

# Single-handed from Falmouth to the Caribbean

Max Campbell

## *Awarded the Sea Laughter Trophy*

It was a cloudy, mid-summer afternoon when we waved goodbye to our worried mothers and sailed out of the Carrick Roads, two naïve 20-year-olds, wide-eyed and open to the world. We had loaded my 22ft sloop *Flying Cloud* with surfboards, a fold-away bicycle, two pasties each and a pint of milk, and set sail for Brittany looking for nothing more than an adventure. This was our gap year, for the first time we had no commitments to work or education, and the freedom was overwhelming. And what better way to travel than a small sailing boat? We were transient, able to make a home of wherever we dropped our anchor, and always had the reassurance of a warm bed and a hot meal. For me, as a means of travel, it made sense.

Our arrival in France was a novel occurrence, both for us and the people we met. With every stop, people were taken aback at the sight of two Cornish



Max and Harry set off in *Flying Cloud*

boys in a tiny, wooden boat. The Atlantic coast of France is alive in August, it seems the whole country is on holiday. Every day was a new adventure. With every stop we found a party, each one crazier than the last.

We had left France by September, and for a few weeks we cruised west along the rugged, green and foggy, northern

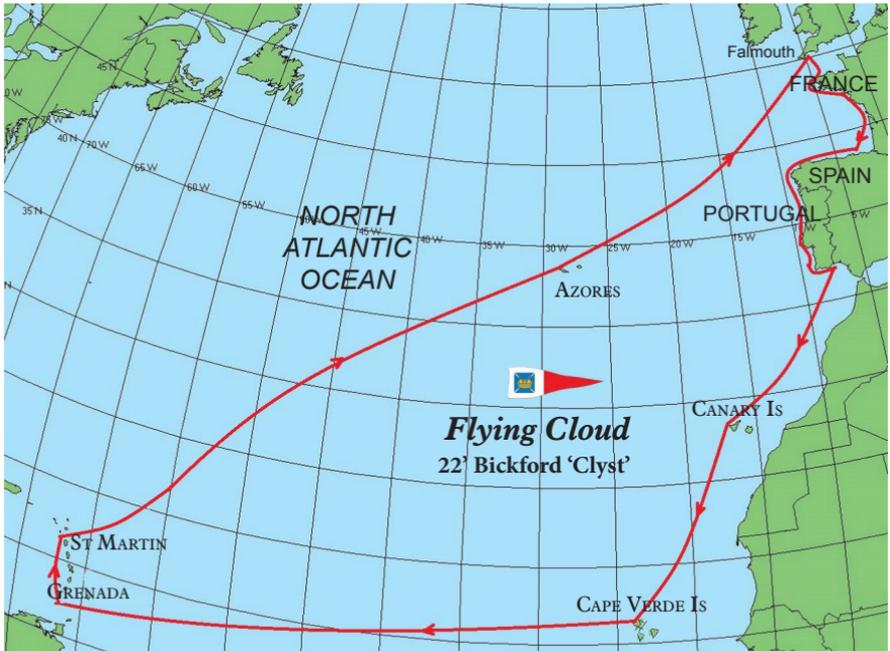
coast of Spain. Cold air rolls down from snow-capped mountain ranges, over dramatic green hills, and into sheltered rias. Compared to the lively French coastline, we seldom saw other yachts. We tied up in small fishing harbours, with long mooring lines fixed to the tall, granite harbour walls. The friendly harbour authorities would come by and ask for nothing more than our names, and afterwards invite us to have showers and drinks at the local Club Nautico.

Too soon we were in Portugal. The green mountains were replaced with a flat, arid landscape. Collections of brightly painted houses lay behind

## Max Campbell

bleached, rocky cliffs and long, sandy beaches. We poled out the jib and embraced the Portuguese tradewinds, goose-winging our way into Lisbon. Here we made friends, not with the locals, but with a motley group of single-handed yachtsmen, all taking part in the annual excursion to the Caribbean for winter. Our friendships escalated quickly, not only because we shared the same passion, but also because we were all living the same dream, and we were doing it on a shoestring.

