

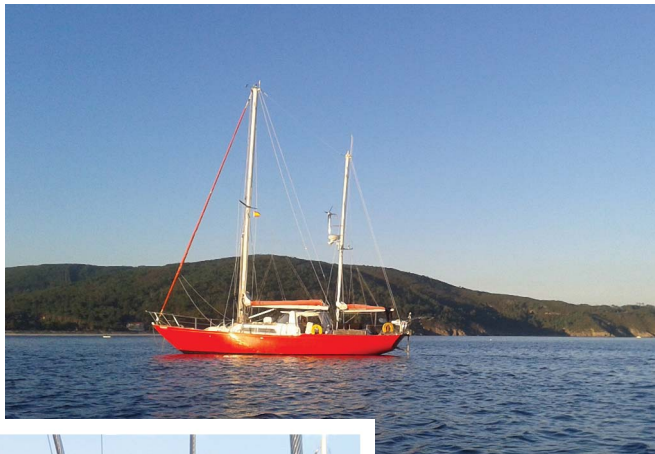
## VIGO TO VIRGINIA: *Seamogs* and the Prudent Mariners James McCaughan

*(When we purchased Seamogs, our very first sailing boat, in the UK in early 2017, my father and I began fulfilling a shared lifelong dream to sail around the world.*

*Together we run a high-country sheep and cattle farm in the South Island of New Zealand. We 'job share' the farm and the boat, with one of us running the farm and one of us sailing, swapping roughly every six months. This is an account of my first six-month stint aboard Seamogs, during which we sailed her from Spain to the USA via the Caribbean and enjoyed many challenges and adventures along the way.*

*This is the passage for which the 2018 Qualifier's Mug was awarded – see page 4. Seamogs also features on the cover of this issue.)*

So there we were, against all odds, getting ready for our first ocean crossing. Our boat, a red Nicholson 48 called *Seamogs*, had been left in Vigo on the Atlantic coast of Spain and it was up to me and my motley collection of friends to get her to the States in one piece. The crew assembled in dribs and drabs over the first two weeks of October 2017. The initial core crew consisted of myself, New Zealanders Guy Wilson, Tyler Beange and Josje Leyten, and the Australian medical representative of the outfit, ship's nurse Emily Rawlings. As a group we were light on experience and heavy on enthusiasm – Tyler and Emily had zero sailing experience, Guy had mucked about in sailing dinghies as a nipper, and I had never crossed an ocean before. We were fortunate



*The good ship  
Seamogs*



*The initial  
crew in Lisbon.  
L to r: Josje  
Leyten, Emily  
Rawlings,  
Tyler Beange  
and Guy Wilson*

*Setting up for an overnight spinnaker run, on a beautiful evening during the passage to Porto Santo*



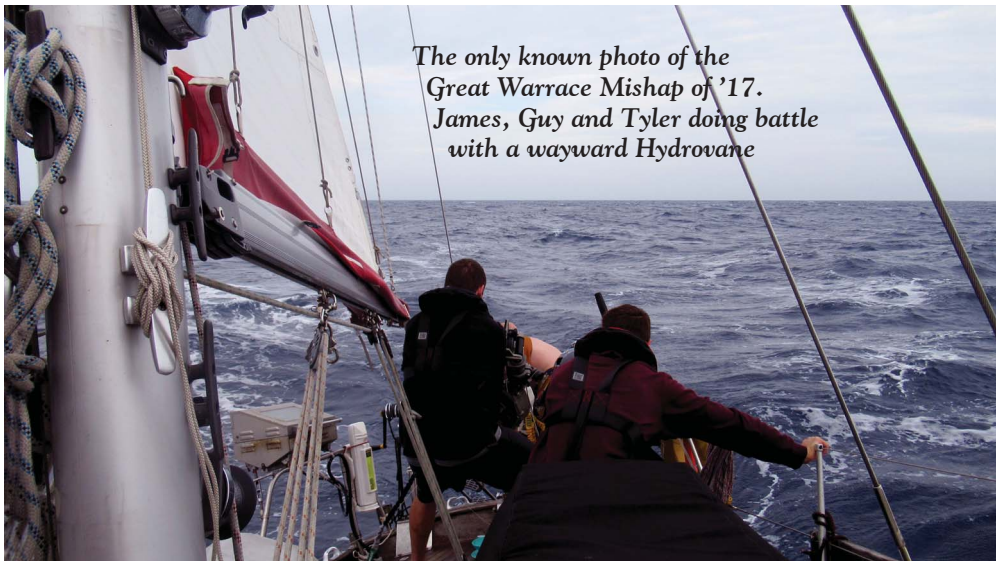
to have Josje with us at the beginning who, while only 24, was a relatively old salt in terms of miles under the keel.

