



Tim & daughter Jeni at the wheel, today.



Fellow cruiser Mary aboard Sapo, somewhere in the Pacific.

# Seven Years in the Pacific



The ever present fishing pole.

By Scott Murray

Tim McMahon and his partner Naomi headed off from Hawaii in June of '95 aboard *Houhere*, a 65-year-old leaky timber boat they spent two years restoring. Their plan was to circumnavigate the world in two years. They had a send-off party for 100 people and one friend even brought a miniature cannon to blast in honour of their departure. The couple had been in Hawaii for seven years, so they knew lots of people and there was a good chance that they wouldn't see many of them again (btw - if the pumps ever stopped working, *Houhere* would have sank in a day, so in the next seven years of cruising Tim and Naomi never left the boat for more than 24 hours at a time).

Their first stop was Samoa, 2100 miles south southwest of Honolulu. As Tim recalls: "When you sail that direction from Hawaii during that time of the year, you are pretty much sailing dead downwind in about 20-30 knots of wind. A couple hours out, we realized we were never going back to Hawaii, the wind was up, the seas were up, and we would have pretty much had to circumnavigate the world to get back to Hawaii. We spent the next three

days puking our guts out and feeling very low, it was definitely a low point in our trip. Reality had hit home. As Tim recalls, "it was all good fun, sitting around a marina, talking up a storm, making plans, buying provisions but three days south of Hawaii, with Samoa 1900 miles away, is a very lonely spot on the planet in a leaky old wooden boat, let me tell you."

They learned a lot in that first leg, which incidentally didn't end in Samoa, but 1,000 miles before Samoa, when Tim realized they were within 100 miles of Palmyra Atoll, one of the few privately owned islands in the Pacific. It wasn't a scheduled stop, but Tim decided to change course as he knew Roger, the caretaker of the Atoll, - they had shared a boat berth in the Ala Wai Marina in the heart of Honolulu - and to this day he is glad he made the stop as Palmyra is still one of his favorite spots on the planet, lying approximately 1,100 nautical miles southward of Honolulu. They had covered that distance in 9 days, 2 hours. Roger's job was to prevent visiting yachties from settling on Palmyra, which was a paradise on earth (ironically, years later, Roger ended up buying a Harley and settling in Thailand).

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*Houherein Waikiki.*

“Never seen fish like it,” says Tim reminiscing of the Atoll as he often does. “And the snorkeling— there was no legal commercial fishing in Palmyra — it was pristine. The marine life was astounding, the coral heads, the sharks. I’ve spent the rest of my life looking for other Palmyra Atolls — it’s the picture of paradise.

“We spent about three weeks there, and learned a lot about the cruising life. It was a great first stop. I’m glad it wasn’t Samoa because my outlook would have been different. Palmyra got me interested in more out-of-the-way places, I’d done a lot of deliveries and sailing around the Pacific, but there’s something different about sailing for money compared to sailing for yourself, and the latter is definitely more enjoyable as you can make your decisions about where you want to go and create your own time schedule.

“We got slapped around on that first leg. We had had lots of little problems like chafing in the wind vane, so we spent time fixing these things and getting better prepared for the next leg. When we pushed off from Hawaii, I don’t think we were really ready to go

— I don’t think anyone who goes cruising is ever really ready to go — but you come to a point where you just have to push off, otherwise you just sit there on the beach buying more stuff, and hearing more ‘bad news’ stories from people. You must realize you will never be 100% ready to go. You get to a point where your list is pretty much taken care of and you say ‘right, we will take care of the rest of it when we get to the next port’”

“So when we pushed off from Palmyra, we were much better prepared than we were when we left Hawaii even though we hadn’t bought any new gear because obviously in Palmyra there was nothing to buy and nowhere to buy it. Most of our supplies also disappeared because whenever you pull into a remote harbor you are also going to have ‘instant friends’, everyone jumps into their dinghy and motors over and says ‘How’s it going?’ ‘Where are you coming from?’ They don’t really care about that,” Tim laughs, “they just want a beer, because you can’t buy alcohol and other goodies in those remote anchorages.

“So lesson learned — whenever you pull into a remote anchorage like Palmyra, Chagos,

Christmas Island or Fanning Atoll, don't shout 'Come on over for a beer', because every man and their dog is going to come on over for a beer and there goes the ship's stores. Of course, I have been on both sides of that situation!"

From Palmyra, the McMahons headed for Samoa with Chad, their new-found useless crewmate who had been stranded on Palmyra Atoll and needed a lift. "I've never had a worse crew member," Tim says. "He would never get out of his bunk, he wasn't sick, he just didn't want to move, except for mealtimes and occasionally to holler 'ARRR' from the bow of the boat. But Roger asked me to take him along so I felt obligated."

