

Sailing home

Memories of sailing from Phuket to Sri Lanka

Jeremy Gurney



Jeremy cooking underway

Jeremy now (below)

I was lucky enough to be able to sail home with my wife, Bridget, when I finished work in Hong Kong in 1997 and this has undoubtedly been our best sailing experience. Our yacht was a Hylas 44, named *Halcyon of Hebe*, built in Taiwan in 1989 and I'm recalling the section from Phuket to Sri Lanka

One glorious evening in early January, after a final dinner ashore, we set off at 2300 under brilliant stars and a half moon. Sharing the journey with us were our son David and his wife Kathryn. We headed NW to the Similan Islands, some 60 miles distant, and arrived about mid-day the next day. The crystal clear waters were popular with dive boats. The Thai National Park

authorities have laid convenient moorings at most of the favoured anchorages in order to prevent damage to the coral from injudicious anchoring. We spent the night moored off Ko Bangu, one of the northernmost islands of the group, where the water was full of phosphorescence, and during the night it was possible to see the glow surrounding our mooring cable curving down into the depths below, illuminated by the effects of the current running through the anchorage.

It was a lovely spot, and although the Surin Islands further north beckoned, we felt the urge to be off and start our first ocean crossing of over 1000 miles. The start was unpropitious, and we motored for the first few hours over a flat calm sea. We were not carrying enough fuel to motor all the way - where was the NE monsoon upon which we were to depend all the way from here to the Red Sea?



Sailing home

In the afternoon a light breeze filled in from the north, and steadily built to a respectable 12-15 knots. It also veered to the NE which enabled us to make good progress. With the genoa poled out to starboard on a 20ft whisker pole we were well balanced and travelling quickly. From then on, our speed rarely dropped below 6 knots all the way.



Halcyon of Hebe with genoa poled to starboard

Between Thailand and the Nicobar Islands we came across several patches of rough water, maybe a quarter of a mile wide in bands stretching N - S, for which there was no apparent cause. There was no change in the wind, no change in the water depth and no noticeable current. By day these were a matter of mild interest, but on one occasion at night it was enough to start the adrenalin running. The log entry reads: 'I heard a roaring sound, like a strong wind or rain squall, but could see no evidence of this, nor any threatening clouds. Then the moon went behind a cloud and the night went dark - it was all rather eerie. Suddenly we were in the roughest patch of rough water yet - breaking water everywhere - but no change in the wind. After a couple of minutes we were through it, and the roaring sound faded behind us - but we could still hear it for another five minutes'. Does anyone know what might be the cause of these rough patches - could it be the effect of a tsunami in the open sea?



Son David with his wife Kathryn

A friend of ours and his crew had left Phuket just after we left the Similans, and they were about 50 miles behind as we approached the Nicobar Islands and the Sombrero Channel between them. We set up a twice-a-day radio chat with them which we maintained all the way to Sri Lanka, good value as we swapped news on progress, weather and fishing successes and disappointments.

Our first success was a beautiful dorado, bright yellow as he was brought aboard, but sadly losing his colour soon afterwards. These predators are built for speed and I read that they shoot out of the surface in pursuit of flying fish - that must be some sight. I also understand that the yellowfin tuna, the other fish that we sometimes caught, is capable of burst

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speeds of about 40 knots - so we never needed to worry that we were sailing too fast to catch fish. But I digress, back to our dorado. We had heard that rum was a much quicker and cleaner method of despatch than any other, and so it proved. A good glob of Philippine Tondena rum (remaining fruits of our last party in the Philippines) down the throat and death was instant. It also meant there was no blood in the cockpit. The end result was eight steaks and two fillets in the fridge - we would be all right for a bit.

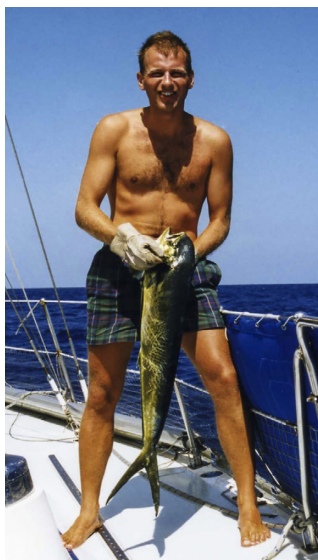
The Sombrero Channel is very wide, so wide in fact that we did not see the land. We did not see any boats but were aware that the echo sounder had found the bottom again and we passed a number of fishing floats. More exciting was the sudden realisation from the acceleration of the SOG readings on the GPS that we had a two knot favourable current sweeping us along. Whether this current is general in the Bay of Bengal, or whether we happened to pick up a 'jet stream' generated by the Sombrero Channel I do not know, but the benefit of a one - two knot current remained with us most of the way to Sri Lanka.

Coupled with the current we were now getting steady winds of 20 knots or so on the quarter and progress was very good indeed. We were travelling over 170 miles in 24 hours through the water and, with the current, around 200 miles over the ground. The sailing conditions were superb, as this entry in the log one night testifies: 'One of the best watches ever. Bowling along in the moonlight under a clear, clear sky - rock steady if held on course, surfing down the wave fronts. This is what we came for!' *Halcyon* was charging along and the helm was light - it seemed like driving something between a racing car and a toboggan, with the sensation of speed enhanced by darkness.

Another night, when David was on watch, something hit him on the back of the head and he was immediately concerned that there was a fault in the rigging. He called for assistance and everything seemed to be in order, then we noticed a flying fish on the cockpit floor, wriggling about and asking to be put back in the sea. In daylight there were numerous flying fish to admire, flying some 100 metres or more before re-entering the sea. They were also occasionally a hazard and it was sometimes prudent to duck down behind the binnacle to avoid impact.

Shortly afterwards we had a visit from a few dolphins. They are beautiful to watch, whether they are playing in the bow wave, dripping phosphorescence, or leaping high out of the water performing various aerobatics. We were lucky enough to see them frequently later on.

As we approached Sri Lanka, there was a part of the coastline, some 30-40



David and a dorado to be proud of

Sailing home

miles away – upwind of us. The entry in the log which says ‘I can smell the land. Not curry exactly, but a dry, dusty, brown smell’. We did not see the land until it was much closer, over four hours later. Eventually, after waiting outside the breakwater to undergo a security check by the Sri Lankan navy, we dropped anchor in Galle Harbour.

At that time, 1998 there were problems in Sri Lanka which may best be described as a civil war, and the navy was concerned that there might be attempts to damage their ships in the harbour by divers fixing explosives to them underwater. We were warned, therefore, that throughout the night there would be occasional depth charges exploding underwater to deter any divers that might be attempting such an attack. The pressure created by the depth charge can cause, at the least, serious damage to their eardrums. We should not worry if we were woken by these, which sound very loud if you are down below – and asleep. It was not a quiet night, but we slept well!



Fisherman keeping dry off the coast near Galle



Jeremy with school children in Galle

We had a very enjoyable couple of weeks in Sri Lanka, seeing not just the city of Galle, with its beautiful cricket ground, but the countryside with its elephants, tea plantations and much more.

We then set off for the Maldives, where we anchored in a lagoon at Uligamu with three or four other yachts. We had

a very friendly welcome from the small population, and after a few days set off for Salalah in Oman, more than 1000 miles away.

I could go on, the whole voyage was a wonderful experience – not just the sailing, but the welcome received from delightful people in so many places that we knew very little about – but the rules limit the length permitted, so I must stop.