

AN AZOREAN ADVENTURE

Owen Hewett

In September 2015 my Dad received an e-mail from Chris and Fiona Jones, saying that there was an opportunity for crew to join them on the final legs of their 14-year circumnavigation, from the Caribbean back to North Wales. Having sailed with Chris and Fi on *Threeships* in many different places around the world, it had long been my ambition to cross an ocean. I'd been too young to do the Indian Ocean crossing (see *Flying Fish* 2015/1), so was thrilled when I realised I could fit in the 1100 mile passage from the Azores to North Wales just after my A-level exams.

Chris had told me about the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme, so in January, once I had turned 18, I wrote out my application and kept my fingers crossed! I am extremely grateful to the OCC for supporting me on this passage, as without their help it would have been very difficult for me to go.

Throughout June I was sitting multiple exams, but I always had one eye on the blog that *Threeships* would send out daily as they completed the first leg of their passage from the British Virgin Islands to the Azores. By the time July came around I was so excited that I was reading everything I could about ocean crossings, travelling around the Azores, and the wildlife you can see on the way. So, early Saturday 2 July, I left Gatwick to fly, via Lisbon, to Horta in Faial, one of the islands of the archipelago. We had a great view of Pico, the highest mountain in Portugal, emerging through the clouds as we flew in to the airstrip just metres from the sea. My Dad, who had sailed on the leg from the BVI to the Azores, was there to greet me at the airport and take me back to the marina, where we found the rest of the crew in the bar (no surprises there).

After my first night on *Threeships* since 2010 we set out to make the most of our time on the beautiful island of Faial, visiting some spectacular volcanic features.





Pico viewed from Horta

The first was a piece of land, about a mile square, which has only existed since 1957. The underwater eruption was just off a headland, so the old lighthouse is now not much use as it is actually inland. This new land is now accompanied by a spectacular James Bond-style museum, with polished concrete everywhere. We also visited the truly stunning *caldeira* which wouldn't have looked out of place in Jurassic Park. On Monday 4th the weather cleared and we got an early ferry across the 2 mile channel to the island of Pico, in order to climb the peak, which is around 2500 metres (7700ft). After 3½ hours of climbing all eight of us reached the summit, with some rewarding views to be absorbed – you could see the sea in every direction! It was very different to being at the top of a 2500m peak in the Alps – we were on the only mountain for 500 miles! After a knee-buckling decent and the short hop back on the ferry, we enjoyed a well-earned meal out and looked forward to some more leisurely exploring in our final days on the island.

The next two days were, as promised, more relaxing, with a compulsory visit to the famous Café Sport and to the gruesome but fascinating whaling museum



On the way up

– well worth a visit. On our final evening in Horta it was the semi-final of the European Cup, with Wales playing Portugal. This was particularly special as Chris and Fi are both Welsh, my dad has Welsh roots, and we, of course, were in Portugal! The relatively international crowd gathered around the TV in the bar all rooted for their hosts, and happily (I think) Portugal came through as the winners.

We took this defeat as our cue to leave, so early the next morning we set sail for Terceira, 70 miles to the northeast, to continue our exploration of the archipelago. It felt great to get out on the water at last, and all the crew soon got into the swing of things with a perfect wind of around 12–15 knots ... until we sailed into the lee of Pico! Once out of this light patch we poled out the headsail and were soon making 7 knots in sunshine across a flat sea – what a start to our sailing adventure!

Our first night in Marina d'Angra do Heroísmo was a fairly squeaky one. Being near the entrance meant that the gentle swells kept us rubbing our fenders and lines all night, but an early morning move deeper into the maze of pontoons solved that problem. After this relatively early start we decided to make the most of the day and set about exploring our new home, finding some brilliant gardens which wouldn't have looked out of place back in the UK! That evening I went to my first ever OCC 'pontoon party', an experience I would love to repeat – I have never spoken to people from so many different parts of the world with so many interesting stories.

On Saturday we headed into town for the much-anticipated bull running, which we managed, accidentally, to get involved in. Don't ask me how, but one minute we were behind the safety of some metal railings enjoying the spectacle, the next we had been persuaded to join the bulls in the road! Our last day in the Azores was spent visiting two of the many caves around Terceira, one of which is an underground tube left behind by flowing lava.

We had been watching the weather for the previous week, looking for some favourable winds with which to leave, and on Monday 11 July it finally looked good to go. The forecast said 18 knot westerlies would kick in a day or so into our voyage, so we set sail in light and variable conditions hoping for a bit more by Wednesday. Chris

had set up an excellent watch system, with everyone having four hours on and eight hours off, but staggered so that you didn't have the same person with you for your entire watch. My first night watch was 0000 to 0400, motor-sailing in 5 knots, which meant I found it very difficult

Local people prepare their shops and houses for the bulls





The remotest burger van in the Atlantic?

to stay awake – and probably wouldn't have had it not been for some well-timed hot chocolate. The following day was similarly slow, but Wednesday certainly brought with it some unexpected and unwelcome excitement.

Threships had been away for 14 years, so returning home required quite a celebration, which we had planned. However, this plan revolved around a big party on 23 July, so we had a rather important deadline to aim for. We had conservatively calculated that we needed to average around 5 knots, but that when we dropped below this we would have to motor-sail. This was fine until, on Wednesday when



We were very close to the action!



