

CROSSING THE PACIFIC: COLÓN TO TAHITI

Helena Klocke

(Continuing on from Helena's account of Sailing Paradise: Crossing the Caribbean Sea in Flying Fish 2019/1. Helena received assistance from the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme to make the initial passage, but that wasn't the half of it...)

On Monday 25th March, Tessa and Paul arrive in Colón, at the Caribbean end of the Panama Canal. Both are from New Zealand and both will stay aboard until we reach Tahiti at the end of May. Our crew is now complete: Tessa, very caring and handy, never misses a good laugh; Paul, also referred to as Uncle Paul, who tells us about the stars in the sky and the fish in the sea and most of the in-betweens; Captain James is, obviously, our skipper – the most generous and relaxed captain, his first priority is that 'everyone has a good time'; my mother Rena, who is also our quite busy boat doctor; and finally me, Helena. I am a 20 year old German girl who had a good portion of luck to be on this beautiful voyage from Saint Martin to Tahiti. It really started in France, where James bought *Kiwa*, his Lagoon 450 catamaran. He will continue to sail her all the way to his home country, New Zealand.

Since James had done the canal transit before, we know roughly what to expect. The boat is measured, the lines and fenders arrive, the fees are paid and so on. When we welcome Julio, our pilot, on board we learn that we will have a monohull tied up each side during the transit – no serious line handling for us! But James will have to drive us all. By the time we get into the first lock everyone but him has got a camera out and gets ready to enjoy. And it is fascinating. The first three locks each take us 9m up, onto the level of the Gatun Lake. In front of us is a huge cargo ship, so we prefer to look behind where the massive doors slowly close. Then the water starts to rise. Maybe it is because of the calmness

– no shouting or other noises, or maybe it is because we all know how special and rare this situation is, which most of us will do only once in a lifetime – but whatever it is, the atmosphere is magical. Although

Paul asked me to give a concert during the transit ...





*A great
experience to
share with
my mom*

it feels fast, it actually takes some time to get through all three locks and by the time we reach the lake it is dark.

The next day is not much different. We motor for a few

hours to get to the last three locks that will each take us down 9m to the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific Ocean ... that's what we're so excited about. Again we tie up in the middle and enter the first lock, this time with a big cargo ship behind us. It's perfect, we get the perspective that we missed yesterday. Three times we watch the giant doors close in graceful slow motion and the water level sink, until the last door opens again to set us free for the Pacific. Just before sunset we say goodbye to Julio and tie up to a buoy for the night, then spend the evening out in Panama City.

The few days we spend here are mostly about deciding how many Panama hats one needs – in fact I'm the only one who doesn't buy one. We experience the Panamanians as very truthful and kind, always willing to help. The city itself I find very tidy and lively, especially on Sunday night! I love it, but I am even more excited about casting off again.

On Monday 1st April, the time has finally come. That is also the day that I book my flight back to Germany for the beginning of June. Two more months. Tessa says it sounds a lot but to me it sounds like the beginning of the end. Slowly but surely we

Mom and Julio, our pilot, on the cabin top as the gates close behind us ...

