

A solo adventurer's spirits sink

AS THE SUN rose on the tiny Indian Ocean island of Cerf, the spirits of shipwrecked yachtsman Anthony Steward sank to new depths.

Marooned in the middle of nowhere on an island well away from any shipping route and very rarely fished, the future of the modern-day Robinson Crusoe looked bleak.

Most people would have been half crazy with panic at the prospect of months alone on a desert island, but Steward had already spent almost a year on his own sailing around the world and was quite at home by himself.

While he was sleeping off the hell of the previous five days, Steward's battered boat drifted ashore and he found some clothing and emergency flares.

Food and water began to take precedence over being rescued, and Steward started exploring his two-mile long home.

After looking around the tiny island he knew he could survive for a long time because of the abundance of "island fruit".

"I lived on pawpaws and coconuts but had no water for the first two days until it rained," he said.

"But what a pleasure the coconuts and pawpaws were compared to what I ate on the boat."

Steward built a wooden platform over the lagoon from which to spear fish and add some variation to his diet, and found a broken down fisherman's hut which he fashioned into a rough home.

After inspecting his boat Steward decided to build a trimaran and sail to Providence Island which was about 30 miles away. However, because of the weather conditions it would have been foolish to attempt the journey before the end of August.

"I was just worried about my fiancée Sue (Middleton) and my folks thinking I was dead."

Each day Steward would wake up before sunrise and look out to sea for any signs of life.

"I would then organise breakfast, a pawpaw and half a coconut with some of the milk, and hoist a red flag up a bamboo pole, hoping it could be seen from out to sea.

"Then I would keep a lookout until lunch which consisted of another pawpaw. Because it was so hot I would sit under a tree and try and not think too much.

"In the afternoon I would gather more food and water, but I would run into the bush and back out because I was terrified of missing a passing boat.

"I now know what Robinson Crusoe must have felt like — pretty lonely."

Steward was badly bruised when his boat hit the second reef and had many small cuts on his hands from fending off the coral.

"My body is only just recovering," he said.

"On the eighth day I saw a fishing boat far off down the reef. I couldn't believe my eyes and sat and watched the boat for the whole day.

"Eventually they came closer but it seemed like forever, and I shot a flare.

"They spotted it and the captain came ashore on a dinghy. I was so emotional and he was laughing and saying over and over 'don't worry, don't worry, we will look after you'.

"He took me back to the fishing boat Versau and they fed me."

Steward stayed on the Versau for several days and was dropped off in its home port on the island of Farquhar where he is being "treated like a king".

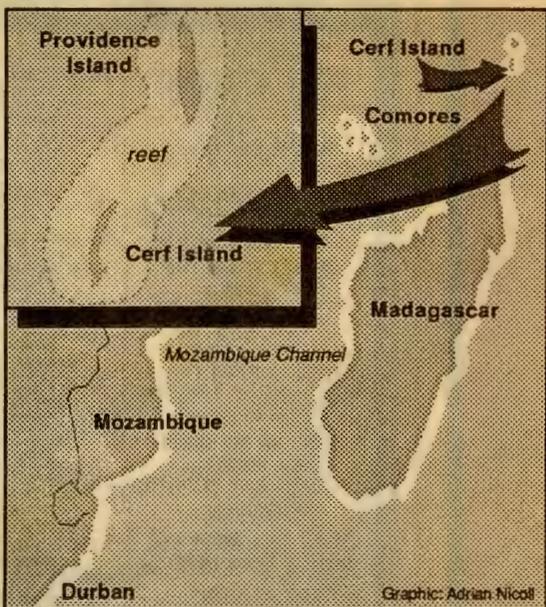
No one there will let him do anything but relax. He has strict instructions "to sit and watch other people work".

From Farquhar he will be flown to the main Seychelles island of Mahe and catch a plane back to Durban via Johannesburg on Saturday next week.

In spite of his ordeal, Steward has vowed to continue with his lone voyage around the world and has a relatively short leg to complete from the Seychelles to South Africa.

"The skipper of the fishing boat which picked me up, Frank, said he will go back to 'my' island and tow my boat back to Farquhar. I will just have to save more money and fix it up before I can continue with the challenge."

"All I want to do is see Sue and my folks and then I'll think of the beer," he laughed.



LEFT: A map indicating the whereabouts of Cerf Island. BELOW: The 19-foot yacht, NCS Challenger, carried Anthony Steward around the world. INSET: Anthony Steward.

