

# The coconut milk run

When it comes to heading out there, crossing the Pacific is usually one goal. **Jess Lloyd Mostyn** describes the different paths you can take.

Many people choosing to set off and sail full-time do so with a big dream in mind, a goal that captured the imagination to the extent that it urged them to cut the docklines. Countless of us out cruising share the same ambition: tackle the South Pacific ocean.

Sailing the South Pacific has the reputation of being that much further, wilder, more exotic and more remote than any previous boating a lot of us have done. From the shores of the Americas to reaching harbour in New Zealand or Australia some 7,000 miles later, the clock is ticking to explore the numerous islands sprinkled across this vast expanse of blue before the cyclone season comes round again.

That is a lot of water to cover in around nine months of travel and the pressure to keep moving on can make it feel like a watery conveyor belt. Those choosing to take more than one season over their cruising adventures

in this sea and dedicating several years to sailing here can be more leisurely about their passage-making but will still need to be mindful of where to tuck into once the tropical storms start up.

## Thinking ahead

This is an ocean that will test your skills in self-sufficiency as, in all likelihood, your nearest port for any major repairs or parts will be several weeks travel away.

Any boat crossing from the Pacific coast of the Americas all the way through to Australasia should be pushing off for the crossing in great shape. Thoroughly well-maintained, rigorously checked and carrying spares and extras, as many as possible. This is not only in case of any repairs necessary en-route but in order to allow yourself the possibility of plans changing without being limited by onboard stores.



It is an ocean that may well require that you sail with additional crew as some of these distances are far greater and may take much longer than any the boat or her crew have previously attempted. Camaraderie is an integral part of a Pacific journey. It also holds some special milestones to be acknowledged; an equatorial crossing and passing the international date line may both occur on the way and it is important to celebrate the sailing achievements that such records signify.

Consistency in strength and direction of the trade winds has meant there are well-trodden routes from east to west traversed by sailors for generations. Choosing the right time of year to depart is critical to a smooth passage. Most time their trip to allow for arrival in French Polynesia once cyclone season has finished.

Watching the weather to pick your window for leaving is only one element of the strategy, making a 3,000 mile trip from push-off until landfall in French Polynesia, means taking on a good three or four weeks at sea. Making effective use of GRIB files, weathergrams, weatherfaxes, SSB radio forecasts and Pacific rally radio nets is an artform in itself and requires a certain amount of predeparture practice to become adept at analysing and interpreting this data to best serve you and influence your sail plan.

You will also be tangling with the intertropical convergence zone (ITCZ), most commonly referred to as the doldrums. What you will experience here may be a far cry from sailing legend as being an area where you will most likely be becalmed.

The ITCZ is the area lying roughly over the equator where the prevailing weather systems of the northern and southern hemisphere converge. Yes, the winds may be light and the sea still in this zone but the benign conditions in these latitudes are sharply contrasted with the short, violent squalls you are likely to experience here too.

The wind plays a fickle game of too much or too little which inevitably makes it hard going to make much progress getting away from this

band of weather disturbance. Though many boats may choose to loll in the slack wind, the crew even taking turns to enjoy a tentative mid-ocean dip, there are many more who cut their losses and crank on the engine in order to speed their way out of the confusion and into the steady southeast trade winds which will kick in at about 2° south.

#### Which route?

A departure from Panama affords you the opportunity of visiting the Galapagos islands. If taking this route you will enter the ITCZ early on, along the 500-mile stretch between leaving Panama and arriving in the Galapagos.

If attempting this early enough in the sailing season, around January or February, you could even further detour your Pacific exploration by cruising another 2,000 miles on a beam reach to take in Easter Island on the way, then the relatively unknown little pit-stops of the Pitcairn islands and the Gambiers before arriving in French Polynesia once the cyclone season has ended in April. Or, if sailing out from further south in South America you can even take in the Juan Fernandez islands on the way to Easter island.

All these interesting breaks in the journey can make for a welcome respite from a long voyage and are opportunities to experience truly unique wildlife and culture. But, as they are really only small dots in the ocean, fresh produce and provisions come at a high price so any pause here will eat into your stocks onboard.

