

Atea - Passage home across the Pacific 2022

John Daubeney



Back in the Pacific, John and Kia with their children Ayla and Braca

As the lock gates opened and the Pacific waters flooded in it felt as if we were home. After eight years in Asia, the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the water that swirled around us was finally that same water that washed around our New Zealand home shores – well, almost anyway. There was the small matter of 6,500 miles and the world's largest ocean to negotiate first, but it felt as if we were nearly back already.

Kia and I have been cruising on our Ganley Solution *Atea* since 2011, starting from New Zealand with two years in the Pacific, then two years in Asia and two years in the Indian Ocean. We were joined along the way by our children Braca (born 2011) and Ayla (born 2013). After an initial lockdown of two months in South Africa we sailed direct from there to the Azores, Europe and West Africa, before crossing the Atlantic in early 2021 so we have managed to keep moving throughout the pandemic. *Atea* is a 45 foot steel hulled, cutter rigged sloop that has served us well throughout these years, but perhaps for the boat, adults and kids alike it was time for us to set course for home.

Our cruise across the Pacific started with the transit of the Panama Canal on 15 January 22. The next few weeks were filled with provisioning and ensuring that the boat was ready. With a leaking stern gland and two year old antifouling, a

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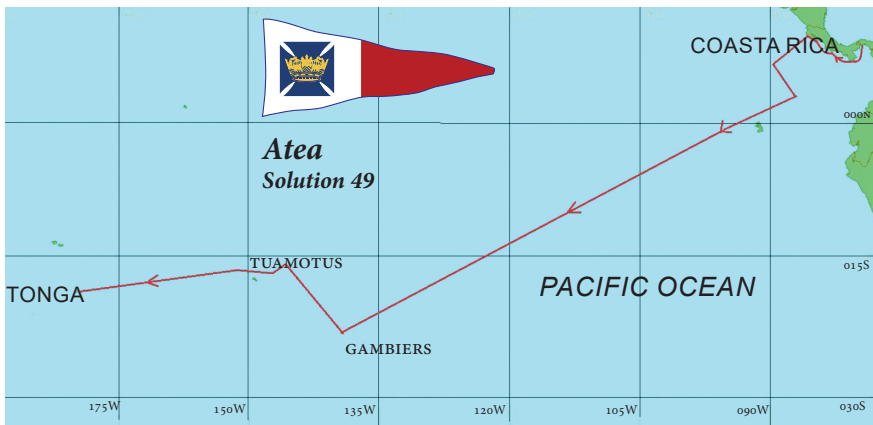


Bubbling paint concealed a hole in the hull

haul out was needed; little did we know just how important this would become. On the first day of the work, the hull cleaning team noted a mark on the paint and within a short time a screwdriver was poked through a hole in the hull. By the time full investigations were completed, this hole had expanded to an 18 inch split in the plating; my confidence in our previously invincible steel fortress was severely shaken. In the aft cabin Kia and I discussed quietly what this might have meant if such a hole had appeared offshore: it was a sobering thought. After 50,000 miles were we ready for these last 6000? However,

the team in the boat yard were unflappable and within a few days a rudimentary patch was welded in place, the leaky stern gland resolved and we were afloat again, my confidence 'shaken, but not stirred'.

From Panama, our course first took us north to Costa Rica. Relatively few yachts make this diversion and our initial impression was that it was a hard country to love. On entry it was only our pleading with the officials that saved us from our freezer full of meat being confiscated, and a hastily applied chain and sealing tape allowed us to keep these treasures for our long voyage ahead. Our new water maker was held up in at the airport over a documentation requirement that seemed ridiculous to our minds, private beaches and exclusive marinas were rather hostile and there was little wind to assist our progress. The rolling surf required us to polish our



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beach landing technique like the Royal Tournament Field Gunners: “Watch the surf... Steady ... Steady ... GO!” then gun the outboard and try to stay on the back of the wave. Don’t get too slow or too fast. Stop and tilt the engine then, “Jump! Kids out! Here comes the next set, lift the dinghy, now RUN...”