Harry, my crew and best friend, succumbed to a girl with a van. In Lisbon he moved his possessions from *Flying Cloud's* modest saloon, and into his new lover's comparatively spacious 1997 Vauxhall Arena. It was an emotional goodbye and, initially, I felt lonely and slightly dispirited at the thought that I no longer had my best friend around to share conversation and boost morale.



However, the feeling quickly passed, as I became distracted by convoying along the Portuguese coast with my new, offbeat clique of fellow single-handers. Harry was replaced with a bungee attached to the tiller, the ultimate, short-term, self-steering system.

My inspiration to keep on sailing came from reading. *Flying Cloud's* library showcased an array of influential adventurers: Chris Bonnington, Tristan Jones, John Guzzwell, Shane Acton, Yossi Ghinsberg, Laurie Lee, Robin Knox-Johnston and Bernard Moitessier. All of their stories appeared to be based on the same principles. They were men who left civilization in pursuit of an adventure, each with elements of danger and of the unknown. To have

## Single-handed from Falmouth to the Caribbean

my own adventure was a dream that occupied my thoughts constantly, and I yearned to do the same.

*Flying Cloud*, as well as being incredibly alluring, was a strong and capable little yacht. Her decks had been sheathed in epoxy, and she had a relatively modern aluminum rig and single-cylinder Yanmar engine. But there were still three very important additions I needed to make: the cockpit was massive and not self-draining, I had no long-term self-steering solution and I also had no spray hood. Like a woman in crocs, I had always felt modern sprayhoods looked tacky on classic yachts, and I had been disinclined to get one. But water getting in under the



Up-mast selfie

sliding hatch had become a constant source of misery for me. Every time solid water cascaded over the cabin top, which happened quite a lot, a hose-like stream shot down from under the hatch and soaked the inside of the cabin.

Having a master shipwright as a step-father has priceless advantages when it comes to owning a boat. Together we created a series of drawings for a bespoke self-steering gear, a vertical wind vane linked to a trim-tab on the back of the rudder. The bungee worked, but it was overly sensitive and required a little too much attention; it wasn't a permanent solution. The drawings were loosely based on the Hasler design, where the wind vane turns the trim tab, and the flow of water past the trim tab causes the rudder to swing in the opposite direction. The adjustable linkage between the wind vane and the trim tab is aligned with the rudder pintles to prevent oversteer.

I sailed round to the Rio Guadiana to finish my preparations. The turbid, meandering river separates the south of Portugal from Spain. About 15 miles upriver, the two small villages of Alcoutim (Portuguese) and San Lucar (Spanish) face each other, cradled like babies in the arms of the surrounding hills. The river and its banks are inhabited by a small community of British expats, some with houses on the shore and some live-aboards on the river.

In the Guadiana I finished building the wind vane. Apart from the wooden vane and nylon bearings, everything was made from stainless steel. There were no strings and no possibility of wear. Keith Buchanan from Rat Island, St Marys, put together a canvas sprayhood/hatch garage, which fitted nicely over my sliding hatch. I also covered in the cockpit footwell with plywood and made two drains out through the transom. It wasn't totally self-draining,

## Max Campbell

but it was so much better than nothing.

A few days before I planned to leave, a big low moved over the Algarve and torrential rain fell relentlessly for three days. The water level rose into caña bushes on the riverbank and the current doubled in strength. During the night, a southerly gale blew up against the river's stream and *Flying Cloud* swung around on her anchor chain like a wrecking ball. A big, dead, saturated log, which had been rolling downstream along the river bed had managed to get wrapped three times around my anchor chain. After a long struggle with the saturated tree, and relieved to have my precious anchor back, I motored back down river, weaving my way between extensive bamboo rafts, garden sheds, and bits of home-made pontoon.

