

RETREAT FROM PARADISE

Vice Commodore Daria Blackwell

(Wearing multiple hats as Vice Commodore, OCC PR Officer and Web Editor, Daria co-ordinated the Club's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in support of the cruising community, with primary focus on the Atlantic.)

Who would have thought that in this age the Q flag, or indeed the L flag, would take on its intended significance of a vessel in quarantine or harbouring contagious disease aboard?

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 created unprecedented chaos for coastal and ocean cruisers worldwide. Ports and countries were closed to cruise ships, airline passengers and cruising yachts without notice – often occurring long after a yacht had departed on a several-week-long passage. In other cases, yachts were left stranded in harbour with no access to the shore and nowhere else to go. Many faced enormous obstacles as borders closed both behind and ahead of them. Suddenly, paradise became a prison to escape from instead of the idyll cruisers had sought.

We estimated that some 900 vessels were in the Atlantic, 500 in the Pacific and another 250 or more in the Indian Ocean, all scrambling to find a country that would allow them entry before the hurricane and cyclone seasons descended. A few skippers acted early, stowed their boats on the hard, and flew home while they still could. The World Cruising Club suspended the World ARC in French Polynesia.

This article describes the OCC's efforts on behalf of the cruising community in 2020.

The early days

Having been very involved with development and marketing of numerous vaccines over the years, I had been following the situation in China closely from the beginning. I had studied the 1918 influenza pandemic, but this was a new virus that didn't behave like any of its predecessors. It posed a serious threat and no one had immunity. My husband Alex and I adopted precautionary measures weeks before the lockdown in Ireland. The feeling of dread was overwhelming.

The speed with which the novel coronavirus spread from China to Europe was limited only by the frequency of transcontinental flights. As countries in Europe began locking down, tourists flocked to the Caribbean to escape the nightmare pandemic at home, taking SARS-CoV-2 with them. In many ways it started as a pandemic of the more wealthy, who could afford skiing and island holidays. The medical facilities in many island and remote nations are rudimentary, PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) and ventilators are scarce, and many don't even have a hospital. As COVID-19 cases showed up, borders were shut tight and restrictions on movement were imposed. The amount of misinformation circulating on the internet and among the cruising community was alarming and the panic level among cruisers not knowing how to make decisions was escalating.

* Until the International Code of Signals was revised in 1965, flag L (black and yellow squares) meant 'I have or had some dangerous, infectious disease on board.'

When a family was prevented from anchoring upon reaching Curaçao from St Maarten, Port Officer Victor Langerwerf used media channels to put pressure on politicians to allow them to anchor and re-provision on humanitarian grounds. They had a small child aboard, limited food and water and posed little risk*. Several other boats were similarly denied entry.

In the Pacific, the situation was even more dire as hundreds of yachts became stranded in cyclone-prone regions while the borders of Australia and New Zealand remained closed. In the Indian Ocean, a boat was turned away from South Africa and initially denied access to St Helena. Short on food and water, this was not a voyage for which they were prepared.

We decided we needed to assist cruisers caught up in pandemic politics and help panicked governments understand the risks that a long-distance cruiser faces but does not present. We needed to provide a place where cruisers could exchange ideas and share reliable information. The first step was to open our OCC Facebook Group's Atlantic Crossing, Pacific Crossing and Caribbean Net+ to non-members and spread the word.

Pooling resources

In this extraordinary time, the cruising community banded together to provide a unified approach to the pandemic response. A decision was made to forward all reliable information on port closures and openings, including quarantine rules and other information, to Noonsite – it would have made no sense for us to duplicate what Sue Richards and her team were doing on a global scale. OCC Port Officers around the world could collect, verify and translate official information for their respective countries, while Noonsite would act as a central repository for trusted up-to-date news about which ports and borders were open and what the conditions of entry were. Many jumped in to help, especially those in strategic locations.

