



PACIFIC CROSSING

By David McCampbell

“WE HAVE ALWAYS FOUND IT INTERESTING THAT MANY AMERICANS TAKE YEARS TO PREPARE, BUT THEN TAKE ONLY ONE SEASON TO SAIL THROUGH THE VAST AND BEAUTIFUL PACIFIC.”

After a year and a half in the western Caribbean we passed through the Panama Canal on Soggy Paws, our 44' CSY Walkthrough cutter, looking forward to a lengthy and warm Pacific crossing.

We had been discussing how to cross the first half of the Pacific to French Polynesia and beyond for some time and knew we did not want to rush through it in one season. We are retired and not in a hurry. It is a huge area, almost 8,000 miles from Panama to Australia and over 9,000 to the Philippines. It is also a paradise for those who enjoy clear water, warm weather, varied cultures, and wonderful safe cruising. I am summarizing the crossing options below and then the story about our first and second years.

Eastern Pacific Crossing Options: There are at least four popular route options for cruising boats crossing to French Polynesia from the Americas. Frequently called the “Milk Run”, or the annual cruising route taken from the West Coast of the Americas through the South Pacific. Each has advantages and disadvantages, and each requires different timing. Here are those that we considered:

Option 1: Take the most well-traveled and most popular route direct to the Marquesas from any of the

US or Central American Pacific ports. It's about 3,000 nm, depending on from where you start, and mostly a broad reach or downwind. The best time for crossing on this route is March-April, so that you arrive in the Marquesas near the end of the southern cyclone season. For most, this route will cross the equator and the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ).

Once south of the ITCZ, the sail will be in mostly E-SE trade winds. But there are no stops along the way to break up the trip. Once in French Polynesia, three island groups are normally visited: the Marquesas, the Tuamotus and finally Tahiti and the Societies.

Option 2: Sail to the Galapagos, on the equator, and then take the direct route to the Marquesas. If crossing from the Galapagos, which is about 500 miles west of Ecuador on the equator, to the Marquesas, it is also about 3,000 nm. However, you will cross the ITCZ between Panama and the Galapagos, before heading west. Departure timing and the rest of the comments in Option 1 apply. Besides the obvious advantage of seeing the Galapagos, stopping in the Galapagos allows for repair work, crew changes, and re-provisioning.



Option 3: After the Galapagos, sail south to Easter Island, Pitcairn Island, the Gambier Islands and back north to the Tuamotus and Marquesas in French Polynesia. If you sail south from the Galapagos to Easter Island (Rapa Nui) (27°S 109°W), it is about 2,000 nm and mostly a beam reach. Because this trip takes you well south of the trade wind belt, it should be done earlier than Options 1 or 2 in order to take advantage of the more settled weather during the southern summer. January and February are good months to leave the Galapagos for this trip. Once at Easter Island, it is about 1,100 miles to Pitcairn Island and then another 300 miles to the Gambiers, the SE-most island group in French Polynesia. All three stops offer unique experiences, but stopping at Easter and Pitcairn require settled weather which is not always guaranteed.

By the time you reach the Tuamotus, in April, cyclone season will be nearly over. If you have planned ahead and obtained a Long Stay Visa for French Polynesia, you have many options and can take your time there. With our Long Stay Visa we were able to spend 6 months in the Gambiers, Tuamotus and Marquesas. By doing this eastern part of French Polynesia backwards from the normal Milk Run group, we avoided the crowded anchorages. The normal Milk Run route is: Marquesas, Tuamotus, and Tahiti. Our route was: Gambiers, Tuamotus, and Marquesas. Also, provisioning was considerably easier. This route also positioned us for an easy sail to Hawaii in late September/early October in order to avoid the upcoming southern cyclone season.

