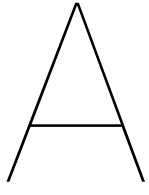


SOUTH SEA TALES

Multihulls have redefined blue water cruising. Kate Ashe Leonard is living that dream and narrates a trip through the Leeward Islands of French Polynesia



Blue Water Cruising



n easterly is due in the next few days, announces a cruiser as we stand around a blazing beach bonfire. The sand under my feet is soft, and still warm from the day. The smell of melting marshmallow hangs in the air beside the fire that crackles. Tendrils of white smoke rise, making our human presence known, but we are far from everything here in the coral atoll of Mauipha'a, our last stop in French Polynesia after 14 months cruising this country.

Tonight, 10 boats are anchored in the inky blue lagoon, waiting for a weather window to take us west. Some to the Cook Islands, Niue or Samoa. The sky looks infinite and the stars seem to fizz. Plans, routes and destinations are discussed. I wonder if we're all mad to be leaving this paradise in the middle of the South Pacific.

I think back to the adventures we've had. The sunrise hikes in the Marquesas Islands, scaling craggy peaks while clear dark skies gave way to technicolour beams of morning light. Gushing waterfalls, banyan trees, friendly, tuna fishermen and ukelele sing-songs. Spinner dolphin dinghy escorts and night diving with manta rays. Boisterous passages and navigating the passes and coral bommies of the Tuamotus archipelago. The yellow, blue, and purples streaking sunsets. Free diving with sharks, and napoleon wrasses. Kiteboarding for days. Reaching Tahiti for the first time; its vibrant Sunday market, seafront promenade



and the abundance of food available in the supermarket after a long few months off the beaten track. Just 12 miles east of there then, Moorea's fields of pineapples, incredible hikes and pristine anchorages sheltered behind coral reef; a safe haven for migrating humpback whales.

But it's these last weeks cruising the Leeward group of Society islands from Huahine west to Mauipha'a, that's impressed us most. It is here we've found our perfect chain of islands and atolls that combine the best of what French Polynesia has to offer: the majestic mountains of the Marquesas, tranquil aqua lagoons encircled by coral reef reminiscent of the Tuamotus. All in relatively close proximity to each other.

Huahine

One month earlier, after a fast overnight sail on a broad reach from Moorea, the island of Huahine came

PREVIOUS PAGE
Polaris at
Mauipha'a atoll

ABOVE
Huahine and its clear
view of the coral reefs

BELOW LEFT
Paddling in Huahine

BELOW RIGHT
Kate on watch

into focus. Entering the wide northwest pass, it was deep but clear and filled with sharks.

Huahine is actually two islands: Huahine Nui in the north and Huahine Iti in the south – both surrounded by a coral reef and connected by a bridge. Said by some to be the most beautiful and authentic of all the Society islands, our expectations for Huahine were high.

Flanked by green peaks and lush jungle, the town of Fare in the north was low key – the tourist footprint minimal but, tasteful. There was a cruiser bar hangout selling cheap beer – unheard of in the rest of the country and, with a selection of independent restaurants, there was no sign of any exclusive resorts like we'd found in Tahiti and Moorea. Passing a few supermarkets and bike hire stores, we were soon strolling out of town and meandering through coconut plantations, fields of watermelons and breadfruit trees.





Taha'a

Under our crimson spinnaker, we sailed the 25nm to Taha'a. Shaped like a flower, Taha'a shares a common lagoon, protected by coral reef, with the larger island of Raiatea to its south.

Taha'a's eastern pass was easily navigated and we tucked in behind the reef and a little island. Since Raiatea has a large charter base, there were lots of charter boats anchored here. High winds began whistling through the first anchorage, and it wasn't long before boats were dragging all over the place.

We left early the next morning for the less hectic northwest anchorage. Our anchor disappeared into powder white sand and I attached our bridle, watching a large reef manta ray swim between our hulls. This area, as it turned out, is home to a variety of rays, and for hours we snorkelled, admiring their elegance.

Although aesthetically stunning, the presence of exclusive resorts lining every visible motu gave Taha'a a vastly different vibe to Huahine. But, keen to see what the fuss was about, that evening we dropped our dinghy in the water and headed towards the long wooden jetty belonging to one of the resorts. Staff wearing white polo shirts approached us but our request to hang out for a few drinks, was rejected – we needed to book a seat at the bar and give at least one day's notice apparently.

