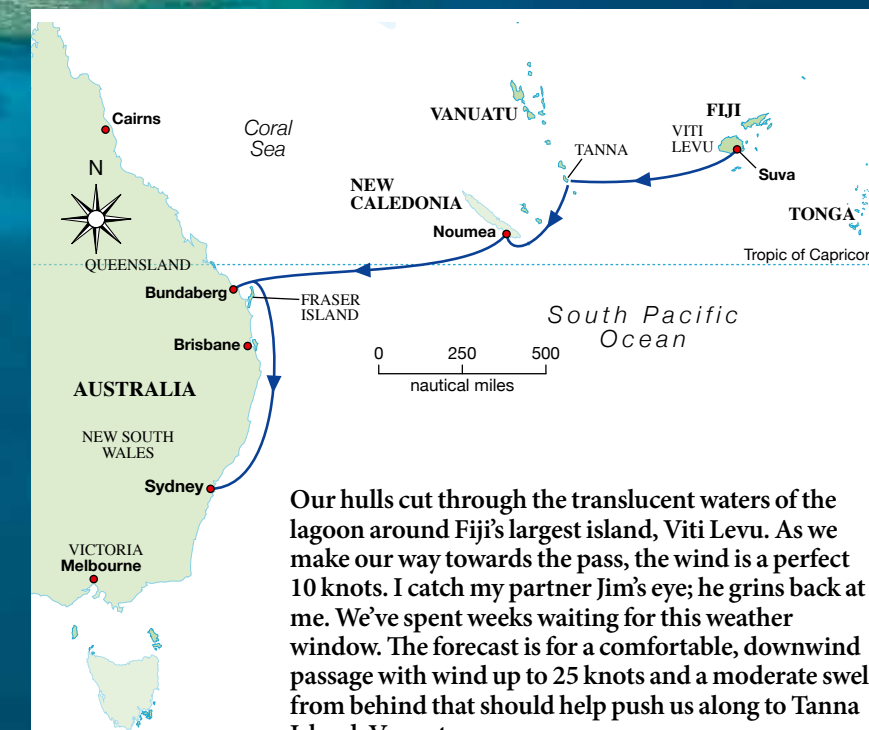


RING OF FIRE

A MEMORABLE PASSAGE FROM FIJI TO AUSTRALIA FOR KATE ASHE-LEONARD



Our hulls cut through the translucent waters of the lagoon around Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu. As we make our way towards the pass, the wind is a perfect 10 knots. I catch my partner Jim's eye; he grins back at me. We've spent weeks waiting for this weather window. The forecast is for a comfortable, downwind passage with wind up to 25 knots and a moderate swell from behind that should help push us along to Tanna Island, Vanuatu.

White choppy currents swirl like boiling water in the pass. My stomach churns, but we've been through so many passes in the Pacific I tell myself there's nothing to fear. Up ahead our friend on a catamaran – one of several boats to leave in the same weather window – has two reefs in his mainsail and I wonder if there is something we don't know? We're in the wind shadow of the island, but from where we are conditions look moderate. Nevertheless, we furl away our genoa to keep life simple as we exit the lagoon.

I take a moment to glance back at the island's outline as it shrinks in our wake. We've spent three months exploring Fiji, but it's October and the time has come to leave. After Vanuatu, we're bound for Australia where ►



Spinnaker flying (above) and smiles all round (right) when the weather is just right for sailing. Right: what the cruising lifestyle is all about: the perfect South Pacific anchorage



we'll spend cyclone season and fulfil bucket list dreams to anchor beside the Opera House to watch New Year's Eve fireworks. That all feels a long way just now.

FIJI TO VANUATU

Through the pass and further from Viti Levu, the wind begins to clock around, shifting by 90° to our port beam and intensifying. In the distance two monohulls heel over and I can see gusts agitating the surface of the water, barrelling towards us. Jim calmly helms our Catana 47 *Polaris*, keeping the apparent wind speed down until it is safe to reef.

At last, with enough clearance from the jagged outer reef, we turn into the wind and put two reefs in the mainsail. Within fifteen minutes it's blowing 35 knots. Conditions are messy and we're bombarded by violent, 4m swells that hit us side on. These are the biggest waves we've ever sailed in, and they almost take my breath away.

We've only been under way for three hours when we



consider turning back. Who in their right mind would choose to be out here, I wonder? But, the sea behind us is so vicious it makes heading back into those waves a worse prospect than continuing on. We're also under pressure to make some miles before cyclone season starts to warm up, and so we decide to persevere.

