

# Ocean

**Film-maker Toni Davis spent a month aboard the Atlanta with 16-year-old Jana Piper, recording an unusual upbringing at sea with her adventurer father. Megan Reeder reports.**

**J**ana Piper went to sea instead of school, with the oceans of the world as her teacher. Her fascinating life with her father on the 16m wooden schooner Atlanta has been recorded in the documentary *Atlanta's Child*, screening on Prime at 6.30pm on Saturday.

The film is unique. The best of almost 100 hours of footage, by her surrogate uncle Peter Gill, has been combined with one month's footage shot by the Wild Visuals documentary film crew, directed by Toni Davis.

The family of the Atlanta might be already familiar: Jana and her father, Laurie Piper, were in the headlines in August when they rescued American millionaire adventurer Steve Fossett from the Coral Sea after his balloon crashed during an attempt to circumnavigate the globe.

Davis boarded the Atlanta in April to document Jana being reunited with her father after she had spent two years on land. Armed with three PVC digital cameras, used in a cinema *verite* style, the crew intimately captured Jana's personality.

"Jana is a real survivor, she is only 16, but incredibly independent for a girl of her age," Davis says.

Raised by her father from the age of five months, Jana has visited 35 countries.

"A lot of her childhood and formative years were spent around the boat or out at sea. And that has definitely rubbed off on her character. She is very much a free spirit," the director says.

*Atlanta's Child* captures the adventure of travelling the world but with a strong human element in Jana's struggle for independence after life at sea. The real story lies with the dynamic relationship she has with her sea-pirate-like father, Laurie.

"Laurie has a real sparkle in his eye. He is always looking over the next horizon and he has a friend in every port," Davis says. "What I really wanted to focus on was what it was like [for Jana] to have such an intense and exotic childhood, but then also to need her own independence and friends

and boyfriends, and what that meant for Laurie."

With a unique window on the world, many issues are raised in *Atlanta's Child*. As an 11 year-old, Jana witnessed the Taipei festival in Malaysia, as locals in hypnotic states put metal hooks through their backs, and drag themselves up a hill, with barbs through their cheeks and tongues. She has climbed a volcano in Vanuatu. She has feasted at the Festival of the Pig in Papua New Guinea. Davis describes her as, "the embodiment of freedom."

But there is a deeper story.

"It's difficult for people to understand, because it's the fantasy of every child to go out and see the world. But for a 14-year-old girl, surrounded constantly by adults, with no peer group and no schooling, that's what she missed," she says. "This is the beauty of it, is that what she missed we see as normal and mundane. And we see as exotic is normal and mundane for her. And that's what put the pressure on her relationship with Laurie, is her need to go."

Secondary to that is the relationship between Jana and her half-sister Camilla. Not as used to filming as Jana, who "was used to Peter Gill always being on board the boat and always having a camera on her," Camilla flowered in the process.

"Camilla had issues and sympathies with Jana's relationship with her father and was able to illuminate those. But she also became a very interesting character in her own right," she says.

Jana's only friend for the 1/2 years she spent aboard Atlanta, a Chihuahua called Cuddles, plays an absent but symbolic part. "Cuddles came to symbolise Jana's youth, and the end of childhood. Cuddles was Jana's only friend on board and she did everything for Cuddles," she says.

"When she left the boat, Cuddles died. When she came back and Cuddles wasn't there, she was really haunted by that loss.



Jana, left, with her half sister, Camilla.

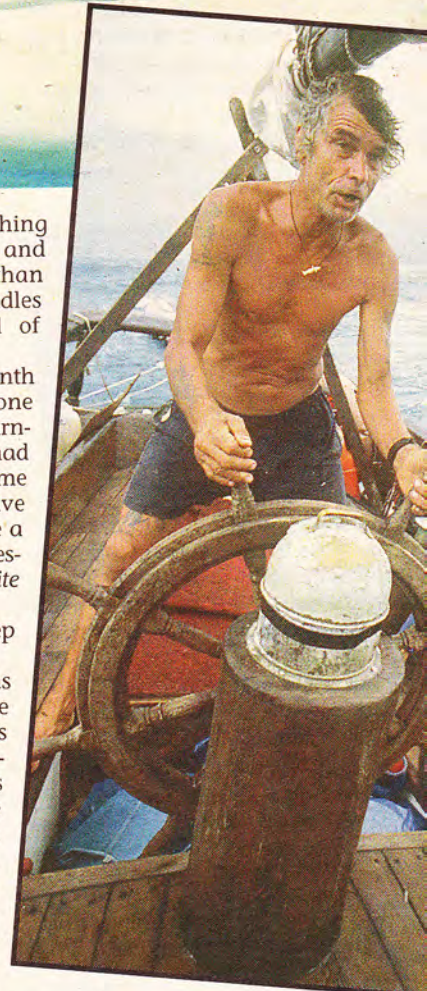
She said there was nothing there for her anymore, and that's obviously more than just the dog, but Cuddles came to represent all of that."

