There’s a very big patch of ocean between the West Coast of the Americas and French Polynesia. And despite the fact that sailors have been migrating across it for generations, no one can give you an irrefutable plan for crossing it painlessly.

This is not to say you shouldn’t study weather data all the way across. Of course you should. But you still might get unlucky. As one cruiser we met in Tahiti this year put it, “Hey, sometimes you have to go through hell to get to paradise!”

As you might have guessed, many boats reported an abundance of sloppy, confused seas and a paucity of idyllic trade wind sailing. Many, but not all. One group that left Puerto Vallarta, Mexico reported having glorious sailing for days on end, where they barely had to trim a sail, while another group that left from the same port a week or two later faced light air, funky seas and way too many squalls in the mysterious ITCZ (Intertropical Convergence Zone). Speaking of which, as any Shellback (equator crosser) will confirm, strategies about how far west to cross it are sure to spark hot debate in every sailors’ bar from San Francisco to Panama.

If you’re considering making a Puddle Jump of your own someday — or just want to study this subject from the comfort of your recliner — check out the crossing data on page 112 (plus the data in recaps of other years at www.pacificpuddlejump.com).

More than 200 boats signed up for our loosely organized Pacific Puddle Jump rally this year, largely so they could associate with others in the fleet and be eligible for the bond exemption, clearance, and duty-free fuel deal we have worked out with a Papeete yacht agent.

After meeting at our PPJ Send-off Parties in Puerto Vallarta or Panama, many boats kept in touch along the way via SSB nets, often relaying weather info, as well as sharing tales and advice.

In June, we caught up with more than 100 fleet members in Tahiti at the Tahiti-Moorea Sailing Rendezvous, and heard about both the highs and lows of their 3,000-mile passages. In addition, we surveyed the fleet to bring you the heartfelt, first-hand insights that follows.

One thing we’re always curious about is how expectations about the crossing compared with the actual experience:

**Convivia:** We had expected the kid dynamic to be more trying than it was. As it turns out, the kids love passage-making and fall right into an easy and generally low-key routine.

**Water Musick** — “With three children we were concerned about lack of access to treatment facilities in the center of the Puddle. In reality we didn’t even think about it out there, and we were more focused on meals, homework and running the boat.”

**Panta Rhei** — “The passage was substantially easier than we expected.”

**Estrella** — “The SE trades are a mythical beast that we never encountered. The ITCZ was often not fully formed and also was often in the Southern Hemisphere.”

**Ladybug** — “We were surprised at how
much difference it made how far east or west one was while crossing the ITCZ. Boats farther west had much better times than when we crossed.

_Bright Angel_ — "The winds were generally lighter than anticipated (both north and especially south of the equator). The ITCZ was not as scary as anticipated, just a pain."

_Wondertime_ — "Coming from the Pacific Northwest, we'd always been leery of . . . encountering high winds on the crossing. But as it turned out we were more worried about not having enough wind. We saw 5-15 knots about 90% of the trip."

_C'est la Vie_ — "I was surprised at the lack of sea life we encountered, as well as how rough it can be waiting out the doldrums. They are not dull — in fact, quite rowdy with the remaining sea movement and no wind."

_Gato Go_ — "The passage seas were rougher than I expected with seas from two to three directions, both north and south of the ITCZ. But the winds were generally in the 15- to 30-knot range."

_Slick_ — "It was much easier than expected. No surprises, except getting caught in a fishing net outside the Galapagos."

_Inspiration at Sea_ — "When I did get the winds, the wind vane took over and the knots we were making were amazing until the halfway point. Then five days of no wind, nada. The winds came back, along with confused seas — the second half was uncomfortable."

_Evergreen_ — "I was very worried about how I would be able to handle the inactivity for all those days at sea since I'm a bit of an exercise nut. . . But in reality it did fine."

_Momo_ — "We saw better trade winds and less swell than expected."

_Pandion_ — "North of the equator we had great wind and made several 200-mile days. Unfortunately, the seas were horribly mixed with three different swells at any given time, and despite our waterline we were getting bounced around as if in a washing machine."

_Red Sky_ — "We were surprised how few squalls we actually experienced, and that we had only one lightning storm that caused us any concern — not that we are complaining!"

_It's been said that a long passage is often a balance of highs and lows. The highs this year?"