In the US the Seven Seas Cruising Association (SSCA) was also feeding information to Noonsite, but keeping up with individual US states proved impossible, while in Great Britain the Cruising Association (CA) set up a border information site for European ports. The Salty Dawgs organised a flotilla of 300 yachts sailing to America from the Caribbean and TransOcean organised a tracker and net in German, but we all exchanged information. Another member was representing a large group of Swedes whom he was supplying with information from our group. It was a valuable co-ordinated effort.

Glenn Tuttle of BoatWatch, a non-profit organisation that reports and helps locate vessels that are overdue or in distress, approached the OCC to assist with BOLO (Be On the Look Out) requests. We agreed and he became an important contact and go-between with the US Coast Guard when things didn't go according to plan. In the interim, the US National Weather Service predicted a more active Atlantic hurricane season than normal. This was not about a rally or flotilla – every skipper would have to make their own decisions about when to leave and how to cross. We'd just supply some of the information they needed to help them reach their own conclusions and make their way safely across an ocean.

* See *Cruising in Times of Closed Borders* in the September Newsletter.

The cruising lifestyle hits the news

It became clear very early in March that decisions were being made haphazardly by government officials who, in many cases, had no understanding of the needs of cruisers nor appreciation of the challenges they were facing. In some cases, families were forced to stay aboard their yachts at anchor with children who were not allowed ashore nor even permitted to swim near the boat. In other cases, yachts were being turned away from remote stop-overs and forced to sail extraordinary distances without support. Hurricane season was fast approaching in the Atlantic and cyclone season in the Pacific. Yachts were stuck in perilous places and flights were grounded. Risk was mounting.

An early attempt to involve World Sailing, which has global influence with authorities and purportedly represents cruising as well as racing, proved fruitless. All they could offer was advice for cruisers to stay put wherever they were and to avoid cruise ship ports.

As OCC PR Officer I understood that the only way to get the attention of world leaders was to publicise the plight of cruisers in the general media. As it happened, solo sailor and digital nomad Susan Smillie, who is a journalist for the *Guardian*, joined our Facebook groups. She was at anchor in Greece. Susan knew that I was helping yachts in difficult situations and we hatched a plan. I would be interviewed by Susan as the voice of the ocean cruising community overall, and would also provide access to willing OCC Facebook group members who were planning challenging voyages or facing tough circumstances. The story was published in the *Guardian* on 12th May and sparked a storm of media attention around the world. BBC World News asked for a live interview the next morning. RTE and BBC Newsline followed, as did CNN, Seascapes, numerous documentary makers and others, including BBC News Russia. I wrote a major story on the OCC website which was picked up by sailing media and others.

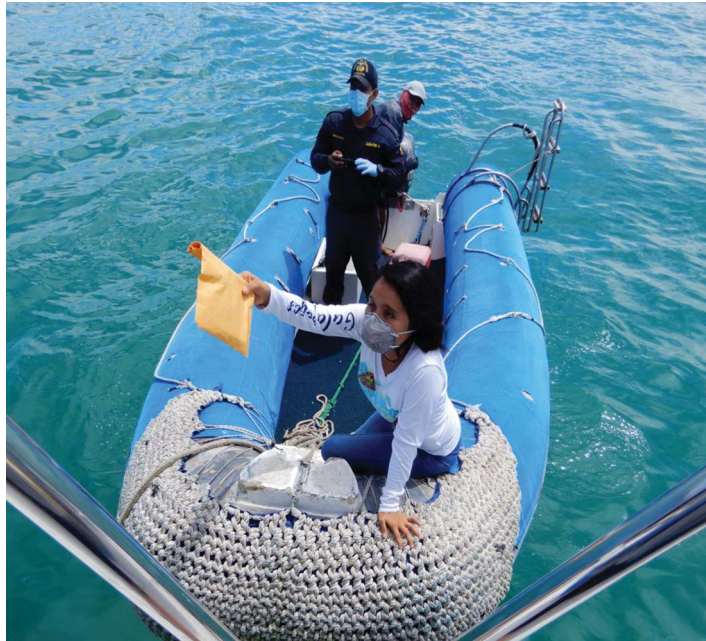
I explained many times that cruisers are among the safest people to encounter, especially after being at sea for weeks out of contact with other humans, and what challenges they face, especially when sailing short-handed. I explained the need for fresh water, fuel and provisions to countless media outlets and documentary makers in the following weeks. I debunked the image of superyachts, and instead painted a picture of families with young children choosing an alternative way of living in the natural world. People were fascinated.

