

Swaraj to the New World

Plymouth UK to Nova Scotia

Angus Handasyde-Dick



Swaraj is a wooden 45' sloop and occasional cutter, from 1984 (built by Ken Latham and designed by Steve Dalzell). She has been in the family since new; we took her on from my in-laws Scrap and Sue Batten (RCC) nearly 25 years ago. They were keen to incorporate as many aspects from their old boat *Dyarchy* into the new boat as possible, some very successfully.

Bridget and I and two friends sailed *Swaraj* from Plymouth to Porto Santo and then Funchal, Madeira in September 2022 taking just over nine days. We had a strong easterly out of the Channel and a favourable breeze to south of Oporto, so fast sailing, although occasionally rough. Once south of Cape Finisterre the wind went light. We flew home to get our US visas (the US Embassy stipulates strictly six months' notice) and Nick Waite (RCC) and three friends kindly took a stolen week from work to get *Swaraj* from Funchal to Puerto Calero, Lanzarote. When we returned to *Swaraj* in early December, she was fine with merely a light dusting of Saharan sand and a nascent colony of goose barnacles under the stern.

We were joined by Becky Trafford (RCC) and Nick Muir, who needed to be in the Cape Verdes in time to fly home for Christmas. After the usual preparations, we set off on 11 December. After two days motoring we picked up a fair breeze. As we approached the Cape Verdes, we found a better slant and diverted to Palmeira on the west coast of Sal.

We anchored just outside the small boat harbour that is tucked between the beach and the commercial dock and is cluttered with



apparently abandoned yachts. Ashore, on a beautiful calm evening, we found a charming port with a strong African feel with plenty of life, and an excellent supper in a beach side bar, along with the World Cup.

Next morning, we awoke to find ourselves surging back and forth on the swell. Surfers, about 100 metres to the south, were actually catching the break. Between us and the surfers an anchored catamaran looked to be about to join the fun. We moved up into the harbour and took our chances amongst the other boats. Unsurprisingly, at our departure later that afternoon, having cleared in and out, we found our anchor well snagged.

We sailed overnight to Tarrafal on the southwest coast of São Nicolau, another vibrant town with plenty of life. The pilot book warns of katabatic winds from the valley above the town, the holding is poor and we soon realised that we could not afford to leave the boat unattended. This limited our stay to just one night and we then headed off to clear the northern tip of São Vicente and then on to Mindelo at the top of a sheltered (in Cape Verde terms) bay on the west side of the island. We enjoyed an unusual (for us) Christmas lunch of beer and frites at the floating bar at the marina.

The centre of Mindelo still has many vestiges of 18th and 19th century Portuguese architecture with



Steep path to Farol de Dona Amélia, São Vicente



Fishing in Mindelo

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clever use of shade and natural ventilation to keep buildings cool in the heat of the day. The market in the centre of town and near the marina provided very good fresh fruit and vegetables – we found the wheelie suitcase made a perfect conveyance for shopping and even better we were still eating fresh fruit and vegetables from Mindelo three weeks later in Grenada. Stuart, who had sailed with us in 2022, re-joined us on 27 December and we set off the next day.

My original plan for a downwind rig was to have two genoas one slightly smaller than the other on the single furler, so the sail area could be halved by letting one sail come across to the other and then rolling them up. However, the strong breezes in Mindelo and along the north coast of São Nicolau caused me to reconsider. The last thing I wanted was a gear failure and to have two sails flapping about on one furler. So for our downwind rig, we ran with a single genoa on the furler to leeward, sheeted via the main boom end whilst our largest staysail was boomed out to weather. This was flexible but occasionally we did feel a little under canvassed.

After our first squall just south of Santo Antão (the most westerly of the Barlaventos) things settled down, and our trip across was admirably uneventful. We had an occasional squall, almost invariably when Stuart was on watch, one or two close encounters with other sailing vessels, little shipping and, very occasionally a whale.

Life became a steady routine of ‘two on six off’ with happy hour between 1800 and 2000. For this period the ship’s company was on watch. This ensured a daily change of two hours in the routine. Becky and Bridget took control of catering and we ate like lords with fresh yoghurt, bread and focaccia every other day (the sour dough starter lasted the full eight months). Our fishing efforts were limited since we had a fridge full of meat. Becky took control of ship’s entertainment and organised the goodies for a half way party. Yoga for Bridget and Becky was below until the fifth day when they progressed to the foredeck. Their sessions forward soon included step ups on the coach roof. It is curious how small people make such a rumble.

