

THE ART OF GOING SOLO

Eugénie Nottebohm

(Belgian member and gifted artist Eugénie Nottebohm joined the OCC following her singlehanded passage from Falmouth to the Azores last year aboard her Contessa 32, Guilia. This article was written for the Contessa 32 Association Yearbook – my thanks to both the CO32 Association and to Linda Lane Thornton for drawing my attention to it.)

I had this crazy dream – to own my own boat and sail out into the middle of the Atlantic. I would visit my friends who lived on the small island of Flores in the Azores. But of course it was just that, a wild dream. I started like so many others, hitching rides on other people's boats, taking sailing courses, and getting to sea as much as I could. Over the next ten years I built up confidence and, with the support of friends, I started to believe that I really could be the owner and skipper of my own yacht.



Eugénie

First I found the boat. *Guilia* had been the treasured possession of Erik, a one-time boyfriend of mine. I had helped him to refit her so I knew her well, and already had the confidence in her that I now understand is so important. Once *Guilia* was mine I had the much bigger task of getting over my fears of taking charge of her.

Always pushing me on was my vision of the voyage. I sat in the cockpit in the marina dreaming of far-off horizons yet paralysed by my own uncertainty. One day Erik asked me if he should skipper her for me, and I knew then I had to take the leap. With a trembling hand I left the pontoon, and for the first time motored alone in the harbour. When I had calmed down sufficiently I returned her to the berth, a tricky move into a tight space, but I did it! To be on the safe side, I took a three-hour harbour docking manoeuvre course on *Guilia* with a skipper, probably the best investment I have ever made. He helped me understand how she reacts under motor, which has reduced a lot of stress when leaving from and arriving in a harbour.

I was just beginning to get enough self-confidence to dare to leave the dock as skipper and sail with friends on board. Slowly, I realised that I felt comfortable on the water with *Guilia*, and soon she became my best mate. I was still far from fulfilling my



Practising on inland waters

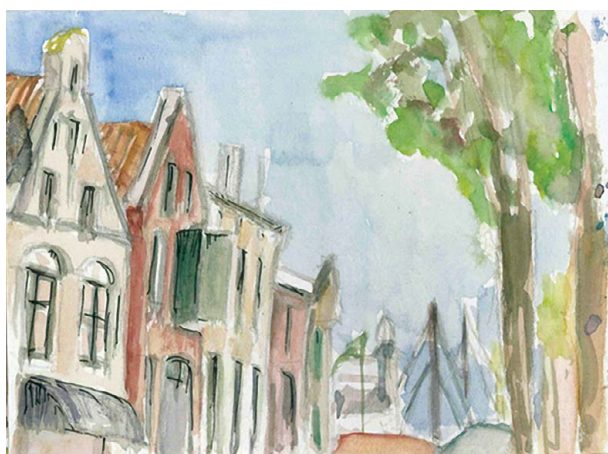
dream of casting off solo when Géry, a neighbour and friend in the marina, challenged me to leave the dock in *Guilia* with him alongside in his boat. I spent a restless night and woke early – here was my chance and I knew I had to do it. An hour later I was sailing alone under foresail on the Veerse Meer, my heart jumping with happiness and disbelief. Yes, I was sailing solo! In the following weeks, every time I felt comfortable with the weather conditions I cast off on the Veerse Meer, each time practising something new – sailing further on the foresail, sailing on the mainsail alone, sailing with both sails, practising mooring.

As my confidence grew the Veerse Meer became too small. However, to access the Oosterschelde I needed to go through the Zandkreek locks – and then one day, there I was in the sunshine in front of the gates when they opened. Without allowing myself to think too hard about it I nudged *Guilia* ahead. Trembling like a leaf I brought her alongside, and after that day my fate was sealed. Over the next weeks *Guilia* took me further and further, at first with other friends sailing their boats nearby, and finally alone for a week on the inner waters of Holland. It was awesome.

The next step was the North Sea and it was a huge one. Did I really want to be alone, just *Guilia*, the sea and me? Then again, did I really just want to sail on the inner waters of the Netherlands for ever? Wasn't my dream to cast off and sail a lot further? Once again I set off and there I was, rounding Walcheren on my next trip, laughing at my fear of being alone at sea as the fog grew thicker. Helped by my paper charts, the little I could

see and checking the AIS on the iPad, I rounded the headland under motor. I felt so happy and safe on *Guilia* and was sure that if I prepared properly she could take me further, if only I would let her.

