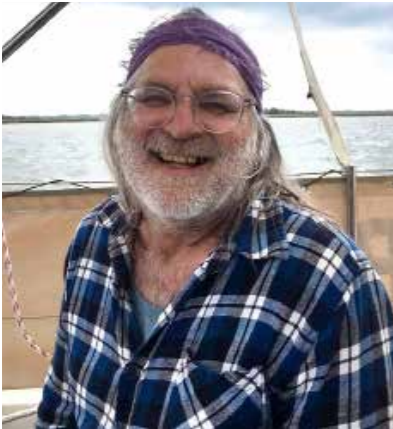


# Pensioner solo across the Pacific

Chris Ayres sails 15,400 miles in a small boat from the UK to New Zealand

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chris Ayres is a sailor, climber & adventurer. For many years he was a climbing and outdoor pursuits instructor and fully qualified mountain guide. He came late to sailing, starting off on a friend's boat, but soon bought a small yacht, a Sadler 25. He cruised extensively around North Wales, the Irish Sea and Scotland west coast and completed a circumnavigation of Ireland.

**E**very year a small handful of sailors set out to cross the Pacific single-handed. In 2017 I was one.

I'd left the UK in 2014 after retirement from work aged 66. It occurred to me that my boat Sea Bear, a Vancouver 28, was capable of a big trip. Dreams of big sailing trips had lain long dormant in my mind since as a teenager I had been inspired by books of sailing adventures. I just never thought that things like that were in my reach, but here I was, I had the boat, the question was: was I up to it? So, after some hectic preparation and planning, one August afternoon I slipped the warps and made my way out over Caernarfon bar and out to sea. I was on my way south, nothing was set in stone but I thought to try out the liveaboard life and to make my leisurely way to New Zealand.

It hadn't been my intention to go single-handed, but my crew dropped out at the last moment. It left me in an awkward

spot. I didn't want to miss the weather window or leave any later. I wanted to be across Biscay before September was out. It didn't take me long to decide to just go alone. It made me a little nervous as I'd never undertaken such a long passage solo before but I wasn't about to let a little setback get in my way.

### Biscay crossing

A passage down the Irish Sea took me to the Scillies where I stopped very briefly to catch up on sleep and then I set out across Biscay. I discovered that the water was really blue out there and I came to understand the term blue water sailor. I did have a bit of a gale which was uncomfortable but I did see a whale which surfaced alongside.

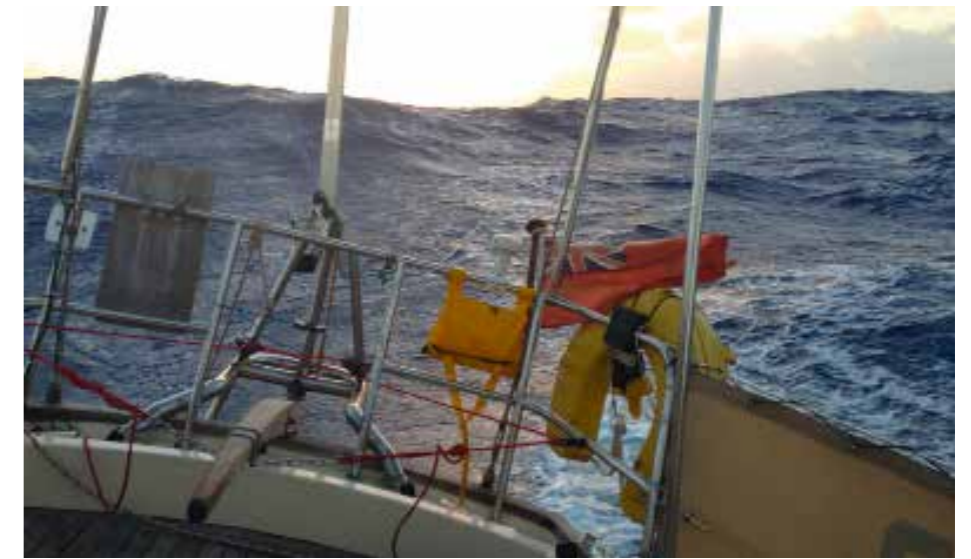
I made landfall in Ribadeo northern Spain after a successful crossing. I then hopped, mostly day sails, down the coast of Spain and Portugal, taking time off to visit a few sites. In Cadiz I met up with Merel, who crewed with me to

Rabat, Morocco, a fantastic experience, then to the Canary islands.

Unfortunately, although Merel was excellent company she was badly effected by seasickness so wisely decided not to cross the Atlantic with me. I visited several of the islands and decided to make my departure from the delightful La Gomera. I was approached by potential crew seeking an Atlantic crossing, and after some deliberation they crewed for me to the Cape Verde Islands. We spent Christmas here and then set out to cross the Atlantic to Martinique.

