

THE IRISH TIMES

‘I have sailed halfway around the world with my partner, living off rental income and remote freelance work’

For Kate Ashe-Leonard, what was intended as an adventurous sabbatical from her London career has turned into a way of life



Kate Ashe-Leonard on board Polaris

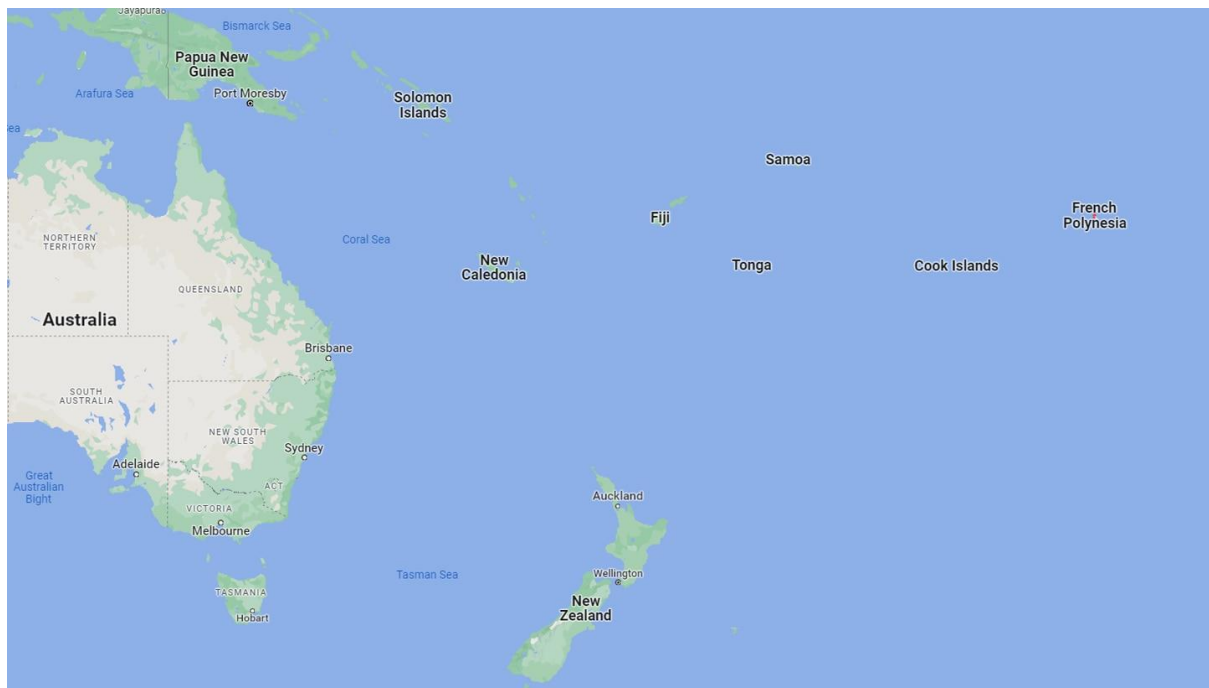
Kate Ashe-Leonard

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Mushroom-like islands protrude out of the crystal-clear water that surrounds our boat. We are in Tonga.

I sip a coffee and look into the sea; the fine white sand is punctuated by navy-blue star fish.

In the distance a plume of breath is released high into the air where a couple of humpback whales rest below the surface. They migrate to these waters between July and November to give birth and raise their calves before the long journey home to Antarctica.



Kate Ashe-Leonard is in Tonga

I reflect on our own migration, which began five years ago. It has opened up experiences I never knew possible; swimming with whales, diving with hundreds of sharks in Fakarava, hiking the peaks of Bora Bora, the Marquesas islands and the Lost City in Colombia. Encountering hammerhead sharks and sealions in the Galápagos islands and kiteboarding in pristine, uninhabited coral atolls. To get to these places we have sailed more than 20,000 miles, just the two of us, and we're still only halfway around the world.

I moved from Dublin to London in 2017. Emboldened by leaving Dublin, I felt more open to change than ever before, and a year later I did a sailing course in Brighton. I had no sailing background, but I felt at home on the water.

My partner learned to sail as a child and delivered a few boats around Europe in his twenties. We became focused on an idea that we had to sail around the world on a three-year sabbatical from work. Things began to progress quickly and soon we were viewing Polaris, a catamaran, which we ended up buying using our savings. We rented out our London flat and sailed from France to Sicily, where we spent eight months in a marina during winter learning the boat and finishing up our work contracts remotely.

The day came when we untied our dock lines and sailed to Greece, where we spent four months. We headed back through the Mediterranean and, by November, reached Lanzarote, followed by Cabo Verde islands. We crossed the Atlantic Ocean in December and made landfall in Antigua.

During the following two years in the Caribbean, including 2020, we realised that the pandemic had normalised remote working and so we began to pick up bits of freelance work.

Our intended sabbatical took on a new shape, with no end in sight. A month wandering Colombia's vibrant cities and trekking ancient trails through rainforest was followed by four months in Panama, mostly in a boatyard. Surrounded by both a jungle full of monkeys and sloths, and mangroves inhabited by saltwater crocodiles, we prepared our boat to cross the Pacific.

The 4,000 nautical-mile passage to French Polynesia would be our biggest challenge yet and is the longest passage on a typical circumnavigation. It could take up to four weeks.

After transiting the Panama Canal, we sailed to Galápagos before completing the remainder of the journey. We spent a glorious year in French Polynesia, getting to know three of its five archipelagos before continuing westward to Samoa and then Tonga.

Living on a boat is always potentially dangerous and our top priority is safety. Being at sea for days and weeks on end can be exhausting with tremendous highs and the odd terrifying moment too. Learning to be resourceful and find improvisations if something critical fails can save your life.

There are inevitable, unenviable weeks spent in hot, dusty boat yards doing maintenance, because things on boats become damaged easily in this salty environment. Developing a detailed knowledge of every system on board is essential unless you are willing to pay others and depend upon them to fix things for you.

Self-sufficiency is vital if you want to reduce costs long term to prolong your time living on board while also surviving in remote places. We make our own water, charge the batteries that power our electronics using solar, catch fish to eat and harness the wind to push us where we want to go. We live at the mercy of the weather, and it is the annual cyclone seasons that dictate where we will go next.

This lifestyle isn't for everyone. Resilience and a highly flexible mindset are both things I had to work on, but the sense of achievement and curiosity to go exploring when you make landfall after a long passage are feelings I never grow tired of.

We have witnessed amazing landscapes and phenomena in nature. Ancient cultures and rituals belonging to the people of the countries we have sailed fascinate and inspire us. We have learned practical skills for life and have bonded with like-minded sailors along the way.

We become better at certain things, but there are others that never get easier, such as being away from family and friends, missing important events.

Those are the big and significant sacrifices for an adventure like ours.



Kate Ashe-Leonard and her partner, Jim

Kate Ashe-Leonard left Ireland in 2017 to live with her partner Jim in London. In 2018, they began their adventure to sail around the world. They initially intended to take a three-year sabbatical from work, but after five years it has become a new way of life. They have lived off rental income from their place in London and working remotely.

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