

“Thank you for the yacht!”

Cloud Walker 35 years ago

Judy Lomax



Judy in 1984, and now (below)

On Christmas day 1984 Jane's present to her father was a book about offshore passages. Then the BBC made David redundant, with just enough pay-off for a brand-new Beneteau First 345, chosen for its two double aft cabins. The name *Cloud Walker* came from our adventure in Nepal in 1975, with our first three children, then 5, 10 and 11. She was fitted out in Guernsey with a liferaft, Zodiac dinghy, autohelm, VHF, sea-water soap, crockery, cutlery, six striped cotton sleeping bags and lines to attach us to the boat on night watches. Her only navigational mod cons were a compass, an echo sounder, a trailing log and a plastic sextant.

David and our two oldest children, Jane and Alistair, along with Jim Reeves (RCC) and Alistair's girlfriend, positioned CW in Madeira ready for the Big One. Jane, 22, boat-sat until November in Funchal, where she sister-proofed CW with netting to keep Emily, 5, from falling overboard.

When Jim, Emily and I, and a university friend of Jane's, flew down to Madeira to join her on CW, Jane announced that she was hitching a lift to the Canaries to catch up with a Norwegian: we'd have to sail to Las Palmas on Gran Canaria to pick her up. By the time David joined us after a freelance filming trip, CW was ready to leave, with several 500 mile cakes, a bunch of bananas, a crate of avocados, long life milk and Don Simon red wine boxes stowed on either side of a flexible water tank.

'This trip was not the most pleasant experience,' David wrote in Las Palmas. 'It started well enough with Jim's spirited rendering of bagpipe melodies. Then gradually the wind increased. Our passage time was fast - 42 hours for 280 miles - but we took a good deal of blue green water over the cockpit in some confused frightening seas.' At one point Emily and I were bounced off the cabin ceiling. 'Mummy,' Emily said in a small voice, '*Cloud Walker* just saved our lives.' It did feel like that.

In Las Palmas, Jane (now RCC) and Norwegian Rikki (now our son-in-law, father of three of our grandsons (and RCC)) escorted us by dinghy



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when we left with Jim again playing the bagpipes on the foredeck. On a link call home, Megan told us that it was snowing back in Berkshire. We were in shorts and T-shirts. The first few days were gentle, with 'much Mozart in the cockpit, and sunbathing. Genoa down as we all went swimming, in turns.' Emily's tears about not being able to touch the bottom turned to laughter when she was allowed to push the skipper overboard. Swimming was abandoned after Jane reported 'interesting black triangles'. We soon settled into a routine, adults doing two hours on watch, then eight hours to sleep, relax, cook, eat, read, chat or just relax in the 'garden' when the sails cast shade over the foredeck.

By the eighth day we were definitely in the trades, with a slow rhythmic rolling and lollopy swell, bustling and creaming along at 5 to 6 kn, goose winging with a preventer on the main and poled-out jenny. By our second 500-mile cake, Emily announced CW felt like home. Her routine was morning school on the chart table, much drawing and colouring,



Emily mid Atlantic

story time whenever anyone could be persuaded to read to her or make up stories, step-ups in the cockpit to let off the natural energy of a five-year-old and joining in random watches. The bears in the cabin she shared with Jane entertained us with puppet shows through the cockpit porthole.

The avocados all ripened together; for two days we ate avocado for breakfast, lunch, and supper. Jim, as water monitor, was strict: vegetables were cooked and washing up done in sea water; clothes, hair and bodies were washed in sea water.



Sunset. 'I saw one yesterday!'

On my 45th birthday, we ate the last of the bananas, and celebrated with caviar, vegetable stew, white plonk, and Scheherezade in the cockpit.

Day followed day, night followed night, with dramatic sunsets at the same time every evening ('Darling, come up and see the sunset.' 'I saw one yesterday.').

“Thank you for the yacht!”

There was always something to look at, sometimes flying fish swooping and glittering from peak to peak, sometimes the progress of a pet cloud. At night, the moon glistened as we goose winged along its bright and mystical path, an inspiration evening after evening for stories I wish I could remember. Being a French boat, CW's knots were *nœuds* – and the Nerds were naughty little people



Atlantic moonpath

who lived on the moon and came cavorting down its path. On other evenings, Emily ‘chattered incessantly’ in the cockpit listening to music with David.

