FROM NOVA SCOTIA TO SCOTLAND, OUR OCC QUALIFYING VOYAGE

Debi Dennis and Jack Markin

(*Debi and Jack were awarded the 2015 Qualifier's Mug – or in this case the Qualifiers' Mug – for the following account of their introduction to ocean sailing. See page 27.*)

We bought *Iroquois*, an Ohlson 38, in 2010. She was the kind of boat we had grown up dreaming of owning – fibreglass, but built like a wooden boat with classic lines. The Ohlson 38 was designed by Einar Ohlson, and the hull built by the Tyler Boat Company in England in 1969 under the supervision of Lloyd's, before being taken to Sweden for completion by Ohlson Brothers. In our minds this was the most seaworthy boat we could buy, and its integrity gave us confidence to venture further and further afield.

In the summer of 2015 we sailed the northern route from Maine to Scotland. Sailing allows one's world to shrink to just the area of the boat, where everything matters a lot and the rest of the world doesn't. It's extreme mindfulness. At sea our position never changes. We are always in the centre of a disc, with the horizon always the same distance in every direction. The delight is that within the stationary there is constant movement and change. We are moving and so is everything around us. The direction, size and shape

Iroquois, our Ohlson 38, ready to go

of the waves are never the same, even the rivulets and ripples on the water surface are in constant flux. The light, the wind, the colour of the water and the sky continually vary. A camera cannot begin to capture the image or the changes.

A small boat is like an island. It's got that fixed horizon thing. But it's an island that moves, sort of, generally, in the direction you want. There are some directions you can't go. Some directions are too uncomfortable to go. And then, there is the direction that you want and can go to. Sailing the ocean in a small boat is an act of faith, but it's not blind faith.

We had confidence that we could sail from Maine to Scotland, but we also prepared for it. Having both grown up in the Great Lakes we had sailed on and off throughout childhood. Jack learned how to sail over many seasons of dinghy sailing, including 'frostbite' racing in Chicago. But our adult sailing experience started with a 19ft Lightning in Montrose Harbor in Chicago in the early 1980s. We bought our first sailing book, *Fundamentals of Sailing, Racing and Cruising* by Steve Colgate, and Jack read it at least ten times, but the real learning happened on the water. Every time we took the boat out and had to sail through the moorings area to get in and out of the harbour our sailing improved. We learned to turn when we needed to, not when we wanted to.

When we bought *Iroquois* in 2010 we took to buying used books from Amazon at a furious pace, ultimately building a new sailing library which takes up almost 7ft of shelf and contains around 75 titles. As we read more, and met more voyagers, we began to think about crossing the Atlantic.

Working as teachers allowed us most of the summer to sail. The first year we had Iroquois we sailed 100–200 miles out of Milwaukee, and the next summer 200–300 miles, with some passages across Lake Michigan. Year three we covered 400–500 miles with many nights at anchor in the North Channel of Lake Huron. Our last summer in Milwaukee we again sailed some 300–400 miles, made a couple of lake crossings ... and raced, just the two of us against fully-crewed boats. We never won and only twice didn't finish last, but we learned a lot. In the spring of 2014 we trucked the boat to Maine and sailed about 1000 miles, including our first offshore passage, four days from Falmouth Foreside, Maine to Halifax, Nova Scotia. And all the time we read, and talked to people everywhere, in order to deepen our understanding of what it might be like to cross an ocean.

Planning and training for an Atlantic crossing began to occupy all of our lives outside work. The boat took every dollar and every hour. A key aspect of our preparation was working on her, and we got to know her intimately from bow to stern, inside and out. Over time we rebuilt or replaced every system on the boat – water, electric, engine, instruments, navigation and eventually rigging and sails. All winter we worked on *Iroquois* and dreamed of sailing.

In 2014 we were taken by the romantic idea of sailing the northern route to Scotland, which was difficult to dislodge. We shopped the winter sales for long underwear, wool socks, fleece pants and hats. We studied weather. We combined all the provisioning lists we could find into one master list, then pared it down to what we thought we would use. We did the same with the medical kit. Lacking offshore experience we weren't a good insurance risk, but Pantaenius UK agreed to insure us once we arrived within the 12 mile territorial limit, but not for any damage which occurred during the passage. That was one thing we did not share with our nervous friends and relatives!

We left Maine on 11 June 2015 and fought our way, wind against water, for the first day. That, and our excitement and the stress of departure, led to both of us ending up pretty seasick, which we had rarely experienced before. There are some missing log entries from this time. When you are too seasick to write in the log you are too seasick to sail attentively. Debi took Meclizine but it wasn't helpful. Jack didn't take anything as we had been told at our 'Safety at Sea' seminar that, like most large-boat sailors who are men and age 50–60, he should not take seasickness medication. At any rate our first good decision of the passage was heaving-to, sleeping in shifts for six hours, and then making for Shelburne, Nova Scotia, to regroup. As it turned out, neither of us was seasick again for the rest of the passage.