I took advantage of three days of gale-force winds to prepare for my first solo trip, from Kortgene in Zeeland to



A typical Dutch scene



Heading out through the locks

Den Helder in North Holland. I read the nautical instructions and wrote down everything about the routes, departure and arrival harbours, the course, dangers to be avoided and waypoints. I prepared some Plan Bs and did everything to help me visualise each step of the trip so that I could cope with the inevitable unexpected situations that we meet at sea.

The day came that weather and tidal conditions allowed me to leave. And so, early one morning, I cast off, very nervous, to sail into the unknown. Friends came alongside in their 45ft yacht, their laughter and offers of cups of coffee the best remedy for the stress that was building up inside me. The first day to Roompot went smoothly and I was lucky to find two boats that were sailing the same route to Scheveningen the next day. They took my mooring lines in the locks and were on watch on Channel 77 during the passage. This felt reassuring, even though they were faster and I couldn't see them after a heavy downpour. I spent my day trimming the sails as best I could, following my route, spending hours just looking at the sea, painting and enjoying the feeling. It was an amazing first day and confirmed that *Giulia* is an excellent boat to

*Looking
out to
sea...*



*... and
out on
open
waters
at last*

sail alone. Stable and easy to handle, she reacts quickly when I reduce the sail. I also realised that my three days of preparation made me feel at ease on the sea, even when it became rougher and I was battered by heavy rain and squalls.

Gaining confidence each time I went out

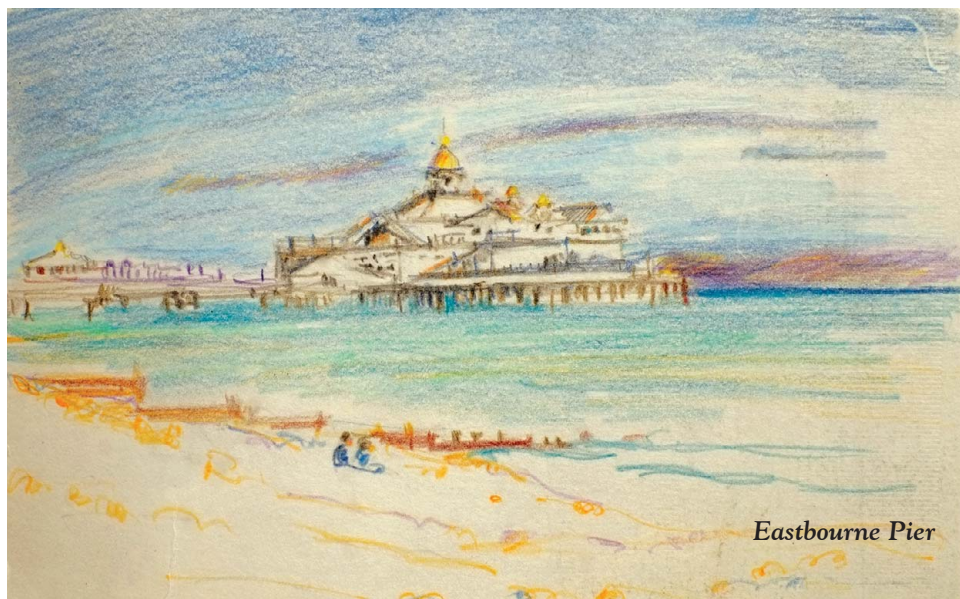


Arriving at the end of the day in Den Helder it was as if I was sailing into a 17th century Dutch painting; the sun reflecting on the silver and turquoise sea, in the background the deep grey sky highlighted by pink to violet clouds, and in between the shadows of the fishing vessels. Obliging, the wind veered to the east which simplified lowering the mainsail. I was welcomed by the crew of a boat I had met in Ijmuiden who kindly took all my lines. I felt I was becoming a skipper. What a beautiful feeling.

From there I visited Texel, and over the Wadden to Makkum on the Ijsselmeer and to Amsterdam. I encountered many different weather conditions from sunshine to fog, light winds to stronger winds, warm to cold, as well as leaving in the dark, each time finding new ways to sail, each time pushing myself further, each time getting to know *Giulia* better, each time more confident in the ability of the boat and her captain.

