A MONTANA COUPLE HITCHHIKES ACROSS THE SOUTH PACIFIC WITH FLY RODS, SEARCHING FOR SOLITUDE AND FISH THAT HAVE NEVER SEEN AN ARTIFICIAL FLY

BY ROB ROBERTS

pacific hitchhikers

The author casts a watchful eye over the flats on Palmerston Atoll in the Cook Islands.

Camping on an uninhabited island in Tonga.

"Have you seen this fish?" I asked a young boy passing by on the rutted dirt road. My French was awkward and halting — I hadn't used it in nearly a decade — but I took a guess and called it *poisson-oisseux.* As I showed him a small drawing I had made with pencil and crayon, a gang of curious schoolkids on rusty pedal bikes quickly enveloped me. Apparently, tall, skinny white guys were an uncommon sight on Kauehi, a lazy tropical island in the Tuamotu Archipelago.

It was a crude picture of a bonefish, but I had no other means of gaining some local knowledge. No guides lived in the vicinity, and finding a tackle shop was out of the question. The kids fought over the drawing and exchanged perplexed murmurs until one of them exclaimed, *Oh, kio kio.* Then the rest of them erupted: *Oui, oui! Kio kio!* Jackpot. They pointed toward a small footpath and led the way as we snaked past barking dogs and overladen coconut trees. Finally, we arrived at an endless white flat dotted with turquoise pockets of deeper water. I smiled and started rigging my fly rod — I had traveled thousands of miles by sailboat to get here, and I wasn't going to waste a moment.

For years, I had longed to be part of the motley band of adventurers, dreamers and vagabonds who visited the South Pacific, from Capt. Cook to Gauguin. Sure, I wanted to cast from deserted white-sand beaches and enjoy the occasional cocktail over a sunset vista, but I had ambitions of more than just a one-off vacation. I was 37 and wanted to live by tidal shift and watch the rhythms of the sea unravel slowly, the way a river reveals its secrets to those who carefully cultivate it season by season.

The solution materialized on a two-week vacation to Baja a couple of years ago. My wife and I and another couple rented a 22-foot Catalina sailboat with Spartan accommodations, no lifelines and a 3-hp outboard. By day, we cruised among the islands of the Loreto Bay National Marine Park, trolling large deceivers on a 12-weight fly rod for tuna and dorado. In the evening we anchored in the protection of pocket bays hemmed in by steep, dry cliffs and paddled a tandem kayak along the rocky shorelines looking for jacks, yellowtail and barracuda. I realized then that a sailboat was the ultimate platform for a more intimate experience in marine exploration.

At first, the logistics of an extended trip through paradise seemed too challenging. Without enough money to outfit a bluewater sailboat, how does one even begin to explore more than 1,000 islands scattered over millions of square miles? In April 2013 we extricated ourselves from a comfortable life in Montana and set off to wander the reefs, tidal rivers and sand flats of the South Pacific. We found work as volunteer crew aboard cruising sailboats, trading time in the galley or on night watch for a berth to the next island or anchorage. In the dozen months that followed, we lived aboard seven boats, sailed a quarter of the way around the planet and visited 25 tropical islands in the South Pacific. We became oceanic hitchhikers, with fly rods and snorkeling gear in tow.

After a 33-day ocean passage from Panama to the Marquesas Islands, we cleared customs and promptly thumbed our way onto a 38-foot sloop skippered by a young Alaskan. He needed help on a five-day journey south to the Tuamotu Archipelago, the top of my "must fish" list.

Midway on the route from the Marquesas to Tahiti, this chain of small islands is an aquatic playground stretching nearly 800 miles. *Motu* means island in many Polynesian languages, but the Tuamotus are more precisely called atolls. They are C-shaped strips of land made of little more than sand and exposed reef, the remnants of volcanic rings that once spilled across the ocean like pepper from a generous shaker.

