An aerial photograph of a tropical island with lush green vegetation and a sandy beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color. A large, semi-transparent compass rose is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, with the words 'THE SEA' and 'TRADER' in a stylized, green, serif font. The compass rose has numbers 1 through 12 and 30, 150, 180, 210, 240, 270, 300, 330, 360. The text 'THE SEA' is positioned above 'TRADER'.

Like the merchant ships
of old, the sailing vessel *Kwai*
brings passengers and cargo to
far-flung Pacific islands

STORY BY LURLINE MCGREGOR
PHOTOS BY PF BENTLEY


THE SEA TRADER







The sailing ship *Kwai* regularly delivers cargo from Honolulu to remote Pacific islands seldom visited by other cargo ships. The 140-foot-long, steel-hulled vessel is seen here and on the opening spread anchored at Tabuaeran (Fanning Atoll). Residents of the Line Islands and Northern Cook Islands place orders with *Kwai* for a wide range of goods, from building materials to bath products, frozen food to footwear (including — quite possibly — the Air Jordan basketball sneakers worn by the young man at left).



By sailing whenever possible, *Kwai* saves fuel and reduces its operating costs. With a top sustained sailing speed of ten knots, *Kwai* doesn't travel as nearly as fast as motorized cargo ships do. But its reduced diesel consumption allows it to serve island communities that wouldn't be profitable for fuel-reliant cargo carriers. Seen here, two crew members prepare to unfurl some of *Kwai*'s eight sails. On the facing page: boarding *Kwai* via cargo net at Kiritimati (Christmas Island).

Working in hard hats and bare feet under the blazing sun, the crew of the sailing vessel *Kwai* spends five days handling cargo at the dock in Kiritimati. Off come pallets of goods purchased at the box stores and thrift shops of Honolulu, and on go barrels of diesel and bags of rice, flour and sugar bound for the remote outer islands. On the third day, the work grinds to a halt when the sun sets and guests arrive carrying the fixings of a feast. It's party time.

Kwai is 140 feet long and can carry the equivalent of ten fifty-foot-long shipping containers, but it's a shrimp compared with the container ships that the dock at Kiritimati (a.k.a. Christmas Island) was built to accommodate. Standing at the edge of the dock with trays of grilled lobster and breadfruit, the guests peer at the ship in the water twenty feet below. To get aboard they climb into a cargo net and hold on tight while the harbor's crane operator swings them into the air and lowers them to the vessel's deck.

As a sailing cargo ship, *Kwai* is an unlikely throwback to a pre-container ship era. Yet by serving tiny islands that other cargo ships rarely visit, and by using sail power to slash its fuel costs, *Kwai* has found a niche in the world of maritime transport. Since 2006 it has plied the waters of the equatorial Pacific offering cargo and passenger services.

Four or five times a year, *Kwai* sails from Honolulu to the Line Islands in the Republic of Kiribati, loaded to its Plimsoll line with merchandise from Costco, Sam's Club, Walmart and other discount outlets. Kiritimati is its regular first stop before setting off for the more isolated isles of Tabuaeran (Fanning Atoll) and Teraina (Washington Island). As supply ships from Kiribati's capital visit Tabuaeran and Teraina just once or twice a year, *Kwai* has become an important part of the economic and social fabric of these communities.

Goods that the islanders order from Honolulu cover a wide range of needs, from building materials to toiletries, fishing supplies to footwear, electronics to frozen cheesecakes. On some voyages *Kwai* adds a side trip into the Northern Cook Islands—Penrhyn, Manihiki, Nassau, Rakahanga and Puka Puka. There it is licensed to sell



things directly off the boat, much like the ocean traders of old, who would show up unannounced and exchange Western goods for copra, shells or whatever else the islanders could scrape up. "Our operation is a relic of the past," says *Kwai*'s senior captain and owner, Brad Ives, a gangly 69-year-old with the wild hair of a mad professor. "But we are still functional, needed and hard at work to survive in the modern world."

On each of the islands it serves, *Kwai* has a business agent, and it's the agent on Kiritimati who has organized the evening's feast. He brings with him a troupe of young dancers, who perform traditional dances of the I-Kiribati, as the people of Kiribati call themselves, set to a techno beat. Adorned in fragrant head lei, the I-Kiribati deckhands and stevedores sing and dance along with them. Ives is pulled

to his feet to join in the final dance. Then he graciously but firmly lets his guests know it's time to get back in the cargo net and go home. There are still two days of cargo loading ahead, and everyone needs their sleep.

