

RUNNIN' DOWN A DREAM —

"If you want to meet Puddle Jumpers, you really ought to come to Panama!" advised former San Diego sailors Frank Nitte and Shirley Duffield, who now call that tiny Central American country home.

Why? Because on any given day during late winter and early spring, anchorages on the west side of the Panama Canal are brimming over with world cruisers who'll soon head west toward



If they're ever going to make it to Tahiti, Don and Judi of 'Passion' figure it's now or never.

the storied isles of French Polynesia — a passage we like to call the Pacific Puddle Jump.

We took Frank and Shirley's advice, and for the past three years we've been co-hosting Puddle Jump Send-off Parties with their club, the historic Balboa YC. This year's shindig (March 10) drew sailors from more than a half-dozen nations. And, as you'll learn in the following mini-profiles, many of them are already extremely well-traveled.

Unlike the groups of westbound cruisers who stage for departure in Mexico, most of these folks had never met before, as they'd been cruising the Caribbean independently and had transited The Ditch in groups of two or three. Also, it seems that most of them planned to make a slight south-westerly diversion to the Galapagos Islands en route — the archipelago lies on the equator, roughly 600 miles off the Ecuadorian coast. From there, the rhumbline distance to French Polynesia

is nearly the same (about 3,000 miles) as it is from Puerto Vallarta, where the largest contingents of Mexico cruisers typically jump off from. Interestingly, this year — perhaps as a diabolical scheme to screw up our PPJ coverage — an uncommonly large group is also staging for departure from La Paz, gateway to the Sea of Cortez. You'll meet a few of those cruisers here also.

As in years past, we hope to catch up with many members of this year's PPJ fleet — there are currently 222 registered at www.pacificpuddlejumper.com — at the annual Tahiti-Moorea Sailing Rendezvous, June 22-24. We'll report on that event, in addition to publishing a recap of this year's crossing, in upcoming editions.

In the meantime, let us introduce you to this international assortment of wide-eyed westbound cruisers:

**Passion — Dufour 39
Don Klein & Judi Mauck
Honolulu, HI**

"On our first date 12 years ago, Don took me sailing," recalls Judy. "I fell in love with it and said, 'This is for me!'" Their cruising dreams began to build from that point on, and when she lost her job a few years ago she reportedly said, "Let's go for it!"

"I'm 72 years old now," says Don. "So I figure it's now or never. As long as I can pull up the anchor a couple times a week and go up the mast I'm gonna keep doing it."

Their general plan is to gravitate to less-developed destinations like Tonga and Papua New Guinea. "The attraction of this kind of life is the lure of freedom; to be able to go anywhere you want to go. . . For me it's the maximum experience of total freedom."

Needless to say, their itinerary is open-ended.

**Felicity J — Dufour 385
Gary & Merry Houghton
Geelong, Australia**

It's not uncommon to meet Aussies in Panama these days. The Land Down Under barely felt the recession, so the Australian dollar is very strong against most other currencies, making this an ideal time for Aussies to buy boats overseas.

Mary and her husband picked up this 38-footer in England for a good price, sailed her across the Atlantic, then did a bit of Caribbean cruising before an unfortunate misstep cramped



their style: Gary tripped on a mooring line and broke his leg while stepping ashore. So now Merry and a four-man crew will deliver the boat to its new home while Gary sits at home convalescing.

**Gypsea Heart — Leopard 47 cat
Rankin Tippins & Sandy Hollis,
Luckenbach, TX**

"I've been wanting to sail the South Pacific ever since I read *Kon Tiki* as a kid," explains Rankin with a broad Texas grin.

He and Sandy have been sailing the Caribbean for 10 years, and seem totally suited to the cruising lifestyle. But as Sandy told Rankin, "If we're ever going to do the South Pacific, we'd better do it

After 10 playful years in the Carib, Sandy and Rankin of 'Gypsea Heart' are heading west.



ALL PHOTOS LATITUDE / ANDY EXCEPT AS NOTED

PACIFIC PUDDLE JUMP PROFILES, PT II



Other than the sailors who arrive at this time each year, there's almost no tourism to Marquesan islands such as Fatu Hiva.

now." He made the crossing once before and has been yearning to spend more time in the Marquesas ever since. After a season of tropical island-hopping, they'll cruise New Zealand.

Panta Rhei — Apogee 50

Larry & Karen Nelson, Seattle, WA

"People ask us, 'When are you coming home?' And we say we're never leaving home; we're taking it with us."

