

Kate Ashe Leonard narrates a voyage across the South Seas taking in French Polynesia and continuing west to Tonga via Samoa

SOUTH SEA



TALES

Our speed over ground aboard *Polaris* reads 16kts. It's midnight and the black, star-studded sky jigs around overhead. I'm tethered to the helm, watching our instruments like a hawk as I bear away to take pressure off the already reefed sails. We're over halfway across the Pacific Ocean, on a beam reach heading west. Right now, our destination is unclear. Niue is top of the list but, we'll let the wind decide.

We've waited weeks to depart the western atolls of French Polynesia for a perfect weather window that never came and now we're under pressure. It's May and we've decided to spend cyclone season in New South Wales, Australia approximately 3,200nm away. We need to be there by October to be safe – the clock is ticking if we are to cruise some Pacific islands in between. We departed reluctantly yesterday with an ambiguous weather forecast and dwindling food supplies.

Looking at our charting software a red vertical line catches my eye: it's our halfway point in this circumnavigation and we've just crossed it. I'll wait 'til the captain's awake to crack open our last can of tonic water and celebrate! →

Nuances of sailing the South Pacific

When considering sailing the Pacific Ocean there was so much emphasis on the first few big legs from Panama to French Polynesia. And for good reason: on a conventional milk run, these passages will be the longest in a circumnavigation. Afterall, it took us 24 days to get to the Marquesas Islands. But, other than near the equator where many are becalmed which presents frustrations, at the right time of year, the trade winds are strong and predictable, often keeping boats on a broad reach sailing steadily west. The biggest challenge is typically enduring being in a confined space for weeks and dealing with breakages from prolonged stress on the boat.

By contrast, this area between French Polynesia and Fiji, known as the ‘Dangerous Middle’ presents more fickle and challenging sailing. While the passages may be shorter with possible stops along the way, winds here quickly shift in direction and strength while large patches of no wind, as well as long Southern Ocean swells that mix with wind waves are common. Regular squalls and the threat of a Pacific low spinning up from New Zealand are also features to be monitored closely.



Well underway en route to Samoa

By day four the waves are enormous and confused. Colliding with corners of tables, stairs and doorways has us both covered in bruises. Fishing is a no-go since landing one off the backstep would be fraught with risk. And we’ve never wanted to catch a fish more: our last provisioning run was almost six weeks ago in Bora Bora. With no eggs left and almost no fresh vegetables the menu options are wearing thin.

Under the glow of our red night light, we review the weather forecast and our route. With predominantly southwesterly winds continuing it’s becoming clear that trying to dip south to Niue would be a

PREVIOUS PAGE
Kate, the author, on watch

ABOVE
The Pacific islands

BELOW LEFT
Keeping a careful eye on the squalls in the middle of the Pacific

BELOW RIGHT
Meal prep on passage

slog and the only anchorage there is untenable in west winds. Due to its location to our Northwest, Samoa makes most sense now.

On the morning of day 10 I see hundreds of Chinese flagged fishing vessel on AIS as we begin closing in on our destination. This level of commercial overfishing is a shock after 14 months cruising the highly protected waters of French Polynesia.

Arriving at Apia, Samoa

We pass the islands of American Samoa as we continue sailing west towards Samoa which is made up of two main islands: Upolu and Savai’i. Check in for yachts is administered in the capital city, Apia, on Upolu. On first approach the port looks industrial with container





ships, barges and large trawlers scattered around. The water is deep, dark and murky. This is the first time in many months we've been near any large vessels.

We hail the harbourmaster, then anchor temporarily outside the town dock area as directed. We drop the hook into thick mud and our anchor sets easily. I look through the binoculars at Apia: it's shabby and colourful with a low skyline. Church steeples, a clock tower, town houses, storefronts, a boardwalk with joggers, and a dinghy sailing club are visible along the water's edge.

As the kettle boils a Rib pulls up. The officials, three men and one woman, turn down offers of tea, coffee or water. Trying to find common ground, I begin to talk rugby. We sit, the six of us in the oppressive heat, speculating about upcoming matches while filling in forms and producing our documents, medical supplies and food stores for inspection. Beads of sweat form on every inch of my skin: it's considerably hotter at this latitude, closer to the equator than we are used to.