I also explained that we were not asking governments to enable unfettered cruising, only for the ability to stop, rest and get desperately-needed supplies so sailors could safely continue their journey home, or at least to safe harbour. I also made it clear that we recognised the limited resources of small nations and respected the need to protect their populations. It was a whirlwind of media interaction, all hungry for a positive story.

As cyclone season starts on 1st November and distances across the Pacific are vast, a long lead-time was needed between getting permission to enter cyclone-free countries like Australia and New Zealand and departure, but they weren't budging. Australian member and Roving Rear Commodore Guy Chester, who was attempting to return home, has extensive diplomatic experience. He and Fiona Jones, OCC IndoPacific Region Co-ordinator, with my input as OCC PR Officer, wrote letters to the various governments of island nations asking them to reconsider. Fi and Guy used the OCC Pacific Crossing Facebook page to communicate with cruisers and put together a list of some 200 yachts expressing interest. They worked with John Hembrow of the Down

Under Rallies and John Martin of Sail South Pacific to formulate a plan for cruisers to enter Australia and New Zealand safely, and were successful in convincing Fiji to set up Blue Zones whereby cruisers could enter the country under quarantine.

When the NZ government declared that escaping cyclones was insufficient reason for entry and the Australian regional government declined yachts who applied for entry in a test case, we had to spring into action with a last ditch effort. We drafted a press release which, as OCC Press Officer, I sent out to the media in New Zealand. Guy and Fi spent the weekend doing TV and radio interviews and speaking to newspaper and web magazine reporters. Between us we drew a massive amount of attention to the plight of cruisers stuck in islands that had limited services, with insurance about to lapse as cyclone season approached. On Sunday evening, PM Jacinda Ardern appeared on TV news to declare that New Zealand would take seasonal issues into account for cruisers and, further, “We are asking the NZ Government to ‘Be Kind’ and allow cyclone refuge for genuine cruising yachties as a compelling need to arrive in New Zealand for humanitarian reasons”. Even so, the Health Minister refused.



Officials in the Galapagos collected donations from cruisers who had heard the appeal for PPE for the islands. \$1200 was raised. Photo Andrew Glasspool

*Three British yachts leaving Antigua.
Photo Caroline Dobbs*



Creating resources

I enlisted Past Vice Commodore Peter Whatley, who was in Antigua on the first leg of an intended circumnavigation aboard his 15m *Henry*, to help with co-ordination in the Caribbean. He and his crew, along with everyone else, were weighing their options. The ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao) had closed, as had both Grenada



*Cruisers delivering relief funds collected from
cruisers in the Bahamas who had been inspired by the
generosity of OCC members in the Galapagos. Photo Kristi Black*

and Trinidad and Tobago, islands typically on the hurricane safe list. Their only choices were to 1) haul out in Antigua and fly home while they still could, 2) wait it out until they could continue on, or 3) sail home. Those were the types of choices everyone was facing on every island in the Caribbean and in every port around the world. Frances Rennie managed the Facebook groups, setting up questions for anyone wanting to join and approving or denying access. She then monitored and communicated with everyone almost around the clock for many weeks. I started a list of boats intending to cross the Atlantic, with a disclaimer about volunteering contact information. A surprising number of singlehanders signed up.

We learned daily of boats that needed crew to sail home, often short-handed or with young families onboard. When the airports closed all flights were cancelled, along with all hope of crew reaching them. So we started a crew-finding service within the group and assigned a member to manage it, linking people who had got stuck in the Caribbean when tourism shut down and wanted to get home with those who had the means – a berth on a sailing boat – and needed crew. It worked surprisingly well.

