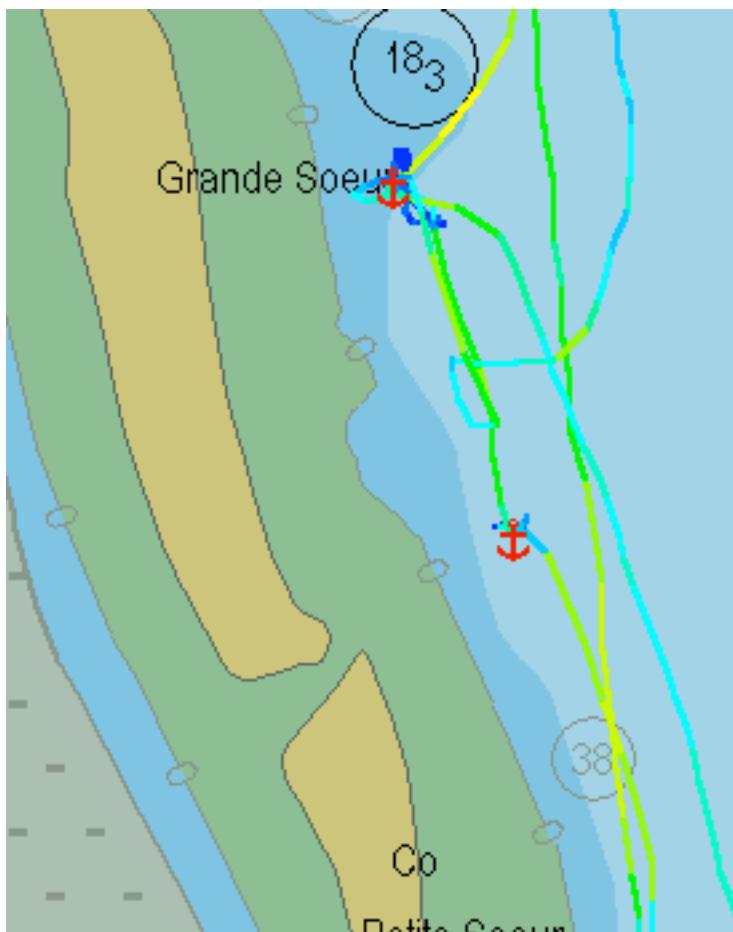


Both our anchoring positions were fairly deep again between 20m-27m at the northern one and 13m-20m at the southern one. Further south there is no sand, but the lower anchorage is quite close to Ile Monpatre, which is very nice to explore.

The main reef is very wide here so that even at high tide one doesn't notice a swell coming in.



Grand Soeur and Petit Soeur:

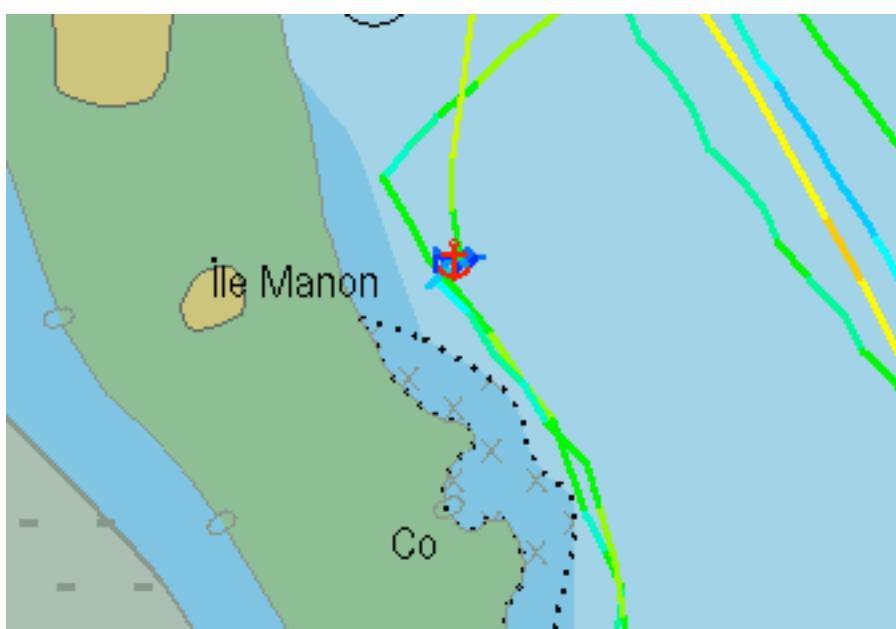


Access to these islands is difficult because of the fringing reef with no real break. Best ist close to the gap between the two islands.