_Estrella_ — "High points: re-falling in love with our boat as a passage-maker and a good light-air sailer; the challenge; and the feeling of accomplishment when we finished."

_Ladybug_ — "High points were wildlife sightings including a huge sperm whale and large pods of striped and other dolphin."

_Wondertime_ — "We loved the time about 10 days out when our days became very routine with meals, playtime, naps, radio schedules, blog posting. This was very comforting underway, especially sailing with two young children (3 and 6)."

_C'est la Vie_ — "The PPJ evening cruisers' net was a high! It was great to hear from everyone else and their experiences (highs and lows) for the day."

_Gato Go_ — "The highs far outweighed the lows. There was a real
PACIFIC PUDDLE JUMP RECAP —

sense of camaraderie amongst the participants on the nets. Highs included breathtaking sunsets and sunrises; several visits by hundreds of pan-equatorial dolphins surfing, leaping, and playing; the stars; time to reflect; and sailing where few people ever get a chance to see — for a second time!"  

Inspiration at Sea: "When becalmed for five days, the colors of the calm glass sea were a painters palette no one would believe to be real. The reflection of the sky on the sea presented colors of the water not ever seen. This is also where we saw the dolphins off my bow (see below)."

Slick — "The highest point was obviously arriving, but the fishing was excellent, and this really gave us something to do."

Evergreen — "The high points were the beautiful star-filled nights and the feelings around finally doing something that we'd planned and worked so hard for so long."

Pandion — "There were so many highs: Catching big fish, sunrises and sunsets, marine mammals playing with the boat, hearing whales sing through the hull of the boat, and sailing at night is magical."

Red Sky — "Ten days of great sailing on a broad reach averaging 7 kts and topping out at 10.1. Interrupting the watch schedule each day to spend time together. The night sky is incredible out there."

Sockdolager — "High points were the first 10 days, in which we averaged 100 miles a day — in our Pacific Seacraft Dana 24!"

The lows this year mostly had to do with confused seas, especially south of the equator, but there were others:

Convivio — "Losing our spinnaker on day two, and Tucker coming down with the flu after crossing the equator."

"We were so excited to make landfall, but found ourselves wanting to stretch out and savor the approach."
The Pleasure & The Pain

Estrella — “So much light wind, not catching many fish, and being becalmed 50 miles from landfall.”

Wondertime — “The 200 miles we had north of the equator with zero wind. It was hard to keep morale up during those days.”

Gato Go — “Fatigue and getting caught in a very strong microburst that ripped our mainsail at the second reef point with 1,000 miles to go.”

Lisa Kay — “Total lack of sea life.”

Slick — “It was frustrating when the spinnaker halyard kept chafing through. Although going up the mast in the middle of the ocean while under sail was a great experience.”

Evergreen — “The only low point was when our autopilot broke, but we had the parts to fix it, so we were back in business.”

Red Sky — “Running out of wind, resulting in 11 days of motorsailing and several days of confused seas.”

We also like to ask passage-makers if they remember the feeling they had when they first made landfall:

Water Musick — “Excitement, but also sadness the passage was over.”

Southern Cross — “Our first glimpse of land came several hours earlier than anticipated, so that was exciting. And the fragrant smell of the vegetation is something I will always remember.”

Panta Rhei — “We were pretty awed by Fatu Hiva. It is a tropical paradise and stunningly beautiful. Add to that, our friends were there!”

Sulyna — “Getting on land is always good. Of course, landfall was always much more spectacular before GPS — I miss the old days.”

Estrella — “I remember the sun rising over the peaks and the spicy floral smell of the island; the giddy feeling that we had actually sailed our home to the South Pacific.”

Wondertime — “We were so excited to make landfall, but found ourselves wanting to stretch out and savor the approach to Atuona (Hiva Oa). We had light wind from astern, and with our spinnaker up we drifted slowly along watching the island pass by on our starboard, absolutely in awe at its beauty and completely relishing our last hours of the passage.”

C’est la Vie — “Elation and exhaustion! I (Jody) felt much more confident and capable in my sailing abilities, and that I could now sail anywhere.”

Gato Go — “We were really excited to see the blip of land come up on the radar screen. From 20 miles out you can just see the beginnings of form, much like an early ultrasound in a pregnancy.”

