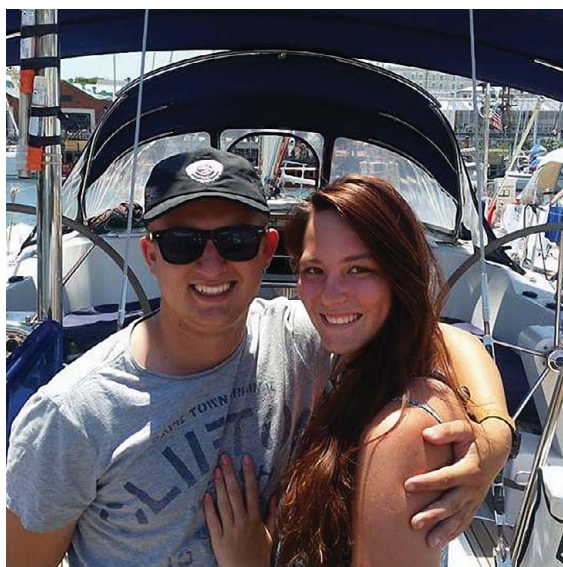


## A LIFE-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY

### Michael Maggs and Jamie Crickmore-Thompson

(As Jamie and Michael both mention, the first leg of their voyage was supported by the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme – see [www.oceancruisingclub.org/Youth-Sponsorship](http://www.oceancruisingclub.org/Youth-Sponsorship).)

**Jamie:** My family's mantra is 'take every opportunity that comes your way, no matter what else is happening', so that is exactly what Michael and I did in October 2016 when we suddenly got the chance to go ocean sailing with the support of the OCC Youth Sponsorship programme. Having spent only a few weekends fooling around on Lasers on the South African dams previously, we took a three-day RYA Competent Crew course in Langebaan, then embraced the adventure with open arms. Just two months later, after postponing our university studies, we arrived on our host boat – the



**Michael and Jamie  
aboard BlueFlyer in Cape Town**

space we would call our home for the next six months – and met our skipper, Hugh Pilsworth, for the first time. It was only two weeks before we were due to leave for St Helena, so it was a leap of faith for both our inexperienced selves and our experienced skipper!

BlueFlyer is a 49ft Jeanneau Sun Odyssey, in which Irish/Australian owner Hugh Pilsworth was completing a circumnavigation started some eight years previously in Ireland but interrupted by a long stay in Australia. She was beautiful – and a lot larger and more complex than our training boat in Langebaan! However, Hugh is also an accredited sailing instructor so we knew we were in good hands.

started with basic theory, and incorporated the practical side on an L34 in Langebaan lagoon (a small town northwest of Cape Town). For me, the best part of the course was when we broke free from the protected lagoon and headed out to the local seal island a few miles from the coast. I got to helm the boat in windy waters, which made me feel like a true sailor! Despite the fact that I only had four days' experience, I was very confident when I finally stepped aboard BlueFlyer. Later events showed it might have been good to have had more experience before attempting a 12-day passage from Cape Town to St Helena! But for now I was ready to start our big adventure.

**Michael:** The course in Langebaan was the first time we had actually experienced offshore sailing. The course

Our departure was delayed due to weather constraints, so we landed up having an extended family farewell in Cape Town over Christmas and New Year. But finally it was time to move aboard *BlueFlyer* and settle in. First job was to stow the gear we had brought. We thought we had packed small – but small when living on land is different to small when stowing stuff on a boat. We then had our first experience of provisioning a boat for a possible two-week sail – we knew there would be some restocking available in St Helena, but had to assume this would be limited as the supply boat that usually called monthly was currently in dry dock in Cape Town, and the airport built at huge cost by the British was unusable. *BlueFlyer* had been in the V&A Waterfront Marina in Cape Town for some time, so Hugh and his existing crew had eaten through most of the provisions, but restocking was simple, if a learning curve. Fortunately both Jamie and I come from scouting and camping backgrounds, so working out a provisioning list was not too difficult.

The day of departure could not come soon enough, but finally, very early one morning, we slipped the lines and watched the beautiful city of Cape Town slowly fade away in the distance as we pointed our bow towards Saint Helena, about 2000 miles away. It looked a very tiny dot on the chart.

