

# TUAMOTU 2024

## Simon Currin

(As well as serving as Commodore from 2019 until earlier this year, Simon has been a frequent contributor to Flying Fish, most recently in 2023/1. He and Sally left Scotland in 2015 aboard Shimshal II, their 48ft (14.6m) cutter, laid her up in Nova Scotia during the Covid pandemic, and then headed south towards Panama which they transited in late 2023.

In Panama they were joined by Tim Farmery and Heather Bone, who sailed with them to the Galapagos islands, the Marquesas and on to the Tuamotu Archipelago, leaving Shimshal II at Makemo island. Follow Simon and Sally's travels at <https://voyagesofshimshal.blogspot.pt/p/blog-page.html>.)

The shrill squawk of our VHF's MAYDAY RELAY alarm disturbed the pre-dawn peace and shook me out of a deep sleep. We had been sailing reefed-down overnight to be certain of making our landfall in daylight. Our watch change was about to take place when the VHF blurted out the spine-chilling news that a yacht called *Resolution* was aground on the outside of Raroia's fringing reef. We were the nearest boat able to respond!

For those who don't know it, Raroia is a tiny atoll in an archipelago of 77 other similar atolls spread over 1100 miles of the South Pacific. They are called the Tuamotu Archipelago but have been known for centuries as the 'Dangerous Islands' because their navigation can be perilous. Each atoll rises only a few metres from the sea and traditional charts were notoriously inaccurate. The difficulties are further compounded by swift and unpredictable currents in the passes leading to their bommie-strewn\* lagoons.

Raroia was to be our first *motu* and we had planned a cautious approach after a 450-mile passage from the Marquesas. All hands were to be on deck for our landfall. We would then eyeball the pass at the time the Tuamotu Tidal Guestimator predicted slack water. If the white water in the pass looked manageable we would then creep through and use four pairs of eyes to avoid the numerous, uncharted bommies between pass and anchorage. The Guestimator is an ingenious spreadsheet written by the OCC crew of *Visions of Johanna* that juggles known tidal data, latitude and wind (strength, direction and duration) to 'guess' when to enter Tuamotu passes at slack water. Persistent strong winds driving ocean swells force more water into the lagoons and thus can abolish the flood tide completely. The Guestimator attempts to take all these variables into account – clever stuff!

Our careful preparation was undermined as soon as we responded to the MAYDAY RELAY. Despite our proximity, we could not raise the stricken boat on their VHF and instead received

\* Bommies are isolated coral heads rising from an otherwise level seabed.



The pass at  
Tahanea. Photo  
Ulf Svensson

messages (sent to us by both VHF and the noforeignland app via Starlink) from vessels safely anchored inside the lagoon. We dropped our sails and altered course to motor to windward wondering, as we went, how we would be able

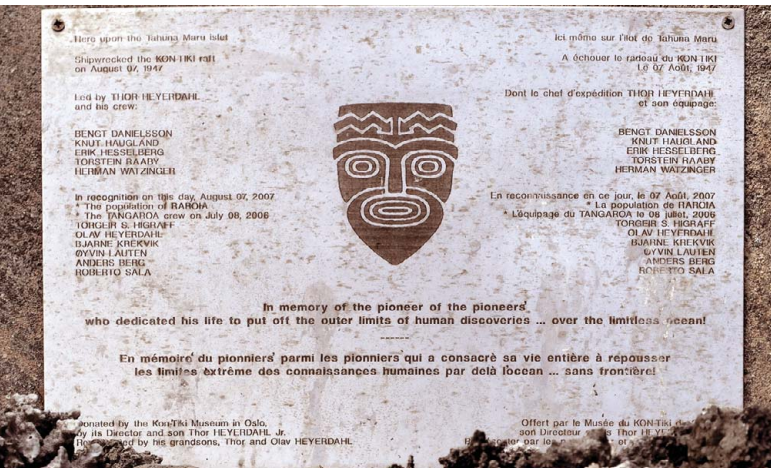
to assist a yacht high and dry on a coral reef being pounded by waves. There were no powerful commercial vessels for hundreds of miles and we hadn't the horsepower to pull a boat off a reef even if we could safely pass them a line. Coral atolls are collapsed volcanic seamounts rising steeply from ocean depths so there would be no possibility of laying anchors and winching a boat off. Lots of thoughts but no solutions flashed through our minds as we raced towards the casualty.

