

Wild Bird to the Azores and back

- our way

Nick Chavasse

Awarded the Irish Cruising Club Decanter

The sale of a business is a precarious thing; and then the seemingly impossible happened. We were presented with the opportunity to go sailing away into the sunset and possibly the trip of a lifetime. The plan came together for a four-month trip with the Azores as our dream destination. It seemed a neat fit to start with the Vice Commodore's Meet in Mounds Bay



in Cornwall in May and to finish with the Beaulieu Meet in September on *Wild Bird of Fowey*, our Bowman 40, built in 1995.

We left our mooring on the Hamble River, on 17 May, full of the joys of spring, but endured thunder, lightening and hailstones as we headed down the Solent towards Hurst Castle. This was not to be the last time we were grateful for investing in top quality Musto oilskins and amazing boots, which had hitherto always seemed a luxury too far! We spent the next week, preparing for the voyage whilst sailing towards the Meet in Mounds Bay.

Margie had declared that she would use the time to study a nutrition course. This involved 35 modules, all of which had to be emailed to the tutor before a final exam. Each tutorial had to be completed and marked before the next tutorial was dispatched. This demand on technology resulted in some not inconsiderable research and investment in communication equipment!

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Sailing out of Poole, we did our only unintended gybe of the voyage, which resulted in some bad language and a Dorade air vent being removed from the coach roof, never to be seen again. Fortunately we managed to locate a replacement in Dartmouth and *Wild Bird* was restored to her proper dignity. When crossing Lyme Bay, the peace was disturbed by a Lynx helicopter, which followed us, hovering overhead for 10 minutes. I racked my brains to try and remember if I had failed to pay a mess bill some years before. The coastguard was also unable to explain its presence and interest in us.



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Helford River is an old haunt and I have spent many summers sailing dinghies up and down the river. With that in mind, I learned that a Bowman 40 doesn't react in quite the same way when tacking against the tide. We cut it fine, close to Bar Buoy and sailed quite elegantly on to the putty. I tried to make it look as if I had done this on purpose by inflating the dinghy and scrubbing the hull. Sadly we were caught out when Jamie Heron (RCC) on *Clemency* came to view the situation. On reflection it was one of those moments when the immediate past Commodore would have recommended 'quietly lowering the burgee'.

We anchored in Mousehole along with four other RCC yachts for the night before the Meet. The anchorage is fine in westerly weather and Mousehole is a charming place to explore. The Meet took place across the bay at St Michael's Mount. After drinks on *Wild Song* with Paul Heiney (Vice Commodore), we were kindly entertained for dinner by David and Jill Southwood (RCC) on *Summerbird*.

It had been the intention that the Meet would re-convene in the Scillies,



Wild Bird of Fowey

but the weather deterred most from venturing further west. We re-joined *Summerbird* the following evening in The Cove, a delightful anchorage on St Agnes. We were caught red-handed by Nick Waite and Charles Nodder (RCC) from *Bethulie*, enjoying a drink or two at the Turk's Head, so we declared a mini RCC Meet in great style and in a fabulous location.

Waking to a strong wind the following morning, we then spent two hours trying to free our anchor

from a cable. It was fortunate that with a little guile and cunning we managed to free ourselves without having to employ a diver, who would have had to be summoned from St Mary's; something really meaty for the FPI and the Isles of Scilly pilot book! We picked up a mooring later in St Mary's and took the ferry to see the gardens on Tresco, which are stunning.

We set sail for Camaret the next morning with a gale forecast for the following day. We negotiated the Chenal du Four in the dark and tied up in the Port du Notic, more convenient for the town than the larger Port Vauban. We arrived at tea time and happily sat out the gale that materialised that night. The crew recovering from *mal de mer* set the tone and the priorities, by muttering 'moules and pommes frite, moules and pommes frites' in an authoritative way.

Feeling that we were well on our way, we stopped in Audierne, and Loctudy before anchoring at Port St Nicholas on the south side of Ile de Groix. The anchorage was well protected from the strong east wind.

We walked over the island to Port Tudy and saw Jonathan and Joy Virden (RCC) returning from a cycling expedition. Later that afternoon we set sail for Belle Ile. The wind was perfect, with up to 23kts from the east. We averaged eight knots with a full main and yankee,



Port St Nicholas, Ile de Groix

and flew past Ster-Wenn, the scene of a noisy and memorable barbecue during the Quiberon Meet in 2014. We anchored in Port de Pouldon on the south-west corner of Belle Ile, again sheltered from the easterly wind.