For Davis, the one month aboard Atlanta was, "one of the most profound learning curves I have ever had in my life. It stretched me on personal and creative levels. It also taught me a lot about filmmaking, especially the cinema *verite* style."

She also forged a deep friendship with Jana.

"The thing that was very important to me was to get into Jana's confidence, and I became very good friends with her," she says. "We filmed a lot of stuff on the boat, but, in fact, the real intimacy I experienced with her was when I was recording interviews with her. I didn't have a camera there, and we were able to talk very deeply about a lot of things."

With such insight into the lives of these characters, Davis feels she has learnt a lot about people. "It was an intense month that we were aboard with very colourful, intense people. I loved every minute of it and I deeply miss not having it in my life."



Seafarers: Laurie and Jana

**The World Around Us: Atlanta's Child will be screened at a later date on Prime.**



# Ocean Girl



*What is it like to grow up on board a boat? Sixteen-year-old Jana Piper's story is charted in a new documentary ...*

**J**ANA PIPER went to sea instead of school. The oceans were her classroom, and at just 16 she has had experiences of which most children her age can only dream.

The story of this veteran of the sea is told in the documentary *Atlanta's Child*, the latest production from former Getaway presenter and producer Tina Dalton.

"I spent most of my life on a yacht called *Atlanta* with my father," Jana says, proud of her upbringing.

ing. "If I had a chance to change the past, I wouldn't. I really feel happy about seeing what I did ... sailing around the world."

Jana, whose parents separated when she was a baby, was just a toddler when she took to the sea on the 16m wooden schooner with her father, Laurie, and, later, Peter Gill, the deckhand and surrogate uncle who has documented her life on film.

The "family" salvaged wrecks and fished for food to survive, also taking on paying guests for extra cash.

By 11, Jana had voyaged across three oceans and seen more than 30 countries. At 14, she left the *Atlanta* to return to Australia on her own.

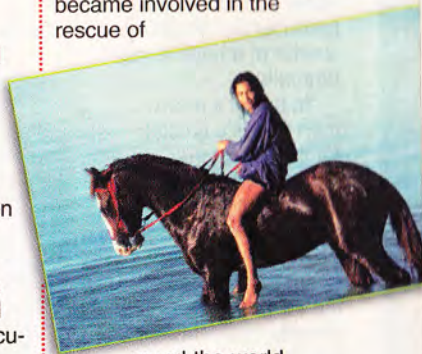
But two years later, she is

## Real Life

back on board with a documentary team to film her reunion with her dad.

Jana must decide whether to stay and complete a round-the-world journey started five years ago in Australia.

The *Atlanta* made world headlines in August when it became involved in the rescue of

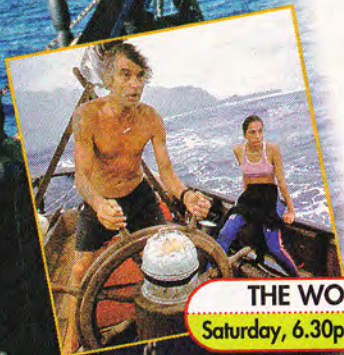


round-the-world balloonist Steve Fossett after he plunged into the Pacific.

For Jana, the rescue was just another day at sea.

*Marina Williams*

● **Jana Piper (left) aboard the schooner *Atlanta* with her father, and (above) bareback in Queensland.**



**THE WORLD AROUND US**

**Saturday, 6.30pm, Seven/Prime (NSW only)**

# The little girl and the Sea

Author: ANTHONY DENNIS

Date: 17/10/1998

Words: 1854

Publication: Sydney Morning Herald

Section: Spectrum

Page: 7

She grew up on a yacht, sailing the world.

