

Crewing on the ARC+.

Name: Kate Woodhouse

Age: 23

Dates:

Type of boat: Bavaria 46

Voyage from Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, to Cape Verde to Rodney Bay, St Lucia

Thank you to the RCC for the Marshall award that helped to make such an amazing trip possible!



I took part in the ARC+ 2018 as part of my 'gap year' between finishing my Psychology degree at Glasgow University and going on to study a Masters. Sailing around the world is a life goal of mine so I decided that crossing the Atlantic was a good place to practice. I found a yacht seeking crew via OceanCrewLink.com and approached the owners, Lawrence and Rhi, a month before completing my RYA coastal skipper in Falmouth. They interviewed me by phone and invited me to join their crew, so a month later I flew out to meet them in Las Palmas. The rest of the crew also flew in that week– their friend Rich and two other guys also found online: a Finn called Niklas and a Dutchman called Jan. A few evenings of bonding, helped along by a

few drinks, had us ready for the huge task of provisioning for 30 days. We also fixed various parts of the boat, a Bavaria 46 recently purchased from a sailing school, and attended a few ARC lectures on hints and tips to get us across the pond safely.

We settled into 'Salana' before heading off to Cape Verde on the 11th of November with the rest of the 71 other yachts taking part. No-one on the boat had ever sailed the Atlantic before, which we thought was good, as we all had the same levels of excitement to experience something new. We had two racing sailors on-board – Nik and Jan - who definitely brought the energy to push Salana and see how efficient we could make our sailing strategy. Our main drawback was the shortage of downwind sails and spinnaker pole, so we had to gybe back and forth rather than heading straight down the rhumb line like most other boats. This led us to head east, towards the coast of Africa for the first few days, to chase a predicted wind funnel that we hoped would push us on a constant quarter down to Cape Verde. The first few days saw a few of us ill with the huge rolling swell from faraway N.Atlantic storms. It took a while to get used-to, but sea legs grew to cope. The predicted wind never developed so we used the light conditions as an opportunity to swim around the boat – a strange feeling in waters 5km deep!



That first leg from Las Palmas to Mindelo in the Cape Verdes (984nm) was the perfect warm-up to get used to a new boat and find things that needed fixing (quite a long list). We had many beautiful starry nights, sun rises and sun sets, which only enthused me more for the second,



longer leg. We also caught our first fish, a little Mahi-Mahi which we called “chicken of the sea!”. Jan was able to climb the mast to check the rigging and to add the downwind sail protectors (swimming pool ‘noodles’). We also experimented with a tip from a friendly neighbour in Las Palmas who told us to burn the roots of onions so they would last longer; it worked – they lasted for 20-ish days! Nik and I were sharing the early morning watch on the day we first sighted the Cape Verde peaks after 7 days. With strangely good timing, he had just got to the part in Joshua Slocums’ *Sailing*

Alone around the World in which he passes Cape Verde! Predictably, a LOT of reading was done on this voyage. Dolphins led us into the islands and we spotted our first whales (about a dozen dozing Minkes) as we made our landfall.

Cape Verde was a great opportunity to stretch legs, buy fresh veg and fruit at the busy markets and fix bits and bobs as well as the very necessary mending of the generator and Satphone. The luxury of a freshwater shower was put off for another day in favour of cold beers and fresh food on arrival. Three days later, we went on an excursion to find really good, very cheesy pizza. Also, after much deliberation, Jan had decided he could no longer continue with us, as the type of sailing (gentle and relaxed cruising) was not what he really enjoyed, compared to his normal racing. During the much longer 2nd leg we discussed this and agreed that it was probably the best decision for him, but we still missed his presence and help. He flew home the morning of the 21st of November, the day we set off for St Lucia (a bit later than the rest of the fleet due to the persistent Satphone repair problems). We hoisted the gennaker in a light North Easterly, speeding up to join the rest of the boats.

On the second day out we had our first experience of a major breakage at sea. Relaxed after a delicious fry-up lunch, we hadn't realised the steady increase in wind strength. The gennaker was still up and, when Nik took the starboard wheel and turned off the autopilot, the steering chain snapped and we lost all steerage.

Everyone responded very calmly; we took down the gennaker, hove-to and assessed the situation. Unfortunately we had no spares to fix the chain but after an hour's discussion over what to do next, we decided to continue with the port wheel (given that we also had an emergency tiller in reserve). This meant that for the rest of the trip we sailed conservatively, reefing overnight and early on any sign of the wind picking up. The sea was pretty calm during this slight 'mishap' which we were thankful for.