I try to adjust to these harsh conditions.

Tethered in, every step is carefully placed and every handhold is utilised.

For the second time in five years, a rogue wave crashes into the cockpit, saturating us both. Soaked, I duck inside to grab some towels – the interior of the boat is in disarray: cupboards have unlatched and dumped their contents on the floor; carefully stowed objects have managed to break free and career across the saloon. I'd precooked a large stew to be reheated but as evening approaches the sea state deteriorates further, suppressing both our appetites.

A wall of navy water repeatedly picks up *Polaris* and jolts us sideways before we crash down into its trough: a point so low we cannot see the horizon. We take turns hand steering to prevent the autopilot becoming overpowered. We say little to one another, instead focussing on the instruments and silently willing the conditions to moderate.

A skipper's voice crackles in and out between static on

the VHF radio. He has lost his rudder and has no Satphone communications. With some limited steerage, he decides to turn back to Fiji. He can't hear our response and we cannot find him on AIS.

I dread to think of the ordeal he's facing. We email all the nearby sailors in Fiji that we know with his details and contact the coast guard on his behalf.

Sleeping for me is an impossibility, the sound and vibration of waves ricocheting between our hulls is too startling. But, come morning, the worst has passed: dawn is greeted by tranquil seas, and less than eight knots of wind. We shake out the reefs in the mainsail, unfurl the Code 0, and trail both fishing lines out. Peace has returned to *Polaris*.

The calm conditions turn out to be short lived. On the second morning we experience winds of over 35 knots again and are pounded by confused seas. We race along at 10 knots while the boat groans and creaks around us. We're tense, keeping a close eye on the rig and sails but everything seems to be fine. I remind myself that we're well equipped for this, and the boat is too.

MOUNT YASUR

We sail the last eight hours with only a tiny sliver of genoa out to slow ourselves and ensure a dawn arrival into Vanuatu. The island of Tanna comes into view.

After a testing 470 miles we are aching and covered in bruises, but breathe a sigh of relief as we drop our sails



Top: waves break on the reef outside the pass on departure from Fiji.

Above: out of Fiji, rough weather and big waves were testing on passage to Vanuatu

and make our final turn into Port Resolution.

The anchorage is exquisite. We're surrounded by both white and black sand beaches bathed in warm morning sunlight. Coconut palms and tropical fruit trees line the rugged coast.

Just above water level, volcanic steam puffs sporadically from vents: we are right beside Mount Yasur, one of the world's most active volcanoes which has been erupting continuously since 1774.

Ashore we begin the formalities of checking in – a lengthy process as Port Resolution is not an official port of entry so you need special permission in advance to land, then must await the officials' arrival. There are homemade wooden fishing canoes along the beach and we're greeted by local children paddling in the shallows.

Once checked in, we explore ashore. Life is remarkably simple here; the village is set around a green field with huts made from thatched palm fronds, and no running water or electricity. Only red dirt tracks connect the main villages to one another.

We meet a group of cruisers in the makeshift sailing club, and together hire a four-wheel-drive to visit Mount Yasur the following evening.

The track is bumpy and becomes blacker as we drive through volcanic ash approaching the volcano. Our guide leads us on foot to its rim as darkness falls.

The molten lava bubbles deep in the crater and I notice giant boulders strewn all around where we stand. They ►



Looking over the rim of the volcano, Mount Yasur on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu

‘Lava explodes way up into the sky above us’

must have been catapulted at some earlier date and serve as a reminder that we’re here entirely at our own risk. I feel a primal fear of the volcano.

Looking over the side for a moment, we are hundreds of metres above its fiery pit. Certain death is just a minor avalanche away.

I step back from the brink, heeding its warning rumbles. Lava explodes way up into the sky above us. With our skin coated in ash and the air heavy with the smell of sulphur, it is an immersive and raw experience. Nobody speaks – we are all in awe.

Back at the sailing club, a new idea emerges among our little band of Pacific voyagers. We will sail to Australia via New Caledonia instead of directly from Vanuatu. There is a cyclone forming north of the Solomon Islands which could spin this way, making us feel the need for a hasty departure. In addition, we’re all still a little shell shocked from the intense passage here – this route via Noumea should improve our sailing angle for the onward passage to Bundaberg. It also gets us 200 miles closer so we’ll have a shorter final passage – and hopefully a more reliable weather forecast.

