

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

A visit to the Pacific can provoke all sorts of joyous emotions but one of the more obscure yet persistent desires of newly arrived cruising sailors is the wish to get a tattoo

Traditionally you should have one swallow tattoo for every 5,000 sea miles under your belt, an anchor tattoo signifying that you've crossed the Atlantic and a compass rose to show that you will always find your way home. Gone are the times when the only people with tattoos were sailors and convicts and it's far more commonplace to mark the crossing of the equator by offering a tot of rum to King Neptune rather than getting a shellback turtle emblazoned onto your skin.

However, there is still one place where every year cruisers who would never normally consider getting body ink done decide to take the plunge and walk away with a permanent souvenir of an important passage. The Pacific. Each year, shortly after making landfall in the Marquesas in French Polynesia, the twitter of rumours about skilled artists starts circulating and newly tanned skinned becomes freshly etched with indelible art. From Easter Island to Samoa, New Zealand to Hawaii, the Polynesian tradition of tattooing strikes a chord within every visiting sailor and they decide to grab the chance while they can.

But far from being yet another form of cultural appropriation what is happening is far more of an appreciation of something deeper in these cultures. You see we're talking about a legacy of seafarers, older than the visiting European sailing ships. The rich history of Polynesian ocean travel and exploration is something they wrote about in these art forms. Each individual tattoo was layered with symbol and meaning specific to the wearer, telling tales of their family, their journey and experience.

So too does every sailor crossing that special threshold from the relative safety of the coastline of the Americas out into the much dreamt of exotic wilderness of the Pacific feel that they too have been on an inward journey far greater than the number of miles now under their keels. They are fresh with the exhilaration of achievement and endurance. For most, that crossing represents the longest and greatest passage they have ever undertaken, stretching their bodies and minds in unexpected ways. The sailor that now steps foot onto the verdant green land and lush hillsides of places like Fatu Hiva is forever different from



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the Mary Jones who once potted around bookshops in Surrey or ate sandwiches on the Isle of Wight. She has now been transformed into more of an Amazonian figure; powerful, capable and certain of her place on her boat, her place in the world and, in the ocean.

And we're not talking about a simple "Ooooooh, that's a nice-looking Chinese symbol, did you say it means courage?" type of pointing at a pinned-up gallery of tattoo choices. A typical Marquesan tattoo artist will simply have you lie down and talk, tell stories of how you got here, where you're sailing onto, about your childhood, your family, your hope for the future. They will draw while you talk, incorporating ever-increasingly intricate geometric symbols, curls and loops, marine animals and graphic lines into a gently sketched scrawl

across your skin. Then, they patiently and painstakingly take apart and explain each stroke, each mark of the pen, describing just why they drew this or that line or shape and why it should matter to your entire story. And the result is a fine line black lace of design, worn with pride by countless cruisers each sailing season.

It's often the people that you least suspect that decide to go for it as well. Like some secret mark of a superhero, Polynesian sailing tattoos are often hidden away so that their mild-mannered owners can carry on with their pretence of being really very ordinary indeed. Sure, that same Mary Jones may have swallowed the anchor and put her sailing days behind her and now works in a pottery shop. But little do they know that she still has the looping curves of a dancing manta ray traced around her hip.

Sure, it's a far cry from the traditional pig and rooster tattoos adorning sailors' feet during World War II in a bid to protect them from drowning as we're talking about something far less bold, and a lot more personal to a character's experience of a voyage but it is nevertheless a steadfast featuring milestone of modern global cruising. And why not? Is it any different from noting a visit from dolphins in your boat's log book or celebrating crossing the international date line? Ultimately, no matter how you look at it it's still going to hurt. So anyone brave enough to commit to the needle or cross oceans has marked themselves for life in more ways than one.



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Jess and James left the UK in 2011 in their Crossbow 42 and have sailed halfway round the world, growing their crew en route. Follow their journey at water-log.com