

Latitude 38

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WE GO WHERE THE WIND BLOWS



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TAHITI '98

It didn't start out well. Just a month before 32 readers were due to depart for *Latitude's* 1998 flotilla charter in Tahiti, a late-season hurricane raged through those fabled isles. Everyone wondered what, if anything, was left of our tropical



Memo to Patagonia: Mark Leon spent time in India and found the same type of clothing kept him comfortable on a charter boat in Tahiti.

destination.

A few phone calls put our worries to rest. Yes, there had been some damage to the islands. And we'd have to transfer to another hotel in downtown Papeete, as the one we had reserved was now full of guests from some of the more heavily damaged islands. But, we were told, this late El Niño-caused instability in the normal weather patterns was fading in the South Pacific as quickly and surely as it was in California. Sun Yacht Charters assured us that our boats were undamaged, the tradewinds were still blowing and the skies were blue.

Those famous skies hung low and gray as we filed off the plane on May 25 after a reasonably quick 8-hour flight from Los Angeles. After the chill of an extended winter, the tropical heat created an all-out assault on our senses. Following a slow and disorganized outfitting at the charter base and a short stop at Uturoa for extra provisions, we took off.

The first day's sail was a long, lumpy, upwind beat to Huahine. Well, at least we didn't need foulies. We anchored off the town of Fare and prepared for our first night aboard. I can't speak for everyone, but for the jet-lagged folks on *Watteau*, our boat, a good night's sleep was at the top of most people's list.

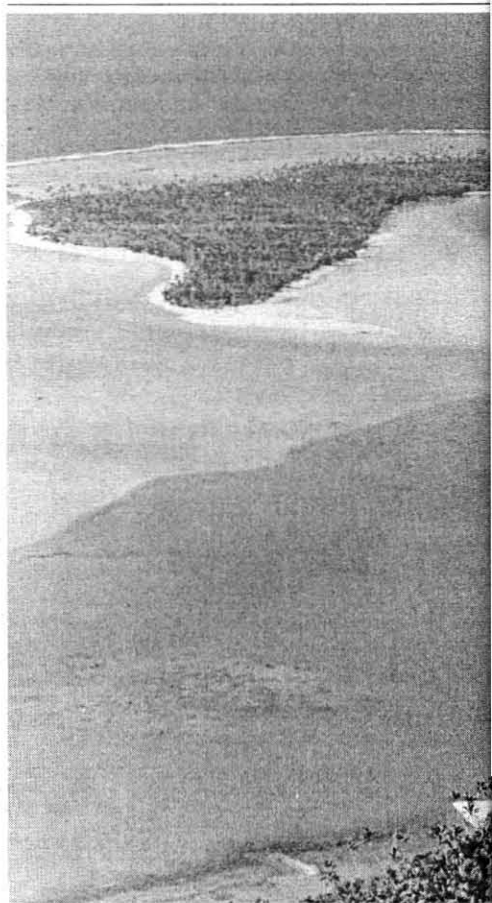
It was not to be. That night, another Niño-enhanced rainstorm hit like a liquid

locomotive. During the deluge, a cruising boat dragged down onto one of our fleet. The flotilla crew dashed topsides to find a naked man aboard their boat trying to release the windlass with a hammer while his hysterical girlfriend screamed useless directions and the two boats banged together.

As soon as he was disengaged and re-anchored astern of the fleet, one of our flotilla boats dragged off the shallow shelf into deep water, across the channel and onto the reef. Christophe, our able, French guide came to the rescue and brought them back to safe anchorage, fortunately without any damage to the boat.

And so started our flotilla charter with Sun Yacht Charters in Tahiti!

Fortunately, fun was rarely again such hard work for the remainder of our week and a half cruising the islands. As the week eased on, the weather settled into almost typical tropical patterns with periodic heavy rains at night and, for the most part, clear skies during the day.

