

Onwards and Westwards ...

Pwllheli, North Wales to La Gomera, The Canaries and Onward...

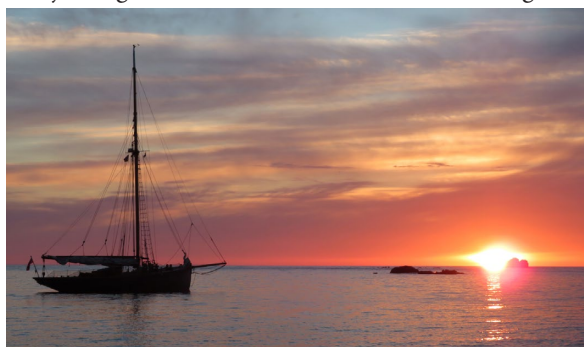
Stephanie Connor

Awarded the Cruising Club Bowl

Left or right at Bardsey Island? That was our question over winter 2018-19. A question that was not resolved until a few weeks before we departed Pwllheli, North Wales in late April 2019 for an extended one-to-two-year cruise. Why the dilemma? Simply because we both wanted to visit the high latitudes and Greenland on a circuit of the North Atlantic. I had already been to high, northern latitudes, but Martin had not and, as much as he wanted to, the thought of a warm breeze after a cold winter was very alluring. So, we planned for both. But it was only after a refreshing walk up Snowdon in early April, when we learnt that Martin's daughter was expecting her first child in November 2019, that heading south and joining the RCC Galicia Meet seemed like a good idea.



Sandpiper



Scilly Isles

We departed Pwllheli on 30 April to go clockwise around the North Atlantic. In fact, we decided to go to the Baltimore Fiddle Festival, County Cork en-route. After a leisurely crossing to Arklow, our port-hopping cruise to Baltimore took us via Waterford, with its

world-renowned crystal factory and Viking history; a side trip to Dublin, with a visit to the Guinness Warehouse for a taste of the 'Black stuff'; and an unexpected, welcome reception by Norman Kean on the pontoon at Courtmacsherry. We

Stephanie Connor

enjoyed a memorable few days at Baltimore and Clear Island, savouring a feast of traditional and contemporary fiddle music, a highly recommended event for music lovers.

Our next stop was to be the Scilly Isles, but several days of south-easterlies almost saw us going directly to the Azores. The wind inevitably changed, and we made a smooth passage to an enjoyable and sunny stay, cruising and exploring the Scillies. We lingered for just over a week which was fortunate as we had arranged for Imray to send us Henry Buchanan's new pilot for Spain and Portugal; fortunately our pilot arrived the day before we were due to leave.

We had planned to arrive early in Camaret to explore the Rade du Brest and surrounding area. Unfortunately our plans fell apart shortly after mooring on a visitors' buoy in the Baie du Stiff at Ile D'Ouessant. We secured ourselves to one of the four large white visitors' moorings inside the harbour. The weather was sunny and winds not too strong, only F3, with occasional stronger gusts off the land, but nothing to concern us while we took a pleasant stroll and a bite to eat. However, on returning to the harbour three hours later we had one of those 'what the heck' frights as *Sandpiper*



Onwards and Westwards ...

had gone - was nowhere to be seen! After a heart-stopping few moments, we saw her pennant flying above and beyond the harbour wall. It looked as though she had been moved outside. Had we perhaps,



Damage (above) and refitting the keel



mistakenly moored onto a private mooring and some kind-hearted owner had moved us? That was our initial thought, but strangely there was no sight of our mooring buoy. A rapid dinghy ride revealed the truth of the matter. As we

approached *Sandpiper* there was clear damage to her bow and it transpired that she had come free from the mooring and drifted onto the steep rocks surrounding the harbour. Fortunately for us, the alert Captain of the Island Ferry *Fromveur II* had seen her loose and despatched his rescue boat to investigate.

