

PASSAGE TO HORTA: The 2018 Pursuit Rally Chris Haworth

While I was crossing the Atlantic aboard *Nyaminyami* in 2013 with my great friends Francis Williams and Jane Williams – my first major passage – I read a book by Theo Dorgan entitled *Sailing for Home* in which he describes Horta as ‘a crossroads of the Oceans’, and Peter Café Sport as ‘... amongst Yachtsmen, maybe the most famous pub in the world’. I had never heard of it! Inspired by his description, however, I resolved that I too would arrive in Horta by yacht and visit Peter’s Bar...one day!

So when, in autumn 2017, I received a call from Jane Williams (by now owner/skipper of *Indulgence*, a 1984 Nicholson 35) advising me that the OCC, on the invitation of Peter Azevedo’s son José, was arranging a rally to Horta the following June to celebrate the centenary of Peter Café Sport, and asking if I’d be interested in joining her for the passage, my answer was an emphatic ‘yes!’. With about 8000 people, Horta is the principal town on the island of Faial, one of nine islands that make up the Azores archipelago, some 750 miles due west of Lisbon and a ‘stopping off’ point for water, supplies and R&R for sailors for centuries.

My brother David and I left Bristol on the 0530 train and reached Falmouth mid-morning on 4th June. Skipper Jane Williams and crewmate Kate Thornton were waiting for us aboard *Indulgence* in Pendennis Marina, fully prepared and victualled. We wanted to get going swiftly to catch the fair tide around The Lizard and into the Channel, and finally left around 1130. In lovely sunshine but not a breath of wind we motored south along the coast to The Lizard, making last-minute phone calls and e-mails, turned the corner, and set a course of 240° towards Horta. Late that afternoon we picked up the forecast 10–15 knots from north-northwest, switched off the engine, and were making 5–6 knots under full main and genoa. The adventure had begun!

Our skipper, Jane Williams





The crew: me, David and Kate Thornton (Jane was taking the photo)

I do not propose to provide a day-by-day account of our passage – which for those who are interested can be accessed at <https://janesnich35.blogspot.com/> and which some may find quite amusing – but will try to pick out the highlights of our trip, lessons and tips learned by this relatively inexperienced ocean sailor.

From our research of prevailing conditions we planned to head predominantly west before sailing south, being careful not to be drawn into the Bay of Biscay – where, we understood, winds could be light to non-existent at this time of year. However, this strategy was not helped by the GRIB files downloaded daily from PredictWind which showed much better winds to the south and a significant ridge of high pressure to the west. The good news was that although there was little wind forecast, what there was was generally coming from the northern quadrant – we didn't want head winds in *Indulgence* as she doesn't enjoy the best tacking angles. As an aside, we generally found that as the GRIB files gave the mean average forecast wind speed, in practice we would experience a bit more – 10% more if 10 knots were forecast, 20% more if 20 knots were forecast, and 30% more if 30 knots were forecast. This observation was confirmed as a good rule of thumb by weather and navigation guru Stokey Woodall whom we met in Horta.

With four crew members of varied experience (including two competent sailors who hadn't previously completed passages of more than two days) we adopted an informal watch system during daylight hours. At night we stood individual watches of two hours, starting at 2200 (after dinner) and finishing at 0600 (dawn), which generally gave each person six hours of night-time sleep. We were, however, fairly flexible. The procedure was that the person on watch would give his/her replacement a 20 minute 'wake up'

call, but if the 'on duty' crew was happy to extend their watch then they would delay the 'wake up' call and the next person would do the same for their replacement. In this way we sought to get the best performance from each individual as suited their mood and energy levels. It wouldn't necessarily suit all crews but it worked well for us.