Becky, Nick and Bridget - half way

We few maintenance jobs included: refitting the outlet valve on the heads, making water, the daily chafe checks and attending to my battery neurosis. Occasionally the clumps of sargassum weed caught the servo blade of the wind vane and we would have to replace the nylon shear bolts. The boat



would gently come hove-to and lie across the wind with the staysail aback. The wind was generally from the north east but we never had a settled swell from a single direction and could often detect swells from three directions, resulting in occasionally uncomfortable motion. All in all we had plenty of time for reading and other self-improvement projects (now still born) including the ukulele and the ocarina as well as astro-navigation.

We arrived in Barbados on 12 January after 15 days at sea – an average of 140 mpd. We celebrated with a dip in the sea, followed by clearing in which was an education in a system clearly devised by the British. It took visits to four offices, in the first Fulham v Chelsea, then reggae and a great gospel choir followed by the news. “Enjoy my island!” sang in our ears. Duck cassoulet and the last of the cabbage, onions and tomatoes for dinner and we were all sound asleep by 2100.

After a good night at anchor we were awakened by snorting, a jockey and a horse swimming around the boat! We were quite a way from the beach but the horse appeared fine and when he was turned for home the whip was applied sparingly. Apparently this was a regular occurrence on non-race days. We had a joyful few days in Barbados taking in the north end of the island, Saturday racing at Garrison Savannah as well as the usual jobs. I blitzed a new colony of goose barnacles. Carlisle Bay was no less rolly than when we were last there on *Dyarchy* in the mid seventies.

Different friends came to join us for short stays as we cruised north through the island chain and we learnt the difference between the Windward and Leeward Isles. Up to St Lucia we found ourselves hard on the wind generally in a F5/6, with a strong cross current and rough seas between the islands. Once north of St Lucia and until halfway to the Bahamas, the wind was nearly always fair.

Fifty years ago when on *Dyarchy*, I remember a local of Saint Lucia expressing pride as to how civilised and prosperous Saint Lucia was compared with the other islands in the Antilles chain. Sadly, this no longer seems to be the case.

Onward up the island chain; more stops and friends aboard. Antigua was calling and we had an easy sail up to Jolly Harbour to meet sister-in-law Tessa Mackenzie-Green (RCC), Emily our daughter-in-law plus grandsons (aged two and four). We were greeted by Chris Russell (RCC) at Jolly Harbour and he kindly relieved us of our laundry. This was a treat and all sorted by the time we had cleared in. We enjoyed our two weeks in Antigua with fine weather and nine anchorages but English Harbour was very crowded, compared with 1975 when I think there were just six boats there for Christmas.

Sargassum weed had worn all the paint away down the centre line from stem to keel, so we had *Swaraj* out of the water and re-antifouled in anticipation of our passage to the USA.

Georgie, our daughter, arrived from the UK on 23 March. We had an easy sail up to Barbuda anchoring off Princess Diana Beach. Distractions included the frigate bird colony, a very long lunch at Nobu (about a mile from our anchorage), good

snorkelling and the Shaka-Kai beach bar. We had an early start for Nevis where we had a highly informative and amusing tour of the island with Fitzroy Williams, 'Teach', a retired teacher. He gave us a unique insight into the history of Nevis, the Caribbean generally, its education system and society's current ills. Bridget and Georgie got their rural fix at the agricultural show.

We spent an evening at Whitehouse Bay at the south end of Saint Kitts and by chance met Ben Coulson (RCC) on *Midnight*. From Ben we heard that the previous night the crew of SY *Genevieve* (a superyacht) had managed to save sixteen out of thirty two people from a capsized boat. These people had been on a skiff and had been attempting to travel overnight to the US Virgin Isles from Antigua. Ben had found himself fulfilling the role of VHF relay between SY *Genevieve* and the authorities in St Kitts – a good reason to leave the VHF on when at anchor.

Then on to Statia, a former Dutch colony, now an oil storage centre. We found the weekend meant all shops were shut, the exceptions being two extremely noisy bars on the front each about 300 yards from our anchorage (if you cannot beat them, then ...). A long walk up to the crater gave great views across to St Kitts. Perhaps inevitably it was a rolly anchorage but with great snorkelling.

Our eldest son Oliver with Sarah and their three boys, aged eight, six and four were joining us in the BVI. We moored in Trellis Bay – the perfect place for a BVI handover as the moorings are a short walk to the airport. What an excellent cruising ground for the young crew with on board entertainment in the form of paddleboard, canoe and sailing tender and visits ashore to favourites including The Pelicans, The Baths and the Bubbly Pool. Our fortnight together was a delight, excellent weather and 28 anchorages.

Bridget and I found ourselves alone for the couple of weeks and made easy progress to Puerto Rico via the USVI and the Spanish Virgin Islands (SVI). The SVI proved to be an excellent area, enjoying light breezes and calm seas. We took in Culebra, Culebrita, Cayo Luis Peña and Vieques. There were few other boats in the USVI so we often had sheltered anchorages to ourselves, particularly during the week when many Puerto Ricans were at work.

