

Change of Course:

Two Weeks to Windward

The Red Thread's Voyage to Rapa Nui

By Jessie Mackelprang-Carter & Neil Carter • CM440

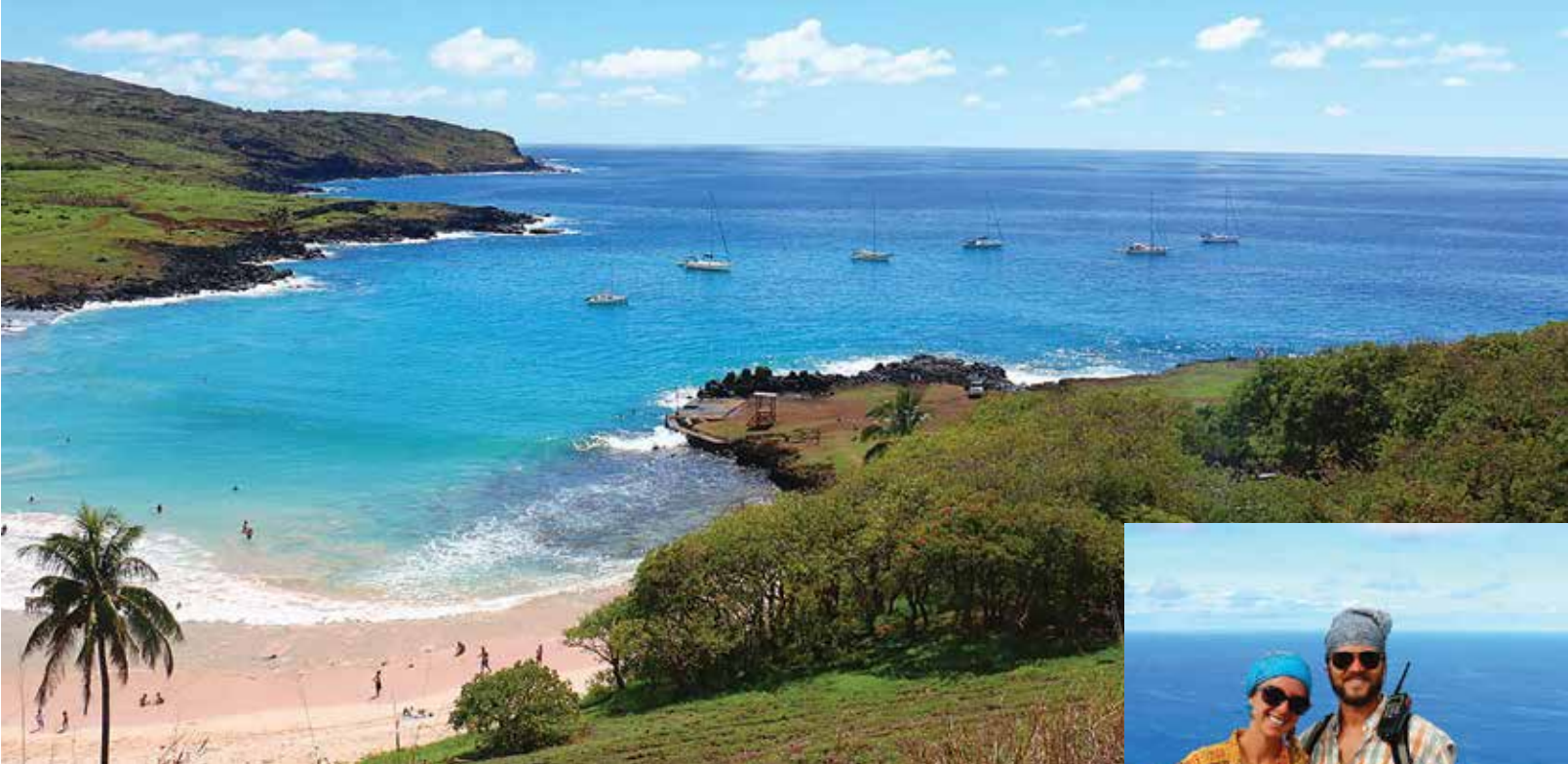
Two thousand nautical miles of wide-open ocean stretched before the bow of our Catalina Morgan 440—inviting, intimidating, and impossible to resist. We were preparing to set sail from Galapagos to Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Chile, the longest passage of our Pacific crossing.

