

LYDIA ROUND THE CAPE AND ACROSS THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

Donald Begg

(Donald and Lydia, his Bowman 48, first appeared in the pages of Flying Fish in 2018/1 – Lydia across the Tasman – and again in 2019/1 – Lydia across the Indian Ocean. Now we rejoin them in Richards Bay for the next leg of their five-year circumnavigation. Visit his blog at blog.mailasail.com/yachtlydia to read more.)

Lydia crossed the Indian Ocean as part of the World ARC fleet, but after arrival at Richards Bay, South Africa the weather turned bad for a week. My wife Nicola was flying into Cape Town from the UK and we were looking forward to a land holiday in SA followed by Christmas at home with the family, so I had to make a decision. That decision was to hand Lydia over to the capable Richards Bay boatyard for servicing and maintenance, allow the rest of the fleet to leave without us, and aim to catch them up at a later stage. Nicola and I had our holiday together and I rejoined the boat with her new crew – Graham Stoddart-Stones and Mark Curtis – on 4th January 2019.

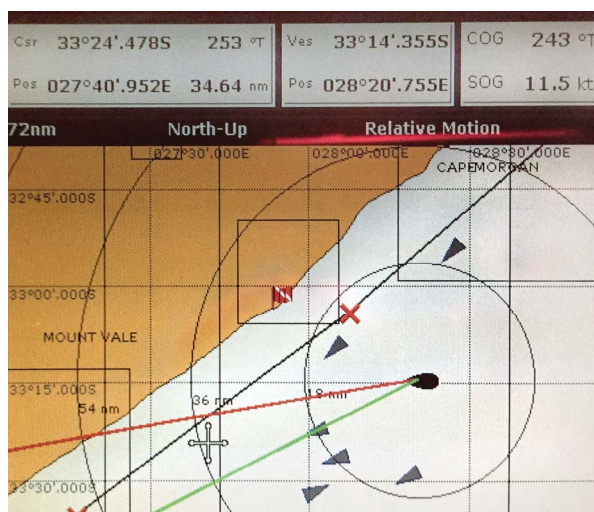
South to the Cape

The name of the game for the passage round to Cape Town is to catch the weather windows. There are few ports of refuge and none for the 250 miles between Durban and East London. The weather, meanwhile, is dominated by the regular formation of lows which send the wind whistling up against the 5 knot Agulhas Current, generating waves that will crunch a yacht. The World ARC fleet was already gathered in Cape Town 950 miles away, ready to restart the rally on 9th January. This would inevitably be without us, but the question was, how close behind them could we get?

We were ready to go on Saturday 5th, but inevitably a low was passing through. Des Cason, amateur router and local weather expert*, said Tuesday, maybe Monday if you must. So Monday it was, sailing on the high tide at 0500 and motoring into a contrary but decreasing wind with a lumpy sea. The wind slowly turned northeast as forecast, we found the current, and we part motor-sailed and part sailed, zooming past Durban and later East London, speed over the ground at anything up to 11 knots, midday to midday distance 217 miles on our

* Des Cason received the 2018 OCC Award for his service to cruising yachtsmen – see *Flying Fish* 2019/1, page 15.

Scorching SOG in the Agulhas Current



Lydia in the Caribbean

first day, 186 on our second. After two days and 482 miles the weather window was closing, Mossel Bay looked like a step too far, so it was in Port Elizabeth that we moored on the evening of 9th January. The only problems had been the generator, which ran for 10 minutes and then cut out, and the mainsail which had not been bent on correctly so enjoyed a few moments of freedom before it could be tamed.