It's about 1,500 miles from Palmyra to Pago, Pago, in American Samoa, and they made this passage in 10 days and 6 hours. When



Naomi making sail covers.



A cruising family – the Kavenga crew.

*Houhere* hit Samoa, Chad was quickly dispatched, though he did have the gall to come back three days later and ask Tim for a reference. The McMahons later hit Apia in Western Samoa and stayed in Samoa for about a month. Since there's not a lot of land in the Pacific, many yachties were moored in Samoa and they were committed to their dream ("If you're in Samoa, you're cruising," Tim says.).

"The cruisers weren't who you thought they'd be either: they were little old ladies, nerds who have never been on a boat before, Mr and Mrs Jones who decided to push off and were learning along the way. They had all dropped what they were doing and had committed their lives to sailing. Many people have the boat and have the dream, but they don't do it. When you actually get out there in the cruising grounds of the Pacific (Tonga, Fiji,

Micronesia, and the Philippines) you meet a lovely and interesting group of people. That's when our two-year carefully planned circumnavigation turned into a sailing lifestyle with no foreseeable ending or obvious outcome. I have been living that way ever since."

Tim's years of charter experience also proved invaluable as where ever they went his knowledge was called upon to help fix one problem or another with fellow yachties' boats. The McMahons, at 30, were also some of the youngest yachties cruising.

"When you come into any popular port in the Pacific whether it be Suva in Fiji or Neiafu in Tonga or the like, you meet an amazing cross-section of people: there's the guys who are coming in and leaving tomorrow, the cruising families that are there to look around the island, some guy who ran aground and is repairing his boat on the beach, and then there's people who have been in the harbor living on their boat for a decade. I fell in love with that group of people and that lifestyle. The sailing is a part of it for sure, but the community is a big part of what makes cruising interesting for me (there hadn't been much of a community feeling during Tim's deliveries in the North Pacific, routes from Hawaii to California or on trips to Guam and Johnson Atoll). "It's definitely what I miss most about cruising, the people that are out there doing it; I don't miss some of the miserable moments on the boat (and there have certainly been a few of them). Actually, when you are out there cruising, most of your time is not spent sailing, but in port. By the time we were about to set sail for Tonga, we were only at sea for 20 days, but we had left Hawaii more than 4 months earlier.

"In Samoa, I determined that when traveling to exotic and faraway places, it's not necessary to see much of them, other than the view from your boat and the nearest bar. Naomi would go shopping and do the sightseeing thing. I just don't consider myself a tourist or a sightseer, the destination is not important to me, it's the act of getting there. And once the anchor feels the bottom, I'm basically there, I don't need to get out and climb around, or go to the beach. So if you ask me anything about Samoa, all I can tell you is where to get a hamburger or where the pub closest to the marina is – and that pretty much sums up the information I gathered at all the destinations we hit. (In Thailand, the farthest inland I have been in 10 years is Bangkok, and that's only because a river leads into it)."

Mary, aged approximately 55, was one of accidental sailors the McMahons met. She had worked for 7-Eleven in California, and put

her son through college. As a graduation gift she bought him a 22ft Falmouth cutter (a trailer sailor). The two sailed to Mexico where her son declared sailing wasn't for him and headed back to California. Mary decided to carry on and it took her two months to reach Samoa where the McMahons first bumped into her in tears and almost ready to eat her cat. She eventually circumnavigated the world but kept running into one misfortune after another with Tim catching up - and helping her - in the midst of many of her crises.

The massive amount of plastic sewage and the smell from the Starkist factory had put Tim off Samoa, or at least Pago, Pago. The next passage, from Samoa to the middle Tongan island group, Va'vau, was about 500 nautical



Tim on Houhere.



Sunset sailing.

*By the time, the McMahons had left Samoa, they had started to relax and really get into the cruising lifestyle. They began to realize that they didn't need to race around the world.*

miles; it took Houhere about a week in light winds. On a good day *Houhere* could sail 120 nautical miles, though one day she did do 180 from Palmyra to Samoa, which was when Tim was carrying the useless Chad whom he couldn't wait to jettison in Samoa. That experience so embittered Tim that he never again took on crew for a long sail aboard *Houhere*.

By the time, the McMahons had left Samoa, they had started to relax and really get into the cruising lifestyle. They began to realize that they didn't need to race around the world. They had also become adept fishermen and made it a point to give some local catch along with a can of beer to every immigration and customs official they visited, a foolproof technique to grease the wheels and pave the

way for trouble-free port clearance formalities.

