

Pacific Cyclone Season: North instead of South?

We've recently returned to Fiji after spending the 2012/13 South Pacific cyclone season in Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands.

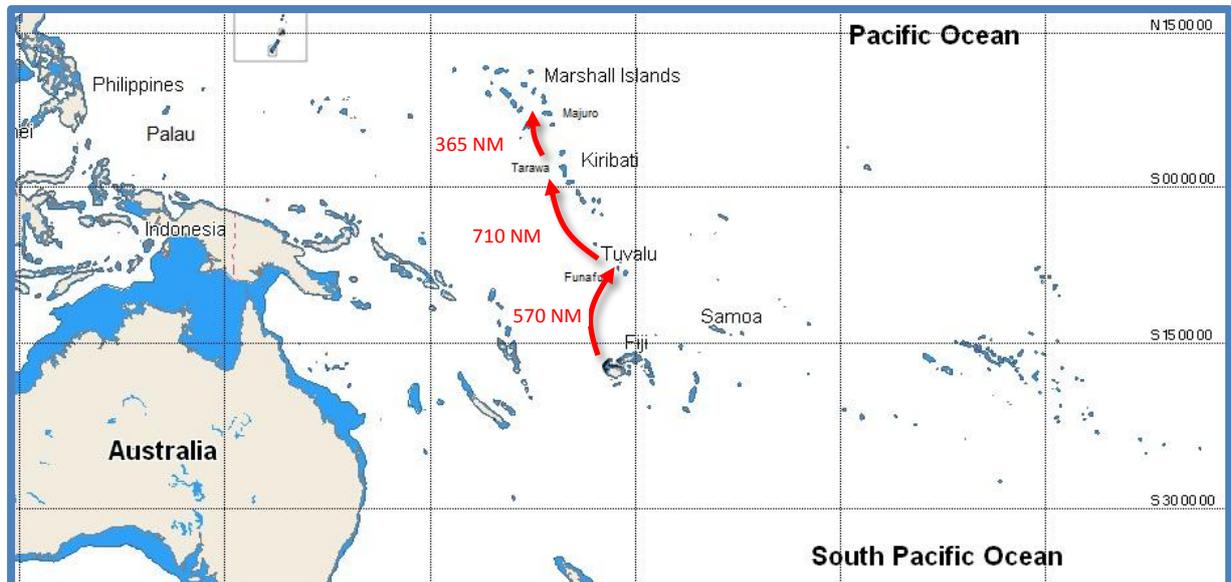
Here's a note which may help in deciding whether it would be good option for you, your boat and your crew. It outlines:

- some of the reasons why you may want to consider this option;
- important considerations about the trip;
- things we wished we had known beforehand; and
- our conclusion on heading north for cyclone season.

We are happy to provide more details, including anchoring & pilotage, and can be contacted via Noonsite or through our facebook page www.facebook.com/yachtstreetcar

Please note this article does not repeat detailed country information (i.e. entry formalities, mooring information, marine/other services, pilot book references). You can find this in the relevant country pages on Noonsite.

Our route & timing



Streetcar left Fiji on October 29th 2012, bound for Funafuti in Tuvalu. Some boats left a few weeks later and felt the effects of one of the first tropical storms while in Tuvalu.

We obtained permission to stop at Nukufetau and Nanumea (outer islands in the northern part of Tuvalu) after making our final outbound clearance from Funafuti on 19th November. However, in the end weather dictated we continue north without stopping.

Streetcar cleared into Tarawa, Kiribati, on 26th November 2012. We extended our initial visa and finally departed for Majuro on 10th January. During this time we spent 3 weeks in the atoll of Butaritari, mainly anchored in the north near the village of Kuna.

We cleared into Majuro in the Marshall Islands on January 13th 2013 and stayed until April 27th. Our daughter wanted to attend a local school so we spent the entire time in Majuro.

Streetcar sailed back to Fiji via a short stop in Tuvalu, clearing into Savusavu in Fiji on 15th May 2013.

