

Come sail away: 10-year-old Maia catches the last rays of sun aboard her family's 40-foot catamaran *Ceilydh* as they depart the island nation of Vanuatu for New Caledonia.

OUR LIFE ON THE WATER

Joy, wonder, and the occasional dollop of paralyzing fear — what it's like to raise a child with the Pacific as her backyard

BY DIANE SELKIRK

Without warning, our boat made a sharp turn. Instead of riding down the eight-foot swells with the wind propelling us from behind, we were now pointing into the waves with the wind coming from ahead. It was as if we'd been skiing down a bunny hill and a rookie mistake caused us to face uphill and slide backward. I jumped into action.

Our ham radio, which allowed us contact with the world beyond our 40-foot catamaran *Ceilydh*, also created electronic interference disrupting our autopilot, causing wild 90-degree turns. Over the radio, my husband Evan continued reading out the weather report and recording the locations and conditions aboard the dozen other boats also sailing the 2,800 miles from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to the Marquesas, French Polynesia, while I began steering us back on course.

We'd been at sea for 16 days straight, and much of the morning's radio call was spent talking about where we'd make landfall in 48 hours. Evan and our buddy boats, a small group of boat crews, with and without kids, that we'd befriended in Mexico and planned to sail the South Pacific in loose company with, traded tasteless cannibal jokes and debated the pros and cons of one island port over another (frangipani-scented jungle and towering fairytale mountain peaks versus tropical beaches and exotic villages), while I spun the wheel and adjusted the sails. With growing confusion I realized no matter what I did, the boat stayed facing into the liquid hills, shuddering with each wave impact, while the sails flapped uselessly.

"Something's wrong with our steering," I called to Evan. He came to the cockpit and repeated my efforts and then joined me at the back of our boat. Our rudders, which control the steering, are found on each hull's stern. "I can see this rudder," Evan said as he peered with me into the hypnotic blue depths, seeking out the rectangular shape, "but on the other side there must be an optical illusion, because I can't see that one."

"We can't see it because it isn't there," I said.

"Of course it's there," said Evan, who had now leaned so far over the stern that the frothy sea licked at his hair. Worried he'd be swallowed by one of the bigger waves, I called our 9-year-old daughter, Maia, out for the tie-breaking decision.

"Definitely gone," she said after taking a long look over the side.

Shock was quickly replaced by action. By adjusting the sails and turning on the motor you can steer a catamaran with one rudder. But it's a bit like a car with one-wheel drive; if the course is straight and flat, it's easy.

While I reported our predicament to the other boats over the radio, Evan began balancing our boat so one rudder could do the job of two. Cautiously we got back underway. I reassured Maia that losing a rudder was a manageable problem, and then to prove it I gave her some schoolwork; French lessons and the geography of volcanoes to prepare her for landfall.

Outwardly calm, Evan and I looked over the charts to pick the best harbor for our crippled boat (a town with skilled welders beat out tropical beaches and exotic villages) and sent out emails to alert the French Polynesian Coast Guard and ask advice. The sea wasn't flat and our course wasn't straight; waves knocked our boat sideways and my heart lurched in fear. There was a high risk that our remaining rudder could be overpowered by a large wave and break off. Having one wheel was stressful; but no wheels, hundreds of miles from shore, could lead to abandoning our boat.

Evan and I met as teenagers at sailing instructor school in Vancouver, British Columbia. His plan was to design sailboats while sailing around the world; mine was to write about boats while sailing around the world. We made a good team. Within a few years we married and bought a sturdy little blue-and-white sailboat with round portholes and a swooping bowsprit. Little *Ceilydh* looked like a traditional seagoing sailboat; and as her 20-something-year-old crew we were the archetype of young adventurers.

It sounds idyllic, like an endless vacation, and in truth sailing is a wonderfully ancient and meandering way to travel the world. We'd slip into a new port at dawn and watch as the land slowly revealed itself. Practicing our Spanish, we'd be led to the market by giggling children then haggle over tomatoes with a shy woman who'd ask what snow felt like. In the evenings we'd sit at rickety tables, sharing bottles of tequila and our worldviews with people from every continent. With the idealism of youth we were trying to sail toward a more deliberate life – one that just happened to include a few risks.

As a crew of two it was easy to

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choose adventure over caution. We surprised the locals when we arrived in a small village in El Salvador. According to the villagers, we were the first foreign cruising boat after the end of their civil war. Missing men, mortar-pocked buildings, and an overflowing prison contrasted with charismatic women who were determined to entice us to try the full range of local cuisine.

