

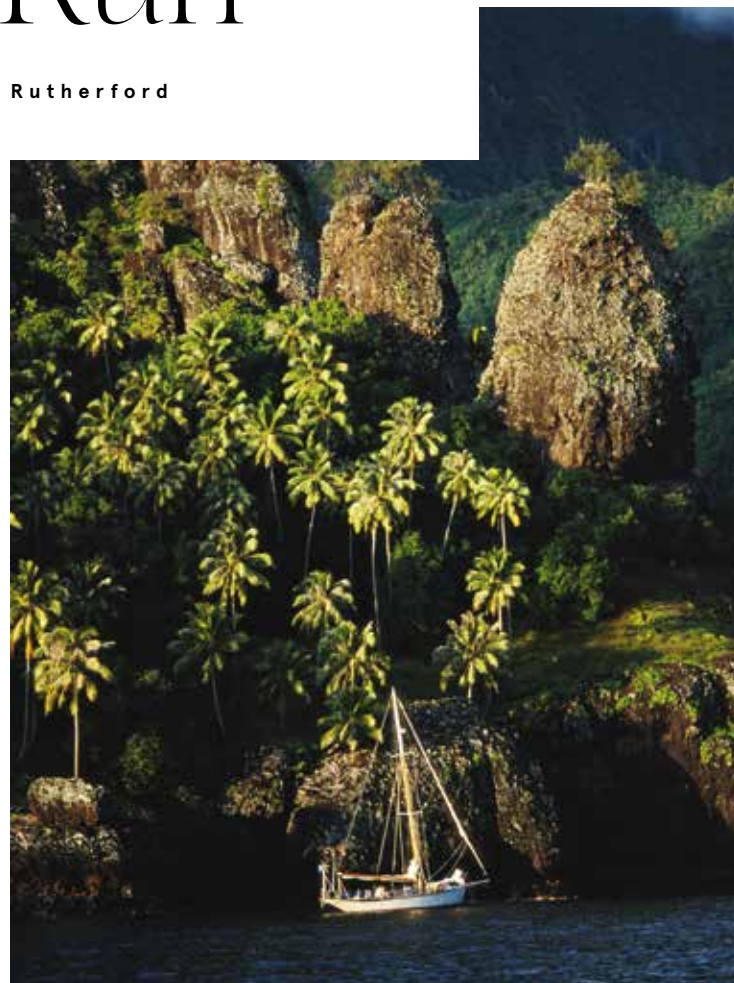


Thrills and spills on the Coconut Milk Run

Words: **Tristan Rutherford**



From the islands of Fiji (top left) to the Marquesas (right), the delights of the Pacific are many and varied



Right: the world map produced in 1527 by Portuguese cartographer Diogo Ribeiro was the first to chart the Pacific's 25,000 islands



The Pacific was colonised by canoe 4,000 years ago. Western-flagged yachts have dropped anchor off the ocean's 25,000 islands only in the past few decades – if at all. Across an area three times wider than the Atlantic, more than 20 sovereign states offer attractions as diverse as volcanic snorkelling, humpback birthing and rudimentary bungee jumping from bamboo towers. Given the distances involved, the Pacific is far from a flop-and-fly. A scatter of atolls, volcanoes and tropical islets necessitates savvy provisioning with a keen consideration of weather, wildlife and local customs. Still game? Then set sail with the most ardent fleet since Captain Cook, as the America's Cup in Auckland marks sailing's ultimate destination.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY; ROBERT HARDING; SHUTTERSTOCK; COOKSON ADVENTURES; ADOBE STOCK; EMIRATES TEAM NEW ZEALAND; PAINTING: © PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN THEIR CANOES (COLOUR LITHO); WILLIAMSON, J. (FL.1850-1919)/PRIVATE COLLECTION/© LOOK AND LEARN/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES





The history

Before the Egyptians built the pyramids, the Austronesians had mastered the art of long-distance navigation using stick charts, celestial observation and by studying bird migration. This enabled islanders to spread across the entire Pacific, a full third of planet earth. By 1,500BC their outrigger canoes had beached on the soft sands of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. Two millennia later, oral tradition recalls that two canoes fled to Rapa Nui to escape from a warring chieftain. The growing society erected totemic humanoid statues on what we now call Easter Island. Nearly 1,000 of them still gaze across the horizon, as if looking for the next deep ocean destination.

