

Round the Cape and across the South Atlantic

South Africa to the Caribbean

Donald Begg

Awarded the Irish Cruising Club Decanter



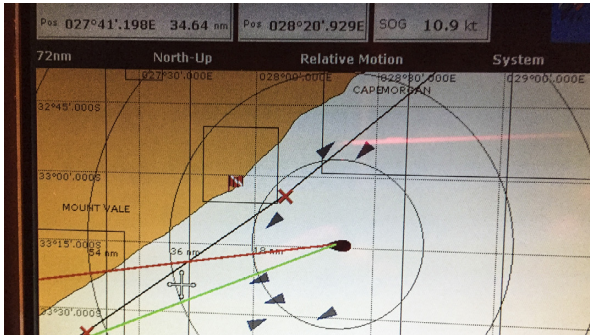
The name of the game for the passage south from Richards Bay to Cape Town is weather windows. There are few ports of refuge, and none for the 250 miles between Durban and East London. The weather, is dominated by the regular formation of lows which send the wind whistling up against the 5 knot Agulhas current, generating waves that will crunch a yacht. To add to the piquancy of this occasion, the World ARC fleet was already gathered in Cape Town 950 miles away, ready to restart the rally on 9 January. This would now be without us, but the question was how close behind them could we get?

We were ready to go on 5 January 2019 but inevitably a low was passing through. Des Cason, amateur router and local weather expert, said Tuesday, maybe Monday if you must. So Monday it was, sailing on the high tide at 0500 and motoring into a contrary but decreasing wind with a lumpy sea. The wind slowly turned to NE as forecast and we found the current. We part motor-sailed, part sailed, zooming past Durban and later East London; we sped over the ground anything up to 11 knots. Onboard *Lydia* with my wife, Nicola, we had new crew Graham Stoddart-Stones and Mark Curtis.

Problems? The generator, always the first to go, ran for 10 minutes and then cut out. The mainsail had not been re-bent on correctly, so enjoyed a few moments of freedom in the wind before it could be tamed.

After two days and 482 miles the weather window was closing, Mossel Bay

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Storming along with the Agulhas current

looked like a step too far, so it was Port Elizabeth.

The marina at Port Elizabeth is ramshackle, a little grubby, but thoroughly welcoming and friendly. The old Algoa Bay Marina appeared to have gone bankrupt a few months ago, but the catering facilities had been taken

over and renamed Nelson Mandela Yacht Club. The marina itself appeared to be being run by local yachtsmen. All good for us, except that the shore power did not generate enough voltage to activate the battery charger. The town itself looked industrial, smoked and did not appeal from the marina. It is also reputed to be unsafe. But in the other direction was a resort, ideal for recreational runs ashore. We had an on-site engineer look over the generator. The verdict, an untightened banjo nut on the fuel line which was sucking in air, and, probably more significantly, dodgy fuel, which the engine could cope with, but not the delicate generator. Our only solution was to burn off fuel on the way to Cape Town and refuel there.

I had hoped to sail two days after we arrived but no such luck as the weather window closed. When it became clear that we would be stuck for the weekend Graham and Mark hired a car and spent an enjoyable day at the Ado safari park so that Graham could at least glimpse one of South Africa's classic attractions. We were itching to go, but the wind was whistling up from the wrong direction. Our local weatherman said that it would start to turn on the Monday, better wait till Tuesday. I said let's go at 1800 on the Sunday and give it a try. That time came and the boat and crew were ready, but it was blowing old boots from the South. Executive decision, we'll have a nice dinner, some sleep, and we'll sail at 0400 on Monday. So we did, motoring out into a light headwind with a lumpy but navigable sea, not a cloud in the sky, the sunshine in tune with the optimism of our spirit.

We motor-sailed for a day and a half against a weak wind. I had hoped for some more favourable current, but now that we were round Cape St Francis we lost the Agulhas, and even had a knot or so of the cold Benguela current against us. By Tuesday afternoon the easterly wind was building and we were sailing. As we approached Cape Agulhas, lost in the mist at first light on Wednesday morning, the wind was up to 30 knots and the sea was rough, but we were making 8 knots in the right direction. We rounded the Cape and *Lydia* was back in the Atlantic after a little under three years.

