

A tale of two dinghies and of Chichester to Madeira and the Canaries

Edward Clay

Looking back I'm not sure when the idea turned into a plan. Certainly by the beginning of this year, my wife Megan and I had told so many people that we were going sailing for a year that we felt it might just happen. Then by July neither of us had a job, so it was definitely on!

We had spent much of the previous two winters doing jobs on *Flycatcher*, the Contessa 38 we part own with my father, Henry. We had even replaced the mast and rigging when we found a crack in the old mast tube. We had had masses of help, particularly from my father, but unsurprisingly there was still plenty more to do. So we emptied our flat, filled Megan's parent's garage with our belongings and spent two weeks on our mooring in Chichester Harbour, doing jobs, sorting out admin and catching up with friends and family.

We left on 8 August and had a gentle morning sail down the Solent. Off Lymington we were met by Nigel and Angela Reid (RCC), my parents



onboard *Coriander* and some friends on their Folkboat - complete with signalling flags wishing us 'Bon voyage!' It was a great send off.

We slept in Lulworth Cove before rounding Portland Bill and crossing Lyme Bay to Exmouth where Megan's parents live. Here we spent a few days being well fed, getting a replacement cable for the radar and getting so far down the jobs list that we both got our hair cut. We had our second great send off as we left, when Megan's parents, godparents and their grandchildren waved us off from the quay.

We sailed overnight to Falmouth and anchored off St Just to watch the working boats race in Falmouth week. Then we anchored off the town, which was extraordinarily busy. It was only when we saw *Gaivota* with the Harrison-Halls (RCC), who explained that the Red Arrows were putting on a display, that we realised why. We bagged a spot and met with some friends who were canoeing past. We all really enjoyed the show and even our army officer friend grudgingly admitted that the pilots were incredibly skilled. On leaving we found we had fouled a large iron ring with the anchor. Fortunately we managed to pull it up, extract ourselves from it, and were relieved to see the lights of Falmouth remain on.

We enjoyed several days in Falmouth in the rain, stocking up the boat, doing jobs, getting beaten at Uno by Mike Pidsley (RCC)'s grandchildren and having supper with my godparents who were racing in the regatta.

From there we left to cross Biscay, leaving on the morning of 15 August. We had a sunny start with a light south-easterly breeze. We fetched to the outside of the shipping lanes off Ushant and then were close-hauled, sometimes making course and sometimes not. The second night started windless and we motored for half of it before a northerly breeze came in. We could then make progress under goose-winged genoa and later the spinnaker. I persuaded Megan that we should keep the spinnaker up the next night, which she regretted when I woke her first to gybe and then to drop it to navigate through a fleet of trawlers. We arrived in La Coruña just over four days after leaving Falmouth.

The first job on arrival was to climb the rigging to work out where the M8 bolt and M5 nut that we had found on deck during the crossing had come from. After scouring the rig I couldn't find anything amiss and we still don't know where they came from. We hope they were lodged under the spinnaker pole during winter work and came out when we used it.

We liked La Coruña with its lively streets and distinctive windows, which are half way to being balconies, and spent a night in the marina before going to anchor off Ensemada de Mera on the other side of the harbour. With a gale forecast for later in the week, we pushed on and motored most of the way to Corme in no wind. At Corme we walked out to the lighthouse at the end of the Ria, enjoying the views and seeing why this coast is called Costa da Morte. This was reinforced the next day when

we set out in fine sunshine towing our new Sunsport inflatable dinghy behind us for the trip to Camariñas. Once out of the ria, however, a front came through and we quickly had 25kts of wind and driving rain. As we reduced sail, we neglected the dinghy. Looking back later, we found the painter and two D-rings, but no dinghy. We had little chance of finding it in the driving rain and building seas, so we sailed somewhat dejectedly on.

In Camariñas we anchored off the town and reported the loss of the dinghy to the coastguard, more so that they didn't spend time looking for occupants than because we expected it to have survived. We had another dinghy, a tough old Avon, so the loss wasn't a disaster, but we felt fools for not deflating and stowing it, and frustrated (and poorer) for the loss.

