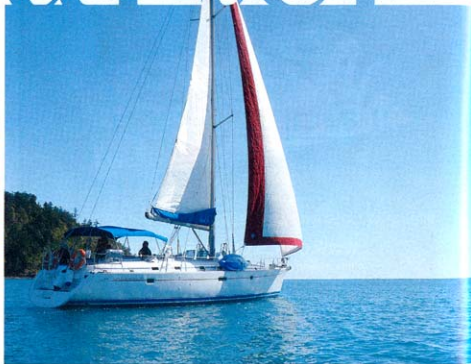


# Charter



A group of sailors book around-the-world plane tickets and charter four exotic places in 34 days

**S**tepping off the plane at Tahiti Faa'a International Airport in Papeete I finally let my guard down. Warm southeast trade winds swept the tarmac as I made my way to the terminal. The South Pacific embraces you the moment you arrive and I could feel my mood lighten as a lovely Tahitian customs official stamped my passport and welcomed

me to paradise. A year's worth of preparations were behind us, now it was time to savor the next 34 days.

We were a group of nine sailors and travelers headed around the world. We had four of the planet's most alluring sailing destinations waiting for us, four handsome charter boats ready to be commandeered, and three intriguing cities to be explored along the way. But first things first, we were hungry and in Tahiti the best place to eat is on the waterfront.

# around



# the world

We piled into “le truck,” the open-air mini buses that rumble around the island and made our way to the cluster of “Les Roullottes” along the main wharf. These rolling food trucks (close to a literal translation) hastily open for business every night. They carry the best recommendation, they’re where the locals eat. In one of the most expensive cities on earth, these mobile kitchens serve delicious French and Polynesian food at very affordable prices. I went with a grilled beef brochette, and we all

squeezed into a picnic table. We had smuggled a couple of bottles of wine from across the street, and in paper cups, toasted our bold enterprise, it was great to be under way.

I confess, the idea to charter sail our way around the world was my wife’s. Tadjji is a teacher, she works tirelessly during the school year and then travels just as dutifully all summer. She’s become a good sailor and we’ve been lucky to spend our summers sailing in the Mediterranean and New England. But this

summer was different. Instead cruising aboard our boat *Quetzal*, we organized our most ambitious and exciting program yet, the around-the-world sail and travel expedition.

The plan was deceptively simple: Pick four sailing destinations, organize four charter boats and, over the course of five weeks, spend about a week sailing in each location while working ever westward by plane until we were back where we began. Working exclusively with Sunsail, we chose the Leeward Islands

**Above, left to right, Rick dives to inspect the Great Barrier Reef. The around-the-world charter visited four different places with different rides, including a Beneteau 50 and a Lagoon 41. The author baby-sits the boat as the rest of the crew snorkels the reef.**



of Tahiti, the Whitsunday Islands along the Great Barrier Reef of Australia, Phuket and the mysterious islands of Phang Gna Bay in Thailand, and finally, Greece's less traveled islands, the Sporades in the Northern Aegean.

The next step was to assemble the right crew, and it wasn't difficult to find three couples to join us. My friend Jeff Erdmann, the owner of Bollman Yachts in Fort Lauderdale, was crestfallen when I told him the trip was full, and I just couldn't turn him away. He was willing to sleep wherever we could stuff him, even if that meant the cockpit, the saloon or, as in the case of the Whitsunday Islands, the less than glamorous crew quarters of a Beneteau 50. Tadjji arranged all the flights, transfers, food and hotels—an important aspect of the expedition was the time spent away from sailing and each other. The plan was to spend six days on each boat, and then fly to a major city near our next sailing destination. We were on our own in the cities, free to explore, ramble or rest.

From Papeete we took a short commuter flight to Raiatea. The Sunsail base was just a short cab ride away. Tadjji and I were delighted to be back where we'd spent our honeymoon a few years before. We piled our gear aboard a late model Sunsail Bahia 46 catamaran. This boat was ideal because in addition to four cabins and four heads, it had a separate berth



in the forward section of each hull. The port side gabled up our unpacked bags and the starboard side housed Jeff.

We pulled away from the dock in the late afternoon and made our way to the anchorage behind Motu Ceran. The setting was ideal. The surf, just a few hundred yards away, was exploding on the reef but the anchorage was calm. The free-falling tropical sun did not mess around at latitude 23, and it quickly disappeared behind the verdant peaks of Tahaa off the stern. The resulting mix of light and shadows had everybody scrambling for their cameras.

Gathered for dinner in the expansive cockpit, I took stock of our diverse crew. Carol Dean and Henry Roesner from Baltimore are longtime friends who have been sailing with me since we first went to Cuba together in early the 1990s. They're both terrific sailors and have been on a mission to see as much of the world as possible since their retirement. George and Susan Mitchell, from Milwaukee, sail their Island Packet 38 on Lake Michigan. George is brilliant, funny and passionate about sailing. Susan is a pure delight to have aboard and she's tireless behind the helm. Janie and Rick Thompson are dear friends. Hard working and generous, Janie needed the trip more than any of us, and Rick has sailed with me all over the world.

