

# Notes on a Pacific crossing

Mel Parish relives his encounter with the Roaring Forties and a monstrous marlin on a double-handed voyage to French Polynesia

**M**odern life is so dependent on people looking for reassurance from others – from friends, family and social media. Believe in yourself and you can spend many happy hours alone, or with one companion, as I discovered on my crossing from New Zealand to the Marquesas.

My friend Colin Porteous and I sailed 4,000 nautical miles via the Roaring Forties in his Moody 54, *Endorphin Beta*. Here are my log entries of the 23-day crossing to the Austral Islands:

## Saturday 18 February

My wife Anna left for home today, boy that

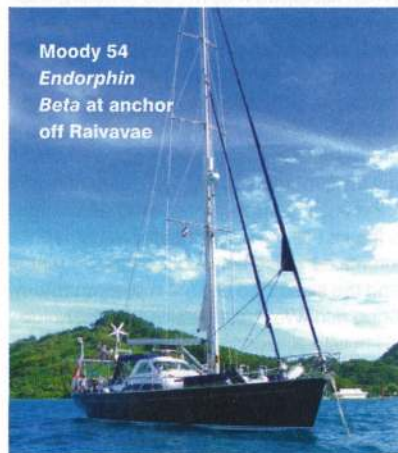
was tough! After two fabulous weeks in New Zealand, sailing round the islands, and a beautiful week in the campervan together, we finally had to say goodbye.

She cried herself to sleep two nights ago. I know how worried she is and I find myself asking why would I put my loved ones – and myself for that matter – through this? But I have always believed you only get one shot at life and I know how incredibly lucky I am to have the love and support that I have.

## Sunday 19 to Wednesday 22 February

The next few days were spent getting the boat ready for off. Everything from rigging, electronics, water systems, safety gear,

Moody 54  
*Endorphin Beta* at anchor  
off Raiivavae





Iconotec/Alamy

Stunning destination: Raivavae Island in the Austral islands of French Polynesia is a long way off the beaten track

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melvyn Parish was born in Hull and spent his childhood sailing on the Humber with his twin brother Andrew, from the Humber

Yawl Club at Brough. He went on to a professional sailing career, starting as a cook on a 30ft oyster smack chartering out of Malden. He later spent two years as bosun on a Baltic trader, four years as chief officer on SY *Baboon*, a 200ft topgallant schooner based in Monaco, then 10 years skippering sailing barge *Audrey* in Hull, doing adventure holidays for disadvantaged groups. He now sails a Drascombe Longboat with his wife, Anna, which they keep in the Swedish archipelago north of Stockholm.

engine and a hundred other things had to be checked. Then there was the shopping – not only the food for the four weeks we'd be at sea, but Colin also needed to put a year's supply of alcohol on board as it's limited and very expensive out in the islands where they would be spending the next year before returning to New Zealand. But with a bit of hard graft we were ready for off.

#### Thursday 23 February

The morning was beautiful and crisp. New Zealand has a freshness about it unlike the UK or Europe; it can be very sunny, but the air often has a chill about it. It's like standing in a sauna with your fridge door open.

By 1300 hours the Customs guys had been, looked at all the beer with raised eyebrows, wished us good luck and left.

After sad farewells with family, we cast off and headed out of the marina past Mount Maunganui, east along the coast and out to the Southern Ocean. For the rest of the day we had light and variable winds and warm sunshine, which was just what we needed to finish off all our jobs and prepare *Endorphin* for an ocean passage. We had savoury mince, cabbage and mash for dinner with our daily glass of red. Our cook (me) seems to be quite an agreeable fellow from Hull, clean enough but with a Houdini-like tendency when it's time to wash the pots. ➔



Ship's cook (the author) relaxing after dinner



One beautiful tuna



Southern Ocean fishing

### Friday 24 February

Wind 8-24 knots 170°T, COG 088°T

The day started OK with light winds and nothing much to report, the usual rounds of checks and fixing things, and generally settling in for a long passage. This period I find most difficult because you are still tied emotionally to the land, your head is full of doubt and 'what ifs?' You could still turn back. Or you could fake illness and they would send you back to your loved ones and say "Poor fellow – and he was so looking forward to getting battered in the Roaring Forties". But now's the time to push on and break that thought for if you don't you'll never go adventuring and will end up an old man (or woman) with a head full of sadness and regret.

