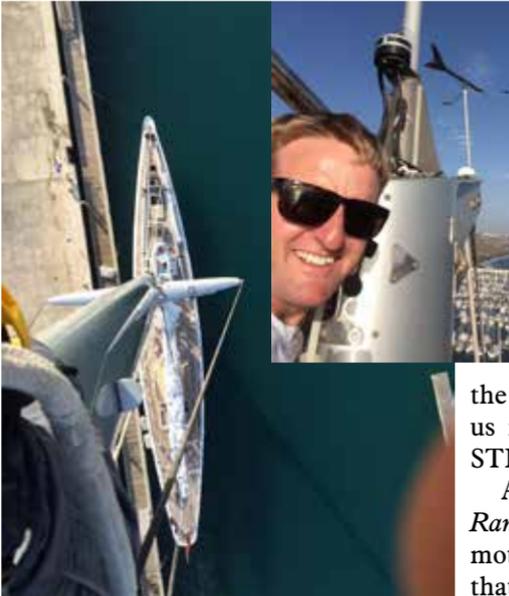


# The Atlantic by J-Class

Edward Handasyde Dick

On 22 October 2015 I joined the J-Class *Ranger* as First Mate with Emily, my long-term girlfriend, as Chef, rather a dream job for us. My initial thoughts were somewhat mixed as I quickly learned that I was to be joining an all-new team. The only crew member staying on for the next season was Tracy, the Chief Stewardess of eight years. At least the interior would be fine.

I inherited Deckhand, Charlie, who had started three days before. He was a ‘cheeky chappy’ from Brighton, experienced on large yachts, having worked on large charter yachts, but he, like the rest of us, had a lot to learn about sailing and working on a J-Boat. I quickly employed Will as my other Deckhand, a young and enthusiastic guy who I had met



Author rig-checking and up-mast selfying

earlier in the year. Will was an experienced small boat sailor and ex-sailmaker who I expected to prove very useful. This was his second job in yachting, having spent the summer in the cramped fo’c’sle of the 19m Fife, *Mariquita*. He was immediately dispatched to the American embassy in Belfast to get the required visas before joining us in the gargantuan shipyard, STP Palma de Mallorca.

At 42m (138ft) in length, *Ranger* was dwarfed by the 70m motor-yacht on our port side, that blocked out the morning sun. However, we had some support from fellow J-Boat, *Velsheda*, on our starboard.

The first weeks were somewhat busy as we were completing maintenance projects such as painting, varnishing and general repairs, as well as



upgrading the Harken genoa blocks and Lewmar 122 primary winches that pull 12 tons and have a one-off back-wind system. These needed to be put back in the deck and sea-trialed before departure. During this ongoing ship's work, I was lucky enough to have a hand-over from the outgoing mate lasting three weeks.

I was then responsible for the deck, rig and two 40ft containers. The first container includes a workshop, all the spares required and cruising equipment, such as cockpit table, swim ladder, sun-beds and cushions. We also keep paint and other chemical products, such as UV protection for the carbon-fibre standing rigging as well as the obligatory cleaning products and chamois. The second 'Race Container' holds 25 sails, two jockey poles, a complete set of running rigging with appropriate spares, as race ropes are allowed to be no older than two years. We also keep all the extra pad-eyes, strops and ties associated with racing a boat such as this.

After some delay for engineering works, we finally left on 11 December 2015. We waved off Deckhand Charlie, who was called home to support his mother who was to have an operation that night, and the sailmakers from North, who came out for a final look at the new mainsail. We undertook a man-overboard drill – really a demonstration of how far *Ranger* can travel



Catch of the day

even in light airs whilst motoring – and were off towards the Straits of Gibraltar.

The first stage of the trip was fairly uneventful with the new crew easing



*Ranger* alongside

into the routine. The great excitement was catching a large Mahi Mahi and enjoying the fantastic ceviche and other Japanese delights expertly prepared by Emily. There was some debate as to who could claim the catch as it was caught on Captain Dan's watch, but Deckhand Will reeled it in and I successfully

gaffed the beast of the deep: a great team effort!

