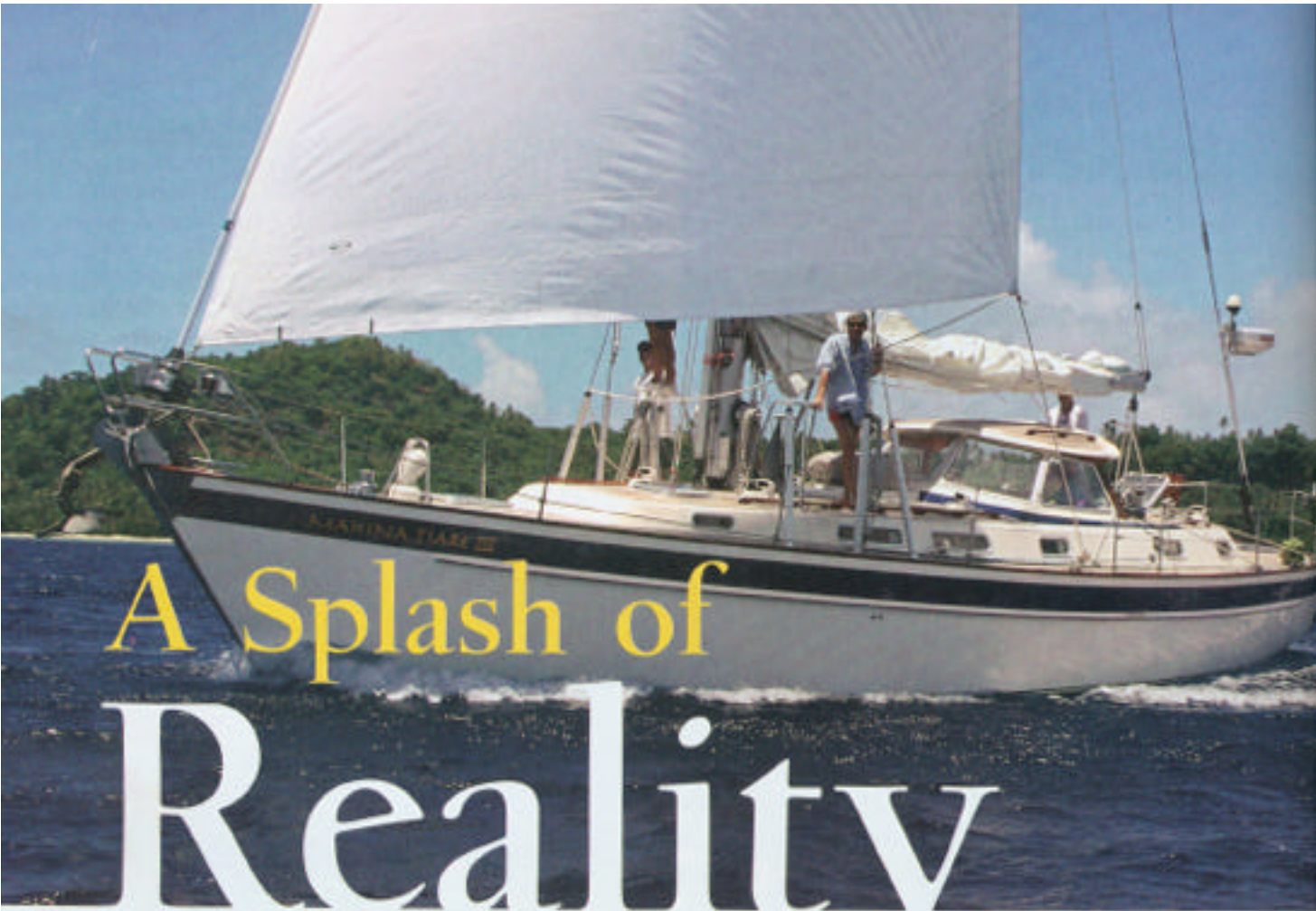




A Splash of Reality



BY WILLIAM DIETRICH

Take the plunge or dip a toe? A coastal-cruising couple takes an offshore course to find out if long-range voyaging is their thing

MY FIRST TROPICAL NIGHTS UNDER sail, en route from Samoa to Fiji in the South Pacific, provided just what Mahina Expeditions leader John Neal had promised: "the dream and the reality." The dream was a 16-knot silken wind under a sky so jammed with stars that it felt like we were sailing in the Milky Way. Flashes of bioluminescence sparked in the foam of lukewarm water as our 46-foot Hallberg-Rassy sloop, *Mahina Tiare III*, slid southwest at six to seven knots. With moonrise, the puffy clouds glowed silver, and each angelic dawn slowly turned this enchanted daguerreotype into a vivid Technicolor of the deepest blues I've ever seen. Toto, we're not in the Pacific Northwest anymore.

