

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE DOLDRUMS

The name "doldrums" is given to the equatorial oceanic belt of cloudy and rainy weather, with little wind except in the form of occasional thundersqualls, lying between the two trade-wind belts. The doldrums, like the trade winds, shift in latitude with the seasons though their movement is much less than that of the sun, which causes it, averaging something like five degrees on either side of the mean position, with a lag of from one to two months behind the sun.

The modern traveler, who crosses the doldrums in a steamship, hardly realizes the discomforts endured in this region in sailing-ship days, when vessels were often becalmed there for weeks. Maury wrote of this belt in the middle of the last century: "Besides being a region of calms and baffling winds, it is noted for its rains and clouds, which make it one of the most oppressive and disagreeable places at sea. The emigrant ships from Europe to Australia have to cross it. They are often baffled in it for two or three weeks, when the children and the passengers who are of delicate health suffer most. It is a frightful graveyard on the wayside to that golden land."

An old nautical name for the doldrums, now almost forgotten, was "the swamp." In French it is sometimes called the "pot au noir."

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