

# Bikini – mon amour

## Filming in the South Pacific

Finally it's about to happen: We've escaped the freezing cold of February. On a beautiful Saturday morning, we board the plane in Hawaii taking us to our final destination, the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific. Although the flight only takes four hours, we arrive on Sunday. After the equator, we cross the date line. In exchange for this lost day, we will spend another day twice on our return flight ....

Not much is remaining of the South Pacific idyll here. The two kilometer runway along the coastline was not originally financed by the tourism authority but by the US Department of Defense. The Marshall Islands were the scene of numerous above-ground atomic bomb tests which ended in the 1950s when the Bikini Atoll became infamous. A total of 66 nuclear tests resulted in the complete evaporation of some islets.

Today the "Marshalls" are of strategic importance precisely because of their remoteness. With a landing boat, we cross the lagoon from the U.S. military base Kwajalein directly into the slum of the Pacific. On the small, 0.14 square mile islet of Ebeye, 10,000 people are crowding in the hope of finding a job. Here, we also meet the first Bikini islanders. Expelled from their homeland more than 40 years ago, they are the first nomads of the nuclear age.

Our stay on the Bikini Atoll is limited to one hour, not longer. So we decide to visit the former inhabitants of the Rongelap Atoll. In a cockleshell boat, powered by two outboard motors, we travel eleven hours at night across the sea. One outboard engine, which is only running at half power, brings us to our destination. We are soaked to the bone. It's a wonder that the film camera is still working.

The islanders welcome us with wreaths of flowers and coconut milk. The South Pacific Paradise is almost perfect until we see the 5 cm long scars on their throats. These are evidence of the thyroid operations that have been performed on 40% of the islanders. The population of Rongelap Atoll wasn't in the test area at all. They were, however, contaminated by the radioactive fallout of a hydrogen bomb. That was in 1954. When the rate of cancer diseases continued to increase, they were evacuated by Greenpeace in 1985.

We spent two weeks on their exile island. Although there were daily radio messages, no boat could be chartered for the return trip. Our boat was the first to arrive here in over four months so we lived with the islanders and enjoyed their hospitality. We've become friends when finally a boat picks us up and takes us back to the slum island. Once again only one of the two outboard motors is still working.

*Oliver Herbrich (Reportage for magazine „Hör zu“ 29th Feb 1989)*