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French Polynesia: Paradise Requires Prior Preparation



In the eight months they have been cruising French Polynesia, US sailor Jill Gallin and her husband Michael have experienced what they describe as quintessential French Polynesia – a real, uncharted paradise, yet one that has its fair share of ups and downs and for which prior preparation is invaluable.

Published 5 months ago, updated 4 months ago

Complicated Cruising in Paradise

From where I sit, my gaze climbs to the peak of Mount Mokoto, a burst of green against the blue sky. The afternoon sun blazes at sea level, but a plume of smoke softens its rays, giving Rikitea an ethereal glow. In less than two hours, we can sail to the south-eastern outer reef motus or one of the sparsely populated volcanic islands dotting the lagoon. This is quintessential French Polynesia – a real, uncharted paradise. But even paradise has its ups and downs.



Taravai Island view from the peak of Mount Mokoto, Gambier. (c) Jill Gallin.

For the past eight months, my husband and I have cruised the Marquesas, the Tuamotus, the easternmost Society Islands and Gambier aboard *Gerty*, our 2011 Outremer 49. It's been an unparalleled adventure. From the spires of 'Ua Pou to the turquoise waters of Tahanea, the beauty here has deepened my appreciation for our planet.

The abundance of sea life – thriving coral gardens, manta rays, eels, clams, humpback whales and sharks – is unlike anything we've seen. I feel blessed to be here, but cruisers must understand this overseas collective of France, which spans five archipelagos and over 100 islands across more than 2,000 km of the Pacific, offers both idyllic sailing and formidable obstacles, making it a complicated and contradictory place to cruise.



The view approaching 'Ua Pou, Marquesas, by sea. (c) Jill Gallin.

Timing is Essential

Cruisers, especially non-EU citizens, must consider timing. Tourist visas last 90 days and 12 month long stay visas (LSVs) must be acquired before arrival in the country. Cyclone season extends from November to May and historically, only the Marquesas have been spared.

Therefore, many cruisers must choose between passing through or staying long-term. As Americans, we got a long-stay visa, arrived in June during a La Niña year and stayed for 11 months. We spent four weeks off our boat, visiting family stateside.

[See [February 2025 report by SY Blown Away](#) about securing a long-stay visa]



Gerty, the author's Outremer 49, anchored in Tikehau atoll, Tuomotus (Photo credit: Ralf Gerking).

Eastern French Polynesia's Contradictions

Though part of the [Coconut Milk Run](#), known for its steady trade winds, Eastern French Polynesia is not easy to cruise. It's remote, requiring substantial passages between safe harbors. Many picturesque anchorages in the Marquesas suffer from relentless ocean swells. The Tuamotus, while offering serene lagoons,

require careful navigation through treacherous passes and vigilant sunlit piloting to avoid coral heads, or "bommies."

Finally, cruisers often joke that one can float downwind from The Galapagos to French Polynesia in the Trades, but the dearth of yacht services east of Papeete is no laughing matter. Cruisers must be self-sufficient and expect repairs may require lengthy delays in less-than-ideal conditions.

Food in Eastern French Polynesia was also wrought with contradictions for me. Provisioning was challenging. We anticipated high alcohol prices and limited fresh produce, so we stocked up in Puerto Rico and Panama. Still, our stores sometimes fell short. In the Tuamotus, we pooled resources with fellow sailors for potluck feasts, enjoying everything from homemade bean burgers served on boat-baked buns to fresh-caught lobster. Inspired, we became better cooks, mastering yogurt and sourdough bread. But the monotony of canned goods and an unfortunate bout of ciguatera proved difficult to manage.



A Humpback Whale off the coast of Moorea, Society Islands (photo credit: Bruse Lohrmann).

Cultural experiences were similarly rewarding yet elusive. With a small, scattered population of about 282,000, meaningful interactions require patience. Weeks can pass without meeting locals, but those who persist are richly rewarded. We were

invited to community events, including Heiva dance performances, a Christmas Spectacular, a coconut toss competition and Sunday barbeques. Some of our most special memories were kiteboarding with locals, reading to school children and listening to people tell life stories represented by their intricate tattoos. Speaking French and learning key Polynesian phrases enhanced our connections.

Despite its wonders, French Polynesia's contradictions took a toll on my health. Physical exhaustion and isolation weighed on me. Receiving visitors proved more difficult than we anticipated and far from my support systems, I was intermittently anxious and depressed. Starlink helped more than it hurt, but be wary of your connection expectations and the undertow of social media. Ultimately, my husband Michael and my fellow cruisers were the best company when I needed them most.



Rotoava Primary School
Christmas Spectacular, Fakarava
atoll, Tuomotus. (c) Jill Gallin.

Preparation is Invaluable

Cruisers often ask if Eastern French Polynesia is worth the trip. I say yes – but preparation is invaluable. Study the regions' weather and navigation techniques. Ensure that your crew is self-sufficient. Bring not only supplies but also more abstract things like self-awareness, confidence and personal goals. Equip for activities ahead of time, like water sports, work, or hobbies, to help pass idle time on the water. Consider healthcare needs in remote regions and lastly, familiarize yourself with the country's history and modern afflictions, namely alcoholism, domestic

violence and obesity, so that you can better understand the peoples' struggles when you arrive.

During my time in Eastern French Polynesia, I witnessed an underwater world as pristine as I may ever see. Locals shared the fruit from their trees, drove my family to town, and taught me ethnic dances—expecting nothing in return. Inspired by Christina Thompson's *Sea People: The Puzzle of Polynesia*, my husband and I followed the star paths of the navigators who first charted these islands. In doing so, I discovered my own strength as a sailor.

Yes, there were ups and downs. And yes, it was worth every moment.

Jill Gallin
SV Gerty of New York

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About the Author

Jill Gallin, a USCG licensed captain, is sailing the world with her husband, Michael, on their 2011 Outremer 49. Since departing in June 2020, The Gallins have sailed over 20,000 NM from New York to Maine, The Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Africa, Panama, Galapagos, French Polynesia and beyond. Jill is also a Paediatric Nurse Practitioner. Her favorite pastime is to bring picture books to schools in the countries they sail to and read to the children. The Gallins have two sons, Zachary and Joshua. Zachary joined them for part of their French Polynesian adventure.

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The author and her husband, making landfall after their Pacific Crossing, Nuku Hiva, Marquesas. (c) Jill Gallin.

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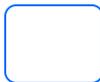
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