

FRENCH POLYNESIA CRUISING —

After years of cruising the world, circumnavigator John Freeland has memories of many exotic places, but French Polynesia was the standout among them all. His unsolicited endorsement of that French Overseas Territory couldn't have been submitted at a better time, as this month dozens of westbound cruisers will embark on the Pacific Puddle Jump passage from the West Coast to the Marquesas and beyond.

After a single circumnavigation I can't claim to know every nook and cranny available to bluewater cruisers, but having taken a total of 10 years to close the loop, my experience is cer-

I hardly saw any yachts while working on trading schooners from Trinidad to Anguilla. But a comparison of the Caribbean basin to French Polynesia as a long-term cruising area provides some tantalizing food for thought. For starters, consider that the five archipelagos of French Polynesia cover a vast area of the South Pacific that is as big as Western Europe.

The Marquesas Islands

The Marquesas are geologically young volcanic Islands similar to the Hawaiian archipelago, but not as volcanically active and lacking the hordes of tourists. Currently, they get very regular supply ships and frequent, regular air service to all islands except Fatu Hiva. Well-known writers such as the Hiscocks list several anchorages in the Marquesas among their favorites, and that archipelago is cyclone-free.

There is now a haulout yard in Hiva Oa that can accommodate most modest-sized yachts, and there are also attended moorings available. Shipping parts from Papeete is cheap by regular cargo ships.

The Tuamotu Atolls

There are 78 atolls in the Tuamotu Archipelago, but only about a dozen of these jewels of the Pacific are visited regularly by cruising yachts. Plenty more are worth seeing. These islands are generally formed by a ring of low-lying *motus* (islets), laid out like a string of pearls that form lagoons, and are essentially small inland seas containing fantastic coral and reef fish.

I can attest that 20 years ago, a major issue like an engine problem could have been nearly catastrophic in these waters. But today, many atolls enjoy the aforementioned regular air and freighter service. Twenty years ago, finding slack water in passes (breaks in the fringing reefs)

was an absolute guessing game. But now the cruiser-developed 'guesstimator' is usually within 45 minutes of being spot-on.

Another relatively new development in the Tuamotus is that Apataki Atoll now has a haulout and storage yard that uses hydraulic lift trailers and, by comparison, has better prices than most Caribbean yards.

The Society Islands

The Societies are classic South Pacific islands with gorgeous mountains and fringing reefs, the most famous isles among them being Tahiti and Bora Bora. You'll find many fine anchorages here, reasonably good boat supplies, marinas, boatyards and many worthwhile cultural attractions ashore.

Each of these islands is encircled by a reef, with a flat-water lagoon inside it, adjacent to the land. As a result, anchorages are well protected and have backdrops of absolutely stunning verdant mountains, and beaches skirted with coconut palms.

Gambier & Astral Archipelagos

Farther afield and less often supplied, these islands provide a real break from the modern world for the few cruisers who visit them.

In terms of variety of geography, it is fair to say that French Polynesia offers a much wider range of cruising opportunities than, say, the Lesser Antilles.



From one generation to another, reverence for traditional music and dancing is universal throughout the archipelagos.

tainly more than a 'mile wide and a foot deep'.

Now that I'm nearing the end of my cruising years, I thought it might be worth sharing a well-kept secret: There are no better cruising grounds in the trade winds belt than French Polynesia. Such claims are usually made on the basis of beautiful pictures with mountains and palm trees, but in addition to all that, a look at some facts is worth consideration.

Many people love the idea of exploring a cruising area over the period of many seasons without making long bluewater passages, but generally the South Pacific is ruled out when considering such arrangements. After researching the history of cyclones in French Polynesia, it occurred to me that for the most part, the French only share this huge hunk of paradise with other sailors who are bent on crossing the South Pacific in a season or two.

We recently spent four years in the Caribbean basin and enjoyed it immensely. Of course, it has changed since my first trip there in 1975, when



Getting There

The challenges of getting to French Polynesia depend mostly on where you start from. If you're leaving Europe, the Atlantic crossing takes the average bluewater cruising boat about three weeks. By comparison, the trip from the Galapagos (roughly 1,000 miles west of Panama) to the Marquesas, the easternmost island group of French Polynesia, often takes closer to a month.

