

CROSSING THE POND

Sarah McKernan and Emily O'Carroll

(Experiencing ripped sails, sea sickness and countless sunsets, two Sea Scouts – and recent OCC Youth Sponsorship recipients – cross the Atlantic Ocean.)

Never in a million years did we think we would sail across the Atlantic Ocean. Having grown up in a small seaside village, we spent most of our childhoods sailing, kayaking and rowing in the Irish Sea. Eager little beavers, we both joined our local Sea Scout group and yacht club where, at the age of ten, we became great friends. Our sense of adventure was magnified by our wonderful years exploring the outdoors from a young age, so when we both went to university we became active members of the sailing, surfing and kayaking clubs. We spent every other weekend gallivanting along Ireland's Atlantic coast, returning home to count down the days until our next trip.

We soon finished college and began planning our next big adventure – travelling South America. There was only one thing in our way, the Atlantic Ocean... Amongst the options open to us in order to achieve this dream, sailing across sounded like a pretty cool way to begin our trip. Feeling like small fish in a big pond we had no idea where to start but nonetheless we powered on, trying to turn our vision into a reality. Scouring the internet for crewing opportunities became our new favourite hobby. A lot of dead ends later and on



Jon and Angie



the verge of giving up, we could barely believe it when we were offered berths aboard SY *Ultima*, an Oyster 56 owned by Jon and Angie Barkway. One good thing led to another and we were granted OCC Youth



Getting used to our harnesses in the anchorage at Mindelo. Left to right: Charlie, Emily, Angie, Sarah and Kimbo

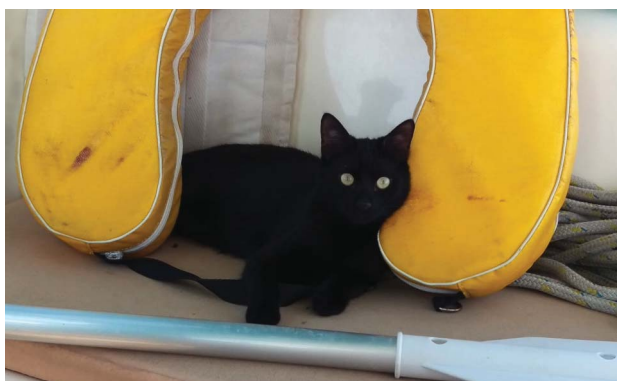
Sponsorship – at this point we really couldn't believe our luck!

So our journey began. We flew into São Vicente in the Cape Verde

on 7th January 2020, full of excitement and nerves. Our skipper, Jon, was there to greet us when we arrived at the marina at Mindelo, and we headed to the Floating Bar to meet the rest of the crew. Within the first ten minutes we knew we'd hit the jackpot – what a great bunch of people! Our crossing crew was seven in total: Kim (soon to be known as Kimbo), a seasoned sailor with a cracking sense of humour and classic Irish charm; Charlie, our resident joker from London and great company; Angie, our first officer, talented cook and lovely boat mum; Jon, our skipper and rockin' '80s DJ; and last but not least, Batman, our beloved feline friend. What a crew!

We motored over to the anchorage and spent the day acquainting ourselves with *Ultima*, our gorgeous new home. Following safety and rigging briefings it was time for a cup of tea and this is when we came across our first issue ... our tea was extremely salty ... oops, there goes the watermaker! The night before setting sail this wasn't ideal but we were able to stock up the next day, counting our blessings that it had come to light before leaving. Next day, after some final checks, we set sail from Mindelo at 1400 in a somewhat dramatic departure. Somehow the headsail of a boat anchored behind us had come unfurled and, with high winds in the anchorage, they had lost control and were coming straight for us. A rapid lift of our anchor and a quick manoeuvre by Jon, and we bade farewell to Mindelo.

Rocky, rolly weather arrived soon after we left and brought with it big waves and high winds. We were aware that the first 48 hours would be rough, but Jon said to hold faith and that the conditions would improve – at least that's what we kept telling Sarah who, before even saying



Batman takes his safety seriously...



Emily admiring a beautiful Atlantic sunset

goodbye to land, was hit with some good old-fashioned seasickness. Soon after that we lost the phone signal and sight of Cape Verde – from this moment on we were at the mercy of the sea, nervous but so excited for the voyage ahead. We'd never been anywhere so remote before and had no idea what to expect – Atlantic Ocean, let's be havin' ya!