Around the corner was the real reason we'd come to this area – to drift snorkel Taha'a's coral gardens. Using the current, we flew over a vibrant corridor of hard and soft coral teeming with mainly juvenile fish but also some black tips, napoleon wrasses and a few Stingrays. →

A Huahine sunrise is a special thing. I slipped my paddle board into the water and set off towards the coral fringing reef. The current was ripping in from the nearby pass so, I paddled against it until I found a coral head that I could stop and hold on to for a while. With the sun rising, turning the sky pink, I sat on my board, feet in the water and watched a black tip shark circle.

A storm was brewing later that day so, we headed to the southwest of the lagoon for better shelter. Under a reefed mainsail and full genoa, we sailed through the glorious turquoise lagoon hemmed by verdant jungle-covered hills off our port side and a low coral reef to starboard.

Reaching the anchorage, navy blue deep water where the moorings were placed, gave way to a distinct pale line indicating the shallow sand bar that lined the area. The sky grew dark as squall clouds rolled in and the wind sent

white horses racing across the lagoon. Secured just in time, we watched as the storm blew by.

At the break of day, the clouds had cleared, leaving behind a mellow, pastel sky. Paddling around the lagoon, we debated the wisdom of leaving such a beautiful place but an evening spent pouring over our charts and the weather forecast kept us focused. It was already May after all, and we had many nautical miles to cover if we were to make it to Australia by November and the start of cyclone season.

To properly appreciate Huahine we rented bikes and toured both islands visiting some ancient marae Polynesian ceremonial grounds and then a river with blue eye eels considered to be sacred. Following the road high into the hills, we looked down at Polaris in the lagoon below. I could understand now why some cruisers we'd met arrived a few years earlier and had never left.

ABOVE
In the coconut plantation

BELOW LEFT
Jim preparing to go paddling

BELOW RIGHT
Kate kiting in French Polynesia



XXXXXXXX





Bora Bora

An easy 18nm west was Bora Bora's iconic peaks. I felt a rush of pride at having reached this place: a milestone as significant to me as transiting the Panama Canal.

Bora Bora is another volcanic island which lies inside a lagoon surrounded by smaller islets known as motus and coral reef. The pass looked straightforward enough as we began our approach. Outside the pass fishermen lingered in traditional Va'a outrigger canoes, while just inside the lagoon a local rowing group were training. A flock of sea terns overhead began dive bombing a bait ball as we dropped our sails, engaged our engines and entered the interior.

Secured to a mooring buoy, we toasted our arrival, spellbound by the view. The island was even more attractive than I'd imagined and the almost constant presence of sharks around the boat was a testament to the health of the reefs despite how developed it was.

There were over 70 mooring buoys available and their use was mandatory in all but two designated areas – those areas had a maximum

stay of just 36 hours. The moorings, priced at about £30 per night, meant we planned to keep our visit here short. This would be our last opportunity to provision and was also the last port of entry and exit from the country. After a bit of exploring, we would be hard at work preparing to depart.

First though, we ventured to the southeastern corner of the lagoon. Deep hulled boats often avoid this passage south because of some very shallow patches. When our depth gauge read less than 2m momentarily, it got our adrenaline pumping.

The sand down south was icing sugar white, and the water looked bluer and clearer than ever. While excellent shelter was provided in the bay, a short trip in the dinghy around the corner brought us to an ideal place to launch our kites and take advantage of the steady winds pumping over the reef. Kiting against the backdrop of Bora Bora's Mount Otemanu while skimming over sharks and turtles might be one of the happiest memories of our circumnavigation to date.

ABOVE

Polaris anchored in Bora Bora

BELOW LEFT

Sharks in Bora Bora

BELOW RIGHT

View from a hike on Bora Bora

Weather window

Over sundowners, we reviewed the weather forecast; average wind speeds of 20kts were forecast for the next four days. This would bring us comfortably to the second last atoll we planned to visit and so, soon we sailed back north, following our old track but this time avoiding the shallowest areas.

After examining a few moorings with some very frayed lines, we found one that looked in better condition outside the Bora Bora Yacht Club and close to town. We'd spend the next two days running around picking up as much fresh produce as we could find and start the process of checking out.