The only wildlife were seals, but lots of them. They lay on their backs on the rough surface, asleep, flippers in the air, occasionally lifting an incurious head to watch us go by. Where were the great whites?

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Every crew seems to produce a cook who shines above the others. In our case, Mark was clear winner. He did amuse us with a touch of finesse, a knob of butter on each plate before dishing up spag bol. Try keeping that on your plate when balancing it on your knee in rough weather.



Mark, Donald (skipper) and Graham, a little wind-swept

I had thought that after Agulhas we would get a bit of lee and calmer conditions as we approached the Cape of Good Hope. Nothing doing. We went scooting up past the 'Cape of Storms' and got no respite until abreast of Hout Bay, with the stupendous Table Mountain ahead. We berthed at the V&A marina in Cape Town, 916 miles from Richards Bay, but didn't want to tarry. The World ARC fleet had an eight day start on us, Mark and I had already done Cape Town, bad luck Graham.

The pilot states that the route to St Helena is straightforward, but advises sailors to keep a close watch on the weather before leaving the Cape. We weren't inclined to hang around. The weather looked reasonable on PredictWind and Windy, so we set sail on Thursday 17 January. There was little wind to begin with. A few fishing boats were offshore. One called us on VHF and helpfully guided us around his fishing floats on a dark night. The following day, Friday, we had 20-30 knots of wind from the WSW, as forecast, and were sailing well despite a rough sea, two reefed sails. Saturday morning was easier, but then the wind started building, and by evening we had 40 knots from the SE and a very rough sea.

These were probably the worst conditions that I have known on this boat, the sea was big. We ran before the gale with a patch of mainsail (we have in-boom reefing), overnight a clear sky and full moon. Boat speed was too high, matching that of the waves. If I had prepared the drogue I would have streamed it but we weren't expecting this, and I didn't fancy preparing it in these conditions. In the event, the boat was the star of the show. She ran on the autopilot and steered straight as a die, rolling with the waves, but never losing it or threatening a broach.

By morning the wind was down to 25 knots, and by the afternoon it was 20. The

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sea was still rough, but we were under control. Phew! These few weeks around the South African capes had been a meteorological roustabout. How about some gentle trade wind sailing from then on? In fact the wind steadied at 20 knots from the SE, we rigged the twin headsails, and had three days of good, if rolly, sailing. On the 24th we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, on the 25th the Greenwich Meridian, so we've been round the world (not an official circumnavigation, for that we needed to re-cross the equator). On the 26th the wind dropped to 10 knots and backed to the east. By this stage we were 300 miles from St Helena, so were prepared to switch on the engine and motor-sail.

And the generator? We had it running for only 45 minutes on the first day out, and the same again on the third. I changed the fuel filter (this had been done in Richards Bay) and bled the fuel line. On the fourth day I ran the engine for five hours to charge the batteries, got fed up with the noise, switched the engine off and the generator on ... and it ran! My only theory is that those five engine hours had burned off some of the dodgy diesel, leaving us with the better quality Cape Town stuff thereafter.

We motor-sailed for two days and picked up a mooring off Jamestown on 28 January, just under 11 days from Cape Town, mostly under sail.

St Helena is a lump of unremittingly grey rock, no sign of greenery from seaward. We approached under a grey sky with a hint of drizzle. From the moment we called St Helena Radio to announce our approach, to the time Port Control guided us to our mooring, to our passage through Customs and Immigration, to our departure two days later, everything and everyone were unfailingly friendly and welcoming. The officials especially, were a pleasant contrast to their counterparts in South Africa. Everybody says hello in the street, big smiles, and drivers wave from their cars.

Problems. Credit cards are not accepted on the island, and the only way to get cash (pounds sterling, of which we unpreparedly had little on board) was to get to the bank with a debit card. There was no phone signal for overseas phones and no place to land and safely leave a dinghy.

More problems, probably because the ARC boats had got there before us. There was no fresh fruit to be had, little veg and the island was running out of beer. We might have to halve the ration en route (or drink gin?) and we'd need a fast passage to Brazil in a race against scurvy.



