

The Circumnavigation of Orinoco Flo

Round the World Surf Charter

by: ROB WARD

PART ONE FINISHED happily in Bayona on January 17th. The 'Bay of Biscuit' (Hils) had done its worst and the ship of fools had sailed into northern Spain on the back of a northeasterly gale with all nine relieved and happy - seven thinking that such an outcome in mid-January was only to be expected if you'd been living clean. Our adventures as we circumnavigated were never 'normal'. How can eight disparate human beings, seven of whom had never seen a sailing boat before, have normal adventures? My concerns were always and foremost for the boat and bodies. The bodies' concerns, liberated from the boat, were other.

I had encouraged the idea of a collective newsletter. Perhaps fortunately it didn't come off. I have about 200,000 words of newsletters of my own on various floppy disks up and down this caravan and back on Flo in the Canaries, but the crew wrote their own account of things and I rejoice in the differences from my account. Here is Paul on Bayona (after the discovery of the huge Bombora yards from our track on entering the previous night.) It helps if you read the account with a gentle Welsh accent. Paul was about 6' 4" and had hair down to his elbows. He looked after water testing for us. We were all keen members of the Surfers against Sewage organisation whose name speaks for itself. Paul was the most committed to doing the work. Andy, also Welsh but of scrum-half proportions, was a stalwart of the build. He actually enjoyed fairing; Paul:-

The following morning revealed our dramatic escape from the 30' Bombora we'd edged past by the Grace of God. For sure, we'd have died if we'd been 100 metres adrift there. Andy and I set foot ashore and headed out along the coast admiring the surging waves. As if drawn like bears to a honeypot we found ourselves climbing a headland towards an intriguing rock form on its summit. To our surprise we found ourselves at the foot of a giant, 80' high statue of the Virgin Mary. Stella Maris, Star of the Sea...the protector of fishermen all over the seafaring Catholic world.

Stumbling around her somewhat amazed we discovered a curious door which led into a passage that was totally dark. By touch we discovered a cobwebby spiral staircase that led upwards and further upwards

Part Two

until it seemed the outside world existed no longer.

*A bit excited like kids on truant, we braved the total darkness until a shaft of light announced our discovery of an exit. We pushed through the door, to be confronted by a panoramic view of the Bay of Bayona with a backdrop of mountains. The sight was so awe-inspiring that Andy breathlessly exclaimed 'Jesus-F***** Christ.' I replied, 'Keep if low man, we're in the Virgin Mary!'*

She seemed to be the guardian of the surrounding waters, a shepherdess attending to her flock of sea farers, carefully guiding them into the safety of the Bay. Arriving at the base of the monumental icon it became clear to us that we had stood not merely upon the outstretched hand of the Virgin but within a craft, cradled up on her hand. Neither of us was born a real Christian let alone re-born. But it was a moment we both treasured.

The passage from Northern Spain to Madeira was pleasantly uneventful - experiments with the spinnaker. The beginnings of tans. Again, all perfectly normal for a crew whose 'normality' was what happened last. Four years earlier whilst running a surf charter from *Midnight Hour*, the Woods' design cat I built in '88, yachts of all descriptions staggered into Arrecife after savage batterings along the stretch of water south of Madeira or coming from the Med south. We were fortunate. Less fortunate on arriving from Porto Santo to Funchal. We had left Porto Santo three hours after a 46' new French production cat and - loaded to the brim with bodies and gear had overhauled them to the point we could have sailed past them into the harbour. Not wishing to rub it in I'd let them go first. (The lesson: always rub it in.)

Inside the harbour a uniformed body gesticulated and howled, waved and raved. Crowded harbour - no room for cats. Naturally, the skipper of the French cat

(which was being delivered to the Caribbean) took the weeping and gnashing of teeth in his stride and immediately rafted up brazenly. The functionary's frustration had but one possible focus. Trapped in a tennis-court of calm water in the inner sanctum of the harbour with the foam from the rabid official landing on deck we quietly - and, I hope with a smile of appalling colonial British sang-froid - spun on our transoms and anchored outside in a slick of raw sewage.

I had promised the crew fine walks on Pico Ruivo and the possibility of untouched surf on the north and west coasts. All they got was a brace of improperly (uncleared) acquired hangovers and a restless night.