Before she became ours in May 2012, the prior owners of hull #33, the Maddox family, had sailed a 40,000-nautical mile Pacific loop and made landfall twice at Rapa Nui, once from the Galapagos and once from mainland Chile. Ours would be *The Red Thread's* third voyage to Rapa Nui. The Maddox's Galapagos-to-Rapa Nui passage had been the swiftest of their five-year voyage, and we set out with fantasies of two weeks on a beam reach. The reality would not be so idyllic.

The Galapagos are situated on the equator and are subject to the whims of the intertropical convergence zone (ITCZ), an infamous weather phenomenon characterized by doldrums and squalls, that straddles the equatorial band across the Pacific Ocean. We'd been monitoring the ITCZ patterns, watching intently as it widened and narrowed. At its most immense, the ITCZ can span over a thousand miles north-to-south, stretching to 8°S at its most southerly. We timed our passage to coincide with northerly movement of the ITCZ. If luck were in our favor, we'd pick up the southeast trade winds near 4°S. On March 12, 2016, we weighed anchor in Puerto Villamil on Isla Isabela and set to sea.

We blazed away from the Galapagos under sail at 6 knots, with pods of dolphins and short-finned pilot whales in the distance as our first day at sea faded to darkness. By early morning, our 75-horsepower "iron sail", maintained our pace in 1- to 2-meter seas and light, variable winds, as we hurried to reach the trade winds before they again shifted south. By evening,





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10 to 14 knots of breeze from the southeast filled our sails—our first taste of the trade winds—the grumble of our Yanmar was replaced by the gurgle of the ocean. It would be 12 days before we'd turn over *The Red Thread's* engine again.

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We caught sleep in increments of minutes, rather than hours, and cooking while heeled 20° to 30° to starboard was an Olympic sport. The passage was taking a toll on our physical selves, as well as our emotions. Nearly a week into our passage, amidst a dreadful stew of fatigue, frustration, and far too much westing, we began to reevaluate our course. It was becoming increasingly uncertain whether we could maintain a course that would allow us to reach Rapa Nui. That, coupled with the very real possibility that wind and sea conditions at the island might make stopping untenable, gnawed at our frazzled nerves. Turning tail and racing downwind toward the Marquesas or Tuamotus became an increasingly viable option; taking the wind and seas on our aft quarter would certainly be less arduous, even if the number of miles was greater. Changing course would also mean relinquishing our dream of making landfall at one of the earth's most mysterious and remote islands. We persisted. So did the challenging conditions.

During night 7, our headsail furling line chafed through at the drum of our Schaefer 3200 furler. During night 9, a second headsail furling line chafed, and we became more diligent about monitoring the position of the

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NEXT STOP: The Gambier Islands of French Polynesia

Authors' Bio: After sailing from Seattle, Washington to Costa Rica between September 2014 and June 2015, Jessie and Neil docked their Catalina Morgan 440, *The Red Thread*, in Costa Rica for the rainy season. They returned to their boat in January 2016 and are currently on the hook in the Austral Islands of southern French Polynesia. Read more about their voyage at www.svtheredthread.com.

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line to ensure it was exiting the center of the drum, rather than the top, where the line could abrade against the upper lip of the drum. During night 11, a vicious 3.5-meter wave ripped the kayak from our leeward stanchions, sweeping it out into the Pacific. With *The Red Thread* blazing at over 7 knots and the wind blowing at nearly 30 in heavy seas, recovery was not an option, especially not at 2:30 am. Needless to say, we regretted not securing the kayak inside the lifelines for the long passage, despite the fact it had remained stable through 6,000 mostly coastal miles prior.

The expanse of ocean between the Galapagos and Rapa Nui was something of a liquid desert, devoid of the life we had grown to expect and appreciate during our travels along the west coast of the Americas. For 14 days, we didn't see another boat. Despite dragging two handlines that produced tuna and mahi mahi along the continent, our hooks remained bare. We experienced no sightings of marine life after day 5, save the misguided flying fish who littered our decks daily at dawn. Surprisingly, however, seabirds were plentiful; we welcomed the sight of at least one petrel, tern, or booby every day.