By mid October the whole gang had assembled and we busied ourselves for a few weeks plunking around the Spanish rías getting to know the boat, training the crew, breaking things and failing to win the Spanish lottery. By early November most of us could tell the difference between tacks and gybes, sheets and halyards, normal operating procedures and genuine emergencies. This seemed probably the most we could hope for without yet having gone to sea, so with a favourable forecast and the motto of ‘if anything is going to happen, it’s going to happen out there’ we set off for Lisbon.

We had a ripper passage south, with crew and vessel performing very well in moderate conditions. It took us two days and two nights, arriving in Cascais mid-morning of day three. We enjoyed our time in Portugal, exploring by rental car and sampling the liberal nightlife in Lisbon. In Portugal we also said goodbye to Josje, who had ongoing sailing adventures calling her away, though we had not seen the last of her.

Anxious to get going and presented with a marginally favourable forecast, after a week in Portugal we set off for Porto Santo. On the third day of the passage I awoke from an afternoon nap rather suddenly. Not sure of what had woken me, I went on deck and, coming up the companionway facing aft, I could see Warrace our windvane self-steering gear looking a bit off. On further inspection I found that it had mostly fallen off the transom, become kinked in areas which once were straight, and was hanging on by the proverbial thread. As we went to furl the genoa and ready ourselves to deal with this predicament, the furling line came loose from the roller and the genoa set itself, with us now minus the means to furl it.

They say bad luck always comes in threes, and so the great Warrace mishap of ’17 came to fruition when we tried to start the engine, an exercise in futility given the previously undiscovered blocked fuel filters. Of course, the wind had been picking up steadily while this unfolded and had gone from a balmy 20 knot breeze to rainy and 30 knots. With no assistance from the engine room, odds were questioned and Murphy’s good name brought into disrepute, but by the time a few hours had passed some form of



*The only known photo of the  
Great Warrace Mishap of '17.  
James, Guy and Tyler doing battle  
with a wayward Hydrovane*

composure had been regained. All of this chewed out a good portion of the afternoon, leaving us approaching Porto Santo at twilight, so we opted to heave-to about 10 miles offshore to avoid making a night approach to an unknown harbour.

Overnight the conditions deteriorated further and dawn came with 35–40 knots of southerly wind turning the harbour on Porto Santo into a lee shore. Sometime early in the morning Guy and I decided we were not quite in the right spot and completed a tack in the dark without warning those below. Coming into a close reach in 35 knots resulted in a rather large amount of water being shipped over the decks which had, up until then, remained perfectly dry while hove-to. Poor Tyler in the forward V berth copped quite a bit of water down his open hatch – we learned of our mistake when he stumbled up the companionway wrapped in a towel, cursing us, our seamanship, and all of our ancestors for several generations. At least he was now out of bed and could get started on making coffee.

With our genoa lashed on deck and dubious engine reliability, we decided to hold off making our approach and spent a rather roly day hove-to off the north coast of



*Tyler  
looking  
like we  
all felt, a  
bit worn  
out and  
ready  
for safe  
harbour,  
Porto  
Santo*





*Happy skipper James McCaughan relaxing in port. Note Tyler's bedding drying out after he copped a wave down the forehatch*

the island. A break in the weather in the late afternoon left us just enough daylight to sneak into harbour with no further dramas.

We stayed in Porto Santo for about five days licking our wounds (forgive my rough estimates of timings, my log of the trip remains aboard *Seamogs*) and making what repairs we could while the weather settled. We departed Porto Santo in late November with three other yachts and a good forecast, all heading for Lanzarote in the Canary Islands. After an uneventful two-day passage we pulled into the marina in Arrecife on Lanzarote, where we began a short repairs and maintenance programme to get everything shipshape before heading across the Atlantic. The jobs list was not particularly long, made for boring reading, and definitely didn't contain five weeks' worth of jobs. As I have learned, however, a job expands to precisely match the time available, and our timekeepers were Spanish salesmen deftly armed with bureaucratic intricacies, mysterious customs officials operating with no telephones from non-disclosed locations (possibly in Madrid), and public holidays which liberally inserted themselves into our schedule with happy abandon.

Five weeks later our 'quick' jobs list was complete – such is the yachtsmen's lament – although we did have the good fortune of reuniting with Josje, who had been with us earlier and was now looking after a boat down the island in Playa Blanca after sailing to Lanzarote from Morocco. We enjoyed catching up with her and having a social time. Our stay in Arrecife, although frustrating, was made much more enjoyable by the large, friendly community of long-distance sailors from many nations all living in the marina at the same time as us. We enjoyed many nights of good company and made many friends while we were there.