Europeans arrived 500 years ago. A circumnavigation led by Ferdinand Magellan pioneered a passage above Tierra del Fuego and into the Mare Pacifico – “the peaceful sea”. By 1527 Portuguese cartographer Diogo Ribeiro, who had sailed with naval greats Vasco da Gama and Afonso de Albuquerque, crafted the first true mapamundi – a world map with the Pacific included. Ribeiro’s diagram unlocked the ocean’s 25,000 islands to a new generation of explorers.

Dutchman Jacob Roggeveen was sent to “discover” the mythical Terra Australis but stumbled upon the topaz lagoons of Bora Bora instead. William Dampier, a former pirate, founded New Britain off Papua New Guinea, which is blessed with 1,000 species of fish and 400 types of coral. Dampier also found time to rescue Alexander Selkirk from the Pacific’s Juan Fernández Islands – thereby inspiring the legend of Robinson Crusoe.

The Royal Navy’s Captain James Cook took in waterfalls in Tahiti and volcanoes in Vanuatu, before becoming, in 1769, the first European to round New Zealand. But, a Maori culture that had existed for four centuries was pounded by European weaponry and infectious diseases. Across the Pacific, a lack of empathy led to mistrust between indigenous islanders and foreign explorers – a lesson that yacht owners should heed today.

Sporting glory

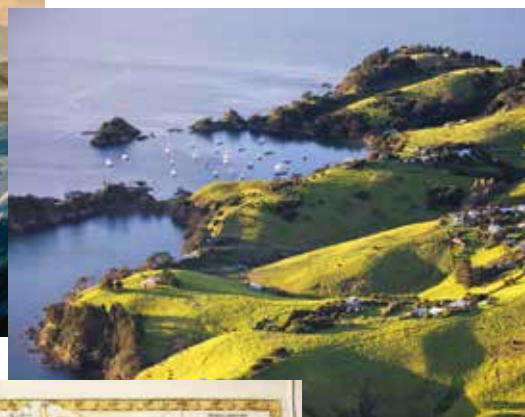
Through 2020, another exploratory fleet will sail to see the world’s fastest and most advanced sailboats. Following the final World Series event in December 2020, the 36th America’s Cup will take place in March 2021, amid Auckland’s island-strewn Hauraki Gulf. Tests of the AC75 yachts, which replace keels with canting hydrofoils to generate speeds of 50 knots, will offer daily action. So, too, will fringe competitions and historic races.

David Lunn, a sales broker at Ocean Independence, speaks for many Aucklanders when it comes to the America’s Cup. In a city where a third of all families owns a sailboat, Lunn recalls being allowed to stay up late to watch the 1995 event live from San Diego, when Team New Zealand’s Russell Coutts trounced US challenger Dennis Conner. As he says: “I was raised on Waiheke Island, which was close to the course of the 2000 America’s Cup in the Hauraki Gulf. The March 2021 races, in the same breezy zone, will be easy to see from the Auckland shoreline.”

After leaving school, Lunn scored a rookie job supporting Prada’s Luna Rossa challenge and never looked back. “After that I crewed all the way to the Mediterranean, eventually captaining the J Class yacht *Rainbow*.” Around six of the historic fleet, including *Velsheda*, *Lionheart*, *Topaz* and *Ranger* – some of them veterans of 1930s America’s Cup competitions – will recreate dramatic races after crossing the Pacific themselves.



Top left: the Cook Islands. Above: Raiatea islanders sailed by canoe to New Zealand. Right: carved wooden totems in Vanuatu



Right: traditional bures in Fiji. Below: Hauraki Gulf, New Zealand; a 1778 map of New Zealand post-Cook



Interest from Ocean Independence clients in Pacific adventures is rising. Lunn advises that 51-metre explorer yacht *Northern Sun*, currently based in Phuket, is likely to weave through the Dampier Strait around Papua New Guinea towards Vanuatu. Here she will hopefully join the 34-metre sloop *Silvertip* in time for specific America’s Cup charters.