Reality hit a few nights later when the wind built to the low 30s, the boat slewed on 15-foot swells as I struggled to master the art of steering on the open ocean, and without warning, fistfuls of spray hit me in

the face. Aside from the sheets of foam that roared and hissed off our quarter, a lone light off Fiji's South Point was my only visual orientation. Fortunately, the dimly lit compass and GPS gave reassurance that we were successfully threading a series of reefs as we barreled down Fiji's Nanuka Passage. By that time, we six offshore-cruising trainees had experienced various degrees of nausea, heat, sweat, cramped quarters, and weary snatches of sleep in bunks rolling through the wash and rinse cycles of our 835-mile trip. Later, at the blessed freshwater showers of Savusavu, my wife, Holly, and her new friend, Barbara Evanish, compared bottom bruises from the rollicking close reach.

Cruising with Training Wheels

Both experiences were courtesy of an offshore-cruising training program that Neal has been running for 18 years, the past 10 in partnership with his Kiwi wife, Amanda Swan Neal. I marveled that we'd gotten a two-week sample of the fabled South Pacific and that



Scenes from the passage on the 46-foot "school ship" *Mahina Tiare III* (top left): Barbara Evanish (far left) trims the main, with a classic Arthur Robb 41 yawl in hot pursuit, on the passage from Savusavu to Ovalau, Fiji. Later, Roberto Pedreira (left) wrestles a yellowfin tuna onto the deck, and Bill Dietrich practices traditional navigation skills (above).



The Mahina Expeditions course covers all aspects of seamanship. Here, John Neal (above, right) demonstrates the proper way to deploy a drogue.

my wife had gone aloft, helped unbolt a water pump, and wound up enjoying the dogwatch. "That was a great trip," she later pronounced.

The Neals' goal is not just to prepare sailors for offshore cruising but also to help them make an informed choice about the lifestyle. While many of their students have gone on to cruise the world, half have concluded that long-term passages aren't for them—and saved a ton of money in the process. In other words, not having a great time can still be good.

Unlike many of the old salts who write for *Cruising World*, we're relative novices. It was just six years ago on our first charter that Holly had been apprehensive about crossing the four miles of Rosario Strait to an anchorage in the San Juan Islands, almost within sight of our home near Anacortes, Washington. We made it just fine, of course, and soon acquired

Outrider, our 1986 Beneteau First 37.3. Learning by book and by blunder, we explored the coastal waters of Washington and British Columbia, while the ocean remained the great unknown and a daunting temptation.

Before boarding *Mahina Tiare III*, I'd never sailed offshore, never sailed at night, never slept behind a lee cloth, and never sailed for any length of time in sustained winds over 20 knots. My navigation was usually by sight and by chart plotter. This would be my introduction to using radar, flying a spinnaker, tethering to a harness and jackline, and deploying a drogue. I viewed venturing into the cold North Pacific akin to falling off the edge of the Earth. With thousands of islands in one of the world's great inshore cruising grounds, why go offshore? Yet I was as enchanted by the tales of ocean passages amid tropical isles as any armchair sailor. What would it be like to go overboard on purpose and end up in balmy turquoise water instead of suffering almost instant hypothermia in Puget

Sound? Not to mention nursing a Pineapple Whammy with a flower in it, cavorting with little Nemo, or, better yet, carrying on with the female supporting cast of *Mutiny on the Bounty*?

A Jump on the Learning Curve

One alternative was investing months of money, time, and emotion outfitting an oceangoing boat, then heading out the Strait of Georgia, turning left, and possibly selling the dream in San Francisco, disillusioned by the realities of life under sail. It happens in real life more times than people care to admit. Or I could put my toe in the water, courtesy of Mahina Expeditions.

Based in Friday Harbor, Washington, the Neals offer an outstanding opportunity. Up to six crew join them for passages that range from pleasant island-hopping to weeks in the Roaring 40s, depending on what experience you're looking for. Along the way, the Neals, who collectively have racked up 400,000 sea miles from Antarctica to Alaska, teach everything from nav-



Chartwork (clockwise, from far left), engine maintenance, rig inspection, and sail repair: Crew on board *Mahina Tiare III* get a taste of many disciplines. They also learned firsthand that cruising requires effort to achieve self-sufficiency.



igation to diesel maintenance. The instruction is introductory and no substitute for hard-won personal experience, but it does shorten the learning curve.

At \$3,000 to \$6,000 per person (excluding airfare) for cruises ranging from 10 days to four weeks, the course isn't cheap. But if it helps a sailor to make well-informed choices, buy a better bluewater boat, or simply temper fantasy with reality, it'll pay for itself.

"We can't believe people pay us to do this," John admitted. "But one passenger said it let him have the adventure without the worry." Their boat is usually full, with crews that are about 60 percent male and around 50 years of age. Most are Americans, but participants come from around the world.