We did not have very good weather for this crossing, it was far from the sunny skies with fluffy white clouds and kindly trade winds I'd been led to expect from guides and others reports. Strong winds and big seas were had.

Single-handed again, I was seduced by the pleasures of the Caribbean so I spent two seasons there. My first season I hopped northwards up the chain of the Windwards and Leewards as far as Sint



**ABOVE** Atlantic sunrise seas – not the sunny tradewind crossing Chris Ayres was expecting



**LEFT** Friend Wendy at the helm in Antigua

**'I was seduced by the pleasures of the Caribbean so spent two seasons there'**

Maarten, returning south to spend the hurricane season in Trinidad.

The following season I was sailing back up the chain but this time continuing on to the British Virgin Islands, and thence to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba. Here I cruised the Gulf of Guacanayabo and Gulf of Anna Maria and the Jardines de la Reina. This is a labyrinth of hundreds of uninhabited cays, reefs and shoals. There are just a few fishermen, few cruisers go this way, it is wilderness unspoilt.

**RIGHT** Approaching Oa Pou, Marquesas



After visiting Trinidad and Cienfuegos I headed south again to the Cayman islands and so to Jamaica. Other cruisers I'd spoken to earlier had shaken their heads when I mentioned my intention to visit Jamaica – too dangerous was the general opinion. I enjoyed my time there, visiting Montego Bay, Ocho Rios and my favourite place, Port Antonio, nestled at the foot of the Blue Mountains. I took a bus across the mountains to visit Kingston and the Bob Marley museum, a bit of a pilgrimage.



Sunset behind Grullas in the Guna Yala Islands of Panama

LEFT Transiting the Panama Canal



## 'With hurricane season approaching I chose to head for Curacao'

With hurricane season approaching I chose to head for Curacao. Although I realised it would be a hard passage I underestimated its difficulties and eventually I diverted to Panama, whose virtues had been extolled by an American cruiser I'd meet earlier. Anchoring in the bay of Portobelo I realised there was more to Panama than just the canal. I laid up the boat for the hurricane season and returned briefly to the UK.

Returning to Panama later, I explored the Guna Yala islands. These are inhabited by the Kuna Indians who keep largely to their old ways and who are famous for their Molas, elaborate embroidered panels that traditionally form part of the women's dress.

### Canal transit

For my passage through the Panama canal I didn't use an agent but did all the organisation myself which I found to be quite straightforward. I actually went through twice, once as a line handler on someone else's boat which was good preparation for *Sea Bear's* transit. This went without a hitch so there I was in Balboa with the Pacific stretching out before me.

I spent a few days in Balboa stocking up on provisions before I headed for the Pearl Islands, some 40 miles away.

I visited a few delightful and peaceful anchorages here and spent some time diving under the boat to scrub off the bottom so at least I'd start my passage to the Galapagos with a clean hull.

The wind and weather between Panama and the Galapagos is notoriously fickle. My passage started off fast with a favourable wind and I made 130 miles in the first 24 hours. Thereafter the going

was much slower with calms, light airs, thunderstorms and squalls. Early one morning I sighted the dramatic Lion rock off San Cristobal, the coast was revealed and soon I was dropping anchor in Wreck Bay, a passage of 838 miles in 10 days.

To check into the Galapagos you need to use the services of an agent. Many cruisers do this in advance but are advised that the process can take around a month to organise. When I'd made my

decision to visit I didn't have that time so I just turned up. Arriving in Wreck Bay a water taxi man organised an agent to visit me and the process of checking in begun. An underwater inspection of your hull is included. At one point I had six officials aboard – all very friendly.

Access to many of the wildlife sites are restricted, for most you need a park warden with you but there are some without such restrictions so I visited them. There are sea lions everywhere – they pretty much rule the roost here.

Leaving *Sea Bear* at anchor I took a ferry across to Santa Cruz to meet up with my son Ged who'd flown in. We joined a tourist boat for a few days, a marvellous experience as our guide was very knowledgeable about the fabulous wildlife. A lot of people complain that the Galapagos is very expensive, for sure it is but as a once-in-a-lifetime experience it's worth every penny I think.

All too soon my allotted three weeks was up and I had to leave so with

fresh provisions and filled with water I departed. Many boats chose to head south to pick up the trades, motoring to do so. With a limited motoring range this was not an option for me and I chose to try and follow a great circle route as closely as I could.