The routes

Although a few luxury yachts will meander from Thailand and Indonesia, the majority will sail the so-called Coconut Milk Run, following the Pacific’s prevailing winds and currents from the Caribbean via the Panama Canal. Luxury 46-metre explorer yacht *Qing*, which is for sale with Camper & Nicholson’s (camperandnicholsons.com) for \$16.5 million (£12.6m), charted a similar course in 2016. “We sailed from Costa Rica’s Cocos Island (a Mecca for hammerheads and whale sharks) to the Galápagos, then the Marquesas in French Polynesia,” says her owner. “We cruised all the island groups aside from the Australs (an offbeat archipelago famed for humpbacks, caves and cliffs), which I still want to do.” *Qing* then followed a sun-kissed line from the Cook Islands to Samoa, the Marshall Islands and Palau. The latter was “a highlight for scuba diving”, while Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands offered in-depth culture. Palmerston atoll in the Cook Islands and Niue due west make increasingly popular ports of call, especially for marine megafauna.

Captain Mark Drewelow, president of the Californian yachting agency C2C, also expects around “15 to 20 superyachts to cruise from the United States’ West Coast to New Zealand through 2020”. Whether sailing from the US or via the Panama Canal, climatic conditions dictate all timing decisions.

Weather and timing

Fortunately, sailors can plan for clement weather all the way to Auckland. As David Jamieson from Yacht Help’s Fiji agency explains: “Cruising Panama and the Galápagos in February is savvy, as both these areas are too close to the equator to get cyclones.” Jamieson recommends cruising the South Pacific from April to October, so the clients for whom he prepares

PHOTOGRAPHY: ACORNERS; GETTY IMAGES; ROBERT HARDING; YACHT AID GLOBAL; COOKSON ADVENTURES; NARONG - RATTANAWA/OCEAN INDEPENDENCE; CAMPER & NICHOLSONS. MAP: ANTONIO ZAITA, ACCORDING TO DISCOVERIES OF JAMES COOK, VENICE 1778/DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

“You’re sailing to some of the most pristine regions on earth, which is what makes it attractive, yet it’s also utterly untamed, with minimal yachting infrastructure”



Left: a colourful community hut in Palau. Above: 51m explorer *Northern Sun* and (right) *Qing*, a 46m explorer



Sailing in support

YachtAid Global was founded by C2C president Captain Mark Drewelow. It facilitates volunteer missions by luxury yachts to deliver humanitarian aid (such as water filters to the Galápagos) and urgent disaster relief (as seen recently when Drewelow’s partners ferried supplies to the Bahamas). The explorer yacht *Qing* undertook an aid mission to the Darién Gap, the inhospitable isthmus that separates Panama from Colombia. Yachts are encouraged to help out “from Panama to Indonesia and many points in between”, says Drewelow. “It starts with a Q&A session with the captain well in advance, to provide routing and timeline info so we can see where maximum impact can be made.” YachtAid Global also encourages all superyachts to partake in free disaster-relief training so they are ready to save lives at sea. yachtaidglobal.org



