

Two sailboats are visible on a clear, vibrant blue sea. The boat on the left is a smaller, dark-hulled vessel, while the one on the right is a larger, white-hulled yacht. Both have their masts and rigging visible against the sky.

Sailing to the Navel of the Earth

Easter Island has a mystique that few other places on earth can match. To sail there is a dream for most of us but **Nick and Jenny Coghlan** dared to dream



A stern, the rugged outline of Robinson Crusoe Island sank slowly beneath the horizon, the near-cloudless sky turning to a hazy purple as dusk overtook us. At the beginning of long passages I always feel excited but a little queasy as well. “Have you taken your Stuger on?” Jenny called from below.

I checked my tether and shuffled backwards in the cockpit to lean out and make an adjustment to our self-steering gear, one eye on the slowly swinging compass. The optimal course was WNW, the wind was a gentle 10 knot WSW: the vane liked any wind forward of a broad reach, so we were off to a good start. After supper Jenny ran through with me

our evening checklist: “No need to reef or to pole the jib? Lifejacket on? Tether on? Check the strobe, the rigging knife. Here’s the headset, the iPod, there’s coffee in the vacuum. I’m off to bed, see you at 10:30.”

Most of the stars were out now. I stood up for a look around, bracing myself on the rigid dodger frame. There were no lights to be seen, I didn’t expect there to be in this quiet corner of the South Pacific. Bosun Bird rustled quietly into the darkness, occasionally slapping down a wave that was bigger than the rest. I craned my neck to check the Windex, its fluorescent orange tip glowing faintly in the light of the masthead tricolour. 1750 nautical miles to Easter Island, known to the Polynesians as the Navel of the Earth.

Every morning we studied the GRIB files that we had downloaded to our laptop via Iridium. We adjusted our course a little to the north so as to avoid the light winds we risked finding at the centre of the South Pacific High. Wolfgang, who ran the Patagonia Cruisers’ Net out of Valdivia, told us on the SSB that our fellow cruising friends in Ludus Amoris were behind us, now approaching Robinson Crusoe, Andiamo had just left Puert Montt, and Dreamaway were closing on Iquique. Soon we were reading a novel a day; Jenny spent much of her off-watches catching up on our finances (which were in a good state as we’d spent four months in the Chilean channels with almost no human contact and no opportunity to spend money).

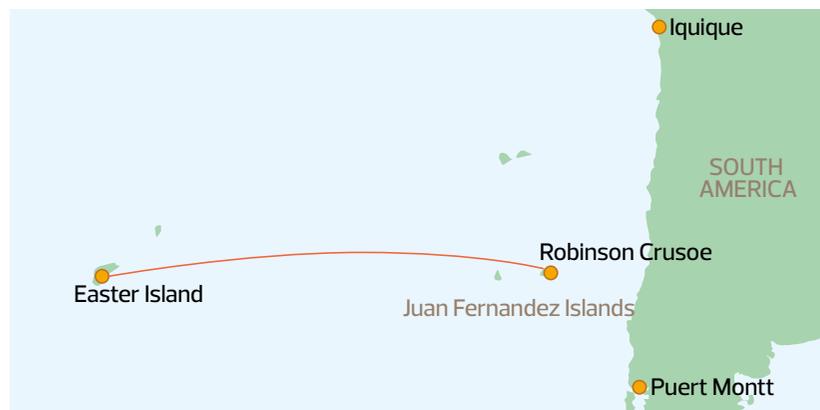
Steadily the wind picked up. Day after day it was 25 knots. We put up our downwind running rig: the staysail poled out to one side, the double-reefed main to the other with a tight preventer. Bosun Bird bowls along in these conditions but she rolls heavily. Down below, we jammed our two biggest pink fenders (known as “the boobs”) between the bunk that was marginally more downhill and the cabin table, so that the off-duty crew member would not roll into the gangway when sleeping.

Day 16 from the log:

“More of the same. A full moon made for good visibility on the night watches, accompanied by Diana Krall on the iPod. We gybed again in the night. The boats in Robinson Crusoe are reporting lots of wind. We got out the new charts. The GRIBS are forecasting NNE for a couple of days’ time, which won’t be good.”

Day 17 was April 1. The captain took advantage of the date to convince the crew – briefly – that he could see Easter Island, even though it was still 130 miles distant. But by next morning we really were closing in on the 1200ft cliffs of Cape Roggewein. I briefly regretted the uncertainty and anticipation of landfalls in the days of celestial navigation, but not for long.

