



HIGHS & LOWS

A CRUISING COUPLE BRAVES THE PACIFIC ALONE
IN THE CROSSING OF A LIFETIME.

STORY BY KATE ASHE-LEONARD
PHOTOS BY JIM HOOPER



Kate and Jim were met with myriad conditions during the multi-week passage. Right, Kate enjoys some time at the helm

With heavy backpacks and our hands laden with as many grocery bags as we could carry, we trudged down the steep hill to our dinghy. I tried to settle my nerves. We were in Santa Cruz, one of the Galápagos islands, gathering last-minute provisions for what would be our longest-ever ocean passage. Our next stop was French Polynesia.

Over the past month, my partner Jim and I hiked dormant volcanoes, surfed alongside swooping sea lions, dove with hammerhead sharks, admired 150-year-old land tortoises, and even spotted penguins hanging out near our boat. The mist that hung persistently over the Galápagos made me think of Ireland, where I am from, but I was thousands of miles away from home. We'd grown fond of the place and its fascinating ecosystems that had informed Darwin's theory of evolution.

Even as we prepared to leave, sea lions glided playfully

around our Catana 47, *Polaris*, while Jim tried one last time to fix our malfunctioning generator. I walked around the boat going through our lists again: the bilges, our ditch bag, prescriptions, and food preparation. My hands were shaking a little as I sealed a food container and put it in the fridge. Excitement, fear, and anticipation were coursing through my body.

With nearly 13,000 miles of our circumnavigation already complete, I knew we were capable of tackling this passage, but we had a healthy respect for what we were about to do—and everything that could go wrong. After we pulled up our anchor, it would be just the two of us and our boat in whatever conditions we were presented with. There would be no turning back.

We prepared to depart under a sky filled with thick clouds. As we stowed items, rolled up our sunshades in the cockpit, and removed our two helm covers, I could see neighboring boats closing hatches and companionways,

shutting sliding doors, and locking themselves cosily inside with no intention of leaving. Ordinarily, we would not choose to depart with such ominous conditions circling us, but our allocated time was up.

We tried not to overthink things, but it all felt a bit wrong; the bad weather and a few issues that had cropped up meant we were in a less-than-optimal state. But with the engines purring and Jim at the helm, we began to navigate through the overcrowded anchorage. The wind brought the worst of the clouds overhead and rain began to beat down, making it difficult to see. I ran below to get our rain jackets and finally, properly dressed for the weather, I glanced back at Santa Cruz, the last land we would see for weeks, maybe even a month.

Clear of the anchorage, we raised our mainsail, unfurled our genoa, and got underway. I caught Jim's eye, and there was a silent exchange, as if speaking would break some delicate balance that needed to be maintained. It was like we were holding our breath. Then the clouds gave way to sunshine, and the wind became a perfect 120 degrees for catamaran sailing. We both exhaled. Maybe this was going to be alright after all.

One of the most important things for us setting out on a long passage is to establish a sustainable routine, starting as we mean to go on. We sat together over dinner at 6:00 p.m. sharp and marveled at the sky ablaze with fierce reds and pinks as our bows pointed towards the setting sun. By 8:00, it was time for me to go down for my first three-hour





sleep. We rotate watch every three hours through the night until 8:00 a.m. During the day the schedule is less rigid. Those first few days are always tough because breaking sleep into short blocks really interrupts the circadian rhythm. After a couple of days not sleeping properly though, the body craves rest and usually begins to do as it's told.

For the first few days, we sailed southwest in confused seas in search of the trade winds. The unpredictable rhythm of the boat's movement caused by large swells hitting us from a variety of angles meant life jackets and tethers were essential. The odd wave crashed over our back steps, soaking whoever was at the helm. Each morning flying fish were nestled in every nook and cranny of the boat imaginable and black squid ink threatened to leave a lasting mark. Inside the boat, although it's a relatively stable catamaran, cooking and moving around became hazardous. Planned meals were put on hold, and we diverted to our "easy" menu for things like pastas and noodles instead. Sleeping remained difficult, as waves pounded the inside of our hulls like a drum and ricocheted, creating loud vibrations that jolted us wide awake.

I hoped for more consistent conditions, and finally at around 5-degrees south we found what we were looking for. Instead of hitting us side-on, the swell was now firmly behind us, the wind a steady 15 to 20 knots. *Polaris* was gliding along effortlessly at 10 to 12 knots. We had found the trade winds! Tapping into our freezer packed full of mahi-mahi from a huge catch en

route to Galápagos, I was able to cook again properly. We began to eat our way through fish tacos, creamy fish pie, grilled, fried, and baked fish. We were both able to get quality sleep again, and life on board was good.

Looking off our stern at the colossal swell pushing us forward as we surfed down its waves, I thought about how we were changed forever and could never go back to who we were before we embarked on this way of life. I was glad we found the courage to take those first steps; quitting our jobs, buying our boat, and becoming full time liveaboards. We were following in the footsteps of the sailors we'd been inspired by.