We organised OCC members with SSB radios to set up an OCC Atlantic Crossing SSB net and multiple volunteers came forward to take radio duties once or twice a week. We also encouraged members to file float plans* with the USCG and to tune into the SSCA Transatlantic Cruisers' Net which offered weather routing by Chris Parker and had a powerful land-based transmitter, callsign KPK.

One member, Tim Goodyear, offered to help with the growing boat list until he was ready to leave himself. He expanded the spreadsheet, then contacted PredictWind

* A float plan – the marine equivalent of an aircraft's flight plan – is an overview of a boat and its intended passage that can give the authorities a head start should a search become necessary. It should include a description of the vessel, the number of people aboard, the destination and the general route to be taken.

The crew of Danú – OCC member Peter Owens with Vera Quinlan and children Lillian and Ruairí – arriving in Horta to be greeted by the heroes from Peter Café Sport. Photo José Azevedo/Peter Café Sport

– with whom he had an account for weather routing – and told them what was happening. They offered to set up a fleet tracker for the group free of charge. It was a new service for them and we were essentially beta testing it. Boats could send in position reports by e-mail or SMS, and it proved a huge benefit for all who signed up as their relatives and friends, as well as our small team, could follow their progress. Those who bought the PredictWind weather service could also avail themselves of the brilliant routing program, but it

was not necessary to buy anything to be on the tracker. Alex joined the team when Tim started preparations for his own departure, standardising sign-up procedures and communication with the tracker at sea, as well as taking over management of the lists.

My main job was that of enabler, and back-up to other team members. If there was a need, I sought approval and resources to do it. I also provided a ‘newsletter’ to members who did not access Facebook, letting them know what we were doing to assist and where to go for information, and posted information on the Forum.

José Azevedo, Honorary OCC Member and PO for Horta, secured permission for cruisers to stop in the Azores en route to Europe. Initially the Azores closed down completely and would not permit yachts even to anchor, but José worked hard to convince the authorities to allow boats to anchor, isolate and pick up fuel, water and provisions. Linda Lane Thornton, based in São Jorge, provided essential information about the other islands to the Facebook group each day.

Another member of the group, Alexander Wyssling, had four crew, each of whom had a satellite phone. He volunteered to set up an emergency communications and position-reporting capability for boats that did not have SSB but did have SAT phones. We set up a special e-mail address – fleet@oceancruisingclub.org – and directed the address to all the group administrators. That way, any communication with any vessel via e-mail would be seen by everyone for continuity.

Administration of the OCC Facebook groups started with me and Frances Rennie, who worked very hard to answer questions and direct new members to vital information. I quickly realised that we needed backup and cajoled Alex into joining in as an administrator, which he took on gladly. Alex maintained constant contact with the members of the OCC Facebook page so we could track who was leaving from where and when.



One member, a retired anaesthetist, advised the group on medical considerations prior to departure – ie. 14 days' quarantine before departure to avoid the risk of getting sick at sea – and debunked myths that were being propagated. Another member, also a medic, offered to consult on medical emergencies at sea via SSB.

In the Pacific, John Hembrow and John Martin organised flotillas to approach Australia and New Zealand in waves so as not to overwhelm the authorities. Together with Guy Chester they wrote procedures for safe tracking and reporting of health status and quarantine on arrival, but unfortunately those borders remained closed.

Expanding the team

The Atlantic team had Alex and me in Ireland, Frances in Scotland and Peter in the Caribbean. When the first problem came up while we were all asleep we realised we needed coverage through the night, so put out a call to OCC members on the east coast of the US and Regional Rear Commodore NE USA Moira Bentzel volunteered – bless Moira! As all things that go bump do so at night, she was the first to pick up most of the emergencies. The 'group' e-mail address forwarded to all team members, so that e-mails could be fielded close to 24/7 and everyone could remain in sync.

