

SAILING

into

PARADISE

COMPLETING
THEIR LONGEST
PASSAGE YET,
A CRUISING
FAMILY FINDS
THE MARQUESAS
WORTHY OF ITS
SUPERLATIVES.

Twenty-six days after sailing away from the tip of Mexico's Baja Peninsula, we dropped our 66-pound Bruce anchor and 300 feet of chain into 140 feet of water. It was the end of the longest passage we'd ever made. I'd not slept well the night before, and upon making landfall, I tried to record my first thoughts and impressions. I detected jasmine and gardenia and an earthy must in the air. I worried we'd never retrieve our primary anchor if it got stuck down there. Then, I thought of penises.

We'd sailed 3,000 miles to reach this place, a narrow anchorage cut into the small

The crews from *Te Ara* of Monaco, *Sept à Vivre* of Belgium, and *Del Viento* found the steep climb to the Bay of Virgins overlook on Fatu Hiva to be well worth the effort.



█ takes a stroll along the clean streets of Hana Vave on Fatu Hiva (right). Litter was nowhere to be found in the Marquesas. Local children loved to offer us fresh fruit (below right). Taaoa Bay on Hiva Oa is a port of entry for many sailors, and it's very well protected (opposite).



island of Fatu Hiva, smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It's one of a group of 15 islands that the Polynesians who settled here around A.D. 1200 named Te Fenua Enata, meaning the Land of Men. Locals still use this name, though the rest of the world calls these islands the Marquesas, after the patron of a 16th-century Spanish explorer. But in this bay in particular, where I was now recording my thoughts and impressions, the earliest residents thoughtfully considered the phallic spires of black basalt rising from the head of the bay and declared it the Bay of Penises. It was a place name befitting the Land of Men, but it made early missionaries uncomfortable, and they quickly corrected things. Today the French call this storied landfall Baie des Vierges, or Bay of Virgins.

Sounds exotic, doesn't it? It definitely stirs thoughts of a South Pacific paradise, rather than simply the first waypoint on a trans-Pacific crossing, as it is for most. Had I been given the task of naming this place upon arrival, I might have gone with Baie de Paradis, but I am no more to be trusted than the missionaries. After all, any port reached after 26 days at sea can seem to a sailor like paradise. So you have to wonder: Is this the reason for the superlatives often used to characterize the Bay of Virgins and other Marquesas landfalls?

The Marquesas are among the youngest of the South Pacific archipelagos. Not enough geologic time has passed for fringing coral reefs to have formed. Compared to the tranquil, turquoise lagoons of the nearby Tuamotus and Society Islands, the water off the Marquesas is rough, deep and murky. The snorkeling, diving and surfing here are downright unremarkable. Because these islands rise from the depths, raw and exposed to ocean swells that travel thousands of miles to crash on rocky shores,

even the best anchorages on the leeward sides are plagued by refracted waves that cause boats to roll uncomfortably. Dinghy landings are often either in surf or at surge-inflicted, inflatable-eating quays composed of jagged rock, rough concrete and rusted metal. When available, Internet service is slower than the average cruising boat, and the imported food seems to have been priced by a high-end retailer.

Still, we spent six weeks exploring these islands. We wished we had six months.

TASTE OF THE CRUISING LIFE

On the windward side of Fatu Hiva, the trade winds hit a tall ridge and pushed upward to form the moisture-heavy clouds that spilled down toward us as we dropped anchor. A rainbow arced across the sky. The topography of these young islands reflects the dawn of time; the exquisite drama of the islands' violent, volcanic origins has not yet been smoothed and worn. The mountainous backdrops demanded that I set a new bar for using words like "steep" and "jagged." At the head of the V-shaped Bay of Virgins is a rocky beach fringed with coconut palms and mountains bearded in deep green, reaching steeply for more than 2,000 feet.

I looked around at the boats anchored nearby. Nearly all were French-, Dutch-, or Australian-flagged. Most had stalks of green bananas hanging from the rigging and cockpit hammocks bulging with fruit.



I've seen thousands of boats in all kinds of anchorages, but this detail, combined with the backdrop, echoed the images I've returned to for decades, the ones of *Wanderer* or *Dove* or *Joshua* anchored in a similar setting, the images that for me define cruising. I was eager to launch our dinghy, go ashore and get my own stalk of bananas to hang in █ rigging. Maybe I'd bring a ma

Among the Marquesan islands, Fatu Hiva is remote and sparsely populated; about

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PACIFIC *Planning*

Though the long passage to the Marquesas is often referred to as a “Pacific crossing,” arriving leaves you only smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. For this reason, sailors who aim to cross the entire ocean in one season must plan to arrive in the Marquesas as the November-to-April South Pacific cyclone season wanes, to allow plenty of time for the miles still in front of them. For those who plan to hole up in the South Pacific during cyclone season, the schedule is not as tight, and a later arrival in the Marquesas is possible — and desirable if you want to share island anchorages with fewer boats.

