

# The hard way to paradise

Neville Hockley endures gale-force winds, 30ft seas and a broken forestay, but the destination is worth it

PHOTOS: NEVILLE HOCKLEY



Reefs in the main and headsail as the winds pick up

With the South Pacific cyclone season over and the Tasman Sea delivering an early winter gale, the docks in Opuā, New Zealand's most northerly port of departure, lie empty. The vast majority of visiting cruisers have long since left for the warm tropical anchorages to the north.

Rather than joining the fleet, my wife Catherine and I, on our 38ft 1981 Cabo Rico, *Dream Time*, have decided that before continuing west on our circumnavigation, we'll revisit an area that we transited in 2009, during our first South Pacific crossing. A vast region covering over one million square nautical miles of ocean, home to hundreds of remote coral atolls, dramatic volcanic islands and tranquil lagoons, a paradise responsible for arousing the imagination of sailors for centuries – French Polynesia.

We anticipate this will be our toughest passage since leaving New York four years ago. Sailing east from New Zealand to Tahiti means more than 2,000 nautical miles against prevailing Trade Winds and currents, with a high probability of gales. We spend seven weeks preparing and waiting for a weather window, but are anxious about sailing into an area of the South Pacific that feels more isolated and unforgiving than any we've sailed before.

## Day 1 – Departure

**(35° 12' South / 174° 12' East)**

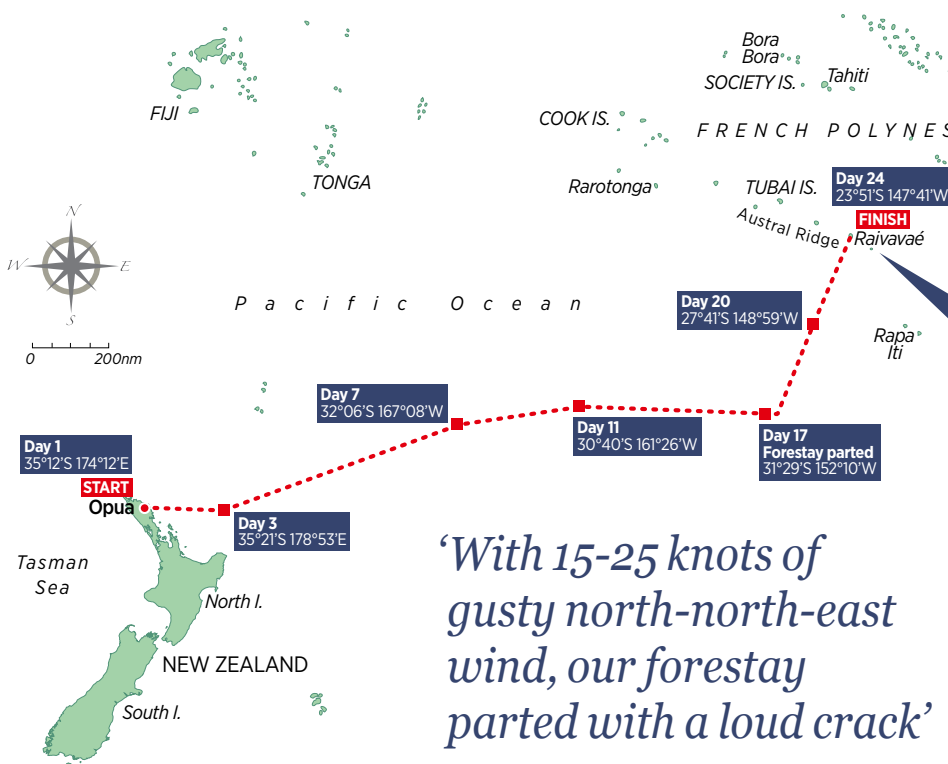
An agreeable wave of low pressure is rolling across the Tasman Sea, so we let go of New Zealand and, encouraged by 15 knots of westerly wind, sail alone out of Opuā, past the old whaling town of Russell, across the Bay of Islands and gently out to sea.