Option 4: Sail south to visit Peru and Chile. Then, the following season, leave from any of the South American ports direct to Easter Island and continue on as in option 3. If leaving from Chile, the normal route is to stop at Juan Fernandez at 33-37S 78-51W. This area normally has southeast trades, so it will be a broad reach to downwind run. If leaving from Lima, Peru the distance is about 2,000 miles, but this route sometimes crosses the High Pressure area that sits north and east of Easter Island, and you might find lighter winds in that area. Once south of about 22S, you are no longer in the trade winds. The most settled weather is in the southern summer, January-March, so that is the best time to make this trip. The remaining comments in Option 3 apply.

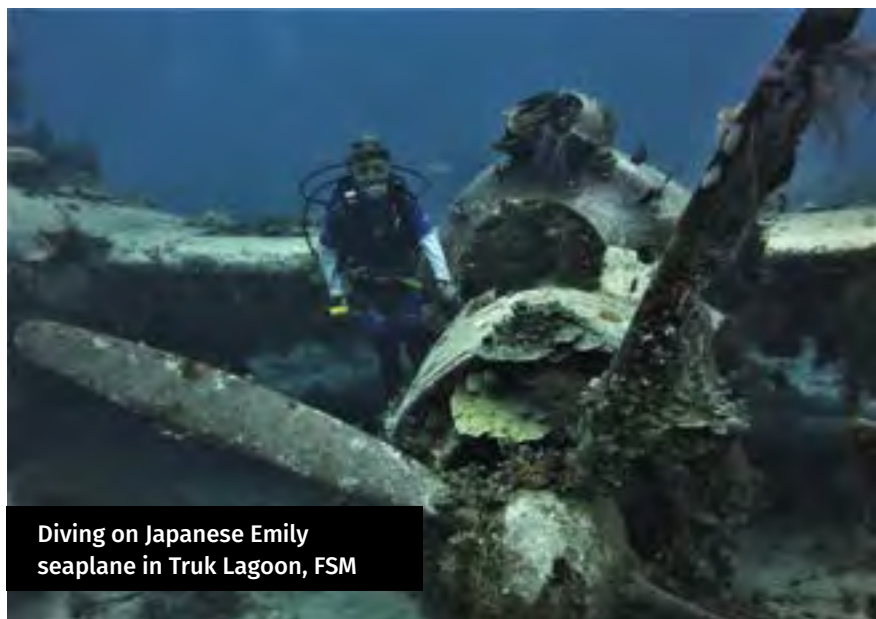
Our Second Year: After spending the northern winter in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, we arrived in the Western Tuamotus in mid-May. Then after a month or so, we worked our way southwest with the rest of the “Milk Runners” to Tahiti for the Puddle Jump crossing festivities. These activities are worthwhile as an introduction to South Pacific culture. After that we still had four months to get to Tonga before the start of the next southern cyclone season. So we meandered behind the crowds through the Societies, Cooks and Samoas to Tonga.

We arrived just as the rest of the cruisers were leaving for the 1,200 mile trip south to New Zealand (another cold and windy trip). The route from Tonga or Fiji to New Zealand can be a dangerous crossing, and then it must be done again coming back north the next year. For this reason, we opted to keep our boat in Tonga for cyclone season. So for us, the next few weeks involved securing our boat for the two months we would be on “vacation” back in the US. November and December are officially the start of the southern cyclone season, but as Tonga rarely experiences cyclones in those months, it was a good time for us to plan to be away from the boat. We used a strong mooring maintained by some former cruisers at Tapanā, south of the main harbor at Neiafu, Vavau. There are also a few strong moorings available in Neiafu Harbor. If staying in Tonga over the cyclone season, choose your anchorage carefully. Upon our return we did get bashed by a small surprise cyclone, but that’s another story.