Off the gap is also the nicer anchorage, but there is only space for one boat to anchor on the sandpatch.

There is more space at the anchorage further north.

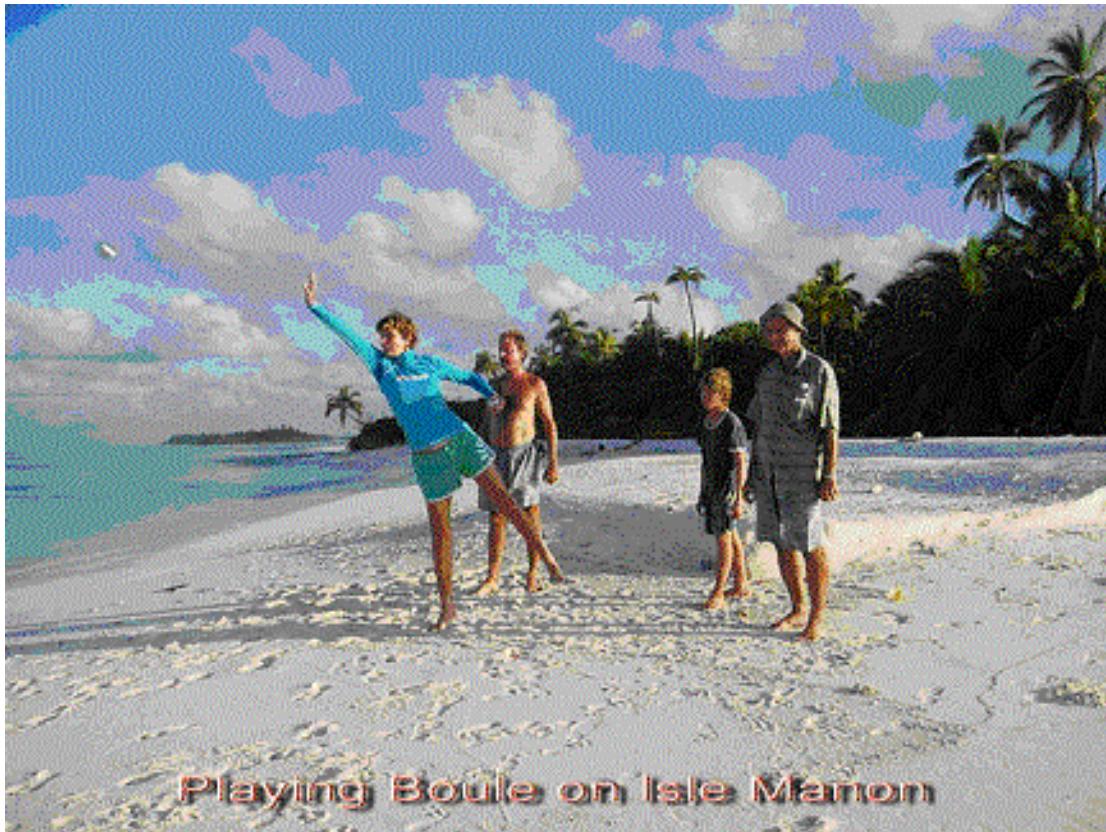
These islands have the biggest cockonutcrab population. At dark you will find many of them running around the sand beach.



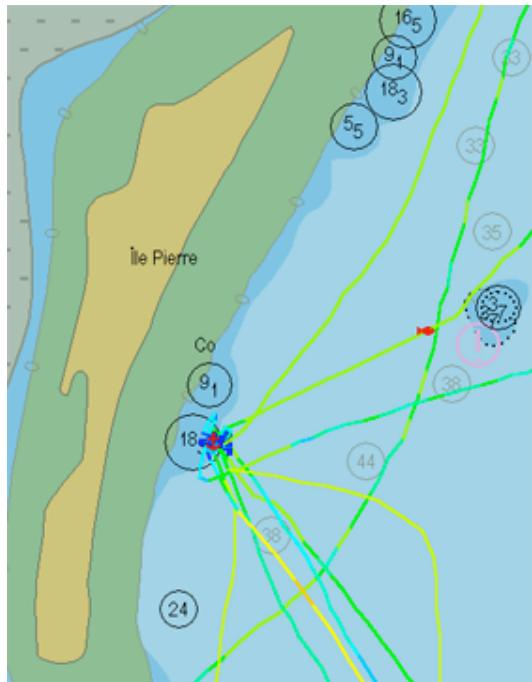
Ile Manon:

Another wonderful place and the anchorage very good and not that deep in 16m.

