

NEW ZEALAND TO SOUTH AFRICA: My OCC Youth Sponsorship passage Cian Mullee

Growing up on the Atlantic coast of Ireland, I was incredibly fortunate to learn to sail amongst the 365 glacially-carved drumlin islands strewn across Clew Bay. It proved to be an excellent training ground to develop as a sailor and progress through the Irish Sailing Association syllabus, qualifying and gaining experience as an instructor. In more recent years my focus has expanded to racing yachts, lured by the range of travelling adventures and career opportunities they offer.

In April 2018, the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme made such an adventure a reality. I left Ireland for Auckland, New Zealand with high hopes for what would be an epic voyage of over 11,000 miles, from the calm of the Pacific Ocean to the turbulent Indian Ocean, encountering a spectacular range of land and seascapes in between.

On joining *Star Charger IV*, a 43ft Oyster ketch, in Whangarei just north of Auckland, I was introduced to my new team-mates – skipper Alasdair Maclean, his wife Gill, and my fellow crew Maura and Ignacio, a Chilean couple taking a break from their work in Antarctica. I enjoyed the time getting to know everyone as we set to work preparing our new home for departure. Alasdair presented us with a list of tasks to complete and gave us free rein to get on with it, although he was always available to help when needed and was very patient with any difficulties and problems we encountered along the way.

It quickly became clear to me that preparation is paramount when it comes to bluewater sailing. I loved the process of dismantling the boat's equipment and reassembling it – the experience gave me a detailed understanding of how the yacht functioned and allowed me to gain confidence in both the vessel and myself. Being given responsibility to complete these tasks at 22 years of age was a huge step in my development as a dinghy instructor progressing into the world of long-distance sailing. I found it easy to settle into my new life on board, helped by being around great people and the strong bond that quickly blossomed between us.

My first ocean passage began when we left the beautiful, rugged coastline of the Bay of Islands for the open deep blue. Despite light winds for the majority of the 1500 miles

*Approaching Port
Resolution, Tanna island,
Vanuatu. Photo Ignacio
Reyes Henríquez*





*Night-time under
Mount Yasur, Tanna
island, Vanuatu. Photo
Ignacio Reyes Henríquez*

to Vanuatu I could not have wished for a better maiden voyage. The calm conditions allowed us to witness the sun sinking into the ocean and stunning views of the unblemished night skies with the Milky Way on full display. Sighting Vanuatu, and watching the tiny silhouette of Tanna island grow gradually as our sails pulled us closer, filled me with anticipation. Port Resolution exceeded all my expectations – a natural harbour surrounded by palm trees and snow-white beaches, where Captain James Cook found safe haven nearly 250 year ago, is nothing short of majestic. We passed locals fishing in their wooden dug-out canoes, before ceremoniously dropping anchor and celebrating a successful passage. That night we ate dinner sitting in the cockpit, under the red glow cast on the night sky by volcanic Mount Yasur. Our crossing to, and stay in, Vanuatu remains one of my favourite memories from the entire trip and set the bar high for the rest of the voyage.

This short account of my trip cannot possibly capture all the memorable moments, but some personal highlights include encountering a welcoming party of false killer whales acting as guides as we wove our way through the Great Barrier Reef on route to Thursday Island. While kayaking around Flying Fish Cove on Christmas Island, a pod of spinner dolphins surrounded me in a phenomenal performance, capped with corkscrew leaps into the air and dramatic crashes back to the sapphire water. In the tropical paradise that is the atoll of Cocos Keeling I had a hair-raising snorkel with multiple

*Sailing across the Coral Sea northeast of Australia.
Photo Ignacio Reyes Henríquez*



white tip reef sharks, their apparent disinterest not quite comfort enough to maintain a steady heart rate.

I thoroughly enjoyed the long spells at sea, but nonetheless found the transition from life on land to living on a boat challenging. Cooking on a rolling boat was something I initially struggled with as I found myself chasing the ingredients around the galley which was usually unbearably hot. My first night cooking on passage I was too nauseous to eat. Over time it became easier however, and before long I was unfazed and feeling relatively at home.

Of all the miles of ocean traversed, the final few hundred packed some of the biggest punches. South of Madagascar, in the notorious waters off South Africa, we encountered a powerful thunderstorm which brought with it winds of over 50 knots (force 10). It was an exhilarating experience, being so far from land and at the mercy of the raw power of the ocean. I remember sitting in the cockpit bracing for wave after wave in complete darkness only for lightning to flash, for an instant illuminating the horizon and revealing the full spectacle of the angry waters surrounding us. It was a humbling experience, especially when the bilge pump decided to quit, forcing us to take turns pumping manually. I couldn't help but think it was like being inside a washing machine, which made me laugh despite the butterflies in the pit of my

stomach. It was an intense encounter, but it made the arrival in South Africa all the sweeter and heightened my personal sense of achievement.

Sailing in the tropics was a new adventure for me, having grown up sailing in the cold waters of the North Atlantic. I really enjoyed swapping foulweather gear for shorts and a woolly hat for sunglasses, even though the heat was unyielding at night making sleep hard-won. As a pale Irishman, sun cream became my most prized possession and I fought a constant battle to avoid turning into a very red Irishman. I also developed a profound hatred for mosquitoes. Despite these minor grievances, it was a welcome change and an act as small as stopping the boat mid-passage to indulge in a swim, often thousands of miles from land, would dispel any notion of complaint!

My journey of 2018 was an unforgettable experience. Ocean sailing taught me a lot about myself – about resilience, creativity, practical thinking and so much more. Participating in such a voyage really stretched my comfort zone and forced me to grow. For someone of my age to get an opportunity like this is truly amazing and has a lasting impact. As I write this piece, I'm building on my experience with the OCC and am midway through a Yachtmaster course.

I'm extremely grateful to the OCC and its fantastic Youth Sponsorship Programme.

Finally I'd like to say a big thank you to Alasdair and Gill for inviting me to join them aboard *Star Charger IV* in New Zealand, which led to everything I've just described. You both made me feel extremely welcome from the very start – it was a pleasure sailing with you and I eagerly await our next adventure together.



Off the Cape of Good Hope

