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A tropical beach scene with palm trees and turquoise water. The background shows a clear blue sky, several tall palm trees, and lush green foliage. The foreground features a sandy beach and clear, shallow turquoise water. A large, smooth, light-colored rock is partially submerged in the water on the left side.

ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

Jenevora Swann narrates an adventurous trip to the
Tuamotus in the heart of French Polynesia



With a multitude of coral reef atolls encompassing aquamarine water, secluded anchorages and miles of low lying coconut palm trees, you could be forgiven for thinking you'd arrived in a tropical paradise when sailing in the Tuamotus in the heart of French Polynesia.

Save for one thing. When it comes to exploring the South Pacific, the Tuamotus has a reputation among sailors that has long since earned them the nickname of the “Dangerous Archipelago”, due to the shallow, sharp reefs that surround the atolls.

Lying 930 miles north-northeast of Tahiti, the Tuamotus form the largest group of coral atolls in the world, covering a total area of 772,204 square miles, but with a land mass of just 328 miles.

Barely rising above sea level, all but one of the 76 atolls are low-lying and are made up of large fringing reefs and tiny motus (islands) that encircle a lagoon.

They are so difficult to spot, especially at night, it's no wonder their reefs and currents caused many a shipwreck in bygone days. Famous British explorers who ventured into the Tuamotus include John Byron, James Cook and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Heeding their 'dangerous' reputation, some cruisers barely deviate from the well-marked passes of the two largest atolls of Rangiroa

and Fakarava as they make their way southwest to the Tuamotus from the Marquesas or northeast from the Society Islands. Both of these popular atolls have marked channels to the main village, good provisioning and access to a 4G network.

Atoll Advice

For a skipper, the lack of landmarks and need for eyeball navigation, especially in locating narrow passes, can make entering an atoll tricky. Timing arrival to coincide with a slack tide is recommended as the difference in water height between the inside and the outside of the lagoon creates strong currents, which can result in standing waves in the channel.

While extra care must be taken when passage planning in the Tuamotus, especially when sailing at night, a confident skipper is all it takes to venture further afield and away from the mass of boats that gather in Rangiroa and Fakarava.

Once safely in through the various

ABOVE
Two Drifters anchored off Motu Hiraumaine

BELOW
On a mooring buoy off Makatea

PREVIOUS PAGE
A swimming pig at Tikehau

atoll passes, it's a different world in the protected lagoons beyond. But the dangers haven't finished yet!

A good light and someone on the foredeck are essential when crossing the lagoons to the anchorages, as there are many unmarked coral heads (known as 'bommies') just below the surface. From the flybridge of our Lagoon 440 catamaran, we had incredible visibility, making it easier to spot the bommies from the helm. But even so we had a couple of very close calls.

We have always had an intrepid curiosity for adventure, so armed with Google satellite images of the atolls, approximate tide and current times for the passes and reasonably accurate charts, we set off to explore the Tuamotus.

Makatea

Departing Huahine in the Society Islands, we motor-sailed 167nm to Makatea. It's not an easy angle from the Society Islands to the





Tuamotus, but we timed our journey well and enjoyed flat-calm seas and starry skies.

Makatea is unique in the Tuamotus as it doesn't take the form of a typical atoll. Instead, its spectacular cliffs soar 80m above sea level to reach a flat plateau, where the island's incredibly friendly inhabitants live.

Anchoring is impossible due to the depths and lack of a lagoon, but there are three free mooring buoys. Their proximity to land is quite close, so this is not a place to visit when the winds are in a strong westerly direction. Also, if there are no mooring buoys left, be prepared to head onwards to Tikehau.

Makatea spans just over nine square miles and offers great hikes and rock climbing. In addition to fabulous views and miles of sandy tracks, we discovered a large underground cave with a freshwater pool, which made for a very refreshing pit stop on a hot day!

ABOVE RIGHT
Snorkelling with dolphins in Rangiroa

BELOW
Anchored off Rangiroa's Blue Lagoon

ALL PHOTOS: JENEVORA SWANN



Tikehau

We enjoyed a fast 50nm sail from Makatea to Tikehau, with the well-established trade winds giving us a constant 17kts on the beam. Entry into the atoll is via a single pass which, due to strong currents, can be difficult at times, but we sailed in and out on more than one occasion without batting an eyelid.

Tikehau encompasses a large oval-shaped lagoon that spills out onto endless motus with coral-sand beaches, sheltered anchorages and little picnic spots accessible by dinghy. It's a charming atoll with a small tourist infrastructure, complete with a couple of supermarkets, restaurants and an organic working farm which sells fruit and vegetables at a reasonable price.

Rangiroa

From Tikehau, it was a pleasant 40nm day sail to Rangiroa, helped by a lovely 15kts of north-northwesterly breeze. This atoll has two entrances, many favour the Tiputa Pass, which is close to the main anchorage. This pass is also famous for its dolphins who love to play in the large waves caused by the fast flowing ebb tide.

