

A TRIP TO REMEMBER

Vicki Mortimer

(Vicki and Roger left the UK in September 2006 to circumnavigate aboard their 42ft Vagabond cutter-rigged ketch, El Vagabond. While in Grenada in 2009 they were joined by Monty, a white Havanese puppy, and all three completed their circumnavigation on returning to Grenada in May 2015.)

Having recently completed our circumnavigation, my husband finally deemed me worthy to join 'his' Club. When completing my OCC application, I looked back over our various ocean crossings and decided that, whilst our Atlantic crossing in 2006 was theoretically my first qualifying passage, by far the most memorable trip was that from

Easter Island to Valdivia, Chile back in 2010...

Vicki dwarfed by the Easter Island moais

We had spent three weeks in Hanga Roa on Easter Island and finally left on 3 March. It seemed very strange to be heading for the cold after the previous three years spent in the Caribbean, and our thermals, fleeces and oilies were all to hand as we knew they would be needed somewhere en route. Twenty minutes



after we left the anchorage a squall came through for an hour or so, just to get us used to being back at sea again. Once this had blown through, the wind dropped to about 10–15

Monty, our Havanese puppy, is totally at ease





Happy hour

knots allowing us to make roughly 4 knots despite the big swell. We progressed slowly but surely for the next few days, with decent winds during the day but dropping right off at night. As a result we were only averaging about 90 miles a day – not really fast enough, especially as it was not in totally the right direction...

We had had a new Raymarine Drive fitted in Panama before we left in December and we had needed to repair the flimsy bracket (supplied by a different company) in Galapagos and then get it re-welded on Easter Island. After four days at sea the bracket broke again, so it was back to the trusty old Monitor self-steering which is great except in light winds.

Unfortunately we were still experiencing very light winds, and averaging only 4 knots during the day dropping off to 2.5-3 knots at night – very slow progress but still comfortable, and we were able to enjoy our Happy Hour of Diet Coke and peanuts at 1730 every evening.



A well-earned nap

The seas were gradually getting bigger and bigger, but we were managing to eat and sleep well. I was able to bake bread and muffins, so we had no real complaints except that progress was much slower than we had anticipated. After ten days we still had 1186 miles to go, and we were still putting in a lot of southern miles to pick up the elusive westerlies. Luckily, we were able to pick up regular weather forecasts via our shiny new sat phone, and were consequently able to adjust our course to try and pick up the favourable winds. We were checking the weather GRIBS every three days or so, and the sat phone is now up there with Marmite and Corned Beef as great things to have on board for long passages. Although, admittedly, it is a tad spooky being able to send and receive e-mails when miles from anywhere.

Everything was going too smoothly and, as always, it was time for something to happen ... in the early hours of 16 March our steering cable sheared. We drifted until daylight when we managed to set up the emergency tiller, a great bit of gear which plugs straight into the rudder shaft. Unfortunately you have to crouch like a garden gnome to use it, making it virtually impossible to hand steer, and we still



*Roger hand-steering
using the emergency tiller*

had no autohelm. After some experimentation we managed to rig up various bits of string to attach the tiller to the steering wheel, which meant that hand steering was possible but the Monitor was redundant – with 983 miles still to go.

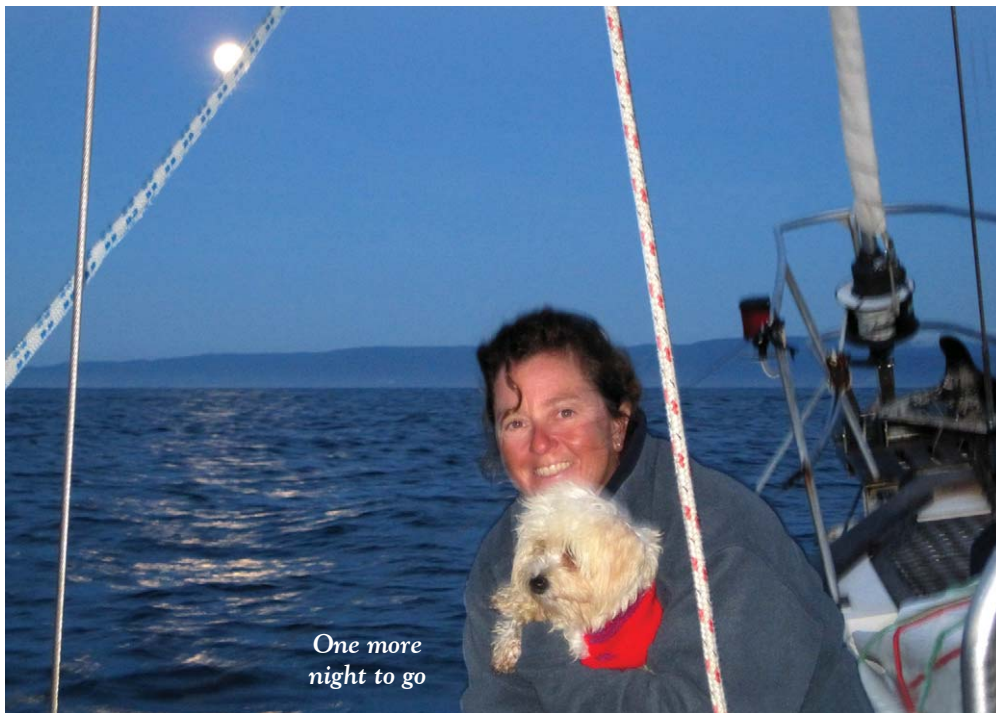
After two days, and 36 hours of hand steering, Roger decided there must be something he could do about the Autohelm, so he disappeared below for the day. After nine hours of bashing, bolting and lots of sweating (or was that swearing?) he had used every spare bolt, piece of string, length of tape etc to create something solid(ish) to hold the bracket in place unless we had really big seas – fingers crossed...