Now we had a machine that was working well. We were sending updates on border restrictions to Noonsite like clockwork, we had a list of boats and their details and a tracker to keep a visual on them. Glenn Tothill of BoatWatch was feeding in US Coast Guard alerts and brought in the SSCA Net. The time spent by the OCC Atlantic Crossing Team on monitoring and responding to Facebook posts, responding to e-mails, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp messages and messages received and forwarded by Rachelle Turk increased dramatically. Every comment to every post had to be reviewed, as often they contained information that needed to be documented or required a reply.



Decision-making

One by one, members of the groups started making decisions as their confidence grew. This boat would take off next week, a Scandinavia group would sail in company in early June, some would

*The crew from Peter Café Sport taking fresh water out to Thom D'Arcy aboard Fathom, his Vancouver 28.
Photo José Azevedo/
Peter Café Sport*

Staff from Peter Café Sport take chocolate cake to the healthcare workers conducting COVID-19 tests in Horta. Photo José Azevedo/Peter Café Sport



wait to see if the ABCs, Trinidad or Grenada would open up. Some would stop in the Azores while others would go direct. Some would decide to sail short-handed when they would have preferred more crew, while some decided to wait until flights resumed to get their crew in. They were armed with the information they needed to reach their own conclusions.

Pretty soon we had a fleet strung across the Atlantic like neon beads on a necklace. Once in a while Alex or Moira would e-mail someone who seemed to be off course, only to learn they had hove-to in order to sleep or had gone off course when the wind shifted. We had two singlehandlers caught in an early season tropical storm which caused enough damage to one vessel that he diverted into the Chesapeake. Moira talked him safely into harbour and we kept the USCG apprised all the way.

Meanwhile in the Pacific...

The Pacific fleet had its own difficult challenges – vast distances between potential stops and no one letting boats in. Some 200 vessels were signed on to the lists and 800 were members of the OCC Facebook Pacific Crossing group. French Polynesia eventually relented and allowed cruisers into its waters, Fiji opened Blue Zones for clearance of yachts into the country and one by one other countries allowed cruisers to stop and reprovision. But Australia and New Zealand remained closed to all but their own citizens and cyclone season was rapidly approaching.

Rear Commodore Jenny Crickmore-Thompson, based in South Africa, was helping people in the Indian Ocean, albeit not through an OCC organised effort. South Africa said it would allow cruisers to enter, but the rate of infection was skyrocketing and one well-known American couple who made it to South Africa contracted the virus on arrival. Tragically, Patrick Childress died at the end of June, leaving his wife alone, devastated and recovering aboard *Brick House*. It's the only case we're aware of in the sailing community. Cruisers who stopped in South Africa needed to quarantine for 14 days before departing in order not to risk becoming ill at sea. At the time of writing (late September), the situation is still evolving and will continue to do so as infection rates flare up around the world. No-one planning to leave can be sure of their reception when they reach their destination.

Outcomes in the Atlantic

In addition to providing help and information to hundreds of yachts, the overall media effort elevated the visibility and credibility of the Ocean Cruising Club and the appeal of the cruising lifestyle immeasurably. Overall, more than 200 yachts sailed from the Caribbean to Europe under the OCC 'umbrella' in 2020 and another 25 sailed with the TransOcean fleet. We don't know how many more sailed on their own, or whether that number is exceptional for a given year. It was a strange weather year, many boats encountering periods of calm alternating with strong northerlies – the trade winds were not playing their usual part this year.

The implementation of this safety net proved invaluable and the feedback from participating OCC members and non-members was universally positive. Several urgent and distress situations were assisted and disaster averted. These included two steering failures, three dismastings, one sinking, two significant storm damages, one lightning strike plus other lesser incidents. Alex and Moira in particular made some close friends out there and were able to talk them through their darker moments.

We had several boats reach the Azores from St Helena and Brazil. A vast fleet congregated at anchor in Horta, with José Azevedo and crew doing a masterful job supplying boats with provisions and meals and organising refuelling and water. They

were heroes! They instilled hope in place of fear and sold quite a few 'Resistance' beanies and bottles of Peter Café Sport gin. Eventually the Azores let cruisers ashore in Horta following a negative COVID-19 test.



