

CAPE TOWN TO CHERBOURG

Jess Bentley

(Jess was able to join Nick Mercer aboard Impala partially thanks to assistance from the OCC Youth Sponsorship Programme.)

An Englishman, an Irishman, a South African and a Bavaria 46 named *Impala* set sail from Cape Town towards Lisbon on 9 February 2016, with an itinerary to stop at St Helena, Ascension Island, the Cape Verde islands and the Azores along the way.



As this route is with trade winds, we were goose-winged for our first leg of 12 days to St Helena. Once we'd left Table Mountain and the misty Cape behind us we enjoyed beautiful

***The crew of Impala.
L to r: Sean Timmins,
Jess Bentley and
(Captain) Nick Mercer***

consistent, warm winds and pristine sailing conditions – an almost perfect start to a four-month Atlantic passage. Consequently we settled into a good watch routine of four hours on, eight hours off, with cooking and cleaning duties, good book-reading, and the start of a competitive Scrabble tournament. On reaching St Helena after our first real ocean stint, we spent a couple of days exploring this unique island and enjoying some downtime before heading out again for Ascension Island.



*Cape Town is a
beautiful port
to sail into*



James Bay, St Helena

The leg to Ascension was a short one, and Captain Nick Mercer handed the reins over to me, so to speak, for the five-day passage. This gave me valuable experience as skipper of both vessel and crew, and made me more aware of the responsibility which goes with it, including plotting the route, downloading the daily weather and doing daily checks on the boat.

At Ascension we only spent a few days stretching our legs, swimming, provisioning and refuelling for the longest and most difficult leg of the trip – Ascension to the Cape Verdes. This involved an Equator crossing, the doldrums, living at an angle of 30° for the majority of the 17 days we were at sea, dealing with a torn mainsail, constant water in the bilges (it only needed bailing once a day, fortunately, but we never did discover where it was coming from though we sure looked for it!), some man-overboard exercises with the horseshoe buoy, a main halyard which completely sheared, and a blocked holding tank for the one head. We were very happy to reach Mindelo in the Cape Verdes and some much-needed rest and recovery for crew and boat. Although it was a tough 17 days, the things one learns at sea are beyond what most people learn in a lifetime, as I have come to learn.

The Impala crew enjoying some downtime in the Cape Verdes



The sailing after the Cape Verde islands was pretty much what one would expect in the Northern Hemisphere – cold, wet, grey and at 30° to the wind. We managed the Cape Verde to Azores leg in 11 days without a working engine – it was only when *Impala* was lifted out of the water in São Miguel that we discovered our propeller had somehow sheared off. Fortunately all we needed was a new propeller to solve the problem.

After the Azores our final destination was supposed to be Lisbon – plans changed, however, and instead it became Cherbourg, France. Crossing the notorious Bay of Biscay was difficult in thick fog, but once we reached the English Channel it was like glass. And so *Impala* and her crew motored into Cherbourg on 8 June after another 11 days

at sea, happy to see land and eager for some champagne to celebrate the 6717 mile journey.

Impala after re-tuning the rigging. It only took us the whole day!



It was Humphrey Bogart who said: 'Unless you really understand the water, and understand the reason for being on it, and understand the love of sailing and the feeling of quietness and solitude, you don't really belong on a boat anyway. I think Hemingway said one time that the sea is the last free place on earth.' It was only after sailing 6717 miles that I really understood what he meant. Every bit of water we sailed over, the beautiful dolphins, whales, birds, flying fish and jellyfish we encountered, the most epic starry



*The calm before the storm ... or after it.
Between the Cape Verdes and the Azores we went through lots of squalls*

nights and hot tropical sunshine, made the 35 knot winds, stormy oceans and long nights all worth it. Looking back now, I truly miss the ocean, the reason for being on it, the quietness and solitude, and a place I can honestly say really is the last free place on earth.

Thank you to the OCC for sponsorship, to Nick Mercer for the opportunity, and to my friends and family for allowing me such a privilege of jumping on a boat and heading off into the sunset. All that's left now is wondering ... when are we crossing the next ocean?



Dolphins enjoying a surf