They reached her just after she struck the rocks and were able to recover her to a secure ferry mooring outside the harbour before she was holed. We may never know what happened to the mooring but are thankful for the prompt action of the ferry captain that *Sandpiper*



Brest Strawberry Festival

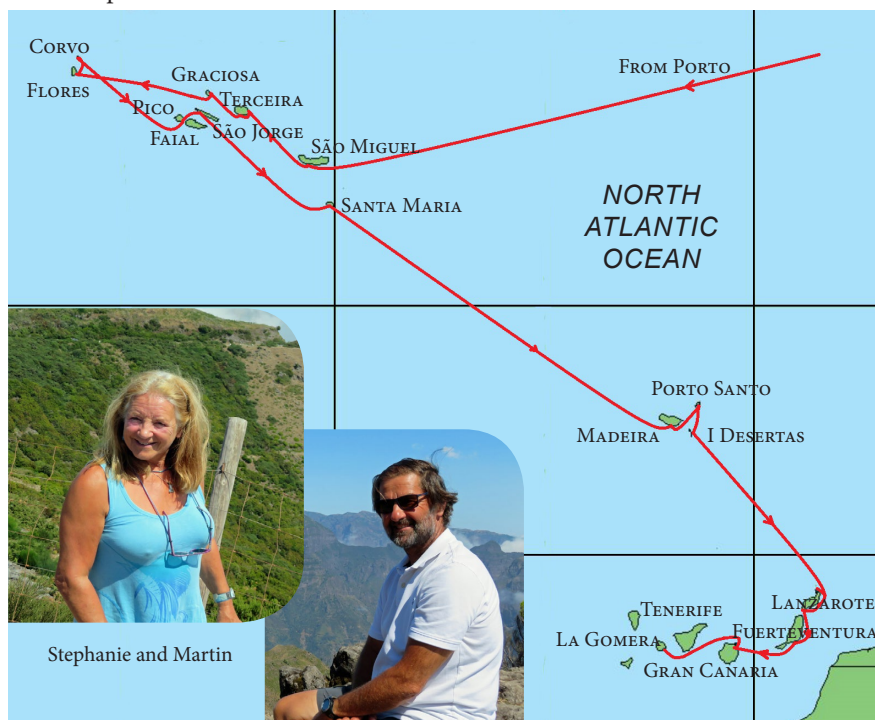
survived to sail another day. Lesson learned: treat untested/unknown moorings with suspicion and consider regarding them as an anchorage by applying a little reverse pressure on them before leaving the boat unattended.

A closer internal examination revealed no leaks or rudder/propeller damage, so we decided our best option was to motor the 30nm to Brest and have *Sandpiper*

Stephanie Connor

lifted to determine the full extent of the damage. Marina Moulin Blanc proved to be the ideal place to do this. We were dismayed to discover significant, but not catastrophic, damage to the bow and port side below the water line along with some keel damage. Following the advice of Damien Likely, a yacht surveyor, the decision was made to drop the keel - just in case.

Our plans to sail to the Camaret meet were scuppered; but Martin having volunteered as the designated photographer, we had to go. We therefore did what any self-respecting sailor wouldn't do and hired a camper van in order to join the meet, but also to use repair time ashore to explore the area we had intended to sail around. What an interesting area it proved to be. In Brittany one is never far from some musical event or religious festival. Martin even learnt a few intricate folklore dance steps.



The meet lived up to all expectations despite the weather's attempt to dampen our visit to the Battle of the Atlantic Museum. The first evening saw us all aboard *Wild Bird of Fowey* for drinks, nibbles and chat. The following morning Nicko Franks delivered a fascinating and excellent presentation on the Battle on the harbourside. Our camper van was useful as an impromptu taxi, ferrying members up to the museum.

With tremendous help from the KVK boatyard team and Moulin Blanc Marina we believed we would be back on the water in time to make the La Coruña dinner on 22 June, in four days' time. All we needed was a weather window to

Onwards and Westwards ...

cross the Bay of Biscay. However, on reading the instructions on the 'Copper-Coating' antifoul tin, we discovered that as a water-based epoxy, it requires a minimum of four days, ideally 5, to cure, otherwise it will simply wash off. *C'est la vie.*

With the boat back in the water on the 24 June, it was catch-up time. We decided to cross the



Galicia Meet - Anyone for a drink?

Bay directly to Portosin, Spain, to join the RCC meet there. With a good weather window and a regular escort of dolphins we had a quick and uneventful crossing of Bay of Biscay; apart from a moment in the Ras de Seine when we mistook overfalls for rocks not on the chart. Still it was better to go around them anyway.



Slight mishap crossing to the Azores!

The meet lived up to all expectations. The Rias offered delightful sailing with a huge variety of anchorages and marinas to fill many seasons of sailing. Especially memorable was the Cadet picnic on Islas Cies and the final dinner in Baiona with many, wonderful, star-filled anchorages along the way.