A. Some reasons to consider heading north rather than south for cyclone season (*in no particular order*)

- 1) *Your boat doesn't need hauling or any work requiring specialist marine expertise.*

We had already hauled Streetcar in Fiji for anti-fouling & regular annual maintenance. At that point we were still undecided where we would head for cyclone season. We knew we had more work & upgrades to complete, but were prepared to do this ourselves.

You will not find a formal yacht haul out in any of the islands we visited, although there is a crane in Majuro which lifts some fishing boats, and the occasional yacht.

- 2) *You're not particularly excited by the prospect of visiting NZ or Australia, not ready to stop sailing, not ready for 'cold' weather.*

We previously lived in Australia and have visited NZ a good few times, so for us to head in that direction felt a bit like heading back home and we weren't ready for that; we wanted to keep exploring. Also, the cost of living in both these countries had us worried we would eat too far into our cruising budget.

- 3) *You are interested in exploring some of the most un-visited & un-developed islands in the Pacific & are not afraid to be well off the beaten track.*

Our initial research into the islands we would be visiting did not exactly convince us that heading north was a good option. Neither Funafuti (Tuvalu), or Tarawa (Kiribati), or Majuro (Marshall Islands) get glowing write ups in the cruising guides.

However, we can now say that if you want to find the remote Pacific this is your area. All the atolls we visited offer an exceptional experience, are completely different to Fiji, Tonga and Polynesia, and in our opinion are well worth a visit.

Our time in Butaritari, Kiribati, has easily been the highlight of our entire time sailing in the Pacific. We'd be happy to share more of our experiences there.

We even grew to like Tarawa, once we had found a reasonably sheltered anchorage off Parliament House. Rather like the author of 'Sex Lives of Cannibals' (a must read if you decide to head this way), while we found there is a lot to lament about conditions on the atoll, the I-Kiribati are the most friendly & welcoming people we have met anywhere.

But this really is off the beaten track: the outlying islands of Kiribati and Tuvalu have very little in the way of facilities: most villages do not have electricity and only some have a public telephone. Life is predominantly subsistence & very basic. Flights are rare and ship arrivals intermittent, perhaps every 2 months. You must be prepared to be self-sufficient.

Whilst we did not visit any of the outer islands in the Marshall Islands, most of the other transiting yachts did and had good things to say about them.

In 2012 less than 20 boats made the trip north to Majuro, from various origins and at various times. We did cross paths with some of them but only very occasionally.

4) *Your big picture plan is to head to Palau/Philippines/Indonesia/Malaysia, and use Majuro as a stopping point en -route*

We wish we had thought about this extended route earlier. From a weather routing perspective it makes a lot of sense. You cruise Tuvalu and Kiribati, arrive Majuro in December. Spend a few weeks/month here, collecting whatever you have pre-ordered from the USA, then head off through Micronesia towards Palau around early/mid Jan, perhaps on into Philippines for cruising, and out again to Malaysia or Indonesia before onset of the active typhoon season (May).

The other option if you don't have time to make Palau & the Philippines, is to head directly to Indonesia. A good time to leave is around May, aiming for landfall in Indonesia (Biak perhaps) for beginning June.

If you are considering heading direct to Indonesia it is worth noting that friends of ours who are US passport holders, got their Indonesian social/cultural visas by sending passports back to the Indonesian embassy in New York (using the US Priority Mail service).

5) *You are a keen diver*

We don't dive but met many people in the Marshalls who will talk positively about the diving in some of the outer atolls. Particularly good are the wreck dives, WW2.

6) *You have things you want to buy in the US and/or your main currency is the USD*

Majuro is part of the US National Postal system, so you can receive orders from the US sent via domestic US Priority Mail.