Atolls have interior lagoons that make for calm anchorages and great fisheries, but they also fill and drain with the tide, usually through a single narrow pass. If you hit the pass at slack tide, navigation can be smooth and uneventful. Time it wrong, and you'll think you're sailing upriver through a Class V rapid. After near calamity in our first attempt to navigate a pass, we were relieved to drop anchor in the small village of Kauehi.

Kauehi was typical of these remote outposts in French Polynesia. A large whitewashed church dominated the landscape, towering over concrete bungalows and outbuildings that lined the beach. Around a windswept point, several decrepit fishing shacks sat on stilts above scattered coral heads in a large bay. Other than the fresh baguettes flown in every other day on a local airline, provisions

The final resting place of a wreck on a fringing reef in American Samoa.

The South Pacific traveler searches for bonefish on Kauehi Atoll in the Tuamotu island group in French Polynesia. Roberts didn't see another fly fisherman for 6,000 miles.

were basic — a single store had mostly barren shelves with little more than tinned meat, crackers and candy.

As I waded cautiously along the edge of that first flat on Kauehi, the kids who gave me the French lesson quickly got bored of my seeming ineptitude. They got back on their bicycles and disappeared. Soon I was standing alone in a knee-deep tropical bay watching a 5-foot lemon shark approach and nearly swim between my legs. Then, 100 yards away, a cluster of dorsal fins and tails formed out of a nearby trough and coursed over the flat like so many miniature gray sails. The fish were moving quickly, searching a long expanse of mostly featureless sand. And they were coming straight at me.

I took a deep breath and flicked a short cast in front of the lead fish. The whole pod bum-rushed the rubber-legged Gotcha as soon as it hit bottom, and I was quickly tethered to a 5-pound Polynesian bonefish. As my cries of triumph boomed over the empty beach, I fumbled for my camera, getting ready to memorialize the occasion. For the rest of the afternoon, I continued searching for shadows and movement among bulbous coral heads and hollowed depressions. I ended up catching a half-dozen fish as large as 8 pounds — each time releasing them with a grateful nod of the head and a wistful *merci*.

The South Pacific covers an enormous area, stretching roughly from Easter Island off Chile to the eastern flanks of Australia. Despite their geographic grouping, the islands are truly disparate and distinct, with great diversity in terms of culture, ecology and climate. Factors such as latitude, ocean currents and the history of colonization intertwine to create a different feel for each country or island group.

Every spring around March or April, sailboats leave the Americas and head west toward this fabled region. This pilgrimage is known as the Milk Run, a testament to the route's reputation for predictable trade winds and mellow weather patterns. Sailors typically make landfall in the Marquesas, resupply in Tahiti, then island-hop until the southern summer's cyclone season forces them to Australia or New Zealand. Because of the vastness of this territory, many places are overlooked along the way. My aim was to make fishing those hideouts the highlight of our yearlong trip.

Before leaving Montana I spent plenty of time online looking for blog posts from traveling fly fishermen, links to lodges and any other information I might find. Not much turned up. I realized the reason once we began our journey: I didn't see another fly angler in the 6,000 miles we traveled through these prime fishing waters.

Since I didn't expect to find any outfitters along the way, I had to pack accordingly. But I was also hindered by our transient, hitch-sailor lifestyle — weight and space were precious. My whole existence had to be condensed into one large dry-bag backpack and a smaller bag for day trips. I focused on the essentials.

I started with a selection of flies sorted into two waterproof boxes. The first box was for the flats, including imitations of shrimp and crabs and other crustaceans. I had tied many of them over the years, leftovers from trips to Mexico, Honduras and elsewhere. The second box held larger baitfish patterns, such as deceivers and clousers, in various sizes, as well as needlefish imitations for barracuda and poppers for the top-water game. I also had a selection of 8- to 50-pound tippet, stainless steel pliers and a chest pack with random accessories.

I'll admit that my rod and reel were heavily worn, but the combo had held up to years of being carted around on kayaking trips, jon-boats and airplanes. I carried a 9-weight Orvis T3 with a big-game reel and one backup spool. I overloaded the rig with 10-weight line to help with quick casts and punching through the stiff winds that are inevitable in a coastal environment.