Boasting its own horizon, Rangiroa is the largest atoll in French Polynesia and comprises 240 motus that string together for more than 110 miles,

completely encircling a deep lagoon.

Aside from its laid back lifestyle, the joy of Rangiroa is in the abundance of activities. Its vast marine life includes diving and snorkelling with sharks, manta rays, eagle rays and dolphins. At the villages between the two passes, there are a few restaurants, bike hire and a pearl farm. Excursion boats offer day trips to a beautiful Blue Lagoon, Les Sables Roses (pink sands), sunset dolphin watching and to a six-hectare vineyard based on a nearby coral motu.

With a lull in the wind, we set off on our boat to explore some of Rangiroa's highlights for ourselves.

Our first stop was Blue Lagoon on the west coast, which is the epitome of a Polynesian paradise. A small set of motus and coral reef make up a natural inner lagoon, which is no more than five metres deep. Its beauty is in the water colour, which is an amazing palette of blues, offset by sandy beaches and pretty palm trees.

Not many yachts venture here as the anchorage is unprotected and can be rolly. We arrived just as the last excursion boat had left, so were lucky to have this little slice of paradise all to ourselves overnight.

The next day, the wind picked up so we sailed across to the east coast which has a wide selection of comfortable anchorages, perfect for hiding from the wind and the swell during the trade winds. A dream to photograph, Les Sables Roses in the southeast corner is well worth a visit to see some of the most beautiful pink sandbanks in the Tuamotus.

However, the highlight of our visit to Rangiroa was snorkelling in Tiputa Pass with a friendly pod of bottlenose dolphins. They swam over and played around us like puppies, nudging and frolicking with each other and then posed for the camera. It was simply magical.



Fakarava

Fakarava, the second largest lagoon in the Tuamotus, is designated by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve.

The Garuae Pass on the northern side is 130nm south east of Rangiroa. The entrance is wide enough for cruise ships to enter and in light winds, it seemed easy enough to navigate at all states of tide. There's a pretty anchorage just inside the pass which is good for north winds and offers a degree of protection during westerly winds.

A few miles away is the village of Rotoava, which has a few small supermarkets, restaurants and a petrol station with a large dock. When the supply ships are due in, the anchorage gets busy as it's one of the better places in the Tuamotus for provisioning.

Fakarava is a world-famous diving and snorkelling destination. On the south side, the Tumakohua Pass offers an exhilarating underwater experience as it's home to the Wall of Sharks. Diving 24m down, there's a narrow underwater valley, heavily populated with lemon, whitetip, grey and hammerhead sharks.

Every year, around the full moon in June or July, groupers gather by their thousands to spawn in the pass. The sight is a spectacle in itself, but the activity draws out hundreds of sharks, all there to feed on the grouper.

While it's a vast atoll, Fakarava has some idyllic scenery with some of the most photogenic palm trees we've ever seen, set against a backdrop of pink-sand beaches.

From Fakarava, there are several options on where to sail to next, depending on the weather. Either wait for a favourable wind and head to Tahanea from the South (Tumakohua)



Pass, then you are well positioned to sail on to Makemo. Or take a day sail from the North (Garuae) Pass to Aratika, Toau or Kauehi.

At Toau, there's a convenient false pass on the leeward side, offering a well-sheltered anchorage with mooring buoys, and access guaranteed at almost any time as there's no strong outflow of water.

Aratika

Aratika is 36nm north of Fakarava. We got to the narrow West Pass – the only safe entrance for yachts – two hours before slack tide with the current flowing out of the pass, which was a little vicious. Being gung-ho we decided to go for it, which was quite exciting, but, it's the first time we saw how it could go wrong and were grateful for our two powerful Volvo Penta engines as we did 3kts speed over ground in through the pass with the outgoing tide running at 6kts against us.

There are a dozen large yellow mooring buoys – in good condition and free to use – scattered between

ABOVE
Garuae Pass
anchorage, Fakarava

BELOW LEFT
The East Pass
on Aratika

BELOW RIGHT
Friendly butterfly
fish in Aratika

the two passes and at the village.

Surprisingly few venture to Aratika, which is a shame as it's got so much to see, especially underwater. This atoll was responsible for my newly acquired love of snorkelling!

Drift Snorkelling

Drift snorkelling and diving are hallmark experiences of the Tuamotus. In much the same way as boats time their entrance in and out of passes at slack tide, those wishing to drift snorkel or dive will plan their trips on an incoming tide – partly as it's safer to drift into a lagoon rather than out of it – but also because the incoming currents are rich in nutrients, which is rather appetising for the underwater world.

I'm a strong swimmer but a very reluctant snorkeller. So, when I agreed to snorkel the East Pass at Aratika, I was well and truly out of my comfort zone. And yet, my experience was exhilarating.

Jumping into the dinghy, we headed outside the pass and got into the water with our snorkel gear. →





Towing the dinghy behind, we were swept back inside the atoll on the incoming current, with the most wonderful below-surface scenes whizzing by in full technicolour.