We are heading to Raivavaé, 400 miles south of Tahiti. Part of the Australs, this volcanic island, framed by a turquoise lagoon, is considered one of the most beautiful in all of Oceania, even competing with Bora Bora, its famous northern cousin, for the title of the most picturesque Polynesian destination. But unlike Bora Bora, whose beauty must be shared with hordes of tourists, honeymooners and charter boats, Raivavaé is off the radar.

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Very few cruising yachts visit Raivavaé, most heading to its northerly neighbour, Bora Bora



*'With 15-25 knots of gusty north-north-east wind, our forestay parted with a loud crack'*



*Raivavaé on the horizon after 24 days at sea. The genoa and furler are lashed to the guardrail*



We are hoping to raise the island in about three weeks, but with New Zealand still visible off our stern, it's a destination too remote to consider for now.

### Day 3 – Finding balance

**(35° 21' South / 178° 53' East)**

We are running along Latitude 35 in a corridor of favourable winds – a sweet spot sandwiched between the Roaring Forties to our south and relentless headwind Trades to our north. With a bit of luck we'll ride the predicted series of lows, highs and troughs to Longitude 155 west, where almost due south of our destination we'll turn left and head up to the sanctuary of Raivavaé's sheltered lagoon.

After six months of coastal cruising along New Zealand's North Island, our once tranquil and orderly home is now in constant motion and consumed by a cacophony of creaks, groans, knocking and sloshing. We are in 'passage mode'. Everything is tied down. We strap ourselves into the galley to cook and sleep with leecloths. We swing through the cabin like seasoned mountain climbers, balancing and bracing instinctively, persuading our systems to accept the regiment of night watches, day shifts and scheduled naps.

We are enjoying ourselves. There is a steady 17 knots of northwesterly wind blowing behind the beam, the long-range forecast looks good, and *Dream Time*, with her sails stretched far to starboard, is charging ahead confidently, carving a wake across the surface of an ocean we feel in complete harmony with.

### Day 7 – Prepared for the worst

**(32° 06' South / 167° 08' West)**

For six days our radio has remained silent, our radar has scanned an empty ocean, and our world, from horizon to horizon, has been filled only with sea and sky. The westerly winds are light, our progress slow. Menacing grey clouds hang over our mast and I have a strange sense of confinement that I've not felt before on *Dream Time*.

A recent GRIB file shows an ominous low pressure system forming to the west and coming our way, driven by 60 knots of screaming winds with seas building to a staggering 40ft. We are steering *Dream Time* north-east in an effort to dodge the worst of it. We could sail due north to avoid the low altogether, but that would give us Trade Winds on the nose and almost certainly end our chances of reaching French Polynesia.

Catherine and I might not welcome a gale, but we know that *Dream Time* has never felt better prepared. The years of restoration projects, repairs and upgrades have made her a solid little ship. That's good, because the nearest land is over 600 miles away and we have no one to rely on but ourselves.