Besides Holly and me, our crew included Ed and Barbara Evanish of San Luis Obispo, California, who are currently sailing an Island Packet 380 and have a Tayana 48 on order. We also had two men, sailing without their wives, who met each other after immigrating to New

Zealand. Kim Korkman is a Finn with a 33-foot Najad who, as that company's new representative in Auckland, is moving up to a 40. Roberto Pedreira is an Argentine who recently bought a 43-foot Jeanneau. All of us were coastal cruisers wanting offshore experience.

Hands-on Lessons at Sea

We met the boat in Apia, Samoa, an unspoiled corner of Polynesia where the prices are cheap and the friendly people demonstrate—contrary to male fantasy—missionary modesty. Sailing to Samoa to find island temptresses is a bit like buying a ticket to the Playboy Mansion and being dropped off at Bible Camp: The population is religious, the women are usually dressed neck to ankle, and their brothers are built like football linemen. Sorry, guys.

It was also surprisingly hot. This was October, the austral spring, and Samoa is just 14 degrees from the equator, compared with Hawaii's 20. Temperatures would moderate by the time we reached

Fiji's 17 degrees of latitude, but during the first full day on board, the cockpit temperature peaked at 105 F in full sunlight. Lesson No. 1: It's hot in the tropics. Our group met the Neals on a Sunday evening for orientation, then boarded at 1200 on Monday, drawing lots for berths. The owners get the stern cabin, while Holly and I drew bunks, Ed and Barb the V-berth, and Kim and Roberto slept in the main saloon. Even though *Mahina Tiare III* has twice the displacement of our boat, having eight adults aboard kept things intimate.

The Neals also understandably demanded that we take care with their prize, and the payoff for the fussiness is that their 8-year-old boat looks brand-new. Their maintenance is inspirational. After a quick orientation, we were underway by 1600, though the unfamiliar rigging took some getting use to. Lesson No. 2: Boats aren't as intuitive as rental cars.

Lesson No. 3 is that the sea is lumpy, and my experiment at forgoing seasick medicine ended within an hour of clear-

ing the breakwater. Kim had brought Stuger, unavailable in the United States, a remedy that proved highly effective at getting my nausea under control. Fortunately, I lost neither lunch nor dignity, and Amanda provided some perspective when I commented on the six-foot swells. "This is flat," she announced disdainfully after poking her head out the companionway, ducking back down to cook dinner. This is flat? Well, you do get used to it, and night did bring its magic. Where had all those stars been hiding? My world had become a few square miles of visible water, and the Universe.

While most cruisers use a windvane or autopilot, the Neals insist that crewmembers hand steer a compass course, a valuable experience that takes real concentration. We plotted a course,



set GPS waypoints, kept a log, studied pilot charts—I'd never seen these before—and generally began to master the rudiments of ocean navigation. We also hoisted the asymmetric spinnaker, set a preventer, poled out the genoa, practiced reefing, and began a round of classes, watches, and chores. The Neals are good teachers, with John giving the only explanation of marine weather charts I've ever understood. He eliminates the meteorological gibberish and gets to the point.

Odds and Ends to Fix

Particularly interesting to me was crewing on a brand of boat I'd long admired, Hallberg-Rassy. I came away impressed with its quality and logic, recognized that like all boats it has its quirks, and enjoyed trying what to me were new features: a center cockpit, hard dodger, mast pulpits, swim step, and so on. One surprise was that a 46-footer not only had incredible solidity, speed, and storage but also required big lines, rigging, and hardware to



The best part of the experience is learning by doing, as the crew discovered during one of the many anchoring drills the Neals conducted during the cruise (above). *Mahina Tiare II's* voyage from Apia, Samoa (left), to Viti Levu, in the Fiji Islands, covered 835 miles.

A Movable Town

At anchorages, there was no generalization to be made about successful cruisers. Boats were big and small, new and old, spotless and begrimed. Some had wind and solar power; others didn't. (The Neals, stressing simplicity, use an oversize alternator on their main engine to recharge their batteries, motoring about an hour a day.) The only constant seemed to be the determination of cruisers to just go. Visiting nine different islands, we spent two weeks covering a stretch of ocean we'd crossed by plane in about two hours: Samoa, Faioa, the Iles Wallis, Nukutapo, the Iles de Horne (Futuna), Vanua Levu, Ovalau, Leleuvia, and Viti Levu. Besides the subjects already mentioned, classes included safety-equipment choices, knots and lines, going aloft, sail repair, anchoring, storm tactics, winch servicing, communication options, medicine, and celestial navigation. Time and again, trying rather than just reading about equipment took away my angst and made everything much more tangible and accessible. Fitting out for an ocean passage is a quantum leap, but a sextant isn't as mysterious as you think, once you use one.

