

SOGGY PAWS – 44' CSY Walkthru Cutter – 5.3' draft – September 2010

Subject Area: Pacific Crossing Considerations and Options

In September 2008 we had just passed through the Panama Canal on Soggy Paws, after a year and a half in the western Caribbean. We had been discussing how to cross the first half of the Pacific to French Polynesia and beyond for some time before that. Most Americans take but one season to sail to the Marquesas and then on to New Zealand or Australia. Based on the time I had spent in the Pacific while in the Navy, and what many circumnavigators had told us, we knew we did not want to rush through it in one season. It is a huge area, almost 8000 miles from Panama to Australia. It is also a paradise for those who enjoy warm weather, clear water, varied cultures, and great safe cruising.

There are at least four popular route options for cruising boats crossing to French Polynesia from the Americas. Each has advantages and disadvantages, and each requires different timing. Here are those that we considered:

1. Take the most well travelled route, the Coconut Milk Run, direct to the Marquesas from any of the US or Central American Pacific ports.
2. Sail to the Galapagos, on the equator, and then take the Milk Run to the Marquesas.
3. After the Galapagos, sail south to Easter Island, Pitcairn Island, the Gambier Islands and finally back north to the Tuamotus and Marquesas in French Polynesia.
4. Sail south to visit Peru and Chile. Then, the following season, leave from any of the South American ports direct to Easter Island and continue on as in option 3 above.

Option 1: By far the most travelled route is the Coconut Milk Run to the Marquesas. It is about 3000 nm, depending on where you start from, and mostly a broad reach or downwind. The best time for crossing on this route is March-April, as so that you arrive in the Marquesas near the end of the southern cyclone season. For most, this route will cross the equator and the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ).

Once south of the ITCZ, the sail will be in mostly E-SE trade winds. But there are no stops along the way to break up the trip. Once in French Polynesia, three island groups are normally visited: the Marquesas, the Tuamotus and finally Tahiti and the Societies.

Option 2: If crossing from the Galapagos, which is about 500 miles west of Ecuador on the Equator, to the Marquesas, it is also about 3000 nm. However, you will cross the ITCZ between Panama and the Galapagos, before heading west. If you want to spend some time in the islands be sure to check for current information. See our website for a description of our stay in the Galapagos from Jan-March 2010. Departure timing and the rest of the Milk Run comments in Option 1 above apply. Besides the obvious advantage of seeing the Galapagos, stopping in the Galapagos allows for repair work, crew changes, and re-provisioning.

Option 3: If you sail south from the Galapagos to Easter Island (27°S 109°W), it is about 2000 nm and mostly a beam reach. Because this trip takes you well south of the trade wind belt, it should be done earlier than the Milk Run in order to take advantage of the more settled weather during the southern summer. January and February are good months to leave the

Galapagos for this trip. Once at Easter Island, it is about 1100 miles to Pitcairn Island and then another 300 miles to the Gambiers. All three stops offer unique experiences. By the time you reach the Tuamotus, in April, cyclone season will be nearly over. If you have planned ahead and obtained a Long Stay Visa for French Polynesia, you have many options and can take your time in French Polynesia. With our Long Stay Visa we were able to spend our full 6 months in the Gambiers, Tuamotus and Marquesas. By doing this eastern part of French Polynesia backwards from the normal Milk Run route, we avoided the crowded anchorages and stressed provisioning. This route also positioned us for an easy sail to Hawaii in late September/early October for the upcoming southern cyclone season.

Option 4: For those that sail down to Peru or Chile first, it makes sense to leave from any port in western South America and sail directly to Easter Island. If leaving from Chile, the normal route is to stop at Juan Fernandez. This area normally has southeast trades, so it will be a broad reach to downwind run. From Lima, Peru the distance is only about 2000 miles, but this route sometimes crosses the High Pressure area that sits north and east of Easter Island, and you might find lighter winds. Once south of about 22°S, you are no longer in the trade winds. The most settled weather is in the Southern summer, January-March, so that is the best time to make this trip. The remaining comments in Option 3 above apply.

Even with a 6 month Long Stay Visa we felt somewhat rushed to visit the Gambiers, Tuamotus and Marquesas, especially with the superb Scuba diving we found in the Tuamotus. So we have planned to delay our progress west this year by wintering over in Hawaii. From the Marquesas, the last island group we visited, it is an easy 2000 nm, mostly beam reach northwest to Hawaii. We had 10-15 knots of wind most of the way and an easy ITCZ crossing (late September and early October). In 2010 we know of about ten boats that chose to go to Hawaii for the winter. About half of those left from the Marquesas and half from the Societies. For the return to French Polynesia next year, we will plan to arrive in the Western Tuamotus in mid April, and then after a month or so, work our way southwest to Tahiti and the Societies.

From French Polynesia westward to Australia the distances between stops are much shorter. There are many options depending on what you like to see and do. There are island groups on both sides and on the equator, and thus the opportunity exists to cruise north and south to avoid the cyclone/typhoon seasons. Since the trade winds are generally northeast north of the equator and southeast south of the equator moving north and south within about 20 degrees of the equator is relatively easy.