A yacht travelling along these routes south of the equator will possibly enter French Polynesia in the Gambier islands, traverse the southern atolls of the infamous Tuamotu Archipelago and then make for the Society islands, skipping the Marquesas altogether.

Leaving from the western United States, Mexico or elsewhere in Central America will mean that your first landfall will be the Marquesas islands in French Polynesia, after three or four continuous weeks at sea. This non-stop route works best for later departures, leaving the Pacific coast in March or April.

MAIN: South Pacific sunset: just like in the brochure.

TOP LEFT: Underway.

TOP RIGHT: Glorious anchorage Anho Bay, Marquesas.

## destination: Pacific Ocean

1. At anchor in the stunning Marquesas.
2. *Adamstor* in the Tuamotus.
3. Palm anchorage Moorea.
4. Stunning water colour at Fakarava, Tuamotus.
5. Definitely not boring Bora Bora.

The ITCZ will most likely be experienced roughly two-thirds of the way into this passage and, as always, the best strategy for negotiating it as swiftly as possible is to try to cut right across it at 90°.

This more northerly itinerary across the Pacific results in a longer unbroken passage, which can be a challenge for many people and their boats. However only this path and the one directly from the Galapagos allow the crew to visit the Marquesas, as the routes via Easter Island, Pitcairn and the Gambiers make too much south to take them in. Many would argue that the steep verdant emerald green peaks of these volcanic islands are a considerable part of the appeal of sailing the South Pacific.

### On your way

Your first Pacific landfall, wherever it may be, will also introduce you to an altogether different league of anchoring techniques. You may be used to dropping your hook in five to ten metre depths with skill and ease. Great. But out here, the steep peaks rising from the bottom of the ocean signify one thing: deep water. It is not at all unusual to find yourself needing to anchor in more than 20 metres of water out here.

Lots of chain, additional kedge anchors and a backup plan if the worst should happen are a must. You will encounter narrow harbours where you carefully pick your way through the fleet in order to find the last remaining free spot to deploy a stern anchor accurately and deftly.

Or you may have a nail-biting obstacle course to navigate between bommies in order to ensure your ground tackle is safely secured into a sandy spot and that your chain will not get wrapped around or jammed in any coral.

Each year's Pacific Puddle Jump fleet swaps stories of badly maintained mooring balls or last minute scrambles to release or even cut an anchor chain when boats drag unexpectedly.

Arrival in the Marquesas signals the end of the longest non-stop stretch of sailing that you will encounter on the coconut milk run. Yet it is far from a short hop either to the next group of islands, as the Tuamotu archipelago is another week's passage away. These historically treacherous atolls have really only recently been made easily navigable thanks to the invention and widespread availability of accurate GPS.

However, the strong tides encountered in the reef passes here, lagoons littered with coral heads and incomplete charting in some areas, still make this island chain a very real test of sailing skill. Taking your time and keeping a scrupulous bow watch pays dividends here.

It is humbling to remember the wisdom of sailing aphorisms that have worked for thousands of years and to try to plan an arrival



in the Tuamotus or a passage between its atolls to coincide with a full moon. However, from the Marquesas onwards, you should hopefully be experiencing steady trade winds of a consistent 15 to 20 knots, so getting to the Tuamotu group is relatively straightforward.

Despite the cautions to be noted, the islands of this group are some of the most unspoilt you can ever expect to encounter in your sailing career. They make for a wonderful marine playground with tranquil lagoons, rimmed by colourful reefs.

Any snorkelling, diving and wildlife enthusiasts on board will love the opportunities to swim and frolic as the water is astoundingly clear.

If you can manage to tear yourself away and move on westwards then the Society Islands are 200 miles, only a couple of days' sail away. Tahiti will probably be the first stop and, in comparison to the rather skimpy availability and high prices of fresh produce and groceries in the Tuamotus, this seems like the promised land.