Because the prevailing trade winds north and south of the equator are easterly, a passage to the Marquesas can be started from anywhere along the Pacific coast of North America. Each year, however, the bulk of the fleet begins its passage from either Mexico’s Baja Peninsula; Mexico’s mainland (Banderas Bay in particular); Balboa, Panama; or the Galápagos Islands. The northernmost jumping-off points are up to 1,000 nautical miles closer and offer better points of sail, but cruisers emerging from the Atlantic side of the canal usually enjoy a nice run once they hit the trades (and with planning, the Galápagos makes a good stop en route).



Even in paradise, there are chores. [redacted] pulls the laundry from the lifelines at sunset while anchored at Ua Pou (above). On Tahuata, three kids approached, and one asked for my camera to take a photo (right).

600 people are spread across three villages. There is no airport on the island. We’d dropped anchor in front of Hana Vave, the village at the head of the Bay of Virgins.

Upon landing, we received a Kafkaesque welcoming — that is to say, a jarring and disorienting one, especially for wide-eyed sailors stepping ashore for the first time in nearly a month. The tiny quay was empty except for a big, heavyset boy in swim trunks who barked at us sternly and urgently in Marquesan. We smiled and said hello. He pointed and grew increasingly agitated at our inability to understand him.

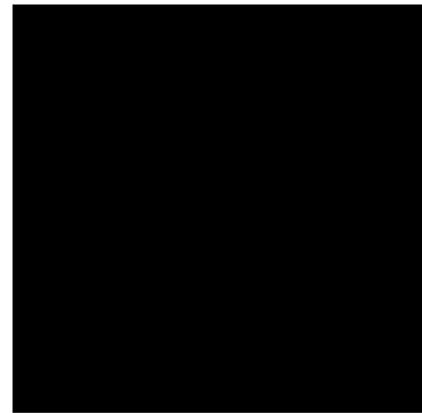
“Does he want us to move our dinghy?” my wife, [redacted], asked.

The boy began grunting. Then he began poking his index finger at [redacted]’s shoulder. I began to sense he had mental health issues. Salvation appeared in the form of a large woman walking toward us. She had a

green grapefruit in her hand.

“His mom is coming,” I said to [redacted].

I greeted the woman. She smiled broadly. I waited for her to rein in her son a bit. She didn’t seem to notice him. She locked her stare on me, her smile fixed, like a young girl in love. The boy poked us and grunted. Then we found ourselves in negotiations to buy her grapefruit. She thrust it at us. The boy was suddenly her English-speaking agent, translating numbers for her, poking the grapefruit. She only smiled and nodded. Now I began to sense she had mental



health issues.

“Let’s go back to the boat,” I said.

“No!” came the chorus from our daughters.

We treaded lightly with our girls in tow, wandering, taken by the smell of flowers and marveling at the trees and plants hung heavy with fruit. Our reception began to make sense. Who else did we expect to stand at the waterfront and greet us? There were 20 other boats in the anchorage, 20 before that, and 20 before that — we were just another dinghy-load of visitors in a season-long procession. The people of Hana Vave have no real need for visiting voyagers, and we’d long ago ceased to be the curiosity that early cruisers like Sterling

Hayden, Robin Lee Graham and Bernard Moitessier presented.

There was no litter anywhere. There were no signs either, and we walked up the narrow concrete road past a string of residences, a church, a school, a soccer field and a small but immaculate *magasin* offering a food selection similar to a 7-Eleven back home. Houses built by their owners stood on defined, ordered lots abutting one another, each with its own satellite dish. We offered smiles and a “*ka oba*” — hello in Southern Marquesan — to the few people we saw on a quiet Monday morning.

A woman in her yard waved us over. She said something in French. We looked at each other. She repeated herself, slowly. We heard the word *échange*, and she pointed to the grapefruit and mandarin oranges hanging from the trees in her yard. Our Mexican citrus was long gone and sorely missed. She motioned at a pile of five coconuts arranged in a pyramid. She held up a jar of viscous amber liquid and pointed to the humming hives at the side of her house. Then she pointed to the Teva sandals on our feet and said the word “*corde*,” while I flipped through our pocket-size French-English dictionary — *corde* (noun): rope.

We shook our heads no, we didn’t have shoes to spare, but yes, we had *corde*. I fumbled again with the dictionary and promised we’d be back in two hours. We waved goodbye — *au revoir!* — and made our way, greeting other residents, even arranging a second trade. Then we dinghied back out to [redacted] gathered things to trade and re [redacted] here, my backpack filled with an old halyard, clothing our girls had outgrown, and some of the children’s art supplies we’d stocked up on before leaving Mexico.