As time progressed, we learnt how to enjoy Costa Rica and live the local motto: *La Pura Vida*. We lived ‘the pure life’ by largely staying off the beaten track in this country of National Parks and rich biodiversity. Our favourite hidden spot was at Domincalita, where we sneaked our way in behind a small rocky headland that barely registered on the chart. After another dinghy landing through the surf we made our way inland to the glorious waterfalls of Nacoya.

After clearing customs in Playa Coco and a final afternoon spent sampling Costa Rica’s finest microbrewery (after all it was nothing but sleepy Pacific ahead of us) we sailed for the open ocean on 21 April 22. *Atea* and her crew have completed many passages before, including one significantly longer than the one that lay before us, but none have begun with such a bad start – the next two weeks were full of setbacks.

First, the replacement of the new water maker caused issue. The replacement arrived a few days before departure and in the rush to leave, we had not taken the time to fit it. “No problem!” I’d said to Kia, “It’s electric and will be easy to install after we leave.” On the second day of our passage I realised what a fool I had been. While the water maker remained obstinately quiet, the volume of our discussions in the aft cabin continued to increase as I explained our predicament: We were on the brink of a 3,500 mile passage, the water tanks were almost empty and the new water maker was not working. With these unpleasant facts to hand, the only prudent option was to turn back for the mainland. We motored, backtracking for five hours before the water maker burst into life and we were able to reset the sails onto our original course. As if in a final act of revenge, the electric gremlin blew one of the chips on our Battery Management System and *Atea* would sail the remainder of the Pacific without this critical component, relying only on the skipper’s attention to keep our new lithium cells within range.

Our next issue came just before dusk on day four at sea, when I noticed that the forestay foil had parted 80% through and we hastily lowered the genoa. Fortunately, the crack was only eight inches from the roller drum and just the inner foil had cracked, so after some precarious work with the hacksaw on the end of the bowsprit I was able to cut loose the broken section, lower the outer foil over the stub of the inner, resulting in a complete, but shorter, genoa foil. Heaving away with a hacksaw within millimetres of the most critical element of the standing rigging whilst holding on to the end of a bowsprit on a boat pitching 500 miles offshore is not an experience I’d care to repeat.

Sadly this was not the end of our woes. We were expecting little wind and adverse current through this area north of the Galapagos Islands, but the equatorial counter current was setting strongly east and the winds stayed in the south west.

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We knew the only way out of this was to make ground to the south. With the wind forward of the beam and the boat sluggish and fully stored, our only option was to motor-sail under genoa and a reefed main. This was no problem since we carry plenty of fuel and are accustomed to the drone of the engine, but frustrating as we ended our sixth day at sea further away from our destination. On our eighth day the winds finally swung around to the south and we were able to enjoy some peace and quiet while resting the iron topsail.

Whilst there is nothing sweeter than the quiet of the engine being switched off, there is no silence as terrible as the quiet of an engine that starts, falters and dies. This is what befell us on our ninth day when our generally faithful and tolerant diesel engine, started, stuttered and stopped due to a combination of air in the fuel and running the engine too long at light load. Less quiet was another aft cabin conversation, along the lines of “Thankfully the windvane is steering, but the batteries are at 30% so we’ll need to throw all the meat overboard and switch off the freezer, and we have no computer or movies for the rest of the trip.” Fortunately, I was saved by a gem of a line in a maintenance manual that advised the following: ‘A diesel engine will run on WD40 sprayed into the air intake. This will assist in clearing air from the injector pipes, so keeping spraying until the engine fires.’ So armed with a trusty tin of WD40, we sprayed, hit the starter and sprayed some more until a beautiful roar resonated through the engine room. The reassuring rumble of Lucy Lister was indeed music to my ears and to keep her warm and the fuel lines charged we would run the engine every 12 hours for the rest of the voyage.