Pape'ete is a bustling metropolis by Pacific standards and the opportunity to restock, to communicate more easily with family back home or even have visitors fly in. There are marinas and supermarkets here, you can have parts sent in if necessary, wifi is no longer a painfully slow satellite link and you will more than likely stumble across every other cruiser that you may know attempting the Pacific crossing that year, your milk run buddies, as it makes for a natural pause along the conveyor belt.



Exploring the other islands in the Society group feels easy and luxurious compared to the navigational challenges and tide timings of the Tuamotus. Passage from one island to the next is straightforward and you will most likely feel very familiar by now with entering reef passes into sheltered lagoons.

These islands are the stuff of South Pacific fantasy and once you have swum with stingrays at Moorea, gazed at the sunset from Huahine's beaches and lounged on the white sand of Bora Bora you should hopefully be feeling justly rewarded for all the hard work and diligent seamanship that it took you to get there.

**“However, both provide rare scenery, unlike any your boating life will take you in the world.”**

The relaxed hops from one island to the next in the Societies should be savoured as from this point on you will either be pushing out for the Cooks, which are another week's sail and all quite far apart, or perhaps looping back towards Hawaii. This second option is the one chosen by many wishing to spend more than one season in the South Pacific and needing a good spot to spend the winter.

Setting out from Bora Bora towards the Cooks is once again all about timing. By this point the trade winds will seem like old friends but you will most likely have become accustomed to the

passing cold fronts which bring sudden rain and unwelcome westerlies.

The best tactic for launching off again into the big blue is to simply take your time and choose your window wisely. We knew several boats hoping to make for American Samoa but the winds forced them to opt for the more favourable passage southwards and they visited the Cook Islands instead.

This flexibility proves invaluable in these waters as any stubbornness to stick to schedule or to a predetermined route may result in your battling 40 or 50 knot winds, making no headway and eventually having to retreat for the easier option anyway. Plus, any passage west of the Cooks is likely to introduce you to the South Pacific Convergence Zone (SPCZ).

This makes for abrupt squally weather, short stormy bursts and rapid changes of wind. When active it brings heavy rains and the most sensible way to tolerate it is to stay put, collect the abundant fresh rainwater and accept that you get underway only once it passes.

From Rarotonga, Aitutaki or Palmerston islands, the most visited by yachts in the Cooks, you can choose whether to make straight for the islands of the Kingdom of Tonga, or to have an unusual respite at either Beveridge Reef or Niue.

Beveridge is a totally submerged atoll, with only a small stretch of sand visible at low tide. Nevertheless, yachts can still stop and anchor within the lagoon, experiencing some shelter from the swell of the surrounding ocean.



The island country of Niue, by contrast, is a raised coral atoll. There is only one option for yachts wishing to stop here which is the mooring field at Alofi.

Both Niue and Beveridge reef are only possible stopping points if the weather conditions are favourable; the reef provides no shelter in strong winds and Alofi is not suitable if a front comes through and the wind clocks round to westerlies. However, both provide rare scenery, unlike any your boating life will take you to anywhere else in the world.

**“...it makes for a natural pause along the conveyor belt.”**

The Vava’u and Ha’apai groups of Tonga are some of the most pleasurable cruising grounds you can find with pristine beaches, healthy corals and enjoyable, easy snorkelling to be done. The many small islands within these two groups allow for fun day sails and laid-back discovery as you can potter about in these waters.

One huge draw to this marine playground is the annual migration of humpback whales and there are many opportunities to go and see them in their breeding grounds. You may find that you do not even need to seek them out as a quick flurry of activity on the VHF is commonplace as the boats lying at anchor alert one another to the

sudden arrival of these majestic creatures into the anchorage.

Remember to be respectful to the whales if you encounter one when underway; slowing your engine and not cutting across their path.

### **Heading west**

If attempting the South Pacific in one season then by this point in the coconut milk run you will probably be feeling pushed for time. It is normally at Niue or Tonga that plans suddenly change as the pressure of the upcoming cyclone season dictates whether you linger somewhere or leave the tropics and the storm belt entirely.

