A PENCHANT FOR THE PRIMITIVE: Reflections on spending my twenties at sea

Ellen Massey Leonard

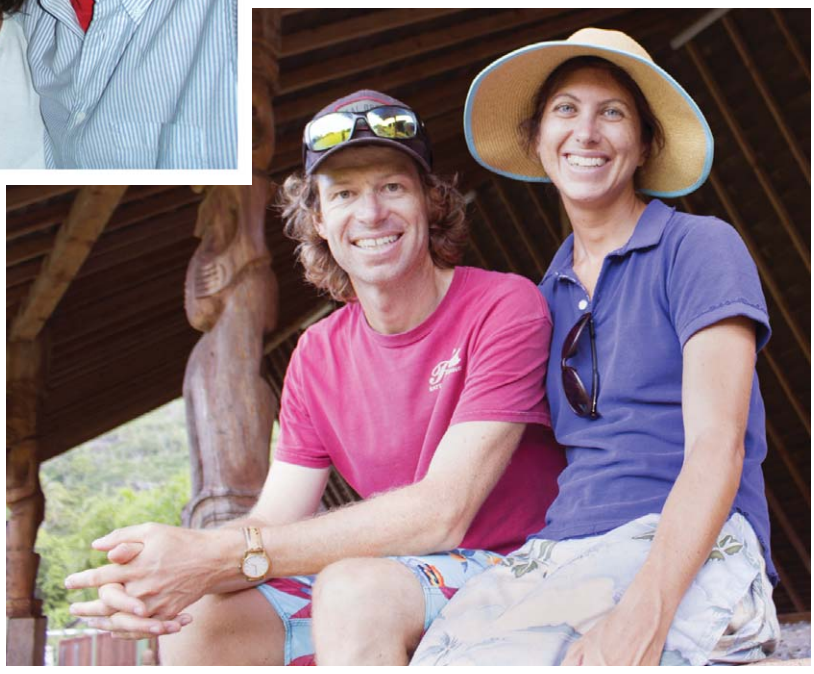
(Ellen and Seth Leonard both grew up sailing, and set off on a four-year westabout circumnavigation from Maine via Panama and the Cape of Good Hope in 2006, when they were 20 and 23. Despite moving to landlocked Switzerland on their return for Seth's PhD in Economics, they continued voyaging each summer, covering over 13,000 miles in Alaska and the Arctic between 2013 and 2017 – see Voyaging to the Top of America *in* Flying Fish 2016/1.

They returned to warmer climes by sailing to Mexico in the winter of 2017/18, and recently completed their second Pacific crossing, followed by a three-month cruise through the French Polynesian islands. They celebrated 50,000 sea miles on the crossing and hope to sail many more!

All photographs are by Ellen and Seth Leonard, as is this issue's evocative cover photo. Visit their impressive blog at https://gonefloatabout.com/ for many more.)

Starting out aged 20 and 23 …

As we sailed into Kodiak, Alaska in June 2017, I realised it was exactly ten years to the day since my husband Seth and I had made landfall after our first ocean crossing. I remember that moment vividly. Ever since I'd learned to sail at age six I had wanted to cross the Pacific, and here I was, only 21 years old, having done just that. Seth and I had been alone at sea together for nearly



… and back in the South Pacific, twelve years later

a month, and in all that time had communicated only with one another. Entirely removed from the world beyond our watery horizon, we'd fallen into a quietly efficient and contented routine – of watches, meals, bucket showers, navigation, reading and simply observing our pelagic world. Neither of us wanted it to end. Sighting Hiva Oa, deep green beneath a bank of cloud, was almost bittersweet – the fulfilment of childhood dreams, the tangible evidence of a great accomplishment, but also the end of those magical days at sea.

After rowing ashore it took us over an hour to walk the mile or so to the *gendarmerie* in Atuona, so bowled over were we by the sights, scents, and sounds of land. At one point, while we were admiring a songbird by the side of the road, a truck slowed to see what had us so enthralled. Those Marquesan men were the first people we'd talked to, besides each other, in a month.

In typical Marquesan *kaoha* (*aloha*) spirit, the *gendarmes* were unconcerned about our clearance process, so we had plenty of time to wander over to the post office, connect to dial-up internet on their boxy computers, and type out our first e-mails to our parents since leaving the Galapagos. Then we bought a fresh baguette in the market and strolled down to the seawall to eat it and watch the locals surf.

Approaching the Marquesas Islands after a month at sea, 20th June 2007

When an acquaintance in New York whom I've not met in person read my account of this, she assumed Seth and I had undertaken this voyage many, many years ago and that we were both in late middle age. I can see why she'd think that – even in 2007 it was highly unusual to cruise aboard a boat which had more in common with *Suhaili* than with a modern production yacht.

Primitive but beautiful – Heretic dwarfed by ships in Gatun Lake, Panama Canal, March 2007

Seth and I seem to have a penchant for the primitive. We're not Luddites – Seth writes computer programs for the finance industry for a living – but somehow we always end up voyaging aboard unnecessarily primitive boats. Some of it has had to do with being very young and having very little money, but I think more of it has to do with our personalities. Outwardly it might appear that we're a little masochistic or that we're trying to prove something to ourselves through unnecessary discomfort. In reality, though, we're just incorrigible optimists. We want to sail around the world? Sure, let's do it! Who cares that the portholes leak so badly you could use them to shave under? Who cares that the boom looks like Swiss cheese or that the masthead is cracked? Your bunk's soaked? Wear your foulweather gear!

