

SARISSA

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

THE 43M/141FT TRIPP SUPERYACHT SARISSA HAS BEEN EXPLORING REMOTE PARTS OF FRENCH POLYNESIA AND INDONESIA. HER SKIPPER **GREGORY MONKS** EXPLAINS 

Pacific blue skies, Pacific blue ocean, scattered white clouds. The seas are calm, the breeze light and warm. In the distance, the underside of the clouds have taken on a subtle turquoise colour. The low-lying atolls to which we are headed are not visible on the horizon, but are showing as reflections on the clouds – the bright waters beneath reflecting to the skies above.

No matter how much offshore ocean sailing we do, it always comes as a relief to fix the boat's position visually. Of course, with all our modern navigation technology, we have an easy time of it compared with navigators of the past. I can't

imagine how those sailors would have felt when they got it right.

We are in the Tuamotus, French Polynesia, and sailing aboard *Sarissa*, a 43m/141ft Tripp-designed performance cruising sloop. Built exclusively from carbon fibre and launched in 2011 by Vitters Shipyard, *Sarissa* has been exploring the world's oceans ever since.

Having spent most of her time off the beaten track *Sarissa*, with her guests and six crew, has been enjoying some of the best that the South Pacific, Australasia and Asia have to offer. From the rich open oceans to wild uncharted atolls, *Sarissa* has explored some of the most isolated and exciting cruising areas of the world.

The northern entrance to the vast atoll of Fakarava is wide and deep. Nonetheless, we plan our arrival with a degree of caution, reaching it at slack water. The tidal range in this remote part of the South Pacific is quite small, about 1m, but the relatively narrow entrances to these huge atolls make getting in and out tricky at mid-tide.

The warm Pacific waters streaming out of the lagoon at speeds of up to eight knots mean it's important to watch both tides and weather when transiting. This also has to be balanced with good daylight as many passes in this area are not adequately surveyed. The northern pass of Fakarava is the only one in the Tuamotus I would consider transiting at night.



From the rich open oceans to wild uncharted atolls, *Sarissa* has explored some of the most isolated areas of the world



Above: the Tripp-designed, Vitters-built *Sarissa* is a carbon fibre superyacht for long-term cruising. Left: paddle boarding in remote Kauehi. Opposite: that's what park avenue booms are for! Opening spread: *Sarissa* at anchor in Wayag, Raja Ampat

The first thing that strikes you when approaching these low atolls is that they appear to be floating above the horizon, the green canopy of coconut trees shimmering over a warm sea. Fakarava, along with Rangiroa, is the most developed of the Tuamotus, both with reliable flight connections to Papeete in Tahiti. Diving is big here, with amazing underwater encounters.

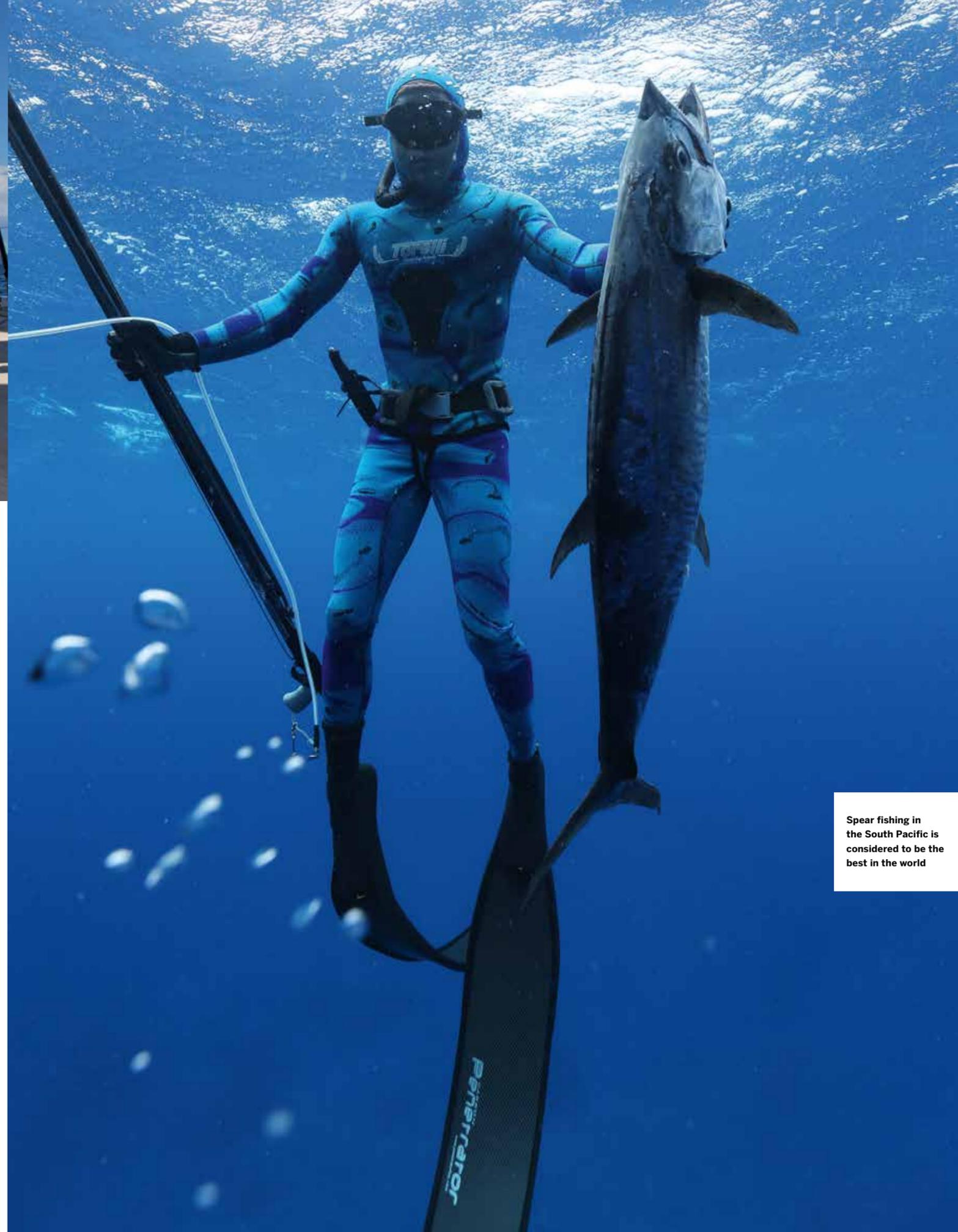
Anchoring a stone's throw away from the airport in Fakarava, we greet our guests and head south within the lagoon, navigating our way along the small eastern channel. Charts cannot be relied upon for safe navigation here. But our deckhand aloft does a great job of guiding us around the isolated shallows and bombies dotted randomly throughout the channel.