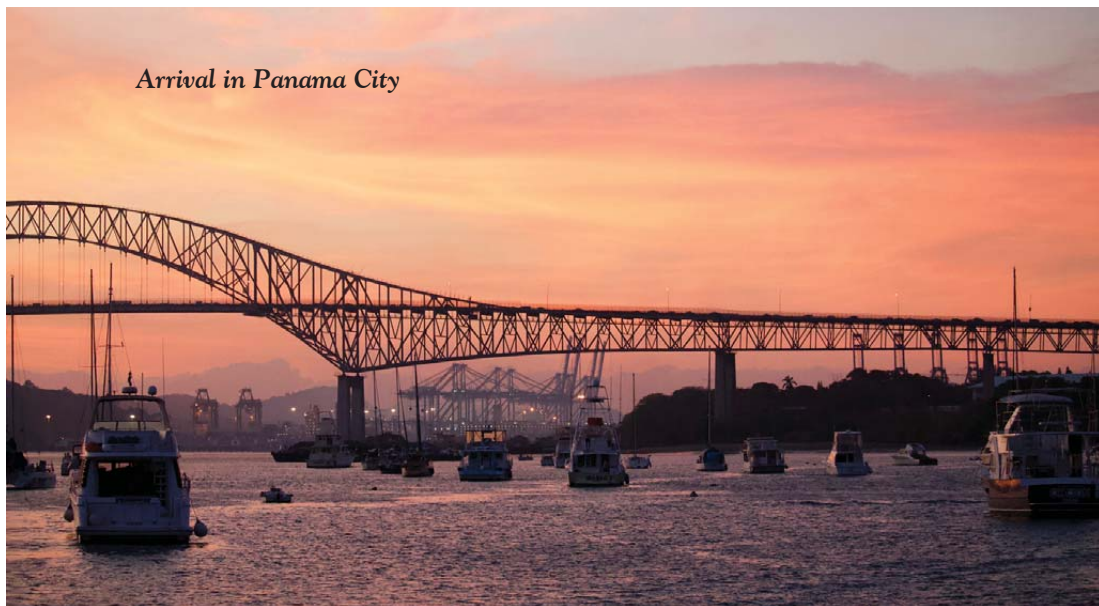




... and boy are they massive!

leave Panama behind. To each side are dozens of birds migrating further south – the formations they build only inches above the water makes a stunning view. In fact our time in Panama was full of beautiful birds. James picks up his shoes and says, “I’m putting away my shoes and it sure feels good!”. It feels great. Soon we get out the spinnaker, ‘just for fun’. Once again its beautiful turquoise colour amazes me. All five of us sit down and watch it carry us onwards. It’s more meditation than fun if you ask me.

During lunch the next day, our regular get-together, Paul’s fishing rod announces its first success. Excited about catching his first fish, he drops his knife and fork and gets ready to land that fish! All of us are excited, but we decide to finish lunch first and then pull in the fish. Paul, who usually takes his time to enjoy his food one mouthful at a time, takes only two minutes to finish and returns to his rod still chewing, which gives me a good laugh. But I hurry too, because I am the unofficial photographer and I want to get some good shots – it must be a huge fish. The first sight makes us think it is a swordfish. It comes up just beneath the water’s surface for a second and I can see multiple



Arrival in Panama City



Tessa and the spinnaker en route to the Galapagos

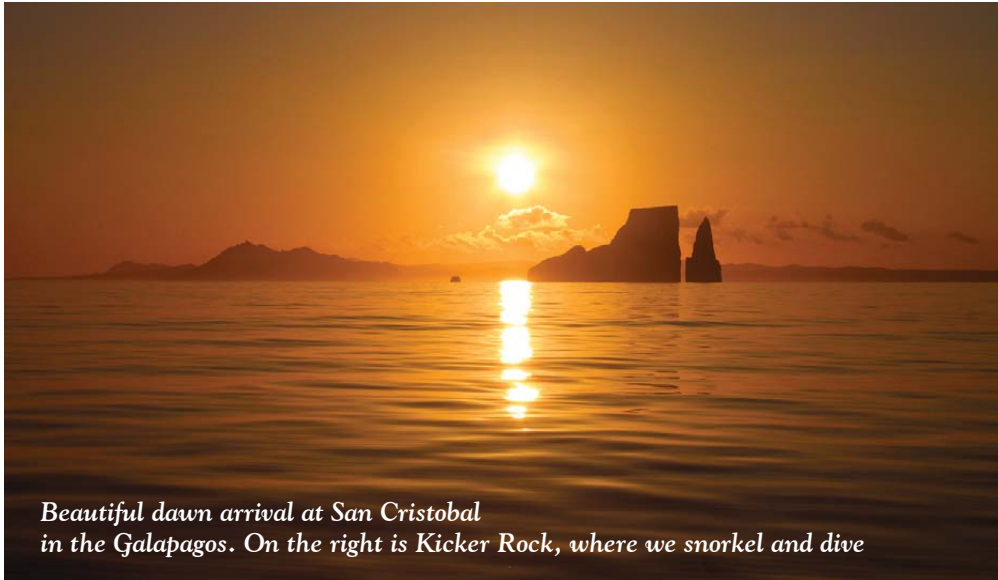
beautiful colours shining on its back, and a long, pointy nose. It looks like a little shark to me, but I don't know much about fish. Whatever it is, it's beautiful, big and determined not to end up as our dinner. But since we don't want to kill what we can't eat, we plan to take it off the hook anyway. He fights us for almost twenty minutes, and has just come close enough when a big snap tells us he's won – the fish is off, and the hook too. I am told that this is the best outcome, since we didn't know how we would have taken the hook out anyway. Now it will rust and fall out ... but I have a hard time feeling good about it.

