

Under a Spell in Paradise

Complacency is one of the most hazardous aspects of cruising. You can't see it, you can't predict it, and it follows you around wherever you go, whether you're on a rough passage, becalmed, motoring, sailing or anchored in an idyllic lagoon. It's a constant threat.



Since setting out years ago, Neville and Catherine Hockley have logged 22,000 sea miles, most of them sublime.

Ironically, the longer you cruise and the more adept you become at making the right decisions, the more dangerous it can get because you might, out of complacency, make the wrong decisions. It disguises itself behind experience and confidence, quietly building until one day you reach your limit, and find yourself doing something utterly regrettable.

I've always considered myself a relatively cautious sailor. If something doesn't feel quite right — a weather window, an approaching squall or a tight anchorage — we either remove ourselves entirely from the situation or take steps to reduce our risk, securing ourselves and *Dream Time*, our 1981 Cabo Rico, so we can endure whatever's coming with a modicum of comfort and control. But it seems that over the five years we've been cruising and the 22,000 sea miles we've covered, my wife, Catherine, and I have gradually drifted away from our rational

rhumb line into increasingly dangerous waters, by embarking on passages, exploring atolls and squeezing into anchorages that a few years ago we'd have gone to great lengths to avoid.

We've certainly had our share of surprises on this circumnavigation, which is to be expected: Unavoidable weather systems have popped up; boat gear has failed, usually when we least wanted it to; uncharted bommies, or waves breaking over coral, have shown themselves only at the last second; and secure anchorages have suddenly transformed themselves into foam and white water.

These situations are rare and are usually nothing more than a lively inconvenience, setting off conditions that, using our experience and a little common sense, we have confidently and safely sailed ourselves away from. But recently we found ourselves doing quite the opposite, sailing into one of the worst situations we've ever experi-



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The author, a graphic designer, manipulated this image to show the type of conditions the boat faced in the narrow pass.

enced. Our complacency was to blame, and it could have cost us *Dream Time*, or much worse.

For five months we've been happily exploring the Tuamotu Archipelago of French Polynesia in the South Pacific Ocean. Known to early mariners as the Dangerous Archipelago — with low-lying islands and hidden reefs, an extensive network of atolls scattered over 400,000 square miles of ocean, strong currents between atolls, and ripping tides funneling in and out of narrow passes — its name is well deserved.

Over the years and with the introduction of auxiliary engines, GPS systems, leading lights, channel markers, tide tables and cruising guides, many sailors now choose to head into the Tuamotus, rather than around them. Black symbols for wrecked ships, like crooked tombstones, mark many reefs on the charts here, reminding us that while beautiful, these atolls can still be unforgiving, especially if you let your



Dream Time, the Hockleys' 1981 Cabo Rico, moves through open seas and fair winds with balance and easy motion.

be felt for up to 2 miles out to sea. And because of complacency we left right in the middle of it, at the worst possible time imaginable.

To appreciate why we made this decision, you should first understand our circumstances. For over a week we'd been anchored inside the lagoon, in the very southeastern corner. It was a perfectly

knots, kite surfing over a flat lagoon, chasing blacktip sharks in sandy shallows. In the evenings we'd lounge in the glow of a crackling driftwood fire on the beach, with *Dream Time's* anchor light, the only one in the lagoon, lost among the stars. We felt like we had the world to ourselves; we were relaxed, comfortable; we were at home.

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guard down.

We let ours down in the atoll of Toau, or more precisely, leaving Toau on a day when ebbing currents ripping out of Passe Otugi were colliding head on with strong east-southeast trade winds and heavy ocean swell. It was a force of energy that rose up from a depth of over 1,000 feet to less than 30 feet in just a few boat lengths. The result was a maelstrom of powerful swirling eddies, walls of water, breakers, sudden troughs and a powerful corridor of mayhem that can, incredibly,

calm and idyllic spot, an area protected from the strong wind and seas behind a natural barrier of sandy motus and bending palm trees. And it was our fourth time in Toau, in a neighborhood of the Tuamotus that we first visited in 2009, an area that feels almost as familiar to us now as Long Island Sound back in New York.