We spent the next day sitting out a gale at anchor, followed by a very roly beat and then motoring when the wind died the following day. We had a good breeze and flatter seas for the rounding of Cape Finisterre though, and had a fun beat through the lead into Muros. Here we enjoyed more of the local food, finding markets selling great cheeses, delicious octopus and mussels, and one metre square loaves of maize bread from which hunks were chopped. We spent one night in the town and one anchored in a bay on the other side of the ria. There we were woken by fishermen nearby fishing for shellfish using a rake with a basket attached to a long pole that they tugged through the sand.

From Muros we had a wet beat into a near gale round to the next ria. It was reassuring that the boat performed well and the crew managed, but by the time we had sailed back on ourselves up Ria Arousa to Pobra do Camariñal, we were miffed to calculate that we had sailed 48 miles to make 10 miles south. We were glad of a cup of tea and a slice of cake (from one of the seven fruit cakes Megan's mother had given us).

We sat out another gale in Pobra do Camariñal, but it wasn't enough to put off the crew of the local *Trainera*, which was out training. These 13 oar boats were originally to bring the sardine catch to shore quickly, but now race all round Galicia. They have no sliding seats, but reach considerable speed and perform impressive turns. The cox stands with an oar off the stern, pushing very hard to turn the boat. We felt it might be the only time that oarsmen thought the cox was earning his keep. Pobra seemed to have a particularly well-drilled crew.

We had a foggy beat out of the ria and were glad of the time spent earlier in the cruise getting the radar working, but by the time we were in the next ria we had sunshine. We anchored off a beach near Aldan and enjoyed a walk ashore and a swim back to the boat - it felt like we were getting south.

In Vigo we met my sister, Jo, and her boyfriend, Oli, who stayed with us for a week. Their trip started with a foggy sail to Isla Cies, a nature reserve at the entrance to the ria. As we walked up the island the fog began to clear, giving great views. Jo compared it to the dance of the seven veils as



Isla de Cies, Spain

the island was slowly revealed.

We sailed onward to Baiona to spend an afternoon exploring before a glorious sail down the coast to Nazaré; the Portuguese trades were blowing and we surfed under spinnaker, covering 164 miles in 24 hours. I liked Nazaré, particularly because there were several traditional fishing boats on the beach with explanations about their fishing methods. The main one seemed to involve launching a number of boats to set nets off the beach before drawing them in. It

seemed to involve most of the town and required serious coordination. The old town on the cliffs has a chapel erected by a grateful noblemen who, when out hunting, was saved from following a deer over the steep cliffs by the Virgin Mary. There is also a fort on the point under which the world's largest wave was surfed. An offshore trench refracts the swell so that it is focused on the point. Then the steeply shelving bottom and the current coming down the coast cause the waves to steepen and break. We were glad to be spending the night in the port, even though there wasn't much swell, and not in the exposed anchorage dreaming of the waves.

The next day we sailed past the Ihla da Berlenga with its fort built by the monks to



Flycatcher in the Portuguese trades

discourage pirates. There was too much swell to anchor, so we headed for Peniche, where we anchored off, and then to Cascais, from whence we explored Lisbon by train. Though we did begin with the usual tour-by-chandlery, we particularly enjoyed the food market down near the river and wandering north admiring the architecture and pastel-coloured buildings. We tried to educate ourselves in the botanical gardens (which were displaying a notice apologising for their poor state of repair and blaming the country's financial condition). Then Jo and Oli treated us

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to an excellent lunch before they headed to the airport and we back to Cascais.

We spent a day doing all the tasks, such as laundry and shopping, that don't feature in two-week holidays, but which we were fast learning were part of longer cruises. Then on to Portinho da Arrabida where we enjoyed two peaceful nights at anchor. While we were there, we went for a walk but tried to avoid the roads. We followed a path up the hill which quickly became overgrown and we lost the markers. Still, we pushed on up the cliffs and through the undergrowth, until we were encouraged to see a small hamlet above us. It was only when we reached it and were politely asked to leave that we realised we had broken into a convent. We stuck to the road after that.