When I moored back in Kortgene after 20 days and around 450 miles sailing alone, I was a happy woman. I could not believe I had done it. I was grateful to all my friends and family who supported me, to the members of the Contessa 32 group on Facebook who reacted so kindly to my posts, and to all the sailors who took my lines in the harbours and locks. I realised how much taking command of *Giulia* is about taking back control of my life after breast cancer. It was the nicest gift life and *Giulia* could have given me.

Less than a year later, the day after my 50th birthday, there we were again, *Giulia* and me, in the Roompot locks. Their gates opened into the dissipating mist. It had taken me all winter to prepare for the journey I had dreamt of for so long. At first I hopped from harbour to harbour as far as Boulogne-sur-Mer. From there I needed to overcome my fear of crossing the Channel. The seas along both coastlines were heavy but the passage across the shipping lanes went smoothly and I put in to Eastbourne before heading to the Solent. Tears ran down my face as I sailed into Lymington, home of the Contessa, where I would enjoy the friendship of fellow Contessa owners and the people at Jeremy Rogers Ltd. When the time came to leave it was hard, but I knew I must push on west and finally the day came for the passage to the Azores.



Eastbourne Pier



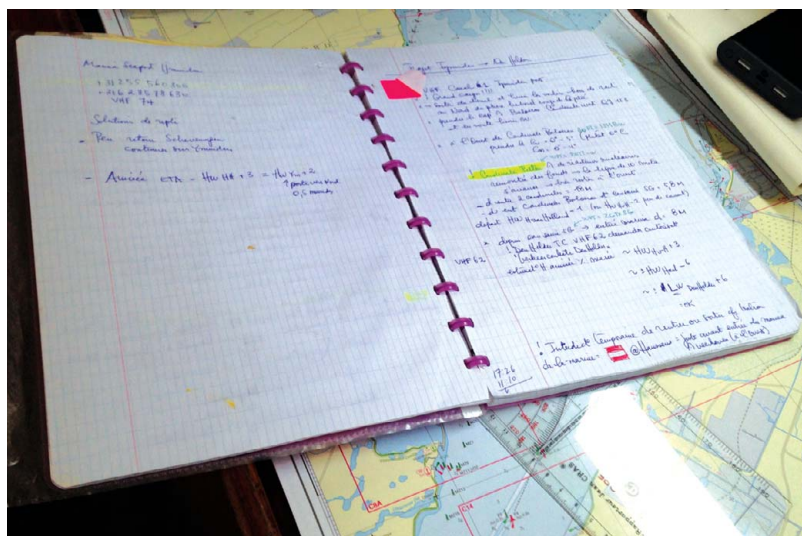
Hurst Gap and the western Solent

The Needles, which guard the Solent's western entrance



I had never sailed more than 20 hours alone and this passage would take me at least eleven days. Could I really do it? With mixed feelings of great confidence and great fear, I followed the inner voice that kept saying – “You can do this. *Giulia* is ready. Just go for it!”. The most difficult part was coping with the dark feelings that bubbled up from far within, tormenting me in the silence of the calms 200 miles from land. “Will I even make it to the Azores? And if I don’t make it, will anyone ever find me?”.

Happily another voice kept answering, “But Eugénie, you are achieving it!” And I realised that voice was right.



My log book/journal



Approaching Terceira

I started to be able to interpret the skies and wind shifts, and felt that I had chosen the best route. The ridge of the Azores anticyclone had weakened and bent to the north of Spain, and by taking a more southerly course than I'd originally intended I had avoided Storm *Debbie* and the following depressions. *Guilia* took great care of me, and my knowledge and judgement did the rest. Physically and psychologically I had adapted well to being on my own at sea. I realised that I had learned a lot about sailing and navigating, and this gave me the strength I needed to keep calm.

When I saw land on the last morning of the passage dolphins greeted me, leaping in the sunlight as the water shone like gold and my heart contracted with joy. This was really happening – I was arriving in Terceira, a tiny Azorean island in the middle of the Atlantic. After 13 days and 7 hours I moored in Angra do Heroísmo, with a strange feeling that I had not done it alone. As soon as I could I called my family, crying with relief and pride.

Days later, having sailed on through the beautiful islands of São Jorge, Pico and Faial,

Guilia and I finally pulled in to the tiny harbour on the island of Flores. How exciting it was to see my friends waving from the dockside. "Yes," I thought, "now the circle is closed". What had began as a wild dream had become a reality. Finally, I was a skipper!

Of course we left our mark in Horta...

