

2024 Pacific Puddle Jump Rally

Fleet Letter #3

Puddle Jumpers! Please read these important messages:

Upcoming Events — We have partnered with members of the South Pacific Sailing Network to offer two highly informative South Pacific Bon Voyage seminars, free and open to all westbound cruisers.

(Please see posters at www.pacificpuddlejumps.com):

- **February 16** at Panama's Shelter Bay Marina (Caribbean side of the Canal): 9:30 - 11:45 am & 2 pm - 4 pm
- **March 11** at the Vallarta YC in Nuevo Vallarta, Mexico: 1 pm - 4 pm

Bob may have said it best.

When it comes to weather expectations for the Pacific Puddle Jump passage, the late Bob Bechler of the Gulfstar 50 *Sisiutl* may have said it best: "Prepare for the worst and deal with whatever you get!" He made the PPJ crossing at least three times — possibly four or five. But of course, no two trips were ever exactly alike, weather-wise.

Although Bob's advice may seem too simplistic to be useful, he actually made a very good point. That is, because you are setting off on such a lengthy passage (3,000 to 4,000 nm) no one can tell you in advance precisely what wind angles, wind speeds and wave heights you'll encounter along the way, or how large the dreaded doldrums will be when you finally reach them.

But after reporting on the Pacific Puddle Jump fleets for the last 27 years, I can tell you that no one has ever found themselves battling 50-foot waves and 50-knot winds during the crossing. In fact, a complaint we inevitably hear from some fleet members every year is that they wish they'd had a bit more wind, not less. As indicated in the sampling of crossing data that was included in our last fleet letter, crossings from Mexico or Panama typically experience sustained wind speeds up to about 25 knots, with gusts potentially in the low-to-mid 30s.

With careful planning and a little luck, you are likely

to experience some of the glorious tradewind sailing that you've dreamed about. For navigators, one of the biggest challenges is picking the shortest route through the doldrums (or Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone). This unpredictable mix of fickle winds, calms, squalls and thunderstorms is the ultimate "weather wildcard," as it constantly reshapes itself over a vast area. A few years ago, it even separated into two parallel bands for a day or two.

So, while some boats might experience hectic conditions that call for multiple sail changes and course corrections, others might be able to motor across it in a day or two during a flat calm.

We are big fans of using PredictWind's weather routing software, both offshore and nearshore. The company is a long-time supporter of PPJ, and they provide a fleet tracking map on the PPJ homepage that is accessible to friends and family back home.

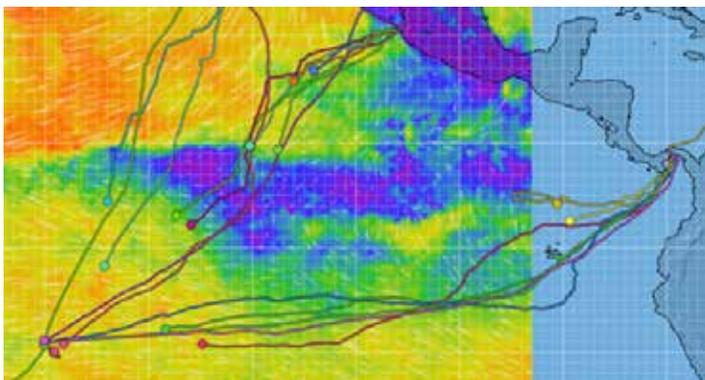
As the tracks of previous fleets confirm, Puddle Jumpers generally follow one of two routes toward their initial landfall in the Marquesas Islands or the Gambier archipelago. Many of those jumping off from Panama typically head SW toward the Galápagos Islands — whether they intend to stop there or not — to get clear of often-powerful mainland weather influences. From there, it is roughly a 3,000 nm sail west through the single-digit latitudes, before making landfall.

Boats leaving from California or Mexico angle to the SW or WSW and, with any luck, may hook into the prevailing easterlies until they're forced to cross the ITCZ.