During the 10 days we spent in Hana Vave, our daily adventures took us about the island and our fruit hammock grew to bulging. We swam with manta rays next to our boat, we hiked to a waterfall that stretched to the sky, we made friends, and we learned we all love grapefruit. When we finally bid adieu and set sail on an overnight passage for the Marquesan island of Hiva Oa, we did so with a massive stalk of green bananas hanging in our rigging.

A BUSTLING WELCOME

The outline of Hiva Oa emerged before dawn. We pulled into Taha Uku, a small harbor within Taaoa Bay, or the Bay of Traitors. At the end was a rocky, palm-fringed beach where horses grazed on shoots of grass along a freshwater stream. Just over a headland is the city of Atuona, where about 1,500 people live — a Marquesan metropolis. Behind Atuona, Mount Temetiu rises to 4,000 feet. The tight

quarters and incoming swell required that we anchor bow-and-stern in the narrow cove adjacent to the supply-ship dock.

We wandered ashore on Hiva Oa, immediately feeling welcome. Right off the bat, people pulled over to give the four of us a ride into Atuona. In the tidy city hub, no larger than a city block, we found a bank where we could obtain French Pacific francs. A woman selling vegetables from her truck piled free produce onto our purchases. We strolled through a small grocery store, delighted at the selection, frightened by the prices. We checked in with the *gendarmerie*, passed a *crêperie*/Internet cafe, and met a French farmer and at last replenished the egg supply that had dwindled to nothing on our passage. Amazingly, on Fatu Hiva, wild chickens were always underfoot, but with so many other delicacies at hand,

no one cared to eat them or tried to harvest their eggs.

The French painter Paul Gauguin made his home on Hiva Oa. So did the Belgian singer Jacques Brel. Both men were buried in the cemetery. We found the museum that celebrates their works and has a reproduction of Gauguin’s home. Dedicated admirers make pilgrimages here, but as this modest museum is perhaps the largest tourist-drawing element, we found few other tourist amenities. There are no big resorts, and the single airport accepts only small planes that fly in from Tahiti, 850 miles away.

In a sense, every visitor to the Marquesas is an explorer, discovering a place that is what it is, for lack of a better phrase, absent any false vibe that comes from being catered to. Later, when we reached the island

of Tahuata, I asked a new friend we’d made about the meaning of the intricate tattoos that adorn the arms, legs and even faces of so many Marquesans.

“There is none. It’s just for beauty. It’s about art and our heritage,” he told us.

On these islands, we found that an appreciation for beauty runs deep. Women and even some men wear a gardenia or hibiscus flower behind an ear as part of their daily life. (They bloom year-round and drop from trees like leaves in a Northern Hemisphere fall.) Public spaces on every island are scrupulously clean, and art — paintings and weavings and woodcarvings — is everywhere, incorporated even into things like

Lush greenery greeted us on Fatu Hiva in May. We couldn’t resist exploring the hills outside Hana Vave.



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TOW, taken by the smell of flowers

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HUNG HEAVY WITH FRUIT.

public benches.

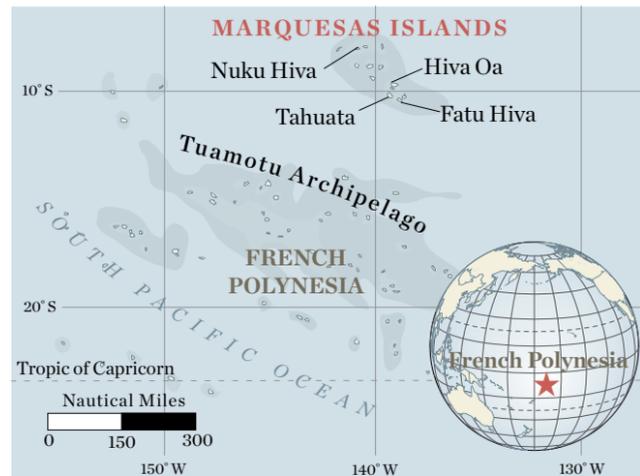
There is a pride in place and culture that booms from the Marquesans I spoke with. The Marquesan people live on land that provides. More food than anyone can eat falls from trees, runs wild through the bush and swims offshore. Fresh water gushes day and night from overflowing cisterns. Perhaps it's this bounty that somehow encourages and allows the Marquesans to keep their rich culture alive. Ahead of the annual Polynesian Heiva competitions, we saw people everywhere rehearsing for dance and music and outrigger rowing competitions. Women sat hunched over their *tapas*, applying ink to the pound-ed-out bark paper. Men carved pieces of rosewood and sandalwood by hand and with Dremels.