Many cruisers, including us, stocked up (and had planned to stock up) with gear from West Marine & Defender, as well as Amazon & Ebay. Most items can be delivered to Majuro by the US Domestic Mail Priority Mail service (arriving in 1 to 2 weeks). Do note that items considered hazardous must be shipped sea freight, delivery time 6-8 weeks

We also took the opportunity to order new batteries which were shipped as part of a larger consignment (thanks to Cary on Yacht Seal), and arrived in about 6 weeks.

7) *You have pets on board*

Difficulty with taking animals into Australia and NZ is one reason some boats head for Majuro, which we understand has less stringent regulations.

8) *You want to fly back to the US/Europe etc and know you can leave the boat safely and cheaply*

Quite a few crews had arrived in Majuro before Christmas, put their boat on a mooring and flown home for a month or more. We thought flight prices out of Majuro were high, but there is a trade off in that the cost of leaving your boat on a mooring ball is very reasonable and pretty safe. There seems to be very little yacht crime in Majuro.

B. Important considerations

1) *Visiting the outer islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati*

The real winner for us about this route north is the opportunity to visit the outer islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati. Clearance formalities aside, from a geographic point of view it is possible to island hop all the way to the Marshalls.

Unfortunately it is currently the case that any yacht wishing to visit the outer islands of either Tuvalu or Kiribati must first make clearance at the main port (Funafuti or Tarawa). You can then apply, in writing, for permission to visit the outer islands (you must specify which ones, and for how long). The yacht must then return to the main port to complete final outward clearance.

It is not acceptable to stop at any of the islands before inward clearance, or after final outward clearance. The authorities keep a close look out for yachts breaking this regulation. Paradoxically the main reason quoted for maintaining this regulation is the persistent breaking of the rules by transiting yachts.

All that said, the rules in both Tuvalu and Kiribati are under review due to pressure from yacht crews keen to revise this very awkward system and explore more of the country. Whilst we were in Tuvalu, we were granted permission to stop at two of the outer islands after making final outward clearance. This was no longer possible when we stopped in the following May, on our way back from Majuro.

We would strongly suggest you make contact with the relevant authorities & officials prior to arriving to start a dialogue which may enable you to stop at the islands en-route. We can provide contact details.

2) *Weather*

The sail from Fiji to Majuro is not without its challenges: usually you have to cross the SPCZ (South Pacific Convergence Zone) and then the ITCZ (Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone) and they can both be a bit nasty. We didn't have any really bad weather, but on the way up did

get some fairly strong squalls. Most of the time it's the wind direction & current that is the problem. You will need to be prepared to leave downwind sailing behind. The trip up and back to Majuro will almost certainly involve periods with wind forward of the beam. Our trip back to Majuro was light wind most of the way, too light most of the time, and consequently quite slow & frustrating.

Once in Majuro the weather was reasonably stable with fresh E to NE winds and some rainy days. The mooring fields are well protected and you don't need to worry about the boat when ashore or away.

In Kiribati the weather was sometimes unpredictable. In Tarawa and Butaritari it was mostly E to SE light winds (and nicely cool at night as well). But there were times when the wind could come from other points and on one occasion in Tarawa we had a 4 hour 35 to 42kt squall from the NE which created an unpleasant sea inside the lagoon. Fortunately we had stayed on the boat when we saw the sky darkening. This was an isolated incident, but meant that you could never completely take your eye off the sky when ashore.

The other weather phenomenon to watch out for is the much talked about westerlies which can blow up to gale force and for as long as a week. These seem to be related to tropical activity to the south as well as the effects of the Asian NW monsoon. We never experienced more than a couple of hours of westerly and these were not severe. We understand that the persistent strong westerlies are usually forecasted, giving time to find a protected anchorage.

3) *Marine Services*

There are no yacht orientated marine services in Tuvalu or Kiribati.

In Majuro there are some marine services. The very helpful Mico Beach Yacht Club will be able to point you in the right direction for someone to assist with electrical/electronic issues, canvas work, and perhaps refrigeration. A very well equipped workshop near the port area can undertake most machine work. There are several good hardware shops which also stock some marine supplies.