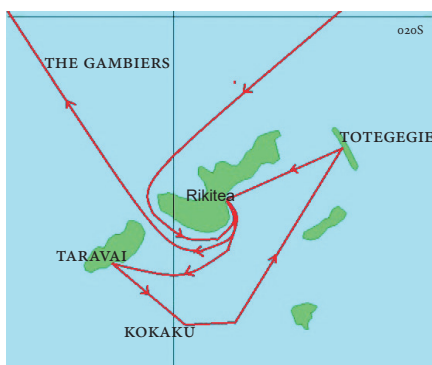
We crossed over into the southern hemisphere on day 12, 1 May at 095°W and King Neptune came on board for his sixth visit in ten years. On this occasion he gifted us a shot of rum and it seemed that our luck was changing. On Day 13 at 002°S the wind turned SE4 and we clocked 123 miles. Better was to come and after passing the half way point on day 16, the following weeks saw our daily mileage stretch out to average over 170 miles per day, peaking at 181 miles on day 18. We were not headed for the Marquesas as most cruisers do, but further south to the Gambier Islands. This route would not only

Toasting Neptune, his sixth visit in ten years

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take us to lesser visited islands but also improved our wind angle and steady fresh SE5/6 winds pushed our weekly mileage out to over 1200 miles. The run to the Marquesas is a downwind roll, but the Gambiers allowed us to track southwest with the wind a comfortable 110 degrees abaft the beam. After a difficult start, the rest of the passage turned into a romp to the southwest and our days were spent with our customary activities: passage presents for the kids, theme days for variation, movies, school work and reading to pass the time.

At daybreak on day 29, 3936 miles after leaving Costa Rica, we arrived in the Gambier Islands to a touching welcome of dinghies coming alongside with fresh fruit, congratulations and other offerings. This was the French Polynesia we had hoped for.



Of particular note are Herve and Valerie on Taravai island who, for the past 15 years have been inviting cruisers to anchor in the lagoon in front of their house and hosting sumptuous pot luck meals on Sundays, petanque on the beach and freshly caught wild pork on the BBQ. With Mother's Day and Kia's birthday coming at the same time, we will fondly remember this corner of the archipelago.

Atea at anchor in the Gambier Islands



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With the southern winter advancing, the Gambiers were starting to get colder and we still had an ocean to cross. We could not linger. After spending four weeks in the area, we pushed northwest into the Tuamotus, visiting the atolls of Amanu, Makemo, Tahanea and Fakareva. All were beautiful, but in particular, Tahanea and Fakarava are worthy of note. Tahanea is the poster child for why people journey to the Pacific – white sand beaches, sheltered lagoon of turquoise water, reef fish and blacktip shark circling the boat, deserted islands waiting to be explored and exciting diving to be enjoyed in the passes. Aft cabin conversations had progressed considerably since the grimmer days two months before: this is what we came for. We thought Tahanea was the peak of Polynesian perfection, until we visited Fakarava, which took diving to the next level.



John diving on Fakareva's famous 'Wall of Sharks'

The south pass of Fakareva and the famous 'Wall of Sharks' is a must do for anyone who enjoys time beneath the sea. After many thousands of miles of over fished and seemingly dead oceans, we were overjoyed to see the prolific corals, numerous fish life and, best of all, hundreds of shark gliding lazily around. To find that the apex predators are thriving is a true sign that all is healthy in the oceans.

Alas, the relentless clock of time kept ticking and we needed to push on to the Society Islands. Although once fabled and occupying a symbolic place in many sailor's dreams, these islands have recently received a bad rap with reports of tensions between sailors and the locals. A huge increase in the number of long term yachts can be attributed to rules that mean anyone with an EU passport can stay indefinitely, and the recent Covid related travel restrictions have screwed the valve down tight on this pressure cooker. We were wary of the welcome we would

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receive, but we found the rumours to be largely exaggerated. One particular bay in Moorea has a vocal person on the shoreline, but the bay is full of yachts which are not supposed to anchor there, so one can see his perspective. Around the rest of the islands the sailing is warm, the seas are blue, and the reception is, if not exuberant, certainly civilised and polite. 'Never trust the rumours. Go and see for yourself' is a motto that has rarely let us down.

As a final farewell to French Polynesia, we decided to visit the islands of Maupiti and Maupihā'a which lay due west on the way to Tonga. The pass in Maupiti makes the island infamous since it faces south to the southern ocean swells and can be closed for weeks at a time. Barely 100 yards across, the breakers crash onto reef either side with a strong ebb tide adding tidal chop, it is not an entrance to take lightly. But the rewards on the inside are rich, with a beautiful lagoon and a striking island peak standing sentry make this seem like Bora Bora in miniature, but without the tourists or the price tag. To add to our delight, there is a Manta ray cleaning station close to the anchorage and we passed happy days enjoying proximity to these gentle giants.