The marina at Port Elizabeth was ramshackle, a little grubby, but thoroughly welcoming and friendly. The old Algoa Bay Marina appeared to have gone bankrupt a few months earlier, but the catering facilities had been renamed the Nelson

Mandela Yacht Club and the marina itself was being run by local yachtsmen. All good for us, except that the shore power did not generate enough voltage to activate the battery charger. We had an on-site engineer, Frenchman Guy Fabre, look over the generator. The verdict – a loose banjo nut on the fuel line which was sucking in air and, probably more significantly, dodgy fuel, which the engine could cope with, but not the delicate generator. Our only solution was to burn off fuel on the way to Cape Town, and to refill there with fresh.

The weather window again closed in on us. We had arrived on Wednesday and I hoped to sail on the Friday, but no such luck. When it became clear that we would be stuck for the weekend Graham and Mark hired a car and spent an enjoyable day at the Addo Safari Park, which at least meant Graham was able to see something of the classic attractions of South Africa. (Mark had already seen plenty and I had had a lovely few days at Addo with Nicola.) The town itself looks industrial and, from the marina, does not appeal. It is reputed to be unsafe, but in the other direction there is the resort of Summer Strand which is ideal for recreational runs ashore.

We were itching to leave but the wind was whistling up from the wrong direction. Des Cason said that it would start to turn on Monday, so better wait until Tuesday. I said, let's go at 1800 on Sunday and give it a try. That time came and boat and crew were ready, but it was still blowing old boots from the south. Executive decision – we'll have a nice dinner, some sleep, and sail at 0400 on Monday 14th. And so we did, motoring out into a light headwind with a lumpy but navigable sea, not a cloud in the sky, the sunshine in tune with our optimism.

We motor-sailed for a day and a half against light winds. I had hoped for some favourable current, but now that we were round Cape St Francis we had lost the Agulhas and even had a knot or so of the cold Benguela Current against us. By Tuesday





Table Mountain

afternoon an easterly was building and we were sailing. As we approached Cape Agulhas, lost in the mist at first light on Wednesday morning, the wind was up to 30 knots and the sea was rough, but we were making 8 knots in the right direction. We rounded the Cape and *Lydia* was back in the Atlantic after a little under three years. The only wildlife were seals, but lots of them. They lay on their backs on the rough surface apparently asleep, flippers in the air, occasionally lifting an incurious head to watch us go by. Where were the great whites?

Every crew seems to produce a cook who outshines the others – Mark, in our case. He amused us with a touch of finesse, a knob of butter on each plate before dishing up spag bol. Try keeping that on your plate when balancing it on your knee in rough weather!

I had thought that after Cape Agulhas we would get a bit of lee and calmer conditions as we approached Good Hope. Nothing doing – we went scooting up past the ‘Cape of Storms’ and got no respite till abreast Hout Bay, with the stupendous Table Mountain ahead. We berthed in the V&A marina in Cape Town at 2230 – 434 miles from Port Elizabeth, 916 from Richards Bay.

We didn’t want to tarry. The ARC fleet had an eight-day start on us, Mark and I had already done Cape Town, so bad luck Graham. On Thursday 17th we ploughed through the laborious check-out procedure – five sets of documents at four different locations – took on fuel, and left at teatime.

Rough weather north of Cape Town



Northwest to St Helena

The pilot states that this is a straightforward route, but advises sailors to keep a close watch on the weather before leaving the Cape. We weren't inclined to hang around, but in any case the weather looked reasonable on PredictWind and Windy, so we sailed at teatime on Thursday 17th January. A few fishing boats were offshore – one called us on VHF and helpfully guided us around his fishing floats on a dark night. Next day we had 20–30 knots west-southwest, as forecast, and were sailing well with both sails reefed, despite a rough sea. Saturday morning was easier, but then the wind started building and by evening we had 40 knots from the southeast.



Mark, Donald and Graham, wind-swept but plainly happy

The night which followed was clear with a full moon, but with probably the worst conditions I have known on this boat. We ran before the gale with just a patch of mainsail – *Lydia* has in-boom reefing – but even so boat speed was too high, matching that of the waves. If I'd had a drogue prepared I would have streamed it (I do have one, but didn't fancy preparing it in those conditions). In the event *Lydia* was the star of the show. She ran on the autopilot and steered straight as a die, rolling with the waves but never losing it or threatening a broach.

