

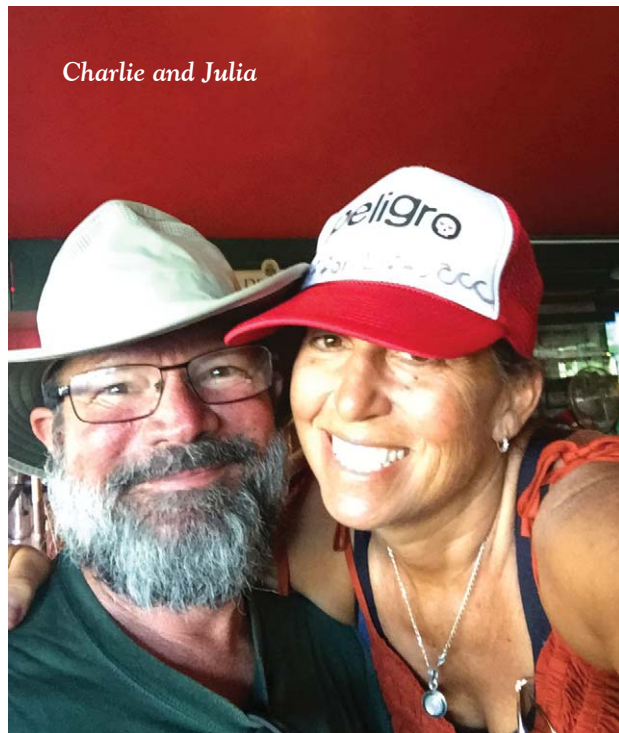
## **OF BOOBIES AND BREAKAGES – Our first offshore voyage Charlie Braffett and Julia Rahal**

*(Charlie comes from Houston, Texas and started sailing in 1973 in small lake boats. After a 20 year hiatus he bought an Erickson 32 in Panama while serving in the Army there, and won the Panama National Championship. He acquired Seagate, a Hans Christian 38T (the T stands for 'Traditional') in 2007, sailing her on Lake Roosevelt before moving it to Ventura, California in 2012.*

*An advertisement for crew for his first offshore trip was answered by Julia, and they have been together ever since – she had long dreamed of sailing to the South Pacific. They share the same birthday, and plan to get married on that date so Charlie will have no excuse for forgetting their anniversary!)*

Going offshore, what a wonderful idea! Been planning it for years, got the boat almost ready and even found a beautiful soul to go with me. Now I just need to spend all of my savings, sell my house and car, fix everything left to fix and shove off with my love. Easy as pie, although I'm not keen on pie. First things first, get the boat on the hard for fresh bottom paint and check the through-hulls. While I'm at it, I'll have a survey done just to check things out. In the meantime, my love and I have to stay in revolving hotels, it being tourist season here in Ventura, California, which makes it very challenging, but our little red wagon carries us effortlessly from hotel to hotel.

The survey comes back and suddenly the yard bill gets significantly larger. Just a few things ... such as replace entire exhaust system, retire/replace all bilge systems, replace all engine hoses and redo the head. The final suggestion (which is the most expensive) is to install a feathering prop. When they pull the prop they find the prop-shaft is no good, and a correct prop for the new shaft is non-standard and requires custom machining. My original 1st March voyage commencement begins to slide a tad.





While we're waiting we start to get the other gear that's necessary for this great endeavour. We go to have the liferaft serviced and are told that it is a coastal liferaft rather than an offshore. Also learn that our PFDs<sup>1</sup> are out-of-date, and buy ones with personal AIS<sup>2</sup> modules for good measure. Then shots, medicinal and sundries for several months. Next comes provisioning, where Julia comes to the fore. She not only organises and stores away two car-loads of food, but also keeps us well-fed on the trip.

A bank loan to pay the yard bill and we are ready to splash the boat. Start the engine and test it out, it won't start. Bleed the lines, engine starts, throw it into forward and ... we go in reverse. Throw it into reverse and ... we start to move forward. Hmmm, pull boat back out of water, check the prop, discover factory setting was right-hand, mine is left-hand. A few adjustments later and we are motoring around the harbour. Just a few more things to get ready and we'll be off. Fill water tanks and emergency jerry cans and test water supply – pump will not stop. After tracing lines for leaks, find they have left the tap in the head on. Try out head with new hoses – pump will not function, find the yard have closed all the through-hulls. Enter our initial GPS co-ordinates for the Marquesas and take a day off to rest and not leave on a Friday (bad luck, don'tcha know?).

Morning comes and it's a beautiful day. Motoring out of the harbour with the Channel Islands in sight, we raise the mainsail and motor-sail. The wind picks up and we cut the engine to begin our voyage. The wind picks up some more and we surge along at about 7 knots. Wind picks up some more and we reduce headsail, a bit more and reef the main. By this point we have 20+ knots of wind and 10ft seas from the starboard quarter, so decide to stay overnight at Smugglers Cove on Santa Cruz Island. The cove is flat with about a dozen weekender boats at anchor, which we join. We spend *Cinco De Mayo*<sup>3</sup> on the hook with a couple of beers to celebrate.