As forecast, the wind had gone northerly. This would make the anchorage off the main settlement at Hanga Roa untenable: it is an open roadstead off a coastline that runs SSW to NNE. The wind would



blow directly into Anakena, the other most favoured anchorage on the north coast. We plumped for Hana Hotu Iti, on the SE side of this triangular island.

It was a dream of a setting. At the head of the bay was a row of 15 of those iconic moai (the enigmatic standing heads of Easter Island), backed by low, rolling green hills. The warm water was clear and we zigzagged among dark coral heads to find a large patch of white sand and drop our Bruce anchor in 35 feet. As the sun set, we had a glass of Chilean box-red to celebrate our arrival.

By some definitions, this is the most remote inhabited location in the world: the nearest neighbours are at Pitcairn, 1300 miles west. That certainly gave us pause for thought. But, as we always do in a strange anchorage, we got up every two hours that night to check the depth sounder and to take visual bearings. Everything was in order.



NICK AND JENNY'S BOAT

BOSUN BIRD

Vancouver 27

LOA 26ft 9in

LWL 22ft 9in

Beam 8ft 5in

Draught 4ft 2in

Next morning Jenny dived on our anchor. She reported: "Not great." Already our chain was working its way around a large coral head, risking becoming jammed. On cue, a small launch zipped out from the one house on shore: Victor, who fished the bay every day, advised us to move to a different corner, where it would be deeper but the bottom would be uniformly sandy. We realised when we tried to get the anchor up that his warning had come none too soon: it took an hour of manoeuvring back and forth to break free and we bent one fluke in the process. As he watched, Victor encouragingly detailed for us the number of sailboats that had been wrecked in this bay.

Our new friend adopted us. He saved us the labour of inflating our oar-powered 8ft Avon (and a row of half a mile) by running us back and forth in his high-powered launch, plied us with strong black coffee in his shack on the beach, and drove us across the island in his open-sided jeep to the "capital" at Hanga Roa. As we chatted, Victor gave us a crash course on island politics. These were surprisingly complex and bitter for such a small and ostensibly idyllic location: there was tension between the majority Rapa Nui (indigenous Polynesian inhabitants) and persons from the Chilean mainland.

We were glad we hadn't gone around to Hanga Roa by boat. A mile off from the town a couple of sailboats were dipping and rising violently at anchor, with two surf-lines between them and the beach. There is a tiny square artificial harbour – Hanga Piko, about the size of a moderate swimming pool – but there were heavy breakers in the

entrance and a swell was working its way in and out, creating a three-foot rise and fall and an awful sucking sound. With the port captain's permission and with payment of a fee to a pilot (obligatory), sailboats may sometimes be allowed in. But they are routinely warned that it could be many days before they are able to leave again.

Chastened and conscious that the weather might turn at any time, we loaded up on as much fresh fruit as we could (an entire stalk of green bananas) and set off to see the sights.

Ah those statues. However much you have read about them, however many photos you may have seen, however much you may have delved into the (often crazy) theories of how they came to be here, the Moai do not disappoint. Most thought-provoking of all the sites is the "Nursery": a quarry cut into the hillside, where you can see 20ft-long monoliths still only half-cut out of the living rock, while all around are more heads set at steep angles into the hillside. It is as if one day, the order had been given to stop work, and everyone just downed tools. There are still very few definitive answers to what happened on Easter Island: what do the Moai mean? How were they raised? How did the

