

Fleet letter #2 – January 19, 2022

Ahoy Pacific Puddle Jumpers,

New Year's Hopes and Predictions

The arrival of a New Year always brings out the optimist in us, so allow us to share our hopeful predictions for the coming months.

Unless there are radical developments related to COVID-19 or, God-forbid, some other unforeseen international calamity, we anticipate that by late March foreign-flag cruising boats will be arriving in French Polynesian waters. Having already completed pre-arrival procedures with DPAM, they will be allowed to clear into French Polynesia in either Nuku Hiva, Rikitea or Tahiti, and will be given 'normal' time allotments for cruising the archipelagos: EU passport holders may stay indefinitely (but may not work), while non-EU citizens may stay 90 days, then must exit the territory for 90 days before returning, unless they have pre-arranged a "long-stay visa" before setting sail from the mainland. The arriving boats, themselves, may stay two years.

Reestablishing the Milk Run

Before COVID, many if not most westbound cruisers did what came to be called the 'Cruiser Milkrun', island-hopping all the way from Tahiti to New Zealand in 6 to 8 months, then laying over in the land of the kiwi bird during the summer months there — and thus avoiding cyclone season in the tropics. Needless to say, the pandemic put the brakes on such plans and created the 'logjam' of cruising boats now lying in some of Tahiti's anchorages.

But if New Zealand finally opens up at the end of April, as anticipated, we expect other island nations will also, thus reopening the Milkrun's track from FP to the Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji (already open) and NZ (and possibly New Caledonia and Australia also). Yes, our fingers are crossed that it works out this way, but you can bet that many absentee owners of boats that are now lying idle at Tahiti, are extremely eager to get them out of there and move west — which would at least partially alleviate the current logjam. The irony of all the chatter heard lately about crowded anchorages and marinas in Tahiti, is that there are fewer cruisers and bareboat charterers sailing in the archipelagos this year than we've ever seen before.

So our best advice is to leave the West Coast a bit later than you might have previously anticipated, i.e. mid-to-late April, by which time we'll know if the Cooks, Tonga and NZ have reaffirmed their intention to open.

Also, if you are not EU and will not be arriving with a Long Stay Visa, but intend to leave your boat in FP while your immigration clock resets, start making plans now for where you will leave your boat, and who will keep an eye on it. In addition to a few large cyclone-safe anchorages such as Nuku Hiva's Taiohae Bay, there are boatyards with limited dry storage at Hiva Oa, Marquesas; Apataki, Tuamotus; and Raiatea, Society (Tahitian) Islands. Currently no dry storage on Tahiti, but there are three marinas, plus a free well-protected anchorage at Port Phaeton (adjacent to Tahiti Iiti). Download the free Tahiti Stopover Handbook for contact info at www.pacificpuddlejumps.com.

Preparing to Jump

Regardless of what sort of weather you experience during your 3,000 to 4,000-mile passage to French Polynesia, and what types of onboard challenges you face along the way, the trip will undoubtedly be an adventure that you'll not soon forget. As we often say, a long bluewater passage is usually a mix of high points and low points, but the highs almost always outnumber the lows.

Here's some food for thought that might help to keep your crossing experience a positive one.

Pre-trip:

PPJ organizers do not do pre-trip vessel inspections. It is each skipper's responsibility to ensure that his or her boat is well prepared for the voyage and that the crew is competent. So if your gut tells you to get a second opinion about your boat's readiness, then by all means get at least a rigging and/or systems checkout (survey) from the most knowledgeable professionals you can find.

What sort of breakage is most common?

Over the years, our end-of-season crossing surveys have listed a variety of gear problems and failures. Rigging issues, both minor and major, have been pretty common — typically involving standing rigging that was 'beyond its sell-by date', or uninspectable rigging elements such as my own boat's forestay chainplate, which had been built into the bow structure.

Older mechanical items that get high usage are always candidates for failure; things like fresh-water and bilge pumps, fridge compressors, generators, autopilots, etc. Image how many swells an electric autopilot would have to steer through during a passage from Mexico or Panama to the Marquesas! No wonder many boats have some sort of windvane steering device or a backup autopilot. (Hand steering this distance with a small crew is doable, but thoroughly exhausting.)

Beyond the Shakedown

Despite some inevitable breakage, it's actually pretty remarkable how few major breakdowns have occurred during the 24 years that we've been involved with this annual 'westward migration' of cruisers. Why? Partly because most European boats have already crossed both the Atlantic and the Caribbean before arriving in Panama. By that time minor gear failures that were inevitable have likely already occurred. Similarly, the one or two years that most West Coast sailors spend cruising Mexico prior to doing the Jump, gives them plenty of time to assess which gear is up to the crossing, which is not, and make upgrades where necessary.

Do you need every item on the shelf at your local chandlery? No, but you will want to bring the obvious things like engine (and generator) spares — filters, oil, coolant — as well as portable backups for your built-in nav and communications gear. You can't bring spares for everything, of course. But in order to get your priorities straight it's worth spending some time considering various 'what if' scenarios with your crew: What if we lose a lower shroud? What if the watermaker fails? What if our main bilge pumps fail? What if our chartplotter fails? What if we lose steerage? What if we lose our refrigeration? Our built-in VHF? Our satellite communications device?

The Crew Conundrum

Whether to take on additional crew is a question that troubles many boat owners. True, it's nice to have extra hands to share the boat chores and rotating watches, but before you commit, we would urge you to consider the following advice:

Never pick up unfamiliar crew without spending enough time with them to assess their sailing abilities and personality traits. A month at sea can be a very long time if spent with an unhelpful or annoying crewmember.

For a successful relationship between captain and crew, it is essential that everyone have appropriate expectations: Long before heading offshore the captain should let everyone know the ship's rules, post watch schedules, explain galley duties, and clarify policies concerning alcohol use (most boats run 'dry' on offshore passages). Another wise prohibition, in our opinion, is an absolute ban on political debate while underway. Also, women, if you are definitely not interested in romance during the trip, make that abundantly clear from the get-go, especially when signing on as crew with an unattached captain.

Although it may sound awkward, we think it's reasonable and important to ask for a list of all prescription drugs that a potential crew is taking, and for what ailment or condition.

It's also reasonable to ask for references from previous skippers.

Also important is to be sure all crew have enough money to cover basic living expenses once they make landfall. And be aware that yacht captains are liable for any problems, bad behavior or fines associated with crew that he/she brings into French Polynesia — this includes fines for overstaying a visa.

All this being said, some of the worst crew stories we've heard concerned long-time friends who'd never actually sailed together long-distance. (Sleep deprivation can do weird things to people.) Likewise, we've heard skippers say the best crew they ever had was a couple of young backpackers that they picked up at the last minute.

South Pacific Bon Voyage Events — Save the Date

In recent years the Pacific Puddle Jump has teamed up with the South Pacific Sailing Network to provide 'seminar and sendoff' events in Mexico and Panama. All westbound cruisers are welcome to attend these highly informative events, which will provide attendees with a wealth of up-to-date cruising info.

Panama: 8 February, 10 am – 1 pm at Shelter Bay Marina on the Caribbean side

Nuevo Vallarta, Mexico: 13 February, 3 pm – 6 pm at Vallarta Yacht Club

***Due to pandemic-related restrictions, space is limited for this event, so please RSVP to andyturpinatlarge@gmail.com.

Look for another Fleet Letter soon regarding fleet communications.

— Andy Turpin
PPJ director