

MAY THE OCEAN BE BEAUTIFUL, AWESOME AND KIND...

Linda Crew-Gee, Port Officer, London

I believe that, like Venus, I was born from the sea foam on the rugged shores of Korčula in Croatia, the reputed birthplace of Marco Polo. When I was four years old I was on a family boat that was sinking, an excitement which has never left me, and ever since then I have been fascinated by the sea and boats. Maybe it's not surprising that at one point I owned five boats and no house, and have lived on the water in London for the past 30 years.

My first, unconventional, ocean crossing was in 1982 when I ran away to sea and ended up on a tanker to Brazil. The vastness of the ocean horizon mesmerised me. Rock climbing and mountaineering challenges captured my imagination for a number of years, but the call of the sea never ceased.

Inspired by Annie Hill, I bought a junk-rigged boat and took to the sea around the UK, Ireland, Europe and further afield. My Pacific crossing ended abruptly and infamously on a reef, while sailing on *Gipsy Moth IV*. A huge Pacific wave that nearly swallowed me did not scare me enough – it was an invigorating experience that made my love for the sea even stronger. With the sea in my blood and under my skin there was no end to my dreams, nor to my determination to cross the Southern Ocean and round Cape Horn. I could hardly believe it when I joined *Tecla* in Auckland in November 2013 to sail eastwards across the Southern Ocean towards Cape Horn and the Falklands Islands. We hoped to complete the last 3000 miles of the passage, from 50°S in the Pacific to 50° S in the Atlantic, under sail alone.

Ten months earlier I had learned that three Dutch tall ships – *Tecla*, *Oosterschelde* and *Europa* – were sailing around the world via the Southern Ocean and Cape Horn. I had never heard of *Tecla* before, although she is well known in international tall ship regattas. She is family owned, and the father, son, daughter and daughter's boyfriend were

taking her to the Southern Ocean. She was built in 1915 in Holland as a herring fishing lugger, and later converted into a sail training ship. She is now a gaff ketch, and can carry up to six sails in light



STS *Tecla*



Tecla at Auckland pier

winds – she is a fast ship, proven at many international regattas. She measures 25m at the waterline and 29m on deck, with a beam of 6.6m.

It was very clear that an opportunity like this would not come again easily, if at all, so with Virginia Spencer, who also wanted to make such a voyage, I made enquires. No experience was required, though they warned us of the likely sea conditions and the remoteness of the route. They were happy to accept us, and not worried that Virginia is deaf, so we booked immediately. It was unbelievable. In my wildest dreams I could not have imagined an opportunity like this.

I will never forget when my boss approved the time off, though I was prepared to resign if she said ‘no’. I was working in the City of London and my boss, who was based in the USA, was fully aware of my lifelong dreams, so I sent her an email asking for three months off. She replied saying: “Linda, that is one of the most beautiful e-mails I ever received at work. I don’t want to stand in the way of you achieving your dream – there are more important things in life than work, so I discussed it and had it approved. Go for it”. I virtually hugged my boss with all my might and my heart, and will always be grateful for her understanding.

In the following months I had many soul searching moments. My lifelong dream was within my grasp, but I still agonised about reaching for it. Something was holding me back, and I eventually realised that I was dead scared of sailing on the Southern Ocean and around Cape Horn. I was confused – I love the sea but seemed terrified of it. Then I realised that I was not scared of the sea but of dying! What could replace my lifelong dream if I gave up on it – would I be able to forgive myself for missing out on this opportunity? ‘Are you prepared to die for your dream?’ I asked myself. ‘Yes!’ I replied confidently.

*This is where we're
going...*

This liberated me. I was never frozen with fears for my life in the Southern Ocean in the way I had been when thinking of going there. That was the most important thing I did that enabled me to enjoy the Southern Ocean to the utmost.

Having dealt with my fears I focused on the discomfort next. I am nearly always desperately cold. I needed to get the best thermal and waterproof gear I could, and I ended up taking 30kg of clothing. My shipmates claimed I wore it all at once, but it kept me warm and dry even when it was very cold and wet.

When I saw *Tecla* in Auckland it was love at first sight. She looked perfect – not too big for handling, and small enough to be close to the sea and feel it properly. Before we left on 2 November 2013 I spent a few hours on Mount Eden above Auckland. I wondered how I would come out of the experience. My main aim was not to get injured or, God forbid, fall in, and to be a useful member of the crew. As for creature comforts, all I wanted was to be warm and not to get too wet too often!

All pulling together...