The following are a summary of some of the major issues that must be dealt with in deciding how to proceed west across the Pacific:

Immigration French Polynesia currently allows US citizens a maximum of 6 months in country during any calendar year. The boat can be in French Polynesia for at least a year, so that is usually not a problem. Despite rumors to the contrary, if you are an American citizen and arrive in French Polynesia without having made prior arrangements for an extended visa, you will receive a maximum of 3 months. There seems to be no exceptions to this rule, and the old trick of flying to Easter Island for a visit no longer gives you an automatic extension. If you want to stay longer you must plan ahead and apply for a Long Stay Visa at a French

consulate, well in advance of your arrival. This will give you up to 6 months in country. See the application details here:

<http://pacificpuddlejump.com/longstayvisa.html>

Presently, after your visa expires you are required to leave the country for more than 6 months before you can return. In addition to PacificPuddleJump.com, Jimmy Cornell's website Noonsite.com, is a great resource for the most up to date info on the constantly changing French Polynesia immigration regulations.

EU citizens fall under different immigration rules, and are allowed to stay in French Polynesia for 2 years without having to do any extra paperwork.

Tropical Storms: Tropical storm seasons are generally driven by elevated water and air temperature. Thus the summer months in each hemisphere are tropical storm season. During El Nino years warm water temperatures extend further east than normal and so even parts of eastern French Polynesia get Cyclones. Cyclone season in French Polynesia is December until May. Hurricane season along the Central American coast is June through November. There are no hurricanes South of Costa Rica in Central or South America. Typhoon season in the western north Pacific is June through November, but there can be isolated typhoons any month. Of the 5 island groups in French Polynesia the Gambiers and Marquesas do not usually experience cyclones. The Tuamotus, Australs and Societies do get cyclones but not often. The further west you go in French Polynesia, the more the risk of cyclones. The area within about 8 degrees either side of the equator is a safe zone for tropical storms and makes a good place to wait out either storm season.

ITCZ: The Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) is an area of disturbed weather, usually following the sun in its North-South meanderings, within about 10 degrees of the equator. It is where the northern hemisphere northeast trades meet the southern hemisphere southeast trades. This area has frequent thunderstorms and squalls of variable magnitude. Crossing it safely involves careful boat preparation, timing, and access to weather resources. A helpful option is to use a weather router or friend to give you daily information about storm cell activity from enhanced satellite pictures on the internet. One could even have them send you a cropped picture of only your area, which would be small enough to receive via Winlink, Sailmail or Sat Phone. There are many other weather resources available through Saildocs that will help you navigate this area safely.

We have posted some of these resources we found useful in French Polynesia and while crossing the ITCZ on our way to Hawaii on our website here:

<http://svsoggypaws.com/pacwx-understanding.htm>

There are many reasons for taking more than one season to see French Polynesia. Not all are obvious until one has been here for a while and talked to a few of the many international cruisers who have spent multiple years here. For those headed that way there are a number of good resources with detailed information. Among the best are the following:

Charlie's Charts of Polynesia-Charles and Margo Wood, 2005 updated to 2007, covers most islands from Easter and Hawaii to 165 west, good navigation info but not much ashore, great chartlets and anchoring info.

Guide to Navigation and Tourism in French Polynesia-Bonnette/Deschamps, 1999, nice color pics and chartlets, covers only selected popular islands, good info on navigation and ashore.

Exploring the Marquesas Islands-Joe Russell, 2000, lots of good detailed info for both ashore and for navigation, great chartlets, covers only Marquesas.

The French Polynesia Dive Guide-Kurt Amsler, 2000, nice glossy dive guide to 27 selected scuba sites mostly in the Societies, 3D dive site maps with many photos, rough locations for each site.

Soggy Paws' Tuamotus Compendium-Sherry McCampbell, 2010, an extensive island by island summary of all the information available on the internet for each island from cruisers' websites, blogs and forums, includes reference to guide book coverage when available, also includes detailed information on weather forecasting and sources, channel/pass current advice, and the best scuba sites. Download it free at:

<http://svsoggypaws.com/files>

At present, very few Americans spend more than three months in French Polynesia and only a few take more than a year to cross the Pacific to New Zealand or Australia. The major impediments are cyclone season and immigration issues. But in some cases it is just poor prior planning, for others it is just the rush to get west for one reason or another. And then there are those that just want to stay with their Milk Run group. Some international cruisers we have met have spent their entire cruising lives in the Pacific and say they still have much to see.

Options for avoiding storm season and delaying ones' progress further west in the south Pacific from French Polynesia include wintering in a number of places within 8 degrees or north of the equator, hauling out at a cyclone protected yard and tying to a strong mooring in a protected storm anchorage.

Cyclone season cruising destinations across the Pacific include such places as Hawaii, the Line Islands, Kiribati Islands, the Gilberts, the Marshalls, Micronesia, the Solomons, and Papua New Guinea. In French Polynesia there are a number of good places to haul out (some where they will bury your keel), including Apataki in the Tuamotus, and Tahiti and Raiatea in the Societies. Further west both Tonga (Vava'u) and Fiji (Savusavu) have strong hurricane moorings in well protected hurricane holes.

We have planned from the beginning to spend at least 5 years getting across the Pacific. For our second season we plan to revisit the western Tuamotus, then the Societies, northern Cooks, Samoas and finally winter on a storm mooring in the Vava'u group of northern Tonga. The third year we plan to make our way back through the Samoas for provisioning, and then through Wallis Island, the Tuvalus, and the Gilberts to the Marshalls north of the equator. Admittedly, since we are avid Scuba divers some of our itinerary is driven by the desire to visit the best diving sites. The Marshalls is one of these places. Our cruising plans and log are on our website at:

<http://svsoggypaws.com>

We hope some of you reading this will give consideration to planning a multiple year visit to the South Pacific. We think you will find this vast and beautiful area one of the highlights of any round the world voyage.

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