Our secondary – or perhaps primary – problem is that we both care far more about a lovely sheer line than pressure water or even modern electronics. Again we're not Luddites – or wooden boat nuts, which may or may not be the same thing. We don't think that anything old and wooden is automatically beautiful, nor do we relish the idea of thousands of potentially loose or rusting fasteners holding our hull together. Both of us did, however, grow up with the *Wooden Boats* calendar on the wall, *Skene's Elements of Yacht Design* on the bookshelf, and historic schooners anchored in the bays outside our windows. In my case, that bay was a fair-weather anchorage in British Columbia and the schooners included the *Robertson II*, which once carried fishing dories to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. In Seth's case, that bay was Blue Hill, Maine and those schooners were the windjammers that once took granite to New York City.

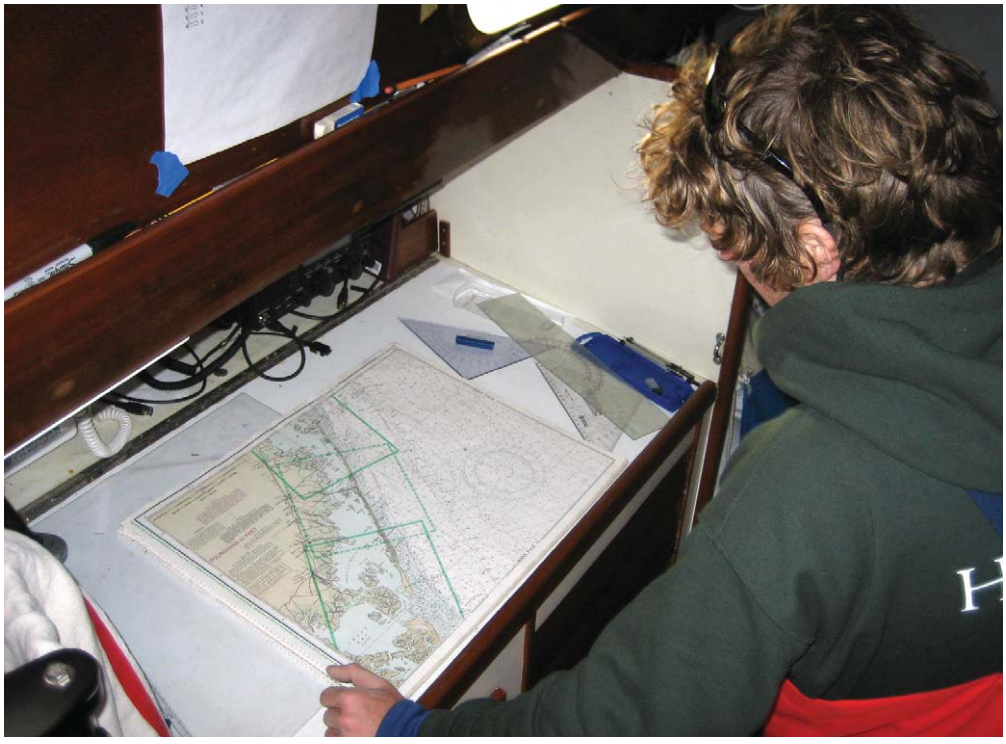
When Seth and I met – in Brooklin, Maine, incidentally one of the world's classic boat capitals – he had already purchased the boat on which he planned to sail around the world. She was a 38ft cutter-rigged sloop copy of the famous Bermuda racer *Finisterre*. Built in 1968 of solid GRP – to a 1954 design – she was heavy, wet and, some would say, cramped. Her short (27ft) waterline, tapering stern and low freeboard, combined with her limited headroom – the cabin sole was laid on top of the centreboard trunk

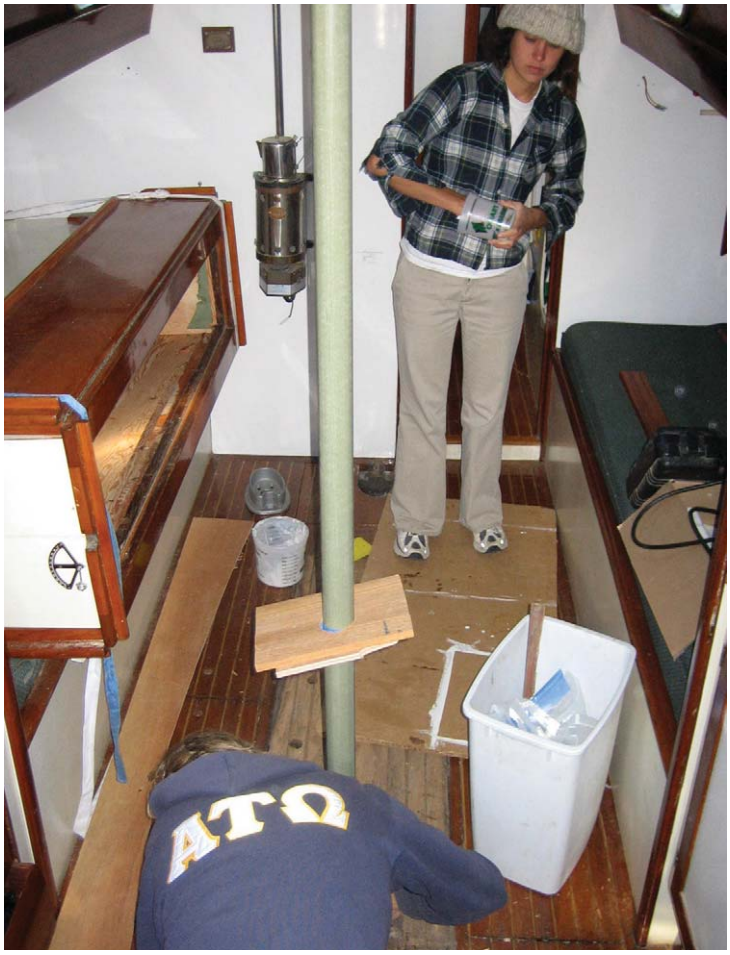
– made her cabin very small compared with modern 38ft production yachts (which tend to have high freeboard, LWLs nearly as long as their LOAs, and sterns as wide as amidships). But she was simply lovely, with her curving bow, wine-glass transom, and varnished mahogany cabin with its oval ports. Had Seth had an ugly boat, I'm not so sure I would have volunteered myself for the voyage...