It wasn't the threat of *sopa de pata* (tripe soup) and *gallo en chicha* (rooster in a fermented sauce) that saw us leave El Salvador and unwisely sail into a gale. Instead we left because we wanted to try surfing in Costa Rica. Our first night at sea, when I was on watch and our little boat was being whacked about like a mouse in the clutches of a cat, Evan was woken up when our pressure cooker and assorted cutlery were launched across the boat and smashed into the wall beside his head. All this for surfing, something we never really got good at.

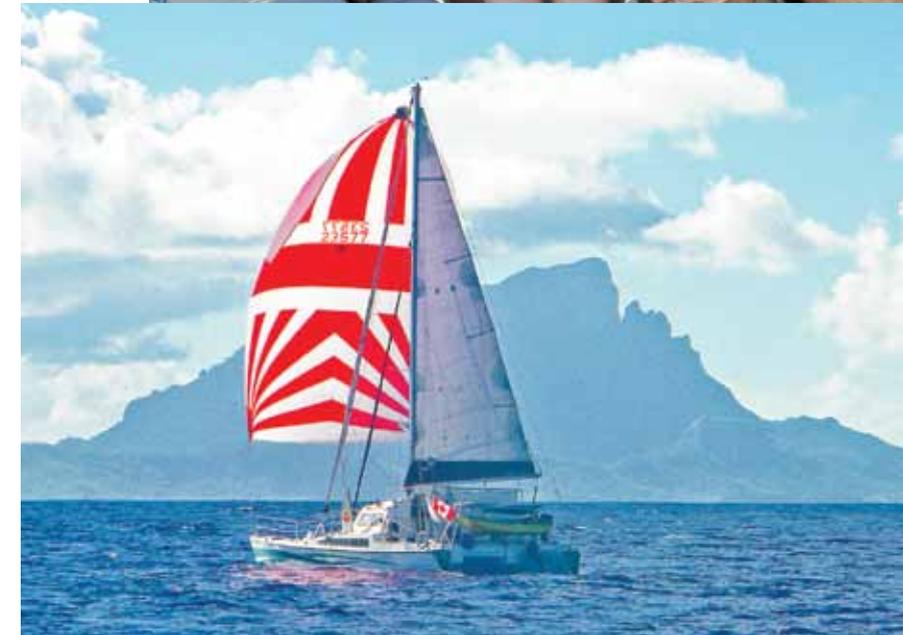
Mostly danger was a story dramatized for other sailors over drinks, and then toned down for our parents during occasional calls home. Our parents shared what friends at home were accomplishing while we were off sailing 12,000 miles to 10 countries: settling into careers, buying houses, and having children. But of course, what we were doing also sounded very nice, they said with uncertainty.

We opted to start a family in our own time. Maia was born a couple of years later in an East Coast port thousands of miles from home. A year later we did what everyone expected and sold little *Ceilydh* and headed home to Canada. Then we got good jobs and bought a home. But six years later we did the unexpected; we moved aboard a bigger *Ceilydh* and prepared to set off to see the world.

"Why are you taking Maia? Pirates are so dangerous – can't you leave her here?" The question from a friend's sister was a familiar one. The implication was sailing as a young couple was an adventure, but sailing as a family was reckless.

We'd met several cruising families while out sailing, and at the time, it struck us as the perfect way to raise our future child – she'd have ready access to her parents and the world would be both her playground and school. But each time I tried to describe the wonders of sailing as a family it sounded irresponsible compared to their more practical concerns about pirates, illness, storms, and homeschooling.

Sometimes I tried to explain how we'd thought it through; we'd weighed each risk and prepared for every eventuality. Even still it's a delicate balance to set sail with a child: Would our daughter be safe? Stay healthy? Could we replace her teachers and find her friends? And yet, we also were looking toward a horizon of unparalleled opportunity: raising a kid for whom the extraordinary becomes ordinary. Swimming with giant manta



Folk on the water: From top, author Diane with Evan and Maia; the *Ceilydh* riding downwind with spinnaker unfurled to Bora Bora, French Polynesia; Maia building her shell collection in Bahía Concepción bay on the Sea of Cortez.

