

# GOTHENBURG TO PORTSMOUTH WITH OCC SPONSORSHIP

## Bex Band

At the age of 19 I was fortunate to have my first sailing experience when I was offered a place on a subsidised youth voyage. A week later, after getting to know The Solent, I left with a shiny new Competent Crew certificate and an absolute love of sailing. I took to it in an instant, which supports my theory that sailing is simply in some people's blood. Lack of money prevented me from pursuing my hobby to the extent that I would have liked, although I found the perfect way to be on the water while also giving back to others – volunteering. It was so satisfying working with disadvantaged children and seeing the transformation that a week on a yacht could bring, as for many of them this was far beyond anything they had ever done before.

My experience was therefore limited to just The Solent area and the Channel, and only ever on day sails, but that was about to change. I was to join Tall Ship Adventures aboard *Challenger 3* on a voyage that would see me sailing from Gothenburg to Portsmouth. This voyage would be my first offshore sailing, the first time I had sailed at night, and the first time with a different start-to-finish location. It was exactly what I needed to progress my knowledge to the next level and to stretch my sailing skills. This was all possible thanks to the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme. The criteria for the award has recently been revised\*, so I was both over the moon and humbled when I received approval for funding that would allow me to join the voyage. As I caught my flight to Gothenburg with my sailing wellies on (I ran out of space in my hand luggage), I can't express the excitement and sense of adventure that I felt. I had been dreaming of this for a long time.

\* See [www.oceancruisingclub.org/about-the-occ/youth-sponsorship-programme.html](http://www.oceancruisingclub.org/about-the-occ/youth-sponsorship-programme.html)





*Winching the mainsail before seasickness struck*

*Challenger 3* was in Gothenburg as she had just competed in the North Sea Regatta (finishing third in her category with four competitors, one of which retired – this provided us with a lot of jokes for the next week!). We were lucky enough to arrive in time for the last night of celebrations, which included a spectacular firework display, followed by a parade the next morning which saw all the competing tall ships head out into the North Sea together before dispersing in their own directions – what a sight!

The North Sea wasted no time in giving us a brash introduction to its notoriously choppy conditions. This was definitely nothing like The Solent! We got to work setting the sails, but it was only two hours before seasickness gripped me. I tried my best to help my watch with our duties – cooking, helming and cleaning – but kept having to lie down with my eyes closed to try and compose my swimming insides. I was soon being ill, and from there the sickness seemed to get worse and worse. The next 16 hours were awful. I couldn't hold down food, I couldn't even hold down water. I desperately tried to sleep, tied up in my berth, but the queasiness kept me awake. I found myself shivering in a cold sweat and I felt unbelievably weak.

*Washing up duty*







*I missed three meals because of seasickness but slowly got my appetite back*

Someone once told me that there are two stages to seasickness. The first is when you think you are going to die, and the second is when you wish you could. Without meaning to exaggerate, I

literally spent the entire time of this ordeal telling myself that I would never step foot on a boat again and daydreaming that someone would come and airlift me home. It's probably a good thing that once you're on a boat you can't get off, because if I had been able to bail out in those early stages it would almost certainly have been a quick end to my sailing days. I finally fell into an exhausted sleep, though, and when I woke I felt a million times better – what a difference! I managed to eat some food, get into my oilies, and join my watch on deck for some much-needed fresh air. I had finally found my sea legs and, thankfully, didn't feel sick again on the trip – something I am very grateful for, as another woman on my watch only managed to make it on deck for two short visits and spent the rest of the voyage in her bunk, horrendously seasick.



*Getting some much needed post-recovery fresh air*



*It took me some time to get to grips with the sail rigging and the different colours*

Our watch that day took in the sunset, grabbing a short four-hours sleep before being back on duty in time for sunrise. I had never seen both a sunset and sunrise on the same night, and we were treated to the most spectacular skyline imaginable. As if that wasn't enough, I then got the joy of spending the night under a bursting sky full of stars, gazing at the Milky Way, satellites and catching the occasional shooting star. It was an incredible experience and a great moment to share with my watch, who I was really starting to get to know – it's fascinating the conversations that manifest when facing a long night and a majestic view.