When the last of the cargo is loaded, the crew closes the hatch, covers it with rugs and stretches a large awning over the deck for shade and rain protection. Thirty-eight passengers, carrying large stalks of bananas and other luggage, board via cargo net, then spread woven mats over the rugs and settle in for the thirty- to forty-hour trip to Tabuaeran. *Kwai* has room for about fifty passengers, and it often sails at capacity. Sports teams, medical personnel, members of parliament, policemen, prisoners, councils of elders, construction crews, businessmen, kinfolk en route to or from months-long family reunions—all sorts of people book passage on the boat, which costs half the price of a ticket on Air Kiribati. In the Northern Cooks, *Kwai* once delivered the entire population of the island of Nassau—eighty-six men, women and children (plus two ducks and one pig)—to the island of Puka Puka for the nation's Independence Day celebration.

While the passengers are supposed to remain on the main deck during the passage, in the evening many somehow find their way to the aft deck, which is reserved for the crew. The informal concerts are inevitable, with passengers and crew playing 'ukulele and singing in harmonies that sometimes move the heart and other times send everyone into gales of laughter.

With all the passengers aboard, Ives blasts the ship's horn, the crew casts off and the five-hundred-mile round-trip voyage to Tabuaeran and Teraina gets under

way. But as *Kwai* motors toward open water, Ives notices puffs of white smoke emanating from the stack. As diesel emissions are supposed to be clear, this means the engine has a problem. Neither Ives nor the engineer can figure out what's wrong, so a quarter-mile from shore Ives turns the boat around and returns to the dock. "Better safe than sorry," he says.

Ives comes from a long line of New England sea captains and counts himself among the descendants of Nathaniel Bowditch, the nineteenth-century mathematician considered the father of modern navigation. As a youth he spent his summers sailing small boats on Maine's Penobscot Bay. At age 20 he "ran away to sea" aboard the *Sophia*, a three-masted, group-owned sailing ship—"a floating commune," he calls it. "The idea was to fix it up in six months and sail around the world in two years, then go back to college. After two years we were still fixing it up, and it took eight years to finally sail around the world." To make ends meet *Sophia* sometimes carried cargo, and so began Ives' career in maritime trade.

In the late 1970s Ives bought and refurbished *Edna*, a 1916-built Danish schooner, and launched an international cargo company. Sailing from New England to South America, with stops in the West Indies and occasional journeys to Africa, he dealt mostly in building materials, such as bricks from New Bedford and tropical hardwoods from Surinam. When he wasn't plying the seas like the ocean traders of old, he worked as a boat builder, commercial fisherman and captain or crew member on other people's boats.

When Ives first laid eyes on *Kwai*, it was a burned-out derelict rusting away in a Norwegian fjord. A fire had gutted its engine room and stern cabin, and the boat appeared destined for the scrapyard. But Ives liked what he saw. Built in Germany in 1950 as a motorized drift net fishing boat, *Kwai* was designed to carry a small sailing rig to keep stable and pointed into the wind while working the fishing grounds. Ives recognized in its steel hull the elegant lines of a sailing ship. "I walked her decks, and she was saying to me, 'I can do it! Take me!'" he recalls. "I knew pretty early on she had a soul."

Ives bought the boat in 2002 and began the painstaking process of rehabilitating it and converting it into a full-fledged sailing ship. After four years of restoration and refitting, he sailed *Kwai* to Surinam, loaded



it with silver bali lumber and set off for Hawai'i to sell the cargo. Along the way he stopped in Rarotonga, where he registered the vessel and ended up acquiring a shipping license allowing him to import goods to the Cook Islands. When government officials in the nearby Line Islands caught wind of the *Kwai*, they invited Ives to apply for a license to work there, too.

The Line Islands lie at the far eastern end of Kiribati, an island nation that is both tiny and immense; its 313 square miles of landmass is spread across 1.3 million square miles of ocean. Tarawa, the nation's capital, is farther from the main Line Island of Kiritimati than Honolulu is. *Kwai* sails 1,300 miles across the wind—the most efficient point of sail—to reach Kiritimati; cargo ships from Tarawa travel two thousand miles into the wind to get there. "The