From Portinho da Arrabida we headed to Sines where we anchored in the harbour under the watchful gaze of the statue of Vasco da Gama. Then on 11 September we set off for the Madeira archipelago. We had the spinnaker up for much of the crossing, which was our second time (after Biscay) that we didn't need to reef. We even found to our surprise that the 20 year old Ampair tow generator that we had been lent by my uncle Hugh worked first time.

We arrived at Porto Santo Island, 20nm north-east of Madeira island itself, early in the morning after 90 hours at sea and spent the rest of the night on the reception pontoon before anchoring in the harbour. We liked the island. It has a long beach along the south side and a main town, Vila Baleira, with handsome two storey whitewashed houses. We spent a day walking around the east end of the island, climbing Pico Castello, where the population sheltered from pirate raids, and enjoyed incredible views from the cliffs at the north-east of the island. After a swim in a cove, we walked back to the harbour past an abandoned complex with shops and a five-a-side football stadium. It seemed to have been funded by EU money 15-20 years ago, but was now suffering from rock falls and falling apart.

The island is keen on its connection with Christopher Columbus, who married the daughter (or granddaughter, sources differ) of the first governor of Porto Santo. There is a house that they claim was his (though there isn't much evidence he lived there), a museum, and while we were there a Columbus Festival, which centred on a re-enactment of Columbus's arrival. Particularly as he was a minor sugar merchant when he came to Porto Santo, we thought the real Columbus would have been much more surprised by the belly dancers, African drumming and the gymnastics than by anything he later found in the New World. But it was fun to try the local food and the fiery *poncha* (spirit with honey and sugar). It certainly seemed to get the tourists out and it involved lots of the town.

We sailed on to Quinta do Lorde on Madeira itself, where we met my parents who were coming out to try sailing their half of the boat in warmer-

than-usual waters. They had also kindly brought out a number of supplies, including another Sunsport dinghy that we had bought second hand. We spent the first few days of their trip exploring Madeira by hire car. In Funchal we visited the cathedral and the colourful market with fearsome looking fish, passion fruits that tasted like bananas and pine cones that tasted halfway between banana and pineapple (unless you bought one, in which case they tasted of bitter cardboard). We enjoyed learning about and tasting wine at the Blandy's lodge and explored the botanical gardens.

We particularly enjoyed Caniçal where the Nossa Senhora da Piedade Festival was being celebrated. This involved the fishing fleet heading to a headland and bringing back the statue of the Virgin Mary. Anyone can



Nossa Senhora da Piedade Festival

board any of the boats for the trip and we saw them coming into port heavily laden with people and decorated with garlands. It put the busiest central raft at the Beaulieu Meet to shame. They then processed through the town, whose streets were lined with stalls selling beer, yet more

pocha, *bolo de caco* (the local round bread made with sweet potato and flour) and sides of beef. At one of these we bought a kilo of meat that was cut into chunks, salted and put on a 4ft stick for us. We learned from our neighbours that we should take it to the beach where there were fires in oil drums for cooking. It was a great atmosphere with the whole town cooking and eating on the beach - and they were doing it all again the next day when the statue is taken back.

We were all keen to walk on some of the *levadas* (irrigation channels that collect water in the mountains and carry it down to drive hydroelectric plants and irrigate fields). We drove into the hills on the north of the island. It started raining as we left and didn't stop for the whole six hours that we were walking, confirming why this part of Madeira is so green. Unfortunately we didn't see many of the views and were (along with some of our electronics) soaked to the skin. It was, however, a spectacular walk. We followed the levada across sheer cliff faces, under waterfalls and through tunnels, and were impressed by the engineering required to make and maintain the levada in these mountains that are so swept with rockfalls. We also confirmed that complete submersion in rice for a number of days will dry out a sodden phone or camera.