We picked up a mooring in Shelburne about 0030 local time, called to clear customs, cleaned up the decks and slept soundly until daylight. We wouldn't have gone in after dark if we had not been there the year before, but it's a straightforward approach and the weather was calm so we felt comfortable finding our way with the help of radar, the chartplotter and memory. We stayed in Shelburne until 17 June making repairs, resting, waiting for a change in weather and meeting people. We made some new friends on a boat next to us who used Scopolamine patches and kindly shared some with Debi. We also met some Canadians, originally from Scotland, who had such enthusiasm for our adventure that any unease we had from our inauspicious start was dispelled. We left with chart packs riddled with pencilled-in recommendations and routes around Scotland.

For the first few days we had light winds, but made some progress southward. Our goal was to get to 41° or 40°S and then head east to skirt the ice field. The calm weather made for good whale watching, and we were also visited by porpoises for the first time. We were mesmerised by the way they circled the boat and were comforted by their frequent visits regardless of the conditions.

Debi used half a Scopolamine patch and had never felt so good while sailing. The patch was her new best friend. It must have been good to displace her former best friend, which was the windvane self-steering. We have a Monitor gear with lines that run along the starboard side of the cockpit to the wheel. Saying we sailed across the Atlantic is giving ourselves perhaps too much credit – what we really did was set the sails so the Monitor could sail us across the Atlantic. With a crew of two there was no way we could hand-steer the whole passage. In fact we only hand-steered about 20 hours over the 31 days.

Within two days the water temperature had risen from 59° to 67° and the colour had changed to a lighter blue – we were in the Gulf Stream. On 21 June we turned east and ran into three days of intermittent squalls. The winds were steady at 25–35 knots, with gusts into the 40s. This was our first heavy weather, and the first time we saw waves big enough to have foamy white rivulets running down their fronts. We ran off under storm jib alone, but even so, a few things got broken. The most serious was the attachment point holding the block for the Monitor control lines which pulled out of the cockpit coaming, but we used a cordless drill to make new holes and through bolt it while hand steering in 35 knots and drenching rain. We also lost our Windex and radar reflector.

After the weather calmed down we headed north to get out of the Gulf Stream before the next gale, which arrived on Saturday 27th. We hove-to for the first 12

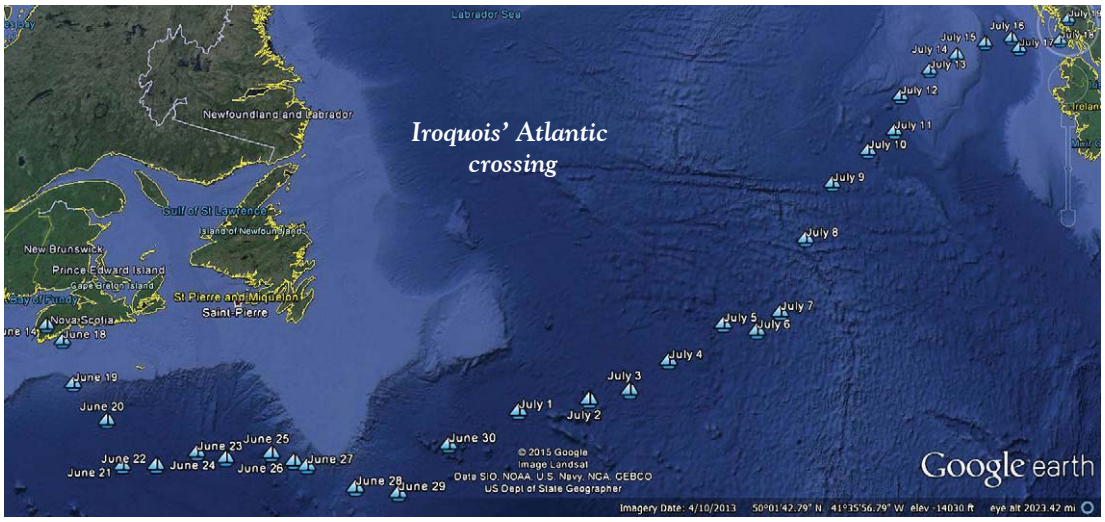
hours of it, then jumped on the tail and made some good progress east. In fact, from this point until the last storm we were able to head east and north with the wind and waves. It was still cold and rainy most of the time, but at least we were heading in the right direction. It became routine to get through 2–3 days of heavy wind and waves with minimal sail, then sit between low pressure systems in no wind for a few hours until the next system hit.