The next morning dawned grey and windy. I went ashore and walked up the hill to obtain a signal for the weather forecast. It was NE6 with a rough sea. We decided to push on close hauled with reefed main and staysail across to Port-Joinville, Ile d'Yeu, where we stayed two nights. We had been warned that the application process for visiting the Spanish islands was bureaucratic and needed to be done several weeks in advance. Accordingly we went into Bourgenay, a modern marina, to seek help in completing the forms and to use their scanning and email facilities.

From this large marina that left little to be desired, we sailed to Saint Martin, Ile de Re, which was a dream of a place; very attractive and full of life. We loved the market, the shops and the atmosphere, particularly as we were there before the high season. We locked out of the harbour the following morning bound for La Rochelle. Sailing under the impressive

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Re bridge was exciting, although the weather was very misty and it rained heavily. We made our way towards La Rochelle itself and motored in between the two towers that mark the entrance to the Vieux Port, an aspiration I had harboured for some years. We asked for a berth for the night, but were told that there was no room and that we should repair back to Port des Minimes, a marina which has recently been expanded to take 5,000 boats.

We planned the voyage so that the main passages would become increasingly long; the Channel, Biscay, Spain, the Azores and finally the big one from the Azores back to the Helford River. Our next crew member, Ian Sawers, arrived in La Rochelle to help us across Biscay. We stopped one night in Ile d'Oleron before setting off for Santander. We had thought we would go straight to La Coruña, but decided to take the shorter route to Santander; a good decision in view of the weather on the day.

The advantage of going to Santander is that the Biscay crossing is a shorter distance, but it lead to a long flog west to La Coruña in confused Biscay seas. There were, however, plenty of pleasant places along the north Spain coast to visit. David Southwood had recommended that we visit the Real Club Marítimo de Santander (RCMS), and so instructions were sent to the crew to bring blazers and ties to be properly attired for our visit. We were lucky to find a space in Darsena de Molnedo, the marina mainly occupied by RCMS members. It was expensive, but we were well looked after by their Commodore, who had just returned from the Bicentenary celebrations of some other club in Cowes. We also learned that flip-flops, however elegant and practical, are not permitted!

Having determined that the delightfully named anchorage Ensenada de Poo was too roly, we decided to seek shelter in Llanes. The harbour wall looked unappealing so we checked out the new inner harbour. We were welcomed with open arms by the crew of a French yacht, skippered by an Englishman and crewed by his French wife. They had been actively discouraging a large Jersey registered motor vessel from taking a small space next to them because it was far too big. The French yacht was delighted to see us and encouraged us to take the space, but without telling us about the large motor vessel. Having tied up and whilst preparing some supper, this enormous motor vessel attempted to come along side. Several east European crew were shouting and waving, claiming that we had taken their berth!

Unimpressed by this behaviour, Ian shouted back that as their boat was registered in Jersey and was flying the Red Ensign, he wished to speak to someone who spoke English! This was met by more angry responses and later some 'gangster types' walked round causing a great fracas over the harbour wall.

We were quite glad that the 'gangsters' could not access the security

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gate to the marina pontoons. The Harbour master had explained earlier that, as he had lost all the visitor access cards, the method by which one now accessed the pontoons was by throwing a rope, in a lassoing type manner, on to the ramp leading to the pontoon. At the moment the rope cut the laser beam another crew member had to be ready to open the gate.

We only had two weeks before we were due to meet with our daughter, Victoria and her boyfriend Josh Pickford, who wanted to spend some time with us in the Spanish rias. The swell and confused sea along the north coast of Spain made it quite a challenge. We managed day-sails for eleven consecutive days, passing beautiful beaches, but with no time to stop, until we reached La Coruña. The apparently less popular Ria de Cedeira to the east is beautiful. It gives a flavour of what is to follow and we wish we could have given it more time.

Approaching La Coruña, we noticed a boat fast approaching on a collision course. We had clearly been spotted on AIS because it turned out to be our ‘gangster’ friends coming too close for comfort. We arrived exhausted and decided to stay for three nights. We were lucky to arrive on the day of Festival of San Juan, on the shortest night of the year. The locals light beach bonfires in joy over the impending arrival of summer. It was an impressive display of pyromania and great to see so much excitement and jollity. It coincides with the Sardine festival, and locals perform a rite, lighting bonfires with what they call *aguardiente*, or firewater, before spending the night jumping over the fires and eating sardines. It is said to ensure fertility.

I was keen to pay my respects to Sir John Moore, who died in La Coruña when commanding the troops in the Peninsular War in 1809. He was, a hero in my Army career as a Green Jacket, a successor regiment to the 60th Rifles. His story played a great part in regimental history lessons to my young soldiers, when I commanded Moore Platoon at the Infantry Junior Leaders Battalion at Shorncliffe in 1977.

