

It still rains in paradise

Frustrated with sailing in miserable British drizzle? Be glad you're not in Fiji, says Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

It's raining today in Fiji. Or rather, it's raining again in Fiji. We've been making passages through the reef systems of these beautiful islands but progress has been slow as we've been weather-dodging, trying our best to avoid huge downpours whilst under way.

Shocking as it may seem, we get a lot of rain. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise but, for some reason, once people know you're off sailing in exotic locations, it's never an image of a rainy day that comes to mind. Well, perhaps it will come as a nice surprise if you're reading this whilst gazing at a wintry scene through your portholes. It rains here. It rains a lot.

The real issue is the flippant use of the word 'paradise'. Since leaving England we've spent the last three years living in the tropics and we've heard almost every place we've stopped in described as paradise: on VHF radio nets in the mornings, written all over cruising guides, and we too find it creeping into our everyday vocabularies more and more. Cruising in the tropics means your sailing routes hit some of the places people have always dreamed of. The dream always includes a cloudless sky and is further fuelled by every book, postcard and every brochure image that is a record of such

places. Tahiti, St Lucia, Fiji, the Virgin Islands, Costa Rica, every one of them trades on the merit of being a glamorous utopia. Emails or Skype calls with our friends and families back home often touch on a note of jealousy about the weather, as people tend to picture us bobbing gently below a clear sky of blazing sunshine. But although the lush vegetation, the verdant hills and the wealth of unusual and colourful flowers sit so well with our personal understanding of 'paradise', people in general fail to realise that such fertility is fuelled by rain.

Tropical rain has a character all its own. Britain may have showers, or drizzle for days, but the rains that we've met in recent years have much more theatre and spectacle. They can start in an instant, like someone flipping a switch, with a force that can't be ignored. It can pound so heavily that it's actually quite pleasurable to stand out in it, with more water pressure you'd get from any domestic shower. The water drums on every surface

and cleans our decks in moments.

Rain obliterates the mainland from view, makes the channel you're sailing towards disappear or suddenly renders a towering mountain invisible. It's so forceful and so sudden that you see a distinct wall of white moving towards you. It's accompanied by a roar of water and a sudden flurry of movement as every boat at anchor closes

itself up, all signs of life gone, like a turtle drawing into its shell.

Sometimes the wall of rain comes with intense gusts of wind. This sends the water flying horizontally and sets the boat bucking and straining at her anchor. If you're under way, you have only seconds in which to reef down once you spot the wall of white approaching. Or it can be the opposite, still and windless with fat, heavy, relentless drops hammering down. Sometimes it's even a bit of both, with erratic swings and changes in wind direction as well as strength. Sailing through it is a real challenge.

Rain in the tropics does at least tend to be quite warm so if you're caught out in a storm you generally won't be shivering.



Our yacht at anchor in French Polynesia



ABOVE: The verdant green of Bora Bora in the South Pacific gives a clue to its climate



A simple tarpaulin funnels rainwater down to a big bucket for collection

A far-off squall dumps its rain out at sea

But what gives it a real personality is the sheer volume of water that falls.

We lived on our boat in Panama through one hurricane season. As far south as that, you're safe from tropical storms but you are most definitely not spared from the full force of the rains. It can easily rain non-stop for three days. In this type of

'People fail to realise that the verdant beauty of tropical islands is fuelled by rain'

persistent downpour you will find any leaks on board that you hadn't noticed before.

These rains can be trying. Everything feels damp and there is no way of drying out soaked clothing, cushions or bedding. The humidity is announced cheerfully over the radio as being 100% and everything you touch seems to be saturated. You can get stir-crazy as torrential rain results in a sort of boat-arrest where your only option is to hunker down.

If you get hit by the rains during the limited time you have in one place, you may miss out on seeing it altogether. We had great weather in Bora Bora but friends who arrived later had a solid fortnight of rain. In ten days at Rarotonga we saw the sun three times.

People who live in the tropics year-round look forward to rain and rejoice

in it. Rain feeds crops, nurtures plants, sustains animals and provides clean water. Cruisers too, for all our dislike of rain when navigating reefs, love the opportunity to fill our water tanks. We have no water-maker so rain catchment is always a huge benefit. We cover our aft deck with buckets, stretch a tarpaulin out or collect rainwater from our dinghy and reap the rewards for the rest of the week. There's something very satisfying about harvesting your own fresh water.

Next time England looks grey and miserable and you silently curse your cruiser friends in some idyllic place on the other side of the earth, add a hefty dose of rain to that sublime image you're painting. Or else feel smug, as you're the lucky ones. We're longing for some of that glorious rain so we can fill our water tanks. ▲



Jessica Lloyd-Mostyn

Jess and James left England in 2011 aboard *Adamastor*, a Crossbow 42, intending to circumnavigate in a couple of years. After cruising the Caribbean they reached Panama, where they decided to take longer over the trip and also to start a family. Their daughter, Rocket, was born in Mexico and logged her first sea miles on their Pacific crossing in 2014. They got married in Fiji and are now in New Zealand where they have just added a son, Indigo, to their crew list. You can follow their progress online at www.water-log.com.

Things to know about tropical rainstorms

■ Squalls can have no wind in them or strong gusts. Once you see that black cloud, check your lines if you're tied to a dock or a mooring. If you're at anchor, check you're happy with the amount of chain you have out. If you're under way, reef early, just in case.



Pennies from heaven: when it pours, we put all our buckets on deck to collect it

■ Rain catchment means free fresh water. Open your deck fill-caps, put out some buckets or rig up a simple tarpaulin to channel it.

■ Tropical rain is all about huge amounts in a few minutes. Close hatches and tents as soon as you suspect the rainfall. If you're going ashore, never leave the odd hatch open, even for ventilation.



Real life in the tropics: palm trees in the background, rain in the foreground

■ Awnings are invaluable for both sun-shade and rain protection. If you don't have one, tarpaulins, canvas or even old sails are a great cheap solution.

■ Storms come with good water pressure. Take advantage of this to rinse the salt off your foul-weather gear, wash down the deck or even have a shower yourself!