By 1800 hours it started to blow. We had 18-30 knots on the nose with a nasty building sea. Cook gave us bananas for dinner – he muttered something about risk assessments and the galley being 'untenable'. I knew he'd be trouble.

### Saturday 25 February

Wind 20-5 knots 180°T, COG 085°T

Saturday morning found the wind and sea easing and by lunchtime we were motoring south-east, heading to below the 40th latitude where we would find strong winds to take us east. At lunchtime we crossed the International Date Line so it's Friday again, or is it Sunday? We decided to see what we'd get for dinner. If it's fish it must be Friday and roast beef and Yorkshires it's Sunday. We got meatballs and spaghetti so we were still none the wiser... what did I say about that cook?

### Saturday 25 February. Again

Wind 2-5 knots variable, COG 125°T

Not much wind today and a calm sea so we decided to try our luck at fishing. We streamed a lure behind the boat and after about an hour the reel went crazy. Colin slowed the boat and I tried to slow the reel by applying the clutch but the line just kept screaming out. Then it happened – we both stood with our eyes wide and our mouths open as a 12ft blue marlin jumped clean out of the water. We did not want that fish on our boat – it would be akin to landing an alligator! Thank goodness the line broke. So after replacing the lure we had another go and two hours and a bit of a fight later were rewarded with a beautiful 12kg tuna. Our freezer stock has started to build.

### Sunday 26 February

Wind 3-10 knots, 180°T

Today we reached 41° South and turned east. We should run along this latitude for about 1,200NM. And so we are now in the Roaring Forties: the place of



The majestic albatross

legends. Massive low pressure systems constantly circle the planet at this latitude and with no land to interrupt the onslaught, huge seas build. This place can challenge human endeavour to the max. If you listen to the wind screaming in your ears you can almost hear it saying "Why are you here? You're just a decorator from Hull. You're not Cook or Slocum, you're not Knox-Johnston or Blythe, you're not Claire Francis or Eric Newby and you certainly are not Shackleton!" Well today for once it's as flat and as calm as East Park yacht pond and the lad from Hull is feeling quite at home Mr Wind thank you very much!

### Monday 27 February

Wind 2-9.5 knots, 210°T

After a calm start the wind slowly built to a usable 9 knots. We attempted fishing, but it ended in a nil-nil draw. Early in the afternoon we saw our first albatross. My, what a creature! I knew they were big, but had no idea that a bird could be so big and fly so majestically. They are our constant companions now and it's awe-inspiring to sit and watch them glide so close to the waves.

### Tuesday 28 February

Wind 12-24 knots, 230°T

Broaching is basically when a yacht carrying too much sail in strong winds is forced over on her side and up into the wind. It is also a very effective way to throw your crew out of bed when you need help reefing at 3am. Personally I would have preferred being woken with a gentle shake and a mug of cocoa. But I was up now and once we had the reefing

sorted and everything put back on various shelves, the rest of the night went well. It was windy with a big sea, and we reached up to 9.5 knots. We spent the rest of the day reefing and un-reefing sails and dodging squalls where we could. It was a tiring day but a great one – lots of miles in the right direction.

**Wednesday 01 to Thursday 02 March**  
**Wind 18-32 knots ...**

These days went by in a bit of a blur. I couldn't sleep from the constantly changing motion of the boat and the noise of the wind, which reached 25 knots. We reefed the main and genoa, but it wasn't enough. Just moving around was hard work in the huge following sea.

At one point, the genoa reefing line jammed so I clipped on my safety harness and went forward. The foredeck was pitching in surging 6m waves, and it took me half an hour to free the line.

I was exhausted. We went down to full staysail and well reefed genoa and *Endorphin* still travelled at up to 9 knots. The noise was deafening. For the next 20 hours we tried to take it turns to sleep but neither of us could – we were filled with nervous tension and adrenalin. No moon, no horizon – just pitch blackness, and the deafening noise of wave after wave breaking around us. The nights lasted forever and the wind crept up to 30 knots. And there was the obsessive doubt that fatigue brings – the 'what ifs'.

Finally, by 1400 on Thursday, the depression had passed and the wind and waves eased and by Friday morning we were rested and fed and ready to fight another day.

