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## CONVERSATION

### The Other Side of Paradise

Driven by wanderlust and the wind, a local family sets sail on an around-the-world adventure—and finds it.

By Ryan A. Smith



Photo by Dina Pielact

The Rigney family aboard Kandú, sailing south from Ventura into the wild blue.

In early February, Ventura's Eric and Leslie Rigney, along with their young sons, Bryce and Trent, embarked on a massively ambitious sailing voyage. They'd spent nearly five years preparing themselves and their 42-foot boat, Kandú, for an around-the-world journey. They'd pared down their belongings, vacated their home, and pulled the boys out of school. A couple months later, they finally crossed their first international border.

What took so long?

Captain Eric, a former post-production VP with Sony Pictures Studios, answered that and other questions from the cockpit of Kandú as the boat was docked in the port of La Cruz, Mexico. And while his family's exotic itinerary may spark envy in the heart of a deskbound office jockey like me, his candid answers reveal a far less romantic side of travel: It's not always a vacation.

#### What inspired you and Leslie to embark on this family journey?

The "cruising" lifestyle, living on your boat and sailing from one country to another, offers a unique environment of learning, exploration, adventure, and community. Moving onto our boat, we immediately met all sorts of kindred spirits, characters who place a high value on life-experience over formal training, and ingenuity over convention. It's rather recent in our culture that we've placed our children in what amounts to a factory-style, conveyor-belt educational path to success. I want to work shoulder-to-shoulder

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## SHORT LIST

with my sons, to impart a solid work ethic, troubleshooting and problem-solving skills, the habit of contemplation, and help them figure out what it is they are meant to do on this planet. I want to live the example in front of them.

### Where do you plan to go?

From Ventura, we're heading south through Mexico. We want to go to the Galapagos and Easter Island, but our delays have put us in a bad weather situation. We may just have to sail directly to French Polynesia; we want to put the boys in school to learn French. From there, we plan to go west to the Cook Islands, Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji. We have to make a choice in Fiji: go exotic and head northerly to Micronesia and the Philippines, or south to New Zealand. In either case, we'll wind up in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Then west to Sri Lanka, turn south through the various island groups in the Indian Ocean toward Madagascar and South Africa. Touch Namibia on our way across the Atlantic to Brazil. Then we sail north to the eastern Caribbean, across the Atlantic again via the Azores, and into the Mediterranean. We plan to spend almost a year-and-a-half in the Med, wintering in Turkey, politics permitting, before sailing to western Africa and across the Atlantic for the third time, above South America in the Southern Caribbean. We'd transit the Panama Canal and either make our way north to California if we're done with the lifestyle and/or our money runs out, or sail west across the Pacific to island groups we missed and to the Far East, China, South Korea, and Japan. From the Far East, we could go to Alaska and down the Northwest Passage through Canada and down the U.S. west coast.

Or we could fall in love with some place along our route and make it our new home. Or we could run out of money and have to sail to Australia to sell our boat. The trip is open-ended.

### What do you plan to see and do?

Everything we can. But we especially hope to live as closely as we can with the communities we visit. "Going native," as it were. We also hope to leave a positive "wake" behind: volunteering, collecting environmental data, and finding opportunities to share our experience with kids back home.

### How did you ready your sailboat, *Kandu*, for this trip?

It feels like we've replaced nearly everything. A lot of money, time, and trouble have been spent getting her ready, more than her purchase price. We spent four-and-a-half years doing that. I addressed any issue I thought could be best handled in Ventura. It's often said that cruising is really just working on your boat in exotic locations. Once you leave the US, it takes much more time to solve a problem. Where things can be ordered and received in a day in the US, it could take months and double or triple the cost in other countries.

I also wanted the boat to be energy efficient and comfortable. Energy efficient means running the engine less to charge the batteries or cool down the refrigerator. Comfortable means that Leslie is more apt to stick it out. Heads usually stink in a boat, so I replaced all the plumbing with odor-free hoses and instituted practices to abate odors, and it's working. Leslie likes a bright, airy, and dry interior, so I added more lighting, especially around the galley. We replaced and or added more fans, and installed screens to keep the bugs out. The most expensive comfort thing we added was our hard dodger—something we had custom built by a Ventura shipwright artisan. He made us a very attractive structure, creating a safe and comfortable place to sit when on watch.

### What other hurdles did you have to clear before

**embarking on this adventure?**

After 17 years of living in the same house, we'd accumulated so much stuff. If it was not going on the boat, we sold it, gave it away, or stored it. Getting visas can be a lot of work, too. If you just want to stay for a few days or a month, maybe even three, getting a visa isn't difficult, except for the Galapagos; it cost about \$1500 to get a 20-day/one-island visa. For a one-year French Polynesian visa, there was a lot of paperwork and some expense, but all in all it was probably easier than applying for a green card in the United States.