We spent our days taking lazy walks around the uninhabited motus in search of shells, snorkeling with friendly reef fish and, when the wind was blowing 20

The GRIB files showed enhanced trade winds blowing for three days before dipping south and easing to a more civilized 10 to 15 knots, a better time to transit the east-facing Passe Otugi. But with our supplies of produce running low, and with the *Cobia*, a supply ship that makes weekly visits to the Tuamotus from Tahiti, scheduled to deliver stockpiles of fresh fruit and vegetables and boxes of Bordeaux to Fakarava, an atoll a mere 14 miles to the south, well, the lure was too great. And so ignoring

our instincts to wait for more favorable conditions, we set off the next morning.

The short 3-mile sail from our anchorage inside the lagoon up to the pass was deceptively pleasant, and in the lee of the islands, *Dream Time* coasted comfortably along on flat waters under a reefed mainsail in 15 knots of wind that spilled over the palm trees. We had convinced ourselves, prematurely, that the weather was OK, but as we cleared the last motu and approached the pass we were surprised by the conditions: wind gusting to over 20 knots, heavy ocean swell colliding with the reef, and breaking seas lined up across the outside of the pass. Rather than do the prudent thing and return to our anchorage or, at the very least, anchor inside the pass and wait for a favorable tide, we chose to ignore our voice of reason. Complacency was in control.

As we motorsailed into the pass, our speed over ground rapidly increased to 9 knots, time slowed, and for five long minutes we were trapped in a roaring riptide of churning white water. We met the first standing waves, one that broke over our bow while, alarmingly, another rose up and crashed over our quarterdeck and into the cockpit. We were stuck in a trough higher than our coach roof with little rudder control, beginning to broach, and it was too late to turn around. Surf broke with no order, sequence or concern. Rather than floating, it felt like *Dream Time* was falling from the lagoon. And it was

POINT OF VIEW

terrifying. We don't have any photos of the conditions, but it is an experience we shall never forget: how the strong counter eddies against the tidal flow tried to drag us back toward the reef; the involuntary shaking of hands locked against the helm; the shock, fear, utter disbelief of our decision; and the numb realization that our life jackets were still inside the lazarette.

The chaotic conditions outside Passe Otugi were without doubt the most intense and dangerous we have encountered on *Dream Time*. We survived without damage or injury and attribute this primarily to our strong, heavy displacement and well-maintained vessel. We made very few sensible decisions during this ordeal, but having a reefed mainsail,

using the engine to maintain speed, and keeping *Dream Time* on a steady heading gave us just enough stability and control to prevent her from broaching.

The next morning, anchored safely inside Fakarava with the wind blowing heavily from the southeast, and still shaken from our experience the day before, we received a DSC distress signal over VHF. We checked the coordinates that scrolled across our radio's display against a chart and realized that the vessel that required assistance was outside Passe Otugi, in exactly the position we'd been caught in the day before. Anxious replies were transmitted and repeated attempts were made by cruisers inside the anchor-

age to contact the vessel in distress, but conditions were too hazardous to venture outside, and while all radios were monitored, disturbingly nothing more was heard from the vessel.

Our experience transiting Passe Otugi was completely unnecessary, and humbling, yet we are fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from our ordeal without consequences.

We've met many cruisers over the years who've shared with us experiences similar to our own and the lessons they learned. A few, regrettably, were so traumatized that they chose to return home, and sadly one sailor, a man who we met in the Marquesas, lost his vessel, and very nearly his life, due to complacency.

Many who read this will be muttering to themselves and shaking their heads in amazement at our obvious stupidity. And they have every right to; I once would have reacted the same way. Sadly, however, this is a lesson that often can only be truly understood by those who've confronted their own complacency.

And to those who are yet unable to relate, take heed and try not to judge us too harshly, for this is a cautionary tale. If you remember the lesson of it, it may one day save you from making the same mistakes.

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Read more about the sailing adventures of Neville and Catherine Hockley aboard Dream Time at their website (www.zeroXTE.com).



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