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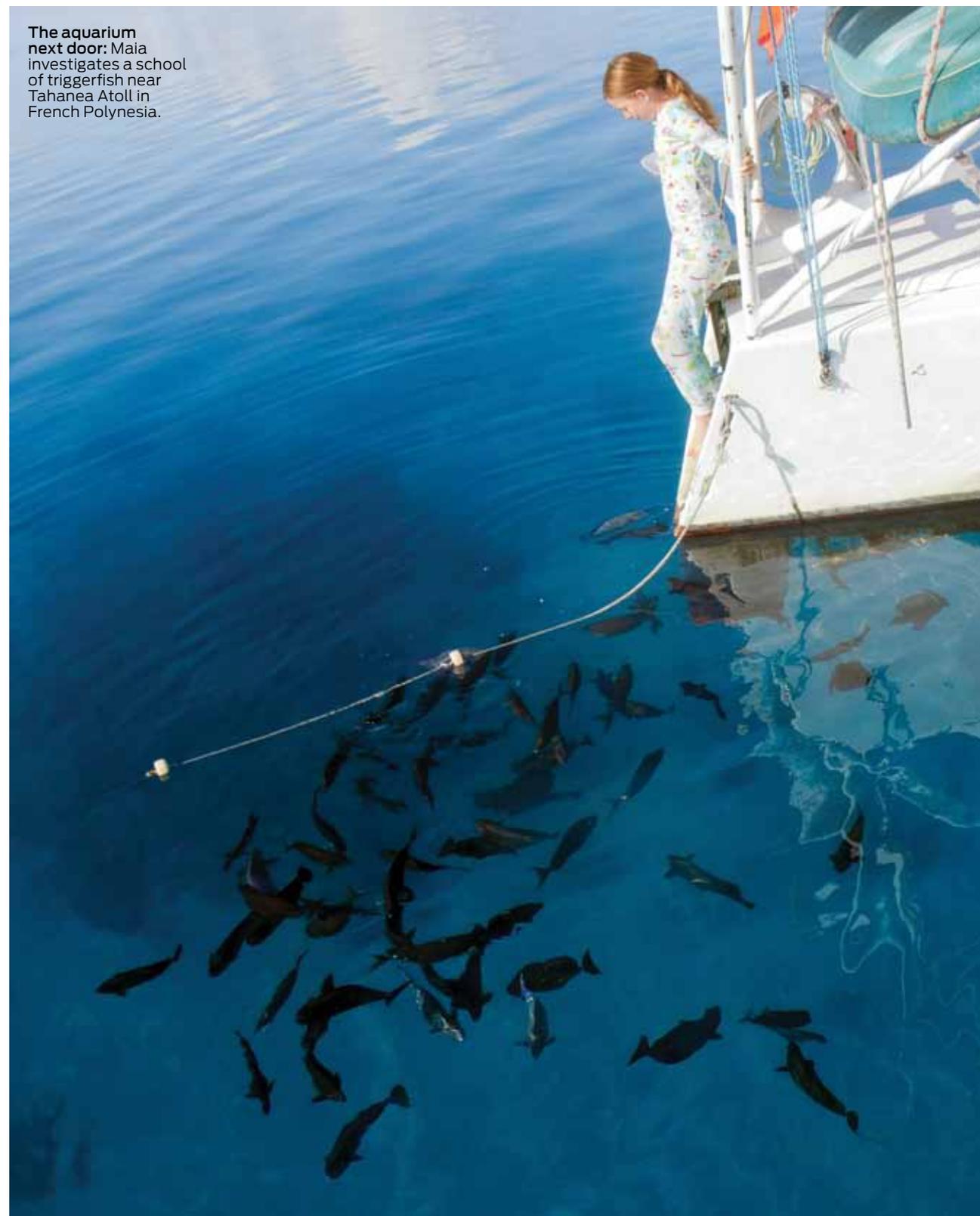
rays, international celebrations, friends from every continent – this could be the stuff of her childhood.

“She likes whales, and being with us. And we’ll avoid the regions with pirates,” I awkwardly responded.

Each day, each experience, proved sailing was the best way for our family to live. One day as we sailed toward an anchorage in Baja, California, I saw signs of a whale

spouting on the horizon. As we sailed toward it I called Maia on deck to see. We saw more spray rising several feet in the air and then started seeing lumpy brown log-like shapes haphazardly drifting on the surface, each one sighing a fine, fetid mist above the placid waves. Taking in the bulbous heads and wrinkled skin, I puzzled over the species, then realized they were sperm whales.

The aquarium next door: Maia investigates a school of triggerfish near Tahanea Atoll in French Polynesia.



While I did the identification, Maia was counting. “Forty! But that really big log might be two whales so maybe 41!” she called out as we made our way through the super pod, changing course every time another leviathan swam lazily into our path. I tried to tell Maia the story of how the sperm whales had been hunted to near extinction for their oil. As they floated beside us, I was grasping how easy slaughtering them must have been. I wanted Maia to know the wonder of seeing a species come back from the brink of destruction. She missed the impromptu homeschooling lesson though, hypnotized by trying to stare down a whale’s massive liquid eye.

