

# SOUTH PACIFIC STRATEGIES —

On the surface of a globe, the distance from the West Coast of the Americas to French Polynesia appears to be a relatively easy hop. But in reality, it is the longest stretch of open water that tropical-latitude circumnavigators must cross as they cruise around the planet — a distance of at least 3,000 miles with

you won't be going back there without enduring a hard beat to windward, or sailing around the world.

## French Polynesia

Recent rule changes make it easier than ever to keep your boat in French Polynesia for up to three years without having to officially import it — a development that opens up several attractive options.

Visas for you and your crew, however, are a separate issue. When we North Americans arrive without prearranged visas, we are automatically given only 90 days, which is *not* extendable once we are in the islands (yes, despite the fact that our boats can remain much longer). But if you are willing to jump through

a few hoops *prior* to leaving the US or Mexican mainland, you and your crew can get Long Stay Visas that are good for a year (highly recommended), and are renewable in Tahiti. Many cruisers are shocked to discover that the five archipelagos of French Polynesia cover an expanse of ocean larger than Western Europe, so having only 90 days forces them to rush through the islands — and believe us when we say this is one of the last places on earth that you'd want to be in a hurry.

French Polynesia does get cyclones occasionally, but rarely if ever a major one, as these islands lie at the eastern limits of the cyclone zone. Knowing this, many cruisers simply roll the dice and leave their boats in a slip or on a mooring at Tahiti's large Marina Taina.

Another option is to put the boat on the hard in the Leeward Islands of Tahiti at either Raiatea Carenage Services or Chantier Naval des ISLV (CNI), while you fly home for a visit. (After being out of the country for at least 90 days, you can get a new 90-day visa upon your return with no prior arrangements.)

On the way to Tahiti, most cruisers make their first landfall in the Marquesas archipelago — the easternmost group of French islands. After a few weeks in those mountainous volcanic isles, almost every modern cruiser makes stops within the low-lying atolls of the Tuamotus, where snorkeling and diving

in turquoise lagoons is truly spectacular. A new boatyard called Apataki Carenage sprang up there a couple of years ago, which presents new possibilities for foreign cruisers. If you are traveling on a 90-day visa, you can island-hop at a leisurely pace through the Marquesas and Tuamotus, then leave the boat at Apataki, fly out for 90 days or more,

*Of all the places they visited, they wish they'd had more time in the Marquesas.*

and start the visa clock again when you return.

This fledgling yard is truly remote, but offers all basic boatyard services and is said to be much less rainy and humid during the wet season (our winter) than either Tahiti or Raiatea, because there are not tall mountains to 'catch' the rain clouds. Haulouts of both mono- and multihulls are accomplished using special hydraulic-lift trailers.

A final option for lingering in French Polynesia is probably way too ambitious for most cruisers, and requires having a Long Stay Visa. But we'd encourage you to give it some thought nonetheless.



**Traditional Polynesian music and dance performances are essential elements of island life for young and old.**

no possible pit stops along the way.

Perhaps even more impressive than the feat of completing this lengthy passage — which we call the Pacific Puddle Jump — is the colossal effort many would-be explorers make in order to realize their long-held dreams of South Pacific cruising. Having reported on the annual Puddle Jump migration for more than 20 years, we know that many Jumpers work toward this ambitious goal for decades before finally making the leap.

But knowing this, we're baffled by the fact that so many westbound cruisers blast all the way to New Zealand — close to 6,000 miles — in one six-month 'dry' season, primarily motivated by fear of South Pacific cyclones and short-stay visas. Don't get us wrong, we absolutely love New Zealand and think it should rank high on every cruiser's must-see list. But choosing to rush past hundreds of alluring Central South Pacific islands along the way seems crazy to us. So in this article we'll attempt to introduce you to a variety of viable options for lingering safely within this dreamy tropical paradise.

Before we get down to the nitty-gritty, though, it's important that you understand that prevailing winds and currents flow east to west in the South Pacific, so once you sail west of a particular place,



**Above: Throughout the South Pacific Islands, ancient arts such as painting on tapa cloth are highly revered. Right: Many cruisers make their first landfall at Fatu Hiva's dreamy Bay of Virgins. Inset, right: The gin-clear waters of the Tuamotus are a wonderland of sealife.**

We're talking about sailing back to the Marquesas from Tahiti or the Tuamotus and hanging out there during the cyclone season because the Marquesas are

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# WHAT'S THE RUSH?