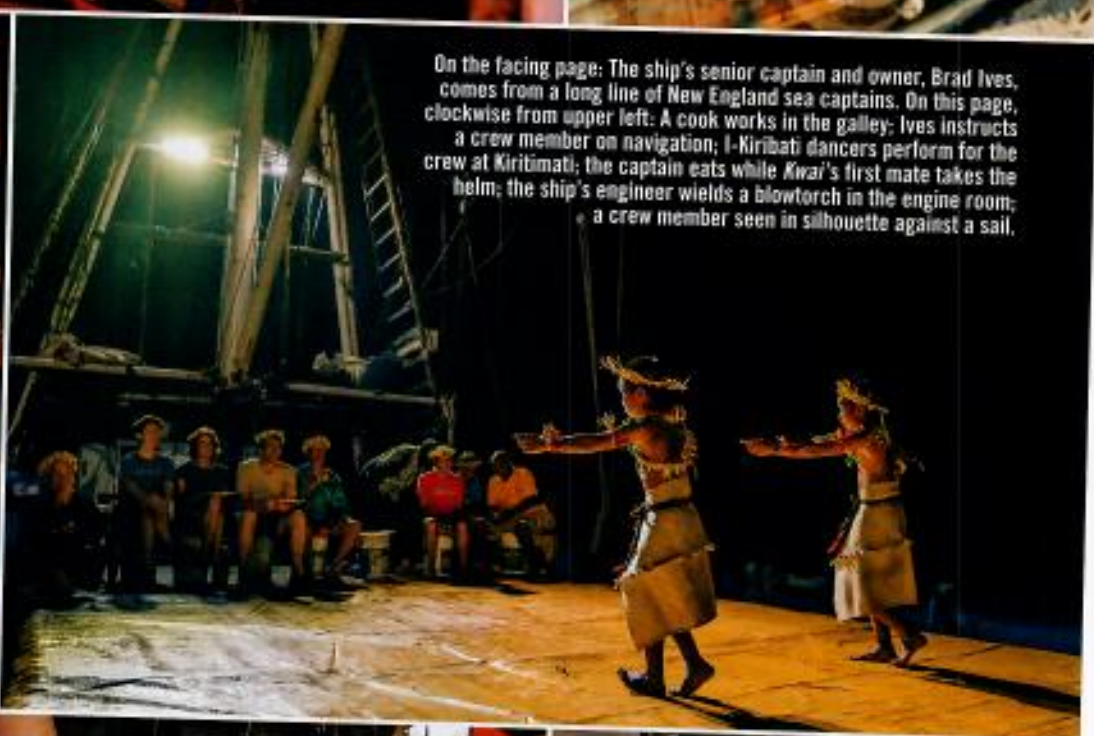
Kwai is an important part of the social dynamic of the Line Islands," Ives says, "and we do our best to keep people happy and serve everyone."

Back at the dock in Kiritimati, Ives and the engineer are unable to pinpoint the problem causing the white smoke. By radio Ives' diesel guru in Honolulu deems the engine sound enough for the out-and-back to Tabuaeran and Teraina, as long as it's not run too hard. The next day the harbor's crane operator swings the passengers, who spent the night ashore, back on board, and *Kwai* gets under way once again.

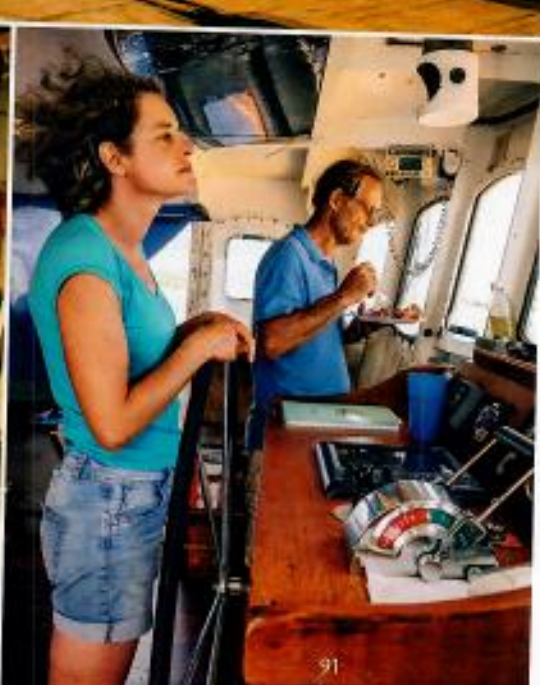
Ives is always looking for skilled people "with just the right amount of weird" to fill the ship's senior crew positions. On this voyage a self-described "boat jockey" from Alaska serves as engineer; a Dutch woman who left a forestry career to go to sea serves as first mate; and a marine biologist from Hawai'i taking a break from environmental consulting serves as supercargo, the manager of the cargo and its sale. On some voyages *Kwai* employs a relief captain, allowing Ives to spend at least part of the year with his wife at their small farm on the flank of Hawai'i's Kilauea volcano. While Ives has gotten years of service from some loyal and talented crew members, there's always turnover in these positions.