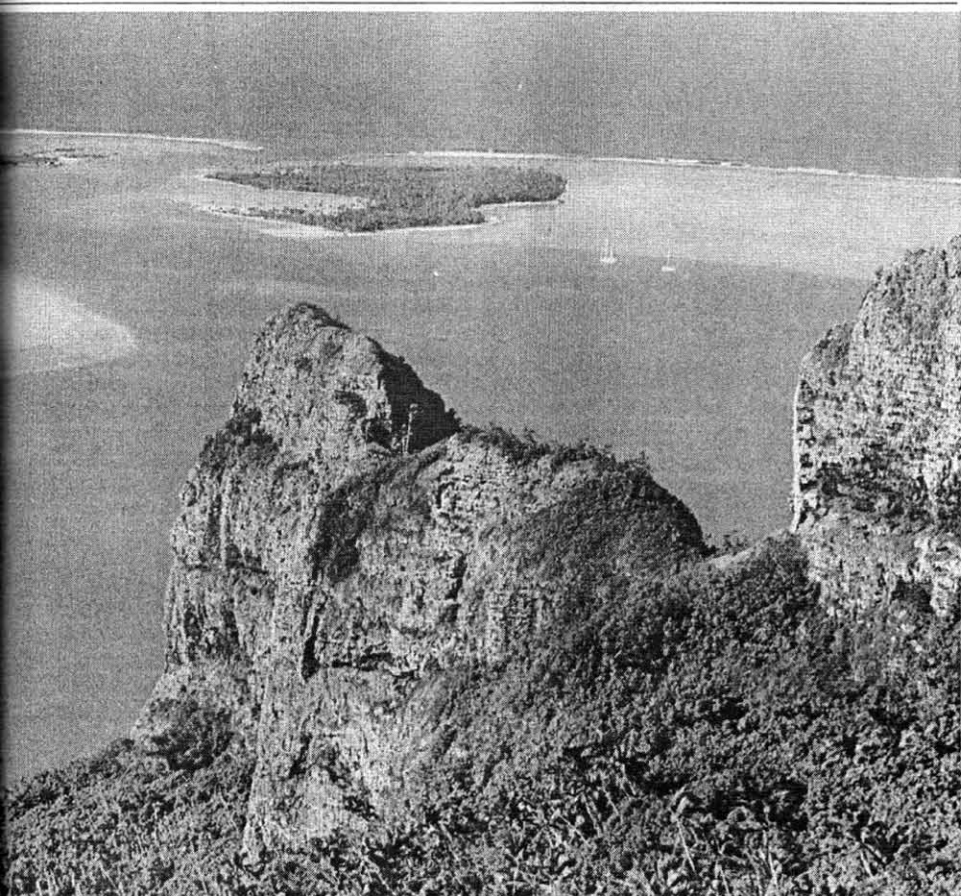


Wind varied from lots on our first day, to calm, motorsailing conditions on other days, with a little of everything in between. Needless to say, it wasn't long before our initial trepidation was dissolved by serene tropical sunsets, gentle breezes and comfortable evenings around the cockpit table with cold Hinanos, the local brew.

The seeds of this tropical vacation were planted many months ago when we told Sun Yacht Charters that we wanted to sail the Leeward Islands of Tahiti with a group of *Latitude* readers, most of whom were pretty experienced sailors. SYC planned out an itinerary that included the four main islands — Huahine, Tahaa, Raiatea and Bora Bora — plus the 'bonus' island of Maupiti. All have their individual attractions, Maupiti's being the complete lack of any tourist facilities. The island is inhabited solely by the native population.

This year's flotilla, only the second we've organized, consisted of five boats. Each sported private cabins and multiple heads for the six to eight people aboard. The fleet consisted of two Beneteau Oceanis 440s, *Valesquez* and *Watteau*, a

— FLOTILLA CHARTER IN PARADISE



Above, Maupiti as viewed from its highest peak. The climb was hell, but the view was great. Left, shore patrol in paradise.

Gib Sea 474 named *Caillebot*, our 'lead' boat, a Privilege 45 catamaran called *Nunki Star*, and the big boat of the fleet, the Jeanneau 52 *Spica*.

The charterers themselves ranged in age from the low 40s to 70 or so, and ran the gamut of interests, marital status and sailing experience. Many, such as John Etherington, Pete Boyce and Mark Leon, had already done tropical charters. But only a couple of people in the group had ever sailed the islands of Tahiti before. For Tom Roper, it was the first time sailing — period, anywhere, ever!

Most of our adventurers hailed from the Bay Area, with a few from Southern California. Long distance travelers included Roper, who hails from Tulsa, Miles Clayton from Bossier, Louisiana, Pat and Laura Moriarty out of Austin, Norman Steuer of Clear-

water, Florida, and three New Yorkers: George Czumaj, Lech Soleck and Hal Morse.

Having spent much of my sailing life on either racing or older cruising boats, I tend to think of myself as a hearty sailor who can tough it out on any leaky old cruising boat. But sailing on a boat with four double cabins, three heads with showers, tons of refrigerated space and lots of fresh water caused a severe attitude adjustment. Big cockpit tables, walk-through transoms, electric anchor windlasses and all the other amenities on these boats completed the effect. By the

time we left, I could barely imagine functioning on a boat without hot and cold sunblock applicators.