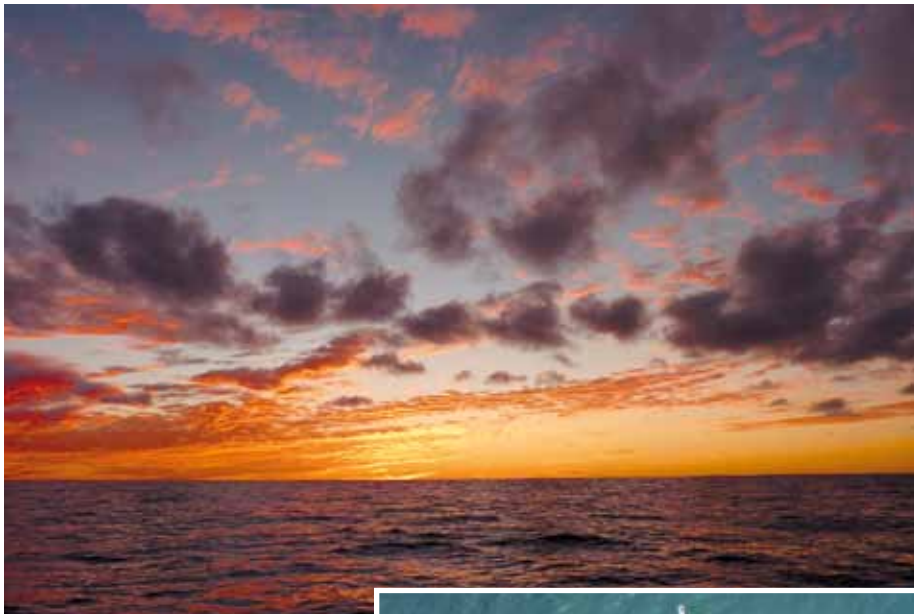


*The break was clean and corrosion-free*



*Two halyards led from the masthead to the bowsprit, through blocks and then aft, secured the mast after our forestay snapped*





ABOVE: The low passed after a few days, the seas subsided and we were left with a beautiful ocean sky

## Day 11 – Running wild (30° 40' South / 161° 26' West)

For the last 24 hours we've been riding the northern side of the low. The winds are pushing us, shoving would be a more accurate description, in the right direction, for which we are profoundly grateful, but conditions are getting a little sporty. In fact, they're the worst we've ever experienced.

The waves have built to a sobering 30ft, the wind gusting to 50 knots, and we're racing east-north-east under a double-reefed main and just a scrap of headsail.

A rogue wave broke behind us last night in an avalanche of foaming, luminescent water that engulfed *Dream Time's* stern, lifting and driving us down its face at a staggering 13.2 knots – a record for our tiny boat, which has a hull speed of only seven. The ride is wet and fast and if it wasn't for *Dream Time's* full keel and heavy displacement, we might be running under bare poles or perhaps even trailing warps by now. But we feel safe, and as we're running in the right direction, counting down the miles at a most satisfactory rate, we're reluctant to put the brakes on.

The sea is magnificent. As the giant swells roll under us, heaving us up upon their crests, we're rewarded with an expansive view of an untamed ocean. We feel vulnerable and insignificant, yet connected to something far greater as we're swept along. The barometer is creeping up, indicating the low's centre is moving away, and the forecasts show the winds easing to a more civilised 25 knots. The waves, however, will stay with us for another day, and are even forecast to build as they continue their journey north. But with eight seconds between crests, and without 50 knots of wind to topple them, we feel a sense of relief and, with it, exhaustion.



Once in the shelter of the lagoon, I went up the mast again to check the jury rig's safety for our continued journey

## Day 17 – Rig failure!

(31° 29' South / 152° 10' West)

Yesterday afternoon, in 15-25 knots of gusty north-northeasterly wind, our forestay parted with a loud 'CRACK', leaving our headsail and furler swinging wildly, suspended only by the halyard, our backstay sagging and our mast flexing alarmingly. Through binoculars we could see the break: the stay had snapped cleanly just below the swage at the masthead.

We immediately dropped the reefed main and cutter jib, managed to furl the remaining headsail, and steered *Dream Time* downwind to keep the tension aft. The main halyard became our temporary forestay which we ran forward to the bowsprit. The dark settles quickly in these latitudes and with nothing to do until dawn, we spent a restless night lying a'hull, adrift, and hundreds of miles from land.

With first light we got to work and prepared to rig two emergency forestays using spare halyards. Unfortunately this meant going aloft, something I don't relish even when secured to a steady dock. We raised the cutter jib to help steady *Dream Time* in the 6ft seas and I began the climb. After an hour, clinging to what I could as the spar made great sweeping arcs 60ft

above sea level, we managed to lower the furling headsail and secure two halyards to the masthead.

We ran one halyard down through a block attached to the bowsprit, under a deck cleat, which functioned as a fairlead, and back to the empty headsail winch on the mast. The second halyard we also ran to the bowsprit, tightening it using the block and tackle commandeered from our boom vang. We put an extra turn on the inner forestay, and with the two emergency halyards in place, the rig seemed secure.