Karen tells us this trip is the culmination of a very long dream. She and Larry, like many within the Panama fleet, will check out the Galapagos on their way west.

According to Larry, this unusual boat name comes from ancient Greece and means "nothing stays the same" — a truism we probably all can agree on.

Pogeyan — Leopard 47 cat

**Rixzene Ayers & Steve Gould
Hobe Sound, FL**

When asked what had inspired them to sail west to Tahiti, Steve replied, "I'm trying to determine if the world is flat or round." (Yeah, he'd had a couple of free beers.) But Rixzene gave us a straight answer: "I've been to French Polynesia once and can't wait to get back there."

A few days earlier, while at Shelter Bay on the Caribbean side of the Canal, a couple came over to *Pogeyan* to pet the ship's dog. The two couples got to talking, became instant friends, and

now they're all heading west together. Needless to say, the Canal Zone is a great place to catch a ride either east or west.

Island Fling — Island Spirit 40 cat Des & Carole Elliott, Wellington, NZL

Des and Carole began their current stint of cruising in South Africa, where



The 'Island Fling' crew started their cruise with the Cape to Rio Race.

Island Fling was built. But rather than making a leisurely cruise up the South Atlantic, they took the fast track by entering the '09 Cape to Rio race. Later, after exploring the Brazilian coast and parts of the Eastern Caribbean, they found themselves in Panama, literally surrounded by other South African cats — all headed west. In fact, they transited the Canal with two *Island Spirit* sisterships, with which they hope to rendezvous in the Galapagos, then make

the crossing as a three-boat flotilla. They'll eventually make Wellington, NZ, their new homeport.

Equinox II — Leopard 40 cat Ray Costello & Lea Rossis Melbourne, AUS

Equinox II is another member of this year's herd of 'cats' heading west. Ray and Lea bought her used in the Caribbean a year and a half ago and are slowly moving her back to their home waters on the south coast of 'Oz'.

"This was definitely his idea," confides Lea, "but it's going well. Turns out it was a pretty good idea after all!" They admit *Equinox II* is a pretty big and complicated boat for operators who only started sailing 10 years ago. "It's a learning process," explains Ray, "and we're learning all the time."

Good To Go — F-P 40 cat Barrie & Pru Almond, Brisbane, AUS

We got a little confused talking to this worldly couple. They're from Australia (perhaps by way of England), but haven't lived there for 20 years. In fact, the last place they lived before buying this boat in the Caribbean two years ago was Bahrain.

"I'm looking forward to the passage for the adventure of it," says Pru. "I've never made a crossing like this, though, and I'm a little anxious. So I hope we can catch up with our buddy boats." If we've got the story straight, they transited the Canal with a nearly identical sistership.

Bamboleiro — Ranger 33 Carl Johnson & Cristina Revilla San Francisco

Named after a Gypsy Kings' ballad about second chances, *Bamboleiro* has undergone a metamorphosis while in the care of Carl and Cristina. When they bought her at a lien sale four years ago she was in terrible shape, but af-

Ranger 33s aren't the roomiest boats, but what the heck, Cristina and Carl are young.



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ter countless hours of hard work she's back in top shape.

"The original plan was to sail to Mexico," explains Cristina. "Then after cruising there for a while we thought, 'What next?' So we sailed on to Panama. And now we've decided to turn right." As they're both in their early 30s, this couple is one of the youngest to have made the jump in recent years.

Fittingly, their plans are vague, but one idea is to voyage all the way to Spain, where Cristina grew up, buy a bigger boat and cruise the Med. Ah youth!

Charlotte — Custom steel 45

Stefan & Sue Marks, Grimsby, GBR

According to Stefan, cruising the South Pacific is Sue's idea: "The whole thing sounds lovely!" she says with a mischievous smile. Stefan explains that they left England about three years ago,



Why would Stefan and Sue of 'Charlotte' want to go home? There's still too much to see.

with the initial intention of spending just one year cruising. "But there was so much to see, so we spent another year, and now here we are going west." It's a story we hear often, of course.

Although they lived in Northampton, far from the sea, they got into sailing dinghies nearly four decades ago, then finally moved up to big boat sailing in the early '90s. Their boat has logged 50,000 miles, mostly by previous owners, but this will be her first trip to the Pacific.

Millennium — Custom 60

John Clayton & Sukanya Kamphang Sydney, AUS

Just about everyone we met in Panama had a lot of sea miles under their belts, but the *Millennium* crew were standouts. Aussie John met his Thai wife Sukanya while cruising in her country five years ago, and they soon took off to explore the world. "So far I like the Chagos Archipelago best," she

says.