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Once across the Caribbean, transiting the Panama Canal is a unique experience, albeit a wee bit nerve-racking on occasion. The cost is about the same as an extra haulout. It's worth remembering that on the route from the south-western Caribbean all the way to the Marquesas, cyclones are not a factor.

It's roughly 4,000 miles from Panama to the Marquesas, or 3,000 miles from the Galapagos, a stop-off that I would enthusiastically recommend. The

The salty Herreshoff replica 'Rhapsody' glides into Cook's Bay beneath the majestic peaks of Moorea.



oft-heard claims of prohibitive costs are overstated.

Needless to say, from the West Coast of North America, French Polynesia is far and away easier to reach than the cruising grounds of the Eastern Caribbean.

Once you arrive in French Polynesia, your biggest jumps will be three to five days between the major archipelagos.

Weather & Cyclones

French Polynesia was long considered to be out of any cyclone region, and, while relatively rare, they can occur during El Niño conditions.

Meanwhile, with an estimated 63,000 boats damaged or destroyed in the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season, many boat owners are now asking, "Why risk keeping a yacht in the Caribbean?"

In Polynesia, many cruisers apply a seasonal strategy that can best be described as "hurry off to New Zealand in one season" to avoid the November-to-March cyclone season. But for savvy cruisers who wish to make French Polynesia their main cruising ground, there are several options worth considering.

The option of staying in the Society Islands has higher risks than in, say, the Marquesas, which are virtually immune to cyclones due to their proximity to the equator (between 8° and 10°S). Nevertheless, major storm risk in the Society Islands is minimal except during El Niño years.

Cyclones are dependent on warm seawater in order to form, and due to the cooling effects of the



Every year in July the best dancers, musicians and athletes come to Tahiti to compete in a sort of cultural Olympics called the Heiva.

Humboldt Current, French Polynesia is on the outer edge of the South Pacific cyclone belt.

In comparison to the Caribbean, records show that there has only been one cyclone in the Society Islands and the northern Tuamotus for every 22 hurricanes in the Caribbean Basin.

El Niños are among the most thoroughly researched climate patterns, backed by millions of dollars in super-computer computation time. In a careful review of satellite-based cyclone tracks from 1969 to 2010, no storm with hurricane force (>64 knots) winds has come within 50 nautical miles of Tahiti, and only two within 100 nm. The highest reported gust in Tahiti was 87 knots.

In the same period, a Google search shows that six hurricanes came ashore on the coast of New York — not a place one normally associates with fear of devastating storms.

Remaining in the Societies during the cyclone season (again, November to March) during a La Niña or a Neutral ENSO (El Niño/Southern Oscillation) year, you will probably experience reduced trade-wind strength and somewhat higher temperatures than during the dry months (April to October), but conditions will still offer fine cruising.

The Gambiers have well-protected anchorages and are a bit cooler than the more northerly islands and atolls of French Polynesia, although they are remote and lack the 'first world' supplies and services of the Societies.

Staying in the Tuamotus during cyclone season is an option, but doing so requires keeping a close eye on the weather, and being ready to move across

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the lagoons when strong winds change direction. Such caution is equally necessary during the winter months (April to October).

In El Niño years there are five secure options (fewer for multihulls): The Marquesas and Gambiers have never had



Outrigger canoe racing is the national sport. Every afternoon you can see strong-armed men and women practicing in the lagoons.

a tropical cyclone. There are two boatyards with hard stands for dry storage in Raiatea (in Tahiti's Leewards), one in the Tuamotus and one in the Marquesas. Tahiti has a protected anchorage at Terevau that many cruisers consider to be a good hurricane hole, and many also opt to simply leave their boats in Marina Taina, close to Tahiti's capital, Papeete. However, none of these options are completely risk-free.

That said, it is worth noting that once you sail west of the Society Islands, the likelihood of experiencing major storms between November and March increases as you travel through the South Pacific islands.

Coral Reefs

My first trip to the Caribbean's Lesser Antilles was in the mid-'70s. Back then, I don't remember ever seeing large areas of damaged or dead coral. But fast-forward 40 years and it seems like a special treat to find areas with healthy coral in the Eastern Caribbean.