We're sailing cautiously under a reefed main and cutter jib, and we're hoping the wind remains on or behind the beam. We have a little over 500 nautical miles to sail before we reach Raivavaé.

## Day 20 – One wave at a time (27° 41' South / 148° 59' West)

We're over the fold! For the last 17 days we've been plotting our position on chart INT 61 – an enormous chart of very small scale which covers the entire southwestern portion of the world's largest ocean. The chart's folded into quarters and as we've been sailing in the lower left-hand quadrant, our tiny trail of pencil marks gives the impression that we haven't gone very far. But thankfully, now we've crossed the fold, New Zealand is definitely behind us and Raivavaé, while just a tiny dot of ink, is finally within sight, on the chart at least. We're motorsailing in 6 knots of wind, but it feels like we're cruising again. The heavy storm clouds have been replaced with sunshine and

the ocean seems to radiate light.

We turned left two days ago at longitude 151° west, after sailing 2,000 nautical miles due east – the 'uphill' portion of the journey. We're 248 miles south of Raivavaé, 48 hours of sailing if we had wind or enough diesel to motor, but we don't have either, so we're just idling comfortably along, shedding our layers of thermals and enjoying the ride.

## Day 24 – Land!

(23° 51' South 147° 41' West)

Raivavaé appeared this morning. Her volcanic ridge, rising from a shimmering horizon, seemed unnaturally still after living for 24 days in a world of movement and change. In gentle winds we coasted around her western reef, ecstatic and transfixed by our long-awaited destination.

We're anchored in the protective lagoon off the tiny village of Rairua, under the shadow of Mount Hiro. Only two other boats are anchored here, cruisers who, perhaps like us, are seeking a quieter South Pacific island, one far removed from a busy world.

Just 800 people live on Raivavaé, a community that relies almost exclusively on *Tuhaa Pae II*, a 30-year-old supply ship





*We were ecstatic as we sailed Dream Time into Raivavae's magical lagoon*



*'After sailing 2,555 nautical miles, Dream Time is able to rest. And so are we'*

*A landfall worth fighting for: the voyage had been challenging, but the arrival was paradisiacal*

that delivers everything from diesel to deodorant every three weeks. There are no banks, no souvenir or dive shops, cafés, bars or restaurants. The island – with its swaying palms framing a sheltered lagoon that provides sanctuary for coral, thousands of clams and fish – appears today as it has for centuries.

In a few weeks, as we cruise through French Polynesia and reach a port with the full range of marine facilities that we took for granted in Europe, we will find out what was the likely cause of our rigging failure. Our forestay, which along with all of *Dream Time's* standing rigging was installed new before we left New York, was replaced with only an 8mm braided wire, not 10mm to match our outer shrouds and backstay. Hidden within our furler, this was something I had failed to notice.

But for now, an evening breeze is blowing across the ridge, down through valleys draped in thick blankets of green, across our anchorage and out to sea, carrying with it the faint scent of a wood fire and the intoxicating fragrance of land. The sun has settled below the horizon, and after sailing 2,555 nautical miles, crossing 33 longitudes, 12 latitudes, two time zones and the International Dateline, *Dream Time* is able to rest. And so are we. ▲



*A celebration bonfire on the beach, not another soul in sight*

### **Neville Hockley**

Neville Hockley, 40, grew up in Southampton. He learned to sail with his father, racing dinghies around Mundeford Quay, and later crewed on yachts while travelling the eastern coast of Australia. In 1994, he

sailed from Sydney to Italy via the Indian Ocean and Red Sea on a 44ft cutter, chronicling the experience in a book, *Dream Time*, published by Vanguard Press in 2000. Neville and Catherine bought their first boat, a 28ft Newport design, in 1998. In 2000

they upgraded to a 38ft Cabo Rico, named after Neville's book. They set off on a circumnavigation in 2007 and are currently still exploring French Polynesia. Neville owns a graphic design and advertising studio which he manages from *Dream Time*.