

SAILING PARADISE: Crossing the Caribbean Sea Helena Klocke

(Helena received assistance from the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme to make the passage described below. She hopes to remain with the boat until New Zealand, so this may well be the first of several articles.)

Hello! My name is Helena and I am a 20 year old German girl. When I graduated from high school in 2017 I felt that a big journey to take me far away from home would be the right thing to do. One year of working later that idea became reality when my mother met James Joll, who was happy to have our company on his way from the Caribbean back to his home country of New Zealand. That journey will take us across the Caribbean Sea to Panama and through the Panama Canal to the Pacific, where we will stop in the Galapagos, the Marquesas and Tahiti before I have to fly back home.

Kiwa will take us all the way and be our home for the next few months. Named after a Maori guardian of the ocean, she is a new Lagoon 450S catamaran which James and his partner Marina bought in France in 2018 and sailed in the ARC to the Caribbean.



James had made the passage before, on a Lagoon 421, in 2012. Marina and my mother, Rena, met in Las Palmas. Marina had to go back to New Zealand and a new crew was needed from March onwards, so we were able to join James.

The first part of our journey, the crossing of the Caribbean Sea, started in Saint Martin:

Kiwa, named after a Maori guardian of the ocean



Cleaning the hulls before leaving Saint Martin

We leave on 11th March 2019. We motor out of the anchorage, look behind us, and say 'goodbye Saint Martin!'. All of us are ready and happy to get going. After 20 minutes it's time to set the sails for a broad reach, for at least 24 hours, James says, just the reefed mainsail and the jib. The wind fills the sails and we're off downwind. James is most relaxed and patient, explaining things to me even though I need to hear most things twice to figure out his Kiwi accent. We set the autopilot and watch the island shrinking behind us – we are off to Panama! What a life. It will take us about one week to get there.

Around noon we gather for lunch to enjoy some food, talk, laugh and roughly plan the night watches ... 'we'll just see how it works out' is James's plan. I look

at my mom and she looks at me – we love this already. And of course it works out. I get up at 0400 and take over from James. Around us darkness still rules, but two hours later I watch the sun rising behind us. It spreads its colours all around the horizon, everywhere I see orange, red, pink and violet. I sit at the helm, watch the waves, and somehow I don't get tired of it. And I won't ever get tired of it. The waves approach us from behind and some of them are so big they could easily destroy us if they decided to break. But instead they rock us gently like a child; take us on their backs for a little ride before they gently put us down again, ready for the next one to do the same thing. It is an absolutely beautiful sail so far.

The next morning James decides to drop the mainsail and head deeper downwind with just the headsail. We do so and are positively surprised that we almost keep the 6.5 knots we were doing before. We put out the fishing line and hope for a nice dinner, but the fish have other plans for the night and, along with weed continuously getting caught in the lure, it is hopeless.

I cannot yet tell you about big adventures, dangerous weather or wildlife encounters. Indeed the only fish we meet are the flying fish that land on the boat. So far it's just us three in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. Our little household runs mainly on common sense. Everything is so uncomplicated. Although we share little space, it is always easy to find a little place to be alone. I love that.



On the fourth day James decides 'we won't just do 5 knots all day', so we get out the spinnaker and set it. I have no idea and am just amazed. A few metres above our heads it gets filled by the wind, still from behind. It seems to me as though it had been waiting very patiently and is now fully content in a very humble way. If the sails were human, then the spinnaker would be the one with the highest spiritual level. The sun enhances its beautiful turquoise colours.

Our journey continues just as beautiful. Later in the afternoon we take the spinnaker down since the wind is beginning to build – some exercise! Again we try to catch fish, but again there is too much seaweed on the water's surface. We do not stop trying, not knowing that it will take us a few more days to succeed. Nevertheless we have a very peaceful time filled with music, books and long conversations sitting up front in the