The sun set behind the Serra de Monchique as *Flying Cloud* ghosted out from behind the breakwater and back into the comparatively clean, clear and saline waters of the North Atlantic. The wind was westerly F3 and the sea



Ocean swells

was flat. My favourite sailing conditions, close-hauled on a constant heel, I left *Flying Cloud* to steer herself. Throughout the night the wind veered to the north. I eased everything and tried my wind vane for the first time. If it didn't work then the next week was going to be hard. After pointing *Flying Cloud* in the right direction, I dropped the pin into the cog, sat back and watched anxiously. Slowly she began to head up, the wind vane detected the change in direction and pushed on the trim-tab tiller. The tiller shifted to starboard and she was back on course, it worked! After half an hour of tweaking, our course changed from an elongated sine wave to an almost straight line. For the first time in my life, I left the comfort of the continental shelf. The seabed beneath me deepened to unimaginable depths, and I sailed out into the North Atlantic Ocean.

For the first three days, the wind blew from the north, and under full sail we - you're never truly alone on a wooden boat - covered 110-130nm a day. The wind gradually veered to the south, and for the following three days we were hard on the wind again, making about 80nm a day. On the seventh day, the wind backed to the north-east, and the Roque Del Oeste rose up from the horizon like an apparition. With a poled-out jib, we passed between the sandy, volcanic islands and made landfall on Playa Francesca, La Graciosa.

## Single-handed from Falmouth to the Caribbean

A lot happened in the Canaries. I encountered the strongest winds of the trip so far and surfed many amazing waves. A friendly Breton gifted me a sculling oar. I made many new friends, bumped into old friends and even had a touch of romance. Six weeks later, with the small jib and two reefs, we sailed out of Las Palmas.

For the first 20nm, I made constant sail changes as we passed through acceleration zones and wind shadows. Short, intense gusts rolled down from the hills and caused the boat to veer off course when the wind vane was steering. It was hard work getting away from the localised, distorted winds, but after a slow night, the breeze settled into a light northerly. I poled out two genoas and averaged 100nm for the next three days. At 25°N, we picked up the tradewinds.

The steady F3 strengthened into a F6-7, and a big following sea built up. I steadily reduced sail, until all I had up was a small jib, and we were still making 6kts. The wind began to whine in the rigging, and I was totally confused as to what the hell was going on, it was so far from what I imagined the tradewinds to be like. I later found out some friends of mine had suffered a knock-down in the same weather system. They were 'dock walkers' from Las Palmas and it was their first sailing experience. The whole rig had been submerged and a wave broke down the companionway; amazingly they didn't seem put off in any way.

The next day the wind dropped slightly to a F5-6, but the swell continued to build. I poled out another small headsail, and *Flying Cloud* reached new top speeds as she surfed down the steep, breaking waves. Consistently, we ticked off 120-130nm a day. It was a fast passage. The tradewinds were so convenient, it almost felt like cheating.



La Graciosa in the Canaries

Nine days after leaving Las Palmas, and 10nm north of Isla de Sal, there was still no evidence of land. Dust blown from the Sahara results in a thick haze, smothering the Cape Verde Islands from view.

Finally, three mountains emerged out of the mist, and it was alarming to see them as they were so close. At first, the Mars-like landscape showed few visible signs of life. Dry, pockmarked, rocky hills spilled gently into expansive, barren, flat areas of orange gravel, with the odd desert shrub to break up the emptiness.

Behind a large granite breakwater, I found the small village of Palmeria. It was a village of brightly painted, quadrate buildings, cobbled streets and

## Max Campbell

colourful fishing dories. It is also a village of oil refineries, fly-tipping and commercial shipping. Unfinished buildings, mounds of waste and many homeless suggest economic struggles, but the wealth of the islands lies with the people. As well as being incredibly welcoming, open and warm-hearted, the locals are a striking combination of European and West African, with big round eyes, golden-brown complexions and sun-bleached, tightly curled hair.

Two weeks later, after filling my lockers with provisions, I lubed up my self-steering gear, scrubbed below the waterline, and sailed out of Mindelo harbour early one morning. The wind howled in the rigging, and again I flew only my small jib. We shot out through the acceleration zone between the two dramatic islands and the view of land merged itself behind us. I was confident and felt no fear, or nervousness, just happiness, and excitement. I wanted adventure, I wanted challenge and I wanted to push myself. This was the trip that I had been planning for so long; a dream at first, it felt so good to make it happen.