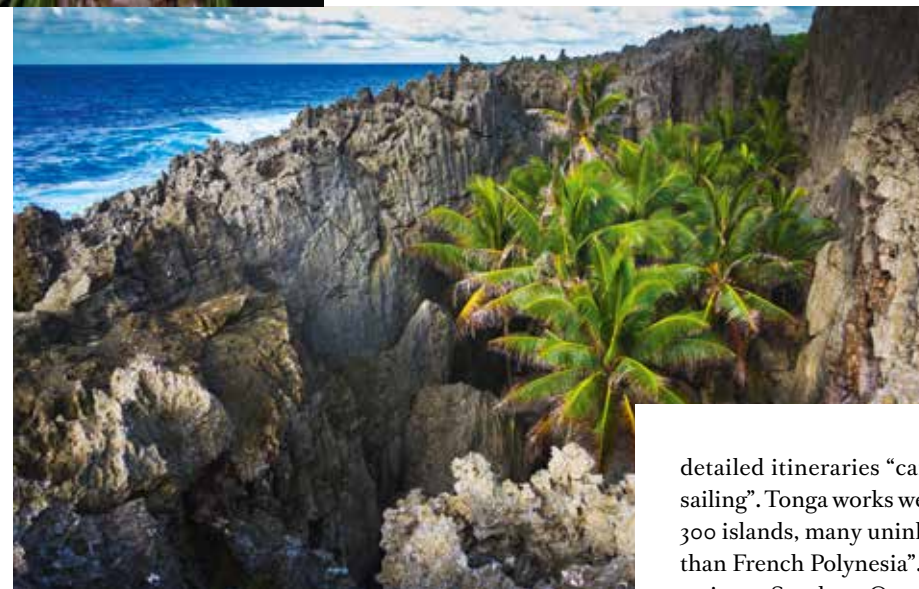
“There’s an inherent joy that comes from sailing into a far-flung anchorage bookended by coconut palms shading a ridiculously dazzling beach”



Left: cooking on the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. Right: Gauguin’s Woman Holding a Fruit, 1893 was painted in Tahiti



Left: Christmas Island in Kiribati. Below: a Solomon Islands waterfall



offering the correct donation to anchor on their ‘land.’” McCallum grew up in Papua New Guinea and speaks the local Tok Pisin tongue, as well as the Melanesian languages of the Solomons: Pijin and Bislama.

The Australian yachting writer Fiona Harper prefers to sail at leisure. “There are few more rewarding sights after an ocean passage than watching a smudge on an endless watery horizon eventually morph into land.” Most commentators claim it would take at least three months to do the Pacific justice – although many guests fly in or out of Tahiti, Tonga and Fiji. That would be a shame, says Harper. “You could fly from Tahiti to Tuvalu, Samoa to Saipan, but that would be missing the entire charm of the South Pacific. There’s an inherent joy that comes from sailing into a far-flung anchorage bookended by coconut palms shading a ridiculously dazzling beach.”

Provisioning

According to Jamieson, technical issues can be solved with parts flown the next day from New Zealand, less than a three-hour flight from his Fiji base.

A varied kit is essential, says Irene Lobo from Cookson Adventures. She leads yachting trips to Palau, Papua and across the Pacific, often with submersibles, sightseeing aircraft and expert guides in tow. A rash vest that protects against UV rays, as well as reef shoes to guard against coral shards and poisonous stonefish, are a must. “Plus, walking boots for trekking to land-based Second World War fighter plane remains in the Solomon Islands. And history books that lend significance to naval battles around Guadalcanal.” As Lobo notes, Ironbottom Sound in the Solomon Islands hosts approximately 53 shipwrecks and the remains of 900 aeroplanes. Wildlife guidebooks and painting easels are also suggested for volcano jaunts in the Marquesas Islands, where French artists Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse took topographical inspiration.

McCallum, who will also sail home to New Zealand to see the America’s Cup, sums up the dichotomy of the Pacific. “You’re sailing to some of the most pristine regions on earth, which is what makes it attractive, yet it’s also utterly untamed, with minimal yachting infrastructure.” The biggest provisioning headaches? “Fuel and food,” says McCallum. “We plan itineraries through a kingdom of water, so we look at a boat’s operating capacity, which is normally only around 4,000 nautical miles. Then we plug in plans B, C and D to embed refuelling and re-provisioning stops, crew changeover and guest arrivals, normally every two weeks.”

Most yachts are designed with one or possibly two weeks of provision and waste capacity. “That’s the limiting factor,” says McCallum. “So we might install an extra freezer unit for fresh goods, which will be used for garbage later on. No one wants to talk about this stuff, but it’s best to plan now rather than when you’re mid-Pacific.” One final packing tip? A handheld GPS. “Most activities are away from the yacht, like hiking or diving, so purchase one with a transponder so that we can find you too.”