Motoring out the next day, as we leave the lee shadow the winds kick up to about 20± knots. Under reefed main and staysail we are doing 8 knots, with 12ft seas slapping us from the starboard side. Finally, too tired to stay up, I hand over to our Hydrovane and take a much needed nap. Next morning, the boat is doing exactly what I left her

1. Personal Flotation Devices – lifejackets to most of us.
2. Automatic Identification System
3. *Cinco de Mayo* is an annual celebration held on 5th May to commemorate the Mexican Army's 1862 victory over the French Empire at the Battle of Puebla. It is observed in the US more than in Mexico, particularly in areas with large Mexican-American populations.

doing and I relax a bit – a Hans Christian is a true bluewater cruiser and a joy in rough weather. Same winds and waves for another day and then we finally get some relief – 15 knot winds and 6ft following seas with us toodling along at 6½ knots. Made 124 miles in our first 24 hours! It looked like it was going to be a quick, pleasant passage with the worst behind us ... or so we thought.

On the next two days we make 139 and 146 miles respectively and are enjoying the sail. Then the cord holding the hydrogenerator snaps and our power begins to fade. No problem – just start up the engine and charge the batteries. 26 minutes later, the engine quits. Test fuel flow and find no issue, will work on it some more later. Attempt temporary fix on the hydrogenerator while hanging upside down off the stern of the boat at 7 knots. The 550 cord I use fails so will have to think of something else.

Over the next few days I repair the hydrogenerator five times with no permanent success. The engine still won't start, and to top it off our headsail tangles on the furler and the staysail comes loose from everything but a couple of hanks. It takes two hours of staying stationary to untangle the headsail as we cross the Tropic of Cancer. At least we're in the tropics now!



*Gladys (see next page)*

On 15th May we sight our first ship since day three – I think it is headed for Guaymas, Mexico. Try to bleed the engine with generator running on the deck, but no success. Finally get hydrogenerator to behave for a while with double 2000lb test crabbing line. We also see squadrons of flying fish and an odd grouping of three seabirds that keep circling around us. All this while seeing the Southern Cross for the first time (reminds me of a song).

Then we hit the dreaded Intertropical Convergence Zone, or ITCZ. We make only 67 miles the first day in sweltering heat, but do better over the next couple of days and even get the staysail jerry-rigged. See some eerie lights on the night of the 18th which

turn out to be oil rigs – what they’re doing out here, I have no idea. Next morning, a National Police helicopter (Ecuador?) flies by to check us out. The real ITCZ takes over and we average between 30 and 60 miles a day, though sometimes only 12, towards our destination. One night a booby lands on our bimini and spends the night. At the time we think it lucky, so name her Gladys and take her picture. Next day we find booby poo all over the bimini and our solar panels, ugh! Even while cleaning the bimini she won’t go until we use a stick to shoo her off. She’s a persistent bird and keeps trying to come back, which initiates ‘booby watch’ as part of watch duties.

Finally, on 28th May, we cross the Equator. We make the appropriate salutes to the sea and prepare for the night. Later, while I’m pulling in the headsail, the boom lets loose from the traveller. I call up Julia to take the helm while I try to bring in the boom, and while wrestling it in find the 90° shackle has let loose. Julia brings up the spare and we get it re-attached, then find the headsail has a double twist in it. We try endlessly to unfoul it but to no avail, and drive on towards Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas under main and jerry-rigged staysail. We pull into the bay on day 28, and the anchor chain fouls coming out and nearly lands us on a lee shore but, finally, we’re here!



*Nuku Hiva, complete with rainbow*

We spend the next five weeks trying to get the engine fixed, but then give up. While waiting, the outboard breaks and has to be replaced. We eventually leave Nuku Hiva for Tahiti with no engine, no headsail, and some friends towing us out to sea with their dinghy.

The first five days go well, with 100+ miles most days. Then, just before the turn around the Tuamotus, we suddenly hit unforecast 30+ knot winds. Even with a reefed main and staysail, I suggest we turn back and wait it out. After making the turn we gybe and I notice part of the main flapping in the breeze – the sail has completely blown out above the first reef. I give the helm to Julia, notice that the second reefing line



*So close yet so far, Tahiti*

is still attached to what's left of the leech, and proceed to double-reef as if the whole sail was still there. I get her tidied up and we continue back, away from the blow, until morning. It's quite spectacular watching the spray coming off the foredeck.

Then we decide it will be easier to cope with the projected 20+ knot winds and 10ft waves for 90 miles to Papeete than to return 700 miles to Nuku Hiva, so push on that afternoon and finally turn the Tuamotus while hitting the heavy winds and thunderstorms. We ride like that most of the day till the winds start falling off. But here's the problem – because we've chosen to go around the Tuamotus rather than through them, it gives a tight angle of sail to make Tahiti. Also, the Equatorial current is pushing us west at the same time as the wind is dying. The closer we get, the more it looks like we're going to drift away.

Then we encounter an atoll that we have to pass to the west, further throwing us out. We contact the emergency services, but all they can do is rescue the people and I'm not giving up our home! While I'm doing some research on islands to the west we're notified that a fishing boat is coming out to give us a tow! Will wonders never cease – here we are, nine miles from Papeete with no wind, and somebody is heading out to help! A couple of hours later we are nestled into Marina de Papeete, safe and sound. 🌺



*Safe in Papeete*