Our passage took 14 days, and although the rhumb line to Horta from Falmouth is about 1250 miles we sailed 1465 miles. For most of the time we had light winds of 10–15 knots or less, although we had several days when it blew 20 knots, and on a couple of occasions it reached 30 knots though for less than six hours. For three-quarters of our voyage the wind was from the northern quadrant and only one-quarter from the southern quadrant. We motored for a total of 100 hours, 28 of which would have been required for battery charging whatever the conditions, so about three days of the 14 when there was either less than 5 knots of breeze or no wind at all.



It's essential to get plenty of rest...

We were fortunate to have very little rain – just a little drizzle or thick, misty dew at night. Until we got within a few days of the Azores the night sailing was surprisingly cold, calling for full wet-weather gear, hat, gloves and several layers, though it was much warmer during the day. I had expected that as we headed south it would quickly get warmer, but this didn't occur. I had also expected clearer skies both at night and during the day, but for 10 of the 14 days it was cloudy with no direct sun, and with no stars or moon at night until the last three days – typical North Atlantic conditions, I gather! Looking at the forecast we were often concerned that we would run out of fuel, as the Azores High seemed to be constantly expanding directly over the islands



*David and me refuelling
mid-ocean*



and creating a huge wind hole between us and Horta. As it transpired, *Indulgence* was able to sail all the way to Horta with reasonable wind the last couple of days, but boats that left after us experienced many more hours of motoring.

The highlights of our trip – at least for me – can be categorised as follows:

Sailing highlights

We hoisted a conventional spinnaker whenever possible, which helped mileage, but kept it flying a little too long on one occasion as the wind increased to 25–30 knots

*We flew the kite
whenever possible*

in big seas and broached. Important lesson learned – shortening sail early on the ocean is a necessary and sensible precaution ... you aren't in the Solent! Similarly, we could have shortened sail a little more aggressively prior to nightfall on a couple of occasions, which would have saved foredeck work in the middle of the night!

Two or three glorious sunny days in 10–20 knots as we approached the Azores, accompanied by spectacular, moonless, star-filled nights – or, as one crew member put it, 'we were blessed with an awe-inspiring heavenly display of astronomical jewels' –

though neither description does justice to a clear night sky in the open ocean!

Then on one occasion we were called up on the VHF by a passing Italian cargo ship, who could clearly spot expert sailors when they came across them ... to ask if we needed any assistance!

Nature highlights

We were frequently visited by pods of dolphins and, on separate occasions, by two solitary whales. To quote from Day 3 of our blog: 'Just been interrupted by a pod of dolphins swimming for a few minutes alongside the boat, about five of them also dancing around the bow. I'm exhilarated! I'm not sure what it is about dolphins, but they bring joy to one's soul every time you see them. They seem to want to play and are such fantastically agile swimmers, it's all happening so quickly zooming in and out – it seems amazing they don't all crash into each other as they leap to the surface. We saw a whale earlier – not massive, probably about 25 feet. A different sort of experience as this one was seemingly on its own, moving



Clear skies at last!

gracefully and a little shy, we didn't get closer than 50 yards and then it dived and we didn't see it again. Wonderful, incredible creatures, leviathans of the ocean, how could anybody kill them?.

As we progressed south and west we saw more and more shearwaters of different types, beautifully graceful flyers so close to the ocean surface, seemingly effortlessly soaring on wave crests and dipping into their troughs, almost never flapping their wings ... beautiful and mesmerising.

Philosophical highlights

Sailing on the ocean gave me time to relax properly and think more deeply away from my usual hectic working life, bombarded with communications and information from every direction, and often allowed me the time and head space to become quite philosophical! There isn't space to share those thoughts with you in this article, but the blog gives more detail.