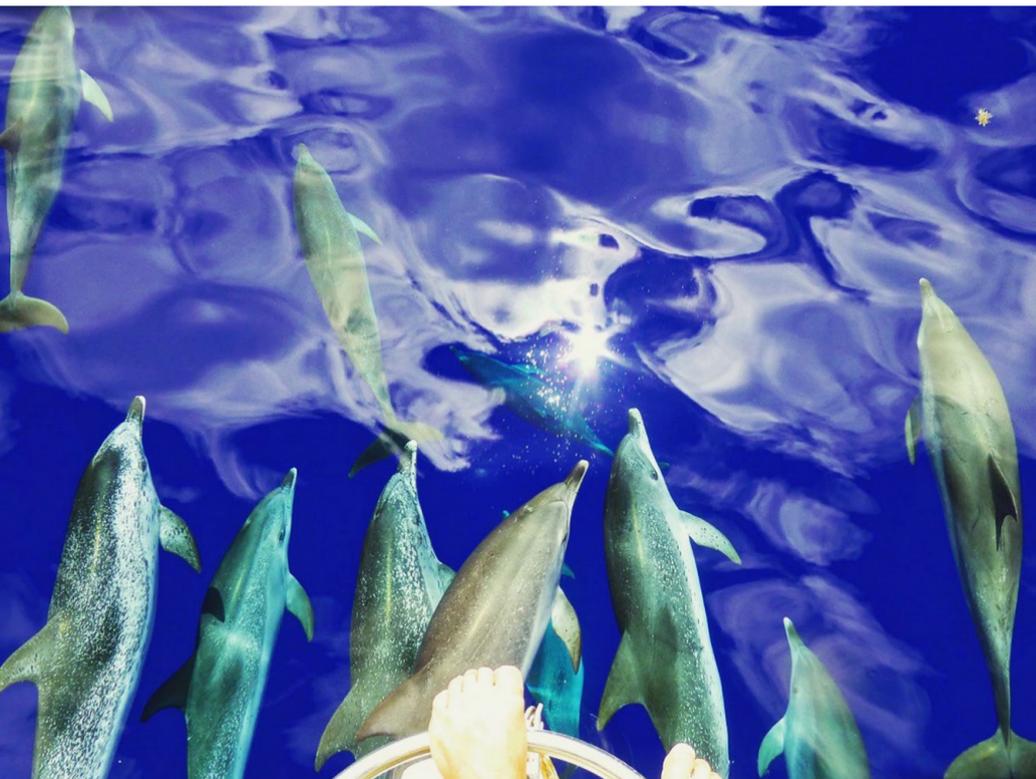
Before leaving I had checked the weather. I knew I had three days of strong winds before the tradewinds eased to their regular strength. For these first few days, I ran with the swell, under my small jib. The waves were the steepest



I had seen yet. They were not the long, undulating oceanic mountains that I expected, but short, sharp, white-fringed rollers. Breakers constantly filled the cockpit and keeping the companionway dry was impossible. There was an unbroken, steady moan coming from the rigging, increasing occasionally to a higher pitched whine as a gust passed by.

On the fourth morning, I was relieved as the wind began to ease. I poled out two genoas and tried

to accustom myself to the feeling of rolling steadily downwind. By then, I had started to adjust to the new living conditions. My compass checks and sail adjustment slowly became fewer and farther between as I became more comfortable, and often I found reassurance with a quick glance at the sky. The rhythmic percussion of the bow wave became a normal feature of life, as did the constant dampness and the periodic sleeping patterns. I became engrossed in books and took time over preparing meals. Night-time brought