The next morning the sailing began in earnest as we cleared the pass and beat our way to Huahine. This is my favorite island in the group. It's the least developed and gives you a sense of what the South Pacific must have been like for early cruisers like the Hiscocks, the Roths and Bernard Moistessier. We wound



our way down the narrow lagoon on the west side of the island to the stunning anchorage at Avea Bay. Janie and Susan launched the kayaks, George found a good place to read, Jeff went for a swim, Rick, Henry and I chatted on the foredeck, and Tadjji and Carol made appetizers.

We sailed back to Tahaa lagoon and picked up a mooring off the Taravana Yacht Club. Tadjji recommended the mahi mahi almandine and it lived up to the billing. Bora Bora, with its distinctive jagged peaks that look like they were drawn by a child, was our next waypoint. A necklace of coral surrounds what just may be the most beautiful lagoon in the world. We met up with our friends Andy and Melissa, who are sailing their Tayana 48 cutter *Spectacle* around the world. We hadn't seen them since they left Fort Lauderdale nearly two years ago, and it was nice to see how they'd transformed from game but green dreamers into accomplished bluewater sailors.

The six days had flown by and soon we were back at Marina Apooti in Raiatea. We had a few hours before our flight to Papeete, so Tadjji dragged Janie along to meet her friend Isidore. When they returned both were sporting authentic and very permanent South Pacific souvenirs, namely tattoos. For Tadjji it was the second time Isidore had left his mark. One more visit to Raiatea and she would look like a real Polynesian and her mother will never speak to me again.

It's a long way across the Pacific, even by plane, and we were relieved to arrive in Sydney. We checked into the Menzies Hotel, a local landmark that overlooks Wynard Park in the



heart of the city. It was an ideal location. Tadjji surprised me with tickets to see Mozart's Don Giovanni at the Sydney Opera House. We explored the historic Rocks district and the fabulous maritime museum in Darling Harbor. Surprisingly cool temperatures kept us from tackling the Sydney Harbor bridge climb.

The weather was much improved when we landed on tiny Hamilton Island in the Whitsunday Islands off the Queensland coast, and soon we were clearing the marina aboard a Beneteau 50. We laid a course for Airlie Beach on the mainland where we planned to provision. The sailing was terrific as we romped across Whitsunday Passage. The weather turned gloomy so we decided to spend a day at the marina, happy to explore this lively little beach town.

The skies were clear the next morning and we made an early departure for Hook Island. We picked up a mooring at the Stonehaven anchorage, keeping a good eye out for "scattered bommies," the Aussie phrase for isolated coral heads. The Whitsunday Islands are part of a National Marine Park and all yachts must follow strict rules. Anchoring is not encouraged, especially in areas where moorings have been laid, and heads cannot be discharged overboard except well away from all harbors, and only after being macerated. After climbing over and around the massive boulders on the beach, we made our way to Butterfly Bay for the evening.

Although they are perched squarely within tropical latitudes, the Whitsundays don't look the part. Continental islands, they have the same flora and fauna as the mainland. The

islands are thickly covered with brush and pine trees, without many palms in sight. Except for the bright sunshine and warm temperatures, you might be in Puget Sound. The next morning we sailed north-northeast to the edge of the Great Barrier Reef.

Although this isn't technically within the area that Sunsail wants charterers to explore, we just had to see the world's largest reef system. We had a rollicking sail both ways and spotted several humpback whales, including a mother and calf. Our final anchorage in the Whitsundays was off Whitehaven Beach. I've anchored off beautiful beaches all over the world, but this incredible expanse of pure white sand is the most beautiful beach I've seen.

Go west, not so young men and women, go west. And so we did. Our next stop was Bangkok, the bustling capital of Thailand. People scurried about in every type of vehicle and vessel; it was bewildering and enchanting at once. Our hotel was located on the banks of the serpentine Mae Man Chao, the river that gives this waterborne city its pulse. We took a city tour in

a longtail taxi, fantastic wooden boats where the rotating, air-cooled engine is perched on the stern, on a long shaft that extends the proper farther aft, providing plenty of noise, horsepower and surprising maneuverability. On land



The Beneteau 50 heads out to Australia's Whitsunday Islands. above. Top, left to right, the photographer explores Thailand's Phang Nga Bay by foot and by dinghy; Rick Thompson pokes his head out of his cabin; Susan Mitchell takes the helm in the Whitsunday Islands; the snorkeling crew heads out on yet another expedition in the Great Barrier Reef.



we rode in tuk tuks, three-wheel open-air taxis that are ridiculously cheap. And yet, there's a serene side to the city too because Buddha is everywhere, from the tiny emerald Buddha on display at What Phra Kaew, near the Grand Palace, to the massive, reclining Buddha sprawled out in the Wat Pho holy temple. After two whirlwind days we were back on a plane heading south to Phuket.