There is a nice sand spit at the north end of the island.



Ile Perre:



This is probably the safest anchorage in Peros. There is an extended plateau of sand with a depth sloping gradually from about 10m to 30m. When anchoring at 15m or deeper even a blow from the east is no problem. We also found that in times of a swell setting into the lagoon, this place was the calmest.

It is one of the nicest islands to ‘circumwalk’. As the anchorage is just across from the narrowest part of the island, the walk can be broken up into a southern and northern loop by crossing the island there.

Less than a mile northeast of the anchorage is a large coral head, which is great for snorkelling and diving.

One day, we had just weighed anchor to sail to Moresby and were heading towards this head to record its position, we caught a 2.7m sailfish on our handline!



While this catch may be a bit unusual, catching fish in Peros is a matter of a few minutes. Trolling the line with the dinghy for ten minutes is usually all you need for a nice dinner. The most common fish to catch is the very good tasting Jobfish.



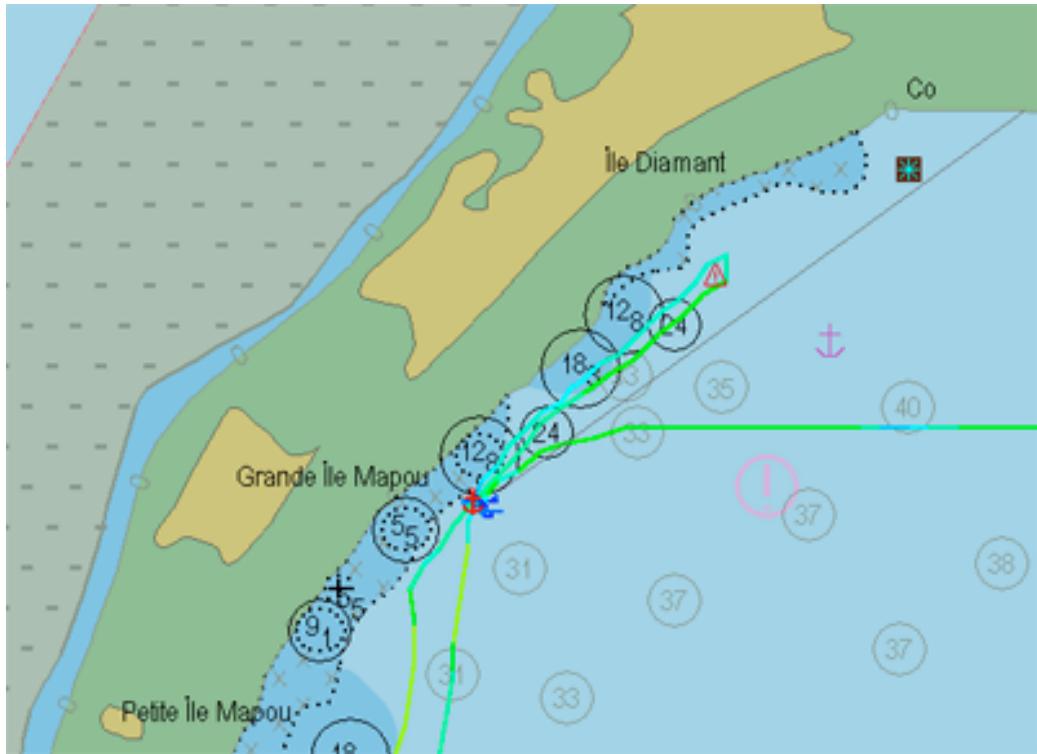


Sunset behind Ile Pierre



Ile Pierre

Île Diamant and Grande Île Mapou:



This is again a designated anchoring area, delimited by the grey line in the chartlet.

The really good anchorage is just a touch south of this area on an extensive sand bank right across from the gap between the two islands.

Holding is excellent and there is space for several boats. Depths from 6m to 20m are all safe.

From here on to the middle of the designated area the ground is all coral.

Then in the middle, where we drew the warning sign, there is a larger area that looks like sand but is hard as rock – beware. All the way up north at the star in the chartlet, there is another sand patch, but quite close to the northern reef, which extends towards the northern pass. Several boats had dragged onto that reef in the past during a sudden windshift, so be careful with that one.