Victoria and Josh joined us in Muxia. We planned a gentle first day, with a sail in the Ria de Camarinas, then lunch at anchor, a swim and a quiet anchorage for the night. After lunch, however, the engine refused to start so the skipper was put through one of those Yachtmaster’s tests to return safely to Muxia port under sail only. A cunning plan was devised which involved Josh taking a long warp to a pontoon by dinghy, as *Wild Bird’s* crew manoeuvred under sail through a mêlée of fishing boats, leaving little room for error. Fortunately the plan was redundant as the



Sir John Moore's tomb in La Coruña

engine started as we entered the harbour.

The local mechanic was summoned for the following morning and he arrived on time. He very quickly diagnosed a broken wire, caused by rust where it connects to the starter motor. Clemente did not speak any English and I did not speak any Spanish, so trying to communicate the problem to him was a challenge. As a permanent reminder of his brilliant engineering skills we now chant the words; '123 Clemente' during the pre-heat sequence to start the engine.

The following day we motor sailed round Cape Finisterre and found an idyllic barbecue spot at Rio Brens in the bay of Ensenada del Sardineiro. We also explored Ria de Muros on the last day of its festival and tasted Goose Barnacles, a local delicacy. Ria de Arousa was next and Vilagarcia proved a great place to stay for a few days, and it is where Victoria and Josh left the boat to go back to work. We took the train to Santiago de Compostela to sample the delights of the city, which marks the culmination of the famous pilgrimage route.

We had great expectations for the Spanish Isles and were not disappointed. We spent the next night at anchor opposite a nudist beach on Illa de Ons. After a lovely walk on the island, with several, embarrassed British detours around the nudist population, we made haste towards Vigo where we met up with our next crew for the crossing to the Azores. As part of the pre-passage sail training, we dropped the hook for lunch at the Islas Cies opposite the entrance to the Ria de Vigo. We were glad that we had gone to the extensive trouble of obtaining permission, as the National Park police were seen checking boats at anchor.

Three nights were spent in Vigo, where our new crew Peter Benson and Sam Doyne joined us to prepare for the Azores crossing. We had a lovely sail down to Baiona at the mouth of Rio de Viga, where we spent one night. There we topped up with diesel and went out for a leaving supper with Richard and Celia Lassen (Royal Thames). They presented us with a goody box to be opened at the halfway point, took photographs and waved us a cheery farewell.

It is hard to put into words the excitement, anticipation, nervousness and general build-up of tension when setting off for the first time on a sailing trip of about 1,000 miles out into the Atlantic. The first night was very rough with a confused sea but a healthy northerly wind, the Spanish trade wind, which is the norm for the Spanish coast at that time of year. This allowed us to make excellent progress, achieving 160nm in the first 24 hour period. We soon lost sight of the Spanish Coast in the mist and settled into our ocean routine.

Lulled into a false sense of security and the prospect of a speedy crossing, the wind turned westerly. Thus began a challenging adventure fighting a westerly wind of about 10 -15kts, rising to 28kts on occasions, combined

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Margie on the helm

with a lumpy sea. The wind was on the nose for the remaining seven days of the passage.

Wild Bird proved her strength and build quality, time and again as the sea did its best to shake her to bits! Much of the time was spent calculating the benefit of reducing sail and

motor sailing to windward, versus sailing full and by (sailing elegantly), and either going south or north but very little west. Peter became the expert at fettling, as he put it, Tinkerbell, our Hydrovane system. It uses no battery power and is set with a vane, a certain number of degrees from the wind, to steer the boat accordingly. It is a magical piece of kit, doesn't answer back and costs nothing to run.

Sam opened some tins of stew on the first night, when no one else had the courage to spend any time in the galley - and what a star he was to produce something to keep us going through that first night. Subsequently, Margie, who had not been well on the first day, found some inner strength and inspiration to produce wonderful meals, both for lunch and in the evening, for the remainder of the voyage. She even managed to make two loaves of bread, which were stunning to look at and delicious to eat. I spent a great deal of time trying to make the satphone work and, in particular, to import the Grib files into a workable software program. I finally managed to do it by importing them into the chart plotter by way of Peter's SD card, which he happened to have in his luggage, as one does.

The final leg sailing towards São Miguel was exciting because of the number of cargo ships and tankers bearing down on us to converge on São Miguel, all bound for its port Ponta Delgada. I was determined not to prolong the voyage by giving too much room, whilst at the same time maintaining a prudent awareness of the International Rules for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea. The lighthouse at the east end of the island loomed out of the cloud cover at breakfast time on Monday. Thereafter we tracked the coast, dodging the odd rock, and eventually made it into Ponta Delgada in the rain to face the Marina office, the Customs, the Immigration officer and the Police. That was a complete delight after eight days at sea!