Our anchorage at the southern end of the lagoon is incredible, the waters crystal clear and full of life. Swimming is safe, but you do need to be cautious and use a little common sense. White tip and black tip reef sharks circle the boat, curious of the giant shape that has arrived in their habitat. The southern pass of Fakarava is one of the world's best dives and is totally unspoiled. We see more than 100 grey reef sharks swimming among fascinating live coral and a thriving eco system. The weather is light and the skies are clear as the moon rises above the Pacific.

We head back to the pass for a night snorkel within the shallows. The underwater world, full of life and strange creatures brightened by the moon and the unnatural light of our dive torches. Experiences like this are rare and very much the reward for all the effort taken in reaching such places.

With a strong motivation to explore the more remote atolls of the Tuamotus, we head 40nm east to the atoll of Kauehi. The pass is well





We have only walked a few metres into the thick coconut forest undergrowth when we are faced with a thriving coconut crab habitat



Above: the children of the Lau Group Island chain. Left: a huge coconut crab on the atoll of Tahanea

Spear fishing in the South Pacific is considered to be the best in the world

charted, shallowing to 10m and, picking the start of the ebb tide, is easy to navigate through. There is one small village on the ring of low-lying land that makes up Kauehi.

Tucked up on the north-eastern corner, the well-surveyed stretch of water that crosses the atoll diagonally makes life easy for us. We are the first cruising yacht to visit in six months – the only other visiting vessels being the regular supply boats bringing food and provisions from Tahiti.

We pass an extremely pleasant day at the village, exploring the quiet streets on foot and spending the afternoon larking around with the children on the village's beautiful beach.

Tahanea, an atoll 70nm sail to the south looks enticing. Very little of the lagoon has been surveyed, always a good sign that it will be pretty much empty of any other boats. The landscape is much the same from atoll to atoll: a low island, covered with coconut trees and fringed with coral reefs and incredible white sand beaches.

And home to huge coconut crabs. Properly off the chart, after dark we head ashore in the tender armed with head torches and reef shoes. We have only walked a few metres into the thick coconut forest undergrowth when suddenly we are faced with a thriving coconut crab habitat. Exactly what we'd come to find and the kids are delighted!

On a fast sail north to the atoll of Toau, one of our fishing lines bursts into life. Exhausted and full of adrenalin from the epic battle that ensues, the owner is in our tender, hauling a 120kg marlin out of the water and into the small boat to cheers from the rest of us on *Sarissa*.



Above: the Sarissa team with their monster catch. Left: village church on the remote atoll of Kauehi



SKIPPER GREGORY MONKS

With a background in ocean sailing in large sailing yachts, Monks joined Sarissa as captain for the build at Vitters in 2011. This was his first command and he saw the yacht through a timely build and delivery. Leading a team of six crew, he stresses the importance of camaraderie and teamwork

Sarissa in the crystal waters of Kauehi atoll. Right: drone photo at a secret spot in Fiji



If there is such a thing as paradise on earth, this indeed must be it: untouched natural beauty

The fish is just too big for us to land on the boat and the conditions too rough to use the lowered swim platform. Our unexpected catch means we are now behind schedule and face a torrent of water rushing out through the eastern pass of Toau on our arrival.

