

SINGLEHANDING HOME

James Tomlinson

(James has always sailed alone and since retirement in 2013 has been able to sail further. He bought Talisker 1, a Westerly Typhoon, in early 2014, and in 2016, with his ship now prepared for longer passages, set off on a shakedown cruise to Scotland, Orkney, Fair Isle, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Holland, returning for further exploration of Norway the following year.

In 2018 he and Talisker 1 sailed 4000 miles in exactly two months. The following article (taken from his diary) describes the final ocean leg of that Atlantic cruise. This was also James's qualifying passage for the OCC.

Talisker 1 is a modified Westerly Typhoon, just over 37ft overall with a tall, fractional rig. Fast and stable, she is set up to be easily handled alone. Video of James's cruises can be found on YouTube at Samingo Sailing, and his blog is at www.samingosailing.com.)



Sunday 8th July – Day 1:

Talisker 1 and I are heading north away from very beautiful Santa Maria in the Azores. Hopefully the easterly winds that are promised for a day or so will get us well to the north. We are romping along at 7 knots, with 15 knots of breeze over the deck. It's overcast and warm. Later tonight we should clear the eastern end of São Miguel and be clear of land and traffic.

Looking over our starboard quarter the island peaks are cloud-covered, much as they were when we were inbound from Madeira a few days ago. I am expecting variable winds for the next ten days or so. With the jet stream parked so high this year, I'm not anticipating heavy weather. I think this voyage to Falmouth could take up to fourteen days.



Monday 9th July – Day 2:

In variable easterly winds we have covered 140 miles in 24 hours noon to noon. It's been overcast with a little rain, but still warm. The expected wind shift is due tomorrow. The wind will back to the north and then we will tack east, sailing as high as we can until the predicted westerly and southwesterly winds arrive sometime around Saturday. Some of those southwesterly winds look quite strong.

Breaking the voyage down into sections will help. Today we will continue to sail north. Yesterday evening, close-hauled on starboard, we were reefed and flying the staysail. I'm getting my head down as much as possible.

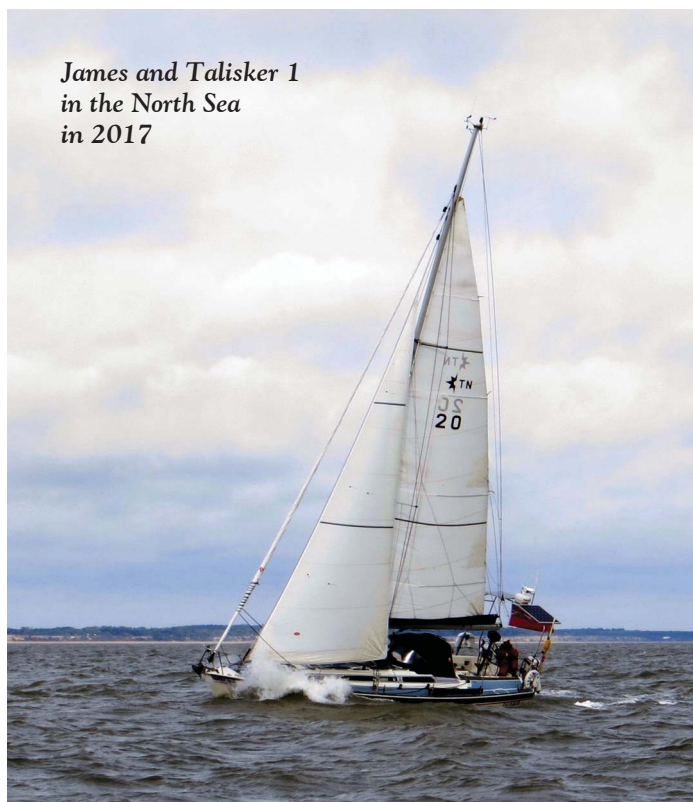
Tuesday 10th July – Day 3:

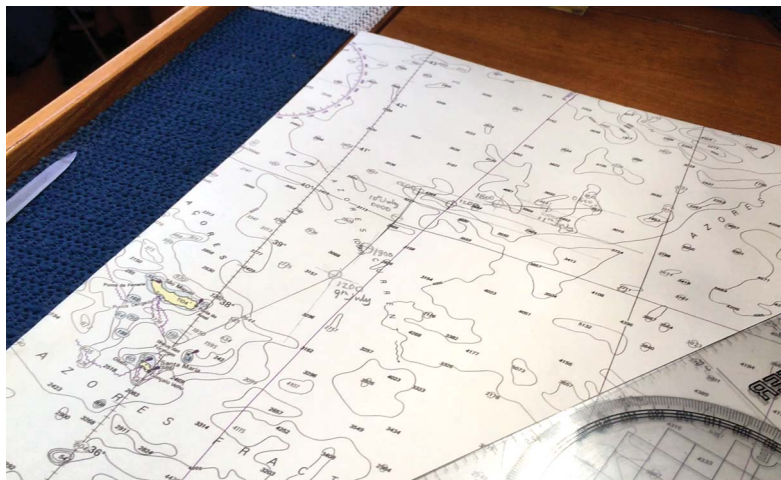
0600: Sailing north over a flat sea in very light northeast winds. I am waiting for the wind to build slowly and then back north and eventually northwest. When to tack? My GRIB charts show the wind will die. A cup of tea. Enjoy the dawn!

Tea drunk and now no wind. Reluctantly we are motoring east in the hope of finding wind this evening.

1000: That didn't last long! Engine off! We are now close-hauled on port in north-northeasterlies heading for ... Lisbon! Four different GRIB charts show varying information. Eventually these winds should back enough for us to lay a course northeast – continuing north as we were would have left us in no wind at all.

A ship, a ship and the first traffic since the Azores. The CS *Crete 1* is bound for Halifax. We are now on a course





The first tack. I like paper charts

of 85°M but airs are very light. Now heading for Finisterre! Better! A few minutes later and we are heading for Gibraltar! Not so good!

2020: A small vessel that had been approaching steadily from our port quarter, MMSI 204211000, eventually passed half a mile ahead of us. Watching the ship get nearer had me feeling vulnerable and scared. There was no response on VHF and my binoculars confirmed that there was no one on the bridge. I later identified the vessel heading off to the east as the FV *Mar Portugues*. Mid ocean, who cares?

MAR PORTUGUES

204211000

Position Lat	40°50.79'N
Position Lon	021°50.39'W
Time Received	Not Available
COG/SOG	097.9° 8.9kn
CPA/TCPA	PAST PAST
HDG/ROT	N/A N/A
Distance/BRG	6.6nm 123.0°
Call Sign	Not Available
IMO Number	Not Available
Vessel Type	Other
Destination	PESCA
ETA	10/11 12:30

ADD to Favorites List

Press ► MENU to ADD
Press INFO ◀ to Clear Display

Range
64nm

She's past! No response had me feeling scared

Wednesday 11th July – Day 4:

1200: We have been 73 hours at sea. The 24 hour runs so far have been 143 miles, 133 miles and 124 miles – a small lift from ocean currents has helped. The wind is just east of north and we are close-hauled on port. Overnight we had a reefed main and staysail, but this morning the wind backed slightly so I furled the staysail and set the genoa. Later the wind will veer again to just east of north, until Saturday at least. Hopefully by then we will be approximately 43°N 13°W – west-northwest of Finisterre. With the sun out the deck is hot. I could have burnt the soles of my feet. There was early morning dew for the first time and it's very slightly colder, but I'm still living in pyjamas to keep cool.

CS *Pacific Reefer* was bearing down on us from the N at 17 knots. "Have you seen us?" I asked. From the sleepy reply, obviously not! The ship turned to starboard and we wished each other a good watch.