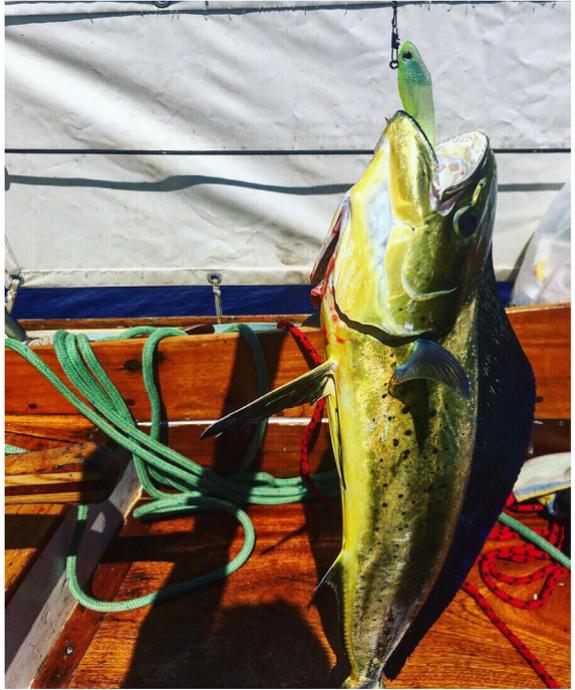


the phosphorescent plankton, more alive and concentrated than I had ever seen. *Flying Cloud's* wake was transformed into long, elegant and dynamic dragon's tail. Often dolphins and whales would join the convoy, silhouetted in a bright-green exoskeleton as they danced at the bow like fireflies beneath the inky black water.

In the first week, I developed a daily routine. In the mornings, the sun rose through the companionway onto my squinting face. I always woke in a positive mood, my entire world contained in this tiny space, and an entire ocean separates everything else. I get out of bed and scan the horizon, changes in conditions were rare, but occasionally I have to climb onto the foredeck to change the headsails. Back in the cabin, I play music while boiling water on the paraffin stove, then drink tea in the cockpit under the morning sun. Normally the deck is littered in flying fish; long, thin creatures with vibrant blue skin and large delicate wings. They vary in size from 1-8 inches, and each day brings at least half a dozen. After collecting them off of the deck, I leave them to marinate in a bowl of lime juice. In the saloon, I pour water into a transparent jar full of young seedlings, my precious supply of fresh produce. Finally, I throw a jelly lure on a heavy line over the transom and make fast the

## Max Campbell

other end to one of the cockpit winches. At mid-day, I plot a fix on the paper chart and figure out the day's run, then indulge myself by rambling on in the log for several pages. For lunch, I coat the flying fish in flour and paprika and cook them in a thick frying pan. I add some of my seedlings and eat them with either rice, noodles or fresh flatbreads. After that I would brew up again and sit out in the cockpit, staring out at the horizon and becoming lost in deep trains of thought. Most days something bites my lure, often the fish escape, or sometimes the line breaks. But every now and then I manage to get something into the cockpit, mostly yellowfin tuna, sometimes dorado, and often species too exotic to identify. More time is spent preparing dinner, usually incorporating fresh fish, seedlings, rice,



Dorado

pulses, onions, potatoes, and cabbage. Despite this daily routine, there are still hours and hours to kill each day. Sometimes I would sail, or carry out little bits of maintenance around the boat. I read books, improve massively on the guitar and constantly listen to music.

For the first half of the passage, the sailing couldn't have been easier. I felt as if I had cheated, by covering so much ground with such little effort. Most days I would make 120nm, and often I sailed for several days without changing anything. With the two headsails sheeted out past 90°, *Flying Cloud* was incredibly well-balanced, and the only factor to affect the directional stability was the constant surge of speed, as we surfed down the steeper waves. I quickly noticed that this could become a problem. She would become engulfed by the power of the wave, quickly build up speed and veer off course to windward. The wind vane then noticed this change in apparent wind, and the tiller quickly kicked to one side to bring her back on course. At this point, the rudder battled the power of the wave, and large turbulent eddies span off into *Flying Cloud's* wake. I began to worry for the rudder pintles.

As I passed the halfway point, I noticed something out of the ordinary

## Single-handed from Falmouth to the Caribbean

behind me. There were a few clouds in the eastern sky, greyish, which appeared to be rain-bearing. The isolated cluster grew nearer, I could see they were blanketed by a misty haze, a bleak contrast to the white, fluffy cumuli I had become so used to, as there had been no rain since the Canaries. The clouds brought an increase in wind and a heavy downpour. In the unfamiliar conditions, I struggled on the foredeck to remove the pole and lash down one of the genoas. But before I had finished, the squall had passed and I found myself becalmed.