The deckhands are a more unchanging group. Many of the thirty or so I-Kiribati men on Ives' roster of local help have sailed with *Kwai* since the beginning. Some are second-generation hands. Jobs are hard to come by in the Line Islands, and crewing on *Kwai* is a prestigious gig. On this trip Ives has brought on eight deckhands and a few extra stevedores. In addition, two I-Kiribati women serve as cooks. Working wonders with an apartment-size four-burner stove and ingredients that might include a twenty-pound bag of rice and a seventy-pound tuna, the cooks keep all aboard well fed.

After an uneventful thirty-hour passage, *Kwai* enters the light blue lagoon at Tabuaeran. Before the crew has finished tying the boat to an offshore buoy, the Tabuaerans are in skiffs headed out to greet them. There is no dock here, so the passengers ride to shore in the skiffs. Then *Kwai*'s boom and winch are rigged, and the unloading of cargo into the skiffs begins. Mountains of staples loaded at Kiritimati and special orders from Honolulu spring up on the beach while the supercargo hunches over his paperwork beneath a



On the facing page: The ship's senior captain and owner, Brad Ives, comes from a long line of New England sea captains. On this page, clockwise from upper left: A cook works in the galley; Ives instructs a crew member on navigation; I-Kiribati dancers perform for the crew at Kiribimati; the captain eats while Kiwai's first mate takes the helm; the ship's engineer wields a blowtorch in the engine room; a crew member seen in silhouette against a sail.



tree, overseeing the fulfillment of orders. A few trucks arrive to carry off goods, but it's mostly motorcycles and bicycles that are used to whisk away the 110-pound bags of flour and flat-screen TVs.

Bicycles, bike parts and bike tire patch kits are popular items from Hawai'i, as are instant noodles, canned juice, canned meat and fish, bottled water and disposable diapers. *Kwai* also carries nine-hundred-pound bales of clothing from the Salvation Army. If you see someone in the Line Islands wearing a t-shirt with Punahou Girls Volleyball or Lanikai Canoe Club printed on it, chances are it came from a bale. Tabuaeran and Teraina only recently got internet service, and now laptop and tablet computers are hot items. On this trip *Kwai* has brought more than three hundred Amazon Fire tablets. All of them were ordered by residents of Tabuaeran and Teraina, which have a combined population of around three thousand.

This is *Kwai's* forty-fourth voyage since it began its Pacific cargo service, and I flew to Kiritimati to join the ship for the trip around the Line Islands. On Tabuaeran, Ives dispatches me to inform a longtime customer, Bruno de Lala, that the freezer he sent off for repair is back and needs to be picked up. Thin and tanned, Bruno is a seventy-something Frenchman whose sailboat ran aground here a few decades ago. Despite the islanders' attempts to send him on his way, Bruno settled down, married a local woman, had two daughters and opened La Belle Etoile, a rustic bed and breakfast that caters to the trickle of fly fishermen and surfers who visit the island each year. It's there, among the thatched-roof guest cottages, that I find him. When I tell him his freezer is back, he says, "What freezer?" It has been more than a year since he sent the broken appliance away, and he has since replaced it with a new one.

There is no end to the setbacks, surprises and complications that arise when *Kwai* is making its rounds. Sails tear, unforecast storms develop, orders are lost, copra bugs invade the crew's bunks. Once *Kwai* came upon an abandoned yacht adrift in the deep blue, compelling it to drop what it was doing and tow the vessel to port. Another time a fifty-ton crane toppled onto *Kwai's* deck, causing extensive damage (but no serious injuries) that took days to repair. Whatever the situation—whether it's a leaking toilet or a leak in the aging hull—Ives' unflappable mien invari-



Clockwise from top left: Passengers camp beneath an awning during the thirty- to forty-hour trip from Kiritimati to Tabuaeran; the driver of a taxi scooter on Teraina (Washington Island) carries a laptop computer between his teeth while his passenger balances a flat-screen TV on his knees—both items just arrived aboard *Kwai*; the economy of the Line Islands is largely based on copra, seen here drying



on Tabuaeran; a stevedore on Teraina carries a bag of copra to a skiff for loading aboard *Kwai*; a customer at the “Kwai Store”—the pop-up market where unclaimed goods are sold—samples the scent of a body product; the Kwai Store’s checkout line. “This is what people really want,” Ives says of the store. “They want to hold things in their hands before buying it.”

ably signals “we can fix this.” Sometimes, though, there’s nothing to be done but drive the boat and hope for the best. Such was the case when a seasick passenger, attended by two other seasick passengers, gave birth on deck. (The healthy baby boy was named Kwai.) Bruno declining the return of his freezer is a faint hiccup, and one that’s quickly forgotten after a Tabuaeran store owner decides he will take the thing instead.