Funnily enough, just as we sit down for lunch next day the same thing happens again. We get excited, Paul

gets ready, I get the camera. This time we can see it's a huge *mahi-mahi* ... but only for a few minutes. Then it, too, pulls off the hook and is gone. So close.



A derelict fishing pirogue encountered along the way



*Beautiful dawn arrival at San Cristobal
in the Galapagos. On the right is Kicker Rock, where we snorkel and dive*

The Galapagos

We reach San Christobal on 4th April. I won't write about all the amazing things we did, but I will sum up the reasons why you should try to visit the Galapagos if you can. We had a fantastic agent, who took a lot of the work off us and left no questions unanswered; the Galapagueños, paid or unpaid, are always truly happy to help and don't look for opportunities to rip you off; and finally the environment itself is just beautiful. The flora and fauna are at least as amazing and diverse as you imagine, and the small towns are generally very tidy and lively. Even though most people work in tourism, and obviously there is a lot of it, the streets are also filled with locals, especially in the evening.



*The
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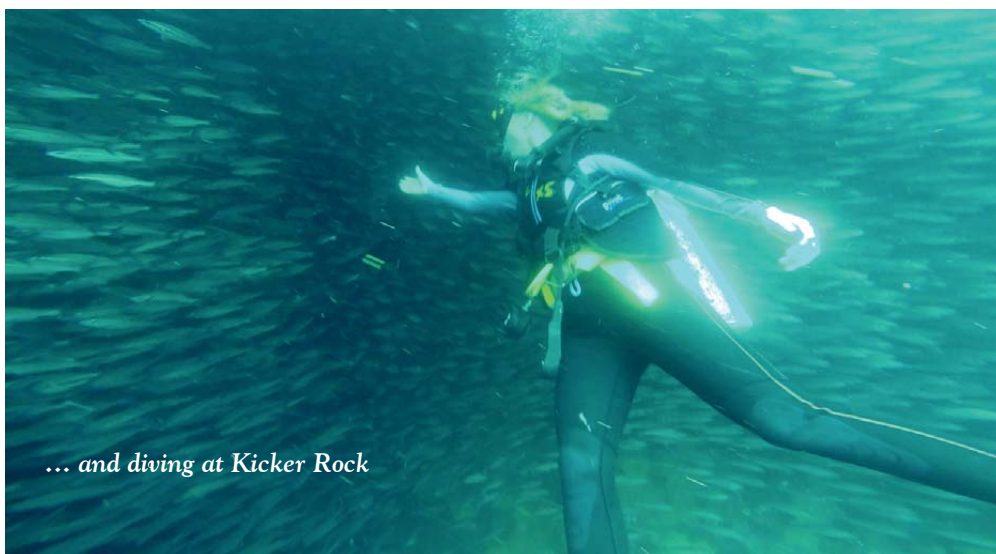


*The Kiwa crew in the Galapagos.
From right to left: James, Paul, Rena (mom), me and Tessa*