Phuket is a large island just off the Malay Peninsula and forms the western edge of Phang Nga Bay. Phuket is an ideal sailing base. In the winter months, when the northeast monsoon blows clear and cool, the Andaman Sea harbors are perfectly protected, and this is the preferred time to charter. However, during the rainy monsoon of the summer months in the southwest, the gravity-defying islands of Phang Nga Bay offer an intriguing charter alternative. Planning a 34-day trip around the world means that somewhere along the way you're going to be sailing out of season. As a result, once we were all loaded aboard our Lagoon 41 catamaran we nosed into Phang Nga Bay for six days of wet, breezy sailing.

Our first stop was the island of Koh Rang Yai. We anchored just behind a floating pearl farm. The resort ashore was nearly empty, an advantage of out of season travel. We had the place to ourselves and celebrated Rick's birthday with a lovely dinner on the beach. The next morning we had a wonderful reach north and anchored in lee of Koh Phanak, a magnificent upwelling of an island that in places looks like it is upside down. Tadj, Jeff, Carol, Henry and I piled into the dinghy and made our along the rim of the island, probing into every cove looking for a "hong," or cave. After several false starts, we found the entrance. We turned off the engine and poled along in complete darkness. It was creepy, especially when bats would shriek overhead. Fortunately Jeff brought a flashlight. Finally we spied a ray of light. We were forced to lay prone to clear the dripping limestone. A few feet from the light source the dinghy was stuck. We slipped over the side and swam into a stunning lagoon. We were in Jurassic Park. It was spectacular.

The next day we continued north into the silty waters of the bay, visiting Koh Phing Kan,

better known as James Bond Island, and then made our way by longtail boat to Koh Pan Yi. This is a remarkable floating village, or at least it seems like it's floating as most of the houses are built on stilts. It is a Muslim fishing village, and wandering through the maze of homes and shops was intriguing. Different faiths are tolerated in Buddhist Thailand. The political system is a different story, there is no tolerance at all and a coup d'état had taken place just before our arrival.

Back aboard we sailed south for the spectacular Phi Phi Islands. We had to search through a crowded anchorage field to find swinging room in the main harbor of Ton Sai Bay. Any ideas of swimming were dashed when an aggressive sea snake struck at our anchor rode. Ashore, evidence of the devastating tsunami that struck Thailand in December 2004 was still abundant. Many lives were lost in Phi Phi and nearly every structure damaged. Still, the bustling tourist village has been rebuilt with one difference—there's now a huge cell phone tower. The entire Phang Nga Province, including all the islands, have excellent cell phone coverage and it seems everybody carries a phone. Should another tsunami arise hopefully people will be forewarned and make their way to high ground.

Twenty-five days into the expedition, especially after a week of steamy, rainy weather, we were dragging. The Mediterranean was just what we needed. Our next stop was Athens. We checked into the Acropolis Museum, a boutique hotel in the Plaka district just around the corner from the Acropolis. I have been to Athens many times but I never tire of wandering around the Acropolis and the Agora. Susan, George, Tadj and I made our way out of town to the Rockwave outdoor concert venue to hear Leonard Cohen. This perpetually cool performer once lived on the island of Hydra and is still very popular in Greece. We were amazed as young and old Greeks sang along in English.

It took us seven hours by private bus to reach our last charter destination, the village of Milinia on the Gulf of Volos, and the gateway to the Sporades, a rugged and



isolated group of eleven islands in the Northern Aegean. Once again we had a Lagoon 41 catamaran. Most chartering in the Sporades is done flotilla style, where many boats sail off together, following a lead boat. The crew at Sunsail seemed relieved to have experienced charterers on their hands, especially ones that had sailed the same boat just the week before, and we were able to get underway ahead of the flotilla.

Unfortunately there wasn't much wind and we motored most of the way to the quaint village of Pegadi. We squeezed into a spot along the wharf and found our way to a harbor-side taverna. Lamb, feta, tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, even the Retsina; it was great to be back in the Mediterranean. Later we climbed a nearby hill to an overgrown temple reputed to be the birthplace

of Achilles. The commanding view of the harbor was worth the effort, at least that's what we told ourselves. The next few days we sailed east into the Aegean, anchoring first in the handsome harbor off the town of Skiathos. This is the island where the movie "Mamma Mia" was filmed, and we enjoyed watching the newly released film in an open-air theater.

We continued on to the small harbor of Loutraki on Skopelos before heading back toward Volos Bay. Our last night of the voyage we found an unlikely mooring spot on the head of a narrow wharf off the small village of Paleo Trikeri. We dropped the anchor in the middle of the tiny harbor and executed a classic Mediterranean moor. A delightful taverna with a whitewashed terrace was just feet away. It was Tadjji's birthday and we had a lot to celebrate. 🍷



The crew loads up for the flight to the next charter, above. Below, the Lagoon 41 heads out of Skiathos in the Sporades. Facing page, top to bottom, the photographer gets her picture taken at the Wat Arun Temple in Bangkok; Jeff Erdmann explores a Thailand cave; the crew hops aboard the Long Boats in Ko Tapu, Thailand; Rick Thompson enjoys Thai fish for his birthday dinner.