At the time (July 2006), Seth and I were 23 and 20 years old respectively. While we had both grown up sailing, and been taught to navigate on paper (although unfortunately we hadn't been taught celestial), neither of us had been offshore. So when, with the callow assurance of all 20-year-olds, we announced that we were going to circumnavigate the planet, we were met with incredulity, naysaying and even ridicule. Consequently, the boat was rechristened *Heretic*. (She had to be rechristened something – her prior owner had called her *Le Bon Temps*. Try that on the VHF.)

Poor *Heretic* was rather the worse for having passed through several owners who hadn't used or maintained her. The ports honestly did leak enough to shave under, the bunks really were constantly wet, the propane system was so dodgy that we used a portable alcohol stove until we had re-plumbed it, the rig really might have fallen over if we hadn't replaced the whole thing, and the only wires we didn't replace caught fire on one of our first passages. The holding tank was a bladder that leaked into the bilge (respirator required for that project!), the sheer-clamp needed refastening, and the tube through which the control line for the centreboard ran had rusted through at the waterline – it's a miracle she didn't sink before we found that out! On the day we departed after months of restoration work, a mysterious fitting on the engine started gushing oil so badly

Navigating the traditional way, one of the more minor ways in which Heretic wasn't a 21st century boat





Battling against Heretic's decrepit state before departure from Maine in 2006. Too bad the heater never worked!

that we plugged it up with the first thing to hand – an old, disused gimbal from the galley.

Then there were the many 'modern conveniences' which *Heretic* lacked and which, because we were 20 years old and knew no better, we didn't miss. On account of all the repairs, we didn't leave Maine until 31st October, the day after the first major winter storm (with 60 knots recorded in the harbour) passed through, and the morning of the first very hard frost. *Heretic*'s GRP hull was uninsulated and she had no heater. She also didn't have a dodger*. We simply thought that a heavily condensating hull, a drenched cockpit, and cabin temperatures hovering at freezing were normal for cold-weather sailing.

Heretic had no autopilot and, for the first 2000 miles, no wind vane. It wasn't until we started to meet other cruising boats that we realised hand-steering as if racing round the buoys was not normal. Because we were hand-steering we had two friends aboard with us, and the four of us (three boys and me) shared *Heretic*'s small, old-fashioned, open cabin. It wasn't until we were invited aboard an Island Packet that we realised that *Heretic*'s layout – two small quarter berths, galley and chart table facing each other, table down the middle with two settees either side, hanging locker facing the head, and V-berth forward – and her utter lack of privacy – were no longer standard issue. Seth and I also realised then that most voyaging yachts are crewed by romantically involved couples (which we already were) rather than groups of friends. We started looking for a wind vane.

* A sprayhood to Brits, to whom dodgers are what Ellen would probably describe as weather cloths, another little comfort which *Heretic* doesn't appear to have had...

Filling water tanks with buckets and jerry jugs, Marquesas, June 2007. (This is still how we do it)

With a tiny (270 ampere hours) battery bank and no generator, *Heretic*'s power requirements had to be kept to a minimum. So, although we did nod to the 21st century with electric navigation lights and a small, black-and-white, GPS unit, we did without – ready? – chart-plotter, autopilot, refrigeration, electric anchor windlass, watermaker, pressure water, hot water, shower, communications other than radio, and even electric lights in the cabin. We like to row and we didn't want to bother with gasoline, so we had a hard dinghy with oars (actually we still do – we took it to the Arctic). The boat didn't come with an oven and we didn't install one. And even the idea of having things like air conditioning, TV, a dishwasher or a washing machine was about as far from our minds as settling down in some landlocked Midwestern cornfield.

Of course many sailors have girded the globe in similar conditions, but today, and even a dozen years ago, most cruisers think you're some kind of grumbling old gaffer if you do. Or that you're a cash-strapped 20-year-old, which we were. But for four years that's how we lived. New Zealand was a bit cold, and rounding South Africa's Cape Agulhas in an unpredicted force 10 storm in such a heavy displacement boat was very wet and a little frightening as successive breaking waves filled the cockpit, but the voyage was, nonetheless, one of the happiest times of our lives.