With *Seamogs* back in ocean-going trim, not the least of which was the fact that we had reattached Warrace to the transom, we waved goodbye to our new friends in Arrecife and set off for the next leg. A short overnight test run from Arrecife to Las Palmas, Gran Canaria was a success, so it was time for fuel, water, provisions and go. During our stay in Arrecife we had collected a stranded French sailor from Brittany, Lydie Carre, who had arrived to crew on a yacht across the Atlantic only to find said yacht was sadly broken down. Lydie had spent time in Vietnam working as a Catholic missionary, which we could

*Dry decks running downwind  
in the Atlantic trades*

only consider a plus as we surely now had God on our side. With this new addition, we departed from Las Palmas towards St Lucia on 7th January 2018 with five crew members and divine providence.

The crossing turned out to be the smoothest going of the whole trip. The wind came from somewhere behind us and blew pretty steadily, the crew slotted into a routine of naps, snacks and book swaps, and Warrace the windvane performed excellently for 9 days out of 21. Things were going so well that we really had not much to do, and so when Warrace had finally had enough and once again toppled off the transom without even handing in his notice, the crew happily added hand-steering our little ship into the schedule of on-watch responsibilities. Tragically, at some stage of the trip during a sail change I lost my beloved Patagonia cap overboard. It had sat atop my swede for over 4000 miles by dogsled in Canada, and sailed over 2500 miles with me as well, so realising it had tumbled overboard was a real blow. The crew celebrated the loss as they claimed it was a disgusting greasy thing and well overdue for replacement.

*Happy sailors in mid Atlantic. L to r: Tyler, Emily, Lydie and Guy*





### ***Peak excitement and satisfaction – landfall***

There was a pattern to the 21-day crossing. The first seven days or so saw us settling into the rhythm of the sailing and liberally consuming snacks, the middle seven days mainly enjoying an easy routine and strictly rationing the snacks, and for the final week there was slowly mounting excitement, sometimes turning into restlessness and a deep regret that we hadn't packed more chocolate. We reached Rodney Bay, St Lucia at around about 0800 on 28th January 2018. I knew there was a welcoming committee from NZ and Australia hanging out somewhere, and as a crew we made a decision to tie up at the marina, check in, tidy up, have something to eat and generally get ourselves together before we made our presence known to those on shore. Well, it just wasn't to be – those dock rats were well aware of our presence, having been closely monitoring our Garmin inReach tracking, and they sniffed out *Seamogs* on the marina before I had even made it out of the customs office. By the time I got back to the boat the crew of five had doubled in size, there were many happy greetings, congratulations, and beers being cracked by all hands. We hadn't even managed to get breakfast in.

We celebrated what was, for all of us, our first ocean crossing well into the evening. The following few days were spent exploring Rodney Bay and St Lucia, concluding the week with the much talked about Gros Islet Friday Night Fish Fry. The fish fry was a big street party with loud reggae music and as much barbecue jerk chicken, lobster and rum punch as you could stomach. Shortly after pulling up onto the beach, Guy and Tyler realised they hadn't brought nearly enough cash to do justice to what was on offer, so they disappeared up the street to visit the cash machine. Thirty or so minutes later we caught sight of them looking a little worse for wear stumbling back towards us through the crowd. They were always getting into strife and mischief of completely their own making, so at first we weren't too alarmed by Tyler's torn shirt and the fact



that Guy was covered in blood. But it turned out that what had unfolded was a little wild, even by their standards.

Having extracted their money from the cash machine, they were jumped by two assailants on a darkened street. After fighting them off and holding their ground for a while, one of the assailants pulled a knife, stabbed Guy, grabbed his wallet, and ran off with his mate who had been roughing Tyler up. Guy was covered in blood with a decent stab wound to the leg, but he proudly announced that he'd managed to pull all his cash out of his wallet and hold it in his fist while being attacked, so all the thief had gotten was a cancellable bank card and a driver's license – financial loss was at a minimum.

At this  
jumped  
friend

stage our varied and not-very-sober medical team  
into action – Emily, a nurse by trade, her best  
Annie, a qualified veterinary nurse, and  
myself, a staunch supporter of the  
nursing profession and toaster to  
good health in general.  
We bundled Guy  
into the



**Daggy  
Boy, our  
indefatigable dink,  
was pushed far beyond the  
manufacturer's recommendations  
with our guests in St Lucia**

dink and whipped back out to *Seamogs*, which was  
about 200m off the beach. Using our very comprehensive  
aid kit, we put Guy's intestinal fortitude to the test by bathing the wound in  
various concoctions of iodine, peroxide and God-knows-what other disinfectants  
that Annie and Emily had in their arsenal, before each of us gloving up and having a

anchored  
onboard first



*Tyler  
enjoying  
some easy  
sailing in  
St Lucia*

crack at throwing in a stitch or two. By all accounts it wasn't the tidiest job, but with Emily administering strict wound care daily, and the Captain prescribing a course of the ship's antibiotics, Guy made a full recovery. The worst part for Guy was that Emily strictly forbade him going in the water for at least ten days, so he was forced to pace the deck, growling like a bear, while we all enjoyed the refreshing waters and beautiful snorkelling of the Caribbean. Such is the price you pay for the lesson learned, that the most dangerous part of a sailing adventure can be experienced wandering down a dark alley in the Caribbean!