Moresby and St. Brandon:



This is a wonderful place that offers a lot. It was our first stop when we came to Chagos from the Maldives and later we spent almost two weeks there in perfect conditions. Walking along Moresby's shore is a delight with so many nesting birds that aren't shy and crabs of all types that frequent the beach.

We anchored in good sand in the two positions indicated, but at some time we had up to 14 boats in the bay, most anchored between these two places. There are several coral heads in this area that need to be avoided when anchoring.



In the old charts St. Brandon is listed as having coconut trees, now it just is a rather small sand hill at high tide. Close to its northern side we found a pass through the reef, through which one can take the dinghy at any tide. The snorkeling left and right of this pass is excellent, especially towards the drop off outside. The pass is filled with sand and just inside of it is a nice shallow anchorage in perfect sand. The sand is also washed out and is a nice marker on the coral reef outside, as even at 30m depth you will instantly see it when swimming along the edge.

Diving along the drop-off left and right of this path is 1st class and it gets topped when you go further south to the corner of the deep pass between St. Brandon and Ile Parasol – but watch the current. This place is full of fish of all sorts and you will definitely see a few sharks.



A completely different dive, but fantastic in its own right is on the inside of St. Brandon.

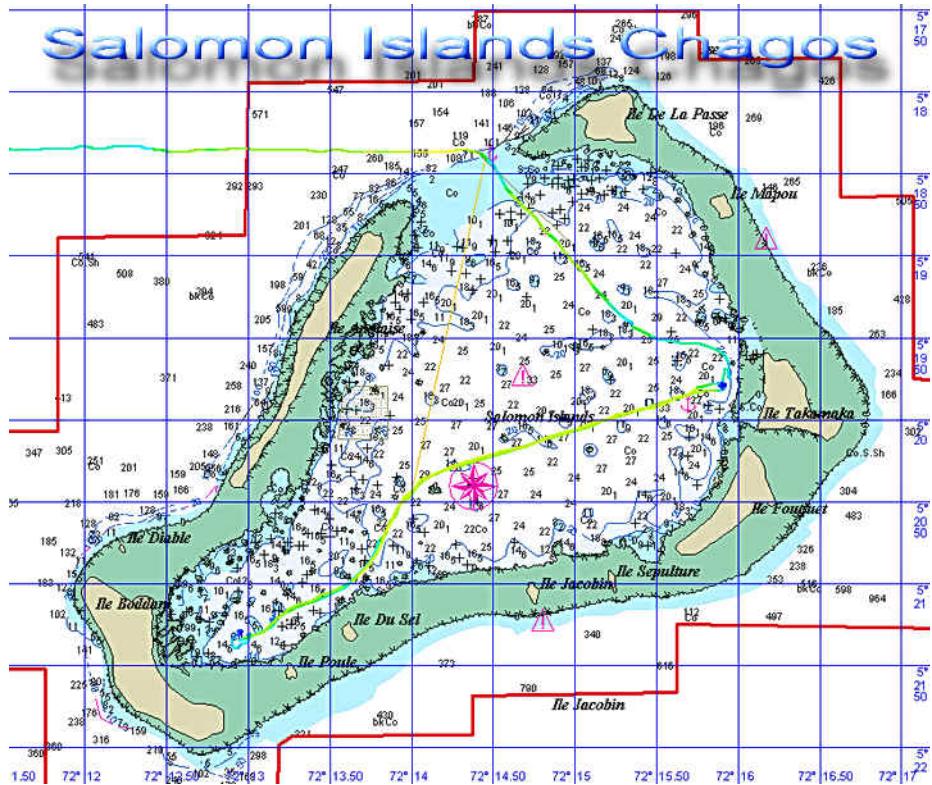
Unfortunately, this great place is not on the new list of permitted anchorages and we are not sure if it will be possible to see these places other than by a long and fuel consuming dinghy ride 4 miles from Diamant. April 1st of 2007 the new regulation went in force and at that time we and many other boats were still anchored outside the designated areas when the patrol boat came by.

They only checked boat name to match the visitor permit, collected the garbage and asked if everything was fine. It may be that they gave us a grace period, or it may be that as long as we all anchor careful and behave reasonable, they may not press the issue.

We hope for all future visitors, that the later is the case, as in Peros Banhos it would be a shame to not be able to enjoy some of the best places. On the other hand, adhering to the restrictions in Boddam is not a big limitation as most of the good places are covered and anything else is easily within dinghy reach.