In the following days, the squalls became more and more frequent. During daytime I could spot them on the horizon, dark shapes creeping up from behind like a savage pack of wolves. Often, after one finished with us, another waited closely behind, ready to chew us up and spit us out all over again. I could sense their presence at night-time too, either by the light rain blowing through the companionway, or the slight increase in wind. Quickly I would jump out of the cabin and take in sail before they had a chance to pull the mast down. They once succeeded in catching me off guard, pulling both the jib and spinnaker halyards out of their blocks at the masthead. Both sails and poles came crashing down to the deck like fallen trees, and I quickly learned my lesson.

With each day I felt more comfortable, contented and enlightened. Weather no longer became an issue, and I simply overcame whatever came my way. It's an eye-opener to take a step back from civilization for a prolonged period and to truly realize how absurd life on land can be.



## Max Campbell

Slowly, I began to re-invent my personality and became unburdened of mental pressures applied unknowingly by western culture. Life became uncomplicated, bringing about the purest form of joy I have ever known. I felt humbled, an insignificant speck in the seemingly endless expanse of the ocean. At the same time, I felt like a god, totally in charge of my own world.

At the start of the third week, the wind veered to a southerly. This sudden change in direction caught me off guard and put me way north of where I wanted to be. At nightfall, after two days of southerlies, a thick blanket of cloud billowed in from the south, bringing with it the scent of rain and almost suffocating humidity. In the distance, a silver fork of lightning split the grey sky, shortly followed by a roaring clap of thunder, and the downpour began. The wind died, and the clunking sound of swaying aluminium spinnaker poles and torrential rain slamming on the deck filled the cabin. In what seemed like a minute, the wind strengthened from the north, and *Flying Cloud* was propelled into the steep swell that had been building up for the last two days. The slamming was unbearable, I decided to heave to for the night. Again, the wind died and built up, this time from the south-west, and in the morning I figured out I had covered 15nm in the wrong direction. For the next two days, I had very light headwinds, actually a nice change from the last two weeks of relentless rolling.

Eventually, the normal tradewinds returned, and we aimed for Grenada. I noticed more seabirds circling around the boat and even saw some commercial shipping far away on the horizon. I could feel the presence of land looming in the distance. With 200 miles to go I felt on top of the world, in my mind, there was no possibility of not making it, whatever came my way.

I had tempted fate, and now it would punish me with a fury. While priming the paraffin stove, a flaming bottle of methylated spirit exploded in my hand with a squeaky pop. Barely clothed and covered in flames, an overwhelming sensation of searing pain ravaged my face and torso.

Without a moment of thought, I held onto a stanchion and flipped myself over the side. Flames extinguished, I climbed back on board and assessed the damage. My duvet and other items of clothing had caught fire, I threw a bucket of water down the companionway to douse the flames. It was obvious that the worst of the damage had been inflicted on my body. Charred pieces of skin fell off my arms, chest, and torso, my face felt stiff, and several big blisters had already formed. My days of working in the RNLI had prepared me well for this situation, but I never foresaw having to treat myself. I used dressings, creams, antibiotics and painkillers, making myself look more like an Arabian nomad than a sailor. After 18 days of heaven, I had to endure two final days of hell. On the 1 March, I spotted a faint etching of a mountainous terrain conflicting with the shades of blue I had become so familiar with. It was Grenada.

My arrival in the Caribbean was not as I hoped it to be. It was a relief

## Single-handed from Falmouth to the Caribbean

to be back on land, but I felt completely robbed of celebration. I dropped my anchor within a stone's throw of the shore and attached myself to the unfamiliar island, then struggled to pack the boat away and pump up the dinghy. Some friends spotted me from afar; we had arranged a rendezvous. They paddled over to express their congratulations, and recognized quickly that something was wrong. Two hours later I lay dressed like a mummy in a hospital bed.