We exchanged emails via satellite communication most days with a group of five other boats on the same passage. Some were ahead and others behind, all at different latitudes and longitudes. Contact with others provided us with a bit of perspective—a reminder of the world outside our hulls. We

swapped ups and downs as well as recipes with the other boaters, and tracked our relative progress towards French Polynesia. I tried not to count down the miles at that point, believing the old adage that a watched pot never boils. I existed in the moment instead.

Our bodies began to move a little slower, naturally conserving energy, and our eyelids felt heavy during waking hours. During the day we kept our spirits high by playing music as loud as we wanted or listening to podcasts. It was such a luxury to be transported back to the real world by the voices of our favorite podcasters while looking out at the vast Pacific. I lost myself in books, too, knowing



Fatu Hiva was well worth the drama of the passage. Above left, Kate takes the helm. Once the gennaker was out of commission, they had to make do with a spinnaker, below left.



that to read all day is a privilege not to be taken for granted.

On night watch the sky was often dazzling with stars. The waves were hypnotizing as they swirled and boiled around us, hissing and fizzing. The rigging hummed in the wind and sometimes it sounded like voices whispering. Inside, the salon glowed a comforting red. I checked AIS and radar, I wrote, and sipped coffee. Back out at the helm, I checked the sails, and most nights, I was mesmerized by the sparkling bursts of phosphorescence stirred up by our wake.

The further west we went, the more the wind came around on our stern, from the east. As we approached the halfway point, the wind speed also dropped significantly to an average of 13 knots, and the seas became sloppy again.

Suddenly, a bigger-than-usual swell hit us from the portside and caused our already tightly sheeted boom to jerk violently from left to right. There was a massive ripping noise. We jumped to our feet, and white thread rained down on us. The entire width of the sail, from leech to luff under the first

reefing point, had completely opened along the seam.

We turned our engines on and together we furled our gennaker and headed into the wind to lower the damaged segment of the mainsail. Because of the size of the sail, the extent of the damage, and the conditions, repair on-passage was not an option. Instead, we'd simply sail with one reef in, and we tried not to let it get us down.

Paranoid about all the sails and their ability to get us through the remainder of the passage, we were on edge. The idyllic middle of the passage was over, and although we were heading fast in the right direction, it felt as though anything could fail at any moment. Two days after our mainsail ripped, I noticed tiny pinpricks of sunlight shining through the seam of the same sail, this time underneath the second reef point. We took turns looking through our binoculars and could see that the same thing was about to happen. To protect the sail from irreparable damage, we put in a second reef.

Twenty four hours later, Jim heard a strange noise coming

from our gennaker. Within minutes there was a loud bang as the halyard snapped and the entire white sail was in the water, getting dangerously close to our propeller. We hauled the sail in, examined the damage—a chafed through halyard and a large rip caused by it hitting the water—and stuffed it into the bow locker as fast as we could. Dangerously powerful swells threw us about, and as soon as we could, we got back to the helm and steered back on course.

Our voyage was beginning to feel like a sail of attrition. In all our miles we had been lucky enough not to suffer any breakages like this. It took a few hours to catch our breath, recover, and make peace with our new reality; the remainder of the passage would be much slower with half of our mainsail and no gennaker, but we would be OK, things could certainly be much worse.

After 18 days at sea, I glimpsed the first sight of land. The ragged Polynesian peaks of Ua Huka lay ahead in the distance, interrupting the unbroken horizon that I had become accustomed



A Motu, or island, in Tuamotus provided spectacular vistas. Left, on a long passage, the maintenance never ends. Below, the turbulent sea didn't distract from the sights along the way.

to. Jim joined me at the helm as we turned into Taiohoe Bay, Nuku Hiva, a few hours later, and with the biggest smiles on our faces, we carefully put away our sails.

It was time to let go of the safe little microcosm life we had established on board for the last 3,000 miles. The simplicity of only needing to care about the here and now was replaced by taking those first shaky, uncertain steps on land, adhering to its formalities and customs, meeting new friends, and exchanging passage tales. We made plans to hike the mountains around us, swim with manta rays in the bay, and go fishing for yellowfin tuna. Later we would explore the remote atolls of the Tuamotus archipelago where we would paddle, dive, and kitesurf the pristine lagoons and have barbecues and sundowners on the beach. We looked forward to swimming with humpback whales and climbing as many mountains in the Society Islands as we could. All the highs and lows of our voyage had been building up to this point. We did it, just the two of us, like we dreamed we someday would. There was nowhere else in the world we wanted to be. 🌴

Kate Ashe-Leonard and her partner Jim are over halfway around the world and are currently cruising the islands of Fiji on their Catana 47 catamaran Polaris. You can follow them on Instagram @sv_polaris and check out their blog at svpolaris.com.