Getting ready for this trip has been little to no fun. Mostly, it's a pain. It really makes you wonder if this makes any sense, all the effort and expense. Why not just buy several really awesome family vacations instead? It's been so long since I've had fun, I fear I may have forgotten how.

**A month after leaving Ventura, you were still in California. Did you expect it to take so long to get out of familiar waters, and did these initial delays prep you in some way for the upcoming trip?**

Our departure has been nothing but delayed. We've missed nearly all our self-imposed deadlines, our "hard" dates. Our neighbors at the Ventura West Marina and fellow members at the Ventura Yacht Club would see us and ask, "You're still here?" They kept saying, "The boat will never be ready, just go." The only ones who understood were those who had actually done it before. They said, "Go when you're ready."

When we left Ventura, we knew we'd still be working on the boat along the way, but we didn't expect to stay so long in San Diego. The sail down brought two significant discoveries: dissolving gasket material blocking diesel flow compromised our fuel tanks, and the wind generator controller wasn't charging our batteries. So we spent an extra two weeks there resolving those issues. That prevented us from seeing the grey whales before they left Baja's Mag Bay and spending Easter in Guadalajara. And we've been forced to remove Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, and Peru from our list of places to make port.

It's now late in the season; hurricanes start hitting Mexico and Central America in late May these days. Plus, per our visa, we're supposed to be in French Polynesia by June 1. On the bright side, all the other boat systems are working great. The boat is dry, bright, and airy, just as I wanted it to be for Leslie—except that it isn't fun.

**How did it feel to say goodbye to the conveniences of American life?**

Leaving the US was a milestone, transitioning from the prep phase to the cultural and adventure portion of our great voyage. I even had a couple of days when I didn't have anything urgent on my to-do list. It was a great feeling of relief and accomplishment, but it was brief. The boys have only seen their dad working on the boat, rarely just hanging out. I guess it's going to take time for me to learn how to do that. And, honestly, after so many years of nose to the grindstone, relaxing is not as easy as it sounds.

**How does everyone pass the time during long crossings?**

The boys read books and play games on their tablets, do schoolwork, or write about their experiences. They have simple chores like doing dishes or laundry. When there's no wind, we'll pull them behind the boat on a long soft-top surfboard. Leslie has her hands full preparing meals, cleaning, and directing the kids to study. She and I try to write. I maintain the boat and the logs, do the navigation, get on the radio networks to check weather, figure out what we'll need to have ready when we arrive. Leslie and I

negotiate the sails; Bryce helps with this, too. And all of us take watches: two hours on, six hours off. During the day, everyone naps a lot, like house cats.

**Now that you are in Mexico, how are things going?**

We have had a little more fun, but with the problems that keep coming up, issues that are better addressed in Puerto Vallarta than the Galapagos or the Marquesas, I'm still very much in work mode. What's different is that I can take a break, walk up a real cobblestone street through the town square, get a cup of fresh agua fresca or go to the local pangueros' fish market. Plus, we're meeting all sorts of eccentric and fascinating people in different stages of their own quests. Here in La Cruz, there is a small collection of boat-schooled children, so the boys are actually getting some much appreciated "kid" time, but they would rather be in Ventura. After so much time in prep, it's hard to sell anyone that fun is just around the corner. Even I have difficulty believing it.

**At what point do you expect that mindset to shift?**

I think the Marquesas are ultimately where I'll shed my work clothes like a crusty chrysalis, transitioning fully into the adventure mode of cruising, Polynesian shirts, and flip-flops. God, I hope so.

**What do you see in the immediate future, and further down the line?**

Once we leave Puerto Vallarta, the goal is to have as many wonderful experiences as possible while spending as little money as possible. I'm trying to appreciate that I don't get to fully decide my future. We'll follow the favorable winds and take advantage of serendipity. Any itinerary seems arrogant/ignorant considering that I haven't been able to keep any of my previous departure dates or stick to any plans. Heck, I don't even know when we're going to leave Puerto Vallarta! I guess that's the greatest lesson—realizing we're not in control of much more in life than our attitudes.

**Follow the Rigneys' voyage online:** [rigneyskandu.com](http://rigneyskandu.com)



"We could fall in love with some place along our route and make it our new home. Or we could run out of money and have to sail to Australia to sell our boat. The trip is open-ended."



Leslie Dennis-Rigney, wife, mother, co-captain, and former opera singer.



In the name of marital peace, Eric customized Kandu with a bright interior and wife-friendly comfort perks.



Bookended by their adventurous parents, Bryce and Trent say goodbye to Ventura and hello to the world at large.



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