By morning the wind was down to 25 knots and by afternoon it was 20. The sea was still rough, but we were under control – phew! The wind steadied at 20 knots from the southeast, so we rigged the twin headsails and had three days of good if rolly sailing, with daily mileages 175, 171 and 160. On Thursday 24th we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn and on the 25th the Greenwich Meridian, so we'd been round the world

(not an official circumnavigation – for that we needed to recross the equator). On the 26th the wind dropped to 10 knots and backed to the east, but by then we were within 300 miles of St Helena so were prepared to switch on the engine and motor-sail. We continued like this for two days, to pick up a mooring off Jamestown at 1230 on Monday 28th, 1718 miles and just under 11 days out from Cape Town. We'd averaged 6.5 knots, mostly under sail.

And the generator? We had it running for only 45 minutes on the first day and the same again on the third. Then I changed the fuel filter, which had also been done in Richards Bay, and bled the fuel line. On the fourth day I ran the engine for five hours to charge the batteries, got fed up with the noise, switched the engine off, the generator on ... and it ran! My theory is that those five hours of engine burned off some of the dodgy diesel, leaving us with the better quality Cape Town stuff thereafter.

St Helena

From seaward St Helena is a lump of unremittingly grey rock with no sign of greenery, and we approached it under a grey sky with a hint of drizzle. Yes, but ... from the moment we called St Helen Radio to announce our approach, through the time when Port Control guided us to our mooring, our passage through Customs and Immigration, and on in due course to our departure two days later, everything and everyone were unfailingly friendly and welcoming. The officials, especially, were a pleasant contrast to their counterparts in South Africa. Everybody says hello in the street, big smiles, and drivers wave from their cars!

Problems included credit cards not being accepted on the island, so the only way to get cash (pounds sterling, of which we unpreparedly had little on board) is to get to the bank with a debit card before closing time at 3pm. We were lucky, having arrived at 1230 on a weekday – what you do if you arrive mid-afternoon on a Friday I don't know. Plus there's no phone signal for overseas phones so we couldn't phone home, and though wifi is available at a price at a couple of hotels and restaurants, it's only useable there. Finally, there's no place to land from and safely leave a dinghy.



Snorkelling with whale sharks

*From the top of
Jacob's Ladder*

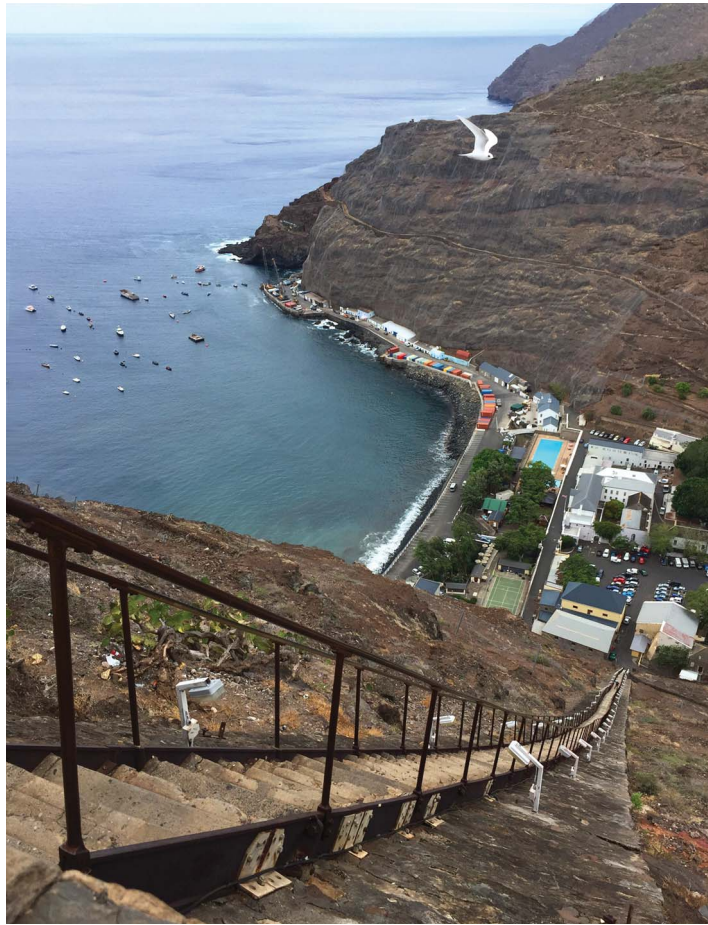
On the plus side there's an hourly water taxi from the moorings to Jamestown, a sleepy but charming little colonial town in the cleft between steep cliffs. Two roads wind out, plus the redoubtable Jacob's Ladder, a long and steep staircase which climbs from the lower town to the upper. Mark and I climbed it (Graham had office work to catch up on) and my legs hurt for days thereafter.