The town's only marina lies just inside the harbour wall. Many passing yachts berth here before heading south or west. Our lines are caught by our new dock neighbours and by the time the boat is secured and we've had a two-hour recovery nap, it's happy hour at the nearby bar.

I relax into my seat, as the group exchanges stories about the adventures we've just had. Only now I feel how beaten up my body is from the boat's violent movements on the waves. That night, in the protected waters of the marina, sleep comes quickly.

After our 10 days of gruelling ocean sailing, waking up docked in this Pacific paradise makes it worthwhile. And if I'm honest the idea of just going to a supermarket

ABOVE
Apia, Samoa

BELOW
Jim, the captain,
taking it easy



is an exciting prospect; after months in remote coral atolls, Apia is the biggest town we'll have been to since Tahiti six months ago.

On foot, we follow the wooden boardwalk around the bay and towards the centre. The place is dominated by churches while in between are small shops and Samoan Fale style buildings that feature a thatched oval roof supported by columns.

At 0845 Apia comes to a standstill. The Royal Samoan Police band march from the Police station playing the national anthem, to the Government buildings where they raise the Samoan flag. Traffic is halted while us bystanders look on, giving our full attention to this ritual. This happens every single weekday. Samoa is a land of tradition.

We walk inland passing more churches, stray dogs and stalls selling vegetables as the road winds up a steep hill leading us to the estate of Robert Louis Stevenson, Scottish author of *Treasure Island*. His house Valima, and the grave, is open to the public. Standing there, looking out across Vaiusu bay, as he would have done, is a memorable moment.

Touring the island by land

We're under pressure and know our time in Samoa is likely to be short so we arrange to hire a guide to drive us to the island's





main sights. The first stop is the giant clams. Past a local Fale, down some steps and then across some slippery rocks, we make our way into the shallows. Wading in knee-deep water, I put my mask and snorkel on. Dozens of metallic blues, green and purple giant clams, almost the same size as our cockpit table, greet me slowly opening and closing their mouths.

As our little car struggles up the island roads to reach the other side of Upolu, I'm struck by the wild beauty of this place. Under the intense sun and cloudless blue sky, the island is a brilliant green, bursting with life as far as the eye can see.

Known for its deep valleys, gushing waterfalls and natural pools, perhaps the most visited attraction here is the To-Sua Water Trench: a 30m-deep sinkhole with a cave, connecting it, via an ancient lava tube system, to the ocean. The pool beneath the sinkhole is surrounded by thick foliage and is accessed via a sturdy bamboo ladder. With around 100 tourists there to experience what has been touted as 'the world's best swimming pool' the queue is long and, in this heat, uninviting.

Instead, we evade the crowds, and drive to a lesser frequented freshwater swimming hole, also complete with a cave. Locals bathe here and sit around sharing picnics on the grass. Dipping my toe in the water, it's very cool, a welcome contrast to the 35-degree heat and 90 percent humidity.

The sun begins to dip below the horizon as we turn down a residential street around the corner from the marina. Family graves are visible in every front garden, the same as we observed in the remote Western Society islands. Although many hundreds of miles apart, the ancient traditions of Polynesia are ever present across the Polynesian triangle.

The dock is beginning to empty because of strong southeasterly winds returning, deemed by most to be suitable, if a little intense, for sailing south to Tonga. And, after just one week here, we too are feeling the pull to get moving again.

The Kingdom of Tonga

A total of 340nm south of the Samoan islands lies the Kingdom of Tonga. A unique Polynesian nation that never relinquished its sovereignty to any foreign power, Tonga is made up of 171 islands, though only 45 of

ABOVE LEFT
To Sua Ocean
Trench Samoa

ABOVE RIGHT
Captain in Samoa

BELOW
Polaris at anchor
in Tonga

those are inhabited. We'll make landfall at the Port of Refuge in the town of Neiafu, capital of the Vava'u group, one of Tonga's three main island groups.