The adjustment to life at sea took a while. Simple tasks, such as pouring water from the big water bottles, chopping fruit for our porridge and even just walking around, suddenly became strenuous. However, it didn't take us long to settle in and Sarah's seasickness soon passed. We were all so excited to see her standing up again ... even the flying fish were thrilled, so much so that within her first few minutes on her feet one hit her in the face! We were well and truly underway!

The first week at sea mainly consisted of shuffling around one another and finding our feet. Night watches were still a novelty and, no matter how tired we were, the stars never failed to amaze us against the clear, dark sky. We were fortunate enough to have hydraulic winches and furlers, but unfortunate enough to be sleeping directly below them. This made for some challenging nights' sleep but soon became our night-time lullaby.

After the first few days of sailing with the jib poled out, the rough seas gave way to fair winds and it was time to hoist the spinnaker. We both learnt a lot as we'd never seen a set-up with double poles before – it was very exciting. The spinnaker went up really well and we were flying – wind speed of 18 knots and making 11 knots. At this rate the thought of a ten-day crossing wasn't too far-fetched and with light winds forecast we kept the spinnaker up overnight.

*Jon and Emily
delighted
with our
poled-out
spinnaker*

Fast forward to the next morning, when we woke up from the first smooth night yet. Suddenly we heard a loud crack, and through our hatch saw the starboard pole fly over the bow and to the port side. 'Everybody up', we heard, and we hurried to help. The wind had picked up during the night and, with strong gusts putting the poles under pressure, we now had a tricky situation. Harnessed up, we tried our best to lower the rogue spinnaker in one



*... but it
took a team
effort to recover it*



piece but, despite our efforts, challenging conditions meant it ripped on the way down and we were back to sailing with the jib poled out.

Aside from this hiccup the rest of the crossing was generally plain sailing. We spent much of our time reading, soaking up the sun and chatting. Kimbo was just about to complete her Yachtmaster qualification, so during the slow days (of which there were many) we passed the time by helping her revise. One of the coolest aspects was being able to predict the weather fronts roll in from the clouds above and so practise what we'd learnt.

By day 4 we decided it was in all of our best interests to start showering! Our broken watermaker meant we had to get creative with our showering techniques and, still in the early days, we were reluctant to use our freshwater supply. With Sarah's sick bucket no longer in use it was re-purposed as the shower bucket (having been thoroughly cleaned first!). This was great fun – we had a good laugh chucking water over each other, and it was lovely to be clean again even we were a little salty. All part of the experience!



Seawater bucket showers on the stern

We'd almost forgotten about our very quiet fishing line trailing aft, until a strong tug on day 7. Lo and behold, something more substantial than seaweed or a squid had caught the line – an extremely large fish (see overleaf). No challenge too big for our resident chef Angie though, who wasn't afraid to get stuck in and prepare it. Lovely fresh Atlantic wahoo for dinner, yum!

With the exception of abundant flying fish we didn't see much wildlife on the crossing. We were starting to wonder if there was anything out there at all until, on

our 11th day, we were blessed with a pod of about 15 dolphins which stayed with us for about an hour. They were beautiful – dancing in unison and weaving in and out so elegantly, it really was a highlight of the trip! Our radar and AIS were quiet for the most part of the crossing too. We couldn't be the only ones out there, we thought, but it was only in our last couple of days that we spotted another sailing vessel, the first since leaving Cape Verde. We knew we must be getting close now!



*Jon and
Charlie with the wahoo*

A few hours into our 15th day, and 30 miles from Barbados, we spotted the glow of civilisation. We hadn't experienced light pollution in two weeks, and as we neared the island it was sad to see the stars slowly disappear. Knowing there really wasn't long to go was bittersweet – we were excited to reach land and catch up with our families, but sad to close the door on this marvellous adventure.

We dropped anchor at 0400, our eyes peeled as we motored around the other boats in the anchorage. Safely settled, with silhouettes of palm trees in the distance, we went to bed full of excitement to see the Caribbean island in daylight. It did not disappoint – the place was truly beautiful and after scrubbing the decks and checking in at Port St Charles the celebrations commenced! We had made it, we had crossed the Atlantic Ocean!

*Two happy
heads having
crossed the
Atlantic!*

We would like to take this opportunity to say a massive thank you to everybody at the OCC for the huge support and encouragement we received. It was an experience of a lifetime and we feel truly privileged to



have had the chance to make this crossing. It wouldn't have been possible without the warm welcome from Jon and Angie, who kindly invited us to join them aboard *Ultima*, for which we are extremely grateful. Last but not least, big thanks to Kimbo, Charlie and Batman – we really made one hell of a crew!