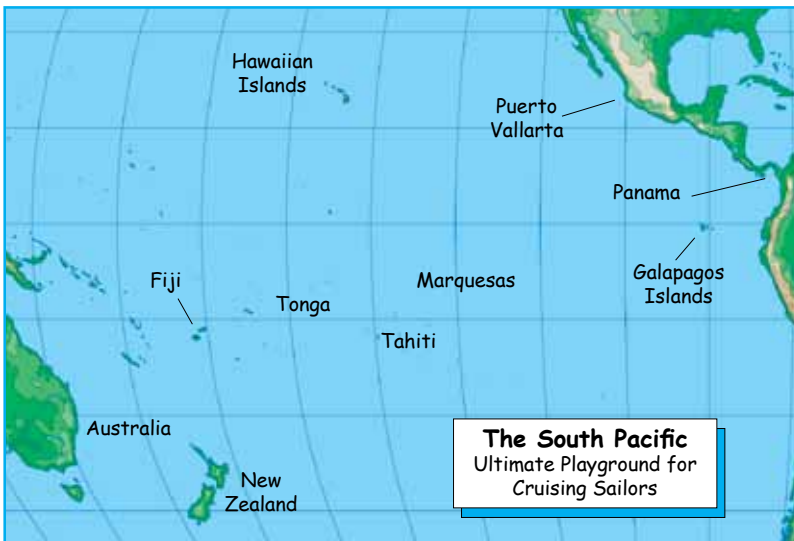
located between latitudes 8° and 10°S, where the formation of cyclones is virtually a scientific impossibility.

Although the route back to the Marquesas from Tahiti or the Tuamotus is basically upwind, here's the trick: You wait in Tahiti for the prevailing southeasterly trade winds to become southerly for a few days, which is not uncommon. That changes your sheeting angle from a beat to a beam or close reach. Your reward for returning will be sharing anchorages with only a few hardy cruisers, and having the opportunity to spend quality time within the rich Marquesan culture, where centuries-old traditions are still highly revered. Many veteran South Pacific cruisers have told us that of all the places they visited, they wish they'd had more time in the Marquesas.

It's also worth mentioning that every year a few Puddle Jump boats opt to sail up to Hawaii from French Polynesia at the end of the season (November and December). Those who jump off from the Marquesas rather than Tahiti or Bora Bora typically have a much smoother ride on this 2,000-mile passage, as they are starting from farther east (140°W), hence a more relaxed sheeting angle to the Big Island of Hawaii, which lies

at 154°W. (By contrast, Tahiti is at 149°W and Bora Bora lies at 151°W.)

Over the years we've known of a few crews who sailed up to Hawaii in December, then back down again a few months later. But read on and you'll see that there are much easier ways to ride out the cyclone season.



## Tonga

Five hundred miles to the west of Tahiti's Leewards lie the well-dispersed Cook Islands archipelago. We don't know of any reliable hurricane holes there, but 800 miles farther west lie the lush green isles of Tonga's Vava'u Group, which offers at least two excellent options.

The principal town here is Neiafu,

built along the shoreline of a natural bay that offers 360° protection from storm surge and violent winds. Over the years many international cruisers have opted to leave their boats on rented moorings or anchored here without incident — although it is always wise to dive on any mooring that you intend to trust with your most prized possession.

We're happy to report that last year a new option was added nearby. Carved out of a small patch of land just outside of Neiafu Harbour, The Boatyard now offers long-term storage on hard stands, as well as bottom jobs and other professional services. Although still a small operation, this yard is a great addition to the SoPac cruising scene, as there is

none other in the country, and many cruising boats need work done before making the 1,500-mile crossing to New Zealand. Other cruisers simply like the option of leaving their boats on the hard while they jet home for a break from cruising.

At the end of the wet season (around April) the cruising fleet expands again with both international cruisers and Kiwis sailing up for some tropical fun. We'll share a few insights about transiting to and from New Zealand a bit later, but for the moment, let's move another giant step to the west (400 miles) to Fiji.

## Fiji

The many lush islands of Fiji are a favorite play-



INTERLUDE



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APATAKI CARENAGE



MARINA TAINA



THE BOATYARD

RAIATEA CARENAGE



ground for westbound cruisers, as well as for Aussies and Kiwis who live only a week's sail away. Fiji's Melanesian islanders are said to be some of the most friendly and joyful people in the entire Pacific Basin, and they always seem proud to share their time-honored cultural traditions. Prices of goods and services are cheaper than on most other islands, and there are very liberal visa rules: Basically, when your initial six-month visa runs out, you can simply sail 300 miles northwest to the tiny cluster of French islands called Wallis and Futuna, get your passport stamped, and return to Fiji where you'll get another six month's visa when you clear in. Boats can get a six-month cruising permit free of charge, and imported parts and other gear for yachts in transit are duty-free — which is not always the case elsewhere.