Culinary highlights

I don't know who said it, but I'm sure a well-fed crew is a happy crew and we were both. Our most memorable meal, to celebrate my brother's 55th birthday, comprised:

Fruit Cocktails

Fresh Melon and Parma ham

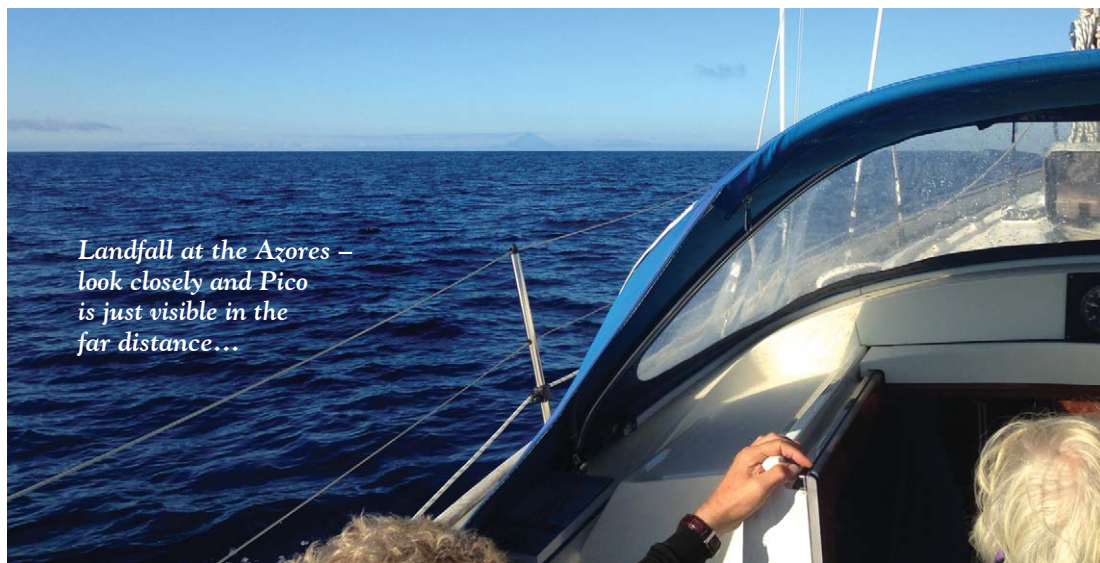
*Rump Steak with a mustard, onion, cream and marmalade/red wine sauce
Boiled new potatoes, fresh broad beans and carrots from the garden*

Steamed chocolate pudding with double cream

Cheese and biscuits (Roquefort and Cheddar)

Coffee and Chocolates

Accompanied by a fine bottle of Bordeaux





... and all prepared and cooked with nothing more than a Neptune Gas Cooker! Although not served up every night, the food prepared almost exclusively by Jane and Kate was of an exceptionally high standard and I commend them unreservedly.

We arrived off Horta on Monday 18th June as planned, a beautiful sunny morning with 10 knots of breeze from the south. Directly opposite, across the 5 mile-wide channel, lies the island of Pico which features the eponymous volcanic peak of Montanha do Pico, the highest mountain in Portugal. It is a dramatic cone some 2341m (7680ft) in height in the classic volcano shape, with its summit frequently shrouded or poking through cloud. We had first seen the peak from some 60 miles away and now, in much closer proximity, it was a magnificent sight with a strangely alluring sense to it.

A number of other yachts were clearly visible in the channel, and as the finish time of 1200 drew near more appeared over the horizon. The plan was to have a grand finale to the sailing part of the rally by virtue of a sort of 'reverse start' with all boats trying to cross the finish line, positioned between the harbour's two breakwaters, as close to 1200 as possible. Although many of the 52 entrants from all over Europe, Canada, the Americas, the Caribbean and even one from Japan, were already in a very busy Horta Marina and reluctant to come and join in for fear of losing their berth, about fifteen boats contested the finish. It was a closely fought affair with line honours clinched by Rally Organiser John Franklin, but a fine spectacle was enjoyed by locals, casual onlookers, fellow sailors and members of the yachting press. Time for a shower, a shave and a beer at Peter's Bar – not necessarily in that order!

For Chris's impressions of his week in Horta, see pages 1 and 2 of the September 2018 *Newsletter*.