Our passage south boded well as we screamed off with spi and main set but soon the wind died and we were drifting and finally motoring toward Lanza. On a previous voyage I had pulled in to the Ilheus Selvagem. This time we made directly for Graciosa, north of Lanzarote - a spectacularly situated small island composed of a small group of volcanoes overshadowed by the 2000' cliffs on the North of Lanza. Anchored at Playa Francesa on the southwest corner with a small sand beach a short swim from the boat, parties went ashore to climb the volcanoes, surf the west coast which is amongst the most powerful waves in the world or just laze.

I kept in mind the unfortunate yacht that was caught by a southwesterly change and blown ashore and wrecked during a previous visit. When anchored with the Trade wind blowing from the land it sometimes seems as if things may never change. I should add that the holding is not that good either. Sand over lava. I usually put an anchor onto the reef and drop a tine down a hole. Now that the small harbour on Graciosa has a western arm it offers shelter if the wind comes up inhospitably. The difficulty for me is keeping a balance between a relaxed enjoyment and a paranoid fear of losing the boat. I have not lost this fear at anchor after some 100,000 miles of sailing now including the circumnavigation. On *Midnight* one day inside the lagoon on Lobos, the small island off Fuerteventura (with the perfect kilometre-long wave on its west side!) I helped a French cat negotiate the tricky entrance. I'd swum out and shown him the way in. As soon as we were inside he lobbed the pick out and retired me to the saloon for a thank-you glass of wine. I thought - 'How relaxed - how

de'contracte'! Oh that I could enjoy my sailing like this... whereupon the grating of one hull on the reef reminded me that fretting about like a mother hen for ten minutes making sure the anchor is well stuck in and you're not going to swing onto anything nasty sometimes pays. I really don't say this with any smugness. I do wish I were less nervous. But there you go.

My friend later dropped his boat on the reef on the way out and bent both his rudder posts back at such an angle they locked. Fortunately we were following him out and were able to tow him (just the one 9.9 hp Yamaha) to Coralejo. Looking back I thought him a competent and brave sailor with his wife and small child aboard a boat he had built himself. There but for the Grace of God. (The lagoon entrance is a mere depression in a line of unbroken flat reef with large boulders which closes the pretty anchorage. My friend had made the understandable mistake of taking the breaking waves from a set of swells wrapping right round the island directly on his bows which had drawn him onto the shallow edge of the channel. The correct procedure is - against one's instincts - to take the waves obliquely on the bows and thus stay in the deeper water.)

There is a fiction that has become an ethos in the sailing magazines that sailors are endlessly obsessed with correct anchoring procedures, flag etiquette and types of electronic instrumentation. There is, clearly, a swathe of readership new to the game and hungry for info. How to, when to, what to... My experience is that sailors are endlessly various. Pompous bores in blazers like the one who enquired in indignant tones when I asked a chandler for sight reduction forms whether I was not going to '...do it properly?' are not all of sailing. I have mates who are more likely to be seen tinkering with an old Triumph in a beat-up leather jacket than debating the merits of Malmsey. They're up there in their home-made sheds welding an Alan Pope design while they garden their way to freedom. Martin and Romer are in the Med with their 4 million ton Colin Archer slowly parting the waters on what may or may not be a circumnavigation. So, on Lanza, my non-sailing would-be circumnavigators got on with the real business at hand—surfing, walking and finally, during the great ritual and fiesta of the *Entierrada de la sardina*, the Burial of the Sardine they ritually solemnly and with the awesome seriousness of the Pope laid to waste the norms of decent behaviour and staggered back aboard at sunrise having kissed most of the islands County Councillors and all (three) of the islands virgins and finally the great sardine itself which was - for the purists - set fire to, not buried. The smell aboard was such as to make those with tight corsets pass clean away but the result of showing respect to the Gods of Sea and Earth and Wind (let's not forget Wind) was a good passage across the Pond.

Time was when you could claim some respect for crossing the Atlantic - notwithstanding the fools who crossed it in ship's boilers, on windsurfers and (have they yet?) skateboards. Now the single handed giants of multihull sailing have set standards which dwarf most recreational sailors. The 24 hour a day handling of a big multihull is so spectacular achievement that one can only expect it of a single-handed French woman. The rest of us get on with our mundane crossings as modestly as we dare. Even so, it was a first for everyone aboard except the writer and there were some nerves displayed just before we took off. A friend, David Nicklin, who had taken a share in the boat was aboard and he brought with him something I'd recommend my friends to keep off a boat—a 'schedule'. This is an American invention (he works for an oil company in

Atlantic had set a Low pressure system in place of the Azores High which is pivotal to the existence of a Trade Wind. Irritatingly enough, the day we were to leave, the Azores High re-established itself with a firm hand and we barrelled off 200 miles the first day in such a strong Northwesterly to start that we ran down the coast of Africa in large and confused seas brought up by the interference of the large northwesterly swell, as it passed between the Canary Islands. Pyramidal lumps occasionally threw up breaking seas big enough to wash clear over the coachroof, even coming up from the quarter, Paul had to hang on tight and even change his gear after one playful polar bear of a wave tried to paw him into the Atlantic.