ANTHONY DENNIS spoke to a teenager who is now trying to adjust to life on the land.

THE SEA stole Jana Piper's childhood. She took her first steps when she was 18 months old, crossing Bass Strait on her father's schooner. As she grew older her daily lesson became the next port of call; seasickness her adolescent illness; her only friend her ocean-going chihuahua-cross; her teacher her wayward father, infected by a toxic, incurable wanderlust that swept both him and her along and, eventually, away. Yet the sea allowed Jana to catch a wave to adulthood, to glimpse a life rarely afforded an average child.

Jana is now 16 and finally ensconced on dry land, truly unfamiliar territory, in Tin Can Bay, near Gympie in southern Queensland. She rides horses now, not waves. She is carefully gluing together the fragments of virtually an entire childhood spent sailing the globe with her father, Laurie Piper. Schooled by correspondence but educated by the sea, Jana is preparing for the uncertainty of her approaching adulthood.

Atlanta is an 18-metre Yankee-cut top-sail gaff-rig schooner, to be precise, which Laurie rebuilt from a 1922 Tasmanian fishing boat. It became their home during Jana's formative years. By the time Jana was 14 she had visited more than 30 countries and sailed across three oceans. She was taking watch and steering a course before she was 10 and could scramble all the way to the top of the rig with the agility of monkey. The sea allowed her to grow up but it might have left her something approaching a half-life. Today, she seems to be searching for the other half, though she remains sanguine.

"Some people I know are, like, 50 and they've never left Queensland," she says, "and it's like, you've missed out on so much, you've missed out on your entire lifetime."

Jana's father is now 55. He is a salt-water Crocodile Dundee, a legend in sailing circles as much for his seamanship and his survival as his derring-do. Laurie left school at an early age and is imbued with a guiding principle that "world knowledge" is more valuable than a traditional education. "I couldn't see any future in hanging around in Australia," he says. "All I could see were bureaucrats."

There are those, of course, who have and will question the wisdom of taking a child to sea and denying her what society considers a proper childhood. Peter Gill is Laurie's best mate and has been described as Jana's "surrogate mother" who accompanied both Laurie and his daughter during their world wanderings. He isn't one of the critics of Jana's arguably dysfunctional childhood, but he empathises with the difficulties Jana experienced, especially as she grew older.

"It hasn't been easy for Jana," says Gill. "She's hankered for the life of a normal kid. As you get older you need your own friends and your own space."

Atlanta was the vessel that rescued Steve Fossett, the millionaire American balloonist, who plummeted almost 9,000 metres into the Coral Sea during his abortive attempt to fly around the world in August. It was near the end of an epic five-year odyssey sailing the world that Laurie sailed the boat, with Jana and her stepsister, Camilla, aboard, into a "treacherous maze of reefs", at night, to collect the stranded Fossett. Laurie, as a result, became a hero, though it was one in a series of adventures, with Jana a leading protagonist.

Jana Piper, who is part-Polynesian, was abandoned by her mother when she was five months old and it was left to Laurie to raise her alone. When Jana was about six months, Laurie had one hand on the wheel and the other holding her as he sailed down the east coast from North Queensland to re-establish life in Eden in southern NSW. It was obvious he was always going to raise Jana unconventionally. His way inevitably, meant a life mainly at sea.

In 1993, Atlanta embarked on the world voyage with Jana, a period that encompassed one of the most critical phases in a child's life. During that time, Laurie had chiselled a living from chartering the boat and salvaging wrecks. Jana's later life was documented on a Hi-8 camera, largely by Gill, though Laurie has been recording Jana's growth since she was two years old. They became inseparable as she mastered the skills of a seaman, adopted the role of Laurie's minder and keeper, swam with dolphins and climbed volcanoes.

Yet each friend she made along the way, on the boat and onshore, slipped from her grasp as Atlanta set sail again on another course, taking with it another aspect of her adolescence. The only continuity in her life were Laurie, Peter, Cuddles, her beloved pet chihuahua, Atlanta and the horizon.

"At the time I was devastated [to have to leave behind the friends she had made]. They were good friends and they couldn't put up with my father. Dad's a great person ... but he is too high-spirited and too hot-headed. He'll never change. You can't teach an old dog new tricks ... But he's a pretty cool dad, I must admit."