With the outgoing current forcing its way out of the protected lagoon and into strong opposing winds, the seas are enormous. Huge standing waves block our entry into the calm lagoon, just 200m further on. With fading light, we change plan and head back to Fakarava and to a pass we know is safe. Anchored safely again, the giant fish is filleted with some going to the galley for supper and the rest going ashore for the locals.

THE LAU GROUP, FIJI

We clear into Fiji at Savusavu, a small port town on the island of Vanua Levu. The crew are still on a high from swimming with giant humpbacks after a quick stop in Tonga on the way from Tahiti.

We are here to provision and prepare for a trip in the remote Lau Group which lies to the east of Fiji, a long way from the tourist hub of Viti Levu. The island chain is an upwind sail from the main port of entry of Suva, which goes some way to putting off visiting yachtsmen. All the better for us.

In light conditions we arrive at the entrance to the surrounding reefs of the island of Vanuabalavu. With the engineer at the top of the mast, we navigate along the coast and into a large protected bay to the north of the island – a perfect spot to rendezvous with the seaplane flying in our guests.

Exploring the islands of Fiji is a great pleasure, not only for the incredible waters, pristine white sandy beaches and tropical paradise islands, but because the Fijians are so warm and welcoming. Most of the islands we visit in the Northern Lau Group are inhabited by small communities of not much more than 150 people.

It is customary to visit the local chief of each village to request permission to explore their land and waters. Bearing gifts of kava for the chief, we walk to the nearby village and are welcomed by cheerful greetings of "Bula!" and a procession of excitable children who guide us to the elders.

The meeting with the chief is all done within a ceremony called sevusevu. The elders of the village will sit cross-legged on a mat on the floor, either in one of the bigger houses or simply outside under a makeshift sun awning. We are all welcomed to sit and everyone greets one another, shaking hands and making friendly eye contact.

The sevusevu is conducted in Fijian with a translator from the village on hand to help us converse. He speaks for five minutes, each one of us listening intently to the Fijian blessings he offers us. With a clap of clasped hands and a unanimous "Bula!" we are officially welcomed into the village.

These islands are incredibly remote. The fishing and diving are some of the best we've experienced. These are the kind of waters where you need to be quick with retrieving your catch or a hungry shark will beat you to it, the kind of islands where it feels as if you've stepped back in time 100 years.

In the ten days we have cruised here, we don't see any other yachts. This is our idea of cruising paradise. In a world that is increasingly crowded, these isolated and wild habitats are getting harder and harder to find.

RAJA AMPAT, INDONESIA

Sorong is an interesting place, a backwater town that serves as the regional hub of West Papua in Indonesia. It isn't a cruising destination in itself, but a necessary stop for any yacht wishing to cruise the magnificent Raja Ampat.

This is a very remote part of Indonesia, away from the bustling westernised tourist areas, far off the beaten track and not easy to reach. Andy Shorten from the Lighthouse Consultancy is our lifeline in this area,

guiding us through all the processes involved with Customs and Immigration, cruising permits, provisioning and logistics.

We've decided to explore the northern region of Raja Ampat. Consisting of 610 islands, this area is vastly beautiful and totally untouched. The island of Arborek is our first stop, or rather the manta cleaning station 1.5nm south.

The diving here is amazing: full-size manta rays congregating in crystal clear water adjacent to some of the most pristine reefs in the world. It's not a difficult dive, in fact it's more a case of relaxing on the sandy bottom, and sitting back and watching the spectacle of these magnificent creatures play out before your eyes. Extraordinary.

Sailing in areas that have not been adequately surveyed is not new to us. Often, with a crewmember at the top of our 56m/184ft mast, we make our way gingerly. Moving around between 1100 and 1500 and having a lookout posted aloft, we make the best of what can be tricky navigation.

At this time of the day with the sun high overhead, the waters of Raja Ampat make it easy for us to spot any shallow reefs, isolated in otherwise deep blue. With a draught of 6.2m/20ft 4in with the keel down, we need to remain vigilant. We can raise the keel to give us more of a safety margin and to gain access to shallower anchorages and ports, and reducing the draught to just 4m/13ft keel up can make all the difference.

An equatorial region, Raja Ampat or 'The Four Kings' is warm all year round. We are here in April, which is typically dry and offers lighter conditions, perfect for diving and relaxed cruising.

Heading north from the incredible manta rays, we look forward to crossing the Equator. Normally the event is held during offshore passages for a privileged few; today we would enjoy sharing the ritual with our guests. In flat calm conditions, just 40m from the Equator we stop the boat to let all the guests jump in. It's not every day you get the chance to complete a 50m swim that includes swimming over the Equator.

The day ends in the picture perfect, deserted islands of Wayag. If there is such a thing as paradise on earth, this indeed must be it: untouched natural beauty and strictly protected by the regional national parks which should help preserve this special area for generations to come.