Matroos after deploying the liferaft from which the skipper was rescued. Photo Gabrielle Lyne

Gabrielle and Jonathan Lyne of Aqualuna, who rescued a sailor off the Azores when his yacht hit a whale and sank





A champagne reception greeted Garry Crothers, one-armed solo sailor, on his arrival in Derry from St Maarten. Photo Derry City Council

OCC member Nicolas Charpy, who had been down below when his steel vessel took a direct lightning hit, suffered burns (on his bum) when he sat on the deck to contemplate his situation. He returned to Antigua for repairs, Alex talking him back as he had no electronics – all fried by the lightning. Another vessel suffered keel damage and sank after striking a whale near the Azores. The skipper was rescued by one of our group, OCC members Gabrielle and Jonathan Lyne.

One member spent time searching for a vessel abandoned due to steering problems after hitting a whale, only to hit a whale themselves but fortunately with no damage, while members Beverley and Kevin Harris of Kailani reported being attacked by orcas (killer whales) off Portugal, their Beneteau Oceanis 50 being turned through 180° and rammed repeatedly. *Kailani* did not sustain major damage, but other boats reporting the same later weren't so lucky.

Several boats in the US decided to head north via Greenland and Iceland to return to Scandinavia. One skipper broke the rules, however, and stopped in Canada which was closed to all foreigners. He was promptly arrested and fined.

Northern Irish sailor Garry Crothers, who lost an arm to amputation following an accident, sailed about 4000 miles alone and non-stop from St Maarten to Derry in time for his daughter's wedding. We were on board with him the entire way – virtually, of course. Garry would normally have had several crew but they could not join him as there were no flights. He arrived home to a hero's welcome.

By late July things were winding down in the Atlantic, but two boats – one French, one British – were still sailing toward the Azores, both low on fuel with no wind and running out of food. We kept the Coast Guard apprised and they diverted commercial shipping to deliver food and fuel. Personnel from a Portuguese naval vessel fixed one

sailor's engine. Then we were warned of the earliest hurricane on record, *Gonzalo*, which fortunately fizzled out, and multiple tropical storms and hurricanes that thankfully veered away from our fleet.

Of the more than 1000 people who had joined the group and the 150 yachts we followed on the tracker, the vast majority had no incidents and just thanked us for being there when they reached their destinations. Significantly, many of the members of our groups were from countries that are not well represented among our current membership, including Sweden, Norway, France and Germany. Our efforts earned much awareness, gratitude and respect for the OCC, and a few new members as well.

Postscript

The thank you notes received when people reached their destinations were heart-warming. For the most part, people noted a sense of growing confidence in the decisions they were making due to trustworthy information being shared in the group. They told us the fact that we were watching their backs when many were sailing short-handed for the first time, some with young families aboard, was a big relief. Those of us on the team felt very proud of being members of the OCC – 2020 is definitely a year to remember ... or maybe to forget.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM PROVIDING SHORE SUPPORT during the 2020 west-to-east Atlantic crossing Alex Blackwell, Regional Rear Commodore, Ireland

As Daria writes in the preceding article, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 created unprecedented chaos for coastal and ocean cruisers worldwide. Amongst other efforts the OCC implemented a safety net for yachts crossing the Atlantic, which proved invaluable. It is an honourable tradition of the sea to render every assistance to those in distress or requiring help, and both members and non-members did indeed need help. For several months it became a full-time job, with significant overtime to boot.

We were able to assist with numerous urgent and distress situations, and also provided weather routing suggestions to several yachts which requested it as well as to yachts receiving assistance. The weather routing was made possible by PredictWind, who provided us with professional-level access to their weather forecasting and routing. Co-operation was also established with Coast Guard Regional Control Centres (RCCs) on both sides of the Atlantic and in the Azores. We reported incidents as they arose and requested their help when situations deteriorated. They also contacted us for assistance and feedback on specific incidents once they learned that we were indeed in earnest.

In the process of providing this hands-off support to so many yachts the team learned

a great deal. The following is a synopsis which may assist members planning their own passages or future shore-support teams watching out for their friends on a crossing.