Having snorkeled all over the globe doesn't make you an expert on the relative health of coral reefs, but most cruisers in the Tuamotus, Society Islands and Gambiers generally find the snorkeling and diving to be exceptional. French Polynesia, being on the eastern side of the South Pacific Basin, benefits from the Humboldt Current's moderating effect on ocean temperatures, reducing the deadly incidence of coral

bleaching caused elsewhere by elevated water temperatures.

Besides the subjective impressions of cruisers, experts support the fact that French Polynesia is ideal for those

of us who find coral ecosystems to be one of cruising's biggest perks. The *Ocean Health Index* reports: "Worldwide, 60% of coral reefs are already seriously damaged." A report titled *Status of Coral Reefs of the World, 2008* says, "The reefs [in French Polynesia] are generally in good condition, especially the outer reef slopes of the high volcanic islands and atolls, as there have been no major natural disturbances during the past decade. The vast majority of the 15,000 km² of reefs and lagoons of French Polynesia are under low risk of degradation in the coming decades; provided that the impacts of climate change are not too strong." In comparison, sadly, the International Union for Conservation of Nature's report states: "The Caribbean's coral reefs have collapsed, mostly due to overfishing and climate change [bleaching]."

Keeping a Yacht in French Polynesia

Visiting vessels can remain for up to three years without any customs issues. At the end of this period some

owners then sail to the Cook Islands or another nearby island nation, then return to Tahiti and reset the clock.

If you prefer to import your vessel the duty is now 8% of the boat's assessed value (plus additional broker's fees).

Holders of European Union passports can stay in French Polynesia (without working) as long as they like. North Americans get 90-day visas upon arrival, which cannot be extended locally. However, *prior to setting sail* Long Stay Visas of up to a year can be arranged in person at a French embassy or consulate.

Comparing Tourism Stats

Since the Great Recession of 2008, tourism in French Polynesia has dropped, and remains around 140,000 tourists per year, compared to the population of about 240,000.

By comparison, the Caribbean Basin gets more than 5,000,000 tourists annually. We have been on Caribbean islands where tourists far outnumbered islanders when multiple cruise ships were visiting.

Except during a few annual events, French Polynesian anchorages are never as crowded as those in the Eastern Caribbean.

Downsides to Long-Term Cruising in French Polynesia

To be fair, there are a few negative

Bora Bora is the most famous — and some say the most beautiful — isle in Tahiti's Leewards. But many cruisers prefer laid-back Huahine.



MARINE NATIONALE / PM BOUDARD SABINE

SIMPLY THE BEST

aspects to long-term cruising in French Polynesia. These include:

- Non-Europeans need to apply for a visa before coming if they wish to stay more than three months.

- Airfare from the US is generally higher than to the Caribbean.

- In the Caribbean the infrastructure for yachts is more extensive than in French Polynesia, although sadly, hurricanes Irma and Maria have significantly reduced services in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and St. Maarten.

As final food for thought, here's a summary of why I think French Polynesia is the world's best tropical cruising ground:

- Safest tropical cruising grounds from cyclones (while still having trade winds.)

- A wide range of island geography.



A traditional sailing canoe cuts across the Moorea lagoon. Yes, the water inside the fringing reefs really is that blue.

- Uncrowded anchorages.
- Very low crime rates.
- Very friendly people.
- Infrastructure very well supported by the French.
- Excellent health care system.
- Little of the extreme poverty seen in other tropical areas.
- Reasonably good infrastructure for yachts.

- Healthy coral reefs.
- In a year French Polynesia gets the same number of tourists as the Caribbean gets in less than nine days.

- The Society Islands and Northern Tuamotus only get one cyclone for every 22 hurricanes in the Caribbean basin.

- There has never been a cyclone in French Polynesia equivalent to a Category 5 Hurricane, such as Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

- French government supports good emergency services.

All these factors contribute to the fact that when many world cruisers hear the word "paradise," they immediately think of French Polynesia.

— **john freiland**

John and several fellow cruisers have authored a 90-page guide to resources for cruisers in Tahiti. You'll find it at www.tahiticruisersguide.com.

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