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At dawn on day 15, the outline of Rapa Nui etched the horizon and the scent of flora lingered in the air. The craggy outline grew larger as the sun climbed to its zenith and then ducked behind a mass of heavy, leaden clouds. The vista exceeded images we'd conjured up in our imaginations. At the eastern and western extremes of the Rapa Nui stood two dormant volcanoes. The island was draped in hues of verdant vegetation, made vivid by afternoon drizzle. We could not contain the sense of satisfaction and relief we felt to see Rapa Nui larger than life before us. For the third time, our Catalina Morgan 440 had sailed to an island called on by fewer than 40 boats a year.

Within VHF range, we hailed the Chilean Armada to request special dispensation to anchor in the northern anchorage of Anakena, rather than continuing to the main settlement at Hanga Roa. Southerly and southeasterly swells were approaching three meters, and the forecast called for deteriorating conditions, with swell building to 4 meters in the subsequent 36 hours. The Armada obliged our request, more concerned about our safety than our legal status in the country, and encouraged us to remain in Anakena until conditions improved. Throughout our stay, the Chilean Armada proved themselves to be the most attentive officials we have met in our

travels. They remained abreast of the locations of each vessel via VHF, warned us of impending weather changes, and encouraged us to shift between anchorages for safety.

We sailed the northern coast of Rapa Nui eastward along the base of Maunga Terevaka, the island's loftiest peak. Waves slammed into the volcanic coastal bluffs again and again, jetting ocean spray stories into the air in an interminable process of erosion. As we approached the anchorage at Anakena, we were surprised to find five boats hailing from five different nations. There, Rapa Nui's largest sand beach stretched golden below Ahu Nau Nau, where seven moai keep secrets of the islands mysterious past. Boasting the most protected anchorage and charming landscape, Anakena turned out to be our favorite of the three anchorages we would visit.

Days later, after conditions improved, we sailed with the small fleet of cruisers to the anchorage at Hanga Roa to clear into the country. We buried our 45-pound delta anchor in the sandy seabed 90 feet below our hull—the deepest anchorage we've ever experienced—and dumped all 250 feet of our 3/8" chain along with it. Landing our dingy at the fishing quay was a hair-raising experience we subjected ourselves to day-after-day in order to explore deeper into the island. The only way in is to brace your dinghy between sets of breaking waves to the dog-leg turn that opens to the safety of the small harbor. We figured out the entrance to Hanga Roa, but the exit proved ever dicey. One boat had their dinghy flipped by the breaking surf, and we experienced the sensation of flight on more than one occasion as we launched from the crest of waves, racing their break.

During our time in Rapa Nui, we trekked the rocky trails along the coast between Anakena and Tongariki and then hitchhiked our way back; summited Rano Kau, the volcanic crater lake on the southern cliffs of the island and explored the clifftop ceremonial village of Orongo; and explored the island's enormous quarry at Rano Raraku, where the hundreds of moai on the island were carved centuries ago.

Conditions soured when a northeasterly wind made Hanga Roa a lee shore. We moved to Rapa Nui's most isolated anchorage, Vinapu, on the southeastern coast. We traded a lee shore for heavy southerly swell that rolled us side-to-side for four long days, during which we acquired a case of cabin fever. Though nights were often rolly and sometimes very uncomfortable, they were a small price to pay for the opportunity to immerse ourselves in one of the more awe-inspiring places on earth. When the swells tempered and winds shifted once more to the southeast, we returned to Hanga Roa to complete our check-out formalities and to provision for our 1,500-nautical mile journey ahead.

Our passage to Rapa Nui tested our resolve with nearly two weeks of hard-to-weather sailing. *The Red Thread* delivered an intrepid performance, averaging 6 knots under reefed sails across nearly 2,100 nautical miles of demanding ocean, proving yet again her fortitude as a bluewater cruising vessel. During our passage, we were all-too-aware of the gamble we were making to try and reach the island at all. Tales abound of mariners who suffered the ache of sailing weeks off the beaten path to reach the extraordinary destination, only to find conditions untenable upon their arrival, with thousands of miles between them and their next landfall. We were gifted 18 remarkable days at one of the most spectacular and mysterious islands in the world, unquestionably one of the crown jewels in our voyage from Seattle thus far. If Rapa Nui is on your cruising bucket list, we can assure you the gamble is one worth making.