When they hit Tonga, they headed for Neiafu, the main anchorage in the middle group. Tonga was meant to be a pit stop on their journey, but they hadn't realized it was such significant and interesting cruising ground. *Sunsail* had a base there, so they got their hands on *Sunsail's* cruising guide and went about exploring Tonga's 33 anchorages. This became the start of the "molested boat" tour where locals tried to sell them anything and everything. They spent a few months in Tonga before heading over to Fiji, covering the 700 mile passage in just under 6 days of cruising bliss.

They made a tricky night entry into Suva, the South Pacific's biggest city. It was another big holding tank for cruising sailors



Anti aircraft gun on Tarawa.

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*A Sailor's Christmas Feast in Micronesia.*



*Tim baking bread.*

with about 150 yachts anchored up in the bay. There was a great sailor's bar, which was a wealth of information. The couple stayed in the Fiji island group for about 6 months. Then, from the Yasawa Group they then sailed to Funafuti (Kirabati), on to Tarawa, Kosarae, Pohnpe, Truk and then Saipan. The irony was that McMahon, an American, was basically covering the Japanese retreat from World War II with his Japanese wife.

While in Honolulu, the McMahons had met a Japanese couple named Yoko and Kubosan who lived on Saipan, and they had offered the McMahons their home and vehicle if they ever made it to Saipan. Tim had helped them fix their Hunter 43 yacht they were delivering it from California to Saipan. When Tim and Naomi sailed into Saipan's Smiling Cove marina, Yoko and Kubo met them on the dock with pizza and ice cream. Within a day, Naomi had a job at Duty Free Shoppers and Tim, using his US captain's license, was quickly able to snag a job driving a charter sport fishing boat doing daytrips and working as a stand by captain for one of the islands dinner cruise operators in the evenings. Although he is shy to admit it, he also worked on a few occasions as a speed boat skipper with a banana boat in tow, taking tourists on daytrips around the islands lagoon. They stayed in Saipan for a year.

When they resumed their journey, they headed to Japan via the Bonin Islands, Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima, before crossing over to Okinawa, leaving *Houhere* in the port while they went to visit Naomi's family and tour around mainland Japan for a while. During the month long voyage from Saipan to Japan they logged over 1800 wet and wild sea miles. Then they returned to Saipan, took care of some needed maintenance issues before heading off for the Philippines, dropping the hook in the small bay of Rapu Rapu before passing through the San Bernardino Strait. That crossing trip took 10 days, 2 hours on a 1,500 mile sleigh ride: dead downwind all the way with 30 knots of wind on the tail. After clearing the outer channel marks leaving Saipan, Tim didn't touch the wheel for 10 days. They ended up spending a couple months in the Manila Yacht Club and almost a year in the Philippines.

The McMahons entered Manila Bay at midnight; as they turned the corner into the Bay Tim said he had never seen so many boats in his life. "You could have walked across the bay stepping from boat to boat, and I use the word 'boat' loosely. Anything that floats was out there," Tim says. "We spent the whole night weaving



Houhere at sea.

between these boats. It was like sailing through a city.” After Manila they hit Subic, Palawan (visiting the world’s largest underwater river), Nida and Balabac and many other fascinating locations.

The first port of call in Malaysia was Labuan, 400 miles and about 7 days of slow passage making from the south end of Palawan. Thirteen miles from Labuan lay Brunei, and Tim spent a lot of time bouncing back and forth and hanging out at the Royal Brunei Yacht Club. The couple spent four months in the region (Tim broke his wrist rollerblading at an amusement park but that’s a whole other story), visiting Miri and Bintulu and even one time going 150 miles up a river where all they saw was Dayak Indians wearing war paint, carrying spears and possibly sporting shrunken heads on their leather waistbands. It’s about a 850-mile cruise from Labuan to Singapore, and they stopped at a number of oil-field ports and other remote villages, as well as Kuching, where their boat became a tourist attraction.

After leaving Singapore the couple made their way up Malaysia’s west coast where eventually Koh Phi Phi was their first port of call in Thailand. Tim and Naomi’s partnership came to an end when they reached Thailand. Oddly enough, Tim never had any charts for the waters beyond Thailand and he figures his settling here was just meant to be. He eventually made it to Ao Chalong, which he called home until 2004, before moving to Ocean Marina, Pattaya.

And now he has set off once again on another adventure, this time running his own sailing company, SailQuest out of Ocean Marina. 📍

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