Memories of the crossing are made up of the horizon, the beautiful turquoise sea, the wonderful stars at night, the ration of one ship sighting per day and the complete lack of trees and animal life at sea. If you had

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been advised by your psychiatrist to go and ‘find yourself’, then a trip such as this is the way to do it. We had used up our reserve of diesel, ending up with about 25 litres in the tank. I made a note to increase our diesel reserve for the voyage home. The crossing from Baiona to Ponta Delgada was a distance of 973nm through the water; it took us 8 days 5 hours.

Ponta Delgada is a pleasant enough city, but the marina leaves little to be desired. It is open to the swell and is more functional than friendly, but it does have good showers. Emily, our youngest daughter, and her friend, Lois Davis, joined us in São Miguel and we spent a few days in Ponta Delgada before finding a beautiful spot in Vila Franca do Campo, a few miles further east along the coast. We managed to squeeze inside the harbour as a local boat had been hauled out for repairs. We hired a car and visited the hot springs in Furnas. An unforgettable experience was swimming in the caldera on Ilheu de Vila Franca, itself an island. Joanna, our middle daughter, joined us at the end of the week, followed by Victoria and Josh who re-joined the boat, so that the family was complete for a few days.

It was a rough crossing but a good sail to Praia da Vitoria on Terceira, a distance of 106nm. We were fortunate to be given a warm welcome and we rafted up next to a local boat. Victoria and Josh became very excited at the possibility of hiring three electric cars, so all six of us set off with



Victoria, Joanna and Emily with buggies . . .

two in each buggy. Still a novelty in Terceira, the locals watched with amazement as these three buggies flew round the island in convoy. Margie and I unfurled our cramped limbs from the buggies

at lunch-time and surreptitiously checked out some restaurants that could enable us to re-charge all three buggies. We found one near the marina in Angra do Heroismo, and the girls ended up driving the buggies *Italian Job* style down a walkway to the Marina bar. The cars were plugged in for a re-charge, whilst we enjoyed the best lunch in the Azores.

After three days in Praia da Vitoria, which is well known as one of the cheapest places for

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Margie and I unfurled our cramped limbs from the buggies



. . . and driving them

over-wintering a yacht, we sailed west to Angra do Heroísmo. We loved Angra, a pretty old town, and really enjoyed the beautiful walks. The next day we left Terceira behind and sailed to São Jorge, 50nm away. São



Nick and Margie, Terceira

Jorge became our favourite island with its volcanic and luxuriant green landscape, and its vibrant blue hydrangeas as it sat like a jewel in the surrounding sea. We did several walks, including one spectacular 17km walk to the north coast. We had breath taking scenery, healthy exercise



Rock pool swim in São Jorge

and topped it off with a swim in a natural rock pool followed by a celebratory drink!

José, the harbour master at Velas, was extremely helpful and was delighted that a photograph of his harbour adorns the front cover of Anne Hammick's RCCPF pilot book *Atlantic Islands*. The harbour had been carved out of the cliff and there is only room for a few visiting yachts. The most striking thing about the harbour is

the noise of the Cory's Shearwater birds making their plaintive scream, sounding suspiciously like a Pingu. For a couple of hours at dusk, the noise was deafening, as if some sadist was turning on the noise as a sleep prevention measure. São Jorge is famous for exporting its cheese and we enjoyed a trip to one of the factories to see it being made.

We spent our last week in the Azores in Horta on the island of Faial. On arrival, we were told that we were the 1,000th boat to book in this year. We were allotted a berth in the locals' area. This was very fortunate as, unusually for this time of year, there were 60kt winds during the week, making life very uncomfortable and damaging for those alongside the harbour wall. We sampled the delights of Peter's Café Sport, a must for all visiting yachtsmen. We found an RCC burgee on the wall, inscribed with '125', which I imagine was a special burgee made for the 125th anniversary of the club. Whilst in Horta, we enjoyed some fabulous meals and more adventurous walks through stunning volcanic countryside. We joined a whale-watching trip and saw sperm whales, risso dolphins and mantas. We also added our own painting to the famous artwork on the quay.

The final crew member on our adventure, Jamie Athill joined us on the 13th August, the day before we set sail for the Helford River. I had read

some books beforehand on how to 'do the trip' and we set a course of 020° and stayed on it for three days. I was conscious of not wanting to be drawn into Biscay to face the consequences if the weather worsened.

