

Abroad

An Irishwoman sailing around the world: ‘This paradise has just seven residents and two dogs’

Dubliner Kate Ashe-Leonard left Ireland in 2017 to live with her partner in London. In 2018, they began their adventure to sail around the world

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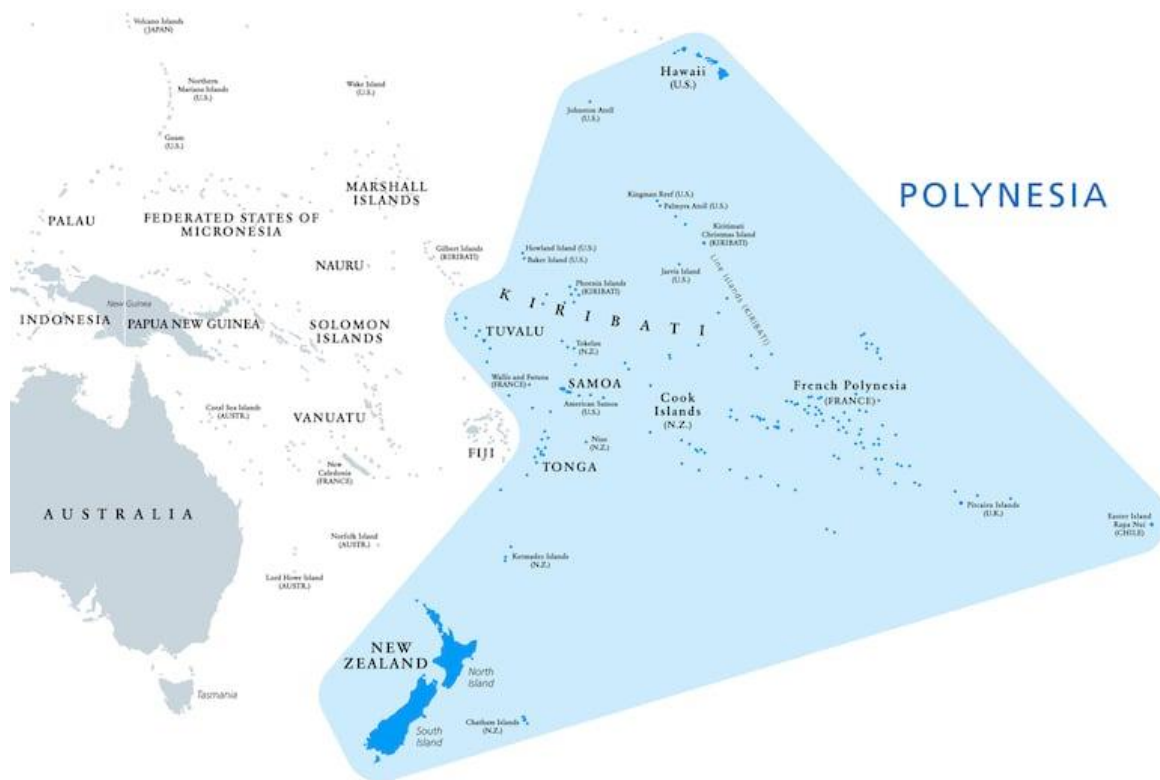
Kate Ashe-Leonard

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The tiny coral atoll of Maupiha’a lies 120 nautical miles west of Bora Bora’s five-star over-water bungalows. This paradise rises only a few feet above sea level and, with just seven residents and two dogs, it’s no tourist hotspot.

Helming our sailboat, we make a careful approach with the help of our chart plotter and satellite imagery. Compared to our own technology-heavy circumnavigation, I’m in awe of the early Polynesian settlers. More than two thousand years ago, in wooden outrigger canoes, they navigated this vast ocean using the stars as their guide.



Polynesia, subregion of Oceania, is made up of more than 1,000 islands scattered over the central and southern Pacific Ocean

Access to the atoll's interior is via a narrow passage where the ocean floods in and ebbs out on the tide and capricious currents swirl menacingly. Furling away our sails, we engage our engines. As we accelerate, steep underwater coral walls either side of us are illuminated by scattered beams of sunlight.