A summary of our passage:

Number of days	Beaufort Scale	How it felt to us
7	Beaufort 1–2 (light air to light breeze 1–6 knots)	miserable difficult and frustrating
7	Beaufort 3–5 (gentle to fresh breeze 7–21 knots)	glorious fine sailing
5	Beaufort 6–7 (strong breeze to near gale 17–33 knots)	challenging but gets you there
5	Beaufort 8 (gale 33–40 knots)	possible, but not pleasant
5½	Beaufort 9 (strong gale 41–47 knots)	just at the edge of and just past hanging on, you wish it would moderate
1½	Beaufort 10-11 (storm to violent storm 48–63 knots)	too much, all you can do is whatever you can, while you wait and hope for it to stop

Our watch schedule dogged each day and consisted of three four-hour watches between 0500 and 1700 and four three-hour watches between 1700 and 0500. Night watches ran the gamut from lyrical to hellish. Sailing at night is based on hearing the sounds

The view astern



and feeling the motion of the boat. The boat, the sails, the water, the rigging, the self-steering windvane – all speak and interact with one another to provide a picture of what needs adjustment and what is happening and, more importantly, what is about to happen. The result is a sublime feeling of movement, a dance between the surroundings, the boat and you.

Some experiences are so sublime they seem imagined, like the evening we saw some movement in the distance and thought maybe the porpoises were coming for one of their visits. As we watched them come closer there were more and more of them, first two, then six or eight, and then suddenly there were twenty or thirty of them spread out behind the boat. As they came closer it became obvious that they were not the white-bellied animals we were used to seeing. These guys were all grey and had squarer, bulbous, snouts and big blowholes. Some were really big, probably as big as the boat, but they were all different sizes, including some obvious babies. They slowly caught up to us and surrounded *Iroquois*, and for about an hour we swam along in a whale world, just cruising together. They moved majestically and rhythmically in a synchronised dance, and appeared to maintain the same order within the group. At some point our white-bellied porpoise friends appeared, zipping in and out in a flash. And we were all moving together – one big mixed up family. Then suddenly they were gone. Just like that.

In contrast, when the wind is gusting 25–40 knots and you are running downwind in the dark under a fragment of headsail, the dance becomes a dervish of which you are part but only partially, if at all, in control. It feels like a roller-coaster operated by a deranged carnie*, drinking beer and putting the moves on a teenager. In these conditions the wind and its interaction with anything that can vibrate could provide the soundtrack to a horror film.

All sailing stories seem to have the same ending – once in sight of land the wind either dies or blows from the wrong direction, the protagonist suffers, but then gratefully makes landfall. We were no exception. We were about 100 miles offshore when we were hit with a low out of the northeast, a big system circling round from Greenland.

* American slang for a travelling carnival employee. Thank you, Wikipedia!

Land in sight at long last

We were dead centre in its path with no escape options, so decided to heave-to until the wind stopped blowing us away from Scotland. Unfortunately, our triple-reefed mainsail could not hold up to the forces and in the middle of the night the top slide broke free. Fearing the loss of more slides we took it down, then had no choice but to turn and run under bare poles. We took 1½ hour shifts, hand-steering for six hours in winds of 40–50 knots gusting into the 60s. Finally, the wind shifted to the southwest and moderated to 20–30 knots, we were able to set some sail, and the windvane could steer. We made good time after that, and when it got light we could see islands through the fog and mist. We were soon surrounded by a storybook scene of rugged green hills running into the sea and peaks in the clouds. It felt like a dream.

We arrived at Oban Marina on 19 July. The story's real ending is the four days of work it took to convert *Iroquois* from a state acceptable in storm on passage to acceptable at anchor near shore. We had managed to keep our bunks relatively dry, but almost everything else was damp and mildewed, not to mention messy. Luckily there were a few hours of sun and the marina has great electric clothes dryers which we could use.

A little tired, we arrive in Oban

Before we left and after we returned, people asked us why we chose to sail across an ocean. We did the passage simply because we could, in the sense that we had the boat and we had the knowledge, we had the desire and we had the persistence, if not the normally requisite experience. We tried to be informed. We worked on the skills required even if we did not qualify for insurance. Yet no amount of day sailing, short coastal cruising, books or YouTube videos is the same as blue water day after day after day. That experience for us came by doing, and we are delighted that it did. People also ask, 'Would you do it again?' That has an easy answer – 'YES'.

Much of this account was taken from our daily blog, which can be found at http://www.sailblogs.com/member/debiandjack/.

The hollow winds begin to blow,
The clouds look black, the glass is low;
Last night the sun went pale to bed,
The moon in haloes hid her head.
Look out, my lads, a wicked gale
With heavy rain will soon assail

Anon