As we closed their co-ordinates, *Resolution's* VHF crackled into life and announced that they had managed, somehow, to get off the reef and were able to rendezvous with us despite a badly damaged rudder. They requested that we escort them through the pass to a safe anchorage, standing by should their ability to steer desert them. Dutifully we agreed, but felt as though it was a case of the blind leading the blind (and partially disabled) as this was our first landfall in the Dangerous Islands and our first lagoon pass.



*Resolution's rudder damage*

Luckily *Resolution* also had a Hydrovane whose rudder was relatively unscathed by the impact, and this was able to complement what remained of her main rudder. Gingerly we were both approaching the pass when the crew of a catamaran, safely anchored inside the lagoon, urged us to come straight in as the current was slack. We wondered about their advice as it was a spring tide and the wind had been blowing at 20 knots or more for the previous ten days. The Guestimator suggested



### *The Kon-Tiki Memorial on Raroia*

a mid-morning slack water, but we chose to listen to the boat beckoning us in.

*Resolution* and *Shimshal* nosed through the first of the tidal whitewater and gradually the current increased. Surf was breaking either side of us and the swirling water around us was starting to look more like an angry Gulf of Corryvreckan in our Scottish home waters than the meek entrance to a tropical paradise. We piled on more and more revs as the current strengthened, until *Shimshal* was blasting along against both tide and a 20-knot headwind. Our speed over the ground soon crumbled and then *Resolution* spun into an eddy and went shooting back out into the ocean at breakneck speed, luckily avoiding the worst of the

### *A colourful hermit crab*





standing waves as she went. *Shimshal* soldiered on for a few minutes, but when the engine overheating alarm came on we put the helm over and followed *Resolution* back to the ocean with a speed over the ground of 14 knots.

For the next couple of hours we drifted around waiting for the mid-morning slack that our Guestimator had predicted and wishing we hadn't listened to those comfortably tucked up at anchor inside the lagoon.

What a difference a couple of hours makes! Our next attempt on the pass found the weak currents we had hoped for, and we shot through with barely a ripple disturbing the surface. By now the sun was up and so, with all eyeballs on deck, we were easily able to spot the bommies and weave our way to a safe anchorage. Our confidence was bolstered by streaming satellite Aquamap images to 'spot' the bommies before they could be eyeballed. We switched on our chartplotter's 'track' function to lay a super-accurate GPS 'crumb trail' enabling us to trace our route back to the ocean should conditions for our exit be less than ideal. We chose to anchor on the eastern side of the atoll where the reef and palm-clad mini-*motus* would give perfect shelter from the prevailing trade winds. It was also the place, marked by a memorial plaque, where Thor Heyerdhal's *Kon-Tiki* raft was wrecked in 1947.

Although the seabed was mostly sand a few bommies littered the anchorage. We used three buoys to 'float' our chain so that only a few links lay on the seabed, which allowed us to swing without either destroying picture-perfect coral or wrapping our chain around overhanging spikes



*A white tern*



*Shimshal  
at anchor in  
the Tuamotu.  
Photo Ian Lewis*

and crevices. We had acquired three abandoned, rigid-plastic pearl farm floats for this purpose – ideal as they don't compress and become less buoyant when submerged in the way a fender does. Each was secured to the chain with some thin cord and a carabiner\* every 10m or so.

Once safely anchored and our 'floating chain' suitably admired, we dinghied over to *Resolution* to meet the crew and inspect their damage. Olaf, the skipper, described the sickening crash that threw him out of his bunk as his three-year-old pride and joy ferched up on the coral reef. In a shaky voice, he explained how he thought his time was up. We dropped over the side with a snorkel, mask and camera to capture the images that he needed to send to his insurer. Half the rudder was missing, with the stock protruding but unbent. There were deep gouges to both hull and keel, but there were no leaks and the rudder was useable in favourable conditions. Not great to suffer so much damage 550 miles from the nearest haul-out facility, but at least the boat could be sailed.