There are many reasons for taking more than one season to see French Polynesia. Very few Americans spend more than three months there, and only a few take more than six months to cross the Pacific to New Zealand or Australia. The major reasons for not taking longer are cyclone season



Hiking to the seven waterfalls on Phonpei, FSM



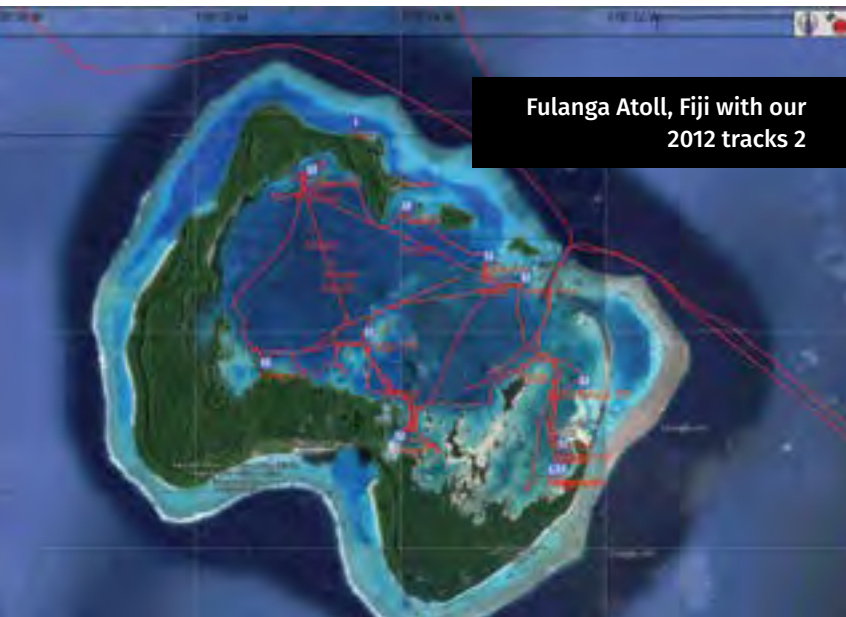
Diving on Japanese Emily seaplane in Truk Lagoon, FSM



Cave snorkeling in Tonga



Pitcairn Island boathouse



Fulanga Atoll, Fiji with our 2012 tracks 2



River rafting in Fiji

and immigration issues. But in some cases it is just poor planning. For others it is the rush to get west for one reason or another. And then there are those who just want to stay with their Milk Run friends. After the first dash across the Pacific to New Zealand, the normal Milk Run brings cruisers from New Zealand back north to Fiji or Tonga and then all the way to Australia at the end of their second Pacific cruising season. This is moving way too fast, in our opinion—skipping through the best cruising grounds in the world.

Avoiding tropical cyclones: Safe options for avoiding the southern tropical cyclone season and delaying one’s progress further west there include: staying in any place within about eight degrees of the equator or anywhere north of it such as Hawaii, the Line Islands, the Gilberts and Micronesia. Only changing one’s latitude is a safe option in a strong Category 3-5 storm.

Cruising destinations south of the equator in the Pacific include such places as French Polynesia, the Cooks, the Samoas, Tonga Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Some of these locations can be a viable option in lesser storms, but only if there is a plan for finding proper protection. In French Polynesia there are a number of places to haul out (some where they will bury your keel), including Apataki in the Tuamotus, and Tahiti and Raiatea in the Societies. Further west both Tonga (Vavau) and Fiji (Savusavu/Buda Point) have storm moorings, somewhat protected haul out facilities and mangrove lined channels. However, none of these are safe in stronger tropical cyclones.

Wintering in Hawaii: Even with a six month Long Stay Visa for French Polynesia we felt somewhat rushed to cruise the Gambiers, Tuamotus and Marquesas. So we delayed our progress west by “wintering over” in Hawaii during the southern cyclone season. From the Marquesas, the last island group we visited, it is an easy 2,000 nm, mostly beam or broad reach northwest to Hawaii. We left the northern Marquesas in mid-September and had a near perfect passage with 12-15 knots of wind and light seas all the way. With an easy ITCZ crossing we arrived in Hilo on October 2nd. However, we knew of only about ten boats, of the 500 that had crossed the Pacific that year that chose to go to Hawaii for the winter. About half of those left from the Marquesas and half from the Societies. The further east you can get for your departure north, the easier the trip will be due to the wind angle advantage.

