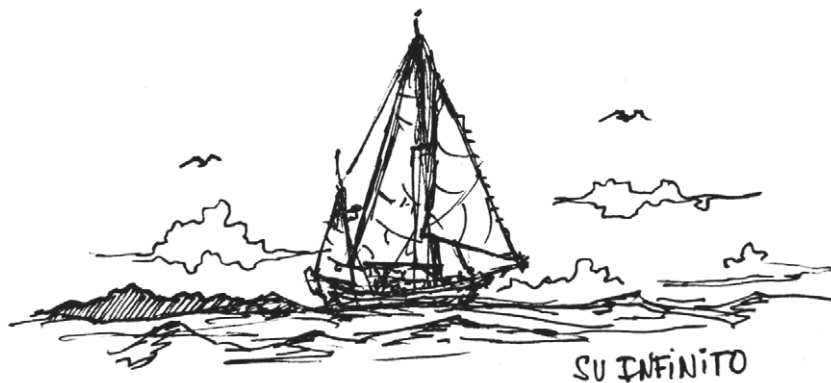


A ROUGH ATLANTIC CROSSING ... in a 31ft boat with a dog, a cat and a pregnant woman **Aleix Gainza**

(Aleix started sailing in his late teens and enrolled at the Institut Públic Escola de Capacitació Nauticopesquera de Catalunya (Nautical Sciences and Fishing Training School of Catalonia) a few years later. After a spell as first officer aboard the brigantine Cyrano he returned ashore to obtain a degree at the Facultat de Nàutica de Barcelona (Barcelona School of Nautical Studies), and then became head of sail training at the Real Club Náutico de Barcelona (Royal Yacht Club of Barcelona). He met Eugenia when she signed on for a passage from Barcelona

to the Balearic Islands, and they got married three days before the start of the voyage related here.

Crew member Tritón, a flat-coated retriever rescued from an animal shelter, was later joined by tabby cat



Atlas. Both are happy on board, though Tritón gets nervous at the beginning of a passage and runs around on deck.)

My wife Eugenia and I met on a sailboat and soon discovered that we shared the same dream – sailing around the world in our own boat. We wanted to visit fantastic places with palm trees, coconuts and turquoise waters. We found a lovely yawl-rigged boat, a 31ft (9.4m) Nantucket Clipper MKIII designed by Alan Buchanan and built in 1977, and named her *Infinito* (Infinity). After two years of preparation and living aboard we cast off the lines from Barcelona in August 2016 with our furry friends Tritón

Eugenia and Aleix





The anchorage at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

and Atlas. Our first Christmas alone, far from the family, was in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, due to a horrible south wind that kept the taverns and the pontoons full, but we finally set sail for the Caribbean in mid-January.

The crossing began comfortably, though the sea was chaotic because of the south wind and the trade winds. The boat's response was great and there were no squalls. However, Eugenia was not feeling very well. She had never been dizzy on board before, but now she was having a hard time – headaches, some vomiting and a lot of abdominal pain. We decided to stop in Mindelo, Cape Verdes, so she could visit a doctor.

Finding a doctor was not easy, not even for our health insurance agents, but three days after arriving we finally found a specialist. I wandered the streets of Mindelo with Tritón, while she visited the doctor. She emerged from the hospital three hours later, pale and walking slowly without saying a word. After a moment she told me she was

The crew ready for departure



*My lovely
crew
underway*

*The entire
crew sailing
south-
southwest*



fine, no problems, but some metres further, while talking about banal things I don't remember, she said: "I'm pregnant!"

Everything changed at that moment – it was the last thing we expected! We were in an African archipelago, where it had taken three days to find a doctor. The supermarkets were not well stocked. In the marina, the boat was moving violently due to the swell and all the boats were breaking mooring lines, day after day. Without a doubt, Mindelo was

The Mindelo skyline





Our second day at sea from the Cape Verdes to the Lesser Antilles

not the perfect place to stay. The doctor said we could continue sailing – she was just a few weeks pregnant and there was no danger at all. So for some reason that now I find hard to understand, we decided to continue to our destination, the Caribbean.

Then, unexpectedly, we met many friends – some from Barcelona, others from our town, and old work colleagues ... the world is a handkerchief. We were all looking at the forecasts for some good weather to set out. So, on January 25th, after a copious meal, we left Mindelo to head west. Our friends left a few hours later, and we did not hear from them again until we reached the other side.

