

Nine of Cups – Liberty 458 Cutter – 7' draft
Subject Area: Îles Gambier, French Polynesia – May 2009

After heaving-to for several hours off Pitcairn to avoid the bad luck of leaving on a Friday, we finally set the sails just after midnight Saturday morning, toasted Neptune and headed to the Gambier, our entry to French Polynesia some 350 NM away. We had strong breezes on the nose, followed by light breezes in our favor. What a delight to see the rugged outlines of the Gambier Islands on the horizon on the morning of our fourth day.

We entered the reef through the Southeast Pass in good light with no problems, then slowly threaded our way across the lagoon. The actual entrance into Rikitea harbor is well marked with red/green markers and to our surprise, there were nearly 20 boats anchored there. We were thrilled to see some friends from Puerto Montt waving as we passed through the anchorage. Kim, on the Danish boat, *Sol*, a fellow SSCAer, came visiting moments after the anchor was down with a hand-drawn map of Rikitea, some fresh pamplemousse (local grapefruit), limes and a dinner invitation. What a welcome!

During our three weeks in the Gambier, we were busy most every day and evening. We met a pearl farmer who invited us to visit his pearl farm with him one day. Not only did we visit and get an in-depth tour of the pearl farming industry, we actually got the opportunity to try our hand at harvesting and grafting (reseeding) some pearls. The same fellow and his wife were active participants in a traditional dancing troupe and invited us to watch them practice in preparation for a presentation in Tahiti. The beating of the drums seems to synchronize with your heartbeat until you feel in a frenzy just watching the dancers. There were hundreds of coordinated dance moves, all performed with precision and grace by the 30+ dancers present. One day we heard drums and went ashore to find that two older residents, a brother and sister, had died within hours of each other. The drums signaled the call for the community to come together for the funeral Mass.

We hiked frequently on several well-marked trails across the island and up to Mt. Duff. There is a 24km rough dirt road around the island that's pleasant and scenic, but long. Take a lime with you when you hike. There are literally hundreds of wasps and the forest vibrates with them at times. Limes help if you get stung.

Social life among cruisers was very active and it was rare to have a night without either entertaining or being entertained.

Here are some of the basics:

Rikitea (Mangareva) Port information:

- **Entry/Arrival/Check-in/Check-out**
 - Charts: US 83251/83252; Navionics electronic charts were spot on.
 - Cruising Guides: *Charlie's Charts of Polynesia*
 - Rikitea Anchorage: 23S06.93/134W58.05 ~60', sand, good holding

The anchorage is usually calm and well-protected and after Easter and Pitcairn, it was most appreciated.

- Check in with the Gendarmerie, about two “blocks” left from the public dinghy dock. Entry forms and passport stamping is completed there; no fees are paid here, but you must purchase a 70CFP stamp at the Post Office to mail a copy of your completed Customs form to Tahiti. All EC residents receive 90 days on arrival; all others (including Canadian & US) receive 30 days, renewable for another 60 days (total 90), unless a 6-month *sejours* (long term visa) is obtained in advance.
- Check-out is a similar procedure at the Gendarmerie and requires posting another Customs form to Tahiti.
- If an island has a Gendarmerie, a vessel must check in and out.
- The Gendarmes are helpful, pleasant and some speak English. Forms are in English and French and easy to complete.
- At least this year, American/Canadian residents registered with the Pacific Puddle Jumpers group were exempt from posting the bond (the Tahiti Yacht Club has bonded us as a group) and therefore you may extend your visa for 60 days at the Gendarmerie in Rikitea. Bring copies of passport, one month recent bank records, copy of the “bond” letter, proof of health insurance, boat documentation and a cover letter indicating your reasons for wanting to extend your visa (English is okay). With the purchase of a 3000CFP (~\$35US) stamp per passport at the Post Office, the Gendarmerie will complete all necessary paperwork while you wait and voilà...a 60 day extension.
- An odd French rule stipulates that until you have actually cleared in with Customs in Pape’ete or a FP Customs boat en route, you must fly your “Q” flag in addition to the French courtesy flag.
- **Time:** UTC -9
- **Currency:** CFP (Cour de Franc Pacifique) \$1US = ~85CFP; US \$ readily accepted and can be exchanged for CFP at the post office. Some stores accept US \$ and give a better rate than the post office.
- **Dinghy dock:** There are several places to tie up your dinghy. The easiest for access to town is the main dock, south end of the anchorage. There is also a beach area good and safe for beaching your dinghy to the west of the anchorage. Tidal change is ~1M.
- **Services:** There are few services available for yachties in Rikitea. The little town has only one main road along the coast. There are two other roads and numerous trails over the mountain to the other side of the island. Most everything is located in town on the main road.
 - Air Tahiti offers weekly service to Mangareva so parts can be flown in. There is a tiny office with limited hours on the road to the Cathedral.
 - Banks: None/ no ATM; you can exchange \$ and € at the post office.
 - Internet: There is internet and wifi available via Iaonet. You can either purchase cards from Fritz Schmack or sign-up and buy via PayPal on-line. The same internet service works in several locations throughout French