Jamestown from the top of Jacob's Ladder, St Helena

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On the plus side. There is an hourly water taxi from the moorings to Jamestown, which is a sleepy but charming little colonial town in the cleft between two steep cliffs, with two roads winding out and up, and the redoubtable Jacob's Ladder, a long and steep staircase, climbing out on one side from the lower town to the upper.

The town itself consists of stone buildings and is reminiscent of a Port Isaac or Mevagissey in Cornwall without the trippers. There is a handful of hotels, bars, and restaurants, all thoroughly welcoming and excellent value.

As tourists, we had an excellent tour of the island, driven by Keith Yon, one of two entrepreneurial brothers. The tour included a walk to Napoleon's tomb, swathed in bougainvillea, and a visit to atmospheric Longwood House, where Napoleon was interned; a visit to the controversial airport which cost billions of British tax payer's money, and which is still restricted to specially trained pilots on the weekly mid-sized Embraer aircraft from Pretoria; a drive around the green landscape at the top of the island which allows a little agriculture and farming; and a visit to the Governor's House to see Jonathan the tortoise, who at 180ish is reputed to be the oldest creature alive.

The undoubted highlight of our stay was the adventure of snorkelling with whale sharks. Yes, whale sharks. These huge creatures, not much smaller than *Lydia*, are harmless plankton feeders. They are particularly beautiful, light blue with white spots, lithe, with a long tail and a fin that breaks the surface of the sea. They are closely followed by a number of parasite fish. Craig Yon took us in a fast RIB out to the feeding ground and chucked us overboard with snorkels into the clear blue water. The experience of putting one's head under water and seeing one of these beasts a few feet away, coming towards you with its jaws wide-open, is one that will live in the memory.



Snorkelling with whale sharks will live in the memory

We sailed from St Helena on 30 January. The Pilot says 'This route is generally a dead downwind run onto the coast of BrazilTalking to those who have done this

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leg to Salvador, they all agreed these were some of the best sailing conditions they had met. I join the agreeers. The sun shone, the wind blew steadily from the East, the worry was that there wouldn't be enough, never that there would be too much. We flew the classic trade-wind rig of poled-out headsails, an efficient and un-fussy rig which comes at a price: you roll like a pig! We had no excitements and saw disappointingly little wildlife. We got to know each other's stories, cooked (mainly Mark), read, practised noon sights on the sextant and became familiar with the Southern Cross as the weather grew warmer.

My previous record for flying twins was twelve days in the Pacific. We beat that this time. For thirteen days we didn't change a sail, we didn't use the engine for propulsion, didn't use the autopilot (the hydrovane was in its element), didn't unroll the mainsail, and never strayed more than 20 miles from the



For thirteen days we didn't change a sail

Great Circle route. I had high hopes of not furling the twins until we were inside the Bahia de Todos os Santos, but no such luck. On the thirteenth day the wind finally abandoned us, and we motored for 18 hours up to the Centro Nautico marina in Salvador da Bahia, arriving on 13 February. The mileage from St Helena to Salvador was 1917 in just under thirteen days. We had now caught up with the World ARC fleet, time for a caipirinha or two, and a bit of shore time.

Salvador is big, a high-rise, modern city, with a historic colonial centre, as befits the original capital of Brazil. We arrived in the run-up to Carnival, and our lasting impression will be one of noise and rhythm, music thumping from 0530 till late at night. Oh, and heat ... well over 30 degrees and 70% humidity. Everyone is immune to noise. If the crew of a tripper boat row a dinghy out to their mooring at

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dawn, their first action on arrival is to switch on the samba. If two men are chatting in the marina and one decides to go to the loo, the conversation continues uninterrupted, just louder so as to cover the extra distance. Opposite the marina is a naval establishment. 'Call the Hands' is at 0600, and throughout the day a



Arriving in Salvador

number of announcements are made, each preceded by a pipe on a bosun's whistle.

There is an undercurrent of crime, none actually seen by us, but hyped by the numerous imprecations to be careful, and by the blatant South American city gulf between rich and poor. On the plus side, there is clear determination by the authorities to protect tourism, and 'policia militar' are everywhere, as are apparently unmolested tourists.