Leaving the islands of Cape Verdes behind was not an easy task. The acceleration zone between São Vicente and Santo Antão was very strong, the waves were high and very short, and the winds changed constantly, so the windvane was working erratically. On the leeward side of Santo Antão there was no wind all night, so we only moved thanks to the current. Then from one moment to the next, in a matter of a few metres, we found the trade winds. *Infinito* went galloping westwards like a frightened horse.

A dolphin family 300 miles from the Cape Verde islands

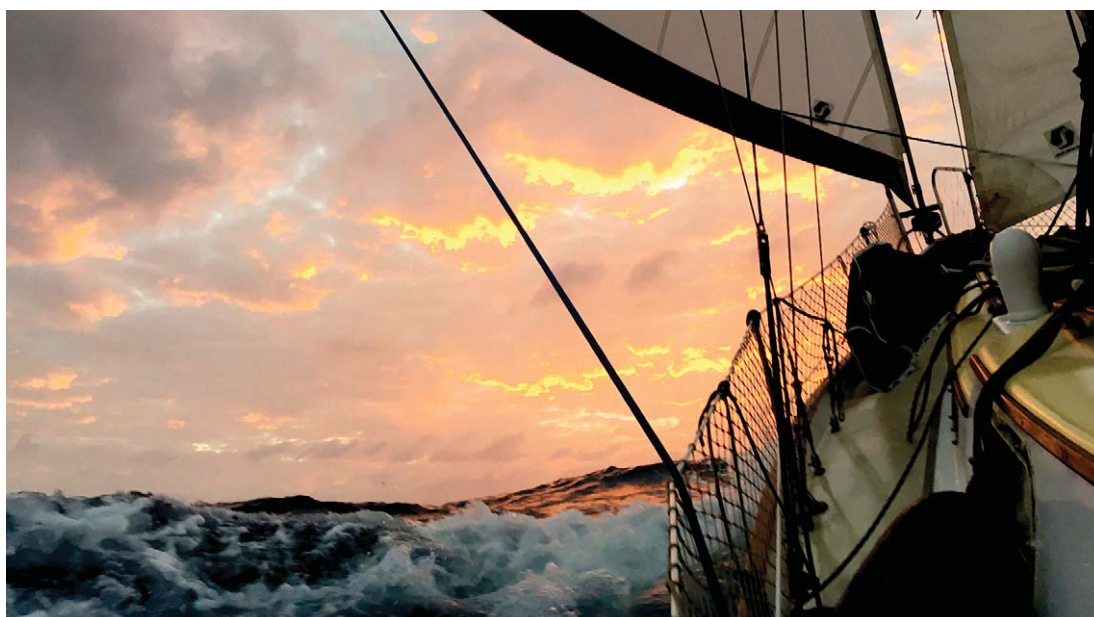




*A few hours
after passing Santo
Antão and both feeling good*

Over the following hours the wind increased, and after reefing the main, I saw that she was much better with only the yankee sheeted to the whisker pole. 'When the wind drops I'll raise it again', I thought, but it wasn't to be like that. The wind kept rising hour after hour and on the third day, with 30 knots and 8ft (2.4m) waves, the 'party' began. Eugenia was still feeling bad, throwing up all the time and very tired. I wrote a message to the friend from Barcelona, who was behind us and checking the weather forecast every day. 'Everything is fine, keep calm. The forecast has not changed. In a few hours, everything will be quieter', he said.

On the crest of a wave...





*Atlas, the
best sailor
ever ...*

*... claims a
non-flying
fish*

But it was not like that. The wind kept rising and we were galloping the high and breaking waves with a very violent movement, rolling from side to side every few seconds. Eugenia seemed to faint from time to time, and each breaking wave that reached us exhausted her a little bit more. She had no strength to hold on and had a hard time moving around the boat, hitting herself all the time due to her lack of strength. I felt so bad for her.

Tritón was looking at us strangely. He didn't understand what was happening, and although he loves swimming he was always looking for a place where the waves wouldn't get him wet – but that place didn't exist. Atlas, the cat, was excited about the show and at first he didn't mind it too much. He fitted his body under the sprayhood, between the hatch and the winch, while he contemplated the landscape and waited for 'flying fish hunting time'. When he heard fish crashing against the sails he ran outside to find them, and during the night he looked for fish on the deck. He waited for a moment without spray, and then caught them and hid them in some remote place inside the cabin so that he had enough food reserves for a good breakfast. So, every morning, my task was to sniff the entire boat to find the damn hidden fish.