My tomatoes are all pretty ripe so I'll have to eat the whole supply soon, and the green bananas have ripened as fast as the yellow ones. The delicious Santa Maria small melons are all gone, but I have enough food on board to last several weeks.

1500: We've been making a comfortable 6 knots, close-hauled with 14 knots of breeze over the deck, for most of the day. The sun has been shining and I've spent the last two hours with my sextant.



Taking sights ... which way is up? The sights seem okay but the maths is disastrous!

Thursday 12th July – Day 5:

0748: E-mail from *Talisker 1*, Subject: Weather Brains

“Uncomfortable night bashing into northerlies close-hauled. Lumpy seas. But she does not get stopped. I'm at 42°21'N 18°23'W. Planning to continue like this until Saturday morning, by which time we should be 43°30'N 13°25'W. Then tack and head north-northwest until the wind backs and we resume course for the English Channel. Winds due to increase a bit. Have I missed anything?”

E-mail from Simon Abley*:

“No, about all you can do is to play the angles and get set for the new breeze.”

E-mail from John & Kara** US SV *Sentijn*:

“You're doing all the right things; just got to keep plugging away until Saturday's switch. It's a marathon – not a sprint – as there's a fair wind on the way and nothing scary on the forecast ... so don't forget to look after yourself too! A few hours hove-to for a comfortable meal, a cup of tea that doesn't slosh out, and a longer stretch in the bunk always does wonders for me when it all just seems like too much work!

We're in Bantry Bay doing some shopping and watching the weather for Biscay crossing. Mostly light winds forecast, so we've got out the full-size spinnaker and are trying to figure out which end is up ... doh! Stay safe, Love, JKD”.

1200: We've run 536 miles through the water and 566 miles over the ground in just under 100 hours. Thankfully the wind has backed and, close-hauled, our heading is east-northeast until Saturday. Then the wind should back northwest, which will allow us to lay a course for the Western Approaches.

* Friend Simon has numerous transatlantics, Fastnets and Sydney Hobart races to his name.

** John and Kara Pennington circumnavigated in a very small boat. *Sentijn* is their new bigger boat, and as of Christmas 2018 they, and baby Dean, had arrived in the Caribbean from the Canaries. Read their splendid book, *Orca*, for the full story.

Last night, close-hauled and in variable wind strengths, we ended up at midnight with a couple of reefs in the main and flying the staysail. The sea was sloppy and uncomfortable as *Talisker 1* smashed her way to windward. I have to catch up on some sleep.

1700: Clouds have to be watched, but resting down below I'm pretty quick to get up on deck to reef. A squall bringing 45 knot gusts is disappearing behind us. Our grey, forbidding visitor is fleeing south, her skirts right down on the waves. Behind her, blue skies, a breath of breeze and a wind shift. North-northwest would you believe.

The wind veers north again. We could set the genoa and shake out the reef, but there is more cloud heading this way. With the wind freshened we are making 6 knots through the water with staysail and reefed main. The ocean is punishing on a boat. Days and

days of non stop wear and tear.

It is tempting to fly full sail, but being underpowered and nursing is key. I find myself looking for weakness on my daily deck and rig checks.

1800: A second reef back in the main and then no wind and rain? We have now covered 600 miles.



One of many, many squalls since Madeira

Friday 13th July – Day 6:

Yesterday evening we were surrounded by squalls. One could not be avoided and the rain required full oilies. I popped a third reef in the main, and when the squall passed and with darkness approaching I left the deep third reef in, and we forereached slowly but comfortably into a messy sea.

The third reef in the main is deliberately deep



Daily deck and rig checks ...

This is okay! Forward momentum. Control. No stress. Into my pilot berth 2230, out at midnight, a check around, set the alarm on radar and AIS and then set a wake-up alarm for 0600. We still made 29 miles in the six hours. What did John say in his e-mail of yesterday? I've just slept six hours but broken – now that's better!