As Panama is located almost directly opposite Thailand on the globe, they've got a lot of exploring left to do before returning to Sukanya's island. In the meantime, John says, "It will be interesting to see what French Polynesia has to offer."

Contina — 85-ft Inace trawler Wilhelm & Dorit Hepfer Road Harbour, BVI

There's probably no one in the Panama fleet more excited about getting duty-free fuel in the Marquesas than Wilhelm and Dorit, as their 85-ft motoryacht will surely be thirsty by the time they make landfall.

Both are natives of Germany who lived in Canada for decades before setting out 12 years ago. Since then, they've logged thousands of sea miles, including a crossing to Europe and back. Still, they are extremely excited to now be heading to the legendary South Seas. "For us, this is the culmination of a lifetime of boating," says Wilhelm, who got his wife hooked on water sports when he taught her to sail at age 18.

Kokomo — Quasar 50 cat Peter Schmieder & Donna Patrick Meerbusch, DEU

A native of Düsseldorf, Germany, Peter started dreaming about exploring the Pacific under sail when he was 18. In fact, he started building a boat to do it in, but he eventually locked those dreams away — until he met Donna in



Similar cruising dreams brought Peter and Donna of 'Kokomo' together.

Florida. She'd done lots of cruising previously and was rarin' to go again. One place that's always been on her must-see list is Bora Bora, and now she'll finally get her chance. After that, who knows? Perhaps all the way 'round.



Catharpin Blue — Island Packet 420 Sam & Marilyn Fowler, Deltaville, VA

Marilyn can still remember it as though it were yesterday: "Back in 2002 he says to me, 'I know what I'm going to do when I retire; buy a boat and go cruising.'"

"Really?" she said, "And have you ever sailed a boat before." He had, but it was only a Snipe. No matter, the cruising bug had bitten hard, so they tested the idea by taking a Windjammer cruise, and loved it. The next step was sailing lessons and before long they bit the bullet and bought this sweet 42-footer, aboard which they've done three Caribbean circuits and a trip to Maine.

Marilyn credits an old college roommate, Lynne Thompson, as the inspiration to do the Pacific. Back in the late '90s she and husband Barry wrote saying, "Don't call us, we're sailing off to the South Pacific." And the Chula Vista-based couple is going again this year aboard their Wauquiez 38 *Sunrise*.

Vinga — Lagoon 42 cat Graham Ramsey, Exeter, GBR

When we caught up with Graham he seemed a bit preoccupied. But no wonder, he was planning to set sail the next day and only two of his five crew were on site. If they all showed up, *Vinga* might have had the most internationally diverse crew in the fleet: two Brits, an Argentine, a New Zealander, and an American.

Saol Eile — Amel Super Maramu 53 Paraic O'Maolriada & Myra Reid Kinsale, Ireland

This boat name is a tough one for most sailors to pronounce, but then most sailors don't speak Gaelic. It's an old Irish expression that means "another life," which seems fitting for this couple who've traded the high latitudes

PACIFIC PUDDLE JUMP PROFILES, PT II



La Paz is such a friendly town that all these sailors chose it as their pre-departure base.

of northern Europe for the tropics.

Crewing on the passage will be Willie Kirkpatrick, who's also Irish, and Florian Kastner, a German-born "wannabe Irishman."

**Xanadu — Fountaine-Pajot 39 cat
The Hartsuiker family
London, GBR**

South Africans Mark and Sonja have been waiting a very long time to see the



Mark and Sonja's South Pacific cruising dreams started long before Oscar was born.

South Pacific. "We nearly got it together 20 years ago," Mark explains, but plans didn't work out, "We've been dreaming about living this life ever since."

The boat's third crew is 12-year-old Oscar, who stands day watches when he's not working on his studies. Their plans? "We're just heading with the wind," says Mark, who is also a British citizen. "We're not in much of a hurry to get back home to South Africa. So we'll see where we end up."

**Theofania — Custom 39
The Ivanov-Konshina family
Saint-Petersburg, RUS**

At first glance it seemed remarkable

that we had Russian cruisers at our fiesta two years in a row. Turned out, though, it was the same family: Max, his wife Natalia and their two lovely daughters, Xenia and Polina, plus Natalia's mom, Nadezda.

Max swears they really did try to make the trip in 2011, but major engine problems caused them to linger in Panama another year — their fifth. "This time for sure!" he says with conviction.