One dark night watch, Jane was sitting in the cockpit in night watch gear of bikini and harnessed oilskin top, when a flying fish hit her in the face. When she screamed, I shot my hand out through the cockpit porthole and grabbed her ankle. She screamed again and almost jumped overboard, but thankfully was clipped on.

The only boredom was during a four day hot windless calm half way across. Somehow we still managed to make 80 to 110 miles a day (rather than our usual 130 to 155). By the second day, our 13th at sea, the calms were making everyone fractious. It was time for the third five hundred mile cake. Emily set a new record for step-ups: 100, after 60 as a warm-up. Next day's boredom was relieved by sightings of a red billed tropic bird, a jumping tunny and an escort of seven pilot fish keeping in slow formation with CW's shadow.

On the fourth evening of the calm, Jane's frustration led to a verbal confrontation on the bows with a Norse god, who over-reacted to being shouted at by whipping up a gale. By the early hours, we were scudding along at 5 to 7 kn, hand steering under storm jib. Flying fish misjudged their flights, one landing on Dave in the heads, others stinking instantly on deck.

Two evenings later, we were still having a ‘frisky sail’ of up to seven knots with ‘occasional exhilarating swoops’, followed by six whales astern. Emily didn't like the constant rolling of our trade wind rig, neither did I. She did enjoy having ‘The

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David, Jane, Emily and Judy suggest that as the wind was NE7 it might be good to remove the spinnaker pole and genoa. A narrow channel with surf on either side took us into Pointe à Pitre and a lavish marina. Emily ran round

Wizard of Oz' read to her four times. Jim and David spent hours with the sextant, eventually agreeing that we weren't far off where we thought we were.

On day 22, Jane reported a whale blowing close to starboard as we altered course for landfall in Guadeloupe. Jim relaxed the water rules and allowed us to rinse ourselves with fresh water to remove scratchy salt crystals after bucket showers. He woke David and me to report land in sight at 0530 on our 24th day, and to



Cloud Walker in the Caribbean



and round in big circles befriending local dogs.

David sent a post card to his ex-boss at the BBC: 'Thanks for the yacht.'

After 48 busy hours in Guadeloupe, we left for a frisky squally overnight to Antigua, where Alistair, 21, and Megan, 16, joined us by air from Miami, minus their luggage.

Megan, Emily and Jane

“Thank you for the yacht!”

Jim piping his farewell in Antigua

Jane and I bought fish in St Johns, a refreshingly colourful scruffy contrast to English Harbour’s stately ‘Beaulieu in the Caribbean’ buildings. We had never heard of salt fish. My resulting fish pie was the worst meal ever, accompanied by a tape of Tibetan monks chanting and a terrible smell: stowing the milk and wine boxes alongside the water tank had been a big mistake. For the next ten years the stinking mixture made sporadic returns to haunt us.

Jim played his bagpipes before leaving. We made an overnight passage to St Barthelemy four days before Christmas. ‘Not a wildly exciting place,’ Jane wrote, ‘lacking



in the colour of Guadeloupe and the outrageously English and expensive atmosphere of English Harbour.’ St Maarten was more fun. A very large very black father Christmas on a trailer with a steel band gave Emily sweets and ‘a plastic somersaulter’.

David sent another ‘Thank you!’ postcard to the BBC.

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After a 172 mile passage to the BVI, two weeks in paradise passed all too fast, with daily expeditions from anchorage to anchorage and island to island, much swimming, snorkelling and socialising for all ages. Father Christmas delivered socks of presents down the mast.



Megan, Jane, Judy, David, Alistair and Emily



Before we left, David sent yet another 'Thank you!' post card.

Cloud Walker is now 35 years old, and still in the family: this year, I handed her over to my oldest Norwegian grandson.

Cloud Walker, big green waves, rain, cloud, sun, jumping fish and a tanker, 5 year old Emily's impressions of the Atlantic