We visit four of the five inhabited islands and do one or two day tours on each. Though pricey, all of them were definitely worth it. We dive with all kinds of marine life including sharks, seals, rays and plenty of colourful fish, and walk in a labyrinth of



*Me with one of the many
giant turtles ...*



lava tunnels, just a metre above shallow turquoise water that is home to giant turtles, seahorses and more. We walk up one of the six volcanoes on Isla Isabela, ending up in a mystical lava landscape with deadly canyons and cacti that are thousands of years old. Basically, every day is a highlight except the ones we take to sail from one island to another, and they are a much-needed rest from all the action and sun. To sum it up, once arrived it was very uncomplicated and safe – we had a good time, with good food amongst good people.

Our last day is Monday 15th April, and we have a tour booked to see Isla Floreana, a small island where a couple of Germans created their own little paradise back in 1929. Beautiful flora and fauna, as on every island, though a little different every time. A few days before that, snacking on something sweet, I notice my tooth being a little too sensitive. The last thing I want is a toothache for three weeks in the middle of the ocean, but despite all efforts we cannot find a dentist who can see me that day – I will have to hope for the best. Monday comes and we go to Floreana.

About 150 people live there. The little restaurant that provides us with lunch lies along a long street with only one other building, right across the street. I ask our tour guide if she knows of a dentist and a local tells us there is one in the building opposite! Maria, our guide, is just as surprised as I am. But it's true – a few times a year a young dentist from Santa Cruz comes here to care for the teeth on Floreana, for free. She fixes mine and is reluctant to accept a donation from us – what a perfect little incident. And she seems just as happy to have a patient as I am to have found a dentist.

Next day we cast off again, this time for the big crossing, 3059 miles to the Marquesas. Having five people on board obviously adds to the chaos on the boat, but since we all like it nice and clean we include a small daily clean-up in our two-hour shifts. After packing *Kiwa* with as much fresh fruit and veggies as possible, we say goodbye and set our sails for the Marquesas.

As the land shrinks behind us life slows down again. We lie in the sun, or the shade, read our books, nap, and watch the water from the helm. Small waves rock us from the port quarter. Sitting on the bow, watching the deep blue sea, a group of dolphins



On a volcanic caldera. From right to left: Rena, our wonderful guide, James, Tessa, me and Paul. I was glad my mom had bought multiple Panama hats!

shows off how much fun it must be living in the South Pacific. It's a beautiful sight, and the first of many encounters. A few days later we're sitting out front again, in the late afternoon when the sun gives only a mild heat, enjoying its beautiful orange colours. Watching the sea and feeling the warm breeze is pure life. Suddenly, four big,

Playing the ukulele at the helm





Goodbye Galapagos, next stop French Polynesia

beautiful dolphins appear right beneath the trampoline. I get very excited seeing them so close. These ones are bigger and have white bellies. We watch them play around only a few metres away. I've seen dolphins before, as every sailor surely has hundreds of times, but there's something beautiful about these animals that enthral us all. We sit there until the stars appear one by one and it's only Paul and me left. While I am simply enjoying these little wonders of space, Paul gets his binoculars and we have a nice little lesson in astronomy, listening to Simon and Garfunkel.

Talking about music, we have a lot of it. And I have a lot of little karaoke dance parties too, because if you don't feel like that while you're sailing from one paradise to the other, then you're either terribly seasick or have an even more serious problem! Unfortunately, I do feel low key sick the first few days – not too much and not all the time, but enough to put on a patch, because I am not going to waste a single minute of this trip.

Monday 22nd is a gloomy day. A thick layer of clouds cover the blue sky and bring a fresh breeze and some rain. I like it a lot, realising that the hot, heavy equatorial sun is a little too much for my fair body. I feel so much better that day. It is also the day we switch our clocks back one hour. We realise that next day we will celebrate halfway, though it feels as if we have only been out at sea for a day or two.

