

## AN OCEAN'S LEARNING CURVE

### Dan Stroud

*(Dan brings new meaning to the phrase 'run away to sea', having decided to 'downgrade to a very different lifestyle' while cycling around Europe in his later 40s. On his return to Plymouth, on England's south coast, he sold his carpentry and property rental business and, with no experience of boats at all, committed himself to a life afloat. In January he wrote from South Africa...*

*His voyage can be followed on the chartlet on page 48.)*

My entry into the world of sailing began in a quiet way on the River Tamar just near Plymouth on England's south coast. On a calm autumn day in 2016 I climbed into an ancient inflatable dinghy, pushed myself off the wooden pontoon into a 2 knot tide and was swept gently downstream whilst trying to row, the oars jumping out of the rowlocks and the dinghy pirouetting in the flow as I craned my head to try to see where my new purchase was moored, rapidly disappearing, in the centre of the river. Before long there

came the purr of an outboard and a guy shouting, "Are you okay, do you need any help?". I swallowed my pride and accepted a tow, and as I fumbled with the rope that tied the dinghy to anything solid he acutely observed, "You don't know what you're doing, do you?". Upon my frank admission that he was indeed correct, he further stated that it was a wise



*Sailing with my friend and mentor Jeremy Hutchinson,  
to whom I owe so much*

man who could admit his limitations, to which I heartily agreed, feeling some relief that I could be honest and not hide behind some pretence. At this point I realised that I was stranded on a small boat attached to an orange ball with winter approaching, and quickly learned the finer points of rowing a dinghy in a variety of conditions across a variable tidal stream. My baptism of fire had begun.

*Aisling* is a Rustler 31, a 50-year-old GRP full-keel sloop. I couldn't have told you that when I'd bought her, and having forked out the princely sum of £11,500 I figured that



### ***Aisling in Scotland in 2017***

I was taking a low-risk gamble. I'd never sailed a boat before, knew almost zero about anything to do with boats, and had never lived on a boat, but here I was. Having fitted a wood-burning stove and resealed some leaky windows I was armed to spend a potentially cold and damp winter on the river. In those early days I had the great fortune to meet Jeremy Hutchinson, a highly experienced cruiser whose wife volunteered him to take me out sailing, which later turned into regular

weekly lessons, in all weathers, through the winter and spring of 2016/17. On our first venture we entered Plymouth Sound in a force 6 and later ran aground in the soft mud at Cargreen, on a falling tide of course. Over cups of tea and a curry, having lit the stove whilst listing at 40°, we spent 11 hours together which I am convinced was an act of serendipity as we began a good friendship that has given us both so much.

Having learned the difference between a halyard and a half hitch, I began to venture out on small forays from my mooring. The sense of trepidation associated with unhitching an 8 ton lump of plastic from the only solid thing in a moving flow of water with no guarantee of hooking back on was acute. However I quickly came to realise that when faced with the unexpected I could learn to adapt or cope with the situation. So picking up a mooring singlehanded became a part of my skill-set, and off I went to sailing school to study for the Day Skipper and get my radio licence. My internal protestations about 'why can't I talk on the VHF like I would talk on a phone?' became ousted by training and repetition so I could make the grade. Since buying the boat I had invested in new standing rigging, new sails and a bunch of safety gear, but everything else remained much the same. It's fair to say that *Aisling* had been a little neglected for a couple of decades, so she needed attention to bring her up to an adequate level of seaworthiness.

Within nine months of buying *Aisling* I was ready for adventure. I had managed to sail all of 26 miles out to the Eddystone lighthouse and back and was hungry to make more miles. So in June 2017 my mentor and I cast off the mooring and set about a clockwise circumnavigation of the UK. We motor-sailed up through the Celtic Sea to

Rosslare, which was absolutely hideous. I felt sick, the boat smashed and crashed into the waves, and the 40-year-old 15hp Yanmar thumped away continuously making it hard to think above the ear splitting racket in the saloon. When we reached Rosslare I remember standing in the harbour master's office feeling as though I'd just come from a war-zone – I couldn't hear properly, the room was swaying, I could hardly speak and all I wanted to do was sleep.

We made our way north to the beautiful cruising grounds off the west coast of Scotland and visited a series of stunning bays and anchorages, culminating in spending a week on Harris where my companion disembarked. I went on, alone, to complete the circumnavigation, sailing across the top of Scotland and down the east coast, through the Thames Estuary (not for the faint hearted!) and back along the south coast, where the toughest part of the voyage lay from Lyme Bay to Plymouth, beating into wind and tide with everyone else coming the other way!