The rigs on all the boats were charter simple — roller-furling jibs and mast-furling mains. While it took awhile for the

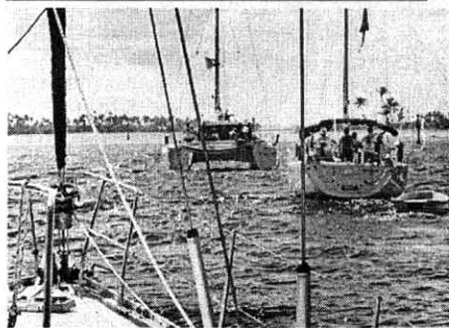
more race-oriented sailors to stop looking for flatteners, cunninghams and other go-fast goodies that weren't there, the ease of these lowest common denominator rigs soon had me and the other 'tweekers' relaxing in the cockpits contemplating more important things: SPF 15... or 30?

Which is not to say these boats don't sail well. They do. None of our fleet were more than a few years old and all the sails and gear were in excellent shape. While the racing contingent may have had to cool their jets a bit, everyone else in the flotilla marvelled at the quick pace and easy motion of these modern designs. In fact, one of the major beefs to come out of the trip was "I didn't get to steer often enough."

The dilemma of any foreign vacation, sailing or otherwise, is budgeting time correctly. If you go too fast, you end up wishing you'd relaxed more. Go too slow and you wish you'd seen more. Fortunately, the SYC folks have done enough of these charters to know the ideal pace and variety of stops and scenery that keep charterers happy and interested.

Our 10-day, five-island trip included one night sail (from Raiatea to Maupiti) and five sails of 20 miles or more. We couldn't really dawdle too long in any one spot, but at the same time, we didn't need to push too hard, either. On *Watteau* and most of the other boats, this worked out perfectly. Sun Yacht Charters even included a couple of 'slow days' in the middle, when we appreciated them most.

Of course, the schedules are not carved in stone. One of the boats in our fleet decided to skip the trip to Maupiti in favor of more hang time in Bora Bora. No



"Follow the leader, single file" — negotiating the tricky entrance through the reef at Maupiti.

problem — except that they missed one of the nicest stops in the South Pacific.

The sail to Maupiti began with a midnight departure from Raiatea. Under the gaze of the Southern Cross, we enjoyed a leisurely downwind sail, inter-

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John Etherington at the wheel of 'Watteau.'

rupted near dawn with a brief rainshower. Then, as we approached the narrow entrance to the lagoon, the sun broke through. As if on cue, dolphins surrounded all the boats for a playful performance. We were reluctant to leave them to head into the lagoon, but once inside things only improved.

Memories of Maupiti are a blur of brilliant blue water, palm-covered *motus*, long walks across shimmering water just a foot or two deep, diving with sharks, manta rays and turtles, an island feast, a Sunday church service highlighted by world class singing — all topped off by a glowing sunset. If we hadn't met them and taken pictures, it would be hard to believe real people live there and call it home!

The locals — about 600 people live on the small island — were the highlight for many of our group. "They were genuinely interested in meeting us and knowing who we were," said John Etherington. "The sing-along where they included us as fellow party-goers was really terrific."

In fact, the entire Tahitian population with whom we came in contact were extremely friendly. They cheerfully endure any attempted assaults on their 'native' French, and will eventually bail you out with whatever English they know. We had a need to hitchhike at one point (to save cab fare), and we were picked up quickly, once by a couple with a baby and later by an elderly couple. Trust and friendliness are abundant natural resources in these islands.

So is tourism. Everyone knew going in that Tahiti was expensive. But it was still a bit of a shock to pay \$25 to \$35 each for eating out at tourist restaurants. The upside is that it made it all the more attractive to be aboard a sailboat with our own provisions.



Left to right: \$2,660, \$3,260 and \$5,630. But it is duty free.

The food on our boat turned out to be just right. The burgers weren't as tender and juicy as those grilled on the backyard barbecue back home. But compared to any fast food joint back home, they were, well, cheeseburgers in paradise. Of course, the fresh produce, especially fruits and juices, made most of the California stuff look pretty bland.

Another popular and worthwhile dining option are Tahiti's famous 'trucks' that gather at many of the main town piers. In Papeete, on the main island of

Tahiti, for just \$7, you could get more delicious grilled fish with rice than you could eat. If you had any room left after that you could go to another truck and order a delicious Citrus Grand Marnier crepe for \$2.50. On other islands, brochettes of fresh fish were \$1 or \$2 each with servings of rice for \$1.50.