By Monday 29th we've been at sea for 16 days, and other than two limes and a some lettuce our fresh food is gone. In the morning I wake up to the sound of the mainsail being lowered to the second reef. Before I have a chance to have a cup of tea we put the spinnaker up, then sit a while to enjoy it. The minute I decide it is time for some breakfast, a little fountain blows up a few metres to starboard. A beautiful, small whale gently breaks the water's surface and appears, then dives back down again. It is beautiful to watch, and the very first time for me. For a few minutes he continues besides us, then bends to his right and shows us a final blow before he returns to the depths. I finally have some breakfast, but little do I know what else this day holds for us.



I enjoyed the navigation – and yes, I did wear that dress all the time...

Just before lunch we notice a small rip at the spinnaker's starboard edge. We get it down, fix it, put it back up. Minutes after we finished lunch my mother calls, "There's another rip in the sail!". This time it is on the port side, and it's rather major. We get it down and go on motor-sailing under jib. 'It was nice while it lasted' – and it really was. The rest of the day goes by relaxed as always, and at sunset we sit at the bow to enjoy beers and chips (crisps to most Brits), our daily treat. Usually, before the last sunlight disappears, some start going to bed, others choose a movie or sit at the helm to do their watch. Today we all stay as the stars appear. Paul goes to turn off all the lights and returns with another bag of chips and his binoculars. Together we watch the beautifully clear sky full of stars, the Milky Way above our heads and even a neighbouring galaxy, as Paul explains. We identify all the constellations that we know, talk about shooting stars and satellites and all the other things that come to one's mind on a night like this. When I go inside to get a jersey I meet James who shows me the bioluminescence in the water – another thing I never saw before. Like a bunch of marine fireflies, the water behind the boat twinkles and shines in enchanted turquoise colours just underneath the surface. I have a hard time deciding which way to turn my head. Finally I make myself a good cup of tea and go to sleep. What a day.

We reach the Marquesas on 4th May after 18 days at sea, and spend the first few days in the capital, Nuku Hiva. We take a tour around the island, enjoy the singing in church on Sunday, trade clothes for fruit and see traditional dancing for the first time – beautiful, and amazingly different from everything I have seen so far. In addition to that we have good times meeting up with fellow sailors, with good stories, jokes and music. Something I've come to love about sailing is how international it is. You sit with people from all continents of the world and laugh and sing the same songs together. Living on a boat makes people forget about all the borders and differences people often believe in so strongly.



We move on to Ua Pou, Hiva Oa and finally Fatu Hiva, our last stop in the archipelago. On each island we take a tour, eat with the locals and learn about the people – and it doesn't get boring because each island is truly unique. What they all have in common is the kindness of their people. Our tour guides always stop to pick heaps of the fresh fruit which I had missed so much on the last half of our big crossing. Nature and culture are definitely the highlights on the Marquesas and inspire our skipper to get a tattoo