The passage to New Zealand is much the same whether one leaves from Niue, Tonga or Fiji. If wanting to visit Vanuatu or New Caledonia then the logical stopping point of the voyage is in Australia. Having said that, no one ever chose to travel by sailboat if they needed to go quickly!

So, if not feeling the pressure of time, the Republic of Fiji boasts 330 islands to dawdle in. The two largest ones of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu with their humming towns and bustling markets are fringed by tiny isolated anchorages and uninhabited islets, affording you a mixture of vibrant street life and idyllic seclusion as the mood takes you.

The warmth, generosity and resilience of the people is so apparent in Fiji. Much like the Ni-Vanuatu recovering from the devastation of



these islands will soon be approached by a spokesman of the chiefdom and welcomed to introduce themselves.

**Had your fill?**

Months later, your head reeling with a huge array of different island landscapes and cultures, not to mention a bulging pocket full of boat cards that you will have collected en route from your other coconut milk runners, you will most probably be tying up the docklines in northern New Zealand or somewhere along the Queensland or New South Wales coast of Australia.

Perhaps you rushed through the Pacific too quickly and are already making plans for next season's return. Or maybe you have sailed round circuit after circuit here as it is easy to see how one could lose years cruising these many different islands and countries. Although losing years is definitely not the right terminology.

The big blue that is a South Pacific sail is understandably the pinnacle of many boaters' cruising ambitions. The sheer achievement of navigating across this ocean, rising to the huge variety of challenges that each of these environments pose, is no small feat. All those who log the 7,000 miles from the Americas to Australasia should never think of phrases such as the 'puddle jump' as diminishing from their triumph of completing it.

Sure, your boat may now need some care and maintenance in the world-class yachting centres that both countries have to offer. However, she was hopefully well-found enough and well-stocked enough to give you a comfortable and safe journey through.

I suspect, once well rested and reprovisioned, the call of the wind will lure you back out there to tackle the ocean once more.



1. Always make time for other pursuits, surfing in Tahiti.
2. Pulling in to anchor in Tonga.
3. A calm anchorage in Fiji after Cyclone Winston.
4. The Pacific can be aptly named, this is a definite coconut milk run day!
5. Bora Bora mountain.

cyclone Pam in 2015 the Fijians are still picking themselves up after being pounded by cyclone Winston early in 2016. The wreckage is still clearly visible.

Yet, lying as they do in the tropical storm belt, these island nations share in an admirable spirit of unwavering resilience as, with the help of the French, Australian and New Zealand aid, they once more rebuild their country.

Five hundred miles to the west and one year ahead of Fiji in their post-cyclone restoration, Vanuatu has a fascinating combination of French, Portuguese and English colonial history.

Cruising the archipelago you will be struck by its volcanic peaks, crystal waters and rugged hilly interiors. There are villages still keeping the traditional customs of dancing and ceremonies alive as far more than a mere show put on for tourists. The Ni-Vanuatu are proud of their heritage and will gladly teach visitors about the meaning of their myriad rituals.

Finally, the last stop on the run, New Caledonia lies 250 miles on from Vanuatu and 750 miles east of Australia. It is part of the French overseas territory and its mainland of Grand Terre has a mountainous spine, separating the lush green vegetation on the east from the sandy plains of the west.

The Loyalty islands are sprinkled to the east of this and are home to coral caves, steep cliffs, dense rainforest and empty beaches. They are still ruled by chiefs and yachtsmen visiting

**cruisinghelmsman Jess Lloyd-Mostyn**



Jessica Lloyd-Mostyn and James left England in 2011 aboard *Adamastor*, a Crossbow 42, intending to circumnavigate in a couple of years. After crossing the Atlantic and cruising the Caribbean they reached Panama, where they decided to take longer and start a family. Their daughter, Rocket, was born in Mexico and logged her first sea miles on their Pacific crossing. They married in Fiji and added to their crew list with their son, Indigo, born in New Zealand. Currently in New Zealand, planning their return to the south Pacific Islands this season and then onwards towards Australia's Barrier reef and Indonesia. Four and a half years, 18,000 miles, 32 countries and two babies en-route. You can follow their progress at [www.water-log.com](http://www.water-log.com).