A couple of days in the wind dropped down and we were forced to turn on the engine. I spent a lot of time with the skipper, who patiently showed me how to use the navigation software, something which I hadn't had much opportunity to learn about previously. By this point the constant on-off watches meant that I had no idea what day we were on. My body had learnt to sleep and eat when it had the chance, regardless



*The first oil rig I've  
ever seen – they  
seem very alien  
alone at sea*



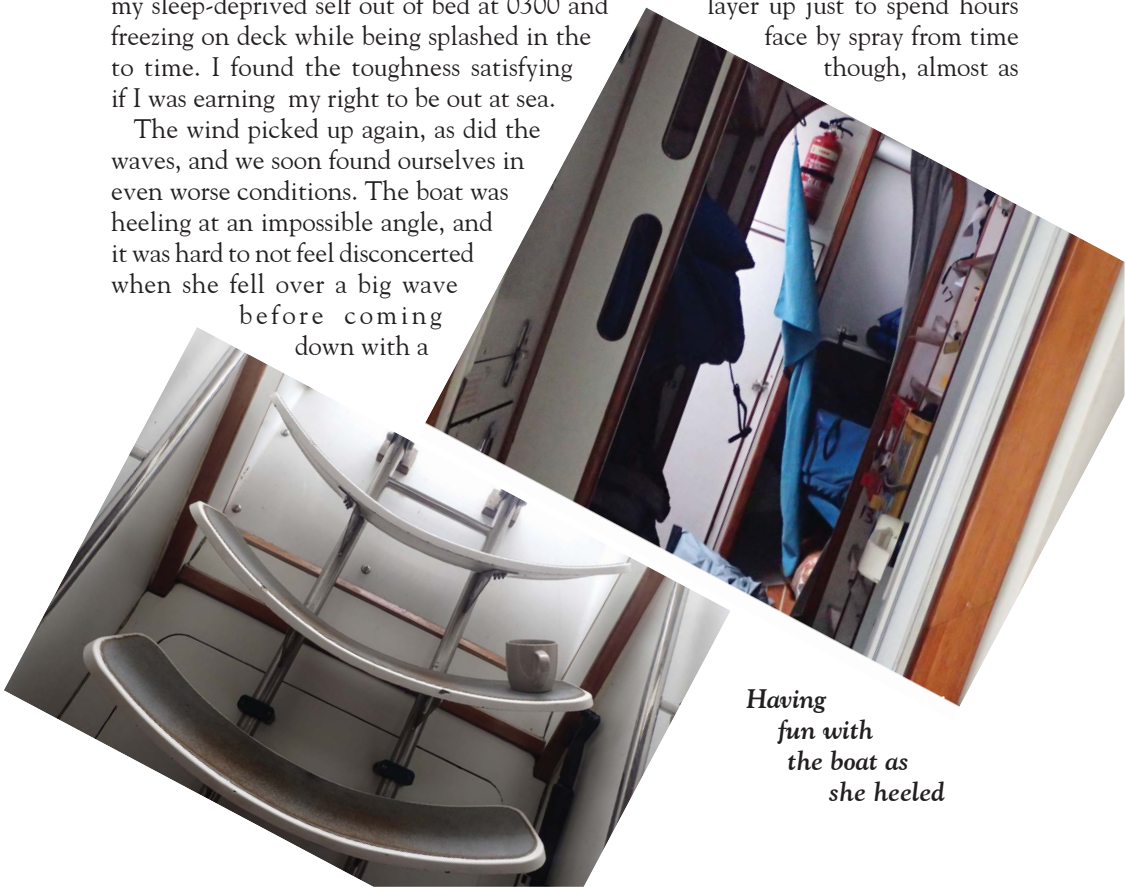


### *Helming in rough seas*

of what time it was. The conditions were tough, my sleep-deprived self out of bed at 0300 and freezing on deck while being splashed in the to time. I found the toughness satisfying if I was earning my right to be out at sea.