Each of the new crew has his or her own Atlantic to tell. For me two memorable moments are these. The first was a truly

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Dallas - where else?) Americans are still suspicious of activities unconnected with work in a corporate environment and have concocted various stratagems for diminishing enjoyment in maverick enterprises like sailing for fun. One is the 'schedule'. There is debate about the correct pronunciation of the word. But its purpose is to ensure the arrival 'on time' for purposes not connected with sailing. We had some light-hearted discussion about the differences between sailing craft and Boeing aircraft (in fact there was talk about 'Airmiles' being at stake for a return flight and the need to be 'on time' to profit from the free 'airmiles' - does anyone know what this means, incidentally?) But the main point that I attempted (unsuccessfully) to stress was the need for wind. Now, even the great Boeing has a battle to be 'on time' when an opposing jetstream is set in its path by the unruly gods. But a sailing craft, not being equipped with four engines the size of a caravan, goes nowhere without the blessing of Aeolius. This was the subject of our intercourse.

At the time of David's arrival the

remarkable surf. There was a very slight Northeast wind about 1000 miles west of the Cape Verdes and the watchkeeper called everyone up to watch dolphins off the bows. We had nine people on deck and three of us were actually on the carbon front beam. There was a glassy swell rising behind us and passing underneath. The spinnaker was up but not the main. Lazy sailing but not too tricky for new watchkeepers to control. We picked up on a swell and the spinnaker went totally limp and then backwinded gently as water began spraying off the bows and sheeting aft. We were locked on the swell with absolutely no help from the wind. I expected it to pass us by momentarily yet on we went. Whoops went up from those of us on the forward beam as the spray curtained past us making rainbows and those on the coachroof were soon caught up in the excitement. The dolphins performed aerials...this was what bowsurfing was all about! It went on, and on and phew! finally came to a halt after about 400 metres. The day was made. It was brought about by the perfect swell direction and the forward trim

caused by the bodies out on deck.

If there is one thing that strikes fear into the heart of the sailor it is - or should be - the appearance of a huge VLCC or VLBC on his horizon. A friend was run down in the English channel only last month. We were four days out of Antigua and quite far south when a small shadow that was a city block came within view and first estimates suggested a collision course. Unusually he opened radio contact and indicated that he had us and would not run us down and were we OK? Delighted by this contact and the consideration we said that, sure we were OK - we crossed the Atlantic all the time and we had enough chickpeas to cross the Pacific too. Then, on a prompting from an unruly sailor I added, 'Actually, we're short of a cold beer.'

Hassan, for such was his name, regretted that there was little he could do as he - alone - was on the bridge of Leviathan. No worries, I added, we were only joking.

We closed further, it really was going to be close. We were under spinnaker again. The radio (conventionally described as 'Crackling into life') came up loud and clear.

Orinoco Flo, this is Cabo Frio, Cabo Frio
Come in Hassan

Orinoco, does beer float? (Thus, truly, we were questioned)

Oh yes, Cabo Frio, beer floats most buoyantly, (we protested)

Then please pass under my stern and we shall lob some off

We shall so pass Cabo Frio.

Therefore we sailed directly at Leviathan in contravention of every practice urged by every pundit. We peeled our spinnaker as we passed the midpoint of his massive bulk and watched two tiny, toy figures some 80' in the air above us loft a package into the water. The package was a cheap sports bag on a wooden pallet. I was

over the side and on it in a mere few strokes. The motors were already started and I was, or rather, the beer was, on board in trice. The skipper - a full order of importance down the scale - was left to haul himself aboard by the rope tossed astern, 'Somewhat carelessly', I thought at the time.

In the bag were two cold bottles of wine and 24 dewey beers. The crew was delighted and we called up *Cabo Frio* (appropriately named) and sang Happy Birthday to Hassan who had told us that he had wanted someone to have a drink with. In his home, Turkey, he ran a charter boat and 'did this' (drive city blocks around the hapless seas) for money. Next time you cringe as a huge, black mass of steel bears down on you like something out of Terminator try imagining that Hassan is up there with a cold beer for you. Next time...the Caribbean and Central America. Later

•*To be continued*