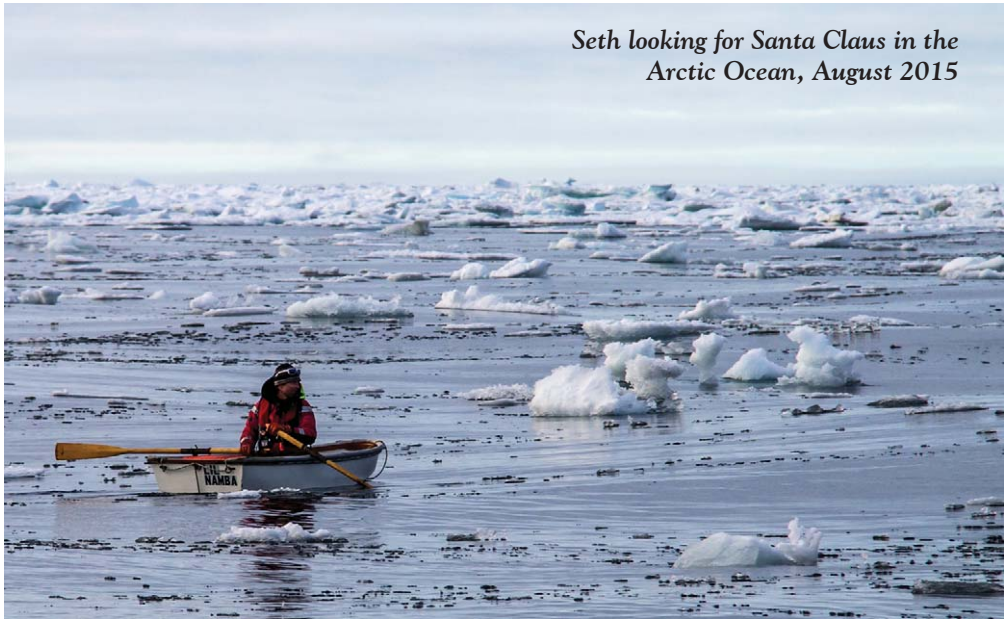
So when we raised Mt Desert Island, Maine in June 2010 – when I was 24 and Seth 27 – it was again a bittersweet moment. We'd done what we set out to do, to circumnavigate the world, but we didn't want it to end. We even thought of turning

the bow east for the Azores right then and just keeping on, but we're a little bit more responsible – not much – than that and we showed up on time for the party that was planned in celebration of our voyage. Then we moved ashore, reluctantly and tearfully sold *Heretic*, and Seth started his graduate studies.

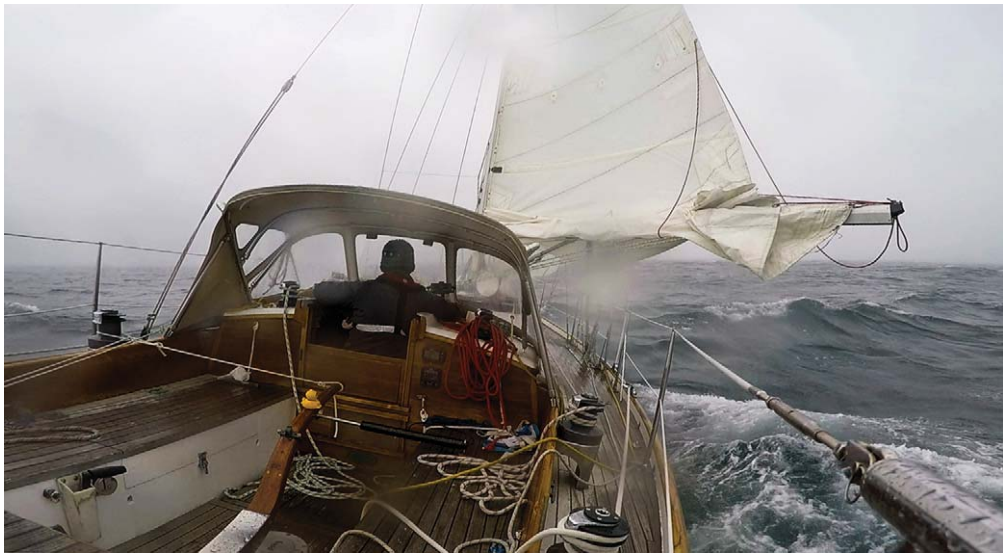
After a year, we realised that we could play truant all summer if I also got an academic job. More sailing! So we set out to find a replacement for *Heretic*. It took us a long time, constrained as we were by our budget, our need (not desire, mind you) to be able to voyage literally anywhere on earth, and our hopeless addiction to classic lines. What we did in the meantime – racing Atlantic Class sloops in Maine and cruising the US Eastern Seaboard aboard a wooden L Francis Herreshoff ketch – didn't help that addiction.