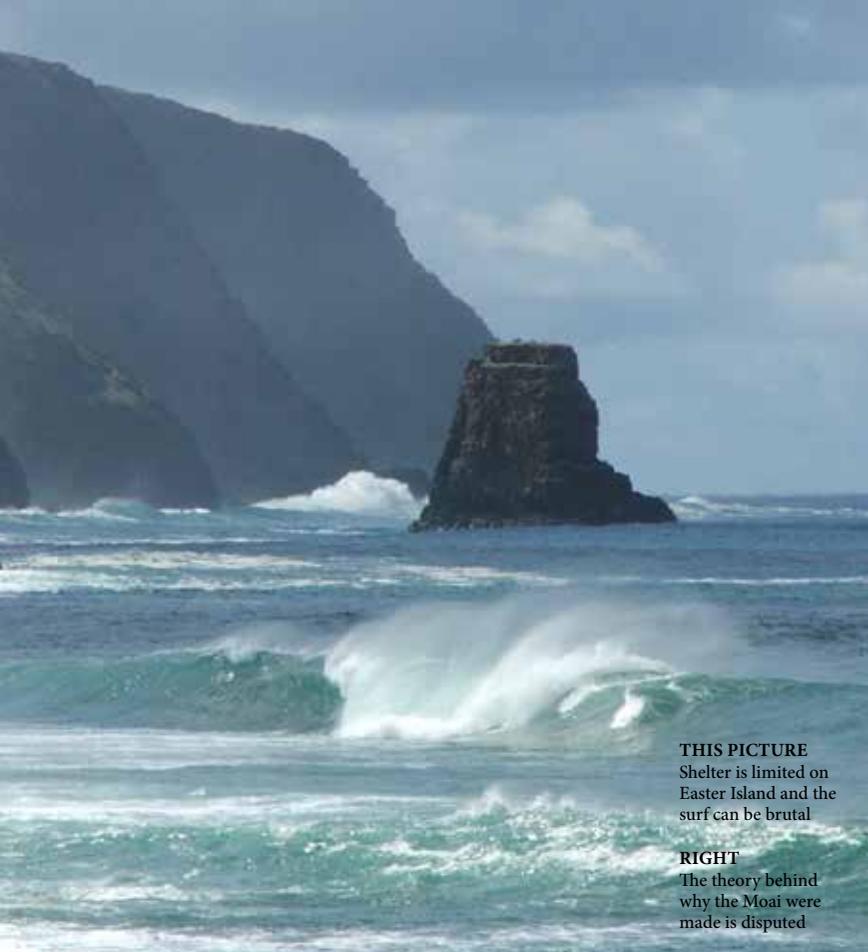


THIS PICTURE
Bosun Bird in her element

BELOW
A selection of the near mysterious Moai stone heads



NICK AND JENNY COGHLIN



THIS PICTURE
Shelter is limited on Easter Island and the surf can be brutal

RIGHT
The theory behind why the Moai were made is disputed



first inhabitants get here? How and why did an apparently once thriving population of over 5000 suddenly collapse? Thor Heyerdahl is among the many who have published their theories: controversially, he postulates that the original settlement was from South America.

Back at Hotu Iti in the late afternoon, we were alarmed to find that Bosun Bird was hardly visible, as she kept disappearing between enormous swells that were now rolling in from some distant storm, breaking thunderously. Victor came to the rescue. He hurried us into his launch with

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the unnecessary admonition:

“Es mejor que se vayan...ya!” (“It’s best you leave...now!”)

We edged out from his tiny concrete jetty and for several minutes, cruised slowly along the beach, in front of the breakers, which Victor eyed carefully. Then, “Hold on!” He gunned his 90 hp Yamaha and we headed straight for a breaker. We lifted high in the air, seemed to pause there, then crashed down into the calmer water beyond.

We said our thank you’s to Victor rapidly as we boarded, and barely spoke to each other as we frantically readied to leave. There was no wind,

but the oily rollers were larger by the minute and seemed to be carrying us inshore. I turned on the depth sounder and saw with alarm that we were rising and falling 15ft; the barograph was in free fall.

The anchor came up on sheer adrenaline, I gunned our trusty Bukh into a now-threatening dusk and we set a course to clear Roggewein.

It had been a short, memorable stay. But next time we’d go by air. And those bananas? Well, they were great, but all ninety ripened on the same day. You can read about the further adventures of Bosun Bird at bosunbird.com

The Vancouver 27

The Vancouver 27 is the original Vancouver. It is the design that started the legend that is Vancouver. The brief was for a small yacht that could sail across oceans double or single handed. It had to be compact, tough, sea kindly, safe and easy to handle. The Vancouver 27 is all of those things. It is a no compromise boat, not governed by fashion or racing rules but by the dictates of the elements. It does today what it did when first built in the 1970s and the proof of that is in the number of Vancouver yachts that have completed extended

ocean voyages and circumnavigations.

The yacht was designed primarily for two people to sail and live aboard for extended periods. It has only three berths; two settee berths and a quarter berth. Indeed, the original Robert Harris design only called for two permanent sleeping berths in a dedicated sleeping cabin. Such is the durability of the design that that boat is still going strong after thirty-seven years. The hull design is heavy displacement with a long-encapsulated keel for directional stability. The hull shape ensures that the yacht does not slam in heavy seas.

