

French Polynesia

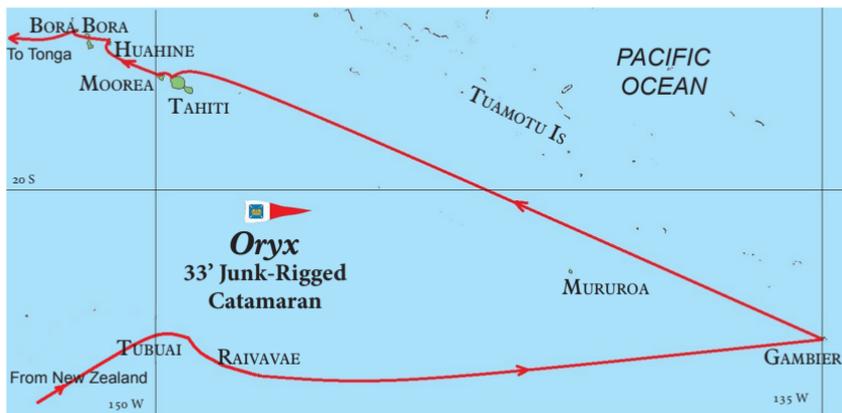
Pete Hill

In the middle of June we left Whangarei in New Zealand and after clearing out from Marsden Cove, we set sail in a fresh SW F6. Once clear of the channel we bore away past Bream Head for French Polynesia. I say 'we' as Linda Crew-Gee, a Croatian Londoner and fellow junk enthusiast, had joined me for the voyage.

The wind continued SW for the next two days, slowly easing to force 5 and giving us splendid runs of 158 and 157 miles, and taking us across the dateline, thus enjoying two Fridays. The SW wind died out and swung round to the ESE F4-5; *Oryx* was beating to windward into a rough sea. The E wind persisted and a week out, in 31° S we tacked and headed SE with two reefs in each sail. The wind increased in strength over the next three days, by which time it was blowing NE 7 and we were jogging along with four reefs in each sail.

Dawn brought a sharp increase in the wind and with large, breaking seas we ran off downwind under bare poles and set the Jordan series-drogue. We immediately slowed down to under two knots and all was relatively peaceful below. We turned in to catch up on sleep. By the late afternoon the wind and seas had eased and after 20 minutes effort, we retrieved the drogue and got underway again with a gentle NW wind.

The following week we had light S winds with daily runs of about 60 miles, but by the end of that week the wind returned, blowing SW F6-7



and giving us good, if rough, runs. By this time we were well S of Tubuai, in the Austral Islands, and when the E wind returned we were able to lay our course. On 6 July we sailed in through the pass in the reef and anchored off the village of Mataura, on Tubuai. We were glad to be in after 23 days of a rather rough passage of 2,188 miles.

The July fete was about to start, so we had arrived at just the right time. The main attraction was the inter-village competitions for traditional dancing, drumming and singing. This took place in an open-air, sand arena and was all the better for not being a staged, tourist spectacle. The Austral Islands lie 500 miles south of Tahiti and off the main tourist and cruising routes; fewer than a dozen yachts call each year. Perhaps because of this the islanders were very friendly. After a few days some bad weather arrived and made our anchorage untenable, so we moved further from the village to anchor near the commercial wharf and were able to land in the very sheltered small boat harbour. A road runs right around the small island and we went for long walks, and the hitch hiking was easy when we got tired.



Repacking the Jordan series-drogue



Traditional dancing Raivavae

After ten days in Tubuai we sailed overnight to the next island south, Raivavae, just over 100 miles away. Our luck held and we had arrived just as their fete started. If anything the costumes were even more elaborate and the amount of effort put in by a large proportion of the small population was impressive. One of the many advantages of having Linda aboard is that she speaks very good French (I am a monoglot), and is very outgoing. We were soon on friendly terms with one of the *gendarmes*, Thibault and his wife, Cindy. They had only arrived from France a few months before, but gave us much useful information about the island. We borrowed a couple of

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bicycles from the *Gendarmerie* and did a tour of the island, which was fun until Linda got knocked over by a large dog jumping out from a garden. No bones were broken, but Linda was shaken up. At the weekend we took Thibault and Cindy for a sail to the other side of the island and anchored off an idyllic uninhabited island, Motu Pescine. This lies on the edge of the fringing reef and has a large shallow natural 'swimming pool' on one side. After a day of swimming, exploring and picnicking, Thibault and Cindy had to paddle their kayaks over to Raivavae and back to work the next day. We stayed anchored off this delightful spot for a further ten days, exploring the nearby motus, sailing in our dinghy *Crake* and celebrating Linda's birthday with barely cool champagne. In retrospect it was the highlight of our cruise.

In early August we sailed off towards the Gambier Islands, 700 miles to the east. Apart from one day of light winds and one vicious NE squall lasting a few hours, we had moderate W winds and a pleasant passage. There was one hairy moment on entering through the reefs. There was a buoy ahead in the early morning glare, not shown on the Navionics chart, it



Mangareva harbour

looked like a starboard hand buoy at a turn in the channel. As we approached to leave it to starboard, Linda spotted a shallow reef right ahead; the green buoy was in fact red! A swift turn to starboard saved the day. We anchored off the village of Rikitea on Mangareva after six days at sea.