As we sailed away, rank whale breath still clinging to our sails, I wondered if I should have tried harder to get her to understand. Then I realized that maybe simply having to tack and change course over and over, just to work our way through an ocean thick with whales was enough.

But on our voyage to the South Pacific on that first rudderless night, when the sun had set but the moon hadn’t risen, when I was entering my 14th hour of trying to hide the kind of fear that constricts your breath and coats your skin like a bruise, sailing stopped feeling like a good way for our family to live. Maia was in bed and Evan and I were outside under bright distant stars. “Maybe if we survive this,” I suggested to Evan, “we could get a cabin in the mountains.”

This is what all those well-meaning questions from concerned friends and family had been about, I realized. At the time, I had answered so full of confidence that we were prepared for the challenges of sailing. But now suddenly it was apparent how little control we had. For all the things I wanted in that moment – for the seas to be smaller, for our remaining rudder to stay strong – I also wanted to get to safety without my brave little sprite of a daughter absorbing my fear.

Two endless days later, our 18th at sea, I saw a smudge on the horizon. That’s what land looks like when you first spot it from the sea. And over the course of an hour I kept my eye on it – watching it take form and hold – ruling out cloud and squall. When I was sure of what I was seeing, I called Maia and Evan out on deck. I pointed to the patch of dark gray outlined against a background of medium gray and held Maia’s finger as I traced the shape. “The Marquesas!?” she whispered excitedly.

Then Maia whooped a “Land Ho!” When she looked at her dad, she saw he had tears in his eyes, “But we found it. Why are you crying?”

A friend told me that an ocean crossing is like childbirth; the moment you step foot on land, you forget the pain and fear of getting there. As we made our way into the harbor at Nuka Hiva, the largest of the Marquesas Islands, glimpsing the mountain peaks through the morning mist and absorbing the intensity of the tropical

green, I realized I didn’t want to forget our passage.

The first step ashore after crossing an ocean doesn’t come with traditions the way crossing the equator does. Some sailors kneel and kiss the earth but most, like us, just sway with land sickness and feel overwhelmed by the smell of flowers and overripe fruit, and the cacophony of birds, kids, and dogs. What I wanted to do once we finished the formalities of checking in with the local authorities was walk – maybe to get as far from our boat as I could. So together with our friends from our buddy boats, with whom we’d stayed in radio contact but hadn’t seen since the start of the Pacific crossing, we climbed up through the heated jungle, legs shaking with the unfamiliar effort.

We were met on the trail by a Marquesan on horseback named Rue. He led us to a sacred site that was marked by huge banyan trees, sacrifice pits, and Tiki statues. Evan and I pondered the ruins of stone pyramids and platforms, while Maia and the kids from our buddy boat ran around picking mangoes, star fruit, and *pamplemousse* (grapefruit) from towering old trees. With fruit juice trickling down her freckled chin Maia exclaimed that she’d never eaten anything so good. Everyone joked that this moment made the whole ocean-crossing thing worthwhile: standing in the sacred shade eating the best fruit in the world.

Breaking out of the jungle we reached the jagged cliffs over the ocean. Maia looked out over islands that faded into the distance and asked which we’d visit next. Evan and I looked back toward the harbor. From our vantage we could see boats belonging to some of the boldest ordinary people in the world. *Ceilydh* jumped out at me. Sailing her is like riding a magic carpet into a world I’ve always been intrigued by – she jumped out, not because she’s more beautiful than the others, but because it’s hard to sail a boat across an ocean and not fall a bit in love with it.

Even if she did throw a rudder.

Reaching for my hand, Evan asked how I felt about the cabin in the woods. “We’ll fix the rudder,” he told me. “We’ll solve each problem that comes up.” Half-listening to Maia as she chattered about the adventures we’d promised and the things she wanted to see, I looked out at the islands too. They were so beautiful, so mysterious, like a package on Christmas morning, just waiting to be opened.

We were different from that young couple who set off fearlessly on their first grand adventure. When we sailed away from the Marquesas with our new rudder, I felt tentative and cautious. But a few days later, when we dropped our anchor in the pristine water of a remote Tuamotu atoll and I watched Maia confidently leap into the ocean to get a better look at manta ray, I knew that while our family had much to lose, we had an entire world to gain.

Diane Selkirk wrote “Lost in Australia” for our Nov/Dec 2014 issue. Her stories have appeared in Reader’s Digest, Men’s Journal, and The Washington Post.