Since setting sail into the chilly Baltic Sea a decade ago in a home-built boat, the family has had lots of adventures. And they're eager for some new ones in this custom cruiser that they picked up in Colombia. One destination high on their must-see list is Suwarrow in the Cook Islands. The New Zealand-administered isle was discovered by a Russian in 1814, and last fall a Russian politician claims to have bought it — and has proclaimed himself Prime Minister!

**Reine Marguerite — Globe Flotteur 34
The Eisenring family, Basel, CHE**

Who would have thought that one of the biggest fans of *Latitude* we'd meet at the party would be a cruising kid from Switzerland? But according to young Loic, he savors every copy he can get his hands on. Now 14, he's been cruising with his parents, Bernard and Margrit, since he was four.

"We don't have another home," explains Bernard, "so our plans are open. Where we end up depends on where we can find a good school for Loic." He's currently being home-schooled aboard.

**Sea of Time — Voyage 440 cat
Maarten Jansen & Yvonne Engelhart
Katwoude, NLD**

They bought their luxurious cat new in South Africa nine years ago, and have spent most of the time since exploring the islands of the Eastern Caribbean. Yvonne says that, although she's had fun, she's had just about enough of the cruising life — although we got the impression that Maarten would be happy to keep cruising indefinitely. "She has the final vote," he explains, "so we'll probably sell the cat in Australia." Although that will mark the end of an era for them, a whole 6,000 miles of adventuring still lies before them.

As we mentioned, never before have so many boats jumped off from La Paz, so we don't normally throw send-off parties there. But we got to know some of the La Paz jumpers (profiled below) via email.

**Buena Vista — Peterson 46
Don & Debbie Robertson, Ventura, CA**

Debbie and Don seem to be following the old adage, "If at first you don't succeed. . ." They set sail for the islands



With last year's frustrations behind them Don, Debbie and 'Buena Vista' are rarin' to go.

last year, but had to turn back three days out due to engine problems. The upside to that misadventure was that they've now made a whole new batch of cruising friends who'll be crossing this year. "We had a fantastic year in the Sea," they tell us.

Unlike most other Jumpers, Don and Debbie plan to follow the path less traveled after cruising Polynesia. They'll head north to the Marshall Islands to avoid the cyclone season, rather than south to New Zealand.



Carol and Livia of 'Estrellita' are eager to meet fun-loving SoPac cruisers.

**Estrellita — Wauquiez 35
Livia Gilstrap & Carol Dupuis
Victoria, BC**

"If we were writing a 'personals' ad for our Pacific Puddle Jump," writes

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Livia, "it would read: Under-40 vessel with under-40 crew seeking activity partners who enjoy playing hard, sailing hard, and living large. Must have interest in crossing Pacific and own their own vessel. Icemaker a big plus."

Sounds like a fun-loving crew to us. Come to think of it, if you like to make new friends wherever you go, cruising with an icemaker would be a brilliant idea. Livia and Carol plan to spend multiple seasons exploring the South Pacific, before heading farther west.

Ladybug II — Coast 34 Chris Bennett & Rani Kaur Victoria, BC

Chris and Rani upgraded to this 34-footer in '09 with the specific intention of sailing her to the South Pacific that spring. But, as is typical, those plans were only 'etched in sand'. "We fell in love with the islands and bays of the Sea of Cortez, and spent three more



Holly, 3, and her sister Leah, 6, of 'Wondertime' are among this year's youngest Jumpers.

seasons cruising in Mexican waters." They've crossed it more than a dozen times!

This year, though, they're determined to reach French Polynesia, which will be Rani's first big ocean crossing. Chris, however, is well accustomed to spending many days on the open ocean. A few years ago, he soloed their Cal 29 from Mexico all the way to Victoria.

Wondertime — Benford 38

The Johnson family, Seattle, WA

Two of the youngest Puddle Jumpers this year are aboard *Wondertime*: Holly, 3, and her sister Leah, 6. Their parents, Michael and Sara apparently figured it was time for a change of pace. "Our plan is to make it to New Zealand," they write, "where we will hopefully stay and work for a few years before heading out again." They add, "Sailing to the South Pacific next season is one of the best opportunities for adventure and growth we can imagine."

That's an excellent thought to end on. Although, as you can see by the fleet list at www.pacificpuddlejumper.com, there are dozens more crews whom we've neither met in person, nor been able to profile.

Bold adventures such as jumping the puddle tend to yield plenty of salty tales, and we intend to share some with you in the coming months.

— **latitude/andy**