There are too many islands, stories and spectacular sights from this year-long trip to write about all of them. A few that were worthy of note: scuba diving in the UNESCO World Heritage Site on Fakarava Atoll, taking in a world-class view from the top of Mount Otemanu in Bora Bora and playing volleyball with locals on the unspoiled beaches of Palmerston Island. And how could I forget saving that woman in Niue from nearly drowning? Or the bait ball that took shelter under our hull in Tonga and was relentlessly attacked by a school of tuna and jacks?

However, there is one enigmatic little hideaway that deserves more attention. It first appeared as a blip on the electronic charts. We were off course and chasing wind; small detours are common on a multiday passage. When I zoomed in the screen to investigate, the name popped up in blocky letters: Beveridge Reef.

From afar, the reef is a faint disturbance on the horizon, a thin line of white foam and agitated water. Imagine a volcano rising from the ocean floor and stopping just short of the surface so that the cone sits only inches below breaking waves. No land. No coconut trees or fishing shacks. Just a stunning, shallow lagoon a few miles in diameter, a protected anchorage dropped into the middle of a restless and roily sea.

As we got closer, we spotted an old fishing boat wrecked on the east side of the reef. The rusty steel trawler sat cantilevered, surging up and down with the tide. Huge rolls of nylon fishing line were still spooled on the deck. Later that evening, we dove into the engine compartment and speared two lobsters the size of house cats that hid under the darkness of metal panels.

Beveridge harbored a bonanza of aquatic life — an untapped zone where game fish still roamed in abundance. The diversity of fauna told me that the reef was too isolated for subsistence fishing and saw only sporadic commercial trips. Shortly after anchoring in 15 feet over a sandy bottom, I hopped into *El Coche* — our leaky and sagging Hypalon dinghy — to scout dropoffs and reef edges. I could see schools of snapper and the hulky bronze shadows of red bass, which are easy to identify by the white spot on their tails. An occasional blue trevally raced away under the boat.

I double-hauled a size 4 red clouser over a submerged rock outcropping and counted to 10. On my first strip the line went tight, and a silver flash jerked toward the bottom. Then a sudden reversal had the fish coming straight at me as I struggled to keep up on the reel. A stout red bass, about 30 inches long, came launching out of the water.

"No way!" I yelled to no one in particular. Then I watched a 4-foot black-tipped reef shark follow in pursuit. Two more sharks appeared, and the bass was quickly devoured. The struggle lasted mere seconds. Undeterred, I motored to another location and tried again, with the same result.

I realized the predicament as my eyes slowly adjusted to the reality below. The pass was not only filled with game fish, but also a herd of savvy reef sharks that was following my each and every move. If predators are the hallmark of a thriving and healthy ecosystem, Beveridge Reef would pass just about any physical exam. I gave up and quit fishing for the day, trading my fly rod for a wet suit and mask to watch the underwater bounty up close.

Long days at sea naturally lead to deep analysis and reflection. I had been to deserted islands and offshore reefs. I had cast to unsuspicious bonefish, barracuda, grouper, tuna and many other species that filled a journal with catch totals, stories and observations. But flipping through the pages and reliving adventures, another theme emerged: solitude.

To find fish that had never seen a man-made fly — that had been my mantra. But in searching out the remote, I had missed something important: the chance to create memories based upon shared experiences. A year spent pushing toward new, empty horizons taught me an important lesson. There will always be another island to discover, another fish that has never seen an artificial fly. But there may not always be a chance to forge new friendships and revel in the companionship from a day spent fishing together. I missed the high-fives that come after a successful grip and grin, the satisfaction of finding a fish and letting a friend take the first cast, the shared joy when he sets the hook. I hadn't seen another fly fisherman during 6,000 miles of roaming through the South Pacific. Sometimes I wish I had.