



# 1,340 miles on starboard

Newfoundland to the Azores

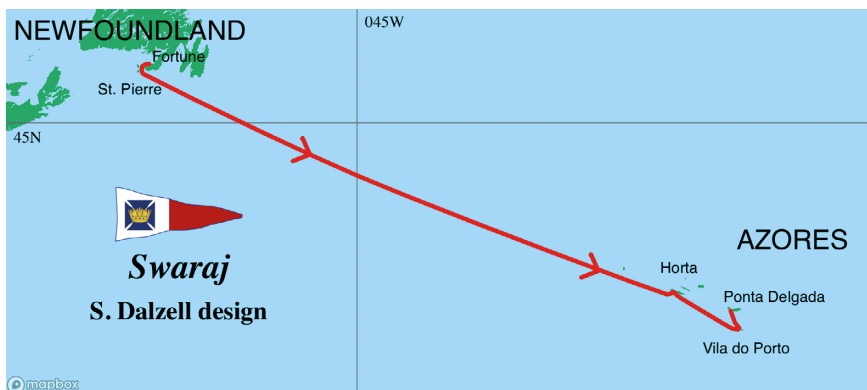
Jennifer Russell

28 June–18 July 2024



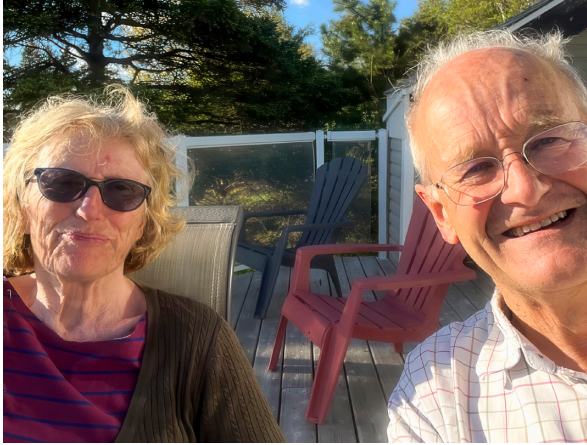
“Ahoy *Swaraj!*” I cheered as I walked down the pontoon towards the boat. After seeing Angus and Bridget Handasyde Dick’s message about having room for a Cadet on board for their Atlantic crossing, I asked if I could bring someone with me, and David (a friend from university) jumped at the opportunity. Armed with lots of books and plenty of Stugeron, we made our way to Fortune, Newfoundland, and were very excited to meet the boat and her crew, having endured a gruelling six hour minibus journey from St. Johns. We were welcomed on board and shown around the boat whilst discussing the passage to St. Pierre the following morning.

Delayed a little by a quick visit to the Fortune Geology Centre with fellow crewmate Bill Barlow, we set off for St. Pierre for our first passage. Initially heading into dwindling amounts of wind, the clear and calm weather made for good conditions to get acquainted with *Swaraj*, and as we tacked across the French-Canadian border, surrounded by flapping puffins, razorbills, and occasionally a north Atlantic dolphin, I was dizzy with joy and excitement for the coming weeks. St.





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Angus and Bridget - skippers' portrait

Pierre was as I had been told: foggy, rainy and drizzly, but home to a reasonable selection of fresh food, and an eclectic mix of yachts and their associated eccentric but rather lovely crew, most of whom were also planning lengthy passages, some to the Arctic, some back to Canada, and others where we were headed: the Azores. It was

decided we would leave on the morning of the 1 July, and when we did, the horizon would have seemed broader than ever before, had we actually been able to see it, which we could not because of the fog.

Adopted crewspeak 'It's a twatting sea' perfectly encapsulates the nature of the Grand Banks. I was annoyingly incapacitated by seasickness for the first 24 hours, and I am thankful to everyone, especially Bridget, for both looking after me and encouraging me to push through it. My first watch was on the



Bridget, and Trenchard the amazing wind vane





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Helming with the cruising chute up, Bill playing ukelele inside the 'sit-outery'

afternoon of the 2 July and, snuggled in the cosy 'sit-outery' *Swaraj* has over her cockpit, the dampness could not get in as I stared out into the thick fog. After some delicious cottage pie, I settled back into my berth in preparation for the 0400 watch. And what a watch it was! I anticipated the sunrise, which slowly illuminated my surroundings from dark grey to..... brighter grey, and I nibbled on some biscuits as I stared into the fog, perpetually convinced I could see a bow jutting out towards us. But as we approached the steep contours of the Grand Banks, the mist lifted as we entered warmer waters influenced by the Gulf Stream. By 4 July, the clear skies, steady swell from behind and fresh breeze meant we were screaming along, heading 125° on starboard with the cruising chute up, making 8-10kts. The sun, the sails and the speed brought all of my hopes for the crossing to realisation, and I tried to soak it all in, convinced the clouds would return at any moment. In the



David taking sunsights





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lulls, our speed was frequently maintained by a knot of Gulf Stream current below us, which helped set us up for our 158nm daily average over the whole crossing.

At one point, I glanced up at the rig and noticed the RCC burgee dangling from its halyard, wrapping itself around the lazy jacks and the port runner, and it soon became evident that it was not coming down on its own. As David and I stood, each of us hoping and waiting for the instruction to get into the bosun's chair, Angus was already away, clipping himself in, and asking for a hoist! As he cut the halyard, the burgee fell and directly speared the coachroof (a debrief with Angus revealed this was not his intended outcome). This called for a quick deployment of the 30-minute epoxy, a temporary fix which was interesting to learn, and I was glad to know that my bunk would be kept dry.