The town itself consists of stone buildings and is reminiscent of Port Isaac or Mevagissey in Cornwall, but without the trippers. There are a handful of hotels, bars and restaurants, all

thoroughly welcoming and really good value. We had an excellent tour of the island, driven by Keith Yon, one of two entrepreneurial brothers. It included a walk to Napoleon's tomb, swathed in bougainvillea, and a visit to atmospheric Longwood House where Napoleon was interned; a visit to the controversial airport which cost hundreds of millions but is still restricted to specially-trained pilots on the weekly mid-sized aircraft from Pretoria; a drive around the green landscape at the top of the island which allows a little agriculture and farming; and a visit to the Governor's House to see Jonathan the giant tortoise who, at 180ish, is reputed to be the oldest creature alive.

The undoubted highlight of our stay was snorkelling with whale sharks – yes, whale sharks. These huge creatures, not much smaller than *Lydia*, are harmless and, like basking sharks, feed on plankton. They are particularly beautiful – light blue with white spots, lithe, with a long tail and a fin that often breaks the surface. Craig Yon took us out to their feeding ground in a fast RIB and chucked us overboard into the clear blue water. The experience of putting my head underwater and seeing one of these beasts a few feet away, coming towards me with its mouth wide open, is one that will live in my memory.

More problems: there was no fruit to be had, and little in the way of vegetables – the ARC boats had probably cleaned it out. We'd need a fast passage to Brazil in a race



against scurvy. We were able to get some meat and frozen food, however. The island was also running out of beer, so we might have to halve the ration en route (or drink gin?). But in summary I thought this was a delightful two-day visit, at the top of my list for ARC stop-overs to date.

Across the Atlantic

We sailed from St Helena at teatime on Wednesday 30th January. The pilot says, 'This route is generally a dead down wind run onto the coast of Brazil ... Talking to those who have done this leg to Salvador, they all agreed these were some of the best sailing conditions they had met'. I join the agreeers. The sun shone, the wind blew steadily from the east and the worry was that there wouldn't be enough, never that there would be too much. We flew the classic trade wind rig of poled-out headsails, an efficient and unfussy set-up which comes at a price – you roll like a pig! We had no excitements and saw disappointingly little wildlife. We got to know each other's stories, we cooked (mainly Mark), we read, we practised noonsights on the sextant, we became familiar with the Southern Cross, the weather grew warmer.