After a most enjoyable and brilliantly organized Galicia meet, we were set on visiting the Azores and after a quick hop to Porto to meet

Martin's daughter and husband for a few days, we were off. With a steady F4/5 NE wind we headed west from Porto, Portugal on the 21 August. We expected a 6-8-day crossing and our first 24-hour sail of 180nm, a record for us, gave us real hope. Foolish optimists. By day three the wind eased and by day four it turned into a westerly. Three days of long tacks finally saw us closing with São Miguel, but not without a slight drama. In this case it was the main sheet that caught the throttle handle and snapped it off.

We had sails so there was no real problem - until we needed to berth. By the time we reached Ponta Delgada on São Miguel we had rigged up a neat pulley system to operate the throttle, but changing gear proved more problematic. Fortunately, we found a finger pontoon with a head-to-wind approach; drama over. Thomas, from Boat and Sail Services, lived up to his reputation of helpfulness and we were soon

Stephanie Connor

fully mobile again, having found a good use for our angle grinder to enlarge the throttle opening on the binnacle.

The Azores are well known for their whale watching and our first experience came on our approach to São Miguel. As dawn broke, we were joined by a large pod of acrobatic dolphins, a display of flying fish with their beautiful colours and fairy-like wings and then a family of four sperm whales bobbing about in the light swell 50m from the boat. What a welcome!



Dolphins. Can never have too many!

Our aim was to get a good feel for all the islands rather than spend time walking



Martin & Stephanie - Leaving Porto for the Azores

or exploring any one in detail and therefore we planned to visit all nine islands during our 4-5 week visit and to explore the interior, where practical, by car.

The geology, topography, and flora on all of these rugged, volcanic islands is stunning and varied. The people are invariably friendly and the weather in August, with a couple of minor exceptions, very comfortable. Each island

has its own character, and all seem to have a full and regular programme of festivals to entertain visitors and locals alike.

São Miguel, 28 Jul-3 August. Using Ponta Delgada as a base we enjoyed wonderful drives through lush forests and dramatic ravine-riven mountains, tasted fresh tea at the Gorreana tea plantation in Maia, and local wine in the vineyards; we bathed as well in the various hot springs and sea pools. One thing we did find a little strange on all the islands was the time their evening festival and musical events started, as late as 2330, many going well into the early hours; when do they sleep?

Terceira, 4 August, and Angra do Heroísmo, 5-9 August. Terceira holds a reputedly world-famous gastronomic festival in August, and we arrived in Praia da Vitoria mid-festival. Its small marina and good anchorage were overlooked

Onwards and Westwards ...



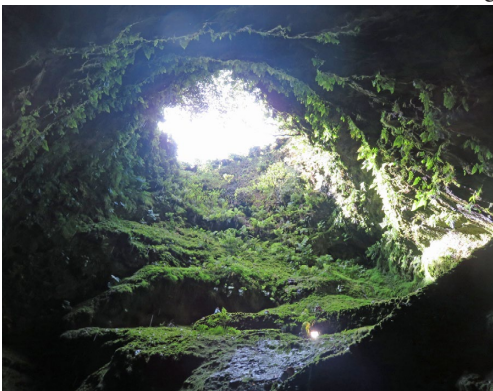
Tea plantation

swell in the Angra marina. We couldn't secure an inner berth and had a couple of uncomfortable nights there. In future we would certainly choose to anchor in the sheltered bay rather than strain the lines and cleats with the constant rocking. The island was full of delights including: spectacular horsemanship displays in the bull ring; local bull-running through the village streets; local gastronomic dishes such as seafood soup-in-a-loaf served at the Hotel Beira Mar above Angra beach.

Graciosa, 9-11 August. Villa de Praia is definitely not a marina. Despite this, the small and busy fishing harbour found space for us, and a few other yachts, on the inside of their breakwater. The tidal range and swell have the potential to strain cleats and damage fairleads. Once more we arrived in time for a religious festival in the main town of Santa Cruz where the streets were decorated with multi-coloured rugs hung from first floor windows and balconies. We also checked out the work on a large breakwater for a new marina at Cais da Barra; it is optimistically hoped to be completed for next season.



