

The Circumnavigation of Orinoco Flo

by: ROB WARD

Part One



I BUILT *Orinoco Flo* in the years 1992-4 with a small gang of young helpers. The circumnavigation took the form of an extended charter to help pay the bills. It was a long one - 35,500 miles. And it took us into the Southern Ocean to round all the great capes from East to West with the exception of Cape Horn. The reason was largely because - as my clients were surfers, like myself, - we wished to visit the coasts most likely to be exposed to swell. As you will see in due course this is not always consistent with comfort and safety. Nonetheless, *Flo* came through.

The Boat

Orinoco Flo is a relatively hi-tech 40' catamaran designed by Nic Bailey and built in a vacuum bagged epoxy laminate of Airex with unidirectional glassfibre and Kevlar below the waterline. We pioneered the use of Scott Bader's new Kollemox (epoxy) resin system in a large project. There are interesting points to *Flo* as there tend to be with Nic Bailey's designs. (But as there is a description of her build in MI August 1992 entitled '**Orinoco Flo - Why Hi-tech**' I shall not go into great detail here.)

However one or two original features are worth mentioning as they may contribute to our shared learning curve. I took many decisions in her build with this in mind. The most obvious feature is her rotating wingmast - (50cm x 25cm chord). This is a foam and carbonfibre structure built along the lines of Barry Noble's designs. It has worked well and I shall remark on its performance in storm conditions as well as for every day sailing. The shrouds are secured by lashings. I hasten to give credit where it is due: I saw Mike Birch with this arrangement on his Irens-designed carbon 40' racing Tri at the start of an Ostar and asked him if he thought it would translate to a cruising boat. He replied: 'Well, it's an old idea, isn't it?' Whereupon the light flickered on. A final odd feature is the half-boom mounted on the aft end of the coachroof. I'll try to give this a mention in context. For the rest, she has carbon daggerboards (2), carbon lifting rudders - transom-hung, and carbon forward beams (athwartship and fore-and-aft to stiffen). She also profits from a prodger to control the asymmetric spi. When we set sail on January 14th 1994 to cross Biscay these things seemed a bit radical. I dare say

that, in keeping with the open-minded and forward-looking ethos of those who have learned to look on cats and tris (and even proas) as real boats, some of these features may become commonplace. If our experiences hasten this happy state of affairs I shall not be embarrassed.

A final prefatory note about the way I am trying to write this. (I said something similar when I wrote about our Atlantic crossings in *Midnight Hour*, the 35' Woods design I built in 1988.) I want to write something close to the truth because, if there are people like me as I was, reading what I write I want this to be of use. It is actually very difficult to remember the detail of storm and calm and the mile by mile progress of a long voyage such as this and I don't wish the story to be tedious. But nor do I wish to succumb to the temptation to make the account heroic. I believe that the voyage is worthy of note as it is a long one in the short history of the cruising catamaran. In addition the crew was, with very few exceptions, entirely without experience. I shall be using as primary evidence the logs of the voyage, my newsletters to friends (sometimes quoted directly) and the accounts written by others on the boat. As well as referring, where possible, to synoptic weather charts obtained at a later date from weather bureaux or friends tracking the voyage. Surfers generally are very conservative in matters such as the judgement of wave size. In other matters (perhaps wind strength) they might be hopeless. I'll try and give a reader who one day might be influenced by what he (which will always mean 'he, she or it') reads here, the most accurate account I can. And with that invocation to the Muse, we begin.

A solitary dolphin leaps to port and disappears

I returned to the UK in March this year with about five pounds to celebrate my fiftieth birthday and accept my wife's unequivocal offer of divorce. I had just completed the most (perhaps only) momentous 60 months of my life. I was somewhat disoriented. I wrote what follows in Spain. It describes my reluctant decision to leave the cold comforts of Falmouth Harbour in January 1994: **Sunday, January 23rd, 1994.** It is sunrise. A solitary dolphin leaps to port and disappears. The sky toward Portugal is red above the horizon and from the nav station

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the arc of 24 windows go from tangerine on the port side through a cool mauve overhead to indigo where the still dark western sky still holds a twinkle of starlight. It will be nautical twilight in ten minutes according to the Almanac. It has been our first day and night out from Bayona in Galicia, northern Spain, and we are motoring towards Funchal, Madeira. We can't do this much longer for want of fuel so we'll try to float the spinnaker again. A big high to the northwest is giving us 3 or 4 knots of following wind. A big low over the UK is giving Scotland 120 knots of wind according to Radio 4. We might try a downwind tack to see if we can generate a little more apparent wind. I'd like to leave enough fuel to motor from the horizon to a visible destination. Flapping about for a couple of days in sight of land would probably drive us mad.

It is a week since I made the decision to leave Falmouth. A low had slipped into France and brought northerlies. I felt sure we had two safe days but I didn't know what would come after. It was the weekend and the Met Office was closed. Falmouth Harbour Commission, too, with its Fax. There was tantalising talk of a ridge of high slipping in after the low. Again - for how long? Seven weeks of very strong southwesterly gales had brought home the point about late departures.. We bought our fresh food and went alongside a floating pontoon at Mylor and the sweet lady in the office said there was no need for payment. This much was good.

On the Saturday the winds had become cyclonic variable. And gales were forecast more or less everywhere. Friends came and helped to load food and bags and assembled for a farewell drink in the evening. I remained unconvinced and the evening felt tense and joyless - a bit forced, like a prison visit. Kev and Hillary, Adam and Wendy, Spencer, Andy and Paul were positive. But Phil looked unhappy and said a couple of times: 'Its a hard decision'. He suffered with me the handicap of experience. The following morning after a sleepless night squeaking against fenders as the rising northerly crushed a tire breakwater against us and crushed *Orinoco Flo* against the pontoon, the decision still seemed a dangerous one. I called Lt. Cdr. Docherty, an Australian Met Officer at Culdrose, and he gave me a thorough verbal synopsis. We would have to weather the tail-end of a front which would bring gales to the UK on Tuesday but high pressure should build again on the Thursday. Combined with the late arrival of the northerly we could still take advantage of, the situation appeared too good to let pass. Once the decision was made, really made, things suddenly looked good.. The northerly eased a little as the depression moved over Brest and spirits rocketed when I announced we were off.