We knew that the weather was due to change and, when squalls came through, we lashed the wheel and reefed the genoa. The wind picked up to 35 knots very quickly on these occasions and the waves were getting very big. Surprisingly, although we had the odd 'big boy' over the deck, the sea did not seem particularly threatening. We were now sharing the steering with the Autohelm, which made life a lot easier, and when hand steering with the 30–35 knots of wind from behind the boat speed increased to 8 knots, improving our average to 6 knots. In the middle of all this mayhem, Monty was fantastic as a morale booster. His ability to judge the big waves, run across the aft deck, poo and race back to the cockpit without getting wet was really quite remarkable – obviously he got a treat every time, so he was happy and we were happy that he survived each marathon adventure!

On 25 March we really knew we had hit the Roaring Forties. The wind steadily increased all day, and by 1800 we had a steady 40 knots gusting to 48. We lashed the helm and stayed between 60° and 90° to the wind with the staysail coping – forward progress about 2.5 knots. By midnight we felt a bit battered but it had passed through and we could hoist the main and genoa again. We were glad to have a bit of calm the next day – the wind had died completely and again progress was slow. We were just drifting, and still had 292 miles to go.

It has to be said that ships are a bit like buses. We had been at sea for 24 days without seeing anyone else at all, and then two fishing boats came along at once – neither of which bothered to respond to our radio call. We were now very keen to reach Chile, but the forecast was for calm for the next few days so, on 28 March the engine went on and we motored at 5 knots through the night. We sighted land at 1100 next morning.

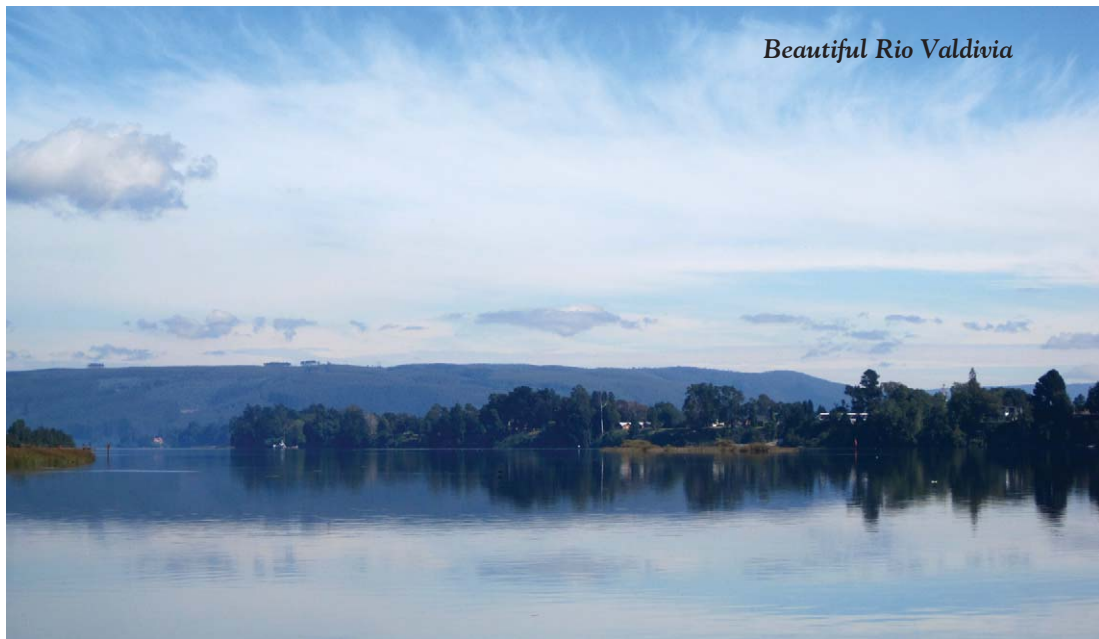




*One more
night to go*

The sea was still dead calm and it was great to be able to watch Monty running around the foredeck again – he had been confined to *El Vagabond* for 3½ months since we had left Panama and was really looking forward to being on land.

The sky got bluer and we could see the mountains some 50 miles away. Penguins and sealions suddenly appeared from nowhere, and it was a fantastic feeling to be approaching Chile, some 5500 miles after leaving Panama in December. We worked



Beautiful Rio Valdivia

out that we had spent more time at sea than at anchor over the previous four months – really good news for our livers! We closed the land with the Autohelm still just about hanging on by its last bolt, and hove-to at about 1800 to be ready to head up the river to Valdivia in daylight.

We awoke early next morning and started up the beautiful Rio Valdivia. We had a lovely end to our journey, and arrived at the Valdivia Yacht Club at about 1300 after a total journey of 2339 miles and 27 days at sea. After tying up Roger went to see the *Armada* to get us checked in and to advise them that we had Monty on board. We were pleased to learn that there were no quarantine requirements, and by 1600 we had all walked into town and were sitting outside a little restaurant having a beer and chips. Needless to say, all three of us slept well that night.

Postscript

Vicki e-mailed again a few days after submitting her account, adding: “Just thought you might want to hear the happy ending to the story!”

“The company in Panama which fitted the bracket for our Raymarine Autohelm were completely incompetent and clearly did not know what they were doing. They refused to acknowledge our e-mails sent from Galapagos and Easter Island so, when we arrived in Chile, we contacted Raymarine in the USA who were absolutely brilliant. Their South American representative sent us a new Autohelm as ours had been damaged by the flimsy bracket, and arranged for Alwoplast (a boatbuilder in Valdivia) to build and fit a new sturdy bracket for it. Both have since completed just over 36,000 miles...”.