Adult beverages ran from \$2.50 a bottle for Hinano beer at a bar in Maupiti, to \$5 for the exact same size bottle in Bora Bora. (Oddly, Corona was available everywhere, too. But no one ordered one so we don't know what it cost.) Piña Colodas at the Hotel Sofitel on Moorea were \$8 each. That seemed a tad pricey, even if the coconuts were probably picked fresh that morning.

Here's a partial list of other prices found shopping: toothbrush, \$2.50; shampoo, \$4; five bananas at the market, \$2; cup of coffee or tea and a croissant, \$4; post cards, \$.50 each; French wines at the market, \$6-12. A round trip, half-hour ride on the high speed hovercraft

'Caillebot' on the passage from Tahaa to Raiatea. With the exception of a few light-air days, most of the sailing was like this.



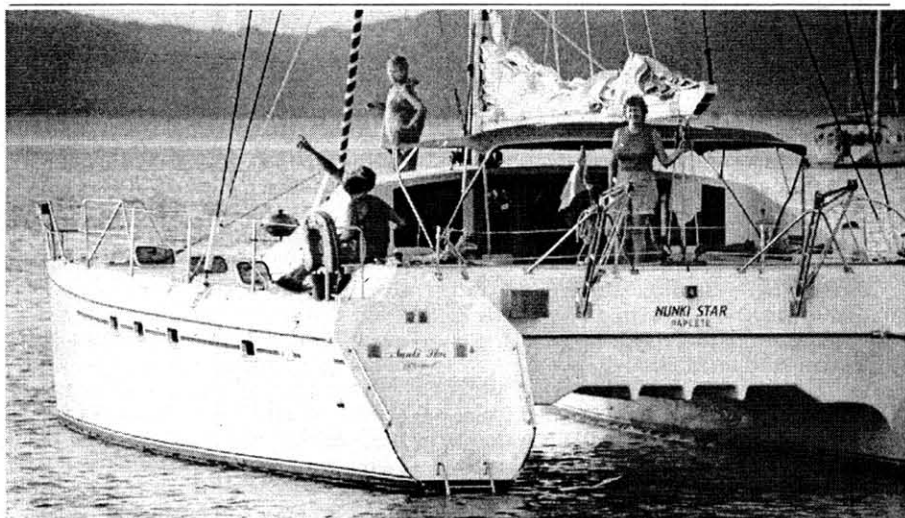
— FLOTILLA CHARTER IN PARADISE

ALL PHOTOS JOHN ARNDT

from Papeete to Moorea and back was a reasonable \$16 per person, while duty free Rolex watches ranged from \$2,600 to \$8,000 each. We have no idea if that's a good deal or not.

Of course, most people don't come to Tahiti to shop and eat. They come to sail, swim, relax and enjoy the real pleasures of these island jewels. And for those with the spirit, a sailboat is still the best way to see Tahiti. The weather and sailing conditions were kind enough to allow us all some great passages, and challenging enough to remind us we weren't staying in beachfront hotels.

Among Tahiti's Leeward Islands, the sailing itself is more upwind/downwind than the Caribbean, and can be boisterous. Once you arrive at an island, however, the area inside the barrier reefs is flat water with many nice anchorages close to one another. The anchorages vary from 60 to 90 feet deep in the more protected coves, to 12 to 30 feet in the



Watching the sun set over Bora Bora from 'Nunki Star.'

midst of large expanses of aqua blue waters. The windward side of Bora Bora, for example, had us sailing over three

mechanical glitches — such as the time we inadvertently filled the outboard with diesel fuel — he was always there. He guided us to the freshest *baguettes*, arranged dinners and answered the

THE REST OF THE STORY

While most participants considered the *Latitude* Tahiti Charter to be a success, the whole truth is that some went home happier than others. Part of the problem is inherent in any flotilla charter: throw a bunch of disparate personalities into intimate contact for 10 days and there are bound to be a few awkward moments.

Part was due to a lack of clarification of people's various roles and interests.

One example was boat captains. The charter company assigned one person on each boat to 'be in charge.' This meant he had the final word on where to anchor, how much scope to put out, how often to run the refrigeration and how much sail to set. Not surprisingly, all the different people on each boat had differing opinions on these issues, some of which were taken into account, some of which weren't. The most popular boat captain was one of the less experienced sailors of our group. He was always open-minded and amenable to the desires and opinions of the crew.

miles of 12-foot-deep water to finally anchor in 10 feet. While the sun is high, eyeball navigation is easy. Once it gets low, you have to be careful.

Another advantage of a flotilla charter is that the company provides a guide. Christophe, who bunked on the catamaran but was 'on call' for all of us at virtually any hour, was indispensable. From the first night when he pulled that boat off the reef to fixing the more usual

Another bit of friction arose as a result of differing financial situations. Simply put, some people on a strict budget wound up on the same boat with money-is-no-object folks.

