

THE ATLANTIC FROM A TO Z

Rachel Westwood

(Rachel made the 2830 mile passage from Tenerife to Antigua with her parents, Steve and Sheryl, aboard their Aphrodite 42 Emma Louise. By March 2017 Steve and Sheryl had reached Tahiti and were about to continue west to the Cook Islands. They hoped to be in New Zealand by the end of the year.)

Arriving in Tenerife on Saturday 24th November 2012 I was greeted by my disgustingly brown and healthy-looking parents who, to add insult to injury, had both lost weight since I last saw them in September. Apparently the cruising life was treating them well, and their separation from their dearly beloved children (the youngest of whom is a very tender 24 and liable to suffer issues in later life concerning abandonment) were clearly not causing them the heartache and trauma that any self-respecting offspring would expect. Gripes aside, it was pretty good to see them, especially given that I'd left a miserable, grey London that was getting steadily colder and wetter by the day. That having been said, there isn't much that's wetter than the Atlantic Ocean ... but it's all relative, at least the water wasn't falling from the sky and I didn't have to contend with miserable, bedraggled commuters on the tube. Rather than a blow by blow account (too much to remember and not sure how interesting 'saw lots of sea, had corned beef hash for tea, Dad a bit annoying' would be) I give you instead the Westwoods' A-Z of sailing the Atlantic. Read the bits you want, don't bother with the rest.

Atlantic Ocean: Westwoods 1 – Atlantic Ocean 0! Taking a route approximately halfway between the middle and southern, we headed southwest from the Canaries for five days, and then routed west at about 21°N for the rest of the trip. Twenty days, 2800 miles sailed and an average speed of just over 6 knots – not bad going and what made the skipper especially happy was that a 54ft Oyster took 22. He had to restrain himself from rubbing his hands together with glee.

Briefing: The safety briefing was pretty straightforward – 'don't fall in and if you do, yell like hell' and 'avoid getting a shark up your arse', were the wise words of Dad and Mum respectively, and filled me with confidence that this was going to be smooth sailing. In the skipper's defence he also showed me how to set off the EPIRB and probably would have briefed me further if he thought either (a) I'd have paid enough attention for it to be of any use, or (b) there was any chance I could have been helpful had anything happened to him. As it was, we'd have been helpless. And he knew it.

Culinary Matters: The crossing was predicted to last 2½ to 3 weeks, so of course they needed to stock up accordingly. Instead they had catered for the nuclear holocaust and then some. It opened a whole new (unwelcome) world of the variety of foodstuffs that can be tinned or pickled. Ingeniously, and in order to keep track of everything, Mum had stuck a yellow sticky note on the inside of every cupboard door with a list of the culinary treats that you could find within – 'mystery meat' being a favourite, categorised by either white or red variety. As you diminished the tin supply you were obliged to cross it off from the list. Failure to do so could result in quarrelling (see separate entry).



Culinary Matters: Stocked for sea

Given the rolling (see separate entry) motion of the crossing the skipper took all cheffing duties on himself. This impressively included fresh bread, pizza from scratch and even cakes, to the delight of the crew. The skipper

maintained that good food was crucial for keeping up morale and a good way to organise the day. The crew were not going to argue with that.

Dolphins: Seen on one occasion at sunset, when they swam alongside for twenty minutes keeping us entertained. True show-offs, when we stopped paying full attention (drinks had arrived) they started leaping clear of the water in the style of an attention-seeking child.

English Harbour: Our first port of call, the historic Nelson's Dockyard in English Harbour, Antigua. If you want to know more, Wikipedia will oblige. This isn't a history lesson.



*English Harbour:
Emma Louise
in same*



***Flying Fish:**
The author's father
with the catch of the day*

Flying fish: As well as being a spectacle to watch, they make good eating! The only positive to come out of 'disaster Friday' (see Mishaps) was that the out-of-action sail, now tied to the foredeck, proved an effective net for trapping flying fish as they whizzed over the boat (typically at night). The skipper tried to claim that this was a successful fishing attempt. The crew weren't having it. He did, however, fry them up with a bit of ginger and served them on fresh bread and butter. Delicious.

Green Flash: Reported to occur on a clear evening with the sun setting into the sea, the green flash was keenly awaited as we supped sundowners (see separate entry) but always managed to elude us. Most of the crew are now convinced that it may actually be just a myth, but the skipper remains convinced (and reports to have seen them on numerous occasions since then).

H₂O: We were surrounded by the salty variety and had to ration the fresh as we could only carry 500 litres. Which meant three showers in just under three weeks (eugh) and hair that defied gravity given its salt content. Unfortunately, despite my whining, the skipper was proved justified when, on the last morning while approaching English Harbour (see separate entry), we ran out. Had the worst happened we could have drunk the water from the multitude of tinned vegetables – I'm sure pea juice would have been both hydrating and tasty. Or not.

I Spy: The skipper was unsure how much diesel we had, so films were a no go. After two weeks of continuous reading there are few things that will keep you amused, and Mum and I decided to try 'I spy'. 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with ... S'. 'Sky' – 'No' – 'Sea' – 'No' – 'Sun' – 'Yes'. We felt we had the game sorted until

Dad asked whether he could play. 'I'm going to try something different – this could be metaphysical'. We didn't know what metaphysical was ... got bored ... the game ended and was never played again.

Jumpers: were not required (ha, ha). Bar a couple of nights at the beginning, days were spent in shorts and T-shirts. Perfect apart from the tan lines that make you look like you've been dipped in brown paint up to your thighs.

