



# BARGE BRINGS WEALTH TO ISOLATED ISLE

BY MARK BARRATT-BOYES

Phoenix Boat's latest 24.4m barge, the *Epi Dream*, has been built for the tropical trades that blow off the coast of Vanuatu. So she has to be able to handle sudden changes in the weather such as squalls, which can spring up out of nowhere.

She is built to carry cattle and goods from Epi Island to the abattoirs at Vila, and has a maximum tare of 40 tonnes, equal to about 60 head of cattle.

The 444sq km island is of volcanic origin, and its highest point, Mount Pomare, reaches a height of 833m above sea level. It has a population of about 3000 people, most of whom live by subsistence agriculture and fishing, although there are now several guesthouses and lodges, as the island's beaches and other natural attractions are drawing an increasing number of international travellers. The island has roads but few vehicles.

There used to be a number of large coconut and copra plantations, principally along the fertile coast, but today most of these have been broken into smallholdings, except for one large plantation that continues to produce copra, beef and kava.

The *Epi Dream's* owner, Plantation Island Ltd, is one of the largest beef producers in the country and owns the abattoirs. The company is believed to run over 10,000 head of cattle on several farms scattered over numerous islands in Vanuatu, including Epi. Some of the cattle are the Wagyu breed, specially raised for the quality of the Kobe-style beef, which originated in Japan and is renowned for its flavour, tenderness and well-

marbled texture. The company is also building a refinery to process coconuts into biofuel.

John Thacker of Auckland Ship Brokers started the ball rolling. "I deal with John quite a bit," says Richard. "He approached me about last June. He was looking for a barge but couldn't find anything suitable." Her construction time was five months.

The *Epi Dream's* hull is virtually the same as Phoenix Boat's B barge. The freeboard is higher at 900mm compared with 700mm so she can carry more than the B barge. Her hull is very strong, due to her heavy scantlings. "Essentially she is overbuilt," Richard says. "We didn't have to put in the material that we did. The deck stringers are 250mm apart, whereas we could've gone to 300mm. All the framing is heavier than it needed to be. She will never crack. But I will never see her again, so I'm happy."

Antifoul has been applied up to the waterline, otherwise the hull is bare aluminium. The owner is keen to keep her clean by using AL18 acid wash.

The hull has a v-bow then runs flat all the way aft. The two skegs are 150mm deep and run almost the full length of the boat. This makes her easier to steer, and the hull has good grip on the water with no slewing.

The deck is covered in treadplate and can be divided into six pens, with gates fore and aft to move stock. The pens are clipped together and can be removed from the ship. Any animal waste is simply hosed overboard. Frames over the entire deck allow tarpaulins to be spread to shelter stock from the tropical sun and



ABOVE: Richard Lane delivers the barge to Auckland for shipping  
BELOW: Phoenix Boats workshop with the barge under construction



rain. The barge will also be able to load 40ft containers filled with machinery for the Epi Island refinery, and the deck has plenty of tie-downs everywhere for lashing down cargo.

Two centre voids taking up the entire beam amidships have baffles so they can be filled with extra fuel in two tanks. Her fore and voids are empty with no access hatches. This avoids any potential for leaks to occur, as everything has been sealed and tested. A sounding tube with a unilock cap makes it easy for a crewmember to sound the voids by lowering a hose to see if there is any water.

The *Epi Dream* has two Perkins 300ti diesel engines in separate compartments in the stern, each driving a sternleg. Because the sternlegs are widely separated the barge has good manoeuvrability and there is room for the fuel tanks in between.

"The skipper has been given strict instructions on what he's got to do to keep them maintained, including a maintenance schedule," says Richard. A fully equipped toolbox is carried on board to make general maintenance as easy as possible.

The *Epi Dream* is essentially a day boat, although she does have facilities on board for her two crew, a skipper and a deckie. The wheelhouse is raised so the entire deck can be washed through. "The deck has a flush floor, with 2m headroom so you can walk underneath it, and it works.

The wheelhouse does create windage in strong beam winds but the solution when berthing is to slide against the berth," Richard said.

Access to the wheelhouse is up external stairs aft. Toilets ▶

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