Helena and James fight to get the spinnaker down

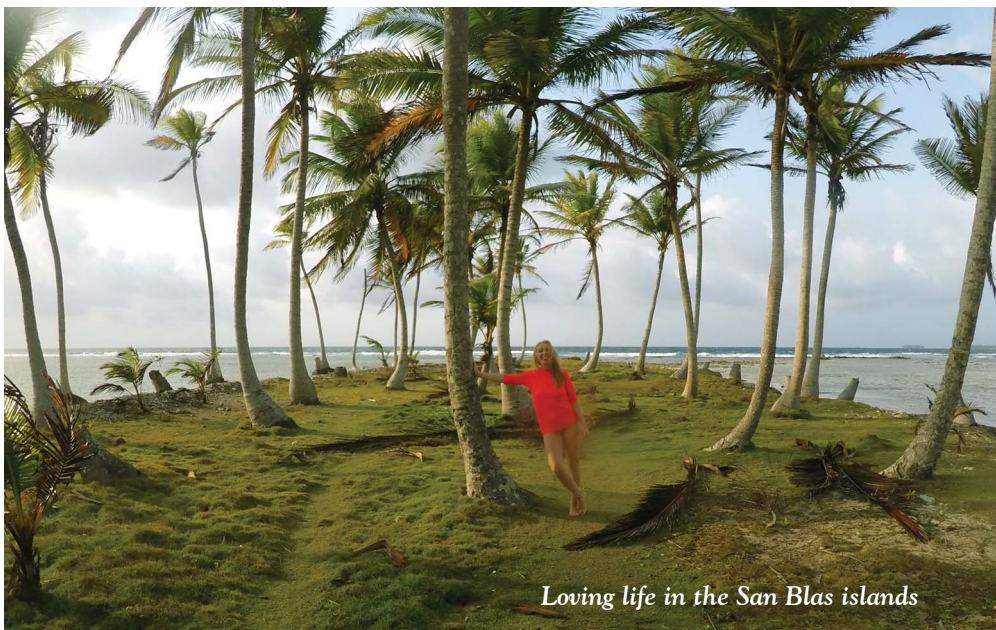


saloon area. James explains some sailing theory to me and gets out the paper chart for me to plot our route so far. There is nothing like learning about something completely new, it is a blessing – just like the whole trip.

By Wednesday 13th we are halfway there. We decide to go to the San Blas islands first, a group of 365 remote little islands along the coast of Panama. The Kuna, an indigenous tribe who migrated to the San Blas only 125 years ago, control the tourism and keep their Robinson Crusoe-type islands nice and tidy. Truly a little paradise – I get very excited. It seems like Neptune senses my excitement and decides to speed our passage up for us. When I wake up the next day at 0400 to take over my watch, James furls the jib a little because the wind has risen to up to 30 knots. The whole day we sail with an average speed of 7.6 knots and a maximum of 17 knots. The sea is accordingly rough. As it calms down in the afternoon we put out the fishing line once more. Half an hour later I sit down to study when all of a sudden I hear a big snap. The hook is gone and the naked line lies on the steps. ‘We could not have eaten a fish that big anyway’, we comfort ourselves, laugh, and try again, not knowing that the same thing will happen again...

By the next day it is only one more day to the San Blas! It is almost a little sad, since we had such a great time at sea. It suits the mood that the sky is covered with clouds for the first time. Funnily enough it is also the day I get a major sunburn from falling asleep on the trampoline, but it doesn't affect the mood in any way. We're too excited about our impending arrival and swimming in the sea again.

It has been seven days since we left Saint Martin. Now here I sit at the helm and we are only 10 miles or so from the San Blas islands. Looking back I think about the whole amazingness of this trip, the exceptional opportunity to do something so special. Yet it was so easy to get used to, so very enjoyable. For this I have to give three big thanks – the first to my mother, my all-time best friend. Her presence alone is the greatest comfort I know. Then to our skipper, James. One seldom finds a soul with such honest kindness and generosity. I thank him very much for having us aboard and teaching me.



Loving life in the San Blas islands



*Arriving in Colón,
Panama*

But the final and biggest thanks goes to the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme for its major help with the costs of the trip which enabled me to join this amazing adventure. I am also very grateful for the kind and supportive correspondence regarding practical matters. I think it is an absolutely great way to support my generation and the ones after mine, since voyages like these help us youngsters open our minds and have experiences that will forever widen our horizons.

We were at sea for 6 days and 20 hours, and sailed 1020 nautical miles at an average speed of 6.7 knots. Far enough to qualify me for membership of the Ocean Cruising Club!