***Michael and Jamie's St Helena montage***



**With  
Jonathan  
tortoise,  
St Helena's  
oldest  
resident**



For the first four days both Jamie and I were very sea sick. Throwing up over the side, I questioned what I was doing on this boat when I could be registering to go to university with the rest of my friends, enjoying life on the land. Fortunately the weather was fairly good, and Hugh and the other crew member (another Michael) were able to keep things going until we recovered. The tablets I was taking did nothing to stop the motion sickness, but we did eventually 'get our sea-legs' as on the fourth day I started what was going to be my job for the next six months. Cooking!

I quickly learnt that cooking while sailing is nothing like cooking on land – it's quite tricky to keep your boiling pasta in the pot while moving up and down like a yo-yo. You also have very limited ingredients and you have to make the best of what you have on board – no trotting out to the corner café for some missing ingredient. Surprisingly, I managed not to poison anyone, and the cooking skills I acquired while sailing will be useful for the rest of my life.

Every day we learnt something new about sailing – we quickly realised how little we actually knew, even after the Competent Crew course. Hugh instructed us how and when to adjust the sails to get maximum performance from *BlueFlyer*, and we thoroughly enjoyed seeing her speed through the water increase as we trimmed correctly. After a few days sailing downwind with a poled-out jib we reached St Helena – it looked like a huge rock in the middle of the ocean. That's not far from the truth, but when you've seen nothing but ocean for twelve days in a row, watching that rock rising up out of the sea was a true blessing.

We were welcomed in by majestic dolphins playing at the bow – what a truly wonderful sight! We found a mooring, picked it up, and had our first encounter with customs officials. They were helpful, polite and laughed at the huge bag of night-time snacks we had packed for night watches! After clearing in, we climbed aboard a water-taxi and made our first landing, once again an unexpected experience. The procedure for landing on St Helena is not for the faint-hearted. You have to grab a rope hanging off the side of the jetty and swing to shore, all the while moving in co-ordination with the boat and waves. No easy pontoon landing here.

We were made welcome by the lovely people of St Helena (population only 4000) and organised a half-day tour of the island for the next day – the reason it was a half-day is because it only takes half a day to travel the whole island! But first we had to stretch our legs after being cramped in the boat for 12 days, so Jamie and I took a



'brisk' walk up Jacob's Ladder. Jacob's Ladder is 924 feet long, has a total of 699 steps with an average rise of 11 inches per step, and rises to 602 feet above sea level. It was wonderful to run up as much as we could – we were told we were the first to do this within minutes of making landfall. Then it was time for a milkshake – unbelievable bliss to slurp cold sweet milk and ice-cream again!

The tour the next day included a visit to the governor's house, a friendly visit to Jonathan the tortoise (who is 185 years old), Napoleon's house and his grave. We ended up at the infamous airport, built at a cost of some £280 million and unusable because the wind-shear makes it too dangerous for planes to land – a white elephant for sure. Eventually we all ended up in Anne's Place, the only location in Jamestown, the capital, where you can get wifi. Phoned home – wonderful to connect with family again: we had missed that. The next day was one of the best of my life, because we got to swim with whale sharks. Whale sharks are huge – and very scary when they swim towards you – but their throat is only the size of a golf ball, so no danger there! It was an incredible experience, and I would recommend a trip to St Helena just to swim with whale sharks.

Only too soon it was time to sail, and I found to my surprise that I was excited to get moving again. Sailing is more than raising the main and trimming the sails. It's linked to many aspects, such as navigating a passage, working out a course, braving the storms (as well as sitting through the boring bits when nothing's happening), avoiding reefs and shipping, keeping everything shipshape, and keeping the boat clean. But over the following months what made my trip so memorable was meeting people and sharing stories. From St Helena onwards we sailed in loose company with many of the World ARC boats we had previously met in Cape Town, as well as several other OCC boats, meeting up at opportune places along the way.

The trip was a life-changing experience for me, as I gained lifelong skills and made new friends. It gave me an added maturity, taught me responsibility and accountability, and helped me communicate better. It enhanced all those skills that I had before the trip, developed and encouraged by family and my wholehearted involvement

#### *A green turtle in the Tobago Cays*



in the Scouts (I am a Springbok Scout, the highest South African Scouting accolade), and has given me a broader understanding of and outlook on the world.

Michael has talked about the beginning and later describes the end of the passage – now Jamie fills in some of the gaps.

**Jamie:** On this unexpected adventure we got to meet many amazing people, both young and older – although Michael and I were always the youngest in any group – people with whom we will be lifelong friends. We



*Visiting St Pierre, Martinique*

have been to places most people only dream about. We have millions of memories and enough stories to last a lifetime. It is impossible to share all that we saw and experienced in this six-month, 10,000 mile passage – I could fill the whole magazine more than once! – so instead I will describe my top three...

