

# The art of barter

Head to the South Seas and the concept of currency and hard cash becomes a little less important and the art of bargaining comes to the fore as **Jess Lloyd-Mostyn** notes

When you come from a world of shops, fixed prices and hard

currency it's hard to imagine how you'd go about trading goods or swapping skills in exchange for your family's food. It sounds daunting, risky, an uncertain way of putting dinner on the saloon table. But, when we started sailing through the islands of Melanesia, it became a way of life.

It started back in New Zealand, where we filled up on supplies. We set off prepared, having taken advice before leaving about the best things to stock up on in places where they were cheap and readily available. Items like rice, sugar, flour, fish-hooks, matches, soap, tinned fish and corned beef, crackers, second-hand clothes, books and medicines. We were also keen to fly our environmentally aware flag whenever we could so we carried large quantities of bamboo toothbrushes, clothes pegs and even cotton buds to hand out in the most remote places to combat the use of their plastic equivalents.

Our route was taking us northwards through the island chain of Vanuatu, zig-zagging across the Solomon islands, several months in the outer atolls of Papua New Guinea and then head westwards into Indonesia. We were saving certain stocks of trading goods for the most remote regions of these countries, particularly the isolated PNG islands, some of which maybe only have a handful of boats that visit them each season en route to South East Asia.

Receiving impromptu canoe visits from excited and curious strangers has been something we've been used to for some time. And, in these waters, where everyone has a garden, where each local relies on subsistence farming, where "your fish for my coconuts" just seems like a fair and logical sharing out of the wealth, we notice that every canoe already has food items crammed into it, transporting things from island to island. So we started to enquire about what the fishermen had caught that day, how many pineapples they had on them, and if they knew anyone with fresh greens.



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We shyly started to dip our toes into trading, something that we hadn't experienced much of since sailing the southern coast of Cuba several years back. In northern Vanuatu we receive some fresh mackerel in exchange for a tin of corned beef and that starts the ball rolling. We mention some of the items we carry on board and suggest things that they might like or find useful. In exchange for such offerings we receive a range of fresh fruits and other treats. There are countless funny negotiations in broken English about whether both parties feel satisfied with the swap, if we've got the amounts right.

There are also places where we are simply gifted these items, just as a gesture of goodwill or welcome, woven hats and bags, shell necklaces and ornaments.

Any trader who brings flowers too is a big hit with Rocket, our daughter. Soon our boat looks like a fresh and tropical market stall, adorned with strings of beads and shell. In the Solomon islands, they are well known for their artistry and we combine a small amount of local cash with trade items in order to buy a beautifully carved wooden octopus and an intricately inlaid bowl.

Other places see us swapping some skills, learning the art of making coconut cream, offering help on someone's winch, trading music and films on a computer memory stick. James patiently gives islanders lessons in making flatbreads and pancakes while I'm approached to bake cakes for local children. There seems to be a sudden rash of birthdays on the island, or perhaps everyone would just like a piece of cake!

It all happens very organically and naturally. After all, money becomes somewhat meaningless on islands with no shops, no banks, no roads. The kids get used to people canoeing up to our boat and offering various items.

All too soon, when we arrive in Indonesia, we're thrown back to the more normal way of getting groceries. Haggling at the markets is all about prices in rupiah, rather than numbers of coconuts or quantities of rice. So we find ourselves wistfully remembering the barter economy of the islands, wishing we could trade places and get back to that world.



**JESS LLOYD-MOSTYN**

Jess and James left the UK in 2011 in their Crossbow 42 and have sailed halfway round the world, growing their crew en route. Follow their journey at [water-log.com](http://water-log.com)