Two ships yesterday evening, both bearing down on us from the north. I've widened the guard on AIS to its maximum. Squalls appear red and menacing and set off a cacophony of alarm sounds on radar. In the next 24 hours we will tack on to starboard. I was thinking of taking out the third reef after the first cup of tea, but I'll have some breakfast first, then another cup of tea and think again.



... and a photo opportunity

The CPA (Closest Point of Approach) was showing half a mile – was it going to be a repeat of our encounter with the *Mar Portugues*? But I got an immediate response on VHF ... “Don't worry, we see you ... we are deciding which side to pass you”. And

1400: I've just had one of those golden encounters at sea. Late this morning I was watching a vessel approaching from astern. To begin with all you see is an MMSI number on AIS. Eventually the name of the ship will appear. In the clear ocean air you see ships in the distance very quickly.

FV Lutador ('fighter' in Portuguese)



then, "Can I help you with anything? Do you need a weather update? Where are you heading?" Before her name, *Lutador*, came up, her white superstructure had me thinking yacht! They were returning to Vigo having fished the Grand Banks. I asked if the fishing had been good.

I ask a huge favour – could *Lutador* take photographs of *Talisker 1*? "Photography! Of course, of course. You're a solo sailor ... I understand. Stay on your heading and leave everything to me." We talked some more. Alfredo had sailed many dinghies including a Laser and races a Dufour 44, *Bull Energy*, in Portugal. Slowly *Lutador* came abreast on our starboard side. I'd told Alfredo I would take pictures too. "Yes please, but we've been photographed by everything including satellites! Can I call your family to give them your position?" I told Alfredo we had satellite communication. We meticulously exchanged e-mail addresses. (Alfredo did e-mail my wife, but despite responding to e-mails hasn't sent any photos yet!)

It's now got really windy. Back to triple-reefed main and staysail, slogging to windward east-northeast on port tack. When to tack? Perhaps this evening or even in the morning?

Sunday 15th July – Day 8:

0700: We are 130 miles northwest of Cape Finisterre. For several days we have been close-hauled and sailing as high as we could. I could feel every blow to *Talisker 1*. Despite being reefed – and for part of the time, triple-reefed – with staysail, *Talisker 1* felt like she was going ten rounds with Mike Tyson. But unlike his opponents, she's still cutting a path towards the English Channel – nothing stops this boat.

At 1615 yesterday we finally tacked and headed northwest for nine hours and 60 miles. At 1800 the wind abated a little and I set the genoa and furled the staysail. Then at 0120 this morning we tacked back onto port and I shook out the first reef in the main. Later today the wind should die and back, and by this evening we should have favourable northwest winds. I hope we don't have to motor – so far, bar a couple of hours, we have only run the engine to charge the domestic batteries. This morning we encountered our first ship since *Lutador*, the *Nasa Neslihan*, bound for Baltimore.

I'm no longer singlehanded. A guest arrived overnight and is still here this morning. I laid on breakfast of water and some cereal flakes, and when I put the small nutritious pan next to him/her, my visitor did not hesitate to tuck in. He/she has fouled the sheets of course! My crewmate is a tagged homing pigeon.

Days of sailing to windward, smashing through the Atlantic, has caused a minor weep from the small hatch just forward of the mast. I meant to remove the hatch and re-bed the frame when I repaired the forehatch, but you never get everything done. Rest is pretty key now. Traffic will build in the Western Approaches and there will be less time to sleep.

Having been feeling so good, last night I felt sick. Just a queasy feeling lying down. Truth is, although I drink lots, I've lost my appetite. I realised I had not eaten, and had a large bowl of cereal with raisins, the last banana and some honey, followed by several of my Mum's crystallised stem ginger cubes. I felt fine after that!

Monday 16th July – Day 9:

If you draw a line between Ushant and the northwest tip of Spain, and then draw

another line parallel to that but 120 miles to the west, we are about a third of the way up that line.