On the return to French Polynesia, we left at the end of April from Oahu and had a somewhat rough



Kauai's north coast

windy passage for the first week, close hauled, with winds in the 18-22 knot range. After that it settled down and we had a pleasant passage through the ITCZ and for the last two weeks. Timing and good weather information, as with any long passage, is essential. And it helps to have someone with internet access watching the ITCZ for you.

The Western Pacific: From French Polynesia westward to SE Asia the distances between stops are much shorter, and there are many options for things to see and do. There are island groups on both sides of the equator, and thus the opportunity exists to cruise north and south to avoid the cyclone/typhoon seasons. Since the trade winds are generally northeast north of the equator and southeast south of the equator, moving north and south within about 20 degrees of the equator is relatively easy. It is only when you want to go back east that things get more difficult, but not impossible.

As an example of what is possible if you have time to spend multiple years in the Pacific, read on to see what we did. From the beginning, we thought we would spend at least five years getting across the Pacific, so that we would have time to see and do as much as possible.

The Third & Fourth years: We visited fabulous Fiji during the southern winter cruising season, sailing directly to Fiji from Tonga in May. After thoroughly exploring the many islands of Fiji over a period of 11 months, we moved north to the Marshalls through Kiribati and Tuvalu the following April and May. The fourth year we remained in the Marshalls over the northern summer so as to be there for the calmer cruising season. Diving in Kwajalein and Bikini Atolls were real highlights.

The Fifth Year: Once the northwestern Pacific typhoon season had died down in January, we started moving west. This involved a cruise through the remote islands of southern Federated States of Micronesia, including Pohnpei, Chuuk and Yap. Remaining just south of 10 North, over the northern winter and spring minimizes the typhoon danger. We arrived in Palau in May and remained there through most of the northern summer in order to take advantage of the great diving. In August, we sailed west for the southern Philippines before typhoons began their more southerly tracks.

Davao in southern Mindanao has a nice typhoon-safe marina and haul out yard. Over the next six years, we

made two trips north into the central Philippines, three south into eastern Indonesia and one all the way to Papua New Guinea and the Solomons.

Another option would be to sail from Palau south to Raja Ampat and Sorong on the northern New Guinea coast. From there, after November, it is possible to move southwest into Indonesia or southeast to the Solomon Islands. The following year, but before May, one could continue southeast from the Solomons and then west through Vanuatu and New Caledonia to Australia.

Admittedly, since we are avid scuba divers, much of our itinerary is driven by the desire to visit the best diving sites. Fiji, the Marshalls, Chuuk, Palau, Raja Ampat and the Solomons are some of these places. We are also very interested to see some of the famous western Pacific World War II sites and remote Pacific islands off the normal southern hemisphere cruising routes. For these reasons and the more difficult passage south, we avoided the more popular run to New Zealand and back.

The following are some of the more difficult issues that must be dealt with in deciding how to proceed across the Pacific:

Weather: Tropical cyclone seasons drive timing for a safe cruise across the Pacific. Warm water and air enhance storm formation; therefore, summer is the storm season in both hemispheres. El Niño years produce warmer water and therefore more storms further east. Cyclone season in the southwest Pacific, including most of French Polynesia, is November until May. Hurricane season along the Central American coast out to Hawaii is June through November. Typhoon season in the western North Pacific is June through December, but there can be typhoons any month. Only the area within about eight degrees either side of the equator is a relatively safe zone.

The Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), not to be confused with the SPCZ further southwest, is an area of frequent thunderstorms and squalls of variable magnitude, migrating within about 10 degrees of the equator. Crossing it safely involves careful boat preparation, timing, and good access to weather resources. The resources we found useful are included in the French Polynesia Weather Compendium on our website. <http://svsoggypaws.com/files/#frpoly>

Navigation: Because of the high expense, variable accuracy, and often inadequate shoreline detail of



Easter morning procession
at Wolei, FSM

commercial charting overseas, many modern cruisers currently use satellite imagery to navigate in remote areas. The excellent open source navigation program OpenCPN and large collections of free satellite imagery are now available to cruisers for this purpose.