Bull running



Volcanic caves

had collapsed during the winter storms. Despite this the marina welcomes visiting

by two large stages hosting loud concerts that finished at 0500. We only stayed one night before moving round to Angra do Heroísmo. A gentle 12nm sail had a sting in the tail as we were hit by a heavy 30-minute squall as we approached Angra, reducing visibility to 50m in torrential rain and gusty F6+ winds. The pilot correctly points out the problems of

Flores, 12-14 August. After an overnight sail and a beat into the westerlies we were met with an interesting entrance to the small marina at Flores das Lajes. The entrance, already narrow, was further constricted by a large section of the breakwater that

Stephanie Connor



Interesting entrance into Flores Harbour

coast as our weather window for getting back to the main island group was quite short. The sailor's perspective is certainly dramatic along this mountainous coast with spectacular cliffs, waterfalls, lava flows and isolated settlements looming around every headland. This is capped by the small island of Monchique, Europe's westernmost point, equidistant from Portugal and Newfoundland.

Corvo, 14-15 August. The smallest of the nine islands, there is no marina, but the old breakwater has been extended by 50% and offers real shelter for alongside berthing in most winds. We were met by the local police and immigration officer, who cleared us in quickly, advising us on upcoming festivities and the best place to eat. The restaurant next to the airport terminal, proved to be excellent, as did the moving, lantern-lit religious procession



Plague of PMOW in the Azores



New Land on Faial, Azores

commemorating lost sailors, in stark contrast to the loud, disco-style concert that followed into the small hours. The water was beautiful and clean and surprisingly warm; so much so that it was difficult to find an excuse not to swim, but only after

a careful check for Portuguese Man of War (PMOW), now pushing further east in quite large numbers on all the islands except for Santa Maria. One local harbour master put this down to the rise in sea temperatures.

Faial, 16-23 August. Horta on Faial, a main port for sailors arriving from the

Onwards and Westwards ...

Americas, was our next port. After a quick passage with a following wind we rounded the headland of Ponta do Cavalo with its interesting tidal eddies to enter the large and busy marina. There are surprisingly few visitors' berths for such a popular marina and we ended up on the inner breakwater. However, there is ample space for safe anchoring in the outer harbour where the busy harbour-master assured us he had had 50 yachts anchored at the height of the season. Pete's Café Sport is a traditional watering hole for Atlantic Ocean sailors. Jose, the owner continues to fill the same role of 'Mr Fixit' for visiting yachtsmen as his ancestors and has been honoured by featuring on one of the islands stamps. The scrimshaw museum in the rooms above the café should be on everyone's visit list and if Jose is available, his tour brings it to life beautifully. During our stay we decided to sort out our Raymarine plotter on which the touch screen facility had stopped working. The Mid Atlantic Yacht Service responded quickly to our plea for help and quickly confirmed the unit needed replacing. It was to take a couple of months before the new part, a Raymarine agent and *Sandpiper* were in the same place.

Pico, 21-22 August. From Horta we visited Pico, a 20-minute ferry ride across the channel. There, a large breakwater encloses a very sheltered harbour; though accommodating regular commercial traffic it also has ample room for visiting yachts of any length, albeit without shore side facilities. We took the unusual decision to book an AirBnB overnight stay so we could attend a folklore festival which ended after the last ferry back - a decision that not only gave us a night in a proper bed, the first for over four months, but also let us enjoy a fascinating insight into the Azorean folklore music, dance and traditions.

São Jorge, 23 August. Thankfully, the breakwater at Vila das Velas has recently been significantly extended, providing excellent shelter in all but easterlies. With a period of calm approaching we decided not to linger and after an overnight stop in this friendly and charming marina we pushed on to Santa Maria, our last island in the group.

Santa Maria, 25-31 August. Vila do Porto, Santa Maria, was our favourite

port of call, nestled beneath a high cliff and fort. It has ample space and excellent facilities, a convenient and good Club Naval bar and restaurant, good diving facilities, and helpful officials; we regretted not being able to stay longer. Exploring Santa Maria was the only time we experienced heavy rain, which created major hazards on the roads, closing many for several hours due to fallen trees, landslides and turning the steep roads into



Waterfall after downpour - Santa Maria

Stephanie Connor

dangerous torrents while creating dramatic waterfalls in several places.

Sadly, all good things come to an end and before long we were searching for the weather window for the 480nm passage to Madeira. Having visited all the islands we can definitely recommend it as more than a re-fuel and re-stocking stop en-route to or from the Americas.