**Friday 03 March**  
**Wind 4-19 knots, 315°T**

We were having a good day... the seas were easing and the wind speed and direction were perfect. We had several messages on the Delorme, a bit of kit that sends and receives satellite texts, and sends tracking data so anyone can see our position. The message was from Bruce, our weather router. Bruce lives in Australia; he is an expert in weather tracking data and computer weather prediction. It's his job to look at all the data and guide us round as much of the bad stuff as he can. His message this morning read: 'You are doing well boys. Behind you are off-the-scale depressions and unthinkable sea conditions. The tropics and Southern Ocean are unusually active this season. Massive low pressure




Spectacular sunset in the Southern Ocean

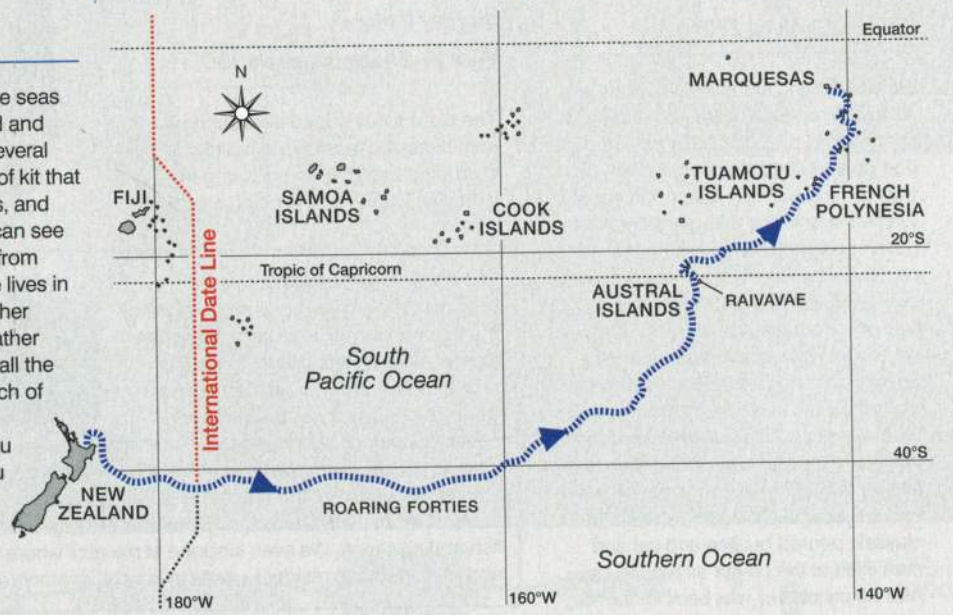
systems are developing around Fiji and moving south as far as 50°. In other words, the lows were thundering across the track that we took three days ago! We've been walking through the woods for the last 10 days oblivious to the massive trees crashing down behind us. But we are adventurers. We look forward to what will be, not back to what may have been. The Southern Ocean is behind us. Only tropical depressions (hurricanes) and lightning storms are in our path now.

**Saturday 04 March**  
**Wind 15-20 knots, 296°T**

Fantastic day, great wind and direction spent most of the day at over 8 knots in glorious sun, the days that dreams are made of.

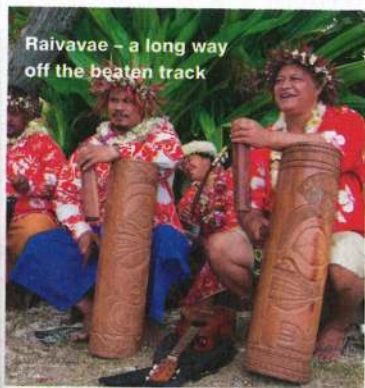
**Sunday 05 March**  
**Wind 3-10 knots, 286°T**

We talked about isolation today. We have been at sea for over 10 days now; we have seen no other people, not one plane (jets don't fly across this part of the world) and no ships. It's just the two of us. Our world is moving with us, we have food, we can make water from sea water, and we have music and laughter. We are over 1,000 miles away from the nearest humans but we're not scared, and we don't fear isolation. Modern life is so dependent on people looking for reassurance from others, with social media, Facebook etc. Believe in yourself and you can spend many happy hours alone. The sunset tonight was the most beautiful that Colin and I have ever seen, and the funny thing is we were the only two to see it... 