THE story of Laurie and Jana Piper has become the subject of a documentary, *Atlanta's Child*, to be screened on the Seven Network tonight. It's the kind of remarkable tale that's occasionally rescued from what would otherwise be oblivion. The documentary is composed largely of the footage shot by Laurie and Peter of Jana growing up at sea since she was two, a poignant family album, demonstrating Jana's astounding shipboard skills (and her unquenchable energy), as well as a vibrant travelogue of her visits to diverse destinations such as Malaysia, the Maldives and Vanuatu. But most revealingly, it is a portrait of the undercurrents in an unusual father-and-daughter relationship.

"Laurie's definitely a nomad," says Toni Davis, the 27-year-old director of *Atlanta's Child*, her first film. "There's a perpetual motion about him - you're never sure whether he's running away or running towards something. Jana's very much halfway between two worlds. She's not sure if she's still a child or an independent adult. What is difficult for her is that her sense of security is her nomadic father."

Perhaps the most significant moment of Laurie and Jana's relationship occurred when she was 14. Atlanta had laid anchor in Greece, three or so years into the world voyage, when Jana decided, after much contemplation, that she wanted to leave her father and her life at sea. She wanted to return to Australia, to a normal existence and to receive the proper schooling denied to her by her travels, to a life, for the first time, without her sea-gypsy father.

"I think that Dad thought me staying would be more beneficial for me, but I thought otherwise," she says. "I finally realised that I'd be so far behind in school and so many people I'd met along the way would tell me, 'Jana, your schooling is so important' ... I realised, 'Oh my God, I'm four and a half years behind [at school], what am I going to do? Luckily I only got kept back two years."

"Dad and I have always been close, but as the journey developed we got closer and got to know each other better. But then when I left and went away, the relationship died a bit. We'd forgotten each other's ways and changed our ways while we were apart."

The producers of the documentary flew Jana and Camilla to Tahiti to be reunited with their father on the last leg of his five-year voyage and to gauge how Jana, now an independent, head-strong young woman, less tolerant of Laurie's foibles, would relate to both her father and Atlanta. (It was on their return to Australia from the shooting of the film that they rescued Fossett).

When you meet Jana she appears like any other 16-year-old you've met - a little elusive on the issues that trouble or challenge her, but a person who radiates a worldliness that emerges only from the depths of a unique experience.

"I've met a few children who have been on yachts and have sailed around the world and are so more advanced than the children I know in Australia," she says. "You just compare the intelligence level of those children who have done correspondence and have travelled and you compare the intelligence of those who have been in school, nine to three every day of their life, and you can tell the difference. They aren't clued in to life. It's probably the parents. They have the biggest influence on a child's life development."

Laurie's only regret about his rearing of Jana was that he spent too long in Asia during their travels, largely because he "went broke" in the Philippines (why?) and had to spend a long period there until he could afford to set sail again. He believes that Jana suffered most in Asia, in terms of peer support, because a Caucasian child couldn't slip as seamlessly into Asian society as she might have in a part of the world such as, say, the Caribbean.

"The sea is my way of life," he says. "My life's whatever comes ... I've got a clear conscience about Jana. The basic knowledge she's picked up will shine through in her later life. It wasn't a burden to take on the responsibility. If all goes well I'll probably put my roots down to see my kids through school. My little daughter's not so little any more. I'm very proud of her."

Then he'll be off again, no doubt, under sail to somewhere or other, because the sea is a dream for Laurie and he doesn't want anyone to interrupt it, not even Jana.

She now lives in Two Can Bay with her father and sister and Laurie's girlfriend, Colleen. She'd like to be a vet, but can't face the prospect of all the study, so she may become a model. She has transferred much of the energy she applied to her life at sea into horses and, less successfully, into her schoolwork.

"I got bored very quickly [with schoolwork] and I needed to direct my energy in some other way - and horses and fun, going to the beach socialising with my friends, were it ... I seem to respect adults a bit more ... I don't really respect people my own age as much."

"I would love to travel again, for sure, maybe more independently, on my own, not with my dad looking over my shoulder all the time. I love

Atlanta, but I could never ever bring myself to live on her ever again."

\* Atlanta's Child screens tonight at 6.30 on Channel 7.

---