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As said before, the Salomon Atoll in Chagos is quite a bit smaller than Pers Banhos and its reef is complete except for an entrance in the north. Helped by the reef, the protection is much better and it is usually very calm inside, except for whatever the wind may throw up on the maximum 3 mile fetch. Aside of the main pass in the north, there is the possibility to take the dinghy over the reef near Ile Diable when the tide is at least 0.7 meters. That is fairly important, as unlike Peros one doesn't catch any fish inside Salomon.

The entrance in the north is easy to make: Go to a point roughly in the middle between Ile de Pass and Ile Anglais at 5-18.37 S and 72-14.42 E and steer about 139 true through the pass, you should always have more than 5 meters. If it is already afternoon it is safer to go to Takamaka than to Boddam.



The island of Boddam is “Downtown Chagos”, it is where all the regular visiting yachts, who spend half a year on block in Chagos have their own moorings. Consequently the island is also more civilized with very good foot paths all over. The ruins of the old settlement get certain use and there are ‘designated’ areas for fish cleaning or laundry areas next to the well. There are also three ‘camps’ which are sites for parties and barbecue on the beach. The main camp at the settlement, then the so called french camp and the west looking sunset camp.

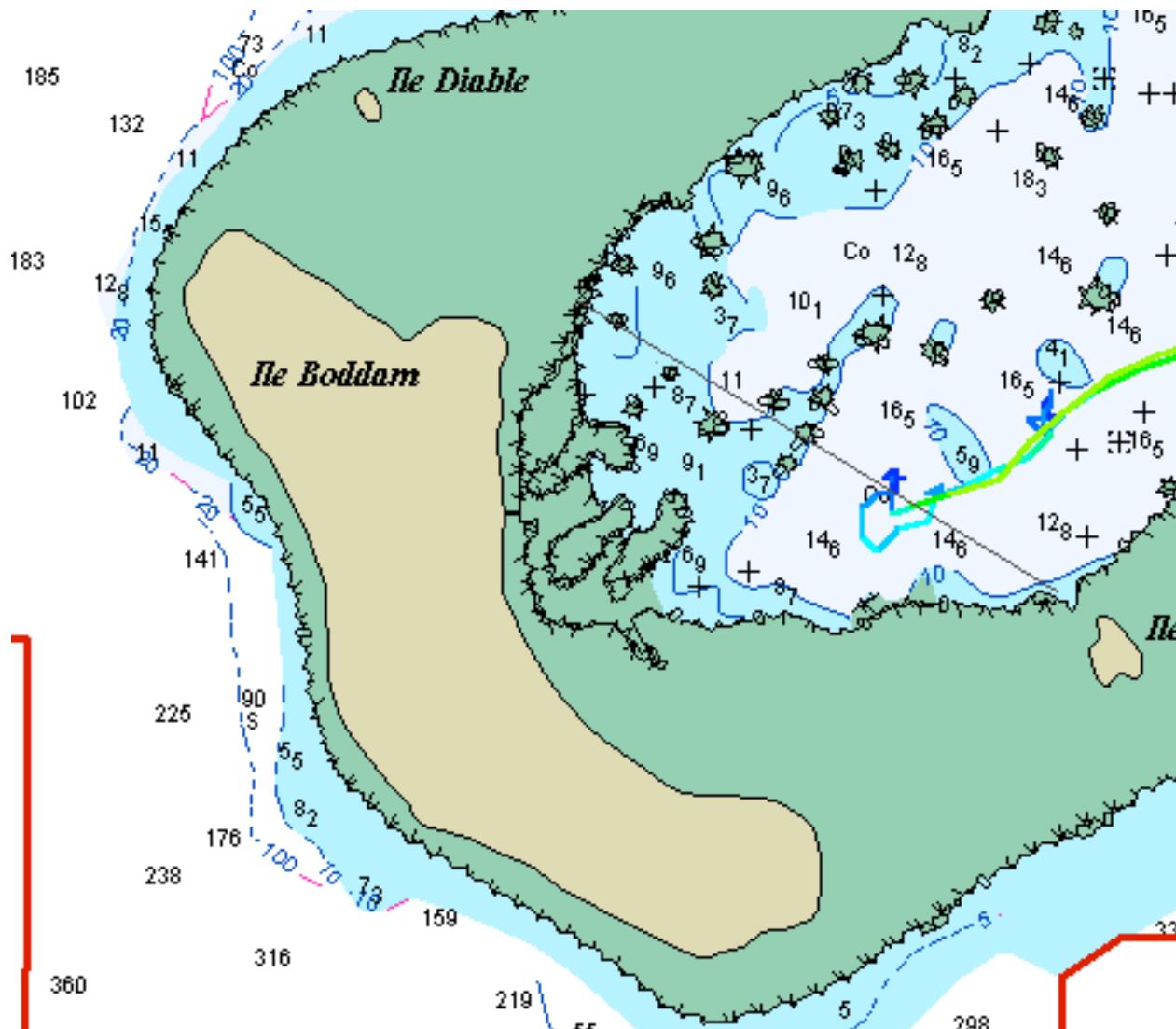
Obviously the better parties are at the french camp, but we tried both.