Exiting the pass at Maupiti on a calm day

Maupihā'a, 100 miles further on, was to be our last stop in French Polynesia, and proved to be perhaps one of the highlights. The pass is sheltered and very narrow (barely 50 yards across) with a fierce 5kt ebb tide that is almost constantly outpouring. We saw another yacht try but fail to enter the pass, but with cautious confidence in Lucy Lister's best efforts we elbowed our way into the lagoon. For anyone disillusioned with the welcome they might have received elsewhere in French Polynesia we can thoroughly recommend a dose of Maupihā'a hospitality. There are fewer than 10 residents on the island, and in the quiet season it seems that everyone competes to be the most lavish host. A charming local man, Peter, took us hunting for coconut crabs, showered us with coconuts, surprised us with the lightning speed he could catch and fillet fish and was a quiet but generous host. Since Peter had never sailed on a yacht, we offered him a sail across the lagoon

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Kia and Peter catch a coconut crab

a good host, but the bar was raised by his rivals on the other side of the lagoon. After shifting *Atea* to be closer to the pass, we were welcomed ashore and offered fish. “Thanks, why don’t we share it with you,” we suggested, “and we’ll bring something to make a pot luck meal on the beach.” We were thoroughly outclassed when we came in two hours later to see a table laden with drinking coconuts, several different styles of BBQ fish, coconut crab and conch casserole – our humble

The wreck of SMS *Seeadler* outside the pass into Maupihā



to a nearby island over which clouds of sea birds swirled. The screeching and squawking mass lifted as we took the dinghy ashore, revealing an island carpeted in eggs. More signs of an unexploited and healthy environment, so we did not feel guilty about taking enough eggs for a small omelette, although the thought of baby terns was enough to keep all but the skipper from enjoying this feast.

We thought Peter was a good host, but the bar was raised by his rivals on the other side of the lagoon. After shifting *Atea* to be closer to the pass, we were welcomed ashore and offered fish. “Thanks, why don’t we share it with you,” we suggested, “and we’ll bring something to make a pot luck meal on the beach.” We were thoroughly outclassed when we came in two hours later to see a table laden with drinking coconuts, several different styles of BBQ fish, coconut crab and conch casserole – our humble cous cous salad was lost in the spread of Polynesian hospitality.

As a ship bore since birth, I was fascinated to hear that outside the pass lies the wreck of the SMS *Seeadler*, a German WW1 lone raider that caused havoc in mid Pacific shipping in 1915-16 before being wrecked at anchor at Maupihā’a. What makes this story particularly interesting is that she was originally a British 270 ft three-masted sailing cargo ship.

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She was captured by a U Boat, taken to Germany and converted with an engine and weapons that would allow her to surprise and fight her victims. They captured 15 ships, but the highly honourable German Captain Felix Luckner fought his ship in such a way that only one allied sailor died. There are conflicting versions of how the ship was wrecked; the proud Captain insisted it was a freak tsunami that carried his vessel onto the reef, but other reports say it was a simple wind shift onto an exposed shore. The wreck today is shallow and broken up, but in clear water one can clearly see an engine block, davits, hull plates, anchors (tragically insufficient to save her) and a slightly ominous gun barrel and mounting. SMS *Seeadler* was one of the very the last sailing warships.

Having waited longer than expected in Maupihā for a suitable weather forecast we set sail west once more on 1 October 2022, and arrived in Vavā, northern Tonga, after a ten day passage. Tonga had been closed to tourists and yachts over the past two years due to Covid, and we were the fourth yacht to arrive. Even now, at the time of writing in late October, there are still less than a dozen boats in these waters, so it's a tight group. This is my 7th visit to these islands, but more notably for our little team this is the second visit for *Atea*, so closes the loop of our circumnavigation. Kia and I were here on our first season, whilst pregnant with Braca in 2011, and we return here to celebrate his 11th birthday.

Atea arrived home in New Zealand on 23 November 2022

Pacific passes and pleasure