Cook posing with the main ingredient for his dish 'Dorado in caper and butter sauce'



Raivavae - a long way off the beaten track

Cindy Hopkins/Alamy

**Monday 06 March**

Wind 10-14 knots, 025°T

Still over 1,400 miles to go to the Marquesas Islands. Because of weather conditions we decided to take a short detour of 670 miles to the Australs which are a group of islands in the south of French Polynesia. Being so remote, they're rarely visited by yachts. We're heading for an island called Raivavae. What a privilege to visit an island that has only two or three visiting yachts a year. We are beating into a big sea and should make the island in about five days.

**Tuesday 07 March**

Wind 10-18 knots, 092°T

Today was another hard day spent slamming into wave after wave at over 7 knots, but we made good progress, and covered 150 miles in the last 24 hours. The albatross have left us now and I saw my first flying fish, a sure sign we are in warmer waters.

**Wednesday 08 March**

Wind 8-33 knots, 270°T

We were sailing along in light winds with all sails when Colin came on deck with the morning pot of tea. The sky on our port quarter suggested something big was coming our way fast: a line squall! Within minutes the thin black line had developed into a 10-mile long front heading straight for us. It must have been travelling at over 30mph and now it was only a couple of miles away. Quickly we stowed the genoa, put the engine on, rounded up and began to stow the mainsail. We had most of it away when it hit. It was like a solid wall of water. Winds over 45 knots and biblical rain slammed into us and within seconds the monster had engulfed us. We hove-to with the staysail, poured our tea and sat and marvelled at the power all around us. After 30 minutes all was back to normal.

**Thursday 09 March**

Wind 8-11 knots, 240°T

Hot sunny day, slow, calming sea...fish! We landed a small dorado and had him for dinner in a caper and butter sauce.

**Friday 10 March**

Wind 2-16 knots variable, 110°T

The day started out great. We had light winds and landed a small tuna of about 6kg. After dinner I went to bed but at 2100 Colin woke me. He had seen lightning ahead. The wind was up and although it was dark I could see the whole of the horizon in front of us was inky black, with the occasional flash of lightning. Little did we know, but the next 24 hours were to become the most difficult and testing sailing that either of us had ever experienced. We turned on the radar. Thunderstorms showed up on the screen as a circular pattern - anything from 0.5 to 10 miles across and blue, orange or red depending on the intensity of the wind and rain. We were totally surrounded by storms, mostly rainstorms but quite a few with lightning.

**Saturday 11 March**

Wind 14-34 knots variable, 105°T

The storms developed all around us, sometimes collapsing but mainly occluding together and growing in intensity. There was no going round

**Before I got home...**

We spent a week in Raivavae because of the thunderstorms, and were desperate for fuel. Luckily, the fortnightly supply ship arrived just two days later, and we managed to buy an oil drum of diesel.

After our stopover in Raivavae I'll admit the rest is a bit of a blur. The isolation was over as we island-hopped, made friends and discovered bars. We sailed north for another six weeks to the Marquesas. The atolls were so remote and there are so many of them - tiny islands with one or two villages where people survive on fruit, fish and chickens. We even stopped at the atoll where the Kon-Tiki landed in 1947, and met a famous resident - but that's another story (see Cruising Notes, p88).



A French Polynesian welcome

Cindy Hopkins/Alamy

them; we had little option but to sail straight through. For the next 20 hours we encountered storm after storm, each around 5 miles across, taking approximately an hour to get through with only a few minutes' lull before the next one. The seas were massive and very confused and the wind was crazy. We finally arrived off the island at 1900 hours and at last the weather had eased. After taking in the sails we entered the pass through the reef in the dark and motored 5 miles to the anchorage, arriving at 2100. We had an omelette and a very large G&T! We'd barely slept in the past 40 hours. How wonderful to climb into the bunk with a warm glow from the gin knowing you're safe now.

**Monday 17 April**

Hillside Cottage, North Lincs, light breeze from the bottom of the garden

It's early, 0530, but there's not a lot you can do about jet lag. So I'm sat in our little garden. It's a beautiful, fresh spring morning and the birds are singing their hearts out. The Southern Ocean is a world away now. Did I dream it? There is a blackbird singing in the cherry tree and somewhere an albatross is gliding over the ocean. They're both birds and, like them, this lad from Hull can sit in his garden or fly over the ocean. Live your life to the full and see the world, for it is truly amazing.