My previous record for flying twins had been 12 days in the Pacific. We beat that this time – for 13 days we didn't change a sail, we didn't use the engine for propulsion, we didn't use the autopilot (the Hydrovane was in its element), we didn't unroll the mainsail, and we never strayed more than 20 miles from the Great Circle route. The lowest daily mileage was 104, the highest 161. I had high hopes of not furling the twins until we were inside the Baía de Todos os Santos, but no such luck – on the 13th day the wind finally abandoned us and we motored the final 18 hours to the Centro Náutico Marina in Salvador da Bahia, arriving at 1000 on 13th February. The mileage from St Helena to Salvador was 1917 and we arrived in just under 13 days, an average of 6.22 knots. We had caught up with the World ARC fleet ... but first for a *caipirinha** or two and a bit of shore time.

Brazil

Salvador is big, a high-rise, modern city, with a historic colonial centre as befits the original capital of Brazil. We arrived in the run-up to Carnival and our lasting impression will be one of noise and rhythm, with music thumping from 0530 until late at night. Oh, and of heat – well over 30°C and 70% humidity. Somewhere to swim would have been wonderful, but there are no pools close to the marina and the water in the bay is uninviting. Everyone is immune to noise. If the crew of a tripper boat row a dinghy out to their mooring at dawn, their first action on arrival is to switch on the samba. If two men are chatting in the marina and one decides to go to the loo, the conversation continues uninterrupted, just louder so as to cover the extra distance. Opposite the marina is a naval establishment. Call the Hands is at 0600, and throughout the day a number of announcements are made, each preceded by a pipe on a bosun's call.

There is an undercurrent of crime, none actually seen by us but hyped by the numerous admonitions to be careful and the blatant gulf between rich and poor. On

* Brazil's most famous cocktail, consisting of *cachaça*, sugar and lime. *Cachaça* is a spirit made from fermented sugarcane juice and is distilled all over the country.



the plus side, there is clear determination by the authorities to protect tourism and *polícia militar* are everywhere, as are apparently unmolested tourists.

The old city is on top of a cliff facing the marina. One reaches it on the Lacerda Elevator, a public lift which operates frequently and costs 15c (say 4p). We were advised not to use it after sunset, but we did so frequently and had no trouble. The buildings, the churches and the cobbled streets are lovely, but unfortunately some of the squares and monuments had been fenced off in preparation for Carnival. I suppose Notting Hill is not much different in August. The restaurants are mostly excellent, the wine is good, the *caipirinhas* are delicious and the prices modest. The beat of Brazilian music in the evening penetrates the soul. Salvador is a vibrant city and I'm glad I've seen it, but it won't top a list of World ARC favourites.

We cleared formalities at Salvador on the morning of 25th February and left the marina just before midday, heading north. The voyage to Cabadelo took four days, the first three of which were somewhat tedious and uncomfortable, with little wind and what there was on the nose. We motored or motor-sailed, but the chop was quite steep and at times we were slowed to 3 knots despite having revs for 6. On the fourth day the wind veered and picked up, so we regained some honour with a decent sail.

The main characteristic of this route is fishing activity. About 20 miles offshore, at the edge of the continental shelf, depths drop from 50m to several hundred metres in the space of a mile, and this is where the fish congregate. We soon learned that the boats trawl, troll, and lay traps just inboard of the edge. The boats are well lit but the traps are not – a yachtsman's nightmare. At night the edge of the shelf is well marked by the line of lit fishing boats. A mile further out to sea and the sailing is clear.

Cabadelo is the port at the mouth of the Paraíba River. We came up the ship channel on the morning of 1st March, into the river where the water suddenly turns from blue to brown, and then a further three miles up, between mangrove swamps, to the marina in the village of Jacaré. 462 miles in four days – a slow passage.



Carnival in Olinda

Jacaré, which means alligator, is flea-bitten, dirt-streeted, hot and humid, but it has a colourful river frontage with a couple of bars and restaurants, and is a base for the tourist boats that ply the river. During Carnival the place rocks, morning till late at night. Towards sunset a canoe drifts past with a local man playing Ravel's *Bolero* on the saxophone. This romantic interlude is a local tradition which attracts a crowd of holidaymakers, and once it is over the samba thumps again. An American boat at the inboard end of the pontoon gets aggressive and starts blaring Country and Western back at the shore. The locals don't even notice.