Yesterday we motored briefly in beautiful sunshine and no wind before the wind returned, but at 0545 a squall had me tumbling out of my pilot berth to double-reef the main, furl the genoa and set the staysail. At 0830 I shook a reef out of the main and we are now flying the genoa again. We should have plenty of wind until this evening so, without pushing *Talisker 1* too hard, I'm trying to make as much progress as possible before the wind dies.

Today it's been anything from 10 to 30 knots over the deck, so multiple sail changes. We should also have plenty of diesel, which is good as the Western Approaches look to be pretty windless for the last 140 miles. We should be close to Falmouth by late on the 18th, but I don't want to go in if it's dark. And anyway, there are the next twelve hours to deal with first.

A catamaran has just passed us port to port. No AIS and no response on VHF. An empty cockpit too! It did look as though she turned to starboard however, so perhaps she's helmed from below. I also had an interesting conversation with *Ocean Ambition*, a cargo ship bound for Rotterdam. "Just wanted to confirm you've seen me! Sailing vessel ... off your starboard bow". "No Sir! I am off your port quarter". "Affirmative ... you're off my port quarter. I'm off your starboard bow...".

Tuesday 17th July – Day 10:

We are approaching 1300 miles logged since leaving Santa Maria, and are now well onto the continental shelf – but with well over 100m down to the seabed it's still deep for a southern North Sea sailor. The four figure soundings in the ocean caused me and *Talisker 1* severe vertigo!

We are currently charging the batteries, motor-sailing in very light westerlies under full main and staysail to port, with the genoa poled out well forward to starboard. I'm hoping we stay in what wind we have, so that once the batteries are charged the engine can be turned off. We should be close to Falmouth by early afternoon tomorrow, but I don't want to speak too soon. We still have another night at sea to come. Concentration on 'finals' is very important. It's easy to think you've arrived and drop your guard. We arrive WHEN we arrive and this is the time to be extra careful. I'm pretty well rested, but will try and get some more sleep today as traffic could build more overnight and tomorrow.

We've logged 3300 miles since leaving the east coast of the UK on 1st June, and *Talisker 1* and I have nearly completed what I've wanted and prepared to do for so long – a small voyage in the ocean. It's been a completely humbling experience. I now have an inkling of what some very special friends do all the time.

Wednesday 18th July – Day 11:

0300: The lights of the Scilly Isles have been visible for the past hour. I've had a little sleep. Enough. AIS targets started their alarms about an hour ago – as I expected there's a good deal of traffic. I'm so pleased we're still sailing. I expected the last three or four days to be more of a struggle, but we've hardly motored at all. The engine hours on this leg have almost all been for battery charging, the one disappointment of the voyage. But we did carry loads of fuel.



Approaching the Cornish coast. Has the Royal Navy come to meet us?

1900: *Talisker 1* and I reached Falmouth today. We are anchored across in St Mawes after sailing 1400 miles from the Azores. I've showered and the cabin is back in harbour mode, but I've had the munchies ever since I arrived.

We slowly made our way up Channel, and on 31st July returned to our home port of Orford, Suffolk, having sailed 4000 miles in exactly two months.

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I'm grateful to friends James Robinson and David Foreman, both Ocean Yachtmasters and RYA Instructors, for pointing me in the direction of a Westerly Typhoon. She's

***St Mawes, Cornwall, and Talisker 1
proudly flies the courtesy flags of Portugal,
Madeira, the Azores, Spain and France***

handled everything thrown at her. I feel the ocean gave us our sail south to Madeira – however windy and rough, it was never taxing downwind. From Madeira to the UK via the Azores we had to work hard for every mile.

Much as I like being at sea, I always prefer to go somewhere. I enjoy the planning and then the actual passage, although the enjoyment is always during and afterwards – I'm far too anxious before departure to call it fun. I don't want to let my ship down though I know I'm the weakest link. I try to prepare for every eventuality, but the sea is unpredictable and the ability to improvise can be essential. I'm grateful for the challenges and the lessons learned, and other boats and their crews' experiences interest me enormously.

