

Ahoy Pacific Puddle Jumpers,

Please take a few minutes to review the important topics below.

A New Year Filled with Challenges and Adventures

For many people, the beginning of a new year sparks new goals and aspirations. But for Pacific Puddle Jump fleet members, the year 2023 promises to be especially significant — if not life-changing.

For many of the passage-makers who've gone before you, sailing to the South Pacific was the realization of a longtime dream, and a departure from the workaday world that allowed them to 'reinvent' themselves into more inquisitive, gregarious and physical versions of themselves.

That said, making a long bluewater passage will inevitably be physically challenging, while typically a blend of high points and low points — but with any luck, the highs will far outweigh the lows. No doubt every Tahiti-bound voyager looks forward to exploring the territory's exotic islands and atolls, but you may discover that time spent alone on the vast 'ocean wilderness' is equally magical – some might even say spiritual. In any case, you are in for a grand adventure, which you will not soon forget. So congratulations for having made it to the starting gates!

Ready or Ready Enough?

It's probably safe to say that no long-haul passage-maker ever begins a lengthy voyage with every item checked off on his or her "to do list." So rather than stressing out or delaying another year, we suggest you set your departure goal as being "ready enough," to make the passage safely and comfortably.

You can't possibly carry with you spare parts and materials for everything that could possibly break or become worn out along the way. Nor is it realistic to expect to master every feature of new systems and devices that you've just installed before heading west.

In order to get your priorities straight it's worth spending some time considering various 'what if' scenarios with your crew: What if we lose a lower shroud? What if the watermaker fails? What if our main bilge pumps fail? What if our chartplotter fails? What if we lose steerage? What if we lose our refrigeration? Our built-in VHF? Our satellite communications device?

If you aren't sure how to prioritize your remaining preparations, or you'd like some assurances that your boat and its gear is up to the rigors of a long ocean crossing, then by all means ask the best surveyor or knowledgeable old salt that you can find to do a "trip survey" of your rigging and systems. Please note: Pacific Puddle Jump organizers DO NOT do pre-trip vessel inspections.

What sort of breakage is most common?

Over the years, our end-of-season crossing surveys have listed a variety of gear problems and failures. Rigging issues, both minor and major, have been pretty common — typically involving standing rigging that was older than its recommended lifespan, or uninspectable rigging elements such as my own boat's forestay chainplate, which had been built into the bow structure.

Older mechanical items that get high usage are always candidates for failure; things like fresh-water and bilge pumps, fridge compressors, generators, autopilots, etc. Imagine how many swells an electric autopilot would have to steer through during a passage from Mexico or Panama to the Marquesas! No wonder many boats have some sort of windvane steering device or a backup autopilot. (Hand steering this distance with a small crew is doable, but thoroughly exhausting.)

Despite some inevitable breakage, though, it's actually pretty remarkable how few major breakdowns have occurred during the 25 years that we've been involved with this annual 'westward migration' of cruisers.

Grappling with the Crew Conundrum

Whether to take on additional crew is a question that troubles many Puddle Jumpers. It's nice to have extra hands to share the boat chores and rotating watches, but before you commit, we would urge you to consider the following advice:

Never pick up unfamiliar crew without spending enough time with them to assess their sailing abilities and personality traits. A month at sea can be a very long time if spent with an unhelpful or annoying crewmember.

For a successful relationship between captain and crew, it is essential that everyone have appropriate expectations: Long before heading offshore the captain should let everyone know the ship's rules, post watch schedules, explain galley duties, and clarify policies concerning alcohol use (most boats run 'dry' on offshore passages).

Another wise prohibition, in our opinion, is an absolute ban on political debate while underway. Also, female crew, if you are definitely not interested in romance during the trip, make that abundantly clear from the get-go, especially when signing on as crew with an unattached captain.

Although it may sound awkward, we think it's reasonable and important to ask for a list of all prescription drugs that a potential crew is taking, and for what ailment or condition. It's also reasonable to ask for references from previous skippers.

Also important is to be sure all crew have enough money to cover basic living expenses once they make landfall. And be aware that yacht captains are liable for any problems, bad behavior or fines associated with crew that he/she brings into French Polynesia — this includes fines for overstaying a visa.

All this being said, some of the worst crew stories we've heard concerned long-time friends who'd never actually sailed together long-distance. (Sleep deprivation can do weird things to people.) Likewise, we've heard skippers say the best crew they ever had was a couple of young backpackers that they picked up at the last minute.

Strategies for Linger Longer

As mentioned earlier, upon arrival at any French Polynesian clearance port EU citizens can stay as long as they like without pre-arranging a visa (as long as they don't work for pay). By contrast, Americans and other non-EU passport holders only get 90 days, which is NOT renewal in the islands. And 90 days is w-a-a-y to short a time to explore these islands. This is why many non-EU sailors are now scrambling to obtain Long Stay Visas, which are good for a year, and are renewable IN THE ISLANDS. (Find an overview of the LSV process on the PPJ homepage, and click on the "Chuck Houlihan" link there for updated details.)

The whole process of obtaining an LSV is complicated, often exasperating, and can take up to eight weeks to complete. Plus you have to surrender your passport during that interval. That said, we think it is well worth the hassle and expense — especially since visiting boats are allowed to stay for two years without special arrangements.

But if you have commitments or other issues that have you eager to set sail sooner than later, here's an idea to consider. After 90 days you may not be ready to sail west to other island nations, but at the end of three months of offshore sailing and island-hopping you may be ready for a break — to go home and visit family, attend to other personal affairs or whatever. If so, you could fly home, and while there apply for your

LSV, then return to the islands (after the required three months) with a bag full of spare parts, and resume your travels under sail.

Where can you leave your boat while away? There are hallout facilities with dry storage in Hiva Oa, Marquesas; Apataki, Tuamotus; Uturoa, Raiatea; and Taravao, Tahiti. Tahiti also has two large marinas, Marina Taina and Marina Papeete (use of a yacht agent might help), plus there is a small marina at Taravao, near Tahiti Iti. Raiatea, in Tahiti's Leewards, has several marinas which are usually full of charter boats, but a smaller monohull might possibly find a spot there. For free anchoring, Nuku Hiva's Taiohae Bay is very well protected, as is the large Port Phaeton anchorage at Taravao, Tahiti. One of the default anchorages in Tahiti for visiting cruisers and local liveboards is the Airport Anchorage, which allows some anchoring, plus a limited number of moorings administered by Marina Taina.

If you haven't done so already, download the Yellow Flag Guide to French Polynesia, for free from the PPJ website. There you'll find marina and boatyard contact info, plus a whole lot more.

South Pacific Bon Voyage Events — Save the Dates

If you will be in Panama or Banderas Bay, Mexico, late this month, we hope you will make a special effort to attend one of our South Pacific Bon Voyage events, presented by the PPJ and the South Pacific Sailing Network. In addition to our own presentation on the PPJ crossing and cruising French Polynesia, we'll have additional presentations on Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand, hosted by South Pacific sailing experts.

Event dates:

January 27 & 28, Shelter Bay Marina, Panama (Caribbean side), 10am – 1 pm

January 30, Vallarta Yacht Club, Nuevo Vallarta, 4-7 pm pm

* We are also in the process of organizing a second round of Bon Voyage events in March. TBA soon.

All of these events are free, and open to both PPJ rally members and other interested sailors.

Safe travels,

— Andy Turpin