After this rather unsettling development in our education we headed south to Soufrière and The Pitons with the idea of slotting in some R&R and enjoying our surroundings. Almost immediately after arriving and taking a mooring, we were set upon by a group of three schoolchildren who paddled up sitting on a chunk of polystyrene to ask, "Captain, captain, have you got any biscuits?". On discovering that we did indeed have quite a diverse and plentiful biscuit selection that we were happy to share, we found we could not get rid of them and they turned out to be the most delightful ruffians you could possibly imagine.

*Beautiful St Lucia and The Pitons*





Kenya was the oldest and the undisputed leader of the gang, and headed up the entrepreneurial aspect of their operation which was, chiefly, paddling around the anchorage asking boats if they could take their rubbish and dispose of it for a small fee – often cash, although biscuits did seem to be accepted as legal tender. *Seamogs* quickly became the boys' base, a rallying point from which they could launch their marketing campaigns on other cruisers as they entered the anchorage. As Captain I became the banker of the enterprise, being trusted to hold any profits throughout the afternoon as business continued. When darkness fell and boats stopped arriving the boys would reconvene to the cockpit of *Seamogs*, where Kenya would divvy up the loot evenly between all stakeholders. This became daily routine, and when school let out on the island at 1400 there would immediately appear a flotilla of craft paddled by children headed to *Seamogs* to commence the day's work. As well as being businessmen they spent a lot of time helping with boat chores, making gifts for the female members of crew (with whom they were enamoured and who exploited their infatuation shamelessly), fishing, and telling us of their lives.

*Businessmen on a business trip: Kenya (left) and his colleagues*



As we got to know them, and they got to know us, the boys went from being shy and polite in the extreme to being totally at home onboard. In the beginning they would not dare enter the cockpit before first clearing it with the Captain, but after a few days it was not uncommon to find them galley-side putting some serious pain on an already under-pressure biscuit stash without so much as a by-your-leave. They would follow instructions rapidly, however, and were enthusiastic and industrious. It would have been folly to leave them in charge of galley operations unsupervised, but with a little executive production from senior crew members they would turn out filling dinners for all hands while the rest of us sat around relaxing. The time we spent in the company of these fine young men was a truly enjoyable and humbling experience.



### *Triumphant sailors in Norfolk, Virginia*

After St Lucia we headed north, visiting Martinique, then Dominica, Guadeloupe, Les Saintes, Antigua, Barbuda, St Barts, St Martin, the BVIs and the USVIs, enjoying fine weather and good company throughout.

We passed many areas

that had been seriously affected by hurricanes *Irma* and *Maria* – the severity of hurricane damage across many of these islands cannot be overstated.

While in Antigua we were lucky enough to spend time with a young Irish sailor, Ross Harte, and his rum drinking cat *Fish* on board Ross's boat *Drumbeat*. We had first met Ross during the ill-fated night out at Gros Islet and ran across him again in Falmouth Harbour. A raft-up ensued and, over several days and a beer or two, plans were made to take both *Seamogs* and *Drumbeat* on a cruise up the east coast of Antigua and onwards to Barbuda, and we had a solid crack at carrying out these plans. As testament to the fact that even the most carefully laid plans being executed in the most focused and driven manner can fall apart, things went awry when Ross discovered a small fire in the engine room of *Drumbeat* and had to turn back to Falmouth Harbour to track it down and eliminate the fire risk. Apparently Ross's crew, a local chef, was so hungover that even the relatively serious threat of fire on board a wooden vessel could not rouse him from his bunk. *Seamogs* continued, minus a friend.

Having given the Lesser Antilles a good crack, we bumbled through a frustrating immigration process in order to avoid fines in the States and departed from St Thomas on 14th April 2018 with myself, Guy and Tyler aboard, bound for Norfolk, Virginia. What followed was the usual passagemaking story – some breakdowns, a force 9 gale, rationed snack supplies, a swordfish that appeared to give hallucinogenic dreams when consumed, a deep consideration of our decision to leave the Caribbean behind as the weather grew colder, and another successful landfall after eleven days at sea.

Although obviously we were on a sailboat and not a mountain, and we had more in common with Johnny Wray\* than with Sir Ed, after cleating the dock lines in Virginia we undeniably felt that we had, in the timeless vernacular, 'knocked the bastard off'.

\* Author of *South Sea Vagabonds*, a New Zealand classic of adventure at sea first published 75 years ago and still in print.