#### *Traditional navigation in the North Sea*

I think I encountered more adverse conditions and learned more on that trip at any other time since. It set me up with a foundation that has become the bedrock of my journey. Tidal flows, currents, transits, navigation markers, shipping, real life Maydays unfolding, navigation, weather, using the VHF, entering and leaving ports, the Pentland Firth! They have all given me indispensable tools for my sailing kit. All navigation was done with an iPhone, backed up with paper charts. *Aisling* is a low-tech boat: no radar, no 'fridge, no shower, no watermaker, no AIS transmission – a whole bunch of things I would never have to fix or spend money on.

Fast forward three months and a previous plan to sail to the Mediterranean lacked lustre. With a bookshelf filled with yarns from Moitessier and Knox-Johnston I just knew that the next trip would be the ultimate – to sail singlehanded around the world in my small, old boat. By September I was bashing my way around the Brest peninsula, clawing south into conditions that, in hindsight, I should never have been out in – I should have known that something was up when I saw all the fishing boats coming the other way! My original plan had been to set a course 210° which would take me in a dead straight line to Argentina (I'm the type of guy who obviously likes to learn the hard way). I was becalmed off Cape St Vincent at the southwestern tip of Portugal,





*Down below between Portugal and Lanzarote*

but having arrived victorious at Arrecife in Lanzarote I was told in very clear terms that I couldn't cross the Atlantic for another two or three months. With plans dashed I became a marina sailor, with a long spell in the Canaries and then on the hook at Banjul in The Gambia before I set off on my first ocean crossing.

I set sail from Banjul at the beginning of December and set course for Salvador, Brazil. I was lucky with the winds but hated the drenching, dripping heat that dogged my every mile across the equator, sometimes bringing me to tears with its intensity. One day, on deck setting up a spinnaker pole with the tears of frustration welling up because I was sweating so much, I found I actually couldn't see because of all the salty water running into my eyes. With grim determination I managed to retain my sanity until, passing close to Fernando de Noronha, I became convinced that my boat was sinking. I've since come to realise that I have a small leak 'somewhere' which means I have to pump the bilge periodically. Back then, all I knew was that the deep bilge was filled almost to the brim and all I could think of was to motor into the bay by the island and sink in the shallows. There I removed all of the water and it failed to rush back in, so I was in the clear and now I just keep my eye on it. These things happen on a boat – you learn to live with them it seems.



*Crossing  
the  
Atlantic,  
December  
2017*



### *Salvador, Brazil*

Brazil was a heat torture, and it was my first experience of Med-style stern-to mooring, which on this particular boat can be an absolute nightmare. I've now sailed over 28,000 miles and I still don't know which way she'll go when I put her

into reverse\*. Marina shenanigans continue to vex me, ranging from feelings of slight anxiety to restrained panic and stress whenever I enter or leave a port. The trouble is that when you cross oceans there's zero opportunity to practice – it's an ongoing work in progress. To date I've had no disasters, just a couple of near misses – it's the only reason I have third party liability insurance cover.

Circumstances dictated that my passage into the Pacific meant that I was to sail south, and it was with some relief that I sailed to the higher latitudes, hauling out and doing some refitting in Uruguay before heading south. When sailors talk about heading S O U T H it is said with hushed tones and reverence. We take the path less travelled, to the cold, the wind, the ice, to El Fin Del Mundo, The End of the World.

I met a sailor in Piriápolis who tidied up the outstanding tangles in my celestial navigation skills. He brought it all together in such a way that I could finally get a handle on the practice, and from then on I started to take sights and work out my position lines and intersections on a daily basis. It turned out that it wasn't a dark art, just a matter of remembering some sequences and formulae. The hardest bit perhaps is getting an accurate sight from the deck of a small boat in a big sea, but it's a skill that seems to come in time, practice being the key. I felt proud to be using an 80-year-old sextant that had belonged to my uncle, also a solo sailor but before the days of GPS and electronic gizmos. Unsurprisingly, he lost a boat on a reef in New Caledonia. That was back in the '60s when a foreign sailing boat turning up in Micronesia was a major

event. Now it seems more like a rest-stop on the freeway that heads west from Panama. How things have changed...

\* Unlike your editor's slightly older sistership, which swings her stern determinedly to port whatever you do with the tiller!

*Provisioning in Uruguay*





### *Anchored off Argentina*

The South Atlantic was grey, cold, damp, big, exciting and sometimes scary, with plenty of opportunity to practise heaving-to in contrary winds and waiting out calms. I spent a week on a deserted island where I managed to salvage enough wood from the beach to knock up a hard dodger to keep off rain and waves over the bow.