A brief stop in Gibraltar was just long enough to eat lunch, receive the required, stamped papers from customs and pick up Charlie, our charming, new, French engineer. It was the work of an instant to whip through the straits and turn left towards Lanzarote. We hoisted the 'hectares' of main, 'acres' of Yankee and the fairly large staysail and began fetching towards our waypoint.

The sailing was fantastic. It's incredible to work such a powerful boat. She really makes you grin. However, sailing inevitably meant less sleep for the crew who were dutifully taking and shaking reefs, changing hanked-on Yankees and getting very wet whilst doing it. With freeboard similar to *Swaraj*, our family's 45ft Bermudan cutter, we regularly took significant amounts of water on board. It was not unusual to have knee-deep water whilst steering at the wheel.



Fast reaching

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*Ranger* is 230 tons and with the boat sailing in excess of 12 knots in 20 knots of wind carrying only a reefed main and staysail, this is a boat to be respected. Deck operations were potentially dangerous, with heavy, spectra sails and the crew regularly disappearing under waves. I felt quite a responsibility for the guys on the foredeck and although they were clipped on, I was still pleased not to have any of their mothers with us.

After the first 0300 headsail change, I soon appreciated the value of good old-fashioned crew strength. We were somewhat handicapped as Deckhand Will had injured his knee, so was 'off games' and consigned to his cabin, leaving our temporary crew to cope with the workload and Emily continuing to cook for the crew and do watches, sail changes etc.



Rig checks underway

On arrival in Lanzarote we made some minor repairs. The water-maker received some attention from the engineers and we gained fresh delivery crew: Mark, Kees, a large Dutchman and Tony for Archie and Rob. Charlie stayed at home with his family. We were now nine crew for the trip across the pond to Antigua, meaning Em would continue standing



Emily at the helm

watches. We left into a calm sunny evening on 17 December. The plan was to motor south through a calm patch and pick up the trades at around 22°N. So once again we settled into ship's works and inevitable Christmas preparations and decoration.

Heading into the trades, we had a thrilling couple of days regularly surfing at over 14 knots. The boat was plunging like my bay mare, Chelsea, when required to wait for a gate shutter as the hunting field galloped over the horizon. The boat was not easy to steer. We took 15-minute, work-out stints on the

wheel, with another crew member standing by to help in case of trouble.

By Christmas Eve the trades were light, 11-15 knots and easterly with a northerly swell. We enjoyed the warm weather and flying fish whilst

wending our way north-west. 24 December saw me take a trip to the end of the boom to effect a modification to the topping lift. I did feel a little exposed hovering 15-20ft over the deep-blue Atlantic as the boat pitched in the swell.

We also discovered that Charlie was not going to re-join us in Antigua, his mother sadly taking a turn for the worse. So I took on Archie as the new deck hand, a young guy from Essex who I was confident would do well.

Christmas Day was a time for some light relief, presents and emails home. Em cooked a fantastic turkey lunch with all the trimmings and everyone enjoyed the obligatory left-overs on Boxing Day.

So it was a couple more gybes, plenty of squalls and warm rain but eventually, we were heading for Antigua. During the rain storms the torrents of water pouring off the gooseneck brought back stories of my grandparents, Sue and Scrap Batten (RCC) sailing *Dyarchy* and *Swaraj* across the Atlantic collecting every drop of water and navigating using only a sextant. Archie observed,

‘Yes it does make you think, on *Ranger* the biggest worry now is that we are getting low on Magnum ice creams.’ An ETA to arrive early on New Year’s Eve had everyone with fingers crossed for the last 30 hours. Arrival in time for New Year meant not only a great party, but also a couple of days off for kite-surfing and enjoying the island before preparing the boat for our inbound guests. We arrived in Antigua at 0800 on New Year’s Eve, passing Falmouth to get in the lee of the island to take the sails down in relatively flat water. This allowed us to put a man at the end of the boom to flake the main down.



After spending the day cleaning and packing up the boat, we had a fantastic party in Nelson’s Dockyard catching up with friends and dancing in 2016.