We found *Celeste* in Victoria, BC in the spring of 2013. Once again, we fell for her lovely lines. Francis Kinney, editor of *Skene's* and long-time designer for Sparkman & Stephens, had drawn her in 1985 as a private project for a sailor in Victoria. She was then custom-built in cold-moulded wood by Bent Jespersen and, from the outside, she looks very similar to *Heretic* – 28ft LWL but 40ft LOA, low freeboard, and beautiful varnished cabin with oval ports. Below the waterline, however, she's much more modern with a fin keel and separate skeg. Built of cold-moulded wood rather than GRP she's also lighter displacement. Both these attributes mean less wetted surface and greater speed. Below decks we were amazed to find a fairly modern layout – double quarter berth in a small aft cabin to starboard of the companionway, and galley with 'fridge and oven to port. Navigation station, settee, chart drawers and pilot berth faced a curved dinette amidships, followed by hanging locker, head with shower stall, and V-berth as you walked forward.

As for modern conveniences, wood insulates much better than solid GRP, and she had a forced-air heater and a 'bus' heater that ran off the engine. Also running off the engine was a hot water tank that, combined with a little pressure pump, made for



Seth looking for Santa Claus in the Arctic Ocean, August 2015

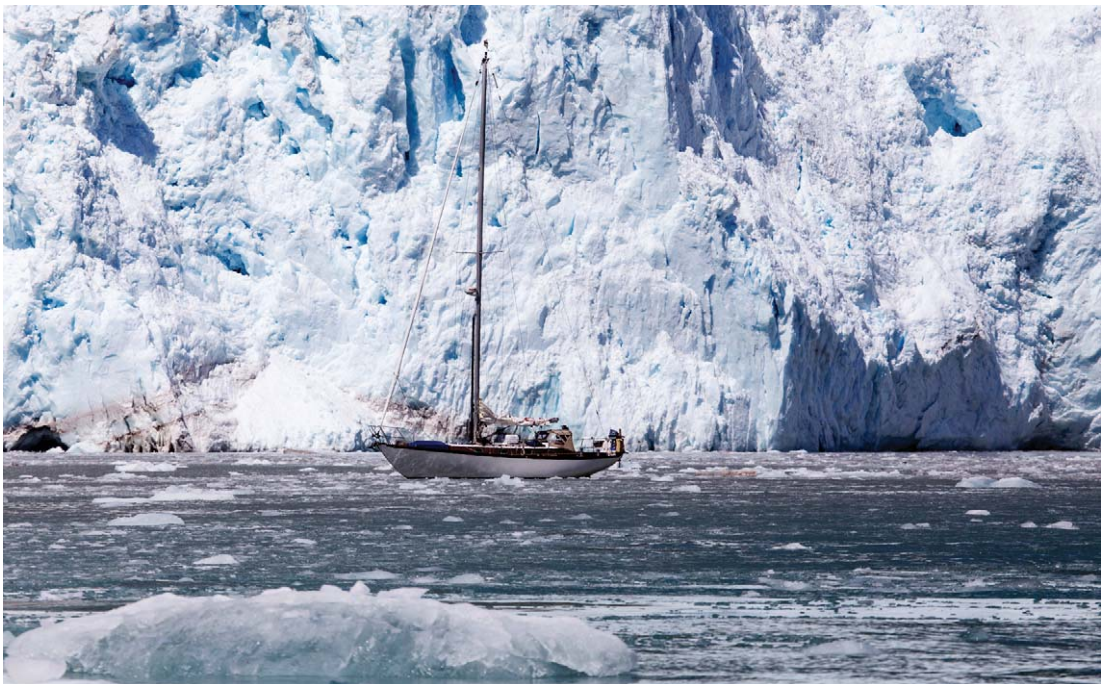


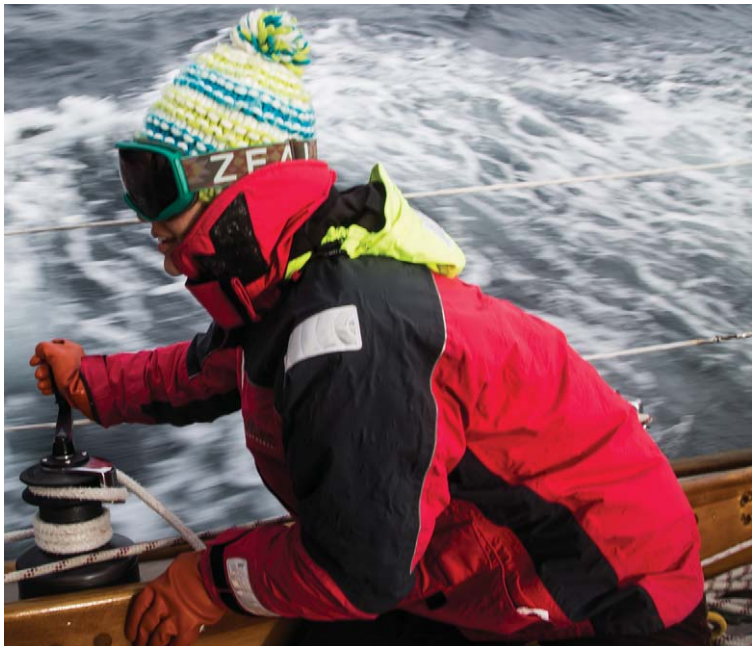
Where's that pilothouse? Seth huddled in the companionway on watch in the Bering Sea, July 2015

lovely showers after puttering into an anchorage. A Cape Horn wind vane was proudly mounted on the stern and a big canvas dodger kept her cockpit dry. So we already thought *Celeste* was pretty luxurious before we even started work on her.