Approaching Grace Richard under full sail

the wind decided to drop off for an hour or so, nothing happened when we turned the key to start the engine – it didn't even try to turn over. There were no clicking noises to suggest the battery was dead – it seemed that the starter motor had just gone kaput! Obviously there are no spare starter motors knocking around 250 miles from land, so Chris set about trying to fix the problem.

I was awoken from my pre-dinner nap by the unmistakable 'donk' of the engine kicking into action – in less than an hour the problem had been solved! A sticky solenoid meant that now, every time we needed to start the engine, it would require the touch of a wire to the battery to initiate the starter motor – we were effectively hotwiring it. A short whale and dolphin sighting finished the day on a more positive note, but the forecast had now changed and the promised westerlies had transformed into more light and variable conditions for the next few days.

This forecast turned out to be accurate for Thursday and Friday morning, but by lunchtime the sun had come out and we were sailing at just over 5 knots – idyllic! Chris even got his sextant out and took a sight, getting within 2 miles, not bad with a 2.5m swell. As I began my night watch that evening two whales blew what sounded like less than 50m behind us – you could smell the fishiness of their breath. The following day Fi baked some lovely fresh bread and delicious brownies to keep us going through the night watches, and we saw another sailing yacht headed in the same direction as us. We were going to pass very close so we radioed them for a chat, and by amazing coincidence it turned out that it was *Grace Richard*, the same boat we'd been moored alongside in Horta a week earlier! Mark, a singlehander, was very pleased to talk to us, and even more so when we threw him a freshly-baked loaf of bread and some brownies as we sailed by – not many bakeries make mid-Atlantic deliveries! That was enough excitement for one day, and I went to my bunk a little more conscious of how truly isolated we were.

On Sunday we finally had some truly cloudless skies to enjoy, but unfortunately they were accompanied by a lack of wind. Whilst motor-sailing we noticed that there seemed to be an awful lot of VHF radio activity, and listening more carefully revealed we were in fact hearing Falmouth Coastguard more than 400 miles away. Astounded by this, Chris went for an ambitious radio check and, unbelievably, they replied with 'Loud and clear'! Needless to say they were almost as shocked as us when we told them our location.

The new week started just as the previous had finished, with enough glorious sunshine for Chris to let me have a go with the sextant. Somehow I got within 1 mile of our GPS fix, but I think he may have helped me out somewhere along the way with some careful rounding, without letting on. That afternoon the wildlife of the North Atlantic put on a stunning show, with a humungous fin whale passing within 100 yards of our bow, and a pod of dolphins playing around the boat, finishing with one athletically leaping well clear of the water. As with most dolphin sightings this put the crew in a great mood, further heightened when Fi once again served up a brilliant dinner as we passed the 500 miles to go mark.

Sadly the good weather didn't last. The fog returned and the AIS suddenly became very useful as the volume of traffic increased. We didn't have a transmitter, but the receiver along with the small display made us feel a lot safer than just having radar, as it was relatively easy to work out whether or not we were on a collision course before the other vessel was within 5 miles. Although still more than 100 miles from southern Ireland, we saw our first gannets, with their spectacular dive-bombing method of fishing.

I was woken a few hours before I was due on watch by something we'd been waiting for for a long time – wind! The promised westerlies had finally arrived. We were broad reaching at 6–7 knots in 17–20 knots of wind, under double-reefed main. The short chop of the Irish Sea felt relatively mild, although Mike and John in the forecabin may have felt otherwise. As the day went on the wind came round to the beam and we reached 8 knots over the ground at times, though the tide may have been helping a bit by this point. Our inability to catch any fish on the passage was finally confirmed

We certainly got close!





Master and apprentice

when we had to reel in the line as the gannets started going for our lure – we certainly didn't want to have to deal with the wrong end of a very large sea bird! We made landfall in Kinsale at around 1700, in order to refuel (both the boat and ourselves) and to make sure we timed the tidal gate at Tuskar Rock correctly.

Leaving Kinsale at 0100 on Thursday meant that we hoped to anchor off Porthdinllaen on Friday, and make our grand arrival in the Menai Strait at 1200 on Saturday. We ended up timing it perfectly, dropping anchor near the pub in Porthdinllaen on Friday morning having had a brilliant sail up the Irish Sea, with many dolphin sightings. A pub lunch ashore was followed by an afternoon nap, in preparation for the grand arrival on Saturday, with a cannon being fired from Caernarfon Castle at 1100.

The morning of the big day started early, as we had to tidy the boat for visitors and, of course, for the photos! Fi had an on-air interview over the phone with Radio Wales, and then we set out to cross the bar and head down the Strait. I took the helm as we sailed past the castle so that Chris and Fi could both be on the foredeck enjoying the moment, and it was a little nerve-wracking when clearance under the keel dropped to less than a metre with a hundred or so people watching. Chris managed to hold his nerve and come alongside with the crowd watching, and that was it! *Threeships* had finally returned home after 14 years sailing the oceans in every corner of the world.

I can now call myself a Full Member of the OCC, and feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to do a 1000 mile passage at such a young age. I would like to thank Chris and Fiona Jones for their support and mentoring, not only on this brilliant trip but all the other (somewhat shorter) sailing adventures I have joined them for around the world. Without their continued patience and tuition I know I would not have the great passion for sailing that I do today. This passage was every bit as



Exciting sailing up the Irish Sea

exciting, enjoyable and adventurous as I had anticipated, and I cannot wait to do another – maybe across the Atlantic next time. If you know any young person who enjoys sailing and travelling, and fancies an adventure, do suggest they apply for OCC Youth Sponsorship!



The welcome party!