Instead of getting better, the weather got worse. The deck was always wet, and soon the cat found not only flying fish on deck but also sardines and other non-flying species that simply went there swimming! As the days went by, long algae grew on the deck. By then Eugenia was at the limit of her endurance and hadn't the strength to get out of bed (where she spent most of the time) without help. When she felt dizzy or was





bothered by a smell, however, she'd want to go out to the cockpit for a short time, so about ten times a day I had to lift her, help her into her foulweather gear, and get her outside. There, I had to make her fast with a rope to the lifeline so that the fierce waves wouldn't fling her to the other side. Most of the time she was also starving, so the *Infinito's* galley looked like the kitchen of a 24-hour restaurant. Then I had to untie her again, take off the drysuit and lower her back into bed. She often needed to go to the bathroom, so first I had to remove the cat's litter and sit her on the toilet, then help her to get back to bed, and finally pump it.

There was one interesting thing that we didn't know yet – it is called toxoplasmosis. Apparently, if a woman has never suffered this disease (similar to a common cold) it is very dangerous to contract it during pregnancy and the consequences can be almost fatal ... and cats transmit it. Perfect! – I'm in a small boat in the middle of the Atlantic, with a pregnant woman who is not immunized and a cat on board, and we're heading to a place where there is a certain risk of Zika virus. All the elements seemed to come together.

Next day the situation became really dangerous. We no longer had waves just from the stern, but also suffered some from the side, as well as a squall about every four hours. When the squalls caught us the wind suddenly increased to 45 knots and forced me to roll up the yankee until there was only a small piece of canvas. I started sleeping less, one day four hours, the next day two ... every few minutes I woke up to check the windvane, the sheets, the mast, if my wife was still breathing, if the dog was still on board and if the cat had stowed away any flying fish.

On the seventh day the situation worsened again like an explosion. It was no longer necessary to be in a squall to have winds of 45 knots. Eugenia's health remained the same, but my strength started to notice the weight of all the work that boat and crew involve. At the end of that day, with the waves up to 16ft, I received a message from my friend. 'Warning! Tomorrow the wind will rise to 35 knots and you will have waves up to 11ft (3.35m)'. Fantastic! – the weather forecast was completely wrong. I

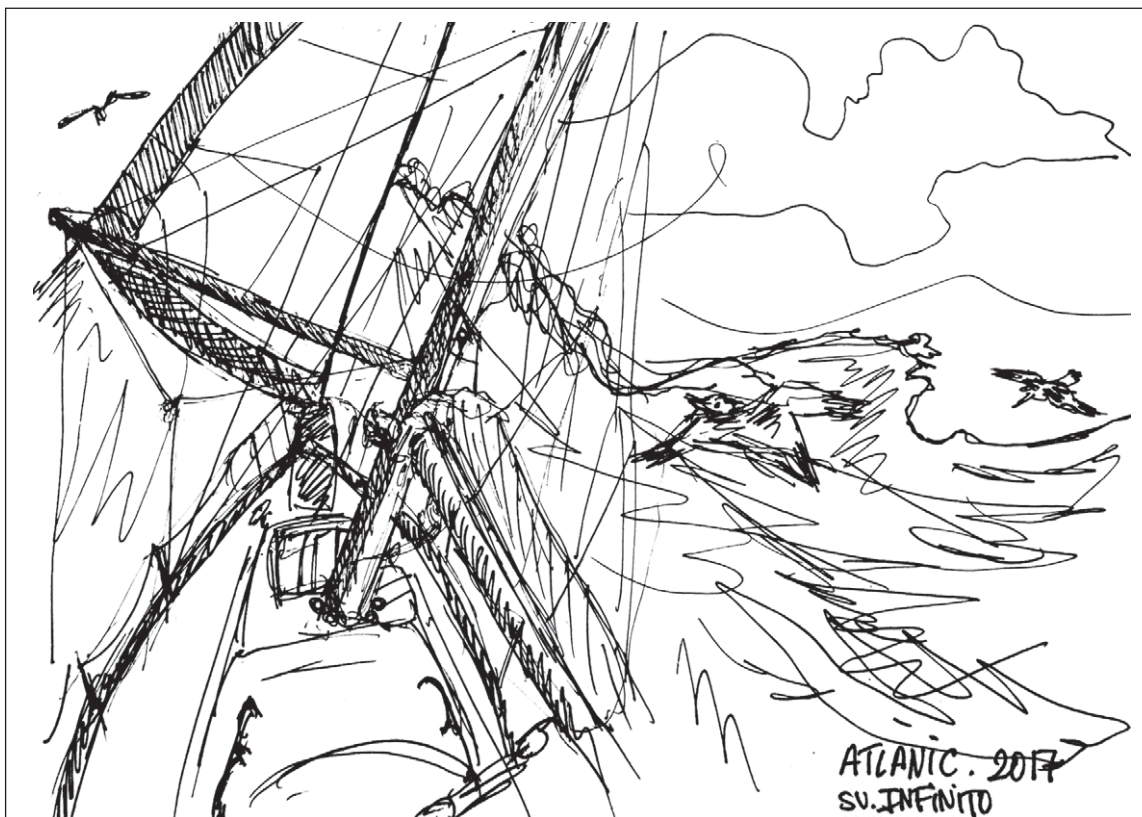
replied quickly saying, 'Worse? Now 45 knots and waves 16ft (4.9m). Give me good news!'. I never got an answer.