*Resolution reefed down with half a rudder*

which could, so easily, have been an option. *Resolution's* builder, Hanse Yachts, e-mailed drawings of the rudder via our Starlink and they were forwarded to the Tahiti shipyard that agreed to build and fit the new rudder. Resolving this tricky situation was made so much easier by access to reliable broadband in this remote region of the South Pacific. I'm pleased to report that *Resolution* made her way to Tahiti without assistance, where we saw her, some months later, ashore and awaiting her new rudder.

The ten days we spent snorkelling on Raroia were the perfect introduction to the Tuamotu. The warm water was gin clear and the coral perfectly adorned with an abundance of flora and fauna. We contacted a speedboat owner in the tiny town on the other side of the

\* A metal clip or loop with a spring-loaded gate, similar to those on life-harness tethers.

*Inside Makemo Cathedral*



Olaf then came over to *Shimshal* to use our Starlink connection to send all the images and documents to his insurers, who swiftly advised him to sail the boat to Tahiti rather than to take it out into the ocean and scuttle it





Raroia

atoll to collect a group of cruisers and take us to his home for a feast with music and dancing performed by his mates. Many days in paradise to cherish and remember.



Our next *motu*, Makemo, is the administration centre for ten of its smaller neighbours. Children and the sick travel there for schooling and healthcare. It boasts a population of 815, a fine cathedral, a few shops, a couple of restaurants and a very warm welcome to visitors. The whole community put on a church fundraising event on a Friday night which a few cruisers also attended. A fine feast followed the church service and droves of kids performed music and dancing late into the tropical night.

An OCC friend encountered a further danger that lurks in the Tuamotu. Having feasted for days on reef fish she succumbed to severe ciguatera poisoning, which made her very unwell for a few days and left her suffering with long-term neuropathic pain, fatigue and other neurological symptoms. A month later she recorded her first-hand account in an OCC Webinar that is now hosted on the OCC website at <https://www.oceancruisingclub.org/webinars?ID=2738>.

We reached Tahanea, some 80 miles further west, after an uneventful overnight sail followed by an easy pass to negotiate. We slid through the rushing waters at first light and dropped the anchor in the clear shallows of an uninhabited paradise. Once again we floated our chain and dropped overboard to admire the many bommies from below the water. A short dinghy ride took us back into the pass where we drifted effortlessly with the current watching the technicolour corals and marine critters shoot past.



### *Ruffian on passage between Raroia and Makemo*

We liked Tahanea's isolation so much that we stayed for a week. A few other cruisers were anchored nearby, which proved lucky when our nearest neighbour, *Matilda* (OCC), retrieved our dinghy at 0600 after it mysteriously untied itself. It's always embarrassing to lose a dinghy, but we were relieved by how commonly this happens when others shared their confessions.

We thought we had the perfect window to move further west. The plan was a slow, 50-mile overnight sail to Fakarava's South Pass, which would allow us to transit at slack water in good daylight. All forecasts and forecasters agreed that we would arrive at the entrance with flat seas and wind speeds of less than 10 knots and we set out with confidence.

Just 15 miles from our destination things started to go wrong when the wind picked up out of nowhere. We thought it was a squall and would soon pass, but it did not. As the wind built, the seas turned white and confused and our destination looked increasingly dangerous. Fakarava's South Pass was now an exposed lee shore and the prospect of negotiating the narrow tidal pass with 40 knots of wind did not appeal. We altered course to sail a further 35 miles to the North Pass, but the tidal planning didn't work. To enter at slack water and in daylight we would have to sit

out the storm at sea. Accordingly, we hove to and retreated below to let *Shimshal* cope with the wind and the angry ocean whilst news pinged in via WhatsApp of the challenging time friends were having in their anchorages in nearby atolls. A hardy couple, with circumnavigations and a Northwest Passage transit to their credit, came close to losing their boat when their Tahanea anchorage turned into a dangerous lee shore lashed by 50 knot winds. Many dragged and a few went aground losing yet more rudders to South Pacific coral.