First on the list, as I am sure they are for many people, are the Tobago Cays. Even before we arrived, I was excited to see sea turtles and swim with them - it was all we talked about! On the day we arrived we anchored in about 10m and could still see the bottom, which blew my mind. The waters around South Africa are pretty murky even on a good day! The small islands all around us were the most picturesque I had ever seen, and with the whitest sand, the bluest water and the swaying palm trees, I felt I had been transported into another world. Without eating lunch (and unfortunately forgetting sun cream) we headed off to meet our friends on *Wishanger II* (OCC). We all had a great time swinging off the boat and into the warm water on a big red buoy attached to the main halyard. After a few flops and some red marks we tried to swim back to the boat, but the current was ridiculous and we had to swim for almost

*Making friends with a parakeet in Guadeloupe*







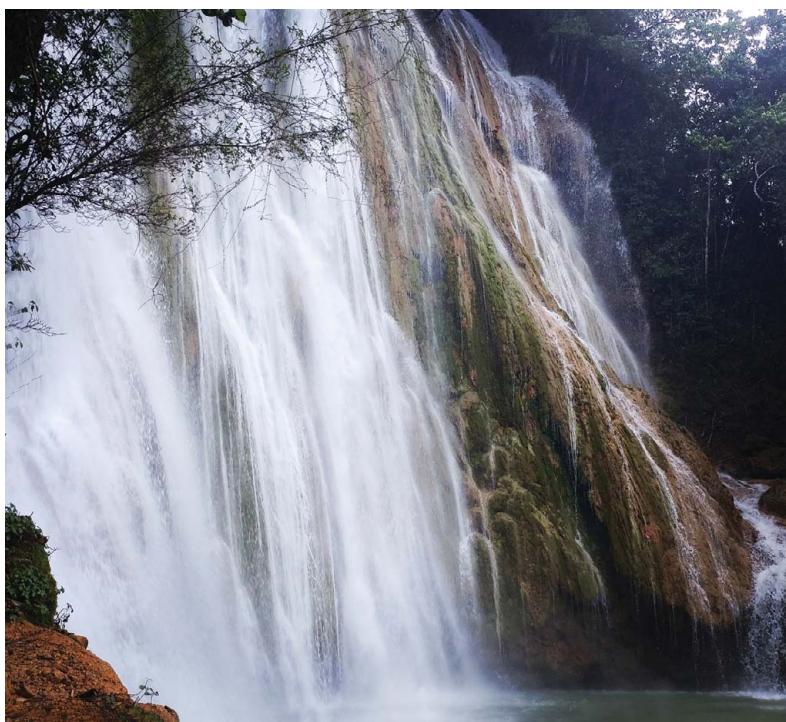
*Sunset in Guadeloupe*

25 minutes before getting back aboard. After a quick lunch and a dinghy ride to the shore we went swimming with the turtles. They were so close you could touch them, the most majestic and graceful animals I think I have ever seen. Together with the other fish and the rays it was just awe-inspiring. I think I was the happiest and most at peace I have ever been. It was magical.

While the Tobago Cays were definitely the most beautiful and breath-taking place we visited, for me by far the most interesting was Cuba. We reached Santiago de Cuba late in the afternoon, the first place where we had to have medical check-ups. In reality it was not much of a check-up – it just consisted of a doctor taking our temperatures and asking if we felt sick! – but it was the first time it had happened so was a bit strange.

During our one-week stay we made friends with a Cuban family who lived down the road from the marina. They adopted us, and we became part of their extended family. We spent almost every night there for a home-cooked dinner and did a few tours around Santiago de Cuba with them. These were not the usual ‘touristo-tours’ but were organised by our ‘new

family’. Perhaps the most memorable was when we decided to go to the mountains for the day. We left in the morning, all six of us piled into the back of a small truck-type thing where our heads touched the roof. They said it would take about two hours – but just



*Dominican waterfall*



*Salt mountains at Great Inagua, Bahamas*

8 km outside of the town, in the mountains, the rear axle snapped. It was now close to lunchtime and we were all starving, but luckily a big bus came to our aid and towed us into town. However, once in town we still had to push the car down the road to the restaurant – and to make the experience even better, it began to rain.