Fair winds and a steady NE F4+ gave us a fast and uneventful passage with the steep, dramatic cliffs and landscape of Madeira appearing from the morning mist at 20nm as we made landfall at Calheta on the main island early on our third day. Sadly, there was little in the way of wildlife en-route although Martin still maintains he saw three or four whales spouting on the second morning watch as dawn broke. Calheta marina was not very full, perhaps due in part to the noisy and ongoing work for over five years to reinforce the fragile and large cliff that looms over the marina and where a local restaurant's chef was killed in January 2019 by a



Local Religious Festival, Madeira

falling rock. For now, only two restaurants have reopened, but the upside was the very cheap marina fees. Before moving around the island to Funchal to better explore the mountainous interior, we took the opportunity to visit the local sugar cane factor, a crop that until recently was a key cash crop for the island.

It is always fascinating to see a new land from the sea and Madeira was no exception. The steep and high cliffs, covered in vegetation, along with dramatic glimpses of the road network that snakes through numerous tunnels around the island provided a dramatic vista as we motor-sailed in the typically light winds along the south-western coast to Funchal. Surprisingly, the land above the sea cliffs was filled with housing on what often seemed like impossibly steep ground, with the high mountain tops obscured by cloud. Funchal itself is a busy harbour with very limited visitors' space on the outer marina breakwater, normally rafted up. But the staff were very welcoming – except to a French boat, which arrived unannounced and sailed straight in ahead of a couple of us and another waiting yacht.

Funchal city is itself fascinating, with numerous excellent restaurants, local activities and folklore displays to usefully fill a few days. We used a car to explore the coastal and highland areas as well as to do the inevitable re-provisioning trip. The high plateau offered some spectacular views and the many *levadas* (man-made watercourses) provide interesting walks through the forests.

Quinto De Lorde, Madeira, 7-17 September. Though a windy marina, this was also a welcoming and secure stop with plenty of room for visitors. The hotel/resort complex is now fully operational and marina users have free access to their pools

Onwards and Westwards ...

and beach facilities but not the hotel restaurant. We had an issue with our engine in very light winds 5nm from the marina. The very helpful marina staff not only sourced an engineer but sent him out to us on a RIB, with the result that we were able to motor back ourselves having fitted our spare starter motor which we discovered had burnt out.



Porto Santo

While at the marina we were able to explore the island by car, stretch our legs on various walks, enjoy local music events and visit several museums with the Whale Museum at Canical being a highlight. We were also treated to a religious festival; boatloads of followers descended on the marina to walk up the hill to collect the statue of Nossa Senhora da Piedade which was then taken back to Canical overnight before being returned the next day.

Porto Santo, 18-21 September. This is a small marina in a much larger harbour, with limited spaces for visitors; it is possible to anchor inside the harbour as well as outside. The port has been recently developed with new marina office, local yacht club, a power plant and algae farm (Buggy Power) in the eastern corner, but with limited yachting facilities. While it is a good walk to the town we found it well worthwhile if only to visit the Christopher Columbus museum with its interesting background to the island, but not that much on Columbus. The open-top bus tour around the island was a easy way to get a good overview.

Carga da Lapa, Ilhas Desertas, 21 September. En-route to the Canaries we had intended to visit the two remote island groups and to overnight at the Ilhas Desertas in the hope of seeing the rare and protected monk seal before visiting the Selvagens to see the bird life. Unfortunately, we found a F5 across the small anchorage with limited space due to recently laid small craft moorings down the middle. Sadly, we decided to move on and by-pass the Selvagem Islands; the forecast was for more of the same and, while not good for anchoring, promised a good sail towards the Canaries.

Arrecife, Lanzarote, Canaries, 23-29 September. Lanzarote Marina is an excellent, safe base from which to explore. We hired a car for three days to tour the island. The volcanic caves and national park were highlights of the trip. In the marina, at Playa Blanca and Rubicon Marina, we also caught up with friends, old and new, who were either following a similar passage plan to the Caribbean or over-wintering in the Canaries. We indulged ourselves by going to the spa at Club Santa, a sprawling sports resort on the west coast, for an indulgent massage and before leaving Arrecife we treated ourselves to a lovely meal, with great food and

Stephanie Connor

views and excellent service on the 17th floor of the Altamar Hotel. Despite the well-stocked chandleries, we managed to keep our credit cards safe apart from paying out for repairs to our 25-year-old fridge that had finally died.