Our bows slice through Maupiha'a's inner lagoon, hemmed by palm-covered islets. Nesting terns stalk from above, while six grey reef sharks, attracted to our anchor chain lowering, begin to circle.

A sturdy woman and tattooed man with rock-solid biceps paddle towards us. "La Ora Na!" (Tahitian hello). "Tu-veux du poisson?"

Placing six parrot fish neatly on our back step, Harry and Norma introduce themselves, inviting us to their place "tout moment" before vanishing.

Since arriving in this country 14 months ago, the interchange between languages is a constant reminder that French Polynesia is an overseas collectivity of France. Recently, the pro-independence party came into power and it's not difficult to understand some of the reasons why. That 193 atomic bombs were detonated by the French, contaminating atolls like this one until 1996, is the most horrifying one to me.



Maupihā'a is an atoll in the Leeward group of the Society Islands in the South Pacific.

Sending ripples across the glassy lagoon, we startle a green turtle and two burrowing stingrays. Through knee-deep water, over coral-pink sand, we wade, dragging our paddle-boards up the beach.

Crafted from woven palm fronds, a little house sits pleasantly under shady overhanging trees. Rows of vegetables, planted in sandy soil, span an impressive variety and nearby, a tiny generator, rainwater catchment system and solar panels complete the technological array.



Kate Ashe-Leonard left Ireland in 2017

I open my bag placing a contribution on the table – flour, mayonnaise, cooking oil, fishing hooks and two spare knives. A black terrier barks playfully until Norma appears, shushing the mutt who's tied to a tree. Punishment, apparently, for gobbling the remaining chickens.

Barefoot, we explore the airless palm forest that runs parallel to the ocean. Machetes and other tools for de-husking coconuts litter the path. A lapis lazuli-coloured coconut crab emerges from a pile of fallen fronds snapping its claws at me. Further along coconut flesh dries in the sun being transformed into what's known as Copra.

On our return, four green coconuts have been set on a table, a drinking hole punched out of each.

“C'est pour tu!” Norma says daubing her forehead.

Flies are swatted, and bowls uncovered reveal an unexpected banquet: speared tuna steaks and sashimi, curried coconut crab, taro, rice and coconut cake. I notice a Ukulele in the corner too.

We begin to chat. Their home atoll, Maupiti, is just 95 nautical miles away. They're here to harvest Copra. With a weighty quota to meet before the Copra ship will come for them, and only seven people to process it, two years has passed since they've been home.

But they do seem content. They say, this place gives them everything they need.

“Socialising with sailors is important though.” Norma explains.

Through our patchy French and with the aid of paper and pencils, we exchange stories of our adventures. Us transients, I realise, are their link to the outside world.

One evening, under a waxing gibbous moon, Harry leads us through the coconut palms. He's been fattening up coconut crabs in traps. Keeping all fingers intact, masterfully he handles them into netted bags.

Harry points skyward “During cyclones, we chop away branches to reduce swaying. Climb up, tie ourselves there.”

This is how, in 1991, the residents survived cyclone Wasa-Arthur's eight-metre waves that submerged all but the tallest treetops.





The tiny coral atoll of Mauipha'a lies 120 nautical miles west of Bora Bora

Life here is precarious: climate change brings more frequent cyclones, while storms from thousands of miles away create surges capable of engulfing an atoll like this one. Without access to weather forecasting, like their Polynesians ancestors, they look to nature's signals; the behaviour of wildlife, the angle and movement of trees, cloud formations and the sea state.

On the 12th night, an east wind blows – the time for our onward journey to Samoa has arrived. Coconuts and papayas are packed into our dinghy, a gift from Mauipiha'a we're told. A guestbook containing sailors' messages of gratitude dating back years is passed to us to sign.

The roar of the Pacific beckons us to walk the outer reef one last time. I watch the night sky mirrored in rock pools and beyond the whitewash of a thousand breaking waves. At first light we'll weigh anchor, all the richer for the time spent with these resilient and generous hosts in this wild place.

Kate Ashe-Leonard left Ireland in 2017 to live with her partner Jim in London. In 2018, they began their adventure to sail around the world. They initially intended to take a three-year sabbatical from work, but after five years it has become a new way of life. They have lived off rental income from their home in London and working remotely. Instagram: sv_polaris Blog: svpolaris.com