*Shimshal* rode the waves without drama and her crew survived without sea sickness. By dawn the next day the winds had started to abate and we closed the North Pass in tranquil conditions. Our OCC friends on *Yaghan* had been monitoring our progress overnight by AIS and told us of a plumb anchoring spot next to them. We hurried to it and dropped our anchor in 8m just off the harbour at Rotoava.



*Shanti 3 on passage  
between Makemo and Tahanea*





*The supply ship leaving Fakarava*

all out. Normally the active weather cells in the Tuamotu are on a small scale, but the one that had just passed had been several hundred kilometres in diameter and had developed within a few hours. Its power had been drawn from the sea temperature differential between the deep ocean and shallow water of the atoll lagoons. Nobody had seen it coming and many had weathered it in unsuitable and unsafe anchorages. Though we didn't appreciate it at the time, we were lucky to have been at sea.

Fakarava is one of the most developed atolls in the archipelago and we were soon ashore enjoying fine food at a harbour-side restaurant with Anders and Nilla of *Yaghan*, with whom we have had many encounters during our Pacific passage. The supply ships had visited recently and, unlike on many of the other islands, fresh baguettes and croissants were abundant. Even eggs were available if we joined the queue at exactly 7am on Wednesday!

Undoubtedly the highlight of our stay on Fakarava was the incomparable diving. We dived and snorkelled both passes and delighted in the appropriately named 'Wall of Sharks'. A magical underwater world.

After a fortnight on Fakarava we resumed our westward journey intending to visit Toau, Rangiroa and Tikehau, but the weather had no regard for our plans. Soon after we had hooked up to a mooring

*Sally and Simon in Fakarava North Pass*



*Shimshal at Fakarava south anchorage*





## Squash Zone

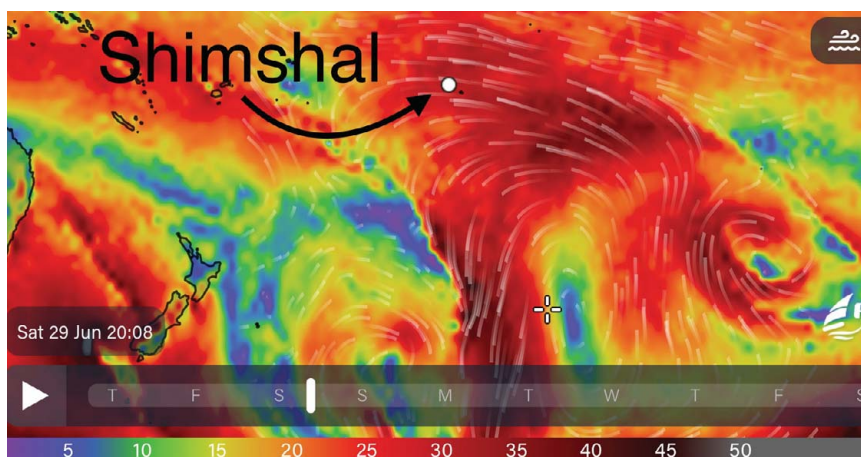
in Toau's False Pass we received news of another South Pacific weather phenomenon starting to develop. A 'squash zone' forms when

an intensifying region of high pressure snuggles up alongside a low-pressure system, compressing the isobars between them. To our south a vicious winter low was spinning off New Zealand and, further east, a high-pressure system was forecast to intensify to 1045hPa\*. The combined systems were forecast to drive enhanced trade winds of at least 30 knots. With a haul-out deadline looming we took the advice of John Martin, OCC member and weather forecaster based in New Zealand, and selected a slot to sail to Huahine in the Society Islands before the squash zone had properly formed.

