



A return visit to the Pacific atoll of Mopelia

Passé Vahine – the channel linking Mopelia's lagoon with the open ocean outside

For a taste of the real South Pacific, you need to make time for Mopelia, says John Neal

Of all the islands in the South Pacific I've sailed to over the last 40 years, tiny Mopelia (Maupihaa in Tahitian) has to be the most memorable.

Lying 150 miles west of Bora Bora and 250 miles ENE of Tahiti, Mopelia is a cruiser's dream come true, but it can also be a real challenge. A classic coral atoll, the island resembles a necklace of islets surrounding a lagoon. The main island is on the windward side and studded with coconut palms, while the rest of the lagoon is surrounded by

unbroken reef, apart from a 60ft-wide, half-mile long pass.

On occasion, the current ebbs from the pass at up to 8 knots with a wall of breakers across the entrance, but at other times we've measured a one-knot flood and glassy calm conditions.

Inside the lagoon

Once inside the lagoon, there are several anchorages to choose from depending on the wind strength and direction. In normal trade winds (12-15 knot east-southeasterly winds) we generally head to the far south-east corner of the lagoon where there is the least fetch and a fairly secure anchorage in 3-8m (12-30ft) depth.

This island is perfect for cruisers, boasting clear 30°C water, a few friendly Tahitians living ashore, and, for those who have run out of time on their French Polynesia visitor's visa, no government representatives or radio. There's also plentiful fish in the surrounding waters, with lobster inside.

My first visit to Mopelia was around 1980 when there were about 30 people living on the island. I spent an amazing week getting to know a young just-married couple, Adrienne and Marcello, who had left their home island of Maupiti, 95 miles away, to have a grand adventure and start a family. At night, following beach bonfires and potlucks we went hunting for lobster on the outer reef and during the day I helped them

weave palm fronds to build their dream thatch huts on stilts overlooking the lagoon. A few years later, a severe cyclone leveled the island leaving nothing on Adrienne and Marcello's property but the crumbled remains of their cement cistern. But the couple had survived thanks to receiving a warning that the cyclone was on its way, giving them time to prepare. First, they each climbed



A juvenile booby on Mahina's spreader



PHOTOS: JOHN NEAL

a coconut tree and chopped off the top to reduce windage. Then they emptied out the deep freezer, punched holes in the top, put their two small children inside and tied it securely to a tree. Finally, they each climbed back up their trees and tied themselves to the trunk. The island was completely washed over, and only a very few frondless palm tree trunks remained, but the family survived. The French government in Tahiti sent a landing craft to take the inhabitants back to their home island of Maupiti, located 30 miles west of Bora Bora.

Welcome diversion

For many years after the cyclone, Mopelia's only permanent inhabitants were Hina, a young Tahitian girl from Maupiti, plus a reclusive Frenchman and his family. Hina loves the diversion from working copra that yachties bring, especially when someone is a guitar or chess player. Every time we've visited in the past 20 years we always ask if we can have a potluck dinner on the beach at her place and she always says yes, reminding me to bake a huge batch of brownies. An open invitation goes out to all the yachts in the anchorage to bring themselves and any musical instruments, and on our last visit in 2015, Edgar, a recent arrival from Tahiti, who lives a little way down the beach, brought coconut crabs while Hina went free-diving on the reef for lobster.

I always ask Hina if she needs anything. Sometimes she'll ask for cooking oil, onions or garlic, but inevitably, she'll say, 'Don't forget to bring ice cream next year!' As she has only a tiny Honda generator, which she uses for lights, anything cold must seem a real treat. Amanda always teases, saying we'll bring taro and coconut flavour ice-cream, to which Hina turns up her nose, demanding 'Chocolate!'

ABOVE: Amanda, Hina and John renew old friendships

RIGHT: Going through the Passé Vahine, there can be strong currents



Adrien, Marcello and the current crew of Mahina Tiare

This year we brought ice cream bars from Bora Bora. Polynesians think it rude to eat while guests are present, so I had to repeatedly urge Hina to enjoy her ice cream before it turned into a puddle in the tropical heat.

After enjoying our recent visit with Hina a wind shift to the north-west caused by a passing cold front turned the normally protected anchorage into a choppy lee shore, so we motored three miles upwind, dodging occasional pearl floats to anchor off Adrienne and Marcello's compound. They've now built a couple of houses and own a backhoe, a speed boat and a truck, but they are as friendly and outgoing as ever. They've now been joined by two daughters and a son, and having seen us enter the pass they were planning a feast. Unfortunately the frontal passage meant that soon the wind would be out of the west, possibly making the exit from the

lagoon impassable. We wanted to stay longer, and Adrienne even tried tying Amanda to a coconut tree to stop her leaving, but this time we had to settle for a short visit and sad goodbyes.

In fact, the pass was a true

maelstrom and getting through without bouncing off the reef on either side required total concentration with quick helm inputs. Amanda gave the bow-thruster control to one of our crew to give even more control at the narrowest part and we took two walls of standing green water over the bow before we were clear of the breakers. We were very thankful for our trusty 95hp engine and three-blade propeller!

If you plan on sailing to Mopelia, first stop by the mayor's office on the island of Maupiti. Hina's father works there and owns a little shop across the road. There will almost certainly be some supplies that need to be taken to Mopelia, and if you have a freezer aboard, try and squeeze in a container of chocolate ice cream to surprise Hina! ▲

Hina's Beach, Mopelia xhxyh xyxh xyh xyxx hxyxh yhxxxx

John Neal and Amanda Swan Neal

John Neal, 63 has sailed more than 340,000 offshore miles include six Cape Horn roundings plus polar voyages to Antarctica and Spitsbergen.

Since 1976, John has hosted over 175 sail-training expeditions worldwide aboard his Hallberg-Rassy 46, Mahina Tiare III and plans to spend the summer of 2016 in the north Atlantic.

Amanda Swan Neal, 51, completed the 1989-90 Whitbread Round the World Race as rigger aboard Maiden, and has 30 years involvement in international racing and sail-training.

For more details see: www.mahina.com.