We had nine days at Marina Puerto del Rey, PR to get jobs done and also to visit the El Yunque national park and San Juan, both very worthwhile. San Juan old town dates from the Spanish colonial era and is remarkably well preserved, and thriving.





El Yunque National Park, Puerto Rico

On 23 May we set off toward the east coast of the USA, with Chris and Katie Russell (RCC) aboard, making good progress for the first 400 miles. We then began to experience the vagaries of the western Caribbean, with occasional spectacular thunder storms squalls and rapidly changing winds both in strength and direction. We decided on a stop at Turks and Caicos, after nearly 550 miles we anchored on the south side of Providenciales. Access to marinas was a problem with our draft but we anchored about $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile offshore from Bugaloo's Conch Bar in a shallow, sheltered spot just to the east of the commercial dock.

After three nights at anchor, we set off again, in perfect conditions, initially with a calm and then a fair breeze and current. We ended up sailing just under 800 miles with our first landfall in the

USA at Brunswick, Georgia. Progress was adequate if not spectacular. After the first day at sea, we had regular lightning around the horizon and occasionally thunder and lightning in close proximity. Again these storms were accompanied by a rapidly changing wind direction and often strong rain squalls as well as contrary winds. Matters were further complicated by an unexpected and strong contrary current from Eleuthera until north of the Abacos.

In spite of these trying conditions we managed to make on average just over 110 mpd but with much motor sailing. Bridget continued to keep us fed and watered throughout. The impact of the Gulf Stream which we crossed just north of Cape Canaveral felt more like a Solent chop and was certainly not the magic carpet we had hoped for.

We were very happy to stop at Landings Marina, Brunswick, GA. Once the two officers from Customs and Immigration had seen our visas, the real issue was our vegetables. Once that issue was disposed of, we rented a car for a couple of days to see the hinterland around the town. A local politician we met invited us to Sunday lunch with his wife, an insight into the US which we had not anticipated. The locals were very welcoming and we received more than one offer for the loan of a car if we needed to visit a supermarket or had other jobs. These offers were repeated as we worked northward.

After a pause in Charleston, Norfolk, VG was our next port of call the other side of Cape Hatteras. Conditions were benign around the dreaded cape, calm

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with much motoring. The dockyard was extraordinary with eight aircraft carriers in various stages of refit and another entering Chesapeake Bay as we left. We will have to save the Chesapeake for another time.

We had an easy passage up to Atlantic Highlands and then through the Verrazano Narrows, past the Statue of Liberty and to Liberty Landings Marina on the New Jersey shore.



Statue of Liberty with Bridget, Katie and Angus

This turned out to be an ideal spot from which to get across to Manhattan once we had mastered the ferry and train time tables, and we became serious tourists. We also bid farewell to Chris and Katie who left us to start their three-month road trip across the USA.

By the third week of June we were concerned to make progress eastwards. The tide was fair at Hells Gate on the East River, NYC on Monday 19 June at 0630, so we were there. We had a long day motoring and anchored at the east end of Smithtown Bay on the north coast of Long Island having anchored off the ‘cottages’ in Manhasset Bay for lunch and a swim.

I was thinking we could get another long hop down Long Island Sound but a strong easterly against a fair tide gave a diabolical chop – we dipped into Port Jefferson and waited for a shift in the weather. Three days later we headed off for Fishers Island (just north of Cape Race) where we paused for two nights. The radar’s connection with the plotter was becoming erratic, so we crept into a foggy but very sheltered bay on the north side of the island. A charming yacht club boasted an immaculate fleet of IOD class yachts swinging on the moorings.

We were hoping the fog might clear but were greeted by the mournful groan of the Race Rock Lighthouse on the second morning so with the tide fair we resolved to set off. Block Island emerged from the fog at lunchtime. A two wheeled tour and then dinner at The Oar – the whole place had the feel of Salcombe but the sun did shine. Next morning to the chiropractor and then on to Cuttyhunk Is before transiting the Cape Cod Canal.

At the east end of the canal at Sandwich, where the old town houses are all clapboard, the fascinating museum records the building of the canal. The marina was quiet, with all facilities and easy access for the open sea.

We had a good visibility up to Shoal of Isles, a useful stop between Cape Cod and New England, with free moorings in a sheltered bay. The main island has a huge old building, formerly an hotel but with the feel of a hall of residence, which is open in the summer for both spiritual retreats and social clubs.

Steve Dalzell, *Swaraj's* designer, now lives in Maine and I was keen to renew our acquaintance from 40 years ago. So we tracked him down and agreed to meet at the Biddeford Pool YC. Steve was very complimentary about the modifications since he had last been aboard. My in-laws had apparently been the perfect clients - they knew their minds and never havered! We concluded the day with our first Maine lobster in the local bar. After two nights on the BPYC moorings we headed off north and east.

