

Tuamotus: the unforgettable challenge

Tom Partridge and Susie Plume
experience this famous French
Polynesian paradise



PHOTO: TINE LEES

*ABOVE: Tom and Susie's Hylas 46 Adina on passage from the Marquesas to the Tuamotus
MAIN IMAGE: Adina motors through Kauehi lagoon with Susie on the pulpit looking for coral heads*



Ask any Pacific voyager where to find palm trees, white beaches and stunning snorkelling, and most will instantly name the Tuamotu Islands. The Tuamotus, 78 coral atolls stretched over 1,000 miles of ocean, are one of five archipelagos that make up French Polynesia, and an unmissable part of the itinerary since Susie and I began planning a round the world voyage on *Adina*, our Hylas 46. ➔



The only settlement on Toau is home to its population of two – the owners of Toau



'Happy birthday to you!' Well wishers help Susie celebrate en route to Kauehi

Sailors used to fear, and steer clear of, these low-lying, largely uncharted islands, swept by strong currents and only visible from around 8-10 miles. GPS makes them more accessible, though care must still be taken.

We sailed the four-day passage from the Marquesas to the Tuamotus with Danish friends on *Ansoba* and Brits on *Lochmarin*. Sailing in sight of each other, we talked on the radio twice a day, swapping navigation notes and debating the day's menu. Susie turned 34 during the crossing and they all radioed to sing *Happy Birthday*. Sailing in company is not only safe, but social too!

With winds abeam we flew towards the atoll of Kauehi. We'd read so much about entering atolls, about yachts losing control and being lost on the reef, so we chose this as our first one because it has a reasonably wide entrance, or 'pass', of 300m or

so – perfect for first-timers like us. The seas flow over the reefs, flooding the lagoons, and on the ebb the water rips through the pass so timing your arrival for around slack tide is critical – and difficult because tide tables are not common here. Our only resource was a spreadsheet, the *Tuamotu Tidal Guestimator*, compiled by a clever cruiser using what little data there is, and factoring in sea state and prevailing winds. We pored over it endlessly and decided our best entry time was 1100.

Our fast passage meant we would arrive around 0500, resulting in an uncomfortable six-hour wait in lumpy seas. Out came the spreadsheet again and we worked out we could also enter 0530-0600. Any earlier and it would be too dark, any later and the ebb too strong. We arrived at 0500 with the palm trees surrounding the pass silhouetted against the first light. At 0545 we went for it.

Heart in mouth

We increased the revs and charged forward – any skipper who says their heart wasn't beating in their mouth as they entered their first pass is a liar. Despite hugging the shore to avoid the worst of the ebb, our boat speed said 7 knots but our speed over the ground was just 2 knots. It looked smooth until we hit a patch of seething, boiling water and battled to keep *Adina* out of the worst of the ebb but off the beach. Ten minutes later we were through! Susie and I

raised arms in victory, relief and joy, then focused on our next challenge – a lagoon scattered with coral heads that could easily hole *Adina's* hull. We headed for our desired anchorage but the sun was too low for spotting coral heads so we headed off to Kauehi village through a locally marked channel and anchored off.

For the first time since Galapagos, *Adina* sat flat in the water. The winds still howled away at 15-20 knots but inside the reef, the water was flat – no more rolling! Smiles all round.

Next stop: the local village. The days of grass skirts are long gone, and today the locals have cars, phones and TV. But it is still a simple, slow way of life. There's a white-painted church, the one shop has limited and expensive provisions and diesel arrives every two months. Coconuts are farmed for export, but the main export here is pearls, specifically



Susie and friends rifle through a pile of black oyster shells in search of the perfect mother-of-pearl

treasured black pearls. We found the man who ran the local pearl farm and the girls rejoiced in hand-picking pearls and mother-of-pearl shells.

After an easy exit from Kauehi, we beam-reached to Fakarava aiming for the narrower south pass, just 110m wide at one point. This was more challenging with a dogleg to the right and some shoals of 2.7m – *Adina* draws 2m. We got the tides bang-on and entered on a flood of 1 knot.

We chose the south pass because South Fakarava is said to have the best diving in the Tuamotus, with the pass rumoured to be full of sharks. We lowered our anchor and when Tom entered the water to check the set he was joined by three black tip reef sharks and two giant barracuda!

Paradise at a price

Though stunningly beautiful, this part of the Pacific is not all paradise. A calm day is rare. That night, squalls and winds of 25-30 knots pitched boats anchored in coral and sand. The next day everybody confessed to a sleepless night. Those perfect days are indeed perfect but there is a fair bit of bad weather too.

The weather finally settled, the sun shone and we went diving. In visibility of 50m or more, we saw hundreds of sharks and coral reef fish, more than we'd ever seen. When diving, we take pictures and film with a GoPro, then identify the fish we've seen on board using our Pacific fish identification book. It's a favourite



Susie paddles in the warm, clear waters of the lagoon in South Fakarava, surrounded by dozens of fish. We saw over 100 reef sharks too!

pastime and makes the underwater world even more enjoyable.

Friends are easily made here and that night we all went ashore to the beach, lit a fire, enjoyed a few drinks and shared supper.

Next morning, we couldn't get the anchor up. Despite using fenders on the anchor chain to keep it above most of the coral heads, it snagged beneath one. It's a common problem in lagoons with shifting winds. I dived in with mask and snorkel to direct Susie on the helm, and eventually *Adina*, her anchor and chain were clear.

At 31 miles north to south, Fakarava is the second longest lagoon in the Tuamotus. We headed slowly north, stopping off for a couple of nights in simple little bays, days spent idly reading, snorkelling or doing a little boat maintenance, before heading for our last atoll: Toau.

Gone fishin'

We were joined by friends on the catamarans *Field Trip* and *Andiamo*; three boats, that's a race! *Adina's* early lead was given up when we sailed over a school of tuna. Our fishing line screamed out and the

lure snapped clean off as I tried to slow the line. *Field Trip* had the same experience. *Andiamo* however stopped with their catch on the line and started to battle. After over an hour, *Andiamo's* owners' son dived in and sealed victory with a spear gun.

In Toau, we sat in a shallow bay protected by a low coral reef – sometimes it was quiet but most of the time the wind blew strongly. The diving was superb again and we were ticking fish off in our guidebook left, right and centre. Most nights we hosted sundowners and caught up with friends, new and old but one night we went ashore to join the two owners of this little atoll, who hosted a wonderful meal.

Soon we were being drawn to the bright lights of Tahiti. Our supplies were starting to run low and an international island like Tahiti offers variety and economy, as well as news of the outside world. As we set sail for civilisation and the Tuamotus dipped beneath the horizon astern, we agreed that yes, the atolls had their challenges, but having done our homework, the rewards had exceeded our expectations. It's a place we will talk about for years to come. 🌴



Tom, Susie and *Adina*

Tom Partridge and Susie Plume met while racing round the cans in the Solent. They bought their Hylas 46 *Adina* together in May 2012, fitted her out for long-distance cruising and set off in April 2013. *Adina* spent summer in the Mediterranean, crossed the Atlantic in November and is now in the Pacific. Their blog can be found at www.yachtadina.co.uk