The wind picked up again, as did the waves, and we soon found ourselves in even worse conditions. The boat was heeling at an impossible angle, and it was hard to not feel disconcerted when she fell over a big wave before coming down with a

and I found it no easy task to drag layer up just to spend hours face by spray from time though, almost as



*Having fun with the boat as she heeled*



### *First glimpse of the White Cliffs of Dover*

loud crashing thump that shook the entire boat. Helming is my favourite duty, but at night in these conditions I had a hairy moment when the wheel was yanked from my hand with such force that it caused me to lose my footing, coming down hard on the cockpit sole. It took me a moment to get myself up, balanced and in control of the helm again. The moment shook me, and also reminded me how much I was at the mercy of the sea. The 72ft steel *Challenger* was being flung around as if she was nothing more than a rag doll. The power of the water is both petrifying and awe inspiring, and you have no choice but to trust your boat and your fellow crew.

I got goosebumps when I finally spotted the familiar White Cliffs of Dover on the horizon. As we neared the coast and joined the Traffic Separation Scheme, the bumpy surface around us flattened and the sun came blazing through the clouds. I got out my sunglasses and shorts and sat on deck with the rest of the crew – this was the first time both watches

### *Everyone enjoying the beautiful weather*



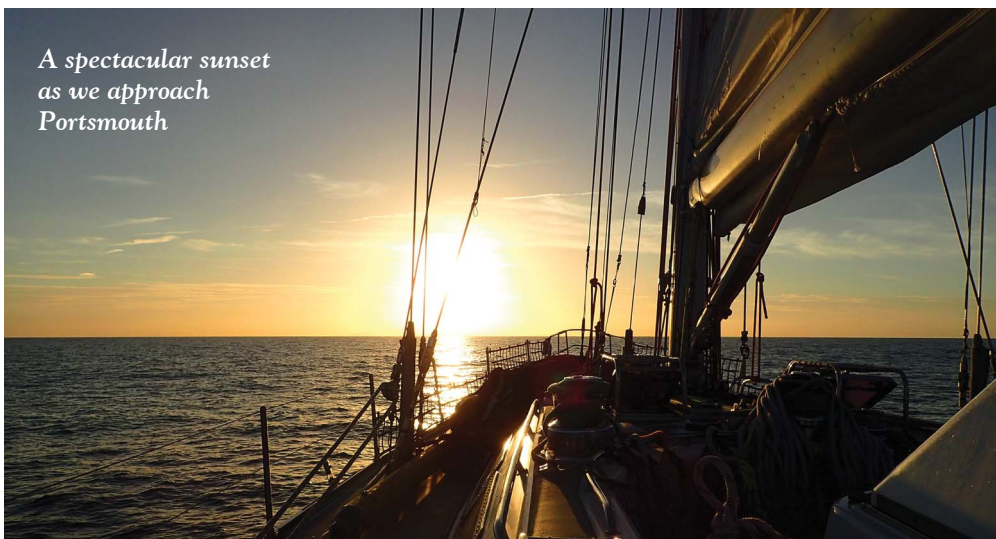


*Rather a lot of washing up after we cook  
all the leftover food for a final  
meal on board*



could be found awake as no one wanted to miss this glorious weather. It was a fantastic way to finish the trip and we prepared a feast with all the leftover food. We arrived at Portsmouth with mixed emotions just after sunset and it was the strangest, most satisfying feeling being back on land. Two days later and my head was still swimming as my body got used to being on a solid surface again.

*A spectacular sunset  
as we approach  
Portsmouth*





### *The crew and Challenger*

I said goodbye to my new friends the next morning with promises of meeting again (and a sore head after a few celebratory drinks the night before) and jumped on a train back home. Looking out of the window – with a huge smile permanently plastered on my windswept face – I reflected on what had been a phenomenal week. The voyage had been an adventure from start to finish and I had a mountain of memories to take home – the stars, laughing with friends, going to the bow to drop the jib at night (and getting soaked!), helming in rough seas, almost falling out of my berth when the boat tacked, seeing my first oil rig ... I could go on. I have a fire in my belly and have set my sights on gaining my Day Skipper qualification within the next year. Tall Ships Adventures have also asked me to return to be a watch leader, and I hope to use this as a chance to join another offshore voyage.

I am deeply grateful to the OCC for helping me achieve an experience I will never forget, and for the opportunity to develop my sailing to the next level. To say the sponsorship was life-changing is no exaggeration. Thank you!