Fortunately, these and other potential problems were handled by most of our charterers as they would be amongst friends. But not always.

While perfection is unattainable — even in paradise — we certainly want to get as close to it as possible. We're still novices in the flotilla charter game, but we've learned some things in the past two flotilla charters that we'll certainly apply to improving future ones. Next time, for example, we'll try to screen applicants more closely for compatibility, and likely arrange a revolving 'watch', in which everyone gets to be captain for a day. We'll also start the trip with a general meeting to make everything clear. We'll open lines of communication early — and keep them open.

numerous questions that came up along the way.

He was also our 'ticket' to the seldom-visited Maupiti, as the narrow, somewhat difficult passage through the barrier reef renders the island generally off-limits to bareboat charters without a guide.

Next to sailing, our favorite activity in the islands was snorkeling. In fact, the



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clear, warm water, easy access to coral heads, and colorful and abundant sea life made us reluctant to climb back aboard. As the week wore on, it occurred to me that most of the activities we enjoyed centered around the boats. While there were villages to visit, ancient ruins to ponder, and souvenir shopping to do, our fleet by and large preferred anchoring out, swimming, relaxing, snorkeling and exploring the miles of beaches. And reading — Sterling Hayden's *Wanderer* is a great read in Tahiti.

The most challenging aspect of the trip occurred ashore on Maupiti when some fool (well, maybe it was us) suggested a morning hike up the island's central peak. Six suckers. . . uh, *adventurers*. . . accepted and at 7:30 a.m., we assembled at base camp ashore. When our island guide failed to show up, Christophe rose to the challenge. "I will lead you," he declared, and off we went.

The first thing we realized was that there was no trail. We just muscled through underbrush that in places was almost shoulder high. The second thing we realized was that we should have

started at 6:30. Wow, was it hot! Imagine doing a workout in a sauna while sharp bushes tear at your clothing and you have some idea of how the morning progressed. By the time we came down at 9:30 a.m., I think we were all five pounds lighter.

Nightlife in Tahiti is not what it used to be in Fletcher Christian's time. As some of the single charterers discovered to their dismay, naked young women no longer swim out to greet boats. In fact, these days, Tahiti is better known as a honeymoon destination.

If the truth be told, most of our nightlife consisted of hitting the bunks early. With the sun setting in the Southern hemisphere by 6:30, we were usually all in bed by 8:30 or 9 and rising at 6:30 a.m. — about an hour earlier than at home!

Most of the charter group did manage one night out together at the Hotel Hibiscus on the Eastern side of Tahaa. For \$50 apiece, they put on an incredible local feast and show of native Tahitian dancing. The young Tahitian women in this show were so beautiful that the *Bounty* mutiny

suddenly made perfect sense to us. (Well, at least to the male contingent.) The feast itself left us thankful that the French ended up with these islands. An incredible variety of local foods are available in the islands, but the French have definitely added a flair to the cuisine that's appropriate for paradise.

Is there a sailor alive who doesn't dream of one day sailing the South Sea islands? If so, we've never met him or her. The reality is that most will never do it — at least on their own boats with unlimited time schedules.

Fortunately, a slice of the dream is only as far away as a flotilla charter. With sleek, modern vessels, all the amenities, the safety of built-in 'buddy boats' and the company of like-minded adventurers from all walks of life, it's the next best thing to being there on your own boat — without the long sail from the West Coast. We don't yet know when or where, but we're looking forward to a new *Latitude 38* sailing adventure in the near future.

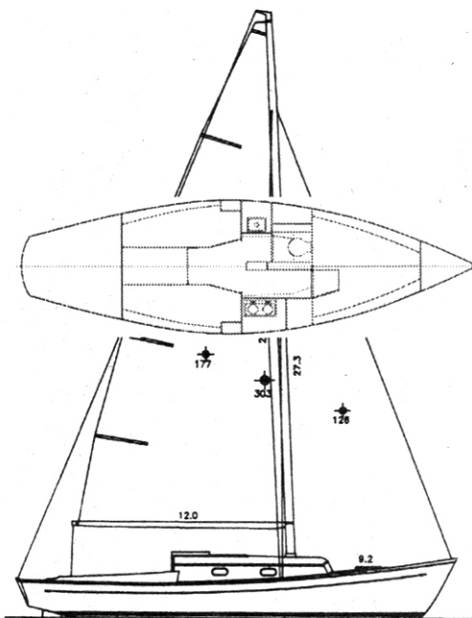
— john arndt

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