On the fourth day we altered course to 070°. It is often said that gentlemen should not go to sea unless the wind is behind them. With the wind right behind us, however, we found that we either had to tack downwind or goose-wing. I was not that keen on adding extra miles to an already long passage and so opted to try the goose-wing option. We managed 12 hours of fabulous sailing, goose-winged with the spinnaker pole deployed to steady the rig. In the evening the wind strengthened and eventually at 0200 I took the decision to take the pole down in order to reduce sail. It was a silly thing to try to do and of course all you prudent mariners will be shouting, 'That's far too late to make that decision!'

Of course, it all went horribly wrong! The pole at the mast-end came crashing down to the base of the mast, while the end attached to the guy went up and slipped forward to the forestay. The sea had by now become rough and it was dark. We could not do anything with the pole, so we reefed the yankee as much as we could. We had tried to reef the staysail to give us more room to work on the foredeck, but this relatively small sail 'did a wineglass', so we could neither reef nor unfurl the sail in those conditions. Then to top it all, the in-mast furling on the main jammed!

We now had three sails out of action. Jamie and I wrestling with a pole on the foredeck in the dark and *Wild Bird* still doing 4kts. I decided that discretion being the better part of valour, we should leave the situation until first light and then resolve each problem in a calm and measured way in daylight. Dawn eventually broke and we resolved all three problems. The only damage was a bent pole-end, which we later managed to have straightened in Falmouth. At the same time we invested in some proper jammers for the pole up-haul and down-haul, to replace the rather dangerous V-shaped jammers.

The wind abated and much of the remainder of the trip was spent motor sailing. We had slightly more fuel left in the tank than we had on the outward voyage. We were glad of the two extra cans I had found going begging in the shower block in Ponta Delgada some weeks previously. We reached our waypoint off the Lizard during the morning of Sunday 23 August and sailed under main, staysail and genoa in bright sunshine into Falmouth Bay and up the Helford River.

We picked up a visitors mooring opposite the Helford River Sailing Club in time for lunch, feeling very proud of our achievement. Margie, Jamie and I went ashore for a much needed shower and then supper in the sailing club that evening. We were delighted to be interrupted, when enjoying a drink in the sunshine on the balcony, by a rendition of *Welcome Home* coming from the club's pontoon down below. Our three daughters,

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Victoria, Joanna and Emily had driven down to Cornwall without telling us, hijacked the ferry, disembarked at the pontoon and unfurled a 'Welcome Home' banner. Needless to say, we were six for supper and a wonderful celebration ensued.

As a new boy to ocean passages, I spent a great deal of time researching the best methods of communication whilst at sea. Before we left England, I took the decision to remove the SSB radio and to purchase a satphone for basic emails and Grib files. One of the biggest challenges was to find a workable solution to display weather whilst at sea. In the end we used a mix of *Mailasail*, *PredictWind* and *TheyR*. We also managed to display the Grib files on our B&G chartplotter on the binnacle, which was excellent.

The trip from Horta to Helford had taken 9 days 2 hours. The maximum wind strength was F6 and the sea state varied from flat calm to rough. We had a watch routine of 2 hours on and 4 hours off for the entire voyage, and we made good use of the autopilot and the Hydrovane, although we did steer by hand for 3 days! We were astonished at how few British boats we had seen on our trip.

The next three weeks were spent cruising along the south coast towards the Beaulieu Meet. This is a stretch we know well, yet have never given much time to it. It was a joy! We visited all the usual haunts and particularly enjoyed our ring-side view of the Cowes-Torquay-Cowes powerboat race, which unfolded before our eyes, as a helicopter filming the lead boat raced past us as we rounded Portland Bill. Margie took her final nutrition exam while in Yarmouth and subsequently found out that she had passed with distinction. The standard of victualling aboard *Wild Bird* will now move up a level accordingly!

Our voyage was challenging, exciting and enormous fun. All crew were briefed on the importance of flag etiquette, and informed that a RCC officer was stationed at every port checking ensign drill at 0800 hours and at sunset. We did not let you down! It was a great help and reassurance to be able to make use of the FPI system. Furthermore the Pilotage Foundation books *Atlantic France, South Biscay, Atlantic Spain and Portugal* and *Atlantic Islands* were an invaluable source of information. There was always one of them open on the chart table.

We were away from home for 120 days, visited the Isles of Scilly, France, Spain and the Azores, sailed 4,239nm and entertained 15 family and friends at various stages.

After 17 weeks at sea and with *Wild Bird* back on her mooring in the Hamble River, we were very happy to return home to Shropshire and to see our dogs, but also delighted that the whole family had been part of the adventure of a lifetime.



Wild Bird artwork at Horta