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We moved round to Baía de Abra, probably the best anchorage in the islands, where we enjoyed a walk along the spectacular cliffs and snorkelling in the bay. From there we headed to the Ihlas Desertas, a nature reserve 16 miles south of Madeira. We spent a night there before exploring ashore in the morning, seeing canaries and Berthelot's pipits, though sadly none of the very rare monk seals.

Heading south, we met F6 on the nose, so we turned back to Madeira and Baía de Abra. A swell was coming into the bay and though perfectly secure it was pretty uncomfortable. Nonetheless, we were sceptical about Louise's plan to sleep on a beanbag in the cockpit, though in the morning she seemed to have had the best night's sleep.

The next day we had a more favourable wind and headed to the Selvagens Islands that lie 160 miles from Madeira and around 100 miles from the nearest Canary island. Since they have never been permanently settled, the Spanish say they should be classified as rocks and therefore legally owned by the nearest country, making them, and the associated fishing ground, Spanish. The Portuguese, of course, disagree and so have wardens on the island all year round who also protect the large Cory Shearwater population and this unique habitat. Our permit allowed us to anchor in a small bay on the south of Selvagem Grande off the wardens' hut. We found some holding at the second attempt, but when snorkelling to look at the anchor it became clear that the bottom was all rock and our anchor was simply on its side sitting on a rock. I stayed in the water, wearing a snorkel, to direct the boat and we were able to drop it on a tiny patch of sand and get it to dig in a bit. It was a great place. The snorkelling was excellent and the next morning's walk around the island with the wardens was fascinating. We got to see Cory's Shearwater chicks and learnt a little of the island's history.

Our first stop in the Canaries was the anchorage at Playa Francesca on Graciosa where we arrived on 27 September. This is a super anchorage off a beach on a small island. It is a mile or so walk along the beach from the town, Caleta de Sebdo, which feels a bit like the set from a Western, with low houses and dirt roads. We spent two nights there, relaxing, doing jobs on the boat, swimming and exploring the island.

In Arrecife on Lanzarote we met Megan's parents, Ray and Mary. We had a day altogether exploring the island and visited two houses belonging to Cesar Manrique. He was an artist and architect, and was influential in planning on Lanzarote, having spent years campaigning for responsible development when the island was first becoming a tourist destination. The first house was a traditional Lanzarotean farmhouse with unique features, including bathrooms with floor-to-ceiling glass looking out over the garden. The second was in the edge of a lava flow and made of bubbles in the lava, joined by short tunnels. The layout of the house with the white

against the dark rock was stunning. We reckoned it would be a great place for a party, or a James Bond villain's lair.

Henry and Louise then left and the four of us spent several days exploring Lanzarote whose volcanic landscape we found fascinating. We particularly enjoyed the Timanfaya National Park, created by eruptions during the 1730s, where we learnt about the different types of lava and volcanoes. We visited a bodega and heard how vines hadn't grown before the eruption, with cereals being the main crop, but afterwards they found that the ash and lava held moisture. By digging down through the pyrocalst and lava (up to 6 feet) they reached fertile soil. Walls were then added to protect the vines from the breeze. The wine was very good though we were glad we didn't have to do the digging.

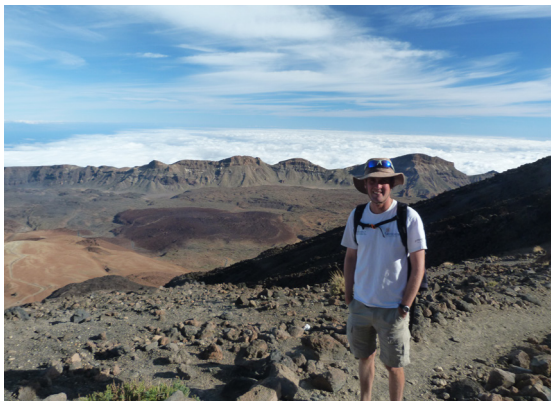
We then spent two relaxing days anchored off Punta Papagayo before a windless trip to Fuerteventura. During this we saw our first flying fish, went swimming and were treated to the most amazing dolphin display - we felt Ray and Mary had picked the right time to join us. The lack of wind meant we didn't push on for Gran Tarajal as planned, but went to Puerto del Rosario, the capital of Fuerteventura, with a small anchorage off the commercial port. Here we had our Avon dinghy and oars stolen from the shore while we were out for supper. Some people hanging out on the breakwater had seen who it was and helpfully went to look for the thief, but with no luck. The immediate problem of getting back onboard was solved by the port police lending us an Optimist with oars. It was horrendously overloaded. We did get back, but I hope my parents in law didn't realise how close I was to really ruining their evening by tipping them into the harbour.