Averaging 7kts, the passage has been physically punishing again. Bashing upwind with side swell on the beam for 48 hours, it's been a battle to keep the boat pointing as high as possible to avoid getting pushed west of our target.

Last night I dug out my long trousers and a fleece and clutched a cup of tea for warmth. Down here the average temperature is just 23 degrees in July, the coolest we've experienced since winter in the Mediterranean.

Limestone capped coral islands appear on the horizon announcing the Vava'u group up ahead. We tack between these mushroom- shaped islands that drip with overhanging foliage and rise up dramatically, hundreds of meters from the ocean floor. →





As we furl away our sails and begin to motor into the port, we receive instructions over VHF and wait to be called to the harbour wall where *Polaris* will be boarded by officials for check-in.

With several boats ahead, we mill around the harbour. There are hazards to consider; a sunken ship two meters deep at the north end of the wall, long rusty bolts protruding about three inches all along the same wall, and several fishing vessels exactly where we would like to squeeze in. But we manage to tie up securely just before the officials show up.

Before today, I'd never seen a Ta'ovala. It's a traditional Tongan woven mat made of either pandanus leaves or hibiscus bark, worn around the waist. Onboard, all the government officials are wearing them. The Ta'ovala is unique to Tonga as distinct from all other Polynesian nations, and is considered formal attire, worn to show both respect and authority.

A big Tongan event fit for a king

We explore the town, noticing a few western restaurants, a couple of Australian and New Zealand Sport Fishing and Whale Watching tour companies. But these sprinkles of western influence are on a small scale. Neiafu is very undeveloped and retains an authentic Tongan vibe.

The big news around town is of the imminent arrival of King Tupou VI who'll be officiating at Vava'u's Royal Agricultural Trade Show the next morning. Two naval ships have arrived in the port, and the townspeople are busily repainting some of the more tired, crumbling buildings.

The show is reminiscent of a country fare in Europe. Across several fields, wooden stands manned by farmers are thronged with local produce and crafts, while Tongan music and dance recitals take place on the grass, in front of gathering crowds.

As we stroll around it's not the heaps of colourful fish or the giant squid, sharks and sting rays tied up, swaying in the breeze that really stand out; it's the King of Tonga walking past, just two meters from where we stand, looking directly at us and waving, that I'll never forget.

Pacific ring of fire

Due to the Tongan Trench, a structural feature of the Pacific floor and, the country's location within the Pacific ring of fire, Tonga is particularly susceptible to seismic activity. A few days before our arrival, several boatowners reported the sensation of their boats shuddering violently, as if having

ABOVE LEFT
Humpbacks in Tonga

ABOVE RIGHT
Kate in Swallow's Cave, Tonga

BELOW
Tongan men wearing traditional Ta'ovala's

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Ashe-Leonard has now sailed over 30,000 nautical miles seven 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:
svpolaris.com

been struck by another vessel, while at anchor. We're fortunate to miss these events but extremely heavy rainfall for several days reminds us that the weather here is very unstable. Despite this we spend our mornings paddle boarding and snorkelling reefs or free diving the crystal-clear waters of nearby caves.

The downpours subside at last and we sail to the southern islands of the Vava'u group where we connect with a well reputed Whale Watching tour company. Humpback whales migrate to Tonga at this time of year and, along with parts of French Polynesia, Tonga is one of the only places in the world you can legally swim with humpback whales.

It's an early start as we set out in a double decker speed boat with two guides. It's not long before we see the telltale splash of a whale's fluke. There are several in fact, belonging to males chasing down one female, a behaviour known as a heat run. The frenzy is fascinating to watch but swimming is too dangerous right now. Later we spot a mother and calf. We enter the water and watch in awe. It's vital that these encounters take place on their terms and so, when they begin to move away, we do not pursue them.

To Fiji

Tonga is the kind of place we could spend years cruising but it's August. An ideal weather window for sailing to Fiji has arisen. Again, we must gather ourselves, prepare the boat and set out in a westerly direction while these favourable conditions prevail. With at least another 2,000nm until we are safely out of the cyclone belt in New South Wales and with plans to visit Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia before October, there's no time to waste. ✦