Eventually we got the car into the parking lot outside the restaurant and ordered food. We ordered a mix of lobster and chicken, which was fantastic and unbelievably cheap as we were given 'local prices'. All the time we were eating, the driver was away. It turned out he was at a friend's house, where together they were welding the axle. After lunch was finished and the axle was back in once piece, we decided it was time to go home as we couldn't go further into the mountains because of the rain. Driving back down the road we heard numerous shouts and saw some very funny faces as we drove past. It turned out that they had welded the axle on skew, so surprise, surprise – every 20 or so minutes we all

*Santiago de Cuba, with  
one of the country's  
famous 1950s cars*





had to get out while the driver tightened the wheel before it came off the car. As if that wasn't enough, we ran out of petrol half way back! But no problem – our driver went to a stranger's house and asked for some, which thankfully they were kind enough to give to us. Our driver paid for the petrol with his T-shirt!

Cuba was full of strange people – but wonderful, gracious, friendly people we will never forget. Writing in September I'm so sad to see the damage that Hurricane *Irma* has done, and feel for those wonderful people we got to know. We will be assisting where we can.

I think my favourite part of sailing is being so close to the water, and the feeling of freedom that this huge expanse of ocean gave us. I don't believe anyone truly knows what freedom is until they have sat on the bow, legs over the side and in the water, watching the dolphins prancing and dancing below. That being one with the world is indescribable. Sitting all by myself in the cockpit at 0200, with just the stars and the waves to keep me company (and sometimes the occasional boat) is a feeling I will never forget. Being able to decide where to go next and how fast to go was something I had never experienced before – the excitement of waking up in the morning and not fully knowing where you will be tomorrow.

We left *BlueFlyer* in July 2017 having done three OCC qualifying passages in the Atlantic Ocean (1693 miles from Cape Town to St Helena, 1796 miles from St Helena to Cabedelo, Brazil, and 1971 miles from Cabedelo to Grenada), cruised the Caribbean including Cuba and Jamaica, and finally helped take the boat through the Panama Canal and into Panama City to greet the Pacific Ocean – 10,000 miles in six exciting months.

**Michael:** Panama is a very busy place. When we arrived our AIS System was overloaded with targets. After being on the open ocean with very little traffic actually seen, suddenly there were so many boats around it was mind-boggling. And the size of some of them!



We spent a fabulous, lazy week at Red Frog Marina, a lovely island off Panama. The island has everything from mangroves to mountains, from forests to white sandy beaches, and is a place we would love to return to. We reached Colón a week before our intended transit date through the Canal, so were able to take some time to explore. The marina has a bus that

***Bocas del Toro,  
Panama***



takes you into town to the local mall, but to do this it has to cross the Canal by either a drawbridge or a ferry, which takes forever because of the Canal traffic. Panama is currently building a huge highway over the entrance to the canal in the hope of avoiding this problem.

On the day we started our Canal transit we left the marina around 1500. As small craft we were grouped together, rafted up with a catamaran in the middle and another monohull on the far side. We were on the starboard side. Aboard our *BlueFlyer* we had our usual three crew (Hugh, Jamie and myself) plus two Kiwis as extra line-handlers. I was placed at the bow to make sure the bow line was given to the Panama line handler, to pick up or release the slack depending on the situation, and to make sure that we did not hit the side wall. Once the water started to fill each lock we rose very quickly, and were able

to get through the three locks and to the overnight point in Gatun Lake before dark.

We started early next day and I helmed all the way to the second set of locks. Going down was a different experience – much faster than going up as gravity was on our side. We went past the viewing point and waved nonchalantly at all the tourists gawking at us. I loved how the system worked and was really keen to learn more about the Canal, so made sure we visited the Panama Canal museum.

Finally through, and in the Pacific Ocean, we headed off to the marina. In many ways this was a relief, as we were all very tired not to mention somewhat stressed, but at the same time it was a sad moment as it was our last sailing leg before flying back home to South Africa. The end of this adventure, but the beginning of a lifetime more!

**Jamie:** For all of this and so much more, for giving us this opportunity to improve our talents and skills, learn a hundred life-lessons, meet friends from all over the world and expand our horizons, I would like to thank the Ocean Cruising Club and Hugh Pilsworth.

**Michael:** I have now been to 21 countries, crossed the Equator by both sea and air, and swum with turtles and whale sharks. I would like to thank everyone who helped make this experience possible, with special thanks to Hugh Pilsworth, our patient skipper, for accepting us on *BlueFlyer* – despite our inexperience and shortage of money!