We spent the next day trying to get the dinghy back, searching the beach and the streets nearby, reporting it to the police, getting in contact with the people from the evening before and spending the evening going up to groups of teenagers and asking if they knew anything about it. Unfortunately even though it is a small place and people must have known who took it, no one said anything. The whole thing was a bit frustrating - the dinghy was not worth much, but being tough, light and easy to inflate it was just what we needed. And it won't be much use to the person who stole it without the pump! We also feel our rate of losing a dinghy a month is unsustainable!

Our delay meant that we said goodbye to Ray and Mary in Puerto de la Rosario and sailed overnight to Tenerife, passing to the south of Gran Canaria and experiencing its typical acceleration zones. We found it odd to start thinking of reefing as one wind died and we were becalmed, but it proved to be a good approach, particularly in the dark. From Las Galletas on southern Tenerife we hired a car and had a great day exploring El Tiede in the middle of the island. At 3,718m, it is the highest mountain

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in Spain and rises majestically from an amazing lava-covered plateau. We walked up to a refuge where you can spend the night at 3,200m if you are more organised than we were. Unfortunately you also needed a permit to get to the top, and there weren't any until November. But there were amazing views over the other islands from the refuge. On the drive down we had excellent views of the sunset, with the peak of El Tiede sticking out above a cloud inversion. Then we spent the evening exploring Santa Cruz with its interesting old buildings and striking modern ones.



Walking on El Tiede, Tenerife

After a day stocking up the boat we sailed to La Gomera, the second smallest island. We anchored in a bay south of San Sebastian, which was a great spot with really good snorkelling and our first deserted anchorage since Portugal. Unfortunately it was also our last anchorage for a few weeks. San Sebastian, the capital of La Gomera, is a fun town with very



Flycatcher anchored off La Gomera

elegant buildings and balconies that make you feel you are in a Shakespeare play. It was a bank holiday and everyone was out in the square as music played in the cafes. We also found, to our surprise, an inflatable kayak for €73 in a hardware shop, which we snapped up to replace the Avon and to use in places where

we felt the dinghy was vulnerable to theft.

The island was beautiful and much greener than the Canaries so far. Every corner seemed to bring a different landscape. We walked into a ravine amongst rocks, fig trees and shrubs before climbing back up through pine forests, and towards vertical volcanic pipes. We did a whistlestop tarmac circumnavigation where we heard people using the whistling

language *Silbo Gomera* (used by the island's pre-Spanish people to communicate across ravines). We wandered around towns finding out about the island's history. Its banana trade has left cranes off some of the beaches, but had funded towns of elegant two-storey shuttered houses.



Walking on La Gomera

Our next stop was Tazacorte on La Palma, where we felt our way in the dark after the breeze deserted us. Tazacorte is on the west side, with stunning views into the crater that forms the centre of the island. Again we found that exploring by hire car, bus and foot worked well. Despite a lot of rain we managed to see the crater and explore the island. We found a fascinating island with medieval buildings, amazing (and well signposted) walks, volcanoes of all ages, and great fruit and veg in the fields and for



sale in markets. A few weeks in the Canaries have shattered our preconceptions; while there are overdeveloped areas, there are plenty of fascinating places to explore by water and by land.

Now, on 21 October, we are in Puerto de la Restinga on the southern tip of El Hierro. It is the smallest of the islands and we shall spend a few days here exploring before we head further south.