We reached out of control into a hideous surf

January 4th 1994 With 20 knots of wind up our chuff we sailed southwest under genoa alone. We averaged 8's and 9's but surfed occasionally up to eighteen knots.

By 2000 we had raised the loom of Ushant. A bit of damage to the main Autohelm 4000GP tiller pilot mount led to the attachment of the first of the 2 Autohelm 2000's for which I had bought new actuator arms. One failed at midnight, permanently, after two hours work and the other lasted less than ten minutes. I was on watch as the second failed and grabbed the tiller joining bar as we reached out of control into a hideous surf. Peering wildly at the compass whilst steering with the tiller bar behind my back I felt the surge as a breaking wave caught us on the quarter and Andy reported we hit 21.5 knots - sideways for the most part. As I write this the GP 4000 is functioning well. We ran out of these winds which were drawn into the low centred over Brest as it moved away into France and by 0600 on Sunday were motoring with whales sporadically blowing around us. We approached Finisterre under motor and were treated to a real Alan Watts textbook frontal array of cirrus, lowering through cumulus to stratus, as the trailing edge of the forecast front stretched away from southwest of us to its origins at the heart of the ocre in the north. Oddly, no wind resulted and we motored through the night. I anticipated a northwesterly change at some point and headed for a point west of Finisterre as Cabo Villano flashed and occasionally disappeared into a mist.

The following morning wind suddenly arrived from the northeast and we gratefully hoisted everything (fully-battened main and battened self-tacking solent jib.) For many moments things seemed to be going our way as we broad-reached fast in flat water. It's true that I muttered to Phil (who is older than me and a more experienced hands-on sailor) that I thought a reef might be worth thinking about and you know the old one about *thinking* about reefing: no sooner thought-about than too bloody late. An epic struggle to get the main down ensued with battens wrapped round shrouds and instant chafe appearing. The wind rose in short order to 35 knots and our destination Bayona went from expected run to reach. The Dolphin battened Spectra jib with a single reef in formed such a clean blade that we sailed across the force 8 steering with the tiller bar. The Autohelm lacked the general savvy for cracking across the soon hard-breaking seas. Phil starred at this. I took the helm for an hour but he steered for at least five and claimed to be enjoying it. We averaged ten knots to arrive off the Isla Cies shortly after dark.

There are a number of elements to this attempt at a circumnavigation: an interesting bunch of people most of whom have never sailed; a quite radical catamaran designed by Nic Bailey and built by Rob Ward and the Venture West team of surfers in Cornwall and the odd concept of surfers building a boat to find waves around the world. At different points we'll comment on each of the elements. At this point *Orinoco Flo* takes a bow. I had never attempted to reach across breaking seas before but Phil seemed happy with it and that jib was looking so clean, spilling wind as we rounded up a little, driving on when the angle was right. But you got the feeling that the lee bow might bury as a sea

broke on the quarter and she began a surf. This was mistaken. With a little windward daggerboard down 75cm to inhibit leeway she surfed off on the steep ones as the gusts came and reached across the others easily with a light and often airborne leeward bow. The girls made tea below as if they sailed across a breaking sea in a gale most days. Hillary, from Liverpool, nicknamed the feared Bay, the Bay of Biscuit as - for the first and only part of the voyage the girls did 'girlie' stuff like making tea and *biscuits*. From Bayona everyone would share cooking and watch duties. I was impressed with the hull shapes and a solid feeling as a rude one punched us.

The entry to Bayona is described in the RCC pilot as 'easy'. We positioned ourselves perfectly with sights off the islands in daylight and sights off the lights confirmed by GPS after dark. But if we had expected to pick up the leading lights after honing in on Cabo Silleira with its one-mile reef urging us onto it as we approached at ten knots, we were rudely awakened. Either the shore lights masked them or they were extinguished and I had to make our approach without their benefit. Many tense moments went by with every good eye glued to binoculars or staring into the night for a sign. I was at the point of abandoning our approach when we caught sight of a cardinal buoy off the reef outside Las Serralleiras. We passed it one hundred metres to port.

What surfers would call a real TOAD

The following morning that sense of relief and joy we had experienced on making our first landfall as a team was tempered by the sight of a huge Bombora breaking at 25' just inside the buoy. 'Bombora' is an evocative Aboriginal word for the giant wave that breaks on an offshore reef. The five surfers aboard had never in many combined years of surfing seen a wave of such awesome ferocity. The Northeast wind fanned the waves' cold blue faces as they could be seen through binoculars rearing over telegraph-pole high and pitching car-thick lips fifteen or twenty feet out onto shallow water over the rocks between Bayona's 'easy entrance' and the southernmost of the Isla Cies Islands and Cabo Silleira. No boat or body would have survived a hundred metre error here. What surfers would call a real TOAD... **'Take Off And Die!'**

Our January departure could have been the cause of many regrets. The late finishing of the wingmast and the long run of bad weather following its completion was the cause. I had exhorted the less strong members of the crew to consider a flight to the Canaries to meet us. All had refused. My many years spent looking at weather maps for fishing, surfing and more recently, sailing contributed to a fortunate departure. But this is one of several courses of action taken during our circumnavigation that I would strongly recommend anybody to avoid. I wouldn't like to repeat it.

To be continued