And how was paradise? Some islands fit every fantasy, like tiny Nukutapo, with its religious shrine on top and marvelous reef just yards from a sandy beach. At the old whaling town of Levuka, John's friend Joseva Drege invited us to his home to enjoy kava, a South Pacific social drink, with his charming family. At each island, flowers erupted, birds darted, and water shimmered in

handle that much weight: Casually releasing a sheet without using the winch as a brake almost took my arm off.

Perhaps a roller-furling main and electric winches would change my mind, but even if I could afford a big yacht, I think I'd prefer a smaller boat for a couple, say 40 feet. This brief experience also made me agree with the oft-repeated advice to choose a fast boat that points well, as the Hallberg-Rassy did. Even going downwind in the trades, we had two or three occasions when good closehailed performance was important. Blimey, I've come 7,000 miles and the wind is still on the nose!

I also learned that no boat, no matter how fine, is maintenance-free. During our two weeks, the boom-vang links broke twice before Amanda rebuilt the entire system. The mainsail slides had to be repaired, and a leaking water pump was replaced. Cruising, I realized, is a job, not just an adventure. A good job, yes, but self-sufficiency takes effort.



countless shades of turquoise.

At other times, the South Pacific was hot, squally, and sleepy. While cruisers insisted they were busy, it was sometimes hard to understand how. I had to remember that our crowded classroom was an experience very different from cruising on your own. Parts of our voyage were hot or uncomfortable, and unlike the relentless cheer of some tours, the Neals don't try to romanticize ocean cruising. "I don't even know if I like sailing," Amanda remarked with deliberate irony at one point, despite a lifetime of the sport that included Whitbread round-the-world racing. "No one likes long ocean passages," John added later. "They are a means to an end."

That end was exquisite anchorages, spectacular snorkeling, lush beauty, and a rhythm so laid-back that one cruiser in Savusavu called it "cruise-heimer's," a play on Alzheimer's. There is a true cruiser's community, and joining is like moving to a small moveable town.

But there's a price.

Not Everybody's Cup of Tea

Our leg had unusual psychological baggage in that we pushed hard to get to Faioa in time for Amanda's 40th birthday—she clearly was having midlife musings—and then she met her parents on a companion boat, *Swanhaven*, after a separation of two years. One benefit of her reunion was to remind us that the emotional side of liveaboard cruising can be more of a challenge than the sailing. Anybody can get to Tahiti, given the desire. "Cruising is much safer than driving,"

said charming Robert Swan, Amanda's father. "If you look at the chart, there's only a very small percentage of the ocean that's less than two meters deep, isn't there? All you have to do is stay away from those two-meter places."

In retrospect, our trip didn't get the same kind of approval from all parties, depending upon what their expectations were. The voyage was particularly valuable to Holly and Barbara, who were required to do things they normally would leave for their husbands and who came away with a new level of confidence. Even if we never cross oceans, the experience of this trip will make us more ambitious and competent. Kim and Roberto, by contrast, expressed disappointment. Both wanted more in-depth instruction. Kim admitted that he was bored with the slow pace of the passages and the islands, and Roberto chafed at being crew instead of skipper and wanted a chance to experiment and make mistakes. "Do that in your boat, not mine," John replied.

Ed and I were quite satisfied and found sailing as couples, with another couple, to be ideal. The Neals are good teachers for first mates. But here's some advice from my perspective: This is a course aimed at intermediate sailors. Those who already have extensive offshore experience will probably find its broad coverage of topics too elementary. You should consult with Mahina on which leg will be best—our combination of overnight passages and frequent island stays was ideal for us, but someone already committed to offshore cruising might prefer the more difficult

With a reef in the main and the crew tucked under the hard dodger, Holly Dietrich braves the elements while steering *Mahina Tiare III* on a rollicking reach as the speedo nudges nine knots.

and longer ocean passages. Read past trip logs on Mahina Expedition's website (www.mahina.com). Come with goals, questions, and flexibility.

The trip isn't a crewed charter, it's a school, and you're a hand, not the skipper. The food is good but simple. The Neals don't drink, and *Mahina Tiare III* is a dry boat, without even coffee. The sole beverage is tank water, and I got so tired of it that in desperation I bought some Tang—and I don't even like Tang.

Also, while recognizing what a balancing act the Neals have as captain, cook, teacher, guide, host, equipment reviewer, and owner, I felt they could have benefited from a mechanism for mid-trip feedback. This might have defused some of Kim and Roberto's frustration.

That said, this voyage for me was one of the memorable high points of my travels: exotic, instructional, and fun. The bottom line is that for anyone seriously considering full-time cruising, this is a wonderful and sobering introduction to a radically different lifestyle.

Plunge if you prefer. Me, I like to put my toe in.

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