We began to learn the real meaning of fog and spent the whole day motoring in flat calm through thick fog to a quiet bay just east of Boothbay Harbour. Another early start and thick fog found us at Dix Is just south of Penobscot Bay. It was on this day the radar finally died. The plotter gave a singularly unhelpful prompt 'change scanner'.

Back in the UK our approach would have been to wait for the fog to clear before we set off. But if we had done this, I am sure we would still be there! Without the radar we proceeded with the GPS/AIS and the foghorn, blasted at two minute intervals when necessary. A local fisherman confirmed that the Maine lobster boats, which shoot around at about 10 kts, not only have radar but also AIS (although not transmitting). All commercial vessels also have AIS, so provided our AIS and plotter and VHF continued to function, with care we could proceed quite safely.

Our aim was to spend Independence Day at Camden, so we crept on,



overnighting in Rockland. We were greeted by a passing yachtsman Bill Strassberg (CCA). It transpired he is editor of the *Viking Route* a new CCA publication. He signed our new copy and enthused about the east-west route. We then had a short flirtation with this possibility for our return home in 2024. However once heading west to east, the ice normally clears from the Labrador coast in late July, leaving a short window for a visit to Greenland

We were actually able to sail from Rockland to Camden. This is a smart yachting centre with many wooden yachts, a welcoming yacht club and boatyard with shops nearby so we could Independence Day fireworks, Camden

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do all the jobs, as well as enjoy an expedition to the top of Mount Battie, just above the town, with wonderful views across Penobscot Bay.

I could not decide if it would be an act of treason to dress *Swaraj* overall on 4 July so compromised with a 5' US ensign as our courtesy flag and a suitably larger red ensign on the stern. We were scooped up by a group of charming locals on an Oyster 65 *Latitude* for an evening party and to watch the fireworks display.

We then had a very happy week heading 'Down East' with generally light winds, plenty of fog, occasionally thick, and a lot of motoring. Maine seemed to be a great cruising area and we were led to believe the weather is best between early August and mid-September.

Mount Desert Island was our last visit in the USA, with wonderful walking along carriage drives through what were private woodlands perhaps 80 years ago – all the work of a Rockefeller. We took our departure for Nova Scotia at about midday on 12 July and arrived at Yarmouth NS early the following morning, Bridget's Birthday. We celebrated with mussels and white wine aboard. Strong contrary winds for getting around Cape Sable delayed our departure for a few days. However, we had a very happy time at Yarmouth, we biked to Cape Fourchu and Lobster pots, Yarmouth NS



Bridget enjoying lunch at Burnt Coat Harbour MA



swam on the way home, a shrivelling experience. Yarmouth Carnival was in full swing at the weekend and activities ranged from a classic car parade to a bell ringing concert at the local church, concluded with the National Anthem.

The weather finally improved and we left at 2230 on 17 July in thick fog. We went a little closer to Bug Light than was ideal. The breeze finally became favourable and we sailed in poor visibility to Shelburne at the top of a deep estuary on the east side of Cape Sable. The town is apparently regularly used for filming as there has been little redevelopment of the 19 century clapboard buildings. The yacht club was very welcoming.

We needed to arrive at East River Shipyard in Mahone Bay and be ready for laying up by the end of July, so we pressed on with two days of motor sailing in fog, with nights at anchor in deserted bays. Our day from Carter Bay to Lunenburg was notable for rain and lightning, with a monumental strike just as we entered the anchorage. It felt as if we were straddled by three forks. Whilst the electronics on duty (the rest in the oven) were completely disturbed they recovered with the corrective 'turn it off and on'; however, no such good effects on the radar.

Over the nine months our problems with the boat which could not be easily resolved were all electronic. As well as the radar, the main VHF set died (new in summer 22) and has since been replaced. Meanwhile the AIS indicates non transmit but the boat does appear on MarineTraffic.com.

Travel does broaden the mind. My prejudices about the New World were completely dispelled – the peoples we met were helpful and friendly to a fault. Furthermore, the natives of the USA were very hospitable. The USA in many ways is similar to the UK but on steroids: the aircraft carriers, the thunder storms, the fog, the size of the cruising areas, the density of the lobster pots in Maine and even the sack trucks.

Wherever we went the locals expressed the weather was not as expected – although depressingly there seems to be little commitment at the personal level to change. We had a joyful eight months away very much due to our sailing companions and the people we met. However, we had to be at home for the grandchildren by early August; inevitably sailing is also subject to life's compromises.



Swaraj, a 45 foot sloop designed by Steve Dalzell