Misconceptions

Size is by far the biggest misconception. Crossing the Pacific is generally a 7,000-nautical-mile voyage, compared with 2,000 nautical miles across the Atlantic. Sailors report the shock of the Panama Canal gates closing, leaving them with a 30-day open-ocean sail to French Polynesia if they don’t stop

detailed itineraries “can enjoy a mostly downwind cruise and smooth sailing”. Tonga works well in July for the humpback season, “while Fiji has 300 islands, many uninhabited, plus territorial waters four times greater than French Polynesia”. But Fiji to New Zealand requires careful timing, owing to Southern Ocean low-pressure systems. “Better make this passage as the Kiwi summer commences in November or December when the low-pressure systems are further south,” says Jamieson.

Qing used a weather routing service for longer passages, plus localised websites to plan the next few days’ activities. “Now there are great data-aggregation apps such as Windy,” says her owner. It crunches data from a variety of sources including the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the US Navy, allowing improved route planning. Pacific weather still springs surprises. “One time, Qing was anchored in a 30-mile-wide [48km] atoll that was flat as a millpond. Within a minute, we felt gusts of 50 knots. The tender broke loose, but our captain, channelling his inner cowboy, lassoed the front cleat. Our first mate spent the night securing the tender, with three warm beers and a bag of nachos for dinner.”

Solo or guided?

“If you’re sailing via a relatively well-trodden route through French Polynesia, Samoa and Tonga, a guide might not be necessary,” says Rob McCallum, a founding partner of the exploration agency EYOS (eyos-expeditions.com). “But if you intend to hit the Solomons and Kiribati, placing a Pacific superyacht specialist on board will open doors and take the pain away from the captain, resulting in a better experience for both owner and guests.” EYOS operates several transits a year on boats ranging from 35 to 200 metres in length.

Getting the timing right for cultural events is also key, continues McCallum. “An example is land diving in Vanuatu.” This rudimentary form of bungee jumping sees young daredevils dive off handmade 30-metre towers with a vine wrapped around each ankle. “It’s one of the most bizarre anthropological spectacles on earth, but seeing it is extremely time-sensitive. In remote Melanesia, only a guide can escort you to a remote one-village island, then assist in presenting yourself to the headman and

A guide could help you watch land diving – or rudimentary bungee jumping – in Vanuatu



PHOTOGRAPHY: EYOS EXPEDITIONS; ADOBE STOCK; GETTY IMAGES; COOKSON ADVENTURES; ALAMY; PAINTING: WOMAN HOLDING A FRUIT, WHERE ARE YOU GOING (EU HAERE IA OEI, 1893) (OIL ON CANVAS), GAUGUIN, PAUL (1848-1903)/STATE HERITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

FIVE TRANSPACIFIC ADVENTURE BOOKS TO PACK



Slow Boats Home by Gavin Young

The veteran Guardian journalist island-hops home from Hong Kong in 1982 via a Pacific fleet of yachts, tramp boats, container carriers and a Soviet cruise ship. Young’s enchanting west-to-east journey, via Bougainville, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Samoa, reverses the classic sailing route of today.



The Happy Isles of Oceania by Paul Theroux

The great American travel writer packs a folding kayak to paddle the Pacific Islands. The searingly different cultures and landscapes, from Papua’s wild Trobriand Islands to the glory of Tonga’s Vava’u group, contrast with the corporate glitz of American Samoa.



Sailing Alone Around the World by Joshua Slocum

The saltiest of sea dogs completed the first single-handed circumnavigation in 1898. His classic tale captures the 19th-century Pacific as he partakes in an ‘ava drinking ritual in Samoa and other local customs.



Kon-Tiki: Across the Pacific by Raft by Thor Heyerdahl

To prove that South American communities could have settled Polynesia by following prevailing winds and currents, Norwegian explorer Heyerdahl built an indigenous-style balsa-log raft in Peru in 1947. His 101-day open-deck sail, chased by storms and sharks, ended with a crash landing on the paradisaical island of Raroia in the Tuamotus.