Polynesia and there is considerable discount available for volume hour purchases.

- Telephone: a phone booth which offers international service is available on the main road opposite the end of the dinghy dock
- Post office: the first left beyond the Gendarmerie.
- Car rentals – none we saw, but you can easily hitch rides around the island. We're told there are 200 vehicles and 28 km of roads.
- Fuel (gas/diesel): Available on an "as need" basis only, but in very limited quantities and requires jerry jugging or you can wait for the supply ship and purchase from directly him. ~\$1.50/ltr.
- Propane: tanks with local fittings are available at several shops in town, but limited quantities until supply ships arrive.
- Medical Clinic: Basic services only; emergencies are airlifted to Tahiti.
- Restaurants:
 - Atomic Pizza (open weekends only Fri-Sun) was great. 1000-1200CFP/large pizza
 - Small Chinese restaurant in town, near the post office
 - A couple of other small take-out places with limited hours. Ask around.
- Fresh water: available from Fritz; ask before filling up
- Provisioning/supermarkets: Several *magazins* along the one main coast road operate from early morning to early afternoon and then again for a few hours in the late afternoon (sometimes) on Mon-Sat. They offer a reasonable supply of staple goods (flour, sugar, rice), some luxury items (wine, beer, cookies, chips) and other basics. Prices are high and quantities vary. If you see it and you want it, buy it. Veggies are at a premium as not much gardening is done on the island. Mr. Takura has some fresh veggies in season (up the hill behind the cathedral), otherwise you must rely on the supply ship. The island has abundant fruit trees (pamplemousse, oranges, limes, mangos, avocados, bananas), but most are owned by residents. Always ask before picking.
- Fresh bread is available daily (450CFP/large loaf...ouch!) at a shop on the way to the Cathedral. You must order in advance or take your chances. Fresh pan au chocolat is sometimes available in some of the shops (150CFP).
- Laundry: Fritz Schmack has a washing machine and clotheslines which he allows and encourages cruisers to use. He lives in the little green house on the northwest end of the anchorage. Markers lead the way for dinghies to approach in shallow water. Cost is 650CFP/load, do it yourself or one bottle of rum for 3 loads.
- Trash: Dumpsters located just beyond the small dock to the north of the beach.