Kindles: The saviour of the first mate and the deck hand, who managed to avoid hours of threatened boredom. The skipper kept himself amused by constantly finding things to do on the boat or playing with his drum kit (all drinks cans were bashed flat to save space). Likened to a puppy, he found endless enthusiasm for a thousand jobs and a constant need to be moving around. And like a puppy a pat on the head often led to a wag of the tail.

Learning: Ever the educator, the skipper was keen to show me the ropes (excuse the pun). Overhand, round turn and two half-hitches, reef, figure-of-eight and bowline (kind of) are now all part of my knot-tying repertoire. Not sure how handy being able to tie a reef knot behind my back will be in my London office job, but should I ever join the Scouts I'll be golden. Star constellations and nautical terms (see Official language) were also favourite topics.

Mishaps: Despite the trade winds behaving as expected there were a few incidents that we could have done without. 'Disaster Friday' was six days in. The skipper was



trying to get the (brand new!) jib down and hadn't noticed that it had got jammed, and when it came free it flew backwards, tangling itself in the wind generator on the mizzen mast. The sail ripped so as not to be usable and we missed the best sunset of the trip. As if we hadn't had enough, about an hour later (after a subdued dinner) the wind generator started making a lot of noise. By then it was dark, so the skipper got a torch to investigate. It turned out that in the sail/generator fight, and despite the rip, the wind generator had come off worst and was now hanging from a single bracket and threatening to fall at any moment. And so, safety lines attached, the skipper scaled the mast, in the dark and amid rolling seas, to secure the buggie (both wind generator brand name and apt for the occasion). Pretty darn impressive for an old bloke – put me in mind of an ageing action man.



Mishaps: *The broken wind generator*

Our other notable mishap occurred in the 24 hours in which we also made the most progress, averaging over 7.5 knots. But the wind proved too much for the sail configuration and the pole holding out the genoa during the night watch. 'Less haste more speed' was the lesson of the day.

Night shifts: All watches were split into three-hour shifts, starting at midnight. During the day it was informal, but at night you were on your own. The skipper woke me, I woke the first mate, etc – which meant I hated skipper, the first mate hated me, etc. Apart from being woken up, night shifts were a great opportunity to star gaze. The Milky Way was visible if the sky was clear, and a meteorite shower produced so many shooting stars we lost count. It also provided a sense of perfect solitude and the opportunity to reflect and be truly introspective if the mood took you. Fortunately for you, it didn't.

Official language: When on a boat (yacht) speak like you're on a boat. No more left/right, it's all about port/starboard. No more upstairs/downstairs, it's above and below deck to you, missy. No more 'Dad', it's 'Mister skipper, sir.' Okay, so the last one not even Dad tried to implement. He'd have faced either mockery or mutiny from his crew, neither being desirable, best to understand the limits of your authority. Conveniently forgetting the nautical terms: 'can you grab my sunglasses, they're downstairs in the lounge to the right in the desk' is an entertaining version of Poke the Bear (see next entry).



Sundowners

Poke the Bear: A great game to pass the time in a confined space. Pick a topic you know will wind one of your crewmates up and start to 'poke'. The rules are very simple, if they rise to it you win. Of course they don't know that you're playing, and the threat of violence in response to your goading is always a possibility (see next entry).



*The author's parents,
Sheryl and Steve*



Zzzzz: The author 'on watch' (see overleaf)

Quarrelling: Surprisingly little, given the confined space and proximity of a small family group. Dad only threatened to stab me (he was careful to emphasise with a knife) once. Given the circumstances I think that's pretty good going, and that he didn't carry out his threat, even better.

Rolling: The biggest cause for complaint for transatlantic crews is the motion of the ocean (not a euphemism). The almost continual rolling makes it difficult to move, cook, eat and sleep, as well as being responsible for a myriad of bruises and the grumpiness of the crew.

Sundowners: An alcoholic beverage to be consumed as the sun goes down. Beer and wine both get a mention, but the ever trusty G&T as usual comes up trumps. Being ever vigilant and not being advocates of drunk driving quantities were kept modest, but it's a ritual that I'm going to bring home with me, albeit one that has to be restricted to the summer months unless I'm going to keep a hip flask under my desk at work.

Tenerife: Our port of origin and last view of civilisation – not to mention the last opportunity I had for rethinking three weeks at sea with only the parentals for company. As it faded into the horizon I had to question my sanity. At least I knew I wasn't going to starve.

UHT Milk: My parents tried to poison me with it.

Vomming: Official term for being sick, vomiting, chucking your guts up, etc. Thankfully incidents were low (a dodgy olive put Mum off for the rest of the trip) and kept to the first couple of days. After that, and once sea legs were acquired, business went on as normal.



Celebrating our arrival in Antigua

Whales: 'thar she blows' was called just once during the trip, exactly halfway across, when a pilot whale and her calf joined us for over three hours, providing unofficial encouragement. After doing the official recce Mum stayed a couple of hundred feet away, but baby stayed close to the boat, popping up every now and again for a quick hello.

X marks the spot: We didn't find any treasure but there's bound to be some. It's a pretty big ocean.

Yacht: The old girl did us proud. She kept us warm, dry and safe for the duration with only the occasional protest if we pushed her too hard. She's named after two pretty impressive women though, so she did have something to live up to.*

Zzzzz: Napping is key to any successful trip when you're running shifts, and I was the undisputed queen. Golden blanket striven for and achieved!

* Editor's note: one of the women in question is the author, Rachel Emma, and the other her sister, Heather Louise.



I know who you are, but you'll have to wipe your feet.

Captain Richard Brown of the schooner *America* to Prince Albert of England, 1851