Unfortunately that was on the same day, as one of our french friends had a birthday party and the town of Boddam was celebrating the “Cinco Mayo”, apparently a big day in Mexico.

In Chagos it marks the end of the calm season as around that date the SE starts to settle in and then most Boddam residents move to their summer anchorage at Takamaka and Fouquet.



The anchorage in Boddam:

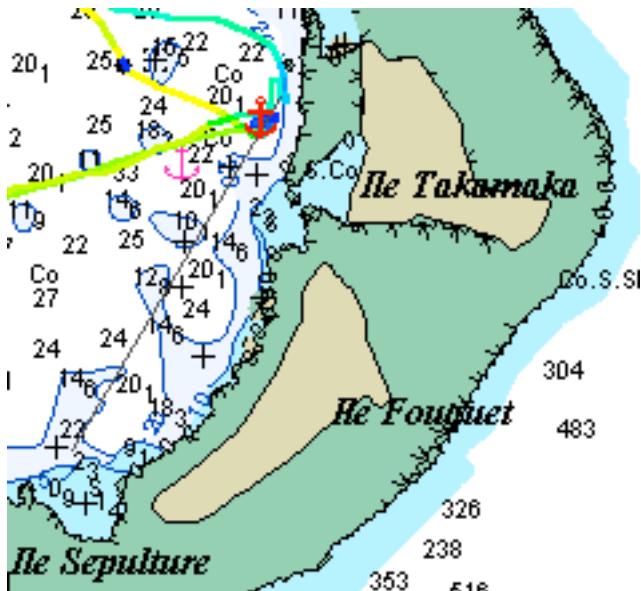


Again the gray line shows the limits of the official anchoring area. There is no sand anywhere and it is all coral and it is inevitable that you will destroy some of it if you anchor there. The BIOT officials have drawn the line to contain the damage in one area they call sacrificial mooring area.

Obviously the holding is not very good and for that reason most of the boats that stay longer have built their own moorings, with chains around coral heads. And since people don't want to loose their mooring, they usually stay put at least until summer season, when most boats move to the other side.

Aside of the poor anchorage and the somewhat difficult approach dodging coral heads, Boddam has some very nice features walks across the island on nice trails and the diving on the seaward side is more than excellent with Mantas and Dolphins.

The Anchorage at Takamaka and Fouquet:



The gray line shows that the designated anchoring area is quite large and goes almost along the whole length of the two islands. It stops a bit short on Takamaka where there is good sand ground just north of the end of the line. Also it is often better to be slightly outside the line and I doubt anybody would have a problem with that.

A tongue of sand bottom spreads out from the pass between the two islands and that is a favorite spot for many boats to anchor quite shallow and still safe if you are not getting in too close.

We anchored a bit further north in 21 m (red anchor), where there is a bit less wind in the lee of Takamaka.



The fleet anchored off Takamaka and Fouquet in Salomon

From the pass further south to the middle of Fouquet there are a few very nice anchoring spots and very close to some of the best snorkeling between many reefs. But be careful that you really have room to swing. This is the area where many boats got into trouble and ended up on the reef and you can snorkel over a large ferro-cement yacht, now home to many fish.

This large anchorage has a lot to offer: There is a good well on Takamaka and many boats filled their tanks there. The beach camp is nice and we had many great evenings there. Snorkeling in the pass between the two islands is great at low tide. Or you can drift out from the pass into the lagoon on higher tide with the current.

The coral reefs along the inside of Fouquet are excellent for snorkeling and we did so for many hours every day. And there is a deep tidal pool in the vast outside reef roughly in the middle of Fouquet and you can walk out to it at spring low tide and snorkel in the pool full of fish.

Ille de Pass is not too far a dinghy ride and a nice island to explore and you can try to catch some fish in the pass when you are there.