Chilling out in the Marquesas





My Marquesan tattoo

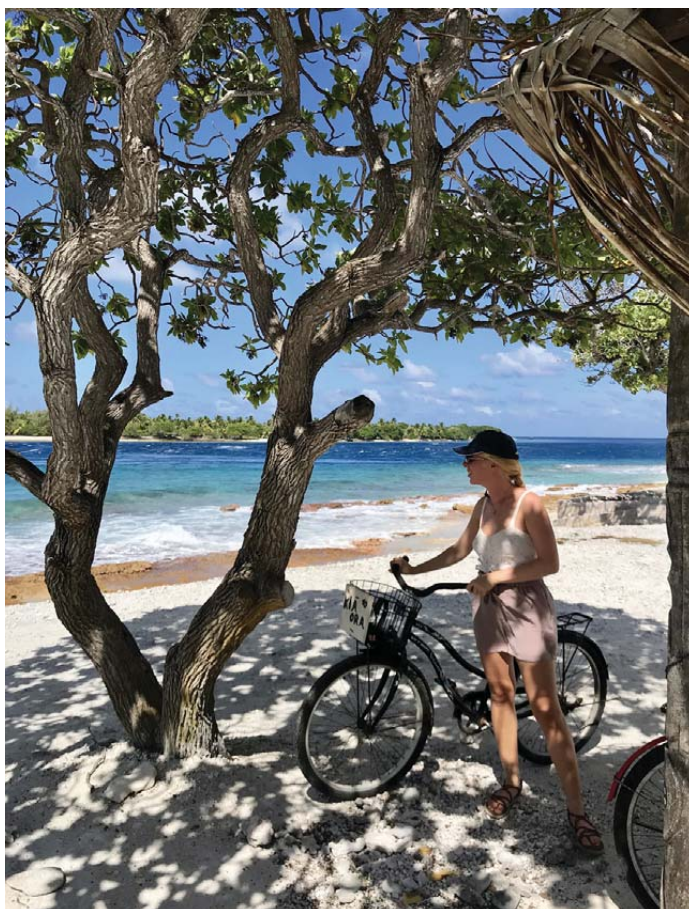
by a local artist. I thought I didn't want any more tattoos after the bad one I got when I was 18, but as I went through a book about Marquesan tattoos and their meanings while James got his one done very well, I decide to get one myself too. It is the

symbol of the ear and stands for understanding and the willingness to listen.

It's 17th May and 24 hours ago we left Fatu Hiva for the Tuamotu Islands. We watched the locals practice a *haka*, a traditional dance to the bold rhythm of drums and singing, then returned to the boat in the evening, hoisted the mainsail and jib, and set off for Manihi. It is all very calm with the waves from astern, and I sit at the helm for my shift from 2000 until 2200. The moon is full and shines so bright that I can still see the blue of the sky and a few white clouds. The only sound comes from the water and the breeze is perfectly cool. This is the last little crossing and I try to embrace it as much as I can. We're slowly leaving this little paradise behind, where there are a thousand colours on the land and in the water. Where nature is so lush you could eat fruit ripened in the sun all year long – so much you could never exhaust it. Where some things still can't be bought with money and where the people still hunt to eat their meat.

Our next stop, and the last one before Tahiti, is the Tuamotu Archipelago. The most amazing island we visit is Rangiroa, again unlike anything I've seen before. A family of dolphins including a baby escort us

Exploring in the Tuamotu Archipelago





With James on our way to Tahiti, our last little crossing

into the lagoon, which is surrounded by a circular reef. The water is crystal clear and 30°C, and the underwater landscape of coral inhabited by the most amazing creatures (the fish are painted by a famous modern artist on LSD). Obviously we spend a good amount of time exploring this little paradise. No wonder that, for most Polynesians, paradise is the underwater world. Unfortunately the water temperature is too high for most corals, which die and lose their colour. We spend our days in the Tuamotus cycling, diving and visiting a pearl farm. It is very interesting and a lot of fun. I wish we could stay a little longer but we have to move on to Tahiti.

There we'll have to say goodbye to Paul, Tessa and Mark, who joined us for the past few weeks. I'll miss Paul especially, as he became a great friend these past weeks and taught me a lot of things I enjoyed learning. The day comes. All of a sudden it's only the three of us again, just like in the beginning. There is much more space now and time seems to slow down too, now that it's less busy on the boat. Suddenly I myself have only a few days left aboard *Kiwa*. I realise how much of a home this boat has become, and I realise that it is thanks to James being just the way he is, sharing his boat all the way. Other than cleaning the hulls, we spend our last days together being lazy.

Now I am sitting in a train through France, on my way home. Saying goodbye to the boat, the skipper and my mom was bittersweet. The time I had was simply incredible – what it has done for me I won't even try to explain. The way we loved life and what I learned about it will surely stay with me from now on. I gained a lot, most of all happiness. And that is why I can look forward to home now, too. Therefore my final and biggest thanks go to everyone who supported me with this experience. My family of course, my mother, James, Tessa and 'Uncle' Paul – and the OCC for accepting me for the amazing Youth Sponsorship Programme. Thank you so very much!