What *Celeste* didn't have wase electronics. We replaced her no-longer-functional VHF, autopilot and radar, and installed a little GPS unit like the one we had on *Heretic*, as well as a chart-plotter – both have become a whole lot cheaper than they

Beautiful, but primitive for high latitudes – Celeste in Alaska, July 2017





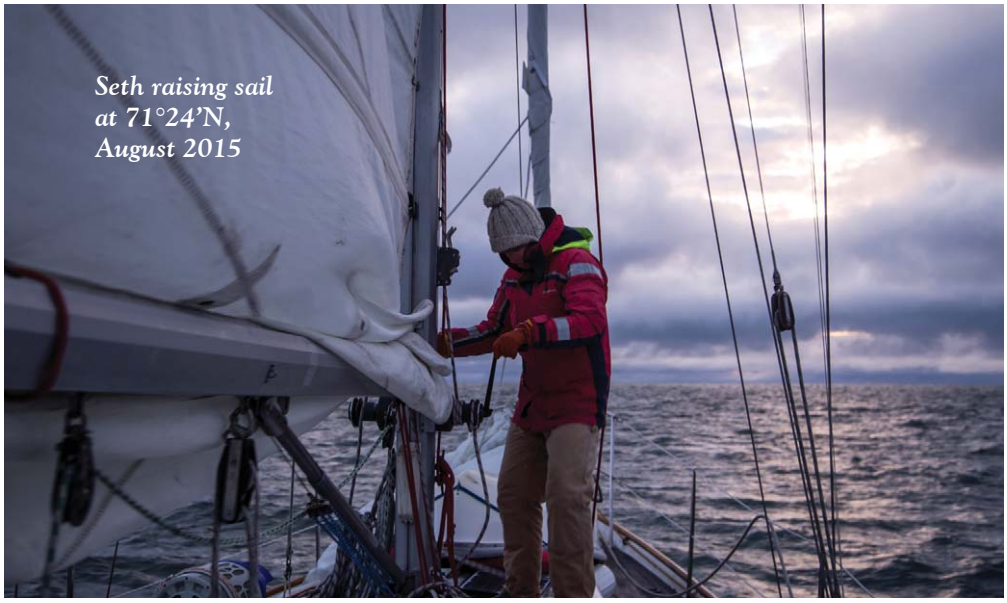
Ellen bundled up for a watch in the Arctic, August 2015

were 12 years ago. We replaced most of her old wiring and mounted solar panels. Still conscious of power draw, we replaced her light bulbs with LEDs and installed a Refleks diesel heater which, unlike the forced-air one, uses no electricity. We also replaced her engine (which, as evidenced from the clouds of blue smoke it emitted, was burning a lot of oil). Thinking ahead to where we planned to take *Celeste*, we plumbed in the smallest Katadyn PowerSurvivor watermaker, which we could run off our solar panels. Finally, with the backing of OCENS, we installed an external antenna and set up a satellite phone communication system for receiving weather files and ice charts – because, what do you do when you finally own a boat that's not primitive? Take her somewhere where she will be primitive!

Yes, we planned to take our 30-year-old cold-moulded wooden, low freeboard, open-cockpit cutter to the Arctic Ocean north of Alaska. This time, though, we knew it wasn't normal. We knew that normal high-latitude sailors have metal boats with enclosed pilothouses. High-latitude boats can be steered from inside these heated pilothouses. Sometimes they even have those nice plexiglass bubbles so that you can look out 'on watch' while wearing just your long undies. High-latitude boats have big heaters and big engines. Our little heaters, by contrast, would usually get the inside temperature up to 10° if it was 1° outside. And our engine was only 30hp.

I suppose it would have been smarter to have bought a burly metal boat with all these attributes or, if we really couldn't kick our classic boat habit, to have taken *Celeste* to someplace where she really would feel luxurious – like the South Pacific. But that incorrigible optimism and that willingness to suffer for beauty meant we pointed the bow north. Really north. Up past the Aleutians to the Bering Strait*. Which is where we learned just why Jimmy Cornell designed his newest *Aventura* so that he didn't have to stand watch in the cockpit with the freezing spray. Up across the Arctic Circle to Alaska's North Slope. And then up to the polar pack-ice in the Beaufort Sea. Which is where, at 72°N, we found out just how much clothing you really can wear all at once. (It's a lot.) The flashy yacht *Celeste* didn't feel so flashy after all.