26 November and our first gale

There were 13 of us – five women and eight men – split into three watches of four hours on, eight hours off, while the professional crew stood six-hour watches. Everyone kept the same watch slot during the entire voyage, and none of us ever missed a watch or was late for it. Each watch was well balanced in terms of sailing ability, physical strength and gender mix, and cabin mates were not on the same watch which gave each of us some privacy and time alone. Each two-person cabin had its own toilet, shower and heating – luxury! Everything worked wonderfully well and we sailed as one big happy family throughout the trip.

A few days after leaving Auckland we anchored at the Chatham Islands, 650 miles to the southeast. The community of 400 was unbelievably welcoming and generous towards us despite their harrowing history – almost the entire tribe had been wiped out when they offered a warm welcome to invading warriors instead of putting up a fight. We wished we could have stayed longer to learn more.

Nobody got seriously seasick when the wind got up and the sea became rougher, but we all got a bit queasy. Slowly we were getting our sea legs, learning how to helm, being trained how to handle the sheets and sails, and what to do and what not to do – I made my first faux pas when I stepped into the centre of some coiled ropes. We all learned fast. The weather was good, the sea moderate, we were nicely eased off into the big ocean. Our aim was to sail as much as possible but especially during the final 3000 miles when we were not permitted to use the engine to comply with the IACH (International Association of Cape Horners) qualifying rules.

On 26 November the first gale hit us, an eventful night that left me wondering how bad it could get. Three crew members on the midnight watch were swept along the bulwarks by a rogue wave that nobody saw coming from behind in the dark. More

mayhem followed. I was in my bunk wondering what was going on. Suddenly, with a massive explosive bang against the hull, my entire bunk was dislodged from the its fittings, taking me across the cabin. I stayed put. We hoped that not many of these big waves, known as *Tres Marias*, would come our way. They were constantly hanging behind and above us, but miraculously not many broke over us. When they did it was like being under a waterfall.

Tecla has high bulwarks and we felt safe on deck, but the raised open helming position has nothing to clip on to, and without a lifejacket it was disconcerting, to say the least. The view from the helm was memorable, though. Holding on with all my might, watching the ship charging along at up to 10 knots in pitch darkness through white foaming seas, is a memory that I will never lose.

Except for a handheld wind gauge, VHF and GPS, the ship was run as in the old days. We were continuously checking the barometer, scanning the horizon and the skies, monitoring the seas and the sails, feeling the wind and putting it all together without relying on technology. I felt privileged to witness such seamanship.

It got colder as we dropped further
fog. For days we longed to
distant planetary

south, and soon we hit interminable
see the sun, moon and stars. Those
bodies – together with the solitary
albatrosses that visited us regularly
– became our closest friends. We
followed a more rigid routine
of watch-eat-sleep, gradually
spending more time in our
bunks.

Not all was misery, however.
As self-appointed ship's
communicator I issued a
weekly newsletter, which
was well received since
most of the crew did not
know much of the 'news'.
First I renamed our
watches Fun, Silent and
Wildlife based on their
behaviour. Then I gave
names to our cabins.
'Rainforest Hut' was
full of water from
condensation,
sweat and steam
because the
door was never
opened as they



Under full sail

wanted to stay warm. My abode became 'Aladdin's Cave', in which everyone found everything they could possibly ever need. The girls' favourite was 'Bachelor's Pad', occupied by a single Frenchman. Then there were 'Captain's' and 'Cookie', but 'Secret Passage' had us all confused...

We would have had no sense of time passing were it not for crossing the dateline on 9 November when we had two Fridays, and for frequent changes of the clock. Time and distance merged into one. Each lost its usual meaning, as though both had become irrelevant and only the here and now existed. I lived for the infinite beauty of the sea, for rare sights of the moon, for when the stars peeked through the clouds. I celebrated sun rays when they tickled my cheeks. I fought with the wind when it tried to blow me away. Occasional dolphins, distant whales and lone albatrosses visited us in this watery, airy universe.

The wind provided infinite entertainment for our sails. We glided along, we charged, we dived. We were transported as if beyond our control, as though some magic was playing with us on this blue planet. While the decks were awash with the foaming seas and the gales screamed in our rigging, down below in my bunk I would be lulled like an embryo by the gentle, soothing waves. Whatever was happening outside and however it was going to end, it was so nice and snug to be in my bunk, especially when I was exhausted from hard work on deck. As for the sea, there was no end to it – my whole being was fully immersed in the vast expanse of the Southern Ocean. I wrote:

The sea prostrates itself in all its glory for us today, showing off its most seductive ways, playing with its mistress, Tecla, who with much ease and youthful fun glides over each wave riding it in the way only she can. The waves come in all sizes and shapes, from all directions, climbing up, breaking up, joining forces or splitting up. There are deep blue wavelets, pleated streams of water, creased cascades of waterfalls, shooting towers of rising water, or plain straight water pools of transparent shiny turquoise, blue and green. Many of them create white foamy swirls that turn into a rainbow mist when the wind picks them up. It does not matter if they are old or young, big or small — they all bring fun, meaning no menace.