Indeed, on the next day the weather visibly worsened. The wind did not increase too much and stayed between 45 and 50 knots, but the sea rose up furious, majestic and huge, as I hope never to see again. The breaking waves followed us overwhelmingly, higher than the 23ft (7m) mizzen, so I calculated that the largest measured about 26ft (8m). I was terrified. Eugenia no longer came on deck – it was too dangerous and she didn't have the strength to do anything, she was like a rag doll that you have to move from one place to another. The waves looked like mountains, with valleys, rivulets and high waterfalls. From each crest you could contemplate an inhospitable landscape. The seabirds flew fast, skilfully escaping the fury of the sea, but *Infinito* couldn't move so quickly. She heeled sharply when each wave reached us, and her small hull surfed the waves at 14 knots with only a tiny sail area.

I had heard about solitary waves, and on the morning of the tenth day, between those huge and brutal mountains of water, I saw a white line on the horizon. It stood out from the other waves and seemed to move fast. I was perplexed that there were waves higher than those around us. One broke, almost above the radome of our radar, I bent down and looked towards the bow – there were many kilos of water there. It hit the stern and filled the cockpit, leaving us almost vertical with the bow towards the sky. I looked back again and saw something terrible – that wave that stood out on the horizon was going to reach us. The sea went down many metres, we slowed suddenly from 6 knots to 5 knots, then 3 knots ... the wall grew and did not stop growing, maybe to 32ft (nearly 10m). It made a low sound as if an orchestra was tuning the basses. It was still many metres away, but seemed to be very near. More than a wave, it was like a set of waves in one, or a huge ripple of the ocean. It got closer and closer and *Infinito* looked down again. She seemed scared.

Something was happening on the crest. It curved, cracked, and there were turquoise lines, shinings and breaks. Its sound was similar to a loaded railway combo going full speed through a tunnel. Our own speed suddenly increased again – we were sailing downhill! The noise became unbearable and I quickly looked for the crew. 'They're all inside and closed, okay', I thought. I closed my eyes and crouched in the cockpit as the wave hit the boat. A lot of water was falling from everywhere. I was underwater and I was holding my breath. I noticed how my harness pulled all my weight onto my ribs and then how it pulled me against the cockpit. Suddenly, most of the water disappeared, the boat straightened up again and I raised my head. There was still a lot of water everywhere. The pole and the yankee were still in place, and both masts were still standing, but water was falling from the crosstrees. The windvane* looked battered but in one piece. 'Am I really in the tropics?' I asked myself. Eugenia suddenly came outside, drawing strength from where it didn't exist. "Are you okay?" she asked, with the broken pressure cooker in her hand. I don't remember what I answered. The other crew didn't seem to have suffered any damage, but the cat's eyes were wide open and his ears pulled back.

I tried to slow the boat down but that made things much worse. When the waves reached us they swept the entire deck, filled the cockpit to the top and the water crashed hard against the main hatch. If I had opened it to help my wife or to cook, the water would have reached the forward cabin, so we had to keep moving



forward. I was very worried about Eugenia, every day she got a little worse. She cried, vomited and was starving all at the same time. Sometimes her mind played games to get away from our situation and changed the cry into a huge laugh – it was a mix of laughter and screams. I just wanted to make landfall. I thought a lot about solo sailors, and I wished I was one of them. They can have a tough time without having to pretend that everything is fine.