Record keeping

Similar to the need to maintain a logbook on a yacht, the recording of information quickly became an integral and very time-consuming task when keeping track of literally hundreds of yachts crossing the Atlantic. Multiple task-specific Excel spreadsheets were set up for this and, where appropriate, shared with the team via the 'cloud'.

Float plan

Perhaps one of the most important aspects – initiated by Daria, implemented by Tim Goodyear and then expanded by me – was listing participating yachts. In essence this became a tabulated float plan* which helped team members contact individual yachts if it became necessary.

Filing a float plan neither diminishes the accomplishment of making an offshore passage nor can it be seen as hand-holding the skipper and crew, but rather is just there should something go awry. In addition to suggesting that boats crossing should provide their information for the boat list, we also recommended a proper float plan be submitted if not already done so elsewhere. The US Coast Guard, for example, will not accept float plans, but they do provide a very useful template for one. It is important that yachts undertaking a passage provide this information to a trusted person ashore in case something should happen.

There was one incident where a singlehander got into difficulties. The person holding the yacht's information contacted the UK and US MRCC and relayed the communications from the yacht. The MRCC contacted us for assistance, relaying the information. As this was not a distress situation they then needed to stand down, but were unable to pass on the contact information due to data protection regulations. A very frustrating week passed before the person with the information contacted the OCC and direct communications could be established with the yacht. We were then able to relay the re-escalating urgency of the yacht's situation back to the MRCC in the US and later in the Azores Rescue Co-ordination Centre. Two commercial ships and a Portuguese naval vessel were diverted by the respective RCCs to assist the skipper. Had a float plan been lodged, this whole process would have been greatly simplified.

Position Tracking

When boats that we were assisting for one reason or another were not on the PredictWind tracker (see below) we plotted their reported positions on Google Earth. We recorded their track and calculated their bearing and speed, precisely the information the RCCs needed for their own logs.

Communication Logs

When we realised that much of the communication with yachts (see below) was

* See page 22.

via SMS satellite communications and that no record of these was retrievable from the providers, logs (Excel spreadsheets) were initiated of outgoing and incoming messages. A positive side-effect of this was that the character length of the message could be calculated automatically – a limiting factor with text messaging, with each technology having its own peculiarities.