4) *Majuro moorings*

A mooring ball in Majuro is relatively inexpensive. We used an RRE mooring, and paid USD75/month. The daily cost at the time was USD3/day. Cheaper rates are available if you pay up front for longer. Other moorings are also available in the south mooring field, and may be cheaper than RRE. It is advisable that you make enquiries when you arrive as to the condition of your mooring.

C. Things we wish we had known beforehand

1) *Provisions*

Rice & flour are usually available everywhere, though have been known to run out in Kiribati. Canned foods such as tuna and sardines are also widely available. Beer is available most places.

If you don't like sweet bread, you need to ask for 'salt bread' in the bakery in Tarawa.

Anything 'western', like coffee, cereal, UHT milk, fresh fruit and vegetables, are scarce and often very expensive.

Majuro has a 'western' style supermarket (air con), with lots of imported US goods. Be careful about out of date products & check the prices (some things are surprisingly expensive). Sashimi grade tuna is available most days, very cheap and excellent quality. Fresh produce is mainly imported from the US so can, and does, run out. Check for the container ship arrival dates.

2) *Fishing gear*

Bring lots of fishing gear, the trolling is excellent. You'll need lots because you're likely to lose some to very big fish, and nearly everyone you meet on the islands survives by fishing so it makes good trade gear.

3) *Cooking gas*

You can get gas bottles filled in Funafuti, Tarawa and Majuro, although not the European Camping Gaz bottles. If you have these, the options are to make up a fitting/adaptor or buy a local gas bottle (we did) and regulator.

4) *Diesel & Petrol*

You can get good quality diesel & petrol in the larger islands, but you will need to jerry can it.

5) *Medical services & supplies*

For Tuvalu & Kiribati make sure you bring with you all the medical supplies you expect to need.

Majuro has two pharmacies. What they don't have they will order, but it can take weeks. You can also get basic drugs in the supermarket.

I can't comment on the quality of medical services in the hospital in Majuro, but I did get Hannah's outstanding routine immunisations done there no problem.

6) *Anchoring*

After clearing into Kiribati, by far the best place to anchor in Tarawa is opposite the Parliament Building. There is also a dock here you can use for dinghy access. The anchorage

at Betio can be dangerous in strong winds; not only does a nasty chop build up, commercial boats have been known to break free from their moorings & drift unchecked across the anchorage.

7) *Weather*

In Majuro trade winds can be strong, for a lot of the time. Remember you are in the NE trades now. Consequently you will find you live with a lot of salt spray.

8) *Children*

If you have kids, Majuro might not be the easiest place to keep them entertained unless you plan on putting them into school (as we did).

Our daughter, Hannah, went to the Coop School. This is a secular school which will accept transient kids for short periods if class space allows.

9) *Clothes*

Don't expect to be making many additions to your wardrobe whilst in the islands; stock up on clothes & shoes in Fij (especially if you have kids), or be prepared to mail order into Majuro.

Everywhere we visited conservative dress is expected when ashore. This generally means knee length skirts/sarongs for women, & tops to cover the shoulders. In Majuro, shorts (not too short) are acceptable day-to-day wear, though when visiting Government offices you'll need a skirt or wrap-around & men will need to wear long trousers/pants.

D. Our conclusion

We were very pleased with our decision to head north for cyclone season.

We loved the fact that our cruising season really did not end, and we got to know places & people very rarely visited by outsiders. We feel very privileged.

Hannah loved her time at school in Majuro; for a single child the regular interaction with kids her age was quite a treat. Also the cruising community in Majuro is welcoming and helpful, with regular weekly events/dinners and monthly yacht racing.

It has also given us the opportunity to return to Fiji, which we are very pleased about. We only spent 1½ months here last year, having originally planned much less time. Contrary to our expectations we've found it is a great place to visit by yacht and certainly worthy of more than one season.

Now we just have to sort our plans for this next cyclone season....