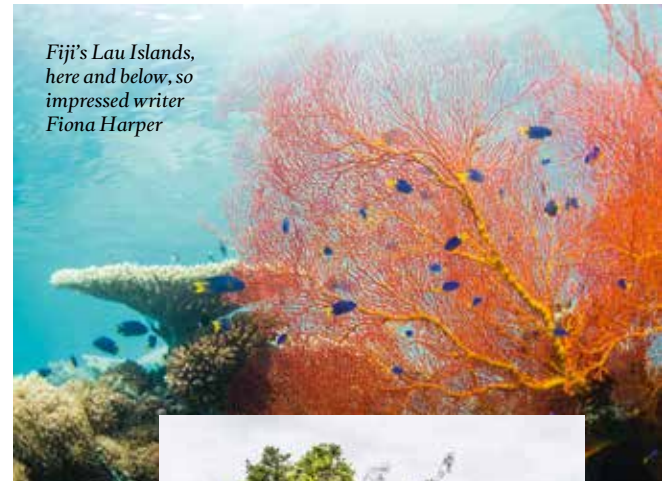
An Island to Oneself by Tom Neale

Treasure Island author Robert Louis Stevenson visited the coral atoll of Suvarrow in the Cook Islands in 1890. Nearly a century later, the Kiwi bushcrafter, writer and hermit Neale spent six years living alone amid an ocean of sperm whales and humpbacks.





A scatter of atolls, volcanoes and tropical islets necessitates a consideration of weather, wildlife and local customs



Fiji's Lau Islands, here and below, so impressed writer Fiona Harper



Natural attractions include blacktip sharks (above), columnar trees on the Isle of Pines (right) and Toau Atoll in the Tuamotus (below)

at Cocos Island or the Galápagos en route. Although, after that, most island stops are between a one- and four-day sail apart.

The technological gulf between the Pacific and Atlantic is also huge. Engine and communications equipment can be airlifted to Fiji and Tahiti – and several other airstrips for a far-higher fee – but don't expect to find engineers or the correct connecting bolts in situ. Smaller sailing boats have reported successful crossings, if only because "the less stuff to fix the better, as there's no one out there to help you", says one captain. Solar panels are a bonus, and a hydrogenerator, which charges a battery via a water turbine, has proven invaluable for many sailing craft.

Languages and prices are a final shock. Some pan-Pacific passages take in 15 sovereign states with competing customs controls and entry permits. The Society Islands group in French Polynesia remain as Gallic as a wheel of Camembert, although a six-pack of Kronenbourg at Papeete's Carrefour costs considerably more than at the same supermarché in Antibes. Many everyday items won't be available, so exploration firms like Cookson and EYOS often pre-arrange provisioning flights to shadow a yacht's passage.

Wildlife and adventure

Lobo recommends the Tuamotus, the largest chain of coral atolls in the world. "Your footsteps will be the first on the beach and the last on the sand before sunset," she says, "while under the waves you can snorkel with the tropical current to see grey and blacktip reef sharks and Napoleon wrasse."

Lunn flags up the Isle of Pines, off New Caledonia. "It's a vast island dotted with pines, not just palms, surrounded by lagoons filled with azure-blue water and white-sand beaches." His second tip is Tonga's Vava'u group. These 55 islands are untouched except by sailors, who find the protected waters also shelter birthing humpback whales and schools of sailfish.

Harper fell in love with Fiji's Lau group. "It's an island paradise that only cruising yachties know about. Visited by fewer than 100 yachts each year, crescent-shaped Fulaga Island is home to around 200 subsistence villagers who throw open their arms to welcome visiting boats." ■

Direct length of Pacific route from Panama to Auckland: 6,500 nautical miles.





VOYAGE OF A LIFETIME

A FLURRY OF OWNERS WILL SOON BE EMBARKING ON THE PACIFIC CROSSING TO WATCH THE BATTLE FOR THE AMERICA'S CUP IN AUCKLAND. HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT JOINING THEM ON ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST CHALLENGING AND REWARDING JOURNEYS...

Illustration Kim McGillivray