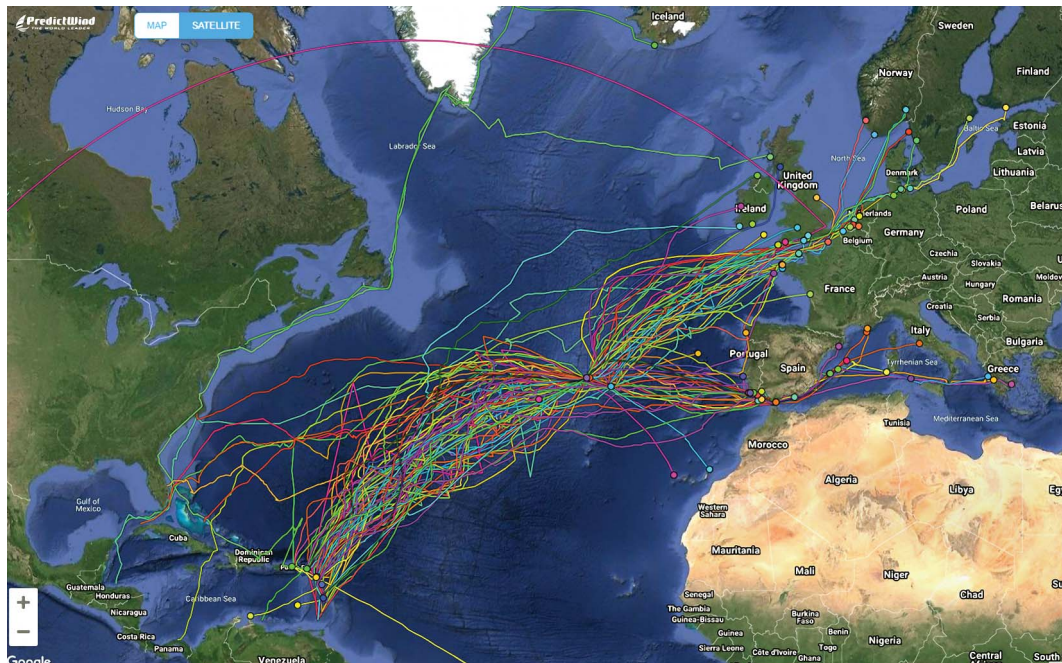
PredictWind

In addition to their weather forecasting services, PredictWind provided a fleet tracker for our fleet at no cost, organised by Tim Goodyear. PredictWind had just developed the tracker and we effectively became the beta-testers. Inclusion in this was recommended for all yachts with Iridium Go!, Garmin inReach, YellowBrick Tracker or using a Sat Phone with e-mail.

PredictWind provided wind forecasting and a tracking map that showed the location of participating vessels in the passage to Europe. Participants had free access to upload positions and were able to view the positions of other boats on the PredictWind Offshore App, which could be installed on Windows, Mac laptops, or on IOS or Android. Each vessel's personal page could be shared with friends and relations and also included a very useful blog feature. We posted a detailed instruction sheet on Facebook, adapted from those published by the Salty Dawg Rally.

The information needed by PredictWind to get a yacht set up on their tracker as part of the fleet was collected by our team and added to an online spreadsheet. The PredictWind support staff had access to this spreadsheet and drew what they needed from it. The team then co-ordinated with individual yachts to ensure they were up and running.

*The OCC Fleet Tracker
after most boats had arrived home safely. Courtesy PredictWind*



Communication Resources

Whereas satellite voice communications are generally one-to-one, we remain proponents of the one-to-many option of HF/SSB radio. Having said that, satellite communications have evolved and by using e-mail and data a vessel may indeed transmit a message to many (pre-selected) recipients at once. Examples of this are sending an SMS text or e-mail message to more than one recipient or uploading a message to a blog, social media or other interface. Either way multiple people can be alerted to a 'situation'.

In our opinion, satellite communications are essential on board an ocean-going vessel these days

The communications systems that the team had to deal with were wide ranging, each with its own quirks. We will leave out VHF, which is generally of little use mid ocean – with the exception of one relay where the distressed yacht only had VHF and one of 'our' fleet happened to be listening and was able to relay. Daria has addressed the HF radio nets that we had in the Atlantic, so that too is omitted here.

When it comes to satellite communications, we worked with:

- Iridium phone – allows voice and data communications, the latter including e-mail and SMS. PredictWind position updates were done manually via e-mail.
- Iridium Go! – communications options are via voice, e-mail and/or SMS, depending on the subscription package. SMS to the Iridium Go! is via a specific Iridium web page form. There is a 160-character limit, which includes the sender's e-mail address. PredictWind position updates are via a built-in tracking feature and can be at intervals or when sent manually. Iridium Go! also allows data downloads. PredictWind and other weather routing resources are thus relatively easily accessible.
- Garmin inReach – communications are via SMS. Outgoing messages from the yacht are forwarded to an input e-mail address, while messages to the yacht are sent through a recipient-specific Garmin web page form. There is a 160-character limit, which does not include the e-mail address. Garmin inReach provides its own tracking page but can also be interfaced with the PredictWind tracker.
- YellowBrick – can include SMS messaging, though to send messages to a YellowBrick device a special app is required. YellowBrick provides its own tracking page but can also be interfaced with the PredictWind tracker.
- SPOT – Of all the Sat Comms equipment we worked with, only SPOT is on the Globalstar network which provides poor to non-existent coverage mid Atlantic. Communications are SMS sent to and from e-mail. There is a 140-character limit which includes the sender's email address. SPOT uploads positions to its own tracker, which gives a good visual but with little information other than a position.

The bottom line when it comes to satellite communications is best stated in the old adage that 'You get what you pay for'.