The old city is on top of a cliff facing the marina. One reaches it on the Lacerda elevator, a public lift which operates frequently and costs 15c, say 4p. We were advised not to use it after sunset, but we did so frequently and had no trouble. The buildings, churches, and cobbled streets are lovely. Unfortunately some of the squares and monuments had been fenced off in preparation for crowd control during Carnival. The restaurants are mostly excellent, the wine is good, the caipirinhas are delicious, the prices modest. The beat of Brazilian music in the evening penetrates the soul. Salvador is a vibrant city. We're glad that we've been there and seen it, but it won't be top of a list of favourites.

We cleared out on 25th February and headed towards Cabadelo in northern Brazil, a four day voyage, the first three of which were somewhat tedious and uncomfortable, the former because there was little wind, the latter because what wind there was was on the nose. We motored or motor-sailed. The chop was quite steep, and at times we were slowed to three knots despite having revs for six. On the fourth day the wind veered and picked up, so we regained some honour with a decent sail.

The chief characteristic of this route is fishing activity. The edge of the continental shelf causes the depth to drop from fifty to several hundred metres in the space of a mile, around twenty miles offshore. This is where the fishing appears to be at its most productive. We soon learned that the boats trawl, troll, and lay traps just inboard of the shelf. The boats are well lit, the traps are not, a yachtsman's nightmare. At night the position of the shelf is well marked by the line of fishing-boat lights. One mile further out to sea and the sailing is clear.

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Cabadelo is the port at the mouth of the Paraiba river. We went up the ship-channel on the morning of 1 March, into the river where the water suddenly turns from blue to brown, and then a further three miles up, in between the mangrove swamps, to the marina in the village of Jacare, which means alligator. It is a small village on the Paraiba river between the port of Cabadelo and the big high-rise beach resort of Joao Pessao. It's flea-bitten, dirt-streeted, hot and humid. It's a colourful river-frontage with a couple of bars and restaurants that is a base for the floating discos that ply the river. During Carnival the place rocks, morning till late at night. Towards sunset each day a canoe drifted past with a local man on board playing Ravel's Bolero on the saxophone. This romantic interlude is a local tradition which attracts a crowd of holiday makers. Once it is over the samba thumps again. An American boat at the inboard end of the pontoon got aggressive and started blaring Country and Western back at the shore. The locals didn't even notice. The majority of the visiting boats were French, including one during our stay which had just completed a circumnavigation from Jacare to Jacare via Good Hope, NZ, and the Horn (perhaps not the time to mention the rule I'd seen that says that for a circumnavigation to be official it must cross the Equator at least twice).

We took a bus to Olinda, an old colonial town and World Heritage Site near Recife, to witness the press of flesh at Carnival. The crowds, the noise, the colours,



The press of flesh at Carnival

the music, are breath taking. There are times when you can't move because of the density of the crowd, and just staying on your feet is a challenge. It is all good humoured, no signs of aggro. That said, I didn't pay sufficient heed to our briefing. This cost me my mobile phone. I think that I felt and saw it go, but could do nothing in that throng. It went from deep in my pocket to a new life on a Brazilian backstreet. Next time, I would welcome a more leisurely sightseeing visit to Olinda. Low season would be fine.

On 6 March, it was Ash Wednesday. Suddenly the music stopped. Silence

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came down like a curtain, well until evening at least. As I went through the village on my morning run, kids were going to school with their satchels. The party was over.

After a long day of passport and customs clearance (patiently-ish handled by the ARC staff), the Rally sailed from Jacare on the evening of 7 March, with our excellent crew member Mark continuing on another boat. Four boats, including us, splinter-grouped away from a night time crossing of the fishing areas, instead opting for a last dinner at Joao Pessao and to leave at first light next morning. We sailed from Jacare on the high tide, up to the top NE corner of Brazil and round, into the ITCZ, commonly known as the Doldrums. So, some wind, some calm, numerous squalls of varying intensity, muggy heat, sails up, sails reefed, engine on, engine off. But on this leg we had one great advantage: the Guiana current, which helped us along with a strength of up to two knots.

