



Canoe commute

BY AMANDA WITHERELL

If you visit only one Marshallese atoll, make it Ailuk – this was the unanimous advice we received from the long-time sailors anchored in the capital, Majuro.

We were offshore, making our final approach to the remote Pacific atoll when I first spied an indication of why they might say so – tiny black triangles, perky as pennants, zipping along the horizon. They darted in and out of view faster than we could catch them as we sailed our 14-metre sloop toward the lagoon's entrance. We were being outraced by traditional eight-metre canoes, built from cheap plywood, rigged with scavenged fishing line and flying tarps for sails. Each was steered by a bowman standing proud on the centre platform and a helmsman perched on the stern, mere inches above the ripping grip of a seven-knot wake, casually palming a stubby, paddle-shaped tiller.

Sail north from New Zealand, pass New Caledonia, Fiji,

Tuvalu and Kiribati and about 2,500 miles later you will arrive in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Ailuk (pronounced "Eye-Look") is one of 34 islands and atolls where the highest point is the top of a coconut palm. Of the 13-mile string of 53 sandy islets, only three are inhabited and any one could stand in for Paradise. Ailuk's main village is the southernmost, just a half-mile long and home to about 300 people in 80 households, two Protestant churches, an elementary school, and a dirt runway beside an "airport" where the weekly flight is usually delayed, indefinitely. Another village of 49 people is situated on Enejelar, the third islet from the top of the atoll, about 90 minutes north if you're commuting by canoe.

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Which is actually the only way to travel. Outriggers gliding low then shooting clear of the ocean's surface as gracefully as a shearwater, these fast, innovative vessels, which feature asymmetrical hulls and reversible rigs, are the essence of sailing. They're also keeping a remote community mobile and in touch with a culture that has disappeared on their neighbouring islands.

"We never stopped using them," says Rufina Jack, third-term Mayor of Ailuk and owner of an eight-metre canoe. "Other islands did stop. They wanted outboards. Ailuk has canoes. There is not much fuel available for motorboats, and we try not to use it. Most people can't afford motorboats and fuel."

Even if they could, the supply is more unreliable than the weather. When we dropped anchor in the lagoon, the island was out of petrol and had been for quite some time. Officially, government supply ships call in every three months. In the spring of 2016, nearly six months passed before a ship was sighted on the horizon.

The atoll was also in the midst of a drought compounded by a strong El Nino, creating conditions so extreme that President Hilda Heine had recently declared a state of emergency. In normal weather, the soil is too dry and sandy to support many crops, but taro, papaya and bananas get by and most families keep a pumpkin patch. Now, even the tops of the hardest breadfruit trees were leafless sticks. Bananas had a shriveled, anemic look. The village's primary watermaker was broken and the smaller backup system was limping along. People were lining up through the night to fill bottles from the trickle.

On other Marshallese atolls we visited, we observed how stranded the villagers were by these conditions. Without sailing canoes, they were unable to reach food and resources in the lagoon and on neighbouring islets. On Ailuk, there were still plenty of wind, plenty of fish, and the beach was as busy as a train depot with canoes coming and going, landing and launching people, copra, cargo, and fish.

There is no tourism on Ailuk and no commerce except three small island stores, which are really just caches of imported food sold from people's huts. Copra, handicrafts, and dried fish are the only sources of income for most villagers. Copra fetches 25 cents per pound and is typically gathered in 100-pound sacks on the uninhabited islets, then transported back to the village via canoes carrying up to eight sacks at a time.

Inside and outside the lagoon, fishermen trawl for tuna, wahoo, mahi and other fish, salting and drying their catches to sell or share with neighbors or export to Majuro on the next available flight. Women weave baskets from pandanus leaves, coconut fibres, and fossicked shells, which are then traded for rice and other provisions, with the island stores acting as middlemen for tourist shops in Majuro where the baskets will ultimately sell for more than twice the price.

Traditionally built up to 100 feet long, Marshallese canoes were used for hundreds of years for lagoon travel and interisland trade, to fish inshore and offshore, and to explore remote reaches of the Pacific. Before World War II, Japanese occupying the atolls banned interisland canoe travel, which led to a decline in construction. The fleet was further decimated by the war, the end of which brought first-world goods to the remote atolls, including outboard engines that were immediately deemed superior to the native craft. Canoes were left to rot on the beaches on every atoll but two – Namdrik and Ailuk. Though there is a small and important renaissance of canoe building in Majuro, seeing canoes sailing in Ailuk's lagoon is like witnessing a nearly extinct black rhinoceros foraging in the wilds of Africa.

Asked why his atoll never abandoned canoes like all the other islands, sailor Tokjen Takju says it's because "it's our custom and culture. They lost their culture." After more thought, he adds, "And the wind direction is good for us. Always." Given a choice between an outboard or a canoe, he doesn't deliberate: "A canoe is better because we always have the wind." To Takju, the equation is simple: no canoes would mean "no food, no fish, no copra, no money."

"Without them we wouldn't be able to travel within the lagoon and visit our mothers," says Darlene Senight, one of the teachers in Enejelar Village. Mother's Day is an important holiday in Marshallese culture: land, the most highly prized possession, is matrilineally inherited and it's not uncommon for women to serve in positions of power. (Ailuk has a woman mayor and a woman iroij, or chief, and the Marshall Islands recently elected its first woman president). Mother's Day weekend, the entire village of Enejelar decamped to Ailuk in a convoy of canoes, to visit their extended families and celebrate with feasts, gifts, and performances. Monday morning saw canoes laden with people and feast leftovers, toddlers wrapped in tarps against the spray while their older brothers helped rig the sails. Kids learn about boats early, sailing carved wooden models and toy boats fashioned from breadfruit, eventually graduating to paddling small canoes. Ask any one if he wants a canoe when he grows up and the answer is an emphatic "Yes!"

And they grow up to become crack sailors, navigating without GPS or compasses, and fearlessly setting sail into the dim light of a quarter moon night. Word from Majuro, transmitted via HF radio, was that a company boat would soon arrive to pay out for the dried, mature copra that is processed into coconut oil for export. Six boats prepared to sail to the northernmost islet for a week of harvesting coconuts, earning \$25 for every sack they could fill. Nobody works alone and with such lively boats to sail, it's never all work and no play. They ease their canoes gently into knee-deep water, sails luffing, and wait for the last boat to rig, just so they can race each other to get there. ■