- **Things to See and Do:**

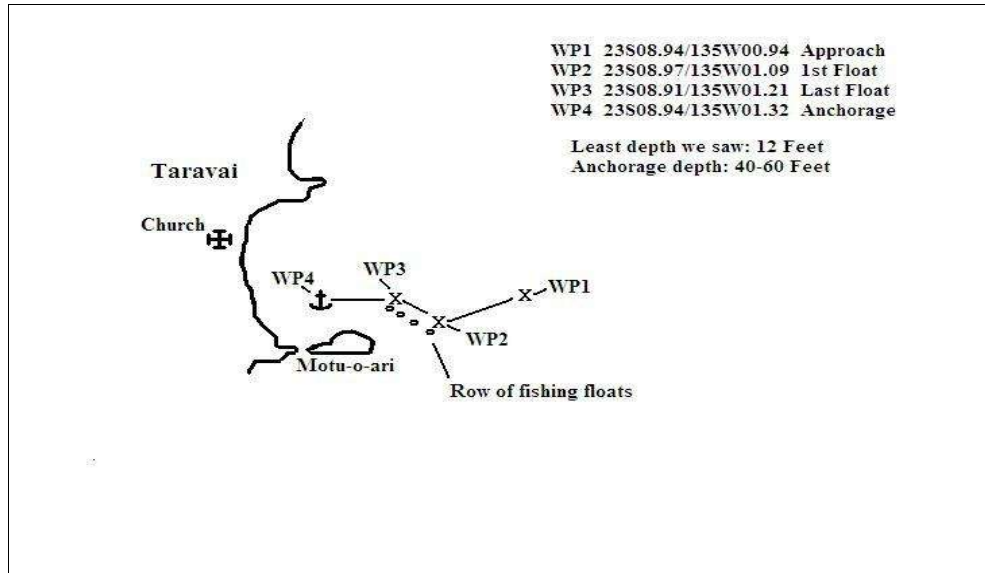
- Walking tour of the island: fabulous views; several marked hikes to Mt. Duff, Belvedere Lookout and other points of interest. The main cathedral is closed for safety reasons, but there are other remnants of P re Laval's influence found all over the island. The cemetery (up the hill from the Cathedral) is quite lovely.
- Diving & snorkeling: the water is crystal clear and the reef provides lots of opportunity for snorkeling, fishing and diving. Check with the locals regarding which fish can be safely eaten without fear of ciguatera.
- Crafts: There are a few shops which primarily sell pearls, pearl jewelry and carved nacre souvenirs (mother of pearl). An artisan school on the road straight behind the Cathedral and before the soccer field on the left, allows you watch students as they carve nacre. There is a small sales shop there where the money from sales is split between the school and the student. On Saturdays, some women display their pearl jewelry and other crafts at the long building opposite the Gendarmerie.
- If you hear drums... something is going on. It could be dance practice or it could be a community meeting. Attend a Sunday Mass to hear glorious singing in multi-part harmony.

Ile Taravai

We didn't spend as much time as we would have liked in the Gambier and didn't explore the other nearby islands as the weather and winds were not very cooperative. Several other boats visited Aukena and anchored off the airport and reported pleasant conditions for snorkeling and beachcombing. We did, however, have the chance to stop at Taravai as we were leaving the Gambier. Our intention was to position ourselves near the Northwest Pass for easy exit at first light and so we anchored quite a ways offshore from Taravai since the charts provided very little in the way of depths closer in. We weren't anchored an hour before a motorized skiff came along side and told us we'd be more comfortable closer in if we'd follow him. We upped anchor and followed Herv  and found ourselves in a lovely spot in the lee of a little motu (island) in very calm, protected waters in about 40'. Herv  politely refused our offer of a cold beer, but invited us to his home the next morning to meet his family and get some fruit. So much for leaving at first light!

We did go ashore and met his wife, Valerie (who spoke excellent English) and 6-year-old son, Alain. We had coffee/tea with them and then collected fruit as we walked their property. We then toured the little island church, long-abandoned, but in better repair than the cathedral, thanks to Herv 's caretaking. We invited them aboard *Cups* for dinner (pizza was the meal of choice) and had a great time answering and asking hundreds of questions with our new friends. They said they welcomed visitors and asked us to give waypoints for the anchorage so more people would stop. We were the first American boat that had stopped by in years. So, true to our word, see the little chartlet and if you're in the area, be sure to tell them that *Nine of Cups (Neuf de Coupes)* sends their best regards. As always, be aware that it's easy to take advantage of people's generosity. Since foodstuffs are expensive and hard to come by on Taravai, we gave them a canned ham, some other canned goods and school supplies for Alain who is home-schooled, as well as

a small stuffed toy. They were also very happy to take the rest of the pizza and brownies for breakfast (some things are universal!).



Three weeks in the Gambier flew by very quickly. With only 90 days in French Polynesia to explore, we needed to move on. Next stop: Tahanea Atoll in the Tuamotus. For more photos and information about Îles Gambier, visit our website at www.nineofcups.com.

Commodores Marcie (AA1ZM) and David Lynn (AA1ZL)