Libertad — “As we neared Hiva Oa, a very large squall moved over the island, completely obscuring it and the entrance to the anchorage. We had a 25-knot breeze moving us at 7.5 knots and we were somewhat concerned to enter and negotiate the anchorage in those conditions. Fortunately the squall moved on, the clouds lifted and the wind slacked just in time for us to comfortably anchor in a very crowded anchorage.”

Red Sky — “Mixed emotions. Both happy and sad feelings, as the dream of doing the crossing had become a reality and now it was over.”

Sockdolager — “Relief. It was a much harder passage than we’d expected (37 days), and we were very glad to be able to rest and relax.”

Advice is rarely hard to find within the cruising community. But tips from successful passage-makers are worth listening to:

Water Musick — “Enjoy the ride!”

Southern Cross — “Thoroughly familiarize yourself with any newly installed equipment before you jump. Don’t put the trip off any longer. It’s wonderful out here!”

Stolen Kiss — “Get access to better weather info (use Sailmail). This is a must to keep abreast of weather changes so that passages can be more enjoyable.”

Estrella — “Don’t leave too early in the season.”

Red Sky — “Make sure you have access to weather info (e.g., GRIB files) and pay attention to where you turn to cross...”
the ITZC. You can cut days off your passage with good weather info and sensible decisions based on it.

Bright Angel — “Go now, go young, and do what is necessary to get the boat safe and seaworthy. But do not get bogged down with the endless project list!”

Wonderitime — “Just go! But do stock up on tequila and tortilla chips before you leave Mexico.”

C'est la Vie — Get the latest cruiser’s guides, charts and first-hand information from cruisers who have traveled those waters in the last two years. Get familiar with the French language and you will enjoy these islands and their people much more!”

Gato Go — “There is so much hype about the ITZC. It is unavoidable, but the winds are seldom above 30 knots and only for a brief time. Don’t head south too soon, follow the conventional wisdom of 125°-130°W. Also, try to limit your expectations of what should be and just take it as it comes. It really is a remarkable experience and quite an accomplishment.”

Libertad — “We believe that if you aren’t a good team before you leave, the passage is not going to make you one. Our advice is don’t look for romance and team work in the crossing. Like all your other provisions, take it with you.”

Evergreen — “Be ready for anything, but do embrace the passage as the bridge to a whole new cruising area that comes with a good chance for smooth sailing and a big sense of peace and accomplishment once completed.”

Not even one in a hundred sailors will ever make the crossing to French Polynesia. Clearly, such ambitious adventuring is not for everyone. But as you can tell, those who do make voyage often find that the rewards far outweigh the risks, and over time, the unpleasant memories tend to fade, while the joyful ones linger.

— latitude/andy

2012 PACIFIC PUDDLE JUMP PASSAGE DATA

Although many more sailors did the Puddle Jump this year, those who responded to our questionnaire give a representative sampling of passage data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bow Name</th>
<th>Best Make &amp; Age</th>
<th>Captain &amp; Crew</th>
<th>Boat’s Homeport</th>
<th>Departed From &amp; Date</th>
<th>Destination &amp; Date</th>
<th>Days of King</th>
<th>Miles of King</th>
<th>Engine Hours</th>
<th>Help/Will Speed of Fast/Caught</th>
<th>Broke/ &amp; Breakdowns</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Rodeo</td>
<td>Deerfoot 50</td>
<td>M. McClellan &amp; A. MacDonald</td>
<td>McColl, ID</td>
<td>Nayarit 3/8</td>
<td>Hiva Oa 4/23</td>
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<td>Bob &amp; Linda Hargreaves</td>
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<td>La Cruz 3/20</td>
<td>Hiva Oa 4/12</td>
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<td>Reino 13m</td>
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<td>Rossman family</td>
<td>Tomales Bay, CA</td>
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<td>Tim &amp; Cherise</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
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<td>128 W</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>105 hrs</td>
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</table>

Momo — “After our 12 years cruising, we can say: The South Pacific is a unique place on Earth.”

Pandion — “Get the six-month visa before you set sail. It’s worth the hassle. French Polynesia is so magical.”

Sockdolager — “Don’t hesitate to heave-to and get some rest if you need it. Also: if you carry limited fuel, being becalmed is a character-building experience.”

Red Sky — “The most important thing you can take with you is a good attitude.”