It was like being weightless in space as we drifted effortlessly on the beautiful but fast-running, turquoise water. Peering down was fascinating as we saw canyons, crannies and healthy coral, home to rays, turtles, sharks and a multitude of fish of all shapes, sizes and colours. They weren't remotely bothered by us, yet it felt oddly rude to be so intrusive, staring at them as they fed and interacted.

With the current moving us swiftly on our insight into their life was fleeting. Blink and you could miss a moray eel sticking his head out of his hidey hole; a white tip shark slinking along in the shadows; a manta ray gliding across the seabed, or a colourful parrot fish sashaying from side-to-side.

Ordinary snorkelling had never appealed, but this type of turbo-charged underwater voyeurism completely got me hooked!

Tahanea

A 48nm sail east-southeast of Fakarava South (Tumakohua) Pass is the beautiful atoll of Tahanea. With no inhabitants or phone signal, there's nowhere better to enjoy an 'off-the-grid' experience.

Tahanea is encircled by a fringing coral reef, 30-miles long and nine-miles wide. Once a designated nature reserve, it's now only visited by cruising boats. Many staying for weeks on end, enjoying the peace

and quiet, rare bird life, beaches and pristine diving and snorkelling.

With the anchor set, we surveyed our surroundings. Tall coconut palm trees swayed in the breeze, the crystal-clear water glistened in the shallows and a school of black tip reef sharks swam around the boat, eyeing up their new neighbours. With no land noise, the tranquillity was spellbinding.

In pursuit of a Robinson Crusoe experience, our first task was to forage for coconuts. We could use the milk in our drinks and porridge, and eat the coconut meat as a snack – delicious raw and sprinkled with herbs, toasted, or lightly fried. We also went out at night with a local farmer, visiting from a neighbouring island, to catch coconut crabs and lobsters for our supper.

Without phones and the internet to distract us, we suddenly had much more time on our hands – which took a little adjusting to – but we fell into an easy routine of cooking, reading, yoga, paddle-boarding and exploring. Not forgetting snorkelling – and we soon discovered Tahanea offers the best drift snorkelling in the Tuamotus.

ABOVE
Another stunning anchorage – this time off Tahanea

With no light pollution, at night we would lie outside on our catamaran's trampolines, mesmerised by the planets, constellations and shooting stars.

Tahanea delivered the perfect desert-island adventure. For a short time, the topsy-turvy world we currently live in seemed a million miles away, and our lives exploring this beautiful atoll felt incredibly simple, relaxed and trouble-free.

Makemo

Makemo is a little further afield in the central Tuamotus and an overnight sail from most islands, but worth the effort.

It was a 48nm sail from Tahanea to Makemo's Tapuhira pass, on the north-west side. There are a couple of anchorages within a few miles of the pass. Otherwise, it's 25 miles to the village of Poeheva, which is by the other pass on the east side at Arikitamiro.

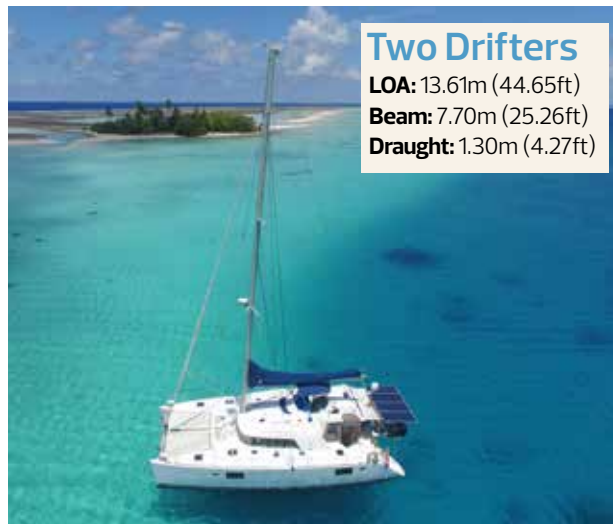
At Poeheva, there's limited anchoring but boats can med-moor to a long quay without charge. The village is one of the most charming and pretty we've seen in the Tuamotus and the people so friendly and welcoming. We also found a small pearl farm with a treasure trove of affordable black pearls.

On the eastern tip of the atoll, we discovered several anchorages with an impressive backdrop of deserted motus, swaying palms and incredible pink sandbanks that would appear at low tide.

Makemo's relaxed way of life and excellent provisioning – including fuel – meant we stayed for several weeks; venturing off-the-beaten-track to discover uncharted deserted anchorages, which was incredibly rewarding.



Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace were liveaboards on their catamaran *Two Drifters* for eight years. They sailed halfway around the world from Greece to Australia before pausing their circumnavigation in 2022.



Two Drifters

LOA: 13.61m (44.65ft)

Beam: 7.70m (25.26ft)

Draught: 1.30m (4.27ft)