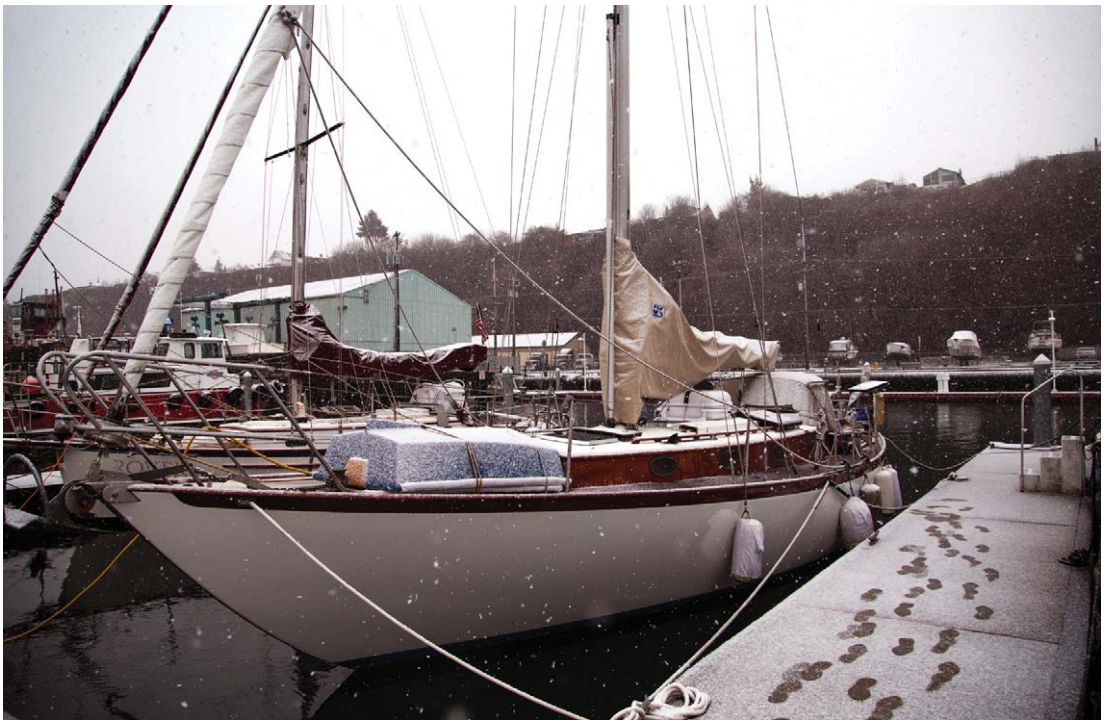
* See *Voyaging to the Top of America*, *Flying Fish* 2016/1.



Seth raising sail at 71°24'N, August 2015

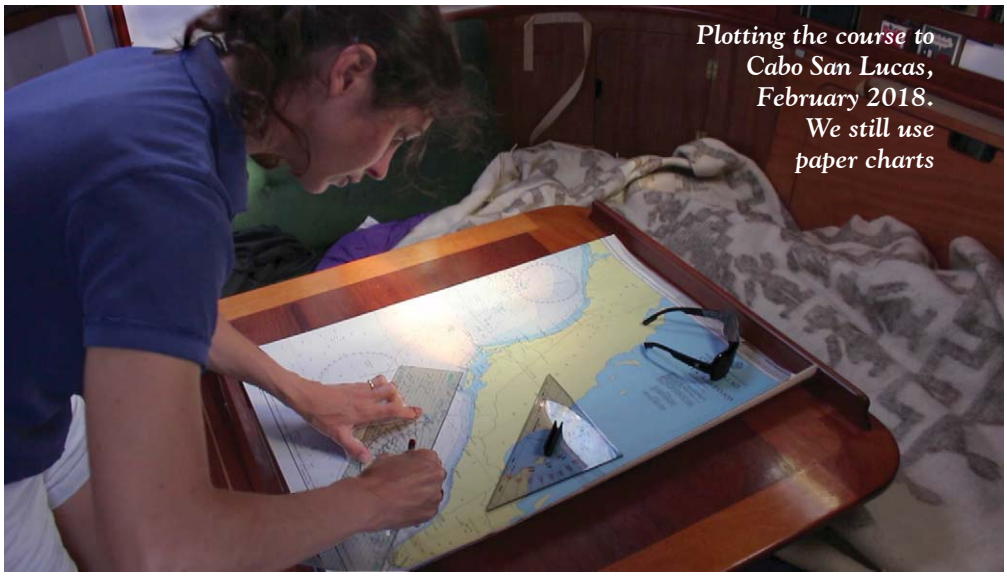
Once again, though, we had the time of our lives. Seeing the Arctic – its people, its wildlife, its frozen ocean, and its wild weather – was something neither of us will forget. And doing it in *Celeste*, a primitive boat for the place, didn't put us off – we're already scheming for Greenland someday. In the meantime, though, we're headed back to the South Pacific, where we'll probably feel like we've landed in the lap of luxury.

Just in case we missed life in the Arctic – living aboard Celeste in January 2017, the coldest Pacific Northwest winter in 20 years