This is an area with a reputation for aggressive fishing boats, not to say banditry and piracy. In consequence, three of us had decided to sail in company, heavy old *Lydia* with *Pretaixte*, a French X-Yacht 42, and *Aranui*, a Swiss X-Yacht 46. The two lighter boats set up a tough pace for *Lydia* to follow, and we were obliged to sail harder than had been our custom. Drama struck us when Niki, owner of *Aranui*, suffered a bad fall, broke ribs, and had to lie still in serious pain. This left Karen, his crew, plus a young and inexperienced godson, to sail the boat. Karen rose to the challenge superbly. *Pretaixte*, whose owners are doctors, helped with medical advice and drugs. The three of us stuck even more closely together to make sure that Karen and Niki had moral support. We stayed well out to sea, and came across only the occasional fishing boat, one of whom came in close to have a look but broke off when he saw that we were a group.

We stopped for 24 hours at Ile Royale, alongside Devil's Island or Ile du Diable, in French Guiana. Not much remains of the old prison buildings, but there is a brooding sense of unhappy history. Ghosts notwithstanding, we had an enjoyable stay at this remote location including dinner at the one small hotel/restaurant ('No Euros? A credit card will do nicely').

From there on we were over the Equator and into the NE trade winds, sailing well on a beam reach with a good current still helping us along. The American catamaran *Cayuse* joined our group. We had one suspicious approach by a fishing vessel, but it was not sustained. Before we knew it we were north of Tobago, approaching Grenada, after 12.5 days, into Port Louis Marina on the afternoon of 21 March.

In Grenada, *Lydia* crossed her track for the first time, circumnavigation complete!

It was time for 16 days of holiday, and sadly also time to say farewell to Graham, whose company we had enjoyed for the 7,000 miles from Richards Bay. After all the sea time and sea miles, we had free cruising, in one of the loveliest cruising grounds in the world, up to the ARC finishing line and end of rally dinner in St Lucia. The itinerary was up to each skipper, but in practice chummy boats stuck together and

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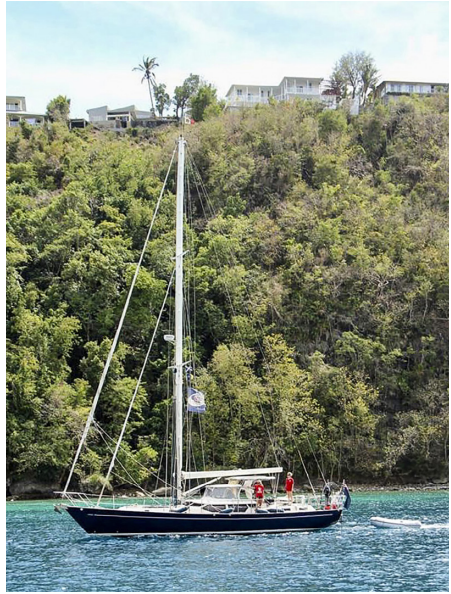
congeniality complemented wonderful geography.

Our last day was the 'Parade of Sail', the 17 finishers sailing in line ahead from Marigot to the improvised finishing line in Rodney. We had the dinner and prize-giving at Rodney Bay on the evening of 13 April, and then the great adventure was over. By Monday the boats were dispersing, nostalgic emotion was the order of the day. And Sharon and Karen, who joined in Grenada, were also leaving. My thanks to them both for being a lovely crew and terrific shipmates. Girl Power rocks.

As ever on a hard-worked boat, Murphy refused to stay behind. It worried me that *Lydia* was 13 years old when I bought her. But the reality is that she is a thoroughly seaworthy and solid boat, and her engineering problems have been no worse, and often less bad, than those of younger boats on the rally. The key is simplicity, accessibility, replaceability, and continuous maintenance. The bogey is a long lay-up, and having to start the whole litany again on re-commissioning.

Back to the old single-handed game again. I sailed after lunch on 15 April, and anchored at the mouth of Marigot Bay. Then a lovely beam reach, the first day down past St Vincent and on to Bequia, the second down past Union Island and Carriacou to the anchorage off St George's, and finally, on the morning of the 18th, into Port Louis marina. As I write I am cleaning and emptying the boat. We're due to be hauled out of the water at Grenada Marine early next week, and then home to the comfort of landlubbery for the foreseeable future.

More sailing next year?



Lydia arriving in Rodney Bay