Immigration: French Polynesia currently allows US and Canadian citizens, without making prior arrangements, a maximum of three months stay, no exceptions. This “visa on arrival” cannot be extended from within French Polynesia. If you want to stay longer, you must apply well in advance of arrival for a Long Stay Visa. See the application details here:

<http://pacificpuddlejump.com/longstayvisa.html>

EU citizens are allowed to stay in French Polynesia for two years without having to do any extra paperwork. Regulations frequently change so keep up to date for this and many other island nations at **Noonsite.com**.

Resources: For those headed this way there are only a few good paper and internet resources, some with detailed information, and others of more value to armchair sailors. Some of those we have used include:

The Pacific Crossing Guide – RCCPF, 3rd edition, 2016, the gold standard for Pacific cruising and preparation information, new edition out soon

World Cruising Routes - Jimmy Cornell, 9th edition, 2022, best guide for route planning an ocean cruise

Charlie’s Charts of Polynesia - Charles and Margo Wood, 8th edition, 2021, detailed chart books

Landfalls of Paradise – Earl Hinz, 5th edition, 2006, good but dated destination information

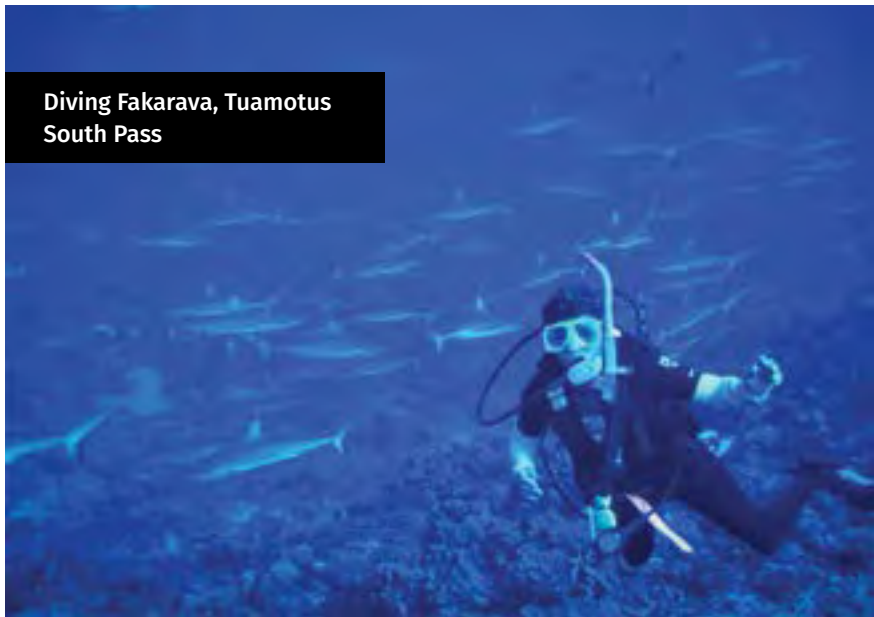
Moon and Lonely Planet Guides - up to date detailed shore location and activity information

Soggy Paws’ Compendiums - 2011-2023, extensive Pacific cruising and navigation information, free downloadable PDF files at:

<http://svsoggypaws.com/files/#frpoly>

We hope some of you reading this will give consideration to planning a multiple year adventure while crossing the Pacific. We think you will find this vast and beautiful area one of the highlights of any round the world voyage. Our own detailed Pacific crossing documentation, technical information and much more are on our website above.

Diving Fakarava, Tuamotus South Pass



Japanese WW2 gun on Tarawa



Stone money on Yap, FSM