I had a period of shifty winds, squalls and thunderstorms. I suffered one particularly viscous squall when I was 14 days out from the Galapagos Islands over 1,000 miles in my wake and bound for the Marquesas still 2,000 miles away. It was then that the reality of being on your own out there and so far from any possible help really hit.

### Storms and calms

The weather continued unsettled and I had a bit of everything, occasional squalls, dark clouds and lightning, wind shifts to keep me on my toes, one to the north-east which found me unexpectedly sailing south-east until I got it sorted, and a short period where I lay ahull when conditions got too bad. I also had a series of calms – one in which I tried to clean off the crop of goose barnacles growing on the hull. I launched the dinghy, tying it alongside. I was rewarded by getting stung by a jellyfish with long, iridescent blue threads. That was painful and caused me to give up. Besides, the rolling was too bad to safely clean the hull.

It had been my habit for a daily douche to tip a bucket or two of seawater over my head. I'd never thought to check if there was anything in the bucket before, but after that I now did so – the thought of tipping a jellyfish over your naked body being a bit too much to bear.

One afternoon I sighted the Marquesas. At first I wasn't quite sure... was it cloud? But no, a bit later I was certain. Land ho! after 33 days. The Marquesas are high



Having a gan, or chat, with friend Thom in his Vancouver 28 off Hiva Oa



Approaching Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas



Ready for adventure: *Sea Bear* in Victoria dock, Caernarfon

## Preparing a boat for extended cruising

*Sea Bear* is a Vancouver 28 built in 1987. She was generally in very good condition when I bought her but I decided she needed a few additions and changes to suit my purposes.

Besides checking all the systems and general maintenance checks, and ensuring that I carried out sufficient spares for most contingencies, I prepared for my voyage with the following work.

Firstly I stripped off all the old antifouling and had Coppercoat applied to the hull.

*Sea Bear* already had a Monitor wind vane self steering system fitted, an item I considered essential for extended cruising, which was a big bonus.



Chris Ayres and *Sea Bear* in Whangarei, New Zealand

I did replace the old boom which had been rigged for slab reefing with external blocks for a more modern Seldén slab reefing system and fitted a Seldén rod kicker, to make sail handling easier.

I also replaced the old jammers with better Spinlock clutches.

I believed the standing rigging to be old so had that replaced with new and also had a set of mast steps added to make going up the mast easier.

Surprisingly there was no VHF radio fitted so one was added.

The log and depth instruments were updated. I opted for a forward looking echo sounder as I thought it would be very useful when it came to navigate through coral reefs.

A wind speed instrument was also added as I'd got used to having one on my previous boat

Radar or AIS? I debated this choice and in the end plumped for a standalone AIS transceiver, choosing the excellent Watchmate WMX870. This is a self contained unit with its own screen and has proved a wise investment.

I wanted to be independent of engine charging to keep my batteries topped up so I designed a rear gantry, which a local stainless steel fabricator made to my drawings to carry a solar panel. This gantry later came in handy to act as part of the framework for a bimini which was added while in the Caribbean.

Finally I replaced the main anchor with a Manson Supreme, keeping the old CQR as a spare anchor. I also had a Bruce anchor for a kedg.



mountainous islands and I was still about 45 miles away. So as to arrive in the morning light I reduced sail and with the help of the current drifted throughout the night, closing the coast next morning.

Entering Atuona Bay, Hiva Oa, I met a friend Thom in *Fathom*, another Vancouver 28, so we had a short gam. Formalities here in French Polynesia were easy with an EU passport, unlike some who, for example, who were limited to a three month stay and have to post substantial bonds.

### Spectacular anchorages

After some time in Hiva Oa I visited other islands in the group; Baie Hanavave, Fatu Hiva, is reckoned one of the most spectacular anchorages in the Pacific; Baie Hanamoenoa, Tahuata, with its beautiful white sand beach; Baie Taiohae, Nuku Hiva, a major gathering point for cruisers out here; Daniela Bay with the walk to its tremendous waterfall; and Ou Pou with its dramatic soaring rock pinnacles.

After a most enjoyable month in the Marquesas it was time to move on.

Some sailors choose to bypass the Tuamotus or Dangerous Archipelago, a group of low lying and hence difficult to spot atolls. These days GPS has to some extent tamed their dangers but they still claim boats every year. The passes through the reefs can be tricky so I chose to just visit Ahe and Rangiroa, two of the more straightforward atolls to enter. All the literature recommends a watcher on the bow or up by the spreaders to assist in navigation through the coral. I was accompanied by Marie, a French girl, for this section. I left her in Rangiroa as she wanted to spend more



**ABOVE** Bora Bora Yacht Club is also an upmarket hotel

**LEFT** Fishermen sorting their catch at Huahine – with one of the famous swimming pigs in attendance

## ‘A catamaran wrecked high and dry was a stark reminder of the hazards of reefs’

time here to free dive.