Isla Graciosa, Playa Francesca, 29 September–3 October. We had a great sail against the F4/5 north-easterlies up the coast to Graciosa, with just a little



Landfall, Canaries

competition with other boats making the same journey. They came second. We were privileged to see a small pod of orca breaching 75m from the boat on a parallel course for 10 minutes on the way, a great sight.

The anchorage at Playa Francesca is lovely, with good holding and a peaceful atmosphere

despite its popularity: a great place to relax, bake a cake and catch up on reading. We had 21 yachts on one night and two huge catamarans and a ferry boat by day, full of 'enthusiastic' visitors. While the sea state in the bay was never uncomfortable, there was a constant F4+ across it. Despite this it is a peaceful place with a great beach, and Stephanie, already a scuba diver, discovered the pleasures of snorkelling around the rocky coast. We canoed around to the nearby village of Puerto de Caleta del Sebo with its tourist atmosphere of cafes and restaurants but no tarmac roads.

Marina Rubicon, Lanzarote 3-7 October. We decided on an early start and a downwind sail along the west coast of Lanzarote. Light winds and a clear sky saw us enjoy a steady if uneventful passage along the coast before rounding the southern headland and making a relaxed afternoon entry into the large and welcoming Marina Rubicon. Although a little sceptical about staying long in such a 'designer' marina we actually enjoyed our stay there very much. We again hired a car and had a wonderful tour of the volcanic highlights of the island and indulged in a very relaxing day at the resort hotel spa. The winds remained light and north-easterly, therefore as soon as we saw a slight increase, we were off to enjoy the short passage south to Gran Tarajal; our planned base from which to explore Fuerteventura.

Gran Tarajal, Fuerteventura 7-11 October. We had a lovely and lively sail south with a steady NE F5 giving a great downwind sail with a little bit of surfing on the 2m swell and the 30nm passed very quickly. Gran Tarajal is a busy fishing port for both commercial and leisure fishing boats, but it does make visiting yachtsmen very welcome. It has one dedicated pontoon for visitors and a second with 50% of berths normally free for visitors; we spent a very comfortable few days there. We soon discovered that the local town has few tourist facilities. We had to take a one-hour bus ride to the airport to hire a car. We toured the island over a two-day

Onwards and Westwards ...

period, checking out the swimming beaches, local folklore activities and museums and generally getting a feel for the life and people of the island. Sadly, the wind was too light to take advantage of the normally great windsurfing locations, but we did enjoy the traditional food of the island and snorkelling in the clear water.

Las Palmas, Gran Canaria 11-15 October. This is not the most hospitable of marinas, dominated by the ARC and other rallies in the Autumn and the check-in staff were surprisingly unfriendly. However, by contrast the *marineros* were very helpful in getting us into a tight corner with lazy line moorings with their useful patrol boat. Once we had our new plotter fitted by the Raymarine agent - only 3 months wait for the new part - we were glad to leave.

On 15 and 16 October we had a great sail down towards Tenerife, having decided to go to the southern end rather than the closer but busier northern marinas. Unfortunately, we didn't quite make it in. Just after we had dropped the main and furled the genoa at 2100, the motor switch proved to have stuck in the start position causing the new starter motor to overheat. It was a little rough at the time, F5-6 in the acceleration zone along the coast. Martin's unfortunate lack of a sense of smell meant that he didn't notice the overheating until too late when the engine alarm went off. By then the starter motor had burnt out and it was a case of quickly letting out the genoa and a sharp tack out to sea to assess the problem. We quickly decided a night entry under sail was too dangerous as was an anchorage in the nearby bay. We decided to sail overnight to La Gomera 40nm away and enter there at dawn.

San Sebastián, La Gomera 17-22 October. Dawn saw us making contact with the marina staff and after a sharp tack into the harbour we accepted a tow up the buoyed channel and a rather too quick approach to a hammerhead



La Gomera

berth. Safely alongside we were able to assess the problem and ended up ordering spare parts from the UK and spending the intervening week exploring the island, catching up on boat administration, sampling the local beaches and restaurants and planning the next 12-months cruising. Before we leave the Canaries, we plan to visit the remaining islands before heading south to visit all the islands in Cape Verde. Then it is definitely time to turn to starboard and head west.