The next few days however provided a new scale of ocean sailing experience for me. The swell and waves increased in height, making them look like rolling mountains behind us. Every time I thought we would be pooped, Salana lifted her skirt and the mountains slid beneath us. The odd sideways or conical wave caught us out, however, throwing a lump of sea into open hatches. This was the only time that I felt a bit overwhelmed, with a wind regularly gusting 40+ knots. Luckily I felt very safe with the rest of the crew and the mixed conditions created some truly stunning skies and seascapes. There was one early morning watch that we had the bright full moon peaking through some menacing clouds directly ahead of us at the same time as a dramatic sunrise directly astern. It was a sight that could never be caught on camera but one that I will remember for ever. I certainly found a new appreciation for the moon as it guided us during those lumpy seas and windy nights.



The middle section of the second leg was the most tiring, with one crew member short and poor sleep due to the boat movements. However morale was far from lost! Once the worst of the weather let up, we changed to solo watches, with 3 hours on, 6 hours off. We played many games such as scrabble and ludo and, as mentioned previously, did lots of reading. Fishing also passed the time with tantalising bites, some frustrating losses but also some very big catches! On our 'half-way day', as three of us were relaxing on deck watching the sunset, we heard whoops and shouts of "FISH!" Lawrence and Rich were fighting and reeling in a 5ft mahi-mahi.



It was dark by the time we finished filleting, and it was Niks' day on 'come dine with me' duty (providing traditional Finnish pea soup with crackers and a sweet mustard, followed by pancakes and jam!), so the fish became ceviche, BBQ's, curry and fry-ups over the next few days. The 'come dine with me' rotation was a big success, giving chief cook, Rhi, a break now and again. She also naturally won the competition, with a mind-blowingly good leek, bacon and cheese quiche. In fact the dining standard was impressive throughout, ranging from Rich's spicy soy-sauce salmon noodles to Lawrence's French onion soup. As long-passage sailors often say, food planning, preparation and enjoyment takes on an exaggerated importance, and this is certainly one of the stand-out memories for my trip!

I think the lack of sleep and unexpected energy reserves also catch one out. On day 13, after another night of little sleep, I rose with a sudden need to make pancakes for everyone. The swell was bad, meaning the idea was also bad. 10 pancakes were produced despite several spills of the mix and bruises acquired. Eating was almost as difficult as cooking, one hand on the plate and one on the condiments to stop anything flying off when the next big wave appeared. "Watch out for the condiment wave!" was heard pretty frequently and we only broke a few mugs and glasses.

The next day we came across huge patches of marigold-coloured seaweed, providing our own 'yellow brick' road' towards St. Lucia. We also spotted dolphins far off in the distance, jumping higher than I ever thought possible – I'm sure one jumped over a cloud! The wind that night picked up again to 40+ knots, Salana was flying at 10 knots and my solo watch was accompanied by several squalls.

The next few days were quite monotonous and the added tiredness made everyone a little low. However, for every low there is an equal, if not greater high. We had beautiful slithers of moon in the blue skies during the day and some more electric-red and orange sunsets. We also had Heinz tomato soup with freshly made soda bread and when does that ever fail to lift your spirits? On the 17th day, in lighter airs, we hoisted the gennaker again to try and keep up with the fleet ahead. We hadn't flown it since the day the steering chain broke and it made all the difference; back up to 10 knots again. This was also a morale booster and felt great to practice manoeuvring the boat with this ginormous sail up. We took it down at dusk, reefed in the main, enjoyed a mahi-mahi potato and chorizo stew and played out our final quiz. Rhi's mum, had made a quiz for us to play every few days, with wrapped prizes for correct answers. I strongly recommend such treats and surprises to anyone planning a long passage.



We passed the finish line at 17:28 on the 8th of December, with Lawrence, the Scot, playing his bagpipes, Rhi popping a bottle of bubbly and everyone in the marina honking their fog horns and waving us a warm welcome back to civilisation. We were given rum punch and a huge fruit basket with a bottle of Nutz'n'Rum which was much appreciated. After various calls home we re-grouped to go off for pizza and more rum punches.

The following few days were spent relaxing, exploring and then doing a big clean of Salana. At the award ceremony we won a big basket of more rum and beer for having taken the longest route (2,366 nm) due to our downwind tacking. A few days later we said our goodbyes in Soufriere, from where I left to catching my flight back to freeeezing England. I had an incredible adventure with all the highs, lows, challenges, beautiful views and new friendships that I had hoped I would experience. I am sure I will see all the crew again in whatever context it may be, and I am 100% certain that that was not the last ocean I will cross. Bring on the next one!



Facts & Figures:

Highest wind speed: 48 knots

Highest boat speed: 12 knots

Average boat speed: 6 knots

Number of suicidal flying fish found on deck: 100's