Kwai’s arrival at Tabuaeran happens to coincide with copra weighing day, when government officials pay cash for the dried coconut the islanders produce. The cargo that comes off *Kwai* is replaced with ninety-pound burlap bags of copra, which will be unloaded on Kiritimati for shipment to the coconut oil mills of Fiji. Once all the pre-ordered goods are distributed and the copra is stowed, bins loaded with merchandise are brought ashore to sell at the “Kwai Store,” a pop-up market of miscellaneous wares. Eager to spend the copra cash in their pockets, the Tabuaerans have lined up long in advance. When the bins are opened, it’s suddenly Black Friday, with shoppers reaching, jostling and shouting. Crew members serving as store security keep order as a great *mélange* of items—hair gel, peanut butter, sunglasses, light bulbs, little backpacks from Ross Dress for Less—are snapped up. “This is what people really want,” Ives says. “They want to hold things in their hands before buying it.”

After three days on Tabuaeran, the passengers bound for Teraina reboard, Ives blows the ship’s horn and *Kwai* heads back out to sea, still trailing little puffs of white smoke. The following morning we drop anchor off Teraina. There is no sheltered lagoon here, let alone a dock, just a hole blasted through the fringing reef for small boats to get in and out. In rough seas unloading tests the expertise of *Kwai*’s crew and the island’s boatmen. But on this trip the waters are calm, and both passengers and cargo are moved easily ashore. Over two days the crew discharges one hundred cubic meters of cargo and reloads forty tons of copra.

Kwai’s arrival is always a spectacle that brings out the community. Even the disembarked passengers remain on the beach to watch the activity. As on Tabuaeran, a single sand road connects the villages that ring the island. Each village has a *maneaba*, or open-air meetinghouse, surrounded by raised houses fashioned from coconut fronds, pandanus leaves and

tin sheeting. Many have solar panels and a few electric lights. The satellite dish for the internet is planted outside the island's council house. During the day two computers are available there for a modest fee. After hours the wi-fi is turned on, and anyone can sit outside and connect. This has made the council house the new gathering spot in the evening, where islanders sit messaging friends in faraway places and shopping on Amazon for things *Kwai* will eventually deliver.

Ives' wife, April Fountain, working from her home office on Hawai'i Island, runs *Kwai*'s business operation, taking orders and overseeing the shoppers who scour Honolulu's retail outlets for the best deals. Every day at 7:30 p.m., when *Kwai* is out in the world plying its trade, she gets on the shortwave radio to talk with Ives. When there's drama to report, it usually flows from ship to shore. But on this trip, as *Kwai* returns to Kiritimati, Fountain is the one with the bad news. It's May 2018, and one mile above Ives and Fountain's farm, the ground has cracked open and lava has come pouring out. Civil authorities are evacuating the neighborhood.

If Ives is freaked out, he doesn't let on. But when we get back to Kiritimati, he hops the first flight for Honolulu. Over the next two weeks, more volcanic vents will open up above and below the house, issuing lava and clouds of sulfur dioxide. Ives and Fountain make a few trips to the property to remove the office files and some furniture before lava destroys the home. "Everything we didn't grab and toss into the truck is gone," Ives says.

Meanwhile, Ives flies in a relief captain to sail *Kwai* back to Honolulu, where the boat's old Detroit Diesel is swapped out for a rebuilt engine. The crew caulks the deck, paints and tars the hull and tends to other routine maintenance. Fountain continues to take orders from an office set up in the couple's new rental house, and her shoppers continue to amass merchandise in *Kwai*'s Honolulu warehouse. Two new I-Kiribati crew members succeed in getting their visas and fly north to join the boat. Just three weeks after returning to Honolulu, *Kwai* is loaded to its Plimsoll line and ready to sail. With Ives staying behind to help at home, the relief captain blows the horn and motors out of Kewalo Basin. All six sails are set and five-hundred tons of ship and cargo plow through the waves, bound for the Line Islands and Northern Cooks once again. ■■■



Built in Germany in 1950, *Kwai* was originally named *Bayern*, then renamed after the 1957 war film *Bridge on the River Kwai*. Ives bought the ship (seen here under full sail in the Line Islands) in 2002, rescuing it from the scrapyard. Facing page, top to bottom: Pallets of cargo are ready for loading at Honolulu Harbor; plastic wrap is used to secure loose items; Ives (in hard hat) helps stow cargo.