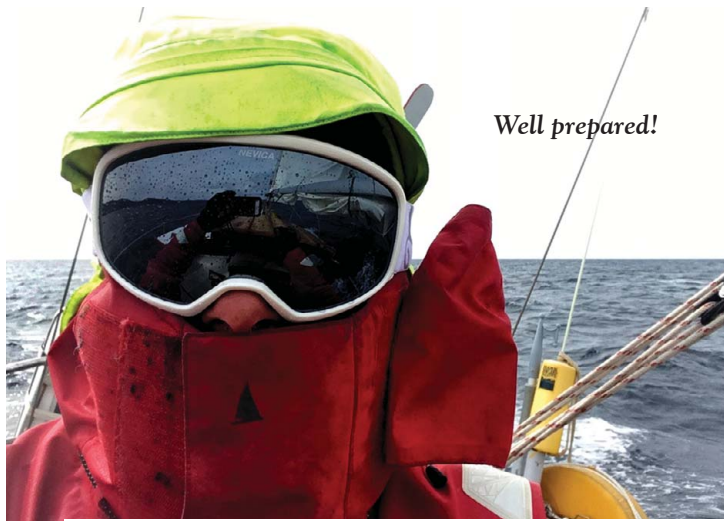


### *My driftwood dodger*



A month after leaving Uruguay we were slogging our way up the Beagle Channel to Puerto Williams, the most southerly town in the world. A Chilean naval base occupied mostly by service personnel, it is an exposed and isolated corner of the world, a huddle of one-story prefabs under snow-tipped mountains rising up from the water's edge.

Perhaps the most exciting part of my voyage lay before me – the journey from south to north through the Chilean



*Well prepared!*

*On the mooring  
at Puerto  
Williams*



*Aisling among the Antarctic charter  
yachts at Ushuaia*

*Waiting for a  
weather window off  
the Magellan Strait*

fjords. After a sojourn in Ushuaia while I waited to get my engine fixed, I took on a young lad who had flown out from the UK for the next adventure. On a quiet Boxing Day morning the ancient Yanmar spluttered into life, enveloping the Micalvi Yacht Club in a plume of blue, and we chuntered out into the Channel heading west in calm conditions.

The issue on the south-to-north passage lies in the continual barrage of headwinds and currents. The wind funnels down between the mountains, the bays become victim to blasting katabatic winds, and most nights you must anchor and run lines to the shore,



*Glacier at Estero Peel*



*My intrepid crew setting off solo from Puerto Eden*

tucking in behind the shelter of a cliff or some trees. Every morning you look at the speed and direction of the scudding clouds overhead, then beat into hail and snow up the Magellan Strait and run for cover as another system arrives. Dragging anchors and pulling up lumps of kelp the size of a wheelbarrow are physical training at its best, as are pulling up 40m of chain and a CQR every morning and scrabbling up banks when moored alongside smooth cliffs. Scavenging dry wood to burn in the stove at night and fetching fresh water in jerry cans from the streams is visceral living, red-blooded and heart-pumpingly good!

Things took a downturn when we arrived at Puerto Eden, little more than halfway north – I had to fly home for a family funeral, leaving my crew with *Aisling*. We decided that he, just a lad of 18 but much wiser than his years, would sail *Aisling* in the general direction of Puerto Montt in the time that I was away. It was a big deal for both of us, but he rose admirably to the challenge and I am proud that I could give him an opportunity which I knew would be life-changing. He made the 650 miles, playing cat and mouse

with the weather and braving the Gulf of Penas, much to the anxiety of both me and his mother! It was amazing to see the boat moored in the bay at Quellon, Isla Chiloé on my return. We completed the last 100 miles together and parted ways at Calbujo, both richer for the experience of our six weeks spent living and sailing together.

*Charging along off Chile*





*Fatu Hiva,  
Marquesas*

The north end of Isla Chiloé was my jumping off point for the Pacific, and the 4500 mile, 36-day passage to the Marquesas went without a hitch. The Marquesas were enchanting – the people, the landscape, the isolation. I managed to visit most of the islands but again was driven on by the heat, which I seemed to be coming less tolerant of!

My original plan had been to head north to Alaska, but by the time I reached Hawaii something had changed. I found that my original motives for making the trip had altered and I began to weigh up my priorities. It emerged very clearly that I wanted to quit, but I quickly learned that offloading a boat in the United States is not a particularly easy proposition. And although my heart said to return home, I also became very aware of my attachment to *Aisling* and that I would like to have her back in the UK. The logical plan therefore was to keep sailing west, taking long, non-stop passages to get home with the seasons. I sailed on to Papua New Guinea via the Solomons and, having had my mainsail split in the Coral Sea and having noticed a broken



*Hiva Oa,  
Marquesas*

strand on one of the lower shrouds, I decided to make repairs and spent six weeks in Port Moresby waiting for parts. It was a unique experience, hanging out with new friends in the yacht club and also doing some voluntary work in a school in an outer suburb. It gave me a taste for more and I would love to return one day.

