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‘An Irishwoman’s Christmas while sailing round the world: ‘I made fish tacos while The Pogues blared from our boat’

‘It’s nearly Christmas and we’re 20 nautical miles off the east coast of Australia.’ Kate Ashe Leonard hopes to make it to Sydney in time



Kate Ashe-Leonard
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It’s nearly [Christmas](#) and we’re 20 nautical miles off the east coast of [Australia](#).

With her mainsail and genoa full, *Polaris* is hurtling along at nine knots while bottle-nose dolphins play between the bows.

Two long-time dreams are simultaneously within reach: to complete the final Pacific-Ocean-leg of our circumnavigation and, to return to Australia under our own steam.

I turned off, [Land Down Under](#), by Men at Work, which we've been playing on repeat and listen instead to the water rushing in our wake. The redness of Queensland lies in the distance. As we near the finish-line, adrenalin courses through my body.

Land-ho!

I radio the coastguard to notify them of our arrival. Australia's entry protocols are strict, and I have been preparing the boat for days in readiness. We make landfall and Ben, a cheerful, stocky guy, leads the inspection. He moves about meticulously, examining the contents of our boat. He picks up tins, looking for labels long since disintegrated. He holds up an enormous rusty one with, Confit de Canard, scrawled in permanent marker.

"Duck," I say. "Emergency Christmas dinner."

We sit down at the cockpit table. Inspection complete, paperwork next.

['I have sailed halfway around the world with my partner, living off rental income and remote freelance work']

Ben removes his hat. "Can I have your rego?". Now it's my turn to look puzzled. "Boat registration papers," he clarifies. I'd forgotten the affectionate nicknames Aussies give to everything. "Servo", "Bottlo", "Dunny". It's been 15 years since I've been here after all. I hand him the document. In the galley. I lift the kettle. He nods.

"Chrissy" on a boat then, what's that like?" He sips his tea, biscuit in hand.

We're [sailing](#) around the world, I explain. We don't know what we're doing next week, never mind Christmas. The weather decides.

Last year in Moorea, French Polynesia, was no exception. We weighed anchor when the wind changed in our favour at the very last minute and set off for the coral atoll of Fakarava.

We entered the atoll's palm-fringed lagoon 24 hours later with an enormous Mahi Mahi fish we'd caught; the delicious but greasy duck that had saved us in the San Blas islands (in Panama) the previous Christmas could rest easy in its can this year.

It being Christmas though, it was a relief the supply ship was due that day. We dropped our dinghy into crystal-clear water, amidst circling sharks. Ashore in the sweltering heat, a local woman nodded towards the ship and its cargo being unloaded: "It's all Christmas parcels, no food," she said.

With fish tacos and rum, we streamed Jules Holland on the laptop

We pressed on. Another five hours of sailing and we arrived in the atoll's south-eastern corner where we would spend Christmas day on its powdery white sandy beaches. The unrelenting sun meant we had enough water in our tanks for plentiful showers thanks to all the solar energy it supplied to our water maker. Things were looking up.

We counted nine boats in the anchorage, all European – all a long way from home. Neighbouring sailors paddled by, introducing themselves, including a Dutch guy with a baby strapped to his chest asking for spare flour. As it happened, we had some and a few parcels of fish to share around too.

On Christmas morning, I made wraps for the fish tacos we would have that evening while The Pogues blared from our boat.

There were video calls home where it was evening in Dublin. Still morning in the South Pacific, clutching snacks, drinks and our machete to harvest some coconuts, we joined the sailors wading in the shallows under overhanging trees. The boisterous Danes danced around a palm tree to Christmas music, and we all joined in their tradition of linking arms, dancing, and singing, but doubled over in stitches for most of it.

Purples, pinks and yellows melded together as the sun dipped below the horizon that evening. With fish tacos and rum, we streamed Jules Holland on the laptop.

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Back in Australia, Ben the coastguard's mouth is hanging open as I recall another year when we celebrated Christmas in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Violent swells sent our dinner flying across the cockpit, even losing us a plate over the side.

This Christmas will be our first on board Polaris in an urban environment since Panama City. We'll sail south, crossing sand bars, dodging weather systems and aiming to reach Sydney. Assuming we arrive in time, and find a place to land our dinghy, we'll venture ashore in search of Christmas provisions.

I imagine the choice could overwhelm us. If we ever make it out of the supermarket, we might just catch the start of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. If we're really lucky, we'll nab a spot to anchor near [Taronga Zoo](#) for New Year's Eve. Surrounded by friends, with lions roaring and fireworks lighting the sky, we'll ring in another New Year on the water, uncertain of where we're headed next.

“You reckon you'll make it to Sydney on time?” Ben asks, packing up his things.

“The plans of sailors are always written in the sand at low tide, but yeah anything is possible.”

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.

Instagram: [sv_polaris](#) Blog: [svpolaris.com](#)