Tahiti was the next stop and after a fast passage of 180 miles I entered the reef guarding Papeete harbour and tied up to a pontoon in Papeete marina. It was much changed since Moitessier’s day but it was here he finally ended his epic 11 month and one and a half times single-handed circumnavigation of the world.

My friend Wendy joined me for a month here. Over several days we circumnavigated the island, anchoring behind the reefs and in and out through the passes, sometime accompanied by spinning dolphins. Then we sailed to Moorea where we anchored firstly in Cooks Bay and then Baie Opunohu. We walked up to the notable viewpoints the Belvedere and Three Pines col. We swam with sting rays and sharks in the shallow of the lagoon, a fabulous experience.

Back to Tahiti and Wendy returned to

the UK, it was time for me to carry on to the Iles du Vent which are the islands of Huahine, Raiatea, Tahaa and Bora Bora.

### Uncharted dangers

Approaching Huahine, a catamaran wrecked high and dry on the reef was a stark reminder of the hazards of reefs and the danger of relying solely on electronic charts for navigation.

Entrances to the lagoons of these islands through the reefs are all pretty straightforward and well marked. I visited all the islands in the group and had some nice time exploring ashore.

After four months in French Polynesia it was time to leave and Bora Bora was to be my jumping off point for the Cook Islands. I waited a few days for the strong winds currently passing to lessen and the forecast was good which proved erroneous. Arriving at Aitutaki

the sky was low and overcast, it was raining and the wind was 25-30 knots. The pass through the reef here is long, narrow and shallow and there is limited room inside as well. There was no way that I was even going to look at entering. Too many boats have been lost trying to enter harbours in poor conditions. So it was an easy but saddening decision to carry on.

The weather continued bad and I found later that the weather nets were advising sailors not to travel, advice that arrived after I’d left Bora Bora.

The area I was in is the South Pacific Convergence Zone, where the south-east trades from transitory anticyclones to the south meet with the semi-permanent easterly flow from the eastern South Pacific. It is noted for unstable weather: sailing through this area is not to be taken lightly.

For days I was just running under staysail alone. Although I’d wanted to visit Palmerston Island and Niue, neither have harbours, only exposed moorings outside of but seriously close



Sunset at Wreck Bay in the Galapagos

**RIGHT** Big Mama’s wreck, Pangaimoto Island, Tonga

**INSET BELOW** School children in Tonga



to the reefs. The bad weather persuaded me not to visit either. I decide to press on to Vana’u, Kingdom of Tonga where at least there was well protected, safe harbour.

I spent four weeks in Vava’u Tonga, some of that was in visiting other anchorages of which there are plenty. It is a lovely cruising ground.

The season was getting on, the cyclone season not so far off so I set out south calling in briefly in at the Ha’apai, a group of about 50 islands and reefs many uninhabited. Although a lovely area I didn’t stay long, I think the strain of single-handing among all the unmarked reefs was getting to me. Another night passage took me south again to Tongatapu, the main island of Tonga and where the



The author at Rainbow Falls in New Zealand’s Bay of Islands

capital Nuku’alofa is located. I anchored off the small island of Pangaimotu, where is found the well known Big Mama’s Beach Bar. This is quite a gathering point for sailors bound for New Zealand and much of their talk is about waiting for a suitable weather for the passage.

To me it looked like I’d have reasonable conditions once the strong southerlies eased so I set off when that looked to be the case. I exited Tongatapu by the Egeria channel, this has a distinct lack of markers of any kind so it is eyeball pilotage assisted by paper charts and electronic charts on the iPad. The electronic charts have to be treated with caution as along with most of the Pacific islands they can be as much as 300m out in position.

Once clear of the reefs I set out on a rhumb line course for the northern end of New Zealand. It was just then a question of settling down to the routine of a long passage. The winds were quite strong but favourable and I had one of my best noon to noon runs of 135 miles

I was closing the coast of New Zealand and it looked likely I’d arrive at night so I reduced sail to slow down. By first light I was about to enter the wide expanse of the Bay of Islands. I could see the light on Cape Brett but the coast was coyly hidden by cloud. Later the cloud cleared and soon I was alongside the customs dock at Opuia. I’d arrived in New Zealand after sailing 7,478 miles from Panama and 15,400 miles from the UK. It would take a while to sink in.

You can read more about the passage in this article in Chris Ayres’s book *A Pensioner’s Folly* available as a paperback and as an ebook on Amazon and also from Apple books. And you can follow his sailing adventure blog at [seabear.uk](http://seabear.uk)