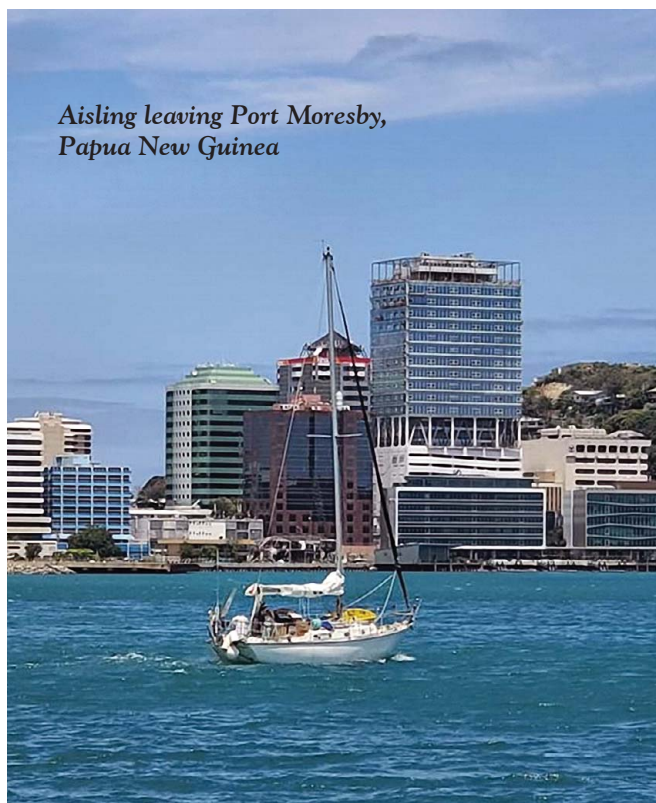
I was naked on deck when an Australian border patrol jet flew over in the Arafura Sea – having traversed the Torres Strait I was on my way west. I dipped below to put on some shorts and the pilot and I had a parley on the VHF. It was one of a number of fly-bys that heralded my epic 8000 mile, 60-day crossing from PNG to Richards Bay, South

Africa. With two days spent in a bay on the north coast of Madagascar, where I took the opportunity to scrape the hull clean, and another two days waiting out a weather system at Bazaruto off Mozambique, it was a full two months before my feet again touched *terra firma*.

Richards Bay was a respite where I met many kind souls and good friendships developed with fellow travellers on the ocean highway. I went to an OCC barbecue at the Zululand Yacht Club and as I sat in amongst the crowd I realised that I was part of a tribe, a collection of wandering nomads, misfits, refugees, dreamers and adventure-seekers. The ocean levels us all, no matter our nationality, gender or bank balance. No matter the length, age or condition of our boat we are, it seems, a global community, where we meet in friendship with love, respect and value, and with stories to tell. It is there at every port I arrive in. It's truly a special thing.

As I remarked previously, my 50-year-old boat is low-tech. I now have a chart plotter, which I think is the only new feature that I have added since I left England. There is a Monitor windvane on the stern that miraculously seems to go on faultlessly for tens of thousands of miles – I've not touched it since I left the UK. My Yanmar 2QM15 has become my reliable friend, she'll run for 30 hours straight without a complaint. My water tank holds 140 litres\* and I collect rainwater from the sail whenever I need to. I have an ancient autopilot that seems to have lasted forever, though I suspect it's on its last legs by now.

\* 31 UK gallons or 37 US gallons



I guess I have a philosophy, and it's to try to weigh up the difference between needs and wants. When I arrived at Richards Bay I had a long list of wants but just about one need. I try to keep to that low-budget, low-tech perspective and I find it saves me a heap of money and hassle. I am shocked by the number of cases I hear of rudders dropping off, of electronic autopilots going wrong, of electric furlers jamming, watermakers breaking – all costing thousands to repair. Part of my philosophy is to ensure that the rig and the hull are sound so that I can go anywhere under sail and without electricity if the need arises. I remind myself that there's a whole industry out there that's trying to sell you a whole bunch of expensive stuff that you don't need, that costs money and is inconvenient to fix. I can honestly say that in the 28,000 miles I've sailed I have met no insurmountable problems and not had to incur any huge outlays for repairs or new kit. I've improvised, made do, I've tried to keep it simple. This is the spirit of sailing, to go where the wind may take you and in a simple fashion. To cross oceans is easy – keep it a day at a time and focus on what's important, adjust to prevailing conditions and wait when you need to, slow down or speed up to nature's pace.

I have an image in my mind from the day that I left the anchorage in Bazaruto. I was beating out into the Mozambique Channel and there was a local craft, of similar size to mine, an open boat with a tall wooden mast and a black, tattered sail hanging off a spar. They were making the same speed and direction that I was, rising and dipping in the swell, no technology, no gizmos, just a simple sailboat and an experienced crew ... the spirit of sailing, it's as simple as it gets.