Because Rob Macfarlane is a highly experienced offshore racer and cruiser, we include his comments here, made in 2017 after crossing from Banderas Bay to Hiva Oa in 19 days aboard his vintage Morgan 456 *Tiger Beetle*:

"Once in the trades, we watched the ITCZ to the south, and paid attention to the East Pacific High Seas Forecast, as they call out the areas of moderate and strong convergence, and you want to avoid those if possible. To that end, we more or less aimed at a point 7°N x 130°W, which did four things for us: kept us in the NE trades so we could make good westing, brought us to a narrow point in the ITCZ, such that the SE trades were roughly 300 miles south of us,

Pacific Puddle Jumpers are invited to have their tracks displayed on the fleet tracking page, provided by PredictWind. Graphic weather can be turned on or off when viewing.



Upcoming Event Reminder —

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*Please see flyers on the PPJ homepage!):

- **February 16** at Panama's Shelter Bay Marina (Caribbean side of the Canal), and
- **March 11** at the Vallarta YC in Nuevo Vallarta, Mexico.

We remind you also about the in-depth **Predict Wind webinar**, Feb 15, which will show how to get the most out of the company's cutting edge weather-routing technology and more.

Date & times; [Zoom link to follow by email.](#)

- 11am, Feb 15 in Tahiti
- 3 pm, Feb 15 in Puerto Vallarta
- 4 pm, Feb 15 in Panama

kept us out of the ITCZ major convection zones, and set us up on a beam reach across the light SE trades to Nuku Hiva. The farther west you get while north, the better your reaching angle into Nuku Hiva to the south.”

The only footnote we would add to Rob's advice is that you don't want to get too-o-o far west — many PPJ veterans would say not past 128W — or your reaching angle down to the Marquesas could get uncomfortably tight, especially if you're sailing a catamaran or a heavy-displaced monohull that's uncomfortable when on the beam.

One final thought here: Only a small minority of sailors carry paper charts these days. But if you can find a large “planning chart” of the Eastern Pacific, plotting your daily progress can give you and your crew the “big picture” perspective in a way that electronic charts can't replicate — it's also kinda fun, in an “old school sort of way.”

Are Cyclones a Threat?

If you've done a little homework on the subject, you know that due to the Marquesas' location close to the

equator (between latitudes 8° and 10° S), it would be virtually impossible for a full-blown cyclone to strike there. Consequently, the Marquesas, and particularly Tiohae Bay, is a favorite seasonal refuge for international cruisers.

In the other four archipelagos of French Polynesia, the greatest possibility of a cyclone forming would be during March or April, at the end of the so-called rainy season (December – April). That said, there hasn't been a bona fide cyclone in these islands since 1983 — 40 years ago.

Why does French Polynesia see fewer seasonal storms than its neighbors to the west? Because its five archipelagos lie at the eastern end of the South Pacific cyclone belt, where tropical disturbances rarely have time to become threatening before moving further west. Meanwhile, Tahiti's westward neighbors, such as Fiji (1,800 nm farther west), tend to get stronger and more frequent storms, so they prepare defenses appropriately.

While we are on the subject, here's a quick rundown of storm shelter options within French Polynesia. As mentioned, Nuku Hiva's Tiohae Bay is an excellent refuge, and there is a well-protected boatyard on Hiva Oa.

In the Tuamotus, Apataki Atoll has a well-protected, boatyard with dry storage.

In the Society Islands, there are two marinas in Tahiti plus several hundred moorings that are somewhat protected by a large fringing reef. At the southern end of Tahiti, where it connects to the smaller Tahiti Iti, a huge natural bay at Taravao offers excellent storm protection. And it's free.

In the Leeward Islands of the Societies, there are two boatyards, which are extremely popular for both haulouts and dry storage. Both take advance reservations. There are also three marinas on Raiatea, but they are usually chock-full of charter boats. Smaller monohulls, however, can sometimes find a temporary berth there.

You can find contact info for all these facilities in the Yellow Flag Guide to French Polynesia, which has just been updated, and is downloadable for free from the homepage of www.pacificpuddlejumps.com.

— Andy Turpin
PPJ founder & director

Scientists tell us it would be virtually impossible for a cyclone to form near the equator. (Courtesy NASA)