Bora Bora's largest supermarket was a disappointment. Sprouting onions and potatoes were only made look better by mouldy tomatoes. Unless we hooked a decent sized fish, I would be reverting to our store of tinned vegetables and fish, pastas and rice.

After completing the formalities with customs and immigration we were both tense. We were obliged to leave the island within 24 hours and depart the country.

Our planned stops at Maupiti and Mauipha'a would be discreet →





Mauipha'a

Mauipha'a was 100nm west. As we approached, I tried to take it all in knowing this would be our last stop in French Polynesia: the narrow pass, its sheer underwater coral cliffs either side and the whale we'd just witnessed breaching a few miles earlier.

Mauipha'a's tranquil interior lagoon became our home these last 12 days. When we first set our anchor Harry and Norma, two of the atoll's eight residents, arrived at our stern and warmly introduced themselves before leaving six fish neatly on our back step – accepting nothing in return. Since then, we've shared feasts at their dining table of freshly caught tuna, coconut crab curry from crabs caught in traps laid deep in the coconut forest and sashimi of all kinds.

From Maupiti originally, they are here to harvest the coconut flesh known as Copra. With almost nothing material except the house they built from woven palm fronds and, the garden they planted, these residents seem willing to share everything possible with visiting cruisers. Fish speared from deep in the pass, mangoes, coconuts, papaya or terns' eggs, as well as knowledge on how to best catch fish and hunt coconut crabs – we've never known kindness like it before. Their resilience and generosity inspire me and, as we stand here at this last beach bonfire and start mentally preparing to leave, I know its experiences like this that teach us how little we really need. ✦

although authorities are aware that it is common for cruisers to stop there and turn a blind eye. However, stopping in these atolls felt a little risky. We could be stuck waiting, with dwindling supplies, if a weather window didn't materialise quickly. Not only that, if something went wrong, we really were on our own since turning back to Bora Bora was not an option. There's no checking back into French Polynesia unless you've been elsewhere for a minimum of six months.

Determined nonetheless to experience these very remote atolls, with our tanks full of duty-free diesel, we headed off towards Maupiti. The pass there is notoriously narrow and could, in the wrong weather, be completely out of the question. The forecasted swell up to 1.8m, would be on the limit of what was recommended by fellow cruisers who'd gone before. We decided to give it a go and take a look, worst case, we would just continue on to our final stop.

Maupiti - an unspoilt gem

After a bumpy 30nm, the pass was a mess of whitewash. Wind over tide created waves that appeared to break right across the area through which we needed to motor. By motoring past a few times and looking at it from a different angle though, the waves were not as bad as they first appeared and our satellite images gave us confidence. We took a deep breath and proceeded through.

As we dropped anchor, the wind speed began to climb steadily until a few hours later we had a localised squall with gusts up to 35kts. The next morning the rigging was still humming in the wind so, we

grabbed our kite gear and headed over to the sand spit where a few other sailors were kiting.

The main volcanic island around which the lagoon is formed is topped with a dramatic pinnacle and an imposing cliff face under which most of the town is located. With only around 1,200 people living here and almost no tourism, this place felt like a mini unspoilt version of Bora Bora.

A walk around the perimeter of the island took a few hours passing friendly villagers, their houses with family tombs in front gardens, a school and fire station. Apart from fruit growing on trees, the little shops had nothing fresh. And, since it was Monday, we'd completely missed the once a week seven am Friday market! The coming weeks and passages were really shaping up to be a challenge from a nutrition point of view.

A very steep, hot hike to the mountain's peak concluded that day. The view of the lagoon and its myriads of shades of aqua-blue speckled with bommies and, beyond across the Pacific Ocean, was a spectacular reward. This was our last mountain hike in French Polynesia.

ABOVE
Sunset in Mauipha'a

BELOW
Polaris anchored inside the pass, Maupiti, Society Islands

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kate Ashe-Leonard has now sailed 30,000 nautical miles six years after purchasing Polaris with her partner Jim Hooper. They are currently cruising Indonesia and in the coming year they will continue their circumnavigation west through the Indian ocean.
Instagram: sv_polaris
Website: www.svpolaris.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR