



Chasing dreams

Raivavae (pronounced reh-vah-VYE) is one of the Austral Islands, part of French Polynesia, and it's one of our favourite lesser-known stops. High and lush, it has an encircling reef that provides multiple safe anchorages, friendly people and low-key authorities. In a word, it closely resembles the far better known islands of the adjoining Societies: Tahiti, Bora Bora, Huahine and Raiatea. The only reason this island receives fewer than a dozen yachts a year is that if you are sailing westwards with the trades, coming from Panama or North America with the usual three-month visa stamp in your passport, then calling in here means bypassing or skipping on the (rightfully) popular Marquesas and Tuamotu archipelago.

Shortly after daybreak, nine days and 725 miles out from the Gambier islands, we were lining up the range markers that lead vessels in through

Raivavae's Passe Mahanatoa, motoring into the flat waters of Rairua Bay and letting our chain out in 10 meters of crystalline water.

Winding down over coffee in the cockpit after a sleepless night, we scanned the small village onshore through the binoculars, savouring a faint smell of smoke and rotting mangoes on the light offshore breeze. There was not a single sign of life. About 9am, an old-fashioned Renault panel van trundled along the coast road from the west, paused for two or three minutes and moved on again.

By 11am, when we rowed ashore, there had been no further movement in the village. As there was no-one around to ask the way, it was quite by chance that we stumbled on the gendarmerie and asked if we could check in.

"Mais bien sûr," was the warm reaction of the evidently surprised young shorts-clad gendarme. "Et soyez les bienvenus!"

ABOVE
Aerial view of Raivavae island with beaches and coral reef in turquoise lagoon

BELOW L-R
At anchor among coral heads, red buoy on a bommie; the gendarmes come visiting; riding around the island

Over more coffee, we were introduced to Jean's wife, his deputy and their new kitten Motu. We mentioned how quiet the place seemed, and the Renault van.

"Ah, that would be the boulanger, the baker. He drives all the way round the island every morning; you just hail him if you want to buy some bread."

This small team at the gendarmerie represented three quarters of the métropolitains (European French) on this island of about 800 people, and we were soon firm friends. One day they came out to *Bosun Bird* for chocolate cake with Earl Grey tea. But after 10 minutes, with the boat only shifting ever so slightly as people moved around, Jean had to excuse himself, much to the amusement of the other two.

"Mal de mer..." explained his wife with a shrug.

With a pair of bicycles lent by the police, it took us a couple of hours to ride all the way around Raivavae.





Hard-bitten travellers are always looking for that special place that is truly off the beaten track. But little-visited places are usually unfrequented for good reason, as Nick and Jenny Coghlan found out when they discovered a forgotten French outpost



It didn't take long to find the island's two or three tiny shops, but there was little to buy.

Tinned peas, \$5

At Angelique's we paid the equivalent of US\$5 for a single can of peas, having felt it would be rude to purchase nothing at all. She then gave us as many giant grapefruits as we could carry, along with a couple of breadfruit; it was challenging to juggle this load on the bikes.

We explored several overgrown marae – Polynesian meeting grounds – and found the island's best-known tiki (idol) which, judging from conversation with the locals, inspires at least as much veneration (or fear) as the several disproportionately large 100-year-old whitewashed Catholic churches that are scattered along the road. The only vehicle we ever encountered was that Renault van, rather eerily travelling first one way around, then the other; by now the boulanger was an old friend.

The weekly supply ship had come in from Rapa, and for a brief period there were nearly a dozen people on the town wharf. Feeling the need to get away from the unaccustomed excitement, we upped anchor and very carefully wended our way along a sporadically-marked channel, around menacing bommies, to Motu Haamu, six miles away on the northeastern corner of the encircling reef.

It was difficult to find a patch of clear sand over which to anchor in the lee of the low, wooded island and we found it convenient temporarily to tie marker buoys to the most threatening coral heads in the neighbourhood, so we could easily judge if we were swinging too close.

Ashore, we gathered coconuts, limes and papayas. There were a couple of ruined shacks that indicated that long ago, there had been a settlement on the motu. We burned a few weeks' worth of garbage and we roamed the

BELOW L-R
Angelique's corner store; Polynesian tiki, Raivavae; The weekly supply ship at the wharf, Rairua

windward beaches for three days. There were hermit crabs and flotsam that was exotic and tantalising in its provenance yet depressing in its quantity: a plastic crate from New Zealand's South Island, part of a dinghy marked "The Waltons", a buoy marked "PG Tips", and another "Osprey".

Back on the big island, as suggested by our friends at the gendarmerie, we sought out the only other métropolitain, a 70-year-old former Légionnaire who – we were told – lived in a small house close to the range markers.

"Il est un peu spécial," Jean warned us with an enigmatic smile. But he would not be drawn any further.

We found Edmond fairly easily. He had a large vegetable and fruit patch behind his house and we were more than happy to load up on delicious fresh produce prior to our departure for Tahiti. But really he just wanted to talk. And to show us something... →



Des beaux rêves

Propped up on beams under a breadfruit tree in his garden was the love of his life: *La Bourrasque* (French for Squall). Edmond had been building this grey-painted 30ft sloop for some time now (to judge from the mould on the cap rail), using scraps of plywood and other suitable debris collected over his many years of island life –supplemented with castoff items from passing yachts.

To imply any criticism of the lines or seaworthiness of another person's boat is, of course, very poor form, so we were duly complimentary. And then Edmond would not let go. We noticed a person who might be Mme Edmond hovering as if to interrupt or offer us a juice; but he dismissed her with a peremptory wave of the hand and went on talking.

Next day, by prior arrangement and hailed from land with a conch horn, we picked Edmond up by dinghy and, over Earl Grey (again) in *Bosun Bird's* cockpit, we talked some more. Edmond asked perfunctory questions about navigating the cold and windy waters we had recently left (in Patagonia) but didn't wait for an answer. Instead he launched into a detailed description of his plans to return home (France) via the Roaring Forties, Cape Horn and the Atlantic.

"Mon idole," he commented in a brief parenthesis and with a faraway look, "c'est Bernard Moitessier. Vous le connaissez sans doute..."



"Mais oui, naturellement..."

But before I could go on, Edmond was back into a lyrical, emotional recounting of his lifelong dream, the hardships he would face, the romance of the sea and the wind. It took hours for us to winkle out of the old Légionnaire the fact that he had never sailed before. In fact, as yet he had no charts and no navigational equipment beyond a hand-held compass.

In our experience, while it is one's duty to point out to dreamers some of the practical obstacles facing their enterprise – especially when, as in this case, the hazards could scarcely be exaggerated – it is both useless and cruel to be dismissive. Edmond half-listened when we suggested cautiously that perhaps a trial run downwind to Tahiti might be a good way to start his voyage, but he brushed this off impatiently, his hand over his heart:

"Mais vous ne comprenez pas, c'est le Cap qui m'appelle. Le Cap... It is Cape Horn that is calling me. It is a call I must answer."

We took a more practical tack. Repeating my admiration for *La*

ABOVE
Edmond and
La Bourrasque
in his garden

BELOW LEFT
Bosun Bird at anchor
at Motu Haamu,
with Raivavae in
the background

BELOW RIGHT
Sunset at anchor,
Rairua Bay



Nick and Jenny Coghlan are an adventurous couple who make a habit of getting off the beaten track in their Vancouver 30, *Bosun Bird*. Nick's book, *Winter in Fireland* narrates some of their adventures exploring Tierra del Fuego and its environs

Bourrasque, I wondered how Edmond intended to extract her from his back garden, carry her across the road and 100 meters of very shallow coral foreshore, and into deep water – this on an island where there was no crane, let alone a Travelift.

Edmond nodded sagely: "Oui, effectivement, c'est un défi." Yes, it is a challenge.

But the old soldier had a plan. It would take 40 men, and he counted them out on his fingers: 10 to keep *La Bourrasque* on an even keel, 20 to pull, and the remaining 10 to run relays, placing greased palm tree trunks under the boat's keel as she staggered forward.

Months later, Jean filled us in by email. Edmond and *La Bourrasque* did indeed make it into the water, more or less unscathed. And, to the surprise of many, she floated on her lines. A few weeks later, Jean and many others were on the quayside when Edmond duly set off, towards the pass – "to find my destiny" as he had put it.

After half an hour, the engineless sailboat was still in sight but apparently headed for a reef, with the just-visible Edmond at a loss. The gendarmes stepped in. They hastily launched their RIB, towed him back in and impounded *La Bourrasque* on the grounds of general unseaworthiness. Edmond did not venture out again. The last we heard – now in his eighties – he was still selling fresh produce to passing yachties.

It was difficult to know whether we should be sad or happy for Edmond and his dream. ✦