The Marquesan people are few in number and live on a group of islands that is not only in the middle of the Pacific, but a four-day sail from the nearest neighboring island group, the Tuamotus. They speak their own language (actually two, North Marquesan and South Marquesan); they have a history distinct from other Pacific Island groups; and for years, they've struggled to break free from the political chains of French Polynesia. I got the feeling that there is a conscious effort to prevent their culture from turning into a mélange of the dominant Tahitian and French influences. Say *bonjour* to a Marquesan, and despite the fact they're fluent in French, you're very apt to be corrected: *ka oba*.

VILLAGE LIFE

We topped off our fuel and water before setting sail for Tahuata, a sparsely inhabited island across the 3-mile-wide Canal du Bordelais. On Tahuata, we spent our first week exploring an isolated anchorage that Eric Hiscock ranked among the three most beautiful in all of French Polynesia. Hanamoenoa Bay is home to a Marquesan known simply as Steven, who lives a hermitlike existence. He fixes visitors with an intense stare, but get on his good side and he'll likely show you how he cultivates tomatoes just above the high-tide line and sets elaborate traps for wild pigs and chickens. Apparently fowl holds more appeal in this corner of the Marquesas.

We spent time anchored off the villages of Vaitahu and then Hapatoni, each with a stunning church and some of the most sincere, open people we've met in our travels. In Vaitahu we spent a couple of days getting to know Jimmy, his wife, Tahia, and their kids. They welcomed us into their home and took us on a hike to their property in an adjacent valley, where they picked tons of food and filled bags with eggplant, coconuts, mangoes, grapefruit and oranges for us to take back to the boat. Our kids and theirs hit it off, and Tahia's English was good. Walking past the local school, she explained that it only serves children up to age 10. At 11, Marquesan kids leave



CAPTAIN'S Log

If you see *tapas*, carvings or other art you like in the Marquesas, buy it. The cost of these same items is much higher in other parts of French Polynesia.

Outside the bigger towns on Hiva Oa and Nuku Hiva, trading is the preferred method to acquire everything from fruit to carvings to tattoos. Shoes and school supplies

are welcome, but by far the most in-demand item for trade is decent braided rope. Those old halyards in your lazarette are prized.

Wander off the beaten path. Get to know the villages on Tahuata and Fatu Hiva. Explore the more remote places on Hiva Oa and Nuku Hiva. You will absolutely find the adventure you seek.

home for boarding school on Nuku Hiva. Throughout the upper grades, they're gone from home for two-month stretches, returning for two-week visits in between.

In Hapatoni, we carried ashore photos taken by a cruiser friend who visited here in the early 1970s. The daughter of the late chief gasped when she saw them, recognizing family who were no longer living, and of whom she had no photos. She showed us carvings her husband made for export to Tahitian tourist markets, and filled bags for us with fruit from her trees while her kids and ours played with a litter of puppies. We

said goodbye and took off at sunset for an overnight sail to Nuku Hiva.

A LAST STOPOVER

Nuku Hiva is the largest island in the Marquesas and boasts the most populous town, Taiohae, home to about 2,000 people. Taiohae sits beside a large, picturesque bay in which 100 boats could anchor. Like most Marquesan anchorages, it's subject to a lot of roll-inducing swell. The bay is said to be contaminated with agricultural runoff, so we didn't swim. After watching fishermen dump fish remnants into the water near the dinghy dock one morning, and witnessing the ensuing thrashing frenzy of habituated sharks, we decided it was just as well.

When our Taiohae needs were met (food, fuel, water, butane), we skirted around to nearby Taioa Bay, better known as Daniel and Antoinette's Bay. It was to be our last anchorage in the Marquesas.

What a finale. The bay, nicknamed for a couple who were renowned friends of cruising sailors, is one of the most protected anchorages we visited in the Marquesas. Peaks and ridgelines wrap around it, staggered in their placement, exaggerating perspective and luring us ashore to travel a well-trod path along a freshwater river and up the Hakau Valley to the falls. Daniel and Antoinette are long deceased, but family still lives in this primordial setting.

The worst thing about the Marquesas is how nature and nations conspire to keep visits brief. We left after 42 days, lamenting the fact that we didn't have more time to spend on the five islands we visited and the 10 we skipped. We wondered about the numerous anchorages we never saw and wished for more time with the people we met. But the French enforce a 90-day visa limit for all of French Polynesia — five island groups stretched over 1,200 miles — and they make getting a visa for a

longer stay difficult. The Marquesas are remote, deep in the trade winds that blow in only one direction. Once a sailor continues west, a return trip isn't trivial.

But that's not to say it wouldn't be worth it. We'll be back.

_____ is currently e
bis family aboard their _____

As _____ reaches into Nuku Hiva's
Tai _____ r daughter, _____ can't
wait to dip her toes into the water.