There's no denying, though, that Fiji has seen some whopper cyclones over the years, the worst being Category 5 Winston in 2016 — regarded as the most intense tropical cyclone ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere. The power of that monster was an excellent test of the country's yachting infrastructure, which

*These days cruisers needn't blast all the way to New Zealand to be safe from tropical cyclones. Consider these options. Top row, left to right: Apataki Carenage in the Tuamotus, Tahiti's Marina Taina, Tonga's Neiafu Harbour, Fiji's Vuda Point Marina. Bottom row: Raiatea Carenage, The Boatyard at Vava'u, Fiji's Musket Cove Marina, New Zealand's spectacular Bay of Islands.*

## Contact Info for Resources Mentioned

- **Marina Taina, Papeete, Tahiti**  
www.marina-taina.com/  
+689 41.02.25
- **Apataki Carenage Services, Tuamotus**  
www.apatakiacarenage.com/  
+(689) 87 727 813
- **Raiatea Carenage Services, Leewards**  
www.raiateaacarenage.com  
+689 40 600 545
- **Chantier Naval des ISLV (CNI), Leewards**  
cnislv.com/en/  
+(689) 40 66 10 10
- **The Boatyard, Vava'u, Tonga**  
boatyardvavau.com  
+676 881 6844
- **Vuda Point Marina, Fiji**  
http://www.vudamarina.com.fj/  
+679 666 8214

proved to be impressive. While many homes and businesses were destroyed, there was relatively little damage to cruising yachts in several marinas. Fiji's popular Vuda Point Marina (see photo above) was built with such storms in mind, and lived up to all expectations during Winston. Vuda's dry storage yard features trenches dug into the ground that are lined with truck tires, into which the keels of cruising boats are placed. While this may sound odd, the system has proved itself on several occasions, and due to the marina's unique circular construction, boats in slips fared well there also.

## Sailing North

Here's another option that may not have occurred to you: If you find yourself as far west as Fiji and the prospect of cyclones is making you nervous, consider sailing north roughly 1,500 miles to the Marshall Islands, possibly paying a visit to Tuvalu and other remote tropical isles



# WHAT'S THE RUSH?



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MUSKET COVE



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along the way.

As mentioned earlier, once you get within about 10 degrees of the equator, there is virtually no chance of cyclone activity. The Marshalls, a US possession, lie at 7°N, so they are hot and humid but cyclone-safe. Although a 'sleeper' destination compared to Tahiti or Fiji, several cruisers we know loved their six-month stay in the Marshalls — especially since diving in the outer atolls is excellent and US postal services provide easy access to boat parts and other special goods from American vendors — duty-free.

Once in the Marshalls cruisers have many options, such as exploring the vast territories of Micronesia — including the divers' paradise of Palau. Or sailing south across the equator for another stint in Fiji, then perhaps west to Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. So many great options.

## Zigzagging to & from New Zealand

We can't recall ever meeting a cruiser who disliked New Zealand, which is no surprise when you consider its endless cruising possibilities — especially in the North Island's Bay of Islands region

— combined with its friendly people, excellent yacht services and seemingly endless land-touring attractions.

These days it's quite common for

cruisers with open-ended schedules to spend several years enjoying what you might call the 'best of both worlds program'. That is, enjoy tropical cruising for two or three years while heading as far west as Tonga. Then dive down to New Zealand and stay throughout the summer months until, say, April, when you sail back up to Tonga again, or a bit farther west to Fiji. At the end of the dry season there, repeat the north-south zigzag all over again. On a recent trip to the Bay of Islands we met cruisers who were on their third round-trip up to the tropics and back again.

Thousands of miles of ocean sailing can take a toll on even the best-equipped cruising yachts, so eventually every boat needs a lengthy maintenance stopover, and New Zealand is the ideal place to do it. Because sailing is one of the most popular national pastimes, it's easy to find top-notch marinas and repair facilities staffed by highly skilled workers.

In popular North Island harbors such as Opua and Whangarei — both ports of entry — you'll find sail lofts, engine experts, metal fabricators, and chandlery with standards of quality that are rare



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in smaller tropical destinations. Parts shipped in for yachts in transit are tax free.

Despite its stellar reputation, many cruisers worry about making the 1,200-mile passage down from Tonga. But according to several Kiwi captains we know, with today's accurate weather forecasting the five-to-seven-day trip usually isn't too tough.

A common strategy among cruisers is to sail roughly 400 miles from Tonga

***Auckland, the 'city of sails', already has world-class boating infrastructure, but that will increase dramatically when AC 36 comes to town.***

down to Minerva Reef — basically an uninhabited, uplifted atoll in the middle of the ocean — and wait there for a favorable weather window. "Every five to seven days a front comes through," explains one delivery skipper. So when conditions look good, you go for it."

When you arrive within the Bay of Islands' maze of lush green bays and

headlands you're likely to become awestruck by the region's unspoiled natural beauty, and it will be obvious why many world travelers consider it to be a sailor's paradise.

**A**ctually, in our opinion, the entire South Pacific from French Polynesia to New Zealand and Australia is a sailor's paradise. So if you have the skills and opportunity to check out this vast, watery playground for yourself, we would highly urge you to do it. Not many experiences in life could ever be as special.

The vast distances and inherent challenges of sailing the South Pacific will prevent its anchorages from ever being as crowded as the Med or Caribbean. Nevertheless we'd suggest you make your move sooner than later. We're certain you won't regret it.

— **latitude/andy**

*If you're ready to head west in the coming months, be aware that signups for the 2018 Pacific Puddle Jump begin early this month at [www.pacificpuddlejump.com](http://www.pacificpuddlejump.com).*