VANUATU TO NOUMEA

We weigh anchor at sunset and, with just enough light remaining, navigate our way out of the anchorage – straight into the waves that break head on. My limbs feel

heavy as we trim the sails; I’m exhausted. But around the corner of Tanna Island, we turn downwind and I’m relieved by the gentler rhythm that makes sleeping easier.

The nights are colder as we head south. Down below, Jim lies under a duvet for the first time in years while I stand at the helm in a thick jumper.

On the chartplotter, I zoom out, tracing our track back east, reminiscing about our stops along the way. We’ve explored some of the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. We’ve come a long way, just the two of us.

I warm my hands on a mug of tea and watch the moon rise. Above, the sky is clear and filled with a light show of stars, glowing planets and satellites in orbit.

Come morning, the smell of coffee wafts into the cabin as I wake from my off-watch. Jim calls “Land Ho!” and I join him on deck as we enter the pass and approach islands lined with New Caledonia’s majestic pine trees.

We spot a flash of red at the foot of some very high cliffs and take turns looking through our binoculars. It’s a man. We’re too far away to make out details, but it doesn’t seem right that he’s there.

Our fatigue is swiftly replaced by adrenalin when we realise he’s in trouble. We circle back but the waves are too ferocious for us to get close.

A noise overhead becomes louder: the unmistakable and deafening roar of a helicopter’s rotor blades. We ▶



Clockwise from above: anchorage at Port Resolution on Vanuatu’s island of Tanna; Jim Hooper at the wheel of *Polaris*; meal preparation on passage; Fraser Island north of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia, is the largest sand island in the world





Left: New Year's Eve fireworks at Sydney Harbour Bridge seen from an anchorage next to the Opera House – a bucket list ambition for Kate Ashe-Leonard and John Hooper

Below: spectating the start of the Rolex Sydney Hobart Race from on board a friend's catamaran



watch as they circle, trying to land several times. It's impossible, though, and the helicopter is limited to just hovering a few feet above the water.

We try them on the VHF radio but there's no answer, then the helicopter is just above our heads, the pilot gesturing for us to try and rescue the man before it banks away and disappears.

We're able to manoeuvre *Polaris* to within 60m of the cliff base, and within 20 minutes the man is clambering aboard, shivering and in shock, having paddled his kayak (which at first we didn't realise he had) through the waves to reach us before *Polaris* was blown back towards the rocks. He's unable to say much to begin with, but repeatedly thanks us, and later manages a coffee and some toast.

It turns out he has been attempting to circumnavigate New Caledonia on his kayak. In a storm he capsized but swam, dragging all of his things for a few kilometres until he reached the foot of the cliffs. Getting away from the land due to the waves was impossible so he'd been stranded for over 24 hours.

Quietly we motor sail the final five hours to Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, where he is reunited with a friend back on dry land.

NEW CALEDONIA TO AUSTRALIA

Pressure is seriously mounting for us to reach Australia. The tropical cyclone we've been monitoring since Tanna Island is now predicted to be Category 5 in strength and its path is still very uncertain. There is also a low pressure system on its way up the east coast of Australia with forecast winds of up to a maximum of 60 knots.

If we time our final 800-mile passage wrong, we could be caught by either weather system.

Thankfully, with light winds expected for the next five or six days en-route to Bundaberg, we should get in ahead of the bad weather, but we will have to maintain an average boat speed of six knots.

We hoist our red spinnaker and set off just three days after arriving in New Caledonia. The sea state is peaceful and provides a relaxed environment for reading,

reflection and planning for Australia.

Throughout this final leg of our Pacific voyage, we navigate around adverse currents and dodge seamounds which create strange currents and waves, while motor-sailing downwind. On my night watch, I savour these last miles and listen to the sound of the water that gushes and splashes in our wake.

Time slips by effortlessly and on day six, Queensland's coast glows in the distance. The end of our Pacific passage is literally in sight, and we have made it safely to our destination just in time.

From departing Panama to Bundaberg, Australia, we've spent 59 days and nights at sea – only a minority of those have been exceptionally challenging, most have been tranquil, even routine.

Sailing this ocean has made us better partners and the tougher days have made us more skilled sailors, adept at coping in stressful situations.

The ocean continues to thrill us, and endlessly teach us. I'll miss our wild adventures in the unspoilt islands of the South Pacific, but now the vast continent of Australia beckons. ■



Kate Ashe-Leonard from Dublin, Ireland, and **Jim Hooper** from London live aboard their *Catana 47 Polaris*. They spent a year in French Polynesia and Fiji before heading for Australia on their circumnavigation. Follow @sv_polaris on Instagram