The sudden change in circumstances was bewildering, and for a while I was unsure of how to move on. Sunshine became my enemy, and it was obvious the Caribbean wasn't the ideal place for me to be. So quickly my priorities were completely transformed; never had it been so undesirable to live on a small boat. I left *Flying Cloud* in a hurricane hole, and flew back to not-so-sunny England.

Constantly I reminded myself it was a small setback, and that it was the end of the journey, but not the end of the adventure. With the whole ordeal came a mental struggle, and positive thinking was invaluable. I found contentment by exploring other avenues in life. As time passed I began to overlook the final upheaval, focusing more on the previous incredible seven months and 5,000 miles. I still retained my love of sailing, my passion for adventure and my attraction to the ocean. Single-handed sailing offers an incredible, euphoric joy, and I was eager for the next voyage.

### Following his recovery, Max wrote what follows.

The fire had left me scarred and frightened. It had forced me to leave both my boat and my adventure, and turn my back on sunshine and freedom. I left *Flying Cloud* at anchor, safe behind a long, spit of mangroves which curved round on itself like the crooked finger of a witch. A year passed before I could muster up the courage to return, but when I did, I let out a sigh of relief as I found my pretty little boat swinging around right where I left her.

My plan was to go home again, but this time, I'd be taking *Flying Cloud* with me. This meant I'd be crossing the Atlantic again, single-handed, on a boat that was definitely not designed



In the boatyard on Grenada

for crossing oceans. It's always difficult to break the news to my parents, especially my Mum, as I can tell it keeps her up at night.

## Max Campbell

'I'm going to sail *Flying Cloud* home again', I told her on the phone, as I sat on the step of a rum shack, my feet buried in the warm tropical sand. She sighed, and paused for a moment, before encouraging my decision. I could tell she was torn between supporting me to reach for my dreams and discouraging me from



Setting off from St Martin to go home

taking another massive risk. It was harder than the first time, as we both knew how close that crossing had brought me to death's doorway.

Because of my limited budget, and general tramp-like appearance, I decided to take a pass on Bermuda and head straight to the Azores. Whilst loading up with provisions, I would see other boats preparing for the crossing piling their decks with cans of diesel. For me that was not an option, *Flying Cloud* was simply too small. I had to depend on the wind to get me there.

The Caribbean faded into the distance behind me as the sun melted into



the horizon, drenching everything in a vibrant orange juice. I had enough food and water for 50 days, although my guess was it would take 3-4 weeks. The first week passed painfully slowly. At the start, it's incredibly daunting to plot your position on the chart and see the vast expanse of ocean that still lies ahead of you. Although, as time passed, and the number of miles between me and the Caribbean grew, I became more and more contented.

Jerome Hamy

Mid-Atlantic

Ten days out of the Carribean, I ghosted into the Azores high. Day after day, I gazed out upon a completely flat seascape, delicately calm, like the skin of some silky blue snake. Progress was slow, and I had to make the most of

## Single-handed from Falmouth to the Caribbean

any breath of wind that moved past me. It seemed that even the jellyfish were overtaking me.

Gradually I inched my way out of serenity and found enough wind to push my boat along steadily. I celebrated with a dorado as I passed the halfway point, and relished in living like a sea gypsy again. People always ask me if I ever became lonely, and I can honestly say that never did a slither of loneliness even cross my mind. It's so refreshing to take a step back from the artificial concerns that society imposes on us, and create an existence in the true order



*Flying Cloud* at anchor in the Scillies

of things. Never before had I felt such a deep-set feeling of happiness and satisfaction than when I let my raw, human instincts completely take over. To have the sun and the moon dictate the rhythm of life is such a blessing, and it's almost ironic how hard I had to work in society beforehand to provide myself with the opportunity.

All in all, I spent 47 days alone at sea, 33 days between the Caribbean and the Azores and 14 days from the Azores to the Isles of Scilly. My return to the UK couldn't have been more perfect. As I pulled into The Cove, St Agnes, my whole family were waiting for me on their big blue fishing boat. I stepped straight from my boat to theirs, salty and windswept, to embrace my emotional mother as we both wept tears of joy. We spent the next week in bliss, taking long walks and catching up on lost time, before sailing back to Falmouth to decide what's to come next.