The islanders seemed less friendly than in the Austral Islands, and quite prosperous, with extensive black pearl farming giving much employment. Yachts were no rarity here, with up to 30 anchored at a time early in the season, having arrived from Panama and Chile. It was late in the season now and only four yachts were in the anchorage. We got friendly with a young French couple, Sandrine and Robin on an impressive steel yacht, *Brinacier*. They hoped to sail down to the Antarctic the following year and the gear seemed massive. On returning on board Linda thought that their boat was like a tank going to war, laughed and said *Oryx* was nothing but a paper boat. We sailed over with *Brinacier* to the nearby Aukena Island and met Bernard, who lived on the island with his assorted animals, all fed on coconuts. He had given up a lucrative job of water diviner on Tahiti to lead

the simple life on the island where he had grown up. One day we all went



Bernard's beach, Aukena

for a sail on *Oryx* to the tiny Motu Tauna, using Bernard's local knowledge to pilot us through the reefs. Another day we sailed out to Akamaru Is, Sandrine commenting that in the light winds *Brinacier* would not have moved at all. Akamaru is a beautiful island

where the tiny village is one, big, well-kept garden. That night we went out in Bernard's boat to watch them dive for crayfish, which we shared on the beach for Sunday lunch. As we ate I commented on the cockerel on Robin's T-shirt. 'Yes,' he proudly said, 'it is the national animal of France. What is the English animal?' 'A lion,' I replied. 'Ah, England has a lion and France, . . . a chicken.' Everyone laughed. And so the days passed.

It was time to move on again, as we had arranged for our friends Rob and Maren to join us in Tahiti, which was 900 miles away. We set off on 28 August with little wind. The rhumb-line to Tahiti passed very close to Mururoa, and it seemed prudent to give the atomic bomb test site a wide berth. Interestingly Bernard had told us that when the first above-ground bomb was tested, the local officials and bigwigs were housed in a reinforced concrete bunker, while the rest of the islanders were put in a wooden shed with a corrugated iron roof, for several days. What should have been a simple detour round the island had us tacking back and forth with a light, variable wind that seemed determined to send us straight to the island. We eventually



Church at Akamaru

won clear and the trade winds returned from the SE. They blew fresh and then even fresher at F6 with frequent stronger squalls and for a while we were running under bare poles. After seven days we were sailing along the NE coast of Tahiti with the wind easing, but just as we were about to round

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Venus Point into Matavai Bay a blinding rain squall hit us, with visibility of less than 50 metres. The sails were dropped and we lay ahull for half an hour until it passed, and then tacked in to anchor where Captain Cook had



Oryx, Pete and Linda at Huahine

lain for the transit of Venus observation.

Matavai Bay has quite some history as, apart from Captain Cook, it is also where the London Missionary Society ship, *Duff*, first anchored in Polynesia, and the Society Islands are named because of that. It is a beautiful anchorage, yet we were the only yacht there. Ashore were showers and fresh water, 2km down the road were two good supermarkets, Post Office, ATM and a bus into Papeete, 10km away; who could ask for more? It is no longer possible

to anchor in Papeete, as all is now an expensive marina. We sailed around to Maeva Beach, near the airport, which is the popular anchorage, to see what we were missing. Extensive moorings and a very crowded, small anchorage area had us quickly returning to Matavai Bay.

Rob and Maren duly arrived from New Zealand and basked in the sunshine after an exceptionally wet and windy winter in New Zealand. They were keen to go sailing and we had an exceptional sail over to Moorea, with perfect trade winds and a fine display put on by the many whales breaching and sounding all around us. We anchored in the spectacular Cook Bay the first night and then round to Robinson Cove the next. Of all the islands we visited, Moorea was the most beautiful. It was then on to Huahine, Tahaa and we ended up in Bora Bora where they left us after a few days. Bora Bora disappointed us: cruise ships, umpteen pearl shops in town and the islanders seemed poor compared to the other islands. The



Alain Gerbault memorial Bora Bora

surrounding motus had many expensive, foreign-owned resorts on them with the visitors rarely going to the main island. The islanders seemed to gain little by being a tourist mecca.

Our three-month visa was about to expire, so we were keen to get away, but it blew very hard for days and even in our sheltered anchorage, in Baie de Povai, we sailed around the anchor in the fierce williwaws.

Eventually the wind moderated a little and we left French Polynesia for Tonga, 1,200 miles to the E. We had five days of great runs of over 150 miles and then the wind picked up again to ESE 7 with frequent stronger squalls. With just one panel up on the port sail we went along at about 4kts with surfs up to 10kts when a big wave passed. Linda is no stranger to heavy weather, having doubled the Horn as crew aboard a 20m, gaff ketch, but it is rather different in a 10m 'paper boat'. One night, a particularly large wave broke under us sending us surfing along at a peak of 17.8kts. The self steering kept us right on course, but it was obviously past time to do something. Conditions were not so severe as to need the Jordan drogue, so we put out the Australian-made Sea Brake astern. This certainly stopped us surfing and we continued on our way at about 3kts, but it was a jerky motion, unlike the Jordan. After a couple of days the wind and seas moderated and it was E 5 again and the runs were back in the 150s.

On the final night of the passage we had to slow down for a daylight entry to Vava'u. At midnight a heavy thunder storm arrived, with squalls and winds from every quarter. By dawn it was blowing SE 7, which gave us a hard beat to enter harbour. Fortunately it eased off by mid-morning, allowing us to tie up at the jetty in Neiafu, after ten days. Unexpectedly we had recrossed the dateline and missed out on a Thursday, to arrive on Friday the 13th.

Sunset behind Moorea