The marina is run by two Frenchmen, Francis and Nicolas. It is friendly, apart

from when the restaurant is very busy, and it has water and power on the pontoons plus good showers. The majority of visiting boats were French, including one which had just completed a circumnavigation from Jacaré to Jacaré via Good Hope, New Zealand and the Horn. The resort area of João Pessoa consists mainly of high-rise apartments, but it has a long and beautiful beachfront with excellent and reasonable restaurants where we had several dinners. There is a big Carrefour supermarket which is good for re-provisioning.

We took a bus to Olinda, an old colonial town and World Heritage Site near Recife, to witness the press of flesh at Carnival. The crowds, the noise, the colours and the music are breathtaking. There are times when you can't move for the crush of people – just staying on your feet is a challenge. It's all good humoured with no signs of aggro, but I didn't pay sufficient heed to our briefing and this cost me my mobile phone. It went from deep in my pocket to a new life on a Brazilian back street. Next time, I'd welcome a more leisurely sightseeing visit to Olinda – low season would be fine.

Then, suddenly, on 6th March it was Ash Wednesday and the music stopped. Silence came down like a curtain, and as I passed through the village on my morning run kids were going to school with their satchels. The party was clearly over.

And so to the Caribbean

Rather than leaving with the ARC rally fleet on the evening of Thursday 7th March, after a long day of passport and customs clearance, we and three others opted for a final dinner in João Pessoa and sailed at first light on the 8th. Mark had left to continue the ARC on another boat – he had been excellent company and a first-class crew. We headed up to the northeast corner of Brazil and into the ITCZ, commonly known as the doldrums. So, some wind, some calm, numerous squalls of varying intensity, muggy heat, sails up, sails reefed, engine on, engine off. But we had one great advantage – the Guiana Current sets northwest at up to 2 knots. Daily mileages were 185, 175, 170 and similar.

This is an area with a reputation for aggressive fishing boats, not to say piracy. Three of us had therefore decided to sail in company – heavy old *Lydia*, *Pretaixte*, a French X-Yacht 42 and *Aranui*, a Swiss X-Yacht 46. The two lighter boats set a tough pace and we were obliged to sail harder than had been our custom. But drama struck us when Niki, owner of *Aranui*, suffered a bad fall, broke ribs and had to lie still in serious pain. This left Karen, his crew, plus a young and inexperienced godson, to sail the boat. Karen rose to the challenge superbly and *Pretaixte*, whose owners are doctors, helped with medical advice and drugs. The three of us stuck even more closely together to make sure that Karen and Niki had moral support. We stayed well out to sea and encountered only the occasional fishing boat, one of which came in close to have a look but broke off when he saw that we were a group.

We stopped for 24 hours at Île Royale – better known as Devil's Island or Île du Diable – in French Guiana. Not much remains of the old prison buildings but there is a brooding sense of unhappy history. Ghosts notwithstanding, we had an enjoyable stay at this remote location including dinner at the one small hotel/restaurant. ("No euros? A credit card will do nicely".) Then we were into the northeast trades, sailing well on a beam reach, with a good current still helping us along and daily mileages of between 160 and 180. The American catamaran *Cayuse* joined our group, and we had one suspicious approach by a fishing vessel but it was not sustained. Before we knew it we were north of Tobago, approaching Grenada, and into Port Louis Marina on the afternoon of 21st March. Distances were 1382 miles from Jacaré to Île Royale plus a further 726 to Grenada, so 2108 in all. This took 12½ days, so an average of around 7 knots over the ground.

Lydia had crossed her track, circumnavigation complete!



There is nothing like lying flat on your back on the deck, alone except for the helmsman aft at the wheel, silence except for the lapping of the sea against the side of the ship. At that time you can be equal to Ulysses and brother to him.

Errol Flynn