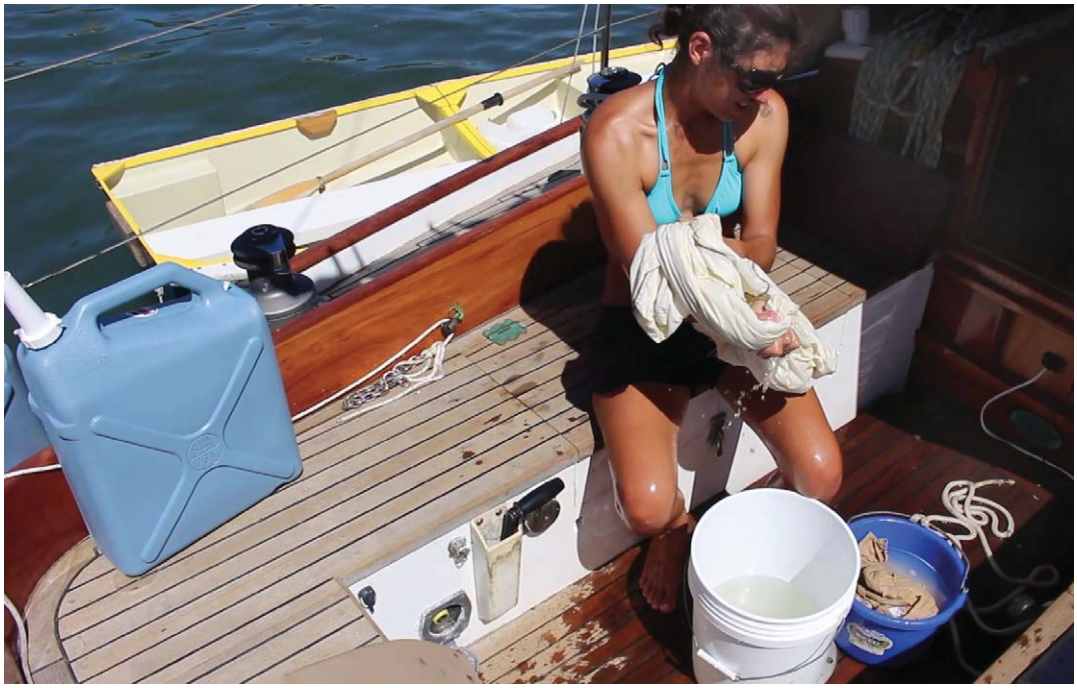
2018 Update

I wrote this piece for the Cruising Club of America's annual chronicle *Voyages* in 2017, when we were still in Alaska. Since then we have indeed sailed back to the South Pacific via Mexico, and it turns out I wasn't quite right that we'd feel like *Celeste* was the height of luxury. Don't get me wrong – we'd reached one of the world's most glorious cruising destinations. Often when you revisit a place that you hold dear in your memory it does not measure up, and we feared that this would happen to us on our return to Polynesia. Not at all. The lush and mountainous Marquesas, the sun-bleached coral atolls – all were just as stunningly beautiful and inviting as we'd remembered them. The underwater world was just as alive with manta rays, sharks, tuna and reef fish as ever (though sadly the coral was not as healthy), and the inhabitants just as warm and welcoming as in our memories. So the voyage was a great success in every way and I was glad that my assumption about *Celeste* had been proven wrong.



Plotting the course to Cabo San Lucas, February 2018. We still use paper charts

Some things were indeed luxurious improvements on *Heretic*: the satellite phone for getting weather forecasts and e-mail (we'd only had HF and VHF on *Heretic*), being able to shower in the head instead of on deck in view of the whole anchorage, the 'fridge, the electric lights in the cabin, and the electronic autopilot for light-air days when the wind vane didn't hold as true a course. Other things, though, told us that *Celeste* remains a primitive boat no matter the latitude. The little sun awning we had sewn for the cockpit just couldn't compare with the impressive shade contraptions – which we took to calling Bedouin tents, mostly out of envy – on all the other boats we saw. We discovered that our 'fridge was terribly badly insulated, something we hadn't been aware of in the cold ambient temperatures of Alaska and the Arctic, so that our solar panels weren't keeping up and we had to decide between charging the batteries with the engine (expensive and bad for the engine) or turning off the fridge. (We opted for engine, primarily because of the fish we were catching.) Our little watermaker, while

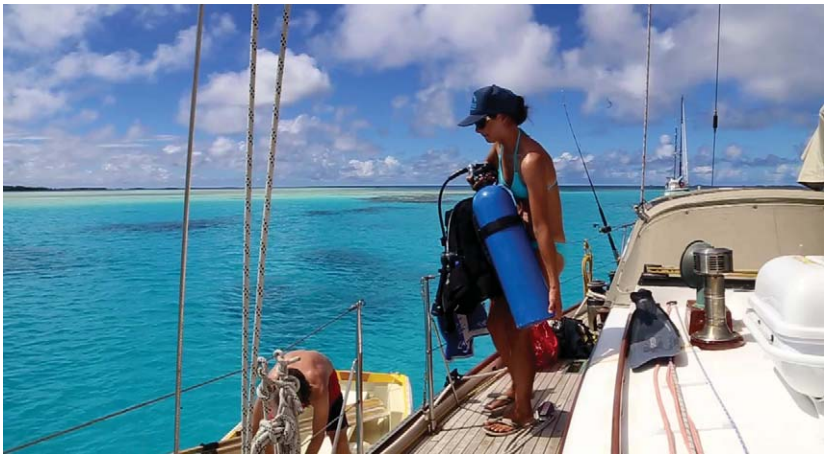


Bucket laundry aboard Celeste, Hiva Oa, June 2018

it had made us self-sufficient in the Arctic, wasn't really enough for all the water we were drinking in the hot climate, let alone for showers and rinsing dive gear, so we were back to hauling jerry jugs and using those solar shower bags, just like we'd done on *Heretic*. Laundry was once again in buckets.

Long distances between, for example, our good anchorage and the coral wall we wanted to scuba dive reminded us that the rowing dinghy is still good for our health. Tacking back and forth outside an atoll waiting for the tide to change to let us into the lagoon reminded us that our engine is still pretty small for our boat.

That said, many of these 'primitive' qualities would not have been considered primitive when, say, the Smeetons were voyaging, and so perhaps they are just a testament to how comfortable modern cruising yachts have become, both in the tropics and the high latitudes. And frankly, they don't really matter – we're all out there having fun, all in our different ways



Loading the (rowing) dinghy for a scuba dive, Tuamotus, August 2018