Angus was keen for us to get to grips with astronavigation, and I enjoyed learning about sextants and taking sunsights, but seasick hours at the chart table scouring the almanac were less appealing, so I let the boys carry on, and instead opted for the cockpit, gazing at the horizon and discussing music through the ages with Bill. We enjoyed 'On the beat-and-track', our imaginary podcast that aired live to the crew on multiple days of the crossing (lucky them!). For a five-day stint, Angus and David took three sights a day, and following a few hours of calculations, noted our position continually during that time, a feat that certainly deserves a mention.

All the while we were fed with fresh yoghurt and freshly baked bread, focaccia



*Swaraj alongside Nostramo, in Horta*

and cakes, made on board by Bridget, whose culinary skills would be to die for in any kitchen, let alone a galley in the middle of the Atlantic with limited resources. I have learned so many tricks to living at sea: pressure cookers; silicone dishes with wire supports to prevent dish collapse; reusable baking parchment; how to keep fruit fresh - the list goes on. I think it is incredible how well each item is kept, used and stowed on board: everything you could need but nothing more, in its place, fastened securely. This was not limited to the galley either. Cutting up plastics and prodding them into empty milk bottles meant that any stinky recyclable waste was contained and compressed, meaning that by the end of the crossing, the waste





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from on board was limited to one bin bag and a few plastic bottles, a revolutionary way of dealing with waste, and one I intend to suggest to future skippers.

As we headed southeast and the wind increased, coming even further aft, the cruising chute was replaced by a poled out headsail, still on starboard. In the sun and rising swell, we enjoyed company from numerous birds, Portuguese man o' war jellyfish, dolphins, and a sperm whale (from a distance), and enjoyed music from Angus' ukelele. I also tried my hand at the ocarina, which must have been terribly annoying, sorry everyone...

After only a week at sea, Flores emerged over the horizon but as we passed it I was glad to be carrying on to Horta, I was not ready to make landfall yet. That night I was accompanied by dolphins on my night watch. In addition to a sky full of stars, the phosphorescence activated by their splashes was one of the most magical things I have ever seen. As they charged down a wave their tracks were illuminated like fairy dust, and then they would disappear, only reappearing when they entered the water again. It made me wonder whether this might be where some old mermaid stories come from. We dropped anchor in the evening of 9 July, eight and a half days after leaving St. Pierre. The following morning we were welcomed alongside by Angus and Bridget's son Ed, who is captain of the 100ft sailing superyacht *Nostramo*. They were also in Horta, having crossed from Newport, Rhode Island six hours before we left St. Pierre. We were racing them to Horta, plotting their position alongside ours the whole way. They beat us, but not on handicap! After clearing into Portugal and enjoying the delights of the local chandlery, we got to work on boat maintenance, specifically attempting to add a sheath to the new burgee halyard, which proved a lot harder than it sounds.

For our last day on the island, Bill hired a car and we drove to the *caldera*, and hiked around its perimeter, enjoying the stunning scenery and luscious vegetation as we went. The blue hydrangea bushes which lined every field and road were visible like a patchwork from the top of the volcano, demonstrating why Faial is nicknamed the 'blue island'. After enjoying the hubbub of activity at the Peter Sport Café that evening, and waving goodbye to Bill the following morning, we headed back to sea to get to Santa Maria in time for the RCC Meet. As we continued southeast on starboard tack, we were



Our mural in Horta, alongside an RCC members' earlier one





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surprised by large pods of dolphins, hundreds of them jumping past us, eight falling out of a wave at one time, all with places to be, as they did not stop to play in our bow wave. The slopes of Mount Pico were visible until dusk, and that night on watch I enjoyed the Milky Way from horizon to horizon. I taught myself new constellations: Sagittarius, Aries, Pisces, and the imaginatively named ‘Triangulum’. A few hours before reaching Santa Maria, we gybed! This was so surreal that the pole was left up on port just in case we needed to change our minds. As the sun dipped below the horizon, we tied up next to *Robin* in Vila do Porto.



Painting *Brown Bear* next to *Swaraj* on the RCC meet mural in Vila do Porto, with *Brown Bear* crew Enriche

Whilst on Santa Maria we enjoyed the island’s geology, adding to the RCC mural, lots of swimming and watching England fail to bring it home, again. It was so lovely to meet Ella Grundy, a fellow Cadet, and to attend the dinner and bus tour. Being shown around people’s boats was a great opportunity finally to talk to members that I had not previously met. David and I also had the chance to talk to Hugh Clay, who was kind enough to give us a berth on *Brown Bear* once *Swaraj* had left for Horta. The extraction of *Swaraj* from her tight and shallow berth the morning after the dinner required a certain level of ‘warp knitting’, involving sculling warps to the other side of the marina and pulling her round at the right angle so that she would not cause damage. It was a multi-phase operation involving plenty of Club members but was executed to perfection. Just like that, she disappeared behind the breakwater and David and I went searching for our new home. Once on board, we enjoyed sailing with Hugh to Ponta Delgada, where we travelled inland to soak up what Sao Miguel had to offer.

I am incredibly thankful for the grant from the Noel Marshall fund I received so that I could have this adventure. Having never been at sea for more than four nights consecutively, and never crossed an ocean, I was worried that my experience level and seasickness would make me more of a hindrance than a help on board, but I learned so much and gained so much more confidence in my abilities. I am so grateful to Angus and Bridget, both for the opportunity and for their generosity, patience and encouragement. Sailing with them and Bill has really inspired me towards my next passage, whatever it may be!