Soon all the WhatsApp chatter was of where to sit out the forecast 10-day blow. Our OCC friends aboard *Pacific Wind* and *Matilda*, moored next to us, decided to head for Apataki and a known safe haven. On the evening before our departure for Huahine, Valentine and Gaston, the sole occupants of Toau, barbecued a gourmet supper for four boats from freshly caught lobster. At first light the next day Sally and I slipped our last Tuamotu mooring and began a boisterous 300-mile passage to the Society Islands. The squash zone materialised as forecast, and we sat it out on a comfortable Huahine mooring whilst the winds blew for ten days with gusts to 40 knots.

Our time in the Tuamotu had been truncated by the weather but our experiences of the 'Dangerous Archipelago', both above and below the water, had exceeded our expectations. Our enjoyment of these tiny coral specks in the vastness of the South Pacific was enhanced by sharing so many anchorages with a small fleet of fellow OCC boats that we had come to know since entering the Pacific. Many of that fleet will be spending the cyclone season in French

\* hectoPascals (hPa), more often referred to as millibars (mb).



*Gaston cooking lobster at Toau*



Polynesia and will resume their onward journey to Australia and New Zealand in 2025. *Shimshal* is now laid up ashore in the Society Islands and we will rejoin that NZ-bound fleet in 2025.

### Cruising notes

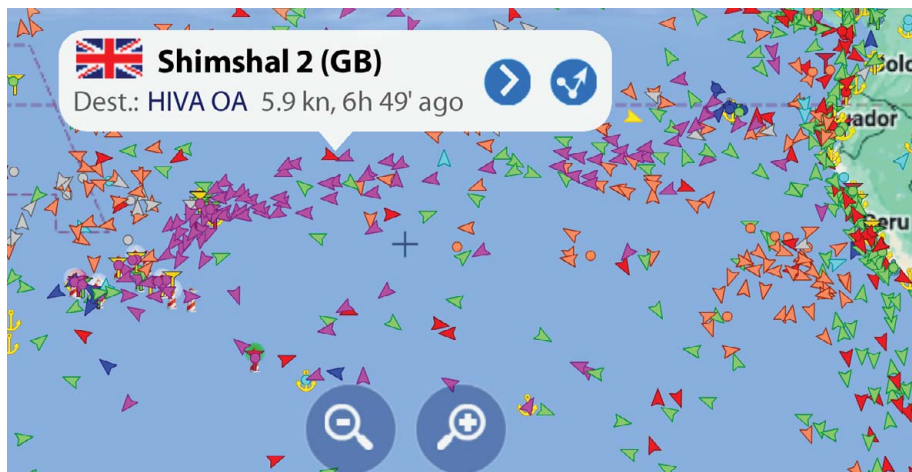
2024 was a very busy year in French Polynesia, with unprecedented numbers of boats converging there from North, Central and South America. There is talk of imposing anchoring bans and mandating the use of moorings to preserve coral and prevent overcrowding. There appears to be no prospect of increasing the number of moorings, however, so there is uncertainty about how cruisers will fare in Polynesia in the future. These issues are more acute in the Society Islands, but there are already unenforced restrictions and charges in Fakarava's Rotoava anchorage and other popular atolls in the Tuamotu.


An expanding cruising population strains the supply of groceries in remote islands, where supply ships are infrequent and their schedules sometimes disrupted, and occasionally cruisers would comment on the need to be quick to seize the newly-arrived fresh produce without giving a thought to the requirements of the local people. We also came across some boats without holding tanks, whose crew thought it acceptable to discharge sewerage directly into an idyllic lagoon. Not

a great way to endear cruisers to either locals or the authorities...

### The crowded eastern Pacific, 7th April 2024

Electronic charts in the Tuamotu are now super-accurate and the ability to



overlay satellite images via Starlink or by building .KAP files dramatically improves the safety of navigation within the lagoons. Many blogsites (such as [www.S/V SoggyPaws](http://www.S/V SoggyPaws)\*) offer downloads of tracks, compendiums of information and .KAP files, but don't forget that the OCC has its own database of cruising information at <https://cruisinginfo.oceancruisingclub.org>, shared with the Royal Cruising Club and the RCC Pilotage Foundation. 

\* See *Using Satellite Imagery with OpenCPN* by Sherry & Dave McCampbell in *Flying Fish 2023/2*.