Tecla rises above the waves with grace, and either shakes them off, turning them into a fluffy white robe that wraps her sides in a bubbly lace of watery foam, or just sweeps them under her hull swaying her hips ever so gently. When they turn up on the other side they curl up into playful crests as though bowing to her grace, on their way waving 'Glad that we have met'.

For the wave suitors that admire her curvaceous stern she has her own ways. They arrive in haste, ceremoniously bowing their heads, taking off their hats, wrapping their arms around her waist. She makes a few seductive moves and before you know it her suitors are enthralled in the most mesmerising waltz. She keeps her proud bows straight, only coquettishly dipping her head as if to say, 'Nice to meet you, thanks for the entertainment' and continues to glide on.'

By now we had had many gales under our keel, innumerable squalls, a few storms and many waypoints in our wake. Soon we would be leaving the abyssal depths and ocean vastness to enter the narrow straits of the land. The magnetic attraction of Cape Horn was turning into reality by the hour. On 2 December we looked in disbelief at the benign weather forecast of 25 knots, knowing it was not credible as the barometer was falling in a downward spiral. We all lived in silent trepidation of what was to



Off Diego Ramirez island – approaching Cape Horn

come. Late that afternoon our captain sighted the island of Diego Ramirez, 57 miles southwest of Cape Horn.

Pelting rain mixed with thick sea spray lashed at me from every direction, driven horizontally. The spray was like snow, creating a whiteout. The clouds were so thick and dark that daylight disappeared. Frequently a massive wave would tower above us on the stern quarter, to disgorge itself into a river on our decks and rush out through the scuppers. Nothing I had seen before prepared me for it. We were flying along at 12 knots in 40 knots of wind. The ship moved like a planing dinghy, surfing on shifting seas under us. The sea and the wind took control and we were just a tiny speck that they spun along. We were surrounded by angry, menacing, powerful seas that meant no good, the wind blowing relentlessly to scare us off even more. It was not a place to hang around. Although we'd been in rough seas for a month we'd seen nothing like this before. I pondered if any human should ever witness it – were we tempting nature to play with our fates?

We were due to pass Cape Horn after midnight, when I would be in my bunk. Winds gusting over 50 knots were driving us along at worryingly unsafe speeds so the crew, in very rough conditions, lowered the mizzen and then the staysail. Tired but jovial faces with elated smiles filled the space around the helm once the ship was under full control again, a 25 sq m storm jib still pulling us along at a steady 12.5 knots, more when surfing! 'Where is the Horn?' we asked.

The Horn and its lighthouses were behind us! We had seen nothing except stormy, boiling seas. We celebrated with chocolates and rum, and in respectful silence dropped a piece from one of *Tecla's* spars into the turbulent waters to commemorate those



seamen not lucky enough to survive the fated Cape Horn. If I had thought that the seas before were bad I was in for a big surprise. The whole sea surface was in shreds, the power of the wind flattening it into streaks of foaming water. The massive waves had no crests – they were blown away into a spray before they could be formed.

Tecla was taking good care of us all. She just ploughed on, battered but undeterred, determined but graceful, rolling from side to side, never violently but sometimes more





Port Stanley, the Falkland Islands

deeply. Gracefully lifting up her stern she would duck her bows in the sea, but always springing up proud and winning. The tiny storm jib looked silly and small but it was pulling us along like never before.

On my next watch I learnt that a massive storm was moving westwards from the Falklands. If we carried on we would be right in its centre with no shelter, so we decided to wait, heaving-to for 36 hours. We were just east of Le Maire Strait and only 100 miles from our waypoint of 50°S. The wind and the seas were coming from different directions, spreading pandemonium around us while *Tecla* rolled like never before. Exhaustion overwhelmed us, and I thought we would all go mad if it continued much longer. We drifted 60 miles towards the Falklands.

With abating winds we set off again, reaching our waypoint and eventually Port Stanley at 0030 on 8 December. I looked in disbelief at the lights of Port Stanley, and listened to the unforgettable sound of the anchor chain going out. I felt trapped. I did not kiss the land when I stepped ashore – I could have continued to sail forever.

The Falkland Islands



Before I left I received a text from a friend of mine: **May the Ocean be Beautiful, Awesome and Kind.** I could have not wished for anything more expressive and true. I remain forever grateful to the Southern Ocean for its infinite beauty, to Cape Horn for its mercy, to *Tecla* for her amazing sea-worthiness and to my crewmates for their resilient spirits and maritime mastery.