I think I was never more than 20 minutes without doing anything – there was always something needing to be done, day and night ... to help Eugenia to the toilet, to dress her in her drysuit and raise her weight up to the cockpit and bring her down again after ten minutes, to cook something tasty, to find fish on the deck before the cat did, to replace fallen objects, to clean the cat's sand, trim the sails, look for the candies, reef ahead of a coming squall... Then Eugenia wants to go outside to be sick and is starving again, the cat has peed on the bed, remove the sheets and wash them, hoisting them well up to dry and put clean ones on (after moving Eugenia to the forward cabin), clean the dog's business, find more hidden fish, wash the dishes, another squall, lower the sheets down, Eugenia wants to go outside again, the damn candies again ... I really don't know where I found the energy, but I suppose it was due to the desire to survive, reach land and, above all, love. I lost about 8kg (17.6lbs) during the passage.

* A Windpilot Pacific, bought second-hand and named Pepito Grillo, the Spanish name for Jiminy Cricket. (Why are so many windvane self-steering gears called after cartoon characters...?)



Playing the blues on my xaphoon as we approach Martinique

Besides the 'party' life went on. Tritón was bored so he started playing with the chart-plotter. First, he tried what happened if he changed the language, so he set it to Chinese. Once this was solved (thanks to the manual) he decided to do a factory reset and we lost a good part of the route. After he had made several resets and changed the language for a few more times I set a pin number to lock the settings. Unfortunately I didn't think about setting a hard one, and I used 1234. It didn't take Tritón long to discover the code, and he played several more jokes on us before we reached land. I got my revenge by making them listen to me playing my xaphoon*.

The storm lasted three more days. After that the wind and waves dropped considerably, but the situation was still quite unbearable. The cat had lost patience and, more and more often, took advantage of an oversight to pee in some corner, preferably on top of our clothes, bed or cushions. The ship reeked as he peed faster than I could clean.

Three days before reaching land the situation became more comfortable, although the sea was still chaotic and the waves came from different directions. Eugenia was still sick, but we were no longer so worried about our lives. The worst had been left behind. We were worried about our friends, who surely had experienced the same horrible passage, but it was impossible to communicate with them. All the while the waves kept pushing *Infinito*. A bit of surfing, then we're slow. On one of these waves I saw something strange as it disappeared to the west – a large, pale object slid down its surface to the trough. I ran to the helm, unhitched the wind vane and kicked the tiller hard. The boat abruptly changed her course and a large piece of wood, perhaps lost from some cargo, passed by us scarcely 16ft (5m) away. Another scare on the list. We had to make land soon.

I spent the last two days concerned about the health of my wife and the baby and hoping to arrive soon. Tritón was convinced that the passage would last for ever

* An amazing instrument, not much bigger than a recorder but with the sound of a saxophone. Head to YouTube to see one being played.

and spent the daylight hours lying on the deck, looking at the horizon. He had some scrapes and wounds due to the constant movement, as he often slid from one side of the cockpit to the other. I think Atlas was still wondering what he could do to stop the boat moving. The day before we arrived, with only 15 knots of wind and smooth seas, *Infinito* moved slowly, as though she was dancing. The weather was nice (hot and sunny), some dolphins appeared, the engine was running well and we could start smelling the land ... everything was okay and there were no major repairs to do.

Next morning at first light Tritón suddenly lifted his head and ears. First he looked twice, and then he went to the bow and looked a third time. Soon after that he looked at me and started running and jumping. Then he started barking and making funny dog sounds. After 19 days we reached Martinique!

We contacted our friends, some in Martinique like us and others in Suriname or Barbados. All of them were fine with their boats still floating, though some had major repairs to make. A boom had broken, and there was some other damage such as torn sails, rigging failure, a mast fastened with truck straps ... we were very lucky not to have had any major damage.

We decided to sell *Infinito* in Martinique. It was not an easy decision as she had become our friend and our home, but she was too small for those waves and that crew. We bought *Cythere*, a beautiful ketch-rigged Endurance 44, to continue following our dream, with one more crew member and new horizons to explore.

Follow *Cythere* and her crew – including young Mia – at www.saltylife.es. Currently in Spanish only, though auto-translation does a surprisingly good job for the non-linguists among us.

*Anchored in the
Caribbean*

